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## **Translating Idioms using Internet-based Translators: Pros and Cos**

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### **Abstract**

Learning a new target language is a process in which students cannot get involved unless they go through translation; they tend to translate words, phrases and whole collocations. In this sense, the translation of idioms may present a major challenge and a source of error, especially these days since most learners tend to use the rapidly applicable internet-based translators such as “Google Translation” and “Reverso”. Henceforth, the present study is an attempt to show the efficiency/non-efficiency of such a kind of translation in relation to idioms. Giving concrete examples, it is claimed that these applications are useful only in case there are similarities between the idioms used in the mother tongue/culture and the target language/culture. However, in case idioms imbed different cultural perspectives or indirect implications, translation results in a complete loss of the meaning, if not a meaning that increases cultural misunderstanding and conflict.

**Keywords:** idioms, internet-based translators, google translation, Reverso, cultural similarities and differences.

### **1.Introduction**

Languages differ all over the world, however, they still share common similarities which allow for translation and make communication possible between people from different backgrounds. Translation involves analysis/ decoding of a message, and restructuring/ recoding it using the signs of a target language rather than the signs of the source language, besides ‘meaning’ transfer. In other words, to substitute linguistic elements without altering meaning (Mahdy Mohammed & Salah Mahdi, 2018; Bassnett, 2002).

The rapidly developing technologies have been of beneficial use in various domains and field, and translation is no exception. Computer applications and software and other computer assisted/aided translation (CAT) tools have been continuously developed to help translators and students translate numerous texts in a short time. Among these, we find Google translation and Reverso which are the most commonly used online translators in Algeria. However, if it is a matter of fact that the problem of equivalence in translation causes trouble for human translators, can these online tools help translators with the matter? Can they provide appropriate equivalents for all linguistic/ culture specific elements? Furthermore, if idioms are culture-bound and represent a major challenge for human translators, how can online translators approach them and to what extent their performance results in accuracy and correctness?

Henceforth, this study is a descriptive and comparative one, it aims to investigate how idioms should be translated from English to Arabic and vice versa, and to find out how Google translation and Reverso approached some idiom examples to be able to decide at the end on the efficiency regarding idiom translation.

## **1. TranslatingIdioms**

Crystal (1980 p. 179) stated that idioms are expressions used “in GRAMMAR and LEXICOGRAPHY to refer to a SEQUENCE of WORDS which is SEMANTICALLY and often SYNTACTICALLY restricted”. Similarly, Baker (1992, p. 63) advocated that idioms are "frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and often carry meaning which cannot be deduced from their individual components". In other words, the semantic meaning of the idiomatic expression is different from the literal meaning of its composing individual words. Besides, variability in word display is not permitted. For instance, the meaning of the idiom “to run oneself out” (to be completely exhausted) cannot be understood from the meaning of the individual words comprising it, as we cannot change the structure of the expression or replace one word by an equivalent alternative (Awwad, 1990).

Many idioms are colloquial and used in informal conversation (Wyatt, 2006). Idioms “carry a heavy semantic load that is culture-specific” (Awwad, 1990 p. 59)

English idioms can be classified into three types; the first one is *lexemic idioms*, these can be verbal (verb+ particle combination; e.g., break in), nominal (e.g., hot dog), adjectival (e.g. his hair is pepper and salt), and adverbial (e.g., she run after him hammer and tongs). The second type is *phraseological idioms* (e.g., to fly off the handle), and the last one is *proverbial idioms* (e.g., don’t wash your dirty linen in public) (Awwad, 1990 p. 58). The same threefold classification -lexemic, phraseological and proverbial- is applicable for Arabic idioms.

Due to the fact that each structure/ language represents a separate reality (Sapir, 1956 cited in Bassnett, 2002), translating idioms is a task during which a number of problematic issues arise. In this vein, Baker (1992 p.65) posited that "the main problems that idiomatic and fixed expressions pose in translation relate to two main areas: the ability to recognize and interpret the idiom correctly, and the difficulties involved in rendering the various aspects of meaning that an idiom or a fixed expression conveys into the target language". Echoing the same idea, Awwad, (1990 p. 59) explained that one expression may have two meanings, a literal meaning and an idiomatic meaning. For instance, the Arabic expressions 'فتح الباب' can be translated as 'he opened the door' which is the literal meaning, and 'he established a precedent' which is the idiomatic meaning (Awwad, 1990 p. 58). Besides, cultural differences result in another major obstacle; cultural beliefs and realities differ and this is apparent in the language used in idioms, thus, we may find idioms that tackle the same idea but in different language; for example, the English idiom 'a fox is not taken in the same snare twice' has an equivalent in Arabic which is 'المؤمن لا يلدغ المؤمن لا يلدغ' as we may find no corresponding idiom in the target culture.

Not only translators face difficulty in translating idioms, students also come across problems of idiom recognition, finding equivalents in the target language, finding a similar counterpart in the target language with a different context of use, finding both the literal and the idiomatic meaning of an expression in the same text, and the difference between the convention, context and frequency of use in both

languages (Davies, 2004 p. 193). In other words, besides difficulty in recognizing the idiom, it is difficult to find a corresponding one in both meaning and form in the target culture (Mollanazar, 2004; Straksiene, 2009).

In the case of having Arabic and English as source and target languages, idioms may be ranged into four main categories:

1. Expressions and functions correspond in both languages.
2. Functions correspond in both languages but expressions are completely different
3. Functions correspond but expressions differ slightly
4. Both expressions and functions differ and are language specific (Awwad, 1990 p. 59)

Awwad (1990) further explained that translators face no/ less difficulty with the first and the third categories, yet they have to work harder to find corresponding idioms with the second and the fourth category and if not possible resort to translating meaning. Furthermore, the bigger the gap between the SL and the TL, the more difficult the translation will be (Al-Shawi& Mahadi,2012).

Hence, idioms are culture bound, therefore, a successful translation of idioms requires the translator to acquire in-depth knowledge of both the source and the target languages (Awwad,1990). Besides the intercultural competence, Baker (1992 pp 26-43) posited four main strategies to translate idioms:

1. Using the equivalent idiom with similar form and meaning.
2. Using an idiom of similar meaning but different form (finding a semantic equivalent).
3. translation by paraphrasing, using a single word or a group of words which roughly corresponds to the meaning of the source idiom, yet is not an idiom itself.
4. translation by omission, the idiom is completely omitted.

However, Bassnett (2002) echoed Levý's view that the act of contracting or omitting difficult expressions while translating is immoral. Rather, the translator should find solutions adopting the functional meaning, therefore, idiom “substitution is made not

on the basis of the linguistic elements in the phrase, nor on the basis of a corresponding or similar image contained in the phrase, but on the function of the idiom” (Bassnett, 2002 p. 32).

Thus, if it is suggested that it is the task of the translator to intuitively find solutions for translation problems such as untranslatability (Bassnett, 2002), how can Computer-assisted/aided Translation tools (CAT) solve similar problems?

## **2. Computer-Assisted/Aided Translation Tools**

Computer-assisted/aided Translation is that type of translation done through the use of computer applications and software. CAT can provide cheap automatic translation of large volumes, deal with numerous languages, memorize previously translated terminology and texts i.e. CAT can help translators perform better (Ulitkin, 2011). Yet, CAT applications and software cannot deal with meaning variation imbedded in literary and cultural terms (Costales, 2010; Mahdy Mohammed & Salah Mahdi, 2018).

The 1990s signaled the appearance of the third generation of MT which shifted from translation based on grammatical rules to that based on bodies of texts, besides integrating human-assisted translation, and “Expanding the translation memory and enriching it with large text codes, bilingual or multilingual dictionaries, and lexicons of proverbs, idioms and special combinations” (Mahdy Mohammed & Salah Mahdi, 2018 p. 343).

Thus, it is worth testing whether the available CAT tools, and mainly the most used ones, are enriched with data that enable them translate idioms appropriately, or their translation results in error?

## **3. The Study**

The aim of this study is to test the extent to which online translation applications -mainly Google translation and Reverso Translation – can be helpful and accurate in the case of translating idioms from English to Arabic and vice versa. it is assumed that these applications are useful only in case there are similarities between the idioms used in the mother tongue/culture and the target language/culture. Henceforth, the study is guided by the following research questions:

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- can students and translators rely on Google translation and Reverso in translating idioms from English to Arabic and vice versa?
  - To what extent these online applications are accurate in translating idioms?
  - In what categories of idioms they are more accurate?

### **3.1.Data Collection**

Idioms used in the present study are collected from different sources: Awwad (1990), Assaf (2016), Faïd (2003), Al-Shawi&Mahadi (2012) and Spears (2007). Idioms are divided into four main categories following Awwad (1990) classification, in other words, category one deals with idioms that have equivalents in both form and meaning in the target culture, the second and the third categories deal with idioms that have equivalents in meaning but they differ in form completely or slightly respectively. The last category covers examples of idioms that are culture specific and for which no equivalent can be found in the target culture.

Having different idiom categories necessitate the use of different strategies to translate them into the target language. For an appropriate translation of the selected idioms, the researcher used the strategy of finding the equivalent idiom with similar form and meaning (with the first category), the strategy of Using an idiom of similar meaning but different form (with the second and the third categories), and paraphrasing (with the fourth category).

Another translation is undertaken via Google Translation and Reverso to be compared with the human translation in an attempt to find out the extent to which these CAT tools can provide the users with appropriate idiom translation.

### **3.2.Results and Analysis**

*Table1. Examples of Idioms Translated from English to Arabic.*

	<b>English idioms</b>	<b>Associative meaning</b>	<b>Google translate</b>	<b>Reverso</b>	<b>Corresponding Arabic idioms</b>
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					Or word- word translation
C A T E G O R Y  1	he pokes his nose in everything	he interferes with everything though it does not concern him	يدق أنفه في كل شيء	يلفح أنفه في كل شيء (MT) دس أنفه في كل شيء (TIC)	يدس أنفه في كل شيء
	he is light-handed	Having a light, delicate touch	إنه خفيف اليد	وهو خفيف اليد	يده خفيفة
	she's up to her ears	Very busy or having more than what she can manage	انها تصل الى اذنيها	وهي تصل إلى أذنيها	هي غارقة حتى أذنيها
	Pull the rug out from under	To make someone's plans fall through.	اسحب البساط من تحت	سحب البساط من تحت	يسحب السجادة من تحت
	To hold out the olive branch	to offer to end a dispute and be friendly; to offer reconciliation.	ليحمل غصن الزيتون	لإمساك غصن الزيتون	يحمل غصن زيتون
C A T E G O R Y  2	Between the devil and the deep blue sea	In a difficult situation where there are two equally unpleasant choices	بين الشيطان والبحر الأزرق العميق	بين الشيطان والبحر الأزرق العميق	بين المطرقة والسندان
	At sixes and sevens	Lost in bewilderment; At loose ends	عند الستات والسبعات	في حالة من الفوضى	رأسا على عقب
	Armed to the teeth	Heavily armed with deadly weapons	مدججين بالسلاح	مدججين بالسلاح	مدجج بالسلاح
	Like a bear with a sore head	To behave in a very bad-tempered and angry way	مثل الدب برأس مؤلم	مثل الدب ذو الرأس المتقروح	كالأفعى المقطوع ذنبها
	Once in a blue moon	Something extremely rare	مرة واحدة في القمر الأزرق	مرة واحدة في القمر الأزرق	مرة في العمر

		in occurrence			
C A T E G O R Y 3	To lose one's head	To lose control and not act in a calm way	أن يفقد رأسه	أن يفقد المرء رأسه	يفقد صوابه
	She was the apple of her father's eye	Her father's favourite	كانت قرة عين والدها	كانت تفاحة عين والدها	كانت قرة عين أبيها
	A thorn in the flesh	Repeatedly annoys others and cause them pain	شوكة في الجسد	شوكة في اللحم	شوكة في الحلق
	Cannot make head or tails of something	Not able to understand something	لا يمكن أن تجعل الرأس أو الذيل لشيء ما	لا يمكن صنع رأس أو ذيل من شيء	لا يعرف رأسه من رجليه
	At one's beck and call	Ready to obey something	تحت إشراف المرء واتصاله	في بيك واحد والنداء رهن الإشارة (TIC)	رهن الإشارة
C A T E G O R Y 4	To get in Dutch with somebody	To be in trouble with somebody	للحصول على اللغة الهولندية مع شخص ما	لدخول اللغة الهولندية مع شخص ما	يقع في مشكلة مع شخص ما
	Work one's fingers to the bone	To work very hard	مرر أصابعه حتى العظم	شغل أصابع الشخص إلى العظم	يبذل قصارى جهده
	Lip service	Expressed in words but not backed by deeds	خدمة الشفة	الكلام الأجوف	مجرد كلام
	Not to let grass grow under one's feet	To take action immediately without hesitation	عدم ترك العشب ينمو تحت قدميه	عدم ترك العشب ينمو تحت أقدامه	لا يضيع الوقت
	Lose one's heart	Fall in love with someone	تفقد القلب	يفقد المرء قلبه	يقع في الحب

**Note:** TIC refers to translation in context. MT refers to machine translation

As shown in the table, Internet-based translators failed to provide an appropriate translation for the majority of idioms. Statistically speaking, both gave appropriate translation in two instances of category one, one in categories two and three, while category four distinguished between Reverso with one correct translation and Google Translation with none. With some examples, the Internet-based translators provide the appropriate meaning of the idiom (which is literal in the first



category) but not its equivalent in the target culture, yet, it cannot be considered as an appropriate translation since idioms should be translated via giving an equivalent in the target language, and paraphrasing can be resorted to in case the idiom is culture specific. The few cases where Internet-based translators exceptionally provided appropriate translation can be explained by being programmed with such information.

Table2. Examples of Idioms Translated from Arabic to English.

	Arabic Idiom	Associative meaning	Google translate	Reverso	Corresponding English idiom or word- word translation
C A T E G O R Y  1	يطعن في الظهر	To betray	stabbed in the back	Stab in the back	Stab in the back
	دم بارد	A purposely ruthless and unfeeling manner	Cold blood	Cold blood	Cold blood
	يلعب بالنار	To do something dangerous or risky	playing with fire	playing with fire	Play with fire
	دموع التماسيح	Sorrow that is unsincere	Crocodile Tears	Crocodile Tears	Crocodile tears
	حصة الأسد	The largest part or most of something	Lion's share	lion's share	Got the lion's share
C A T E G O R Y  2	سبق السيف العذل	To try to prevent or rectify a problem after damage has already been done	The sword preceded the humiliation	It was too late	Lock the barn door after the horse is stolen
	الصبر مفتاح الفرج	Patience is the only key to get rid of troubles	Patience is the key to relief	Good things come to those who wait	Everything comes to him who waits
	كل ممنوع مرغوب	Forbidden things seem more appealing	All forbidden is desirable	All Forbidden Desired	Forbidden fruit is sweetest
	إن كنت ريحا فقد	if you are	If you are a	If I was	If you are

	لاقيت إحصارا	strong, you are facing someone stronger than you.	wind, you have met a hurricane	wind, I had a hurricane.	Marconi I am Einstein
	تخبرت الأحلام	Feeling disappointed for not achieving a goal	Dreams evaporate	Dreams evaporated	Broken dreams
C A T E G O R Y 3	يمسك بزمام الأمور	To be in control	Take control	Hold all the cards	To hold the reins Hold all the cards
	كان كبش الفداء	Bears the blame for others	Was the scapegoat	Was the patsy	He was the scape-goat
	ذئب في جلد حمل	Dangerous person pretending to be harmless	wolf in lamb skin	A wolf in the skin of a lamb	A wolf in sheep's clothing
	أذان صاغية	Listening eagerly and carefully	all ears	Friendly ears All ears (TIC)	All ears
	ظهره مسنود	He is supported by somebody else	his back is propped up	It's a mascot	He is backed up
C A T E G O R Y 4	مقطوع من شجرة	He has no relatives	cut from a tree	Cut from a tree	rootless
	أفل نجمه	Said when one's fame fades away.	lower star نجم	Let go of his star.	Becomes unpopular
	أتى على الأخضر واليابس	To be greedy, to destroy everything	Came on green and dry	It came on the green. And to Epps	He destroyed everything
	مكلل بالغار	Glory gained by someone for being genius in art or science	Laureate	Boiled with laurels	He is glorious <sup>2</sup>
	الخروج من عنق الزجاجة	To get out of a difficult situation	out of the bottleneck	Get out of the bottle's neck.	Getting out of trouble

Idioms in category one are similar in both form and meaning, as a result the translation provided by Google Translation and Reverso are to the point. In category two, idioms have equivalents in meaning but not in form, a fact that led to error occurrence, Google translation found none while Reverso found one equivalent. The third category imbeds idioms that have the same meaning but slightly differ in form and internet-based translators scored 2 out of 5 for each. An interesting note to be mentioned here is that Reverso provided inappropriate equivalent idioms in some instances which means that it is enriched by some idiomatic expressions, still used inappropriately. The fourth category represents idioms that are culture particular, hence, that require paraphrasing meaning. Internet-based translators failed to translate the meaning in all the chosen examples.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, when translating idioms from English to Arabic, internet-based translators' performance was weak with an average of four appropriate replies out of Twenty idioms for Google translation, and five out of twenty for Reverso. Then, in translating idioms from Arabic to English, their performance was a little better, yet not satisfactory with an average of seven appropriate translations out of twenty for Google Translation, and eight out of twenty for Reverso.

Thus, it can be claimed that such type of translation can be helpful in the case of ordinary texts but not in the case of idioms. Still, they may help to a limited degree with idioms that have equivalents in the target language which are similar in form and meaning, and a more limited scope with those having equivalents in meaning and different forms.

However, despite the lack of efficiency and competence noticed in the use of CAT in translating idioms, still their translation is not wholly a failure, translators have to pay attention to these defects to be able to overcome them and to benefit from the advantages that CAT afford.

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