

On the Study of Idioms and the Problem of Their Equivalence

The present article dwells upon the problem of equivalence in translating idiomatic expressions. The latter has always been one of the most problematic and challenging issues in translation practice. For decades myriad attempts have been made by linguists to suggest the most effective techniques for translating idioms as the latter being very culture-specific often deviate from the accepted norms of translation and require some specific approach. Various linguists have submitted different views as to the strategies of translating idioms with a clear aim to rid translators of that heavy burden and facilitate the translation process. Following the in-depth and thorough investigation of the issue as well as the approaches of some linguists, a strong accent has been laid on the techniques put forth by Mona Baker's, since they seem quite easy for any translator to follow as well as appear to be the most comprehensive in essence.

Key words: Idioms, equivalence, translation strategies.

Language is a living phenomenon, which evolves under the influence of a multiplicity of factors. As humans, we all use a language in day-to-day life to live and communicate. We create words, phrases that give sound and meaning to objects, phenomena and abstract concepts as well as create grammatical structures to give form to the messages we convey. Any language possesses great flexibility through which it broadens, enriches its vocabulary with the words the speakers coin. Alongside this it also refills the stock with loan words and neologisms. It is well-known that language is closely related to culture, it's an integral part of it. Languages and cultures interact and shape each other.

The richness of a language also becomes palpable when we take a close look at the idioms and idiomatic phrases used therein since idioms are first and foremost associated with cultural mind-set. Idioms derive from the culture of a nation and from daily life. They are special language forms that convey cascades of culture-specific information such as religion, history, customs, national identity, speaking manners, national behavior etc. We can get a better understanding of a certain culture by investigating the idioms as they hold a cultural background behind themselves. They help language learners better understand the culture, penetrate into the customs and lifestyle of a particular people, and gain a deeper insight into their history.

Idioms are undoubtedly among the hardest things for a person to learn in the process of learning a new language. This is because most people grow up using idioms as if their true meanings actually make sense. The English language itself possesses a huge diversity of idioms which imbue the language

with flavor and give it a stunning variety, flamboyant character and color. Idioms are used in both spoken and written English and appear in all spheres of life. They are frequently employed by native speakers who feel the language at an inborn level. Idioms are for just one language. In some cases, when an idiom is translated into another language its meaning may be changed or not make any sense as it once did in the source language.

Prior to giving definitions of idioms and understanding what they imply and investigating them at length it is worth knowing that the English word “*idiom*” was borrowed from Middle French *idiome* in the 16th century, though its ultimate source is Greek *idioma*, signifying a peculiarity, peculiar phraseology. The root of the word is Greek *idios* (personal, private). In classical Latin, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, *idioma* meant a “special term or phrase used by an individual or group”. In post-classical Latin (from the 7th to 13th centuries), *idiom* came to mean “a language, a peculiarity, a special property, a dialect, or a spoken form of language”- the OED says (www.grammarphobia.com/blog/2011/08). Nowadays there are various definitions of *idiom* suggested by different linguists which better illustrate its essence and linguistic value.

According to Stephen Cramley idiom is defined as “a complex item which is longer than a word- form but shorter than a sentence and which has a meaning that cannot be

derived from the knowledge of its component parts” (Cramley 2004:128).

As Mona Baker puts it: “idioms are frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components” (Baker 1992: 67).

Charles Hocket considers idiom “a modern linguistic agreement on one composed of two or more constituent parts generally deemed to be words. The closer the wording of an idiom reflects a real world situation the easier it is to interpret” (Hocket 1958:92).

One of the approaches to elucidating this linguistic phenomena underlines that an idiom is a manner of speaking that is natural to native speakers of the language. It comes to prove that only people who master the language can adequately and to the point use idiomatic expressions in their speeches.

It is indubitable that the meaning is the most important factor when talking about semantic properties of idioms. Figurative meaning is the fundamental characteristic of idioms for it assists in determining whether a fixed expression is an idiom or not. On eminent linguist V. V. Vinogradov’s word, the meaning of an idiom is “*the special chemical mixture*” of the meaning of all components (Vinogradov 1997: 120). The meaning of an idiom cannot be sensed from its component words since the meaning is far from the same as that of a set

phrase. Consequently, idioms should be understood metaphorically rather than literally and translated maintaining their meaning rather than structure.

It comes as no surprise that in translating idioms, translators run into difficulties that may seem insurmountable. The major problem they face is the lack of equivalence i.e. finding idioms in the target language possessing the same form and meaning as those in the source language, in the meantime, literal translations of idioms are inevitably pregnant with stylistic and semantic errors. Idioms are especially hard to translate in case they are culture bound. In that event, translators should proceed with patience and delve into the culture of a certain country to demystify and bring out cultural peculiarities strongly reflected in the language system. With the aim of transferring idioms of the source language into the target language, one should adopt the most appropriate strategies, most importantly, the characteristics of idioms in both languages. It can be stated that the huge differences between English and Armenian cultures, for example, have a prevailing impact on the expressions used in both languages. When touching upon the complexities related to finding correct and accurate equivalents of idioms, a distinction is to be made between interpreting an idiom and translating it since once an idiom has been clearly understood and interpreted one should next decide on the way wherein it should be translated into the target language.

Linguists have classified idioms according to various criteria. The most remarkable classification is based upon the varying degrees of idiomaticity.

According to Fernando (1996), idioms can be grouped into three sub-classes: pure idioms, semi-idioms and literal idioms.

A *pure idiom* is a type of conventionalized, non-literal multiword expression whose meaning cannot be understood by adding up the meanings of the words that make up the phrase. For example the expression *spill the beans* is a pure idiom, because its real meaning has nothing to do with beans.

A *semi-idiom*, on the other hand, has at least one literal element and one with a non-literal meaning. *Foot the bill* (i.e. “pay”) is one example of a semi-idiom, in which *foot* is the non-literal element, whereas the word *bill* is used literally.

A *literal idiom*, such as *on foot* or *on the contrary* is semantically less complex than the other two, and therefore easier to understand even if one is not familiar with these expressions.

Fernando's classification of idioms is based on the degree of lexical variance in idioms. Others such as Halliday have come up with fictional categorization. On the basis of function of the phrase, Halliday (1985) has classified idioms into the following types: *ideational* signifying message content, experiential phenomena including the sensory, the affective, and the evaluative, or they characterize the nature of the message such as *tear down*, *be in a pickle*, *a red herring*. *A watched pot never*

boils, *interpersonal* fulfilling either an interactional function or they characterize the nature of the message': they can, for instance, initiate or keep up an interaction between people and maintain politeness such as let's face it, come off it, good afternoon etc. and *rational* ensuring that the discourse is cohesive and coherent such as on the contrary, as distinct from, to cap it all etc.

In other words, from the point of view of intelligibility idioms can be categorized into 2 groups: transparent idioms, that is, we can easily see the link between the idiom and its meaning and opaque idioms, that is, the meaning of an idiom is not at all that of the sum of the literal meanings of its constituents. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that an idiom that seems rather opaque at first glance may be translated with greater ease whereas a transparent idiom may have no equivalent in the target language. As we mentioned above idioms are culture-specific and the translation in increases in difficulty as the language pair to be translated are considerably different from each other especially when looked at from a cultural standpoint. English idiomatic expressions such as *in the pudding club (pregnant)* or *“see red” (lose one’s temper)* are good examples. By the same token in Armenian we have a myriad of idiomatic expressions that superficially, may seem easy to translate, for instance *“Կհզն աննէլ”* implying *“to assume responsibility for something”* or *“Ինձ հարցրո՛ւ” (ask me!)* meaning *“I know it best”* which best display Armenian culture and mind-set and translators may face difficulties in

deciphering them, let alone finding accurate and precise equivalents. Yet, culture-specific idioms are not necessarily beyond translation. The failure to translate does not lie in the expression itself, but rather the meaning it imparts and the context wherein it is used.

The overwhelming majority of idioms in one language have their counterparts in other languages and they are similar in both meaning and form. Idiomatic equivalence is mainly due to the close relations and commonalities existing between two or more languages. However, one can scarcely encounter absolutely identical idioms in different languages since at least one of the components of an idiom in one language may be different from the constituents of an idiom in another, i.e. they may be identical only at the semantic level. Even in case such exist, then they are likely to have been borrowed from another language as a result of linguistic interaction or impact. In case of English, a vast number of idioms and idiomatic expressions have their counterparts both in German and French for English has much in common with the latter from a historic perspective. The English idiom *“to buy a pig in a poke”*, for instance, meaning *“to buy something without being sure of its nature, quality etc.”* has its counterparts in German and French *“die Katze im Sack kaufen”* and *“acheter un chat dans un sac”* respectively. As regards its Armenian counterpart we should first figure out its meaning to find an equivalent expression. The same can be implied in Armenian through *“չկտրած ձկերուկ”*, literally- *“an uncut watermelon”*; however, the constituents of

the latter have no resemblance at all with those of the English idiom. Generally, there are a number of English idioms (like “it is raining cats and dogs” or “as easy as pie”) which do not have counterparts in Armenian and in case of their literal translation they will make no sense. However, this does not apply to all idioms and the table below presents English idioms with their French and German and Armenian counterparts that are close both in meaning and form.

ENGLISH	FRENCH	GERMAN	ARMENIAN
Make ends meet <i>(to earn and spend equal amounts of money)</i>	<u>joindre les deux bouts</u>	<u>den Kopf über Wasser halten</u>	ծայրը ծայրին հասցնել
see everything black <i>(to be pessimistic)</i>	<u>voir à travers un nuage</u>	<u>alles wie durch einen Schleier sehen</u>	ամեն ինչ սև գույներով տեսնել
in the twinkling of an eye <i>(very quickly)</i>	<u>en un rien de temps</u>	im Nu	աչքը չթափթած
<u>bring to light</u> <i>(reveal someone or something to the public)</i>	<u>mettre en plein jour</u>	<u>ans Licht bringen</u>	<i>ջրի էրես</i> <i>բերել</i>

behind the scenes (<i>out of public view</i>)	<u>derrière les coulisses</u>	<u>hinter den Kulissen</u>	կուլիսներից այն կողմ
lose one's head (<i>to become uncontrolled</i>)	perdre la tête	den Kopf verlieren	զուլխը կորցնել
save smth for a rainy day (<i>to reserve smth for future need</i>)	garder une poire pour la soif	etwas auf die Seite legen	սև օրվա համար պահել
Come to senses (<i>to begin thinking sensibly</i>)	revenir à la raison	zur Besinnung kommen	խելքի գալ
not hold a candle to someone (<i>not to be nearly as good as sb</i>)	<u>ne pas arriver à la cheville de qn</u>	jemandem das Wasser nicht reichen können	եղունգը չարժենալ
throw dust into somebody's eyes (<i>mislead someone</i>)	<u>jeter de la poudre aux yeux</u>	j-m <u>eitlen Dunst vormachen</u>	աչքերին թոզ փչել

In order to overcome all possible difficulties in translating idioms some effective strategies should be adopted.

Generally, different translation strategies are singled out by different translation theorists. Overall they suggest translating idioms with non-idioms, translating idioms with idioms and translating idioms literally.

Nida and *Taber* (1982) exclude the literal translation strategy and suggest three translation strategies for idioms: translating idioms with non-idioms, translating idioms with idioms and translating non-idioms with idioms. *Nida* and *Taber* claim that most frequently source language idioms can be translated with target language non-idioms, although they also admit that sometimes it is indeed possible match a source language idiom by an equivalent target language idiom though it should be highlighted that idioms suffer a great deal of semantic adjustment. The most recommended translated strategy for idioms is translating them with a natural target language idiom which has the same meaning as the original language idiom. *Bassnett – McGuire* (1980), on the other hand, suggest that an idiom should be translated on the basis of the function of the phrase: the source language idiom should be replaced by a target language idiom that has the same meaning and function in TL culture. As distinct from this *Newmark* (1981) proposes that the original SL idiom and its translation should be equally frequent in two languages. This approach is

somewhat impossible since it is rather difficult to estimate the frequency of certain expression in certain languages. As suggested by Mona Baker (1992) an idiomatic expression should be translated employing the techniques as follows: 1. using idioms with the similar meaning and form, 2. using an idiom with a similar meaning but different form, 3. by paraphrase and 4. by omission. Having investigated the basic strategies proposed by various linguistic, self-evidently the techniques put forth by Mona Baker seem the most streamlined and easy to follow. The in-depth investigation of the strategies recommended by Mona Baker's is presented below:

- 1) Translation by using an idiom *similar in meaning and form like* “*Bite one’s tongue*” meaning “to struggle not to say something that you really want to say”, will be “*sich auf die Zunge beißen*” in German, “*se mordre la langue*” in French and “*Լեզունն իծել*” in Armenian. These are absolute equivalents without any difference in form or meaning.
- 2) Translation by using an idiom *similar in meaning but dissimilar in form, for example:* “*Keep a stiff upper lip!*” or “*keep your chin up*” implying to remain cheerful despite difficulties, may be translated into German as “*Halt' die Ohren steif*” literally “*keep your ears stiff*”. An interesting analogy can be drawn between the mentioned German idiom and English “keep a stiff upper lip”. In both idioms the word “stiff” connotes “courage” “persistence” as in “stiff-necked” meaning “proud and

refusing to change”-as Oxford Dictionary says. The German idiom originates from the animal kingdom, as some animals prick up their ears when they are alert while they hang them when they are exhausted and weak (<http://www.redensarten-index.de/suche.php>). The same is implied through the English “stiff upper lip” since one who has a stiff upper lip displays fortitude in the face of adversity whereas the trembling of the upper lip is a sign of weakness (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stiff_upper_lip).

As to the French “*Garde la tête haute!*” and Armenian “Գլխուխղ քարձր պահի՛ր”, here the upright position of the head is meant to denote ignorance and perseverance. In addition, the English idioms unlike their foreign counterparts are prepositional.

3) Translation by *paraphrasing*,

The English idiomatic expression “*had a good innings*” is rather culture-specific and it is almost beyond the capacity of translators to find a proper equivalent, First, the word “innings”, as Wikipedia explains, is a period of time in a game, most notably baseball and cricket during which a team or a single player is batting (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Innings>). By extension, this term is used in British English for almost any activity which takes a period of time. Nowadays, the mentioned expression is used figuratively in reference to someone who has died at a reasonably old age or lived a rich and rewarding life. Thus, the only way of translating this idiomatic expression is

to figure it out and merely paraphrase in the target language through lack of equivalence.

4) Translation by *omission*

In this case the idiom may be omitted altogether. According to Baker (1992, p.77) omission is allowed only when there is no close equivalent in the target language or it is difficult to paraphrase as well as an idiom may be omitted for stylistic reasons.

Thus, idioms being very culture-specific and grammatically peculiar speech forms have always been at the center of attention of both foreign language learners and translators. The meaning of idioms is deemed the main cause for confusion and failure to attain the accurate and appropriate translation. Nonetheless, it is up to the language learners to cultivate their language skills to such an extent and achieve such a level that will allow breaking all the language barriers and open a whole world of metaphorically used expressions, which will make the communication far more exciting and enjoyable.

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Դարձվածքները և դրանց համարժեքության խնդիրը

Սույն հոդվածում դիտարկվում է դարձվածքների թարգմանության համարժեքության խնդիրը: Թարգմանության մեջ այն ամենախնդրահարույցն է: Լեզվաբանների կողմից բազմիցս փորձ է արվել գտնելու դարձվածքների թարգմանության ամենաարդյունավետ միջոցները, քանի որ դարձվածքները կրում են մշակութային առանձնահատկություններ, և այդ պատճառով հաճախ շեղվում են թարգմանական չափորոշիչներից և պահանջում հատուկ մոտեցում: Լեզվաբանների կողմից դարձվածքների թարգմանության տարբեր մեթոդներ են առաջադրվել, և խորը ուսումնասիրությունից հետո հստակ շեշտադրվել են Մոնա Բեյքերի առաջադրած մեթոդները, որոնք համապարփակ են և միննույն ժամանակ դյուրին կիրառման տեսակետից:

Բանալի բառեր, դարձվածքներ, համարժեքություն, թարգմանության ռազմավարություններ:

Идиомы и проблема их эквивалентности

Данная статья затрагивает проблему поиска эквивалентов в переводе идиом. Последнее является одним из наиболее проблемных и сложных вопросов в практике перевода. Лингвисты в течение многих десятилетий после бесчисленных попыток предложили наиболее эффективные стратегии перевода идиом, так как они являются специфическими для каждой культуры, часто отклоняются от принятых норм перевода и требуют особого подхода. Лингвисты по-разному выразили свое мнение относительно стратегий перевода идиом, которые облегчают процесс и помогают переводчику с точностью передать смысл языку-реципиенту. После углубленного и тщательного расследования этого вопроса, а также подходов некоторых лингвистов, акцент был сделан на методах, выдвинутых Моной Бейкер, поскольку переводчикам проще им следовать, а также, по всей видимости, эти методы наиболее полные по существу.

Ключевые слова: идиомы, эквивалентность, стратегии перевода.