

## **Translation Across the Difficulties of Equivalence Concept**

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**Abstract:** The main purpose of this study is to discuss the concept of Equivalence across the translation process from English to Arabic, and its different relationships with linguistic aspects. The discussion presented in this study will also show that equivalence is one of the vital issues in translation studies that cannot be ignored or underestimated. The cultural differences between English and Arabic are discussed along with the relationship between the nature and function of equivalence.

**Keywords:** translation problems, translation difficulties, translation strategies, equivalence

### **1. Introduction**

In earlier works regarding translation theory, the theorists and scholars have shown that the issue of equivalence has been one of the most crucial and controversial issues which has caused heated debates among the many theorists of translation theory. Most of the controversies within the process of translation theory have emerged around the concept of equivalence. Wilss (1982:134) claims that in this respect that equivalence between source text and target text is one of the most controversial issues in translation theory. According to Gutt (1991:10) “equivalence is one of the central issues in the theory of translation and yet no linguists seem to have agreed and disagreed. However, equivalence as the central concept, will surely affect different views and suggestions since the concept is a matter of heated debates”. Thus, the concept of equivalence has a central and vital role in translation studies, and the “equivalence” is the oldest notion and the most problematic concept in translation studies.

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Translation students often search through various dictionaries when trying to understand the meaning of a lexical item. An equivalent can always be found in any dictionary and it is either an explanatory equivalence or translation equivalence. The former is an explanation of the meaning of the word in the source language, while the latter represents a direct translation of the meaning of the word in the target language. If the word has more than one meaning depending on the context the paraphrased explanations are more likely to provide the information the translator needs to render the intended meaning. The explanatory equivalent cannot be used directly in translation texts, but it is more suitable for the determination of translation equivalents because it is only a paraphrase of the meaning of a word.

Therefore, since many theorists and researchers have discussed the concept of equivalence at different levels, relating to syntactic and semantics categories and not as of yet reached any real consensus it is worthwhile to review the topic particularly with regard to Arabic-English translation.

## **2. The History of the Equivalence Concept**

Since Antiquity, the notion of equivalence has been one of the most problematic and radical issues in translation theory. After decades of developing controversy over the issues of free and literal translation, translators and theorists are making strenuous efforts to produce a more methodical translation, they started to show forth their concern towards radical notions such as equivalence. Many different theories dealing with the notion of equivalence have been developed over the last fifty years. Theorists and translators say that the concepts of equivalence have been quite different throughout the history of translation theory; some of these theorists elaborate upon the different kinds of connections between the source language and the target language and many feel that these relations are to be found under the form of equivalence.

Obviously, there is obscurity around the whole idea of equivalence between a source text and a target text. The equivalence concept is known as a tricky concept for most of the theorists and it is seen as a “big bugbear” in the translation field. For a long time, we have remarked the preoccupations regarding the matter of equivalence, which has been debated in the writings of linguists such as Jakobson and Catford whereas others such as Casagrande highlight the cultural concept. Equivalence is a hard, well-established word in the comprehensive lexicography of the English language. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) stated that the first use of the adjective “equivalent” is found in 1460, whereas the noun “equivalence” was first mentioned in 1541. Therefore, the concept of “equivalence” and “equivalent” has existed in the English language for a long time. Much later, in 1965, Chomsky used the idea of equivalence in transformational grammar, which indirectly affected translation theory. Saint Jerome, the most well-known translator of the Greek Bible into Latin, allows us to observe by comparison that the method of translation underwent a central change towards the middle of the eighteenth century. The

theoreticians of translation theory have divided the concept of equivalence into two categories: main types and subtypes. The former consists in the functional, stylistic, semantic, formal and grammar equivalences, while the latter gives more priority to some types than to others. Theorists have proved that equivalence consists of several dual oppositions: Jakobson's imitation vs. functional; House's overt vs. covert; Nida's formal vs. dynamic; Newark's semantic vs. communicative; and Nord's documentary vs. instrumental.

### **3. The Nature of Equivalence**

The notion of equivalence became in different world languages a hallmark of Western translation theories in the second half of the twentieth century. The peak of equivalence theory came along in the 1960's and 1970's, especially within the scope of structural linguistics. The notion of equivalence postulates that source texts and translated versions have the identical value (equivalence) in several fields. Equivalence is considered a foremost concept within the discussions of translation studies across the last decades, regardless of the nature of these discussions they are evidence-based, academic or heuristic. Another way to say it is that translation has been defining the term of equivalence since the first era of debates around this subject. Some theorists have tackled the misconception of describing translation in terms of equivalence. Equivalence has occupied a foremost role in translation studies because it strictly overlaps with other overriding theoretical notions in translation studies. As a matter of fact, there is a presumption that the presence of equivalence is necessary for the arguments of the most speculative notions in translation studies.

### **4. The Situation of Equivalence**

The notion of equivalence has been discussed in terms of many different techniques. For instance, Nida discussed the dynamic equivalence especially in the translation of the Bible; the reaction of readers to the source language text and target language text should be alike; in other words, have the same effects on both sets of readers. Situations in translation could be construed differently as a translation takes shape in different cultures, in different places, in different times, in different languages and different nations. Christiane Nord argues that "functional equivalence between source and target texts is not within the normal scopes of translation, but an exceptional case in which the factor change of functions is assigned zero". Equivalence as a relationship between source and target texts however is not a means of achieving equivalence rather it is a deeply profound harmonization of linguistic aspects between two languages. For instance, Douglas Robinson asserted in his preoccupation about translation theory that equivalence is an expository style that takes part in the translator's performance across the accurate and honest translation. The situation of equivalence is a vital case in all translation types and can be grasped as a context, time, place and culture, as the foremost issues and the principles of

translators as human beings. The situation is not the reproduction of any condition; each individual behaves in different ways and makes different lists of tasks and activities that denote an individual situation. The linguistic aspects are grasped variously in different situations: the thoughts, messages and the information are part of the meaning, but each has their own situation. The problematic case has occurred between the orientations of writers and the manoeuvring of translators when the translators shift the writers' intention according to their situation while the writers intended other situations. Such heated debates take into account the translation studies and are offered by the manipulative school of translation where these scholars have rejected the fact that translation is the reproduction of the original and that translation is all about manoeuvring the original text.

### **5. Equivalence and Culture**

Since the era of translation theory began and as the debates of researchers emerged in the field of translation process, cultural equivalence has been a problematic issue in the research of scholars (Mansoor Khalid, p4, 2016). Recent extensive studies and contrastive analyses related to equivalence and cultural aspects in translation include Dejica (2013), Dejica (2016), Pungă (2012) or Pungă (2016a). The theorists' preoccupations regarding the translation theory have included burgeoning cultural discussions in translation studies because the researchers have realized the necessity to reach beyond the boundaries of linguistic translation studies and start talking about cultural approaches. Culture is an important phase taken into consideration as linguistic elements are treated in translation. Translation is the communicative system of humankind and renders perspectives, ideas and thoughts from one person to another and must take the cultural and linguistic aspects into account. Obviously, language is not only a group of sounds, words, sentences and structures; language also includes the habits, norms, orientations and socio-cultural aspects of a group of people, whereas the translation is all about rendering the meaning of a message or thought from the language of the sender to the language of the receiver. It still remains a very problematic issue to select an exact word for every word of a text in one language to an equivalent word in another language. The translators should tackle this problem by keeping the meaning of the target language the same as the original by preserving it under various expressions rather than individual words. Many theorists, such as Baker (1996); Dejica (2008, 2009, 2010); Dejica and Stoian (2018); Fraghal (1995); Larson (1984); Newmark (1988); or Pungă and Pârlog (2017) have proven that cultural equivalence is one of the most problematic issues in the translation process and at the same time it is a translator's duty to find this cultural equivalence. The translator has to deal with comprehensive elements of content, context, pragmatics, stylistics, semantics and syntax, not just with the equivalent meaning.

For instance, Lado (1986:53) points out that the translator cannot distinguish between two cultures; except if he masters the exact comprehension of the cultural

elements belonging to the two different languages. The translator should not ignore the cultural aspects within the course of evaluation. The translated version cannot be acceptable and effective unless this is done in accordance with the linguistic and cultural aspects of the source text. The translation of English and Arabic consists of numerous areas of confusion and is riddled with a kind of difficulty that relates to the differences between the systems of these two languages and to the cultural aspects. For example, Casagrande (1954) says that the Arabic culture is like any other culture in the world, but the Arabic culture has been affected by many factors such as: religion, politics, social habits, education, economy, and history. Yet, the translator should be more precise and should master the Arabic culture in order to translate correctly and provide an acceptable version. For instance, Nida (1964:91) points out that the cultural aspect is one of the most important aspects and has a vital role in language analysis and the translation process; he makes a distinction among five types of cultural aspects and discusses them: (1) ecology, (2) material cultural, (3) social cultural, (4) religious cultural and (5) linguistic cultural (Mansoor Khalid 2017).

Some scholars like Ghazala (2002) and Newmark (1988) state that culture is convertible and translatable because it is a part of language. Robinson (1997) stated that the cultural aspect is untranslatable because language is overall culture and it implies the impossibility of translation, but this view has been denied by Ghazala (2003:194). Meanwhile, Snell-Hornby defines the cultural equivalence as a shift of cultural information and the translator should be masterful and bicultural not only bilingual. Culture is the social aspect of the language and the communicative system. For instance, even the greeting manners are different in each of the Arabian Gulf states, yet they speak one and the same language and share similar traditions. Finally, we can notice that culture is different between the regions of one country; in the western region of Iraq the greeting manner differs from the southern region manner and so on. A more obvious example of this type of cultural difference can be seen between two more divergent cultures; the sun is considered as a lovely and hopeful sign in England along with most of the European countries whereas it is a fatigue sign in most of the Arab countries.

## **6. Linguistic Problems of Equivalence**

Indubitably, every language has its own linguistic aspects that may differ from one language to another. These linguistic differences cause essential difficulties in the process of translation. As a result, the linguistic features which are particular in one language must be taken into consideration during the process of translation. Arabic is a good example of a language that has very different linguistic features from English. The Arabic and English translators should be aware of the differences between the two linguistic systems since these differences can present dilemmas during the translation process. The major problems that occur in translation are result from: semantic and grammatical categories, issues that can occur in any two

languages during the translation process. These will often lead the translators to decide whether or not they will use a single translation approach. Nonetheless, the translators should do well to engage with the linguistic aspect of the given text, to analyse and to describe it professionally. They should not only focus on the linguistic aspects such as single words, idioms, phrases, clauses and sentences, but also on the text as a whole message in order to transfer the general meaning and purpose of the SL text into the TL text with which a target public would be able to engage with completely.

To discuss the problems of translation from English to Arabic, the perspective of translation equivalence should be considered. The reason is that the main objectives of translation are to achieve relative equivalence between the SL and the TL and to influence the readers of TL in the same way as the source readers have been influenced. Subsequently, linguistic competence is very important for translators to be able to understand the grammatical and lexical relationships between the two languages of any text and to deal with the more complex structures in order to find the relevant meaning. Translators encounter enormous linguistic challenges in the process of translation due to the different linguistic structures of the English and Arabic languages. To obtain a well translated text and to convey the intended message, they should analyse and describe the linguistic aspect in detail and be aware of the semantic, stylistic and syntactic differences of both language structures. Similarly, some linguists and researchers indicated that linguistic problems appear in the overlapping formations of structures in which often cause recurrent grammatical and semantic errors. For instance, Dickins et al (2002:99) indicates that the grammatical differences between Arabic and English are explicit particularly in their excessively manifold tense systems. Mona Baker (1992:84) argues that grammatical features are completely different from lexical features. Grammatical features are more fixed and resistant to change than lexical features. Using new words, expressions and collocations in any language is much easier than using a new grammatical element or system. Therefore, the grammatical features are more important than others. Most grammatical errors made by translators or translation students are not related to translation itself, but they are concerned with the misunderstanding of the source text grammatical structures. Furthermore, the most serious problems translators encounter derive completely from a lack of understanding the syntax of the target language and how to deal with it.

## **7. Equivalence Problems Encountered at the Word Level**

Some theorists treat the language as an independent subject; thus, they start the analysis beyond the sentence level. This type of analysis becomes problematic for sentence-based grammar and communication. The reason is that the message of a text cannot form the unity of equivalence in the true sense. Besides, the best kind of translation of a text is established at the level of words, lexical items, collocations, phrase, clause and sentence, but never at the level of text. Many theorists have

discussed these problems. Hatim and Mosan (1990) claimed that the translators should not translate words, but they should deal with sentences, ideas and message. Baker (1992:46) stated that equivalence can be achieved when words are put together in order to establish configuration regardless the language. Thus, words are never put together arbitrarily, but they are combined with the purpose of conveying meaning. Words can materialize into lexical patterns such as, idioms, phrasal verbs and collections and these combinations shift their meaning from one language into another. When the translators attempt to carry the entire meaning of a given text, they first need to comprehend the meaning of the smaller units. These units convey the meaning in that text. Therefore, the smallest unit the translators should expect to deal with is the word.

Obviously, the translation dictionaries are very useful. They are helpful for both the students of translation and translators alike, when they are dealing with target texts. The dictionaries supply the students of translation with a list of practical words in a given language, but the meaning of an individual word does not mean solely the meaning that is found in the dictionary. The reason is that there are different kinds of meanings comprised in the lexical items such as referential, allusive, associative, cultural, metaphorical, connotative, etc. These kinds of meanings relate to semantic equivalence. However, the meaning can be carried by smaller units than words, by much more complex units than the individual words and by different linguistic systems. The English structure has a comprehensive range of affixes and this makes the production of new lexical items very easy. On the contrary the Arabic structures do not have these particular features. The problems of lexical items are considered to be the most problematic cases that are generally encountered by the students of translation and translators as well, because the translators find difficulty to recast translation equivalence between the lexical items of two languages. For instance, in the case of vocabulary, word for word harmony is uncommon, since there are no two words in one language have the same system due to the overlapping meanings of most words. In English-Arabic translations there are many types of problems of lexical items that the translators confront with such as, the lexical items that have uncomplicated equivalence in the TL and the translators can deal with them easily presented in Table 1:

English Words	Arabic Words (fully equivalent)
bed	firash (فراش)
book	kitab (كتاب)
sun	shamss (شمس)
Jordan	Amman (عمان)
president	Raais (رئيس)
reporter	sahify (صحافي)
sick	maridh (مريض)
study	yadruss (يدرس)
speaker	muthadith (متحدث)
conversations	muhadathat (محادثات)

**Table 1** Full Equivalence between English and Arabic Language

The translators will not face any problems in establishing translation equivalence for these lexical units since the target language has suitable equivalences for the source text words; the problem related to lexical items is when the translator can find only partial equivalences and needs to recast them in the target language. It can sometimes be acceptable and sometimes can show the lack of suitable equivalence in the target language as presented in Table 2:

English words	Arabic words (partially equivalent)
Lord	Rapp (رب)
neon	nioan (نيون)
entrepreneur	Rajulaamal (رجل اعمال)
bluff	Yukhadeaa (بخادع)
prayer	salat (صلاة)
howl	aweel (عويل)

**Table 2** Partial Equivalence between English and Arabic Words

The second category of problems can be overcome by translators through experience and by rewording them; these problems include items, which do not have equivalence in the Arabic language. Newmark (1988) refers to them as “the unfindable words”. These words can be translated by rephrasing, using metaphors, or borrowing some words. Nida (1976) indicates that any message in one language has equivalence in another language with reasonable accuracy. In this situation, a translator may find it easier to coin ready-made equivalents from the SL than to borrow one from the TL. However, it is not always possible to establish equivalence which corresponds to the SL. The English words that do not have equivalence in the Arabic language are “parliament”, “AIDS”, “shuttle”, “digital”, “television”, “lower chamber”, “upper chamber”, “entropy”, etc. Some of TL equivalence may not be acceptable enough because of the lack of stability in the use of terminology and the vocabulary gap between its use and sense.

The problems regarding lexical items are concerned with the scientific, legal, religious, political, literary and technical terms, which may not have proper equivalence in the target language such as “kinship”, “computer”, “currencies”, “technology” and most of the religious words. There are different ways, in which the translators can establish suitable equivalence for their receivers and readers to understand SL terms, which do not have satisfactory equivalences in the TL by explaining or defining the SL term or rendering them metaphorically.

### **8. Baker’s Approach Towards Equivalence at Word Level**

Mona Baker (1992:21) identified the problems of non-equivalence at word level and mentioned the strategies and the solutions that deal with the problems according to the nature of non-equivalence as follows:

- A. Culture-specific concepts: the items of SL may convey an obscure meaning in the TL culture. Baker proposes this problem to be solved by providing a translation of more general words (concretes and abstracts) in order to tackle the shortages of specificity in the TL. For example, the phrase, “the speakers of assembly”, in Arabic does not have the equivalence of a specific concept. Consequently, the translators handle this issue by using general words like “chairman” or “dean”.
- B. The SL concept is not lexicalized in the TL. In this case, the word indicating the item is familiar to the target language of the speakers, but it is not lexicalized as there is no lexical item in TL to express it, for examples, “entrepreneur”, “reachable”, “seasoned” and “spicy”. The translation here should be more neutral in order to not convey incorrect expressive meaning.
- C. The SL word is complex in the semantic point of view. This is one of the most common problems in the translation process. There are many words in SL which have a difficult semantic expression in the TL. For example, “Al muaamunoon”, (believers) means “people who have absolute beliefs and reliance in their God” and the religious Arabic bible, “Quran”. Here, the translation can be performed by cultural substitution that is to replace a cultural expression with a TL item with an identical influence on the target receivers and readers.
- D. The source and target languages have meaning distinctions. The target language may establish less or more distinctive meanings than the source language. In this case, the translators must try to understand the text as a whole and use loan in order to overcome such translation difficulties.
- E. The target language lacks a super-ordinate. In this case, the translators may use the paraphrase through related words because of the limited specific words in the target language. Paraphrasing in Arabic may be accomplished through comparisons for words such as “facilities” translated into “tacihilat”.
- F. The target language lacks specific terms (hyponyms). In English, there are many words which have no equivalence in many languages such as “bungalow”, “chantey”, “cabin”, “etc. In this case, the translators shift the meaning of those specific hyponyms through paraphrasing some unrelated words where the specific concept is not lexicalized. The hyponym, “cabin”, can be translated into “kukh”, meaning “a small room for one person who works as a night guard or farmer”.
- G. Regarding the differences in the physical or interpersonal perspectives about the relationship between the participants in the discourse, the translators use omissions if the meaning carried by particular expressions is not important for the entire text. In the Arabic language, this pattern is used to emphasize the meaning more; thus, commands such as “go and fight”, are translated into English by deleting the first verb and translating the last one (*he fights*) which has the main meaning.

H. Differences in expressive meaning; the source and target language might have the same prepositional meaning, but they have different means of expressing it. In this case, the translators may use addition and illustrative words to make the concept more acceptable in the target language. For instance, the word “gay” (“mithal aljinss”) is translated into Arabic by adding an adjective in order to become more acceptable. In a language, every item refers to something that particularises it from other items. In many cases, when the translators deal with two languages, they find equivalence for individual words in the target language, but in the case of non-equivalence, the translators have to take into account some important aspects such as culturally specific items, especially words which do not only belong to a particular situation, but also to general terminology. Mona Baker stated that translators or grammarians can coin new terms in Arabic language by four methods: (1) Al ishtiqaq (derivation); (2) Al istinbat (discovery); (3) Al ishtiqaq be tarjamah (loan translation, calque); and (4) Al taarib (Arabisation). For instance, there are many words in the English language derived from Arabic language, such as “sultan”, “Bedouin”, “zero”, “master”, “wise”, “guide”, “cotton”, “candle”, “coffee”, “magazine”, “safari”, etc.

To sum up, the translators have to do their best while shifting the original meaning into target language by using all linguistic features and necessary skills in order to cover these semantic gaps and to render the effects into the target text as they are found in the source text. All languages have differences and most of those differences are caused by cultural concepts. Every linguistic society has its own method of interpreting the world. Consequently, a concept has different functions and meanings from one language to another language because culture is not restricted to certain specific ranges of understanding, but it is a marital and non-material thing.

## **9. Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on the concept of equivalence, which is considered to be the most crucial concept in translation studies and areas of culture related to English/Arabic translation. The paper highlights the particular significance of the role of equivalence in translation and the relationships between language and culture in translation studies. This study also includes an attempt to discuss the linguistic problems of equivalence at the word level. The examples provided in this paper, however, cannot cover all cases that occur in real practice of translating non-equivalence at word level, but it has indicated that translation difficulties of semantic and grammatical equivalence are quite overlapped. There are different methods that have been used to overcome these problems in an attempt to bridge the gaps created by linguistic differences between the source and target texts, with specific reference to the English and Arabic languages. It has also been mentioned in this study that the problem of translation of culture from Arabic into English or vice versa could be related to linguistic and cultural origins. A key study

lying behind the writing of the current paper is to provide helpful insights into the nature and theories of translation for translators and trainees of English departments in Arabic universities. In summary, the larger the gap is, the harder the translation process will be. Therefore, it is a necessity for translators to constantly improve their knowledge on linguistic aspects and cultures of different countries.

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