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ENGLISH IDIOMS IN UZBEK TRANSLATION: EQUIVALENTS, STRATEGIES AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

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Abstract
Idioms are among the most difficult elements to translate because their meaning cannot be worked out from their individual words and often depends on culture-specific images. This study examines how common English idioms can be rendered into Uzbek and which of them are hardest to translate idiomatically. Fifty widely used English idioms, grouped into five image types (journeys, animals, war, the body and food), were compared with their Uzbek counterparts and classified according to Baker's (2011) idiom translation strategies. Eighteen idioms could be translated with an Uzbek idiom of similar meaning and form, twenty with an Uzbek idiom of similar meaning but different form, and twelve only by paraphrase. Idioms based on journeys were the easiest to translate, while idioms based on war most often required paraphrase. When Uzbek used a different image, it frequently drew on parts of the body, and several Uzbek equivalents carried cultural meanings absent from the English originals. The findings offer practical guidance for translators and for teachers who use translation to develop learners' understanding of idioms.
Keywords: idiom translation; translation strategies; English–Uzbek translation; equivalence; culture-specific images; EFL teaching

1. Introduction

Idioms are frequent in everyday English, and fluent speakers use them as ready-made units (Wray, 2002). Their meaning, however, cannot be derived from the words they contain: *bury the hatchet* has nothing to do with tools, and *get cold feet* has nothing to do with temperature. For translators, this creates a double task. They must first recognise an expression as an idiom and understand it, and then find a way to convey both its meaning and its expressive effect in the target language (Larson, 1998; Baker, 2011). For language learners, the same problem appears as misunderstanding or literal translation (Cooper, 1999).

Baker (2011) describes the main strategies available to a translator. The best solution is usually an idiom of similar meaning and form in the target language. If none exists, the translator may use an idiom of similar meaning but different form, paraphrase the meaning in plain words, borrow the source expression or, in some contexts, omit it. Similar distinctions appear in other translation frameworks (Newmark, 1988; Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995) and in phraseology, which separates full, partial and zero equivalents (Kunin, 1996). Which strategy is possible depends first of all on what the target language offers.

Why some idioms travel well between languages and others do not has been explained by cognitive linguistics. Many idioms rest on images grounded in common human experience, such as moving along a road, and these images tend to be shared across languages (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2005). Other idioms are tied to the history, environment and values of a particular culture, and their images rarely have direct equivalents. Some apparent equivalents are the result of borrowing, as with idioms that spread across European languages from classical and biblical sources (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2005; Piirainen, 2012).

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English and Uzbek offer a useful case. The two languages are unrelated, one Germanic and one Turkic, and they developed in different cultural settings. Uzbek phraseology is well described in national lexicography (Rahmatullayev, 1978), and the first author's earlier work compared English and Uzbek idioms for teaching purposes (Ro'ziboyev, 2026). Few studies in international journals, however, show clearly which strategies are available for translating common English idioms into Uzbek and which kinds of idioms cause the most difficulty. This information is practical for translators and for teachers of philology students, who often use translation as a learning tool (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008). The study therefore asks three questions:

RQ1. Which of Baker's (2011) strategies are available for translating common English idioms into Uzbek?

RQ2. Which types of idioms are the easiest and the hardest to translate idiomatically?

RQ3. What do the Uzbek equivalents show about cultural differences that translators and teachers should take into account?

2. Methods

2.1 Material

The study is based on 50 common English idioms selected from three standard dictionaries: *The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* (Siefring, 2004), the *Collins COBUILD Idioms Dictionary* (2012) and the *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary* (2006). To cover a range of images, ten idioms were chosen for each of five image types: journeys, animals, war, the body and food. All idioms are in current use and suitable for learners at B1–B2 level. For each idiom, an Uzbek counterpart with the same figurative meaning was sought in Rahmatullayev's (1978) phraseological dictionary and checked against the authors' native-speaker competence. Where several Uzbek idioms were available, the one closest in image to the English idiom was chosen.

2.2 Classification

Each English idiom was assigned to one of three translation strategies adapted from Baker (2011) (Table 1). Omission was not included, because it depends on the context of a whole text, and borrowing was not needed as a separate category: the few loan translations already established in Uzbek were treated as Uzbek idioms of similar form and are noted separately. An idiom was assigned to the first strategy only if the Uzbek image was essentially the same (a sheep for a lamb); a different animal or object (a donkey for a mule) placed it in the second. All pairs were classified jointly by the authors, and doubtful cases were settled by discussion. The results are reported as simple counts.

Table 1. Translation strategies used in the study (adapted from Baker, 2011)

Strategy	Description	Example
1. Similar meaning and form	An Uzbek idiom with the same meaning and the same image	*turn a blind eye* – ko'z yummoq ('to close the eyes')
2. Similar meaning, different form	An Uzbek idiom with the same meaning but a different image	*when pigs fly* – tuya dumi yerga tekkanda ('when the camel's tail touches the ground')
3. Paraphrase	No Uzbek idiom exists; the meaning is expressed in plain words	*bury the hatchet* – yarashmoq ('to make peace')

3. Results

3.1 Available strategies (RQ1)

Of the 50 English idioms, 18 could be translated with an Uzbek idiom of similar meaning and form, 20 with an Uzbek idiom of similar meaning but different form, and 12 only by paraphrase. In other words, 38 idioms can be rendered by an Uzbek idiom, which keeps the figurative and expressive character of

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the original, while 12 lose it in translation. The second strategy was the most common: Uzbek usually has an idiom for the same idea, but it uses a different picture. Three of the idioms in the first group (*crocodile tears*, *a wolf in sheep's clothing* and *a double-edged sword*) have equivalents that are established loan translations: timsoh ko'z yoshlari, qo'y terisini yopingan bo'ri and ikki tig'li qilich.

3.2 Differences between image types (RQ2)

The five image types differed noticeably (Table 2). Idioms based on journeys were the easiest to translate: six of ten had Uzbek equivalents with the same image, for example *go astray* – yo'ldan ozmoq ('to stray from the road') and *a dead end* – boshi berk ko'cha ('a street closed at its head'). War idioms were the hardest: half of them, including *stick to one's guns*, *hold the fort* and *jump the gun*, could only be paraphrased. Animal and body idioms were usually translated with an Uzbek idiom of different form and rarely needed paraphrase. Food idioms fell in between.

Table 2. Translation strategies by image type (number of idioms)

Image type	Similar meaning and form	Similar meaning, different form	Paraphrase	Total
Journeys	6	2	2	10
Animals	4	5	1	10
War	2	3	5	10
Body	4	5	1	10
Food	2	5	3	10
Total	**18**	**20**	**12**	**50**

3.3 What changes when the form changes (RQ3)

In about half of the second-strategy cases, Uzbek keeps the same type of image but changes its details. Animals are a clear example: *kill two birds with one stone* becomes bir o'q bilan ikki quyonni urmoq ('to hit two hares with one bullet'), *as busy as a bee* becomes chumolidek tinim bilmay ishlamoq ('to work tirelessly like an ant'), and *as stubborn as a mule* becomes eshakdek qaysar ('stubborn like a donkey'). In the other cases the image changes completely, and most often it moves to the body. *Lead someone up the garden path* corresponds to ko'z bo'yamoq ('to paint the eyes'), *bite the bullet* to tishini tishiga qo'ymoq ('to set one's teeth on one's teeth'), *the apple of one's eye* to ko'zining oq-u qorasi ('the white and black of one's eye') and *egg on one's face* to yuzi shuvut bo'lmoq ('one's face becomes blackened'). Several Uzbek equivalents also carry cultural meanings that the English idioms lack. *Bite the hand that feeds you* corresponds to tuzini ichib tuzlug'iga tupurmoq ('to eat someone's salt and spit into the salt-cellar'), which links ingratitude to the tradition of sharing bread and salt. *Break someone's heart* corresponds to ko'nglini sindirmoq, where *ko'ngil* means the inner self as a seat of feeling rather than the physical heart. *Cry over spilt milk* corresponds to o'tgan ishga salovat ('a blessing upon what has passed'), which has a religious overtone.

4. Discussion

The ease of translating journey idioms is consistent with the view that images based on common bodily experience are widely shared across languages (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2005). People everywhere move along roads, lose their way and meet obstacles, so both languages describe life in these terms. When such an image exists in both languages, the translator can keep it and the reader recognises it at once.

War idioms show the opposite situation. Many of them come from specific practices, such as firearms, forts or the custom behind *bury the hatchet*, which are part of English-speaking history rather than shared experience. Uzbek expresses conflict and endurance figuratively too, but in this sample it did so mainly through fire or the body, not weapons. When no Uzbek idiom is available, paraphrase conveys the meaning but loses the expressive effect. Baker (2011) suggests compensating for such losses by

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using figurative language elsewhere in the text. As the sample is small, this tendency needs confirmation on a larger set of idioms.

The second strategy, the most common in this study, is also the riskiest for learners and novice translators. A translator who does not know the Uzbek idiom may translate the English image word for word, for example rendering *kill two birds with one stone* as "bir tosh bilan ikki qushni o'ldirmoq". Such a version reads as a literal statement rather than as the established Uzbek idiom. Translators also need to know the connotations of the Uzbek equivalent. An idiom with religious or traditional associations, such as o'tgan ishga salovat, may not suit every context, even if its meaning matches. The cultural content of such idioms reflects what Sharifian (2017) calls cultural conceptualisations: shared ways of thinking that are built into a language.

The loan translations in the first group show that similarity between idioms does not always mean shared culture. Idioms such as *crocodile tears* spread across many European languages from older written sources (Piirainen, 2012) and most probably entered Uzbek through Russian. For translators they are convenient, but their register should be checked, as some may sound bookish in everyday Uzbek.

The results also have implications for teaching. Translation tasks with idioms can help philology students notice how languages picture the same idea differently. Idioms of the first type can be taught through direct transfer. Idioms of the second type are best taught by comparing the two images and explaining each, which helps learners remember them (Boers, 2000; Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008). Idioms of the third type need an explanation of their origin, because learners have no image in their first language to rely on.

The study has limitations. The sample is small and was selected from dictionaries, so the results describe this sample only. The idioms were examined in isolation, not in real texts, and the study shows which equivalents are available, not which strategies translators actually choose. Future research could analyse published Uzbek translations of English fiction and media to see how translators deal with idioms in practice.

5. Conclusion

Most common English idioms in this sample can be translated into Uzbek with an Uzbek idiom, but usually with a different image. Journey idioms translate most easily, war idioms most often require paraphrase, and when Uzbek changes the image, it often turns to the body. Some Uzbek equivalents also add cultural meanings that translators should notice. For translators, the practical lesson is to look first for an Uzbek idiom with the same image, then for one with a different image, and to paraphrase only when neither exists. For teachers, comparing English and Uzbek idioms through translation is a simple way to make learners aware of both shared and culture-specific images.

Declarations

Author contributions (CRediT). Kuvonchbek Ro'ziboyev: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Supervision. Sarvinoz Lutpillayeva and Hilolaxon Qadamboyeva: Data curation, Formal analysis (classification of idiom pairs), Visualization (tables), Writing – review & editing.

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Use of generative AI. [To be completed by the authors according to the target journal's policy, stating which AI tools were used, for which parts of the manuscript, and that the authors reviewed and take full responsibility for the content.]

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