

A Literature Review of Eugene Nida's Translation Theory

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Abstract:

Eugene Nida (1914-2011) is an outstanding contemporary translation theorist and linguist in the West. He is widely regarded as one of the most influential scholars in the field of translation. Nida's translation theory has been constantly revised and developed in translation practice. While being recognized by many scholars, doubts and challenges have followed. This paper first expounds Nida's translation theory, and then makes a literature review of the research on Nida's translation theory at home and abroad, and dialectically discusses the contributions and limitations of Nida's translation theory.

Keywords:

Eugene Nida, Translation Theory, Literature Review, Contributions, Limitations

1. Introduction

Eugene Nida (1914-2011) is an outstanding contemporary translation theorist and linguist in the West. Nida is regarded as one of the most influential scholars in the field of translation. He draws on knowledge from information theory and linguistics to study translation studies, and builds his own theory of translation. He has achieved great success in the field of translation theory and practice, and his translation theory has exerted great influence in Western countries and even China. However, many scholars have different views on Nida's translation theory. Since its inception, Nida's translation theory has been studied by many translation theorists and has put forward many profound and valuable arguments. At the beginning, the theory was highly appreciated by translators, but as time went on, it was also questioned and challenged.

2. Nida's Translation Theory

One of the major features of modern translation studies in the West is the integration of translation into the field of linguistics. Under the influence of the structural theory, transformation generation theory, functional theory, discourse theory and information theory of modern linguistics, translation theorists study translation from different perspectives, such as comparative linguistics, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, semantics, semiotics, logic, anthropology and philosophy, thus putting forward new research methods, theoretical models and translation

techniques. Eugene Nida's theory is one of the outstanding representatives in the field of modern western translation theory [1].

2.1. Three Development Stages of Nida's Translation Theory

We can divide Nida's translation thought into three stages: (1) Stage of Descriptive Linguistics; (2) Stage of Communicative Theory; (3) Stage of Social Semiotics.

The first stage of Nida's translation thought was in the 1940s and 1950s, that is, the stage of descriptive linguistics. During this period, Nida turned from the general description of English syntax and morphology to the specific study of multilingual comparison, especially the study of Bible translation.

The second stage, from 1959 to 1969, is the communicative theory stage. In 1964, Nida published an important book, *Toward a Science of Translating* [2]. In this period, Nida's basic translation thoughts mainly include four aspects: (1) translation is not only an art, a skill, but also a science; (2) Nida applied communication theory and information theory to translation study, and believed that translation is communication; (3) Dynamic equivalent translation theory; (4) The four-step process of translation: analysis, translation (interpretation), reorganization, and examination.

From the 1970s, it entered the third stage, that is, the stage of social semiotics. Nida made a series of modifications and supplement to his translation theory, incorporating the useful elements of the original theory into the social semiotic model. The book *From One language to Another* [3], published in 1986, mainly written by Nida, reflects Nida's research achievements since the 1980s, which can also be regarded as a representative of the third stage of Nida's translation thought. There are four major developments and changes in this book:

(1) Translation theory based on social semiotics emphasizes that everything about the translation has meaning, including the form of speech. Therefore, form should not be easily sacrificed;

(2) The rhetorical features of language play an important role in language communication;

(3) Replacing "dynamic equivalence" with "functional equivalence";

(4) The meaning is divided into rhetorical, grammatical and lexical meanings, and all kinds of meanings are divided into referential and associative meanings. The book also expounds the relationship between meaning and brain, meaning and psychology, and puts forward the concept of "isostructuralism" in the process of meaning production.

2.2. The Main Points of Nida's Translation Theory

2.2.1. Language Universality

Different languages have different ways of expressing, but Nida believed that "what can be said in one language must be said in another." He believed that human beings have more commonalities than differences, and there is a "common core" in human experience and expression^[4]. The main purpose of the theory is to show that there are convertibility and translatability between different language symbols.

At the same time, Nida also admitted that there are still personalities in language, and the differences between languages are mainly in the form of expression. "If all

language differ in form (and this is the essence of their being different) , then quite naturally the forms must be changed if one is to present the content” [5].

2.2.2. Message of Translation

According to Nida’s translation theory, translators can use the scientific approach to deal with language structure, semantic analysis approach and information theory to deal with translation problems. The translator needs to “elongate” the expression form of the information in order to be accepted by the target readers. In his message of translation, Nida drew into the theory of information communication. The intervention of this theory can not only guide translators to deal with cultural information and differences reasonably, but also provide solutions for the differences between source and target languages due to their cultural backgrounds and language families [6].

2.2.3. Theory of Readers’ Response

In Nida’s view, the service object of translation is the target reader or the target language recipient, so it is necessary to compare the target reader’s reaction to the target text with the original reader’s reaction to the original text. If the response is consistent, the quality of the target text is proved to be high, and vice versa. “The relationship between receptor and message should be absolutely the same as that which existed between the original receptor and the message” [2].

2.2.4. Dynamic Equivalence& Functional Equivalence

In the 1960s and 1970s, Nida first proposed the concept of dynamic equivalence. Nida’s definition of translation is: “Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the close natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of styles” [5]. There are three key elements in this definition: closet, natural, and equivalent. “Natural” means that the text of the translation should be natural and translationese should be avoided, “close” means that the meaning of the translation is most close to the original text, and “equivalent” emphasizes the equivalence of information content. It can be seen that Nida emphasizes the point of view that content is important and form is secondary in translation. However, this view has given rise to many misunderstandings.

Thus, Nida later changed the term “dynamic equivalence” to “functional equivalence” in *From Language to Language: On Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation* [3], meaning that not only content but also form should be considered. Later, in his book *Language, Culture and Translation* published in 1993, Nida proposed “two levels of translation equivalence”. He divided equivalence into “the highest level equivalence” and “the lowest level equivalence”. He gave the explanation of the highest level: The readers of a translated text should be able to understand and appreciate it essentially the same as the original readers did [7]. And the highest level of equivalence means a high level of linguistic and cultural correspondence. The lowest level: The readers of a translated text should be able to comprehend it to the point that they can conceive of how the original readers of the text must have understood and appreciated it [7]. Any translation below this level of equivalence is not acceptable.

3. Research Status

3.1. Abroad

The following reviews are divided into two categories: Affirmation of Nida's theory; Criticism of Nida's theory.

3.1.1. Affirmation of Nida's Theory

Philip C. Stine published *Eugene A. Nida: Theoretician of Translation* in 2012 [8]. He credited Nida with helping scholars, translators, and experts in Christian missions find effective ways to communicate.

Jonathan M. Watt published *The Contributions of Eugene A. Nida to Sociolinguistics* in 2005 [9]. Watt said the connections Nida made in interdisciplinary fields made important contributions to linguistics, many of which carry sociolinguistic implications.

Wendy J. Porter published *A Brief Look at The Life and Works of Eugene Albert Nida* in 2005 [10]. Porter said that one of Nida's characteristics is his ability to explore a new problem or idea with great energy, to constantly reflect on linguistic and cultural issues and to find ways to solve them. He also approached people with an open, inclusive and appreciative attitude.

Stanley E. Porter published *Eugene Nida and Translation* in 2005 [11]. Porter mentions that many of the features of Nida's translation theory deserve recognition because they help the translator arrive at an assumption about the three basic components of the translation process: the source language, the receiving language, and the information transmitted from one language to another. Moreover, two of Nida's contributions to the theory of dynamic or functional equivalence are: (1) a careful understanding of the complexity of translation itself, and a detailed description of as many aspects as possible; (2) developing a process for doing translation and considering its complexity. Porter also pointed out that Nida's profound influence on the development of translation theory, especially the translation of the Bible. May be many people disagree with his translation theory, but if you want to understand the development of bible translation, you must understand these theories.

3.1.2 Criticism of Nida's Theory

Edwin Gentzler(1993) is regarded as "one of Nida's fiercest critics". He claimed that Nida's dynamic equivalence theory is a product of religious translation and has great limitations [12]. He did not believe that the information of the original text can be replicated in the target language, nor did he believe that the reaction of the original text readers to the original text will be the same as that of the target language readers to the translation. In his view, Nida's theory is useful only for propaganda, advertising, or the translation of certain religious materials, but cannot provide a basis for a general theory of translation.

3.2. At Home

Nida's translation theory was introduced into China in the early 1980s, and as the first and most systematic translation theory accepted by China, it has been gradually accepted by China. His translation theory has been highly valued and has exerted great influence on the practice and research of translation in China.

3.2.1 Studies on “Nida’s Translation Theory”

In the late 1980s, Tan Zaixi began to make a comprehensive introduction and scientific criticism of Nida and his translation theories. While agreeing with Nida’s theory, Tan Zaixi (1999) also put forward three criticisms of Nida’s translation theory in the *New Edition of Nida’s Translation Theory*: (1) Nida’s theory is too focused on solving the problems of the communicative and intelligibility of translation, so its scope of application is limited; (2) Nida once put forward the proposition that “translation is science”, and later basically abandoned this proposition. Whether he proposed or abandoned, he did not present sufficient and convincing arguments; (3) Nida’s writings seem to repeat themselves at times, and inevitably give a sense of mixing sand with gold. Moreover, Tan believed that the view that “translation is science” cannot be established, translation is not a science, but translation studies is a science [1].

Lao long (1987) highly praised Nida’s theory, pointing out that dynamic equivalence is more scientific, objective and concrete [13]. He also believed that Nida’s theory has solved the long-standing debate on literal translation and free translation.

Jin Di(1997) believed that the nature of translation determines that the effect of translation on the receptor should be the same as that of the original text on the receptor in the source language, so Nida’s translation theory is feasible [14]. He also pointed out that one of Nida’s important contributions is that he shifted the focus of translation to the effect of translation on the receptor.

In his *Review of Nida’s Translation Theories* in 2001, Xiong Demi pointed out that Nida’s translation theories and principles have enriched China’s translation theories and also played a good role in guiding translation practice [15].

Du Lili published the journal *Review of Nida’s Translation Theory* in 2008^[16]. She believed that Nida’s translation theory has a strong academic and relatively new perspective, which has brought impact to Chinese translation studies, improving the academic nature of Chinese translation studies, and enriching and updated Chinese translation theories.

Wu Li (2007) pointed out in *A Brief Introduction to Nida’s Translation Theory* that Nida’s theory is of great guiding significance for some literary styles whose content is more important than form [17]. However, when the important feature of literary works is conveying the exotic flavor and the expression mode of the source language, attention must be paid to the retention, reproduction and foreignization of the form and features of the source language, so as to realize the cultural transmission of literary translation. In addition, we should fully consider the level of intended readers of our translated works to grasp the weight between content and form in translation.

Song Jing (2009) pointed out the limitations and deficiencies in his *Reflections on Nida’s Translation Theory*: based on the macro discussion, ignoring the micro level; the contradiction and conflict of the theory are obvious; underestimating the increasing speed of cultural integration [18].

Liu Yingkai (1997) argued that Nida ignores the importance of style and form in literary translation [19]. He also believed that because Nida’s theory pays too little attention to the author and the original text, it has a negative impact on Chinese translation. He criticized Nida’s idea of adding information, saying that Nida devalued cognitive abilities.

3.2.2 Research on “Dynamic Equivalence Theory”

Wu Yicheng (1994) [20], Liu Miqing (1989) [21] and Sun Zhili (1997) [22] argued that Chinese is different from the Indo-European languages on which Nida's theory is based, so Nida's theory is not applicable to Chinese-English translation. Wu Yicheng and Sun Zhili also believed that Nida's theory is impossible to achieve translation equivalence.

Wang Dongfeng (2003) pointed out that Nida's equivalence theory based on the translation of bible is not applicable to general translation, especially literary translation [23]. Moreover, due to cultural differences, it is impossible for the original readers and the target readers to respond equally.

3.2.3. Research on “Theory of Readers' Response”

In *On the Status and Role of Readers' Response in Nida's Theory* in 2012, Lin Kenan classified Nida's theory as a process model by using two bases and three circumstantial evidences [24]. In addition, he tried to demonstrate from various aspects that “readers' response” was not Nida's intention or focus in writing *Translation Theory and Practice*. Lin believed that “the theory of readers' response” is just a “introduction” that Nida used to attract readers' attention. According to Lin, Nida actually believed that the relationship between readers' response and the translation process should be: “If you follow the translation steps I have given step by step, the target readers read the resulting translation, will have the same reaction as the original readers after reading the original text, and there is no need to measure the reaction of the reader, and there is no need to compare the reaction of the original reader after reading the original text with the reaction of the target reader after reading the translation.” Nida's translation theory should have belonged to the process model, but it has long been studied as a comparative model in the academic circle, and there has been a long pointless debate about this. Therefore, Lin called on everyone to focus on the “explanation” part of translation theory, rather than just the “introduction” part.

Lu Jun (1998) argued that Nida's translation theory puts too much emphasis on the readers and ignores the objectivity of the text, so it is not feasible in practice [25]. In addition, it is unrealistic to judge translation standards by readers' reactions, which are subjective after all.

Zhang Meifang (1999) believed that readers' responses cannot be equal when their cultural backgrounds and reading experiences are different [26].

4. Literature Review

From the above review, it can be seen that most scholars' evaluation of Nida's theory is reasonable, but some are too absolute and extreme. Some scholars do not fully understand Nida's theory, resulting in some misunderstandings.

Many scholars said that Nida's translation theory is based on the text of the Bible and does not apply to general translation. In fact, Nida did not limit his theory to the translation of the Bible. Nida did use many examples of Bible translation, but it is not wrong for a translation theorist to draw his own theory from the translation activities he is most familiar with. In this regard, Nida (1998) has also expressed in an interview with JFL that his basic principles regarding translation were developed long before working with Bible translators [27]. The author believes that Nida's translation theory has made a very important contribution to the study of general translation. Not every

theory is perfect, and Nida's translation theory is no exception. There are contributions and shortcomings, we should continue to explore and develop. All in all, Nida's translation theory has certain enlightenment and is helpful for our translation studies.

4.1. Contribution of Nida's Translation Theory

Most scholars agree with and praise Nida's theory. Tan Zaixi said, "In a broad sense, Nida's contribution to translation theory lies in the fact that he helped us create a new mode of dealing with different languages and cultures to enhance world communication [28]."

4.1.1. Contribution of the "Science of Translating"

Nida studied translation theory and translation practice by using modern linguistics, sociolinguistics, social semiotics, communicative theory and information theory, which is a major breakthrough in previous translation theories. Nida first coined the term "science of translating" in *Toward a Science of Translating*, which led translation theorists everywhere to explore science in a scientific way. People began to use modern linguistics and other relevant theories to construct the principles of translation, and began to establish a special discipline of translation studies. In the course of the development of translatology, Nida has made an important contribution.

4.1.2. Contribution of Functional Equivalence Theory

The theory of functional equivalence provides a new perspective for us to study and solves the long-standing debate between literal translation and free translation. Nida's theory of functional equivalence is a new translation concept, which gives readers due attention. The fact that dynamic equivalence has been widely used by Bible translators since the 1950s is sufficient evidence of the success of this theory. Some scholars also agree that functional equivalence theory can be used to guide general translation practice. For example, Liu Chongde (2003) believed that Nida's dynamic equivalence principle (functional equivalence) is rich in content and has practical reference value for most translators [29].

4.1.3. Contribution of Readers' Respond Theory

The theory of readers' respond is based on the theory of dynamic equivalence, and Nida is the first scholar to take readers' equivalent response as one of the translation criteria. The proposal of this theory broadens the perspective of our theoretical research. Some scholars criticized readers' response theory, arguing that the readers' response of the original text and the translated text is impossible to be equal, but through the analysis of Nida's theory, we can know that Nida takes the readers' response as a supplementary role, and does not take it as the only standard. Readers' response theory is also an indispensable part of his theory, we must admit that this theory is of great value.

4.2 Limitations of Nida's Translation Theory

Nida's translation theory has made great contributions to translation studies, but it also has some shortcomings and deficiencies.

4.2.1 Limitations of "Dynamic Equivalence Theory"

We have discussed the importance of this theory in the contribution of dynamic equivalence, but in practice it also has theoretical and practical limitations. Translation is a complex task that involves many factors, such as the original text, translator, environment, culture, language, receptors and so on. The dynamic equivalence theory is mainly concerned with the response of receptors involved in the translation process, so it is limited in translation practice.

4.2.2. Limitations of “Readers’ Response Theory”

In Nida’s theory, “ordinary readers” is regarded as the central factor that translators should consider in the process of translation. But Nida does not have a definitive definition of how to define the “ordinary reader”. In practical translation practice, translators have to deal with the immeasurable individual readers rather than the abstract general readers in theory. Therefore, the application of readers’ response theory to practice will be limited to some extent.

5. Conclusions

Although the academic circles have different reactions to Nida’s theory, it is undeniable that Nida’s translation theory has become an indispensable part of translation studies, and its importance is beyond doubt. When a theory is developed, some supporters believe that it can be applied to all types of texts, while some opponents reject it completely when they see that the theory is limited to certain areas. Such concepts are incorrect, and every theory has its own theoretical and practical application. As long as the theory is helpful to translation, we can adopt and continue to develop it. When evaluating Western translation theory, we can neither reject it because it has certain limitations, nor can we be absolutely sure that it can be applied to all situations. As a discipline, translation studies should be viewed from different perspectives.

While affirming Nida’s translation theory, we must also admit its shortcomings, so as to develop translation theory and translation research. When adopting a theory, we should conduct in-depth research on it, evaluate it in a comprehensive and dialectical way, and then combine it with practice to judge whether it is reasonable.

Conflicts of Interest

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