

## Philosophical Interpretation on E. A. Nida's Definition of Translation

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### Abstract

Since 1980s, E.A. Nida's translation equivalence theory experiences a history of rising, booming and declining in China, and his translation theories and concepts are also widely quoted and discussed. However, the focuses are mainly on what is equivalence, the realization of equivalence, what levels of equivalence, the applicability of his theory and mistranslation of his translation in China, and no one discusses his definition of translation from the perspective of philosophy. As the definition of translation will represent the basis and starting point for translation studies, analysing on it will facilitate our understanding to the theory. In this article, based on the tendency of absolutization to his definition, it is to analyse the presupposition and shortage of the definition by philosophical analysis and to urge following researchers to adopt a dialectic and critical attitude to western translation theories, which may advance Chinese translation studies in future.

**Keywords:** Nida, Definition of translation, Philosophical perspective, Absolutization

E. A. Nida is an important translation theorist in the history of translation studies all over the world. In 1980s, E. A. Nida's equivalence theory goes through the process of rising, prospering and falling, which of course is closely related to the new development of international translation studies. Nida's translation theory plays an essential role in the development of Chinese translation studies, just as Liu Shicong says "whether you agree or not, you can not deny Nida and his translation theory", so "his translation theory has becomes one part of Chinese translation studies"(from Ma Huijuan). But when his translation theory occurs in China early, many researchers accept it or praise it blindly. Only hot discussions on his translation theory and its shortcomings do make his theory clear for Chinese researchers, which also advance the development of Chinese translation studies. In these discussions, some are related to his definition of translation such as Fang Yuehua's, Li Tianxin's, Tan Zaixi's and Ma Huijuan's, but their concerning is mainly on the Chinese translation of his definition, while no one criticises the definition itself, not even from the perspective of philosophy, which deserves our thinking. Therefore, in the article it is to interpret Nida's definition of translation from philosophy in order to make us clearly understand the definition and further his translation theory based on this.

### 1. Nida's Definition of Translation

Definition of translation represents the perspective and attitude to translation theory, which is the basis and starting point of relative translation studies, so deep understanding to definition will deepen the recognition to the theory. According to Nida and Taber in *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, "Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style". There are Chinese translations from Tan Zaixi, Li Tianxin and Ma Huijuan, and Ma thinks "equivalence is the closest possible approximation". Whatever the translation is, the original definition is the same, so the discussion seems a little confusing and useless. In fact the problem is the two words "closest" and "equivalent", which lead to absolutization and indeterminacy of meaning from perspective of philosophy.

### 2. Philosophical Thinking to Closest Equivalent

#### 2.1 Absolutization of the Definition

From its origin and early usage, "for the last 150 years English *equivalence* has been used as a technical term in various exact sciences to denote a number of scientific phenomena or processes", "in mathematics and formal logic it indicates a relationship of absolute symmetry and equality involving guaranteed reversibility"(Snell-Hornby), therefore, *equivalent/equivalence* with the meaning of similar significance is progressive for the development of translation theory

from word-to-word translation to modern translation theory. Whereas, closest is the superlative degree form of the adjective “close”, which means “most...”. From the perspective of philosophy, the superlative degree form represents the extreme point, the last end, which is the problem of absolutization, namely philosophical absolutism. In philosophy, absolutism “as a kind of metaphysical standpoint presupposes that there is some absolute reality, that is, Being independent of human’s cognition, as the being is objective, out of control of time and space but human’s cognition is limited by time and space” (Note 1). Once “closest” is added before the equivalent, it presupposes there exists an absolute correct final translation, that is an ultimate goal, which is beyond the difference of translators, time and space. However, who can find out the final translation? And if it is realized, is retranslation possible? Who can identify which one is the absolute correct translation? Is there only one absolute final translation beyond the translators, time, space and context?

### 2.2 Subjectivity of Evaluation

If there is an absolute correct translation, then we have to face the question that “who can identify the absolute correct translation?” An expert or an ordinary reader? Are their opinions the same? No one can answer this question, because “no poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener” (from L.Venuti, 2000), and no text is for a fixed reader. Therefore, the evaluation of “closest natural equivalent” is subjective and personal. As every estimator is characteristic of his/her personal class, any valuation is characteristic of relative class feature. Readers decide to accept or reject translations, and different types of reader will require different types of translation. (A. Lefevere) A closest natural translation for highly qualified intellectuals may not the closest natural one for common people or ordinary citizens.

### 2.3 Contextualization of Translation

“There is nothing outside context”, and “meaning – not only the meaning of what we speak, read and write, but any meaning at all – is a contextual event; meaning cannot be extracted from, and cannot exist before or outside of a specific context.(from K.Davis) Temporal spirit concerns that any social activity is closely related to its historical context, therefore in discussing these activities, it is necessary to consider it historically and dialectically. From this view, any translation and translating activities are connected with their temporal feature, and any criticism without considering it is a scientific and unreasonable. “Rather like any human activity, it (translation) takes place in a specific social and historical context that informs and structures it, just as it informs and structures other creative process. In the process of translation, the operation becomes doubly complicated since, by definition, two languages and thus two cultures and two societies are involved.” (from L.Venuti,1992)For Lin Shu’s translation activities, the modern researchers had better to discuss his translated text and activities from his temporal context and its historical significance, which can help us understand his translation activities. This is historical context, and there is also another textual context. In practice, any translation has to be analysed on different contexts, which is a view from pragmatics, as different contexts will produce “closest natural equivalents” at different levels in different degrees, because “we have come to recognise that different types of texts require different translation strategies”(S. Bassnett and A. Lefevere). This is contextual equivalence.

### 2.4 Different Equivalent at Different Levels

Early translation studies focuses on the correspondence of word for word, gradually the focus widens to macro perspective. Western translation theory can be dated from word-for-word of Rome era to later sense-for-sense, then equivalent at phrase level, at sentence level, at paragraph level and even at textual level. While Nida’s definition does not limit the level of equivalence, so it maybe at any level. From temporal development of translation studies of his time, the study on translation unit is concerned to phrase and sentence based on linguistic analysis, therefore Nida’s definition of translation is to some degree on the “closest natural equivalent” at phrase and sentence levels. In *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*, Mona Baker analyses equivalence at word level and above word level, including grammatical equivalence, textual equivalence and pragmatic equivalence, which means equivalence is hierarchical, from this aspect, Nida’s equivalence theory is questionable. Of course, it is necessary to consider the fact that Nida’s equivalence theory is put forward as early as 1960s, while others are far later from his theory.

### 2.5 Possibility of Re-translation

If there exists a closest natural equivalent, any translator is to seek for it to his/her best, and if he/she does realize the goal, the translated text is the ultimate translation, which never changes, that is, there is no possibility to re-translation. However any translator is characteristic of his/her personal subjectivity, and “when any sense-maker understands the objective content of an object, in fact it is never avoidable that his/her personal subjective factors are permeated into it”(Huang Zhending).

From Derrida’s view, meaning is “what is disseminated in the transform process of a serie of signifiers, but not a stable signified-signifier relation. Language is not an unambiguous and well-defined structure between groups of signifieds and signifiers, but seems like a disordered game in which all kinds of factors interact and interchange, which leads to

forever “difference” of signified-signifier chain.”(Liu Hui) The “*difference*” between signified and signifier relationship subverts conventional response relation between them, and leads to the indeterminacy of word meaning. The indeterminacy of word meaning “further proves that text is not an unambiguous and self-evident close unit any more, but a ceaseless move process and activity”(Lu Yang). As a result, the indeterminacy of meaning leads to the different interpretations and translations for different translators, and “the process of reading and interpreting a text is a limitless dynamic extension of signs, but not a static and stable structure”(Lu Yang). The meaning and the idea of the original is in the process of unlimited “*difference*”, and translators cannot identify a norm text with exact meaning and stable translation model in translating. Therefore in the process of translation, translators will, according to his/her understanding and personal cultural background knowledge, creatively interpret and understand original text, so “the traces of translators and other translated texts all will *difference* in a translator’s text”(Liu Hui). A text“lives only if it lives *on* [sur-vit], and it lives *on* only if it is *at once* translatable *and* untranslatable [...] Totally translatable, it disappears as a text, as writing, as a body of language [*langue*]. Totally untranslatable, even within what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately.” (from K. Davis) Any text at specific temporal and spatial contexts will produce different texts by different translators, even the same translator will develop a new text in a new temporal or spatial context. Therefore, re-translation is possible, and inevitable, which proves that there does not exist a final translation ---“the closest natural equivalence”.

### **3. Philosophical Interpretation for the Definition**

From Nida’s definition, translation is to reproduce the closest natural meaning of source language information in target language firstly, while its stylistic features of both source language and target language are of second importance. From philosophy, the definition presupposes the determinacy of meaning and ultimate translation, and it also emphasizes the centrality of original text and the priority of meaning, which neglects the creativity and dynamicity of translation. “Translation is not only the intellectual, creative process by which a text written in a given language is transferred into another.” (from L. Venuti,1992)

From Nida’s definition, as translation is to “reproduce” the closest natural corresponding information and meaning, for translators it is to find the presupposed meaning and express it out. Meanwhile as discussed in 2.1 “closest” also presupposes that there exists an ultimate information or meaning, any translator is to discover the absolute correct translation. This is the first presupposition. However, “meaning is a plural and contingent relation, not an unchanging unified essence, and therefore a translation cannot be judged according to mathematics-based concepts of semantic equivalence or one-to-one correspondence.”(L.Venuti, 2004) If the presupposition is denied as above-discussion, the definition and even the theory is vulnerable to attack. In the definition, it is required to “reproduce” the information of source language, so the information starting point of the definition is the source text, the source meaning, and its translation is dependent on its source text, just as the by-product of original text, which is widely criticised by post-modernism translation studies. “First in terms of meaning” emphasizes on the priority of meaning, but the definition to some degree has a relative applicability to some text, however for poems and ads text, the priority of meaning has to face challenge. From this point, the definition is mainly suitable to “content-focused text”, but not to “form-focused text”(K. Reiss). “Reproduce” in English means “to produce again or to produce a counterpart, an image or a copy”, without the meaning of creativity, therefore the definition also neglects translators’ subjectivity and creativity, especially for literature translation activities. So the “closest natural equivalence” eliminates the possibility of advancement, progress and further perfection. In addition, the definition neglects such factors as culture and communication in the process of translation as well, by nature “translation is multilingual and also interdisciplinary, encompassing languages, linguistics, communication studies, philosophy and a range of types of cultural studies.”(J.Munday) Cultural equivalence is not semantic equivalence, and the function or purpose of translation is not equivalent to its semantic meaning from the functional translation studies such as skopostherie.

According to the analysis, Nida’s definition of translation has played an important role in history of Chinese translation studies, and also widely used before, especially in 1980s and 1990s, but its shortage is also obvious. Many translation researchers in China just apply it in the translation activities without considering its applicability. Therefore, it is important to adopt dialectical attitude to Nida’s definition of translation and to his translation theory based on the definition, especially for modern researchers, at the same time as translation studies researchers, it is necessary to realize the philosophical basis and shortcomings of all kinds of western translation theories, and accordingly develop and improve Chinese translation studies.

### **4. Conclusion**

Based on the analysis of absolutization of Nida’s definition of translation, it is concluded that this definition has many problems from the perspective of philosophy, first the possibility of final exact translation, then the presupposition of meaning determinacy and presupposition of existence of final meaning for texts. From the aspect of linguistics, the definition is of paramount importance under the frame of linguistics, and Nida and other successors also make some supplement and discussion, but for translation studies researchers, it is necessary to limit this definition in the field of

translation studies from the perspective of linguistics. Concerning the temporal spirit of Nida's definition and the development of western translation studies, it is undoubtedly that Nida's definition of translation and his translation theory have played an important role in the early development of Chinese translation studies, and his definition and translation theory also is progressive at that time. From the progress of Nida's translation theory expanding in China since early 1980s, in the early period of western theory into China, Chinese researchers often are vulnerable to envy western theories blindly and neglect the contradiction behind these theories, therefore in this article it is to advance the dialectical thinking, acceptance and application to western theories by philosophical thinking, which could be useful to future study for Chinese translation researchers.

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