



# The Application of Functional Equivalence Theory in Novel ——A Cases Study of *Normal People*

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**Abstract:** This study takes *Normal People* as an example, adopting Eugene A. Nida's functional equivalence as the foundational guiding theory for novel translation. Through the meticulous application of meaning equivalence, stylistic equivalence, and cultural equivalence, it conducts a comprehensive and in-depth research and analysis of the translation process within the context of novels.

The study explores how these three translation methods are subtly yet profoundly reflected in various aspects of the novel, including its narrative structure, dialogue, character development, and thematic elements. By examining these facets, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how functional equivalence is operationalized in practice. In the narrative structure of *Normal People*, the translator employs meaning equivalence to ensure that the plot unfolds logically and coherently in the target language, preserving the original author's intent and narrative voice. Similarly, stylistic equivalence is crucial in maintaining the unique linguistic style and tone of the novel, which is often integral to its appeal and impact. Cultural equivalence, on the other hand, is vital for conveying the cultural nuances and references embedded within the text, ensuring that the translated work resonates with readers from different cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, the study asserts that Nida's functional equivalence plays an indispensable and decisive role in ensuring the accuracy, readability, and overall quality of novel translations. It emphasizes the importance of giving sufficient attention to this theory in order to ensure that translated works not only convey the intended meaning and tone of the original text but also resonate with readers on an emotional and intellectual level. By achieving functional equivalence, translators can create translations that are both faithful to the original and accessible to a wider audience.

Under the guidance of the theories and methods of scientific novel translation, these translated works can serve as bridges that enable readers to better understand and appreciate the diverse and rich tapestry of excellent foreign novels. By fostering greater cross-cultural understanding and respect, these translations can significantly enhance the effectiveness of international communication and contribute to the promotion of global cultural exchange and harmony. Ultimately, the study underscores the critical role of functional equivalence in facilitating meaningful and impactful literary translation.

**Keywords:** Functional Equivalence, Novel Translation, *Normal People*

## 1. Introduction

In the era of economic and cultural globalization, international cultural exchanges have become increasingly frequent, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures worldwide. Books, particularly novels, stand as a pivotal medium for cultural dissemination and knowledge sharing, enabling readers to explore and comprehend different societies, histories, and ideologies. The translation of foreign novels into Chinese has therefore become a crucial aspect of cultural exchange, serving as a bridge that connects China with the global cultural landscape.

Among the numerous foreign novels translated into Chinese, Sally Rooney's *Normal People* holds a special place. This novel encapsulates the essence of human spiritual exploration, delving into themes of truth, goodness, and beauty that are fundamental to ideological and moral education. By exploring these themes, *Normal People* offers profound ideological insights that can significantly impact the spiritual growth of young students.

However, translating literary works, especially novels, requires a nuanced understanding of both the source and target cultures. Without pertinent theoretical guidance, translators may struggle to accurately convey the author's intended meanings and ideological connotations. This is where Eugene A. Nida's functional equivalence theory becomes invaluable. This theory emphasizes the need for a translation to be functionally equivalent to the original text, meaning that it should convey the same meaning and have the same impact on the target audience as the original text had on its audience.

Given the significance of novel translation in cultural exchange and the challenges faced by translators in accurately conveying the author's ideological connotations, this study aims to explore the unique cultural background knowledge of



foreign novels, with a specific focus on *Normal People*, through the lens of functional equivalence theory. By doing so, this study seeks to elucidate how translators can accurately grasp and convey the author's ideological connotations, thereby enhancing the quality and impact of translated novels in China. Ultimately, this study endeavor holds considerable significance in promoting cultural understanding and exchange between China and the rest of the world.

## **2. Novel Translation and Its Language Features**

### **2.1 Definition of novel 2. Language features of novel translation**

Novels are one of the most popular forms of fictional writing, perhaps the most widely written and read literary works of all. They are derived from the Italian word "novella," which translates to "a short story" or "something new." Today, the novel has evolved into a long literary prose form. According to Abrams, "novella" means "a small brand of new thing," and he further interprets the word as "a short story in prose form"<sup>[i]</sup>. Therefore, a novel can be described as a literary work that consists of multiple events, features a plot with characters, incorporates a theme, and reflects the worldview of the characters.

### **2.2 Language features of novel translation**

When translating a novel, the translator should first recognize the basic features of the novel and believe that a novel is a narrative literary genre that expresses social phenomena or real life with the help of artistic elements. Some basic components of a novel include: a complete story plot, distinct characters, the absence of limitations by time and space, the use of flexible artistic techniques from multiple perspectives to express social reality, and a huge social capacity. In terms of writing techniques and language features, a novel expresses its feelings with poetic language full of emotions, describing beautiful and moving artistic conceptions, yet it is not merely expressing feelings like poetry. A novel expresses the author's feelings and comments through the style of prose, but unlike prose, it has a plot and characters. One common example of such language features in a literary text is the use of onomatopoeia by novel writers to lure readers into the novel's world. Onomatopoeia is a commonly used sound device where sets of ordinary words are strategically put together to produce a sound that supports the concept within the work<sup>[ii]</sup>. Some common examples of onomatopoeic words are: the tick-tock of a clock, the ding-dong of a doorbell, the boom of a firework, and more. In translating literary novels, onomatopoeic words can be difficult to handle. Translators are generally not able to find exact equivalents for certain onomatopoeic words. Therefore, in translating, the language features of novels are important factors to consider in order to achieve functional equivalence. Moreover, the production of original works such as novels is based on certain social, historical, and cultural backgrounds. In novel writing, the author considers their target audience before and during the creation process. When translating novels, the translator should consider all the above factors, that is, the mediation of cultural factors. The following pages will discuss several main features of novel translation based on specific materials.

### **2.3 Translation of characters' names in novels**

Each language and culture possesses its own unique naming conventions. For instance, Chinese and English utilize different orders for first and last names. Furthermore, the selection of names is intimately tied to history, culture, tradition, and geography. Especially in novels, the main characters' names are often the product of the author's thoughtful and intricate design: the name not only adheres to the general societal norms but also reflects the actual societal conditions. More importantly, names are frequently associated with a particular plot, hinting at the character's fate or reflecting their personality or unusual background. When it comes to narrative angles, the author often develops and describes the plot from a specific identity perspective. Thus, proper nouns occupy a special position within a language system and serve a significant purpose in literary works. Their meaningfulness and cultural significance can pose challenges during translation: the issue is not merely whether the transposition of such proper nouns is technically feasible, but also whether it is appropriate, as the names may not carry the same meaning in the target language<sup>[iii]</sup>. This is evident because proper names lack synonyms and do not convey descriptive content or connotations. Therefore, when translating proper nouns into the target language, careful consideration must be given to the context in which the characters are named, ensuring that the transposed names achieve the effect of functional equivalence.

### **2.4 Maintaining and remodeling the character's image**

A good novel often leaves one or more characters indelibly etched in the reader's mind. However, the characters in the novel are all created within a specific social and cultural background. It is the responsibility of the translator to adapt the characters from one particular background into another language and cultural context. During the process of adaptation, some elements of the character's image are inevitably reshaped and refined. Sometimes, even if the translator strives to achieve a complete adaptation, the understanding of the target text readers may still differ significantly from that of the original text readers.

### **2.5 The maintenance of style**

Traditional style descriptors such as "elegant," "magnificent," "novel," "elaborate," and other impressions are evaluative feelings that carry a strong subjective element. It is not easy to explain these descriptors through specific analysis. However, modern linguists believe that the emergence of style must be grounded in specific language forms. Leech and Short refer to these linguistic features that may contribute to the creation of style as stylistic markers. They classify stylistic markers into five categories: syntax, grammar, rhetoric, context, and cohesion<sup>[iv]</sup>.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Functional Equivalence theory

Nida's translation theory was not achieved overnight. Rather, it evolved through decades of continuous practice and exploration, undergoing constant revision and improvement. Nida excels at summarizing experience from practice, transforming it into theory, and then using that theory to guide further practice. Consequently, Nida's translation theory has stood the test of time and scrutiny.

In *From One Language to Another*, published in 1986, Nida mentioned Functional Equivalence for the first time. This concept not only retained the essence of dynamic equivalence translation theory but also clarified and refined its meaning. Functional equivalence theory softened the strictness of dynamic equivalence's emphasis on "fidelity to the language structure of the original language". Functional equivalence holds that in translation, attention should be paid not only to the meaning and spirit of the language but also, as much as possible, to the form, as form also carries meaning. If formal equivalence can be preserved without compromising the appropriateness and natural transmission of meaning and spirit, it should be. If meaning and spirit are constrained by form, then formal equivalence can be disregarded, i.e., "meaning first, form second"<sup>[v]</sup>.

It is clear that Nida's translation theory has been continually amended, refined, and elevated in practice to optimize the translation effect. Meanwhile, it has become increasingly applicable to a broader range of contexts with greater universality. The "function" in Nida's "functional equivalence" refers to different pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and discourse that serve the same or similar expressive function. This aligns with Nida's frequently mentioned "reader's response theory," which suggests that the readers of a translated text should be able to understand and appreciate it in a potentially similar manner as the original readers. The target readers can grasp the spirit and meaning of the original author through the lines of the translated text.

However, it should be noted that general readers cannot respond identically to both the original text and the translation simultaneously, as most general readers do not master both languages. Only scholars who can understand both the original text and the translated text can respond similarly after reading. This underscores the translator's crucial role as a bridge in translation. The translator's knowledge, culture, and professional qualifications have a significant impact on the translation quality of the work and simultaneously impose high standards on the translator.

#### 3.2 Principles of Functional Equivalence Theory

Functional equivalence is constructed on the basis of sociolinguistics and the communicative function of language, and it consists of three aspects: meaning equivalence, stylistic equivalence, and cultural equivalence. Meaning equivalence is what a qualified translator should strive to achieve. A good translation is not only a version that is grammatically and lexically coherent with the original text, but also one that corresponds to what the author intends to express. Misunderstandings could be avoided if a translator recognized the importance of grasping the meaning of the original text correctly. Thus, the level of a translator's interpretation of the original text determines whether target language readers are able to get the same feeling as the readers of the source language.

Functional equivalence surely includes the correspondence in style. A stylistically equivalent translation should be one that has the same stylistic value: it should be plain if the original is plain, and elegant if the original is elegant. Any elevation or degradation of the original style would be considered unethical and a serious violation of the principles of functional equivalence.

Culture refers to the entire way of life of a society. It includes, but is not limited to, knowledge, beliefs, arts, moral standards, traditions, customs, language, and any other habits acquired by members of a particular society. In *Language, Culture, and Translating*, Nida puts forward that "for truly successful translating, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism, since words only have meaning in terms of the cultures in which they function"<sup>[vi]</sup>.

### 4. Case Study of *Normal People*

#### 4.1 A brief overview of *Normal People*

*Normal People*<sup>[viii]</sup> is a novel written by the Irish writer Sally Rooney in 2018. The Chinese edition was translated by Zhong Na and published by Shanghai Translation Publishing House. It is a story of two Irish students who have fallen in love with each other. Connell and Marianne grew up in the same small town, but their similarities end there. At school, Connell is popular and well-liked, while Marianne is a loner. But when the two strike up a conversation—awkward but electrifying—something life-changing begins. A year later, they are both studying at Trinity College in Dublin. Marianne has found her feet in a new social world, while Connell hangs on the sidelines, shy and uncertain. Throughout their years

at university, Marianne and Connell circle each other, straying toward other people and possibilities but always magnetically, irresistibly drawn back together. And as she veers into self-destruction and he begins to search for meaning elsewhere, each must confront how far they are willing to go to save the other. *Normal People* is the story of mutual fascination, friendship, and love. It takes us from that first conversation to the years beyond, following two people who try to stay apart but find that they can not.

#### 4.2 Application of Meaning Equivalence

In most cases, the primary goal of translation is to convey the information contained in the original text. As a result, in translation, conveying language or semantic information takes precedence. As Nida stated in *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, translation should be semantically equivalent to the original text. In terms of style, coherence with the original text should also be prioritized. Therefore, the primary mission of translation is to convey information accurately. A qualified translator should strive for meaning equivalence. A good translation is one that is not only grammatically and lexically equivalent to the original text, but also corresponds to what the author intends to express <sup>[viii]</sup>. Misunderstandings could have been avoided if the translator of *Normal People* had understood the importance of accurately grasping the meaning of the original text. For example, by comparing the original and translated versions of some examples, attention could have been paid to the novel's context so that translated words and sentences could be adjusted to fit the real context and situations using the functional equivalence guide. Here are examples:

Example 1:

It's a face like a piece of moon reflected in something wobbly and oblique.

她的脸又像月亮在某件东西上的倒影，颤颤巍巍，歪歪扭扭。

The "face" here explicitly refers to Marianne's face, and the pronouns should be translated clearly to avoid any confusion on the reader's part. "Wobbly" means something that moves unsteadily from side to side. "Oblique" refers to a line or angle that is neither horizontal nor vertical; an oblique angle is any angle other than a right angle. Based on this correct interpretation, the translator uses "颤颤巍巍，歪歪扭扭" to describe "what the shadow looks like when it shakes," achieving meaning equivalence.

As a special lexical phenomenon, reduplicated words exhibit the beauty of languages in rhythm, image, and expression. It is of great significance to explore their usage and identify shared features between English and Chinese. The reiterative locution, a common and typical artistic device, often reveals the writer's personality and is filled with aesthetic value and character.

This version is not only easy to understand but also conveys Marianne's embarrassment and discomfort before attending the party. As a member of her class, she feels isolated from her peers. It may also reflect her anxiety. This translation not only conveys the literal meaning but also resonates with the reader on an emotional level, achieving meaning equivalence.

Example 2:

Last night he spent an hour and a half lying on the floor of his room, because he was too tired to complete the journey from his ensuite back to his bed.

昨天晚上他在房间地板上躺了一个半小时，因为他累得没法从套间走回床边。

"Too tired to complete" means to be too tired to finish the work, which is used in the specific context. Based on the correct interpretation, the Translator employs "累得没法" to Express "too tired to complete" to achieve meaning equivalence. This version is easy to understand, and it also shows Cornell, the hero, is physically and mentally exhausted. By maintaining stylistic consistency and coherence with the original, the translator has successfully conveyed the intended message while respecting the author's underlying intent, achieving meaning equivalence in the process.

#### 4.3 Application of Stylistic Equivalence

Achieving a reasonable level of stylistic equivalence in translating the original literary text is another important aspect of the translation process. Any elevation or degradation of the original style will be considered as an unlawful alteration and a serious violation of the principles of functional equivalence. Here are examples:

Example 1:

She looked, he thought, almost frail.

他心想，她看起来都有点弱不禁风了。

In this phrase, 'frail' means someone who is not very strong or healthy, or something that is fragile and can be easily broken or damaged. But in the translated version, the translator uses the exaggerated technique "弱不禁风". This induces a strong feeling in readers. Such stylistic equivalence highlights the characteristics of certain aspects of people or things, making the expressed content more prominent and thus giving people a deep impression, creating a strong resonance. This stylistic choice highlights the weakness and delicacy of the character, reflecting a strong emotional resonance and artistic appeal in the target language, thereby achieving stylistic equivalence.

Example 2:

Maybe you should give me grinds, Connell, she says.

我是不是应该请你给我补补课，康奈尔，她说。

First, the translator employs a rhetorical tone, which, depending on the context, may indeed be suggestive. "Grinds" is a Hiberno-English term used interchangeably to refer to both the lesson and the teacher, although the latter usage is less common. It is generally used in the plural ("I do maths grinds"). For the moment, let us disregard the other extended meanings of "grind." Merely considering the literal meaning of "tutorial" is sufficient to appreciate the rich semantic variations of the same language in different contexts. The profile reflected Marianne's pride and obstinacy. This stylistic adaptation ensures that the translated text maintains the intended tone and mood of the original, thus achieving stylistic equivalence despite the cultural and linguistic differences between the source and target languages.

#### 4.4 Application of Cultural Equivalence

Culture refers to the entire way of life of a society, encompassing information, beliefs, expressions, ethical guidelines, traditions, language, and any other behaviors acquired by individuals within a specific society. In *Language, Culture, and Translation*, Nida puts forward that for truly effective interpreting, biculturalism is indeed more important than bilingualism, since words only have meaning in the context of the societies in which they function. Dynamic Equivalence has been discussed in terms of "closest natural equivalence," but the term "dynamic" has been misunderstood by some individuals as implying something that has an impact. Consequently, many people have been led to believe that if an interpretation has a significant impact, it must be a prime example of dynamic equivalence. Due to this misunderstanding, and to emphasize the concept of function, it seems more appropriate to use the term "functional equivalence" when describing degrees of translation adequacy.

Nida distinguishes degrees of "functional equivalence" based on cognitive and experiential factors in his book *Language, Culture, and Translation*. These degrees range from minimal, realistic functional equivalence to maximal, ideal functional equivalence. The former level of functional equivalence can be described as "the reader of a translated text should be able to comprehend and appreciate it to the point that they perceive it as being essentially the same as the original." Anything less than this level of equivalence is unacceptable, according to Nida. The ultimate, ideal functional equivalence should be such that "the readers of a translated text should be able to understand and appreciate it in essentially the same manner and to the same degree as the original readers." Here are examples:

Example 1:

Thankfully you're the strong and silent type.

谢天谢地,你是那种内心强大、沉默是金的类型。

In this example, "the strong and silent type" carries cultural information. It is a stereotype of men in the Western world that corresponds to a "female rap image," possessing a positive meaning and often a playful sense. The translator uses annotation to explain this concept and retains the cultural information. Consequently, readers may understand why the author said so. Furthermore, the translator's use of annotation (though not explicitly shown in the translation provided, but implied by the explanation) would help readers unfamiliar with this Western stereotype to understand the context and appreciate the intended meaning. This achieves cultural equivalence by ensuring that the translated text conveys the same cultural information and emotional tone as the original.

Example 2:

Marianne seemed like the kind of straightforward person who would arrange the whole procedure herself, and at most maybe go with him on the plane.

玛丽安似乎是一个坦诚直率的人,她会自己把所有流程安排好,他顶多只用陪着她坐飞机。

In this example, Ireland had imposed Europe's strictest abortion law, and women who wanted an abortion usually had to undergo the procedure abroad. According to the Guardian, over 3,000 Irish women have abortions in the UK each year. In 2018, the Irish referendum successfully repealed the abortion ban. That is why Connell thought he might accompany her on the plane. This translation achieves cultural equivalence by conveying the original text's cultural and situational context to the target audience. It helps readers understand why Connell might think he needs to accompany Marianne on the plane, given the social and legal realities of the time.

#### 5. Conclusion

The application of Nida's functional equivalence theory to novel translation has indeed profound implications both in theoretical and practical aspects. Theoretically, it provides a robust framework for analyzing and evaluating translations, emphasizing the importance of receptor's response and diversity in translation. It underscores the need for translations to be both culturally and functionally equivalent to the original text, ensuring that the intended meaning, tone, and cultural nuances are conveyed accurately to the target audience.

Practically, functional equivalence theory guides translators in making informed decisions about retention or modification of elements in the source text based on the characteristics and cultural backgrounds of both the native and foreign languages. By achieving maximum equivalence for the target reader, translators can facilitate greater cross-cultural understanding and respect, enhancing the effectiveness of international communication and contributing to the promotion of global cultural exchange and harmony.

Furthermore, this study reveals that achieving functional equivalence in novel translation requires a nuanced understanding of the source text and a sensitivity to the potential reactions of the target audience. It emphasizes the importance of not only conveying the literal meaning of the text but also its narrative structure, dialogue, character

development, and thematic elements. Through the use of various translation methods, such as meaning equivalence, stylistic equivalence, and cultural equivalence, translators can strive to reproduce the style and culture of the original text in a way that resonates with the target audience.

However, the functional equivalence theory, which emphasizes meaning, style, and cultural equivalence, faces several shortcomings. It may neglect contextual differences, leading to difficulties in accurately conveying the original meaning. The pursuit of meaning equivalence can result in excessive freedom in translation, altering the original text's form and content. Achieving stylistic equivalence is challenging due to significant differences in style and rhetoric between languages, often leading to a loss of the original's artistic appeal. Cultural equivalence is particularly difficult to achieve due to cultural differences, potentially resulting in cultural loss or misinterpretation. Additionally, over-adaptation of cultural elements to fit the target culture can undermine the authenticity and cultural value of the original text.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the application of Nida's functional equivalence theory to novel translation is both feasible and necessary, offering valuable insights and guidance for future translation work in this genre. By achieving functional equivalence, translators can contribute to the promotion of global cultural exchange and harmony, fostering a more interconnected and diverse world.

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