

A Revisit to Nida's Notion of 'Translation Equivalent'

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Abstract:

This paper sheds light over the notion of 'translation equivalent,' coined by E. Nida who was a linguist, and was very well-known for his Bible translations. The paper also highlights and explores how other translation scholars and theorists view this notion, and what they offered to the field of translation studies instead. This exploration will start with the view of the deconstruction school represented by E. Gentzler, and ends with P. Newmark, a famous translation theorist and scholar. Finally, the paper will attempt to answer a frequently asked question, that has been repeated for a long time and that the professional translators and linguists differ in answering it, which is, "Is the idea of a perfect translation applicable in the field of translation?"

Keywords: *Dynamic equivalence; Formal equivalence; Deconstructionism; semantic approach; communicative approach; relevant translation; Source Language (SL); Target Language (TL).*

Introduction

It has often been debated whether it is appropriate to use the term 'equivalence', in translation. Hatim and Mason in their 'discourse and the translator' were hesitant in recognizing the notion of equivalence in translation. "There is also a problem concerning the use of the term

'equivalence' in connection with the translations. It implies that complete equivalence is an achievable goal, as if there were such a thing as formally or dynamically equivalent target language (TL) version of source language (SL) text". (H&M: 1990:8).

Translators, in accordance to Friedrich Schleirmacher use only two methods during the translation process, the first is where the translator get as closer as possible to the text's author, while in the other method, the translator leaves the text's author towards the reader. According to Schleirmacher, translators are allowed to choose whether to domesticate the text they are translating or foreignize it.

Accuracy and meaning in the translation process are tied together, and it has been thought that the more the translator follows the original structure of the text, the more accurate the translation produced. However, a translator in this context is only transferring one form of the text while neglecting the other. The translator is either transferring the form of the text at the expense of its meaning or sacrificing the form of the text for the sake of its meaning. In both cases, we cannot describe such translation as a perfect or accurate one.

Nida's Formal & Dynamic Equivalence:

The concept of equivalence is very often misunderstood. People or even translators assume that equivalence means saying the same thing,

concept in the target language that has been said in the original. The notion of equivalence involves obviously two sides: the source text with its language and culture, and the target text, with its related language and culture. Equivalence says that on some level, something on the side of the source language has the same value, the same weighing as something on the side of the target language.

Nida's theory of translation has opened the way to other scholars to examine a new dimension in translation studies. It also has encouraged others to follow disciplined, objective, and clear procedures during the translation process. But it is always beneficial to keep in mind, that Nida was a Bible translator, who looked at the purpose of translation from a missionary's point of view. Nida believed that the Bible, as a message from God, had to be reachable and accessible to all people regardless of their languages.

Nida's contribution to the field of translation studies can be summarized by coining two types of translation equivalence and these are 'Formal' equivalence, where translation focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content, and 'Dynamic' equivalence where Nida stresses "the principle of equivalence effect". Concerning dynamic equivalence, Nida stated that this type of equivalence is based on "the principle of equivalent effect", in which "the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which

existed between the original receptor and the message."(Nida, 1964: 159, qtd by Munday).

In other words, Formal equivalence is if the form of the translation matches the original. With this type of equivalence, a translator can get a good sense of the structure of the original, but the resulting translation may be stilted and sometimes awkward.

However, with dynamic equivalence, the translation's effect in the TL reader shall be identical to that of the original on the SL.

According to Nida, changes in the text, such as idioms, metaphors and even omitting or adding may be allowed, provided that the target text functions just as well as the source text. Nida for example states that the word (lamb) in the bible can be translated and replaced by other words such as (seal) for the Eskimo people and pig, for those who do not know what lamb means, in order to make the message or the word of God clear and conveyable. For Nida, some changes to the words of the text will be necessary to convey the intended meaning and achieve the equivalence effect. This type of method in the field of translation often occurs or could occur in languages where there is no cultural and/or linguistic affinity.

However, even with such requirements, dynamic equivalence and the equivalent effect claimed by Nida are still problematic to some scholars. Such approach means the original text is to be domesticated in

TL in a way the reader of the target language is unable to recognize it as a translated work, as the culture and semantics of the source are all melted in the targeted language with no sign or trace that refers to or indicates it.

Deconstructionist view of translation equivalence:

Deconstructionism is a theory founded by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. It is contradicting the structural approach of the text. Deconstructionism had been used to read the text and also as a method of literary criticism until recently, but only for types of texts. The stress and emphasis in this type of reading is not to know the meaning implemented by the writer/author in the text, but rather the readership's subjective interpretation. Deconstructive school asserts that the text is closely linked to the reader, meaning that reading is the point of focus. So the authority here is for the reader over the text. The text according to this method is open, and its meaning is not fixed, and therefore the reader is able to reproduce the text and rewrite it in a way that may differ from the original. The text for a deconstructionist is of no value without the reader who, according to this approach, is the superior and able to determine the significance of the written text. Deconstructionism also claims that the text isn't having one fixed meaning. Instead, there are several readings for it, and each of those readings has a different meaning depending on the reader and the reading time.

Deconstructionists prefer to use the term ‘relevant translation’ over Nida’s ‘translation equivalence’. A relevant translation to them would therefore be, quite simply:

a good” translation, a translation that performs its mission, honors its debt and does its job or its duty while inscribing in the receiving language the most *relevant* equivalent for an original, the language that is *the* most right, appropriate, pertinent, adequate, opportune, pointed, univocal, idiomatic, and so on. (Derrida & Venuti 2001).

According to Derrida, what decides the meaning of a word in any text is the reader and in the case of translation, the translator. He neglects any role of the author or the producer of the original text and the meanings that he embedded in that text. He allows the translator the whole freedom to negotiate between the source language and the target language, to come up with the most relevant translation of the original text. Derrida, when asked how to assess whether translation is relevant, mentioned that relevance relies on both the translator and reader in viewing and looking at such translation. “A relevant translation is that which seems appropriate, whatever feels right” (Derrida & Venuti 2001)

Adding to that, Deconstruction is limiting translation into merely a form of a text analysis, as Anthony Pym has stated in his paper titled ‘Doubts about deconstruction as a general theory of translation’ (1995). It reduces translation into a form of source text analysis due to its

philosophical basis. In fact, it turns translation into what could only be an inferior form of the kind of readings undertaken by deconstruction itself”, as he added.

On the other hand, Edwin Gentzler, another deconstructionist, has criticized what he sees as Nida's belief that “the language of the Bible contains certain absolute truth that can be identified and translated into other languages” (Barry Turner: Gentzler, Chomsky and Nida-Further Comments). In Gentzler's view, “dynamic equivalence serves the purpose of converting the receptors, no matter what their culture, to the dominant discourse and ideas of Protestant Christianity”. "(Munday:43). Gentzler questioned the feasibility of what Nida introduced. As a deconstructionist, Gentzler based on the deconstruction theory tried to degrade and disprove Nida's ideas regarding the dynamic equivalence and the idea of looking at translation as a science. He claims that there is no such a science in translation, as the field of translation is filled with exceptions and it is a very hard task to determine the meaning of a word.

What Gentzler is trying to say is that there is no such a specific law that controls translation as long as laws do not allow us to make exceptions, and therefore there is no such correct inclusive theory for translation.

Newmark's idea of semantic & communicative translation:

Peter Newmark as a translation scholar also had his share of comments on Nida's equivalence approaches. Although he to some extent agrees with Nida's idea of dealing with translation as a science, he clearly expressed his dissatisfaction with the idea of 'equivalence effect'. In principle, Newmark liked the idea of the equivalence effect, but he expressed his view regarding the difficulty of achieving it.

Similar to Nida, Newmark has introduced two methods of translation. These are communicative and semantic translation. Semantic translation can be considered to some extent to be the same as in formal translation of Eugene Nida, while communicative translation can be comparable to his second type of translation "dynamic equivalence". In Communicative translation, the main focus is the reader in the target language, reflecting Nida's dynamic method. Newmark's communicative approach aims to present the target text in a way where both content and the type of language used are reasonable and well comprehended to the reader in the target language.

Semantic translation, on the other hand, resembles Nida's formal translation. "It attempts to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original". (Newmark 1981, cited in Munday 2008).

Newmark's Semantics attempts to convey the meaning of the text contents in the source text. It is used when the original expressions of the

author in the source text are as important as the text itself. This reason makes such an approach preferable over communicative translation in translating religious, literary and political texts.

For example, if a translator wanted to translate the word ‘hands’ in the following verse of Quran,

[بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ: يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِغْسِلُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ وَإَيْدِيكُمْ إِلَى الْمَرَافِقِ]

an acceptable translation of the above verse would be as the following: “o you who believe! When you intend to offer the prayer, wash your faces and your hands (forearms) up to the elbow”.

In English, the word ‘hand’ means this part of the body from the wrist to the fingertips, but that is not what the verse is referring to in the original text. In Arabic, the word ‘hand’ refers to the part of the body from the shoulder to the fingertips, this is the reason why the verse has specified which part of the hand must be washed. So the mission of any translator here is to convey the real contextual meaning of the word ‘hands’ as in the original text.

Conclusion

It is clear that whether it is formal, dynamic, semantic or communicative, or even a relevant translation as in deconstruction, the result is the same, that the idea of a perfect translation is not applicable in this field, There will always be something in the original that is

nontransferable and untranslatable. The term 'equivalence' is always comparative, even between languages that are culturally and linguistically related.

Furthermore, Nida's dynamic equivalence and despite all the criticism he received over it is an achievement and a remarkable contribution in the field of translation studies. his dynamic approach is focusing on reader's response to the text and is the reason why he coined his principle of 'equivalence effect'. Deconstructionist and some other translation theorist as in Newmark believed that such a principle is not feasible and hard to achieve. The equivalent effect is still problematic; such approach means the original text is to be domesticated to the readers in the TL in a method the TL reader is unable to recognize it as a translated work.

There is no doubt, that translation is all about transferring the author's message that he/she has embedded in a text, and making it accessible to the reader in other languages. It is in essence a domestication process where the only one responsible in deciding which method to undertake in such process is the translator. Such decision is dependent on various factors, which could include but not limited to: the intended readership, the purpose of translation and the type of text. But despite all the above, a text in the target language should also preserve the sense of foreignness of the original, and highlight its cultural and semantic differences.

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