

Translation of euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms in a culturally bound context

ترجمة العبارات الاصطلاحية التلطيفية والتقبيرية المرتبطة بالسياق الثقافي

Meriam Benlakdar¹meriem.benlakder@univ-alger2.dz
University Algiers 2- Translation Institute, Algeria

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Abstract:

In this paper, we aim to answer the following questions: what are the types of difficulties encountered by translators when transferring euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms from English into Arabic? What are the techniques that can be used by translators to overcome these difficulties? To this end, we will use a descriptive analysis approach. The significance of the study is to suggest an exhaustive theoretical framework to translate euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms in a culturally bound context. Untranslatability, loss of euphemistic or dysphemistic connotations, loss of figurative meanings, social, cultural, and religious differences as well as the absence of idiom equivalents in the TL are the main difficulties of translating euphemistic or dysphemistic idioms. The techniques that can be used to overcome these difficulties are footnotes, substitution, explication, and combination of techniques.

Keywords: cultural context, idioms, euphemism, dysphemism, translation

ملخص:

نهدف في هذه الورقة البحثية للإجابة عن الإشكالية التالية: ما هي أنواع الصعوبات التي يواجهها المترجم وعند نقل العبارات الاصطلاحية التلطيفية والتقبيرية من اللغة الإنجليزية إلى العربية؟ وما هي التقنيات التي يمكن أن يستخدمها المترجم ويتغلب على هذه الصعوبات؟ وعليه، نستخدم المنهج التحليلي الوصفي لتسليط الضوء على هذه الصعوبات وتحديد التقنيات المستخدمة. كما تكمن أهمية الدراسة في اقتراح إطار نظري شامل لترجمة العبارات الاصطلاحية التلطيفية والتقبيرية من اللغة الإنجليزية إلى العربية اللصيقة بثقافتها يعد تعذر الترجمة، وفقدان الدلالات التلطيفية أو التقبيرية، وفقدان المعاني الإيحائية، والاختلافات الاجتماعية والثقافية والدينية، وغياب مكافئات العبارات الاصطلاحية في اللغة الهدف بسبب الفجوات المعجمية والدلالية من الصعوبات الرئيسية في ترجمة العبارات الاصطلاحية التلطيفية والتقبيرية. تتمثل التقنيات التي يمكن استخدامها للتغلب على هذه الصعوبات في الحواشي، والاستبدال، والإيضاح، والجمع بين التقنيات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سياق ثقافي، عبارات اصطلاحية، تلطيف، تقبيح، ترجمة

1.Introduction:

Idioms are phrases and expressions whose meanings are figurative and symbolic; they can be found in almost all languages and cultures. They may be difficult to understand - especially for non-native speakers. Idiomatic expressions are used to fulfil a variety of functions such as

expressing feelings, attitudes as well as intentions, avoiding offending others, and even denigrating people. In this regard, euphemistic idioms are used to soften harsh realities, avoid referring to taboos, and conceal painful truths as part of euphemism. By contrast, dysphemistic idioms are used to express disapprobation and denigrate others as part of dysphemism. Translating these two types of idioms can be a challenging task for translators, as cultural mediators, because they are closely related to their source culture and language. The problem we will try to address throughout our paper is as follows: what are the types of difficulties encountered by translators when transferring euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms from English into Arabic? What are the techniques that can be used by translators to overcome these difficulties? To this end, we will apply a descriptive analysis approach to identify these difficulties and the adopted translation techniques.

2. Idioms:

Idioms are defined in OED as “the form of speech peculiar or proper to a people or a country”. They are defined in Phraseology (para.9), as “part of the larger class of relatively fixed multiword units. They are frequently described as semantically opaque word-combination, that is, combinations whose global meaning is different from the sum of the individual meanings of the constituent parts” (as cited in Imahayashi&Nakao, 2010, p. 173) Moreover, culture is an important dimension that should be considered in learning and understanding idioms because “idioms are part of all cultures, and understanding them is important for understanding written and spoken language. Not knowing the history, origin, or meaning of various idioms can make them difficult to understand” (Iland, 2011, p. 109).

In other words, idioms are words or expressions with figurative meanings. Some idioms may retain the literal meaning of their words or phrases, however, some other have cultural meanings which makes it hard for non-native speakers to understand them.

Idioms are generally characterised by “semantic opacity, lack of lexical (paradigmatic) variation and morphosyntactic constraints” (Linguisticae investigations, 2003, p. 14) Thus, explanations about the origin of idioms should be provided to enable learners to fully grasp their non-literal meaning. The word combination of idioms is well-fixed; no lexical element can be used instead of another. Moreover, lexical variation is closely linked to semantic and morphological variations. As for idioms morphosyntactic constraints, they are too rigid and do not allow grammatical construction substitution.

Further, idioms are characterised by figurativeness, metaphoricity, fixedness of form and internal structure, and familiarity. (Dabrowska, 2018, p. 16). That is to say, idioms are sometimes considered as “frozen” metaphors which are fixed in form and construction, and whose meaning is figurative.

Idioms may be ambiguous and “offer a ground for word plays and puns because of their “complex semantic structure and formal frozenness” (Ranam, 2001, p. 111) That is, idioms are sometimes ambiguous because they have both literal and figurative meanings. Thus, cultural and situational contexts are much needed to understand the meaning of idiomatic expressions. As for wordplays and puns, they are often based on polysemic words, literal and non-literal interpretations of meanings to create figurative and humourous effects.

There is a significant range of idiomatic expressions; many researchers have suggested various types, classes, and categories of idioms. For instance, Katz and Postal (1963) distinguish between lexical idioms and phrase idioms. (as cited in Strassler&Strassler, 1982,

p. 30) Carter (1987) suggests different categories of idioms under types of fixed expressions which include, idioms, (Irreversible binomials/ compound idioms: e.g. ‘huff and puff’, “spick and span”, full idioms, semi-idioms), proverbs, stock phrases, catchphrases, allusions/quotations, idiomatic similes to name just a few. (p. 60)

In the same vein, fixed expressions are combinations of words which have semantic connection and rigid patterning, and whose meanings are not immediately obvious or transparent since they cannot be understood from words in isolation.

Further, according to Norbury (2004), there are transparent idioms whose meanings are close to the word-for-word interpretation, and opaque idioms whose meanings is not related to the actual interpretation of words.

Idioms may be used to express several topics, feelings, intentions, actions, characters, and attitudes. Here are some examples of idiomatic expressions:

- Give someone a hand: which means to help somebody;
- Face the music: which means to face unpleasant consequences;
- Keep an eye on: which means to take care of someone or watch them carefully;
- An old hand: which refers to an experienced person;
- See eye to eye: which means to agree on something;
- Dog days: which refer to very hot days;
- Get the lion’s share: which means to get the greatest percentage;
- Wear the trousers: which means to be in charge of something;
- Black and white: which means straight forward;
- Green with envy: which means to be very jealous;
- In the red: which means in debt;
- Spill the beans: which means reveal the truth.

2.1 Euphemistic idioms:

Before we deal with euphemistic idioms, we shall first give some definitions of euphemism which is an expressive mode that characterises our daily lives.

Euphemism is defined in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English as a “polite word or expression that you use instead of a more direct one to avoid shocking someone” (Procter, 1995, p. 466). That is, euphemism is an indirect word that is used to avoid offending others.

Moreover, it is deemed as “a term alluding to an offensive thing by an inoffensive expression” (Rogers, Malinski & Barrett, 1994, p. 155) That is, euphemism is an agreeable word, phrase, or expression that is used to substitute another that is considered harsh and unpleasant.

On the other hand, Allan and Burridge define euphemism (1991) as “words or phrases used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression. They avoid possible loss of face by the speaker and also the hearer or some third party”. (p. 11) The word “euphemism” is etymologically derived from the Greek words “eu” which means “well” and “pheme” which means “speaking”. (as cited in Davoodi, n.d., “para.13”)

As for euphemism types, Rawson distinguishes between positive euphemism which makes the euphemised items appear more important and acceptable, e.g. ‘sanitary man’, and negative euphemism which lessens the negative connotations of negative phenomena. When used in

military and political fields, negative euphemism is called “doublespeak”, e.g. ‘ethnic cleansing’, ‘therapeutic misadventure’ (Rawson, 1981, pp.1-4)

Radulovic (2012) divides euphemism into context-independent euphemism such as “make an honest woman of” which means “to marry a woman you have impregnated” and “the oldest profession” which refers to “prostitution”, and context-dependent euphemism such as “make peace” which refers to the preparation for violence” (p. 25).

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that euphemism is used in all areas of life and is deeply entrenched in almost all languages to avoid taboos and the loss of “face”, soften or conceal harsh realities, or even mislead and manipulate people.

As for euphemistic idioms, they are “made up of common everyday core words. However, much euphemism employs high-register classical terminology or abstraction”. (Hughes, 2015, p. 152) That is to say, a portion of euphemistic idioms pertains to the plain language that is used in daily conversations, whereas the other portion is characterised by classical and formal words.

Euphemistic idioms may express many complex concepts, for instance “several activities of people regarding their job, family, free time, day life, and their relationship with nature”, Fellbaum (2002) provides the following euphemistic idioms: “buy the farm”, (which refers to death, especially in a violent way), “have a bun in the oven” (which refers to being pregnant) (as cited in Anastasiou, 2010, p. 71).

Euphemistic idioms are used and interpreted within a communicative situation in all types of discourses; they are produced “as a response to social taboos, and subscribes to social convention of avoiding offence (like the euphemistic expression for death) (Abrantes, 2005, p. 88) In other words, euphemistic idioms are often deemed socially and culturally appropriate and acceptable to show politeness and respect towards others (e. g. to avoid swear words), mention embarrassing subjects, and mitigate the hideousness of some facts.

Euphemistic idioms are usually formed based on the metaphoric nature of languages and have expressive values. Here are some examples of euphemistic idioms:

- “Gone to Heaven” instead of “died”
- “Powder your nose” instead of “going to the toilet”
- “Bag lady” instead of “a homeless woman”
- “Horizontally challenged” instead of “fat”
- “Vertically challenged” instead of “short”
- “Up to scratch” instead of “bad”
- “Be on a gardening leave” instead of “unemployed”
- “Be wearing your apron high” instead of “being pregnant”
- “Lose your lunch” instead of “vomit”
- “Over the hill and picking up speed” instead of “old person”.
- “In one’s birthday suit” instead of “naked”.

The use of this type of expressions is usually “motivated by a desire not to offend, but they are also motivated by the wish to upgrade whatever they denote, and even the display of wit” (Allan & Burrige, 2006, p. 96) That is, the use of euphemistic idioms is driven by many reasons that should be carefully considered.

2.2. Dysphemistic idioms:

Dysphemism contrasts with euphemism, according to Allan and Burrige (2006) dysphemism is “a word or phrase with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance”. (pp. 31-33) Further, Spears (1981) defines dysphemism as “a word that have unpleasant or taboo connotations” (p. 27) That is, dysphemism is a derogatory word or expression that is used to offend the addressee or the audience.

Dysphemism is used deliberately to insult, express rejection, disapprobation, devalue, denigrate, and humiliate others. It usually expresses offensiveness, taboos, and distaste. For instance, Fellbaum (2002) provides the following dysphemistic idioms which have the meaning of rejection: “einenKorbgeben” “give a basket”, “show the cold shoulder” (as cited in Anastasiou, 2010, pp. 71-72).

Allan and Burrige (2006) distinguish between two types of dysphemism, conventional dysphemism which politely or impolitely refers to taboo subjects, and general dysphemism which describes things, occurrence, and situations. Moreover, dysphemism may include swearwords and profanity, and may be shocking, offensive, and insulting.

Dysphemistic idioms can be defined as phrases or expressions that are pejorative, offensive, and even obscene whose use is motivated by hatred, contempt, and anger towards others. The functions of these idioms may vary according to various contexts; they may be used to humiliate others, stigmatise certain social and ethnic groups as part of stereotypes, represent harsh realities, express anger, hatred, and other bad feelings. It is noteworthy that these idioms have undergone a process of pejoration and are characterised by a lower style in addition to pertaining to informal registers in many instances.

Here are some examples of dysphemistic idioms:

- “Croaked”, “word food” for “a dead person”
- “Not the sharpest knife in the drawer” for “a person’s lack of intelligence”
- “Nerd”, “egghead” for “a smart person”
- “Geezer” for “an old person”
- “Grease monkey” for “someone who works as a mechanic”
- “loony bin” for “a psychiatric care facility”
- “coloured person”, “negro” for “African-American person”

Dysphemistic idioms are generally used “in a deliberate attempt to insult, shock, or outrage the reader” through replacing an everyday word or an expression with ones that have strong emotional values and connotations. (Barber & Berdan, 1998, p. 106) This is the reason why it is very important to recognise and understand dysphemistic idioms.

3. Translation of euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms:

Language and culture are deeply connected, “culture and language are closely interrelated because languages do not operate in isolation but within and as part of cultures and cultures differ from each other in different ways”. (D’Almeida, 1982, p. 287) In turn, euphemism and dysphemism are closely related to culture. Therefore, translators should have the required linguistic ability and be familiar with the target language’s cultural background.

Since euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms are culturally bound. A particular idiom that is euphemistic in one culture may be dysphemistic in another. This fact may make it hard for non-native speakers to learn and understand them.

Further, the translation of euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms may be challenging because of the differences that exist among cultures and languages. In this vein, Nida states that “differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure” (Nida, 1964, p. 30). In fact, translators may find solutions to linguistic and structural difficulties, however, they may fail to overcome culture-related problems.

Strakšienė (2009) considers that the absence of idiom level equivalence is the main problem faced by translators when interpreting idioms. (p. 15)

Moreover, Baker (1991) notes that the key difficulties of translating idiomatic expressions are the absence of idiomatic expressions counterparts in the target language as well as the differences among languages in using idioms to convey various concepts and ideas.

Baker (1991) suggests four main strategies to translate idiomatic and cultural expressions which are: using an idiom with similar meaning and type (total equivalence); using an idiom of similar meaning but different form (partial equivalence); paraphrasing translation; and omission translation.

As for translating euphemism and dysphemism, Leppihalme (1997) suggests three strategies to translate allusion that can apply to the translation of both euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms which are: (a) retention, (b) minimum change/literal translation, (c) addition of extra-guidance (including typographical means), (d) footnotes, endnotes, forewords or other additional explanations, (e) simulated familiarity, internal marking, (f) replacement by preformed target-language item, (g) reduction to sense, (h) re-creation using a variety of techniques, and (i) omission. (p. 82)

As for Larson (1998), “Euphemisms will often need to be translated by a comparable euphemism in the receptor language. The important thing is for the translator to recognize the euphemistic nature of the source language expression and then translate with an appropriate and acceptable expression of the receptor language whether euphemistic or not” (p.116) This may also apply to euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms.

Further, Larson admits the complex process of translation, “however, a translator who is concerned with transferring the meaning will find that the receptor language has a way in which the desired meaning can be expressed, even though it may be very different from the source language form.” (Larson, 1984, p. 22)

On the other hand, Unseth (2006) suggests four strategies to translate euphemism which may be relevant to the translation of euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms, namely: (1) literal translation, (2) substitution, (3) plain language, and (4) combination of two strategies. (pp. 35-36)

Further, Ivir believes that borrowing, definition, literal translation, substitution, lexical creation, omission, and addition are the most important techniques to render euphemisms (as cited in Alqurashi, 2010, p. 18), and therefore, euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms

To summarise, there is no agreement among translation researchers and theoreticians on specific translation strategies to transfer euphemism and dysphemism. Thus, various translation techniques can be used to render ST euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms onto TT. However, situational and cultural contexts should be taken into account.

Moreover, euphemism and dysphemism functions should be considered when attempting to render euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms such as taboo-avoiding, politeness, and even deception in order to choose the most suitable translation strategies in a cross-cultural context. Further, these two types of idioms should be analysed pragmatically by translators and not only semantically.

4.Samples analysis:

In this section, we will apply a descriptive analysis approach to study some samples of both euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms to identify translation difficulties and techniques.

- **Euphemistic idioms:**

1- Cross the river: this idiom is an allusion to the crossing of the river Styx which represents the boundary between Earth and the Underworld in classical Greek mythology, and over which the souls of the newly dead are transported by Charon, the ferryman. It is a euphemistic idiom which means to die.

This idiomatic expression is culturally bound and may not be translated literally into Arabic because it will not conform to the Islamic beliefs, precepts, and values. Translators may not render the same wording of the original expression since it contradicts the religious and cultural values and beliefs of Muslims. In this vein, we have come across the following translations: “انتقل إلى رحمة الله”, “انتقل إلى العالم الآخر”, “انتقل إلى دار البقاء” which are all acceptable and appropriate for the Arab reader. The technique of equivalence enables the translation of the meaning of the original euphemistic idiom in such a way to create the same effect upon the TT reader.

2- Go to Halifax: Halifax is a town in Yorkshire in England. It is used idiomatically instead of the expression: “go to hell”. It is considered as a polite euphemistic expression. Thus, this idiom is culturally bound and is closely related to its historical background and geographical environment.

Translators may not use literal translation to render this expression because it will not have the same effect onto the Arab reader who probably does not even know the town of Halifax. If translators decide to use the technique of retention, that we have seen earlier, they may add a footnote to explain the word “Halifax” to avoid ambiguity. However, the translated expression “يذهب إلى هاليفاكس” may mean nothing to the Arab reader, and the meaning and effect will be lost even with the use of footnotes. Hence, translators can use the technique of substitution which explicit the meaning of the expression as follows: “اذهب إلى الجحيم” which is used in Arabic especially in subtitles to angrily tell someone to go away. Nevertheless, the euphemised meaning will be lost since it will be replaced by a dysphemistic idiom.

- **Dysphemistic idioms:**

- 1- **Tub of lard:** It is a highly derogatory idiom for an overweight person. It is pejorative and insulting. According to Collins Dictionary, the word “lard” means a “soft white fat obtained from pigs. It is used in cooking. (lard, n.d.) whereas, the word “tub” means “a deep container of any size”. (tub, n.d.). Thus, the phrase “tub of lard” literally means a deep container of pig fat and is offensively used to describe an obese person. Unlike the terms “overweight” and “obese” which are used as euphemisms or more precisely as orthophemism, terms like “fat”, “chubby”, “bloated”, and “tubby” are highly offensive and should be avoided. The following idioms are also dysphemistic: “fat as a big”, “fat as a beached whale”, and “fat cat”.

We notice that this idiom should not be translated literally. The literal translation will read as follows: “حوض من شحم الخنزير” which means absolutely nothing in Arabic. Thus, the translator should break free from the lexical constraints of the idiomatic expression and look for an equivalent idiom in the TL that preserves the dysphemistic connotations of the SL idiom to produce the same effect. We have found the term “ممتلئ البدن”, “ممتلئ الجسم”, “مكتنز العضل”, “لحيم”, “بجياج”, “زبيل”. However, these terms and expressions do not reflect the dysphemistic connotations of the original idiom which is highly derogatory.

- 2- **Worm food:** it is used in reference to a dead body, a corpse after being buried in the ground. This phrase also refers to the decomposition of a dead body. It may be shocking and disgusting.

Translators may use literal translation to retain the negative connotation of this dysphemism using the technique of retention as follows: “طعام الديدان” which can be quite scary and repulsive for Arab readers in certain contexts especially, as part of intimidation. However, based on the cultural and religious contexts, translators may use a neutral or euphemistic idiom to render this dysphemistic idiom which may not be considered appropriate and acceptable.

- 3- **Bean counter:** it is used to refer to an accountant. It is a dysphemistic idiom that is insulting for accounting and finance professionals. “Counting beans” may be silly. “A bean counter is one who nitpicks over small things in order to save costs” (bean counter, n.d.)

We notice that this offensive idiom is culturally bound and may mean nothing when translated literally into Arabic due to lexical constraints. The literal translation “عداد الفاصولياء” does not exist in Arabic and is unfamiliar to the Arab reader who will not understand its dysphemistic connotative meaning. The original idiom may be untranslatable due to the absence of idiom level equivalence.

5. Conclusion:

Euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms are part of everyday conversations. They are often characterised by semantic opacity and lack of lexical variation. They usually mean something different than the literal meaning of the individual words would suggest. Moreover, they are closely connected to cultural and historical background as well as geographical environment. The main difficulties encountered by translators when transferring euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms from English into Arabic are untranslatability, loss of euphemistic or

dysphemistic connotations, loss of figurative meanings, social, cultural, and religious differences, which may result sometimes in cultural bumps, as well as the absence of idiom equivalents in the target language due to lexical and semantic gaps. The techniques that can be used to overcome these difficulties may be footnotes, substitution, explicitation, and combination of techniques. Further, the communicative and situational contexts and the readers' expectations should be taken into account when translating euphemistic and dysphemistic idioms to achieve acceptability and appropriateness.

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