

THE CONCEPT OF EQUIVALENCE IN TRANSLATION

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Annotation

The study analyzes the complexities in translation, based on the “untranslatability” theory, and the ideas of Wilhelm von Humboldt, E. Sapir, and A. Meyye. It emphasizes that a translator must not only transfer words from one language to another but also consider cross-cultural adaptation, preserving both meaning and style of the original text.

Key words

Translation, equivalence, literal translation, free translation, linguistic art, cross-cultural adaptation, Humboldt, Sapir, Meyye.

The Theory of Untranslatability and the Concept of Equivalence in Translation

In this regard, the “theory of untranslatability” was developed as early as the 19th century. Wilhelm von Humboldt's linguistic theory is, undoubtedly, one of the most influential linguo-philosophical conceptions of the 19th century. During that period, the primary focus of linguistics was to study the specific characteristics of a language and to reveal all the unique features that distinguish it from other languages: the specific structure of the language, the grammatical framework of each individual language, and the peculiarities of its vocabulary. All of these constitute the identity of a language and its national character. For these very reasons, the hypothesis emerged regarding the impossibility of transferring these features—both linguistic and linguo-cultural aspects—into another language. At the same time, it was believed that a translation must fully recreate the source text and be absolutely identical to it; therefore, the translation of literary texts, in particular, was deemed fundamentally impossible.

Translation was viewed as an impossible task, inevitably leading to both semantic and artistic losses. Two approaches were identified, both of which were recognized as unsatisfactory: the first—remaining absolutely faithful to the source text while sacrificing the uniqueness of the target language and literature (i.e., literal translation); the second—departing from the source text and recreating it in the target language based on the specific features and linguo-cultural aspects of that language (i.e., free translation or adaptation). Consequently, the conclusion was declared that translation, as an exact copy of the source text, is impossible.

According to E. Sapir, "there is a generalized, non-linguistic art that can be transmitted through a foreign language without any damage, and there is also a specific linguistic art that is essentially untranslatable." Based on this quote, it can be said that while translation may not be identical in all aspects, it is nonetheless possible.

A. Meillet expresses a similar view: "Every language expresses thought to the extent necessary for the society it serves... Any thing can be expressed using any phonetics and any grammar." At the same time, the possibility of expressing everything is not always fully realized in practice within a specific language, which creates difficulties in achieving a perfect and comprehensive translation.



Due to the impossibility of achieving absolute identity between the source text and the translation, the term "equivalence" was introduced. This term denotes the commonality of content, i.e., the semantic proximity between the source text and the translation. Noting that there are various views regarding when and where the term "equivalence" entered translation theory, P. M. Toper writes that R. Jakobson proposed the term "equivalence in translation" as a "human" characteristic of translation in his article "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation." The term "translation equivalence" has been defined differently in various sources. Some are listed below. The Dictionary of Social Sciences provides the following definition: "Translation equivalence is the commonality of content, the semantic proximity between the source text and the translation."

L. S. Barkhudarov writes in his work *Language and Translation*: "In the process of interlingual transformation (as in any other transformation), losses are inevitable, meaning that the meanings expressed in the source text are not fully transferred. Therefore, a translation text can never be a full and absolute equivalent of the source text. The translator's task is to make this equivalence as complete as possible, i.e., to reduce losses to a minimum. However, demanding a 'one hundred percent' correspondence of meanings expressed in the source and translation texts is completely unrealistic."

V. Komissarov also explains this concept as follows: "The equivalence of individual words in the source and translation texts implies maximum possible similarity not only of referential-logical meanings but also of connotative meanings. This reflects the perception characteristics of the recipients of the information embodied in the word. In conveying connotative semantics, the emotional, stylistic, and figurative components of the word are of the greatest importance."

Based on these definitions, the key term for the concept of "equivalence" is equality—that is, the equality of meanings. In linguistics, equivalent translation is understood as a process aimed at preserving the meaning, structure, and function of the translation. It is important to preserve semantic, structural, functional, communicative, pragmatic, genre-specific, and other characteristic parameters in translation. Below is an explanation of each parameter with Chinese examples:

- **Semantic equivalence** – the full preservation of the sentence's meaning in translation. For example:

- Uzbek: "Men kitob o'qiyapman."
- Chinese: "我在看书。" (Wǒ zài kàn shū.)
- Meaning exactly preserved: "Men" → 我, "kitob o'qiyapman" → 在看书。

- **Structural equivalence** – means preserving the sentence structure and syntactic order. For example:

- Uzbek: "U tez yuguradi."
- Chinese: "他跑得很快。" (Tā pǎo de hěn kuài.)
- Preserves the Subject + Verb + Adjective structure.

- **Functional equivalence** – preserving the function of the sentence within the language, i.e., the communicative purpose. For example:

- Uzbek: "Iltimos, eshikni yoping."
- Chinese: "请关门。" (Qǐng guān mén.)
- The imperative function and politeness are preserved.

- **Communicative equivalence** – preserving the communication goal in translation, i.e., the emotion or intent of the message in speech. For example:

- Uzbek: "Sizni ko'rganimdan xursandman."
- Chinese: "很高兴见到你。" (Hěn gāoxìng jiàn dào nǐ.)
- The sentence preserves the function of expressing joy.



- **Pragmatic equivalence** – preserving the cultural context and the social function of speech. For example:
 - Uzbek: “Sizni mehmonxonaga taklif qilaman.” (Meaning: I invite you to my home).
 - Chinese: “我请你去我家做客。” (Wǒ qǐng nǐ qù wǒ jiā zuòkè.)
 - In Chinese culture, “做客” signifies being a guest and conveys the invitation in a culturally appropriate manner.
- **Genre equivalence** – means preserving the genre or style of the text. For example:
 - Uzbek: “Bir bor ekan, bir yo‘q ekan...” (Once upon a time...)
 - Chinese: “从前，有一个故事.....” (Cóngqián, yǒu yí gè gùshì...)
 - The introductory genre of a children's story is exactly preserved.

It should be noted that equivalent translation requires the preservation of semantic, structural, functional, communicative, pragmatic, genre-specific, and other characteristic parameters. Depending on the text itself, as well as the conditions and methods of translation, the degree of their practical implementation varies [Vinogradov 2001]. Dinda Gorlee, who examined this issue, notes: "This landscape becomes even more complex because there are many definitions associated with this term. Often it is used not only in a descriptive (i.e., neutral) sense but as a prerequisite that must be met for a text to be considered an adequate translation. The variety of types of equivalence proposed in works on translation theory is astonishing: in addition to the most general term 'translation equivalence', one can encounter terms such as 'functional equivalence', 'stylistic equivalence', 'formal equivalence', 'textual equivalence', 'communicative equivalence', 'linguistic equivalence', 'pragmatic equivalence', 'semantic equivalence', 'dynamic equivalence', and 'ontological equivalence'."

To understand the concept of translation equivalence, it is necessary to comprehensively consider various approaches to interpreting the structure of equivalence.

In his work *Theory of Translation (Linguistic Aspects)* [Komissarov 1990], V. N. Komissarov developed the theory of levels of equivalence, according to which equivalent relations are established between the source text and the translation at corresponding levels during the translation process. From the perspective of the content of the source and translation texts, V. N. Komissarov identifies five levels of content. According to Komissarov's theory, translation equivalence consists of achieving maximum identity at all content levels of the source and translation texts.

Source and translation units may be equivalent across all five of these levels or only in some of them. Potentially, both in the source language and the target language, there exist full equivalents, partially corresponding equivalent units, or contextual equivalent expressions. At the same time, their correct evaluation, selection, and application depend on the translator's skill, knowledge, proficiency, and creative ability, as well as their capacity to account for and compare a whole complex of linguistic and extralinguistic factors. In the translation process, every translator solves a complex task: they must not only find and select the necessary equivalent unit but also apply it correctly to create statements that are communicatively equivalent in both languages.

Komissarov also distinguishes between two types of equivalence. The first is **potentially achievable equivalence**, which implies that the content of two texts created in different languages is as common as possible, taking into account the differences in the language systems; this type of equivalence can be called ideal or theoretical equivalence. The second is **translational or practical equivalence**, which represents the real semantic proximity achieved by the translator between the source and translation texts during the translation process.



Accordingly, in the translation process, the translator works based on a specific text, brings the translation closer to the source text through various methods, achieves different degrees of content preservation and proximity, and strives to get as close as possible to the potentially achievable equivalence.

In linguistics, equivalent translation is understood as a process aimed at preserving the meaning, structure, function, and context of the text. There are various types of equivalence in the translation process, each focusing on different aspects. The three most fundamental ones are **formal equivalence, semantic equivalence, and situational equivalence.**

- **Formal equivalence** – involves maintaining the literal or structural proximity of the source text in the translation. Here, the primary focus is on linguistic structure and grammar. For example, the Uzbek sentence “*Men ertalab maktabga bordim*” is translated into Chinese as “*我早上去了学校。*” (Wǒ zǎoshang qùle xuéxiào). Here, the words and sentence structure are kept close to the source text: “Men” → 我, “ertalab” → 早上, “bordim” → 去了, “maktab” → 学校.

- **Semantic equivalence** – ensures the preservation of the core meaning and content in translation, although literal correspondence is not required. For example, the Uzbek sentence “*Bu kitob juda qiziqarli*” is expressed in Chinese as “*这本书非常有趣。*” (Zhè běn shū fēicháng yǒuqù). Here, the main essence of the sentence—that the book is interesting—is preserved, but the sentence structure and word choice may change slightly.

- **Situational equivalence** – ensures alignment with the speech context, situation, and culture in translation. In this type of equivalence, along with the meaning of the sentence, the social and cultural context of the person using it is taken into account. For example, the Uzbek sentence “*Sizni mehmonxonaga taklif qilaman*” (I invite you to my home) is translated into Chinese as “*我请你去我家做客。*” (Wǒ qǐng nǐ qù wǒ jiā zuòkè). In Chinese culture, “*做客*” signifies being a guest; thus, the translation is adapted to the context and preserves the speech situation.

In this way, each type of equivalence in translation focuses on specific aspects. Formal equivalence manifests in structure and words, semantic equivalence in content and the core message, and situational equivalence in context and cultural appropriateness. They all serve to ensure that the translation is accurate, understandable, and culturally relevant.

- **Example of structural proximity:**

- Uzbek: “*Men kecha bozorda savdo qildim.*”
- Chinese: “*我昨天在市场上做生意。*” (Wǒ zuótiān zài shìchǎng shàng zuò shēngyì.)
- Here, most of the sentence structure and words are kept close to the source: “Men” → 我, “kecha” → 昨天, “bozorda” → 在市场上, “savdo qildim” → 做生意.

Dynamic equivalence, on the other hand, aims to preserve the core meaning and the effect of the speech in translation; that is, the translation serves to convey the same emotion and meaning to the reader or listener as they would have understood from the source text. In this method, literal correspondence is not as important as the impact and message of the text. For example:

- Uzbek: “*U juda tez yuguradi.*”



- Chinese: “他跑得飞快。” (Tā pǎo de fēikuài.)

Here, the translation accurately preserves the meaning of "running very fast," but the words and expression are somewhat more liberal because the goal is to create the image of rapid running in the reader's mind.

Thus, formal equivalence focuses on structure and words, while dynamic equivalence focuses on content and impact. Both types are important in increasing the quality of translation, and their use depends on the type and purpose of the text.

However, in considering this classification, the previously mentioned problematic question arises again: can a text evoke the same impact in recipients belonging to different cultures, mentalities, literary traditions, and historical periods? Nevertheless, despite this issue not being fully resolved, Nida's theory significantly influenced many scholars.

Among them is the German scholar **Werner Koller**. Developing Eugene Nida's theory, he identified five types of equivalence. In translation, equivalence is an important concept aimed at preserving the meaning, structure, style, and communicative characteristics of the text. Each type of equivalence performs a specific function. Below are the five most important types and their Chinese examples:

1. **Denotative equivalence** – relates to the full transmission of the extralinguistic content of the text, i.e., facts and reality. In this type of translation, it is important to accurately preserve the meaning of the sentence and the event or fact. For example, the Uzbek sentence “*Toshkent O‘zbekistonning poytaxtidir*” is expressed in Chinese as “塔什干是乌兹别克斯坦的首都。” (Tǎshígàn shì Wūzībiékèsītǎn de shǒudū). Here, the denotative meaning—Tashkent being the capital—is fully preserved.

2. **Connotative equivalence** – also known as stylistic equivalence, it aims to preserve the stylistic tone of words. In this type of translation, it is important to choose the most appropriate synonym for the text. For example, the Uzbek sentence “*U juda jasur edi*” is translated into Chinese as “他非常勇敢。” (Tā fēicháng yǒnggǎn). Here, the emotional and stylistic tone—bravery—is preserved.

3. **Text-normative equivalence** – ensures adherence to the norms appropriate for a specific text type. For instance, in scientific texts, precise terminology and units of measurement are essential. The Uzbek sentence “*Suvning qaynatish harorati 100°C ga teng*” is translated into Chinese as “水的沸点为100摄氏度。” (Shuǐ de fēidiǎn wéi 100 shèshìdù). The scientific style and terms are fully preserved.

4. **Pragmatic (communicative) equivalence** – is aimed at directing the message toward the recipient. The translation should be such that the reader or listener is affected in the same way as they would understand the source text. For example, the Uzbek sentence “*Itimos, eshikni yoping*” is given in Chinese as “请关门。” (Qǐng guān mén). Here, the polite imperative form and its impact are preserved.

5. **Formal equivalence** – is directed at preserving wordplay, irony, authorial embellishments, and the specific characteristics of a character's speech in the source text. For example, the Uzbek sentence “*‘Uning aqli fikrlari meni lol qoldirdi,’ dedi Ali hazil bilan*” is expressed in Chinese as “‘他的聪明想法让我目瞪口呆，’阿里开玩笑地说。” (Tā de cōngmíng xiǎngfǎ ràng wǒ mùdèngkǒudāi,” Ālǐ kāiwánxiào de shuō). Here, the wordplay and the humorous tone are preserved, and the author's stylistic embellishment is not lost.

In conclusion, the five types of equivalence—denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, and formal—serve to preserve various aspects of translation. Denotative equivalence



preserves facts and reality; connotative—style and emotion; text-normative—conformity to the text type; pragmatic—the impact directed at the recipient; and formal—stylistic and linguistic embellishments. All of them serve to ensure that the translation is accurate, clear, and culturally appropriate.

"This theory is convenient for studying the results of translation, as it examines them from various perspectives and demonstrates its multifaceted nature. However, the lack of a single criterion and clear foundations for such a division prevents this classification from being categorized as a strictly scientific one. Consequently, the types of equivalence identified by V. Köller partially overlap with one another."

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