

## Translating Frozen Expressions

Case Study of Translating 'Al- Zilzaal' (The Earthquake) by Tahar Wattar from Arabic into French by Marcel Bois and English by William Granara

ترجمة التعبيرات المسكوكة  
دراسة حالة ترجمة "الزلزال" للطاهر وطار من العربية إلى الفرنسية - مارسيل  
بوا - والإنجليزية - ويليام غرانارا -

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### Abstract:

This study is interested in translating frozen expressions. The aim is to determine the difficulties translators may face when translating these frozen expressions and the translation procedure most used to deal with them. It focuses on the problem of understanding the mechanisms of the functioning of these expressions in terms of being culture-bound and metaphorical. This makes their understanding in the source language difficult and their reproduction in the target language a hard task because of the lack of equivalence. This may be the main reason for conducting this study to identify frozen expressions translation difficulties. The study adopts a descriptive comparative method to deal with a corpus of 19 Arabic frozen expressions extracted from Tahar Wattar's novel "الزلزال" "Al- Zilzaal" (The Earthquake) and their equivalents in both French and English. The results reveal that translating frozen expressions is problematic. The translation procedure most used in translating frozen expressions is literal translation.

**Keywords:** Equivalents; Expressions; Frozen; Mechanisms; Procedure; Translating.

**ملخص:**

يهتم هذا البحث بترجمة التعبيرات المسكوكة. الهدف من ذلك هو تحديد الصعوبات التي قد يواجهها المترجمون عند ترجمة هذه التعبيرات المسكوكة وأسلوب الترجمة الأكثر استخدامًا للتعامل معها. تركز هذه الدراسة على مشكل فهم آليات عمل هذه التعبيرات كونها مرتبطة بالثقافة ومجازية. وهذا يجعل فهمها في اللغة المصدر أمرًا صعبًا، كما أن إعادة صياغتها في اللغة الهدف يعد مهمة صعبة بسبب عدم وجود التكافؤ. يمكن اعتبار هذا هو السبب الرئيسي لإجراء هذه الدراسة. تتبنى الدراسة المنهج الوصفي المقارن للتعامل مع مدونة مكونة من 19 عبارة مسكوكة استخرجت من رواية الطاهر وطار "الزلال" وما يكافئها في الفرنسية والإنجليزية. تظهر النتائج أن ترجمة التعبيرات المسكوكة تشكل إشكالية. إن أسلوب الترجمة الأكثر استخدامًا في ترجمة التعبيرات المسكوكة هو الترجمة الحرفية.

**الكلمات المفاتيح :** مكافئات؛ تعابير مسكوكة؛ آليات؛ أسلوب؛ ترجمة.

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**1. Introduction**

Translating frozen expressions is very often considered problematic. These particular expressions which make up a large proportion of any discourse are a source of many difficulties in translation. This study attempts to put the focus on some aspects of these expressions that make their translation a difficult task. Frozen expressions are characterised by conveying cultural realities and having metaphorical meanings. The problem of this study is to determine whether frozen expressions translation difficulties are due to the mechanisms of their functioning. Some research questions are worth raising to guide this study:

Are cultural and metaphorical components underlying frozen expressions at the origin of their translation difficulties?

What kind of translation procedures do translators opt for to deal with frozen expressions?

To what extent can frozen expressions be transferred from one language into another, producing equivalent cultural aspects and metaphorical meanings?

We propose the following hypothesis:

Frozen expressions are difficult to translate because of the mechanisms of their functioning. If frozen expressions have their own characteristics and specific use, they are worth studying from translational viewpoint. Understanding the working process of frozen expressions translation is of vital importance.

## **2. Methodology**

The present study deals with translating frozen expressions. It takes as an example the translation of frozen expressions included in Tahar Wattar's novel "Al- Zilzaal" (The Earthquake) and their equivalents in both French and English. As this study is mainly concerned with the investigation of translating frozen expressions difficulties from cultural and metaphorical perspective, a descriptive comparative method is adopted. This study is based on a corpus of 19 Arabic frozen expressions extracted from Tahar Wattar's novel "Al – Zilzaal" (The Earthquake) and their equivalents in both French and English. We opt for a judgment or targeted sample, selecting important and relevant frozen expressions to the study. The sample is subject to criteria set by the researcher for the purpose of his research. The sample depends on the personal assessment of the researcher in terms of selection. The analysis of the way frozen expressions are dealt with in both French and English translations focuses on understanding the process of translation in terms of difficulties faced by the translators with reference to the cultural and metaphorical aspects of these frozen expressions, identifying them in the Arabic text, finding equivalents provided by the translators and determining translation procedures opted for to treat them. The analysis takes into consideration translation quality in terms of producing a translation that is understandable and accessible for the target text reader and faithful to the original text.

## **3. Frozen Expressions**

Frozen expressions refer to those expressions whose meanings are not predictable from the usual meanings of their constituent elements. They are conceived as fixed multi-word expressions that conceptually encode non-compositional meaning. Frozenness denotes a set of fixed syntactic and

semantic features of lexical units. Frozen expressions function as blocks or language chunks. According to Crystal (2001:305-305), “They are [a] group of words standing in a fixed association”. Frozen expressions refer to verbal expressions that are fixed in form, often non-literal in meaning as in idioms and proverbs. They are fixed combinations of words that can facilitate fluency in speech. Frozen expressions are difficult to understand simply because their meanings are far from the sum of their components. Moreover, Kharma and Hajjaj (1989:74) state that “Some of them are really difficult because they are very culture-specific”. Frozen expressions are sequences of words which are prefabricated that are stored and retrieved from memory. Speaking a language with any degree of fluency requires knowledge of frozen expressions which are seen as bits and pieces of fossilised language. They are fundamental to fluent language production. They are considered as the key towards gaining better communication skill as they are used to reflect customs, beliefs and traditions of people from all the world.

The more frozen expressions a person knows, the more native-like his language will sound. The learner or the speaker of a language must memorise them in their entirety in order to be able to use them properly taking into account the context of situation. Frozen expressions are an important object for linguists working in the field of phraseology. These sequences constitute a great interest for learners and simple users of the language. Indeed, if we give all this interest to the frozen expressions, this is because they are not a marginal phenomenon of the language. Ignoring frozen expressions is ignoring a great part of language, especially if we think in terms of formulaic language.

### **3.1. Features of Frozen Expressions**

Frozen expressions are a linguistic phenomenon whose features may be stated as follows:

A given sequence is called opaque when, from the meanings of the component elements, we cannot reconstruct the meaning of the whole. The compositional meaning is therefore different from the opaque meaning of

the expression. This may be applied to these expressions in French and English “Avoir le bras long”, “To have a long arm”. The opaque meaning of the two expressions is far-reaching power or influence.

The elements of the frozen expression cannot be freely transformed. We cannot turn an affirmative sentence into a question, and so on. We cannot replace an element of a frozen expression by a synonym. It is also impossible to insert an adjective between the frozen elements. Frozen expressions are characterised by the impossibility of transformation, the non-interchangeability of the lexical components and the impossibility of adding lexical elements inside the lexical unit.

### **3.2. Categories of Frozen Expressions**

There are different categories of expressions. The boundaries between these categories are not clear. Sometimes, it is difficult to draw a sharp line of distinction between them. They tend to overlap. They vary in their frequency either in speaking or writing. Because of the limited space, we limit ourselves to dealing with the most important categories of frozen expressions.

An idiom is a group of words which, as a whole, has a different meaning from the meaning of the individual words it contains. McMordiew, J. S. (1983:3), provides a definition for the idiom: “We can say that an idiom is a number of words which, taken together, mean something different from the individual words of the idiom when they stand alone”. Idioms are linguistic expressions whose overall meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of the constituent parts. Most idioms are based on conceptual metaphors. Idioms are usually regarded as a part of culture. Since culture is localised, idioms may lose their value beyond their local context. Idioms make the language more colourful. People use them to express something more vividly and often more briefly. Fernando (1996:25) states that – “Idioms not only ensure that our communication is coherent and cohesive, but they also produce discourse that is socially acceptable as well as precise, lively and interesting”. According Baker, M. (1992:63), 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". It is easy to realise that most idioms are fixed expressions. As idioms express peoples' different ways of perceiving the world, this makes their translation difficult.

Collocation refers to a group of words that often go together or that are likely to occur together. It is a group of words associated together as an expression in the lexicon: e.g. "red in the face", which means "angry". Coll Robins (2000:64) argues that collocation is "The habitual association of a word in a language with other particular words in sentences". Halliday and Hasan (2001:317) argue that collocation, a means of cohesion, is "The co-occurrence of lexical items that are in some way or other typically associated with one another, because they tend to occur in similar environments". Collocation is not only a necessary element of language but also an outstanding feature that makes language specific and correct. Collocation belongs to the phenomenon of frozenness.

An adage is a short, memorable saying that is considered to be true by the majority of people. This saying may give wisdom about life and as its usage increases, it is presumed to display a universal truth. It is oral in nature and has a didactic function. Here are some common adages: Better safe than sorry. This adage is used to convey the conventional wisdom that in some situations risk taking is not the optimal choice. Curiosity killed the cat. This adage conveys the idea that excessive snooping can be dangerous. Adages are short sayings that are popular and well known. Adages are important because they reveal strong messages through simple phrases.

A maxim is a short, pithy statement expressing a general truth or rule of conduct. The maxim "the early bird gets the worm" is a short statement that gives behavioral advice. It advises the listener to be early or prompt in order to be successful. A maxim is a general truth, fundamental principle, or rule of conduct.

A proverb is defined by (Freyha, 1974) as, - "A short pithy saying in general use". Bakalla (1984:248) states that a proverb is – "Often used colloquially and set forth in the guise of a metaphor and in the form of a

rhyme, and is sometimes alliterative”. Meider (1985:119) has defined the proverb as – “ A short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisable form and which is handed down from generation to generation ”. A proverb expresses a dense meaning through a few words, for example – “ love is blind” – “ l’amour est aveugle ” “الحب أعمى” /al hubbu 'a3maa/ is a proverb which denotes the fact that the lover doesn’t care about the defects of the person he loves. His love covers his defects. All this notion is expressed in a brief and figurative way. It has been defined by (Trask, 1997) as “A short and memorable saying which expresses a piece of experience, often in a vivid language”. A proverb is characterised by its brevity, vivid images, and memorisation through the use of alliteration, rhyme, and rhythm. It is an economic mental picture because many other situations can be understood from particular one. A proverb reflects the experience of the members of a particular speech community. It deals with a shared truth.

### 3.3. Frozen Expressions Translation

Translating frozen expressions is problematic because they are characterised by a semantic globality, that is to say that their global meaning does not come from the meaning of the lexical units that compose them: they are therefore non-compositional. The semantic opacity of a frozen expression is thus well related to the non-compositionality of its meaning, which often has a metaphorical aspect. In an Arabic statement such as “اضرب الحديد وهو ساخن” /aDrib al hadiid wahuwa saakhin/ (strike while the iron is hot, make hay while the sun shines) - (il faut battre le fer pendant qu’il est chaud) a literal interpretation of the sum of words does not give the intended meaning which is “ taking advantage of an opportunity as soon as it exists”. The same applies to the French language where an expression such as “Il a cassé sa pipe” (He broke his pipe), does not admit a compositional reading because we cannot conclude the intended meaning, from the meaning of all the words, which is “died”.

It is interesting to note that certain expressions lend themselves to a double reading: compositional and non-compositional (fixed) or, in other words, one transparent and the other opaque. The expression “ Les carottes sont cuites”, “ The carrots are cooked ”, may have a compositional meaning to indicate that these vegetables are ready to be eaten, and another opaque meaning to indicate that the situation is desperate (what’s done cannot be undone- ce qui est fait est fait ).

Before beginning the translation of frozen expressions, we must master internal (linguistic) and external (cultural) aspects, that is to say assimilate the semantic dimension of frozenness that encompasses all internal and external factors. This semantic dimension of frozen expressions is quite complex, but at the same time it is important at the level of translation because the semantic aspect is at the origin of translation difficulties.

On the other hand, the difficulty of translating frozen expressions does not lie solely in the fact of transposing lexical units from one language to another in isolation. Translating these expressions follows the same approach as any human translation implying the implementation of a “cognitive process” which “consists for the translator in understanding the text to make it intelligible for the readers who do not have access to the original”. Therefore, we can divide the translating operation of frozen expressions into two main steps: The first step is the understanding of the expression. It is articulated around both linguistic and cultural aspects.

For the linguistic aspect, comprehension primarily is related to the syntax of the source language. The translator must isolate the frozen sequence and treat it as an indissociable whole. For example, if the translator does not recognise the frozenness of the expression “ Passer l’arme à gauche ” “ Pass the arm to the left ”, he will of course arrive at a false meaning or misinterpretation. The translation of the lexical units composing this expression gives us a sequence having no relation with its global meaning (pass away).



As for the cultural aspect, it goes without saying that translating generally responds to cultural needs. The translator needs to have extra-linguistic knowledge. To achieve effective communication, he must first analyse and understand the cultural content underlying this frozen expression.

Once this step is over, the translator can move on to the next one, which consists in the re-expression of what he has understood. The translator thus re-expresses the cultural content of the frozen expression according to the discursive mechanisms accepted by the target culture. It is therefore necessary to master what is called the cultural transfer.

To put the process thus described into practice, we can have the translation of the following Arabic expression into French: له عنق فى الخير / lahu 3unuqun fii alkhairi /. By translating this expression word for word, we obtain the sequence: “Il a un cou dans le bien” “He has a neck in the good”, which may be meaningless for the French reader. But if we go back to the analysis of cultural content, we find that Arabic speakers use this expression to describe people who show themselves to be generous (open-handed) and charitable towards others, which would correspond in French to “ Avoir le coeur sur la main ” “ Have the heart on the hand ”, “ To wear one’s heart on one’s sleeve ”. This is called “equivalence” in translation. Frozenness remains a difficult phenomenon to translate. Frozen expressions which are characterised by their metaphorical aspect and social and cultural realities are difficult to treat from translational viewpoint.

#### **4. The Role of the Translator**

Whenever the translator wants to translate frozen expressions, he recalls frozen expressions stored in his mind in relation to the target language instead of brainstorming his mind searching for which word goes with which. The translator needs to be able to use fixed forms. The translator must not limit himself to literal translation, but he should find equivalent frozen expressions. He will diminish the quality of translation if, for example, he translates the expression “Aux grands maux les grands remèdes” (Great evils, great remedies) into Arabic, using an “explanation”

as “الأدوية الكبيرة للأمراض الكبيرة” /al'adwiya al kabiira lil'amraaD al kabiira/, instead of using an idiomatic equivalence, “آخر الدواء الكي” /aakhir al ddawaa'i al kay / “The last remedy is cauterization”. Only in cases where the frozen expression of one culture has no equivalent in the other language, it is advisable to resort to an explanatory translation.

Translating a frozen expression should be done by an equivalent frozen expression in the target language. The translator uses a paraphrase when an equivalent does not exist in the target language. This procedure is the most common way of translating frozen expressions when a match cannot be found in the target language. The translator can resort to the omission of the frozen expression. This procedure involves leaving out the expression completely in the target text for reasons such as no close match in the target language, its meaning cannot be easily paraphrased, or for stylistic reasons. The translator may translate the frozen expression literally. It is important to remain faithful to the source text, reproducing as much information as possible in the target text so that the reader of the target text can largely share the effect felt by the reader of the original text.

## 5. Findings and Discussions

At the end of our analysis of the translation of frozen expressions from Arabic into French and English, a number of considerations are reached. Our hypothesis is confirmed, as we find that frozen expressions have a deep cultural anchorage and figurative meaning, this makes their translation problematic. It is found that 12 and 8 (63.15%) - (42.10) out of the 19 extracted frozen expressions are transformed into French and English by using literal translation. If this procedure tends to be preferable to other procedures, this may be justified by the fact that it provides a translation that tends to remain faithful to the source text culture. Only 4 and 5 (21.05%) - (26.31) out of the 19 extracted frozen expressions are translated into French and English by means of the procedure of equivalence. This procedure makes the target text intelligible and easy to understand. The use of paraphrase is applied to 3 and 5 (15.78%) - (26.31) out of the 19 extracted frozen expressions to translate them into French and English and this serves

as a way to convey the source text message in the target language. The omission procedure is used to translate 1 (5.26%) out of the 19 extracted frozen expressions into English. In fact, omission is rarely used, especially when the translator thinks that the translation of the expression does not add any interest to the target text. It is noticed that translating frozen expressions is characterised by some loss of information at different levels. It is difficult to render the cultural associations and connotations frozen expressions may have into the target language. It is not easy to find exact equivalents that transpose accurately frozen expressions figurative meaning in the target language because conceptualising the world differs from one language to another. The selection of any translation procedure in a specific situation depends on the translator's objective. It is important to emphasise the fact that translating frozen expressions is problematic because of their cultural and metaphorical features.

The translation procedure most applied to translating frozen expressions contained in Tahar Wattar's novel "Al- Zilzal" is literal translation for both translators. Bois and Granara are in favour of literality. This can be justified by the willingness of the translators to carry out the act of acculturation through literality, which is a means of discovering the Other. They stick as much as possible to the procedure of literal translation to highlight the specificities of the original text concerning frozen expressions and avoid deviating from the original text and distorting it. Through literality, Bois and Granara aim at the interaction between cultures and the essence of translation remains acculturation, the coming together of visions and the rapprochement of cultures in the context of respect for the specificities of the Other and tolerance of diversity. Translation actively participates in reducing gaps between cultures and civilisations by establishing bridges between them. It remains a means of bringing cultures closer together.

The following table represents the translation procedures frequency used by both translators to deal with Arabic frozen expressions.

**Table 1. Translation Procedures Frequency**

<b>Translation procedures</b>	<b>PF in French T</b>	<b>Rate %</b>	<b>PF in English T</b>	<b>Rate %</b>
<b>Literal translation</b>	<b>12</b>	63.15	<b>8</b>	42.10
<b>Equivalence</b>	<b>4</b>	21.05	<b>5</b>	26.31
<b>Paraphrase</b>	<b>3</b>	15.78	<b>5</b>	26.31
<b>Omission</b>	<b>00</b>	00	<b>1</b>	5.26%

**Source: Abdelaziz AGTI, 2022, p. 7**

## **6. Conclusion**

Through this study, it is revealed that frozen expressions have a great importance in the linguistic system and pose problems for the translator because of their cultural values and metaphorical aspects. It is necessary to work on them because of their frequency in language and cultural and metaphorical dimension in order to ensure a good command of the language and a better translation. Translation students and language learners need to be aware of the fact that frozen expressions are an important part of fluent and idiomatic language use. Frozen expressions represent lexical elements that help to communicate better. Since frozen expressions convey the message quickly and allow users of the language to express themselves more effectively, they must be integrated into the process of language teaching and learning. In other words, a language learner or a translator student needs to have solid knowledge of these frozen expressions. They play a vital role in language learning and translation quality. The production of frozen expressions enables the speaker or the writer to focus more on the message to be conveyed than on how express it orally or in written form. Maximum economy is gained by repeating expressions that are learned by heart, instead of continually creating new expressions. While it is more economical for the speaker or the writer to use ready-made constructions to convey a message, it is also easier for the listener or the reader to decode it. To a certain extent, these frozen expressions facilitate both the production and the perception of utterances. They are frequently used in both writing and speaking. Translation students and language learners need a large

inventory or repertoire of frozen expressions, discerning their cultural dimension and metaphorical meaning making them suitable for specific contexts. Comparative activity between languages can help learners to understand the similarities and differences between them in relation to frozen expressions. It can also contribute to the improvement of the translation or language learners' learning skills. Comparative analysis allows the translation learner to identify the necessary transformations that he must perform when switching from one language to another. It also helps him to improve his bilingual lexical skills that facilitate the translating operation.

Frozen expressions translation is a multifaceted topic and vast field to explore. Frozen expressions are characterised by their multidimensional semantic mechanisms which require an in-depth understanding to be dealt with from translational standpoint.

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