The Status of Equivalence in Translation Studies: An Appraisal

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Equivalence has been a central notion in discussions of translation across the ages, whether these discussions are theoretical or practical. In fact, it has been so central that translation itself is defined in terms of equivalence, for example in Nida (1959:19), Catford (1965:20), and Wilss (1982:62).

Not all early theorists made the mistake of defining translation itself in terms of equivalence however. Jakobson was one of the few early theorists who avoided the issue of equivalence altogether in his definition of translation (1959:233). This is later picked up and asserted more clearly in Frawley (1984:160).

In assessing the centrality of the notion of equivalence in translation studies we might note the following:

● The notion of equivalence is important because it is used in defining translation itself. This also makes it problematic because it is circular – translation is defined in terms of equivalence and equivalence is at the same time used for assessing and describing actual translation acts.

● Equivalence is also central in the study of translation because it is closely linked to other important theoretical notions in translation studies; in fact the assumption of its existence is a prerequisite for the discussion of most of the theoretical notions in the discipline. For example, it is central to the notion of fidelity/faithfulness to an original; which clearly presupposes not only the possibility but the desirability of equivalence. Similarly, the notion of ‘shift’, an important tool of analysis in descriptive studies and an important notion in normative approaches, also relies on an assumption of equivalence. Shifts are changes that occur or may occur in the process of translating. The notion of shift presupposes the existence of what is sometimes called an ‘invariant’ (not much different from ‘equivalent’). An invariant is what remains unchanged. Invariants are elements which are not or should not be affected by shifts in the process of translation – the choice of are not or should not depends on whether the approach being adopted is descriptive or prescriptive. Definitions of equivalence can similarly be either normative (postulating a specific relation to be achieved) or descriptive (discovering a relation of equivalence/correspondence between source and target elements).

● The idea of a unit of translation – again the subject of much debate in translation
studies – similarly rests on an assumption of equivalence. Discussions of a unit of translation centre on what units are to be considered equivalent (words, clauses, etc.) or what units translators work with in real life in order to produce an ‘equivalent’ version of the source text.

Given that the notion of equivalence has been so central in translation studies (it is both used to define translation itself and is taken as a given in attempts to elaborate other theoretical notions), it is somewhat worrying to find it discredited in so much of the recent literature on translation. It is worrying because discarding it involves discarding a whole set of notions that go with it, like shifts, fidelity, and so on. This would necessarily involve a radical reassessment of the nature and goals of translation studies as a discipline as well as the nature of translation activity itself. There is also the question of whether we have or need other notions to replace ‘equivalence’ in order to underpin theoretical work in the discipline.

**What is wrong with the notion of equivalence?**

Let us first look at why the notion of equivalence has been discredited before we move on to discussing whether there is anything to be salvaged in this concept.

Equivalence has traditionally been treated as a semantic category. By this I mean that scholars of translation have traditionally stressed equivalence of meaning, of semantic content. For example, Rabin defines translation as “a process by which a spoken or written utterance takes place in one language which is intended and presumed to convey the same meaning as a previously existing utterance in another language. It thus involves two distinct factors, a ‘meaning’, or reference to some slice of reality, and the difference between two languages in referring to that reality” (1958:123; my emphasis). For ‘same meaning’, read ‘equivalent meaning’. The notion of equivalence here is similar to that of synonymy, except that one applies to items in two different languages and the other to items in the same language. As a semantic category, the notion of equivalence is static – it is not dictated by the requirements of the communicative situation but purely by the content of the source text.

The semantic view of equivalence draws on a representational theory of meaning, as can be seen in Rabin’s definition: the idea that reality is unproblematic, it exists out there, and that representation of reality (whether in language or any other form) is not only possible but can provide direct, unmediated access to this transparent reality (Niranjana 1992:2). The function of language is to represent this reality directly – this is how meaning is generated. The function of a translation is to represent the same reality that is represented in the source text. There is no question of mediation here.

Given the fact that the representational theory of meaning has now been rejected in most disciplines (very few people continue to believe that words and texts represent reality as such), the treatment of equivalence as a semantic category soon came to be regarded as untenable in translation studies. One of the first alternatives to be offered was a definition of equivalence not as a question of ‘how close’ a target text is to the same reality portrayed in the source text but rather as how close it comes to reproducing the same effect or response in the target readers that the source text
produced in the source readers. This approach originated with Bible translators: Nida (1958, 1964; Nida & Taber (1969); Larson (1984), Beekman & Callow (1974). The notion of ‘equivalent effect’ brought with it other dynamic notions such as ‘receptor’ as opposed to ‘target’ language, and dynamic equivalence as opposed to formal equivalence.

This emphasis on the dynamics of translation (as opposed to static features of text) became more popular because it allowed us to bring in the human element, albeit in the form of the reader rather than the translator or the commissioner for instance – other definitions of equivalence stress other participants in the translation process, for example the client or commissioner.

The idea of equivalent effect, though more attractive than the semantic alternative, in fact helped to undermine the notion of equivalence even further. It was soon pointed out by various people that there is no reliable way of measuring effect in readers – not only is it impossible to know how two people are going to respond to a given text, it is also true that even the same reader will respond differently to the same text on different occasions. ‘Equivalent effect’ is simply a shorthand way of saying that the translator has to imagine how a reader or group of readers might respond to both the ST and the TT – subjectively.

Alternatively, we can limit the notion of equivalent effect to ‘similarity’ in a very global and limited sense. For instance, Hervey & Higgins (1992:23) suggest that the translator of a portion of an ST which makes the source reader laugh can attempt to produce a TT which makes the target reader laugh. As they rightly explain, this is “a gross reduction of the effects of a text to a single effect”.

The notion of equivalent effect is also linked to the idea of reproducing the ‘intention’ of the source author, i.e. emphasizing the equivalence of intended meaning. This is also highly problematic because it assumes that the translator ‘understands’ rather than ‘interprets’ the source text – that somehow he or she has direct access to the communicative intentions of the original author. But translators cannot know with any certainty what the source author intended to convey, especially where there is a large temporal gap between the source and target texts. All they can do is try to interpret it, so that any theory or model based on some notion of equivalence of intention would be impossible to verify.

Another alternative which gained much ground in the seventies and eighties of the last century was to speak about equivalence of functions rather than effect or intention. Some scholars try to define the possible functions or purposes of communication in order to suggest ways in which “equivalence of message” may be achieved in relation to the function which is most in focus. Roberts (1985) for instance suggests that there are three main functions: expressive (primary focus on source), informative (primary focus on object: subject matter), and imperative (primary focus on intended receptor). If the function is imperative, the translator must make sure that the target reader reacts to the message in the same way as the source reader (as in the case of advertisements). Irrespective of changes in the translated version, equivalence is achieved if the target reader reacts to the message in the way intended by the source writer.
Apart from the obvious problems of defining a single function for a text (as well as the earlier problem of identifying the intention of the source writer and the effect on the target reader), this approach has rightly been criticized as divorced from the realities of translation in that it assumes that the function of the target text is determined by (and therefore has to be equivalent to) that of the source text. This is not at all the case in many situations. If, as often happens, a client gives a translator an advertisement and asks him or her to produce a rough translation of it for informative purposes, it would be perverse of the translator to insist on producing a target text which can function as an advertisement in its own right.

In response to this challenge, new approaches emerged in the eighties, particularly in Germany, which pointed out that the reasons for commissioning or initiating a translation are independent of the reasons for creating the source text. What matters therefore is the function of the translated text, not that of the source text. Equivalence here, it is suggested, becomes a function of what is sometimes called the *skopos* or commission accompanying a request for translation. Sager (1994) similarly suggests that equivalence is a function of the specification that comes with a translation. Scholars like Vermeer (1989) therefore talk of ‘adequacy’ with regards to the skopos, rather than equivalence, as the standard for judging translations. Nord (1991) takes this even further by suggesting that it is not the text itself that has a function – rather a text acquires its function in the situation in which it is received.

But by now we have moved far enough from the notion of equivalence as sameness or identity to render it almost irrelevant to the debate (see figure 1 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>source text/target text</th>
<th>(same meaning)</th>
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<tr>
<td>source text/target text</td>
<td>(same effect on respective readers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>source text/target text</td>
<td>(same function)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>target text</td>
<td>(independent function, specified by commission)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>target text</td>
<td>(independent function acquired in the situation in which it is received)</td>
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</tbody>
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*Figure 1: The Gradual Erosion of the Notion of Equivalence in Translation Studies*

There are other reasons why the notion of equivalence is no longer as appealing as it used to be – reasons not connected to the lack of rigour in defining it nor to whether or not it is valid in its own right.

One of these reasons, for instance, is that the notion of equivalence suggests a denial of originality in translation (Pym 1992:39, footnote). If equivalence (in whatever form – semantic, functional, etc.) is to be aspired to, then what we are really saying is that we do not expect translations to be original or creative: we expect them to adhere as closely as possible to some aspect of the source text, as specified by a participant other than the translator. This means that translation is not a creative, original process and the translator therefore cannot be treated as an author. This assumption underlies the legal attitude towards translators, the fact that copyright law in most countries places strict limitations on the translator’s control of the translated text and that authors continue to
enjoy an exclusive right to translations of their works (Venuti 1995). Translators are typically paid a flat fee to translate a literary text but no percentage of the royalties or subsidiary rights sales. Similarly, according to the allotment of loan rights under the Public Lending Right the author receives 70 per cent and the translator 30 per cent of royalties accrued each time a book is borrowed from a public library.

Finally, equivalence, however defined, means ‘sameness’. Irrespective of the types of things which may form the two poles of the equivalence relation (meaning, effect, function, etc.), the assumption is that if they are equivalent, their relationship is one of sameness or identity. Any kind of theoretical notion in the humanities that starts from an assumption of identity or sameness (whether this assumption is descriptive or prescriptive in nature) is unlikely to be popular in the present intellectual climate. The emphasis in various branches of the humanities is increasingly on highlighting difference rather than sameness or similarity, especially where people and cultures are concerned. Niranjana (1992) – like many other scholars – tends to regard the impulse to see ‘sameness’ or homogeneity as a colonial enterprise and to favour approaches which “emphasize the need to reinvent oppositional cultures in nonessentializing ways” (ibid:46). She suggests that translation studies ignores the fact that languages are not ‘equal’ and that translation is a tool of colonialism (ibid.:58).

Conclusion

The notion of equivalence assumes a fairly close relationship between a specific original source text and a translated version of it. The weaker the relationship between the two, the more elusive the notion of equivalence becomes. It is, and probably always will be, more precise as a theoretical construct when it is treated as a semantic category (as equivalence of form or meaning). Moving away from a semantic view of equivalence by necessity renders the notion of equivalence itself less useful, although it opens up the door to other notions that are likely to prove more useful.

Equivalence as a semantic category may offer rigour but it does not often relate to what goes on in real life. What goes on in real life includes forms of translation which do not lend themselves easily to being described or assessed in terms of notions of equivalence. I am referring, for example, to phenomena such as adaptations and pseudotranslations; these suggest that we have to look for other notions to supplement (if not necessarily replace) equivalence. And we might have to focus on relationships other than those that may exist between source and target texts.

There is also another problem which is rarely addressed in discussions of equivalence: the fact that many source texts are badly written and that the professional tasks of translators have now been extensively stretched to include such things as copywriting, linguistic consultation, writing summaries, editing, etc. Equivalence to a badly written source text is the last thing any client wants.

One thing that has come out of the debate so far is that rather than seeing equivalence as an a-priori relationship which exists between discrete, static systems or texts, we should perhaps see it as a textual (not systemic) relationship which emerges from situations in contact and is shaped by a variety of dynamic factors, including the
translator's interpretation of the source text, the requirements of the commissioner, the context of translation, and of course the translator's own ideological make-up. Pym (1992:43) suggests that the notion of equivalence is similar to (or should be treated like) that of value in economics: a coat may be equivalent to 20 yards of linen this week and 15 yards next week.

It would seem then that we still cannot throw ‘equivalence’ out of the window. Even the idea of producing a target text that addresses a specific reader – rather than one that is faithful to the original – still implies transferring some part of the source text that is considered to be of value in the particular exchange situation. The concept of equivalence is thus likely to be with us for a long time to come.

References


Roberts, Roda (1985) ‘Translation and Communication’, NUCLEO 1, Caracas, 139-76.

