

**OVERCOMING DIFFICULTIES
IN TRANSLATING IDIOMS FROM
ENGLISH INTO ARABIC**

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to shed some light on the main reasons which make idiomatic expressions such a thorny issue, not only for learners of English, but also for translators. To overcome this difficulty, three strategies have been suggested; making it possible for the translator to adopt the one he sees most suitable in the given text under translation. However, emphasis is given to cultural substitution in which the meaning is given priority over the form in favour of preserving the cultural flavour of the target language.

1. Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that the cultural dimension seems to constitute the most serious challenge in translating idioms between Arabic and English.

2. Introduction

An idiom, according to Richards and Schmidt (2002: 246), can be defined as: "an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts." For example, the meaning of the idiom to have a bee in one's bonnet is: "to be continually occupied with, or obsessed by, one idea or thing." This meaning has nothing to do with the meanings of the separate words of which the idiom is composed. However, it is to be noted that an idiom usually has started as a phrase having a literal meaning which then starts to be used in a figurative way. Al-Haddad (1994:217), argues that there must be some relationship between the meaning of most idioms and the meanings of their

constituents at some time in the past, and, if not, they would not have been expressed by them.

Idioms, therefore, constitute a problematic area for both foreign learners of English and translators. The foreign learners should possess a good knowledge of idioms in terms of their true meanings as well as their cultural associations. As a matter of fact, idioms are rather problematic and difficult to learn. This can be ascribed to a number of factors. Some such factors are related to the nonliteral meanings of idioms or to the odd word grouping of some idioms, or rather to the rigid word order of some idioms. Other factors can also be detected. Al- Haddad, 1994:218) mentions four more such factors: insufficiency of teaching techniques followed in this very area, inadequacy of the criteria of textual frequency, the foreign learning situation in which English is learned, and lack of cultural assimilation on the part of the students.

The translator, on the other hand, has a two- fold responsibility laid on his shoulder. First, like foreign learners, a good mastery of idioms in terms of meanings and cultural backgrounds is required. Then, and most importantly, he is asked to give equivalent idioms in the target language to which he is translating, taking into account the cultural differences that may arise between both languages.

3. Translating Idioms

Translation, in general, is not an easy task, and translating idioms, in particular, makes it rather a more difficult task. Pedersen (in Trosborg, 1997: 109) argues that: " The translation of idioms is as difficult as it is central".Whereas Larson (1984:143), argues that idioms should be translated with great care:" The translator must first be sure of the meaning of the idiom and then look for the natural equivalent way to express the meaning of the idiom as a whole".

The difficulty arises from the fact that words of an idiom should not be translated literally; " these (idioms) are never translated word for word" (Newmark, 1988: 125). It has also been emphasized by Larson (1984:20), that:" The real danger comes in translating an idiom literally, since the result will usually be nonsense in the receptor language".

Words of an idiom, therefore, are not to be translated in isolation; rather the translator should go after the real meaning or image transferred by each idiom. In this respect, the translator may face not a single, but rather many problems which may be summarized as follows:

1. It may sound rather difficult at times to be recognized on the part of the translator that he is facing an idiom in a given text. This is due to the fact that not all idioms are to be recognized easily. Some idioms are easier to recognize than others. To overcome such a problem, the translator may resort to literal rendition as a start and see whether the meaning fits, and if not, i.e., if the literal meaning does not make sense, he can then recognize it as an idiom and deal with it as such: " Generally speaking, the more difficult an expression is to understand and the less sense it makes in a given context, the more likely a translator will recognize it as an idiom." (Baker, 1992: 65).

2. Another problematic issue facing the translator in this regard is when an expression is having two meanings, one of which is literal, and the other is idiomatic. This happens most often when the idiomatic expression is based on a physical image. This is usually found in idioms where parts of the body are involved. Consider the following examples:

A slap on the face

It has two meanings. The first is literal, whereas the second is idiomatic (a sudden and unexpected rejection, defeat, or disappointment) (Seidl and McMordie, 1988: 220).

Keep one's head above water

Here again two meanings are involved: literal, to prevent yourself sinking into the water, and idiomatic (keep out of debt, out of difficulty) (Ibid: 226).

A pain in the neck

It could either mean a physical pain or idiomatically: (an irritating or annoying person) (Ibid: 229).

The text-type in which such expressions are used will determine which of the two meanings is intended, and then the translator makes his decision regarding the strategy he adopts in dealing with those expressions.

3. After recognizing the presence of idioms in the text under translation, the translator encounters certain difficulties when attempting to render them into the target language. Such difficulties involve, above all, selecting the most appropriate strategy for translating idioms. In her discussion of idioms, Baker (1992:71-78), mentions four strategies for translating idioms. In the present study, in which two distinct languages are involved, it has been suggested that the translator can achieve the best effect in his rendition of idioms by selecting any of the three strategies to be discussed soon.

4. Translation Strategies of Idioms

Three different strategies are suggested to help the translator in his endeavor to produce the most effective counterpart for any idiom he may encounter in the source text. It is to be noted that the first two strategies may be regarded as more effective than the third one, which he may choose as a last resort if he finds out that the other two strategies prove inapplicable.

3. 1 Total Equivalence (Form + Meaning)

According to Baker (1992:72)," this strategy of finding an idiom of similar meaning and similar form in the target language may seem to offer the ideal solution, but that is not necessarily always the case".

It is to be emphasized that idiomatic expressions are culture- bound. A great majority of idioms, in all languages, have cultural associations which make them peculiar. Inani (1998:32) argues that most English and Arabic idioms have appeared as metaphors which started to be used, bit by bit, unchanged until they have been recognized as established forms of a given language. This point is further emphasized by Al- Haddad (1994:217), when he argued that " The meaning of many idioms results from the figurative extension of the original situation which is often unknown to the majority of speakers. This source may have been obscured by time". Again, this aspect has been pointed out by Larson (1984:21), when he mentioned that idioms are figures of speech and as such," are often based on stories or historical incidents. Many times, the origin of the figure is no longer apparent".

Such being the case, this kind of matching can only be arrived at in certain occasions, when both the source language and the target language belong to the same language family; hence, having cultural similarities, a matter which facilitates translation. When, on the other hand, two culturally remote languages such as English and Arabic are involved, it is not advisable to resort to total

equivalence since the source language idiom and the target language idiom may have distinct cultural implications.

It is to be noted, however, that many English idioms have got currency in the Arabic language through translation, and have been used to a great deal in the daily journalistic register or present – day writing. In fact, such a phenomenon has become so common in modern Arabic that it might be thought, at times, that such expressions are originally Arabic. This is due to the fact that Arabic has a unique ability to digest the foreign terms and make them look like the genuine ones in it (see Hijazi, 1978:318).

The following examples illustrate the usage of many foreign idiomatic expressions in present-day Arabic:

To shed crocodile tears	يبكي بدموع التماسيح
To fish in troubled water	يصطاد في الماء العكر
To digest ideas	يهضم الافكار
The man of hour	رجل الساعة
Literary currents	التيارات الادبية
To throw light on	يلقي ضوءا على
Lion's share	حصاة الاسد

Crux of the matter	صلب الموضوع
To give the green light	يعطي الضوء الاخضر
The lesser of two evils	اهون الشرين
A necessary evil	شر لا بد منه
A stumbling block	حجر عثرة

3.2 Partial Equivalence (Similarity in meaning not in form)

This strategy involves translating an ST idiomatic expression into its equivalent TT idiom which conveys the same meaning, but has a different form. It is often possible to find an idiom in the TL which has a meaning similar to that of the SL idiom, but which consists of different lexical items.

In this respect, it is advised that the translator possesses a good cultural background concerning the idiomatic expressions he may be faced with. A lack of such a background may hinder him from grasping the real image and the comprehensive idea and/ or meaning behind any idiom having a cultural specification. It is worthy to mention that having a good cultural background about idioms is a necessity which is supposed to make the translator not only get the true and complete meaning behind idioms, but also'' to enable him to find equivalent idioms having the same or similar functions in the TL''.

(Sadiq, 2008:50).

Furthermore, cultural background has been looked upon as a must in translating idioms if the translator seeks to produce a truly effective target language text” The cultural background is the only way out to translating idioms in an equivalent way”(Ibid:51).

The following are illustrative examples of ST idioms which have been translated into their TT counterparts which carry the same meaning, but differ in their forms:

On pins and needles / On tenterhooks	على احر من الجمر
To jump on the bandwagon	يركب الموجة / يساير التيار
To carry coals to Newcastle	بيبع الماء في حارة السقايين
To give someone his head / To keep a loose rein on someone	يلقي له الحبل على الغارب
To keep a tight rein on someone	يضيق عليه الخناق
He has an axe to grind	في نفس يعقوب غاية
To take the rough with the smooth	اتى على الاخضر واليابس
At sixes and sevens	يضرب اخماسا باسداس
To put a brave face on	يحفظ ماء الوجه
To end up in smoke	ضاع هباءا منثورا / ذهب ادراج الرياح
At someone's beck and call / To eat out of someone's hands	

	يصبح طوع بنانه / يصبح رهن إشارته
To fly off the handle / To blow one's top	ثارت ثائرتة / طار طائرته
Not to talk over one's head	اعط القوس باريها
To catch someone on the hop	يأخذه على حين غرة
To add fuel to injury / To add insult to injury	زاد في الطين بلة
To make a mountain out of a molehill	يعمل من الحبة قبة
To move earth and heaven	أقام الدنيا وأقعدھا
To rain cats and dogs	تمطر كأفواه القرب
To turn tails / To take to one's heels	أرسل ساقه للريح
To have a finger in the pie	له قدم في الامر
A word in season	لكل مقام مقال
To be at one's wits end	ضاقت به السبل
In full swing	على قدم وساق
Dead to the world	غارق في النوم
Through thick and thin	في السراء والضراء
To know what's what	لا يشق غباره
To roll up one's sleeves	شمر عن ساعده
To bury the hatchet/ To be back on an even keel	

	تعود المياه إلى مجاريها
The bottom line	بيت القصيد
To give a free hand	أطلق له العنان
It is no use crying over spilt milk	سبق السيف العذل
All/ Completely at sea	وقع في حيص بيص
Body and soul	قلباً وقلباً
A dead loss	صرخة في وادٍ
Put on / give yourself airs (and graces)	ينفش ريشه
To be at loggerheads	إنشقت العصا
To be behind the times / have seen (known) better days	أكل الدهر عليه وشرب
To fall on stony ground	يضرب به عرض الحائط
Can't make head or/ nor tail of something	إختلط الحابل بالنابل

It is worth noting, here, that finding Arabic idioms carrying the same or almost the same meanings to those listed above – or even to any other idiom – is not as easy a matter as it appears to be. As a start, an interpretation of the intended meaning of the original idiom is required. To accomplish this, the translator begins his extensive search for genuine Arabic idiomatic counterparts to fit in place of the English ones. As a matter of fact, two – or even sometimes three source books are needed to fulfil this task. Not all idioms are included within English – Arabic dictionaries, and thus, English – English dictionaries are indispensable. Furthermore, Arabic – Arabic dictionaries are also needed so as to be sure of the meaning intended.

3. 3 Paraphrasing

This strategy, as the name indicates, involves giving a brief explanation of the meaning behind the idiomatic expression being used in the ST. This is usually done when the translator is faced with idiomatic expressions in the SL which have no corresponding idiomatic expressions in the TL, or, more often, when he fails to find an idiomatic expression in the TL that matches the one used in the SL.

Paraphrasing may be considered the most common way of translating idioms when a match cannot be found in the TL or when it seems inappropriate to use idiomatic language in the TT because of differences in stylistic preferences of the SL and the TL. It might be suggested, however, that the translator is advised to apply this strategy only when he is left with no option but to paraphrase.

It is to be noted that this strategy is best applied to such idioms which are less culture-specific than others. Otherwise, the cultural flavour will be lost.

The following are some examples of paraphrasing:

A hard nut to crack	مسألة مستعصية / قضية شائكة
To walk on air	تغمره السعادة/ يشعر بسعادة غامرة
To live from hand to mouth	يحيا حياة الكفاف
Wrong end of the stick	نقيض المراد
Sound in wind and limb	في أتم صحة
Have no backbone	ضعيف الإرادة أو الشخصية
To think on one's feet	سريع البديهة
To go to the ends of the earth	يفعل ما بوسعه
To let the cat out of the bag	يفشي سرّاً / يذيع أمراً
To keep both feet on the ground	يكن واقعياً

Conclusions

Translation is a complicated process by itself, let alone the translation of idioms which are problematic and difficult to learn. Being problematic and difficult to learn is not merely attributed to the fact that idioms have non-literal meanings, though this is a huge problem by itself. Some other factors make idioms distinctive, and thus not an easy matter to tackle. Some idioms are characterized by their odd word grouping and/or their rigid and unjustifiable word order.

Two interrelated difficulties are detected on the part of the translator when dealing with idioms: his ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly on one hand, and his success in looking for the most suitable rendition of an idiom into the target language, on the other.

More often than not, idioms are culture-specific, a matter which needs further care and awareness on the part of the translator. In order to preserve such a criterion, the translator should work hard, not only to avoid literalisms – which he must avoid with almost all idioms – but also to endeavour to provide his readers, whenever this is possible, with idiomatic translations in which not only the intended meaning is presented, but also the cultural specificity flavour.

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