Compare and contrast two theoretical approaches to translation

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During the course of this essay, two theoretical approaches to translation – Skopos and Polysystems – will be examined. They will be placed in historical context before the main features of each, accompanied by relevant critique, are discussed in some detail. Case studies will then help determine advantages and disadvantages before a final comparison is made to reveal similarities and differences between the two positions.

Skopos theory lies within the realm of the Functional Linguistic approach to translation theory (Berghout 7/9/05) that originated in Germany during the 1970s and 1980s, signalling a change in thinking from the structural linguistic approach that had dominated the previous twenty years. It follows in the footsteps of Katharina Reiss’ work, which moves the concept of equivalence away from the micro-level of the word or sentence to that of the macro textual level, in which translation options for different text types are proposed (Munday, 2001, pp 73-76). Skopos precedes but is incorporated into Holz-Mänttäri’s theory of translational action where TT emphasis also takes into account some practical issues, including the role of the participants in the translation process (Munday, 2001, pp 77-78); and Christiane Nord’s translation-oriented text analysis, which places more emphasis on the ST than Skopos (Munday, 2001, pp 81-84).

Skopos is the Greek word for “purpose” or “aim” (Munday, 2001, p.78) and, according to Hans Vermeer who introduced the term in the 1970s, it “is a technical term for the aim or purpose of a translation” (Vermeer, 1989, p.227). The German equivalent is skopostheorie and it is detailed in the book Grundlegung einer allgemeine Translationstheorie (Groundwork for a General Theory of Translation) that Vermeer and Katharina Reiss collaborated on in 1984. The fundamental principle of the Skopos theory lies in determining the reasons for which the translation is being commissioned and the function of the TT in the target culture. This is done in order for the translator to decide upon which methods will be employed in the production of a suitable TT – Vermeer’s “translatum”.

The basic rules of the Skopos theory as laid down by Vermeer and Reiss are:

1) The final version of the TT is determined by its skopos and the role it will play in the target culture.

2) The role of the ST in the source culture may be different to the role of the TT in the target culture.

3) The TT must take into account the receiver’s situation and background knowledge – it must be “internally coherent”.

4) The TT must be faithful to the ST – “coherent with the ST”. Here the translator is the key, as the information provided by the ST must be determined, interpreted and relayed to the target audience.

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5) These rules are in order of importance, so skopos has the prime position (Munday, 2001, p.79).

The commissioning of the translation is critical to Skopos theory. Vermeer defines the commission as “the instruction, given by oneself or by someone else, to carry out a given action – here: to translate” (Vermeer, 1989, p.235), so the purpose of a translation can be determined either by the translator him/herself or by another party – an editor or publisher, or the board of directors of a multinational corporation, for example. In the modern world, the commissioning process is usually rather precise in detail, providing information about the aim of the translation, deadlines, payment, etc. According to Holz-Mänttäri, the translator is the key player in the translation process, “the translator is the expert” (Holz-Mänttäri in Vermeer, 1989, p.235). It is up to the person in this role to determine whether the proposal can be realized within the given specifications. If not, suggestions and alternatives should be offered in order to achieve realistic outcomes (Vermeer, 1989, p.235). For example, if the commissioner of a translation needs a 200 page technical report finalised in a couple of days for use in an important boardroom meeting, the translator should offer advice as to the feasibility and offer suggestions on how it can be made to happen, which may also include the renegotiation of the fee because of the tight time frame.

If the commission falls beyond the scope of the specifications, that is if the translator is unable to produce the best possible TT available, then an “optimal” version should be agreed upon (Vermeer, 1989, p.236). Vermeer offers four definitions of the term “optimal”:

- “one of the best translations possible in the given circumstances”
- “one of those that best realize the goal in question”
- “as good as possible in view of the resources available”
- (as good as possible) “in view of the wishes of the client” (Vermeer, 1989, p.236).

As previously mentioned, the purpose of the commission needs to be clearly stated at the outset so that translation strategies can be put in place. A translator may decide to employ a technique suggested by Dryden in 1680 – metaphrase (word-for-word), paraphrase (sense-for-sense) or imitation (rewrite) (Berghout 10/8/05); or opt for House’s overt or covert translation methods (Munday, 2001, pp 93-94) where ST features are either retained or suppressed, depending on the circumstances. In the case of the 200 page technical report cited above, one concept of the “ideal” translation would be faithful adherence to text type i.e. reproduction of the detailed report. However, because of the obvious time limitations, another text type such as a summary may be proposed as an alternative. This may offer the extra advantage in that the key points raised for discussion in a boardroom meeting may be more easily accessible in a summarised form.

Whatever the final format of the TT, if it fulfils the instructions of the mutually agreed upon commission, then it is deemed to have achieved its purpose and can be considered to be adequate. In light of this, it can be seen that the emphasis of the skopos theory lies firmly on the TT, with the ST playing a role of secondary importance. The major advantage of Skopos,
therefore, lies in the fact that the same ST can be translated in different ways depending on its role and purpose in the target culture.

However, Skopos has been criticised on several grounds. Firstly, it has been said that it does not apply to literary texts, because it could be considered that they serve no purpose. (Munday, 2001, p.81; Vermeer, 1989, p.230). If this were the case, then Skopos cannot claim to be a legitimate general theory for translation, as indicated by the title of Reiss and Vermeer’s 1984 publication. Vermeer argues strongly against this point by insisting that literary works are created with a specific goal in mind, even if it is reduced to the simplest “art for the sake of art” premise (Vermeer, 1989, p.231). The application of skopos to a literary text may, in fact, suppress some of the intended deeper levels of meaning that are open for reflection to readers of the ST. However, Vermeer counters this particular argument by claiming that if the reading of a literary TT on multiple levels is desired, it should be clearly stated at the time of the commission (Vermeer, 1989, p.232). From a linguistic perspective, Skopos has been condemned for being stylistically and semantically loose, as well as for not paying enough attention to TT micro-level features (Munday, 2001, p.81). Vermeer could, I suppose, counter this criticism in the same manner by claiming that attention to linguistic detail should also be stated in the commissioning process.

In view of these criticisms, it seems that the major weakness of the skopos theory lies in the fact that almost any translation can be justified and any criticism dismissed as long as the final version of the TT satisfactorily fulfils the outcomes stated at the beginning of the assignment. This raises the obvious question as to what actually constitutes translation, with the distinct possibility of linguistic and textual equivalence being discarded if the commissioner doesn’t require it or doesn’t raise it as an issue. Even Vermeer’s rule on TT coherence with the ST is located on the bottom rung of the scale of importance.

A brief case study of the application of the skopos theory, based on personal experience, will hopefully demonstrate the advantages it offers as a practical approach to translation.

Case Study.

The ST is “Sarissa”, *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* vol.94 (1970) pp 91-107. Originally written in Greek by Manolis Andronicos, it was translated into French by Pierre Amandry and Francis Croissant. It includes four passages in German and twenty short passages from Greek Antiquity (Homer, Xenophon, Theophrastus, etc), all of which have been left unaltered in the French version, as well as five pages of diagrams, maps and sketches. The TT is to be used as a reference source for a university project by Mark Fowler on the construction of the Macedonian sarissa and will form part of the appendix of the final paper.

The commission is one of the key issues in the way the ST has been translated, as the defined field of research centres on the advantages that the metal collar offers in the overall construction of the shaft of the sarissa. After a preliminary reading of the ST and discussions with the commissioner, it was determined that only the final ten pages needed to be addressed, as the first six pages describe the archaeological site, hence deemed irrelevant to the topic of the research paper. Furthermore, working within the constraints of a strict budget and time frame, the overall length of the ST was reduced by approximately 40%.

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An analysis of the ST reveals several features that have influenced translation methodology. From a syntactic and stylistic perspective, it is fairly evident that the French text is itself a translation. It was therefore considered necessary to reword several awkward constructions, working within semantic boundaries, so as to render them more accessible to the English-speaking target audience. The German and Greek passages have been left intact, as they fall beyond the translator’s language range. They have, however, been annotated with space allocated in the footnotes for the English. This was done after consultation with the commissioner who has access to German and Greek translators. Since the field of research is specialised, terminology was decided upon after further input from the commissioner – “pointe de lance”, “talon de lance”, “douille” would be translated as “spearhead”, “buttspike” and “collar”. Diagrams and sketches have been transposed and translated in the TT, although the maps have been omitted due to their irrelevance to the research topic. The title itself poses an interesting problem. Since the French ST is entitled “Sarissa” (an English word), should the English TT be called “Sarisse” (the French word)? Considering that the purpose of the TT is scientific rather than literary, it was decided to retain the English title in the English text.

From this brief study, it has been shown that the emphasis of the translation lies firmly on the TT. After consultation with the commissioner, the purpose of the TT allows for alteration to macro-level textual features, while modified micro-level features on the word and sentence level renders the TT more accessible to the target audience. With the TT being delivered on time and within budget, and a satisfied commissioner with a completed research project, it can be seen that Skopos offers a successful, practical approach to translation which may not be realizable by other methods.

In the 1970s, a literary approach to translation theory began to emerge, partly as a response to the prescriptive linguistic theories that had monopolised thinking for the previous two decades. Key elements of this new literary approach are the writings of the Manipulation School; systems theories; and Gideon Toury’s descriptive translation studies (DTS), which tries to identify laws in translation, of which Itamar Even-Zohar’s Polysystem Theory – PS (www.art.man.ac.uk) forms a vital part. At the Leuven Conference in 1976, Even-Zohar presented a paper entitled “The Position of Translated Literature in the Literary Polysystem” where he considers the position of translated literature within the literary, cultural and historical contexts of the target culture. He does not advocate the study of individual translations but rather views the body of translated works as a system working within and reacting to a literary system, which, in turn, is working within and reacting to the historical, social and cultural systems of the particular target audience. Therefore, there is a system within a system within systems i.e. the polysystem.

The notion of “system” does, perhaps, need some clarification at this point. Literature viewed as a system can be traced back to Russian Formalist thinking of the 1920s when Yury Tynjanov is credited with being the first person to describe literature in these terms (Hermans, 1999, p.104). Translated literature itself is also considered to operate as a system in at least two ways – firstly, in the way that the TL chooses works for translation and secondly, in the way translation methodology varies according to the influence of other systems (Munday, 2001, p.109). Even-Zohar himself emphasises the fact that translated literature functions systemically:

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“I conceive of translated literature not only as an integral system within any literary polysystem but as a most active system within it.” (1976, p.200).

PS functions as a system on the level of a series of relationships between apparent opposites. These are:

- canonized (high) and non-canonized (low) forms, which opened the door for the consideration of detective and children’s stories and their role in translation
- centre and periphery
- primary (innovative) and secondary (stagnant) models
- ST and TT

The key idea of PS is that there is a continual repositioning of genres in relation to each other, “a continual struggle for power between various interest groups” (Hermans, 1999, p.42), which helps give rise to the dynamic nature of literature. If literature is to remain vibrant, it needs to be in a constant state of fluctuation, with established, familiar, canonized forms being constantly nudged and eventually replaced by newer, more innovative, peripheral models. Therefore, translated literature does not occupy a fixed position in a literary system because the system itself is in a constant state of change, although Even-Zohar proposes that the secondary position is really the normal position for translated literature (Munday, 2001, p.110). However, even though change to the core comes from the peripheral, new literary forms, when translated literature occupies this position, it is generally perceived to be fairly conservative, working within the confines of the target culture.

Even-Zohar does insist that there are occasions when translated literature forms part of the nucleus and it is then that the boundaries between translated and original literature begin to merge, being virtually indistinguishable from one another (Even-Zohar, 1976, p.200). There are three possible scenarios when this may occur:

1) When an emerging literature from a relatively new culture adopts translations from more established literatures in order to fill the gaps that exist within its own system, due to it being unable to instantly create a wide range of text types and genres. Translated literature introduces features and techniques that did not previously exist, such as new poetic structures.

2) When a smaller nation is dominated by the culture of a larger nation, it may rely on imported literature from the dominant culture in order to keep its literary system dynamic, as well as being possibly the only source available for the creation of new genres, for example Breton culture in Brittany may rely heavily on literary styles from France in order to fill the gaps that exist in its own literary system.

3) When there are turning points in literary history, such as when established forms lose popularity or when there is no existing model. This could conceivably be the role that Harry Potter occupies in Chinese Mandarin.
There are also occasions when translated literature can occupy both a central position and a peripheral position within a literary system. This may occur when major social changes are taking place. Even-Zohar exemplifies this with the role of translated literature in Israel in the early 1900s when literature from Russian into Hebrew was more dominant than translations from English, German or Polish (Munday, 2001, p.110; Even-Zohar, 1976, p.202).

Having briefly discussed the theoretical workings of the polysystem approach, it now remains to be seen how it affects translation methodology. Even-Zohar says that when a translated work occupies a central position in the literary polysystem of the target culture, it is generally strong in itself and doesn’t need to conform to target culture conventions. The translator doesn’t try to adapt to TL models, staying close to the original ST. If the position of translated literature is weak, the reverse trend occurs. The translator tends to adopt more features from the target culture, so the translation becomes target culture dominant, often providing a less than satisfactory translation (Even-Zohar, 1976, pp 203-204; Munday, 2001, p.110).

PS is important because it moves translation away from the traditional ST-TT linguistic comparisons of shift and equivalence towards the viewing of translation in a social, cultural and historical context. There is also a change from the study of individual texts as a systemic approach tries to uncover the universal laws and principles that govern translation. It is also quite significant because it can be applied to other systems besides strictly literary systems eg television programming and politics (I would like to develop this theme but space restrictions prevent me from doing so here), therefore making the system itself universal.

PS has been widely criticised on a number of issues:

- Gentzler questions Even-Zohar’s objectivity, claims that the universal laws are too abstract, criticises the level of input and the relevance of Russian Formalism, and states that little thought has been given to limitations placed on translation and texts (Munday, 2001, p.111).

- Berman condemns Even-Zohar’s proposition that translated literature generally occupies a role of secondary importance in the target culture because “it downplays their creative and formative aspect” (Hermans, 1999, p.154). Berman also thinks that translated literature remains a separate entity within the target culture.

- Susan Bassnett thinks that the comments describing target literature as “young”, “weak” “vacuum”, etc are highly subjective. Subjectivity also dominates the definition as to what constitutes canonized and non-canonized literature. She questions the abstract nature of the theory which tends to neglect concrete examples while, at the same time, wondering whether the theory has progressed much beyond the ideas of Russian Formalism of the 1920s (Bassnett & Lefevere 1998: 127 in Hermans, 1999, p.109).

- André Lefevere claims that Even-Zohar is presumptuous in his claim that the systems he describes actually exist, condemns the abstract nature of the theory, and describes the terms “primary” and “secondary” as “superfluous” (Hermans, 1999, p.125).

- Philippe Codde believes that PS has become outdated as other systemic theories are presented as alternatives (2003, p.26)
- Theo Hermans argues against one of Even-Zohar’s most fundamental principles by saying that the target culture may not necessarily select the ST. He cites the example of the period of European colonization when France and England were seen to be “dumping literary items on a colonized population” (1999, p.111). He also claims that the series of binary opposites that constitute the polysystem theory don’t take into account those factors that are not diametrically opposed.

While PS could be seen to offer an intellectual approach to translation, I believe that it remains far too abstract in its presentation because it doesn’t provide concrete evidence, doesn’t venture into specifics, or offer functioning examples. No mention is made of the concept of overt and covert translations (this comes later), although Even-Zohar says that it is difficult to differentiate translated from original literature when placed in the central position. I would now like to examine two case studies in order to exemplify the workings of PS.

**Case Study 1.** Translated literature at the centre of the polysystem.

In the 1970s, “Planet of the Apes” starring Charlton Heston appeared in cinemas across the United States and throughout many countries of the world. Its widespread popularity and box office success placed it firmly at the centre of popular culture and indeed remains so today with numerous television repeats and the success of the 2001 remake. The movie provides an excellent example of translated science fiction occupying the centre of the literary polysystem of the English-speaking Western world, since few people realise that “Planet of the Apes” has been derived from an original French novel entitled “La planète des singes” by Pierre Boulle, published in 1963.

In order to occupy such a key position in the literary polysystem, “La planète des singes” has been subjected to the influence of several translation theories. Skopos would have been initially applied in order for the TT’s purpose in the target culture to be determined i.e. to produce a screenplay and ultimately a movie that will earn the movie companies a lot of money. Holz-Mänttäri’s theory of translational action, involving players in the translation process, is a key feature with the roles of the initiator and commissioner being filled by Hollywood executives and the roles of TT user and TT receiver being filled by movie theatres and the audience (Munday, 2001, p.77). Dryden’s intersemiotic method also figures prominently as Boulle’s novel is transformed into a screenplay by William Broyles Jr (www.imdb.com). Finally, the ultimate TT exists as a covert translation, since many ST features have been suppressed. “Le professeur Antelle”, “le physicien Arthur Levain” and “le journaliste Ulysse Mérou” from the original have been replaced by “Astronaut Taylor”, “Astronaut Dodge” and “Astronaut Landon” (www.movieprop.com); while Paris’ Orly Airport has been replaced by the Statue of Liberty in the final scene of the American version, to mention just a few examples.

The advantage of polysystems in this instance is fairly clear, as it embraces the application of multiple theories under the umbrella of one general theory. The chief disadvantage, however, is that Even-Zohar is not clear enough about this in the enunciation of his theory.

**Case Study 2.** Translated literature at the periphery of the polysystem.
Often, when a piece of translated literature occupies the peripheral position in the polysystem, the reader is aware that what is being read is, in fact, a translated text. Juliane House calls this an overt translation (Munday, 2001, p.93) – a translation with ST orientation that tends to retain some of its original cultural identity. These texts are sometimes found on the shelves of newsagents, in some obscure section in bookshops, in a rack at the train station, or in airport departure lounges.

The translation of Émile Zola’s *Germinal* by Leonard Tancock in 1954 supports this idea, since the target audience is aware that they are reading an account of coal mining conditions in northern France in the 1800s. The TT retains all of the proper nouns of the ST (eg “Étienne”, “Plassens in Provence”, “Pierre Rougon”, “Antoine Macquart”, etc on p.8), with no attempt at cultural camouflage. The same features are evident in peripheral literature translated into French. *La Guerre des Rose* (1985) by Warren Alder (translated by Christiane Cozzolino) retains the names of the American characters and places, as does Glenn Savan’s *White Palace* (1973) (translated by Isabelle Reinharez), which doesn’t even try to mask the title. The same features are evident in *Mon Michaël* (1973) by Amos Oz (translated by Rina Viers), which retains all Hebrew proper nouns and references to Israel from the Hebrew original. Furthermore, these four translations have all retained ST format. *Germinal* in particular could possibly have been presented in an abbreviated English version, however, the seven part French model remains intact.

These two case studies reveal a possible discrepancy in Even-Zohar’s theory concerning translation techniques and position in the polysystem. According to him, if translated literature occupies the central position, it possesses ST orientation. If it is peripheral, it possesses TT orientation (1976, pp 203-204). These two cases tend to reveal the opposite trend with “Planet of the Apes” conforming more to TT expectations and *Germinal, La Guerre des Rose, White Palace* and *Mon Michaël* retaining many ST features. However, if *Tintin* by Hergé can be thought of as occupying a central position as translated work in the English literary polysystem, it does conform to Even-Zohar’s ideas because it is heavily ST orientated. It can be argued, therefore, that central and peripheral positions can be viewed in a highly subjective manner, as does Susan Bassnett (1998). Despite this dilemma, it is clear that relative position in the polysystem for all literary works, not just translated works, is a reflection of social and cultural tastes and historical trends.

After examining in some detail the Skopos theory and the Polysystems Theory, it can be seen that they were both conceived around the same time in the 1970s, partly as a reaction to the structural linguistic approach to translation theory. Skopos offers a Functional Linguistic approach which is heavily TT oriented, while Polysystems provides a literary approach that can be either ST or TT oriented, depending on the position translated literature occupies in the literary polysystem of the target culture at a particular time. Skopos provides a practical approach to translation that allows for the individual ST to be translated in different ways, depending on the purpose it will serve in the target culture. Polysystems is an intellectual, systemic, perhaps even universal approach that moves away from the examination of individual texts, allowing for the possible inclusion of several theories under the one umbrella. Skopos can be applied to both literary and non-literary texts, whereas Polysystems, being a literary approach, could be seen as neglecting non-literary work, although it does allow for the inclusion of “lower” genres, such as police novels, to be viewed in terms of translation theory.
The role of the translator is an important feature of both theories. Skopos allows for a considerable amount of input from the translator in determining strategies after negotiating directly with the commissioner. While the role of the translator may not seem to be as dominant in Polysystems Theory, a great deal of subjectivity is required in order to be able to reflect the cultural and historical status of the literary work in the target culture.

Both theories could be criticised over a number of issues. Skopos could be seen as a possible justification for the production of almost any translation, regardless of accuracy and quality. In the quest to uncover universal laws in translation, Polysystems, with its roots in Russian Formalism, could be viewed as archaic, too abstract, offering little in the way of evidence of its practical application. However, both approaches are not prescriptive, offering an alternative to word-for-word, sense-for-sense, equivalence and shift issues.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


