Business Translation Ethics from the Angle of *Skopos* Theory

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Abstract

Translation is known to significantly contribute to business success, particularly in today's international business context. Many business translation works are produced to achieve target-side purposes, as opposed to the equivalence between a source text (ST) and a target text (TT). Translation guided by the TT's intended functions is claimed to fall under Vermeer's (1978) *skopos* theory that has been attracting active interest from scholars in translation studies. However, with great priority being assigned to the TT's determined purposes, many questions whether a TT that is not faithful to the ST should be deemed ethical. In the literature, business translation ethics under the *skopos* theory does not seem to abound. This paper therefore discusses this topic, commencing with examining business translation prior to associating it with the *skopos* theory. Then it explores translation ethics and proposes three ethical concerns to be pondered for business translation from the angle of *skopos* theory. These are functionality, loyalty and accountability.

Keywords: business translation, business translation ethics, *skopos* theory, translation ethics

In the new era of digital globalization, a great number of businesses have become increasingly global or at least multinational. Business internalization appears to be a corporate growth strategy for enhancing business competitiveness and establishing new business networks. With more international business interactions and undertakings being entailed, language can be a formidable challenge. Translation is thus considered to be an important tool for exchanging business information and mitigating language barriers among those using different mother tongues. It is claimed that correct and effective translation can yield business success whereas an incorrect one may produce the opposite.

Business texts are claimed to convey meanings and aim at communicative purposes (Ellis & Johnson, 2003). The translation of the texts

then appears to be meaning-based translation. Through the meaning-based translation, Larson (1998) posits, the meanings from an ST are kept although expressed in the different form of a TT. However, this can be rather generalized. Given different communicative purposes for using the TT, the extent to which the ST' meanings are to be kept can arguably be varied. The translation determined by the target-side purpose falls under the *skopos* theory proposed by Vermeer (1978). Zhang (2016) argues that this theory practically guides business translation. Zhong (2020) likewise states that "*Skopos theory is particularly suitable for business translation because it inherently prioritizes business intentions and objectives over linguistic equivalence.*" (p.29).

However, as the *skopos* theory posits that one particular ST can be translated differently dependent upon differently determined purposes (Reiss & Vermeer, 2014), which implies that business translation adhering to the theory can go beyond equivalence unless the equivalence is the very purpose. With a target-side purpose being preferred over an ST's meaning maintenance, the traditional translation ethics, in which fidelity or faithfulness to the ST has long been reinforced (van Wyke, 2010), appears to be challenged.

This paper aims to discuss business translation ethics from the perspective of the *skopos* theory. It will begin with examining the features of business texts and then the translation of the texts, as shown in the following section.

Business Translation

Business is a generic term encompassing a wide range of business fields, such as marketing, accounting, sales, finance, management and economics. This, therefore, makes business texts varied and distinctive pursuant to their respective fields. However, irrespective of the fields, all business texts are claimed to essentially possess both language clarity and accuracy, expressing explicit communication objectives (Guffey & Seefer, 2010). Gao (2018) notes that effective communication is a requisite for the business world as it can render either business successes or even business failures.

Nowadays, as business is becoming more global, the importance of business translation seems much more enhanced. This translation type is perceived to be a specialised translation (Dam & Koskinen, 2016), involving terminology and certain stylistic and syntactic features (Rogers, 2015). As a consequence of this, Chiper (2002) claims, business translators should be either language graduates who consistently develop their business knowledge, business terminology and formulaic business expressions, or professionals with sufficient foreign language proficiency. Neubert (2000) echoes this view, adding that the translators of specialised texts also need to master rules of language in terms of genre or text type. Biel and Sosoni (2017) mention the genre issue as follows:

> *Business discourse covers a broad variety of genres, from highly controlled and regulated genres, such as annual reports, investor prospectuses, financial statements and articles of association, to ritualised and relatively fixed genres, such as application letters, earnings forecasts, corporate social responsibility reporting, performance appraisals, mission statements and press releases, and, finally, to dynamic, much less predictable and creative genres, such as CEOs' speeches, advertisements and corporate homepages.* (p. 352)

These scholars' perspectives suggest the desired attributes of the business translators are possessing language proficiency, business language proficiency and sufficient business knowledge and discourse. In addition to these, another attribute considered to be significant for business translators lies in their ethical behavior and stance. As business translation involves several agents, the decisions on what a business TT should be thus require not only the translators' criticality but also their adopted ethical stance. The discussion on the consideration of business translation ethics will be in the last section of this paper.

Gao (2018) argues that for business translation, a TT should preserve an ST's register: maintaining the use of formal language and business terminology. Gao maintains that the TT needs to be sufficiently rigorous in terms of language fluency, consistency and conciseness. The conciseness, Gao contends, is highly significant as time is a treasure in the business arena and should be economised and wisely spent. Dickins et al. (2016), write that most business texts use informative language conveying intended messages from a communication sender. Biel and Sosoni (2017) likewise point out the informative language identified in business texts and add that sometimes they can be the operative language involving certain persuasion. Notably, Hatim and Mason (1990) argue that a particular text can also involve divergent types of language used, which they refer to as 'hybridization', and this is what translators should be aware of. Given this, it can be concluded that business texts should not be generalized as a specific text type. Various language types are invited and considered part of business texts providing that they are intended for business purposes. Nevertheless, regardless of the language types displayed, Biel and Sosoni (2017) hold that when translating such business texts, the meanings as well as explicit or implied intentions in an ST should be extracted and transferred to a TT. This sentiment indicates that business translation is situated under meaning-based translation.

However, Zhang (2016) asserts that the translation of business texts cannot overlook relevant contextual factors, such as the culture of intended readers and the function of a TT commissioned by clients. Several scholars take similar views. For example, Chidlow et al. (2014), advocate taking into account

a process of intercultural interaction in business translation. Altarabin (2021) underlines the function that a translated business text performs. Such a function, Chiper (2002) argues, is essential given that business appears to privilege time and costs. All of their views clearly indicate the pillars of the *skopos* theory, which will be further described in the following section.

Skopos **Theory**

According to Munday (2016), *skopos* theory is a target-text oriented theory propounded in the 1970s by the German professor, Hans J. Vermeer (1930-2010). '*Skopos*', Munday says, is the Greek word for 'purpose', 'aim', 'goal' or 'intended function'. Vermeer (2012) postulates that:

> *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*. (p. 198)

Vermeer (2012) notes that this theory has no prescribed set of rules and an ST should be dethroned whereas a TT's functionality is prioritized. The basic tenet of this theory, Chesterman (2017) explains, is that all translation works possess their own *skopos* either explicitly or implicitly and the translation works need to be guided by them. For the tacit *skopos*, Gentzler (2001) contends, professional and experienced translators will be able to infer it. Therefore, given different purposes, a particular ST can be translated in different ways (van Wyke, 2010). Nord (2010, p. 122) claims that "*Vermeer regards a text as an offer of information directed at an addressee who then selects those items they want and/or are able to use in their own culture-specific situation*". Nord's view suggests that meanings in ST are not to be rendered but selected.

Hatim (2009, p. 40) mentions two assumptions underlying the theory: "*Skopos Rule 1: Interaction is determined by its purpose. Skopos Rule 2: Purpose varies according to the text receiver*". Hatim argues that translators' decisions on translation procedures and strategies are fashioned by textual and contextual factors. The contextual factors can be viewed in terms of cultural factors and social factors. This indicates that this theory understands translation as involving not only linguistic analysis but also a sociocultural process.

Regarding the cultural factors, the *skopos* theory posits that embedded in language is culture and, as translation is a process to do with the language, the culture is unavoidable, whether it exists tacitly or explicitly (Chesterman, 2017). Therefore, according to the theory, when translating the ST into the TT, the TT's culture has to be heeded to achieve the target-side purpose. The TT then reflects not only the clients' intended purposes but also the TT's cultural characteristics. Despite this, translators are still required to be experts in the two cultures so that

they will be able to negotiate the translation which indeed, as Pym (2017) claims, is an intercultural communication.

For the social factors, these usually concern such social actors as paying clients, editors, end-users and translators themselves (Pym, 2017). All of these actors play pivotal roles in determining translation purposes. That is to say, paying clients usually express their intended purposes in translation briefs, which are sometimes called 'commissions', 'instructions', or 'job descriptions'. According to Nord (2007), each translation brief consists of the following aspects: an intended text function, the addressees including senders and recipients, the time and place of text reception, a method or way of expressing texts and the reasons for writing an ST and of why it is being translated. The brief will help the translators make decisions on which information in the ST needs to be included, the extent to which it should be modified and the translation strategies to be employed. After translation works are produced, the editors will verify whether they serve the desired functions and suit the end-users' needs.

Nevertheless, despite the clients being the key factor, Pym (2017) argues that this does not mean the translators have to adopt a subservient role: completely following the clients' briefs. Rather, Pym maintains, the translators play a crucial part in contemplating the extent to which the given purposes should be fulfilled and negotiating the benefits of all concerned. If any misunderstandings caused by different translation concepts are anticipated, the translators will attempt to prevent them (Nord, 2010). It thus suggests the translators' criticality and mediating role in the translation process.

From all the assumptions above, two implications arise. First, the role of the translators appears more visible "*as they leave marks of the decisions they have made*" (van Wyke, 2010, p. 113). Second, a TT will be evaluated as being effective when it is functionally adequate (Munday, 2016) even though some important meanings intended by an ST's author are missed. A TT failing to meet a determined purpose can also be perceived to be a translation mistake (Nord, 1997). The *skopos* theory is thus considered to be a mild revolution in translation theory (Pym, 2017) where an orthodox view of equivalence is widely accepted as a translational goal (Chidlow et al., 2014).

Pym (2017) mentions a virtue of this theory, stating that "*It recognizes that the translator works in a professional situation, with complex obligations to people as well as to texts*" (p. 55). Pym's view indicates the reality of translation, particularly business translation, where many social actors are involved and their needs have to be compromised. Nord (2005) also highlights its place in translation practice nowadays where translations are required for multiple communicative functions. However, despite its practicality being raised, many scholars take issues with it. For example, Chesterman (2017) sees this theory as being idealistic, suitable only in optimal working conditions with

competent and experienced translators able to effectively make decisions on the given *skopos*. However, in actual situations, Chesterman contends, such conditions are rare. Newmark (1997, p. 77) raises issues on quality and accuracy, asserting that "*translation is a noble, truth-seeking activity, and that it should normally be accurate*". For Newmark, although meanings in an ST are to be interpreted and different translators may interpret them differently, the meanings as well as their implied or explicit functions to be constructed should be available there in the text, not from other sources. Newmark's notion on accuracy indicates his conviction of attempting to accomplish equivalence and, thereby, signifying the translation ethics of fidelity. The translation ethics under this theory appears to be an intense debate. The following section will discuss this moot point.

Translation Ethics under *Skopos* Theory

According to van Wyke (2010), ethics is claimed to contain a binary judgement: being either right or wrong. Translation ethics, he claims, "*necessarily addresses what is considered the morally correct manner in which one should practice the task of rewriting a text in another language*" (p. 53). Baker and Maier (2011, p. 4) argue that translation indeed is "*an activity that in itself is intrinsically ethical*". They maintain that:

> *The decisions made during the course of translating and interpreting can potentially have considerable impact on the survival of individuals and even whole communities; at the very least they can impact the quality of life of those who rely on the translator or interpreter to mediate for them, whether in business meetings or healthcare encounters, in daily interaction between host country officials and vulnerable migrants or in preparing instructions for the use of a food mixer*. (Baker & Maier, 2011, p. 4)

From their perception, translation can affect translators, others involved or even not involved and the society as a whole. Pym (2017) states that professional translators are assumed to be the mediators between two cultures. As cultural mediators, Pym contends, their role as ethical agents is to be emphasized. Because of these, ethical arguments in the realm of translation should not be downplayed or overlooked. Rather, they need to be in an inexorable process to help articulate an appropriate ethical stance that translators should adopt or maintain. Several scholars also concur that translation ethics needs more attention (e.g., Baker &Maier, 2011; Chesterman, 2017; van Wyke, 2010; Venuti, 2012). van Wyke (2010) claims that perhaps a convincing justification is the postmodern philosophy on 'deconstruction' introduced by Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). According to the deconstruction concept, van

Wyke says, the same text can be interpreted differently by different translators. Therefore, the traditional translation ethics on fidelity shown in striving to acquire the equivalence between an ST and a TT appears to be questioned.

Traditional translation ethics tend to be aligned with the concept of equivalence (Newmark, 1991), the one which is generally claimed as the goal of translation (Chidlow et al., 2014). Pym (2017, p. 6) defines equivalence as expressed in equal values: "*Equivalence does not say that languages are the same; it just says that values can be the same.*". For Pym, value can be in relation to form, function or anything in between. Sager (1997) states that such equivalence is assessed in terms of accuracy, fidelity and appropriateness. Baker and Maier (2011) argue that to obtain equivalence, translators need to be neutral and invisible. For Baker and Maier, the pursuits of fidelity, neutrality and invisibility are indeed processed in tandem. This view is in accordance with van Wyke (010) who mentions translators' fidelity and invisibility as traditional translation ethics.

However, given the postmodern deconstruction concept, as translators can construe a particular text differently their translation works can be varied. Because of this, their agency and subjectivity cannot be completely discarded and they themselves cannot be neutral. Moreover, many scholars have argued that such ethics should not fall only upon the area of sameness as translation itself is pertinent to other factors involved (e.g., Pym, 1997; Venuti, 2012; van Wyke, 2010). Therefore, questions on fidelity and invisibility have been posed along with a new lens to translation ethics arising. van Wyke (2010, p. 113) states that "*Being ethical does not involve simply declaring fidelity, but, instead, sorting through difficult decisions and taking responsibility for those taken*". The decisions critically made and the responsibility given to them, van Wyke contends, can be undertaken through acknowledging translators' visibility. That is to say, they need to realize that their self and subjectivity, such as those in terms of their worldviews, cultures, beliefs, perceptions and emotions, can shape their interpretation of an ST, and thereby a produced TT. However, merely such realization may not suffice. It appears that their reflections on the linguistic aspects and culture of the ST and the TT as well as their ability to mediate these should also be important. van Wyke's notion is echoed by Baker and Maier (2011) who endorse translators' accountability. Baker and Maier argue that translators should be responsible for their translation works, justify how and why the works have been translated in that way and reflect on how these can influence others' lives as well as the society. Their notion suggests that the translators' responsibility is twofold: individual and social.

In the sphere of the *skopos* theory, where the end justifies the means (Nord, 2007) and where an ST's meanings and culture are dethroned and therefore undervalued, translatorial actions appear to be deemed unethical. Nevertheless, Koskinen (2000, p. 21) claims that the theory goes beyond the

ethical notion of fidelity but falls under that of loyalty which "*builds on ideas of responsibility, visibility and trust*". It can be argued that these three ideas under the loyalty concept are interrelated. That is to say, under the theory, translators' individuality is argued to be emphasized, resulting in their visibility being bolstered. Making themselves visible can promote transparency and accordingly engender trust from all social actors involved. Nevertheless, although individuality and visibility are permitted, the translators' responsibility towards their individuality should also be shouldered. Without such responsibility, their visibility can be pointless and others' trust breached.

Nord (1997) similarly mentions the ethical concept of loyalty, stating that it should be emphasized alongside functionality, which is the core concept of this theory. Nord (1997) elucidates the term 'loyalty' as follows.

> *Loyalty commits the translator bilaterally to the source and the target sides. It must not be mixed up with fidelity or faithfulness, concepts that usually refer to a relationship holding between the source and target texts. Loyalty is an interpersonal category referring to a social relationship between people.* (p. 125)

Nord's (1997) view indicates that with the loyalty concept, the overriding concern should be on the relationship among the people involved, as opposed to the fidelity concept that tends to focus on the relationship between an ST and a TT. Moreover, Nord claims that a function of the TT should be compatible with the explicit or implied intention of the ST's author. However, Nord herself acknowledges that sometimes the implicit intention may be interpreted differently, with some of the interpretations probably countering the intention of the ST's author. Nord's notion indicates that although the function of the TT and that of the ST can be different, relevancy between the two functions, to some extent, is still needed. In the realm of business translation, there is a paucity of translation ethics being proposed and accordingly discussed. Based on the aforesaid discussion, the following section will suggest the aspects to be pondered in the context of business translation from the angle of the *skopos* theory.

Business Translation Ethics Under *Skopos* Theory

Business translation involves many social actors who may possess various demands but sometimes accommodating all of the demands cannot be feasible. Therefore, translators are to consider other relevant factors to weigh the advantages and disadvantages, select the demand(s) that should be prioritized and finally make appropriate decisions. Notably, even though all of these demands are concurrently satisfied, the relevant factors still need to be reflected alongside. Inevitably, one of the factors can be translation ethics. The aspects to

be pondered when tacking ethical issues then seem needed. Drawing upon pertinent literature, this paper suggests considering the following 3 ethical aspects: functionality, loyalty and accountability.

Functionality

An ethical concern seemingly prominent under the *skopos* theory concerns whether a produced TT is functionally adequate. As Munday (2016, p. 12) puts it, under this theory, "*knowing why an ST is to be translated and what the function of the TT will be is crucial for the translator*". This is also true in business translation where most translators need to translate in accordance with their clients' needs. Apart from the needs, Alwazna (2014) suggest taking into account the nature of the text to be translated as well as the type of audiences intended. For Alwazna, the clients' expectations, the types of texts and the types of audiences are crucial elements to examine as these are assumed to help translators follow translation ethics and a TT's functionality. Drawing on Alwazna's view, three examples will be given.

The first example is the translation of an instruction manual, which is a guide informing customers how to use a particular product. Providing that a translator's client needs a translation that gives accurate information to their customers, here equivalence can be the purpose. Concerning the text type, this manual is a piece of expository writing. The TT should then maintain this genre. The intended audiences are those buying the product and they need useful and precise information on how to use it. When the three aspects converge, the translation, according to Alwazna (2014), can be argued to be ethical and functional.

The second example is the translation of a corporate annual report. This report is a business document describing information on a company's activities and performances undertaken in the previous year, addressing the company's strengths and areas of improvement derived from an analysis of this information, delivering corporate news and informing of new policies, strategies and/or action plans to be implemented in the following year. A client commissions a TT that summarizes the information in an ST, claiming that his/her intended audiences prefer this. For the text type, as the ST and the TT are used for business purposes, both texts should contain business language features, such as formal language, business terminology and concise and precise language. In following the translation brief, considering the audience and elaborately using the text type, the produced TT can arguably be functional. However, despite some information being lost, the functionality should not be claimed as being unethical in as much as the meanings in the ST are not distorted but meticulously selected.

The last example is the translation of a brochure designed to have both versions of an ST and a TT. The translator's client demands the TT which is

more persuasive than the ST as the more intended audiences are those using the target language, as opposed to the source language. Because of this, although the ST itself is in the form of persuasive writing, the translator has to use translation strategies, such as adding more adjectives to the TT, to fortify its persuasiveness. For the intended audiences, the translator has to ensure that the added information can persuade them, does not undermine the ST authors' intention and does not jeopardize the audience's health or safety. When the ST genre is maintained, the TT meets the client's demand and no potential risk to the TT's readers is posed, the translatorial action should not be perceived as unethical.

Loyalty

As discussed elsewhere in this paper, according to Nord (2001), loyalty concerns the relationship among those involved in translation, such as clients, agencies, intended audience and translators themselves. Being loyal here does not mean rigidly adhering to and satisfying the clients' needs. As Nord (2001) puts it:

> *If the client asks for a translation that entails being disloyal to either the author or the target readership or both, the translator should argue this point with the client or perhaps even refuse to produce the translation.* (p. 200)

Nord's (2001) view on the translator's right of refusal suggests his/her power in the process of translation. However, the fact is that many business translators do not work as autonomous individuals. In other words, they usually work for a company with a team of specialists, such as editors and revisers. In such a context, power asymmetry exists. Most of the translators have to act in accordance with what is needed by power-holders, who are usually their agencies. As a consequence of this, they sometimes cannot make a decision on what they deem appropriate. The refusal can then signify not only disloyalty but also a mark of disrespect for their agencies. Moreover, in a translation service, it can be unethical to refuse to translate the clients' assigned work despite ample justifications being given. To provide a viable solution, this paper argues that prior to agreeing to make a translation, translators and their teams can request some time from clients to examine an ST beforehand so that ethical concerns can be diagnosed and planned to be avoided. Any identified concerns then will be discussed among those related, including the clients. With this, if refusal is necessary, it cannot be considered unethical as the work has not yet formally agreed by both parties. It should be noted that this has been practised by those in many translation agencies. Nevertheless, the counterfactual thoughts among the translators, their teams and their agencies can arise. From time to time, the

majority's opinions may contradict or even diminish the translators' own personal ethics shaped by their moral values stemming from their cultural and religious assumptions. In such a case, their professional ethics and personal ethics have to be scrutinized in order to strike a balance (Robinson, 2003). If the balance cannot be achieved or restored and the personal ethic outweighs the professional one, they can arguably refuse the translation work. This implies that loyalty also involves translators' self-loyalty. Given this, it can be argued that loyalty in business translation under the *skopos* theory concerns loyalty given to others involved, including themselves. And self-loyalty can also be prioritized for it is important for translators to respect themselves as being ethical and moral individuals.

Accountability

Baker and Maier (2011) note that 'accountability' has become a buzzword in all professions, including the translation profession. They clarify that accountable translators need to be responsible for their translation works, justify how and why the works have been translated and reflect on how these can influence others' lives as well as the society. 'Accountability', Baker and Maier (2011, p.3) maintain, is increasingly highlighted as a result of the visible role of translators being enhanced: "*Increased accountability has led to increased visibility, and hence greater pressure on the profession as a whole to demonstrate that it is cognizant of its impact on society*.". Interestingly, such responsibility is identified in the concept of accountability embracing social responsibility. Drugan and Tipton (2017) state that in translation studies, social responsibility concerns not only translation that is good to society but also how translation can promote "*better living together as an ethical goal*" (p.121) and the latter has increasingly been amplified. Therefore, in business translation, business translators should adhere to this accountability concept: being responsible for the translations they have produced, being able to justify why and how the works have been translated and reflecting on how their works cause harm to anyone, are good to others and can potentially support the lives of others in society.

It should be noted that all of the three aspects discussed thus far should be critically reflected upon. Critical reflection can be equated with critical thinking (Brookfield, 2012). Therefore, to think critically about functionality, loyalty and accountability can mean to explain, reason, analyze, infer and evaluate them with open-mindedness and fair-mindedness. Given that critical thinking "*facilitates good judgment because it relies upon criteria, is self-correcting and is sensitive to context*" (Lipman, 1988, p. 39), it can be argued that with critical reflection, an appropriate ethical decision in business translation, to some degree, can be made**.**

Conclusion

The digital globalization era appears to have enhanced economic globalization. Thus, more importance has been attached to business translation as a tool to drive international business undertakings. It can be argued that such a translation type has largely been guided by the *skopos* theory, the one in which a target-side purpose is highlighted, as opposed to the original purpose of an ST's author. It then seems the traditional translation ethics that involve fidelity in maintaining the ST's meaning and the ST's author purposes are eroded. However, under the *skopos* theory, fidelity is not key as loyalty is claimed to be an ethical stance. This paper suggests critically reflecting upon the three aspects to make a business translation which is TT *skopos*-led ethical. These aspects are functionality, loyalty and accountability. As can be seen, the three aspects have been demonstrated as a guide, instead of a 'how-to step'. This can be ascribed to the fact that each business translation context contains a unique set of challenges and thereby is different. Simply providing generalized answers or paths to strictly follow may not be practical. Despite some suggestions being offered, this paper argues that ethical areas in business translation need to be further investigated. As business translation under the *skopos* theory involves social, cultural and situational factors, it is considered to be intrinsically ethical in nature. Because of this, more reflections are invited and healthy debates should be ignited.

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