Theoretical Foundations on Equivalence and Non-Equivalence

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Abstract: Equivalence in translation is a fundamental concept in translation studies, addressing the challenge of transferring meaning across languages while maintaining the integrity of the original text (Jacobson, 1959, p. 113). This paper explores the theoretical foundations of equivalence and non-equivalence, examining key contributions from scholars such as Roman Jakobson, Eugene Nida, Peter Newmark, and Werner Koller. Jakobson's work on the untranslatability of languages and the concept of "equivalent effect" laid the groundwork for understanding translation as a dynamic process. Nida introduced the concepts of dynamic and formal equivalence, focusing on the role of the reader's response. Newmark's semantic and communicative translation approaches provide a practical framework for balancing fidelity to the source text with cultural adaptation. Koller's five types of equivalence further refined these approaches, offering a more detailed view of the translation process. This paper discusses the theoretical developments in translation studies and the ongoing challenges in achieving equivalence in cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: translation equivalence, dynamic equivalence, formal equivalence, semantic translation, communicative translation, untranslatability, translation strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Translation is the process of changing words or texts from one language into another. One of the biggest challenges in translation is the concept of equivalence, which is the idea of keeping the meaning of the original text while translating it into another language. When translating, it is important to try to stay as close as possible to the meaning of the original text. However, no two languages are the same, so it is impossible to always find a perfect match between words or phrases. This is why translators often need to make choices about how to keep the meaning while making the translation understandable in the target language.

In the study of translation, many scholars have discussed equivalence and how to deal with the problems that arise when there is no direct translation for a word or expression. The works of Roman Jakobson, Eugene Nida, Peter Newmark, and Werner Koller have helped us understand how translators can manage the difficulties of transferring meaning between languages. Each scholar has suggested different ideas about how equivalence works and how translators should approach their task. For example, Roman Jakobson explained that languages do not have exact equivalents for every word. He said that the goal of translation is not just to find a matching word but to create an effect on the reader that is similar to the original. Eugene Nida introduced the idea of dynamic equivalence, which focuses on the reader's understanding of the translation, and formal equivalence, which tries to stay close to the exact meaning of the original text. Peter Newmark also talked about two ways of translating: one that focuses on the exact meaning of words (semantic translation) and another that adapts the meaning to

suit the culture of the target language (communicative translation). Lastly, Werner Koller described five different types of equivalence that can be used in translation, each depending on the type of text being translated.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical methodology grounded in a comparative analysis of seminal theoretical contributions and practical strategies in translation studies. Primary data were derived from key theoretical works by Roman Jakobson, Eugene Nida, Peter Newmark, and Werner Koller, as well as contemporary approaches proposed by I. G'afurov et al. and Komissarov & Koralova on handling equivalent-lacking lexical items. The analysis focuses on synthesizing these frameworks to examine the conceptual evolution of equivalence and non-equivalence in translation. Emphasis was placed on identifying the strategies translators use to preserve meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Textual and contextual examination of selected examples allowed for a critical assessment of the applicability and limitations of each theoretical model and practical method within various translation scenarios. This approach enabled a comprehensive evaluation of equivalence as both a theoretical construct and a pragmatic challenge in modern translation practice.

RESULTS

Roman Jakobson's concept of equivalence. Jakobson, in his seminal 1959 paper, identifies three types of translation: **intralingual**, **interlingual**, and **intersemiotic** (Jacobson Roman, 2004, p. 113). His primary focus is on **interlingual translation**, or translation between different sign systems (i.e., between two languages). Jakobson challenges the notion of perfect equivalence, asserting that no language has an exact counterpart for every word or concept in another language. For example, the Russian word «сыр» does not encompass all the varieties of cheese found in English, and vice versa, which reflects the broader challenge of interlinguistic differences in vocabulary and meaning (Jacobson Roman, 2004, p. 115).

Jakobson also introduces the concept of the **"equivalent effect"**, which refers to the translator's goal of evoking a response in the target audience that mirrors the response of the source audience. Thus, while linguistic equivalence may not be fully achievable, translation can still succeed if the emotional, cultural, or intellectual response of the audience remains consistent. This theory laid the foundation for the study of translation as a communicative act, not just a linguistic one.

Eugene Nida's dynamic and formal equivalence. Eugene Nida's theory of **dynamic equivalence** and **formal equivalence** built upon Jakobson's ideas and advanced them in the 1960's. In contrast to Jakobson's more linguistic focus, Nida emphasized the importance of the reader's response in translation (E. Nida, 1964, p. 38). **Formal equivalence** focuses on closely matching the structure and content of the source text, aiming for a literal translation, while **dynamic equivalence** focuses on the effect the translation has on the target reader, aiming to create a similar experience to that of the original audience.

Nida's translation method involves a three-step process: **analysis**, **transfer**, and **restructuring** (E. A. Nida & Taber, 2003, p. 53). The analysis stage breaks down the source text into its core elements (kernels), which are the essential building blocks of meaning in any language. These elements are then transferred to the target language, and the final step is the **restructuring** of the sentence to accommodate the grammatical and cultural rules of the target language. This approach recognizes that different languages have different structures and cultural contexts, and therefore, a translator must prioritize **dynamic equivalence** – making the translation feel natural and relevant to the target audience (E. A. Nida & Taber, 2003, p. 56). Nida's theories have had a profound impact on how religious and literary texts are translated, shifting the focus from exact lexical equivalence to communication and reader-oriented translation.

Peter Newmark's semantic and communicative translation. Peter Newmark extended the work of Nida by introducing two types of translation: **semantic translation** and **communicative translation**. **Semantic translation** emphasizes preserving the exact meaning of the original text, adhering closely to the source text's wording and structure, while **communicative translation** focuses on adapting the message to the target audience's cultural context, seeking to evoke the same effect as the original text (Newmark, 1988b, p. 76). Newmark's work introduces a more pragmatic approach to translation, arguing that the choice between semantic and communicative translation depends on the type of text being translated (Newmark, 1988a, p. 82). For instance, **communicative translation** is often preferred for works with a strong cultural or emotional component (e.g., literature, advertisements), whereas **semantic translation** might be more appropriate for technical, legal, or academic texts, where precision is paramount. Although Newmark recognizes the challenges of translation, particularly when dealing with deeply rooted cultural differences, he challenges the idea of achieving a perfect "equivalent effect". He suggests that the nature of translation involves compromise, with the translator balancing fidelity to the original with adaptation to the target culture.

Werner Koller's Types of equivalence. Werner Koller takes a more granular approach, categorizing **five types of equivalence** that are important for translation (Koller, 1979, pp. 91–95). Table 1 demonstrates Koller's typology of equivalence.

Table 1. Types of equivalence and their research focus

Type of equivalence	How attainable	Research focus
Denotative	By analyzing correspondences and textual factors	Lexis (words)
Connotative	Often approximate, involves understanding connotative dimensions in different languages	Stylistic effects, social usage, geographical origin, formality
Text-normative	By comparing patterns of usage in different languages	Usage in different communicative situations
Pragmatic	By translating the text for a specific readership, prioritizing the audience's needs	Communicative conditions in different language pairs
Formal	Using the TL's possibilities creatively, even inventing new forms	Equivalence in rhyme, metaphor, and stylistic forms

Koller emphasizes the **hierarchical application** of these types of equivalence, suggesting that translators begin with **denotative equivalence** (literal translation) and move to **connotative** or **pragmatic equivalence** when necessary (Koller, 1979, p. 98). This approach acknowledges the complex, context-dependent nature of translation and the need for flexibility in choosing the appropriate strategy based on the communicative goals of the translation.

Strategies for translating equivalent-lacking words. Building on the foundational theories of equivalence, I. G'afurov et al. (2012) contribute a practical typology for handling lexical items that lack direct equivalents in the target language. These include culturally specific terms, neologisms, and context-dependent expressions. The authors propose five main strategies (G'afurov et al., 2012, pp. 119–122):

1. **Transliteration**, which preserves the phonetic form of the source term using the script and norms of the target language, is especially effective for proper nouns and institutional names.

2. **Explanatory additions**, such as footnotes or parenthetical clarifications, provide necessary cultural or referential context.

3. **Calquing (loan translation)** attempts to reproduce the structural elements of the original term in the target language, maintaining both form and meaning.

4. **Functional or semantic equivalence** involves selecting a culturally or semantically analogous term in the target language.

5. **Descriptive translation** renders the meaning of the term through a phrase or clause, particularly useful for neologisms or technical jargon.

Similarly, Komissarov and Koralova (1990) focus on the interpretive and dynamic nature of translating **equivalent-lacking words**, particularly neologisms and culturally embedded terms (realia). These terms often have no fixed dictionary equivalents, requiring translators to creatively deconstruct and reformulate their meaning. For example, novel coinages like *nuclearist* or *zero-growther* must be interpreted based on morphological intuition and translated using descriptive or contextually appropriate constructs. In addressing realia and polysemous words, the authors advocate for strategies such as **borrowing**, **semantic transformation**, and **contextual paraphrasing** (Комиссаров & Коралова, 1990, p. 80).

DISCUSSION

The analysis of Jakobson, Nida, Newmark, and Koller reveals several common themes:

➢ Incompleteness of equivalence. All four scholars agree that perfect equivalence is unattainable between languages, yet they suggest various ways to approximate meaning and convey the intended effect of the original text.

➢ Focus on the target audience. Both Nida and Koller emphasize the importance of achieving an equivalent effect on the target audience, acknowledging that translation is a reader-centered process.

➢ Contextual and cultural factors. The work of these scholars, along with the contributions by G'afurov et al. and Komissarov & Koralova, underscores the significance of cultural adaptation and semantic flexibility. Translators must creatively bridge linguistic and cultural gaps, especially when encountering words without direct equivalents.

➢ Practical approaches. Newmark's focus on semantic and communicative translation provides a pragmatic framework, while G'afurov et al. offer concrete methods – transliteration, calquing, and descriptive translation – for handling lexical gaps. Komissarov and Koralova expand this by emphasizing the translator's interpretive skill when dealing with neologisms and realia.

These perspectives illustrate that achieving equivalence often requires a blend of translation strategies tailored to the communicative function and genre of the source text. Translators are not merely conveyors of words but active mediators of meaning, responsible for both linguistic accuracy and cultural resonance. The complexity of translating equivalent-lacking terms reveals that equivalence is less about literal correspondence and more about interpretive fidelity.

CONCLUSION

Equivalence remains a crucial part of translation theory, and the work of scholars like Jakobson, Nida, Newmark, and Koller has greatly advanced our understanding of the complexities involved in translating across languages and cultures. The integration of insights from I. G'afurov et al. and Komissarov & Koralova highlights the evolving challenges of translating equivalent-lacking lexical items and underscores the translator's need for creativity, contextual awareness, and linguistic dexterity.

While perfect equivalence is unattainable, their theories provide valuable frameworks for achieving **effective communication** in translation, focusing on the **target audience's response**, **cultural adaptation**, and the preservation of the original text's core meaning. As translation studies continue to evolve, the contributions of these scholars remain foundational in guiding both theoretical discourse and translation practice.

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