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Nada Abdelbaset Abdou Mohamed Badawy¹, Bahaa Eddin. M. Mazid², and Tarek Abdelnaim Assem³

¹ MA candidate, Faculty of Languages, English Department, Sohag University

² Professor of Linguistics & Translation, Vice-Dean for Post-Graduate Studies and Head of the Department of English, Faculty of Languages, Sohag University

³ Associate professor of Linguistics, Department of French, Faculty of Languages, Sohag University

FUNCTIONALIST TRANSLATION OF MEDICAL TEXTS

Abstract

This study investigates the translation of medical texts through the lens of Skopos theory, which emphasizes the function and purpose of translation rather than strict linguistic equivalence. The data comprise medical reports from Sohag University Hospital and informational pamphlets collected from local pharmacies. A qualitative research design was employed to analyze the strategies used in translating medical terminology, the challenges encountered, and the extent to which the Arabic translations fulfil the communicative function of the original texts. To enhance validity, the suggested translations were reviewed by healthcare professionals specializing in cardiology, urology, and pharmacy. The analysis demonstrates that applying Skopos theory facilitates clearer and more effective medical translation by adapting terminology to suit the needs of both specialist and non-specialist readers. The findings highlight the translator's crucial role in bridging physician-patient communication, avoiding misunderstandings, and making complex medical information accessible to the general public. The study also acknowledges its limitations, particularly the small sample size and focus on English-Arabic translations, and recommends expanding future research to include a broader range of medical genres and languages. It concludes that prioritizing the target audience's needs enhances the effectiveness of medical translation and contributes significantly to improving health communication practices.

Keywords: Skopos, Theory, Medical, Translation



ندي عبد الباسط عبده محمد بدوي

بهاء الدين محمد مزيد

طارق عبد النعيم عاصم

طالبة ماجستير

أستاذ اللغويات والترجمة قسم اللغة
الإنجليزية - كلية الآلسن - جامعة
سوهاج

أستاذ اللغويات المساعد، قسم اللغة الفرنسية، كلية
الآلسن جامعة سوهاج

الترجمة الوظيفية للنصوص الطبية

التي تركز على الهدف (Skopos) تتناول هذه الدراسة الترجمة الوظيفية للنصوص الطبية بالاعتماد على نظرية الغرض من الترجمة وجودتها. تبرز أهمية البحث في مواجهة التحديات المرتبطة بالمصطلحات الطبية المتخصصة وصعوبة نقلها بدقة إلى اللغة العربية، لما لذلك من أثر مباشر على حياة المرضى. اعتمدت الدراسة على تحليل تقارير طبية من مستشفى سوهاج الجامعي ونشرات دوائية من صيدليات محلية، للكشف عن الاستراتيجيات التي يعتمد عليها المترجمون بين مراعاة النص الأصلي واحتياجات القارئ في اللغة الهدف.

أظهرت النتائج أن العديد من المصطلحات الطبية في النشرات والتقارير لا تُفهم بسهولة عند ترجمتها للعربية، مما قد يؤدي إلى سوء فهم أو مخاطر طبية. كما بينت أن تطبيق نظرية الغرض يساعد على تحسين دقة الترجمة، ويعزز من فهم المصطلحات الطبية، وبالتالي يرفع جودة الترجمة الطبية ويقوي التواصل بين الأطباء والمرضى.

الكلمات الرئيسية: نظرية، سكوبس، الترجمة، الطب

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FUNCTIONALIST TRANSLATION OF MEDICAL TEXTS

by

Nada Abdelbaset Abdou Mohamed Badawy¹, Bahaa Eddin. M. Mazid² and Tarek Abdelnaim Assem³

Introduction

Medical translation is a specialized branch of scientific translation that requires exceptional accuracy and precision. Unlike other types of translation, it directly impacts people's health and safety, making it one of the most demanding fields of practice. Scholars such as Newmark (1976) noted that medical writing is often directed at professionals (doctors, nurses, medical students), while other genres such as patient information leaflets or advertisements target the general public. More recent studies (Montalt & Davies, 2007; O'Neill, 2018) stress that medical translation must balance terminological accuracy with communicative clarity, depending on the target readership.

Compared with traditional linguistic or equivalence-based approaches (e.g., Catford, 1965; Nida, 1964), functionalist approaches such as Skopos theory (Vermeer, 1978; Nord, 1997) allow translators to adapt strategies according to the purpose of the translation. This orientation is especially relevant in medical contexts, where texts may serve different functions: providing precise information for specialists, simplifying terminology for patients, or guiding behavior in public health communication. Thus, while linguistic approaches focus on lexical or syntactic equivalence, Skopos theory prioritizes achieving the intended communicative effect in the target context.

Problem of the Study and Research Questions (Revised)

The translation of medical texts poses unique challenges due to the presence of technical terminology (often of Greek and Latin origin), specialized measurements, and sensitive data. Errors even minor ones can compromise the effectiveness of physician–patient communication or endanger health outcomes. These challenges necessitate an approach that

is both pragmatic and functional. Skopos theory provides such a framework, as it emphasizes the purpose of translation and enables the translator to adapt the level of language to suit either specialist or lay readers.

This study examines English–Arabic medical translation of reports, pamphlets, and medication inserts. It investigates how Skopos theory can be applied in practice and to what extent this framework enhances the clarity, accuracy, and functionality of medical texts for their target audiences.

Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How can Skopos theory be applied in translating English–Arabic medical texts?
2. What strategies can help translators deal with medical terms and style within this framework?
3. What challenges do translators face when using Skopos theory in medical translation?
4. How well do the translated texts meet their purpose for different readers (specialists and non-specialists)?

Review of the Literature

Scientific translation, including medical translation, has long been recognized as one of the most important and challenging areas of translation studies. Ghazala (1994) defines scientific translation as the transfer of texts in disciplines such as medicine, physics, chemistry, and computer science. Kingscott (2002) even estimates that scientific and technical translation accounts for 90% of global translation output, highlighting the field's significance. However, while these definitions underline the scope and importance of scientific translation, they tend to remain general, offering little guidance on the specific problems encountered in medical contexts.

Medical translation, as a sub-branch of scientific translation, raises unique challenges due to its direct connection to health and safety. Nida (1964, as cited in Hassan, 2019) stressed the

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difficulty of translating scientific terms from Western languages into those of developing countries. While his observation remains relevant, it reflects an early linguistic-oriented approach that places the burden on lexical equivalence. Later scholars, such as Caldwell and Henger (1987) and Newmark (1979), emphasized the complexity and inconsistency of medical terminology, pointing out the “jungle of synonyms” and symbolic nature of medical language. These perspectives highlight the terminological challenges but stop short of addressing how translators can effectively mediate between specialist discourse and lay readership.

In the Arab context, the challenges are compounded by factors such as lower literacy rates and limited functional knowledge of English (ALECSO, 2023). This means that medical translation cannot rely solely on technical accuracy but must also consider accessibility and comprehensibility for patients and the general public. While many descriptive studies have listed difficulties such as terminological variation and lack of equivalents, fewer have analyzed how translation strategies can overcome these issues or how translators can balance accuracy with readability.

This is where functionalist approaches, particularly Skopos theory (Vermeer, 1978; Nord, 1997), provide a valuable perspective. Unlike linguistic theories that prioritize equivalence, Skopos theory emphasizes the purpose of translation, allowing the translator to adapt strategies according to the needs of the target audience. Scholars such as Hatim (2001) and Nord (1997) have argued that functionalism “dethrones” the source text by foregrounding communicative function in the target culture. This principle is especially relevant in medical translation, where texts serve diverse audiences—from highly trained medical professionals to patients with no technical background.

Despite these insights, a clear research gap remains. Most studies have focused either on describing the linguistic challenges of medical translation or on presenting Skopos theory in

abstract terms. Few have examined how Skopos theory can be concretely applied to English–Arabic medical translation, particularly in real-life documents such as hospital reports and pharmacy pamphlets. Even fewer have investigated how functionalist strategies can bridge the gap between specialist and non-specialist readerships in the Arab context.

This gap justifies the present study, which explores the application of Skopos theory to English–Arabic medical translation, with the aim of identifying strategies that enhance both accuracy and accessibility, while meeting the communicative needs of different target audiences.

Theoretical Framework

Skopos Theory

Skopos theory, introduced by Vermeer in 1978, is a functionalist approach that emphasizes the purpose (skopos) of translation as the guiding principle of the translational process. Unlike earlier linguistic approaches that focused on equivalence at the lexical or syntactic level, Skopos theory highlights the intended function of the target text (TT) within its cultural and communicative context. As Nord (1997) argues, “linguistics alone won’t help us... because translating is not merely and not even primarily a linguistic process” (p. 10).

In Skopos theory, translation strategies are determined by the intended readers and the communicative goals of the text. The translator is therefore not merely a linguistic mediator but an active decision-maker who produces a “translatum” that functions effectively in the target culture (Du, 2012). Nord (2001) further clarifies that the “function” of a translation depends on factors such as the expectations and norms of the target culture, which often differ from those of the source culture.

This functionalist orientation makes Skopos theory especially relevant for medical translation, since medical texts may target highly specialized professionals, semi-professionals, or lay readers, each with different expectations. Skopos theory allows the

translator to adjust strategies accordingly, prioritizing clarity for patients while maintaining accuracy for professionals.

However, Skopos theory is not without limitations. Critics argue that its strong emphasis on purpose risks neglecting the linguistic and stylistic features of the source text (Schäffner, 1998). Others suggest that in highly sensitive fields like medicine, where accuracy is non-negotiable, the freedom given to translators by Skopos may sometimes conflict with ethical obligations (Munday, 2016). Thus, while Skopos theory offers flexibility, it must be applied carefully in medical contexts to balance functional adequacy with terminological precision.

Medical Language and Terminology

Medical language is often cited as one of the most complex forms of specialized discourse. It is characterized by technical vocabulary, frequent use of Greek and Latin roots, and distinctive stylistic features such as passivization, nominalization, and impersonality (Newmark, 1988; Haddad, 1997). Herget and Alegre (2009) classify medical language under the broader category of “languages for special purposes,” which differ from everyday language by their high degree of specialization and restricted communicative contexts.

Several scholars have proposed levels of medical discourse depending on the audience. Newmark (1988) identifies three levels—academic, professional, and popular—while Herget and Alegre (2009) distinguish four communicative contexts, ranging from professional–professional exchanges (e.g., research papers) to professional–non-professional communication (e.g., patient information leaflets). These models are useful because they highlight the variability of medical texts and the need for translators to adapt their strategies accordingly.

In the context of this study, medical language and terminology present both a challenge and a testing ground for Skopos theory. Since many medical terms are derived from Greek and Latin, translators often face the decision of whether to use established Arabic equivalents,

transliteration, or simplified lay terms. Skopos theory provides a framework for making these decisions based on the communicative purpose of the translation: accuracy and precision for professionals, versus clarity and accessibility for patients and the wider public.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory design to examine the translation of medical terms from English into Arabic within the framework of Skopos theory. The aim is not to generalize findings to all medical translations, but rather to provide insights into the challenges, strategies, and functional adequacy of selected texts.

Data Collection

The study corpus consists of two types of materials:

1. **Medical pamphlets:** Fourteen health pamphlets originally written in English and translated into Arabic were collected from local pharmacies. These texts target the general public and therefore serve as a useful site for analyzing how specialized medical terminology is adapted for lay audiences.
2. **Medical reports:** Five bilingual medical reports produced at Sohag University Hospital were examined. These texts, intended primarily for clinical use, provide examples of translations targeting professional or semi-professional audiences.

Sampling Rationale

The materials were selected purposively to reflect different communicative contexts (professional-to-lay vs. professional-to-professional). The sample is limited in scope and therefore does not claim statistical generalizability; rather, it allows for in-depth qualitative analysis of translation practices.

Data Analysis

The analysis proceeded in three stages:

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1. Identification of problematic terms: Single words, compounds, and abbreviations that posed challenges in translation were extracted from the texts.
2. Functional evaluation: Each term and its translation were analyzed in light of Skopos theory, with attention to whether the translation fulfilled the intended function for the target audience (clarity, accuracy, accessibility).
3. Categorization and comparison: Translation strategies (e.g., borrowing, calque, equivalence, simplification) were categorized, and recurrent patterns were identified.

To enhance validity, the suggested translations discussed in this study were reviewed by independent medical professionals specializing in urology, cardiology, and pharmacy. Their role was to evaluate the accuracy and appropriateness of the terms without involvement in the analysis itself.

Ethical Considerations

All pamphlets analyzed are publicly available and distributed freely in pharmacies. Medical reports were anonymized prior to analysis to protect patient confidentiality. Professional reviewers provided feedback voluntarily and no sensitive personal data were collected.

Limitations of the study

This study offering valuable insights into the application of Skopos theory in medical translation, has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively limited, as the data were collected from a small number of medical reports from Sohag University Hospital and a few drug leaflets from local pharmacies. This restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study focused primarily on Arabic translations, which may limit the applicability of the results to other target languages. Third, although professional healthcare practitioners were consulted and provided valuable feedback, the validation process could be expanded in future studies to include a broader panel of medical translators and practitioners from different specialties and institutions in order to strengthen the reliability and generalizability

of the results.

Suggestions for Future research

Future studies are encouraged to expand the scope by including larger and more diverse samples of medical texts, such as clinical trial reports, patient information leaflets, and medical guidelines from multiple hospitals and pharmacies. Comparative studies across different language pairs would also provide deeper insights into the universality of Skopos theory in medical translation. Additionally, collaborative research involving multiple translators and medical professionals could help validate translation strategies and ensure greater reliability. Experimental or empirical studies—such as testing translated texts with healthcare providers or patients—may also be useful to assess the practical impact of functionalist translation approaches. Finally, future work could compare Skopos theory with other translation theories to identify strengths and limitations in different medical translation contexts.

Analysis and Findings

Analysis of pamphlets

This section analyzes selected medical pamphlets in both English and Arabic to illustrate how translation problems arise and how Skopos theory can guide more functional solutions. The sample is limited (fourteen pamphlets), but they were chosen purposively because they represent widely distributed texts in local pharmacies and are highly relevant to patient–doctor communication. Each pamphlet was examined for problematic terms, with attention to whether the translation was source-text (ST) oriented or target-text (TT) oriented, and whether it fulfilled its communicative purpose.

Example 1: Congestal drug leaflet

ST: *Congestal is indicated for relieving these symptoms of hay fever and the common cold.*

TT: *يستخدم كونجستال لعلاج الأعراض المصاحبة لنزلات البرد وحمى القش*

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Here, the term “hay fever” is translated literally as حمى القش, a rendering that is linguistically accurate but functionally inadequate. This expression is not medically recognized in Arabic and may mislead patients. According to Collins Dictionary, “hay fever” is an allergic reaction to pollen, commonly referred to in Arabic as حساسية الربيع. The more functional translation, therefore, is حساسية الربيع, which conveys the correct medical meaning and is accessible to the general public. In line with Skopos theory, this strategy prioritizes the target audience’s understanding, thereby reducing the risk of miscommunication about symptoms and treatment.

Analysis of Medical Reports

To complement the pamphlets, five bilingual medical reports from Sohag University Hospital were analyzed. These reports were selected because they reflect real-world translations used in institutional and clinical contexts, often requested by government bodies or employers. While the sample is limited, it provides insight into how professional medical discourse is rendered into Arabic and how functionalist strategies affect comprehension.

For example, the term *acute cardiac chest pain* was translated as أزمة قلبية حادة rather than the literal ألم قلبي حاد في الصدر. This reduction strategy reflects standard usage in Arabic medical discourse and is more accessible to both professionals and lay readers. Similarly, *ECG* was translated literally as مخطط كهربائية القلب, which, while medically accurate, is not widely understood outside specialist contexts. The alternative رسم القلب is more functional for non-specialists, showing the importance of choosing TT-oriented strategies when clarity is required.

Other terms, such as *myocardial infarction* (احتشاء عضلة القلب vs. جلطة قلبية), *CBC* (صورة vs. فحص تعداد الدم الكامل), and *creatinine* (الكرياتينين vs. وظيفة الكلية), further demonstrate that literal or naturalized renderings often obscure meaning for patients, whereas functional

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equivalents enhance accessibility without undermining accuracy. Professional reviewers in cardiology, urology, and pharmacy confirmed that TT-oriented renderings such as *جِلْطَة* or *رسم القلب* or *قلبية* are more likely to be understood by non-specialists, validating the importance of functional adequacy.

The examples highlight recurring patterns: literal, ST-oriented strategies tend to preserve terminological accuracy but risk excluding patients from understanding their own health information, while TT-oriented strategies, guided by Skopos theory, improve accessibility and support effective communication. The analysis also shows that inappropriate renderings (e.g., *حمى القش*) are not simply linguistic issues—they may lead to patient confusion, misdiagnosis, or improper use of medication. Thus, functionalist translation is not only a theoretical choice but also a practical necessity in contexts where patient safety is at stake.

Although the corpus is limited, the systematic approach of analyzing both pamphlets and reports, combined with professional validation, provides evidence that Skopos-based strategies can balance accuracy and clarity. Future research with larger samples and broader validation panels could further confirm these findings.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Skopos Theory provides a practical framework for analyzing the translation of medical texts by highlighting how the function of a text should guide the translator's choices. The analysis of pamphlets and reports demonstrated that translation problems often arise when literal renderings overlook the needs of the intended audience. For example, pamphlets aimed at lay readers were sometimes rendered in overly technical language that obscured meaning, while reports for professional use occasionally included terms that, if shared with non-specialists, would hinder comprehension. These findings suggest that the success of medical translation depends not only on linguistic accuracy but

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also on functional adequacy: whether the translation communicates effectively to its specific audience.

At the same time, the study highlighted common difficulties faced by inexperienced translators in handling medical terminology, particularly in distinguishing when to preserve technical accuracy and when to adapt terms into more accessible forms. By applying Skopos Theory, translators can navigate these challenges more systematically and minimize misunderstandings that may jeopardize patient safety.

However, the study has several limitations. The analysis was based on a relatively small sample—fourteen pamphlets and five reports—which limits the generalizability of the findings. The involvement of family members as contributors, while valuable in terms of expertise, may raise concerns about objectivity. In addition, the study did not employ formal coding procedures or inter-rater validation, which restricts the extent to which the findings can be considered replicable.

Future research should therefore expand the dataset to include a wider range of medical texts (e.g., patient education brochures, hospital consent forms, or clinical trial information), apply systematic methods of coding translation strategies, and incorporate multiple reviewers to enhance reliability. Comparative studies could also examine how Skopos-based translation differs from other approaches, such as equivalence-based or corpus-based translation, in order to evaluate the added value of functionalist principles in medical translation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Audience-oriented strategies:** Translators of medical pamphlets should prioritize accessibility by replacing obscure or literal renderings with terms that are widely

understood by the public (e.g., translating *hay fever* as “حساسية الربيع” rather than “حمى القش”). Reports, on the other hand, should maintain technical accuracy but include explanations when shared with non-specialists.

2. **Training in medical translation:** Translators should receive specialized training that combines linguistic skills with medical knowledge, with particular emphasis on recognizing when Skopos requires technical precision and when it requires simplification.
3. **Terminology resources:** Institutions should develop standardized bilingual glossaries of medical terminology, validated by healthcare professionals, to support translators in avoiding inconsistent or misleading renderings.
4. **Collaboration with specialists:** Translators should collaborate systematically with medical professionals not only for accuracy checks but also for ensuring that the translated text fulfills its communicative function for the intended audience.
5. **Ethical responsibility:** Given the potential risks of miscommunication in health contexts, medical translators should be guided by professional codes of ethics that emphasize clarity, accuracy, and patient safety.

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