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# THE DIFFICULTY OF TRANSLATION OF SET PHRASES AND IDIOMS IN ENGLISH

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**Abstract:** In this article we will discuss the difficulty of translation of set phrases and idioms in English and useful aspects of using them in oral speech. 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. Because they do not make sense if interpreted literally, the highlighted expressions in the following text are easy to recognize as idioms assuming one is not already familiar with them. Provided a translator has access to good reference works and monolingual dictionaries of idioms, or, better still, is able to consult native speakers of the language, opaque idioms which do not make sense for one reason or another can actually be a blessing in disguise.

**Keywords:** Misinterpreted, confusion, monolingual dictionaries of idioms, culture-specific, literal interpretation, idiomatic.

## INTRODUCTION

Today language is not only a library language but also a language of opportunities and possibilities. Recognizing the new role of English in the present era, the academic bodies are launching new courses with the goal of equipping students with requisite knowledge and skills. In addition to this, spoken English institutes are mushrooming in almost all cities and urban areas. In a liberalized global world English is the best medium of communication and the gateway to educational opportunities and economic success. Speaking is one of the main speech activities in English. The students exchange will give information by

speaking. Speaking plays a great role in teaching English language. Without speaking the communication cannot be conducted. Speaking taken 30% of speech. To date, the most urgent problem requiring new solutions is the problem of improving the quality of knowledge of the English language with a small number of hours of academic work devoted to the study of the subject. Knowledge of a foreign language today is a prerequisite for getting an interesting, well-paid job, both in our country and abroad, for communicating with foreign partners, for getting the opportunity to continue education abroad, and professional development in your field.

Thus, the main goal of learning a foreign language is the formation of linguistic competence. Linguistic competence involves mastering a certain amount of formal knowledge and the corresponding skills associated with various aspects of the language: vocabulary, phonetics, grammar. Therefore, we can conclude that in teaching the emphasis is not on language as a system, but on speech.

Nowadays, many teachers are actively searching for new forms, methods and teaching methods. Modern education is aimed at preparing students for the active development of the situation of social change, not only the development of the ability to adapt. When teaching a foreign language, special attention is paid to such forms of classes that involve the active involvement of each student in the educational process, stimulate communication in a foreign language, promote the development of interest in language learning and increase motivation.

One of the non-traditional teaching methods is the association method or the keyword method. This method is not widely distributed among the techniques and methods traditionally used in English lessons, speaking in the best means of importing and consolidation, assimilation elementary linguistic English knowledge, of cultivating habit, and of creating skills. As far as idioms and phraseological units are concerned in translation, the first difficulty that a translator comes across is being able to recognize that s/he is dealing with an idiomatic expression.

This is not always so obvious. There are various types of idioms, some more easily recognizable than others. Those which are easily recognizable include expressions which violate truth conditions, such as *It's raining cats and dogs*, *throw caution to the winds*, *storm in a tea cup*, *jump down someone's throat*, and *food for thought*. They also include expressions which seem ill-formed because they do not follow the grammatical rules of the language, for example *trip the light fantastic*, *blow someone to kingdom come*, *put paid to*, *the powers that be*, *by and large*, and *the world and his friend*. Expressions which start with *like* (simile-like structures) also tend to suggest that they should not be interpreted literally. These include idioms such as *like a bat out of hell* and *like water off a duck's back*. 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.

Because they do not make sense if interpreted literally, the highlighted expressions in the following text are easy to recognize as idioms (assuming one is not already familiar with them).

Provided a translator has access to good reference works and monolingual dictionaries of idioms, or, better still, is able to consult native speakers of the language, opaque idioms which do not make sense for one reason or another can actually be a blessing in disguise. The very fact that s/he cannot make sense of an expression in a particular context will alert the translator to the presence of an idiom of some sort. Speaking is the most important skill since people who know a language are referred as "the speaker" of a language. In addition, speaking is the ability that includes all other kinds of knowing. It is the productive skill in the aural mode".

According to Brown and Yule (1983), when the speaker says words to the listener, it is not only to express what is in his/her mind but also to cater to the needs or information services of the listener. Speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a

variety of contexts' (Chaney, 1998. 13). It is an extremely important faculty, and essential for an individual's living as are the abilities of seeing and walking.

Speaking is also the most natural way to express one's own feelings, thoughts, opinions, ideas and insights. Without the ability of speaking, people fail to orally communicate with their fellow human beings and remain in isolation from any kind of society. Language is a social phenomenon and a system for communication in speech and writing. Written language is the representation of spoken language by visual symbols. Language indeed is a special possession of humankind. Without language human civilization would have been impossible.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

*There are two cases in which an idiom can be easily misinterpreted if one is not already familiar with it:*

(a) Some idioms are 'misleading'; they seem transparent because they offer a reasonable literal interpretation and their idiomatic meanings are not necessarily signalled in the surrounding text. A large number of idioms in English, and probably all languages, have both a literal and an idiomatic meaning, for example *go out with* ('have a romantic or sexual relationship with someone'). Such idioms lend themselves easily to manipulation by speakers and writers who will sometimes play on both their literal and idiomatic meanings. In this case, a translator who is not familiar with the idiom in question may easily accept the literal interpretation and miss the play on idiom.

(b) An idiom in the source language may have a very close counterpart in the target language which looks similar on the surface but has a totally or partially different meaning. For example, the idiomatic question *Has the cat had/got your tongue?* is used in English to urge someone to answer a question or contribute to a conversation, particularly when their failure to do so becomes annoying.

Apart from being alert to the way speakers and writers manipulate certain features of idioms and to the possible confusion which could arise from

similarities in form between source and target expressions, a translator must also consider the collocational environment which surrounds any expression whose meaning is not readily accessible. Idiomatic and fixed expressions have individual collocational patterns. They form collocations with other items in the text as single units and enter into lexical sets which are different from those of their individual words. Take, for instance, the idiom *to have cold feet*. *Cold* as a separate item may collocate with words like *weather*, *winter*, *feel*, or *country*. *Feet* on its own will perhaps collocate with *socks*, *chilblain*, *smelly*, etc. However, *having cold feet*, in its idiomatic use, has nothing necessarily to do with *winter*, *feet*, or *chilblains* and will therefore generally be used with a different set of collocates.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Once an idiom or fixed expression has been recognized and interpreted correctly, the next step is to decide how to translate it into the target language. The difficulties involved in translating an idiom are totally different from those involved in interpreting it. Here, the question is not whether a given idiom is transparent, opaque, or misleading. An opaque expression may be easier to translate than a transparent one. The main difficulties involved in translating idioms and fixed expressions may be summarized as follows:

(a) An idiom or fixed expression may have no equivalent in the target language. The way a language chooses to express, or not express, various meanings cannot be predicted and only occasionally matches the way another language chooses to express the same meanings. One language may express a given meaning by means of a single word, another may express it by means of a transparent fixed expression, a third may express it by means of an idiom, and so on. It is therefore unrealistic to expect to find equivalent idioms and expressions in the target language as a matter of course.

Like single words, idioms and fixed expressions may be culture-specific. Formulae such as *Merry Christmas* and *say when* which relate to specific social or religious occasions provide good examples.

Basnett-McGuire (1980: 21) explains that the expression - *say when* 'is ... directly linked to English social behavioral patterns' and suggests that 'the translator putting the phrase into Russian has to contend with the problem of the non-existence of a similar convention in either culture'. Less problematic, but to some extent also culture-specific, are the sort of fixed formulae that are used in formal correspondence, such as *Yours faithfully* and *Yours sincerely* in English. These, for instance, have no equivalents in Arabic formal correspondence. The same mismatch occurs in relation to French and several other languages but in Russian we have similar expression *Ваш верный!*

Idioms and fixed expressions which contain culture-specific items are not necessarily untranslatable. It is not the specific items an expression contains but rather the meaning it conveys and its association with culture-specific contexts which can make it untranslatable or difficult to translate. For example, the English expression *to carry coals to Newcastle*, though culture-specific in the sense that it contains a reference to Newcastle coal and uses it as a measure of abundance, is nevertheless closely paralleled in Russian by *в Тулу со своим самоваром*. Both expressions convey the same meaning, namely: to supply something to someone who already has plenty of it.

(b) An idiom or fixed expression may have a similar counterpart in the target language, but its context of use may be different; the two expressions may have different connotations, for instance, or they may not be pragmatically transferable. *To sing a different tune* is an English idiom which means to say or do something that signals a change in opinion because it contradicts what one has said or done before. *To go to the dogs* ('to lose one's good qualities') has a similar counterpart in German, but whereas the English idiom can be used in connection with a person or a place, its German counterpart can only be used in connection with a person and often means to die or perish.

(c) An idiom may be used in the source text in both its literal and idiomatic senses at the same time. Unless the target-language idiom corresponds to the

source-language idiom both in form and in meaning, the play on idiom cannot be successfully reproduced in the target text.

(d) An idiom or fixed expression may have a similar counterpart in the target language, but its context of use may be different; the two expressions may have different connotations, for instance, or they may not be pragmatically transferable. An idiom may be used in the source text in both its literal and idiomatic senses at the same time. Unless the target-language idiom corresponds to the source-language idiom both in form and in meaning, the play on idiom cannot be successfully reproduced in the target text.

Using idioms in English is very much a matter of style. Languages such as Arabic and Chinese which make a sharp distinction between written and spoken discourse and where the written mode is associated with a high level of formality tend, on the whole, to avoid using idioms in written texts. Fernando and Flavell discuss the difference in rhetorical effect of using idioms in general and of using specific types of idiom in the source and target languages and quite rightly conclude that *'Translation is an exacting art. Idiom more than any other feature of language demands that the translator be not only accurate but highly sensitive to the rhetorical nuances of the language'*.

## CONCLUSION

Most translators prefer to think of their work as a profession and would like to see others to treat them like professionals rather than as skilled or semi-skilled workers. But to achieve this, translators need to develop an ability to stand back and reflect on what they do and how they do it. Like doctors and engineers, they have to prove to themselves as well as others that they are in control of what they do; that they do not just translate well because they have 'flair' for translation, but rather because, like other professionals, they have made a conscious effort to understand various aspects of their work.

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