



Functionalist Approaches of Translation

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ABSTRACT

Functionalist approaches to translation places great emphasis on the vital role of the target text in translation in general and literary translation in particular. They function within the target text-oriented translation that valorizes the function or purpose of the translation. This article explores the functionalist approaches to translation, including Catherine Reiss's text type, Hans Vermeer's skopos theory and Christiane Nord's model of functionalism. It shows the extent to which their models are insightful in terms of recognizing the significance of culture in translation. However, they appear to be more relevant in professional translation than that of the literary one.

Key words: function, skopos, target text, purpose,

Introduction

The main trends in functionalist theory of translation were rooted in German linguistic and literary traditions. They emerged in the 1980s in reaction to dominant linguistic equivalence-based approaches to translation.¹ Unlike equivalence-based models, where the TT is the determinant of the translation method, functional approaches praise the purpose or skopos of the translation as decisive factor in the translation process.² Moreover, functionalism goes beyond the linguistic approach as it recognizes other extra linguistic factors in translation.³

This article aims to discuss the key aspects and characteristics of functionalist theory, with particular reference to action theory as the theoretical departure for functionalists. It also explores the vital contributions functionalists make to the definition of translation in general and literary translation in particular. Finally, the article traces the criticisms leveled against functionalist models of translation.

Reiss's Theory of the Text Type

Text type is a functionalist theory proposed by Catharina Reiss. This theory considers translation as a communicative action performed at the text level. In the text type theory, Reiss argues that the text type serves as a key determinant of the translation method. However, her model still functions by merging equivalence theory with some insightful developments. Thus, for Reiss, good translation "would be the one in which the aim in the TL [target language] is equivalence as regards the conceptual content, linguistic form and communicative function of a SL [source-language] text."⁴ Accordingly, equivalence is not achieved at the lexical or grammatical levels. It is rather sought at the textual level. Discussing Reiss's approach, Munday observes that her model of translating "builds on the concept of equivalence but views the text, rather than the word or sentence, as the level at which communication is achieved and at which equivalence must be sought."⁵ In this vein, achieving communication is regarded as the main task of the translator.

Reiss divides text types into three categories: informative, expressive and operative. The following table⁶ designed by Reiss illustrates the relations between text types as well as the language function and the translation method for each text type:

Text type	Informative	Expressive	Operative
Language function	(representing objects and facts)	Expressing sender's attitude	(making an appeal to text receiver)
Languagedimension	Logical	Aesthetic	Dialogic
Text focus	content-focused	form focused	Appellative-focussed
TT should	Transmit referential Content	Transmit aesthetic form	Elicit desired response

¹Oyali, "A Critique of Functionalist Approaches to Translation Studies," 51.

²Hans Vermeer, "Skopos and Commission in Translational Action," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Laurence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2000), 222.

³Jeremy Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 72.

⁴Christiane Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1997), 9.

⁵Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies*, 72.

⁶*Ibid.*, 73.

Translation method	'Plain prose', explication as required	Identifying Method, adopt perspective of ST Author	Adaptive equivalent effect
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Obviously, Reiss identifies three translation methods for three main translation types. In the informative text, the focus is placed on the functional correspondence related to the semantic aspects of the ST. In the expressive text, the translator is required to focus on functional rendering with more attention to ST aesthetic and linguistic forms. As regards the operative text, adaptive equivalent effect is preferred.

Reiss's text type is, then, a functionalist theory, which revolutionizes translation studies. In this respect, some translation scholars praise Reiss's text typology as a model which allows for many approaches to different text types:

The study of text types in the text-oriented translation will help the translator to have a thorough understanding of the text and to obtain adequate equivalence in target language text from the source language text. Every text is characterized by one or several basic communication functions. Different text type should require different transfer methods.⁷

Hence, in Reiss's model, the translation process is conceived as a communicative function, which can be performed by different translation methods suitable for the textual features of every text type. Thus, Reiss introduces the text function to the translation analysis system. More importantly, the equivalence concept is preserved but narrowly refashioned and subordinated to 'adequacy' as a key requirement. Elaborating on adequacy, Nord observes that "the target text serves the same communicative function or functions as the source text, thus preserving invariance of function between source and target text."⁸ In this vein, equivalence is shifted from its theoretical position in the linguistic-based approach to a mere "functional equivalence on the text level."⁹ Hence, Reiss's framework is still a linguistic-based theory with more attention to the functional relations between ST and TT.¹⁰

Interestingly, in *A Foundation of General Theory*, Reiss's conception of text type "is integrated as a specific theory within the framework of Vermeer's general theory."¹¹ Thus, Reiss paves the way for the paradigm shift in translation studies as she incorporates her text typology with Vermeer's skopos theory in order to put the foundation for a general theory of translation. In this regard, her work is significant because "it moves translation theory beyond a consideration of lower linguistic levels ... beyond even the effect they create, towards a consideration of the communicative purpose of translation."¹² Even though, Reiss' model is still insufficient for literary translation because it overlooks the linguistic gaps resulting from differences between the SL and TL. In addition, she does not provide effective methods for dealing with the translation problems caused by the culture bound terms and the figures of speech. This emanates from the fact that she adheres to equivalence at the text level as an intention to opt for the domestication strategy. Her model is perhaps more appropriate for professionalism.

Vermeer's Skopos Theory

In a similar vein, Hans Vermeer advocates a communicative function-oriented approach to translation. In his "Skopos and Commission in Translational Action," Vermeer elaborates his skopos theory by which he approaches translation from a functionalist point of view. In skopos theory, priority is given to the function of the TT rather than any other linguistic aspects of the ST.¹³ Additionally, Vermeer argues that the intention of the translator determines the method of translation.¹⁴ Thus, he enlarges the scope of translation parties to include the commissioner or initiator in addition to the translation and the original text.¹⁵ Vermeer points out,

The translator is such an expert. It is thus up to him to decide, for instance, what role a source text plays in his translational action. The decisive factor here is the purpose, the skopos, of the communication in a given situation.¹⁶

Thus, a third dimension is added to the process of translation. That is, Translation is no longer viewed within the ST and TT dichotomy since the translator's essential role is recognized. That is to say, it is the translator's intention that formulates the preferred translating procedure.

⁷ Wang Zheng, "Introduction of Functionalism and Functional Translation Theory," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 185. (2017):626, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>

⁸ Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹² Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies*, 74.

¹³ Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, 12.

¹⁴ Vermeer, "Skopos and Commission in Translational Action," 226.

¹⁵ Andy Cheung, "A History of Twentieth Century Translation Theory and its Application for Bible translation," *Journal of Translation* 9, no. 1 (2013): 132, https://www.sil.org/system/files/reapdata/14/62/43/146243287590382592044287238746367616828/siljot2013_1_01.pdf

¹⁶ Vermeer, "Skopos and Commission in Translational Action," 222.

Additionally, Vermeer identifies the skopos of the TT as the main goal to determine the translation process. Unlike Reiss's model, which regards the ST as "the measure of all things in translation,"¹⁷ the ST, in skopos theory, is considered as "the offer of information."¹⁸ Vermeer comments on this new status of the ST, saying: "One practical consequence of the skopos theory is a new concept of the status of the source text for a translation."¹⁹

In her seminal work on functionalist theory, *Translation as Purposeful Action*, Christiane Nord observes that translation in Vermeer's model is "a form of translational action based on a source text, which may consist of verbal and/or non-verbal elements."²⁰ In this sense, the nonverbal elements will be verbalized to be an essential part of the communication message. Thus, Vermeer, as understood by Snell Hornby, views translation to be a kind of "complex form of action in which someone gives information about a text (source language material) under new functional, cultural and linguistic conditions and in a new situation."²¹ In this case, translation becomes a purposeful and situational human action, and it is consequently governed by the cultural assumptions of the TRs in general and the translator as a main TR in particular.

Therefore, functionalists such as Vermeer and Nord insightfully analyze language as situational human activity, and thus it is part of culture.²² Hence, Vermeer, like other functionalists, recognizes the cultural dimension in formulating languages and translation. Since "language is part of culture,"²³ any analysis of the functional relations between ST and TT, for him, has to take into account the cultures that shape both of them and the purposes that determine their formulations:

As its name implies, the source text is oriented towards, and is in any case bound to, the source culture. The target text, the *translatum*, is oriented towards the target culture, and it is this which ultimately defines its adequacy. It therefore follows that source and target texts may diverge from each other quite considerably, not only in the formulation and distribution of the content but also as regards the goals which are set for each, and in terms of which the arrangement of the content is in fact determined.²⁴

Seemingly, Vermeer believes that any text is set for a particular goal. This goal determines the arrangement of the content of the text. However, by associating the 'adequacy' of the TT or the *translatum* with the target culture, Vermeer adheres to the domestication strategy, which makes the source culture invisible for the sake of the target readers' comprehension.

In his seminal paper entitled "Is Translation a Linguistic or a Cultural Process?" Vermeer discusses the importance of culture in translation. Unlike linguists of the equivalence-based approach who conceive translation as linguistic trans-coding process, he views translation as "a "cultural" phenomenon dealing with specific cultures: translation is a culture transcending process."²⁵ However, the gap in Vermeer's model lies in his focus on the TT culture at the expense of the source culture.

As a major functionalist scholar, Vermeer claims the insufficiency of linguistics in the process of translating for two reasons: "First, because translating is not merely and not even primarily a linguistic process. Secondly, because linguistics has not yet formulated the right questions to tackle our problems. So let's look somewhere else."²⁶ Thus, translation embraces a paradigm shift from "linguistic considerations to also encompass cultural issues."²⁷

In Vermeer's framework, translation is freed from any restrictions. As he says, "Skopos theory does not restrict translation strategies to just one or a few; it does not introduce any restrictions."²⁸ In this sense, the main criterion for translation methods is determined by the famous functionalist principle: "the end justifies the means."²⁹

The significance of Vermeer's approach lies in his recognition of culture in the translation process. His approach, however, is still inadequate for literary translation for two reasons. First, he denies the role that linguistics can play in providing solutions to the semantic and lexical problems encountered in literary translation. Second, he undermines the intercultural communication by giving primacy to TT over ST.

¹⁷ Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹ Vermeer, "Skopos and Commission in Translational Action," 222.

²⁰ Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, 11.

²¹ Marry Hornby, *The Turns of Translation Studies: New Paradigms or Shifting Viewpoints?* (Amsterdam: Benjamins Translation Library, 2006), 53.

²² Vermeer, "Skopos and Commission in Translational Action," 222.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

²⁵ Hans Vermeer, "Is Translation a Linguistic or a Cultural Process?" *Ithado Desterro*, no. 28 (1992): 40, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5007/%x>.

²⁶ Hans Vermeer, "What Does it Mean to Translate?" *Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 13, no. 2 (1987): 29.

²⁷ Uchenna Oyali, "A critique of Functionalist Approaches to Translation Studies," *The Linguistic Association of Nigeria* 18, no. 1(2015): 55, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319482970>

²⁸ Hans Vermeer, "Starting to Unask What Translatology Is About," *Target* 10, no. 1(1998): 45, <https://doi.org/10.1075/target.10.1.03ver>

²⁹ Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, 124.

Nord's Model of Functionalism

Following Hans Vermeer, Christiane Nord holds a functionalist skopos approach to translation. In this regard, Nord publishes many scholarly works to advocate skopos theory. She defines translation as an activity or a human action. For her, "the parameters of action theory may help to explain some aspects of translation."³⁰ Drawing on the action theory, Nord builds her hypothesis of translation as purposeful activity.

As a great exponent of functionalist theory, Nord responds to the severe critiques leveled against functionalist theory of translation. In this regard, she pinpoints many gaps or even pitfalls that mark linguistic-based approaches. For example, they do not consider "the pragmatic (and) cultural aspects"³¹ of language. In Nord's hypothesis, linguistics alone is not enough for the translation process since it requires a cultural theory that emphasizes the specific communicative function of languages involved in translating. Nord states:

Translation cannot be considered a one-to-one transfer between languages. Within the framework of such a comprehensive theory of human communication, a translation theory cannot draw on a linguistic theory alone, however complex it may be. What is needed is a theory of culture to explain the specificity of communicative situations and the relationship between verbalized and non-verbalized situational elements.³²

Clearly then, Nord views culture as a necessary conceptual and analytical tool for the translation process. With respect to literary translation, she refutes the famous argument held by many translation scholars that functionalism is not applicable in literary translation. She views literary translation as a sort of communication determined by the situation and the purpose.³³ Hence, literary translation is perceived as an action framed by the situational purpose.

Therefore, Nord adopts the top- bottom approach where equivalence is sought at the pragmatic textual level. It seems, however, more appropriate for a translator not to overlook the translation at the bottom level where lexical and semantic discrepancies between ST and TT can cause many problems for translators, particularly between two distant languages such as Arabic and English.

In fact, Nord tries to promote a systematic analysis of translation theory based on Vermeer's skopos theory. In this vein, she proposes the concept of 'loyalty' to control the exaggerated freedom that functionalists have given to translators.³⁴ While Vermeer and Reiss essentialises the skopos as the only determinant in translation, Nord suggests the concept of loyalty as a decisive factor for the skopos. In this vein, the skopos is not the only determinant of the translation; it is rather controlled by loyalty. Therefore, Nord develops a new functionalist model, basing on Vermeer's approach to fill the gaps in his skopos theory by refashioning its theoretical components.

Conclusion

The functionalist approaches greatly contribute to the development of translation studies. First, they refashion the translation terminology as they introduce a range of technical terms that substitute those used by proponents of equivalence approaches. More importantly, they contribute to the emergence of translation studies as autonomous discipline. Thus, functionalism is regarded by many scholars as a paradigm shift in the translational scholarly research.³⁵

Indeed, functionalism is useful in the empirical analysis of translation because it recognizes the inescapable role that the translator plays in the rendering process. In this respect, functionalist approaches are critiqued by many translation scholars because their models are thought to imply a call for the subjectivity of translators. Accordingly, the functionalist approach is viewed to be useful mostly in professionalism,³⁶ but not in other areas such as literature, particularly prose where foreignization strategy might be preferred due to its functioning to transmit the cultural assumptions represented in the plot. In short, the models offered by Reiss, Vermeer, and Nord are significant because of their consideration of the cultural factor in translation. However, their major gap lies in giving priority to the TT over the ST. This makes their approach unfit with literary translation.

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³⁰ Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

³² Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, 111.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1-2

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

³⁵ Oyali, "Critiques on Functionalist Approaches," 54.

³⁶ Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, 68.

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