

# *Skopos theory*

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*Skopos* theory is an approach to translation which was developed in Germany in the late 1970s (Vermeer 1978), and which reflects a general shift from predominantly LINGUISTIC and rather formal translation theories to a more functionally and socioculturally oriented concept of translation. (cf. ACTION (THEORY OF TRANSLATORIAL ACTION); COMMUNICATIVE/FUNCTIONAL APPROACHES). This shift drew inspiration from communication theory, action theory, text linguistics and text theory, as well as from movements in literary studies towards reception theories (see for example Iser 1978). Apart from Hans Vermeer, the founder of *skopos* theory, other scholars working in the paradigm include Margret Ammann (1989/1990), Hans Hönl and Paul Kussmaul (1982), Sigrid Kupsch-Losereit (1986), Christiane Nord (1988) and Heidrun Witte (1987a); see also articles in the journal *TEXTconTEXT*, published since 1986 by Groos in Heidelberg.

*Skopos* theory takes seriously factors which have always been stressed in action theory, and which were brought into sharp relief with the growing need in the latter half of the twentieth century for the translation of non-literary text types. In the translation of scientific and academic papers, instructions for use, tourist guides, contracts, etc., the contextual factors surrounding the translation cannot be ignored. These factors include the culture of the intended readers of the target text and of the client who has commissioned it, and, in particular, the function which the text is to perform in that culture for those readers. *Skopos* theory is directly oriented towards this function.

Translation is viewed not as a process of trans coding, but as a specific form of human action. Like any other human action, translation has a purpose, and the word *skopos*, derived from Greek, is used as the technical term for the purpose of a translation. *Skopos* must be defined before translation can begin; in highlighting *skopos*, the theory adopts a prospective attitude to translation, as opposed to the retrospective attitude adopted in theories which focus on prescriptions derived from the source text. In addition to its purpose, any action has an outcome. The outcome of translational action is a **translatum** (Vermeer

1979:174; **translat** in Reiss and Vermeer 1984/1991:2), a particular variety of target text.

### **Vermeer's *skopos* theory**

Vermeer (1978:100) postulates that as a general rule it must be the intended purpose of the target text that determines translation methods and strategies. From this postulate, he derives the ***skopos* rule**: Human action (and its subcategory: translation) is determined by its purpose (*skopos*), and therefore it is a function of its purpose. The rule is formalized using the formula: IA(Trl) = f(Sk).

The main point of this functional approach is the following: it is not the source text as such, or its effects on the source-text recipient, or the function assigned to it by the author, that determines the translation process, as is postulated by EQUIVALENCE-based translation theories, but the prospective function or *skopos* of the target text as determined by the **initiator's**, i.e. client's, needs. Consequently, the *skopos* is largely constrained by the target text user (reader/listener) and his/her situation and cultural background. Two further general rules are the coherence rule and the fidelity rule. The **coherence rule** stipulates that the target text must be sufficiently coherent to allow the intended users to comprehend it, given their assumed background knowledge and situational circumstances. The starting point for a translation is a text as part of a world continuum, written in the source language. It has to be translated into a target language in such a way that it becomes part of a world continuum which can be interpreted by the recipients as coherent with their situation (Vermeer 1978:100).

The **fidelity rule** concerns intertextual coherence between translatum and source text, and stipulates merely that some relationship must remain between the two once the overriding principle of *skopos* and the rule of (intratextual) coherence have been satisfied.

### **The general translation theory of Reiss and Vermeer**

In combining Vermeer's general *skopos* theory of 1978 with the specific translation theory developed by Katharina Reiss, Reiss and Vermeer (1984/1991) arrive at a translation theory that is sufficiently general

(*allgemeine Translationstheorie*), and sufficiently complex, to cover a multitude of individual cases. They abstract from phenomena that are specific to individual cultures and languages an account of general factors determining the translation process, to which special theories that concern individual problems or subfields can be linked consistently.

A text is viewed as an **offer of information** (*Informationsangebot*) made by a producer to a recipient. Translation is then characterized as offering information to members of one culture in their language (the target language and culture) about information originally offered in another language within another culture (the source language and culture). A translation is a secondary offer of information, imitating a primary offer of information. Or, to be more precise, the translator offers information about certain aspects of the source-text-in-situation, according to the target text *skopos* specified by the initiator (Reiss and Vermeer 1984/1991:76). Neither the selection made from the information offered in the source text, nor the specification of the *skopos* happens at random; rather, they are determined by the needs, expectations, etc. of the target-text receivers. Translation is by definition interlingual and intercultural, it involves both linguistic and cultural transfer; in other words, it is a culture-transcending process (Vermeer 1992:40).

Since *skopos* varies with text receivers, the *skopos* of the target text and of the source text may be different. In cases where the *skopos* is the same for the two texts, Reiss and Vermeer (1984/1991:45) speak of *Funktionskonstanz* (functional constancy), whereas cases in which the *skopos* differs between the two texts undergo *Funktionsanderung* (change of function). In cases of the latter type, the standard for the translation will not be intertextual coherence with the source text, but **adequacy** or appropriateness to the *skopos*, which also determines the selection and arrangement of content.

Although a translatum is not *ipso facto* a faithful imitation of the source text, fidelity to the source text is one possible or legitimate *skopos*. *Skopos* theory should not, therefore, be understood as promoting (extremely) free translation in all, or even a majority of cases.

Although the terms '*skopos*', 'purpose' and 'function' are often used interchangeably by Reiss and Vermeer (1984/1991), **function** is also used in a more specific sense which derives mainly from Reiss. In this sense, it is linked to aspects of genre (*Textsorte*) and text type (*Texttyp*). The source text can be assigned to a text type and to a genre, and in making this assignment, the

translator can decide on the hierarchy of postulates which has to be observed during target-text production (Reiss and Vermeer 1984/1991:196).

Reiss and Vermeer's text typology, based on Bühler (1934), includes the informative, the expressive and the operative text types, which derive from the descriptive, the expressive and the appellative functions of language, respectively. Such a typology is helpful mainly where functional constancy is required between source and target texts. However, both Vermeer (1989a) and Reiss (1988) have expressed reservations about the role of genre: the source text does not determine the genre of the target text, nor does the genre determine *ipso facto* the form of the target text, or, indeed, the *skopos*; rather, it is the *skopos* of the translation that determines the appropriate genre for the translatum, and the genre, being a consequence of the *skopos*, is secondary to it (Vermeer 1989a:187).

### **Status of source text and target text**

According to *skopos* theory, then, translation is the production of a functionally appropriate target text based on an existing source text, and the relationship between the two texts is specified according to the *skopos* of the translation. One practical consequence of this theory is a reconceptualization of the status of the source text. It is up to the translator as the expert to decide what role a source text is to play in the translation action. The decisive factor is the precisely specified *skopos*, and the source text is just one constituent of the commission given to the translator. The translator is required to act consciously in accordance with the *skopos*, and *skopos* must be decided separately in each specific case. It may be ADAPTATION to the target culture, but it may also be to acquaint the reader with the source culture. The translator should know what the point of a translation is—that it has some goal—but that any given goal is only one among many possible goals. The important point is that no source text has only one correct or preferable translation (Vermeer 1989a:182), and that, consequently, every translation commission should explicitly or implicitly contain a statement of *skopos*. The *skopos* for the target text need not be identical with that attributed to the source text; but unless the *skopos* for the target text is specified, translation cannot, properly speaking, be carried out at all.

## Criticism of *skopos* theory

Objections to *skopos* theory mainly concern the definition of translation and the relationship between source text and target text.

It has been argued that Reiss and Vermeer, in their attempt to establish a truly general and comprehensive translation theory, force totally disparate cases of text relations into a frame which they attempt to hold together by means of the notion of information offer (Schreitmüller 1994:105). But there should be a limit to what may legitimately be called translation as opposed to, for example, ADAPTATION. In translation proper (Koller 1990), the source text is the yardstick by which all translations must be measured, independently of the purpose for which they were produced.

In this context it is also argued that, even though a translation may indeed fulfil its intended *skopos* perfectly well, it may nevertheless be assessed as inadequate on other counts, particularly as far as lexical, syntactic, or stylistic decisions on the microlevel are concerned (a point made by Chesterman 1994:153, who otherwise acknowledges the important contributions of *skopos* theory). Such objections come mainly from linguistically oriented approaches to translation that focus on bottom-up aspects of text production and reception. For example, Newmark (1991b:106) criticizes the oversimplification that is inherent in functionalism, the emphasis on the message at the expense of richness of meaning and to the detriment of the authority of the source-language text.

However, proponents of *skopos* theory argue for a wide definition of translation (e.g. Reiss 1990). As soon as one asks for the purpose of a translation, strategies that are often listed under adaptation, for example reformulation, paraphrase and textual explication, will come in naturally as part of translation. And critics of micro level decisions usually lift the texts out of their respective environments for comparative purposes, ignoring their functional aspects.

Reiss and Vermeer's cultural approach has also been judged less applicable to literary translation, due to the special status of a literary work of art. Snell-Hornby (1990:84) argues that the situation and function of literary texts are more complex than those of non-literary texts, and that style is a highly important factor. Therefore, although *skopos* theory is by no means irrelevant to literary translation, a number of points need rethinking before the theory can be made fully applicable to this genre.

It is also possible to argue that to assign a *skopos* to a literary text is to restrict its possibilities of interpretation. In literary theory a distinction is often made between text as potential and text as realization, and *skopos* theory appears to see

the text only as realization, and not as a potential which can be used in different situations with different addressees and having different functions. However, Vermeer (1989a:181) argues that when a text is actually composed, this is done with an assumed function, or a restricted set of functions, in mind. *Skopos* theory does not deny that a text may be used in ways that had not been foreseen originally, only that a *translatum* is a text in its own right, with its own potential for use.

*Skopos* theory has helped to bring the target text into focus. As a text, a translation is not primarily determined by a source text, but by its own *skopos*. This axiom provides a theoretical argument for describing translations in terms of original text production and against describing them in the more traditional terms of EQUIVALENCE with another text in another language (see also Jakobsen 1993:156). Translation is a DECISION MAKING process. The criteria for the decisions are provided by the *skopos*, i.e. the concrete purpose and aims in a concrete translation commission. The shift of focus away from source text reproduction to the more independent challenges of target-text production has brought innovation to translation theory. As attention has turned towards the functional aspects of translation and towards the explanation of translation decisions, the expertise and ethical responsibility of the translator have come to the fore. Translators have come to be viewed as target-text authors and have been released from the limitations and restrictions imposed by a narrowly defined concept of loyalty to the source text alone.

### **Further reading**

Ammann 1989/1990; Newmark 1991b; Reiss 1986, 1988, 1990; Reiss and Vermeer 1984/1991; Vermeer 1978, 1982, 1989a, 1992.

Baker M. (ed.) (1998/2001). *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. London: Routledge.