

# **SKOPOS THEORY: A PRACTICAL APPROACH IN THE TRANSLATION PROCESS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Numerous criticisms have been addressed toward the application of Skopos theory within translation studies. Issues such as vague concepts of translation, 'dethroning' the source text, oversimplification and inapplicability to achieve equivalence for literary and religious texts are some of many critiques for Skopos theory. In addition, from a student's perspective, it is argued that there is no specific guideline to carry out the theory. However, here, I would like to present my perspective as a student practicing translation as well as a brief overview of Skopos theory, its criticisms as well as its usefulness in actual implementation.

**Keywords:** Skopos theory, translation practice

## **INTRODUCTION**

*The emergence of Skopos theory*

*The late 1970s marks the beginning of a translation theory, Skopos theory (Skopostheorie), proposed by Hans J. Vermeer (Nord, 2012, p. 26). First introduced in 1978 by Vermeer in a German journal *Lebende Sprachen*, this theory is claimed to be a "framework for a general theory of translation" (Nord, 2012, p. 27). Vermeer's view on this general approach is highly motivated by his attempt to seek for another way to translate without depending on linguistics level only, as portrayed in his statement quoted in Nord (1997): "Linguistics alone won't help us; first, because translating is not merely and not even primarily a linguistic process. Secondly, be-*

cause linguistics has not yet formulated the right questions to tackle our problems. So let's look somewhere else" (Nord, 1997, as cited in Stajszczak, 2011, p. 11).

This new approach has also drawn a shift in the translation paradigm from linguistically oriented concepts to a functionally and socio culturally oriented framework (Prunc, 2003 in de Leon, 2008, p. 1; Schaffner, 1998, p. 235). Skopos theory, though it is not a new concept in the functionalist approach, has then integrated with previous functionalist approach (Katharina Reiss' text-types and language function) in a collaborative work between Reiss and Vermeer in 1984 (Nord, 2012, p. 27) and developed itself to be more functional and target-reader oriented (Stajszczak, 2011, p. 12). Hence, Skopos theory has then signaled for the paradigm shift, from linguistics to functionalism, due to its focus of translation that lies between extra-linguistic factors (i.e. culture and client) and textual factors (i.e. the 'purpose' of a text) (Nord, 2012, p. 34; Sunwoo, 2007, p. 2).

## Theoretical Review

### *Skopos theory and the translation brief*

Borrowing a Greek word, Vermeer uses 'Skopos', which literally means 'a purpose', as a distinct technical term and states that any translation is an action and goal-oriented, thus any translating action needs to have a purpose, or a skopos (de Leon, 2008, p. 1) that plays a role as "the prime principle determining any translation process" (Nord, 1997 in Masduki, 2011, p. 167).

The requirement to have a skopos or a purpose has led to one important consideration in the Skopos theory; a high need of practical experiences for a translator in understanding what is intended to be achieved in the target text (Green, 2012, p. 109). Still, Skopos theory tries to keep the equivalence between the source and the target text; however, Skopos theory only regards a source text as an 'offer of information' to which it will eventually be simulated, as a whole or partially, into an offer of information in a target text by taking into account the target language and culture (Reiss & Vermeer 1991 in Sunwoo, 2007, p. 2; Munday, 2008).

From the Skopos theory's standpoint, a translation product (*Translatum*) needs not to have a similar functional equivalence to a source text. In this case, Vermeer argues that a translator defines the function of the translation product through a translation brief, or a translation commission, since the brief is an "inter-cultural operative" (Green, 2012, p. 109); thus, within the framework of Skopos theory, the cultural aspects of both source and target language are deeply regarded although the theory focuses more toward the target culture. By definition, Vermeer describes that a translation brief is an "instruction, given by oneself or by someone else, to carry out a given action, in this connection: "to translate" (Vermeer, 2000 in Jensen, 2009, p. 11). A translation brief, however, may or may not be explicitly stated (by a request) (Nord, 2006, p. 142) and can be in writing or speaking form (Jensen, 2009, p. 11). Nevertheless, a translation brief is deemed necessary in the Skopos theory which serves as a guide for translators (Nord, 2006, p. 142; Green, 2012, p. 109). Only by having a translation brief can a translator establish the skopos (Nord, 2006, p. 142; Jensen, 2009, p. 11) and decide what method or strategy s/he should implement during the translation process of a text in accordance with the intended skopos (Nord, 2006, p. 142; Chesterman, 2007 in Jensen, 2009, p. 5).

### ***Criticisms over Skopos theory***

The Skopos theory has received heavy critiques by the proponents of linguistic and equivalence based theories. The critiques mainly focus on the definition of translation and the attitude of the Skopos theory toward the source text, or in other words, the 'dethronement' of the source text (Schaffner, 1998, p. 237). The Skopos theory is seen to go beyond the translation proper's limits and consequently make "the contours of translation, as the object of study ... steadily vaguer and more difficult to survey" (Koller, 1995 in Nord, 2012, p. 27) which may bring a translation product closer to an 'adaptation' rather than a 'translation' (Nord, 1997 in Green, 2012, p. 111; Schaffner, 1998, p. 237). Further, Skopos theory should put the source text (rather than the target text) as the starting point regardless of the purposes of the texts produced during the translation process (Koller, 1990 in Schaffner, 1998, p. 237). Another critique by Newmark (1991) underlines oversimplification which in-

herently exists in functionalism, emphasis on the message instead of the richness of meaning and also detriment of the source-language text (in Schaffner, 1998, p. 237).

A rather specific critique pinpoints that the Skopos theory is inapplicable to literary texts (also religious texts) since these texts involve highly stylistic and expressive language; therefore equivalence may not be achieved (Nord, 1997 in Green, 2012, p. 111). Another particular criticism mentions unclear guideline for the implementation of Skopos theory during the translation practice from a student's point of view, i.e. what are step by step procedures that have to be done during the translation process (Sunwoo, 2007, p. 2).

## DISCUSSIONS

### *The applicability of Skopos theory from a student's perspective*

Despite a number of objections made by the proponents of non-functionalism, I consider the Skopos theory to be a rather useful approach to be applied in the translation practice. The Skopos theory offers a new horizon on how a translator should handle a given task. To my view, the fact that a translator is provided with a translation brief is indeed the answer for every critiques addressed toward this theory. Nord (1997), a proponent of the theory, has made a clearly stated motion to tackle these issues that any "form of equivalence required for an adequate translation" can be obtained through "the skopos of the translation" (in Green, 2012, p. 112). Naturally, to have the skopos, we need to have the translation brief. The availability of translation brief can also help to determine the translation strategies and methods when translating. However, it should be kept in mind that the decision for the translation choices depends on each translator. Further, Vermeer also states that the Skopos theory does not put any restrictions on the choice of translation strategies; in other words, it allows for a freedom in translator's actions that also comes with a certain responsibility (Vermeer, 1998, pp. 45-54).

What may still be unsolved due to limited empirical studies on the translation brief is the question on what exact procedure that needs to be carried out for the

Skopos theory to be clearly understood for students or translators in training. Since the theory only handles the translation approach from a major level and pays little attention to the minor levels of language, it nevertheless requires a careful and detail work during translating.

In spite of its general conception, Skopos theory in fact allows students to be rather practical and creative. Since there are no restrictions for the translation strategies, we are left with choices to make, for example, domestication or foreignization, or anything in between. This kind of practice also offers an analysis for both source and target texts before starting to translate.

In my situation, I will use an example of the translation brief taken from a course I took in the translation studies, MODL5103 Translation in the Media. If we are to follow Vermeer's and Nord's explanation of the theory, it is obvious that this translation brief is a crucial factor during the translation process. Below is the example:

*Table 1. Translation brief of the "UNSW at a glance" text*

**Translation brief:** Please translate the following passage into your LOTE. The client is the University of NSW; the translations are to be published on the UNSW website as information for prospective international students and their parents.

**[1]UNSW at a glance**

[2]The University of New South Wales is one of Australia's leading research and teaching universities. [3]Established in 1949, [4] it is ranked among the top 60 universities in the world, [5] renowned for the quality of its graduates and its world class research.

Here is the breakdown of the translation brief of the "UNSW at a glance" text:

Target language: Indonesian

Client: the University of New South Wales

Medium: the UNSW website

Text purpose: information for prospective international students and their parents

Target reader: Indonesian

Then, after establishing the skopos of the UNSW text to be “to translate the English text into Indonesian in an informative manner”, the translator, in this case it is myself, will be able to determine which translation strategy to apply.

Taking into account the culture and other aspects of Indonesian readers, per Skopos theory requirement, I tried to translate the UNSW text in such a way that Indonesian readers will feel as if the UNSW text was originally written in Indonesian. To achieve this quality, it is expected that some shifts were to be present during the translation process. For example, since structurally there are many differences between English and Indonesian, the shifts in grammar are unavoidable. Yet, I also considered the aspect of culturally equivalent translated texts which the skopos has identified beforehand. One notable shift, in this example, was when translating the title of the text. The “[1]UNSW at a glance” was literally translated as “UNSW dalam sekilas pandang”. This translation is acceptable in Indonesian; however, if I chose to put the translation in the UNSW website, the translated text would carry on a sense of literary text for Indonesians. Thus, Indonesian readers would somehow feel ‘weird’ toward a supposedly informative text about a university. Having considered this element, I decided to translate it as “[1]Sekilas tentang UNSW = A glimpse of UNSW” which carried along a sense of information and usually appeared in typical Indonesian’s descriptive and informative media texts. Below is the full translation of the text as well as the respective back-translation.

Table 2. Indonesian's translation and back-translation of the "UNSW at a glance" text

Translation
[1] Sekilas tentang UNSW [ <i>A glimpse of UNSW</i> ]
[2]University of New South Wales (UNSW) merupakan salah satu universitas terkemuka dalam riset dan pengajaran di Australia. [ <i>The University of New South Wales (UNSW) is one of the leading universities in research and teaching in Australia.</i> ]
[3]Didirikan pada tahun 1949, [4]UNSW berada di antara 60 universitas terbaik di dunia, [5]yang dikenal akan kualitas para alumninya serta risetnya yang berkelas dunia. [ <i>Established in 1949, UNSW is among (the) 60 best universities in the world, known for the quality of its alumni and world-class research</i> ]

The next line of the text: [2]**The University of New South Wales is one of Australia's leading research and teaching universities** was finally translated as [2]**University of New South Wales (UNSW) merupakan salah satu universitas terkemuka dalam riset dan pengajaran di Australia**. In this case, for the name of the university, UNSW, I decided to keep the name as it is. I did not translate the **University of New South Wales** into **Universitas Wales Selatan Baru**, rather I use the English name of it. Following the skopos, the text is intended to be read by prospective students and their parents; therefore, by keeping the original, it means that I keep the brand as the name UNSW carries the idea of not only a mere university's name but also a brand.

Another shift I made was related to the description of the University: **one of Australia's leading research and teaching universities**. In Indonesian, the position of an adjective is after the noun, whereas in English it is the other way around, adjective + noun, respectively (Sayogie, 2009, p. 71). As it can be seen here, the phrase **Australia's leading research and teaching** stands before the noun **universities**. Thus, to make it readable and understandable as in Indonesian grammatical rules, the

translation would be **universitas-universitas terkemuka dalam riset dan pengajaran di Australia**. However, once again, following the skopos, the text is to be read by Indonesians; therefore, I decided to omit the double plural form and only use one word 'universitas' to be the equivalent form of 'universities.' This decision is because mostly Indonesians tend to use a singular form of anything plural (Sayogie, 2009, p. 71) to prevent a longer sentence structure. Hence, the final translation became **"sah satu universitas terkemuka dalam riset dan pengajaran di Australia."**

Further, a shift also appeared in the sentence "[4] **it is...**" It is common in English to use inanimate nouns to act as a subject of a sentence; however, it is very seldom in Indonesian. It is not common to say 'ia/itu/ini' to be the pronoun and acts as the subject. Therefore, a shift was made, and the UNSW was recalled in the text. Thus, the translation becomes "[4] **UNSW....**"

The choice of shifts was, in fact, influenced by the skopos. No matter what changes I made in my translation, the final product was intended to meet the purpose of the skopos itself. However, I understand that the translation process indeed is laborious in the Skopos theory because it truly integrates every aspect of a language as well as the socio cultural aspect of the target readers. By doing so, in my opinion, the Skopos theory aims at providing a qualified and communicative translation product; thus, this theory is more inclined to target-reader oriented approach. Yet, at the same time, I find that the nature of the theory has eased the students and translators in training to seek for better equivalence in their translations.

## CONCLUSIONS

Skopos theory has earned a name for itself in the eyes of its proponents as well as to those who oppose of its major level concept. None the less, the Skopos theory has made a significant contribution to the world of translation trainings. Where other theorists are based on linguistics and equivalences at micro level, Vermeer breaks the dominance through the introduction of a general framework for translation with the strong emphasis on the skopos or purpose; thus, this theory can come in handy into practices until today. Another advantage of the Skopos theory is

that it does not limit the translators to choose what translation methods to analyze and apply for a specified translation task. From my perspective, the Skopos theory brings an insightful notion in that it allows for a student's creativity when learning to translate a given task. However, further studies on translation briefs and data on the Skopos theory are undoubtedly necessary to provide more evidence on its usefulness toward students' translation practices. Hence, they may develop a well explained procedure in translating on the basis of the Skopos theory which will contribute even greater to students' or translators' practical situations.

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