2.2 The skopos theory and its functional approach

In 1976, the same year as the historic conference in Leuven, other scholars were engaged in heated debate in a lecture-hall in Germersheim, Germany. In what was to be one of his last publications, Hans Honig (1941–2004) and Paul Kussmaul recall these developments, each from their individual viewpoint (Honig 2004, Kussmaul 2004).

Once again, the point of resistance was the paradigm of (applied) linguistics, which was then producing its own "science of translation", drawing on a background of contrastive linguistics, curricular management and machine translation (cf. Wilss 2004). In 1977 Wolfram Wilss published his book *Übersetzungswissenschaft. Probleme und Methoden* (which appeared in English in 1982 with the title *The Science of Translation*), where he compiled an inventory of the factors involved in translation as based on linguistics and communication theory, and with reference to concepts from the Leipzig School. This book has often been described as the beginnings of the discipline in (West) Germany, and it did indeed do much to make the study of translation acceptable to an academic environment which had till then dismissed it as a "merely practical" activity – in the climate of the time an undoubted achievement. But it did not bring about a radical change of paradigm. This, according to Honig and Kussmaul (both 2004), was initiated by Hans J. Vermeer during the academic year 1976–77 in a lecture course describing a "General Theory of Translation".

The ideas were so new and so exciting that the younger colleagues Honig and Kussmaul were motivated to attend and join in the discussion. The result was Vermeer’s seminal essay “Ein Rahmen fur eine allgemeine Translationstheorie” (A framework for a general theory of translation, Vermeer 1978), which laid the foundations for the skopos theory.

Kussmaul, who recalls that the idea of attaching more importance to the target culture had already been “in the air” among the colleagues at Germersheim, describes the approach as follows:


(A central idea of the essay was that the aim and purpose of a translation is determined by the needs and expectations of the reader in his culture. Vermeer called this the “skopos”, and the so-called “faithfulness to the original”, equivalence in fact, was subordinated to this skopos. This gave us a real sense of release, as if translation theory had at last been put on its feet.)

On the basis of Vermeer’s ideas, Honig and Kussmaul then compiled their book *Strategie der Übersetzung. Ein Lehr- und Arbeitsbuch* (Strategy of Translation. A coursebook), which appeared in 1982 and, as the title indicates, was written for students, in a lively and lucid style and illustrated by many examples. The Greek word *skopos* was avoided, as at the time it was largely unknown in the translation context, and instead the authors used the word *function* – which earned them, and
others of similar convictions, the title of the “Germersheim Functionalists”. In their book, which soon became a bestseller, the concept of culture has a central role; their definition of the text, which for translation purposes rivals that of Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), is “the verbalized part of a socioculture” (1982:58): the text is embedded in a given situation, which is itself conditioned by its sociocultural background (for the diagram of these relations see Kussmaul 1986: 209). The translation is then dependent on its function as a text “implanted” in the target culture, whereby there is the alternative of either preserving the original function of the source text (“functional constancy”), or of changing the function to adapt to the specified needs of the target culture.

Vermeer was to restate and elaborate his theoretical principles in a collection of lectures he published in 1983, then at a colloquium held in Saarbrucken in 1983 (Vermeer 1984), and above all in the book he wrote with Katharina Reiss which became the “manifesto” of the skopos theorists: Grundlegung einer allgemeinen Translationstheorie (Foundations of a General Theory of Translation, Reiss and Vermeer 1984), where, like James Holmes before him, he discussed the name of the discipline involved. Taking over Kade’s generic terms Translation, Translator and Translat, he suggests (among other possibilities) the derivative Translationswissenschaft, which has meanwhile gained acceptance in the German-speaking scientific community.20 In his model, language is not an autonomous “system”, but part of a culture, hence the translator should not be only bilingual, but also bicultural. Similarly, the text is not a static and isolated linguistic fragment, but is dependent on its reception by the reader, and it invariably bears a relation to the extra-linguistic situation in which it is embedded, it is therefore “part of a world-continuum” (1983: 48).

This approach relativizes both text and translation: the one and only perfect translation does not exist, any translation is dependent on its skopos and its situation. Whereas Toury’s concept of a translation is “a text that is accepted as such” (2.1), the skopos approach has identified five broad translation types. The interlinear version (or word for word translation), as once used by Bible translators in the form of glosses, merely reproduces the linear sequence of words, irrespective of any rules of the TL language system. The grammar translation, as used in foreign language classes to test knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, observes the rules of TL syntax, and the linguistic meaning itself is clear, but it functions at sentence level, and there is no context. The documentary or “scholarly” translation reflects Schleiermacher’s maxim of “moving the reader towards the author” (1.1): the text is here seen in its entirety, but the translation is oriented towards the source text and aims at informing the reader of its content, even by “alienating” or “foreignizing” the target language.

The communicative or “instrumental” translation is oriented towards the target culture, using its conventions and idioms; the text function typically remains unchanged (as with instructions for use — cf. 2.3) and the text is not immediately recognizable as a translation. With the adapting or “modifying” translation, the source text functions as raw material to serve a particular purpose, as with multimedia or multimodal translation (3.1.3) or when news reports are used by press agencies. (Cf. Reiss and Vermeer 1984: 134–136, also Reiss 1995: 21–23, see too Gawlas 2004). With this approach a translation is seen in terms of how it serves its intended purpose, and the concept of translation, when set against the former criterion of SL equivalence, is more differentiated and indeed closer to the realities of translation practice.

Vermeer expanded his ideas in a lecture given in Zurich on 21st May 1984, which was published in a later version as “Übersetzen als kultureller Transfer” (“Translation as a cultural transfer”, Vermeer 1986). Here he states his own definition of translation:

…ein Informationsangebot in einer Sprache z der Kultur Z, das ein Informationsangebot in einer Sprache a der Kultur A funktionsgerecht (!) imitiert. Das heisst ungefahr: Eine Translation ist nicht die Transkodierung von Wortern oder Satzen aus einer Sprache in eine andere, sondern eine komplexe Handlung, in der jemand unter neuen funktionalen und kulturellen und
sprachlichen Bedingungen in einer neuen Situation über einen Text (Ausgangssachverhalt) berichtet, indem er ihn auch formal möglichst nachahmt. (1986: 33)

(...an offer of information in a language t of the culture T, which imitates an offer of information in a language s of the culture S according to its specified function. In other words, a translation is not the transcoding of words or sentences from one language into another, but a complex form of action in which someone gives information about a text (source language material) under new functional, cultural and linguistic conditions and in a new situation, while preserving formal aspects as far as possible.)

This is an explicit rejection of the then still influential linguistic definition of translation as an “equivalent” version of the source text. The most important factor is the skopos (Greek for aim, purpose, goal), hence the purpose or function of the translation in the target culture, as specified by the client (in a translation brief) or the envisaged user-expectations; translation is hence prospective rather than, as had hitherto been the case, retrospective. The skopos can apply to both the process and the product of translation, and a distinction is made between the Translationsskopos (the translator’s intended purpose) and the Translatskopos (the function of the translation as seen in the receiving culture): in everyday practice these differ, and only in ideal cases is there complete agreement between them.

The second important factor is intratextual coherence: a message has been understood when the reader (or user) can make sense of it both in itself and in relation to his/her given situation. That is more important than intertextual coherence (or fidelity to the source text), which pertains if the function of source and target texts remain the same. If a change of function is required, the translation should fulfil the criteria specified in the skopos. In the heated discussion following the Zurich lecture, Vermeer spoke of “de-throning the source text”, which he merely considered a “means to a new text”, ideas which were anathema to the assembled linguists and which even among translation scholars provoked stormy debate.

Vermeer’s approach was essentially dynamic and holistic, actually in keeping with the trends of the times, and today it might seem strange that it met with such opposition. His ideas harmonize with those of James Holmes (for whose disciplinary utopia he provided a General Theory), as for example his concept of “intertextual coherence” (cf. 3.3.1) which replaces the orthodox “equivalence” and refines Holmes’ notion of the “network of matchings” (1.4). Similarly the concepts of “documentary” and “instrumental” translation – compatible with Newmark’s “semantic” and “communicative” translation (1981) – are placed in context with leading, linguistically oriented, works of the time (House 1977 and Diller and Kornelius 1978, cf. Reiss and Vermeer 1984: 92).

Basically however, as we see from the title of his 1986 essay, Vermeer views translation as a cultural transfer rather than a linguistic one, language being part of culture. The definition of culture, taken over from his Germersheim colleague Heinz Gohring, itself based on that of the American ethnologist Ward Goode-nough (1964: 36, see Snell-Hornby 1988: 39–40), has meanwhile become standard among German-speaking translation scholars supporting the functional approach:

Kultur ist all das, was man wissen, beherrschen und empfinden können muss, um beurteilen zu können, wo sich Einheimische in ihren verschiedenen Rollen erwartungskonform oder abweichend verhalten, und um sich selbst in der betreffenden Gesellschaft erwartungskonform oder abweichend verhalten zu können, sofern man dies will und nicht etwa bereit ist, die jeweils aus erwartungswidrigem Verhalten entstehenden Konsequenzen zu tragen. (Gohring 1977: 10)
(Culture consists of everything one needs to know, master and feel, in order to assess where members of a society are behaving acceptably or deviantly in their various roles, and in order to behave in a way that is acceptable or deviant for that society, as far as one wishes to do so and is not prepared to take the consequences arising from deviant conduct.)

Later Vermeer was to modify this definition as:

...die Gesamtheit der Normen, Konventionen und Meinungen, nach denen sich das Verhalten der Mitglieder einer Gesellschaft richtet, und die Gesamtheit der Resultate aus diesem Verhalten (also z.B. der architektonischen Bauten, der universitären Einrichtungen usw. usw). (Vermeer 1989a: 9)

(...the totality of norms, conventions and opinions which determine the behaviour of the members of a society, and all results of this behaviour (such as architecture, university institutions etc. etc)

This concept of culture as a totality of knowledge, proficiency and perception (in particular the notions of norm and convention) is basic to the functional approach to translation as a special form of communication and social action in contrast to abstract code-switching, and it was later extended by Heidrun Witte (1987) in a discussion of the translator’s “cultural competence” as “competence between cultures”.

The concept of culture is central to the skopos theory (described more fully in Schaffner 1998b), and as such already gave rise to the “cultural turn” in Germany during the mid-1980s. The “new orientation” was so clear that in 1984 (the same year in which the volume by Reiss and Vermeer was published) I started asking colleagues for contributions to an anthology reflecting this change (Snell-Hornby 1986): they include essays by Vermeer, Kussmaul and Honig. The exciting new developments in the German scientific community then formed the topic of the paper I gave at the Warwick Conference in 1988, “Linguistic Transcoding or Cultural Transfer? A Critique of Translation Theory in Germany” (Snell-Hornby 1990), which begins with these remarks:

In recent years there has been a ferment of new ideas on translation in the German-speaking countries, many of them hotly debated in countless publications, but in the English-speaking world the household names of German translation theory remain virtually unknown. As an attempt to counteract the deficit, this paper presents an overview of the two main streams in translation theory that have developed in Germany since the war: the linguistically oriented Übersetzungs wissenschaft as represented in particular by the theorists of the Leipzig School, along with Wolfram Wilss and Werner Koller, and the culturally oriented approach of scholars such as Hans J. Vermeer. (1990: 79)

In the introduction to their 1990 volume Lefevere and Bassnett use the notion of the “cultural turn” (1990: 4, quoted in 2.1) with explicit reference to that paper – which describes developments in Germany of the 1980s. All the more perplexing is Gentzler’s assertion, likewise quoted in 2.1, that it was with the 1990 anthology “that translation studies officially took the ‘cultural turn’” (1998: xi). When the turn was “officially” taken is difficult to say: “unofficially” I would suggest that it was taken by Honig and Kussmaul in 1982, and then followed up by Vermeer and his colleagues through the following years, definitely contributing towards what Bassnett and Lefevere themselves were so famously to describe as the “success story of the 1980s” (1990: ix).