

Translation Theory

Translation Theory from Structural
Linguistic Translation to Functional
Translation Theory

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1. Definitions of Translation

Translation is a controversial concept that is hotly debated. There are many definitions of translation that **revolve around meaning, and the different notions of equivalence.** Halliday et al. (1965) describe translation as **the establishment of textual equivalents, rather than lexical or grammatical equivalents.** Thus, as stated by Halliday et al. (1965), translation is not a mere word-for-word rendition but, rather, **translation is seen as a whole text-to-text transplanting**

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Catford (1965, p. 20), similar to Halliday, defines translation as ‘the replacement of textual material in one language, i.e. the source language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language, i.e. target language (TL).’ House (2001) perceives translation as a reproduction of a text in an SL in an equivalent text in a TL. Thus, Halliday et al. (1965) see translation in terms of textual equivalence, and not word-for-word equivalence.

Widdowson (1978) sees translation from a different perspective; he views translation from a communicative perspective. Widdowson states that translation should neither operate at the word level, the sentence level, the lexical level, or the grammatical level; translation should be only at the communicative level

As for Hatim and Munday (2004), they state that there are two distinctive senses of translation: **translation as a process**, and **translation as a product**. They view translation, or to use their words, the ambit (scope) of translation as:

- (1) The process of transferring** a ST into a TT **in a specific socio-cultural context**;
- (2) A product which is the result of the previous step**; and the cognitive, linguistic, visual, cultural and ideological phenomena that are a principal component of (1) and (2). This definition **seems have greater care for the socio-cultural aspects of translation**.

Other scholars and researchers (e.g. Venuti, 2004; Ahmed, 2006) see translation as a process that not only implies conveying meaning in a TL, but that **should retain the same style and tone of a ST**: the translated text should not appear to be a translation but, rather, should appear to be an **original text, wherein no translator is visible**. This definition focuses on the equivalence level between a ST and a TT; **it goes beyond lexical equivalence to include style and tone**, which are difficult to achieve

However, another perspective sees translation as **reproducing a text in one language in another TL** to make it accessible to a larger audience (Ordudari, 2007). Ordudari's definition is more concerned with the **aim of translation**; that is, **to reach a greater audience**, which applies to many types of texts.

Levý (1967) sees translation **as a process of decision making**, whereby the components of this decision are:

1. The situation: sometimes the SL expresses one lexical item using a certain item where the TL has two equivalents for the same word. For example, a translator has to make a decision when translating the English word 'eclipse' because it has two equivalents in Arabic (i.e. one is related to the moon and the other related to the sun).

2. Instruction I: This implies defining the class of possible alternatives.

3. Instruction II: This denotes **making a selection from the available class alternatives**. This selection is **context-based**. For example, to translate the word **'eclipse'** into Arabic, a translator should refer to the context to understand whether it is a 'lunar eclipse' (relating to the moon), or a 'solar eclipse' (relating to the sun).

Levy's (1976) view of translation is related to the process of the translation, which sounds practical. Levy's perspective of translation sounds comprehensive, **as it encompasses the notion of 'equivalence' without disregarding the role of a translator in selecting the most appropriate equivalent**

Another perspective of translation is that of **Reiss (2004)**, who sees translation as a process of producing a text in the **TT that is functionally equivalent to the ST**. However, she goes on to say that, during the communication process, the message will be altered, perhaps by a translator's views, or experience and knowledge. **These changes can result in two types of message changes:**

1. **Unintentional changes:** Changes may result from the differences between **the structure** of a language, or from **the degree of the translator's competence**.

2. **Intentional changes:** These changes can affect the **functionality of the ST**. This kind of change occurs if the aim of the ST is rendered differently in the TT.

Reiss's view of translation equivalence is in terms of functional equivalence.

Overall, most of the aforementioned **views of translation are centered on certain basic notions—lexical equivalence** and meaning in translation; and the **functional equivalence** in translation—**that reflect the different approaches and theories of translation.**

1.2 Translation Unit

A translation unit, as defined by Manfredi (2014), is **the linguistic level employed by a translator during their act of translation**. Theorists hold a variety of positions in regard to the translation unit, depending on what they consider a translation unit to be. For example, **Vinay and Darbelnet proposed the terms 'lexicological unit' or 'unit of thought'** as a translation unit. They rejected the notion that **a word** can be a unit of translation (Manfredi, 2014).

Newmark (1988, pp. 66–67), on the other hand, regards **a ‘sentence’** as the best unit of translation. He justifies his view by stating that **a sentence is a unit of thought** and a means presenting objects. He adds, ‘All lengths of language can, at different moments and also simultaneously, be used as units of translation in the course of the translation activity’ (Newmark, 1988, pp. 66–67).

However, Newmark mentions that in some texts such as **expressive texts**, a **'word'** should be deemed as the unit of translation as it can better convey the **finest nuances**.

Bassnett (2005), however, states that **a text** should be **the unit of translation**, especially in relation to **literary prose texts**. Strangely, **Snell-Hornby** considers **the notion of culture** as the **unit of translation** (Hatim and Munday 2004).

Manfredi (2014), in line with **Halliday and Matthiessen (2014)**, argues that **a clause** is the most proper **unit of translation**. However, Manfredi states that in **written translations**, especially **literary ones**, **a sentence** should be considered as **the unit of translation**. **Sentence**, in this context, refers to a **graphological unit** that begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop.

'Word, in its context, can be the proper unit of translations, especially **authoritative and sacred** texts such as the Holy Quran **because nuances between words give different meanings.'** In addition, **faithfulness** to the ST requires carrying out the translation process at the **word level,** rather than at **sentence level.**

In sum, different scholars revealed different understandings and perspectives of **the unit of translation**. Whatever the case may be, translating these units of translations (whether word, sentence, clause, or culture) **poses many problems**, which will be discussed in due course. However, first, we should discuss **meaning in translation**, as translation is **a process of conveying meaning**. P. 4

Importance and Effect of the 'Unit of Translation'

The notion of the **'unit of translation'** is important in translation theory because it establishes the **linguistic level** at which a translator operates.

This notion significantly affects the **theory and practice of translation** in the following ways:

1. Effect on Theory

A) Variety of Perspectives: The text demonstrates that different theorists hold a variety of positions regarding **the unit of translation** (e.g., **Vinay and Darbelnet** proposed the **'lexicological unit'** or **'unit of thought'**; **Newmark** favored the 'sentence' or 'word' in expressive/sacred texts; **Bassnett** argued for the 'text'; and **Snell-Hornby** suggested 'culture'). This disagreement forms a central, debated topic in translation theory.

Importance and Effect of the 'Unit of Translation'

B) Guiding Principle: The chosen unit of translation provides **a theoretical framework or a starting point** for discussing and analyzing the process of conveying meaning. As the text states, **"translation is a process of conveying meaning,"** and the unit defines ***where* that meaning is primarily located and transferred.**

Importance and Effect of the 'Unit of Translation'

2. Effect on Practice

a) **Translational Approach:** The choice of unit directly influences the translator's strategy and focus:

- a) A focus on the **word (as in sacred texts like the Holy Quran)** is necessary for conveying the "**finest nuances**" and **ensuring faithfulness to the Source Text (ST)**.
- b) A focus **on the sentence (as favored by Newmark and Manfredi for written translations)** treats the translation as a "unit of thought" and a means of "**presenting objects.**"

Importance and Effect of the 'Unit of Translation

c) A focus on **the text** (as favored by **Bassnett**) or **culture** (as favored by **Snell-Hornby**) dictates a broader, more contextualized approach to translation, **moving beyond linguistic structure**.

B) Problem Identification: The text concludes that "translating these units of translations (whether word, sentence, clause, or culture) poses many problems," indicating **that the selection of the unit directly dictates the specific problems** a translator must confront in their work.

Thank you

