

Eugene A. Nida's Dynamic Equivalence Theory and Poetry Translation

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Abstract

Nowadays, Eugene A. Nida's dynamic equivalence theory is very influential in translation works. In this essay, I will explore Nida's formal and dynamic equivalence theory. The exploration will start from interpreting of Nida's equivalence theory. Then the applicability of the theory in poetry translation will be analyzed.

Keywords: Eugene A. Nida, Dynamic Equivalence Theory, Poetry Translation

1. Introduction

During the process of translation, the comparison between different languages and cultures is an inevitable phenomenon. Therefore, the concept of equivalence gets involved in translation. When rendering different types of text, the questions such as whether the theory of equivalence can be applied and how the concept of equivalence influences the translation strategy can be controversial.

As a typical literary style, poetry pays much attention on the form and the rhythm and plays with words and forms. The meaning of a poem is of course important, but the form and style is also of high importance, and sometimes it might be of much more importance than meaning. This paper will explore whether the dynamic equivalence theory is suitable during the poetry translation.

2. Dynamic Equivalence Theory

In his essay *Principles of Correspondence*, Nida begins by asserting that given that "no two languages are identical, either in the meanings given to corresponding symbols or in the ways in which symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence between languages. Hence, there can be no fully exact translations." (Nida, 2000: 126) While the impact of a translation may be close to the original, there can be no identity in detail.

Nida then sets forth the differences in translation, as he would account for it, within three basic factors: the nature of the message, the purpose of the author and of the translator and the type of audience.

As for the nature of the message, he thinks that in some messages the content is of primary consideration (e.g. prose), and in others the form must be given a higher priority (e.g. poetry). As for the purpose of the author and of the translator, there are three purposes: to give information on both form and content, to aim at full intelligibility of the reader so he/she may understand the full implications of the message and for imperative purpose that aim at not just understanding the translation but also at ensuring no misunderstanding of the translation. As for the type of audience, prospective audiences differ both in decoding ability and in potential interest.

Nida brings in the reminder that while there are no such things as "identical equivalents" in translating, what one must seek to do in translation is to find the "closest natural equivalent". Here he identifies two basic orientations in translating based on two different types of equivalence: Dynamic Equivalence and Formal Equivalence. The two terms have often been understood fundamentally as sense-for-sense translation (translating the meanings of phrases or whole sentences) and word-for-word translation (translating the meanings of words and phrases in a more literal method).

Formal equivalence focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content. (Nida, 2000: 129) One is concerned that the message in the receptor language should match as closely as possible the different elements in the source language. Most typical of formal equivalence translating is "gloss translations", in which the translator attempts to reproduce as literally and meaningfully as possible the form and content of the original. (Nida, 2000: 129) Such a translation might be a rendering of some Medieval French text into English, intended for students of certain aspects of early French literature not requiring acknowledge of the original language of the text. (Nida, 2000: 129) Their needs call for a relatively close approximation to the structure of the early French text, both as to form (e.g. syntax and idioms) and content (e.g. themes and concepts). (Nida, 2000: 129) Such a translation would require numerous footnotes in order to make the text fully comprehensible. (Nida, 2000: 129)

Dynamic Equivalence was first put forward in 1964 and it means that the relationship between the target language receptor and the target text should generally be equivalent to that between the source language receptor and the source text. For example, to translate "holy kiss", (Romans 16:16) in a gloss translation would be rendered literally 'holy kiss', and would probably be supplemented with a footnote explaining that this was a customary method of greeting in New Testament times (formal equivalence). (Nida, 2000: 129) But J.B. Phillips' rendering of the New Testament in Romans 16:16 he quite naturally translates "greet one another with a holy kiss" as "give one another a hearty handshake all around" (dynamic equivalence).

For Nida, the success of the translation depends above all on achieving equivalent response. It is one of the “four basic requirements of a translation”, which are: making sense; conveying the spirit and manner of the original; having a natural and easy form of expression; producing a similar response.

In later years, Nida distanced himself from the term "dynamic equivalence" and preferred the term "functional equivalence".

3. Dynamic Equivalence Theory in Poetry Translation

According to Nida, correspondence in meaning must have priority over correspondence in style. (Nida, 2000: 134) However, how about the typical literary style like poetry that pays much attention on the form and the rhythm and plays with words and forms? Poetry is a sort of art and artist has a tendency of regard form as the basic of art, because their mission is to perform life into the form. (宗白华, 1987:6) For a poem, the meaning is of course important, but the form and style is also of high importance, and sometimes it might be of much more importance than meaning. Only pursue natural expressions for the receptors sometimes cannot reach the equivalence. That is to say the relationship between the target receptors and message is not the same as the relationship existed between the original receptors and the message. Let's take Max Weber's poem *Night* and one of its Chinese translations as an example.

Night

Fainter, dimmer, stiller, each moment,
Now night.

—Max Weber

夜
愈近黄昏，
暗愈暗，
静愈静，
每刻每分，
已入夜境

In this translation version, it is very easy for Chinese receptors to understand and its tidy and neat make it looks like a pretty Chinese poem with no trail of a translation version from an English poem, thus its expression is natural. What's more, the meaning and romantic charm of the original poem is manifested incisively and vividly. Thus it satisfies the dynamic equivalence principle. But as we can see, its form is very different from the original poem in which the form is of most importance. To appreciate the original poem, the just two lines first enter into our eyes, one is long and another is short, which is a sharp contrast. But in the translation version, it was divided into five lines and each is of almost the same length which is a totally Chinese poetry style and creates a mild atmosphere with absolutely no visual stimulation. Max Weber is a painter and a poet, in his poems, he pursues the cubism poem's artistry, but the translation's oversize and redundant makes the poem lost its image. What's more, in the original poem, “Fainter, dimmer” has a kind of distinct graduation of light intensity, but in the translation, the graduation is ellipsis but an addition of “愈近黄昏” that lengthens the beginning of the poem making the poem more redundant. Thus the relationship

between receptor and message is not substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message.

Another example is an exception from Amy Lowell's *HOKKU* and its translation.

Night lies beside me,
Chaste and cold as a sharp sword,
It and I alone.

—Amy Lowell

夜睡在身边，
冰凉如一只利剑，
它和我孤单。

Amy Lowell is one of the imagism leaders in the American Free Verse Movement, his works are of typical imagism perspective which advocates the use of free verse, common speech patterns and clear concrete images. In this poem, its form imitates Japan's Haiku with three lines and five, seven and five words respectively. Japan's Haiku has very strict rules to form and syllables, if the Chinese translation aims at natural expression with a Chinese style but ignores the form, the style of a Haiku, the original message, will be lost. Here the translation not only keeps the same number of lines, but also the same number of words in each line, which represent the formal beauty. And from the respect of the meaning, the translation's expression is natural and accurate and it gives up the tidy and neat in Chinese poetry. All of these reproduce in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source message.

So, for genre of poetry that emphasize a lot on forms, formal equivalence principle is more suitable than dynamic equivalence principle.

4. Conclusion

All in all, dynamic equivalence translation principle might not suitable for all styles and in every situation, and for genre of poetry that emphasize a lot on forms, formal equivalence principle is more suitable than dynamic equivalence principle.

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