

Nord's 'function plus loyalty' concept

Sociology, Communication



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Ever since Post-structuralism and Reception-Aesthetics (also known as Reader Response Theory) happened questioning the very validity of fixing a text with one unitary and holistic reading, functionalist approaches to translation has been gaining ground among the translation theorists all over the world. With its roots in the 'Skopos' theory as proposed by Hans Vermeer, these functionalist approaches has radically shaken up the till recently unquestioned fortress of the linguistic-models of translation and has revolutionized the way translation is practiced, assessed and consumed for all times.

Christine Nord with her concept of 'Function plusLoyalty' has contributed much to this movement modifying it at the same time in an attempt to answer the rather common criticisms of arbitrariness and mercenary approach against the functionalist model. However, a discussion of the nitty-

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gritty of the functionalist approach is necessary before we can proceed to discuss the effects of the introduction of the concept of 'function plus loyalty' into the system.

The Functionalist Approach to Translation

Functionalist approaches to translation as theorized by Vermeer, Schaffner and Nord, in its most outspoken form claims to 'dethrone the ST'. In the new model of translation, the translator does not focus on words, phrases or grammatical structures etc. in an attempt to find semantically equivalent words and phrases in the TL. Instead, the text is considered as a whole.

It is a communicative occurrence that has occurred in the SL. The translator's job is to carry out the same or similar communicative occurrence in the TL. "A specific text in a specific situation and within specific cultural parameters performs a specific function. A good TT would be one which performs the same function in the targetculture." (Schaffner, 1998: 3) Thus, from re-production of a text, in the functionalist model, translation has come to be considered as the production of a text following certain guidelines.

A good translator, therefore, should take into account lexical, semantic, cultural, text-typological and other aspects with varying degrees of stress in each according to the theory of translation by which it is informed or according to the 'skopos' or 'function' of the translation.

Function-plus-Loyalty Theory

A basic description of the translation procedure as envisioned by Nord (1997 a: 126-127) would run thus: Translation is a service rendered to a client by

some expert in the process, in this case the translator. The client who might be the author of the ST or a publisher or any group or agent interested in the translation approaches a specialist translator.

Grasping the intentions of the client in commissioning the translation is of utmost importance for the translator, for on that brief depends the setting up of the 'function' of the translation. The client provides the translator with as many specific details as possible about the translation's purpose. He briefs the translator about the addressees, time, place, preferred medium, and the general function of the translation. This translation brief provided by the client thus specifies the kind of translation expected by the client. However, the translator, who is the expert in the translation process, has a far more important role to play.

Nord explains that the translator studies the brief and advises on the viability of the translation project in accordance with the brief provided by the client. The translator also has to negotiate this brief with the client. However when the final brief, the result of negotiations has been arrived at the translator must ensure that the TT is loyal to the 'function' set by this brief. Thus, while the translator is not bound to abide by the 'function' provided by the original brief by the client, s/he must never deceive his or her client as to the 'function' in accordance to which the translation is being done.

Therefore the translator is required to be loyal to the specifications of the client without violating the original functions of the ST to any gross extent. This is what constitute Nord's 'function-plus-loyalty' model. Evidently, it serves a two-fold purpose. On the one hand it retains the freedom enjoyed

by the translator in the functionalist model while on the other hand it makes the translator accountable to the client as well as the user/s of the translation.

Criticism of Functionalist Approach

The criticisms aimed against such a 'pragmatic' approach to translation are rather obvious. The commonest among these are that translators translating to satisfy the needs of the clients can become 'mercenaries' (Schaffner, 1998: 3). It provides the translators with the authority to misinterpret or misrepresent the ST to satisfy the cultural demands from translation in that society at that particular point of time, or to abide by the guidelines set by the agency commissioning the translation etc.

As Schaffner points out, critics of functionalist approaches to translation are of the opinion that the purpose (or 'function' in Nord's terminology) or what the users of the translation are expecting of it or what they will do with it cannot justify the means. That in the functionalist approaches, the ST is dethroned is another major criticism. As the role of the client is exaggerated, translators tend to become 'mercenaries' who translate to please the readers and turn the book into a bestseller at the cost of the ST.

It cannot be denied that the functionalist approaches accord a much higher position to the translator and the readers of the TT. As one of the foremost translation theorists, Schaffner words it:

“ Now that the functional appropriateness of the TT has become the yardstick for assessing the quality of translation, both the translators and the

TT user(s) are assigned a higher status and a more influential role than is the case in more traditional approaches to translation.” (1995: 3)

The question, as Honig puts it, is how one can make sure that translators are not arbitrary or self-willed in deciding the 'function' of the translation; how one can make sure that 'translators base their decisions for a certain translation-skopos on intersubjectively valid criteria'. However, Nord's function-plus-loyalty concept does deal with all these criticism to some extent and provides a fit reply to some of the criticism.

Nord's Reply to Criticism

It is true that according to the basic framework of the functionalist theory, as proposed by Vermeer for instance, any 'skopos' that will be convenient to the translator and serve his interests the best might be chosen by him or her to justify the decisions taken in the process of translation. However, the freedom enjoyed by the translator is never absolute.

There are various conventions, cultural, social and political those predetermine the translation's function on behalf of the translator. For instance, in any society at any given point of time, there are discourses present that shape what is expected of a translation and what might be accepted as a proper translation. These cultural traditions determine what degree of 'resemblance' that must exist between the ST and the TT for it to qualify for a proper translation. Thus we see that a functionalist in approach or not, a translator is inevitably bound to his client or the users of the translation by means of these conventions.

This is where Nord's concept of 'loyalty' comes in. With the concept of loyalty Nord binds the translator not only with his or her clients but also with the author of the ST. The author of the ST naturally expects the translator to function in certain ways. These are generally the conventions of translation prevalent in the Source Culture. Since, acting loyally according to Nord implies taking seriously the responsibilities that a translator has not only to his client but also to the Source Author, the translator must negotiate the function of the translation with the source author or the representatives of the same. In most cases the Source Author do not have any means of checking on the 'loyalty' of the translator. This is why the translator should let the Source Author as well as his clients or readers know the norms according to which the translation is being carried out. S/he will not consciously violate the norms or the 'function' of the ST in the original situation without informing the Source Author. In other words: the 'skopos' of the TT must be compatible with the intentions of the ST author. If it is not so, the translator must be responsible enough to inform his clients accordingly.

Assessing the Criticism in the New Light

As Schaffner points out, the blame of being 'mercenaries' on the functionalist translators, often result from a misinterpretation of the word 'function' which is usually taken to be referring to the communicative functions of a TT in the target culture. However, as Christine Nord's function-plus-loyalty concept ensures that the 'function' in functionalist approaches to translation also involves issues like ST functions such as the informative of

persuasive functions of a text. Loyalty to these is also necessary to make a translation 'functionally appropriate'.

Criticism of Nord's Views

However, certain functionalist critics like Venuti and Honig are not highly supportive of Nord's function-plus-loyalty concept as it is. For instance, Honig says, " Nord (1993: 20) illustrates this with an example which seems to make loyalty a rather vague principle: no author of a best-selling novel will object to the translation becoming a bestseller, too. S/he will therefore not object to the translators-when translating the title of the book- using means which will make it appealing for the target culture readership. Loyalty, it seems, means acting in the best interest of one's client which is more a matter of expediency than of ethical standards."

Venuti, (1995: 34) though he does not criticize Nord directly, provides yet another radical view of the process of translation. He severely criticizes the recent Anglo-American trend of praising fluency and naturalness in a translation. He points out that this expectation of the clients for fluency in translation actually acts towards subverting the ST.

While acknowledging that there is " a fundamental ethnocentric impulse in all translation" (ibid. 47), Venuti calls for the translator to make an ethical choice for " foreignizing" rather than " domesticating" translation, downgrading the importance of readability and preserving or restoring the foreignness of a ST. However, this is in effect to suggest that disregarding ' loyalty' to the client, the translator must stress on a specific ideology to determine the function of the translation.

Assessment of Nord's Position

Thus, one might conclude that though Nord's Function-plus-loyalty theory has not yet been able to completely resolve the problematic regarding translation fruitfully, it has surely shown a new direction of development for translation studies. As Umberto Eco points out in *A Rose by Any Other Name*, a translation can be basically of two types: "target-oriented" and "source-oriented". What Nord's theory of loyalty does is to make every party (client, users, source-author etc) involved in the process of translation know what kind of a translation is being done. Surely, Eco's distinction of all translation into two types is rather simplistic, and as is evident from the earlier discussion, many more factors (ideological, cultural, financial etc.) are involved in the process of deciding the exact 'function' of the translation.

Surely, there can be a great number of middle courses possible for the translator to choose from in addition to the two extreme categories. But whatever the course chosen by the translator, Nord's theory ensures that it is clearly delineated to both the reader of the translation as well as the author of the ST. The parameters, depending on which the translator makes his or her decisions in the process of the translation no longer, remain hidden from the public or from the scholars assessing the translation. And thus, though the 'functionalist' translator is not completely exempted from the charge of being a 'mercenary' (in the sense that s/he can still choose the 'skopos' with financial gain in mind), s/he is at least partly exempted from the charge of being 'arbitrary'.

Whether, the translator chooses to adopt a 'domesticating' or 'foreignizing' approach is a question of ideology, aesthetics, socio-cultural expectations etc. and is negotiated openly and clearly on the table between the client, the translator and the author of the ST. But function-plus-loyalty theory ensures that whatever is the approach, it is not an arbitrary one adopted according to the whims of the translator. In the present day situation, where inter-cultural translation is becoming the lifeline for many a culture under immense pressure from forces of Anglo-American globalization, this accountability of the translator to his client, the source culture and the target audience is essential beyond any doubt.

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