Literary translation as an act of mediation between author and reader

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the translation process of literary works is examined from the point of view of functionalism and *Skopos* theory. The aim is to analyse to what extent the elements intervening in the act of communication (author, reader and situational context) condition that result. On the one hand, the author seeks to prove the hypothesis that states that the translation of a literary work can only be considered "functionally valid" if the message is adequately transmitted and, therefore, if the communicative purpose is met. On the other hand, he considers the possibility that the translation of a literary work may lose validity and that there exists an infinite number of functionally valid translation results, since the elements of communication are different in each particular act.

Keywords: Elements of communication, functionalism, literary translation, literary work, mediation, *Skopos* theory.

La traducción literaria como acto de mediación entre autor y lector

RESUMEN

En este artículo, se examina el proceso de traducción de obras literarias desde la perspectiva del funcionalismo y la teoría del *Skopos*. El objetivo es analizar en qué medida los elementos que intervienen en el acto de comunicación (autor, lector y contexto situacional) condicionan el resultado. Por un lado, el autor intenta demostrar la hipótesis de que la traducción de una obra literaria solo puede ser considerada "funcionalmente válida" si el mensaje se transmite adecuadamente y, por tanto, si se consigue el propósito comunicativo. Por otro lado, se estudia la posibilidad de que la traducción de una obra literaria pierda validez y de que exista un número infinito de resultados de traducción funcionalmente válidos, en tanto que los elementos de la comunicación cambian en cada acto de habla concreto.

Palabras clave: Elementos de la comunicación, funcionalismo, traducción literaria, obra literaria, mediación, teoría del *Skopos*.

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1. Introduction

The translation process is often conceived as a communicative act where the translator acts as a sort of mediator between the author of the source text and the reader of the target text. In fact, translators are urged to take into account key aspects in communication, like function, when translating both general and specialised texts.

However, the linguistic and pragmatic characteristics of literary texts often go unnoticed and we make the mistake of conceiving the role of literary translator as a mere activity of creation and interpretation of a functionally poetic text.

This poetic conception of the translation process makes literary translators see the result of their work as an end in itself, as a new work of creation that is not aimed at a specific objective public but at an abstract reader or receiver, who is part of this atemporal dimension of which art is also part.

The aim of this work is precisely to prove the temporal and deciduous character of the translation of a literary text. Starting from two premises, that every concrete reading constitutes a communicative act and that in every communicative act different elements or factors get involved, we will conclude that every translation has a limited validity, as it responds exclusively to a specific communicative reality.

2. Functionalism and *Skopos* theory

On the one hand, functionalism is a linguistic current that is heir to Saussure's structuralism and upholds, broadly speaking, that language is a system of means of expression that are suitable for a specific aim and that, thus, language is essential as a communication tool. According to functionalists, man, who is naturally a social being, does not just use language for representing the world and for presenting itself in it, but also as a communication tool with the others. Human language constitutes, therefore, one of the pillars of social life and it is essential to take into account this functional approach of language when analyzing any linguistic phenomenon.

On the other hand, *Skopos* theory (which is the Greek word for *aim* or *purpose*) is based on the translation theory presented by German linguist Hans J. Vermeer. According to this theory, the basic principle that determines any translation process is the aim of the translation action and, this action, as any other, is characterized by its purpose. The fundamental principle of the *Skopos* theory could be then formulated as follows: the communicative aim determines the translation method or, in

other words, "the (intended) purpose of the target text determines the choice of method and strategy in the translation process" (Nord 2006: 30).

Christiane Nord, starting from the instrumental approach of functionalism, develops Vermeer's *Skopos* theory. She states that, apart from function, some other key aspects that need to be taken into account when translating a text are the sender's intention, the receiver, the time and place of the reception, the channel and the reasons of the production or reception of the text. This way, she does not just emphasize the need to analyze the intention, but she also prescribes the importance of analyzing all the other factors intervening in the communicative act, which, according to her, condition the translation process.

Starting from this functionalist approach, Nord (2006: 31-32) establishes seven basic principles that should be considered when dealing with any translation project or task:

a) The purpose of the translation determines the choice of the translation method and strategy: there is not a single method or strategy for a particular source text, and any decision between different available solutions to a translation problem has to be based on the communicative function of the target text.

b) Clients usually define the translation purpose when assigning a translation project. If the instructions are not explicit enough, the translator will need to find out what kind of purposes the client has in mind, relying on previous experience in similar situations or, simply, asking clients for further information about the intended purpose of the target text.

c) A translation that achieves the intended purpose may be called "functional." That a text (or a translation, in this case) is functional means that it works for its receivers in a particular communicative situation in the way the sender wants it to work. The author of the text (and the translator as an author, too) has, therefore, to evaluate the audience's capacities of comprehension and cooperation and anticipate the possible effects which certain forms of expression may have on the reader.

d) Functionality is not an inherent quality of a text, but it is the receiver who ascribes that quality to a text in the moment of reception, who decides whether and how a text "functions." Since the same receiver at a different moment of their life may react in a different way to the same text, it is most improbable that different readers in different cultural environments will react to the same text in the same manner.

e) We cannot be sure that a text achieves the function that we want it to achieve. We have to rely on the audience's willingness to cooperate in a given situation; otherwise, communication would be impossible. Any person who produces a written text consciously or unconsciously uses some kind of verbal 'function marker' indicating the intended communicative function(s), and it is just recognising these markers that we can accept the text as "functionally valid."

f) One of the most important strategies for producing a written text is to find the appropriate balance between new and old information: a text offering too much new information will be incomprehensible for the readers, while the audience will not find it worth reading a text containing little new information.

g) Especially in the case of texts translated from a source culture that is distant in time and/or space from the target cultural environment, the function intended for and/or achieved by the target text may be different from that intended for and/or achieved by the source text.

Nevertheless, it should be analyzed whether these principles, which have been designed for general or specialized (legal, scientific, technical…) translation, could be applied in the same way to literary texts.

Both referring to literary and general/specialized discourse, it is common to find the terms *enunciation* and *situation of enunciation* (Maingueneau and Salvador, 1995). Any statement is the result of a unique act called *enunciation* and the elements intervening in this enunciation or communicative act are the addresser or sender, the addressee or receiver, and the concrete moment and place, which make up the situation of enunciation. This dimension of language developed by Jakobson and Benveniste that will be dealt with hereinafter does not offer such a clear image with regard to literary texts as with regard to usual linguistic exchanges. However, enunciation in literary discourse cannot avoid the common rule.

On the one hand, regarding the role of author, for instance, although it cannot come down to a mere interlocutor, it cannot be completely dissociated either from that element which defines the communicative act. On the other hand, with regard to the reader of a novel or a poem, or a member of the audience of a play, it does not have direct contact with the author of the text, as it would happen in other types of communicative act. Maingueneau and Salvador (1995) explain that this phenomenon is not just due to obvious material reasons. According to them, that happens especially because the fact that author and readers cannot have direct contact except through the literary institution and its rituals is part of the essence of literature. The specificity of literary discourse affects particularly the notion of the abovementioned situation of enunciation in its three dimensions (personal, spatial and temporal): while an ordinary enunciation or communicative act refers directly to physically perceptible contexts, literary texts constitute their communicative scenes through a set of internal relations within the text itself.

It is necessary, therefore, to establish what the elements that intervene in the communicative act that underlies literary discourse are, and to what extent they can determine the choice of method and strategy in the translation process.

3. The elements of the communicative act and their influence on literary translation

Since Karl Bühler, father of functionalism, many scholars have been interested in the communicative process and all of them, despite the differences among them, had in common the idea that "language consists in someone telling someone else something about something." However, Jakobson's paradigm is the most accepted and followed by linguists.

From Jakobson's point of view, six factors intervene in any communicative act: the addresser or sender, the addressee or receiver, the message, the code, the channel and the situational context. The addresser sends to the addressee a message that, in order to be effective, needs a context (an environmental, situational, and cultural and social context, the knowledge that both interlocutors have of each other and the knowledge of the world shared by addresser and addressee), a code (totally or partially common for addresser and addressee) and a physical channel that allows them to establish and keep the communication going.

If this paradigm is transferred to the peculiar communicative act where literary discourse is developed, it will be necessary, therefore, to talk about an author, who acts as a sender or producer of the message; a reader, who acts as a receiver; the literary text itself that, insofar as message, constitutes the key element of this communicative act; the language, as a code of communication; and the writing or the book, as a channel and medium through which the message travels. With regard to the situational context in which the communication of literary discourse takes place, this translation or movement is a little more complex; since in literature it is not possible to talk about a single context, but a situation to which the author's producing activity is confined and an infinite number of situations in which an also infinite number of potential readers or receivers of the message carry out the reading activity, being often unaware of the reality that the corresponding message may have been recoded by a mediator. It will be in this interesting activity of mediation that the translator will get involved, turning into an indispensable element of the communicative act.

3.1. *Author or sender and the intention of the source text*

It is essential for translating a literary text to determine not who the sender of the message or author of the text is, but the aim or purpose that made the latter produce it. And this aim, although it is not often expressly transmitted by the author to the translator, somehow becomes plain in the text through a series of functional signs. The translator should, therefore, recognise these signs and reproduce them with the target language, so that the reader can easily identify them and then accept the functionality of the text, in other words, determine if the text "functions."

In Robert Louis Stevenson's *Prince Otto*, some linguistic features provide evidence of the author's clear intention of reproducing faithfully the reality of the time where the action takes place and, above all, reflecting the use of French language as a lingua franca in the courts of Europe. With that purpose, Stevenson often uses honorary forms of address or posts in French before the names of the characters, and introduces words or complete phrases in French within the dialogues. However, the author of the Spanish translation published in 1932[1] did not notice this functional

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[1] The first translation of *Prince Otto* into Spanish was published in 1932 with the title "El príncipe Otón." It appeared in *Lecturas para todos* (no. 38), a supplement of the weekly magazine *Jeromín*. Subsequently, in 1952, the publishing company Austral-Espasa Calpe published the work again in Buenos Aires

sign and decided to translate everything into Spanish, even the forms of address or the words or phrases in French (see example 1). Doing this, the translator eliminated a distinctive feature of the court language of that time. The author of the translation of 2010 (Stevenson, 2010), in contrast to his predecessor, reproduces this effect in the target text and allows the reader to identify this functional sign.

> Example 1
> 'Madame von Rosen,' replied Otto, 'I choose, and I will go. My duty points me, duty still neglected by this Featherhead. But do not fear to be a loser. I propose instead that you should take me with you, a bear in chains, to Baron Gondremark.'
> […]
> Dearest Anna, come at once. Ratafia has done the deed, her husband is to be packed to prison. This puts the minx entirely in my power; *le tour est joué*; she will now go steady in harness, or I will know the reason why.

Something similar happens in *Watch and ward*, Henry James' first fiction literary work. In the source text, first published in 1871 and written while he was travelling from Venice to Paris, it is easy to appreciate an author's evident wish to reflect his knowledge of the world and European languages with the aim of causing a sort of admiration in the reader. With that purpose, he does not only write with meticulous perfection the places where the characters pass through in the course of the novel (see example 2), but he also introduces lexical units in up to four different languages apart from English (see example 3). In this case, the author of the Spanish translation (James, 2008) has decided to preserve foreign words (except when a foreign word was Spanish in the source text) in order to provoke in the reader of the target text the same effect that the source text provokes in the English native reader.

> Example 2
> Roger's journey was long and various. He went to the West Indies and to South America, whence, taking a ship at one of the eastern ports, he sailed round the Horn and paid a visit to Mexico. He journeyed thence to California, and returned home across the Isthmus, stopping awhile on his upward course at various Southern cities.

> Example 3
> Roger, in execution of this promise, passed three weeks under his roof, in the society of the lovely *señorita*.
> […]
> '*Elle a les pieds enormes*,' said Hubert.
> […]
> On the doorstep she turned and kissed her hostess with a fervent '*Du allerliebste*!'
> […]
> 'The fop!' said Mrs. Keith, sotto voce. 'His vanity is tickled, on the very verge of exposure.'

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with the same title, as a book this time; although this last translation was actually a revision of the translation published in 1932.

So far, the terms *intention*, *purpose* and *aim* have been exclusively used with regard to the role of author. In fact, Vermeer (Reiss & Vermeer 1984: 96), when describing *Skopos* theory, uses those three terms together with *objective* and *function* with an almost equivalent meaning. However, it is necessary to distinguish *intention* from *function*.

Nord (2009: 215) points out that the intention is defined from the point of view of the sender, who wants to achieve a specific purpose with the text produced, in this case, the literary work. Nevertheless, even the best intention does not guarantee a perfect result, especially in the cases where there is a great distance between sender and receiver's situational contexts. On the other hand, receivers use the text for a specific function, according to their own prospects, needs and situational conditions. Just in an ideal case where sender's intention achieves its purpose, it is possible to state that intention and function are analogous or even identical. The difficulty of translator's work, therefore, increases considerably, since it involves overcoming the linguistic and cultural barriers separating a sender and a receiver who belong to substantially different worlds.

3.2. *Reader or receiver and the function of the target text*

As it has been already commented, the receiver ascribes the quality of functional to the text in the moment of the reception of the message or the reading of the literary work. This is the reason why it is essential to consider who the receiver of the target text or the translation is before starting the translation process.

The intention of the translator and the translation should be the same of the author and the original text, namely to transmit the author's subjectivism using linguistic means. But, even the predominantly poetic function of literary discourse should be sought in both texts; this function (determined, ultimately, by the receiver of the message) will be completely dependent on the characteristics of the reader of the final text, in this case, the translation.

According to Newmark (1988: 13), the translator "may try to assess the level of education, the class, age and sex of the readership if these are 'marked'." If the translator does not get any instruction with that regard, as often seems to happen, Newmark suggests opting for an "average text […] for an educated, middle-class readership in an informal, not colloquial style" (Newmark 1988: 13). However, is this enough to make the final target text achieve a maximum level of functional validity? And can this rule be extended to any type of literary text? What happens in the cases where the author of the text uses an essentially colloquial style?

In Richard Fariña's sixties novel *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me*, the number of colloquialisms or lexical units belonging to American youth and student slang of that time is huge (see example 4). Thus, before starting the translation process, the translator should consider the objective audience at whom the translator of the novel is aimed, whether it is necessary to keep or reproduce the colloquial style of the original (in this case, to resort to the Spanish slang of that time or to use the slang which is contemporary to the reader's situational context) and what effect the choice of one method or another would cause in the reader of the target text.

Example 4
'Can I move on tonight?'
'No! Oh, I feel awful. Poor Simon.'
Got to piss. Better wait until I get someplace else.
'Okay, baby, dig you later.'
 […]
'No shit, man,' Heff giggling nervously, 'we thought you were down.'

In this case, the author of the Spanish translation (Fariña 2008), on the one hand, considered a young or middle-aged, high or middle-educated, middle-class readership; and, on the other hand, he decided to adapt the text to the colloquial language used in the situational context of the potential reader of the translation. Of course, it has to be said that this choice could be taken to the detriment of the functionality of the text with regard to future generations, since young and student slang undergoes a continuous updating or change process. Nevertheless, the eagerness to extend the validity of the translation may result in a text with a very low level of equivalence and, consequently, with a limited functionality. Hurtado Albir (2001) corroborates the possibility of having different editions and/or translations for a single source text according to the time and the reader.

In the Spanish translation of *Prince Otto*, the identification or the reader and function of the translation also merit some attention. However, in this case, although it is also related to style and register, it is not a lexical problem but a matter of equivalence between the way of representing the second person in English (using the pronoun *you* and some other deictic elements of the same lexical family, such as *your* or *yours*) and the many and different possibilities of representing this same concept in Spanish. Therefore, while in English they use *you* as a deictic element, in Spanish, they usually represent the second person using different verbal suffixes. The Spanish use totally depends on the linguistic register, the receiver's geographical context (which will force the translator to comply with the stylistic conventions of the reader's geographical variety), the historical context (which will compel us to reject archaic uses and to choose new forms) and the type of relation between the interlocutors.

The particularities of the work (the fact that it is contextualized in a historical period different from the present one and that its characters belong to different social strata) may make the translator's work even more difficult. Nevertheless, the criterion followed by the author of the Spanish translation of 1932 is rather confused (possibly because he or she was user of an American Spanish variety), since either the typical Argentinean form or the European Spanish form for the second person are used. The same happens regarding the use of what is called *voseo de respeto*[2] and the verbal form for *usted*. In the case of the translation of 2008, the situation is

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[2] In European Spanish, the *voseo de respeto* involves the use of the 5th verbal inflection, corresponding to the second person plural (*vosotros*), for the second person singular (*tú*). It used to be a way of indicating respect to address somebody, especially a king or a queen (i.e. "Sois mi rey. Vuestros deseos son órdenes para mí."). Nowadays, the way of indicating respect is by using the form *usted* or *ustedes* and their corresponding verbal inflections.

completely different. The translator decided to use the form *usted* or *ustedes* and their verbal inflections when the interlocutors of the communicative act in fiction belong to different social classes or are not relatives, and to use the verbal form for *tú* when the interlocutors are member of the same family (as it is commonly done in mainland Spain at the moment). The author of the last translation considers that the use of the *voseo de respeto* has fallen into disuse and, albeit the story occurs in a previous historical period, the purpose of bringing the novel and the reader of today closer predominates.

3.3. *Situational context*

The concept of situational context refers to the temporal, cultural and social conditions where the communicative act is developed. However, in literature, as has already been pointed out, when in the communicative act two different languages are involved, it is necessary to consider at least two situations temporally, culturally or socially remote from each other where, on the one hand, the producing activity is carried out and, on the other hand, the act of reception takes place.

In an ordinary speech act, both sender and receiver have a certain level of knowledge of their interlocutor and a perfect knowledge of the world they share; but, regarding the act where literary discourse takes place, both interlocutors (author and reader) may not share the same world, especially if they do not share the code of communication, the language. It is the literary translator who shares the reader's world (and, sometimes, even the author's world) and, at least, knows the author's code of communication and the situational context where the producing activity is developed. For this reason, the literary translator is the only one who is able to overcome linguistic, temporary, social and cultural barriers that separate the author and the reader, and make possible a communication act that, otherwise, would be inconceivable.

The exercise of translation into Spanish of *Watch and Ward*, *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me* and *Prince Otto* involves bringing three substantially different worlds closer to a single situational context, the one of an adult reader who uses the mainland variety of Spanish, living in Spain, with a middle social and cultural level. But this exercise of adaptation, naively conceived as a mere exercise of cultural adaptation, presents itself in a purely linguistic plane. An example of this is the topic of the translation of anthroponyms which is still the object of controversy, especially because the criteria about what should be translated or not have changed over the last half century. In Spain, for many years, there was a tradition of translating the names of the characters of fictional works, probably in the interests of the Spanish nationalist eagerness of *domesticating* foreign literary works. However, in our present age of globalization, translators tend to use *foreignizing* translation, which tries to keep the exotic features of the literary work and, therefore, anthroponyms are kept in their original language.

In the case of *Prince Otto*, the translation of names becomes more difficult, since the characters in the novel, despite being disguised as fictional, are actually based

on real historical figures. For the author of the translation of 1932, it was easier, as he chose to translate the names of all the characters, according to the standard practice of that time of adapting names. However, although the conventional practice now is to keep names in their original language, it is also a Spanish tradition to translate the name of kings, queens, princes, princesses, etc. In view of this conflict of traditions, the author of the translation of 2008 opted to consider them all to be fictional characters and to keep the foreign form. Both translators satisfactorily solved the problem of adapting to the social conventions of the moment, but the resulting texts are not interchangeable in their corresponding situational contexts.

Another example of adaptation to the situational context could be the translation of titles. According to Nord (1990), the functions of the title as a linguistic unit are conditional upon the factors of the situation where this unit acts as a communicative tool, and whether a title *functions* or not depends in large measure on the effect that it has on the receivers. The aim is, then, to make the title achieve its functions in the target culture to such a degree that it is possible to push the matter of fidelity into the background in case of conflict.

4. Conclusions

After describing the elements that intervene in communication and analyzing the peculiarities of the communication act in literary discourse, it is necessary to state that

a) literary translation inasmuch as it is a translative process also involves an analysis with a functionalist approach.
b) it is not only useful to consider the receiver or the situational context before starting the translation exercise, but it is also essential to take into account all the elements that intervene in communication to make the translation achieve a maximum degree of functional validity or, in other words, achieve its aim.
c) a general or literary translation is only valid in the context for which it was intended. Thus, outside of this particular communicative situation, the literary text could not achieve its intended function.
d) the only person who is able to make communication between the author and the reader of a literary work possible is a professional translator who shares the reader's world and knows the author's code of communication and the context of the creative process thoroughly.

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