

# Idiomatic Translation Between English and Arabic: Cultural Differences

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## Abstract

This paper examines the different levels of difficulties that bilingual translators face when translating idioms in English and Arabic. It aims to suggest some solutions that tackle the amount of difficulty. Since the world is getting smaller, Arabs became more open minded. They like to read, explore, and gain more knowledge about other cultures, therefore, they started investigating and looking for books and articles that are written in foreign languages. These books may include some idioms that need to be translated carefully so it can carry the message correctly. However, the translation of idioms is partially decided by the culture. Thus, improving a cultural awareness, including religious and social, and understanding other cultures are necessary to get the exact meaning of idioms otherwise, translators may find it difficult to deliver the hidden meaning.

## Keywords

Translation, Cultures, Idioms, Equivalence

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## 1. Definitions of Idioms

### 1.1. Definition from Dictionary

The Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary defines an idiom as 'an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of its separate words but that has a separate meaning of its own'. Also, the Oxford online dictionaries provide the following definition of the idiom: A group of words, whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words: 'Let the cat out of the bag' is an idiom meaning to tell a secret by mistake (Oxford Learners' Dictionary Online).

### 1.2. Definitions from Scholars

An idiom is a form of expression that indicates an implied meaning in every single language. It is the history and traditions of a certain country that have been formed in words. The idiom has a grammatical structure in which it

cannot be understood as individual units. In some senses, idioms are the reflection of the environment, life, and historical culture of native speakers. Moreover, they are closely associated with their experiences and feelings. They are commonly used in all varieties of a language-informal, formal, spoken, and written. Since idioms are an important part of languages, understanding a language requires understanding its idioms and tactics of translating them.

Also, idioms are characterized of being metaphoric, that is, they go beyond the words and imply a connotation. They, therefore, when added to a text, enhance its creativity and complexity to make it more interesting and indirect in a way that the readership will be caught and lost by the beauty of the text nuisances.

According to the definition mentioned above, trying to understand the meaning of idioms by isolating their words, will strip them out of their metaphoric meaning. Hence, the spirit of the idioms can only be comprehended and delivered once a person is familiar with the origin, background, and the

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story behind the idioms.

To illustrate, the idiomatic expression *to walk on water* means someone who can make miracles happen. However, if the idiom is attempted to be understood by the lexical meaning of its words, it will lose its spirit to mean only ordinary straightforward expression. That is, someone verbally walking on water which is impossible.

Another example, *the two athletes were neck and neck in the race*. Neck and neck means close in distance or next to each other. However, if the literal translation was applied here, the idiom will lose its meaning since neck will be translated to the actual human organ.

Some definitions have specified that idioms have certain meanings. They are independent and have the same meaning out and within a context. An idiom cannot be divided into words because it loses the meaning it's used for [9]. Some writers agree with that. Idioms were explained as "an idiom is an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts." [11].

Furthermore, Ghazala [6] has stated that "an idiom is a fixed phrase whose form is usually unchangeable, and whose meaning is always the same, inflexible, metaphorical and indirect."

For example, the meaning of the idiom *half a loaf is better than no bread* is to get what you are able to take better than leaving all which is in Arabic translated literally. The meaning of this idiom is not related to the meanings of the words separately of which the idiom is composed.

Moreover, idioms have been explained in many books as fixed phrases that cannot be edited. In her book, *In Other Words*, [3] it was stated that "idioms are frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components". For example, if the Arabic idiom "*one with no money is sad* is translated by the general meaning it would be *empty hands lead to sadness*. However, to carry the same message that was shown in the source language, translators should look for the equivalences in the target language, so the final translation will be *a light pure makes a heavy heart*.

To give another example, the equivalent of the idiom *let us talk shop* is *let us talk about business* that is let's talk about work/ business. If it was translated literally, however, it will be let's talk about the shop which has no idiomatic hidden meaning.

## 2. Properties of Idioms

As all aspects of languages, idioms have their own features

and properties that characterize them and distinguish them. According to Croft and Cruse, properties of Idioms can be analyzed as follows:

### 2.1. Conventionality

The meaning of idioms cannot be predicted from knowledge of the independent conventions that determine the use of their constituents when they appear in isolation from one another.

### 2.2. Inflexibility

Idioms typically appear only in a limited number of syntactic frames or constructions. To illustrate, here are some examples taken from their book. *The breeze was shot, the breeze is easy to shoot with him? Whose eyes was the wool pulled over? What ate Harry?* Someone has cooked my goose.

### 2.3. Figuration

Most idioms are known of being metaphorical. They are not straightforward and usually carry a different connotation between their layers. For instance, the idiom *take the bull by the horns* holds a metaphor. Also, metonymies, which are words or phrases that are used to stand in for another word and sometimes a metonymy is chosen because it is a well-known characteristic of the word, can be found in some idioms such as *lend your ears* and *she is counting heads*. In addition, hyperboles are presented in *not worth the paper it's printed on*. Sometimes, however, it's difficult to put a finger on the exact figure of the idiom, for example, *he kicked the bucket*.

### 2.4. Proverbiality

Idioms are typically used to describe a recurrent situation of particular social interest. For example, *spill the bean* which means speak. This idiom is equal in meaning with *let the cat out of the bag*.

### 2.5. Informality

In every language, there are different levels of formality style used in the written or spoken forms. Levels of informality are ranging between the informal to the colloquial and the most slang words. Idioms, like any part of a language, are associated with informal or colloquial registers. To illustrate, the idiom *a knuckle sandwich* is an informal idiom. If you give someone a knuckle sandwich, you punch them. Same as the case with the idiom *having egg on someone's face*.

### 2.6. Affect

Idioms are typically used to imply a certain evaluation or affective stance toward the things they denote. "A language doesn't ordinarily use idioms to describe situations that are regarded neutrally—buying tickets, reading a book—

although of course one could imagine a community in which such activities were sufficiently charged with social meaning to be worthy of idiomatic reference". NB: "Idioms are not after all a linguistically natural kind, in the sense of being candidates for a category of universal grammar, and for theoretical purposes, the category can be defined in different ways for diverse purposes" (p. 494)

### 3. Stories and Cultures Behind Some Idioms

History, mostly, decides the nature of a nation. This history is formed throughout years by the people themselves. Hence, they will be affected by it for decades and decades. That is, if an incident of heroism, for instance, takes place in a certain generation, that incident will be an example to be followed by the rest of coming generations to the extent that it might become a part of its history. These incidents will, later on, be referred to as idioms. They will be the story behind the idioms. The origins where the idioms were stemmed.

Every language involves a complex system of idioms and expressions. Most of bilingual translators find it quite challenging to translate them taking into consideration the cultural background and the story behind them. Each country has its own history and cultures that distinguish it from others. Thousands of years ago, many historical, critical, sarcastic, educational, and moral stories took place. People of that time used to say a phrase or a line about these events. Since then, these phrases and expressions were used in the countries they were stemmed from until now. Therefore, using an idiom is confined to a certain situation. They are not used randomly in any place.

In 1604, Shakespeare used a line in his play '*Othello*' (Act 1, scene ii), when Desdemona confessed, "*I dote upon his very absence.*" Also, James Howell, in '*Familiar Letters*' in 1650 said: "*Distance sometimes endears friendship, and absence sweetened it.*" These were the stories behind the idiom *absence makes the heart grow fonder* which means missing the loved ones when they are away. There are other references to this idiom in literature, but it was originally the first line of an anonymous poem which appeared in Davison's '*Poetical Rhapsody*' in 1602.

Moreover, in ancient times, criminals who are sentenced to death used to be hanged by a rope while they are standing on a bucket. The bucket was then kicked, thus, the criminal will be hanging until he dies. However, there is another reference to the idiom *kick the bucket*. In England, the word *bucket* also meant a *beam* or *yoke* used to hang or carry things. When people hung animals up on a wooden frame to slaughter them, the frame was called a bucket. The animals would kick

and struggle to death. That is why this idiom means *to die*.

As for the idiom *Back to square one*, which has an equivalent in Arabic that is *going back to zero point*, which means to go back to the starting point, several different possible histories of this curious idiom exist. Though, only one from 1952 seems to be the most likely. *Snakes and Ladders*, known as *Chutes and Ladders* in the United States, may not have sent unlucky players straight to the first square. But this did not stop an economic journal article from wielding it as a metaphor for having to start over from the very beginning.

The famous idiom *it is raining cats and dogs* holds a story behind it as well. The story took place in England. It narrates that in old England, the roads were not paved. There were big holes all over the roads. Many cats and dogs were running around loose at these days. During heavy rainstorm days, these holes would be filled with water, and the cats and dogs would fall into them. That is where the idiom *it is raining cats and dogs* came from.

To elaborate more on the stories of idioms, here is another example. When something suspicious and strange happens, people would say *something is fishy here*. That is something is doubtful. The story behind it is that it was known that some fishermen have had a reputation of dishonesty or bragging with things that did not happen. They would stretch the truth and say: "a big fish got away", but they did not catch any.

Therefore, in order for bilingual translators to get the exact meaning of the idiom before translating, they should go back to its origins and find out the reason behind it. Thus, providing a proper translation will be easier.

Here are some funny idioms with their stories derived from *Reader's Digest* website.

**Fly off the handle:** In the days before mass merchandising, poorly fastened axe heads would fly off while they were in use. The result was dangerous; hence why the phrase is used to describe risky behavior with unpredictable results.

**Steal someone's thunder:** In the early 1700s, English dramatist John Dennis invented a device that imitated the sound of thunder for a play he was working on. The play flopped. Soon after, Dennis noted that another play in the same theater was using his sound-effects device. He angrily exclaimed, "That is my thunder, by God; the villains will play my thunder, but not my play." The story got around London, and the phrase was born.

**Chew the fat:** Originally a sailor's term this phrase refers to the days before refrigeration when ships carried food that wouldn't spoil. One of them was salted pork skin, which consisted largely of fat. Sailors would only eat it if all other food was gone rotten and they often complained as they did. This idle chatter became known as "chewing the fat."

## 4. Typology of Idioms

Idioms in general have different categories and sub-categories that were recognized in many approaches. They, for example, may share the same meanings as implied by words, have different meanings from those of the composed words, or partly have the same meanings with some of the words forming the idioms. Among these approaches are the one of Fernando's typology and Gazala's approach. In 1996, Fernando suggested three sub-classes for idioms. They are: pure idioms, semi-idioms, and literal idioms. As for Gazala, idioms are categorized to direct, indirect, and different idioms.

### 4.1. Fernando's Scale

#### 4.1.1. Pure Idioms

Regarding idioms sub-classification and because idioms are like mirrors that reflect cultural images of a country, a translator should be fully aware of the importance of conveying the same impression of the source language on the readership. Fernando has proposed the typology for idioms in 1996 by distinguishing three sub-classes of idioms. First, pure idioms. She has defined pure idiom as some kind of "conventionalized" phrases that cannot be translated literally. Pure idioms are always non literal, however they may be either invariable or may have little variation.

Pure idioms are "nominations whose semantic unity limits or blocks together the replacement of both (or any) of the components by other words"[4]. Their separate parts are not related to the meaning they express within the whole combination. They are non-literal idioms that are difficult to decode outside a context. For example, *A word in season*. The meaning here is not related to seasons. It means that using proper words in proper situation. In Arabic, it is translated to *speak when necessary and according to the situation*.

Also, the idiom *spill the beans* which means to tell people secret information is pure because the meaning is not related to the word *beans*.

Moreover, Fernando [5] has stated that these three types are structurally divided into two: invariant idioms and idioms with restricted variance. In the former one, the parts of the idiom are never changed lexical, semantic, and stylistic wise. However, in the case of the latter type, some parts of the idiom are changeable. To give an example, the idiom *smell a rat* is an invariant idiom whereas *get cold feet* is of a restricted variance in the sense that the verb *get* can be replaced with *have*.

#### 4.1.2. Semi-idioms

Semi-idioms are said to have one or more literal constituents

and one with non-literal sub sense. Therefore, this type of idioms is considered partially opaque [7]. For example, *foot the bill* which means *pay* is semi-idiom. Also, the meaning of the idiom *to have a bee in one's bonnet* is to be continually occupied with, or obsessed by, one idea or thing.

Idioms are set of vocabulary or components that work together to give a certain meaning. They cannot be separated and they have hidden meanings. Nevertheless, semi-idioms differ from others in that one of its lexical elements have a literal contribution in deciding the meaning.

In this type of idioms, the idiom has two elements. The literal and non-literal. One lexical component used literally and the other figuratively. For example, *promise the moon*. The word *promise* here is used literally while *moon* here means something impossible. Another example, *foot the bill*. The word *foot* is used figuratively which means *pay* and the word *bill* has a literal meaning in this idiom.

#### 4.1.3. Literal Idioms

Literal idioms are considered to be transparent as they can be translated on the basis of their parts. For example, *to shed crocodile tears* is translated literally. They are the easiest semantic wise. The meaning is clear and direct in these idioms. For translators, this type is easy to transfer to the target language since there are no hidden meanings in them. In the former two types, translators should have a cultural knowledge in order to be able to analyze pure idioms and semi-literal ones. However, this type is less complex. It is understood even if the readership is not familiar with the culture of the TL. For instance, the idiom *the lesser of two evils* is translated directly as it is in English. It does not contain any hidden meanings. In Arabic the literal equivalent idiom is a literal idiom.

### 4.2. Gazala's Scale

#### 4.2.1. Direct Idioms

According to Gazala [6], an idiom is "a fixed phrase whose form is usually unchangeable, and whose meaning is always the same, inflexible, metaphorical and indirect." direct idioms are called 'direct' because they are translated directly into Arabic with the exact same words. They are clear, straightforward, and can be easily rendered into the target language. The words used in a direct idiom, however, don't mean the senses of them. They have a hidden meaning beyond the words. This type of idioms is known of being the easiest among all for they have direct equivalents in Arabic which makes the translators' job easier. To give an example, *our dear aunt is at death's door*. Here, death's door refer to being close to death in the sense that a person is being too sick or too old and so on. The same expression is used in Arabic. Therefore, this type of idioms are translated directly



but understood indirectly. Another example is the idiom *on the tip of someone's tongue*. This idiom doesn't actually mean the superficial primary meaning of its word. However, they will be translated as they are. Something being *on the tip of someone's tongue* means they were about to say them.

#### 4.2.2. Indirect Idioms

Unlike the previously mentioned idioms, this type of idioms are not direct in both translation and meaning. For the students of translation, this type is problematic since they cannot use the primary meaning in translation. Separating the words forming these idioms is not a solution as well for they don't mean what they say. Therefore, in translating this type, translators should get themselves involved in the history of idioms of both languages to be familiar with the equivalents. It is also suggested that the translators use specialized idioms dictionaries to find the intended meanings. Some of which are Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms, Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms, and the Wordsworth Dictionary of Idioms.

Moreover, talking to native speakers and discussing these idioms with them might lead to a satisfactory result. As an illustration, the idiom *second hand* is used to say that something is not new. However, the direct meanings of the words refer to the human organ; hand; which is not related to the idiom. Translators must, therefore, take into consideration the lexical differences between languages for they don't convey the meaning behind the indirect idioms. As a strategy of overcoming this problem, translators might try to translate the idiom literally to confirm that it doesn't have an equivalent with these words in the target language. Then refer back to the context and understand it in order to absorb the message of the idiom. In the idiom *someone is a big shot*, for instance, translators must understand the context where this idiom appears to be able to give an acceptable translation. Being a big shot means of a great importance, notable, well-known and so on.

#### 4.2.3. Different Idioms

This type of idioms can be considered as the most difficult translation-wise. If the translators are not acquainted with the correspondence of the different idioms, their mission might get harder in translating due to the lack of similarity between the words and the sense of this type of idioms. That is to say that none of the lexical parts are related to the collective meaning of the idiom nor to the words of the equivalent. Each word forming the idiom has a meaning that is divergent from its first meaning. Yet, the words all together provide one implication. In English, for instance, the idiom *one man's meat is another man's poison* implies that when a person faces a hard time, another will be benefiting from the situation. Consequently, it can be said that the lexical items

and the meanings are not interconnected. To clarify, different idioms are called so because they have nothing in common with their meanings. The idiom *a stitch in time saves nine* means that a timely effort will prevent more work later. Accordingly, the number *nine* and the word *stitch* are not associated with the sense.

## 5. Difficulties in the Translation of Idioms

According to Liu [7], "One major stumbling block in understanding the nature of and make use of this understanding in the teaching of foreign languages is that they are regarded as linguistic expressions that are independent of any conceptual system and that they are isolated from each other at the conceptual level"

AL Mubarak [1] study has found the following:

Newmark (1988) has mentioned that in rendering idioms into idiomatic language, it is especially hard to match the meaning with its equivalent occurrence. He also stated that the principle issues a translator encounters are not syntactic, but rather lexical, i.e. words, collocations, and settled phrases or idioms. Moreover, Baker [3] claimed that the major challenges that idiomatic and settled expressions discompose in translation are related to two main fields: the capacity to identify and to translate an idiom appropriately, as well as the complications in translating several aspects of meaning that an idiom or a fixed expression carries into the target language. Additionally, Mollanazar pointed out clearly that the initial step in rendering idioms is to identify them. Thus, the pitfall for translators is to decipher the idioms accurately. Besides, word-for-word translation for idioms is often nonsense or even, sometimes, interesting. Translation is not an easy job, especially the translation of idioms because they are linked to the culture, history, and background of a specific place there for they are the most difficult part to render. However, it is important to know that an idiom usually is a phrase having a literal meaning which then started to be used in a figurative way. In other words, idioms, originally, belong to a story. They were said because of an incident. However, later on, they became a crucial part of a certain culture and are used in similar situations. Idioms, therefore, create such a challenge for both foreign learners of English and translators. Translators should have a good background of idioms, and what they represent as well as possessing a cultural knowledge in order to decode and translate idioms accurately.

Difficulties of translating idioms are increasing to a very high rate especially to bilingual translators with no cultural background. Translating idioms is a sensitive case because it largely depends on the history and cultures. The lack of

awareness of traditions, norms, history of other countries may lead to a weak translation where the idiom loses its meaning. After all, precise translations demand professional translators. So, this study will help to a great extent in providing methods and strategies on how translators can overcome these problems.

Difficulties of translating idioms vary according to the level of the translator. Nevertheless, they can be branched into three major ones. Idioms with no equivalents, idioms with multi meanings, and cultural diversity.

### 5.1. Non-equivalence in Translation

When a translator recognizes the hidden meaning of the idiom or the fixed expression, the second part comes which is deciding how to translate it. Main difficulties may lie in the fact that some idioms may not have an equivalent in the target language (TL). Languages may express, or not express meanings in similar ways. Some languages may express the meaning using one word, one phrase, or a fixed idiom.

According to Baker [3], non-equivalence might be at the micro level or macro level. The idiom or the fixed expression may be 'lexicalized' in the language i.e. being a term or vocabulary used in the language. Hence, speakers of that language use that idiom without explaining what its individual words mean. However, translators may not find an equivalent word in the target language (TL), therefore, they express it at the macro level. For example, using *Christmas* in idioms as in *to cancel someone's Christmas* which means to kill someone. Arabic, for instance, does not have the *Christmas* tradition, so translators would express the meaning and explain it using more than one word.

### 5.2. Cultural Problems

Cultures play a critical role in translating idioms. There are certain idioms that are used in some countries only because they have a cultural origins in that place. The culture-specific idioms may not be understandable outside a context, therefore, translators should have a former knowledge on what they are about to translate. For example, *to carry coals to Newcastle* which means to do what was done before, is not used with the same words in other cultures because the Newcastle is placed in England. So, people in France, for example, would say *to carry water to the river* because they do not have the Newcastle and in Arab cultures it would be selling waters in water land.

Moreover, saying *as white as snow* is replaced with *white as cotton or milk* in Arabic because it is not familiar with the snow in Arab countries. Another cultural differences between English and Arabic cultures, is the story of Romeo and Juliette which is translated as *Gais and Layla*, known for

being faithful couple in deep love. So, translators should pay attention to the culture behind the idioms before translating.

Also, the Arabic expression *to cut my right hand* is a phrase used to refer that a certain thing is impossible to happen. However in American culture it is replaced with the expression *pigs might fly*. According to Kishtainy, Egypt's Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal Amin, was horrified to see President Nasser ordering a tattoo artist to print on his right arm the names of all territories seized by Israel like Sinai, Gaza, Sharm al-Shaykh, Jerusalem, the Golan Heights

'Why are you doing this?'

'Lest I should forget them'

'But why tattooed? What will you do if we get them back?'

'If we get them back, I'll cut off my right arm.' (Cited in Baker, 1992, p. 157).

In the former example the idiom was used in a humor way. However, only the speakers of the language may find it funny.

The great gap between western and oriental cultures makes idioms translation rather difficult. Summer in West, for instance, is the season of warmth, going outdoors, and being closer with people. However, in Arab countries, it is the hottest season during which most people may not feel comfortable to practice their activities. Thus, the expression *summer's day* as in *shall I compare thee to a summer's day* will be changed in Arabic into *spring's day* in order to convey the same message.

### 5.3. Expressions with Two Meanings

Another problematic issue facing the translator in this regard is when an expression is having two meanings, one of which is literal, and the other is idiomatic. "An idiom may be used in the source text in both its literal and idiomatic senses at the same time" (idem). Accordingly, translators must shed lights not only on the form, but on the sense as well "Unless the target-language idiom corresponds to the source-language idiom both in form and in meaning, the play on idiom can't be successfully reproduced in the target text" (idem).

This happens most often when the idiomatic expression is based on a physical image. This is usually found in idioms where parts of the body are involved. For example, the idiom *a slap on the face* has two meanings. The first is literal, whereas the second is idiomatic, that is a sudden and unexpected rejection, defeat, or disappointment.

## 6. Translation Strategies of Idioms

Many approaches and writers have provided some general

strategies that can be applied to limit the difficulties that translators face while dealing with idioms. The most used ones are: giving equivalence, paraphrasing, and omission.

### 6.1. Equivalence

Inani argued that most English and Arabic idioms have appeared as metaphors which started to be used, bit by bit, unchanged until they have been recognized as established forms of a given language. In each culture, there is a set of these expressions and metaphors. Some of them are similar to those of other cultures that is why they are called equivalents because they have the same meanings and used in the same situations but the words of which they are composed differ. Giving the equivalence means to translate the idioms with one equivalent meaning and a suitable cultural image but not the same words as in source language.

So, regardless of grammatical, semantic, and cultural differences, the translation can be carried out easily if there is an equivalent in the TL. According to Baker [3] " this strategy of finding an idiom of similar meaning and similar form in the target language may seem to offer the ideal solution, but that is not necessarily always the case."

Some examples of giving equivalent translation is the idiom *it's raining cats and dogs*. The Arabic equivalent is it is raining heavily. Another example is *to fish in troubled water will be to fish in dirty water*.

### 6.2. Paraphrasing

This strategy involves giving a brief explanation behind the idiomatic expression being used in the ST. This is usually done when the translator faces idiomatic expressions in the SL which have no corresponding idiomatic expressions in the TL, or when he fails to find an idiomatic expression that matches the one in the SL. Paraphrasing may be considered as the most common way of translating idioms when a match cannot be found in the TL or when it seems inappropriate to use idiomatic language in the TL because of differences in stylistic preferences of the SL and TL. It may be suggested, however, that the translator is advised to apply this strategy only when he is left with no option but paraphrasing.

## 7. Conclusion

In sum, translation is a hard task, but the most difficult is dealing with idioms. This is due to the nature and structure of

the idiom and because it has a fixed form that conveys a certain meaning which makes it further harder for the translator to guess the meaning without having a background about it or about the culture where it comes from. Cultural differences dominate the translation of idioms in specific because idioms are stemmed out of specific history and norms of certain country. Translators, therefore, should be open minded and read continuously about cultural aspects so translation would be easier and clearer. The main difficulties lie in the lack of equivalence, the cultural differences, and idioms that indicate more than one meaning. However, they can be solved by either giving an equivalence, paraphrasing the meaning, or omission.

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