

HANS J. VERMEER (1930–2010)

“Skopos and Commission in Translational Action”

Keywords:

commission, functionalist approach, intertextual coherence, *skopos*, *translatum*

1. Author information

Hans J. Vermeer (24 September 1930 – 4 February 2010) was a professor of translation studies and the founder of the *skopos* theory. He studied translation and interpreting, general linguistics and Indian languages at Heidelberg University, where he also completed his PhD. He extensively published on Indian languages, Portuguese language and literature, foreign language teaching and translation studies.

2. Abstract

In his article “Skopos and Commission an Translational Action” Vermeer presents and explains his *skopos* theory. The author also replies to the objections raised by critics of the theory who claim that it is not applicable to all types of translation.

Vermeer understands translation as an action which has an aim or purpose and leads to a target text. The goal and the mode in which the action (translation methods and strategies) is realized are determined by a commission (set by the client or by the translator himself/herself).

Replying to arguments against the *skopos* theory, the author postulates that every translation, like every text, has an aim; even the creation (and translation) of literature involves purposeful action. The translator always makes interpretations and addresses the text to a specific group of text users (restricted by the commission).

The realizability of the commission depends on the circumstances of the target culture. However, a translation does not always have to adapt the text to the target culture. Like “fidelity” to the source text, this is one of the possibilities, specified by the commission.

3. Terminology

Source text term	Meaning	Term in Polish
commission	the instruction given by oneself or by someone else to carry out a given action	zlecenie
intertextual coherence	relation between the <i>translatum</i> and the source text	spójność intertekstualna
<i>skopos</i>	goal, aim or purpose of a translation	<i>skopos</i>
<i>translatum</i>	the resulting translated text	tekst docelowy, tłumaczenie

4. Methodology

The concept of translation presented in Vermeer’s article is functionally and culturally-oriented. It reflects a paradigm shift from the linguistic to the functionalist approach, which defines translation as a purposeful transcultural action.

5. Links with other publications on the subject

Nord, C. 1991a. *Text Analysis in Translation: Theory, Methodology and Didactic Application of a Model for Translation Oriented Text Analysis*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

----- 1991b “Scopos, Loyalty, and Translation Conventions”, *Target* 3: 1/1991. 91–109.

----- 1997. *Translating as a Purposeful Activity. Functionalist Approaches Explained*. Manchester: St Jerome.

Vermeer, H. J. 1983. "Translation Theory and Linguistics", in: Pauli Roinila, Ritva Orfanos and Sonja Tirkkonen-Condit (eds), *Näkökohtia kääntämisen tutkimuksesta*. Joensuu: University of Joensuu. 1–10.

----- 1987. "What Does it Mean to Translate?". *Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics*. 13/1987. 25–33.

----- 1992. "Is Translation a Linguistic or a Cultural Process?", in: Malcolm Coulthard (ed.) *Studies in Translation/Estudos in Tradução, Ilha do Desterro*. 28/1992. 37–49.

----- 1996. *A Skopos Theory of Translation (Some arguments for and against)*. Heidelberg: TEXTconTEXT.

6. Critical commentary

The presentation of the *skopos* theory made by Vermeer is logical and easy to understand. It is difficult to argue with the statement that every translation has a purpose because this observation is based on the experience of every translator. If a commission he/she gets does not specify an exact goal and addressee, he/she chooses one, even if unconsciously.

In my opinion, this pragmatic approach has been chosen to show translators that they should not be confined to the source text, and to remind them that they do not translate a source text in a void. I think that defining a goal and an addressee may not make the translator's work easier, but definitely increases the chances that his/her translation will be successful. These claims seem to be obvious, yet still worth mentioning, as they are often forgotten.

7. Quotation to remember the text by

“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 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” (Vermeer, 2000: 229).

“The *skopos*, which is (or should be) defined in the commission, expands the possibilities of translation strategies, and releases the translator from the corset of an enforced – and hence often meaningless – literalness; and it incorporates and enlarges the accountability of the translator, in that his translation must function in such a way that the given goal is attained. This accountability in fact lies at the very heart of the theory: what we are talking about is no less than ethos of the translator” (Vermeer, 2000: 237).

8. References

Vermeer, H. J. 1989. “Skopos and Commission in Translational Action”, in: Andrew Chesterman (ed.), *Readings in Translation Theory*. Helsinki: Oy Finn Lectura Ab, 173–87.

----- 2000. “Skopos and Commission in Translational Action”, in: Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*. London. New York: Routledge, 221–32.

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