

Linguistic, Cultural, and Pragmatic Challenges in Translating Idiomatic Expressions from English to Uzbek

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Introduction

Idioms are figurative expressions that reflect the worldview, values, and communicative traditions of a language community. Unlike literal language, idioms resist direct translation due to their metaphorical meaning and context-specific functions. In both English and Uzbek, idioms play a significant role in daily communication, literature, and media. However, translating them requires more than lexical substitution — it demands sensitivity to linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic dimensions.

This research explores the challenges encountered in translating English idiomatic expressions into Uzbek. It highlights three major problem areas: linguistic (structural and grammatical), cultural (beliefs, customs, and worldviews), and pragmatic (intended function, tone, and context). The goal is to identify patterns in how idioms behave across languages and recommend translation strategies suitable for Uzbek translators working with English texts.

Methodology

This research employs a **qualitative-descriptive method** using **comparative analysis** and **case-based examples**, which is common in translation studies (Baker, 2018; Larson, 1998). The study follows these steps:

1. **Idiomatic Sample Selection:** Twenty idioms were selected from widely used English idiomatic dictionaries (e.g., *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*) and literary texts.
2. **Uzbek Translations Analyzed:** Their existing or potential Uzbek equivalents were reviewed in both published translations and unofficial media subtitles.
3. **Categorization:** Challenges were classified into three main domains — linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic — following theoretical frameworks proposed by Baker (2018) and Nida and Taber (2003).
4. **Translation Strategy Evaluation:** Each idiom was analyzed in terms of the strategy used: literal translation, substitution, paraphrasing, or omission (Newmark, 1988).
5. **Text Types:** Both literary texts (e.g., *Animal Farm*) and audiovisual materials (e.g., Netflix subtitle translations) were analyzed to illustrate domain-specific challenges.

Results

Linguistic Challenges

English idioms often follow a verb-object structure, while Uzbek, being an agglutinative language, uses suffixation to show grammatical relationships (Larson, 1998). For example, “bite the bullet” cannot be directly mirrored in Uzbek syntax without distorting meaning. According to Newmark (1988), when syntactic equivalence is lacking, reformulation is required, yet this may dilute stylistic effect.

Uzbek idioms also tend to be more image-based and metaphorical. A literal translation like “don’t cry over spilled milk” as *to’kilgan sut uchun yig’lama* fails to resonate culturally or linguistically. Instead, the Uzbek idiom *O’tgan ishga salovat* carries similar pragmatic meaning but is grammatically and culturally native.

Cultural Challenges

Many idioms in English stem from Christianity, Greek mythology, or Western traditions. For instance, “Achilles’ heel” references Greek mythology and requires contextual knowledge not common among Uzbek speakers (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995). A literal translation offers little

meaning without cultural explanation. As Nida and Taber (2003) argue, cultural equivalence often outweighs lexical accuracy in translation.

Similarly, “bring home the bacon” involves food and lifestyle associations unfamiliar or inappropriate in Muslim-majority Uzbek society. A more suitable equivalent would be *non topib kelmoq*, which aligns with Uzbek culture and conveys the intended meaning of earning a living (Baker, 2018).

Pragmatic Challenges

Idioms often carry specific **pragmatic functions**, such as signaling politeness, sarcasm, or exaggeration. The English idiom “break the ice,” for example, functions as a metaphor for initiating social interaction. Translating it literally into Uzbek does not convey its idiomatic nuance. According to Fernando (1996), the pragmatics of idioms must be evaluated alongside their semantic and syntactic components.

Tone and register also differ significantly. For example, “burning the midnight oil” may be translated as *kechasi bilan o’qimoq*, but this translation lacks the poetic imagery. As Newmark (1988) notes, idioms often serve an expressive or rhetorical purpose, and a loss in tone may diminish their communicative effect.

Discussion

The challenges identified reinforce the view that idiomatic translation is a **multidimensional process** requiring both linguistic competence and cultural literacy. Baker’s (2018) strategies — using idioms of similar meaning and/or form, paraphrasing, or omission — were frequently observed across both literary and media texts.

In culturally sensitive contexts, translators tend to **domesticate** idioms — that is, they replace them with expressions familiar to the Uzbek audience (Venuti, as cited in Baker, 2018). For instance, the idiom “when pigs fly” is best translated as *tovuq tishlaganda*, which maintains the function (impossibility) but changes the metaphor.

In literary translation (e.g., Orwell’s *Animal Farm*), translators often opt for paraphrasing or functional equivalence to maintain narrative clarity. In contrast, film subtitle translators sometimes omit idioms due to time and space constraints, a practice also discussed by Larson (1998) as a trade-off between brevity and semantic richness.

These findings suggest that translator training in Uzbekistan should emphasize idiomatic competence and the importance of **contextual meaning**, not just vocabulary knowledge. This is particularly important in professional domains like diplomatic translation, literature, and audiovisual localization.

Conclusion

Translating idiomatic expressions from English to Uzbek presents linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic challenges that demand more than word-for-word equivalence. Because idioms are fixed expressions with figurative meanings, direct translation often results in confusion or loss of meaning.

This study shows that strategies like substitution with a culturally similar idiom, paraphrasing, and, in some cases, omission can be effective, depending on context and purpose. The translator’s role is to balance fidelity to the source with accessibility and resonance for the target audience (Baker, 2018; Nida & Taber, 2003).

Further research could examine the translation of Uzbek idioms into English or the teaching of idiomatic expressions in bilingual classrooms. Ultimately, mastering idiomatic translation is key to effective cross-cultural communication.

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