

A Comparative Study of Nida's and Koller's Translation Theories

Yan Li

School of Language and Cultures, Youjiang Medical University for Nationalities, Baise, China

Email: susanliyan8@163.com

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Abstract

Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory and Koller's Equivalence Theory have formed two representative theoretical paradigms centered around the issue of "equivalence", exerting a profound influence on the development and practice of translation theory. This article attempts to introduce Nida's "Analysis-Transfer-Restructuring-Testing" model of Functional Equivalence Theory and the multi-level equivalence types of Koller's Equivalence Theory, which include "denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, and formal-aesthetic" aspects, as well as to compare the connections and differences between Nida's and Koller's translation theories. The aim is to help readers gain a deeper understanding of Nida's and Koller's translation theories and to provide some reference for the more reasonable and flexible selection and application of translation theories in practice.

Keywords

Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory, Koller's Equivalence Theory, Comparative Study

1. Introduction

Translation is a complex and challenging task that requires translators not only to possess solid language proficiency but also to comprehensively consider multiple dimensions such as language, culture, context, and communicative functions, thereby achieving the effective transmission of information, meaning, and function. In the field of translation studies, "equivalence" has consistently been one of the core issues of academic focus. Scholars have proposed diverse theories centered around the question of "in what sense the target text should be equivalent to the source text". Among these, Eugene Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory and Werner Koller's Equivalence Theory are particularly representative. Nida's Func-

tional Equivalence Theory centers on “reader response”, moving beyond traditional formal equivalence to emphasize communicative effects (Wu & Su, 2023). In contrast, Koller’s Equivalence Theory systematically deconstructs the broad concept of “equivalence” into five distinct levels—“denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, and formal-aesthetic”—thereby providing a set of analytical and operational theoretical tools for translation research (Munday, Pinto, & Blakesley, 2022). Both Nida’s and Koller’s translation theories elucidate the issue of achieving “equivalence” from different perspectives, exerting a profound influence on both translation theory and practice.

While Nida’s and Koller’s translation theories share certain similarities, they also exhibit significant differences. In light of this, this paper systematically introduces Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory and Koller’s Equivalence Theory, along with their similarities and differences. The aim is to provide translators with important reference material for theoretical reflection and strategic choice in translation practice.

2. Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory

Eugene Nida is one of the most influential translation theorists of the 20th century, having played a significant and far-reaching role in advancing translation studies in China. Nida’s core translation theory is “dynamic equivalence” (later renamed “functional equivalence”), which posits that the response of the target text’s recipients to its message should be essentially the same as the response of the original text’s recipients to its message (Nida, 1964). Nida emphasized that translation equivalence is not a simple mechanical correspondence of linguistic forms but rather a “closest natural equivalence” in terms of psychological response and communicative effect. In other words, the ultimate judge of a translation is the reader of the target language.

In his work *From One Language to Another*, Nida changed the term “dynamic equivalence” to “functional equivalence” (Waard & Nida, 1986). This modification was not a negation or revision of the theory but rather aimed to avoid potential misunderstandings that the term “dynamic” might cause. “Functional equivalence” refers to an operational principle in translation, emphasizing that translators should achieve the same understanding and reaction in target text readers as in original text readers by selecting expressions in the target language that serve the same communicative function.

Deeply influenced by Chomsky’s Transformational-Generative Grammar, Nida proposed the translation steps of “Analysis-Transfer-Restructuring-Testing” (Nida & Taber, 1974).

Analysis: The translator breaks down complex surface structures into kernel sentences and extracts their deep structure and meaning. Analysis is the core part of the translation process, ensuring that the translator not only gains a deep understanding of the original text’s information but also accurately conveys its message, meaning, culture, and emotion. During the analysis phase, the translator

should temporarily free themselves from the constraints of the source language form and fully focus on “What is the original text about?” and “What function did the original text serve for its contemporary readers?”

Transfer: The translator needs to transfer the core meaning of the source language into expressive forms in the target language, making appropriate adjustments based on culturally characteristic expressions and communicative functions in the target language. This ensures that target language readers achieve understanding and reactions similar to those of original text readers. At this stage, factors such as the translator’s experience, cultural background, and language skills may influence the translation outcome. Since different languages carry different cultural traditions and ways of thinking, corresponding adjustments are often required in semantic expression and syntactic structure when transferring between two languages to ensure that target language readers have similar understanding and feelings as source language readers.

Restructuring: The translator reorganizes the transferred sentences into target language expressions according to the grammatical rules and expressive habits of the target language, ensuring that the translation is natural, accurate, and easy to understand. During the restructuring process, the translator must ensure that the stylistic register of the translation remains consistent with that of the original text. Additionally, the translator should consider the specific circumstances of the target language readers, such as their cultural background, education level, reading habits, and social status, to enhance the acceptability of the translation within the target language context.

Testing: The translator verifies whether the translation achieves a function equivalent to that of the original text in terms of communicative effect. After an initial draft is completed, the translator must systematically test the quality of the translation to determine whether target language readers can achieve communicative effects similar to those of source language readers in terms of understanding, feeling, and reaction. Nida pointed out that the focus of translation testing is not on correspondence at the word or syntactic level but on whether the translation achieves dynamic equivalence in aspects such as “meaning conveyance, textual fluency, and stylistic function”. Based on this, Nida also introduced “reader response” into the translation quality assessment system, emphasizing that the acceptability and actual reactions of target readers should serve as important reference standards. Translators can continuously adjust the translation through methods such as test readings, feedback, and revision to ensure the effective conveyance of the original text’s intent, emotion, and communicative value.

Nida’s proposed four-step process of “Analysis-Transfer-Restructuring-Testing” provides an operational method for achieving functional equivalence.

3. Koller’s Equivalence Theory

Werner Koller is one of the influential translation scholars in German-language translation studies during the latter half of the 20th century. His significant con-

tribution lies in the further refinement of the concept of “equivalence”. At a time when the concept of “equivalence” was criticized for being overly prescriptive and lacking practical applicability, Koller refined, stratified, and operationalized it. He proposed the “frame of equivalence relations”, which decomposes the single concept of “equivalence” into multiple levels such as “denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, and formal-aesthetic” equivalence (Koller, 1995). This gives the core concept of “equivalence” more specific and feasible operational standards for describing and analyzing concrete translations.

Denotative Equivalence: Focuses on the correspondence between linguistic signs and the referents in the objective world, primarily manifested in the transmission of meaning at the lexical and conceptual levels. Its core requirement is to ensure that the factual content, concepts, and propositions in the source text are accurately reproduced in the translation. It serves as the fundamental prerequisite for achieving informational accuracy in translation.

At the level of lexical equivalence, Koller further subdivides denotative equivalence into five types: “one-to-one”, “one-to-many”, “many-to-one”, “one-to-zero”, and “one-to-part” equivalence. This provides translators with strategies for addressing complex lexical correspondence issues (Liu, 2024).

“One-to-one” equivalence refers to a source language expression having an exact corresponding word or phrase in the target language.

“One-to-many” equivalence means a single source language expression corresponds to multiple forms in the target language. Translators can choose the appropriate target language expression based on their understanding of both languages and the textual context.

“Many-to-one” equivalence occurs when multiple expressions in the source language can be covered by a single word or phrase in the target language. This can be used as long as the target language expression accurately conveys the referential content of the source expressions without causing misunderstanding among target language readers.

“One-to-zero” equivalence refers to the absence of a directly corresponding word between the source and target languages. In such cases, the translator needs to borrow the source language word or use methods like annotations to bridge the lexical gap.

“One-to-part” equivalence means the target language can only partially correspond to the meaning of the source language expression. In such cases, translators can supplement the information through footnotes, annotations, or appendices to ensure the message is transmitted as completely as possible.

Connotative Equivalence: Concerns the emotions, values, stylistic nuances, and social meanings evoked by words within specific socio-cultural contexts. Koller believes that connotative meanings are not static content fixed in dictionaries but are closely related to conditions of use within the language system and social conventions, such as the speaker’s identity, regional factors, communication channels, modes of linguistic expression, and textual frequency of use.

Achieving connotative equivalence requires the translator to have a deep understanding of the stylistic features of the source text and to appropriately reproduce these features in the translation. This helps readers better understand the textual meaning and enables target language readers to achieve understanding and feelings similar to those of source language readers. Koller points out that achieving connotative equivalence is one of the most challenging aspects of the translation process. It constitutes the core of cultural adaptation in translation, involving the transmission and transformation of values, ideologies, and aesthetic preferences. Therefore, in practical translation, achieving full connotative equivalence is often difficult, and translations typically only achieve “approximate equivalence” close to the original meaning.

Text-Normative Equivalence refers to the translation adhering to genre conventions and norms in structure and language use corresponding to those of the source text. To achieve text-normative equivalence, the translator needs to preserve the structural features and stylistic norms of the source text while adjusting translation strategies in accordance with the reception habits for different text genres within the target culture. In this process, factors such as semantics, syntactic structure, and modes of expression all influence the achievement of normative equivalence. The goal of translation is not to create entirely new textual forms but to reproduce a text in the target culture that meets the expectations for that genre.

Pragmatic Equivalence requires that the communicative intention and effect achieved by the translation among target language readers should be essentially consistent with those achieved by the original among source language readers. To better achieve pragmatic equivalence, translators should fully consider the social status, knowledge background, education level, cultural environment, and specific social context of the target language readers. The advantage of pragmatic equivalence is that it not only compensates for the limitations of denotative and connotative equivalence in translation but can also, to some extent, make up for “information loss” caused by linguistic structural and cultural differences resulting from translation. Pragmatic equivalence elevates translation research from the sentence level to the textual and communicative event level, explicitly incorporating reader response and textual social function into the evaluation framework.

Formal-Aesthetic Equivalence focuses on the reproduction of the aesthetic features, formal structure, and rhetorical devices of the source text in the translation. It emphasizes the aesthetic and rhetorical value carried by the linguistic form of the original, including consciously used linguistic forms and their artistic effects, such as rhyme, rhythm, syntactic structure, and metaphor. To achieve formal-aesthetic equivalence, translators need to fully reflect the overall characteristics of the source text during the translation process and, through means such as lexical choice, syntactic adjustment, rhetorical application, and textual organization, achieve an aesthetic effect in the translation similar to that of the original. Koller points out that formal-aesthetic equivalence is particularly important in literary translation.

Koller's Equivalence Theory not only categorizes translation equivalence into five types—"denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, and formal-aesthetic"—but also provides relatively in-depth explanations and definitions for each equivalence relation. However, in actual translation practice, complete equivalence between source and target texts on all levels is not required. Instead, a dynamic and reasonable prioritization of equivalence types is necessary based on the specific features of the source text, such as text type, style, form, and aesthetic attributes (Long, 2024).

4. Similarities Between Nida's and Koller's Translation Theories

1) Common Academic Orientation: Systematization and Standardization

In his work *Toward a Science of Translating*, Nida explicitly proposed the concept of "translation science". By drawing on Chomsky's Transformational-Generative Grammar, he constructed the translation procedure of "analysis-transfer-restructuring-testing", providing an objective and rational operational framework for translation (Gao, 2023).

Koller similarly dedicated himself to building translation studies as a systematic discipline. His seminal work, *Einführung in die Übersetzungswissenschaft (Introduction to Translation Studies)*, aimed to establish a comprehensive conceptual framework and theoretical system for the field. The five-level equivalence framework proposed by Koller—"denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, and formal-aesthetic"—serves as a highly systematic tool for translation analysis.

2) Common Shift in Equivalence Standards: From Text-Centered to Reader-Oriented

Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory redefined the notion of "faithfulness", arguing that true "faithfulness" lies not in lexical or syntactic formal equivalence, but in the transfer of function and the equivalence of reader response. Through the concept of "functional equivalence", he shifted the focus of equivalence from the "source text" to the "target text reader" (Hu & Yang, 2023).

Koller inherited and developed this important shift. Among his five levels of equivalence—"denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, and formal-aesthetic"—"pragmatic equivalence" aligns closely with Nida's emphasis on reader response.

3) Common Translation Perspective: Intercultural Communication Perspective

Nida's "functional equivalence" holds that the core task of translation is to enable target text readers to understand, feel, and respond, thereby achieving the transmission of information, emotional resonance, or calls to action. Nida regarded translation as a dynamic and purposeful intercultural communicative act (Yang, 2024).

Although Koller adopted a more specific approach in his theoretical construction, pragmatic equivalence, text-normative equivalence, and connotative equiv-

alence essentially analyze and ensure that the translation successfully fulfills its intended socio-cultural and communicative functions within the target culture.

5. Differences Between Nida's and Koller's Translation Theories

1) Difference in Theoretical Role: Practical Guidance vs. Analytical Tool

Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory aims to provide a practical guide for translation practice. It carries a clear directive purpose, encouraging translators to make necessary adjustments, adaptations, or even creative transformations to the original form in order to achieve the goal of "functional equivalence".

Koller's Equivalence Theory does not directly instruct translators on what to do; instead, it provides a set of analytical tools for translation research. Through the five equivalence relations—denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, and formal-aesthetic—it addresses core issues in translation.

2) Difference in Translation Perspective: Holistic vs. Multidimensional

In Nida's translation theory, "equivalence" does not refer to the correspondence between specific linguistic forms but rather to a holistic, psychological-level communicative effect. That is, the understanding, emotions, and reactions evoked by the translation in target-language readers should be as similar as possible to those produced by the original in source-language readers. This effect of equivalence is highly comprehensive and cannot be broken down into several independently measurable linguistic units.

In contrast, Koller deconstructs "equivalence" into a multidimensional and competing set of equivalence relations. He views "equivalence" as a relational ensemble composed of the five levels: "denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, and formal-aesthetic". These five levels of equivalence are not parallel; rather, they are prioritized and selected based on specific translation practices (Long, 2024).

3) Difference in Translation Approach: Process-Oriented vs. Result-Oriented

Nida proposed a translation process model for translators, consisting of the four steps: "analysis-transfer-restructuring-testing". This is a linear, dynamic operational guide that instructs translators on how to progress step by step from understanding the source text to producing the translation. Nida focuses on the generative path of the translation process and provides translators with clear practical operational methods, offering strong practical guidance.

The five-fold equivalence framework proposed by Koller—"denotative, connotative, text-normative, pragmatic, and formal-aesthetic"—focuses on the correspondence between the translation result and the original across multiple dimensions. Koller's Equivalence Theory provides translators with analytical tools, enabling them to systematically verify the correspondence of the translation across different levels.

6. Conclusion

Both Nida's and Koller's translation theories break through the limitations of traditional formal equivalence, establishing cultural factors and reader reception as core elements of their frameworks. The differences between the two theories precisely reflect the inherent diversity and flexibility of translation activity itself. Through a systematic overview and comparison of Nida's and Koller's translation theories, this paper demonstrates that their relationship is not one of simple opposition but rather an important manifestation of the internal logical development and theoretical complementarity within translation studies.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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