Towards a General Theory of Translational Action

Skopos Theory Explained

Katharina Reiß / Hans J. Vermeer

Translated from the German by Christiane Nord

English reviewed by Marina Dudenhöfer
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This is the first English translation of the seminal book by Katharina Reiß and Hans Vermeer, Grundlegung einer allgemeinen Translationstheorie, first published in 1984. The first part of the book was written by Vermeer and explains the theoretical foundations and basic principles of skopos theory as a general theory of translation and interpreting or ‘translational action’, whereas the second part, penned by Katharina Reiß, seeks to integrate her text-typological approach, first presented in 1971, as a ‘specific theory’ that focuses on those cases in which the skopos requires equivalence of functions between the source and target texts. Almost 30 years after it first appeared, this key publication is now finally accessible to the next generations of translation scholars.

In her translation, Christiane Nord attempts to put skopos theory and her own concept of ‘function plus loyalty’ to the test, by producing a comprehensible, acceptable text for a rather heterogeneous audience of English-speaking students and scholars all over the world, at the same time as acting as a loyal intermediary for the authors, to whom she feels deeply indebted as a former student and colleague.
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Translator’s preface

The starting point for what is now called the functional approach to translation was a lecture course on a ‘General Theory of Translation’ held by Hans J. Vermeer at the School for Translation and Interpreting Studies in Germersheim, University of Mainz, Germany, in the academic year 1976-1977 (cf. Snell-Hornby 2006: 51). This theory was introduced to a wider audience in an essay published in *Lebende Sprachen* (Vermeer [1978]1983), in which the author proposed a “framework for a general theory of translation”. He called it *skopos* theory (*Skopostheorie*) and suggested that the most important criterion guiding the translator’s decisions should be the *skopos*, i.e. the aim or purpose, of the translation process. Two factors kept this theory from becoming widespread: (a) *Lebende Sprachen* was (and is) a journal for professional translators, whose attitude towards theory has always been rather sceptical, and (b) the German academic style of the paper did little or nothing to make them change their minds. It was not until 1984, when the book in question here was first published, that German translation scholars began to pay attention to this new approach. As translation studies in Germany up to that point had been entirely dominated by linguistic theories based on the fundamental notion of equivalence, the *skopos* theory was harshly criticized for transgressing the limits of “translation proper” and making “the contours of translation, as the object of study [...] steadily vaguer and more difficult to survey” (Koller 1995: 193).

During the decade after Vermeer first published his seminal article, *skopos* theory remained relatively unknown outside the German-speaking world. It is hard to believe that, by the end of the 1980s, less than a handful of articles by Vermeer had been published in English, as well as a longer essay in Portuguese and a Finnish translation of some parts of this book. An (incomplete) Spanish translation appeared as late as 1996. The situation has not changed much since then. Translation scholars all over the world have had all too often to rely on second-hand information, which, sadly, has distorted the facts more than once; a not insignificant factor for this would be the style conventions of German academic writing, which are not easy to process for readers with different cultural backgrounds.

The first part of this book was written by Vermeer and explains the theoretical foundations and basic principles of *skopos* theory as a general theory of translation and interpreting, whereas the second part, penned by Katharina Reiß, seeks to integrate Reiß’s text-typological approach, first presented in 1971, as a “specific theory” within the general framework of *skopos* theory. This attempt to combine the general with the specific (together with the conventional alphabetical order of the authors’ names) led to the misconception, which is still widely held, in particular by newcomers to translation studies, that Katharina Reiß was the founder of *skopos* theory. What is true, however,
is that, in her first book, in a chapter called ‘The limitations of translation criticism’, Reiß included a special function of a translation as an exception to the overall concept of equivalence she subscribed to (Reiß [1971]2000: 92-101), thus cautiously introducing a functional perspective to translation.

In this translation of Reiß and Vermeer’s 1984 book (from the 1991 edition, which provides a list of more recent publications in this area), I have tried to put functional translation theory to the test, whilst striving for both intratextual coherence from the target audience’s point of view and intertextual coherence with the source text (6.2., 6.3.), as well as for loyalty (cf. Nord 1997 and elsewhere) towards all of the interactants involved: the authors, the audience addressed by this book, the commissioner, and, last but not least, myself, as a translator and former student and colleague deeply indebted to both Katharina Reiß and Hans Vermeer. Intratextual coherence is based on the previous knowledge which the target audience is expected to possess. This knowledge may include earlier publications in English by Vermeer or Reiß, on the one hand, and publications in English written by other scholars and dealing with skopos theory and functionalism. Therefore, I have adopted the terminology used there, whenever I found it appropriate.

However, these publications do not provide a homogeneous terminological system. For example, Andrew Chesterman, the translator of Vermeer’s essay on skopos and commission in translational action (Vermeer [1989]2004: 227) uses the term translational action to refer to Justa Holz-Mänttäri’s Translatorisches Handeln, a generic concept including not only translation and interpreting but also other forms of intercultural mediation which are not based on a source text, such as cross-cultural technical writing or a consultant’s information on a regional political or cultural situation (cf. Holz-Mänttäri 1984). I adopted this translation in an earlier publication (Nord 1997: 12). More recently, Snell-Hornby (2006: 56, similarly Schäffner 1998) translated Holz-Mänttäri’s term with translatorial action, which makes sense if we understand translatorial as an adjective to describe objects or phenomena related to translators (cf. Pym 2009: 46). In this book, I shall therefore use translatorial action to translate translatorisches Handeln, and translational action as generic term for translation and interpreting (T&I) where the authors use Translation in German (1.1.). Accordingly, translation and interpreting (T&I) studies will be referred to as translatology to mark the difference with regard to the more traditional approaches of the time, whereas translation studies will be used to translate Übersetzungswissenschaft. Translation science or the science of translation, a term used by Nida (1964) and Wilss ([1977]1982) in the titles of their works, has never made its way into general usage.

But there are other cases: in Reiß ([1981]2004: 173), the translator rendered Textsorte as “text variety” because text type, the usual term at the time, would have blurred Reiß’s distinction between Textsorte and Texttyp. In this book, I have opted for genre, which has become the generally accepted term for what

Examples and sample texts or text segments always raise the most challenging problems in the translation of linguistic and translation-related publications. Wherever possible, I have adapted the examples to the target language and culture(s), unless this would have required rewriting the entire context (cf. Nord 2013). In these latter cases, especially where meta-language was involved, I preferred to add glosses, explanations or analogies in English, or existing English translations where available. For example, the reference to three German translations of Homer’s *Odyssey* was replaced by a reference to the English translations by Butler and Murray, which (fortunately) display the same phenomenon criticized by the authors. In one case (the German translation of Genesis 1 by Buber and Rosenzweig, § 3.1., example 1), I decided to abridge the very long German text and to provide a literal translation in order to facilitate comprehension for readers who are not familiar with this language. For the sake of loyalty towards the target audience, such changes are always indicated in the text or in a translator’s note.

With regard to quotations, I have replaced the German texts wherever an English original or published translation was available (e.g. Schleiermacher 1838 → [1838]2004; Ortega y Gasset [1933]1947 → [1933]1962; 1957, 1976 → 1992; Reiß 1971 → [1971]2000; Wilss 1977 → [1977]1982; Lyons 1972 → 1968, etc.), changing the bibliographical reference accordingly and including details on the translator. Unless indicated otherwise, the translation of quotations from the German linguistic or T&I literature is mine; the original German, French or Spanish text is provided in a footnote in order to avoid a ‘Chinese whispers’ effect if readers want to use it in their own research. In the case of certain Latin quotations, which the authors assumed belonged to their audience’s general knowledge (which, as many a desperate student has told me, is not always the case), I have added a paraphrase in English.

When the book was first published, inclusive language was not yet an issue in the English-speaking world, let alone in Germany. Today, I do not really feel comfortable myself referring to translators and interpreters as male persons only by using the generic masculine forms preferred by the authors. On the other hand, I know from personal communication with both Vermeer and Reiß that they were always rather sceptical with regard to the (excessive) use of inclusive forms (cf. Reiß 1993, on linguistic feminism in Bible translation). In my translation, I have therefore tried to cautiously follow a middle path, generally reproducing the generic masculine forms found in the source text, but trying to avoid them where this was possible without making the text sound ‘too feminist’.

In order to enhance the readability of the text, I have used two strategies, a stylistic and a formal one. With regard to style, it was often impossible to divide the long German sentences into as many chunks as would be necessary to achieve a piece of acceptable academic writing in English. But I have tried
my best. To compensate for the remaining syntactic stumbling blocks, I have opted for a more reader-friendly layout, adding headings to paragraphs where the source text did not provide them, using indentations for quotes, boxes for examples and key points, and italics to stress particular words or phrases.

Allison Beeby (1998: 64) points out that the unmarked use of translation to mean “translation into the mother tongue” is so common in English that there is not even a specific term to refer to translation into a foreign language. Having trained generations of young students to translate in both directions, at least in the field of specialized translation, I have often argued that it is a part of translation competence to know the limitations of one’s own abilities. Therefore, the English translation of this seminal book is the result of “split competence” (cf. Nord 2001: 186). I am a native speaker of German familiar with both this book and other publications by the authors, and I was trained as a professional translator. Proceeding according to my “looping model” of the translation process (Nord [1988]2005: 39), I felt competent enough to interpret the translation brief, to analyse and understand the source-language offer of information and to choose the appropriate translation strategies and procedures. However, for the production of a target-language information offer that would meet the expectations of an educated English-speaking audience, I had to resort to somebody else’s linguistic and cultural competence. I am deeply indebted to Marina Dudenhöfer, a professional translator and translation teacher at the Faculty for Translation Studies, Linguistics and Cultural Studies of the University of Mainz at the Germersheim campus, who volunteered to revise my English draft. But her contribution was by no means limited to a mere native speaker’s monolingual review. Her critical feedback, particularly with regard to concepts and terminology, was of immeasurable value to the project. It goes without saying, however, that I have only myself to blame for those inadequacies which are still present in the text.

My thanks go to Prof Dr Katharina Reiß and Dr Manuel Vermeer for entrusting me with the translation of this book, to my dear friend Dr Robert Hodgson for encouraging me to “dare the unthinkable” (as my friend and editor Marina Dudenhöfer put it), and to Ken Baker for unconditionally accepting the manuscript for publication by St. Jerome. As usual, my feelings during the translation process alternated between modest satisfaction and utter despair, but the fascination I felt for this wonderful piece of scholarly work always gained the upper hand.

Heidelberg, September 2012

Christiane Nord
References


Foreword to the first edition

This work is the result of many years of extensive reflection on the theory and practice of translation. It builds on several smaller studies (for exact references cf. Vermeer 1983a), which have been revised, made more specific, and extended, and it discusses important, or at least acknowledged, recent publications in the field of translation and interpreting (T&I) studies. Our aim was to lay down the foundations of a general theory of translational action which would allow room for the development and inclusion of coherent subtheories with regard to a particular problem or area. The blueprint for such a comprehensive theory of translational action, as proposed in this book, draws on cultural studies and linguistics, taking both text-linguistic and hermeneutical aspects into account. It has emerged from the numerous discussions of the authors with each other and with many colleagues, to whose generosity and willingness to debate all sorts of issues we are deeply indebted.

The theory set out here is not designed to be an abstract theoretical model; we have made an effort to consider the practice of translation and interpreting at all times. The aim of T&I studies is not just to examine the problems faced in professional practice, but also to offer theoretically founded, reliable guidelines for practising translators and interpreters (cf. Hönig and Kußmaul 1982 on practice-orientation).

In this context, we would like to clarify the widespread misconception that theory should have a direct impact on practice. A ‘theory’ consists in the interpretation and correlation of ‘observed data’; it is an object that pursues its own interests, which are not directly linked to practice. This concept of theory is in line with modern epistemology. It would therefore not make sense to expect that theory could immediately contribute to the improvement of practice. To whom would it occur to ask about the practical uses of a theory regarding the origins of the solar system? (We apologise for the example if the analogy seems too pretentious.) However, a subtheory of this theory may interpret and correlate certain aspects of practical activities and this reflection on ‘practice’ can indeed be expected to have some impact on how the activities are carried out.

For example: astronomers analyzing the trajectories of the planets may be asked how a space shuttle can steer clear of Jupiter and Saturn. Moreover, without knowledge of the trajectories of planets and planetoids, the shuttle would not find its way through the universe – and shooting it into space would simply mean wilfully putting at risk the capital invested in it.
This is almost exactly how we would like our theory to be understood.

The authors also offer their reflections in the hope that they can contribute to what should become the rule in all disciplines, that is, to encourage a broad and at the same time profound debate serving to make T&I studies progress further.

Würzburg and Heidelberg, 1984
Katharina Reiß
Hans J. Vermeer
Foreword to the second edition

In today’s academia, six years are a long time. Since the first edition of this book was published in 1984, translation and interpreting scholars have done a lot of research, and some progress has been achieved. That this book can still be reprinted unchanged, complemented only by a short list of more recent publications, may be regarded as an indication that our theory has not lost its validity.

However, we would like to clarify a misconception which has sometimes been put forward. Some scholars feel that the first and the second part of the book do not fit together. We do not share this opinion. The second part assumes that the skopos demands invariance of functions between the source and the target texts as a case in point; the first part considers this to be a specific case where the difference between source-text and target-text functions is ‘zero’. In our opinion, both approaches are legitimate within the framework of a general theory.

Würzburg and Heidelberg, 1991

Katharina Reiß
Hans J. Vermeer
0. Introduction

0.1 Preliminary remarks

We do not promise a coherent or complete theory. Our aim is to present some aspects in a new light rather than to introduce new viewpoints. “Scientific progress is created where scholars propose theories that are worth debating”,¹ says Sökeland. Our readers may judge whether this holds true for this book. At any rate, “nullumst iam dictum quod non dictum sit prius”; nothing has been said that has not been said before (Terence, *Eunuchus*, line 41).

Individual topics will not be presented in strict sequence. Some topics are broader than others because a complex theory should explain the reasons behind certain phenomena, clarify relationships and look into other disciplines. We shall not try to avoid repetition and we shall allow ourselves the liberty of not striving for completeness or definitiveness (which cannot be achieved anyway!) but shall instead select those aspects of a theory of translational action which seem most interesting and relevant, in part because they have not been dealt with adequately in the literature so far in this area.

0.2 General epistemological considerations

In presenting our theory, we shall constantly emphasize the interdependence of language and culture. However, according to the very definition of translation and in line with traditional viewpoints, the linguistic aspect has always been at the centre of attention and, therefore, we may consider translatology (i.e. translation and interpreting studies) to be a subdiscipline of applied linguistics or, more specifically, pragmalinguistics, which is itself a branch of cultural studies (cf. the diagram in Vermeer 1978: 4, where *semiology* and *ethology* were, at some point of the publication process, mistakenly swapped over).

In our discussion, we shall thus deal with cultural transfer only to the extent that it is relevant for a general theory of translational action focussing on language. In principle, cultural transfer might – and should – be placed on the same level as linguistic transfer. This would mean that translatology would be classified as a culture-specific form of textology or theory of text production. However, these considerations would not add anything essentially new to our theory but might indeed increase the risk of misunderstandings. For the time being, we shall therefore refrain from describing translatology from a primarily cultural perspective.

The object of our theory is translational action (for terminology 3.1.). We shall describe the process of translating or interpreting, its product (the *translatum*),

¹ Wissenschaftlicher Fortschritt entsteht da, wo Theorien vorgetragen werden, über die es sich zu diskutieren lohnt. (Sökeland 1980: 8)
and the relations between them, i.e. how they are interdependent.

For pedagogical reasons, we shall use the most elementary case as the starting point of our model. We shall assume that a source text, produced by a ‘text producer’ or ‘sender’ (for terminology 0.4.), is being translated/interpreted by a translator/interpreter for a target audience. In order to reduce the complexity of the process, other factors that may also be involved will be excluded, such as a client or commissioner (e.g. a translation agent) mediating between the text producer and the translator/interpreter, an actor in a drama production, or a newsreader in a TV broadcast, who act as secondary senders. We shall also ignore the fact that it may be relevant for the translation strategy whether a translator or interpreter is working for the source or the target side, etc.

Scientific description must be ‘objective’, i.e. supra-individually valid in such a way that the description (both as a process and as a product) will lead to the same result if it is reproduced under the same conditions. These conditions, i.e. any underlying assumptions or rules, must be made clear.

A theory of translational action may be general, i.e. independent of culture and language pairs, or specific, i.e. focussing on a particular pair of cultures and languages. In this book, we are only concerned with a general theory.

A complete theory of translation […] has three components: specification of function and goal; description and analysis of operations; and critical comment on relationships between goal and operation. (Kelly 1979: 1)

In general terms, a theory can be broken down into (1) a description of its groundwork, (2) a description of its subject matter, and (3) a set of rules (for more details, 4.). The set of rules for a theory of translational action should include (a) general rules, (b) specific rules and (c) meta-rules.

The general rules set out the conditions under which translational action takes place, regardless of specific languages or texts. The specific rules refer to the conditions prevailing in specific cultures, languages or texts. Meta-rules establish the conditions under which the process of translational action can be described (e.g. defining the concept of translational action on which our theory is based).

0.3 The purpose of T&I studies

What is the purpose of a theory of translational action? One possible answer could be the one given by Isocrates (436–338 B.C.) when speaking about rhetoric. An answer which was aptly reworded by W. Wackernagel in 1837:

The purpose of a theory of poetics or rhetoric can never be to turn somebody who studies it or reads a textbook into a poet or an orator.
A wise and conscientious teacher or textbook writer will merely strive to analyse the poetry and prose that lies before us, in order to discover the principles inherent in them and bring them to light, facilitating their comprehension, heightening the pleasure of reading, sharpening and strengthening the student’s judgement. Anyone among the readers or listeners on whom God has bestowed a gift for poetic or rhetorical art will benefit doubly from these lessons because they will also receive practical instruction; the teacher of poetics or rhetoric will enhance their abilities. But neither the teacher nor anybody else will make a poet or orator out of somebody who is not yet a poet or orator.²

The same holds true for translating and interpreting. Isocrates goes on to say, as paraphrased by Kennedy (1980: 32):

one must start with native ability, which training can sharpen, but not create. […] It is the function of the teacher to explain the principles […] and also to set an example […] on which the students can pattern themselves.

0.4 General remarks on terminology

In T&I studies, it is still very common to speak of source and target language texts, readers, etc. In this book, however, we shall refer to them as source text, target text, target recipients, etc., and try to emphasize, from the very beginning, that translational action is not only a linguistic but also a cultural transfer.

Cultures – and the languages they encompass – are like paradigms (Kuhn 1970). New paradigms use new terminology, or confer new meaning to existing terminology. Linguacultures³ do not only follow on from each other chronologically, they also exist simultaneously, i.e. in the same manner as paradigms that are at different stages with regard to the perceptibility and perception of

² Der Zweck einer Poetik, einer Rhetorik kann niemals der sein, den, der sie studiert oder ein Lehrbuch liest, zu einem Dichter, einem Redner zu machen. Ist das Bestreben dessen, der sie lehr[t] oder ein Lehrbuch schreibt, vernünftig und gewissenhaft, so geht er nur darauf aus, die Poesie und die prosaische Literatur, wie sie vor uns liegt, auf die Gesetze hin zu betrachten, die in ihnen walten, diese Gesetze zur Anschauung zu bringen und dadurch das Verständnis zu erleichtern, den Genuß zu erhöhen, das Urteil zu schärfen und zu befestigen. Ist dann unter den Lesern oder Hörern jemand, dem Gott Dichter- oder Rednergabe verliehen hat, dem werden dann freilich jene Lehren doppelt zugute kommen, er wird auch praktischen Nutzen davon haben: einen solchen wird der Poetiker, der Rhetoriker weiter ausbilden; aber jemanden zum Dichter oder Redner machen, der es nicht schon ist, das kann weder er, noch sonst ein Mensch. (W. Wackernagel 1906: 409)

³ This neologism, which is used by the American linguistic anthropologists Paul Friedrich and Michael Agar, among others, is intended to stress the interdependence of language and culture. (Translator’s note)
Introduction

the ‘world’. Translational action (even between languages with similar surface structures like English, French and German) is impossible unless we understand the paradigms of linguacultures, i.e. their ‘theories’ of world perception (cf. Andersson 1978: 76, although he is referring to a different context).

Where terminological distinctions do not seem to be necessary, we have taken the liberty of using a variety of expressions, borrowing from different sources. For example, we have used synonyms such as text producer, sender, author, speaker, writer, and recipient, listener, reader, respectively – not through carelessness but in order to avoid a monotonous style. (0.2.)

A comment should be made here about the term translation function. This term can refer to (1) the external function of the process of translational action (e.g. the translator making a living) or (2) the internal function of the process with regard to the translatum that is produced (e.g. the text conveying some information). This second meaning is also expressed by target-text function. We shall use both terms in this book, i.e. translation function when focussing on the process of producing a target text and target-text function when focussing on the product once it is finished. If we wanted to be more exact, we would have to say ‘the function of the target text that is being produced’ in the first case, but this is a rather awkward way of putting it. At any rate, we shall allow ourselves – and others – some terminological liberties.

Of course, terms are arbitrary labels that can be changed (J. Wackernagel [1926]2009: 37, calls them “tokens”). Arguing about terminology is futile if we bear in mind that although the selection of terms is arbitrary, they should not convey wrong associations, as Lüllwitz reminds us (cf. 1972: 263, note 28). Thus, our use of terminology in this book is tentative at best.
Part I

Theoretical groundwork