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## IDIOM AND CULTURE. CHALLENGES REGARDING STRATEGIES OF TRANSLATION

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The world of English idiomatic expressions is huge and diverse, and every aspect of their study certainly deserves attention. In order to understand the depth of this process, it has been necessary to find out what an ‘idiom’ is from both: linguistic and cultural perspectives.

The study stresses the importance of idiomatic translation that is probably one of the most challenging types of translation because there are no expressions for which dictionaries have exact equivalents.

The most important thing to keep in mind is the cultural difference the translator encounters during the translation process as well as understanding all the peculiarities, similarities and differences of the two languages in order to choose the appropriate translation strategies and achieve the same meaning as in the source text. Besides, the translator requires creativity, skills, willingness, and perseverance to search for the best equivalent.

**Keywords:** *idiomatic expressions, semantic relationship, difficulties of translation, target language, source language, etymology, challenge.*

### IDIOMUL ȘI CULTURA. PROVOCĂRI PRIVIND STRATEGIILE DE TRADUCERE

Studiul demonstrează importanța traducerii expresiilor idiomatice, care este considerată unul dintre cele mai provocatoare domenii de traducere, deoarece sunt lipsă sau rare structurile pentru care dicționarele ar propune echivalente exacte.

Cercetarea propune un șir de abordări ale expresiilor idiomatice din perspectiva traducerii, ori traducerea acestora cu acuratețe absolută este foarte importantă. De asemenea, un alt obiectiv este traducerea acestor structuri atât din punct de vedere lingvistic cât și cultural, care sunt extrem de valoroase.

Expresiile idiomatice sunt o lume unică, specială, enormă și variată. Cu certitudine, acestea ne oferă emoții, sentimente și culoare. În plus, această parte a vocabularului reflectă mai mult sau mai puțin atitudinea personală a autorului față de evenimente sau fenomene. Prin urmare, traducerea acestor expresii necesită anumite competențe, creativitate, acuratețe și fidelitate textului sursă.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *expresii idiomatice, relații semantice, dificultăți de traducere, limba țintă, limba sursă, etimologie, provocare.*

### Introduction

Translation is the process of transferring the meaning of a text from one language to another. A complex and challenging task requires not only language proficiency but also cultural awareness, subject matter expertise, and critical thinking skills. For someone who just is familiar with the common meanings of its components, an idiom can be challenging to be deciphered. A good translator is able to convey accurately the meaning of any idiom in the original text while also adapting it to suit the linguistic and cultural context of the target audience. Handling idioms is one of the hardest aspects in translator’s work, thus we need to look closely into idioms.

### Results and Discussions

Idioms are a fundamental part of language and communication. They are phraseological units that convey a meaning that is different from the literal interpretation of the words used. Idioms can also be classified as phrases or expressions that have a figurative or cultural meaning that cannot be translated literally or directly into another language. They are often used in everyday language and are a common feature of many cultures and languages around the world. Idioms can take many forms, including sayings, proverbs,

and metaphors, and are used to convey ideas, sentiments, or feelings that may not be easily expressed using literal language. Longman Idioms Dictionary defines them as „a sequence of words which has a different meaning as a group from the meaning it would have if you understand each word separately” [1, p. 9]. Accordingly, idioms should not be broken up into their elements because they are sometimes referred to as a fixed expression. John Beekman defines idioms as „the combination of at least two words which cannot be understood literally and which function as a unit semantically” [2, p. 30]. According to Catford J., in most circumstances it is difficult to translate such units word for word since the meaning of such units does not correspond to the entire meaning of their constituents. The idiom or phrase is regarded as the translational unit [3, p. 24].

The history of idioms is intertwined with the development of language itself. Idioms have been used for centuries to add color, express ideas concisely, and convey cultural nuances. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact beginnings of idiomatic expressions, they have evolved over time through a combination of cultural influences, historical events, and linguistic shifts.

For instance, the idiom „to kill two birds with one stone” is believed to have originated from the sport of falconry, where a successful catch of two birds with a single stone was considered a highly skilled and impressive feat. Idioms can also vary greatly between different regions and dialects of a language, adding to their richness and complexity. For example, the idiom „throw a spanner in the works” means to disrupt or sabotage a plan, but in the United States, a similar idiom, „throw a monkey wrench into the works”, is used instead.

Many idiomatic expressions that we encounter nowadays quite often come from the Bible and the New Testament. Many people could never think of that, as a lot of these expressions sound modern, as if someone made them up. There are hundreds of Biblical idioms such as „the bread of life, the salt of the earth, to cast the first stone, doubting Thomas, Good Samaritan, forbidden fruit”. Nevertheless, Rebecca Denova explains the exact origin of the following Biblical idiomatic expressions: „to turn the other cheek” – to ignore mistreatment without revenge; „an eye for eye” „a tooth for tooth” – pay someone back with the same action or behavior. *Greek origin* [4].

First, we have idioms that came from Greek mythology, namely those mentioned by Erin Duffin, which allures us with very unique, inimitable expressions such as „Achilles, Heel, Trojan Horse, The Shirt of Nessus, Sour Grapes, The Midas Touch” [5]. As we can see, many English idioms have their roots in ancient Greek myths and legends.

*Ancient Idioms:* The use of idiomatic expressions in ancient civilizations dates back thousands of years and can be found in a variety of texts, artifacts, and cultural traditions. For example, ancient Mesopotamian texts like the Epic of Gilgamesh contain idiomatic phrases like „to take the bull by the horns” to describe taking decisive action, and „to pour oil on troubled waters” to describe calming a tense situation. Furthermore, ancient Greek and Roman civilizations also had their share of idiomatic expressions. The phrase „to open Pandora’s box” originates from Greek mythology, specifically the story of Pandora, who opened a forbidden box, releasing all the evils into the world. Now it is used to describe an action that unleashes unforeseen troubles or problems. In the Roman Empire, Latin idioms were prevalent. The phrase „carpe diem,” meaning „seize the day,” originated from the works of the Roman poet Horace. It encourages living in the present and making the most of each moment [6]. Similarly, Egyptian hieroglyphics feature idiomatic expressions that draw upon the natural world, such as „to smell like a crocodile”, which describes someone with bad breath, and „to go round in circles like a bee”, which describes aimless wandering. Another example is „mend the fold after the sheep are lost”, which means to take action too late, and „riding the tiger”, which means to take a risky or dangerous action [7]. The use of idioms in these ancient civilizations demonstrates the timeless human desire to express ideas in a creative and memorable way. They also illustrate the role of culture and environment in shaping idiomatic expressions, with ancient idioms relying heavily on natural phenomena, animal behavior, and mythology to convey meaning.

*Biblical Idioms:* The Bible, particularly the King James Version, has had a significant impact on the English language and idiomatic expressions. Many idioms we use today have originated from biblical passages or allusions. Phrases like „a drop in the bucket”, „escaping by the skin of your teeth” and „the writing on the wall” can be traced back to biblical stories [8].

*Medieval Idioms:* During the Middle Ages, idiomatic expressions evolved within the context of feudalism, chivalry, and religious beliefs. The works of Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare played a crucial role in popularizing idiomatic expressions in English. Shakespeare, in particular, introduced numerous idioms and coined new phrases that have become deeply ingrained in the English language that is “to play devil’s *advocate*”. Devil’s advocate is a translation of the Latin „*advocatus diabolic*”. This was the popular title given to the official appointed by the Roman Catholic church to argue against the proposed canonization of a saint by bringing up all that was unfavorable to the claim [9].

*Modern Idioms:* The Industrial Revolution, technological advancements, and global interactions have influenced the evolution of idioms in recent centuries. Idioms related to machines, industry, and urban life emerged, such as „*up the ante*”, „*grease the wheels*” and „*break the bank*” [1]. The rapid development of technology and the internet in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has also contributed to the creation of new idioms and phrases.

Hence, there follow some examples of idioms with their possible etymologies:

- „*Break the ice*”: To “*break the ice*” is to start a conversation or other social contact. It is said that the habit of ships breaking ice in frozen waters to make a route for other boats to follow is where it originated. Breaking the ice, as used in social situations, refers to the initial effort required to get through awkwardness or silence and create a welcoming atmosphere for dialogue [10].

- „*Bite the bullet*” is a saying that encourages someone to tackle a challenging or unpleasant circumstance head-on. Its origins may be found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when troops were given bullets to bite on as a crude kind of pain treatment after operations or amputations. It represents going through adversity or suffering for a better good [11].

- „*Kick the bucket*”: This term denotes death. There are a few hypotheses as to where it came from, albeit it is not very clear. One theory proposes that the term „*bucket*” refers to a beam or hanging support, and that the phrase „*kicking the bucket*” alludes to the act of standing on a bucket and then kicking it away, which results in one’s death. Another hypothesis links it to a Catholic tradition in which holy water is placed by a person who is dying’s bedside; the container used is sometimes referred to as a „*baguette*” or „*bucket*.” [12].

- „*Don’t cry over spilled milk*” is the contemporary iteration of the idiom, „*No weeping for shed milk*”, originally published in 1659 in „*Paramoigraphy*”— a book of proverbs by Welsh historian and author James Howell. The term highlights how pointless it is to dwell on one’s past transgressions or tragedies [13].

- „*Under the weather*”: The expression denotes feeling ill or uncomfortable. Its origins may be seen in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when sailing ships would frequently experience bad weather at sea. In such storms, sick crew members were frequently put below deck, where they would be safe but still be impacted by the ship’s motion, making them feel ill [11].

These are only a few illustrations of the origins of idioms. It is crucial to remember that the historical and cultural settings from which idioms originated can be understood by studying their etymology.

Frequently, an idiomatic expression belongs to just one language. The esthetic quality of the language is improved by idiomatic components, which are translated metaphorically rather than literally. However, it is also challenging to grasp and translate from a foreign language due to the usage of idioms and idiomatic expressions.

One of the reasons that idioms can be difficult to understand is that they often rely on cultural knowledge and context to convey their intended meaning. For example, the idiom „*barking up the wrong tree*” means to pursue a mistaken or misguided course of action, but this meaning is not apparent from the literal meaning of the words. Similarly, the idiom “*spill the beans*” means to reveal a secret, but again, this meaning is not immediately apparent from the literal meaning of the words. Another reason that idioms can be challenging is that they often involve figurative language, such as metaphors, similes, or hyperbole. For example, the idiom “*cold shoulder*” means to show indifference or hostility to someone, but this meaning is derived from a metaphorical interpretation of the words, rather than their literal meaning [14, p. 9].

Translation of idiomatic expressions is often a difficult problem. Because of their semantic richness, imagery, laconicism and brightness idioms are of great importance in the language, for they give language

expression and originality. For example, most of *colour idiomatic expressions* are closely connected to army, the word “colour” in this case having the meaning of the print from the clothes and flag:

- *to join the colours* (to join the army) - *a se înrola în armată* [15].

This idiomatic expression, as well as the following, are specific to British culture. Because this idiomatic expression is culture-specific, the translator had no option but to use **paraphrase**;

- *with flying colours* (with honour and great success) - *cu steagurile-n vîin* [15];

- *to call sb. to the colours* (call or order to serve in armed forces of a country) - *a chema pe cineva sub drapel* [15].

The idiom above was translated by **a partial equivalent**; the translator changed the word *colour* with *drapel*, which is also coloured;

- *to lower one's colour* (no longer to support a cause of action) - *a se da bătut / a depune armele*, etc. [15].

**Similar meaning but dissimilar form**, having a **negative connotation** are characteristic of the largest part of idiomatic expressions of this kind:

- *to be colourless* (to lack personality) - *a fi insipid* [15].

The translator made the best choice in finding the appropriate equivalent for this idiomatic expression. Even if the Romanian equivalent is not total, the translator kept the expressive meaning of the idiomatic expression. *Insipid* means without spirit, which fits the meaning of idiomatic expression *to be colourless*;

- *to show oneself in one's true colour* (to reveal one's true nature) - *a-și arăta adevărata față / a-și da arama pe față* [15]. (**partial equivalent**).

However, there are also many Romanian equivalents translated by **paraphrase**:

- *to nail one's colour* (make one's view known on a subject and abide firmly by them) - *a-și dezvălui / a-și expune punctul de vedere* [15];

- *to give a false colour to something* (to give an untrue account of something) - *a prezenta o imagine falsă* [15];

- *to give a true colour of something* (to give a correct account of something) - *a prezenta ceva în mod corect* [15].

We can state that Romanian equivalents presented above prove that English is more colourful in inventing idioms, which contain the word „colour” and this is the reason why most of such idioms are translated into Romanian by **paraphrase**.

The possibility of misinterpreting an idiom in the source text calls for great deal of vigilance on the part of the translator. For lack of knowledge or even lack of attention may lead to a dry or incorrect translation.

Thus, idioms have distinctive language and cultural characteristics, which make translating them, a difficult undertaking. In addition to negotiating cultural differences and preventing the loss of comedy or subtlety in the translation, this might make it challenging to locate similar terms in the target language.

## Conclusion

Translating idioms poses significant challenges for translators, requiring them to employ various strategies to convey accurately their meaning and implications. Translators need to be well versed in both the source language and the target language, familiarizing themselves with idiomatic expressions and learning to identify unfamiliar ones.

Translating idioms is a challenging yet essential task for achieving accurate and culturally relevant translations. It requires a combination of linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness, and strategic decision-making; conversely, translators contribute to bridging the linguistic and cultural gaps between different languages, enabling effective communication and understanding across cultures.

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