

NAVIGATING BETWEEN WORD AND MEANING: FROM
ANCIENT DEBATES TO MODERN PROFESSIONAL OPENINGS

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Annotation. This article explores the long-standing debate between word-for-word and sense-for-sense translation. The exploring starts with ideas of ancient thinkers like Cicero and St. Jerome and see how their views influence translators today. In this paper explained which strategy is better to use while translating different texts with the analysis of advantages and disadvantages.

Аннотация. В этой статье разбирается спор переводчиков стоит ли переводить слово в слово или лучше передавать смысл за смыслом. Из периода Цицерона до сегодняшних дней изучается подходы и мысли про двух стратегий и каое из них использовать лучше в разных текстах.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqolada tarjimonlar o`rtasidagi azaliy bahs – matnni so`zma-so`z t yoki ma`no bo`yicha tarjima qilish fikrlarini ko`rib chiqiladi. Cicero va St. Jerome davridan boshlab hozirgi kungacha bo`lgan qarashlarni tahlil qilingan. Yana qaysi strategiyani qachon qo`llash togriroq ekanligiham korib chiqiladi.

Key words: translation, literal translation, free translation, history of translation.

Ключевые слова: перевод, буквальный перевод, свободный перевод, история перевода.

**Kalit so`zlar:** tarjima, so`zma-so`z tarjima, erkin tarjima, ma`no tarjimasi, tarjima tarixi.

INTRODUCTION

In the translation process, translators have multiple choices to express one idea from one language into another one. As Newmark stated, translation is the process of replacing one source language with another target language. [1]

Every type of text has its own meaning, sometimes the writer tries to impress the reader with emotions, inner thoughts or even describes the atmosphere so detailed that they can visualize the situation. Some texts include just facts, theories or analysis to dive deeply into the subject, to learn particular things. Furthermore, they are proved by different scholars, translators, specialists worldwide. While the another type of texts inform us with news, or what is happening in the world with the help of mass media and others. It means, translators not just the words but also tries to give information in different styles as it may be requested in the one type of text or style. Each style aims it's own function and preserve this by using special words, terminology, neologisms, stylistic devices, papers of law or others.

Translators interpret the text with taking into account these characteristics: sometimes it is better to translate literal word for word; sometimes sense for sense; with the help of transformations lexical, grammatical, stylistic; by describing some unusual or blur ideas of one culture to the another; some texts require accurate and consistent translation while the others creativity and cultural adaptation.

Understanding Translation as a cultural and ideological Activity

Translation has often been shaped by religious beliefs, political power, ideological agendas, and cultural values. For example, bible translations contributed to the formation of European national languages. The Arabic translation movement preserved and transmitted Greek scientific heritage.

1. **Ancient period** - Translation activity in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome laid the foundation for translation practice. Roman theorists like Cicero and Horace formulated the famous debate between literal and free translation. [2]

2. **Medieval Period-** Religious translation really dominated in this period. And there were some major translation centers such as:

Monasteries in Europe

Bayt al-Hikma (house of wisdom) in Baghdad.

Translation preserved and transmitted knowledge across cultures.

3. **Renaissance and Reformation** - Humanism emphasized fidelity to original texts, while the Reformation promoted vernacular bible translations, significantly shaping national languages.

4. **Early modern period** - Classicism imposed strict translation norms, emphasizing clarity, elegance, and stylistic conformity.

As all the periods are unique and they have been transformed by the different social historical events at these times. Now we can see that translators from these periods also translated various types of texts like religious, political, and also there were debates between literal and free translation.

The Choice Between Word-for-word or Sense-for-sense Translation

Early translations reveal how translators coped with linguistic and cultural barriers. Ancient translators had to invent strategies for transferring meaning between languages with vastly different structures and conceptual systems.

Many theoretical concepts in modern translation studies originated in early reflections. For instance:

Cicero (1st century BC) advocated translating according to sense rather than words.

St. Jerome (4th century AD) emphasized conveying meaning instead of literal form, particularly in religious translation. [3]

And these early ideas definitely laid the groundwork for contemporary theories such as dynamic equivalence, communicative translation, and functionalism. [4]

Major debates in the history: Literal vs Free Translation

One of the most complicated debates concerns the opposition between Word-for-word translation and Sense-for-sense translation. Cicero argued that translators should focus on meaning rather than individual words. St. Jerome applied this principle to biblical translation.

This debate continues today in discussions of equivalence, domestication, and foreignization. As it originates in classical antiquity and continues to influence modern translation theory and practice. Literal translation aims to preserve the lexical units, grammatical structures, and syntactic organization of the source text as closely as possible, thereby ensuring formal fidelity and linguistic precision. This approach has traditionally been favored in the translation of religious, legal, and scientific texts, where accuracy and terminological consistency are crucial.

However strict literalism often results in unnatural, awkward, or semantically distorted target texts due to structural and cultural differences between languages.

In contrast, free translation prioritizes the transmission of meaning, communicative intention, and stylistic effect, allowing the translator to adapt linguistic forms to the norms and expectations of the target language and culture.

This method creates great readability, fluency, cultural accessibility, particularly in literary, journalistic, and public discourse translation.

The theoretical foundation of this debate was formulated by Cicero, who asserted that translators should render not words but meanings focusing on rhetorical effect rather than lexical equivalence. This principle was further developed by St. Jerome who applied sense for sense translation to secular texts while maintaining greater literalism for sacred scripture, recognizing the theological responsibility inherent in biblical translation.

The advantages of literal translation:

- + High accuracy of vocabulary
- + Preservation of original grammar and sentence structure
- + Often essential for legal, religious, or technical texts, where precise terminology is crucial.

Disadvantages:

- Can produce incomprehensible sentences in the target language
- Fails to capture idiomatic, stylistic or cultural nuances.
- May distort meaning when source and target languages have different grammatical systems

Free translation:

- + Produce fluent and natural target texts
- + Potential loss of specific stylistic appropriateness
- + particularly effective for literary, poetic, or rhetorical works.
- May be seen as less faithful in highly formal contexts
- Potential loss of specific stylistic or lexical features.
- Risk of interpretive bias by the translator [7-14].

Feature	Word-for-word	Sense-for-sense
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Primary goal	Formal fidelity & linguistic precision	Communicative intent & readability
Historical Roots	St. Jerome (sacred texts)	Cicero, Horace, Humanism
Key Advantage	High Accuracy & consistency	Natural flow & cultural adaptation
Main Risk	Awkward or distorted meaning	Potential loss of grammar or unique structures
Preferred Text Types	Legal, Scientific, Religious	Literary, poetic, journalistic

CONCLUSION

The choice between literal or sense for sense translation is not the answer as it is right or wrong but it is about decision based on text itself: the function it require, the audience who will read your translation, the context in which it will be presented, or the aim of the text. While literal translation remains essential for formal and technical accuracy, free translation ensures cultural accessibility and emotional impact. Modern translation practice successfully combines both methods, depending on the specific goals.



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