SKOPOS THEORY: BASIC PRINCIPLES AND DEFICIENCIES

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1.Abstract

Skopos theory is a theory of translation by the German translator Vermeer in 1978. In this theory, the process of translation is determined by the function of the product. This function is specified by the addressee. This theory is one of the functionalist approaches whose aim is to dethrone the source text (ST). This is done by emphasizing the role of the translator as a creator of the target text (TT)and giving priority to purpose(skopos)of producing TT. Functionalism is a major shift from a *linguistic equivalence* to *functional appropriateness*. Thus , translation is considered primarily as a process of intercultural communication whose end product is a text which has the ability to function appropriately in specific situations and context of use(Schaffner,1998a:3).

Skopos is a Greek word for 'purpose'. According to skopostheorie, the basic principle which determines the process of translation is the purpose (skopos) of the translational action. The idea of intentionality is part of the very definition of any action (Nord,1997:27).

This paper aims at investigating the principles of the skopos theory and its deficiencies. Within the flow of the discussion the differences between functionalist and the non-functionalist approaches are incorporated. It is hypothesized that this theory has nothing to do with the ST; it concentrates on the purpose of the translation process. It is a common knowledge that every theory has its own drawbacks. Skopos theory is no exception .

2. Skopos and its Related Terms:

Out of the introduction above we can recognize that skopos is a technical term for the aim or purpose of a piece of translation. In Vermeer's theory, there is a distinction between the terms *aim* and *purpose*. This is further explained by Nord (ibid:28-29). The gist of Vermeer's discussion is that *aim* is considered as the final result which an agent tries to achieve via an action; whereas *purpose* is a provisional stage in the process of achieving an aim.

Function is yet another term that refers to what a text means. The meaning of the text is viewed by the receiver. Another related term to skopos is *intention* which is regarded as an aim- oriented plan of action on the part of both the sender and the receiver. This points towards an appropriate way of producing or understanding the text.

In order to remove the ambiguity resulting from the difference between *intention* and *function*, Nord (1991:47f) has proposed a distinction between *intention* and *function*. The sender is responsible for specifying intention and by using a text he tries to achieve a purpose. The receiver uses the text with a certain function, depending on his/her own expectations, needs, previous knowledge and situational conditions.

This distinction is important to the field of translation as the sender and receiver belong to different cultural and situational settings. Some say that translation is translating cultures. So, intention and function can be analyzed from two different angles. The former is viewed from the sender's point of view while the latter is seen from the receiver's.

3. Skopos and Translation Brief

As it is mentioned earlier, the skopos rule shows that a translational action is determined by its skopos .That is to say , ' the end justifies the means'(Reiss and Vermeer , 1984:101).Furthermore, Vermeer explains the skopos rule as follows (cited and translated by Nord , 1997 : 29):

> *Each text is produced for a given purpose and*
> *should serve this purpose. The skopos rule thus*
> *reads as follows: translate/interpret/speak/write*
> *in a way that enables your text/translation to*

function in the situation it is used and with the
people who want to use it and precisely in the
way they want it to function.

A variety of skopoi are allowed in most translational actions. These skopoi may be related to each other in a hierarchical order. The task of translators is to justify their choice of a particular skopos in a given translational situation. The skopos of a particular translation task may require a 'free' or 'faithful' translation. Making a decision depends on the purpose for which the translation is intended. Accordingly the role of translators is essential especially in making the purpose of translating a text clear. Kangarioo (2004:2) in his paper <u>Sense Transferring Through</u> <u>Poetry Translation</u> states that there are new considerations concerning "target readers , the unavoidable translator subjectivity and the purpose and function of translations". For instance, as Xiaoshu and Dongming (2003: 2) put it , literary translation has to reproduce the spirit and features of the original . In addition, they also show that even the artistic images should be reproduced by the translator in a way that attracts the target reader's attention as the writer of the original text does. Thus, the receiver is the main factor determining the target –text skopos. There are many cases where relative literal translation is required, for example in the translation of a marriage certificate or driver's license, foreign legal texts   for comparative purposes or direct quotations in a newspaper report.

It is worth mentioning that translation is normally done 'by assignment' .A client needs a text for a particular purpose and calls upon the translator for a translation, thus acting as the initiator of the translation process (Nord , 1997 : 30). The initiator is the person who initiates the process of translation because he wants the ST to be translated. He can be the ST author, the TT recipient, the translator, a private company, an agent from the government etc.. To give a concrete example , the colonizing countries in Iraq can be considered as the initiator of some processes of translation in that they have carried out projects ,e.g. refurbishing schools and clinics , providing equipment for certain departments and the like. These are done by giving contracts which the Iraqi contractors provide quotes about. The Iraqi contractors receive leaflets concerning their projects. These leaflets need to be translated into Arabic, and the quotes need to be rendered into English. The purpose of such translation is to know what to do, the time span specified for the whole work, the quality of the work and so on. In an ideal case which is suggested by Nord (ibid), the client would

give as many details as possible about the purpose, explaining the addressees, time, place, occasion and medium of the intended for a given text. This information would constitute an explicit translation brief. Translation brief is a term which is the equivalent of the German term 'Ubersetzung sauftrag'. This information is important as it is needed by the translator to accomplish his/her task.

The German term creates a translation problem in the sense that it can be translated as either <u>translation commission</u> or <u>translation assignment</u>. Nord (1991: 8) has introduced the term <u>translating instructions</u>. However, Nord (ibid) said that Janet Fraser is the one who uses the term <u>brief</u> which is meant by the German <u>Ubersetzung sauftrag</u>. A translator receives the basic information and instructions but is then free to carry out those instructions. The instructions or commission, which are represented by *the brief*, specify the goal or purpose of a piece of translation. The translator must interpret ST information "by selecting those features which most closely correspond to the requirements of the target situation"(Shuttleworth and Cowie,1997:156).In short, the skopos of translating a given text is decided by the client and translator.

4. Skopos in Relation to Intertextuality and Intratextuality

In <u>skopostheorie</u>, the workability of the brief is based on the target culture. The source text is part of the brief, i.e. the instructions received. Receivers help make the text meaningful. What is important is that different receivers find different meanings which are offered by the text.

A text in <u>skopostheorie</u> approach is considered as an <u>offer of information</u>. This offer is directed from the producer of the text to its recipient. Translation is then is a secondary offer of information about information originally offered in another language within another culture (Schaffner , 1998 b :236). Translators are aware of the fact that the norms of the target language will not necessarily go in line with those of the source language. That is why a kind of accommodation (adjustment) in the target text is needed so as to arrive at a solution for the problem (Baker, 1992; 243). Consequently, a TT is an offer of information formulated by a translator in a target culture and language about an offer of information in the source culture and language. A translator is in a position to produce a text that is meaningful to target –culture receivers. In Vermeer's terms, the

TT should conform to the standard of 'intratextuality coherence'. This is explained in his book in collaboration with Reiss (Reiss and Vermeer, 1984 b:109ff). For a text to be communicative and understandable, it has to be coherent with the receivers' situation. Being 'coherent with' is synonymous with being 'part of' the receivers' situation and context of use.

What is significant is that there is a relationship between a ST and TT since a translation is an offer of information about a preceding offer of information. Vermeer calls this relationship ' intertextual coherence ' or 'fidelity' (Nord , 1997 :32). The intertextual coherence relationship holds between source and target texts. The form of this coherence depends on:

a.   the translator's interpretation of the ST and
b.   the translation <u>skopos</u>.

According to Bell (1991 : 170-171) intertextuality refers to "the relationship between a particular text and other texts which share characteristics with it ; the factors which allow text-processors to recognize , in a new text , features of other texts they have encountered". Intertextuality allows readers to identify scientific texts and poems as different types of texts. Thus, one can say that texts fulfill quite specific and distinct communicative functions.

One of the examples of intertextual coherence is being faithful to the source text. Literary translation is good exemplification for this. The postulate of fidelity to the ST is the goal that most literary translators try to achieve. It is a common knowledge that language is the central subject of any discussion about translation. However, there are certain elements involved in the process of translation which go beyond this conventional area. This is specially true for literary translation. According to Jackson (2003), literary translation is a translational species in itself, but it "differs in many respects from the kind of translation practiced in a language class". He contends that , on the one hand, literary translation involves a good deal of interpretation about the intent and effect. On the other hand, the literary translator is often not as much interested in literal 'transliteration' as in finding a corollary mood , tone , sound , response and so forth. The intertextual coherence is part of the skopos rule. However, skopos theory and functionalism give the translator more freedom and simultaneously more responsibility. In a situation like this the translator becomes a TT author who is freed from the "limitations and restrictions imposed by a

narrowly defined concept of loyalty to the source text alone"(Schaffner,1998b:238).

Unlike the non-functionalist approaches, the functionalist approach translator is loyal to his client and he must be visible.The translation processes should be target text oriented. Furthermore, the aim of translation is considered as communicative acceptability (Honig , 1998 : 14).

5. The Deficiencies of Skopos Theory

Skopos theory has been criticized for allowing the end to justify the means in the translation process. This would make this theory inappropriate to the translation of texts –such as literary or religious translation – that are largely determined by the author's personal intention. Newmark (2000: 259-260) criticizes this theory saying that

> *to translate the word ' aim ' into Greek , and*
> *make a translation theory out of it , and exclude*
> *any moral factor except loyalty , added on as an*
> *afterthought by Nord (e.g. , Nord , 1997) to*
> *Vermeer (who wrote that the end justifies the*
> *means , (e.g. Vermeer ,1978) is pretending too*
> *much and going too far.*

Interestingly enough, Nord (1997: 109-123) has devoted a whole chapter surveying and discussing criticism directed to skopos theory. She successfully defended this theory against these criticisms (See Nord: ibid). For the sake of brevity I will summarize the most important points of shortcomings in the following paragraphs.

The *first* important criticism is that not all actions have an intention. The essence of action-based translation theories is questioned. Some critics claim that there are actions that do not have any intention or purpose, referring mainly to the production of works of arts, often presumed to be literary texts in general or at least some literary texts.

Secondly, it is claimed that not every translation can be interpreted as purposeful. In addition to that, the translator does not have a specific purpose in mind while translating the ST. Having such a purpose would

limit the possible translation procedures and thus the interpretations of the TT.

Thirdly, it is also claimed that skopostheorie is not an original theory in that since functionalism is based on something as obvious as the fact that human actions are guided by their purposes, it cannot claim to be an original theory. Peter Newmark (cited in Nord, 1997:114) attacked this theory harshly. He says that "…in order to do anything well, you have to know why you are doing it , and that if you're translating a soap advert, you won't do it in the same way as you translate a hymn ."This is a common sense. Moreover, the position of the purpose of translation is also questioned because if the purpose intended resides in the target culture, so there is nothing of significance to be transferred. This point is also emphasized by House(2001:243-257)when it comes to tackling the evaluation of a translation as any translation is linked to its origins and the presuppositions and conditions that govern its reception in the new environment.

Fourthly, it is also claimed that functionalism is not based empirical findings. This weakness is levelled by Koller as cited in Nord (1997:116). Koller has said that functional models of translation have a theoretical – speculative approach rather than an empirical one.Functionalists like Reiss and Vermeer say that translators offer just so much information and in just the manner which is optimal for the recipient in view of their translation. Koller says that if these sentences were based on , say, 1000
translations from English into German revealing that %95 of cases the important factor for the translation was the translator's decision as to what and how to translate.

Another important point of criticism is that functional approaches go beyond the limits of translation proper. This is basically related to the feature of equivalence which is considered as a constitutive one as far as translation is concerned. Nord (ibid:112) cites the definition of translation provided by Koller (1995:193) in his paper the Concept of Equivalence and the Object of Translation Studies which says that translation is

> *the result of a text-processing activity, by means*
> *of which a source-language text is transposed into*
> *a target-language text. Between the resultant text*
> *in L2 (the target-language text)and the source text*
> *in L1 (the source-language text)their exists a rela-*

tionship, which can be designated as a translational,
or equivalence relationship.

Koller considers equivalence as a flexible and relative concept. This is in contrast to the earlier definitions of this concept like the one given by Catford(1965:20)as the "replacement of textual material in one language (SL)by equivalent material in another language(TL)".As for Koller, skopos theory makes the contours of translation vague and difficult to be surveyed.

The last point of concern is the one that is raised by House (ibid). To him, skopos theory failed on a number of issues:

(1) the notion of function which is crucial to the approach is never
made explicit in any satisfactory way,

(2) its inability to determine the (relative)equivalence and
adequacy of a translation ,

(3) the indeterminacy of the linguistic realization of the skopos of
a translation and

(4) due to the role of the 'purpose' of a translation , the ST is
considered as a mere offer of information.

6. *Conclusions*

Skopos theory claims to be general or universal model of translation . The main idea of skopos theory could be paraphrased as the translation purpose justifies the translation procedures. This would be acceptable whenever the translation purpose is in line with the communicative intentions of the original author. Thus, things related with source text are essential. We cannot dethrone the ST. Doing so will negatively affect the translation process. Besides, due to absence of massive evidence of empirical nature, skopos theory cannot be considered as a universal theory.

The translation brief, a term brought into focus by skopos theory, limits the job of the translator. This is because the instructions received do not let the translator to follow up his job as he wants. If the translation brief requires a translation whose communicative aims are incompatible with the author's opinion, the skopos rule can be interpreted as 'the end justifies the means', and there would be no restriction to the range of possible ends.

Further, the ideal brief provides explicit or implicit information about the intended TT function(s), the TT addressee(s), the medium and so on.

In this theory, the notion of the translator as a mediator has been challenged by the skopos theorists who regard the translator as an independent text producer who produces a new text based on criteria determined by the target receivers. Turning his back on the source text, Vermeer views the translator as a text designer whose task is to design a target text capable of functioning optimally in the target culture.

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