

Cultural Implications in the Translatability of English Food Idioms into Arabic

Assist. Prof. Mohammad Abdul-Qadir Ajaaj (Ph.D.)

Assist. Instructor Hadeel Najeeb Mohammad (M.A.)

Al-Ma'moon University College - Department of Translation

Abstract

Idioms are specific expressions or phrases whose meaning cannot be predicted easily from literal interpretation. The translator should be aware of the cultural norms and social attitudes of both source and target language. However, idioms range in opacity from literal, semi-opaque to complete opaque expressions. The last two categories are very dangerous in interpretation because the translator had to be acquainted with the social competence of the two cultures. The present study focuses upon one important field of knowledge i.e. the translatability of food idioms because they are culturally bound and need much concentration from the translator. The present paper attempts to find out the suitable strategies involved in translating food idioms from English into Arabic. It proposes a number of equivalences for the investigated food idioms taking into account all perspectives and shades of meaning in these two cultures.

Keywords: types of idioms, strategies of translation, food idioms, cultural recognitions.

1. Idioms: An Introductory Background

Idioms are linguistic items which are expressed as figures of speech, representing objects, concepts or phenomena of material life particular to a given culture. They, generally, preserve the local and cultural colour of that language through observing the figurative sense of the society. Larson (1984:20) defines an idiom as "a string of words whose meaning is different from the meaning conveyed by the individual words" . Then an idiom bears certain emotive connotations which are not revealed in other lexical items.

Idioms are fixed group of words which have a different meaning from their separate words. They are translated non-literally because their meaning cannot be predicted from their constituents. Baker (1992: 63) elaborates on this point saying that idioms are frozen patterns of language which have little variation in form and their meanings cannot be deduced from their components. In more precise way, Richards and Schmidt (2002: 246) define an idiom as "an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts."

Though, idiomatic expressions look natural to native speakers, they are very confusing for non-native speakers because the words do not mean what they say. This means that idioms of any language cannot be literally translated into other languages. The following examples explicate some of the encountered difficulties in translation:

Source Idioms	Literal Translation	Target Equivalence	Strategy adopted
It runs in the family.	ينحدر في أئانه	بالتوريث	Strategy (B)
under the weather	تحت الطقس	هو مريض	Strategy (C)

In this context, word-for-word translation into Arabic will be non-sense. People use idioms not only to make their language richer and more colourful but also to convey shades of meaning or intentions. For example, the proper translation of the third idiom 'it runs in the family' is بالوراثة which is more succinct than saying 'ينحدر في العائلة'. In order to understand any idiom, one should be totally engaged in the intertwined process of cultural concepts and social attitudes of SL and TL.

Cultural idiomacity is deeply inherited in language to the extent that most native speakers are rarely aware of this colloquialism. In other words, the idioms of a language are culture-specific which differentiate one society from another. Thus, outsiders or foreigners cannot decipher an idiom from their native perspectives. As such idioms are often the most difficult aspect of a foreign language to be learned, comprehended and translated. Glucksberge (2001: 87) states that "familiar idioms in one language community would be utterly opaque to people from a different community." Also, idioms whose meanings could be inferred literally are generally better known for second-language learners than those that are either opaque or semi-opaque.

Fraser (1970: 22) refers to an idiom as "A constituent or series of constituents for which the semantic interpretation is not a compositional function of the formatives of which it is composed." Idioms are often used to replace a literal word because they describe

the full nuance of meaning i.e. they are more precise than literal words because they have fewer words and reveal much.

2. Categorization of idioms:

There is a sort of typology proposed by Fernando (1996:35) ,who distinguishes three sub-classes of idioms ; pure idioms ,semi-idioms and literal idioms.

1. Pure idioms (opaque phrases) are "a type of conventionalized, non-literal multiword expressions" (ibid: 36). They are fossilized, non-compositional expressions which are impervious to any morphological, semantic or syntactic changes as they result in the loss of their unitary meaning. Palmer (1981: 88) cites 'kick the bucket' as a pure idiom because it is semantically opaque and lexically fixed expression. Another example is 'spill the beans ' which has nothing to do with the beans. Pure idioms are not translated literally because their sense should be predicted from the implied meaning of the SL.

kick the bucket

وافته المنية

spill the beans

يفشي السر

hit the sack

يلتحف الفراش

As shown in the translation above, the Arabic version "وافته المنية" is totally different from the literal meaning of "ركل السطل". The second example 'spill the beans' is better translated into figurative sense "يفشي السر" than the literal meaning "فرط الحمص". The resultant translation implies the same sense of the SL because literal translation will be misleading.

2. Semi- idioms (pseudo-literal translation) have one or more literal constituents and another non-literal one. They comprise at least one literal and one figurative component, which give an overall partial compositional meaning. This partial opacity is explained in the following two examples:

make up one's{ mind }

يتوصل لقرار

foot the bill

يدفع الفاتورة

It's raining cats and dogs.

إنها تمطر كأفواه القرب

The idioms above are semi-opaque because the first part 'mind' and 'foot' are opaque while the rest 'make up' and ' bill ' are transparent. For this reason, the translator confronts little difficulty in translation.

3. Literal Idioms (transparent expressions) are collocations of expressions whose meaning can be easily predicted from their components. These expressions are not problematic because the translator does not pay any effort in finding a TL equivalence.

of course

بالطبع

in any case
for certain

على أية حال
بكل تأكيد

3. Difficulties in Translating Idioms:

Translating an idiom is a risky task because they should be translated with great care. Only by having a solid foundation and a deep knowledge of both cultures, the translator can catch the implied meaning. This needs full awareness of alien attitudes and specific cultural implications of SL as well as TL. Cultural and even religious implications may raise great difficulties for translators and interpreters especially with regard to traditional and innovating idioms. The following English idioms cannot be translated literally without violating the cultural conceptions and conventional attitudes of the community. So, they are best translated into their idiomatic equivalences in the target language:

Shut your cake hole

امسك عليك لسانك

Forbidden fruit is sweetest

كل ممنوع مرغوب

There are many problems which confront the translator because of stylistic, cultural, and even religious reasons. The wider the gap between the SL and the TL, the more difficult the task will be for the translator to transfer the message. However, not all idioms are easily recognized because some are easier to recognize than others. Translating and interpreting an idiom are totally different tasks and the question is whether a given idiom is transparent or opaque.

4. Strategies for Translating Food Idioms:

The strategies for translating idioms from SL into TL depend on many factors in which culture plays a significant role, for idioms are culture-specific. The translator should pick out the most suitable strategy which helps the readers in the process of comprehension. In other words, the translator may use his communicative competence in order to reflect the real sense of the TL.

For instance, if the original idiom does not have an equivalent, the translator should make his attempt to clarify the real sense properly. There is "strong unconscious urge in most translators to search hard for an idiom in the receptor language, however inappropriate it may be" (Fernando and Flavell, 1981:82). The researchers have chosen their food idioms from some important dictionaries: Idioms Organizer (2002) and Mac-Graw Hill's Dictionary of Food Idioms (2005). For Arabic dictionaries, 'Muçđam ʔlamøāl Alçrabia' (1993) has been consulted thoroughly. Following Baker (1992), there are four strategies for translating idioms ;

a. Using Equivalent Idioms in the TL:

In this strategy, the translator should be resistant to dig out idioms of similar form and meaning. According to Newmark (1981: 123), there is correspondence in functions and expressions of both languages and the translator can manage the situation by providing the exact equivalence in the TL. This may be done through consultation and negotiation with specialists and linguists in both languages. However, the translator should find out the approximate lexical item which explicates the sense of the SL idioms as in the following example:

fast food	أكالات سريعة
salt and pepper	ملح و فلفل
dried broad beans	باقلاء مجففة
not worth a hill of beans	لا يساوي كومة قش (باقلاء)
sweet and sour sauce	صلصه حلوه وحاذقه

b. Using an Idiom of a Correspondent Function but Dissimilar

Expressions :

Here, the translator may maneuver through observing functions but flouting out expressions. Some idioms are highly cultural-specific and fossilized in sense and it is the job of the translator to manipulate his linguistic facilities in order to find out a TL idiom which has the same meaning but different lexical items. For example, the translator, in the following idioms, preserves the Arabic sense through replacing the SL idioms with TL idioms which have the same functions:

not one's cup of tea	ابد مو ثوبي
piece of cake	شربت ماء
a couch potato	تنبل
someone's bread and butter	مورد رزقي
in a pickle (informal)	في حيص بيص
cool as a cucumber	ابرد من الثلج (ابرد من طيز السقا)
the salt of the earth	ابن حمولة
cherry-pick something	يميز الخبيث من الطيب
take something with a grain of salt	حديث خرافة
have one's cake and eat it too	اخذ الخيط و المخيط
shut your cake hole! and Shut your pie hole!	امسك عليك لسانك
the apple of someone's eye	قرة العين
forbidden fruit	ثمرة إبليس
apples and oranges	مثل الحية والبطنج
bread and water	بساط احمدي
bread is the staff of life.	اكل يرب القلب

break bread with someone	وجب الزاد
cast one's bread upon the waters.	انفق ولا تخشى من ذي العرش إقلالا
know which side one's bread is buttered on	اعلم من أين تأكل الكتف
one's (butter and) egg money	تحوشيت العمر
pass the buck	فلا تلوموني ولوموا أنفسكم
the bread always falls on the buttered side.	لا تأتي المصائب فرادى
butter wouldn't melt (in someone's mouth).	يتوارى من القوم

fine words butter no parsnips.	مواعيد عرقوب
separate the wheat from the chaff	يميز الخبيث من الطيب
doesn't know beans (about something)	ما يعرف كوعه من بوعه
down to chili and beans	أصبحنا على الحديد
full of beans; full of bull;	هواء في شبك

c. Translation by Paraphrasing:

This is the most common strategy where the translator cannot find out an equivalent for the source idiom. Here, he may opt to new expressions which reflect the same idea of the TL idiom. The proposed expressions in paraphrasing may not have the same idiomatic quality of the SL idioms as shown in the examples below:

food for thought	ملهم أفكاري
go 'pear-shaped	زاد الطين بله
junk food	طعام غير صحي
convenience food	طعام جاهز للطبخ
cheese someone off	يستثيطه غضبا
a slice of the cake	حصاة من المقسوم
bread-and-butter letter	رسالة شكر و امتنان
Variety is the spice of life.	التغيير متعة الحياة
food bank	مطعم مجاني للفقراء

d. Translation by Using Notes:

This strategy is used when no close match between the SL and TL exists or when the translator fails to find any equivalent. The translator resorts to writing notes because there is no correspondence in function and expression between the TL and SL. So, he should be aware of the cultural and social attitudes in the two languages. This is quite obvious in translating religious subjects from the Bible or the Glorious Quran. Eftekhari (2008: 5) states that "employing 'notes' in the translation, both as a translation strategy and a translation procedure, seems to be essential so that the foreign language

readership could benefit from the text as much as the ST readers do". The following proposed translations of food idioms explain this idea clearly;

stew in one's own juice	غمرات ثم ينجلين (يهدئ من روعه)
don't put all your eggs in one basket.	لا تكشف كل أوراقك (لا تغامر)
nutty as a fruitcake	طبل فارغ (أحمق)
apple-polisher	مساح الأكتاف (منافق)
let them eat cake.	يأكلوا هواء (ليذهبوا الى الجحيم)
have egg on one's face	ضاربه على خشمه (يحمر وجهه خجلا)
cake someone or something with something	تلطخ بالطين (او أي ماده أخرى)
spill the beans	غربال ما يحفظ شي (يفشي السر)

Conclusions

The present study has come up with the following conclusions;

1. Some food idioms cannot be translated literally because their meanings cannot be predicted easily from their constituents.
2. The translator should be completely endowed with the social and cultural knowledge of each society in order to reflect the exact function of food idioms. He should be highly sensitive of the rhetorical and artistic features of idioms in both languages.
3. He ought to make fine consultation with Arab linguists in order to have the exact equivalence of idioms. This can be supported by holding direct meetings in order to enhance confidence in the proposed translations.
4. He may hold a corpus study by conducting a questionnaire expecting the right choice of idioms. He, later on, may evaluate the answers in terms of the strategies of translation.
5. The study shows that most of food idioms have been translated through strategy B and C because Arabic has similar idioms of the same sense. Few other food idioms have been translated through strategy A and D i.e. Arabic has no equivalences for some English food idioms. To conclude, Arabic is rich of food idioms because they have counterparts in English.

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اثر العوامل الحضارية في ترجمة مصطلحات الطعام باللغة الانكليزية الى العربية

أ.م.د. محمد عبد القادر عجاج

م.م. هديل نجيب محمد

كلية المأمون الجامعة - قسم الترجمة

المستخلص

المصطلحات هي عبارات خاصة تحمل معنى غير مأخوذ من الترجمة الحرفية . يجب على المترجم الأخذ بالسلوك الاجتماعي والأعراف الحضارية لكلتا اللغتين. ان المصطلحات تتفاوت في المعنى كونها تعابير غامضة إلى أخرى واضحة. تعد المصطلحات الغامضة صعبة التفسير لان المترجم يجب أن يكون ملما بالمعرفة الاجتماعية لكلتا الحضارتين.

تركز الدراسة الحالية حول حقل مهم للمعرفة هو ترجمة مصطلحات الطعام كونها متلازمات حضارية وتحتاج إلى تركيز ودقه من المترجم. كذلك يحاول البحث إيجاد أطريقه المناسبة في ترجمة مصطلحات الطعام من اللغة الانكليزية إلى العربية . كذلك تقدم مصطلحات طعام مناظره مع الاخذ بما للحضارات من معنى لتلك المجتمعات.