

An Analysis of the Use of Functional Equivalence Theory in Novel Translation—Taking Everything I Never Told You as an Example

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Abstract: As a literary genre, novels have unique and distinctive artistic characteristics. Novel translation should not only follow the corresponding communication purpose, but also take into account the linguistic characteristics and cultural factors of the novel, and strive to retain the style of the original in the translated text, to ensure that the translated text can bring readers the same reading experience as the original. This concept coincides with Eugene Nida's theory of functional equivalence. Based on Eugene Nida's functional equivalence theory, this paper will analyze the translation of *Everything I Never Told You* from three levels: lexical, syntactic and textual. As for the lexical level, the four-character Chinese structure is suggested. At the syntactic level, the right combination and division strategies should be used according to the source language text. When dealing with the textual level, two aspects should be taken into account, i.e. the communicative context and the situational context, to ensure the accurate translation of specific terms, phrases and sentences.

1. Introduction

In light of the expanding economic and cultural interactions between China and the West, China has consistently introduced global literary works while allowing domestic literary creations to travel overseas. Nevertheless, the quality of these translations fluctuates, with some merely achieving linguistic transformation, disregarding the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and thinking patterns, significantly affecting the reader's reading experience. Translation, a complex cross-linguistic and cross-cultural endeavor, involves not only linguistic word conversions but also the adaptation of the distinct cultural and cognitive aspects of two languages. This is particularly evident in literary translation. Translation is an essential means of communication and cultural exchange, as language is the primary carrier of culture. Each unique language has its own unique culture, and the process of translating any language should effectively translate that culture's values, beliefs, customs, and way of life. As cultures differ, translating one language into another inevitably involves interpreting and translating these differences to ensure accuracy. This interpretative

process often results in shifting, enhancing, and re-creating cultural connotations, leading to the inevitable occurrence of translation localization.

Celeste Ng's novel *Everything I Never Told You*, a critically acclaimed piece in both U.S. and international circles, epitomizes Chinese American literature. Her narratives are deftly composed, and marked by tranquility and restraint. Her skillful storytelling has captivated numerous readers with its subtlety and profound emotions. The novel tells the story of a girl, Lydia, who is overwhelmed by her parents' expectations and eventually commits suicide, and her family's grief-stricken search for Lydia's murder, only to realize in the end that it was they who caused their daughter's death. Through the portrayal of various characters, the author provides insights into family and gender issues and triggers deep thinking about family education and parent-child relationships.

A good translator should take the cultural differences between the source language and the target language fully into account in translation practice, make the translation appropriate to the local society and culture, and achieve semantic consistency between the original and the translation. Nida's functional equivalence theory also emphasizes the importance of semantic consistency, which can effectively guide cross-cultural translation (Yang, 2003).[5] Under the guidance of Nida's functional equivalence theory, this paper will thoroughly analyze the lexical, syntactic and textual structure of the translated novel, explore how the translator applies this theory in the translation process, and analyze the effect it produces. By analyzing translations in detail, we will have a better understanding of the application of functional equivalence theory in translation practice and improve our understanding of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

2. Functional Equivalence Theory

Eugene Nida, a renowned American linguist and translation theorist, has diligently summarized a multitude of translation theories from the practice of Bible translation spanning many decades. This substantial contribution has greatly promoted the evolution of contemporary translation theory, with Functional Equivalence Theory serving as the cornerstone of this translation theory.

In the 1960s, the American linguist Eugene Nida proposed a theory with far-reaching implications for modern translation—dynamic equivalence theory, or functional equivalence theory. He made it clear that, in translation practice, there is no need to insist on strict correspondence on the surface of words but should focus on seeking functional equivalence between two different languages. It is particularly noteworthy that the "function" mentioned here refers essentially to the effectiveness of the language in practical application. Functional equivalence theory plays an important role in translation activities, which has four main levels: lexical equivalence, syntactic equivalence, textual equivalence and stylistic equivalence.

If a literal translation is made according to the literal meaning of the two texts in English and Chinese, the true meaning of the original text cannot be conveyed effectively. Realistically, it is very challenging to find a sentence pattern in Chinese that can match perfectly with English to express the same meaning. Therefore, the translator should use the corresponding words in the target language to explain the original text directly, so as to improve the acceptance of the translated text by the readers. Only when the translation can reflect the style and spirit of the original text, both linguistically and culturally, can we truly consider such a translation a commendable effort.

His theory emphasizes that the target readers can obtain similar reading experience and aesthetic effects from the original readers, and focuses on both linguistic and cultural dimensions, which fully meet the needs of literary translation, so the theory has a wide scope of application in the practice of novel translation.

3. Case Study

Guo Jianzhong (Guo, 2000) points out that Functional Equivalence Theory is a basic concept of translation formed in Nida's study of Greek literature, which is not limited to Bible translation; moreover, literary translation is mainly to translate the charm and spirit of the original text and reproduce the effect of the original text. Therefore, he believes that Nida's theory of functional equivalence is applicable to literary translation.

Everything I Never Told You uncovers themes of gender, family, and self-actualization. The author skillfully employs flashback narratives to guide readers through Lydia's experience and her tragic decision to end her life, encouraging individuals to liberate themselves from societal expectations and embrace their authentic selves. Guided by Nida's theory of functional equivalence, this paper analyses novel translation in detail in terms of lexical, syntactic and textual levels, aiming to evaluate the feasibility of translation methods involved in functional equivalence theory. The Chinese translation chosen is the version translated by Sun Lu.[1]

3.1. Application of Functional Equivalence at Lexical Level

Words are the basic unit of language. In translation, the choice of vocabulary needs to be considered in many ways, especially focusing on the cultural connotation of words, and different cultural backgrounds have their unique ways of expressing language. Due to different cultural perceptions, the customary expression of vocabulary is also different. When describing the same phenomenon or thing, the translator may choose different words, and the influence of culture will penetrate the vocabulary (Zhang, 2013).[6] Nida defines translation as the reproduction of the message of the original language in the closest, most natural equivalent, first in terms of semantic equivalence and then in terms of stylistic equivalence. Certainly, translation initially requires lexical equivalence. Lexical equivalence serves as the most fundamental equivalence in translation practice. This form of equivalence should not only accurately and comprehensively convey the meaning of words, but also take into account the context, content of the original text, cultural practices and other factors so that the source language and the target language can achieve functional equivalence.

Example 1

ST: 1977, May 3, six thirty in the morning, no one knows anything but this **innocuous fact**: Lydia is late for breakfast.

TT: 1977nian5yue3rizaochen6dian30fendeshihou, meiyourenzhidaolidiyayijingsile, tamenzhiqingchuyigewushangdayadeshishi: lidiyalajibujichizaocanle.

For their second daughter, Father James, and Mother Marilyn have high hopes for Lydia, and they both hope she can make a career and solve any difficulties the family encounters within American society. They are not concerned with Lydia's inner thoughts and feelings, but rather about her getting to school on time. The phrase "innocuous fact" would be translated as "wuhaideshishi" if a direct translation were used, but the resulting translation would be somewhat dull and lacking in vitality. As such, the translator chose to translate the phrase as "wushangdaya", which enhances the expressive power of the phrase and makes it more vivid. At the same time, this translation also makes the text more fluent and concise. By adjusting the phrase to a four-character structure, the translation becomes more in line with the expression habits of the Chinese people, which makes it easier to read and understand. It also enhances the sense of rhythm.

Example 2

ST: You never got what you wanted; you just learned to **get by without it**.

TT: Niyongyuandebudaonixiangyaode, nizhishixuehuileruhedeguoqieguoeryi.

Lydia has endured a lot of pressure from her family, society and herself, which stems from her mother's quest for personal fulfillment and her father's high expectations. Despite the hardships,

Lydia bravely shoulders these burdens in silence and strives to play the perfect daughter role. The translator translates "get by without it" into "deguoqieguo", which not only enriches the literary quality of the work but also accurately captures Lydia's current predicament. The four-character structure of the translation aligns more closely with the Chinese way of expression and vividly depicts Lydia's mental activities.

Example 3

ST: It's she who says, at last, "Lydia's **taking a long time today.**"

TT: Zuihou, tabunaifandishuo: "lidiyajintianzhennengmoceng."

It's almost time for school, and Lydia is still missing. This is a complaint from Marilyn, the mother, about her daughter Lydia. If we translated it directly, it would be "hualehenchangshijian." However, such a translation may not be in line with the habits of Chinese readers and may not accurately convey the mother's dissatisfaction with Lydia in the original text. The use of "moceng" can effectively solve these problems and at the same time make translation full of the rich flavor of life.

3.2. Application of Functional Equivalence at Syntactic Level

English and Chinese sentence structures differ significantly. English sentences emphasize hypotaxis, forming a "tree" structure, where various modifiers, phrases, or clauses are attached to the main sentence. Chinese sentences, on the other hand, stress parataxis, forming a "bamboo" structure where several short clauses can comprise a sentence. The logical sequence of thought drives the structure of Chinese sentences. In addition, in English, attributes and adverbials (words, phrases, and clauses) can attach to the backbone of a sentence, resulting in complex, long sentences. In Chinese, modifiers are usually placed before the main word, while in English, they are usually placed after it. The focus of English sentences is usually at the front, while the focus of Chinese sentences is usually at the back. Due to these differences in sentence structure, logic, and focus, direct translation from English to Chinese may not conform to the common Chinese expression and may pose reading difficulties for readers.

According to Nida's principle of functional equivalence translation, if a translation that is close in form may misunderstand the meaning, some changes must be made to the translated text (Nida, 1993:125).[2] Therefore, in translation practice, we can adopt Division and Combination to analyse and deal with various grammatical structures in the original text, present a more intimate and natural translation, and enhance the readability, understandability and acceptability of the translation (Nida, 1986).[3]

Example 4

ST: It happens sometimes—their faces are so alike you'd see one in the corner of your eye and mistake her for the other: the same elfish chin and high cheekbones and left-cheek dimple, the same thin-shouldered build. Only the hair color is different, Lydia is ink-black and their mother is honey-blond.

TT: Nanguaineisihuibamuqincuokanchenglidiya, zhezhongqingkuangshiyoufasheng munvliazhangdehenxiang, niyaoshiyongyanjiaodeyuguangdaliang, feichangyoukenengrencuoren: liangrendoushijianxiaba, gaoquangu, zuobianyigedanjiuwo, xiaojianbang. Weidutoufadeyansebutong, lidiyadeshimoheise, tamuqindetoufashimizongse.

This sentence explains why Ness always mistook Lydia and her mother for each other. The first sentence is a subject-predicate structure, the main sentence is "It happens sometimes", followed by two parallel adjective phrases, two noun phrases and one phrase to describe how two people look alike in more detail, which will lead to misunderstanding. It can be seen that the translator uses division to split the first long sentence into several short sentences, which makes the meaning of

this sentence more compact, makes the meaning of the sentence more complete, avoids looseness and conforms to Chinese expression.

Example 5

ST: She pictured her daughter tossing the cookbook onto the grass and stomping it into the mud with her shiny Mary Janes and walking away.

TT:Taxiangxiangzhenverbashipurengdaocaodishang,yongtanashanshanfaguangdemalizhennisica ijinnili, ranhouzoukai.

This sentence is a description of the psychological activities of her mother, Marilyn. Marilyn is tired of being a housewife, and she longs to continue her studies to fulfill her dream of becoming a doctor. The "shipu" is part of the life she is tired of, so she often imagines how her daughter throws it away. This sentence is an object clause guided by "She pictured". The translator splits the original sentence and adjusts the word order accordingly, presenting the inner logic of the original sentence in a common Chinese expression so that the reader can understand it better.

Example 6

ST: "Were you good while I was away?" she asked, crouching on the linoleum beside them. "Did you behave?"

TT: "Wobuzaideshihounimenbiaoxianhaoma?" tadunzaitamenpangbiandeyouzhanshangwen.

Marilyn, after getting married, decided to abandon her children and husband in pursuit of her dream of becoming a doctor. However, she soon discovered that she was unexpectedly pregnant and was forced to abandon her aspirations and return to her family. This is the greeting she gave to her children after she returned from her absence. If translated in the original form, the Chinese version would be "Wobuzaideshihounimenguaima? tadunzaitamenpangbiandeyouzhanshangwen. nimenbiaoxianhaoma?" The meaning of this sentence is somewhat scattered and does not fully convey the intended message of the original text. Therefore, the translator adopts the method of combining two simple sentences into one sentence, and makes the translation read more naturally.

3.3. Application of Functional Equivalence at Textual Level

To emphasize the significance of context and situation in translation, textual equivalence is often advocated. Textual equivalence requires that the meaning and function of the source language be maintained in a specific context while translating a paragraph. This involves not only rendering the semantic text but also providing a somewhat freer translation tailored to the context. Nida's theory of functional equivalence points out that achieving equivalence in meaning should supersede form in translation. Thus, to achieve the deepest level of meaning equivalence between the translated text and the original, comprehensive analysis and full understanding of the original is paramount. This ensures that the translated text maintains the same function and meaning in the same context. During the translation process, careful attention must be paid to the context of the original text and the most appropriate target language should be chosen to ensure textual equivalence between the original and the translated text. This necessitates a thorough analysis of the context and a comprehensive understanding of the background. In conclusion, textual equivalence is a crucial aspect of translation that requires careful attention to context and situation. By carefully analyzing the original text and selecting the most appropriate target language, the author can achieve the most profound meaning equivalence between the translated text and the original.

Example 7

ST: The exam before this one, she'd managed a sixty-two-**technically** passing, but hardly passable.

TT: Zaiczhiqiandekaoshizhong, ta62fenmianqiangjige, danhennanguoguan.

The original meaning of "technically" is "jishushang; gongyishang; jiqiaoshang." This phrase

signifies Lydia's inability to keep pace with her learning schedule. Obviously, "jishushang; gongyishang; jiqiaoshang" are not appropriate for this context. The author emphasizes that Lydia was previously an exemplary student in her mother Marilyn's eyes, but Lydia realized that escalating study demands made meeting her mother's high standards increasingly challenging, and her grades were merely passable. Therefore, the translator translates it into "mianqiang," which is in line with Lydia's current situation.

Example 8

ST: Everywhere things came undone. But for the Lees, that **knot** persisted and tightened, as if Lydia bound them all together.

TT: Yiqiedoumeiyoujieshu. Danduiyulijia, nagexinjieyijiuzainaer, erqieyuelaiyuejin, fangfushilidiyatamenquandoubangzaiyiqishide.

The meaning of "knot" is "shengjie; haili; jieliu" in Chinese. This sentence primarily describes her father, James, who is of Chinese descent. Although born and raised in the United States, he feels a deep sense of isolation and exclusion within American society. Many years later, despite his efforts to move on, this internal struggle remains unresolved. The term "knot" is a metaphor for this complex and deeply personal struggle, and its translation into English is a delicate balance between accuracy and accessibility. Therefore, the translator considered translating it as "xinjie".

4. Conclusions

This paper analyses the role of Eugene Nida's functional equivalence theory in novel translation. In the process of translation, the translator's task is not only to transcode the linguistic symbols but more importantly, to transcode the culture carried by the linguistic symbols. The difference between Chinese and Western cultures determines that there are certain differences in the expressions of the two languages, and it is impossible to achieve complete equivalence in form (Wang, 2022).[4] Before translation, it is necessary to fully understand the relevant background knowledge of the author, and read through the original text to know the general idea of the work to avoid misunderstanding; to reproduce the style of the original work, it is necessary to understand the author's language expression habits and style.

Sun Lu's translation of *Everything I Never Told You* carries out Eugene Nida's functional equivalence theory, taking into account the language characteristics and cultural background of Chinese. From this point of view, we can see that Eugene Nida's theory of "functional equivalence" plays a very important role in conveying cultural information in depth, which is helpful to improve translation quality and reduce readers' reading burden.

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