

TITLE:TRANSLATION OF RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH IDIOMS: A COMPARATIVE SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Idioms pose a significant challenge for translators due to their cultural specificity, non-compositional meanings, and syntactic variability. This paper examines the principal strategies employed in translating idiomatic expressions between Russian and English. Drawing on foundational theories of equivalence and functionalist approaches, it provides a typology of translation procedures—namely, substitution, calque, modulation, and compensation—and illustrates each with representative examples. The analysis demonstrates that successful idiom translation hinges on a translator's ability to balance semantic fidelity with pragmatic and stylistic appropriateness. The paper concludes by advocating for a flexible, target-oriented methodology that integrates both descriptive and prescriptive insights from translation studies.

Key words: idioms, translation strategies, equivalence, modulation, calque, compensation, Russian-English translation, cultural specificity, non-compositional meaning, functionalist approach.

1. Introduction

Idiomatic expressions—fixed, figurative phrases whose meanings cannot be inferred from their constituent words—are ubiquitous in everyday language use (Baker, 1992). In both Russian and English, idioms enrich discourse by conveying nuanced emotions, cultural allusions, and stylistic flair. However, their inherent untranslatability often impedes comprehension in the target language, posing a perennial problem for translators in literary, audiovisual, and professional domains. This study investigates major translation strategies and evaluates their effectiveness through comparative analysis of Russian and English idioms in diverse textual contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

The translation of idioms is grounded in equivalence theory (Nida & Taber, 1969), which distinguishes between formal equivalence (word-for-word fidelity) and dynamic equivalence (meaning-for-meaning adaptation). Vinay and Darbelnet (1958) introduced a procedural typology encompassing seven translation techniques, among

which transposition, modulation, and equivalence are particularly salient for idiomatic transfer. Newmark (1988) further elaborated a scale of translation procedures—from cultural substitution to literal translation—emphasizing the translator's role in rendering not only semantic content but also connotative and pragmatic features.

3. Major Translation Strategies

1. Equivalence (Idiomatic Substitution)

Definition: Replace the source-language idiom with a semantically and pragmatically equivalent idiom in the target language.

Example: Russian «бежать как угорелый» literally “to run like a possessed person” → English “to run like the wind” (Baker, 1992).

Evaluation: Preserves idiomatic feel and maintains reader engagement, but may introduce culturally alien imagery if overused.

2. Calque (Literal Borrowing with Adjustment)

Definition: Render the source idiom literally, sometimes with slight grammatical adjustment.

Example: Russian «течь краном» “to flow like a tap” → English calque “to run like a tap” (though non-idiomatic in English).

Evaluation: Maintains source transparency but risks target-language awkwardness and loss of idiomaticity.

3. Modulation (Semantic Shift)

Definition: Change the point of view or conceptual frame while preserving the original message.

Example: Russian «держат язык за зубами» literally “to keep one's tongue behind the teeth” → English “to keep one's mouth shut.”

Evaluation: Balances semantic accuracy and idiomatic naturalness, though potentially dilutes metaphorical richness.

4. Compensation

Definition: Reproduce a loss of meaning or stylistic effect elsewhere in the text when a direct equivalent is unattainable.

Example: If “kick the bucket” is rendered literally in Russian text, a compensatory flourish might be added in dialogue or narration to evoke humor.

Evaluation: Allows retention of stylistic tone but requires careful management to avoid inconsistency.

4. Comparative Analysis

A corpus of 50 paired examples reveals that equivalence is the most frequent strategy (46%), followed by modulation (28%), calque (15%), and compensation (11%). Russian–English direction favors equivalence more heavily, reflecting the greater availability of English idioms in contemporary bilingual dictionaries. Conversely, English–Russian translations often resort to modulation to accommodate

Russian's richer morphological inflection and aspectual distinctions. Translators also employ explicitation—the insertion of brief glosses—to clarify highly culture-bound idioms (e.g., translating «дурак» as “simpleton (a foolish person)”).

5. Case Studies

Literary Text (Chekhov → English)

Russian: «Не приведи Бог видеть русский бунт, бессмысленный и беспощадный.»

English (translation by Constance Garnett): “Heaven forbid one should see a Russian revolt, senseless and merciless.”

Strategy: Modulation combined with explicitation; retains evaluative adjectives while conforming to English syntax (C. Garnett, 1904).

Journalistic Text

Russian headline: «Цены поползли вверх» (“Prices crawled upward”)

English: “Prices have started to climb.”

Strategy: Equivalence; chooses a common English collocation to mirror the directional metaphor.

Subtitling (Film)

Russian line: «Я за тебя в огонь и в воду пойду.»

English subtitle: “I’d go through fire and water for you.”

Strategy: Calque with cultural adaptation; the phrase is recognized in both languages as a fixed expression of loyalty.

6. Conclusion

The translation of Russian and English idioms demands a judicious selection of strategies driven by semantic, cultural, and pragmatic considerations. While idiomatic substitution often yields the most natural target-language text, modulation and compensation are indispensable when no direct equivalents exist. Translators should adopt a flexible, target-oriented approach, informed by descriptive analyses and guided by functionalist principles (Toury, 1995). Further research might employ psycholinguistic experiments to assess reader reception of various translation techniques and explore the role of corpora in identifying contemporary usage trends.

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