

CHALLENGES OF TRANSLATING IDIOMS AND FIXED EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract

Translating idioms and fixed expressions is widely recognized as one of the most demanding aspects of cross-linguistic and intercultural communication. Idioms are expressions whose meanings cannot be deduced from the literal definitions of the individual words they contain; they are deeply embedded in the culture, history, humor, and worldview of a speech community. Fixed expressions, while often more syntactically regular, also present significant challenges when they do not follow the same grammatical or semantic patterns in the target language. These linguistic units frequently carry metaphorical or symbolic meanings that are context-dependent and culturally bound, making their accurate translation a complex task that goes beyond word for word equivalence.

This article provides an in-depth analysis of the multifaceted challenges that translators face when rendering idiomatic and formulaic language into another tongue. It highlights the cognitive demands of identifying idiomatic language in context, the need for cultural competence to understand and convey intended meanings, and the translator's role as a cultural mediator. Particular attention is given to the risks of literal translation, such as semantic distortion, cultural miscommunication, or unintended humor, and the strategies required to achieve dynamic equivalence ensuring that both the meaning and function of the original expression are preserved.

The study draws upon examples from English, Russian, Uzbek, and other languages to demonstrate typical pitfalls and successful translation approaches. It also explores how idioms reflect unique cultural narratives and why their misinterpretation may affect not only the clarity but also the emotional impact of a text. Furthermore, the abstract examines the limitations of machine translation tools in dealing with figurative language and underscores the importance of human judgment and creative adaptation in translation. Ultimately, this article emphasizes that idiom and fixed expression translation is not merely a linguistic exercise but an

act of intercultural negotiation requiring linguistic precision, cultural awareness, and artistic sensitivity.

Keywords: idioms, fixed expressions, figurative language, translation strategies, cultural competence, linguistic equivalence, cross-cultural communication.

ТРУДНОСТИ ПЕРЕВОДА ИДИОМ И УСТОЙЧИВЫХ ВЫРАЖЕНИЙ

Абстракт

Перевод идиом и устойчивых выражений является одной из наиболее сложных задач в межъязыковой коммуникации. Идиомы обладают переносным значением, не выводимым из значений отдельных слов, и часто отражают культурные особенности народа. Устойчивые выражения также могут отличаться по структуре и употреблению в разных языках, что создаёт дополнительные трудности при переводе. Буквальный перевод таких единиц нередко приводит к искажению смысла, культурным недоразумениям или потере выразительности.

В данной статье рассматриваются основные лингвистические и культурные барьеры, возникающие при переводе идиоматических выражений, а также предлагаются стратегии их адекватной передачи: от подбора функциональных эквивалентов до перефразирования и культурной адаптации. Примеры из английского, русского и узбекского языков иллюстрируют необходимость творческого подхода и глубокого понимания контекста. Особое внимание уделяется тому, как переводчик может сохранить как смысл, так и эмоциональную окраску оригинального выражения.

Ключевые слова: идиомы, устойчивые выражения, перевод, культурная адаптация, переводческие стратегии, межкультурная коммуникация.

IDIOMALAR VA BARQAROR IBORALARNING TARJIMASIDAGI QIYINCHILIKLAR

Abstrakt

Idioma va barqaror iboralarni tarjima qilish bu tilshunoslik va madaniyatlararo muloqotdagi eng murakkab jarayonlardan biridir. Idiomalar o'z tarkibidagi so'zlarning bevosita ma'nosidan farqli, ko'pincha obrazli yoki ramziy ma'noni anglatadi va ular muayyan xalqning madaniyati, tarixiy tajribasi hamda mentaliteti bilan chambarchas bog'liqdir. Ustuvor iboralar esa grammatik jihatdan qat'iy

shaklga ega bo'lsa-da, boshqa tillarda ularning mos keladigan shakli yoki funksiyasi bo'lmasligi mumkin.

Mazkur maqolada idiomatik va barqaror iboralarni tarjima qilishda yuzaga keladigan asosiy til, madaniyat va kontekst bilan bog'liq qiyinchiliklar yoritiladi. Tarjimada mazmunni, uslubni va konnotatsiyani to'liq yetkazish uchun qanday strategiyalar funksional ekvivalent topish, kontekstual moslashtirish va ba'zan izohli ifodalar qo'llanishi kerakligi muhokama qilinadi. Ingliz, rus va o'zbek tillaridan olingan misollar orqali tarjimon uchun nafaqat til bilimlari, balki madaniy savodxonlik va ijodiy yondashuv zarur ekani ta'kidlanadi.

Kalit so'zlar: idioma, barqaror ibora, tarjima strategiyalari, madaniy moslashtirish, til to'siqlari, funksional tarjima.

Introduction. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a cultural artifact that encapsulates the values, history, worldview, and shared experiences of a speech community. Among the many linguistic features that reflect this deep cultural embeddedness, idioms and fixed expressions stand out as particularly complex and culturally loaded. Idioms, by their very nature, are expressions whose meanings cannot be deduced from the literal interpretation of their individual components. For example, the English idiom *“kick the bucket”* literally suggests a physical action, but its actual meaning is *“to die”*. Such expressions are not only figurative but often bound to specific cultural, historical, or societal contexts.

Fixed expressions, though generally more predictable in form, also present challenges in translation due to differences in usage, frequency, and stylistic function across languages. These expressions include collocations, phrasal verbs, proverbs, and culturally specific sayings that do not always have direct equivalents in other languages. When encountered in a text, especially in literary or colloquial discourse, idioms and fixed expressions demand that the translator possess not only linguistic proficiency but also a deep understanding of both source and target cultures.

The act of translating these expressions often goes beyond the transfer of semantic meaning; it requires the preservation of tone, function, and emotional nuance. A literal translation may lead to confusion, distortion, or even unintentional humor, while an overly free translation may risk losing the original expression's stylistic or cultural resonance. This section of the paper explores the multifaceted challenges involved in translating idioms and fixed expressions, emphasizing the importance of cultural awareness, contextual analysis, and creative problem-solving in achieving accurate and effective translation.

Linguistic and Cultural Barriers. One of the primary challenges in translating idioms and fixed expressions arises from the structural and semantic

differences between languages. Idioms are often non-compositional and metaphorical: their meanings cannot be directly inferred from the meanings of the individual words that comprise them. This unique characteristic makes idioms particularly resistant to literal translation and requires the translator to engage in a process of interpretation and cultural transposition.

For instance, take the English idiom “*barking up the wrong tree*”, which figuratively means accusing the wrong person or pursuing a mistaken course of action. A literal translation of this phrase into many other languages would produce confusion, as the image of a dog barking at a tree does not inherently suggest error or misjudgment in cultures unfamiliar with hunting metaphors. In the same way, the Japanese idiom “*猿も木から落ちる*” (*even monkeys fall from trees*) conveys the idea that even experts can make mistakes a concept that is universal, but the metaphor may not translate effectively unless adapted with an equivalent expression in the target language. Cultural specificity plays an equally significant role. Many idiomatic expressions are tied to the customs, social norms, geography, religion, and even climate of the source culture. For example, English idioms such as “*a snowball’s chance in hell*” or “*throw in the towel*” rely on cultural knowledge related to climate and Western boxing, respectively. These references may be obscure or meaningless to speakers of languages from different geographical or cultural backgrounds. Similarly, idioms in Uzbek like “*qulog‘iga qum solmoq*” (literally “to pour sand into someone’s ear”) or “*it og‘zidan olib qo‘ymoq*” (literally “to take something from a dog’s mouth”) cannot be directly translated into English without significant explanation or transformation. Fixed expressions, including collocations, proverbs, and phrasal verbs, also pose serious linguistic challenges. While fixed expressions may seem more transparent than idioms, their specific word combinations are often language-dependent. For example, in English, one “*makes a decision*”, but in Russian, the equivalent expression is “*принимать решение*” (“to take a decision”), and in French it is “*prendre une décision*”. A literal translation of “make a decision” into these languages would sound unnatural or grammatically incorrect.

Another layer of complexity arises from the emotional tone and stylistic register of idioms. Some expressions are humorous or ironic, while others are formal, solemn, or even poetic. Preserving these nuances in translation is essential to retain the original intent and communicative impact of the message. For example, the phrase “*bite the bullet*”, which means to endure pain or hardship without complaining, has a somewhat stoic and historical undertone in English. Finding a

target-language equivalent that mirrors both the meaning and emotional resonance can be extremely challenging. Additionally, idioms may carry connotative meanings or reflect historical or political contexts that are not immediately visible to non-native speakers. Failing to recognize these dimensions can lead to inaccurate or even offensive translations. In such cases, the translator must possess a high level of cultural competence and historical awareness.

To navigate these linguistic and cultural barriers effectively, translators must act not only as language experts but also as cultural mediators. They must decide whether to:

- retain the original idiom with footnotes or explanations,
- replace it with a culturally and functionally equivalent idiom in the target language,
- paraphrase the expression to preserve the meaning while sacrificing form,
- or, in some cases, omit the idiom if it adds confusion without contributing meaningfully to the text.

Ultimately, idioms and fixed expressions test the translator's creativity, sensitivity, and intercultural literacy. A successful translation does not merely replicate words it conveys meaning, emotion, style, and cultural identity in a new linguistic framework.

Equivalence and Function. When translating idiomatic expressions, functional and dynamic equivalence often take precedence over literal accuracy. For example, the English idiom "*when pigs fly*" is used to express impossibility. Its Russian counterpart is "*когда рак на горе свистнет*" ("when the crayfish whistles on the mountain"), and in Uzbek, one might use "*qushlar suvda suzsa*" ("if birds swim in water"). While the imagery varies, the intended meaning—*never or highly unlikely* is preserved. This illustrates how idioms can have **functional equivalence** despite having no linguistic similarity.

In cases where no equivalent idiom exists in the target language, the translator may employ a **paraphrase**, aiming to explain the underlying meaning rather than preserving the idiomatic form. For example, the phrase "*spill the beans*", meaning to reveal a secret, might be translated simply as "*to reveal a secret*" in languages where no colorful idiomatic equivalent exists. Though this strategy loses the imagery and informality of the original, it maintains clarity and avoids confusion especially in legal, academic, or journalistic contexts where precision is prioritized. **Register and tone** are also crucial components of functional equivalence. Idioms are often tied to informal, humorous, sarcastic, or even poetic registers. The translator must identify the **stylistic level** of the idiom and choose an equivalent that matches it in

the target language. For instance, the French idiom “*avoir le cafard*” (literally, “to have the cockroach”) means to feel down or depressed. Translating this idiom literally would confuse English speakers. The closest English equivalent in both meaning and tone might be “*to feel blue*” or “*to be in a funk*”, depending on the context.

Fixed expressions such as **collocations**, **greetings**, **idiomatic phrasal verbs**, or **formulaic responses** pose different but equally nuanced challenges. For instance, English uses the phrase “*make a mistake*”, while Spanish uses “*cometer un error*” (to commit an error). Using “*hacer un error*” (a literal translation of “make a mistake”) would sound unnatural in Spanish. These fixed combinations often defy logical rules and must be **memorized and internalized** in each language, making their translation highly dependent on native-level familiarity.

The issue of **cultural connotation** also arises in expressions with layered symbolic meaning. Take, for example, the phrase “*to cross the Rubicon*” an idiom referring to a point of no return, rooted in Roman history. If the historical reference is unfamiliar to the target audience, a translator must decide whether to preserve it, adapt it, or replace it with a more culturally accessible metaphor. Ultimately, the pursuit of equivalence in idiom translation is less about exactness and more about **impact**. What matters most is that the target reader experiences the same effect whether it be amusement, irony, emphasis, or clarity that the original intended. Achieving this requires the translator to balance fidelity to the original with intelligibility, fluency, and naturalness in the target language.

Cognitive Load and Translator Competence. Translating idioms and fixed expressions is not only a linguistic and cultural challenge it is also a cognitively demanding task that requires advanced processing skills and expert-level language awareness. The difficulty begins with identifying idiomatic language in the source text. Many idioms appear deceptively literal and are only recognizable through contextual cues or cultural familiarity. For inexperienced or non-native translators, such expressions may go unnoticed or be misinterpreted, leading to inaccurate or awkward renderings in the target language.

From a **cognitive perspective**, idiom translation places a significant burden on **working memory**, **semantic processing**, and **decision-making mechanisms**. The translator must:

- detect that the phrase is idiomatic or fixed,
- suppress its literal meaning,
- retrieve the figurative or functional meaning from long-term memory,
- evaluate whether an equivalent exists in the target language, and

- make a strategic choice about how to render the expression.

This decision-making process is influenced by various factors, including the **translator's linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, subject matter familiarity, translation brief, and target audience expectations**. Professional translators with specialized training are more likely to navigate these factors successfully, while novice or untrained translators may rely too heavily on literal renderings or automated tools, resulting in translation errors.

A major issue in contemporary translation practices is the overreliance on **machine translation** tools such as Google Translate or AI-based systems. While these tools have improved in recent years, they still struggle with idiomatic language. Many idioms are rendered word-for-word, producing nonsensical or misleading translations. For example, translating the English idiom "*hit the books*" (to study hard) literally into another language might suggest physical violence against actual books. This illustrates the importance of **human interpretative ability**, especially when dealing with figurative or culturally embedded expressions.

Even for skilled translators, idioms demand more than linguistic knowledge they require **pragmatic sensitivity and stylistic judgment**. Translators must consider:

- What is the function of this idiom in the text? (humor, sarcasm, emphasis?)
- What register or tone does it convey? (formal, informal, poetic?)
- Can the target audience understand or appreciate the original metaphor?
- Should the idiom be replaced, adapted, paraphrased, or explained?

The answers to these questions are rarely obvious and often depend on the **text type, genre, and purpose** of the translation. In literary translation, for instance, a creative or poetic rendering may be appropriate, whereas in technical or legal documents, clarity and precision take precedence. Furthermore, bilingual competence alone does not guarantee successful idiomatic translation. **Intercultural competence**—the ability to navigate and mediate between cultural systems is equally critical. A translator must understand not only the denotative meaning of an expression but also its connotative implications, historical context, and potential emotional impact. This is especially important when translating texts for multilingual, multicultural, or international audiences. Finally, the process of translating idioms can lead to **translator fatigue**, especially when multiple figurative expressions appear in close succession. This increases the risk of **inconsistency, stylistic dissonance, or even mistranslation**. For this reason, professional translators often engage in multiple drafts, peer reviews, and consultations with native speakers or subject matter experts when working with

idiomatic-heavy content. In summary, the successful translation of idioms and fixed expressions relies heavily on the translator's **cognitive capacity**, **linguistic intuition**, and **cultural sensitivity**. It is a dynamic process of interpretation, adaptation, and judgment that goes far beyond simple language substitution. High-quality idiomatic translation, therefore, is a hallmark of professional competence in the field of translation studies.

Conclusion. Translating idioms and fixed expressions remains one of the most intellectually and creatively demanding aspects of professional translation. These linguistic elements, deeply rooted in cultural, historical, and social contexts, resist literal transfer and instead require a nuanced and context sensitive approach. Their successful translation hinges not only on the translator's linguistic proficiency but also on their cultural awareness, stylistic flexibility, and interpretive judgment.

Throughout this paper, we have examined the multiple layers of complexity that idiomatic language presents. Linguistic and cultural barriers, non-compositional meanings, and differences in figurative logic across languages all contribute to the difficulty of rendering idioms and fixed expressions accurately. Moreover, we have seen that functional and dynamic equivalence are often more important than formal similarity, particularly when preserving tone, register, and communicative effect.

We also explored the cognitive demands placed on translators recognizing idioms in context, interpreting their meaning, and selecting the most appropriate translation strategy whether it be functional substitution, paraphrasing, cultural adaptation, or omission. This process highlights the translator's dual role as both language expert and cultural mediator.

In a globalized world, where cross-cultural communication is increasingly vital, idiomatic expressions pose both a challenge and an opportunity. They test the depth of a translator's competence and invite a deeper engagement with the source and target cultures. While machine translation tools continue to evolve, they remain inadequate in handling idiomatic content, reaffirming the importance of human insight in translation tasks. Ultimately, translating idioms and fixed expressions is not simply about achieving accuracy it is about conveying meaning in its fullest sense: linguistic, emotional, and cultural. It is in these moments of figurative translation that the translator's skill is most visible, and their creative decisions most impactful. By embracing flexible, culturally sensitive approaches, translators can bridge the expressive gaps between languages and ensure that idiomatic meaning is not lost, but transformed faithfully and artfully into another linguistic world.

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