

Translating Idiomatic Expressions from English into Arabic: Difficulties and Strategies

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Abstract

An idiom is a form of speech or an expression that is peculiar to itself. Grammatically, it cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its elements. Culture plays an important role in the course of the idiom interpretation. Only by having a solid foundation of the culture of the target language, the translator can catch the implied meaning. It, therefore, requires enhancing cross-cultural awareness and needs open-minded understanding of the culture of the second language from different aspects. Moreover, the difference between the source language and the target language as well as variations in their cultures makes the process of translating a real challenge. The present paper tries to investigate and identify firstly some existing obstacles in the process of translating idiomatic pairs, and then suggests some theoretical strategies to overcome such difficulties. Following Baker's (1992) classification of difficulties and strategies and the related sub-categories, the findings show that there are number of factors which should be considered in order to translate idiomatic expressions correctly. The most important of such factors include socio-linguistic elements, cultural aspects, linguistic and stylistic considerations.

Key words: Arabic translation, classification of idioms, idioms, translation difficulties, translation strategies

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I. Introduction

It is widely assumed that as far as intercultural translation is concerned, there is always a gap that is difficult to be bridged when translating idioms from one language to another. Idioms are an inalienable part of each language found in large numbers in most of the languages. Since the meaning of these collocations cannot be understood from the literal meanings of their constituent parts, this yields an array of problems in the process of understanding and translating them.

The process of translating idioms from one language into another is a fine work which obliges a translator to have a good knowledge of both languages and cultures. More precisely, a translator has to be not only bilingual but also bicultural. People of different languages use completely different expressions to convey a similar meaning, in a way that while an expression might be completely tangible and transparent for a particular community of speakers of a specific language, the same set of words and expressions may seem fully vague and opaque and even in some cases nonsense to the speakers of another language. This is due to the fact that each language has got some culture-specific items that are completely different from the corresponding items in another language. That is, language and culture are closely interrelated since the former reflects various aspects of the latter (Larson 1984, p. 432).

In the case of Arabic and English languages, they both belong to two different settings and different language families. Arabic is a Semitic language whereas English is Indo-European. They are culturally unrelated and alien. Besides, non-linguistic factors as religion, geographical locations, and different ideologies harden the process of understanding and translating idiomatic pairs from English into Arabic and vice-versa.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the difficulties that arise when translating idioms and to recreate the same sets of idioms of one language in another language in a way that they might convey the same ideas of the original language. The structure of this paper can be seen along the following lines. Section I defines what idioms are and classifies them into different categories. Section II deals with the difficulties encountered while translating idioms. Section III discloses the possible ways put forward to overcome those difficulties mainly through applying those strategies proposed by Baker (1992), alongside with some other experimental findings mentioned by a number of experienced translators and scholars.

II. Definition of Idioms

Idioms are linguistic expressions or lexical items that have got a vast territory in a way that they can include many cultural aspects such as religious beliefs, culture-specific items, superstitions, and different ideologies of the people from diverse societies and nations. They are necessary to any language in order to keep the local and cultural color of that language. Idioms are defined in the Collins English Dictionary (2006) as *“an expression such as a simile, in which words do not have their literal meaning, but are categorized as multi-word expressions that act in the text as units”*. In Longman Idioms Dictionary (1998) idioms are referred to as *“a sequence of words which has a different meaning as a group from the meaning it would have if you understood each word separately”*. Accordingly, idioms should not be broken up into their elements because they are sometimes referred to as a fixed expression, Cowie & Mackin (1975). For example the idiom **“conceited as a barber’s cat”** refers to having a high or exaggerated

opinion of oneself or one's accomplishments and can be translated into Arabic as مغرور مثل الطاووس. Here there is nothing to do with the cat or the barber. We can see that if this idiom will be translated word by word as مغرور كقطاة الحلاق it will make no sense to the readers.

Newmark (1988), who considers idioms as "extended" metaphors, claims that an idiom has two main functions: *pragmatic and referential*. The pragmatic function is to appeal to the senses, to interest, to surprise, to delight, while the referential function is "to describe a mental process or state, a concept, a person, an object, a quality or an action more comprehensively and concisely than is possible in literal or physical language". (p. 104)

Baker (1992) states that idioms are frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components. She also mentions that idioms allow "no variation in form under normal circumstances" (p. 87) and that a translator cannot do any of the following with an idiom:

1. Change the *order* of the words of an idiom. The way the words are put together is fixed and they cannot change their place. E.g. "go to rack and ruin" not "go to ruin and rack".
2. The word in an idiom cannot be *omitted*. E.g. "shed crocodile tears" not "shed tears".
3. There are no extra words that might be *added* to an idiom. E.g. "have a narrow escape" not "have a narrow quick escape".
4. No word in an idiom can be *replaced* by another word. E.g. "out of sight, out of mind" not "out of sight, out of heart".
5. The grammatical structures of an idiom cannot be *changed*. E.g. "ring the bell" not "the bell was ringed".

Different scholars have categorized idioms according to their types of meaning. Some of them have spoken in general terms while others have used more specific classification.

According to Makkai (1972), as cited in Fernando (1996), there are two types of meaning: idioms of encoding and idioms of decoding. The idioms of encoding are those idiosyncratic lexical combinations that have transparent meanings and can be easily understood even by non-native speakers. For example, *kill two birds with one stone*, which could be directly translated into Arabic as ضرب عصفورين بحجرة. The idioms of decoding refer to those non-identifiable and opaque lexical expressions by using only independently learned linguistic conventions. This type of idioms can be further classified into lexemic and sememic. Lexemic idioms include strings of words like a) phrasal verbs (*to come up with, to turn off, etc ...*), b) phrasal compounds (*black ice, black road*), c) incorporating verbs (*man-handle*) and d) pseudo-idioms (*spick and span, kit and kin*). Whereas sememic idioms usually convey pragmatic meanings related to a particular cultural environment. They include a) proverbs (*A bird in hand is worth two in the bush*) and b) familiar quotations (*not a mouse stirring*).

Larson (1984) believes that there are two primary kinds of meaning; namely, *Explicit* and *Implicit* meanings. He states that these two primary kinds of meaning can be further categorized into three sub-categories:

1. “*Referential meaning*” in which a specific word “ refers to a certain thing, event, attribution or relation which a person can perceive or imagine”;
2. “*Organizational meaning*” that deals with some aspects of surface structure and grammatical points of the sentence;
3. “*Situational meaning*” that is the meaning of an utterance in given communication. (Larson 1984, p. 41-43)

On the other hand, Nida (1964), as cited in Munday (2001), advances the following categorization:

1. *Linguistic meaning* that borrows some elements of Chomsky’s (1957) model and the fact that meanings are arbitrary;
2. *Referential meaning* that is called denotative meaning;
3. *Emotive meaning* that is called connotative meaning and deals with extra-linguistic factors and the figurative meanings that a word may concern.

Another classification of meaning types deals with Koller’s (1979) equivalence in which he proposes five types of meaning for the corresponding equivalents:

1. “*Denotative equivalence*” deals with linguistic content of a text and Koller names it “content invariance”;
2. “*Connotative equivalence*” deals with a feeling or idea that is suggested by a particular word although it is not necessarily a part of that word’s meaning;
3. *Text-normative equivalence* is related to different text types in which texts behave in different ways;
4. *Pragmatic equivalence* which deals with the influence of the text on the target language audience;
5. *Formal equivalence* that concentrates on “the form and aesthetics of the text and meaning.

It is worth mentioning that although all the scholars aforementioned have come up with different categorizations, they have all determined a kind of meaning that deals with a meaning type related to “*non-linguistic*” or “*extra-linguistic*” aspects of words. That is, all scholars have got a categorization which refers to idiomatic expressions of a language. For example, in the meaning types stated above, Larson’s (1984) “*situational meaning*”, Nida’s (1964) “*emotive meaning*” and Koller’s (1979) “*connotative meaning*” are related to the domain of idioms and fixed expressions.

III. Difficulties in Translating Idioms

Culture plays an important role in the course of the idiom interpretation. Only by having a solid foundation of the culture of the target language, the translator can catch the implied

meaning. It, therefore, requires enhancing cross-cultural awareness and needs open-minded understanding of the culture of the second language from different aspects.

Cultural roots, however, play a major part in the translation process. Words which have various connotations in one language may not have the same emotive associations in another. Different languages frequently reflect different connotations and associations of feeling because of the differences in cultural roots.

The differences between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL), as well as the variation in their cultures make the process of translating a real challenge. As indicated earlier, problems of translation involve not only the linguistic and stylistic features but also the cultural and social differences between SL and TL. Hence, the bigger the gap between the SL and the TL, the more difficult the transfer of message from the former to the latter will be.

The social factors of the Arabic and English cultures have their influence on the Arabic and English languages. They have a clear impact on their perception of social experiences that include every aspect of life: customs, morals, feelings, emotions, beliefs, etc. To explain this crucial fact of translating precisely, consider the following:

رهظه ونسمد
وطقمع رجش نمة

He is backed up.
He has no relatives.

Speakers of English will not understand the idiomatic meaning, if any of these Arabic idioms is translated into English.

The first idiom illustrates that Arabs prefer big and extended families with many sons and brothers, since they believe that this supports social rank and influence in their society. Therefore, the Arab feels proud to be a member of a big family. Whereas the second idiom is used in the opposite situation to mean that someone's all family members are dead. Thus, the person needs help and sympathy from others around him, especially when his family is no longer a source of help and assistance.

Idioms are usually impossible to be translated literally because their meanings are not built up from the meanings of their parts. Thus, when it is said: "رهظه ونسمد". i.e., his back is supported; it is actually not saying anything about his back or supporting. But when it is said that someone is cut off from a tree, it is not referring to anything about cutting off or a tree.

Culture is considered as all of human attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, and values. It is the product of his head and heart as well as his hands. So, human cultures are all alike in providing answers to the universal problems of human existence, but the answers are all different, and each culture is therefore unique.

In short, the main problems that idiomatic expressions pose in translation relate to two main areas: the ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly; and the difficulties involved in rendering the various aspects of meaning that an idiom conveys into the target language.

Therefore, translation involves far more than replacement of lexical and grammatical items between two languages. As can be seen in the translation of the previous idioms, the process may involve discarding the basic linguistic elements of the SL text so as to achieve the goal of 'expressive identity' between the SL and TL texts.

Moreover, an idiom may have no equivalent in the target language, i.e. the meanings cannot be predicted and only occasionally matches the same meaning in the TL. In some cases, a word for word rendering of Arabic into English seems to be impossible usually because the words simply do not exist in target language. The strategies that help to solve the problem of translating idioms of these types will be presented next.

IV. Translation Strategies

The way an idiom is to be translated depends on the context in which it is used. We have different and various translation strategies but the translator should see the use of which kind of these strategies can help the target language readers to better comprehend the meaning of the idioms. When translating a source idiom the translator should be conscious of the sense. He may change some aspects of the idiom to preserve the sense and to transfer it to the TL readers. In the case that the original idiom does not have its equivalent in another language, the translator should not delete that idiom from his text but he should clarify more on it to let the readers understand its meaning better. Fernando and Flavell (1981) express that there is "strong unconscious urge in most translators to search hard for an idiom in the receptor language, however inappropriate it may be" (p.82)

The strategies which are used in this article are those proposed by Baker (1992). They are going to be further illustrated by using some examples of idiomatic expressions in both English and Arabic as the source and target languages.

4.1 Total Equivalence (Form and Meaning)

According to Baker (1992, p.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) 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, p. 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, p. 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 (Hijazi, 1978).

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

To shed crocodile tears

بيكي بدموع التماسيح

To fish in troubled water

يصطاد في الماء العكر

To digest ideas

يهضم الأفكار

Lion's share

حصّة الأسد

Crux of the matter

صلب الموضوع

To give green light

يعطي الضوء الأخضر

4.2 Partial Equivalence (Similarity in meaning not in form)

This strategy involves translating a source text (ST) idiomatic expression into its equivalent target text (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, p. 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”(Sadiq, 2008, p. 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:

To take the rough and the smooth	أتى على الأخضر واليابس
To keep a tight rein on someone	يضيق عليه الخناق
Through thick and thin	في السراء و الضراء
To move earth and heaven	يقيم الدنيا ويقعدها
To add insult to injury	يزيد الطين بلة

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 fulfill 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.

4.3. 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 impact of the idiom and its cultural significance will be lost, (Baker, 1992). The following are some examples of paraphrasing:

To walk on air	يشعر بسعادة غامرة
To live from hand to mouth	يحيا حياة الكفاف
Have no backbone	ضعيف الإرادة والشخصية
To let the cat out of the bag	يفشي سر
To think on one's feet	سريع البديهة

4.4 Translating by Omission

The time that there is no close match between the languages' items or the time that the translator cannot find any equivalents, this strategy is used to completely omit the idiom from the

target text. A translator can avoid translating an idiom appearing in original version if its meaning is verbose for a translated sentence, or a translator cannot find an equivalent word or idiom. To put a certain idiom aside by translating its meaning can provide the reader with an acceptable equivalent that is equal to the original version. Consider the following examples:

The Arabic idiom **ابن تسعة أشهر** which means a human being could be omitted in English translation and be substituted just by “One” or “human”. Unlike Arabic which tolerates elaboration, English tends to be straight and to the point. Thus, when translating the idiom **ابن تسعة أشهر** into English, translator could simply delete the idiom and replace it with what it stands for.

The Arabic idiom **دب الشقاق بينه و بين أخيه** meaning **تشاجر** is a verbose idiom and could be omitted and substituted by “fight” or “dispute” which is easy for the English audience to understand.

It is observed here that the translator has omitted the idioms and has changed them into non-idiomatic expressions. So the significance of the words in the source idioms is not transferred by the way the translator has translated them.

Another strategy which is proposed by Baker (1992) is giving a literal translation of the target idiom. Of course the literal version of the idiom should be acceptable by the target readers and it should be lexically modified. In the case of not finding a proper equivalent, giving a literal translation is not always an easy task to do. The more literal a text is translated, the more confusion it brings to the readers. According to Newmark (1988), literal translation is translating an idiom by giving a word-for-word translation of the source language idiom, which most of the time results in unnatural or wrong rendering of idioms.

Conclusion

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 endeavor 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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