

The Three Essences of Functional Equivalence and Its Application

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Functional equivalence is a quite common translation theory but the three points, naturalness, closeness and equivalence should be endowed clear and precise meanings to instruct the translating practice.

1 The Essence of Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory

Eugene Nida, the famous American linguist and translation theorist, proposed the concepts of "formal equivalence" and "dynamic equivalence" in his book *Toward a Science of Translating* (4th issue) in 1964. Later, in order to emphasize the communicative function of translation and to instruct translation practice better, Mr. Nida perfected and integrated the two concepts into the theory of "functional equivalence". As Eugene A. Nida defines, "Translation consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style." Nida's definition of translation indicates that translation is not only lexical equivalence, but also semantic equivalence, and stylistic equivalence. The equivalence in "dynamic equivalence" includes four aspects: lexical equivalence, syntactic equivalence, text equivalence, style equivalence. Of these four aspects, Nida believes that meaning

equivalence is the most important and form equivalence the second. (Nida, 2002:168) It is worth mentioning that this initiative is not to encourage students to focus on content and ignore form, but to pursue formal equivalence on the basis of content.

The information conveyed by translation includes both lexical information on the surface and deep cultural information. In the *Language, Translation and Culture*, “functional equivalence” is defined as: the target language readers should be able to understand the translation in the same way as the source language readers. In this definition, it underlines the fairly similar feelings of the target language readers and the source language readers. which is the highest level of functional equivalence and the essence of this theory. For the purpose of functional equivalence between the source text and the target text and avoid “translationese” as much as possible, the translator needs to break the barriers of language structure and make a breakthrough in shackles of corresponding form between two languages, no matter in literary translation or scientific translation. The translators can find equivalence, restructuring forms and semantic deconstruction to achieve it, which involves “closeness”, “naturalness” and “equivalence”.

2 The Guiding Significance of Functional Equivalence Theory to the Translation Practice

Nida said that conscientious translators seek the most natural equivalence. In fact, a natural translation means no grammatical and stylistic stiffness in expression, and avoids translationese because it is faithful to form, finally causing unfaithfulness to the translation of the original communicative function. Undoubtedly, the excessive stress on “naturalness” will certainly weaken the achievement of “functional equivalence” due to the consequence of “naturalness”. Therefore, proper application of the principle “naturalness” is an indispensable part in the translation practice, particularly academic English papers translation.

In "functional equivalence", "closeness" has a very close and complex relationship with "naturalness". On the surface, "closeness", meaning that the translation should be close to the information given by source language, holds "naturalness" in check which is revealed after a close reading of Nida's masterpiece. "Closeness" and "naturalness" are like two ends of a straight line, representing two extremes. In fact, they reflect the contradiction between content and form in translation, which is an thorny issue for translator to deal with in the translation practice, especially in the translation of academic English papers, its form and content equally crucial.

“Equivalence” is the core word of equivalence theory in translation application. There is not completely or absolutely equivalent translation, because the most naturalness and closest equivalent translation is still at a

certain distance from the original text itself. “Equivalence” is the best balance between the two extremes. In the process of translation, the most effective way to achieve functional equivalence is to find a both close and natural way of expression between languages and cultures. Therefore, in the process of translation of academic English papers, it is one of the elements at the heart to find the “equivalent” translation.

Under the guidance of “naturalness”, “closeness” and “equivalence”, the translation practice of this time is constantly revised and improved, so as to produce a relatively high-quality translation finally.

3 Case Analysis

3.1 Case Analysis Guided by “Naturalness”

“Naturalness” is the most basic criteria of translation. In order to offer the fairly similar feelings which source language brings to the readers; translation must be naturalness as the sense of target language. For instance, the following text is given a proper translation instructed by the rule of “naturalness”.

Example 1:

For Staël, public morality needed to protect the basic human rights and happiness of each and every individual, even if he or she belonged to a minority.

对于斯塔尔来说，即使个人属于少数群体，公共道德依旧需要

保护他们的基本人权和幸福。

Analysis: In this compound sentence, the word order is rearranged to conform the Chinese statement smoothly. It's worth of mentioning that "he or she", which is underlined, is not translated literally into "他或她", but another general and formal word "个人".

Example 2:

She found the public morality of the late eighteenth century and the French Revolution, defined vaguely as duty to "public utility," to be extremely dangerous because it was difficult for parties to agree on what could be deemed "useful."

她发现，18 世纪晚期和法国大革命的公共道德，被模糊地定义为“公共事业”的义务。这种意识是极其危险的，因为社会各政党很难就什么是“有用的”达成一致。

Analysis: In Chinese, repetition occurs frequently to underline the matter which is referred to in the text above. This expression can substitute the specific thing in the condition where abstract nouns in Chinese are underdeveloped. In the example above, to explain the contents mentioned before, the addition,“这种意识”, gives its translation an clarified expression, which satisfies the request of coherence in discourse.

It is worth noting that this repetition or variation should be moderate to avoid tedious wording. Besides, it should also be explicit in case the

meaning of the sentence is ambiguous. Therefore, this kind of repetition should be in accord with the principle of naturalness.

3.2 Case Analysis guided by “Closeness”

As Liu Zhong De’s translation theory says, "faithfulness, expressiveness and closeness", closeness is crucial for the translator to measure the accuracy of the information transmission. In academic English papers, closeness plays an important role undoubtedly for the importance of the content in translation. Perhaps sometimes some approaches are needed in the translation process, such as the meaning extension or shrinking, specification or generalization. From this example can we see the semantic shift clearly.

Example 3:

Perfectibility and the Definition of National Progress Today

改善和定义当今国家的进步

Analysis: This phrase is the subheading which offers a summary of part of the passage. Generally, it is the noun phrases that are used to conclude the main idea of the content, just like “Perfectibility and the Definition of national Progress Today”. While in Chinese, verbs and verb phrases have higher frequency of use which is the customs of Chinese dictions. Nominalization, which refers to the use of nouns to express the information originally expressed by verbs, such as using abstract nouns to

express actions, behaviors, changes, states and so on, is a common phenomenon in English, especially in English. That is why “perfectibility” is transformed into “perfect” and “definition” is transformed into “define” in the translation process.

3.3 Case Analysis guided by “Equivalence”

"Equivalence" is the core word of the functional equivalence theory. Good translations must achieve functional “equivalence” by comparison with the original text. Nida emphasizes that there is no completely absolute equivalence, and there is a certain distance between the most natural and the closest equivalence and the original text itself. “Naturalness” and “closeness” contain yet restrict each other. And in most cases, there are contradictions between them. “Equivalence” is the golden section point between the two extremes of “closeness” and “naturalness”. It is suggested that the most effective way to realize functional equivalence is to find the closest and the most natural expression of the source language between languages and cultures or to achieve it by reorganizing the original forms and semantic structures in an appropriate way. Only when “functional equivalence” comes true in the translation, can the result of “the source language readers and the target language readers feel roughly the same” be produced.

Example 4:

Furthermore, investment in STEM at the expense of the arts and the humanities parallels the Enlightenment's obsession with progress as defined as the conservation and accretion of empirical knowledge and material gain.

此外，以艺术和人文学科为代价对 STEM 的投资，与启蒙运动对发展的痴迷如出一辙，后者被定义为经验知识和物质利益的保持和增长。

Analysis: “parallel” often refers to the adjective in most cases, “two or more lines that are parallel to each other are the same distance apart at every point”. But as a verb, “parallel” means “to be similar to sth”, which may be unknown without the dictionary. It can also be solved with the help of “equivalence”.

To reach the goal of “bringing the same feeling that original language readers got to the target readers”, translator should take the advantage of analogy. Imaging that, “investment in STEM at the expense of the arts and the humanities” and “the Enlightenment's obsession with progress” are two “parallel” line, so they are to a great extent similar to each other.

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