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The Notion of Equivalence in Translation

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Résumé : *La notion d'équivalence est l'un des domaines les plus problématiques de la théorie de la traduction. Diverses théories de la traduction proposées par différents théoriciens de la traduction ont discuté, analysé, évalué ce terme de différents points de vue et l'ont approché de différentes perspectives.*
Cet article est une tentative de discuter de la notion d'équivalence ainsi que des différentes théories utiles pour retracer l'évolution de ce concept. Nous essayons de répondre à la question principale : comment les théoriciens de la traduction perçoivent-ils « l'équivalence » ?
On s'aperçoit que la difficulté à définir l'équivalence semble se traduire par l'impossibilité d'avoir une approche universelle de cette notion. Il n'y a pas de théorie de la traduction universellement acceptée parce que les personnes qualifiées pour les former ont des opinions divergentes. Cependant, la connaissance de ces différents points de vue aide les étudiants en traduction à connaître les caractéristiques de base de la traduction.
Mots clés : *Traduction, équivalence dynamique, correspondance formelle, interprétation.*
Abstract: *The notion of equivalence is one of the most problematic areas in the theory of translation. Various translation theories proposed by different translation theoreticians discussed, analyzed, evaluated this term from different points of view, and approached it from different perspectives.*
This paper is an attempt to discuss the notion of equivalence as well as the different theories useful to trace back the evolution of this concept. We try to answer the main question: How do theoreticians of translation perceive "equivalence"?
It is realized that the difficulty in defining equivalence seems to result in the impossibility of having a universal approach to this notion. There is no universally accepted theory of translation because the people who are qualified to form them have differences of opinion. However, the knowledge of these different views help the students of translation to know the basic features of translation.
Keywords : *Translation, dynamic equivalence, formal correspondence, interpretation.*

1. Introduction

The Randsom House Dictionnary of English Language defines 'Translation' as 'the rendering of something into another language'. This definition is very brief if it is compared with the definitions of some theoreticians who worked or have been working in the field of translation. Theoreticians have defined translation

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variously as 'reproducing a message' (Nida 1949:76), 'substituting /replacement of a text' (Catford 1965:1 and 20), 'rendering the meaning of one language into/ by another language' (Newmark 1988: 5).

The language from which translation is done is called 'source language' (**SL**), and the language into which translation is done is called 'target language' **(TL**). Whatever are the definitions and terminologies of the theoreticians working in the field of Translation, most, if not all, of them devote their attention to the 'question of equivalence'. In fact, translation equivalence has been at the heart of the field of translation since it was first born.

Translation equivalence refers to the equivalent relationships between target language and source language. This concept (**TE**) is a vital component when discussing the translation process, and it has been one of the key words of the translation studies and one of its most problematic area. Many modern translation theoreticians, including Eugene Nida (1964), John Catford (1965), Peter Newmark (1988), Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) used different approaches, either linguistic or functional to study equivalence in relation to the translation process. An analysis of their theories will be useful to follow the evolution of this concept, and to attempt an answer for the following question: How do theoreticians of translation perceive "equivalence"?

2. Nida 'formal correspondence and dynamic equivalence'

Nida is perhaps among the first theoreticians who talk about translating as a science particularly in his book Toward a Science of Translating in which he presents his theory of the formal-dynamic equivalence. Nida classifies translation into two types: (1) Formal equivalence and (2) Dynamic equivalence

The formal equivalence "focuses attention on the message itself in both form and content" (Nida, 1964:159). Nida argues that there are not always formal equivalents between two languages. So, he suggests that these formal equivalents should be used wherever possible if the translation aims at achieving formal rather than dynamic equivalence. In this type of translation, the message in the target culture is constantly compared with that of the source culture to determine standards of accuracy and correctness.

A translation following formal equivalence is put to the test on cultural standards, and this method (formal-equivalence translating) is called "gloss translation". It is therefore a way of translating which permits the target language reader to identify himself with the source language reader, and it allows the target language reader to understand and appreciate the cultural codes and the way of thinking of a source language native speaker.

According to Nida the translator is obliged to add to the translated text only what is linguistically implicit in the source text, and all what is related to background information and cultural information should be mentioned in commentaries and footnotes and not in the translated text.

ISSN : 1112 – 3974

In contrast, dynamic equivalence observes the principle of the "identical effect". i.e., that 'the relationship between receiver and message should aim at being the same as that between the original receivers and the SL message" (Nida, 1964: 159).

Dynamic translating is supposed to create on the readers of a given translated text the same effect made by the source text on the source language readers. The following illustration is given by Nida:

- "**white as snow**" could be translated for people who have no experience with snow as "**white as egret feathers**".

Nida states that all good translation tends to be longer than the original because the translator not only states what the original includes but also makes explicit all what was implicit in the source language text. Although Nida illustrated his dynamic equivalence theory with extra-linguistic, culture-specific factors, his theory remained inadequate because all his examples were taken from Biblical translations, rather than from different types of texts.

3. Equivalence as interpreted by Catford

Catford's approach to translation is based on the linguistic work of Firth and Halliday. According to him, the theory of translation should be a branch of comparative linguistics. His famous book A Linguistic Theory of Translation (1965) deals with the analysis and description of translation processes. Catford defines translation as "the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL) " (1965:20). According to Catford, the central problem of translation practice is that of finding TL translation equivalents.

He makes a distinction between textual equivalence and formal correspondence. The former refers to "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" and the latter is "any TL category (unit, class, structure, element of structure, etc.) which can be said to occupy, as nearly as possible, the same place in the 'economy' of the TL as the given SL category occupied in the SL" (1965: 27).

According to Catford, meaning is extremely important in translation. He states, "it is clearly necessary for translation theory to draw upon a theory of meaning; without such a theory certain important aspects of the translation process cannot be discussed " (1965:35).

For him, the translation equivalence is to be established at the sentence rank because he thinks that the sentence is the grammatical unit most directly related to speech function within a situation. He also emphasizes the role played by the language varieties in translation. The selection of an appropriate variety or register in TL is also important in translation.

ISSN : 1112 – 3974

Catford has a preference for a more linguistic-based approach to translation. His translaion equivalence theory is purely linguistic and overlooks the extra-linguistic factors that contribute to the production of functional equivalence between the source language and the target language texts.

4. Equivalence as viewed by Peter Newmark

Newmark considers translation as a craft. He defines translation as " a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written message and / or statement in one language by the same message and /or statement in another language" (Newmark 1981:7).

Newmark's approach to translation is an inter-disciplinary one. According to him translation theory derives from comparative linguistics and within linguistics it is mainly an aspect of semantics.

Newmark rejected the "principle of equivalence", which underlies Nida's theory of the dynamic equivalence. This rejection was based on three reasons:

- The equivalent effect is not always reached, particularly when the original text deals with cultural codes that can not be understood by the target language readers.
- The equivalent effect is not necessarily important, since this has to do with texts types, which are according to him: expressive, informative and vocative. So, difference in text types may entail different translation strategies.
- Loss of meaning is usually noticed when dynamic-equivalence-based translation is practiced. (loss of lot of biblical metaphors)

To substitute Nida's theory, Newmark suggests another dichotomy which is the (1) Semantic Translation / (2) Communicative Translation. The former focuses mainly on the semantic content of the original text and the latter focuses essentially upon the comprehension and response of the receptors. Newmark examined the translation equivalence concept from perspectives that swung "between literal and free, faithful and beautiful, exact and natural translation, depending on whether the bias was to be in favor of the author or the reader, the source or the target language of the text" (1988: 45).

He stated that "communicative translation attempts to produce in its readers an effect as close as possible to that produced in the readers of the original" and that "semantic translation attempts to render as closely as the semantic and syntactic structure of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original" (1988: 39).

One can notice that all the above discussions of the translation equivalent concept were rigid since they reduced the diversity of translation behavior to clear-cut dichotomous forms. Semantic and communicative translation strategies are more or less the same as Nida's formal/dynamic equivalence.

ISSN : 1112 – 3974

5. Equivalence as viewed by Vinay and Darbelnet

According to them, equivalence is a procedure which 'replicates the same situation as in the original, whilst using completely different wording' (quoted in Kenny, 1998:342). It is therefore the ideal method when the translator has to deal with proverbs, idioms, clichés, nominal or adjectival phrases and the onomatopoeia of animal sounds. They conclude by saying that ' 'the need for creating equivalences arises from the situation, and it is in the situation of the SL text that translators have to look for a solution' (ibid.: 255).

So, the fact that a semantic equivalent is quoted in a dictionary is not enough and can by no means guarantee a good translation. They supply lot of examples to prove their theory, and the following expressions appear in the list that they establish:

- ' **Take one'** is a fixed expression which would have as an equivalent French translation '**Prenez-en un'**. However, if the expression appeared as a notice next to a basket of free samples in a large store, the translator would have to look for an equivalent term in a similar situation and use the expression '**Echantillon gratuit'**
- '**Greetings of the season** 'another fixed expression which would have as a french equivalent '**Meilleurs vœux'**, '**Bonne année**', etc., and by no means '**Compliments de la saison'** an expression unfortunately used in Canada. (p.243)

6. Conclusion

The notion of equivalence is one of the most problematic areas in the theory of translation. Various translation theories proposed by different translation theoreticians discussed, analyzed, evaluated this term from different points of view, and approached it from different perspectives. It is realized that the difficulty in defining equivalence seems to result in the impossibility of having a universal approach to this notion.

There is no universally accepted theory of translation because the people who are qualified to form them have differences of opinion. However, the knowledge of these different views help the students of translation to know the basic features of translation.

ISSN : 1112 – 3974

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