

What's in a Name?: The Metalanguage of Equivalence¹

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Abstract

Despite a plethora of theories and decades of efforts to pin down the nature of equivalence, it remains a notoriously contentious topic, so much so that scholars have run the gamut from its deification to its demonization. While many definitions of translation revolve around the concept of equivalence, for some, equivalence in translation is nothing more than a mere myth. This paper will first briefly survey the literature on the different attitudes towards equivalence from the second half of the 20th century. It then goes on to argue that the very naming of 'equivalence' has further complicated this inherently multifaceted concept, and despite its naming that implies *equal value*, it is anything but. Against this backdrop, a new term is proposed instead in an attempt to address some of the concerns arising from the metalanguage of equivalence. Finally, the far-reaching implications of the current project for training translators and for the definition of translation itself are outlined.

Keywords: Equivalence, Quasivalence, Translation definition, Descriptive Translation Studies, Translation as a cluster concept

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1. Introduction

Equivalence is “one of the most popular as well as controversial concepts” in translation studies (Blumczynsky, 2020, P. 45) — and, in its wake, the definition of translation — so much so that Chesterman (1997, P. 9), in his *Memes of Translation*, calls equivalence a supermeme that is “the bugbear of translation theory, more argued about than any other single idea”. Similarly, Pym (1992, P. 37) argues that “equivalence has been extensively used to define translation, but few writers have been prepared to define equivalence itself” and it “is simply assumed to exist” (Pym, 2004, P. 58). Although the ideal of total equivalence has long been debunked for very good reasons and called a “chimera” (Bell, 1991, P. 6), its presence can be found to varying degrees in many definitions of translation (e.g., Catford, 1965; Nida & Taber, 1969/1982; Wilss, 1982; Toury, 1985; Newmark, 1988; Koller, 1995). It is not unreasonable to claim that almost all definitions of translation posit an equivalence relation between the source text and the target text.

What follows is a brief overview of a wide range of views on equivalence from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, addressing the messy intersection of sociocultural norms and equivalence in the Iranian context to bear out how the nature of equivalence varies with the norms prevalent in the target culture, and finally a digression on the naming of equivalence to show how the term ‘equivalence’ itself has contributed to the complexity of this notoriously elusive concept. The latter can be considered the main contribution of this study.

2. Some Background

Notwithstanding recurrent and sterile overgeneralizations spanning centuries that focused mainly on the diad of “word-for-word” versus “sense-for-sense” translation, not until the 1950s did serious scholarly theorizing about the phenomenon of translation emerged. Basking in the glory of their findings in the field of contrastive

linguistics and their "initial euphoria" over the immediate and, to their chagrin, relatively short-lived success in machine translation (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997, P. 100), translation scholars and theorists of the 1950s and 1960s "aimed to create formulae and algorithms for something as fluid as language and wanted to keep context out of such a contextual activity as translation" (Morini, 2008, P. 33). This school of thought attempted to prescribe what a translation should be rather than describe what a translation is and can be, and relegated the status of the target text to a mere carry-over from the source text.

The 1970s marked a historic turning point when Holmes first introduced the term 'Translation Studies' in his seminal 1972 essay "The Name and Nature of Translation Studies". Holmes (1972/2004, P. 183) ventured into the uncharted territory of translation, previously afflicted with terms such as 'science of translation' (Nida, 1964b), 'translatology' (Harris, 1977), the German *translatologie*, the Spanish *traductologia*, and the French *traductologie*, and, as the title of his essay suggests, not only implanted the term 'Translation Studies' as "the appropriate designation for this emerging discipline as a whole," but also clarified "what constitutes the field of translation studies." From his division of the discipline into two broad categories of 'pure translation studies' and 'applied translation studies' and the subdivision of the former into two further areas, the term 'Descriptive Translation Studies', particularly relevant for the present study, was born, offering promising new avenues to scholars working in the field.

The concept of Descriptive Translation Studies was later fleshed out by Toury, a protégé of Even-Zohar. To quote Pym (2011, P. 55), "instead of analyzing translation situations and alternatives to traditional equivalence, this paradigm annulled the appeals to equivalence." Primarily picking up the thread where Even-Zohar (1978/2004) with his introduction of the polysystem theory had left off, Toury (1978/2004) introduced the concept of translational norms, showed how target

culture norms could change our understanding of equivalence, argued against the *a priori* approach to viewing translation in general and equivalence in particular, and pushed back the boundaries of translation far beyond linguistic anisomorphisms to what it does in target cultures (Hermans, 2020, PP. 143–147). According to him, with shifts occurring throughout the act of translation and with target culture norms predominating it, adequacy-oriented translation should give way to acceptability-oriented translation (Toury, 1978/2004, P. 208).

Such an approach to understanding the status of equivalence is congruent with Toury's 'assumed translation'. According to it, "equivalence [...] is of little importance in itself. There is a point in establishing it insofar as it can serve as a stepping stone to uncovering the overall CONCEPT OF TRANSLATION underlying the corpus it has been found to pertain to" (Toury, 1995, P. 86 emphasis in original). Within this approach, the status of equivalence is defined less in terms of prediction than in terms of retrodiction.

Despite the introduction of norms and the impact they might have on our understanding of equivalence, the reign of equivalence and its centrality in some definitions provided for translation spilled over to varying degrees into the 1980s.

Reiss and Vermeer's 1984 Skopos theory dethroned equivalence (Hebenstreit, 2021, P. 59); it invaded the sacrosanctity of equivalence, with the value of equivalence subjugated to a set of target-oriented purposes dictated by clients, and consequently shattering the myth of one-to-one correspondence between an original and its translation. Within this teleologically driven paradigm, which places functional criteria far above equivalence as the defining criterion of translation, Vermeer defines translation as follows: "To translate means to produce a text in a target setting for a target purpose and target addressees in target circumstances" (Vermeer, 1987, P. 29). Since these purposes may change over time, from client to client, and from addressee to addressee, the nature of equivalence as fixed has been further

impugned, and "equivalence is reduced to functional constancy between ST and TT (the cases where the function is the same for both ST and TT)" (Munday, 2001, P. 80). At this point, however, a strong word of caution should be sounded: Neither Toury's historico-descriptivism nor Reiss and Vermeer's target-side functionalism denied the existence of some kind of equivalence in translation. "They simply refused to base their scientific status on equivalence. They chose other weapons" (Pym, 1995, P. 160).

The concept of equivalence, however, was sharply and unapologetically criticized by Snell-Hornby. She did not mince words when she called it illusory, fallacious, and distorting in her bitter argument against equivalence:

The term equivalence, apart from being imprecise and ill-defined (even after a heated debate of over twenty years) presents an illusion of symmetry between languages which hardly exists beyond the level of vague approximations and which distorts the basic problems of translation (Snell-Hornby, 1988/1995, P. 22).

Nevertheless, some scholars have found a happy medium between equivalence being the "nucleus of all translation theory" (Albrecht, 1987, P. 13 as cited in Gerzymisch-Arbogast, 2001, P. 228) and being "an illusion" (Snell-Hornby, 1988/1995, P. 22) or "damaging" (Gentzler, 1993 as cited in Kenny, 1998, P. 77, Blumczynsky, 2016, P. 65). For example, Baker (1992, PP. 5–6) adopts the term "for the sake of convenience — because most translators are used to it rather than it has any theoretical status". Or Pym (1995, P. 168) believes that the rejection of equivalence by some theorists has not led to any better solutions and the absence thereof "quickly leads to a peculiarly uncentered conceptual expansion [of translation], the nature of which is still far from clear". While exercising extreme discretion not to fetishize equivalence, he argues for the need to enshrine equivalence in translation studies because its existence, whatever its definition, helps us understand not only what translation is, but also what translation is not.

The concept of norms as a dividing line between translations and non-translations was brought to the fore, among other things, as one of the reactions to Quine's (1960) 'thesis of indeterminacy of translation', exemplified by his notion of radical translation, i.e. the "translation of the language of a hitherto untouched people" (Quine, 1960, P. 28). However, the fact that no unique meaning can be ascribed to the words and sentences of a language is better off being read as "Quine's scepticism about the possibility of absolute equivalence" rather than "a substantial statement for impossibility of translation" (Tack, 2000, P. 214 emphasis in original). Among scholars working within the framework of norms, Toury's 'functional-relational equivalence' stands out as a response to Quine's 'indeterminacy thesis' stands out. According to Toury (1985, P. 36), it "distinguishes between translation and non-translation in certain specific sociocultural circumstances of the target culture, i.e., between adequate and inadequate instances of performance with respect to the governing model(s) and to the norms deriving from these models."

Despite the etymologically implicit equality in the term, equivalence is a chameleon of a concept that carries favor with whoever calls the shots in the sociocultural background. Clearly, then, translating and establishing an equivalent for an SL term in the TL text is not so much a linguistic adjustment as it is the performance of a congeries of high-stakes sociocultural acrobatics. The true essence of this argument can perhaps be summed up in the words of Bassnett and Trivedi:

Translation does not happen in a vacuum, but in a continuum; it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer. Moreover, translation is a highly manipulative activity that involves all kinds of stages in that process of transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of *equality* between texts, authors or systems (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999, P. 2 our emphasis).

It follows that *faute de mieux*, we must be content with equivalence so long as we want translation to make sense as a relation between a source text and a target text at whatever degrees of proximity. However, it by no means implies a purely linguistic equivalence of a congealed and set-in-stone nature with total disregard for sociocultural variables. In other words, the value of equivalence is slavishly at the service of constraints imposed by sociocultural contexts and, due to its relative and protean nature, can vary as these sociocultural variables shift over time to favor one equivalent over another. A tangible example of this would be the translation of beer, whisky, or vodka into Persian. Before the Islamic Revolution in Iran, their equivalents tended to be بیر , ویسکی and وودکا , meaning *beer*, *whisky*, and *vodka* respectively. But after the Islamic Revolution, when Islamic values prevailed, blanketing the entire sociocultural texture and alcoholic beverages of any kind became a cardinal 'no-no', the equivalent of all these beverages in many translated texts and dubbed movies suddenly metamorphosed into the all-encompassing $\{ \text{مور} \text{ or } \text{آب} \}$ meaning *water* or *drink*. And this is exactly what Iranian sociocultural norms and standard protocol dictate. Any translator who wishes to render these drinks' linguistic equivalents and offend Iran's Islamic sensibilities would risk having their work censored, suspended, or simply banned. The list of ways in which sociocultural factors can influence the translator's choice of an appropriate equivalent for an SL term in the TL could be endless. However, the above example seems to suffice to illustrate the point. (For a fairly detailed discussion of how the norms of the target culture prescribe an equivalent of a particular type in translation, see Katan (2020, PP. 133–138)).

In short, the answer to the nagging question of whether equivalence is a myth or a reality is in the eye of the beholder; from the standpoint of its true dictionary meaning, i.e., equal value with *equi* meaning *equal* and with *valence* meaning value, it is a pure myth; in its ability to establish a relation between an SL and a TL at different degrees of proximity, it is a reality as the last resort, which "emerges from the context of situation as defined by the interplay of (many different factors) and has no existence

outside that context, and [...] it is not stipulated in advance by an algorithm for the conversion of linguistic units of L1 into linguistic units of L2" (Ivir, 1996, P. 155).

4. An Excursus on the Naming of Equivalence

Although "in recent decades, the increasing problematization of the underlying notion of equivalence has led to a spectacular demise of the crude idea of fidelity in translation theory" (Blumcynsky, 2016, P. 65), its onomastics has not changed despite all the passionate calls for a change in the metalanguage and all the damage it does to the notion of translation itself (Snell-Hornby, 1988/1995; Hermans, 1999, P. 61). Against this backdrop, we would like to end this somewhat extended discussion of equivalence by making a digression on its naming. On the one hand, "there is ordinarily no full equivalence between code" (Jakobson, 1959/2004, P. 139) since there is no true synonymy within a language. What we actually mean by equivalence is relative. On the other hand, in the literature, we still use the term equivalence, i.e., equal value, and, by extension, equivalent, in its relative and not absolute sense. By using this entirely false term, we simply contradict ourselves; we mean relative by absolute. We believe that adopting or even coining a new term for equivalence can go a long way towards clarifying its true function in translation.

Although the project seems too ambitious and Promethean, we take the initiative in proposing *quasivalence* and, by extension, *quasivalent*, something of approximate or relative value, where *quasi* means *approximate*, *relative*, or *similar*, and *valence* means *value*. In fact, what we are looking for in translation is not the equivalent of an SL unit in the TL, but its *quasivalent*, because achieving *equivalence* is literally impossible. In this respect, Neubert's (1994, P. 414) observation about equivalence falling out of favor is also interesting: "The narrow and hence mistaken interpretation of translational equivalence in terms of linguistic correspondence is in our opinion one of the main reasons that the very concept of equivalence has fallen into disrepute among many translation scholars." We also believe that the very naming of

equivalence has partly contributed to this misinterpretation. The choice of *quasivalence* can at least debunk the myth of linguistic correspondence in translation and help equivalence to recover its *amour propre* in a new guise.

The issue is not just nomenclature; not only does it assign a true meaning to what we are really doing, but its wide-ranging implications for the teaching of translation are also obvious. For one thing, prospective translators would learn from the outset that what they can achieve in translation is *approximation*, not *absoluteness*. For another, they would learn what they should compare and contrast between an SL text and its TL counterpart is *resemblance* of varying degrees, not duplication. And most inconveniently, they would learn that there is no such thing as equivalence in the proper sense: What there is is a concept tentatively called *quasivalence*.

And perhaps the lesson we can all learn is this:

Equivalence is not a relationship that is fixed once and for all, and the question is, as always, what kind of *similarity* we are prepared to accept as equivalence in a particular context for a particular purpose. Equivalence is constructed, not out of *absolute identity* but out of a rich diversity of *similarities* (Yallop, 2001, P. 242 our emphasis).

However, a disclaimer should be added at this point: The authors of this study in no way pretends that the birth of *quasivalence* means the final demise of equivalence and all its attendant complications. The gnawing pain of equivalence still hangs heavy like a sword of Damocles and seems here to stay, and, as Kewley Draskau noted in 1991, the lament over its deuced elusiveness is still obligatory. The main point of proposing *quasivalence* is to choose the right name for our ubiquitous problem, namely equivalence, since there is a near-universal consensus that equivalence is relative and not at all absolute, while the naming of equivalence does not reflect this reality. Common sense dictates that a wrong and counterintuitive name for an already disconcerting problem further complicates the problem. One hopes that this simple change in naming will have other practical implications, as noted above.

5. What the Future Holds

When Tymoczko (2005a, P. 1082) looked into the rather murky crystal ball of translation studies, one of the things she saw was that the definition of translation would attract the lion's share of translation scholars' attention. It may seem aporetic that an area of study whose growth "as a separate discipline" is effusively hailed as "a success story of the 1980s" (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1992, P. xi) is still stunted at its core, i.e., its definition. It is not that there has been a dearth of attempts to produce a working definition of translation. Quite the contrary. "Definitions of proper translating are almost as numerous and varied as the persons who have undertaken to discuss the subject" (Nida, 1964a/2004, P. 157). And almost every book that deals with the concept of translation in earnest or claims to deal with it in its entirety often starts from an operational definition of translation, based on which it grounds its doctrines on the various aspects of translation and addresses other issues surrounding the concept of translation. The root cause of the problem seems to lie elsewhere.

Among other things, the failure to define the nature of equivalence is often cited as the main cause of the difficulty or even impossibility of defining translation, since, as Pym (1992, P. 37) believes, equivalence and translation are caught in a vicious circle so that equivalence defines translation and translation, in turn, defines equivalence.

Also in this regard, in her "Trajectories of Research in Translation Studies" (2005a), "Enlarging Western Translation Theory: Integrating Non-Western Thought About Translation" (2005b) and subsequently more extensively in her 2007 book *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators*, Tymoczko challenges the overwhelming dominance of Western views on the nature of translation in general, rejecting them as intellectually hegemonic, ethnocentric and parochial, which would ultimately lead us to a narrow and restrictive definition of translation. By examining some non-Western words for translation –such as *fanyi*, meaning 'turning over' in the Chinese context, the Indian *rupantar* and *anuvad* meaning 'change in form' and 'speaking after, following' respectively, the Arabic *tarjama* meaning 'biography', and the Nigerian *tapia* with *ta* meaning 'tell, narrate' and with *pia* meaning

'deconstruction, break [it] up', she shows how restrictive and insular some Western concepts of translation such as fidelity and one-to-one reconstruction are. She, therefore, argues for pushing the boundaries of translation theory far beyond Western concepts to include non-Western concepts. To achieve this, she appeals to a cluster concept of translation without fixed and predefined boundaries, borrowing ideas from Wittgenstein's game concept (1953). She also believes that any attempt to achieve such a definition of translation as a cluster concept must inevitably entail "moving to an *a posteriori* definition of equivalence" (Tymoczko, 2005b, P. 15). The authors of the present study believe that the choice of *quasivalence* for equivalence necessarily implies not only that any relation between source texts and target texts is not a relation of identity, as implied by the term equivalence, but "a similarity relationship which entails difference" (Tymoczko, 2005b, P. 15), but is also a step forward in establishing an *a posteriori* rather than an *a priori* relation between source and target texts. This *a posteriori* relation is immanent in and constitutive of the very *quasi* meaning approximate, relative, not fixed, and not predefined. Therefore, *quasivalence* seems to tie in closely with our attempts to define translation as a cluster concept.

Despite the recognition that equivalence is a misnomer and that it is a term of convenience used in the literature of translation studies for want of a better word, it would be naïve to assume that the debate on it is over and that it is only mentioned in relation to discussions of translation before the 21st century. As Blumczynsky and Hassani's (2019) proposed multidimensional model for translation in general and equivalence in particular shows, there is still plenty of interest in this concept and its problematization in a way that seems more compatible with translational *quasivalence* than equivalence.

6. Conclusion

This mainly theoretical study took on the onomastics of equivalence, arguing that in addition to the intrinsic volatility of equivalence, its very naming has contributed to its complexity. Against this background, we proposed a new term: *quasivalence*. If a translation is an approximation of a source text, it is anything but equivalent. We believe

that our proposed term can at least help to debunk the myth of equivalence in translation and set the record straight on the true dynamics of translation, especially for those who have just begun to learn the craft of translation. It seems like a good idea to practically test whether introducing *quasivalence*, instead of equivalence, to budding translators would lead to different translations. If so, how would their translations differ from the translations of those translators who approach translation with the notion of equivalence?

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تأملی در نام‌گذاری واژه تعادل^۱

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چکیده

علی‌رغم نظریه‌های متعدد درباره ماهیت تعادل ترجمه‌ای و دهها سال تلاش در این زمینه، تعادل ترجمه‌ای همچنان یکی از موضوعات بحث‌برانگیز رشته مطالعات ترجمه است؛ نظریه‌پردازان ترجمه دیدگاه‌های مختلف، و حتی بعضاً کاملاً متضاد، درباره تعادل ترجمه‌ای دارند. درحالی‌که تعریف بسیاری از نظریه‌پردازان از ترجمه مبتنی بر ماهیت تعادل در ترجمه است، برخی تعادل ترجمه‌ای را توهمی بیش نمی‌دانند. این پژوهش نظری بر آن است تا پس از ارائه پیشینه پژوهشی درباره تعادل ترجمه‌ای از نیمه دوم قرن بیستم به بعد، به مسئله نام‌گذاری تعادل ترجمه‌ای در زبان انگلیسی یعنی equivalence بپردازد. این پژوهش این‌گونه استدلال می‌کند که خود واژه equivalence به پیچیدگی ماهیت تعادل ترجمه‌ای افزوده است و با این‌که واژه equivalence بیانگر ارزش یکسان (equal value) در ترجمه است، در عمل هرگز چنین اتفاقی نمی‌افتد. باتوجه به این مسئله، این پژوهش واژه جدیدی به جای equivalence پیشنهاد می‌کند و استدلال می‌کند که این نواژه واحدی زیاده با آنچه در عمل، ما از تعادل ترجمه‌ای انتظار داریم سازگار است.

واژه‌های راهنما: تعادل، ترجمه به مثابه مفهومی خوشه‌ای، تعریف ترجمه، شبه‌تعادل،

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