EQUIVALENCE AND PURPOSE IN ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF DON QUIXOTE

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Abstract: The idea of equivalence has been one of the core worries in translation studies for quite a few decades, so long story short, scholars still keep turning it around. People argue about whether a translation should stay really near to the source text, or if it should be adapted so it fits the expectations of brand new readers. And this kind of discussion matters even more with literary translation because language there often brings along cultural weight, emotional tone, and artistic meanings too, not just "content" in a dry way. This article looks at the link between equivalence and purpose, using Hans J. Vermeer's Skopos Theory as the main lens. By taking multiple English versions of Don Quixote as examples, it suggests that translation decisions tend to be guided by purpose and audience, more than by one fixed interpretation of equivalence.

Keywords: Skopos Theory, equivalence, literary translation, Don Quixote, functionalism, translation studies, Hans Vermeer, translator agency

Introduction

One of the oldest questions in translation studies is basically whether a translation should stay quite close to the source text, or if it should be sort of reworked for the target audience, you know. For a long time, a lot of scholars treated "equivalence" as the main thing, like the central aim of translating. In that view, the translator ought to reproduce the meaning and the intended effect of the original text as faithfully, and as closely as possible. Still, literary translation kind of proves that this aim is not always easy to reach. Novels , poems, and plays often include stylistic quirks , cultural pointers, forms of humor, and emotional wording that can't always be carried over directly into another language without losing something in the process.

Later, as translation studies grew, researchers started asking whether equivalence on its own can really describe what translators do. One notable reply came from Hans J. Vermeer, who introduced Skopos Theory. Instead of putting equivalence in the spotlight, Vermeer claimed that the purpose, the skopos, of a translation should steer the translator's choices. This article looks at the idea using Don Quixote as the example. The fact that there are multiple well-regarded English versions of the same novel suggests that equivalence isn't a single rigid thing. It seems more like something that can bend, shift, and flex depending on purpose, audience, and context, even when the "same" story is in front of everyone.

Equivalence in Translation Studies

During the twentieth century, the whole concept of equivalence kept showing up like a major character in translation theory. A lot of scholars tried to say, basically what makes a translation "equivalent" to the source text. One name that becomes pretty hard to ignore is Eugene Nida. He separated formal equivalence from dynamic equivalence, and yeah the distinction mattered. Formal equivalence tends to keep the shape, and the meaning, of the original wording as close as possible. Dynamic equivalence meanwhile tries to produce a similar kind of reaction in the target readers even if a few alterations in the phrasing become necessary.

Because of Nida, translators could move past that strict word for word idea, you know, the kind that treats language like it maps neatly. Still, his approach kind of assumes that some form of equivalence has to stay the main objective, even if the "how" changes. Similar themes also show up with Peter Newmark. He suggested semantic translation and communicative translation as two separate strategies. Semantic translation, more or less, aims to stay nearer to the source text, while communicative translation puts stronger weight on the expectations, and needs, of the target audience.

Even with all that influence, the theories were not universally accepted. Many critics argued that literary texts can contain meanings that simply cannot be mirrored exactly in another language. A metaphor, a joke, or a cultural reference might work like a charm in one culture, but in another it just loses, or shifts, its effect. In these situations, translators end up deciding which pieces of the text matter most. And that brings up a question that is not small: if different translators decide differently, can there really be only one equivalent translation?

These worries helped push things toward functionalist approaches, where attention moves away from strict equivalence and toward the function, and the purpose, of translation, instead of chasing one fixed match.

Skopos Theory and Functionalist Perspectives

Hans J. Vermeer kind of introduced Skopos Theory in the late 1970s, as part of a wider functionalist current in translation studies. The word skopos comes from Greek, and it basically means “purpose” , or “aim” . And according to Vermeer, every translation is made for some specific goal in mind, so that goal ends up steering the translator’s decisions. In short, translators should ask themselves what the version is meant to do, rather than just focusing on how tight it tracks the source text.

This view, it really showed a noticeable turn in translation theory. Vermeer said that different settings, mean different translation strategies. So a translation done for academic inquiry could look different from one meant for everyday readers, even if both start from the same source text. So then, “good quality” should be measured by whether the translation actually accomplishes its intended purpose, not by something more abstract.

Katharina Reiss added to this line of thinking, especially through her work on text types and communicative functions. She claimed that texts aren’t all doing the same job, and if they serve different roles, they ought to be translated in ways that fit. Her

proposals helped push functionalist theories forward and made the "function" in translation analysis feel central.

Christiane Nord later built on that functionalist mindset by bringing in the concept of loyalty. She agreed that purpose matters a lot, yet she also underlined the translator's ethical responsibility, toward the source text, the author, and the target audience too. Nord's position is sort of that translators do have room to maneuver, but that room should be used carefully, not randomly.

Taken together, these scholars pushed back against the notion that translation is basically just equivalence, nothing more. Instead they showed translation as a purpose-driven activity, shaped by context, by readership, and by communicative objectives that have to make sense in the real world.

Don Quixote as a Case Study

The many different English versions of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* kind of show, how the reason for translating pushes the translator into certain choices. Ever since it first came out, the novel got translated into English, again and again. And among the most talked about versions are the ones by John Ormsby, Samuel Putnam, and Edith Grossman, they get mentioned a lot.

Ormsby's translation, which was published in 1885, is usually admired for its focus on the original wording, and for that historical feel. He tried to keep a lot of the stylistic traits of Cervantes's writing. Because of that, some present day readers say it can feel a bit harder to step into, but a fair number of scholars still really like how near it stays to the source text.

Putnam's translation came later, 1949, and it leans in a different direction. Putnam basically wanted the book to read easier for audiences of the twentieth century. His wording often sounds smoother, and more natural for modern ears, even if it means letting go of a few details that are closer to the Spanish original.

Then there's Edith Grossman's version, from 2003, which is sort of a third way. Grossman aimed for a middle ground between readability and loyalty to Cervantes's literary manner. Her translation has gotten a lot of praise for managing to carry over the tone and the core feel of the original novel, while still fitting what contemporary readers tend to expect.

What makes these translations particularly interesting is that all three translators worked from essentially the same source text, yet the final products feel a bit different in tone, style , vocabulary, and overall reading experience. If equivalence were one single fixed standard, it would be hard to explain why several different translations can all still be seen as successful, even if they don't quite match each other.

From a functionalist perspective, though , the differences actually make a lot of sense. Each translator had their own goal in mind, different purposes , and a different target audience too. The fact that we have multiple respected translations suggests that literary translation is never just a mechanical process, it's more like choosing which bits of the original to elevate. Some translators lean heavily into linguistic accuracy, others choose readability as the main path, and still others try to keep that literary effect, almost like a kind of aftertaste, not only the meaning. So in this view, different kinds of equivalence kind of compete instead of peacefully aligning in perfect harmony.

Discussion: Does Equivalence Really Exist?

The example about Don Quixote kinda brings up wider questions about what "equivalence" even means, like where the match is supposed to be. Most translators would probably agree that some kind of bond between the source text and the target text has to exist. Still, literary translation shows that that bond can look really different. A translator can try to keep, for instance, the sense, the sentence rhythm, those cultural touchstones, or the emotional pull, but in real life it's often not possible to keep all of that in the same balanced way.

Because of that, equivalence seems more useful as something pliable, rather than as a hard fixed rule. Different translators can end up with different translations that are still worth reading, mostly because they aim for different outcomes. The fact that there are multiple good English versions of Don Quixote kind of backs up this idea.

Skopos Theory explains the whole thing by focusing on purpose, not on some absolute sameness. It doesn't mean translators can simply disregard the source. Instead it says that translation choices should be steered by what the translation is meant to do, its intended function. With that view, the variety you see across literary translations becomes pretty easy to understand.

Conclusion

The debate over equivalence stays one of the most important things in translation studies. Traditional theories usually treated equivalence as the big aim of translation, but literary translation, it keeps showing that full equivalence is hard, if not outright impossible to get. Different pieces of a literary text kind of compete for attention, so translators end up deciding what should stay, and what can be tweaked, or even reshaped.

Hans J. Vermeer's Skopos Theory gives a helpful way of seeing these decisions. When it puts purpose right in the middle of translation, the theory also makes clear why different translators can come out with different versions of the same work and still end up with translations that work. The English translations of Don Quixote really show this. Even though Ormsby, Putnam and Grossman translated the same novel , their versions still mirror distinct priorities, readerships, and aims

So the Don Quixote case pushes back on the belief in one single ideal equivalence. Instead, it points toward translation as a purposeful activity , something molded by

context and communication needs. In literary translation in particular , purpose often matters more than strict follow-through on any one equivalence pattern. For that reason Skopos Theory keeps giving useful insights into translation itself and into what translators actually do.

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