Idiomatic Expressions:
A problem in learning and translating languages

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We have all heard or read the phrase "language is a living thing", although most of us never really think about how and why this occurs. All living things grow and change regularly and constantly, and so does a language. It is easy to recognize the differences between Milton's English and the English used in contemporary books, papers or documents, but even modern English grows and changes ceaselessly. It is important to understand how a language develops today, because modern languages tend to adopt new idiomatic expressions at a faster rate than in the past. When learning or using a language, the speaker cannot choose whether to use or to omit idiomatic expressions, since they are not a separate part of the language but an essential part of it. You do not need to be a linguist or glottologist to realize that the vocabulary of a modern language grows steadily through the regular introduction of new words generated by new developments in knowledge or new social and political phenomena. At the same time, there are idiomatic expressions that lose favor, go out of style, and finally disappear. New events, developments, discoveries and ideas must be given a name in order to permit communication first among people speaking the same language and then among people speaking different languages. Thus the problem arises of how to transfer a meaning or a concept into a language where no equivalent word or phrase can express the same idea. In such a context, the translation of "idioms" represents a particularly difficult task that requires a thorough knowledge of both languages if the meaning of the "idiomatic expression" is to be fully preserved.

Idioms can be defined in many ways, although the most simple and exact definition is that an idiom is a number of words which, taken together, mean something different from what they mean when they are taken individually. Our aim is not to provide an in-depth analysis of English idioms, because it is impossible to make a clear and complete classification of all idiomatic expressions of the language or to find an equivalent example in another language. Our discussion focuses on how idiomatic expressions affect the work of a translator, on the problems they cause and on the possible solutions. In order to carry out this analysis it is necessary to look at the processes and development through which new words (neologisms) are created, because neologisms are most of the time the determining factor in the creation of an idiomatic expression. Thus, many times an idiomatic expression can be translated successfully into a foreign language only if we know the origin and meaning of the neologism that brought the idiomatic expression into existence.

One way a neologism can be formed is by changing a noun into a verb or a verbal phrase into a noun. Examples of nouns formed from verbal phrases are

stop-over (a pause or a break) or *check-up* (an inspection or control). Examples of verbs formed from nouns are *to pilot* (to fly an airplane)*, to radio* (to send a message) *and to service* (to repair a car). It is easy to give words a new grammatical function because English is a flexible language, and changing the function does not necessarily imply changing the form.

Another way to form a neologism is to change an adjective into a verb to express a process, as in *bulletproof* or *soundproof*. All these changes in the function of a word have one purpose: to make the form of the words used shorter and more direct. All these language short-cuts are quicker and more convenient to use, and that is the reason why they are becoming more and more popular (and more difficult to translate!).

Verbs can also be made from the root of a noun, such as *to housekeep* (from the noun *housekeeper*) or *to babysit* (from the noun *babysitter*). Another type of short-cut joins two or more words together in order to form one single adjective replacing a long phrase, such as *round-the-clock* service instead of *a service which is offered 24 hours a day*.

Neologisms can also be created by adding endings such as *–isation* or *–ise* to adjectives or nouns. These types of language short-cuts are particularly used in newspapers and in television language and a typical example is *Americanisation*. Other neologisms are the result of prefixes such as *mini-, -maxi, -non, -super, -extra* or *–uni* which are placed in front of adjectives and nouns to express quantity or quality in the shortest and quickest possible way. Some examples of these neologisms are *supergrade gasoline* (best quality), *unisex* (clothes for men and women), *non-stop flight* (without making stops), *extra-large* (the biggest size available) and *minidisk* (a small-size compact disk).

Finally, new words can also be created by mixing just a part of two words that already exist, such as *brunch* (breakfast + lunch), *smog* (smoke + fog) and *laundromat* (automatic + laundry). Modern English is becoming more and more tolerant with the adoption and usage of these neologisms, and some sort of deviation from the grammatical rules of the past is now accepted both in spoken and written English. And also words which were considered to be *slang* in the past may be more acceptable in present-day English, although they may still be considered to be colloquial or informal. An excellent example are the two words *bloody* or *damn* which in the past were considered to be unacceptable language, but are used by almost anybody today.

Knowing the origin of a neologism does help translators in their difficult job of finding a more or less corresponding equivalent in another language, but it does not solve the problem completely. A second and just as important step towards the solution of the issue consists in taking a close look at some of the most peculiar features of idiomatic expressions. A very important aspect that must be stressed is that idioms are not only colloquial expressions, as many

people believe. Idiomatic expressions also appear both in slang and in formal style, and examples can even be found in poetry. Many times the way in which the single words of an idiomatic expression are put together is odd, illogical or even grammatically incorrect, but this is just one of the most typical features of an idiom. Because of the above-mentioned special features of most idiomatic expressions, we have to understand their meaning and learn how to use them as a whole, and we often cannot change any part of them. The English language is extremely rich in idiomatic expressions, and that is why it is almost impossible to speak and write English correctly without using idioms. English native speakers are often not aware at all that they are using lots of idiomatic expressions when they speak or write, and maybe they do not even realize that many of the idioms they use are grammatically incorrect. Non-native speakers and, in particular, non-English native speaker translators make the correct use of idiomatic English one of their main aims, and the fact that a great number of these idiomatic expressions are illogical or even grammatically incorrect causes them difficulty, especially in translations.

It is impossible to explain why a specific idiomatic expression has developed an uncommon or unusual arrangement or choice of words, because the idiom has been fixed by its long usage. For example, the very common English idiomatic expression *to buy a pig in a poke* means to buy something without inspecting it previously and which is worth less than what it has been paid for. The word *poke,* which is an old English word meaning *sack*, is no longer used today and it only appears in present-day language with this meaning in this specific idiom. Therefore, this example shows clearly that the idiomatic expression has survived, whilst the single word disappeared a long time ago. Although we have stressed the great variety and importance of understanding the source and origin of idiomatic expressions, the most important thing about idioms is their meaning. Sometimes native speakers do not even realize that there are grammatically incorrect idioms because they focus on their meaning and understand them perfectly, whereas a translator may find it extremely difficult to transfer the meaning and content of an idiomatic expression from one language into another, especially when no equivalent cultural context or words exist in the other language.

Idioms may have many different structures or forms. They can be very short or rather long and can represent a translation problem regardless of their length. A great number of very short idioms consists of some combination of noun and adjective, such as *cold war*, while some other idiomatic expressions are much longer, such as *to take the bull by the horns*. Some idioms have a regular structure but their meaning is not clear; other idioms have an irregular or even grammatically incorrect structure but their meaning is obvious; and finally there are idioms where both the structure and the meaning are not clear. The idiom *I am good friends with him* is both irregular and illogical in its grammatical structure because the pronoun *I* is singular and the correct form should be *I am a good friend with him* or *"of his"*; but the translator would not have any problems

in translating this idiomatic expression into another language, because the meaning of this idiomatic expression is perfectly clear although its structure is irregular. The idiom *to have a bee in one's bonnet*, on the other hand, has a regular form but its meaning is not obvious. It means, in fact, that one is obsessed by an idea, but how can the translator know this unless he has learned it as an idiom? Finally there are idiomatic expressions such as *to be at large*, where we find an unusual grammatical form (verb, preposition, adjective and no noun) and an unclear meaning. Unfortunately, most idioms belong to the second group (regular form and unclear meaning) and this is a serious risk for translators. An idiom of the first group (irregular or incorrect structure and clear meaning) does not represent a translation problem, because its clear meaning can be easily transferred into a foreign language without being affected by its irregular or even incorrect grammatical structure. An idiom of the third group (irregular or incorrect structure and unclear meaning) does not cause excessive risks to the professional translator, because its unusual or irregular grammatical structure arouses suspicion in the non-native translator, who will double check the expression to make sure there are no hidden meanings. The real problem arises with the great number of idioms belonging to the second group (regular and correct structure and unclear meaning), because precisely their regular grammatical form does not reveal the hidden *idiomatic meaning* of the phrase, so the danger of an unfaithful or even completely wrong translation into the other language is extremely high for a translator who has never heard the idiomatic expression.

Even within this second group there are idioms which are clearer than others, so they are easier to guess and eventually easier to translate. One of these easy-to-guess idioms belonging to the second group is *to give someone the green light*. We can guess the meaning of this idiomatic expression even if we have never heard it before, because we can associate the words *green light* with the colors of the traffic light where green means "GO!", so we can imagine that this idiom means *to give someone permission to do something*. Other idioms can be guessed easily if we hear them within a specific context, that is to say, if we know how they are used in a particular situation. For example, let us take the idiomatic expression *to be at the top of the tree*. If we hear the sentence *John is at the top of the tree now*, we are not sure what this is telling us about John. Is he in a dangerous position? Is he hiding? But if we hear this phrase in a specific context the meaning becomes clear to us: *Ten years ago John joined our company and now he is the general manager. Yes, he is really at the top of the tree.* Now we perfectly understand that this idiom means *to be at the top of one's profession, to be successful*. However, some idioms are too difficult to guess correctly because they have no association with the original meaning of the individual words. Some examples are *to bring the house down* (which means 'To cause great laughter in the audience') and *to fall between two stools* (which means 'to miss two opportunities because one hesitated in choosing either of them). If they have never heard them before, the translators will have great difficulties first in understanding these idiomatic expressions and then in finding a

faithful equivalent in the other language. Furthermore, there is an even more dangerous type of idiomatic expression that can put in trouble even experienced translators who have a fluent knowledge of the foreign language: idiomatic expressions with phrasal verbs that have a second 'hidden' meaning along with their first 'obvious' meaning. The problem in this case is that a great number of non-native speakers only know the most common meaning and often are unfamiliar with the other less popular meaning of the idiomatic expression, even when it is used in a clear and specific context. A good example here is the idiomatic expression *to tell someone where to get off*. Most non-native speakers (and translators) do know that *to get off* means to step out of a train, bus or other transport means, but they do not know that this phrasal verb has another quite different and less known idiomatic sense: it means *to tell someone rudely and openly what you think of him*. In other words, the idiomatic meaning of this phrase remains unintelligible to a non-native English reader or translator whenever it is used with its less popular idiomatic sense.

We have taken into consideration several aspects of idioms: where they come from, their form, their meaning and the difficulty translators face when they try to find an equivalent expression in another language. Before we put an end to our discussion we need to say that another difficulty that foreign learners and translators experience when they try to use and translate idiomatic expressions is that they do not always know in which situation it is correct to use an idiom, because they do not know the level of style. In other words, they do not know whether an idiomatic expression can be used both in a formal and in an informal situation, because most of the time the choice of the words depends on the person one is speaking to and on the situation or place at the time of speaking or writing. This is another quite serious problem for the non-native translator, because there is a high risk of using colloquialisms or extremely informal expressions in an official translation, and this could be considered rude and impolite.

The impossibility to perform a comprehensive list and analysis of all idiomatic expressions existing in one language and to provide an equivalent example in all other languages leads us to the same conclusion that most linguists, translators and translation theorists come to: not everything can be translated, and this is particularly true for idioms. Thus, when we learn a new idiomatic expression or try to translate its meaning into another language we must be aware of the fact that, instead of paying attention to the meaning of the single words, we will have to focus on the concept or message that is conveyed by that idiomatic expression as a whole. The idiom is not a list of words with individual meanings; its words are rather the tiles of a mosaic whose meaning can only be understood, interpreted and translated correctly into another language if its integrity and completeness are preserved.

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