

## **Dynamic Equivalence and Formal Correspondence in Translation between Chinese and English**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper gives a critical review of E.A.Nida's translation theory of dynamic equivalence and initiates a comparative study of dynamic equivalence and formal correspondence with special reference to the translation between English and Chinese, for the purpose of confirming the applicability of dynamic equivalence to English-Chinese translation. The findings further prove that though the theory of dynamic equivalence has its defects, it usually takes precedence over formal correspondence in the translation between the Chinese and the English languages.*

**Keywords:** dynamic equivalence, formal correspondence, functional equivalence, translationese

### **1. Introduction**

E.A.Nida establishes four priorities as guiding principles in translating and bases for judgment, namely contextual consistency; dynamic equivalence over formal correspondence; the aural (heard) form of language over the written form; forms that are used by and acceptable to the audience for which a translation is intended over forms that may be traditionally more prestigious (Nida and Taber, 1969: 14). Among them, dynamic equivalence is of primal concern, which is the core or essence of Nida's entire theoretical system. Besides, the question of equivalence, as agreed by many translation theorists home and abroad, is a decisive factor in disclosing the nature of translation and a criterion by which the quality of translation is judged. Basically, the diversity of translation theories is attributed to the varied views on equivalence. Therefore, my thesis will only be devoted to the priority of dynamic equivalence over formal correspondence, with a view to examining the validity of dynamic equivalence, particularly in regard to Chinese-English or English-Chinese translation, and, as an ultimate aim, to getting a thorough understanding of Nida's translation theories.

### **2. Nida's Translation Theory of Dynamic Equivalence**

Nida's dynamic-equivalence theory studies translation from a totally new perspective, deviating from the traditional source text-centered theories, shaking off the straitjacket of sticking to some specific linguistic problems and shifting the focus to the function of translation — to make certain that the receptor understands accurately the message carried by the source text. In this sense, it is a big step forward in translation studies.

Nida bases his dynamic equivalence theory on some linguistic achievements made by Jakobson and Chomsky who claims that a dynamic dimension can be added to language structure through the use of transformation. Nida thus categorizes the kernel sentences of a language into seven types, in other words, the surface structure of any language is but the logic organization of those kernel sentences, which justifies the possibility of dynamic equivalence between different ways of expression within one language (戴灿宇, 1987: 61). He, therefore, concludes that all languages have the same capability of expressing by saying: "Anything that can be said in one language can certainly be said in another language...", with reasonable accuracy by establishing equivalent points of reference in the receptor's culture and matching his cognitive framework by restructuring the constitutive elements of the message (Nida, 1984: 13).

A dynamic equivalence, as defined by Nida, is to reproduce "in the receptor language the closest natural equivalence of the source-language message..."(Nida and Taber, 1969: 12).

The key words are "closest", "natural" and "equivalence". By "closest", he indicates that owing to the impossibility of absolute equivalence, the "closest" equivalence is the most ideal one. Nida (1964: 167) particularly stresses that "a natural rendering must fit the receptor language and culture as a whole; the context of the particular message; and the receptor-language audience". To put it plain, either the meaning or form should not sound "foreign". The essence of dynamic equivalence is the receptor's response, in Nida's own term, "the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language"(Nida and Taber, 1969: 68). The reaction or response is based on the comprehensive reception of the message, not only understanding the meaning or content, but also feeling in the way the original readers do. By laying stress on the receptor's response, he underlines the improvement to the source text by the receptor's subjectivity and aesthetic sense.

### 3. Formal Correspondence

Nida puts forward dynamic equivalence in opposition to formal correspondence. In speaking of naturalness, he is strongly against translationese — formal fidelity, with resulting unfaithfulness to the content and impact of the message. Basically, a formal equivalence translation, as Nida (1964, 165) states, is source-oriented, which is designated to reveal as much as possible the form and content of the original message, that is, to match as closely as possible the formal elements like grammatical units, consistency in word usage, meanings in terms of the source context, just to name some. David Crystal, J.R.Firth, Catford and other linguists and translation theorists agree upon the six levels of formal equivalence, namely, phonetic, phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactical and semantic equivalence (乐眉云, 1989: 38).

A formal equivalence translation, strictly speaking, is impossible, because of the differences between linguistic structures and socio-cultures. As Saussure points out that there is no essential link between the signified and the signifier, and such arbitrariness determines that languages, particularly those of different language families, differ greatly in form (扬忠, 李清和, 1995: 11). In many instances, certain formal elements of the source language, as mentioned by Nida, cannot be reproduced, like puns, chiasmic orders of words, instances of assonance, or acrostic features of line-initial sounds. Crystal, too, agrees that it is impossible to achieve equivalence on all formal levels — the absolute formal equivalence — and, on usual occasions, semantic equivalence should be given priority while other levels, especially phonetic, lexical, morphological, syntactical equivalence, etc., are given attention only to achieve special translation effects (乐眉云, 1989: 38).

To take the translation between Chinese and English as an example. A formal equivalence translation between the two languages, belonging to different language families, is hard indeed, if not at all impossible. Chinese, belonging to the Sino-Tibetan language family, is an ideographic language of paratactic structure, composed of monosyllable units — logographic characters — which represent ideas or things rather the sound of a word, whereas English, belonging to the Indo-European language family, is an alphabetic language of hypotactic structure, composed of Latin letters, representing the sound of a word. As two totally different languages, some language phenomena which exist in one are lacking in the other, for instance, in English, the indefinite and definite articles, inflection, tense, post-modifiers of a noun, etc., and in Chinese the various classifiers, special sentences with either an adjective, a subject-predicate construction or verbal expressions in series as its predicate, the pivotal sentence, etc.

A detailed comparison between Chinese and English syntax is listed below to further prove the difficulty in maintaining formal correspondence between the two languages:

A. In most cases, the English interrogation sentence is formed by inverting the order of the subject and the predicate verb (or part of the predicate verb). In Chinese, however, a yes-no question is formed simply by adding an auxiliary word “吗” (pronounced as *ma*) at the end of a declarative sentence (see Table 1).

Table 1

Chinese	English
(1) 苏珊是你的导师。	Susan is your tutor.
(2) 苏珊是你的导师吗？	Is Susan your tutor?

In forming Chinese special questions, no inversion of any kind is required. The question word may be placed anywhere within a sentence and its position simply depends on its grammatical function. So the word order of a special question is just the same as that of a normal declarative sentence.

B. In English an adverbial of place is usually put at the end of a sentence, while in Chinese an adverbial of place is usually placed between the subject and the predicate verb.

C. In English an attribute (except for a noun or an adjective) is usually put after the word it modifies, whereas in Chinese an attribute is always put before the word it modifies, hence transposition is required in achieving structural equivalence.

D. In English there are also rhetoric inverted sentences. In Chinese auxiliary words are employed to express emotion or show emphasis instead of resorting to inverted word order.

(3) 这些(these) 花(flowers) 多(how) 美(beautiful) 啊(auxiliary word)!

(4) How beautiful these flowers are.

E. In English the modifier is sometimes separated from the word it modifies either for the sake of balancing the sentence or for rhetoric purposes. However, in Chinese the modifier is never separated from the word it modifies.

(5) Many **paintings** are in existence **of farmers working in the fields**.

(6) 保存着许多描绘农民在田间劳动的画。

In (5), the words *are in existence* are inserted between the modifier (*of farmers working in the fields*) and the modified (*paintings*). In its Chinese translation (6), the modifier (描绘农民在田间劳动的) immediately precedes the modified (画).

F. In English there are some elliptical sentence structures which are employed for the sake of simplicity or emphasis. As there are no similar structures in Chinese, the omitted parts will be added or repeated when these structures are turned into Chinese.

(7) Histories **make men** wise, mathematics ( ) subtle; logic and rhetoric ( ) able to contend.

(8) 历史**使人**明智, 数学**使人**周密, 逻辑和修辞**使人**善辩。

In (7), the words *make men* are omitted in the following two parallel structures, but in the Chinese translation of the sentence (8), the Chinese meaning of the words (使人) is repeated in those structures.

#### 4. The Priority of Dynamic Equivalence over Formal Correspondence

In view of the difficulty in retaining formal correspondence, and of the fact that all communication is goal-oriented, no matter intralingual or interlingual communication, the move from the source's intention to the receptor's interpretation is quite natural and reasonable. So Nida's dynamic equivalence seems a good way to foster the interlingual communication and it is justified to say that dynamic equivalence often has priority over formal correspondence. C.W.Orr likens translation to painting: "the painter does not reproduce every detail of the landscape" — he selects what seems best to him, and for a translator, "it is the spirit, not only the letter, that he asks to embody in his own version" (Nida, 1964: 162).

To further demonstrate that dynamic equivalence translation is feasible and merits commendation, listed below are four different translations of a Chinese sentence “巧妇难为无米之炊” (see Table 2):

Table 2

Translation Strategy	English Version
A. word-for-word (WT)	clever-woman -difficult-do-without-rice-'s-cook
B. literal translation (LT)	Even the cleverest woman cannot cook a meal without rice.
C. free translation (FT)	Nobody can make something out of nothing.
D. dynamic equivalence (EQ)	One cannot make bricks without straw.

Version A violates the grammatical rules of the receptor language and does not make any sense.

Version B rearranges the words on the phrase level, thus occur some phrases in conformity with English vocabulary and grammar, like "the cleverest woman", "cook a meal" and "without rice".

Though B is in keeping with the linguistic rules of the receptor language, the two languages exhibit distinct cultural features. The Chinese idiomatic expression bears a strong local flavor, for rice is the staple food in China. Without the knowledge, receptors of other languages would find it hard to understand.

Version C further reorganizes the literal translation on sentence and paragraph levels. The aim is not to seek formal correspondence but to make explicit the real meaning. That's why the equivalent words of Chinese like "woman" (妇), "cook" (为), "meal" (炊), etc., are nowhere to be found.

Version D is the final adjustment and perfection of function and form of FT on the discourse level, and is the "closest natural equivalence", which conforms to English idiomatic expression and bears its distinct cultural features. In this way, it is easily understood and similarly responded to by the receptors.

### **5. The Defects of Dynamic Equivalence**

Nida's dynamic equivalence theory is of great practical value, as well verified by his Bible translation. However, it is not almighty and perfect. There are still some doubts which invite argument. What to be discussed are not the special occasions mentioned by Nida himself in *Toward a Science of Translating*, including linguistic restrictions, cultural restrictions and diglot publication, but in a general sense and application.

#### **5.1 The abstract nature of dynamic equivalence as a translation criterion**

The first doubt cast upon the theory is that it is too abstract to be used as a criterion to judge the quality of a translation. Nida maintains, "to measure dynamic equivalence, we can only rightly compare the equivalence of response, rather than the degree of agreement between the original source and the later receptors..." (Nida and Taber, 1969: 23). However, the measurement is intuitive, dependent upon subjective judgment, for how can we know exactly the responses of the source language receptors, particularly if the source text was written ages ago? Moreover, the receptors Nida has in mind are the specific readers of certain text and it is their responses that are required to judge the quality of a translation, but he does not request the average readers of the translation to check with the source text, since they do not know or just know a little source language, that is to say, those who judge virtually are not average readers but the critics of a translation or linguists.

#### **5.2 Contradictions in regard to the cultural elements in translation**

It is, then, argued that dynamic equivalence exhibits certain contradictions in regard to the cultural elements in translation. On the one hand, Nida favors a natural rendering which aims to "fit the receptor language and culture as a whole", in other words, it means certain adjustments should be made, including replacing the images projected by the culture of the source text with those familiar to the receptors, like the dynamic equivalence translation of "巧妇难为无米之炊", in which the original images of "meal" (炊) and "rice" (米) are replaced by "bricks" and "straw" which sound familiar to the receptors. On the other hand, Nida is in favor of "linguistic" translation other than "cultural" translation, whereas sometimes it is no easy task to distinguish between "cultural" translation and some adjustments of cultural elements to achieve similar receptor responses, as proposed by dynamic equivalence, since the latter, too, is intuitive and the line is somewhat blurred by the individual's subjectivity.

#### **5.3 The degree of "naturalness" in translation**

Moreover, in speaking of "naturalness", Nida insists that the best translation should not sound like a translation, but I think otherwise for two reasons:

Firstly, language and culture are inseparable. "Language is an integral part of culture," John Lyon says, "and that the lexical distinctions drawn by each language will tend to reflect the culturally-important features of objects, institutions and activities in the society in which the language operates" (邱懋如, 1989: 27). Peter Newmark (1988: 94) echoes Lyon's opinion by stating: "culture is the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression". As translation aims to enable one to get exposed to foreign works, while you are translating a foreign language text, you are introducing its culture as well. The change of some images bearing cultural features will undoubtedly diminish the cultural load of its language and leave unfinished the task of cultural transmission. It is undesirable, therefore, to use typical target cultural elements to replace those of the source text, but acceptable to preserve certain "foreignness".

Secondly, by naturalizing the translation, dynamic equivalence, to certain degree, has ignored the assimilating ability of peoples. In spite of the fact that differences do exist, "the similarities between men are finally much greater than the differences", and "all members of the species share primal attributes of perception and response which are manifest in speech utterances and which can therefore be grasped and translated"(邱懋如, 1989: 28). Within the receptor's assimilating ability, certain "strangeness" in translation is acceptable, particularly when some new terms are first introduced during the primary stage of cultural communication. Actually, in quite a lot of cases, rather than damaging its perfection, the absorption into Chinese of new words and new ways of expression further enriches the Chinese language, as well-proved by some words in vogue which are merely translated from English, like *sofa* (沙发, pronounced as *shafa*), *clone* (克隆, pronounced as *kelong*), etc.

In sum, to sound "natural" to the receptor is good, while to keep "foreignness" or "strangeness" to certain degree is also permissible. In this sense, as far as the preservation of the cultural elements of the source language is concerned, it is desirable that a translation read like a translation.

#### **5.4 The simplification of the source language**

What also comes under criticism is that dynamic equivalence risks simplifying the source language, even decreasing its literary value. One of the distinctive features of literary works is the frequent use of figurative language and fresh expressions, and the author's real intention is to be sought between the lines. If intelligibility or the communicative effect of the receptor language text is always given the priority and all the figurative images in the source text are left out, or all that is implicit is made explicit, then, despite its intelligibility, the receptor language text reads boring and fails the purpose of literature. Therefore, in translating secular literary works, unlike Bible translation, intelligibility should not be solely stressed. In later years Nida has increasingly realized the problem and in his work *From One Language to Another*, he no longer agrees to the priority of intelligibility but places equal weight on intelligibility, readability and acceptability.

#### **6. Modification of Dynamic Equivalence and Formal Correspondence**

Aware of the defects in his dynamic equivalence theory, Nida continues to modify and perfect his theories, including those concerning formal correspondence. He acknowledges that any element in connection with receptor language text is meaningful, including the form: "For effective impact and appeal, form cannot be separated from content, since form itself carries so much meaning..."(Nida, 1989: 5). If form is sacrificed, meaning is damaged as well, so he cautions the translator not to easily change the form and asks them to achieve as much formal correspondence as possible, which marks a shift from total neglect of form to attaching certain importance to formal elements.

Mention should also be made of his replacing "dynamic equivalence" by "functional equivalence" in *From One Language to Another*. No matter how varied the ways of expression of languages are, he holds, they have the same or similar functions, therefore, functional equivalence seems more accurate and precise (谭载喜, 1989: 34).

#### **7. Conclusion**

For all the defects and doubts, Nida's dynamic equivalence contributes a remarkable insight into translating and helps to create an atmosphere of treating different languages and cultures from an entirely new perspective in order to promote interlingual communication and understanding between peoples. Through seeking dynamic equivalence, the communication between languages and cultures, and the formidable task of translation become at all possible.

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