UNLOCKING MEANING: EXPLORING WORD EQUIVALENCE IN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: *This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on translation theory and practice by providing valuable insights into the dynamic process of equivalence at the word level. By elucidating the multifaceted nature of translation equivalence and highlighting the interplay between linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic factors, this study offers a nuanced understanding of the complexities that are inherent in cross-linguistic communication and underscores the importance of context-sensitive translation strategies in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps. Moreover, the article identifies instances where the translator's creativity and linguistic expertise play a pivotal role in bridging linguistic and cultural divides, thereby achieving a harmonious balance between fidelity and fluency.*

Keywords: *equivalence, computational linguistics, language processing, semantic equivalence, functional equivalence, pragmatic equivalence, formal equivalence, word alignment, semantic analysis, machine learning algorithm, untranslatability, pragmatic dimension, minimax strategy, proscriptive, sign system, copula, elements of meaning, orthographic word, morpheme, fidelity.*

INTRODUCTION

"Equivalence at the word level" refers to the concept of comparing or establishing similarity between words according to their meanings, functions, or properties within a given context. It often can be found in several linguistic analyses, language translation, computational linguistics, and natural language processing tasks.

In different contexts, word equivalence can be understood and analyzed in various ways:

Semantic Equivalence: Words are equivalent if they have similar meanings. This can involve identifying synonyms or words that represent the same concept or idea. For example, "big" and "large" can be considered semantically equivalent because they perform a similar idea of size.

Functional Equivalence: Words are considered equivalent if they convey the same grammatical or functional role within a sentence or linguistic structure. For instance, in the sentence "He drives a car" and "She operates a vehicle," "drives" and "operates" are functionally equivalent as they both serve as the main verb indicating the action performed by the subject.

Pragmatic Equivalence: Words are deemed equivalent if they have the same effect on the listener or reader in terms of conveying the targeted meaning or achieving communicative goals. This involves considering the pragmatic context in which the words are used and understanding how they contribute to the overall message or discourse.

Formal Equivalence: Words are considered equivalent if they share similar linguistic forms or structures, regardless of their meanings. This can include comparing morphological or syntactic characteristics of words. For example, in English, the words "walked" and "slept" are not semantically equivalent, but they share the same grammatical category (past tense verbs).

In natural language processing and machine translation assignments, reaching word equivalence is essential for accurately converting text from one language to another or for various other language processing tasks. Techniques such as word alignment, semantic analysis, and machine learning algorithms are often deployed to establish word equivalence in these contexts.

Translation Studies: A Journey through the Lens of Susan Bassnett

According to Susan Bassnett, equivalence in translation, then, should not be regarded as a search for sameness, since sameness cannot even exist between two TL versions of the same text, let alone between the SL and the TL version.

Loss and gain

Once the principle is accepted that sameness cannot exist between two languages, it becomes possible to approach the question of loss and gain in the translation process. It is again an indication of the low status of translation that so much time should have been spent on discussing what is lost in the transfer of a text from SL to TL whilst ignoring what can also be gained, for the translator can at times enrich or clarify the SL text as a direct result of the translation process. Moreover, what is often seen as 'lost' from the SL context may be replaced in the TL context.

Eugene Nida provides a valuable source of data about the problems of loss in translation, particularly about the difficulties faced by the translator when encountered with terms or concepts in the SL that do not exist in the TL. He cites the case of Guaica, a language of southern Venezuela, where there is little trouble in finding satisfactory terms for the English murder, stealing, lying, etc., but where the terms for good, bad, ugly and beautiful cover a very different area of meaning.

(1) Good includes desirable food, killing enemies, chewing dope in moderation, putting fire to one's wife to teach her to obey, and stealing from anyone not belonging to the same band.

(2) Bad includes rotten fruit, any object with a blemish, murdering a person of the same band, stealing from a member of the extended family and lying to anyone.

Untranslatability

When such difficulties are encountered by the translator, the whole issue of the translatability of the text is raised. Catford distinguishes two types of untranslatability, which he terms linguistic and cultural. On the linguistic level, untranslatability occurs when there is no lexical or syntactical substitute in the TL for an SL item.

Catford's category of linguistic untranslatability, which is also proposed by Popovič, is straightforward, but his second category is more problematic. Linguistic untranslatability, he argues, is due to differences in the SL and the TL, whereas cultural untranslatability is due to the absence in the TL culture of a relevant situational feature for the SL text. Catford also claims that more abstract lexical items such as the English term home cannot be described as

untranslatable. If, for example, the phrase I'm going home is spoken by an American resident temporarily in London, it could either imply a return to the immediate 'home' or a return across the Atlantic, depending on the context in which it is used, a distinction that would have to be spelled out in French. Moreover, the English term home, like the French foyer, has a range of associative meanings that are not translated by the more restricted phrase chez moi.

Finally, Susan Bassnett suggests, that it is clearly the task of the translator to find a solution to even the most daunting of problems. Such solutions may vary enormously; the translator's decision as to what constitutes invariant information with respect to a given system of reference is in itself a creative act. Levý stresses the intuitive element in translating:

As in all semiotic processes, translation has its Pragmatic dimension as well. Translation theory tends to be normative, to instruct translators on the OPTIMAL solution; actual translation work, however, is pragmatic; the translator resolves for that one of the possible solutions which promises a maximum of effect with a minimum of effort. That is to say, he intuitively resolves for the so-called MINIMAX STRATEGY.

Science or 'secondary activity'?

Here, Bassnett brings about the problem whether the translation progress is a science or a 'secondary activity'. It appears to be rather obvious that any discussion about the existence of a science of translation is out of date: there already exists, with a serious set of measures that investigating the process of translation, attempting to clarify the question of equivalence and to examine what constitutes meaning within that process. But nowhere is there a theory that pretends to be normative, and even though Lefevere's statement about the goal of the discipline suggests that a comprehensive theory might also be used as a guideline for producing translations, this is a long way from suggesting that the aim of translation theory is to be proscriptive.

The myth of translation as a secondary activity with all the associations of lower status implied in that assessment, can be dispelled once the extent of the pragmatic element of translation is accepted, and once the relationship between author/translator/reader is outlined. A diagram of the communicative relationship in the process of translation depicts that the translator can be both receiver and emitter, the end and the beginning of two separate but linked chain of communication:

Author—Text—Receiver=Translator—Text—Receiver

Roman Jakob son: the nature of linguistic meaning

and equivalence

In his work "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation", Jakob son deals with issues of translatability and equivalence in meaning, by providing detailed examples from different sign systems.

According to Roman Jakob son, there are three types of translation:

- intralingual;
- interlingual;
- intersemiotic.

Interlingual translation, which is translation between two different written languages, has two issues, notably linguistic meaning and equivalence. For instance, in English the word cheese is the acoustic signifier which 'denotes' the concept

'food made of pressed curds'. However, the Russian сыр is not identical to the English cheese (or, for that matter, the Spanish queso, the German Käse, the Korean chijeu, etc.) since the Russian 'code-unit' does not include the concept of soft white curd cheese known in English as cottage cheese. In Russian, that would be творог and not сыр. This general principle of interlinguistic difference between terms and semantic fields importantly also has to do with a basic issue of language and translation. Full linguistic relativity would mean that translation was impossible, but of course translation does occur in all sorts of different contexts and language pairs. In Jakobson's explanation, interlingual translation includes 'substituting messages in one language not for separate code-units but for entire messages in some other language'. Thus, a translation of cottage cheese would not be the TT unit for cottage plus the unit for cheese; the message cottage cheese would be taken into account and translated as a whole term. For the message to be 'equivalent' in ST and TT, the code-units will necessarily be different since they belong to two different sign systems (languages) which partition reality differently (the cheese/сыр example above). In Jakobson's description, the issue of meaning and equivalence concentrates on differences in the structure and terminology of languages rather than on any inability of one language to render a message that has been written or uttered in another verbal language. Thus, Russian is still able to express the full semantic meaning of cheese even though it breaks it down into two separate concepts.

Cross-linguistic differences undoubtedly form the inseparable part of the concept of equivalence in translation, as "Languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they may convey". Such disparities are also highlighted in Jakobson's work.

o gender level: e.g. house is feminine in Romance languages, neuter in German

and English; honey is masculine in French, German and Italian, feminine in Spanish, neuter in English, etc.;

o aspect level: in Russian, the verb morphology varies according to whether the

action has been completed or not;

o the level of semantic fields, such as kinship terms: e.g. the German

Geschwister is normally explicated in English as brothers and sisters, since siblings is rather formal. Similarly, in Chinese it would be 兄弟姐妹 ('xiōng dì jiě mèi', literally meaning 'elder brother, younger brother, elder sister, younger sister').

Nida and 'the science of translating'

The prominent American translator Eugene Nida started his translation studies based on his practical work from the 1940s while he was translating and organizing the translation of the Bible. Nida, with two major works "Toward a Science of Translating" and the co-authored "The Theory and Practice of Translation" tackled the questions of meaning, equivalence and translatability by a completely new 'scientific' approach.
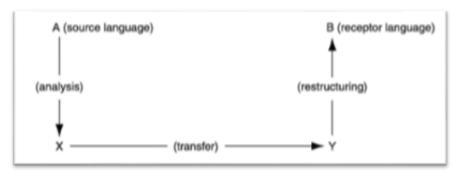
Figure 1. Nida's three-stage system of translation.

Nida, in cooperation with Taber, developed his three-stage system of translation based on Chomsky's model of translation. particularly, Nida and Taber suggest that the 'scientific and practical' advantages of this method compared to any effort to draw up a fully comprehensive list of equivalences between specific pairs of SL and TL structures. 'Kernel' is a key term in this model. Just as kernel sentences were the simplest structures of Chomsky's primary model, so, for Nida and Taber, kernels 'are the basic structural elements out of which language builds its elaborate surface structures'. Kernels are to be obtained from the ST surface structure by a reductive process of back transformation. This entails analysis using generative–transformational grammar's four types of functional class:

(1) events: often but not always performed by verbs (e.g. run, fall, grow, think);

(2) objects: often but not always performed by nouns (e.g. man, horse, moun

tain, table);

(3) abstracts: quantities and qualities, including adjectives and adverbs (e.g. red, length, slowly);

(4) relationals: including affixes, prepositions, conjunctions and copulas (e.g.

pre-, into, of, and, because, be).

Some examples of analysis, aimed at illustrating the different constructions with the preposition of, are as follows:

surface structure: will of God

back transformation: B (object, God) performs A (event, wills)

and

surface structure: creation of the world

back transformation: B (object, the world) is performed by A (event, creates).

Mona Baker's explanation of equivalence 'in other words'

In the book "In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation", Baker looks into various translation problems that can be caused by the lack of equivalence at word level and what measures can be taken when a translator cannot find any suitable word in the target language which expresses the same meaning as the source language word, while providing cross-linguistic examples from several languages.

We tend to think that the word is the most basic meaningful element that exists in a language. However, this statement is not totally accurate. Meanings can be expressed by units much smaller than the word. For instance, the word rebuild has two different meaning elements: re and build, i.e. 'to build again'. This is also the case for the word disbelieve, which

is paraphrased as 'not to believe'. Elements of meaning which come with two or more orthographic words in one language, say English, can be represented by one orthographic word in another language, or vice versa. For example, tennis player is rendered by one word in Turkish: tenisçi; if it is cheap is written as one word in Japanese: yasukattara; and the verb type is written in three words in Spanish: pasar a maquina. This is obvious from here that one-to-one correspondence between orthographic words and elements of meaning within or across languages does not exist.

Some linguists suggested the term morpheme to define the minimal formal element of meaning in language, so that meaning elements should be dealt with more effectively. The biggest and the most significant disparity between morphemes and words is that a morpheme might contain more than one element of meaning and cannot be further analyzed.

Taking an example from English, inconceivable is represented by a single word but consists of three morphemes: in, meaning 'not', conceive meaning 'think of or imagine', and able meaning 'able to be, fit to be'. A suitable paraphrase for this word would be 'cannot be conceived/imagined'. Morphemes have different grammatical functions such as marking plurality (funds), gender (manageress), and tense (considered). Some serve to change the class of the word, for example from verb to adjective (like: likeable), or to add a specific element of meaning such as negation (unhappy). However, morphemes do not clearly defined boundaries. We can witness two distinct morphemes in the word girls: girl + s, but this is not the case for the word men, since the two morphemes 'man' and 'plural' are fused here together. It is utterly important to keep in mind that these types of distinctions can be useful in translation progress, especially on dealing with neologisms in the source language.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the pursuit of equivalence at word level in translation embodies both the art and science of linguistic mediation. With the help intricate analysis, translators navigate the nuances of language, culture, and context to craft translations that not only convey the literal meaning of words but also capture their desired essence. However, the quest for perfect equivalence must be tempered with an understanding of the inherent complexities and limitations of language itself. While striving for fidelity to the source text, translators must also embrace the creative potential of language, allowing for adaptation and interpretation when necessary. In the end, the pursuit of equivalence at the word level is a dynamic and nuanced endeavor, one that requires a delicate balance between fidelity and creativity to bridge the gap between languages and cultures effectively.

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