

TRANSLATING IDIOMS AND PROVERBS ACROSS CULTURES

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Ingliz tili tarjima nazariyasi kafedrasida o'qituvchisi

Annotation This article explores the linguistic and cultural challenges of translating idioms and proverbs from one language to another. As fixed expressions deeply rooted in national mentality, idioms and proverbs often carry metaphorical meanings that do not have direct equivalents in the target language. The paper analyzes various translation strategies such as literal translation, equivalence, adaptation, and omission, evaluating their effectiveness through real examples in English, Russian, and Uzbek. Special attention is given to the role of cultural context and background knowledge in achieving accurate and culturally appropriate translation. The article concludes that successful translation of idioms and proverbs requires not only linguistic competence, but also a deep understanding of both source and target cultures.

Аннотация Статья посвящена анализу лингвистических и культурных трудностей, возникающих при переводе идиом и пословиц с одного языка на другой. Идиомы и пословицы как устойчивые выражения тесно связаны с национальной картиной мира и нередко несут метафорическое значение, не имеющее прямых аналогов в языке перевода. В статье рассматриваются различные стратегии перевода — буквальный перевод, эквивалент, адаптация и опущение — с анализом их эффективности на примере английского, русского и узбекского языков. Особое внимание уделяется значению культурного контекста и фоновых знаний в обеспечении точного и уместного перевода. Автор приходит к выводу, что успешный перевод таких выражений требует не только языковой, но и культурной компетенции переводчика

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Idioms and proverbs are deeply rooted in the cultural and historical experience of a linguistic community. Their meanings often go beyond the literal interpretation of individual words and rely on shared cultural knowledge, making their translation particularly challenging. These expressions serve as condensed forms of collective wisdom, humor, and worldview — and thus cannot be translated in isolation from their cultural context.

Without cultural adaptation, such translations risk either distorting the message or sounding unnatural in the target language. Therefore, the translator must act not

just as a linguistic converter, but as a cultural mediator who bridges the conceptual worlds of both languages.

This article analyzes such challenges and offers strategies — including equivalence, adaptation, and explanation — for effectively translating idioms and proverbs across English, Russian, and Uzbek, with the goal of preserving both meaning and cultural impact.

The Nature of Idioms and Proverbs. Idioms and proverbs represent an essential and vivid part of language, encapsulating the cultural memory, social norms, and worldview of a people. Although often discussed together, idioms and proverbs serve different functions in communication and differ in structure, meaning, and degree of metaphor.

An idiom is a fixed phrase whose overall meaning is not predictable from the meanings of its individual components. Idioms are inherently metaphorical and culturally bound, requiring not only linguistic but also cultural knowledge to be properly understood. For instance, the English idiom “*kick the bucket*”, meaning “to die,” has no transparent meaning when interpreted literally. Its Russian equivalent «*сыграть в ящик*» and the Uzbek “*jon taslim qilmoq*” serve the same euphemistic function but are grounded in their own cultural imagery.

Another example is “*bite the bullet*”, which in English means to endure a painful situation with courage. In Russian, this may be rendered as «*стиснуть зубы*», while in Uzbek, a similar idea is conveyed with “*ichini tishlab chidamoq*”, which literally means “to endure while biting inside oneself,” reflecting inner strength and self-control.

By contrast, proverbs are complete sentences that express general truths, moral values, or practical advice. They are often used in folk speech to guide behavior or summarize cultural wisdom. For example, the English proverb “*Don’t count your chickens before they hatch*” warns against premature optimism. This idea is echoed in the Russian «*Цыплят по осени считают*» and the Uzbek “*Tovuqni kuzda sanashadi*”, both of which draw on agricultural metaphors familiar in their respective cultures.

Similarly, the proverb “*A stitch in time saves nine*”, which encourages early action to prevent bigger problems, finds its approximate Russian counterpart in «*Лучше предупредить, чем лечить*», and in Uzbek, “*Boshida chorasi topilmagan ish – oxirida boshingni yeydi*”, which vividly states that a problem not solved early may lead to serious consequences later.

Both idioms and proverbs are culturally embedded. They often reflect the symbolic systems of their native speakers—animals, objects, natural phenomena, and historical references. For instance, the English idiom “*as busy as a bee*” reflects the cultural perception of bees as symbols of industriousness. In Uzbek, someone moving very quickly might be described with the idiom “*o‘qdek otilmoq*” — “to fly like a

bullet,” a phrase that draws on speed and power. In Russian, the idiom «как белка в колесе» — “like a squirrel in a wheel” — illustrates frantic, non-stop activity.

These expressions go beyond linguistic structure; they are cultural artifacts, tightly linked to how different societies conceptualize the world. Their successful interpretation and translation require an understanding of both the linguistic form and the cultural substance they convey.

Difficulties in Translating Idioms and Proverbs . Translating idioms and proverbs is one of the most challenging tasks in the field of translation studies due to their figurative nature, cultural specificity, and fixed lexical structure. Unlike ordinary vocabulary, these expressions carry meanings that are often deeply rooted in cultural traditions, history, and shared experience, which makes direct translation either impossible or misleading.

Linguistic Challenges. One of the primary linguistic difficulties is non-compositionality—the idea that the meaning of the whole expression cannot be derived from the meanings of its parts. For example, the English idiom “*spill the beans*” means “*to reveal a secret*” but a literal translation into Russian («*пролить бобы*») or Uzbek (“*loviyani to‘kmoq*”) would make no sense. These expressions require either finding a functional equivalent or rephrasing to convey the intended meaning.

Another issue is the lack of structural equivalents in the target language. Idioms and proverbs are often grammatically frozen; altering their structure can affect their acceptability. In translation, especially from English to Uzbek or Russian, preserving both meaning and stylistic effect can be difficult, particularly when the expression contains outdated vocabulary or metaphorical components unfamiliar to the target audience.

Cultural Barriers. Cultural differences present a more complex problem. Idioms and proverbs are *cultural texts* that encode specific values, social behaviors, and beliefs. For instance, the English proverb “*The squeaky wheel gets the grease*”, which implies that the most noticeable problems get attention, has no direct counterpart in Uzbek culture, which values modesty and collectivism. A literal translation might even suggest an inappropriate meaning.

Similarly, the Russian idiom «*делать из мухи слона*» (“*to make an elephant out of a fly*”) has an English equivalent — “*to make a mountain out of a molehill*” — but neither would make much sense if translated literally into Uzbek without cultural explanation or substitution.

In addition, symbolic imagery in idioms often varies between cultures. In English, “*white*” symbolizes purity and innocence, while in some cultures, white may be associated with mourning. A proverb or idiom involving colors, animals, or religious references may require adaptation or cultural substitution to maintain relevance and avoid confusion or offense.

Pragmatic and Functional Issues. Idioms and proverbs are often used for specific rhetorical purposes—humor, irony, moral teaching, or emotional emphasis. When translating, the pragmatic function must be preserved. For instance, if a proverb is used sarcastically in the source text, the translation must also convey sarcasm, even if the literal content changes.

Moreover, the audience's expectations play a role. Translators working for readers unfamiliar with the source culture may need to add explanatory notes or choose more general expressions to ensure comprehension.

Translation Strategies. Translating idioms and proverbs is a complex process that often goes beyond finding lexical matches between languages. Due to their figurative nature and cultural specificity, such expressions require translation strategies that consider not only linguistic accuracy but also cultural relevance and communicative effectiveness. Scholars such as P. Newmark and M. Baker emphasize that the translator's goal should be to preserve both meaning and function—even if this means altering form.

One of the most common yet risky methods is literal translation, where the phrase is translated word-for-word. This approach works only in rare cases where the expression is either universal or coincidentally shared between cultures. For example, translating the English idiom “*to carry coals to Newcastle*” into Russian as «*нести уголь в Ньюкасл*» or into Uzbek as “*Nyukaslga ko‘mir tashish*” makes little sense without knowledge of the idiom's origin. Such literal translations often confuse readers or lead to misinterpretation.

A more effective and widely accepted method is finding a full equivalent—that is, an expression in the target language that conveys the same figurative meaning and communicative function. For instance, the English proverb “*Don't cry over spilled milk*” has accurate counterparts in Russian («*Что упало, то пропало*») and Uzbek (“*Bo‘lgan ish – bo‘ldi*”). These equivalents reflect the same pragmatic meaning and emotional tone, making them ideal choices for translation. Likewise, the Russian proverb «*Цыплят по осени считают*» corresponds closely to the English “*Don't count your chickens before they hatch*” and the Uzbek “*Tovuqni kuzda sanashadi*”—all of which convey the idea of not rushing to conclusions.

In cases where no direct equivalent exists, adaptation or cultural substitution becomes necessary. This involves replacing the source idiom with a culturally relevant expression in the target language. For example, the English idiom “*When pigs fly*”, expressing impossibility, is adapted into Russian as «*Когда рак на горе свистнет*» (“when the crayfish whistles on the mountain”) and into Uzbek as “*Olma daraxtidan nok chiqsa*” (“when a pear grows from an apple tree”). Although the imagery differs, the core idea of improbability remains intact.

When neither equivalent nor adaptation is possible, translators may rely on paraphrasing or explanation. This strategy involves expressing the figurative meaning

in neutral or descriptive terms, especially when the original imagery might be confusing. Take, for example, the idiom “to let the cat out of the bag.” In Russian, this would be translated as «проговориться», and in Uzbek, as “sirni ochib qo‘yish”—both of which are not literal translations but convey the underlying idea of accidentally revealing a secret.

Finally, in rare and extreme cases, translators may resort to omission, especially when the idiom is so culturally bound or context-specific that no translation can preserve its impact. This is most common in subtitles or highly condensed translations, where space and clarity take precedence over stylistic nuance.

Idioms and proverbs are more than linguistic ornaments — they are cultural artifacts that encapsulate a community’s values, worldview, and cognitive patterns. Their figurative meanings, emotional undertones, and symbolic references make them one of the most challenging elements to translate across languages and cultures. As this article has shown, translating idioms and proverbs requires much more than lexical equivalence; it calls for intercultural awareness, pragmatic sensitivity, and creative linguistic choices.

Linguistic difficulties such as non-compositional meaning and structural rigidity are compounded by cultural barriers, including symbolic associations, folklore references, and culturally embedded logic. The examples discussed from English, Russian, and Uzbek highlight the diversity of metaphorical thinking and the necessity of tailoring each translation to fit the communicative norms of the target culture.

A variety of translation strategies—ranging from direct equivalence and cultural adaptation to paraphrasing and, in rare cases, omission—can be used depending on the translator’s goals and the audience’s expectations. The most successful translations are those that preserve not only the semantic content of the original expression but also its pragmatic effect and cultural relevance.

Ultimately, idioms and proverbs function as bridges between language and culture. Translators, therefore, are not merely converters of words, but cultural mediators who navigate between symbolic systems. The more aware a translator is of the cultural connotations behind a phrase, the more effective and meaningful the translation becomes. In this sense, the translation of idioms and proverbs is not just a technical task, but a profoundly human one — requiring empathy, insight, and cultural intelligence.

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