# Problems of Translating English Idiomatic Expressions into Arabic

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| | Idioms have been defined as groups of words or phrases used together to have fixed meanings. No doubt, ideas or thoughts have been expressed differently in different languages. Using the idiomatic expressions is one of the ways that can be used to convey the intended meaning indirectly. Many researches have been carried out in this respect to show the importance of idioms and how problematic it is the process of translating them from one language into another knowing that this phenomenon is culture-specific. This research paper aims at translating idiomatic expressions from English into Arabic. The current study ends with the following conclusions: (1) idioms are culture specific, (2) Idioms are of two kinds. They are a: transparent and b: opaque, and (3) most idiomatic expressions were translated communicatively and in certain cases adaptation was used. These two types of translations result in effective renderings. |

## I. Introduction

Idioms are defined as phrases or expressions that have fixed structures. The meaning that can be conveyed by using the idiomatic expressions is either literal or figurative. Historically, the word idiom is derived from the French word "idiome" which means private property. Hockett (1970: 303) states that idioms are constantly created in any living language, some of them are used for a long time, others might be forgotten. He also mentions that formation of new idioms is important even if it is small, simply, because it will have an essential effect on the field of linguistics. Idioms are associated with historical, geographical and cultural factors. So, people from different cultures may not understand some expressions like the idiomatic ones. This case results in

problems in translation.  Another factor related to the idiomatic expressions which is the social class. For example, nowadays, the new generation are interested in the new technology, so they use some words that might be unfamiliar for those who are not interested in. from what have been said so far, people create idioms depending on their usage socially.

People speak idiomatically even if they do not know that. It can be said that idioms are used in everyday language and in literature as well.  Structurally, idioms are group of words combined together with a specific meaning. Using the words of these idioms will result into different meanings. The participants tend to use the idiomatic expressions to make something clear when other words do not express it clearly.

Regarding Chomsky's theory (1975:57) of generating sentences with formal and semantic properties, the meaning of a sentence is determined by the rules of syntax and semantics as well as the intention of the participant which makes the sentence understandable.

## 2. Classification of Idioms

Elewa (2015: 220) classifies idioms into five types according to their variation in terms of transparency of meaning. These types are as follows:

1. Transparent and literal idioms, for example, put the blame on.
2. Semi-transparent idioms, such as, pull strings.
3. Semi-opaque idioms, as in this example, break the ice.
4. Opaque idioms, like, kick the bucket.
5. Misleading idioms, for example, war chest.

The participants tend to use the idiomatic expressions to make something clear when other words do not express it clearly.

## 3. Idioms in Terms of Transparency and Opaqueness

Semantically speaking, Ulman (1962:45) distinguishes between transparent and opaque words and believes that the transparent words have meaning which can be understood from the meaning of their parts, while the meaning of the opaque words can be determined in the same way as the transparent ones. As it is mentioned earlier that the idiomatic expressions have fixed meaning and structure, therefore; they can

be considered as opaque expressions since their meaning cannot be predicted from the meaning of the individual words.

Grammatically, there are certain restrictions that vary from one idiom to another regarding the grammatical functions. Al-Sulaimaan (2016:200) listed these restrictions as follows:

a. Idioms are not changeable regarding the plurality. If they have singular form and vice versa.

b. The tense of idioms is fixed, i.e. if the idiom is in present tense, it cannot be changed into plural.

c. They have no comparative and superlative forms.

d. It is not possible to change the voice form from active into passive and vice versa.

So, idioms have fixed phrases which cannot be changed as well as fixed meaning.

## 4. Idioms and Translation

As for translation, idioms could be defined in terms of non-equivalence from one language into another. Idioms should not be translated literally. It is more appropriate to fine a rendering that can convey the same meaning and effect in the target language as in the source one.

Ghazala (2007: 128-130) classifies the translation of idioms from English into Arabic in terms of directness and indirectness:

### 1. Direct idioms

Translators might not face problems with direct idioms. They can find the equivalents in target language that have an appropriate meaning or similar to the one in the source language. For example,

A true friend does not stab in the back.

الصديق الحقيقي لا يطعن في الظهر.

### 2. Indirect idioms

This type of idioms might cause problems and mistakes in their translation because the translators cannot find equivalent in the target language. For example,

He can walk on water.

يستطيع صنع المعجزات

## 4.1 Types of Translation

Newmark (1988:46) discusses the following types of translation: semantic communicative translation and adaptation. His classification is considered an important contribution to the studies of translation. They will be briefly explained as follows:

### 4.1.1   Semantic Translation

It focuses on the source language text, for this reason it can be said that it is semantically and syntactically- oriented. Besides, it is more literal and faithful; the translator should follow the source language text. It is described of being more complex, more detailed and more awkward.

### 4.1.2   Communicative Translation

It focuses on the target language text to help the reader comprehend it. This method is used to translate pragmatic texts, so the meaning will be rendered contextually. It also concentrates on the effectiveness of the message on the reader. Therefore, it is described as freer. It is also smoother, simpler and more direct.

### 4.1.3   Adaptation

It is considered as a free translation. It is important; in order to achieve a perfect translation, the translator should go beyond the words. The meaning of the words can be extracted according to the context. It is necessary to know that adaption is linked to culture. When there is something belongs to a specific culture and it is expressed differently in another culture, the translator has to change the SL expression or the text if it is not found in the TL.

In what follows, the types mentioned above are applied in translating the examples in data analysis.

## 5. Data Analysis

The best way for comprehending idioms is to be used in context. Since the idioms are in widespread use, the English learners need to know how they are used and what they mean. The following idioms have been chosen form (English Idioms in Use) and translated into Arabic to show the similarities and differences between them.

**1.  Idioms Expressing Happiness and Sadness.**

- SL: I am <u>on the top of the world</u>.
    TL:

    - انا <u>على قمة العالم</u>. (Semantic Translation)

    - انا في <u>قمة السعادة</u>. (Communicative Translation)

    - انا <u>فوق النخل</u>. (Adaptation)

**Table: (1) A**

| SL | TL | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Semantic** | **Communicative** | **Adaptation** |
| on the top of the world | على قمة العالم | في قمة السعادة | فوق النخل |

- SL: Jack is <u>down in the dumps</u>, because he does not like his new job.
    TL:

    - جاك في <u>اسفل النفايات</u> بسبب عمله الجديد (Semantic Translation)

    - جاك <u>مكتئب</u> بسبب عمله الجديد  (Communicative Translation)

    - جاك <u>وضعه زفت/ مترد</u>. (Adaptation)

"down in the dumps" means that Jack is unhappy with his job. It is important to know that this expression is informal. It is clear that the second and the third renderings are the correct ones. The third rendering is used in the colloquial Arabic.

**Table: (1) B**

| SL | TL | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Semantic** | **Communicative** | **Adaptation** |

| Down in the dumps | اسفل النفايات | مكتئب | وضعه زفت/متردد |
|---|---|---|---|

### 2.Idioms Expressing Knowledge

SL: She knows the system inside out.

TL:

- هي تعرف النظام داخل وخارج. (Semantic Translation)

- هي تعرف كل صغيرة وكبيرة. (Communicative Translation)

The SL idiom means that she knows every detail about it. It is translated semantically and communicatively into Arabic, but the second translation is the correct one, simply, because it conveys the meaning that has the same effect.

**Table: (2)**

| SL | TL | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Semantic** | **Communicative** | **Adaptation** |
| the system inside out | النظام داخل وخارج | كل صغيرة وكبيرة | ——— |

### 3. Idioms Describing Critical Situation (Dilemma)

SL: They have got me over the barrel.

TL:

- رموني فوق البرميل.(Semantic Translation)

- تركوني في وضع صعب. (Communicative Translation)

- تخلوا عني.(Adaptation )

The SL example means that they have put him in a situation where he has no choice over what he can do. It has three different renderings in the TL the second. The communicative translation was used in the second one and adaption in the third one.

**Table: (3)**

| SL | TL | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Semantic** | **Communicative** | **Adaptation** |
| over the barrel | فوق البرميل | وضع صعب | التخلي عن |

## 4. Idioms for having Responsibility

SL: Sally has had to carry the can.

TL:

- كان على سالي حمل العلبة. (Semantic Translation)

- كان على سالي تحمل المسؤولية. (Communicative Translation)

The example in the SL means that Sally has had to accept the blame or the responsibility alone, even though other people were responsible. It is translated semantically and communicatively. The second translation is the best one, because it has the same meaning of the SL.

**Table: (4)**

| SL | TL | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Semantic** | **Communicative** | **Adaptation** |
| to carry the can | حمل العلبة | تحمل المسؤولية | ـــــــ |

## 5. Idioms Expressing Social Status

SL: He is very nice, but his brother is very toffee-nosed.

TL:

- هو لطيف لكن اخاه حلو الانف جدا. (Semantic Translation)

- هو شخص لطيف جدا الا ان اخاه متعالٍ جداً. (Communicative Translation)

- هو شخص لطيف جدا الا ان اخاه متعجرف/ متكبر/ شايف نفسه شوفة/خشمه عالي.

Toffee-nosed in the SL text means that the person is of a high social class and looks down on people of lower class. This phrase has two different renderings in Arabic,

however the second one is the correct rendering because it conveys the same meaning of SL one.

**Table: (5)**

| SL | TL | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Semantic** | **Communicative** | **Adaptation** |
| toffee-nosed | حلو الانف جداً | متعالٍ جداً | متعجرف/متكبر/شايف نفسه/خشمه عالي |

## 6. Idioms Expressing Oneself

SL: You must not be afraid <u>to speak your mind</u>; it is important that everyone hears your views.

TL:

- يجب ان لاتخشى من الكلام عن <u>مافي عقلك</u> لانه من الضروي ان يسمع كل شخص ارائك
(Semantic Translation)
- يحب عليك ان <u>تعبر عن رايك من دون تحفظ</u>.(Communicative Translation)

It is clear from the example in the SL text that the speaker asks the listener to state his opinion clearly and frankly by using "your mind" which translated twice into Arabic one is semantically and the other one communicatively. The communicative translation is the more appropriate in this example for the effectiveness that it conveys.

**Table: (6)**

| SL | TL | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Semantic** | **Communicative** | **Adaptation** |
| to speak your mind | ما في عقلك | تعبر عن رأيك دون تحفظ | ـــــــــ |

## 7. Idioms Expressing Colours

SL: The boss gave me <u>the green light</u>.

TL:

• اعطاني المدير الضوء الاخضر.

The "green light" in English means the permission given by someone for something to intiates. It is obvious that this idiom has an equivalent in the TL (Arabic) represented by "الضوء الاخضر" which is used to convey the same meaning in Arabic. It can be said that this example can be translated semantically and communicatively.

**Table: (7)**

| SL | TL | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Semantic** | **Communicative** | **Adaptation** |
| the green light | الضوء الاخضر | الضوء الاخضر | _____ |

### 8. Idioms Expressing Body Parts

SL: Sam <u>opened his heart</u> to me.
TL:

• فتح سام لي قلبه.(Semantic Translation)

• فضفض لي سام عما في داخله. (Communicative Translation)

• افصح لي سام عما في داخله.(Communicative Translation)

• افصح لي سام عما في ذهنه. (Adaptation )

"opened his heart to me " is used in English to say that that someone shares his deepest feelings with someone else. This expression can be translated into Arabic by saying "افصح لي سام عما يشعر به", "فتح لي قلبه" , or "افصح عما في ذهنه". It can be said that this idiomatic expression may be translated into Arabic by using semantic, communicative translation or even adaptation ; all can convey the same meaning that this expression has in English.

**Table: (8)**

| SL | TL | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Semantic** | **Communicative** | **Adaptation** |
| open his heart | فتح لي قلبه | فضفض عمل في داخله | افصح عما في ذهنه |

| | | افصح عما في داخله | |
|---|---|---|---|

## 9. Idioms Expressing Emphasis

SL: (A) You can borrow my car tonight.

(B) <u>Thanks a million!</u>

TL:

(أ) بامكانك استعارة/اخذ سيارتي الليلة.    (ب) مليون شكر  (Semantic Translation)

(أ) بامكانك استعارة سيارتي الليلة.    (ب) شكراً جزيلاً  (Communicative Translation)

(أ)بامكانك استعارة سيارتي الليلة.    (ب)  الف شكر   (Adaptation)

"thanks a million" is one of many expressions used by a person who would like to thank someone very much indeed. It was translated semantically, communicatively and adaptation was also used. The last two renderings are the correct ones and the third one is used in the colloquial Arabic.

**Table: (9)**

| SL | TL | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Semantic** | **Communicative** | **Adaptation** |
| Thanks a million | مليون شكر | شكرا جزيلا | الف شكر |

## 10. Idioms Expressing Updateness

SL: My computer is <u>out of date.</u>

TL:

- ان حاسوبي قد <u>مضى عليه الزمن</u>.(Semantic Translation)

- ان حاسوبي <u>قديم</u>. (Communicative Translation)

- حاسوبي <u>عفى عليه الزمن</u>.(Adaptation)

"out of date" in the SL text means that the computer is old and not useful anymore. It has been rendered into Arabic by giving three different translations. The first one

has a semantic meaning, while the econ one has been translated communicatively and adaptation was followed in the third one .The third rendering is the best one for the this idiom.

**Table: (10)**

| SL | TL | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Semantic** | **Communicative** | **Adaptation** |
| out of date | مضى عليه الزمن | قديم | عفى عليه الزمن |

## Conclusions

The current study came up with following conclusions:

1. The idiomatic expressions are culture-specific. They are used by native speakers. Due to the cultural divergences idioms might be difficult to be understood by English language learners.

2. Idioms are of two kinds as far meaning is concerned; a. transparent idioms which are not problematic because they are language- universal, and b. opaque idioms which are really idiomatic since they are language-specific.

3. Most idiomatic expressions were translated communicatively and in certain cases adaptation was used. These two types of translation result in effective rendering.

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# گرفتەکانی وەرگێرانی دەستەواژەی زاراوەیی لەئینگلیزییەوە بۆ عەرەبی

## پوخته:

دەستەواژەی زاراوەیی بەوە دەناسرێن کە ئەوانە کۆمەڵە وشەنە یان دەستەواژەنە پێکەوە بەکاردێن واتای جێگیر دەبەخشن. ئەوەی گومانی تێدا نییە، ئەو هزرانە دەبن دەربرین لێ بکرێت بەشێوەیەکی جیاواز لە زمانە جیاوازەکاندا. بەکارهێنانی دەستەواژەی زاراوەیی ئەوە یەکێکە لەو رێکایانەکە دەتوانرێ لەنێوانیاندا واتاکانی مەبەستدار بگوازیێتەوە بەشێوەیەکی ناراستەوخۆ . زۆر تویژینەوە لەوبارەیەوە کراون لە بێناو دیار کردنی گرنکی ئەو دەستەواژانە وسەختی وەرگێرانی لە زمانێکەوە بۆ یەکتری. بو زانین ئەم دیاردەیە دەگەریێتەوە بۆ تایبەتمەندی زمان. ئامانجی ئەم تویژینەوەوەیە وەرگێرانی دەستەواژەی زاراوەیی  لەزمانی ئینگلیزی بۆ زەمانی عەرەبی. گرنگترین ئەنجام کەئەم تویژینەوەی ئێستا پێ گەیشتۆوە بو یێتییە لەمانەی خوارەوە:

1.          دەستەواژەی زاراوەیی دەگەریێتەوە بۆ تایبەتمەندی زمان، 2. ئەم دەستەواژانە  دوو جۆرن: أ, روونکراون ,ب شاردراون ،3. زۆربەی دەستەواژەکان بەشیوەیەکی لکێنراوی وەرگێراوی  ولەهەندێ بارودۆخدا وەرگێرانی تێکرایی یان گونجاوی بەکارهێنراوە. لەم هەر دوو جۆرە ورگێرانە، وەرگێرانی کارایی دروست بووە.

# مشكلات ترجمة التعابير الاصطلاحية من الانكليزية الى العربية

## المستخلص

تعرف التعابير الاصطلاحية على انها مجاميع من كلمات او عبارات تستخدم معا لتمنح معانياً ثابتة. مما لاريب فيه ان الافكار يتم التعبير عنها بشكل مختلف في لغات مختلف واستخدام التعابير الاصطلاحية هي احدى الطرق التي يمكن من خلالها نقل المعني المقصود بشكل غير مباشر. قد اجريت العديد من الدراسات في هذا الصدد لبيان اهمية هذه التعابير ومدى صعوبة ترجمتها من لغة الى اخرى علما ان هذه الظاهرة تعود لخصوصية اللغة. يهدف هذا البحث الى ترجمة التعابير الاصطلاحية من اللغة العربية الى الانكليزية. واهم النتائج التي توصلت اليها الدراسة الحالية هي كالتالي: 1: تعود التعابير الاصطلاحية لخصوصية اللغة، 2: هذه التعابير ذات نوعين: أ واضحة، ب: مبهمة، 3: ترجمت معظم التعابير تواصلياً وفي بعض الحالات استخدمت الترجمة المعدلة او المكيفة. اذ نتج عن هاتين الطريقتين ترجمات فاعلة.