

DEFINING TRANSLATION FUNCTIONS.  
THE TRANSLATION BRIEF AS A GUIDELINE FOR THE  
TRAINEE TRANSLATOR

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**Introduction**

It can be regarded as widely known that, from a functionalist point of view (cf. Reiss/Vermeer 1984, Nord 1991), the translator's decisions in the translation process should be governed by the function or communicative purpose the target text (TT) is intended to fulfil in a particular target-culture situation. This is a normative statement which does not describe an existing state of things (otherwise we would not have to lament the poor quality of so many translations) but rather an aim towards which prospective professional translators should be geared in their training. Functionalist approaches to translation, among them Skopostheorie (cf. Vermeer 1978), have been designed in and for translator training, and this is why they have been criticized by the followers of a descriptive approach who, often drawing on examples taken from literary translation, claim that translation studies 'should be' (another normative statement) based on empirical research only. Referring to several apodictic statements presented by Reiss and Vermeer (for example, "Translators offer just so much information and in just the manner which they consider optimal for the target-text

recipient in view of their translation", Reiss/Vermeer 1984:123), Koller asks the following questions:

Do these sentences refer to a given set of translations, say in German, i.e. are they based on empirical investigations which justify results of the type: The analysis of 1000 translations from English into German reveals that in 95% of cases the important factor for the translation/interpretation was the respective translator's decision as to what and how to translate/interpret? Or is the idea that: For a translator/interpreter to translate well, s/he must decide what and how to translate? (Koller 1995: 215, note 21)

Koller is quite justified in asking this kind of question. To my knowledge, the principles of Skopostheorie have so far not been based on any thorough analysis of large, possibly electronically-held corpora. They are founded on observations of translation practice in various fields, as indeed would seem to be Koller's own remarks about equivalence being a constitutive feature of translation and the five equivalence frameworks he suggests to explain certain features of some texts and their translations.

This is not the place for a contest in empiricism. If we take existing translations to be the norm governing any future translation process, we risk setting the fox to keep the geese, for how could we tell a 'good' translation from a 'bad' one? In the context of translator training, evaluation is part and parcel of the teacher's job, and how can a teacher ever evaluate a student's translation if each and every translation as such is part of the norm? Or is it only a professional translator's product that forms the norm? Or only a published translation? And then, who decides whether or not a translation is to be published, and is every person whose translations are published a 'professional translator'? Therefore, in order to train prospective professional translators, we have to look for another yardstick to measure translation quality. Functionalist approaches to translation suggest that it might be helpful to ask whether or not the product of a translation process achieves the intended communicative function.

### **Translation as an intentional, intercultural, partly verbal communicative interaction involving a source text**

Functionalist approaches to translation draw on action theory (cf. Nord 1996). Action can be defined as an intentional change or transition from one state of affairs to another (cf. von Wright 1963:28). If there are two or more agents involved in an action, we may speak of an interaction. An interaction is referred to as communicative when it is carried out through signs produced intentionally by one agent, referred to as the 'sender', directed towards another agent, referred to as the 'addressee' or 'receiver', and intended to change the state of mind of the latter. Communicative interactions take place in situations that are limited in time and space. This means every situation has historical and cultural dimensions that condition the agents' verbal and nonverbal behaviour, their knowledge and expectations of each other, their appraisal of the situation, and the standpoint from which they look at the world.

Translators enable communication to take place between members of different culture communities. They bridge the gap between situations where differences in verbal and nonverbal behaviour, expectations, knowledge and perspectives are such that there is not enough common ground for the sender and receiver to communicate effectively by themselves.

The translator's mediatory role does not always involve translating in any literal way. In fact, translators quite regularly do much more than translate texts, they sometimes even advise their clients not to have a particular text translated at all but to use another kind of communication medium to achieve the purpose they are aiming at. To account for this difference, we distinguish between 'translational action' (the range of what translators actually do) and 'translation' (what they do when rendering texts). In this article, I will refer to 'translation' (in the narrower sense) only.

Texts may consist of verbal and nonverbal signs (illustrations, tables, text format, etc. in written texts - intonation and pitch, gestures,

face and body movements in face-to-face communication). The use of verbal and nonverbal signs in a particular text or text type may be governed by culture-specific norms and conventions. The translator may therefore have to change from the verbal to the nonverbal code, or vice versa, in the course of the translation process.

Translating can thus be regarded as an intentional, intercultural, partly verbal communicative interaction involving a source text.

### **A flexible concept of culture**

Göhring (1978: 10) stresses the fact that in intercultural encounters the individual is free either to conform to the behaviour patterns accepted in the other culture or to bear the consequences of behaviour that is contrary to cultural expectations. Culture is a complex system, of which language is an intrinsic part, especially if culture is defined as a "totality of knowledge, proficiency and perception" (Snell-Hornby 1988: 40). However, the borderlines between cultural systems or sub-systems (such as paraculture, diaculture or idioculture, cf. Ammann 1989: 39) are notoriously difficult to define. A culture cannot simply be equated with a language area. For instance, the linguistic behaviour of the Portuguese and the Brazilians will be different in some situations and very similar in others. Or again, Argentinians and Brazilians from the regions along their common border may differ in language but have similar value systems. In modern multicultural societies we cannot even say that a town or a street represents a single homogeneous culture. The American ethnologist Michael Agar, who works as what he calls an "intercultural practitioner" between US-Americans and Mexicans along the border, takes this into consideration when he writes:

Culture is not something people have; it is something that fills the spaces between them. And culture is not an exhaustive description of anything; it focuses on differences,

differences that can vary from task to task and group to group.  
(Agar 1992: 11)

The differences in verbal and nonverbal behaviour causing culture conflicts or even communication breakdowns between two communities in contact are called "rich points" (cf. Agar 1991). This is a pragmatic way of describing the translator's situation. A translator does not have to take into account all cultural rich points which may occur between all members of two linguistic communities; translation always takes place between two rather well defined sub-groups of the two language communities involved, such as South Brazilian and North Argentinian engineers (e.g. in the case of the translation of a technical text from Portuguese into Spanish) or the readers of a particular São Paulo daily newspaper and those of a particular US-American newspaper (e.g. in the case of the translation of a political commentary on the relations between Brazil and the United States from Portuguese into English). In these examples, it is neither necessary nor possible to translate for all Spanish-speaking or all English-speaking readers. In this respect, the translator's work is not very different from that of any person writing about a particular topic in any language.

### **Intentionality and text function**

In translation, intentionality may be associated with the translator or, more often, with the person who is the 'initiator' of the translation process. Translational intention may or may not be similar to the intention guiding the original sender or text producer in the production of the source text, which is an intentional communicative interaction in itself.

Texts are intended to carry out communicative purposes, which, in another terminology, are called communicative functions. Since the best of intentions will not always guarantee success, we will distinguish the sender's intention from the function assigned to the text by the

receiver from their own point of view, which, particularly in intercultural communication, may be quite different from the one the sender had in mind. Intention and function may, but need not, be congruent. Texts are intended to be meaningful to their addressees, and therefore, text producers (and translators are text producers, too) shape their texts so as to conform as far as possible to the situational conditions of the addressees. They usually provide the text with function markers indicating the intended function, and in normal communication receivers would be cooperative and use the text for the intended purpose if they recognize the markers.

Therefore, all a translator (or any other text producer) can do is provide their texts with the corresponding intention markers and hope for the receiver to join the game. To be able to do that, the translator needs as much knowledge as possible about the communicative purposes the target text is supposed to achieve for the addressees in their communicative situation. These details are explicitly or implicitly defined in the translation brief.

### **The translation brief (Übersetzungsauftrag)**

Here we have to clarify a translation problem. The German word *Übersetzungsauftrag* may be translated literally as either translation commission or translation assignment. We find both terms used in the works by (mostly German) functionalist translation scholars writing in English or translated into English. I have even introduced a third term myself, translation instructions, "because it highlights the pedagogical aspect" (Nord 1991: 8, note 3). However, in a recent study Janet Fraser uses the term "brief" (Fraser 1996: 73), which seems to express very aptly what is meant by *Übersetzungsauftrag*. It implicitly compares the translator with a barrister who has received the basic information and instructions but is then free (as the responsible expert) to carry out those instructions as they see fit. I will therefore use the term "translation

brief" referring to the definition of the intended purpose of the translation process.

In professional settings, translators very often do not feel any need for a detailed specification of the translation function(s) because their experience tells them that a particular kind of source text provided by a particular kind of client (perhaps their employer, if they happen to enjoy the benefits of stable employment) is usually i.e. if not stated otherwise) expected to be translated for a particular kind of purpose, including a particular kind (or even specimen) of addressee, medium, format etc.

Lacking this kind of experience, trainee translators cannot be expected to interpret a situation that, in the classroom, is not very clear anyway. Each translation task should thus be accompanied by a brief that defines the conditions under which the target text should carry out its particular function.

Starting from the idea that the communicative situation (including the communicators and their communicative intentions) determines the verbal and nonverbal features of the text, we may assume that the description of the situational factors defines the slot into which the text should fit. This applies to both the source and the target texts. The situation in which the source text fulfils its functions is, by definition, different from that of the target text. Simultaneous translation could be regarded as an exception with regard to the difference in place, time, motive and purpose of the communication, but even there we have to consider a certain difference with regard to the culture-bound knowledge, experience or susceptibility of the respective audiences. To find the aspects in which the source and the target texts will diverge, the translator has to compare the source text with the target-text profile defined in the translation brief.

The translation brief should contain (explicit or implicit) information about:

- the target-text addressee(s),
- the prospective time and place of text reception,

- the medium over which the text will be transmitted, and
- the motive for the production or reception of the text,

and this information will allow some conjectures as to the communicative function(s) the text is intended to have for the prospective receivers.

The intended communicative function of the target text is the crucial criterion for the translator's decisions in the translation process. To make function analysis easier in translator training, I use a rather simplified model of text functions combined with a functional translation typology, which will be briefly explained in the following section.

### **Text functions and translation functions**

The following schema is based on a combination of the models of language functions elaborated by Bühler (1934) and Jakobson (1960) and consists of four basic functions with an open list of sub-functions each.

- Referential function: (objective) reference to the objects and phenomena of the world; sub-functions: informative, metalinguistic, metatextual, directive, didactic etc.
- Expressive function: expression of the sender's (subjective) attitude or feelings towards the things and phenomena of the world; sub-functions: evaluative, emotive, ironical etc.
- Appellative function: appeal directed at the receiver's sensitivity, previous experience or disposition to act; sub-functions: illustrative, persuasive, imperative, pedagogical, advertising etc.
- Phatic function: establishing / maintaining / ending (social) contact between sender and receiver; sub-functions: small talk, taking leave, introductory "peg" for text opening etc.

Basically, these communicative functions may be considered to be universal or at least, to put it more carefully, transcultural, whereas the verbal or nonverbal indicators used to mark them are determined by culture-specific norms, traditions, preferences, etc. Therefore, we may



assume that translations would have to bear the markers used in the target culture in order to be meaningful to the target receivers, unless the receivers are made aware of the fact that they are reading a translation and have to re-interpret the function markers themselves. We may thus distinguish two types of translations: those that are explicitly marked as texts transferred from another culture (by stating the name of the translator, the language from which they have been translated, the source where they were first published etc. and/or by bearing "foreign" or "strange" textual markers) and those that do not betray their origin in another language and culture and will thus be interpreted as target-culture texts by the receivers.

The first type, which I call the documentary translation type, is first and foremost a metatext, being a target-culture text informing about a source-culture text or any of its aspects and dimensions (for example, an interlineal word-for-word translation informs about the lexical and syntactic structures or the source language as used in the text), and as such, its communicative function will be realized in an indirect way: e.g., informing target-culture addressees about a source-culture author referring to an object of the world (from a source-culture point of view), or informing target-culture readers about somebody from a source culture appealing to their addressees' culture-specific experience of the world (cf. Juliane House's "overt translation" type, House 1981).

The second type, which I call the instrumental translation type, is an object-text in its own right, directed at a target-culture readership for whom it can fulfil any of the above-mentioned basic functions and sub-functions like a non-translated text, and modelled according to a pre-existing text borrowed from a source culture (cf. House's "covert translation" type). Instrumental translations may be intended to achieve the same function as the source text ("equifunctional translation") or a function that is different from that of the source text ("heterofunctional translation"). The fundamental option for either the documentary or the instrumental translation type then governs any subsequent decision the translator has to take during the translation process. Therefore, it is

of vital importance that the translation brief contains some explicit or implicit clue as to the expected translation type.

### **Example: Selling apartments to foreign visitors in Spain**

Let's look at an example. A Spanish estate agent wants to sell a number of apartments situated in a large building by the seaside in a small town called Cullera in the South of Spain. They have produced a folder in Spanish, but somehow the business does not prosper. The place is full of Germans, Austrians, Swiss, French, Belgian and English people spending their holidays mostly in rented apartments, and the agent thinks it would be worthwhile to have the text translated into German, English and French to address a larger clientele. So they ask a group of translators who happen to be around to produce a German, an English and a French translation for separate folders in these languages.

This situation can be formalized as follows:

- target addressees: any German-speaking, anglophone or francophone visitors who pass by the agent's office or the building site where the folder is distributed free; they are already in Cullera and know the place, they seem to like Spain, and they should be sufficiently well-off to afford to buy an apartment abroad;
- place and time of reception: Cullera (Spain), from the start of the project to the moment all apartments have been sold;
- medium: monolingual folder with coloured pictures and short pieces of text in a given layout which will be the same for all versions;
- motive for text production and reception: the wish to establish contact between the building company and prospective customers;
- text functions: phatic (to attract possible customers' attention), referential-informative (to inform about the building), appellative-persuasive (to raise the reader's interest and eventually 'seduce' them to buy one of the apartments).

This leads to the following translation "brief": The situation characterized by the five dimensions listed above calls for a text that

attracts the target addressees' attention (phatic function), provides information that is comprehensible for them (referential function), and appeals to their ideas of a perfect place where to spend their holidays in Spain for many years to come (appellative function). We may assume that the source text similarly addresses its source-culture audience (although possible linguistic or stylistic or cultural imperfections of the source text are really not the translator's concern in this case). What is required is, thus, an equifunctional instrumental translation, where the target text is adapted to the norms and conventions of the target culture and the needs and expectations of the target audiences.

To find out how the source-text features have to be transformed in order to meet the requirements of the translation brief, we have to take a closer look at the source text and at the way the intended text functions are marked in the Spanish original. We find that the text consists of three main parts:

- part 1 (front and back cover if the leaflet is folded properly) contains a kind of slogan, "En el lugar más tranquilo de la playa de San Antonio", and the name of the building, "Torres de San Antonio") and the identification of the sender (Cooperativa de viviendas "El Ferrobús" + address), accompanied by an illustration suggesting sun, sea and a stereotypical Spanish village;
- part 2 presents the attractions of the apartment block and the premises, including two schematic maps, one showing the situation of the building with regard to the town and the seaside and another one showing the localization of the projected building on the premises, and a photograph showing a model of the building;
- part 3 gives the prices for the three basic types of apartment, the conditions of payment and some information concerning tax reductions and other financial advantages.

A functional analysis of these three parts shows that:

- part 1 is mainly phatic: contact is established by offering information and producing a positive impression on the reader, using mainly nonverbal means which appeal to the cliché of a prototypical

Spanish coastal village, thus responding more to the expectations of foreigners than of Spaniards even in the original;

- part 2 is mainly appellative, using the expressive-evaluative elements praising the positive aspects of the building (el lugar más tranquilo, emplazamiento inmejorable, soleamiento adecuado, materiales de primera calidad, etc.) and referential-informative elements referring to the social aspect (dos piscinas, dos pistas de tenis, parque infantil, local social, etc.) as an indirect means of appeal;

- part 3 is also mainly appellative, since the information given in this part is supposed to make the object attractive to the reader (I have deleted the original prices because they would look ridiculous today after various devaluations of the peseta); we would neither expect nor find any negative aspects of the building to be mentioned in this kind of text.

If the target text is supposed to achieve the same functions for the target audience, we have to consider the following principles:

The referential function relies on correctness and comprehensibility. If source and target audiences do not share the same amount of previous knowledge, the translator has to provide additional information. In our example, English, German or French readers cannot be expected to be familiar with the Spanish "V.P.O." (viviendas de protección oficial) system; therefore the information is of little use for them as it stands; a target-culture equivalent might be used to explain the basic idea. On the other hand, the information about tax reductions does not apply to foreigners unless they have a permanent residence and workplace in Spain - to avoid misunderstandings, the translator would have to make this detail explicit in the target version.

The phatic function relies on conventionality. Since the illustrations used in part 1 are rather target-culture oriented (and could not be changed anyway), they will not cause any functionality problems.

The appellative function depends on the audience's cooperation. If the evaluations presented in the text are not positive enough from a target-cultural point of view (as, for example, soleamiento adecuado

for a German or British audience who goes to Spain precisely in order to take in as much sun as possible), they may have to be 'upgraded' (e.g., to "sonnige Südlage" for the German reader); if, on the other hand, they seem exaggerated to a central European reader (as in el lugar más tranquilo - what is tranquilo for a Spaniard may be terribly noisy for an English person), they may have to be 'downgraded' or shifted to another dimension in the target text (e.g., to "a nice and quiet part" or "the most beautiful part" for the English reader).

### **Intertextuality as a source of information in the translation process**

To conclude, let me briefly mention another aspect which makes the translation brief a valuable tool in translator training. The considerations about culture-specific expectations and value systems presented above often seem rather far-fetched to the students. On the one hand, they are not aware of the differences in attitude and conventions, and on the other, they have never learned to produce texts like the one used as an example, i.e. they are not familiar with the linguistic norms and conventions of the text type in question. The two constraints may be compensated for by using parallel texts as a source of information or even as a textual model in the translation process.

The translation brief describes, as it were, the situational slot into which the target text has to fit. If such a type of communicative situation exists in the target-culture community, there may also be target-language texts which are used, or have been used, in this kind of situation. Texts used in similar or identical situations are linked by similar or identical features, they form a text type or genre, and their characteristics serve as indicators of the intended function conventionally linked to a text type. Therefore, the translation brief helps the students to find these texts, which we usually call parallel texts if they belong to the same text type, and to model their translations according to the patterns they find there.

With regard to the example presented above, a number of German parallel texts (for example, advertisements published in a daily newspaper and an estate agent's documentation on projected apartment blocks) allowed the students to compose a list of possible functional equivalents which appeared in the parallel texts in a rather stereotypical way, as is shown in the following table. Using these modules, they could not only verify some of the cultural and quite a few terminological differences but also overcome their own difficulties in producing a text they had never before been asked to produce.

entrega de llaves	Bezugsfertigkeit"
precios"	Festpreise
versión duplex	Maisonette"
en el lugar más tranquilo	ruhige Umgebung, absolut ruhige Lage, sehr ruhig
"emplazamiento inmejorable	herrliche Umgebung, einmalige Lage, Spitzenlage, schönste Lage"
orientación mediodía (soleamiento adecuado)	sonnige Lage, Südlage"
arquitectura singular	außergewöhnliche Architektur/ Bauweise"
materiales de primera calidad	erstklassige/beste Bauqualität (und Ausstattung)/ ... mit jeglichem Komfort"

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