

Implementing *Skopostheorie* in Bible Translation

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Abstract

Implementing *Skopostheorie* as a translation framework helped focus the Likɔɔnl Bible translation project theoretically and relationally. By answering some basic questions unique to their situation, *Skopostheorie* helped the team to craft their purposes for translating by imagining how the host product would be used. Implementing *Skopostheorie* helped the author relate the translation to some of the diverse fields involved in translation, such as: intercultural communication, theology, ideology, and media studies. Implementing *Skopostheorie* is a challenge, but in this postcolonial era it will likely facilitate better communication between various translation participants and result in greater local engagement with Scripture products.

Keywords

Skopostheorie, Bible translation, Ghana, intercultural communication, translation studies, postcolonial, ideology, media, theology, missiology

1 Introduction

Researchers¹ began work in the Likɔɔnl² or Komba language area soon after *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference* (Wilt 2003) was released. The book pushed Bible translation (BT) practitioners to consider many new disciplinary fields and perspectival voices relevant to translation. The difficulty the researchers faced was how to reincorporate these diverse frames and voices into a conceptual whole. Which frames should one choose to incorporate and which ones to ignore?³ Already by that time, a German New Testament (Berger and Nord 1999) had been published using an approach called *Skopostheorie*, a functional approach to translation pioneered by Hans Vermeer (Reiss and Vermeer 1984) and further developed by Christiane Nord (Nord 1997).⁴ Since that time, many BT theorists and practitioners have been advocating *Skopostheorie*.⁵ So the Likɔɔnl translation project took up the challenge to define a *skopos*, to research and write a translation brief, and to try to implement the brief throughout a New Testament translation (Esala 2011).⁶ By utilizing the frames of reference approach combined with the concepts of *Skopostheorie*, the team discovered that many diverse frames of reference could find expression and could be prioritized in relation to a translation product practically focused on end-user acceptability without neglecting accuracy, artistry, or clarity (Wendland 2008a, 226ff.).

Skopostheorie requires that translators ask a number of practical questions as part of interpreting and translating a source text for a host community. For instance: Who is involved in this project? Which organizations? Which churches? Which communities? What are they intentionally trying to accomplish? What are their motives? Who will be using this product? How do translators anticipate they will use it? What media do the users prefer? What paratextual materials are necessary and preferred? How interested is the audience in the unique aspects of the source culture? How might we shape our translation to fit the way we answered those questions for our users (*skopos*)?

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² The Likɔɔnl language (Komba) is a Gurma language of Northern Ghana, part of the macro language family of Likpakpaaln (Konkomba). The people are called Bikɔɔm while the speech variety is Likɔɔnl. Both the people and the language are known in English as Komba. They are part of the larger Konkomba ethnic identity. In this paper the language will be referred to as Likɔɔnl and the people as Bikɔɔm.

³ This observation was recognized by the authors and the pedagogical aspects have been explicated in subsequent publications (Wilt and Wendland 2008; Wendland 2008a).

⁴ There is a brief discussion of *Skopostheorie* in Wilt 2004, 14-16.

⁵ The New Dutch translation (NBV) used *Skopostheorie*. See de Blois and Mewe 2002. The Afrikaans translations utilized a combination of relevance theory and *Skopostheorie* in producing four translations with different purposes (*skopoi*). See van der Merwe 2003. Many theorists have been advocating using the *skopos* approach including de Vries 2001; Naude 2002; Wendland 2004; van der Jagt 2010; Noss, 2009; Kerr 2011; Peng 2012.

⁶ Despite the acceptance of *Skopostheorie* in BT discourse, examples of translation briefs and training materials are difficult to obtain.

These questions are not just relevant for program planning, but within *Skopostheorie* they actually help shape the translation process. These pragmatic issues, which are extratextual in nature, are raised to the highest level of importance to achieve a successful translation (Nord 1997, 65).⁷ The concepts of *skopos* and the translation brief helped the Likoonl New Testament translation team to address those communicative questions in such a way as to guide our corporate translation decisions and the final translation product or products in a theoretically defensible, transparent, intentional, and acceptable way for our context.

This paper highlights the preliminary discoveries and results from implementing *Skopostheorie* in the Likoonl New Testament translation. After a summary of the theory I will attempt to use the theory as a lens to see what it brought into focus in relation to intercultural communication and key term selection, text interpretation, and ideology. I will consider practical applications to the Likoonl project along the way, including a case study to illustrate how the theory helped the translation team deal with written products in relation to oral products. Finally I will discuss some of the challenges of practically implementing *Skopostheorie* for future translation projects.

2 What is Skopostheorie?

Skopostheorie comes out of the field of translation studies, a discipline devoted to intercultural communication. As J. A. Naudé suggests, no new translation can afford to ignore translation studies (Naudé 2002, 55). But *Skopostheorie* is not only at home in the academy, it was designed to help train translators in actual translation projects (Nord 1997, 39ff.). That should sit well with BT practitioners, who sometimes express frustration with theories⁸ that lack the complexity of real world applications.

As already mentioned, *Skopostheorie* approaches the translation from the perspective of the translation process. Translation begins with an initiator, often called a commissioner, who calls for a translation to fulfill a certain function in the host⁹ context. For BT, the initiator could be a church, a local council of churches, an individual, or a translation agency. Ideally, an initiator does not act unilaterally but works together with the host community and other stakeholders in initiating the project and forming the *skopos* for a translation (Chemorion 2009, 3).

The next step is to identify and describe the end users or the hosts of the translation product. This description should be based on research regarding the demographics, interest, and preferences of the host community relevant to the proposed translation product.

Based on what the initiators know about the host community and what they know about the source document, the initiators describe the purpose of the translation product as they imagine it being used in the host context. This purpose is called the *skopos*. The *skopos* is the *intention* of the initiator(s) for how the translation will *function* in the host context. That intention results in a new offer of information (the new translation product) that is related to a previous offer of information (the source document or product).¹⁰ The *skopos* is usually expressed succinctly and is like a mission statement for the translation product. The way that the new translation ends up actually being used is the function of the translation in the host context.

Since the *skopos* is so succinct, it is further described in the translation brief, which is the set of more detailed translating instructions for the translator (Naudé 2002, 51). The concept of the translation brief “implicitly compares a translator to a barrister who has received the basic information and instructions, but then is free (as a responsible expert) to carry out those instructions as they see fit” (Nord 1997, 30). The brief provides the context to understand the *skopos* by providing answers to a number of questions that taken together form the translating instructions. Translators interpret the brief and decide what sort of translation principles should be used to consistently solve recurring translation issues. This is more of a top-down approach than is typically used in sentence-by-sentence bottom-up translation (Nord 1997, 68).¹¹

Nord realized that translators needed ethical guidance to prevent *Skopostheorie* from being applied in radical or utilitarian ways. She has addressed the issue of ethics in *Skopostheorie* by introducing translators to the concept of *loyalty* (Nord 1997, 123-25). Loyalty is relational and bi-directional. *Relational* ideally refers to concrete people who are “source” and “hosts” with whom the translator interacts. *Bi-directional* implies that translators need to be loyal to the author’s intentions, as well as loyal to the receivers’ expectations for how the translation should function in the host context. Loyalty keeps the translator accountable to

⁷ Many of these questions were part of Nida’s logistics or the secondary implementation part of a translation project (Nida and Taber 1969, 175-88).

⁸ *Skopostheorie* is actually not a theory in the traditional sense of making a hypothesis and then empirically testing it. I believe it is best understood as an “interpretive analytic.” It is most useful “in relation to” other perspectives and approaches. See Robbins 1996, 11-17.

⁹ Following the suggestion of James Maxey, I prefer the metaphor of “host” language, culture, and text compared to “target” or “receptor.” Nord uses “receptor.”

¹⁰ In BT, the source document is generally the standard Greek and Hebrew texts of the Bible, such as Nestle Aland²⁷ (now NA²⁸) or the UBS⁴ Greek New Testament. But many minority languages have no translators who can interact with those ancient languages. The Likoonl translation brief instructed the translators to use the base/model translation method and specified that the NIV 1984 was its base translation of the source document. Since the translators could not access the Greek source in their translation drafts, the base translation was supplemented by a source language study provided by the exegetical advisor that was to “highlight the argument structure of the text, discourse structure, use of genre, use of metaphor and components of artistry and their functional meaning” (Esala 2011, 11). For the base/model method see Bessong and Kenmogne 2007, 379.

¹¹ The result of this method is a very consistent translation intratextually.

concrete people and perspectives¹² in relation to the original source communication context and accountable to concrete people and their perspectives in relation to the new audience who will be interacting with the translation. For a translator, the concept of loyalty limits the power of the *skopos*.

After learning the *skopos* and understanding the translation brief, then the translators begin to interact with the source text. Next, the translators go into a detailed analysis of the source text with specific attention to how the source text functions (Nord 1997, 40-44). “It is necessary to loop back continually to the translation *skopos*, which acts as a guide to determine which source text elements can be preserved and which elements will have to be adapted. This circular process ensures that the translator takes into consideration factors relevant to the translation task” (Naudé 2002, 51; see also Nord 2005, 36-40).

It is important to note that translators are not handcuffed in the process of translating. They have to seek to apply the brief’s instructions and sometimes competing principles ethically and effectively. Throughout this process, they remain mindful of their responsibility to remain loyal to the host and source authorities. After the project is finished, it is helpful to assess how adequately the translators applied the brief to the actual translation.

There are a couple of unique features of *Skopostheorie* that significantly differ from Eugene Nida’s concept of dynamic equivalence.¹³ First, by raising the hosts’ agency in the very process of interpretation and translation, *Skopostheorie* presupposes many important aspects of what BT organizations call Scripture engagement.¹⁴ Second, *Skopostheorie* refers to meaning selection rather than meaning transfer (Nord 1997, 32). The notion of *equivalence* is not the general principle for good translation. In most types of translation, equivalence cannot be achieved on all levels—word, sentence, and discourse levels—at the same time. Moreover, when a text is viewed pragmatically in terms of its rhetorical action or text function, equivalence becomes even more partial (Nord 1997, 45).¹⁵ Instead, Nord, following Reiss, prefers the concept of *adequacy*. Adequacy is defined in terms of how the host text fulfills the instructions of the translation brief (Nord 1997, 34-36).

2.1 Text typologies in Skopostheorie

As stated above, *Skopostheorie* describes translation as an offer of information about a previous offer of information. Information is understood broadly, including form, content, and function of the message which is encased in a shared cognitive, contextual framework (Wendland 2004, 313). The previous offer of information refers to a source document’s form, content, function, and context. In the translation brief, the source should be defined. What is the source and what is the new translation’s relationship to it intertextually? Are there any significant relationships to other translations of the source?¹⁶ Clearly, there are different ways that the source text can be related to the host text. David Weber suggests that within the world of BT, there is a need to think “in terms of a richer set of parameters than literal (formal), versus free (idiomatic)” (Weber 2005, 66). Nord has outlined such a set of parameters for how the source text can relate to the host text building on what Reiss has called text typologies (Nord 1997, 43ff.).

The primary distinction for Nord is between an instrumental translation and a documentary translation. Each major type has several subtypes along a scale (1997, 47-48). An instrumental translation produces “an *instrument* for a new communicative interaction between the source-culture sender and a host-culture audience using (certain aspects of) the source text as a model” (1997, 47). This is similar to what Ernst August Gutt calls indirect translation.¹⁷

A documentary translation attempts to create a translated text that highlights aspects of the source situation. It produces a *document* that sheds light on certain aspects of the communication that originally took place between an author and an audience. It also has several scalar subtypes. Nord’s documentary translation is similar to Gutt’s direct translation (see also Hill 2006).

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¹² In translation of ancient documents like the Bible the original authors are not accessible directly. One can talk about “implied author” as interpreted generally in narrative analysis. One can cite the consensus of professional biblical scholars or a historical reading from ancient church fathers. The chosen methods are to be described in the brief.

¹³ Nida and Taber 1969, 24. See also de Waard and Nida 1986. In this latter work, the term dynamic equivalence is jettisoned in favor of functional equivalence, and there is evidence of a shift toward social scientific understandings of language and semiotics in Nida’s thought. Still, the later work remains essentially an extension of the earlier (Pattimore 2007, 228).

¹⁴ Scripture engagement is a shorthand phrase to describe how God engages people through the Scriptures and how such an encounter affects change (Lutheran Bible Translators 2008, 6).

¹⁵ The translator also has to compare how the functions of the source text will work in the host text. Where the source text is inducing the hearers to act, the host text may only be informing about an appeal; where the source text refers to something familiar to its readers, the host/target text may refer to something unfamiliar. Nord (1997, 51) suggests that “Nida’s dynamic equivalence changes the referential function of translation in order to save the appellative function.”

¹⁶ The Likoonl translation is closely related linguistically to the Konkomba (Likpakpaln) translation (Esala 2011, 6). It is possible to access the source exclusively by another translation in addition to the translator’s contextual knowledge about the source. Anthony Pym, referring to Léon Robel, discusses a non-representative translation epistemology that understands translations as extending meaning by building additions on previous extensions (Pym 2007, 204).

¹⁷ Weber 2005, 61-63, citing Gutt 2002. I prefer Nord’s language because it seems less value laden. Direct, indirect, and covert can easily be perceived to indicate a value preference from the outset. But I see relevance theory as complementary to *Skopostheorie*.

It is important to note that an instrumental translation may significantly change the communicative functions of the source text in order to achieve the desired results of the translation’s initiators. If an advertising campaign seeks to sell a product in a new culture while maintaining a similarity to its other advertising campaigns around the world, it may need to adapt and modify terminology and argumentation in order to achieve its aim of product sales. That is to say, depending on how the *skopos* is written, in an instrumental translation some functions of the source may be disregarded, reprioritized, or changed. One can see this clearly in children’s Bibles. Some functions of the source text are not deemed relevant (poetry, puns, sarcasm, political commentary) and the new translation is modified for the new audience.

When I wrote the Likɔɔnl translation brief, neither I nor any of the translation participants delineated which typology the translators should employ, but there is a tendency in the brief toward domestication (Esala 2011, 9-10). Domestication usually implies an instrumental translation. Of the three types of instrumental translation defined by Nord—equifunctional, heterofunctional, and homologous—the Likɔɔnl translation would be a *heterofunctional* instrumental translation.¹⁸ That means that in the Likɔɔnl translation, the function of the original cannot be preserved in whole or in the same hierarchy, but the translation does seek to achieve adequately similar functions in the host context to those of the source text in the source context.

As BT practitioners adopt this terminology and explain it to the various constituencies, it may help foster greater appreciation regarding the different purposes of different Bible translations and differing emphases between translation organizations, and provide a more fruitful meta-language for the translators, theologians, parachurch organizations, and church bodies who have opinions on the theological and missiological implications of translation decisions.

Perhaps the language of *Skopostheorie* may open up a more fruitful dialog on the “Son of God” translation debates in Muslim majority contexts (Hansen 2012).¹⁹ In terms of ethics, *Skopostheorie* would shift the debate to bi-directional loyalty both to the host audience as well as to the source situation and source authorities. It would distinguish the roles of host and initiators. Such a debate is beyond the argument I want to make here, but it may be helpful to reference a parallel difficulty the Likɔɔnl translation faced in translating the Bible in the context of the dominant African Traditional Religion. But first, to help pave the way, we move to a brief discussion of intercultural communication as it is understood in *Skopostheorie*.

2.2 Intercultural communication

Translation is a form of intercultural communication. Discussing text typologies begins to address how to bridge the cultural gaps between source culture and host culture. This is especially crucial in BT because the background knowledge gap in time and culture is in many cases wide.²⁰

Nord, following Agar,²¹ describes culture barriers in terms of linguistic and cultural *rich points* that may cause communication conflicts. Rich points can be understood as complex frames that come as a whole cultural package. When viewed across cultures, the rich points, if unexamined, appear deceptively similar. A translator’s task is to be sensitive to the groups on both sides of the divide, to be bi-directionally loyal (Nord 1997, 125). The decision of whether to highlight the gap along the continuum of possibilities, to be more foreignizing or exoticizing, as it were, or to bridge that gap along the continuum of possibilities, to be more domesticating, depends especially on the translation’s *skopos* (Nord 1997, 50).²²

In order to determine how much information about the rich points to add in the paratextual notes, the Likɔɔnl translation team experimented with a version of Luke 1-2 that made heavier use of footnotes, some of which were documentary in nature explaining the source concept and some of which were intended to engage the host community in contextual theologizing. In the process the team discovered that Bikɔɔm Christians, many of whom are not adept readers, did not have high levels of interest in the longer footnotes. They preferred short notes. Lots of reading and heavy description were often considered not worth the processing cost.²³ So the challenge was to find terms that communicated without slowing down the drama and the interest level in the text’s movement.

¹⁸ Equifunctional translations are limited to manuals and technical texts, such that, ideally, receivers do not realize they are reading a translation. Homologous translations are homologous in genre, such that source-text poetry is represented in host-text poetic style with a similar degree of originality.

¹⁹ See the final recommendations to Wycliffe/SIL by an independent committee of the World Evangelical Alliance on this controversy (World Evangelical Alliance Global Review Panel 2013). The committee’s Recommendation 8 to add guidelines regarding ownership of the project could be well accomplished with the language of bi-directional loyalty.

²⁰ Molokwu 1935, 54, quoted in Sanneh 2008, 180. See also Nord 2002, 99-101; Hill 2006, 29-35. African cultures are often by comparison much closer to Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures than Western cultures. However, sometimes relative cultural proximity can be a greater cultural communication danger than obvious broad gaps because the apparent formal similarities may mask deep-seated ideological and especially religious differences in understanding and evaluation.

²¹ Agar 1991, 168, referenced in Nord 1997, 25.

²² The terms *foreignization* and *domestication* (Venuti 1995) were utilized in the Likɔɔnl translation brief. The concepts originated with Friedrich Schleiermacher (Venuti 1995, 19-20).

²³ Processing cost is a term from relevance theory. See Sperber and Wilson 1986, 125.

2.3 Inter-religious contact and bi-directional loyalty in key term selection

Now we return to the discussion of translation decisions in a context where Christians are a minority and African Traditional Religion (ATR) is dominant. Given the host audience’s low interest in the source culture, the translation team discovered that a move toward foreignization (e.g., a descriptive phrase for a priest or a transliteration rather than the traditional word for a fetish priest) was often implicitly a move toward the Bikɔɔm perception of more modern Western frames of reference rather than the Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern frames of reference because the Bikɔɔm assumption is that Western culture is closer to biblical culture, and they are somewhat familiar with the foreign Western culture. That is to say, a foreign term also had the potential for domestication towards the mediating Western culture (Esala 2011, 5-6). None of these decisions are ethically neutral. In a context where interest level in the source culture is low, a move toward foreignization, which might lead one to think they are shedding light on the source text might actually be a move toward Western hegemony in the hearer’s perception (Pattemore 2007, 233-34).²⁴

So in determining an approach to biblical key terms and ATR, the Likɔɔnl team followed suggestions of Kwame Bediako beginning with the use of the name of God. The God who created the universe is called *Uwonbɔr* by the Bikɔɔm people (Bediako 2004, 32).²⁵ A Trinitarian understanding similar to that of the Apostles’ Creed was applied to the Bikɔɔm cosmology and in a sense interprets their cosmology in light of biblical revelation about the Trinity and salvation history. The choice of Likɔɔnl terminology for God and for other religious concepts in the translation of Scripture encourages Bikɔɔm hearers to realize that their Bikɔɔm conceptual world is another arena for Christ to be Lord. It is also granted that the majority of Bikɔɔm do not conceive of the high God *Utindaan Uwonbɔr* “the landowner” and also “the chief of the sun” in Trinitarian terms. Neither do they interact with God through the biblical record of salvation history. But since God is one, that is the way the Likɔɔnl translators are interpreting the “aim” of the ultimate Author, who is one and the same *Utindaan Uwonbɔr* or the Father, the First Person of the Trinity. The translation of key terms takes pre-Christian terminology into account, recognizing that *Uwonbɔr* was active among the Bikɔɔm prior to the advent of Christianity through ATR concepts. This is how the translators sought to produce a text that was loyal to God’s Trinitarian activity among the Bikɔɔm people, loyal to the Bikɔɔm people themselves, and loyal to the source situation as delineated by preferred interpretive methodologies and source authorities.²⁶

3 Skopostheorie and Sacred Text

As mentioned, many Africans are predisposed toward receiving the Bible in their own language as a living document, a sacred document through which God speaks to them as intended extensions of the original audiences (Sanneh 2008, 137). If the hosts are to value the product, their culture-specific perspectives about translation itself should be adopted as part of the *skopos*; or if translators intentionally go against such conventions, the reasons should at least be addressed in the translation brief and discussed with the hosts in the translation process (Nord 1997, 34; Chemorion 2009, 4).

The growing interest in the theological interpretation of Scripture may be of help at this point in African Bible translation (Fowl 2009, 6).²⁷ It focuses interpretation on the hearer’s intention of communion with God and God’s intention to communicate with all people (Sanneh 2003, 53). While this does not mean excluding the human and historical contingencies from interpretation, it does mean granting theological concerns interpretive priority (Fowl 2009, 23). From the perspective of *Skopostheorie* this acknowledgement is trying to retain what Christians see as the appellative function (Nord 1997, 42-43) of the Scripture, which is inducing the host audience to respond to the divine initiative communicated through the sacred text.

4 Beliefs, intention and textual interpretation

The beliefs of the joint initiators are a major lens through which translators read and translate the Bible. On one hand, translators must listen to the source text and culture on its terms, but on the other, they must admit ahead of time they are not interpreting or translating in a vacuum. Beliefs are an inescapable part of the package. So how does *Skopostheorie* relate presuppositions to text interpretation?

Skopostheorie admits that translation is interpretation of the sender’s intention (Nord 1997, 85). Sometimes an author is not known, but there is implicitly a sender, nevertheless (Nord 2005, 48). The texts that the sender produces are more than codes; they are made meaningful by their receivers (Nord 1997, 31). How do new hearers comprehend sender intentionality through the translated text (Nord 2005, 53-56)?²⁸

²⁴ Pattemore discusses this but does not deal with the scenario described here.
²⁵ See also Bediako 1996, 22; Sanneh 2003, 10-11; Hill 2006, 95.
²⁶ In relation to God’s Trinitarian activity and the danger of cultural imposition, see Esala 2011, 3-5. In relation to loyalty to the Bikɔɔm people, see Esala 2011, 1-2. In relation to source authorities, the brief highlights the methods of Ernst Wendland and David Rhoads; see Esala 2011, 11.
²⁷ Fowl here is following the suggestion of Webster 2003.
²⁸ As I have already argued, given a set of Christian convictions about God’s self-revelation through Scripture, it is possible to also have a *skopos* that is sensitive to the intentionality of the Spirit beyond the mind of the author. See Fowl 2009, 49-50.

It begins with the translator on behalf of his host audience engaging the source text. Timothy Saleska argues that when engaging a text, “From the start, we make interpretive assumptions about the author, his goals, purposes, and situation that enable us to make sense of the text. And the shape of those assumptions is responsible for the shape of the interpretation” (Saleska 2010, 7). Saleska is building on the work of Stephen Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels (1982; 1987) who have argued that any time interpreters are trying to understand a text’s meaning they are actually seeking after authorial intention,²⁹ or in Vermeer’s terminology, the author’s aim. However, interpreters do not have the benefit of any “objective” theoretical methodology that sets the parameters of the interpretational playing field and necessarily privileges one set of rules over another. The upshot is that no presuppositions have *necessary* priority over others. This applies equally to both traditional hermeneutics and deconstructionism. Interpreters still argue for the benefits of their particular interpretations as potentially correct beliefs regarding the sender’s communicative intention, but they must admit their starting points. Beliefs cannot be extricated from interpretation.

But if translators cannot point to an objective theory that necessarily validates their interpretation, how can they justify their interpretation of authorial intention?³⁰ A translator is one possible reader who gives an interpretation of the source text arrived at generally by consulting secondary sources (Nord 1997, 85). However, that does not guarantee that the translator is a representative interpreter for the host audience. So the translation brief becomes the only means of subjecting the translator to a higher authority in interpretive methodology and application (Nord 2005, 36).

But equally concerning is the question of how a translator can interpret Scripture without consciously or unconsciously inscribing his or her own sin in a way that now appears to be justified by Scripture. To avoid this, Fowl underscores the importance of a community that is open to communication, accountability, and reconciliation (Fowl 2009, 50-52; see also Esala 2011, 5). Applying Fowl’s admonition to the process of forming a translation brief and in the process of drafting and testing the translation, we need to create habits of dialogue and an environment that fosters openness, honesty, and reconciliation between translation initiators and hosts. In order to have honest dialogue, we will also need to address power relations among participants. But first a brief mention of the interpretive methods used in the Likɔɔnl translation.

4.1 Interpretive decisions affecting the Likɔɔnl New Testament

Primary for the Likɔɔnl translators is a recognition that this text communicates divine action through original apostolic calls to repent and trust in Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the triune God. That original call to repentance, faith, and a transformed life is still intended to be proclaimed for the Bikɔɔm hearers today, but precisely what that calling looks like will be determined by Kasi a Naay (the Holy Spirit) connected to Yisa Masiya (Jesus Christ) as he is lived out as Uyudaan (head-owner/Lord) of Bikɔɔm followers of Yisa who follow in relation to other Christians from all tribes (Esala 2011, 2-3).

However, the ancient text was composed in a real life source situation, and in order to be loyal to the source we need to take its historical contingencies seriously. The team uses interpretive methodologies, such as literary-rhetorical criticism, narrative analysis, and performance criticism, similar to those used on any other ancient text (Esala 2011, 11). Through these methods they attempt to understand the various functions³¹ of the source communicative situation. Their attitude is one of humility with the intention that through their interpretation the apostolic message centered in Jesus’s death and resurrection (the appellative function) is communicated clearly for the Bikɔɔm hearers.

5 Ideology and *Skopostheorie*

Since I am advocating dialogue in forming the *skopos*, it must be acknowledged that dialogue about translation and translation work itself takes place in the real world where partners represent socio-cultural groups with whom they consciously or unconsciously share presuppositions, beliefs, and values. These beliefs are often referred to as ideologies. Ideology can be defined as “an integrated system of beliefs, assumptions, and values” that reflects “the needs and interests of a group or class at a particular time in history” (Davis 1975, 14). As partners come together to work on setting the *skopos*, they will represent different ideological positions consciously or unconsciously and they will negotiate their ideologies in one way or another. Setting a *skopos* is an ideological activity. Even if a translation has no *skopos*, it is not free of ideology (Nord 2006). Being aware of our ideologies, then, can help partners as they assert preferences and negotiate differences in forming the *skopos* and writing the translation brief.

Skopostheorie admits that translation is intentional activity seeking to change things (Nord 1997, 19). In the translation brief, initiators, translators, and potential end users are all encouraged to articulate their own powerful intentions—intentions of

²⁹ For a relevance theory perspective on authorial intention, see Gibbs 1999.

³⁰ The concept of the necessity of a single author is challenged in oral performance studies, which refers to situations that are appropriately described as having “distributed authorship” (Pathways Project 2010). The shared tradition between performer and audience becomes the decisive authority in interpreting “intention” (Maxey 2009, 99).

³¹ Nord (1997, 40-44) identifies the referential function of texts (phenomena of the world), the expressive function (emotive), the appellative function (inducement to action), and the phatic function (relational).

communicating and appropriating God’s message, intentions of service toward others, and the potential benefits in all this for themselves. This practice of laying out intentions attempts to take seriously the interests of others by sharing and discovering each other’s motives and interests. The process disambiguates the involvement of the various participants and gives impetus to the joint initiators to begin to mediate the differences in the formation of the *skopos*. It is also hoped that the process will help to mitigate the pervasiveness of the sinful desire to dominate under any number of banners including the banner of Christian mission, denominational loyalty, tribal identity, or political association.

One critique is that this approach seems to be dominated by a low context culture, where all cards are laid on the table, as compared to a high context culture where information is less explicit and more often inferred. Laying all cards on the table may be even more difficult in politically or religiously charged environments. The Ghanaian context is more of a high context culture than my own North American culture, but one that is also open to religious dialogue and exchange. Whatever the context, much can be overcome by careful listening and sensitivity to power dynamics. Such listening can take place on many levels—the local audience level, within professional secular and religious groups, and on the political level. How much of this varied dialogue goes into the published translation brief is itself a question that should not be decided unilaterally.

5.1 Cultural ideological clashes in the Likɔɔnl translation brief

In the Likɔɔnl New Testament translation we have taken the general approach to prioritize the Bikɔɔm ideological perspective in setting the *skopos*. The Bikɔɔm perspective, however, is not uniform, nor is it static, and needs to be considered in light of insights brought in from a broader Ghanaian or African perspective that has more historical interaction with Christianity than the brief three decades of the Bikɔɔm (Bessong and Kenmogne 2007, 380). The translation consultant, Dr. Fabian N. Dapila, was relied upon to augment the translators with this broader African perspective. This African perspective also helps mitigate against uncritically acceding to the Western globalizing influence. As I described above, whereas some Likɔɔnl users prefer foreignization of key terms implicitly in the direction of modern Westernized understandings rather than Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religious conceptions³² or traditional Bikɔɔm understandings, the African approach as put forth in the brief prefers domestication toward traditional Bikɔɔm religious terminology and, where the gap is too wide, the insertion of a footnote to describe the ancient Mediterranean concept (van der Jagt 2010, 115).³³ What is avoided is foreignization in the direction of Western cultural understandings that correspond neither to the ancient Mediterranean concept nor the Bikɔɔm concept. Even still, because of the desire among many Bikɔɔm to avoid an uncritical adoption of their premodern traditional religious past, this point needs to be critically and creatively considered on a regular basis (Esala 2011, 5-6).

5.2 Ideology of the printed text and orality

When translation participants are encouraged to pay attention to ideological perspectives, it may unearth unexamined biases that should be discussed. One such unexamined ideology that is getting more attention recently is called the ideology of the text (Pathways Project 2011a). The concept of the written text implies a certain type of interchange of ideas that is assumed and unexamined in Western culture. The written text is central in the media marketplace in the West, but not nearly so pervasively in the cultures where many Bible translators work.³⁴

BT practitioners have accounted for oral media by reading written translations and recording them in “non-print media.” However, orality studies indicate that if the original *skopos* of the translation involves primarily written text, it is difficult to overcome writing simply by recording. The oral product has the scent of written text.

Rather than falling into the great divide theory which posits literacy and orality as binary opposites, John Miles Foley, beginning from an assumption of the unique nature of oral poetry, has laid out four types of oral poetry with different oral/written media types (Foley 2002, 39).

	Composition	Performance	Reception
1. Oral performance	Oral	Oral	Aural
2. Voiced texts	Written	Oral	Aural
3. Voices from the past	Oral/Written	Oral/Written	Aural/Written
4. Written oral poems	Written	Written	Written

³² Martin Hengel (1974) argues that in the New Testament we are dealing with a general Mediterranean culture which includes Greeks, Jews, and Romans. Nevertheless, the character of the texts reflects a Jewish sphere of society. See Robbins 1991, 332.

³³ Van der Jagt in general favors foreignization as a translation strategy and places a high value on translator honesty. I suggest that the brief itself can cover many of the decisions that otherwise might be put into footnotes.

³⁴ Nord also discusses the importance of the medium in text interpretation that is translation-oriented (2005, 52, 62-66).

Foley begins from the perspective of orality and its unique nature rather than beginning with written text and adapting it to orality as most BT practitioners do. Hence any written text that is recorded does not necessarily qualify as a voiced text in Foley's terms. But a text that is written and from its inception is imagined as to how it will *sound* is more likely to have specifically oral qualities and thus be a voiced text. Some biblical scholars are suggesting that much of the Bible was originally composed as voiced texts in this way or in some cases as oral performance with minimal reference to a written text.³⁵

5.3 Oral-written ideological clashes in the Likɔɔnl translation project

It is interesting to note that the expatriate researchers involved in the Likɔɔnl translation were in favor of approaches more sensitive to orality, even sidestepping literacy, but the Bikɔɔm leaders, who have been to a great extent shaped by orality, opposed oral methodologies that excluded literacy.³⁶ This has led the team to deeper consideration of oral and written symbiosis rather than binary opposition (Foley 2002, 36-38; see also Esala 2011, 9-12).

For an example of the type of ideological clashes between literacy and orality to which I am alluding, I share this story from the Bikɔɔm area. A church-planting mission organization that has used primarily oral Bible teaching methods has found the same resistance to strictly oral methodology from new converts in the Bikɔɔm area. One Bikɔɔm Christian who had been brought up in the story-telling tradition of this church told the American missionary who taught him, "You are scattering us like tortoise meat in the forest."³⁷ The Bikɔɔm traditional stories typecast the tortoise as a very traditional slow-moving animal that other wiser animals tend to cheat. The tortoise is often compared to the Bikɔɔm people themselves who have clung to their traditions, do what is right, and often feel cheated by other people. I think the implication of the statement is that by using only traditional methodologies (i.e., exclusively oral) the missionaries are contributing to their exploitation or at least not helping them overcome it. This example illustrates the perception that many leaders from many churches have expressed to the Likɔɔnl translation team and why they want to engage literacy on some level. This is parallel to their desire to engage issues of globalization and modern development rather than retain an exclusively premodern Bikɔɔm worldview.

6 Skopos in action: The Likɔɔnl New Testament translation

6.1 The formation of the translation brief

The translation brief for the Likɔɔnl New Testament began in late 2004 when I began trying to apply principles in *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference* in training new translators. The translators had already attended workshops using equivalence models in translation training (Barnwell 1986). At that time, I had seen no examples of a translation brief apart from the frames of reference inferred from existing translations in *Frames* (Wilt 2003, 14-16, Appendix F). Over the next few years the translators worked voluntarily and did some provisional translation drafting as well as working on literacy. In 2008 when I was encouraged by Lutheran Bible Translators (LBT) to write the brief, the Likɔɔnl translation project took up the challenge to define a *skopos*, to research and write a translation brief, and to try to implement the brief throughout a New Testament translation.³⁸ Workshops were organized for the translation reviewers who represented different denominations and different Bikɔɔm tribes to discuss possible translation options. As mentioned above, a test booklet was produced at the end of 2008, experimenting with a more heavily footnoted written text and more rhythmic renditions of poetry. The results of that test were to make footnotes short and pointed and to include pictures and other media in the explication of background material. The team also realized that a greater linguistic similarity to a well-known English translation was desirable for the community. At that same time the translation project was being organized in partnership between LBT and the Bible Society of Ghana. Subsequently, the input of Dr. Dapila as the Translation Consultant also modified the brief, especially in the more rigorous implementation of the base/model method of translation and the influence of the African ideological perspective as discussed in Section 5.1 above. The brief was officially revisited and revised in 2011 when a new translator was brought on board and at that time it was posted online. A summary of the translation brief will be included in the Likɔɔnl language with the preface to the New Testament. The completion of the project will be the time to check and see how the translation fleshed out in relation to its brief and how well the brief actually anticipated the desires and expectations of the host churches and communities.

³⁵ See Rhoads 2006; Iverson 2009; Robbins 1995. Acknowledging that orality and literacy interact on a continuum, Robbins prefers to call New Testament culture a "rhetorical culture."

³⁶ Moore (2006, 95) suggests the subversive native desire for a printed biblical text may not be to read as such, but may also be a *materialist* strategy of resistance to foreign domination, which refuses to engage with the Bible apart from its materiality. That includes a resistance to reading it, but still wanting it as a book. Along this line, Esala (2011, 3), states that *some* users desire to use the translation as *fetish*.

³⁷ Weston Leibee, personal communication, June 14, 2011.

³⁸ Dr. James Maxey, who was then the Director of LBT's Program Ministries gave a lot of theoretical guidance in writing the brief.

6.2 The Likɔɔnl *skopos*

The *skopos* of the Likɔɔnl New Testament translation project is for a written text sensitive to aural reception primarily to be used for reading in church. Secondly, the translation should serve as a symbol of pride and unity for the Bikɔɔm and therefore should be similar in look and status to other Ghanaian translations. Third, the written text should be appropriate to be adapted for aural reception in mass and interpersonal media (Esala 2011, 9-12).

The first two *skopoi* are compatible enough. However, the third *skopos* begins to push things in a new direction. If it is followed closely, the Likɔɔnl New Testament translation begins to look unacceptably different from other Ghanaian and English translations. End users are very sensitive on this point. This has led researchers to consider the idea of “translating the translation” for more performance-based oral performance stages.

6.3 A written text for oral media: *Scripture song case study*

One method to produce oral media in BT is through translated Scripture put to traditional musical genres (Larsen 2008). Consequently, soon after the Likɔɔnl team finished Ruth and Luke, the project office sponsored a Scripture song workshop to identify audience felt needs, Scripture texts applicable to those felt needs, and appropriate traditional musical genres for the Scripture texts. These new songs were then recorded to be sold on cassette tape and for free cell phone distribution. However, these media had a limited distribution.

Then at the 2010 Bikɔɔm Lutheran Christmas convention, innovative choir leaders who had been present at the Scripture song workshop utilized the convention as an opportunity for live performance of their songs. The Christmas convention is a time when all the smaller churches and outposts of the churches gather together at a particular town, and each church comes with a choir ready to perform. Some of those choir leaders had been present at the Scripture song workshop. Those choir leaders did not use songs from the workshop. Instead they had choirs perform new songs. These song lyrics were in some cases limited to the actual published translated text, but lines were usually rearranged and refrains added.

To analyze this adaptation of the Scripture song concept, performance theory is helpful (Foley 2002, 84, 164-65). Two characteristics common to oral performances surfaced in this Christmas convention example: the performance environment and the freedom of the performer. The Christmas convention is a performance environment where the choirs and audience operate according to an unspoken contract within a church worship context. There is a sense of competition as each choir wants to do their best to represent themselves and their town by showing they know how to praise God in a Christian fashion. There is also a benefit for choir leaders to innovate and thus distinguish themselves from others. The performer(s) has a message and needs to display some unique talent in performing that message, and needs a performance environment that is conducive to displaying that talent.

None of this is surprising as we recognize that the marketplace of orality is expressly different from the marketplace of printed texts. An innovation’s success in the oral marketplace is going to have to follow the oral method of doing things, not the printed text method of doing things (Pathways Project 2011b).³⁹ Perhaps we could produce translations with the oral marketplace in mind. A written translation might consider the oral patterns in the source text (see Scott and Dean 1996, 311-78; Scott 1999, 101-18; Horsely 2006) and possible performance stages from the source context and then find instrumental ways to translate those oral patterns in the host text as well as to translate and provide helps for the performance stage in the host context. Ernst Wendland has provided many suggestions for how written texts can take these source and host performance dynamics into account (Wendland 2008b).

7 Challenges for implementing *Skopostheorie*

In the past few years, the language of *Skopostheorie* has become part of the discussion in relation to Bible translation. But the concepts still need to disseminate to translation organizations, church bodies, and host communities. If more translation projects are to implement *Skopostheorie*, more guidance and examples need to be made available about how to do research with the host communities in relation to setting a *skopos*. How can communities become aware of translation options they have never seen? How can a team effectively craft a *skopos* and a brief in dialogue with the prospective users so that their desires for usage and expectations about translation are addressed? Some honest discussion needs to happen about the challenges of translation organizations having productive, honest dialogue with individuals from the host communities, and church bodies present in the host communities. Then as translation begins, a further challenge is to train translators to access the type of information that is relevant for their translation *skopos* by teaching them to use the translation looping process in text interpretation and in translation itself so that the brief becomes an integral part of what it means to interpret the source and to translate.⁴⁰ Then after publication, it

³⁹ The Pathways Project is especially helpful in learning about the unique natures of oral tradition, written texts, and the internet media.

⁴⁰ The looping process means referring to the source text and the translation instructions in a circular fashion. As translators study the source text, they should continuously refer back to the *skopos* and their knowledge of the audience to see which source elements can be translated as they are, and which elements need to be adapted in order to accomplish the purpose of this translation for this audience.

is very important to evaluate how effectively a project used their brief, and to ask how effectively a brief anticipated the host communities' desires for the translation and the resulting functions of the translation in the host communities.

Given the fact that Christianity is growing in the global south in ways that have not happened since the conversion of Europe, while much of the infrastructural and historical power of Christianity including Bible translation remains in the West (Sanneh 2005, 3), implementing *Skopostheorie* could help foster better communication between host communities, churches, and international translation organizations. From a Christian perspective, *Skopostheorie* helps translation teams serve the communities for whom they translate so that together initiators, translators, church bodies, and host communities are engaged together by God through the interpretation and translation of Scripture. The Likoonl New Testament project has discovered that *Skopostheorie* provides a framework, to borrow a phrase from Lamin Sanneh, that has the potential to build bridges and not dams (Sanneh 2008, 287).

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Bible versions cited

NA	Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament (edition superscripted)
NBV	De Nieuw Bijbel Vertaling
NIV	New International Version
UBS	UBS Greek New Testament (edition superscripted)

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