

Comparative Analysis of the Translation Theories of Yan Fu's "Faithfulness, Expressiveness, and Elegance" and Nida's "Functional Equivalence"

Yue Bin

Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu 10000, Sichuan, China

Email: 2364049602@qq.com

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Abstract

Chinese and Western translation theories are characterized by their distinctive features and profound impacts. In China, Yan Fu's "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" principles are held as the golden rules of translation. Meanwhile, in the West, Eugene Nida's "functional equivalence" theory stands out as a prominent example. This paper aims to conduct a comparative analysis of these two translation theories, exploring their similarities and differences, with a view to providing theoretical references for translation practice. Meanwhile, it also promotes the exchange and integration of Chinese and Western translation theories, jointly advancing the prosperity and development of global translation undertakings.

Keywords

Yan Fu; faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance; Nida; functional equivalence; comparison

1. Introduction

Translation, as a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communicative activity, revolves around the core issue of how to accurately convey the meaning, style, and cultural connotations of the original text. This question has been at the forefront of translation theory research since the inception of translation activities. Throughout the history of translation in both China and the West, various translation theories have emerged from different historical periods and schools. These theories have developed independently yet interacted with each other, collectively forming a rich landscape of translation theories. Historically, Chinese and Western translators have conducted profound explorations into translation standards, yet due to different traditions and schools, their emphases vary. Yan Fu's "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" and Nida's "functional equivalence" theory represent the essence of translation theories in China and the West, respectively. Yan Fu emphasizes fidelity

to the original text, fluency in expression, and elegance in literary style; whereas Nida focuses on the functional equivalence between the translation and the original text, pursuing consistency in reader response. Although originating from distinct cultural backgrounds, both theories have had profound impacts on translation practice. This paper aims to conduct a comparative analysis of these two theories, exploring their similarities, differences, and implications for modern translation practice. Through this endeavor, we hope to provide new perspectives and references for translation research and practice, thereby contributing to the innovation and development of China's translation theory system. In this process, we anticipate uncovering more universal principles and unique charms within cross-cultural translation theories, laying a solid foundation for the establishment of a more open, inclusive, and diverse translation research landscape.

2. Introduction to Yan Fu's "Faithfulness, Expressiveness, and Elegance"

2.1. Brief Introduction to Yan Fu

Yan Fu was a Chinese military officer, newspaper editor, translator, and writer. He was most known for introducing western ideas to China in the late 19th century. He was one of the most influential scholars of his generation as he worked to introduce Western social, economic and political ideas to China. Previous translation efforts had been focused mainly on religion and technology. Yan was also one of the first scholars to have personal experiences in Western culture, whereas many prior scholars were students in Japan who then translated Western works from Japanese to Chinese.

2.2. "Faithfulness, Expressiveness, and Elegance"

In the introductory remarks to his *Evolution and Ethics* and *Other Essays*, Yan Fu articulated that "translation confronts three primary challenges: faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance." Notably, he did not intend these to serve as universal criteria for translation nor did he imply their autonomy from one another. Nevertheless, subsequent to the release of his translation, the triad of "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" has been credited to Yan Fu as a benchmark for excellence in translation endeavors. The introduction of this standard not only provided fresh theoretical guidance for China's translation community at that time but also established a benchmark for future translation work. Subsequent to Yan's seminal identification of the three challenges in translation, a succession of novel translation standards emerged within China's translation community. Nevertheless, "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" remains a cornerstone and widely recognized benchmark among translation standards. "Faithfulness", in particular, stands as the fundamental prerequisite and paramount consideration throughout the translation process.

3. Introduction to Nida's "Functional Equivalence"

3.1. Brief Introduction to Nida

Eugene A. Nida, an American linguist, pioneered the concept of Dynamic Equivalence, alternately referred to as Functional Equivalence, in the realm of Bible translation. Renowned as one of the forefathers of contemporary translation studies, Nida has blazed trails in both translation theory and linguistics. His seminal contribution to the field lies in the formulation of Functional Equivalence, which revolutionized the understanding of translation.

3.2. "Functional Equivalence"

In 1969, Nida put forth the theory of "functional equivalence," which centers on achieving functional equivalence between two languages rather than a rigid, word-for-word correspondence. This theory includes a comprehensive framework consisting of four pivotal aspects: lexical equivalence, syntactic equivalence, textual equivalence, and stylistic equivalence. He also outlined four criteria that must be met in translation: accuracy in conveying meaning, faithful representation of the original spirit, natural and smooth wording, and similarity in reader response. He believed that when a conflict arises between content and form, the latter should be sacrificed to preserve the former. Nida emphasized that the objective of translation transcends the linguistic constructs of the original text, aiming instead to communicate its essence and spirit accurately.

4. Comparison between Yan Fu's "Faithfulness, Expressiveness, and Elegance" and Nida's "Functional Equivalence"

4.1. Similarities

4.1.1. Emphasis on the Transmission of the Original Information

During his translation practice in late Qing and early Republic of China eras, Yan Fu proposed the three principles of "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance," with "faithfulness" being the foremost. This principle underscores the imperative for the translation to faithfully convey the content and meaning of the original text, ensuring neither distortion nor omission in the process. This reflects the translator's respect for the original author and their work, and is a fundamental ethical and professional norm that must be upheld in translation as a bridge of cross-cultural communication. Similarly, Nida's translation theory, while emphasizing the artistic and scientific aspects of language transformation, places the faithful transmission of the original information and intention at the core. He believes that the essence of translation lies in achieving equivalence in meaning and function between different languages, rather than a simple substitution of linguistic symbols. His theory of "functional equivalence" stresses that the translation should enable readers to have

the same or similar reading experience as the original readers, preserving to the greatest extent the semantic content, linguistic style, and even stylistic features of the original text, so that the translation remains persuasive and appealing in the target cultural context. Both Yan Fu's "faithfulness" principle and Nida's translation theory converge on the core mission of translation: to faithfully and accurately convey the information and intention of the original text, thereby fostering understanding and integration between different cultures.

4.1.2. Necessary Adaptations in the Form of the Translation

Yan Fu's "expressiveness" requires the translator not only to deeply comprehend the essence and connotation of the original text, "to thoroughly grasp the spirit of the entire work," but also to possess the ability to transform this understanding into another linguistic form, making the translation "smooth and well-rounded in its expression." In other words, the translator must serve as a bridge between the original and the translated text, through a thorough grasp of the original ideas and a mastery of the linguistic characteristics of the target language, flexibly adjusting sentence structures, rhetorical devices, and even narrative styles to ensure that the translation naturally and vividly conveys the intent and charm of the original. Nida's functional equivalence also demands "the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message in the receptor language," which necessitates that translators, in pursuit of this goal, adapt the linguistic forms of the original text flexibly according to the linguistic structures and expressive habits of the target language. This ensures that the translation can blend seamlessly into the target culture and evoke similar reading experiences and sensations as the original within that cultural context.¹ Thus, both Yan Fu's "expressiveness" and Nida's functional equivalence theory reveal the necessity of linguistic form adaptation in the translation process. Such adaptations are not arbitrary but rather grounded in a profound understanding of the original text and an accurate grasp of the target language's characteristics, aimed at achieving a higher level of translation goals.

4.1.3. Emphasis on Readers

Yan Fu's concept of "elegance" manifests in his consideration for the readers of his translations, which not only reflects his pursuit of literary value but also demonstrates a profound consideration for reader acceptance and influence. Deeply aware of the reader group his translations would encounter—feudal intellectuals steeped in traditional culture and accustomed to classical Chinese expressions—Yan chose the elegant style of the Tongcheng School as the vehicle for his translations.² This style not only aligned with the aesthetics of contemporary intellectuals but also effectively conveyed the profound connotations of the original texts. His choice demonstrates not only a precise grasp of reader needs but also a profound insight into the social and cultural value of translation works. Within the framework of

modern translation theory, Nida's "reader response theory" provides a more direct and explicit elaboration of the central role of readers in the translation process. Rooted in his profound reflections and practical experiences from translating the Bible, this theory emphasizes that the ultimate goal of translation is to achieve a substantially similar response in the target-language readers as that of the original-language readers.³ According to Nida, the target audience of translations are the readers of the translated texts, and the evaluation of translation quality must take into account reader responses. To facilitate the rapid dissemination of the translated Bible, he employed straightforward language that enabled even the broader audience from lower social strata to grasp the teachings of the Bible deeply. Thus, both Yan Fu's "elegance" and Nida's "reader response theory" reflect the translators' profound attention to readers.

4.1.4. Both Belong to the Camp of Free Translation

From the perspective of translation methods, both Yan Fu and Nida belong to the camp of free translation. Yan believed that a translation should capture the essence of the entire text, allowing for the reversal, addition, or deletion of words, phrases, and sentences based on the needs of meaning, as long as the original intent is preserved without meticulous adherence to the corresponding order of words, phrases, and sentences. This flexible translation strategy enables Yan's translations to maintain the depth and breadth of the original ideas while also being easily understood and accepted by readers of the target language. Nida's functional equivalence, within the broader context of free translation, strives to approximate the original work's grammar and word choice as closely as possible, offering greater flexibility than a text-centered approach. He consistently advocates that meaning takes precedence over form, though this does not mean form is entirely ignored.⁴ Focusing solely on content at the expense of form can make a translation dull and unengaging; conversely, emphasizing form over content risks failing to faithfully convey the original message, resulting in a superficial translation. Therefore, the translation ideologies of both Yan Fu and Nida profoundly embody the spiritual essence of the free translation camp. They jointly emphasize that the core of translation lies in the conveyance of meaning, rather than the mechanical reproduction of form. Under this overarching premise, they respectively developed flexible translation strategies and methods to accommodate the needs of linguistic communication across different cultural backgrounds.

4.2. Differences

4.2.1. Different Theoretical Backgrounds and Core Concepts

Yan Fu's theory of "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" stems from the rich soil of traditional Chinese translation theory and literature, drawing upon the translation of Buddhist scriptures since the Han and Tang dynasties as well as the

abundant translation experience of predecessors. Its core concepts include “faithfulness,” which requires the translation to be loyal to the original text and accurately convey its meaning; “expressiveness,” which demands the translation to be smooth and fluent without being constrained by the form of the original; and “elegance,” which necessitates the translation to be concise, graceful, and rich in literary merit. In contrast, Nida’s translation theory is more influenced by modern linguistics, particularly his in-depth linguistic research on Bible translation, which laid a solid foundation for his translation theories. Nida’s theory emphasizes the pursuit of functional equivalence between the two languages in the translation process, rather than simple word-for-word correspondence. This theory breaks through the excessive pursuit of formal equivalence in traditional translation theories, shifting the focus of translation to the actual effects and functions of the translated text in the target language cultural environment. It requires translators to not only pay attention to the superficial lexical information of the original text but also deeply explore and convey the underlying cultural information, emotional color, and communicative intentions of the original, enabling readers of the translated text to obtain a similar reading experience and psychological feeling as readers of the original. This reader-centered, function-oriented translation concept provides new perspectives and ideas for translation practice. Thus, it can be seen that Yan Fu and Nida’s theories differ in their backgrounds and core concepts.

4.2.2. Different Presupposed Target Audiences

The differing identities and social backgrounds of Yan Fu and Nida determine the different presupposed target audiences for their translations. Yan’s purpose in translation was to propagate Western learning and reform old China, thus his readers were the well-educated members of the ruling class. He was acutely aware that to drive fundamental changes in Chinese society, this class must first accept and understand Western advanced ideas. Therefore, his translated works were carefully selected and translated specifically for this reader group, aiming to stimulate national reform consciousness by introducing Western theories such as evolutionism and economics, and to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for the reform movement.⁵ As a Bible translator, Nida’s purpose was to disseminate the will of God, making his target audience extremely broad. His translations had to satisfy both the requirements of church leaders and the tastes of the general public who lacked knowledge of the Bible and related religious matters, thus encompassing individuals from all social strata as recipients of his translation theories. It is evident that Yan Fu and Nida’s theories differ in terms of their presupposed target audiences.

4.2.3. Different Scopes of Application

Lu Xun and Qian Zhongshu once pointed out that “faithfulness, expressiveness, and

elegance” are in fact “an extension of the translation views of Zhi Qian, the pioneer of Chinese translation theory,” indicating that Yan’s translation theory “has its origins and is rooted in China’s long cultural history, inheriting the achievements of ancient rhetoric and literature and applying them to translation.”⁶ While “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” cover a wide range of aspects, they lack clarity and are thus empirical and vague, serving as general guiding principles for translation. In contrast, Nida’s translation theory, guided by Chomsky’s Transformational-Generative Grammar and Reader Response Theory, has a solid theoretical foundation and is more scientific and operable, guiding translators to engage in translation practice from a micro perspective. Yan’s approach is macro-level, with “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” being traditional translation standards with Chinese characteristics, mentioned briefly by himself. Nida, on the other hand, adopts a micro-level verification approach. He himself believed that “functional equivalence,” as the goal of translation, is based on the context rather than the language system itself. Furthermore, He employs linguistic and semiotic concepts, making “functional equivalence” appear more systematic, specific, and linguistically robust, forming a comprehensive translation system. Therefore, Yan Fu and Nida’s theories differ in their scopes of application.

4.2.4. Different Theoretical Focuses

Yan Fu emphasized that translations must faithfully reproduce the deep meanings of the original text while ensuring the fluency and naturalness of the translated language, enabling readers to experience a similar aesthetic feeling as that of the original during the reading process. This precise grasp of textual content and meticulous crafting of linguistic form make “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” particularly adept at translating literary works. Literary works are renowned for their rich emotional expression, profound ideological content, and unique artistic style, and Yan’s translation theory precisely meets the dual demands of meaning transmission and artistic representation in the translation process of these works. In contrast, Nida approached the concept of “equivalence” from a communicative perspective, emphasizing the effective communication of the original information. “His theory primarily addresses the communicative essence and comprehensibility of translations, which subsequently restricts the breadth of its applicability.” In other words, the primary task of translation is to ensure that readers of the translated text can obtain a similar reading experience and psychological response as readers of the original, requiring translators to not only attend to the literal meaning of words but also deeply explore and convey the communicative intentions and cultural connotations of the original. Therefore, Nida’s translation theory has significant advantages in addressing the communicative nature and intelligibility of translations, particularly suitable for the translation of applied texts that emphasize information transmission and functional realization. Consequently, the “functional equivalence” theo-

ry is often used to guide the translation of applied texts. Thus, Yan Fu and Nida's theories differ in their theoretical focuses.

5. Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of Yan Fu's "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" and Nida's "functional equivalence" translation theories, we can observe that despite originating from distinct cultural backgrounds and academic traditions, both theories have played significant roles within their respective domains and exerted profound influences on translation practice. Yan's "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" theory, with its concise yet profound formulation, not only established a benchmark for translation quality in the Chinese translation community but also guided countless translators in pursuing the perfect unity of fidelity, fluency, and artistry in their translations. This theory underscores the importance of translation as a cultural transmission activity, facilitating the overseas dissemination and exchange of Chinese culture. On the other hand, Nida's "functional equivalence" theory, with its unique perspective and innovative thinking, offers a new direction for translation practice in the West and globally. This theory emphasizes the importance of reader response and the functional equivalence between the original and translated texts, aiming for a translation that is more aligned with the reading habits and cultural backgrounds of target language readers. The application of this theory enhances the readability and acceptability of translated works, fostering greater understanding and communication between different cultures. Through this comparative analysis, we identify the following similarities between the two theories: both emphasize the transmission of the original information, necessitate changes in the form of the translation (belonging to the camp of free translation), and attach importance to readers. However, they also exhibit differences, including: distinct theoretical backgrounds and core concepts, different presupposed reader targets, varying scopes of application, and differing theoretical focuses. As highly representative translation theories in Chinese and Western translation theories, the similarities and differences between Yan's and Nida's translation theories provide insights for us to conduct a more detailed and in-depth comparison between Chinese and Western translation theories. Furthermore, they lay a solid foundation for us to integrate Chinese and Western translation theories and establish a unique translation theory system with Chinese characteristics.

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