

Analysis of Eugene Nida's Translation Theory

Yinli Gao

School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Petroleum University, Chengdu 610500, China

Abstract: As a well-known translator and linguist in the world, Eugene Nida devoted himself to the development of translation theory. His translation theories enjoy an incomparably significant position in the translation field and have had a pretty profound influence on the translation of the Bible. Moreover, his translation theories enable people to get more knowledge and deeper understanding of translation, which broaden their horizons, especially the well-known theory “dynamic equivalence”, renamed as “functional equivalence” later, is of great significance in guiding the translation practice of human beings. Consequently, it is necessary to study and research Nida's translation theories, and only when we fully understand the connotation and meaning of Eugene Nida's translation theories can we apply them to practice reasonably and thus improve the quality of translation.

Keywords: Eugene Nida, Dynamic equivalence, Functional equivalence, Translation theory.

1. Introduction

Eugene Nida is recognized as one of the founders of modern translation theory, and his research areas cover linguistics, semantics, translation studies, religious studies, cultural studies, etc. (Zhang Zheng, 2018). Nida has made great contributions to the world in translation, leaving valuable treasures to mankind, and *Toward A Science of Translating* published in 1964 is a masterpiece of Nida in the mature period of his translation thought, in which Nida closely combines translation practice and translation theory, introduces linguistic theory into translation studies, and puts forward important concepts such as formal equivalence. *The Theory and Practice of Translation* is Nida's classic work on translation after *Toward a Science of Translating*, which aims to help translators further understand the essence of translation theory so as to effectively master translation skills and strategies. After Nida's works were introduced to China, they provided the necessary reference for the majority of translators and translation researchers, effectively promoted the development of Chinese translation, broadened people's horizons, and enriched people's understanding of translation. Nida's translation theories are earlier translation theory introduced into China, which has a positive influence on the development of translation in China. There are also many evaluations of Nida's translation theory in the domestic translation community, which is enough to show the great influence of Nida's translation theory.

2. Introduction to Eugene Nida

Nida was born in 1914 in Oklahoma City, south-central United States. (Tan Zaixi, 1999) He graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles, proficient in many languages, researched more than 100 languages, and were often invited to lecture in many countries. In addition, Nida had a deep affection for China, and since 1982, he had been invited to give lectures in China more than ten times, and had maintained close academic contacts and exchanges with many schools and academic colleagues in China for a long time (Tan Zaixi, 2004). As a famous American translator, translation theorist, and linguist, Nida had made great contributions to the study of Bible translation. At the same time, he was well versed in linguistics. Nida believed that

languages have a common property, that is, any kind of human language has the ability to convey information. In the study of translation theory, Nida not only applied traditional methods to explain, but also further explored and innovated on the basis of tradition. Based on transformational generative grammar, especially the concepts of core sentences (Tan Zaixi, 2005), he described the translation process as the transition of meaning within the deep structure of both the original and translated languages. This transformational generative translation method makes the transition of meaning take place on the core sentence with the simplest structure and the clearest semantics, which has strong explanatory power and considerable enlightenment (Zhang Hesheng, 1996).

3. Nida's Translation Theory and Its Development

Nida's translation theory involves many fields, such as linguistics, lexicology, etc. His translation theory is not established or unchangeable, but is constantly evolving on the basis of theories in other disciplines. For example, Nida, in his book “*From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating*,” co-authored with Waddell, changed the “dynamic equivalence” he proposed in *Toward A Science of Translating* to “functional equivalence” (Yang Sigui, 2016) in order to avoid conceptual confusion, which reflects the advancement of Nida's translation theory. In addition, in *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Nida and co-author Taber gave a textbook definition of translation: translation refers to the reproduction of source language information in the receiving language with the closest natural equivalence (Nida, Taber). Therefore, it is not difficult for us to see that Nida believed that the primary task of translation is to reproduce the information, which is what the book calls “*Translating must aim primarily at ‘reproducing the message’*” (Nida, Taber, 2004). In addition, Tan Zaixi divided the development of Nida's translation thoughts into three different major stages, namely, the early linguistic stage with obvious American structuralism, the middle stage of translation science theory and translation communicative theory, and the later stage of social semiotics (Tan Zaixi, 1999). This view was unanimously agreed by scholars Liao Qiyi and Guo Jianzhong, and became the most incisive summary of Nida's translation theory (Chen Weibin, 2019).

The first stage of Nida's translation thought is the linguistic stage, in which Nida published a series of books and articles studying the syntactic and lexical phenomena of English, attempting to elucidate the structural nature of the language through the portrayal of syntactic, lexical, and linguistic translation problems. Moreover, he had collected a number of examples of speech differences through his travels around the world and his exposure to a variety of different languages. However, he depicts speech differences not as insurmountable barriers between languages, but as different phenomena of the same essence (Tan Zaixi, 1999).

The second stage of the development of Nida's translation thought is the stage of translation science theory and translation communicative theory. In his book *A Short History of Translation in the West*, Tan Zaixi summarized the following five main contents in connection with the development of Nida's translation thought at that stage:

3.1. Science of Translating Theory

According to Nida, translation is not only an art and a skill, but also a science. The science referred to here is to combine translation with linguistics, so that problems in translation can be analyzed and dealt with from a linguistic point of view. From this point of view, we can see that Nida not only regarded translation as an elegant act, a skill, but also emphasized the close connection between translation and linguistics. He connected translation with linguistics and advocated analyzing the problems in translation from a linguistic point of view, which provided a new path for human translation and broadened people's horizons, thus promoting the development of translation. For example, in our country's ancient text, there was no such word as "romantic", "club", but in order to understand things better, we accepted these new words and put them into use, in fact, these words were translated from other languages, so we can see that translation and linguistics are very closely related, and the combination of translation and linguistics is reasonable.

3.2. Communicative Translation Theory

Nida believed that translation is communication, which indicates that the purpose of translation is to realize effective communication in real life. As a matter of fact, the subtitle translation of film and television dramas precisely reflects this idea. With the continuous improvement of people's living standards, the communication between various countries is also becoming more and more. As an essential part of people's life, movie and television works also play an indispensable role in the cultural exchange of different countries, which not only can bring people a visual feast but also contribute to the dissemination of culture. On the surface, the subtitle translation seems to be just a switch occurred between two different languages, but as a matter of fact, it is a communication and integration between two special cultures of two different countries. Consequently, from this point of view, it is not difficult to see that translation is communication, which enables people from different countries to realize cross-cultural communication through subtitle translation. In Nida's view, the main purpose of translation is to enable readers to understand the original work in a straightforward manner, even if they do not have the relevant cultural knowledge. Therefore, in the translation, the translator should not directly convert the language, but should take the language habits and cultural background of the readers of the target language into account, and try to adopt the authentic

language which is easy to be accepted by the readers of the target language. For example, the line "wicked trainers" in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, which is said by Ron to Dobby. If it is literally translated as "邪恶的鞋子", it will conflict with the storyline of the movie. Consequently, the word "wicked" can't be translated as "邪恶的". Through searching for information on the Internet, we can find that "wicked" can be used as a slang word which means "很棒的, 不错的", but if it is translated as "不错的鞋子", it will be a bit awkward for the audience of the target language and lose the flavor of the source language, so the subtitle translation adopted "鞋很有品味啊" as its proper translation, which not only conveys the message of the source language completely, but also reflects the sense of humor of Ron's jokes to Dobby. From the above, it is not hard for us to see that translation is a kind of communication, which can make people feel the characteristics of other languages and cultures through language conversion, thus promoting cultural exchange.

3.3. Dynamic Equivalence Translation Theory

This is one of the most familiar statements in Nida's translation theory. As a matter of fact, the translation of dynamic equivalence is to translate with the guidance of the theory of translation communication, which specifically means that "from semantics to stylistics, the source language information is reproduced in the target language with a natural equivalent that is close to the source language" (Tan Jaixi, 2004). This idea requires that the translation should pay attention to the dynamic equivalence, but it is not a rigid one-to-one correspondence between words, and there should not be translationese, and at the same time, it should also apply the vocabularies that are as close as possible to the original language, and the whole translation should be fluent. In order to avoid confusion, Nida later changed it to functional equivalence theory.

Nida's most important translation theory is equivalence theory, including formal equivalence theory and functional equivalence theory. Formal equivalence theory is to pursue the formal correspondence between the translated text and the original text, and try to retain the formal style of the original text, while functional equivalence theory is to pursue the communication of the original text, aiming to make the readers have the same feeling as the original readers.

During the translation practice, we should strike a balance between "formal equivalence" and "dynamic equivalence", and we should not pursue only one of them, formal equivalence or dynamic equivalence, but should flexibly apply equivalence theory according to the actual situation and effectively combine the formal equivalence theory and dynamic equivalence theory, so as to ensure the faithfulness and readability of the translation. For example, the sentence "He is a student", if we translate this sentence directly word for word into "他是一个学生", although this translation covers the meanings of every word correspondingly, realizing the equivalence of words and forms, and there is no problem with the sentence, it is not in line with our Chinese habit of speaking, and we are used to saying "他是学生", therefore, we can't only focus on the equivalence of words and forms during the translation, but also take into account the linguistic habits of the readers of the target language, and adopt the natural equivalents close to the original language for translation, only in this way can we truly achieve "functional

equivalence”. Another example is a line in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*: “I see no reason to put stock into an old wives’ tale.” The phrase “an old wives’ tale” means “nonsense, silly story”, while the phrase “put stock into” means “trust, believe, value”. If it was directly translated into “我认为没有必要相信这无稽之谈”, it would meet the formal equivalence and be understandable, but the translation is a little bit rigid and redundant, and meanwhile, this is a conversation between Harry Potter and Mr. Ollivander, in our daily life, we won’t talk like this at all, so the direct translation of this sentence isn’t in accordance with our language habits. The subtitle translation is “枕边故事而已, 不必当真吧”, and in Chinese, “枕边故事” means “stories told to children before going to bed to lull them to sleep, and sometimes refers to unrealistic things”, which is closer to the life of Chinese people and allows the audience to realize the meaning of this English idiom. The translation conveys the original meaning of the idiom well, and at the same time takes into account the linguistic and cultural habits of the audience, which promotes effective communication between different languages and cultures.

“Formal equivalence” and “functional equivalence” are not either this or that, we should try our best to take both into account in translation, and when we can’t take both into account, we should give up the form and focus on conveying the meaning of the original text. Take English slang for example, in fact, there is no English slang having the corresponding word in Chinese, so we have to look for Chinese word which has the most similar meaning of the English slang during the translation, and strive to not lose the meaning and cultural elements of the original text in the conversion of two languages, so as to achieve “functional equivalence”. Language and culture have a very close connection, and they are in the state of intermingling, language can be shown through culture, and culture can also be reflected through language, so when carrying out translation with the theory of equivalence as the guiding translation theory, we should pay attention to deal with the form of formal equivalence and functional equivalence.

3.4. Functional Equivalence Translation Theory

From the viewpoint of sociolinguistics and the communicative function of language, Nida believed that translation must serve the readers. To judge whether a translation is correctly translated, the reader’s reaction must be the criterion. To a certain extent, the functional translation theory has the same connotation with the reader’s reflection theory, only the names of the two are different. The core of the two sayings is to put the readers in the most important position, pay attention to the readers’ reading reflection, and think that a good translation is able to show the spiritual connotation of the original work, that is to say, it has not lost its important connotation in the conversion of two different languages, and it can allow the readers to have the same feeling as the people who read the original work. The purpose of translation is to express the connotation of the source text completely in another language and bring the readers the same flavor as the original. Therefore, in Nida’s opinion, to judge whether a work has been translated correctly and successfully, we should pay attention to the readers’ reaction (Tan Zaixi, 2004). Nida’s idea of functional translation theory is of a good guiding significance for our translation practice, he emphasized the readers’ feelings, the readers’ reflections,

and the essence of translation is to realize communication, exchange, so the readers’ reflections can be used as a criterion to measure the goodness of a translated work. If the translator does not care about the readers’ feelings when translating a work, it will certainly cause obstacles to the readers in the process of reading, which will not achieve a good communication effect, and such a work cannot be considered a good translation.

3.5. Four Steps Translation Theory

This is in regard to the translation process. Nida proposed that the process of translation is: analysis, language transformation (transferring the meaning obtained from analysis of the source language to the target language), reorganization (reorganizing the translated text according to the rules of the target language), and checking (testing the target text in accordance with the source text). Among these four steps, the “analysis” step is the most complicated and crucial, and the focus of analysis is on semantics, so Nida devoted a great deal of time to analyzing semantics in both *Toward A Science of Translating* and *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Tan Zaixi, 2004). In our routine translation practice, we will also have this feeling, to translate a sentence, first of all, we have to analyze the components of the sentence, and then try to express it in another language in our mind in accordance with the meaning of the source sentence, after that it is to adjust the order of the sentence, the wording of the sentence and so on, and then we will start to write down the target text. Finally, the target text will be checked to make sure that there are no omissions, mistranslations, and so on. From the above, we can see that the four-step model of translation proposed by Nida has been well applied in our translation practice. Because Nida’s translation theory is constantly developing and advancing (Yang Sigui, 2016).

Beginning in the 1970s, especially after entering the 1980s, Nida made a series of modifications and additions to his theory of translation. He did not completely abandon the original theory of the communicative school, but further played on the original basis, incorporating the useful components of the original theory into a new model. This new model is the social semiotic model of the third stage of development of Nida’s translation thought.

At this stage, Nida’s main translation theories are “functional equivalence” and “linguistic commonality” translation theory, which has been mentioned before. The translation theory of “linguistic commonality” refers to the conversion between two different language symbols, in other words, it is translatability. This theory is related to cross-cultural communication. Nida believed that any language can be converted, that is to say, any language embraces translatability, and there is no insurmountable gap between languages, so people can communicate regardless of which country or region they are located in and no matter what nationality they belong to. From this we can see that the theory of “linguistic commonality” has a positive impact on the promotion of intercultural communication.

4. Conclusion

The importance of Nida’s translation theory for our translation practice is self-evident. He combined translation with linguistics and other fields, and put forward important translation theories such as “functional equivalence”, which guides people’s translation activities, broadens people’s horizons, provides impetus for the development of translation

theory, and makes great contributions to the translation cause of mankind. Therefore, we should deeply grasp the core of Nida's translation theories and apply them in translation practice, so as to promote the output of high-quality translations.

References

- [1] Chen Weibing: Approaches to Contradictions of Translation (Peking University Press, China 2019).
- [2] Nida&Taber: The Theory and Practice of Translation (Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, China 2004).
- [3] Tan Zaixi: A Short History of Translation in the West (Commercial Press,China 2004).
- [4] Tan Zaixi: New Edition of Nida's Ideas on Translation (China Translation & Publishing Corporation, China 1999).
- [5] Tan Zaixi: Translation Studies (Hubei Education Press, China 2005).
- [6] Yang Sigui.Re-exam of Eugene Nida's Translation Thought (Sichuan University Press, China 2016).
- [7] Zhang Hesheng: Studies on the Development of Western Translation Theory, Foreign Language Education, 1996(04), p.45-49.
- [8] Zhao Jianming, He Zurui, Du Jing: An Analysis of Nida and Newmark's Translation Theory, Overseas English, 2019(06), p.63-64.
- [9] Zhen Zhang: An Introduction to Translation Studies (Tsinghua University Press, China 2018)