

*The Use of English Idioms in Oral Expression  
and Translation*

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**Résumé :**

*Idiomatic expressions are part of every language. They are generally used as a kind of illustration both in the written and the oral form of language. They sound like old proverbs and are most of the time used informally, though they appear here and there in the flow of ideas and events of literary works. The main difference between idioms and proverbs is that the former constitute a group of words whose meaning is not explicit even when one knows the meaning of all the words that compose the idiom. The latter, though it may at times be confused sometimes with the former, generally proposes certain behaviour, or suggests to avoid a certain misbehaviour, and, therefore, carries a moralizing message.*

**1. Definition of idioms**

*“Every language has phrases or sentences that cannot be understood literally. Even if you know the meaning of all the words in a phrase and understand the grammar completely, the meaning of the phrase may still be confusing. Many clichés, proverbs, phrasal verbs, and*

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*common sayings present this kind of problem. A phrase or sentence of this type is usually said to be idiomatic”.*<sup>1</sup>

One particular element about the idiom is that it does not mean anything when translated word for word. In other words, one has to know the existence of the idiom (i.e., to have read it or heard it) and to have a good knowledge of the culture of the people and the language in which the idiom occurs. So, the cultural element is fundamental whenever any translation of any idiom takes place. Cameliafrunza, in “Translating culture – Specific Metaphoric Expressions” states:

*“Every person is a part of culture, and at the same time, contributes to its development. Moreover, culture is made for everybody, for all the people in the world although we find it – in the same way as we find language, moulded into historical shapes that are specific to certain communities. Culture is not seen as just the things or tools man fashions to make himself more efficient in coping with this day-by-day, year-by-year problems, but as all of his attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, and values – the product of his head and heart as well as of his hands.”*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>. Antanas Klimas, Some remarks on idioms, Luthuanian Quarterly Journal of arts and sciences. Vol. 40, n°1, Spring 1994, p.1.

<sup>2</sup>. Language Specific, Rumania, 7 .11. 2005. Cameliafrunza, Translating Culture- Specific Metaphoric Expressions

## **2. Idioms in the Oral Expression Class**

Idioms and proverbs are areas of difficulties for the majority of students of foreign languages, who do not generally understand why different languages and different cultures do not share exactly the same idioms and proverbs. To put it another way, our students do not always understand why any idiom or a proverb in any target language cannot be literally translated into their native language, especially when there are some equivalent idioms and proverbs.

We know that idiomatic expressions are very often appreciated by students (especially at the intermediate level, i.e. in the second year of the English Licence) in the oral expression class. Indeed, the students most of the time try to use them in their speech production. But they often use them wrongly even when they have tried to learn them by heart, as they do not remember the exact words of the idioms or use a wrong word order.

Idiomatic expressions are generally very hard for the students to remember (and eventually to use in their attempt to communicate in the oral expression class), especially when they do not correspond to the equivalent idiomatic expressions of their mother tongue.

The mother tongue is no doubt the first tool to consider in any attempt to translate and idioms are no exception. Referring to the importance and the influence of the mother tongue when learning a foreign language and when translating from a foreign language, Allan Duff writes:

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*“We all have a mother tongue or first language. This shapes our way of thinking and to some extent our use of the foreign language (pronunciation, choice of words, tone, word order etc.). Translation helps us to understand better the influence of the one tongue on the other, and to correct errors of habit that creep in unnoticed (such as the misuse of particular words or structures). And because translation involves contrast, it enable us to explore the potential of both languages-their strengths and their weaknesses.”<sup>3</sup>*

### **3. Some English Idioms and their Translation**

Idioms can occur in literature, in listening comprehension, in reading comprehension, but they are generally the object of some oral expression teaching. Idioms can be taught by the teacher or brought into the oral expression class by the students themselves, mainly when they come across some easy ones through their readings, when they consider some to be funny, or when they manage to memorize them. So, they sometimes propose them to the teacher to show him their motivation and their taste, or decide to use them when they are asked to perform situations or role play.

But to what extent is the language teacher ready to cope with idioms, (knowing that there are so many that it is impossible to remember even some), especially when they are not part of the language module he teaches. For this reason, Jo Budden, in her article: “Proverbs and

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<sup>3</sup>. Alan Duff, Translation, Oxford University Press, p.3. Jo Budden, Proverbs and Idioms, Teaching Tips, On Line, p. 1.

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idioms” suggests that the teacher considers the following questions before introducing idioms in the classroom.

How often I actually use proverbs and idioms? Are my students going to use their English merely to communicate with native speakers?

Do my students need to be able to produce idioms and proverbs or only recognize them and understand them?

Have students asked me to teach some proverbs and idioms or am I forcing it on them because I think it will be fun?

Are my students ever likely to spend time in an English speaking country?<sup>4</sup>

Translation of some English idiomatic expressions selected, explained and translated by a second year conversation class:

1. Apple of one's eye  
(Somebody or something loved very much)
2. To have a sharp tongue  
(To speak bitterly about somebody)
3. To make somebody's hair stand on end  
(To frighten)
4. To push oneself forward  
(To draw attention to oneself)
5. Still waters run deep  
(Beware of quietness)
6. Carry a torch for someone

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<sup>4</sup> . Nedjai, F.Z. Why don't we use translation in the TEFL classroom? Expressions, n° 5, 1998, p. 87.

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(To endure the fact that someone does not return the love)

7. To let cat out of the bag

(To reveal a secret)

8. To take somebody down a peg

(To lower the pride of someone)

9. To get a grip on oneself

(To control one's behaviour)

10. To get on one's nerves

(To make someone nervous)

11. To get stuck.

(To be unable to get ahead)

12. To get even with

(To take revenge on)

13. Add fuel to the fire

(Make the problem worse)

14. Armed to the teeth

(Have the necessary weapons)

15. Bear fruit

(Produces good results)

16. Easy as pie

(Very easy)

17. Beside oneself

(Very angry)

18. Cloud nine

(Very happy)

19. Add insult to injury

(Make the problem or the situation worse)

20. Fat cat

(A very rich person)

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Translation into French:

1. Prunelles des yeux
2. Avoir la langue de vipère
3. Dresser les cheveux sur la tête
4. Se faire remarquer
5. Il faut se méfier de l'eau qui dort
6. Tenir la chandelle
7. Divulguer un secret
8. Rabaisser l'orgueil de quelqu'un
9. Se contrôler
10. Taper sur les nerfs
11. Etre coincé
12. Se venger de
13. Jeter de l'huile sur le feu.
14. Armé jusqu'au dents.
15. Porter ses fruits
16. Facile comme de l'eau.
17. Etre hors de soi
18. Etre aux anges
19. Remuer le couteau dans la plaie
20. Grosse tête

### **4. Idioms and Culture**

Of course translating easy idiomatic expressions as the ones listed above is not only an easy task but a motivating activity. As one may notice, the students selected the easiest idioms available in English, and they had no problem with providing their translation into French, or rather their equivalents which are also very easy to find and memorize.

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What was surprising is that the students felt the need for translating or finding the corresponding idioms in their mother tongue, i.e., Algerian Arabic. The translation into Algerian Arabic was perceived by the bulk of the students as a “game”. They became very interested in the activity as their interest was sustained mainly because of the humour that this activity provided.

To put it another way, the students welcomed the opportunity to translate from English into Algerian Arabic and to take advantage of the fun that it all entailed. (That was a first experience in an oral expression class!)

Broadly speaking, the use of Algerian Arabic (which used to be forbidden in the foreign language class) contributed to create a humorous atmosphere in a relaxing climate shared by all the students. In this respect, Nedjai, F. Z. states:

*“As far as humour is concerned, Arabic is the language preferred to create a more friendly and homely atmosphere. It is worth underlining that the use of Arabic in this context is not directly linked to translation itself but is a deliberate choice followed by some teachers to rub off, for a short while, the gap between the teacher and the learner, since both of them belong to the same cultural background...”*<sup>5</sup>

Idioms, like proverbs, are very difficult to translate because of the cultural dimensions and the imagery that they carry. Each language has its particular repertoire of

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<sup>5</sup> . Antanas Klimas, *ibid.*



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idioms and proverbs that have been based, historically, on practices that often lead to establish a morale. The first task in any attempt to translate idioms, is to be able to recognize them. The second task is to be able to distinguish them from any other written form of language (creative writing), i.e., to be able to recognize idiomatic from non-idiomatic language. The third task is to look for the corresponding idiom in the language into which the translation is made. When the same idiom exists in both the source and the target language, translation becomes an easy task and even a pleasant activity.

The selected list of idioms below gives examples of idioms that can be easily understood by our students in oral expression and that can be more or less adequately used in their oral productions as they correspond to the French idioms.

1. A little bird told me.  
(I will not tell you).
2. A bed of roses.  
(A very good situation)
3. Back to square one.  
(Back to the beginning again)
4. Crocodile tears.  
(Useless tears)
5. Get off on the wrong foot.  
(Start something very badly)
6. Hold your horses.  
(Try to be patient)
7. Know the ropes.  
(Know how things work)

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8. Not worth the candle.  
(Worthless)
9. Sacred cow.  
(Cannot be criticized)
- He is all heart.  
(He is generous).
11. As neat as a new pin.  
(Very clean and nice)
12. Get your feet wet.  
(Give it a try)

The following list gives the corresponding idioms in French:

1. Mon petit doigt m'a dit.
2. Un tapis rouge.
3. Retour à la case de départ.
4. Des larmes de crocodile.
5. Se lever du pied gauche.
6. Prendre son mal en patience.
7. Avoir les tuyaux.
8. Ne vaut pas un sou.
9. C'est sacré.
10. Avoir le cœur sur la main.
11. Tiré à quatre épingles.
12. Se jeter à l'eau.

Idioms 3, 4, and 5, are the equivalent idioms in French. They provide a similar imagery and share almost the same semantic and syntactic features.

## 5. Methodology

Teaching idioms and proverbs in a foreign language obviously requires a methodology that helps the students grasp the meaning, be able to use them adequately and find situations where they can apply them correctly. Jo Budden (ibid.) suggests to bear in mind the following “tips” when dealing with idiomatic expressions and proverbs:

Deal with proverbs and idioms as when they crop up in their context such as in reading and listening tasks or when you use one naturally in class.

Group the sayings by topic and introduce in conjunction with other activities around the topic...

Use visuals and pictures to help learners remember them.

Do some matching activities. For example, give students five proverbs that have been cut in half and get them to match them up.

Ask students if any proverb translate directly into their own language...

Put them into context. Try to use situations when people actually use the expressions and get students to create dialogues or role-play.

Explain to the students that it may be more useful to understand the expressions when they hear them than to be able to produce them.<sup>6</sup>

Teaching and learning idioms is generally a rewarding experience, especially in the oral expression class. The activity often leads to interesting debates in

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<sup>6</sup> . Jo Budden, Ibid., p. 2.

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terms of language and culture. Besides, it creates, as already mentioned, a pleasant and humorous atmosphere that invites all the students to participate. But, as for any other classroom activity, the teacher has to be careful not to use too many idioms, to avoid decreasing the students' motivation and participation. The "recipe" is to use only a few idioms at one time, in their context, and in association with other classroom activities. "The recipe" is also to use them for a very short period of time, and only occasionally.

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