



The Definition of Translation in Davidson's Philosophy: Semantic Equivalence *versus* Functional Equivalence

Définir la traduction : équivalence sémantique *versus* équivalence fonctionnelle

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article expose comment le concept d'équivalence a été utilisé pour définir la traduction, et comment ce même concept nous permet de dire pourquoi un énoncé dans une langue L est la traduction d'un énoncé dans une autre langue L1. Il analyse deux sens principaux utilisés dans la philosophie analytique pour définir la traduction : l'équivalence sémantique et l'équivalence fonctionnelle, afin de montrer que tracer la distinction entre ces deux sortes d'équivalence est une manière de comprendre la distinction entre différents niveaux ou aspects de la signification. Ces deux concepts, celui d'équivalence sémantique introduit par Gottlob Frege, et celui d'équivalence fonctionnelle proposé par Wilfrid Sellars, furent développés dans la théorie de la signification de Donald Davidson. Après avoir noté les limites des définitions d'équivalence chez Davidson, cet essai soutient que la notion d'équivalence fonctionnelle nous amène à comparer la philosophie de Davidson à des positions comme celles qui ont été exprimées par l'herméneutique de Hans-Georg Gadamer.

The Definition of Translation in Davidson's Philosophy: Semantic Equivalence *versus* Functional Equivalence

Francesca Ervas

Introduction

In contemporary translation theory, the concept of equivalence has played a central role in clarifying the relationship between an original (*source text*) and a translation (*target text*). The vast amount of existing literature on this topic contains many different points of view and adopted theoretical approaches, which demonstrates the important role equivalence has played in research on the problem of translation (cf. Koller, 1989, 1995; Vinay and Darbelnet, 1995; Halverson, 1997; Kenny, 1998). As shown in this article, trying to define equivalence is, however, a problem in itself, which has raised a debate without clear and universally approved answers, in both Translation Studies and philosophy of language. The interdisciplinary comparison could reveal similar conceptual patterns as well as subtle differences in theorising the problem of translation equivalence.

This article aims at comparing the history of the philosophical debate on the most important meanings of equivalence to research in Translation Studies. This does not mean that Translation Studies have never looked at the problem of translation from a philosophical point of view; on the contrary, philosophy has played a fundamental role in translation theory.

It means instead that even though research on the problem of translation has addressed the importance of equivalence from a philosophical point of view, this research has never been compared with philosophical research on the concept of equivalence outside of translation theory. For its own part, philosophical thought, particularly in the analytical field, has often shown little interest in other areas of the problem of translation and Translation Studies.

On the one hand, this article attempts to bridge the gap between the philosophy of translation and Translation Studies, beginning with analytical definitions of translation equivalence and, in particular, Donald Davidson's point of view. On the other hand, besides critically presenting Davidson's contribution to translation theory, this article will emphasize the analysis of translation equivalence that Davidson brought forth with his theory of radical interpretation and, above all, his theoretical "turn" in 1986. Because of the role that Davidson gives to interpreters and speakers in his later works, his philosophy has been compared with positions such as those expressed in Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics. This article will also show why it is possible to state that Davidson's latest definition of translation equivalence could be a bridge between analytical and continental philosophy of language.

1. Translation Equivalence in Analytical Philosophy of Language

Analytical philosophy proposes two main kinds of equivalence to define translation: semantic equivalence and functional equivalence. For example, let us look at two sentences, S and S^1 , each belonging to natural languages L and L^1 :

(1) Def. 1: S is the translation of S^1 if S and S^1 have the same meaning. In other words, there is a relation of semantic equivalence between S and S^1 .

(2) Def. 2: S is the translation of S^1 if S and S^1 have the same function or they play the same role in L and L^1 . In other words, there is a relation of functional equivalence between S and S^1 .

Drawing a distinction between semantic and functional equivalence is a way to understand the distinction between different levels or aspects of meaning. The concept of semantic equivalence that Gottlob Frege proposed in *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* [*On Sense and Reference*] (1892) was based on differences in communicative content or effect, which were not to be considered as differences in meaning but as differences in tone (*Färbung*). According to Frege, such differences “do not touch the thought” because they are shades that “color” the communicative content of an expression without changing whether it is true or false. Language offers many examples of expressions that differ in tone but not in meaning: “died-deceased,” “cat-kitten,” “horse-steed,” for example. All these differences, which nowadays are most often conceived as pragmatic differences, were removed from what was considered to be the meaning of a sentence. Frege seemed to think of tone as being linked to poetry or poetic language, claiming that tone is too subjective and therefore cannot belong to a rigorous, exact science “directed toward truth and only the truth” (Frege, 1918, p. 23). Inevitably, Frege’s philosophical thoughts on meaning had an influence on the definition of translation:

The difference between a translation and the original text should properly not overstep the first level [the level of ideas]. To the possible differences here belong also the colouring and shading which poetic eloquence seeks to give to the sense. Such colouring and shading are not objective, and must be evoked by each hearer or reader according to the hints of the poet or the speaker. Without some affinity in human ideas art would certainly be impossible; but it can never be exactly determined how far the intentions of the poet are realized. (Frege, 1892, p. 27)

In other words, although one sentence could be more appropriate than another with regards to context, and both could differ in overall communicative content, a good translation should preserve meaning. It is not, however, required to preserve “its colour,” tone or communicative effect.

A similar conceptual distinction can be found in Translation Studies, for instance in Eugene Nida and Charles

Taber seminal work (1969). They argued that meaning has to remain as clear as possible in the target text: “meaning must be given priority, for it is the content of the message which is of prime importance” (Nida and Taber, 1969, p. 13). However, they argued that even though the formal aspects of the message are important, it is secondary to communicative content. In order to achieve a good balance between content and form, Nida proposed two types of equivalence: formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. The first one “focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content” (Nida, 1964, p. 159), the second one is obtained by “reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message” (Nida and Taber, 1969, p. 12). In their view, dynamic equivalence in translation is far more than mere correct communication of information: in fact, “one of the most essential, and yet often neglected, elements is the expressive factor, for people must also feel as well as understand what is said” (my italics, Nida and Taber, 1969, p. 25).

On the contrary, in the collected papers *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (1984), Davidson still used Frege’s concept of semantic equivalence and proposed a formal definition of translation, claiming that *S* is a translation of *S*¹ if *S* and *S*¹ have the same truth conditions. By applying Alfred Tarski’s theory of truth to natural languages (Tarski, 1944), Davidson defined translation through semantic equivalence: *S* is true if and only if *S*¹ is true also. For instance: “La neige est blanche” is true if and only if snow is white. This is an example of a T-sentence, in Tarskian model. “The equivalence thesis,” which is the basis of the Tarskian model, helped Davidson explain meaning and the sameness of meaning in terms of truth conditions in the world. In *Translation Studies*, the concept of equivalence proposed by John Catford was based on an essentially referential theory of meaning: he defined textual equivalence as “ultimately based on similarities of situation substance” (Catford, 1965, p. 91). As Peter Fawcett explained, “the reference to substance may seem a little odd, but it stems from the linguistic theory Catford is working with. Writing, sound and the things out there in the world are “substance.” Language is an abstract and formal representation of that substance” (Fawcett, 1997, p. 55). However, in philosophy

of language, the reference to “the things out there in the world” had been questioned in 1960 by Willard van Orman Quine’s well-known theses on ontological relativity and indeterminacy of translation (cf. Ervas and Tripodi, 2012).

Davidson also thought that he should not have mentioned meaning itself as in Def. 1, in order to avoid the problems that were previously raised on the notions of meaning and synonymy (having the same meaning) by Jakobson (1959) and Quine (1951). The forceful Quinean analysis of the relation of synonymy showed the obscurity of the notion of meaning and the circularity of the different attempts to define it. Coupled with the relation of synonymy, this analysis seriously questioned the possibility of clarifying the concept of meaning. For this purpose, Davidson used the formal model proposed by the Tarskian theory of truth and its concept of equivalence in the first phase of his philosophical reflection to develop his theory of radical interpretation. However, the limit of Davidson’s theory lies in his attempt to apply this theory to natural languages. Applying the methods of deductive sciences to natural languages runs the risk of hindering the understanding of what he wanted to clarify: the concept of translation. The notion of semantic equivalence that Davidson first used does not successfully explain why some T-sentences built through the Tarskian formal model are simply true and why others, besides having the same truth conditions, are the real translation of the source sentence (Ervas, 2008).

This limit was overcome by a second definition of translation, given through the concept of functional equivalence, used by Wilfrid Sellars in *Truth and Correspondence* (1963) and, later, by Davidson himself: S is the translation of S¹ if S and S¹ have *the same function* or *play the same role* in L and L¹ (Def. 2). According to Sellars, T-sentence equivalences are misleading because both S and S¹ do not have to be logically equivalent or convey the same meaning. Where Frege took the meaning of a sentence to be a *thought* (an objective entity, neither physical nor mental, which human minds can somehow “grasp”), Sellars applied a metaphysical and obscure notion of meaning. S and S¹ can have the same communicative content and effect and the same function in both L and L¹ without having the same

meaning. In the same vein, Nida and Taber proposed a notion of dynamic equivalence based on the “principle of equivalent effects,” according to which the message in the target language should have on the target readers the same impact that the original message had on the source text audience. In their words, “dynamic equivalence is therefore to be defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the *same manner* as the receptors in the source language” (my italics, Nida and Taber, 1969, p. 24). The notion of “having the same function,” or as Sellars preferred, “playing the same role,” is to be understood as: S serves exactly the same purpose for speakers of L as S¹ serves for speakers of L¹. In this respect, Sellars’ notion of functional equivalence is similar to the concept functionalist approaches proposed (cf. Nord, 1997).

However, this notion of functional equivalence comes with a difficulty: if both S and S¹ have a function inside a language, it is difficult to explain how a function might be defined *a priori* as being similar to that of another sentence S¹ belonging to another linguistic system. As noted by Katharina Reiss, “functional equivalence” between the source language and the target language text sometimes cannot be maintained and the situation calls for “a change of function” (Reiss, 2000, p. 161). For example, “À tout à l’heure” could be a good translation of “See you later,” depending on its role in a given context, i.e., only if you are to see the same person later on the same day.

The “correspondence” is a correspondence of *use*, or, as I prefer to say, role. Linguistic roles and role aspects differ in kind and complexity. Rarely does an expression in one language play exactly the same role as an expression in another. The closest approximation to identity of role is found in connection with logical and mathematical words. There are degrees of likeness of meaning, and meaning statements are to be construed as having a tacit reader to the effect that the correspondence is in a relevant respect and obtains to a relevant degree. (Sellars, 1963, p. 203)

On the one hand, if translation is defined as a correspondence of role between S and S¹, no two expressions will have exactly the

same function, and no expression can be a translation of another expression. On the other hand, if S^1 is a translation of S when it has roughly the same function as S , the definition of translation will be desperately vague.

2. Equivalence as a Process

In *Communication and Convention* (1984) and above all in *A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs* (1986), Davidson proposed a second theory of meaning based on the notion of *linguistic use* to explain many cases of translation, such as those of functional equivalence, that he had not explained in his first theory. In the words of Kirsten Malmkjaer: "The theory Davidson advocates provides a method and a concept of what meaning is, which allows us to make sense of the linguistic and other behaviour of other people, and to see how their *use* of certain sentences relates to their use of certain other sentences" (Malmkjaer, 2005, p. 56). This new theory rejected the idea of "invariance of meaning," as in semantic equivalence, and proposed a "second" notion of equivalence, which was closer to Sellars' functional equivalence and described as the study of momentary and ever-changing points of convergence between an interpreter and a speaker. Davidson claimed that interpreters begin trying to understand speakers by using a *prior theory*, which expresses how previous experience has prepared them to interpret a speaker in a given context. Prior theories are infinite according to context, speakers, and interpreters' expectations or their level of knowledge of a speaker's beliefs or intentions, for example. Interpreters adjust their prior theories according to new information coming from a communicative encounter in order to build a *passing theory* (or several), which expresses how interpreters *actually* understand speakers. The "negotiation of meanings" that Davidson proposed is thus entrusted to the sensitivity, intuition and creativity of the interpreter.

What we cannot expect, however, is that we can formalize the considerations that lead us to adjust our theory to fit the inflow of new information. No doubt we normally count the ability to shift ground appropriately as part of what we call "knowing the language." But in this sense, there is no saying what someone must know who knows the language; for intuition, luck, and

skill must play as essential a role here as in devising a new theory in any field; and taste and sympathy a larger role. (Davidson, 1984, p. 279)

This means that interpretation relies on the judgement and the sensitiveness of the interpreter. It is no longer governed by a previously existing, clearly defined set of rules and conventions before being applied to an infinite number of cases.

Some Translation Studies scholars believed the problem with previous definitions of translation was that they were based on a too strong concept of equivalence. As in analytic philosophy of language, a process of “liberalisation” of the concept of equivalence followed, in which it was proposed to make equivalence weaker and more relative, introducing notions such as “matching” (Holmes, 1988) or “similarity” (Chesterman, 1996). Within this process, Gideon Toury described equivalence in terms of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “family resemblance” (Wittgenstein, 1953). According to his target-oriented approach, Toury claims that a translation is not a translation because it is equivalent to a source text, but because it has a “family resemblance” with other translations: “the relationship between the members of the ‘translation’ class can be regarded as those of family resemblance” (Toury, 1980, p. 18). In the same vein, in analytic philosophy, Davidson then questioned the possibility that a “language machine,” such as his previous theory of radical interpretation, could explain natural language use in a relationship between two people: an interpreter and a speaker. He proposed a “liberalised” notion of translation equivalence, giving greater importance to the interpreter’s ability, creativeness and imagination in understanding the speaker. The interpreter creates a momentary convergence, which is continuously questioned and renewed in other forms of the relationship between interpreter and speaker and their use of language.

The process described in *A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs*, is based on a concept of translation equivalence, stating that “each relation of equivalence is a transitory convention, a momentary link in process of potentially endless exchange” (Pym, 1992, p. 45). Davidson’s attempt to describe functional equivalence did not, however, stray completely from his theoretical programme.

With this later paper, Davidson did not abandon Tarski's theory of truth at all. Instead, he tried to reconcile it with the new requirements for a theory of meaning. Both prior theory and passing theory seem to be products, once again, of the Tarskian theory of truth for formalized languages. Therefore, Davidson's new solution does not seem to avoid the problems of his original theory examined above. Is it really possible to reconcile Davidson's definition of semantic equivalence with his more recent definition of functional equivalence? It could be argued that semantic equivalence, despite its difficulties, cannot be totally abandoned. As noted by Jennifer Draskau, "the discussion of equivalence is inevitably bound up with the definition of meaning: it leads us to enquire what types or aspects of meaning it is expedient to operate with—what facets should or can be retained in transfer" (Draskau, 1986, p. 27). Therefore, it proves to be necessary when referring to a state of affairs and its truth conditions, whether it is the context of a dialogue or the objective feature of a narrative plot. Semantic equivalence also seems to be a necessary condition to preventing the interpreter from working in a totally arbitrary way.

However, as argued above, this notion of equivalence faces a serious problem: it does not successfully explain why some T-sentences are simply true and why others, besides being true, are the real translation of the source sentence. Despite this, a translator, who is not in the "radical situation" hypothesized by Davidson, would probably eliminate the T-sentences that represent an "equivalence without translation," i.e., an equivalence between S and \hat{S}^1 in L and L¹ which is not a translation. Moreover, since Davidson believed that translators should assign the truth conditions of sentences inside a *holistic* programme, semantically invalid T-sentences will not offer translations that are consistent with the rest of the linguistic system. In other words, if interpretation is a global project, involving not only the linguistic behaviour of our interlocutors but also their beliefs, intentions and desires, "simply true" T-sentences will propose solutions that are too bizarre and that do not work inside the whole interpretive project. From this perspective, the truth conditions assigned by the translator would be interpreted *in a wider sense of the term*, not in a strictly Tarskian sense. In other words, T-sentences are

no longer the translation unit, which is now represented by more holistic translation unit as the text and the linguistic-cultural content where it occurs, as extensively claimed in Translation Studies.

The concept of semantic equivalence seems to be adequate when applied to the translation of *literal meaning*, or what is *semantically expressed* in a sentence. The concept of functional equivalence could instead explain what is not semantically expressed but *pragmatically implied* in a sentence. The intentions and implicit meaning of a speaker's sentence must be taken into account in the process of translation in order to better transpose the overall meaning and context of a sentence into the other language. Davidson himself would surely not have accepted Paul Grice's distinction between the literal and non-literal meanings of a sentence, or between what is semantically expressed and what is pragmatically implied by a sentence (Grice, 1989). But this does not prevent those of us who accept this distinction from using Davidson's theory to assign "literal meanings" to equivalent sentences. Translators need to be able to not only determine the literal meaning of every sentence—which could be the tacit knowledge of its truth condition in the broader sense explained above—but also to infer its non-literal meaning.

Davidson's "first" theory of meaning could be used to define translation, even if its notion of semantic equivalence plays an explicative role that is limited to the literal meaning of sentences. Semantic equivalence does not seem to be sufficient to define translation in cases that require going beyond literal meaning. Functional equivalence, however, could provide an explanation for instances where a sentence in a target language is used in a target-linguistic community in the same way that it is used in a source-linguistic community. The functions of translation units within different linguistic systems become commensurable in single exchanges with an interlocutor. As Malmkjær noted, in so doing, the "second" Davidson is much closer to Toury's theory:

Davidson's account is not given in terms of the meaning of expressions being the same. Meaning is seen as a relationship between an utterance, a speaker, a time, a set of circumstances and a hearer. Each such relationship is unique. A unique

relationship cannot be replicated. Therefore, we can forget about defining equivalence in terms of “meaning”. Rather, there are, as Toury, says, possible equivalents, i.e., those terms or utterances which we might have used in those circumstances, as well as actual equivalents, i.e., the terms actually used in a translation. (Malmkjær, 1993, p. 141)

This is why it is necessary to explain natural language by how human beings speak it to each other or by the way it is written in texts, such as James Joyce's works. In the paper *James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty* (1989), Davidson emphasizes the creative and productive power of language, which—however detached from rules and conventions it may be—opens “a hermeneutic space between the reader and the text” (Davidson, 1989, p. 12).

3. A “Hermeneutic Turn?”

After *A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs* was published, Davidson's ideas about translation began to be associated with those claimed by “continental” philosophers of language such as Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur, but above all Hans-Georg Gadamer (Ramberg, 1989; Malpas, 1992; Hoy, 1997). Similarities can be drawn between Davidson's philosophy and Gadamer's work *Wahrheit und Methode* [*Truth and Method*] (1960) through the relevance given to the creative nature of the interpretative act, the contextuality and flexibility of our comprehension, and the need for constant adaptation of our theories in order to understand what the speaker means. When talking about Joyce's writing, Davidson says that every literary text, whether narrative or lyric, does not shut itself inside its own meaning and internal structures but instead “opens another world” and offers it to the reader. The distance between text and reader can be filled by sharing this “world,” or as Davidson wrote, this “hermeneutic space.” Readers do not passively accept such a space. They cooperate with an author's creative process through dialogue. The meaning of a literary text is thus determined and produced by a comparison in which readers can put their own ideas into the text, changing them if necessary.¹

1 It is worth noting that both Davidson and Gadamer studied Plato's *Philebus* and especially Plato's method of dialogue. For a discussion of

According to Gadamer, interpreters never begin interpreting a text with a *tabula rasa* state of mind. Instead, they always begin with some expectations and pre-judgements, from which a first interpretative project arises. Good interpreters continually test their projects to make their hypotheses more believable, changing them when they do not find confirmation. Davidson also said that interpreters start interpreting with some expectations or prior theories. During the interpretative process, interpreters modify and adjust these prior theories to adapt to a speaker's demands and intentions. With the word "*Wirkungsgeschichte*," ["effective history"] *Gadamer exactly means that* past sentence usage, or prior theory, serves as a way of evaluating new linguistic items as they enter into the semantic relationships that form at the momentary fusion of speaker, interpreter and context. For Davidson, interpreters understand a speaker's utterances according to holistic criteria: the meaning a speaker gives to a word somehow depends on the meaning of the whole sentence into which it is inserted, and the meaning of a sentence can only be understood within the whole language of which it is a part. In a similar way, Friedrich Schleiermacher claimed that interpreters cannot understand one part of a work if they do not have a certain "pre-comprehension" of the whole work. This is because understanding a single element depends on understanding a whole (cf. Steiner, 1975). At the same time, an author's entire work can only be understood in the broader cultural context in which it belongs. Schleiermacher therefore anticipated the description that Gadamer gave to the *hermeneutic circle*: in order to understand the meaning of part of a text, the interpreter must have a pre-comprehension of the whole text (Dreyfus, 1980).

Despite the similarities between Davidson's philosophy and certain aspects of hermeneutic philosophy, there are also some important differences. Examining these differences will help us better understand Davidson's philosophy and justify a possible "hermeneutic turn" in his work. To do so, we must consider Davidson's philosophy as a whole. Indeed, the ideas in *A*

Plato's influence on their philosophy of interpretation, cf. Davidson 1997 and Gadamer 1997a.

Nice Derangement of Epitaphs represent only one part of a much broader thought belonging to an organic and coherent program. For example, Gadamer believed every instance of communication presupposed a supporting basis of agreement, or, as he called it, "a common language" between both interpreter and speaker. Davidson described successful communication as something needing a wide basis of agreement, and, in the papers mentioned above, he gives a description of communication which considers both the speaker's and the interpreter's points of view. This is different from what Davidson says in his early papers, where communication is described from only the interpreter's point of view.

In Davidson's early papers, the agreement between interpreter and speaker in accordance with the interpreter's criteria is based on the Principle of Charity. According to this principle, the condition of possibility—not only of interpretation but also of the simple fact of being recognized as speakers of a natural language—is that there is no radical difference between interpreter and speaker. Davidson says that "a *condition* for being a speaker is that there must be others enough like oneself" (Davidson, 1992, p. 120). For Davidson, interpreters can never consider the speaker as someone *radically different* from themselves. Interpreters must either interpret the speaker's behavior according to the method proposed by the principle or realize that what cannot be recognized through such a method is neither thought nor discourse: "If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behavior of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything" (Davidson, 1973a, p. 137). Therefore it is impossible that the speaker might have beliefs or criteria radically different from the interpreter. In fact, Davidson *ab initio* denies the possibility that the speaker has a system of beliefs or a conceptual scheme that is radically different from ours. The speaker's vision of the world is mostly true and similar to ours: when speakers recognize the causes of their own beliefs as relevant, interpreters also instinctively recognize them. Davidson claims that if a creature shows propositional attitudes, "it is

analytic that they must conform more or less to ours” (Davidson, 1985, p. 352).

These conclusions seem very different from the thesis expressed in *A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs*, where agreement on a passing theory is shared and reached by both interpreter and speaker through their dialogue. This is why Davidson’s work has been said to have drawn on the work of scholars such as Schleiermacher and Gadamer, who stressed the need for both interpreters and speakers to agree on a “common language,” allowing for a real comparison, a “fusion of horizons.” *A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs*, can be seen as a “hermeneutic turn” if we do not consider that the agreement of both interpreter and speaker and the relation between them are very different from those described by Gadamer. We have to consider the different ways of understanding the relation between the two—which distinguishes Davidson’s thought from the philosophy of hermeneutic style—in order to understand that *A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs*, even if it introduces some new ideas, is still part of Davidson’s philosophical thought, which is coherent and organic.

Some differences between interpreter and speaker do exist, but they are differences of opinions that are always understood and explained in accordance with the interpreter’s point of view. These differences could never lead to cases of untranslatability due to a radical difference between conceptual schemes of different languages. The unique acceptable cases of untranslatability are those of *local* untranslatability, i.e., cases that are understandable because of a long history of successful translation due to the agreement between interpreter and speaker. Davidson claims that what is essential in the interpretative process is “the phenomenon of generalization, of perceived *similarity*” (Davidson, 1992, p. 117). He also says that differences can be explained by an agreement between substantially similar people. Speakers and interpreters can have different opinions but not different “visions of the world,” as claimed by “continental” scholars like Gottfried Herder or Wilhelm von Humboldt. In contrast, in his paper *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme*

(1974), Davidson says that it is not possible for radically different conceptual schemes to exist because of different languages:

But if translation succeeds, we have shown there is no need to speak of two conceptual schemes, while if translation fails, there is no ground for speaking of two. If I am right then, there never can be a situation in which we can intelligibly compare or contrast divergent schemes, and in that case we do better not to say that there is one scheme, as if we understood what it would be like for there to be more. (Davidson, 1973b, p. 243)

There cannot be a difference in how we classify reality. If we somehow succeed in interpreting speakers in every situation, it is only because we classify the features of the world in the same way (Forster, 1998).

In this respect, Davidson's philosophy is far removed from Gadamer's, according to which the phenomenon of interpretation coincides with the experience of otherness. By associating his own philosophy closely to Davidson's ideas, Gadamer says, from his point of view, the difference between their stands is that "apart from questions of method, a hermeneutic virtue is necessary: we always must be aware that everything, included every text, wants to say *something different*, and, in order to understand it, we need to open ourselves" (Gadamer, 1997b, p. 130). Unlike Davidson, Gadamer believed that interpreters meet speakers who are not similar or "familiar" to them but different or "extraneous." Mutual comprehension does not happen because the other is similar to us. The "fusions of horizons," or the aim of interpretation, is the result of a linguistic meeting where interpreter and speaker recognize themselves in their differences. According to Gadamer, this is the authentic hermeneutic experience of the relation to the other and not one where the understanding of the other is a certain form of repetition or reduction to us. In the latter case, "the place of the interpretation" would become a "struggle land" where, as in Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* [*Phenomenology of Spirit*] (1807), one part is subjugated by the other. Only if we compare ourselves to other people, who cannot be reduced to our point of view, can we understand not only them but also ourselves. Mutual comparison allows us to understand speakers in their difference and to recognize our identity. This is exactly

what seems to lack in Davidson's description of communication: the idea that comparing oneself to someone *radically* different is a necessary condition in order to recognize oneself as a translator.

Conclusion

The debate on translation equivalence in philosophy of language has used conceptual tools considered (and sometimes even dismissed) by translation scholars. However, as Malmkjær noted, translation scholars extensively discussed the Quinean thesis on the indeterminacy of translation, but most recent work by Davidson still remains mostly unknown. His latest papers, especially "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (1986), could be remarkably interesting, because they present a linguistic theory that can be used as a valid conceptual tool for the analysis of the translation process:

It is therefore good to see that references and reactions to Quine's indeterminacy thesis have begun to re-enter translation literature. Unfortunately, references to Davidson's more optimistic view are rarer, and I do not believe that his later writings – absent even from Benjamin² – have yet been absorbed by the community of translation scholars. This is a pity since the later work stresses difference and the fluidity of language to a degree which should make it impossible any longer to misread Davidson as seeking to establish "an original and archaic site of meaning" and "an unmediated access to the world." (Malmkjær, 1993, p 135)

On the one hand, this paper critically introduced Davison's philosophy of translation equivalence, by discussing his theoretical background in the history of analytic philosophy and comparing it to continental philosophy of language. On the other hand, this article compared the two main meanings the concept of equivalence has in Davidson's philosophy, to translations studies theoretical background, showing some points of convergence and some clear differences. Overall, the paper showed that the main point of convergence is the concept of equivalence as a

² Kirsten Malmkjær is referring to Andrew Benjamin and his book *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy: A New Theory of Words* (1989).

process in the linguistic-cultural context of a speaker-listener relationship, which is made possible by a “deeper” agreement among speakers. It is this “more fundamental equivalence which in turn engenders the possibility of the recognition of semantic equivalence” (Benjamin, 1989, p. 65). However, the very nature of this relationship in Davidson’s thought could place a distance not only from the continental philosophical background, and more specifically, from Gadamer’s philosophy of language, but also from contemporary culturally-oriented translation studies.

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ABSTRACT: Defining Translation: Semantic Equivalence versus Functional Equivalence — This article discusses how, in addition to providing a definition for translation, the concept of equivalence may explain why we can say that sentence *S* in language *L* is a translation of sentence *S*¹ in language *L*¹. It analyzes two main kinds of equivalence that are used in analytical philosophy to define translation: semantic equivalence and functional equivalence. This analysis shows that drawing a distinction between semantic and functional equivalence is a way to understand the distinction between different levels or aspects of meaning. Both semantic equivalence, introduced by Gottlob Frege, and functional equivalence, proposed by Wilfrid Sellars, were developed in Donald Davidson's theory of meaning. After discussing the limits of Davidson's definitions of equivalence, this article will argue that functional equivalence is a reason for comparing Davidson's philosophy to positions such as those expressed by Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics.

RÉSUMÉ : Définir la traduction : équivalence sémantique versus équivalence fonctionnelle — Cet article expose comment le concept d'équivalence a été utilisé pour définir la traduction, et comment ce même concept nous permet de dire pourquoi un énoncé dans une langue *L* est la traduction d'un énoncé dans une autre langue *L*¹. Il analyse deux sens principaux utilisés dans la philosophie analytique pour définir la traduction : l'équivalence sémantique et l'équivalence fonctionnelle, afin de montrer que tracer la distinction entre ces deux sortes d'équivalence est une manière de comprendre la distinction entre différents niveaux ou aspects de la signification. Ces deux concepts, celui d'équivalence sémantique introduit par Gottlob Frege, et celui d'équivalence fonctionnelle proposé par Wilfrid Sellars, furent développés dans la théorie de la signification de Donald Davidson. Après avoir noté les limites des définitions d'équivalence chez Davidson, cet essai soutient que la notion d'équivalence fonctionnelle nous amène à comparer la philosophie de Davidson à des positions comme celles qui ont été exprimées par l'herméneutique de Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Keywords: translation definition, equivalence, meaning, semantics/pragmatics distinction, analytical philosophy

Mots-clés : définition de la traduction, équivalence, signification, distinction sémantique/pragmatique, philosophie analytique

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