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The Concept of Equivalence in Translation

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Abstract: Equivalence is one of the central and most debated concepts in translation studies. It refers to the relationship established between a source text and a target text when both communicate similar meanings, functions, effects, or cultural values. However, complete correspondence between languages is rarely possible because linguistic systems differ in grammar, vocabulary, style, and cultural associations. This article examines major theoretical approaches to translation equivalence, including formal, dynamic, textual, functional, semantic, and pragmatic equivalence. Particular attention is given to the views of Eugene Nida, John Catford, Peter Newmark, Mona Baker, and Juliane House. The article also discusses lexical, grammatical, cultural, and pragmatic problems that translators face when searching for equivalent expressions. Examples from English, Uzbek, and Russian demonstrate that equivalence should not be understood as absolute identity. It is better viewed as a context-dependent relationship shaped by communicative purpose, target audience, genre, and cultural environment. The study concludes that successful translation requires the translator to balance semantic accuracy, natural expression, stylistic appropriateness, and communicative effect.

Keywords: translation equivalence, formal equivalence, dynamic equivalence, semantic equivalence, functional equivalence, source text, target text, translation theory.

Introduction

Equivalence has occupied a central position in translation studies for many decades. Translators are expected to reproduce the meaning of a source text in another language, but languages do not divide reality in exactly the same way. A word, grammatical construction, cultural reference, or stylistic feature in one language may not have a direct counterpart in another.

For this reason, equivalence cannot be reduced to word-for-word similarity. It includes semantic content, grammatical structure, communicative function, stylistic effect, cultural meaning, and reader response. A translation may differ formally from the original while still being equivalent in meaning and function.

Jakobson argues that full equivalence between individual linguistic units is often impossible, but messages can still be translated through different combinations of signs (Jakobson, 1959). This idea demonstrates that translation equivalence is usually relative rather than absolute.

The aim of this article is to examine the concept of equivalence in translation, analyse its main types, and identify the linguistic and cultural factors that influence equivalent translation.

Theoretical Background

The concept of equivalence has been interpreted differently by various scholars. Some approaches emphasize formal correspondence, while others focus on meaning, function, context, or reader response.

Catford defines translation as the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language (Catford, 1965). His approach is largely linguistic and distinguishes between formal correspondence and textual equivalence.

Nida introduces the distinction between formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. Formal equivalence focuses on the form and content of the original message, while dynamic equivalence aims to produce a similar effect on the target audience (Nida, 1964).

Newmark distinguishes semantic translation from communicative translation. Semantic translation attempts to preserve the precise contextual meaning of the source text, whereas communicative translation focuses on producing a similar effect on target-language readers (Newmark, 1988).

Baker examines equivalence at different linguistic levels, including word level, phrase level, grammatical level, textual level, and pragmatic level (Baker, 2018). Her approach demonstrates that equivalence is not a single relationship but a combination of several linguistic and communicative correspondences.

House views translation equivalence from a functional-pragmatic perspective. According to this approach, a translation should preserve the function of the original text within the target cultural context (House, 2015).

These theories indicate that equivalence is multidimensional. A translation may be equivalent semantically but not stylistically, or functionally but not grammatically.

Formal Equivalence

Formal equivalence attempts to preserve the grammatical structure, lexical choices, and textual form of the source language as closely as possible. It is often used in legal, religious, scientific, and technical translation, where precise correspondence is important.

For example:

- English: *The contract shall enter into force on 1 January.*
- Uzbek: *Shartnoma 1-yanvardan kuchga kiradi.*
- Russian: *Договор вступает в силу 1 января.*

The grammatical structures are not identical, but the legal meaning and formal tone are preserved.

Formal equivalence is useful when the structure of the original text carries important legal, stylistic, or terminological value. However, excessive dependence on source-language form may result in unnatural target-language sentences.

For instance:

- English: *He gave me a hand.*
- Literal Uzbek: *U menga qo‘l berdi.*
- Contextual Uzbek: *U menga yordam berdi.*

The literal version preserves the words but not the idiomatic meaning. The contextual version is more equivalent at the semantic level.

Dynamic Equivalence

Dynamic equivalence focuses on the response of the target audience. Nida argues that the relationship between the target reader and the translated message should be similar to the relationship between the original reader and the source message (Nida, 1964).

Consider the expression:

- English: *Break a leg!*
- Uzbek: *Omad!*

- Russian: *Ни пуха ни пера!*

A literal translation of *break a leg* would sound strange and misleading in Uzbek or Russian. A dynamically equivalent translation conveys the intended function of wishing someone success.

Dynamic equivalence is particularly important in literary translation, advertising, public communication, and audiovisual translation. The translator must consider how the target audience will understand and respond to the message.

However, dynamic equivalence may involve significant changes in form. Therefore, translators must be careful not to distort the content or introduce meanings that are absent from the source text.

Semantic Equivalence

Semantic equivalence refers to the preservation of meaning between the source and target texts. It requires the translator to identify both denotative and connotative meanings.

For example:

English	Uzbek	Russian
house	uy	дом
freedom	erkinlik	свобода
responsibility	mas'uliyat	ответственность

These words have relatively stable equivalents, but complete semantic identity is still not guaranteed. Words may differ in cultural associations, emotional tone, frequency, or collocation.

The English word *home*, for example, does not always correspond exactly to Uzbek *uy* or Russian *дом*. It may also suggest emotional attachment, family, belonging, or homeland.

Thus, semantic equivalence often requires contextual interpretation rather than dictionary substitution.

Lexical Equivalence

Lexical equivalence concerns the relationship between words and phrases in different languages. It is often difficult because one word may have several meanings or may correspond to multiple target-language units.

Table 1. Examples of lexical non-equivalence

English word	Uzbek equivalents	Russian equivalents
uncle	amaki, tog'a	дядя
brother	aka, uka	брат
sister	opa, singil	сестра
you	sen, siz, sizlar	ты, вы
home	uy, xonadon, vatan	дом, жильё, родина

The English word *uncle* is broader than the Uzbek words *amaki* and *tog'a*. A translator must know whether the person is the father's brother or the mother's brother.

Similarly, Uzbek distinguishes between older and younger siblings through separate lexical items. English generally uses the broader words *brother* and *sister*.

These examples show that lexical equivalence is frequently partial.

Grammatical Equivalence

Grammatical equivalence refers to the way languages express number, gender, tense, aspect, definiteness, person, and grammatical relations.

English, Uzbek, and Russian differ considerably in their grammatical systems.

Table 2. Grammatical asymmetry

Category	English	Uzbek	Russian
Articles	a, an, the	absent	absent
Grammatical gender	limited	absent	masculine, feminine, neuter

Word order	mainly SVO	mainly SOV	relatively flexible
Case system	limited	developed	developed
Aspect	analytical forms	suffixes and auxiliaries	perfective and imperfective verbs

For example:

- English: *I have written the letter.*
- Uzbek: *Men xatni yozib bo‘ldim.*
- Russian: *Я написал письмо.*

The forms are structurally different, but they can express a comparable completed action. The translator must select the construction that is most appropriate in the target-language context.

Grammatical equivalence therefore depends on function rather than formal similarity.

Textual Equivalence

Textual equivalence concerns cohesion, information structure, thematic progression, reference, conjunction, and repetition.

Different languages organize texts differently. English often uses pronouns and explicit connectors, while Uzbek may tolerate repetition or omit elements that are understood from context. Russian frequently uses flexible word order to highlight new or important information.

For example:

- English: *The researcher conducted the experiment. He then analysed the results.*
- Uzbek: *Tadqiqotchi tajribani o‘tkazdi. So‘ng natijalarni tahlil qildi.*
- Russian: *Исследователь провёл эксперимент. Затем он проанализировал результаты.*

The Uzbek sentence may omit the pronoun because the subject remains clear from the context. A literal repetition of *u* may sound unnecessary.

Textual equivalence requires the translator to follow the cohesion norms of the target language.

Pragmatic Equivalence

Pragmatic equivalence concerns implied meaning, politeness, context, intention, and communication between speakers.

For example:

- English: *Could you open the window?*

This sentence is grammatically a question about ability, but pragmatically it functions as a polite request.

Possible translations include:

- Uzbek: *Derazani ochib bera olasizmi?*
- Russian: *Не могли бы вы открыть окно?*

A literal translation may preserve grammar but fail to preserve politeness. Pragmatic equivalence therefore requires attention to speech acts and interpersonal relations.

Politeness systems also differ across languages. Uzbek and Russian distinguish informal and respectful second-person pronouns, while English uses *you* in both situations.

The translator must compensate through titles, modal verbs, indirect structures, or lexical choices.

Cultural Equivalence

Cultural equivalence is one of the most difficult aspects of translation. Cultural concepts, customs, institutions, food names, forms of address, and historical references may not exist in the target culture.

Examples include:

- *mahalla*
- *hashar*

- *Thanksgiving*
- *pub*
- *samovar*

Several translation strategies may be used:

1. borrowing;
2. transliteration;
3. descriptive translation;
4. cultural substitution;
5. explanation in a note;
6. functional equivalent.

For example, the Uzbek word *mahalla* may be retained as *mahalla* and explained as a traditional neighbourhood community institution. Translating it simply as *neighbourhood* may not preserve its social and administrative significance.

Cultural equivalence therefore often requires explanation or adaptation.

Equivalence in Literary Translation

Literary translation presents particular difficulties because meaning is expressed through imagery, rhythm, metaphor, sound, style, and cultural association.

A literary translator must preserve not only what the text says but also how it affects the reader.

For example, metaphors may not have direct equivalents:

- English: *Time is money.*
- Uzbek: *Vaqt oltindan qimmat.*
- Russian: *Время — деньги.*

The Uzbek expression does not reproduce the same words exactly, but it expresses a culturally natural idea about the value of time.

In poetry, full equivalence is especially difficult because form, rhyme, meter, and meaning may conflict. The translator may need to choose which features are most important.

Newmark notes that semantic translation is usually more appropriate for expressive texts, while communicative translation is often suitable for informative and persuasive texts (Newmark, 1988).

Translation Strategies for Achieving Equivalence

Translators use different strategies to achieve an acceptable level of equivalence.

Table 3. Main translation strategies

Strategy	Description	Example
Literal translation	Preserving close formal correspondence	*open the door → eshikni ochmoq*
Specification	Replacing a broad word with a more specific one	*uncle → amaki*
Generalization	Replacing a specific word with a broader one	*opa → sister*
Addition	Adding necessary information	*mahalla → traditional neighbourhood community*
Omission	Removing redundant information	Omission of repeated pronouns
Compensation	Reproducing lost meaning elsewhere	Expressing politeness through modal verbs
Adaptation	Replacing a culture-specific element	Contextual cultural substitution
Paraphrase	Explaining meaning descriptively	Idiom translated by its meaning

No single strategy is suitable for every text. The translator’s decision depends on genre,

audience, communicative purpose, and cultural context.

The Relative Nature of Equivalence

Modern translation studies generally reject the idea that equivalence means complete identity. Source and target texts belong to different linguistic and cultural systems. Therefore, some degree of change is unavoidable.

Pym argues that equivalence is not a fixed property existing automatically between two texts. It is a relationship created and justified through translation practice (Pym, 2014).

A translation may be:

- semantically equivalent but stylistically different;
- functionally equivalent but structurally different;
- culturally adapted but formally distant;
- lexically close but pragmatically inappropriate.

For this reason, equivalence must always be evaluated in relation to context and purpose.

Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that equivalence in translation is multidimensional. A translator must consider several levels at the same time:

- lexical meaning;
- grammatical structure;
- textual cohesion;
- communicative function;
- cultural context;
- reader response.

A word-for-word translation may preserve lexical form but lose pragmatic meaning. A free translation may sound natural but omit important semantic details. The best solution usually lies between mechanical literalism and excessive adaptation.

The translator therefore acts not merely as a language converter but as an interpreter of meaning, context, culture, and communicative intention.

Conclusion

Equivalence remains one of the fundamental concepts in translation theory and practice. However, it should not be understood as complete formal identity between source and target texts.

Different scholars have proposed different models of equivalence. Nida distinguishes formal and dynamic equivalence, Catford focuses on textual equivalence and formal correspondence, Newmark contrasts semantic and communicative translation, and Baker analyses equivalence at multiple linguistic levels.

The study shows that translation equivalence may be lexical, grammatical, textual, pragmatic, functional, semantic, or cultural. These forms of equivalence are interrelated but do not always occur simultaneously.

Effective translation requires the translator to preserve the essential meaning and function of the source text while producing a natural and culturally appropriate target text. The translator must therefore balance accuracy, clarity, style, cultural relevance, and reader response.

Equivalence is not an absolute condition but a flexible and context-dependent relationship. Recognizing this fact enables translators to make more informed decisions and produce translations that are both faithful and communicatively effective.

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