

The Contribution of Skopos Theory to a Paradigm Shift of Attitudes towards the Translation Phenomenon

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Abstract: This paper attempts to examine the role and contribution of Skopos Theory to Translation Studies. The purpose of the article is to demonstrate its significance to the field of Translation Studies and how it has brought a considerable shift of attitudes towards the translation phenomenon. After a brief introduction to the particular approach and its main points, terms like "function", "purpose", and "intention" will be discussed as the key-words in our analysis. Other matters to be investigated concern the shift of status both of the translator and the source text in Skopos Theory as well as the process of translation as an intercultural activity. Afterwards, the main points of criticism that Skopos Theory has received by other scholars will follow, related, mainly, to its applicability to different text - types. Finally, there will be some conclusions regarding the reflections put forward throughout the paper.

Keywords: Coherence and Fidelity rule, Criticism of Skopos theory, Function of the text, Shift of attitude towards translation, Skopos Theory

1. Introduction

Skopos Theory has been an innovative approach to the process of translation that was developed in Germany in the late 1970's (Vermeer, 1978). Its important contribution to the field of Translation Studies lies to the fact that it reflects a shift of focus from the linguistic nature of translation to its functional aspects constituting a systematic effort to bridge the traditional gap between the theory and practice of translation prevailing in the field of Translation Studies.

Vermeer (1989), one of the most important representatives of Skopos Theory, describes an action as a form of behaviour setting as precondition for a form of behaviour to be called "action" the person's ability to justify why he acts in a particular manner while he could have acted in a different manner. Reasons for acting in a definite manner can be determined in terms of aims or goals which are the opposite of the notion of cause. As far as the act of translation is concerned, he presents it as a form of transference where the linguistic and non-linguistic communicative elements are transferred from one language to another. According to his theory, translation is viewed as a human action having both a purpose (Skopos) and a result. The word *Skopos* that derives from the Greek work "*σκοπός*" is used as a technical term, meaning the "*aim*" or "*purpose*" of the translation. Knowing the function of the TT (Target Text) is very important to the purpose of translation since it determines the strategies and methods that should be implemented by the translator. To this context, every translation commission should contain a statement of *Skopos* that determines the outcome of the translational action known as *translatum*.

Apart from the technical term *Skopos*, the related terms *aim*, *purpose*, *intention* and *function* are also used which are specified as follows:

Aim is defined as the final result that the acting subject wishes to achieve by means of an action. For instance, someone wishes to learn Chinese in order to read Chinese poetry by the original (Vermeer, 1989: 93).

Purpose is defined as a temporary stage in the process of achieving a goal. For instance, someone is buying a grammar book of the Basque language (purpose no1) in order to learn the language (purpose no2), so that he can translate Basque short stories (purpose no3), with the aim of communicating Basque literature in other linguistic communities (aim). (Vermeer, 1989: 94).

Intention is considered as an “oriented toward the aim action plan” (Vermeer: {1978} 1983: 41) from both the transmitters and the recipient’s side.

Finally, *function* refers to the real or assumed meaning of a text from the recipient’s side.

2. Literature review

Three types of purpose in translation are distinguished: the translator’s general purpose during the translation process (to earn his living), the communicative purpose of the translated text in the target audience (to “inform” the reader) and the purpose of the particular translation strategy or method (the adoption of literal translation in order to stress the structural particularities of the target language), although the term *Skopos* usually refers to the purpose of the translated text. The notion of *Skopos* can be applied in three ways referring to: a. the translation process, and hence the *purpose* of this process, b. the translation result, and hence the *function* of the translatum and c. the translation mode, and hence the *intention* of this mode. For instance, in the translation of scientific and academic papers, instructions for use, tourist guides contracts, etc., the contextual factors surrounding the translation cannot be ignored. Consequently, the guiding rule for every translation is the *Skopos* rule, according to which a translational action is determined by its *Skopos*. The *Skopos* rule is explained as follows:

Each text is created for a specific purpose and it has to serve this purpose. In other words, we have to translate in a way that the original text or the translation functions in the circumstances in which it is going to be used and with the persons wishing to use it, exactly in the way they wish to function. Most translational actions allow a series of different “*Skoposes*” that are interconnected and that we could classify in hierarchical order. The translator should be able to justify his choice of one particular *Skopos* at a specific translational incident. It should be stressed at this point that true translation with an adequate *Skopos* does not mean that the translator should adapt to the customs and usage of the target culture, only that he can so adapt. To conclude, what *Skopos* theory suggests is that the translator ought to translate consciously in accordance with a certain principle that would respect the target-text, although translation theory does not determine the principle which should be decided separately for each translational case.

3. Methodology

3.1. The process of translation as an act of commission

Each translation is implemented according to a *commission*. Toury (1995: 75) supports that a client (*commissioner*) needs a translation for a certain purpose and therefore he addresses to the translator, acting as the inspirer of the translation process. Ideally, the client will provide the translator with all the necessary information about the purpose, describing in detail parameters of the translation processes such as the recipients, the place and time, the occasion and the means of the expected communication as well as the function that the text intends to serve. However, quite often, clients neglect the fact that precise instructions result to good translations avoiding to provide analytical instructions. The whole of this piece of information that defines in detail the type of translation required is called by Fraser *brief* (2001: 7). It is clear that quite often it is necessary that the client and the translator need to negotiate in order to define the purpose, especially in cases where the client has an unclear or even false attitude about the type of text adequate for the specific occasion. There are cases where the translator and the client may disagree on the text type that

would best serve the intended purpose, in which case the translator can either quit or do exactly what the client asks him to do.

Every translation is based on a commission which should either directly or indirectly include a statement of Skopos so that translation can be carried out, although the Skopos of the target text is not necessary to be similar to that attributed to the target text. Nord (2001: 110) mentions that a commission comprises detailed information as possible on the following: a. the goal, that is specification of the aim of the commission and b. the conditions under which the intended goal should be attained (matters related to deadlines, fees e.t.c.), which should be explicitly discussed between the translator and the client (the commissioner) so that the commissioner does not have a false image concerning the way the text might be received in the target culture. At this stage, the translator is allowed to make argumentative suggestions, whereas the commission can be binding and conclusive only in cases where the commissions are clear enough. Thus, the translator is released from certain limitations and his role is to make decisions on the feasibility of the purpose.

What Skopos Theory emphasizes is that the translator must translate consistently and in accordance with some principles respecting the target text, but it does not state clearly these principles which must be decided in each case separately. On the contrary, it does state that the translator must be aware that a goal or many different goals exists in each text to be translated. As far as the number of the text's goals are concerned, any given goal is only one among many others although in some cases the number of realizable goals is unique. As a consequence, every translation commission should directly or indirectly contain a statement of Skopos in order to be carried out.

The function of Skopos of the target text is determined by the client's needs and the role of the translator in Skopos theory is differentiated from the traditional one. The conditions under which the purpose of the translation will be achieved should be discussed between the translator and the client (commissioner). He should know, above all, what the point and goal of a translation is and that this goal is only one among many possible goals.

In addition, the importance of the concept of *realizability* of a commission is stressed in Skopos Theory, a notion that depends on the circumstances of the target culture, not that of the source text. Indeed, a commission is dependent on the source culture only indirectly in the sense that it involves the source text. It is suggested that in cases where the commission cannot be realized due to the fact that the client is not familiar with the norms and conditions of the target culture or does not accept these norms, the translator must come upon an agreement with the client on the "optimal" translation that could be achieved "under certain circumstances" which means (Vermeer, 1989: 237) "as good as possible or "in view of the wishes of the client" and always in the opinion of the translator, and /or of the recipient". It is worth mentioning that when assigned a translation work, the translator reserves the right to accept or decline it, under which circumstance he accepts and whether there is need to modify the commission.

3.2. The Coherence and Fidelity rule in Skopos theory

Munday (2008: 39) refers to the contribution of Skopos Theory to the act of translating by introducing two further rules that should be followed: the Coherence and the Fidelity rule. According to the Coherence rule, the target text must be coherent enough to allow target readers to comprehend it, taking into account their background knowledge and cultural circumstances. Hence, the text has to be translated in such a way that it can be received as coherent by its recipients.

The Fidelity rule concerns intertextual coherence between the source text and the translated text. In other words, there must be some kind of relationship between the two, but not a narrowly defined connection of loyalty to the source text. Since Skopos varies with text receivers, the Skopos of the target text and that of the source text may be different. In this case, the criterion for the correct translation is not intertextual coherence with the source text but adequacy to the Skopos. Therefore, Skopos Theory does not promote free translation in all kinds of texts.

3.3. Translation as an intercultural process

Chen (1999: 67) stresses the importance of Skopos Theory for the practice of translation since it views translation as an interlingual and intercultural process involving both linguistic and cultural transfer. In particular, the target text is considered as an offer of information to members of the target culture in their language. However, it should be stressed that Skopos Theory by no means claims that a translated text should ipso facto conform and adapt to the target culture norms and behaviour. Although this is one potential option, Skopos Theory can equally accept the opposite type of translation, intending to express source-culture features by target-culture means. Consequently, every type of translation approach moving between the two extremes is likewise possible, including hybrid cases, as well.

The information offered in the target text is determined to a large extent by the needs of the target text receivers. Thus, the Skopos of the target text and that of the source text may vary. A statement of Skopos must not be necessarily identical with the Skopos given to the source text as there are cases where this identification is not possible. In cases where the Skopos is the same in both texts, we talk about functional constancy, whereas, in cases where they differ, we talk about change of function.

3.4. The status of the source text in Skopos Theory

The relationship between the source text and the target text is redefined and the status of the source text changes. The translator decides about the role of the source text in the translation process in accordance with the Skopos that is decided separately in each case. The important point of Skopos Theory is that it allows the possibility of the same text to be translated in different ways and that no source text bears only one "correct" translation.

Skopos Theory is closely connected to Text-Typology theory introduced by Reiss and Vermeer (1984) where the source text can be assigned to a specific type of text. According to their text-typology theory, there are three types of text, namely the informative, the expressive and the operative text types which come from the descriptive, the expressive and the appellative functions of language respectively. The specific typology is mainly helpful when functional constancy is required between the source and the target text. However, it is worth mentioning that Vermeer has expressed his reservations about the role of text type in the process of translation. In particular, according to his critique the type of the source text does not determine the type of the target text nor does it determine the form of the target culture but rather its Skopos is the parameter that determines the appropriate text type for the translation, with the type being a consequence of the Skopos.

4. Discussion

There has been some criticism of Skopos Theory in the field of Translation Studies concerning the definition of the translation phenomenon as well as the relationship between the source and the text. Such criticism comes mainly from linguistically oriented approaches to translation that are against functionalism.

First of all, it is argued that even though a translation may adequately fulfil its Skopos, it may be assessed as inadequate as far as the micro-level features of the target text are concerned. It may be evaluated as insufficient in other levels such as the lexical, syntactic or stylistic level. Such a critique has been exercised by Chesterman (1994) who otherwise recognizes the importance of Skopos theory and its contribution to the practice of translation.

It has also been argued by House (2001: 123) that Skopos Theory cannot be applied to literary texts which are stylistically far more complex. According to this critical attitude, some literary texts have no aim at all, they are claimed to be "aimless" or at least the aim is not potentially specifiable. If this is the case and literature has "no purpose", it obviously means that literature involves individual moments of creature in which no goal or aim can be attributed. Practically, this means that if an action has no goal or function, then it is not an action in the technical sense of the word.

In addition, it is possible to argue that when a Skopos is assigned to literary texts its possibilities of interpretation are restricted since a literary text can be used in different situations and with different functions (Ernst, 2004). The function and goal of literary texts are far more complex than non-literary texts, owing to the parameter of style that is involved in such texts. Consequently, the translator has to take into account a

number of other important factors that are involved in literary texts so that theory can be made applicable to this genre.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the innovation that Skopos Theory has brought to the field of Translation Studies is that it is not the source text as such that determines the translation process, but the function or Skopos of the target text. We can maintain then that every production of a text can be assigned a Skopos, as can every translation, by an observer or literary scholar, and also that every action is guided by a Skopos. Given that the source text is bound to the source culture and the target text towards the target culture, it follows that the two texts may differ considerably, not only regarding their content but also their goals both of which determine the arrangements of the content.

Translation is no longer described in the traditional terms of equivalence with the source text, but as human action involving decision making. This means that it is not to be expected that simply “transcoding” a source text or “transposing” it into another language will result in a serviceable translation product. Even in the case that the translated product has the same function (Skopos) as its source text, yet, the translation process is not to be viewed as a “transcoding” process since even this type of translation is mainly oriented towards the target culture situation.

Moreover, since the functional aspect of the act of translating is central, the contribution of the translator is inevitably redefined. According to Holz-Mänttari (1984), the translator is viewed as an expert whose role is to take decisions on the process of translation bearing the responsibility of whether, when and how to translate. Indeed, experts are called upon in all situations in order to be consulted and be listened to, given that, as experts, they know more about a particular field than outsiders. Hence, the translator’s voice must be respected although the client can debate with him in order to consider alternative ways of reaching a given goal until a common base is reached between the two of them.

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