

EQUIVALENCE IN TRANSLATION. TRANSLATION STUDIES AS AN INTERDISCIPLINE

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of equivalence has been at the centre of focus for numerous researchers during the past decades, especially in the field of translation studies, equivalence being one of the key concepts of translation theory. However, the concept has also come to be regarded as highly elusive and oftentimes difficult to define and achieve. In addition to this, translation itself is regarded as a multifaceted discipline, which has always been looked upon in various diverse manners. Even though these definitions vary greatly, they do have some common denominators: the reference to the two languages involved in the translation process (source language and target language) and the creation of equivalence between the original and the translated text, in order to preserve the original's characteristics. In the present paper we attempt to shed light on some of the characteristics of equivalence in translation, and by resorting to a series of theoretical considerations, as well as practical examples, demonstrate how equivalence is sometimes challenging to achieve.

KEYWORDS: equivalence, interdisciplinarity, source language, target language, translation

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of equivalence in translation has been at the centre of focus for numerous researchers during the past decades, equivalence being one of the key concepts of translation theory. Translation is increasingly viewed as a multifaceted, interdisciplinary endeavour, and has always been defined in diverse manners. Even though these definitions vary greatly, they do have some common denominators: the reference to the two languages involved in the translation process (source language and target language) and the creation of equivalence between the original and the translated text, in order to preserve the original's characteristics.

According to A. R. Meetham and Richard A. Hudson in the *Encyclopaedia of Linguistics, Information and Control*, quoted also by Roger T. Bell, professor of linguistics who shares the same view, translation is the replacement of a text's representation in a certain language with the representation of an equivalent text in a second language (Bell, 2000). In Meetham and Hudson's opinion, the main goal of translation is to reproduce as faithfully as possible all the grammatical and lexical categories of the original source text, by identifying equivalent terms in the target language. Simultaneously, the two authors argue, any information contained in the original text must be preserved also in

translation (quoted in Bell, 2000). A similar viewpoint is upheld also by Roger T. Bell, who lists the following objectives of translation: the transformation of a text in a certain language into an equivalent text in another language, in keeping, as much as possible, the contents of its message, the characteristics of form and the functional roles of the original text (Bell, 2000). Consequently, both the objectives of translation, and its essence are based on the concept of equivalence, signifying sameness of value, of effect, of signification, or of sense or equality in value, signification, or sense.

In the opinion of George Steiner, starting with the 18th century the theory of translation started to be concerned with 3 major aspects: the first one is connected to strict literality, a face-to-face arrangement of words in the interlingual dictionary, foreign language manuals and interlinear translation. The second represents a central area of trans-position by means of faithful, but independent reformulation. The translator closely reproduces the original, but at the same time produces a natural-sounding text in his own language, which can enjoy an independent existence. The third aspect is related to imitation, recreation, variation and interpretative parables. These terms cover a large and diffuse area, ranging from transpositions of the original into a more accessible idiom to the most liberal of echoes, often allusive in nature or bordering on parody (Steiner, 1983).

Theoreticians in the field of translation studies uphold the idea that the content of the original text is impossible to preserve, the translated text being an entirely new creation resulting from the reading of the original, thus being a reconstruction, and not a copy, thereof (Bell, 2000, p. 177). In the process of translation, some of the most important aspects to consider are the extent of the text to be translated and the manner in which the translator engages in the respective process, by trying to stay faithful either to the source text's content or to its form.

The present paper aims to prove that one of the central tenets of both the theory and the practice of translation is the one of textual equivalence. From a methodological point of view, the paper explores the idea according to which the typology of texts influences the mode of translation and implicitly the types of equivalence, by resorting to several established critical opinions in the field, which are contrasted with each other. The phenomenon of equivalence has been of decisive importance in the theoretical description of translation and in the process of determining its essential nature. Still, equivalence does not enjoy a clear-cut and distinctive theoretical status within the theory of translation, as many authors opine that it should be considered a relative characteristic, due to a series of linguistic and cultural factors. Our paper attempts to shed light on these and similar aspects related to the complex and sometimes elusive concept of equivalence in translation.

2. Shifting Perspectives on the Concept of Equivalence

Just as different definitions of translation correspond to different stages in the development of Translation Studies as a discipline, the multiple interpretations of equivalence reflect the evolution of opinions on what constitutes the essence of the translation process. Even though the typology of equivalence may vary sometimes from one theoretician to another, the vast majority admits to the close connection between translation equivalence and translation processes. Thus, most attempts at defining equivalence spring out of the description of actual processes of translation.

In today's globalized context, when we are becoming increasingly aware of having become citizens of the so-called global village, translation, be it technical, commercial or literary, is a domain that is in continuous expansion. Along with this development, the theoretical study of translation, known as Translation Studies,

which is an interdisciplinary area *par excellence*, as Hatim and Munday point out (Hatim & Munday 2004), has also witnessed an unprecedented development in the past twenty years. Translation Studies is linked to numerous other domains and disciplines, such as linguistics, modern languages, culture and cultural studies, etc. Overall, one might state that especially in nowadays' increasingly connected world, translation plays a highly important role in our everyday existence, from translating political statements and speeches in the media, to translating legislation across countries' boundaries, or simply translating a restaurant menu. The question however is how can translation be defined as described as a phenomenon, and what does the study of translation imply?

Some guidance on this issue might be offered by *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, that defines translation as follows: "*translation n. 1 the act or an instance of translating. 2 a written or spoken expression of the meaning of a word, speech, book, etc. in another language*". We can thus observe that in this definition the first sense looks at translation as a process, while the second one treats it as a product (Hatim & Munday, 2004, p. 4), entailing the fact that "translation" as a term or concept can be approached from very different perspectives. The first sense is connected to the role played by the translator within the process, namely the one of approaching a text produced in a source language and of transposing it into a target language, whereas the second sense is rather interested in the final product that results from this process (a new text in a new language, the target language). A similar viewpoint is upheld also by the *Dictionary of Translation Studies* (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997, p. 181, quoted in Hatim & Munday, 2004): "*Translation. An incredibly broad notion which can be understood in many different ways. For example, one may talk of*

translation as a process or a product, and identify such sub-types as literary translation, technical translation, subtitling and machine translation; moreover, while more typically it just refers to the transfer of written texts, the term sometimes also includes interpreting". This definition is more complex and encompasses various other factors or sub-categories, which do not only refer to written texts such as technical or literary translation, but also more recent phenomena in the field of translation, such as machine translation, or "*audiovisual translation, a written product which is read in conjunction with an image on screen (cinema, television, DVD or computer game)*" (Hatim & Munday, 2004, p. 4). A highly important element of the definition offered by the *Dictionary of Translation Studies* is that translation is no longer a domain which pertains exclusively to humans – with the advent of machine translation especially in professional settings, translation is starting to become a domain combining the power of analysis of computers and our human capacity of determining sense and meaning in order to produce appropriate equivalents in source languages. The aforementioned definition also touches upon another key aspect in the field of Translation Studies, the distinction between translation and interpreting. According to Shuttleworth & Cowie, interpreting should be strictly regarded as the "*oral translation of a spoken message or text*" (1997, p. 83) – however, in everyday life, the two terms are quite often mistaken for one another or simply seen as a homogenous unit. A telling example is offered in this respect by Hatim & Munday: during the court trial in the Netherlands of the two Libyan citizens accused of bombing an American passenger aircraft over Scotland, the lawyers based their defence on what they perceived to be the poor "translation" which in their opinion did not allow their clients to properly understand the proceedings (2004, p. 4).

3. Challenges in Maintaining Equivalence in Translation

Nonetheless, even if we eliminate interpreting from the equation, translation still remains a highly complex and problematic field. Let us consider another example offered by Hatim & Munday: if a restaurant owner displays on his entrance door three signs reading: “Benvenuti!”, “Welcome!”, and “Hi!”, accompanied by the Italian, the British and the American flags respectively, customers might easily perceive the connection between “benvenuti” and “welcome”, but how does “hi” fit into this equation? And what about the flags placed under each of these three greetings, can they be seen as part of the translation, too? (2004). Our daily lives are flooded with such subtle instances of translation seen as the art of interpreting signs: for example, road signs, icons on our digital devices, etc. Furthermore, the two authors argue, translation can also exist between varieties of the same language or between a language and its non-conventional versions, such as sign language, braille, etc. It is again Hatim & Munday who offer a telling example in this respect: the case of the various translations of the *Harry Potter* children’s books, which have been translated into more than 40 languages, with these translations evincing sometimes surprising differences. The first volume in the series, originally entitled *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* was translated for the American market as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. Besides this obvious change in the title, there were also other minor incongruences and alterations in translation, such as: British biscuits rendered as American cookies, football as soccer, Mummy as Mommy, sherbet lemons as lemon drops, etc., besides change in sentence structure (which was often simplified), or in spelling: got became gotten, at weekends became on weekends, etc. (2004). In the Hebrew translation of the same volume, the dessert

sherbet lemons became a traditional Jewish sweet. What we are then dealing with here is not translation from one language into another, but from one variation of the language into another one of its variations, or between two dialects. This is referred to as intralingual translation, and bears similarities to translation between languages, as it basically resorts to the same instruments: replacing elements of the lexicon with more suitable ones (from a cultural point of view) for the intended target audience.

One of the most important distinctions in the field of translation belongs to the Russian-American theorist Roman Jakobson, who in his paper “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” (1959, quoted in Hatim & Munday, 2004) mentions three distinct types of translation:

- **intralingual translation** – the act of translating within the boundaries of the same language, for example by means of paraphrase or rewording;

- **interlingual translation** – the process of translating from one language into another;

- **intersemiotic translation** – translating verbal signs by non-verbal ones, for example by transposing words into images or music.

In Jakobson’s opinion, it is only the second category that can truly be regarded as translation.

To sum it up, we might state that nowadays translation is mostly regarded as the act of translating between two written languages (Hatim & Munday, 2004), even though the interests of Translation Studies have moved far beyond the restrictive boundaries of ‘simply’ transposing a text from a source into a target language by means of linguistic and lexical equivalents. Recent research, as previously mentioned, has started to increasingly focus on various types of phenomena related to the spheres of linguistics, ideology and culture, which greatly influence translation: Hatim &

Munday for example mention **theatre translation**, where a text is ultimately translated in written form but is meant to be performed orally, **adaptation** (of dialect, geographical or historical location), **omission**, as in the case of Oliver Todd's 1996 English translation of Camus' biography, which omits a third of the original French text, or the **political context** of translation, exemplified by such things as bilingual road signs (2004). In addition to these facts, the two authors also mention other types of recent developments in the field of Translation Studies, brought about and aided by technological advancement: *"Thus, research into audiovisual translation now encompasses sign language, intralingual subtitles, lip synchronization for dubbing as well as interlingual subtitles; the image – word relationship is crucial in both film and advertising, and there has been closer investigation of the links between translation, music and dance"* (Hatim & Munday, 2004, p. 6).

In spite of these manifold ramifications, Hatim & Munday conclude that translation can be summed up as one of the following three processes:

- the act of transferring a written text from a source language to a target language, performed by a translator in a certain social and cultural environment.
- the final product, referred to as target text, resulting from the translation process and existing in the social and cultural context of the target language.
- the cognitive, linguistic, visual, cultural and ideological factors which form an integral part of the first two processes (Hatim & Munday, 2004).

The approach Jakobson undertook in order to describe and define translation was based on a set of central questions pertaining to the field of linguistics, including the concept of equivalence between lexical items in the source and target language or the concept of

translatability. These questions were amply discussed by researchers in the '60s and '70s, and led to the formal establishment of the field of Translation Studies, mainly due to the seminal work of Dutch scientist James Holmes and his work "The Name and Nature of Translation Studies" (1988). Holmes can be credited with having approached this new research field in an entirely scientific manner, drawing a distinction between what he termed "pure" and "applied" Translation Studies. The first category refers to descriptive analyses of already existing translations, as well as general theories regarding translation, while the second covered the specific training translators should receive, instruments which can aid him/her, and criticism of translation. Holmes chose to focus mostly on the first category, which he then further subdivided into two parts (1988): firstly, the description of translation phenomena and translation experience, secondly the establishment of a set of general principles meant to explain and predict such phenomena. Holmes also established an important distinction between "translating" and "translation": he employed the term "translating" in order to refer to the process itself, and "translation" for the final product (quoted in Hatim & Munday, 2004, p. 8). Drawing on the principles set up by Holmes, another theoretician, Gideon Toury, in his work *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (1995), introduced the concept of translation being governed by two distinct laws: firstly, the so-called law of growing standardization, which refers to target texts usually displaying a smaller degree of linguistic variation than the original source text, and secondly the law of interference, which stipulates that in most cases the lexical and grammatical patterns of the source text tend to be copied without sufficient adaptation, thereby creating unusual and unnatural sounding constructions in the target text (quoted in Hatim & Munday, 2004). The common

conclusion of both laws is that the language of translated texts usually evinces certain peculiarities, referred to by Toury (1980) as universals of translation. Other theoreticians who have elaborated on the nature of these universals are for example Blum-Kulka & Levenson (1983), Baker (1993) and Mauranen & Kujamäki (2004).

4. Conclusions

In spite of some theoreticians still referring to Translation Studies as to a new discipline (for example Riccardi, 2002), nowadays the general consensus is rather that Translation Studies is an interdisciplinary domain *par excellence*, sharing common features, instruments, etc., with several other domains. At present, the goal of Translation Studies is still the description of

translation's phenomena and the setting up of general principles governing this discipline, however, the analytic methods employed are much more varied and increasing interest has been allotted to such aspects as the ideological and cultural background of translation. Some of the disciplines connected to the field of Translation Studies are: linguistics, philosophy, literary and cultural studies, or language engineering.

To conclude, we might state that Translation Studies can be defined as an interdiscipline (Hatim & Munday, 2004), connected in manifold ways to a number of adjoining disciplines, which leads us to believe that translation can be looked at from various vantage points ranging from the scientific to political or cultural ones.

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