

Translating Idioms

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Dania A. Salamah

Translators' Club

College of Languages and Translation

An idiom is...

- “an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts” – *Longman’s Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (2007)*

Characteristics of Idioms

- Multiword expressions → usually made up of more than one word
- Fixed, non-literal meanings
 - **Food for thought**
 - **Storm in a tea cup**
 - **Under the weather**
 - **To throw caution to the wind**

- Fixed word order → cannot be rearranged or changed
 - **the short and the long of it***
- Words cannot be added to idioms
 - **the *very* long and the short of it***

- Words cannot be removed from idioms
 - **spill beans***
- Words cannot be replaced in idioms
 - **bury *a* hatchet***

- Fixed grammatical structure → e.g., cannot be changed from active to passive
 - **face the music → the music was faced***

Why are Idioms difficult to understand?

- Failure to recognize that an expression is an idiom → the more difficult it is to understand the more likely it will be recognized as an idiom
 - **Raining cats and dogs**
 - **Under the weather**

- Some idioms have reasonable literal interpretations
 - **While we were sitting in the kitchen she spilled the beans.**
- The non-literal meaning of idioms
 - **To get cold feet**

- Similarity between idioms in the SL and TL may be misleading
 - **Pull someone's leg (to joke) vs.**
يسحب رجله (يستدرجه في الكلام)

- Being unfamiliar with the expressions
- Lacking the cultural knowledge necessary to understand/use idioms

Why are Idioms difficult to translate?

- Lack of an equivalent idiom in the TL
- A TL equivalent that has a different context of use
- Frequency of idioms in written texts vary from language to another

Strategies for Translating Idioms

- TL expression with the same/similar meaning and form
- TL expression with the same/similar meaning but different form
- Paraphrasing the SL idiom

Examples

- A true friend does not stab in the back.
• الصديق الحقيقي لا يطعن في الظهر.
- She can't believe her eyes/ears.
• لا تستطيع أن تصدق عينيها/أذنيها.
- The company is on the black list.
• الشركة على القائمة السوداء.

- Let's turn a new page.

• لنفتح صفحة جديدة.

- My car is second hand.

• سيارتي مستعملة.

- There's too much monkey business.

• هناك كثير من الأمور المرعبة.

- There is a crying need for more schools.
• هناك حاجة ماسة للمزيد من المدارس.
- The thief was caught red-handed.
• قُبِضَ عَلَى اللصِّ مَتَلْبِسًا.
- You can return books to the library after hours.
• يمكنك إرجاع الكتب إلى المكتبة بعد ساعات الدوام.

- This new medicine is a double-edged sword.
• يُعتبر الدواء الجديد سلاح ذو حدين.
- The ideas discussed in the meeting were ahead of their time.
• كانت الأفكار التي تمت مناقشتها في الاجتماع سابقة لعصرها.
- It's raining cats and dogs.
• إنها تمطر بغزارة/كأفواه القرب.


- He stood his ground although some people objected.

• تمسك برأيه بالرغم من معارضة البعض.

- The team discovered their opponent's Achilles' heel.

• اكتشف الفريق نقطة ضعف خصومهم.

- Before calling upon a Member not represented on the Security Council to provide armed forces in fulfillment of such member's obligations, the Security Council shall invite that member....



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dsalamah@ksu.edu.sa

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Translate the Following..

- **A fair face and a foul heart**
- **What goes around comes around**
- **A blessing in disguise**
- **When in Rome, do as the Romans do**
- **I felt it in my bones**
- **It came close to home**