



Problems of Translating Opaque Idioms from English into Arabic

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ABSTRACT

Translating idioms appears to be challenging for most translators, since most idioms' meanings cannot always be inferred from the meaning of their individual components. Considering the problems of translation of idioms, this study deals with the problems that arise while translating English opaque idioms into Arabic, as well as the strategies employed by MA students to identify an appropriate translation in the target language. The theoretical part will explain some basic notions regarding the definition of idioms, the strategies. The aim of this study is to examine the types of problems that students face when translating idioms and to find potential solutions and preventative strategies. In this regard, MA students were given a test consisting of five English opaque idioms that needed to be translated. The study's findings indicate that there are potential problems when translating English opaque idioms into Arabic.

Key words: The notion of idioms, opaque idioms, context and data analysis

ترجمة التعابير الاصطلاحية المبهمة الإنكليزية الى العربية: مشاكل وحلول

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المستخلص

إن التعابير الاصطلاحية الانكليزية المترجمة إلى اللغة العربية تشكل تحدياً لمعظم المترجمين التحريريين، لأن معاني معظم التعابير لا يمكن دائماً استخلاصها من معنى مكوناتها الفردية. وبالنظر إلى مشاكل ترجمة هذه التعابير الاصطلاحية، تتناول هذه الدراسة المشاكل التي تنشأ عند ترجمتها إلى العربية، فضلاً عن الاستراتيجيات التي يستخدمها الطلاب لتحديد الترجمة المناسبة باللغة الهدف. وسيشرح الجزء النظري بعض المفاهيم الأساسية المتعلقة بتعريف التعابير، والاستراتيجيات. والهدف من هذه الدراسة هو دراسة أنواع المشاكل التي يواجهها الطلاب عند ترجمة التعابير وإيجاد الحلول الممكنة والاستراتيجيات المناسبة. وفي هذا الصدد، أعطي طلاب ماجستير في قسم الترجمة اختباراً يتألف من خمسة جمل إنكليزية تحتاج إلى ترجمة باللغة العربية. وتشير نتائج الدراسة إلى أن هناك مشاكل محتملة عند ترجمة اللغة الإنكليزية إلى اللغة العربية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: شرح التعابير الاصطلاحية، التعابير الاصطلاحية المبهمة، النص و تحليل البيانات



INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Idioms, or idiomatic expressions, are figurative words or phrases commonly understood by native speakers. They are an inherent part of language and can have different meanings depending on the context. Translating idioms is challenging due to the unique culture-specific items in each language. Idioms are a frozen pattern of language, meaning they cannot be deduced from their individual components. We feel more perplexed and confused when we hear or use them in a foreign language, because when we study a language we usually tend to neglect them and to pay attention to words and terms we consider important or appropriate to our needs. This study narrowed the research scope to opaque idioms, because they may pose comprehension hurdles if they are not known. Consequently, the purpose of this research was to identify the most frequent opaque idioms in English, which are worthy of pedagogical attention and attempts to investigate and figure out the translation strategies applied in translating opaque idiom.

Aims of the Study

The current study tries to achieve the following aims:

1. Identifying the translation strategies applied to translate the idiom.
2. Identifying the problems that the subjects face in translating opaque idioms from English into Arabic.

Value of the Study

The study of idiomatic expressions is also valuable because it enables researchers to discover underlying patterns which relate to the semantic, structural, and lexicographical aspects of language itself. Thus, the added value of this thesis is to be found in its examination of the types and the figurative meaning of opaque idioms in English sentences and its analysis of the factors or contexts which influence how the meaning of idiomatic expressions is interpreted.

1. The notion of idioms

Roberts (1944) argues that what has to be looked at is how the cognitive structure of a specific language manifests itself in what he terms "creative idiomaticity," which refers to speakers of that language's clever manipulation of idiomatic expressions by speakers of given speech community that normally requires cultural or literary awareness on their part. Idioms, in Roberts' terms are viewed as adhering to the cultural norms of language use in thinking and speaking; this is considered to be a matter of cultural awareness, which enables language users to think and communicate and live effectively in the culture underlying his creative power in thinking and generative talent in language use. Idioms are sequence of words that function as a single unit and are semantically and often



syntactically restricted, according to Crystal (1980, p. 179). Semantically speaking, an idiomatic expression cannot be understood by adding up the meanings of its constituent words. Syntactically speaking, the terms frequently do not allow for the typical variability that exhibit in other contexts. For example, "it is raining cats and dogs" does not allow for it to be raining a dog and a cat or dogs and cats. An idiom is defined as "a number of words which, taken together, mean something different from the individual words of the idiom when they stand alone" by J. Seidl McMordiew (1983:4). In a definition given by Larson idiom is "a string of words whose meaning is different from the meaning conveyed by the individual words" (Larson, 1984, pp.20-142). In another place he claims that idiom "carries certain emotive connotations not expressed in the other lexical items". For example, in English, the term "kick the bucket" means the same thing as "die," but it conveys a sense of disrespect. As a result, idioms and their effects could not be ignored or omitted in translation.

According to Mona Baker (1992), idioms are frozen linguistic patterns with limited change and meanings that cannot be derived from individual components. She defines five prerequisites for idioms, which are as follows: A) The order of words in an idiom cannot be altered. The word order is set and cannot be changed. Example,

1) "go to rack and ruin" as opposed to "go to ruin and rack".
B) Words in an idiom cannot be omitted. Language users cannot delete specific words from an element. For example,

2) "*shed crocodile tears*" rather than "*shed tears*."

C) An idiom cannot be expanded with more words. For example,

3) "*have a narrow escape*" rather than "*have a narrow quick*."

D) No words in an idiom can be replaced by another word. E.g.

4) "*out of sight, out of mind*" not "*out of sight, out of heart*".

E) It is also impossible to change an idiom's grammatical structures. For example,

5) "*ring the bell*" not "*the bell was ringed*".

2. Classification of idioms

Fernando and Flavell (1981: 19) provided an explanation of different types associated with the categorization of idioms, which was grounded on the concept of



how clear their meaning is. They provided a categorization of idioms, which consists of four types, as elaborated in the subsequent paragraphs.

1-Transparent idioms, this includes idioms where the literal and metaphorical meanings are closely connected, making it possible to infer the metaphorical meaning from the literal one. Examples of such idioms.

6) *to cut the wood and to break the eggs*(Fernando and Flavell 1981).

2-Semi-transparent idioms, including expressions that consist of both a literal and figurative meaning, known as idioms, which can be considered as metaphors. Examples of these idioms are

7) *skate on thin ice* (to be in a risky situation)

8) *add fuel to the fire* (to worsen a situation) (Fernando and Flavell 1981:19)

3-Semi-opaque phrases, these metaphorical idioms, like to burn one's boats and tarred with the same brush, are somewhat difficult to understand and not fully comprehensible(Fernando and Flavell 1981: 19).

4-Opaque phrases, which are full Idioms like to pull somebody's leg and to pass the buck have completely different literal and figurative meanings which cannot be understood by looking at the individual words in the idiomatic expression.(Fernando and Flavell 1981: 19)

3. Types of Opaque Idioms

According to the degree of their opacity (non-transparency), idioms may be divided into 3 main groups:

•Fully opaque –

The meaning of a fully opaque idiom is not based on the sum of the meanings of the individual words, and no logical link can be detected between the meaning of the parts and the meaning of the whole. Makkai (1972) describes pure idioms as idioms of decoding. Fernando (1996) describes this type as full idiom in which the figurative meaning cannot be understood by looking at the individual words in the idiomatic expression On the other hand , Moon (1998) describes pure idioms as opaque metaphors, which cannot understood without referring to the knowledge of the historical source, such as

9) *To burn ones boat (to make retreat impossible).*

10) *kick the bucket(die).*



11). *Spill the beans (reveal a secret)*

•**Pseudo opaque** the meaning of a pseudo- opaque idiom is not based on the sum of the meanings of the individual words, but it is possible to guess its meaning. Pseudo idioms, where one of the elements does not make any sense on its own, such as spic and span and kith and kin (Makkai, 1969). Similarly, other phrases could also contain an element does not make sense in its own, such as

12) *easy-peasy and blah blah blah.*

•**Semi-opaque** –

at least one word of the expression is used literally, the other words are fully metaphorical. In other words, the expression is separated into two parts; a part of the phrase has a literal meaning, while the other part has a figurative sense (Fernando, 1996). For example,

13) *to know the ropes* (to know how a particular job should be done).

4. Strategies used in the translation of idioms

Newmark (1988) believes that a translator should ensure that, for the majority of texts, 1) the translation makes sense and, 2) it reads naturally, written in everyday English with common syntax, idioms, and vocabulary appropriate for the context. Additionally, he says that the various idioms, styles, or registers that make up natural language use are dictated by the following factors: a) the text's context; b) the author, topic, and readership (Newmark, 1988). He tackled the notion of equivalence by asking if a translation should try to remain as close as possible to the source language or if it should, instead, aim to be free and idiomatic. He called these two approaches semantic translation and communicative translation respectively.

In translating idioms, translators should consider a number of factors, according to Baker (1992), there are five strategies.

1. Using an idiom of similar meaning and form

This strategy might seem to be the ideal solution, but other aspects, such as register, style, or rhetorical effect, must be considered as well. Baker agrees with Fernando and Flavell in their warning against the urge that most translators feel to search for an idiom in the target language risking to use even inappropriate ones (Fernando & Flavell qtd in Baker 1992). Using an idiom with a comparable meaning and form in the target language refers to using an idiom that contains



analogous lexical elements and roughly corresponds to the meaning of the phrase in the source language (e.g. *break someone's heart*)

2. Making use of an idiom with a similar meaning but a different form.

This strategy is based on the possibility to find an idiom in the target language with a similar meaning to that of the source idiom or expression, but containing different lexical items (e.g. *Jack-of-all-trades*)

3. Translation by paraphrase

According to Baker, this is the most popular method of translating idioms when using them in the target text is not appropriate due to variations in stylistic choices or when there is no correspondence in the target language.

4. Translation by omission

Idioms could occasionally be omitted from the target text. This might happen because they are difficult to paraphrase, do not closely correspond to the target language, or have stylistic issues.

5. Strategy of compensation

Baker avoids illustrating this method due to space constraints. In short, this means that a feature like idiomaticity can be either emphasized or ignored when it appears in the source text and add it to the target text in a different place. Baker comes to the conclusion that a translation's readability can be significantly impacted by using the target language's usual phraseology, which includes its own naturally occurring fixed and semi-fixed expressions, and the appropriate degree of idiomaticity. Should a translator if the author effectively addresses these problems, the target material will seem less "foreign" (Baker 1992).

5. The Concept of Context

Linguists frequently define context of a phrase or word as the surrounding text. The context, which comprises information about the subject matter of the discussion as well as the circumstances surrounding the speech, is a little portion of the discourse universe that is shared by the speaker and the hearer. It is never possible to pinpoint the precise context of any one remark with absolute accuracy. Context has become an important concept in language research. The growing interest in how language is used in real-life settings, as well as what individuals mean when they use its meaning potential, can be attributed in part to Chomsky's treatment of language and the language user as abstract entities (Chomsky 1965:3).



Context has been classified into two types: (a) local context, and (b) topical context.

6. The Role of Context in Translating Idiomatic Expressions

Context is most often used to describe the surroundings or situation in which anything (words or actions) occurs. When we describe anything as contextualized, we suggest that it has been placed in a suitable context, one in which it may be appropriately thought about. Language is a colorful tapestry that is weaved together with human experience, culture, and history. The idiomatic idioms stand out among its many threads. These expressions, which are ingrained in the spirit of a language, frequently resist literal translation. Idioms pose special difficulties for those working in the "translation services" industry, highlighting the importance of context in translating idioms, especially between languages as diverse as Arabic and English. Firth (1957) emphasizes the significance of contextualizing speech, defining it as a complex set of interconnected relationships. According to Newmark (1988, p. 41) the context of the translation approaches closer to the readers' native language , the translator will utilize an expression or an idiomatic expression to help the readers grasp the text better.

7. Data Analysis:

SL. 1- Learning another language is **no picnic**, it can take more work s than you think.

TL text.

- 1- ان تعلم لغة اخرى ليس بالأمر السهل بل يمكن ان يتطلب عملا اكثر مما تعتقد.
- 2- تعلم لغة اخرى ليس امرا سهلا قد يستغرق المزيد من الجهد اكثر مما تتوقع.
- 3- ليس من السهل تعلم لغة جديدة فقد يتطلب ذلك جهدا اكثر مما تظن.
- 4- تعلم لغة اخرى ليس نزهة بل يمكن ان يتطلب عملا اكثر مما تعتقد.

SL Text		TL Texts		Strategy of Translation		Appropriateness
	Type	Subject		Semanti	Commu	



no picnic	+	Semi-opaque	Translation		-	+	+
			1	ليس بالأمر السهل			
			2	ليس امرا سهلا			
			3	ليس من السهل			
			4	ليس نزهة			

Discussion:

According to Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2008) this opaque idiom is used to mean (quite difficult or unpleasant). The type of idiom used in this text is fully opaque. As for the subjects' translations it seems that, the first three subjects successfully translated the opaque idiom, whereas subject number four failed in his/her translation when s/he translated the opaque idiom into (ليس نزهة). . Except for no.4, all subjects used a communicative strategy in their renderings, hence all translations are appropriate with the exception of no.4, which is incorrect because the subject failed to provide an appropriate equivalent.

SL. 2- I think David **hit the nail on the head** when he said that kids won't want to buy this product

TL.

- 1- اعتقد ان ديفيد كان على حق تماما عندما قال ان الاطفال لن يرغبوا في دفع ثمن هذا المنتج
- 2- اعتقد ان ديفيد كان محقاً عندما قال ان الاطفال لن يرغبوا في شراء هذا المنتج
- 3- اعتقد ان ديفيد اصاب كبد الحقيقة عندما قال بأن الاطفال لن يرغبوا بشراء هذا المنتج
- 4- أعتقد ان ديفيد ضرب المسمار في رأسه عندما قال ان الاطفال لن يرغبوا بشراء ذلك المنتج

SL Text	TL Texts	Strategy of Translation	Annotation
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	Type		Subject	Translation	Semantic	Communicative	
		Semi-opaque					
hit the nail on the head	+		1	على حق تماماً	-	+	+
			2	محقاً	-	+	+
			3	اصاب كبد الحقيقة	-	+	+
			4	ضرب المسمار في رأسه	-	-	-

Discussion:

This opaque idiom is used to mean (to be exactly right about something:). The type of idiom used in this text is fully opaque. As for the subjects' translations it seems that, three subjects successfully translated the opaque idiom, whereas subject number four failed in his/her translation when s/he translated the opaque idiom into (ضرب المسمار في رأسه). . Except for no.4, all subjects used a communicative strategy in their renderings, hence all translations are appropriate with the exception of no.4, which is incorrect because the subject failed to provide an appropriate equivalent.

SL. 3- I could never **keep my nose clean** so my parents sent me to military school.

TL

- 1- لم اتمكن ابداً من تجنب الوقوع في المشاكل ، لذلك ارسلني والداي الى المدرسة العسكرية
- 2- ارسلني والداي الى المدرسة العسكرية لأنني لم اتمكن من الحفاظ على نظافتي الشخصية
- 3- لم اكن من النوع الذي يبقى بعيد عن المشاكل لذلك قام والداي بأرسالي الى المدرسة العسكرية
- 4 لم اتمكن ابداً من الحفاظ على نظافة انفي لذلك ارسلني والداي الى المدرسة العسكرية

SL Text	TL Texts	Strategy of Translation	Annotation
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	Type		Subject	Translation	Semantic	Communicative	
		Semi-opaque					
keep my nose clean	+		1	تجنب الوقوع في المشاكل	-	+	+
			2	الحفاظ على نظافتي الشخصية	-	+	+
			3	يبقى بعيد عن المشاكل	-	+	+
			4	الحفاظ على نظافة انفي	-	-	-

Discussion:

This opaque idiom is used to mean (*to avoid getting into trouble*). The type of idiom used in this text is fully opaque. As for the subjects' translations it seems that, subjects no.1 and 3 successfully translated the opaque idiom, whereas subjects no. 2 and 4 failed in their translation because they translated the opaque idiom into ((الحفاظ على نظافتي الشخصية الحفاظ على نظافة انفي)). Subjects no.1 and 3 used a communicative strategy in their renderings, so their translations are appropriate while the translation of no.2 and 4 is incorrect because the subjects failed to provide an appropriate equivalent.

SL. 4-Jim ran a stop sign and caused an accident; now he's going to have to **face the music**.

TL.

- 1- ركض جيم عند اشارة التوقف وتسبب في وقوع حادث الان سوف يتحمل العواقب
- 2- جيم تجاوز اشارة التوقف وتسبب في حادث الان يضطر لمواجهة العواقب
- 3- اجتاز جيم اشارة المرور بسرعة بحيث تسبب في حادث الان عليه ان يتحمل عواقب افعاله
- 4- جيم تجاوز اشارة التوقف وتسبب في وقوع حادث الان وتسبب عليه مواجهة الموسيقى



SL Text			TL Texts		Strategy of Translation		Appropriateness
	Type		Subject	Translation	Semantic	Communicative	
		Semi-opaque					
face the music			1	يتحمل العواقب	-	+	+
			2	لمواجهة العواقب	-	+	+
			3	يتحمل عواقب افعاله	-	+	+
		+	4	واجهه الموسيقى	-	-	-

Discussion:

This opaque idiom is used to mean (to accept criticism or punishment for something you have done). The type of idiom used in this text is semi-opaque. As for the subjects' translations it seems that, subjects no.1, 2 and 3 successfully translated the opaque idiom, whereas subjects no. 4 failed in his/her translation because s/he translated the opaque idiom into (مواجهة الموسيقى). Subjects no.1, 2 and 3 used a communicative strategy in their renderings, so their translations are appropriate while the translation of no.4 is incorrect because the subject failed to provide an appropriate equivalent.

SL. 5- I've warned you several times about being late and **my patience is wearing thin**.

TL.

1- لقد حذرتك عدة مرات من التأخر وصبري بدأ ينفذ

2- بقدر حذرتك عدة مرات من التأخير وصبري نفذ

3- لقد حذرتك عدة مرات عن هذا التأخير وها قد بدأ صبري ينفذ

4- لقد حذرتك من التأخير وصبري ينفذ



SL Text			TL Texts		Strategy of Translation		Appropriateness
	Type		Subject	Translation	Semantic	Communicative	
		Semi-opaque					
my patience is wearing thin			1	صبري بدأ ينفذ	-	+	+
			2	وصبري نفذ	-	+	+
			3	بدأ صبري ينفذ	-	+	+
		+	4	و صبري ينفذ	-	+	+

Discussion:

The opaque idiom in this text means (you become less and less patient). The type of the idiom here is Semi-opaque. All the subjects succeeded in their translations as they translated this idiom into صبري بدأ ينفذ. So all the subjects provided appropriate translations. As for the strategy of translation, all the subjects adopted the Communicative strategy.

8. Findings and Discussion

This part highlights and discusses the findings from analyzing 5 opaque idioms. Four tables were designed to summarize and highlight these data.

1. Table (1) below shows the frequencies of numbers percentages of the types of idioms that were used in this study.



Table (1): Occurrence Frequencies of Numbers Idioms Types

Types of idioms	Numbers
Fully opaque	3
Semi- opaque	2
Total	5

As previously said, four subjects rendered 5 opaque idioms. Table 1 shows that 3 fully opaque idioms and 2 semi-opaque idioms were used in this study.

2. The total number which is 20 translations was sub-categorized as in table (2) based on number of translations connected to each of the two categories opaque idioms. It also shows the frequencies of occurrence of appropriate vs. inappropriate translations in accordance with the same two types.

Table (2): Frequencies of Occurrences Appropriate vs. Inappropriate Translations in Accordance with the same two Types of Idioms

Types of Idioms	Appropriate	Inappropriate	Total
Fully opaque	8	4	12
Semi-opaque	7	1	8
Total	15	5	20

More specifically, 12 out of 20 were translations of fully opaque idioms, (3 fully opaque idioms multiplied by translations of four subjects). 8 out of 20 were translations of semi-opaque (2 semi-opaque idioms multiplied by translations of four subjects). The results reveal that 8 out of 12 translations of opaque idioms are appropriate and 4 translations are inappropriate. 7 out of 8 translations of semi-opaque idioms are appropriate and 1 translation is inappropriate. This indicates that a high number of appropriate translations is associated with fully opaque idioms and a less number is associated with semi-opaque.

3. Table (3) below describes in detail the numbers and percentages of the translations of subjects' appropriateness and inappropriateness.



Table (3): Occurrence Frequencies of Numbers of Appropriate and Inappropriate Translations

Subjects	Appropriate Translations	Inappropriate Translations
1	5	0
2	4	1
3	5	0
4	1	4
Total	15	5

The results show that 15 out of 20 (four subjects each multiplied by 5 translations) are appropriate translations, whereas the remaining 5 are inappropriate translations.

Table (4): Occurrence Frequencies of Numbers of Semantic and Communicative Translations

Subjects	Semantic	Communicative	Non
1	0	5	0
2	0	4	1
3	0	5	0
4	0	1	4
Total	0	15	5

The results show that 15 of the 20 used the communicative strategy. The remaining 5 translations were unsuccessful and did not adopt either a semantic or communicative strategy of translation. The results reveal that the semantic strategy was not adopted because opaque idioms cannot be translated semantically.

5. Opaque idioms require context to be accurately translated. They may be difficult to translate if they are not contextualized.



Conclusions

The study focuses on opaque idioms. They are characterized a set of characteristics but The most evident of these characteristics, which define them as opaque idioms, is that their semantics and lexical structure are not compatible. The researcher has selected certain idioms for her data that meet the criteria specified for identifying opaque idioms. These idioms don't derive their meaning from their constituents words. They also don't provide any hints as to how to interpret what they mean. The analysis of these idioms reveals they have a metaphorical formulation. It is impossible to translate opaque idioms semantically; instead, one must identify the equivalent in the target language in order convey similar meaning. Communicative translation is therefore important. When translating opaque idioms, context plays an important role since without it, the meaning of these expressions cannot be inferred.

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