

Strategies Employed in Translation of Idioms in English Subtitles of Two Persian Television Series

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Received: 10 February, 2011

Accepted: 15 November, 2011

Abstract

Translation of idioms seems to be complicated for most translators since the meaning of idioms is difficult and sometimes impossible to be deduced from the meaning of their individual components. Considering the difficulties of translation of idioms and also the specific constraints of subtitling such as space and time limits, this research studied the strategies employed in translation of idioms in English subtitles of two Persian television series: Madâr-e Sefr Daraje ‘*Zero Point Orbit*’ and Shab-e-Dahom ‘*The Tenth Night*’ both directed by Hassan Fathi. A total of 50 idioms from each of these films were analyzed based on the strategies suggested by Baker (1992) for translating idioms. The frequency and percentage of strategies applied were calculated and the results indicated that the strategy of paraphrase was the most frequently used strategy in translation of idioms by 72% of the total occurrence. 8% of idioms were omitted totally, and the strategy of using an idiom of similar meaning and form was not employed at all. Therefore, it can be suggested that the idiomaticity of the SL was avoided by translators as they paraphrased or omitted SL idioms instead of using equivalent idioms in the TL. 13% of idioms were translated by using an idiom of similar meaning with dissimilar form. 5% of idioms were translated by using false form of target language idioms and 2% of idioms were translated in false way.

Keywords: Translation, Idioms, Subtitling

Introduction

There is always interaction between language and culture and they are considered inseparable notions. Translators face different cultures during the process of translation and they have to do their best in order to convey the implicit cultural aspects of the source text. In this regard, translation of idioms which are culture specific items is one of the most challenging tasks for translators. Since idioms are deeply rooted in the SL culture and their meaning and form may change in the process of translation from one language to another, translators should exercise care in handling such cultural items.

Idioms are natural and important part of every

language and we hardly ever notice the extent to which we use them in our everyday discourse. Baker (1992, p. 63) defined idioms as “frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and often carry meanings that cannot be deduced from their individual components.” Since words do not appear in their actual meaning and do not follow the same grammatical rules in idioms, it is difficult or sometimes impossible to find their equivalence by checking the meaning of each individual word in the dictionary. Translation of idioms becomes even more difficult in subtitling which is “transcription of a movie or TV dialogue in the same or different language, presented simultaneously on the screen at the bottom” (Cintas, 2008, p.7).

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In subtitling, which is a specific form of translation, some constraints have to be taken into consideration like limited space and synchronization with the image, etc. Considering different constraints of subtitling and difficulties of idiomatic translation, this study provided the answer to the following questions:

1. What strategies were employed in translating idioms in English subtitles of two Persian TV series Madar-e Seft Daraje 'Zero Point Orbit') and Shab-e-Dahom 'The Tenth Night')?
2. Which translation strategy was more frequently used in the translation of idioms in English subtitles of the two aforementioned Persian TV series?

Subtitles

"subtitles sometimes referred to as captions, are transcriptions of a movie or TV dialogue in the same or different language, presented simultaneously on the screen at the bottom" Cintas (2008, p.7). Subtitles should be placed at the bottom of the screen in order to not interrupt the image action. The only case when the subtitle can change its position is when something important is shown in the part of the screen where subtitles are inserted. Moreover, subtitles are two lines, at a maximum, otherwise the subtitles would cover too much of the screen, which would be very disturbing. Furthermore, three lines would be difficult to read in the short time available. The majority of sources state that there should be maximally 35 to 40 characters in each line.

Hatim and Munday (2000) explained some constraints of subtitling and stated that there is a shift in mode from speech to writing and as a result of this shift, some features of speech such as non standard dialect, intonation, style shifting and turn taking could not be represented in written mode. Moreover, there is a physical constraint of available space in subtitling. Usually there should be up to 33 or in some cases 40 keyboard spaces per line, and no more than two lines on screen should exist. As a result of these constraints, there is reduction of source text in subtitles and it should be mentioned that the normal redundancies of speech gives people more chance of picking up intended meaning. In subtitling, the redundancy is inevitably reduced so chances of retrieving lost meaning are fewer. Furthermore, there should be Coherence between the subtitled text and the moving image, so matching the sub-

titles to what is actually visible on screen may create an additional constraint.

Idioms and Their characteristics

Idioms enrich the language and produce a strong impression on people, so communication can be more effective when they are used. As it was mentioned by Larson (1984) idioms often carry certain emotive connotations. For example, in English, the idiom *kick the bucket* has the same meaning as *die*, but it shows a certain lack of respect. So idioms and their effect could not be ignored or omitted in translation.

According to Crystal (1980, p.179) idioms are sequence of words which function as a single unit and they are "semantically and often syntactically restricted. From a semantic viewpoint, the meaning of the individual words cannot be summed to produce the meaning of idiomatic expression as a whole. From a syntactic viewpoint, the words often do not permit the usual variability they display in other contexts, e.g., 'it is raining cats and dogs' does not permit it is raining a cat and dog/dogs and cats." This restriction is also explained by Baker (1992, p.63) where she stated "an idiom allows no variation in form under normal circumstances unless one is consciously making a joke or attempting a play on words." She further explained that a speaker or writer cannot normally do any of the following with an idiom: Change the order of the words in it or the grammatical structure of it, Delete a word from it or add a word to it, Replace a word with another.

Different characteristics have been mentioned for idioms by different scholars and various approaches exist. Some common characteristics of idioms are mentioned here: *Compositeness* is one of the characteristics of idioms which indicates that idioms are multiword expressions which function just like single-word expressions. Beekman and Callow (1974, cited in Mollanazar, 2001, p.49) defined idioms as "expressions of at least two words which cannot be understood literally and which function as a unit semantically."

Semantic opacity or *non-literality* can be considered as another feature of idioms. Semantic opacity means that idioms are often nonliteral, that is why their meaning cannot be deducted from the meanings of the individual words of them. Makkai (1972, p. 118) mentioned that "the meaning of an idiom is not predictable from its component parts, because they are used in a figurative, non-literal sense."

Some scholars considered *lexical fixity* or *lexical integrity* as an essential feature of idioms. Most of the idioms have fixed form and the order of words in idioms and their grammatical structure cannot be changed and also their words cannot be added or omitted or replaced by other words. It should be noted that some idioms sometimes allow variation to some extent but the degree of this variation depends on the idiom in question. Some idioms do not allow even the simplest variations, whereas others may freely allow the possibility of some changes. It should be considered that the vast majority of idioms are invariable.

Ambiguity or *disinformation potential* is another characteristic of idioms. According to Weinreich (1969, p.44) "This ambiguity arises from the fact that the constituents of an idiom have literal equivalents in other contexts." But contextualization minimizes the possibility of disinformation potential.

Translation of Idioms

Various ways were suggested for translation of idioms among which Baker's (1992) strategies seems more comprehensive and applicable. There are mentioned in the following:

1) Using an idiom of similar meaning and form: this strategy involves using an idiom in the target language which conveys roughly the same meaning as that of the source language idiom and, in addition, consists of equivalent lexical items. This kind of match can only occasionally be achieved.

2) Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form: it is finding an idiom or fixed expression in the target language which has a meaning similar to that of the source idiom or expression, but which consists of different lexical items.

3) Translation by paraphrase: This is by far the most common way of translating idioms when a match cannot be found in the target language or when it seems inappropriate to use idiomatic language in the target text because of differences in stylistic preferences of the source and target languages.

4) Translation by omission: an idiom may sometimes be omitted altogether in the target text and This omission may be because it has no close match in the target language, its meaning cannot be easily paraphrased, or for stylistic reasons.

5) Compensation: this means that one may either omit or play down a feature such as idiomaticity at the point where it occurs in the source text and introduce it elsewhere in the target text. This strategy is not restricted to idiomaticity or fixed expressions and may be used to make up for any loss of meaning, emotional force, or stylistic effect which may not be possible to reproduce directly at a given point in the target text.

Method

Corpus

This study was conducted to find the frequent strategies employed in translation of idioms in English subtitles of two Persian TV series: *Tenth Night* (Shab-e-Dahom) and *Zero Point Orbit* (Madar-e Sefr Darajeh), both written and directed by Hassan Fathi. *Tenth Night* was produced in 2001 and *Zero Point orbit* was a production of 2006. These TV series were subtitled and released by Soroush Company. 50 idioms of each TV series were selected by minutes of footage and studied to find out their prevailing translation strategies.

Design

The present research was a corpus-based study with a descriptive approach to the analysis of the strategies employed in translation of idioms in subtitling of two Persian television series: *Zero Point Orbit* (Madar-e Sefr Darajeh) and *Tenth Night* (Shab-e-Dahom).

Theoretical Framework

Among different available models for translation of idioms, the researcher employed Baker's (1992) strategies for the analysis of the aforementioned corpus. There are five main strategies for translation of idioms according to Baker (1992): Using an idiom of similar meaning and form, using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form, paraphrase, omission and Compensation. The focus of this study was on the Persian idioms of the dialogue of the two mentioned television series and their subtitled translation in order to find their translation strategy. It should be noted that the compensation strategy was not covered in this study since the focus of researcher should be initially on the subtitles instead of the dialogue to see where an English idiom is used in English subtitles and originally in Persian dialogue a non-idiom exists as its match. Since the process for

investigation of compensation is quite the reverse of what is needed for the other strategies, it was not studied here.

Procedure

In order to provide the answer to the research questions, two Persian TV series: *Tenth Night* (Shab-e Dahom) and *Zero Point Orbit* (Madar-e Seft Darajeh) were watched carefully and their idioms were detected. A separate list for idioms of each TV series was procured and then 50 idioms were selected randomly from each of them. Persian idioms of the dialogue and their translations were compared in order to find the strategy of their translation. As it was mentioned before, they were analyzed according to Baker's (1992) suggested strategies for translation of idioms. The data gathered from the selected TV series were tabulated. Persian idioms, their meaning in context, their translation and their translation strategies were outlined in separate tables for each TV series. It should also be noted that except from 4 strategies which were introduced by Baker (1992), two other cases have been observed in translation of idioms of the aforementioned corpus. Although some idioms were translated into an idiom in the TL, the translator used a false form of that idiom. These items were labeled "false form of TL idiom" in the translation strategy column of the table. Moreover, some SL idioms were translated into an idiom with a dissimilar meaning. These instances were labeled as "False translation". The frequency and percentage of strategies applied for each television series were calculated and also the overall frequency and percentage of each strategy were displayed in a table. The data have been illustrated in charts and diagrams.

Some examples:

"خون کسی را به جوش آوردن" means making someone very angry, this idiom can be translated into "to make someone's blood boil". These idioms are similar in meaning and form. They consist of equivalent lexical items such as blood and boil.

"موی دماغ کسی بودن" was translated as "to be a pain in the neck for someone". The meaning of these two idioms is the same but they consist of different lexical items. Both of these idioms mean a person who is very annoying but nose and neck are different body organs. Here the strategy of using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form was used by the translator.

"عصای دست کسی بودن" was translated as "to help

someone". Here the source language idiom was paraphrased and the meaning was conveyed with a non-idiom.

"باسلام و صلوات کسی را راهی خانه کردن" means to send someone home respectfully but the English idiom "with flying colours" means with great success. They don't have the same meaning in context and the translation could be considered a false translation. Another example of false translation could be: "خون کسی را به جوش آوردن" which means to make someone very angry but it was translated to "take it too far" which means to continue doing something beyond reasonable limit and to behave in an extreme way that is not accepted, so it seems that this English idiom is an equivalent to "شورش را در آوردن" and not "خون کسی را به جوش آوردن".

"سفره دل پیش کسی باز کردن" means to reveal one's thoughts and feelings to someone, and the English idiom "open your heart to someone" means to tell someone about your problems and secrets and to reveal your inmost thoughts to someone. These are idioms of similar meaning but dissimilar form. It should be mentioned that Persian idiom was translated to "to split her heart open to" which is a false form of TL idiom "open your heart to someone".

Results

Based on the collected data, this study has come to the following results:

1. The strategy of using an idiom of similar meaning and form, introduced by Baker (1992) was not used at all in the translation of the idioms of these two Television series.
2. The most frequent strategy employed in translation of idioms in English subtitles of two Persian TV series: *Zero Point Orbit* (Madar-e Seft Darajeh) and *Tenth Night* (Shab-e Dahom) was the paraphrase strategy with 72% of the total occurrences.
3. Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form was the second strategy that was used. Totally 13% of idioms were translated by this strategy.
4. 8% of idioms were omitted totally in English subtitles.
5. Totally 5% of idioms were translated by using false form of TL idiom.
6. Two cases of false translation were observed in translation of idioms of the two mentioned Persian television series. In those cases, the meanings of SL and TL idioms were not the same.

Table 1:
Translation Strategies Used in Two TV Series

| Name of TV Series: | Zero Point Orbit | Tenth Night | Total |
|--|------------------|-------------|-------|
| Translation Strategy | | | |
| Idiom of similar meaning and form | Frequency | 0 | 0 |
| | Percentage | 0% | 0% |
| Idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form | Frequency | 6 | 13 |
| | Percentage | 12% | 13% |
| Paraphrase | Frequency | 39 | 72 |
| | Percentage | 78% | 72% |
| Omission | Frequency | 3 | 8 |
| | Percentage | 6% | 8% |
| False form of TL idiom | Frequency | 1 | 5 |
| | Percentage | 2% | 5% |
| False Translation | Frequency | 1 | 2 |
| | Percentage | 2% | 2% |

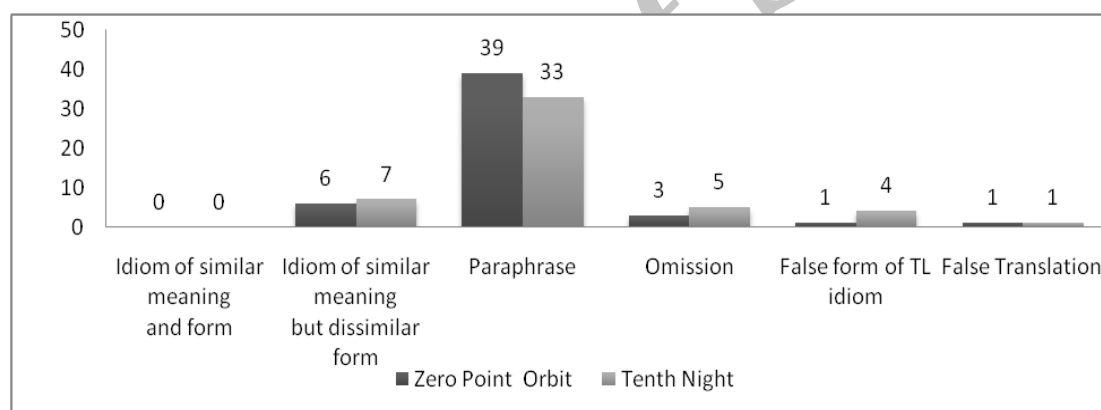


Figure 1 Translation Strategies Used in Two TV Series

Conclusion

It can be suggested that in Audiovisual translation, In order for the rendition to come out as a wholesome product, a kind of team translation is suggested where the translator takes care of the mechanics of the text and the co-translator arises from another discipline such as performing arts, sociology or psychology who can analyze the text from perspectives other than linguistics.

The results of this study revealed that 72% of the total idioms were paraphrased and 8% of idioms were omitted in the English subtitles of television series under the investigation, so it can be suggested that the idiomaticity of the spoken discourse which is so commonly used in screenplays is avoided by the translator using paraphrasing and omission instead of equivalent idioms in the TL. Moreover, it should be noted that translators

should be familiar with the use of idioms in the receptor language and use them to keep the style of the source text and produce the same effect on the TT reader. Since only 13% of total idioms were translated into idioms of similar meaning but dissimilar form and 80% of idioms were paraphrased and omitted, the TT cannot produce the same effect on the receptor as that of the ST.

It should be considered that idioms have fixed patterns and allow little or no variation in form. A translator cannot add or delete any of their words and also change their order of words or grammatical structure. In this study 5% of the total idioms were translated to false form of TL idiom. Such errors can be easily avoided by checking the form of TL idiom in the available dictionaries. In addition; totally there were two cases of false translation of idioms. This can be

due to misunderstanding of the meaning of SL or TL idioms by the translator and it can be avoided by paying attention to the collocational environment of idioms or the context in which idioms occur and also checking the exact meaning of the TL idiom in dictionaries. An ideal idiomatic translation can also summon the help of a native speaker who has a better command of his/her own language than the translator to make known the real sense and feeling of the idiomatic utterances.

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