

Mapping the idiomatic terrain: In search of an association between translation and comprehension strategies

رسم خريطة التعابير الاصطلاحية: نحو البحث عن الارتباط بين الترجمة واستراتيجيات الفهم

Fouad BOULKROUN*

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Abstract:

Idiomatic expressions are a defining characteristic of languages and cultures. Understanding them often poses a challenge to learners, and so does translating them. The aim of the present paper is to investigate the relation between translation strategies and eventual comprehension.

Five research questions were raised along with five hypotheses. A questionnaire was administered in class to 48 Master 1 learners of English at Mila University Centre. The collected data were submitted to a *Chi-square test* in *SPSS*. A mixture of results was obtained and implications are discussed.

Keywords: Association; comprehension; idiomatic expressions; literal/cultural translation strategies.

Corresponding author: Fouad BOULKROUN, f.boulkroun@centre-univ-mila.dz

*Faculty of Letters and Languages, University of Mila. f.boulkroun@centre-univ-mila.dz

ملخص:

التعابير الاصطلاحية هي سمة مميزة للغات والثقافات. يشكل فهمها غالبًا تحديًا للمتعلمين، وكذلك ترجمتها. الهدف من هذه الورقة البحثية هو التحقيق في العلاقة بين استراتيجيات الترجمة وفهم هاته التعابير.

تم طرح خمس أسئلة بحثية مع خمس فرضيات. وزع استبيان في الصف لـ 48 طالبًا في مرحلة الماجستير 1 في اللغة الإنجليزية بالمركز الجامعي لميلة. تم تحليل البيانات المجمعة باستخدام اختبار مربع كاي في برنامج *SPSS*. أدى التحليل إلى مزيج من النتائج وختمت الدراسة بمناقشة الدلالات.

كلمات مفتاحية: الارتباط، التعبيرات الاصطلاحية، استراتيجيات الترجمة الحرفية/الثقافية، الفهم.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a system of communication, with literal and figurative meanings. Unlike the literal meaning, the figurative connotation – which is typical of idiomatic expressions – is not evidenced by the meaning of individual words. The comprehension and translation of idioms represents a real challenge to different users, be they learners or translators. This is particularly true if the user's native language and the target language are of radically distinct cultural background.

Different users approach idiomatic expressions differently. Two such approaches are the literal and the cultural. Attempting to understand or translate idioms literally is more often than not misleading because their meaning does not always reside in the

meaning of the constituent elements. Translating them culturally seems to be a wiser approach for comprehension to be due.

Given the intricate reality of idiomatic expressions across languages, an account of them is very much in order. Therefore, for the purposes of the present paper, a brief sketch of some definitions of idioms will be presented, together with their characteristics, types, and their bearing on culture. In addition, a number of the difficulties that may be met by users and the strategies employed in an attempt to understand or translate them will be discussed. Such an account is likely to equip the reader with some analytic tools that may be used when it comes to the second part of the present work, namely the field work.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Idioms

The word “idiom” is a peculiar expression in the making conforming to no conventional principle (Shaw, 1975), a fixed group of words with a special meaning different from the meanings of its constituent words (Fraser, 1970). According to Baker, “[i]dioms are frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and they often carry meaning which cannot be deduced from their individual components” (1992, p. 63). In keeping with the aforementioned, Langlotz holds that they are “*semantically opaque and structurally fixed*” (2006, p. 2).

In point of fact, there are countless definitions in the literature, for there are as many ways of putting those definitions as there are writers themselves. However, from the above definitions, one can understand that the words in a given idiom

cannot be deleted, replaced, or extended, nor can its word order or grammatical structure be changed. Besides, there is consensus that idioms are expressions whose meaning must not be deduced literally from the meaning of their constituent elements. As a matter of fact, this poses a real problem for the comprehension or translation of idiomatic expressions.

2.2 Types of Idiomatic Expressions

Idioms are differentiated in terms of their degree of idiomaticity that renders them either easily comprehensible or totally opaque. According to Moon (1998), idioms are of many types: transparent, semi-transparent, semi-opaque, and opaque.

The meaning of a *transparent idiom* is close to the literal. As such, it can be deduced from the meaning of its constituents. When it comes to the comprehension or translation of such idioms, there is no easier in comparison with the remainder of the types. Take the example of *Dwell on the past* which means thinking too much about the past that it becomes a problem.

Semi-transparent idioms are metaphorical in meaning, so the meaning of the constituent elements has little or no role in the understanding of the general meaning of the idioms in question. For instance, we have: *Don't wash your dirty laundry in public* (referring to people, especially couples, who argue in the presence of others), *To break the ice*, and idioms of the like.

As regards *semi-opaque idioms*, their figurative meaning does not relate to the meaning of the constituent elements. The idiom happens to contain two parts: one having a literal meaning, and the other denoting a figurative one. Let us take three examples: *Don't look a gift horse in the mouth* (this means

that if you are given something, a present, you should not be too critical), *Don't judge a book by the cover*, *Devil is in the detail*.

Insofar as *opaque idioms* are concerned, their meaning does not reflect in any way that of the constituent words, and thus such expressions are the most difficult to understand or to translate. This may have to do with the cultural background whose knowledge is likely to help account for the underlying meaning, for instance, *Sail too close to the wind*.

From a different perspective, idioms can be classified otherwise. There are idioms which *violate truth conditions* like: *It's raining cats and dogs*, *Go under the hammer*; these are, therefore, easily recognisable for their being absurd, and/or ill-formed expressions at the level of their surface structure (Baker, 1992). In addition, there are *simile idioms* which should not be understood or translated while drawing upon their literal meaning (Baker, 1992); these contain either like-structures (like+noun): *Like a duck to water*, or as+adjective+as structures: *As cold as stone*, *As easy as ABC*. Clearly, simile idioms are comparative expressions which differ in the degree of predictability of word choice; that is, while some words are easily predictable in the way they combine (e.g., *As cold as ice*), others are rather unpredictable (e.g., *As mad as a hatter*) and this is true of the degree of their idiomaticity as well. *Metaphorical idioms* are characterised by their opacity and figurative meaning (see Ghazala, 2008). Here is an idiom as an example: *I've got a bone to pick with you*.

2.3 Idioms and Culture

One way of understanding idiomatic expressions is by digging into their cultural background since different cultures tend to portray different ways of life. Actually, the reverse situation is also true in that much cultural knowledge can be derived from the learning and understanding of idioms. In either case, cultural knowledge seems to be invaluable and as such an account about the defining elements of culture is very much in order.

Culture has been investigated in various disciplines, namely literature, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, philosophy. It is reasonable, therefore, to note that the concept varies in definition according to the discipline. Basically, two views of culture are worthy-noting: the humanistic and the anthropological perspectives, respectively (House, 2007). The former perspective captures the cultural heritage of a given community as regards literature, fine arts, music, etc. The latter perspective accounts for their overall way of life in terms of habits, preferences, beliefs, values, etc. Whether it be the one or the other, it is clear that in order to survive the handling of idioms one needs to be vested in the underlying cultural connotations.

Culture seems to be a whole which comprises various parts or components. Its elements can either meet the eye or be invisible. These elements happen to be looked at as an ‘iceberg’ (Brett, 2007). Above the water line are the behaviours and institutions of any society; as for values, norms, and beliefs, they are below the water line.

Minkov (2013) and others tend to agree that there are actually basic culture features characteristic of all social groups – this might explain why different languages or cultures happen to share commonalities in the use of some idiomatic expressions.

Anthropological studies carried by Haviland, Prins, McBride and Walrath (2013) hold that cultures are said to be socially learned, shared, based on symbols, integrated and dynamic. In line with this are Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein & Colby (2003) who are against static definitions of culture; they hold that cultural patterns change over time and that some cultures influence others (take the example of Algerian Arabic and how such influence is exhibited in the use of idioms of a French background).

2.4 Difficulties in Comprehending and Translating Idioms

As a matter of fact, difficulties may arise in an attempt to comprehend or translate idioms. Bortfeld states that:

Given that idioms are used in virtually every language and because surface representations of similar concepts differ across languages, these phrases pose a particularly difficult problem for language learners. (2003, p. 217)

No doubt, cultural knowledge plays a role in understanding idioms (Kecskes & Papp, 2000). Because of cultural differences, idiomatic expressions are likely to resist comprehension and translation without due knowledge of the source and the target cultures. Therefore, the wider the gap, the greater the difficulty (Yowelly & Lataiwish, 2000). According to Baker (1992), two main difficulties are the *recognition* and the appropriate

interpretation of an idiom. In effect, different types of idioms pose different degrees of difficulty; take the case, for example, of opaque idioms which are easily recognisable, or transparent idiomatic expressions which are easily interpretable.

To elaborate further, in the translation of idiomatic expressions, Baker (1992) suggests four major difficulties. These go as follows: an idiom may have no equivalent in the target language; it may have an equivalent but with a different context of use; it may be used in both its literal and idiomatic meanings in the source language, knowing that it is scarce on the ground to find in the target language idioms corresponding to those of the source language both in form and in meaning; and the convention of idiom use, the context and the frequency of use may be different. Usually, users tend to translate idiomatic expressions either literally or culturally (i.e. contextually), and in either case all of the previously mentioned instances pose a real challenge for an appropriate interpretation or translation.

2.5 Strategies for Translating Idioms

Baker (1992) suggests a number of six strategies used in the translation of idioms; however, given the scope and the purposes of the present study only three of the total are covered below – for their direct relevance.

One strategy used for the translation of idiomatic expressions is the use of an idiom of similar meaning and form. This means hitting an idiom with an idiom by looking, in the target language, for an idiomatic expression that communicates almost the same meaning as that of the source language while consisting of equivalent lexical items. For reminder purposes,

having two idioms from different languages which match both in form and in content is a rarity.

A second strategy is using an idiom which expresses similar meaning with dissimilar form. Clearly, this is commonplace among languages. This is especially true of languages which do not belong to the same family and whose cultural background is radically different.

To push further on the same line, another strategy is translation by paraphrasing which is the most common practice among idiom users and translators. That is, when a mismatch exists between the source and the target language, reformulating the idiomatic meaning by using one's own words may be the way out despite the fact that the original impact of the idiom in question may be lost in translation, and so may accuracy.

2.6 Literal vs. Cultural Translation

Languages are said to have both literal and figurative meanings. While the former is obtained from the sum of the constituent words or the surface structure of a sentence, the latter meaning is not easily predictable.

Translation is very important in an attempt to convey the content of the source passage. As might be understood from the above accounts, learners tend to use mostly *literal* or *cultural* translation strategies. In the same vein, Hatim and Munday state that:

Some of the main issues of translation are linked to the strategies of literal and free translation, form and content. This division, that has marked translation for centuries, can help identify the problems of certain

overly literal translations that impair comprehensibility. (2004,p.16)

The question that begs itself is: which of the two strategies should be used, especially for securing better understanding? Literal translation may be useful for texts that do not contain figurative language or cultural elements, such as legal and technical documents. It may be said that the main advantage of literal translation is to ensure accuracy, precision and consistency. However, this can lead to inadequate, awkward phrasing in the target language and thus misunderstanding (Armstrong, 2005).

Cultural translation, on the other hand, is the process of translating words, phrases, and longer texts while considering the cultural context and nuances of the target language. Nida (1964, p.13) insists, in any piece of translation, on “*the transfer of the message, meaning, and cultural elements from one language into another*”, especially because cultural connotations are considered to be more extensive than linguistic meanings (Nida, 1998). One may conjecture that it makes more sense for this approach to be used in creative or imaginative texts, such as literature and movies. However, it remains true that cultural translation can prove challenging.

At any rate, both literal and cultural translation strategies have their rewards and drawbacks. As such, the choice of strategy depends on the text type, purpose, and audience.

3. Methodology

3.1 Context

Understanding idiomatic expressions often proves challenging to English language learners, and much the same is true of translating them. The present paper aims to investigate the way English language learners tend to approach them for comprehension. Specifically, it seeks to explore the relation between the translation strategy used and eventual comprehension. To pursue this aim, five research questions were raised along with five corresponding hypotheses. The research questions go as follows:

1. *What is the proportion of English language learners who face comprehension problems with idiomatic expressions?*
2. *Do they use translation to understand them?*
3. *Is there an association between idiom translation and understanding them (or the lack thereof)?*
4. *Which translation strategy is used: literal or cultural?*
5. *Is there a relation between the translation strategy used and understanding better?*

As for the set hypotheses, below both of the alternative hypotheses and their anti-thesis, namely the null hypotheses are outlined:

$H_1 =$ *The proportion of learners who face comprehension problems with idioms and of those who do not are significantly different.*

H_0 = The proportion of learners with and without comprehension problems are the same.

H_2 = *The proportions of learners who use translation to understand idioms and those who do not are different.*

H_0 = The proportion of learners who use translation to understand them is similar to the proportion of those who do not.

H_3 = *There is a statistically significant association between idiom comprehension or the lack thereof and idiom translation.*

H_0 = There is no match between the comprehension and the translation of idioms.

H_4 = *There is a proportional difference between learners who use literal translation and those using cultural translation.*

H_0 = The proportions of literal translation users and culture-based translation users are equal.

H_5 = *The translation strategy used and understanding idioms better are significantly related.*

H_0 = The translation strategy used and understanding idioms better are independent of one another.

3.3 Procedure

3.3.1 Instrument and Participants

A pen-and-paper questionnaire was administered, in class, to 48 Master 1 English language learners at Mila University Centre. It contained mostly yes/no questions. Therefore, the

questionnaire items along with the collected data are categorical in nature (see Appendix). Of note, initially the questionnaire consisted of ten items including demographic questions, but later it was decided to include only those which are pertinent to the aim of the present research work; as such, a number of items were excluded from analysis, thereby serving a follow-up study.

3.3.2 Data Coding and Analysis

Since the variables under investigation are categorical, each item was dichotomously responded to and thus coded on a 0 to 1 point scale. The raw data were then submitted to a *Chi-square Goodness of Fit test* and a *Chi-square Group Independence test* using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (*IBM SPSS 26*). While the former test was used to compare the counts of cases and as such to uncover the difference between the respective categories, the latter test was utilised to determine the relationship or the lack thereof between the two categorical variables.

4. Results and Discussion

Forty-eight Master 1 students of English took part in the present study by answering a structured questionnaire. When running a *Chi-square Goodness of Fit test* in *SPSS* to test hypothesis one, the results turned out to be statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, n = 48) = 27.000, p < .05$ (see Tables 1a&b below). Thus, we gain confidence in the set hypothesis and reject the null.

Table 1a. Frequencies Table 1b. Chi-square test

Facing comprehension problems

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
No	6	24.0	-18.0
Yes	42	24.0	18.0
Total	48		

Test statistics

Facing comprehension problems

Chi-Square	27.000 ^a
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.000

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 24.0.

In performing a *Chi-square Goodness of Fit test* to test hypothesis two, again the results were statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, n = 48) = 18.750, p < .05$ (see Tables 2a&b below), so we obtain evidence in favour of the set hypothesis and reject the null.

Table 2a. Frequencies

Translating idioms

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
No	9	24.0	-15.0
Yes	39	24.0	15.0
Total	48		

Table 2b. Chi-square test

Test Statistics

Translating idioms

Chi-Square	18.750 ^a
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.000

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 24.0.

To test the third hypothesis and thus answer the respective research question, namely whether there is an association between idiom translation and understanding (or the lack thereof), this time a *Chi-square test for Independence* (with Yates' Continuity Correction, see Field, 2013) was computed revealing no significant relationship between the two variables, $\chi^2(1, n = 48) = .957, p = .328$ (see Table 3c below). As such, there is not enough evidence to reject the null.

**Table 3a. Comprehension problems * Translating idioms
Crosstabulation**

			<i>Translating idioms</i>		
			No	Yes	Total
Comprehension problems	No	Count	2	4	6
		Expected Count	1.1	4.9	6.0
		% within Comprehension problems	33.3%	66.7%	100.0%
	Yes	Count	7	35	42
		Expected Count	7.9	34.1	42.0
		% within Comprehension problems	16.7%	83.3%	100.0%
	Total	Count	9	39	48
		Expected Count	9.0	39.0	48.0
		% within Comprehension problems	18.8%	81.3%	100.0%

Table 3b. Chi-square tests

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.957 ^a	1	.328		
Continuity Correction ^b	.176	1	.675		
Likelihood Ratio	.842	1	.359		
Fisher's Exact Test				.312	.312
Linear-by-Linear Association	.937	1	.333		
N of Valid Cases	48				

a. 2 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.13.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table.

In order to put the fourth hypothesis to the test and answer the concomitant research question, a *Chi-square test for Goodness of Fit*, comparing the proportion of students using literal translation and those opting for cultural translation, was made use of. As can be observed in the tables below, the test indicated – as hypothesised – a significant difference, $\chi^2 (1, n = 48) = 7.410, p = .000$ (see Tables 4a&b below).

Table 4a. Frequencies Table 4b. Chi-square test

Literal or cultural translation

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
No	11	19.5	-8.5

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Yes	28	19.5	8.5
Missing	9		
Total	48		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 19.5.

Test Statistics

Literal or cultural translation

Chi-Square	7.410 ^a
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.000

In an attempt to obtain evidence for the fifth hypothesis and answer the corresponding research question, namely whether there is an association, or the lack thereof, between the translation strategy used and understanding idioms better, the *Chi-square test for Independence* (with Yates' Continuity Correction) was conducted indicating no significant relation between the two variables under investigation, $\chi^2 (1, n = 48) = .042, p = .837$ (see Table 5c below).

Table 5a. Literal or cultural translation * Better comprehension Crosstabulation

			<i>Better comprehension</i>		
			No	Yes	Total
Literal or cultural translation	<i>Literal</i>	Count	1	10	11
		Expected Count	.8	10.2	11.0
		% within Literal or cultural translation	9.1%	90.9%	100.0%
	<i>Cultural</i>	Count	2	26	28
		Expected Count	2.2	25.8	28.0
		% within Literal or cultural translation	7.1%	92.9%	100.0%
	Total	Count	3	36	39
		Expected Count	3.0	36.0	39.0
		% within Literal or cultural translation	7.7%	92.3%	100.0%

Table 5b. Chi-square tests

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.042 ^a	1	.837		
Continuity Correction ^b	.000	1	1.000		
Likelihood Ratio	.041	1	.840		

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Fisher's Exact Test			1.000	.642
Linear-by-Linear Association	.041	1	.839	
N of Valid Cases	39			

a. 2 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .85.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table.

To summarise, when running a *Chi-square Goodness of Fit test* in SPSS 26 to test hypotheses 1, 2, and 4, the results turned out to be statistically significant ($p < .05$), so we gain confidence in the set hypotheses and reject the null. In performing a *Group-Independence Chi-square test* to test hypotheses 3 and 5, the analysis showed that there is no statistically significant relation ($p > .05$), so we reject the hypotheses that the variables are associated in favour of the null that they are independent.

Having expounded the results, some *implications* and *recommendations* are greatly warranted. The questionnaire was administered to 48 students, which is quite small for a Chi-square test, let alone the recorded missing values. Certainly, this is not without consequences on the effect size. The author is inclined to remind the reader that one of the assumptions of the Chi-square test is that the sample size needs to be large enough so as to allow the expected frequencies for each category to be at least 1, and for 80% or more of the categories to be at least 5. While all assumptions were met in the *Chi-square Goodness of Fit test*, the reverse situation held true for the *Chi-square of Independence test* (2 cells translating into 50% have expected counts less than 5). The outlet is to recruit more participants, which is obviously not possible, so recourse should be made to

using Fisher's exact test (Field, 2013); this is reported in each respective table.

To push further, the findings, on the whole, reiterate the claim that *culture* plays a noticeable role in the learning of languages, let alone the comprehension/translation of idiomatic expressions. In fact, most of the participants indicated that they face comprehension problems when using idioms and most of them happen also to have recourse to using translation to come to terms to understanding them; most of the participants indicated that, of the two comprehension/translation strategies they use in learning idioms, *cultural* translation stands in the fore.

Contrary to what was hypothesised, however, there seems to be no apparent association between idiom translation and understanding, nor between the translation strategy used and understanding better. Enlightening as it might seem, this should not deter future research from digging further, especially by maximising the sample size, a path that may well alter the results.

Moving to the recommendations, teachers should take a cultural stance in their foreign language classroom. One short way of doing that is through the teaching of idiomatic expressions and sorting out the cultural differences in their use. Researchers, on their part, should address the relationship between idiom use and cultural background and investigate those difficulties pertinent as they are to the comprehension and translation of idiomatic expressions. It is also recommended that intercultural awareness be promoted in class and researched in the field because of what potential it carries in communication

for both areas: teaching and research and the same may be true for translation.

5. CONCLUSION

Idioms are non-literal, culture-bound expressions. Therefore, they can create a difficulty for users, be they learners or translators. This paper set off by outlining a range of definitions of idiomatic expressions, their characteristics, types and the way they relate to culture. It then addressed the kind of encountered difficulties and the strategies employed when trying to understand or translate idioms. The study conducted here is mostly associational in nature. It is of concern to translators, learners, teachers, and researchers alike. As for the findings, a mixture of results was obtained. While appraising the positive results, and notwithstanding the negative findings, we should remind of the principle: absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

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7. Appendix: Questionnaire for students

You are kindly requested to answer this questionnaire which explores the use of idiomatic expressionism relation to comprehension and translation strategies. Rest assured that the information you provide will be anonymously used for the purpose of the present research only. You are required to choose only one answer; underline or tick where appropriate. Your collaboration is greatly appreciated.

1. Do you use idioms? Yes No
2. Do you face comprehension problems with idiomatic expressions? Yes No
3. Do you use translation to understand them? Literal Cultural
4. If yes, which translation strategy do you use? Yes No
5. Does translation help you understand them better? Yes No

Thank you very much for your cooperation.