

BEYOND LEXICAL EQUIVALENCE: UNPACKING THE LIMITS OF TRANSLATION THEORY

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Annotation: This paper explores the deep and complex nature of translation. It argues that a basic, **word-for-word method**, known as **lexical equivalence**, is simply not enough to fully carry over the true meaning, feeling, and goal of an original text. We will dive into the major **cultural, situational, and practical problems** that translators face every day. By tracing the history of translation studies, this discussion shows how modern theories have caused a big change. This change moves from a strict language-swapping rule to a more **active, purpose-focused, and culturally smart** process. The main idea of this longer work is to clearly show that a good translator is much more than just a **language worker**; they are an important **creative guide** and a bridge between different ways of seeing the world.

Keywords : *Translation theory, lexical equivalence, cultural translation, Skopos theory, words that can't be translated (untranslatability), dynamic equivalence, practical translation (pragmatics), functional equivalence, cultural details, communication goals.*

Introduction: Why Simple Word Swapping Fails

Translation is a **key and common process** that creates the necessary links for talking between different cultures and languages. To someone new to the field, the job might seem easy: just find the correct word in the new language for every word in the first one. This simple idea is the basis for **lexical equivalence**, an approach that, while a good starting point, is finally very **limited** in real-world use. The truth is that languages are not just two simple sets of codes where every part has a perfect match. They are complex, living systems, **deeply tied** to their people's ways of life, their history, and the exact situation they are used in. This article claims that the biggest and most difficult problems in translation happen when a translator must go **beyond this surface-level**,

literal reading. By looking at how modern translation theories have grown, we can see how they were created to handle these deep problems and limits. The translator's job, therefore, is not just to move words. It is a complex journey of managing *ideas, hidden emotions, social rules, and specific practical aims* that are truly hard to simply replace. This work requires a deep kind of knowledge and creative effort that is much more than simple language skills.

The Mistake of Lexical Equivalence and the Gap of Untranslatability

The rule of *lexical equivalence* works on the powerful, but finally wrong, idea that a word or short phrase in one language can be directly and automatically changed to a single, matching word or phrase in another. While this works well for *simple nouns* like "pen" or "shoe," its limits become very clear when dealing with more complex, abstract, or multi-meaning language parts. Think about the English word "set," which has a huge number of meanings, making a single, perfect partner in another language *impossible* to find. The idea of *untranslatability* itself is a direct and strong challenge to the notion of perfect word-for-word matching. Words or phrases that resist translation exist because they are tightly connected to unique cultural habits, environments, or historical times. The German word *Schadenfreude* (joy in another person's bad luck) or the Japanese word *komorebi* (sunlight filtering through leaves) are perfect examples. In these cases, a translator cannot just look for a single word. They must instead use a more creative plan, using *longer phrases, detailed descriptions, or a cultural adjustment*. This is the vital moment when the translator's job quickly changes from a mechanical, dictionary task to a *deeply creative and interpreting* one, where they must often *build the meaning* in the new language instead of just finding it. This process of creative action is not a failure of the original text; it is a smart act of *making up for a loss*. The translator, seeing an unavoidable word gap, gives the same conceptual, emotional, or cultural *effect* of the original, even if the word shape is lost.

Cultural Translation: Crossing the Unseen Borders

The strong link between *language and culture* cannot be overlooked. A translation that is only correct in grammar or words but is *culturally wrong* will definitely fail to share the intended message or have the right effect.

Cultural details—like mentions of specific historical events, local stories, religious practices, or social norms—are a big, often unseen, hurdle. For example, a text full of references to *Thanksgiving* or the *UK Parliament* might confuse a reader from a culture that doesn't know these things. The translator has a difficult decision to make:

1. **Explain the Detail:** Use a note at the bottom of the page or an added note in brackets. This breaks the flow of reading and can sound too academic.

2. **Replace with a Local Idea (Domesticate):** Swap the original idea with a more familiar, working equivalent from the target culture. This choice *makes the text local* and risks changing the feel of the source culture.

3. **Leave it Out or Use a General Term:** Completely remove the detail or use a general, less powerful word, which causes the original text to lose its richness and specifics.

Every choice changes the translated text and how the audience reacts to it. Also, the *situation* in which a word is used is most important, going far past its basic dictionary definition. The meaning of a simple word like "cool" can totally change if it's used for the weather, a person's calm manner, or a trendy piece of clothing. A good translator must have a deep and full understanding of the whole situation—the sentence, the paragraph, the whole document, and the *context outside of language*—to make a smart choice that truly keeps the author's original *communication goal*. This hard job needs not only great language skills but also a deep, personal *understanding of both the source and target cultures*.

The Practical Side (Pragmatics): From Words to Actions

Beyond the word and cultural parts is the *practical side (pragmatics)* of translation. Pragmatics looks at how the situation changes the meaning of a text—how we use language to **do things** rather than just talk about them. Words and sentences are not just signs; they are tools used to give orders, ask for things, share opinions, and show feelings.

A strictly word-for-word translation often completely misses the *illocutionary force* (the intended purpose or function) of the original statement. For example, in English, the phrase "Can you pass the salt?" is a question about ability, but its practical use is a polite *request or direction*. A literal translation into a language without this specific polite rule could be confusing or even rude if that culture prefers a more direct or a much more indirect way of asking.

Speech acts are very specific to a culture. A direct "No" might be fine in one culture, while another might use a long, very indirect, face-saving *roundabout way of speaking* to say the same thing. The practical translator's job is to make sure the *new text does the same communication job* as the original text, even if this means greatly changing the language's shape. This focus raises translation to the level of a *cross-cultural communication act*, where the success of the translation is judged by its ability to reach its intended goal with the new audience.

Modern Theories: Making the Translator a Powerful Guide

Seeing the deep, lasting limits of simple lexical equivalence, modern translation theories have rightly made the translator a *creative, necessary, and interpretive guide*. Two key theories show this big change in thinking:

Skopos Theory (Focusing on Function)

Skopos Theory (from the Greek word *Skopos*, meaning 'purpose' or 'aim'), started by Hans J. Vermeer and Katharina Reiß, says that the **purpose** (or *Skopos*) of the translation is the single most important factor guiding all of the translator's choices. This theory completely **removes the original text** as the highest authority and instead focuses on what the new text needs to **do** for its new audience.

For instance, a **legal paper** meant for a court must be translated with a focus on **absolute form and meaning accuracy** (a *Skopos* of documentary truth). In sharp contrast, a global **marketing tagline** for the same product would put **impact, cultural feeling, and easy memory** first, instead of a word-for-word translation (a *Skopos* of sales function). *Skopos* Theory frees the translator from a tight, often harmful, focus on the original text's form and lets them wisely choose to make the new text work well for its specific readers.

Dynamic and Functional Equivalence

Created by the famous linguist **Eugene Nida**, the idea of **Dynamic Equivalence** (later called **Functional Equivalence**) focuses strongly on the **"effect"** of the translation. The main goal is to make a new text that creates **very much the same impact and reaction** on the new audience as the original text did on its first audience. This often means the translator must greatly change the words or sentence structure.

Nida pushed for the "closest **natural** equivalent." For example, a Bible line about sin being "white as snow" would not make cultural sense for a community living near the equator with no idea of snow. A dynamic translation might instead use "white as desert sand" or a similar local phrase for great whiteness, thereby keeping the emotional or spiritual **effect** rather than the literal picture. This audience-focused method is very common and successful when translating important works like literature, religious texts, and things meant to persuade, where keeping the emotional or rhetorical **effect** is more important than sticking to the exact words.

The Translator's Duty: A Cultural Mediator

By moving past the limits of lexical equivalence, the translator takes on a deep **duty and intellectual role** as a **cultural mediator** (a go-between). They are not just exchanging words; they are actively managing and discussing things between two different cultural systems, often in a space of unequal power and different ideas.

The choice to **foreignize** (keep original culture details to show the reader the 'other') or to **domesticate** (change the text to fit the new culture's rules for easier reading) is a choice with

important ethical and social results. How much the translator intervenes becomes a matter for serious thought. This ethical role demands:

Deep Self-Knowledge: Knowing and controlling their own cultural biases and beliefs.

Standing Up for the Text: Making sure the original writer's intended message (its ideas and purpose) is respected and successfully carried over, even when the exact words must be dropped.

Respecting the Audience: Creating a text that is not just understood but also fits the culture and works well for the people who will read it.

This modern view sees the translator not as a quiet, unseen tool, but as an **active part** of cross-cultural communication, whose careful choices help shape how cultures understand each other.

Conclusion: The Active, Interpreting Art

To conclude, the work of translation is much more complex and demanding than the simple word-for-word swap suggested by **lexical equivalence**. While the word-based approach offers a basic starting point, it quickly proves completely useless when facing the huge, many-sided problems of real language, culture, and situation working together.

Modern translation theory—by supporting smart, audience-focused ideas like **Skopos Theory, dynamic equivalence, and practical function**—has bravely recognized and effectively accepted these challenges. This shift in theory has rightly moved the translator's role from just a simple copyist to a key **cultural go-between and a creative artist**. The professional translator must skillfully move through the often-unseen spaces between languages, making careful, smart, and highly strategic choices that keep the original message's important **spirit, main feeling, and final communication goal**. By firmly moving past the limits of a purely word-based approach, we truly see translation for what it is: a hard, active, and absolutely necessary **art form** that is vital for building real, lasting global communication and understanding in our closely connected world.

Resources.

1. **Nida, Eugene A., and Charles R. Taber.** (1969). *The Theory and Practice of Translation, With Special Reference to Bible Translating*. Leiden: Brill. (Covers the core ideas of formal and dynamic/functional equivalence).
2. **Vermeer, Hans J.** (1989). *Skopos and Commission in Translational Action*. In *The Translation Studies Reader* (2000), edited by Lawrence Venuti. London: Routledge. (Key text for Skopos Theory and the focus on function).

3. **Catford, J.C.** (1965). *A Linguistic Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics*. London: Oxford University Press. (Discusses language-based and culture-based words that can't be translated).
4. **Venuti, Lawrence.** (1995). *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge. (Looks at the cultural role of the translator, including foreignizing and domesticating).
5. **Baker, Mona.** (1992). *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*. London: Routledge. (Gives full frameworks for word, grammar, text, and practical equivalence).
6. **Nord, Christiane.** (1997). *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing. (Further details on the *Skopos* rule and functional translation).