Idiomatic Expressions in Translation

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Abstract

There is no language without its own collection of idiomatic expressions. They are expressions with a figurative meaning different from its literal meaning. Idiomatic expressions play a very important role in the establishment of rapport. They are two or more words syntactically related, with a meaning like a single syntactic unit whose meaning is not predictable from its component words. It is said that without a sound knowledge of idioms one's language will remain foreign. Idiomatic expression is a universal feature of language, though different languages may use literally different idiomatic expressions serving the same function. Owing to these complexities, rendering the idiomaticity of expressions from a source into a target language has always been problematic. This study aims to scrutinize some aspects of the translation of idiomatic expressions. To this end, Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath is compared with two versions of its translation into Persian.

Keywords: Translation strategies, Idiomatic expressions, Figurative Meaning, Literal Meaning.

1. Introduction

An idiom, also referred to as idiomatic expression, is a set of words or phrases that has a figurative meaning conventionally understood by native speakers. This meaning is different from the literal meaning of the idiom's individual elements. In other words, idioms do not mean exactly what the words say. Idiomatic expressions have a part of paramount significance in the establishment of communication. It is believed that without a sound mastery of idioms one cannot acquire native fluency in a foreign language. Although idiomatic expression is a universal feature of language, different languages may use literally different idiomatic expressions with similar referential meanings. These complexities make the rendering of the idiomaticity of expressions from a source into a target language so sophisticated and problematic a task. Taking these into consideration, this study aims at an investigation into some aspects of the translation of idiomatic expressions. To do so, Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath is juxtaposed with two versions of its Persian translation.

2. Review of the Related Literature

An idiom is a phrase or a fixed expression that has a figurative, or sometimes literal, meaning. An "idiom's figurative meaning is different from the literal meaning" (McArthur, 2008: 495). They occur frequently in all languages. Idioms fall into the category of formulaic language.

Trask (2007) asserts that an "idiom is "an expression whose meaning cannot be worked out from the meanings of its component words" (p: 114). It is "a sequence of words which semantically and often syntactically restricted, so that it functions as a single unit" (Crystal 1992:180). For Matthews (2007:181), an idiom is "a set of expression in which two or more words are syntactically related, but with a meaning like that of a single lexical unit". In other words idiom is " an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts" (Richards and Schmidt 2002:246).

Linguistically speaking, "idioms are usually presumed to be figures of speech contradicting the principle of compositionality" (Jurafsky and Martin 2008:597). According to the "principle of compositionality, the meaning of sentences are compositional, either hypothetically or by definition, if considered in abstraction from particular occasion on which they are uttered" (Matthews2007:70). This principle states that the meaning of a whole should be constructed from the meanings of the parts that make up the whole. In other words, one should be in a position to understand the whole if one understands the meanings of each of the parts that make up the whole.

In phraseology, "idioms are defined as a sub-type of phraseme, the meaning of which is not the regular sum of the meanings of its component parts ( Leaney, C. 2005:121)  Saeed (2003) defines an idiom "as collocated words that became affixed to each other until metamorphosing into a fossilised term"(p.84). This collocation of words redefines each component word in the word-group and becomes an idiomatic expression.

Idioms usually do not translate well; sometimes, when an idiom is translated directly word-for-word into another language, either its meaning is changed or it is meaningless. A literal translation of opaque idioms will most likely not convey the same meaning in other languages. The idiomatic expression To kick the bucket would best illustrate this. The following list shows idioms from other languages that are analogous to this English idiom:

**Arabic:** /wad'aa/ he said goodbye

**Persian:** /riq-e rahmat ra saikefid/ (S)he drank the liquid stool of blessing.

**French:** manger des pissenlits par la racine 'to eat dandelions by the root'

or casser sa pipe 'to break his pipe'
or passer l'arme à gauche 'pass the weapon to the left';

**German:** den Löffel abgeben, 'to hand the spoon back';

ins Gras beißen, 'to bite (into) the grass';

or sich die Radieschen von unten ansehen, 'look at the radishes from underneath.'

In regard to the translation of idioms, Baker (2012) writes:

A person's competence in activity using the idioms and fixed expressions of a foreign language hardly ever matches that of a native speaker. The majority of translators working into a foreign language cannot hope to achieve the same sensitivity that native speakers seem to have for judging when and how an idiom can be manipulated. This lends some support to the argument that translators should only work into their language of habitual use or mother tongue, at least in genres which are characterized by creative or playful use of language (p. 86).

The major problems in the translation of idiomatic expressions relate to two main areas ‘the ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly; and the difficulties involved in rendering the various aspects of meaning that an idiom or a fixed expression conveys into the target language’ (Baker, 2012: 68).

### 3. Objectives

To date, a large number of research projects have been conducted in the realm of idiomatic expressions. Most of these studies, however, have mainly focused on cross-linguistic or cross-cultural analysis of the idiomatic expression in different languages. Nonetheless, there are a scant number of studies regarding the translation of idiomatic expressions, especially in English and Persian.

Some empirical studies done in the realm of idiom and their application in translation have focused on the patterns of idioms in Persian (Beeman, 1976 & 1986). On the other hand, there are a good number of studies conducted on idiomatic structures in different languages worldwide.

The present study aimed at providing translators with some translation strategies beneficial for translating idiomatic expressions, illuminating the similarities and differences between English and Persian with respect to the type of idiomatic expressions used, and assessing the translation quality of these pragmatic structures. To this end, the following research questions were raised:

1. What translation strategies have been employed by the Persian translator of the selected English novel in rendering idiomatic expressions?

2. To what extent have the Persian translations of English idiomatic expressions rendered the exact degree of idiomaticity?

### 4. Data and Method of the Study

The present study utilized four different theories as its frameworks. With respect to the analysis of the source text and the target text utterances in terms of the idiomatic expressions, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory was employed as the ‘pragmatic framework’ of the study. Newmark’s (1988) translation strategies, on the other hand, was used as the ‘translation framework’ for determining the types of translation strategies utilized by the Persian translators in rendering idiomatic expressions.

To conduct this study, John Steinbeck’s (1939) *The Grapes of Wrath*, translated by Sharifian (2008) and Maskoob & Ahmadi (1964) into Persian as "Khoshe-ha-ye Khashm" were selected as the material of the study. In order to quantify the qualitative data gathered, and to present them in a more meaningful way, a set of descriptive statistics including, frequency, percentage, mean score, total score, and mode was used.

Using Brown & Levinson’s (1987) theory, the utterances of the novel were analyzed and the types of idiomatic expression were determined. Delineating the utterances encompassing the idiomatic expressions, 100 utterances were randomly selected and compared with their Persian translations. Then, they were analyzed based on Newmark’s (1988) translation strategy. With respect to the first research question, after determining the frequencies and percentages of the occurrence of translation strategies, a conclusion was made and some useful translation strategies were proposed. With respect to the second question of the research, the method of scoring the translations in which the scores of 1, 2, 3, and 4 are assigned to the unsuccessful, relatively successful, successful, and completely successful translations, respectively was adopted.

### 5. Data Analysis and Results

In the following data:

**E** stands for the English sentences extracted from Steinbeck’s the Grapes of wrath,

**PS** the Persian translation by Sharifian and

**PM** for the Persian translation by Mashkub and Akbari

(1)
E: Like me to he’p you get them valves set an’ the head on? (Questioning/Hedging & Giving Deference)

PS: /?edţaze midin komæketun konәm supap-ha ro sævar konim vәreglәʃejun konәm/

Translation strategies in PS:
- Questioning/Hedging: /?edţaze midin/
- Giving Deference: Using third person plural suffix /midin komæketun/

Translation strategies:
- Expansion: /?edţaze midin / / reglәʃejun konәm/
- Literal translation: /komæketun konәm supap-ha ro sævar konim/

PM: /mixa baәrә-e kargoʃtaәn-e supapa vә dәrәf behet komәk konәm/

Translation strategies in PM:
- Questioning: Using question as an offer

Translation strategies:
- Literal translation: /mixә/ /supapa vә dәrәʃ/ / /behet komәk konәm/
- Transposition: /kar goʃtaәn-e/

In example 1, the context of situation as well as the level of power, intimacy, and rank of imposition between the speaker of this utterance and the addressee shows a kind of formality that requires a little politeness even at the time of offering. With this regard, a person who has not read this novel cannot recognize this situation. In PS, the translator has delicately applied two Idiomatic expressions , namely, questioning/hedging and giving deference, through using expansion and literal translation as two translation strategies, leading to rendering the same Idiomatic expressions of the E in the PS. That is while in PM, the translator has maintained the linguistic form of the E utterance in PM, leading to a relatively literal translation whose level of Idiomatic expressions  is different from that of the E utterance. It is crystal clear that PM lacks the Idiomatic expressions strategy of giving deference. However, the implicit negative strategy of giving deference in SL has been explicitly rendered in PS.

(2)

E: Could ya come down from your thinkin’ an’ listen a minute? (Questioning/Hedging, Giving Deference, Being Pessimistic)

PS: /miʃә ?әz-un ?әәәm-e fәr kәrdәәn e zәrәe bian pain vә e dәqәqә guʃ bedin/

Translation strategies in PS:
- Questioning/Hedging: /miʃә/
- Giving Deference: Using third person plural suffix / bian / /bedin/
- Being pessimistic: /miʃә ?әz-un ?әәәm-e fәr kәrdәәn bian pain vә e guʃ bedin/

Translation strategies:
- Expansion: /?әәәmә/ /?әz/ /e zәrәe/
- Literal translation: /miʃә ?әz-un fәr kәrdәәn e zәrәe bian pain vә e dәqәqә guʃ bedin/
- Functional equivalent: /miʃә/

PM: /mitunin ?әz fәr kәrdәәn birun bian vә e dәqәqә be мәәn guʃ bedin/

Translation strategies in PM:
- Questioning/Hedging: /mitunin/
- Giving Deference: Using third person plural suffix /mitunin/ / bian / /bedin/
- Being pessimistic: /mitunin ?әz fәr kәrdәәn birun bian vә e dәqәqә be-mәәn guʃ bedin/

Translation strategies:
- Literal translation: /mitunin/ /?әz fәr kәrdәәn/ / vә e dәqәqә guʃ bedin/
- Functional equivalent: /?әz fәr kәrdәәn birun bian/
In example 2, both translations have rendered the three idiomatic expression strategies into P. To be more concise, in both PS and PM, the word /miʃe/ and /mitunin/ have simultaneously conveyed the idiomatic expressions strategies of Hedging and Being Pessimistic. On the other hand, the third person plural suffixes have been utilized to render the strategy of Giving Deference. However, in terms of usage, the word /miʃe/ is better than /mitunin/ among Persian speakers in such a situation. Moreover, in PS, the literal translation of [come down from your thinking] as /æz un fekkærdaen e zærræbænæpæn/ sounds unnatural in TL. This unnaturalness has been eliminated by using a functional equivalent in PM. Consequently, with respect to the accuracy and clarity of translation, both PS and PM are successful while there are some drawbacks in terms of naturalness.

(3)

E: Owners don’t want us to pick up nobody. So we got to set here an’ ust skin her along.

PS: /saheba-e kamiuna ?edʒaze nemidæn ma mosafer sævar konim. ma haem dige natʃarim tæk-o tænha beʃinim vae ranændegi konim./

*Translation strategies in PS:*
- The whole utterance.

*Translation strategies:*
- Modulation: /?edʒaze nemidæn/
- Expansion: / kamiuna/ / mosafer/ / dige/ /tæk-o tænha/
- Functional equivalent: /?edʒaze nemidæn/ / tæk-o tænha beʃinim vae ranændegi konim/

PM: /?ærbab-ha nemizaræn mosafer begirim. Baaed tæk-o-tænha poʃt-e rol gæz kærd./

*Translation strategies in PM:*
- The whole utterance

*Translation strategies:*
- Functional equivalent: /?ærbab-ha nemizaræn mosafer/ / poʃt-e rol gæz kærd/
- Expansion: / mosafer/ / tæk-o-tænha/
- Modulation: / nemizaræn/

In example 3, both PS and PM have accurately rendered the negative translation strategy of Stating the FTA as a General Rule through utilizing the abovementioned translation strategies. It should be mentioned that albeit both PS and PM are successful in terms of accuracy and clarity, PS is more acceptable with respect to the factor of naturalness.

(4)

E: If it hits you wrong, don’t take no offence at it, will you? (Hedging & Minimizing the Imposition)

PS: /?æege ?æez ?una xoʃet næumæd, delxor næʃi-a, bafe/

*Translation strategies in PS:*
- Hedging: /?æege/
- Minimizing the Imposition: / delxor næʃi-a/ / bafe/

*Translation strategies:*
- Expansion: /?æez/
- Reduction: [at it]
- Functional equivalent: /?æege ?æez ?una xoʃet næumæd/ / delxor næʃi-a/ / bafe/

PM: /?æege ?æez ?in hærfa xoʃet nemiad, æqæellaen behet bær-nemixore ke/

*Translation strategies in PM:*
- Hedging: /?æege/
- Being Pessimistic: / æqæellaen behet bær-nemixore ke/

*Translation strategies:
In example 4, PS has accurately and naturally rendered the idiomatic expression strategies (that is, Hedging & Minimizing the Imposition) of the SL utterance into the TL through employing appropriate translation strategies. However, in terms of clarity, the first part of the utterance is a little bit problematic since the reference of the pronoun is not that clear to comprehend. To clarify, it would be better to make the implicit part of this pronoun explicit, as what the second translator has done through employing expansion strategy (that is, in PS).

In order to illustrate the results of the second question of the study regarding the assessment of translation quality of the idiomatic expression strategies, a few examples will be presented and discussed below.

(5)

E: Why don’t you lay a minute till it warms? (Conventionally Indirect, Minimizing the Imposition)

PS: /ʧeranemixabilatævægekæmɡærʃe/

Translation strategies in PS:
- Conventionally Indirect: Using interrogative form to convey speech act of offer.
- Minimizing the Imposition: Indirectly imposing the FTA, and offering instead of commanding.

In example 5, both PS and PM have rendered the abovementioned idiomatic expression strategies. In PS, the translator has creatively translated the respective idiomatic expression strategies by using appropriate translation strategies. Technically speaking, in PS, even though the translator has omitted the noun phrase [a minute], this phrase has been compensated through the translation strategy of compensation by using the adverbial phrase /e kæm/. This translation covers the triad of accuracy, clarity, and naturalness and thus stands in the fourth position of translation quality cline, i.e., completely successful translation whose score is 4.

On the other hand, PM is acceptable; however, it has employed a translation strategy of modulation which is unnecessary and unjustifyable. Hence, it would be better to use the literal translation of the word [lay] instead of /sæbrkærdæn/, even though it has nothing to do with rendering the exact idiomatic expression strategy. This translation is also regarded as a completely successful one whose score is 4.

(6)

E: Could ya come down from your thinkin’ an’ listen a minute? (Questioning/Hedging, Giving Deference, Being Pessimistic)
PS: /miʃærz-un ?alæm-e fekr kærdæn e zærre bian painvæ e dæqiqe guf bedin/

Translation strategies in PS:
- Questioning/Hedging: /miʃ/
- Giving Deference: Using third person plural suffix / bian/ /bedin/
- Being pessimistic: /miʃ æz un fekr kærdæn bian painvæ e dæqiqe guf bedin/

Translation strategies:
- Expansion: /?alæme/ /?un/ /e zærre/
- Literal translation: /miʃ æz un fekr kærdæn e zærre bian painvæ e dæqiqe guf bedin/
- Functional equivalent: /miʃ/

PM: /mitunin ?æz fekr kærdæn birun bianvæ ye dæqiqe be mæn guf bedin/

Translation strategies in PM:
- Questioning/Hedging: /mitunin/
- Giving Deference: Using third person plural suffix /mitunin/ /bian/ /bedin/
- Being pessimistic: /mitunin ?æz fekr kærdæn birun bianvæ ye dæqiqe be mæn guf bedin/

Translation strategies:
- Literal translation: /mitunin/ /?æz fekr kærdæn/ / væ je dæqiqe guf bedin/
- Functional equivalent: /?æz fekr kærdæn birun bian/
- Expansion: /be mæn/

In example 6, both PS and PM have rendered the three Idiomatic expressions strategies. To be more concise, in these two translations, the word /miʃ/ and /mitunin/ have simultaneously conveyed the Idiomatic expressions strategies of Hedging and Being Pessimistic. On the other hand, the third person plural suffixes have been utilized to render the strategy of Giving Deference. However, in terms of usage, the word /miʃ/ is better than /mitunin/ among Persian speakers in such a situation. Moreover, in PS, the literal translation of [come down from your thinkin’] by /?æz un fekrkærdæn e zærrebianpain/ sounds unnatural. This unnaturalness has been eliminated by using a functional equivalent in PM. Consequently, with respect to the accuracy and clarity of translation, both translations are acceptable while there are some drawbacks in terms of naturalness. In Zamani’s (2013) framework, such a translation stands in the third position of the cline, i.e., successful translation (whose score is 3).

With respect to the first question of the study, the results of the data analysis proved that different translation strategies were simultaneously involved in the translation of Idiomatic expressions. Furthermore, the findings of the study indicated that from among Newmark’s (1988) 16 translation strategies, 6 strategies were more beneficial for translating idiomatic expressions. Table 1 shows the frequencies and percentages of the translation strategies involved in the translation of Idiomatic expressions.

| Newmark’s strategies       | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Literal translation       | 118       | 20.6%      |
| Transference              | 8         | 1.3%       |
| Naturalization            | 0         | 0          |
| Through-translation       | 17        | 2.9%       |
| Cultural equivalent       | 36        | 6.3%       |
| Functional equivalent     | 84        | 14.7%      |
| Descriptive equivalent    | 27        | 4.7%       |
As Table 1 shows, *expansion, literal translation, and functional equivalents* are among the very highly frequent translation strategies. On the other hand, *reduction, cultural equivalent, and descriptive equivalent* are located in the high frequency position of the continuum. Furthermore, *modulation, synonymy, transposition, and through translation* are among the translation strategies of low frequency. Finally, the translation strategies of *transference, componential analysis, and compensation* are located at the last position of frequency, that is, very low. With reference to these results, the 6 translation strategies of high and very high frequency are regarded as the most useful strategies in translating idiomatic expressions strategies. In what follows, a few examples will be illustrated and discussed in detail in order to investigate how these strategies have been employed in the translation of idiomatic expressions strategies.

The following table presents the descriptive statistics for each Persian translation with respect to the translation quality of TT1 and TT2.

| Translators          | Mean of scores | Total score | Mode | Number of items |
|----------------------|----------------|-------------|------|-----------------|
| Sharifian            | 3.1            | 312         | 3    | 100             |
| Maskoob & Ahmadi     | 2.3            | 231         | 2    | 100             |

As Table 2 shows, with reference to the aggregated results, the mean scores and the mode of Sharifian’s (2008) (TT1) translation are 3.1 and 3, respectively. These results demonstrate the fact that Sharifian’s translation of idiomatic expressions strategies stands at the third level of translation quality, i.e., successful translation. On the other hand, the gained results show that the mean scores and the mode of Maskoob & Ahmadi’s (1964) (TT2) translation are 2.3 and 2, respectively. This reveals the fact that Maskoob & Ahmadi’s translations are placed at the second point of the translation quality continuum, namely, relatively successful translation.

6. Discussion

As to the frequency of translation strategies, the three translation strategies of expansion, literal translation, and functional equivalent have proved to be amongst the very high frequent translation strategies both in their study and in the present study. This shows the fact that the aforementioned translation strategies are amongst the most useful translation strategies that can facilitate the process of translation of idiomatic expression (idiomatic expressions strategies, in this case).

7. Applications

The findings of this study can be applied in different areas of language, as well. Furthermore, the findings of this study provide translators with some insights regarding interpretation, understanding and translating idiomatic expression in daily oral or written communication. Moreover, these findings can be of interest to different scholars in such areas as translation, linguistics, sociolinguistics and pragmatics. In addition, the findings of the translation quality assessment part of this study are useful in the realm of Translation Quality assessment. Accordingly, the findings of the present study can help translators improve their level of pragmatic competency, at the minimum, in the area of politeness, which can result in improving the quality of translation. Furthermore, the outcomes of the present study can help ESL/EFL teachers to expose their students to some reliable sources of pragmatic information as to their mother tongue and the second/foreign language to be learned.
8. Conclusions

With respect to the first question of the study, the results of the study indicated that from among the 16 translation strategies proposed by Newmark (1988), only 6 strategies were more frequent than the others. Moreover, according to the observations of the study, these 6 strategies proved to be the most beneficial and influential strategies in translating the idiomatic expressions of the selected novel. These 6 strategies included: (a) expansion, (b) literal translation, (c) functional equivalents, (d) reduction, (e) cultural equivalent, and (f) descriptive equivalent. The rest of Newmark’s (1988) strategies, however, proved to be not much important in translating idiomatic expressions. Furthermore, the observations of the study showed that there was a large number of translation strategies involved in the translation of each utterance of idiomatic expressions, indicating that the translation of these pragmatic structures is problematic and needs competency of pragmatic issues, on the part of the translator, to overcome the challenges.

Regarding the second question of the study, translation quality assessment indicated that Sharifian’s (2008) translation of idiomatic expressions strategies stands at the third level of translation quality, i.e., successful translation, while Maskoob & Ahmadi’s (1964) translation is located at the second point of the translation quality continuum, namely, relatively successful translation, illustrating that Sharifian’s translation is one level above the Maskoob & Ahmadi’s. As the results demonstrate, none of these two translations stands at the fourth level of translation quality, i.e., completely successful translation. This proves the fact that even professional translators need to be provided with the contributions of translation studies such as those of the present study in order to improve their quality of translation. Consequently, a competent translator must have mastery of pragmatic issues of the languages involved in the process of translation as well as the linguistic issues.

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