

LOST IN TRANSLATION: THE CHALLENGE OF IDIOMS AND CULTURAL
REFERENCES

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Abstract. This article examines some challenges that translators may encounter while translating sentences or words related to the culture or some idioms and phrases. This article shows the reasons why the original meaning of idioms is lost in the translation process and how to translate them correctly.

Key words. Idioms, language, culture, lexical inconsistency, difficulty.

Introduction. Language is not just a collection of words or a system consisting of grammatical rules, but it is a bridge that transmits the culture and rich history of each people and nation to generations, as well as the only way to express life experiences and, feelings and thoughts. Phrases, expressions, words related to culture are probably one of the most problematic situations that a translator may encounter.

Discussion. The main reason for this is the lack of a suitable and alternative translation option between languages.[1] There are some concepts that cannot be expressed in one word, for example, the Uzbek word “**mehribonlik**” is difficult to express with the English word “**kindness**”. At the heart of this word lies the hospitality of the entire population, concern for the pain of others and special care. Another example of this is “**gap-so'z**”. This is not just a simple communication between people, but also expresses both positive and negative views or criticism that can affect society and people's lives. Along with this, the English language also has its own words that cannot be expressed in one word. For example, it is difficult to find an equivalent in Uzbek for the word “**serendipity**” - a word that means suddenly finding something valuable. Also, “**Wanderlust**”, which in Western romanticism means travel and related issues, cannot be translated accurately not only in Uzbek, but also in many other languages. In addition to these words, each language has its own expressions that are real puzzles for the translator. Their meaning cannot be directly deduced. The English expression “**it's raining cats and dogs**” does not mean that real animals are falling from the sky. But how can this be conveyed to an Uzbek speaker? The Uzbek phrase “**qo'li ochiq**” literally means “open hand,” but it also describes a generous person. A direct translation into English would lose the rhyme and imagery of the Uzbek phrase. In contrast, the English phrase “**break a leg**” when translated literally into Uzbek would mean “**oyoqni sindirish**,” which sounds strange, even malicious. In fact, the phrase has a deeper meaning of “good luck.” The Uzbek phrase “**non-tuzini yemoq**” translates to “**to eat bread and salt**,” but it also means to eat together and develop close friendships. This idiom is based on a Central Asian tradition, in which bread and salt symbolize hospitality and sacred bonds between people. There is no English equivalent to

this cultural tradition. Translating Uzbek cultural expressions into English poses a number of linguistic, cultural, and practical challenges. These challenges stem from the specific characteristics of the expressions, The difference between Uzbek and English cultures stems from lexical incompatibility and the risk of losing contextual meaning.[2]

Lexical inconsistencies. The lack of direct English equivalents for many Uzbek cultural expressions and proverbs leads to the problem of lexical inconsistency. Uzbek proverbs often have figurative and symbolic meanings that are deeply connected to the specific socio-historical context of Uzbek society. For example, the proverb “**Ikki kemani boshini tutgan cho’kadi**” in Uzbek means that it is impossible to do two important things at the same time. While an English expression such as “You cannot play two balls at the same time” may be used, it does not fully capture the practical wisdom and cultural context of the Uzbek proverb. Another example, “**Olov bilan o’ynashma**” is directly translated into English as “Don’t play with fire,” but the sense of caution and responsibility inherent in the Uzbek language is not fully reflected. Such lexical inconsistencies increase the risk of misinterpretation or loss of the original effect of the phrase during translation.

Cultural differences. Words that belong to our culture further complicate the process. The Uzbek concept of “**gap**” has a much broader meaning than the simple “**talk**” or “**gossip**” in English. It includes the entire social institution of neighborhood gatherings, public discussions, and informal networks where information and social norms are transmitted. Translating it simply as “gossip” or “talk” loses its cultural quality. In English, someone might refer to Joseph Heller’s novel and say that there is a “Catch-22 situation.” But this information is meaningless to someone unfamiliar with American literature and World War II. Similarly, when Uzbeks say “ko’rpachaga o’tiring” (a traditional Uzbek mat), they are referring to an entire cultural context of informal intimate gatherings that have no parallel in Western culture. The word “**mahalla**” is particularly interesting. Although often translated as “**neighborhood**,” it actually describes a self-governing residential community, unique to Central Asia, with its own social obligations, collective decision-making, and traditional leadership. No English word can capture this institutional and social complexity. Additionally, Uzbek proverbs often have rhythmic and poetic structures that are almost impossible to reproduce in English. As a result of these stylistic changes, translations often lose the aesthetic and emotional impact of the original Uzbek expressions.

The difficulties that a translator faces in translating, especially when changing idioms from one language to another, can be overcome by the following factors: 1) the correct use of translation techniques 2) taking into account the function of the context. Idioms are expressions consisting of at least two words that cannot be understood literally and that function as a semantic unit. [3] Idioms are frozen patterns of language that allow little or no variation in form, and idioms often have meanings that cannot be extracted from their individual components. Despite recent developments in translation theory, serious questions arise about how idiomatic expressions can be translated, what difficulties the translator faces, and what solutions should be used to overcome these difficulties. As Baker (2018) notes, idioms “carry implied meanings that cannot be understood from the individual components of the expression,” making literal translation misleading. For example, translating the English idiom “kick the bucket” literally into another language would fail to convey its figurative meaning — “to die.” Similarly, Newmark (1988) emphasizes that cultural references such as foods, festivals, or historical figures create additional barriers, because translators must not only render linguistic content but also bridge

cultural context. Nida (2000) further argues that successful translation requires "dynamic equivalence," where the translator aims to evoke the same response in the target audience rather than preserve the exact wording. These challenges demonstrate why idioms and cultural references often get "lost in translation," highlighting the need for translators to balance fidelity to the original text with cultural adaptation. The actual problem of translating idiomatic expressions is that their idiomatic quality is not always found as an equivalent in the language. Modern translation technology struggles with these nuances more than human translators. Machine translation can handle direct equivalents well, but idiomatic expressions and cultural references often produce funny word-for-word results. AI can correctly translate the word "ko'ngli sinmoq" (to break the heart) into English, but in Uzbek, the expression is usually used for a less serious injury than its English equivalent. Ultimately, translators must recognize that perfect translations of idioms and cultural references are often impossible. Every choice involves a trade-off. Should one preserve the metaphor when translating the word "boshi qattiq" (hard head) to describe stubbornness, or should one use the English word "stubborn as a mule," which completely changes the image? Neither choice is perfect; both involve some loss. The translator must either preserve the foreignness in the language to help readers feel the unique perspective of another culture, or localize the text to make it feel natural.

Conclusion. The difficulties in translating idiomatic expressions and cultural references are a reminder that languages are not neutral systems for encoding information. They are cultural artifacts shaped by history, geography, social structures, and collective experiences. Words like "mahalla," "gap-so'z," "hashar" in Uzbek, or "serendipity," "wanderlust," and "privacy" in English, carry a very broad meaning that defies simple translation. These untranslated passages do not reveal the shortcomings of language, but rather its richness. They show us how different cultures have developed their own unique ways of understanding and expressing human experience. The task of the translator, then, is not only linguistic but also cultural: to build bridges between different ways of seeing the world, knowing that some meaning is always lost in the intersection, but also hoping to gain something valuable.

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