

TRANSLATABILITY OF IDIOMS – GETTING THE BEST OF BOTH TEXTS

Iulia-Cristina ANTONIE
University of Craiova, Romania

Abstract: The paper focuses on the use of idiomatic language as epitomizing cultural stereotypes and the problem of fidelity in literary translation. It is common knowledge that idioms are specific to every culture and may lack direct equivalents in the target language. The paper enlarges upon two main problems associated with the translatability of idioms: how to comprehend the connotation of idioms in the source language, and how to reconstruct conceptually and structurally these idioms in the target language, sometimes changing referents while conveying the same meaning and the writer's stylistic effect.

Keywords: culture-specific items; translation studies; equivalence; stereotyping; intercultural competence; idiomaticity.

1. Introduction

What is a stereotype and what do we understand by stereotyping? There is no denying that stereotyping has a long history and it is the result of economic, social, religious or politic occurrences. Stereotypes can be of thought, highlighting attitudes, prejudices or beliefs, and linguistic. They are representative for the human cognitive system whose purpose is to simplify the complex stimuli we as human beings perceive from the surrounding environment and ease their understanding. Linguistic stereotypes serve a double purpose: they convey cultural awareness and epitomize the conventional way of communicating as a native speaker. Recognition of cultural stereotypes and linguistic clichés alongside their correct use is what we define as intercultural competence. "The pernicious problem of binarism and stereotyping is shown to be one which arises when someone knows enough to contrast two cultural groups or discourse systems but remains unaware of further dimensions of contrast and commonality." (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2001: 24)

2. Idioms as linguistic stereotypes

As linguistic expressions and culture-specific units, idioms preserve the cultural heritage of the language they belong to since they carry "certain emotive connotations not expressed in the other lexical items". (Larson, 1984:142)

The ability to recognize idiomatic phrases and to use them accurately means pragmatic competence in cross-cultural communication. Their correct usage may trigger acceptance and recognition within the target language, and they become the ideal tool

for understanding cultures and sharing languages. The widespread use of idiomatic expressions makes their understanding an essential part of successful communication, while at the same time adds grace and exactness to the language. The fact that an idiom has a different meaning from the meanings of its individual parts is what toughens its translatability and poses a challenge for the translator when trying to deliver the same message from one language to another without incurring meaning or usage changes. In Mona Baker's study *In Other Words* idioms are defined as "frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components". (1992:67)

She also delivers five requirements for linguistic structures to be considered as idioms:

- impossibility of changing the order of the words within any given idiom (for instance the idiom *to go from rags to riches* cannot be used as *to go from riches to rags*).
- a fixed structure which means that no extra words may be added (for example the idiom *to pass with flying colours* cannot be used as *to pass with flying bright colours*).
- replacement of the constituents with synonyms is not possible (for example the idiom *to go from rags to riches* cannot be used as *to go from riches to rags*).
- words representing the constituents of any given idiom cannot be omitted (for example the idiom *once in a blue moon* becomes unusable as *once in a moon*).
- the grammar structure of an idiom cannot be modified (for example the idiom *ring a bell* loses its idiomatic meaning if used with a passive form such as *the bell is rung*).

Opaqueness of idioms ranges from full transparency to being completely indecipherable. Therefore, it is important to make a clear distinction between idioms and collocations as well as idioms and metaphors.

2.1. Idioms vs. Collocations

Combinations of words bearing a different meaning when used together are known as idioms, whereas in collocations words retain their meanings. It is their so-called illogical nature or lack of discernible relation between their linguistic meanings and idiomatic meanings what sets idioms apart from other fixed expressions. Hence the definition of idioms as constructions of words whose meanings cannot be derived from its constituents. The utterance of a familiar idiom leads to the retrieval of its meaning from memory, a process like that of a familiar word. For idioms, the relation between the literal and the idiomatic meaning can be opaque as in *kick the bucket* or *pop the clogs*. Their meaning is the same *to die*, but nobody knows how they have come to mean what they do. At the same time the relation between the literal and the idiomatic meaning can be transparent as in *break the ice* for which the literal meaning of the work *break* is an indicator of the idiomatic meaning. (Glucksberg, 2001: 68-69)

Patterns of occurrence for collocations include adjective + noun, verb + noun, noun + verb and noun + noun. The question that arises is how do people understand language that is intended figuratively used, since the intended meaning does not coincide with the literal meaning? A traditional approach of figurative language exemplified in psychological, linguistics and philosophical research sees it as involving the same kind of semantic rules that are used for literal language.

2.2. Idioms vs. Metaphors

Metaphors have come to mean different things to different people; thus, a definition represents a challenge. Two major senses of the term are illustrated in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1996). The first sense defines metaphor as a type of language: "A figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable; an instance of this [is] a metaphorical expression." A second definition identifies metaphor as a form of conceptual representation: "A thing considered as representative of some other (usually abstract) thing: A symbol." Research studies carried out in linguistics, philosophy and psychology focus precisely on these two senses of metaphors: a means for linguistic expression and communication and a form of conceptual representation and symbolization. In literary studies metaphors are also addressed in two different ways: as poetic devices and as symbols. A metaphor embodies a figure of speech in which words or expressions are used to render a meaning different from the literal connotation. Let us consider the utterance *I'll make you eat your words* whose meaning is patently metaphorical. In some other cases the metaphorical connotation is far from being straightforward and its understanding may differ. The metaphor *a lifetime is a day* can be interpreted in many ways, depending on what a day is taken to represent. Glucksberg and McGlone (1999: 78) give two elucidations: on one hand, a day may be perceived as a rather short period, therefore the allegory may point at the idea that life is short. On the other hand, a day could also represent the phases of a cycle of existence in which morning represents birth or childhood, noon represent maturity, afternoon represent old age and night demise. Metaphors are one of the core bases of idioms and therefore one of the core features of idioms given their conventionality. The idiom *rob Peter to pay Paul* refers to a short term ineffective type of borrowing and it acts as a metaphor by categorizing its referent and using it as a symbol for a whole ray of actions.

2.3. Features and classification of idioms

Syntactically, idioms can be flexible, for example they may be used both with an active and a passive form (e.g., *Who let the cat out of the bag? It was let by Peter.*) They can be internally modified, for example instead of saying *Peter did not spill the beans*, we can say *Peter did not spill a single bean*. Is the meaning of an idiom dependable upon its syntactic form? Can it be open to syntactic analysis and transformation? Considering that the constituents of an idiom have no meaning at all would also mean that idioms lack syntactic flexibility. However, there are idioms fully syntactically flexible. Let us consider the example of *call the shots* (*to make decisions, to decide what needs to be done*). It can be used with different tenses *Tom called the shots yesterday* or *Tom will call the shots soon*, different number *Tom called two shots at our last meeting* or adverbial modification *He reluctantly called the shots*.

Idioms also vary in predictability, meaning the way in which they can be recognized. An idiom such as *yummy, yummy, yummy* becomes clear as soon as the first *yummy* is uttered, whereas an idiom such as *like a dog with two tails* cannot be predicted until the word *tails* is heard.

A classification of idioms according to the degree of compositionality and semantic transparency has been made by Glucksberg (2001,73-76). Compositionality refers to what extent meaning of an idiom stems from the meanings of its constituents and becomes comprehensible for the reader. Idioms whose meaning cannot be extrapolated from the meaning of their constituents are syntactically non-analysable, semantically non-compositional and opaque. In a way they are like long words with an arbitrarily assigned meaning. On the other hand, there are idioms which behave almost like metaphors by epitomizing a whole class of actions, occurrences, or circumstances, such as *skate on thin ice*. For this type of idioms, the literal meaning is related to their idiomatic meaning. Syntactically they are variable and analysable (*I decided not to skate on thin ice and accept the more secure offer instead*), semantic variations are accepted (*Father take risks? Not him, he would only skate on solid ice.*) and their idiomatic meaning is transparent if one knows the literal referent.

- *non-compositional idioms* whose meaning is not related to the meaning of their constituents and it therefore must be retrieved from memory, such as *spick and span* or *up and running*. None of the components map onto the idiomatic meaning of neat and clean, respectively of functional. Comprehension becomes more difficult for non-compositional idioms, given that their idiomatic and linguistic meaning might conflict.
- *partially compositional* also called *compositional-opaque* idioms which display some connection between their constituents and their idiomatic meaning. For instance, the idiom *bite the dust* does not point to the literal meaning of the verb *to die*, but it permits discourse variations as it can be used in the present, past, or future tense *Greg bit the dust last month* or with modal auxiliary verbs *Greg might bite the dust*. Given that an idiom is compositional, it can still be opaque or transparent. For compositional-opaque idioms there may not be any kind of connection between the idiomatic meaning and the meaning of its constituents, but the meaning of individual words can nevertheless be subject to interpretation and use.
- *compositional-transparent* idioms demonstrate clear connections between the meaning of the idiom and that of its constituents. In the case of the idiom *break the ice* the verb *break* points at the idiomatic meaning of roughly changing a tensed situation. Likewise for the idiom *spill the beans* the verb *spill* indicates the act of revealing.
- *Quasi-metaphorical* idioms convey meaning by means of their allusional content. In a way these idioms are linked to a stereotype of an entire category of people, events, situations or actions and use the same communicative strategy as do metaphors. In idioms such as *the detective is a shark*, the word *shark* alludes to ideal examples of their metaphorical category and simultaneously serves as a representative for that category.

We can conclude by stating that idiomatic expressions are multiple words expressions which show a strong semantic shift that its constituents undergo, in the way that their meaning is not even remotely connected with the meaning of their founding words. Semantically, idiomatic expressions are considered fixed because their figurative meaning does not allow replacement of their constituents. For example, the idiom *hit the road* cannot be replaced by *hit the street*. Replacement of their constituents may change the figurative meaning into a literal meaning. There are two questions that have remained unsettled in psycholinguistic research: *How do people process the figurative meaning of*

an idiom and store it in the lexical memory? How is the figurative meaning of an idiom assembled? Seminal studies belonging to Cacciari & Tabossi 1988; Gibbs Jr. 1992; Cacciari & Glucksberg 1994 focused on a non-compositional representation which assumed that the figurative meaning of an idiom is stored as a distinct entry in the mental lexicon. More recent models focus on the idea that idioms are equally compositional and unitary, given that idioms are composed of constituents whose meaning becomes activated to a certain degree and that at the same time, each idiom possess its own lexical entry storing its overall meaning.

3. Culture-specific items as cultural stereotypes

Culture-specific items are highly significant in Translation Studies because in the target language the translator may find either that they do not exist or, they serve different functions and have different connotations. Their classification is a valuable implement in facilitating the process of translation and choosing the most effective strategy for translation. Given that they transfer the customs and traditions of the people of the source language to the target language, their translation is of utmost importance. Popular culture, including traditions, customs, practices, beliefs, stereotypes and even prejudices, represents the identity of a nation. "Culture is not a material phenomenon, it does not consist of things, people, behaviour or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the form of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and interpreting them." (Goodenough, 1964:36)

Cultural exchange is a hard nut to crack when dealing with translation because even when there are no linguistic voids between two cultures, culture-specific items may not carry the same significance or have the same referents. Rather than being a process in which information is transferred completely, it is one based on a certain degree of tolerance or negotiated transmission. Nevertheless, even though cultural differences may be a deterrent in the process of translation, the information carried by certain elements can still be decoded and rendered in the target language. Hence, the formation of a travelling concept, the *culturème* and the significance of this term in the theory of the linguistic transfer.

Little theorized before the 1980s, the concept is scrutinized by Oksaar in 1988 in his study *Kulturemtheorie* as a minimum linguistic unit bearing cultural information. It is seen as a key concept whose study is linked to the cultural corpora, with a fundamental role in intercultural communication. In English, culture-specific items are defined by Aixela as cultural elements specific to the source language, including customs, opinions, objects perceived as foreign elements in the target language "usually expressed in a text by means of objects and of systems of classification and measurement whose use is restricted to the source culture, or by means of the transcription of opinions and description of habits equally alien to the receiving culture." (Aixela, 1996: 56)

Translatability of culture-specific items and the tactic chosen for this are governed by the purpose that they serve in the source text, by that we mean whether they are key elements or complementary ones, and the degree to which they are liable to enter a process of intercultural adjustment or evolution. A documented opinion in the study of the translation of culture specific-items belongs to Lungu-Badea (2004). She outlines that the status-quo of a *culturème* is linked to the intention of the author, so the translator's task implies a double effort: identification and loyal transference, with a clear view to reconstructing the spiritual, intellectual, cultural, and social atmosphere of the

original text. Otherwise, any translation belonging to a different era would be reduced to a withered summary without meaning or content. The same linguist presents three features of this concept:

- monoculturalism – it is a definitory element of a single culture in which it can produce a certain effect. This effect becomes less intense when replicated in the target language because it is influenced by the degree of comprehension of the source culture.
- relativity- it is a concept directly influenced by the subjectivity of the writer, the translator's and the knowledge and expectation of the readership.
- translational autonomy- it is not translation-sensitive since it is a concept that can easily transcend the constraints of translation.

Mainstream literature provides various classifications of culture-specific items according to different criteria. The most noticeable ones to be analysed as it follows belong to Newmark (1988), Lungu-Badea (2004) and Vilceanu (2007).

Following the same criteria as Nida in 1964, Newmark offers a five-category classification of culture-specific items:

- cultural elements (such as cookery, clothes, architecture, etc.);
- ecological elements (such as the flora, fauna, climatic specificities);
- socio-economic elements;
- administrative/religious/artistic and political structures;
- customs and gestures.

The Romanian researcher in the field of linguistics, Georgiana-Lungu Badea (2004:219) proposes a categorization of culture-specific items according to four different criteria, following dire years of study in this direction, as it follows. The examples in English are provided by Vilceanu (2007:124-125).

- Formally, we can distinguish between:
 1. simple culture-specific items (such as common nouns, for example *pudding*, *lord*, *porridge*, or proper nouns, for example *Scrooge*, *Macbeth*)
 2. compound culture-specific items (*white collar-functionar*)
- Functionally, we can distinguish between:
 1. historical culture-specific items (*five o'clock tea*, *To be or not to be*, *What's in a name?*)
 2. current culture-specific items (*baby-sitter*, *politically correct language*)
- According to the source text, we can distinguish between:
 1. literal culture-specific items, which may be found in poems, prose, or drama - this type was added by Vilceanu (2007:125) as a specificity of English literature (for example *To be or not to be? - Hamlet* by *Shakespeare*)
 2. nonliteral culture-specific items
 3. common to both literal and nonliteral texts
- Geographically, we can distinguish between:
 1. culture-specific items belonging to the area they come from
 2. foreign culture-specific items

Vilceanu (2007:126-127) makes a different classification of culture-specific items on the grounds of the degree of their sensitivity to translation. Thus, she distinguishes between:

- culture-specific items with a high degree of resistance to transfer that require the intervention of the translator to ease the understanding of the text by making further references. Perhaps the best example is provided by the translation of religious

elements which are difficult to understand if they have no referent in the target language.

“Those textually actualized items whose functions and connotations in a source text involve translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the non-existence of the referred item or of its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text”. (Aixela, 1996: 56)

- culture-specific items that may appear as neutral but are transferred into the translation. A well-chosen example is how American and European culture have different items to refer to the beginning of a school year. The former uses a red apple, whereas the latter uses a bouquet of flowers.
- culture-specific items that are neutral but become cultural elements in certain contexts. For example, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde uses the term *modern culture* which may appear neutral. However, a French translator Hardin (1996) states that Oscar Wilde alludes to the Victorian era when Shakespeare's work was subject to censorship.

4. Dealing with linguistic and cultural stereotypes in literary translation - correspondence vs. equivalence

Before the 20th century, Translation Studies was not considered a science, but rather a collateral activity in the field of philology, mainly targeting literary texts. At the turn of the century anthropologists suggested that language was the product of the culture it belonged, which made cultural barriers insurmountable. This position led to a clear development of Translation Studies into two different directions: literal translation and free translation. A progressive scholar who draws attention to the role of the translator is Vilceanu (2007). The translator becomes a mediator in the process of communication whose competence transcends the field of linguistics, given that an understanding and equivalence of both cultures is required. The translator is supposed to understand the intention of the author of the original text and anticipate the readership's expectations. Recurring difficulties in translation are generated by cultural exchange. On one hand, the translator faces the challenge of maintaining the spirit of the source text by transference of culture-specific items. On the other hand, the translator may neutralize these culture-specific items by equivalence with cultural references in the target language.

Equivalence in translation derives from the exposure of the translator to the source text alongside culture and it refers to the proper transfer of a message from the source language to the target language. In 1964, Nida distinguishes two types of equivalence: formal and dynamic. Further clarification is made as it follows: in the case of formal equivalence “one is concerned that the message in the receptor language should match as closely as possible the different elements in the source language.”(1964:159), whereas dynamic equivalence highlights the importance of the message transferred to the target language, which must have the same or a similar effect as the one of the original text upon its readership by stating that “the relationship between receptor and message is substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message.”(1964:159)

Baker (1992) identifies equivalence in translation at four different levels:

- lexical – the first level of equivalence established by a translator in search of the proper corresponding words.
- grammatical - the translator becomes aware of the diversity of syntactic structures in the two languages, but often conveys the message in a different form.
- textual- equivalence in translation is dependent upon three key factors: informative content, coherence, and cohesion of the text.
- pragmatic- the translator will try to render as closely as possible the intended meaning of the author of the source text.

In the same climate of opinion Nida endorses that “The fact that not all language-cultures use similar terms for corresponding positions of responsibility creates special problems for translators.” (2001:7).

Translation of figurative language is the area most likely to cause errors because of the translator’s lack of competence or skills to understand the cultural implications of a text in both source and target languages (Dejica 2008). Since the connotations of words that create idiomatic terminologies cannot be assumed from the connotations of the separate single words in isolation or from the component words as a cluster, there are difficulties in both their understanding and interpretation. Translation of idioms from one language into another is a fine skilful work which requires on one hand the translator to master the language and culture being transmitted and on the other hand the ability to deal with problems that might arise in the process of finding a proper equivalent for the idiomatic expression. Apart from the fact that each language has particular language chunks specific to it, such difficulties can also be caused by features such as geographical position, religion, philosophies and social classes of individuals. A stimulating decision-making process for translators, translation of idioms requires experience and creativity, which may be troublesome even for experienced translator who ideally have well-grounded knowledge of the target language and its cultural aspects. Therefore, there are two chief complications: how to comprehend the connotation of idioms in the source language and how to reconstruct similar expressions in the target language in such a manner that the terminologies deliver exactly the same concepts as in the first. Defining a single approach for the translating process may prove an impossible task because many idioms are culturally specific and in idiomatic language pragmatic meaning outweighs literal meaning. According to Culler (1976) languages are consistent of concepts and paradigms which differ to a great extent from those of another, therefore a comparison between languages proves that cultures identify similar social observations and following a pattern based on their own experience, tradition, and knowledge to create their own phrases. Larson (1998:17) identifies two main types of translation: form-based and connotation-based. The form-based translation attempts to follow the procedures of the source language and it is also known as literal translation, while connotation-based translation also known as idiomatic translation seeks to find a proper match for idioms and set expressions into the target language.

The current paper provides some examples of translation of idioms and collocations, having as a corpus an extract from the novel *Number 11* by Jonathan Coe and its corresponding translation into Romanian *Numărul 11 sau Mărturii despre Nebunie* by Radu Paraschivescu.

English text	Romanian Translation
<i>Following a hunch</i>	<i>Dând curs intuiției</i>
<i>His voice sank to a conspirational whisper</i>	<i>Înghiți cu greu și conchise cu o șoaptă care era mai moale, dar mai presantă ca niciodată</i>
<i>Broke into a sprint</i>	<i>Sprintă de-a binelea</i>
<i>He tailed off</i>	<i>Se întrerupse</i>
<i>Got waylaid</i>	<i>Am fost distrasă</i>
<i>She goes bonkers</i>	<i>Ea o ia razna</i>
<i>He's always getting on his high horse</i>	<i>Mereu face pe deșteptul</i>
<i>Niceties of speech</i>	<i>Vorbire manierată</i>
<i>Right in the middle of nowhere</i>	<i>Unde-a dus mutu`iapa</i>
<i>A scaredy cat</i>	<i>O pisică speriată de orice</i>

Plainly, literal translation of idiomatic expression follows two processes: understanding and expression. Basically, the translator comprehends the insides of the source language, summarizes the data it incorporates and renders everything into the target language by means of translation prototypes. For some of these expressions such as *following a hunch* or *broke into a sprint* the translation process does not undergo dramatic changes, whereas for others such as *right in the middle of nowhere* the transfer of meaning and the translation itself make usage of extensive modification to make it understandable in the target language. When coming across across an idiom whose literal meaning makes no sense, we search for a meaning in the idiom list in the target language. Bobrow and Bell's (1973) finding suggests that a literal-priority approach of understanding idioms is wrong, since when we hear idioms and we know what to expect, we get into an idiom-mood which facilitates its comprehension, making it a lot easier than if we did not know what kind of expression to expect. An overview upon the hurdles of literary translation is given below:

“One of the most difficult types of translation is the one pertaining to literature. Literary translation is the most complex field of translation due to the many specificities of a particular writer's style which fluctuates according to the topic s/he selected for his/her literary work. The constraints of translation are thus conditioned by supertext and subtext.” (Pârlog 2014: 73–75)

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that cultural embedding is at the basis of any type of text, including literary texts and the translator needs to fully develop his or her socio-cultural awareness to understand it in full compliance with linguistic particularities. I must stress that deficiency of satisfactory mastery of rendition leads to mistranslation, especially when idioms and set terminologies come into play since idioms are specific to every culture and may lack direct equivalents in the target language mostly because their meaning is not derived from the meaning of their constituent words. The two chief problems associated with translatability of idioms which are dealt with in this paper: how to grasp the connotation of idioms in the source language and how to reconstruct identical pairs of idioms in the target language while conveying the same meaning have yet to be explored. Simple recognition of an idiom is not sufficient for a translator, he/she must also be capable of deciding which equivalents are appropriate to use in the

translation, depending on genre and register. Awareness of cultural identity, mastery of communicative competence, stereotyping and the dynamics of identity within a framework of cultural growth are all skills that define a translator's work.

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