

## **Equivalence in Translation: Features and Necessity**

**Xiang Yinhua**

School of Foreign Languages, Chongqing Jiaotong University

Chongqing, China, 400074

E-mail: Xiangyh6@163.com, Phone: 13594379546

### **Abstract**

*Translation is a kind of cross-linguistic, cross-cultural and cross-social communication. As a kind of communication, the main purpose is nothing but to establish equivalence between the source text and the target text. In other words, as the receiver of the source message and the sender of the target message, the translator should try his best to convey all the contents of the source text into the target text, otherwise, translation as a kind of communication would end in failure. The present paper intends to elaborate on the features and necessity of equivalence in translation.*

**Key words:** translation equivalence; features; necessity

### **Features of Translation Equivalence**

Translation equivalence is a principal concept in Western translation theory. It is a constitutive feature and the guiding principle of translation. As Catford points out, "the central problem of translation-practice is that of finding TL equivalents. A central task of translation theory is that of defining the nature and conditions of translation equivalence." (Catford 21: 1965) Actually, since the fifties of the twentieth century, many translation theorists have involved and elaborated translation equivalence in their respective theories. However, the concept of translation equivalence is sometimes distorted, and, perhaps, this is why some people deny its validity and necessity. To argue for the necessity of translation equivalence, we should first clarify its features. First of all, it is necessary for us to understand exactly the meaning of the word "equivalence" itself.

According to Mary Snell-Hornby (17: 1988), for the last 150 years, the word "equivalence" in English has been used as a technical term in different kinds of exact sciences to refer to a number of scientific phenomena or processes. For instance, in mathematics, it indicates a relationship of absolute equality that involves guaranteed reversibility. At the same time, however, it can also be used as a common word in the general vocabulary of English, and, in this sense, it means "of similar significance". In other words, the word "equivalence" is used in the English language both as a scientific term and as a common word. As a central concept in translation theory, "equivalence" cannot be interpreted in its scientific sense. It can only be understood in its common sense as a general word. As J.R Firth points out in his writing on translation, it was in the common sense and as an item of the general language that the word "equivalence" was originally used in English translation theory. (Snell-Hornby: 17)

Philosophically speaking, there are no things that are absolutely identical. Nida expresses this view as follows:

There are no two stones alike, no flowers the same, and no two people who are identical. Although the structures of the DNA in the nucleus of their cells may be the same, such persons nevertheless differ as the result of certain developmental factors. No two sounds are ever exactly alike, and even the same person pronouncing the same words will never utter it in an absolutely identical manner. (Nida 1986: 60)

As far as languages are concerned, there are no two absolute synonyms within one language. Quite naturally, no two words in any two languages are completely identical in meaning. As translation involves at least two languages and since each language has its own peculiarities in phonology, grammar, vocabulary, ways of denoting experiences and reflects different cultures, any translation involves a certain degree of loss or distortion of meaning of the source text. That is to say, it is impossible to establish absolute identity between the source text and the target text. Therefore, we can say that equivalence in translation should not be approached as a search for sameness, but only as a kind of similarity or approximation, and this naturally indicates that it is possible to establish equivalence between the source text and the target text on different linguistic levels and on different degrees. In other words, different types of translation equivalence can be achieved between the source text and the target text such as phonetic equivalence, phonological equivalence, morphological equivalence, lexical equivalence, syntactical equivalence and semantic equivalence. (Le Meiyun 1989)

### **Necessity of Translation Equivalence**

As translation is a kind of communication, the principal task in translation-practice is to establish equivalence of the original text in the target language. In other words, any translation involves a kind of equivalence between the source text and the target text; without equivalence of certain degrees or certain aspects, the translated text cannot be regarded as translation of the original text.

In short, equivalence is of absolute necessity in and a basic requirement of translation. This can be illustrated in the following aspects:

### ***1. Necessity of Equivalence as Implied in Definition of Translation***

Translation is so complex a kind of activity that to define it adequately is not an easy job. So far, various kinds of definitions have been given, some of which are quoted as follows:

(1) E. Tanke, the Director of the Translation Institute at Siemens, defines translation as "the process of communication in which the translator is interposed between a transmitter and a receiver who use different languages to carry out a code conversion between them." (Huang Long 1988: 18), and later he improves it as "transfer of a text from a source language into a text in target language, the objective being a perfect equivalence of meaning between the two texts." (Huang Long: 18)

(2) Peter Newmark defines translation as "rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text." (Newmark 1988: 5)

(3) Nida defines translation as "reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style." (Nida 1982: 12)

(4) The traditional definition: "the process of transfer of message expressed in a source language into a message expressed in a target language, with maximization of the equivalence of one or several levels of content of the message...." (Huang Long: 19)

As can be easily seen in the above, no matter how translation is defined, the concept of equivalence is inseparable and is implied in one way or the other. In a sense, each of the above definitions is constructed round the basic concept of equivalence, or as Marry Snell-Hornby points out that definitions of translation may be regarded as variations of the concept of equivalence. (Snell-Hornby:15) The essentiality of the concept of equivalence in any definition of translation demonstrates adequately the necessity of equivalence in translation.

### ***2. Necessity of Equivalence as Required by Essence of Translation***

Just like definitions of translation, there are also various opinions concerning the nature of translation, such as "Translation is a science." "Translation is an art.", "Translation is a language activity.", etc. However, translation, in essence, is basically a kind of communication. In history, translation has always functioned as a bridge for people who do not know foreign languages to understand the source text. As a matter of fact, translators and translation theorists worldwide have long realized the essence of translation as a kind of communication. Nida has said time and again that translating means communication. Professor Fan Zhongying has also expressed the same opinion, saying that translation is a language activity, the cardinal aim of which is to communicate. (Fan Zhongying 1994: 9)

Since translation in essence is a kind of communication, equivalence between the source text and the target text naturally becomes an essential requirement. It is generally agreed that the fundamental requirement of any kind of communication is to guarantee that the message is adequately transmitted from the source to the receptor. Similarly, in translation, the translator should try his best to reproduce the closest equivalent message of the original text in the target text so that the target text reader can understand the source message adequately; otherwise, translation as a kind of communication would end in failure. Therefore, it might be safe to say that the essence of translation as a kind of communication calls for the necessity of equivalence in translation.

### ***3. Necessity of Equivalence as Demonstrated by Limitations of Translatability and Difficulty of Translation***

When we say that something is translatable, in a sense, it means that a certain degree of equivalence of the source text can be achieved in the target language. Contrarily, when we say that something is untranslatable, it means that no equivalence of the source text can be realized in the target language. In other words, the limitations of translatability are just caused by the necessity of equivalence in translation. (Catford, 93) If translation were not to seek equivalence, there would be no limitation of translatability, and any translated text can be regarded as a correct version of the original text. Therefore, we can say that the existence of limitations of translatability well demonstrates the necessity of equivalence in translation. Likewise, the difficulty of translation sometimes arises from the necessity of equivalence in translation. It is generally agreed that translation is more difficult than original creation, and this mainly results from the requirement of equivalence in translation. In the original creation, the author is free to say whatever he wants to say and say it in whatever ways he prefers to. In translation, however, the translator does not have the freedom, because he has to say what the author has said in the original text and say it in more or less the same manner as the original author has done. Liu Zhongde, a Chinese professor, argues:

"The difficulty in translation just lies in the fact that both the content and the style are already existent in the original and as a result, you will have to do your best to reproduce them as they are in quite a different language." (Liu Zhongde 1991: 7) The necessity of equivalence in translation is also suggested in the famous remark made by Yan Fu when he exclaimed: "it often takes as long as ten days or even a whole month to establish a term in translation after repeated consideration and hesitation" (Liu Zhongde: 6) As a matter of fact, it is equivalence that connects the source text and the target text and only after the realization of equivalence of some degree or in some aspects can we say that the target text is the translation of the source text; without equivalence of some degree or in some aspects, nothing can be regarded as the (successful) translation of a certain text. Let's see the following example:

It is raining cats and dogs.

A: 正在下着倾盆大雨。

B: 在下雨。

C: 他去上学。

In this example, Version A and Version B can both be regarded as translation of the original sentence, for they each reproduce some of the message of the original sentence and thus are equivalent to the original sentence in some degree or in some aspects: Version A is the closest equivalent while Version B reproduces the main message. As for Version C, it shares nothing with the original sentence or, in other words, there is no equivalence between them at all, therefore, it cannot be regarded as the translation of the original sentence. This demonstrates the necessity of equivalence in translation from another perspective.

### **Conclusion**

Equivalence in translation cannot be interpreted as identity in terms of its scientific sense. As we know, there are no words that have exactly the same meaning in one language. Quite naturally, no two words in any two languages are absolutely identical in meaning. As far as the whole text is concerned, it is simply impossible to transfer all the message of the original text into the target text. Therefore, equivalence in translation can only be understood as a kind of similarity or approximation. This means that equivalence between the source text and the target text can be established on different levels and in different aspects. As one of the three principal concepts in Western translation theory, equivalence is a constitutive feature and the guiding principle of translation. Without equivalence of certain degrees or in certain aspects, the translated text cannot be regarded as a successful translation of the original text. In short, equivalence is of absolute necessity in and a basic requirement of translation. As Catford contends, it is the central problem of translation-practice. (Catford, 21)

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