

Negotiating Meaning Across Cultures: A Corpus-Based Study of English-Hindi Idiomatic Expressions

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the complexities of translating idiomatic expressions across English and Hindi, two linguistically and culturally distinct languages. Idioms, with their figurative meanings and cultural nuances, present significant challenges in translation, often leading to loss of meaning or cultural misinterpretation. This study explores how cultural differences influence the translation process and examines strategies employed to address these challenges. Through a comparative analysis of selected idiomatic expressions in both languages, the paper highlights issues such as the lack of direct equivalents, cultural references, and the impact of these factors on effective communication. By analysing both literal and adapted translations, the research provides insights into the effectiveness of various translation strategies, including adaptation, explanation, and localization. The study also considers the role of cultural context in shaping idiomatic expressions and discusses implications for translators working in cross-cultural settings. The findings aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection between language and culture in translation practices, offering practical recommendations for achieving more accurate and culturally sensitive translations.

Keywords: Idiomatic Translation, Cultural Differences, Translation Strategies, English-Hindi Comparative Analysis, Cross-Cultural Communication

Introduction

Idioms are fixed expressions or phrases whose meaning isn't immediately obvious from the individual words. They often have a figurative meaning that's different from their literal

interpretation. Idioms are a way to convey complex ideas or emotions concisely and often reflect cultural context, values, social norms, shared experiences and references. They're commonly used in everyday language, literature, and informal speech. Literal translations of idioms can sometimes lead to confusion or misunderstanding.

For example, English Idiom: "Throw in the towel" – To give up or admit defeat.

Literal Hindi Translation: (/ɦɑːtʰkʰəɾeː kərnɑː/) – To raise one's hands.

Hindi Idiom: – To raise one's hands to surrender/ admit defeat.

The idiom "throw in the towel" originates from the sport of boxing. In boxing, when a trainer or a fighter wants to concede defeat, they throw a towel into the ring as a signal to the referee and the audience that they are surrendering or that the fighter can no longer continue the match. The metaphorical use of the phrase has broadened to mean giving up or admitting defeat in any context, not just in sports. So, when someone "throws in the towel," they are choosing to stop trying or resign from a situation.

Idioms are deeply rooted in cultural and historical contexts of a language, making their translation particularly challenging. Understanding the cultural backdrop is crucial for accurate translation as idioms often embody specific cultural references. The translation of idiomatic expressions between languages is a complex area of study that involves both linguistic and cultural dimensions.

Translating idioms between English and Hindi involves more than just linguistic conversion; it requires a nuanced understanding of cultural differences that shape language use. English Idioms often reflect Western culture; historical events, societal norms and everyday life of English-speaking countries whereas Hindi Idioms reflect traditional values, historical events, and local customs specific to Hindi-speaking regions in South Asian culture.

This paper aims to investigate how cultural differences affect idiom translation between English and Hindi, the challenges faced by translators when conveying idiomatic expressions across these languages and analyses various translation techniques and strategies employed to address cultural nuances.

Literature review

Theoretical Frameworks in Translation Studies

1. *Eugene Nida's Theory of Translation*: Nida's '*Science of Translating*' emphasizes the communicative approach to meaning, viewing translation as a complex communicative process involving encoding and decoding. He highlights the crucial role of culture in this process, noting that both the sender and receiver of the message should share a common cultural background. According to Nida, "Translation is not simply about matching surface forms through correspondence rules but is a more intricate process involving analysis, transfer, and restructuring."

In his books '*Toward a Science of Translating*' (1964) and '*The Theory and Practice of Translation*' (1969) Nida talks about the concept of Dynamic and Formal equivalence. Formal equivalence focuses on preserving the exact wording and structure of the source text to maintain its form and meaning, while dynamic equivalence (Functional Equivalence) emphasizes conveying the original text's intended effect and meaning in a way that feels natural and understandable in the target language.

Following the Dynamic Equivalence we can focus on conveying the meaning and function of the idiom rather than a literal translation. The focus is on how the idiom functions in the target language and culture. This theory is particularly relevant to idiomatic expressions, where a direct translation often fails to capture the idiom's nuanced meaning (Nida, 1964). Translators aim to find an equivalent idiom or expression in the target language that has the same impact or effect as the original, even if it is not a direct translation.

2. *J. C. Catford's Translation theory*: In the book '*A Linguistic theory of Translation*' (1965), Catford talks about adaptation which involves modifying cultural references or elements in the source text to better fit the cultural and linguistic context and expectations of the target audience. When translating idioms one can try to retain its essence by using cultural references more familiar to the target audience, to maintain the idiom's original tone and style.

3. *Hans Vermeer's Skopos Theory*: Developed by Vermeer in the late 1970s and outlined in his book '*Skopos and Commission in Translational Action*,' (1984), Skopos Theory highlights that the main aim of translation is to achieve the target text's intended purpose (skopos). This approach directs translation strategies according to the text's function and audience, influencing how idioms are rendered to meet the target audience's needs and expectations effectively.

4. *Peter Newmark's Theory of Communicative Translation*: Communicative translation is a key component of Newmark's broader translation theory and is specifically detailed in his work '*A Textbook of Translation*' (1988). The primary goal is to convey the meaning of the source text in a way that is natural and easily understood by the target audience. This approach emphasizes achieving a similar response or effect in the target language as the original text intended for its audience. This theory is centered on making the translated text as effective and engaging for the target audience as possible, focusing on readability, flexibility and cultural appropriateness.

Cultural Substitution – Another translation strategy in which a source-language idiom or culturally specific element is replaced with a target-language equivalent that preserves meaning and impact in the target culture. This strategy has been discussed and developed in various ways by Baker (1992), Newmark (1988), and is conceptually related to Nida's (1964, 1969) dynamic equivalence theory.

These frameworks provide translators with various approaches and tools for effectively dealing with idioms, balancing the need for literal accuracy with cultural and contextual appropriateness.

Challenges in Translating Idiomatic Expressions

Translating idiomatic expressions poses unique challenges due to their embedded cultural and contextual meanings. Idioms often have specific cultural connotations that may not have direct equivalents in the target language.

For example, the English idiom "kick the bucket" (meaning "to die") lacks a direct Hindi counterpart and thus requires a translation that conveys the intended meaning without literal translation (Kenny, 1998).

In addition, the concept of "translatability" plays a critical role in this process. Certain idioms may be untranslatable due to the absence of corresponding idioms or cultural references in the target language (Catford, 1965).

For example, the English idiom "let the cat out of the bag" meaning "to reveal a secret" necessitates an understanding of both linguistic and cultural subtleties in Hindi to find an appropriate equivalent or paraphrase.

Finding Strategies for Translating Idiomatic Expressions

To address the challenges of idiomatic translation, researchers have identified several strategies such as modulation, adaptation, cultural substitution, communicative translation, etc. Looking at the above theories, we can say that one needs to remember the dynamic equivalence and text's intended purpose (skopos), when translating idioms.

For example, English Idiom: "Bite the bullet" – To face a painful and difficult situation bravely.

Literal Hindi Translation: (/go:li: tʃəba:na:/ka:ʃna:/) – Could be confusing without context.

Culturally Adapted Translation: (/səhənkərna:/) – Means "to endure," which conveys the meaning without the literal imagery.

The phrase is thought to have originated from the historical practice of having soldiers bite on a bullet to endure pain during surgery without anaesthesia. In modern usage, it signifies facing a tough situation bravely or making a hard decision despite the discomfort it may bring.

Cultural context shapes language use, including idiomatic expressions therefore translators must be adept at navigating cultural differences to ensure that the idioms resonate with the target audience. For instance, the cultural context of a Hindi-speaking audience may

influence the choice of idiomatic expressions that are familiar and meaningful to them, even if they differ from the English source.

The role of Literature and Media in Translation of Idioms

Literature: In literary works, idiomatic expressions are often adapted creatively to retain the original tone and style. For instance, in translated novels, poetry or plays, translators may use culturally relevant idioms to maintain the narrative’s emotional impact. Translating Shakespeare’s idioms into Hindi may involve significant adaptation to maintain the original tone and style

Media: In movies and TV shows, subtitling and dubbing often involves adapting idiomatic expressions to ensure they make sense to Hindi-speaking audiences. For instance, translating humour or colloquial expressions might involve creating new phrases that resonate culturally. Idiomatic humour might be adapted to fit local comedic sensibilities.

Data Analysis

A comparative analysis of Hindi and English idioms to explore how cultural differences impact the translation of idiomatic expressions and to identify strategies for effective translation.

Table 1: List of idioms which have an equivalent in English-Hindi

	Hindi Idiom	Translation	English Idiom
1.	/sɑːp bʰiː məreː ɔːrlaːtʰiː bʰiː nət̪uːt̪eː/	The snake should die, but the stick should not break (Achieving a goal without negative repercussions)	Have your cake and eat it too (Having two conflicting things simultaneously)
2.	/pʰuːl suːŋgʱi keː rɛfnɑː/	Eat very little	Eat like a bird

3.	/ro:zi: ro:ti:/	Basic means of support	Bread and butter
4.	/e:kti:r se: do: nɪʃa:ne:/	Achieve two results by doing one thing	Kill two birds with a stone
5.	/əḍḥə d̄zəl gəgəri: t̄ʃələkət d̄za:e:/	A half-filled container spills more water	An empty vessel makes the most noise
6.	/na:t̄ʃ nə d̄za:ne: a:ŋgən t̄e:d̄ʰa:/	Not knowing how to dance but calling the courtyard crooked	A bad workman blames his tools
7.	/ʊlʈa: t̄ʃo:rko:t̄va:l ko: ḍā:t̄e:/	When caught, the thief scolds the policeman	Pot calling the kettle black
8.	/d̄za:n h̄e: to: d̄zəh̄a:n h̄e:/	If there is life, then there is the world	Health is wealth
9.	/u:n̄t̄ ke: m̄onḥ me:n d̄zi:ra:/	A cumin seed in a camel's mouth (Indicating something insignificant in a large context)	A drop in the ocean
10.	/d̄zəb d̄za:go: t̄əb səʋe:ra:/	Whenever you wake up, the day starts	Better late than never
11.	/ta:l məʋo:l kərna:/	To evade or avoid something	Beat around the bush (To avoid talking about something)
12.	/a:sma:n se: gire: kḥəd̄zu:r me:n ət̄ke:/	Moving from a bad situation to one that is even worse.	Out of the frying pan into the fire
13.	/du:sro:n ke: gḥər ka: t̄ʃʊlḥa: zja:da: gərəm/	People often think others have it better	The grass is always greener on the other side
14.	/sukḥ d̄okḥ ka: sa:t̄hi:/	At all times – both good and bad	Through thick and thin

15.	/ā:kʰḍ: ka: ta:ra:/	Someone whom you are very fond of	Apple of my eye
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Table 2: List of Hindi idioms with possible translation in English

	Hindi Idiom	English Translation	Explanation
1.	/əkəl pər pəṭṭʰər pəṇḍa:/	Stone falling on the intellect	To have a lapse in judgment (Google Translate, 2024)
2.	/əpne: mōḥ mījā: mīṭṭʰu: bəṇna:/	To become parrot in one's own mouth	To boast about oneself or To sing one's own praises
3.	/əpne: pɛ:ro:n pɛ: kʰəṛa: fīo:na:/	To stand on one's own feet	To be self-reliant
4.	/əpna: ollu: si:ḍḍʰa: kərna:/	To straighten one's own owl	To serve one's own interests
5.	/əṅga:ro:n pər le:ṭna:/	To lie on heated charcoal	To be in a very uncomfortable or painful situation
6.	/əpna: sa: mōḥ le: kər rəḥ ḍḍa:na:/	To be left with a face like one's own	To be left with a dumbstruck or bewildered expression
7.	/əpni: kʰṛṭṭi: a:p pəka:na:/	To cook one's own porridge	Pursuing own interests or objectives independently of others (self serving)
8.	/əṅgu:ṭʰa: ṭʰa:p/	Thumb-marked	Illiterate or uneducated
9.	/əṇḍḍḍər pəṇḍḍḍər ḍḍi:le: fīo:na:/	Loosening of ribs and bones or parts	To be in a rundown condition

10.	/əpna: sər o:kʰli: me: dɛ:na:/	To put one's head in the mortar	To put oneself in a difficult or troublesome situation
11.	/əkəl ke: gʰo:ɽe: do:ɽa:na:/	Running the horses of intellect (Google Translate, 2024)	To apply one's intellect
12.	/əpna: əpna: ra:g əla:pna:/	To sing one's own tune	To emphasize one's own perspective or point of view regardless of others' viewpoints or needs
13.	/ã:ɽo:n me: bəl pəŋɖa:/	To have twists/ knots in intestines	To be under extreme stress or strain
14.	/ge:fu:n ke: sa:tʰ gʰu:n pɪsna:/	Weevil getting grounded with wheat	To be adversely affected along with others in a situation or to be caught in the crossfire
15.	/a:sma:n sɪr pe: tu:ɽna:/	The sky breaking on the head	To face a major crisis/ catastrophe
16.	/tʃo:ɽa: mʊnʰ bəɽi: ba:tʃ/	Small mouth big talk	Someone speaking beyond capacity or making grand claims despite their limited position or status
17.	/gʊla:bi: səpne:/	Rose-colored/ pink dreams	Idealistic dreams
18.	/kʰəja:li: pʊla:ʊ bəna:na:/	To make imaginary pilaf (rice dish)	To indulge in unrealistic or fanciful thinking, often daydreaming about things that are unlikely to happen
19.	/na:ko:n tʃəne: tʃəba:na:/	To chew gram with one's nose	To face severe difficulties

20.	/le:ne: ke: de:ne: pəɾna:/	Have to give instead of take	To be caught in a dilemma (Google Translate, 2024)
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Table 3: List of English idioms with possible translation in Hindi

	English Idiom	Hindi Translation	Explanation
1.	Under the weather	/mɔ:səmke: ni:tʃe:/	Feeling ill due to the weather
2.	A blessing in disguise	/tʃʊpa: fʊa: əʃɪrva:ɖ/	Something that appears negative but results in a positive outcome.
3.	Raining cats and dogs	/bɪlɪjā: ɔ:rkʊtʃe: bəɾəsɾeɦe: fɪẽ/	Raining heavily
4.	Full of beans	/pʰəlijo:nda:l se: bʰəra: fʊa:/	Energetic and lively
5.	Break the ice	/bəɾəftʊ:ɖna:/	To initiate conversation to ease tension/ take the first step (Google Translate, 2024)
6.	The ball is in your court	/gɛ:ndʱ a:pke: pa:le: me: fɪe:/	It's your turn to take action or make a decision
7.	Putting all your eggs in one basket	/səbʰi: əndʱe: e:ktʊ:kri: me: ɖa:lna:/	Risking everything on a single plan or venture
8.	Snowed under	/bəɾfke: ni:tʃe: ɖəba: fʊa:/	Overwhelmed with too much work or to be busy
9.	Spill the beans	/pʰəlijā:/ da:lgɪra:na:/	Reveal a secret or disclose information

10.	A piece of cake	/ke:k ka: e:ktʊkɔ:ɔ:/	Something very easy to do
11.	In a pickle	/ə'tʃa:r me:/	In a difficult or tricky situation.
12.	Eat your words	/əpne: ʃəbɔ̃ kʰa:na:/	Admit that what you said was wrong
13.	Salt of the earth	/prɪtʰvi: ka: nəmək/	A person of great worth and reliability (Google Translate, 2024)
14.	Bite off more than you can chew	/ɪtʰna: ka:ʔo: dʒɪtʰna: tʃəba: səko:/	Take on more responsibility than you can handle
15.	Walk on eggshells	/əŋɔ̃de: ke: kʰo:l pe: tʃəlna:/	Act cautiously to avoid upsetting someone
16.	Go bananas	/dʒa:o: ke:le:/	Go crazy or become very excited
17.	Barking up the wrong tree	/gələʔ pe:dpərbʰo:ɪkna:/	To pursue a mistaken or misguided course of action
18.	Hit the nail on the head	/sɪrpərki:lma:rna:/	To be right about something or to address a matter precisely
19.	Hot potato	/gərəma:lu:/	A controversial or difficult issue
20.	Bring home the bacon	/be:kəŋʰərla:na:/	Earn a living or provide for one's family

Discussion

Proper idiom translation ensures that the intended message is conveyed clearly and accurately therefore when trying to translate idioms we have to keep in mind the following points:

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- Cultural Context: Understand how idioms reflect cultural attitudes and societal norms in both languages.
- E.g.:-/u:nʃke: mən^h me: be:kən/
- Impact on Communication: Misinterpreted idioms can lead to confusion or miscommunication.
- Case Studies: Analyze specific examples of idiomatic expressions and their translations.
- Audience Perception: Consider how different audiences, (native speakers of English and Hindi in this case) perceive and react to idiomatic expressions in translations. This could involve surveys or interviews to gauge how well idioms are understood or appreciated.

Strategies for Effective Translation

1. *Adaptation* (Finding contextual Equivalents), use idioms or expressions that convey similar meanings in the target language, potentially altering the core message to fit local context.
2. *Explanation* (Providing Context), provide a brief explanation when no direct equivalent exists.
3. *Localization* (Cultural Relevance), use idiomatic expressions that resonate with the cultural context of the target language. For example, using local proverbs or sayings to capture the essence of the original idiom.

Conclusion:

The translation of idiomatic expressions between English and Hindi presents a complex interplay of linguistic and cultural factors. Theoretical frameworks such as dynamic equivalence, adaptation and communicative translation offer valuable insights into addressing these challenges. Strategies like modulation, adaptation, and equivalence provide practical approaches to translating idioms effectively. Understanding cultural context remains crucial for ensuring that translations resonate with the target audience as effective translation often involves more than finding direct equivalents.

Humour often relies on idiomatic expressions that are culturally specific. Idioms can carry emotional weight that is hard to replicate across cultures. Translators must consider the emotional resonance of idioms and find equivalents that evoke similar feelings in the target audience.

Translators often face challenges in maintaining the original tone and style while translating idiomatic expressions in literature. For example, translations of Shakespeare's plays into Hindi must navigate idiomatic expressions that are deeply tied to Elizabethan culture.

Films and television shows often require idiom adaptation to ensure that jokes and cultural references are understood by the target audience. For example, translating idiomatic expressions in comedy shows may involve creating new jokes that fit the cultural context. The Translator's Background may also have an effect on Idiom Translation. Understanding that in different cultures, expressions related to sports or other activities might have different implications helps in finding suitable translations.

Analysing specific case studies can provide insights into translation strategies. Future research could further explore the effectiveness of these strategies in various translation contexts and the impact of cultural nuances on idiomatic expression translation. Further exploration could also focus on how technological tools and machine translation handle idiomatic expressions, the role of idioms in cross-cultural communication, how idiom translation varies across different genres and contexts, or examine the impact of globalization on idiom usage.

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