

EQUIVALENCE AND TRANSLATABILITY OF ENGLISH AND ARABIC IDIOMS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Despite recent developments in the field of translation theory and application, idiomatic expressions still pose a serious challenge for translators and foreign teachers. The present paper proposes a general theoretical framework or model for dealing with the various problematic aspects of idioms in translation. It provides an operational definition of idioms, investigates their types and context of occurrence, and discusses constraints they impose on the translation process with special reference to Arabic and English. It then proposes a model of how different types of idioms may be transferred from source language into target language.

II. DEFINITION AND TYPES OF IDIOMS

In *A First Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, Crystal defines idiom as:

"A term used in GRAMMAR and LEXICOLOGY to refer to a SEQUENCE of WORDS which is SEMANTICALLY and often SYNTACTICALLY restricted, so that they function as a single UNIT. From a semantic viewpoint, the MEANING of the individual words cannot be summed to produce the meaning of the 'idiomatic' expression as a whole. From a syntactic viewpoint, the words often do not permit the usual variability they display in other CONTEXT, e.g. it's raining cats and dogs does not permit *it's raining a cat and a dog/dogs and cats, etc. (Crystal (1980:179); also see Bolinger (1975:99-107); Duff (1981:89-92); Faser (1976:103); Lyons (1969:177-78); and Kane (1983:366)).

Notice, for example, that the idiom "to run oneself out" means to be completely exhausted, which is not the sum of the meaning of the verb to "run" and the adverbial particle "out". Nor is the meaning of the idiom "with one's back to the wall" the same as the total meaning of the six words comprising it. Furthermore, observe that one can "go against the grain", but cannot go against the seed or the grains, nor can the grain be gone against by somebody. Also observe that we can say "the child

is running a temperature" but cannot say *a temperature is being run by the child. We can certainly ask somebody to "cough up" his/her savings but under no circumstances can we ask people to sneeze their savings. What has been said about English idioms also applies to Arabic idioms. The Arabic idiom "yadāka awkata wa-fūka nafax", means "you are to blame" although the total meaning of the individual words comprising it adds up to "your two hands tied and your mouth blew". *ʿāda bixuffay Hunain* is another Arabic idiom which means "he returned empty-handed" although the total meaning of its three words is "he returned with the slippers of Hunain". Also observe that we cannot substitute *waṣal* (he arrived) or *sāra* (he walked) for *ʿāda* and still have an idiom.

English idioms can be lexemic, phraseological, and proverbial as in "hammer and tongs", "to fly off the handle", and "don't wash your dirty linen in public" respectively (Boatner and Gates 1975:V-VI). Furthermore, lexemic idioms can be verbal (verb + particle combination), nominal, adjectival, and adverbial as in "break in", "hot dog", "pepper and salt" (in "his hair is pepper and salt"), and "hammer and tongs" (in "she ran after him hammer and tongs") respectively (Boatner and Gates 1975:IV-VI).

Arabic idioms can also be lexemic, phraseological and proverbial as in "šahm wanār" (fat and fire (complete opposites)), "ʿala ʿēni/rāsi" (on my eye/head (with pleasure)), and "man sāra ʿala al-darbi waṣal" (he who walks on the road will get there, (he who takes the first step will eventually achieve his aims)). Arabic lexemic idioms can also be verbal, nominal, adjectival, and adverbial. However, Arabic verbal lexemic idioms do not occur with particles. The Arabic equivalent for "he broke into the house" is "iʿqtahama al-bayta" or "daxala albayta ʿunwatan", which means he entered the house by force. It is to be observed here that "iʿqtaham" means "daxala ʿunwatan". Thus Arabic verbal lexemic idioms are made up of either the verb alone or the verb followed by an adverbial nominal.

III. DIFFICULTIES WITH TRANSLATING IDIOMS

One major area of difficulty with regard to translating idioms is misinterpreting the intention of the original writer or speaker. In Arabic, "fataha al-bāba" may have both a literal and an idiomatic/metaphorical sense. Literally, it translates into "he opened the door"; idiomatically, it translates into "he established a precedent". This also applies to "sakkara al-bāba", which means he closed the door, or he put an end to something. The Arabic idiom "ibn harām" can be used in the literal sense to mean an illegitimate son or in the metaphorical sense to mean "son of a gun", which is a compliment.

Cultural differences among languages comprise another area of great difficulty for translators and interpreters with regard to both traditional and innovating idioms. The English idiom "a fox is not taken in the same snare twice" is equivalent to the Arabic idiom "la yuldayu al-muʾminu min juhrin wāhidin maratayn", the English translation of which is "A good believer will not be stung from within the same hole twice". In English, people "look a gift horse in the mouth"; in Arabic a person can be "šahhād umiṣarriṭ", which is also the equivalent of English "beggars and

choosers". When an Englishman dies we say "he kicked the bucket", but if an Arab dies we say "sallama al-amanata" i.e. he handed over/delivered what he was entrusted with, which is a reference to the soul leaving the body. The Arabic idiom "θulθēn al-walad laxala", which can be translated into English as "two thirds of the body's traits can be ascribed to his mother's brother", does not have a corresponding idiom in English. The best we can do is to say that he takes after his uncle. What this means is that for a translator or an interpreter to produce a translation that is true to the original he must be at home with both cultures and both languages.

Without a thorough knowledge of both cultures the translator or interpreter will be at a complete loss to translate idioms which carry a heavy semantic load that is culture specific. The Arabic idiom "yujidu alḥazza wayusibu almifsal" can be literally translated into English as "he is good at cutting, and hitting the joint", which is nonsensical to a native speaker of English. An interpreter/translator from Arabic into English can give the equivalent English idiom "he hit the nail on the head" only if he knows both the exact meaning and context in which the idiom is used.

Sometimes, when the translator/interpreter is faced with innovating or traditional idioms which are completely alien to the target language, he can only resort to explaining the cultural concept as shown in (IV.d) with regard to the concept of *jāha*, which is explained in the footnotes.

IV. CORRESPONDENCE OF IDIOMS IN SL AND TL

Idioms in SL and TL may fall within the following categories:

- a. Expressions and functions correspond in both languages (Newmark 1982:123);
- b. Functions correspond in both languages but expressions are completely different;
- c. Functions correspond but expressions differ slightly;
- d. Both expressions and functions differ and are language specific.

The above four correspondence categories allow us to make the following predictions:

- a. When expressions and functions correspond, the resulting translation will be correct and idiomatic in both languages. Assuming that the translator is a native speaker of one language and has native-like competence in the other, he should encounter no serious difficulties in rendering any such SL idioms into the corresponding TL ones as shown in the following examples:¹

¹ Most English Idioms given in this paper are taken from Boatner and Gates' *A Dictionary of American Idioms*, Bruce Fraser's *The Verb-Particle Combination*, Hornby's *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, and Julie Howard's *Idioms in American Life*. With regard to Arabic idioms, the authors consulted Hani al-ʿamad's *al-Amthalu al-Šarabiyyatu al-Urduniyya* (Jordanian Folk Proverbs), Abu Sofa's *Al-Amthalu al-Šarabiyyatu Wamašadiruḥa fi al-Turāth* (Arab Proverbs and Their Sources in the (Arab) Heritage), Abu al-Hassan al-Wāḥidi's *Kitāb al-Waṣeet fi al-Amthal* (The Right Anthology of Proverbs), Rudolph Sellheim's *Al-Amthalu al-Šarabiyyatu al-Qadeemah* (Arabic Old Proverbs), and Hans Wehr's *A Dictionary of Modern Standard Arabic*.

A large number of Arabic idioms were also provided by a class of ten students enrolled in the M.A. in translation programme at the Language Centre of Yarmouk University.

ENGLISH IDIOMS	ARABIC IDIOMS (WITH A WORD-FOR-WORD ENGLISH TRANSLATION)
- Play with fire	yalfabu bin-nār 'he plays with the fire'
- Pull the rug out from under (a person)	yashabu as-sijādata min tahti 'he pulls the rug from under šaxsin mā a person specific'
- Put words into one's mouth	yaḍaʿu lkalimāti fi fami 'he puts the words in the mouth l-?insān of the person'
- Turn over a new leaf	yabbaʿu šafhatan jadīdah 'he starts a page new'
- Wash one's hands of	yaḡsilu yadayhi min 'he washes his hands from'
- To shed crocodile tears	yaḡrifu dumūʿa ttamāsīh 'he sheds tears of the crocodiles'
- I am all ears	kullī āḍānun (sāḡiyah) 'all of me ears listening'
- When the cat is away the mice will play	yāb ilquṭ ilʿab yā fār 'was absent the cat play mouse'
- Bury one's head in the sand	yadfinu raʿsahu fi rrimāl he burries his head in the sand'
- Curled her lips	zammāt šafatayha 'she curled her two lips'
- Go to bed with the chickens	yanāmu maʿa ššīṣān 'he sleeps with the chickens'
- Foam at the mouth	yuryī wayūzbid 'he foams and lets out froth'
- Between life and death	bayna lḡayāti walmawt 'between the life and the death'
- Beat one's head against the wall	yaḡribu raʿsahu fi lḡāʿiṭ 'he hits his head in in the wall'
- At death's door	ʿalā abwāb ilmawt 'on the doors of the death'
- At the tip of his tongue	ʿalā raʿsi lisānih 'on the tip of his tongue'
- To tell a white lie	yakḍibu kaḍibatan baiḡāʿ 'he lies a lie white'
- Save one's hide	yanjū bijildihī 'he survives with his skin'
- To hold out the olive branch	yarfaʿu yusna zzayūn 'he raises the branch of the olive (tree)'
- Walls have ears	al-judrānu lahā āḍān 'the walls for them ears'
- Got the lion's share	ḡašala ʿalā našābi lḡasad 'he got on the share of the lion'
- Love is blind	?al-ḡubbu aʿma 'the love blind'

- He pokes his nose in everything	yadussu anfahu fi kullī šayʿ 'he pokes his nose in every thing'
- He is light-handed	yaduhu xaffah 'his hand light'
- She's up to her ears	ḡiya ḡāriqatun ḡattā uḍunahḡā 'she is drowning up to her two ears'

b. When the functions correspond but the expressions are completely different, the translator's task becomes more demanding due to interference between SL and TL at the level of expression. In this case, the translator must either find the right idiom in TL, or render a translation of the meaning of the idiom as best as he can. Translating the meaning of the idiom is to be resorted to only if the translator fails to locate the corresponding idiom. The following are examples of such idioms.

ENGLISH IDIOMS	ARABIC IDIOMS (WITH A WORD-FOR-WORD ENGLISH TRANSLATION)
- Between the devil and the deep blue sea	bayna fakkay kammūšah 'between the two jaws of a pair of pincers'
- At sixes and sevens	raʿsan ʿalā ʿaqib 'head on back'
- Trade in	yuḡāyid 'to exchange something for something else'
- Waste one's breath	yudayyiʿu waqtahu 'he wastes his time'
- We behind the ears	ḡirr 'novice'
- Dry behind the ears	miḡannak 'experienced'
- Armed to the teeth	mudajajun bissilāḡ 'heavily armed with weapons'
- Like a bear with a sore head	kalafʿā almaqtūʿu ḡanabuhā 'like the snake the cut its tail'
- She's white	maktūfun lawnuhā 'taken away her color'
- He has bats in his belfry	mʿajjir ttabiq ḡḡāni (colloq) 'renting the floor the second'
- A fox is not taken in the same snare twice	lā yulḡayu lmuʿminu min 'not he stung the faithful from juḡrin wāḡidin maratayn a hole one twice'
- Once in a blue moon	maratan fi lʿumr 'once in the life span'
- Lock the barn door after the horse is stolen	sabaḡa ssayfu lʿayal 'it precededt he sword the blame'
- To lose one's tongue	yurtaju ʿalayhi 'to be closed on him (to be unable to speak)'
- Make a pass at	yuyāzil/yufākis 'he makes a pass at'

- Make hay while the sun shines	ʔiða habbat riyāhuka faytanimhā 'if it blew your winds then seize them'
- Everything comes to him who waits	As-sabru miftāhu ifaraj 'the patience (is) the key of the relief'
- If you want a thing done, do it yourself	mā hakka jildaka miḡlu ḡufrik 'neg. scratched your skin like your finger-nail'
- When in Rome do as Romans do	dārihim mā dumta fī dārihim 'treat them nicely as long as you are in their house'
- One is never too old to learn	utlub ifilma mina lmaḡdi 'seek/ask the knowledge from the cradle ilā llaḡd to the grave'
- Forbidden fruit is sweetest	kullu mamnūʔin marḡūb 'everything forbidden (is) desired'
- Diamonds cut diamonds	la yafullu lḡadida illa lḡadid 'neg. it dints the iron but the iron'
- If you are Marconi I am Einstein	in kunta riḡan faḡad lāḡayta 'if you were wind then truly you faced ʔiʔṡārā a tornado'
- on the horns of a dilemma	ʔala kaffi ifirit 'on the palm of a devil'

c. Idioms in which functions correspond but expressions differ slightly do require the translator to pay special attention to the areas of difference in expression between SL and TL. However, they are not as problematic as the idioms in (b) above where functions correspond but expressions do not. Needless to say, they are more problematic than idioms in (a) above where both functions and expressions correspond. The following are a number of examples of such idioms:

ENGLISH IDIOMS	ARABIC IDIOMS (WITH A WORD-FOR-WORD ENGLISH TRANSLATION)
- To hold the reins	yumsiku bizimāmi lʔumūr 'the holds with the reins of the things'
- He was the scape-goat	kāna kabṡa lfidāʔ 'he was the ram of the sacrifice/ransom'
- Money begets money	lmāl bijurr māl (colloq.) 'the money attracts money'
- She stoopes to conquer	ibtitmaskan ḡatta 'she feigns humility so that titmakkan (colloq.) she will establish herself/have control'
- A wolf in a sheep's skin	ḡiʔbun fī jildi ḡamal 'A wolf in the skin of a lamb'
- He is still green	mā yazālu ḡaḡḡan 'he is still brittle/soft'
- To lose one's head	yafḡidu ṡawābah 'he loses his mind'
- She was the apple of her father's eye	kānat gurrata ʔayni abīḡa 'she was the joy of eye of her father'

- He was a thorn in the flesh	kāna ṡawkatan fī lḡalḡ 'he was a thorn in the throat'
- Cannot make heads or tails of something	lā yaʔrifu raʔsahu min rijlayḡ 'neg. he knows his head from his feet'
- At one's back and call	rahna lʔiṡārah 'subject to the sign/call'
- By heart	ʔan ḡahri ḡalb 'by/on the back of a heart'
- Blood is thicker than water	iddam ma biṡir mayya (colloq.) 'the blood neg. it becomes water'
- Call a spade a spade	ḡul laliʔwar iʔwar 'say to the one-eyed person (he is) one eyed'
- The fat in the fire	wallaʔat 'it kindled, it cannot be controlled'
- Double talk	ḡadiḡ mbaḡḡan 'speech lined (with other implications)'
- Eat one's words	yashabu kalāmah 'he withdraws his speech (his words)'

d. When expressions and functions differ in both SL and TL, the translator's task becomes extremely difficult. Not only is he required to have almost complete mastery of both SL and TL linguistic system but also a deep understanding and awareness of the SL and TL culture and way of life. Without being fully immersed in both cultures, the translator is likely to find himself helpless and rendering inaccurate literal translations that are extremely difficult if not impossible to understand. The following are examples of this category of idioms:

ARABIC IDIOMS (WITH A WORD-FOR-WORD ENGLISH TRANSLATION)	ENGLISH MEANING
miḡil imm lʔarūs (colloq.) 'like the mother of the bride'	doing nothing
alḡamalu yaʔruju min ṡafatiḡi 'the camel limbs from its lip'	to suffer for the wrong reason
lbāb by šsaʔ ḡamal (colloq.) 'the door it accommodates a camel'	get lost/nobody is stopping you from leaving
infataḡla bāb ṡsama 'it opened for him the door of the sky'	fortune smiled on him
lʔaras min ilʔaris 'the mare is from the rider'	the rider/jockey is more important than the horse
kul ṡāḡ mʔallaka bʔarkū bḡa (colloq.) 'every she-goat is hung with / from its tendon'	everyone is on his own
iḡḡib ma bōkil illa lḡanam 'the wolf not it eats but the sheep ṡṡardah (colloq.) stray / untended'	a house divided against itself can't stand/disunity leads to vulnerability.
iḡḡil tūl naḡlah 'the height height of a palm tree wilʔakil ʔakil ṡaḡlah (colloq.) and the mind mind of a baby she goat'	- tall but hollow (immature)

ʕaḏḏama llāhu ajrakum
'he multiplied Allah your reward'

ʕakara llāhu safyakum
'he thanked Allah your efforts'

ijjāha lfālha finjānha
'the jāha the successful its cup
ma bubrud (colloq.)
not get cold'

xaṭiyit lwalāya
'what accrues from wronging the women'

bithid izzawāya (colloq.)
it destroys the cornerstones'

mīn šihid
'who praised/gave favorable evidence
laʕarūs? imha uxālitha
for the bride her mother and her aunt
uʕaʕarah min hāriṭha (colloq.)
and ten from her neighbourhood'

lā tōxiḏ fārah wimha
'not take a she-mouse and its mother
fil hārah
in the neighbourhood'

yilʕan sabāh abūh (colloq.)
'curse the forehead of his father'

kird yihimlak (colloq.)
'a monkey it will carry you'

taqabbal llāh
'accepted Allah'

jamal almahāmīl (colloq.)
'the camel of litters'

ʕalli ʕala nnabī
'pray (imp) on the prophet'

may Allah reward you greatly for your loss (this is what people say when offering their condolences to the family of the deceased)

may Allah reward you for your efforts (this is said by the family, and relatives of the deceased to those who have offered their condolences and are taking their leave)

the efforts of a successful jāha² are always productive

wronging women engenders havoc onto the wrongdoer

I don't believe what you are saying about him/her for there is a special relationship between the two of you, i.e. you are not a disinterested party.

do not marry a girl whose mother is still around.

let his father be damned.

get lost, beat it.

may Allah accept (your prayer / deeds)

the one we depend upon

– it can be the equivalent of anyone of the following utterances:

a– forget about it: I don't want to talk about it now,

b– don't fight among each other; be patient,

c– may the prophet bliss/grace somebody/something.

² When a man wants to get engaged to a lady, he usually arranges for a number of dignitaries to go to the lady's father's house in order to formally ask for her hand on his behalf. The delegation usually comprises the man's father, important persons from among his relatives, and important people from the local and nearby communities. These people are called a *jaha*. Once they reach their destination, they are usually received by the lady's father and his relatives. A short time after that and once the guests are seated, their host offers them coffee to drink. The guests take a cup each but do not drink the coffee. Their leader tells the lady's father that he and his colleagues will not drink the coffee unless they are granted their request, which is the host's approval that his daughter be engaged to the man on whose behalf they are acting. If the lady's father agrees to this they become happy and drink their coffee before it gets cold. If, on the other hand, their request is not granted, they don't drink the coffee which thus gets cold. *Jaha* is also resorted to in settling all sorts of disputes ranging from minor physical injuries to murder.

sawwad llah wijhak (colloq.)
'blackened Allah your face'

ana ʕībak (colloq.)
'I (am) your wolf'

ʕalā habil ṭdaka (colloq.)
'on the rope of your hand'

iḥlam ʕalay (colloq.)
'dream (imp.) on me'

wāh ad ṭabil / l'h
'one a drum board'

may Allah disgrace you for what you did

you can depend on me.

It is yours, you may have it (if you really like it). It is said to anybody who tells you how beautiful a garment you are wearing is.

please be patient.

an ignoramus/empty-headed person

ENGLISH IDIOMS

- turn in
- turn down
- take it on the chin
- talk through one's hat
- wear out one's welcome
- work one's fingers to the bone
- to get in Dutch with somebody
- he is a lady killer
- to lay somebody out in lavender (slang)
- lip service
- she looked daggers at him
- not to let grass grow under one's feet
- lose heart
- lose one's heart
- on the rocks
- pass the buck
- pour oil on troubled water

ARABIC TRANSLATION

- yaʕwi lilfirāṣ / linnawm
'go to the bed / the sleep'
- yarfud
'to refuse'
- yataqabbal alʕmra birūhin
'to accept the matter with spirit
riyādiyyah
having to do with sports'
- yatakallamu bidūn tafkīr
'to talk without thinking'
- yajʕalu nafsahu ʕayra murahhbin bihi
'he makes himself not welcome'
- yabḏulu qusāra jahdihi
'he exerts the utmost of his effort'
- yaqaʕu fī muʕkilatin maʕa ʕaxṣin ma
'he falls in trouble with a person some'
- huwa maʕbūd assayidāt
'he (is) the one worshipped by the ladies'
- yuwabbixu ʕaxṣan mā
'he rebukes a person some'
- mujarrad kalām
'no more than talking'
- jaharathu
'she looked at him very angrily'
- la yuḏīʕu lwaqta
'he does not waste the time'
- yafqidu lʕamal
'he loses the hope'
- yaqaʕu fī lḥubb
'he falls in the love'
- fī waḏʕin sayyiʕ
'in a situation bad'
- yaḏaʕu llawma ʕala lāxarīn
'he places the blame on the others'
- yaxaffu min hiddat lʕumūr
'to lessen from the sharpness of the matters'

- private eye	muxbir	sirr
	'informer	'secret'
- saw wood / gourds	yaškur	
	'to snore'	
- sow one's wild oats	yišmal	šamaylah (colloq.)
	'he does	'his deeds'
- he is pushing up the daisies	?innahu mayyit	
	'he is dead'	

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has provided a working definition for idioms, specified their types, and presented evidence to the effect that English and Arabic idioms constitute a major area of difficulty for translators and interpreters. It has also examined a large corpus of English and Arabic idioms and arrived at a theoretical framework for dealing with the translatability of idioms. According to this framework, an idiom can be assigned to one of four categories of correspondence between Arabic and English idioms. The framework also predicts degrees of difficulty of translating an idiom from one language into another. Following are the four correspondence categories in a descending order of difficulty:

- a- Idioms with no correspondence between expression and functions, i.e. expressions and functions are language specific.
- b- Idioms with corresponding functions in both languages but with completely different expressions.
- c- Idioms with corresponding functions in both languages, but with slightly different expressions.
- d- Idioms with corresponding functions and expressions in both languages.

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