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Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies, Ldn 1998
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# E

## Equivalence

Equivalence is a central concept in translation theory, but it is also a controversial one. Approaches to the question of equivalence can differ radically: some theorists define translation in terms of equivalence relations (Catford 1965; Nida and Taber 1969; Toury 1980a; Pym 1992a, 1995; Koller 1995) while others reject the theoretical notion of equivalence, claiming it is either irrelevant (Snell-Hornby 1988) or damaging (Gentzler 1993) to translation studies. Yet other theorists steer a middle course: Baker uses the notion of equivalence 'for the sake of convenience – because most translators are used to it rather than because it has any theoretical status' (1992: 5–6). Thus equivalence is variously regarded as a necessary condition for translation, an obstacle to progress in translation studies, or a useful category for describing translations.

Proponents of equivalence-based theories of translation usually define equivalence as the relationship between a source text (ST) and a target text (TT) that allows the TT to be considered as a translation of the ST in the first place. Equivalence relationships are also said to hold between parts of STs and parts of TTs. The above definition of equivalence is not unproblematic, however. Pym (1992a: 37), for one, has pointed to its circularity: equivalence is supposed to define translation, and translation, in turn, defines equivalence. Unfortunately, few attempts have been made to define equivalence in translation in a way that avoids this circularity. Theorists who maintain that translation is predicated upon some kind of equivalence have, for the most part, concentrated on developing typologies of equivalence, focusing on the rank (word, sentence or text level) at which equivalence is said to obtain (see, for example, Baker 1992), or on the type of meaning (denotative, connotative, pragmatic, etc.) that is said to be held constant in translation. Investigations of the essential nature of equivalence remain the exception.

### Typologies of equivalence

At various levels, and loosely following Koller (1979: 187–91, 1989: 100–4), equivalence is commonly established on the basis of: the source language (SL) and target language (TL) words supposedly referring to the same thing in the real world, i.e. on the basis of their **referential** or **denotative equivalence**; the SL and TL words triggering the same or similar associations in the minds of native speakers of the two languages, i.e. their **connotative equivalence**; the SL and TL words being used in the same or similar contexts in their respective languages, i.e. what Koller (1989: 102) calls **text-normative equivalence**; the SL and TL words having the same effect on their respective readers, i.e. **pragmatic** (Koller 1989: 102) or **dynamic equivalence** (Nida 1964); the SL and TL words having similar orthographic or phonological features, or **formal equivalence**. Baker (1992) extends the concept of equivalence to cover similarity in ST and TT information flow and in the cohesive roles ST and TT devices play in their respective texts. She calls these two factors combined **textual equivalence**. Newman (1994: 4695) stresses that not all the variables in translation are relevant in every situation, and that translators must decide which considerations should be given priority at any one time, thus establishing a kind of **functional equivalence** (see also Neubert 1994).

Kade (1968) and other writers on lexical equivalence, in particular in the area of terminology (see, for example, Arntz 1993; Hann

1992), combine the above qualitative distinctions with a quantitative scheme that categorizes equivalence relationships according to whether there is: a single expression in the TL for a single SL expression, i.e. **one-to-one equivalence**; more than one TL expression for a single SL expression, i.e. **one-to-many equivalence**; a TL expression that covers part of a concept designated by a single SL expression, i.e. **one-to-part-of-one equivalence**; or no TL expression for an SL expression, i.e. **nil equivalence**. Such a quantitative approach may have limited applicability in language for specific purposes (LSP), but Snell-Hornby (1988: 20) has argued that it is deficient because it is restricted to the word level and also because it implicitly assumes that the language system can be equated with concrete realization in a text.

## The nature of equivalence

Writers who have addressed the problem of the nature of translation equivalence include Catford (1965; 1994) and Pym (1992a). Catford posits an extralinguistic domain of objects, persons, emotions, memories, history, etc. (**situation** in Hallidayan terms), features of which may or must achieve expression in a given language. Translational equivalence occurs, he suggests, when STs and TTs are relatable to at least some of the same features of this extralinguistic reality, that is when ST and TT have approximately the same referents (1965: 50, 1994: 4739). Catford thus relies on an essentially referential theory of meaning, an approach which translation theorists such as Bassnett (1980/1991: 6) have found too narrow. Likewise, from Frawley's semiotic perspective, the idea that meaning resides somewhere outside language is untenable: 'There is no meaning apart from the code', he maintains, adding that 'The worlds and possible worlds differ, and the question of referent is not even the question to pose' (Frawley 1984b: 164). Catford also comes under criticism – from Snell-Hornby (1988: 20), among others – for using simplistic, invented sentences to exemplify his categories of translational equivalence, and for limiting his analysis to the level of the sentence. Catford's approach may have been criticized, but few alternatives have been put forward. The problem of pinning down the essential nature of equivalence seems to be related to the problem of pinning down the nature of linguistic meaning itself. Pym (1992a) avoids this difficulty by moving away from the strictly linguistic to view translation as a transaction, and equivalence as **equality of exchange value**. Equivalence becomes a negotiable entity, with translators doing the negotiation.

## Interlingual and intertextual equivalence

In earlier work on equivalence, theorists made a distinction between hypothetical mappings between elements of abstract language systems (at the level of *langue*) on the one hand, and actual observable mappings between elements of real STs and TTs (at the level of *parole*) on the other. Catford (1965: 27) used the terms **formal correspondence** and **textual equivalence** respectively to refer to the two categories. Koller (1979: 183–4) made a similar distinction when he differentiated between **Korrespondenz**, formal similarity between language systems, and **Äquivalenz**, equivalence relations between real texts and utterances. Koller then went on to present *Äquivalenz* as the real object of enquiry in translation studies. Similarly, Toury (1980a: 24–6) charts the evolution of the notion of TRANSLATABILITY from an interlingual phenomenon to an intertextual one. While relationships established at the level of *langue* are now largely seen as the concern of comparative linguistics, formal correspondence continues to have pride of place in MACHINE TRANSLATION, where linguistic-knowledge-based systems using direct or transfer architecture often rely on mappings between the formal structures of two languages. Indeed Catford's translation SHIFTS bear real similarities to notions of complex transfer in machine translation (see Hutchins and Somers 1992; Arnold et al. 1994).

Thus the general view in translation studies soon came to be that equivalence was a relation between texts in two different languages, rather than between the languages themselves. This step liberated translation studies from debates on interlingual translatability based on entire language systems with all their

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unactualized meaning potential (see Koller 1979; Pym 1995: 157–8). Such debates had centred on incompatibilities between the worlds inhabited by speakers of different languages and on the structural dissimilarities between languages. Once attention was focused on texts and utterances, many of the potential multiple meanings and functions of words and structures in a language system could be eliminated by reference to their co-text and context, making translation not only more tractable, but also more realistic.

## Equivalence as an empirical and a theoretical concept

The narrowing down of the scope of the term equivalence to an intertextual relation still left plenty of room for competing notions of the concept. Toury (1980a: 39) identified two main uses of the term: first, equivalence could be 'a *descriptive* term, denoting concrete objects – actual relationships between actual utterances in two languages (and literatures), recognised as TTs and STs – which are subject to direct observation'. This definition regarded equivalence as an empirical category which could be established only after the event of translation. Toury contrasted this approach with equivalence as 'a *theoretical* term, denoting an abstract, ideal relationship, or category of relationships between TTs and STs, translations and their sources' (ibid.).

This dichotomy can be problematic, however. For one, it may not be psychologically plausible. From the translator's point of view, it is not clear whether a real distinction can be made between what one intends to write, and what one actually writes. Furthermore, equivalence as a theoretical term, a prospective and often prescriptive notion, is responsible for acquiring a bad name for equivalence in some quarters in translation studies. Gentzler (1993: 4), for example, contends that standards of translation analysis that rely on equivalence or non-equivalence and other associated judgmental criteria 'imply notions of substantialism that limit other possibilities of translation practice, marginalize unorthodox translation, and impinge upon real intercultural exchange'. Newman (1994: 4694), on the other hand, describes translation equivalence as 'a commonsense term for describing the ideal relationship that a reader would expect to exist between an original and its translation'. Newman's equivalence is clearly prospective and ideal, although empirical approaches also feature in the analysis. Pym also speaks about equivalence as a 'fact of reception' (1992a: 64) and about the socially determined 'expectation' that TTs should stand in some kind of equivalence relation to their STs (1995: 166).

Toury's empirical category of equivalence has much in common with Catford's textual equivalence. A **textual equivalent** is defined as 'any TL form which is observed to be the equivalent of a given SL form (text or portion of text)' (1965: 27). Equivalent forms can be matched by appealing to the intuition of bilingual informants or by applying more formal procedures such as **commutation** (Catford 1965: 27–8), a method of discovering textual equivalents which consists of asking a competent bilingual informant to translate stretches of text and then systematically introducing changes into the SL text to establish how each change is reflected in the translation. Textual equivalence is, according to Catford, an empirical, probabilistic phenomenon. The probability that a given ST form will be translated as a given TT form can be calculated on the basis of previous experience and recast as a probabilistic **translation rule** (Catford 1965: 31). Snell-Hornby (1988: 20) finds the same weakness with this view of equivalence as does Pym (1992a: 37): it is circular; translation equivalence is what is observed to be equivalent. But while Catford's view of textual equivalence may say very little about the nature of equivalence, the approach has found application in areas such as example and statistics-based machine translation (see Hutchins and Somers 1992: 317–22) and, more recently, in translation memory systems, where previously translated STs and their TTs are stored with a view to recycling old translations, should the system recognize new input for which it already has an 'equivalent' target rendering (see MACHINE-AIDED TRANSLATION; MACHINE TRANSLATION, APPLICATIONS; MACHINE TRANSLATION, METHODOLOGY).

Equivalence as an empirical phenomenon has seen perhaps its most powerful manifestation to date in Toury's (1980a; 1995) work. Whereas other theorists might ask whether two texts are equivalent according to some predefined, prescriptive criterion of equivalence, Toury treats the existence of equivalence between TTs and STs as a given. This **equivalence postulate** (1980a: 113) then allows him to state that 'the question to be asked in the actual study of translations (especially in the comparative analysis of TT and ST) is not *whether* the two texts are equivalent (from a certain aspect), but *what type* and *degree* of translation equivalence they reveal' (1980a: 47). Toury's approach, and subsequently Koller's (1995: 196), makes appeal to a historical, relative notion of equivalence. 'Rather than being a single relationship, denoting a recurring type of invariant, it comes to refer to any relation which is found to have characterized translation under a specified set of circumstances' (Toury 1995: 61). The NORMS that determine the particular concept of equivalence prevalent at different stages in history, or amongst different schools of translators, or even within the work of a single translator, then constitute a valid object of enquiry for descriptive translation studies.

Toury's equivalence postulate, as well as his broad definition of a translation as whatever is regarded as a translation in the target culture (1980a; 1995), allow him to broaden the scope of translation studies to investigate previously marginalized phenomena. Thus equivalence-based translation theories can escape the censure of other schools of thought, where it is widely held that equivalence implies a prescriptive, non-inclusive approach to translation. There are, however, objections to what is viewed as too wide a notion of equivalence: Snell-Hornby (1988: 21) suggests that the notion of equivalence in the English-speaking world has become so vague as to be useless; while Pym (1992a, 1995), Neubert (1994) and Koller (1995) would like to see a more restrictive view of equivalence reinstated, not least because a more constrained view of equivalence allows translation to be distinguished from non-translation. Pym (1995: 166) quotes Stecconi (forthcoming) to support this point: 'Equivalence is crucial to translation because it is the unique intertextual relation that only translations, among all conceivable text types, are expected to show'.

*See also:*
LINGUISTIC APPROACHES; SHIFTS OF TRANSLATION; UNIT OF TRANSLATION.

**Further reading**
Catford 1965; Koller 1989, 1995; Pym 1995; Snell-Hornby 1988; Toury 1980a, 1995.

DOROTHY KENNY

# Explicitation

Explicitation is the technique of making explicit in the target text information that is implicit in the source text. Explicitation (implicitation) strategies are generally discussed together with addition (omission) strategies (Vinay and Darbelnet 1958). Some scholars regard addition as the more generic and explicitation as the more specific concept (Nida 1964), while others interpret explicitation as the broader concept which incorporates the more specific concept of addition (Séguinot 1988, Schjoldager 1995). The two are handled as synonyms by Englund Dimitrova, who uses the terms 'addition-explicitation' and 'omission-implicitation' (Englund Dimitrova 1993).

## Defining explicitation

The concept of explicitation was first introduced by Vinay and Darbelnet (1958), in whose glossary of translation techniques explicitation is defined as 'the process of introducing information into the target language which is present only implicitly in the source language, but which can be derived from the context or the situation' (1958: 8; translated). Implicitation is defined as 'the process of allowing the target language situation or context to define certain details which were explicit in the source language' (ibid.: 10). The results of explicitation and implicitation are often discussed in terms of gains and losses; for example, because the Hungarian pronoun system is not marked for gender, part of the meaning of the English personal pronoun *she* is lost in translation into Hungarian.

The concepts of explicitation and implicitation have been further developed by Nida