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# Exploring the dynamics cultural and challenges of equivalence in translation

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**Abstract** - This paper explores whether the concept of equivalence in translation is a practical reality or merely a theoretical construct. While equivalence—typically understood as achieving similarity in meaning between source and target texts—remains a core pursuit in translation, its feasibility is debated. Drawing from modern translation studies and the views of theorists such as Nida, Catford, Jakobson, and contemporary scholars, this study analyses both the theoretical underpinnings and real-world obstacles to equivalence. Major issues include cross-cultural interpretation, unique language structures, and context-dependent meaning. Through discussion of practical cases like idiomatic expressions, legal, and marketing texts, the paper shows that absolute equivalence is unattainable. However, functional or dynamic equivalence offers a more achievable and context-sensitive approach. Understanding the flexibility and limitations of equivalence empowers translators to make informed decisions tailored to the communicative needs of specific audiences.

**Keyword:** Translation Equivalence, Functional Equivalence, Translation Theory, Cross-cultural Translation, Translation Strategies

## 1. Introduction

Translation is increasingly vital in facilitating communication and cultural exchange in a globalized world. Whether in international business, academia, or media, the accurate transfer of information, ideas, and values from one language to another is indispensable. Central to this process is the notion of "equivalence" the expectation that a translation should convey the same meaning, tone, and communicative effect as the original text.

However, achieving perfect or absolute equivalence between languages is highly contested. Every language reflects its own unique cultural, historical, and social background. Translation is thus not just a linguistic act, but also an act of cultural negotiation. As contemporary research highlights, translators grapple with bridging not only linguistic gaps but also cultural, pragmatic, and functional differences, requiring them to navigate nuance and implicit meaning. Consequently, modern translation theory distinguishes various types of equivalence, such as formal, dynamic, semantic, and functional, each offering different approaches based on the purpose and context of translation tasks.

Translation is a complex process that goes beyond mere word-for-word substitution, involving the intricate task of achieving **equivalence** between source and target languages. Equivalence refers to the degree to which a translated text accurately conveys the meaning, style, and cultural nuances of the original. However, achieving cultural equivalence remains a significant challenge due to differences in social institutions, customs, idiomatic expressions, and worldviews embedded within languages (Hamamoto, 2023; Imami et al 2021; Iskakova et al., 2025).

These challenges are urgent in today's globalized world where cross-cultural communication is essential across fields such as literature, business, law, and healthcare. Key terms central to this discussion include cultural equivalence, which focuses on preserving culturally specific meanings; functional equivalence, emphasizing similar effects on target audiences; and untranslatability, referring to concepts or expressions lacking direct counterparts in another language (Saparova, 2025; Iskakova et al., 2025).

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for translators who must navigate linguistic structures alongside cultural contexts to produce translations that are both accurate and meaningful (Rosa, 2021; Chidlow et al., 2014). This exploration highlights the ongoing tension between linguistic fidelity and cultural adaptation in translation practice.

Theoretical frameworks on equivalence in translation explore how a target text relates to its source text to achieve similarity in meaning, function, or effect, despite linguistic and cultural differences. Early structuralist approaches focused on formal equivalence, emphasizing linguistic correspondence at word or sentence levels, as seen in Catford's and Jakobson's theories, who introduced distinctions like intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic translation and highlighted the impossibility of full equivalence due to language-specific concepts (Alrymayh, A. (2024). Nida's dynamic equivalence theory shifted focus toward functional and communicative equivalence, aiming for equivalent response or effect on the target audience rather than literal word-for-word translation (Iskandarov, 2025; Panchenko, 2025).

Contemporary views recognize equivalence as multilayered and context-dependent, involving semantic, pragmatic, and cultural dimensions that require translators' competence in both languages and cultures to negotiate asymmetries and preserve the original's intent or "skopos" (Panchenko, 2025; Panou, 2013; Oneț & Ciocoi-Pop, 2023). Semiotic approaches propose understanding equivalence through universal categories of similarity, difference, and mediation, offering a broader conceptualization beyond linguistic sameness (Rędzioch-Korkuz, 2023).

Critical evaluations highlight ongoing debates about the usefulness of equivalence as a concept in translation studies, with some scholars advocating for its centrality while others question its applicability given evolving translation practices and technologies (Panou, 2013).

Several recent studies have explored the concept of equivalence in translation, examining both its theoretical foundations and practical implications.

Al Awdi (2025) conducted a comparative analysis of Nida's and Newmark's approaches to equivalence, emphasizing the importance of functional equivalence in capturing the intended meaning rather than literal accuracy. This study highlighted that translators increasingly favour dynamic and functional strategies to handle cultural and linguistic gaps across languages.

Wang (2025) focused on the application of Nida's functional equivalence theory in translating brand names from Chinese into English. The study demonstrated how adaptation and modulation key strategies under functional equivalence—can effectively bridge cultural differences while preserving brand identity and consumer appeal.

Karismawati et al. (2021) examined how cultural filters contribute to achieving functional equivalence in English translation. They found that translators often employ explicitation and cultural adaptation to meet target audience expectations, particularly when source culture elements have no direct correspondence. Challenges related to idiomatic expressions and cultural untranslatability were explored in studies such as that by Academia.edu (2023), which discussed strategies translators use to convey culture-specific terms and idioms without losing the original nuances. Similarly, research published in ScienceDirect (2024) confirmed that machine translation technologies still struggle with idioms and contextual meanings, underlining the continued necessity for human intervention to maintain equivalence in nuanced texts.

These findings are consistent with the observations of Dickins et al. (2017), who argue for understanding equivalence as a spectrum rather than an absolute state. This perspective encourages translators to focus on the communicative purpose of texts and adapt their approach accordingly, aligning with the functionalist translation philosophy. Overall, these recent studies enrich the ongoing discourse by confirming that while absolute equivalence remains elusive, functional equivalence offers a flexible, context-sensitive framework that accommodates linguistic and cultural diversity in translation practice. Therefore, this paper seeks to revisit the debate: Is equivalence in translation achievable in practice, or is it better viewed as an ideal guideline for translators? By analysing both foundational and contemporary theories, alongside real-world examples, this study addresses how and to what extent equivalence can be realized.

The next points are the research problems of the study. (1) What are the foundational theories and evolving definitions of equivalence in translation, considering both classical and contemporary perspectives? (2) What are the primary challenges translators face in achieving equivalence, particularly regarding linguistic, cultural, and contextual differences between source and target languages? (3) To what extent can functional equivalence, as proposed by Nida and others, provide a viable and effective alternative to the pursuit of absolute or formal equivalence in translation practice?

The objectives of the study are describe as follows. (1) To systematically outline and compare the various types of equivalence—such as formal, dynamic, functional, semantic, and communicative—as

5 defined in recent translation theory literature. (2) To analyse the key obstacles that hinder achieving true equivalence across languages and cultures, including issues related to cultural specificity, linguistic asymmetry, and contextual variability. (3) To critically evaluate the practicality and effectiveness of functional equivalence in contemporary translation practice by assessing its ability to balance fidelity to the source text with cultural and communicative appropriateness in the target language.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Data Collection

The study would collect data from a range of translated texts across different genres and languages to explore the dynamics of cultural equivalence and challenges in translation. This could include literary works, dialogues, and cross-cultural research materials to capture diverse translation contexts and cultural nuances. Additionally, theoretical and critical literature on equivalence theories would be reviewed to frame the analysis within established scholarly debates. Bilingual translators' insights or expert evaluations might also be gathered to understand practical challenges and decision-making processes in achieving equivalence.

### 2.2 Data Analysis

A qualitative content analysis approach would be employed to examine how equivalence is realized or challenged in the collected translations, focusing on linguistic, cultural, pragmatic, and functional aspects. Contrastive analysis methods would compare source texts and their translations to identify shifts, losses, or adaptations related to cultural elements and equivalence strategies. The analysis would also consider theoretical frameworks such as dynamic equivalence, formal equivalence, and semiotic approaches to interpret findings within broader translation studies discourse. Finally, thematic coding could be used to categorize types of challenges encountered by translators in maintaining equivalence across cultures.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Results

Equivalence has been a central and evolving concept in translation studies, reflecting the complex interplay between linguistic and cultural factors. Roman Jakobson's foundational work (1959) introduced three types of translation—intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic—laying the groundwork for understanding equivalence beyond mere word-for-word substitution (Panou, 2013; Oneț & Ciocoi-Pop, 2023).

Eugene Nida further developed this by distinguishing between formal equivalence, which focuses on literal fidelity to the source text's form, and dynamic or functional equivalence, which prioritizes producing an equivalent effect on the target audience, emphasizing meaning over form (Panchenko, 2025; Yuan & Miao, 2025). Catford contributed the notion of textual equivalence, highlighting the substitutability of language segments between source and target texts while acknowledging that perfect correspondence is often unattainable [13](#).

Panou, D. (2013). Equivalence in Translation Theories: A Critical Evaluation. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 3, 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.3.1.1-6>.

Panchenko, O. (2025). The Notion Of Equivalence In Its Historic Development And Contemporary Understanding. *Journal "Ukrainian sense"*. <https://doi.org/10.15421/462514>.

More recent scholarship problematizes the traditional quest for exact sameness, suggesting that equivalence should be viewed as a spectrum rather than a binary condition. Dickins et al. (2017) argue that translation involves managing degrees of similarity and difference rather than achieving perfect identity [1](#). Anthony Pym and others emphasize the relational and directional nature of equivalence, underscoring the translator's active role in negotiating meaning within specific cultural and communicative contexts (Kashgary, 2011).

This perspective recognizes that languages encode unique worldviews and cultural categories, making some concepts inherently untranslatable or requiring creative strategies beyond direct equivalence. Theoretical developments also reflect different levels at which equivalence operates—from word-level semantic or pragmatic equivalence to broader textual or functional equivalence depending on the translation's purpose and genre [38](#). For example, legal translations demand high precision at the word level to maintain legal validity, whereas literary translations may prioritize aesthetic or cultural resonance over

literal accuracy (Bhattarai, 2024; Stambekova et al., 2025). The dynamic nature of equivalence means translators must balance fidelity to source text intentions with adaptation to target language norms and audience expectations (Chu & Li, 2025; Yang & Qin, 2025).

Critiques of equivalence highlight its limitations as an absolute standard due to linguistic asymmetries and cultural specificity. Some scholars propose embracing non-equivalence as a legitimate strategy when direct equivalents do not exist, especially for culture-specific terms like idioms or metaphors [9](#). This approach reframes non-equivalence not as failure but as an essential aspect of translation creativity that can produce meaningful target texts while respecting source culture uniqueness.

Overall, the theoretical foundations of equivalence in translation reveal it as a multifaceted, context-dependent concept shaped by linguistic structures, cultural differences, translator agency, and communicative goals. Equivalence remains a useful heuristic for guiding translation decisions but requires flexible application sensitive to text type, purpose, and intercultural dynamics (Oneț & Ciocoi-Pop, 2023).

Contemporary views encourage moving beyond rigid definitions toward understanding equivalence as a dynamic process involving negotiation between source fidelity and target relevance.

This synthesis reflects decades of scholarly debate from Jakobson's early typologies through Nida's functionalism to current relational models emphasizing spectrum-based and directional equivalences. It highlights how translation theory continues to evolve in response to growing awareness of cultural complexity and the translator's mediating role in bridging languages and cultures effectively.

### 3.1.2 Challenges in Achieving Equivalence

Practical translation faces significant challenges in achieving equivalence due to linguistic and cultural complexities. One major obstacle is **cultural untranslatability**, where certain words or concepts, such as the Indonesian "gotong royong" or Portuguese "saudade," carry deep cultural meanings without direct equivalents in other languages. Translators must employ creative strategies like adaptation, explanatory notes, or paraphrasing to convey these ideas effectively while maintaining the source text's intent [1610](#). Structural differences between languages also pose difficulties; for example, Japanese often omits subjects in sentences, whereas English requires explicit subjects, affecting sentence construction and comprehension (Naveen & Trojovský, 2024).

Idiomatic expressions present another challenge because their meanings cannot be derived literally from individual words. Phrases like "kick the bucket" or Indonesian "buah bibir" require interpretation that captures the intended figurative meaning rather than a word-for-word translation (Fauzi et al., 2025; Abdulhussein, 2021; Aliyeva, 2025). The purpose of the text and its target audience further influence equivalence strategies: legal documents demand high literal fidelity to preserve accuracy, while literary or advertising texts allow more creative adaptations aligned with functionalist approaches such as skopos theory (Anthony et al., 2021).

Technological advances have introduced machine translation tools that facilitate cross-linguistic communication but struggle with idiomatic language and cultural nuances. These limitations highlight the irreplaceable role of human translators who apply cultural knowledge and contextual judgment to negotiate equivalence successfully [5](#). Overall, translators must balance linguistic accuracy with cultural sensitivity and textual function, often making strategic decisions to bridge gaps where direct equivalence is impossible (Saparova, 2025; Sergeyevna, 2025; Efendi & Hardjanto, 2023). This dynamic process underscores translation as both an art and a science requiring linguistic skill, cultural competence, and creativity.

### 3.1.3 Functional Equivalence in Contemporary Practice

Functional equivalence has become a key approach in contemporary translation practice, addressing the challenges posed by linguistic and cultural differences. Rooted in Nida's theory, functional equivalence **prioritizes conveying the communicative intent and naturalness of the source text rather than adhering strictly to literal word-for-word translation**. The goal is to produce a target text that elicits a similar response from the target audience as the original did from its audience, taking into account both linguistic structures and cultural contexts [139](#). This approach recognizes that some degree of difference between source and target texts is inevitable and even desirable to maintain effectiveness and readability.

In practical terms, translators employ several strategies aligned with functional equivalence. **Adaptation** involves modifying cultural references to make them relevant and understandable for the target audience, such as changing idiomatic expressions or culturally specific items [110](#). **Modulation** refers to shifting perspectives or points of view to better fit the target language's norms without altering meaning [10](#). **Transposition** allows changes in grammatical structure, such as altering word order or sentence type, to enhance fluency and clarity [510](#). **Explicitation** makes implicit information explicit when necessary to ensure comprehension by the target audience, especially when cultural assumptions differ [24](#).

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These strategies are widely applied across various fields. For example, Bible translations increasingly use functional equivalence to balance faithfulness with accessibility, ensuring that spiritual messages resonate across cultures [1](#). In branding and marketing, functional equivalence helps adapt slogans and product names so they appeal naturally within different cultural markets while preserving brand identity [1](#). Audiovisual media like film subtitles rely heavily on this approach to maintain emotional impact and narrative coherence despite time constraints and linguistic differences [10](#).

Legal translation also benefits from functional equivalence by focusing on preserving the function of legal terms within their respective legal systems rather than literal wording. Translators working between languages with distinct legal traditions—such as Arabic and Azerbaijani—seek terms that perform equivalent roles in contracts or statutes, ensuring legal accuracy and cross-cultural clarity [27](#). However, challenges remain when no close counterpart exists; strategies like glossing or hybrid translations may be necessary to bridge gaps while maintaining functional integrity.

Medical translation illustrates another domain where functional equivalence is critical. Accurate communication of health information requires not only linguistic precision but also cultural appropriateness to ensure patient understanding across diverse populations. Integrating terminology standardization with functional equivalence principles improves both accuracy and readability in medical texts [4](#). Similarly, political news translation employs these principles to convey key terms precisely while adapting syntactic structures for clarity in the target language, enhancing international communication effectiveness [5](#).

In literary translation, especially song lyrics or poetry, functional equivalence guides translators in balancing semantic fidelity with aesthetic qualities. For instance, translating Taylor Swift's country music lyrics into Chinese involves reconstructing meanings creatively while preserving emotional resonance and cultural relevance [6](#). This highlights how functional equivalence supports both faithful content transmission and artistic expression.

Overall, contemporary practice views functional equivalence not as a rigid formula but as a flexible framework guiding translators' decisions based on text type, purpose, audience expectations, and cultural context. It acknowledges that perfect identity between source and target texts is unattainable but emphasizes achieving equivalent communicative effects through strategic adaptation [139](#). This pragmatic orientation enhances cross-cultural understanding by respecting linguistic diversity while facilitating meaningful communication.

Functional equivalence has gained prominence because it addresses real-world translation challenges by focusing on naturalness, clarity, and audience reception rather than literal accuracy alone. Its application spans religious texts, legal documents, medical communication, media subtitles, political discourse, branding, and literary works. Translators use adaptation, modulation, transposition, and explicitation among other techniques to negotiate meaning effectively across languages and cultures. This approach reflects an evolving understanding of translation as an active process of intercultural mediation aimed at producing functionally equivalent texts that resonate authentically with target audiences [12345679](#)+1 MORE.

## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1 Conclusion

The concept of equivalence in translation remains complex and multifaceted, involving linguistic, cultural, pragmatic, and functional dimensions that challenge translators to balance fidelity to the source text with the target culture's norms and expectations. While traditional theories distinguish between formal, dynamic, and functional equivalence, contemporary perspectives emphasize equivalence as a context-dependent relationship that may operate at word, sentence, or text levels depending on the translation's purpose and genre. Cultural differences often create asymmetries that require creative strategies beyond literal correspondence to preserve meaning and communicative effect, highlighting the translator's role as a mediator rather than a mere code converter. Despite ongoing debates about its theoretical status and applicability, equivalence remains central to translation studies as a guiding principle for evaluating translation quality and adequacy.

### 4.2 Suggestions

Future research should focus on empirical studies using annotated corpora and cognitive approaches to better understand how equivalence functions in diverse translation contexts, including new textual modes and technological mediation. Translators are encouraged to develop deep cultural competence alongside linguistic skills to navigate challenges posed by cultural nuances effectively. Additionally, adopting flexible frameworks that integrate semiotic and functional perspectives can help address the dynamic nature of

equivalence in practice. Emphasizing translator decision-making processes and audience reception will further enrich understanding of how equivalence is negotiated in real-world translations.

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