

VERMEER'S SKOPOS THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION TO THE ARABIC TRANSLATION OF MILLER'S DEATH OF A SALESMAN

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Abstract

The present study aimed at shedding some light on Vermeer's (1989) Skopos theory in translation as suggested by Vermeer along with the application of this theory to an English literary text taken from Miller's *Death of A Salesman* (1947) and its Arabic translation done by a Syrian Arab translator called Omar Jabak. Besides, the article will try to examine the weaknesses of Skopos theory in terms of its applicability to literary texts in particular. The researchers adopted the analytical descriptive approach in this small-scale qualitative study to prove the inapplicability of the Skopos theory principles to the above-mentioned English play and its Arabic translation. The research data and findings revealed that Vermeer's Skopos theory had somehow little applicability to translated literary works because literature and its translation, in general, and drama, in particular, have meaningful or 'skopos' in people's social, economic and political lives.

Keywords: translation, Skopos theory, translation strategies, Arabic translation of *Death of a Salesman*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The present paper is a small-scale qualitative study which aims at shedding some light on the Skopos theory in translation as suggested by Vermeer (1989) along with the application of this theory to an English literary text taken from Miller's *Death of A Salesman* (1947) and its Arabic translation done by a Syrian Arab translator called Omar Jabak. More importantly, the article will try to put the Skopos theory under the microscope and pinpoint the weaknesses this theory has from the point of view of its applicability to literary texts in particular. There is a general consensus among researchers that theories alone do not carry much weight unless they have practical, valid applications. In this way, theoretical knowledge and practical applications represent two sides of the same coin, neither of which can be separated from the other. In support of the inseparability of theory from practice, Baker (1996:2) suggests, "Needless to say, this type of theoretical knowledge is itself of no value unless it is firmly grounded in practical experience".

In this particular way, this paper will be a mixture of theory and practice along with some critical insights into the Skopos theory in translation. The last part of the article will round off the findings which the present study will have come up with.

Hence, the current study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To test the validity of Vermeer's Skopos theory;
2. To prove the inapplicability of Skopos theory to literary translation.

2.0 THE STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The present research aims to find answers to the following two questions pertaining to Skopos theory:

1. Is Vermeer's Skopos theory valid for literary translation?
2. Why does Vermeer's theory have little applicability to the Arabic translation of *Death of a Salesman*?

3.0 MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The current research study made use of the analytical descriptive method in this kind of small-scale qualitative research to help achieve its objectives and answer its questions. An English literary work and its Arabic translation were chosen to provide the data for the current study and offer some fresh insights into Skopos theory and its applicability to the translation of literary works in general and the Arabic translation of '*Death of a Salesman*' in particular. A short excerpt was randomly chosen from Miller's '*Death of a Salesman*' along with its Arabic translation to help examine Skopos theory and its application to literary translation.

■4.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current research is probably one of the very few research studies aiming at validating or invalidating Vermeer's Skopos theory with specific reference to the Arabic translation of Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. After a rigorous review of the relevant literature available on this theory and its application to Arabic translation, the researchers found one MA thesis shedding light on Skopos theory in relation to advertising translation into Arabic carried out by Haddad (2015). The researcher tackled Skopos theory in relation to advertising translation into Arabic. Haddad came to the conclusion that, "While Skopos theory has a proven importance in the translator's armory, and enables and directs translators to be flexible and utilise different micro-strategies when dealing with an advertising text, this theory itself does not deal with specific micro-strategies" (p, 49). Another researcher who examined Skopos theory very closely was Schjoldager, (2008). In her book entitled *Understanding Translation*, she questioned Skopos theory on the grounds that the theory lacks well-formulated hypotheses which can be empirically tested or verified. Due to the scarcity of studies on the application of Skopos theory to Arabic-English translation of literary works, the literature review will be restricted to elaborating on this theory and presenting some translation scholars' views on it.

In fact, since the coming of Skopos theory in the late 1970s, it has attracted both warm applauses and severe criticisms due to its somehow extreme rules. In this respect, Munday (2001:73) believed that "The advent of Skopostheorie is regarded by Western translation scholars as a mark of a move away from the static linguistic typologies of translation shifts". The word "Skopos" is a Greek word meaning "purpose" in English (Vermeer 1996:4). Since 1980s, translation has been widely regarded as a cultural transfer of a given source text rather than a linguistic activity. Thus, translation is looked at as both a social and communicative process that leads to the target text along with its function in the target culture.

With reference to translation as one type of social action, Vermeer (1986:230-232) suggests that translation is carried out for specific audience or readership with specific purposes in a given situation (Skopos). So, a translator carries out his/her translation assignment with such purposes in mind. The specification by the client on the translator's task (commission) is treated as an essential requirement for the Skopos. According to Vermeer (1989a), the goal of the translational action and the conditions under which the anticipated goal will be negotiated between the client and the translator. Besides, the translator assumes responsibility and authority as a translation expert who is consulted by his/her client or translation companies, and has the right to decide what role the source text could play in his/her professional job due to his/her linguistic and cultural knowledge of both, the source language and the target language. In addition, the target text should fulfill the expectations and needs of the target audience.

Vermeer (1989b:20 in Nord 1997: 29) explains the Skopos rule as follows: "[T]ranslate/interpret/speak/write in a way that enables your text/translation to function in the situation in which it is used and with the people who want to use it and precisely in the way they want it to function." In this way, the source text is deprived by the translator of its primary and sacred status whenever the translator thinks this is appropriate for the achievement of the designated Skopos or purpose.

The source text merely serves as one of various information sources by the translator, not the first and foremost criterion in the translator's decision-making process. In this particular respect, Hönig (1998: 9) notes, "the source text should no longer be seen as the 'sacred original,' and the purpose of the translation can no longer be deduced from the source text, but depends on the expectations and needs of the target readers". The Skopos theory, therefore, allows the translator to have freedom to act as an expert and take responsibility for his/ her approach. In the Skopos theory, the way a target text is intended to be received basically determines which translation strategy is the most convenient one.

There are three major kinds of purposes: (a) the general purpose as to why the translator performs this translation; (b) the communicative purpose (e.g. to inform); (c) the strategic purpose aimed at following a particular procedure (e.g. literal vs. free translation). Here "the end justifies the means" in translation (Nord 1997:29). In other words, the translation strategy is determined by the intended function of the target text, which may not be the same as that of the source text. As a "cross-cultural event," the target text (a "translatum") could assume a different sociolinguistic and pragmatic significance in a different sociocultural context (Vermeer 1998). Vermeer (1986:33 in Snell-Hornby 1990:82) claims that translation is a "complex form of action, whereby someone provides information on a text (source language material) in a new situation and under changed functional, cultural and linguistic conditions. Translation presupposes a purpose (Skopos) and is guided by it." Moreover, meaning is not fixed and static in its linguistic manifestation. It depends on the negotiated and oppositional readings by the receivers of a given text. Different receivers (or even the same receiver at different times) would attribute and assign different meanings to the same source text. Nord (1992:91) argues that "a 'text' can be as many texts as there are receivers."

On the other hand, the Skopos theory seems to tip the scales in favor of a culture- oriented approach to translating against a linguistic approach to translating. Maybe Vermeer's devotion to the cultural approach comes from the notion that languages are replete with cultural references and sensitivities which cannot be rendered into another language by the help of linguistic knowledge alone. In his 'Framework for a General Translation Theory' of 1978, Vermeer states his general position by saying, "Linguistics alone won't help us. First, because translating is not merely and even primarily a linguistic process. Secondly, because linguistics has not formulated the right questions to tackle our problems. So let's look somewhere else" (Nord 1997:10).

Criticisms on the Skopos theory

As has always been the case with any other theory, Vermeer's Skopos theory has been duly and some translation scholars have found fault with some of its aspects such as the lack of Skopos in literary texts, and blind devotion to the cultural approach to translation. Skopos theory was criticised for its simplicity, and was questioned as a theory, as it seems to lack well-constructed hypotheses that can be empirically and scientifically tested (Schjoldager, 2008). Among those translation scholars who launched some harsh criticisms on Vermeer's Skopos theory in translation are Nord (1997: 109-22) and Schaffner (1998: 137-8). Their criticisms include the following points as they appear in Munday's *Introducing Translation Studies*, Second Edition (2008: 81):

- (1) What purports to be "general" theory is in fact only valid for non-literary texts. Literary texts are considered either to have no specific purpose and/or to be far more complex stylistically.
- (2) Reiss's text type approach and Vermeer's Skopos theory consider different functional phenomenon and cannot be lumped together.
- (3) Skopos theory does not pay sufficient attention to the linguistic nature of the ST nor to the reproduction of microlevel features in the TT. Even if the skopos is adequately fulfilled, it may be inadequate at the stylistic or semantic levels of individual segments.

As for the first claim that literary texts have no skopos, this is not very precise because literary works are produced in an age as a reaction to some economical, social, industrial or political degeneration. Of course English literature bears witness to the various purposes of its numerous works. For example, Dickens's novels are all directed towards the injustices done to the individual by the social system and economic situation of the day. Shakespeare's plays tackle historical, social, political and above all timeless themes that are traceable and observable even today. In a word, to divest literary texts of their primary purposes is to do them injustice. So, the Skopos theory does not hold water in the translation of literary texts into any languages.

As for the second criticism, there seems to be some contradictions between Reiss's text-typology and Vermeer's Skopos theory as Vermeer suspects the practical purposes of literary texts and their translation while Reiss literary texts as expressive texts which have meaning, purpose and function along with their translations. Of course the idea of classifying texts into categories goes contrary to Vermeer's Skopos theory to a certain extent.

As for the third criticism, most translation scholars are of the opinion that for translators to be good ones they should have the mastery of the linguistic aspects and the cultural ones of both the source language and the target language. Therefore, it stands to reason that the linguistic mastery of the language pairs alone is not enough to carry out translation successfully. Nor is the cultural knowledge of the language pairs enough to assist translators in performing translation tasks as accurately and communicatively as possible. Even Reiss seems to disagree with Vermeer on this point. In this respect, Reiss (2000: 60) argues:

Due to the fact that differences between the grammatical systems of languages are frequently quite great, it is the morphology and syntax of the target language that clearly deserve priority unless there is some overriding factor either in the nature of the text or some special circumstance.

■ 5.0 DISCUSSION

Analysis of the Source Text from the Point of view of Skopos

The source text chosen for this article is an excerpt taken from the American playwright, Miller's *'Death of A Salesman'* (1947). The source text is provided at the Appendices Section towards the end of the article. Nida (1964) suggests that it is very important that translators analyse source texts carefully before they translate them. It is well-known that the purpose of writing plays is to have them performed on the stage in front of a large audience. From this general point of view, the playwright's skopos is to stage his/her plays so that the audience (the American people of the twentieth century) will watch them and interact with them. On the social or economic level, the playwright's skopos is to depict the current ills of his/her society in a way so as to find cures for these ills. For Miller's *'Death of A Salesman'*, Miller aims at depicting the collapse of the American dream for the middle-class family which is trying to survive in a densely populated country. The play is full of references to such an idea. Willy Lowman expresses the attitude of middle-class families by saying:

Willy: The street is lined up with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood. The grass don't grow any more, you can't raise a carrot in the back yard They should've had a law against apartment houses. Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there? When I and Biff hung the swing between them? (1949: 8)

Of course this play has a great impact on the audience because it relates directly to current issues they face on a daily basis and will definitely achieve its aim or skopos by making the audience both appreciate its aesthetic value and have some attitudes to the current issues. As for the publisher, the skopos for him/her is to adopt promising works and benefit financially by agreeing to publish such literary works which tackle passing issues of some degree of importance. For practical translators (Munday 2008: 78) the skopos is to meet the demands of translation companies and publishing houses which are either the client or the commissioner. Besides, the translators' skopos is to produce a text that matches the intended meaning of the source text to a great extent, and to try to preserve the aesthetic effect of the source text on the readership.

Analysis of the Target Text from the Point of view of Skopos

The target text chosen for this article is the Arabic translation of an excerpt taken from Miller's *'Death of A Salesman'*. The Arab translator of this excerpt is Omar Jabak. The target text is provided at the Appendices Section towards the end of the article. Since the source text is an excerpt taken from Miller's *'Death of a Salesman'*, and the play itself is part of a literature course on the English syllabi of the English departments at most Arab universities across the Arab world, Arab or non-Arab publishing houses hire translators or translation companies to translate it into Arabic. In this way, the skopos of this translation for publishing houses is to get the Arabic version translated as soon as possible so that Arab students of English literature and American literature along with Arab readers in general buy the translation/ target text at the price these publishing houses determine. The skopos for the target Arab students is to understand the play which will help them pass the American Drama exam. However, for the general readers, the aim is to get to know something about the American society; its culture, customs, values and other important aspects.

Furthermore, the translator's skopos is to try to convey the meaning of the source text as truthfully and accurately as possible and at the same time to preserve the aesthetic effect which the source text has on the audience. However, to do so, the translator will have to make some strategic decisions upon encountering some linguistic or cultural challenges in the process.

6.0 FINDINGS

As most of the source text is written in American English slang commensurate with the so called language or jargon of the middle-class American families, there are many violations of grammar rules in the source text. Now, if the translator neglects, or pays little attention to this linguistic aspect, as Vermeer (1987 a:29) suggests, the target text which results from the translational action will be grammatically incorrect according to the grammar rules of the target language and semantically vague. Let us examine the following table to better understand this important point:

Source Text phrase	Target Text Equivalent	Notes
There's more people	يوجد الكثير من الناس.	People as a singular noun means "nation", but the translator's decision to translate it as the plural of "person" is right.
The grass don't grow any more, you can't raise a carrot in the back yard.	وما عاد العشب ينمو هناك، وليس بالإمكان زراعة ولا حتى جزرة واحدة في الساحة الخلفية.	The source text has a grammatical mistake which is the use of 'don't' with a singular noun. The translator just ignored this grammatical mistake as Arabic allows for this. There is also the verb 'raise' which the translator did not translate literally. The translator's choice is right as he seemed to focus on conveying the intended meaning of the source text.
They should've arrested the builder for cutting those down. They massacred the neighbourhood.	كان عليهم اعتقال البنّاء لقطعته هاتين الشجرتين لأنه أكرم في حق الحي	As can be seen in the source sentence, the word 'those' is linguistically vague, but the translator made it very clear when he added a noun after it in the translation. The word 'massacred' in the source sentence was not translated literally as it would then change the intended and true meaning of the source text. The translator did not only depend on his linguistic or lexical knowledge of the English language. The translator's decisions are all right here.
The competition is maddening!	والتنافس أصبح على أشده.	The word 'maddening' was not translated literally based on its basic lexical meaning alone. The translator made the right decision by drawing on his linguistic and cultural knowledge of Arabic to translate that word correctly.
You're my foundation and my support.	أنت سندّ داعم لي يا ليندا.	Here the source text has a word which means the same as another word, and the translator translated only one of these two words and dropped the other word to avoid repetition. The words 'foundation and support' are synonyms in English, and there is no need to translate them both as this will be tautological.
you've got too much on the ball to worry about.	لديك عمل كثير عليك الاهتمام به.	The source expression is an American slang expression which cannot be translated literally. The translator's strategy to replace it with "you have a lot to do" is a good one.
I'll put money on Biff.	سأراهن على بيف.	Again, the source expression is an American slang one which means "to bet". The translator's cultural knowledge helps him opt for its true meaning.
You make mountains out of molehills	أنت تهوّل الأمر.	Once more, the source expression is an idiom which simply means to exaggerate. The translator's equivalent is a good match as his skopos is to convey meaning as truthfully and accurately as possible.

We notice that for the first item in the above table, the part of the Skopos theory which calls for paying little attention to linguistics does not help the translator convey the intended meaning of the source sentence. However, for the rest of the examples, the culture-oriented approach suggested by Vermeer and followed by the translator to render the correct meaning of the source texts is of much help. As the Arabic translations in the above table show that the translator relied on his linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge of Arabic, his native language, to convey and preserves the intended meanings expressed by the corresponding English sentences. This means that linguistic competence in the target language and adherence to providing translation based solely on lexical meaning do not help much in literary translation.

Of course, the source play and the target translation of the play have a lot more than the above-mentioned examples where the Skopos theory can sometimes be applicable and correct and some other times inadequate and incorrect. But because the present research is a small-scale qualitative study, only the attached excerpts at the Appendices section have been examined, analysed and discussed.

7.0 CONCLUSION

The present study has shed some light on the Skopos theory as suggested by Vermeer, and has come to the conclusion that it can sometimes be applied to literary texts and sometimes it cannot. Besides, the Skopos theory which investigates the purpose of writing source texts and translating them remains debatable, especially when one wants to apply it to literary texts which Vermeer doubts have any skopos. In this respect, the present article has shown that Vermeer's Skopos theory of translating literary works is questionable, to a great

extent, because literature and its translation, in general, and drama, in particular, have meaningful roles or 'skopos' in people's social, economic and political lives.

To translate literature, translators have to be equipped with both linguistic and cultural knowledge of both the source language and the target language so that they not only carry out the translational action successfully, but they also preserve the social, political, economical and aesthetic effects of the source text and convey them to the target audience as faithfully and accurately as possible. In fact, translators are facilitators of cultural transmission and communication. Still, no one can deny the financial or materialistic influence which publishing houses and translation companies have on the purpose and products of translation in general. It is hoped that the present article contributes to the understanding of the Skopos theory and the application of this theory to source texts and target texts of literary nature. In this respect, this article might set the stage for further research studies in the context of the Skopos theory and its application to other types translation. The researchers recommend that future large-scale qualitative or quantitative research be conducted on Skopos theory and its application to other translated books to either confirm the findings of the current study or refute them.

■8.0 APPENDICES

8.1 Source Text (PP 8-9)

WILLY: The street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood. The grass don't grow any more, you can't raise a carrot in the back yard. They should've had a law against apartment houses. Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there? When I and Biff hung the swing between them?

LINDA: Yeah, like being a million miles from the city.

WILLY: They should've arrested the builder for cutting those down. They massacred the neighbourhood. (*Lost.*) More and more I think of those days, Linda. This time of year it was lilac and wisteria. And then the peonies would come out, and the daffodils. What fragrance in this room!

LINDA: Well, after all, people had to move somewhere.

WILLY: No, there's more people now.

LINDA: I don't think there's more people. I think

WILLY: There's more people! That's what's ruining this country! Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening! Smell the stink from that apartment house! And another one on the other side... How can they whip cheese?

(*On Willy's last line, Biff and Happy raise themselves up in their beds, listening.*)

LINDA: Go down, try it. And be quiet.

WILLY (*turning to Linda, guiltily*): You're not worried about me, are you, sweetheart?

BIFF: What's the matter?

HAPPY: Listen!

LINDA: You've got too much on the ball to worry about.

WILLY: You're my foundation and my support, Linda.

LINDA: Just try to relax, dear. You make mountains out of molehills.

WILLY: I won't fight with him any more. If he wants to go back to Texas, let him go.

LINDA: He'll find his way.

WILLY: Sure. Certain men just don't get started till later in life. Like Thomas Edison; I think. Or B. F. Goodrich. One of them was deaf. (*He starts for the bedroom doorway.*) I'll put my money on Biff.

8.2 Target Text (pp:8-9)

ويللي: الشارع مكتظ بالسيارات، وما من هواء منعش في الجوار وما عاد العشب ينمو هناك، وليس بالإمكان زراعة ولا حتى جزرة واحدة في الساحة الخلفية، وكان عليهم إيجاد قانون إزاء شقق الينابات. أنتنكرين شجرتي الدر الجميلتين هناك عندما قمت أنا وبيف بنصب أرجوحة بينهما؟

ليندا: نعم وكأنا على بُعد مليون ميل من المدينة.

ويللي: كان عليهم اعتقال البناء لقطع هاتين الشجرتين لأنه أكرم في حق الحي (بضيغ) إنني أفكر بتلك الأيام أكثر فأكثر يا ليندا، ففي مثل هذا الوقت من السنة كان ينمو الليلك والويستاريا، وبعد ذلك كانت

كان ينبعث من هذه الغرفة! تظهر البوكرند والأزهار، أي عطر

ليندا: حسن، كان على الناس بعد كل هذا أن ينتقلوا إلى مكان آخر.

ويللي: لا يوجد العديد من الناس الآن.

ليندا: لا أعتقد أنه يوجد المزيد من الناس، أظن....

ويللي: يوجد الكثير من الناس وهذا ما يدمر هذا البلد، فقد أصبح تعداد السكان خارج السيطرة، والتنافس أصبح على أشده. هل تشمين الرائحة الكريهة التي تنبعث من تلك الشقة! والأخرى من الجانب الآخر.

كيف يمكنهم طبخ الجبنة؟

(عند حديث ويللي الأخير، ينهض بيف وهابي من سريرهما ويستمعان)

ليندا: انزل. حاول ذلك وكن هادئاً.

ويللي: (مستديراً نحو ليندا كما لو كان مذنباً) أنت منزعجة مني؟ أليس كذلك يا حبيبتي؟

بيف: ما الأمر؟

هابي: أصغ!

ليندا: لديك عمل كثير عليك الاهتمام به.

ويللي: أنت سنذ داعم لي يا ليندا.

ليندا: فقط حاول أن تهدأ يا عزيزي، فأنت تهول الأمور.

ويللي: لن أتشاجر معه ثانية، فإن أراد أن يعود إلى تكساس فليفعل.

ليندا: سيرعرف طريقه.

ويللي: بالتأكيد، فبعض الرجال لا يبدوون حتى يصبحوا في عمر متأخر من حياتهم كنوماس أديسون كما أظن، أو ب. إف. غودريش كان أحدهما أصماً (يتجه نحو مدخل غرفة النوم) سارا هن على بيف.

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