

**A Valuable Book but Need More Efforts for Readers**  
**Book Review: *Translating as a Purposeful***  
***Activity---Functionalist Approaches Explained* [1997]**  
**Christiane Nord (Author)**

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## 1. Introduction

German School of functionalist translation has always occupied a high position in the field of translation theory. Since the 1970s, functionalist theory has made tremendous progress, but since most of the works are written in German, many views and ideas are not well known in the world. Recognizing the difference in language, which greatly hindered academic communication, Christiane Nord translated her German work *Text Analysis in Translation Theory, Methodology, and Didactic Application of a Model for Translation-Oriented Text Analysis* into English and published it in 1988. This book subsequently caused a huge response in the translation field, and she then directly wrote *Translating as a Purposeful Activity-Functionalist Approaches Explained* in English, which was published by St. Jerome Publishing in 1997. St. Jerome Publishing enjoys a high reputation in the translation field, since its establishment in 1995, it has been committed to publishing journals in the field of translation research (such as *The Translator* and *Interpreter and Translator Trainer*), academic works, textbooks, dictionaries, etc. Its published content and quality are widely praised by translation researchers in various countries. A book can be published by such a publishing house, its influence is obvious.

Christiane Nord was born in 1943 and graduated from Heidelberg University in 1967, majoring in Spanish and English. In 1983, she received her doctorate in romantic literature from Heidelberg University. In 1993, she was awarded the Certificate of Applied Translation Studies and Translation Teaching by the University of Vienna. Meanwhile, she has taught in many universities. From 1996 to 1998, she served as the director of the School of Translation and Professional Exchange at the University of Applied Sciences, Magdeburg, Germany. From 1998 to 2000, she served as vice president. Nord is a translator, a teacher and a translation researcher. She has published about 80 papers and Monographs on translation teaching and research, which mainly involve text analysis, translator training, translation function categories, etc.

This book makes a comprehensive introduction about the functionalist approaches with a large number of examples, explains the translation theory and the relevant terms, and also clarifies the author's own perspective on functionalism. The book first reviews the background of functionalism and its development process, such as: Katharina Reiss and functionalist translation criticism, Hans J. Vermeer's Skopostheorie and its extensions, Justa Holz-Manttari's theory of translation action. Then it describes the main points of this translation theory and its role in the training of interpreters, in the end, the application of functionalist approaches in literary translation, interpretation was discussed. Moreover, Nord made a response to the criticism of functionalist, especially skopos theory.

The theories of the functionalist listed in the book play an important theoretical guiding role in the future and the current translation studies. Zhang Meifang (2003), a professor in the English Department of the School of Foreign Languages at Sun Yat-sen University, believes that this book has high reference and learning value, but some theories in the book still have deficiencies. Regarding Skopostheorie, she believes that the main point is "the purpose of translation determines the translation process", or "the end justifies the means", but "purpose" does not give a clear scope.

Although Nord has proposed a function plus loyalty model to solve this problem, this model can be applied when the translation and the original text have the same purpose; but if the two are not the same, Nord does not give a clear answer to this. At this time, we don't know whether the translator should be loyal to the originator of the translation activity, or loyal to the original author or reader.

For me, this book has a high reading value, but it also needs readers to read repeatedly to fully grasp. On the one hand, it gives me a general understanding of functionalism, and at the same time, it also broadens my horizons, which makes me know that the functionalism can also be used in the training of translators or interpreters and the practice of literary translation. What impresses me most in this book is Nord's writing attitude. As a world-famous translation theorist, she still takes a positive and open attitude towards the different views of other scholars. In the face of criticism of functionalism, she still maintains a humble attitude and responds to these one by one. On the other hand, I also have some puzzle about this book. Due to my limited knowledge, the description of the theoretical part in the book is too professional for me to fully understand, meanwhile, the use of a large number of terms in the book also caused obstacles to my understanding. As Nord says "Functionalism means focusing on the function or functions of texts and translations." As Prof Zhang said that Nord's function plus loyalty model may be too idealistic, which does not give detailed and comprehensive translation guidance.

Through the analysis and a large number of examples used in the book, the development of functionalist translation theory has a clear framework. The representatives of functionalist and their theories are as follows.

## **2 Representatives and Main Theories of Functionalist Approaches**

### **2.1 Katharina Reiss and the Functional Category of Translation Criticism**

As early as 1971 Katharina Reiss introduced a functional category into her "objective approach to translation criticism". Although still firmly within equivalence-based theory, her book *Possibilities and Limits of Translation Criticism* may be regarded as the starting point for the scholarly analysis of translation in Germany. Taking equivalence as her basis, Reiss develops a model of translation criticism based on the functional relationship between source and target text. According to Reiss, the ideal translation would be one "in which the aim in the TL is equivalence as regards the conceptual content, linguistic form and communicative function of a SL text" (1977, translation in 1989: 112). She refers to this kind of translation as "integral communicative performance" (1989:114).

For teaching purposes, Reiss proposed a translation-oriented Text Typology theory to help translators clarify the appropriate degree of equivalence required for specific translation purposes. She distinguished two types of classification: one is the text type, which is classified according to the communicative function; the other is the text genre or text sort, which is conventionally classified according to language characteristics or conventions. In her opinion, each type may include many different types, but one type may not only involve one text type.

## **2.2 Hans J. Vermeer: Skopostheorie and Beyond**

Hans J. Vermeer has gone much further in trying to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Having been trained as an interpreter, he took up general linguistics then translation studies. His desire to break with linguistic translation theory developed from work published in 1976 and became very clear in his “Framework for a General Translation Theory” of 1978. Vermeer states his general position as following: Linguistics alone won’t help us. First, because translating is not merely and not even primarily a linguistic process. Secondly, because linguistics has not yet formulated the right questions to tackle our problems.

Vermeer considers translation to be a type of transfer where communicative verbal and non-verbal signs are transferred from one language into another. Translation is also a type of human action. In accordance with action theory, Vermeer defines human action as intentional, purposeful behavior that takes place in a given situation; it is part of the situation at the same time as it modifies the situation. Further, since situations are embedded in cultures, any evaluation of a particular situation, of its verbalized and non-verbalized elements, depends on the status it has in a particular cultural system.

Skopostheorie holds that the translation purpose determines the translation process. The term “Skopos” usually refers to the purposes of the target text, except the term “Skopos”, Vermeer also uses the other terms, such as: aim, purpose, intention and function. While in Nord’s opinion, intention is from the perspective of the senders, while function refers to text function, which is determined by the expectations, needs, existing knowledge and environmental conditions of the receivers. Nord also points out that there are two limitations of Skopostheorie: one is about the cultural specificity of the translation process, and the other is the connection between the translator and the original author. But there is no definite limit to the purpose. Some critics had criticized the functionalist approaches to give translators so much freedom, that they can modify the original text according to customer requirements easily, and in response to this view, Nord proposes function plus loyalty.

## **2.3 Christiane Nord and Function plus Loyalty**

In 1960s, it was usually the source text or some of its features that were declared to be responsible for the selection in translation strategy. In this situation Skopostheorie had incomparable advantages, which seemed to be exactly the translation model that was needed because of its pragmatic, culture-oriented, consistent, practical, normative and comprehensive. But like other concepts, the Skopostheorie is not perfect, there are two limitations to the Skopos model. One concerns the cultural-specificity of translational models; the other is the relationship between the translator and the source-text author. Although Vermeer allows for the relationship of “intertextual coherence” or fidelity to hold between the source and target texts, the demand of fidelity is subordinate to the Skopos rule.

Nord points out that translators must take readers’ different expectations into account. This does not mean that translation should always follow the expectations of the readers, but the

translator has the moral responsibility not to deceive the reader. In order to further improve the Skopostheorie, Nord proposed function plus loyalty model. She says “‘loyalty’ this responsibility translators have toward their partners in translational interaction. Loyalty commits the translator bilaterally to the source and target sides. It must not be mixed up with fidelity or faithfulness, concepts that usually refer to a relationship between the source and target texts. Loyalty is an interpersonal category referring to a social relationship between people.”

In introducing the loyalty principle into functionalist model, Nord would also hope to solve the problem in radical functionalism. This concerns the relationship between the source text author and the translator. Since authors are rarely experts in translation, they are likely to insist on a faithful rendering of the source text’s surface structure. Only if they trust the translator’s loyalty will they consent any changes or adaptations needed to make the translation work in the target culture. And this confidence would again strengthen the translator’s social prestige as a responsible and trustworthy partner.

Therefore, the loyalty principle adds two important qualities to the functional approach. Since it obliges the translator to take account of the difference between cultural specific concepts of translation prevailing in the two cultures involved in the translation process, it turns Skopostheorie into an anti-universalist model, and since it induces the translator to respect the sender’s individual communicative intentions, as far as they can be elicited, it reduces the prescriptiveness of ‘radical’ functionalism.

#### **2.4 Justa Holz-Manttari and the Theory of Translational Action**

In the functionalist, there is another theory, which puts the perspective beyond the text study, but based on the principles of action theory, Justa Holz-Manttari proposed “translational action”, which first presented in 1981 and published in more elaborate form in 1984, she even avoid using the term “translation” in the strict sense. This enables her to move away from the traditional concepts and expectations connected with the word. Her theory is designed to cover all forms of intercultural transfer, including those which do not involve any source or target texts.

Holz-Manttari places special emphasis on the actional aspects of the translation process, analyzing the roles of the participants (initiator, translator, user, message receiver) and the situational conditions (time, place, medium) in which their activities take place. One of her prime concerns is the status of translators in a world characterized by the division of labor. Her concepts of vocational training emphasize the role of translators as experts in their field.

### **3 The Application of Functionalism**

Through the previous chapters of this book, I have a roughly outline of the functionalism. There is no doubt that this part of the content has a high reading value, as for me, the more significant part of this book is in Chapter Four and Five about the description of functionalism in translator training and literary translation. In my opinion, Nord’s purpose of writing this book is not just to summarize functionalism, but to introduce people to the application of functionalism and

change people's inherent concept of functionalism.

### **3.1 Functionalism in Translator Training**

Nord combined with her own experience in translation training and used a large number of texts to explain how functionalism is applied in the training of translator. She says that the functionalist approaches have been developed with an orientation toward translator training, and this is still one of the main fields in which they are most useful. In Chapter Four, she explains what communicative functions is and how they can be identified in a text; how translations can be classified according to the functions they are intended to carry out, and the role of norms and conventions in functional translation was discussed. Meanwhile, she also showed us how the acquisition of translational competence can be guided by means of appropriate translation briefs, source-text analysis and a systematic approach to translation problems.

In German translation studies, the term Translation was coined by the Leipzig translation scholar Otto Kade in 1968 and has come to be widely used as a generic term covering both written and oral translation. This usage reflects the idea that translating and interpreting can be regarded as twins, as two varieties of the same intercultural communicative interaction based on a source text. So in Chapter Six Nord briefly discussed the role interpreting plays in Skopostheorie, particularly with respect to the first-interpreting-then-translating approach in translator training. Then she gave a short overview of Franz Pochhacker's attempt to integrate simultaneous interpretation into the general framework of translational action.

### **3.2 Functionalism in Literary Translation**

Can functionalism not be applied to literary translation? Nord doesn't think so, in Chapter Five, she explains that in literary translation, the translator is expected to transfer not only the message of the source text but also the specific way the message is expressed in the source language. This would ideally establish equivalence between source and target text with regard to both text function and text effect. An ideal translation would then have the same function and effect as the source text. Therefore, at the beginning of this chapter, she analyzes the actional aspects of intracultural literary communication, trying to identify the features that distinguish literary from non-literary communication. Then she makes a discussion about the Skopos or assignment of literary translation and the role of equivalence in this context.

In Nord's view, the stylistic and thematic features of the literary text are not marked as literary as such; they are interpreted as being literary on the basis of particular culture-specific signals. For this purpose, the receiver draws on individual culture-specific experience gained from the previous reading of literary texts. Under different situational conditions, the same thematic and stylistic features might be interpreted as non-literary. Consequently, the specific effect of a literary text depends on both cultural and individual factors.

Based on the analysis, the crucial points of cross-cultural literary communication are described as follows: (a) the relation between the sender's intention and the text, (b) the relation between the

sender's intention and the receiver's expectation, (c) the relation between referent and receiver, and (d) the relation between the receiver and the text. Therefore, if the translator is to succeed in establishing equivalence between the source and target text, there are a number of basic requirements that must be fulfilled: interpretation, text function, cultural distance and text effect. In order to achieve these goals, Nord gives some suggestions for a purpose-oriented approach to literary translation.

(1) The translator interprets the source text not only with regard to the sender's intention but also with regard to its compatibility with the target situation.

(2) The target text should be composed in such a way that it fulfils functions in the target situation that are compatible with the sender's intention.

(3) The text world of the translation should be selected according to the intended target-text function.

(4) The code elements should be selected in such a way that the target-text effect corresponds to the intended target-text functions.

After that, from the five aspects of translation type, cultural distance, form and effect, fictional characters and fictional dialogues, Nord takes a few examples from *Alice in Wonderland* and its translations to show what the Skopos requirements mean for the concrete translation process. There is no doubt that this chapter has greatly broadened my horizon, logically clear reasoning and the analysis of specific cases, all of which show Nord's great confidence in the applicability of functionalism in literary translation.

#### 4. Conclusion

All of the above contents show the reading value of this book. A logical and clear narrative framework, step-by-step analysis and derivation, and abundant cases analysis will help readers have a general understanding of functionalism. At the same time, in Chapter Seven of this book, Nord also modestly accepted a lot of criticism on functionalism. She summarized and classified these criticism, integrated them into ten main questions, and combined with the research results of others to answer them in detail. Christiane Nord, as the leader of translation studies, still remains the modest and cautious attitude, which is admirable.

However, to be honest, I think readers also need to make a great effort to fully understand the contents of this book, because the description of the relevant concept in the book is professional, which requires readers to have certain basic knowledge; the analysis in the book is logical, which requires readers to have the ability of logical thinking; as the author is German, most of the translation examples in the book are English to German, French or Spanish. If readers can master a second foreign language, it will be more conducive to the understanding of the content.

Due to my limited knowledge, I don't think this book is perfect though it is a great one. As I said before, its high professionalism makes it not very friendly to the general readers. Meanwhile, a large number of terms used in the book will also cause obstacles in understanding. And since the translation theory also needs to be further developed and perfected, it is not difficult for us to find

that Nord sometimes fails to give a clear definition in the book. The last but not the least, Nord's function plus loyalty model may be too idealistic, which does not give detailed and comprehensive translation guidance.

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