Equivalence

In brief

SPA *Equivalencia*

◁◁ origins

In the 1540s, from French *équivalence*, from Medieval Latin *aequivalentia*, *aequalis* ('same') and *valor* ('value'). Related: *Equivalency* (1530s).

≔ abstract

Equivalence is the core notion of any consideration of translation. It is the relationship between any target text and the source text it derives from, which accounts for both texts being purportedly "the same" in different languages. It has also been and still is one of the most challenging and controversial issues among scholars. Whereas most include the concept in their models, some consider it useless or reject it, denying equivalence any status in Translation Studies.

This paper starts by stating that there is no translation theory without some notion of equivalence to encode the dependency of the target text on its source text and recipient context. It presents a critical review of the most influential approaches that have helped to model the concept: *stylistique comparée*, early linguistic and *Äquivalenz* approaches, text-linguistic advances, and various functional models paved the way for the empirical grounding of the discipline with Descriptive Translation Studies, translation process research and cognitive translation studies. The article also briefly outlines the connections between various conceptions. Today, the more traditional equivalence concepts are challenged by new textual modes, translation technology, and hybrid translation practices. Pre-editing and post-editing practices, crowdsourced translation and translaboration, contribute new perspectives on how equivalence is understood. Current work from different perspectives suggests that empirical research using human-informed, richly annotated corpora and cognitive findings is the way to better characterize the concept of equivalence and, in doing so, account for these new realities.

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Entry

SPA *Equivalencia*

contents

📖 Introduction

Equivalence is a crucial notion in any consideration of translation. In contemporary translation studies (TS), it is the relationship that binds any target text (TT) to the source text (ST) it derives from, and that accounts for both texts being purportedly "the same" in different languages. Depending on the theoretical outlook and the text's specificity involved (e.g., literary, technical, multimodal), this dependency relationship may adopt different modes to ensure the successful TT's delivery to its intended recipients.
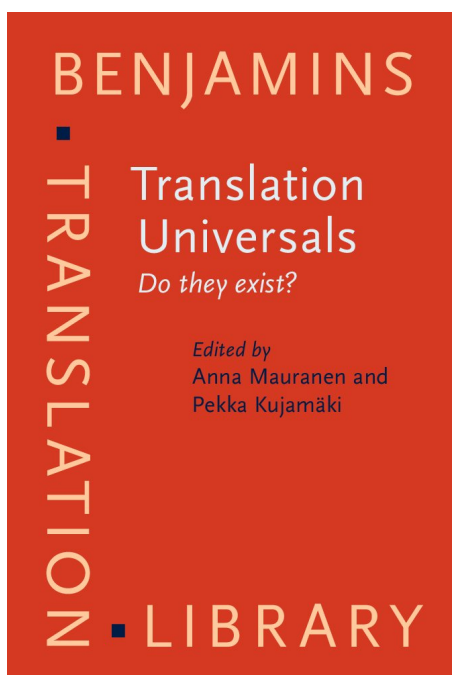
Equivalence has been and still is one of the most challenging and controversial issues among scholars, who have taken one of three views: equivalence as a defining condition for translation, as a conceptual tool useful for describing translation, or as an impediment for advancement in TS (Halverson 1997, Kenny 2009). Most approaches discuss the concept in terms of necessity or usefulness (e.g. Nida 1964, Catford 1965; Popovič 1976, Toury 1980, 1995; Wilss 1982; Koller 1983, 1995; Rabadán 1991; Neubert & Shreve 1992; House 1997; Pym 2007, 2010), and some reject it, denying equivalence any value in TS (e.g., Reiss & Vermeer 1984, Snell Hornby 1998). Others simply ignore it, as it is out of bounds for their frameworks (e.g., Robinson 1991).

There are ample reasons to claim that no translation model is possible without some implicit or explicit recognition of the relationship between the TT and its ST. Such omission would question the very existence of translation in all its forms and manifestations.

In practice, equivalence underlies every effort to distinguish translation from non-translation. Research into translation universals has proven that translated language – the third code – shows features that set it apart from original, non-translated language. Since both textual practices use the same resources, these are essential to discriminate translations from non-translations (Rabadán, Labrador & Ramón 2009). Equivalence is also the fundamental criterion of translation quality assessment, a yardstick for measuring the preservation of textual meaning and function across two different languages and cultures, whatever the translation evaluation approach. Doing away with equivalence would also challenge the basis of most translation technology developments, from machine translation and translation memories to post-editing practices.

Since writing about equivalence amounts to discussing a large portion of TS's development as a discipline, what follows is a (necessarily non-comprehensive) critical review of key approaches to this concept.

The debate about equivalence in translation can be dated back to Jakobson's (1959) statement of "equivalence in difference." Ever since, it has fostered an abundance of divergent, often complementary approaches that enrich the discussion (Rabadán 1991: 57-78, Pym 2007, Krein-Kühle 2014:15-35, for general overviews). Early approaches tend to depend, conceptually and methodologically, on the linguistic theories they adhere to while seeking to explain the (surface) operations involved in translation. Linguistic approaches range from equivalence as a translation strategy in *stylistique comparée* studies (Vinay & Darbelnet 1958) to classifications concentrating on the linguistic level at which equivalence is attained (e.g. Koller 1995). Also, on the degree of translatability (Kade 1973 below) or, more recently, on cognitive-linguistic modelling (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 2015 below).

back to top

¶ Early approaches

Drawing on Malblanc's (1944) French-German *stylistique comparée*, Vinay & Darbelnet's *équivalence* is presented as one of seven types of translation procedures, together with borrowing, calque, literal translation, transposition, modulation and adaptation (1958: 8-9). They aim to bridge cross-linguistic problems. *Équivalence* is defined at the micro-level and consists of translating fixed and idiomatic expressions in the ST into functional correspondents in the TT rather than resorting to word-for-word translation, e.g., Spanish "estar como una rosa" by English "to be as right as rain." Vázquez Ayora (1977) also defines equivalence as a translation technique which affects lexis and is applied to fixed expression and idioms. From today's perspective, these studies are a contrastive description of the language pairs involved, structuralism informing Vinay & Darbelnet's and Malblanc's, while Vázquez Ayora's is based on transformational-generative principles.

German *Äquivalenz* studies are precisely characterized by offering equivalence classifications, its most illustrious representative being Koller (1995: 196-97). He includes

five types of equivalence: (a) denotative equivalence, relating to the extralinguistic aspects of a text, (b) connotative equivalence, dealing with lexical solutions, (c) text-normative equivalence, concerning text-types, (d) pragmatic equivalence, engaging the recipient, and (e) formal equivalence, which would account for the form and aesthetics of the text. Along the same classificatory line are Kade's (1973) degrees of (terminological and lexicographic) equivalence: total equivalence would be word-to-word correspondence, optional and approximative equivalence would account for partial, one-to-many equivalence, and zero equivalence would refer to the absence of term and concept in the target language.
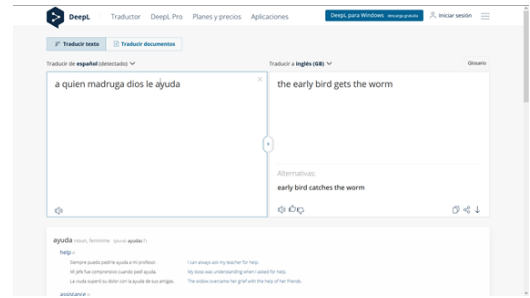
Vinay & Darbelent (1958): Equivalence as translating idioms into functional correspondents.

Catford (1965:1) grounds his study on systemic functional linguistics. He takes Halliday's rank-scale grammar to address "the nature and conditions of translation equivalence (1965:21)". In this approach, system-based, cross-linguistic correspondents at different levels and ranks are accounted for by *formal correspondence*, whereas text-based, situationally interchangeable items are related to *textual equivalence.* A formal correspondent is any target language category which can be said to occupy the 'same slot' in the economy of both source and target language, a well-established principle in traditional linguistic contrast. However, textual equivalents rarely are *the same* or have the same meaning, but they can function in the same situation (Catford 1965: 49). When the source and target language items can be interchangeable in a particular cross-linguistic context, they are translation equivalents. Catford's equivalence is established generally at the level of the sentence, and meaning is subject to contextual conditions in the TT.

Nida (1964) brings the receptor into the discussion by distinguishing between *formal* and *dynamic equivalence*. Formal equivalence entails an accurate matching of the SL's linguistic units with those of the TL. In dynamic equivalence, the attention is on obtaining the same understanding of the message by the target recipients as it had achieved by source receptors. He defines it as "the closest natural equivalent to the source language message" (Nida 1964:166), natural referring to target language acceptability. Working exclusively with Bible translation, this proposal introduces a receptor-based turn into equivalence approaches as it prioritizes conceptual understanding over linguistic accuracy and literal fidelity to the ST. Applying dynamic equivalence often involves substituting referents in the TT if deemed necessary to achieve the same "equivalent effect" (de Waard & Nida 1986). Nida's approach stands as the earliest attempt at introducing functional, receptor-based equivalence to translation.

Nida's and Catford's approaches marked the beginning of a long tradition of attempts at defining equivalence – and translation- as a binary concept relating, on the one end, to the ST and culture, on the other to the TT and the recipient context. Binary classifications of equivalence are well documented and usually related to types and modes of translation. They include House's (1977) formulation of her very influential overt vs covert translation dichotomy (see below). Also, Newmark's (1981) semantic vs communicative translation, Nord's (1997) documentary vs instrumental translation (see below), or Pym's (2007) distinction between natural and directional equivalence (which subsumes most binarisms above), to name a few.

back to top

¶ Textual approaches

Textlinguistics research, both as text typological research and discourse analysis, also influenced translation equivalence. Wilss considers translation a "text-oriented event" as a procedure that leads from an ST to "an optimally equivalent" TT. Texts are characterized by different communicative functions, which combine into a particular text type. Text types respond to different equivalence criteria and different transfer methods (Wilss 1982: 112). He offers *text-pragmatic equivalence*, which he understands "as describing and regulating the communicative relations between ST and TT" (Wilss 1982:135) within a semiotic framework of reference. This framework includes the translator as a secondary sender, text-specific and recipient-specific factors, which are different, for example, for LSP texts, drama or fiction. Neubert evolves from considering equivalence a semiotic category composed of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects to defend that it is text- and receiver-based and achieved through "deliberately mediated intertextuality" (Neubert & Shreve 1992:145). In an early approach, the levels are hierarchically organized, with syntactic equivalence governed by semantic equivalence and pragmatic equivalence. Later on, he distinguishes between maximal, textual and communicative equivalence. Equivalence is a relationship of communicative value between the textual elements that play the same role in the TT as they did in the ST for their respective receivers. The communicative value of a translation refers to the pragmatic and social effect generated by the textual meaning achieved by the TT in context (Neubert & Shreve 1992: 140ff).
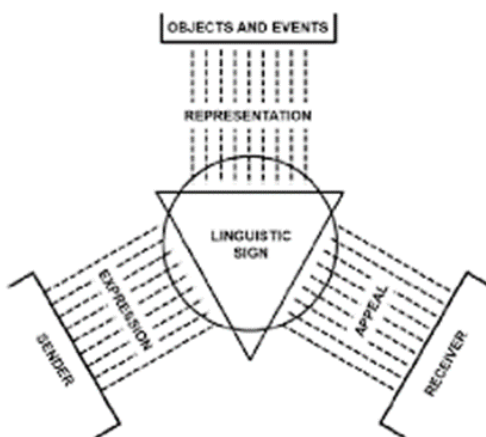
Bühler's (1934) organon model of functions in communication

Reiss (1971, 1976) applies a text-typological perspective and shows an interesting evolution in her thinking. Her earliest proposal considers that equivalence entails that the TT maintains the function and text class of the ST. She contemplates three text classes based on Bühler's three functions of language: i) form-focused texts, e.g., literary texts; ii) content-focused texts, e.g., sci-tech texts, and iii) those that directly address the intended recipient by fulfilling a conative function, e.g., adverts. A fourth category, subsidiary texts, accounts for multimodal texts, such as audiovisual modalities. In 1976 she reworked her framework into informative, expressive and operative texts, classified by their dominant communicative function, which would determine translation strategies. After heavy criticism (House 1977 among others) for considering that equivalence cannot be built on a monofunctional conception, Reiss (1981) refines her understanding of equivalence. Now equivalence, still textual and functional, rests on two principles: selection and hierarchization. Selection affects the ST and decides which features are taken into account to determine textual function. Hierarchization operates on the TM to prioritize and order the textual features to maintain the text class in the recipient context. Reiss's became a co-founder, with Hans Vermeer, of Skopos theory (Reiss & Vermeer 1984), which challenges the notion of equivalence (see below).

Embracing the principles of pragmatics, House (1977 [1981]) also defends that matching function between ST and TT is essential for equivalence. Function is "the application or use which the text has in a particular context of situation" (House 1977:37). To achieve equivalent status, the TT needs

to match the textual profile and function of the ST. In the revised version of the model (House 1997), the profiling is based on Halliday's concept of register, consisting of the parameters of field, tenor and mode, and the category of genre. Applying these parameters to ST analysis will yield the textual profile that defines a particular textual function. Whether the TT will maintain the ST function will depend on the type of translation applied to the original, *overt* or *covert* translation (House 1997:66-71). An overt translation brings a linguistically and culturally marked ST to the target recipients by applying a "second-hand function" to the TT to give target receptors access to the function the ST had in the source context and culture, e.g., a linguistically-marked English comedy. In contrast, a covert translation and its ST are pragmatically equal for both source and target recipients, i.e., they are functionally equivalent, a kind of "second original," e.g., a sales report.

back to top

¶ Functional approaches

Functionalism in translation is frequently associated with skopos theory (Reiss & Vermeer 1984/1996), which revolves around translational action and professional translator training's specific needs. According to skopos theory, any translation project aims to produce a meaningful TT for the target receptors in their context. Equivalence, understood as approximation (Reiss & Vermeer 1984:139), is not seen as the 'normal' skopos of translation, but an exceptional case in which there is no "change of functions" is assigned (Nord 1988/ 1991:230). To counteract the extreme leaning of the skopos approach towards the TT recipient (client), Nord, a "second generation" functionalist, introduces the *loyalty principle*, making the translators morally responsible for respecting the source author's communicative intentions in their decision-making. She formulates two broad modes of translation, determined by translation purpose: documentary and instrumental translation (Nord 1997: 47–52) (see covert and overt translation above).   A documentary translation is source-oriented, marked as a text from another culture, and bears "evidence" of the purpose of the ST, e.g., an interlinear translation of a classic text. An instrumental translation "reworks" the material obtained from the ST into a target culture form, e.g., a tourist brochure, so that the needs and expectations of potential target customers are met.

However, functional perspectives on translation are far from being homogeneous, and they include typological and pragmatic outlooks, as shown above. Other functionalisms can be traced to Russian Formalism and Czech structuralism, which have significantly contributed to TS and the translation equivalence discussion.

Anchored in Czech' functional structuralism' as its epistemological and methodological basis, Jiří Levý's *Art of Translation* (1963/ 2011) examines (artistic) literary translation from a multidisciplinary perspective (Jettmarová 2011: xv). Best known for his conception of *translation as a decision-making process* (Levý 1967), moving between reproduction (of the ST) and originality (in the TT), the priority in this process is preserving the artistic value of the original (Králová & Cuenca Drouhard 2013). Levý's work shines through Lefevere's dichotomy of translated literature and literary translation (1982), Toury's norms (1995:53-69), and serves as groundwork for Popovič's conception of equivalence.

Popovič, the Nitra School's better-known representative, also conceives translation as an aesthetic issue, and equivalence as the balance between the *invariant core* and the necessary *shifts of expression* (Popovič 1970). The aim is to achieve *expressive identity* between ST and TT. He distinguishes four types of equivalence: linguistic, indicating word for word correspondence; paradigmatic, affecting grammatical categories; textual, restricted to text pattern; and stylistic equivalence, defined as "functional equivalence of elements in both original and translation aiming at an expressive identity with an invariant of identical meaning" (Popovič 1976:6). Popovič's shifts laid the foundations of many key issues such as hybridity, authorship identity, naturalization and modernization as reflected in translation practice(s) and later approaches to Translation Studies (e.g., Venuti 1995, among others). He can also be credited with being one of the forerunners of retrospective analysis, which would become crucial in Descriptive Translation Studies (see below).

Popovič's (1970) - Teória umeleckého prekladu.

back to top

⅏ Empirical approaches: Descriptive Translation Studies and Process Research

So far, our review has centred on approaches entertaining a pre-defined notion of (optimal) equivalence. This maximalist, prescriptive orientation determines which textual products are considered translations, leaving those that do not fully conform to the pre-established conditions outside the category (Even-Zohar 1981:3). Unlike this rule-governed conception, Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) regard equivalence empirically as a TT's necessary property. Toury sees translations as facts of the target culture and puts forward the notion of *assumed translation* to account for the relativity and variability inherent to any TT-ST dependency relationship(s) (Toury 1995:31-36). Equivalence may be considered from three different viewpoints, as a *potential equivalence* relationship, if considered theoretically, as *empirical, realized equivalence*, if viewed descriptively, and, as *a priori, required equivalence*, if regarded from the applied branch of TS
 (Toury 1981: 65ff; 1995:19). Since translation processes can only be accessed indirectly, it is necessary to analyze the TTs and their ST retrospectively to unveil what type of equivalence has been attained in a particular translation product. Equivalence, as manifested by actual translations, is governed by norms. Norms are specific to a context, period, genre, etc. and can be defined as translational behaviour regularities followed by practitioners and discovered by retrospective analysis of actual translations and their STs. Equivalence, as a defining property of translation, is then norm-governed, a relative and historical notion that is actualized anew in each TT according to what translation means to the target context.

Rabadán (1991) takes up Toury's descriptive outlook to explore different realizations of equivalence, understood as a dynamic, functional and relational notion that defines the dependency of every TT on its ST. Linguistic factors, textual specificity, social and cultural dimensions and the challenges they may present to achieve equivalence are analyzed functionally. Retrospective comparative analysis allows the researcher to identify regularities of translational behaviour, which, provided there is enough empirical evidence, will lead to the formulation of translation norms and the reconstruction of the equivalence model underlying each textual pair (Rabadán 1991: 201-277). Equivalence is then whichever existential relationship any TT holds with its original.

DTS deals with the empirical study of translation products (TTs) as compared to their STs through retrospective analysis. The goal is to reconstruct the underlying equivalence relationship, which may come in different types. However, how this relationship comes into being or how it is produced is not addressed by descriptive models.
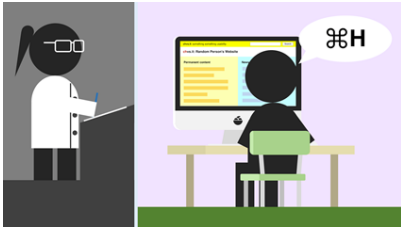
Think aloud protocols, by Chun Fei Lung (2018).

To fill in the gap left by DTS and other "response-oriented, behavioural approaches" (House 1997:4), famously Nida's dynamic equivalence and functional models, a growing number of researchers have adopted a process-oriented cognitive perspective (Alves & Jakobsen 2020). Cognitive TS focus on the mental processes inside the minds of the agents involved in translation (Muñoz 2010) and the way they reflect and interact with the physical, social and technological idiosyncrasies present in a particular context (Ehrensberger-Dow & Massey 2017).

Cognitive equivalence is located in the translator's mind and aims at simulating the same conceptual effects (meaning) of ST and TT on their respective (virtual) recipients. It is a procedural concept referring to the translator's attempt to level out differences between source and target text (translation problems) and becomes the primary mechanism behind decision-making in translation (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 2015:9). This means that equivalence is relative, as it designates the *temporary* outcome of a comparative cognitive process that involves ST and TT and their reception in their respective contexts. Cognitive approaches emphasize the information processing of translational operations as traced by introspective methods, notably Think-Aloud Protocols (TAPs), external resources such as data sheets and questionnaires, and observational tools as keystroke logging and are remarkably productive in translator training.

Cognitive conceptions of translation include translation competence models (e.g., PACTE 2003, Hurtado 2017) and situated translation approaches (Risku 2002). Also, formulations such as Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk's adoption of re-conceptualization to re-define equivalence in cognitive terms (2015) or the processing model put forward by Sickinger (2017).

back to top

¶ Critical approaches

Our review also accommodates some critical views on the topic as a counterbalance to the previous efforts to characterize equivalence. If Vermeer's skopos model discussed above shuns out equivalence by privileging the purpose of the TT, another highly vocal critic of the concept is Snell-Hornby (1998). She considers that equivalence is an ill-defined notion, which has hindered research and is therefore unsuitable for an integrated approach to TS. According to her, equivalence creates "an illusion of symmetry between languages which hardly exists beyond the level of vague approximations" (Snell Hornby 1998: 22). Her critique suggests that the notion should be abandoned and *equivalence* reduced to the status of technical terminology.

In deconstruction-based approaches, since any ST is a translation of other, previous texts, equivalence is an interpretive fiction (Robinson 1991). According to deconstructionists, meaning does not reside within texts and cannot be extracted from them. Instead, readers attribute meanings to texts through the act of interpretation. Translation does not involve reproducing a fixed ST into a

second language and culture, but its *transformation* to keep existing. The translator's role is enhanced to become level with that of an original author. If so, equivalence is *cancelled out*, as the central position of the original and the subordinate (dependent) status of the TT are challenged.
This ideology informs, among others, the claim of the translator's (in)visibility (Venuti 1995) and the understanding of translation in terms of power struggle. It underlies post-colonial approaches to translation (e.g., Bassnett & Trivedi 1999), feminist approaches (e.g., Simon 1996) and queer translation (Baer & Kaindl 2018).
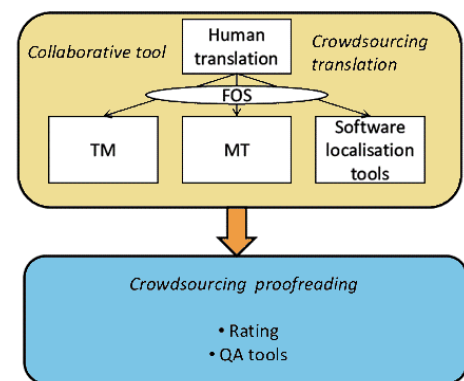
back to top

¶ Further considerations

This entry shows that whatever the approach, there is a constant in any translation activity: two different textual ontologies. One, the ST, is the trigger of the translational act (and process). The other, the TT, is a "derived text," and it is contingent on its ST.

Different translation and textual modes accomplish this dependency differently: e. g. in drama translation, equivalence entails speakability and performability (Merino 2000). In advertising, it becomes copy-adaptation. Additionally, contemporary translation practices such as audiovisual translation (which blends in many textual modes) are challenging the more traditional concepts of equivalence (Díaz-Cintas & Remael 2007, Gutiérrez-Lanza 2014). In dubbing, equivalence means lip-syncing between what is seen and what is heard (Chaume 2012). Subtitling depends on strict time and space synchronization. When translating multimedia content, i.e., software, websites, video games, mobile apps, etc., equivalence means localization.

Crowdsourcing translation. Source Anastasiou & Gupta (2011).

Translation technology, from translation memories to machine translation and revision and (post)editing (O'Brien, Simard & Goulet 2018), demands a different understanding of equivalence. Pre-editing practices such as controlled natural languages, which are becoming more and more generalized, also contribute new perspectives on how equivalence is accepted and understood.

Modes of user-generated translation clearly show that translation partakes of highly heterogeneous text production practices. These include crowdsourcing, hybrid human-machine translation and writing support, and other forms of translaboration (Zwischenberger 2020). This hybridization is naturally impacting the way translation equivalence is realized.

Current work from different perspectives suggests that research using human-informed, richly annotated corpora (Čermak 2016, Rabadán 2019), along with cognitive findings (Neumann & Serbina 2020), will help us to account for these new realities and characterize translation more accurately. Ivir's words about the relativity and dynamism of the concept still hold good today: "Equivalence is…relative and not absolute,…it emerges from the context of situation as defined by

the interplay of (many different factors) and has no existence outside that context" (1996: 155). Context is *situated* to include the translating agents and their technological working environment. Regardless of how equivalence is accounted for (or disallowed) in different approaches, it appears that, for the time being, grappling with TT-ST ontological dependency will remain a fixture in TS.

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[back to top](#)

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⚙ Research potential

Researching equivalence equals researching translation models. Our understanding of equivalence would benefit from empirical studies in any new textual modalities and hybrid practices that are now mainstream. Product studies on meaningful corpora of more traditional textual modalities will also contribute to a better grasp of both translation and textual practices in context. Process studies on translational behaviour and translators' interaction with their environment, including computers, would also contribute to equivalence characterization. Combining product and process approaches using corpus linguistics methods with, for example, choice network analysis (CNA), can yield robust insights into the workings of problem-solving and decision-making in translation.

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[back to top](#)

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