Unit One
Linguistic Approaches to Translation

Chapter 1  Eugene Nida
Dynamic Equivalence and Formal Equivalence

Chapter 2  Peter Newmark
Semantic and Communicative Translation

Chapter 3  Albrecht Neubert
Translation as Text
Introduction

Translation was not investigated scientifically until the 1960s in the Western history of translation as a great number of scholars and translators believed that translation was an art or a skill. When the American linguist and translation theorist E. A. Nida was working on his Toward a Science of Translating (1964), he argued that the process of translation could be described in an objective and scientific manner, “for just as linguistics may be classified as a descriptive science, so the transference of a message from one language to another is likewise a valid subject for scientific description” (1964:3). Hence Nida in his work makes full use of the new development of linguistics, semantics, information theory, communication theory and sociosemiotics in an attempt to explore the various linguistic and cultural factors involved in the process of translating. For instance, when discussing the process of translation, Nida adopts the useful elements of the transformational generative grammar put forward by the American linguist Noam Chomsky, suggesting that it is more effective to transfer the meaning from the source language to the receptor language on the kernel level, a key concept in Chomsky’s theory. Nida’s theory of dynamic equivalence, which is introduced in this unit, also approaches translation from a sociolinguistic perspective. It describes “the way translators can adapt texts to the needs of a different audience in the same way we all adjust our language to suit the people we are talking to” (Fawcett 1997:2). In the same period, the British linguist and translation theorist J. C. Catford tried to build a linguistic theory of translation by using Halliday’s case grammar in his objective analysis of translation. In his work of 1965, A Linguistic Theory of Translation, he argues that any theory of translation needs to draw upon a theory of language because translation is “an operation performed on languages: a process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another” (1965:1).

Linguistically-oriented translation theories focus their studies on “translation equivalence”. The term “equivalence” first appeared in J. R. Firth’s writing (1957) when he stated that “the so-called translation equivalents between two languages are never really equivalent” (Snell-Hornby 1988:37). In 1959, the Russian-born American linguist Roman Jakobson in his seminal paper “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation”, which approaches translation from a linguistic and semiotic angle, discusses “equivalence” in translation in great detail. In this paper, he states that “equivalence in difference is the cardinal problem of language and the pivotal
concern of linguistics”. Since then linguistically-oriented translation theorists have privileged “equivalence” in their writings. Catford claims that one of the central tasks of translation theory is “defining the nature and conditions of translation equivalence” (1965:21). In his translation model, he distinguishes two types of equivalence: formal correspondence and textual equivalence (1965:27).

Nida’s model of translation is closely related to dynamic equivalence and formal equivalence. The German translation theorist Werner Koller classifies equivalence into denotative equivalence, connotative equivalence, text-normative equivalence and pragmatic equivalence.

The study of “translation equivalence,” however, is heavily criticized in recent translation studies. For instance, Snell-Hornby thinks that “equivalence is unsuitable as a basic concept in translation theory” because it is “imprecise and ill-defined (even after a heated debate of over twenty years)” (1988:22). Nevertheless, the notion of equivalence should not be dismissed as useless and outdated in translation studies. As the British linguist and translation theorist Peter Fawcett points out, translation equivalence “continues to be used in the everyday language of translation because they represent translation reality” (2007:62). In other words, the active role of linguistics in the development of translation studies should not be denied despite the limitations of linguistic approaches. Linguistics did and will continue to offer something insightful to the study of translation, helping people understand better the translation phenomenon, which is claimed to be “the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos” (Richards 1953:250). Just as Fawcett states in the foreword of his work Translation and Language: Linguistic Theories Explained, “There are many things in translation which can only be described and explained by linguistics. Further, a translator who lacks at least a basic knowledge of linguistics is somebody who is working with an incomplete toolkit.” (1997)

In this unit, three classic texts written by linguistically-based translation theorists are selected. Chapter 1 presents Nida’s dynamic equivalence and formal equivalence. Chapter 2 focuses on the British translation theorist Peter Newmark’s semantic and communicative translation, which is a refinement of Nida’s two types of equivalence. Chapter 3 is the German translation theorist Albrecht Neubert’s discussion of translation from the perspective of text linguistics.
Chapter 1

Eugene Nida

Dynamic Equivalence and Formal Equivalence

**Guided Reading**

Eugene A. Nida (1914– ) is a distinguished American translation theorist as well as a linguist. His translation theory has exerted a great influence on translation studies in Western countries. His works on translation set off the study of modern translation as an academic field, and he is regarded as “the patriarch of translation study and a founder of the discipline” (Snell-Hornby 1988:1; Baker 1998:277).

After receiving his PhD in linguistics in 1943, Nida was employed by the American Bible Society (ABS) to check and evaluate the publications of Bibles, and later was appointed as Associate Secretary for Versions and Executive Secretary for Translation, providing practical service for missionary Bible translators, including counseling them how to translate better and, sometimes, providing them with a model of translation, etc. In order to carry on his work on more solid basis, he began touring different countries where missionary translators were working, examining various aspects of languages and cultures, and helping missionary translators with different linguistic and translation problems. In 1970, Nida was appointed Translations Research Coordinator in the United Bible Society (UBS), coordinating various activities in connection with Bible translating, such as writing translators handbooks, preparing teaching materials for translators and testing translations, etc.

Before Nida advanced his translation theory in the 1960s, there was
a tendency in translating, i.e. the emphasis on technical accuracy and literalism, which had a very negative effect on Bible translations in the 19th century. For instance, the English Revised Version of the Bible (1881, 1885) and the American Standard Version of the Bible (1901) were very literal and only popular with theological “ponies”; but never popular with the Christian community of English-speaking people, for “they simply do not communicate effectively, owing to their 16th century forms (in some cases more archaic than those of the King James Version) and the literal, awkward syntax” (Nida 1964:20). This general background explains why Nida in his theory gives priority to “dynamic equivalence” over “formal correspondence” in translation.

Nida’s theory of dynamic equivalence is his major contribution to translation studies. The concept is first mentioned in his article “Principles of Translation as Exemplified by Bible Translating” (1959) as he attempts to define translating. In his influential work Toward a Science of Translating (1964), he postulates dynamic equivalent translation as follows:

In such a translation (dynamic equivalent translation) one is not so concerned with matching the receptor-language message with the source-language message, but with the dynamic relationship, that the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message (1964:159).

However, he does not give a clear definition of dynamic equivalence until 1969. In his 1969 textbook The Theory and Practice of Translation, dynamic equivalence is defined “in terms of 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” (1969:24).

The expression “dynamic equivalence” is superseded by “functional equivalence” in his work From One Language to Another (1986, with De Waard). However, there is essentially not much difference between the two concepts. The substitution of “functional equivalence” is just to stress the concept of function and to avoid misunderstandings of the term “dynamic”, which is mistaken by some persons for something in the sense of impact (Nida 1993:124). In Language, Culture and Translating (1993), “functional
equivalence” is further divided into categories on two levels: the minimal level and the maximal level. The minimal level of “functional equivalence” is defined as “The readers of a translated text should be able to comprehend it to the point that they can conceive of how the original readers of the text must have understood and appreciated it”. The maximal level is stated as “The readers of a translated text should be able to understand and appreciate it in essentially the same manner as the original readers did” (Nida 1993:118; 1995:224). The two definitions of equivalence reveal that the minimal level is realistic, whereas the maximal level is ideal. For Nida, good translations always lie somewhere between the two levels (Nida 1995:224). It can be noted that “functional equivalence” is a flexible concept with different degrees of adequacy.

In Nida’s theory, dynamic equivalence is defined with “receptors’ response” as its nature. Unlike traditional translation theories, which focus on verbal comparison between the original text and its translation, Nida’s concept of translating shifts from “the form of the message” to “the response of the receptor”. Thus, the importance of receptors’ role in translating is emphasized. In his view, when determining whether a translation is faithful to the original text or not, the critic should not compare the formal structures between the source text and its translation, but compare “receptors’ response”. If the reader in the receptor language understands and appreciates the translated text in essentially the same manner and to the same degree as the reader in the source language did, such a translation can be evaluated as a dynamic equivalent translation. That is to say, the critic should judge a translation not by verbal correspondence between the two texts in question, but by seeing how the receptor, for whom the translated text is intended, reacts to it. Nida likens his theory of “readers’ response” to market research. When judging a product, one should test how consumers react to the product, for “regardless of how theoretically good a product might be or how seemingly well it is displayed, if people do not respond favorably to it, then it is not going to be accepted” (Nida and Taber 1969:162). Similarly, in evaluating a translation, when a high percentage of people misunderstand a rendering, or find it difficult to understand, the critic cannot regard it as a legitimate translation (Nida & Taber 1969:2). Nida’s theory emphasizes the importance of the acceptance of a translated text by the intended reader in the receptor language, and avoids the subjective evaluation of the critic.
Dynamic equivalence has been widely adopted by Bible translators since the 1950s and has been successful. For instance, the revision of The Reina-Valera Spanish Bible, the new translations of the New Testament, including The Spanish Version Popular New Testament (1966) and Good News for Modern Man (Today’s English Version) (1966), and the new Chinese version of the Bible (Today’s Chinese Version) all follow the principle of dynamic equivalence put forward by Nida.

However, there are divided opinions about the scope of its applicability into general translation practice. Some scholars hold that the value of dynamic equivalence is not merely restricted to Bible translation, and it can be used to guide general translation practice. Newmark considers the principle of “equivalent effect” an important concept in translating with reservation. He states that “‘equivalent effect’ is the desirable result, rather than the aim of any translation… it is an important concept which has a degree of application to any type of text, but not the same degree of importance… in the communicative translation of vocative texts, equivalent effect is not only desirable, it is essential” (1988:48). But some scholars express their doubts about the application of dynamic equivalence to general translation practice, especially literary translation. Gentzler questions Nida’s theory from the perspective of “reception theory” in literary criticism. He does not believe that the message of the original text could be determined and reproduced in the receptor text, nor does he believe that the reception of the translated text would be the same as that perceived by the original receptors as Nida has assumed (1993:54-60). In Gentzler’s view, Nida’s theory is only useful for translations of propaganda, advertisement or certain religious materials; but it could not provide the basis for a general translation theory (1993:60).

Although Nida’s translation theory has been questioned and challenged since the 1980s, it has attracted and will continue to attract attention with its theoretical and practical value in translation studies. The following excerpt is taken from Chapter Six of Nida’s seminal work Toward a Science of Translating (1964). In this chapter, Nida postulates two different types of equivalence: formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence, and describe their features respectively in great detail. He also tries to define what a good translation is, though he argues that it is difficult to define it without taking into consideration a myriad of factors.
Selected Readings of Contemporary Western Translation Theories

Principles of Correspondence

By Eugene Nida

Since no two languages are identical, either in the meanings given to corresponding symbols or in the ways in which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence between languages. Hence there can be no fully exact translations. The total impact of a translation may be reasonably close to the original, but there can be no identity in detail. Constance B. West (1932, p.344) clearly states the problem: “Whoever takes upon himself to translate contracts a debt; to discharge it, he must pay not with the same money, but the same sum.” One must not imagine that the process of translation can avoid a certain degree of interpretation by the translator. In fact, as D. G. Rossetti stated in 1874 (Fang, 1953), “A translation remains perhaps the most direct form of commentary.”

Different Types of Translations

No statement of the principles of correspondence in translating can be complete without recognizing the many different types of translations (Herbert P. Phillips, 1959). Traditionally, we have tended to think in terms of free or paraphrastic translations as contrasted with close or literal ones. Actually, there are many more grades of translating than these extremes imply. There are, for example, such ultraliteral translations as interlinears; while others involve highly concordant relationships, e.g. the same source-language word is always translated by one—and only one—receptor-language word. Still others may be quite devoid of artificial restrictions in form, but nevertheless may be overtraditional and even archaizing. Some translations aim at very close formal and semantic correspondence, but are generously supplied with notes and commentary. Many are not so much concerned with giving information as with creating in the reader something of the same mood as was conveyed by the original.

Differences in translations can generally be accounted for by three basic factors in translating: (1) the nature of the message, (2) the purpose or purposes of the author and, by proxy, of the translator, and (3) the type of audience.
Messages differ primarily in the degree to which content or form is the dominant consideration. Of course, the content of a message can never be completely abstracted from the form, and form is nothing apart from content; but in some messages the content is of primary consideration, and in others the form must be given a higher priority. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, despite certain important stylistic qualities, the importance of the message far exceeds considerations of form. On the other hand, some of the acrostic poems of the Old Testament are obviously designed to fit a very strict formal “strait jacket.” But even the contents of a message may differ widely in applicability to the receptor-language audience. For example, the folk tale of the Bauré Indians of Bolivia, about a giant who led the animals in a symbolic dance, is interesting to an English-speaking audience, but to them it has not the same relevance as the Sermon on the Mount. And even the Bauré Indians themselves recognize the Sermon on the Mount as more significant than their favorite “how-it-happened” story. At the same time, of course, the Sermon on the Mount has greater relevance to these Indians than have some passages in Leviticus.

In poetry there is obviously a greater focus of attention upon formal elements than one normally finds in prose. Not that content is necessarily sacrificed in translation of a poem, but the content is necessarily constricted into certain formal molds. Only rarely can one reproduce both content and form in a translation, and hence in general the form is usually sacrificed for the sake of the content. On the other hand, a lyric poem translated as prose is not an adequate equivalent of the original. Though it may reproduce the conceptual content, it falls far short of reproducing the emotional intensity and flavor. However, the translating of some types of poetry by prose may be dictated by important cultural considerations. For example, Homer’s epic poetry reproduced in English poetic form usually seems to us antique and queer—with nothing of the liveliness and spontaneity characteristic of Homer’s style. One reason is that we are not accustomed to having stories told to us in poetic form. In our Western European tradition such epics are related in prose. For this reason E.V.Rieu chose prose rather than poetry as the more appropriate medium by which to render The Iliad and The Odyssey.

The particular purposes of the translator are also important factors in dictating the type of translation. Of course, it is assumed that the
translator has purposes generally similar to, or at least compatible with, those of the original author, but this is not necessarily so. For example, a San Blas story-teller is interested only in amusing his audience, but an ethnographer who sets about translating such stories may be much more concerned in giving his audience an insight into San Blas personality structure. Since, however, the purposes of the translator are the primary ones to be considered in studying the types of translation which result, the principal purposes that underlie the choice of one or another way to render a particular message are important.

The primary purpose of the translator may be information as to both content and form. One intended type of response to such an informative type of translation is largely cognitive, e.g. an ethnographer’s translation of texts from informants, or a philosopher’s translation of Heidegger. A largely informative translation may, on the other hand, be designed to elicit an emotional response of pleasure from the reader or listener.

A translator’s purposes may involve much more than information. He may, for example, want to suggest a particular type of behaviour by means of a translation. Under such circumstances he is likely to aim at full intelligibility, and to make certain minor adjustments in detail so that the reader may understand the full implications of the message for his own circumstances. In such a situation a translator is not content to have receptors say, “This is intelligible to us.” Rather, he is looking for some such response as, “This is meaningful for us.” In terms of Bible translating, the people might understand a phrase such as “to change one’s mind about sin” as meaning “repentance.” But if the indigenous way of talking about repentance is “spit on the ground in front of,” as in Shilluk,1 spoken in the Sudan, the translator will obviously aim at the more meaningful idiom. On a similar basis, “white as snow” may be rendered as “white as egret feathers,” if the people of the receptor language are not acquainted with snow but speak of anything very white by this phrase.

A still greater adaptation is likely to occur in a translation which has an imperative purpose. Here the translator feels constrained not merely to suggest a possible line of behavior, but to make such an action explicit and

---

1. This idiom is based upon the requirement that plaintiffs and defendants spit on the ground in front of each other when a case has been finally tried and punishment meted out. The spitting indicates that all is forgiven and that the accusations can never be brought into court again.
compelling. He is not content to translate in such a way that the people are likely to understand; rather, he insists that the translation must be so clear that no one can possibly misunderstand.

In addition to the different types of messages and the diverse purposes of translators, one must also consider the extent to which prospective audiences differ both in decoding ability and in potential interest.

Decoding ability in any language involves at least four principal levels: (1) the capacity of children, whose vocabulary and cultural experience are limited; (2) the double-standard capacity of new literates, who can decode oral messages with facility but whose ability to decode written messages is limited; (3) the capacity of the average literate adult, who can handle both oral and written messages with relative ease; and (4) the unusually high capacity of specialists (doctors, theologians, philosophers, scientists, etc.), when they are decoding messages within their own area of specialization. Obviously a translation designed for children cannot be the same as one prepared for specialists, nor can a translation for children be the same as one for a newly literate adult.

Prospective audiences differ not only in decoding ability, but perhaps even more in their interests. For example, a translation designed to stimulate reading for pleasure will be quite different from one intended for a person anxious to learn how to assemble a complicated machine. Moreover, a translator of African myths for persons who simply want to satisfy their curiosity about strange peoples and places will produce a different piece of work from one who renders these same myths in a form acceptable to linguists, who are more interested in the linguistic structure underlying the translation than in cultural novelty.

Two Basic Orientations in Translating

Since “there are, properly speaking, no such things as identical equivalents” (Belloc, 1931 and 1931a, p. 37), one must in translating seek to find the closest possible equivalent. However, there are fundamentally two different types of equivalence: one which may be called formal and another which is primarily dynamic.

Formal equivalence focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content. In such a translation one is concerned with such correspondences as poetry to poetry, sentence to sentence, and concept to
concept. Viewed from this formal orientation, one is concerned that the message in the receptor language should match as closely as possible the different elements in the source language. This means, for example, that the message in the receptor culture is constantly compared with the message in the source culture to determine standards of accuracy and correctness.

The type of translation which most completely typifies this structural equivalence might be called a “gloss translation,” in which the translator attempts to reproduce as literally and meaningfully as possible the form and content of the original. Such a translation might be a rendering of some Medieval French text into English, intended for students of certain aspects of early French literature not requiring a knowledge of the original language of the text. Their needs call for a relatively close approximation to the structure of the early French text, both as to form (e.g. syntax and idioms) and content (e.g. themes and concepts). Such a translation would require numerous footnotes in order to make the text fully comprehensible.

A gloss translation of this type is designed to permit the reader to identify himself as fully as possible with a person in the source-language context, and to understand as much as he can of the customs, manner of thought, and means of expression. For example, a phrase such as “holy kiss” (Romans 16:16) in a gloss translation would be rendered literally, and would probably be supplemented with a footnote explaining that this was a customary method of greeting in New Testament times.

In contrast, a translation which attempts to produce a dynamic rather than a formal equivalence is based upon “the principle of equivalent effect” (Rieu and Phillips, 1954). In such a translation one is not so concerned with matching the receptor-language message with the source language message, but with the dynamic relationship (mentioned in Chapter 7), that the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message.

A translation of dynamic equivalence aims at complete naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of his own culture; it does not insist that he understand the cultural patterns of the source-language context in order to comprehend the message. Of course, there are varying degrees of such dynamic-equivalence translations. One of the modern English translations which, perhaps more than any other, seeks for equivalent effect is J. B. Phillips’ rendering of the New Testament. In Romans 16:16 he quite
naturally translates “greet one another with a holy kiss” as “give one another a hearty handshake all around.”

Between the two poles of translating (i.e. between strict formal equivalence and complete dynamic equivalence) there are a number of intervening grades, representing various acceptable standards of literary translating. During the past fifty years, however, there has been a marked shift of emphasis from the formal to the dynamic dimension. A recent summary of opinion on translating by literary artists; publishers, educators, and professional translators indicates clearly that the present direction is toward increasing emphasis on dynamic equivalences (Cary, 1959b).

**Linguistic and Cultural Distance**

In any discussion of equivalences, whether structural or dynamic, one must always bear in mind three different types of relatedness, as determined by the linguistic and cultural distance between the codes used to convey the messages. In some instances, for example, a translation may involve comparatively closely related languages and cultures, e.g. translations from Frisian into English, or from Hebrew into Arabic. On the other hand, the languages may not be related, even though the cultures are closely parallel, e.g. as in translations from German into Hungarian, or from Swedish into Finnish (German and Swedish are Indo-European languages, while Hungarian and Finnish belong to the Finno-Ugrian family). In still other instances a translation may involve not only differences of linguistic affiliation but also highly diverse cultures, e.g. English into Zulu, or Greek into Javanese.

Where the linguistic and cultural distances between source and receptor codes are least, one should expect to encounter the least number of serious problems, but as a matter of fact if languages are too closely related one is likely to be badly deceived by the superficial similarities, with the result that translations done under these circumstances are often quite poor. One of the serious dangers consists of so-called “false friends,” i.e. borrowed

---

1. We also encounter certain rare situations in which the languages are related but the cultures are quite disparate. For example, in the case of Hindi and English one is dealing with two languages from the same language family, but the cultures in question are very different. In such instances, the languages are also likely to be so distantly related as to make their linguistic affiliation a matter of minor consequence.