
Strategies for Translating Idioms

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Abstract

One of the most challenging issues in the realm of translation is translating idioms from one language into another with the maximal success in conveying the same conceptualization, connotation and shades of meaning. This paper reviews a variety of idiom translation strategies introduced by leading figures in translation studies. As this paper indicated, there are no ready-made, fixed strategies to be prescribed to translators in dealing with idioms and it is up to the translator himself or herself to draw upon the best strategies while translating idioms.

Keywords: Translation, Strategies, idiom

I. Introduction

Language has been a tool or a link for making a relationship between nations in order to cooperate and solve the human problems generally and reflect our ideologies and beliefs particularly. In this way, language as a mean to make this discourse is very important. The essential force for this relation can be regarded as translation. Because translation as an entity in making relationships between two languages is fundamental being and lack of it can lead to a break in making the mentioned discourse and understanding.

Concentrating on the concept of translation we can see that the purpose of translation is to reproduce various kinds of texts in another language and thus making them available to wider readers which is a very difficult, time consuming activity that needs concentrations and elaboration.

In this rapid world which necessitates the expansion of information training translation is an important task; because a good translator can convey the message easily and without any changes. In this way not only preparing good translators are necessary but also preparing good translation is inevitable. This paper focuses on the strategies of idiom translation which are the results of previous researches in this field.

II. Definition of Translation

In *Translation: Applications and Research*, Brislin (1976, p.1) defines translation as:

"the general term referring to the transfer of thoughts and ideas from one language (source) to another (target), whether the languages are in written or oral form; whether the languages have established orthographies or do not have such standardization or whether one or both languages is based on signs, as with sign languages of the deaf."

As a matter of fact those who are involved in the process of translating and are called translators are supposed to be the agents for transferring messages from one language to another, while preserving the underlying cultural and discursal ideas and values (Azabdaftary, 1996). In this way, a translator should be completely aware of his activity and try to maintain his or her goodness. There are some steps that make a translator be good and prosperous.

And finally, the translator's task is to create conditions under which the source language author and the target language reader can interact with one another (Lotfipour, 1997).

III. The Definitions of Translation Strategy

Krings (1986, p.18) defines translation strategy as "translator's potentially conscious plans for solving concrete translation problems in the framework of a concrete translation task," and Seguinot (1989) believes that there are at least three global strategies employed by the translators: (i) translating without interruption for as long as possible; (ii) correcting surface errors immediately; (iii) leaving the monitoring for qualitative or stylistic errors in the text to the revision stage.

Loescher (1991, p.8) defines translation strategy as "a potentially conscious procedure for solving a problem faced in translating a text, or any segment of it." As it is stated in this definition, the notion of consciousness is significant in distinguishing strategies which are used by the learners or translators. In this regard, Cohen (1998, p.4) asserts that "the element of consciousness is what distinguishes strategies from these processes that are not strategic." Jaaskelainen (1999, p.71) considers strategy as, "a series of competencies, a set of steps or processes that favor the acquisition, storage, and/or utilization of information." He maintains that strategies are "heuristic and flexible in nature, and their adoption implies a decision influenced by amendments in the translator's objectives."

In an article titled "Interview and translation strategies: coping with multilingual settings and data" (2009) B. Filepfocuses on the challenges and questions interview and translation strategies. He believes that, the translator should first know that what are should be the good strategies for the translators and what a translator should do in order to find equivalences in translating unfamiliar lexicons and expressions. He focuses on the deconstruction of the meaning of geographical names and politically loaded expressions in order to show the sensitivities of language, the difficulties of research in multilingual settings.

IV. General Strategies for a Good Translation

The first step is extensive reading of different translations of different kinds of texts, since translating requires active knowledge. In this way the translator can be a master in an specific context and the process of translating becomes natural.

The second step is having knowledge on both source and target language. Students should read different genres in both source and target languages. By knowing structure and the lexical parts of speech and their features in a language the process of translating becomes so easy and finally acceptable.

The third step for being a good translator is writing. It is in fact the main job of a translator.

The forth step in listening. A good translator should have should have a good ear for both source and target languages; in order to understand various expressions, idioms, and specific vocabulary and their uses, and store them in their minds to be used later.

Generally the mentioned criteria for being a good translator can be dedicated to the strategies for good translations as well. Indeed this is the translator who uses those strategies and criteria for making a good translation. In the following I will focus on some of the so called general strategies for a good translation:

In the process of translating a text from a source language to a target language, the hidden structure of the source text should be discovered through the use of various strategies by the translator. These strategies can be done through the using of dictionary or grammar books in order to make the sentence and structure to the point.

Group work and cooperation with can always lead the translating process to better results. Students who practice translation will be able to solve problems more easily and will also more rapidly develop self-confidence and decision-making techniques (Razmjou, 2002). Although there is a possibility of making mistakes during group work, the experience of making, detecting, and correcting mistakes will make the students' minds open and alert.

Another important point is that successful translators usually choose one specific kind of texts for translating and continue to work only in that area.

V. Problems of Translating Idioms

According to Newmark (1988): "in translating idiomatic into idiomatic language, it is particularly difficult to match equivalence of meaning with equivalence of frequency" (p. 28). He believes that the main problems, a translator faces, are not grammatical but lexical, i.e. words, collocations, and fixed phrases or idioms (Newmark, 1988).

Davies mentions a number of problems students may face in translating idioms and fixed expressions:

- Recognition
- No equivalent in the target language
- A similar counterpart in the target language with a different context of use
- An idiom used in the source text both in its literal and idiomatic sense at the same time
- Difference between the convention, context and frequency of use in the source and target languages (2004, p. 193).

Baker (1992) believes that " the main problems that idiomatic and fixed expressions pose in translation relate to two main areas: the ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly and the difficulties in rendering various aspects of meaning that an idiom or a fixed expression conveys into the target language (p. 65).

For Mollanazar, " the first step in translating idioms is to recognize them. The pitfall for the translators is to translate idioms literally. A word-for-word translation of idioms is often nonsense or even sometimes amusing" (2004, p. 52).

Similarly Nolan believes " The most common pitfall to be avoided is not recognizing figurative or idiomatic language and translating it literally" (2005, p. 67).

Baker (1992) mentions two cases which might lead to misinterpreting an idiom:

- 1) when an idiom's literal meaning also makes sense
- 2) when there is an idiom in the target language which has a similar form but refers to a different solution

According to Baker (1992), there are a couple of problems a translator may face:

- Some idioms may have no equivalent idiomatic expressions in the TL. Different languages may express the same meaning through a single word, an opaque idiom, a transparent fixed expression (Baker, 1992).
- " An idiom or fixed expression may have a similar counterpart in the TL, but its context of use may be different; the two expressions may have different connotations, for instance, or they may not be pragmatically transfereble" (Baker, 1992, p. 69).
- Sometimes an idiom in the SL refers to both its literal and idiomatic sense. "unless the TL idiom corresponds to the SL idiom both in form and in meaning, the play on idiom cannot be successfully reproduced in the TL" (Baker, 1992, p. 69).
- The very convention of using idioms in written discourse, the contexts in which they can be used, and their frequency of use may be different in the SL and TL" (Baker, 1992, p. 70).

According to Straksiene (2009), one of the problems a translator faces in translating idioms is the lack of equivalence on the idiom level. All languages have idioms. But it is not easy to find an equivalent in the TL that corresponds to the idiom in the ST in both form and meaning. Idioms may contain a culture-bound item and this poses a problem for the translator.

VI. Strategies of Translating Idioms

There have been many scholars writing about various strategies to be used for rendering a text from L1 into L2 during the history of translation. Apart from translating isolated words, " the most typical example of translating on the level of the combination of words is the translation of idiomatic or phraseological units" (Catford, 1965, p. 44).

He also argues that the meaning of such units is not identical with the total meaning of their constituents and it is impossible to translate such units word for word in most cases. The idiom or phrase is considered as "the unit of translation: (ibid).

Catford (1965, p. 54) further states that idioms and phraseological units should not be considered as " the only possible translation units on the level of combination of words". In many times, such a unit can be " a free combination of words whose source language meaning is built up out of the meaning of its separate components."

Hansen, Malmkjaer, and Gile (2004, p. 64) mention that " the meaning of an idiomatic expression cannot be deducted by examining the meaning of the constituent lexemes".

Baker (1992) argues that a person's competence for using idioms and fixed expressions of a foreign language is not comparable with that of a native speaker. She suggests that most of the translators working into a foreign language cannot hope to achieve the same sensitivity of the native speakers of a language in judging when and how an idiom can be manipulated.

Newmark (1988) believes that for most texts, the translator has to make sure that 1) his/her translation makes sense and 2) it reads naturally, written in ordinary language, using the common grammar, idioms and vocabulary that meet the situation. He also states that the natural use of language comprises different idioms, styles or registers which are determined by a) the setting of the text and b) the author, topic and readership (Newmark, 1988). He distinguishes between the translation of idioms and idiomatic translation and says that idiomatic translation " reproduces the *message* of the original but tends to distort nuances of meaning by preferring colloquialisms and idioms where these do not exist in the original" (Newmark, 1988, p. 47).

Larson (1984, pp. 48-49) states that " a literal word-for-word translation of the idioms into another language will not make sense. The form cannot be kept, but the receptor language word or phrase which has the equivalent meaning will be the correct one to use in translation".

Larson (1984, p.49) points out: translators who want to make a good idiomatic translation often find figures of speech especially challenging. A literal translation of *blind as a bat* might sound really strange in a language where the comparison between *a blind person* and *a bat* has never been used as a figure of speech. In Aguaruna it would be more natural to say blind as a fox. There is a legend in which the sun borrowed the fox's eyes and then returned to heaven taking the fox's good eyes with him and leaving the fox with the sun's inferior eyes.

According to Baker (1992), translators should take into consideration various factors in translating idioms, such as availability of an idiomatic expression with a similar meaning in the TL, the significance of the specific lexical items constituting the idiom, i.e. whether they

are manipulated elsewhere in the SL; and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of using idiomatic language in a given register in the TL, style, register and rhetorical effect.

She believes that idioms and fixed expressions which contain culture-specific items are not necessarily untranslatable. It is not the specific items an expression contains which can make it untranslatable or difficult to translate (Baker, 1992, p. 68).

Nida and Taber make a clever point by stating that although all translation exercises involve an inevitable loss of a number of idioms (at least in the case of longer texts), some idioms can also be gained in the process (Nida & Taber as cited in Mustonen, 2010, p. 44). Musonen further states that: "the most recommended translation strategy for idioms is translating them with a natural target language idiom which has the same meaning as the original source language idiom."

Regarding translation strategies, Baker (1992, pp. 72-77) presents four strategies for translating idioms:

1. Using an idiom of similar meaning and form

This strategy involves using an idiom in the target language which conveys roughly the same meaning as that of the source language idiom and, in addition, consists of equivalent lexical items. This kind of match can only occasionally be achieved. The English expression "break somebody's heart" and the Persian expression "قلب کسی را شکستن" are instances of idioms with similar meaning and form.

2. Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form

It is often possible to find an idiom or fixed expression in the target language which has a meaning similar to that of the source idiom or expression, but which consists of different lexical items. For example, the English expression *One good turn deserves another* and the French expression *A beau jeu, beau retour* (a handsome action deserves a handsome return) use different lexical items to express more or less the same idea (Fernando and Flavell, 1981 as cited in Baker, 1992). For example, the English expression "she did not return a hair" and the Persian expression "خم به ابرو نیاورد" use different lexical items to express more or less the same idea.

3) Translation by Paraphrase

This is by far the most common way of translating idioms when a match cannot be found in the target language or when it seems inappropriate to use idiomatic language in the target text because of differences in stylistic preferences of the source and target languages. For

example, translating the Persian idiom "سیر تا پیاز ماجرا را تعریف کردن" into "tell every details of an event" is an example of paraphrasing.

4) Translation by Omission

As with single words, an idiom may sometimes be omitted altogether in the target text. This may be because it has no close match in the target language, its meaning cannot be easily paraphrased, or for stylistic reasons.

Roos (1981, cited in Gottlieb, 1997), taking the contrastive analysis approach, gives the following typology for the translation of idioms:

1. SL idioms matched by TL idioms:
 - a) Convergence (identical at word level)
 - b) Equivalence (differing at word level)
2. SL idioms matched by other TL lexemes:
 - c) Single-word matches
 - d) Formula (i.e. non-metaphorical multi-word matches)
 - e) Free form (i.e. encyclopedic meanings) (p. 319)

Berman (1985, cited in Munday, 2001) considers the destruction of expressions and idioms a deforming tendency in translating novels. He believes that translating an idiom or proverb by its equivalence in the TL is an ethnocentrism. In his view, this is attacking the foreign work's discourse. Thus cultural references should not be replaced by the target cultural references. He believes that the foreign should remain foreign in the TL.

Ingo (as cited in Helleklev, 2006, p. 27) mentions four ways of handling idioms. Unlike many scholars, one of the methods he proposes is a word for word rendering of idioms:

- " 1. By translating an idiom with an equivalent idiom
2. Word for word
3. With an explanatory everyday expression (*normaluttryck*)
4. An everyday expression (*normaluttryck*) is translated by using an idiom."

Trim (2003) believes that " translator has [...] to decide [...] whether to translate the idiom itself [...] or to find a target language equivalent, in accordance with the more problematic

criterion of equivalence of effect or to abandon the idiom and express the idea in plain language, losing the stylistic value of the idiom. Each solution has its gains, losses and dangers (p. 18).

The other solution offered by Jensen (2008) to translate idioms is "Basically to apply the same decode-representation-encode strategy" (pp. 5-6). In order to carry out the strategy, we should first try to "*decode*" idioms and find out what they actually mean. Having realized the meaning of what Jensen calls "*semantic representation*" of the idioms, one needs then to *encode* this meaning into the receptor text, that is, the text to be translated (ibid). Jensen for the last stage states that "you have to find a target language which expresses the same thing". "In case of not finding a similar idiom or an idiom which means almost the same thing in the target language, He claims, "you will have to use an ordinary universal term" (ibid).

The solution put forth by Newmark is that " I have always preferred to define idioms as extended standard metaphors which may be universal or cultural (more often cultural); they can be translated a) by finding another metaphor, b) by reducing to sense (thereby losing their emotive force) or c) occasionally literally" (1998, p. 40).

Mollanazar also suggests two ways to translate an idiom: a) an appropriate idiom is found in the target language as its equivalent b) when there is no proper idiom in the TL meaning should be used" (2004, p. 52).

Belloc (as cited in Bassnett, 2002, p, 120) maintains "the translator should render *idiom* by *idiom* and idioms of their nature demand translation into another form from that of the original [...]".

Another strategy is adaptation, which is a very free form of translation. Newmark (cited in CheSuh, 2005, p.117) addresses adaptation and writes , " it is forced on the translator where no corresponding cultural or institutional custom or object, idiom or expression exists in the target culture or language, and a smooth, natural translation is required."

Wright (1999) is against a word for word method of idiom translation. In his words, "you must translate the whole expression. Sometimes you will be able to translate the English idiom into an idiom in your own language. However, there may be no idiom and you may just have to explain the meaning" (1999, p. 10).

Vinay and Parbelnet (2000, cited in Munday, 2001) identify seven translation strategies: borrowing, calque, literal translation, transposition, modulation, equivalence and adaptation. They believe that equivalence is the best strategy used for the translation of idioms and proverbs. In their view, idioms and proverbs describe different situations using different styles and structures. Therefore, in translating them, the sense and not the image is to be conveyed.

Sornsuwannarsi (2010) found four strategies used for translating idioms in her research: free translation, equivalent translation, omission, and literal translation.

VII. Conclusion

This review paper indicated the different strategies employed by translators for rendering idioms. Since the use of idioms is a matter of style, attempting to find an idiomatic expression in the TL to translate them will help convey the style of the original in the TT. This is an important issue that could be dealt with in translator training courses. The translators need to be familiar with SL idioms and learn ways to recognize the ones they do not know. Then the different strategies for translating idioms could be introduced to them. They could learn ways to find appropriate equivalents for idiomatic expressions.

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