Language and Culture in Eugene Nida's Work the Dynamic Equivalence.

Critics and Defenders

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Abstract: In this article we examine the books, lectures and manuscripts of the eminent American translation scholar Eugene A. Nida, in which he speaks of his fieldwork in more than one hundred countries in order to help native translators to render the Bible into their own languages. In doing so, he studied nearly two hundred languages and cultures and explored the deep relationship that exists between culture and language. Given his fieldwork research, he could develop his theory of dynamic equivalence, which represented a revolution in the approach to translation. Even though this theory was very well received, some detractors have criticized it. Here we review some of these critics and the comments of the authors who have defended Nida's theory. We mention as well some Spanish translation specialists who introduced Nida's ideas into Spain and have been instrumental in their divulgation.

Key words: culture, verbal symbols, sociolinguistics, dynamic equivalence

1. Introduction

In the 1940s, the American Bible Society noticed that the versions of the Bible that had been translated into most of the existent languages were impossible to understand for the readers of many local languages. In order to find out where the problem was, they hired a reputed linguist, Eugene Nida, who had written a brilliant dissertation in Linguistics at the University of Michigan (USA) with the title "Morphology, the Descriptive Analysis of Words" and graduated in Ancient Greek at the UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) with one of the best marks in the history of the United States, as well as in Anthropology and even Geography.

Dr. Nida then started to carry out a very active fieldwork that would last for nearly 50 years, taking him to more than 100 countries and studying about 200 languages and cultures. Very soon he realized that if the readers of many local languages couldn't understand the translations of the Bible into their languages it was because they were made by English or French missionaries who didn't know the "genius" of the language into which they were translating: its structure, expressions, metaphors…, they were translating word for word from their own languages. He explains this in his manuscript "My Linguistic Odyssey", one of the three manuscripts I have found in his files after his passing:

> "The Bible Societies had discovered that in a number of instances the Scriptures published in indigenous
> languages in Latin America, as well as in other parts of the world, were simply not being used. In most cases

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the fundamental difficulty was that missionaries had translated the text more or less word for word, and as a result neither the lexical semantics nor the syntactic constructions were comprehensible. ..

…Soon I realized how language is only a part of the much bigger domain of cultural anthropology and that the functions of language cannot be explained apart from the total context of culture…There is no way to think relevantly about translation without combining   the structure of language with the structure of human behavior. After all, language is only a set of verbal habits of behavior and signs are only the means by which the reality is represented".

2. Language and Culture

In another manuscript entitled "Language and Culture", Nida says about his linguistic itinerary:

"After travelling around the world several times in order to help translators, I have met up with a number of cultures.   It was crucial for me to know the values of these different people in order to understand how they communicate meaningfully with one another…

The decisions about translating were all made by the missionaries and not in cooperation with local people. But the missionaries did not fully appreciate the fact that the local language belonged to the local people... The diversity of languages and cultures makes translation into local languages a very difficult task, but translators need to understand that behind the words there are powerful cultures that must not be ignored.

We had to keep in mind the beliefs of people in order to help them to translate into their local languages".

This was the essential vocation of Nida: to teach native translators how to translate into their own languages.

In his wonderful book *Customs and Cultures*, Nida also exposes the customs and ideas of people from different parts of the world that will determine their way of expressing themselves. He says:

"What counts is the value attached to different customs and expressions by a particular culture" (Eugene A. Nida, 1954, p. 10).

In his writings he constantly insists on this idea. In 1994, in a lecture given at the Institute of Translators of the Complutense University of Madrid, he said:

"The meaning of verbal symbols on any and every level depends on the culture of the language community. Language is a part of culture, and in fact, it is the most complex set of habits that any culture exhibits. Language reflects culture, provides access to the culture, and in many respects constitutes a model of the culture through its taxonomic hierarchies of words representing tokens and types on every level from viruses to galaxies…"[1]

And in another lecture given during the summer courses at "El Escorial", Madrid, he even stated:

"A language is a series of verbal habits that represent aspects of a culture. No one speaker possesses a complete inventory of the signs and the structures of a living language, but the society of speakers collectively possesses a language and can accordingly change the forms. Persons living separated from one another cannot preserve a language because languages are essentially interactive…

All languages reflect the culture of which they form a part… The fact that a language is a part of the culture clearly indicates the necessity of formulating any theory of translation by means of the culture represented by

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[1] "Encuentros en torno a la traducción", 22-26 February 1994. Lecture published in the journal *Hieronimus*, of the "Instituto de lenguas Modernas y Traductores", Complutense University, with the title "Sociolinguistics as a crucial factor in translating and interpreting".

the language…"[2]

Nida has expressed these ideas in many occasions, in his books and also in many lectures he has given around the world. He says so in his book *The Sociolinguistics of Interlingual Communication*:

"...It makes no sense to talk about languages without recognizing that they only have relevance in the culture of which they are a part" (Eugene A. Nida, 1996, p. 25).

And in another lecture he gave at the Complutense University of Madrid about figurative language he stressed the importance of knowing people's cultures in order to understand the expressions used in their languages:

"Whenever I have the opportunity to read a text describing the experiences or thoughts of so-called primitive people, I am delighted to note how effectively they express their ideas and emotions. Such people have no systematic instructions about how to make maximal use of metaphors, similes, adages, and proverbs, but they manage to incorporate into their oral or written texts a great deal of sophisticated figurative language.

Many emotional states are referred to by describing the nature or state of an organ of the body.   Because different emotional states influence so greatly the rate and strength of heart beats, it is not strange for a language to represent a number of different emotional states in terms of the functions of the heart. In the Miskito language of Honduras and Nicaragua, peace is a state of "having only one heart". But in some of the dialects of Quechua doubt is "having two hearts", and being hard-hearted can be expressed as "having no holes in the heart". In Chontal, (Mexico), a state of indecision can be expressed as "there are butterflies in my heart", but amazement can be expressed as "who knows where my heart went to". In Tzeltal (Mexico) a timid person "has a small heart", but a brave person has "a hard heart". In this language faith is "hanging on to God with the heart", while in Chol, Mexico too, faith or belief is "to fix one's heart on God's promise". In Tzotzil, Mexico, however, "a hot heart" refers to extreme anger, but pain in the heart is "love", while "counting the heart beats" indicates sadness.

But in numerous languages is it the liver, and not the heart, that is the focal feature of figurative expression. The focus on the state of the liver in describing various positive and negative emotions is probably due to the wide spread occurrence of malaria , particularly in Africa, and the fact that the liver is the primary organ of the body in dealing with the abundance of dead cells resulting from malaria. For example, in Habbe (West Africa) sorrow is "having a sick liver", while in Shilluk, spoken in the Sudan, significant pleasure in interpersonal relations can be described as "my liver is sweet with you". In Anuak, a typical Nilotic language of the Sudan, the liver is a key entity in a number of nominal and verbal expressions: "His liver is sweet": he is happy. "His liver is bitter": he is very unsocial. "His liver is heavy": he is sad. "His liver is small": He is not greedy, not overly eager. "His liver is large": He is greedy, etc.

In verbal expressions: "It has gone into his liver": he understands. "His liver is wandering": he is confused…But these occurrences of liver are by no means exhaustive (Eugene A. Nida, 1964, p. 54).

As a conclusion I have to recommend to translators they investigate with the maximum interest the culture of the languages they have to translate, otherwise they will only produce dead texts, that is words without any meaning, when the mission of a translator is to communicate ideas, to give life to a text" ((Eugene A. Nida, 2006).

He insisted so much in the necessity of respecting the culture which molds the language because he had seen thousands of translations made word for word, in which the meaning of the message was distorted or lost. In fact, before him there were everywhere translations, and not only of the Bible, made in which Nida called "formal

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[2] "Theories of Translation", Lecture given at El Escorial (Madrid), July 1996, and published in Spanish at the Journal *Hieronimus* in numbers 4–5, June 1996–June 1997, with the title "La Traducción en perspectiva".

equivalence", it is translating nouns by nouns, verbs by verbs, etc. keeping all phrases and sentences intact and preserving all formal indicators, e.g. marks of punctuation and paragraph breaks (Eugene A. Nida, 1964, p 165).

3. The "Dynamic Equivalence" Theory and Its Influence in the Translation World

Given his linguistic and anthropologic knowledge, and the extraordinary fieldwork he carried out, Nida wrote more than 60 books. Some of them represented a milestone in the approach of translation. He says in the mentioned manuscript "My Linguistic Odyssey":

> "In view of the tremendous increase in translation activity throughout the world and the confusion which existed in the minds of many people as to whether translating was a science, an art, or a skill — when in reality it can be all three — it seemed essential to describe some of the increasing number of insights about communication coming from information theory, communication theory, cultural anthropology, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and linguistics. This was done in a volume entitled *Toward a Science of Translating*, and later in *The Theory and Practice of Translation (Eugene A. Nida & Charles R.Taber, 1969)* and *From one Language to Another*." (Jan De Waard & Eugene A., 1986).[3]

In these books he presented and explained his theory of "dynamic equivalence", that he describes for the first time in *Toward a Science of Translating*:

> "It is the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message (first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style)[4]. This type of definition contains three essential terms: (1) *equivalent*, which points toward the source language, (2) *natural*, which points toward the receptor language, and (3) *closest*, which bind the two orientations together on the basis of the highest degree of approximation.

> However, since a D-E translation is directed primarily toward equivalence of response rather than equivalence of form, it is important to define more fully the implications of the word *natural* as applied to such translations. Basically, the word *natural* is applicable to three areas of the communication process: for a *natural* rendering must fit (1) the receptor language and culture as a whole, (2) the context of the particular message, and (3) the receptor-language audience.

> The conformance of a translation to the receptor language and culture as a whole is an essential ingredient in any stylistically acceptable rendering" (Eugene A. Nida, 1964, p. 166).

His books and this theory have had a tremendous impact in translation studies. He was called "The patriarch of translation", and received many distinctions. He gave lectures in the best Universities of the world and he was honored several times as Doctor Honoris Causa in some of them. He received many tributes in Universities and Linguistic Societies all over the world.

4. Critics and Defenses of the "Dynamic Equivalence" Theory

Nida has been object of great admiration, but his ideas have also received some critics. It is evident that all important scholars receive tributes of admiration and also critics, some of them with a real basis, but others not. It is precisely because his ideas were very striking that some authors have criticized Nida, sometimes because they hadn't read his books in their complete context or because they had very different points of view, not having had his anthropological education neither his experience in the extent fieldwork he realized. Nevertheless, the best

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[3] In 2001, when he was already living in Brussels, Nida wrote another book very important about the role of the context in translation: *Context in Translation*, John Benjamins. The Netherlands.

[4] Nida added the sentence in parenthesis in his book *The Theory and Practice in Translation*, p. 12.

translation scholars have always defended his ideas. But even when criticized they become important, because in one way or another they are a focus of interest.

One of the most recent critics of the "dynamic equivalence" theory is the one of Roland Boer. Boer calls his paper "The Dynamic Equivalence Caper" (Scott S. Elliot & Roland Boer, 2012). It is interesting to observe how there is always a prestigious scholar who respond to the critics of Nida's work. In this case Ernst Wendland y Stephen Pattemore (Wendland & Pattemore, 2013, pp. 471-490) responded saying:

> "Why does Boer classify the dynamic equivalence approach as a "caper", so, according to the Oxford Dictionary as an illicit or ridiculous activity or escapade?" (Wendland & Pattemore, 2013, p. 471).

They essentially say that it is without any doubt because he has not studied seriously Nida's ideas in its entirety:

> "Boers' narrowly-focused, rather insufficiently-researched evaluation of Nida's work suffers from both a lack of historical perspective and a current awareness of what many, more recent translation scholars and practicioners have been writing for the past several decades…"[5]

Boer says in his paper:

> "Dynamic (or functional) equivalence, as is well known, focuses on the message. Everything may be sacrificed — words, syntax, grammar — as long as the essential content of the original text it rendered in an acceptable way in the target language" (Boer, 2012, p. 13).

First of all, as the mentioned authors say, Nida "was no mono-dimensional scholar with just a single 'great idea' to his credit", and he never said that "everything may be sacrificed". In fact, in his book *Toward a Science of Translating*, Nida says:

> "…A certain degree of concordance may be highly desirable in certain types of F-E (Formal Equivalence) translating. For example, a reader of Plato's Dialogues in English may prefer rigid consistency in the rendering of key terms (as in Jowett's translation), so that he may have some comprehension of the way of which Plato uses certain word symbols to develop his philosophical system" (Eugene A. Nida, 1964, p. 165).

> "Some types of strictly F-E translations are of limited value; others are of great value. For example, translations of foreign-language texts prepared especially for linguists rarely attempt anything but close F-E renderings. In such translations the wording is usually quite literal, and even the segments are often numbered so that the corresponding units may be readily compared.

> From what has been said directly and indirectly about F-E translations in preceding sections, it might be supposed that such translations are categorically ruled out. To the contrary, they are often perfectly valid translations of certain types of messages." (Eugene A. Nida, 1964, p. 166).

And in *The Theory and Practice of Translation* he also says in this sense:

> "The extent to which the forms must be changed in order to preserve the meaning will depend upon the linguistic and cultural distance between languages. Quite naturally the easiest translations (those with the least amount of formal change), occur when one translates from a language such as English into German, closely related languages. Moreover, English and German represent the same cultural setting, Western technological. On the other hand, if one from English into Hungarian, the formal shifts are greater, for Hungarian.

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5 Abstract of the paper.

Is not a member of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family of languages, but belong to an entirely different family, the Fino-Ugrian. However, Hungarian is still part of the same cultural setting as English. Hence, the shifts are not so extreme.

If however, one has to translate from English into Hindi, the formal changes are greater than from English to Hungarian, for even though English and Hindi belong to the same Indo-European family of languages, the cultural contexts, including many differences of the world view, are so diverse that the formal structure patterns, both grammatical and lexical, must be altered more extensively in order to preserve the content. Finally, in translating from a language such as English into Zulu, which belongs to the so-called Bantu family of languages and represents quite a different culture, the formal modifications must be still more extreme" (Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, 1964, pp. 5-6).

Boer should have interpreted Nida's theories in its whole context not in a limited perspective. Anyway, the points of view of the authors who criticize Nida's theory of dynamic equivalence are necessarily more restricted than Nida's approaches, because his intense fieldwork. It gave him a large perspective of the language and of the translation, something that these critics couldn't have had because their studies were reduced to a theoretician approach and not practical. It is evident that when we translate from a language into another which is very distant, it is necessary to change radically the form, the syntax and the grammar. We can't even forget that the different cultures create their own expressions and metaphors, and when it is not possible to understand them in the target language it will be necessary to make a change. This is what dynamic equivalence is all about, something that it is very easy to realize when we read Nida's ideas as a whole and not by disconnected paragraphs.

Nida had already indicated in *The Theory and Practice of Translation* the necessity of respecting the genius of each language:

"…Each language possesses certain distinctive characteristics, which give it a special character, e.g., word-building capacities, unique patterns of phrase order, techniques for linking clauses into sentences, markers of discourse, and special discourse types of poetry, proverbs, and songs…Some languages are rich in modal particles. Others seem particularly adept in the development of figurative language…

…To communicate effectively one must respect the genius of each language. Rather than force the formal structure of one language upon another, the effective translator is quite prepared to make any and all formal changes necessary to reproduce the message in the distinctive structural forms of the receptor languages" (Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, 1964, pp. 3-4).

It was precisely the necessity of respecting the genius of each language when translating which led Nida to elaborate his theory of dynamic equivalence. As he says so clearly in these paragraphs, when we translate we can't impose the structure of one language over the other, but we have to make the necessary changes in order to reproduce the message with the characteristic forms of the target language. The conclusion reached by Boer is absurd and disproportionate. As Wendland y Pattemore indicate, Nida never said that "everything may be sacrificed"; dynamic equivalence consists precisely in not sacrificing the meaning of the original message by looking for the right and equivalent forms of the target language.

Another defender of Nida's ideas is the eminent scholar on translation Anthony Pym (2007), who says about Nida's dynamic equivalence:

"Some of the great translation theorists have had a go at Nida, as have many of not-so-great. Almost always, the attack is on the idea of dynamic equivalence, as if Nida had said that there was only one legitimate way to translate. To criticize him for having only ever defended dynamic equivalence seems short-sighted, and even unfair. His *theoretical* contribution was to open a conceptual space within which a range of translation options

could be debated".

At the beginning of his article "'All things to all people'. On Nida involvement" (Anthony Pym, 2007), Pym says that during a conference in Prague in 2000, when Dr. Nida was 85 years old, he asked him a double-banger multi-barbed question. The first part was something like this: "Is it not your preference for dynamic over formal equivalence a reductive simplification? And is your translation project not ultimately imperialist?" Nida answered: "The two types of equivalence stand as poles for a range of options, and there are sometimes good reasons for preferring the more formal kinds of equivalence". Pym says in the same article that it was a wonderful reply.

In fact, all critics of Nida's work have been about his dynamic equivalence theory, as if Nida would had said that there is only one legitimate way of translating. This theory has made him famous, and most scholars consider it brilliant, but as everything new, and in some way revolutionary, it has also been a controversial subject.

5. Conclusion

In my opinion, the different critics on Nida's work didn't evaluate his ideas in its correct dimension. Nida's point of view on translation is necessarily much larger and universal, because he worked with hundred of languages and cultures. He studied the habits, attitudes, fears and taboos that mold the different languages, something that us, occidental people, limited to our culture, we can't even imagine. He analyzed linguistic structures that are not at all familiar to us, and moreover he taught to translate into many languages the Greek and Hebrew of the Bible, which are very distant from us.

His intellectual adventure was magnificent, his experience nearly impossible to imagine for our minds. When Nida passed away, newspapers from all over the world praised his accomplishments. *L'Osservatore Romano* called him "un nuovo Girolamo", a new Jerome, and The *Wall Street Journal* said: "Eugene Nida brought new translations of the Bible to millions from the Artic Circle to Asia to the South Sea Islands".

Spanish scholars and translators also praised him before and after his death. When he died, an important Spanish translator from the General Directorate of Translation of European Commission, Pollux Hernúñez, wrote his obituary in the Spanish newspaper "El País", saying:

> "Interweaving disciplines (linguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, lexicology, communication theory), Nida established the principle of 'dynamic (or functional) equivalence'. It is the balance between the understanding of the original text and its correlative in translated language, always bearing in mind the cultural parameters of the reader" (Hernuñez P., 2011).

The obituary is entitled "Eugene Nida, the great authority among translators".

Roberto Mayoral, a professor of the Granada University, said in a tribute that his University organized after Nida's passing:

> "If on one hand Nida as a linguist was a magnificent figure (in grammar, semantics, morphology, sociolinguistics, stylistics, and structuralist and generative approaches), in the study of translation he made enormous steps, to such an extent that nowadays it is nearly impossible to say something new that was not said by Nida in his books; every rereading of his writings made us see new aspects that we had not detected before. He was a pioneer, advanced for his time to a remarkable level: the pragmatic and communicative approaches, the functional approaches, the professional approaches to translation as a professional action in a social context, the cognitive approaches — all these were initiated by Nida half a century ago, when interlinguistic equivalence was the usual definition of translation. Nida took the study of translation out of the prison of the text and he moved it into the reality of its receptors and the social and professional function of

translating".[6]

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