Exploring Theories of Equivalence: A Critical Review

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Abstract

The notion of equivalence is one of the most important issues in translation studies that scholars and translation theorists examined in the 1960s and 1970s. Since then, it has been an issue of considerable controversy owing to the multiplicity of opinions, interpretations and definitions of the concept under discussion. A plethora of theories of equivalence, hence, came to the forefront and scholars' work, in this regard, has been categorized into three major groups: 1) linguistically-oriented approaches to translation, 2) culturally-oriented approaches to translation, 3) a combination of the two approaches. The present paper ostensibly aims to delve into the most pivotal theories of equivalence, in a critical fashion, that have been presented by translation scholars and theorists starting from Vinay and Darbelnet (1958) through Anthony Pym (2010), eventually. These theories cast considerable light on how the concept of equivalence has evolved over time. Despite the divergent views with regards to the concept in focus, it is still being used in translation literature up to the present time.

Keywords: Equivalence; translation; translator; translation theories; source language (SL); target language (TL).

1. Introduction

Before the advent of the concept of equivalence in translation studies as termed by James Homes (1988), translation scolars were deeply concerned and discussed for several centuries the widely-cited dichotomy 'Lieralism contrasted to free translation'. Such debates gave rise to the nascence of a new discipline, and established itsel as a formal academic one in its own right in the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1950s and 1960s, translation scholars began to center their attention on key linguistic issues. The notion of equivalence, therefore, was the most important and controversial one [1:59].

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The main reason behind such controversy can be ascribed to the multiplicity of opinions, interpretations and definitions with respect to determining the exact meaning and application of the term under examination on the one hand. On the other hand, this basic concept in translation theory ''has long been at the core of heated debates over the quality and fidelity of translations'' [2:76]. During the aforementioned period, through the 2000s, translation theorists suggested a plethora of theories of equivalence, namely Vinay and Darbelnet (1958), Roman Jakobson (1959), Nida and Taber (1969), John Catford (1965), Juliane House (1997), Werner Koller (1979), Peter Newmark (1981), Mona Baker (1992), and Anthony Pym (2010) Ultimately. The suggested theories, pursuant to Vanessa Leonardi, can be categorized into three major groups taking into account the role, function, purpose, and audience expectations and responses to the translated work [2:77-78]. These are :

- The first group opted for a linguistically oriented approach to translation where extra-linguistic factors, such as culture, are relegated to the sidelines.
- The second group stressed the impotance of cultural transfer from the source culture to the target culture. This approach proponents placed more emphasis on semantics and pragmatics in their translations.
- The third group combines the best aspects of the two aforementioned approches.

2. Defining the Concept of Equivalence

The notion of 'equivalence', according to the large amount of existing literature, is referred to in multiple ways by translation theorists depending on their respective understanding of the controversial term in focus. Linguistic Equivalence, pragmatic equivalence, functional equivalence, semantic equivalence, textual equivalence, ontological equivalence, dynamic equivalence are commonly used terms, amongst others, indicating the concept of equivalence as an impotant aspect in the theorists' concept of translation [2:76]. These terms are used by many writers to ''describe the nature and the extent of the relationships which exist between SL and TL texts or smaller linguistic units'' [3:49]. In Leonardi's words, equivalence-related terms, cited above, ''attempt to establish an equivalent relation between the ST and the TT'' [2:77]. In very simplified form, equivalence is meant to refer to some kind of 'sameness' or 'similarity' that ST and TT translation share at various levels, be it linguistic, cultural, textual, or all combined. However, any attempt, on the part of translators, towards achieving an exact 'equivalence' with the ST tends to be debatable. To further explain, Leonardi [2:77] provides several reasons for this questionable matter. She claims that :

1) the same text can be interpreted differently by the same person on diferent occasions.

2) subjectivity plays an important role in the translator's interpretation of the ST and his or her translation strategies.

3) the target audience expectation may play an important role in terms of equivalent effect.

3. Exploring the Concept of Equivalence

3.1   *Vinay and Darbelnet (1958): Equivalence as translation procedure*

In their seminal work ''Stylistique Comparée du Français et de l'Anglais'', which was translated into English under the theme ''Comparative Stylistic Analysis of French and English'', Vinay and Darbelnet identified a number of translation procedures and strategies based on their study of two languages: French and English. Accordingly, they put forward two primay translation strategies. These are Direct translation (literal translation), and Oblique translation (free translation). The former comprises three strategies (Borrowing, Calque, and Literal translation), whereas the latter involves four strategies (Transposition, Modulation, Adaptation, and Equivalence) [4:31-40]. Oblique translation deals with situations where, because languages differ in terms of lexis, structure and culture, ''some stylistic effects cannot be rendered satisfactorily without disturbing the syntactic or lexical order of the text'' [3:115]. Conversely, direct translation concerns itself with situations requiring the replacement of ST elements by TL elements. In such cases, the translated work is more likely to be ''unacceptable in terms of meaning, structure or style'' [3:115]. The two authors use the term '**equivalence'** to refer to a particular translation situation or task that requires rendering a text from one language to another ''using completely different stylistic and structural methods'' in an attempt to create an impression that is the same for the two languages [4:38]. In their viewpoint, equivalence is meant to replicate ''the same situation as in the original, whilst using completely different wordings'' [4:342]. For them, equivalence is useful when it comes to translating idioms and proverbs. They affirm that translators can access a number of resources while translating a given work, such as dictionaries, glossaries and collections of fixed expressions or idioms. Nevertheless, these resources do not suffice to maintain equivalence or assure an acceptable translation in terms of meaning, structure and style. Instead, translators are encouraged to find a solution by considering the context surrounding the challenging translation situation at hand in the hope to employ the right strategy. In Vinay and Darbelnet's words, 'it is in the situation of the SL text that translators have to look for a solution' [4:255].

3.2   Roman Jakobson (1959): 'Equivalence in diference'

Before dwelling on examining the notion of equivalence as perceived by Jakobson, it is important to consider his tripartite classification of translation. According to him, there are three types of translation: intralingual or 'rewording' (within one language), interlingual (between two languages), and intersemiotic (between sign systems). Needless to say, interlingual translation is the main area of reseach of translation scholars ,translators, and teachers who use translation as a tool to improve their students' performance in a particular foreign language. Roman Jakobson's [5:233]   famous statement "equivalence in difference" contributed greatly to the development of translation analysis, and translation studies worldwide, more importantly. In his widely-cited statement, he considers equivalence as 'the cardinal problem of language and the pivotal concern of linguistics [5 :233]. Like Vinay and Darbelnet, Jakobson adopted a linguistic approach to translation equivalence. They both claimed that translation is possible irrespective of the syntactical, cultural and lexical differences between two languages or 'code-units', as Jakobson terms it. The author in focus concludes, in his analysis of interlingual translation, that translation 'involves two equivalent messages in two different codes' [5 :233]. The translator's task, therefore, is to recode and transmit a message from one language to another.

3.3   Nida and Taber (1964/1969): Formal and Dynamic Equivalence

Eugene Nida's theory of translation stemed its basic substance from two major sources : 1) semantics and

pragmatics, 2) Chomsky's generative-transormational model. The latter inspired him to investigate translation from a scientific perspective and depart from a linguistically-oriented approach to translation [6 :38-40]. Nida's (1964) contribution, in collaboration with Taber (1969), in the field of translation studies lies in his clear distinction between two types of equivalence: (a) 'Formal equivalence' and (b)'Dynamic equivalence' [7:159]. Pursuant to Nida, formal equivalence ''focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content'' [7:159]. This type of equivalence concerns itself with adhering to the essence of the ST, in terms of lexis and syntactic structure, and remaining as close as possible to the original text in an effort to shy away for any possibility of distorting the original meaning. In other words, translation, therefore, is dealt with from a word-for-word approach. With regards to 'dynamic equivalence', it is an approach to translation which places much emphasis on the 'principle of equivalent effect'. To explain, Nida argues that in this type of equivalence 'the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message' [7:159]. It is axiomatic that much effort should be invested, on the part of the translator or student translator, to render the ST as natural as possible into the TT. By so doing, the translated text becomes much more intelligible and accessible to the target readers, meeting their linguistics needs and cultural expectations. 'Naturalness of expression', as termed by Nida, is observed to characterize his favourite form of translation [8:25]. This preference is justifiable as he was immersed in translating the Bible which gave supremacy to the power of the message in its relation to the receptors over the mere adherence to the original wording. From here, it is crystal clear that the author in question, compared to his predecessors, has adopted a receptor-based orientation over form-based orientation to translation. It is important to mention that dynamic equivalence can be employed in instances where the SL and the TL are diametrically different, and word-for-word translation, as a choice, will definetely corrupt the original message. It can also be used to translate novels to achieve naturalness [9:2]. However, Nida's'reader-based orientation to translation theory has been strongly criticized by a number of translation theorists, such as Lefevre, Gentzler, and Larose. The strongest one comes from Gentzler. In his book 'Contemporary Translation Theories' (2001), Gentzler [10:72] states that Nida's use of dynamic equivalence is meant to spread the ideas of Protestant Christianity and influence the receptor's assimilation of the Bible dictates.

3.4   John Catford (1965): Formal correspondence and textual equivalence

Catford predicated his linguistic-based approach to translation on Firth and Halliday's work. He has been known for introducing two basic concepts into the field of translation theory. They are 'types' and 'shifts' of translation. In his analysis of the notion of translation, Catford [11:21-24] put forward broad types or categories of translation based on three important criteria:

(1) The extent of translation (full translation contrasted to partial translation).
(2) The levels of language involved in translation (total translation as opposed to restricted translation).
(3) The grammatical rank at which the translation equivalence is established (rank-bound translation contrasted to unbounded translation)

With regards to translation 'shifts', Catford refers to them as "departures from formal correspondence in the process of going from the SL to the TL" [11:73]. He ascertains that two types of translation 'shift' exist: (1)

level shifts, where 'the SL item at one linguistic level has a TL equivalent at a different level', and (2) *category shifts* which are divided into four types: (a) structure-shifts involving change at the level of Grammar (b) class-shifts involving changes in class (e.g, rendering an adjective into a noun), (c) unit-shifts which involves changes in rank, and (d) intra-system shifts which occur when "SL and TL possess systems which approximately correspond formally as to their constitution, but when translation involves selection of a non-corresponding term in the TL system" [11:80]. In his linguistic-based approach to translation, Catford differentiated bewteen two types of equivalence: formal correspondence and textual equivalence. While the former looks for correspondence at the level of 'unit, class, structure, elements of structure' and the like, the latter looks for correspondence at the level of individual uttterances. This finds evidence in Catford's words. He maintains that textual equivalence is 'any TL text or portion of text which is observed on a particular occasion...to be the equivalent of a given SL text or portion of text". Conversely, formal equivalence is 'any TL category (unit, class, structture, elements of structure…) which can be said to occupy as nearly as possible the same place in the economy of the TL as the SL given category occupied in the SL' [11:27]. Catford, hence, received a chorus of citicism in relation to his linguistic theory of translation. Snell-Hornby, as an example, holds that Catford"s definition of textual equivalence is "circular", and his example sentences "isolated and even absurdly simplistic" [2:87].

3.5   Juliane House (1977): Semantic and pragmatic equivalence

Based on theories of language use, pragmatics-oriented, House developed her translation quality assessment model. Being a core concept in her model and translation theory, she prefers to use semantic and pragmatic equivalence. She argues that ''a translation text has a function equivalent to that of its source text'' [12:23]. Simply put, ST and TT should match one another in funtion. For her, it is viable to characterize the function of a particular text by determining the 'situational dimensions' of the ST, and taking them into consideration whenever engaging in a translation task. Central to House's discussion about her model of translation, she proposed two major translation types: overt translation and covert translation. The former does not hide the fact that it is a translation. On that account, There is no need to strive to recreate a 'second original' because the ST is inextrictably linked to the SL community and its culture rather than the TL community and its culture [12:54]. A covert translation, on the other hand, does not read like a translation. To say it another way, it hides the fact that it is a translation. In this type of translation, the translated text should be functionally equivalent in relation to the ST. Thus, the translator has to make some adjustments with respect to cultural differences by means of a 'cultural filter', as House calls it, between the ST and the TT. By so doing, the translator views ''the ST through the eyes of a taget culture member'' [12:54]. House argues that covert translation, as a strategy, can be empoyed to address any cultural community, and not a target culture as an individual addressee.

3.6   Peter Newmark (1981/1988): Semantic and communicative translation

In reaction to Nida's taxonomy with respect to the notion of equivalence (formal and dynamic equivalence), Newmark [13:185] suggested two primary methods of translation; 'semantic' and 'communicative'. The former attempts to ''render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original''. Communicative translation, on the other hand, attempts to ''produce on its

readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original'' [13:185]. It is self-evident that Newmark's semantic translation focuses on the form of the SL that is to be rendered into the TL bearing in mind the TL norms, whereas communicative translation strives to evoke the same response or 'effect' on the reader of the translation similar to the one obtained on the reader of the original. It should be pointed out that semantic translation differs from communicative translation in several aspects. Newmark deems semantic translation as being personal and individual, whereas communivative translation is viewed to be social. The former stresses the importance of the author of the ST and tends to ove-translate, whereas the latter prioitizes the message in its relation to the readership, and tends to under-translate. While semantic translation is complex in its nature, communicative translation is much simpler and clearer [13:47-48]. Altogether, Newmark's published works have been regarded as an advisory guide for trainees and translators despite the heavy criticisms he received given his strong prescriptivism [6:46].

3.7 *Werner Koller (1979/1989) : The five types of equivalence*

The concept of equivalence has been the centrepiece of German scholars in the field of translation studies during the 1970s and 1980s. Nida's designation of translation as 'science' gave a new impetus to Koller, and many others, in his examination of the area of research in question. In his Einführung in die Übersetzungswissenschaft (Introduction into the Science of Translation), Koller scrutinized the concept of equivalence and its linked term 'correspondence'. By Correspondence, he refers to comparing two language systems where differences and similarities are described on contrastive basis. Equivalence, on the other hand, deals with equivalent items in specific ST-TT pairs and contexts [6:46-47]. When examining the concept of equivalence, Koller raised a fundamental question of what is equivalent to what.in this regard, he introduces five different types of equivalence:

- Denotative equivalence which involves equivalence of the extralinguistic content of a text.
- Connotative equivalence relating to lexical choices.
- Text-normative equivalence relating to text-types.
- Pragmatic equivalence which is receiver-oriented, and goes in the same line as Nida's 'dynamic euivalence'.
- Formal equivalence relating to the form and aesthetics of the text [6:47].

Koller's contribution to the field of translation studies lies in being one of the forerunners who intoduced translators to a variety of types and ways whereby equivalence might be realized.

3.8 *Mona Baker (1992): Equivalence typology*

Mona Baker's *In Other Words*, approached the notion of equivalence from a different perspective. For pedagogical reasons, she opted for a bottom-up approach starting at the lowest level (simple words and phrases) as will be shown below. She seems to put forward a much detailed approach where equivalence is explored at different levels. She makes a distinction, with regards to the notion under discussion, between these subgroups:

(1) Equivalence at word and above word level. Being the smallest unit denoting individual meaning, bearing in mind the context, the translator is required to give considerable attention to single words as well as units smaller than the word (morpheme). In the same vein, the translator should also take into account a variety of factors, in the translation process when dealing with individual words, such as number, gender and tenses [14:11-12].

(2) Grammatical equivalence. This type of equivalence refers to grammatical categories that different languages possess, and the challenges posed to translators, in their endevors, to find an equivalent in the TT due to the differences that mark the afoerementioned grammatical systems across languages. Some of these challenges, as stated by Baker, are related to number, voice, person, gender, tense and aspect [14:82-83].

(3) Textual equivalence is related to equivalence between ST and TT with reference to cohesion and information. In order to produce a cohesive and coherent translated text, the translator needs to make choices and employ strategies bearing in mind three main factors. These are the target audience, the purpose of the translation and the text type [14:119-122].

(4) Pragmatic equivalence. This type of equivalence focuses on implicature. That is, the implied meaning not the meaning that is explicitly conveyed. The translator, in this respect, has to work out the intended meanings in a given communicative situation, duing the translation process, so as to make the ST message attainable for TC readers [14:217-223].

3.9   Anthony Pym (2010): Natural and Directional equivalence

Last of all, Anthony Pym (2010) contributed to the ongoing discussion about the notion of equivalence by stating that ''equivalence does not say that languages are the same; it just says that values can be the same'' [15:7]. Such statment obviously suggests the impossibility of perfect equivalence between languages. For him, equivalence means 'equal value' between an ST expression and a TT expession at the level of form, function and reference [15:7].. In his discussion of the concept in focus, he makes a clear distinction between natural and directional equivalence. In the first type, equivalents are viewed as existing prior to the act of translating, and they are discovered by the translator. Hence, directionality is not a determining actor here [16:7]. On the other hand, the main idea that directional equivalence theories put forward is that translators are allowed much room to choose an approach (usually literal or free translation), which is by large not determined by the ST. These two aopposed poles indicate that the translator would tend to adhere either to ST or TT norms. It is important to note, as expressed by Pym, that it is hard to tell that ''two translations of the same text will ever be the same'' [15:26].

4. Conclusion

Lastly, what needs to bourne in mind is that the notion of equivalence is a debatable issue, in translation studies, due to the divergent views put forward by a myriad of experts and scholars in the field of translation. It is axiomatic that the notion in question, since its advent, has been presented in two contrasting ways of translating based on a variety of different perspectives, be it linguistic, cultural, or combined together. Some say that equivalence can be formal or dynamic (Nida), others suggested semantic and communicative translation

(Newmark), formal correspondence and textual equivalence (Catford), overt and covert translation (House), and natural vs. directional equivalence as set forth by Pym. However, equivalence, despite the emergence of new translation paradigms following the notion in focus, is still being used amongst translation theorists and researchers. It is worth-noting that defining equivalence is regarded as a difficut task due to the lack of a universal approach to accomplish this goal. Yet, it is still deemed to be as an important pilar in translation studies, as it is one of the biggest issues that translators have to deal with while engaging in a given translation task.

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