Asian Journal of Technology and Applied Sciences
ISSN: 2301-xxxx (online) | IF: 10.01 | Vol: 1, issue 1
Available: http://asiansciencejournal.org

UNTRANSLATABLE IDIOMS IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK FICTION

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Abstract: Phraseological units and idiomatic expressions represent one of the most culturally marked and semantically complex layers of language. Some idioms are considered partially or fully untranslatable because their meanings, metaphorical imagery, pragmatic functions, and cultural associations cannot be reproduced directly in another language. This article investigates untranslatable idioms in English and Uzbek fiction and analyzes the linguistic and cultural factors that complicate their translation. The study applies a qualitative contrastive and translation-oriented approach based on the theories of Vinogradov, Kunin, Nida, Baker, Newmark, and House. Literary examples from English and Uzbek fictional works are examined according to semantic structure, stylistic function, metaphorical imagery, and translation strategy. The findings demonstrate that untranslatability frequently emerges because of cultural asymmetry, metaphorical incompatibility, historical specificity, and pragmatic differences. The study further reveals that translators often rely on functional substitution, paraphrasing, compensation, and contextual adaptation to preserve communicative effect.

Keywords: untranslatable idioms, phraseological units, literary translation, cultural asymmetry.

Introduction

Phraseological units constitute an important component of literary language because they enrich discourse with emotionality, figurative imagery, humor, irony, and national-cultural coloration. Unlike free lexical combinations, idioms possess semantically indivisible meanings that frequently cannot be interpreted literally (Vinogradov, 1977; Kunin, 1984). In literary texts, idiomatic expressions perform stylistic and pragmatic functions that contribute to characterization, emotional intensification, and narrative vividness. However, the translation of phraseological units often becomes problematic because idioms are deeply connected to culture, historical experience, mentality, and metaphorical thinking (Baker, 2018).

Some phraseological units are considered “untranslatable” because no direct equivalent exists in the target language. In such cases, translators must choose between preserving semantic meaning, metaphorical imagery, emotional effect, or cultural specificity. This dilemma is especially visible in translation between English and Uzbek, which belong to different linguistic and cultural traditions. The purpose of this article is to investigate untranslatable idioms in English and Uzbek fiction and analyze the strategies used to render them in literary translation.

Theoretical Framework

Vinogradov (1977, p. 142) defines phraseological units as stable lexical combinations characterized by semantic unity and reproducibility. Kunin (1984, p. 56) emphasizes idiomaticity and figurative meaning as central features of phraseological expressions. From a translation perspective, Nida’s theory of dynamic equivalence argues that translators should reproduce equivalent reader response rather than formal lexical similarity (Nida, 1964, p.

159). Newmark (1988, p. 47) emphasizes communicative translation when literal translation fails to preserve pragmatic meaning.

Baker (2018, pp. 66–77) identifies several idiom translation strategies, including:

- full equivalence,
- partial equivalence,
- paraphrasing,
- omission,
- functional substitution.

House (2018) argues that cultural and pragmatic adaptation is often necessary when translating culturally bound expressions.

Methodology

The research applies qualitative contrastive analysis. Phraseological units were selected from English and Uzbek fictional works including novels by Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Ernest Hemingway, Abdulla Qodiriy, and Abdulla Qahhor. The examples taken from English and Uzbek fictional novel were analyzed according to their semantic structure, metaphorical imagery, stylistic function,cultural specificity, translation strategy, gains and losses in translation.

Results

Idioms and set phrases we have analyzed in this article are divided into five major groups according to the reasons why they are not fully translatable:

1. **Cultural Specificity**

Many idioms reflect national traditions, social behavior, historical experience, and worldview. Since English and Uzbek cultures differ significantly, some metaphorical models have no direct equivalent. The idiom “To let the cat out of the bag.” (from The Adventures of Tom Sawyer) – possible uzbek translation would be “Sirni ochib qo‘ymoq.”The English idiom metaphorically refers to revealing a secret accidentally. Uzbek possesses no equivalent idiom involving a cat or bag imagery. The translator preserves semantic meaning but loses humorous metaphorical imagery. The idiom is difficult to translate because it contains a culture-specific metaphor which does not exist in Uzbek language. The translated version is a partial equivalence through descriptive substitution. However here metaphorical vividness, comic imagery and stylistic color have been lost but it became clear and natural for uzbek readers. Similarly, in Uzbek “Ko‘ngli tog‘dek ko‘tarildi.” (From O‘tkan kunlar) – possible English translation: “He felt extremely happy.” The Uzbek idiom contains culturally specific mountain imagery symbolizing emotional uplift and spiritual relief. English translation preserves semantic meaning but loses poetic and cultural imagery. Translation difficulty arises because of national metaphor, so descriptive paraphrasing has been used to make it clear and readable for English readers.

2. Metaphorical Incompatibility

Idioms often rely on metaphorical imagery that does not exist in another culture. A glaring example for this can be taken from *Pride and Prejudice*: “Keep a stiff upper lip.” A Possible Uzbek translation of this phrase: - “O‘zini bardam tutmoq.” The English idiom reflects British cultural values associated with emotional restraint and self-control. Uzbek culture lacks an equivalent metaphorical image connected with “upper lip.” It can be challenging to translate because it shows culturally specific emotional behavior, so metaphorical incompatible. In this case, national-cultural symbolism and historical associations have been somehow faded. Functional substitution has been used to render meaning and preserve communicative function. An example from Uzbek fiction: “Yuragi orqasiga tortib ketdi.” - Possible English translation: “He became extremely frightened. ”The

Uzbek idiom expresses fear through bodily imagery. Literal translation would sound unnatural in English because the metaphorical model does not exist. Somatic metaphor incompatibility is the main translation difficulty here. Translated version is a contextual adaptation which helps to remain communicative comprehensibility. However, emotional imagery and stylistic vividness are not so clear in translation.

3. Pragmatic Differences

Certain expressions carry humor, irony, sarcasm, or emotional associations that cannot be reproduced fully. A good example can be taken from from Three Men in a Boat:"I nearly died laughing." Possible Uzbek translation is: "Kulaverib o'lib qolay dedim." The hyperbolic idiom creates comic exaggeration. Although Uzbek contains a similar expression, the humorous tone and rhythm may vary because comic effect depends heavily on contextual style. The main translation difficulty here is preserving humor intensity and colloquial rhythm. Translated version is a functional equivalence which helps to maintain emotional effect.

4. Historical and Social Specificity

Some phraseological units are connected with historically specific realities or social practices. "To be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth." (From Oliver Twist)- Uzbek translation: "Boy oilada tug'ilgan". The English idiom symbolizes aristocratic privilege and inherited wealth. Literal translation would sound unnatural in Uzbek because the metaphorical association with a silver spoon is culturally unfamiliar. Translation difficulty arises due to historical symbolism and cultur-specific social imagery. Descriptive paraphrasing has been used to translate, however aristocratic connotation and metaphoric imagery have been lost to gain semantic accessibility.

There are four main translation strategies that are widely used to translate idioms and phraseological units in from English into uzbek:

1. **Functional Substitution is** replacing the original idiom with a culturally acceptable equivalent. "To be in hot water" → "Boshi baloga qolmoq." Here The metaphor changes, but communicative meaning remains.

2. Descriptive paraphrasing - Used when no idiomatic equivalent exists. "Born with a silver spoon" → boy oilada tug'ilmoq"

3. Compensation - Stylistic effect lost in one place may be recreated elsewhere. "He was scared to death" → "U yuragi chiqib ketgudek qo'rqdi."

4. Contextual Adaptation - The translator modifies the idiom according to narrative context and reader expectations. "Keep your chin up." → Tushkunlikka tushma

Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that idiomatic untranslatability is primarily connected with cultural asymmetry and metaphorical incompatibility between English and Uzbek phraseological systems. Many idioms reflect culturally specific emotional models, historical associations, and symbolic imagery that cannot be reproduced directly. The findings further reveal that translators frequently prioritize semantic and pragmatic adequacy over metaphorical preservation. As a result, descriptive paraphrasing and functional substitution become the most common translation strategies.

However, these strategies frequently produce stylistic losses, particularly in humor, irony, emotional intensity, and poetic imagery. Nevertheless, successful translation depends not on literal equivalence but on preserving communicative and emotional effect (Nida, 1964; House, 2018).

Conclusion

Untranslatable idioms constitute one of the most difficult aspects of literary translation because they combine linguistic, stylistic, pragmatic, and cultural complexity. The comparative analysis of English and Uzbek fiction demonstrates that idiomatic expressions frequently resist direct translation due to cultural asymmetry, metaphorical incompatibility, and historical specificity. The study reveals that translators employ various strategies including functional substitution, descriptive paraphrasing, compensation, and contextual adaptation in order to preserve communicative effect. Nevertheless, translation inevitably involves certain stylistic and cultural losses, particularly regarding metaphorical imagery, humor, irony, and national coloration. The findings confirm that successful translation of phraseological units requires not only linguistic competence but also intercultural awareness, stylistic sensitivity, and creative adaptation. The article contributes to further research in phraseology, literary stylistics, and English–Uzbek translation studies.

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