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Some Remarks on Idioms and Idiomatic Translation

Abstract

This paper focuses on key issues concerning the notion of idiom and its definitions. The paper provides insight into the classification of idioms, their translation strategies and finally difficulties regarding idiomatic translation. This work presents the views of numerous scholars whose findings show that various factors should be taken into consideration in the process of idiomatic translation.

Keywords: *idiom, classification of idioms, dictionary, translating idioms, translation strategies.*

Abstrakt

Niniejsza praca koncentruje się na kluczowych zagadnieniach związanych z pojęciem idiomu i jego definicji. Przedstawia ona klasyfikację idiomów, strategie stosowane podczas tłumaczenia oraz trudności z którymi może się spotkać tłumacz. Poniższa praca prezentuje opinie wielu naukowców których badania pokazują jak wiele czynników należy wziąć pod uwagę w procesie tłumaczenia idiomów.

Słowa kluczowe: *idiom, klasyfikacja idiomów, słownik, tłumaczenie idiomów, strategie.*

Idioms constitute a substantial part of each language whose recognition, understanding and appropriate translation may cause some problems in efficient translation. The translator is expected to have a good knowledge of both languages and cultures and should be capable of dealing with arising problems in the process of translating idiomatic pairs. Indispensable features in this process, apart from a thorough knowledge of the source and target language, are creativity, skill, willingness and experience.

Nida emphasizes that there are three presuppositions which should determine the semantic analysis (Nida, 1990, p. 103):

1. No word (or semantic unit) ever has exactly the same meaning in two different utterances.
2. There are no complete synonyms within a language.
3. There are no exact correspondences between related words in different languages.

This work aims to present some remarks on idioms and idiomatic translation. An attempt has been taken to depict the difficulties and strategies regarding the notion of idiom.

The notion of idiom

There are various definitions of idioms suggested in the linguistic literature as well as in the preface of dictionaries of idioms, some of them are presented in the following paragraph.

In the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (Summers, 2003, p. 741) an idiom is defined as 'a phrase which means something different from the meanings of the separate words; the way of statement typical of a person or a people in their use of language'. Similarly, in Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (Richards, Schmidt, 2010, p. 270) the notion of idiom is presented as 'an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts'. Webster's New World Dictionary of the American English states that an idiom is 'an expression established in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either in grammatical construction or in having a meaning that cannot be derived as a whole from the conjoined meanings of its elements' (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 456).

Longman Idioms Dictionary (Stern, 1998, p. 128) defines it 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'.

Newmark (Newmark, 1988, p. 104) considers an idiom to be an "extended" metaphor and claims that an idiom has two main functions: *pragmatic and referential*. The first function also called *cognitive* is to appeal to the senses, to interest, to surprise, to delight. The second one, called *aesthetic*, 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 and physical language' (cited in Strakšiene, 2019, p. 14).

According to McMoriew 'we can say that an idiom is a number of words which when taken together mean something different from the individual words of the idiom when they stand alone' (McMoriew, 1983, p. 4). Fromkin and Rodman claim that idioms are similar in structure to ordinary phrases except that they tend to be frozen in form and do not enter into other combinations or allow the word order to change. 'Idioms, grammatically as well as semantically, have special characteristics. They must be entered into the lexicon or mental dictionary as single items, with their meanings specified, and speakers must learn the special restrictions on their use in sentences' (Fromkin, Rodman, 1993, p. 154).

On the other hand, Moon in her book, *A Corpus Based Approach*, categorizes an idiom as

'an ambiguous term used in conflicting ways. There are two meanings of the term idiom. Firstly, an idiom is a particular means of expressing something in music, art, language, which characterizes a person or a group; secondly, an idiom is a particular lexical collocation or phrasal lexeme, peculiar to a language'. (Moon, 1998, p. 3)

Moreover, Baker states that:

[...] idioms and fixed expressions are at the extreme end of the scale from collocations in one or both of these areas: flexibility of patterning and transparency of meaning. They are frozen patterns of languages which allow little variation in form and, in the case of idioms, often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components. (Baker, 1992, p. 63)

What is more, she underlines that certain idioms even allow 'no variation in form under normal circumstances'. Additionally, a translator is forbidden to change the order of the words in it, delete a word from it, add a word to it, replace a word with another and change its grammatical structure.

According to Brenner, native English speakers use idioms automatically without analyzing their constituents. He underlines certain confusion and

disagreement concerning the definition of idioms. However, the most popular one is 'two or more words together that, as a unit, have a special meaning that is different from the literal meaning of the words separately' (Brenner, 2003, pp. 4-5).

Classification of idioms

McPherron and Randolph claim that the majority of linguists, writers, language teachers, and learners agree that idioms evoke vivid descriptions and are definitely more effective and powerful than literal, non-idiomatic language. What is more, they stress that idioms cannot be easily classified, and they are definitely a challenge for language teachers (McPherron, Randolph, 2014, p. 78).

Kövecses compares idioms to a 'mixed bag' which 'involves metaphors (e.g. *spill the beans*), metonymies (e.g. *throw up one's hands*), pairs of words (e.g. *cats and dogs*), idioms with it (e.g. *live it up*), similes (e.g. *as easy as a pie*), sayings (e.g. *a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*), phrasal verbs (e.g. *come up*), grammatical idioms (e.g. *let alone*), and others' (Kövecses, 2010, p. 231).

Fernando classifies idioms dividing them into three subclasses: *pure* idioms, *semi*-idioms and *literal* idioms. *Pure* idioms are invariable or may have little variation. Moreover, they are non-literal multiword expressions and often considered to be opaque (e.g. *to spill the beans* has nothing to do with beans). *Semi*-idioms consist of one or more literal constituents and one with non-literal sub-sense. Consequently, *semi*-idioms are partially opaque (e.g. *foot the bill*, which means 'pay'). Finally, *literal* idioms can be invariable or allow little variation. They are transparent as well as easy to deduce the meaning from their parts (e.g. *of course*, *in any case*, *for certain*) (Fernando, qtd in Strakšiene, 2009, p. 14).

The classification of idioms provided by Seidl and McMordie shows that idioms can have different structures and forms. The three main types are: idioms with an irregular form and clear meaning (e.g. *give someone to understand*), idioms with a regular form and unclear meaning (e.g. *to have a bee in one's bonnet*) and idioms with an irregular form and unclear meaning (e.g. *to be at large*, *to go through thick and thin*, *to be in the swim*) (Seidl, McMordie, 1978, p. 5). They also point out that most idioms constitute the second category (a regular form and unclear meaning). However, even some of these idioms are clearer than others (e.g. *to give someone the green light*).

Kvetko presents a classification of idioms from a semantic point of view, based on their fixedness or stability. He presents two categories: *unchangeable*

idioms and changeable idioms. Unchangeable idioms allow no modifications (e.g. *once in a blue moon, red tape*). On the other hand, *changeable idioms* can undergo certain modifications which lead to the following possibilities of variation:

1. grammatical variations involve limited, irregular syntactical or morphological changes such as tense, word order, form, articles, and their results are grammatical variants (e.g. *have been in the wars – had been in the war; on and off – off and on; turn up one’s nose – turn one’s nose up*);
2. lexical variations refer to optional or obligatory variations regarding the lexical structure of idioms, and their results are lexical variants (e.g. *out of a clear sky – out of a clear blue sky; last straw – final straw*). In certain cases, changeable idioms can undergo both grammatical and lexical changes (e.g. *a/the skeleton in the cupboard – a/the family skeleton; there is no smoke without fire, where there is smoke, there’s fire*);
3. orthographic variations refer to changes in spelling, using different punctuation marks, or using small or capital letters; the results of these changes are orthographic (spelling) variants (e.g. *nosy parker, nosy Parker, pay lip service, pay lip-service*);
4. geographic variations are preferred only in certain parts of the English-speaking world and they can include any of the previously mentioned variations; examples for geographical variants: *on second thoughts* (British English) – *on second thought* (American English); *a skeleton in the closet* (American English) – *a skeleton in the cupboard* (British English) (Kvetko, 2009, p. 104-105).

Another classification of idioms presented by Kvetko focuses on their construction. Consequently, we can distinguish *verbal*, *verbless*, *sentence* and *minimal* idioms. *Verbal* idioms consist of a verb and an object (e.g. *paint the town red*); *verbless* idioms have no verb and can be nominal, adjectival, or adverbial (e.g. *once in a blue moon*); *sentence* idioms present a complex sentence structure (e.g. *make hay while the sun shines*); *minimal* idioms consist of at least one word (e.g. *on the go*).

Cacciari and Glucksberg (Cacciari, Glucksberg, 1991, p. 98) classify idioms according to the dimension of compositionality and present three categories: *non-compositional*, *partially compositional*, and *fully compositional*.

In *non-compositional* idioms, no relations between the idiom’s constituents and the idiom’s meaning can be discerned, as in the idiom *cheesecake* to refer to pin up art [...]. In *partially compositional* idioms, some relationships between idiom’s constitu-

ents and its idiomatic meaning can be discerned and exploited. Although one could not infer the meaning to die from the literal meaning of *kick the bucket*, the idiom's literal meaning does constrain its use and comprehension. [...] In *fully compositional* idioms, the constituents map directly onto their idiomatic referents, as in the idiom *pop the question*. (Glucksberg, 2001, p. 73)

Some linguists have tried to estimate whether *compositional* idioms or *non-compositional* idioms are easier to understand. The comprehension of *compositional* idioms is facilitated by the fact that their linguistic and idiomatic meanings correspond. In the case of *non-compositional* idioms these meanings do not correspond, therefore, it is more difficult to comprehend them.

Glucksberg establishes another classification of idioms based on their degree of transparency. He distinguishes *opaque* and *transparent compositional* idioms. In *compositional-opaque* idioms, the relations between an idiom's constituents and its meaning may be opaque, but the meanings of individual words can nevertheless constrain both interpretation and use. For the idiom *kick the bucket*, the semantics of the verb to *kick* can constrain interpretation. Kicking is a discrete act, and so one could not say he *kicked the bucket* all week, even though one could say *he lay dying all week* (Glucksberg, 2001, p. 74).

As far as *compositional-transparent* idioms are concerned,

'there are one-to-one semantic relations between the idiom's constituents and components of the idiom's meaning. In the idiom *break the ice*, for example, the word *break* corresponds to the idiomatic sense of abruptly changing an uncomfortable social situation, and the word *ice* corresponds to the idiomatic sense of social or interpersonal tension'. (Glucksberg, 2001, p. 74)

He also distinguishes *quasi-metaphorical* idioms which convey meaning through their allusional content evoking prototypes or stereotypes referring to certain people, actions or situations: 'they can simultaneously refer to an ideal exemplar of a concept and characterize some event or situation as an instance of that concept. For the concept doing something prematurely, for example, one might use the metaphorical idiom *crossing one's bridges before coming to them*' (Glucksberg, 2001, p. 75).

Cacciari and Tabossi (Cacciari, Tabossi, 1993, p. 105) state that *quasi-metaphorical* idioms refer to a similar communication strategy as metaphors in context such as 'my lawyer is a *shark*, or my job is a *jail*'. *Shark* denotes ruthless people and *jail* evokes the connotation of unpleasant circumstances.

According to Kvetko, the classification of idioms based on the degree of opacity is as follows: *pure* or *demotivated* idioms (also known as phraseological fusions), *semi-opaque* or *partially motivated* idioms and *semi-transparent* or *semi-idioms*. *Pure* or *demotivated* idioms are based on no connection between the meaning of individual constituents and the meaning of the whole idiom, for example: *kick the bucket*, *red tape*, *white elephant*. *Semi-opaque* or *partially motivated* idioms are figurative idioms presenting the connection between the meaning of individual words and the meaning as a whole, for instance *have a free hand*, *add fuel to the flames*. *Semi-transparent* or *semi-idioms* are phraseological combinations with one constituent used metaphorically and the other having a literal meaning: *foot the bill*, *promise somebody the moon* (Kvetko, 2009, p. 106-107).

The classifications presented above corroborate that there have been several attempts to classify idioms. Being aware of the existence of different types of idioms can help to recognize, understand and translate them.

Translation of idioms – strategies

Kovács (Kovács, 2016, p. 93) claims that 'to translate idioms from the source language into the target language the translator has to choose the best strategy, taking into consideration the peculiarities, function, culture – specificity, semantic and structural unpredictability of these expressions'.

Baker presents the view that the most ideal situation would be to find an idiom which has a similar meaning in the target language. However, if it is not the case, the following factors should be considered:

For example, the significance of the specific lexical items which constitute the idiom, i.e. whether they are manipulated elsewhere in the source text, as well as the appropriateness or inappropriateness of using idiomatic language in a given register in the target language. The acceptability or non-acceptability of using any of the strategies described below will therefore depend on the context in which a given idiom is translated. [...] Questions of style, register, and rhetorical effect must also be taken into consideration. (Baker, 1992, p. 72)

Baker suggests the following five strategies for translating idioms:
 – *Using an idiom of similar meaning and form*

Baker believes that using an idiom of similar meaning and form is the ideal solution. What is more, register, style, and rhetorical effect must

be taken into consideration as well. This strategy is based on using an idiom in the target language with the same meaning and equivalent lexical items as the source language idiom (e.g. *break someone's heart* – złamać komuś serce, *face to face* – twarzą w twarz, *step by step* – krok po kroku).

– *Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form*

This type of strategy focuses on the possibility of finding an idiom with a similar meaning in both languages but different lexical items (e.g. *one good turn deserves another* – przysługa za przysługę, *Jack-of-all-trades* – ktoś od wszystkiego, to od niczego).

– *Translation by paraphrase*

Baker considers it to be the most common way of translating idioms when idiomatic expressions in the target language that cannot be used because of differences in stylistic preferences (e.g. One frequent criticism of the Manitoba Government throughout the language controversy was that it never seemed to *get a handle on the issue* – zrozumieć temat).

– *Translation by omission*

If idioms are not possible to be paraphrased, they can be omitted from the target text.

– *Strategy of compensation*

'Briefly this means that one may either omit or play down a feature such idiomaticity at the point where it occurs in the source text and introduce it elsewhere in the target text' (Baker, 1992, p. 78). Baker summarises that the right level of idiomaticity together with the typical phraseology of the target language and its own fixed and semi-fixed expressions determine the readability of translation. Once a translator succeeds in dealing with the above issues, the target text will feel less "foreign" (Baker, 1992, p. 78).

On the other hand, Zhang and Wang (Zhang, Wang, 2010, p. 882-887) present strategies which should be abided by when translating idioms:

– *Literal translation*

- a. *Direct translation* – there is a direct correspondence between the original language and the target language preventing culture deformation,
 - b. *Literal translation with annotation* – the annotation presents the historical background of an idiom explaining its origin as well,
 - c. *Amplification* – the strategy where necessary words are added in the translation to deepen the understanding of the translated text,
- *Free translation* – the translator uses different expressive forms to convey meanings from the source language,

– *Other methods*

- a. *Combination* – using both strategies i.e. literal translation and free translation,
- b. *Omission* – omitting words in order to achieve a concise and idiomatic representation,
- c. *Borrowing* – seeking for an equivalent idiom in the target language,
- d. *Transposition* – changing the overall arrangement of sentences by transferring a certain translated part to another place in the text,
- e. *Integration* – combining the meanings of the source language idiom with the meaning of some other part in the text.

Difficulties concerning idiomatic translation

English language appears to be full of idioms which pose many problems in the process of translation. Idioms may belong to different varieties of English (i.e. British, American, Australian, Canadian or other varieties). These idioms may be found in *Webster's New World American Idioms Handbook* by Gail Brenner and *English Idioms Dictionary* by Ralph Pilkington.

As Klaudy stresses, translators should be both cultural and linguistic mediators and they should know the culture of the source language and the target language to 'compare and assess the geographical, historical, social and cultural aspects of two language communities' and create 'strategies to bridge the gaps between the cultures' (Klaudy, 2003, p. 175).

Teilanyo says that there may be idioms which contain culture specific or cultural bound items which may create difficulties in the process of translation: 'The difficulty arises from the problem of finding adequate target language equivalence for terms containing culture sensitive notions in the source language as a result of the fact that the two languages have different meaning subsystems and cultures' (Teilanyo, 2007, p. 16).

Mona Baker stating that 'the main problems that idiomatic and fixed expressions pose in translation relate to two main areas: the ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly and the difficulties in rendering various aspects of meaning that an idiom or a fixed expression conveys into a target language' (Baker, 1992, p. 65) presents the classification of difficulties and divides them into four subcategories. There is no equivalent in the target language which means that both source language and target language may depict one specific meaning in different ways, that is using a single word or an idiom, a fixed expression or an explanatory sentence and

vice versa. Additionally, Baker claims that some idioms might be culturally specific. In this case 'it is not the specific items an expression contains but rather the meaning it conveys and its association with culture specific contexts which can make it untranslatable or difficult to translate' (Baker, 1992, p. 68-69). There is a similar counterpart for an idiom in the target language, but the context of its use may be different because of different cultural conventions. To exemplify the issue Baker compares English and Chinese. In English an idiom *to sing a different tune* means to say or do something that signals a change in opinion because it contradicts what one has said before. Whereas in Chinese the same idiomatic expression means to sing different tunes or to sing a duet which gives 'strong political connotations' as well as 'complementary rather than contradictory' points of view which gives a 'quite different usage' (Baker, 1992, p. 68-69). The third problem is that 'an idiom may be used in the source text in both its literal and idiomatic senses at the same time. Unless the target language idiom corresponds to the source language idiom both in form and meaning, the way an idiom cannot be successfully reproduced in the target text' (Baker, 1992, p. 68-69). The fourth difficulty is strictly related to the way (convention) of using an idiom which can be different in both the source language and target language as far as written discourse, certain contexts and the frequency of use are concerned (Baker, 1992, p. 68-69).

Davies describes some of the problems connected with the translation similarly to Baker. He enumerates recognition, no equivalent in the target language, a similar counterpart in the target language with a different context of use, an idiom used in the source text both in its literal and idiomatic sense at the same time, difference between the convention, context, and frequency of use in the source and target languages (Davies, 2004, p. 193). Newmark postulates that the level of naturalness in a translation may determine whether it makes sense, reads naturally, and 'is written in ordinary language, the common grammar, idioms and words that meet that kind of situation' (Newmark, 1988, p. 24).

Conclusion

In this paper four aspects concerning idioms were shown: the notion of idiom, classification of idioms, translation strategies and the difficulties of idiomatic translation. This work underlines the importance of translator's knowledge about semantics, possible lexical sets to deal with non-equivalence in semantic field. The translator should bear in mind that there is a strong

connection between language and culture. Following Newmark (Newmark, 2007, p. 109), we must agree that 'the sociological factor is represented by the context, where idioms bind the text to social groups and backgrounds, proving that translation is not produced in a vacuum'.

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