The Concept of Equivalence in the Age of Translation Technology

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Abstract
The activity of terminology management and the concept of equivalence offer different insights into the nature of meaning and how words in different languages correspond to each other. This study analyses the challenges posed by high-end technology, particular the management of terminological data, in relation to the notion of equivalence. The author argues that recent translation technology is in dialectic with current developments in translation theory, approaches which displace the notion of meaning in translation away from the idea of equivalence. In addition, the paper suggests that if the concept of equivalence is to have any relevance in translation theory and practice today, a more encompassing approach needs to be embraced, one which considers a diversity of factors, both internal and external to language.

Keywords: difference, directional equivalence, equivalence, natural equivalence, semantic correspondence, terminology management, translation theory

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Equivalence in translation has been seen in the last four decades as theoretically untenable. Nevertheless, a major part of the activity of terminology management inevitably involves a theory of equivalence in meaning. If recent theoretical developments in Translation Studies have gradually moved away from the concept of equivalence, or at least of narrow equivalence, the ideas of alignment, parity and sameness which underlie all contemporary translation technology seem to go against the grain of these theoretical evolutions. Even though translation theory has paid relatively little attention to terminology management, the activity plays a vital role in professional translation practice today globally, relying heavily, as it does, in the very notion of equivalence which translation theory has a contention for (Gentzler, 2001). In this way, the two are intrinsically linked. This study analyses the complexities involving high-end technology, in particular the management of terminological data, in relation to the concept of equivalence. The paper will consider some of the methods by which linguistic features in different languages can correspond to each other, stand for one another, or recreate each other’s meaning using, amongst other theories, Roman Jakobson’s linguistic theory to illustrate my argument. Jakobson (1959) is adamant that there is no regularly complete equivalence between words in different languages, since cross-linguistic distinctions, which underscore the idea of equivalence, hinge around compulsory grammatical and lexical form. The author shall argue that linguistic equivalence is indeed impossible. For meaning or content to be ‘equivalent’ in Source Text and Target Text, the words, terms or ‘code-units would have necessarily to be dissimilar, being as they are, part of two distinct sign systems. In addition, the author suggests that any attempt to define either the study or the process of translation in terms of linguistic equivalence, i.e. words or linguistic signs which have ‘equal value’ in ST and TT is bound to be restricted. Such dogmatism has limited place in Translation Studies if it is to be taken in isolation, excluding other important theoretical and pragmatic approaches to language, context, meaning and translation.

Crucially, theorists and practitioners have now begun to discuss other ways of conceiving what distinguishes one kind of approach to equivalence from another, ideas which are not necessarily linguistic but strategic, cultural and pragmatic (Cronin 2013). A case in point is the work of the scholar Anthony Pym (2014), for whom equivalences, regardless of their nature does not take place between locales, they are created by ‘internationalization’ or translation of one kind or another. The scholar goes on to say that equivalences “are necessary fictions without necessary correlative beyond the communication situation” (Pym 2014, p.62). Equivalences might be fictions in their very essence but nevertheless true and realistic in the context of globalised neoliberal communication practices. Pym (2014) defends the equivalence paradigm by analysing two competing conceptualisations: ‘directional’ as opposed to ‘natural’ equivalence. If the latter is presumed to occur between languages or cultures prior to the translating act, which in Pym’s view is a misconception based on the historical circumstances of national vernacular languages and print culture, the former stresses the “strange way that a relation of equivalence can depend on directionality”, and it is valuable because it allows the translator to choose between several translation strategies (Pym, 2014, p.40). Both models analysed by Pym should be considered in all their complexity.
Hermans (2003) goes even further and suggests, rather radically, that total equivalence only happens when the translation replaces the original (i.e. in the case of the *Book of Mormon*), a process which generally involves a declaration of truth by an ideological (or ‘divine’) authoritative force, in which case the target text is not seen as translation at all. Hermann’s thoughts about equivalence touch on a contradiction endemic to Translation Studies. This changing importance of theoretical views on equivalence may be indeed determined by various factors, linguistic and literary, cultural and social. Part of the argument of this study is that only by considering such diversity of factors, both internal and external to language, and by enhancing the scope of what is meant by equivalence to encompass directionality, concept orientation and other kinds of correlations which are not universal in all cultures can the concept be harmonised, reconciled and interchangeable with the culture of digitalised, interoperable terminological data so prominent in the ‘translation age’ in which we live (Cronin, 2013).

Terminology management is an integral part of semantic web technologies and as such it belongs to what Pym (2004, p.63) describes as ‘internationalization-based equivalence’ paradigm. In a sense, it works as a standardisation tool and as such is dependent on the very notion of a stable translational equivalence relation, a concept which has been rejected almost unanimously by contemporary scholars, seeking, as it does, comparison with a source or intention within a wider natural system (Gentzler, 2001). In this scenario, the linguist Melby (2012) is resolute in affirming that the need for skilled terminology work will increase despite the fact that aligned multilingual corpora such as bi-texts are becoming widely accessible. Specialised translation relies unavoidably on the work of terminologists and involves specific domains of knowledge, each particular field is organised through the use of concepts which relate to objects or ideas applicable to that area. More specifically, words, expressions and phrases stored in bi-lingual or multilingual termbases should ideally be endowed with consistency in their relation of correspondence with concepts to be effective, i.e. target-language terms should always be used for a given source-language term – but this is not always the case due to the fluid nature of language, words and meaning. Rogers (2008) points out perceptively that unadulterated, automatic consistency of terminology may not necessarily be the most appropriate choice for a translation project:

Consistency of terminological choice has been seen not only as a characteristic of good technical writing in itself but also as an advantage of machine translation over human translation: for a particular source-text term, a machine-translation system always chooses the same equivalent i.e. is consistent in its automatic interlingual substitution of one form for another. (p.109)

The scholar problematizes the notion of consistency in translation choices, a conception which is essentially based in the idea of always choosing the same equivalent. Instead, she suggests that conventional understanding of terminological consistency can be made more sophisticated, more sensitive to nuanced meaning through an insight into ‘motivatedness’, an idea which is rooted, according to the scholar, in textuality. If this constant sliding and hiding of meaning that Rogers is addressing through ‘motivatedness’ is to have true effectiveness and applicability, then the scope of what is understood by equivalence must be amplified to encompass other textual and extra-textual elements, including additional information about word usage, context and semantic shades.
of terms as well as images, sounds and other multimodal elements like 3D graphics, for instance, videos, and so on.

The notion of equivalence, with its “vaguely mathematical heritage” has been understood primarily in connection to ideas of accuracy, correspondence, fidelity, correctness and identity (Malmkjær 2001, p. 16). In this context, equivalence is concerned with the ways in which the translation is connected to the target text. Catford (1965) suggests that ‘reproductions’ of an ‘original’ text in a second, third or multiple languages are analogous to notions of mathematics. The implicit idea in Catford’s theory is that translation is a symmetrical and reversible process, a question of substitution (replacement) of each word or item in the source language by its most adequate equivalent in the target language. This notion of equivalence has generated a lot of controversy amongst theorists and practitioners, not least because the very word ‘equivalence’ is rather polysemic and a number of different meanings coexist under its rubric (Shuttleworth, 1997). Snell-Hornby (1988, p. 17) considers the concept of equivalence as presenting “an illusion of symmetry between languages”, and Pym (2010, p. 30) complements this assertion by stating that equivalence creates a “presumption of interpretative resemblance” and, in this sense, it is always ‘presumed’. Nevertheless, the semiotic situation involving equivalence relations in terminology databases today seems to imply something rather different. Terminologists, unlike theorists, are generally bound to perform an enforced, fixed form of pressuring terms into natural equivalence, and to some degree they exemplify what Pym (2010, p. 31) conceives as “conceptual geometries of natural equivalence”. In such an environment, which encompasses the localization industry as well as machine translation and translation memory technology, equivalence makes a pragmatic return to corroborate the artificial imposition of controlled patterns of meaning on a global scale. This is one way in which equivalence and the terminology industry have become inevitably, if forcefully, reconciled.

Conversely, Fernand de Saussure suggests that the production of meaning in language is a matter of ‘difference’ (as cited in Fry 2013, p.97). Saussure was a predecessor of Roman Jakobson, for whom ‘equivalence in difference’ is the cardinal problem of language and the pivotal concern of linguists (Jakobson, 1959). In this structuralist conception of language, ‘cat’ is ‘cat’ not because there is a straight, neatly symmetrical unity between one signifier and one signified but because ‘cat’ is not ‘cap’ or ‘bat’. But if a ‘cat’ is what it is precisely because it is not ‘cad’ or ‘mat’, and ‘mat’ acquires meaning or significance because it is not ‘map’ or ‘hat’, it becomes hard to see, in my view, how far one should press this endless process of difference. In this sense, the differential nature of meaning is always the result of a severance or articulation of signs (Eagleton, 1996). It becomes evident that Saussure was interested not in the individual utterance (parole) but in the structure which allows ideas to be expressed within a linguistic system (langue). Saussure isolates language from its sociality in the most crucial stage: at the point of linguistic production where social individuals speak, interact, write, translate, adapt and read. One of Saussure’s fiercest critics is Mikhail Bakhtin, for whom parole is not an individual but inevitably a social and ‘dialogic’ affair, something that is located in the intersection of speakers and listeners in a highly complex field of values and purposes (Bakhtin, 1981). It is in this scenario that a more encompassing approach to equivalence needs to be embraced if the concept is to have any relevance.
Some scholars have convincingly pursued this expansion in approach. In his 1964 essay *Towards a Science of Translating*, Eugene Nida (as cited in Munday 2016, p.68) developed a new conception of equivalence, discarding old terms like ‘literal’, ‘free’ and ‘faithful’ translation in favour of ‘two basic orientations’ or ‘types of equivalence’: formal equivalence (later ‘formal correspondence’) and dynamic equivalence (later ‘functional’ equivalence). The former term focuses attention on the actual message, both in formal and semantic aspects (Munday, 2016). It is concerned primarily with matching the TT as close as possible to the different elements of ST, being inclined, in this way, towards the ST structure. The latter term describes what Nida calls ‘the principle of equivalent effect’ and is based on the idea that the relationship between TT and message should fulfil the linguistic needs and cultural expectation of the target audience, aiming towards a compelling ‘naturalness of expression’ (Munday 2016, p. 68). Nida’s theoretical developments were crucial in the sense that they moved theory and practice of translation away from rigorous word-for-word equivalence. Subsequently, however, the scholar’s new ideas about the principle of equivalent effect and the concept of equivalence came under severe scrutiny. Steiner (1975) argues that ‘fidelity’ is an ethical commitment but it is also economic. This is an important point to make since the nature of domain specific translation is inseparable from its neoliberal context. The influential Belgian scholar Lefevere (as cited in Bassnett 1994, p.26) was suspicious that equivalence in Nida’s view had ever departed from the word level, in the same way that the scholar Van den Broeck (as cited in Bassnett 1994, p. 27). felt that equivalent response or effect was something impossible to measure. According to Broeck no text could possibly elicit the same reception in two or more different cultures and times. Broeck, alongside House (as cited in Bassnett 1994, p.27) considered the concept of equivalence conceived in Nida’s manner to be unhelpful, since to define equivalence in mathematical terms poses an obstacle to translation theory not least because there is no reliable way of measuring it. If both scholars make a valid point, it seems that their case does not entirely apply to the pursuit of terminology management. As we have seen, the activity is wedded at birth with the concept of equivalence in its most squared manifestation.

To see equivalence in a more encompassing way, then, is a valuable advance. Nevertheless, outside the salutary activity of terminology management, in which concepts are pressured into acquiring equal meaning or value, equivalence should not be approached as a search for sameness and identicality, as Bassnett (1994, p. 27) categorically states. If sameness is hardly achievable even between two Target Language versions of the same text, it becomes even more untenable between the Source Language and the TL version. This situation has another nuance. The theories of Nida, with their distinction between functional and dynamic equivalence or of the Slovak scholar Popovič (1976, p.13), which distinguishes four types of equivalence (linguistic, paradigmatic, stylistic and textual) are useful starting points towards an approach which places the concept of equivalence as dialogical. In this sense, equivalence is always sensitive to the signs and the myriad of socio-linguistic structures within and surrounding the source and target language texts. In a similar vein, Lawrence Venuti, for whom translation is indeed an act of surreptitious manipulation, a process which “changes everything”, suggests two renewed and more fluid modes in which equivalence can be thought: ‘formal correspondence’ and ‘stylistic approximation’ (Venuti 2013, p. 181). Both of these notions are less nervous about linguistic or cultural rigidity.
and promote an absolution of the translator from the constraints of ‘linguistic reproduction’ (Venuti 1995, p.97).

The definition of both equivalence and terminology is rather blurred. Broadly, terminology is the science which studies the structure, formation, biography and usage of terms (Rey, 1995). Management of terminology includes collecting terms and defining their meaning, indicating their correct usage and translating them, and storing terminological data so that it can be interchangeable, interpretational and standardized. It becomes important to inquire, at this stage, into the definition of a term since it seems that there is very little consensus regarding its meaning. Roughly a term is a designation of a concept belonging to a language for specific purpose (LSP), a language used in a subject field, generally a field of ‘special’ knowledge (Rey 1995, p. 7). But the truth, according to the terminologist Warburton (2014), is that nobody really knows what a term is. Various attempts to define a term have been forwarded by a diversity of theoretical approaches. The primary consensus may be that terms are fundamental components for the communication network which drives the global economy. In any case, managing terminology is really an activity concerned with lexical units of any kind, in which case it is intrinsically linked with the science of Lexicology, which studies words and their meanings, rather than concepts, except that lexicological and terminological structures are needed for different purposes. Among the different approaches to terminology management are the ‘systematic’, working on a set of terms that are semantically related; and increasingly the corpus-based and the ‘ad-hoc’ approach which deals with one entry/term at time responding to an immediate need (Warburton 2014, p. 6). For that matter, translation involves far more than substitution or replacement of words and lexical items between languages. Instead, the translating process may inevitably involve the displacement of linguistic elements of the SL text. In Baker’s view, this moving away from linguistic equivalence is precisely the moment where determining the exact nature of equivalence level aimed for begins to emerge (Baker, 2012). For words in different languages to correspond to each other in different levels, translators and theorists have to recognise that, despite the efforts of global terminology management enterprises in pretending that translational equivalence cannot allow for non-equated connotations or cultural surplus, languages and cultures always and inevitably thrive in such cultural complexities, overlaps and asymmetries.

In conclusion, far from needing to be reconciled, the concept of equivalence and the activity of terminology management are already inter-linked, overlapped, feeding one another in a dialogical cycle. The author has argued that recent translation technology is in dialectic with current developments in translation theory, approaches that displace the notion of meaning in translation away from the idea of equivalence. Due to this seeming paradox, an opportunity emerges to rethink and amplify the scope of what is meant by equivalence and extend its franchise. This paper has suggested that, if a match is not linguistically the thing it matches, as Bellos (2012) comments, there must be a way in which the two can be comparable, related or approximated. One way of conceptualizing the kinds of matches which are involved in translation practices is to encompass more fluid ways of considering the notion of equivalence. The increasing interaction between human and technology situates translation at an unprecedented level of importance and the management of digital data is a core aspect in this process of evolving technology. If translation
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The concept of equivalence has avoided focusing its attention on problems of equivalence, the convergence of terminological activity with notions of equivalence (alignment, synonymy, sameness, which are to some extent ways of seeing, thinking of or dealing with ideas of ‘equal value’) makes the reassessment of theoretical approaches to the concept more necessary, relevant, and even urgent. The author has suggested that one way of harmonising equivalence relations with the practice of terminology management is to dialogically expand the ways in which equivalence can be understood by incorporating extra-textual elements in the analyses to include sociological, economic and cultural contexts, as well as a sensitivity to form and style rather than restricted reverence for linguistic signs.

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Uliana, Elton is a Brazilian translator working with global marketing implementation and literary translation. He is currently completing a master’s degree as a researcher in Translation Studies at University College London. As a literary critic the author has written profusely on the work of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and José Saramago.

References


