

CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATING IDIOMS FROM ENGLISH INTO UZBEK

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Translating idioms from English into Uzbek is one of the most demanding areas of practical translation because idioms carry meaning that is not predictable from the individual words. They are compact “packages” of culture, history, humor, and shared assumptions. When an idiom moves across languages, the translator is forced to choose between preserving meaning, preserving imagery, preserving tone, and preserving stylistic effect—and often cannot keep all four at once. Below is a focused discussion of the major challenges involved, with practical examples and strategies relevant to English→Uzbek translation.

The first core challenge is non-compositional meaning. In idioms, the whole meaning differs from the sum of parts. If an English learner reads “spill the beans” word-by-word, they imagine an accident with food. The intended meaning is “reveal a secret.” Uzbek also has ways to express the idea (for example, “sirni ochib qo‘ymoq,” “og‘zidan chiqib ketmoq”), but the metaphor of beans is not culturally anchored in Uzbek the same way. If a translator keeps the literal imagery (“loviya to‘kib yuborish”), the result is either confusing or unintentionally comic. So the translator must recognize idiomaticity first, then detach from the surface meaning.

A second challenge is cultural specificity and background knowledge. Many English idioms depend on Anglo-American history, sports, religion, or everyday practices. “Touch base” comes from baseball; “the ball is in your court” from tennis; “on the same page” from shared documents or scripts; “Sunday best” from Christian social practice. Uzbek readers may still understand sports idioms if the metaphor is globally familiar, but others may not land naturally. In Uzbek, metaphorical frameworks often draw from local social life, family relations, craft, agriculture, and shared moral values. When the cultural script differs, a direct transfer may sound foreign, even if it is understandable. The translator has to decide whether to domesticate (choose a natural Uzbek equivalent) or foreignize (keep the English flavor), depending on genre and audience.

The third difficulty is the absence of a one-to-one equivalent. Some idioms have near-perfect matches across languages; many do not. English “once in a blue moon” means “very rarely.” Uzbek can express rarity with “juda kamdan-kam,” “yilda bir,” or “ming yilda bir,” but the “blue moon” image is not native. Similarly, “break the ice” (start

social interaction) can be rendered as “muloqotni boshlab yubormoq,” “gapga yo‘l ochmoq,” or “muzni eritmoq” if that metaphor feels acceptable. Sometimes Uzbek has an idiom with different imagery but the same function; other times it only has a non-idiomatic paraphrase. The challenge is not only semantic equivalence, but also pragmatic equivalence: does it sound like something a real Uzbek speaker would say in that situation?

A fourth challenge is register and tone. Idioms carry stylistic signals: informal, humorous, sarcastic, old-fashioned, formal, or slangy. “Kick the bucket” is humorous/informal for “die,” while “pass away” is polite and formal. Uzbek also marks register strongly (“vafot etmoq” formal, “o‘lib qolmoq” neutral/informal, other euphemisms used in polite contexts). If an English idiom is playful, translating it into a stiff Uzbek phrase can ruin the author’s voice. Conversely, translating a polite English euphemism into a blunt Uzbek verb can sound rude. The translator must match tone, not just meaning.

A fifth issue is polysemy and context sensitivity. Many idioms are “flexible” and used metaphorically in multiple ways. “Get cold feet” usually means “lose courage before doing something,” but in context it may also imply hesitation, anxiety, or second thoughts. Uzbek equivalents could vary: “jur’ati yetmay qolmoq,” “ko‘ngli qolmay qolmoq,” “ikkilanib qolmoq.” The right choice depends on narrative voice, character, and situation. Misreading context leads to a translation that is technically “close” but pragmatically wrong.

A related problem is idiom variation and creativity. Writers often modify idioms for stylistic effect: “spill the beans” may appear as “spill a few beans,” “spill the political beans,” or “the beans were spilled.” Or a text may combine two idioms for humor. Uzbek translation has to decide whether to recreate a similar playful twist or to normalize it. In literary translation, preserving creativity is important. In technical or journalistic translation, clarity may be prioritized over cleverness.

Metaphor clashes also create difficulty. English and Uzbek may conceptualize emotions, time, and relationships using different metaphors. English often uses “up/down” for mood (“feeling down”), “heat” for anger (“hot-headed”), “light” for understanding (“see the point”). Uzbek has overlapping metaphors but also distinct patterns and culturally preferred expressions. Translating “I’m down” word-for-word (“men pastdaman”) is unnatural; the translator must switch to Uzbek emotional vocabulary (“kayfiyatim yo‘q,” “tushkunman”). This requires metaphor awareness, not just dictionary knowledge.

Another challenge is false friends and semi-idioms. English has phrases that look literal but function idiomatically, like “make up your mind,” “take your time,” “give me a hand.” A translator may mistakenly translate them literally and produce awkward

Uzbek. “Give me a hand” in context may mean “help me,” not “hand.” Uzbek would likely use “yordam ber,” “qo‘l uchini ber,” or “ko‘maklash.” Similarly, “I see” often means “I understand” rather than visual seeing; Uzbek would choose “tushundim.” Recognizing these semi-idiomatic forms is crucial.

Humor and wordplay represent one of the hardest areas. Idioms are often used for jokes, irony, or punchlines. English puns may rely on homophones inside idioms, which do not exist in Uzbek. For example, a joke that plays on “piece of cake” (easy) and actual cake may not transfer. The translator may need to substitute a different Uzbek expression that can carry humor, or add a small contextual adjustment. This is not “betraying” the original; it is recreating effect, which is a core translation goal in many genres.

Proverbs and fixed expressions create another layer. English idioms sometimes overlap with proverbs, and Uzbek has a rich proverb tradition. When an English idiom is proverb-like (“Don’t count your chickens before they hatch”), Uzbek may have a proverb with close meaning but different imagery. A translator can use an Uzbek proverb to achieve naturalness and cultural resonance, but should be careful: proverbs can carry stronger moral force than the original English phrase. Overusing Uzbek proverbs can also shift the style toward folk wisdom even if the English text is modern and neutral. Here, genre sensitivity matters.

The constraints of subtitle translation and interpreting introduce practical pressures. In audiovisual translation, space and timing are limited. Idioms must be short, readable, and instantly understood. A long Uzbek paraphrase may not fit on screen. In interpreting, there is no time to search for a perfect equivalent; the interpreter may choose a quick neutral paraphrase to preserve meaning. Thus, medium constraints can determine strategy.

Given these challenges, translators commonly rely on a set of strategies. The first is finding a functional Uzbek equivalent idiom (if it exists). The second is replacing the idiom with a culturally appropriate Uzbek expression that matches meaning and tone, even if not strictly idiomatic. The third is paraphrasing: explaining the meaning clearly, sacrificing idiomatic flavor for accuracy. The fourth is literal translation only when the idiom is transparent and likely understandable or when the translation is intentionally foreignizing (for example, in language-learning materials). The fifth is compensation: if a particular idiom cannot be translated idiomatically in one spot, the translator may add idiomatic flavor elsewhere to maintain the overall style of the text.

Quality in idiom translation also depends on process. A practical workflow is: identify candidate idioms; test for literal plausibility; verify meaning in context; assess register and speaker; search for Uzbek equivalents; choose strategy; then re-read to ensure the sentence sounds natural in Uzbek. Building a personal bilingual idiom bank is

extremely helpful, especially for repeated work in certain domains (business, media, fiction). For teachers, classroom activities like “idiom matching,” “context guessing,” and “translation comparison” can strengthen students’ pragmatic awareness and reduce literal translation errors.

In conclusion, translating idioms from English into Uzbek is challenging because idioms are not merely linguistic units—they are cultural actions. The translator must read beyond words to intentions, tone, and shared assumptions, and then rebuild the message in Uzbek so that it performs the same communicative function. The best translations are those that Uzbek readers experience as natural and meaningful, while still reflecting the author’s voice and the text’s purpose. Success comes from strong idiom recognition, deep cultural literacy in both languages, and flexible strategy selection guided by genre, audience, and medium.

Literature

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