EQUIVALENCE AND TRANSLATABILITY OF ENGLISH AND ARABIC IDIOMS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Despite recent developments in the field of translation theory and application, idiomatic expressions still pose a serious challenge for translators and foreign teachers. The present paper proposes a general theoretical framework or model for dealing with the various problematic aspects of idioms in translation. It provides an operational definition of idioms, investigates their types and context of occurrence, and discusses constraints they impose on the translation process with special reference to Arabic and English. It then proposes a model of how different types of idioms may be transferred from source language into target language.

II. DEFINITION AND TYPES OF IDIOMS

In *A First Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, Crystal defines idiom as:

“A term used in grammar and lexicology to refer to a sequence of words that is semantically and often syntactically restricted, so that it functions as a single unit. From a semantic viewpoint, the meaning of the individual words cannot be summed to produce the meaning of the ‘idiomatic’ expression as a whole. From a syntactic viewpoint, the words often do not permit the usual variability they display in other context; e.g. it’s raining cats and dogs does not permit ‘it’s raining a cat and a dog/dogs and cats, etc.’ (Crystal 1980:179; also see Bolinger 1975:99-107; Duff 1981:89-92; Faser 1976:103; Lyons 1969:177-78; and Kane 1983:366).

Notice, for example, that the idiom “to run oneself out” means to be completely exhausted, which is not the sum of the meaning of the verb to “run” and the adverbial particle “out”. Nor is the meaning of the idiom “with one’s back to the wall” the same as the total meaning of the six words comprising it. Furthermore, observe that one can “go against the grain”, but cannot go against the seed or the grains, nor can the grain be gone against by somebody. Also observe that we can say “the child
is running a temperature” but cannot say *a temperature is being run by the child.* We can certainly ask somebody to “cough up” his/her savings but under no circumstances can we ask people to sneeze their savings. What has been said about English idioms also applies to Arabic idioms. The Arabic idiom “yadlika awkata wa–fūka nafax”, means “you are to blame” although the total meaning of the individual words comprising it adds up to “your two hands tied and your mouth blew”. ʿĀṣa bīxuffay Hunain” is another Arabic idiom which means “he returned empty–handed” although the total meaning of its three words is “he returned with the slippers of Hunain”. Also observe that we cannot substitute waṣal (he arrived) or sāla (he walked) for ṣāda and still have an idiom.

English idioms can be lexemic, phraseological, and proverbial as in “hammer and tongs”, “to fly off the handle”, and “don’t wash your dirty linen in public” respectively (Boatner and Gates 1975: V–VI). Furthermore, lexemic idioms can be verbal (verb + particle combination), nominal, adjectival, and adverbial as in “break in”, “hot dog”, “pepper and salt” (in “his hair is pepper and salt”), and “hammer and tongs” (in “she ran after him hammer and tongs”) respectively (Boatner and Gates 1975: V–VI).

Arabic idioms can also be lexemic, phraseological and proverbial as in “ṣāhīn waqān” (fat and fire (complete opposites)), “ṭalā ʿfēr ṭāsā” (on my eye/head (with pleasure)), and “man sāra ṣalā al–darbi waṣal” (he who walks no the road will get there, (he who takes the first step will eventually achieve his aims). Arabic lexemic idioms can also be nominal, adjectival, and adverbial. However, Arabic verbal lexemic idioms do not occur with particles. The Arabic equivalent for “he broke into the house” is “lṭqāham al–bayt” or “daxala albayta ṣunwata”, which means he entered the house by force. It is to be observed here that “lṭqāham” means “daxala ṣuqwata”. Thus Arabic verbal lexemic idioms are made up of either the verb alone or the verb followed by an adverbial nominal.

III. DIFFICULTIES WITH TRANSLATING IDIOMS

One major area of difficulty with regard to translating idioms is misinterpreting the intention of the original writer or speaker. In Arabic, “fataha al–bābā” may have both a literal and an idiomatic/metaphorical sense. Literally, it translates into “he opened the door”; idiomatically, it translates into “he established a precedent”. This also applies to “sakkara al–bābā”, which means he closed the door, or he put an end to something. The Arabic idiom “ıbn harām” can be used in the literal sense to mean an illegitimate son or in the metaphorical sense to mean “son of a gun”, which is a compliment.

Cultural differences among languages comprise another area of great difficulty for translators and interpreters with regard to both traditional and innovating idioms. The English idiom “a fox is not taken in the same snare twice” is equivalent to the Arabic idiom “la yuldāy al–muʿmin min julīrīn wâhidīn marâyirn”, the English translation of which is “A good believer will not be stung from within the same hole twice”. In English, people “look a gift horse in the mouth”; in Arabic a person can be “ṣaḥḥād umṭṣarīṭ”, which is also the equivalent of English “beggars and choosers”. When an Englishman dies we say “he kicked the bucket”, but if an Arab dies we say “salla al–amanat” i.e. he handed over/delivered what he was entrusted with, which is a reference to the soul leaving the body. The Arabic idiom “ṭubbūn al–walad laxāla”, which can be translated into English as “two thirds of the body’s traits can be ascribed to his mother’s brother”, does not have a corresponding idiom in English. The best we can do is to say that he takes after his uncle. What this means is that for a translator or an interpreter to produce a translation that is true to the original he must be at home with both cultures and both languages.

Without a thorough knowledge of both cultures the translator or interpreter will be at a complete loss to translate idioms which carry a heavy semantic load that is culture specific. The Arabic idiom “yujidu alḥażza wayusibū almīṣfīl” can be literally translated into English as “he is good at cutting, and hitting the joint”, which is nonsensical to a native speaker of English. An interpreter/translator from Arabic into English can give the equivalent English idiom “he hit the nail on the head” only if he knows both the exact meaning and context in which the idiom is used.

Sometimes, when the translator/interpreter is faced with innovating or traditional idioms which are completely alien to the target language, he can only resort to explaining the cultural concept as shown in (IV.d) with regard to the concept of jāha, which is explained in the footnotes.

IV. CORRESPONDENCE OF IDIOMS IN SL AND TL

Idioms in SL and TL may fall within the following categories:

a. Expressions and functions correspond in both languages (Newmark 1982:123);

b. Functions correspond in both languages but expressions are completely different;

c. Functions correspond but expressions differ slightly;

d. Both expressions and functions differ and are language specific.

The above four correspondence categories allow us to make the following predictions:

a. When expressions and functions correspond, the resulting translation will be correct and idiomatic in both languages. Assuming that the translator is a native speaker of one language and has native-like competence in the other, he should encounter no serious difficulties in rendering any such SL idioms into the corresponding TL ones as shown in the following examples:

1—Most English Idioms given in this paper are taken from Boatner and Gates’ A Dictionary of American Idioms, Bruce Fraser’s The Verb–Particle Combination, Hornby’s Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English, and Julie Howard’s Idioms in American Life. With regard to Arabic idioms, the authors consulted Hani al–Tamad’s al–Ammalul al–Shukāriyyatu al–Urduniyya (Jordanian Folk Proverbs), Abu Sofya’s Al–Ammalul al–Farahiyatu Wamaqaddhāta al–Turāth (Arabic Proverbs and Their Sources in the (Arab) Heritage), Abu al–Hasan al–Walfid’s Kitāb al–Wāsīt al–Ammal (The Right Anthology of Proverbs), Rudolph Sethheim’s Al–Ammalul al–Farahiyatu al–Qademin (Arabic Old Proverbs), and Hans Wehr’s A Dictionary of Modern Standard Arabic.

A large number of Arabic idioms were also provided by a class of ten students enrolled in the M.A. in translation programme at the Language Centre of Yarmouk University.
ENGLISH IDIOMS

- Play with fire
  yaitabu bin-nak
  'he plays with the fire'

- Pull the rug out from under (a person)
  yashabu as-sajadat min tahiti
  'he pulls the rug from under a person specific'

- Put words into one's mouth
  yaqalu iklamati fi fami
  'he puts the words into the mouth of the person'

- Turn over a new leaf
  yabhu?u as-sathatan jadidah
  'he starts a new page'

- Wash one's hands of
  yasili yadaihi min
  'he washes his hands from'

- To shed crocodile tears
  yasirfu dumu'ta itmadith
  'he sheds tears of the crocodiles'

- I am all ears
  kullf adanu (shaylah)
  'all of me ear listening'

- When the cat is away the mice will play
  yab likuit iltab ya far
  'was absent the cat play mouse'

- Bury one's head in the sand
  yasifnu ra?ahu fi rimil
  'he buries his head in the sand'

- Curled her lips
  zammat uayfayha
  'she curled her two lips'

- Go to bed with the chickens
  yanamu rafa qajam
  'he sleeps with the chickens'

- Foam at the mouth
  yuryf wayyubid
  'he foams and lets out froth'

- Between life and death
  bayna lhayyti walmawt
  'between the life and the death'

- Beat one's head against the wall
  yasifu ra?ahu fi layfitu
  'he hits his head in the wall'

- At death's door
  tali abdab ibimawt
  'on the doors of the death'

- At the tip of his tongue
  tali ra?si liisath
  'on the tip of his tongue'

- To tell a white lie
  yakhribu kahibatan baidah
  'he lies a lie white'

- Save one's hide
  yanju bijildhi
  'he survives with his skin'

- To hold out the olive branch
  yarifatu yusna zayyun
  'he raises the branch of the olive (tree)'

- Walls have ears
  al-judrubu ilah adim
  'the walls have their ears'

- Got the lion's share
  hasala talu nasabi liisad
  'he got on the share of the lion'

- Love is blind
  tal hubhu a'ma
  'the love blind'


b. When the functions correspond but the expressions are completely different, the translator's task becomes more demanding due to interference between SL and TL at the level of expression. In this case, the translator must either find the right idiom in the TL, or render a translation of the meaning of the idiom as best as he can.

Translation of the idioms is to be resorted to only if the translator fails to locate the corresponding idiom. The following are examples of such idioms.

ENGLISH IDIOMS

- Between the devil and the deep blue sea
  bayna fakkay kammat
  'between the two jaws of a pair of pincers'

- At sixes and sevens
  ra?tan tala yaqib
  'head on back'

- Trade in
  yuqayyid
  'to exchange something for something else'

- Waste one's breath
  yudayyyu waqathu
  'he wastes his time'

- We behind the ears
  mihannak
  'experienced'

- Dry behind the ears
  mudejjuun bisailah
  'heavily armed with weapons'

- Armed to the teeth
  kalafis malmafitu banabubu
  'like the snake cut it s tail'

- Like a bear with a sore head
  mantofun lamwah
  'taken away her color'

- She's white
  m?ajir itabiq 80m (colloq)
  'renting the floor the second'

- He has bats in his belfry
  mà yuladu imu'min min
  'not he stung the faithful from'

- A fox is not taken in the same snare twice
  marstan fi l?umr
  'once in the life span'

- Once in a blue moon
  sabaqa sayyu l?]ayla
  'it preceded he sword the blame'

- Lock the barn door after the horse is stolen
  yurtaju talayhi
  'to be closed on (him to be unable to speak)'

- To lose one's tongue
  yusallu yu'liku
  'he makes a pass at'
c. Idioms in which functions correspond but expressions differ slightly do require the translator to pay special attention to the areas of difference in expression between SL and TL. However, they are not as problematic as the idioms in (b) above where functions correspond but expressions do not. Needless to say, they are more problematic than idioms in (a) above where both functions and expressions correspond. The following are a number of examples of such idioms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENGLISH IDIOMS</th>
<th>ARABIC IDIOMS (WITH A WORD-FOR-WORD ENGLISH TRANSLATION)</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To hold the reins</td>
<td>yumsikub bizimami lIumur</td>
<td>'the holds with the reins of the things'</td>
<td>mubu imm litaras (colloq.)</td>
<td>'like the mother of the bride'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He was the scape-goat</td>
<td>kana kaba la fidaa</td>
<td>'he was the ram of the sacrifice/things'</td>
<td>aljamal roju min safahi</td>
<td>'the camel limbs from its lip'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money begets money</td>
<td>lmaj bijurr mal (colloq.)</td>
<td>'the money attracts money'</td>
<td>ibab by isal</td>
<td>'the door it accommodates a camel'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She stoop to conquer</td>
<td>ibitmaskan hatta</td>
<td>'she feigns humility so that</td>
<td>infatahsa bab sassa</td>
<td>'it opened for him the door of the sky'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A wolf in a sheep's skin</td>
<td>bilqub fi jiddi hamal</td>
<td>'A wolf in the skin of a lamb'</td>
<td>ifaras min illaris</td>
<td>'the mare is from the rider'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He is still green</td>
<td>ma yaqulu yaqadon</td>
<td>'he is still brittle/soft'</td>
<td>larlub mal toqkili illa isanam</td>
<td>'the wolf not it eats but the sheep sa'd (colloq.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To lose one's head</td>
<td>yafqidu sa'abah</td>
<td>'he loses his mind'</td>
<td>stray / untended</td>
<td>'the rider/jockey is more important than the horse'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She was the apple of her father's eye</td>
<td>kana gurara layni ahiba</td>
<td>'she was the joy of eye of her father'</td>
<td>ibbub ma bokil illa lqanam</td>
<td>everyone is on his own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She was a thorn in the flesh</td>
<td>kana sawkatan fi ltabu</td>
<td>'he was a thorn in the throat'</td>
<td>lal yafru ra'sanu min riyal</td>
<td>'neg. he knows his head from his feet'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot make heads or tails of something</td>
<td>ra'nah yis'arah</td>
<td>'subject to the sign/call'</td>
<td>ra'nah yis'arah</td>
<td>'byon the back of a heart'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At one's back and call</td>
<td>bani bari qab</td>
<td>'blood is thicker than water'</td>
<td>bani bari qab</td>
<td>'say to the one-eyed person (he is) one-eyed'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By heart</td>
<td>qal ilwiwar</td>
<td>'call a spade a spade'</td>
<td>qal ilwiwar</td>
<td>'the blood neg. it becomes water'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood is thicker than water</td>
<td>in kunta rithan faqad laqata</td>
<td>'if you were wind then truly you faced'</td>
<td>aljamal roju min safahi</td>
<td>'it kindled, it cannot be controlled'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call a spade a spade</td>
<td>bani bari qab</td>
<td>'the fat in the fire'</td>
<td>bani bari qab</td>
<td>'speech lined (with other implications)'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The fat in the fire</td>
<td>bani bari qab</td>
<td>'double talk'</td>
<td>bani bari qab</td>
<td>'he withdraws his speech (his words)'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double talk</td>
<td>bani bari qab</td>
<td>'eat one's words'</td>
<td>bani bari qab</td>
<td>'he withdraws his speech (his words)'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Eat one's words | bani bari qab | d. When expressions and functions differ in both SL and TL, the translator's task becomes extremely difficult. Not only is he required to have almost complete mastery of both SL and TL linguistic system but also a deep understanding and awareness of the SL and TL culture and way of life. Without being fully immersed in both cultures, the translator is likely to find himself helpless and rendering inaccurate literal translations that are extremely difficult if not impossible to understand. The following are examples of this category of idioms:
when a man wants to get engaged to a lady, he usually arranges for a number of dignitaries to go to the lady's father's house in order to formally ask for her hand on his behalf. the delegation usually comprises the man's father, important persons from among his relatives, and important persons from the local and nearby communities. these people are called a jahā. once they reach their destination, they are usually received by the lady's father and his relatives. a short time after that and once the guests are seated, their host offers them coffee to drink. the guests take a cup each but do not drink the coffee. their leader tells the lady's father that he and his colleagues will not drink the coffee unless they are granted their request, which is the host's approval that his daughter be engaged to the man on whose behalf they are acting. if the lady's father agrees to this they become happy and drink their coffee before it gets cold. if, on the other hand, their request is not granted, they don't drink the coffee which thus gets cold. jahā is also resorted to in settling all sorts of disputes ranging from minor physical injuries to murder.

may allah reward you greatly for your loss (this is what people say when offering their condolences to the family of the deceased)

may allah reward you for your efforts (this is said by the family, and relatives of the deceased to those who have offered their condolences and are taking their leave)

the efforts of a successful jahā are always productive

wronging women engenders havock onto the wrong-doer

i don't believe what you are saying about him/her for there is a special relationship between the two of you, i.e. you are not a disinterested party.

let his father be damned.

get lost, beat it.

may allah accept (your prayer / deeds) the one we depend upon

- it can be the equivalent of anyone of the following utterances:
a- forget about it: i don't want to talk about it now, b- don't fight among each other, be patient, c- may the prophet bless/glance somebody/something.

may allah disgrace you for what you did you can depend on me.

it is yours, you may have it (if you really like it). it is said to anybody who tells you how beautiful a garment you are wearing is.

please be patient.

an ignoramus/empty-headed person

english idioms
- turn in
- turn down
- take it on the chin
- talk through one's hat
- wear out one's welcome
- work one's fingers to the bone
- to get in with somebody
- he is a lady killer
- to lay somebody out in lavender (slang)
- lip service
- she looked daggers at him
- not to let grass grow under one's feet
- lose heart
- lose one's heart
- on the rocks
- pass the buck
- pour oil on troubled water

arabic translation
ya?wī līfirīs lī nanni'm 'go to the bed / the sleep'
yaruf to refuse' yataqabbal a?mra birīhi)n 'to accept the matter with spirit riyādiyeh having to do with sports'
yatakallamu bidūn tafkīr 'to talk without thinking'
yāfi?lū naṣāfhu yāya maruhhihin bihi 'he makes himself not welcome'
yābu'lū quṣra jahidihi 'he exerts the utmost of his effort'
yaqū'ū ft al-muṣṭafā laḥṣa fāṣṣha 'he falls in trouble with a person some'
huwa maṣīḥ asayyīdāt 'he is the one worshipped by the ladies'
yuwa'bī?u fīsīn mā 'he rebukes a person some'
mujarrad kalām 'no more than talking'
jāharā thu 'she looked at him very angrily'
la yqufū 'he does not waste the time'
yaqūfū l'amāl 'he loses the hope'
yaqū'ū ft lubb 'he falls in the love'
fi waṭṭān sayyīl 'in a situation bad'
yāqū'ū lāwma lālā lilā warrūn 'he places the blame on the others'
yazāfī?ī fīhāt līmūr 'to lessen from the sharpness of the matters'
Mohammad Awwad

- private eye
  - musbir sirr
  - ' informer secret'

- saw wood / gourds
  - yakbar
  - 'to snore'

- sow one's wild oats
  - yi'mal tamaylah (colloq.)
  - 'he does his deeds'

- he is pushing up the daisies
  - ?inshayh mayyit
  - 'he is dead'

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has provided a working definition for idioms, specified their types, and presented evidence to the effect that English and Arabic idioms constitute a major area of difficulty for translators and interpreters. It has also examined a large corpus of English and Arabic idioms and arrived at a theoretical framework for dealing with the translatability of idioms. According to this framework, an idiom can be assigned to one of four categories of correspondence between Arabic and English idioms. The framework also predicts degrees of difficulty of translating an idiom from one language into another. Following are the four correspondence categories in a descending order of difficulty:

a– Idioms with no correspondence between expression and functions, i.e. expressions and functions are language specific.
b– Idioms with corresponding functions in both languages but with completely different expressions.
c– Idioms with corresponding functions in both languages, but with slightly different expressions.
d– Idioms with corresponding functions and expressions in both languages.

REFERENCES


