

## IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN TRANSLATION: CORPUS-BASED STRATEGIES

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**Abstract:** Idiomatic expressions present persistent challenges in translation due to their non-compositional meanings, cultural specificity, and varied equivalence across languages. This corpus-based study analyzes translation strategies for idioms across 2,000 English-Spanish translated text pairs, examining how professional translators handle idiomatic language. Using computational linguistics methods combined with qualitative analysis, the research identifies seven primary translation strategies and investigates factors influencing strategy selection. Results indicate that translators prioritize communicative function over formal equivalence, with contextual factors such as text type, target audience, and idiom transparency significantly affecting strategic choices. The study develops a decision-making model for idiom translation and discusses implications for translation practice, pedagogy, and automated translation systems.

**Keywords:** idiomatic expressions, translation strategies, corpus linguistics, English-Spanish translation, phraseology, equivalence.

### Introduction

Idiomatic expressions—multi-word units whose meanings cannot be deduced from their constituent parts—constitute a ubiquitous feature of natural language and a persistent challenge in translation. Expressions such as "kick the bucket," "break the ice," or "the ball is in your court" convey meanings that transcend their literal interpretations, requiring translators to navigate complex linguistic and cultural terrain.

The translation of idioms has attracted considerable scholarly attention across various linguistic traditions. Fernando and Flavell (1981) estimated that idioms occur approximately once every 200 words in English discourse, underscoring their prevalence and importance. Despite this frequency, systematic research examining how professional translators actually handle idiomatic language in authentic translation contexts remains limited, particularly from corpus-based perspectives.

Translation Studies scholars have proposed various frameworks for classifying idiom translation strategies (Baker, 1992; Lörcher, 1991; Straksiene, 2009), yet questions persist regarding strategy selection patterns, contextual influences on translator decisions, and optimal approaches for different idiom types. This study addresses these gaps through corpus-based analysis of authentic translations, investigating both what strategies translators employ and why they make particular choices.

### Research objectives

This study pursues three primary objectives:

1. To identify and categorize translation strategies employed by professional translators when handling idiomatic expressions
2. To investigate factors influencing strategy selection, including idiom characteristics, textual context, and translation brief requirements
3. To develop an evidence-based decision-making model for idiom translation applicable to translator training and practice

Understanding idiom translation strategies has implications for multiple stakeholders. For translation practitioners, evidence-based insights can inform decision-making when confronting idiomatic challenges. For translation educators, systematic knowledge of effective strategies supports curriculum development and pedagogical approaches. For developers of machine translation systems, understanding human translation strategies can improve automated idiom handling, an area where current systems often fail. Idioms exist along a continuum of conventionality and semantic transparency. For this study, idiomatic expressions are operationally defined as multi-word units exhibiting three key characteristics:

1. **Non-compositionality:** The meaning of the whole cannot be reliably predicted from the meanings of the parts
2. **Conventionality:** The expression is a recognized unit within the language community
3. **Fixedness:** The expression demonstrates syntactic and lexical stability, though some variation may occur

This definition encompasses core idioms ("kick the bucket"), figurative idioms with some transparency ("break the ice"), and phrasal verbs with idiomatic meanings ("put up with"). It excludes collocations, proverbs, and purely compositional multi-word expressions.

Translation equivalence, particularly regarding idioms, has been theorized in multiple ways. Nida's (1964) distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence remains influential: formal equivalence prioritizes source text form and structure, while dynamic equivalence emphasizes equivalent communicative effect.

Baker (1992) discusses equivalence at multiple levels—word, phrase, grammar, text, and pragmatic—noting that idioms often require equivalence at phraseological and pragmatic levels while sacrificing word-level correspondence. Her framework recognizes that idiom translation frequently involves choosing between different equivalence types, with the optimal choice depending on translation purpose and context.

Newmark's (1988) semantic versus communicative translation dichotomy offers similar insights: semantic translation attempts to render the exact contextual meaning of the original while communicative translation seeks to produce the same effect on target language readers.

### Methodology

This study employs a corpus-based descriptive approach, analyzing authentic translations to identify actual translation strategies and patterns. The research

combines quantitative analysis of strategy frequencies with qualitative examination of contextual factors influencing strategy selection.

A specialized bilingual corpus was compiled comprising 2,000 English source texts and their Spanish translations (approximately 1.2 million words total). Texts were selected to represent diverse genres:

- Literary fiction (500 texts)
- Journalism and news (500 texts)
- Marketing and advertising (300 texts)
- Technical manuals (300 texts)
- Academic writing (200 texts)
- Subtitles and audiovisual (200 texts)

All translations were professionally produced and published, ensuring quality and authenticity. Copyright permissions were obtained for corpus use.

Idiomatic expressions were identified through a three-stage process:

1. **Automatic identification:** Computational tools (phrase extraction algorithms) identified multi-word units occurring with above-threshold frequency
2. **Dictionary verification:** Candidate idioms were cross-referenced with idiomatic dictionaries (Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms, Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms)
3. **Expert validation:** Two professional translators independently verified idiomaticity, with disagreements resolved through discussion

This process identified 4,732 idiomatic expressions in source texts (approximately 1 idiom per 250 words), consistent with Fernando and Flavell's (1981) estimates.

Strategy classification

Each idiom's translation was analyzed and classified according to an expanded strategy taxonomy developed through preliminary corpus examination and synthesis of existing frameworks:

1. **Idiomatic equivalent (same form and meaning):** Target idiom shares both semantic meaning and similar imagery/form
2. **Idiomatic equivalent (similar meaning, different form):** Target idiom conveys the same meaning but uses different imagery
3. **Literal translation:** Word-for-word or compositional translation of the idiom
4. **Explicitation:** Idiom meaning is made explicit, often through paraphrase
5. **Adaptation:** Source idiom is replaced with culturally appropriate target language expression (not necessarily idiomatic)
6. **Omission:** Idiom is not translated
7. **Compensation:** Idiomatic effect is reproduced elsewhere in the text

Two professional translators independently classified 500 randomly selected idiom translations, achieving inter-rater reliability of  $\kappa=0.84$ , indicating strong agreement. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, and classification guidelines were refined. The lead researcher then classified all remaining translations.

The most frequent strategy involved using target language idioms with similar meanings but different forms (39%), followed by explicitation through paraphrase (28%). This pattern suggests translators prioritize communicative function over

formal correspondence, opting for natural target language expression that conveys the intended meaning.

True equivalents (same form and meaning) were relatively rare (16%), reflecting the reality that cross-linguistic idiom equivalence at both semantic and formal levels is uncommon. This finding challenges notions that idiom-for-idiom replacement should be the default strategy.

Translators often faced competing demands—maintaining style while ensuring comprehension, preserving cultural elements while adapting for target audience, staying faithful to source while producing natural target text. Strategy selection reflected priority judgments based on translation brief and text function.

Successful idiom translation often involved creative solutions going beyond standard strategies, including:

- Mixing strategies (partial explicitation with idiomatic expression)
- Using footnotes or glosses for culture-specific idioms requiring preservation
- Compensation through idiomatic language elsewhere when omitting specific idioms

Translators consistently considered target audience knowledge and expectations:

- Translations for educated adults preserved more cultural references
- Translations for children adapted more extensively
- Translations for specific professional audiences (technical, academic) prioritized clarity

Translators worked to match source text register and stylistic level:

- Formal idioms translated with formal expressions
- Colloquial idioms matched with colloquial target language
- Literary idioms rendered with attention to aesthetic qualities

### **Discussion**

This corpus-based analysis reveals that professional translators employ diverse strategies when handling idiomatic expressions, with strategy selection systematically influenced by idiom characteristics, text type, and contextual factors. The predominance of different-form idiomatic equivalents and explicitation strategies suggests that translators prioritize communicative function and target language naturalness over formal correspondence with source text.

The finding that translators most frequently use functionally equivalent idioms with different forms (39%) supports functionalist translation approaches emphasizing communicative purpose over formal fidelity. Translators appear to ask "What does this idiom do in this context?" rather than "How can I reproduce this idiom's exact form?" This pragmatic orientation produces translations that function effectively in target language contexts while potentially sacrificing some source text characteristics.

This pattern aligns with Nida's (1964) dynamic equivalence and Newmark's (1988) communicative translation, suggesting these theoretical frameworks accurately describe professional translation practice. The relative rarity of same-form equivalents (16%) confirms that true cross-linguistic idiom equivalence is

uncommon and that effective translation requires flexible, context-sensitive approaches.

The significant variation in strategy distribution across text types demonstrates that translation is fundamentally context-dependent. Literary translation's preference for same-form equivalents and compensation reflects values of stylistic preservation and creative expression in literary translation norms. Technical translation's heavy reliance on explicitation reflects priorities of clarity, precision, and unambiguous communication in technical domains.

Marketing translation's high adaptation rates illustrate how commercial imperatives—persuading target audiences—override source text fidelity concerns. The finding that subtitle translation shows highest omission rates reflects medium-specific constraints (space, time, reading speed) that necessitate strategic reduction.

These genre-specific patterns have important implications for translation pedagogy, suggesting that teaching effective idiom translation requires genre awareness and flexibility rather than universal rules.

The strong influence of idiom transparency on strategy selection confirms that translators assess semantic accessibility when making decisions. Transparent idioms tolerate more literal approaches because readers can infer meaning even if the idiom isn't recognized as idiomatic. Opaque idioms require more interpretive intervention because readers cannot deduce meaning from components.

This finding suggests a continuum from transparent to opaque idioms, with different strategic approaches appropriate at different points. Translation pedagogy should develop students' ability to assess transparency and adjust strategies accordingly.

Cultural specificity's influence demonstrates the central role of cultural knowledge in translation. Culture-specific idioms pose particular challenges because they reference source culture elements potentially unknown to target readers. Translators must choose between maintaining cultural reference (foreignization) and adapting to target culture (domestication), with decisions reflecting translation purpose and audience factors.

### **Conclusion**

This corpus-based study of idiomatic expression translation provides empirical insights into professional translation strategies and decision-making processes. Analysis of 4,732 idiom translations across diverse text types reveals that translators employ varied strategies systematically influenced by idiom characteristics, genre conventions, and contextual factors. The predominance of functionally equivalent translations demonstrates that professional translators prioritize communicative effectiveness and target language naturalness over formal correspondence with source texts.

These findings have practical implications for translation practice, pedagogy, and technology development. The decision-making model proposed here offers a structured approach to idiom translation applicable in multiple contexts. For translation education, results emphasize the need for training that develops analytical

abilities, strategic flexibility, and genre awareness rather than teaching universal rules.

As translation continues evolving with technological advancement and globalization, understanding effective approaches to persistent challenges like idiom translation remains crucial. This study contributes empirical evidence and analytical frameworks that support translators, educators, and researchers in addressing these challenges. Future research extending these findings to additional language pairs, contexts, and methodological approaches will further enhance our understanding of this complex but central aspect of translation.

Translation is fundamentally about making meaning accessible across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Idiomatic expressions, with their cultural embeddedness and non-compositional semantics, exemplify translation's challenges. By examining how skilled translators navigate these challenges, this research illuminates not only idiom translation specifically but broader principles of effective translation practice: context-sensitivity, functional prioritization, cultural awareness, and adaptive problem-solving. These principles transcend idioms, applying to translation challenges across multiple domains and contexts.

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