On Nord's text analysis

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Christiane Nord. **Text Analysis in Translation. Theory, Method, and Didactic Application of a Model for Translation-Oriented Text Analysis.**Translated from the German by Christiane Nord and Penelope Sparrow. Amsterdam/Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1991. 250 pp. ISBN: 90-5183-311-3.

You've been translating for years, you arrive in class armed with examples, experience, communicative methods, didactics and dialectics, and soon your students are floundering in a sea of disparate problems, competences and skills. Some kind of life raft is needed, for both teachers and students.

Christiane Nord's model of translation-oriented text analysis, translated and adapted from her *Textanalyse und Übersetzen* of 1988, is a very useful raft in such situations. Designed for application to all text types and language pairs, Nord's approach aims to provide "criteria for the classification of texts for translation classes, and some guidelines for assessing the quality of the translation" (2). It has numerous clear examples, some very complete box-and-arrow diagrams, and coffins around the key statements that students tend to underline anyway. It should be of extreme interest to anyone seeking a solid basis for the training of translators.

The book has five sections. Part one outlines a series of theoretical principles relating source-text analysis to German Skopostheorie. Part two describes the role of source text analysis. Part three then runs through the extratextual and intratextual factors involved in the analysis. Part four discusses the didactic applications of the model. Part five applies the model to an analysis of three texts and their translations. The approach is nothing if not systematic.

Nord's adherence to what German knows as Skopostheorie means she ranks target-text purpose (the "skopos") above all other determinants on a translation. For Nord, the skopos is "a more or less explicit description of the prospective target situation" (8). It is thus to be derived from the instructions given by the "initiator," the person for whom the translator is working (not to be confused with authors or readers, although authors and readers may become initiators). The skopos is in a sense the pragmatic content of the initiator's instructions. As such, Nord's use of the term differs from previous usages in Vermeer, for whom the translator fixes the skopos on the basis of the initiator's instructions. Nord does not accord the translator the freedom to decide such things alone. For her, the skopos remains "subject to the initiator's decision and not to the discretion of the translator" (9). Although no reasons are given for this variant on other versions of Skopostheorie, one suspects that the relatively subordinate position of Nord's translator is due to the classroom situation for which she is writing. Perhaps her translator is ultimately a student.

At this point Nord negotiates at least one theoretical problem. If the main factor determining a translation is the target-text function as fixed by the initiator, why should any translator engage in extensive source-text analysis? Surely it would be enough to analyze the prospective target-text function and then take whatever elements are required from the source text. Indeed, if the two texts are to have different functions anyway (Nord argues that equivalence or functional invariance is merely an exceptional case), why venture into the previous function of the source text at all? This argument is not entirely perverse for those of us who have had to translate texts that are so badly written as to be inadequate even to their ascribed source-culture functions. And yet Nord, here differing from Holz-Mänttäri, excludes free rewriting from the domain of translation (28), without asking if it is something we should nevertheless be teaching. Although Nord justifies this exclusion on the basis of "the conventional concept of translation that I have grown up with"

(28), her position is also strategically necessary for a source-text analysis aspiring to "provide a reliable foundation for each and every decision which the translator has to make in a particular translation process" (1). Yet even granting the exclusion, if the initiator's purpose is truly dominant, how can source-text analysis also be sufficiently dominant to make translation an entirely determinate process? An Aristotelian might accuse Nord of opting for both initial and final causation at the same time.

Nord's solution to this problem is to insist on a specifically "translation-oriented" mode of text analysis. When establishing the function of the source text, the translator "compares this with the (prospective) 'function-in-culture' of the target text required by the initiator, identifying and isolating those source-text elements which have to be preserved or adapted in translation" (21). The most concrete illustration of this method is a three-column table (143) in which the various text-analysis categories are applied to the source, the target, and the moment of transfer as a comparing of functions. By filling in the three columns the student should discover the changes to be made. All practical and theoretical problems are thus solved.

Or are they? Consider the effort required for anyone to work through Nord's categories. The model incorporates 17 levels or factors; her checklists present some 76 questions to be asked in order to produce a text profile, and all this should perhaps be done for at least two of the three columns. Nord cannot be accused of having left much out. The problem is rather that she has put everything in. As useful as 76 questions might be the first time around, students also have to be trained to work quickly. The model's main virtue is thus that it can eventually lead to some kind of global awareness that texts carry out functions.

Consider, too, the way the theoretically dominant role of the initiator's purpose gradually disappears as Nord advances into the practical aspects of source-text analysis. This shift first appears in the idealist postulate that there must be "compatibility between source-text intention and target-text functions if translation is to be possible at all" (29). We then discover that, given this compatibility, "the translator must not act contrary to the sender's intention" (48). And when analyzing the final examples of literary translation we find that "the translation skopos requires equivalence of effect" (202). All these statements go against the absolute primacy of initiators' purposes and the theoretically exceptional nature of equivalence. Further, they are all explicitly located as norms of "our culture" (29, 72), as "our culture-specific concept" (73), and even, lest anyone suspect this "our" is specifically German, "our 'average Western cultures'" (182). Within this frame, Nord's text analysis becomes a way of applying the prevailing norms. There is little question of translators changing these norms in the name of some higher or future rationality. As in Snell-Hornby's "integrated approach," Nord's final analyses turn out to be pedagogically normative, conveniently forgetting the initial theorizing about specific initiators and the exceptional status of functional invariance. She is a teacher after all.

Although the nature of translation norms is mostly intuited in this book, Nord's more recent work (1993) uses the case of translating titles in order to indicate how norms can be located, systematized, and integrated into her general approach. The analyses are solid and stimulating. In both books, however, the main hermeneutic component is a pronounced will to system. Nord sometimes seems afraid to recognize any indeterminism or subjectivity in translation. Indeed, the fact that individuals might actually interpret texts in individual ways is regarded as a difficulty to be averted: "The only way to overcome this problem is, in my opinion, first to control source-text reception by a strict model of analysis [...] and second, to control target-text production by stringent 'translating instructions' which clearly define the (prospective) function of the target text" (17). All this "control" should enable the translation class to produce anonymous technicians able to apply the same method to come up with the same or similar answers. Without such control, says Nord, the "function and effect of target-text structures will be purely accidental" (236). Heaven forbid!

Nord's theoretical insistence on the dominance of the skopos, although not carried through in practice, could yet be seen as a masterful way of keeping indeterminism at bay. If the teacher alone no longer has the authority to say how a text should be translated (since many target functions are possible), authority is displaced towards initiators, who must then be trained to specify exactly what kind of translation they require. Just as translators are accorded the relatively subordinate position of students, initiators virtually become teachers at large. And their ideally determining role in turn supports the authority of teachers in class, who can now assume or set their own explicit instructions (justified as norms of "our culture") in supposed imitation of generalized initiators. But can anyone prove that actual translation processes, like most translation instructions beyond the classroom situation, are not significantly indeterminate?

In this regard, some note should be made of a certain indeterminism underlying this book's status as a translation itself. Despite Nord's statement that "the translator [...] is a text producer in the target culture" (11), her own work on this translation has obviously been carried out in an intercultural position formed by collaboration. This interculturality is absent from Nord's theory but does enter her practice, particularly with respect to English renderings of the more technical German terms. Her use of "instructions" for "Übersetzungsauftrag" is better than "commission," which could suggest the translator receives a cut of the profits (not a bad idea). But the neologism "skopos" for the German-Greek "Skopos" is more uncertain, since Nord occasionally uses "scopos" (4) and the very misleading "scope" (72, 79, 197). Such variants constitute a general problem in the movement of Skopostheorie into English. Vermeer has elsewhere directly glossed a twentieth-century use of the English term "scope" as equivalent to his German "Skopos" (1992 II: 72) and Pöchhacker gives us the English "T&I" (for translation and interpreting) because he believes the German superordinate "Translation" is not covered by the English "translation" (1993: 88). German-speakers can do what they like with their own language. But as far as I'm concerned, "scope" is a synonym of "range," "translation" is easily made to include interpreting, Nord's use of "skopos" can in most cases adequately be covered by "purpose," and no effort should be spared to keep English terminology as accessible as possible. At the same time, however, considerable effort should be put into having more Skopostheorie available in English, since it has many valuable things to say.

As one of the few translations attempting this movement, Nord's book could not avoid a certain gap between one theoretical tradition and another. Particularly regrettable here is the lack of bridging references to discourse analysis as we find it in Delisle or, had time permitted, Hatim and Mason (or more generally to Halliday). More problematically, her repeated insistence on auctorial intentions ("we are mainly interested in the intention which the author is trying to realise", 15) fits in badly with the legacy of New Criticism, and even worse with deconstructive approaches to textuality, especially those recognizing Freudian subjectivity. Nord's simple acceptance of intention will seem rather naïve to many English-language readers. But it might nevertheless be adequate to the restricted concerns of certain translation classes.

There then remain a series of minor theoretical issues that Nord fails to address because of her focus on translator training. These are best formulated as three quick questions:

- Do the "skopos" principles apply to all translation by definition or to translation as it should be? Failure to address this question enables considerable sliding between descriptive and normative statements.

- If the skopos is truly dominant, should it not determine the very categories of each particular source-text analysis? This could provide an elegant way of reducing the effort put into analysis. But it would also mean that each skopos requires a different theory. To avoid this outcome Nord tries to base her analysis on "the categories by which we perceive the world" (42), which are somehow recruited in one page and summarized as "space," "time," "culture," and "text functions." Is Nord saying that cultures are not spatiotemporal, or that space and time are not perceived in culturally determined ways?

- How can Skopostheorie resolve ethical conflicts between the initiator's purpose and the translator's expertise? Nord tells us the translator remains "responsible" for work carried out according to someone else's criteria (9) and further posits that the translator's "loyalty" is to both senders and receivers (27). All these concepts fit together nicely for as long as the principle of compatibility reigns. But surely ethical principles are only required in situations of incompatibility, when translators have to decide one way or the other?

Perhaps these points would only worry someone with training in philosophy (?). They should not detract from the specific aims and purposes of most translation classes. Nor do they detract from the excellent practicality of Nord's general approach. In fact, avoidance of imponderables keeps this book healthily free of the arcane abstraction, gratuitous belligerence and paperback mysticism that occasionally spice certain other Skopostheorie writings.

Despite relatively slight problems in her theorizing, I have used and benefited from Nord's models and checklists in my own translator-training classes. They do not solve all the problems encountered in particular texts. But they do provide very valuable help for students struggling to grasp functionality, as well as a solid basis for oral discussion. As such, they wholly justify Nord's reputation as one of the few specialists who can really help us consolidate and refine our teaching practices.

References

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