Techniques for Interpreting Abstruse English Idioms into Arabic

Tareq Ali Edaroos Assaqaf

Associate Professor at English Department, Faculty of Education, University of Aden, Yemen.

Abstract: *Idioms exist in every language. They are words or phrases that aren't meant to be taken literally. For example, if you say someone has "cold feet," it doesn't mean their toes are actually cold. Rather, it means they're nervous about something. At the present time, idioms, in all languages around the globe, are commonly used not only in texts, business, press, novels, short stories, plays and social media communication tools, but also articulated in everyday spoken language. In fact, idioms are commonly used in all aspects of life and in all world cultures and languages. For example,in Armenian, "stop ironing my board" means stop bothering me. In French, "when chickens have teeth" means something's never going to happen.In German, "an elephant made out of a fly" means to make a big deal out of nothing.In Italian, "to treat someone with a fish in their face" means to disrespect someone. In Japanese, "my cheeks are falling off" means the food is really delicious. In Polish, "mustard after lunch" means it's too late to do something. Consequently, all these examples prove the importance of interpreting idioms into various languages. But interpreting idioms is not an easy process, since interpreters may encounter many challenges and problems while interpreting them into another language. This study investigates the techniques of interpreting abstruse English idioms into Arabic. The data of the this study are collected from a number of well-known dictionaries such as : A Dictionary of English idioms : English - Arabic, Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture, Al-Mawrid AL-Hadeeth : A Modern English-Arabic Dictionary, Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. The data analysis of this study reveals that there are many techniques can be used for interpreting English idioms into Arabic. These techniques are selected and gra ded according their own priorities.*

Keywords: Translator, Interpreter, Equivalent, Idiom, Technique

1. Introduction

An idiom can be defined as an expression whose meaning is not predictable from the usual meanings of its individual elements, such as **kick the bucket** or **to plough the sand**, or from the general grammatical rules of a language, as **the table round for the round table** .While Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture (1992, p.655) defines the term idiom as " a phrase which means something different from the meanings of the separate words from which it is formed" , Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1995, p. 589) points out that an idiom is " a phrase or sentence whose meaning is not clear from the meaning of its individual words and which must be learnt as a whole unit" . Moreover, Al-Mawrid AL-Hadeeth : A Modern English-Arabic Dictionary (2015,p.568) indicates that an idiom is a phrase that has a meaning which cannot be recognized by just comprehending its individual elements, (my translation). Maxos, (2003,p.4) refers that by and large, idioms are mostly used in speaking more than writing. To quote Maxos "Generally, idioms are used more often in speaking than writing and therefore sixty to seventy percent of idioms are associated with spoken language". Moreover, Larsen (1984, p.180) states that religious idioms are considered to be the most difficult to be interpreted. To quote him (1984, p.180) "terms which deal with the religious aspects of a culture are usually the most difficult, both in analysis of the source vocabulary and in finding the best receptor language equivalence".

But a question is raised here: Why idioms are important? Why do people of various cultures tend to use idioms in their use of language intensively? Idioms are important and useful, I think for a number of reasons: firstly, idioms help us speak or write many things with just a few words, secondly, they help us enrich and enhance our use of language, thirdly, they are nicer to listen to and make the conversation less monotonous and more funny, fourthly, idioms are often used by native speakers, so if second language learners wish to sound like native speakers, they have to start using them. Fifthly, using idioms gives power and add colour to writing and speech. Last but certainly not least, idioms can amplify messages in a way that draws receptors' attention and care and helps to awaken their senses.

Why Do Foreign Language Learners Have to Learn Idioms?

All languages are full of idioms, and native speakers use them spontaneously without even thinking about their figurative nature. Language learners generally find idioms hard to understand, and this is not surprising. Three basic reasons of why learning idioms by foreign language learners is so important can be listed as follows:

1) Idioms can help expanding foreign language learners' knowledge. This means, using idioms can make their writing creative and outside the box. For example, instead of saying or writing (he has a limited experience of doing something) , one can say or write (he is **wet behind the ears**). (Mowafi et al, 1985, p.89).
2) Idioms can help making writing and speaking have a sense of humor. It means that idioms can also add humor and fun to writing and speaking in places where someone may find themselves seem brash. For example, instead of saying / writing (I actually believed that his wife had a royal blood. Then I realized she was joking at me.), one can say or write (I actually believed that his wife had a royal blood. Then I realized she was **pulling my leg**.) Similarly, "**when pigs fly**" is a more dynamic way to say that something is highly unlikely to occur since pigs actually do not fly. (Mowafi et al, 1985, p.231, 220).

3) Idioms "dress our writing or speech to impress". There are a number of idioms that can take a dull writing and make it more impressive. For example, using "**add insult to injury**" sounds just a bit more expressive http://thewritelife.com/pumping-your-writing-full-of-creativity/than telling someone that they are making a situation worse. Instead of telling someone that somebody is dead, one might say " he /she passed away" .Are you trying to convey that you agree with someone? Perhaps you could say that you "**see eye to eye**." To say that you were between two dangerous alternatives, one can say "**between the devil and the deep blue sea**"(Mowafi et al, 1985, p. 154,215, 96,78).

2. Problem Statement

It's a well-known fact that the process of interpreting is much more difficult than the process of translating. While in the latter process, the translator has enough time and effort and also has the necessary weapons for the process which are various general and specific dictionaries, not only this, but also has the time to revise what he / she translates , in the former process, the interpreter suffers of lack of all these possibilities :lack of enough time , lack of doing the process of revising what he / she interprets and suffers of lack of consulting necessary dictionaries. His / her only weapon is the speed of the process and his / her memory.

The same story happens here in interpreting idioms compared with translating them, in short, interpreting idioms is much more difficult than translating them because of the already mentioned reasons. To add insult to injury, some English idioms are abstruse and difficult to translate even by using dictionaries, so how about in case of interpreting them?

The problem of this study is to find an answer to the following question:

What are the suggested techniques which might help interpreters in rendering abstruseEnglish idioms into Arabic orally?

This paper tries to investigate to answer this question.

The Importance of Interpreting Abstruse English Idioms into Arabic
The basic importance of this paper lies in its duty to supply interpreters with necessary techniques and procedures that can help them overcoming the challenges that face them while encountering abstruse English idioms to be interpreted into Arabic.

The Proposed techniques for Interpreting Abstruse English Idioms into Arabic
Six applicable techniques have been suggested by the researcher in order to help interpreters to interpret English idioms into Arabic. These techniques are selected and graded according to their own priorities. They are listed as follows:

1) Interpreting an SL idiom by an equivalent TL idiom that is identical or at least similar in both words and structure.

2) Interpreting an SL idiom by an equivalent TL idiom that uses different words and structure.
3) Paraphrase.
4) Calque.
5) Guessing the message of the SL idiom by comprehending its contextual meaning .
6) Consulting the technique of literal interpreting with an indication to a statement, if needed be, to clarify the SL idiom message and this has to be carried out as a last resort.

A note of paramount significance is to be considered here which is the process of using, selecting and grading all these techniques should be worked out in a speedy rate inside the interpreter's mind.

All these proposed techniques will be discussed in detail in the coming sections.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

This paper adopts the qualitative approach for collecting and analyzing data. The collected data of this study, i.e. the selected English idioms to be interpreted into Arabic are collected from a number of various accredited dictionaries. These dictionaries are as follows : A Dictionary of English idioms : English - Arabic, Longman Dictionary of English language and Culture, Al-Mawrid AL-Hadeeth : A Modern English-Arabic Dictionary, Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. The techniques of the process of interpreting are applied, selected and graded according their own priorities.

3.2 Data Analysis
The first suggested technique to help the interpreter, which must be given a priority, is using a ready-made equivalent TL Arabic idiom , that is an idiom which is identical, or at least, similar in form and structure. Bahumaid (2010) indicates that this technique would perhaps be considered as the most appropriate procedure for interpreting English idioms into Arabic. However, such a strategy would not work effectively in most cases especially when the two languages involved in the process of interpreting are culturally divergent and have different linguistic and historical origins. Indeed, there are only a few equivalent idioms that are similar in their structural and lexical makeup in such pairs of languages as English and Arabic whose cultures and linguistic structures are disparate. For example, the English idiom **turn a deaf ear** as in the following sentence: (The teacher **turned a deaf ear** to Pop's excuse) which means he refused to listen to Pop's excuse .(Mowafi et al, 1985, 318). The ready- made TL Arabic equivalent is يصم آذانه عن   ) (yasomuadanihi an) literally means (to cover his ear) . In case the interpreter cannot find the identical ready-made TL equivalent or cannot remember it, then he / she can use a TL equivalent similar in words and structure. For example, **add fuel to the fire** which means to make an already difficult situation worse by one's actions or words, as in the following sentence (Nothing would help her when she became worried. Words of encouragement just **added fuel to the fire**). (Mowafi et al, 1985, p.109). The similar TL

idiom in Arabic is(يصب الزيت على النار) (yasobualzyta ala alnari) literally means (to pour oil to the fire). Note that though the SL English idiom and TL Arabic are identical in meaning, they are slightly different in form. The only two differences are in the words add and fuel. While the SL idiom uses the words add and fuel, the TL Arabic one uses the words pour and oil respectively. But the meaning, which is the main goal for the process, remain the same.

In case, the interpreter cannot find or remember the first technique, he/she can adopt the second one which is by interpreting an SL idiom with an equivalent TL idiom that uses different words. In other words, this means that though both SL and TL idioms are formally different, they are idiomatically identical. To make the point clear, let us take the following example, the English idiom (**kick in the teeth)** whichmeansto discourage or disappoint someone very much, especially when they need support or hope,as in the sentence (Whenever John needed help or encouragement from his father, his father always seemed to give him **a kick in the teeth**) (Mowafi et al, 1985, p. 301). The TL Arabic idiomatic equivalence is يخذله خذلانا تاما / يكسر قلبه) (literally means (to break one's heart / to disappoint one) . Note, the literal meaning of the words teeth and kick has no relation to the meaning of the previous indicated idiom. Another example, the English idiom (**pay through the nose**) which means to make one pay a very high price for something. For example, (he made me **pay through the nose** for this watch) (Baalbaki, 2015, p. 777). The TL idiomatic equivalence is (**جعلني أدفع ثمنا باهظا لهذه الساعة**) literally means (He made me pay a very high price for this watch). The word nose is not crucial to the SL English message.

Again in case the interpreter does not find or cannot remember a TL idiomatic idiom in Arabic that convey the same meaning of the SL English idiom, he/she may rely on the third technique which is the process of paraphrasing. A paraphrase may be defined as an expanded target text version of a source text lexical unit written in the translator's own words in order to reproduce the source text author's meaning as closely as possible (Mundey 2009,p.214). Using the technique of paraphrasing in interpreting idioms would be the safest and most appropriate procedure to be applied. Take the following examples below :

SL English Idiom   TL Arabic Paraphrased Equivalence
As dry as dustممل / مضجر   dull
Wet behind the ears قليل الخبرة   having little or no experience.
Dry behind the ears محنك / خبير Having great experience of doing something.
Let the cat out of the bagيفشي سرا to reveal a secret.
Between the devil and the deep blue see بين امرين أحلاهما مر between   two matters in which the better one is worse. Marwick   et al (1992).

Note that the key words of the previous SL idioms which are dry, dust, ears, cat, bag, devil and deep blue see are not crucial to the SL message of the idioms, because of this, the interpreter has to quickly paraphrase them by using a direct and simple language.

In case the interpreter cannot have or does not know the ability to paraphrase the required SL English idioms, then he/she can consult the forth technique which is using a calque.

A calque or, to use Newmark's)1988(terminology, a 'loan translation' is an interpreting strategy whereby the individual elements of an SL item are interpreted literally to reproduce a TL equivalent (Shuttleworth and Cowie 1999, p.18). The dominance of English worldwide due to political, economic and historical factors has led, among other things, to the spread, mainly through the media, of expressions and phrases including idioms borrowed from English to several languages. The borrowed idioms correspond both literally and figuratively to their English counterparts. In Arabic, a number of English calques are currently in frequent circulation among native speakers of the language. Such calques have become part and parcel of the Arabic lexicon and have even found their way into some monolingual Arabic-Arabic and bilingual English-Arabic dictionaries. For example, the Arabic idiom يضرب / كسر الرقم القياسيwhich is borrowed from English **break a record** is found in *Al-Mu'jam Al-Wajeez* (2007, p.378) - an Arabic-Arabic Dictionary published by the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo- and Ba'albaki's*Al-Mawrid*: *a Modern English – ArabicDictionary* (2000, p.766). Examples of some English calques that appear in spoken and / or written forms in Arabic are listed below:

English
Arabic

twist his armيلوي ذراعه
tighten the beltشدالأحزمةعلى البطن
strike a (sensitive) chordيضرب على وتر حساس
get the lion's shareيحصل على نصيب الاسد
The fifth technique is guessing the message of the SL idiom by comprehending its contextual meaning . This technique is arrived at in case the last two techniques of paraphrasing and using calque do not work or the interpreter cannot remember them, in such a case, guessing the meaning of the SL English idiom by understanding what comes before and what comes after the required SL English idiom message is inevitable. In other words, understanding the message that comes before and after the required SL idiom, this will help the interpreter to understand the message of the required SL idiom. For example, suppose the following short dialogue between two people, let us call them A and B :
A. " I'll wake up early in the morning tomorrow to clean my room since tomorrow is a vacation".
B. " Yes, you will do that **when pigs fly**".
A. " Oh, no. I mean what I say. Don't make fun of me".

The SL idiom **when pigs fly** indicates that something is unlikely impossible to happen since pigs actually do not fly. (Mowafi et al, 1985, p. 220). The phrase is often used for humorous effect, to scoff at over-ambition. Whereas "A's" statement refers that he/she is going to wake up early in the morning in order to clean his/her room, "B's" reply is like a sense of humor to tell "A" that is very difficult for him/her to get up early in the morning and clean his/her room, since "A" does not usually get up early in the morning for doing something. But in case the interpreter cannot comprehend

the SL message of the idiom, he/she can guess its meaning from the beginning and the end of the dialogue, i.e. comprehending the context. Notice, at the end of the discourse "B's" reply is "Don't make fun of me" which indicates that "A's" reply was certainly an irony and he/she does not believe that "B" is going to get up early in the morning to clean his/her room. Understanding the context helps the interpreter to guess the meaning of the required SL idiom. But a question is raised here: how can the interpreter understand the context? Well, interpreters will make aware to a context in case they recognize what I call the "Ws". By the term "Ws" I mean to know the followings of a dialogue:
1. Who is talking to whom?
2. What is being talked about, i.e. the subject matter?
3. Where did the incidents of the dialogue take place ?
4. When did the incidents of the dialogue take place?
5. Why did the incidents of the dialogue take place?
6. How did the incidents of the dialogue take place?

Recognizing these "Ws" will effectively help interpreters to comprehend the context of the message and so helping them guessing the message of the required SL English idiom.

But in case the fifth technique of guessing the message of the SL idiom by comprehending its contextual meaning doesn't work, the interpreter has to consult the final technique which is the process of literal interpreting. But this technique is to be arrived at as a last resort. In both calques and literal interpreting, a word-for-word correspondence exists between the SL idioms and their TL counterparts. However, unlike calques which have been transferred from the SL to the TL through borrowing and '*mayover time become fixed*' (Munday 2009, p. 171), literal interpreting reflects the attempts made by individual interpreters to produce what they would perceive as correct renditions of the SL idioms. It should be pointed out that since idioms primarily convey figurative meanings, they would not be expected, in the overwhelming majority of cases, to lend themselves easily to literal interpreting. Hence, using this technique of literal interpreting for rendering idioms will be always fraught with problems. It is for this reason that interpreting scholars often warn interpreters against the use of literal interpreting in rendering idioms into the TL, although they do not rule it out completely. In this respect, Newmark (1998, p.73) states that "idioms cannot be translated literally … unless they have a perfect literal equivalent in the TL". Thus, interpreters may attempt a literal, but careful rendering of an SL idiom only as a last resort when the already explained five interpreting techniques discussed above cannot be employed. As far as the interpreting of English idioms into Arabic is concerned, Abu- Sayyideh (2004, p.125) points out that only in a few cases literal translation may fit snugly in the idiomatic system of Arabic. The most significant requirement that must be fulfilled in rendering an SL idiom literally is that the TL items must have the literal and figurative potential of that idiom as in the case of the literal Arabic rendition of the English idiom **broaden his horizons**as يوسع آفاقه . (youwas'oafaqihi). Moreover, in many times interpreters have to use a statement, beside literal interpreting, to throw more light to their TL message equivalence.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is of paramount significance to indicate that the process of interpreting English Idioms into Arabic is much more difficult compared with the process of translating them from English into Arabic. The reasons for this can be outlined as follows:
1) Interpreters, unlike translators, suffer of lack of enough time while performing the process.
2) Unlike translators, interpreters suffer of lack of revising what they have already interpreted.
3) No dictionaries are allowed to be used in the process of interpreting English idioms into Arabic, the only weapons for interpreters are just using their mind and memory and acting as well as responding in a speedy reaction.

Then, the researcher of this paper moved on to suggest six techniques that might help interpreters to interpret English idioms into Arabic. These techniques are outlined as follows :
1) Interpreting an SL idiom by an equivalent TL idiom that is identical or at least similar in both words and structure.
2) Interpreting an SL idiom by an equivalent TL idiom that uses different words and structure.
3) Paraphrase.
4) Calque.
5) Guessing the message of the SL idiom by comprehending its contextual meaning .
6) Consulting the technique of literal interpreting with an indication to a statement, if needed be, to clarify the SL idiom message and this has to be carried out as a last resort.

Finally, these proposed techniques by the researcher are systematically selected and graded according their own priorities. In case technique number 1 does not work or remembered by the interpreter, he/she shouldn't hesitate to adopt the second one. In case the second technique does not work, he/she moves on to the third one and so on. Of course, all these techniques are supposed to take place in the interpreter's mind in a speedy rate.

References

[1] Abu-Ssaydeh, Abdul-Fattah. (2004). 'Translation of English idioms'. *Babel*, 50/ 2: 114-131.
[2] *Al-Mu'jam Al-Wajeez*(2007) Cairo: Arabic Language Academy.
[3] Ba'albaki, M.(2000). *Al-Mawrid, A Modern English-Arabic Dictionary*.
[4] Beirut: Dar El-Ilm Lil-Malayen
[5] Ba'albaki, M. Ba'albaki, R.(2015).*The All New AL-Mawrid AL-Hadeeth : A Modern English-Arabic Dictionary*. Beirut: Dar El-Ilm Lil-Malayen
[6] Bahumaid, S. (2010). "Strategies of Translating Idioms in English-Arabic Dictionaries". *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies (IJAES).*Vol.11
[7] Hornby, A. (1995). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary.* Oxford : Oxford University Press.
[8] Larson, M. (1984). *Meaning-Based Translation: A Guide to Cross Language Equivalence*. New York : University Press of America

[9] Marwick, K. Johnson, D. Hargraves, O. Brock, B. (1992). *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*. England : Longman House.

[10] Marwick, K. Stern, E. Engineer, S. (1995). *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English.* England : Longman House.

[11] Maxos, H. (1995-2003). *The Arabic Idioms; the Art of Speech-Arabic Idioms Chapter*. Syria : Damascus Press.

[12] Mowafi, M. Kharma**,** N. Durayni, M. Fayad, S. Barbary, S. Hajjaj, A. Hammouda, F. Gad, A. (1985). *A Dictionary of English Idioms : English – Arabic*. Beirut: Librarie Du Liban.

[13] Mundey, J.(2009). *The Routledge Companion to Translation Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.

[14] Newmark, P.(1988). *A Textbook of Translation*. Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall.

[15] Newmark, P.(1998). *More Paragraphs on Translation*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

[16] Shuttleworth, M. and Cowie, M.(1997). *Dictionary of Translation Studies*. Manchester : St. Jerome.