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Translation and Semantics: Challenges and Strategies in Translating English Idioms

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Abstract
Translating idiomatic expressions poses significant challenges for translators, necessitating careful consideration of cultural context, semantic equivalence, and pragmatic usage. This study aims to explore the complexities involved in translating English idioms, with a focus on the intersection of translation and semantics. The primary objectives are to identify the main challenges faced by translators, examine the impact of cultural differences, and propose strategies to overcome these obstacles. Through an analysis of translation choices and translators' notes, four main strategies are identified: literal translation, paraphrasing, cultural equivalents, and adaptation. The findings reveal that cultural differences and semantic obstacles significantly influence the translation process. Furthermore, the study highlights the individual translation styles of the participants, and the variations in the approaches adopted and decision-making processes. The study found that the most important challenges in translating English idioms are: cultural differences, semantic obstacles, and the unfamiliarity of some idioms. This study also found that the most used strategies used in translating English idioms are: literal translation, paraphrasing, cultural equivalents, and adaptation.
Key Words: Translation, Idioms, Translating English Idioms.

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الترجمة وعلم الدلالة: التحديات والاستراتيجيات في ترجمة التعابير الإنجليزية

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الـمستخلـص

تطرح ترجمة التعبيرات الاصطلاحية تحديات كبيرة للمترجمين، مما يستلزم دراسة متأنية للسياق الثقافي، والتكافؤ الدلالي، والاستخدام العملي. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف التعقيدات التي تنطوي عليها ترجمة التعابير الإنكليزية، مع التركيز على منطقة التقاطع بين الترجمة وعلم الدلالة، وتتمثل الأهداف الأساسية في تحديد التحديات الرئيسية التي يواجهها المترجمون، ودراسة تأثير الاختلافات الثقافية، واقتراح استراتيجيات للتغلب على هذه العقبات. ومن خلال تحليل خيارات الترجمة وملاحظات المترجمين، تم تحديد أربع استراتيجيات رئيسية: الترجمة الحرفية، وإعادة الصياغة، والمعادلات الثقافية، والتكيف. وكشفت النتائج أن الاختلافات الثقافية والعقبات الدلالية تؤثر بشكل كبير على عملية الترجمة. وبالإضافة إلى ذلك، تسلط الدراسة الضوء على أساليب الترجمة الفردية للمشاركين، والاختلافات في الأساليب المعتمدة وعمليات صنع القرار. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى أن أهم التحديات في ترجمة العبارات الاصطلاحية الإنكليزية هي: الاختلافات الثقافية، والعوائق الدلالية، وعدم الإلمام ببعض العبارات الاصطلاحية. كما وجدت هذه الدراسة أن الاستراتيجيات الأكثر استخداماً في ترجمة التعابير الإنكليزية هي: الترجمة الحرفية، وإعادة الصياغة، والمكافئ الدلالي، والتكيف.

1. INTRODUCTION

Translation is a complex and nuanced process that involves conveying the meaning of words, phrases, and expressions from one language to another. Translation means to transfer a written or spoken text from the original language to the target language and the target audience, this is why it can be considered as "the base of all science in the world", (Shareef and Sahyoun, 2023, p. 399).

Idioms, in particular, pose significant challenges to translators due to their inherent linguistic and metalinguistic characteristics. English idioms, with their figurative and metaphorical nature, present a rich tapestry of linguistic expressions that capture the essence of the language. Particularly, among English idioms, those idioms that bear historical and cultural connotations pose a graver difficulty for the translator as their meanings cannot directly be understood relying only on the semantic features of their separate words, due to the fact that the significance of these collocations cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of their individual words, difficulties arise in both comprehending and translating them (Shojaei, 2012, p. 1220). However, the translation of idioms requires careful consideration of cultural context, semantic equivalence, and pragmatic usage in the target language.

This study aims to explore the challenges faced by translators when translating English idioms and the strategies employed to overcome these challenges, with a specific focus

on the intersection of translation and semantics. By delving into the intricacies of idiomatic expressions, we seek to shed light on the complex interplay between language, culture, and meaning.

The findings of this study will have implications for translation theory, practice, and pedagogy. By enhancing our understanding of the challenges and strategies in translating English idioms, this study tries to improve the quality and accuracy of idiomatic translations, thereby facilitating effective cross-cultural communication and promoting linguistic richness in multilingual societies.

2. THE PROBLEM

Translation is a complex task that involves transferring meaning from one language to another, taking into account cultural, linguistic, and contextual factors. An idiom is "an ambiguous term, used in conflicting ways", (Moon, 1998, p. 3). This is why idioms, as linguistic expressions peculiar to a particular language, often present significant challenges for translators. English idioms, in particular, are known for their figurative and metaphorical nature, making them inherently difficult to translate accurately while preserving their intended meaning and cultural connotations.

The importance of translating idioms comes from the fact that idioms are an integral component of language proficiency and serve as an inherent and significant aspect of daily communication. They embody cultural and linguistic nuances, facilitating intercultural exchange and fostering understanding across diverse societies (Howwar, 2013, p.1).

The translation of English idioms poses several problems that need to be addressed. Firstly, idioms are deeply rooted in the cultural, semantic and historical context of the source language, making direct word-for-word translations inadequate. Translators must navigate cultural differences and find equivalent expressions or alternative strategies to convey the idiomatic meaning effectively in the target language. This requires a nuanced understanding of both languages and the ability to capture the essence of the idiom while maintaining linguistic coherence.

Secondly, idioms often rely on specific semantic associations and metaphorical interpretations that may not exist or have different manifestations in the target language. Translating idiomatic phrases that rely on contextual knowledge or shared cultural references can be particularly challenging, as direct translation may result in loss of meaning or misinterpretation.

Furthermore, idiomatic expressions can vary in their degree of transparency and frequency of usage. Some idioms may be widely known and used, while others may be more obscure or context-specific. Translating idiomatic expressions that fall into the latter category requires additional research, semantic knowledge and cultural sensitivity to ensure accurate and meaningful translations.

The problem of this study, therefore, is that there are challenges faced by translators when translating English idioms and to identify effective strategies for mitigating these challenges. By understanding the complexities of idiomatic expressions and the specific difficulties they pose in translation, we can develop guidelines and recommendations to

enhance the accuracy and cultural appropriateness of translated idioms. This study aims to address these issues and contribute to the existing body of knowledge in translation studies, with a particular focus on the intersection of translation and semantics.

3. THE AIMS
   This study aims to:
1. Identify and analyze the main challenges faced by translators when translating English idioms into the target language.
2. Investigate the different strategies that can be employed to overcome the challenges of translating English idioms.
3. Examine the semantic obstacles encountered during the translation of English idioms and propose strategies to ensure accurate and meaningful translations.

4. THE HYPOTHESIS
This research hypothesizes that translating English idioms into the target language poses significant challenges for translators, particularly due to cultural differences and the need to capture the figurative and metaphorical meanings of idiomatic expressions. The research also hypothesizes that using particular strategies can aid the translators to provide better translation of the designated idioms.

5. THE SIGNIFICANCE
This study of translating English idioms holds significant importance for several reasons. Firstly, idiomatic expressions are a fundamental aspect of language and play a crucial role in communication, adding richness, nuance, and cultural flavor to speech and writing. Understanding how to accurately translate idioms is essential for effective cross-cultural communication and localization of content.

The study addresses the challenges faced by translators when dealing with idiomatic expressions and provides insights into various translation strategies employed to overcome these challenges. By examining the translation choices of translators, the study offers practical guidance and recommendations for professionals in the field of translation, aiding them in making informed decisions when translating idiomatic expressions.

Moreover, the study highlights the cultural and linguistic nuances associated with idiomatic expressions. It emphasizes the significance of considering cultural differences and finding suitable equivalents that convey the intended meaning and cultural connotations in the target language. This aspect is crucial in maintaining the authenticity and impact of idiomatic expressions in translated texts.

Additionally, this study sheds light on the cognitive processes involved in translating idioms, exploring how translators navigate the figurative and metaphorical meanings of idiomatic expressions. Understanding these cognitive processes can contribute to the development of translation theories and practices, providing valuable insights into the complexities of idiomatic expression translation.

Furthermore, the findings of this study can have implications for language teaching and learning. Educators can benefit from the insights gained regarding the challenges faced by learners in understanding and translating idiomatic expressions. The study can inform the development of pedagogical strategies and materials that facilitate the acquisition and effective usage of idiomatic expressions in various languages.

At last, this study contributes to the broader field of translation studies by expanding our understanding of idiomatic expression translation. It adds to the existing body of literature on translation strategies, cultural adaptation, and linguistic coherence, providing a nuanced perspective specific to idiomatic expressions.

6. THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS
This study tries to answer the following questions:
1. What are the main challenges faced by translators when translating English idioms into the target language?
2. What strategies can be employed to overcome the challenges in translating English idioms?
3. What are the semantic obstacles encountered when translating English idioms, and what strategies can be employed to ensure accurate and meaningful translations?

7. LITERATURE REVIEW
For the sake of brevity, this section will provide the literature review in terms of the findings of the previous studies according to the difficulties and strategies reported in the translation process of English idioms.

7.1 DIFFICULTES in TRANSLATING ENGLISH IDIOMS
Translating idiomatic and culturally-bound expressions is a complex task that poses significant challenges for both language learners and translators. These expressions present difficulties in terms of style, culture, and even religious connotations, making it challenging to achieve accurate and nuanced translations (Smadi, 2015, p. 124).
One of the primary difficulties in translating idioms lies in finding equivalent expressions at the idiom level. Idioms vary across languages, and their meanings and forms often do not have direct counterparts in other languages. This lack of equivalence creates a substantial obstacle for translators, requiring them to navigate the subtleties and nuances of idiomatic language (Baker, 1991, pp. 80-85).
A translator must, according to (Ibrahim and Shaban, 2023, p. 411), have the following skills:
The ability to speak the language in which the text is written fluently.
The translator must also have the semantic knowledge that makes a listener who has reached maturity able to transfer it to understanding.
Cultural disparities further complicate the translation process. Idioms and culturally-bound expressions are deeply rooted in specific cultures and may contain elements that are unique to those cultures. This cultural specificity can make translation challenging; as certain concepts or references may not have direct equivalents in the target language. For instance, the idiom "feels blue" has a cultural association with sadness or depression in

American culture, but this association may not exist in the same way in other cultures, such as Arabic-speaking cultures (Al-Shawi & Mahadi, 2012, pp. 141-146).

Additionally, the distinction between written and spoken discourse poses another difficulty. Idiomatic expressions are commonly used in spoken language and often reflect colloquial or informal speech patterns. However, written language tends to adhere to more formal conventions, which may exclude the use of idioms. This divergence in usage between spoken and written language can create challenges in finding appropriate translations that maintain the intended meaning and style of the original idiomatic expression (Baker, 1991, p. 84).

7.2 STRATEGIES for TRANSLATING ENGLISH IDIOMS

Translating idiomatic and culturally-bound expressions requires careful consideration and the implementation of various strategies. Baker (1991) defines one such strategy as finding an idiom in the target language that not only shares similar meaning but also has a comparable form, although this approach may not always be feasible (p. 72). Loescher (1991) describes translation strategy as a conscious procedure used to address translation challenges. Building on these ideas, Baker (1991) proposes four main strategies that translators can utilize when translating idiomatic and culturally-bound expressions: total equivalence, partial equivalence, paraphrasing, and omission (pp. 85-93).

The first strategy, total equivalence, involves finding idiomatic expressions in the target language that possess the same meaning and form as those in the source language. However, achieving total equivalence is often limited to cases where the source and target languages share a common linguistic and cultural background. For example, certain English idioms may have direct equivalents in present-day Arabic that exhibit transparent meanings and similar linguistic structures.

The second strategy, partial equivalence, entails translating the source language idiom into a target language idiom that conveys the same meaning while differing in form. This strategy necessitates the translator's cultural competence and awareness to identify idiomatic expressions in the target language that capture the essence of the original idiom. For instance, when translating the English idiom "to carry coals to Newcastle" into Arabic, the resulting idiom may have a different form but retains the intended meaning and function.

Paraphrasing is another strategy employed when translating idiomatic expressions. In this approach, the translator provides a concise explanation of the underlying meaning of the idiom in the source language. This allows for a more explicit translation that conveys the intended meaning effectively.

Furthermore, translators may employ the strategy of omission, which involves intentionally excluding the translation of an idiom if an appropriate equivalent cannot be found in the target language. Omission is often utilized when idiomatic expressions are deeply rooted in the source language's cultural context and lack direct equivalents in the target language.

8. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to investigate the challenges and strategies in translating English idioms. By using both the qualitative and quantitative data, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and strategies in translating English idioms.

The methodology consists of two main phases: data collection and description.

8.1. DATA COLLECTION and DESCRIPTION

a. Participant Selection: A total of 20 fourth-year students majoring in English translation, in the English department in Takreet university in the academic year 2023-2024, were recruited as participants for this study. These students were selected based on their academic background and on the basis of their willingness to participate in this study .

b. Translation Task: The participants will be given the 10 sentence samples. They will be instructed to translate the sentences into Arabic language while aiming to capture the idiomatic meaning accurately.

c. Translation Notes: Participants will be encouraged to provide notes explaining their translation choices, highlighting any challenges they encountered, and describing the strategies they employed to overcome these challenges.

8.2. DATA ANALYSIS

a. Qualitative Analysis: The translations provided by the participants will be analyzed qualitatively. The analysis will focus on identifying common challenges encountered during the translation process, such as cultural differences, semantic obstacles, and issues related to transparency and frequency of idiomatic expressions. The strategies employed by participants to address these challenges will also be examined.

b. Quantitative Analysis: In addition to qualitative analysis, quantitative measures will be employed to identify patterns and trends in the translations as well as the notes provided by the participants. This includes assessing the frequency of specific translation choices or the effectiveness of certain strategies in conveying the idiomatic meaning.

c. Thematic Coding: The qualitative data obtained from the translations and notes will be subjected to thematic coding. Themes and categories will be derived from the data to capture the recurrent challenges and strategies employed by the participants.

8.3 THE SAMPLE

1. "He offered me a free vacation, but I should Beware of Greeks bearing gifts".
2. "The politician knew that he would be crossing the Rubicon."
3. "Despite the reassurances, the employees saw the writing on the wall and feared layoffs were imminent"
4. "It was like having the sword of Damocles hanging over me"
5. "The enormous legal fees made it a Pyrrhic victory for the plaintiff."
6. "He tried to pass the buck to his subordinates."
7. "In his speech, the politician threw down the gauntlet in the face of his opponents".

8. "He accidentally let the cat out of the bag."
9. "While revising the book, the editor cautioned the author not to throw the baby out with the bathwater."
10. "She presented her groundbreaking research to the committee, feeling like she was casting pearls before swine."

9. ANALYSIS and FINDINGS

For the sake of brevity, the analysis and the findings will be presented together for each of the tasks discussed in section 6.1 namely the translation choices task and the translators' note task.

1. Challenges and Strategies in Translation Choices

- Literal Translation: 40% of the translations involved a literal translation approach, aiming to preserve the original wording of the idiomatic expression.

- Paraphrasing: 30% of the translations used paraphrasing, where participants rephrase the idiom using equivalent expressions or alternative wording to convey the intended meaning.

- Cultural Equivalents: 20% of the translations have used cultural equivalents, where participants replace the English idiom with a similar idiom or expression in the target language that carries a similar meaning.

- Adaptation: 10% of the translations used adaptation strategy, where participants modify or adjust the idiomatic expression to fit the target language while maintaining the idiomatic sense.

2. Challenges and Strategies in Translators' Notes

- Cultural Differences: 50% of the participants' notes mentioned challenges related to cultural differences, such as finding appropriate cultural equivalents or adapting idioms to the target culture.

- Semantic Obstacles: 40% of the notes mentioned difficulties in dealing with the figurative or metaphorical meanings of idiomatic expressions and the need to find suitable equivalents in the target language.

- Less Familiar Idioms: 30% of the notes highlighted challenges encountered when translating less familiar or context-specific idioms, requiring additional research or consultation.

- Figurative vs. Linguistic Coherence: 20% of the notes discuss the trade-off between preserving the figurative nature of idioms and ensuring linguistic coherence in the target language, mentioning different strategies employed by the participants.

- Individual Translation Styles: 60% of the notes reflect the individual translation styles of the participants, showcasing variations in their approaches, preferences, and decision-making processes.

10. CONCLUSION

This study has found that translating English idioms indeed presents numerous challenges due to the complexities arising from style, cultural connotations, and the lack of direct equivalents in other languages. The analysis of translation choices reveals that translators employ various strategies such as literal translation, paraphrasing, cultural equivalents, and adaptation to tackle these challenges. However, the selection of a suitable strategy

depends on factors such as linguistic and cultural similarities between the source and target languages.

This study found that the most important difficulties, research question 1, that face the translators in translating English idioms are: Cultural Differences; 50% of the participants' notes mentioned challenges related to cultural differences, Semantic Obstacles; 40% of the notes mentioned difficulties in dealing with the figurative or metaphorical meanings of idiomatic expressions and the need to find suitable equivalents in the target language, and the Unfamiliarity of some Idioms; 30% of the notes highlighted challenges encountered when translating less familiar idioms.

The study also found that, in terms of the strategies used in translating English idioms as stated in research question 2, the most recurrently mentioned strategies are: Literal Translation; 40% of the translations involved a literal translation approach, Paraphrasing; 30% of the translations used paraphrasing, where participants rephrase the idiom using equivalent expressions or alternative wording to convey the intended meaning, Searching for the Cultural Equivalents; 20% of the translations have used cultural equivalents, where participants replace the English idiom with a similar idiom or expression in the target language that carries a similar meaning, lastly, Adaptation; 10% of the translations used adaptation strategy, where participants modify or adjust the idiomatic expression to fit the target language while maintaining the idiomatic sense.

In relation to semantic obstacles, research question 3, this study found that semantics also posed a difficulty in translating English idioms, as 40% of the notes mentioned difficulties in dealing with the figurative or metaphorical meanings of idiomatic expressions. Additionally, figurative coherence was an obstacle to 20% of the participants as 20% of the notes discussed the trade-off between preserving the figurative nature of idioms and ensuring linguistic coherence in the target language.

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Appendix I: The Most Recurrent Errors in the Participants Answers:

1. "He offered me a free vacation, but I should Beware of Greeks bearing gifts."

- عليّ عطلة مجانية، ولكن يجب أن أحذر اليونانيين يحملون الهدايا".

- Translation 2

"عرض عليّ عطلة مجانية، ولكن يجب أن أحذر اليونانيين يأتون بهدايا".

2. "The politician knew that he would be crossing the Rubicon."

"عرف السياسي أنه سيعبر الروبيكون ".

- Translation 2

"عرف السياسي أنه سيتجاوز الروبيكون".

3. "Despite the reassurances, the employees saw the writing on the wall and feared layoffs were imminent."

- Translation 1:

"على الرغم من التأكيدات، رأى الموظفون الكتابة على الحائط وخشوا أن الأجور قد تكون وشيكة".

- Translation 2

"على الرغم من التأكيدات، رأى الموظفون الكتابة على الحائط وخشوا أن الفصل الوظيفي قد يكون وشيكًا ".

4. "It was like having the sword of Damocles hanging over me."

- Translation 1

"كان الأمر مثل وجود سيف داموكليس يعلق فوقي".

- Translation 2

"كان الأمر مثل وجود سيف داموكليس يعلق فوق رأسي".

5. "The enormous legal fees made it a Pyrrhic victory for the plaintiff."

   - Translation 1

"رسوم المحاماة الضخمة جعلتها انتصارًا بيريكًا للمدعي ".

   - Translation 2

"الرسوم القانونية الضخمة جعلتها انتصارًا باهظ الثمن للمدعي".

6. "He tried to pass the buck to his subordinates."

   - Translation 1

"حاول أن ينقل المسؤولية إلى مرؤوسيه".

   - Translation 2

"حاول أن يمرر الدولار إلى مرؤوسيه".

7. "In his speech, the politician threw down the gauntlet in the face of his opponents."

   - Translation 1

"في خطابه، رمى السياسي القفاز في وجه خصومه ".

   - Translation 2

"في خطابه، رمى السياسي التحدي في وجه خصومه ".

8. "He accidentally let the cat out of the bag."

   - Translation 1

"بطريقة غير مقصودة، أطلق الوحش من الحقيبة ".

   - Translation 2

"بطريقة غير مقصودة، أخرج القط من الحقيبة".

9. "While revising the book, the editor cautioned the author not to throw the baby out with the bathwater."

   - Translation 1

"أثناء مراجعة الكتاب، حذر المحرر الكاتب من رمي الطفل مع ماء الاستحمام".

   - Translation 2

"أثناء مراجعة الكتاب، حذر المحرر الكاتب من رمي الطفل في الحمام ".

10. "She presented her groundbreaking research to the committee, feeling like she was casting pearls before swine."

   - Translation 1

"قدمت أبحاثها المبتكرة إلى اللجنة، شعرت وكأنها تلبس اللآلئ للخنازير ".

   - Translation 2

"قدمت أبحاثها الثورية إلى اللجنة، شعرت وكأنها تلقي اللآلئ في وجه الخنازير ".

Appendix II: The Typical Translation:

1. "He offered me a free vacation, but I should Beware of Greeks bearing gifts."

" عرض عليّ إجازة مجانية، لكن يجب أن أحذر من اليونانيين حتى عندما يحملون الهدايا".

2. "The politician knew that he would be crossing the Rubicon."

" عرف السياسي أنه سيعبر خط اللارجعة".

3. "Despite the reassurances, the employees saw the writing on the wall and feared layoffs were imminent."

" على الرغم من التطمين، توقع الموظفون الأسوأ وخشوا أن إقالتهم قد تكون وشيكة".

4. "It was like having the sword of Damocles hanging over me."

" كان الأمر مثل وجود سيف داموكليس فوق رقبتي".

5. "The enormous legal fees made it a Pyrrhic victory for the plaintiff."

" رسوم المحاماة الضخمة جعلته انتصارًا مكلفاً للغاية واشبه بالخسارة".

6. "He tried to pass the buck to his subordinates."

" حاول رمي المسؤولية على مرؤوسيه".

7. "In his speech, the politician threw down the gauntlet in the face of his opponents."

" في خطابه، تحدى السياسي خصومه".

8. "He accidentally let the cat out of the bag."

" لقد كشف عن الخدعة بالصدفة".

9. "While revising the book, the editor cautioned the author not to throw the baby out with the bathwater."

" أثناء مراجعة الكتاب، حذر المحرر الكاتب ألا يحذف الأشياء المهمة مع الأشياء التافهة".

10. "She presented her groundbreaking research to the committee, feeling like she was casting pearls before swine."

"   قدمت بحثها الرائد إلى اللجنة، لكنها شعرت وكأنها تعطي اللآلئ للخنازير".