

## Fidelity vs Creativity- How Western and Indian Thinkers Define `Equivalence`

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### Abstract

*The fidelity–creativity debate is foundational to global translation studies, shaping long-standing questions of meaning, authorship, and cultural transmission. Western translation theory has broadly conceptualised equivalence as a form of accuracy—semantic, structural, or communicative—while Indian theory, influenced by aesthetic and philosophical traditions, often interprets translation as a creative act of re-embodiment of meaning, emotion, and experience. This paper compares major Western theorists, from Cicero and Dryden to Nida and Venuti, with Indian thinkers such as Bhartrhari, Anandavardhana, and A. K. Ramanujan, demonstrating that despite superficial parallels, each tradition prioritises different forms of equivalence. While Western theory balances fidelity and creativity under the rubric of authorial intention or reader response, Indian theory understands creativity as intrinsic to achieving true fidelity—specifically, the evocation of *rasa*, *dhvani*, and *shoṭa*. The paper argues that equivalence is culturally constructed, and its divergent definitions reveal fundamental philosophical differences between Western and Indian intellectual traditions.*

*Key Words: Translation Equivalence, Fidelity, Creativity, Cross-Cultural Poetics*

### 1. Introduction

Across the history of translation studies, one of the defining points of contention has been the relationship between fidelity and creativity. From antiquity onwards, Western theorists have grappled with how closely a translation should follow its source and how far it may reshape it for rhetorical, stylistic, or communicative effect. Cicero, for instance, in *De Optimo Genere Oratorum*, argues that the translator’s task is not to copy words mechanically but to preserve the rhetorical force and intention of the original (Cicero, 1949). Jerome later echoes this stance in his *Letter to Pammachius*, insisting that rendering “sense for sense” rather than “word for word” constitutes a more faithful approach to translation (Jerome, 1997).

Despite rejecting rigid literalism, Western translation theory has generally privileged the retention of a recognisable source meaning. Creative transformation is possible, but it is typically framed as a controlled intervention in service of a stable semantic or authorial core.

Placed beside Indian aesthetic philosophy, however, this assumption appears culturally specific rather than universal. Thinkers such as Bhartrhari, Anandavardhana, and Abhinavagupta conceive language less as a vehicle for conveying fixed meaning and more as a medium through which cognitive and aesthetic experience takes shape. As a result, the fidelity–creativity dilemma is rooted in fundamentally different ontological views of language in the two traditions.

### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1 Classical Western Foundations

- Cicero (1949) and Jerome (1997) establish early non-literalist models centred on meaning rather than lexical form.
- These reflections influence later humanist and Renaissance thinking on rhetorical equivalence.

5.2 Early Modern Formalisation • Dryden (1992) provides one of the earliest systematic taxonomies of translation methods. • His paraphrase-centred approach reflects anxieties about excessive creative liberties.

5.3 Linguistic and Communicative Approaches • Nida (1964) revolutionises translation through structural linguistics and communication theory. • The shift from formal to dynamic equivalence marks an attempt to account for reader response, though still grounded in representational models.

5.4 Postmodern Ethical and Cultural Turns • Venuti (1995) critiques the ideology of fluency and calls for translator visibility and ethical foreignisation. • His work foregrounds the politics of translation but maintains accountability to the source.

5.5 Indian Aesthetic and Philosophical Paradigms • Bhartrhari (1995) reconceptualises meaning as holistic cognition. • Ānandavardhana (1990) and Abhinavagupta (1986) theorise aesthetic value through suggestion and *rasa*-realisation. • Ramanujan (1989) contributes a modern interpretive model that blends traditional aesthetics with contemporary translation practice.

### **3. Western Theories of Equivalence: Negotiating Fidelity**

#### **3.1 Dryden and the Early Modern Taxonomy of Methods**

John Dryden's influential tripartite classification—metaphrase, paraphrase, and imitation—marks a significant attempt to organise translation practice during the early modern period (Dryden, 1992). While he acknowledges that strict word-for-word reproduction often produces awkward results, he warns against the dangers of imitation, which can stray too far from the source. Paraphrase thus becomes his preferred mode: a midway method that respects meaning while allowing stylistic adaptation.

This taxonomy epitomises a long-standing Western inclination to treat creativity as permissible only within the bounds of semantic fidelity.

#### **3.2 Nida and the Communicative Turn**

Eugene A. Nida's work in the twentieth century reframes equivalence through modern linguistics and communication theory. His distinction between formal equivalence (structural correspondence) and dynamic equivalence (equivalent effect) shifts the focus from textual matching to reader reception (Nida, 1964). Yet even dynamic equivalence presupposes a source message whose meaning or impact can be reliably transferred.

Thus, creativity remains instrumental—a technique for securing communicative accuracy rather than a redefinition of fidelity itself.

#### **3.3 Venuti and the Ethics of Visibility**

Lawrence Venuti challenges the Anglo-American preference for fluent, domesticated translations that obscure the translator's agency (Venuti, 1995). His call for foreignisation is presented as an ethical responsibility to the cultural other. Nevertheless, his model still assumes accountability to the source text's difference; creativity is reinterpreted but not uncoupled from fidelity. The translator is visible, but still bound to ethical referentiality.

Taken together, Western theorists consistently regulate creativity through notions of accuracy, intention, or ethical responsibility.

### **4. Indian Aesthetic Philosophy: Meaning as Manifestation**

Indian intellectual traditions develop translation-relevant ideas not through explicit translation theory but through broader reflections on language, cognition, and aesthetics.

#### **4.1 Bhartrhari and Holistic Meaning**

Bhartrhari's *śphoṭa* theory, articulated in the *Vākyapadīya*, posits that meaning emerges as a holistic cognitive event rather than as a compositional sum of discrete linguistic units (Bhartrhari, 1995). Translation, therefore, must recreate an experiential unity rather than replicate lexical components. Fidelity becomes inseparable from the creative reconstitution of meaning.

#### **4.2 Ānandavardhana and Suggestive Meaning**

Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka* asserts that suggestion (*dhvani*) is the essence of poetic meaning, surpassing literal denotation in importance (Ānandavardhana, 1990). A translation that reproduces only the propositional content but not the implied emotional or aesthetic resonance fails aesthetically. The translator must therefore engage creatively to evoke what is suggested rather than what is overtly stated.

#### **4.3 Abhinavagupta and the Realisation of *Rasa***

Abhinavagupta's expansion of rasa theory centres aesthetic experience as the purpose of literature (Abhinavagupta, 1986). Because rasa is an affective, universalised experience, translation must enable its realisation for a new audience. Literal accuracy becomes secondary to experiential adequacy, making creativity essential to true fidelity.

#### 4.4 A. K. Ramanujan and Layered Contextuality

A. K. Ramanujan conceives translation as an inherently interpretive act shaped by multiple layers of cultural, historical, and linguistic context (Ramanujan, 1989). This perspective aligns naturally with classical Indian aesthetics, in which creative interpretation is not a compromise but a responsibility.

### 5. Ontological Divergence

At the core of the differences between Western and Indian traditions are contrasting philosophies of language. Western frameworks generally treat meaning as representational—something that exists independently of language and can be transferred across linguistic systems. Equivalence, accordingly, is an accuracy problem. Indian aesthetic frameworks view language as revelatory and experiential. Meaning is not transferred but manifested. Equivalence is therefore about experiential recreation rather than replication. In Western thought, creativity supplements fidelity; in Indian thought, creativity constitutes fidelity.

### 6. Conclusion

The long-standing debate between fidelity and creativity cannot be understood without recognising the cultural assumptions embedded in different theories of language. Western translation theory frequently constrains creativity within frameworks of representational fidelity or ethical accountability. Indian aesthetic philosophy, by contrast, views meaningful translation as inherently creative because meaning itself is experiential, suggestive, and holistic. A genuinely global translation theory must therefore acknowledge multiple ontologies of language and avoid projecting Western binaries onto non-Western traditions. Only by recognising this plurality can translation studies move toward a more inclusive and dialogic theoretical landscape.

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