

The Translatability of English Idioms into Arabic: A Comparative Study of Challenges and Pedagogical Strategies

قابلية ترجمة العبارات الاصطلاحية الإنجليزية إلى اللغة العربية: دراسة مقارنة للتحديات والاستراتيجيات التربوية (البيداغوجية)

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ABSTRACT

Proverbs and idioms constitute a core component of linguistic and cultural systems, encapsulating collective memory, social values, and culturally embedded modes of expression. Their figurative density and pragmatic orientation render their translation between languages — particularly between English and Arabic — highly complex. This study undertakes a comparative analysis of selected English idioms and proverbs and their Arabic translations, examining the extent to which linguistic structure, cultural context, and grammatical constraints shape translational choices. Grounded in contemporary translation theory, the paper foregrounds translation as a process of linguistic, cultural, and functional transfer rather than mere lexical substitution. The findings demonstrate that prioritizing dynamic functional equivalence over literal, word-for-word translation is essential for preserving intended meaning, pragmatic force, and cultural resonance. The analysis further highlights the decisive role of grammatical competence in English - Arabic translation, given Arabic's distinct syntactic orientation and rich morphological system. In addition, the study addresses ethical considerations in translation practice and underscores the limitations of automated translation systems in handling emotive, idiomatic, and culturally nuanced expressions. Ultimately, the paper argues that successful idiom and proverb translation depends on the translator's bicultural awareness, grammatical mastery, and interpretive sensitivity, reaffirming the irreplaceable role of human agency in literary and cultural translation.

الخلاصة

تعد الأمثال والشوارد اللغوية (التعابير الاصطلاحية idioms) مكوناً جوهرياً في النظم اللغوية والثقافية، إذ تختزن الذاكرة الجمعية والقيم الاجتماعية وأنماط التعبير المتجذرة في الثقافة. ويجعل ما تنسم به هذه الوحدات التعبيرية من كثافة مجازية ووظيفة تداولية ترجمتها بين اللغات - ولا سيما بين الإنجليزية والعربية - عملية بالغة التعقيد. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إجراء تحليل تقابلي لمجموعة مختارة من الأمثال والشوارد اللغوية الإنجليزية وترجماتها العربية، مع التركيز على أثر البنية اللغوية والسياق الثقافي والقيود النحوية في توجيه الاختيارات الترجمة. وانطلاقاً من مناهج حديثة في نظرية الترجمة، ينظر البحث إلى الترجمة بوصفها عملية نقل لغوي وثقافي ووظيفي، لا مجرد إحلال معجمي. وتبين النتائج أن إعطاء الأولوية للتكافؤ الوظيفي الديناميكي على حساب الترجمة الحرفية كلمة بكلمة يعدّ أمراً أساسياً للحفاظ على المعنى المقصود وعلى القيمة التداولية والانعكاس الثقافي للنص الأصلي. كما يبرز التحليل الدور الحاسم للكفاءة النحوية في الترجمة بين الإنجليزية والعربية، نظراً لاختلاف التوجه التركيبي للعربية وغناها الصرفي. وإلى جانب ذلك، يناقش البحث الاعتبارات الأخلاقية في الممارسة الترجمة، ويكشف عن محدودية أنظمة الترجمة الآلية في التعامل مع التعبيرات الانفعالية والاصطلاحية المشحونة ثقافياً. ويخلص البحث إلى أن الترجمة الناجحة للأمثال والشوارد اللغوية تعتمد على وعي المترجم الثنائي بالثقافة، وإتقانه للبنية النحوية، وحساسيته التأويلية، مؤكداً بذلك الدور الذي لا يمكن الاستغناء عنه للعنصر البشري في الترجمة الأدبية والثقافية.

Keywords

الكلمات المفتاحية

الأمثال، (الشوارد) التعابير الاصطلاحية، التكافؤ الوظيفي الديناميكي، النقل الثقافي، الترجمة بين الإنجليزي والعربي idioms, proverbs, dynamic equivalence, cultural transfer, English-Arabic translation

Received

استلام البحث

5/11/2025

Accepted

قبول النشر

10/12/2025

Published online

النشر الإلكتروني

12/1/2026

1. INTRODUCTION

Translation is defined as a persistent task involving the creation of a target text from a source text which is constrained by language and culture. (Vermeer, 1989, as cited in Munday, 2016). In other words, it is the process of changing words, phrases and sentences, along with their meanings, from one language to another. Likewise, Catford (1995) states that translating a text from one language to another — the target language — is the process of replacing the original text. Translation has existed since BC. For Urvashi (2022), in the final decade of the 20th century, translation received the attention it deserved, and in the 21st century, it has continued on its successful trajectory. These days, researchers are particularly interested in translation studies.

Nordquist (2020) states that the Latin word "translation" is the actual and physical source of the English word. Its root word, *transfere*, is Latin and a compound of:

The prefix "trans-" means "across" or "beyond."

The verb "*ferre*" means "to carry" or "to bear."

Thus, the most basic etymological meaning of the word "to translate" is "to carry across."

There are several levels at which this "carrying across" occurs:

Translating meaning from one language "the source" to another "the target" is known as "linguistic transfer."

Transmitting thoughts, narratives, and ideas between cultures is known as "cultural transfer."

Transmitting historical texts into the present is referred to as temporal transfer or temporal carrying.

Translation requires more than changing words from the source language to the target language. It also requires a thorough understanding of the world, a wide range of cultural backgrounds, and an understanding of the phrases' or chunks' functional purposes; otherwise, true meanings may be lost. Such information is not exclusive to the language of origin. It should also include the target language. In this regard, translators are expected to enrich their knowledge in both languages, say the source and target language, as this enables them to be considerate and gain comprehension of what is kept unsaid in the target text.

2. MOVING BEYOND LITERAL TRANSLATION

According to Baker (2018), the fundamental challenge of translating idioms is that they are fixed forms of language which permit slight to no modification in form, and they have a meaning that cannot be inferred from its constituent parts. The enormous linguistic and cultural differences between Arabic and English enhance this issue. Stated differently, idioms as a whole express a meaning distinct from the meaning of the words that make them up.

3. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

It is important to keep in mind that different languages have different ways of expressing ideas, and that these ways follow social and cultural conventions, as **Hatim & Munday (2004)** put it. For example, idioms and proverbs in Europe, and the UK in particular, reflect the extremely cold weather, whereas in the Arab world, which is reputed to be hot, the opposite is true. An example of this will be the idiom "*to warm someone's heart*", meaning to make someone glad, where the Arabic translation of this is "يُثَلِّجُ الصَّدر". Another example is "*on pins and needles*" whose Arabic equivalent is "على أحر من الجمر". In both idioms the cultural aspect is preserved. In the first idiom, the verb "*to warm*" comes from the bitterly cold climate of Europe, namely the United States and the United Kingdom. The word then gives the concept a positive twist because "*warm*" is a desirable quality in such frigid nations. The opposite is true in Arab countries whose climate is hot. In order to convey its exact meaning, a positive reference to the climate and culture should be considered when translating such idiom into Arabic. As for the second idiom "*on pins and needles*", meaning worried or nervous about something, the culture and hot climate of the Arab countries is also maintained. In this, "being worried or nervous: is connected to something which is negative, say being/ waiting on a hot and burning ember. Such idioms are impossible to translate literally, and doing so could produce a message that has no sense.

The same is true for dotting the letters; where necessary, add dots to the letters. In Arabic, this is practically required. Otherwise, words will be difficult to understand or read. In English, the case is not that significant because only few letters require it. Due to this, the idiom "*to dot the i's and cross the t's*", meaning to pay a great deal of attention to the details of something, should not be translated literally into Arabic, because doing so might never accomplish what the idiom is attempting to convey. Instead, when translating it into the target language, cultural considerations must also be taken into account which is "يُضَعُّ النِّقَاطُ عَلَى الحُرُوفِ". These illustrations show that translation is neither a literal description of word meanings nor a word-for-word equivalent.

Related to the culture of the United Kingdom is the idiom "*not be someone's cup of tea*", meaning not the type of thing that someone likes "ليس من ذوقي". The idiom takes its origin from Britain, and it reflects the outstanding bond between Britain and tea. In the 1840s, Anna, the Duchess of Bedford, popularized the afternoon tea custom, which later became a mainstay of social life, Pettigrew (2001) states. Giving someone a cup of tea was a gesture of friendship and hospitality.

Accepting it meant finding something in common. On the other hand, declining a certain blend or the practice of drinking tea was a subtly obvious sign of incompatibility. As a result, the drink changed from being a straightforward beverage to a strong social emblem. Rendering the precise meaning of an idiom or a proverb might, to a great extent, rest on understanding the history of the culture of the nation wherein the same idiom or proverb is used.

Similarly, the idiom *"to carry coals to Newcastle"*, meaning to supply something to a place or person that already has a lot of that particular thing; a pointless action, "ناقل التمر إلى هجر". Meaning to carry dates to Hajar (Bahrain and East Saudi). *"Newcastle"* was once famous for being a center of coal shipping from nearby mines. Since the idiom originated in the United Kingdom, when translating, translators need to be keen on conveying the meaning in the target language according to the appropriate culture.

Parallel to the previously analyzed idioms, the idiom *"to beat around the bush"*, meaning to avoid talking about what is important, "يلف ويدور في حديثه" comes from hunting traditions used in the West. This would be unintelligible if it was translated directly.

Moreover, translators must be aware of linguistic variances and adjust the content accordingly. Furthermore, translators ought to change meanings in an ethical manner. To put it differently, tricky words should not be easily omitted or left out only due to the false belief that they are insignificant or contribute little to the overall meaning. For Nida (1964), translators are required to faithfully communicate and maintain writer's message and intention. Moreover, ideas and opinions should be rendered precisely and faithfully. The writer's intended meaning may be distorted if the exact intention is not clearly conveyed throughout the work.

4. TRANSLATION FRAMEWORK AND STRATEGIS

A variety of approaches to handling tricky idioms has been developed by linguists and translation theorists. How these are used in the English-Arabic context can be seen through a comparative examination.

a) Translating idioms by finding an equivalent one in Arabic which has a similar meaning.

In terms of meaning and figurative picture, this optimal approach locates an Arabic idiom which is equivalent to the English one. For example, *"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush"* means holding onto what one has is preferable to risking losing it in the pursuit of something better.

In the light of the above strategy, the most convenient translation will be:

"عصفور في اليد خير من عشرة على الشجرة"

Similarly, the idiom "strike while the iron is hot" signifies to seize an opportunity as soon as it presents itself. According to the strategy of finding an equivalent Arabic meaning, the most suitable Arabic translation is: "أن تضرب الحديد وهو ساخن". In these idioms, the main analogy, along with the overall structure, is nearly the same in both versions the English and Arabic, so a direct translation with relevant culture is possible (Jabr, 2020).

b) Paraphrasing the translation

When there is not a cultural counterpart, translators must translate the meaning simply, discarding the idiom's structure and aesthetic value as is the case of the idiom *"to carry coal to Newcastle"*. When the same idiom is translated, the cultural identity will no longer exist because of the loss of cultural equivalent, attempting to convey the same semantic significance the idiom communicates.

The idiom's conciseness, cultural character, and rhetorical strength are all lost in the process, but the semantic meaning is guaranteed to be grasped. According to Newmark (1988), it is a practical last choice for statements that cannot be translated.

5. GRAMMAR FACTOR

Arabic sentences typically start with verbs as the Arabic word order is verb, subject, object Ryding (2005), with the exception of nominal sentences, whereas English sentences start with subjects or pronouns. However, a translated text alters slightly. This is due to some feelings that are not transferable from one language to another. The Arabic language is regarded rich in sentiments, which makes it challenging to translate, hence this is evident while translating poetry. When it comes to deciphering the writer's exact feelings, some parts of the original, source language may be challenging to reproduce. Not even machine translation can accomplish this.

When it comes to definite articles, for Ryding, the noun phrase is made definite by the addition of the Arabic definite article *"al-"* "the". Additionally, the construct status, or *"إضافة"*, *Idafa* is a "genitive construction" that expresses possession without the use of a possessive preposition, for example, "The student's book". The Arabic translation is "كتاب الطالب". In literal translation, the same might be translated as "الطالب الكتاب".

The case endings or *'i rāb* (إِغْرَاب) in Arabic are distinguished by short vowels or "diacritical marks", say *ḍammah*, *fat'hah*, *kasrah* and *sukuun*, attached to a word's final consonant. The grammatical role of a noun in a sentence is indicated by these endings (subject, object, object of a preposition, etc.). The case system in English, which depends on word order and prepositions, is essentially obsolete or archaic.

e.g. The student gave the teacher the ID card.

“The student” is the subject, and the case is nominative, meaning "التلميذ".

“the teacher” is the indirect object, and the case is accusative, meaning "المدرس".

“the ID card” is the direct object, and the case is also accusative, meaning "البطاقة".

Correct pronunciation or diacritical marks are fundamental towards better understanding. They, however, play a significant role in rendering the meaning while translating.

6. CONCLUSION

There is more to translation than merely switching words between the source and target languages. Rather, it demands a deep comprehension of the world and its cultures, along with an awareness of the idioms' or expressions' practical value. This knowledge level or proficiency extends beyond the native language. It should include the target language as well. Therefore, bilingual proficiency is essential for translators to uncover meanings that lie beyond the written text.

The fact that different languages express concepts in different ways while adhering to social and cultural norms should not be underestimated. Restricting the translation process to giving words their corresponding meaning is never fair since being a faithful translator also involves trying to understand someone's or something's real feelings or functions from what is said or written. It also involves comprehending cultural nuances.

Translation ethics are upheld by competent translators, who, for example, cannot simply omit difficult words because they are deemed unnecessary or do not significantly contribute to the overall meaning. Rather, they must uphold the writer's intended meaning and message; ideas and opinions must also be expressed truthfully and accurately. Further, the author's intended message throughout the text could be misrepresented if the objective is not communicated clearly.

To keep up with and then govern technical, political, medical, or social change, disciplines are more likely to bend and shift in fast-paced societies. Due to its connection to a variety of discipline fields, translation is believed to function in a flexible way to successfully convey meanings. It no longer serves as a field of study or a means of passing down past literary masterpieces to us. Instead, it has grown into a business. It has also been very important in accomplishing corporate goals.

Grammar is not a secondary element in English-Arabic translation; rather, it is a fundamental one. Arabic's left-branching syntax, VSO (Verb–Subject–Object) default, and complex morphological systems of gender, case, and aspect necessitate a thorough procedural understanding of the language. A translator will create a translation that is, at best, "foreign-sounding" and, at worst, unintelligible if they ignore these grammatical structures and just concentrate on lexical equivalency. For this reason, mastering these grammatical rules is not just academic but also necessary to produce translations that are correct, natural, and efficient.

Because of automation, the amount of time or money spent on the same activity by hand has decreased. Emotions, however, are essential to accurately conveying the meaning, and machines have not been able to adequately comprehend them yet. Humans will, therefore, always be favored over robots, particularly in the translation of literary and poetic works.

Conflicts Of Interest

The paper states that the author has no financial or non-financial interests that could be perceived as influencing the research or its interpretation.

Funding

The author's paper explicitly states that the research project did not receive any funding from institutions or sponsors.

Acknowledgment

The author expresses gratitude to the institution for their provision of software tools and equipment that supported data analysis and visualization.

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