

A Study of Eugene A. Nida and His Translation Theories

Dan Mao*, Zhilin Wang

School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Petroleum University, Chengdu, China

**Corresponding author: daisyandxixi@163.com*

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Abstract: Ever since China's reform and opening up, there has been a surge of interest in Western translation theories, with Nida's theories gaining the most recognition. As a pioneer in contemporary translation theory, Eugene A. Nida has made significant contributions to the field. This paper is divided into four parts: the first part provides an introduction to Nida and his translation theories; the second part delves into the development of Nida's theories in three stages and analyzes his ideas within each stage; the third part offers a comprehensive estimation of Nida and his theories, including his main contributions and the potential weaknesses of his theories; and the final part summarizes the paper, highlights the importance of studying Nida's theories, and presents the author's conclusion. Through a thorough analysis of his theories, it is evident that Nida's impact on the field of translation is profound, and his ideas continue to shape contemporary translation studies.

1. Introduction

Throughout the historical development of China, three significant translation climaxes have emerged, each leaving a profound impact on Chinese translation. The first climax occurred during the Eastern Han Dynasty and extended through the Tang and Song dynasties, characterized by a surge in the translation of Buddhist scriptures. This expansion of Buddhist scriptures broadened the scope of translation, encompassing religious subjects. The second climax unfolded in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, focusing on the translation of science and technology. This period witnessed a remarkable translation effort in scientific and technological works, reflecting the growing importance of these fields during that time. The third climax emerged during the period from the Opium War to the May 4th Movement, marked by the translation of Western studies. This era witnessed a heightened interest in translating Western knowledge and ideas into Chinese, reflecting the nation's increasing engagement with the West. The translation of Western studies broadened the horizons of Chinese translation, encompassing various disciplines such as literature, philosophy, and social sciences.

According to Tan Zaixi, China ushered in the fourth climax of Chinese translation at the end of the twentieth century, which took the advent of globalization and the implementation of a series of policies such as China's reform and opening up as an opportunity[3]. During this period, Eugene A. Nida, a prominent Western translation theorist, had a profound impact on the study of Western translation theories in China. Nida's introduction provides Chinese scholars with valuable insights and lays the foundation for the establishment of a robust translation system in China. His translation theories continue to exert a lasting influence on the global translation field. Scholars worldwide are dedicated to studying his theories, particularly his concepts of dynamic and formal equivalence in

biblical translation. Nida's work remains widely studied and applied by scholars and translators worldwide, underscoring its enduring importance in the field of translation studies.

2. Profile

Despite being born in 1914, Eugene A. Nida's contributions to the fields of linguistics and translation remain highly relevant and influential in contemporary times. From an early age, Nida's devout Christian beliefs and his profound passion for the Bible fueled his aspirations to become a missionary. His exposure to linguistic disciplines, including the study of Latin, and his academic pursuits in foreign languages during college provided him with a solid foundation for his later engagement in Bible translation. Consequently, Nida's translation theories became intricately intertwined with the translation of the Bible, establishing a distinct presence in the Western translation world. Although Nida did not undertake extensive translation projects himself, his theories effectively guided the translation and revision of several prominent Bible translations during his era. His ideas permeated the translation processes, influencing decisions regarding linguistic choices, cultural adaptation, and communicative effectiveness. His theories were instrumental in ensuring accurate and accessible translations of the Bible for diverse audiences. Furthermore, Nida's influence extends beyond the realm of Bible translation, as his ideas continue to shape contemporary translation activities. Many translators choose to apply his theories in their practices, recognizing the significance of his concepts such as dynamic equivalence and formal equivalence. Nida's emphasis on the importance of conveying meaning and preserving the function of the source text resonates with translators seeking to produce effective and faithful translations across various domains.

Furthermore, Nida's contributions extended beyond his translation theories. As a highly accomplished linguist, he embarked on a career with the American Bible Society after completing his education, where he was entrusted with the task of evaluating translations from a linguistic perspective. Nida gladly shared his expertise with others, offering guidance and coaching to translators. He played a pivotal role in establishing guidelines for translators and providing valuable insights to enhance their work. Throughout his career, Nida embarked on extensive travels, visiting nearly 100 countries and exploring numerous languages, including those spoken in remote areas. His profound knowledge and experiences culminated in the publication of several influential works. Among his notable publications are *Toward a Science of Translating* (1964), *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (1969), and *From One Language to Another* (1986). Notably, Nida maintained a close connection with Chinese academics. His profound fondness for China led to his invitation to this country on eight occasions, where he delivered lectures that drew large audiences. His presence in China was met with great enthusiasm and his visits left a lasting impact on the academic community. In summary, Nida's impressive linguistic expertise, coupled with his dedication to fostering effective translation practices, contributed significantly to the field. His extensive travels, valuable publications, and close engagement with Chinese scholars solidify his position as a highly regarded figure in translation studies.

3. Translation Theories

In his book *Nida and His Translation Theory*, Mr. Tan Zaixi divides the development of Eugene A. Nida's translation theory into three distinct stages. These stages are referred to as the stage of descriptive linguistics, the stage of communicative theory, and the stage of social semiotics. Following Tan Zaixi's framework, the author will discuss Nida's translation theories by these three stages. By examining each stage, the paper will explore the evolution of Nida's ideas and their significance in shaping contemporary translation practices.

3.1 The Stage of Descriptive Linguistics

The first stage in the development of Eugene A. Nida's translation theory is the stage of descriptive linguistics, which lays the foundation for subsequent stages of communicative theory and social semiotics. This stage spans from 1943, when Nida completed his doctoral dissertation, *A Synopsis of English Syntax*, to 1959, when he published *Principles of Translation as Exemplified by Bible Translating*[6]. During this initial stage, Nida focuses on exploring syntax and morphology from a linguistic perspective. He authors several articles, including *Morphology: The Descriptive Analysis of Words and Field Techniques in Descriptive Linguistics*, in which he seeks to elucidate these subjects and even sheds light on the process of translation from a linguistic standpoint. Nida aims to provide a fundamental understanding of the increasingly significant role of language and translation.[5]

Nida is greatly influenced by Leonard Bloomfield, a representative of American structural linguistics, and Edward Sapir, an anthropological linguist, in the early stages of his theoretical explorations[7]. He depicts syntax, morphology, and translation from a linguistic point of view. He discusses the relationship between the nature of language and interlingual translation in the light of translation theory, trying to find a more scientific method for the transformation of language and its translation[8]. However, Nida does not perceive linguistic differences as insurmountable divides; on the contrary, he analyzes them as distinct phenomena emanating from a shared essence. His insights even precede Noam Chomsky's proposition of deep structures and surface structures by five years. This exemplifies Nida's innovative approach to the exploration of translation theories.

In conclusion, the stage of descriptive linguistics marks the initial phase of Eugene A. Nida's translation theory development. During this stage, his focus on syntax, morphology, and translation from a linguistic perspective lays the groundwork for subsequent stages, and his insights and influences pave the way for the ongoing evolution of his theoretical framework.

3.2 The Stage of Communicative Theory

During the second stage of Nida's translation theory, which can be considered a major milestone in his theoretical exploration, he made significant contributions to the field of translation, with a major influence on the West and the world. This stage, known as the stage of communicative theory, spans from the publication of *Principles of Translation as Exemplified by the Bible* in 1959 to the publication of *The Theory and Practice of Translation* in 1969[7]. Over these 10 years, Nida's achievements in translation theory are extensive and varied. In this paper, the author will focus on four significant translation ideas that he put forward during this period.

3.2.1 "Translating" Is Science

In his seminal work *Toward a Science of Translating*, Nida delves into the intricacies of translating, presenting a comprehensive exploration of the subject from theory to practice. He posits that while "translating" encompasses scientific aspects, it is also a skill that ultimately transcends into an art form[9]. This perspective on "translating" as a science has significantly influenced Western translation circles, with Chinese scholars also providing their insights on the matter.

Tan Zaixi, in his articles *The Need to Establish a Science of Translation* and *A Trial Study of Translation*, critiques Nida's viewpoint, highlighting an inadequacy in his translation theories. Tan argues that translation rather than "translating" should be regarded as a science. From Tan's perspective, the criterion for determining whether "translating" is a science lies in its ability to unveil the objective laws governing its development. However, the term "translating" often refers to the practice, process, or task itself, which fails to unveil the objective rules governing translation.

Although Nida eventually abandoned this viewpoint, he made efforts to formalize translation to lend it scientific validity, a characteristic evident in his translation theories.

3.2.2 Translation Is Communication

Nida's translation theories, particularly in the stage of communicative theory, are characterized by his utilization of communication theory and information theory. He firmly believed that translation is a form of communication[10], which is a central tenet of his theoretical system.

According to Nida, a translation serves no purpose and lacks quality if it fails to fulfill its role as a means of communication. When translating, the translator must take into account all factors related to communication to ensure that the reader can understand the intended message. This includes considering the specific context in which the translation will be received and placing the language within the broader context to be comprehensively understood. Additionally, the translator must consider the relationship between the speakers or participants involved in the communication. Furthermore, Nida emphasized the importance of producing a translation that maintains the source text's communicative function, which requires the translator to carefully consider multiple aspects.

In essence, Nida's approach highlights the significance of effective communication in translation. By considering the various elements that contribute to successful communication, such as context, participants, and intended function, the translator can produce a translation that effectively conveys the meaning and message of the source text to the target audience.

3.2.3 Formal Equivalence and Dynamic Equivalence

When discussing Nida's translation theories, it is impossible to overlook his renowned theory of Dynamic Equivalence, which stands as one of the most prominent theories within his body of work. In *Toward a Science of Translating*, Nida initially introduced the concepts of "dynamic and formal equivalence," providing a comprehensive analysis to differentiate between the two. Formal equivalence refers to the formal characteristics of the source text shown in the target language text unchanged. Dynamic equivalence is therefore to be defined 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. For many years, translation theories have been centered around the debate between "direct translation" and "free translation", two opposing approaches that arise in the practice of translation. However, Nida's theories take a different perspective, emphasizing the functional use of translation and the importance of considering both the linguistic and cultural background. By breaking the constraints caused by the differences in formal structure between languages, Nida highlights the communicative role of translation and its purpose of serving the readers of the target text. Ultimately, the success of a translation is measured by its ability to be understood and comprehended by its readers. This serves as a reminder that translation should not be viewed as a mere linguistic exercise, but rather as a tool for effective communication across languages and cultures.

Besides, from Nida's definition of Dynamic Equivalence, it becomes apparent that a high-quality translation is one in which the message of the source text is transported into the target language to elicit a response similar to that of the original readers[11]. Within the theory of Dynamic Equivalence, the translator is not bound to strictly adhere to the form of the source text. However, this does not imply complete freedom in translation. Instead, the translator is required to faithfully reproduce the meaning of the source text within the linguistic structure of the target language. It is worth noting that due to frequent misunderstandings surrounding the term "dynamic equivalence," Nida later replaced it with the term "functional equivalence." This change signifies the ongoing development and refinement of Nida's translation theories, demonstrating their enduring vitality and we will discuss it

later.

In addition, Nida argued that translating consists of reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalence of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and second in terms of style. Nida's approach to translation includes three fundamental concepts: equivalence, naturalness, and closeness. Equivalence refers to the source language, while naturalness refers to the target language. The term "closest" highlights the importance of finding a translation that is both faithful to the source language and natural in the target language. By balancing these three concepts, Nida believed that translation could be most effective in accurately conveying the message of the source text to its readers.

Moreover, Nida's concept of dynamic equivalence encompasses four key aspects: lexical equivalence, syntactic equivalence, textual equivalence, and stylistic equivalence. Lexical equivalence requires the translator to have a deep understanding of the usage and meaning of words in the source language, and to find corresponding words or phrases in the target language. Syntactic equivalence involves not only recognizing the presence of certain structures in the target language but also understanding their frequency of use. Textual equivalence requires the translator to not only analyze the language itself but also consider its meanings and functions in different specific contexts. Lastly, stylistic equivalence highlights the importance of understanding the unique linguistic features of different genres and utilizing them effectively to create translations that accurately reflect the style of the source language. Only by mastering all of these aspects can a translator create translations that truly capture the essence of the source text.

In conclusion, Nida's theory of Dynamic Equivalence has left a lasting impact on the field of translation. As he continuously develops and refines his theories, his emphasis on faithfully conveying the meaning of the source text while considering the linguistic and cultural context of the target language serves as a valuable framework for translators seeking to bridge the gap between different languages and cultures.

3.2.4 Four-Step Model in the Process of Translating

When it comes to the translation process, Nida argues that it is a complex task that involves several steps: analysis, transfer, restructuring, and testing. Among these steps, Nida considers analysis to be the most crucial and challenging.

Firstly, translation is not simply a matter of converting the source text into the target text. It requires careful consideration of various factors, with a particular emphasis on analyzing the source text. Each text, whether between sentences or chapters, possesses its internal connections. Therefore, translators must be well-prepared to analyze the source text and its referential and associative meanings, as well as study its syntax and discourse structure in detail[2]. Nida suggests that many translation mistakes stem from a lack of detailed analysis. Translators who can analyze the source text thoroughly will find the subsequent translation process easier and will produce higher-quality translations.

Secondly, the conversion from the original language to the target language is a critical step in translating, referred to as transfer in Nida's four-step model. Transfer, in a broad sense, is the conversion of linguistic symbols or forms, and in a narrow sense, it refers to the three methods including addition, omission, and conversion. Translators should strive to reproduce the meaning of the source text as faithfully as possible, without strictly adhering to the original form of expression. Various methods, including omission, addition, and conversion, can be employed to achieve this goal.

In addition, after completing the transfer step, the translator needs to restructure the translation to enhance reader comprehension. Restructuring involves adjusting vocabulary, syntax, and parts of speech in the target language, making the translation align more closely with the expression of the target language. This enables readers to better understand and comprehend the translation. Analysis

is the premise and foundation of transfer and restructuring, transfer is an important means of restructuring, and restructuring is an important part of reproducing the original language[1].

Finally, testing represents the last step in Nida's four-step model. It plays a vital role in identifying any existing errors in the translation. Testing involves inviting readers to evaluate the translation, and Nida suggests several effective methods, such as having readers read the translation aloud, analyzing their facial expressions, asking those who have heard the translation to relay its content to others, and conducting fill-in-the-blank testing[2]. By involving readers in the testing process, translators can identify errors that they may have overlooked, ultimately improving the quality of the translation.

In conclusion, Nida's four-step model of translating involves analysis, transfer, restructuring, and testing. A thorough analysis of the source text is essential for effective translation, while transfer and restructuring ensure the faithful reproduction of meaning and form in the target language. Testing involves inviting readers to evaluate the translation, allowing for identifying and improving any errors.

3.3 The Stage of Social Semiotics

In the 1970s, Nida began to refine and expand his translation theories, integrating valuable elements from earlier translation theories into a new model. This new model incorporates the stage of social semiotics. Nida's book, *From One Language to Another*, published in 1986, can be considered the seminal work of this third stage, providing a comprehensive exposition of Nida's theoretical developments since the 1980s. In this book, Nida introduces modifications to his previous translation theories.

Firstly, Nida places great emphasis on the significance of form in the target text. He argues that every aspect of language, from its lexical choices to its syntactic structures, carries inherent meaning and must be taken into consideration by translators. This means that translators cannot simply focus on the literal meaning of words, but must also pay attention to the formal elements of the source text to capture its full meaning and essence. By disregarding the form, translators risk losing important nuances and layers of meaning in the translation process. Secondly, he also acknowledges the crucial role of rhetoric in effective communication. Nida argues that capturing these rhetorical nuances is essential for producing translations that resonate with the target audience in the same way as the original. By paying attention to the rhetorical features of language, translators can ensure that their translations are not only accurate in meaning but also effective in communicating the intended message to the target audience. Thirdly, to eliminate misunderstandings and clarify his theories, Nida replaces the term "dynamic equivalence" with "functional equivalence". This modification in terminology underscores his focus on the practical, communicative purpose of translation, rather than a rigid adherence to formal correspondences between the source and target texts. It has greatly influenced the field of translation and continues to be relevant in contemporary translation studies. Fourthly, he redefines the classification of meanings, shifting from the previous divisions of grammatical, referential, and associative meanings to rhetorical, grammatical, and lexical meanings. This reconceptualization reflects his deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of linguistic meaning and its implications for translation. Fifthly, he incorporates social semiotics into the study of translation, viewing language as a symbolic phenomenon and stressing the inseparability of language and its social context. Nida argues that language cannot be divorced from its sociocultural context, and translators must be aware of these factors to produce accurate and culturally sensitive translations. By incorporating social semiotics into translation studies, Nida expands the theoretical landscape of translation and emphasizes the importance of considering the social implications of language in the translation process.

To sum up, Nida's modifications to his previous translation theories have greatly impacted the field, providing new perspectives and approaches that have influenced the way translators think. He

emphasizes the importance of form and rhetoric in the target text, makes modifications in terminology, and incorporates social semiotics into the study of translation. His theories stress the practical, communicative purpose of translation and highlight the inseparability of language and its social context. These ideas continue to shape contemporary translation studies and have expanded the theoretical landscape of translation.

4. Estimation

Eugene A. Nida is widely regarded as one of the most influential translation theorists in the West, spanning nearly two centuries of scholarly development. His extensive body of work, comprising numerous books and fruitful research, encompasses a broad spectrum of subjects, ranging from the foundational principles and organizational aspects of translation to the intricacies of human and machine translation, as well as the intricate interplay between linguistics and translation. Nida's groundbreaking contributions have significantly expanded the research horizons within the field of Western translation, serving as an exemplary model for the translation community.

Nida's seminal work revolutionizes the way languages and cultures are approached in translation. He pioneers a novel perspective, saying that ideas and concepts expressed in one language can be effectively conveyed in another, with the translator striving to find equivalences between the respective languages and cultures. Consequently, Nida emphasizes the imperative of fully respecting the linguistic conventions and practices of the target language. Rather than resorting to the creation of neologisms or novel expressions at the first sign of difficulty, he advocates for the utilization of linguistic forms that align with the natural expression of the target language.

Additionally, Nida introduces the renowned concept of Functional Equivalence, which places a central focus on achieving equivalence in translation. He further refines this concept by delineating it into two distinct levels: the highest level equivalence and the lowest level equivalence, providing comprehensive elucidations for each tier. Nida's concept of the highest level equivalence refers to the ideal state in which the readers of a translation can understand and appreciate it in the same way as the readers of the source text. On the other hand, the lowest level equivalence means that readers of the translation can gain an understanding of how readers of the source text would comprehend and appreciate the source text. While achieving the highest level of equivalence is the ultimate goal, it is a difficult feat for most translators to accomplish. As such, the lowest level of functional equivalence serves as a minimum standard that must be met for a translation to be considered acceptable. However, it is worth noting that excellent translations often fall somewhere in between these two levels, as achieving perfect equivalence is a complex and challenging task. This innovative concept expands the theoretical landscape of translation and encompasses dimensions beyond the purview of earlier theories.

Furthermore, Nida stresses the pivotal significance of the reader's response and actively incorporates the reader into the translation process. His theory is characterized by putting aside language differences to look at readers' responses[4]. He contends that evaluating the merits and shortcomings of a translation necessitates an examination of how the reader responds to the translation, comparing it to the responses generated by the source text. Nida recognizes that one of the primary objectives of translation is effective communication, enabling readers of the target language to comprehend the source text's meaning. However, without adequately considering the reader, the purpose of the translation is compromised, and the resulting rendition cannot be deemed a successful translation.

Despite Nida's profound contributions to the translation community, his theory is not without its limitations. One notable shortcoming pertains to his attempt to extend the applicability of Dynamic Equivalence as a guiding principle for all texts. Nida's theory primarily focuses on biblical or

evocative and informative texts, rendering it less universally applicable. Nida's translation theory cannot be universally applied to all texts, as diverse texts and readers necessitate a multitude of translation theories.

5. Conclusion

Despite some inherent limitations, Nida's translation theories stand as one of the most remarkable works in the history of Western and global translation. What sets Nida's research apart is his integration of various disciplines such as linguistics, semiotics, communication theory, and information theory into the realm of translation studies, representing a breakthrough in translation theory research. Furthermore, the breadth of his research extends beyond the translation process itself, encompassing the principles, processes, and organization of translators to a notable extent. Even today, many scholars continue to explore and expand upon Nida's translation theories, while countless students rely on his theories to guide their translation practice. As long as translation research persists, there will always be individuals studying and employing Nida's translation theory in various capacities. Ultimately, Nida's contributions have injected new vitality and made significant advancements in the study of translation theory.

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