

## Translation of Literary Language with Special Focus on Idioms

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### ABSTRACT

This research addresses problems of translating literary language, i.e., of idioms, and figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, personifications, and alliterations with special focus on idioms from English into Arabic. Those problems result from many factors which can be objective, generic, and even affective factors. What is important here is the translator's education background and experience in translating, first, then the affective factor which is the readers' responses on the idiom's translation quality, second. Through this evaluative qualitative research, it is found that idioms were translated by using idiomatic translation method while metaphors, similes, personifications, and alliterations were translated by using literal translation method. Idioms were translated accurately, whereas the translation of metaphors, similes, personifications, alliterations have not been very accurate. Based on the naturalness level, the translation of idioms is natural, while metaphors, similes, personifications, and alliterations are not yet natural.

**KEYWORDS:** Translation, Literary Language, Idioms, Naturalness.

### 1. Introduction:

Figurative language which is the pivot of literary discourse is that language which has several meanings. It is a type of language in which the visual is used to portray things in an exaggerated manner. It is the language in which the true or literal meaning is converted into a figurative meaning through the use of an intermediary implicit or indirect meaning in a way that requires analyzing the text to reach the intended meaning (Kennedy, 2002). Although figurative language is often summarily referred to as metaphoric, still it covers a wider realm of expressions that include allusion, exaggeration, antithesis, repetition, metaphor, simile, personification, apostrophe, climax, irony, litotes, metonymy, paradox, pleonasm, euphemism, onomatopoeia, and synecdoche (Keraf, 1998).

Translation of figurative expressions is one of the many practical problems if not the most important particular one facing the translator of literary or non – literary texts, and the students of English and translation as well. (Dickens, 2005). Newmark (1998) identifies five fundamental characteristics of

figurative language which the translator should render: 1. Allegory and figurativeness 2. onomatopoeia (the importance of sound above meaning) 3. rhythm 4. polysemous words 5. collocations.

These problems can be linguistic, cultural or both, due to the wide discrepancy between the source language and the target language, and the culture that these media of expression represent.

Since the scope of metaphor is very wide (it may be single – viz one word – or extended; an idiom, an allegory, a collection, a proverb, a sentence, a complete imaginative text. (Newmark, 1998; Cooper,1986).

An attempt has been made here to deal with one of its components: that of idioms.

Idioms have ever proved to be pitfalls to translator. R. Glemet, a professor at the school of interpreters in the university of Geneva, cites the following story in this respect: "On one occasion, a Russian delegate in the course of a discussion in a conference attacked an American delegate and at some point, in his dialectics, said in Russian, "There's a dead dog hidden here", by which he meant merely, "that's where the shoe pinches". The interpreter misrendered it into "there's a nigger in the wood-pile". He did not, unfortunately, remember that the head of the American Delegation, the undersecretary of State for labor, was a coloured man ... there was diplomatic incident". (Glemet, 1958, 105).

On occasions, inaccurate translating of idiom may mean very little to a native or non-native speaker or even the result will utterly be bewildering and possibly high amusing (Ghazala,1995).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the nature of idioms and to describe typical methods that can be used in translating idioms across Arabic and English, for which, to my best knowledge, no former work has been carried out (except for few articles by Newmark and others on translating metaphor from English into languages other than Arabic (Newmark,1998; Robenson,2001).

Ultimately, this work is far from having exhausted every aspect of the subject. Since the scope of every component of figurative language covers huge and overlapping material, I have tried to sketch an outline of pertinent subjects which may furnish material for broader research.

## **2. Metaphor and figurative language:**

Figurative language, in the most general sense, refers to any manner or method by which a writer or speaker uses "figurative language " or gives distinctive shape or form to a succession of words and ideas (Robinson, 2001; Maalej,2005). In this sense, particular kinds of sentences, like antithesis and parallelism, are figures of speech which entail particular ways of transferring meaning or words from one signification to another.

The oldest known instance of figurative language dates from the end of the third millennium B.C. in Mesopotamia, shortly before the second world war, where an Oxford archeological expedition discovered at Sippar in (Iraq) a buried stone thought to have been served as a lintel to the main doorway of a school. The words inscribed with a uniform on it were these: " May he who sits in the place of learning shine like the sun", (Wheelwright, 1975: 117).

Metaphor is traditionally taken to be the most fundamental form of figurative language. The word metaphor comes from the Greek word metaphors derived from "meta" meaning, "over", and "pher" in, "to carry". It refers to a particular set of linguistic processes whereby aspects of one object are "carried over" or transferred to another object, so that the second object is spoken of as if it were the first.

There are various types of metaphor, and the number of "objects" involved can vary, but the general procedure of transference" remains the same:

*1.Awake for Morning in the Bowl of Night*

*Has flung the stone puts the stars to flight.*

(Edward Fitz Gerald, The Rub'aiyat of Omar Khayyam)

*2.It's what's under the bonnet that counts;*

(Car advertisement)

Figurative language is the language which does not mean what it says (Hawks, 1972: 1-2). In the two examples above: Night is not a bowl of water, and morning does not throw stone into it, and Cars do not wear bonnets.

In the history of rhetoric, metaphor has been described as the most important "semantic change" (or shift) and the most elaborated creative device in language and literature (Aristotle's, 1952: 9-10; Hawkes, 1972: 71). Hence it is not surprising that so much has been written on metaphor since Aristotle's poetics.

### 3. The term "idiom":

The term "idiom" is derived from the Greek *idios*, which means 'private, personal'. (Liddle- Scott, 1968: 818). In English as well as in some other languages which have borrowed it, the term has expanded in the course of time to acquire other meanings (O. E. D.: 20-21); P. Robert: 602; L. Mackensent: 450, among others). The concept has been called lexical cluster, (semantically) exocentric expression, collection (not to be confused with Firth's use of collocation) and phrases, frozen collocation, formula and locution (Healey, 1968;104).

Although the terms 'a special linguistic structure and specified idiomatic expression' و تركيب لغوي خاص و اصطلاح تعبير مخصوص. اصطلاح have been found in (Badger, 1881: 465; and Doniach,1972:575)respectively, the combination عبارة اصطلاحية 'idiomatic expression' seems to be the dominant usage in Arabic (Al-Ba'albaki, 1990: 447; Wahbe, 1974: 236).

#### 3.1. The definition of idioms:

Most dictionaries as well as scholars define idioms as: a conventionalized form of expression whose meaning cannot be deduced from the meaning of its components when they stand alone. (Irujo, 1986:288). Idioms are the stuff of conversation and their foundation in the spoken as well as the written language places them in the forefront of a language evolution.

They can appear in poetry as in the language of Shakespeare;

*Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,*

*Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,*

*While, like a puffe'd and reckless libertine,  
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,  
and rocks not his own rede.*

(Shakespeare, Hamlet).

And in other literary genres;

*" .... It was lucky for Flory that at present he was  
too busy to have time to think. The whole camp was at sixes and sevens since his long absence."*

(George Orwell, Burmese Days).

In his preface to *Immaturity*, O.B. Shaw says: .... "I did set up one condition in my early days, I resolved that I would write nothing in my early days, I resolved that I would write nothing that would not be intelligible to a foreigner with a dictionary, like the French Voltaire; and I therefore avoided idioms. Later on, I came to seek idioms as being the most highly vitalized form of language ... (Quoted from Kennedy, 1975: 48). Ideas expressed by idioms produce a strong impression on the reader, idioms do not just convey some information to the reader's mind, they appeal to his\her emotions, esthetic perception, and background. An idiom makes one feel part of one's own language community; one's cultural heritage (Robinson,2006).

English is very rich in idiomatic expressions; in fact, it's difficult to speak or write English without using idioms (O.D.C.I.E. vol.1, 1978: Vii). Arabic literature, likewise, is also rich in metaphor and idioms, idiomatic phrases are the commonest structure (Farghal & Shunnaq,1999).

Idiomatic sentences are also common. As the case in English, and many other languages, idioms in Arabic reflect the customs, manner or ways of life and outlook on life of the Arab nation (Robinson,2014;2015a;2015b).

### 3.2 Different Sources of Idioms:

After exploring several works and dictionaries on the subject (see bibliography), it has been found that there are many different sources of idioms, many idioms' phrases come from the everyday life of the English people and their numbers amount to thousands, e.g.

They come from home and family:

-To be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth.

(To express good luck since childhood).

يولد وفي فمه ملعقة من فضة (للتعبير عن الحظ السعيد منذ الطفولة)

-To hit the nail on the head.

Its equivalent in Arabic would not be translated literally as by saying: to hit the head of the nail. Rather, it would be: يصيب كبد الحقيقة

Many idioms are to do with food and cooking:

-To jump out of the frying pan into the fire. If this idiom is translated literally, it would look like; القفز من النار كالمستجير من الرمضاء بالنار whereas the Arabic idiom in this regard is: المقلاة الى النار

-A pie in the sky.

The literal translation of which is: كعكة في السماء, whereas we can find a more suitable Egyptian colloquial equivalent in Arabic: عشم أبليس بالجنة

In standard Arabic

(حلم صعب المنال)

Others from agriculture:

-To put one's hand to the plough

يشمر عن ساعد الجد

-To separate the wheat from the chaff

يميز الغث من السمين

Others come from nautical and military life:

-To be in the same boat

كلنا في ألهم سواء

-Still water runs deep

شخص كتوم (في باب السرية)

-The same in colloquial Egyptian

يا ما تحت السواهي دواهي

-Ships that pass in the night

للتعبير عن المعرفة العابرة

-To fight a pitched battle

معركة حامية الوطيس (شدة النزال)

-Zero hour

ساعة الصفر (بدء التنفيذ)

Many include parts of the body, colour, and animal:

-To lose face

يفقد ماء وجهه

|                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| -To have finger in the pie         | له في كل عرس حصّة                                       |
| -Under one's nose                  | تحت سمع وبصر  |
| -To give someone the cold shoulder | في باب التعبير عن التجاهل                               |
| -A blue film                       | فلم اباحي   |
| -Green belt                        | حزام أخضر (من النباتات والاشجار حول الاماكن)            |
| -To have a bee in one's bonnet     | في باب التعبير عن انشغال الذهن بفكرة                    |
| -Pretty kettle of fish             | في باب التعبير عن الحال المسبب للنكد                    |
| -To buy a pig in a poke            | كمن يشتري السمك في النهر (دون معاينة)                   |
| -Let sleeping dogs lie             | دع الفتنة نائمة لعن الله من أيقظها ، أو: لا تثر المتاعب |

### 3.3. Idioms on special situations:

To mention but few in the world of business, buying and selling, health and illness, holidays and travels, politics and government, telephoning, work and industrial relations:

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| -Wall street “nomenclature”       | سوق الاسهم والسندات                           |
| -To go window shopping            | التبضع بالنظر الى واجهات المحلات فقط دون شراء |
| -Shop–lifter                      | لص مخازن                                      |
| -Pocket – lifter                  | نشال  |
| -To go for a song                 | في باب البيع بثمن بخس                         |
| -Poor health                      | في باب اعتلال الصحة                           |
| -To pass away/ to kick the bucket | يموت او يتوفى                                 |
| -To come round                    | يفيق من غيبوبة او إغماءه                      |
| -A package holiday                | سفرة جماعية                                   |
| -A globe trotter                  | رحال، جوابة، جواب، دائم الاسفار (سندباد)      |
| -A five – star hotel              | فندق درجة اولى                                |
| -A busman's holiday               | عطلة يزاول فيها المرء نفس عمله اليومي         |
| 10 Downing street “nomenclature”  | مقر رئاسة الحكومة البريطانية                  |
| The white house “nomenclature”    | مقر رئاسة الحكومة الامريكية (القصر الابيض)    |
| The cabinet                       | “مجلس الوزراء                                 |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| The shadow cabinet                        | حكومة الظل (المعارضة)                   |
| Right / left wing                         | جناحا الحكومة او الحزب المتطرفان        |
| A hot line                                | الخط التلفوني (الهاتفي) بين رؤساء الدول |
| To ring off                               | ينهي مكالمة هاتفية                      |
| To take the call                          | يتسلم النداء او المكالمة                |
| A white – collar worker                   | موظف او عامل مكتبي                      |
| A blue – collar worker                    | عامل مهني                               |
| To fire someone/ to give someone the sack | في باب الفصل او الطرد من العمل          |

To these we might add another variety of idioms derived from history, classical works, romance, tales, geography, and religion.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| to meet one's waterloo                           | في باب التعبير عن الهزيمة او الخسارة التامة                |
| Even thou Brutus                                 | حتى انت يا بروتس -في باب الخيانة والتتكبر للأصدقاء         |
| Midas touch                                      | في باب التعبير عن النجاح (المالي) بغض النظر عن نوعية العمل |
| Sword of Damocles                                | للتعبير عن خطر محقق (كالسيف المسلط)                        |
| Achille's heel                                   | للتعبير عن نقطة ضعف او المقتل                              |
| David and Goliath                                | في باب النزال غير المتكافئ والذي يفوز فيه الاضعف           |
| Rich as Croesus                                  | في باب التعبير عن الغنى الفاحش (اموال قارون)               |
| Casanova   | كازانوفا (زير النساء)                                      |
| A quixotic project (from Cervantes' Don Quixote) | مشروع خيالي  |
| Cinderella                                       | فتاة مهضومة الحق   |
| Open sesame                                      | في باب التعبير عن العلاج السحري لكل موقف                   |
| To build castles in Spain                        | للتعبير عن عقد الآمال العريضة: بناء قصور في الهواء         |
| Not for all the tea in China                     |  |

في باب التعبير عن رفض المرء القيام بأي عمل حتى ولو عرض عليه ثراء الصين

|                |                              |
|----------------|------------------------------|
| Dead sea fruit | شيء يعجبك مظهره ويخيبك مخبره |
|----------------|------------------------------|

These idioms if translated literally as they are in source language, they will not convey the right meaning at all.

### 3.4. Form, Structure, and Meaning of Idioms:

Idioms take many different forms and structures. They can be very short (a large number of idioms consist of some combination of noun and adjective):

Cold war  
اجازة بدون استئذان

French leave  
حرب باردة (سياسية)

or rather long;

To fish in trouble waters  
التصيد في الماء العكر

Fortune favours the brave  
انما تؤخذ الدنيا غلابا

Two heads better than one  
ما خاب من استشار

or even compound and complex idioms:

you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs:

لا حلوى بلا نار، او : ولا بد دون الشهيد من أبر النحل . ويقول نزار قباني : لا بحر من غير دوار

Adversity makes strange bed-fellow  
مصائب الزمان تضطرك لمعاشرة أغرب الاقران

You find fault with a fat goose  
لا تعدم الحسنة ذاماً / شخص صعب الارضاء

An idiom's semantics is a complex entity. Komissarov (1979:50) presents five aspects of its meaning; as follows:

- a) The idiom's figurative meaning.
- b) Its literal meaning
- c) Its emotive character
- d) Stylistic register
- e) National colouring

In a) and b) above, the figurative meaning of the idioms is its *raison d'etre*. It is the basic part of its total sense. The idiom "red tape" means bureaucracy, "to kick bucket" is a sardonic way of saying that someone died, and "to wash dirty linen in public" means to disclose one's private or family troubles to outsiders.

The figurative meaning of the idioms is inferred from its literal meaning. "Red tape", "to kick the bucket", and "to wash dirty linen in public", respectively mean, a coloured tape, to deal a blow to a bucket, and

some kind of laundering, though in some cases this aspect is subordinate and serves as a basis for the metaphorical use. (See also Lakoff,1980).

c) With regard to their emotive (affective) character, the meaning of idioms can be:

- positive, e.g.

"To kill two birds with one stone" is a good one:

الحصول على شيئين بمجهود واحد ( عصفورين بحجر )

- negative, e.g.

"To find mar's nest" figuratively means a discovery which looks valuable or promising but which turns out to be worthless. Its literal meaning is a ludicrous mistake for it is against the nature of things –mars are not birds in nests. In Arabic the idiom means

في باب تقخيم الامور وتضخيمها مغالطة

- neutral, e.g.

" Rome was not built in one day" is a natural statement of fact.

لم يبن العالم في يوم واحد

Therefore, idioms are worded as:

- recommendations, e.g.

" You should mind your P's and Q's, which means: pay attention to the details of etiquette. حسن الفاظك او تصرف بلياقه

- warnings, e.g.

" You cannot eat your cake and have it"

في باب التحذير وعلى الاخص من عدم الاستئثار بالشيء

- describe undesirable situation, e.g.  
(To have one's skeleton in one's cupboard)

في باب التعبير عن وجود أشياء محرجة لدى المرء ولا يرغب في أفشائها

- humorous, e.g.

"To push up the daisies

نمت الزهور على دمنته، في باب مات وشبع موتاً

d) stylistic register, this aspect of meaning may be:

- bookish or elevated in style, e.g.

" To join the majority "

حشر مع الناس عيد

" All is well that ends well

العبرة بالخواتيم (النتائج)

- colloquial, e.g.

" The butcher, the carpenter, and the candle maker, or Tom, Dick, and Harry.

- or even vulgar, e.g.

"To be a pain in the neck"

"My foot!"

مصدر ازعاج  
قطعا لا! (طرز بالعامية المصرية)

e) National Colouring. The meaning of idioms may be nationally coloured, that includes some words (usually proper or geographical names) which mark, as the product of certain nation, the following:

"French leave"

اجازة بدون استئذان

"Turkish bath"

حمام تركي (شعبي)

"Castle ambitions "

آمال عريضة ، اضغاث أحلام

### 3.5. Idioms and Metaphor:

Idioms and metaphor are similar in that both are characterized by figurative style; they both have meaning which are not their original meaning, and may have a literal as well as the figurative meaning. The difference between them lies in the strength of the imagery: in idiomatic expressions, the words convey rather than illustrate the meaning; in metaphoric expressions the words colour the meaning (Duff, 1981: 89).

Thus, for instance, to “fall in love” is idiomatic: these words must be taken together, and in this combination, they have a figurative meaning.

Whereas an expression such as “get down to brass tacks” is metaphorical: here the figurative meaning is far stronger, but the bond between the words is weaker, for if we substitute the neutral word "work" for the image "brass tacks", we end up with an idiom, "get down to work".

### 4. Typical Method of Translating Idioms:

In translating idioms, the translator should proceed from the assumption that an idiom is an important part of the text, therefore, whenever the author of the source text uses an idiom, it is the translator's duty to try and produce it with utmost fidelity. His choice for an equivalence in the target language will be influenced by the five aspects of its semantics. (See. Robinson,2001).The translator will not run short of adequate

equivalence; he can scoop up from a rich store of adequate equivalence of idioms and metaphors in Arabic.

Some scholars and theorists of translation propose various methods for translating idioms. Nide (1974: 107) suggests three general types of transference;

- 1) Idioms to non-idioms,
- 2) Idioms to idioms, and
- 3) Non-idioms to idioms.

Catiya (1974: 184-186) expands these three types into four and rearranges them in order of performance. They are listed as follows together with some modifications derived from my personal teaching experience.

- a) An idiom may be translated preserving all the five aspects of its semantic structure. That means that the translator makes use of an idiom in Arabic which has the identical figurative meaning derived from the same literal meaning (that is containing the same image) as in the English language idioms, which preserve the same emotive, stylistic and national characteristics. The first thing the translator should do therefore, is to look for such an idiom in the target language; compare:

|                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Behind ones back                 | من وراء الظهر (في باب التأمير او ما شابه) |
| Walls have ears                  | ان للحيطان آذانا (نصح بالتزام السرية)     |
| To wash the hands from a case    | يغسل اليدين من قضية (يتخلى)               |
| To kill two birds with one stone | اصابة عصفورين بحجر واحد                   |

However, the list of such direct equivalents is rather limited. The translator has a good chance of finding the appropriate idiom in Arabic if the original expression originated in some other language, say Latin or Greek, and was later borrowed by both English and Arabic. Such international expressions may also be derived from the Bible, works of classical writers, famous aphorisms and the like, compare:

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| A good Samaritan        | السامري الصالح (فاعل خير)                      |
| Achilles' heel          | كعب أخيل (نقطة الضعف)                          |
| Sword of Damocles       | سيف ديموقليس (خطر داهم، سيف مسلط)              |
| Open sesame             | افتح يا سمسم (تعبير عن العلاج السحري لكل موقف) |
| To be or not to be      | كن أو لا تكن                                   |
| Iron curtain            | الستار الحديدي (طوق لا يمكن الفكك منه)         |
| To shed crocodile tears | يذرف دموع التماسيح (في باب النفاق)             |

b) Some images that have a different literal meaning, as often as not identical figurative meanings can be inferred from different collocations in the two languages; compare:

|                                     |                          |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| A chip off that old block           | هذا الشبل من ذاك الاسد   |
| To rain cats and dogs               | مطر كأفواه القرب         |
| Diamond cuts diamond                | لا يقل الحديد الا الحديد |
| At someone's beck and call          | طوع البنان               |
| The leopard cannot change his spots | الطبع يغلب التطبع        |

Here the change of literal meaning of idioms does not detract much from its effects.

This method of translation should not be used if the Arabic idiom is distinctly nationally marked. Take the English idiom "do not carry coal to Newcastle". The use of such purely English idiom may be justified if the translator's aim is to conceal the foreign origin of his text, but this is a rather exceptional case. In most cases a neutral idiom will be preferred, e.g.: لا تأخذ التمر الى هجر

لا تبيع الماء في حارة السقاينين or كما في المثل العراقي : يرجع الخل للبصره

c) An English idiom may be translated by reproducing its form in Arabic, which has no equivalent figurative expression or image. In this case, producing the literal meaning of the idiom through a word-for-word translation, may preserve all other aspects of its semantics structure; compare:

People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.

من كان بيته من زجاج لا يرمي الآخرين بالحجارة

d) And, finally, instead of translating an idiom, the translator may explain and analyze its figurative meaning, so as to preserve at least the main element of its semantic structure. In this case, no Arabic idioms phrase or imitation is used except the idiom's explanation; for example, see these idioms; "To dine with Duke Humphrey" is rendered into Arabic as:

" يغدو بدون طعام ويموت من الجوع "

" كان من تقاليد القوم في بريطانيا ان يتوجه الاثرياء بعد انتهاء قداس يوم الاحد الى موائد عامرة للغداء، اما الفقراء فلا مكان لهم يذهبون اليه سوى البقاء في الكنيسة والتعلق حول قبر الدوق همفري (وهو أسم رمزي)، وبالطبع لا طعام يرتجى.

This method is the translator's last resort; though undesirable, it may prove to be unavoidable in the absence of a better alternative.

## 5.Conclusion:

An idiom is a figurative meaningful extension of meaning. An idiomatic utterance has two important aspects of meaning. These are the literal meaning or the image composed by its constituent lexical items and its figurative meaning. Corollary to its structure, an idiom should be translated according to its overall meaning rather than the meaning of each of its lexical items if the concept they refer to exists in both the English culture and the Arabic culture.

Likewise, one needs to distinguish between idiomatic expressions that are common to both Arabic and English and those which are peculiar to one of the languages. In Translating expressions of the second kind, the translator should not feel constrained to render idiom for idiom; it is primarily the context of the text and of course the idiomatic potential of Arabic – that should determine his choice.

Finally, whereas the translated work inevitably loses many idioms in the process of translation, it also stands to gain a number of idioms. For instance, "at sixes and sevens" may be rendered in Arabic as;

"مشوش , بحالة فوضى بلا نظام او ترتيب"

which is an idiomatic loss, and "to sail under false colours" as;

"وقل لمن يدعي في العلم معرفة حفظت شيئا وغابت عنك اشياء"

which is an idiomatic gain, such idiomatic renderings do much to make the translation come alive, for it is by means of such distinctive expressions that the message can speak meaningfully to people in term of their own lives and behavior.

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