

Literary Translation Theories between the Normative and Functional Approaches: A Critical Review of the Literature on Arabic–English Translation

A Literature Review Submitted for Academic Promotion

A.L. Rawaa kadhim jawad

College of Fine Arts, University of Basra

rawaa.kadhim@uobasrah.edu.iq

نظريات الترجمة الأدبية بين المعيارية والوظيفية: مراجعة نقدية للأدبيات في الترجمة من العربية إلى الإنجليزية

م.م. رواء كاظم جواد

جامعة البصرة/ كلية الفنون الجميلة

ملخص البحث

تتناول هذه الدراسة نظريات الترجمة الأدبية في إطار المقاربات المعيارية والوظيفية، مع إشارة خاصة إلى الترجمة من العربية إلى الإنجليزية. وتهدف إلى مراجعة نقدية لأهم نظريات الترجمة مثل نظريات التكافؤ والمقاربات الوظيفية لتحديد نقاط القوة والضعف في التعامل مع النصوص الأدبية. وتعتمد الدراسة على منهج المراجعة الأدبية النقدية لمجموعة من الدراسات المختارة في مجال الترجمة النظرية والتطبيقية. وتشير النتائج إلى وجود انقسام نظري واضح بين المقاربات المعيارية التي تركز على التكافؤ اللغوي والدلالي، والمقاربات الوظيفية التي تهتم بغاية الترجمة ووظيفة النص الهدف. كما تبين أن معظم الدراسات تتعامل مع هذه المقاربات بشكل منفصل دون دمجها ضمن إطار تحليلي موحد. إضافة إلى ذلك، لا يزال مجال الترجمة الأدبية العربية-الإنجليزية أقل تناولاً مقارنة بميادين أخرى مثل الترجمة الدينية والسمعية البصرية. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن أيًا من المقاربتين المعيارية أو الوظيفية لا تكفي وحدها لتفسير تعقيد الترجمة الأدبية، بل يتطلب الأمر منظورًا تكامليًا يوازن بين الأمانة النصية والفعالية التواصلية. ويسهم هذا البحث في تعميق فهم نظريات الترجمة ويشكل أساسًا نقديًا لدراسات مستقبلية في الترجمة الأدبية العربية-الإنجليزية. الكلمات المفتاحية: نظريات الترجمة الأدبية، المقاربة المعيارية، المقاربة الوظيفية، التكافؤ، الترجمة الأدبية، سكوبوس

Abstract

This study examines literary translation theories within the framework of normative and functional approaches, with particular reference to translation from Arabic into English. It aims to provide a critical review of the most prominent translation theories, such as equivalence theories and functional approaches, in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses in dealing with literary texts. The study adopts a critical literature review methodology, based on selected studies in both theoretical and applied translation research. The findings indicate a clear theoretical division between normative approaches, which focus on linguistic and semantic equivalence, and functional approaches, which emphasize the purpose of translation and the function of the target text. It also shows that most studies treat these approaches separately rather than integrating them within a unified analytical framework. In addition, Arabic–English literary translation remains relatively under-researched compared to other fields such as religious and audiovisual translation. The study concludes that neither normative nor functional approaches alone are sufficient to account for the complexity of literary translation. Instead, an integrated perspective is required to balance textual fidelity with communicative effectiveness. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of translation theories and provides a critical foundation for future studies in Arabic–English literary translation. Keywords in English: Literary translation theories, normative approach, functional approach, equivalence, literary translation, Skopos theory.

Introduction

Translation Studies has experienced substantial theoretical and methodological shifts over the past seventy years, moving away from a rule-based, fidelity-oriented framework toward a broader understanding that incorporates communicative, cultural, and ideological dimensions of translation. This transformation has had a particularly strong impact on literary translation, where the translator is constantly confronted with the challenge of balancing the aesthetic and cultural integrity of the source text with the expectations and interpretive horizons of the target readership. The Arabic-English translation pair represents a particularly complex and revealing context for examining these developments. The significant linguistic, cultural, and rhetorical disparities between Arabic and English, along with their distinct literary traditions, generate translation challenges that extend beyond the scope of many theories originally developed within European linguistic and cultural settings. Classical Arabic poetry, modern fiction, and dramatic texts each present unique translational difficulties that require careful theoretical reconsideration. Accordingly, this literature review critically examines the major theoretical paradigms that have shaped literary translation studies, with particular attention to the shift from prescriptive approaches to functionalist perspectives. It also investigates how these frameworks have been applied, adapted, or contested in Arabic-English literary translation scholarship, drawing on studies from the mid-twentieth century to contemporary research across both Western and Arab intellectual traditions.

The central research problem is therefore formulated as follows: To what extent do normative and functional translation theories adequately account for the complexities of literary translation between Arabic and English?

Significance of the Study

- This study provides a structured critical review of the major theoretical approaches in literary Translation Studies, particularly the normative and functional frameworks.
- It highlights the intellectual shift in translation theory from a focus on textual fidelity to an emphasis on the cultural and communicative functions of the translated text.
- It contributes to a better understanding of the linguistic, cultural, and aesthetic challenges involved in translating literary texts from Arabic into English.
- It identifies gaps in existing research, thereby opening avenues for more specialized future studies in literary translation.

Research Objective

This study aims to identify the main theoretical approaches in literary Translation Studies, analyze how previous research has addressed Arabic-English translation in light of normative and functional perspectives, clarify the differences between these approaches in explaining the translation process.

Delimitations of the Study

Thematic delimitation: This study is limited to a review of literature on literary Translation Studies, with a focus on normative and functional approaches, without engaging in detailed textual analysis of translated works.

Linguistic delimitation: The study focuses exclusively on Arabic-English literary translation, excluding other language pairs.

Temporal delimitation: The review covers literature published from 1980 to the present, as this period marks the significant development of functionalist and contemporary critical approaches in Translation Studies.

Chapter One: Normative and Linguistic Approaches in Literary Translation

One of the foundational contributions to modern Translation Studies was introduced by Eugene Nida through his distinction between formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence in *Toward a Science of Translating* (1964) and later in *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (1969). Formal equivalence focuses on preserving the linguistic and structural features of the source text, whereas dynamic equivalence aims to achieve an equivalent effect on the target audience. Nida's model represented a major shift in translation theory because it emphasized the response of the receptor rather than strict adherence to the form of the original text (Nida, 1969). Within Arabic-English literary translation, Nida's dynamic equivalence has frequently been applied to the translation of religious and classical texts. However, researchers such as Farghal and Shunnaq (1999) argue that this approach becomes problematic in literary genres where stylistic and aesthetic features are inseparable from meaning itself. In poetry and highly literary prose, formal structures, imagery, and rhythm often function as semantic components that cannot be fully replaced by communicative equivalence alone (Farghal, 1999). Linguistic approaches to translation, particularly those associated with structuralism, viewed translation primarily as an operation involving relationships between linguistic systems. John Catford in *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (1965) introduced the concept of translation shifts to describe deviations from formal correspondence between source and target languages. Although Catford's framework provided a systematic

method for analyzing translation, it was criticized for paying insufficient attention to literary and cultural dimensions (Catford, 1965). The debate concerning translatability became especially significant in the field of poetry translation. Roman Jakobson (1959) famously argued that poetry is, in many respects, resistant to complete translation because poetic language depends heavily on sound patterns, symbolism, and stylistic nuance (Jakobson, 1959). In Arabic poetry, the issue becomes even more complex due to the intricate metrical system, rhetorical density, and intertextual traditions associated with classical Arabic literature. Scholars such as Mattingly (1989) and Jayyusi (1992) observed that translating Arabic poetry into English inevitably involves losses and transformations, requiring translators to prioritize certain aesthetic or semantic elements over others (Jayyusi, 1992). Linguistic-oriented approaches within translation theory, particularly those emerging from the structuralist tradition, conceptualize translation as a rule-governed transfer between linguistic systems. In this context, John Catford, in his work *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (1965), introduced the notion of "translation shifts" to describe the changes that occur when formal correspondence between source and target languages cannot be maintained. While this framework offered a systematic and descriptive apparatus for analyzing translation phenomena, it has been widely regarded as limited in addressing the aesthetic and literary dimensions inherent in literary texts (Catford, 1965). Within this theoretical orientation, the issue of translatability became a central concern, especially in relation to poetry. Roman Jakobson (1959) famously argued that poetic language resists complete translation due to its reliance on sound patterns, rhythm, and stylistic form, which are difficult to reproduce in another linguistic system. This argument has remained influential in ongoing discussions within Translation Studies (Jakobson, 1959). In the case of Arabic poetry, the problem of translatability becomes particularly complex. Classical Arabic poetic tradition is characterized by a highly structured metrical system, elaborate rhyme schemes, and dense intertextual references, all of which contribute significantly to meaning construction. As a result, achieving full linguistic equivalence in English is highly constrained. Studies by Mattingly (1989) and Jayyusi (1992) indicate that the translation of Arabic poetry inevitably involves degrees of loss and transformation, requiring translators to prioritize certain semantic, rhythmic, or aesthetic features over others depending on the intended purpose of the translation (Jayyusi, 1992).

Chapter Two: The Functional Turn and Descriptive Studies in Translation

The development of Translation Studies witnessed a significant paradigm shift during the late twentieth century, moving from linguistic and prescriptive models toward more functional and descriptive frameworks. This shift marked a reorientation in translation theory, where attention moved from formal equivalence and structural correspondence to the communicative purpose and contextual function of translated texts.

2.1 Reiss and Vermeer: Text Types and Skopos

The functionalist approach to translation theory developed within the German scholarly tradition during the late 1970s and 1980s, marking a clear shift away from source-text dominance. Within this framework, Katharina Reiss proposed a text typology that classifies texts into informative, expressive, and operative categories. She argued that translation strategies should be determined by the function of the source text. In the case of expressive texts, which include literary works, the translator is expected to preserve aesthetic qualities while also ensuring communicative effectiveness in the target language (Nord, 1991, pp. 28-29). Building on this foundation, Hans Vermeer introduced Skopos Theory, which asserts that the primary factor governing translation decisions is the intended purpose of the target text. In this model, translation is viewed as a purposeful action in which the translator acts as an expert negotiator between the requirements of the commissioning context and the expectations of the target readership. Although Skopos Theory has significantly influenced contemporary translation studies, it has also been criticized for allowing excessive deviation from the source text, particularly in literary translation, where fidelity to authorial intent and aesthetic form is often considered essential (Jabir, (2006), p. 38). Functionalist approaches to translation, particularly target-oriented models such as Skopos Theory, have become increasingly influential within contemporary Translation Studies. Despite their widespread adoption, these theories have also generated considerable debate concerning both their theoretical assumptions and their practical implications for translation practice (Nord C. , 1997). Central to the functionalist perspective is the principle proposed by Hans Vermeer, which states that the intended purpose of the target text should guide the translator's strategic decisions. According to this view, translation is not a mechanical process of linguistic replacement, but rather a purposeful communicative activity shaped by the needs of the target context (Vermeer, 1978). Because different translation strategies may be suitable for the same source text, the translator is required to select methods according to the communicative function expected from the translated text. However, this flexibility has led some critics to argue that radical functionalism risks granting translators excessive freedom, potentially allowing economic or institutional demands to outweigh fidelity to

the source text. Scholars such as criticized this tendency by suggesting that translators could become overly dependent on the expectations of commissioners and target audiences (Pym, 1996, p. 339). In response to such criticism, functionalist theorists emphasized that texts should be understood within their situational and cultural contexts. From this perspective, a source text is considered a product of specific historical, social, and communicative conditions, while its interpretation by the translator is inevitably influenced by the circumstances of reception in the target culture. Consequently, translation is viewed as a process of negotiation between two communicative situations rather than a simple transfer of fixed meanings (Reiss, 1984, p. 19).

The functionalist turn in Translation Studies introduced a broader understanding of translation as a purposeful and culturally situated activity rather than a purely linguistic transfer. Despite the criticisms directed at radical functionalism, these approaches contributed significantly to expanding the analytical scope of literary translation and redefining the role of the translator.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

1- Christiane Nord (2002) – Manipulation and Loyalty in Functional Translation

The study by Christiane Nord (2002) critically examines the relationship between functional translation theory (Skopos theory) and the concept of translator loyalty. The paper addresses one of the main criticisms of radical Skopos theory, namely that it may allow the purpose of translation to override the integrity of the source text, particularly in texts where authorial intention is central, such as literary and religious discourse. Nord argues that functionalism, when applied in isolation, may lead to excessive manipulation of the source text in favor of target-text functionality. To address this limitation, she introduces the principle of “loyalty,” which functions as an ethical constraint that balances the interests of the source text author, the target audience, and the translator’s purpose. The study demonstrates, through practical examples, that combining functional adequacy with loyalty provides a more balanced and ethically grounded approach to translation. In relation to literary translation, this framework is particularly relevant, as it allows translators to negotiate between preserving stylistic and cultural elements of the source text and adapting it for communicative effectiveness in the target language. This dual perspective aligns directly with the objectives of the present research, which examines the tension between normative and functional approaches in Arabic–English literary translation (Nord C. , Manipulation and loyalty in functional translation, 2002).

2- Aveling (2007) – Culture Research & Polysystem Theory (Even-Zohar)

The study by Harry Aveling (2007) examines the cultural extension of Itamar Even-Zohar’s Polysystem Theory, focusing on translation as a cultural and semiotic activity within literary systems. The study is particularly relevant to literary translation, as it positions translated literature as an integral part of the target cultural system rather than a secondary linguistic product. A key concept discussed is “repertoire,” which refers to the system of cultural norms, conventions, and materials that shape the production and reception of literary texts. Within this framework, translation is understood as a process of cultural transfer and negotiation between different literary systems. The study further highlights the role of cultural agents in the movement of texts between systems, emphasizing that translation is not only a linguistic act but also a cultural intervention. In relation to the present research, this perspective supports the functional approach to translation, where meaning and function in the target culture are prioritized alongside source-text constraints (Aveling, 2007).

3- Saleh Alqefari (2016) – Skopos Theory and Text-Type Theory in Translating Arabic Religious Texts

The study by Saleh Alqefari (2016) critically analyzes the English translations of Arabic religious texts by applying both Hans Vermeer’s Skopos Theory and Katharina Reiss’s Text-Type Theory. The study aims to evaluate which theoretical model is more suitable for analyzing and guiding the translation of religious discourse from Arabic into English. The research demonstrates that Skopos Theory emphasizes the role of extratextual factors, particularly the purpose of the translation and the communicative function in the target context. In contrast, Text-Type Theory focuses more on intertextual and linguistic features, categorizing texts according to their communicative function (informative, expressive, operative). Through the analysis of four translated religious texts, the study concludes that it is difficult for any translation to fully reproduce the original effect intended for the source audience. The findings further suggest that Reiss’s Text-Type Theory is more appropriate for analyzing religious translation, as religious texts inherently possess a fixed communicative purpose that limits functional reinterpretation. In relation to the present research, this study is highly relevant as it highlights the tension between functionalist approaches and text-bound (normative) approaches in translation theory. It also reinforces the idea that no single theory is sufficient to fully account for the complexity of Arabic–English translation, particularly in culturally and ideologically loaded texts (Alqefari, 2016).

4- Al-Bdour (2022) – Translatability of Literary Contexts (Arabic–English)

The study by Waddah Mahmoud Al-Bdour (2022) investigates the translatability of Arabic literary contexts into English, focusing on the structural and cultural challenges that arise in literary translation. The study is particularly relevant to Arabic–English translation, where significant linguistic and cultural distance affects the transfer of meaning, style, and aesthetic values. The research emphasizes that literary translation cannot be reduced to linguistic equivalence alone, but must also account for cultural imagery, stylistic features, and aesthetic functions embedded in the source text. In this sense, the study indirectly reflects the tension between normative approaches, which prioritize fidelity and equivalence, and functional approaches, which prioritize communicative effect and readability in the target culture. Furthermore, the study highlights the role of translation strategies such as literal translation, adaptation, and cultural mediation in dealing with Arabic literary texts. It concludes that successful literary translation requires balancing source-text fidelity with target-text functionality, which aligns closely with the theoretical framework of this research (Al-Bdour, 2022).

5- Yan Li (2026) – A Comparative Study of Nida’s and Koller’s Translation Theories

The study by Yan Li (2026) presents a comparative analysis of Eugene Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory and Werner Koller’s Equivalence Theory. The research focuses on two major paradigms in translation studies that revolve around the concept of equivalence, which has significantly shaped both theoretical and applied translation practices. The study explains Nida’s Functional Equivalence model, which emphasizes achieving a similar communicative effect on the target reader through a process involving analysis, transfer, restructuring, and testing. In contrast, Koller’s model introduces a multi-dimensional understanding of equivalence, including denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, and formal-aesthetic levels. From a theoretical perspective, the study highlights both convergence and divergence between the two approaches, showing that while Nida prioritizes communicative effect (reader-oriented translation), Koller provides a more structured and linguistically detailed framework of equivalence. In relation to the present research, this study is significant because it represents the normative tradition in translation theory, which forms one pole of the analytical framework in contrast to functional approaches such as Skopos theory. This comparison is particularly relevant in literary translation, where translators must negotiate between semantic accuracy and communicative adequacy, especially in Arabic–English translation contexts (Li, 2026).

General Orientation of Previous Studies

The reviewed studies indicate a clear division in translation scholarship between two main orientations: the normative approach, which is grounded in the concept of equivalence and linguistic accuracy, and the functional approach, which prioritizes communicative purpose and target-text function. This division is evident in theories such as Nida’s Functional Equivalence, Koller’s Equivalence Model, and Skopos Theory. Although some recent studies attempt to integrate both orientations, such integration often remains theoretical rather than critically applied, particularly in the field of Arabic–English literary translation.

Strengths of Previous Studies

The previous studies demonstrate several strengths, including theoretical diversity, as they engage with multiple translation frameworks such as Skopos Theory, Functional Equivalence, Text-Type Theory, and Polysystem Theory. This reflects the richness of translation studies as a discipline. In addition, many studies highlight the cultural dimension of translation, particularly through concepts such as domestication and foreignization, which represent a significant shift from purely linguistic approaches. Furthermore, several empirical studies provide applied analyses of translation practices in religious, literary, and audiovisual texts, thereby bridging theory and practice.

Limitations of Previous Studies

Despite their contributions, the reviewed studies reveal several limitations. First, there is a lack of integration between normative and functional theories within a unified analytical framework. Most studies treat these approaches separately rather than comparatively. Second, Arabic–English literary translation remains underexplored compared to religious or audiovisual translation. Third, many studies tend to be descriptive rather than critically analytical, focusing on translation strategies without deeply examining their theoretical implications. Finally, there is a limited number of comparative studies that systematically contrast normative and functional approaches within the same research design.

Research Gap

The analysis of previous studies reveals a clear research gap: the absence of a comprehensive critical study that integrates both normative and functional approaches within Arabic–English literary translation. Most existing research either focuses on theoretical discussions or applies a single framework without comparative analysis.

Results

Based on the critical review of previous studies, the following findings can be identified:

1. There is a clear theoretical division in translation studies between normative approaches (equivalence-based theories) and functional approaches (purpose-oriented theories).
2. Normative theories such as Nida's Functional Equivalence and Koller's model emphasize linguistic accuracy and structural correspondence, while functional theories such as Skopos Theory focus on communicative purpose and target-text function.
3. Most studies reviewed tend to treat these approaches separately rather than integrating them within a unified analytical framework.
4. Arabic-English literary translation remains relatively underexplored compared to other fields such as religious and audiovisual translation.
5. Cultural factors play a crucial role in shaping translation strategies, particularly in the opposition between domestication and foreignization.
6. Functional approaches appear more flexible in dealing with cultural and contextual variation, while normative approaches provide stronger linguistic control and textual fidelity.

Conclusions

The study concludes that translation theories cannot be reduced to a single explanatory model, as both normative and functional approaches contribute essential perspectives to understanding translation processes. While normative theories ensure linguistic and semantic accuracy, functional approaches provide flexibility and adaptability in intercultural communication. In the context of Arabic-English literary translation, a purely normative or purely functional approach is insufficient. Instead, an integrated perspective that considers both textual fidelity and communicative function is necessary to achieve effective translation outcomes.

References

- Al-Bdour, W. M. (2022). The translatability of literary contexts from Arabic into English. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 18(Special Issue 1), 692-704.
- Alqefari, S. (2016). Analysis of English translations of Arabic religious texts with reference to Skopos theory and Text-type theory. *Journal of Arabic Sciences and Humanities*, 9(4), 41-57.
- Aveling, H. (2007). Culture Research in the Recent Work of Itamar Even-Zohar. *Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia*, 9(2), 206-221.
- Catford, J. C. (1965). *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Farghal, M. &. (1999). *Translation with reference to English and Arabic: A practical guide*. Dar Al-Hilal.
- Jabir, J. K. ((2006)). Skopos theory: Basic principles and deficiencies. *University of Basrah*, (41). *Journal of the College of Arts*.
- Jakobson, R. (1959). On Linguistic Aspects of Translation. In R. A. Brower (Ed.), *On Translation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press., (pp. 232-239).
- Jayyusi, S. K. (1992). *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Li, Y. (2026). A Comparative Study of Nida's and Koller's Translation Theories. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 16(2), 65-73.
- Nida, E. A. (1969). *The theory and practice of translation*. Brill.
- Nord, C. (1991). Skopos, Loyalty and Translational Conventions.
- Nord, C. (1997). *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*. Functionalist.
- Nord, C. (1997). *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- Nord, C. (2002). Manipulation and loyalty in functional translation. *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 14(2), 32-44.
- Pym, A. (1996). in Neubert, Albrecht / Shreve, Gregory / Gommlich, Klaus (eds.): *Basic Issues Material Text Transfer as a Key to the Purposes of Translation*, in *Translation Studies. Proceedings of the Fifth international Conference Kent. Forum on Translation Studies II*, Kent/Ohio: Institute of Applied Linguistics., 337 - 346.
- Reiss, K. &. (1984). *Grundlegung einer allgemeinen Translationstheorie*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Vermeer, H. J. (1978). Ein Rahmen für eine allgemeine Translationstheorie. In: *Lebende Sprachen* 23 (1). 99-102.