

TRANSFER IN THE TRANSLATION OF IDIOMS

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ABSTRACT: *This paper investigates the role of transfer in the translation of English idioms by Arab learners of English. It attempts to spotlight on the difficulties of translating idioms and to indicate potential transfer that may occur in the process of their translation. The data of the study were collected from the translation of selected English idioms administered to senior Saudi English language majors. The general performance of subjects indicates poor competence in translating idioms from the target language. Results reveal lack of familiarity with the target idioms, particularly with their pragmatic and cultural aspects. The study urges that idioms worth greater attention in linguistic research and in ELT environment.*

KEYWORDS: idiom, transfer, opaque idiom, translation, Linguistic transfer

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

The nature of idioms

Idioms, though idiosyncratic bits of language, but have widely been accepted as constructions in natural language. Their idiosyncrasy raises much controversy about their status in the lexicon. At one extreme, idioms, on basis of their phonological, syntactic and semantic properties, are claimed to be part of the lexicon (Jackendoff, 1987:157). To go to the other extreme, due to their odds to linguistic familiarities, idioms are sometimes strongly disapproved as could be read in this quote from Johnson-Laird: "if natural language had been designed by a logician, idioms would not exist". (Ifil 2002:2) As a result the definition and properties of idioms are seen from different perspectives. The first problem that idioms pose is that they lack a uniform definition and could not regularly be identified. There is no clear cut syntactic or semantic criterion to set apart the linguistic entity so called 'idiom'. Idioms constitute a massive class and a wide ranging category. This class counts up to 7000 idioms in McCarthy and Walter's Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms [McCarthy and Walter 1998] while it goes up to 10000 in Oxford Idioms Dictionary for Learners of English. The lack of a uniform definition and the inclusion of massive words under the category of idioms output numerous classifications of this category. These problems of identifying and classifying idioms "lead to problems in presenting them usefully for foreign learners" (Grant, Lynn and Laurie Bauer, 2004:44).

Idioms have an anomalous nature in different ways that they do not behave the normal way other linguistic items do. They do not usually allow syntactic operations. Furthermore, their meanings reveal a varying degree of non-compositionality. These abnormalities cause many problems that learners encounter when they deal with idioms. Examining some of the key properties of idioms would reveal some of these abnormalities. The first of these properties is the syntactic structure of

idiomatic expression. The degree of the fixedness and flexibility of this structure could not be summed up in a definite set of regular rules. In fact idiomatic structure stands between two extremes; full and nil flexibility. An idiom such as spill the beans represents the first extreme where idioms can syntactically be flexible. This idiom is syntactically analyzable and can undergo syntactic variation. It allows syntactic processes of tense, passivization and negation: spill/spilled/is spilling/have spilled the beans..., some/no beans were spilled out about..., don't spill the beans...

To go to the other extreme, the syntactic structure of some idioms such as by and large, is completely frozen. It is "syntactically nonanalyzable and its syntactic flexibility is virtually nil" (Gluckberg et al 2001:72). Another evidence of the idiosyncratic nature of idioms can be traced in their unusual semantic features. It worth mentioning here that idioms are basically defined on semantic terms and that "the most satisfying criterion to establish idiomaticity is undoubtedly the semantic one" (Fernando & Flavel 1981:20).

An idiomatic structure could fit in a particular pattern and studied on the basis of syntactic rules but seeking the semantic characteristics of this idiomatic structure does not correlate to syntactic considerations alone. When the meaning of an idiomatic expression directly corresponds to its syntactic structure, that is, its meaning can be inferred from its parts, the idiom is said to be transparent. Non-transparent idioms on the other hand are those whose meaning cannot be inferred from the meanings of its individual parts. This meaning has a set of properties. First, an idiom is a semantic unit. This unit 'comprises compound or cranberry words-lexical elements which are highly collocationally restricted' (Sohen 2006:2). In a given context the parts of the idiom appear as a whole unit whose parts are not separable and whose meaning is not the sum of the meanings of its parts. Second, an idiom is a lexeme [Fernando *ibid*:23] which is the smallest reducible unit of meaning. As a structure, this unit occurs in a variety of forms; monomorphemic, polymorphemic or an entire expression. The term 'lexeme' (Lyons 2002:145) does not refer here to word lexemes (i.e. lexemes whose forms are always word forms. Many of these lexemes are phrasal lexemes (lexemes whose forms are phrase forms). Phrases whose meaning is idiomatic are claimed to be phrasal lexemes and those resulting in mere literal meanings are not termed so. An idiomatic expression such as spic and span is a lexemic phrase. It is conceived as meaning 'neat'. It is not conceived as the sum of the meanings of spic and span as individual morphemes each. So it is lexemic since it is taken as a unit that is not reducible.

A dimension that accounts for the semantic properties of idioms is "the degree of their transparency" [Cacciari *ibid*: 80]. Idioms show a varying degree of transparency and opacity. Transparent idioms can be clear and often based on the literal meanings of the lexemes that made up those idioms. Even with the least transparent idioms the meaning is available by means of guessing. The following examples show different degrees of transparency:

- Our business policies need to be altered to fit in with (to suit) the new global trends.
- You should not have said that since you were not sure of it. You have just put the cat among the pigeons (you caused trouble by what you have said). You have no idea how upset they were.
- The team was on its best all the time. Incredibly, it was defeated in the very last seconds. Everybody just shed tears over. (express regret)

Opaque idioms or non-decomposable idioms on the other hand are the most difficult for non-native speaker because they do not allow literal interpretation and their meanings do not assign to the meanings of the individual words that make them up. Typical examples of non-decomposable idioms are saw logs and, shoot the breeze, which mean 'snore' and 'chat' respectively.

Transfer in the translation of idioms

For transfer to occur in the process of translation, there is supposed to be common linguistic features between the source language [SL] and the target language[TL]. Thus it could be understood that linguistic similarities between the two languages might result in positive transfer whereas negative transfer, or interference, is due to dissimilarities. Translation is the attempt to convey meaning from one language to another. It is a search for the equivalent meaning in the target language. But translation is not just a mere linguistic substitution. It goes beyond the linguistic dimension of the text and includes broader pragmatic and cultural contexts. Translation of idiomatic expressions would bring about greater challenges because idioms are culture bound.

The ultimate goal of the translator is to find as possibly the meaning as intended in the source language. Difficulty arises from the fact that the meaning created is a peculiar property of the text producer and that language is only an external form of this text. Hence transfer emerges. An adequate linguistic knowledge would solve the translator's problem regarding the text form but what about content? The content referred to here is by no means a semantic one. In any translation, as indicated by Nida[2003], there will be a type of loss in this semantic content . To avoid semantic loss a translator would fall back on the strategy of semantic adjustment which though could preserve the content in its literal aspect but may result in losing its stylistic features. The need for semantic adjustments as justified by Kolahi& Goodarzi[2012] arises from the lack of direct suitable and meaningful equivalences in every pair of languages.

Semantic analysis of the content of idioms would not alone provide an interpretation of idioms especially in the case of opaque ones. Idioms are often seen to be subject to content transfer and to semantic loss when translated. If the loss is inevitable, then it should be reduced to the minimum as proposed by Nida (ibid) who proposes three types of adjustments to manage semantic loss in the process of translating idioms. The adjustments types are; from idioms to nonidioms, from idioms to idioms and from nonidioms to idioms. The first two types are the closest to the interest of the present study. In the first type of adjustment idioms are substituted by nonidioms whereas in the second type an idiom from the source language is matched by one from the target language.

RELEVANT RESEARCH

This part attempts to provide a review of the literature pertaining to the subject of the present study to see how transfer is treated in relevant research.

Linguistic transfer refers to the learning process of applying knowledge from one language to another. A quick survey of the issue of linguistic transfer [Wang 2009:138 and Gass& Selinker Rutherford1984:2-3] reveals the attention transfer has received in the research of applied

linguistics and language learning. Earlier interest was shown by the contrastive analysis model where transfer was "usually interpreted as L1 habits interfering with acquisition of the L2 structures." [Durgunoglu & Hancin-Bhatt 1992:3]. The contrastive analysis model recommends a comparative linguistic analysis between languages to predict potential learning difficulties. Similar patterns [Irjuo 1984:4] would be easy to learn because they could be successfully transferred from the first language. Different patterns would cause interference and therefore be difficult to learn." Errors made by learners are attributed to the interference of the mother tongue. But the occurrence of these errors could be due to factors other than the influence of the native language that which makes doubts [Odlin 1989:17] about the validity of contrastive analysis. Opposing to the contrastive analysis model is the L1=L2 model[Durgunoglu & Hancin-Bhatt 1992-ibid:3] in which the focus is on the universals of language acquisition rather than on differences among languages. Learning errors in this model are assumed to occur in a similar way as to those in acquiring the L1.

Riyad et al [2000] aim at finding out, on basis of the interference theory, whether the type of idioms makes a difference as to the accuracy of translating them from Arabic into English. Problems relating to idioms are apparently seen in case of their translation where some translators tend to use non-idiomatic expressions because of their lack of knowledge of these idioms and because of transfer from L1[p.23]. Negative transfer has been shown to play a significant role in the translation of idioms. The degree of transfer in translating idioms, as for their study, varies according to the relevance of those idioms to the subjects' native idioms.

Irujor's study [1984]-an influential paper in the field of idioms transfer, is an attempt to investigate the impact of transfer in the acquisition of L2 idioms. The study is mainly concerned with the comprehension and production of idioms and uses for its instrumentation a translation test in addition to others tests. The study indicates the occurrence of more positive transfer in the production of identical idioms than in other types of idioms. Use of negative transfer or interference is reported to occur with similar or totally different idioms. It is suggested that language similarities may encourage interference, and that idioms are not always considered nontransferable.

Evidence of transfer in the translation of idioms is also shown in Mahmoud's study [2002] on the interlingual transfer of Idioms. He assumed that low proficiency in the foreign language encourages interlingual transfer. The data collected is based on assignments written by the selected subjects; English language majors. Results reveal high frequency negative transfer which is attributed to lack of familiarity with English idioms and to the exclusion of idiomatic language from the students' written academic or scientific discourse. Interlingual transfer is indicated as a poor linguistic competence because it reveals learners' linguistic inadequacies to satisfy communicative needs in the target language.

The study Al-Shawi & Mahadi[2012] on the strategies of translating idioms focuses on disparity among languages and cultural gaps (the case of English and Arabic) that raise difficulties in translating idioms. Because they are culture bound, the cultural roots of idioms need to be considered. Lexical behavior of the words that makes up idioms should also be observed "for

words which have various connotations in one language may not have the same emotive associations in another. Different languages frequently reflect different connotations and associations of feeling because of the differences in cultural roots." [p.141]. Problems that idioms pose in translation relate, as viewed by the researchers, to the ability of recognizing and interpreting an idiom correctly and the difficulties of grasping the aspects of meaning that an idiom conveys into the target language.

In summary, the question of transfer in the translation of idioms has not received its due attention in relevant research literature. Only little research could be reported on the transfer in the translation of English idioms into Arabic and vice versa. Idioms are culture specific and vary across cultures and requires knowledge of a particular kind to deal with. Based on the aforementioned considerations, the present paper attempts to trace the impact of transfer in the translation of English idioms into Arabic. It attempts to investigate the problems of mother language's negative transfer in translating idioms.

The Problem

The present study investigates the role of transfer in the translation of English idioms by Arab learners of English. It makes a great challenge for learners to develop a sound idiomatic knowledge of the target language and to realize the cultural grounds that give rise to the linguistic guises such as idioms. To manage or overcome these challenges learners tend to rely on their mother tongue. Turning to the native language is a strategy foreign language learners would employ to deal with idioms they find difficult in the target language. This involves the use of idioms from their first language which could result in negative transfer of the target idioms. This assumption is justified by the lack of similarities between the two languages; Arabic in the and English in the context of present study. They belong to two different language families and represent two different cultures. Idioms are distinctive cultural characteristics in each of these two languages. So when learners rely on their native idioms to translate the target idioms, negative transfer is more likely to occur because instances identical idioms are very few. This study attempts to spotlight on the difficulties of translating idioms and to indicate potential transfer that may occur in the process of their translation.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data of the study were collected from the translation of selected English idioms administered to a sample consisting of 20 subjects. Subjects were senior Saudi English language majors from the college of Science and Humanities at Prince Sattam University-kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Subjects were asked to translate 20 idioms varying from transparent to opaque idioms. The main criterion for the typology of these idioms is a cultural one since it has often been emphasized that idioms are culture specific. In fact, in the literature surveyed, the design of tests for similar purposes as for the present one does not radically vary in consideration of its typology of idioms. Thus idioms are paired in such tests as identical and non-identical idioms, semi and different cultural idioms, equivalent and nonequivalent idioms and so on. Idioms in the current study are classified as identical, similar and opaque or different idioms.

Analysis and Discussion

The data obtained will be grouped according the classification appeared in the test. The test was planned to include 20 idioms varying as identical, similar and opaque or different idioms but due to faulty listing only 19 idioms appeared in the test. Identical idioms are listed (1-6), similar idioms (7-12) and different idioms (13-19) The following part will provide an analysis of the responses of the respondents to each of these idioms.

The calm before the storm

Nineteen out of the twenty respondents who constitute the sample of the present research communicated exactly the equivalent idiom in their L1. Only one subject was recorded to give no answer to this idiom. The target idiom and the one that subjects reported in their translation are two identical idioms. Being transparent, subjects find this idiom easy to infer its meaning by looking at the meanings of its parts.

To turn over a new leaf

Though this idiom is transparent and it has a direct equivalent in Arabic language but six respondents left the idiom undone whereas two gave irrelevant answers.

Appropriate translations were given by the other twelve subjects in two different structures as; 'bidait šafha jadeedah' (beginning a new page) and 'aftah šafha jadeedah' (you- begin a new page). The key to see how this translation is appropriate is to trace transfer in choice and use of the word 'šafha' instead of 'waragga', the Arabic equivalent to the word page. Plural of the word 'šafha' is 'šhaif' (refers to the record of a person's deeds) which carries a sense similar to the one embedded in the target idiom.

To tell a white lie

Seventeen respondents (85% of the total research sample) succeeded in providing the correct translation of this idiom and only three failed to give correct response. This high percentage could be attributed to the fact that the idiom has a direct equivalent in their native language. The idiom has its roots in English language. Positive transfer In both languages the idiomatic expression is transparent and the idiomatic meaning is close to the idiomatic one.

To give the green light

Eight respondents gave correct answers and only two respondents gave incorrect answers. Twelve respondents gave the literal meaning which is the same in the two languages. In Arabic, y'ašfi aldhao alakhdhr (to give the green light), is more frequent. It indicates allowance and permission. This literal translation is not only transparent but is a direct equivalent of the target idiom. Five of the respondents gave two translations; one literal as the one just mentioned above. The other translation (to show approval, give permission, agreeing ...etc which is more likely bears an idiomatic sense its meaning does not directly correspond to its individual components. Only one correspondent gave the most appropriate translation.

To fish in troubled water

Though the idiom has a counterpart in Arabic but only twelve respondents provided the correct translation and the remaining eight respondents failed to translate it. The lexical wordings of this

idiom corresponds to its counterpart in Arabic and the meaning the two idioms convey is the same in the two languages. Thus it could not be made sure that the correct answers reported here are idiomatic and not literal ones since the idiom has the same lexical structure in the two languages.

6. Lion's share

One respondent gave a literal translation as *alassd almusharek* (the lion which shares), a translation with no idiomaticity relevance in Arabic language.

Twelve respondents gave correct answers as *hišat alassad* and *našib alassad*. The word *alassad* is one of the Arabic names of the animal lion and the two words *hišat* and *našib* are lexical equivalents to the English word 'share'. In fact there is significant difference in Arabic language between the two words *hišat* and *našib*. The word *hišat* in Arabic refers to the share of an individual that is always clearly and unsuspectedly shown. The other word, *našib*, is a share that could possibly be fair or unfair, exceeding or deceiving what one's deserves. Thus the translation *našib alassad* seems to be closer to the meaning of the target idiom as we see, in the fable that gives rise to this idiom, that the lion's share exceeds what he deserves.

To keep one's nose clean

Four respondents provided no answers. Two attempted literal translation of the target idiom, one of which is *tubgi khsham ahadhun nadheef* (to keep one's mouth clean). Transfer occurs here because the word *khsham* (mouth) is a dialectical variation of the word 'nose' in the speech community of the research sample. The answers of the rest of the respondents which constitute 55% of the whole sample reveal some sort of confusion with the target idiom. It seems that the inclusion of the word 'nose' and the general sense of this idiom made subjects confuse it with the idiom 'to poke one's nose into another's business' which has an equivalent in their L1. Unexpectedly only one respondent gave the idiomatic equivalent of the target idiom while the others provided only its equivalent meaning in different lexical representations.

To rush away (from the wind)

Results revealed that six respondents left this question blank and three gave irrelevant translations. Ten respondents who actually constitute 50% of the total sample were reported to provide literal translation of the target idiom as *yajri sareʔn* 'to run quickly'. Only one respondent gave an equivalent meaning as escape quickly. The exact Arabic equivalent to this idiom is *atlqa saqehi lil reeh*

To be timeworn

Ten respondents left this idiom undone and seven gave incorrect answers. Although the answers include the Arabic equivalents of the word 'time' but, in general, these answers are loosely structured and incoherent phrases. The rest of the translations (provided by the remaining three subjects) correspond to the target idiom. They (i.e. the subjects) seem to grasp the intended meaning of the idiom but fail to provide the required idiomatic wording. The answers recorded are *Litaku:n gadi:m* (to be old), *tagleedi* (traditional) and *gadeem* (old).

The Arabic equivalent of this idiom is *akal addahru ʔalihee wa sharib* and these answers as can be seen to relate semantically to the target idiom. This Arabic idiom itself is a highly standardized form and less frequent in common usage.

To turn your back (on someone)

This idiom has an identical equivalent in Arabic with the same form and the same content. Subjects' translation of this idiom does not, however, greatly assign to this relevance and equivalency. Four respondents left no answers, two subjects attempted a literal translation, three provided irrelevant translations and five suggested a semi literal translation as 'do not retreat'. The remaining six respondents provided appropriate translation either by giving the exact equivalent in their native language or including in their answers the meaning of the target idiom (abandon, desert. not to mind).

To give up (smoking)

Results reveal that 80% of the respondents were recorded to give correct translation of this idiom, two respondents gave literal translation and another two left no response. The idiom itself is a common phrasal verb that learners might usually encounter in their study context.

To run like the wind

Seven respondents left blank answers and three mistranslated the idiom. The rest of respondents who constitute 50% of the total sample had properly translated this idiom. The idiom is a semitransparent one the thing which triggers both semantic and lexical transfer.

Red herring

Ten respondents gave incorrect translations and two attempted a literal one. The remaining eight respondents gave an equivalent of the target idiom, in their L1. The Arabic idiom reported here is 'dharr alrramad fi aleuyun' which is in fact an identical equivalent of the English idiom 'to throw dust in the eyes'. Subjects responses strength the possibility of prior knowledge of the target idiom.

To spill the beans

Results reveal a lack of familiarity with the target idiom. Answers were left blank by fifteen respondents, three gave literal translation, one gave irrelevant and only one respondent provided the correct translation. The high percentage of blank answers could be attributed to the fact the target idiom does not have an equivalent in the subjects' native language. Subjects seem to be aware of the idiomaticity gap and that prior knowledge about the target idiom is required so no attempts were made.

To shoot the breeze

Eight respondents left this idiom with no responses, four gave incorrect responses and other five respondents provided literal translations either as itlaq annar (to shoot) or itlaq annar 'ala alnaseem (to shoot (fire) into the breeze). The idiomatic sense of this phrase is caught by only one subject who translated it as hdarren/habbaen (something wasted ,e.g. time) which might carry the idea of the target idiom that refers to idle talk. There is no impact of the mother tongue on translating such idioms since they are culture dependent and no similar instances exist in the other language.

To rain cats and dogs

This is one of the typical examples of opaque idioms that are often pain in the neck for EFL learners. Interestingly such idiom are frequently cited in EFL classes when referring to difficulties and idiosyncrasies of idiomatic expressions. In case of the present idiom a high percentage of 90% of the subjects gave the expected answer and only two respondents mistranslated the idiom. It is likely that this high percentage resulted from direct instruction of the target idiom.

To hit the sack

Results show that ten respondents skipped this question, one respondent gave a literal translation, one gave an irrelevant answer and only one respondent gave the correct answer. The other seven respondents translated the idiom as 'yadhrib biyad min hadid' 'beat with an iron fist'. These subjects seemed to have picked the word 'hit' as the key word in the target idiom and understood the whole phrase as 'beat severely'. The Arabic idiomatic expression they have used is close to this sense.

To go bananas

Only two respondents correctly translated this idiom. The case of these two subjects could suggest a probability of acquaintance with the target idiom. The rest of the respondents failed to provide correct translation of this idiom either by leaving blank answers or giving literal or irrelevant translations. A highly considerable percentage of 30% of the respondents translated the idiom as 'go ahead' or 'proceed' relying on the sense indicated by the word 'go'.

To put off (a meeting)

Ten respondents correctly translated this idiom, four left blanks, and the remaining six respondents gave a translation that correspond to the meaning of 'never put off till tomorrow what can be done today' which is a frequent saying in their native language. Transfer occurs here because the target idiom does not have an equivalent in Arabic and its meaning could only be literally conveyed because to 'put off' (postpone) often associate with work in Arabic usage.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The general performance of subjects indicates poor competence in translating idioms from the target language. Results reveal lack of familiarity with idioms especially opaque ones. Idiom with direct equivalents in the students' L1 pose less challenge than different ones. Positive transfer is reported to occur in translating similar and identical idioms. Subjects, however, sometimes use lexical substitutions or literal translations which sometimes end with the target idioms losing their idiomatic sense. Findings reveal that when they fail to provide the exact equivalent of the target idiom in their L1, subjects give a non idiomatic expression that is close to the idiomatic sense of the target idiom. They seemed to rely on word to word translation strategy which often blinded them from recognizing the idiomatic meaning of the target idioms .

Obvious instances of negative transfer could well be seen in the translation of opaque idioms. Here subjects trapped themselves in the linguistic frames of these idioms and could hardly see their pragmatic grounds. The significantly high percentage of the correct responses to some opaque idioms could probably be due to prior teaching occasions.

The study of idioms in general and the study of the impact of idiomaticity on the translation of idioms in particular receive only very little interest in linguistic research. Expectedly, idioms has almost become, as one result of this, neglected in the ELT environment. An adequate knowledge about idiomatic expressions is possibly attainable by their inclusion in language syllabi and material. It is thus, strongly recommended by the present research that idioms should be treated as such a core target of language and translation studies.

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