NOTIONS OF EQUIVALENCE:
EARLY INTEREST AMONG TRANSLATION THEORISTS

Abstract
The problem of equivalence has been raised since research and speculation on translation started to first arise. Three well-known translators, researchers and authors, Roman Jacobson, Eugene A. Nida and John Cunnison Catford, described three different but equally important theories on equivalence and its notion. Their ideas and theories were fruitful and are still under consideration today since the definition, relevance and applicability of equivalence has not been, nor will likely ever be agreed upon by all translation theorists. It is however generally agreed that translation should not be thought of as a word-for-word act, but this can be considered rather simplified when the words are not followed by the same meanings as in the SL language. This is the problem raised in different ways by the aforementioned authors. The aim of this essay is to gather important concepts by these authors so as to clarify the complexity of equivalence.

Keywords: equivalence, linguistics, semiotics, machine translation, controversy

The author wishes to acknowledge the contribution of the Department of Culture, Media and Communication of the University of Surrey, UK.

As machine translation evolved in the 1950s, the need for defining the notion of equivalence amongst different languages became quite evident. Many linguists thought of machine translation as an immature invention, which could only confuse both translators and readers as it was “received with considerable scepticism by many linguists who rejected it for its naivety in linguistic matters and for its unfounded assumptions on the ‘logicality’ of language” (Hutchins 1986:30). Because of the problem that arose from the launch of machine translation, different theorists dealt with the issue of equivalence by describing its concept and how it works for different kinds of texts.

However, the notion of equivalence in general and its vague sense, “the condition of being equivalent; equality of value, force, importance, significance, etc” (The Oxford English Dictionary, 1989:358), has been the reason why translation theorists that dealt with the matter did not seem to agree on the term equivalence, on its importance and its applications. Nonetheless, the difference in opinions and theories does not imply that the theories mentioned during the last decades are not of great importance to the theory of translation. According to Venuti, although the hurdles of equivalence remained unsolved, at least during the 1940’s and the 1950’s, the issue was studied thoroughly: “The obstacles to translation are duly noted, judged either insurmountable or negotiable, and translation methods are formulated with precision” (2000:67).

Does equivalence concern all kinds of texts or does it apply only for particular texts? Is equivalence merely a grammatical problem or does it concern the culture and the receiver of the text? Eugene Nida, Roman Jacobson, Peter Newmark and Mona Baker are only a few of the linguists that pondered the problem of equivalence. In this essay three of the first most prominent
theories concerning equivalence will be briefly discussed with reference not only to the theories themselves but also to the reasons that cause the concern for the problem and whether these particular theories can be doubted or not. The theories will be mentioned in chronological order, so as not to indicate preference to or supremacy of a specific one in comparison to the others.

Apart from the fact that there are many more theories not mentioned here, it must also be noted that no attempt is made to give a definite answer to the problem of equivalence, or to which of the theories is the correct one, since the problem is complicated and it is not based on definite facts but merely on opinions that concern not only the translator but also the reader.

Roman Jacobson (1959), Eugene A. Nida (1964), and John Cunnison Catford (1965) are linguists who dealt with the notion of equivalence, spotlighted the problems and tried to give explicit answers. Roman Jacobson (1959) in his paper ‘On linguistic aspects of translation’ firstly refers to three kinds of translation: intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic:

1. Intralingual translation or rewording is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language.
2. Interlingual translation or translation proper is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.
3. Intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (Jacobson, 1959/2000:114)

Obviously influenced by semiotics, he goes on stating that the signifier can be conceived as a message even by someone who has never seen or experienced the sign, “that it is possible to understand what is signified by a word even if we have never seen or experienced the concept or thing in real life” (Munday, 2002:36). In addition, he stresses that equivalence is a difficult issue for both translator and linguist, but believes that almost everything is translatable since the translator can pass the message either by using a description of the word, a synonymous, a circumlocution or by simply making a decision on the translation. However, he points out that “poetry is by definition untranslatable” (1959/2000:118) since the translator has to transfer the language of the poem, i.e. affixes, syntax, morphology, and not simply the message, which is considered impossible.

From the very beginning of Jacobson’s essay, it can be deducted that his interest on equivalence is based on linguistics and the occasion for his discussion on the topic was given by the British philosopher Bertrand Russell and his doctrine on logical positivism. It is not by chance that Jacobson begins his essay referring to Russell and that he criticizes Russell’s view of the linguistic aspect of philosophy.

“According to Bertrand Russell, “‘no one can understand the word ‘cheese’ unless he has a nonlinguistic acquaintance with cheese’. If, however {my emphasis}, we follow Russell’s fundamental precept” (1959/2000:113).

It must also be highlighted that Jacobson is greatly influenced by Peircean ideas on semiotics and that he treats the language, thus translation and equivalence, as a system of signs, which are interrelated. He tries to focus on the fact that there is a relationship between codes, i.e. between languages, and he believes that translation is a conversion from one code to another. According to Jacobson, translatability is strongly connected to how the translator decides to complete the translation since he believes that one way or another translation is simply recoding, a point which is strongly emphasized by Venturi (2000:69).

By referring to Jacobson’s beliefs on linguistics, it is intended to indicate the reasons why he shows concern on the matter of equivalence. Jacobson tried to transfer the notions of formalism and structuralism into linguistics. “Roman Jacobson who introduced the word structuralism in the field of linguistics way back in 1929 declared “I do not believe in things, I believe only in their relationships”” (Emirbayer, 2002:151). He focuses mostly on the language as a system of signs, and not as a cultural element. Translation, according to him, is only a representation of another system of signs, of another code, a fact that he tried to prove with his paper on equivalence. Thus, his interest in equivalence is based on linguistics, and more specifically on semiotics, which indicates the way Jacobson thinks of language and translation.
Jacobson’s theory, although of great importance to linguistics and to the theory of translation and equivalence, cannot be considered as flawless. In his theory, Jacobson refers to all the above three kinds of translations as a form of interpretation. However, according to Eco, not every interpretation is a kind of translation: “However, to say that translation is a form of interpretation does not imply that interpretation is a form of translation” (2003:123). Hence, Jacobson’s theory can create confusion for the translator and the linguist. In addition, Eco believes that rewording cannot be considered as translation since definition, paraphrasing and synonymy that are regarded forms of rewording can simply be considered a mere joke when used in a translation process: “But this joke has been made possible by having identified translation with interpretation” (2003:128).

Naturally, in Jacobson’s case, it can be considered rather dogmatic the fact that Eco states that rewording cannot be regarded as translation, since Jacobson in his essay clearly mentions that synonymy is not complete equivalence: “Yet, synonymy, as a rule, is not complete equivalence” (1959/2000:114). Eco, in order to prove his argument, uses examples of poetry, and, to be more exact, he quotes Hamlet (2003:127), while Jacobson undoubtedly leaves poetry out of his theory.

What followed Jacobson’s discussion on equivalence was the theory of Eugene A. Nida (1964) who argued that there are two types of equivalence that, of course, are merely the poles of the notion and that between them intermediate many levels. The first type is formal equivalence or formal correspondence, which is a word-for-word approach of the text with an emphasis on the source language. Namely, “Formal equivalence focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content” (Nida, 1964:159), while the second type is dynamic equivalence that can be considered to be in a way the opposite pole. Dynamic equivalence emphasizes the relation between the text and the reader and what is important is the fact that the receiver is effected in the exact same way that the readers of the source text are, i.e. in the most natural way, since dynamic equivalence is “producing in the ultimate receptors a response similar to that of the original receptors” (Nida, 1964:163). This impact on the reader is what Nida calls equivalent effect.

It should be noted that Nida is in favour of the dynamic equivalence in translation since he believes that the message is more important than the form of the text. Along with Taber, he clearly states that correct communication is only achieved through a dynamic equivalence translation procedure.

“Dynamic equivalence in translation is far more than correct communication of information. In fact, one of the most essential, and yet often neglected, elements is the expressive factor, for people must also feel as well as understand what is said”. (Nida & Taber, 1982:25)

Nida expresses his concern on the issue of equivalence based on his interest in Bible translation. As a member of the American Bible Society, he travelled around the world and pondered the problem of translating for different cultures. “Eugene Nida joined the Society in 1943 and became one of its luminaries. He personally visited over 50 nations and worked on more than 100 translation projects” (http://www.christianhistorytimeline.com/DAILYF/2001/05/daily-05-11-2001.shtml). That is the reason he believed that it is better when translation transmits the message rather than the form and the content was because he wanted to minimize the diversity of cultures as far as translation is concerned, since the most difficult problems of translation are based on cultural differences among nations: “In fact, differences between cultures cause many more severe complications than do differences in language structure” (Nida, 1964:161)

In addition, it must be highlighted that Nida was undoubtedly influenced by Chomsky’s generative-transformational model, which analyzes sentences in simple structures. “Nida incorporates key features of Chomsky’s model into his ‘science’ of translation” (Munday, 2002:39). In particular, Nida uses this model in order to pinpoint the deep structure of the sentences and thus make translation easier and more understandable to the translator and the reader.

No matter how much Nida influenced not only the translators and the linguists, but also the American Bible Society and the readers, especially those of the Bible, his theories were strongly criticized by some, and probably not unduly.
According to Gentzler, Nida is mostly based on his religious beliefs and theology rather than on scientific principles. He also states that Nida’s theory can be regarded as misleading and superfluous, because it is not based on certain facts and ideas, but on generalities and vagueness. Last but not least, Gentzler believes that Nida’s theory can only be used in particular cases, such as when translating propaganda or advertisements, i.e. in cases of exploitation. Gentzler in his book *Contemporary Translation Theories* finishes the chapter ‘The “science” of translation’ summing up in a few words his severe criticism on Nida’s work:

“Nida provides an excellent model for translation which involves a manipulation of a text to serve the interests of a religious belief, but he fails to provide the groundwork for what the West in general conceives of as a “science”” (1993:60).

Susan Bassnett doubts Nida’s theory as well, arguing that his approach is ambiguous and, in some cases, the kinds of equivalence that he suggests can be contradictory to each other. She argues that the definitions of dynamic and formal equivalence are very abstract and cannot be applied in all cases of translations “[…] the weakness of Nida’s loosely defined types can clearly be seen” (2002:33).

Thus, it can be concluded that Nida’s theory in equivalence serves translation and has influenced many translators and subsequent theorists, but it has also limitations in its application, since it is a rather general and abstract theory that cannot be useful in every case.

John Cunnison Catford (1965) in his book *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* refers to textual equivalence and formal correspondence as far as translation equivalence is concerned. *Textual translation equivalent* is any Target text (TT) or part of a text, which is corresponding to a certain Source text (ST) or part of a text. “A textual translation equivalent, then, is any TL form (text or portion of a text) which is observed to be the equivalent of a given SL form (text or portion of a text)” (Catford, 1965:27). *Textual equivalence* can be applied through commutation, i.e. through changes of parts of a text, where it can be concluded that when the TT is altered, then the ST text alters as well: “A textual translation equivalent is thus: that portion of a TL text which is changed when and only when a given portion of a SL text is changed” (Catford, 1965:28). By formal correspondence, Catford refers to the economy of the text and the fact that a part of a TL category “takes up the same place” as a particular SL category.

“A formal correspondent is any TL category, which may be said to occupy, as nearly as possible, the ‘same’ place in the economy of the TL as the given SL category occupies in the SL” (Catford, 1965:32).

In addition, Catford uses the notion of shifts in order to justify lack of equivalence between SL and TL. By shifts he means the alterations amongst SL and TL items that are divided in two major groups: level shifts and category shifts, where level shifts are between grammar and lexis, while category shifts concern grammar proper and are divided in structure-shifts, class-shifts, unit-shifts and intra-system-shifts (Catford, 1965:73).

In general, Catford’s approach to equivalence is based on linguistics, thus on the context of the translation, rather than on the culture and the readership of the target language. He is obviously influenced by the advancements of machine translation, since he deals with translation as if it is a mere substitution of words that can easily be done by a machine. “Indeed, Catford’s translation SHIFTS bear real similarities to notions of complex transfer in machine translation […]” (Kenny, 1998:78). Moreover, Catford’s concern on equivalence is also based on his influence and interest on sociolinguistics and Halliday’s functional grammar, which divides the language in units, structures, classes and systems, as Catford does when referring to the language “Catford had a preference for a more linguistic-based approach to translation and this approach is based on the linguistic work of Firth and Halliday” (http://accurapid.com/journal/14equiv.htm).

Catford’s approach to translation and equivalence is not considered to be successful by many other theorists. One of the most severe criticisms on Catford’s ideas comes from Snell-Hornby, who describes his approach as totally insufficient, by stating that it is based on isolated examples and has nothing to do with the reality of translation. She particularly stresses that “From such
examples he derives “translation rules” which fall far short of the complex problems presented in real-life translation” (1995:20). Newmark, as well, believes that Catford’s theory is not of great importance to translation, since he states that Catford’s ideas have to do mostly with linguistics and not with translation theory “he may be helping the student to translate, he is illustrating contrastive linguistics, but he is not contributing to translation theory” (1981:19). Indeed, it should be noted that Catford faces translation as a phenomenon cut off from culture and people. He refers to translation, associating it to mathematics and statistics and tries to create unconditioned translation rules. But, it cannot be doubted that language, and thus translation, has a close relation to culture and the way of life in general. As Mary Snell-Hornby explains, "Language is not seen as an isolated phenomenon suspended in a vacuum but as an integral part of culture" (1995:39). On the other hand, Catford’s theory is an organized work that attempts to analyze translation from a linguistic point of view “It does, however, remain one of the very few truly original attempts to give a systematic description of translation from a linguistic point of view” (Fawcett, 1998:121), which, of course, is one part of translating, but there is also a wide range of other elements that intervene, such as the mentality of the translator and the culture of the receiver.

No certain answer can be given to the definition of equivalence and what it involves, since the choice between an SL-oriented approach and a TL-oriented one is based on the theoretical point of view of the translator. It can be deducted that translation equivalence is a complicated notion and has created many different, but all logically based, theories. In addition, all of the early theories have certainly influenced many translators and, at the same time, they were criticized again by many.

Briefly, in the case of Jacobson, the main point is that he thought of language and translation equivalence through a semiotics spectrum, believing that everything, with the exception of poetry, is translatable. Based on his interest on semiotics and philosophy, he dealt with equivalence from a linguistics point of view. His theory was one of the first really important ones on equivalence, but is considered in a way mistaken, because it deals with translation as mere recoding, while as Kasapi mentions all linguistic researches are related to quantitative and qualitative methods (2000: 59) {my translation}.

As far as Nida is concerned, he refers to two types of equivalence, dynamic and formal, which means sense-for-sense and word-for-word translation respectively. His concern derives from his influence in Chomsky’s transformational grammar and his interest on Bible translation, through which he wanted to reduce the cultural gap amongst people. Nida, as well, had his ‘fierce enemies’, who considered his theory as propaganda with rather abstract ideas on translation equivalence. Catford spoke about textual equivalence, formal correspondence and shifts, all based on Halliday’s functional grammar. Influenced by machine translation, he refers to language and translation on a word-to-word basis. Although his work was structured logically with regard to the linguistic part, he was criticized because he never thought of cultural influences on the translation process.

The notion of equivalence disunited theorists and translators and has deeply influenced translation theory. The final choice on which theory is correct is mainly the translator’s decision, which can be rather difficult given the complicated nature of the theories mentioned. But, it must be emphasized that the most important choice is that of the reader, who will judge whether a translation is acceptable or not.

References