

FUNCTIONAL APPROACHES IN TRANSLATION
STUDIES IN GERMANY

Paul Kußmaul

Contrastive linguistics and functionalism

In the early phase of translation studies in Germany, contrastive linguistics played a major role. I shall briefly describe this approach so that the functional approach will become clearer by contrast. Influenced by the representatives of *stylistique comparée*, Vinay/Darbelnet (1968) Wolfram Wilss, for instance, in his early work (1971, 1977) makes frequent use of the notion *transposition* (German "Ausdrucksverschiebung", cf. also Catford's (1965) term *shift*). As a whole, of course, Wilss' work has a much broader scope. More recently, he has investigated the role of cognition (1988) and the various factors in translator behaviour (1996). Nevertheless, transposition is still a very important and useful notion in describing the translation process. The need for transpositions arises when there is no possibility of formal one-to-one correspondence between source and target-language structures. The basic idea is that whenever there is a need for transposition, we are faced with a translation problem. For instance, if we have to translate an English sentence such as

(1) Walking along the street I met my old friend Tom.

Into German, we might, according to the rules of grammar, translate it by using its syntactic equivalent, i.e. a present-participle construction

(1a) Die Straße entlangehend traf ich meinen alten Freund Tom.

However, this sentence would stylistically be marked as “poetic” in German. These constructions, for instance, are quite frequent in Bertolt Brecht’s poetry, e.g.:

Die Vaterstadt, wie find ich sie doch?
 Folgend den Bomberschwärmen
 komm ich nach Haus.

(Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke 10. Werksausgabe Edition Suhrkamp Frankfurt am Main 1968: 858*)

but they would not be used in normal everyday situations. In non-poetic contexts we thus have to make use of syntactic changes and produce target sentences such as:

(1b) Als ich die Straße entlangging, traf ich meinen alten Freund Tom.

(1c) Beim Entlanggehen der Straße traf ich meine alten Freund Tom.

(1d) Ich ging die Straße entlang und traf meinen alten Freund Tom.

We may analyse these variants syntactically as subordinate clause (1b) or prepositional nominal construction (1c) or co-ordinated main clauses (1d), but even by looking at the variants within this syntactic contrastive framework we might ask: what are the criteria of choice between these apparently equivalent variants? We may come to the conclusion that (1c) is rather formal and would not be used in spoken language whereas (1b) and (1d) would. Thus, if we define function according to Firthian contextualism (cf. Halliday 1970: 142) as the way a linguistic item is used for a particular purpose in a specific situation, choices between syntactic variants can be made by looking at their functions.

Wilss, in his recent book *Knowledge and Skills in Translator Behavior* (1996) devotes a chapter to “decision-making and choice”. He complains that this issue is not well covered in translation research

(177). The present paper can be seen as a contribution to this somewhat neglected but very important issue.

The use of the functional approach as a means to finding criteria for decision-making may become even clearer through the following example taken from university regulations and their variant translations (cf. Hönig Kussmaul 1992: 109):

(2) The qualification for the degree [of Master of Arts] shall be the pursuance of a full-time curriculum of advanced study approved by the senate for that purpose.

(2a) Voraussetzung für den Magisterabschluß ist die Teilnahme an einem Studiengang für Graduierte, der vom Senat für diesen Zweck anerkannt wurde.

(2b) Voraussetzung für den Magisterabschluß ist die Teilnahme an einem vom Senat für diesen Zweck anerkannten Studiengang für Graduierte.

If the translation aims at explaining the university regulations to a foreign student, (2a) should be adequate. If, however, the purpose of the target text is a document in its own right, (2b) is the adequate version, because it observes the syntactic norms of German "official" language in rules and regulations.

Text typology

It was Katharina Reiß who was the first to develop a functional model of translation in Germany in her book *Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Übersetzungskritik*. In this now classic work, recently reviewed again by Nord (1996), under the heading "revisiting the classics", she applies the so-called organon model of the Austrian psychologist Karl Bühler to translating, thus providing an overall framework for decision-making on all linguistic levels. According to Bühler the linguistic sign has three basic functions: it is a symbol of extralinguistic reality (representational function), it is a symptom of

the sender's attitude toward the described reality (expressive function) and it is a signal to stimulate reaction on the part of the recipient (appellative function). Bühler's notion of a threefold function of language was adapted by Reiss for translation purposes. She talks of the predominant functions of texts which she labels as (1) *inhaltsbetonter Texttyp* (content-focused texts) such as news items, business correspondence, official documents or manuals, (2) *formbetonter Texttyp* (form-focused texts) which mainly include literary genres such as novels, plays and poetry, and (3) *apellbetonter Texttyp* (appeal-focused texts) such as advertising, satirical prose, pamphlets or election speeches (cf. Nord 1996: 82).

Reiß' typology has been criticised (e.g. Wilss 1977: 142ff., Koller 1979: 199ff. and Kußmaul 1974: 88f.) on the grounds that she does not seem to take account of the fact that there are mixed types of texts. In one and the same text all three of Reiß' functions may be at work. I think it is important to see that Reiß' text types are based on the notion of dominance or hierarchy. She is aware of the fact that content-focused texts may have - sometimes very obvious - formal features. For instance, business correspondence is marked by a large number of politeness conventions. Also, it is hard to imagine form-focused texts without any content, and appeal-focused texts, such as advertising, may use formal - sometimes poetic - devices to market a product. For Reiß it is a question of dominance. There is dominance of content over form or form over content or appeal over both form and content.

In order to illustrate the threefold functions of language, we may refer again to our first example. In its above form it is a typical sentence in a content-focused text such as a rather factual report. In a slightly different form such as

(3) I would suggest you meet Tom. Just walk along High Street between 5 and 6 p.m.

the intention of the sender is that the recipient perform an action. In Reiß' terminology, it could be part of an appeal-focused text. And a sentence such as

(4) Steven was striding down straight and steep High Street when he met his mate Mike meandering merrily with a mug in his hand.

could be part of an expressive text, where according to Reiß, form is predominant over meaning.

When translating these sentences within their respective contexts we have to preserve their original function by finding suitable equivalents for their linguistic devices. And it is here where Reiß' hierarchical notion of textual functions forms the guiding principle. For instance, when translating example (4), we may change the content as long as we preserve the form. Thus the names do not have to be preserved, the main thing is that we get the alliteration in the target text. And the street does not have to be steep and straight either.

Reiß when discussing the translation of her text types does this with a view to preserving the function of the source text. She is aware of the fact that there are changes of function through translation, such as when Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (a satire and thus a text of the appellative type) is translated into German as a children's book, and thus becomes a text of the informative, and maybe partly the expressive type. But she sees such instances as exceptions. Her focus is on the source text.

Skopos theory

It was Hans Vermeer (1978) who changed the focus. He looks at the recipients of a translation in their specific situation in the target culture. Vermeer's ideas, although controversial, have become widely known under the label Skopos theory. One of the key words to understanding his approach is Informationsangebot (information offered), which means that the source text should no longer be seen as the "holy original", and the purpose (Skopos) of the translation can no longer be deduced from the source text but depends on the expectations and needs of the target readers. The most comprehensive discussion of

his ideas can be found in the book he wrote in collaboration with Katharina Reiss under the title *Ein Rahmen für eine allgemeine Translationstheorie* (1984).

Vermeer has caused some stir in translation studies. His ideas have occasionally been misunderstood, especially with regard to the translation of literary texts. He was accused of advocating arbitrariness and a disregard of the value of the source text. In actual fact, he never maintained that the purpose of a text should always be changed in translation. He is aware of the present tradition of literary translation in Western cultures, where a literary text remains embedded in the source culture (Reiß/Vermeer 1984: 89ff.). But this does not mean that it always has to be so. As Toury (1995) has convincingly shown for translations into Hebrew, there have been many cases of adaptations of German and English texts to the Hebrew literary tradition which involved some remarkable changes of the original both in content and form. What Vermeer has shown is that logically the target-culture conditions are superordinate to source-culture conditions. But there may very well be cases where target-culture conditions and target-reader expectations are such that a text remains embedded in its source culture.

In order to illustrate Skopos-change we may take up our second example again. There is identity of Skopos between (2) and (2b) while between (2) and (2a) perhaps there is not. (2b) in the same way as (2) has the status of a legal document, whereas with (2b) because of its disregard of the syntactic conventions the legal status may be doubtful at least. To make things even clearer, suppose someone explained the content of the university regulations orally to a foreign student, using words such as:

(2c) Wenn du einen Magister machen willst, mußt du an einem entsprechenden Studiengang teilnehmen.

then this sentence would serve its purpose of explaining the important facts for the recipient in his or her situation, but it could certainly not serve as part of a legal text.

One might argue that “entsprechend” (respective) is rather vague and imprecise for “a full-time curriculum of advanced study approved by the senate for that purpose”. The question is - and it fits nicely into Skopos theory - how precise do we have to be for a particular purpose?

The degree of precision

My colleague Hans Hönic and I in our book *Strategie der Übersetzung*, which actually appeared around the same time as Reiss' and Vermeer's book, have proposed the principle of the necessary degree of precision as a guiding line (for a discussion cf. Snell-Hornby 1988: 44ff.). I shall illustrate what we mean by this principle. Often when we are faced with institutional terms such as “bachelor's” or “master's degree”, “grammar school”, “comprehensive school”, “county council”, “House of Lords” etc. there is normally no equivalent institution in the target culture, and we have to paraphrase or explain the meaning of the term, but we often do not know how much information to give our target readers. Is a short paraphrase enough or should we add a sentence in brackets or even insert a footnote? Although the principle of the necessary degree of precision is by no means limited to culture-specific terms, and indeed not to the meaning of words alone, it can best be illustrated by this type of translation problem. For instance, the term public school (example taken from Hönic/Kussmaul 1982: 58ff.) implies such a large amount of culture specific knowledge that one may find it difficult to render its meaning completely in a translation. Within a functionalist approach, however, we do not have to worry, since the function of a word in its specific context determines to what degree the cultural meaning should be made explicit. If the term appears in a sentence such as:

(5a) In Parliament he fought for equality, but he sent his son to Eton.

the translation will have to be different from translating the sentence

(6a) When his father died, his mother could not afford to send him to Eton anymore.

The following translations would be sufficiently detailed:

(5b) Im Parlament kämpfte er für Chancengleichheit, aber seinen eigenen Sohn schickte er auf eine der englischen Eliteschulen.

(6b) Als sein Vater starb, konnte seine Mutter es sich nicht mehr leisten, ihn auf eine der teuren Privatschulen zu schicken.

Of course, there is more factual knowledge implied in the term public school than expressed in the translation, but the translation mentions everything that is important within the context of the sentence, in other words, the translation is semantically precise enough.

When it comes to evaluating a translation, Pym (1992) has suggested that we distinguish between binary and non-binary errors. Binary errors can be described within the correct-wrong dimension; we can make a qualitative judgement. Thus a translation of example (5a) such as:

(5c) Im Parlament kämpfte er für Chancengleichheit, aber seinen eigenen Sohn schickte er auf eine öffentliche Schule.

would clearly be wrong. "Öffentliche Schule" (state school) makes no sense here.

With respect to non-binary errors, however, a typical commentary is: "It's not really wrong, but..." These types of mistakes can be described in a quantitative way. Thus a solution may not be quite good enough, one solution may be better than the other etc. Thus a translation such as:

(5d) Im Parlament kämpfte er für Chancengleichheit, aber seinen eigenen Sohn schickte er auf die Schule in Eton.

would not be precise enough and would have to be classified on a non-binary scale. The feature "elitist", which is implied in the term public school and which is made prominent in the original sentence by the context, cannot be deduced from the translation by the German reader. I must admit that I am using an isolated sentence for economy's sake. Of course, one would have to see the whole text and one would have to specify the readership of the target text. German readers who know

about traditional British education might find that sentence meaningful enough, although when referring to the famous public school one would just write "aber seinen eigenen Sohn schickte er nach Eton." On the other hand, a translation such as:

(6c) Als sein Vater starb, konnte seine Mutter es sich nicht mehr leisten, ihn nach Eton zu schicken, jene teure englische Privatschule, aus deren Absolventen auch heute noch ein Großteil des politischen und wirtschaftlichen Führungsnachwuchses hervorgeht.

would be far too detailed. Although the translator did well in making the feature "expensive" - which is implied in the original sentence - explicit in the translation (German teuer), he/she added such a large amount of additional information with the result that the main idea is hidden from the reader. If the text had the topic "the British education system", then, of course, one might consider translating public school in such a detailed way.

The principle of the necessary degree of precision is in line with Grice's conversational maxim of Quantity which runs: "Make your contribution as informative as required (for the current purposes of the exchange). Do not make your contribution more informative than is required." (Grice 1975: 45)

Thus, when reading (6c) one might draw the conclusion that the topic of the text, or at least the passage, was British public schools, and not the history of a family.

There is another model that may back up our principle of the degree of precision. Psycholinguistic research has found that in the process of comprehension we do not activate all of the potential features of the meaning of a word but only the relevant ones - in some cases only one single feature. There is a very illustrative example provided by Barclay et al (1974) and quoted by Hörmann (1981: 139). The word "piano" has, potentially, quite a number of semantic features: HEAVY, WOODEN, SOUND-PRODUCING, BEAUTIFUL etc. If, however, a person hears or reads the sentences

The man lifted the piano.
 The man smashed the piano.
 The man tuned the piano.
 The man photographed the piano.

the verbs in turn activate one of the various features which make up the meaning of "piano". The first sentence activates the feature HEAVY, the second activates WOODEN, the third SOUND-PRODUCING and the fourth BEAUTIFUL (Barcley et al. 1974:476, Hörmann 1981:139). In other words: bottom-up processes which are set into motion by the potential semantic features of "piano" are counterbalanced by top-down processes which are started by the different verbs.

To sum up the discussion of our public-school example, the translators who conform to the principle of the necessary degree of precision have made explicit one of the potential features of the word in the original sentence which was activated by the context: For (5b) this was the feature "elitist" and for (6b) this was the feature "expensive".

The principle of the necessary degree of precision does not only apply to the meaning of words. It is not only a semantic principle but may serve for decision-making on all linguistic levels. Thus, in our example (2) the decision on the syntactic level of whether to use a relative clause in the translation or an enlarged attribute was dependent on whether the target text should serve as a legal document in its own right or not.

As far as speech acts are concerned, the illocutionary device for the speech act "regulation" (shall be made) in the following example (cf. Hönig/Kußmaul 1982:78) is dependent on the same overall decisions:

(7) Application for admission to a curriculum of advanced study for the degree of Master of Arts shall be made to the Registrar not later than the 1st May preceding the commencement of the course.

The illocution of the sentence would be understood if it were translated by

(7a) Der Zulassungsantrag für ein zum Magisterabschluß führendes Graduiertenstudium muß bis spätestens 1. Mai vor Beginn des jeweiligen Kurses an die Verwaltung gerichtet werden.

This would be understood as a regulation, but the form conventionally used in German official texts of this kind is not *muß* but *ist zu*. Only if this phrase is used will the target text (as a legal document) be sufficiently precise. One might argue that for students as target readers of the text it does not really matter if we use *muß* or *ist zu*, as long as they understand what they have to do and what consequences it has if they do not. But we may also imagine a different reader, for instance a specialist in legal texts. He or she will get the impression that the text was not written by an expert and thus the text might not be taken seriously. An adequate translation in this case would thus run:

(7b) Der Zulassungsantrag für ein zum Magisterabschluß führendes Graduiertenstudium ist bis spätestens 1. Mai vor Beginn des jeweiligen Kurses an die Verwaltung zu richten.

Conclusion

By discussing a number of examples, I have tried to demonstrate the use of functional approaches. The "functionalist view" has caught on in translation studies and in translation teaching in recent years, apart from the authors mentioned, most notably in the works of Kiraly (1995), Kupsch-Losereit (1986, 1988), Nord (1988), Schmitt (1986, 1987) and Snell-Hornby (1988). What is the didactic value of functional approaches? They can serve us as guidelines for decision-making. There is a rather naive but popular maxim which says that we should translate as precisely as we can and freely when the need arises. With such a maxim we are surely left hovering in the air. It is much too vague. It should specify the notion of "can" and "need". How precise do we have to be under which circumstances, and what precisely are the needs to translate freely? The functional approaches give translators

the guidelines they need for their decisions. As we have seen from the discussion of the examples, however, there are no simple rules. If we use rules, they should be embedded in overall strategies. Thus, as we have seen from example (7), there is no rule that says: Translate shall into German by muß. Our choice between German muß or ist zu depends on further considerations on the function and status of the target text. What we have to do as translators is start a chain of reflection, as it were, and see the links between the textual item, the immediate context, the larger context, the function of the source text and the function (or Skopos) of the target text in its target cultural situation (cf. Kussmaul 1986, 1995). We must be prepared - and often this is no small task - to perform all these steps before we can decide on a particular variant.

References

- BARCLAY, J.R., Bransford, John D., Franks, Jeffrey J., McCarrell, Nancy S. & Nitsch, Kathy. (1974). "Comprehension and Semantic Flexibility". *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour* 13. 471-481.
- CATFORD, J. C. (1965). *A Linguistic Theory of Translation. An Essay in Applied Linguistics*. London: Longman.
- GRICE, H. Paul. (1975). "Logic and conversation". Cole, P. & Morgan, J.L. (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics*. Vol.3: Speech Acts. New York: Academic Press. 41-58.
- HALLIDAY, M.A.K. (1970). "Language structure and language function". Lyons, John. ed. *New Horizons in Linguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- HÖNIG, Hans G. & Kussmaul, Paul. (1982). *Strategie der Übersetzung. Ein Lehr- und Arbeitsbuch*. Tübingen: Narr.
- HÖRMANN, Hans. (1981). *Einführung in die Psycholinguistik*. Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft.

- KIRALY, Donald Charles. (1995). *Pathways to Translation: From Process to Pedagogy*. Kent/Ohio: Kent State University Press.
- KOLLER, Werner. (1979). *Einführung in die Übersetzungswissenschaft*, Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer.
- KUPSCH-LOSEREIT, Sigrid. (1986). "Scheint eine schöne Sonne? oder: Was ist ein Übersetzungsfehler?" *Lebende Sprachen* 1/1986. 12-16.
- KUPSCH-LOSEREIT, Sigrid. (1988). "Die Übersetzung als soziale Praxis". *Fremdsprachen lehren und lernen, FLuL*. 17. 28-40.
- KUSSMAUL, Paul. (1974). "Die Bedeutung von Texttypen, Normentsprechungen und Normabweichungen für das Übersetzen." *Lebende Sprachen* 3/1974, 88-92.
- KUSSMAUL, Paul. (1986). "Übersetzen als Entscheidungsprozess. Die Rolle der Fehleranalyse in der Übersetzungsdidaktik." In: Snell-Hornby, Mary. (ed.) *Übersetzungswissenschaft. Eine Neuorientierung*. Tübingen 1986. 206-229.
- KUSSMAUL, Paul. (1995). *Training the Translator*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- NORD, Christiane. (1988). *Textanalyse und Übersetzen*. Heidelberg: Groos. (English version: *Text analysis in Translation*. Amsterdam: Rodopi 1991)
- NORD, Christiane. (1996). "Text Type and Translation Method: Review of Reiß's Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Übersetzungskritik." *The Translator*. Vol. 2, number 1.
- PYM, Anthony. (1992). "Translation error analysis and the interface with language teaching". In: Dollerup, Cay & Loddegaard, Anne. (eds.) *Teaching translation and Interpreting. Training, Talent and Experience*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins. 279-290.
- REISS, Katharina. (1971). *Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Übersetzungskritik*. München: Hueber.
- REISS, Katharina. (1976). *Texttyp und Übersetzungsmethode. Der operative Text*. Kronberg im Taunus: Scriptor.
- REISS, Katharina & Vermeer, Hans J. (1984). *Grundlegung einer allgemeinen Translationstheorie*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.

- SCHMITT, Peter A. (1986). "Die 'Eindeutigkeit' von Fachtexten: Bemerkungen zu einer Fiktion". In: Snell-Hornby, Mary (ed.) *Übersetzungswissenschaft. Eine Neuorientierung*. Tübingen: Francke 1986. 252-282.
- SCHMITT, Peter A. (1987). "Fachtextübersetzung und 'Texttreue': Bemerkung zur Qualität von Ausgangstexten". *Lebende Sprachen*, 23. Jg., 1/1987. 1-7.
- SNELL-HORNBY, Mary. (1988). *Translation Studies. An Integrated Approach*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- TOURY, Gideon. (1995). *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*. Amsterdam: Benjamins
- VERMEER, Hans J. (1978). "Ein Rahmen für eine allgemeine Translationstheorie". *Lebende Sprachen* 1978/3. 99-102.
- VINAY, J.P. & Darbelnet, J. (1968). *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais. Méthode de traduction*. Paris: Didier 4. Aufl.
- WILSS, Wolfram. (1971). "Englische Partizipialkonstruktionen und ihre Wiedergabe im Deutschen". In: Bausch, Karl-Richard & Gauger, Hans-Martin. (eds.) *Interlinguistica. Sprachvergleich und Übersetzen. Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Mario Wandruszka*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- WILSS, Wolfram. (1977). *Übersetzungswissenschaft. Probleme und Methoden*. Stuttgart: Klett.
- WILSS, Wolfram. (1982). *The Science of Translation*. Tübingen: Narr.
- WILSS, Wolfram. (1996). *Knowledge and Skills in Translator Behaviour*. Amsterdam. Amsterdam: Benjamins.