

TRANSLATING IDIOMS AND EXPRESSIONS

Sunnatullayeva Ch.S.¹, Zayniddinov M.²

Abstract:

This article analyzes the important role of idioms and expressions in the cultural and linguistic structure of any language. The fact that idioms and expressions cannot be translated literally has always been a challenge for translators. Translators need to increase their linguistic resources, but also find appropriate equivalents in the language. The article explores the complexities of translating idioms and expressions, including strategies such as idiomatic equivalence, paraphrase, and cultural adaptation. The discussion highlights the importance of culture in preserving meaning, tone, and communicativeness in languages. Effective idiom translation enhances intercultural communication, helps maintain language and cultural relations.

Key words: Idioms, translation, expressions, cultural context, equivalence, linguistic problems, paraphrase, understanding, intercultural communication, language translation.

INTRODUCTION

Language is more than just a collection of words and grammar rules—it's a reflection of culture, history, and shared human experience. One of the most vivid examples of this is found in idioms and expressions. These phrases often carry meanings that go far beyond the literal interpretation of their words, making them both rich in flavor and notoriously difficult to translate. When translating idioms and expressions from one language to another, the challenge lies not only in conveying the intended meaning but also in preserving the cultural context and emotional impact. This article explores the complexities, strategies, and importance of accurately translating idiomatic language, shedding light on why literal translations often fall short and how creative solutions can bridge the gap between languages and cultures.

Idioms and expressions add color and depth to everyday language. They are often rooted in culture, history, and shared experiences, making them unique to each language. However, this uniqueness presents a major challenge when it comes to translation. Translating idioms is not just about finding word-for-word equivalents—it's about capturing the meaning, tone, and cultural nuances behind the phrases. A literal translation can lead to confusion, or worse, complete misunderstanding. This article delves into the art and difficulty of translating idioms and expressions across languages, exploring why they matter, where the main challenges lie, and how translators can approach them creatively and effectively.

LITERATURE ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGY

The translation of idioms and expressions has been widely discussed in translation studies, particularly within the frameworks of cultural linguistics and comparative semantics. Scholars such as Mona Baker (1992) and Peter Newmark (1988) emphasize that idioms represent a key challenge in cross-cultural communication due to their figurative and often culturally bound nature [Baker, M. 2018.]. Baker highlights that idioms are one of the main sources of non-equivalence in translation, often requiring a strategy that goes beyond literal interpretation to capture intended meaning.

Previous research suggests several strategies for translating idiomatic expressions, including:

- Using an idiom with a similar meaning and form in the target language
- Using an idiom with a similar meaning but different form
- Paraphrasing the idiom to convey the intended message
- Omitting the idiom entirely when it cannot be naturally translated

This article adopts a qualitative methodology, analyzing examples of idiom translation across a selection of language pairs, such as English–Arabic, English–French, and Spanish–English. Source texts include literary works, news articles, and audiovisual translations. Each idiom is examined based on its linguistic features, cultural relevance, and the strategy used for its translation. The goal is to identify patterns and assess the effectiveness of various approaches in preserving meaning and cultural nuance.

¹ *Sunnatullayeva Chexrona Sohijon qizi, Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages Faculty of English Philology and Translation Studies 4th stage*

² *Zayniddinov Mukhammadjon, Intern Staff Department of Theory of Translation and Practice Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages*

Idioms and expressions have long been recognized as one of the most challenging aspects of translation. Scholars such as Larson (1984) and Baker (1992) have emphasized the importance of context, culture, and figurative meaning when dealing with non-literal language. According to Baker, idioms often do not have direct equivalents in other languages, making their translation a task that requires both linguistic and cultural sensitivity [Baker, M. 2018].

The literature outlines several strategies for translating idioms, including:

1. Finding an equivalent idiom in the target language
2. Substituting with a culturally appropriate expression
3. Rewriting the meaning in plain language
4. Avoiding the idiom when no suitable equivalent exists

RESULTS

The analysis of translated idioms across different languages and contexts revealed several key results:

Literal translations often failed to convey meaning. In more than half of the examples analyzed, idioms that were translated word-for-word lost their intended meaning entirely or sounded awkward in the target language. When idioms were translated word-for-word, the result was often confusing, misleading, or completely nonsensical to target language readers. For example, the English idiom “spill the beans” was sometimes translated literally in Arabic or French, resulting in a phrase that makes no sense in the target culture. This outcome highlights the core issue with idioms: their figurative meaning cannot be inferred from the individual words. Literal translations ignore the cultural and contextual layers of idiomatic expressions, often stripping them of meaning or producing unintended interpretations. These findings reinforce the idea that idioms must be approached with an understanding of both source and target cultures, rather than relying on dictionary-level equivalence.

Paraphrasing was the most commonly used strategy. Translators frequently rephrased idioms in simpler, non-figurative language. While this preserved the core meaning, it sometimes led to a loss of stylistic or emotional impact. In the absence of direct or culturally equivalent idioms, translators often relied on paraphrasing to convey the intended meaning. This involved replacing the figurative expression with a more straightforward, literal explanation of the idea. For example, the English idiom “beat around the bush” was translated in some cases as “avoid talking directly” in Arabic or Spanish. While paraphrasing ensured that the meaning was not lost, it often sacrificed the stylistic or emotional impact of the original idiom [Larson, M. L. 1998]. Despite this trade-off, paraphrasing proved to be the most practical and reliable method in many situations, especially when addressing audiences unfamiliar with the cultural background of the source idiom. It also allowed the translation to remain accessible and clear, particularly in formal or academic texts where precision was prioritized over expressiveness.

Culturally equivalent idioms produced the most natural translations: When an equivalent idiom existed in the target language, the translation was often smoother, more expressive, and better received by native speakers. When translators were able to find a culturally equivalent idiom in the target language, the translation felt the most seamless and natural. These idioms carried the same figurative meaning and emotional weight as the original, making them the ideal choice in many cases [Nida, E. A., & Taber, C. R. 2003]. For instance, the English idiom “a penny for your thoughts” was effectively translated into the French “que penses-tu?” (literally, “what are you thinking?”), which, while simpler, serves the same function in the target culture [Chesterman, A. 1997]. These translations preserved the idiomatic nature of the expression, ensuring that the target audience understood both the meaning and the cultural context without any confusion. This finding highlights the importance of cultural knowledge in translation: when an idiom exists in both languages with similar meaning and usage, it provides a smoother and more relatable translation.

These results suggest that successful idiom translation relies on flexible, context-sensitive strategies [Nurmuxammedov.Y.Sh. 2024]. Rigid or literal approaches tend to result in ineffective or confusing translations, while culturally informed and adaptive methods preserve both meaning and tone more successfully.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of translated idioms across various texts revealed both insightful patterns and significant challenges. One of the most notable findings is that literal translation is rarely successful when dealing with idiomatic expressions. In many cases, direct translations led to confusion, awkward phrasing, or a complete loss of meaning [Khujakulov, R. 2024]. This supports previous theoretical claims that idioms are deeply rooted in cultural context and cannot be separated from their figurative or emotional significance.

Successful translations were often those where the translator applied creative strategies—such as replacing the source idiom with a culturally equivalent one in the target language, or rephrasing the idea in a more neutral but clear form [Jabbarovna, S. N. 2020]. For example, the English idiom “kick the bucket” was

more effectively translated into equivalent euphemisms for death in Arabic or Spanish, rather than as a literal phrase, which would sound meaningless or even humorous.

However, several problems and limitations became evident:

1. Cultural gaps: Some idioms reflect concepts or social norms that simply don't exist in the target culture, making equivalent expressions impossible to find.
2. Loss of tone or humor: Many idioms carry humor, sarcasm, or emotional weight, which often disappears when reworded.
3. Context sensitivity: An idiom may carry different meanings depending on the situation, making it harder for translators to choose the right strategy without deep contextual understanding.
4. Lack of awareness: In some translations, idioms were rendered literally, possibly due to a lack of awareness or sensitivity to idiomatic language on the part of the translator.

Overall, the findings reinforce the idea that idiom translation is more an art than a science, requiring not only linguistic knowledge but also cultural insight and creative thinking. The translator's role is not just to convert words, but to reconstruct meaning, often reshaping the expression to fit the audience and context.

CONCLUSION

The process of translating idioms and expressions is one of the most complex and nuanced challenges faced by translators. As demonstrated through the analysis, literal translations often fail to convey the intended meaning, highlighting the need for a more thoughtful approach. Paraphrasing emerged as the most commonly used strategy, ensuring that the core message was preserved, though sometimes at the expense of tone and stylistic impact. The use of culturally equivalent idioms proved to be the most effective and natural solution when available, underscoring the importance of cultural context in translation. However, in cases where no suitable equivalent could be found, omission was sometimes the only viable option, though this carried the risk of losing some of the original expression's depth.

Ultimately, successful idiom translation requires not just linguistic expertise but a deep understanding of both the source and target cultures. Translators must be flexible, creative, and culturally aware, adapting idiomatic expressions in ways that maintain their original meaning while ensuring they resonate with the target audience. This study reinforces the idea that translation is as much an art as it is a science—requiring not only technical skill but also the ability to navigate and bridge cultural divides.

References:

- [1]. Baker, M. (2018). *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation (3rd ed.)*. Routledge.
- [2]. Newmark, P. (1988). *A Textbook of Translation*. Prentice Hall.
- [3]. Larson, M. L. (1998). *Meaning-Based Translation: A Guide to Cross-Language Equivalence (2nd ed.)*. University Press of America.
- [4]. Nida, E. A., & Taber, C. R. (2003). *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Brill.
- [5]. Chesterman, A. (1997). *Memes of Translation: The Spread of Ideas in Translation Theory*. John Benjamins.
- [6]. Nurmuxammedov.Y.Sh. (2024). *TURLI TIZIMLI TILLAR FRAZEOLOGIK BIRLIKLARIDA GAVDALANGAN "TAQDIR"*
- [7]. Khujakulov, R. (2024). *The Rich Tapestry of Folk Medicine Terminology: a Reflection of Cultural Specificity in English*. *Miasto Przyszłości*, 55, 1619-1621.
- [8]. Jabbarovna, S. N. (2020). *Types and usage locative sennas in english and uzbek languages*. *International Journal of Scientific and Technology Research*, 9(3), 1844-1854