Natural and directional equivalence in theories of translation

Anthony Pym
Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona, Spain*

Equivalence was a key word in the linguistics-based translation theories of the 1960s and 1970s, although its basic mode of thought may be traced back to Cicero and later to the Renaissance theories that began to presuppose languages of equal status. Close inspection reveals that some theories assume pre-existing equivalents and are thus concerned with a search for “natural” equivalence. Other theories allow that translators actively create equivalents, and are thus concerned with “directional” equivalence. The first kind of equivalence is concerned with what languages ideally do prior to translation; the other deals with what they can do. These two approaches are often intertwined, giving rise to many misunderstandings and unfair criticisms of the underlying concept. The historical undoing of the equivalence paradigm came when the directional use of the term allowed that equivalence need be no more a belief or expectation at the moment of reception, which need not be substantiated on the level of linguistic forms. At the same time, source texts became less stable and languages have been returning to more visibly hierarchical relations, further undermining the concept. Contemporary localization projects may nevertheless fruitfully be interrogated from the perspective of natural and directional equivalence, since the presumptions are being used by contemporary technology precisely at the moment when the terms themselves have been dropped from critical and exploratory metalanguage.

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Parable

At one stage in the criminal trial of O.J. Simpson, a photo was shown of backyard at night, with the killer’s footsteps visible in the moonlit dew. A Charlie-Chan detective then scrutinized the photograph. Over there, more dimly in the dew, he saw another set of footsteps. Two paths, not one. So which footsteps were the killer’s? And for that matter, who took the photo, and how did they get there?
1. Introduction to a historical location

The term “equivalence”, in various European languages, became a feature of Western translation theories in the second half of the twentieth century. Its heyday was in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly within the frame of structuralist linguistics. The term roughly assumes that a source text and a translation can share the same value (equi-valence) on some level, and that this assumed sameness is what distinguishes translations from all other kinds of texts. Within that paradigm, to talk about translations was to talk about different kinds of equivalence. That might still be the case. Equivalence, however, has since been surpassed by a range of alternative paradigms. It became no more than a special-case scenario for German-language Skopostheorie; it was a banal constant for Toury’s Descriptive Translation Studies; it has long remained at loggerheads with indeterminism, and its implicit essentialism has become an easy pop-shot for deconstructionist approaches. As a result, the equivalence paradigm has come to be regarded as naïve or limited in scope. Mary Snell-Hornby, for example, jettisoned equivalence as presenting “an illusion of symmetry between languages which hardly exists beyond the level of vague approximations and which distorts the basic problems of translation” (1988: 22).

Here we take the unpopular view that the equivalence paradigm was and remains far richer than the facile dismissals would suggest. Its metalanguage merits a serious place alongside and indeed within the more recent alternative paradigms. We shall attempt to show that the theorizing of equivalence has in fact involved two competing conceptualizations: “natural” as opposed to “directional” equivalence. Two paths, not one. The intertwining duality of these notions allows for considerable subtlety in some past and present theories, as well as pervasive confusion not only in many of the theories themselves but also in the many arguments against equivalence.

At the same time, we readily recognize that equivalence denominates a profoundly historical paradigm. Notions of “equal value” presuppose that different languages do or can express the same values. Such equal potential might have been possible between classical Greek and Latin, allowing Cicero, resting on Horace, to conceptualize the one text as being translated in two different ways (ut interpres vs. ut orator), which necessarily assumes that there is some value that remains constant. That was a fundamental conceptualization of equivalence, albeit without the term. Nevertheless, that particular belief in equal value across languages was rarely fronted in European theorizing prior to the Renaissance. The medieval hierarchy of languages usually meant that translation was conceptualized as a way of enriching the target language with the values of a superior source language (most translations went downwards in the hierarchy, from Hebrew or Greek to Latin, or
from Latin to the vernaculars). For as long as the value hierarchy existed, claims to equivalence (without the term) played little role in thought on translation. For roughly parallel historical reasons, the conceptual geometry of equivalence was difficult to maintain prior to the age of the printing press, since printing reinforced notions of a fixed source text to which a translation could be equivalent. Before that fixing, textuality tended to involve constant incremental changes in the process of copying, such that translation was often just further extension of that process. Printing and the rise of the vernaculars facilitated the conceptualization of equivalence, albeit still without the term (its place was often marked by talk of “fidelity” to meaning, intention or function). In accordance with this same logic, the relative demise of equivalence as a concept would correspond to the electronic technologies by which contemporary texts are constantly evolving, primarily through text re-use (think of websites, software, and product documentation). Without a fixed textuality, to what should a translation be equivalent? We retain the answer for the end of our story.

2. Equivalence as a concept

Most discussions of equivalence concern typical misunderstandings. For instance, Friday the 13th is an unlucky day in English-language cultures, but not in most other cultures. In Spanish, the unlucky day is Tuesday the 13th. So when we translate the name of that day, we have to know exactly what kind of information is required. If we are just referring to the calendar, then Friday will do; if we are talking about bad luck, then a better translation would probably be Tuesday 13th (actually martes y 13). The world is full of such examples. The color of death is mostly black in the West, mostly white in the East. A nodding head means agreement in western European, disagreement in Turkey. That is all boring textbook stuff, but an understanding of these differences is an essential part of translating.

The concept of equivalence underlies all these cases. Equivalence, we have seen, says that the translation will have the same value as (some aspect of) the source text. Sometimes the value is on the level of form (two words translated by two words); sometimes it is reference (Friday is always the day before Saturday); sometimes it is function (the function “bad luck on 13” corresponds to Friday in English, to Tuesday in Spanish). That is why Cicero’s two alternative ways of translating can be considered a basic conceptualization of equivalence. Equivalence does not say exactly which kind of value is supposed to be the same in each case; it just says that equal value can be achieved on one level or another.

Equivalence is a very simple idea. Unfortunately it becomes quite complex in its applications. Consider the television game-shows that are popular all over the
world. English audiences usually know a show called *The price is right*. In French this becomes *Le juste prix*, and in Spanish, *El precio justo*. Equivalence here is not on the level of form (four words become three, and the rhyme has been lost), but it might be operative on the level of reference or function. In German this show became *Der Preis ist heiss*, which changes the semantics (it back-translates as “The price is hot”, as when children play the game of rising temperatures when one comes closer to an object). But the German version retains the rhyme, which might be what counts more than anything else. It could be getting very warm in its approach to equivalence.

If you start picking up examples like this and you try to say what stays the same and what has changed, you soon find that one can be equivalent to many different things. For example, in the game-show *Who wants to be a millionaire?* (which seems to retain the structure of that name, more or less, in many language-versions), the contestants have a series of *lifelines* in English, *jokers* in French and German, and a *comodín* (wild-card) in Spanish. Those are all very different images or metaphors, but they do have something in common. Describing that commonness can be a difficult operation. More intriguing is the fact that the reference to “millionaire” is retained even though different local currencies make the amount quite different. Given that the show format came from Britain, we should perhaps translate the pounds into euros or dollars. This might give *Who wants to win $1,867,500?* The title has more money but is decidedly less catchy. One suspects that equivalence was never really a question of exact values.

3. **Equivalence vs. langue**

In the second half of the twentieth century, translation theorists mostly dealt with this kind of problem against the background of structuralist linguistics. A strong line of thought leading from Wilhelm von Humboldt to Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf argued that different languages expressed different views of the world. This connected with the vision of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who in the early years of the twentieth century explained how languages form systems that are meaningful only in terms of the differences between the terms. The word *sheep*, for example, has a value in English because it does not designate a cow (or any other animal for which there are names in English) and it does not refer to *mutton*, which is the meat, not the animal (the difference between names for animals and names for their meat is fairly systemic in English) (Saussure 1916: 115). In French, on the other hand, the word *mouton* designates both the animal and the meat, both *sheep* and *mutton*.

Such relations between terms were seen as different “structures”. Languages were considered to be sets of such structures (and hence different “systems”).
Structuralism said we should study those relations rather than try to analyze the things themselves. Do not look at actual sheep, do not ask what we want to do with those sheep, do not ask about the universal ethics of eating sheep meat. Just look at the relations, the structures, which are what make language meaningful. One should therefore conclude, according to structuralist linguistics, that the words *sheep* and *mouton* have very different values. They thus cannot translate each other with any degree of certainty. In fact, since different languages cut the world up in very different ways, no words should be completely translatable out of their language system. Translation should simply not be possible.

That kind of linguistics is of little help to anyone trying to translate television game-shows. It is not of any greater help to anyone trying to understand how the translations are actually carried out. Something must be wrong in the linguistics. As the French translation theorist Georges Mounin argued in the early 1960s,

> If the current theses on lexical, morphological, and syntactic structures are accepted, one must conclude that translation is impossible. And yet translators exist, they produce, and their products are found to be useful. (1963: 5)

Either translation did not really exist, or the dominant linguistic theories were inadequate. That is the point at which the main theories of equivalence developed. They tried to explain something that the linguistics of the day could not explain or somehow did not want to explain.

Think for a moment about the kinds of arguments that could be used here. What should we say, for example, to someone who claims that the whole system of Spanish culture (not just its language) gives meaning to *martes y 13* in a way that no English system could ever reproduce? “Martes y 13” is the stage name, for example, of a popular pair of television comedians. Or what do we say to Poles who once argued that, since the milk they bought had to be boiled before it could be drunk, their name for milk could never be translated by the normal English term *milk*? In fact, if the structuralist approach is pushed, we can never be sure of understanding anything beyond our own linguistic and cultural systems, let alone translating the little that we do understand. Even more dubiously, structuralist theories suggested that people within the one linguistic or cultural system did indeed understand all the relations at work around them.

Theories of equivalence then got to work. Here are some of the arguments that were used to address this cluster of problems:

- Within linguistic approaches, close attention was paid to what is meant by “meaning”. Saussure had actually distinguished between a word’s “value” (which it has in relation to the language system) and its “signification” (which it has in actual use). To cite a famous example from chess, the value of the
knight is the sum of all the moves it is allowed to make, whereas the signification of an actual knight depends on the position it occupies at any stage of a particular game. “Value” would thus depend on the language system (which Saussure called \textit{langue}), while “signification” depends on the actual use of language (which Saussure termed \textit{parole}). For theorists like Coseriu, those terms could be mapped onto the German distinction between \textit{Sinn} (stable meaning) and \textit{Bedeutung} (momentary signification). If translation could not reproduce the former, it might still convey the latter. French, for example, has no word for \textit{shallow} (as in “shallow water”), but the signification can be conveyed by the two words \textit{peu profond} (“not very deep”) (cf. Coseriu 1978). The language structures could be different, but equivalence was still possible.

- Some translation theorists then took a closer look at the level of language use (\textit{parole}) rather than at the language system (\textit{langue}). Saussure had actually claimed that there could be no systematic scientific study of \textit{parole}, but theorists like the Swiss Werner Koller (1979) were quite prepared to disregard the warning. If something like equivalence could be demonstrated and analyzed, then there were systems beyond that of \textit{langue}.

- Others stressed that translation operates not on isolated words but on texts, and texts have many linguistic layers. The linguist John Catford (1965) pointed out that equivalence need not be on all these layers at once, but could be “rank-bound”. We might thus strive for equivalence to the phonetics of a text, to the lexis, to the phrase, to the sentence, to the semantic function, and so on. Catford saw that most translating operates on one or several of these levels, so that “in the course of a text, equivalence may shift up and down the rank scale” (1965: 76). This was a comprehensive and dynamic theory of equivalence.

- A related approach, more within lexical semantics, was to list all the functions and values associated with a source-text item, and then see how many of them are found in the target-side equivalent. This kind of componential analysis might analyze \textit{mouton} as “+ animal + meat − young meat (agneau)”, \textit{mutton} as “+ meat − young meat (lamb)”, and \textit{sheep} as “+ animal”, and then we would make our translation selections in accordance with the components active in the particular source text. In the same way, \textit{lifeline} could be turned into something like “amusing metaphor + way of solving a problem with luck rather than intelligence + no guarantee of success + need for human external support + nautical”. We would then find that the translations \textit{joker} and \textit{wild-card} reproduce at least three of the five components, and would thus be equivalent to no more than that level. There could be no guarantee, however, that different people would all recognize exactly the same components.
All of those ideas were problematic in their own ways. All of them, however, named or implied a relation of equivalence, and they did so in a way that defended the existence of translation in the face of structuralist linguistics. Their confrontational virtue is not to be belittled.

4. Directional vs. natural equivalence

That collection of ideas formed the basis of what might be called the equivalence paradigm. From the late 1950s, most definitions of translation have consequently referred to equivalence in one form or another, especially within the field of applied linguistics. Here are a few of the earlier definitions (italics ours):

Interlingual translation can be defined as the replacement of elements of one language, the domain of translation, by equivalent elements of another language, the range [of translation]. (Oettinger 1960: 110)

Translation may be defined as follows: the replacement of textual material in one language (Source Language, SL) by equivalent material in another language (Target Language, TL). (Catford 1965: 20)

Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message. (Nida and Taber 1969: 12; cf. Nida 1959: 33)

[Translation] leads from a source-language text to a target-language text which is as close an equivalent as possible and presupposes an understanding of the content and style of the original. (Wilss 1982: 62)

Many similar definitions can be found in the literature (cf. Koller 1979: 109–111, 186; 1992: 89–92; discussed in Pym 1992, 2004: 57–59). These definitions would all seem to cover the sort of thing that happens to the names of game-shows. You go from one language to the other, and the result is a translation if and when a relationship of equivalence is established on some level.

Look closely at the definitions. In each case, the term “equivalent” describes one side only, the target side. The processes (“replace”, “reproduce”, “lead”) are profoundly directional: translation goes from one side to the other, but not back again. If we ask what the target-side equivalent is actually equivalent to, we find an interesting array of answers: “elements of a language”, “textual material”, “the message”, “source-language text”. The theories in this paradigm would seem to agree on some things (target-side equivalents, directionality) but not on others (the nature of the thing to translate).
In any theory, look for the definition of translation and try to see what it is assuming, then what it is omitting. What you find usually indicates the strengths and weaknesses of the whole theory. In this case, the strength of the definitions is that they have the one term ("equivalent") that distinguishes translation from all the other things that can be done in interlingual communication (rewriting, commentary, summary, parody, etc.). The weakness is that they mostly do not explain why this relation should just be one-way. Further, they are often in doubt as to whether the equivalent is equal to a position or value within a language, a message, a text with content and style, or to all those things but at different times.

We will describe those definitions as proposing a notion of "directional" equivalence, at least to the extent that they forget to tell us about equivalence as an affair of equal relations, or movements that could go either way. This might seem like splitting hairs, but its importance will soon be clear.

Opposed to this one-way directionality, we also find notions of equivalence that emphasize two-way movements. On this view, a relation of equivalence can be tested by a simple test of back-translation. We can go from Friday to viernes and then back to Friday, and it makes no difference which term is the source and which the translation. We might term this two-way kind of equivalence "natural", at least in the sense that the correspondence existed in some way prior to the act of translation (this is how Nida and Taber used the term "natural" in the definition given above). On the level of bad luck, we could go from Friday 13th to martes y 13, and back again. The test might work for Le juste prix, and even for Der Preis ist heiss, if we define carefully the levels we are operating on. But why does the French apparently not have "Le prix juste"? And what about the “lifelines” that become “jokers” and “wild-cards”? Can they also be justified as being in any way natural? For that matter, what should we say about the “Friday the 13th” that is recognized in Taiwan (we are told) not because it was always in the culture but because it traveled there in the title of a horror film? Some kinds of equivalence refer to what is done in a language prior to the intervention of the translator (hence the illusion of the natural); others refer to what translators can do in the language (hence the directionality of the result).

"Directional" and "natural" are terms that we are using here to describe the different concepts used by theories of translation; they are not words used by the theories themselves. They nevertheless help make some sense of a rather confusing terrain. Most of the questions coming from structuralist linguistics concerned strictly natural equivalence, or the vain search for them. When we mentioned Sau-ssure's sheep and mouton example, we talked about them “translating each other”. The same would hold for Polish milk and universal bad-luck days. For that linguistic paradigm, it should make no difference which of the terms is the source and which is the target. For the above definitions of translation, on the other hand,
equivalence was something that resulted from a directional movement. They were adopting quite a different approach to the concept.

The reference to directionality was perhaps the most profound way in which the problem of structuralist linguistics was solved. To understand this, however, we must first grasp the directions in which the naturalistic theories were heading.

5. **Strategies for maintaining natural equivalence**

One of the most entertaining texts in translation theory is the introduction to Vinay and Darbelnet’s *Stylistique comparée du français et de l’anglais*, first published in 1958. The two French linguists are driving from New York to Montréal, noting down the street signs along the way:

We soon reach the Canadian border, where the language of our forefathers is music to our ears. The Canadian highway is built on the same principles as the American one, except that its signs are bilingual. After SLOW, written on the road-surface in enormous letters, comes LENTEMENT, which takes up the entire width of the highway. What an unwieldy adverb! A pity French never made an adverb just using the adjective LENT…. But come to think of it, is LENTEMENT really the equivalent of SLOW? We begin to have doubts, as one always does when shifting from one language to another, when our SLIPPERY WHEN WET reappears around a bend, followed by the French GLISSANT SI HUMIDE. Whoa!, as the Lone Ranger would say, let’s pause a while on this SOFT SHOULDER, thankfully caressed by no translation, and meditate on this SI, this “if”, more slippery itself than an acre of ice. No monolingual speaker of French would ever have come straight out with the phrase, nor would they have sprayed paint all over the road for the sake of a long adverb ending in -MENT. Here we reach a key point, a sort of turning lock between two languages. But of course — parbleu! — instead of LENTEMENT [adverb, as in English] it should have been RALENTIR [verb in the infinitive, as in France]! (1958: 19; our translation)

What kind of equivalence is being sought here? The kind the linguists actually find, exemplified by the long French adverb *lentement*, is fair enough in directional terms, since it says virtually the same thing as the English adverb *slow*. It changes the length, but there is apparently room on the road. What worries the linguists is that the sign *Lentement* is not what one would find on roads in France. For them, the equivalent should be the verb *Ralentir*, since that is what would have been used if no one had been translating from English (and as if Canada were itself within France). This second kind of equivalence is thus non-directional, in fact non-translational. It is what different languages and cultures seem to produce from within their own systems. This is certainly natural equivalence: *Slow* should give *Ralentir*, which should give *Slow*, and so on.
Natural equivalents do exist, but rarely in a state of untouched nature. They are most frequently the stuff of terminology, of artificially standardized words that are made to correspond to each other exactly. All specialized fields of knowledge have their terminology. They are unnaturally creating “natural” equivalents all the time. In Vinay and Darbelnet, however, the artificially imposed glossaries are to be avoided where possible. On the contrary, they are seeking equivalents characterized as “natural” precisely because they have supposedly developed without interference from meddling linguists, translators, or other languages. In terms of this naturalism, the best translations are found when you are not translating. We use this mode of thought whenever we consult parallel texts.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, equivalence was often thought about in this way. The problem was not primarily to show what the “thing” was or what one wanted to do with it (Vinay and Darbelnet might have asked what words were best at actually making Canadian drivers slow down). The problem was to describe ways in which equivalence could be attained in all the situations where there were no obvious natural equivalents.

Vinay and Darbelnet worked from examples to define seven general strategies that could be used in this kind of translation. Not all the strategies would count as good ways to produce natural equivalence. For example, they condoned the use of loans and calques (necessarily directional) when there was no natural equivalent available. They allowed for “literal translation” (here meaning fairly straightforward word-for-word), all the time stressing that its directionality may give unnatural results. The strategies of key interest to Vinay and Darbelnet were transposition (where there is a switching of grammatical categories) and modulation (where adjustments are made for different discursive conventions), since these were the main ways in which linguistic changes could be made in order to keep semantic sameness. The remaining two strategies concerned cultural adjustments: correspondence (actually called équivalence in the French version) would use all the corresponding proverbs and referents (like “Friday the 13th”), and adaptation would then refer to different things with loosely equivalent cultural functions: cycling is to the French what cricket is to the British, or baseball to the Americans (or gardening is to the British what having lovers is to the Italians, we are told). In all, Vinay and Darbelnet’s strategies range from the highly directional at one end to the highly naturalistic at the other. They were thus able to recognize some kind of continuity across both kinds of equivalence.

There are quite a few theories that list strategies like this. Vinay and Darbelnet’s work was inspired by Malblanc (1944), who compared French and German. They in turn became the basis for Vázquez-Ayora (1977), who worked on Spanish and English. Different kinds of equivalence-maintaining strategies have been described in a Russian tradition including Fedorov (1953), Shveitser (1987) and
Retsker (1974), and by the American Malone (1988), all usefully summarized in Fawcett (1997). Some of these theorists are more accessible than others, but none seems to have substantially extended the approach we find in Vinay and Darbelnet. The only strategy we would really want to add to the above table is compensation, where an equivalent that cannot be found in one place or on one level in the translation is made up for elsewhere. A source-text dialect, for example, might be replaced by a few adjectives describing the speaker concerned, or functional use of the intimate and formal second persons (a distinction that has been lost in English) might be compensated for by the selection of intimate or formal lexical items (more examples can be found in Fawcett 1977).

The lists of strategies all make perfect sense when they are presented alongside their carefully selected examples. However, when you get a translation and you try to say exactly which strategy has been used where, you usually find that several strategies explain the same equivalence, and some equivalence relations do not fit comfortably into any. Vinay and Darbelnet recognize this problem:

The translation (on a door) of PRIVATE as DÉFENSE D’ENTRER [Prohibition to Enter] is at once a transposition, a modulation and a correspondence. It is a transposition because the adjective private is rendered by a noun phrase; it is a modulation because the statement becomes a warning (cf. Wet Paint: Prenez garde à la peinture), and it is a correspondence because the translation has been produced by going back to the situation without bothering about the structure of the English-language phrase. (1958: 54)

If three categories explain the one phenomenon, do we really need all the categories? Or are there potentially as many categories as there are equivalents?

The theories are rather vague about how natural equivalence works. They mostly assume there is a piece of reality or thought (a referent, a function, a message) that stands outside all languages and to which two languages can refer. The thing would thus be a third element of comparison, a tertium comparationis, available to both sides. The translator thus goes from the source text to this thing, then from the thing to the corresponding target text. Non-natural translations will result when one goes straight from the source text to the target text, as in the case of Slow rendered as Lentement.

Perhaps the best-known account of this process is the one formulated by the Parisian theorist Danica Seleskovich. For her, a translation can only be natural if the translator succeeds in forgetting entirely about the form of the source text. She recommends “listening to the sense”, or “deverbalizing” the source text so that you are only aware of the sense, which can be expressed in all languages. This is the basis of what is known as the theory of sense (théorie du sens). From our historical perspective, it is a process model of natural equivalence.
The great difficulty of this theory is that if a “sense” can be deverbalized, how can we ever know what it is? As soon as we indicate it to someone, we have given it a form of one kind or another. And there are no forms (not even the little pictures or diagrams sometimes used) that can be considered truly universal. So there is no real way of proving that such as thing as deverbalized sense exists. “Listening to the sense” does no doubt describe a mental state that simultaneous interpreters attain, but what they are hearing cannot be a sense without form. This theory remains a loose metaphor with serious pedagogical virtues.

One of the paradoxes here is that process models like Seleskovitch’s encourage translators not to look at linguistic forms in great detail, whereas the comparative methods espoused by Vinay and Darbelnet and the like were based on close attention to linguistic forms in two languages. The process theories were breaking with linguistics, tending to draw more on psychology (Seleskovitch turned to the French psychologist Piaget). The comparative method, however, was entirely within linguistics. It would go on to compare not just isolated phrases and collocations, but also pragmatic discourse conventions and modes of text organization. Applied linguists like Hatim and Mason (1990 and 1997) simply extend the level of comparison, generally remaining within the paradigm of natural equivalence.

For the most idealistic natural equivalence, the ultimate aim is to find the pre-translational equivalent that reproduces all aspects of the thing to be expressed. Naturalistic approaches spend little time on defining translation; there is not much analysis of different types of translation, or of translators having different aims. Those things have somehow been decided by equivalence itself. Translation is simply translation. That is not always so, however, for directional equivalence.

6. Strategies for attaining directional equivalence

Questions about directional equivalence tend to concern what remains the same and what is different after the transition from source to target. Most theories that work within this sub-paradigm list not strategies, but different kinds of equivalence. They also talk about different kinds of translating, which amounts to much the same thing, since you translate quite differently depending on the level at which you want equivalence to work.

Many of the theories here are based on just two types of equivalence, usually presented as a straight dichotomy (you can translate one way or the other). Perhaps the best known theorist of this kind is the American linguist Eugene Nida, who argued that the Bible can be translated to achieve “formal equivalence” (following the words and textual patterns closely) or “dynamic equivalence” (trying
to recreate the function the words might have had in their original situation). For example, the “lamb of God” that we know in English-language Christianity might become the “seal of God” for an Inuit culture that knows a lot about seals but does not have many lambs. That would be an extreme case of “dynamic equivalence”. On the other hand, the name “Bethlehem” means “House of Bread” in Hebrew, so it might be translated that way if we wanted to achieve dynamic equivalence on that level. In that case, our translators traditionally opt for formal equivalence, even when they use dynamic equivalence elsewhere in the same text. (Of course, things are never quite that easy: the Arabic for Bethlehem, Beit Lahm, means “House of Meat” — so to whose name are we to be equivalent?)

As we have seen, Nida’s definitions of translation claim to be seeking a “natural” equivalent. At one stage he toyed with Chomsky’s idea of “kernel phrases” as the tertium comparationis. Nida, however, was mostly talking about translating the Bible into the languages of cultures that are not traditionally Christian. What “natural” equivalent should one find for the name of Jesus or God in a language where they have never been mentioned? Whatever solution you find, it will probably concern a directional notion of equivalence, not a natural one. In this case, an ideology of naturalness has been used to mask over the fact that the purpose of translation is to change cultures.

A similar kind of dichotomy is found in the English translation critic Peter Newmark (1981, 1988), who distinguishes between “semantic” and “communicative” translation. The semantic kind of translation would look back to the formal values of the source text and retain them as much as possible; the communicative kind would look forward to the needs of the new addressee, and adapting to those needs as much as necessary. Theories of directional equivalence mostly allow that translators have to choose whether to render one aspect or another of the source text. There is thus no necessary assumption of a “natural” equivalent.

For the Swiss theorist Werner Koller, whose German textbook on Translation Studies went through four editions and many reprints between 1979 and 1992, equivalents are what translators produce (cf. Pym 1997). In fact, equivalents do not exist prior to the act of translation (cf. Stecconi 1994). Koller also shows that there is no necessary restriction to just two kinds of equivalence. An equivalent can be found for as many parts or levels of a source text as are considered pertinent. Koller actually proposes five frames for equivalence relations: denotative (based on extra-linguistic factors), connotative (based on way the source text is expressed), text-normative (respecting or changing textual and linguistic norms), pragmatic (with respect to the receiver of the target text) and formal (the formal-aesthetic qualities of the source text). These categories suggest that the translator selects the type of equivalence most appropriate to the dominant function of the source text. The German theorist Katharina Reiß (1971, 1976) was saying fairly similar things
in the same years. She recognizes three basic text types and argues that each type requires that equivalence be sought on a different level.

There are important differences between the terms used in this set of theories. Nida’s two types of equivalence can potentially apply to any text whatsoever. The same text could, for him, be translated in different ways for different audiences. Koller and Reiß, on the other hand, generally see the translator’s strategies as being determined by the nature of the source text. The different usages of “equivalence” are thus describing different things. Further, there would seem to be no strong reason why there should be five ways to cut the cake (as in Koller), three (as in Reiß) or just two (as in Nida). There might be even more categories than those normally considered in the theories, and many solutions that fall between the types.

Consider the problems of translating someone’s résumé or curriculum vitae. Do you adapt the normal form of résumés in the target culture? Or do you just reproduce that of the source culture? The solution is usually a mix, since the first option means too much work, and the second option would mostly disadvantage the person whose résumé it is. These days, however, most résumés are on a database that can be printed out in several different formats and in several different languages (English, Spanish and Catalan, in the case of our own university). The results are somehow equivalent to something, but not in accordance with any of the directional parameters listed above. In those cases, technology would seem to have returned us to a “natural” equivalence of a particularly artificial kind. That is where we are headed.

7. Equivalence as back-reference

Snell-Hornby, we noted, criticized the concept of equivalence as presenting “an illusion of symmetry between languages” (Snell-Hornby 1988: 22). We are now in a position to see that her criticism might be true of natural equivalence (especially if tied to an ideology of “natural” usage), but it hardly holds for theories of directional equivalence. The naturalistic theories were basically analyzing languages, battling within the paradigm of structuralist linguistics. Directional theories, on the other hand, were working very much at the level of creative language use, in keeping with attempts to analyze parole rather than langue.

Historically, the directional theories have been the most active within the equivalence paradigm. This is partly because they encapsulate a dynamic view of translation as a process. It is also because, when they come to analyze products rather than processes, these theories can describe the way translations refer back to their source texts. In this vein, the Czech theorist Jiří Levý (1969: 32ff.) distinguished between anti-illusory and illusory translations. When you read an “illus-
sory” translation, you are not aware it is a translation; it has been so well adapted to the target culture that it might as well be a text written anew. An “anti-illusory” translation, on the other hand, retains some features of the source text, letting the receiver know that it is a translation. This basic opposition has been reformulated by a number of others. The German theorist Juliane House (1977, 1997) refers to overt and covert translations. Christiane Nord (1988, 1997: 47–52) prefers documentary and instrumental translations. The Israeli theorist Gideon Toury (1995) talks about translations being adequate (to the source text) or appropriate (to the circumstances of reception); the American theorist Lawrence Venuti (1995) opposes resistant to fluent translations. Lying behind all of these we find the early nineteenth-century German preacher and translator Friedrich Schleiermacher (1813) arguing that translations could be either foreignizing (verfremdend) or domesticating (verdeutschend, “Germanizing”). Although these oppositions are all saying slightly different things, they would all more or less fit in with Schleiermacher’s description of two possible movements:

Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader toward that author, or the translator leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author toward that reader.

As in Nida, here we are talking about a choice made by the translator, not necessarily by the nature of the source text. What is strange here is that so many theorists should be content with a simple “either/or” choice.

All these oppositions could be regarded as operating within the equivalence paradigm. In all cases the two ways to translate can both lay claim to represent some aspect or function of the source. The first term of each opposition would be something like Nida’s “formal equivalence”; the second term would incorporate some degree of “dynamic equivalence”. So translation theorists would be saying the same thing over and over, down through the centuries. Then again, try to apply these oppositions to the simple examples at the beginning of this paper. If we take “martes y 13”, we know that a formal translation would refer to “Tuesday 13th”, and a dynamic-equivalence translation would give “Friday 13th”.

Now, which of those two translations is foreignizing? Which is domesticating? Which is moving the reader? Which is moving the author? It seems impossible to say, at least until we have a little more information. Or rather, both translations could be domesticating in their way. If we wanted something foreignizing (anti-illusory, overt, documental, adequate, resistant) we would have to consider saying something like “bad-luck martes 13th”, “Tuesday 13th, bad-luck day”, or even “Tuesday 13th, bad-luck day in Spanish-speaking countries”. Is this kind of translation equivalent? Certainly not on the level of form (in the last rendition we have added a whole phrase). Could we claim equivalence in terms of function? Hardly. After all, a simple referential
phrase has become a whole cultural explanation, at a place where the source text need offer no explanation. Some would say that the explanation is not equivalent, since our version is too long to be a translation. Others might claim that this kind of expansion is merely taking implicit cultural knowledge and making it explicit, and since the cultural knowledge is the same, equivalence still reigns. Our version might then be a very good translation.

This is a point at which natural equivalence breaks down. Directionality becomes clearly more important; we could use it to justify quite significant textual expansion or reduction. The equivalence paradigm nevertheless tends to baulk at this frontier. How much explanatory information could we insert and still claim to be respecting equivalence? There is no clear agreement. The debate has become about what is or is not a translation. And that is a question that the equivalence paradigm was never really designed to address (it merely assumed an answer).

8. Only two categories?

Is there any reason why so many directional theories of equivalence have just two categories? It seems you can translate just one way or the other, with not much in the middle. However, many translation problems can be solved in more than two ways. Naturalistic approaches can indeed have many more than two categories (Vinay and Darbelnet, for example, listed seven main strategies). How should we explain this profound binarism on the directional side? Let us just suggest two possibilities.

First, there may be something profoundly binary within equivalence-based translation itself. To grasp this, translate the following sentence into a language other than English (preferably not Dutch or German for this one!):

The first word of this very sentence has three letters.

In French this would give:

Le premier mot de cette phrase a trois lettres.

Here the word-level equivalence is fine, but functional equivalence has been lost. A true self-reference has become a false self-reference, given that the first word of the French sentence has two letters, not three (cf. the analysis of this example in Burge 1978). How should the English sentence be translated? One might try the following:

Le premier mot de cette phrase a deux lettres.

This tells us that the first word of the French sentence has two letters. We have lost word-level equivalence with the English, but we have maintained the truth of the
self-reference. Our translation would seem to have moved from anti-illusory to illusory, documentary to instrumental, adequate to appropriate, and the rest. In this example, there would seem to be only these two possibilities available, one kind of equivalence or the other. Or are there any further possibilities that we have not yet considered?

A second possible reason for just two categories can be found in the early nineteenth century. As we have seen, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1813) argued that there were only two basic “movements”: you either move the author toward the reader, or the reader toward the author. This is because “just as they must belong to one country, so people must adhere to one language or another, or they will wander untethered in an unhappy middle ground” (1813: 63). Translators, it seems, cannot have it both ways.

If we look at these two reasons, they are both basically saying the same thing. Translation has two sides (source and target), and thus two possible ways of achieving self-reference, and two possible contexts from which the translator can speak. This might suggest that directional equivalence is a particularly good mode of thought for certain kinds of translation, and that those kinds, with just two basic sides, are particularly good for keeping people on one side or the other, in separate languages and countries. At the same time, is not all translation good at precisely that?

9. Relevance theory

Ernst-August Gutt (1991, second edition 2000) proposes a very elegant theory that addresses these problems. Gutt looks at theories of natural equivalence (of the kind we have seen from Vinay and Darbelnet, or Koller) and says that, in principle, there is no limit to the kinds of equivalence that they can establish. Every text, in fact every translation decision, would have to have its own theory of equivalence. So all these theories are seriously flawed (a theory should have fewer terms than the object it accounts for).

To overcome this difficulty, Gutt looks closely not at language or translations as such, but at the kinds of things people believe about translations. Here he distinguishes between different kinds of translation, using two binary steps:

– “Overt translations” are texts marked as translations, whereas “covert translations” would be things like the localization of a publicity campaign for a new audience, which may as well not be a translation. Receivers of the “covert translation” will not have any special beliefs about its equivalence or non-equivalence, so Gutt is not interested in them.

– Within the category of “overt translations”, considered to be translation proper, there are two kinds. “Indirect translation” covers all the kinds of translations
that can be done without referring to the original context of the source text. “Direct translation” would then be the kind that does refer to that context. In Gutt’s terms, it “creates a presumption of complete interpretative resemblance” (1991: 186). When we receive a direct translation, we think we understand what receivers of the original understood, and that belief is not dependent on any comparison of the linguistic details.

Here the critique of natural equivalence (too many possible categories) brings us back to just the two categories (“direct” vs. “indirect”). And those two, we can now see, are very typical of directional equivalence. That alone should be reason enough for seeing Gutt as a theorist of equivalence.

What makes Gutt’s approach especially interesting here is the way he explains directional equivalence as “interpretative resemblance”. He regards language as being a very weak representation of meaning, no more than a set of “communicative clues” that receivers have to interpret. When he sets out to explain how such interpretation is carried out, Gutt draws on the concept of inference, formulated by the philosopher H. Paul Grice (1975). The basic idea here is that we do not communicate by language alone, but by the relation between language and context. Consider the following example used by Gutt:

(1) **Source text**: Mary: “The back door is open”.

(2) **Source context**: If the back door is open, thieves can get in.

(3) **Intended implicature**: We should close the back door.

If we know about the context, we realize that the source text is a suggestion or instruction, not just an observation. What is being said (the actual words of the source text) is not what is being meant (the implicature produced by these words interacting with a specific context). Grice explained such implicatures as operating by breaking various maxims, here the maxim “Be relevant”. If we know about the context and the maxims, we can reach the implicature. If we do not, we will not understand what is being said. Note that Grice’s maxims are not rules for producing good utterances; they are rules that are regularly broken in order to produce implicatures. The actual maxims might thus vary enormously from culture to culture. This variability is something that the British linguists Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson (1988) tend to sidestep when they reduce the Gricean analysis to the one maxim “Be relevant”. They thus produced “relevance theory”, in fact saying that all meaning is produced by the relation between language and context. Implicatures are everywhere. And it is from relevance theory that Gutt developed his account of translation.

If we were going to translate source text (1), we would have to know if the receiver of the translation has access to the context (2) and to the pragmatic maxim
being broken. If we can be sure of both kinds of access, we might just translate the words of the text, producing something like formal equivalence. If not, we might prefer to translate the implicature, somehow rendering the “function”, what the words apparently mean. The notion of implicature might thus give us two kinds of equivalence, in keeping with two kinds of translation.

Gutt, however, does not really want these two kinds of equivalence to be on the same footing. He asks how Mary's utterance should be reported (or translated). There are at least two possibilities:

(4) Report 1: “The back door is open”.
(5) Report 2: “We should close the back door”.

Gutt points out that either of these reports will be successful if the receiver has access to the source context; we may thus establish equivalence on either of those levels. Two paths, not one. What happens, however, when the new receiver does not have access to the source context? Let us say, we do not know about the possibility of thieves, and we are more interested in the children being able to get in when they come home from school. If the reporter is working in this new context, only the second report (5), the one that renders the implicature, is likely to be successful. It will tell us that the back door should still be closed, even if there remain doubts about the reason. Gutt, however, believes that direct translation should always allow interpretation in terms of the source context only. His preference would be for the first report (4). For him, something along the lines of the second report (5) would have no reason to be a translation.

Gutt's application of relevance theory might be considered idiosyncratic on this point. This could be because he has a particular concern with Bible translation. In insisting that interpretation should be in terms of the source context, Gutt effectively discounts much of the “dynamic equivalence” that Eugene Nida wanted to use to make biblical texts relevant to new audiences. Gutt insists not only that the original context is the one that counts, but also that this “makes the explication of implicatures both unnecessary and undesirable” (1991: 166). In the end, “it is the audience's responsibility to make up for such differences” (ibid.). Make the receiver work! In terms of our example, the receiver of the second report (5) should perhaps be smart enough to think about the thieves. Only when there is a risk of misinterpretation should the translator inform the audience about contextual differences, perhaps by adding, “... because there might be thieves”.

At this point, the equivalence paradigm has become quite different from the comparing of languages. The application of relevance theory shows equivalence to be something that operates more on the level of beliefs, of fictions, or of possible thought processes. It is thus something that can have consequences for the way translators make decisions.
10. Equivalence as an illusion

With respect to equivalence (regardless of his personal translation preferences), Gutt got it just about right. Translations, when they are accepted as such, do indeed create a “presumption of interpretative resemblance”; and that presumption, no matter how erroneous, may be all there ever was to equivalence. There is then no need to go further; no need actually to test the pieces of language according to any linguistic yardstick. Equivalence is always “presumed” equivalence, and no more.

In this, Gutt’s position is deceptively close to Toury (1980: 63–70, 1995), where all translations manifest equivalence simply because they are translations. The work is then to analyze what the translations actually are (which is where equivalence becomes a non-issue for Descriptive Translation Studies). Gutt’s location of equivalence is also very much in tune with Pym (1992, 1995), except that Pym stresses that the belief in equivalence is historical, shared, and cost-effective in many situations: “the translator is an equivalence producer, a professional communicator working for people who pay to believe that, on whatever level is pertinent, B is equivalent to A” (1992: 77).

Gutt, Toury and Pym might thus fundamentally agree on equivalence as a belief structure that has to be analyzed as such. Paradoxically, this kind of rough consensus also logically marks the end of equivalence as a central concept. Thanks to that agreement, linguists may venture into pragmatics, descriptive translation scholars can collect and analyze translation shifts, and historians might want to similarly shelve equivalence as an idea, operative only because of a conjuncture of far more interesting sociological reasons. All those avenues take debate away from equivalence itself. In so doing, they minimize the tussle between the natural and the directional, killing the internal dynamics of the concept itself.

Equivalence might thus appear to be dead, except for the occasional deconstructionist who has read little translation theory and is in need of a cheap Feindbild. Then again, history has not finished.

11. A problem not solved

Our purpose here has not been to support any hypothetical return to the equivalence paradigm. We have instead sought to dispel some of the more frequent misunderstandings associated with the term, notably the idea that equivalence means domestication, or that it is opposed to creativity, or that it only comes in one flavor. Indeed, understood in our terms, the concept may be able to address problems quite different from those it was designed for.
As we struggle to see what the localization industry is doing to translation, just a few things seem clear. First, the very term “localization” is being used to rob “translation” of its more creative or adaptational aspects. When one talks about the localization of software or websites, “translation” means the interlingual replacement of natural-language sentences or phrases, in tune with the narrowest of linguistic approaches from the 1960s or 1970s. On the face of it, equivalence has returned. Translation practice is being restricted to the kinds of decontextualized examples used in the bad old days, except that now the decontextualization is not just in the examples, it is a result of the technologies used in the practice itself. A whole generation of translation theory has been undone.

Second, localization projects make use of all kinds of databases to keep translation within that narrow range of equivalence. Standard glossaries or read-only term databases exemplify the conceptual geometries of natural equivalence. The catch, of course, is that there is nothing natural about them. They tend to be imposed by the companies organizing or paying for the project. But natural equivalence is precisely the mode of thought they make their translators adopt.

Third, when translation-memory tools are employed in these projects, the process is very much in tune with directional equivalence. Equivalence is produced from the languages of internationalization into the languages of end-use.

By thus applying the metalanguage of equivalence to a new kind of problematic, some insight might result, and a few interesting questions can be asked. For instance, if terminology tools fix natural equivalence and translation memories fix directional equivalence, what kinds of movement can occur between the two? When directional pairs are verified and enter the database, does not the result of human decision become falsely naturalized? And when translators are obliged to use read-only translation memories (such that they are unable to correct any perceived mistakes in the memories), is not the directional activity subordinated to the falsely natural? Finally, to test this entire illusion of controlled naturalness, can the databases be used in reverse, to go from target language to source? The practice is so rare as to be called “reverse localization” (Schäler 2005).

The contemporary use of translation within localization projects thus retains huge doses of equivalence, mostly of a highly retrograde kind. Gone is the kind of re-creative equivalence that was once allowed for by the hunt for the natural nuance; gone is the directional creativity by which translators consciously introduced the new. Instead, equivalence returns to ensure the imposition of controlled patterns on all cultures. And it does so at a time when the metalanguage of equivalence has lost its exploratory and critical force.

Look closely, and you might still see the killer’s footprints.
Note

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References


Résumé

Le concept d’équivalence a été la clef de voûte des théories linguistiques de la traduction depuis les années 1960, bien que sa géométrie conceptuelle puisse remonter jusqu’à Cicéron. Vues de près, quelques-unes de ces théories présupposent des équivalents qui existent bien avant le moment de la traduction, dont l’horizon idéologique serait alors l’équivalence « naturelle ». D’autres théories, pourtant, projettent un traducteur plutôt créateur des équivalences, dont l’horizon serait alors aussi « directionnel » que l’est l’acte de traduire. L’équivalence naturelle concerne l’illusion des langues prétraductionnelles ; l’équivalence directionnelle recherche la productivité des langues dans et grâce au passage traductionnel. L’entrelacement de ces deux pensées a donné lieu à maints malentendus, voire à des critiques injustes du concept d’équivalence. La fin historique du concept est pourtant survenue au moment où l’on a conceptualisé l’équivalence directionnelle comme croyance ou attente du côté du récepteur, sans besoin de vérification en termes linguistiques. En même temps, la communication électronique rend moins stables les textes de départ, ce qui rend plus difficile l’équivalence comme fidelité à une valeur fixe, tout comme les relations entre les langues deviennent plus hiérarchiques, ce qui brise les illusions de l’équivalence naturelle. Plus caduc que jamais, le métalangage de l’équivalence pourrait néanmoins jouer un rôle clef dans l’analyse critique du discours et de la pratique de la localisation contemporaine, où les technologies de la terminologie et des mémoires de traduction imposent respectivement au traducteur, sans les termes, l’équivalence naturelle et l’équivalence directionnelle.

Author’s address

Anthony Pym
Universitat Rovira i Virgili
Plaça Imperial Tàrraco 1
E-43005 TARRAGONA
Spain

e-mail: ap@astor.urv.es