

An Analysis of Translating Figurative Expressions from Arabic into English Using Newmark's Theory

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Received: 15 Mar

Accepted: 20 Apr

Volume: 4

Issue: 2

This study explores the challenges of translating figurative language, particularly metaphors and similes, from English into Arabic. It examines how cultural differences and the lack of direct equivalents affect translation and evaluates the effectiveness of semantic and communicative approaches. Findings show that figurative expressions pose significant difficulties due to their cultural specificity and implicit meanings, often leading to misinterpretation if translators lack cultural awareness. Semantic translation preserves the original meaning and style, while communicative translation ensures clarity and naturalness for the target audience. The research concludes that effective translation requires a balanced use of both approaches, tailored to the text and context. These insights provide practical guidance for translators and students in overcoming linguistic and cultural challenges in figurative language translation.

KEYWORDS: communicative translation, cultural differences, figurative language, metaphors, semantic, similes, translation.

Introduction

Translation is a crucial tool for exchanging knowledge; however, it becomes challenging when dealing with idioms and culturally specific expressions. Effective translation requires understanding both languages, their cultures, and appropriate strategies (Dweik & Thalji, 2016). Since language and culture are closely related, idioms often carry cultural connotations that make them difficult to interpret and translate (Howwar, 2013).

This research aims to identify the strategies and difficulties encountered by Iraqi translation students when translating culturally bound idioms and expressions. Idioms are defined as expressions consisting of at least two words whose meanings cannot be understood literally but function as a single semantic unit (Beekman & Callow, 1974, as cited in AlShawi, 2013, p. 140). They are an essential part of everyday language and reflect cultural and linguistic boundaries, yet they present significant challenges for translators (Howwar, 2013).

Despite developments in translation theory and practice, translating idiomatic and culturally bound expressions remains difficult for translators and students. The meaning of an idiom goes beyond the sum of its individual words (Hussein et al., 2000, p. 26), which makes accurate translation challenging. One major issue is the lack of equivalence between languages, as each language expresses meaning differently (Baker,

1992). Another difficulty arises when idioms have similar forms but different meanings across languages. These challenges are further complicated by linguistic differences between Arabic, a Semitic language, and English, an Indo-European language (Al-Shawi & Mahadi, 2012).

1.1 Aim of the study

1. To examine the challenges of translating figurative language, especially metaphors and similes, between English and Arabic.
2. To analyze the role of cultural differences in shaping the meaning of figurative expressions in translation.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of semantic and communicative translation strategies in conveying figurative language.

1.2 Problem of the Study

1. Difficulty in translating figurative language due to cultural differences and lack of direct equivalents.
2. Risk of losing the intended meaning or effect when translating metaphors and similes literally.
3. Challenges in choosing appropriate translation strategies that preserve both meaning and style.

1.3 Research questions

1. What are the main challenges in translating metaphors and similes from English into Arabic?
2. How do cultural differences affect the translation of figurative language?
3. Which translation approach (semantic or communicative) is more effective in translating figurative expressions?



Literature Review

2.1 Translation and Culture

Translation is “a literal attempt to convey a written message or phrase from one language to another with the same meaning” (Newmark, 1981). Moreover, translation also involves transferring all the grammatical and lexical features of the source text to the target language with the utmost accuracy while preserving the full context (Bell, 1991). Consequently, these definitions highlight that translation may be understood as a final written text or as the translator's work. In addition, translation is described as the process of transforming a text from one language to another, while the product is the translated text that the reader sees (Hatem & Munday, 2004). Furthermore, translation has great cultural significance, as it highlights the differences between weak and good texts and reveals the complexities of language. It also plays a role in transferring knowledge across cultures, enabling individuals to absorb others' cultural characteristics, which, in turn, helps them understand the components of their own culture (Newmark, 1981).

Culture is considered a set of beliefs that form a behavioral frame of reference, encompassing elements such as religion, language, economics, politics, and literature (Aziz, 1999). In this regard, language is emphasized as a fundamental component of culture, and translation deals with two different cultures. Moreover, the main challenge lies in preserving the cultural character of the original text while adapting it to sound acceptable and natural in the target culture. Similarly, the task of translation extends beyond literal word-for-word rendering to encompass conveying the whole meaning, including ideas and messages. This requires a thorough cultural understanding of the source language and its contexts of use (Shunnaq, 1998). In addition, translation becomes more complex when direct alternatives to cultural elements are not provided (Ilias, 1988). In such cases, it is recommended to use an alternative that performs the same function within the recipient's culture, even if it is not formally identical to the original. The cultural specificity of each language is manifested in its own vocabulary and rhetoric, making the success of a translation dependent on the translator's cultural awareness.

2.2 Figurative language

Figurative language refers to the use of words with meanings that extend beyond their literal sense, often inferred from shared cultural references or general context. This is particularly important in understanding metaphor in language (Montgomery et al., 2007). “A figurative word is one used in place of another meaning or expression that is not synonymous with it, but rather is related to it through ideas expressed through elements such as similes, metaphors, or idiomatic constructions” (Nida, 1975). This complexity demonstrates that dealing with figurative language in translation is not merely about transferring words; it requires a careful understanding of the cultural and linguistic contexts. “Translating figurative language

requires not only knowledge of the language and cultures of the source and target languages, but also the selection of appropriate words and appropriate translation strategies.” (Abdul Wahid, 2017).

The greatest challenge in translation lies in the translator’s ability to grasp the cultural dimension intended by the authors of the original text and convey it in a way that ensures the same impact in the target language as if the authors had written it in that language (Abdullah, 2014). This requires the use of precise expressions that enable the recipient to benefit from the content as intended. “It is very clear that the principle of complete equivalence is impossible in translation because languages differ from one another and have different codes and rules governing the construction of grammatical forms that carry different meanings” (Bell, 1991). In the same context, “Each unit contains within itself a set of non-transferable associations and connotations” (Bassnett, 1980). She also argues that “similarity cannot exist even between two versions of the same text in two target languages”.

Metaphor is defined as “an extension of the literal or basic meaning,” emphasizing that figurative language is based on the traditional concept of metaphor as the use of figures, which express indirect meanings often linked to cultural context (Matthews, 2007). Figurative language, by its very nature, contains a degree of illusion and often relies on similarities between different elements linked by similar meanings, making metaphor a means of expressing one thing through something entirely different (Newmark, 1988). Understanding metaphors is not achieved by analyzing their individual words in isolation. Instead, it requires viewing them as a whole with a complete meaning, as is the case with phrasal verbs (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). While the patterns of figurative language vary, this study will focus on two main types: metaphor and simile.

2.2.1 Metaphor

Metaphor is a linguistic device that conveys ideas more profoundly and concisely than literal language (Newmark, 1988). Moreover, the difficulty of metaphor in translation often stems from its unfamiliar form in the target language, primarily when it is associated with the source culture. Therefore, understanding the subject, form, and point of similarity is the key to successful translation (Larson, 1984).

Metaphors are not merely linguistic devices but rather cultural concepts based on understanding one experience through another, influenced by implicit assumptions and cultural backgrounds that shape our understanding. Furthermore, metaphor is considered “ far from being a special category of language proper to poets and rhetoricians, “and is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action.” (Lakoff and Johnson as cited in Altman, 1990, p.499)



Metaphor is defined as a type of figurative language that is based on the comparison of two different ideas or elements. Unlike similes, however, metaphors do not use “as” or “like.” They explain that metaphors add a rhetorical and imaginative quality to literary texts (Rozakis, 1995). Furthermore, a metaphor is a linguistic figure of speech in which one thing is named after another, but the literal meaning differs from the intended meaning. The relationship between them depends on the context, unlike similes, which use conjunctions (Kennedy, 1979, as cited in Maulana, 2023). In addition, a metaphor can be seen as a condensed form of a simile, linking two things without a conjunction, making it a rhetorical device that conveys profound meaning clearly and concisely (Kerav, 1994, as cited in Maulana, 2023)

2.2.2 Similes

A simile is a rhetorical figure of speech that links two things using explicit comparative devices such as “as” and “like,” making the image easier and more precise (Cuddon, 1980). Unlike a metaphor, which conceals the element of comparison, a simile directly highlights the relationship between the two parties and is widely used in literature. Furthermore, simile is more common in literary writing than metaphor and is characterized by a more experimental, decorative style (Baldick, 2001)

In addition, simile relies on connecting devices such as “as” and “like”. It expresses a clear separation between the things being compared, unlike metaphor, which is characterized by the unity and surprise of the image (Child and Fowler, 2006). Therefore, a simile is a temporary, adaptable, and easily renewed interpretive device.

Metaphor and simile share the same conceptual structure, with a simile being a form of metaphor that differs only in the way it is expressed (Kennedy, 2007). The success of a simile translation depends on accurately identifying its basic components: the topic, the vehicle, and the similarity feature. She believes that failure to recognize these elements during translation may lead to inaccurate understanding or even semantic distortion. Accordingly, she emphasizes the need to carefully analyze the simile in the source language before attempting to transfer it to the target language to ensure a translation characterized by semantic consistency and clarity (Larson, 1984).

2.3 Challenges in translating Figurative Language

Understanding metaphorical similarity is one of the biggest challenges translators face when dealing with figurative language. Figurative language relies on words that are not used literally but convey implicit meanings that require interpretation beyond a superficial explanation (Montgomery et al., 2007). Therefore, translators must take cultural differences into account to ensure the accurate transmission of the message

between the two languages. Proficiency in the source language and knowledge of the target language culture are only part of the requirements for successful translation. Translators must also be highly skilled at selecting words and expressions, as well as using translation tools, to ensure the message is effectively conveyed to the reader in the target language (Abdul Wahid, 2017, p. 17). Additionally, translators face the challenge of selecting the most suitable strategy when translating figurative language. Strategy serves as a functional tool for solving specific translation problems, making understanding the cultural context and the author's intention essential (Lusher, 1991, as cited in Jumaah, 2024).

Analyzing the elements of a simile, namely subject and image, is a prerequisite for accurately conveying and understanding its meaning (Larson, 1984). Identifying these components in the source text helps accurately translate the simile into the target language. However, translating metaphorical language can be challenging. Several challenges may hinder a translator, most notably the presence of an equivalent that differs from its meaning, the lack of a direct equivalent, or the literal translation of a metaphor in the source language that results in a different metaphor in the target language. Additionally, differences in the styles and patterns used in metaphorical language between the two cultures can complicate the process (Baker, 1992)

In the same context, challenges related to translating metaphor in general into five categories: literary, related to preserving the literary style; linguistic, resulting from the overlap between the two languages or syntactic ambiguity; aesthetic, related to the technical dimensions of the text, such as rhetorical images; social and cultural, which appear when dealing with cultural contexts and diverse concepts (Adel & Ahmed, 2016). All of these difficulties require the translator to have a strong ability to reconcile the text's semantic and formal dimensions without neglecting its cultural context (Adel & Ahmed, 2016).

2.4 Newmark's theory communicative and semantic translation

One of the most notable contributions to translation theory lies in his elaboration of the concepts of semantic translation and communicative translation (Newmark, 1988). Based on his classification of texts' functions as informative, expressive, and persuasive, he developed two approaches: semantic translation, which seeks to preserve the precise meaning of the original text, and communicative translation, which aims to convey the message to the reader clearly and effectively. Semantic translation and communicative translation should not be seen as opposing paths; instead, they can be combined in complementary ways according to the text's requirements and context. In texts not linked to a specific culture, they can produce similar effects on the recipient.



What distinguishes communicative translation from semantic translation is that it favours the functional and rhetorical impact of the text over literal accuracy when both cannot be combined (Newmark, 1988). Translation is not a mechanical process subject to rigid rules, but instead requires functional flexibility in keeping with the nature of the text and its culture. Communicative and semantic translation do not represent two opposing approaches, but rather fall within a single domain, with translations varying according to the nature of the text. The appropriate style is chosen based on the text's importance; the greater the importance, the more appropriate the semantic translation.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the challenges faced by Iraqi translation students when translating figurative language, particularly metaphors and similes, from English into Arabic. The qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for a deeper and more detailed understanding of the linguistic, cultural, and contextual factors that affect the translation process and influence students' choices and interpretations.

The research focuses on analyzing students' translations to identify the strategies they use, such as literal translation, paraphrasing, or adaptation, as well as the difficulties they encounter when dealing with culturally bound expressions. It also aims to highlight how differences between English and Arabic can make translating figurative language more complex and challenging for learners. In addition, the study seeks to provide insights that may contribute to improving translation teaching methods and helping students develop more effective translation skills.

Results

4.1 Result of first research question

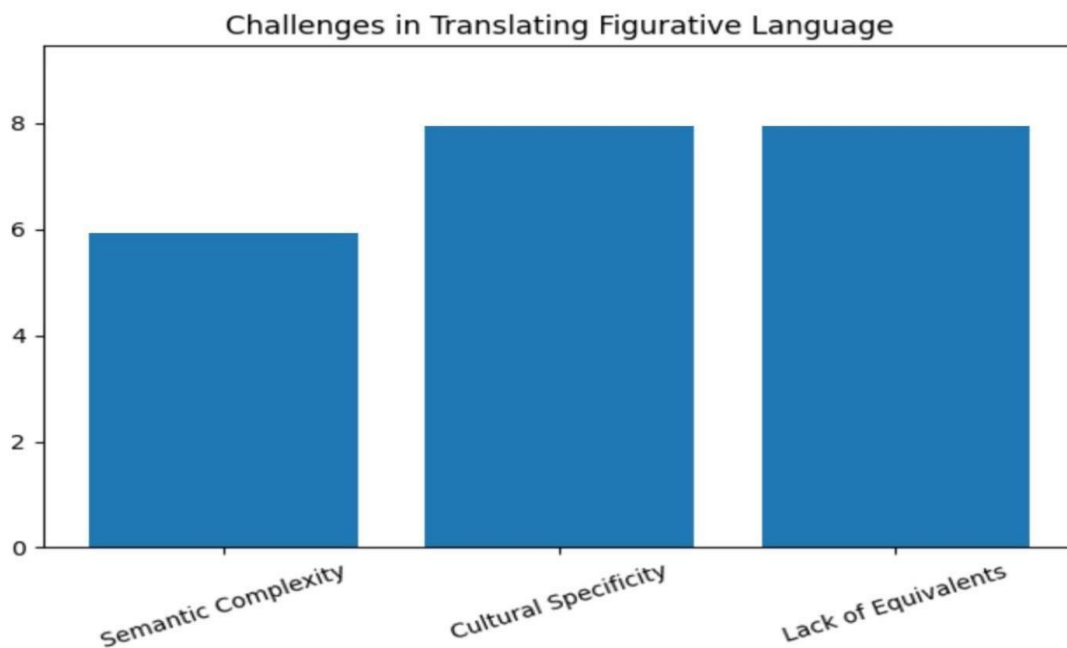
What are the main challenges in translating metaphors and similes from English into Arabic?

The research reveals that translating metaphors and similes poses significant challenges due to their semantic complexity and cultural specificity. One of the primary difficulties lies in identifying the intended meaning behind figurative expressions, as they often carry implicit meanings that go beyond the literal interpretation (Montgomery et al., 2007).

Moreover, metaphors are particularly problematic because they are deeply rooted in the source culture, making them unfamiliar or even incomprehensible in the target language (Newmark, 1988). Translators

often struggle to determine whether to preserve the original metaphor or replace it with a culturally equivalent expression. Similarly, similes require careful analysis of their components, the image, and the point of similarity to ensure accurate translation (Larson, 1984).

Another major challenge is the absence of direct equivalents in the target language. In many cases, literal translation leads to semantic distortion or loss of meaning (Baker, 1992). This confirms that figurative language cannot be translated word-for-word without considering context and cultural background.



4.2 Result of the second research question

How do cultural differences affect the translation of figurative language?

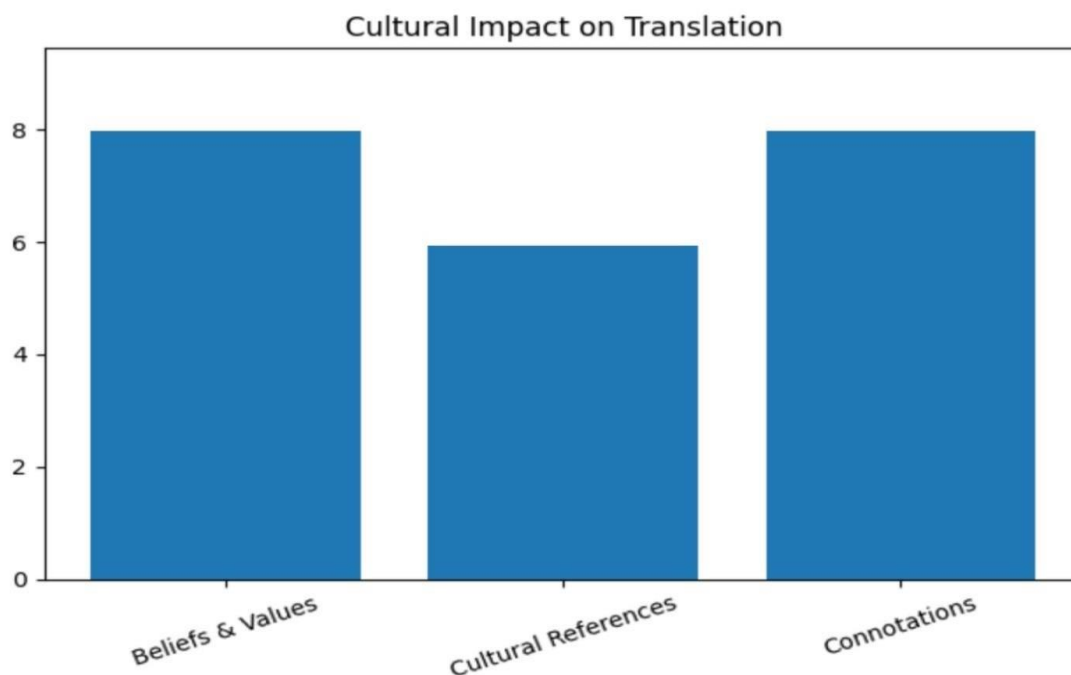
The research indicates that culture plays a central role in the translation of figurative language. Since language is an integral part of culture, figurative expressions often reflect specific cultural beliefs, values, and experiences (Aziz, 1999). As a result, translating such expressions requires not only linguistic competence but also deep cultural awareness.

Cultural differences may lead to misunderstanding or misinterpretation if the translator fails to recognize the underlying cultural references embedded in the source text (Shunnaq, 1998). In cases where no direct cultural equivalent exists, translators are required to adopt alternative expressions that perform the same communicative function in the target culture (Ilias, 1988).

Additionally, the research confirms that figurative language carries connotations and associations that are not easily transferable between languages (Bassnett, 1980). This reinforces the idea that complete



equivalence in translation is unattainable, and translators must instead aim for functional equivalence that preserves the intended effect on the reader.



4.3 Result of third research question

Which translation approach (semantic or communicative) is more effective in translating figurative expressions?

The research show that both semantic and communicative translation approaches play important roles in translating figurative language, and their effectiveness depends on the context and purpose of the text.

Semantic translation is effective when the goal is to preserve the original meaning and stylistic features of the source text (Newmark, 1988). This approach is particularly useful in literary texts where maintaining the author's voice and imagery is essential. However, it may result in awkward or unnatural expressions in the target language when cultural differences are significant.

On the other hand, communicative translation prioritizes clarity and naturalness, making the text more accessible to the target audience (Newmark, 1988). This approach is especially useful when dealing with culturally bound expressions, as it allows the translator to adapt the message in a way that resonates with the target culture.

The research suggests that neither approach is sufficient on its own. Instead, an effective translation requires a balance between semantic accuracy and communicative effectiveness. This supports the view that translation is a flexible process that depends on the nature of the text and the intended audience.

Discussion

This research shows that translating figurative language, like metaphors and similes, is challenging because their meanings go beyond literal words and are closely tied to culture. Translators need to understand both source and target cultures and balance semantic and communicative approaches to keep the meaning clear and natural.

The research highlights the importance of cultural awareness and careful strategy selection. However, the study focused only on English-Arabic translation, analyzed limited types of figurative language, and used only textual examples.

Future research could explore other languages, include more figurative expressions, and involve professional translators to better understand practical challenges.

Conclusion

This study has examined the challenges associated with translating figurative language, particularly metaphors and similes, from English into Arabic, with a focus on cultural influence and translation strategies. The findings indicate that figurative expressions present significant difficulties due to their implicit meanings and strong cultural associations, which can not be adequately conveyed through literal translation.

The study further demonstrates that culture plays a crucial role in the translation process. Figurative language reflects culturally specific values and experiences, which often limits the availability of direct equivalents in the target language. Consequently, translators must rely on cultural awareness and select expressions that achieve a similar communicative effect, even when formal equivalence is not possible.

In addition, the findings highlight the importance of both semantic and communicative translation approaches. While semantic translation contributes to preserving the original meaning, communicative translation enhances clarity and naturalness for the target audience. An effective translation, therefore, requires a balanced integration of both approaches in accordance with the context.

In conclusion, the translation of figurative language is a complex process that extends beyond linguistic transfer, requiring cultural competence and strategic decision-making to ensure effective communication between languages.

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