Reversing a common notion:  
Translation and examples in contrastive linguistics

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Abstract

According to Euclid, things that are equal to the same are equal to each other. In translation studies, I argue, things are ordered the other way around: things that are equal to each other are equal to the same — as translational equivalence does not pre-exist the source and target texts and there is nothing that serves as a direct measure of their equivalence. But once the two texts or text parts have established a relationship of translational equivalence, the translational equivalents that this relationship obtains between can be compared to statements about equivalence in contrastive linguistics literature. From comparisons of this kind, it is possible to achieve a certain degree of understanding about the relationships between languages in use (as opposed to languages studied as static systems), and of the nature of examples in contrastive linguistics.

Key words: contrastive linguistics, Danish, discourse particles, equivalence, source text, target text, translation, translational equivalence, translational equivalent

1. Introduction

Euclid (ca 300 B.C.) has it as his first ‘common notion’ that “Things that are equal to the same thing are equal to one another”. This implies that there has to exist a measure of equivalence: the same thing — thing$^1$ — which pre-exists the other things — things$^{2-\text{n}}$ — and which functions as a measure or guarantor of their equivalence.

I want to argue here that in translation studies, things are quite different: translational equivalence is created by the existence of the two texts, or text parts, the Target Text and its Source Text; it is the relationship between them.
This is not a relationship that can pre-exist the two, and nor is there any Euclidean 'same thing' that the two texts can be directly measured against, either during their creation or after it, and which serves as the determinant of their equivalence. I owe a major part of this understanding of translational equivalence to Gideon Toury (Toury 1980b, 1981, 1995). But once the two texts or text parts have established a relationship of translational equivalence, it is possible to compare the translational equivalents that this relationship obtains between to statements about equivalence in contrastive linguistics literature, such as bilingual dictionaries and grammars.

From comparisons of this kind, I think that it is possible to achieve a certain degree of understanding about the relationships between languages in use (as opposed to languages studied as static systems), and also a better understanding of the nature of the illustrative examples commonly used in contrastive linguistics—perhaps, even, in all modes of descriptive linguistics. Finally, it might be possible to discover grounds for supposing a common semantic base for languages, which might in some sense provide a 'same thing' for both translational equivalents and contrastive linguistics equivalents to relate to after all, albeit more distantly than Euclid's 'things' related to their 'same thing'. This would be interesting, and relevant to various more theoretical linguistic sub-branches such as cognitive linguistics and semantic theory.

Before I go any further, I think I should probably make my terminology clear:

- I mean by **Target Text** a translation.
- I mean by **Source Text** the text that the Target Text is a translation of.
- I mean by **Translational Equivalence** the relationship between a Target Text (part) and a Source Text (part).
- I mean by **Translational Equivalent** an item which stands to another in a relationship of translational equivalence.

To resume: translational equivalence is created by the two texts, or by the being of the two texts. It is not created by the translator: the translator creates the Target Text, the translation, on the basis of (minimally) the Source Text and what he or she knows about it and about its author and its function and about the language systems and cultures and sets of text and genre conventions involved. The relationship of translational equivalence does not pre-date the two texts: it is never possible to predict for certain what a translation into language \(b\) will be of a linguistic item in language \(a\); one of the sources of tension between linguists and translation scholars has often been the perception among translation scholars that linguists think that the relationships they declare to obtain between language systems can be considered as translation rules or (even just)
tendencies.

In the following section, we shall explore reasons why the Euclidean understanding of equivalence is unsuitable for language in general.

2. Euclidean equivalence and language

There are several reasons to suppose that the Euclidean picture of equivalence does not hold good for language, even though it is very good for establishing samenesses of other kinds. For example, if you go to buy two meters of ribbon, or ten meters, the seller will measure a meter against a measuring stick, twice, or ten times. Normally, they won’t measure one meter of ribbon and then another against the first piece and so on. If I want to buy five pieces of wood, each a meter long, I will measure the plank against a meter rod, five times. I won’t measure one, cut it, and then measure the second against the first, and carry on like that. If I want to tune three guitars, I will tune each to a tuning fork rather than to another guitar—at least ideally. This prevents gradual distortion, of course: if you kept measuring the next thing against the one you have just cut or tuned, then small inaccuracies could gradually become significant; whereas if you have a constant to measure all new instances against, minor inaccuracies will remain minor.

But this picture cannot be transferred to language, at least not to the semantics. Languages, for a start, are subject to continuous, observable, gradual change, at least in the semantics and also, certainly, in some aspects of surface grammar. For instance, the progressive in English is more and more being used in sentences like “How are you spelling that?” (Adamson 1998: 140), which is not concerned with the type of at-this-very-moment event which the progressive used to be exclusively associated with.

Secondly, language cannot be used to create identicals, be they meanings or states of mind. Instead, language promotes cognitive development: it gets you from one mental state to another, different, mental state. It cannot get you from one mental state to another, identical, mental state, whether your own or somebody else’s.

Thirdly, language items are inherently flexible and multifunctional in their semantics. This ensures that when the first person ever to say it said “My goodness, the earth is not flat, the earth is round”, the change in theory about the earth that this utterance gave voice to could be absorbed into the theory about the meaning of the term ‘earth’, and everyone still knew what he or she was talking about.

Catford (1983: 13) re-tells the following story:

Once upon a time a lady was sitting in a train (a Danish train in Jon
Uldall’s story) with a small dog upon her lap. The conductor came along, looked at the dog, and then said, “Madam, do you have a ticket for the dog?” “No”, she answered, “but he’s just a little dog, and he’s not taking up a seat...” “I’m sorry madam”, said the conductor, “but rules are rules, and you’ll have to buy a ticket for the dog”. So the lady paid. Meanwhile, a clergyman sitting next to the lady is becoming visibly uneasy and, before the conductor passes on, he reaches up to the luggage rack and lifts down a small box. He opens it, revealing to the conductor that he is transporting a tortoise. “Must I buy a ticket for my tortoise?”, he asks. The conductor scrutinizes the animal, scratches his head, opens his little book of rules and searches through the pages. Finally, he snaps the book shut, and makes his pronouncement. “No”, he says, “you don’t have to pay. Insects are free”.

If you understood this story, you have just engaged in the kind of linguistic liberalism I’ve been talking about. But whatever connection, exactly, you have just drawn between tortoises and insects, or between the two words, is probably not exactly the same as the connection I drew. Similarly, when we hear a novel metaphor, or read a poem, we do not all get the same thing out of it, probably. And when the same person reads the same poem more than once, or thinks about a metaphor at length, their meanings seem often to broaden and grow and differ from earlier. Meaning of this kind arises anew in each situation as a result of the interaction of all of the relevant features of the situation and of the speakers involved, and the practice at using language that they bring to the situation (Davidson 1973: 1986).

Relatedly, it is entirely possible (in fact I think it is inevitable) that the translational equivalence which one person may perceive between two texts is not exactly the same as the translational equivalence that another person might perceive between them, even though, clearly, the surface forms of the two texts are the same for both of them. In this, again, translational equivalence mirrors interpretations within one language as described by e.g. Davidson (1986), who points out that since so much of language use is novel and unexpected, for us to cope with it requires us constantly to adjust the expectations we bring to each linguistic encounter, in light of what actually happens in that encounter. We must constantly update our understanding of how parts of language can be used and of how they relate to other parts of language. Unless we were able to do this, we would be stymied when, for example, we encounter a brand new metaphor, or read the poetry of e.e. cummings, or converse with a more than usually eccentric language user. But we are not. We use what we have learnt in the
past together with what happens in the instant with amazing creativity. Still, in spite of this variability, it is likely that the varied meanings or interpretations we arrive at in such cases cluster within certain so-called semantic fields. This, again, is true of translations, as we shall see in the following section.

3. Constraints on variation in translation

If any number of translators are asked to translate the same text, it is most unlikely that they will produce even two exactly identical translations. It is not necessary to have a very long text to observe this — though it does usually have to be a text, rather than, say, a word. The variation, however, will almost always be contained within the confines of what we know as semantic fields.

Consider, for example, the last line of Hans Christian Andersen’s story, “The Princess on the Pea”. I have thirteen versions of it, and not two are identical, not even two which are more or less made by the same translator; but the choices cluster around a fairly narrowly defined set of concepts:

**Source Text (1835):**
See, det var en rigtig Historie!

**De Chatelain (1852: 232):**
“And this, mind you, is a real story”

**Dulcken (1866: 36):**
“Look you, this is a true story”

**Wehnert (1869: 44):**
“Now, this is a true story”

**Hersholt (1942: 20):**
“There, that’s a true story”

**Keigwin (1950/1976: 28):**
“There, that’s something like a story, isn’t it?”

**Kingsland (1959: 29):**
“And that’s a true story!”

**Spink (1960: 25):**
“There, now that was a real story!”

**Peulevé (1967: 62):**
“Now, this is my idea of a good story!”

**Haugaard (1974: 21):**
“Now that was a real story!”

**Corrin (1978: 66):**
“How about that for a true story!”

**Lewis (1981: 12):**
“There’s a fine story for you!”

**Corrin and Corrin (1988: 60):**
“How about that for a real story!”

**Blegvad (1993: 29):**
“Now, what did you think of that for a story!”

Here, as we see, the story is constant; descriptions of it cluster within the sense ‘good example’ (“real”, “true”, “good”, “something like” and “fine”); there is generally an attention summoning summing up device (“Look you”, “Now”, “There”, “And”, “How about”); there is a discourse deictic (“this”, “that”, “There”); and there is tense (mostly “is”, “was”). The variation is probably greater than most of us would expect to find on the basis of a Source Text fragment of six fairly tame lexical items. Still, there is not wild variation (no translator says, e.g. “What a boring article!”). So there is clearly something that
limits the choices translators make when translating and which probably also helps translators to get going and critics or bilingual readers to form an opinion about the merit of the products of the translator’s efforts. The difficulty lies in stating what this something is and what type of thing it might be, as the following section will illustrate, by way of a discussion of two contrasting views of equivalence which prevail in translation studies.

4. The concept of equivalence in translation studies

Traditionally, in translation studies, a similar picture to the Euclidean one for measuring has been presented: two texts are equivalent to the degree that they can be related to the same. This same may be the same situational features (Catford 1965: 50); the same effect created in the audience (Nida 1964: 159); the same message (Jakobson 1959: 233, Nida 1964: 159); the same sum of content, rhythm and verbal effects, in the case of poetry (Selver 1966: 21); the same various ‘strata’ and the same relationships between these strata, in the case of literary works of art (Ingarden 1931/1973: 59).

Usually, in traditional translation studies, these standards of measurement of equivalence would be considered to be derivable initially from an analysis of the Source Text and to be what the Target Text must match if it is to be equivalent to the Source Text. Unsurprisingly, Target Texts typically fail to live up to this predefined, ideal equivalence to the Source Text, so that writers in this mode generally pepper their writings with statements to the effect that, e.g., “A faithful translation of truly great literary works of art hardly seems possible” (Ingarden 1931/1973: 156); or that “poetry by definition is untranslatable” (Jakobson 1959/1987: 434).

This deep and stultifying theoretical pessimism about translation and about translation products held sway until the late 1970s when Toury (1980b: 40) pointed out that the Source Text oriented view of equivalence creates a vast, unbridgeable and immensely embarrassing gap between theory (that translations cannot really be made) and fact (that translations exist), and that it prevents any kind of fruitful discussion that might move the discipline forward. Instead, he argues for a Target Text oriented study, which regards the Target Text and the relationships between it and the Source Text as empirical phenomena which can be described from a number of different points of view and for a number of different purposes. When this is done, translation studies can contribute something to all of the disciplines which have fed insights into it in the past, such as linguistics, psychology, history, sociology, cultural studies, literary theory and others, and it can also move forward inside its own territory.
In Toury’s view, the relationships that actually obtain between the Target Text and Source Text are selected from sets of possible relationships; and the extent of each set depends on the languages involved, the text types, the process of translation, and so on (1980b: 46). He describes the role played in this complex by contrastive linguistic descriptions as follows (1980a: 29-30): “an exhaustive contrastive description of the languages involved is a precondition for any systematic study of translations, and, on the discipline level, a developed CL [contrastive linguistics] is a necessary precondition for translation studies”, because it provides the “intermediary level of translatability”.

But this picture quickly runs up against objections, such as, e.g. Snell-Hornby’s (1988/1995: 34 and 95), that the results of contrastive linguistics seem so far not to have yielded results that are useful to translators. It is difficult to disagree with her, at least if by ‘useful’ is meant ‘directly useful’. It is an inexperienced translator indeed who has not felt that their very best, most comprehensive bilingual dictionary or grammar is selling them short. And it is these same, inexperienced translators, who rely too much on the bilingual linguistic literature (at best, some obviously just guess), who produce the notices in hotels and the translated menus in restaurants, and the manuals and tourist brochures that we all love to laugh at, and which make up column upon column of ridicule in some translators’ trade journals.

We therefore have something of an impasse in Translation Studies. On the one hand, Toury’s method for establishing translational equivalence relies on a prior understanding of the relationships between languages; but what we are presented with as illustrations of this knowledge in the contrastive linguistics literature proves, according to Snell-Hornby, to be starkly at variance with the needs and experience of translators. In the following section we will try to discover a way out of this difficulty.

5. An example of contrastive translation studies

My own favourite example for showing that contrastive descriptive linguistic literature cannot necessarily be directly applied to translation is provided in what I admire as a remarkably useful grammar of Danish, in English, namely the one by Allan, Holmes and Lundskær Nielsen (1995). For the Danish discourse particle, jo, this grammar’s preferred translation equivalent is ‘(as) you know’. For the sentence Tom er jo en flink fyr, it gives, ‘Tom’s a nice chap, you know’; and for Han er jo i London, it gives ‘He’s in London, you know’ (Allan et al. 1995: 366-7). The Danish–English dictionary edited by Axelsen (1984: 239) also has ‘as you know’ as its favourite equivalent for jo, though it also suggests ‘you see’, ‘why’ (as in I can-
not betray him; why he is my best friend), 'of course' and tag questions.

As I have mentioned elsewhere (Malmkjær 1997: 10, 1999a, 1999b), these suggestions are in less than total harmony with the selection of equivalents for *jo* made by the one translator, Barbara Haveland, whose manner of dealing with this discourse particle in one novel I have so far been able to examine in detail. I know that this set of data is insufficient to make sweeping generalisations about the translation of *jo* into English, but it is interesting all the same.

There are 50 occurrences of *jo* in Peter Høeg's *De måske egne**nde* (1993) (at least that is the number my manual search revealed; a computer aided search might reveal a slightly different, more accurate number). Haveland (1994) leaves almost half — 21 occurrences (42%) — without any overt equivalent in the Target Text. For the rest, she gives 'after all' (8,16%); 'well' (7,14%); various intensifiers (5,10%); 'of course' (5,10%); and one (2%) each, of 'but then', 'isn't it', 'you see', and the grammar's and dictionary's favoured 'you know'. So it looks as if the grammar accounts for a mere 16% of the data provided by this experienced, successful translator's choices of equivalent for *jo*, and we might want, in the light of this, to endorse Snell-Hornby's (1988/1995: 95) remark that "there seems to be an unbridgeable gap between the convictions of lexicologists (as theoretical linguists) and bilingual lexicographers on the one hand, and the actual needs of the translator as dictionary user, on the other".

Except that if we complement the lexical search which produces the stark figure of 16% with some interpretative effort, it turns out that, in its specific context, each one of the translational equivalents (including 'no overt equivalent') used by Haveland gives expression to a sense of acknowledgment on the part of its speaker that the information whose expression is accompanied by *jo* in the Danish text, or by one of the translational equivalents in the English text, is known by both the speaker and the hearer to be already known by the hearer. This is what Danish linguists (e.g. Davidsen-Nielsen 1992: 8-9) identify as the major function of *jo*: *jo* is a hearer oriented indicator of the speaker's belief that the hearer already shares the information conveyed by the speaker (Davidsen-Nielsen 1992: 8-9) and this is also, we may agree, what is expressed most obviously in English by 'you know'.

To start with the instances in which the translator provides no overt equivalence for *jo*. As mentioned just above, the function of *jo* is to indicate hearer orientation and an assumption of sharedness of knowledge. In this function, *jo* is used extensively in Danish in both speech and writing (Davidsen-Nielsen 1992: 32). In speech, *jo* is unstressed. So Danish and English differ in that Danish has an explicit marker of the speaker's presupposition that the in-
formation conveyed is shared by the hearer, namely the hearer-orientated discourse particle *jo*. English has no discourse particle category, and consequently has no surface form that can fulfill the function that *jo* fulfills unobtrusively in Danish.

So perhaps we might explain the 21 instances in which *jo* has no apparent equivalent in the English Target Text (TT) by suggesting that in Danish, where this common ground marker is very common, stating information which is shared without using the specific marker would seem unnecessarily aggressive and imposing. The speaker would seem to be ignoring the fact that the information in question was shared, and the addressee would wonder what this could possibly imply. But in English, which does not have similar, unobtrusive discourse particles, it is quite acceptable to state certain types of information which can be assumed to be shared without marking it explicitly as shared. In fact, marking it as shared when the sharing is obvious would be what would be likely to lead to implicature generation. What this suggests is that in those cases in which *jo* in fact embodies what ‘you know’ expresses, it would be inappropriate to translate it explicitly.

But if this is right, then we need to know two things. We need to know what the relationship between *jo* and ‘you know’ is; it is obviously not a relationship of straightforward translation equivalence since we have just established that the best equivalent in many cases is not any individual lexeme but rather a reliance on the implicit understanding that the information at issue is shared. And secondly, we need to know why the translator selects overt equivalents in some cases.

The best way to establish this is probably to examine the circumstances in which the different equivalents are selected, and in Malmkjær (1999b), I present analyses that suggest the following:

The equivalent is ‘after all’ when *jo* is used in a clause which introduces a premise for a conclusion presented in the previous clause, as in:

**ST** Han havde jo erfaringen, han havde jo slået børn jævnligt gennem 40 år
**Gloss** He had x the experience, he had x hit children regularly through 40 years
**TT** ‘He certainly did have experience, after all he had been hitting children regularly for forty years’

Here, the second clause, that means ‘he had x been hitting children regularly for forty years’, expresses the premise for the conclusion expressed in the first clause, that means ‘he had x experience’ (for an explanation of why this clause is translated using the intensifier, see Malmkjær 1999b).

The equivalent is ‘well’ when *jo* occurs in a clause which presents the cause
for a consequence in another clause, typically preceding the clause with *jo*:

ST  **Hendes stemme var hæs af sovn, jeg havde jo vækket hende** (: 81)

Gloss  Her voice was husky with sleep, I had *x* woken her

TT  ‘Her voice was husky with sleep. *Well, I had woken her up*’ (: 69)

The equivalent is ‘of course’ — one of the choices offered by Axelsen’s Danish-English dictionary (1984: 239) — when the clause carrying *jo* contradicts a contradiction to the current line of argument so that the line of argument is re-established, as in:

ST  **Men man så ingen udvej. Indtil jeg traf Katarina**

Gloss  But one saw no way out. Until I met Katerina

TT  ‘But you saw no way out. Until I met Katarina’

ST  **Men derefter brød alt jo sammen** (: 226)

Gloss  But thereafter broke everything *x* together

TT  ‘But then, *of course*, everything fell apart’ (: 204)

This example has the following logical structure:

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MAIN (1)    CONCESSION    MAIN (2)
I saw no way out    I met Katarina    But then everything fell apart
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The equivalent is an intensifier in cases which realise a premise-conclusion relationship, but where the distance between premise and conclusion is wide. Consider, for example, the following:

ST  **Men alle de steder findtes der jo en løsning på forhånd**

Gloss  But in all those places was found *x* a solution in advance

TT  ‘But in all of these instances an answer *did*, already, exist’

ST  **At man skulle score, og huske et bestemt årstal og synges rent**

Gloss  That one must score, and remember a certain year and sing true

TT  ‘That you had to score, or remember a particular date or sing true’

ST  **og løbe under en vis tid ...**

Gloss  and run under a certain time ...

TT  ‘or run a distance under a certain time ...

ST  **Derfor var det ret nemt at overskue hvad der var rigtigt og hvad der var**

Gloss  Therefore was it fairly easy to over-view what was right and what was
“So it was pretty easy to see what was correct and what was wrong, and when something was better or worse than something else, ‘wrong, when one thing was better or worse than another’.

Here, in the Danish source text, the clause with jo is followed by two full sentences which elaborate on what the pre-existing answer is that is mentioned in the clause with jo; there then follows a new sentence introduced with Derfor, ‘Therefore’ (rendered in English as the arguably weaker, ‘so’). But the distance between the clause with jo and the clause beginning Derfor is considerable, and it is possible that the reason that intensification is preferred in such examples is that the English adverbiales have more limited scope than the Danish discourse particles, so that it is difficult to use them to signal evidentiality that stretches far back or far ahead from their own locus. Intensification seems appropriate in view of the mass of evidence surrounding the assertion.

What we have seen so far, then, is four possible translation equivalents: ‘after all’ to signal a premise-conclusion relationship; ‘well’ to signal a cause-consequence relationship; ‘of course’ to signal that a circumstance that appears to contradict the current line of argument is itself contradicted; and intensification to signal a premise-conclusion relationship that holds across a long textual distance. None of these functions conflicts with the function which the contrastive linguistics literature assigns to jo. Rather, they seem additional to it. Perhaps, then, when jo has only the function which the linguistics literature signals with the surface form ‘you know’, it is unnecessary and misleading to give it an overt translation equivalent. But when jo has the additional function of signaling an argument structure, it is safe to translate it into English and an element may be lost if it is not translated.

6. Conclusion

As we saw in sections 4 and 5 above, there has been an implicit assumption by some translation studies scholars that examples used in contrastive linguistics literature to illustrate relationships between languages are meant to illustrate relationships of translational equivalence. This assumption may be shared by some contrastive linguists. But translation scholars have been quick to point out that the examples are typically far from ideal as examples of translational equivalence, and that they are likely to mislead. But if, as the previous section suggests we might, we conceive, instead, of examples in contrastive linguistics literature as illustrating the nearest lexical realisations in one language of the se-
mantic essentials of expressions in another language, then the full potential for translation studies of contrastive linguistics will be more easily realised.

Indeed, the kind of contrastive knowledge which we need as a prerequisite for exhaustive description and criticism and successful creation of translations seems to be exactly this kind of knowledge of how a common semantico-pragmatic system is realised in the lexis and syntax of the languages involved. We need this knowledge whether or not we seek for so-called ‘faithful translations’, or for freer versions or adaptations. This knowledge is not a different kind of knowledge from the knowledge a monolingual has for one language, and having it for more than one language does not of itself guarantee success in either translation creation, description, or criticism. For this, special executive skills are required, including supreme control of transfer and prevention of interference. The fact that these skills improve with practice and education might make translators interesting subjects of study for linguists, especially, perhaps, researchers in bilingualism, and we could arrive at a fruitful, interdisciplinary inter-change of insights and experience.

Source Texts and Target Texts


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