# ANALYZING THE PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATING IDIOMATIC TEXTS FROM ENGLISH TO TAMIL AND TAMIL TO ENGLISH

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## Abstract

The study investigates the problems in translating idiomatic texts from English-Tamil and Tamil-English, which is frequently occurring in general translation, and the effective ways of overcoming such problems using procedures of translation as techniques and strategies. This work has used both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The data collected from the translation tests conducted for the undergraduates of the Department of Translation Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna consisted of idioms at the sentence level. The validation of the text was through judgment comparing both source and target texts. The findings are as follows; when translating idioms from English to Tamil specific strategies like using an idiom of similar meaning and form, using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form, Translation by paraphrase, and dynamic equivalence are adopted. This study will help the undergraduates/ trainee translators to translate in a reader-friendly manner.

**Keywords:** *Idioms, Strategies, Translation, Techniques, Undergraduates.*

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## Introduction

The study 'Analyzing the problems in translating Idiomatic texts from English-Tamil and Tamil-English' is primarily focusing on the frequently occurring problems in idiomatic translation. Since culture and language are interrelated such problems will unavoidably happen as these languages belong to different language families. Idiomatic translation errors are very common among undergraduates of Translation Studies. Since they are the future translators, the mentors have to guide them to overcome such types of problems. Considering the facts, the study is based on the undergraduates of the Department of Translation Studies, University of Jaffna.

Idioms refer to a group of words that possess peculiar meanings and cannot be translated literally. In other words, idioms are figures of speech formed by more than one word that carries the connotative meaning. Particularly, idioms are formed to express specific emotions and meanings. They are categorized in various forms, according to the grammatical category, according to the concepts or emotions, according to the picture expressed by the idiom, according to parts of the body, idioms concerned with food, and according to the semantic class or meaning expressed classified as slangs, similes, dead metaphor, social formulas, and collocations.

Since the idiom translation relies on cultural connotation, understanding and translating the idioms which are culturally bound is a challenging task for translators. This study includes Ten English and Ten Tamil idioms. At this juncture, it is important to note that idioms are given with sentences because, idioms are used in spoken language and therefore, it is easy for the students to understand the culture.

## Materials and Methods

The research is based on qualitative and quantitative methodologies. In qualitative methodology the researcher analyses the effectiveness of the translations of the students. Accordingly, comparative and descriptive methods are used. The comparative method is used to compare the Target text with translation theories and the descriptive method is used to describe the data by analyzing whether it is aligned with the aim of the study. This method gives more space to get the information for supporting the study. Using this method, the researcher is expecting to identify the problematic areas in the translation of idioms and to explain the appropriate translations with relevant justifications. The Undergraduates of the Department of Translation Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna are selected as the participants.

*Data Collection*

The data for the study is collected in the following ways;

1. Primary Data Sources:

   Classroom Assignment conducted for the Undergraduates of the Department of Translation Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna is considered as the primary data source. Two types of Translation tests were given, firstly, from English-Tamil and secondly, from Tamil-English.

2. Secondary Data Sources:
   Related books and e-sources are secondary data sources. All these data are collected from the Library of the University of Jaffna and websites. When focusing on the books related to translation the following books are important sources.

   a) Baker.M, (1992). *In other words, A course book on Translation*, London and New York: Routledge.

   b) Nida.E.A, (1991). *Theories of Translation. Language and Culture in Translation Theories,* Volume 4.

**Results and Discussion**

Idioms are a part of the language and not all idioms carry direct equivalents in the target language because it is a linguistic expression that belongs to a certain language and its culture. Accordingly, it is impossible to adopt one translation technique. In terms of translating idioms several translation strategies are applied since they express connotative and denotative meanings in accordance with the language. This study focuses on translating Ten English to Tamil idioms and ten Tamil-to-English idioms.
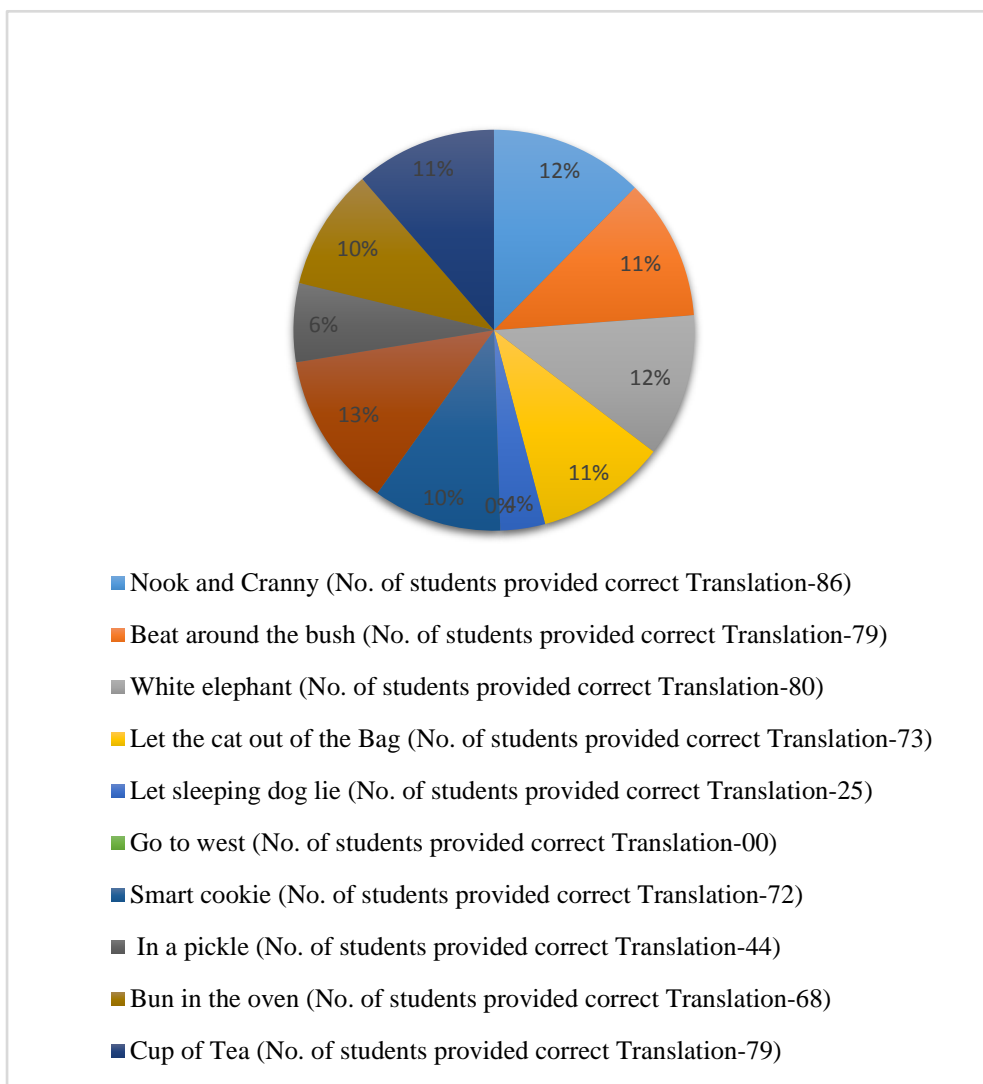
*Translation from English to Tamil*

Ten idioms were given for the translation and they were written in sentences. When translating such idioms from English into Tamil the following strategies proposed by Mona Baker (1992) are adopted.

1. Using an idiom of similar meaning and form

This strategy means *using the idiom in the Target language that conveys the same meaning as the Source language idiom and includes equivalent lexical items (Baker, 1992, p.72).*

**Figure 1:**

*Idiom Translation- English to Tamil*



- Nook and Cranny (No. of students provided correct Translation-86)
- Beat around the bush (No. of students provided correct Translation-79)
- White elephant (No. of students provided correct Translation-80)
- Let the cat out of the Bag (No. of students provided correct Translation-73)
- Let sleeping dog lie (No. of students provided correct Translation-25)
- Go to west (No. of students provided correct Translation-00)
- Smart cookie (No. of students provided correct Translation-72)
- In a pickle (No. of students provided correct Translation-44)
- Bun in the oven (No. of students provided correct Translation-68)
- Cup of Tea (No. of students provided correct Translation-79)

Accordingly, this strategy is applied to the following idiom by the students who produced the correct translation, but, other students did not find the correct equivalent due to the unfamiliarity of the idiom.

a) **Source Text:** I could go on and on, I know every Nook and Cranny of the house.

   **Target Text:** எனக்கு அந்த வீட்டின் **மூலைமுடுக்கெல்லாம்** தெரியுமென்பதால் என்னால் தொடர்ந்து செல்ல முடியும்

**Figure 2:**

*Idiom Translation – Tamil to English*



2. Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form.

*This category includes the idioms which have a similar meaning to the source language idiom in the target language but use different lexical items. (Baker, 1992, p.74).*

The following idioms are translated using the aforesaid strategy.

a) **Source Text:** Let's be frank and don't beat around the bush

**Target Text:** வெளிப்படையாக இருப்போம் சுற்றிவளைத்துப் பேசவேண்டாம்.

**b) Source Text:** She is a smart cookie

   **Target Text:** அவள் கற்பூரப்புத்திகொண்டவள்

3. Translation by paraphrase

   This is the popular way of translating idioms when the source idiom cannot be translated using any one of the techniques: literal translation, dynamic equivalence, and cultural equivalence. Accordingly, the following idioms are translated by the students appropriately using the above strategy. However, students who produced the wrong translation tried to adopt one of the above-mentioned strategies and it led to producing the wrong translation. The proper translations of the idioms are as follow;

   **a) Source Text:** Soon, I realized that the old car was difficult to maintain and it was like a **white elephant.**

   **Target Text**: பழைய காரைப் பராமரிப்பது கடினமானது என விரைவில் உணர்ந்துகொண்டேன், இதற்கு **தேவையில்லாமல் அதிகசெலவு செய்யவேண்டியிருந்தது**.

   **b) Source Text:** John didn't look surprised at all. Harry must have **let the cat out of the Bag** about his surprise birthday celebration**.**

   **Target Text:** ஜோன் அதனைப்பார்த்து அச்சரியப்படவில்லை. அவனை ஆச்சரியப்படுத்தும் வகையில் நாம் ஏற்பாடு செய்த பிறந்தநாள் கொண்டாட்ட **இரகசியத்தை** ஹரி அவனுக்குச் சொல்லியிருக்க வேண்டும்.

   **c) Source Text:** The newly appointed secretary is always **in a pickle** because of carelessness

   **Target Text:** புதிதாக நியமிக்கப்பட்ட செயலாளர் கவனக்குறைவால் எப்போதும் **குழப்பமான சூழ்நிலையிலேயே** இருக்கின்றார்

   **d) Source Text:** The doctor told her that she has **a bun in the oven**

   **Target Text:** அவள் **கர்ப்மாக இருப்பதாக** வைத்தியர் அவளிடம் கூறினார்.

   **e) Source Text:** Dance is not my **cup of Tea**
      **Target Text:** நடனம் எனக்குப் **பிடித்தவிடயமல்ல**.

**4.** Translation by Dynamic equivalence

When the idioms are unable to be produced using the above strategies dynamic equivalence is the possible procedure that helps to produce the effective output in the target language. Accordingly, the following idioms are translated using the procedure.

   **a) Source Text:** Let the sleeping dog lie

   **Target Text:** தொந்தரவு இல்லாத விடயங்களைப் பெரிதுபடுத்த வேண்டாம்.

   **b) Source Text:** He had gone to the west

   **Target Text:** அவன் காலமாகிவிட்டான்

*Translation from English to Tamil*

To identify the student's knowledge in translating idioms from Tamil to English ten idioms that are familiar in day-to-day life were given. Accordingly, to produce effective reader-friendly target idioms the following strategies are applied.

1.  Using an idiom of similar meaning and form
    **a) Source Text:** பணத்தை சம்பாதிப்பதற்கு ஏதேனும் வேலையைத் தேடு ஆகாயத்தில் கோட்டை கட்டாதே.

      **Target text: Don't build a castle in the air,** just find some work to earn money

    **b) Source Text:** நான் அவளுடைய பிறந்தநாளை மறந்ததை மனதில்வைத்து அவள் எனது பிறந்தநாளிற்கு வாழ்த்துமடல் அனுப்பாமல் **பழிக்குப் பழி வாங்கிவிட்டாள்.**

      **Target text:** She didn't send me a birthday card. I think it was a **tit-for-tat** because I forgot her birthday.

    **c) Source Text:** வறுமையிலிருந்த நண்பனுக்கு தக்கசமையத்தில் குமார் கை கொடுத்தான்

      **Target text:** Kumar **lends a hand** to his friend in needy on time**.**

d) **Source Text:** அந்தப்பாழடைந்த வீட்டினுள் நுழைந்தபோது தனிமையை விரும்புபவர்களைக் கூட அச்சம் கொள்ளச்செய்யும் **மயான அமைதி** நிலவியது.

**Target text:** When entered into the abandoned house, **a dead silence** remained which can turn any solitary person to get scared.

2. Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form
   a) **Source Text:** வரவுக்குத் தகுந்த செலவு செய்.

   **Target text:** To cut the coat according to the cloth.

   b) **Source Text:** ஒருவன் அபிமானத்திற்குப் பாத்திரமாய் இரு.

   **Target text:** Be in one's good book

3. Translation by Dynamic Equivalence

When there is no similar meaning and form in the Source and Target idioms the translator has to apply another equivalent procedure. Accordingly, the following idioms are identified under dynamic equivalence.

   a) **Source Text:** அடுத்த தெருவில் ஒரு பச்சை மட்டை விழுந்திருக்கிறது.

   **Target Text:** Someone has kicked the bucket in the adjoining Street

   b) **Source Text:** காணி வாங்கித்தருவதாகக் கூறி பணத்தைப்பெற்று அவர்களுக்குத் தண்ணீர் காட்டிவிட்டான்.
   c)
   **Target Text:** He is a nemesis because he got money saying he will help to buy the land.

   d) **Source Text:** எனக்கு ஏற்கனவே காது குத்தியாச்சு

   **Target Text:** Do not try to deceive me. You can't.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

According to the analysis depicted in the pie charts, it is clear that the understanding of the idioms varies. Most of the students have translated the following idioms correctly.

   a. I could go on and on, I know every **Nook and Cranny** of the house.
   b. Let's be frank and don't **beat around the bush.**

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c. Soon, I realized that the old car was difficult to maintain and it was like a **white elephant.**
d. The corona virus problem is a **hard nut to crack.**
e. Dance is not my **cup of Tea.**

க. பணத்தை சம்பாதிப்பதற்கு ஏதேனும் வேலையைத் தேடு **ஆகாயத்தில் கோட்டை கட்டாதே.**

ப. அந்தப்பாழடைந்த வீட்டினுள் நுழைந்தபோது தனிமையை விரும்புபவர்களைக் கூட அச்சம் கொள்ளச்செய்யும் **மயான அமைதி** நிலவியது.

ஈ. காணி வாங்கித்தருவதாகக் கூறி பணத்தைப்பெற்று அவர்களுக்குத் **தண்ணீர் காட்டிவிட்டான்.**

னை. பையனுக்கு எப்போ **கால்கட்டு** போடப்போறீங்க

To translate idioms from English to Tamil and Tamil to English it is impossible to adopt one translation procedure, a variety of translation strategies are applied to express connotative and denotative meanings according to the target language. When translating idioms, the following strategies of Mona Baker (1992) are adopted.

1. Using an idiom of similar meaning and form
2. Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form
3. Translation by paraphrase

These are appropriate translation procedures to bring out the intended meaning of the idioms. Further, dynamic equivalence is also applied when there is a need for connotative equivalence in the target language. In this regard, Mona Baker's strategies for translating idioms are useful procedures to bring out the Target idioms effectively.

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