A Study of International Publicity Translation: A Perspective of Skopos Theory’s “Translation Brief”

Fei WANG

School of Social Science & Foreign Languages, Tianjin University Ren’ai College, Tianjin, China

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Abstract. Functionalists have made theoretical breakthroughs by attaching importance to the intended text functions, addressees, time and place of reception, medium, the motive for the target text, etc. As such, all important concept “translation brief” has been put forward, intended to shed lights on the reasons why the translators adopt various strategies in their translation practice. By applying the functionalist approach to the translation for international communication, this thesis is an attempt to justify them theoretically and practically as translation methods for recognition, study and application. The author argues that the translators should adopt appropriate strategies while translating, under the guidance of the intended purpose of the target text, translators could help the outside world know China better.

1. Introduction

With action theory introduced, German functionalist approach has placed the translation research into a wider background. It is safe to say that functionalism is a systematic translation theory with Skopos rule as the primary principle. Functionalists have made theoretical breakthroughs by attaching importance to such specific aspects as intended text functions, addressees, time and place of reception, medium, the motive for the target text, etc. As such, an important concept “translation brief” has been put forward, intended to shed lights on the reasons why the translators adopt various strategies in their translation practice.

Skopos theory, as a distinguished translation theory, makes itself stand out by its pragmatic instruction to the translating practice. Many key points stated in this theory have shed lights on the strategies that the translators should adopt. And it has been proved that good translation that is suitable for the purpose or skopos of target text has been produced. As Vermeer has further explained that “What the skopos states is that one must translate, consciously and consistently, in accordance with some principle respecting the target text” [1]. This principle is applied according to the translation commission. It is the translation commission that “defines the Skopos of a translation” [2] or, influences the choosing of translation strategies. Every translation task should thus be accompanied by a brief that defines the conditions under which the target text should carry out its particular function. To find the aspects in which the source and the target texts will diverge, the translator has to compare the source text with the target text profile defined in the translation brief. The translation brief can contain information as follows:

1. The (intended) text function(s)
2. The target-text addressee(s)
3. The (prospective) time and place of text reception
4. The medium over which the text will be transmitted and
5. The motive for the production or reception of the text

The author would argue that translators should bear the translation brief in his or her mind, and opt for appropriate ways such as abridgement, addition, adaptation, explanation and other strategies while they are translating international publicity materials.

2. The (Intended) Text Function(s)

Intended text function refers to a prospective function of a text that is translated from a source
text. Skopos theory holds that the end justifies the strategies. So translators should follow the primary principle in Skopos theory, namely Skopos rule. Different source texts would produce different functions; while when translated into target texts in another language, the original intention should be fulfilled.

As for the translation for international communication, the main function is to inform the foreigners who want to know more about China of anything related including the economy, politics, culture and the various aspects about Chinese people's life. “Typical authoritative statements are political speeches, documents etc., by ministers or party leaders; statutes and legal documents; scientific, philosophical and ‘academic’ works written by acknowledged authorities.” [3] From the perspective of the intended text function, we can see that since this type of publicity material usually reflect the nation’s policies and principles, concerning political impact and country’s image, and also the political attitude and language style of the speakers who, in most cases, are the top leaders of a country. So to translate this kind of publicity material, the translators must follow the meaning of the source text and the author’s idea, rather than modify its original meaning by imposing his own opinions during the translating process. The senior translator for authoritative statement, Prof. Cheng Zhenqiu once pointed out that when translating authoritative statement, first, the translator should grasp the meaning of the source text closely, without arbitrary addition or deletion. Sometimes, the translators should follow the lexical order and structure of source text rather than adjust or even inverse it or they may make political mistakes. He also emphasizes that in dealing with such special source text, the translators should measure cautiously the connotations and effects of the translation version by choosing proper political words and expressions.

3. The Target-Text Addressee(s)

Before starting any translation, the translator should be fully aware that who would read the target text, what they expect to read and what they really want. Otherwise, the whole translating process probably leads to a failure. There exists a huge gap between Chinese and foreigners (mainly English speakers), who come from different cultural background holding different thinking mode, religious belief and ideology, values, customs, aesthetic psychology, etc. Since the target—text addressees, foreign to China, are keen to know better about China, so while translating, the translators should take all the above into account.

3.1 Filling Some Chinese ABCs

Translators’ offering some background information will make it easier and clearer for foreigners to understand what they care about. A senior translator Duan Liancheng pointed out that “Never underestimate the audience’s intelligence. But never over-estimate an ordinary foreigner’s knowledge of China”. Hence it is frequently needed to fill in brief explanatory notes when addressing foreign audience. The need usually arises under the following circumstances: when historical or geographical terms are used, it is always safer to explain.

3.2 Filling the Gap Between the Languages

Chinese, known for its wencai (literary grace) abounds with lots of four-character expression, antitheses, parallelism, applying various rhetorical devices into its syntax. However most of them bear nothing but repetition, or redundant words and expressions. They have no realistic meanings, only to create musicality, create all affectionate atmosphere, and to follow the habit of Chinese way of expression. If translators render all of them one by one ignoring the huge difference between these two languages and people’s different cognitive ability, the so-called target-text would make no sense in the prospective of reception environment. English readers would have all inclination to plain, clear, effective information, but Chinese readers would not, which is due to the two nationalities’ differences of mental cognitive ability, aesthetic interest, and psychologist experience.

3.3 Bridging the Gap Between Different Cultures

Since the huge gap between Chinese and English audience, translators should offer some
expository information to help convey the meaning of source text for foreigners. They come from different social backgrounds, holding different ideas, thus some explanations are quite necessary. Or else, the readers of target text cannot understand what the target text really mean.

4. The (Prospective) Time and Place of Text Reception

Though, “the translation brief does not tell the translator how to go about their translating job, what translation strategy to use, or what translation type to choose.” [4]. The translators should keep them in mind all through the translating process. No item should be ignored for they will more or less exert influence to the effect of the target text, and even to skopos of a communication. In her book “Translating As a Purposeful Activity--Functionalist Approaches Explained”, Nord has set a fairly elaborate example, which exemplifies specifically functionalist notion that “every translation task should thus be accompanied by a brief that defines the conditions under which the target text should carry out its particular function. “

4.1 The Medium over Which the Text will be Transmitted

With the coming of information era, medium through which the translation will be widely accepted all around the world is an increasingly important element related to the translating process. The medium provides advantages or makes limits for the transfer of two languages and cultures. Thus the translators should take it into account while translating.

Media here refer to many kinds of means including newspaper, TV, internet, broadcast, brochures, etc. Translators should vary their translating strategies to meet the needs of different means.

4.2 The Motive for the Production or Reception of the Text

This item of translation brief sounds like the first one. i.e. the (intended) text function(s). However, they are still different. The (intended) text functions mean the goal that the target text is supposed to achieve. The motive for the production or reception of the text refers to the immediate goal set for the target text.

From the perspective of application of translation theory in practice, the ‘translation brief’ does provide much instruction for the translators especially those engaged in publicity—oriented C—E translations whose hard work would improve Sino—foreigners’ communication. Here, the author of the thesis would like to make it clear that even though the five aspects of “translation brief” have been analyzed one by one, which does not necessarily mean every translator when they deal with a source text, would merely consider one aspect of “translation brief”. In most instances, a translator should make a comprehensive and detailed analysis of both the source text and the specific “translation brief” before he or she starts the rendition.

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