

On the Implausibility of Equivalent Response (Part II)

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Article abstract

Cet article étudie la théorie de l'équivalence dynamique de Nida afin de déterminer si elle peut constituer un but à atteindre dans la pratique de la traduction. On commence par un survol de divers concepts fondamentaux en linguistique puis on compare la théorie de Nida avec d'autres approches. On discute ensuite de la nature du langage et on se concentre sur la compréhension en tant que processus mental.

ON THE IMPLAUSIBILITY OF EQUIVALENT RESPONSE

(Part II)

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Résumé

Cet article étudie la théorie de l'équivalence dynamique de Nida afin de déterminer si elle peut constituer un but à atteindre dans la pratique de la traduction. On commence par un survol de divers concepts fondamentaux en linguistique puis on compare la théorie de Nida avec d'autres approches. On discute ensuite de la nature du langage et on se concentre sur la compréhension en tant que processus mental.

CHAPTER II THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE DENIES EQUIVALENT RESPONSE

As translation is communication involving two languages, translation theory is consequently required to study language as the preliminary foundation upon which the whole architecture of translation theory is to be set up. In fact, translation studies pivot upon the interpretation of the nature of language. Different language-views give rise to different attitudes towards translation. The universalists see more similarities than dissimilarities between languages, so they assert that translation as inter-lingual communication is undoubtedly possible, for underlying languages there is an element common to all human speech. The monadists are overwhelmed by the disparities among languages which they see as obstacles blocking communication between them. The disagreement between universalists and monadists over the possibility of translation reflects the polarized views existing in language philosophy (cf. Steiner 1975: 73-4). In view of this disparity, before attempting to ascertain the extent to which translatability can be achieved, I deem it necessary to remove some misconceptions about language.

1. Language is a code-system

Language is often described as a tool of communication and thinking. This is a vague and incomplete definition, for it acknowledges only the functional aspect of language. Language is undoubtedly the principal medium by which man communicates and thinks, but it is by no means the sole medium. Body language is universally both a conscious and subconscious non-verbal method of communication; in specific situations, man has devised communication methods from smoke signals and drum beats to semaphore and traffic lights; some people think in images, others in chemical or mathematical formula (cf. Jin & Nida 1984: 53). It must be admitted that in the process of communicating or thinking, all these mediums — with the exception of subconscious body language — merely serve as a **secondary** tool and **their functions depend on those of language**. For example, flag signals are born of language and cannot exist independently (Ye F.S. & Xu T.Q. 1981: 13). However, their employment in communicating and thinking reveals the inadequacy of the definition that language is a tool for communicating and thinking.

This definition — and others in a similar vein — creates the false impression that language is merely a vehicle or tool to convey meaning or ideas. It implies that meaning or thought is separable from the vehicle or tool that conveys it, and the vehicle or tool is only a carrier for meaning or thought. It further implies that meaning remains constant regardless of the vehicle by which it is conveyed. This is not so. Meaning and thought develop with language and only basic impulses and instincts exist independent of language. In his tract on the amelioration and correction of German, Leibniz (cited in Steiner 1975: 74-5) notes that “language is not the vehicle of thought but its determining medium. Thought is language internalized.” Hamann (cited also in Steiner 1975: 76-7) also affirms that “there is a determining concordance between the direction of thought in a community and the lineaments of its speech.” On the interaction of language and thought, Sapir (1921: 16-7) remarks:

The birth of a new concept is invariably foreshadowed by a more or less strained or extended use of old linguistic material; the concept does not attain to individual and independent life until it has found a distinctive linguistic embodiment.

Though these observations are imbued with monadism which may not be popularly acceptable, they nevertheless uncover the axiom that thought (meaning) and language, as content and form, are not dissociable in reality. Man thinks when a particular language operates. Supporting this view, Willa Muir (1959: 94), in *Translating from the German*, writes: “The very shape of thought has to be changed in translation.” When thought “goes from one language to another,” it actually alters and is no longer what it was in the original language.

The “communication tool” definition of language also fails to offer an explanation for the power and efficiency of language in communication and thinking. When man communicates by flag signals or thinks in images or formulae, these systems are only viable within a given linguistic framework; they are language-related and language-dependent, and they cannot serve effectively by themselves. The potentialities of language appear to be boundless and to describe it as a tool of communication and thinking does not distinguish it from other mediums.

This definition also ignores the significance of language itself which becomes inextricably woven into the message it conveys. This point will be discussed later in Chapter IV.

Language is a well structured code-system, a system in which all the components (codes and code-units) are arranged and organized into a hierarchy of interrelationship¹. Within such a complicated yet controllable framework, each code or code-unit operates on the axis of its connection with all the other codes or code-units at various levels of the system. A code or code-unit by itself cannot convey, refer or symbolize; it is only through the relationship with other codes or code-units that the task is achieved. This idea could also be expressed by saying that it is the particular position in the code-web occupied by a code or code-unit which grants to the code or code-unit the potentiality to convey, refer or symbolize (cf. Saussure 1916: 162, 170, 180). In reply to the question of language representing a non-linguistic world, Jay Rosenberg (1974: 118) says:

the one represents the other by being **structurally** a system of objects in the natural order (natural linguistic objects) **protocorrelated** with the system of non-linguistic objects represented and (ideally) extensionally isomorphic to that system of non-linguistic objects.

Clearly, the **structural** nature of the linguistic system receives the primary stress, for its **protocorrelation** with the non-linguistic system presupposes the structural nature of the linguistic system.

This linguistic system is characterized by the hybrid nature or arbitrariness and regularity. Its arbitrary nature lies mainly in the conventionalized relation of morpheme to the sound it represents and in the conventionalized relation of morpheme to the meaning it embodies. There is no reason why in Chinese the code “gu” refers to the same animal as the English code “dog” and the French code “chien.” Even onomatopoeia is not a real exception to the arbitrary nature of linguistic system². Within a given linguistic system, onomatopoeia may appear to bear certain “rational” relation to the sound it mimics. When a comparison is made of words from various linguistic systems that imitate the same sound it is evident that each language imitates the sound in its own way. For example, a dog’s bark is recorded as **bow-wow** in English, whereas it becomes **ouah ouah** in French, **hoho** in Sirono, **dashdash** in Chacobo, **u’u** in Kipsigis and **wāngwāng** in Chinese (Jin & Nida 1984: 61). This indicates that none of these codes bears any logical relation to the sound it describes. But each represents the sound and functions well in its own system. Had other codes been selected instead of those quoted above they could equally well have performed the same function³.

As well as an arbitrary quality language displays ostensive regularity. The way in which morphemes are combined to form complicated words is not completely random and without reason; nor is sentence-making a haphazard procedure. For instance, words in English must be arranged into a certain order that conforms to English grammar; otherwise they will not make a great deal of sense⁴. Grammar could be regarded as the regular behaviour of a given language. English sentences are countless, but their constructions are countable; from countless English sentences a number of rules can be extracted in accordance with which English words are grouped into sentences (cf. Chao 1980: 42).

According to Humbolt, language has a quality of being **finite** and **infinite** at the same time⁵. This quality is related to its simultaneous arbitrariness and regularity. Being arbitrary, language is able to use any sound or code to refer to, symbolize or describe anything, which accounts for the assumption that language is **capable of expressing or describing anything felt or perceived by its speaker**. However, its regularity allows language to operate in a controllable framework where all its components are organized into a system or structure. As a result, language becomes powerful and efficient in communication and thinking; it is capable of limitless extension and it is easy to control.

The paradigmatic and syntagmatic are another pair of characteristics that bear a certain relation to the linguistic arbitrariness and regularity. Needless to say, language displays its most obvious regularity on the syntagmatic plane. Regularity is in most cases realized in syntagmatic sequence, but the latter is formed on the basis of conforming to certain grammatical rules. On the paradigmatic plane, of course language also gives a demonstration of its regular nature. For instance, words which can mutually replace each other are those that can fulfil the same grammatical function on the syntagmatic plane. But paradigmatic associations are less constrained than syntagmatic associations. Syntagmatically, every word is required to stand in a grammatic-semantic relation to the others with which it makes a sentence, whereas paradigmatically a word may link with others merely by chance. Liu Yu Xi’s famous line 道是无晴却有晴 “Dàoshì wúqíng què yǒuqíng⁶” provides a good example. In Chinese, “晴” (sunniness) is a homophone of “情” (love, passion) with the same tone: qíng. As an analogy has been drawn between the hybrid nature of the climate and that of the relation between a man and a woman, the association of “晴” with “情” has been brought into play in the poem. Apparently, the fact the “晴” shares the same sound with “情” is a contingency or coincidence; the two words happen to be read as qíng. Because it depends on the conventionalized relation among code, sound and meaning, this type of paradigmatic association is arbitrary and accidental.

In addition to all these “congruent opposites” (Steiner 1975: 205), there is another pair that has remained a bone of contention in linguistics and translation studies, the universal and the individual.

2. The universal and the individual

At the beginning of this chapter, the dispute over the problem of translatability was said to be rooted deeply in the polarity of two language philosophies: universalism and monadism. The universalists believe that underlying every language there is a structure common to all and that differences between languages are basically superficial. Therefore

translation is realizable precisely because those deep-seated universals, genetic, historical, social, from which all grammars derive can be located and recognized as operative in every human idiom, however singular or bizarre its superficial forms. To translate is to descend beneath the exterior disparities of two languages in order to bring into vital play their analogous and, at the final depths, common principles of being (Steiner 1975: 73).

Nida is representative of those with this philosophy of language. Not only does he assert that dynamic equivalence is obtainable between languages, but he also demonstrates how to establish it first by back transformation in the source language and then by forward transformation in the target language.

The monadists are convinced that universal deep structures are very elusive, abstract and trivial, although they accept as truth “all languages of which we have apprehension are able to name perceived objects or to signify action” (ibid.: 74). In consequence, they begin their reasoning at “the actual workings” of language:

These workings are so diverse, they manifest so bewilderingly complicated a history of centrifugal development, they pose such stubborn questions as to economic and social function, that universalist models are at best irrelevant and at worst misleading (ibid.).

The extreme “monadist” position, as Steiner (ibid.) points out,

leads logically to the belief that real translation is impossible. What passes for translation is a convention of approximate analogies, a rough-cast similitude...

It is interesting to note that there is a common element in these opposing points of view: both are well aware of the universals and dissimilarities in language and both accept the fact of their existence. They do so because language is such an incredible system; it separates one speech community from another and it also bridges the gaps between them. The real opposition between the two language philosophies is that one stresses the universal aspect of language, paying little heed to individual use, while the other emphasizes the idiosyncrasies of separate languages, claiming that they lack common ground. The subsequent question is which one of them outweighs the other in determining translatability versus untranslatability? Perhaps they relate dialectically and function in a contradictory-complementary way. If so, the translatability problem cannot be resolved by a definite either-or decision. Before attempting to answer this question, a brief investigation should be made into the two aspects of language.

(a) The universal

A language universal, in Hockett’s (1962: 1) words, is “a feature or property shared by all language, or by all languages.” Greenberg *et al.* (1962c: 255) express the same idea in slightly more detail: “Language universals are by their very nature summary statements about characteristics or tendencies shared by all human speakers.” Briefly, they are

generalizations about language (Hockett 1962: 1). Listed below are some putative universals randomly chosen:

- i) "Every human language has a common clause type with bipartite structure in which the constituents can reasonably be termed 'topic' and 'comment'" (Hockett 1962: 18).
- ii) "In declarative sentences with nominal subject and object, the dominant order is almost always one in which the subject precedes the object" (Greenberg 1962b: 61)
- iii) "All languages have pronominal categories involving at least three persons and two numbers" (ibid.: 75).
- iv) "In English and many other languages, words can be motivated in three different ways. The verbs **swish**, **sizzle**, and **boom** are phonetically motivated because the sounds are a direct imitation of the sense. A compound like **arm-chair** and a derivative **thinker** or **retell** are **morphologically** motivated: whoever knows their components will understand them at once. Finally, figurative expressions like 'the bonnet of a car' or 'the pivot on which a question turns' are **semantically** motivated: they are derived, by transparent metaphor, from **bonnet** 'head-dress' and **pivot** 'short shaft or pin on which something turns or oscillates'" (Ullman 1962: 175-6).
- v) "It [radiation of synonyms] was found there that when a particular word was given a transferred sense its synonyms tended to develop on parallel lines. Thus the verbs for 'beat' — **toucher**, **taper**, **estamper**, **toquer** — received the same secondary sense" (ibid.: 183).

Statement i) as a putative universal depends on the nature of communication which certainly contains something to be talked about (topic) and something to be said about (comment). Actually, the "bipartite structure" of the common clause in every human language is an illustration of language accommodating the need of communication. In actual communication, the hearer needs to establish **what** is being referred to (the "topic") before he can comprehend the related information (the "comment"). This accounts for the fact that the "bipartite structure" in many languages is normally composed with the "topic" preceding the "comment"⁷. This is also true of statement iii). In almost every act of communication, there are three persons involved: the speaker(s), the hearer(s) and the one(s) being talked about. Since each type of participant may or may not be **one** person, distinction in number becomes necessary and is usually expressed as singular or plural.

Statement ii) is concerned with the order of syntactic units. This is one of Greenberg's (1962b: 61-76) forty-five universals of grammar which refer particularly to the order of meaningful elements in the dozens of languages which he has studied. Universals of this kind are summary statements about some of the regular linguistic behaviour on the syntagmatic plane.

Statement iv) is a generalization about the different ways in which words are formed or motivated in many languages as well as in English. The phonetically motivated type is called onomatopoeia; the second type, the compound word, is composed of already existent morphological elements; the third type is a metaphorical use of a given word. These motivations are based on the arbitrary nature of the relation between sound, code and meaning. Ullman (1962: 175-6) notes this phenomenon, and he declares that

morphological motivation is "relative" in the sense that, while the words themselves are motivated, their ultimate constituents may be opaque, as are in the above examples **arm**, **chair**, **think**, **tell**, and the bound morphemes **-er** and **re-**. The same may be said of semantic motivation: the metaphorical of **bonnet** and **pivot** are transparent, but the words themselves, in their literal meanings, are purely conventional.

He appears to take the phonetic type for pure motivation, but actually this is not so; onomatopoeia is in fact conventional by nature, though perhaps to a lesser degree.

Statement v) concerning the radiation of synonyms is also concerned with the arbitrary quality of words. The fact that all the other quoted verbs for “beat” develop the meaning of “deceive” after the verb **chiquer** has been given the meaning, is clearly dependent on the arbitrary association of the verbs with their primary meaning of “beat.” Verbs without the meaning of “beat” do not show the same tendency.

Clearly, these universals are characteristics shown by linguistic systems. There are general characteristics that are not direct generalizations about language as a systematic structure, for example, the assertion of the biological and neuro-physiological nature of all human speech:

all languages are subject to constraints and determined by the design of the brain, by the vocal equipment of the species (Steiner 1975: 232-3).

Undoubtedly, all natural languages result from the working of the human brain. Furthermore, language mirrors **one and the same reality**. This phenomenon is a universal of all languages, or more accurately, it is an origin of linguistic universals.

In summary, universals, when directly relevant to linguistic systems, are putative general characteristics found at higher or deeper layers of language. Supralinguistically, however, they are logical deductions, rational assertions and philosophical abstractions regarding the relationship between language, as a social phenomenon, and the subjective and the objective worlds it represents; (these representations include language itself when it is to be described and the human brain as a biological substance).

(b) The individual

Unlike universals, individual characteristics cannot be generalized as summary statements applicable to all existent languages, for each language manifests its individual characteristics in its own way. To investigate these characteristics, attention is focused on two or more chosen natural languages, comparing their individual peculiarities and similarities. This is the task on Contrastive Analysis, a branch of applied linguistics. Another branch of applied linguistics, Comparative Grammar, is also dedicated to linguistic comparison, confining itself to the grammars of the chosen languages. Such detailed and extensive investigation is beyond the scope of this thesis; however, in order to sustain the continuity of the discussion, five salient points will be examined.

1) Each language segments reality in its own way. The various structures of vocabulary possessed by different languages are undeniable evidence of this fact. Each vocabulary “structures and organizes reality in its own manner and thereby determines the components of reality that are peculiar to the linguistic system where it belongs” (Steiner 1975: 86-7). For example, the internal structure of lexical fields of spectrum of kinship varies from language to language. There is no one-to-one correspondence between the colour words from Chinese and English⁸, the obvious example being the lack of an English equivalent for the Chinese **qīng**⁹. The difference between the kinship words from the two languages is even more striking. In English, there is no distinction between paternal and maternal kinship; there is no indication of seniority, and when referring to a **cousin** or a **parent**, English even fails to distinguish which sex is concerned. In Chinese, however, all kinship words must be marked with at least one of these three distinctions: **zǔfù** (father’s father) or **wàizǔfù** (mother’s father); **gūmā** (aunt on the paternal side) or **yímā** (aunt on the maternal side); **bófù** (father’s elder brother) or **shūfù** (father’s younger brother). Even within the same referential parameters, these lexical fields are structured disparately in different languages. Other areas of vocabulary with no uniform referential spheres differ across languages and the extent of the difference could be immeasurable.

Not only is vocabulary organised variously in different languages, but it also produces different impacts or shows different inclinations. Bally (cited in Kelly 1979: 13) notes that “words in Germanic languages tend towards a picture, reflecting a physical type of vision; while those in Romanic languages define, resting on a mental vision.” A similar statement concerning the differences indicates that some languages are inclined to be general in their descriptions or references while others, like German, tend to be specific (cf. Ullman 1962: 180; Kelly 1979: 13).

2) When studying word order in different languages, many similarities can be found. Compare some expressions from Chinese and English¹⁰:

hēibái — black and white;	hàowù — like or dislike
yòu zhè yòu nà — this and that;	nán nǚ értóng — boys and girls
dōngxī — east-west;	xuèròu — flesh and blood.

Generally these are arranged in a similar order, but English needs conjunctions to co-ordinate the nouns (or a hyphen as in the case of “east-west”) whereas Chinese rarely uses conjunctions. Due to this, the order of the Chinese phrase is rigidly fixed while the English phrases, in some cases, can be reversed¹⁰:

boys and girls — girls and boys;
east-west — west-east.

There are many pairs of words that have opposite sequences in English and Chinese; here are a few examples¹⁰:

nánběi — north-south;	gāngtiě — iron and steel;
tiánjìng — track and field;	guānguǎ — a widow or widower.

It should be noted that the examples quoted are without contexts. Also, all of them — to a greater or lesser degree — are idiomatic expressions; each is used as a unit or even as a **single concept**, and this is especially so with the Chinese phrases. When original or unique combinations of words are examined it is not surprising to find that order is frequently language-relative, particularly when impact is required, although there are similarities across languages.

Order — or sequence — carries significance of its own, and similar order may carry different significance in various languages, so changing the impact. It is in this sense that the word order is considered to be language-specific. Arrangements of words present many difficulties in translation for, when alike in sequence, they may be different in significance and impact. So, when they are divergent in sequence, even more difficulties can arise. This is what Edwin Muir (1959: 93) regrets while translating Kafka:

as a beginning, one must change the order of the words, and to do that with a great prose work is to commit an irremediable yet unavoidable injury against it...

He is caught on the horns of this dilemma because if he leaves Kafka’s word order undisturbed the translation will be unintelligible to the TL audience; if he changes the word order in obedience to the tyranny of the TL grammar or norms he feels that he will “kill” Kafka’s writing:

The word order of Kafka is naked and infallible; it not only expresses his meaning but is involved as part of it; only in that order could he have said what he had to say. Yet the fine order has to be disarranged, the original edifice of the sentence dismantled and put up again. And the result can never be quite satisfactory, **simply because the words run differently***¹¹.

3) The arrangement of code-units into grammatical sentences is also language-specific. Although universalists assert many generalizations concerning this aspect of language, the common characteristics emerge in ways particular to each of the languages that share the said universals. Chinese and English both have S(ubject) V(erb) O(bject) as their dominant order, but the English SVO is more adaptable and capable of being extended by adding pre-modifiers and post-modifiers to syntactic units whereas the Chinese SVO is rather rigid and reluctant to accept many modifiers. In addition, with conjunctive pronouns, English nominal syntactic units can fairly freely take attributive clauses which are always postpositioned while Chinese is subject to greater constraints. For lack of such conjunctions, attributive clauses must be prepositioned, like all the other modifiers; (in Chinese, modifiers are as a rule not permitted to follow the modified). Owing to the limited capacity of human memory, prepositioned modifiers tend to be restricted both in number and in length. Absolute structures can be inserted into an English sentence, a process which is unimaginable in Chinese. The adaptability of English syntax allows for greater complexity and length in its structure, which is compared to “a tall tree with many branches.” By contrast, Chinese sentences tend to be short in length and concise in structure, one following another in a semantically coherent succession (cf. Peng Q.L. 1980: 110).

4) Every language has a grammar of its own, for grammar is actually categories abstracted from language behaviour and then imposed on the given language as rules. So certain grammatical categories may be present in one language but absent from another. This argument is well illustrated by another comparison of English and Chinese. English has grammatical categories “tense,” “aspect,” “voice,” and “mood,” and English verbs are marked, when required, to fit the appropriate concepts:

(1a) Although he wore a long gown, it was dirty and tattered, and looked as if it had not been washed or mended for over ten years. (Kong I-Chi)

(2a) Someone else would call out, in deliberately loud tones: “You must have been stealing again!” (Ibid.)

In example (1a), the verbs “wore,” “was,” and “looked” are the past tense forms of “wear,” “be” and “look” respectively, denoting past time. The predicate of the clause introduced by “as if” denotes a negative fact; the past tense form of the auxiliary “have” plus the past participle of “be” are followed by the main verbs “washed” and “mended,” past participles of “wash” and “mend”; this arrangement constitutes the mood traditionally known as the subjunctive. In this case, it is also in the passive voice. In example (2a), the predicate of direct speech is the perfect continuous tense, an aspect denoting an action that has been completed or an action that started in the past and has continued until now. Such an aspect is marked by the auxiliary “have” plus the past participle of “be” followed by the present participle of “steal,” the main verb in the sentence.

It is generally agreed that in Chinese such categories are absent¹² as Chinese verbs are not inflected, or rather, the Chinese language is not an inflected language. Following are the Chinese counterparts of the English sentences just quoted:

(1) *Chuānde suǐrán shì chángshān, kěshì yòu zāng yòu pò, sīhú shíduōnián méi yǒu xī, yě méi yǒu mǔ.* (Kong Yi Ji)

(2) *Tāmen yòu gùyìde gāoshēng rāngdào, “Nǐ yīdìng yòu tóule rénjiade dōngxile!”* (ibid.)

In these sentences, none of the verbs “shì,” “bǔ,” “xī,” “rāngdào” and “tōu” are inflected for “tense,” “aspect,” “voice” or “mood.” In Chinese, these grammatical categories are left to be determined either by context or by other words immediately accompanying the

verbs concerned. We know by context that “*shì*” in (1) and “*rāngdào*” in (2) denote past time. The perfect tense of “*tōu*” is indicated by “*le*” which follows. Sometimes grammatical significance is indicated by both the accompanying words and the context in which the sentence occurs. The subjunctive mood and the passive voice of the clause “*sìhu shí-duōnián méi yǒu xǐ, yě méi yǒu bǔ*” in (1) are both denoted by the accompanying word “*sìhu*” and the context.

English nouns are inflected for number but Chinese nouns are not:

(3) *Tā shēncái gāodà; gīng bái liǎnsè, zhòuwén jiān shícháng jiǎxiè shānghén.* (Kǒng Yǐ Jì)

(3a) He was a big man, strangely pallid, with scars that often showed among the wrinkles of his face. (Kong I-Chi)

English nouns “scar” and “wrinkle” are inflected with the final -s. The number of the Chinese counterparts, “*shānghén*,” “*zhòuwén*,” has to be determined either by context or by accompanying words, or by both.

It is interesting to note that even when a certain category is shared by two languages, it may not always have the same significance or impact. For example, the Hopi word “*ᵛo./māw*” (“cloud”) when pluralized become a metaphor, for in Hopi inanimate nouns when pluralized becomes animate nouns. This is not the case with English and other European languages (Whorf 1956: 79).

Both English and Hopi have plurals and cardinals, but with different applicability. According to Whorf (1956: 140), they both can say “ten people,” but the former can also say “ten days” while the latter cannot:

(4) English: They stayed ten days.
Hopi: They stayed until the eleventh day.
They left after the tenth day.

(5) English: Ten days is greater than nine days.
Hopi: The tenth day is later than the ninth.

5) Each language shows certain typological distinctions. Chinese — especially Classical Chinese — “requires very little if anything in the way of syntactic or morphological marking” (Lyovin 1981: 33). This is certainly true of the language in Classical Chinese poetry, where the subject or object is rarely specified, and nor are verbs and nouns. By contrast, Russian requires a great deal of syntactic or morphological marking (ibid.). Such marking is in many cases compulsory in English. Although English allows parataxis, it is much rarer than hypotaxis, which is the dominant structure in English. The contrast between hypotaxis and parataxis, as Nida (1982: 16) claims, is one of the most important linguistic distinctions between English and Chinese. Like other linguistic distinctions, the typological variation is one of the sources of difficulty for translators.

This discussion has looked briefly at **some** linguistic universals and distinctions but it is not at all considered to be exhaustive.

3. Translatability

The coexistence of universals and distinctions makes untenable both the claim of total translatability or that of complete untranslatability. Faced with the question of whether translation is possible, it is unreasonable to seek an answer which is an extreme affirmative or negative for no such uncompromising solution can stand the test of reality. Translation, oral and written, has a history of several thousand years which has amply justified the existence of inter-lingual communication; yet the fact that there never can be

a perfect or final rendering reduces translatability to a relative degree. The task for translation studies is not to determine whether translation is possible, but to specify the degree of achievement. This is a far more baffling question, for translatability can vary in degree as sensitively as mercury in a thermometer reacts to a temperature change.

Because translatability is a matter of degree, neither of the extreme views in language philosophy can be abandoned as being totally erroneous. Each contains some elements of truth, for each has exposed one side of the problem; partiality is their common weakness. Translators and theorists can build on the truths that the extremists have established, and develop a middle course.

The universal view can be dated to 2,500 years ago. The Greek were convinced that at the “back of language was a universal uncontaminated essence of reason, shared by all men.” For them, words were merely the medium. Hence “a line of thought expressed in any language could be translated without loss of meaning into any other language” (Chase 1956: vii). Some Chinese linguists held the same view: Ji Yun (cited in Qian Z.S. 1979: 1367) maintained that “although different languages are used in different parts of the world, truth and human nature are universally the same. Therefore, meaning can be conveyed though translations and retranslations.” In his *A Proposal for Setting Up a Translation Academy*, Ma Jian Zhong (1894: 3) also asserts that “truth is universally the same; what differentiates Chinese from all the other languages is the way in which things are denominated.” Based upon this idea, many linguists compare language to clothes or shells that can be thrown away without causing injury to the meaning or thought which they wrapped — a metaphor that has become almost a cliché.

If language is really like “clothes” or “shells” — without any significance of its own — then total translatability can be obtained and full equivalence established under any circumstances. For “shells” and “clothes” both imply separability from their contents, leaving the kernel (of an idea) or the body (of information) intact. Translation practice has demonstrated that this is not true; the investigation discussed briefly in this chapter has already shown that individual characteristics of a given language do carry significance that is peculiar to the language. In the process of “going from one language to another,” thought will inevitably be affected by losing the significance of one kind of language and at the same time gaining that of another. This accounts for the fact that **the exact original text** can never be achieved by rendering any of its translations back into the original source language.

In this connection, the Sapir-Whorfean hypothesis — if suitably restricted — could have clarified the nature of language. Sapir and Whorf observed that every language was an autonomous system operating in its own way. They also noted various distinctions between languages. Their intuition led them to presume that the significance of a given language affected what it conveyed. However, they over-presumed and in their view language **determined** thought rather than merely **affecting** it:

the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systematizations of his own language (Whorf 1956: 252).

Since languages vary widely, “the modes of perception, thought, and response in human groups using different languages will be very different” (see Steiner 1975: 88). It follows that

The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached (Sapir cited in Bassnett-McGuire 1980: 13).

This theory claims that the extent to which languages separate one speech community from another is so vast that no communication between them can ever take place.

This is not true for, if communities actually dwelt alone in “distinct worlds” represented by individual languages, inter-lingual communication would certainly be impossible. Different speech communities do in reality communicate across languages, and this fact denies the Sapir-Whorfean hypothesis. There is only one objective world; a given language may draw the attention of its speakers to certain phenomena about that world or to certain relationships with or within that world, simultaneously blinding them to others. The way in which a given language affects the world-view of its speakers is arbitrary and — to a certain degree — compulsory. People need to comply with the norms of their own language in order to employ it for observing and analyzing the world and for communicating with others. The arbitrariness and compulsion naturally result in the incompatibility of various world-views held by speakers of different languages. It must be stressed that the differences are actually in the **world-views** held by people who speak different languages, and not in the **world in reality** as observed by them. It is only **in this sense** that different languages can be said to “create” different worlds.

The incompatibility between the affected world-views of different-language speakers does create some difficulties for communication across languages. For example, to Europeans, “time is a motion on a space,” and therefore “unvarying repetition seems to scatter its force along a row of units of that space, and be wasted.” To the Hopi, time is not a motion, but “a getting later of everything that has ever been done,” so “unvarying repetition is not wasted but accumulated” (Whorf 1956: 151). The different concepts of time may prove to be a difficult problem in translations between a European language and Hopi.

Similarly, the incompatibility between languages themselves is an inherent obstacle to translation. On the difficulties of translating from European languages into Chinese, Ye Han (cited in Ma Z.Y. 1984: 246) says:

Written languages of the West are alphabetic systems in which new worlds can be formed to serve different purposes at different times, with the result that more and more derivatives have kept coming into use. On the other hand, written Chinese is a system of pictographic characters which cannot be re-formed but which can only be “borrowed” to express new ideas. To transliterate an alphabetic word of a Western language, a lot of Chinese characters must be employed and are bound to sound queer to the Chinese ear, thus boring the readers, whereas a meaning-based translation of an alphabetic word may be given different interpretations by different readers. This is where lies the difficulty in morphology when a translation is being done. As for the grammar of a Western language, like what we have seen in the critical explanation of classical Chinese words, it consists of conventionalized rules for the combination of words into sentences as well as the forms of words. Though the grammatical rules of Western languages are conventionalized and different from one another, they can be creatively applied in composing whole articles. However, this is not the case with classical Chinese in general and the rhythmical prose characterized by parallelism and ornateness in particular. If translations are done in such classical Chinese, they are bound to be illogical and unintelligible... And this is where lies the difficulty in grammar.

Although Ye Han is right, difficulty does not necessarily lead to impossibility; on the contrary, it presupposes probability, for probability is the precondition of the existence of difficulty.

The conclusion which can be drawn from this section follow. Both universal and individual characteristics function in the process of translation or inter-lingual communication. Universal characteristics denote the commensurability between the two languages concerned as linguistic structures, and between their ways of representing reality. The reality to be represented is one and the same. All natural languages are, in the final analysis, functions of the human brain, a highly developed biological substance. These two

phenomena are the source of all other universals. And all this provides in principle a potential base for inter-lingual communication at any time under any circumstances. Individual characteristics are the distinctive structures and workings of a given linguistic system, and the distinctive way its speakers observe and represent reality. Universal statements are generalizations or abstractions about the putatively shared characteristics among languages; individual characteristics are concrete and tangible, distinguishing one language from any others. These concrete characteristics present themselves as **concrete** difficulties and problems throughout the process of translating and to translate is, in a sense, to overcome these concrete difficulties and problems. The universals functions as an underlying force that sustains inter-lingual communication while the individual characteristics of the two involved languages conflict in the linguistic contact making complete inter-lingual communication impossible.

The degree of inter-lingual translatability appears to be in direct proportion to the degree of commensurability in a particular case, and consequently it is in inverse proportion to the degree of incommensurability at a given point. As the equilibrium between the commensurability and the incommensurability varies with all the other factors concerned, it is inadvisable to determine the degree of translatability finally. Actually, it is impossible to do so as the degree of translatability can only be specified in a particular case, taking into account all the factors functioning in this connection.

4. Congruent opposites allow no equivalence

Apart from the equilibrium between the universal and the individual, the degree of translatability also depends on the equilibrium between the other congruent opposites. Translation is a process in which various factors are tangled into an extremely complicated web: “the going from source language to target language” (translation) is simultaneously driven and hindered as the web responds to the conflicting pull of its two opposing forces. Linguistic arbitrariness presents concrete problems and difficulties that handicap the process while linguistic regularity to some extent provides a base for commensuration that sustains the process. Being infinite, a language is endowed with an inexhaustive capacity with which it can describe, express or mirror anything — the objective world, the inner or psychological worlds and languages, including the describing language itself. It can even mirror these through other languages, of which translation is a case. Being finite, its behaviour unavoidably endures constraints and it has to conform to certain rules, particularly grammar. It is true that commensuration is to be found among grammars, but as each grammar is the behaviour system of a particular language, grammar is by nature individualistic. So the modes of mirroring of a given language will inevitably be affected and restricted.

The problem is even more complicated when a given factor, either universal or individual, affects translatability in either way; in one case it may handicap the process of translating but in another, it may promote it. For instance, in both English and Chinese the SVO is the dominant syntactical order. In many cases, this makes rendering easy and smooth:

- (6) God created man. (Genesis)
- (7) **Shàngdì chuàngzào rén. (Chuàng Shìjì)**

However, (6) can be put in the passive voice where it is equally idiomatic and fluent:

- (6a) Man was created by God.

(6a) may be rendered as

- (7a) **Rén shì yòu Shàngdì chuàngzào chūláide.**

but many would prefer (7) as a better rendering of (6a) than (7a), though the latter is equally idiomatic Chinese.

When seen from a different point of view, universal linguistic characteristics may become individual, and vice versa. Every language is to some extent arbitrary and each language has its own particular arbitrary quality. However, the idea that every language has the capacity to be arbitrary is a fair generalization about a characteristic common to all languages. This universally-shared property finds its embodiment distinctively in each case; this embodiment and the way it is embodied are individualistic and arbitrary; they are language-specific. Theoretically a given characteristic, universal or individual, may promote the process of translating at one level while inhibiting it at another. In some cases it may even exert the two opposing forces simultaneously. In practice the differences will be magnified and multiplied since all the shared characteristics are universal in a relative sense and form the basis for bridging the linguistic gaps between communities only in principle. During the process of translating they are forced into the background. The first demand on a translator is coping with the various obstacles which block the channel. These obstacles — the individuals or linguistic distinctions — demand immediate solution. It is in this sense that translation can be seen as a process of smoothing out — as far as possible — the disparities between languages.

As this is the role of translation, it is of vital importance to be fully aware of this aspect of language in translation studies — **language is a system of congruent opposites**. “Contradictory congruence” is a dialectical phenomenon. The nature of translation is determined by this aspect of language more than any other. Translation as inter-lingual communication is the most delicate procedure straddling the two opposing forces and so complete translatability is pre-determinedly impossible. So is equivalence even more impossible?

Before proceeding with this discussion, **translatability** needs to be distinguished from **equivalence**. Although equivalence implies translatability, they are different concepts and they must not be confused. In many cases, translation is performed logically but equivalence is not achieved; so interchangeability in a given context can at best mean translatability but it cannot serve as a criterion by which to determine equivalence.

Based on these observations of language, the following deductions may be made:

■ Equivalence demands translatability, the latter being a precondition for the occurrence of the former; however, translatability does not necessarily entail equivalence. If translatability is restricted, equivalence will have relatively greater limitations.

■ Translating entails overcoming concrete problems and difficulties presented by linguistic divergences. Consequently the very nature of translation denies full equivalent effect or equivalent response since translating blurs some distinctions in the source language and introduces the target language influences. Efforts to preserve the distinctions of the source language can cause a translation which sounds alien, hence also unable to elicit equivalent response. A loss to the source language is a gain for the target language; and vice versa.

Note: This deduction refers only to the concrete problems and difficulties that are likely to hamper the process of communication. It has been assumed that universals, linguistic and non-linguistic, are **the major premise** that ultimately sustains the process of translating. In the process of inter-lingual communication, it is the cultural-linguistic divergences and their subsequent problems which must be dealt with. The degree of translatability — and that of equivalence — depends on the extent to which the concerned languages differ, and the extent to which mediation between them is possible. Since the solution almost inevitably allows the source language and the target language each to keep its distinctions

at the cost of the other, **equivalence** is an inherently defective term. It is the **term** which is misleading and a better one would be **temporal correspondence**.

■ In the process of translating, the equilibrium between all the congruent opposites in the source language must change or be changed. This is demanded by the grammar and idiom of the target language. This substitution of SL equilibrium by TL equilibrium, necessarily affects the degree of translatability and ultimately that of equivalence. If SL equilibrium is kept intact the TL text, even if readable, will not be smooth or idiomatic. The extent to which the SL equilibrium is permitted to remain depends on the normal readability of the TL text; the extent to which the TL text is allowed to achieve an idiomatic quality and fluency is related to its nearest possible approximation to the SL text.

■ Language is distinctive and arrangement or combination of semantic elements is language-relative; in “going from one language to another,” the semantic elements must be redistributed. Different distributions of the same semantic elements affect the meaning they express, for distribution itself, like the sequence of words, carries a significance of its own.

■ The term, “contradictory congruence” or “congruent opposites,” summarizes the dialectical nature of language. In a linguistic system, various relations are both opposite and complementary, and they remain in permanent fluctuation and oscillation. These in turn give rise to perpetual conversion between the languages involved, of similarities to divergencies and vice versa. Accordingly, any translation is a distinctive act of creation; the relation between the rendering and the original and, ultimately, between the source language and the target language varies with the persons (translator, receptor reader) involved, the time at which the rendering is done, and the place where the act of rendering is carried out. Perpetual alteration requires perpetual adjustment. If this is so, the concept of “the closest natural equivalent” appears to be elusive. “The closest natural equivalent” can only be determined in a particular act of inter-lingual communication, and in most cases it cannot be set up on all levels. Sometimes, due to the constraint at the higher level, it cannot occur on the lower level in the context. Though available, such “closest natural equivalent” is no longer equivalent in this case. In other cases, due to the force of the higher level, a normally unequivalent unit may actually appear in the TL text, and it may become “the closest natural equivalent” in that particular context.

“The closest natural equivalent” itself is often an over-translation or an under-translation. For example, the Chinese rendering “**dòng wù**,” “**zhí wù**,” “**kuàng wù**” and “**guài wù**” of the English words “animal,” “vegetable,” “mineral” and “monster” are the closest natural equivalents either **in or out of context**. Yet they are overtranslations, particularly in this rendering of the English novel *Through the Looking Glass* (Chao 1976: 166). To the Chinese reader, this rendering sounds like word play, as all the four compounds have “**wù**” (object) as the head word, premodified by “**dòng**” (move, live), “**zhí**” (vegetable), “**kuàng**” (mineral) and “**guài**” (strange, bizarre) respectively. The word “**wù**” (object) creates a relationship between the compounds since they are all “**wù**” (object); the corresponding English words “animal,” “vegetable,” “mineral” and “monster” bear no formal markers to create a relationship between them in the mind of the English reader.

■ If there is disparity between formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence, the disparity must lie between the two corresponding paradigmatic-syntagmatic systems of the languages in contact, not merely between certain constituents of those systems that happen to be the centre of attention. Every linguistic unit functions within the scope of complete paradigmatic-syntagmatic system into which it enters in a given context. It is unprofitable to compare certain elements of that system in isolation.

Since paradigmatic-syntagmatic systems or relations are unexceptionally language-specific, equivalence between them is not possible and therefore all translations involve “losses” and “gains” in meanings. In translation, it is evident that such systems cannot be transferred from one language to another, but they must be substituted one for another. The “loss” is that which the SL system has but the TL lacks; the “gain” is that which is absent in the SL system but present in the TL.

It can be postulated that there is no equivalence between paradigmatic-syntagmatic systems across languages; this assertion, if accepted, is a precursor to a further postulation that any type of equivalence is set up on the base of certain necessary disparities between the two paradigmatic-syntagmatic systems being brought into a comparison by the establishment of that kind of equivalence. Each type of equivalence is a comparison of some points from the two paradigmatic-syntagmatic systems across languages. Not only is equivalence incomplete, but it **cannot** be complete; more importantly it **should not** be complete. Equivalence presupposes disparity and divergence. To recognize only its incompleteness is insufficient for understanding its nature. There must also be an awareness of its existence which requires a measure of disparity and divergence as preconditions. Equivalence is equivalent between differences.

■ Since there is no complete translation, there can be no criterion by which complete translation can be gauged. Similarly, since there is no full equivalence, there is no practical criterion which measures full equivalence. This is demonstrated by the various types of equivalence, particularly the hypothetical opposition of different types as with formal equivalence versus dynamic equivalence. Almost all linguists, translation theorists and practitioners acknowledge the unlikelihood of full equivalence.

However, criteria are still useful, especially when they are adequately expressed.

■ If full equivalence is implausible, the response of the receptor readers to the translation will not be equivalent to the response of the source readers to the original. Different stimuli will arouse different responses. Even the same stimulus will elicit different responses, for no two receptors of the same linguo-cultural background will decode or interpret the same text in exactly the same way, due to differences of age, sex, intellect, education, and experience. If equivalent response is not probable between two members with a common language and culture, how much less plausible it must be when translated texts are presented to members of different speech communities.

NOTES

1. Cf. Ye F.S. & Xu T.Q. (1981: 28): “Language is a code system, and this statement summarizes the nature and characteristics of language.”
2. Cf. L.R. Palmer (tr. Li R. et al. 1983: 8). Palmer admits that onomatopoeia such as “dingdong” is an exception to the assertion of the linguistic arbitrariness in question.
3. Cf. Xu Zi (**Xu Zi: On denotation**): “There are no inherently appropriate denomenations, which can only be established through common practice. Denomenations are considered appropriate if they keep in line with such common practice, otherwise they are regarded as inappropriate.” That a word may have two antonymous meanings is typical of the conventionalized relation of code (sound) to meaning (referent), cf. Qian Z.S. (1979: 1058): “... This is further borne out by the fact that there are words which originally did not have two antonymous definitions but which have been frequently used to denote things contrary to those explicit in their primary definitions so that gradually such words as having secondary definitions have come into accepted usage.”
4. Semantic rules also apply here; in some cases, word arrangement is grammatical but the sentence is still senseless. Chomsky’s famous sentence: “A colorless green idea sleeps furiously” is an example.
5. Cf. Chomsky (tr. Zhao X.E. 1982: 1): “Humbolt has observed that language is a finite means of which infinite use can be made.”
6. Liu Yu Xi (772-842), one of the great Tang poets and a materialist thinker. The following is a rough translation of the line: (With sunshine in the east and rain in the west,) It is hard to say whether it is fine or not.

7. Some linguists such as Leech refer to the "topic" as "old (given) information" and the "comment" as "new information." The adjectives "old (given)" and "new" imply the sequence in which the old (given) information comes before the new (cf. Leech & Svartvik 1974: 172-5).
8. Cf. William H. Snyder (1981: 127-34). He claims that languages vary so widely that there is no one-to-one correspondence between across-lingual words, not even between such closely related languages as German and English or French and Italian.
9. The part of spectrum covered by the Chinese colour word **gīng** is divided into three English terms: **green**, **blue** and **black**.
10. All these examples are taken from Chen Z.S. (1984: 77-8).
11. Throughout this thesis, all underlinings in quotations marked with * are my own to draw attention to specific points.
12. Cf. Zhao Z.Y. (1981: 70-95), who maintains that there are such categories in Chinese, only substantiated in a different way; cf. also Ren X.L. (1981), who asserts that grammatical categories must be indicated by formal markers (20). Chinese has no tense for lack of markers (130-1). But he holds that there is the "aspect" category in Chinese with its well developed formal markers (142-79); Zhang J. & Chen Y.Q. (1981: 310): "So far Chinese has had no established synthetical and analytical forms of tense and aspect. However, there can be seen such a tendency and at present the language is undergoing a transition period." But Chinese has developed a mood system (1981: 315-23).