

## Approaches to translating English idioms into foreign languages

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### Abstract

In the following paper the attention is focused on the complexity involved in the translation of idioms. First, emphasis is put on the review of the characteristics of idioms and fixed expressions across languages. The study is based on comparative research of translating English idioms into foreign languages according to different translation strategies. The choice of appropriate and feasible translation strategies is discussed. Further, the prevailing translation theories and procedures proposed by well-known authors are summarized, which are used as a framework by translation practitioners when overcoming the difficulties they encounter. Recent studies which reflect current and highly valued theories of translation, and influence the practice of translation in general are also examined, while the questions how different translators cope with the aspects of idioms while translating idiomatic texts are answered. Culturally specific and thus the pragmatic meaning of idioms within a translation process should be more considered than the literal meaning.

### Keywords

translating idioms; translation strategies; equivalence; relevance theory; functional equivalence theory; skopos theory; pragmatics

### 1. Introduction

The recognition, understanding and appropriate translation of idioms is considered to be one of the most difficult parts of a language study. Moreover, every idiom has its own cultural background. Due to this fact idioms are dependent on culture and the culture is therefore one of the most important parts in comprehension of the idiomatic meaning. Awwad (1990, pp. 57-67) considers two areas of difficulty when translating idioms: a) misinterpreting the intention of the writer or speaker and b) recognizing the cultural differences among languages. This consideration goes hand in hand with Nida (in Sans 1990, p. 103) who insists on the existence of three presuppositions which must underline the semantic analysis:

*“- No word (or semantic unit) ever has exactly the same meaning in two different utterances.*

*- There are no complete synonyms within a language.*

*- There are no exact correspondences between related words in different languages.”*

He rejects any possibility of perfect communication and states that all communication is one of degree and he indicates that the cultural fact symbolized by a word provides the denotative meaning, whereas the emotional response in the culture is the basis of connotative meaning (ibid.). This perception suits perfectly to the nature of idioms and the approaches needed for their translation.

## 2. Definition of idioms

Various definitions of idioms have been suggested in the linguistic literature or in the literature of translation theory, as well as in the preface of dictionaries of idioms. Some of them are presented in the following paragraph.

Webster's New World Dictionary of the American English (1988) defines an idiom as *"an expression established in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either in grammatical construction or in having a meaning that cannot be derived as a whole from the conjoined meanings of its elements."*

In the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003, p. 741) an idiom is defined as *"a phrase which means something different from the meanings of the separate words; the way of statement typical of a person or a people in their use of language."*

Moon (1998, p. 3) defines an idiom as *"an ambiguous term, used in conflicting ways. In lay or general use, idiom has two main meanings. First, an idiom is a particular means of expressing something in language, music, art, and so on, which characterizes a person or group. Secondly, an idiom is a particular lexical collocation or phrasal lexeme, peculiar to a language"*.

Baker (1992) distinguishes idioms from collocation by the transparency of meaning and flexibility patterning. According to her (1992, p. 63) idioms are *"frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and often carry meanings which can not be deduced from their individual components"*. She (ibid) excluded five things that normally can not be done to an idiom as it will lose its sense: the translator can not change the order of the words in an idiom; can not delete a word from it, can not add a word to it; replace one word by another one and change its grammatical structure.

Newmark (1988, p. 104) considers an idiom to be *"an extended metaphor, which has two main functions: pragmatic (cognitive) and referential (aesthetic)"*. The pragmatic function is to appeal to the senses, to interest, to surprise, to delight.

To put it another way, an idiom is an expression whose meaning is not compositional, and does not follow from the meaning of the individual words which make up of it. That is why a lot of idioms can not be translated literally because their meaning cannot be predicted from the usual meaning of their constituents.

### 3. Translation of idioms

As Valero-Garcés states (1997, p. 35) “*there seems to be an agreement among linguists that an idiom does not translate word for word.*” She adds (ibid.) that even apparently simple translation equivalences may be deceptive. She suggests this might be a reason why the realisation of the difficulties of translation led to the adoption of more contextually-oriented approaches. The translation of idioms can therefore be approached from different perspectives: functional equivalence theory, skopos theory, pragmatics and relevance theory.

*Functional equivalence* in translation is according to Nida (1964, p. 166) “*the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message*”. According to Zhang and Wang (2010) using the term of *equivalent*, Nida suggests trying to make the response from target language receptors as proximate as possible to that from the source language receptors. They further state that a functional-equivalence translation is mainly concerned on the equivalence of the receptors response rather than the equivalence of language forms. This means that Nida established the importance of readership in the translation process. Kussmaul (1995) writes that the functional approach has a great affinity with skopos theory. From the functional point of view a translation is dependent on the knowledge, expectations, values and norms of the target readers, who are influenced by the situation they are in and by the culture. These factors determine whether the function of the source text can be preserved or has to be modified or even changed.

As Nord states (1997) *skopos theory* focuses on translation as an activity with an aim or purpose, and on the intended addressee or audience of the translation. To translate means to produce a target text in a target setting for a target purpose and target addressees in target circumstances. In skopos theory, the status of the source text is lower than it is in equivalence-based theories of translation. The source is an offer of information, which the translator turns into an offer of information for the target audience.

The inability of semantics to adequately explain the sociolinguistic and other non-linguistic components of verbal communication gave birth to *pragmatics*. Pragmatics is the study of language use and language users. It sets out to explain what people wish to achieve and how they go about achieving it using language. Through pragmatics, contextual meaning is analyzed to discover the real meaning. It is important in pragmatics to talk about implied and intended meaning, assumptions, purposes and goals of people in communication and various types of actions.

*Relevance theory* tries to explain the method of communication that takes into account implicit inferences. It argues that the audience will search for meaning in any given communication situation. Relevance theory is an inferential approach

to pragmatics. Huang and Wang (2006) state that from the relevance-theoretic point of view, pragmatic translation should achieve interpretive similarity to the original in relevant aspects. The translation should resemble the original in aspects that make it adequately relevant to the reader by offering adequate contextual effects and at the same time should involve optimal processing effort.

#### **4. Overview of the existing translation strategies of idioms**

There are different types of correspondence or degrees of equivalence between idioms in the source and target language. These are connected with various difficulties when translating them. That is why the solutions, methods or strategies available to the translator are different, too. Baker (1992, pp. 72-78) defines the following strategies for translating idiomatic expressions:

1. Using an idiom with the same meaning and form which involves using an idiom in the target language,
2. Using an idiom with the similar meaning but different form,
3. Using a paraphrase when a match cannot be found in the target,
4. Using compensation to make up for any loss or meaning, emotional force, or stylistic effect, which may not be possible to reproduce directly at a given point,
5. Using omission if the idiom has no close match in the target language and its meaning cannot be easily paraphrased.

Based on literature review of functional equivalence theory, Zhang and Wang (2010, pp. 882-887) put forward nine strategies which can be applied when translating idioms:

1. Literal translation - keeping the same form as the source language and is further subdivided into:
  - a. Direct translation - original images and figurative meanings of target language idioms correspond with those in the original form or an idiom of the original language does not lead to cultural deformation in literal translation and can be accepted by readers of the target language.
  - b. Literal translation with annotation - the annotation explains the historical background of an idiom or its origin is completely explained.
  - c. Amplification - adding necessary words in the translation without changing the original meaning and helps the target readers deepen their understanding of the translated text.
2. Free translation - using different expressive forms to put across meanings in the source language.

### 3. Other methods

- a. Combination - using both literal and free translation. We have to bear in mind that free translation can on one hand erase the misunderstanding and make the translated version easily understood, while on the other hand the exotic flavour in the original text can get lost.
- b. Omission deals with the superfluous wording in order to achieve a concise and idiomatic representation.
- c. Borrowing - finding an equivalent idiom in the target language.
- d. Transposition - transferring the translation of a certain part to another place in the text for the purpose of the overall arrangement of the sentences and the meaning is guaranteed.
- e. Integration - integrating the meaning of the source language idiom with the meaning of some other part in the text as a whole.

These strategies go beyond the linguistic system which means that they do not consider only the issue of whether an idiom with similar meaning and similar form is available in the target language. They also reflect on the appropriateness or inappropriateness of using idiomatic language and the context in which the idiom is translated.

## 5. Illustrative examples of translating idioms into foreign languages

In this part the overview of three studies which focus on different approaches to the translation of idioms is discussed. Various authors analyse the translation of idioms under the aspect of the previously mentioned theories and strategies. Strakšien (2009), Motalebzade and Tousi (2011) and finally O'Mara (2007) offer insight into translation procedures applied by translators of Lithuanian, Persian and Spanish/Catalan origin.

Baker's (1992) proposed translating strategies were taken as the framework of the studies.

In the study *Analysis of Idiom Translation Strategies from English into Lithuanian* by Strakšien (2009) four basic translation strategies for translating idioms were employed:

1. Idiom to idiom translation using an idiom of similar meaning and form, and using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form
2. Paraphrasing comprising explanatory and stylistic paraphrase
3. Literal translation
4. Omission

According to the author following tendencies concerning the equivalence in translation were revealed:

1. Preserving the effect and meaning of the original idiom,
2. An effect of interference of another language due to the fact that paraphrases often contained the structure of the original idioms,
3. An effect of foreignization by using literal translation,
4. Favouring the local colouring over fluency and transparency.

In the study *Employing Compensation Strategy in Translation of Idioms: A Case Study of the Translation of Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn in Persian* written by Motallebzade and Tousi (2011) three basic translation strategies for translating idioms were employed:

1. Translating an English idiom with a Persian idiom
2. Translating an English-language idiom with a non-idiomatic Persian phrase
3. Translating an English non-idiom, with a Persian idiom

The author discovered the following tendencies concerning the equivalence in translation:

1. Avoiding of translating idioms with an idiom and looking for other strategies for translating difficult cases,
2. Compensation used as one possible strategy in order to preserve the idiomaticity of the original text and to avoid the loss caused by translating,
3. Translator's effort to compensate an idiom by omitting it and putting it in another place.

In O'Mara's (2007) study *Translating colloquial idioms/metaphors in The catcher in the rye: a comparison of metaphorical meaning retention in Spanish and Catalan texts* four basic translation strategies for translating idioms were engaged:

1. Paraphrasing,
2. Equivalence,
3. Literal translation,
4. Omission.

The author discusses these tendencies concerning the equivalence in translation:

1. Frequent use of the technique of paraphrasing or modification.
2. Avoidance of preserving rhetoric, national and regional characteristics in the target language.

To draw several conclusions from the reviewed studies, which cannot be still generalized, paraphrasing seems to be the most commonly used procedure in dealing with idioms. This procedure is adopted in translation when the translator cannot find a similar idiom in the target language or she/he believes using an idiom is not suitable for stylistic matters. As Tabačková and Gálová (2012, p. 114-115) put it: *“When translating idioms we have to focus on keeping their meaning in the text and looking for the appropriate solution.”*

## 8. Conclusion

To summarize the outcomes of the overviewed theories, strategies and studies on translation of idioms it can be said that *“if the main target of a translator is to produce as nearly as possible the same effect on his readers as was produced on the readers of the original, we will meet a lot of instances, where this effect cannot be achieved”* (Sans 1990, p. 106), then the translation of idioms, which are deeply culture-bound, have a special historical background and different origin, is the best example to be offered. One must agree with Newmark (2007, p. 109) that *“the sociological factor is represented by the context, where idioms bind the text to social groups and backgrounds, proving that translation is not produced in a vacuum.”* The translator should have knowledge about semantics and lexical sets in source language to develop strategies for dealing with non-equivalence in semantic field. Besides this, the translator should not forget that language and culture are closely related (especially in terms of idioms) and both aspects must be considered for translation.

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