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SELF STUDY

THEME: EQUIVALENCE IN TRANSLATION OPINIONS OF
SCIENTISTS ABOUT EQUIVALENCY IN TRANSLATION AND THEIR
LEVELS.

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**Theme: Equivalence in Translation opinions of scientists about
equivalency in translation and their levels.**

1. Introduction.

2. Main part:

- 2.1. *Vinay and Darbelnet and their definition of equivalence in translation*
- 2.2. *Jakobson and the concept of equivalence in difference*
- 2.3. *Nida and Taber: Formal correspondence and dynamic equivalence*
- 2.4. *Catford and the introduction of translation shifts*
- 2.5. *House and the elaboration of overt and covert translation*
- 2.6. *Baker's approach to translation equivalence*

3. Conclusion

1. Introduction.

The comparison of texts in different languages inevitably involves a theory of equivalence. Equivalence can be said to be the central issue in translation although its definition, relevance, and applicability within the field of translation theory have caused heated controversy, and many different theories of the concept of equivalence have been elaborated within this field in the past fifty years.

The aim of this paper is to review the theory of equivalence as interpreted by some of the most innovative theorists in this field — Vinay and Darbelnet, Jakobson, Nida and Taber, Catford, House, and finally Baker. These theorists have studied equivalence in relation to the translation process, using different approaches, and have provided fruitful ideas for further study on this topic. Their theories will be analyzed in chronological order so that it will be easier to follow the evolution of this concept. These theories can be substantially divided into three main groups. In the first there are those translation scholars who are in favour of a linguistic approach to translation and who seem to forget that translation in itself is not merely a matter of linguistics. In fact, when a message is transferred from the SL to TL, the translator is also dealing with two different cultures at the same time. This particular aspect seems to have been taken into consideration by the second group of theorists who regard translation equivalence as being essentially a transfer of the message from the SC to the TC and a pragmatic/semantic or functionally oriented approach to translation. Finally, there are other translation scholars who seem to stand in the middle, such as Baker for instance, who claims that equivalence is used 'for the sake of convenience—because most translators are used to it rather than because it has any theoretical status' (quoted in Kenny, 1998:77).

2. Main part:

2, 1. *Vinay and Darbelnet and their definition of equivalence in translation*

Vinay and Darbelnet view equivalence-oriented translation as a procedure which 'replicates the same situation as in the original, whilst using completely different wording'. They also suggest that, if this procedure is applied during the translation process, it can maintain the stylistic impact of the SL text in the TL text. According to them, equivalence 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.

With regard to equivalent expressions between language pairs, Vinay and Darbelnet claim that they are acceptable as long as they are listed in a bilingual dictionary as 'full equivalents'. However, later they note that glossaries and collections of idiomatic expressions 'can never be exhaustive'. 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'. Indeed, they argue that even if the semantic equivalent of an expression in the SL text is quoted in a dictionary or a glossary, it is not enough, and it does not guarantee a successful translation. They provide a number of examples to prove their theory, and the following expression appears in their list: *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 *Échantillon gratuit*.

2.2. Jakobson and the concept of equivalence in difference

Roman Jakobson's study of equivalence gave new impetus to the theoretical analysis of translation since he introduced the notion of 'equivalence in difference'. On the basis of his semiotic approach to language and his aphorism 'there is no signatum without signum', he suggests three kinds of translation:

- Intralingual (within one language, i.e. rewording or paraphrase)
- Interlingual (between two languages)
- Intersemiotic (between sign systems)

Jakobson claims that, in the case of interlingual translation, the translator makes use of synonyms in order to get the ST message across. This means that in interlingual translations there is no full equivalence between code units. According to his theory, 'translation involves two equivalent messages in two different codes'. Jakobson goes on to say that from a grammatical point of view languages may differ from one another to a greater or lesser degree, but this does not mean that a translation cannot be possible, in other words, that the translator may face the problem of not finding a translation equivalent. He acknowledges that 'whenever there is deficiency, terminology may be qualified and amplified by loanwords or loan-translations, neologisms or semantic shifts, and finally, by circumlocutions'. Jakobson provides a number of examples by comparing English and Russian language structures and explains that in such cases where there is no a literal equivalent for a particular ST word or sentence, then it is up to the translator to choose the most suitable way to render it in the TT.

There seems to be some similarity between Vinay and Darbelnet's theory of translation procedures and Jakobson's theory of translation. Both theories stress the fact that, whenever a linguistic approach is no longer suitable to carry out a translation, the translator can rely on other procedures such as loan-translations, neologisms and the like. Both theories recognize the limitations of a linguistic theory and argue that a translation can never be impossible since there are several methods that the translator can choose. The role of the translator as the person who

decides how to carry out the translation is emphasized in both theories. Both Vinay and Darbelnet as well as Jakobson conceive the translation task as something which can always be carried out from one language to another, regardless of the cultural or grammatical differences between ST and TT.

It can be concluded that Jakobson's theory is essentially based on his semiotic approach to translation according to which the translator has to recode the ST message first and then s/he has to transmit it into an equivalent message for the TC.

2.3. Nida and Taber: Formal correspondence and dynamic equivalence

Nida argued that there are two different types of equivalence, namely *formal equivalence*—which in the second edition by Nida and Taber is referred to as *formal correspondence*—and *dynamic equivalence*. Formal correspondence 'focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content', unlike dynamic equivalence which is based upon 'the principle of equivalent effect'. In the second edition of their work, the two theorists provide a more detailed explanation of each type of equivalence.

Formal correspondence consists of a TL item which represents the closest equivalent of a SL word or phrase. Nida and Taber make it clear that there are not always formal equivalents between language pairs. They therefore suggest that these formal equivalents should be used wherever possible if the translation aims at achieving formal rather than dynamic equivalence. The use of formal equivalents might at times have serious implications in the TT since the translation will not be easily understood by the target audience. Nida and Taber themselves assert that 'Typically, formal correspondence distorts the grammatical and stylistic patterns of the receptor language, and hence distorts the message, so as to cause the receptor to misunderstand or to labor unduly hard'.

Dynamic equivalence is defined as a translation principle according to which a translator seeks to translate the meaning of the original in such a way that the TL

wording will trigger the same impact on the TC audience as the original wording did upon the ST audience. They argue that 'Frequently, the form of the original text is changed; but as long as the change follows the rules of back transformation in the source language, of contextual consistency in the transfer, and of transformation in the receptor language, the message is preserved and the translation is faithful'.

One can easily see that Nida is in favour of the application of dynamic equivalence, as a more effective translation procedure. This is perfectly understandable if we take into account the context of the situation in which Nida was dealing with the translation phenomenon, that is to say, his translation of the Bible. Thus, the product of the translation process, that is the text in the TL, must have the same impact on the different readers it was addressing. Only in Nida and Taber's edition is it clearly stated that 'dynamic equivalence in translation is far more than mere correct communication of information'.

Despite using a linguistic approach to translation, Nida is much more interested in the message of the text or, in other words, in its semantic quality. He therefore strives to make sure that this message remains clear in the target text.

2.4. Catford and the introduction of translation shifts

Catford's approach to translation equivalence clearly differs from that adopted by Nida since Catford had a preference for a more linguistic-based approach to translation and this approach is based on the linguistic work of Firth and Halliday. His main contribution in the field of translation theory is the introduction of the concepts of types and shifts of translation. Catford proposed very broad types of translation in terms of three criteria:

1. The extent of translation (*full translation vs partial translation*);
2. The grammatical rank at which the translation equivalence is established (*rank-bound translation vs. unbounded translation*);

3. The levels of language involved in translation (*total translation vs. restricted translation*).

We will refer only to the second type of translation, since this is the one that concerns the concept of equivalence, and we will then move on to analyze the notion of translation shifts, as elaborated by Catford, which are based on the distinction between formal correspondence and textual equivalence. In *rank-bound translation* an equivalent is sought in the TL for each word, or for each morpheme encountered in the ST. In *unbounded translation* equivalences are not tied to a particular rank, and we may additionally find equivalences at sentence, clause and other levels. Catford finds five of these ranks or levels in both English and French, while in the Caucasian language Kabardian there are apparently only four.

Thus, a *formal correspondence* could be said to exist between English and French if relations between ranks have approximately the same configuration in both languages, as Catford claims they do.

One of the problems with formal correspondence is that, despite being a useful tool to employ in comparative linguistics, it seems that it is not really relevant in terms of assessing translation equivalence between ST and TT. For this reason we now turn to Catford's other dimension of correspondence, namely *textual equivalence* which occurs when any TL text or portion of text is 'observed on a particular occasion ... to be the equivalent of a given SL text or portion of text'. He implements this by a process of commutation, whereby 'a competent bilingual informant or translator' is consulted on the translation of various sentences whose ST items are changed in order to observe 'what changes if any occur in the TL text as a consequence'.

As far as translation shifts are concerned, Catford defines them as 'departures from formal correspondence in the process of going from the SL to the TL' (ibid.:73). Catford argues that there are two main types of translation shifts, namely *level shifts*, where the SL item at one linguistic level (e.g. grammar) has a TL equivalent at a different level (e.g. lexis), and *category shifts* which are divided into four types:

1. *Structure-shifts*, which involve a grammatical change between the structure of the ST and that of the TT;
2. *Class-shifts*, when a SL item is translated with a TL item which belongs to a different grammatical class, i.e. a verb may be translated with a noun;
3. *Unit-shifts*, which involve changes in rank;
4. *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' (ibid.:80). For instance, when the SL singular becomes a TL plural.

Catford was very much criticized for his linguistic theory of translation. One of the most scathing criticisms came from Snell-Hornby (1988), who argued that Catford's definition of textual equivalence is 'circular', his theory's reliance on bilingual informants 'hopelessly inadequate', and his example sentences 'isolated and even absurdly simplistic'. She considers the concept of equivalence in translation as being an illusion. She asserts that the translation process cannot simply be reduced to a linguistic exercise, as claimed by Catford for instance, since there are also other factors, such as textual, cultural and situational aspects, which should be taken into consideration when translating. In other words, she does not believe that linguistics is the only discipline which enables people to carry out a translation, since translating involves different cultures and different situations at the same time and they do not always match from one language to another.

2.5. House and the elaboration of overt and covert translation

House (1977) is in favour of semantic and pragmatic equivalence and argues that ST and TT should match one another in function. House suggests that it is possible to characterize the function of a text by determining the *situational dimensions* of the ST.* In fact, according to her theory, every text is in itself placed within a particular situation which has to be correctly identified and taken into account by the translator. After the ST analysis, House is in a position to

evaluate a translation; if the ST and the TT differ substantially on situational features, then they are not functionally equivalent, and the translation is not of a high quality. In fact, she acknowledges that 'a translation text should not only match its source text in function, but employ equivalent situational-dimensional means to achieve that function' (ibid.:49).

Central to House's discussion is the concept of *overt* and *covert* translations. In an overt translation the TT audience is not directly addressed and there is therefore no need at all to attempt to recreate a 'second original' since an overt translation 'must overtly be a translation' (ibid.:189). By covert translation, on the other hand, is meant the production of a text which is functionally equivalent to the ST. House also argues that in this type of translation the ST 'is not specifically addressed to a TC audience' (ibid.:194).

House (ibid.:203) sets out the types of ST that would probably yield translations of the two categories. An academic article, for instance, is unlikely to exhibit any features specific to the SC; the article has the same argumentative or expository force that it would if it had originated in the TL, and the fact that it is a translation at all need not be made known to the readers. A political speech in the SC, on the other hand, is addressed to a particular cultural or national group which the speaker sets out to move to action or otherwise influence, whereas the TT merely informs outsiders what the speaker is saying to his or her constituency. It is clear that in this latter case, which is an instance of overt translation, functional equivalence cannot be maintained, and it is therefore intended that the ST and the TT function differently.

House's theory of equivalence in translation seems to be much more flexible than Catford's. In fact, she gives authentic examples, uses complete texts and, more importantly, she relates linguistic features to the context of both source and target text.

2.6. Baker's approach to translation equivalence

New adjectives have been assigned to the notion of equivalence (grammatical, textual, pragmatic equivalence, and several others) and made their appearance in the plethora of recent works in this field. An extremely interesting discussion of the notion of equivalence can be found in Baker (1992) who seems to offer a more detailed list of conditions upon which the concept of equivalence can be defined. She explores the notion of equivalence at different levels, in relation to the translation process, including all different aspects of translation and hence putting together the linguistic and the communicative approach. She distinguishes between:

- Equivalence that can appear at word level and above word level, when translating from one language into another. Baker acknowledges that, in a bottom-up approach to translation, equivalence at word level is the first element to be taken into consideration by the translator. In fact, when the translator starts analyzing the ST s/he looks at the words as single units in order to find a direct 'equivalent' term in the TL. Baker gives a definition of the term *word* since it should be remembered that a single word can sometimes be assigned different meanings in different languages and might be regarded as being a more complex unit or *morpheme*. This means that the translator should pay attention to a number of factors when considering a single word, such as number, gender and tense.

- Grammatical equivalence, when referring to the diversity of grammatical categories across languages. She notes that grammatical rules may vary across languages and this may pose some problems in terms of finding a direct correspondence in the TL. In fact, she claims that different grammatical structures in the SL and TL may cause remarkable changes in the way the information or message is carried across. These changes may induce the translator either to add or to omit information in the TT because of the lack of particular grammatical devices in the TL itself. Amongst these grammatical devices which

might cause problems in translation Baker focuses on number, tense and aspects, voice, person and gender.

- Textual equivalence, when referring to the equivalence between a SL text and a TL text in terms of information and cohesion. Texture is a very important feature in translation since it provides useful guidelines for the comprehension and analysis of the ST which can help the translator in his or her attempt to produce a cohesive and coherent text for the TC audience in a specific context. It is up to the translator to decide whether or not to maintain the cohesive ties as well as the coherence of the SL text. His or her decision will be guided by three main factors, that is, the target audience, the purpose of the translation and the text type.

- Pragmatic equivalence, when referring to implicatures and strategies of avoidance during the translation process. Implicature is not about what is explicitly said but what is implied. Therefore, the translator needs to work out implied meanings in translation in order to get the ST message across. The role of the translator is to recreate the author's intention in another culture in such a way that enables the TC reader to understand it clearly.

3. Conclusion

The notion of equivalence is undoubtedly one of the most problematic and controversial areas in the field of translation theory. The term has caused, and it seems quite probable that it will continue to cause, heated debates within the field of translation studies. This term has been analyzed, evaluated and extensively discussed from different points of view and has been approached from many different perspectives. The first discussions of the notion of equivalence in translation initiated the further elaboration of the term by contemporary theorists. Even the brief outline of the issue given above indicates its importance within the framework of the theoretical reflection on translation. The difficulty in defining equivalence seems to result in the impossibility of having a universal approach to this notion.

** It should be noted that House's model of situational dimension is adapted from Crystal and Davy's model elaborated in 1969. House gives an extensive explanation of the reasons which motivated her to change, and sometimes omit, some of the information given by Crystal and Davy. Further details can be found in House (1977:38-41), or in D. Crystal and D. Davy, *Investigating English Style* (London: Longman, 1969).*

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