



## How to Achieve Equivalence, the Eternal Issue in Translation Studies: A Review of *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*

HONG Xiyao<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Foreign Language Department of Guangdong University of Finance, Guangzhou, China.

\*Correspondence author.

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### Abstract

Centering on equivalence in different levels/aspects such as lexical equivalence, grammatical equivalence, textual equivalence, pragmatic equivalence, Mona Baker's *In Other Words* (1992) addresses some basic and important issues/problems in translation in a systematic way. It is of great value to both vocational and academic translation trainers, translation scholars and practitioners, and the like. The present paper is going to review the main ideas of the book, and give some comments on it by relating it to some Chinese translation issues.

**Key words:** Lexical equivalence; Grammatical equivalence; Textual equivalence; Pragmatic equivalence

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### INTRODUCTION

Since its first publication in 1992, *In Other Words: A coursebook on translation* has been read and reread by scholars in the field of translation studies as can be seen from its repeated publications. Translation scholars have also made reviews of this book in different languages: Bader (1994), Rodríguez (1995), Chesterman (2012),

to name just a few. Nevertheless, up to now, few reviews tell us in detail exactly what is expounded in the book, and what are the implications for Chinese translation trainers as well as translation scholars. To supplement this, the present paper will make a brief review of what has been dealt with in the book and offer the author's own understandings of it at the same time.

### THE MAIN IDEAS OF THE BOOK

The book opens its discussion through citing two quotations made respectively by Firth and Fawcett. While the latter's quotation touches the issue of translation quality assessment, the former, I think, vividly reflects the situation when one translates, which reads like: Do we really know how we translate or what we translate? ... Are we to accept 'naked ideas' as the means of crossing from one language to another? ... Translators know they cross over but do not know by what sort of bridge. They often re-cross by a different bridge to check up again. Sometimes they fall over the parapet into limbo (Firth, 1957, p.197; see Baker, 1992, the page after the preface).

In Chapter 1 'Introduction', Baker explores the root for the unjustly low status of translation as a profession. She argues that it is not just the general public to be blamed for that, but the translation community itself should be held responsible for underestimating the complexity of the translation process and hence the need for formal professional training in the field. Nevertheless, as just scholars like Nick Rosenthal has pointed out that, translators are not yet sure "whether translation is a trade, an art, a profession or a business" (Baker, 1992, p.2) To help raise the status of translation as a profession, and so as to make translators know what they do and how they do it, it is argued that, translators need, first of all, to acquire a sound knowledge of the raw material with which they work: To understand what language is and how it comes to function for its users rather than the current mixture of the

intuition and practice. It is at this aspect that linguistics, especially, modern linguistics which not only embraces the study of language *per se*, but also encompasses some sub-disciplines such as textlinguistics and pragmatics, that have a great deal to offer to the budding discipline of translation studies.

The main task of Chapter 2 is to seek the answer to the question how to translate when there is no word in the target language which expresses the same meaning as the word in the source language, namely, the question of non-equivalence. Before illuminating some specific types of non-equivalence and various strategies for dealing with them, Baker looks into some basic issues about a word. For example, she examines the definition of a word, expounds the questions like whether or not a word is the main unit of meaning in language, what kinds of meaning a word can convey, and how languages differ in the way they express certain meanings rather than others. To answer the third question, Baker adopts a model largely drawn from Cruse (1986) to analyze the components of lexical meaning which can be divided into propositional meaning, expressive meaning, presupposed meaning and evoked meaning and so on. What is worth noticing here is that Cruse's model is different from a number of other linguists', such as Morris' three main types (1971) of meaning (referential, pragmatic and intralingual meaning, all with subcategories), Leech's seven types (1974) of meaning, and Newmark's two main types (2001) of meaning. While briefly mentioning Zgusta's (1971, Chapter 1) and Leech's (Chapter 2) model, Baker doesn't tell us why she chooses Cruse's model over others'.

A large part of the latter part of Chapter 2 is devoted to outlining some of the common types of non-equivalence which frequently bring difficulties to the translator as well as some useful strategies for dealing with them. However, though as comprehensive as it looks, the classification of non-equivalence seems to lack of certain systematicity. As for the strategies outlined, from my personally perspective, although some of the strategies can be useful at times, we should use them in cautions, otherwise some delicate meaning of a word may easily be lost. Take the first strategy "Translation by a more general word" for instance (Baker, 1992, p.28), the author cites the translation of an English word "strongholds" in "Today there may be no more than 1,000 giant pandas left in the wild, restricted to a few mountain strongholds in the Chinese" (see Appendix 3 *China's Panda Reserves*) into "山区" (mountainous area) to illustrate the applicability of the first strategy here. But in my humble opinion, the meaning of strongholds is much richer than "山区", since it echoes the underlying theme of the short passage that the living condition of panda is endangered nowadays, which deserves our attention. While a literal translation of "strongholds" into "要塞" (fortress), "据点" (foothold) or the like, seems a little weak in describing the dangerous situation wild pandas face nowadays, we may resort to

other strategies such as paraphrasing or explaining. Thus based on the original translation "今天, 仍处于野生状态的大熊猫可能只有一千只, 仅限于中国的四川、陕西和甘肃省内的一些山区 (Baker, 1992, p.267); Today, there may only one thousand pandas living in the wild, limited to only some mountainous area in Sichuan, Shaanxi and Gansu provinces in China; my translation)", we may add an explanation at the end of it, making it runs like "...山区, 它们是野生大熊猫最后的栖息地 (... mountainous area, which are the last habitats of wild pandas)." In this way, the meaning of "strongholds" gets a fuller expression in its Chinese translation. Therefore it is perhaps safer for Baker to point out that the strategies can be used collaboratively rather than independently on certain occasions. The cause for the Baker's neglect of this may be due to the nature of the materials dealt with in this book, which are mostly non-literary, and therefore as Baker herself has argued that "it is unhelpful and undesirable to translate the full meaning of a word" in such materials whose propositional meaning matters most in most instances.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the issue of lexical patterning which is dealt with under two main headings: collocation, and idioms and fixed expressions. Collocation here does not refer to the combination of words restricted by the rules of a language which doesn't allow exceptions, but mainly refers to those which is not restricted by "rules", but maybe by "habitual use" (suggested by myself here) and admits exceptions. Moreover it applies to individual words rather than classes of words.

Under the heading of "Collocation", what is elaborated on first is the idea that the patterns of collocation are largely arbitrary and independent of meaning. This is true both within and across languages. In what follows, through comparing the different collocations of an English word *deliver* with a number of nouns with their equivalents in Arabic, Baker suggests differences in collocational patterning among languages are not just using, for instance, a different verb with a given noun; they more too often reflect different ways of looking at things or of describing an given event. In other words, many collocations actually mirror the material, social or moral environment in which they occur. The rest part under the first heading is then devoted to issues such as collocational range and markedness, collocation and register (Interestingly, the discussion on this naturally brings home the idea that courses in specialized and technical language form an important component of translation training syllabuses), collocational meaning, which paves the way for analyzing a number of collocation-related pitfalls encountered by translators.

Under the second heading, before exploring the difficulties translators usually encounter in translating idioms and fixed expressions as well as the strategies for tackling them, Baker analyzes the idioms and fixed expressions from the perspective of collocation, based on

which certain issues such as the direction of translation is also touched upon. Baker suggests five strategies for translating idioms and fixed expressions towards the end of this chapter. While pointing out that the first strategy “Using an idiom of similar meaning and form” can only occasionally be achieved, the third “Translation by paraphrase” is the most common way of translating idioms, Baker only mentions the fourth “Translation by omission” and the fifth “Translation by compensation” in passing. Comparatively, it seems Baker favors the second “Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form” most, since in the end of the chapter, the Baker suggests that for the readability of one’s translation, it is recommended to use “the typical phraseology of the target language”, namely, its natural collocations, with of course the accuracy of meaning be unavoidably sacrificed when the tension between naturalness and accuracy occurs.

Chapter 4 serves as a transitional chapter in the sense that, on one hand it connects at the beginning the previous two chapters which deal with equivalence at lexical level by pointing out that both lexical and grammatical resources are powerful factors which affects the way we use to analyze and report experience and the differences between them, and on the other hand connects next chapter in the end which focuses on equivalence at textual level. Briefly speaking, the main task of this chapter is to examine the various grammatical categories which are not, as many may take for granted, universal across different languages (for instance, tense and aspect are not grammatical categories in Chinese), and to see whether they can or cannot be expressed in different languages as well as the way they affects decisions in the course of translation.

A possible minor mistake can be found in the first paragraph on page 91 (Baker, 1992), in which Baker is probably wrong in stating that “Other languages such as Chinese and Indonesian do not have gender distinctions in their person systems at all”. And on page 95, Baker reiterates the same opinion regarding the case of Chinese. Whether Indonesian has the grammatical category gender or not is not my concern here, but as a Chinese, I know for sure that there are gender distinctions too in the Chinese person system, such as the third-person singular “他” (he), “她” (she) and “它” (it) which distinguish between masculine, feminine and inanimate in much the same way as English does. Therefore it is perhaps more accurate for Baker to state something like

gender distinctions in Chinese is not as straightforward and regular as in some European languages such as French, German and Russian, they only exist in some semantic areas and in the person system, which probably has something to do with the uninflected nature of Chinese.

Since word order is deemed by Baker as of paramount importance to the overall organization of discourse, and it plays a crucial part in maintaining a coherent point of

view and in orienting messages at text level, Chapter 5 mainly involves a detailed discussion of word order from a purely textual perspective. On the whole, the remaining three chapters, i.e. from Chapter 5 to Chapter 7, deal with textual equivalence according to some common linguistic features of texts across different languages which make us identify a stretch of language as a text. These features express themselves in the way the sentences are connected either implicitly or explicitly in a given text. The explicit connections mainly refer to those surface links which include the connections established through thematic and information structures (this is what Chapter 5 is concerned with), and connections jointing persons and events together through cohesive devices (this is what is handled with under the heading “cohesion” in Chapter 6). The implicit connections usually reveal the underlying meaning of a given stretch of a language, and are dealt with in Chapter 7 under the heading of “coherence and implicature”.

To be more specific, Chapter 5 falls into two main parts, with each part in introducing respectively one approach to the analysis of clauses as a message rather than just a string of grammatical and lexical elements. The first is the Hallidayan approach, an approach that treats thematic and information structures as separate features of discourse organization, though admitting they are often overlapping at the same time. The second is the approach proposed by the Prague School which on the whole combines the two structures in the same description. The first part is devoted to discussing in great detail the two main orientations regarding the treating of clauses as the message. One orientation involves the distinction between theme and rheme which is speaker-oriented, the other involves distinction between given and new which is hearer-oriented. The second part of this chapter is contributed to the introduction of the Prague School position on information flow which is quite different from that of Halliday’s. Based on the discussion throughout this chapter, Baker suggests several strategies for dealing with some translation problems which stem from differences in thematic and information structures of different languages.

Many linguists have outlined various models for analyzing cohesive devices which are surface links connecting together various parts of a text, among them are Halliday and Hasan who outlined a model in *Cohesion in English* (1976) which is considered to be the best-known and most detailed. Hence in Chapter 6, the author draws heavily on Halliday & Hasan’s model to explore the translation difficulties and strategies in relation to those cohesive ties proposed. Halliday and Hasan identify five main cohesive links in English, namely, reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. The main contents of this chapter is thus organized under each of them, although what we shall bear in mind is there are other cohesive devices apart from those mentioned

above, such as continuity of tense, consistency of style, and punctuation devices and etc. Translators should be sensitive to the functions of these cohesive links, otherwise some common pitfalls in translation will be unavoidable.

Previously, we briefly mentioned that Chapter 7 deals with implicit connections which is different from explicit connections discussed in the preceding two chapters. The connectivity discussed in Chapter 5 and 6 is explicit in the sense that it can be identified on the surface and is thus traceable between or among textual elements, while the kind of connectivity here in Chapter 7, the concluding part of the book, is implicit in the sense that it relates to something not on the surface, but to something beyond. More specifically, the connectivity in Chapter 7 relates textual elements of a given text on one hand, and the context in which the utterance takes place on the other. In short, Chapter 7 explores 'language in use', a technical term for which is pragmatics. Since Baker deems the concept of coherence and implicature as the most important two notions for exploring the question of "making sense" and for highlighting difficulties in cross-cultural communication, the former two parts of this chapter are thus contributed to expounding this two areas of study, which paves the way for the discussion of corresponding translation strategies in the last part.

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## CONCLUSION

As we can see from the above discussion, the content of the book is organized by following a bottom-up approach, namely, from the lower lexical level to the higher textual level, which is very convenient for both vocational

translation trainers and academic translation trainers to find some solutions to the problems they may encounter in their profession. What is more, with its good balance between translation theory and practice, the book is of great benefits to both translation scholars and practitioners as well. In summary, by systematically elaborating the issue of equivalence in different levels/aspects, such as lexical equivalence, grammatical equivalence, pragmatic equivalence and textual equivalence, Mona Baker has actually provided both theoretical and practical guidance to all those who have an interest in translation.

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