IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS: “MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING” OR A REAL CHALLENGE FOR TRANSLATORS

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Abstract

Rendering idiomatic expressions from SL into TL is one of the most challenging tasks in the translation process. Identifying, correctly interpreting and finding a proper translation equivalent for idioms often become a major obstacle for translators. Idiomatic expressions are language- and culture-bound and their proper transfer from ST to TL requires an excellent command of both mother tongue and foreign language as well as of SL and TL culture.

The paper aims to investigate the process of translating idioms from English into Macedonian. The goal is to ascertain what strategies are employed in translating idioms (e.g. idioms with the same form and meaning; idioms with the same meaning but different form; literal translation of idioms; omission of idioms, etc.). For the purposes of this research, the paper offers an analysis of a random selection of idiomatic expressions used in Shakespeare’s romantic comedy, “Much Ado About Nothing”, and their translation equivalents in the Macedonian translation of the play, “Od vlakno ortoma” by Dragi Mihajlovski.

The research unequivocally points to one strategy being clearly predominant– translating an idiom from SL with an idiom with similar meaning but different form from TL. The research further reveals that in the effort to preserve the same aesthetic effects in the target text, and depending on the context, the translator, in fact, employs a variety of translation strategies. At points the translator even introduces idioms where there are no such expressions in the original.

Key words: idioms, translation techniques, English, Macedonian

1. Introduction

Idioms represent that part of the language that transgresses ordinariness. They introduce freshness, liveliness, color, and even humor into both oral and written discourse. Consequently, idioms present a huge challenge especially for translators who are faced with the daunting task to transfer them from SL to TL.

In part, the uniqueness and the challenging nature of idioms stems from the fact that they do not follow the general grammatical or semantic rules of a language. That gives rise to their figurative meaning, which sometimes can be equally baffling for both native and non-native speakers of a language. In addition, idioms are a culture-bound phenomenon. They are a product of people’s linguistic endeavors to depict various social, geographical, historical, political peculiarities of their respective cultures as neatly as possible. Logically, as there are

1 Revisional scientific paper
no two completely identical cultures in the world, there are no two languages in the world in which there is a total overlapping of the systems of idiomatic expressions. For instance, the English language is rich in idioms related to the sea and sailing due to the UK’s extensive sea-faring history (e.g. make waves – to shock or upset people with something new or different; plain sailing – to make steady progress, etc.). On the other hand, Macedonian history and past have been marked by long periods of foreign invasions and occupations. Hence, it is no surprise that the Macedonian language abounds with idioms which reflect people’s efforts to survive and persevere in difficult times (e.g. Наведната глава сабја не сечу which literary translates to Keep your head bend low and no sword will cut it, meaning obedient people will come to no harm; Кратко јагне од две мајки љица which literary translates to Two mothers feed the mild lamb – meaning an obedient person always benefits more than the disobedient one, etc.).

Idioms are further characterized by a constant evolution. As time goes by and societal circumstances change, some idioms become obsolete, i.e. fall out of use since the concepts they represented previously are no longer valid at the present moment (e.g. A Daniel come to judgment – an idiom coined by Shakespeare in The Merchant of Venice, for an extremely wise and righteous individual). Conversely, other newly coined idioms continuously spring to life reflecting various contemporary aspects of human affairs (e.g. snail mail – the ordinary postal system as opposed to email, down the drain - on the way to being lost or wasted, disappearing, etc.). Others simply develop new meanings and are used in a completely different contexts than before.

Idiomatic expressions are used in relation to all conceivable fields of human activities (e.g. science, technology, education, politics, etc.). They constantly pop up and season people’s everyday informal and formal, written and oral interactions.

All of the above-mentioned aspects of idioms and their usage point to their highly intricate nature. The complexity of idioms is particularly evident in translators’ attempts to render them from SL to TL. Identifying and correctly interpreting an idiom, and, then, finding a proper translation equivalent in the SL, are, in fact, the three major tasks translators are confronted with when dealing with idioms. Skillful translators, in this respect, are required to have a firm grasp not only of SL and TL, but also of SL and TL cultures, respectively.

In this paper we investigate the issue of translating idiomatic expressions in the context of two completely dissimilar and unrelated languages – English and Macedonian. The underlying assumption is that the respective systems of idiomatic expressions of these two languages are marked by profound differences, which, in turn, makes the translation process of idiomatic expressions particularly intriguing and worth analyzing.

The first part of the paper offers a brief theoretical background, presenting some general definitions and classifications of idioms. It also briefly discusses some of the difficulties that emerge in translating idioms alongside with the translation strategies translators apply to overcome these difficulties. The second part of the paper presents the results and findings of the research at hand. In the end, it concludes with a discussion of the findings and insights gained.

2. Theoretical background

In order for translators to handle idiomatic expressions successfully, they need to understand what is at the core of this linguistic phenomenon, and how it is normally realized.
2.1. Defining idioms

In an attempt to decipher the term ‘idiom’ or ‘idiomatic expression’ one might turn to definitions offered in dictionaries as well as to researchers’ findings, which discuss this linguistic phenomenon at length.

In dictionaries, idioms are normally treated as figures of speech. Thus, for instance, in *The Collins English Dictionary* (2006) an idiom is defined as “an expression such as a simile, in which words do not have their literal meaning, but are categorized as multi-word expressions that act in the text as units”. *Longman Idioms Dictionary* (1998) defines idioms as “a sequence of words which has a different meaning as a group from the meaning it would have if you understand each word separately”.

Scholars, on the other hand, in their studies have brought some other aspects of idioms to the foreground. Larson (1984), for instance, confirms that an idiom is “a string of words whose meaning is different from the meaning conveyed by the individual words”, but he further underlines that “idioms carry certain emotive connotations not expressed in the other lexical items” (in Adelnia et al. 2011). In the same vein, Komissarov (1985) purports that “ideas expressed by idioms produce a strong impression on the reader … they appeal to his emotions, his aesthetic perception, his background” (in Sadeghpour 2012). For Komissarov, an idiom’s semantics is a complex entity which has as many as five aspects: figurative meaning, literal meaning, emotive character, stylistic register, and national coloring. Newmark (1988), on the other hands, depicts idioms as ‘extended’ metaphors which have two main functions: pragmatic and referential. The pragmatic function is to appeal to the senses, to interest, to surprise, to delight, whereas the referential function is to describe a mental process or state, a concept, a person, an object, a quality or an action more comprehensively and concisely than it is possible in literal or physical language (in Shojaei 2012).

One of the most frequently cited definition of idioms in literature is decidedly Baker’s definition (1992). Baker refers to idioms as “frozen patterns of language whose meaning cannot be deduced from their individual components”. She also highlights another salient feature of idioms – “they allow little or no variation in form”. In fact, Baker states that one is neither allowed to change the order of words in idioms; to delete, replace or add words to an idiom; nor to change its grammatical structure. Similarly, in an earlier study, Cowie and Mackin (1975) have also manifestly warned against messing up with the forms of idioms and cautioned users to avoid ‘breaking idioms up into their elements’ (in Balfaqeeh 2009).

On the basis of all these findings, it can be inferred that idioms are invariably multiword expressions whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words they are composed of. Due to their emotive character they are frequently preferred over literal expressions, and, last but not least, their grammatical structure in all contexts is to remain intact.

2.2 Classifications of idioms

Idioms are obviously a very versatile category of linguistic expressions. In order for one to be able to recognize them more easily, one needs to be aware of the different classifications of idioms. Thus, depending on their structure, idioms are said to be of four principal types: a) wh-questions (e.g. *What on earth?*), b) complete noun phrases (e.g. *a pain in the neck*); c) prepositional phrases (e.g. *out of order*), and d) verb-based (e.g. *change one’s mind*) (in *The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, 1999).
Moreover, idioms can be categorized according to the degree of idiomaticity. Thus, there is a continuum of idiomatic expressions which varies from transparent, at the one end of the continuum, to opaque idioms at the other end (Fernando, 1996). Transparent idioms are usually not difficult to understand and translate, because their meanings can be easily inferred from the meanings of their constituents (e.g. *to see the light* - to understand, etc.); whereas, the opaque idioms are the most difficult type of idioms, as their meaning is never the sum of the literal meanings of their constituents (e.g. *burn one’s boat* – to make retreat impossible; *kick the bucket* – to die; *spill the beans* – reveal a secret, etc.).

Fernando (1996) further classifies idioms according to variance of form into: a) idioms of invariance– their form never changes, and b) idioms of little variance–these can change, but only slightly (e.g. *to pass the buck* vs. *there was a lot of buck passing*, etc.).

Carter (1998) takes a broader approach and classifies idioms as fixed expressions which include: proverbs, stock phrases, catchphrases, allusions, idiomatic similes and discoursal expressions (in Shojaei, 2012). A similar classification is offered by Adelnia et al. (2011) with idioms being grouped into five categories: colloquialisms, proverbs, slang, allusions and phrasal verbs.

### 2.3 Difficulties and strategies in translating idioms

Given that idioms are intricate, culture-bound expressions and their meaning is rather metaphorical, finding their closest translation equivalent in another language can make the translator go at great pains to accomplish that. Baker (1992), in that context, distinguishes between a) difficulties in the process of interpreting idioms, and b) difficulties in the process of translating idioms.

As to the difficulties that can arise in the process of interpreting idioms Baker (1992) recognizes two possibilities: 1) idioms offer a reasonable literal interpretation and their idiomatic meanings are not necessarily signaled in the surrounding text, and 2) an idiom in SL may have a very close counterpart in TL, but this seemingly close counterpart has a totally or partially different meaning.

The difficulties that are bound to occur in the process of translating idiomatic expressions, according to Baker (1992) can be classified into four subcategories:

1) an idiom or fixed expression may have no equivalent in the target language;
2) an idiom or fixed expression may have a similar counterpart in the target language, but its context of use may be different;
3) an idiom may be used in ST in both its literal and idiomatic sense at the same time, and
4) The very convention of using idioms in written discourse, the contexts in which they can be used, and their frequency of use may be different in SL and TL.

Having underlined the difficulties, Baker (1992), goes on to offer the following four problem-solving strategies:

1) using an idiom of similar meaning and form;
2) using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form;
3) translation by paraphrase; and
4) translation by omission.
Abu-Ssaydeh (2004) in his research of translation strategies acknowledges Baker’s four strategies, but also proposes a fifth strategy – literal translation, in which case, he claims, the semantic impact of the entire statement/utterance may be lost. Eventually, he concludes that the choice of a particular translation strategy depends on the closeness between the two languages, the translator’s experience, the adequacy of dictionaries, and the nature of the idiom in question.

In a more recent study, Strakšiene (2009) also highlights these same translation strategies: “paraphrasing, which involves explanatory and stylistic paraphrase; idiom to idiom translation, which involves using idiom of similar meaning and form, and using idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form; literal translation; and, finally, omission” (in Shojaei 2012). Interestingly, Larson (1984), in an earlier study, purports yet another strategy by arguing that there are often cases when words in SL which are not idioms are best translated with an idiom in TL (in Adelnia 2011).

In summary, the strategies for translating idioms proposed by researchers so far encompass the following: using an idiom of similar meaning and form; using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form; translation by paraphrase; translation by omission; literal translation of idioms. One should also bear in mind that translating a non-idiomatic expression from the source text with an idiom in the target text is viable translation strategy as well.

3. The aim of research and methodology

The chief aim of this research is to investigate the process of translating idiomatic expressions from English into Macedonian. For the purposes of this research, a literary text rich in idiomatic expressions – Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing – and its translation in Macedonian, Od vlakno orroma, by Dragi Mihajlovski², were selected and subjected to analysis.

Considering the different repertoires of idiomatic expressions in Macedonian and in English, the analysis was directed at inspecting the actual translation strategies employed by the translator as well as how frequently these strategies recur in the process of translating idioms from SL, English in this case, to TL, i.e. Macedonian.

In the initial stage of the research, 100 idiomatic expressions from Much Ado About Nothing were singled out, at random. Subsequently, their translation equivalents in the Macedonian text were detected. Thus, the selected corpus subjected to analysis consisted of 100 English idioms and 100 translation equivalent of these idioms in Macedonian.

The second stage of the analysis was directed at identifying the actual translation strategies employed by the translator in each particular case, as well as the incidence with which these strategies were utilized in the analyzed corpus.

4. Results

The analysis of the randomly selected idioms showed that, indeed, for the most part (90%), the translator has employed the already established translation strategies for transferring idiomatic expressions from SL to TL (Table 1). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the analysis also brought to the forefront the usage of yet another translation strategy (10%) for

²Dragi Mihajlovski is one of the most renowned contemporary Macedonian authors and translators. In 2013, he successfully completed and published the translation of all Shakespeare’s works into Macedonian (“Site drami i soneti”, Kaprokornus, Skopje, 2013).
which, to the best of our knowledge, no reference has been made in literature so far – translating an idiom with an idiom from TL with a completely different form and meaning.

Table 1 Translation strategies used in the analyzed corpus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation strategies</th>
<th>no. of instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idiom with similar meaning but different form</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literal translation of idiom</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase of idiom</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adding an idiom with different form and meaning</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiom with similar meaning and form</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission of idiom</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apart from the identifying and classifying the translation strategies, the analysis was also directed at ascertaining the frequency with which these strategies were employed in the translation. The results, in that respect, showed that the utilized strategies can be organized as follows (Chart 1):

a) the most frequently employed translation strategies;
b) translation strategies used with moderate frequency, and
c) the least frequently employed translation strategies.

Chart 1 The frequency with which translation strategies were used in the corpus

The most frequently employed translation strategy (TS) obviously was translating an idiom with an idiom from TL which has similar meaning but different form (1) (53%).

(1) TS: Using an idiom with similar meaning but different form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ST</th>
<th>TT</th>
<th>(literal translation of TT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“… or you play the flouting Jack…”</td>
<td>“… или пак си играте мајтап …“</td>
<td>“or you are making fun of me/playing pranks again”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In (1) the Macedonian idiom игра мајтап is used as translation equivalent for play the flouting Jack. Although the form of these corresponding idioms is different they both practically mean the same thing – making fun of somebody or teasing somebody.

Two of the translation strategies employed were used almost equally and with moderate frequency: a) literal translation of an idiom (16%) (2), a) paraphrasing an idiom (14%) (3).

(2) TS: Literal translation of an idiom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ST</th>
<th>TT</th>
<th>(literal translation of TT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“What need the bridge much broader than the flood?”</td>
<td>“Зошто мостот да е поширок од текот?”</td>
<td>“Why should the bridge be wider than the flow of the river?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In (2), the idiomatic expression what need the bridge much broader than the flood, which practically means why doing something which is not needed, has been rendered literally into Macedonian – Зошто мостот да е поширок од текот, which at first glance may be a bit confusing for the Macedonian reader of the play.

(3) TS: Paraphrasing an idiom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ST</th>
<th>TT</th>
<th>(literal translation of TT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Ere you flout old ends any further...“</td>
<td>“Пред да продолжете со верглања на познатите излитени фрази...”</td>
<td>“Before you go on repeating the old and well-known phrases...”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example (3) clearly illustrates the translation strategy – paraphrasing an idiom, as the original idiomatic expression to flout old ends has been replaced by a suitable paraphrase in Macedonian. What is interesting in this case is the fact that the translator avoided using an idiomatic expression in Macedonian which has a similar meaning – и пак истата/старата песна which literally translates into the same song again.

The newly uncovered strategy, i.e. using an idiom with a different form and meaning (10%) (4) can also be placed in the group of translation strategies used with moderate frequency.

(4) TS: Using an idiom with a different form and meaning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ST</th>
<th>TT</th>
<th>(literal translation of TT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“You have put him down Lady, you have put him down”</td>
<td>“Море го легнавте, госпоѓице, го кутнавте на плеки”</td>
<td>“You have laid him down Miss, knocked him down on his back”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What the original idiomatic expression to put somebody down, repeated twice in (4), means is to humiliate somebody. This expression has been completely replaced in the Macedonian
translation with two other expressions –  

го легнавте грб (lit. you have laid him on his back), and  

gо купнааме (lit. you knocked him down). The sexual connotation of both is inescapable in the target text, which in turn provides the entire utterance with an overtly humorous overtone.

The strategies which were clearly the least frequently used were the following: a)  

omission of idiom (3%) (5), and b)  

using an idiom with the same form and meaning (4%) (6).

(5)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TS: Omission of an idiom</th>
<th>ST</th>
<th>TT (literal translation of TT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“But I had a rougher task in hand…”</td>
<td>“Но имав погрубаза задача тогаш…”</td>
<td>“I had a rougher task then…”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In (5) the English idiom to have something in hand, which means have something under control, has been completely omitted in the Macedonian translation.

(6)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TS: Using an idiom with the same form and meaning</th>
<th>ST</th>
<th>TT (literal translation of TT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“… to make me such a fool…”</td>
<td>“… да мене направи таква будала…”</td>
<td>“… to make me such a fool…”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In (6), the translator probably did not have to go to great lengths to find a suitable translation equivalent in the target language as the same idiom is also used in Macedonian – прави будала од некого (lit. make somebody a fool).

Finally, it is worth noting that in searching for the translation equivalents of the selected English idioms, in the target text we also came across two particularly interesting cases of idiomatic expressions. Namely, in some of the Macedonian utterances in TT:

1. an idiomatic expression was added where there was non-idiomatic expression in ST, and
2. an idiomatic expression was added for which there was no corresponding linguistic item in the original text whatsoever.

This rather unexpected finding, first, confirms Larson’s (1984) proposal that idioms can sometimes be used in the TT to replace non-idiomatic expressions in ST (7); and, second, it points to another so far not explicitly discussed translation strategy in the context of idioms – using idioms in the TT when there were no corresponding linguistic elements, idiomatic or non-idiomatic, in the ST (8).

(7)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TS: Translating a non-idiomatic expression with an idiom</th>
<th>ST</th>
<th>TT (literal translation of TT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“They would have been troubled”</td>
<td>“Ке беа на голем зорт”</td>
<td>“They would have been in a big trouble”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In (7) the verbal phrase would have been troubled in the English text is replaced by the Macedonian idiomatic expression беа на голем зорт which, more or less, conveys the same
meaning as the original verbal phrase, except for the fact that unlike the neutral expression in ST, the idiom in TT is fully emotionally charged and has an overtly humorous overtone.

8) TS: Adding an idiom when there is no corresponding linguistic item in the original text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ST</th>
<th>TT</th>
<th>(literal translation of TT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/</td>
<td>“До каде дотурка!”</td>
<td>“How have I put myself in such an unfavorable situation?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The idiomatic expression in (8), до каде дотурка, which in English literary translates to How have I put myself in such an unfavorable situation, has no linguistic counterpart in the original text at all.

The rationale behind the usage of these two translation strategy which introduce idioms in the TT would be that the translator, perhaps, at some earlier points in the translation was probably unable to render adequately certain idiomatic expressions, and decided to apply the principle of compensation at a later stage in the text. Or possibly, due to the very frequent usage of idioms in the entire text, he simply felt obliged to maintain the aesthetic effect by enriching the TT with additional idiomatic expressions at certain points in the text where there were none.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there is an evident attempt on the part of the translator to transfer the idiomatic expressions from the original text adequately in the target text by providing suitable idiomatic expressions. In doing so the translator employs a variety of translation strategies. Nevertheless, the most predominant strategy is using an idiom with similar meaning but different form. On the other hand, using an idiom with the same form and meaning is among the least frequently employed strategies in the analyzed corpus. This is quite understandable considering the huge linguistic and cultural differences that exist between English and Macedonian.

Moreover, this research brings to light the tendency of the translator to introduce idioms in the target text even when there were no idiomatic expressions in the source text. The general pervasiveness of idioms in the source text might have instigated him to do that. Also, this tendency of introducing idioms where there were none in the original might be attributed to the compensation principle – using an idiom in the target text for an idiom used in the source text which was impossible to render in the target text at an earlier stage in the text.

On the whole, on the basis of these findings, it is practically unavoidable to conclude that idioms are an intrinsically intricate linguistic phenomenon, and, consequently, should be tackled with a great deal of caution in the process of translation. In other words, translators should be ‘equipped’ with and apply different translation strategies when they render idioms from one language into another.

Finally, although this research was concerned with rendering idioms in literary translation, it is worth noting that the conclusion reached here equally applies to non-literal, i.e. technical

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3 The principle of compensation in translation is discussed by Baker in more detail in her book titled “In Other Words” (1992).
translation, as idiomatic expressions are by no means excluded from non-literary texts as well.

REFERENCES


Dictionaries: