Translation and the Skopos Theory: A Functionalist Approach to Audiovisual Media

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Abstract:*The growing internationalisation of the media in recent years makes it essential for audiovisual translation (AVT), including subtitling, dubbing and localization to provide optimum ways audiences can be engaged. Classical translation approaches, which are frequently based on linguistic parity or equivalence, prove unsuccessful when extended to the multimodal and culture-specific reality of AVT. To that effect, the article looks into whether Skopos Theory, a functional approach focusing on the translation purpose rather than equivalence-orientation, can respond to some of AVT's particular challenges. Through a focus on audience uptake, situational fit and communicative purpose Skopos Theory provides an adaptable foundation for negotiating the demands of language, culture and technology. Analysing examples from film and television, this article demonstrates the value for viewer comprehension and cultural resonance of translating with a focus on 'function'. The article also touches on the ethical implications and critiques of audiovisual translation but claims that a functionalist methodology, if consciously used, may not necessarily be an obstacle to bridging source and target cultures without mutilating the original audio product.*

Keywords*: Skopos Theory, Audiovisual Translation (AVT), Subtitling, Dubbing, Localization, Transcreation*

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Introduction

In a world where the media has become more and more globalised there is an ever-growing need for well-informed, high quality audiovisual translation (AVT). From movies and series through documentaries web content to video games, all of them have broken free from their language constraints for widespread-global distribution. This new state of conceptualization bears complex challenges to translators: linguistic, technical but also cultural and communication-related. Audiovisual works are characterized by spoken words, music, visual images and written language – all in a multi-modal space which cannot be adequately translated applying linguistics only. In this regard, Skopos Theory (a functional model of translation formulated by Hans J. Vermeer) proves to be relevant here.

In comparison to previous statement-based models that had aimed for equivalence, Skopos Theory is a radical approach. Vermeer argues that "the prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose (Skopos) of the overall translational action" (Vermeer 1989). The theory also moves the translator's attention away from source-text fetishism towards a concern with target-text purpose, encouraging translators to concentrate first on what are presumably those requirements of communication which both make up and limit texts. This functionalist methodology is likely

to be particularly well-adapted for AVT where extra-linguistic restrictions such as time, space or visual cohesion and the expectations of a receiving audience require anything more than a word-for-word equivalence.

Skopos is quite different from previous source-oriented translation theories of equivalence. The theory moves away from the source-text 's precedence to that of target-text's function and thus calls for translators to consider first their communication aim in a very specific context. This is particularly the case with AVT, where such operational limitations as time and space restrictions (and visual consistency and viewer expectation) require a priori more than just direct- equivalent parroting.

Subtitling and dubbing, the most widespread AVT modalities, provide examples of strategies that are not necessarily motivated by any purpose. Subtitles are usually subject to imposition due to time and length restraints, so their contents can be condensed or replaced. Dubbing, on the other hand, requires lip synchronisation and echo of speech rhythms that must be adjusted for naturalism and fluency in target language. Technical and cultural aspects of a literal translation may not work in such cases. According to Christiane Nord, "a translation can be considered good if it fulfils the skopos or purpose defined in the translation brief" (Nord 1997). Audiovisual translation is, therefore, successful not through linguistic fidelity but for the establishment of communicative success and cultural relevance in the target language.

Furthermore, Skopos Theory frees the translator as a cultural go-between because it makes him/her the one with authority to take decisions according to what is expected from (what was translated of) the target text and other limiting factors such as media. This change in the role of translator takes on greater importance, however, when considering audiovisual translation (AVT) where every single decision made; be it regarding idiomaticity and humour or cultural references, affects reception. This article argues that Skopos Theory constitutes a flexible and adequate framework, capable of accommodating the needs imposed on audio-visual translation as it tackles an increasing number of challenges; in doing so attempts to apply such theory through examples based on texts belonging to different media.

Understanding Skopos Theory

Skopos Theory, developed by German translator and translation theorist Hans J. Vermeer, precipitated a major paradigm shift in late twentieth-century approaches to the theory & practice of translation. Unlike earlier models which operated in terms of linguistic equivalence, Skopos Theory focuses on target-orientated or skopotic translation. The German "skopos" (from the Greek) simply means "aim," or goal. According to Vermeer, the success of a translation should not be based on its fidelity to the original text but rather whether it fulfils its purpose in another culture. He explicitly states: "Each text is produced for a given purpose and should serve that purpose" (Vermeer 1989). In this way fluent translation is literally an instrumental and communicative

occurrence in hegemonic or political-cultural terms. The translator is no longer just a linguistic vehicle, rather they become an agent of culture who reacts to the needs and conditions in society. The key principles of Skopos theory are as follows:

1. Purpose over Fidelity

One of the key lessons from Skopos Theory is that function in translating should trump equivalence at all costs. It's not to translate it exactly/verbatim, but to recreate what was being done with that word in the new context. This is particularly important in areas such as AVT or advertising material and technical manuals where a literal translation might be confusing. As Vermeer puts it, "The source text is no longer the first and foremost yardstick" (Vermeer 1989).

2. Target Audience Centrality

Intercultural and interpersonal audience analysis plays an important role in this strategy. What speaks clearly in one culture may not speak well, or exactly fittingly, from another. Each audience can be limited to individual or multiple viewers, and the translator must consider such implications when imagining how they would receive and understand a text. Christiane Nord, a proponent of functionalist theories in translation studies comments: "The function of a text is determined by the receiver's situation" (Nord 1997).

3. Translator's Agency

Skopos Theory recognizes the role played by tool as an agent of translation. Rather than an invisible mediator, the translator is regarded as

a person making decisions by considering various factors (e.g. context and purpose) through which s/he makes choices about strategies to have recourse interpreted on that basis. It is an agency that we need when some or another form of cultural adaptation and creative reformulation are necessary. The translator is not exclusively tied to form of original text anymore but he may do as the skopos intends.

4. Multiplicity of Legitimate Translations

One of the liberating ideas in Skopos Theory is that different translations for the same text can still be valid, as long as they do what it is necessary. The text itself can also be translated in different ways; a religious work, for example, may vary greatly between a version intended towards scholarly study or to serve as reference and an edition printed with the intention of devotional reading. These two approaches might be valid when considered in their specific goals. This flexibility allows translations to be more context-sensitive and powerful.

Audiovisual Translation: Forms and Challenges

Audiovisual translation (AVT) constitutes a key area of research in the realm of translation studies, especially at this current time when digital media leads to an internationalization/mobility of content. Unlike literary translation, the AVT takes place in multimodal texts—texts that combine spoken language with visual information, music and sound effects as well as on-screen informational text. It's not just a matter of

translating words; there is meaning and emotion to hold on for dear life as it moves from one language, culture or dialect into another. As Díaz-Cintas and Remael point out, "Audiovisual texts are semiotically rich and complex; translating them involves much more than transferring spoken dialogue" (2007).

AVT comes in several shapes and sizes depending on the mode of presentation, expectations for audience performance and standing practice traditions. The most common forms are:

- Captioning: Display of transcribed dialogue on the theoretical low bandwidth channel in synchronization with original audio streaming. It is also specific to time and place, particularly two lines of approximately 35-42 characters per line.
- Dubbing: In this type, the source is overlaid by a new audio in the target language with lip and voice to be sync.
- Voice-over: Now, a translated version of the speech is laid over it with barely audible original audio underneath. It is frequently used in documentaries and news narratives.
- Localization: This is a further more extensive process that reshapes the content—dialogue, references, gestures and even cultural codes (in short meaning)- to match with what would be acceptable for a certain area or organization of people.

However, AVT has its share of complications. The intrinsic properties of audio-video media give rise to specific issues, linguistic and logotechnical problems for which solutions are sought.

1. Temporal and spatial limitations in subtitling

Subtitles will need to be not only timed with the dialogue but also in a viewer's peripheral, making sure that all who read them are receiving their information without being lost in the chaos. Thus, large and or complicated expressions must frequently be reduced. If that's the case, then sometimes you can't translate literally. According to Gottlieb (1992: 1), "like all translation, subtitling involves a process of reduction and adaptation rather than word-for-word equivalence".

2. Lip-Synchrony and Prosody Mapping in Dubbing

In the case of dubbing, translators need to be sure whatever they've translated aligns not only with lip movement but also tone, emotion and rhythm. This is particularly tough for high-emotion scenes, comedy or musical sequences. A literal translation might not sound proper if the lip-sync, energy of a singer or speaker does not fit.

3. Cultural Content in Jokes, Idioms and References

AVT also encompasses the culture-bound aspects of idiomatic language, puns and local references that do not exist in target languages. A pun, or a proverb that makes sense in English can make no sense at all — or be simply confusing — to someone who speaks Hindi or Tamil. And this is certainly a term where some sort of creative rephrasing or cultural

switcheroo will be needed to get the point across.

4. Censorship and Sensitivity Abroad

AV works are often censored by the state or society. Text about politics, religion (and negative beliefs), sex or violence may need to be toned down/rephrased by translators. This puts them in morally precarious positions where achieving a compromise between ethical craftsmanship and legal adherence can be nearly impossible.

With these issues, simply inflexible translation processes that rely upon a linguistic transposition will not suffice. What AVT needs is an adaptable and goal oriented philosophy, which can be found in use of Skopos Theory. This focus on the translation's role in its specific circumstances enables the translator to make rational decisions concerning condensation, substitution, adaptation or even deletion (as appropriate for corresponding translated units) based on what is required of equivalent translations. As Christiane Nord rightly observes, "The skopos theory provides translators with a framework to justify their translation strategies as long as they fulfil the intended purpose of the target text" (Nord 1997).

Skopos Theory in Practice: Subtitling and Dubbing

Audiovisual translation (AVT) has become an exciting area of study that examines the transfer meaning in a wide range of languages and cultures through sound-and-picture media. Two of the most popular AVT forms, subtitling and dubbing present unique challenges since they are both multimodal mediums with simultaneity constraints. A term coined by Hans Vermeer in his functionalist translation theory and an approach that offers a practical means for dealing with such problems, Skopos Theory is not concerned directly so much with reaching equivalence as interpreting what the purpose (Skopos) of a text should be in comparison to one's source.

According to Vermeer, "each translation is carried out with a definite purpose and the ultimate criterion guiding the translation process is the intended function of the target text in the target culture" (174). This perspective leaves room for the translators to put audience recognition, viewing habits and cultural expectations as well as medium-specific norms above a straightforward similarity in determining fidelity.

Subtitling

Subtitling is the process by which spoken words are rendered into written text and shown at foot of screen. This type of translation for AVT is limited by space (average 2 lines/max 35-40 characters per line) and time (between three and six seconds on screen). Under these constraints, not all the lexical details of an original utterance can be retained (especially in hastily spoken exchanges or culturally laden ones). Skopos theory sanctions introductory contraction, domestication and even amputation so long as these are for textual communicative purposes. If the subtitle is too long to be easily read within its on-screen time, it needs to be edited down while maintaining the essential message and tone.

Example 1:

- Source (English): "You gotta be kidding me!"

- Literal Hindi Translation: "तुम मज़ाक कर रहे हो!"

- Skopos-aligned Subtitle: "क्या बात कर रहे हो!"

Though this is a correct translation in terms of language, it seems somewhat too formal to me and doesn't capture the levity of the orignal. "क्या बात कर रहे हो!" is snappier, more colloquial in Hindi and better for quick screen reading. It even has the emotional punch the original was going for.

Example 2:

- Source (English): "I'm totally broke this month."

- Skopos-aligned Hindi Subtitle: "इस महीने बिलकुल कंगाल हूँ"

Here, "कंगाल" says less by expressing the status of being broke in simple two syllables instead of an entire sentence like "मेरे पास पैसे नहीं है". Conciseness also conforms to subtitling limitations and yet retains meaning, tone. As Nord (1997: 97) puts it "If the function demands brevity, then reduction is not a fault but a requirement." Therefore, Skopos Theory provides license to such adaptations and actively advises that these translations be done when the target audience and medium make them necessary.

Dubbing

Dubbing involves substituting the original language audio with translated speech as closely tied to lips, expressions and timing of on-screen performances. In contrast to subtitling, dubbing involves the need for proper lip-sync issue as well as prosodic alignment and naturalness of dialogue. Most likely a translation task is insufficient. The so present Skopos Theory locates itself in the sense of a practical and purposeful dubbing. The translator may – and should, very often change words around, change idioms at will, turn in references to pop culture for local equivalents if the important thing was getting a laugh\cry out of you without caring what sort; as long as emotional tone & narrative function are maintained.

Example 1:

- Source (English): "That's the last straw!"

- Literal Translation: "यह आख़िरी तिनका है"

- Skopos-aligned Dubbing (Hindi): "अब बर्दाश्त के बाहर है!"

The actual metaphor falters here, it isn't natural in Hindi. An English idiom and tone that could send a viewer unfamiliar with them right over the top of it. The translation of the dubbed version, "अब बर्दाश्त के बाहर है!", has more emotional clarity and performative intensity.

Example 2:

- Source (English - Comedy): "You're such a buzzkill."

- Skopos-aligned Hindi Dubbing: "हर बात पे पानी फेर देते हो!"

Once again, the word "buzzkill" does not have a literal translation in Hindi and it would simply be confusing to pass on such translations. The translated vernacular works well for speaking, and comes off funny too.

In dubbing prosody —the rhythm and intonation of speech—is just as important as lexical correctness. While a dialogue well-dubbed has to seem natural, and not read. Not just the words but also their emotion, breathing, pauses and tone must be matched by a translator; this while conforming to lip-sync. According to Gambier (2003), "Dubbing is a form of performance translation, where the translator becomes a scriptwriter, actor, and cultural negotiator simultaneously (24)."

Both in translation for subtitles and dubbing, the translator is not a mere language optimiser; he/she manages the cultural falling back (and therefore adaption) of a given text or script as well as creative issues. The translator must decide what the function of the AV text is: Is it to entertain, inform teach or evoke emotion? With the purpose in mind, then the translator chooses which strategy to make and this could be reduction, expansion, substitution or transformation. Skopos Theory thus frees up the translator from "faithful" reproduction and enables audience-focused, medium-specific, culture-bound decisions to be made. As Vermeer aptly states, "Translation is not a sterile linguistic transference, but a human act carried out with intention (34)." It must always be a 'human act', and must also clearly express the intention of communication.

The use of Skopos Theory in audiovisual translation, most especially subtitling and dubbing has shown that with the theory being put into practice will be more enabling as relates to quality enhancement vis-à-vis efficiency on real world translations. Skopos Theory is a flexibly regimented system for accommodating the many demands facing AVT, based on (albeit not impervious to) purpose and audience/mode concerns. Content over faithfulness is still king for Jia, and if there comes a point when one considers that not just the original texts (which could be rejected) but several approved translations should all somehow be 'valid', it stands as an apt model in these particularly globalized mediatic times.

Both in subtitle and dubbing, the translator is not only a devotee of language conversion but it can cede to cultural mediator as well as creative selector. The translator s this or that as an AV text's function: to entertain, inform, instruct and arouse emotions? The translator, depending on this purpose, will then apply the specific treatment of reduction or expansion in a particular case by way of substitution or transformation. Skopos Theory, therefore, frees the translator from thinking in terms of "faithful" extraction and allows him/her to use medium-specific and culture-bound options that will be optimal for the target audience. According to Vermeer, "Translation is not a sterile linguistic transference, but a human act carried out with intention (35)."

A classic example of the application of Skopos Theory in AVT, especially for subtitling and dubbing which shows how a functionalist theory helps to improve translations and make them optimize according to their settings. Through its emphasis on Skopos Theory, the

theory of purpose and audience in conjunction with medium which interdicts function-oriented viewpoints with a balanced principle, it provides an open-minded yet disciplined model for dealing with AVT´s intricate challenges. Its prioritisation of function over fidelity and its affirmation of multiple equally valid translations, is a valuable resource for the translator working today in the globalised media age.

Skopos in Localization and Transcreation

Localization is more than just moving words from one language to another; there are functional, cultural and linguistic adaptation aspects too. Localization can thus be well grounded in the Skopos Theory that what strategy should be used is determined by why it was translated. As Hans J. Vermeer asserts, "It is the purpose of the target text that determines translation methods and strategies" (Vermeer 1989).

The guiding principle of traditional translation, that the form and style should be as close to the original Author's experience of his own material (or sense) in another language is here replaced by flexibility --transformative mutability-- such change being required for functionality at a specific local or market. For instance, a product that is global in nature such as game, Assassin's Creed for example, is localized not just based on language but also perceived appropriateness of the culture and user interface etc. Dialogue may be translated using local slang or references, game instructions adjusted for local mental models of play and even the visual cues modified to match culturally-bound conceptions of spatiotemporal

interaction. These are not distortions, but rather adjustments to facilitate the communicative function of product.

This interpretive license is further expanded in transcreation work, where the objective is not to translate content, or render it into another language from an existing translation but to "create" content — often virtually de novo — that has a similar emotional impact and covers cognitive ground as closely aligned with contextually nuanced communicative goals. Transcreation is most apparent in advertising, marketing campaigns and entertainment media where the ultimate goal of a message is deemed more important than sentence-for-sentence correspondence between it and its translation. For example, McDonald's global catchphrase "I'm lovin' it" is translated into India as not the literal translation but as a culturally resonant (with Indian sensibilities) instead / equivalent:"वक्त है कुछ अच्छा होने का. This approach is consistent with Skopos Theory because you want to engage your target audience by stimulating the same thoughts and emotions. From the viewpoint of Skopos Theory, not only localization but also transcreation are established as forms of legitimate translation and no longer as deviations. As Christiane Nord points out: "Every translation is embedded in a particular situation, and this must be taken into account to produce a functionally adequate target text" (Nord 1997). Call something a mobile app, or film, your marketing campaign anything and the point is that nobody cares how it maps to what was there in literal form; all we care about is does this communicate effectively? As a result, translators now have the theoretical conception that not only permits

but encourages bold acts of creativity where necessary. It reinforces that function trumps faith, in terms of cultural relevance and audience engagement as well as communicative clarity.

From the date Skopos Theory was created, it has completely revolutionized traditional translation by prioritizing function rather than slavishly following source text. It has enabled translators to become more of agents rather than mere mouthpieces. Nonetheless, the freedom of these developers is not unchecked and has raised a number of ethical concerns among some other scholars and professionals.

A frequent concern is also the danger of overfitting. There is a danger of losing, inflecting it beyond recognition or effacing the native identity and through localisation/ functional appropriacy. When a translation takes too many liberties in order to accommodate the target culture, it can compromise or neutralize elements of the source society's values and aesthetic. As Lawrence Venuti cautions, "Translation is always an ethical act... it involves choices that inevitably affect the representation of the foreign culture" (Venuti 1995). So, for instance, an Islamic cinema may be localised to a western audience with religious references toned down or removed altogether leading potentially back towards cultural assimilation.

The other is the disregard for source-text integrity. Focusing on the target text's function can also sometimes obscure much of an original's artistry or philosophical density. They might simplify dense dialogues, cut out subtitled cultural idioms or replace poetic quality with plain prose language. Although this has the effect of making a text more accessible, it also can dilute its literary and/or ideological substance.

Furthermore, it has been claimed that authorial intention is undermined in a Skopos-oriented approach. Writers strive to achieve certain artistic, cultural or political design in their works. However, when translation is too market-oriented the intentions may disappear or be substituted by capitalism-friendly ones. For example, when kids' films get dubbed or translated in India with a certain level of localization, cultural items like food (for instance "hamburger") are occasionally altered to the culturally resonant names such as "samosa" or "vada pav," which can help children relate better but dilute the original flavor.

Yet, these criticisms don't make Skopos Theory mute when it comes to ethics. Instead, they stress the imperativeness of ethics and cultural sensibility in their utilization. Christiane Nord has rightly commented: "Functionalism does not mean anything goes. The translator's decisions must be ethically justified and culturally responsible" (Nord 2005). In AVT, where the comprehension by the audience is important, as well accessibility and emotional involvement of subjects to displays in other domains, such compromises may not just be acceptable but crucially needed.

Finally, the theory is a balanced and moderate model if only applied with ethical discretion. Translators must weigh every matter, and in no case should functional requirements take precedence over either respect for the source

culture or what they perceive as their sense of purpose. Skopos Theory thus encourages creative and responsible, informed practice.

Conclusion

In the end, I would argue that the theory is a balanced approach and flexible when applied with discernment. Translators need to be vigilant on a case by case basis, so that the goal of functionality is not overemphasized at the expense of respect for SD cuSkopos Theory represents an important milestone in translation theory: it turns our attention away from fixed equivalence and faithfulness towards purpose-oriented discourse. Especially in the area of AVT (Audiovisual Translation), where linguistc transfer is paired with visual, temporal and culture-specific aspects, a functionalist orientation such as that provided by Skopos Theory offers theoretical transparency but also practical manoeuvrability. With the focus on intended purpose—or skopos—of translated product, such a theory permits translators to take strategies promoting understanding, emotive appeal, and cultural proximity. In subtitling, dubbing or localisation the theory of Skopos will motivate shifts, omissions and reformulations which would otherwise be classified as deviations from the original. According to Hans J. Vermeer, "It is the purpose of a translation that determines the methods and strategies to be employed, not the source text itself" (Vermeer 1989).

In an age of globalised viewing, AVT is under greater pressure to deliver for velocity and adaptability in cultural nuance. With the rise of international cinema and streaming services, video games and educational content (mere months outside our time did other Grad Shows), translation for a wider audience has never been more in demand. Skopos Theory as a theory that favours functional completeness over formal comparison remains relevant and flexible. But it should be applied with a modicum of ethical responsibility. Despite the importance of audience engagement, our source culture and authorial intent should still be respected. Suddenly the translator is not only a sort of linguistic go-between, but also a cultural diplomat, managing function and ethics; access and fidelity. In short, Skopos Theory does not eliminate the worth of the source text but rather places it in a target-oriented communicative setting. As the discipline of AVT further develops together with digital technologies Skopos Theory has continued to be an invaluable concept, both in research and application.

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