On How to Achieve Functional Equivalence in Translation between Chinese and English

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Abstract: Based on Nida’s theory on functional equivalence, this paper contrasts formal correspondence and functional equivalence and analyzes how to apply functional equivalence theory to the interlingual translation between English and Chinese. It’s argued that translators achieve equivalence from the functional transference of language structures, textual cohesions and cultural contexts.

Key words: functional equivalence; interlingual translation

1. Introduction

In the course of the language teaching practice of EFL in mainland China, it’s commonly encountered that the EFL learners have many problems in the interlingual translation between English and Chinese though they have acquired a quite large amount of vocabulary. The teachers are perplexed about how to teach translating skills; the learners have performed poorly on translation in the CET-4 (College English Test-Band 4). It seems to most EFL learners that the way of translating is to transfer every word or phrase of source language into corresponding counterparts of the target language without taking other considerations such as the function, or the context of target language, which without a doubt causes a lot of breakdown, or misleading even completely wrong message during the translating process.

Equivalence is usually said to be the central issue in translation although its definition and applicability in the field of translation theory have caused heated controversy. Some foreign translation theorists, such as Eugene A. Nida, Roman Jackson, John Catford, Peter Newmark and Mona Baker, to name a few, view this concept from quite different perspectives. Besides, Chinese translation theorists JIN Di and TAN Zai-xi also contribute to the literature of equivalence theory. This paper is to compare formal correspondence and functional equivalence, present the different views on equivalence, and try to study how to achieve functional equivalence in English-Chinese and Chinese-English translation.

2. The Definition of Functional Equivalence and Its Significance

Equivalence can be divided into two kinds: formal correspondence and functional equivalence. As the term suggests, formal correspondence is the equivalence at the level of form. Nida (1964) says that formal correspondence focuses attention on the message in form. One is concerned that the message in the receptor language should match as closely as possible the different elements in the source language. Nida calls the kind of translation guided by formal correspondence a “gloss translation”, which aims to allow the reader to understand as
much of the source language context as possible. It attempts to render the exact word from source language to target language. On the other hand, functional equivalence follows the principle of equivalent effect, that is, the relationship between the receptor and the message should aim at being the same as that between the original receptor and the source language message. It attempts to render receptor words from one language to another, and caters to the receptor’s linguistic competence and cultural needs.

As Doctor Nida (2001) views, “in general it is best to speak of ‘functional equivalence’ in terms of a range of adequacy, since no translation is ever completely equivalent. A number of different translations can in fact represent varying degrees of equivalence”. Formal correspondence sometimes distorts the grammatical and stylistic patterns of the target language, and hence distorts the message, only to cause the translation to be ambiguous or awkward. However, functional equivalence sometimes changes the form of the source text, but preserves the message of the source language, because it transforms the message in the receptor language. Of the two, Doctor Nida undoubtedly favors the latter. “If a more or less literal correspondence is functionally equivalent in both designative and associiative meaning, then obviously no adjustments in form are necessary. But if this is not the case, the translators should make some adjustments in order to achieve the closest natural equivalence”. This implicates that functional equivalence is actually supplementary to formal correspondence.

The concepts of formal correspondence and functional equivalence also have attracted many other translation theorists’ interests. Peter Newmark puts forward his famous theory about semantic translation and communicative translation. “Communicative translation attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original. Semantic translation attempts to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original.” “Admittedly, all translation must be in some degree both communicative and semantic…”(Newmark, 2001). TAN Zai-xi is a follower of Nida’s functional equivalence theory. He says that translation consists in reproducing the source language message from meaning to style by rendering the closest natural equivalent in the receptor’s language. Translators are confronted, all the way through translating, with the conflicts of form and content, meaning and style, equivalent and identity, and so on, but the most important point in translation is the content of the message of the source language, therefore, the transference of form should give priority to the transference of message. Mona Baker, in her book *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation* offers a detailed list of conditions upon which the concept of equivalence can be defined. She studies equivalence at different levels—equivalence at word level, equivalence above word level, grammatical equivalence, textual equivalence and pragmatic equivalence.

The theory of functional equivalence in translation is a great contribution to translation theory in the 20th century. It not only influences the biblical translation in the United States, but also influences the exploration on translation theory in China. According to the traditional Chinese translation theory, the translators should achieve “faithfulness, smoothness, and elegance”. But there are no how-toes towards meeting these three principles. Nida’s theory on functional equivalence leads to the heated argument in Chinese translation field which results in the benign circulation in development of our own translation theory. In this sense, Nida’s theory on functional equivalence is an important guidance to the practice of Chinese translators.

### 3. The Application of Functional Equivalence in the Translation between Chinese and English

Chinese and English respectively belong to Sino-Tibetan family and Indo-European family; hence there are a
lot of obvious distinctions between these two languages in the structure. Chinese and English sometimes express the same idea in different ways, however, different languages have the same psychological and sociological functions. The same functions constitute a prerequisite to translatability. Nida (2001) suggests the four basic processes in translating consist of (1) analysis of the source text, (2) transfer from source to target language, (3) restructuring in the target language, and (4) testing of the translated text with persons who represent in the intended audience. This four-phase translation process involves a comparison of source language and target language, so it is advisable that we study these differences of Chinese and English in structure and function, and then give functional equivalence a full play in the interlingual transference.

### 3.1 Topic-prominence VS subject-prominence

Chinese is a topic-prominent language. Chinese sentences mostly follow the topic—comment pattern. The topic in a sentence can be a word, phrase, clause or even several clauses, and it will always be at the initial position, whereas the rest of the sentence describes or illustrates the topic, or shows the writer’s view or attitude. The topic in a sentence does not necessarily coincide with the subject, and in a Chinese sentence there can be no subject, but can’t no topic. The topic-comment pattern takes up approximately 50% of all sentence patterns in Chinese. Let’s see some examples of topic-comment pattern.

(1) a. 街口有一家小店。
(2) a. 出不出国他都无所谓。
(3) a. 下雪了。

Example (1) a is a sentence with a prepositional phrase as the topic. Example (2) a is a sentence with a verbal phrase as the topic. While example (3) a is a sentence with a clause as the topic. All these three sentences have no subjects. English is a subject-prominent language and English sentences center on verb. The primary framework of such a sentence is Subject-Verb. The subject is frequently at the initial position and it must be a nominal element. Strictly speaking, in an English sentence subject can’t be omitted. So when translating, translators should note this difference between Chinese and English and change the form in the target language. The above examples can be translated as the following:

(1) b. There is a small shop down the street.
(2) b. There is no difference to him whether to go abroad or not./He doesn’t mind whether to go abroad or not.
(3) b. It is snowing.

### 3.2 LR sentence VS RL sentence

Sentences can be divided into two kinds when speaking of their linear extension. When a sentence develops in a seriation (left-right), it is called LR sentence, in which the end is open; whereas when a sentence develops in a reverse (right-left), it is called RL sentence, in which the head is open. English sentences are LR sentences, and in the extended structure the sequence of “an agent (subject) does (active verb) something (direct object) to/for someone (indirect object) with something (instrumental adjunct) somewhere (locative adjunct) sometime (temporal adjunct) to make something (resultant adjunct)” is typical. However, Chinese sentences are RL sentences, in which temporal adjunct, locative adjunct and resultant adjunct are placed at the beginning, while instrumental adjunct is placed before the verb. Therefore, the semantic centre and word order should be adjusted in the interlingual transference of Chinese and English: When translated into Chinese, the adjuncts should be at the head of the translated text; when translated into English, sentence patterns like “it”-clause, “there be”, inversion sentence, and compound complex sentence can be frequently used to achieve LR extension. Let’s see some pairs of examples.
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(4) a. 昨天在课堂上我们听地理老师说中国地大物博。
   b. We heard the geography teacher said that China has a large territory and abounds in natural resources in the class yesterday.

(5) a. 华生医生的日记到这里就结束了。
   b. Here ends the diary of Dr. Watson.

(6) a. He was quick to use self-deprecating humor to throw anyone off the scent.
   b. 为了迷惑别人,他机灵地说些自我挖苦的笑话。

3.3 Comparison between Chinese and English on textual cohesion

In Halliday and Hasan’ book *Cohesion in English*, textual cohesion is mainly divided into reference, substitution and ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. Mostly, cohesion is common to both Chinese and English, so in the interligual transference, equivalence can be easily achieved by some cohesive devices. But there are exceptions: conjunction and phonological cohesion (this device is not mentioned by Halliday and Hasan).

The Chinese linguist WANG Li put forward the concept of parataxis and hypotaxis. Both parataxis and hypotaxis exist in Chinese and English, but Chinese abound with hypotaxis, while English is teemed with parataxis, because Chinese characters are ideogram and Chinese put stress on sense, but English is an inflective language and puts stress on structure. Hence, sometimes the conjunction within sentences or between sentences is different in these two languages. English is confined by parataxis mostly so that coordinate and conjunctive words or phrases appear between clauses or between sentences. These coordinate or conjunctive words and phrases are so critical that if they are omitted the sentences will not be grammatically right. However, Chinese stresses sense, and the logic meaning lies in the word order which is the same as things happen in the nature. So, comparatively speaking, Chinese uses fewer coordinate and conjunctive words or phrases although it has been influenced by English since the New Culture Movement. In view of this difference in conjunction, some adjustments should be made in the interlingual translation between Chinese and English. The following are two examples of the adjustment in conjunction.

(7) a. 他病了,只得呆在家里。(The logical conjunction is causal here.)
   b. He had to stay at home because he was ill.

(8) a. 妈妈反对,我们怎么办?(The conjunction is conditional here.)
   b. Suppose mother objected, what should we do?

Phonological cohesion is a cohesive device frequently used in both Chinese and English poetry, but the methods are different. Chinese poetry usually uses rhyme on the first, second and fourth lines in a stanza, for example, LIU Zong-yuan’s “Jiang Xue” (江雪). The last words—“绝”, “灭”, “雪” are in the same rhyme. But English poetry follows different patterns. For example, William Wordworth’s “Earth Has Not Anything to Show More Fair” follows the rhyme-scheme abba, abba, cdcdcd, but his “The Solitary Reaper” follows the rhyme-scheme ababcdcd in each stanza. Therefore, the translation of poetry is most difficult and needs more consideration. One of the best examples of poetry translation is the one of Robert Burns’ “A Red, Red Rose” by GUO Mo-nu, a Chinese modern poet. Let’s see the first stanza in both versions.

O My luve is like a red red rose,  
那爱如玫瑰红
That’s newly spring in June,  
六月初开韵晓风
O My luve is like the melodie,  
吾爱吾爱如管弦
That’s sweetly played in tune.  
其声悠扬而玲珑

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4. Conclusion

This paper contrasts English and Chinese on language structure and textual cohesion. The characteristics of the structure of English are subject-prominence and LR-extension, whereas the characteristics of the structure of Chinese are topic-prominence and RL-extension. From the perspective of the textual cohesion, English texts usually use more conjunction than Chinese texts, but phonological cohesion appears more frequently and regularly in Chinese poetry than in English poetry. Therefore, on translating, translators should consider the differences in all these aspects, and try to achieve functional equivalence of the message from source language to target language.

References:

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