The question and the problem of EQUIVALENCE is not simply a formal and linguistic issue, but a cultural, ideological and even “political” one, and the translator has to become a “communicator”, and not simply the bringer of a “linguistic”_uni t into another “linguistic” unti. Basil HATIM and IAN MASON in The Translator as Communicator (1997) argue that the division of the subject into literary and non-literary, technical and non-technical and so on, is unhelpful and misleading. Instead of dwelling on these differentials, the authors focus on what common ground exists between these distinctions. As a consequence, the translator works as a sort of “cultural mediator”.

Therefore translation cannot be simply (and superficially) approached neither as a “skill” nor as an “art”. It is both, and it is also something else. It is in itself a form of meta-communication, based on a deep understanding of the SOURCE CULTURE and CONTEXT (and then of the SOURCE TEXT). Therefore, before beginning a translation it is necessary and useful to scan into the context of enunciation (life of the writer, historical period) in order to be introduced to the actual SOURCE TEXT. In this respect, translation may be seen as a “global process” (“processo globale” in Paola Faini’s words in Tradurre. Manuale teorico e pratico).

Apart from the so-called SOURCE-ORIENTED and TARGET-ORIENTED translation (a definition that sounds a bit old-fashioned) is is better to delineate new modalities such as what PETER NEWMARK in Approaches to Translation (1981) defines as “semantic translation” (focused on the meaning) and “communicative translation” (based on the effect).

Also the notion of “fidelity” is a bit old-fashioned and, indirectly, sexually discriminating. It derives from the expression “belles infidèles” (referred to good translations), coined by XVIIIth century French philologist
Gilles Ménaire. Nowadays, it is better to replace this expression with “Loyalty”, which has also a political and ideological nuance.

It is also important to bear in mind that each translation is an “hermeneutic act”, an interpretation and that, accordingly, there is not a “ultimate” translation but infinite variations and approximations.

In his book entitled Dire quasi la stessa cosa. Esperienze di Traduzione (2003), Umberto Eco asserts that each translation is a “gamb” and that the translator “gambles” that his interpretation is right.

This is particularly apparent in the case of poetry, in which even single words (and even each single comma or dividing line) has a “sematic value”.

However, it also necessary to underline the contribution of linguistics to the debate on translation, which is both a linguistic and a cultural process, and act.

Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the most important figures of modern linguistics, in his study Course in General Linguistics ; Cours de linguistique générale (published in 1916 and collected from his own notes compiled from 1906 to 1911) distinguished between:

- signifier (the linguistic sequence of words and sounds) /
- signified (the “ideal” image associated with them)

- langue (the linguistic system of a certain language in a society) /
- parole (actual verbal production of each different speaker).

De Saussure asserted that the meaning of a word is an arbitrary association between signifier and signified.
One of the first, and most representative, linguists who approached translation as a “science” and not simply as an “art” was Roman Jakobson, unanimously reputed as the “father” of contemporary translation theory and practice.

Roman Osipovich Jakobson (October 10, 1896, Moscow – July 18, 1982, Cambridge, Massachusetts) was a Russian linguist and literary theorist. As one of the first of the structural analysis of language, which became the dominant trend of linguistics during the first half of the twentieth-century, Jakobson was among the most influential linguists of the century.

Influenced by de Saussure, Jakobson developed, with Nikolai Trubetzkoy, techniques for the analysis of sound systems in languages, inaugurating the discipline of phonology. He went on to apply the same techniques of analysis to syntax and morphology, and controversially proposed that they be extended to semantics (the study of meaning in language). Drawing on insights from Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics, as well as from communication theory and cybernetics, he proposed methods for the investigation of poetry, music, the visual arts, and cinema. Through his decisive influence on Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, among others, Jakobson became a pivotal figure in the adaptation of structural analysis to disciplines beyond linguistics, including anthropology and literary theory; this generalization of Saussurean methods, known as “structuralism”, became a major post-war intellectual movement in Europe and the United States. Meanwhile, though the influence of structuralism declined during the 1970s, Jakobson’s work has continued to receive attention in linguistic anthropology, especially through the ethnography of communication.

Jakobson was born in Russia to a well-to-do family of Jewish descent, and he developed a fascination with language at a very young age. He studied at the Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages and then in the Historical-Philological Faculty of Moscow University. As a student he was a leading figure of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and took part in Moscow’s active world of avant-garde art and poetry. The linguistics of the time was overwhelmingly neogrammarian and insisted that the only scientific study of language was to study the history and development of words across time (the diachronic approach, in Saussure’s terms). Jakobson, on the other hand, had come into contact with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, and developed an approach focused on the way in which language’s structure served its basic function (synchronic approach) – to communicate information between speakers.
Jakobson distinguishes six communication functions, each associated with a dimension or factor of the communication process:

1. *referential* (= contextual information)
2. *aesthetic/poetic* (= auto-reflection)
3. *emotive* (= self-expression)
4. *conative* (= vocative or imperative addressing of receiver)
5. *phatic* (= checking channel working)
6. *metalingual* (= checking code working)

One of the six functions is always the dominant function in a text and usually related to the type of text. In poetry, the dominant function is the poetic function: the focus is on the message itself. For him, poetry successfully combines and integrates form and function, and poetry turns the poetry of grammar into the grammar of poetry, so to speak. Jakobson’s theory of communicative functions was first published in "Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics" (in Thomas A. Sebeok, *Style In Language*, Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1960, pp. 350–377)

"On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" (1959)  
"On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" is an essay written by Russian linguist Roman Jakobson in 1959. Jakobson has been closely associated not only with formalism but also linguistics, anthropology and psychoanalysis. He is known as being the founder of the Prague Linguistic Circle. He is also known to have coined the term “Structural Linguistics”.

In his essay, Jakobson states that meaning of a word is a linguistic phenomena. He remarks that there is no *signatum* (meaning) without a *signum* (a linguistic sign) (p. 232). Using semiotics, Jakobson believes that meaning lies with the signifier and not in the signified. Thus it is the linguistic verbal sign that gives an object its meaning.

Interpretation, and therefore translation, of a verbal signs according to Roman Jakobson can happen in three ways: intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic (p. 233).

- **Intralingual translation**: the changes take place within the same language. A verbal sign (word) belonging to a particular language is replaced by another sign (word) belonging to the same language.
- **Interlingual translation** can be seen as replacing a verbal sign with another sign but belonging to a different language (it is also called “translation proper”).

- **Intersemiotic translation** (“Transmutation”). The translator, instead of paying attention to the verbal signs, concentrates more on the information that is to be delivered. It is the actual translation from a semiotic system (i.e. book) into another (movie).

Jakobson focuses on the question of “equivalence”, which is “the cardinal problem of language and the pivotal concern of linguistics” (p. 233). In this respect, he states that “Languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they may convey” (p. 236). Therefore translation, although it is a complex and sometimes utopistic task, is necessary.

He says that “the faculty of speaking a given language implies a faculty of talking about this language. Such a ‘metalinguistic’ operation permits revision and redefinition of the vocabulary used” (p. 234). If we apply this sentence to translation, it is important to look at the source text in both ways: first through the perspective of how our own language works (metalinguistic approach) and then of how the “other” language works (interlinguistic approach). The better we know our own language, the better we can translate (that’s why writers are usually good translators).

Roman Jakobson uses the term “mutual translatability” and states that when any two languages are being compared, the foremost thing that needs to be taken into consideration is whether they can be translated into one another or not. Laying emphasis on the grammar of a particular language, he feels that it should determine how one language is different from another. In the essay, Roman Jakobson also deals with the problem of ‘deficiency’ in a particular language. Jakobson believes that all cognitive experiences can be expressed in language and while translating whenever there is a lack or ‘deficiency’ of words, ‘loan words’, ‘neologisms’ and ‘circumlocutions’ can be used to fill in this lack (p. 235).

Reinforcing the fact that one of the factors that translation has to take care of is the grammatical structure of the target language, Jakobson believes that it becomes tedious to try and maintain fidelity to the source text when the target language has a rigid grammatical framework which is missing in the source language.

Jakobson, in his essay also brings in the relationship between gender and the grammar of a particular language, anticipating the reflection on “translation and gender categories” of the following decades (p. 237).

Then, he concludes his article with a brief reference to poetry. “In poetry, verbal equations become a constitutive principle of the text. Syntagmatic and morphological categories, roots, and affixes, phonemes and their components […] carry their own autonomous signification. Although “poetry buy definition is untranslatable”, in this case “only creative transposition is possible” (p. 238). Basically, a translated poem becomes a new poem (see Quasimodo translating Saffo, Attilio Bertolucci translating Thomas Hardy, or, more recently, Franco Buffoni translating W. H. Auden).
WALTER BENJAMIN, “The Task of the Translator”

Walter Bendix Schönflies Benjamin (15 July 1892 – 26 September 1940) was a German Jewish literary critic, philosopher, social critic, translator, radio broadcaster and essayist. Combining elements of German idealism or Romanticism, Historical Materialism and Jewish mysticism, Benjamin made enduring and influential contributions to aesthetic theory and Western Marxism, and is associated with the Frankfurt School. Among his major works as a literary critic are essays on Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities*; the work of Franz Kafka and Karl Kraus; translation theory; the stories of Nikolai Leskov; the work of Marcel Proust and perhaps most significantly, the poetry of Charles Baudelaire. He also made major translations into German of the Tableaux Parisiens section of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* and parts of Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

His turn to Marxism in the 1930s was partly due to the influence of Bertolt Brecht, whose critical aesthetics developed epic theatre and its *Verfremdungseffekt* (defamiliarisation, alienation). An earlier influence was friend Gershom Scholem, founder of the academic study of the Kabbalah and of Jewish mysticism. Benjamin’s work is often cited in academic and literary studies, especially the essays "The Task of the Translator" (1923) and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936).

His premature (and tragic) death is intimately connected with European history. As the Wehrmacht defeated the French defence, on 13 June, Benjamin and his sister fled Paris to the town of Lourdes, a day before the Germans entered Paris (14 June 1940), with orders to arrest him at his flat. In August, he obtained a travel visa to the US. In eluding the Gestapo, Benjamin planned to travel to the US from neutral Portugal, which he expected to reach via fascist Spain. The historical record indicates he safely crossed the French-Spanish border and arrived at the coastal town of Portbou, in Catalonia. The Franco government had cancelled all transit visas and ordered the Spanish police to return such persons to France, including the Jewish refugee group Benjamin had joined. Expecting repatriation to Nazi hands, Walter Benjamin killed himself with an overdose of morphine tablets on the night of 25 September 1940; the official Portbou register records 26 September 1940 as the official date of death. His brother Georg was killed at the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp in 1942.
"The Task of the Translator" (1923)

Benjamin opens his essay discarding the importance of readers in works of art, and then in translations: “In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful [...]. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener” (p. 69). Therefore, Benjamin provocatively asserts that the aim of translations is not simply to communicate an information (this is the case of “bad translations”). Translations have, first and foremost, point to something more “ideal” and mystic. For Benjamin translation is a means to aspire to what he calls, later on, “pure language”.

Then he introduces the notion of “Translatability” as an “essential quality of certain works”; it means that “a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability” (p. 71). This is to say that the “translatable” quality of certain works of art foregrounds the presence of a “significance” that goes beyond linguistic differences. The “afterlife” of a text manifests itself thanks to the presence of translations. In a way, the original (what, in linguistic terms, we would call the “source text”) continues to live because of its future translations. To sum up, in Benjamin’s words, “Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages” (p. 72). The only way to let the “kinship between languages” emerge is through a reproduction of the “source text” as faithful (and, as he writes, “accurately”) as possible. The so-called “pure language” (“die reine sprache”) identifies the “totality” of languages, which seem to suggest the presence of a common language (through translation and “translatability”). Thus, while “all individual elements of foreign languages – words, sentences, structure – are mutually exclusive, these languages supplement on another in their intentions” (p. 74). It follows that Benjamin regards a process of “supplement” of languages as taking place through translation because of the difference between source and target language. This inadequacy is in itself the source of an enrichment of the target language: foreign, untranslatable concepts and structures are brought into a language and take part in the process of an ongoing complement of languages with its climax in “pure language”. As a consequence, Benjamin’s thoughts cannot be understood without having a closer look at his concept of language — “pure language” seems a rather vague term. His whole project is so remarkable because it has an all-embracing notion of language as its basis: the world is made of language and the final aim is to understand this “textus” of the world, to achieve harmony between the inadequate human languages and the language of God. This thought is highly influenced by Jewish mysticism mainly bequeathed in the “Cabbala”. Also known as “Kabbalah”, this is an esoteric method, discipline and school of thought. Its definition varies according to the tradition and aims of those following it, from its religious origin as an integral part of Judaism, to its later Christian, New Age, or Occultist adaptions. Kabbalah is a set of esoteric teachings meant to explain the relationship between an unchanging, eternal and mysterious divine presence and the mortal and finite universe (his creation).

The biblical idea of a once existing complete language in paradise disintegrated by God after the Tower of Babel grounds Benjamin’s theory of language. The particular languages are thus only incomplete pieces of the “pure” original. It is this idea which leads to the understanding of language as not only a communicative tool between humans, but moreover the realm of hidden divine
truth, of something enigmatic which is totally free of meaning and resonating in the human languages. Benjamin builds his teleology on the basis of this mystical idea: the final aim is to approach divine language, in which all truth is hidden, but which is at the same time no longer communicative, but rather totally free of meaning. Translation is the decisive means to reach the final end: “In translation the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air, as it were” (p. 75).

According to him translations should not try to transfer meaning, but rather translate as close to the original as possible, by transferring its syntax and also its way of expressing concepts to the target language: “A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully”. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words, rather than sentences, to be the primary element of the translator” (p. 79).

What is “the task of the translator”? Benjamin writes that it “consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original” (p. 76). For this reason, he concludes his essay arguing that “all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines; this is true to the highest degree of sacred writings. The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation” (p. 82).

Benjamin’s theory of translation can only be understood in religious terms. It is bound to the Cabbalistic tradition, which is in itself enigmatic and contradictory—and so is Benjamin’s essay. Its magic is evoked by its ambiguity and its holistic aesthetics. In it, translation can live in its extraordinariness. Although it is not a theory of untranslatability, it is hard to think of its practical influence on translators. As mentioned before: the presupposition of his theory of translation is his “messianic” theory of language.