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Eugene Nida
For Julius David Venuti

ma tu ci hai trovato

e hai scelto nel gatto
quei miagolii che
non lo fanno apposta!
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This paper is a short sketch of my skopos theory (cf. Vermeer 1978, 1983; Reiss and Vermeer 1984; Vermeer 1986; and also Gardt 1989).

1 Synopsis

The skopos theory is part of a theory of translational action (translatorisches Handeln – cf. Holz-Mänttäri 1984; Vermeer 1986: 269–304 and also 197–246; for the historical background see e.g. Wilss 1988: 28). Translation is seen as the particular variety of translational action which is based on a source text (cf. Holz-Mänttäri 1984, especially p. 42f; and Nord 1988: 31). (Other varieties would involve e.g. a consultant’s information on a regional economic or political situation, etc.)

Any form of translational action, including therefore translation itself, may be conceived as an action, as the name implies. Any action has an aim, a purpose. (This is part of the very definition of an action – see Vermeer 1986.) The word skopos, then, is a technical term for the aim or purpose of a translation (discussed in more detail below). Further: an action leads to a result, a new situation or event, and possibly to a “new” object. Translational action leads to a “target text” (not necessarily a verbal one); translation leads to a translatum (i.e. the resulting translated text), as a particular variety of target text.

The aim of any translational action, and the mode in which it is to be realized, are negotiated with the client who commissions the action. A precise specification of aim and mode is essential for the translator. – This is of course analogously true...
of translation proper: skopos and mode of realization must be adequately defined if
the text-translator is to fulfil his task successfully.

The translator is “the” expert in translational action. He is responsible for the
performance of the commissioned task, for the final translatum. Insofar as the duly
specified skopos is defined from the translator’s point of view, the source text is a
constituent of the commission, and as such the basis for all the hierarchically ordered
relevant factors which ultimately determine the translatum. (For the text as part of
a complex action-in-a-situation see Holz-Mättäri 1984; Vermeer 1986.)

One practical consequence of the skopos theory is a new concept of the status
of the source text for a translation, and with it the necessity of working for an
increasing awareness of this, both among translators and also the general public.

As regards the translator himself: experts are called upon in a given situation
because they are needed and because they are regarded as experts. It is usually
assumed, reasonably enough, that such people “know what it’s all about”; they are
thus consulted and their views listened to. Being experts, they are trusted to know
more about their particular field than outsiders. In some circumstances one may
debate with them over the best way of proceeding, until a consensus is reached, or
occasionally one may also consult other experts or consider further alternative
ways of reaching a given goal. An expert must be able to say – and this implies both
knowledge and a duty to use it – what is what. His voice must therefore be
respected, he must be “given a say”. The translator is such an expert. It is thus up
to him to decide, for instance, what role a source text plays in his translational
action. The decisive factor here is the purpose, the skopos, of the communication
in a given situation. (Cf. Nord 1988: 9.)

2 Skopos and translation

At this point it should be emphasized that the following considerations are not only
intended to be valid for complete actions, such as whole texts, but also apply as far
as possible to segments of actions, parts of a text (for the term “segment” (Stück)
see Vermeer 1970). The skopos concept can also be used with respect to segments
of a translatum, where this appears reasonable or necessary. This allows us to state
that an action, and hence a text, need not be considered an indivisible whole. (Sub-
skopoi are discussed below; cf. also Reiss 1971 on hybrid texts.)

A source text is usually composed originally for a situation in the source culture;
hence its status as “source text”, and hence the role of the translator in the process
of intercultural communication. This remains true of a source text which has been
composed specifically with transcultural communication in mind. In most cases the
original author lacks the necessary knowledge of the target culture and its texts. If
he did have the requisite knowledge, he would of course compose his text under
the conditions of the target culture, in the target language! Language is part of a
culture.

It is thus not to be expected that merely “trans-coding” a source text, merely
“transposing” it into another language, will result in a serviceable translatum. (This
view is also supported by recent research in neurophysiology – cf. Bergström 1989.)
As its name implies, the source text is oriented towards, and is in any case bound to, the source culture. The target text, the *translatum*, is oriented towards the target culture, and it is this which ultimately defines its adequacy. It therefore follows that source and target texts may diverge from each other quite considerably, not only in the formulation and distribution of the content but also as regards the goals which are set for each, and in terms of which the arrangement of the content is in fact determined. (There may naturally be other reasons for a reformulation, such as when the target culture verbalizes a given phenomenon in a different way, e.g. in jokes – cf. Broerman 1984; I return to this topic below.)

It goes without saying that a *translatum* may also have the same function (skopos) as its source text. Yet even in this case the translation process is not merely a “trans-coding” (unless this translation variety is actually intended), since according to a uniform theory of translation a *translatum* of this kind is also primarily oriented, methodologically, towards a target culture situation or situations. Trans-coding, as a procedure which is retrospectively oriented towards the source text, not prospectively towards the target culture, is diametrically opposed to the theory of translational action. (This view does not, however, rule out the possibility that trans-coding can be a legitimate translational skopos itself, oriented prospectively towards the target culture: the decisive criterion is always the skopos.)

To the extent that a translator judges the form and function of a source text to be basically adequate per se as regards the predetermined skopos in the target culture, we can speak of a degree of “intertextual coherence” between target and source text. This notion thus refers to a relation between *translatum* and source text, defined in terms of the skopos. For instance, one legitimate skopos might be an exact imitation of the source text syntax, perhaps to provide target culture readers with information about this syntax. Or an exact imitation of the source text structure, in a literary translation, might serve to create a literary text in the target culture. Why not? The point is that one must know what one is doing, and what the consequences of such action are, e.g. what the effect of a text created in this way will be in the target culture and how much the effect will differ from that of the source text in the source culture. (For a discussion of intertextual coherence and its various types, see Morgenthaler 1980: 138–140; for more on Morgenthaler’s types of theme and rheme, cf. Gerzymisch-Arbogast 1987.)

Translating is doing something: “writing a translation”, “putting a German text into English”, i.e. a form of action. Following Brennenstuhl (1975), Rehbein (1977), Harras (1978; 1983), Lenk (edited volumes from 1977 on), Sager (1982) and others, Vermeer (1986) describes an action as a particular sort of behaviour: for an act of behaviour to be called an action, the person performing it must (potentially) be able to explain why he acts as he does although he could have acted otherwise. Furthermore, genuine reasons for actions can always be formulated in terms of aims or statements of goals (as an action “with a good reason”, as Harras puts it). This illustrates a point made in another connection by Kaspar (1983: 139): “In this sense the notion of aim is in the first place the reverse of the notion of cause.” (Cf. also Riedl 1983: 159f.) In his *De Inventione* (2.5.18.) Cicero also gives a definition of an action when he speaks of cases where “some disadvantage, or some advantage is neglected in order to gain a greater advantage or avoid a greater disadvantage” (Cicero 1949: 181–3).
3 Arguments against the skopos theory

Objections that have been raised against the skopos theory fall into two main types.

3.1 Objection (1) maintains that not all actions have an aim: some have “no aim”. This is claimed to be the case with literary texts, or at least some of them. Unlike other texts (!), then, such texts are claimed to be “aimless”. In fact, the argument is that in certain cases no aim exists, not merely that one might not be able explicitly to state an aim – the latter situation is sometimes inevitable, owing to human imperfection, but it is irrelevant here. As mentioned above, the point is that an aim must be at least potentially specifiable.

Let us clarify the imprecise expression of actions “having” an aim. It is more accurate to speak of an aim being attributed to an action, an author believing that he is writing to a given purpose, a reader similarly believing that an author has so written. (Clearly, it is possible that the performer of an action, a person affected by it, and an observer, may all have different concepts of the aim of the action. It is also important to distinguish between action, action chain, and action element – cf. Vermeer 1986.)

Objection (1) can be answered prima facie in terms of our very definition of an action: if no aim can be attributed to an action, it can no longer be regarded as an action. (The view that any act of speech is skopos-oriented was already a commonplace in ancient Greece – see Baumhauer 1986: 90f.) But it is also worth specifying the key concept of the skopos in more detail here, which we shall do in terms of translation proper as one variety of translational action.

The notion of skopos can in fact be applied in three ways, and thus have three senses: it may refer to

a. the translation process, and hence the goal of this process;

b. the translation result, and hence the function of the translatum;

c. the translation mode, and hence the intention of this mode.

Additionally, the skopos may of course also have sub-skopoi.

Objection (1), then, can be answered as follows: if a given act of behaviour has neither goal nor function nor intention, as regards its realization, result or manner, then it is not an action in the technical sense of the word.

If it is nevertheless claimed that literature “has no purpose”, this presumably means that the creation of literature includes individual moments to which no goal, no function or intention can be attributed, in the sense sketched above.

For instance, assume that a neat rhyme suddenly comes into one’s mind. (This is surely not an action, technically speaking.) One then writes it down. (Surely an action, since the rhyme could have been left unrecorded.) One continues writing until a sonnet is produced. (An action, since the writer could have chosen to do something else – unless the power of inspiration was simply irresistible, which I consider a mere myth.)

If we accept that the process of creating poetry also includes its publication (and maybe even negotiations for remuneration), then it becomes clear that such behaviour as a whole does indeed constitute an action. Schiller and Shakespeare
undoubtedly took into account the possible reactions of their public as they wrote, as indeed anyone would; must we actually denounce such behaviour (conscious, and hence purposeful), because it was in part perhaps motivated by such base desires as fame and money?

Our basic argument must therefore remain intact: even the creation of literature involves purposeful action.

Furthermore, it need not necessarily be the case that the writer is actually conscious of his purpose at the moment of writing – hence the qualification (above) that it must be “potentially” possible to establish a purpose.

One recent variant of objection (1) is the claim that a text can only be called “literature” if it is art, and art has no purpose and no intention. So a work which did have a goal or intention would not be art. This seems a bit hard on literature, to say the least! In my view it would be simpler to concede that art, and hence also literature, can be assigned an intention (and without exception too). The objection seems to be based on a misunderstanding. Nowadays it is extremely questionable whether there is, or has even been, an art with no purpose. Cf. Busch (1987: 7):

Every work of art establishes its meaning aesthetically [. . .] The aesthetic can of course serve many different functions, but it may also be in itself the function of the work of art.

Busch points out repeatedly that an object does not “have” a function, but that a function is attributed or assigned to an object, according to the situation.

And when Goethe acknowledges that he has to work hard to achieve the correct rhythm for a poem, this too shows that even for him the creation of poetry was not merely a matter of inspiration:

Oftmals hab’ ich auch schon in ihren Armen gedichtet,
Und des Hexameters Mass leise mit fingernder Hand
Ihr auf dem Rücken gezählt.

(Römische Elegien 1.5.)

[Often have I composed poems even in her arms,
Counting the hexameter’s beat softly with fingering hand
There on the back of the beloved.]

Even the well-known “l’art pour l’art” movement (“art for art’s sake”) must be understood as implying an intention: namely, the intention to create art that exists for its own sake and thereby differs from other art. Intentionality in this sense is already apparent in the expression itself. (Cf. also Herding (1987: 689), who argues that the art-for-art’s-sake movement was “a kind of defiant opposition” against idealism – i.e. it did indeed have a purpose.)

3.2 Objection (2) is a particular variant of the first objection. It maintains that not every translation can be assigned a purpose, an intention; i.e. there are translations that are not goal-oriented. (Here we are taking “translation” in its traditional sense,
for “translation” with no skopos would by definition not be a translation at all, in
the present theory. This does not rule out the possibility that a “translation” may
be done retrospectively, treating the source text as the “measure of all things”; but
this would only be a translation in the sense of the present theory if the skopos was
explicitly to translate in this way.)
This objection too is usually made with reference to literature, and to this extent
we have already dealt with it under objection (1): it can scarcely be claimed that
literary translation takes place perforce, by the kiss of the muse. Yet there are three
specifications of objection (2) that merit further discussion:

a. The claim that the translator does not have any specific goal, function or inten-
tion in mind: he just translates “what is in the source text”.
b. The claim that a specific goal, function or intention would restrict the trans-
lation possibilities, and hence limit the range of interpretation of the target
text in comparison to that of the source text.
c. The claim that the translator has no specific addressee or set of addressees in
mind.

Let us consider each of these in turn.

a. Advertising texts are supposed to advertise; the more successful the advertise-
ment is, the better the text evidently is. Instructions for use are supposed to describe
how an apparatus is to be assembled, handled and maintained; the more smoothly
this is done, the better the instructions evidently are. Newspaper reports and their
translations also have a purpose: to inform the recipient, at least; the translation
thus has to be comprehensible, in the right sense, to the expected readership, i.e.
the set of addressees. There is no question that such “pragmatic texts” must be goal-
oriented, and so are their translations.

It might be said that the postulate of “fidelity” to the source text requires that
e.g. a news item should be translated “as it was in the original”. But this too is a
goal in itself. Indeed, it is by definition probably the goal that most literary trans-
lators traditionally set themselves. (On the ambiguity of the notion “fidelity”, see
Vermeer 1983: 89–130.)

It is sometimes even claimed that the very duty of a translator forbids him from
doing anything else than stick to the source text; whether anyone might eventually
be able to do anything with the translation or not is not the translator’s business.
The present theory of translational action has a much wider conception of the trans-
lator’s task, including matters of ethics and the translator’s accountability.

b. The argument that assigning a skopos to every literary text restricts its possi-
bilities of interpretation can be answered as follows. A given skopos may of course
rule out certain interpretations because they are not part of the translation goal; but
one possible goal (skopos) would certainly be precisely to preserve the breadth of
interpretation of the source text. (Cf. also Vermeer 1983: a translation realizes
something “different”, not something “more” or “less”; for translation as the real-
ization of one possible interpretation, see Vermeer 1986.) How far such a skopos is
in fact realizable is not the point here.
c. It is true that in many cases a text-producer, and hence also a translator, is not thinking of a specific addressee (in the sense of: John Smith) or set of addressees (in the sense of: the members of the social democrat party). In other cases, however, the addressee(s) may indeed be precisely specified. Ultimately even a communication “to the world” has a set of addressees. As long as one believes that one is expressing oneself in a “comprehensible” way, and as long as one assumes, albeit unconsciously, that people have widely varying levels of intelligence and education, then one must in fact be orienting oneself towards a certain restricted group of addressees; not necessarily consciously – but unconsciously. One surely often uses one’s own (self-evaluated) level as an implicit criterion (the addressees are (almost) as intelligent as one is oneself . . .). Recall also the discussions about the best way of formulating news items for radio and television, so that as many recipients as possible will understand.

The problem, then, is not that there is no set of addressees, but that it is an indeterminate, fuzzy set. But it certainly exists, vague in outline but clearly present. And the clarity or otherwise of the concept is not specified by the skopos theory. A fruitful line of research might be to explore the extent to which a group of recipients can be replaced by a “type” of recipient. In many cases such an addressee-type may be much more clearly envisaged, more or less consciously, than is assumed by advocates of the claim that translations lack specific addressees. (Cf. also Morgenthaler 1980: 94 on the possibility of determining a “diffuse public” more closely; on indeterminacy as a general cultural problem see Quine 1960.)

The set of addressees can also be determined indirectly: for example, if a publisher specializing in a particular range of publications commissions a translation, a knowledge of what this range is will give the translator a good idea of the intended addressee group (cf. Heinold et al. 1987: 33–6).

3.3 Objection (2) can also be interpreted in another way. In text linguistics and literary theory a distinction is often made between text as potential and text as realization. If the skopos theory maintains that every text has a given goal, function or intention, and also an assumed set of addressees, objection (2) can be understood as claiming that this applies to text as realization; for a text is also potential in the “supersummative” sense (Paepcke 1979: 97), in that it can be used in different situations with different addressees and different functions. Agreed; but when a text is actually composed, this is nevertheless done with respect to an assumed function (or small set of functions) etc. The skopos theory does not deny that the same text might be used later (also) in ways that had not been foreseen originally. It is well known that a translatum is a text “in its own right” (Holz-Mänttäri et al. 1986: 5), with its own potential of use: a point overlooked by Wilss (1988: 48). For this reason not even potential texts can be set up with no particular goal or addressee – at least not in any adequate, practical or significant way.

This brings us back again to the problem of the “functional constancy” between source and target text: Holz-Mänttäri (1988) rightly insists that functional constancy, properly understood, is the exception rather than the rule. Of relevance to the above objections in general is also her following comment (ibid.: 7):
Where is the neuralgic point at which translation practice and theory so often diverge? In my view it is precisely where texts are lifted out of their environment for comparative purposes, whereby their process aspect is ignored. A dead anatomical specimen does not evade the clutches of the dissecting knife, to be sure, but such a procedure only increases the risk that findings will be interpreted in a way that is translationally irrelevant.

3.4 I have agreed that one legitimate skopos is maximally faithful imitation of the original, as commonly in literary translation. True translation, with an adequate skopos, does not mean that the translator must adapt to the customs and usage of the target culture, only that he can so adapt. This aspect of the skopos theory has been repeatedly misunderstood. (Perhaps it is one of those insights which do not spread like wildfire but must first be hushed up and then fought over bitterly, before they become accepted as self-evident – cf. Riedl 1983: 147.)

What we have is in fact a “hare-and-tortoise” theory (Klaus Mudersbach, personal communication): the skopos is always (already) there, at once, whether the translation is an assimilating one or deliberately marked or whatever. What the skopos states is that one must translate, consciously and consistently, in accordance with some principle respecting the target text. The theory does not state what the principle is: this must be decided separately in each specific case. An optimally faithful rendering of a source text, in the sense of a trans-coding, is thus one perfectly legitimate goal. The skopos theory merely states that the translator should be aware that some goal exists, and that any given goal is only one among many possible ones. (How many goals are actually realizable is another matter. We might assume that in at least some cases the number of realizable goals is one only.) The important point is that a given source text does not have one correct or best translation only (Vermeer 1979 and 1983: 62–88).

We can maintain, then, that every reception or production of a text can at least retrospectively be assigned a skopos, as can every translation, by an observer or literary scholar etc.; and also that every action is guided by a skopos. If we now turn this argument around we can postulate a priori that translation – because it is an action – always presupposes a skopos and is directed by a skopos. It follows that every translation commission should explicitly or implicitly contain a statement of skopos in order to be carried out at all. Every translation presupposes a commission, even though it may be set by the translator to himself (I will translate this keeping close to the original . . .). “A” statement of skopos implies that it is not necessarily identical with the skopos attributed to the source text: there are cases where such identity is not possible.

4 The translation commission

Someone who translates undertakes to do so as a matter of deliberate choice (I exclude the possibility of translating under hypnosis), or because he is required to do so. One translates as a result of either one’s own initiative or someone else’s: in both cases, that is, one acts in accordance with a “commission” (Auftrag).
Let us define a commission as the instruction, given by oneself or by someone else, to carry out a given action – here: to translate. (Throughout the present article translation is taken to include interpretation.)

Nowadays, in practice, commissions are normally given explicitly (Please translate the accompanying text), although seldom with respect to the ultimate purpose of the text. In real life, the specification of purpose, addressees etc. is usually sufficiently apparent from the commission situation itself: unless otherwise indicated, it will be assumed in our culture that for instance a technical article about some astronomical discovery is to be translated as a technical article for astronomers, and the actual place of publication is regarded as irrelevant; or if a company wants a business letter translated, the natural assumption is that the letter will be used by the company in question (and in most cases the translator will already be sufficiently familiar with the company’s own in-house style, etc.). To the extent that these assumptions are valid, it can be maintained that any translation is carried out according to a skopos. In the absence of a specification, we can still often speak of an implicit (or implied) skopos. It nevertheless seems appropriate to stress here the necessity for a change of attitude among many translators and clients: as far as possible, detailed information concerning the skopos should always be given.

With the exception of forces majeures – or indeed even including them, according to the conception of “commission” (cf. the role of so-called inspiration in the case of biblical texts) – the above definition, with the associated arguments, allows us to state that every translation is based on a commission.

A commission comprises (or should comprise) as much detailed information as possible on the following: (1) the goal, i.e. a specification of the aim of the commission (cf. the scheme of specification factors in Nord 1988: 170); (2) the conditions under which the intended goal should be attained (naturally including practical matters such as deadline and fee). The statement of goal and the conditions should be explicitly negotiated between the client (commissioner) and the translator, for the client may occasionally have an imprecise or even false picture of the way a text might be received in the target culture. Here the translator should be able to make argumentative suggestions. A commission can (and should) only be binding and conclusive, and accepted as such by the translator, if the conditions are clear enough. (I am aware that this requirement involves a degree of wishful thinking; yet it is something to strive for.) Cf. Holz-Mänttäri 1984: 91f and 113; Nord 1988: 9 and 284, note 4.

The translator is the expert in translational action (Holz-Mänttäri 1984 and 1985); as an expert he is therefore responsible for deciding whether, when, how, etc., a translation can be realized (the Lasswell formula is relevant here – see Lasswell 1964: 37; Vermeer 1986: 197 and references there).

The realizability of a commission depends on the circumstances of the target culture, not on those of the source culture. What is dependent on the source culture is the source text. A commission is only indirectly dependent on the source culture to the extent that a translation, by definition, must involve a source text. One might say that the realizability of a commission depends on the relation between the target culture and the source text; yet this would only be a special case of the general dependence on the target culture: a special case, that is, insofar as the commission is basically independent of the source text function. If the discrepancy is too great,
however, no translation is possible – at most a rewritten text or the like. We shall not discuss this here. But it should be noted that a target culture generally offers a wide range of potential, including e.g. possible extension through the adoption of phenomena from other cultures. How far this is possible depends on the target culture. (For this kind of adoption see e.g. Toury 1980.)

I have been arguing – I hope plausibly – that every translation can and must be assigned a skopos. This idea can now be linked with the concept of commission: it is precisely by means of the commission that the skopos is assigned. (Recall that a translator may also set his own commission.)

If a commission cannot be realized, or at least not optimally, because the client is not familiar with the conditions of the target culture, or does not accept them, the competent translator (as an expert in intercultural action, since translational action is a particular kind of intercultural action) must enter into negotiations with the client in order to establish what kind of “optimal” translation can be guaranteed under the circumstances. We shall not attempt to define “optimal” here – it is presumably a supra-individual concept. We are simply using the term to designate one of the best translations possible in the given circumstances, one of those that best realize the goal in question. Besides, “optimal” is clearly also a relative term: “optimal under certain circumstances” may mean “as good as possible in view of the resources available” or “in view of the wishes of the client”, etc. – and always only in the opinion of the translator, and/or of the recipient, etc. The translator, as the expert, decides in a given situation whether to accept a commission or not, under what circumstances, and whether it needs to be modified.

The skopos of a translation is therefore the goal or purpose, defined by the commission and if necessary adjusted by the translator. In order for the skopos to be defined precisely, the commission must thus be as specific as possible (Holz-Mänttäri 1984). If the commission is specific enough, after possible adjustment by the translator himself, the decision can then be taken about how to translate optimally, i.e. what kind of changes will be necessary in the translatum with respect to the source text.

This concept of the commission thus leads to the same result as the skopos theory outlined above: a translatum is primarily determined by its skopos or its commission, accepted by the translator as being adequate to the goal of the action. As we have argued, a translatum is not ipso facto a “faithful” imitation of the source text. “Fidelity” to the source text (whatever the interpretation or definition of fidelity) is one possible and legitimate skopos or commission. Formulated in this way, neither skopos nor commission are new concepts as such – both simply make explicit something which has always existed. Yet they do specify something that has hitherto either been implicitly put into practice more unconsciously than consciously, or else been neglected or even rejected altogether: that is, the fact that one translates according to a particular purpose, which implies translating in a certain manner, without giving way freely to every impulse; the fact that there must always be a clearly defined goal. The two concepts also serve to relativize a viewpoint that has often been seen as the only valid one: that a source text should be translated “as literally as possible”.

Neglecting to specify the commission or the skopos has one fatal consequence: there has been little agreement to date about the best method of translating a given
text. In the context of the skopos or the commission this must now be possible, at least as regards the macrostrategy. (As regards individual text elements we still know too little about the functioning of the brain, and hence of culture and language, to be able to rely on much more than intuition when choosing between different variants which may appear to the individual translator to be equally possible and appropriate in a given case, however specific the skopos.) The skopos can also help to determine whether the source text needs to be “translated”, “paraphrased” or completely “re-edited”. Such strategies lead to terminologically different varieties of translational action, each based on a defined skopos which is itself based on a specified commission.

The skopos theory thus in no way claims that a translated text should ipso facto conform to the target culture behaviour or expectations, that a translation must always “adapt” to the target culture. This is just one possibility: the theory equally well accommodates the opposite type of translation, deliberately marked, with the intention of expressing source-culture features by target-culture means. Everything between these two extremes is likewise possible, including hybrid cases. To know what the point of a translation is, to be conscious of the action – that is the goal of the skopos theory. The theory campaigns against the belief that there is no aim (in any sense whatever), that translation is a purposeless activity.

Are we not just making a lot of fuss about nothing, then? No, insofar as the following claims are justified: (1) the theory makes explicit and conscious something that is too often denied; (2) the skopos, which is (or should be) defined in the commission, expands the possibilities of translation, increases the range of possible translation strategies, and releases the translator from the corset of an enforced – and hence often meaningless – literalness; and (3) it incorporates and enlarges the accountability of the translator, in that his translation must function in such a way that the given goal is attained. This accountability in fact lies at the very heart of the theory: what we are talking about is no less than the ethos of the translator.

By way of conclusion, here is a final example illustrating the importance of the skopos or commission.

An old French textbook had a piece about a lawsuit concerning an inheritance of considerable value. Someone had bequeathed a certain sum to two nephews. The will had been folded when the ink was still wet, so that a number of small ink-blots had appeared in the text. In one place, the text could read either as deux “two” or d’eux “of them”. The lawsuit was about whether the sentence in question read à chacun deux cent mille francs “to each, two hundred thousand francs,” or à chacun d’eux cent mille francs “to each of them, one hundred thousand francs”. Assume that the case was being heard in, say, a German court of law, and that a translation of the will was required. The skopos (and commission) would obviously be to translate in a “documentary” way, so that the judge would understand the ambiguity. The translator might for instance provide a note or comment to the effect that two readings were possible at the point in question, according to whether the apostrophe was interpreted as an inkblot or not, and explain them (rather as I have done here). – Now assume a different context, where the same story occurs as a minor incident in a novel. In this case a translator will surely not wish to interrupt the flow of the narrative with an explanatory comment, but rather try to find a target language solution with a similar kind of effect, e.g. perhaps introducing an ambiguity
concerning the presence or absence of a crucial comma, so that 2000,00 francs might be interpreted either as 2000 or as 200000 francs. Here the story is being used “instrumentally”; the translation does not need to reproduce every detail, but aims at an equivalent effect. – The two different solutions are equally possible and attainable because each conforms to a different skopos. And this is precisely the point of the example: one does not translate a source text in a void, as it were, but always according to a given skopos or commission.

The above example also illustrates the fact that any change of skopos from source to target text, or between different translations, gives rise to a separate target text, e.g. as regards its text variety. (On text varieties (Textsorten), see Reiss and Vermeer 1984; but cf. also Gardt’s (1987: 555) observation that translation strategies are bound to text varieties only “in a strictly limited way”.) The source text does not determine the variety of the target text, nor does the text variety determine ipso facto the form of the target text (the text variety does not determine the skopos, either); rather, it is the skopos of the translation that also determines the appropriate text variety. A “text variety”, in the sense of a classificatory sign of a translatum, is thus a consequence of the skopos, and thereby secondary to it. In a given culture it is the skopos that determines which text variety a translatum should conform to. For example:

An epic is usually defined as a long narrative poem telling of heroic deeds. But Homer’s Odyssey has also been translated into a novel: its text variety has thus changed from epic to novel, because of a particular skopos. (Cf. Schadewaldt’s (1958) translation into German, and the reasons he gives there for this change; also see Vermeer 1983: 89–130.)