

TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION AS AN INTENTIONAL, INTERPERSONAL, COMMUNICATIVE, INTERCULTURAL AND TEXT-PROCESSING ACTION. THE SKOPOS THEORY APPLIED

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Abstract: In the last decades population movements are facilitating connexions between groups of minority languages and cultures and a majority and dominant language and culture in limited time and space. This situation is producing changes in the role of the intermediary or third party in the communication chain when people talking in different languages meet. At the same time, new scenarios appear and the need to communicate between the providers of services and the users of these services forces the creation of mechanisms and tools that help in this endeavor. Assuming that one of the first steps is linguistic communication, a pragmatic use of the language when translating and/or interpreting is expected. From this perspective, my objective is to analyze both translated written and oral texts (TT) recently produced in minority languages in Spain in the light of the *Skopos* theory. Results show that when applying the notion of 'text function' to the production and analysis of TTs, the translators and interpreters do not consider their role to be so invisible. To a greater or lesser extent, they perceived that they play a visible and active role in facilitating communication, and the act of transferring the information becomes an intentional, interpersonal, communicative, intercultural and text-processing action.

Key words: translation; community interpreting; skopos theory

1. Introduction

In the last decades population movements are facilitating connexions between groups of minority languages and cultures and a majority and dominant language and culture in limited time and space. This situation is producing changes in the role of the intermediary third party (e.g. interpreter, translator, intercultural mediator) in the communication chain when people talking in different languages meet. At the same time, new scenarios appear and the need to communicate between the providers of services and the users of these services forces the creation of mechanisms and tools that help in this endeavor. Two solutions often used are, on the one hand, the production of written multilingual materials and, on the other hand, the use of intermediaries that help them in oral encounters. These solutions are not new as translators (written communication) and interpreters (oral communication) have always been present in history when two or more communities linguistically differentiated have established contact (Greeks and Romans, Americans and Spaniards, English and native Americans...). However, in recent times this process has been accelerated and people with almost unknown languages and cultures, unbalanced educational background and socially and economically differentiated levels have given rise to new situations. Assuming that one of the first steps is linguistic communication, a pragmatic use of the language when translating and/or interpreting is expected.

From this perspective, my objective is to analyze both translated written and oral texts (TT) recently produced in minority languages spoken mostly by immigrants in Spain in the light of the *Skopos* theory. First I will briefly explain the *skopos* theory; secondly I will apply its main principles to the analysis of translated texts (oral and written) for minority communities in Spain, and finally, some conclusions and suggestions for future action will be pointed out.

2. Purpose as the main principle when translating and interpreting. The *Skopos* Theory

Skopos is a Greek word meaning ‘aim, target, and purpose’ and the theory that applies the notion of *skopos* to translation is known as the *skopos* theory, a theory due mainly to Reiss and Vermeer (1996), Vermeer (1989), and later developed by Nord (1991 and 1997).

According to this theory, the main principle determining any translation process is the purpose (*skopos*) of the overall translational action. This fits in with intentionality being part of the very definition of any action, and the assumption that any TT (written or oral) has a specific function associated. This intentionality is achieved through ‘translation instructions’, which must consist of a more or less explicit description of the prospective target situation, and are referred to as the *skopos*, i.e. the text function of the translated text (TT). It is worth to call the attention to the fact that the *skopos* theory is primarily applied to written translated texts (generally known as ‘translation’), but I make it extensive to oral texts too (interpretation).

According to Nord (1997: 15-26), the notion of “text function” involves viewing translation (including interpretation as explained above) as an intentional, interpersonal, communicative, intercultural and text-processing action:

1. Translating and interpreting as intentional interaction means that the translation is first and foremost *intended* to change an existing state of affairs (minimally the inability of certain people to communicate with each other);

2. Translating and interpreting as interpersonal interaction involves the interaction of certain agents who perform different functions in a complex network of mutual relations. These agents and their roles are the following ones. The role of the initiator or commissioner, who are the person, group or institution that starts off the translation process and determines its course by defining the purpose for which the TT is needed. Nord also mentions the role of source-text producer who are the person, group or institution actually responsible for any linguistic or stylistic choices present in the text expressing the sender’s communicative intentions. Both roles – initiator and ST producer – are often performed by the same person. The role of the translator, who is the expert in translation action and should be responsible both for carrying out the commissioned task and for ensuring the result of the translation process, even when aspects like formatting and layout are assigned to other agents (Vermeer 1989). In cases when the sender’s intention is not expressed adequately in the text, the translator can be compared with a target-culture text producer expressing a source-culture sender’s communicative intentions. The role of target-text receiver, who is the addressee of the translation, and the prospective receiver from the text producer’s standpoint. This agent often coincides with the target-text user, who is the one who finally puts it to use. It is also important to note that different agent roles may be fulfilled by one person.

3. Translating and interpreting as a communicative action means that the function of the TT is recognized by the receiver. That is, the translator and /or interpreter (TI) produced signs that are recognized by the audience, signs that must be taken considering that the a source-culture inventory might be misinterpreted from a target-culture point of view.

4. Translating and interpreting as intercultural action means that, assuming that translation takes place in a concrete, definable situation that involves members of different cultures, and that language and culture are inseparable, then the TI have to be aware of this interdependence and the rich points relevant to a particular translation task between group or sub-groups on either side of the language culture barrier.

5. Translating and interpreting as a text-processing action means that the translator, faced with a source text which is only an “offer of information” among the various sources of

information, s/he must choose the items s/he regards as interesting, useful or adequate to the desired purpose, changing or adapting as needed.

Thus, translation is seen as the production of a functional target text maintaining a relationship with a given source text that is specific according to the intended or demanded function of the target text. As a result the TT allows a communicative act to take place which because of existing linguistic and cultural barriers would not have been possible without it.

Assuming that, on the one hand, the TT recipient will be different from the ST recipient in at least one respect because s/he is a member of another cultural and linguistic community, and, on the other hand, that there can be different kinds of recipients, then functional equivalence between ST and TT doesn't necessarily need to be always the same. As a consequence different versions/ translations of the same ST can be expected as the target reader may handle the text in a different way: s/he may not be familiar with the subject matter, or s/he may need to be filled in on ST specific cultural phenomena.

The intermediary (called translator or interpreter) is in a great deal responsible for negotiating and producing different degrees of equivalence, especially when the client has only a vague or even incorrect idea of what kind of text is needed for the situation in question. As Nord (1997: 30) points out, clients do not normally bother to give the translator an explicit translation brief, not being experts in intercultural communication, and I quote: "they often do not know that a good brief spells a better translation".

The intermediary is then responsible for the communicative function of the TT, which may imply the production of different versions of the same ST or the use of different strategies when translating the same ST for a different purpose. At the same time, s/he must be forced to make changings because of the linguistic/cultural differences between the SL and TL, but also because of intentional choices made by the TI in order to comply with purpose and intentional outlines in the given translation instruction. This purpose brings into play the importance of the sender-receiver relationships and that of the asymmetry of knowledge: the TT receiver's knowledge of institutions or cultural elements may not be as detailed as that of the ST receivers; and the other way round, the ST receiver (or ST initiator) may not know the TT receivers' culture, which requires additional expansions when translating the text for a specific audience (Arabic, Romanian, Polish, Wolof, etc).

Sender /receiver relationship may also lead to some changes, for example, in the level of formality expected; or depending on the cultural distance that separates the ST and TT audience; or on the TT producer's adherence to the principle of loyalty, which has two directions: towards the ST, and towards the TT reader. Nord, stressing the concept of loyalty, considers that the translator's task is to "mediate" between the two cultures without falling into the trap of "cultural imperialism", i.e. without pretending that the concept of culture A is superior and, therefore, must be adopted by others.

In the following pages, it is my intention to examine the functionality (the *Skopos*) of the TTs produced for the immigrant population in Spain.

3. The production of translated materials and the *Skopos* theory

In this section it is my intention to check in which ways the *skopos* theory applies to written TTs through the analysis of the results of a study conducted in Spain in 2007. The data were collected through a questionnaire about translated materials produced for immigrant minorities. The questionnaire included questions related to the informants' perception about the use of language, of the content, and of the role of the translator and the commissioner of the translation. The informants were public in general: immigrants, Spanish people, civil

servants, NGO workers, many of them with experience as translators and interpreters for NGOs and the government, as well as receivers of STs and TTs. The TTs were mainly information brochures with services providers' addresses and informative notes, official documents produced by the Government (application forms, etc.), instructions to have access to some public services, or texts written in Spanish but for a more specific purpose and depending on the needs: how to take the tube, how to register in the town hall, how to ask for the sanitary card, and so on. The results show the following (for more information about this study see Valero-Garcés 2007):

When asked about the language use, most informants (90%) agree that the TT were understandable and intended for the general public. A few mentioned that sometimes the use of a more specific terminology posed a problem for both the TT receiver and the translator him/herself due mostly to the lack of resources, but also of training. Informants also reported that the most common strategies used were word-for-word translation, and loan translation which sometimes makes the term difficult to be understood, even though the context (text and images) usually help to get the intended meaning. Other strategies used to produce functional texts were the use of explanations, footnotes, or the translation of technical terms in everyday language, due to, at least, two main factors, firstly, to the recommendations by the commissioner of the TT (mainly the government or NGO), who is becoming more sensitive to the quality of TT; and secondly, the (trained) translator's own decision (For more information about this topic see Valero-Garcés and Sales 2007).

When asked about the content of TT, most informants also agree with the adequacy of the content. Only a few made some comments about certain difficulties in using /understanding concepts or expressions related to socio-cultural aspects (e.g. eating, religious or any type of habits, or administrative procedures) specially when the term has no equivalent in the other language and the translator has to show his/her ability to make it understandable to the new audience mentioned. For example, the expression "celula de habitabilidad," a sort of certificate that says a house can be inhabited. Some others - only 10 % - pointed out that sometimes the TT for minority languages were less sensible to the specific culture. For example, they do not take into account the differences that exist between standard Arabic, which is official for Moroccans, and the *Amazight* (Berber) dialect of Rif, or the *Dariddiyya* language spoken by most of the Moroccan people. Most institutions do not make these differences and the work they produce is 100% in standard Arabic. The risk is that all these texts may not be understood by the population they are targeted at.

When asked about the role of the translator, a high percentage of informants considered that the translators were mostly ad hoc translators and interpreters: NGO volunteers, and bilinguals without any specific training, especially in languages such as Bulgarian, Russian, Polish, or Romanian, languages that were not usually taught in Spain, and were neither included as work languages in translation and interpreting training nor in applied linguistics programs at university level. This information agrees with results from previous studies which reveal that a characteristic that shares most of the TI working with migrants is that they perform a double role, especially if they are members of the minority; that is, they work, on one hand, inside of and for their same community, often using their own language, and, on the other hand, they work with the host society at schools, in hospitals, or at work where they have to negotiate and exchange meanings with people that usually don't share the same language and culture (for more information about these studies see Valero-Garcés 2003 and 2004).

This makes particularly relevant the topic of loyalty as explained by Nord and it is the source of debate in many recent papers (See Brunette et al. 2003, Wadensjö et al. 2004, and

Valero-Garcés and Martin 2008). There is also an increasing number of some more experienced translators working for the government, or from translation agencies and freelance translators with some experience who are hired to translate specific texts and who produce more linguistically homogeneous and culturally sensitive texts, according to the informants. Informants also perceived some differences between the official bodies, on the one side, and NGOs and private institutions and businesses, on the other side; the last ones tended to produce TT addressed to very specific groups and needs and rely on a more highly motivated staff.

These data seem to confirm an increasing awareness on the part of society and institutions of the need of functional TT, as well as a great degree of effectiveness of the TT. However, some difficulties are also related, as for example, certain lack of adequacy when translating cultural concepts, lack of training or resources to translate terminology, which may be influenced by the lack of specific – or little- budget dedicated to TT in most institutions, the production of ephemeral TT, and limited distribution.

Coming back to the main objective of this article- applying the notion of “text function” to the production and analysis by receivers of multilingual texts for immigrants – research reveals the following: the texts are intended to provide practical information to the new population about the administration and institutions; the interpersonal interaction involves the participation of different agents including the translator – who very often is an immigrant himself, a volunteer, and a “natural” translator –, the commissioner of the translation – who are usually the government, NGOs or even private institutions interested in these communities –, the reader of the TT – who are immigrants with different languages and cultures and also with different degrees of knowledge of the host language and culture; the main purpose of TT is to communicate with the new population who must recognise the message which may imply changes between the ST and the TT, but also between different TTs; these changes may be due to linguistic but also cultural differences, and even to textual differences between the ST and the TT receiver as the main aim of the translation is the production of a functional target text.

4. The role of the interpreter and the *Skopos* theory

History is full of examples of intermediaries in many different settings performing many different roles. They participate in business, politics, courts, hospitals, schools, etc. They have also been labeled differently: mediator, chairman, cultural broker, go-between, middleman, translator, or interpreter.

In the area of Translation Studies, the traditional view of the interpreter as a “language-switching operator” (or “conduit model”) as developed by Seleskovitch and Lederer (1989) is still supported by many scholars, especially when referring to conference interpreting. However, in the specific field of Public Service Interpreting and Translating (PSIT), under which this study is included, the literature is full of examples of the never-ending discussion about the roles of the interpreter placed along a line with two ends: the visibility vs. the invisibility of the interpreter, which under the theoretical framework of the *skopos* theory, the role of the TI would be determined by the special purpose in a specific situation, which allows the interpreter to (deliberately) make changes to the form of the text and manipulate the words in order to aid understanding across culture.

Results from previous research conducted under different theoretical frameworks also agree with this perspective when seen the TI as an essential partner in a cross-cultural conversation (Roy 2000; Wadensjö 1992 and 1995), and co-constructors of the interaction

(Angelelli (2003 and 2005). These studies reveal that the interpreter is a visible agent with all the social and cultural factors that allow her/him to co-construct a definition of reality with the other co-participants to the interaction (Angelelli 2003: 17), while the idea of an “invisible” interpreter is considered as an illusion.

Our own research in Spain also agrees with this last tendency. Three studies were conducted (1998, 2002, and 2006) with a twofold objective: on the one hand, to analyze and compare the main difficulties encountered working as interpreters in public settings, and, on the other, to analyze and compare the roles that these interpreters think they have to perform when acting in these public settings. The informants were general public (mostly immigrants) who worked in the northern area of Madrid. Most of them had also worked as TI for NGOs or for the government when required, or simply as volunteers or assisting their families and friends, as it also happens in the case of the translators or other intermediaries. Their educational backgrounds were quite different, ranging from the illiterate to university graduates in their countries of origin, and almost none of them had received instruction as interpreters or translators in Spain or in their countries (for more information about these studies see Valero-Garcés 2003 and 2004).

As for the main difficulties encountered when working as interpreters in public settings, these were: problems in understanding dialects or specific accents; problems in understanding technical or semi-technical words; problems related specifically to translating and interpreting skills; problems derived from the lack of familiarity with the situation, place, or people; problems with deciding which position to adopt; problems derived from some sort of pressure from the providers of services (for more information about this study see Valero-Garcés 2007).

As for the roles that these interpreters think they have to perform when acting in public settings, viewing the changes from the traditional position under the skopos theory may add a significant perspective. Thus, the study conducted in 2006 indicates that interpreters had problems when deciding which position to adopt: either being compliant with the users or the providers, or trying to be neutral. The tendency was to admit a more open role for the interpreter. When asked about which roles the interpreter had to perform, those surveyed considered that the intermediary was not only a ‘linguistic’ translator or interpreter, but also a cultural mediator who had to explain the hidden meaning or the differences between the cultures (over 70% of the answers). They also considered that they had to explain technical words or difficult expressions. They also agreed when it came to correcting misunderstandings produced by a lack of knowledge of the languages or cultures. Most of them claimed that they had to adapt the text to the reader, simplifying or explaining, and even omitting information. They also reported that performing other extra-linguistic activities: filling out application forms, completing reports, talking to social workers, or making phone calls also were quite a common task.

Summarising, these intermediaries did not consider their role to be invisible. To a greater or lesser extent, they perceived that they play a visible and active role in facilitating communication, one that is not only restricted to switching from one language to another, challenging the myth of the invisible interpreter and the need to redefine the traditional monolithic view of the invisibility of the interpreter. Similar results have been obtained in other studies carried out in other countries (Valero-Garcés and Martin 2008), even though more research needs to be done.

These results can also be explained under the theoretical framework of the skopos theory, when applying the notion of “text function” to the production and analysis by receivers of oral encounters when an interpreter is needed: the act of transferring the information becomes an

intentional, interpersonal, communicative, intercultural and text-processing action which makes possible communication eliminating the linguistic and cultural and textual barriers.

5. Conclusions and further considerations

In our changing societies towards more multicultural models, the TI is an essential element – highly influential – in the communication chain. The strategies s/he uses in producing a (oral or written) TT may determine the nature of the text and their effect. Research has revealed some deficiencies and changes in attitudes, given rise to some texts and in some languages highly communicative, while others are not. Many factors affect these results: initiators, translators, text type, specific time and situation, TT readers, asymmetry of knowledge... Many of these deficiencies could be eliminated with training. And the *skopos* theory provides an excellent framework to develop a program and some guidelines for future TI. Our experience and results from this research show that in order to ensure quality in TTs and effective communication, training is necessary as well as a specific education and professional recognition.

Our societies are increasingly aware of the emerging multicultural reality, and are therefore making their first gradual steps in the study of a hitherto neglected area, namely interlinguistic communication. There is even more visible interest in this type of translation and interpretation, considered as an additional mechanism or means for facilitating communication between the majority and those with a limited knowledge of the mainstream language or the language used in the public services and government offices.

Obviously and like any other corpus-based analysis, this study remains open to any complementary results that might emerge from future research. We are of course aware of this. However, we believe this is a first step towards further work.

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