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The Communicative Act of Literary Translation in the Post-structural Theories of Translation

الفعل التواصلي للترجمة الأدبية في النظريات ما بعد البنيوية للترجمة

L'acte communicatif de la traduction littéraire dans les théories post-structurelles de la traduction

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## **The Communicative Act of Literary Translation in the Post-structural Theories of Translation**

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### **L'acte communicatif de la traduction littéraire dans les théories post-structurelles de la traduction**

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#### **Introduction**

Translation is inherently a novel form of communication, born out of a pre-existing one (Hatim & Mason, 1994, p. 01). Consequently, these two acts intertwine into a compound entity through the message/text, assumed to remain unaltered until it reaches its final recipient. However, this idealistic view of translation is impeded by various variables that challenge the translator's endeavor to convey the message to the target receptor. Indeed, "translators are inevitably acting under the pressure of their social conditioning while at the same time trying to assist in the negotiation of meaning between the producer of the source text and the reader of the target-language text, both of whom exist within their own, different social frameworks" (Hatim & Mason, 1994, p. 01).

Throughout history, translation scholars and practitioners have been acutely aware of such variables. They have contended that achieving a complete correspondence of meaning between the source text and target text is an unattainable feat, particularly in literary texts where linguistic, cultural, and social conditioning disparities are most pronounced. This contention has, however, sparked considerable debate regarding the alternative relationship between the source text and target text, or more precisely, between the source text and the target receptor.

In this context, the present paper aims to explore how post-structuralist theories of translation, which emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, conceptualize the communicative act of literary translation. This conceptualization predominantly revolves around the duality of the source text – target reader, as well as the nature of the translator's task. To provide a foundation, we will first present an overview of the structuralist perspective on this duality.

## 1. The Unified Meaning in Literary Translation

In the initial half of the 20th century, amidst the ascendancy of structuralism, the communicative act of literary translation was focused on the source text, as being of an invariant nature. In his thesis titled "Contemporary Translation Theories," Edwin Gentzler pointed out that such a tendency was built upon the notion of "the unified meaning." For Richards, this unified meaning comes from a perfect understanding of the literary text, which can be reached through proper and thorough training of the translator. There is no room for disparities in the reading and interpretation of the text ; interpretation deficiencies are a mere product of mistakes that can be avoided with proper training (Gentzler, 1990, p. 23). The literary translator's activity, being the receptor of the source text, is not dynamic but rather mechanical. Any individual interference is to be suppressed so that the perfect understanding of the text, as intended by the author, can be achieved.

The source text-centeredness remained the mainstream ideal in the wake of the scientific linguistic theories that dominated until the end of the first half of the 20th century. These theories were mainly focused on translation being a special form of a communicative process that is based on recoding the message from the sender into the receiver code.

It is also worth mentioning that structuralist linguistic theories have adopted the formalist conceptualization of the aesthetic effect, being the result of the dominating poetic function, at the expense of the other communicative functions. A literary translation in this view is a purely linguistic activity that can be approached exclusively from a mechanical scientific perception, leading to the neglect of the individual and artistic aspects that are needed in dealing with such types of meanings, like connotations and symbols which are the product of the cultural environment. For Catford, for example, the treatment of such variables is a "matter of opinion" (Catford, 1978, p. 94).

With Eugene Nida's dynamic equivalence, the structuralist grip on translation theory has loosened up. The target reader's response here has become a center of interest. The translator has to consider all contextual variations (culture, age, gender, etc.) of the target readership to achieve the "naturalness of meaning" (Nida, 1964, p. 159), in other words, to adapt the message with its new context so that the meaning would not seem odd or even inscrutable. Nevertheless, Nida did not completely detach from the source text-centeredness. For him, the translator's task must be purely objective, or as he put it : "He must exert every effort to reduce to a minimum any intrusion of himself which is not in harmony with the intent of the original author and

message” (Nida, 1964, p 154). The previous statement clearly emphasizes the structuralist perception of the literary meaning being an exclusive result of the text/author intent, while the receptor/translator’s role is a passive one. For Nida, the translator has to be highly qualified so that he can reincarnate the author and preserve his intents, thoughts, and styles. This is, for Gentzler, impossible and unrealistic, especially with literary texts whose meanings do not exclusively emanate from the author’s intent but also from the dynamic interaction between the text and its readership (Gentzler, 1990).

## **2. Target-centeredness shift in Literary Translation Poststructuralist theories**

The seventies of the twentieth century witnessed the decline of structuralism in language studies, literature, and humanities in general. In translation, this was reflected in the fundamental changes in the methods and approaches of studies. The practice was no longer seen as a transfer of semantic and structural categories from one language to another, but it ceased being the exclusive source of meaning. The latter, however, is the product of a dynamic interaction between the text and its readership (Iser, 1972). This vision had a significant impact on the perception of the communicative act of literary translation : the message transferred by the translator is not a replication of the author’s intent but rather comes from the fusion between the translator’s and the text’s horizons of expectation. Translation from this perspective is a concretization of the text, with no legal rights on it, since there exist other potential concretizations governed by different contextual variables.

We can argue here that reader response theories have deeply contributed to the reshaping of translation approaches, and the emergence of what has been known then as the target-oriented and product-oriented theories, which prioritized the study of translation being a product and having its own function in the target language literary system. For André Lefevere, only translation, as a product having its purpose and function in the target culture and the literature, can unveil the true characteristics of the literary translation. (Lefevere, 1982, p. 04). Consequently, the translation communicative act, within this scope, is no longer founded on reaching equivalence between source and target message, but is built upon the principles of “acceptability” and “adequacy”.

### **2.1 Nord’s Function-oriented Model of Literary Translation**

In her book “Translating as a Purposeful Activity, Functionalist Approaches Explained”, Christiane Nord brought the functionalist model

to the realm of literary translation. Her work is deemed an extension of the Skopos theory as coined by the German scholar Hans Josef Vermeer. What distances such vision from the structuralist models is that any translation strategy is to be set based on the fact that “the prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose (Skopos) of the overall translational action” (Nord, 2018, p. 26). For Nord, the source-oriented model of equivalence is inadequate, considering that the translator acts as a receiver of the source text and the producer of the target one and is guided by their own assumptions, expectations, and previous knowledge of the target receiver. “These assumptions will obviously be different from those made by the original author because source-text addressees and target-text addressees belong to different cultures and language communities” (Nord, 2018, p. 33). According to Nord, such communicational constraints make it impossible for the translation to offer the same kind or level of information as the source text. In this regard, the source-oriented equivalence must stop being an ultimate normative of translation, even though it can be set as a possible aim to reach. For Nord, the ultimate purpose of translation is to reach adequacy, which she defines as : ”... the qualities of a target text with regard to the translation brief : the translation should be “adequate to” the requirements of the brief.” (Nord, 2018, p. 33). It is noteworthy here that Nord’s functional-oriented approach does not advocate for a specific trend or direction of translation. The literal translation is not to be discarded as long as it serves the purpose fixed beforehand. To provide a clearer picture, Nord sets several requirements in the literary translation communicative act to be fulfilled to reach equivalence ; she follows up on each requirement with a suggestion of equivalence that fits this type of text : a. Interpretation : The ideal situation of equivalence is when the translator’s interpretation is identical to the sender’s intention. Such a situation is not the most likely to occur in literary translation, considering that “The openness specific to literary texts... allows for various interpretations at once, making the aforementioned equivalence requirement not only impossible to meet but also rather undesirable” (Nord, 2018, p. 83). The purpose-oriented equivalence that Nord suggests here is that the interpretation of the text should balance between the sender’s intention and compatibility with the target context (time, place, motives, addressees, etc.). b. Text Function : The requirement here is to “verbalize the sender’s intention in such a way that the target text can achieve the same function in the target culture as that which the source text achieved in the source culture” (Nord, 2018, p. 83). According to Nord, such a requirement

is not easy to fulfill for different reasons ; for example, a text can perform different functions in different times of history. Another reason is when the source's function cannot be transferred in the target reader's context. The suggestion made by Nord in the context of the purpose-oriented equivalence is to list the different functions of the text, and then choose the ones that are compatible with the target readers' situation.

c. cultural Distance : The equivalence requirement to achieve here is that the text's world must be understood by the target receiver the same way it was understood by the source receiver. For Nord, such an ideal can become unrealistic in cases "when dealing with large language areas, like Spanish in Spain and Latin America, or when dealing with older texts, because we have to ask which of the various possible source-text receivers should be taken as a model" (Nord, 2018, p. 84). Nord's suggestion for purpose-oriented equivalence is that "The text world of the translation should be selected according to the intended target-text function" (Nord, 2018, p. 85).

d. Text Effect : The translation must reach the same effect on the target readers as the source text in its readers. Such a requirement, according to Nord, is very challenging to achieve if one is to adopt a faithful translation of the form and content, and that is for two main reasons ; the first is due to the existing disparities between aesthetic norms between literatures. The second reason is that the text effect is not invariant as it is not possible to measure it even within the same culture and era. For the text effect, the purpose-oriented translation as suggested by Nord is that "The code elements should be selected in such a way that the target-text effect corresponds to the intended target-text functions" (Nord, 2018, p. 86). For example, formal equivalence can be a perfect fit in cases in which readers are open to novel aesthetic experiences coming from foreign cultures.

Nord's purpose-oriented model for literary translation appears to be a tangible add-on to the Skopos theory as proposed by Vemeer. It attempts to turn the normative and mechanical source-oriented concept of equivalence into a more relative and dynamic one. Such relativity takes into account different communicative variables that were believed to be constant in the past source-oriented theories including the text function, the target receivers, the place and time of reception, and the intention of the translation. Most importantly, she even argues that the source text is not invariant since any translator approaches it from their point of view in time and space. It is time for her to dethrone the source text ; nevertheless, "dethroning does not imply murder or dumping ; it simply means that the source text, or more precisely,

its linguistic and stylistic features, is no longer regarded as the one and only yardstick for a translation” (Nord, 2018, p. 110).

## **2.2 Toury’s Target-Oriented Model of Literary Translation**

As Toury’s target-oriented model of literary translation gained prominence, so did the critique that sought to restore the centrality of the source text in translation studies. The emergence of a “resisting current” in the eighties of the twentieth century aimed to challenge the target-oriented approach and reassert the importance of the source text in the communicative act of literary translation. Toury’s model, born out of a meticulous quantitative study of translation tendencies across various languages, dismissed source-oriented models as virtual and normative. According to Toury, these models were detached from reality and incapable of accounting for translated texts accepted as literary in the target literary system (Toury, 1981). In response, he proposed a purely target-oriented approach that refrained from imposing conditions on the relation between source text (ST) and target text (TT) for equivalence to be achieved. Instead, Toury’s approach provided a theoretical framework for a descriptive study of translated texts in their environment, acknowledging the dynamic interplay within the target literary polysystem (Toury, 1981, p. 16). In the context of the present study, the concept of Norms as conceived by Toury presents us with other significant data concerning the perception of the communicative act of literary translation in the scope of his theoretical framework. Indeed, this concept represents a variable that has major influences on the literary translator’s decision-making. According to Toury, “Sociologists and psychologists have long regarded norms as the translation of general values or ideas shared by a community - as to what is right or wrong adequate and inadequate” (Toury, 2000, p. 199). For Toury, since translation is a social and cultural behavior by nature, only norms can shape its course. The initial norms are the first to be detected ; they are concerned with the mainstream general translation choices the translators make. They can either be influenced by the source text system norms, which will result in an adequate translation, or by the norms of the target system and the result will be an acceptable translation. Other norms are also listed by Toury, like preliminary norms and operational norms. It matters here to point out that Toury, somehow, rules out any subjective criteria in the decision-making of the translators. Their task appears to be mechanical and passive, following pre-set methodologies and strategies. Nevertheless, Toury affirms that non-normative behaviors of translators exist and are one of many factors that contribute to the changing of norms, or as he puts it : “It



is not as if all translators are passive in the face of these changes. Rather, many of them, through their very activity, help in shaping the process, do translation criticism, translation ideology (including the one emanating from contemporary academe, often in the guise of theory), and, of course, various norm-setting activities of institutes where, in many societies, translators are now being trained.” (Toury, 2000, p. 204-205) Besides, Toury argues that in most cases, what appear to be non-normative translation behaviors are actually a part of non-mainstream norms that attempt to compete with the mainstream ones and eventually take their place. Following the details mentioned above, both Nord and Toury’s target-oriented models regard literary translation as a purely communicative process that is subject to cultural and social constraints. More importantly, the target setting has the upper hand in shaping the course of such communication. Such a vision has sparked a great deal of contention and controversy on its ethicality because it tends to strip the source text of its legal rights and more importantly from its identity. The eighties of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a “resisting current” aiming to restore the source-text centeredness, and subsequently questioning the communicative nature of literary translation as coined by Toury.

### **3. Critique and the Resurgence of Source-Text Centeredness**

The eighties witnessed a resurgence of a ‘resisting current’ that aimed to challenge Toury’s target-oriented model and restore source-text centeredness in translation studies. This movement questioned the ethical implications of sidelining the source text, emphasizing its legal rights and identity.

The debate between target-oriented and source-text centered approaches highlights the ongoing contention within the field of translation studies. While Nord and Toury’s target-oriented models position literary translation as a communicative process subject to cultural and social constraints, the resurgence of source-text centeredness reflects a persistent tension surrounding the ethical dimensions of translation practices.

#### **3.1 The Ethical Turn : Berman’s Critique and Autonomy of the Translator**

In his book “L’épreuve de l’étranger ; Culture et traduction dans l’Allemagne romantique”, the French historian and theorist of translation Antoine Berman advocates for a more ethical approach to literary translation. According to him, the source text is a foreign entity that undergoes certain

trials reflected in the repression and even negation of its foreignness, as he describes it : “As if translation, far from being the trials of the Foreign, were rather its negation, its acclimation, its ‘naturalization.’ As if its most individual essence were radically repressed. Hence, the necessity for reflection on the properly ethical aim of the translating act (receiving the Foreign as Foreign)” (Berman, 2000, p. 285-286). Here, Berman refers to translation tendencies that eliminate the text’s local traits and adapt them to the receiving parameters and conditions of the target system, making the text appear as if the original author had written it in the target language. Such tendencies, in Berman’s view, establish another facet of cultural dominance and ethnocentric attitudes, especially prevalent in the Western world. Berman sees these trends as prioritizing the target reception factor over the text’s original identity. In contrast to Toury and Nord, who justify such trends by the communicative nature of translation, Berman believes that the translation of creative texts does not aim for communicative purposes. Instead, he argues that any work of art aims for openness to the world’s experience, even though it may contain informational elements. The literary translator who tailors their text according to a target audience is more likely to make concessions at the expense of the text. To support his argument, Berman draws an analogy between a translation that removes foreign traits from the text to make it transparent and accessible to its target audience and the popularization of scientific and technical writing to make it accessible to non-specialist readers. Regarding the literary translator’s task, Berman takes a relatively opposing stance to Toury’s. He views the translator as autonomous in their decision-making. Accordingly, he “does not agree that reality can be considered a set of deterministic laws and systems ruling over the individual ; the individual translator always makes choices. Berman gives individual translators the power to change languages, literature, and cultures” (Brownlie, 2003, p. 101). For that reason, the translator’s performance must be judged and cannot simply be regarded from a neutral position. However, Berman does not fully disagree with Toury concerning the existence of constraints and forces that impose limits on the translator’s creativity, which he refers to as the “translator’s horizon.” These constraints include language, literary culture, and historical parameters that influence the translator’s feelings, actions, and thoughts (Berman, 1995, p. 79). For Berman, the horizon impedes the translator from fully unleashing their creative potential and conflicts with their sense of truth. A competent translator is one whose creative and innovative instincts prevail against social and cultural norms.

### 3.2 Domestication vs. Foreignization : Venuti's Dichotomy

Berman's ethical turn in literary translation had a significant impact on other translation theorists, including Lawrence Venuti, who was keenly dedicated to dissecting the reception of translated texts in the American literary system. He explored how literary critics, reviewers, and publishers push towards more transparent and fluent tendencies in translating novels, plays, and poetry, giving the illusion that the source text is intended for the target readership (Venuti, 1995, p. 02). These tendencies, which he labels domestication, come into dichotomy with foreignization, which favors maintaining the source text's original cultural traits and identity. The pretext used to prioritize the communicative act of literary translation, according to Venuti, is not founded on solid ground. One important reason is that "The foreign text is rewritten in domestic dialects and discourses, registers and styles, resulting in textual effects that signify only in the history of the domestic language and culture" (Venuti, 2000, p. 471). In attempting to communicate the source text, the translator invents domestic equivalents of these effects and forms, but the result goes beyond mere communication to release target-oriented possibilities of meaning (Venuti, 2000, p. 471). Yet, Venuti does not negate the communicative act of literary translation ; he considers it, however, of secondary importance and partial. Translation communicates an interpretation of the source text, and this interpretation can also be shared by the source text readers. "The translation will then foster a common understanding with and of the foreign culture, an understanding that in part restores the historical context of the foreign text—although for domestic readers" (Venuti, 2000, p. 473). Regarding the literary translator's task, Venuti's view is quasi-identical to Berman's. In his famous book "Translator's Invisibility", he notes that prevailing domesticating norms in the Anglo-Saxon system have impacted the status of the translator, reducing them to mere tools to produce transparent and fluent copies of the original. Venuti attributes this to the primacy of authorship over translation, where translation is defined as a second-order representation. Only the foreign text can be original and authentic, true to the author's personality or intention, whereas the translation is derivative, potentially a false copy (Venuti, 1995, p. 07). Consequently, the translator becomes an invisible being whose task is limited to giving a false impression to maintain the author's presence in the target text, by conforming to the target norms.

## Conclusion

Post-structuralism has brought about drastic changes in the approach to literary translation practice. The emergence of functionalism has prioritized the communicative act, making the target receiver the focal point to which all linguistic and cultural variables surrounding the translation process are adapted. However, within the same post-structural context, Berman and Venuti have questioned the ethicality of functionalist methodologies aiming to dethrone the source text. They argue that the translation act should not prioritize communication ; instead, it should aim to preserve the source text's identity. Communication, in their view, merely serves to cover ethnocentric and acculturation tendencies that have dominated the history of translation, especially in the Western world, and have been projected in functional theories.

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## Abstract

The present paper aims to shed light on how major post-structural theories of translation perceive the nature of the communicative act of literary translation. It is worth noting that such novel views emerged as reactions to the structural theories that were exclusively centered on the source text. The study examines Christiane Nord's functionalism and Gideon Toury's target-oriented descriptive model as examples of this shift. It also discusses the ethical implications of prioritizing the communicative act in literary translation as challenged by Antoine Berman and Lawrence Venuti. The study found that both Toury's target-oriented model and Nord's functionalist approach focus on achieving effective communication in translation. While they both agree on the non-centrality of the source text, they differ in their conceptualization and the place of other communicative aspects. For Nord, the translator is an interpreter of meaning whose task is to adapt the source text to its intended function in the target language, whereas Toury is more concerned with the target literary and social norms and constraints that shape the translator's role. On the other hand, Berman and Venuti regard communication in literary translation as a guise for ethnocentric and acculturation propensities that have pervaded the history of translation, particularly in the Western world.

## Keywords

Literary Translation, Post-structuralism, Functional Theories of Translation, Target-oriented Theories, Ethical Turn

## مستخلص

تسلط الضوء في هذه الورقة على الفعل التواصلية للترجمة الأدبية من منظور نظريات ما بعد البنيوية. ويجدر بالذكر أنّ هذا المنظور جاء بمثابة ردة فعل على النظريات البنيوية للترجمة المرتكزة أساساً على النص المصدر. وتتناول هذه الدراسة النظرية الوظيفية للترجمة لكريستيان نورد بالإضافة إلى نموذج الترجمة الموجهة إلى النص الهدف لجدعون توري كمثالين عن هذه التحولات. كما تعالج الآثار الأخلاقية للمناهج الترجمة وحقيقة البعد التواصلية عند كل من أنطوان بيرمان ولورنس فينوتي

ومما توصلت إليه هذه الدراسة هو أنّ نموذجاً نورد وتوري يستهدفان الوصول إلى النجاعة التواصلية للنص في محيطه الجديد. ومن جانب آخر، في الوقت الذي يتفقان بخصوص لا مركزية النص الأصلي، فهما يختلفان حول مكانة ودور العناصر التواصلية الأخرى. بحيث أنّ نورد تعتدّ بالترجم بصفته مؤوّلاً للمعنى تتحدد مهمته في تكيف النص الأدبي مع وظيفته فاللغة الهدف. أما توري في يركز أكثر على المعايير والقيود الإجتماعية والأدبية التي تتحدّد على إثرها دور المترجم. وفي الجهة المقابلة، يرى كل من بيرمان و فينوتي أنّ الفعل التواصلية في الترجمة الأدبية ماهو إلا غطاءاً لزعزعات استلابية ومتمركزة عرقياً والتي انتشرت في تاريخ الترجمة عموماً والترجمة في العالم الغربي على وجه الخصوص

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كلمات مفتاحية

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الترجمة الأدبية، النظريات ما بعد البنيوية ، النظريات الوظيفية في الترجمة، النظريات الترجمة الموجهة إلى النص الهدف، التحول الأخلاقي

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**Résumé**

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Le présent article vise à mettre en lumière la façon dont les principales théories post-structurelles de la traduction perçoivent la nature de l'acte communicatif de la traduction littéraire. Il convient de noter que ces nouveaux points de vue sont apparus en réaction aux théories structurelles exclusivement centrées sur le texte source. L'étude examine le fonctionnalisme de Christiane Nord et le modèle descriptif orienté vers la cible de Gideon Toury comme exemples de ce changement. Elle examine également les implications éthiques de la priorité donnée à l'acte communicatif dans la traduction littéraire, telles qu'elles ont été remises en question par Antoine Berman et Lawrence Venuti. L'étude a montré que le modèle orienté vers la cible de Toury et l'approche fonctionnaliste de Nord se concentrent tous deux sur la réalisation d'une communication efficace en traduction. S'ils s'accordent tous deux sur le caractère non central du texte source, ils diffèrent dans leur conceptualisation et la place qu'ils accordent à d'autres aspects de la communication. Pour Nord, le traducteur est un interprète du sens dont la tâche est d'adapter le texte source à la fonction qu'il doit remplir dans la langue cible, tandis que Toury s'intéresse davantage aux normes et contraintes littéraires et sociales qui façonnent le rôle du traducteur. D'autre part, Berman et Venuti considèrent la communication dans la traduction littéraire comme une couverture pour les propensions ethnocentriques et d'acculturation qui ont imprégné l'histoire de la traduction, en particulier dans le monde occidental.

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**Mots-clés**

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Traduction Littéraire, Théories post-structurelles, Théories Fonctionnelles de la traduction, Théories de traduction orientées vers la cible, Tournant