

# A Terminological Study of Translation Equivalence

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**Abstract.** Since Federov explicitly proposed the theory of "equivalence" in 1953, translation equivalence had been identified as an important thesis in translation. This opens a door for research of translation equivalence. However, throughout history, seemingly, it is hard to see the discussion and analysis toward translation equivalence from the point of terminology always and all over the world. This paper, starting from the definition of translation equivalence, reviewing equivalence theory research in China and internationally, aiming to explore the development of the concept, classifies and analyzes its feature from the angle of terminology. Combining with the instance of translation equivalence, the paper comes up with some inspirations both for translation theory and practice with the purpose of drawing researchers' attention, while at the same time, hopes to be able to provide a new view for the research on translation equivalence.

## 1. Introduction

Viewed from the angle of the translating theory history, this is a time-honored matter. From the 1960s to the 1980s, the notion translation equivalence has played a vital part in the area of modern translation research in the West. However, Chinese scholars were not up to this notion until the age of 1980s. In the mid-1980s, the concept of equivalence that has been referred in the modern translating theory in Western, started to introduce to Chinese translation area (Xiang, 2009). Up to this day, the transition of translating study has gone through from linguistics to culture, and then to philosophy. The one thing that has not changed is that translation equivalence always stands to the core in this area. With the shift to culture in translating study, equivalence study also shifts from the linguistic side to the pragmatics and cultural side (Ren & Feng, 2009). However, no matter how plentiful the study is, the scholars neglect that the term "translation equivalence" itself is quite important in translation. Chinese and international scholars seldom analyze or discuss its origin as well as its concept extension, which is inconformity to its interdisciplinary character. Without realizing translation equivalence as an important term, people will not comprehend multiple dimensional feature (Tao, 2015). It's a high time that we looked at this term in the height of translation history and discipline construction, portraying its dear profile, manifesting its connotation and extension.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Overview of Translation Equivalence

Since the middle of the 20th century, the rapid development of linguistics has had a profound influence on translation studies. Translation equivalence is a core concept in Western translation theories, and many translation theorists have put this concept as an important content in their theoretical system, such as Catford's textual equivalence, Nida's dynamic equivalence and functional equivalence as well as Newmark's descriptive equivalence and cultural equivalence, trying to study translation equivalence at all levels and all types (Heng, 2003).

When Equivalence Theory was introduced into Chinese translation field, it is widely applied. Cui (2007) said that translation is a goal which all the serious translators must pursue. Qiu's opinion is that inter-language equivalence is an abstract relationship based on the source language and target language, while translation equivalence is a concrete relationship based on source text and target text.

Translation equivalence is a purpose that the translator transforms the source text into the target text. The more the translation equivalence is, the higher the quality of the translations are, so it is also a standard of checking the quality of translation (Sun & Zhao, 2005).

## **2.2 Overview of Chinese Terminology**

Zhen (2004) can be classified as a leading figure of domestic terminology. He has published in many major journals about terminology research. In the term of methods on the study of terminology, he argues that the first is linguistic approach. The second is borrowed method from philosophy and semiotics. The third is a terminology research method. In his article *Terminology Is an Independent Comprehensive Discipline* he writes that in 1969, Muscovite University held a seminar called the status of terminology in modern scientific system. The meeting unanimously confirmed that terminology has become an independent discipline. Around the same time, scholars in other countries also had the same understanding about it. Meanwhile, terminology is closely linked to linguistics, semiotics, informatics and science. Therefore, he considers the terminology is an independent comprehensive discipline (2003).

## **3. Development of Translation Equivalence**

As one of the concepts of the modern translation theory in Western, equivalence was first put forward by Rieu in 1953. Federov, the representative linguist of former Soviet Union, is the first person to raise translation equivalence in modern era. In his book *Введение в теорию перевода* (Summary of The Translation Theory) in 1953, he presented this theory, arguing that translation is a process using one language to completely express another language which is impartible in content and form. He insisted that there was a certain equivalent relationship between translation and original text. Consequently, translating equivalently is to exactly and rightly convey the idea of the original text and extreme coincidence in function and rhetoric (Han, 1999).

Jakobson and Catford made an effectual exploration on the matter of translation equivalence from the point of linguistics. It is generally believed that Jakobson analyzed the notion of equivalence in a scientific way in his book *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*. To him, translating process should firstly get rid of the difference between original context and the target language. Although there are some imparities between the two languages, the translator must make sure that the version is equal to the original context (Guo, 1986). From the point of Catford (1965), translation means using a textual material of equal language (version) to substitute another one (original language). In this definition, the key is the notion "equivalence". The central problem of translating practice is to find the equivalent element of the version. The central task of the translation theory is to definite the nature and situation of the equivalent relation.

And then, Nida put forward the point of dynamic equivalence in his book *Toward a Science of Translating*. He stated that the relationship between the receiver and the version should be basically the same with the original text receiver and original information (2001). In the year of 1986, he replaced his theory of functional equivalence with the former term. He pointed out that translation is an art of recomposing work in another language without losing its original flavor (Nida, 1998).

Barhudalov is a scholar who also agrees to set up equivalent relationship in terms of language construction. In his book *Language and Translation*, he states briefly that equivalent translation should be realized based on six levels: phoneme, morpheme, word, word group, sentence, discourse, which are different types of levels (1985). He figures that translating at the necessary and enough levels is the right equivalent translation. Translation at low level is an inflexible translation while on the opposite, a high-level translation is excessive paraphrase.

## **4. Terminological Study of Translation Equivalence**

Term is a word or phrase expressing certain area of professional knowledge, having these kind of characters: systematization, definition, translation, unemotional, the rhetoric of neutral (Meng, 2011). As an important domain in humanities social science, the terms are characterized by: vagueness, productivity, simplicity, monosomy, systematisms and motivation. As an essential term in translation,

we should explore the nature as well as the connotation and extension of translation equivalence perspective from terminology.

#### **4.1 Vagueness**

For the nature of vagueness, it has been a deep-rooted tradition that language researchers are inclined to pursue "preciseness" throughout history, confirming that the more precise it is, the better the versions are. They are about the concise and comprehensive version and must hit the target with one remark. Nonetheless, as a matter of fact, language is perplexing enough to puzzle a Philadelphia lawyer and, what's worse, the version is far from satisfaction for the reason that language can hardly strike an absolute preciseness.

The vagueness is one of an inherent feature in humane system. The application of some accurate methods draws some perfect but impractical conclusion in some cases. Just like Kant said that fuzzy concepts are more expressive than clear ideas.

To make my argument more clear and definite, let me show you examples:

(1) He was awarded 500-yuan damages for the injury he suffered in the accident.

In this example, "award" and "damage" are legally legal meaning of common words. Thus, if it is used in legal profession, it should not be translated into “由于遭受了意外事故，他获得500.”. Award usually refers to give someone "reward", while damage refers to someone is "hurt". But in legal English, the former is defined as "court ruled that", and the latter as a "compensation".

(2) letter of advice

If regarded as common vocabulary, it can be translated into “建议信”. Some common vocabularies may have professional meanings in some particular cases. Thus, if it is in the business English, advice may not be referred as "tips", while in the opposite, it means "notice". Therefore, it is translated into “发货通知单”. Likewise, "advice of arrival" should be translated into “货物到达通知单”.

It is also a terminologization phenomenon in terminology. In short, a common vocabulary used in a certain subject, obtaining scientific definition full of preciseness, finally turning into a term.

#### **4.2 Productivity**

As an important term translation study, translation equivalence, owing to its productivity in English words formation, provides possibility for creating new terms for translation. Thus, it derives many new English words, enriching the knowledge system of translation theory, and promoting the development of translation. Specifically, based on whether having the same referential relation and identical association between source language and target language, it can be divided into denotative equivalence and connotative equivalence; based on whether having the same or semblable language form, ideological contents or pragmatic effect in literary form between the words in two contents, it can be divided into formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence (or pragmatic equivalence); judging from the word or units in sections and chapters between the two languages, we can distinguish it into lexical equivalence and textual equivalence; proceeding from the function of information communication or contact and inter-lingual relationships between the two contexts, we can differentiate it into communicative equivalence (or functional equivalence) and interlingua equivalence (Liang, 2002).

#### **4.3 Simplicity**

As an important term in the realm of translation study, the simplicity of translation equivalence is easy to understand. It requires us that we should be concise when translating and avoid the unnecessary expressing redundancy to the top of our mind. It is determined by the nature of term itself. As is known to all, a redundant term is inconvenient for understanding and promoting. Nonetheless, we are supposed to bear in mind that the premise of the simplicity of translation equivalence is that we should keep the balance between simplicity and veracity.

Take this into consideration, we should achieve simplicity in the premise of accuracy as far as possible. Regarding this point, we can get inspiration from the change of translation in line accordance with time (Wei, 2010), for example: "democracy" was first translated according to pronunciation when it was introduced into China for the first time. Telephone, which is known as what it is meant by Chinese people, was first transliteration. Also, we can get evidence from many popular translations at present, for example: acquired immunodeficiency syndrome was first translated word by word and

now it is recognized by its more concise name AIDS. I conclude by saying that this phenomenon is quite common in today's translation field.

#### **4.4 Monosemy**

From the point of mono-meaning character, we aim to mean that translation equivalence is of inherent connotation and extension, and thus it is a relative concept, which is relative to object and time. Let me take the word "china" for example, when it was first known to foreigners it was acknowledged as porcelain. As the porcelain was more and more popular, china was used to represent the whole country which is abundant in China. With regard to monosemy, I deem that the translation of the Chinese classical culture can best hit the point. In a time when there was no frequent Chinese and Western culture communication, or hardly any translator good at both target language and source language, the version translated, in most cases, could not achieve equivalence, for example, “掌上明珠” was translated into "a pearl in the palm". Seemly, there was nothing wrong. However, with the improvement of cross-cultural ability, translator found that this version was barely satisfactory compared to "the apple of one's eyes". This translation can make readers in both the target language and source language understood, living up to translation equivalence. Let me take the translation of personal name for example, some versions translate “鸳鸯” in *The Story of the Stone* into Faithful Goose and “宝钗” into "Precious Virtue". As Chinese name is gradually known to the West, it is used phonetic symbol to represent name nowadays. Although the readers cannot understand the original comprehension and beauty, it can yet be regarded as an equivalence, and I believe there will be some better versions in the future.

### **5. Conclusion**

To investigate and study the origin, distribution evolution and influence of translation equivalence, undoubtedly, it can let us think and make the study of translating theory clear. From the first small beginnings one can see how things will develop.

First, in terms of its notion, terminology perspective enriches the comprehension of translation, providing a brand-new opportunity for people to rethink and study translation equivalence. Taking this opportunity, we can discuss a hot topic that has been debated for years in translation equivalence realm: whether the equivalence means totally equal translation or not. Take Nida's theory for example, some scholars deem that Equivalence Theory is the second to none principle that can be used in any translation practice while still others hold a total opposite opinion that translation equivalence is anything but a dream (Zhang, 2008). Both two attitudes are complete inadvisable, and they are not good for understanding a certain theory roundly and rightly. If we read Nida's works carefully, we will easily discover that we misunderstand his original idea, but we often find fault with the choice of words literally. Nida himself never said he aimed at achieving total equivalence between target text and source text.

Secondly, if we judge equivalence theory in terms of historical and relative point, equivalence and even the description of translation is anything but a relative notion. As a term of translation, equivalence carries the ideal longing of scholars to realize a wonderful relationship between the original text and source text, which is also an ideal translation aim for translators to pursue all their life. Although it is a little idealization out of the gate or even can be looked at but not touched. The reason why we call it a relative notion is that equivalence is exactly a relative translation principle and translating action itself is also an activity which is restricted by time and spot (Liang, 2002). Discussing the equivalence in terms of correlation, we can go beyond different equivalent notions defined by various scholars as well as the philosophical view of strife.

Thirdly, talking about translation equivalence in terms of terminology can bring us enlightenment on the layer on translating practice. The translating scholars in our country have achieved many successful experiences put equivalence theory into translating practice. Fan Zhongying has provided many specific instance descriptions in his book *An Applied Theory of Translation* (实用翻译教程). Likewise, formal equivalence is set as a dominant factor in MTS. No matter what direction computer technology aiming to develop to, machine translation still needs to study the conversion issues of

language form and structure. The importance of translation equivalence is that equivalence can fully demonstrate the equivalent relation between text and discourse.

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