# Equivalence-Based Linguistic Approaches to Literary Translation

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*Abstract:*

*This article investigates the linguistic approaches to translation in general and literary translation in particular. It discusses the equivalence models elaborated by Eguene Nida, J. C. Catford, Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet, Peter Newmark and Mona Baker, with much emphasis on Nida's paradigm of equivalence because of being deeply involved in the discussion of the figurative language, which represents a core part in the literary translation. The article elaborates the contributions offered by such linguists to the field of translation studies and how some of their insights can be integrated into a cultural approach to literary translation. However, this does not necessarily mean that their models do not have methodological pitfalls or cultural limits.*

*Keywords:* equivalence, literary translation, semantic and lexical translation, translation strategies.

**Introduction:**

This article discusses the linguistic methods in translation studies, with a particular focus on equivalence theories. The concept of equivalence has been of major concern during the linguistic age of translation studies "although its relevance; definition and applicability … have caused controversy." It has been theorized and applied by many linguists, including Vinay and Darbelnet, Roman Jackboson, Eugene Nida, J. C. Catford, Peter Newmark and Mona Baker, among others. Yet, they have approached it from different perspectives and for different ideological objectives.

In this article, extensive discussion is provided in order to conceptualize equivalence paradigm that respects the SC and the TL system. In this regard, different equivalence models will be examined and evaluated to see the extent to which they can be utilized in the translation of literary prose. In other words, this article tries to answer the following question: how can the existing

equivalence models provide solutions for the lexical, semantic, and stylistic gaps encountered in the translation between two distant linguistic codes such as Arabic and English?

## Nida's Equivalence:

The American theologian and linguist Eugene Nida is thought to have shifted the translation theory from philosophy to linguistics. This is manifest in his book *The Science of Translating* and his co-authored book with Charles Taber *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Nida's equivalence revolutionizes not only Bible translation but also secular translation studies, including literary ones. Although it is a linguistic-based method, equivalence was brought to the arena of translation studies by Nida to develop an accurate method for Bible translation. Advocating Equivalence, which aims at creating sameness between ST and the TT, Nida divides translating into "two poles …: strict formal equivalence and complete dynamic equivalence."

## Nida's Formal Equivalence:

Traditionally known as literal translation, formal equivalence is the faithful rendering of the form and the content of ST in the TT. Nida is critical of formal equivalence as he claims that translation studies have shifted "from the formal to the dynamic dimension." He goes further to argue that the essential task of the translator is to reproduce the ST message in the target language, and this reproduction can only be achieved by the dynamic equivalence model. By contrast, some scholars such as Mildred Larson and Peter Newmark contend that literal translation should be the first strategy to be employed, and the translator should only deviate from using it when proving insignificant, as it is the case with idiomatic expressions and the culture-bound terms.

According to Nida and Taber "formal correspondence distorts the grammatical and stylistic patterns of the receptor language, and hence distorts the message." In their view, formal correspondence is not useful to overcome the gaps resulting from the lexical, semantic, and stylistic differences between two linguistic codes. In fact, their stance towards formal correspondence is ridiculous because formal equivalence can be effectively employed in translating narrations that do not have cultural implications. For instance, the Arabic sentence extracted from the Arabic novel *Thakirat al-raml* "آه...السالمة لقد كنت على حق" can be directly rendered as "Oh Salma, you were right." Formal correspondence is, then, undoubtedly useful in translating non- metaphorical meaning from ST into TT.

Formal correspondence can also be used to translate some figures of speech such as similes. See the following example from the Mohamed Salem's Mauritanian Arabic novel *Thakirat al-raml* (The Sand Memory, 2008).

أنت كالثور تنزو كل يوم على أنثى

You are like an ox every day making love with a female.

The translation of this simile using Nida's method of dynamic equivalence does not communicate the probable connotation of the term because the translator, according to Nida, has to search for a simile in the TL that can create the same effect as that of the SL. Therefore, I opt for using formal correspondence to convey the meaning in more accurate and expressive way.

Therefore, this article contends that formal equivalence, to some extent, guarantees more faithful rendering because it respects the SC as opposed to the dynamic equivalence, which searches for fluency of the translation and hence becomes dismissive of the original's cultural features. Thus, such translating method is useful in literary translation since it ensures certain degree of faithfulness to the ST.

The study, however, agrees with Nida's rejection of using formal equivalence in the translation of the linguistic features that are divergent from their counterparts in the TL. In this regard, the translator must respect the target language system. He/she has to opt for dynamic equivalence, which is probably more appropriate in overcoming linguistic gaps.

**Dynamic Equivalence:**

In *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Nida and Taber define dynamic equivalence "in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language." In this regard, dynamic equivalence is projected to shift the attention to the response of the receptor-readers. Furthermore, the dynamic equivalence, according to Nida, has three levels within which it operates: "(1) equivalent, which points towards the source language message, and (2) natural which points towards the receptor language, and (3) closest, which binds the orientations together on the basis of the highest degree of approximation." Obviously, Nida undermines the balance between the form and the content as he gives essential priority to the meaning more than to the form which is not mentioned in his dynamic process of translating. Nida states, "Meaning must have priority over style." In this respect, two questions come to the fore: Is meaning homogenous? Are the social and cultural implications of the form separate from the total meaning or an essential part of the meaning?

To advocate dynamic equivalence, Nida further argues that "rather than force the formal structure of one language upon another, the effective translator is quite prepared to make any and all formal changes necessary to reproduce the message in the distinctive structural forms of the receptor language." The form is clearly inessential in the translation process since the translator can restructure the formal aspects of the ST, so that they can be natural. Moreover, Nida claims the untranslatability of the form since it is part of the language genius, which is different from one language to another. Hence, in the process of translating the style of the original, the translator produces "something which is not functionally equivalent." The fact that there is no functional formal equivalence leads Nida to contend that translation studies have shifted from the formal

rendering to the dynamic one.

The irrelevance of the form in the process of translating represents the hallmark of the receptor-oriented approach, which advocates domestication strategy. In this sense, the ST formal and structural aspects have to be adapted to their equivalents in the target language. Munday asserts:

> The receptor oriented approach considers adaptations of grammar, of lexicon and of cultural references to be essential in order to achieve naturalness; the TT language should not show interference from the SL and the foreignness of the ST setting is minimized in a way that would now be criticized by later culturally oriented translation theorists."

Therefore, by concealing the foreignness of the source culture, translation turns to be a mere cultural adaptation or interpretation, which is, according to Nida, inescapable. In Nida's words, "one must not imagine that the process of translation can avoid a certain degree of interpretation by the translator." However, the translator's interference or subjectivity can result in violating and misrepresenting the ST.

Nida formulates his dynamic equivalence basing on the linguistic theory especially Chomsky's generative grammar, pragmatics and semantics. According to Munday, dynamic equivalence is merely "an adaptation of transformational grammar models; and scientific (linguistics) methods to analyze meaning in his work on bible translating." In the same vein, Moa Huaizhou states that "generative transformational Grammar (GTG) by Noam Chomsky, along with its legitimacy among linguistics, lent credence and influence to Nida's "science of translation." Hence, following Chomsky, Nida argues that the generative view of language allows for transcending the search for formal equivalents between languages. Instead, the translator must "attempt to describe the mechanisms by which the total message is decoded, transferred, and transformed into the structures of another language."

The pragmatic dimension in Nida's equivalence is highly manifest through his recognition of the relevance of context in determining the meaning. Dohun Kum asserts that in Nida's theory "meaning is context dependent." Hence, Nida acknowledges that the translation problems caused by pragmatics eliminate the possibility of achieving identical translation. Nida observes: "the response can never be identical, for the cultural and historical settings are too different but there should be a high degree of equivalence of response, or the translation will have failed to accomplish its purpose." Clearly then, Nida implicates the difficulty of translating the pragmatic features from one language to another. Since it is impossible to achieve 'identical' response among TRs, translators can only achieve a high degree of sameness in translation.

Admittedly, the semantic assumption in Nida's equivalence is confirmed in his preference of dynamic equivalence over formal equivalence. Nida points out:

We must analyze the transmission of a message in terms of a dynamic dimension. This analysis is especially important for translating, since the production of equivalent messages is a process, not merely of matching the parts of the utterances, but also of reproducing the total dynamic characters of communication.

Nida obviously introduces the dynamic dimension as the decisive factor in the translation process. In this respect, translation is understood as a dynamic reproduction of the communicative message. In Nida's theory, the communication process focuses on the semantic meaning more than stylistic values of the ST. Accordingly, the translator is called to alter the form in order "to preserve the meaning."

As a system of translating, dynamic equivalence has three steps by which the process of dynamic rendering can be achieved. These steps are: "analyses," "transfer" and "structuring." The analysis is concerned with decoding grammatical units and referential meanings of words while the transfer is the step "in which the analyzed material is transferred in the mind of the translator from language A to language B." Restructuring, as the last step, aims at creating 'the natural' meaning. This naturalness is the main goal of translation in Nida's theory:

A translation of dynamic equivalence aims at complete naturalness of expression and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of his own culture; it does not insist that he understand the cultural patterns of the source-language context in order to comprehend the message.

Seemingly, Nida's model focuses on creating the complete naturalness as a key condition of a good translation. In this regard, the translator's task is not to impart new cultural features to the TRs. Rather, it is simply to construct his/her own vision about the source culture. Therefore, translation, in Nida's equivalence, is no longer an intercultural communication means but rather an adaptation of the foreign culture.

To a large degree, Nida's model stimulates many translation scholars and contributes to the emergence of the discipline of translation studies. However, he has been criticized for offering a theory shaped by theologian and missionary goals. That is, Nida's main strategy is to come up with a translation version of the Bible, which can persuade many people to convert to Christianity. Yet, when he formulates his dynamic or functional equivalence, Nida does not essentialise it as the absolute method for all translation fields. Rather, Nida contends that cultural translation is not useful only in case of Bible translation, his own area of translational practice and theory. Nida puts it: "a good translation of the bible must not be a cultural translation. Rather, it is a linguistic one."

However, Nida does not acknowledge culture at the level of analysis, his second stage of the dynamic translation process. Rather, he recognizes the significance of culture only in the third stage, restructuring. Such recognition is meant to give fluency to the TT as it dismisses all the aspects of

the foreign/source language. This removal of the ST foreign aspects in the translation is called domestication strategy that has been criticized by many translation scholars, including critics of the cultural turn, especially Laurence Venuti    In short, Nida's dynamic equivalence is not appropriate for literary translation because it overlooks the cultural features of the ST by adapting them to the TT. Dynamic equivalence, however, remains to some extent helpful when translating idioms and collocations.

**Other Equivalence Models:**

This section is an attempt to explore the equivalence models offered by linguists and translation scholars, among them Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet, Roman Jakboson, Peter Newmark J.C Catford and Mona Baker**.** It shows the extent to which their equivalence paradigms are significant for overcoming the linguistic gaps in literary translation. Like Nida, these thinkers opt for domestication strategies for literary translation.

**Vinay and Darbelnet's Model of Equivalence:**

In their book *Stylistique Comparée du Français ET de l'Anglais*, Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet divide translation into two types: direct and oblique translation. On the one hand, the direct translation method is employed when there are "(i) parallel categories, in which case we can speak of structural parallelism, or (ii) on parallel concepts, which are the result of metalinguistic parallelisms." In this sense, the translator is concerned with the direct transmission of the ST materials into the equivalent TT ones. On the other hand, the oblique translation method is used by translators to fill the gaps of ST with "corresponding elements, so that the overall impression is the same for the two messages." Thus, the translator may be required "to transpose the source language message element by element into the target language." We can notice that they focus on the message in the process of translation instead of the stylistic features such as lexical and syntactic items, which are likely to be translated with respect to the target language system. This is because, according to Vanay and Darblenet, "each language has its own methods for achieving economy of expression."

Clearly then, Vinay and Darbelnet distinguish between two types of translation in which equivalence can be easily achieved on the form and content levels because the ST and TT share similar structures or code units that have parallel extra-linguistic assumptions. They also recognize another type of translation where the ST and TT do not share any structural or metalinguistic similarities. In this case, the translator is allowed to employ another method that can transfer the message with the same effect. Therefore, Vinay and Darbelnet modulate seven translation procedures: borrowing, caique, literal translation, transposition, modulation, equivalence and adaptation. The first three procedures are used in foreingnization strategy, and the others are used in the domestication strategy.

Like Nida, Vinay and Darblent adhere to domestication strategies to overcome the cultural

gaps encountered in literary translation, especially between two dissimilar languages and cultures. For them, the translator must handle the translation gaps so that the overall impression of the ST and TT would be the same. They assert that the major objective of equivalence is "to convey a message which a reader does not understand for cultural reasons, by a detour which makes it accessible." They clearly overlook the necessity of the faithful rendering of the SC so as to achieve the cross-cultural exchange between the SC and the TC.  For this reason, this study makes use of their framework to translate lexical and syntactic units, but it negotiates their strategies for literary translation.

**Jakobson's Model of Equivalence:**

In addition to Nida, Darbelnet and Vinay, the structuralist and linguist Roman Jakobson is another important figure in linguistic translation studies. In the mid of twentieth century, he published an essay entitled "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" where he divides translation into three types:

1.  Intralingual translation or *rewording* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language.

2. Interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.

3. Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.

The second type is the most interesting for translation studies. Jakobson, however, contends that there is "no full Equivalence between code-units, while messages may serve as adequate interpretations of alien code-units or messages."  Accordingly, equivalence is presented as kind of interpretation of the ST unit, so that it can be transferred into the TT.

For Jakobson, equivalence is to be achieved at the semantic level. In his view, grammatical problems in translation are likely to be solved by using a TT message that refers to an ST grammatical codes. He states, "If some grammatical category is absent in a given language, its meaning may be translated into this by lexical means." Thus, the direct rendition of an ST into a TT is somewhat difficult due to the profound lexical and grammatical divergences between ST and TT.

Seemingly, Jakobson modulates practical strategies for dealing with the syntactic and lexical gaps faced in translation. His model appears relevant to the study because it can help translators overcome the difficulties resulting from differences between the two linguistic codes involved in the process of translation. Jakobson, however, appears to overlook the cultural factors in translation, and this makes his model inadequate for literary translation.

**Catford's Model of Equivalence:**

J. C. Catford is another revolutionary contributor to the development of equivalence theory in

translation studies. Unlike Nida who recognizes, to some extent, cultural and social dimensions in translation, Catford narrows the scope of translation; he reduces translation to the interpretation of linguistic features of the ST. Indeed, he is highly concerned with the translatability of the different linguistic aspects of the ST. This is clearly manifest in his division of the translation process: "phonological translation," "graphological translation," "grammatical translation," and "lexical translation." Therefore, translation equivalence is realized at different levels.

Basing his study on Hallidayan linguistics, Catford introduces the rank scale in which he analyzes the grammatical and phonological hierarchies in the sentence. This shows the extent to which Catford essentialises and reduces translation to a mere linguistic activity. That is to say, Catford does not go beyond the linguistic scope of the sentence, because he considers sentence as the highest rank in which the process of communication operates. He, rather, dismisses other extra-linguistic realities, including cultural factors. In Catford's model, the main objective of translation is to achieve equivalence or the "total translation," to use Catford's words. He divides equivalence into formal correspondence and textual equivalence.

Textual equivalence refers to "any TL text or portion of text which is observed on a particular occasion… to be the equivalent of a given SL text or portion of text," while formal correspondence relates to the transference of the ST category to the equivalent TT category. Obviously, Catford makes use of the Hallidayan linguistics to introduce analytical terms such as category, unit, class, and rank. The translator is then required to achieve equivalence at these linguistic levels.

In his view, these two methods can be employed in the translation of a single text in order to achieve equivalence at both levels: form and content. However, if there is no equivalence at the form level between the ST and TT, a linguistic shift is inevitable. This linguistic shift is Catford's contribution to the field of translation studies.

Indeed, the translation shift is very significant for dealing with grammatical gaps between two dissimilar linguistics codes. To explain this, Catford provides an example from English French translation where an English adjective is rendered as an adverbial phrase in French. For example, the English phrase "medical student" becomes "etudiant *en médecine*" in French.  Here, the adjective "medical" is translated by the adverbal phrase "*en médecine.*"

In his attempt to elaborate a linguistic theory of translation, Catford "introduced a number of definitions that divided and subdivided translation into various criteria. The most important of these was the idea of grammatical rank." In this respect, he divides translation into two categories: Rank-bound translation and unbounded translation. The former means that the equivalence is achieved at word or morpheme level, while in the latter "equivalence does not take place at the same level or rank, but exchange can take place at the sentence, clause or other level."

Nonetheless, Catford's model remains somewhat restrictive for literary translation studies

where a cultural approach might be preferred. In fact, Catford oversimplifies translation in his definition of translation since he does not go beyond language. Furthermore, Catford's monolithic theory of translation seems strange even among linguists who, to some extent, recognize the role of culture in translation.

**Newmark's Model of Equivalence:**

The concept of "equivalence" has been evolved by Peter Newmark who transcends Nida's dichotomy of formal and dynamic equivalence to semantic and communicative translations. These two methods are defined by Newmark as follows:

> Communicative translation attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original. Semantic translation attempts to render as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language.

In his view, the two methods are complementary with each other in the sense they can be used in one text. According to Newmark, "there are often sections in one text that must be translated communicatively … and others semantically." Hence, the use of either method depends on different dimensions: context, situation, and text.

There are overlaps between Newmark's communicative equivalence and Nida's dynamic equivalence. In the same way, semantic equivalence has some similarities with Nida's formal equivalence. In agreement with Nida, Newmark advocates the principle of "equivalent effect" in translation. However, he approaches the principle of the equivalent effect in translation somewhat differently from that of Nida's. As he notes, "the equivalent-effect element is inoperant if the text is out of TL space and time." Clearly then, Newmark extends Nida's dynamic equivalence to include many cultural, social, and spatial dimensions. Hence, he does not view any approach to be the universal method of translating. For him, translation theory "cannot propose a single method (e.g. dynamic equivalence), but must be concerned with the full range of text-types and their corresponding translation criteria, as well as the major variables involved." Therefore, Newmark can be said to have paved the way for the cultural approach. This contention is confirmed when he considers that the main function of translation is to transmit knowledge and culture between different nations. Although he valorizes literal translation, Newmark's model still functions within the target text-oriented approach, which is proved unfruitful in the translation of culture bound terms.

**Baker's Model of Equivalence:**

This theoretical inquiry would have been incomplete without reference to Mona Baker who makes valid points concerning the different dimensions and assumptions that formulate each type of equivalence. In this respect, Baker identifies different types of equivalence at different levels of the word, phrase, grammar, text, pragmatic, etc. She, hence, divides equivalence into many types, including pragmatic equivalence, grammatical equivalence and functional equivalence. This stems

from her conviction that there is no one sufficient approach to the process of translation. Rather, translating requires the application of all approaches. For this reason, she incorporates all equivalence theories into one approach that acknowledges all linguistic, social and cultural dimensions. In this sense, translation methods are complementary to each other since every translation approach has a gap that can be complemented by another. Baker's integration of translation approaches in an encompassing model is meant to provide adequate rendition of the ST message. In her view, translators must employ all procedures in order to transfer the ST grammatical, pragmatic, lexical and semantic aspects to their equivalents in TT.

Another seminal input of Baker into equivalence is her call for an eclectic approach to translation. Unlike Nida and Catford who hugely focus on linguistics, Baker argues that there is no one adequate approach for the process of translation. In her view, the employment of one translation strategy results in an inadequate rendition of the ST message. For Baker, the translator is expected to resolve translation problems by any strategy he/she thinks to be useful. She asserts,

> Whatever lexical and grammatical problems are encountered in translating a text and whatever strategies are used to resolve them, a good translator will make sure that… the target text display a sufficient level of lexical cohesion in its own right.

Baker tends to domestication strategy which focuses on the cohesions and readability of the TT. She thinks that any translation may entail adjustments to meet the target readers' expectations. She points out that "anything that is likely to violate the target reader's expectations must be carefully examined and, if necessary, adjusted in order to avoid conveying the wrong implicatures or even failing to make sense altogether." Clearly then, Baker grants the translator the freedom to render the ST in a way that conforms to TL system and cultural conventions. Therefore, her model is insufficient for literary translation since she overlooks the strategies that can help the translator handle the gaps resulting from the literary translation between two dissimilar languages.

**Conclusion:**

The equivalence models surveyed above can be significant in Arabic English literary translation. That is to say, they suggest working solutions for translating linguistics items such as idioms, collocations and figures of speech. However, such models still need to be adapted to convey the cultural specificities of the ST.

Despite their pitfalls and gaps, the linguistic approaches still have some advantages over literary translation. In particular, Nida's footnote technique in conjunction with Vinay and Darbelnet's borrowing procedure can operate within a cultural approach to literary translation. First, the footnote is more effective for translating concepts in the sense that the cultural loads are not concealed. In the same vein, the use of footnote guarantees a certain degree of the translator's invisibility in the running text, because it is a space within which the translator provides his / her

interpretation and comments on the translated concepts. Moreover, if there is no lexical equivalent in TL, the borrowing procedure is fruitful, for it draws attention to exotic and foreign concepts, with an endeavor from the translator to assist TRs to comprehend them.

Furthermore, borrowing strategy is more faithful than Nida's equivalent effect since the substitution of one term by another can be sometimes a distortion of the source language culture. That is, instead of granting the target audience the chance to get introduced to new terms, the translator simply misleads them by replacing an SL cultural term with another TL cultural term. In fact, the focus on creating the equivalent effect is a very essential task, but it should not be at the expense of the essential purpose of translation, which is intercultural communication. For not taking into account the extra-linguistic realities such as cultural and social factors, equivalence-based approaches have been harshly criticized. Many translation scholars emphasize the limitations of the linguistic approaches.

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