

Translating Sports Idioms from English into Arabic : Pragmatic Perspective

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Abstract

Translating sports idioms from Arabic to English is tricky for translators and often results in misunderstandings of the original text. This raises a big question: how can these idioms be translated effectively? This study explores the strategies translators use for Arabic sports idioms into English and the hurdles they encounter. It predicts that translators lean on certain go-to strategies for these expressions . The study presents five sports idioms pulled from sports journalism articles published on internet . Five MA students from the Department of Translation at the University of Tikrit's College of Arts handled the translations and analyzed the data using Fernando and Flavell's (1981) idiom types (pure, metaphor ,and –literal idiom) and Newmark's (1981) strategies (semantic and communicative). The results show these students struggled a lot with sports idioms, mostly because they weren't fully tuned into the cultural gaps between Arabic and English .

Key words : Translation , sports idiom , pragmatic perspective .

ترجمة الامثال الرياضية من الانكليزية الى العربية : منظور تداولي

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المستخلص.

يعد ترجمة الأمثال الرياضية من العربية إلى الإنجليزية تحدي كبير للمترجمين، وغالباً ما يحدث خلل في نقل المعنى الأصلي للنص . و هذا يثير سؤالاً مهماً: كيف يمكن ترجمة هذه الأمثال بشكل مناسب ؟ . تذكر هذه الدراسة الاستراتيجيات التي يعتمدها المترجمون لنقل الأمثال الرياضية العربية إلى الإنجليزية، والعقبات التي تواجههم . و تتوقع الدراسة الحالية أن يميل المترجمون إلى استراتيجيات معينة مفضلة لترجمة هذه الأمثال. يقدم البحث خمسة أمثال رياضية مستخلصة من مقالات صحفية رياضية منشورة على الإنترنت. ترجمها خمسة طلاب في مرحلة الماجستير من قسم الترجمة بكلية الآداب في جامعة تكريت ، ثم تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام تصنيفات الأمثال لفرناندو و فليفيل (1981) ، (الأمثال الاصلية ، المجازية، والحرفية)، واستراتيجيات نيومارك (1981) (الدالية والتواصلية). أظهرت النتائج أن هؤلاء الطلاب واجهوا صعوبات كبيرة مع الأمثال الرياضية، ويرجع ذلك أساساً إلى عدم إدراكهم للفجوات الثقافية بين العربية والإنجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الترجمة، الامثال الرياضية، منظور تداولي.

1. INTRODUCTION

Idioms add color and depth to our language and go way back in history, even if pinpointing their exact start is impossible. The Bible, one of the earliest books to spread far and wide, gave us tons of them—like "bite the dust" or "broken heart." Shakespeare wove them into his plays too, think "wild goose chase" or "green-eyed monster." And "fair play," the go-to term for good sportsmanship today, actually comes from his works (Chetwynd 2016: 190)

are a natural part of the way we speak every day. They add depth and color to any language, but they are also among the trickiest elements to translate. Not every idiom has a direct match in another language, because idioms are fixed expressions that are deeply rooted in a particular culture and way of speaking.

Because so many idioms are culture-specific, it is hard to describe a single, special method for translating them. Instead, researchers in comparative translation keep developing models and frameworks to evaluate how well different translation choices work and to judge the quality of actual translated texts (Arwa 2019: 8)

LITERATURE REVIWE

2.1 Idioms Concept

when studying idioms, it's key to first pin down what an idiom actually is—but that's easier said than done. The definition really hinges on who's doing the defining. Liu (2008) dug into how various scholars approached the term and discovered a ton of variation, all tied to their specific research goals. Looking at nine different definitions, he saw no universal agreement on what counts as an idiom. Some experts stuck to super narrow criteria, while others cast a much wider net for words or phrases. For instance, Hockett stood alone in including single-morpheme units, but folks like Katz & Postal, Makkai, and Fraser limited it to multi-word or polymorphemic expressions. Still, most agreed on the basics: idioms are typically multi-word phrases with fixed structures, where the overall meaning doesn't come from the literal sense of the individual words. That's pretty much the standard dictionary take too.

Liu (2008) notes that pinning down a clear definition of idioms is tricky and varies by audience. Scholars grapple with a host of complex factors, but for students—whether learning a second language or not—the essentials boil down to a meaning that's opaque and a structure that's fixed and unchangeable (Liu 2008:13).

Baker (1992:63) defines an idiom as a fixed phrase in language that resists changes to its structure and typically carries a meaning you can't piece together from the individual words alone. Moon (1998:3) views "idiom" as a slippery term applied in all kinds of conflicting ways. In casual or general usage, it mainly refers to two things: first, a distinctive style of expression in language, music, art, etc., that marks a person or group; second (and far less common in English), a unique word pairing or phrase specific to a particular language .

According to Moon (1998: 4), the term "idioms" serves as a catch-all for various multi-word expressions, regardless of whether their meaning is opaque or transparent. These are word combinations where the overall sense can't be figured out just by looking at the individual parts. They're often packed with cultural baggage—think phrases or sentences that are super specific in meaning and deeply linked to unique cultural traits and mindsets. Idioms fall under figurative language, where cultural gaps frequently show up and create headaches for translators. In this context, "idioms" is used broadly to cover phrase, clause, and sentence-level examples .

2.2 Translating Idioms

Fernando and Flavell (1981) point out that translating idioms depends heavily on their context. While there are various strategies for handling them, translators need to pick the one that best helps target-language readers grasp the idiom's meaning. When working with a source-language idiom, the translator must focus on conveying its sense—sometimes tweaking elements to make it land well for the audience. If no direct equivalent exists in the target language, don't just drop the idiom; instead, expand on it with extra explanation to clarify the meaning. As Fernando and Flavell (1981) note, many translators feel a strong, instinctive pull to force-fit an equivalent from the target language, even if it's a poor match.

Fernando and Flavell (1981) explain that the best way to translate idioms hinges on the context they're used in. Translators have several methods at their disposal, but they should choose the one that helps readers in the

target language truly get the idiom's point. Above all, when dealing with an idiom from the source language, the key is preserving its core sense—which might mean adjusting certain parts so it resonates with the new audience. If there's no ready equivalent in other languages, the translator shouldn't cut it out entirely; rather, they should add more details around it to make the meaning crystal clear for readers. Fernando and Flavell (1981) also highlight how translators often have this deep-seated urge to dig up a matching idiom in the target language, no matter how off-base it might be .

2.3 DIFFICULTIES OF TRANSLATING IDIOMS

Translating idioms ranks among the toughest challenges for translators. It's not just about swapping words or grammar from one language to another—it requires moving beyond the core building blocks of the original language.

Awwad (1990) points out two key hurdles: first, misunderstanding what the writer or speaker really means, and second, grappling with cultural gaps between languages, whether for time-honored or newly coined idioms. Bassnett (1980:24) argues that idioms are best handled by focusing on their purpose: swap the source language idiom for a target language one that conveys the same idea .

Translating idioms is one of the trickiest jobs translators face. It's way more than just plugging in equivalent words or fixing grammar across languages—you have to step away from the source text's fundamental linguistic pieces.

As Awwad (1990) highlights, the big issues boil down to two: getting the writer's or speaker's true intent wrong, and overlooking cultural differences that shape both classic and fresh idioms in different languages. Bassnett (1980:24) puts it simply: translate idioms based on what they do—replace the original with a target - language version that carries the same punch .

Baker (1992:65) points out that idioms and fixed expressions create two big challenges in translation: spotting and correctly understanding them, and then capturing all the layers of meaning they carry when shifting them into the target language.

Mollanazar (2004) adds that the first hurdle is simply recognizing idioms—translators often trip up by translating them word-for-word,

which usually results in nonsense or something unintentionally funny (p.52).

For Straksiene (2009), the core issue boils down to a lack of direct equivalents at the idiom level. Every language has its own idioms, but matching one from the source language (SL) to the target language (TL) in both meaning and form is tough. Idioms often tie into specific cultural elements, which makes things even trickier for translators

SPORTS IDIOMS

sports idioms are catchy phrases born from sports that have worked their way into everyday chat, far beyond the game itself (Marin, 2020). They've been passed around for generations, slipping into our conversations so naturally that we barely notice. Sure, some are obvious—like "the ball is in your court," "on the ropes," or "front-runner." But plenty more have origins that aren't so clear-cut (Victor, 2018). Sports idioms are expressions pulled straight from sports but now tossed around casually in daily life, way outside the field or court (Marin, 2020). Over time, they've become second nature in how we talk, often without us pausing to think about their roots. A few have pretty straightforward origins, like "the ball is in your court," "on the ropes," or "front-runner." That said, tons of others have histories that aren't so obvious (Victor, 2018) Sports idioms usually come from particular games like baseball or sailing. Over time, though, their meanings have expanded to fit everyday situations. These expressions are especially popular in fields like business, where they're often used, even though they still relate closely to their original sports context (Ibid) .

3.DATA ANALYSIS AND DISSCUSSION

3.1 Models adopted

The study adopted two models to analyze five sports idioms . The first is the linguistic model of Fernando and Flavell's (1981) which involved three subclasses pure idioms , metaphor and literal idiom . And translation model of Nemark's (1981). Newmark proposed two strategies for translation , semantic and communicative translation .Semantic translation aims to convey the intended meaning of the original text without changing while communicative translation focuses on transporting the meaning as the hearer or reader understand by changing in the original texts to be more understandable .

3.2 Data analysis

SL (1)

Neck and Neck

TTs:

- ١- الخصمان متساويا القدرات
- ٢- الخصمان متقاربان
- ٣- رقبة برقية
- ٤- للخصمان قدرات متساوية
- ٥- منافسة عادلة

Discussion :

As for the sport idiom "neck to neck " is a pure idiom as it describes a very close competition .

The sport idiom (Neck and neck) means when competitors are as strong as each other and have an equal chance of winning . Translators (1) succeeded in translating the sport idiom above by adopting communicative translation as he /she translated the text into (الخصمان متساويا القدرات) . Translator (2) translation was good too as he/she translated the sport idiom into (الخصمان متقاربان) by adopted communicative translation .

The translation of the translator (3) was failed as he/she translated the idiom into (رقبة برقية) by adopting semantic strategy . Translator (4) translated the idiom into (للخصمان قدرات متساوية) by using communicative translation and he/she succeeded in conveying the meaning of the idiom .

By adopting communicative translation , translator (5) was the most appropriate translation as the translator translated the idiom into (منافسة عادلة) .by adopting communicative translation .

Table(1) : Analysis of the sport idiom " Neck to neck "

SL Idioms	Idiom type	Translator No.	TL Text	Translation Strategy	
				Semant ic	communicat ive
Neck to		1.	الخصمان متساويا المستوى و القدرات	-	+
		2.	الخصمان متقاربان	-	+

Neck	Pure	3.	رقبة برقبة	+	-
		4.	للخصمان قدرات متساوية	-	+
	idiom	5.	منافسة عادلة	-	+

The suggested translation for this idiom is (متقاربين جدا) .

ST (2)

Hit below the belt

TTS

- ١- غير عادل
- ٢- ضربة تحت الحزام
- ٣- قاس جدا
- ٤- ضربة خاذلة
- ٥- ضربة قاسية
- ٦- تصرف غير عادل

Discussion :

The sport idiom "hit below the belt " is a pure idiom since it describe unfair playing .

The sport idiom " hit below the belt " means to behave unfairly or to say something personal or insulting in an argument . Translator (1) translated the idiom into (غير عادل) by adopting communicative strategy , he/she convey the meaning of the idiom successfully . While translator (2) translated the idiom literally (ضربة تحت الحزام) , he / she adopted semantic translation and the translation was an appropriate .

Translators (3,4) adopted communicative translation by translated the idiom into (قاس جدا ، ضربة خاذلة) , and their translation was appropriate . Translator (5) translated this idiom the most successful translation as she /he translated the idiom into (تصرف غير عادل) as hitting below the belt is a forbidden behavior in some sports .

Table(2) : Analysis of the sport idiom " Hit below the belt "

SL Idioms	Idiom type	Translator No.	TL Text	Translation Strategy
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				Semant ic	communicat ive
Hit below the belt	Pure Idiom	1.	غير عادل	-	+
		2.	ضربة تحت الحزام	+	-
		3.	قاس جدا	-	+
		4.	ضربة خاذلة	-	+
		5.	تصرف غير عادل	-	+

The suggested translation for this idiom is (متقاربين جدا)

ST (3)

Call the shots

TTS

- ١- يتخذ القرارات
- ٢- يسير الامور
- ٣- يستخدم الطلقات
- ٤- يدير الموقف
- ٥- يمسك بزمام الامور

Discussion :

The type of the linguistic model of the sport idiom " call the shots " is metaphor since it describes the player control or making decisions .

Translator (1) translated the idiom " call the shots " into an appropriate translation into (يتخذ القرارات) , since the idiom meaning is about making decisions . Translator (2) translation was also appropriate as he /she translated the idiom into " يسير الامور " , both of the translators adopted communicative strategy .

While translator (3) failed in translated the idiom as he/she adopted semantic strategy to translate it into "يستخدم الطلقات" which is the literal meaning and considered inappropriate . Translators (4,5) translation was successful as they translated the sport idiom into " يدير الموقف ، يمسك بزمام الامور " .

Table (3) : Analysis of the sport idiom " Call the shots "

SL Idioms	Idiom type	Translator No.	TL Text	Translation Strategy	
				Semantic	communicative
Call the shots	Metaphor	1.	يتخذ القرارات	-	+
		2.	يسير الامور	-	+
		3.	يستخدم الطلقات	+	-
		4.	يدير الموقف	-	+
		5.	يمسك بزمام الامور	-	+

The suggested translation for this idiom is "يتخذ القرارات المهمة".

ST (4)

Take the lead

TTs

- ١- تولي القيادة
- ٢- اخذ زمام المبادرة
- ٣- تصدر المشهد
- ٤- التحكم بزمام الامور
- ٥- يأخذ القيادة

Discussion :

The type of the linguistic model of the sport idiom " take the lead " is literal idiom which means to assume leadership or responsibility in a group of situation , or to move into first situation of advantage over others .

The sport idiom " take the lead " means to take first position in a competition . The translators above adopted communicative strategy by translating the idiom into (تولي القيادة ، اخذ زمام المبادرة ، تصدر المشهد ، التحكم بزمام الامور ، يأخذ القيادة) , respectively . Their translation are correct and convey idiom meaning .

Table(4) : Analysis of the sport idiom " Take the lead "

SL Idiom	Idiom type	Translator No.	TL Text	Translation Strategy
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s				Semant ic	communicat ive
Take the lead	Metaphor	1.	يتخذ القرارات	-	+
		2.	يسير الامور	-	+
		3.	يستخدم الطلقات	+	-
		4.	يدير الموقف	-	+
		5.	يمسك بزمام الامور	-	+

The suggested translation for this idiom is "المتصدر".

ST (5)

Make the cut

TTS

- ١- اجتاز الاختبار
- ٢- صاحب الانجاز
- ٣- متخذ القرارات
- ٤- من اجرى القطع
- ٥- المنجز

Discussion :

The type of the linguistic model of the sport idiom " make the cut " is metaphor since it describes person who make achievements .

Translators (1,2,3) adopted communicative strategy by translating the idiom into (اجتاز الاختبار ، صاحب الانجاز ، متخذ القرارات) , respectively , their translation convey the meaning of the idiom and the idiom cannot be translated literally since it is metaphorical expression .

While translator (4) adopted semantic strategy by translating the idiom into (من اجرى القطع) , he /she translated the idiom literally and failed in conveying the meaning of the idiom . Translator (5) has the most appropriate translation as he/she translated the idiom into (المنجز) .

Table (5) : Analysis of the sport idiom " Make the cut "

SL Idioms	Idiom type	Translator No.	TL Text	Translation Strategy	
				Semantic	communicative
Make the cut	Metaphor	1.	اجتاز الاختبار	-	+
		2.	صاحب الانجاز	-	+
		3.	متخذ القرارات	-	+
		4.	من اجرى القطع	+	-
		5.	المنجز	-	+

The suggested translation for this idiom is "صاحب الانجاز".

4. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the five sports idiom under study which translated by five MA translation students in department of translation / Tirit university , most of the translator adopted communicative strategy in translating the sports idioms above to reach to the intended meaning of the idiom . Idiom translation require this type of strategy because Semantic strategy cannot provide the intended meaning of the idiom and sometimes the translation wrong and the meaning is too far from the intended meaning .

We can see also the cultural differences reflect the translation of the idioms above , translator who are aware of cultural differences reach to the intended meaning of the idiom unlike the other translators whose their cultural knowledge is weak so they couldn't reach to the suitable translation of the idioms above .

Conclusion :

This analysis shows that communicative translation—tailored to cultural nuances—beats out semantic approaches when handling sports idioms. It lets Arabic speakers fully get the original meaning without anything getting lost in translation.

Translators should focus on pragmatic equivalence rather than sticking to word-for-word accuracy, particularly for expressions tied to specific cultures. That way, cross-language communication stays clear and effective.

Looking ahead, researchers could test more idioms or build AI tools to automate these kinds of adaptation .

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