

## **(Un)Translatability of Persian Idiomatic Expressions to English in Political Discourse**

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### **Abstract**

The present study sought to investigate the extent to which Persian idiomatic expressions would influence the western translators' strategies in providing the ultimate product in English, and it also attempted to uncover the underlying assumptions in target text, then to suggest some weighty strategies to overcome difficulties with translation. For this purpose, the data was analyzed within the mentioned framework proposed by Mona Baker (1992) that are four problem-solving strategies to overcome the difficulties of idiomatic translation. For that purpose, at first the texts of Mr. Ahmadinejad's speeches were selected from the Iranian government news agency website. Then the renditions of transcriptions of the news were excerpted from the Western English media. After all the data were collected, the descriptive and test statistics provide us a help to see the frequent type of the strategies used to overcome difficulties with translating idiomatic expressions. Totally, according to the table, 30 idiomatic expressions were randomly selected in his speeches. Among these strategies, "translation by omission" was the most frequently used, and the other three expressions of "Using an idiom of similar meaning and form", "Using an idiom of similar meaning and dissimilar form", and "Translation by paraphrase" formed the other half. Accordingly, the research null-hypothesis that states, "There are no specific translation strategies of idiomatic expressions in political discourse" is rejected, and we can claim that there were specific translation strategies of translation of idiomatic expressions in Mr. Ahmadinejad's political discourse by Western media.

### *Key words:*

Idiom, Untranslatability, Translation, Cultural untranslatability, Linguistic untranslatability, Translation strategy

## **2. Introduction**

When talking about translation, the first thing we should consider is the relationship between language and thought. Then, we must assume that all human communication means translation, either inside or between languages.

Language has been a linkage for relating notion to assist and clear up the mankind difficulties and mirror our beliefs. In fact, language as a way to construct this discourse is significant. The key factor for making this relationship can be considered as translation. Seeing

that translation as a tool in making relationship between two language is underlying entity and it's absence can cause a gap in constructing a discourse and comprehension .

No one can overlook the significance of politics. A political speech may alter the potential relationships between countries. Misquoting or mistranslating a message may result in a world war as World War I. Therefore, the role of conveying meanings and senses of words in translation is increasingly important. On the other hand, translating idiomatic expressions is by far the most important matter because it is mostly impossible to interpret idioms literally, and practical methods should be applied to transfer the exact and accurate meanings and senses into the target language.

In 1988 , Newmark states that : there are two theories to translating : 1) When you begin translating sentence by sentence , for example the first paragraph , to know the feeling mood of the text , and so you knowingly sit back , analyze the position , and read the rest of the target text . 2) You look through the whole text two or three times, and realize the purpose, addressee mood, represent the complex words and texts and begin translating purely when you have gotten the points.

In order to describe the boundaries of translatability, untranslatability has to be assessed in a certain passage and a certain pair of languages (see Mounin, 1977,p.312) .Respectively, Mounin maintains that there are more serious, definite difficulties which the translator has to encounter with. In conformity with his view, more consideration should be assigned to resolving this problem rather than to hypothesizing the degree of translatability of the passage.

Media theorists such as van Dijk (1998) and Fairclough (1995) maintain that accurate rendition presented by news reports are elementary versions of occasions, and are generally formed by certain viewpoints and methods of principle of their courses of action. It has been suggested that ample sources of bringing ideological beliefs to others are news media.

The relationship between language and ideology has a long time gained the attention of researchers in different methods, specially linguistics, sociology, political science and psychology. A field that has a need of being more extended is that of the relationship between translation and ideology.

### **3. Significance and Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this study was to investigate the extent to which some political Persian expressions can be translated into English. This research seeks to examine what difficulties arise in the process of translating idiomatic expressions in political discourse from one language to another. And the difficulties in the processes of comprehending the meaning of idioms will be analyzed, then the possible ways of solving those difficulties will be mentioned mainly through applying those strategies proposed by Baker(1992) ,besides some other experimental findings mentioned by a number of experienced translators and researchers. Additionally, a number of suggestions, considering idiomatic translation, proposed by such scholars Newmark (1988), and Gottlib (1997) and others will be taken into consideration. This research will shed light into the benefits of application of some strategies which can facilitate the process of translation. It will also ask political leaders to avoid untranslatable expressions, and recommend them to use some techniques and strategies like rephrasing idioms in order to convey their opinions.

#### **4. Literature Review**

Translation is rewriting of a source text and all redrafting without reference to their purpose indicate a definite ideology suggesting rewriting proves operation attempted in the Favor of power. Translation experts who are appealed to the political interpretations of ideology primarily assume that translating itself is a political task, as Tahir-Gurcaglar (2003) maintain that , " translation is political because , both as activity and product , it displays process of negotiation among different agents . On micro-level, these agents are translators, authors, critics, publishers, editors, and readers " (p.113) .

Idiomatic expressions are an inseparable element of every encountered item in great deals in most of the languages. Regarding the meaning of these expressions cannot be taken from the surface meanings of the every individual word comprising them, so there are some difficulties in both processes of comprehending and translating them. The process of translating idiomatic expressions from one language into another is a classic task binding a translator to have good understanding of both languages and cultures being conveyed or carried as well as , being able to determine and deal with problems in coming up with an effective .

#### **4.1. Translatability**

Considering the notion of translation, we can find out the function of translation is to emulate different types of texts in another language and therefore, providing them available for more readers which is demanding task that needs close a attention and involvement.

In this speedy world requiring the development of information, studying translation is a significant task; seeing that a proficient translator can convey the message effortlessly. So not only having skillful translators are essential but also is unavoidable.

#### **4.1.1. Translation Levels:**

Newmark (1988) identifies four levels of translation as follows.

##### *4.1.1.1. The Textual Level*

Translating at the text level, you unconsciously make particular changes. You carry the source language grammar into their target language equivalents translating the lexical items into the point that seems precisely suitable in the context of the sentence. The next is your basic level in translating. This is a level of literal translation of the source language into the target one. So Translation is primarily the task in which you have to consider several things simultaneously.

##### *4.1.1.2. The Referential Level*

In this level you should not look through a sentence without examining it on the referential level of translating. You have to involve your mind, continually whether the text is literal or technical, what it is about, the aim of the text and the writers' intuition. The referential is like the textual level. All languages have polysemous terms which can be definitely resolved solely on the referential level, starting by a few purposes, prepositions and conjunctions. The referential level in which you mentally consider the text, is gathered based on the interpretation of all linguistic problems.

##### *4.1.1.3. The Cohesive Level*

Apart from the second authentic level of translating, there is third, cohesive level, relating the first and second level in which you have to consider it. And it goes along with both the construction and senses of the text. The construction through the linking words, connecting the sentences mainly beginning from given information to new one . The second element in the cohesive level is the feeling of the text. Moreover, this can be displayed as a controversial factor happening between negative and positive, affecting and impartial. It means that detecting the

theme of a text through its valuable and nonsense texts which may be conveyed by nouns or objects like adjectives or qualities. In this level, An attempt to make in the feeling throughout the relatives and the mood, and the intuition through valuable or valueless phrases is certainly, only provisional, however it may establish the difference between monotonous translation and a good one. This level is regulator, it assures coherence and also modifying significance.

#### *4.1.1.4. The Naturalness Level*

You have to consider that the level of naturalness of ordinary expression is grammaticality and lexical, and using proper sentence connectives may reach the whole passage. Naturalness is simply explained. Natural expression consists of different kinds of idioms or styles established fundamentally by the "setting" of the passage, i.e. where it is usually issued or realized incidentally by the author, topic and reading, all of that are mainly influenced by the setting.

## **4.2. Translation Strategy**

According to Loescher (1991,p. 8) translation strategies are as "a potentially conscious procedure for solving a problem faced in translating a text, or any segment of it." As it is pointed out in this description, the concept of consciousness is important in recognizing strategies applied by the translators. Interestingly, Cohen (1984,p.18) claims that "the element of consciousness is what distinguishes strategies from these processes that are not strategic". Krings (1986,p.18) describes translation strategy as "translators potentially conscious plans for solving concrete translation problems in the framework of a concrete translation task." and holds the view that there seem to be least three universal strategies utilized by the translators: (i) translating with no interference if possible; (ii) rectifying surface mistakes instantly; (iii) passing on the detecting of qualitative mistakes in the passage to the rewriting stage. As Jaaskelainen (1999,p.71) observes "strategy as a series of competencies, a set of steps or processes that favor the acquisition, storage, or/and utilization of information." He suggests that strategies are flexible naturally, and their assumption involves a choice caused by comments in translators' objectives.

## **4.3. Different Methods of Translation According to Newmark (1988)**

Regarding the process of translation, it is mostly risky to translate more than a sentence or two before looking through the first, two or three paragraphs, if a quick look through assures you that the text is going to set forth some difficulties.

Actually, the more problematic-culturally, 'referentially', linguistically the passage is, the more preliminary search is better to do before you begin translating a text, solely on the basis that one misanalysed the idea about a keyword in a text.

#### **4.3.1. The Methods of Translation**

*4.3.1.1. Word-for-Word Translation*

*4.3.1.2. Literal Translation*

*4.3.1.3. Faithful Translation*

*4.3.1.4. Semantic Translation*

*4.3.1.5. Adaptation*

*4.3.1.6. Free Translation*

*4.3.1.7. Idiomatic Translation*

*4.3.1.8. Communicative Translation*

Some researchers write about translation considering, implicitly or explicitly, the presence of a principal boundary in untranslatability among cultural untranslatability and linguistic untranslatability. This indicates that a dichotomy can be set between the translations problems that arise from the difference between source and target language, and those originating in the disparity between the source and target culture.

A preliminary work on British Translation studies an explanation of this matter was undertaken by Catford (1965). He observed that the integrity of the differentiation among linguistic and cultural untranslatability is called into question. He suggests the definition below in a linguist's theory of Translation.

***Linguistic untranslatability:*** "failure to find a TL [target language] equivalent is due entirely to differences between the source language and the target language" (Catford, 1965,p.98) e.g.; ambiguity

***Cultural untranslatability:*** emerges "when a situational feature, functional relevant for the SL [source language] text, is completely absent from the

culture of which the TL [target language] is a part (Catford,1965,p.99) e.g.;  
names of clothes , foods and abstract concepts .

Catford hold a view that the dichotomy stated above would not come to being in the event that it could be revealed that all cases of cultural untranslatability counter to "the impossibility of finding an equivalent collocation in the TL [target language]" (1965,p.101). In his view, this impracticability is a matter of "collocational untranslatability", which Catford identifies as: "untranslatability arising from the fact that any possible TL [target language]

#### **4.5. Media Translation**

Media theorists such as van Dijk (1998) and Fairclough (1995) maintain that accurate rendition presented by news reports are elementary versions of occasions, and are generally formed by certain viewpoints and methods of principle of their courses of action. It has been suggested that ample sources of bringing ideological beliefs to others are news media.

The relationship between language and ideology has a long time gained the attention of researchers from different methods, specially linguistics, sociology, political science and psychology. A field that has a need of being more extended is that of relationship between translation and ideology.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) presents translation reviews with a tool for analyzing ideological factors. Supporters of CDA argue that " hidden socio-political control actively constructs society on some level."(Atkins, 2002,p.2). In 1993, Kress states, "The everyday, innocent and innocuous, the mundane text is as ideologically saturated as a text which wears its ideological constitution overtly."(1993, p.174). Kress(1989) suggests that language usually emerges as the indication of the structure of linguistic expressions which are realizations of ideological systems.

#### **4.6. Definitions of Idiomatic Expressions**

Actually there are many languages all over the world that each of them varies from the other ones in some facets. Moreover, it is clear that the people of different societies have got different views. The ideologies affect the languages and the methods of conveying meanings. Thus, the idiomatic expressions of languages differ from each other in the most aspects. In a research

conducted by Balfaheel's (2009) utilizes a number of approaches concerning this matter in addition to stating some Arabic examples by producing a questionnaire and producing some quantitative and qualitative data.

On the other hand, Stakšiene (2009) examines idiomatic expressions via presenting some Lithuanian cases and claims that the translation of idioms constitutes four principal translation strategies:" Paraphrasing, which involves explanatory and stylistic paraphrase; idiom to idiom translation which involves using idiom of similar meaning and form, and using idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form; literal translation; and finally omission." (Stakšiene,2009,p. 18)

#### **4.7. Difficulties with the Translation of Idioms**

In 1988, Newmark hold a view that "in translating idiomatic into idiomatic language, it is particularly difficult to match equivalence of meaning with equivalence of frequency" (p.28). He argues that the major difficulties that translator encounters, are lexical rather than grammatical. That is fixed phrases, idioms, collocations (Newmark, 1988).

Mollanazar states that "the first step in translating idioms is to recognize them. The pitfall for the translators is to translate idioms literally. A word-for-word translation of idioms id often nonsense or even sometimes amusing" (2004,p.52)

Davies writes some of the difficulty that learners may encounter in translating idioms:

-Recognition

-No equivalent in the target language

-Difference between the convention, the context and frequency of use in the source and target languages

-A similar counterpart in the target language with a different context of use

-An idiom used in the source text both in literal and idiomatic sense at the same time (2004, p.193)

#### **4.8. Baker's Viewpoint on Idioms**

In 1992, Baker's view at equivalence at a set of levels: at word, above-word, thematic structure, cohesion and pragmatic levels (Cited in Munday, 2001, p.95). In this study we are considering

with her 'pragmatic' and 'above-word' levels of equivalence, as the domain of idiomatic expression particularly takes place in these two areas.

Furthermore, she argues three pragmatic notions where pragmatics is "the manner discourses are employed in vocal context.":

1) Coherence associates to the spectator's comprehension of the universe, which differs in the case of source text and target text readerships.

2) Presupposition is the matter in which the receiver of the message is considered to have some background knowledge ... this case poses difficulty with translation, as readers of target text may not have the similar understanding as well as source text readers.

3) Implicature is a case in which the sense is involved rather than mentioned ... this can result in a wrong translation of the purpose of the text. (Cited in Munday, 2001, pp.97-98)

#### **4.8.1. Strategies to Master Difficulties of Translating Idioms**

However, there are some problems in the action of translating idioms; there are also some strategies to control such probable difficulties. Baker (1992) on the third chapter of her book throughout the parts addressing this matter suggests four strategies for translating as mentioned below:

1) Using an idiom of similar meaning and form this strategy constitutes employing an idiom in the target language which carries approximately the similar sense as that of the source language idiom and also includes equivalent lexical cases.

2) Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form

Generally, there is a possibility to find an idiomatic expression in the target language which has a meaning similar to the meaning of the source idiom, while it consists of various lexical matters.

3) Translation by paraphrase

This one is the most usual of translating idioms when an equivalence cannot be found in the target language or when it sounds unsuitable to apply idiomatic language in the target text due to variations in stylistic priorities of the source and target language.

4) Translation by omission

As with individual terms, an idiom may be omitted in the target text. This may be in that it has no near counterpart in the target language, its meaning cannot be simply interpreted, or for formulaic grounds.

Moreover, she mentions that: "the way in which an idiom can be translated into another language depends on many factors . . . Questions of style, register, and rhetorical effect must also be taken into consideration" (1992,pp.71-72)

Additionally, Fernando and Flavell (1981, p.82) inform translators about "the strong unconscious urge in most translators to search hard for an idiom in the receptor language, however inappropriate it maybe" (cited in Baker, 1992, p.72) .

## **5. Methodology**

The aim of the present study was to underline the importance of translatability and untranslatability of idiomatic expressions in political discourse. The study sought to investigate the extent to which some political Persian expressions used by Mr. Ahmadinejad could be translated into English, and to examine which strategies in translation of political idiomatic expressions are more frequently employed .

### **5.1. Theoretical Framework**

The main source that has been the theoretical framework of the paper is Mona Baker's (1992) *In Other Words* and specifically the third chapter, *Equivalence Above Word Level*, which deals with idioms and fixed expressions and some ultra-word level textures such as proverbs and collocations. Throughout the paper it has been tried to mention the difficulties encountered in the translation of idioms as well as providing some strategies to overcome those difficulties.

The first step taken in the process of writing this paper included gathering some authentic data regarding subject of the work. To gain information, firstly Mona Baker's (1992) *In Other Words* was studied in detail, and the parts of the book including any relevant data in this issue were highlighted mainly focusing on the categorizations for idiomatic expressions. The next step was to find some works of previous researchers on the issue. Analyzing the found sources, some helpful theories were added to the paper so as to cover a comprehensive body of knowledge and data. Finally, the last step was to collect the findings and mention the strategies that in translation of political idiomatic expressions were more frequently employed.

### **5.2. Corpus of the study**

This study conducted with analyzing the speeches of Mr. Ahmadinejad during his presidency in Iran since 2005 to 2013. 30 items of his speeches were randomly extracted. The study focused on idiomatic expressions and their translations into English by some English media.

Translated or interpreted idiomatic expressions of Mr. Ahmadinejad as president of Iran since 2005 to 2013 published in some popular news agencies such as Reuters, AP (Associated Press), Guardian and BBC were investigated.

**5.2.1.** The English rendition was found in:

Express, Guardian, BBC, Reuters, and the Independent New York Times

**5.2.2.** The Persian text of Iranian president's speech was selected from the official website of Iran's president ([www.dolat.ir](http://www.dolat.ir)) published on.

### **5.3. Data Collection Procedure**

In order to achieve the aim of the study, the following procedures were followed. To conduct the study, in order to answer the question of the study, the data gathered was analyzed within the aforementioned framework proposed by Mona Baker (1992) that is four problem-solving strategies to overcome the difficulties of idiomatic translation. For that purpose, at first the text of president's speech was selected from the Iranian government news agency website. Then the renditions of transcriptions of the news were excerpted from the Western English media.

Finally, using Baker's strategies (1992) and through the careful reading of the source texts and their renditions in the Western media. The results were then tabulated and their frequency was reported.

### **5.4. Data Analysis**

After all the data were collected. To analyze the data, the framework used for the study is the one introduced by Mona Baker (1992). The descriptive and test statistics in tables provide us a help to see the frequent type of the strategies used to overcome difficulties with translating idiomatic expressions.

## **6. Result and Discussions**

The research question of the present study was to find out the more frequently employed strategies in translation of idiomatic expressions in political discourse. In order to answer this

research question, the translations of Mr. Ahmadinejad's idiomatic expressions in western media during his presidency from 2005 to 2013 were analyzed according to Mona Bakers' (1992) strategies. It was done to overcome difficulties of idiomatic expressions in order to see which strategies in translation of idiomatic expressions in political discourse were more frequently employed; the results of which are set forth in Table 6.1. Totally, according to the table, 30 idiomatic expressions were randomly selected in his speeches. Among these strategies, "Translation by omission" was the most frequently used strategy by the frequency of 16 out of 30 (53.3%). The second most frequent applied strategies were both "Using an idiom of similar meaning and form" and "Translation by paraphrase" by the frequency of 5 out of 30 (16.7%); and "Using an idiom of similar meaning and dissimilar form" was the least frequently observed one of all by the frequency of 4 out of 30 (13.3%). Accordingly, the first research hypothesis that states, "There are no specific translation strategies of idiomatic expressions in political discourse" is rejected, and we can claim that there were specific translation strategies of translation of idiomatic expressions in Mr. Ahmadinejad's political discourse by Western media.

Table 6.1

*Frequencies and Percentages of Translation of Mr. Ahmadinejad's Idiomatic Expressions*

Strategy type	Frequency of Expression	Percentage
1. Using an idiom of similar meaning and form	5	16.7%
2. Using an idiom of similar meaning and dissimilar form	4	13.3%
3. Translation by paraphrase	5	16.7%
4. Translation by omission	16	53.3%
Total	30	100.0%

There have been many researchers commenting on strategies to be employed for translating a text from L1 into L2 during the history of translation. Besides translating isolated words," the most typical example of translating on the level of the combination of words is the translation of idiomatic or phraseological units." (Catford, 1965, p. 44). He also claims that the meaning of these units is not similar to the general meaning of their constituents and it is not possible to

translate such units word for word in many times. The idiom is regarded as “the unit of translation” (Catford,1965, p.44). This finding of the present study is consistent with a number of studies. Such as Baker(1992) claims that a person's proficiency of utilizing idioms and fixed expressions of a foreign language is not equal to that of a native speaker. She maintains that many translators working into a foreign language cannot have in mind to reach the identical understanding of the native speakers of a language in examining when and how an idiom can be useful.

Examples of idiomatic expressions utilized by Mr., Ahmadinejad is as follows:

**Source Text:** اسرائیل باید از صحنه ی روزگار حذف شود

**Target Text:** 26, October 2005

*Guardian press* = Israel to be wiped off the map

*New York Times*= wiped off the stage

That the original sense is that we should cause a place to stop existing and to destroy it completely and John Cole (A university of Michigan professor of Modern middle East and south America History) interprets this sentence in this way that Israel should be vanished from pages of time.

**Source Text:** غرب دست از بچه بازی بردارد و با دم شیر بازی نکند.

**Target Text:** July, 2010

*Newsweek:* the west should stop obdurate and aggression against children and do not play with lions.

*EL PAIS, Spanish newsletter:* Iran's president accused the west to bother children and stated security council should stop playing with lions.

*Lacronia, Italian newsletter:* Ahmadinejad warned the west that they should not aggregate children stubbornly and must give up killing lions.

As you can see, there are so many different paraphrases of a sentence that was a kind of untranslatability.

## 7. Conclusion

Throughout different parts of the paper it was described that there are some difficulties regarding the translation of idioms. Four of such problems were mentioned as:

1. An idiom may have no equivalent in the TL
2. An idiom may have a similar counterpart but with different meaning
3. An idiom may be used in both literal and idiomatic senses at the same time
4. The contexts in which idioms can be used are different.

Analyses showed that these difficulties are encountered in different situations. Then the four strategies were mentioned to solve the problems that idiomatic expressions may cause. It was shown that there is no clear-cut way to cope with idiomatic expressions, but it is the situation which decides which strategy to be employed. A key concept to be considered is that translator must have a deep knowledge on both SL and TL so as to understand the connotative meanings of idioms of the SL and then to recreate their exact counterparts in the TL.

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