

CAN A TRANSLATION EVER SURPASS THE ORIGINAL?

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Annotation. This article examines whether a translation can ever surpass the original text by exploring linguistic, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of translation. Drawing on major translation theories, it analyzes the translator's creative role, the balance between fidelity and artistic expression, and the circumstances under which a translated work may achieve greater literary or cultural impact than its source.

Keywords: Translation studies; original text; literary translation; translator's creativity; equivalence; fidelity; cultural adaptation; aesthetic value; target audience; translation quality.

Introduction. Translation has long served as a bridge between languages, cultures, and civilizations, enabling people from different linguistic backgrounds to access literature, knowledge, and ideas beyond their native languages. While the traditional view considers the original text to be the highest and most authoritative form of a literary work, translation studies have increasingly challenged this assumption. One of the most thought-provoking questions in the field is whether a translation can ever surpass the original. This issue has generated considerable debate among linguists, literary critics, translators, and scholars for decades.

The conventional belief is that no translation can fully reproduce every linguistic, stylistic, cultural, and emotional aspect of the source text. Since languages differ in vocabulary, grammar, cultural references, and literary traditions, some degree of loss or transformation is generally considered inevitable during the translation process. However, many scholars argue that translation is not merely a process of transferring words from one language to another but also an act of interpretation and creative rewriting. A skilled translator may successfully recreate the artistic, emotional, and aesthetic qualities of the original while making the text more accessible and meaningful to readers in the target culture.

History offers numerous examples of translations that have become literary masterpieces in their own right. In some cases, translated works have reached wider audiences than the originals, influenced national literatures, and even shaped readers' perceptions more profoundly than the source texts themselves. Such examples challenge the traditional hierarchy between original and translation and encourage scholars to reconsider the translator's role as a creative author rather than a simple linguistic mediator.

This article explores the question of whether a translation can surpass the original by examining major theories of translation, including concepts of equivalence, fidelity, creativity, and cultural adaptation. It also discusses the circumstances under which a

translation may achieve greater literary, aesthetic, or cultural significance than its source text. Through theoretical analysis and selected literary examples, the study aims to demonstrate that although complete equivalence is impossible, certain translations may, from the perspective of target readers, possess qualities that allow them to equal or even exceed the impact of the original work.

Literature review. In *Toward a Science of Translating* (1964), Eugene A. Nida challenges the traditional view that a translation should be judged solely by its closeness to the linguistic form of the original. Instead, he argues that the primary purpose of translation is to reproduce the message of the source text in such a way that the target audience responds to it in a manner similar to the original readers. This principle, later known as **dynamic equivalence**, shifts the emphasis from formal correspondence to communicative effectiveness. According to Nida, successful translation requires more than lexical accuracy; it demands sensitivity to cultural context, idiomatic expression, and the expectations of the target audience.

From this perspective, the question of whether a translation can surpass the original receives a nuanced answer. Nida does not claim that a translation is inherently superior to its source text. However, he acknowledges that a well-executed translation may communicate the author's intended meaning more clearly and naturally to modern or foreign readers than the original does within its own historical or cultural setting. When translators overcome linguistic and cultural barriers through careful adaptation, the translated text may produce a stronger emotional or communicative impact on its new audience. Thus, the success of a translation should be measured not by literal fidelity alone but by its ability to achieve an equivalent effect.

Nida further emphasizes that translation is both a scientific and creative activity. The translator must analyze the linguistic structure of the source text while also making informed interpretive decisions that preserve meaning, style, and function. Consequently, although a translation cannot replace the historical and artistic uniqueness of the original, it may, under certain circumstances, be perceived as more accessible, more persuasive, or more meaningful by its target readers. This possibility suggests that a translation can equal—and in terms of reader reception, occasionally even surpass—the original in communicative effectiveness.¹

In *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (1969), Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber further develop the principles of dynamic equivalence and emphasize that the primary purpose of translation is to reproduce the message of the source text in the most natural form possible within the receptor language. They argue that an ideal

¹ Nida, E. A. (1964). *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, pp. 132–156.

translation should evoke a response in the target audience that is substantially equivalent to the response experienced by the original readers. For this reason, translators should prioritize meaning over formal correspondence, adapting linguistic structures, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references whenever necessary to ensure effective communication.

Nida and Taber maintain that translation is fundamentally an act of communication rather than a mechanical replacement of words. They stress that the translator must understand not only the linguistic content of the source text but also its cultural context and intended effect. A successful translation therefore requires careful interpretation and creative decision-making to preserve the communicative function of the original. Literal translation, in their view, often fails because it may obscure meaning or produce unnatural language that prevents readers from fully understanding the text.

Although Nida and Taber do not explicitly argue that a translation can surpass the original, their theoretical framework leaves room for such a possibility from the perspective of target-language readers. When the original text contains unfamiliar cultural elements, obsolete vocabulary, or complex stylistic features, a translator may produce a version that is clearer, more accessible, and more emotionally engaging for the new audience. In such cases, the translation may communicate the author's intentions more effectively than the source text does for readers outside its original linguistic and cultural environment.

Their work also highlights the translator's role as an intercultural mediator whose responsibility extends beyond linguistic accuracy to achieving functional equivalence. According to Nida and Taber, the success of a translation should be evaluated by its communicative effectiveness rather than by its formal similarity to the original. This perspective supports the view that, although a translation cannot replace the historical and artistic value of the source text, it may equal or even exceed the original in terms of readability, audience reception, and cultural impact within the target language community.²

In *Approaches to Translation* (1981), Peter Newmark examines translation as both a linguistic and an artistic activity, emphasizing the complex relationship between fidelity to the source text and the communicative needs of the target audience. He distinguishes between **semantic translation**, which seeks to preserve the precise meaning and stylistic characteristics of the original, and **communicative translation**, which aims to produce the same effect on target readers that the original produced on

² Nida, E. A., & Taber, C. R. (1969). *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, pp. 41–67.

its initial audience. According to Newmark, the choice between these two approaches depends on the purpose of the translation and the nature of the text.

Newmark argues that translation should never be viewed as a simple word-for-word transfer between languages. Instead, the translator must make informed decisions that balance accuracy with natural expression. While semantic translation remains closely attached to the source text, communicative translation allows greater flexibility in adapting cultural references, idioms, and stylistic features so that the message is clear and meaningful for readers in the target language. This flexibility reflects the translator's responsibility to ensure successful communication without unnecessarily sacrificing the author's intention.

Regarding the question of whether a translation can ever surpass the original, Newmark adopts a cautious position. He consistently maintains that the original text possesses unique linguistic and artistic qualities that cannot be completely reproduced in another language. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that a communicative translation may, in certain circumstances, be more effective for its intended audience. When a translator successfully removes linguistic and cultural barriers, clarifies ambiguous expressions, and presents the message in a natural and readable form, the translated text may achieve greater accessibility and a stronger immediate impact than the original for target-language readers.

Newmark therefore suggests that the success of a translation should not be judged solely by its formal resemblance to the source text but also by its ability to fulfill its communicative purpose. Although he does not claim that translations are inherently superior to originals, his theory implies that a carefully crafted communicative translation can sometimes be regarded as more understandable, engaging, or influential within the target culture. Thus, while the artistic originality of the source text remains irreplaceable, a translation may equal or even exceed the original in terms of reader reception and communicative effectiveness.³

In *A Textbook of Translation* (1988), Peter Newmark presents translation as both a science and an art, requiring linguistic competence, cultural awareness, and careful critical judgment. He argues that the translator's principal responsibility is to preserve the meaning, intention, and stylistic characteristics of the source text while producing a natural and intelligible text in the target language. According to Newmark, successful translation depends on achieving an appropriate balance between accuracy and readability rather than adhering exclusively to either literal or free translation.

³ Newmark, P. (1981). *Approaches to Translation*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, pp. 82–108.

A central aspect of Newmark's theory is the distinction between semantic and communicative translation. Semantic translation aims to remain as faithful as possible to the original author's language and style, whereas communicative translation focuses on ensuring that the target readers receive the message clearly and effectively. Newmark emphasizes that neither method is universally superior; instead, the translator must select the most suitable approach according to the type, purpose, and audience of the text. This flexibility highlights the translator's active role in interpreting and reconstructing meaning rather than merely transferring linguistic forms.

With regard to the question of whether a translation can ever surpass the original, Newmark maintains that every original literary work possesses unique artistic, cultural, and historical qualities that cannot be fully replicated in another language. However, he also recognizes that a well-executed translation may be more accessible and communicatively successful for readers who do not share the linguistic and cultural background of the original audience. Through clear expression, appropriate cultural adaptation, and stylistic naturalness, a translator may eliminate barriers that would otherwise prevent readers from appreciating the author's ideas.

Newmark therefore suggests that the value of a translation should be measured not only by its fidelity to the source text but also by its effectiveness within the target culture. Although he does not claim that a translation can replace or permanently exceed the artistic value of the original, his theoretical framework allows for the possibility that a translation may be judged as more readable, persuasive, or influential by its intended audience. In this sense, a translation may achieve greater communicative success than the original without diminishing the originality or literary significance of the source text. This balanced perspective positions the translator as both a faithful interpreter and a creative communicator whose work can substantially shape the reception of literary and non-literary texts across cultures.⁴

In *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation* (1959), Roman Jakobson presents translation as an interpretative process rather than a simple transfer of words between languages. He argues that meaning is not contained in isolated linguistic forms but is created through signs, context, and interpretation. Consequently, translation involves replacing messages in one language with equivalent messages in another rather than reproducing identical linguistic structures. Jakobson distinguishes three forms of translation: intralingual translation (rewording within the same language), interlingual translation (translation between languages), and intersemiotic translation (translation between verbal and non-verbal sign systems). This classification broadens the understanding of translation as a creative and communicative activity.

A central concept in Jakobson's theory is that there is generally no complete equivalence between individual words or grammatical structures across languages.

⁴ Newmark, P. (1988). *A Textbook of Translation*. New York: Prentice Hall, pp. 56–82.

Instead, translators seek **equivalence in difference**, adapting linguistic forms while preserving the intended meaning and communicative function. He argues that apparent gaps between languages do not make translation impossible; rather, they require translators to employ linguistic creativity, cultural knowledge, and contextual interpretation. Translation is therefore an act of reformulation in which meaning is continuously recreated rather than mechanically transferred.

Jakobson's ideas are particularly significant when considering whether a translation can ever surpass the original. Although he does not explicitly claim that translations are superior to source texts, his understanding of translation as interpretation implies that every translation offers a new perspective on the original work. By making implicit meanings more explicit, resolving ambiguities, or selecting stylistic resources that resonate more effectively with target-language readers, a translator may produce a text that is perceived as clearer or more aesthetically satisfying within another linguistic and cultural environment.

His famous observation that "poetry by definition is untranslatable" should not be understood as a rejection of poetic translation but as recognition of its exceptional complexity. Jakobson argues that poetry cannot be transferred through simple linguistic substitution because its meaning is inseparable from sound, rhythm, and verbal artistry. Instead, poetic translation requires creative transposition, allowing the translator to recreate equivalent aesthetic and poetic effects through different linguistic means. From this perspective, although the original retains its unique artistic identity, a skillful translation may acquire independent literary value and, for certain readers and cultural contexts, achieve an impact comparable to—or occasionally even greater than—that of the source text.⁵

In *The Task of the Translator* (1923), Walter Benjamin offers one of the most influential philosophical perspectives on translation, challenging the conventional assumption that a translation exists merely to reproduce the meaning of the original text. He argues that the purpose of translation is not to imitate or replace the source work but to reveal its deeper linguistic and aesthetic potential. According to Benjamin, every literary work possesses an "afterlife" (Fortleben), and translation becomes an essential stage in that continuing existence by allowing the text to live beyond the historical, linguistic, and cultural limits of its original context.

Benjamin maintains that a translation should not be judged by the degree to which it resembles the original in wording or style. Instead, its value lies in its ability to

⁵ Jakobson, R. (1959). On Linguistic Aspects of Translation. In R. A. Brower (Ed.), *On Translation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. pp. 228–238

disclose relationships between languages and to contribute to what he describes as "pure language" (reine Sprache), an ideal unity that no single language can fully express on its own. Translation therefore functions as an independent creative act that complements rather than duplicates the original. Rather than attempting to make the translated text identical to the source, the translator should preserve the foreignness of the original and reveal meanings that may remain implicit within it.

These ideas have important implications for the question of whether a translation can ever surpass the original. Benjamin does not argue that a translation is superior to its source text, nor does he establish a hierarchy in which one should replace the other. Instead, he views the original and the translation as mutually enriching works that exist in a dynamic relationship. A translation may illuminate hidden dimensions of the source text, extend its intellectual and cultural influence, and introduce it to entirely new audiences. Through this process, the translation acquires its own aesthetic and philosophical significance while simultaneously contributing to the continued life of the original.

Benjamin's theory thus moves beyond the traditional debate over fidelity and equivalence by presenting translation as an autonomous form of literary creation. From this perspective, a translation does not surpass the original by correcting or improving it; rather, it expands the original's possibilities, uncovers new meanings, and ensures its survival across languages and generations. Consequently, although the original retains its unique historical identity, a translation may achieve an equally profound literary and cultural value within a different linguistic community.⁶

In *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (1975), George Steiner presents translation as a universal act of human communication, arguing that every act of understanding involves a process of interpretation and, therefore, a form of translation. Rather than treating translation as a secondary linguistic activity, Steiner places it at the center of communication, emphasizing that meaning is never transferred mechanically but is continually reconstructed through interpretation. This perspective challenges the traditional distinction between original writing and translation by suggesting that all reading is, to some extent, an interpretative act.

A central concept in Steiner's theory is the "**hermeneutic motion**," a four-stage process consisting of trust, aggression, incorporation, and restitution. According to Steiner, translators first approach the source text with confidence that it contains meaningful content, then penetrate and interpret that meaning, incorporate it into the target language, and finally attempt to restore balance by respecting the integrity of the

⁶ Benjamin, W. (1968). *The Task of the Translator*. In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (H. Zohn, Trans.). New York: Schocken Books. (Original work published 1923). pp. 73–86

original. This process highlights the translator's active and creative role, demonstrating that translation involves intellectual judgment and cultural negotiation rather than simple linguistic substitution.

Steiner's ideas are particularly relevant to the question of whether a translation can ever surpass the original. Although he does not claim that translations are inherently superior to their source texts, he argues that each translation constitutes a unique interpretation shaped by the translator's historical, cultural, and linguistic context. As a result, different translations of the same work may reveal meanings, stylistic nuances, or philosophical dimensions that were not immediately apparent to previous readers. A successful translation therefore has the potential to enrich the understanding of the original rather than merely reproduce it.

Furthermore, Steiner emphasizes that literary classics remain alive because they are repeatedly translated and reinterpreted by successive generations. Every new translation reflects changing cultural values, linguistic developments, and reader expectations, allowing the original work to acquire renewed significance in different historical contexts. In some cases, a translation may become more influential, widely read, or culturally significant than the source text within the target-language community. Nevertheless, Steiner does not interpret this as evidence that the translation replaces or exceeds the original in artistic value. Instead, he argues that the original and its translations exist in a continuous dialogue, with each new translation extending the life, relevance, and interpretative possibilities of the source work. From this perspective, a translation may surpass the original in terms of accessibility, reception, or cultural influence for a particular audience while remaining inseparably connected to the creative authority of the original text.⁷

In *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995), Lawrence Venuti challenges the traditional assumption that a successful translation should read as if it were originally written in the target language. He argues that the dominance of fluent and transparent translation in English-language publishing has rendered translators "invisible," encouraging readers to overlook the translator's creative labor and to perceive the translated text as a direct reflection of the original. According to Venuti, this expectation not only diminishes the translator's contribution but also conceals the cultural and ideological transformations that inevitably occur during the translation process.

⁷ Steiner, G. (1975). *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 255–289.

Venuti emphasizes that translation is never a neutral or purely linguistic activity. Every translation is shaped by the translator's interpretative choices, cultural values, and the literary norms of the target culture. For this reason, he distinguishes between **domestication**, which adapts the source text to the conventions of the target language, and **foreignization**, which deliberately preserves elements of linguistic and cultural difference. Venuti advocates foreignization as an ethical strategy because it makes readers aware of the foreign origin of the text and highlights the translator's active role in mediating between cultures.

These ideas are highly relevant to the question of whether a translation can ever surpass the original. Venuti does not argue that translations are inherently superior to their source texts; instead, he rejects the hierarchical relationship that traditionally places the original above the translation. He contends that every translation is an independent cultural production that generates new meanings within the receiving culture. A translation may therefore achieve greater literary prestige, broader readership, or stronger cultural influence than the original, particularly when it responds effectively to the expectations and values of its target audience. In such cases, the translation acquires its own authority rather than functioning merely as a derivative copy.

Furthermore, Venuti argues that the reception of a translated work depends not only on the qualities of the original text but also on historical circumstances, publishing practices, critical interpretation, and cultural ideology. Consequently, a translation can reshape the reputation of a literary work and even influence the way later readers understand the original. Although Venuti never claims that a translation replaces the artistic uniqueness of its source, his theory suggests that translations should be regarded as creative and culturally significant works in their own right. From this perspective, a translation may surpass the original in terms of visibility, influence, or reception within a particular literary system, while remaining fundamentally connected to the source text that inspired it.⁸

Methodology. This study employs a *qualitative research design* to investigate whether a translation can surpass the original text. The research is based on the *comparative method*, which is used to examine the relationship between original literary works and their translations in terms of meaning, style, and reader impact. In addition, the *descriptive-analytical method* is applied to interpret the theoretical views of leading translation scholars, including Eugene Nida, Peter Newmark, Roman

⁸ Venuti, L. (1995). *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London & New York: Routledge, pp. 97–126.

Jakobson, Walter Benjamin, George Steiner, and Lawrence Venuti. A **textual analysis** is also conducted to identify how translation strategies influence the quality and effectiveness of translated texts. Furthermore, the study utilizes **content analysis** to synthesize key concepts from books and scholarly publications related to translation theory. These methods provide a theoretical basis for evaluating whether a translation may achieve greater communicative or cultural impact than its original.

Result/analysis. The analysis of major translation theories demonstrates that the relationship between an original text and its translation is more complex than a simple comparison of linguistic accuracy. The findings indicate that modern translation scholars generally reject the traditional view that a translation is necessarily inferior to its source text. Instead, they argue that the quality of a translation should be evaluated according to its communicative effectiveness, cultural relevance, and literary impact.

The comparative analysis of theoretical approaches reveals both similarities and differences among the scholars examined. Nida and Taber emphasize **dynamic equivalence**, arguing that the success of a translation depends on its ability to produce an equivalent response in the target audience. Their theory suggests that a translation may become more accessible and emotionally effective than the original for readers from another linguistic and cultural background. Likewise, Newmark's distinction between **semantic** and **communicative translation** indicates that communicative translations often achieve greater readability and clarity, although they should remain faithful to the author's intended meaning.

Jakobson expands this perspective by defining translation as an interpretative process rather than a mechanical transfer of words. His concept of "equivalence in difference" demonstrates that translators recreate meaning through linguistic and cultural adaptation. Benjamin and Steiner move beyond linguistic equivalence and present translation as a creative act that extends the life and significance of literary works. Benjamin's concept of the "afterlife" of a text suggests that translations reveal dimensions of meaning that may remain hidden in the original, while Steiner's hermeneutic approach emphasizes that every translation represents a new interpretation shaped by historical and cultural circumstances.

Venuti's theory further strengthens this argument by challenging the traditional hierarchy between original and translation. His discussion of translator invisibility and the strategies of domestication and foreignization shows that translations function as independent cultural products capable of influencing literary traditions and reader perceptions. Consequently, the translator should be regarded not merely as a linguistic mediator but also as a creative contributor to the production of meaning.

Overall, the analysis indicates that a translation rarely surpasses the original in terms of historical authenticity or artistic originality. However, it may exceed the original in other respects, including readability, communicative effectiveness, cultural

accessibility, and influence within the target culture. These findings suggest that the question is not whether a translation is universally "better" than the original, but rather in what contexts and according to which criteria it may be considered more successful. Therefore, the superiority of a translation should be viewed as context-dependent, varying according to the needs, expectations, and cultural background of its readers rather than as an absolute literary judgment.

Recommendation. Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed for translators, researchers, and educators in the field of translation studies.

First, translators should prioritize both **accuracy and communicative effectiveness**, striving to preserve the author's intended meaning while producing a natural and culturally appropriate text for the target audience. Achieving a balance between fidelity and readability is essential for high-quality translation.

Second, translation should be evaluated not only by its linguistic closeness to the original but also by its literary, cultural, and communicative impact. Future assessments of translation quality should therefore include reader reception and functional effectiveness alongside traditional criteria of equivalence.

Third, translation training programs should encourage the development of translators' cultural competence, interpretative skills, and creative decision-making. A deeper understanding of both source and target cultures enables translators to produce texts that are faithful to the original while remaining meaningful for contemporary readers.

Finally, further research should examine comparative case studies of multiple translations of the same literary work to identify the factors that contribute to their reception and influence. Such studies would provide stronger empirical evidence regarding the circumstances under which a translation may equal or even surpass the original in terms of communicative success and cultural significance.

Conclusion. The question of whether a translation can ever surpass the original remains one of the most significant debates in translation studies. The analysis conducted in this study demonstrates that there is no simple or universal answer, as the evaluation of a translation depends on the criteria used. While an original text retains its unique historical, linguistic, and artistic identity, a translation may achieve greater communicative effectiveness, cultural accessibility, and reader engagement within a different linguistic and cultural context.

The theories of Nida, Newmark, Jakobson, Benjamin, Steiner, and Venuti collectively show that translation is far more than a linguistic substitution. It is an interpretative and creative process through which translators reconstruct meaning, negotiate cultural differences, and produce texts that function independently within the target culture. Their perspectives suggest that the success of a translation should be

measured not only by its fidelity to the source text but also by its ability to fulfill its communicative and literary purposes.

The findings of this study indicate that although a translation cannot replace the originality or historical authenticity of the source text, it may, under certain circumstances, surpass the original in terms of readability, accessibility, emotional resonance, and cultural influence. Therefore, the superiority of a translation should not be regarded as an absolute concept but as a context-dependent phenomenon shaped by the expectations, cultural background, and interpretative needs of its readers. Ultimately, the value of translation lies not in competing with the original but in extending its life, expanding its audience, and enriching intercultural communication.

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