

Theoretical Bases of Nida's Functional Equivalence

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Abstract: This paper discusses the general knowledge and common misunderstanding of the core of Eugene A. Nida's translation theories — the "Functional Equivalence" theory. It probes into the theoretical bases of the theory from the perspectives of Chomskyan linguistics, Information Theory and Social Semiotics. Meanwhile, the limitations of each theoretical base are also explored, which contributes to proper understanding and evaluation of "Functional Equivalence" theory.

1. Introduction

Since its first introduction to China in the 1980s, American linguist and translation theorist Eugene A. Nida's functional equivalence theory has been overwhelmingly influential to the whole Chinese translation circle. Its primary focus on the readers' responses has been a revolt against the old traditions that cared only about the text, both the original and the translated version. The functional equivalence has drawn the translators' attention from the traditional static analysis of the translation criterion to a set of dynamic and open principles. For a time functional equivalence has been the golden principle in the Chinese translation circle. Anything that is not related to functional equivalence in translation is considered theoretically weak.

However, from about the late 1980s and early 1990s, doubts began to arise. Everyone was talking about the flaws of functional equivalence because they found that it was not possible to reach functional equivalence in translation activities. According to Liu (2007), at least under some circumstances functional equivalence can not be achieved [1].

Except for some of the reasonable comments, most of the criticisms were actually a result of the misunderstanding that functional equivalence theory was based on the reception aesthetics. This paper attempts to probe into the theoretical bases of functional equivalence and discuss their respective defects so as to help to reach a proper understanding and evaluation of functional equivalence.

2. General knowledge about functional equivalence theory

Ever since its birth, functional equivalence has gone through repeated revisions. In 1964, Nida proposed the concept of "dynamic equivalence" for the first time in his book *Toward a Science of Translating*. It has been treated in terms of "closest natural equivalent", "but the term 'dynamic' has been misunderstood by some persons as referring only to something which has impact" (Nida, 2001:91) [2]. Later on, Nida substituted "functional equivalence" for "dynamic equivalence", which "provides a much sounder basis for talking about translation as a form of communication" [2]. But the two terms are actually quite similar in essence because they both focus on the readers' responses.

In the 1990s, Nida improved his theory a step further and he differentiated degrees of adequacy from minimal to maximal effectiveness on the basis of both cognitive and experimental factors. A minimal functional equivalence is defined as "The readers of a translated text should be able to comprehend it to the point that they can conceive of how the original readers of the text must have understood and appreciated it" [2]. Anything less than this degree of equivalence is unacceptable. A maximal functional equivalence is stated as "The readers of a translated text should be able to understand and appreciate it in essentially the same manner as the original readers did" [2]. This high degree of language-culture correspondence is rarely achieved except for texts only involving

routine information.

Functional equivalence should be understood from the following two aspects. First, functional equivalence is a kind of relative equivalence, not the absolute identity in the mathematic sense. It is the equivalence of the information transmitted and communication achieved, not the correspondence at all layers of linguistic elements. Second, functional equivalence seeks the equivalence in function, and it is about the readers' responses of the two different languages.

3. Misunderstanding of the theoretical base of functional equivalence theory

"Functional equivalence" brings "readers' responses" into the criterion of the translation adequacy. And the correspondence between the original readers' responses and those of the translated text readers' is the aim of translation. This view goes beyond the traditional faithfulness of the translated text to the original. However, scholars like Yin Yantong (2001) criticized it as being built upon the "reception aesthetics", which undermines the literary works itself by overemphasizing readers' importance to it [3]. Under reception aesthetics, literary works can not stand in its own right. It only exists in the readers' mind. This leads people to regard Nida's functional equivalence as such translation principles as "similarity in spirit" or "sublimation", which is strongly subjective. And this idealized principle can hardly be achieved in translation practice. Therefore, it was thought to be impractical.

Nevertheless, that is untrue. Fundamentally, Nida's functional equivalence is still text-oriented. He held that while testing the adequacy of the translation it is essential to compare not only the texts of the two different languages, but also the responses of readers of the two languages. If there is much correspondence in their responses, functional equivalence is thought to be achieved. A quick glance at this may lead people to believe that this criterion is absolutely reader-oriented. But a closer look at Nida's theory reveals that it is still text-oriented. This could be shown in Nida's definition of translation. "Translating consists in 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" [4]. He claimed that "Translating must aim primarily at 'reproducing the message'. To do anything else is essentially false to one's task as a translator" [4]. In fact, the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message is another definition of functional equivalence. In a real sense, Nida seeks to achieve in the target language "the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message" [4]. So it is safe to say that his readers' responses principle is still text-oriented though he also stresses the importance of readers' responses. Whatever translation principle it might be, text must always be the prerequisite. Obviously, Nida's "readers' responses" principle is rather different from the readers-centered principle in reception aesthetics.

4. Theoretical bases of functional equivalence theory

4.1 Functional equivalence on the basis of Chomskyan linguistic theory

Descriptive linguistic period is the first stage in Nida's theoretical development in translation. He succeeded in bringing the modern linguistic theories into the translation theory researches. He made a distinction between the designative meaning and associative meaning on the basis of semantic theories. Inspired by Chomsky's deep structure and surface structure, he made a step further and proposed the concept of "kernel sentences", on the basis of which he designed the complete interlingual transfer process. He believed that the translation system consists of three elaborate stages:

- (1) Analysis, in which the surface structure (i.e., the message as given in language A) is analyzed in terms of (a) the grammatical relations and (b) the meanings of the words and combinations of words,
- (2) Transfer, in which the analyzed material is transferred in the mind of the translator from language A to language B, and,
- (3) Restructuring, in which the translated material is restructured in order to make the final

message fully acceptable in the receptor language.(Nida, 2004:33) [5]

These three stages actually involve decoding the original text into the structurally simple and semantically clear kernels and then transfer the kernels into the target language and finally restructuring the appropriate corresponding translated sentences in the target language. Nida believed in the universality of all languages and he thought such universality is much more perceivable in the deep structure (in this case the kernels) than that in the surface structure. Such transfer through deep structure or kernel sentences makes it possible to achieve functional equivalence.

Admittedly, Nida's theory brought the Chinese translation circle into a more scientific era. Unfortunately, while stressing the universality among languages he overlooked the differences, which is what translation is all about. Besides, Chomsky's deep-surface structure transformation is inside one language. But Nida used it between two languages. Whether Chomsky's deep-surface structure transformation theory applies to two or more languages is still unclear.

4.2 Functional equivalence on the basis of Information Theory

From the early 1950s Nida began to introduce the Information Theory of C.E Shannon into his translation theory and practice. Nida thought of translation as communicating through the transmission of information. In other words, translation is to transfer the information code of one language into that of another. When the receptor get the same amount of information from the translated text as original reader from the original text, it is said to have achieved functional equivalence. But the problem is that the information channel of the receptors is far narrower than that of the original reader, so some redundant information might be of help to make the translated text more understandable for the receptors. Sometimes it is necessary to alter the original forms so as to add the readability of the translated text.

Under this scheme, Nida undervalued the importance of form. His focus on equivalent information transmission is applicable for those texts only with routine information, but not for those highlighting the aesthetic values, such as poems or songs.

4.3 Functional equivalence on the basis of Social Semiotics

From the 1970s and 1980s Nida made a series of revisions and adaptations of his own translation theories [6]. This is his social-semiotic mode of his translation theory. He believed that semiotics is the best system to analyze meaning. Social semiotics is the best way to do translation because it deals with human language, the most sophisticated semiotic system. There is nothing better than social semiotics in encoding and/or decoding the different languages.

Nida proposed to use isomorphism to overcome the cultural differences so as to accomplish essentially the same results with different systems. It is to arouse similar readers' responses. The problem is whether readers' responses should be regarded as a reliable translation principle, which is a fairly old topic but still finds few satisfactory answers.

5. Conclusion

Nida made constant revisions and frequent adaptations on some of his own ideas. Instead of focusing solely on understandability, now he pays equal attention to understandability, readability and acceptability. Besides, he is no longer putting down "formal equivalence", but rather he thought translators should not break the forms of the original text at will. What's more, he also adds rhetorical factors into the translation process. Although he made a lot of revisions, he did not probe deeply into these problems. Much work still needs to be done for the further development of the translation theories.

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