

Loss and Gain when Translating Somatic Idioms

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Abstract

The current paper aims to disclose the complex workings of idioms perceived as language- and culture-specific linguistic units in relation to their translation from English into Romanian. It examines the notions of translation loss (under-translation) and translation gain (over-translation) with reference to somatic idioms defined as “idiomatic combinations of various functions containing at least one obvious body-part name” [10, 110]; actually, it analyses a subclass of somatic idioms, those that contain the lexeme “eye”. It concludes that in terms of translation, even if it is unanimously accepted that complete symmetry can hardly ever exist, unfortunately, Romanian dictionaries do not offer a standard translation for many somatic English idioms.

Keywords

somatic idioms, equivalence, translation loss

It is generally acknowledged that idioms are a colourful and fascinating aspect of English and they are commonly used in all types of language, informal and formal, spoken and written. For this reason one's language skills will increase rapidly if he/she can understand idioms and use them confidently and correctly. However, *it goes without saying* that no matter how captivating idioms might seem they are not only basic to the language but they are also the most difficult part of it to learn, *to put it mildly* these fixed phrases are “*the icing on the cake*” when learning English. This is why, for instance, if one were to analyze at least the last three rows in this article, one could easily identify in less than three lines three idioms which might lead to misunderstandings if the speaker and/or the translator is not aware of their exact meanings and/or use them inappropriately.

Thus, idioms are always language- and culture-specific linguistic units whose meaning cannot be guessed from the words it contains. More often than not they have a stronger meaning than non-idiomatic phrases. To illustrate this point consider the following example, “*to pull the wool over sb's eyes*” which has more emphasis than “to deceive somebody”, but they mean the same thing because idioms have usual meanings assigned to single semantic units in a specific context. Actually, using metaphorical concepts all idioms explain the way humans make

sense of their experiences, how they conceptualize their various experiences and how they perceive the world and act upon those perceptions.

As Curry, Dean [11, 32] argued “idioms are used to give life and richness to the language by enabling it to absorb new concepts which need to be expressed linguistically in a new way”. Idioms take existing words, combine them in a new sense, and bring forth new phrases which are more vividly expressed than the common way of conveying the same idea.

Moreover, idioms not only that they evade the normal rules of understanding, but they also defy direct translation, they are unique because their meaning is learnt only in context. Thus, as concerns idioms translation problems arise when the translator does not have the necessary concepts in the target language because the source language idiom is a notion embedded in the national culture. This is where translation loss appears and idioms defy direct translation as it is sometimes difficult to render a certain notion in the target language.

Therefore, this article examines the notions of *translation loss* or *under-translation* and *translation gain* or *over-translation* with reference to somatic idioms. Furthermore, this article is a personal endeavour to disclose the complex workings of idioms perceived as language- and culture-specific linguistic units in relation to their translation from English into Romanian because an inadequate correspondence can remould the dynamics of communication.

To accomplish this aim, the article will provide many contrastive examples of somatic idioms explaining why some idioms are over-translated while others are under-translated and they have to carry the burden of translation loss.

In terms of translation, it is unanimously accepted that complete symmetry can hardly ever exist and findings that this article shall reveal show that unfortunately, Romanian dictionaries do not offer a standard translation for many English idioms, that is to say, there are different translations for the same English idiom which is certainly, very confusing for any non-native speaker of English. This lack of standardization between various bilingual idiom dictionaries proves that there is still a heated debate, as to the way certain fixed phrases are to be translated into another language. Even if idioms are perceived as fixed in their lexical structure this lack of consensus between different dictionaries is not only misleading for the learners of English, but it also shows various translation constraints when trying to find the most adequate correspondence to an English idiom, very often due to the fact that idioms have very specific applications which are not obvious from simply knowing the individual words, some of these fixed phrases remain obscure in other languages.

Thus, the concept of translation loss originates in the common belief that the notion of translation equivalence in the sense of “sameness” cannot be separated from that of translation loss as “a target text will always lack certain culturally relevant features that are present in the source text” [15, 16], but this fact doesn’t mean that translation loss should be understood as a loss of translation, it is only a loss of exact and precise source text – target text correspondence in translation. Furthermore, obviously, as it is impossible to achieve and measure “sameness” in translation one cannot pretend to measure translation loss objectively, let alone accurately.

When talking about translation loss Hervey and Higgins [15, 24] as quoted by Armstrong, N. [1, 52] draw an analogy with the engineering concept of “*energy loss*”, which is inevitable in the design of machinery and which of course is the reason why perpetual motion can never be achieved. “The engineer accepts that energy loss is inevitable and the aim is to minimise it; similarly, the translator’s aim is to reduce translator loss” [15, 24]. A frequent strategy is “compensation”, that is accepting the loss of one element in the target text, and compensating by adding an element elsewhere, but of course, where the fragment of the source language being translated is so short, as is the case with idioms and fixed phrases, no compensation elsewhere is possible. Loss is a concept that lays a considerable burden of responsibility upon the translator, since the reader of a target text who does not know the source language will not know whether translation loss has occurred at any given time. It is well known that there are different levels of translation loss, namely, on morphological level, syntactic level, semantic level, textual level or stylistic/rhetorical level no matter if that particular loss is *inevitable* in which case it occurs because of the different language systems or *avertable* that is attributed to the translator’s failure to find the appropriate correspondence.

As Baker, M. [4, 69] emphasized “a certain amount of loss, addition, or skewing of meaning is often unavoidable in translation; language systems tend to be too different to produce exact replicas in most cases”. The translator should remember that accuracy is a significant aim in translation, but it is also important to bear in mind that the use of common target-language patterns or/and syntactic structures which are familiar to the target reader has an essential role in keeping the communication channels open.

As far as translation gain is concerned Bassnett, Susan [7, 38] argued that one shouldn’t ignore what can also be gained, “for the translator can at times enrich or clarify the source language text as a direct result of the translation process.” She even suggests that what is often seen as “lost” from the source language context

may be replaced in the target language context, but, unfortunately in the case of idioms this translation strategy cannot be applied.

Nonetheless, to support this translation strategy called compensation, Nida [2, 106] as quoted by As-Safi, A. B. in “Translation Theories, Strategies and Basic Theoretical Issues” argued that as regards translation gain “one of the difficulties is that too often translators are not sufficiently sensitive to the possibilities of idiomatic expressions, and hence the end result is a weakening of the figurative force of the translation, since they do not compensate for the loss of certain idiom by the introduction of others.”

Translation gain can be attained primarily on the stylistic level if the translator adopts a target language-oriented strategy trying to reproduce a natural piece of writing in the source language or if he/she chooses a functional, dynamic translation technique or if the translator introduces new elements, only because he/she wants to explain a certain notion deemed important in the source language but which does not have a corresponding element in the target language.

For a better understanding of these two concepts, that is, translation loss and gain, I will analyze a few somatic idioms in terms of their translation into Romanian as registered in various dictionaries. For instance, in the source language, in this case, English, there are five idioms conveying mainly the same idea, “to watch or look carefully” with slight differences of register or/and meaning while in the target language, in Romanian, all these five idioms have been translated in the same way, according to the various dictionaries where they have been registered; here are the relevant examples: 1. “*Be all eyes*” [23, 113] = “a fi cu ochii în patru” [27, 58] or 2. “*Keep your eyes open/peeled/skinned (for sb/sth)*” [23, 113] = “a fi cu ochii în patru (pentru); a sta cu atenția încordată ca să” [26, 300] or 3. “*Keep your eye on the ball*” [23, 112] = “a fi cu ochii în patru (pentru); a sta cu atenția încordată (ca să)” [26, 300]; “a nu pierde din vedere scopul principal; a fi atent/ cu ochii în patru” [21, 121] or 4. “*Keep an eye out (for sb/sth)*” [23, 112] = “a fi vigilent; a fi cu ochii în patru” [26, 298]; “a fi cu ochii în patru/atent la; a băga de seamă la” [21, 119] 5. “*Keep a weather eye on sth/open for sth*” [23, 441] = “a sta/fi cu ochii în patru la ceva; a urmări cu mare atenție; a fi foarte atent la; a sta cu ochii pe” [26, 298]; “a fi în gardă/cu ochii în patru” [21, 119].

Looking at the above-mentioned examples, one might argue that the target language is somewhat poorer as regards idioms, and this is partially true, because the inevitable loss prevents the reader from understanding the slight differences between the five English idioms. If they were to be translated with different phrases, a loss in the target language would still occur, because those idioms

wouldn't convey the exact meaning of the source language idiom. Therefore, the choice of translation strategy depends entirely on the co-text – the linguistic environment in which a word is used within a text [17, 126] – and on the context of situation – the immediate physical, temporal, spatial, social environment in which verbal exchanges take place [17, 126].

On the other hand, there are idioms in the source language which when translated they seem drier, less expressive, not conveying the meaning as suggestive as in the target language; consider the following example “*Have one eye/half an eye on sth*” [23, 112] = “a se uita cu un ochi la slănină și cu altul la făină” [6, 802]. When analyzing this example, it is obvious that the target language gains, the Romanian correspondent is culture-specific, it pertains to the unique elements that differentiate it from other languages worldwide.

As already pointed out translation loss and gain is often inevitable, due to the inner characteristics of idioms and because of this fact translation, as a technique looks more like a negotiation process, in search of the most adequate equivalence, because it is universally acknowledged that there will always be a difference between the source text idiom and the target text idiom as, in a sense any translation is a fake of the original.

This lack of definite correspondents for various idioms which proves exactly the fact that regardless of the translator's work, idioms remain somehow stuck in the language system that produced them is shown by the following examples which can only be conveyed into Romanian, with a loss of their idiomatic value: “*Not a dry eye in the house*” [23, 99] = “ochii tuturor au fost în lacrimi”; “toată lumea este/era cu ochii în lacrimi; toată audiența este/era cu ochii în lacrimi” [26, 502] or the somatic idiom “*Have a roving eye*” [23, 332] = “a fi mereu gata de o nouă aventură amoroasă; a fi ușuratic/ fustangiu” [26, 247]; “a-i fugi ochii după cineva” [6, 478].

The target language idioms are just a brief explanation of the source language idioms; they are actually a restatement of the meaning of the phrase using other words, an over-translation as Newmark called it or in other words, “one of the commonest techniques of translating in the case of lexical-semantic discrepancies between the lexical systems of the source and the target language” [25, 117].

Thus, these Romanian equivalents are simply a means of conveying the original meaning of the source language idioms, not necessarily their best possible correspondents that would make the reader aware of the original phrase; here is another such example: “*The apple of sb's eye*” [23, 9] = “marele său amor; soarele

său de pe cer; lumina ochilor săi (fig.)” [26, 488]; “a-i fi drag cuiva ca ochii din cap/ a ține la cineva ca la ochii din cap” [27, 57]. Thus, the failure to translate fixed phrases adequately and appropriately leads to instances of translation loss and gain regardless of the fact that the overall meaning is generally correctly conveyed.

Nonetheless, in some cases, there are more idioms both in the source language and in the target language for the same notion, such as the idea of having a lot of something to deal with, as in the next examples: “*Be up to your eyes/eyeballs in sth*” [23, 113] = “*Be up to your ears in sth*” [23, 102] = “a fi băgat până în gât în ceva; a fi băgat/ implicat până peste cap în ceva” [26, 92]; “până peste cap/urechi” [21, 257].

Moreover, Philip, Gill [24, 1] argues that “the closer the wording of an idiom reflects a real-world situation, the easier it is to interpret” and the following example proves this belief because the idiom “*Have eyes in the back of your head*” [23, 113] reflects someone’s ability to see everything and know what is going on and the idiom’s visual image can be easily connected with this idea even in the target language: “A avea ochi la ceafă / spate” [26, 251] “A avea ochi la ceafă; a nu-i scăpa nimic” [21, 97] “A avea un ochi la ceafă = a vedea totul, a nu-i scăpa nimic” [27, 58].

In much the same way, “an idiom which refers to a culturally-familiar situation poses little difficulty to interpretation” [24, 1] as illustrated by the next idiom, first mentioned in the Bible, “*The scales fall from sb’s eyes*” [23, 339] whose correspondent in the target language is “I s-a luat ceața / pânda de pe ochi; a venit de-acasă” [26, 498] “I s-a luat (cuiva) vâlul de pe ochi; acum vede limpede adevărul” [21, 205].

To conclude, taking everything into account, there is no doubt that translation losses and gains occur on all language levels, semantic, morphological, syntactic or/and stylistic, but the most important thing that all translators should consider is achieving a balance between these two opposed concepts that cannot wholly disappear as long as culture specific elements exist in each and every language. It so happens that translators may inevitably lose many idioms in the transfer of meaning from a source language to a target language but, one also stands to gain a number of idioms. “Such idiomatic renderings do much to make the translation come alive, for it is by means of such distinctive expressions that the message can speak meaningfully to people in terms of their own lives and behaviour” [22, 106].

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