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SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC EQUIVALENCE IN TRANSLATION: A THEORETICAL APPROACH AND PRACTICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

Equivalence remains one of the most discussed concepts in translation studies because it describes how meaning is transferred between a source text (ST) and a target text (TT). This article examines equivalence through two complementary perspectives: semantic equivalence, which concerns the transfer of denotational meaning and structural correspondence between units, and pragmatic equivalence, which concerns communicative effect, audience expectations, and contextual adaptation. Drawing on established theoretical views, the paper explains regular equivalents (permanent and variable), occasional equivalents, and the role of linguistic and situational context in selecting appropriate correspondences. It also highlights how pragmatic meaning—connotation, stylistic force, presupposition, coherence, and implicature—can require translators to modify semantic exactness to preserve the intended impact on TT readers. Practical analysis includes examples of polysemy (e.g., "attitude"), connotative shifts ("ambitious"), culture-bound references ("abolitionist"), and pragmatic adaptation in stylistic choice. The article argues that successful translation depends on balancing semantic accuracy with pragmatic adequacy.

Keywords:

equivalence; semantic equivalence; pragmatic equivalence; context; regular equivalents; occasional equivalents; connotation; implicature; presupposition; translation strategies

Introduction:

Equivalence in translation is often described as a measure of similarity between the source text and the target text. In practical terms, translators attempt to reproduce meaning so that the TT can function as a communicatively adequate substitute for the ST. Yet equivalence is not a single, fixed relationship. It is established between correlated units in two texts and is influenced by context, cultural expectations, and the translator's strategic choices. When the structural relationship between ST and TT units is identifiable, TT units that render the meaning of corresponding ST units operate as functional equivalents. Many language units are used in their commonly accepted meanings; therefore, a large number of ST units have regular equivalents in the TL that appear repeatedly in translations.

However, semantic similarity alone does not guarantee successful translation. Communication is aimed at a receptor and designed to create a particular effect. Even if the translator reproduces denotational meaning "exactly," the TT may fail pragmatically if it does not create the intended impression for target readers. This becomes especially visible when words carry connotative force, cultural associations, or presupposed background knowledge. As translation theory suggests, pragmatic adaptation is often necessary to preserve the communicative effect of the original text.

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This article explores semantic and pragmatic equivalence as two interconnected layers of translation adequacy. It explains how translators choose among permanent, variable, and occasional equivalents and how they manage pragmatic meaning through coherence, presupposition, implicature, and connotation. The purpose is to offer a theoretical overview supported by practical analysis and to show how professional translation requires balanced decisions rather than mechanical substitutions.

Main Body:

1. Semantic Equivalence and Regular Correspondences

Semantic equivalence refers to the transfer of denotational meaning from ST to TT. It becomes visible when the translator establishes relationships of equivalence between correlated units and chooses TL substitutes to render the meaning of SL units. In many cases, the translator benefits from regular equivalents—established correspondences between units in two languages.

A useful distinction in semantic equivalence is between **permanent (one-to-one) equivalents** and **variable (one-to-many) equivalents**. Permanent equivalents are stable correspondences that remain consistent across contexts. They are typical of proper names, geographical names, and technical terms whose meanings are relatively independent of immediate context. For example, “London” has a stable equivalent “Лондон” in Russian, and similarly in Uzbek practice such names often follow established transcription or transliteration norms. The same logic applies to technical terms: items such as “hydrogen” or “machine-gun” are generally rendered through recognized terminological equivalents. The key point is that such units provide translators with stable reference points, making translation decisions less ambiguous. In contrast, **variable equivalents** appear when an SL unit has several possible TL equivalents. This is not an error in the system; rather, it reflects the fact that languages carve up meaning differently. When several equivalents exist, the translator must choose based on context and semantic nuance. The English word “attitude,” for instance, can be translated into Russian as “отношение,” “позиция,” or “поза,” depending on usage. This illustrates a central principle: semantic equivalence is not always about finding “the” equivalent, but about selecting “the most fitting” equivalent for a particular context.

Importantly, regular equivalents can be classified by language level: lexical, phraseological, and grammatical. Lexical equivalence concerns words and terms; phraseological equivalence concerns idioms; grammatical equivalence concerns structural forms. While lexical equivalence may sometimes be relatively stable, grammatical equivalence rarely offers permanent one-to-one correspondences because grammatical meaning interacts with lexical context and syntactic constraints. Therefore, semantic equivalence is a multi-layer phenomenon, not a single mapping rule.

2. Context as the Mechanism of Semantic Choice

Even when regular equivalents exist, they are only potential substitutes. The translator must confirm that the chosen equivalent fits the meaning of the unit as used in the ST. This requires attention to context, which can be divided into **linguistic context** (surrounding words and sentences) and **situational context** (time, place, shared knowledge, historical circumstances, and expected background information).

The importance of linguistic context becomes clear in cases of polysemy. Consider the three sentences using “attitude”:

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1. “I don’t like your attitude to your work.”
2. “There is no sign of any change in the attitudes of the two sides.”
3. “He stood there in a threatening attitude.”

The first requires the meaning “отношение / munosabat,” the second relates to “позиция / pozitsiya,” and the third corresponds to “поза / holat (tana holati).” Before and after these examples, the analytical point is essential: the translator cannot decide based only on dictionary meaning. The surrounding linguistic cues determine which semantic component becomes dominant. If the translator ignores these cues, the TT may remain grammatically acceptable but semantically inaccurate. Situational context can be even more decisive because it concerns what the receptor is expected to know. The term “abolitionist” demonstrates this. Without historical context, a translator may assume the abolition of slavery only. Yet the term has been used in different periods for people seeking abolition of slavery, prohibition laws, or the death penalty. Therefore, the translator’s choice depends on the historical setting described in the ST. This example illustrates a broader rule: semantic equivalence is not merely linguistic; it is informational and historical. Translators must interpret lexical meaning against the situation, not only against words.

3. Occasional Equivalence and Contextual Substitutes

A crucial insight from translation practice is that regular equivalents are not always usable. Sometimes the context blocks all regular dictionary options, and the translator must create an occasional equivalent or contextual substitute. This does not necessarily reduce accuracy; in many cases, it increases adequacy by aligning the TT with actual contextual meaning.

For instance, “He has a friendly attitude towards all.” None of the standard Russian equivalents (“отношение,” “позиция,” “поза”) fits naturally here. A more appropriate solution is to transform the structure: “Он ко всем относится по-дружески.” This example is important because it shows that semantic equivalence may require a shift of part of speech or syntactic restructuring. The translator preserves the meaning (friendly treatment) but chooses a more natural TL expression.

Another classic case concerns proper names with permanent equivalents that still require occasional substitution due to pragmatic knowledge gaps. “New Haven” is normally rendered as “Нью-Хейвен.” Yet in the sentence “I graduated from New Haven in 1915,” the literal translation may not convey the intended meaning if TT readers do not know that New Haven is associated with Yale University. In such a context, the translator may select an occasional equivalent: “I graduated from Yale University in 1915.” The supportive idea here is not that the translator “changes facts,” but that the translator clarifies the reference to preserve the intended informational value. This reflects a bridge between semantic and pragmatic equivalence: semantic naming is preserved when possible, but communicative meaning is prioritized when reader knowledge differs.

4. Phraseological Equivalence and Functional Reproduction

Phraseological units often pose challenges because their meaning cannot be derived compositionally from individual words. Translation theory distinguishes idioms with permanent equivalents from those requiring variable or occasional solutions. Some idioms have close equivalents that preserve figurative meaning: “the game is not worth the candle” corresponds to “игра не стоит свеч,” which in Uzbek interpretive gloss can be expressed as “ovora bo‘lishga arzimaydi.” Another idiom, “to pull chestnuts out of the fire for somebody,” corresponds to

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“таскать каштаны из огня для кого-л.,” and can be interpreted in Uzbek as “birov uchun o‘zini o‘tga urmoq.” Before and after such examples, the translator’s decision logic matters: idiomatic equivalence is not about literal matching but about reproducing figurative intent and communicative effect. Some idioms share meaning but use different imagery: “to get up on the wrong side of the bed” corresponds to “встать с левой ноги.” The literal images differ, yet the pragmatic meaning (starting the day in a bad mood) is preserved. In other cases, an idiom may have several possible equivalents, and the translator chooses based on context: “Do in Rome as the Romans do” can be rendered using different Russian proverbs depending on pragmatic intent, or it can be translated word-for-word if stylistically appropriate. This demonstrates that semantic equivalence at the phraseological level depends on functional correspondence: translators reproduce meaning, effect, and cultural resonance rather than surface wording.

5. Pragmatic Equivalence: Meaning as Effect on the Reader

Pragmatics comes from the Greek notion of “action,” and in translation it concerns meaning as it is used and interpreted by people in real situations. Pragmatic meaning is not simply what words denote; it includes the speaker’s attitude, implied evaluations, cultural associations, and the response produced in the receptor. As Komissarov explains, language units relate semantically to objects, syntactically to other units, and pragmatically to people—the users and recipients of language. This triadic model is essential because translation is communicative action. A translator must preserve not only “what is said” but also “what it does” to the audience.

A word may evoke different impressions in different social groups. Your example “haqqa yetishish” is highly instructive: for religious people it may carry spiritual meaning; for lawyers it may evoke legal concepts; for common speakers it may be understood broadly as “achieving one’s rights” or “reaching truth.” This illustrates why pragmatic equivalence cannot be reduced to dictionary substitution. Translators must predict audience interpretation and select expressions that guide readers toward the intended effect.

Barxudarov’s view that pragmatic meaning includes stylistic and emotive expressiveness is also relevant. Consider your example: “It was a good lesson to me that he bit me on the face.” A literal translation would sound unnatural and pragmatically wrong in Uzbek. A pragmatically adequate Uzbek solution, “Uning yuzimga tarsaki tushirishi menga katta maktab bo‘ldi,” shifts expression to convey the intended meaning: the event became a serious lesson. The supportive point is that pragmatic adequacy sometimes requires idiomatic or culturally natural rendering, even when literal semantic similarity is reduced. The translator chooses a form that produces a similar psychological and evaluative impact on the TT reader.

6. When Semantic Exactness Produces Pragmatic Failure

One of your most important points is that extremely exact translation can sometimes lead to pragmatic mistakes. This is not an argument against accuracy; it is an argument for a broader definition of accuracy that includes reader impact. For example, “She was singing a song” can be translated as “U qo‘shiq aytib borardi,” which is semantically correct. But in many contexts “U hirgoyi qilib borardi” may sound more natural and pragmatically appropriate, especially if the ST suggests informal humming rather than formal singing. The supportive explanation here is crucial: the translator must interpret the communicative situation. If the ST describes a casual, background action, a more nuanced Uzbek verb better preserves the pragmatic tone. Similarly, pragmatics explains why the same word may require different translations depending on connotation. “Ambition” in English can be neutral or positive, whereas its Russian counterpart “амбиция” often carries negative implications. Therefore, translating “The boy’s ambition was to become a pilot” as “Мечтой мальчика было стать летчиком” preserves positive meaning,

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while “political ambitions” can be translated using “амбиции” when the context supports a negative reading. The general rule is that correlated words may produce different pragmatic effects across cultures; translators must adapt to preserve evaluative orientation.

7. Pragmatic Concepts: Coherence, Presupposition, and Implicature

Baker defines pragmatics as the study of meaning in use, meaning conveyed and manipulated by participants in a communicative situation. In translation, three pragmatic concepts are especially relevant: coherence, presupposition, and implicature.

Coherence depends on the receptor’s experience of the world and expectations. Baker’s Harrods example illustrates that TT readers may lack background knowledge necessary to make connections that are obvious to ST readers. Therefore, translators sometimes add explicit links. The supportive principle is that translators may need to make implicit connections explicit so that TT coherence matches ST coherence.

Presupposition involves assumed knowledge. When an ST refers to a political dispute or an institutional setting, ST readers may know the background, while TT readers may not. Fawcett provides a strong example: a place name like “Mohacs” may have metaphorical meaning (“crushing defeat”) for Hungarian readers but may mean nothing to outsiders, so the translator must explicate. The translator’s responsibility is to adjust presuppositions so that TT readers can retrieve meaning without losing intended effect.

Implicature, defined as what is implied rather than explicitly stated, is central in persuasive and evaluative discourse. Translators must reproduce not only explicit content but implied meaning—sometimes through different linguistic means. This is one reason pragmatic equivalence is difficult: implicatures are culturally conditioned and context-dependent.

8. Balancing Semantic and Pragmatic Equivalence in Practice

The relationship between semantic and pragmatic equivalence is not “either-or.” In professional translation, semantic equivalence provides the foundation, while pragmatic equivalence ensures communicative success. Translators often begin with regular equivalents as starting points, then test them against context. If a regular equivalent fits both meaning and effect, it can be used. If not, occasional equivalents and pragmatic adaptation become necessary.
A practical model emerges from your material: translators need competence in three areas. First, they must know permanent and variable equivalents and understand terminological stability. Second, they must interpret linguistic and situational context to choose among options. Third, they must preserve pragmatic effect through adaptation, explicitation, or stylistic substitution. The translator’s “skill and taste,” as your source text notes, becomes visible in these decisions—especially in avoiding pragmatic distortion such as turning praise into criticism or comedy into tragedy.

Conclusion:

This article has shown that equivalence in translation functions on at least two major levels: semantic equivalence and pragmatic equivalence. Semantic equivalence concerns how meaning is transferred between correlated units and how translators choose among permanent, variable, and occasional equivalents using linguistic and situational context. Pragmatic equivalence concerns how the translation produces an effect on its target readers, including connotation, stylistic value, coherence, presupposition, and implicature. The practical analysis demonstrates

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that regular equivalents are useful but not mechanical; context can force the translator to create contextual substitutes, restructure sentences, or provide pragmatic adaptation. Ultimately, successful translation depends on balancing semantic precision with pragmatic adequacy so that the TT conveys not only what the ST says, but also what it intends to do in communication.

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