The meaning of "meaning": Reflection on linguistic school's

theoretical description of meaning in translation

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Abstract: The issue of meaning is undoubtedly significant in translation theory. Based on Catford's and Nida's view on meaning in translation, this paper aims at explore linguistic school's contribution to the theoretical description of meaning. With Nida's semantic studies as a focus, it argues that Nida's semantic studies represent an important stage and carry the linguistic school's theoretical studies of meaning in translation a step forward.

Key words: meaning; linguistic school; Catford; Nida; semantic analysis

1. Introduction

It is universally accepted that meaning is very important in translation and it is clearly necessary for translation theory to draw upon a theory of meaning. Without the theoretical description of meaning, it is hard for us to make a discussion on certain important issues of translation theory—the nature of translation, translatability and untranslatability, and translation equivalence.

2. Comment on Catford's view on meaning in translation

In his paper *A Brief Survey of Western Translation Studies* (LIU Mi-qing, 1989), Mr. LIU Mi-qing thinks that Catford tends to investigate the formal structure mechanism regardless of meaning and function, and thus Catford's equivalence concept is a concept of form. In this sense, Mr. LIU concludes that linguistic school's theoretical description of meaning is always in a weak situation. It seems that Catford does not attach importance to meaning. In fact, Catford has made some penetrating remarks on meaning. For example, by opposing Firth's view that the SL (source language) and TL (target language) texts "have the same meaning", Catford points out that "a SL text has a SL meaning, and a TL text has a TL meaning" (1965, p. 35). That is to say, it is impossible for the SL and TL texts to have the same meaning, and the formal meaning in different languages cannot be identical but corresponding. This is because "meaning is a property of a language" (Catford, 1965, p. 35). For instance, there are articles in both the English and French languages. These two languages share three kinds of articles, i.e., *zero* article, *definite* article (*the* vs. *le*, *la*, *l'*, *les*), and *indefinite* article (*a*, *an* vs. *un*, *une*). Nevertheless, it is unlikely for these two languages to have the identical formal meaning. Here is an example:

French SL text: *J'ai laissé mes lunettes sur la table.*

English TL text: *I've left my glasses in the table.*

(Catford, 1965, p. 76)

It seems that *the* is an equivalent of *la* in terms of formal meaning. However, there is still some difference

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between *the* and *la*, and they cannot have the same meaning. Because in French language, articles are different in masculine gender and feminine gender: *le* falls into the masculine gender, while *la* belongs to the feminine gender. While in English language there is no such difference in articles. Therefore, *the* can't be treated as the full equivalent of *la.* In this sense, Catford's view that it is impossible for transference of the same meaning to occur in translation may serve as a straightforward guideline for translation practice. It is a great pity that Catford's view on formal meaning has been misunderstood by Mr. LIU as formal structure. At the same time, Mr. LIU doesn't pay enough attention to Catford's view on meaning. This may lead to his hasty and arbitrary conclusion that the linguistic school's theoretical description of meaning is always in a weak situation.

3. Rethinking Nida's view on meaning in translation

It is an irrefutable fact that Nida has made a great contribution to the theoretical description of meaning. Based upon Nida's two important representative works published in the 1960s, i.e., *Toward a Science of Translating* (1964) and *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Nide, E. A. & C. R. Taber, 1969), the famous Chinese scholar TAN Zai-xi thinks, in his paper *Nida and His Translation Theory* (1989) that Nida has proposed a four-step model in the process of translation, i.e., analysis, transfer, restructuring and testing. Mr. TAN Zai-xi further points out that among the four steps, analysis is a most complicated and pivotal step which is the emphasis of Nida's translation studies and that semantic analysis is the focus of analysis. That is why Nida has dealt with the problem of semantic analysis with a length in these two works.

3.1 Three types of meaning in translation

In *Toward a Science of Translating,* Nida discusses linguistic meaning in chapter four, and referential meaning and emotive meaning in chapter five. Later, in *The Theory and Practice of Translation,* he expounds grammatical analysis, referential meaning and connotative meaning in chapters three, four and five respectively. In our view, these meanings can be summarized as the following three types: *grammatical* meaning, *referential* meaning and *connotative* (i.e., *emotive* or *associative*) meaning.

3.1.1 Grammatical meaning

Grammatical meaning refers to "the meaningful relationship between the constituent parts of the grammatical construction" (Nida, 1964, p. 57). This can be interpreted as the meaningful relationship between words, phrases and sentences. The total meaning of a phrase or sentence is not determined by a simple combination of the meanings of isolated words; part of the total meaning is derived from the particular structure of the phrase or sentence. For example, in the phrases such as *old man*, *gray house, beautiful fur* and *tall tree,* it is the first component in each case which qualifies the second. Moreover, such structures in traditional grammar as "subject + predicate" and "verb + object" designate, in fact, a kind of grammatical meaning. This can explain why the combination of words in a language is meaningful and cannot be changed freely. For example, when we analyze the combinative relationship of words in the sentence "*The old men stared at us*", we do not relate *the* to *old, old* to *men, men* to *stared,* etc., and do not reverse the position of *men stared* as *stared men.*

Generally speaking, the phrases and sentences made up of similar construction may have similar meanings. For instance, *The old men stared at us* and *Some young boys pounced on them* bear the same construction of the parts of speech of words, i.e., "det. + adj. + n. (pl.) + v. (past) +prep. + pron.", and thus they share the same grammatical meaning. But this is not always the case. Not all the same grammatical structures bear the same meaning, which should be valued by translators. A frequently-cited example is Nida's comparison between the

four phrases *his car, his failure, his arrest* and *his goodness.* These four phrases have the same construction, i.e., "possessive pron. (*his*) + n.", but the relationship between *his* and the following nouns is quite different in each phrase. Nida interprets them as *he has a car, he failed, he was arrested* and *he is good.* That is to say, these four expressions are actually different. Then Nida describes the four diverse formulas: "A possesses B", "A performs B", "A is the goal of the action B", and "B is the quality of A" (Nida, 1964, p. 59). In Nida's opinion, the reason for diverse meaningful relationships between structurally similar types of expressions is that they are transformed from different kernel sentences and we should resort to and explore the deep structure in order to have a clear understanding of the surface structure. Obviously, Nida attempts to adopt Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar to make his semantic analysis reasonable. Nida's analysis of grammatical meaning merits consideration as it can help translators to have a clear understanding about the relationships between the elements of structures, i.e., grammatical meanings, to acquire a better understanding of the original, and to avoid lumping together such expressions as *his car, his failure, his arrest, his involvement* and *his aged helper,* all of which have the same surface structure, but different deep structural meanings.

In the course of analyzing grammatical meaning, Nida proposes a new classification of words into: *object* words, *event* words, *abstract* words and *relational* words on the basis of Sapir's and the symbolic logician Reichenbach's theories (Nida, 1964, p. 62). *Object* words are the words indicating objective entities, such as *man*, *dog* and *machine*; nouns often function as object words. *Event* words are the words of action, such as *run*, *study* and *work*; verbs often function as event words. *Abstract* words are the words implying abstract concepts, such as *tall*, *quite* and *beautiful*; adjectives or adverbs often function as abstract words. *Relational* words are the words used to link the phrases or sentences, such as *in*, *if* and *although*; prepositions and conjunctions often function as relational words. However, this doesn't mean that all object, event, abstract and relational words are nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs, and prepositions or conjunctions. The reason is that Nida's four types of words are classified according to their meanings, and they denote the meanings of words, i.e., the concepts of words, which are something in the deep structure, not the grammatical forms which are something in the surface structure. Therefore, a certain type of word can have several diverse forms. For example, *beauty, beautiful, beautifully* and *beautify* belong to abstract words, but they are noun, adjective, adverb and verb respectively in terms of grammatical function.

3.1.2 Referential meaning

Grammatical meaning is no doubt important, but comparatively speaking, referential meaning and connotative (emotive or associative) meaning are where the key of Nida's semantic analysis lies. In Nida's view, referential meaning is generally thought of as "dictionary meaning" (Nida, 1964, p. 70). Later, he interprets referential meaning as the meaning of "the words as symbols which refer to objects, events, abstracts, relations" (Nida & Tiber, 1982, p. 56). Nida's explanation about referential meaning has been generalized by Mr. TAN Zaixi as the meaning of words referring to a certain objective entity or concept[1]. Referential meaning is, in fact, in our eyes, "conceptual meaning" bearing the logical, cognitive or denotative content which is the first basic meaning of Leech's seven kinds of meaning (i.e., *conceptual* meaning, *connotative* meaning, *social* meaning, *affective* meaning, *reflected* meaning, *collocative* meaning and *thematic* meaning) (HU Zhuang-lin, LIU Run-qing & LI Yan-fu, 1988, pp. 143-144). It is true that referential or conceptual meaning can often be found in dictionaries.

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[1] China Translation and Publishing Corporation. (Ed.). (1983). *A collection of essays concerning the introduction to and comments on translation theories abroad*. Beijing: China Translation and Publishing Corporation, 56. (in Chinese)

However, the referential or conceptual meaning of the same word may vary in different contexts. Therefore, a translator should analyze the linguistic context of the original carefully, comprehend the specific conceptual meanings accurately in different contexts, and choose the appropriate words in the TL. Otherwise, errors in translation may occur. Here is an example:

> *Jones' wife says, "I hope you take the photographs of the baby. There can never be enough pictures. When one looks back, there are hardly any pictures at all."*

> ——*Joy Williams: Bromeliads*

> *Qiong Si De Qi Zi Shuo, "Wo Xi Wang Ni Gei Wa Wa Pai Ge Zhao Pian. Ta De Wai Mao Shi Mei Fa Zi Miao Shu De. Dang Ni Hui Xiang Qi Lai Shi, Yi Dian Mei Fa Zi Miao Shu."*

> （琼斯的妻子说："我希望你给娃娃拍个照片。她的外貌是没法子描述的。当你回想起来时，一点没法子描述。"）

> (MAO Hua-fen, 1991)

Obviously, the two *pictures* have been rendered into *Miao Shu* (description) in a wrong way. In fact, *photographs* in the context have implied that *pictures* should be translated into *Zhao Pian* (photos) in the two cases. Thus, a translator will distort the referential or conceptual meaning of the original if he doesn't pay enough attention to the context. And that is why Nida suggests that "referential meaning" should refer primarily to "the cultural context identified in the utterance" (Nida, 1964, p. 70). Context plays a decisive role in determining the appropriateness of words bearing two or more than two meanings. This is just as firth has noted that "each word when used in a new context is a new word" (MAO Hua-fen, 1991).

3.1.3 Connotative meaning

Connotative or emotive meaning relates to the associative or "emotional reactions to words" (Nida & Tiber, 1982, p. 91) of the participants in the communicative act. It involves such emotive values as "vulgar", "obscene", "slang" and "pedantic". Although the analysis of emotive meaning is by no means as easy as that of referential meaning, Nida proposes that the only way in which emotive meaning can be analyzed is by contexts, either cultural or linguistic (Nida, 1964, p. 71). In describing emotive meaning based on cultural contexts we either analyze the behavioral responses of foreign speakers to the use of certain words if we are studying a foreign language or we attempt to diagnose our emotional attitudes toward words of our mother tongue. In describing emotive meaning through the examination of linguistic contexts we analyze the co-occurring words which may prove diagnostic as to emotive value. This is, in our view, collocative meaning. It is true that some synonyms may have the same referential or conceptual meaning, but they have different collocative meanings when they co-occur with other words. For example, *pretty* and *handsome* are synonyms bearing the same referential meaning "good-looking", but when they co-occur with the word *woman*, different collocative or associative meanings arise, for *a pretty woman* implies "a beautiful woman" and *a handsome woman* indicates "a respectable woman".

According to Mr. TAN Zai-xi, Nida's classification of "referential meaning" and "connotative meaning" is of positive significance for translation practice[2]. As we all know, synonyms exist universally in a language and they are different in terms of connotative or emotive meanings, not in referential meanings. For example, *thin*, *slender*, *skinny* and *scrawny* share the same referential meaning "having not much flesh", but their connotative or emotive meanings are quite different. *Thin* is a general word; *slender* bears appreciative flavor. *Skinny* and *scrawny* are

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[2] China Translation and Publishing Corporation. (Ed.). (1983). *A collection of essays concerning the introduction to and comments on translation theories abroad*. Beijing: China Translation and Publishing Corporation, 57. (in Chinese)

derogatory words, and the latter bears a much stronger derogatory sense than the former. Therefore, they can be rendered into different kinds of Chinese version separately as follows: *Shou De*（瘦的）, *Miao Tiao De*（苗条的）, *Pi Bao Gu De*（皮包骨的）, and *Gu Shou Ru Chai De*（骨瘦如柴的）. If we do not pay attention to their different connotative or emotive meanings and translate all of them into *Shou De*（瘦的）, the same Chinese word in a simple and careless manner, their emotive value may experience a great loss. To cite one more example, the two sentences of "*He died*" and "*He passed away*" have the same referential meaning "He was dead", but the latter is the euphemism for "died". Their Chinese equivalents may be *Ta Si Le*（他死了）and *Ta Shi Shi Le*（他逝世了）.

Similarly, if *He passed away* is translated simply and hurriedly into *Ta Si Le*（他死了）in Chinese, the euphemistic flavor of the original cannot be conveyed faithfully and accurately in translation.

3.2 Nida's approaches to semantic analysis

In addition, Nida adopts different approaches to make an in-depth analysis of different meanings. The most familiar approaches are chain analysis, hierarchical analysis, and componential analysis used to describe the referential meanings.

3.2.1 Chain analysis

In chain analysis, Nida analyzes semantic structures by the lineal arrangement of lexical items. We may analyze color and numerical terms by means of chain analysis. Through the analysis, we find that it is hard for us to define some color terms because their sense may involve overlapping to some degrees. That is to say, some colors may be referred by either of two terms. This is as true of English terminology as that of any other language. Generally speaking, in English and a number of other languages such as Chinese, there is no overlapping in numerical terms *one*, *two*, *three*, *four*, etc., for considerable precision is attached to them and any possibility of ambiguity has to be removed[3]. However, for some languages there is a good deal of overlapping. Nida takes the Shiriana dialect of Shirianan (a language spoken on the Upper Uraricaa River of northern Brazil) as an example. There are basically only five number words in this language:

(1) "*pemi*, indicating that there is none. This contrasts with all other number terms, which are positive.

(2) *moni*, one or a few, but not as many as *ŋami*.

(3) *čarekep*, two, or more than one, but not as many as *čarami*.

(4) *ŋami*, few, but in contrast with *čarami*.

(5) *čarami*, many, usually five or more."

(Nida, 1964, p. 72)

Then in order to reveal clearly the semantic overlapping and distinction of these five number words, Nida provides a chain figure (see Figure 1) as follows (Nida, 1964, p. 72):

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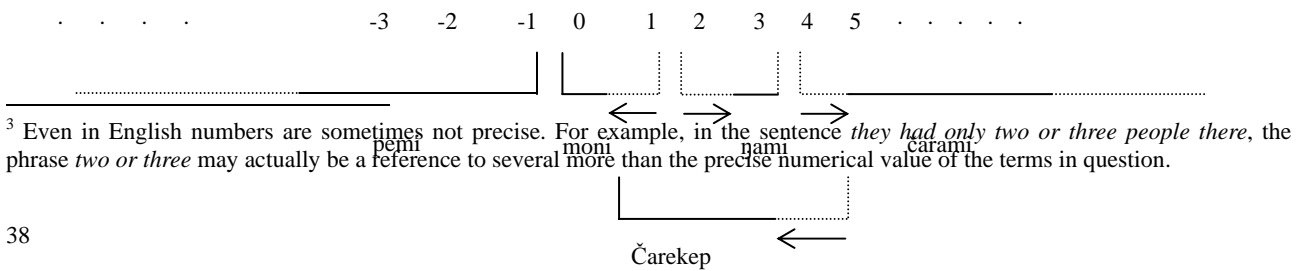
[3] Even in English numbers are sometimes not precise. For example, in the sentence *they had only two or three people there*, the phrase *two or three* may actually be a reference to several more than the precise numerical value of the terms in question.

Figure 1   Nida's chain figure

In Nida's view, though a chain analysis may be quite useful in exploring the relationships existing in certain semantic structures, this procedure of analysis is actually not of great significance for only a few sets of words reveal these relationships and most semantic structures are too complex to be treated by any chain analysis. It is for this reason that Nida puts forward the other two approaches—hierarchical and componential analyses, which are much more useful and effective than chain analysis.

3.2.2 Hierarchical analysis

In hierarchical analysis, Nida analyzes the meaning in the form of hierarchical structures. In other words, if we treat meanings as a kind of hierarchically structural relationships and each word holds a certain rank, the meaning of an upper term can include that of its lower term. In fact, Nida's hierarchical analysis is based upon an important sense relationship in linguistics—hyponymy. Hyponymy involves us in the notion of meaning inclusion and it is a matter of class membership (HU Zhuang-lin, LIU Run-qing & LI Yan-fu, 1988, p. 148). The upper term is more general and is called superordinate; the lower term is more specific and is called hyponym. The meaning of superordinate can include that of hyponym. For example, the word *animal* holds the upper rank in a hierarchical structure, and it can include *dog*, *cat*, *rat*, *fish*, *human being*, etc. Consequently, *animal* is the superordinate of *dog*, *cat*, *rat*, *fish*, *human being*, etc. Such a relationship can be shown by the following diagram of hierarchical structure (see Figure 2):
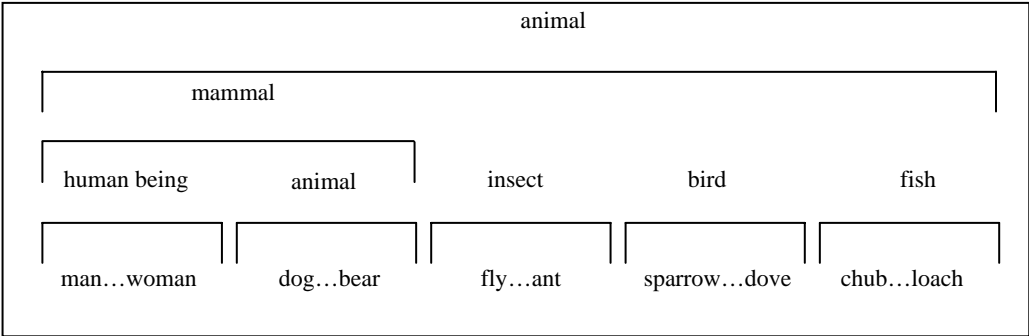

Figure 2   A diagram of hierarchical structure

In the above diagram, the word *animal* appears in the two cases because in the actual speech, *animal* bears at least two meanings: *animal* includes, in a broad sense, *human being*, *insect*, *bird*, etc.; *animal* is, in a narrow sense, in contrast with *human being*, *insect*, *bird*, etc.

It is clear that hierarchical analysis focuses on hyponymy and this kind of analysis can help a translator to judge whether the TL words and the SL words are semantically equivalent or not, whether they belong to the corresponding ranks or not. For example, the same Chinese term *Nong Ye* (agriculture) in *Nong Ye Shi Guo Min Jing Ji De Ji Chu* (agriculture is the basis of national economy) and *Nong Lin Mu Fu Yu Hu Xiang Jie He De Fang Zhen* (the policy of combining forestry, fishery, sideline occupation as well as farming and husbandry

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together) may refer to the different hierarchical semantic levels. *Nong Ye* in the first statement which includes forestry, fishery, sideline occupation as well as farming and husbandry, is a superordinate term and therefore should be translated into *agriculture* in English. *Nong (Ye)* in the second statement refers to the practice or specific activity of agriculture, and it is a hyponym of *Nong Ye*, and therefore should be rendered into *farming*. Probably owing to the failure to make the distinction between superordination and hyponymy and the failure to judge the corresponding ranks of the SL sentence and TL sentence in a correct way, *A Chinese-English Dictionary of Neologisms* published by Beijing Foreign Languages Institute in 1990 translates *Nong Lin Mu Fu Yu* into *agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, sidelines* and *fishery*, which is an inappropriate rendition, if not wrong.

3.2.3 Componential analysis

In addition to chain analyses and hierarchical analyses, Nida adopts a third approach—componential analysis to analyze the meaning of related words, which provided that the relationships between terms are based upon certain shared and contrastive features. In other words, the approach of componential analysis functions as breaking down the meanings of terms into their respective constituents of meaning, then comparing these semantic components in order to clarify the meanings of terms. Of course, Nida is not the founder of componential analysis of meaning. In the 1930s some anthropologists adopted this kind of analysis to analyze the kinship. Other linguists such as Jakobson, Conklin, Katz and Fodor have made some contribution to the improvement of componential analysis. According to Mr. TAN Zai-xi, the contribution that Nida has made to the componential analysis lies in the fact that he has provided a relatively thorough and systematic analysis of language by applying this approach[4]. Nida compares and analyzes the lexical items in the same semantic field by adopting the diagnostic methods. This diagnostic procedure of determining the relevant components of the lexical items consists of the following six steps (Nida & Tiber, 1982, p. 78):

(1) Isolate and "discard" the universal component(s), since they are not distinctive;

(2) Isolate the components which occur in one or more but not all of the meanings, i.e., those which are distinctive of subsets of meanings;

(3) Arrange these components in parallel columns under each meaning, marking as much similarity and difference as is needed;

(4) Of the remaining components, reject for the moment supplementary components, i.e., those which can be excluded without destroying the meaning, and add to each column those which are necessary to define that meaning;

(5) Indicate the extent of parallelism or agreement between senses;

(6) Determine which components are distinctive, individually or collectively, for each meaning.

Then, by the application of step (1) through (6), Nida gives a full analysis of the components of the nominal meanings of *chair* (Nida & Tiber, 1982, p. 78) in the four phrases *bought a chair, electric chair, address the chair,* and *the chair of philosophy* (Table 1).

Table 1   A table to analyze the components of the nominal meanings of *chair*

1	2	3	4

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[4] China Translation and Publishing Corporation. (Ed.). (1983). *A collection of essays concerning the introduction to and comments on translation theories abroad*. Beijing: China Translation and Publishing Corporation, 59. (in Chinese)

a. manufactured object	a. manufactured object	a. person	a. position
b. for sitting	b. for sitting	b. prominence	b. prominence
c. for resting	c. for execution	c. parliamentary	c. academic

If we compare each component of meanings in the above examples, we can have a clear understanding about which components are identical and universal and which are different and distinctive.

Nida's componential analysis has been widely applied in the course of analyzing kinship terms. By means of comparing and describing the distinctive features of kinship terms, we can draw a relatively scientific and objective conclusion about the meanings of terms. For instance, *father* may be described as *the first ascending generation*, *male* and *lineal* (i.e., the directly related member of a family), while the description of *mother* has two identical features with that of *father* and one distinctive feature *female* in contrast with *male*.

By using componential analysis, it is possible for us to describe the words of a language with respect to components of meaning interlingually and contrastively. For this reason, componential analysis has become an important methodological concept for semantically differentiating the words in the field of meaning (i.e., a semantic field) and for studying synonyms. Therefore, Nida's semantic componential analysis is helpful to translators if it is adopted in a proper way.

4. Conclusion

It is an irrefutable fact that Nida has been focusing on semantic study and attempting to explore the semantic structure since the 1960s, for in his view interlingual communication involves meaning and the barriers resulting from the former can be overcome with the study of the latter. In 1975, Nida issued *Exploring semantic structures.* Nida includes some essays concerning semantic study in this book and makes a further exploration of semantic structures. In the same year, Nida wrote *Componential Analysis of Meaning* and made a thorough investigation on the semantic problems of English words. Nida's componential analysis has been highly evaluated by W. Wilss. In *The Science of Translation: Problems and Methods*, Wilss holds that Nida's componential analysis approach "is especially revealing from the standpoint of the science of translation" among the many attempts made in linguistics in the last twenty years in the field of componential analysis, "because it stems from the discussion of semantic problems involved in translating the Bible and includes reflection on basic aspects of TE (Translation Equivalence)" (Wilss, 2001, p. 74). However, Nida's approach is only limited within the monolingual comparative analysis of meaning, and doesn't take the interlingual comparative analysis of meaning into consideration. In the 1980s, Nida's three important works on semantic study were issued, which are *Meaning Across Culture* (1981), *Translating meaning* (1982) and *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation* (co-authored with J. de Waard, 1986). In *Translating Meaning*, Nida proposes that "'translating' means 'translating meaning'" (1982, p. 11). Later, in *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation*, he further interprets "translating meaning" as "translating meaning implies translating the total significance of a message in terms of both its lexical or propositional content and its rhetorical significance" (ZHOU Jun-qing, 1996). At the same time, in this book, he replaces the previous classification of *grammatical* meaning, *referential* meaning and *connotative* or *emotive* meaning with that of *grammatical* meaning, *lexical* meaning and *rhetorical* meaning, and each kind of meaning can be subdivided into *referential* meaning and

connotative or *emotive* meaning (TAN Zai-xi, 1999, p. XXI).

Therefore, Nida's theoretical studies of meaning in translation have been in constant development. His semantic studies, thus, represent an important stage and carry the linguistic school's theoretical studies of meaning in translation a step forward.

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