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Translating English Idioms into French: The Interplay between Flexibility and Creativity

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Abstract

A controversial aspect of investigations into idioms has been their flexibility and creative use for achieving stylistic effects. While much of previous work has considered frozenness as a feature of idioms, this property arguably gives rise to their creative variability through lexico-grammatical transformations. This qualitative study was designed to describe and compare the interplay between literal and semi-literal English idioms translated into French. Two markedly differing patterns emerged from the analysis of the two groups of idioms under study. Literal idioms pose no particular translation difficulty. In stark contrast, the subset of semi-literal idioms with a partial transfer of meaning and lexical modification is more challenging than literal idioms. More notably, shorter, coalesced semi-literal idioms stand out as particularly more challenging. This comparison reveals interesting correlation between idiom translation difficulty and the extent to which their internal composition is shorter or longer, fairly transparent, and therefore flexible at syntactic and semantic levels. The study underlines the strong persistence of idiom translation difficulties in non-native translation. In addition to the contribution to translation practice, this study helps understand how idiom flexibility can be conceptualized.

Keywords: Creativity - English - French Translation - Idiom - Polysemy

Traduire des idiomes anglais en français : l'interaction entre flexibilité et créativité

Résumé

Dans les recherches sur les idiomes, leur défigement et usage créatif à des fins stylistiques suscite des débats. Tandis que de nombreux travaux antérieurs considèrent le figement comme une caractéristique des idiomes, cette propriété est susceptible de donner lieu à leur créativité aux moyens de modifications lexicogrammaticales. Cette étude qualitative se propose de décrire et de comparer la manière dont le caractère littéral ou semi-littéral des idiomes entre en jeu dans leur traduction en français. Deux tendances très différentes ressortent de l'analyse des deux groupes d'idiomes faisant l'objet de la présente étude. Les idiomes à caractère littéral ne posent pas de difficulté de traduction particulière. Assorti de transfert partiel de sens et de modification lexicale le sous-groupe d'idiomes à caractère semi-littéral contraste fortement avec les idiomes à caractère littéral. Fait notable, les idiomes à caractère semi-littéral plus courts et fusionnés sont particulièrement plus difficiles. Cette comparaison révèle une corrélation intéressante entre les difficultés de traduction des idiomes et la mesure dans laquelle leurs éléments constitutifs sont plus courts ou longs, assez transparents, et par conséquent flexibles aux plans syntactique et sémantique. Cette étude souligne la persistance des difficultés liées aux idiomes en traduction non-native. Au-delà des apports pour la pratique traductionnelle, cette étude propose une perspective sur le défigement des idiomes.

Mots-clés : Créativité - Idiom - Polysémie - Traduction anglais - français

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction And Background

Translation scholars have been much more concerned with direct translation than inverse translation. The prevailing assumption in scholarship on directionality holds that a professional should translate into his native tongue (P. Newmark 1988, 1991, A. Langlotz 2006, N. Garbovsky 2007, J. Delisle 2013, M. Baker 2018). Proponents of this widely held view contend that the process of learning a second or foreign language is never complete, with formulaic language, idioms in particular, remaining a daunting task for the non-native language learner. A. Kunin (1996, p.15), most notably, pointed out that “English phraseology presents daunting difficulties both for students of the language and for translators¹”. Advocates of the native-speaker argument further elaborate that in direct translation the translator feels at home, for he can skillfully and creatively manipulate the lexicon of his native tongue for achieving pragmatic effects, the overall element in meaning-making, as compared to the lexis and syntax (A. Chesterman, 2016, p.104).

Language policies adopted in multi-ethnic postcolonial countries, multinational companies and institutions, and the global reach of English called into question the prevailing directionality axiom. In sharp contrast to native translation, non-native translation is disparagingly characterized as poor in pragmatic subtleties and discursive resources, resulting into non-fluent, unidiomatic translation. Although A. Pym (2016) and M. Baker (2018) both strongly argue for native translation, they acknowledge that difficulties in translating idioms are not limited to non-native translators. A. Pym, for instance, bemoans that “translators tend to opt for the easiest alternatives, equivalents of the unmarked ‘very quickly’, creating texts that eschew perspective, becoming flat and unengaging” (2016, p. 230).

Against the backdrop of the broader category of formulaic language the subcategory of idioms stands out as particularly pivotal, ill-defined, and challenging (C. Fernando 1996, A. Langlotz 2006, A. Baranov and D. Dobrovol’skij 2008). The intermediate position of idioms between the semantics and the syntax (A. Langlotz, 2006, p.9) points to their central importance and highlights the difficulties they present in understanding and recreating in translation. While acknowledging that phraseology has been researched from a range of theoretical perspectives,

¹ All translations from Russian are mine

R. Moon (1998, p.8) levelled her criticisms against the “traditional approaches” to phraseology predominantly based on theory, with a special thrust on “typology, semantics, and syntactic behavior”. R. Moon, instead, argued for exploring the use of idioms in a broader context as they occur in corpus data; the rationale being to take account of their widespread use in spoken and written language (1998, p.9).

In an attempt to capture the fuzzy lexico-structural characteristics featuring in phraseological units (PUs), S. Jaki (2014, p.6) noted that:

it is more appropriate to speak of relative fixedness as a defining criterion: even though PUs are more or less stable in the language system (*langue*), they tend to undergo changes in their concrete realization in discourse (*parole*), where they are either used erroneously, undergo variation or modification.

It is worthy to note that traditional linguists considered idiom figurative meaning as a given, which hardly lends itself to any rational decomposition and analysis. In response, psycholinguists and cognitive linguists challenged this restrictive view, assimilating idiom access and comprehension to knowledge acquisition, storage, and retrieval. To paraphrase A. Langlotz (2006, p.12), idiom comprehension will be accounted for by metaphor and metonymy, leaving little room to arbitrariness, non-transparency, and non-decomposition.

As can be noted, idiomatic creativity (to borrow the phrase by A. Langlotz 2006) runs counter to the prototypical description of idioms as dead, fossilized strings of lexical items. Rather, idioms can be used in unconventional ways, posing intractable difficulties to translators regardless of translation direction (M. Baker 1992/2018, A. Pym 2016). A. Langlotz (2006) and S. Jaki (2014) make the important point that it is paradoxical that fixedness, widely held to be a defining feature of idioms, gives rise to their creative variability at the same time. Typically, the creative use of idioms is resorted to by language users for running a whole gamut of stylistic effects such as humor, wordplay, puns, irony, etc. (M. Baker 1992/2018, N. Garbovsky 2007, S. Jaki 2014). This creative manipulation is generally instantiated through lexicogrammatical substitution, insertion, clipping, and blending (A. Abeillé 1995, N. Garbovsky 2007, S. Jaki 2014).

1.2. Problem statement

Traditional linguistics-oriented approach to phraseology considered polylexicality, fixedness, and idiomaticity as the key features characterizing idioms in relation to other formulaic elements across languages (C. Fernando 1996, R. Moon 1998, A. Baranov and D. Dobrovolskiy 2008). A. Langlotz (2006) and S. Jaki (2014) emphasized how theoretical linguists considered non-compositionality and semantic fixedness to be the primary features of idioms. This rigid model, as has been shown in cognitive and corpus-linguistic evidence drawn from real language context (R. Moon, 1998, p.309), fails to explain lexicogrammatical transformations and creativity in idiom use.

Phraseological research in general, with its recognition of the centrality of idioms in particular, has been predominantly carried out from intralingual theoretical perspectives. As a result, idiom typologies applied to individual languages show limited utility and transferability across languages. In this sense, similarities and differences between source and target idiom domains put into perspective polylexicality, frozenness, and idiomaticity characterizing idioms at cross-linguistic level. Idioms allowing for modification in constituents, therefore, stylistic effects are heavily understudied in translation theoretical models, although “the transformational deficiencies are to be seen as tendencies rather than as strict rules” (S. Jaki 2014, p.: 9).

Difficulties in translating idioms from English into French languages point to differing lexicogrammatical and discursive features characterizing their idiom repertoires. Translation of idiom creative use in this language pair is heavily understudied (A. Abeillé, 1996, p.23), with scanty attention paid to strategies appropriate for dealing with the interplay occurring through polysemy and creative manipulation in idioms. It is therefore important to address this knowledge gap by describing the patterns characterizing literal idioms and semi-literal translation, with emphasis laid on difficulties underpinned by the conjunction of polysemy and creative manipulation in semi-literal idioms.

1.3. Purpose and objectives

The overarching goal of this study is to describe patterns of English literal and semi-literal idioms translated into French by student translators. An important objective of the study is to gain a better understanding of flexibility and modification in English idioms and their recreation in French. Looking closely at polysemy and creative manipulation in idioms, the study

describes the underlying difficulty arising from these two features characterizing idiom creative use and derived translation.

1.4. Research questions

The study is framed by two research questions constructed to describe how literalness and creativity may separately or in conjunction contribute to idiom translation difficulties.

1. What patterns characterize literal and semi-literal idiom translations performed by student translators?
2. How do student translators translate English semi-literal idioms in relation to their polysemy and creative modification?

1.5. Significance of the study

The study shows marked differences between the two sets of idioms, literal and semi-literal. The theoretical and practical implications for translation result into insights gained from phraseology asymmetry across English and French. From a processual perspective on translation, this evident asymmetry implies that source-text idioms can be theoretically approached and recreated through equivalent, correspondent, literal translation, or plain paraphrasing.

The findings derived from this study will contribute to enhancing skills in translating idioms. In addition, they may stimulate further inquiry into non-native translation in educational and professional settings. This aspect is currently gaining importance, for the perennial native and non-native translation divide is increasingly being blurred by languages and cultures brought into closer contact in a global world.

1.6. Delimitation and limitations of the study

This study reports on the findings from a home-assigned translation performed by a group of 18 students taking a course in translation at the final year toward a Master's degree in translation. A purposeful sample of five English literal and semi-literal idiom translation sequences has been taken. The analysis of the translation outputs collected was based on frequency counts of valid category and sought to gain a better understanding of difficulties

underlying idiom translation. The study was not designed to assess the research participant overall performance in translation.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Defining key concepts : formulaic language, phraseologism, (idiom

2.1.1. Formulaic language

The field of phraseology also termed formulaic language is a challenging academic discipline authors sternly warned against decades ago. Malkiel (1959), as quoted in J. Strässler (1983, p.17), advised “to steer clear of any reference to the ill-defined category of idioms or phrasal formulas.” This pronouncement is intended to call attention to the intractable, often conflicting and overlapping, definitions and classifications set forth by phraseologists who embark on tackling phraseology from different theoretical frameworks.

Despite the terminological disarray involved in defining the properties of phraseology and delineating the subject matter of the discipline, attempts were made by phraseologists to describe and encompass the complex strands of the discipline. Formulaic language has been termed and defined in a wide variety of ways, including phraseology, phraseologisms, phraseological units, formulaic sequences (A. Wray 2002, 2009; S. Gries 2008, V. Seretan 2011).

Wray puts forth the following definition of formulaic language: « For most researchers, the term ‘formulaic language’ refers to two or more words which may or may not be adjacent and which have a particular mutual affinity that gives them a joint grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, or textual effect greater than the sum of the parts » (2009, p.266).

As can be noted from this definition of the term formulaic language or sequences generally accepted in recent years (A. Wray and M. Perkins 2000, A. Wray 2002, 2009; V. Seretan 2011), formulaic language is a generic term covering a wide range of linguistic units functioning as different word classes. For S. Gries, a phraseologism is: « the co-occurrence of a form or a lemma of a lexical item and one or more additional linguistic elements of various kinds which functions as one semantic unit in a clause or sentence and whose frequency of co-occurrence is larger than expected on the basis of chance » (2008, p.35).

This definition of phraseologism proposed by Gries concurs with Wray's definition in terms of the constituent elements. They both consider, albeit using different specific terms, phraseologism as a fixed word combination with an institutionalized meaning and whose bond is not arbitrary, for the constituents participating in the combination are mutually bound.

Although there is no set limit on the number of words participating in formulaic sequence or phraseologism, the term is generally viewed as a complex lexical unit, which cannot function as a full sentence. This function restriction criterion, pointed out by many authors, categorizes phraseologism in the narrow sense of the term. Based on this criterion longer, ready-made, routine, stretches of utterance such as proverbs and sayings, authorial quotations, phatic expressions, etc., do not qualify as phraseologisms, for they can stand alone as full sentences.

Following many recent studies favoring the term formulaic language or sequences over phraseology, I will further use interchangeably the term formulaic sequences or elements to refer to the wide range of recurrent patterns of the lexicon in the broad sense (collocations, compounds, idioms, routine formula such as greetings, proverbs and sayings, clichés, authorial quotations, similes, etc.). The term phraseologism, following Gries's definition, will be reserved to denote the narrow subcategory of formulaic elements.

2.1.2. Idioms in formulaic language

Dominant theoretical linguistic frameworks (e.g., generative grammar) viewed idioms in relation to the primacy of structure (grammar) over the lexicon, as ill-formed, anomalous, recurrent patterns of word combinations (R.W. Gibbs 1995, C. Fernando 1996, A. Langlotz 2006). Phraseologists who levelled this criticism against linguistics-oriented frameworks argue that the evident lack of interest in vocabulary shown by the traditional approach is posited on the idea that vocabulary is merely a loose string of words. C. Fernando, for instance, points out that this dismissive view of vocabulary overlooks the interdependence combining words together and the "the ways language-users perceive these interdependent relationships as reflecting conceptual associative organization" (1996, p.30).

Like numerous phraseologists before (C. Fernando 1996, R. Moon 1998, A. Baranov and D. Dobrovolskij 2008), S. Jaki (2014) underlines the centrality of idioms to the broad range of phraseological units. For her, ill-formed idioms in the traditional sense of the word are linguistic

items borrowed from other languages on the one hand, or words in common usage that fell into oblivion and only live on in fossilized or frozen form (p. 5). Traditionally, this type of idiom was the focus of phraseology research. In the words of A. Baranov and D. Dobrovol'skij (2008, p.18), in the 1970s there will be a shift in interest away from typology-oriented investigations in phraseology systems toward research centered on syntactic behavior, semantic characteristics, pragmatic features, and psycholinguistic processing of phraseological units.

Phraseologists have long lamented the lack of generally agreed-on definition of phraseology in general and of idiom in particular (C. Fernando 1996, R. Moon 1998, A. Langlotz 2006, S. Granger and F. Meunier 2008, A. Baranov and D. Dobrovol'skij 2008). Langlotz, for instance, has emphasized the difficulties in defining, classifying, and explaining the syntactic behavior of idioms. In the view of A. Baranov and D. Dobrovol'skij (2008, p.21), idioms present equal linguistic and cognitive interest, for the figurative meaning, if not directly forming the actual meaning, is a contributing factor to the semantic range (my translation from Russian).

In traditional linguistic approach to idioms, non-motivation was held as the primary feature of idiom proper, (e.g., the type of idioms termed by Jaki as ill-formed, also known in the literature as idioms proper, or phraseological fusion by V. Vinogradov 1947). Using the notion of conceptual metaphor (comparison and metonymy), cognitive linguists have challenged this feature of idioms, to make the point that the seemingly non-motivated idioms are syntactically and semantically more flexible than previously acknowledged in scholarship. According to J. Strässler (1983) and A. Langlotz (2006) communication context may help decipher such 'fossilized expressions'. Contextualization makes them less opaque, more transparent, adding them more flexibility than their isolated dictionary entry would allow. A. Langlotz (2006, p.16), in particular, emphasized that theoretical linguists held non-compositionality and syntactic inflexibility as defining features of idiom. However, this rigid model, as it has been observed in cognitive and corpus-linguistic evidence drawn from 'real language use', fails to account for creativity and lexicogrammatical transformations in idiom use.

Asymmetry in phraseological systems best illustrates the non-portability of idiom taxonomies at cross-linguistic level. From translation perspective this observation implies that idioms can be theoretically approached and rendered in equivalent, correspondent, literal or plain lexical items. In other words, lexicogrammatical features and discursive functions characterizing idiom

typology at intralingual level are seldom fully preserved in translation. With cross-linguistic idiom asymmetry in mind, Y. Retsker (1982) aptly pointed out that a translator must be knowledgeable of phraseology theory, but he must not concern himself with the formal structure (typology) of phraseological units in dealing with a given phraseological unit, for the most important constituent in translation is the pragmatic effect.

2.1.3. Defining idiom

Although the linguistic construction of idiom has been extensively researched from different linguistic and translational perspectives, up to this point there is little agreement among scholars regarding the very definition and key features of idiom. On the contrary, there is a great deal of confusion surrounding the concept of idiom. Some linguists seem to consider idiom as a natural way of speaking specific to a given language, some others think of idiom as high fluency in language, the ability to observe grammar constraints and usage rules of a particular language. Still, it is less confusing – and more appropriate – to consider idiom as a set multi-word combination assigned semantic unity. In this line of thinking, C. Fernando (1996, p.30) defines idioms as “indivisible units whose components cannot be varied or vary only within definite limits”. Similarly, for A. Langlotz (2006, p.5), “An idiom is an institutionalized construction that is composed of two or more lexical items and has the composite structure of a phrase or semi-clause, which may feature constructional idiosyncrasy”. Langlotz further on describes the discursive functions of idiom as predominantly ideational and figurative, with limited semantic arrangement and collocational range. While acknowledging idiom definitional and classificatory disarray, A. Baranov and D. Dobrovol’skij (2008, p.28) set apart three primary characteristics of idiom: multi-word structure, frozenness, and idiomaticity. These key properties are closely bound, as a rule, with one feature gaining more occasional prominence depending on the nature of the idiom under consideration.

Broadly speaking, polylexicity and fixedness feature prominently in idiom and are less open to controversy. However, it is worth emphasizing that neither feature can stand alone and classify a set word combination as an idiom unless it integrates idiomaticity (C. Fernando, 1996, p.30; A. Langlotz, 2006, p.5; A. Baranov and D. Dobrovol’skij, 2008 p.29, 57). While idiomaticity is widely held to be a key criterion for a word combination to be considered as idiomatic, the concept appears more open to debate as compared to polylexicity and

frozenness, inasmuch as its components are multilayered and its delimitation hardly clear-cut. It has been argued by several phraseologists (A. Langlotz 2006, A. Baranov and D. Dobrovol'skij 2008, S. Jaki 2014) that the creative use of idioms with its meaning-making layers involves, by necessity, breaking down the apparent rigid semantic structure and actualizing or obliterating the figurativeness displayed by idioms. As A. Langlotz points out, this constitutes “the creative structure and the creative use of idioms” (2006, p.14).

2.2. Consulted Analysis and Authors

2.2.1. Translation strategies for idioms

To a varying extent, phraseology permeates all known human languages. This evident pervasiveness and ubiquity, repeatedly noted in literature, must not, however, obscure the important fact that lexical, syntactic patterns and pragmatic effects characterizing phraseology systems across languages are asymmetrical. This asymmetry is closely related to translating idioms, as it points to a wide range of strategies for their recreation.

The subcategory of idiom considered from the broader category of formulaic language is heterogeneous, ranging from opaque idioms, analyzable idioms, to more literal idioms, and cannot be satisfactorily translated with the help of a single all-encompassing translation strategy. Therefore, translation scholars and practitioners (J-P Vinay and J. Darbelnet 1972, Y. Retsker 1982, M. Baker 2018) suggested employing a whole range of strategies for idioms. These strategies can be categorized following the typological characteristics setting apart the idiom under consideration as opaque, analyzable, or literal.

The degree of collocational and structural restriction is widely held as a primary property of idioms. This feature points to a significant difference in idioms on a scale of greater or looser combinatorial restriction and syntactic flexibility. This largely acknowledged heterogeneity in idioms leads C. Fernando (1996) to put forth a tripartite classification: pure idioms, semi-literal idioms, and literal idioms.

(1) Pure idioms. The examples given by Fernando to illustrate this kind of idioms fall under a broad range of formulaic sequences. These include idiom proper, proverbs, collocations, clichés, phatic expressions. Some illustrative examples are: while the cat is away, the coast is clear, red herring, as good as gold, that is a good question, a war of attrition, guess what?

These examples clearly show how C. Fernando (1996, p.32) stretches the concept of idiom too far to include compounds, collocations, proverbs and sayings, similes, phatic expressions. This overstretching has the severe limitation of lumping into the same group linguistic constructions of different configuration on account of non-literal meaning only. The narrower delimitation of idioms, as noted earlier, based on their internal structure and nominative function has the advantage of setting clear criteria for idiom delineation from other borderline formulaic elements.

(2) Semi-literal idioms. For C. Fernando (1996, p.36), this kind of idioms includes “one or more literal constituents and at least one with a non-literal subsense, usually special to that co-occurrence relation and no other”. Examples include: drop names, catch one’s breath, foot the bill.

In agreement with the definition of idiom provided by C. Langlotz (2006, p.5) and phraseologism proposed by S. Gries (2008, p.35), semi-literal idiom can be defined as a word combination with a partial or full transferred meaning, functioning as part of a clause or sentence.

(3) Literal idioms. This set of idioms is illustrated by C. Fernando (1996, p.32) with the help of the following examples: On foot, one day; in sum; in the meantime; on the contrary; arm in arm; very important person; potato crisps; happy new year, etc. Again, these examples lump together significantly different combinatorial patterns with ill-defined boundaries. In two ways, sentence-like sequences such as that is a good question and guess what? classified as pure idioms cannot be, lexically and semantically, distinguished from one day, in sum, classified as literal idioms.

2.2.2. Polysemy and flexibility in idioms

Like many phraseologists before, C. Fernando (1996, pp.36-37) acknowledged the difficulty in setting up a clear-cut delineation between pure idioms, semi-idioms, and literal idioms on the one hand, and collocations and idioms (restricted and unrestricted), on the other hand. These linguistic constructions appear to be overlapping, sharing several features. Moreover, difficulty in recognizing and understanding transparent, analyzable, idioms may not be as straightforward as it looks at first glance. This increased difficulty arises from the polysemy and creative

flexibility displayed by this subtype of idiom. Therefore, following numerous phraseologists and translation scholars, M. Baker (2018, p.72) observed that polysemy features in the overwhelming majority of idioms across languages. Polysemy presents difficulty in understanding and recreating, and the derived translation can hardly cover the whole literal and figurative range of meaning ascribed to the source text idiom (2018, p.267). The interplay between literal and figurative meaning can be accounted for by the development of meaning-making as a whole, moving from concrete to abstract through polysemy or modulation.

In a revised and enlarged edition of her original book (1992) M. Baker (2018) took into account developments fostered by languages being brought into closer contact by globalization. From four (4) initial strategies proposed more than two decades earlier, the translation scholar expanded the strategies to 6, fine-tuning the terminology used for the translation strategies and delimiting them more clearly: (1) using an idiom of similar meaning and form, (2) Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form, (3) borrowing the source language idiom, (4) translation by paraphrase, (5) translation by omission of a play on idiom, (6) translation by omission of entire idiom (pp.77-91).

It falls beyond the scope of this study to provide a detailed account of all the six strategies. Therefore, close attention will be paid to (3) borrowing the source language idiom and (5) translation by omission of a play on idiom. Emphasis is laid on these two strategies, insomuch as they relate to literalness and creative manipulation in idiom use and translation.

Typically, translators have recourse to borrowing for filling lexical gap relating to cultural attainment, technological advances, social practices and norms. In addition, translators may resort to loans in order to add local flavor to the translated text. The gap to be filled may come in the form of single lexical items or formulaic sequences such as idioms and catchy phrases (J-P Vinay and J. Darbelnet 1972, P. Newmark 1991, M. Baker 2018).

For M. Baker (2018, p.80), borrowing the source language idiom is a complementary strategy for dealing with idioms. There is, however, a long-standing practice for languages to lend and borrow back idioms and fixed expressions. The example of source-text idiom borrowing given by M. Baker, 'Out of This World' (p.80), is unidirectional, from English to a range of languages, and is limited to promotional material. Unidirectionality and text type point to the prestige

attached to the source language, English. P. Newmark (1991, p.80) and A. Pym (2016, p.244) emphasized the enriching role played by translation through linguistic transfer of formulaic elements such as idioms and fixed expressions. In their view, linguistic transfer occurs through calquing lexical and grammatical forms of the source-language items. More importantly, the novelty in borrowing and calquing the source language idioms lies in the literal translation of the borrowed idioms. As a result, the target language equivalent idiom and its calque from translation tend to coexist despite strenuous condemnations from purists (J-P Vinay and J. Darbelnet 1972, J. Delisle 2013). A case idiom in point is double standard currently being translated as ‘double standard’, while the ready-made French translation equivalent ‘deux poids deux mesures’ is increasingly pushed on the sidelines.

Frozensness widely held as a primary feature of idioms does not preclude the latitude for language speakers to use idioms creatively (A. Abeillé 1995, A. Langlotz 2006, S. Jaki 2014). For achieving stylistic effects such as joke, humor, sarcasm, or pun, a language user can make a play on a constituent participating in the entire idiom through actualization of the literal or figurative meaning, or even through lexical substitution. M. Baker (2018, pp.72, 85) rightly observed that this wordplay can prove difficult to reproduce in other languages. Accordingly, the translator may decide to sacrifice the wordplay and retain only the factual information contained in the original idiom. The original text undergoes transformations to suit the target language-culture communicative situation. Subsequently, pragmatic elements in the original should remain unchanged if the translation is to meet the criteria of genuine translation, as opposed to other kinds of interlingual communication (J. House, 2016, p.15). Pragmatically determined transformations are most appropriate for dealing with idioms, for syntactic and semantic patterns are changed; still, the communicative effect is achieved through different means. As has been noted earlier, these modifications are commonly used for achieving a broad range of stylistic effects such as humor, irony, wordplay, shared values, allusions, etc.

It has been pointed out repeatedly in scholarship that idioms cover a broad range of fixed word combinations featuring different degree of fixedness. To put another way, some idioms are more fixed, others are more flexible, allowing creative use for pursuing stylistic effects. Reflecting on the interdependence of semantic and syntactic flexibility at play in French idioms A. Abeillé (1995, p. 23) asserts, “the syntactic flexibility of an idiom may be predicted on

semantic grounds: the more the idiomatic meaning can be decomposed, the more flexible the idiom is”.

3. Methodological design and implementation

3.1. Research participants

The study is designed and conducted as a qualitative comparative enquiry among a group of 18 student translators in the final year of their two-year program toward a Master’s degree in translation. The participants came from backgrounds related to languages and linguistics. The target population was a mix of university graduates and in-service English language teachers, who entered the program to advance their academic career in a specialized field. A handful of institutional translators and on-the-job translators were part of the group as well. Prior to entering the program the student translators had no prior formal training in translation. At undergraduate level, however, they were introduced to translation for acquiring higher proficiency in English as a foreign language.

3.2. Data collection and presentation

The translation text was a full-length page containing 490 words and was assigned as a take-home assignment purposefully targeting formulaic elements, following the theoretical input on translating elements of formulaic language taught by the researcher. The text was an authentic material extracted from M. Dee Dee (2009). Home-assigning the translation allowed ample time for students to research and work diligently on potential problem areas they could identify in the text.

A preliminary analysis of the raw data allowed to sort through a complex set of heterogenous formulaic elements; consequently, five idioms were targeted. These were subsequently assigned to two groups described as literal (1-3) and semi-literal (4-5) idioms, following the typological classification of idioms put forth by C. Fernando (1996).

Table 1: Targeted idioms

LITERAL IDIOMS	SEMI-LITERAL IDIOMS
1. and women have continued to gain ground in in virtual every imaginable area of public life	4. From the earliest days, women succeeded by adopting the rituals of men, by going native
2. The origin of this double standard isn’t much of a mystery	5. which makes it harder still for them to break out of the boxes
3. Women are caught in a double bind	

The first group of idioms (1-3) is described as semantically transparent and analyzable, insomuch as the idioms in their internal composition do not contain a word which is not present

in present-day English lexicon. Their overall meaning is fairly amenable through conceptual metaphor (comparison or metonymy). The second group of idioms (4-5) is less straightforward and presents semantic units ascribed a special meaning different from the additive meanings of their constituent words. Importantly, *go native* and *break out of these boxes* stand out as instantiations of polysemy and lexical substitution based on their interpretation of contextual cues. *Go native* conjures up meliorative connotation through contextual wordplay² while *break out of these boxes* undergoes both insertion and lexical substitution.

3.3. Data analysis procedures

Students' translation outputs were first manually retrieved and analyzed for recurring translations leading to patterns, coded into categories based on their degree of acceptability. In the next stage, the qualitative data was quantified to measure the frequency rate, the extent to which a specific translation category is evidenced. This quantitative analysis is followed by a more detailed qualitative analysis of three criteria for acceptability established for idiom occurrences. The established categories have been statistically processed for their frequency counts. On the basis of this dual qualitative analysis and quantitative frequency rating the translation sequences were allocated to the following categories of acceptability: accurate, semi-accurate, and inaccurate. SPSS computer software has been utilized for handling the quantitative data in order to count frequency rates in translation outputs. Finally, the resulting translation categories were analyzed, and interpreted in the light of the questions guiding the study.

3.4. Data analysis and interpretation

The first research question was constructed to describe patterns characterizing literal and semi-literal idioms translated by student translators. An analysis of the tabled presentation of the two groups of idioms shows statistically significant differences between literal idioms and semi-literal idioms on the one hand, and between the three categories established for translation acceptability on the other hand.

² *Go native*": to start living like local people when you are in another country. This phrase shows that you do not approve of this behaviour, or think that it is funny (Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners CD-ROM 2nd Edition. CD-ROM © Macmillan Publishers Limited 2007. Text © A&C Black Publishers Ltd 2007)

Table 1: Descriptive frequency counts for literal and semi-literal idioms

Groups of idioms	Accurate		Semi-accurate		Inaccurate		Number count	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Literal idioms	38	70.3	7	13	9	16.7	54	100
Semi-Literal idioms	4	11.1	5	13.9	27	75	36	100
Total	42	46.7	12	13.3	36	40	90	100

From the strong statistical evidence cutting across the two groups of idioms, one can see how participants score higher on translating literal idioms, with 70.3% accuracy rate. By contrast, semi-literal idioms returned an accuracy count of 11.1 % for the same category, cumulating acceptability rate at 46.7 % for the two groups. The comparative results in percentage for semi-accurate is approximately the same for the two groups of idioms, 13.0 % and 13.9 % respectively. They are, therefore, amalgamated for a detailed discussion of findings. These clearly show strong tendency for paraphrasing with a wide range of alternative translations. The category marked 'inaccurate' for the two groups of idioms, 16.7 % for literal idioms compared to 75 % for semi-literal idioms, with a cumulative percentage of inaccurate translation set very high is very indicative of idiom translation difficulties faced by the research participants.

A linguistic analysis of the targeted literal idioms shows that they have ready-made equivalents in the target language (French) and are fairly constrained in their use of variants or modifications. However, viewed from the perspective of their individual components, English idioms and their French equivalents present congruence and non-congruence in their syntactic structure and lexical elements. Double standard, for example, is typically translated as *deux poids deux mesures*, with a non-congruent *mesures* for standard.

There is strong disagreement in the literature on coining translation equivalent or borrowing source-text idiom by translators. J-P Vinay and J. Darbelnet (1972, p.52) sternly warned translators against resorting to idioms of their own coinage for the sake of equivalence through loan or calque, because readers may fail to understand their new coinages. In striking contrast, M. Baker (2018, p.80) unambiguously adopted borrowing the source-text idiom as a translation strategy. However, the only example given to illustrate the target language borrowing the source

idiom (*Out of This World*) is disappointingly unidirectional, from English into French, Italian, Spanish, German, and Japanese.

The second research question sought to compare the extent to which idiom polysemy and creative modification can increase translation difficulties experienced by student translators.

Table 2: Frequency rate for accuracy in translating semi-literal idioms

Semi-Literal idioms	Accurate		Semi-accurate		Inaccurate		Number count	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Going native	1	5.6	1	5.6	16	88.8	18	100
Break out of these boxes	3	16.7	4	22.2	11	61.1	18	100
Total	4	11.1	5	13.9	27	75	54	100

The analysis of the translation sequences is based on two semi-literal idioms: going native and break out of these boxes. These targeted idioms are characterized as metaphorical, flexible enough to allow for creative transformations. The pejorative connotation marking native is altered; as a result, the idiom gained a meliorative ring, as opposed to its dictionary meaning. The frequency counts for this idiom indicates a combined percentage of accurate and semi-accurate translations representing 11.2 %. Inaccurate translation sequences make up 88.8 %. This strong statistical evidence clearly shows that a coalesced, not distributed over many constituents, idiom posed increased translation difficulty.

A close look at Table 2 shows how lexicogrammatical substitutions in a modifiable idiom (think in the box and its variant think out of the box) is creatively used for stylistic effects. The translation outputs collected from students indicate a comparatively higher frequency rate for accuracy and semi-accuracy, 16.7 % and 22.2 % respectively. As with (1) going native, in dealing with (2) break out of these boxes, the most part of translations are inaccurate, 61.1 %. High frequency counts of inaccurate translation for the two idioms under analysis clearly show that they are not seen as metaphorical idioms with lexical modification. Failing to identify and understand the canonical form or original underlying the whole targeted idioms accounts largely for the strong rate of inaccurate translation. As has been emphasized by phraseologists (A. Langlotz 2006, S. Jaki 2014), breaking up the rigid syntactic and semantic structure opens up

space for wordplay on polysemy and lexical substitution, which translators may fail to grasp if they did not identify the canonical idiom in the first place.

3.5.Key Findings

The analysis shows two significantly different patterns in translating literal and semi-literal idioms. The overwhelming majority of student translators satisfactorily dealt with source-text literal idioms, with increasing inaccuracy rate as the English idiom in question varies markedly from a one-to-one literal lexicogrammatical equivalent in French. On the other hand, difficulties in translating semantically variable and syntactically flexible semi-literal idioms, as compared to literal idioms with overarching focus on fairly transparent idioms, are significantly higher. The interplay between polysemy and modification in the English idioms explains to a large extent the significant differences and inaccuracy evidenced in translating semi-literal idioms.

To make detailed evaluation of the difficulties evidenced from the data, it is important to keep the source text original idiom in mind. Polysemy and creative manipulation are the pivotal concepts featuring in semi-literal idiom. These interrelated features through understanding and recreation suggest the more constituents participating in a semi-literal idiom, the less the meaning from the whole idiom is lost on the research participants.

This study partially relates to A. Abeillé's work (1995) on French idiom flexibility and syntactic rules and S. Jaki's (2014) on phraseological substitution, centered on English idioms. Abeillé for French and Jaki for English point to the same conclusion that idioms are syntactically and semantically more flexible than previously acknowledged in scholarship. The literature on idiom flexibility and creative manipulation is predominantly intralingual. Proceeding from a translational perspective across English and French, this study argues that difficulties in idiom ascribed lexicogrammatical transformations for achieving stylistic effects are closely bound with the number of constituents participating in the idiom and are less challenging than shorter, fused idioms.

4. Conclusion

The study shows strong variance in literal and semi-literal translation patterns. The interplay of literalness, polysemy, and lexicogrammatical variability in English idioms has shown that literal idioms with transparent meaning pose no particular difficulty. By stark contrast, semi-literal idioms, with a partial transfer of meaning and lexical substitution are particularly challenging. While there is general agreement among researchers that flexible idioms, as a result of lexicogrammatical transformations for stylistic effects, can be difficult to identify and recreate in the target language, the findings derived from the study revealed that shorter, fused semi-literal idioms pose more difficulty. The subset of idioms lending themselves to creative manipulation, on account of the actualization of their components, is more open to lexicogrammatical transformations and creative use of individual components or the whole idiom. Overall, the findings may help understand how idioms can be conceptualized and translated.

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