Strategies for Translating Idioms from Arabic into English and Vice Versa

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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 variation in their cultures makes the process of translating a real challenge. Among the problematic factors involved in translation are the social and the religious cultures. The main objective of this study however will focus on the problem of translating idioms both in social and religious culture from Arabic into English language and vise versa. The strategies that could contribute to overcome the obstacles facing a translator in this subject are proposed and discussed.*

Keywords: *translating idioms, SL (source language), TL (target language), social culture, religious culture, strategy*

استراتيجيات ترجمة المصطلح من العربية إلى الانجليزية وبالعكس

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الملخص:المصطلح هو صيغة أو تعبير خاص بحد ذاته. نحويا، لا يمكن فهم المصطلح من المعاني الفردية لعناصر تكوينه. حيث تلعب الثقافة دورها في طريقة تفسير المصطلح وبوجود قاعدة ثقافية لدى المترجم للغة المقصودة (اللغة المراد الترجمة إليها) يمكن للمترجم حينها أن يتوصل إلى معنى المصطلح الضمني. لذا يتطلب من المترجم تعزيز وعيه عبر الثقافات المختلفة كما يتطلب منه عقلية منفتحة لفهم ثقافة اللغة المقصود الترجمة إليها و من أوجهها المختلفة وذلك لغرض ترجمة المصطلح بشكل دقيق. إضافة إلى إن الاختلاف في ثقافة النص واللغة المراد ترجمة النص إليها تجعل عملية الترجمة مهمة صعبة. ومن بين تلك الجوانب المعوقة في الترجمة هي الدينية والاجتماعية في الثقافة. إن الهدف الأساسي من هذه الدراسة، يتركز على مشكلة ترجمة المصطلح بالجوانب الاجتماعية والدينية في الثقافة من اللغة العربية إلى اللغة الانجليزية وبالعكس. وقد وضعت ونوقشت بعض الاستراتيجيات التي من المؤمل أن تسهم في التغلب على المعوقات التي تواجه المترجم عند التعامل بمثل هذه المصطلحات.

الكلمات الأساسية: ترجمة المصطلح ، اس ال (اللغة المترجم منها) ، تي ال (اللغة المترجم اليها) ، الثقافة الاجتماعية ، الثقافة الدينية ، ستراتيجيات الترجمة.

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Introduction

An idiom is an artistic expression of the language. Usually, the individual meanings of its components are different from its literal meaning. It often carries meanings which cannot be deduced from its individual components. By contrast, ordinary language is mathematical i.e. source language equals to target language, for example; (he studied for five years, درس لمدة خمس سنوات). Idiomatic expressions are colorful, dramatic, lively, closer to the way people really feel and near to the local culture.

Idioms are considered as one class of figurative expressions which occur in all expressions of "at least two words which cannot be understood literally and which function as a unit semantically" (Beekman and Callow 1974: 121).

However, the majority of idioms are used interchangeably between both speaking and writing, i.e. each type is marked as written only, spoken only, literary…etc. Generally, idioms are used more often in speaking than writing and therefore sixty to seventy percent of idioms are associated with spoken language (Maxos, 2003:4).

There are regular idioms and special idioms in terms of structure or meaning. Those of special structure are the dialogue expressions, the narrative expressions and the rhetorical questions. Conversational expressions are very common in Arabic, these typically require a response to a question (it requires two participants), for example ("for you or for the wolf, Ahmed?" احمد! الك ولا للذيب —

. يخسأ الذئب - Woe to the wolf.

احتاج مئة ألف دينار . - I need a hundred thousand Dinar.

A warmly challenging expression used when one asks a friend to do you a favor, something you really need. If this friend responds positively, he should answer: " يخسأ الذئب woe to the wolf". This shows they are willing to help. Whereas, narrative expressions normally composed of some short sentences that make a very brief story which presents a point, e.g. إذا قلت لها موتي بتموت، عيشي بتعيش. "If I tell her to die, she dies; if I tell her to live, she lives". This idiom indicates total faith and obedience to someone.

While rhetorical idioms, which consist of one short sentence and used in formal style, e.g. "cool my breast (chest)" اثلج صدري to give relief or comfort or bring hope for good news. Offensive idioms are excluded from this study as they cannot be employed in polite company (Bahameed, 2008:3).

As mentioned above, idioms tell much about people's traditional ways of experiencing reality, about values and warnings, and rules and wisdoms the elders want to impress on the minds of their young. Besides, an idiom cannot be understood simply from the meaning of its individual words, i.e. it is not total of the meaning of its individual parts which pose a serious problem for the translator. Moreover, the differences between the SL (source language) and the TL (target language) and the variation in their culture make the process of translating a veritable confront as will be clarified in the coming sections.

Hence , this study will focus on the problem of translating idioms both social and religious from Arabic into English and vise versa. The strategies that could contribute to overcome the obstacles that face a translator in this respect are proposed and discussed.

2. Data Collection

There are no ready-made sources available for collecting idioms .Therefore, the corpus consist tentatively of a collection of mainstream from two sources. First, live sources such as TV, radios programs & movies and directly from daily interaction. Secondly, written sources such as newspapers, magazines, novels books and dictionaries. Next, some of those idioms will be implemented and analyzed to view the possible difficulties that encountered.

3. The Difficulties of 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. Moreover, the Islamic religion has affected the Arabic language and its society culture.

The difference between the SL and the 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. Among the problematic factors involved in translation is the religion, social background and others. 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.

In the light of the above facts it is believed that the qualified translator must have a good knowledge about the religious concepts such as Islamic, Christianity and many others.

Moreover; the wide differences between the English social culture and the Arabic social culture have a prevailing impact on the expressions used in both languages. By way of illustration, consider the following factors:

3-1- The Social Culture:

The social factors of the Arabic and English cultures have their influence on the Arabic and English. They have a clear impact on their perception of social experiences that include every aspect of life: customs, morals, feelings, emotions,

beliefs, interpersonal relationships and friendship, family life, marriage, and economics, etc.

To explain this crucial fact of translating precisely, consider the following Arabic examples:

Arabic Idiom	English literal Meaning	English Equivalent Meaning
ضع أيدك بماء بارد	Put your hand in cold water	Do not worry/ Be certain

This idiom is initiated to a person who seems to be very worried about handling an important matter or problem. However, it indicates that the problem will be solved and the speaker will take care of it. This expression reflects Arabs' view of water as they see hot water is characterized by "worry", while cold water is characterized by coolness.

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

Arabic Idiom	English literal Meaning	English Equivalent Meaning
- ظهره مسنود	-His back is supported.	-He is backed up.
- مقطوع من شجرة	-Cut off from a tree.	-He has no relatives.

The first above idiom illustrates that, Arabs prefer big family with many sons and brothers since they believe that it supports social rank and influences in their society. Therefore; the Arab feels proud to be a member of a big family. While the second, is used in an opposite situation where all the family members of someone are dead. Thus, the person needs help and sympathy from others around him especially when his family has no longer been 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. Instead, they have a unique meaning which has nothing to do with the meaning of their parts. Thus, when it is said: "ظهره مسنود".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. Some more social idioms that are peculiar to Arab social culture are mentioned below:

Arabic Idiom	English literal Meaning	English & Arabic Equivalent Meaning
إذا القاضي راضي!	If the judge is satisfied!	Keep away please. Used to push aside an intruder, or when you don't want to interfere or get involved. يستعمل عندما لا يريد شخص التدخل أو التورط في قضية ما.
مكلل بالغار	Crown of Garland	Symbol of glory. The Garland (plant) crown used in medieval time to celebrate a hero after returning from victorious war. رمز للنصر. وتاج نبات الغار كان يستخدم في العصور الوسطى للاحتفال ببطل عند عودته منتصرا من الحرب.
أفل نجمه	His star faded.	Said when one's fame or reputation fades away. To no longer be popular. تقال عندما تتلاشى شهرة او سمعة شخص ما.
أشكال وألوان	Shapes and colors.	Many kinds. عدة أنواع
ارحموا عزيز قوم ذل	Be merciful with an honorable person who	Please, help me I am not begging. ارحموا هذا الشخص لأنه كان يوما من أشراف المجتمع.

	has been humbled.	
أكل الأخضر واليابس	He ate the green and the dry.	To wipe out totally. To be greedy and merciless. أزاله كليا أو انه طماعا بلا رحمة

Culture is considered as all of human attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, and values. It is the products 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. Examine the instances below which reflect part of English social idioms:

English Expression	Arabic literal Meaning	Arabic Equivalent Meaning
To break the bank	يكسر البنك.	يربح مالا كثيرا في لعب القمارو تدعو مدير اللعبة لإيقاف اللعب.

This expression is used in a situation where a gambler wins so much money that the banker suspends the play. However; gambling is not forbidden in English-speaking world. The opposite occurs in Arab world where the Islamic culture and religion prevail.

English Expression	Arabic literal Meaning	Arabic Equivalent Meaning
Golf widow.	أرملة الجولف.	زوجة غالبا ما يتركها زوجها ويذهب لقضاء الوقت مع أصدقائه .

This idiom is used to describe a wife whose husband often leaves her alone and goes to play golf. Playing golf is very common and popular in the Western world.

English Expression	Arabic literal Meaning	Arabic Equivalent Meaning
Three sheets to the wind.	ثلاث أوراق للريح	ثمل، سكران، مخمور

The above expression is used to describe a person who is addicted to drinking and he is a regular drinker. This behavior is also a common social activity in Western world.

Some other social idioms that are peculiar to English social culture are mentioned below:

English Expression	Arabic literal Meaning	English & Arabic Equivalent Meaning
Black hole	الثقب الأسود	If there is a black hole in financial accounts, money has disappeared. إذا كان هناك ثقب في الحسابات المالية فان الأموال تختفي.
Black sheep	خروف اسود	Someone who is the black sheep doesn't fit into a group or family because his/her behavior or character is not good enough. شخص شاذ بتصرفاته عن بقية أفراد العائلة. "صوفته حمراء"
Blank cheque	شيك فارغ	If you are given a blank cheque, you are allowed to use as much as you need for the project. أذا أعطيت شيك على بياض ، فمن الممكن أن تصرف المبلغ الذي ترغب بلا حدود.
Big fish	السمكة الكبيرة	An important person in a company or an organization. شخص مهم في شركة أو منظمة.
Big nose	الأنف الكبير	Person who is excessively interested in everyone else's business. الشخص الفضولي الذي يتدخل فيما لايعنيه.
Big cheese	الجبنة الكبيرة	The boss. الرئيس

As it can be seen from the above Arabic and English idioms, there are idioms which are used to describe different social situations in both languages. The differences between these two languages in social cultures urge adequate translators to be familiar with the social culture in both Arabic and English where these idioms are produced and used. Otherwise, his translation may not reach the level of accuracy and appropriateness.

3.2 Religious Culture

Arab world is dominated by Islamic culture and religion, while English-speaking world is dominated by Christian culture and religion. This difference in culture has its effect on the language. Consequently, idioms used in Arabic and English will be affected according to the principles of culture and religion in these two languages. Thus, religious idioms are used to express feelings and moral tradition that manifest the socio-religious system of the Arab and English culture.

Religious idioms are usually difficult to translate. Larson (1984:180) states that, "terms which deal with the religious aspects of a culture are usually the most difficult, both in analysis of the source vocabulary and in finding the best receptor language equivalence. The reason in that these words are intangible and many of the practices are so automatic that the speakers of the language are not as conscious of the various aspects of meaning involved".

Therefore, the translator will encounter much difficulty in translating terms and expressions which are not used or practiced in the TL (target language). To illustrate this point, let us discuss some idioms that are peculiar to Arabic and English religious cultures.

Arabic Idiom	English literal Meaning	English Equivalent Meaning
رمضان كريم	Ramadan is generous.	Excuse me for not offering something to eat or drink for it is fasting time
اسم الله عليك	God's name be upon you.	God protects you
-البيت الحرام، -البيت العتيق، -بيت الله .	-The forbidden home. -The old house. -God's home	The Ka'ba The Ka'ba The Ka'ba

The first idiom is used in a situation where someone comes to visit someone else during the day through the Holy fasting month (Ramadan). Usually used to apologize to the guest for not offering him something to drink or eat. Throughout this month, all adult Muslims must fast every day from the dawn to sunset.

Whereas, the second idiom is used in a situation where a child has accidentally fallen on the ground, gotten frightened of something, or cried because of pain, etc. It is also used by mother's child or any of his relatives when a healthy nice child is seen by others because of their belief in God's name and power as a source of protection (El-Barouki, 1985, p.116). Hamady (1960, p.157) mentioned that "The name of God dominates the Arab's social relations, even the most common ones. Not only in public but also in his privacy the Arab unceasingly invokes the name of God to reign over his actions".

Description of the holy place the 'Ka'ba', to which Muslims direct themselves five times a day when praying to God, is indicated by the third idiom.

Some more idioms that are peculiar to Arabic religious cultures are mentioned below.

Arabic Idiom	English literal Meaning	English & Arabic Equivalent Meaning
الله يسمّعنا الأخبار الطيبة	May God let us hear good news.	Used when some embarrassing news or secrets are revealed. تستعمل عندما تكشف بعض الأسرار أو الأخبار المحرجة.
أم الآثام	Mother of sins	Wine. الخمر
الصبر مفتاح الفرج	Patience is the key to relief	Be patient. أصبر أو كن صبورا

Translation of biblical idioms is no different from translation of any other idioms. If the words of an idiom in any source language, including any idiom in the biblical source texts, are literally matched up with words in a target language, those who read or hear the translation will not understand the original meaning of the idiom. Below some idioms from the Bible:

English Idiom	Arabic literal Meaning	English & Arabic Equivalent Meaning,
You will go to your fathers	ستذهب إلى آباءك	you will die (Gen. 15:15) ستموت
They knew no quiet in their bellies .	عرفوا انه لا هدوء في بطونهم.	They were greedy (Job 20:20) كانوا طماعين .
their throat is an open grave	حنجرتهم كقبر مفتوح.	They speak deceitfully. (Ps. 5:9) يتكلمون بشكل مخادع .
lift horn	يرفع البوق	defy God (Ps. 75:5) يتحدى الله

They help us to recognize that those who speak the biblical languages often speak figuratively, and are not literally as speakers do in English and in many other languages.

To translate the Bible accurately only people who read the Bible understand the meaning of what have been translated, but biblical idioms cannot be translated accurately, unless English happens to have the same idiom. It is perfectly fine to footnote the translation of the meaning of an idiom, giving the literal meaning of the words of that idiom. But there is a problem with literally translated idioms: Many interested people, including some Bible scholars, recognize that idioms are not intended to be understood literally, but they try to get some spiritual or theological meaning from their literal translation.

In short, the main problems that idiomatic poses 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. But once the translator moves away from close

linguistic equivalence, the problems of determining the exact nature of the level of equivalence begin to appear.

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.

4. Strategies for Translating Idioms

The way in which an idiom can be translated into another language depends on many factors. The first factor is that an idiom may or may not have a similar meaning in the TL. The other factors are the significance of specific lexical items that constitute the idiom whether they are (a) used elsewhere in the SL inappropriate in the TL and (b) acceptable or non-acceptable in the TL. Some strategies related to the problem of translating idioms will be discussed below depending on the context in which an idiom is to be translated. These strategies, however, may offer some solutions and guides to a translator in such cases as:

i) **Using a parallel idiom in the TL:** The translator should attempt to come up with a parallel idiom in the TL that conveys roughly the same meaning as that of SL, in addition, consists of equivalent lexical items. For example, "First with the first". أول بأول

ii) **Using similar meaning but dissimilar form:** The translator should try to convey the intended meaning while presenting the idiom effect of the original, i.e. to find an idiom in the TL that has the same meaning to that of SL but consists of different lexical items. For example, "Jack of all trades but master of non" سبع صنايع والبخت ضايع.

iii) **Paraphrasing the idiom:** This is the most common way of translating idiom, if the previous two strategies fail in which the translator can opt for neutral term in order to convey the implied meaning of the idiom expression without maintaining its idiomatic quality. For example, مثل الأطرش بالزفة can be translated into "having no idea about what is going on".

iv) **Using notes:** The best way of translation is that allows translator to use notes. Eftekhari (2008: 5) states that "employing 'notes' in the translation, both as a translation strategy and a translation procedure, seems to be essential so that the foreign language readership could benefit from the text as much as the ST readers do".

v) **Consulting informant:** There are many idioms in the Holy Quran and the Bible but sometimes those who read or hear these idioms cannot understand the intended meanings. Therefore, it is of great help to have someone (informant) teaches those idioms to translators of this type of translation, whether that is done in person, or Holy Quran & Bible footnote, through a book or another resource tool.

5. Conclusion

The conclusion likely to be drawn from this study is that one of the troublesome problems of translating idioms is the disparity among languages. The bigger the gap between the SL and the TL, the more difficult the transfer of a message from the former to the latter will be.

The difference between the SL and the TL, and the variation in their cultures makes the process of translating a real challenge. Among the problematic factors involved in translation are the social as well as the religious cultures.

This study reveals that using translator's knowledge of a particular culture can help in many cases to recognize the meaning of the idiom, particularly the one that has non-literal meaning because that idiom demands more than any other feature of language that the translator is not only accurate but highly sensitive to the rhetorical hints of the language.

Some strategies such as using a parallel idiom in the TL, using similar meaning but dissimilar form, using notes…etc are discussed depending on the context in which an idiom is to be translated. These strategies, however, may offer some solutions and guidelines to a translator in such cases.

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