A grey area in translating proverbial expressions: The case of English and Persian

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Abstract

All the languages in the world contain a large number of prefabricated or fixed expressions that have to be learned and used as they are. They do not often allow any deletion, substitution, or addition of any individual constituent word. One such expression is a proverb that contrarily allows variability to some degree. It carries truth, collective wisdom, and morals concerning everyday experience from generation to generation. This experience is common and the same across the languages. Therefore, a similar counterpart might normally exist for a proverb in translating from one language into another or in compiling proverbs in two languages. However, translators or dictionary compilers seem to ignore the characteristic features making the proverbs distinct from other expressions, suggesting some non-corresponding equivalents in translating or compiling dictionaries in the two languages as far as these features are concerned. Thus, in this study, the researcher considers a sample English-Persian dictionary of proverbs in which the compiler does not observe the characteristic features of proverbs in compiling the English entries, meaning that both proverbs and idioms are collected in a single dictionary on proverbs. Ironically however, very few Persian idioms are provided as equivalents for English proverbs. Based on the findings of the present study, the researcher suggests that taking the characteristic features of proverbs and idioms into account could have both lexicographic and pedagogical implications.

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1. Introduction

Language contains a large number of expressions in which language users, and language learners alike, have no choice or freedom in changing the position of their constituent elements. These expressions show degrees of fixedness and include many types, e.g. idioms, proverbs, clichés, and so on. Language learners for that matter have to learn as well as use these expressions as they are used in the language they attempt to learn. As a fixed expression, proverbs can be considered as the ornaments of language and contribute to the discussion and communication since they are normally used to summarize the point raised in a clear, concise, memorable, and pleasant way. People react and seem to get the point, glazed with proverbs, better and much more clearly.

Research findings show that comprehending proverbs is apparently associated with proficiency, word knowledge, and analogical reasoning (Nippold, Allen, & Kirsch, 2001). For a foreign or second language learner, it might be a double effort to first understand a proverb and then relate it to a proverbial equivalent in one’s own native language.

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The personal experience of the researcher as well as the numerous cases happening in our foreign language classes testify to this issue. Sometimes, it gets rather difficult to find a good equivalent in the native language to explain the meaning of what one gets in an English proverb. This difficulty could have been overcome with ease by offering a proverbial equivalent to the English proverb for the point to be comprehended more fully and quickly, without going to length. A translator maybe faced with this challenge at a higher level as well though he or she might be better off in understanding and even selecting appropriate counterparts for proverbs across languages. However, there are a number of proverbs for which it is fairly hard to provide equivalents. In addition, dictionary compilers in two languages, like translators, might be in the same boat in that they might not be capable of providing exact proverbial counterparts in the two languages with which the dictionary is concerned. This might be due to some reasons. A dictionary compiler might simply lack the knowledge of the delicacies of his or her native language, leaving him or her less empowered. The dictionaries or other sources available might not include a proper proverb for the intended English one, thus making the task of providing equivalent proverbs formidable. There are still some proverbs that are culture- or language-specific. This group of proverbs might be most frustrating for the compiler. Aside from these reasons, another reason might come from the possibility that the compilers might not be able to distinguish what a proverb is from among the other fixed expressions, such as idioms, simply because they might be less cognizant of the distinctive features of proverbs and other expressions. This is observed in even monolingual dictionaries of proverbs as Akbarian (in press) indicates that idioms are compiled in a dictionary of proverbs due to the assumption that the constituent features of each of these expressions, distinguishing the boundaries between idioms and proverbs, are not clearly identified. Therefore, it would be helpful at this point to define these terms and review the characteristic features of proverbs and idioms, pointed out by a number of scholars. The discussion would then lead us to the very point under investigation in this study.

2. What is a proverb?

Proverbs have been the focus of study for many centuries and the term ‘proverb’ has been defined by many scholars. Even there are proverbs in many languages that define what a proverb is. The following are some instances: (1) Proverbs are the children of experience, for an Englishman, (2) a proverb is to speech what salt is to food, or it is the lamp of speech, for an Arab (Stone, 2006), (3) proverbs are wisdom’s eyes, for a Turk, and (4) a proverb is the ornament of speech, for a Persian.

From among the given definitions on ‘proverb’, I prefer that of Mieder (1993, p. 5) who states that a proverb is “a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and [memorable] form and which is handed down from generation to generation”. Indeed, it concisely and effectively expresses a truth concerning everyday experience, a word of advice or warning, or a wise general comment on a situation. A proverb actually comes to the interlocutors’ aid in any language in knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom (Rezaei, in press).

3. Features of a proverb

A number of characteristic features, identified by different researchers, could help us distinguish proverbs from all other fixed or formulaic types of expression in any language. They are as follows:

- Proverbs express meanings or speech acts, e.g. promises, warnings, requests, and so on (Gramley & Pätzold, 1992).
- They equal to a whole sentence or free utterance (Gramley & Pätzold, 1992) and are thus statements.
- They do not need a context of situation to be comprehended correctly. Rather, they sum up situations and give advice in short, terse phrases (Bertram, 1996).
- They are self-contained, with none of the essential grammatical units in them to be replaced (Seiler, cited in Norrick, 1985).
- Unlike idioms or other formulaic types, shortened versions of the complete sentence form of some proverbs are also quite common (Akbarian, 2010; Norrick, 1985).
Proverbs show irregular syntax, for example, *like father, like son*.

They concern general rather than specific meanings, which is why they are expressed in the present tense (Norrick, 1985, p. 70).

They are well established, traditional, and recorded in many collections and dictionaries (Smith, 1985).

They contain “a good dose of common sense, experience, wisdom and above all truth” (Mieder, 1989, p. 15).

They are folklore items, with no known authors (Gramley & Pätzold, 1992).

Proverbial affixes, like *(as) they say, it is said, as the proverb goes* mark proverbs (Norrick, 1985).

Addition, transformation, and abbreviation do not change proverbs out of all recognition, such as *it is while the iron is hot that it should be struck*. Treated this way, idioms would become meaningless or allow only a literal reading.

Some metaphorical phrases, e.g. *to make a mountain out of a molehill*, would be admitted as a proverb in case they appear as *Don’t make a mountain out of a molehill*. They are thus used in sentence form and contain some advice, wit, or universal truth (Simpson, 1992).

### 4. What is an idiom?

An idiom is considered as a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words making the idiom. For instance, *‘let the cat out of the bag’* is an idiom, meaning *to tell a secret by mistake*. But it does not mean what it says.

Language is generally more or less idiomatic. In fact, there is a scale of idiomaticity and, furthermore, a distinction of degree between idiomatic language and idioms. At the top end of this scale of idiomaticity, there are some opaque idioms, the meaning of which cannot be necessarily deduced from the sum of their parts whereas, at the bottom end of this scale, there are some others that are transparent (Lennon, 1998).

### 5. Features of an idiom

Like the features of proverbs above, we have to cite a number of characteristic features concerning idioms to distinguish them from the other kinds of lexical strings. The features are as follows:

- **Institutionalization**, meaning that whether an idiom is regularly considered by a language community to be a single unit (Moon, 1997). In other words, does the idiom recur?

- **Fixedness** by which Moon refers to the degree to which an idiom “is frozen as a sequence of words”, for example, *they kicked the bucket* not *the buckets*.

- **Non-compositionality** which is the degree to which an idiom “cannot be interpreted on a word-by-word basis, but has a specialized unitary meaning” (Moon, 1997, p. 44).

- Unlike proverbs that express speech acts, idioms do not carry out speech acts.

- They need a context of situation to be comprehended as idioms. Otherwise, their literal meanings will be intended which would not make sense.

- **Meaning** is the decisive, if not the only, criterion of idioms, with the word forms not making an isolable contribution to the meaning of the whole idiom (Gramley & Pätzold, 1992).

- The constituents in idioms are not semantic constituents or lexical units; they are formatives, for instance *red herring*, but not *green herring* (Cruse, 1986).

- The formulation of an idiom is contrary to the syntactic rules of contemporary English. The definite articles in English sentences indicate an item has already been mentioned. It does not, however, serve its function in these two idioms, *kick the bucket* and *fly off the handle*.

- **Idioms** have an unpredictable stress; they have a phonologically irregular pattern (Strässler, 1982).
6. Statement of the problem

The distinctive characteristic features of idioms and proverbs, as outlined above, provide an objective scale or criteria to evaluate the dictionaries on these two types of formulaic language within one language or across two or more languages. As mentioned earlier, not knowing the distinguishing boundaries between idioms and proverbs might result in compiling instances of either of the two in the wrong dictionary. Proverbially speaking, it would be contrary to ‘a place for everything and everything in its place’. Thus, there is the assumption that bilingual or multilingual dictionaries might be susceptible to the same problem.

Given the discussion above and the point that English is the basis of compiling a dictionary of proverbs under investigation, the present small-scale study attempts to realize whether bilingual dictionaries on proverbs (English to Persian) observe the relevant characteristic features of proverbs and include only Persian proverbial expressions as equivalents in the two languages or provide non-proverbial Persian counterparts, say idioms, for the English proverbs as well. The dictionary investigated is Rahnama English-Persian Dictionary of Proverbs (Ghanbari, 2010). More specifically, the present study intends to answer the following two questions:

1. Does Rahnama English-Persian Dictionary of Proverbs (Ghanbari, 2010), as a sample dictionary of proverbs, fail to distinguish between proverbs and idioms and include idioms as the equivalent for the English proverbs compiled?
2. What percentage of the Persian entries, compiled as the equivalents to English proverbs, belong to idioms?

7. Method

7.1. Materials

Given the above criteria and characteristic features distinguishing proverbs from idioms, this research aims to investigate a sample dictionary, namely Rahnama English-Persian Dictionary of Proverbs (Ghanbari, 2010), destined for the teaching of foreign languages. We selected this dictionary because it (a) is a dictionary with many proverbs, (b) includes Persian equivalents for English proverbs more than other dictionaries, (c) is recently edited unlike the other dictionaries, and (d) is consulted most frequently by Iranian foreign language learners of English. Thus, it can be considered as a reliable and up-to-date source in Iran. The lexicographic microstructure of the dictionary includes:

- The entries are alphabetized by the head word in the proverbs.
- The entries appear in boldface.
- Persian equivalents follow the English entries, appearing in regular font.
- For a number of the entries, a brief explanation or comment appears after the Persian equivalents to clarify the proverb, illustrate its use, or refer to the origin.
- Possible variants of English proverbs or entries are listed in the dictionary, printed in bold and italic type.
- An Index is provided to permit easy locating of an entry head.

The dictionary includes 410 pages. There is a Persian introduction of three pages. The entry heads of the dictionary run from page 1 to 379, the Index from 380 to 392, and the bibliography from 393 to 396. When you open the dictionary, the running head on the left page is the first entry and that on the right page is the last entry on that page. The page numbers appear at the bottom center.

7.2. Procedure

To conduct the study, Rahnama English-Persian Dictionary of Proverbs (Ghanbari, 2010) was carefully considered in accordance with the criteria and the respective features cited above, counting the number of proverbs and the non-proverb items as well as the non-proverb equivalents to English proverbs. Only the entry proverb or idiom, not the variant forms, is included into the corpus of our study.
8. Results and discussion

In answer to Research Question 1, the above dictionary was carefully investigated, showing that totally 1772 entries exist in the dictionary. Of the total number of the entries, only 1293 entries are proverbs and the remaining 479 entries are not proverbs. It means that 72.97 percent of the total number of the entries includes proverbs whereas 27.03 percent of the total number of the entries includes non-proverb items, mainly idioms. It roughly translates into one third of the entries. The limited sample under study is acknowledged and more data are needed to securely generalize the findings. Yet, the obtained evidence confirms the findings of Akbarian (in press) who found that NTC’s Dictionary of Proverbs and Clichés (Bertram, 1996) failed to differentiate between proverbs and other prefabricated expressions. His investigation showed that nearly 67 percent out of the total number of the entries in this dictionary proved to be proverbs whereas around 33 percent of them turned out to be non-proverb items. The results in both studies directly support our assumption; the compilers of proverb dictionaries do not distinguish the boundaries between the prevailing fixed expressions such as idioms, proverbs, and the like. Akbarian (in press) argues that “a dictionary on proverbs should meet its claim in compiling the specific, relevant formulaic entries in order to retrieve the required information as quickly and as successfully as possible”.

The consultants of Rahnama English-Persian Dictionary of Proverbs or any other such dictionary will further benefit from it if the lexicographers mark the entries as proverbs or idioms explicitly. Accordingly, through explicit marking of the entries as such, the consultants’ attention will directly and intentionally be drawn to the entries and the need for a more consistent organization of the entries emerging from the analysis of the dictionaries will be highlighted (Szczepaniak & Lew, 2011). Explicit marking could thus have double lexicographic and pedagogical implication for the consultants, including (a) clear clues as to the contents and (b) cognizance of both of these expressions and their distinctive boundaries.

Despite the close correspondence of the results in this study with that of Akbarian (in press) concerning the compilation of English proverbs and idioms in a single dictionary, the data in the current study further revealed an interestingly different finding in that only seven proverb entries out of the total 1293 proverb entries, collected in Rahnama English-Persian Dictionary of Proverbs (Ghanbari, 2010), contained Persian idioms as their equivalents (see Table 1). In contrast, an inspection of the equivalents for the collected English idiom entries showed more Persian proverb equivalents for English idioms in the dictionary. Of course, this issue is not the focus of our study. A further study by another researcher concerning this very point would strengthen our position further. Nonetheless, the answer to Research Question 2 shows that the compilers observe the subtle distinctions between proverbs and idioms in trying to select proper equivalents from one language into another, Persian to English, in our case.

| Table 1. Seven proverbs containing Persian idioms as their equivalents |
|---------------------------------|------------------|-----------|
| Proverb                         | Persian idiom equivalent | Page no.  |
| 1. Claw me, and I’ll claw you   | نان به همدیگر قرض دادن | 67        |
| 2. Do as I say, not as I do     | واعظ غیر متبع یوند | 84        |
| 3. Fiddle while Rome burns      | بیپرورشی قلق دادن | 126       |
| 4. The purse of the patient protracts the disease | استخوان لای زخم گاشتن | 288       |
| 5. A tale never loses in the telling | عطر کردن | 326       |
| 6. Wake not a sleeping lion     | روی تمن در خلق یابگاشتن | 350       |
| 7. You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours | دست به دست هم دادن | 377       |

Dictionary compilers should bear in mind the various needs of the consultants. However, as Lew (2011) expresses, very few studies tackle this issue. Awareness-raising is another strategy that would help language learners gain the right knowledge of the language through the dictionaries. Not mixing proverbs and idioms or not offering idioms as equivalents to proverbs in translation and the other way around would implicitly help learners gain that awareness on the respective and distinctive features of each of these fixed expressions.
As the concluding remark, the current research has produced evidence that confirms the finding of our earlier investigation, pointing to the need to reconsider proverb dictionaries with regard to the general linguistic boundaries between proverbs and idioms along the features set forth in this paper. Atkins and Rundell (2008), state that linguistic theories help lexicographers to work more effectively and confidently. On the other hand, technology provides new routes for the access of the content and information. Benefiting from these two areas, lexicographers will improve the dictionaries on proverbs. As a result, dictionary users will retrieve the required information effectively.

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