THE TRANSLATOR’S CHALLENGES TO ACHIEVING EQUIVALENCE IN TRANSLATION PRACTICE

Gerald Chishiba

Department of Literature and Languages, University of Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia

ABSTRACT

This article looks at the limitations that translators encounter in their quest to achieve equivalence in translation practice. Many research scholars in this field have brainstormed on the concept of equivalence and many of them tend to think that it is not a simple matter to try and establish the expected or required sameness between the source language and the target language. There are numerous challenges that translators are faced with in their effort to establish similarity or sameness between the source text and the target text. The debate surrounding the notion of equivalence started as early the 1950s, and ever since, the topic has not only been problematic but also controversial, with many arguing that no two languages in the whole world are absolutely identical in meaning. They further argue that equivalence can only be understood as a kind of likeness and not sameness. Consequently, numerous theories have emerged and have been expounded on the possibility of the source text and target text sharing some kind of approximation in meaning. This work has attempted to critically examine some of the limitations concerning the issue of equivalence in translation as propagated by a number of specialists in the field of translation theories. This article also stresses the fact every translator is likely to face these challenges, as they endeavour to convey the same message from the source language to the target language.

Keywords: Equivalence in translation, Translator’s limitations, Approximation in meaning, sameness and translation practice.

INTRODUCTION

According to Munday [1], “The notion of equivalence has been a key issue in translation studies throughout the 1970s and beyond”. In fact, the notion became the subject of intense debates among scholars as early as the 1950s. Vanessa Leonardi [2] adds that “the notion of equivalence is undoubt-
scholars and why those definitions revolve around the concept of equivalence. According to Newmark [11], translation can be described as “rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text.” In other words, translation is to be seen as a bridge that enables people speaking two different languages to understand each other. Jakobson [3] explains that: “Translation involves two equivalent messages in two different codes”. His explanation is surely debatable as the meaning of the term equivalent is relative. Huang Long [4] defines translation as the “Transfer of a text from source language into a text in target language, the objective being a perfect equivalence of meaning between the two texts.” The adjective perfect in Long’s definition is equality debatable. According to Nida and Taber [5], the focus of translation should be “reproducing in the receptor’s language the closest natural equivalent of source language message first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style.” As can be seen from the above definitions, the notion of ‘equivalence’ is central. Adding to the debate, Bell [6] contends that “texts in different languages can be equivalent in different degrees (fully or partially).” In other words, what matters most is conveying the content and style from the source text to the target text (Table 1). Throughout the second half of the 20th Century and the first decade of the twenty-first century the term ‘equivalence’ was used to mean that the source text and the target text were similar, even though some other scholars have argued that it is difficult to find full equivalence between the source language and the target language; in the sense that each language has its own lexical, grammatical, syntactical, phonetic and phonological structures.

Looking at table 1 (above), we note that almost all the definitions given aim at erecting a communication bridge between people speaking the source language and the people speaking the target language.

The Concept of Equivalence

From the foregoing, it evident that translation revolves around the central term of equivalence. Citing Vinay and Darbelnet, Munday [1] states that “equivalence refers to cases where languages describe the same situation by different stylistic or structural means.” As a matter of fact, this has been one of the premise upon which a number of scholars based their research during the last half of the twentieth Century. From the 1950s to date, researchers in the field of translation studies have attempted to punch holes in the works of other researchers, and it would like the debate is far from being concluded. The term ‘equivalence’ has two facets; it can either be used in the English language as a scientific term or as a common word. Nevertheless, many have argued that using the word ‘equivalence’ as a scientific term in translation theory would be inappropriate. According to them, there are no two words, in any two languages, that are absolutely identical in meaning. In other words, it is impossible to establish absolute identity between the source text and the target text. In this vein, Nida and Taber [5] indicate that “there are no two stones alike, no flowers the same, and no two people are identical.” Hermans [7] added that “A strict application of the concept as it is used, say, in Mathematics, is obviously unworkable. It would imply reversibility and interchangeability, and we know that translation is a one-directional event, involving asymmetrical linguistic and cultural worlds.” This position has been supported by Baker [10] whose argument is that there are several different types or levels of translation equivalences, such as, semantic equivalence, syntactic equivalence, lexical equivalence, morphological and phonetic equivalence. The controversial nature of the concept of equivalence in translation eventually gave birth to a number of theories that sought to redefine it. In this essay, only a few scholars will be the focus, namely, Jakobson, Vinay and Darbelnet, Nida and Taber, Catford, House, Baker, Newmark and Koller.

According to Roman Jakobson

Roman Jakobson [3] is one of the pioneers in translation studies who used the term of equivalence. As far as he was concerned, it is not possible to achieve full equivalence between language units. He stressed the fact that different languages have different phonetic, grammatical, syntactical and lexical structures. Jakobson cited by Munday, [1] studied the notion of equivalence in meaning and concluded that “there is ordinarily no full equivalence between code-units,” citing the example of the English word ‘cheese’ which is not identical to the Russian word ‘syr’ or the Spanish word ‘Queso’. Vanessa Leonardi [2] has been quoted as saying that Jakobson introduced three kinds of translation equivalence, namely, intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic. Establishing intralingual equivalence refers to rewording and paraphrasing within a language, interlingual is between two languages, whereas intersemiotic is between two sign systems. Much as Jakobson made a meaningful contribution, other researchers still found it inconclusive.

According to Vinay and Darbelnet

Vinay and Darbelnet [8], cited by Munday [1], added another dimension to the debate by saying that what helps the translator to establish equivalence more easily is the context. Accordingly, Vinay and Darbelnet proposed seven procedures that a translator can use to help him or her achieve equivalence in
Table 1 Summary of different definitions of the word “Translation”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial number</th>
<th>Scholar’s name</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Newmark [11]</td>
<td>“Rendering the meaning of a source language (SL) text into a target language (TL) text”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jakobson [3]</td>
<td>Producing “two equivalent messages in two different codes” (languages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Huang Long [4]</td>
<td>“Achieve a perfect equivalence of meaning between the SL text and the TL text”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Nida et al. [5]</td>
<td>“Reproduce the closest natural equivalent and style of the SL text in the TL text”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bell [6]</td>
<td>“Establishing equivalence between SL text and TL text at different degrees”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

his or her translation practice. These are: borrowing (loan words), calque, literal translation, transposition, modulation, equivalence (as a technique), and adaptation. Therefore, the translator is at liberty to use the most appropriate strategy to help him achieve his intended goal. The Duo did not apparently make a clear distinction between ‘equivalence’ as a notion and ‘equivalence’ as a procedure.

According to Nida and Taber

Nida and Taber [5], as cited by Munday [1], indicated that there are two kinds of equivalence, namely, formal equivalence (also known as formal correspondence) and dynamic equivalence. According to them, formal equivalence (formal correspondence) focuses on word-for-word translation and content faithfulness, whereas dynamic equivalence is more concerned with context and sense-for-sense adaptation. As Vanessa Leonardi [2] summarises it, dynamic equivalence is based on the principle of equivalent effect. In other words, the translated text should be able to produce the same effect on the target audience. For this reason Nida, cited by Munday [1] argues that “The success of the translation depends above all on achieving the equivalent effect or response.” However, because various languages differ in many aspects, it would not be possible to achieve sameness in terms of effect on the target audience. Nevertheless, Nida and Taber’s “introduction of the concept of formal and dynamic equivalence was crucial in introducing a receptor-based (or reader based) approach” [5]. Many of Nida’s critics openly argued that it is an illusion to think that a translation can produce the same effect on the receptor or provoke the same response in two different cultures.

According to Baker

Baker [10] combines linguistic and communicative approaches. She makes a distinction between equivalence at word level, equivalence at grammatical level, equivalence at textual level and equivalence at pragmatic level. According to Baker [10], “the translator should pay attention to a number of factors when considering a single word”, such as number, gender, and tense.” Pragmatic equivalence refers to the diversity of grammatical categories across languages. Textual equivalence concerns the importance of cohesion and coherence in a text. Concerning pragmatic equivalence, the translator is expected to recreate the author’s intention in another culture by working out implied meanings of the Source text that enable the target audience to understand the message clearly. For most Romance languages, the linguistic aspect is of extreme importance; as we shall see later that in French, for instance, the difference in gender matters and may lead to a mistranslation.

According to Catford

Vanessa Leonardi [2] describes Catford’s approach as being different from that of Nida in the sense that Catford’s approach is linguistic based. Catford’s contribution to the debate lies in the introduction of the concept of types and shifts of translation. Shifts refer to the changes in the translation processes.

According to Newmark

According to Koller

Koller as cited by Munday [1] recognises 5 types of equivalence relations between the source text and the target text. These are denotative equivalence, connotative equivalence, text normative equivalence, pragmatic equivalence and formal equivalence. Koller’s equivalences are hierarchically ordered according to the needs of the situation. Denotative refers to the extra linguistic content of the text. Connotative is related to the lexical choices. Text normative is related to the types of text. Pragmatic equivalence is oriented towards the target audience of the text. Formal equivalence concerns the form and aesthetic of the text. The advantage with this approach is that the translator can choose the type of equivalence highlight (Table 2).

Table 2 (above) shows that scholars have not been unanimous concerning the perception of the concept of ‘equivalence in translation’.

Having looked at the various definitions and perceptions of the words ‘translation’ and ‘equivalence’, let us show some of many limitations that are likely to make the work of a translator difficult.

Limitations of the Concept of equivalence in Translation Practice

Hermans [7] once said: “The more closely one looks at what constitutes equivalence in translation, the more problematic the notion becomes.” This work first looked at Jones’ [13] list of challenges as a starting point and then enriched it with a number of other limitations. Jones’ [13] list of difficulties is relevant for both the source language and the target language. What Jones calls is what is being referred to in article as limitations to the concept of equivalence in the translation practice. Below are some examples of areas where limitations to the concept of equivalence have occurred during the translation process.

Limitations Due to Grammatical and Syntactical Divergences between the SL and the TL

It is a well-known fact that all the languages in the world belong to one family or the other. English, for instance belongs to the Germanic group of languages, while French belongs to the Romance group of languages. Unlike French, English is a language that favours synthetic and concise expressions. Therefore, it is not surprising that a text translated from French into English will be shorter than the original French version. One word in English will correspond to several words in French. In other words, there is notable difference in terms of grammar and syntax between French and English. Therefore, translating one single word from English to French and vice versa may not pose a problem, but translating compound or complex sentences may become a challenge due to the syntactical differences between these two languages.

Let us consider, for instance, the following sentence in English: ‘No sooner did the President arrive at the airport than the brass band began to play the national anthem.’ Our translation in French would be: ‘Le Président n’était pas plus tôt arrivé à l’aéroport que l’orchestre commença à jouer l’hymne national.’ It is not easy to translate a complex sentence like this one from French to English or vice versa. Another grammatical limitation worth mentioning is that of the French historical present. Minutes of meetings are usually written in present tense, whereas the minutes in English are written using the simple past. These examples have been given to illustrate the difficulties that may arise as a result of grammatical and syntactical differences between two or more languages.

Limitations Due to the Polysemous Nature of Words in the SL and TL

Most of the time, translators have faced the challenge of polysemous words. Translators who are in the habit of using small dictionaries have often been warned against this practice. The reason is simple; most of these small dictionaries do not show all the meanings of a word in a sentence. As Jones [13] indicates, “very few words are monosemous in any given language; the words one uses on a daily basis are all polysemous, carrying multiple meanings.” This means, therefore, that the translator will have to fully understand the context in which a particular word was used if he has to achieve equivalence in the target. In other words, the context will help the translator determine the meaning that may be attributed to a particular term. Take, for instance, the French word ‘siège’, it could either mean a chair, a seat in an office, or it could mean the headquarters of an organisation. For example: ‘Le siège de l’UNESCO se trouve à Paris’. Zgusta [12] and cited by Baker [10] explains that “every word has something that makes it different from any other word.” For example, the word ‘chou’ in the following two sentences: - a) ‘j’aime mon petit Chou’ (figurative meaning); - b) ‘le chou est bon à manger’ (literal meaning). Therefore, for the translator to know the exact meaning of a word, he must be guided by the context. If the translator does not understand the context, chances are that his translation may be affected.

Limitations Due the Gender Aspect

The gender issue has also been a source of limitation to the notion of equivalence in translation. Let us consider the French
Table 2 Different perceptions of the term equivalence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial number</th>
<th>Scholar’s name</th>
<th>Perception</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jakobson [3]</td>
<td>Equivalence between the source text (ST) and the target text (TT) is achievable at 3 levels, namely, intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic levels. Full equivalence is not possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Vinay and Darbelnet [8]</td>
<td>Equivalence between ST and TT is achievable as long as certain procedures are followed, such as borrowing, adaptation and modulation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nida et al.[5]</td>
<td>Equivalence between ST and TT is achievable from two angles: formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. However absolute or full equivalence is impossible to achieve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Hermans [7]</td>
<td>Absolute or perfect equivalence is impossible to achieve because the SL text and the TL text are simply not reversible or interchangeable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Baker [10]</td>
<td>Equivalence can be achieved at lexical, morphological, grammatical, phonetic, textual as well as pragmatic levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Newmark [11]</td>
<td>Equivalence is achievable at semantic level as well as at communicative level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Koller cited by Munday [1]</td>
<td>Equivalence is achievable at five levels, namely, denotative, connotative, text normative, pragmatic and formal equivalence levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Munday [1]</td>
<td>We talk of equivalence when two or more “languages describe the same situation by different stylistic means”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

term ‘poste’, which in English could either mean ‘position’ or ‘post office’ depending on the gender of the word. The same challenge applies to the French word ‘critique’, which in English could either mean ‘the critique’ or ‘critics’ depending on the gender attached to it. A mistake in this area could certainly lead to mistranslation. A third example would be that of the French word ‘chèvre’. Everybody knows that la chèvre means the goat in English, but not many know that le chèvre means goat’s cheese.

Limitations Due to the Non availability of Equivalents in TL

Some words do not exist in one language or the other, and the only option left to the translator is borrowing. The loan words may not be easy for the target audience as the borrowed word is totally foreign to their language. As Baker [10] indicates, “the use of loan words in the source text poses a special problem in translation. They can add an air of sophistication to the text. Loan words also pose the problem of deceptive cognates” (les faux amis). For instance, ‘le dancing’ in French means ‘dance hall’ in English; ‘le camping’ in French means ‘campsite’ in English. The French word ‘chiffon’ means ‘rag’ in English; while the French word ‘nappe’ means ‘table cloth’ in English, but the English word ‘nap’ would mean ‘siesta’ in French. Nevertheless, this argument should not be used as a weapon to discourage the use of loan words. Jakobson [3] once said: “whenever there is deficiency, terminology may be qualified and amplified by loan words or loan translations, neologism or semantic shifts.” The trouble is when the borrowed word is not easy to explain.

Limitations Due to Culture-Specific Concepts

According to Baker [10], “the source language word may express a concept which is totally unknown in the target culture. The concept may be abstract or concrete. It may be related to a religious belief, a social custom”. It is surprising to note that the English term “Speaker” does not have any equivalent in Arabic, Chinese and Russian. These three languages prefer to use the term ‘Chairman’ which is consistent with their situation; and yet, ‘chairman’ would not reflect the role that the Speaker of a National assembly or Parliament would play as an independent of the legislative wing of Government in most of the Anglophone countries.

Limitations Due to Absence of Localised Concepts in TL

Baker [10] gives the example of the words ‘standard’, ‘landslide’ and ‘savoury’ which have no equivalents in many languages. He adds that these words may be understood by the target audience and yet they have no appropriate actual equivalent in the target language. This challenge, however, is not common between English and French as these two languages share a lot lexical items.
Limitations Due to Semantic Complexity of Terminology in SL

The practical example given by Baker [10] is that of the expression ‘raining’ in the Indonesian language. The English sentence ‘it is raining’ or the French sentence ‘il pleut’ do not make a distinction between ‘going out in the rain with prior knowledge that it is raining and going out in the rain without prior knowledge. In the Indonesian language, the distinction has been taken care of. There are many other examples one can give.

Limitations Due to Lack of Specific Equivalents

There are a number of specific words in English that may not find equivalents in the target language. Let us look at the following co-hyponyms of the word ‘House’ in the English language: cottage, bungalow, hall, villa, mansion, hut, lodge, chalet and crafts. The terms may not all be available in other target language, especially languages from the developing world.

Limitations Due to Wrong Interpretation of Idiomatic Expressions

Idiomatic and fixed expressions do exist in English, in French and in many other languages of the world. The challenge is how to translate such expressions and manage to achieve equivalence in the target language if one does not know the expression. The other challenge is that the translator may not even be able to recognise as quickly as possible that he is dealing with idioms. Idiomatic expressions such as ‘il tient le coup’, ‘petit à petit, l’oiseau fait son nid’, ‘bury the hatchet’ may not be easy to translate for someone who does not know them, hence limiting the possibility to achieve equivalence.

CONCLUSION

The concept of equivalence in translation has been thoroughly discussed in this essay. It is undoubtedly a notion that many a translator have not found easy to handle. The concept of equivalence in translation has equally been controversial among researchers. This essay has attempted to present some possible areas of limitations and explain why some scholars contend that there are no words or expressions that are perfectly identical in meaning in any two languages. Therefore, in order to erect communication bridges, between the Source Language and the target language, the translator must be aware of these limitations to equivalence in translate so as to be able to convey the right message to the target audience. As we have earlier indicated, the concept of equivalence is one of the most problematic areas in translation practice and theory. Therefore, achieving equivalence in translation has remained the focus of research work in the field of translation. Equivalence is a fundamental requirement to guide translators as well as interpreters in their work. It is essential as it helps the translator to provide the so much needed similarity or approximation between the source text and the target text.

REFERENCES


