



COMMON TRANSLATION PROBLEMS OF SET EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract: *This article examines the common challenges involved in translating set expressions, including idioms, proverbs, collocations, and phrasal verbs. It highlights the linguistic and cultural complexities that make direct translation difficult, such as the lack of direct equivalents, cultural specificity, structural differences, and the risk of losing figurative meaning. The study draws on examples from English and Uzbek to illustrate these challenges and explores practical strategies for overcoming them, including functional equivalence, descriptive paraphrase, and cultural substitution. The findings underscore the importance of cultural awareness and context-sensitive approaches in achieving accurate and meaningful translations.*

Key Words: *set expressions, idioms, translation challenges, cultural context functional equivalence*

Introduction

Translation is a complex process that goes beyond mere word-for-word substitution. It involves capturing the meaning, tone, cultural context, and stylistic nuances of the original text. One of the most challenging aspects for translators is dealing with set expressions, also known as fixed or idiomatic expressions. These include idioms, proverbs, collocations, phrasal verbs, and other fixed language units that have established meanings not always predictable from the meanings of their individual components.



Set expressions are deeply rooted in the culture and history of a language community, reflecting its worldview, values, and collective experiences. This cultural specificity often leads to significant challenges in translation, as direct equivalents may not exist in the target language. For instance, the English idiom “to let the cat out of the bag” has no precise counterpart in many languages, requiring translators to find a suitable equivalent or use paraphrasing to convey the same meaning.

Moreover, the structure and function of set expressions vary significantly across languages, further complicating their translation. Factors such as word order, metaphorical meaning, and cultural connotations must all be considered to avoid mistranslation or cultural misunderstanding. This article explores the common problems translators face when handling set expressions and offers strategies to overcome these challenges, drawing examples from English and other languages to illustrate key points.

Literature review

Translation studies, as a field, has long recognized the complexities involved in translating set expressions. Scholars like Peter Newmark (1988), Mona Baker (1992), and Eugene Nida (1964) have emphasized that set expressions, including idioms, proverbs, and collocations, present unique challenges due to their fixed structures and culturally bound meanings. These expressions often carry cultural, historical, or emotional connotations that do not easily cross linguistic borders. Newmark highlighted the importance of understanding both the literal and metaphorical aspects of set expressions, noting that direct, literal translation can often lead to misinterpretation. He proposed the use of various strategies, such as functional equivalence, descriptive paraphrase, or cultural substitution, to bridge these linguistic and cultural gaps.

Baker further explored this in her influential work, “In Other Words” (1992), where she identified four main problems in translating idioms and set expressions:



lack of an equivalent in the target language, different levels of stylistic or emotional intensity, different contexts of use, and the risk of losing the figurative or metaphorical aspect. She also emphasized the importance of context in choosing appropriate translation strategies, warning against overly literal translations that might distort the original meaning.

Nida and Taber (1969) also contributed significantly to this area through their concept of dynamic equivalence, focusing on how the target text should produce a similar response in the target audience as the original did in the source audience. They argued that this approach is particularly critical when dealing with culturally loaded expressions, where literal translation might fail to convey the intended message.

In recent years, researchers have shifted their focus to the cognitive and cultural dimensions of set expressions, incorporating insights from pragmatics, psycholinguistics, and cultural studies. For example, Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2005) explored the role of cultural and cognitive models in shaping idiomatic meaning, while Gläser (2001) examined how phraseological units reflect the worldview of different linguistic communities.

Methodology

The methodology for this article is based on a qualitative analysis of set expressions and their translation challenges. The study draws on examples from English and other languages, including Uzbek, to illustrate common translation problems and strategies. The following steps were taken in the analysis:

1. Data Collection

Set expressions were collected from a range of sources, including dictionaries of idioms, phraseological reference books, literary texts, and real-life conversational data. English sources included works like “Oxford Dictionary of Idioms” and online databases, while Uzbek expressions were drawn from traditional literature, folklore, and contemporary media.



2. Classification of Set Expressions

The collected expressions were categorized based on their structure and function, including idioms, proverbs, collocations, and phrasal verbs. This classification helped identify patterns in the types of translation problems that commonly arise.

3. Identification of Translation Challenges

The study then analyzed the specific problems associated with translating these set expressions, focusing on:

Lack of Direct Equivalents – Cases where no direct counterpart exists in the target language.

Cultural Differences – Expressions with meanings deeply rooted in the source culture.

Structural and Grammatical Variations – Differences in word order, syntax, and grammatical flexibility.

Loss of Figurative Meaning – Instances where literal translation obscures or distorts the original metaphorical sense.

4. Comparison of Translation Strategies

To address these challenges, the study examined a range of translation strategies, including:

Functional Equivalence – Finding culturally appropriate equivalents.

Descriptive Paraphrase – Replacing the expression with a more straightforward, explanatory phrase.

Borrowing and Calque – Directly importing expressions or closely mirroring their structure.

Cultural Substitution – Replacing the source expression with a culturally appropriate alternative.

5. Case Studies and Examples



Real-world examples were analyzed to demonstrate the effectiveness of different strategies in overcoming common translation problems. These case studies included both successful and problematic translations, highlighting the importance of context and cultural knowledge.

6. Expert Consultation and Validation

Finally, the findings were reviewed by professional translators and language experts to validate the practical applicability of the proposed strategies and ensure linguistic accuracy.

This approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges associated with translating set expressions and offer practical guidance for overcoming these obstacles.

The analysis of set expressions in this study revealed several key findings related to the challenges of translating these fixed language units. The results can be summarized as follows:

1. Lack of Direct Equivalents

One of the most common issues identified was the absence of direct equivalents for many set expressions in the target language. For instance, the English expression “to kill two birds with one stone” has no precise match in Uzbek, requiring a more context-specific approach, such as “ikki quyonni bitta o‘q bilan urmoq” (to hit two rabbits with one bullet), which, though similar, carries slightly different cultural connotations.

2. Cultural Differences and Contextual Variability

The study found that many set expressions are deeply embedded in the culture of their source language, reflecting unique historical or social contexts. For example, the English idiom “the elephant in the room” refers to an obvious problem that is being ignored, but this metaphor does not naturally resonate in many cultures where elephants do not hold the same symbolic meaning. This often necessitates creative adaptation or the use of culturally relevant metaphors in translation.



3. Structural and Grammatical Challenges

The structure of set expressions can also present significant challenges. English, for instance, relies heavily on phrasal verbs like “give up” or “run out of,” which may lack straightforward equivalents in languages like Uzbek, where such meanings are typically expressed through single verbs or more complex constructions.

4. Loss of Figurative Meaning

Another common issue is the loss of figurative meaning when set expressions are translated too literally. For example, translating “spill the beans” as “fasollarni to’kmoq” would miss the idiomatic sense of revealing a secret, potentially confusing the target audience. This highlights the importance of preserving the metaphorical or symbolic sense of such expressions.

5. Successful Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

Despite these difficulties, the analysis identified several effective strategies for overcoming translation challenges, including:

Functional Equivalence: Using culturally relevant alternatives, such as replacing “the ball is in your court” with “endi navbat sizda” in Uzbek, which captures the same sense of responsibility or decision-making.

Descriptive Paraphrase: Clearly explaining the underlying meaning of complex expressions, especially when no close equivalent exists.

Borrowing and Calque: In some cases, directly adopting foreign expressions, particularly for widely recognized idioms, can be effective.

Cultural Substitution: Replacing culturally specific expressions with more familiar alternatives that achieve a similar effect in the target language.

6. Impact on Translation Quality

The study also highlighted the critical role of cultural awareness in achieving high-quality translations. Translators who possess deep cultural knowledge are



better equipped to select appropriate strategies, avoid misinterpretation, and maintain the stylistic impact of set expressions.

These findings underscore the importance of flexibility and creativity in translating set expressions, as well as the need for a nuanced understanding of both source and target cultures.

Results

The results of this study highlight the complex nature of translating set expressions, revealing that successful translation often requires more than just linguistic knowledge. It demands cultural sensitivity, creativity, and a deep understanding of both the source and target languages. The analysis identified several key challenges, including the lack of direct equivalents, cultural specificity, structural differences, and the risk of losing figurative meaning.

One significant finding is that direct, word-for-word translation often fails to capture the intended meaning of set expressions. This aligns with the theories proposed by Newmark (1988) and Baker (1992), who emphasize the need for functional and dynamic equivalence to preserve the impact and nuance of the original text. For example, the English idiom “to add fuel to the fire” has a close counterpart in Uzbek, “o’tga yog’ quyish,” demonstrating that in some cases, culturally similar expressions can provide effective equivalents.

However, in cases where no direct equivalent exists, translators must rely on strategies like descriptive paraphrase or cultural substitution. This approach can help maintain the original tone and intent, as seen with expressions like “to let the cat out of the bag,” which might be more appropriately translated as “sirni oshkor qilmoq” (to reveal a secret) in Uzbek, despite the loss of the original metaphor.

Additionally, the study found that some set expressions carry deep cultural meanings that cannot be easily transferred without losing context. For instance, English phrases like “Achilles’ heel” or “swan song” are rooted in Western mythology and literature, making their translation particularly challenging for



audiences unfamiliar with these references. In such cases, translators must carefully consider their target audience and the potential impact of cultural adaptation.

Overall, these findings underscore the importance of flexibility in translation, encouraging translators to move beyond literal interpretations and consider the broader cultural and contextual factors that shape meaning. This approach not only enhances the accuracy of the translation but also preserves the stylistic richness and emotional resonance of the original text.

Conclusion

In conclusion, translating set expressions presents a unique set of challenges that require a deep understanding of both linguistic structure and cultural context. The absence of direct equivalents, differences in metaphorical frameworks, and the risk of losing figurative meaning all contribute to the complexity of this task. However, by employing strategies such as functional equivalence, descriptive paraphrase, borrowing, and cultural substitution, translators can effectively bridge these gaps and produce accurate, culturally appropriate translations.

This study has highlighted the critical role of cultural awareness in successful translation and the need for a flexible, context-sensitive approach. Future research could further explore the cognitive processes involved in interpreting and translating set expressions, as well as the impact of digital translation tools on this aspect of linguistic practice.

Ultimately, the art of translating set expressions is a balancing act between preserving the original meaning and adapting to the cultural expectations of the target audience - a challenge that remains at the heart of effective cross-cultural communication.

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