

Problems Faced in Translating English Idioms

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Abstract

English, the Lingua Franca of the modern world, is a beautiful language acclaimed by many across the globe. English language grows rapidly along with various discoveries and inventions in the world. There are very many features that are unique in this auxiliary language. English vocabulary is one such feature. In general, vocabulary in English is categorised into three. They are single lexical, phrasal verbs and idioms. In English language, the role of idioms, in particular, is colossal. It is not an exaggeration that idioms add beauty to the Queen's language. An idiom is a part of English vocabulary. One of the aspects of English idioms is its peculiarity. Idioms are of native varieties which are considered unique. Though English embraces single lexical and idioms from languages around the world, it is a Herculean task while translating idioms into regional languages. The reason is idiom's constituent parts and its idiomacity in nature. As against translating English vocabulary in to regional languages, translating English idioms poses a great challenge. This article sheds light on the various problems faced in translating English idioms.

Keywords: Translating English Idioms, Idiomacity, literal meaning, cultural context, sense

Idioms are peculiar ones in English language. More than the fact that it adds beauty and colour to the language, idioms interest students/learners to learn English. An idiom is a group of words that gives an idiomatic meaning. Here in an idiom, the constituent parts do not give meaning individually. An idiom is viewed or treated as a single entity or unit. It, for convenience sake, can be said as a lengthier item of vocabulary with a unique meaning. Idioms, by and large, are not literal, though there are transparent and opaque idioms in English.

Idioms are present /available in almost all the languages. These multi-word expressions have its origin from culture of respective countries. In fact, idioms and culture are inextricably linked. One can even go to the length by saying that no idioms can exist without a cultural context/background.

Opaque idioms pose difficulty in the comprehension of its meaning. This is because opaque idioms give no clue at all in the semantic aspect. The constituent words in an opaque idiom are clueless and challenging for the L2 learners. They, the opaque idioms, as a single unit, give a special, readymade and fixed meaning. Neither the meaning nor the structure of the idioms could be changed. It is reiterated that idioms are fixed one.

As far as translating English idioms is concerned, it is a Herculean task. In translating idioms, verbatim i.e. word to word translation results in a futile effort. The reason is, as mentioned earlier, individual words in an idiom has no role to play as far as its meaning is concerned. An idiom cannot and should be translated verbatim.

Since idioms are culture bound, they are very much embedded in every culture. This results in that they become difficult or rather impossible to translate from one language to another language.

In the modern technological era, the advent of computer and internet are handy in regard to translation. When a passage in one language is fed in the computer/internet, it translates the passage into English. There is considerable accuracy in this type of machine translation. On the other hand, machine translation is, out and out, a failure/futile one as far as translating idioms are concerned. When an idiom is fed in the computer or internet, it gives the actual literal meanings of the constituent words in the idiom. In other words, machine translation of idiom results in verbatim. As a result, the original fixed meaning of the idiom is not known.

When the idiom ‘apple of one’s eye’ is machine translated into Tamil, the machine translated version of the idioms is not only incorrect, but it gives an unsuitable meaning. The translated version would be in no way related to the idioms semantically. There will be no semantic congeniality between the actual meaning of the idiom and the machine translated meaning.

The idiom ‘shed crocodile tears’ has its origin in Aesop’s Fables. When this idiom is translated into Tamil, the original meaning ‘to pretend’, ‘act/cry falsely’ is not retained. One must understand that there are underlying meanings in every idiom. Idioms should never be taken at face value. They are highly contextual in meaning.

The idiom ‘down to earth’ gives a meaning that someone is practical, realistic and not pretentious. When this idiom is translated into Tamil, the original idiomatic meaning is not retained.

There are transparent idioms which retain some of the literal meanings of the constituent parts of the idioms. However, when a transparent idiom is translated into Tamil, what appears as answer is its literal meaning. Yet another idiom is ‘add fuel to the fire’. When this idiom is translated into Tamil, the translated version is a mere verbatim. Readers end up understanding the idiom as ‘pouring oil in fire’. Besides, the actual meaning of the idiom i.e. making a bad situation worse remains unknown.

There are other opaque idioms that give no clue at all for the comprehension and production of it. For example, ‘by the by’ and ‘by and large’ are such idioms that are difficult to translate. These aforesaid idioms have no Tamil equivalents, at least at the literal level.

Idioms and its mere literal meanings should never go hand in hand. It never works. Idioms should be translated by its sense, by what the idiom means. There are idioms with same common themes, meanings and ideas. The words in an idiom may not be as same or equal as in the translated version. The bottom-line in translating idioms from one language to another language is its sense, meaning and not just the words.

The idioms ‘add fuel to the fire’, ‘fan the flame’ and ‘rub salt on the wounds’ give same or similar meanings though the constituent words in the idioms are entirely different.

Every language has idioms on its own, depending upon the context and cultural background. Fortunately, there are umpteen of idioms in Tamil that find its equivalent ones in English. Most of the Tamil idioms could be matched with its English equivalents concerning the same sense or meaning. In the process of translating English idioms, one can only find equivalent idioms in his native language to the English version. However, when there are no semantically equal idioms to English idioms in one’s native language, translation is a redundant one. No idioms can be translated at one’s whims and fancies.

All said and done, it is important to remember that idioms lose their cultural and semantic values when translated. One should find idioms with similar meanings in their native language as against the English equivalents. In other words, there are idioms in every language with similar sense and meanings. The translators’ duty is to find such idioms with common or similar meanings.

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