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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **A Critical Assessment of the Principle of Functionality in Skopos Theory and its Application to Quran Translation**

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**| ABSTRACT**

This study critically examines the principle of functionality in Skopos Theory and its applicability to the translation of the Holy Quran. The research explores whether the purpose-oriented nature of Skopos Theory aligns with the linguistic, cultural, and spiritual characteristics of the Quran. Using a qualitative and descriptive approach, one key Quranic verse is analyzed through selected English translations to evaluate how functionality influences the translation process and its final outcome. The findings reveal that while the functional principle enhances communicative effectiveness and audience accessibility, it remains limited in addressing the sacred and immutable purpose of the Quranic text. The study concludes that a strict functionalist approach cannot fully capture the divine and theological intent of the Quran, which highlights the need for a more balanced method that acknowledges both the communicative and spiritual dimensions of sacred translation.

**| KEYWORDS**

Quran translation, Skopos Theory, functionality, Quranic meaning, translation challenges.

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### **1. Introduction**

Translating the Holy Quran into different languages is a widespread and ongoing effort around the world. However, even with great care, these translations often come at a cost to the original text. The Holy Quran is regarded as a miraculous and linguistically unique work, which makes it especially challenging to translate. Even exegetes sometimes struggle to interpret its meanings within Arabic, let alone when rendering it into linguistically and culturally different languages such as English. The translation of the Quran has attracted considerable attention from both Arab and Western scholars, leading to a vast body of work. Over time, translators have turned to various translation theories to bridge the linguistic and cultural gaps between the source and target texts, as well as their respective cultures. Many of these theories aim to facilitate communication and make the message more accessible to new audiences. However, they often risk diminishing the sacred and authoritative nature of the original text.

Among these approaches, Skopos Theory has emerged as a major functionalist model that views translation as a purposeful act. Developed by Hans J. Vermeer in the late 1970s, it argues that the success of a translation should be measured by how well it fulfills its intended function—or Skopos—in the target culture, rather than by strict adherence to the wording of the source text. This view gives translators the flexibility to adapt their work according to the goals, audience, and context of the translation.

While this approach has proven effective in many secular fields such as technical, literary, and commercial translation, it presents serious challenges when applied to sacred texts like the Quran. The core principle of Skopos Theory—functionality—assumes that translation serves specific human purposes that can be shaped by the translator or commissioner. The Quran, however, conveys a divine message whose purpose is fixed, eternal, and universal. It transcends the cultural and temporal limits that normally influence translation. Therefore, applying a functionalist perspective to the translation of the Quran risks reducing its sacred and timeless meaning to context-bound human goals.

This conflict between functionality and the sacred nature of the Quran raises important questions about the suitability of Skopos Theory for Quran translation. This study addresses these questions by critically examining the principle of functionality and assessing its adequacy in guiding translations of the Holy Quran.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Skopos Theory has revolutionized translation studies by prioritizing the intended purpose of the target text over literal equivalence. Yet, this principle becomes problematic when applied to texts whose function is divinely established. The Quran's primary purpose—to guide humanity—is not open to redefinition by the translator or the target audience. This creates a conflict between the functionalist flexibility promoted by Skopos Theory and the fixed, sacred function of Quranic discourse.

### **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to critically assess the principle of functionality in Skopos Theory and its relevance to the translation of the Holy Quran. It aims to explore whether the theory's emphasis on communicative purpose aligns with the Quran's immutable divine function. By analyzing how functionality influences translation decisions and outcomes, the research seeks to highlight the theory's limitations and propose a more text- and context-sensitive understanding of purpose in sacred translation.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent can the principle of functionality in Skopos Theory respond to the specific linguistic and spiritual challenges of translating the Quran?
2. How does applying a functional approach influence the translator's ability to maintain the Quran's sacred meaning and theological depth?
3. What modifications to the concept of functionality could make Skopos Theory more appropriate for translating sacred texts like the Quran?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Features of the Holy Quran**

The Holy Quran is the literal word of Allah, revealed in Arabic to the Prophet Mohamed (peace be upon him). It occupies a unique position as both a spiritual guide and a legal, ethical, and moral authority for Muslims. As Abdel-Haleem (2001) notes, "the Quran is the supreme authority in Islam. It is the fundamental and paramount source of the creed, rituals, ethics, and laws of the Islamic religion" (p. ix). Consequently, the Quran holds a central place in the lives of Muslims, shaping both their beliefs and their conduct.

Beyond its spiritual significance, the Quran is distinguished by its unique linguistic and stylistic features. It is widely regarded as a miraculous text, whose eloquence and structure cannot be imitated. Its style reflects a distinct *l'jāz*, or inimitability, which underscores its divine origin and linguistic perfection. The Quran's language is marked by precise word choice, rhythmic flow, and rhetorical elegance, qualities that collectively set it apart from all human compositions.

Arberry (1980) observes that the Quran is "neither prose nor poetry, but a unique fusion of both" (p. 10). This fusion of forms makes translation exceptionally challenging, as both the meaning and the aesthetic impact of the text are deeply rooted in the Arabic language. Its use of imagery, metaphors, repetition, and sound patterns gives the text a distinctly musical and persuasive quality that appeals to both the mind and the emotions.

Abdul-Raof (2001) argues that the beauty of the Quran's language and style exceeds human capacity to replicate it in translation. He explains that "Quranic expressions and structures are Quran-bound and cannot be reproduced in an equivalent manner to the original in terms of structure, mystical effect on the reader, and intentionality of source text" (p. 1), emphasizing the doctrine of *I'jāz al-Qur'ān*, which affirms the Quran's inimitability. This principle reflects the belief that the Quran's eloquence and structural perfection are of divine origin rather than human creation. In the same vein, Abdel Haleem (2001) observes that "both followers and opponents of the Prophet recognised its literary supremacy and inimitability" (p. 8), reinforcing the idea that the Quran's linguistic and rhetorical excellence transcends human ability.

The Quran's coherence, logical structure, and harmonious composition allow it to convey complex theological and moral messages with clarity and precision. Its combination of spiritual depth, linguistic mastery, and rhetorical power makes it distinct from all other texts. These attributes make it a miraculous speech, unparalleled by human expression. Thus, the Holy Quran must be considered a special genre that "requires a special theory taking into consideration its sensitivity and specificity" (Zahid & Belghita, 2020, p. 8).

## **2.2 Challenges of Translating the Holy Quran**

Given its universal address to all humanity, the Prophet Mohamed's (PBUH) mission was to convey the Quran's message to people of all nations, languages, and cultures. Therefore, translation plays a vital role in fulfilling this mission, enabling non-Arabic speakers to access, understand, and reflect on the Quran's guidance. Since only about 20% of Muslims are native Arabic speakers, the vast majority depend on translations to grasp the meanings of the Holy Book. In this context, Abdul-Raof (2001) further emphasizes that "the translation of the Quran is seen as a major positive contribution to humankind and a magnificent promotion to cross-cultural understating" (p. 179). Beyond facilitating comprehension for non-Arabic speakers, translations also promote interfaith dialogue by allowing readers and scholars from diverse backgrounds to engage with its teachings.

Despite their necessity, Quranic translations face numerous linguistic and interpretive challenges. The text's structure, style, and word choices carry profound religious, legal, and rhetorical significance. It employs complex syntax, shifts in pronouns and verb tenses, and intricate intertextual references that create multiple layers of meaning. Cultural and historical allusions, metaphorical expressions, and specialized terminology further complicate the translator's task. Additionally, the Quran is a performative text, meant to be recited, memorized, and reflected upon within Islamic worship and scholarship. This performative nature requires that translations not only convey the intellectual meaning of the text but also preserve its spiritual and aesthetic impact, ensuring that the message resonates with both the mind and the heart.

Translators must carefully balance clarity, comprehensibility, and faithfulness while maintaining the sacred and cohesive nature of the Quran. The challenge lies in conveying its divine message accurately without sacrificing its linguistic beauty, rhetorical power, or theological depth. In essence, translating the Quran demands more than linguistic skill—it requires a deep awareness of its spiritual significance and a sensitive approach that respects its sacred character.

The linguistic, cultural, and spiritual complexities of the Quran highlight the need for a translation approach that goes beyond a literal, word-for-word rendering. Various translation theories provide frameworks to guide translators in making informed decisions that balance fidelity to the original text with accessibility for the target audience. Among these, Skopos Theory, which emphasizes the purpose (*skopos*) of a translation and the intended function of the target text, offers valuable guidance for navigating the delicate task of conveying both meaning and impact.

## **2.3 Overview of Skopos Theory**

Skopos Theory emerged in the early 1970s as a functionalist approach to translation, marking a significant shift in the field of translation studies. The theory was developed against the backdrop of a broader paradigm shift in translation studies. In this regard, Munday (2001) notes that "the 1970s and 1980s saw a move away from the static linguistic typologies of translation shifts and the emergence and flourishing in Germany of a functionalist and communicative approach to the analysis of translation" (p. 72).

In the same vein, Schäffner (2009) observes that "the theories developed by Hans J. Vermeer (1978) and Justa Holz-Mänttari (1984) reflect a paradigm shift from predominantly linguistic approaches and rather formal translation theories, firmly situated within the framework of applied and comparative linguistics, to a more functionally and socio-culturally oriented concept of translation" (p. 116). Similarly, House (2015) reinforces this observation, stating that "in the 1980s, following the 'pragmatic turn'

in linguistics, the functionalist paradigm shifted the focus of translation studies towards a consideration of the extralinguistic setting of translation" (p. 11).

Vermeer (1987) asserts that "translation problems cannot be solved depending on linguistics alone" (p. 29), while he further explains that "any form of translational action, including therefore translation itself, may be conceived as an action; any action has an aim, a purpose" (1989, p. 29). Nord (1997) clarifies that "this is why Vermeer calls his theory Skopostheorie, a theory of purposeful action" (p. 12), with the term *skopos* serving as a technical designation for the aim or purpose of a translation. Pym (2010) also notes that "this theory insists that a translation is designed to achieve a purpose" (p. 43).

The pioneers of Skopos Theory, often associated with the German School of functionalist translation, include Hans J. Vermeer, Justa Holz-Mänttari, Katharina Reiss, and Christiane Nord. Munday (2001) highlights the collective contribution of these scholars in shaping the functionalist approach to translation (p. 71). Katharina Reiss (1971/1988) is recognized for laying the groundwork for functionalist translation criticism, with her work *Possibilities and Limits of Translation Criticism* regarded by Nord (2006) as "the starting point for the scholarly analysis of translation in German" (p. 9). Other key figures include Justa Holz-Mänttari, who developed the theory of translational action (1984), and Christiane Nord, known for her "Function plus Loyalty Principle" (1988/1997).

The central principle of Skopos Theory is that the purpose of a translation should guide all translational decisions. Translators are encouraged to prioritize the intended function of the target text and the needs of the target audience, rather than adhering rigidly to formal equivalence with the source text. This functionalist perspective has significantly influenced translation studies, offering a flexible, goal-oriented framework for analyzing and producing translations across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts.

#### ***2.4 The Principle of Functionality in Skopos Theory***

The principle of functionality lies at the core of Skopos Theory, developed by Hans J. Vermeer in the late 1970s as part of the functionalist movement in translation studies. Vermeer redefined translation as a purposeful human activity, guided by the notion that every translation must serve a specific *Skopos*—a Greek term meaning "purpose" or "aim." This represented a major shift from earlier linguistic and equivalence-based approaches by emphasizing the role of the translation's purpose in determining translation strategies and evaluating outcomes.

The principle of functionality lies at the core of Skopos Theory and serves as its fundamental backbone. Functionalist theorists argue that a translation is considered successful when it achieves its intended communicative purpose within a given context. As Nord (1997) states, "the prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose (*Skopos*) of the overall translational action" (p. 27). She refers to this as the "functionality principle," emphasizing that the translator's decisions should be guided primarily by the function the target text is meant to fulfill. Similarly, Vermeer (2000) defines *skopos* as "the aim or purpose of a translation," stressing that "all translations need to be assigned a *skopos*" (p. 227). From this perspective, translation is not merely a linguistic transfer but a purpose-oriented human activity. Vermeer (2000) further clarifies that the theory "campaigns against the belief that there is no aim (in any sense whatever), that translation is a purposeless activity" (p. 237).

Before delving deeper into the principle of functionality, it is important to note that Skopos Theory rests on several interconnected principles. These include the *Skopos* rule (which prioritizes the purpose of the translation), the Coherence rule (which ensures the target text is coherent for its target audience), and the Fidelity rule (which maintains an appropriate relationship between the source text and the target text). Together, these rules create a hierarchy in which the *skopos* of the translation takes precedence, determining the strategies and methods used by the translator. Within this framework, the present paper focuses specifically on the principle of functionality, as it represents the practical and communicative essence of Skopos Theory.

According to Nord (2006), functionality means that "a text (in this case: a translation) 'works' for its receivers in a particular communicative situation in the way the sender wants it to work" (p. 31). In other words, a translation should effectively perform the function it was designed for. For example, "if the purpose is information, the text should offer this in a comprehensible form to the audience; if the purpose is to amuse, then the text should actually make its readers laugh or at least smile" (p. 31). It is, therefore, the translator's responsibility to assess the target audience's linguistic and cultural background, anticipate their level of comprehension, and consider how different linguistic or stylistic choices might affect their interpretation of the text.

In this sense, the effectiveness of a translation depends on the audience's willingness and ability to engage in the communicative act. A translation cannot function adequately unless it resonates with its intended receivers, since the same text may evoke different responses from the same reader at different times, or from readers belonging to distinct cultural backgrounds. Functionality, therefore, is not an intrinsic quality of a text but a relational one. As Nord (2006) emphasizes, "functionality is not an inherent quality of a text. It is a quality attributed to the text by the receiver, in the moment of reception" (p. 31). Ultimately, it is the receiver who determines whether the text "functions" in a given communicative situation.

However, when applied to Quran translation, the principle of functionality gains particular significance. Since the Quran addresses all humanity and fulfills multiple communicative purposes, including spiritual, moral, and instructional purposes, the translator's task is to ensure that the translation functions effectively for diverse audiences while conveying the intended message faithfully.

### **2.5 Criticism of Functionality in Translating the Holy Quran**

While the principle of functionality is a cornerstone of Skopos Theory, it becomes problematic when applied to sacred texts such as the Holy Quran. In Skopos Theory, the translator's priority is to produce a target text that serves a specific purpose and meets the needs of the target audience. This raises a crucial question: Is the functionality of a text an inherent feature, or is it determined by the translator and the translation commissioner?

In the case of the Holy Quran, functionality is not a flexible or negotiable aspect—it is embedded in the divine message itself. The Quran's ultimate purpose is to convey guidance from God to all of humanity. If functionality were determined by translators or clients, as Skopos Theory suggests, the translation of the Quran would risk becoming highly variable. Each translation could be shaped by a different purpose, audience, or cultural expectation, which could result in multiple interpretations that might distort the original intent of the sacred message.

Moreover, Skopos Theory encourages translators to adapt the source text to the expectations of the target audience to ensure communicative success. Such adaptation may be appropriate in secular or pragmatic texts, but it presents serious challenges when applied to divine revelation. The sacred nature of the Quran requires that its divine message be transmitted faithfully and consistently, without alteration or adjustment to suit contemporary contexts or reader preferences.

Therefore, while functionality serves as a valuable concept in general translation practice, its application to the translation of the Holy Quran undermines the stability and universality of the text's message. The translator's role, in this context, should not be to redefine the purpose of the Quranic text, but rather to preserve its original function, which is to offer spiritual guidance, ensuring it remains clear and accessible to readers in the target language.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Methodology of Research**

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and descriptive methodology to examine how the principle of functionality in Skopos Theory applies to the translation of the Holy Quran. This approach allows for a detailed exploration of the translation process and how the functionality principle works when applied to the translation of the Holy Quran. The interpretive aspect enables critical engagement with linguistic, cultural, and religious dimensions, while the descriptive component ensures a systematic presentation and analysis of textual observations.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

The research examines one selected verse from the Holy Quran and its English translations by three prominent translators: A. J. Arberry (1955), Muhammad Asad (1980), and Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1987). These translations are compared in order to highlight differences in linguistic, stylistic, and interpretive choices. Classical exegeses by Ibn Kathir (2000), Al-Zamakhshari (2007), and Al-Tabari (2012) are consulted to provide theological and contextual insights that inform the analysis.

The study specifically evaluates the extent to which the principle of functionality can guide translators in producing target texts that maintain the Quran's meaning, style, and spiritual purpose. By focusing on functionality, the research aims to determine whether Skopos Theory adequately addresses the unique challenges of translating a sacred text such as the Quran.

**4. Discussion and Analysis**

This verse was chosen because it encapsulates two of the most central concepts in Islamic practice—*ṣalāt* (prayer) and *zakāt* (almsgiving)—whose meanings extend beyond their literal sense to encompass spiritual, social, and moral dimensions. The co-occurrence of these terms throughout the Quran reflects the inseparable link between worship and social responsibility in Islam. Moreover, the lexical and conceptual richness of both terms presents a significant challenge for translators seeking to convey their full religious and ethical implications in English. By analyzing this verse, the study aims to illustrate how different translation strategies interpret these core concepts and to assess how well these renderings align with the intended function and meaning of the original text.

The terms *ṣalāt* and *zakāt*, two fundamental acts of worship in Islam, exhibit multiple layers of meaning across the translations of Yusuf Ali, Asad, and Arberry. Before analyzing the selected verse in detail, it is important to note that the term *zakāt* frequently appears in the Quran alongside *ṣalāt*. A preliminary examination of the translations under study shows a consistent rendering of *ṣalāt* as “prayer” by all four translators. However, *zakāt* has been interpreted with notable variation: Yusuf Ali translates it as “regular charity,” Asad uses the simpler term “charity,” and Arberry employs the term “alms.”

**Translation Assessment of Ṣalāt and Zakāt**

وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتُوا الزَّكَاةَ وَارْكَعُوا مَعَ الرَّاكِعِينَ (البقرة : 43)		
wa'āqimuwā al-ṣwalāta wa'ātuwā al-zwakāta wārka'uwā ma'a al-rwāki'īna		
<b>Yusuf Ali</b>	<b>Asad</b>	<b>Arberry</b>
“And be steadfast in <b>prayer</b> ; Practise <b>regular charity</b> ; and bow down your heads with those who bow down (in worship).” (1987, p. 27)	“And be constant in <b>prayer</b> , and <b>spend in charity</b> , and bow down in prayer with all who thus bow down.” (1980, p. 35)	“And <b>perform the prayer</b> , and <b>pay the alms</b> , and bow with those that bow.” (1955, p. 7)

The selected verse includes two fundamental pillars of Islamic practice—*ṣalāt* and *zakāt*—which together represent core aspects of Muslim faith and worship. These terms are not only central to Islamic theology but also deeply embedded in the linguistic, cultural, and spiritual framework of the Quran. Their translation, therefore, provides an ideal case to assess whether the functionality principle proposed by Skopos Theory can adequately preserve the sacred meaning of such religiously significant terms.

All the translators under study—Yusuf Ali, Asad, and Arberry—render *ṣalāt* as “prayer.” However, while the English term “prayer” may appear functionally appropriate for the target audience, it fails to communicate the full religious and ritualistic meaning of *ṣalāt*. In Islamic practice, *ṣalāt* refers to the obligatory five daily prayers, each performed at fixed times and preceded by ritual purification (*wuḍūʿ*). The English term “prayer,” as defined in general dictionaries, refers broadly to an act of speaking to or worshiping God and can denote any form of supplication. It does not convey the obligatory, structured, and ritual dimensions intrinsic to *ṣalāt*. Functionally, therefore, the translators’ choice facilitates accessibility for target readers but fails to capture the sacred and performative nature of the original term. From a Skopos perspective, this approach might serve the communicative goal of comprehension, yet it undermines fidelity to the religious meaning that the source text intends to preserve.

A similar issue arises with the translation of *zakāt*. The three translators differ slightly in their renderings: Yusuf Ali uses “regular charity,” Asad chooses “charity” and later refers to it as “purifying dues,” while Arberry translates it as “alms.” Although these terms share a semantic field of generosity and giving, they do not fully convey the precise theological implications of *zakāt*. In Islam, *zakāt* is a mandatory act of worship—an obligation to purify wealth and soul, calculated according to specific legal parameters (2.5% of one’s savings), and performed as an expression of obedience to God. By contrast, “charity,” “dues,” or “alms” in English generally imply voluntary acts of kindness, detached from spiritual purification or divine command.

Yusuf Ali’s use of “regular charity” attempts to emphasize the obligatory and consistent nature of *zakāt*, yet the term remains insufficient. It domesticates the concept for a Western audience but sacrifices its sacred and legal essence. Similarly, Asad’s “charity” and “purifying dues” show awareness of the purificatory aspect of *zakāt*, yet the use of “dues” risks confusing it with taxation or social obligation, concepts foreign to the religious intention of the original. Arberry’s “alms” further narrows the scope of meaning, reducing *zakāt* to a mere act of almsgiving without its spiritual dimensions.

From a functionalist standpoint, these renderings might be justified as attempts to make the text accessible and communicatively effective for non-Muslim readers. However, functionality alone proves inadequate for translating terms that embody divine injunctions and sacred rituals. The functional equivalence achieved here is superficial as it communicates a general sense of giving or worship but omits the theological, spiritual, and legal dimensions central to *ṣalāt* and *zakāt*.

Therefore, the application of the functionality principle in this context fails to ensure adequacy in translation. Religious terms of this nature require more than functional alignment; they demand a strategy that preserves their sacred, religious, and cultural-specific meaning. The translator's role extends beyond ensuring communicative efficiency to safeguarding the sacredness and depth of the message. Thus, while functional equivalence may enhance accessibility, it cannot replace the need for faithful conveyance of meaning—particularly in the translation of the Quran, where each term carries profound theological and ritual significance.

### Findings

The translators' attempts to render the term *zakāt* into accessible forms for target text readers—such as “charity,” or “alms,”—reflect an application of the functionality principle central to Skopos Theory. By prioritizing the communicative purpose and the target audience's cultural expectations, these translators sought to produce a text that functions effectively within the target context. However, this functional adaptation results in a significant loss of the term's sacred and legal connotations. The religious meaning of *zakāt* is reduced to a general moral or social act. In this case, the functionality principle, while effective in achieving accessibility, proves inadequate for conveying the theological precision and spiritual essence embedded in the Quranic message.

Given the depth and specificity of *zakāt* in Islamic discourse, transliteration offers a more faithful alternative to the functional approach. Preserving the original term respects the Quran's religious authority and prevents semantic dilution. Moreover, translators must have a sound understanding of Quranic exegesis (*tafsīr*) to interpret such concepts accurately. Without this exegetical awareness, the application of the functionality principle risks oversimplifying divine concepts, prioritizing communicative success over doctrinal integrity. Thus, while functionality may facilitate comprehension, it ultimately fails to capture the full sacred dimension of Quranic terminology.

### Conclusion

The analysis of the Quran translations under study reveals that the principle of functionality, central to Skopos Theory, has limited applicability in the context of sacred texts. While functionality emphasizes adapting the text to suit the target audience's understanding and purpose, the Holy Quran's meaning is fixed, universal, and deeply embedded in its linguistic, theological, and cultural context. Functionalist approaches may enhance readability and accessibility, but they often fail to preserve the sacred, spiritual, and doctrinal dimensions that are essential to the integrity of the text. Consequently, applying the functionality principle in Quran translation risks reducing the text to a culturally familiar message at the expense of its religious and semantic integrity. This highlights the need for translation strategies that prioritize faithful transmission of meaning while maintaining the text's sacred and contextual essence.

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