



TRANSLATING IDIOMS

Translator's Club – 26 October 2017

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1 What is an idiom?

- An idiom is “an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts” – *Longman’s Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (2007)*
- Examples:
 - Food for thought
 - Storm in a tea cup
 - Under the weather
 - To throw caution to the wind

2 Characteristics of idioms

1. Semantically, idioms have fixed, non-literal meanings.
2. Structurally, idioms have the following characteristics:
 - a. multiword expressions (i.e., they are made up of more than one word)
 - b. fixed word order (i.e., the words in an idiom cannot be rearranged)
 - * *it's raining dogs and cats*
 - c. words cannot be added to idioms
 - * *she pulled her brother's **left** leg*
 - d. words cannot be removed from idioms
 - * *spill beans*
 - e. words cannot be replaced with other words in idioms
 - * *bury **a** hatchet* - * *Kicked the **pail***
 - f. cannot be used in passive voice
 - * *the bucket was kicked*

3 Why are idioms difficult to understand?

1. One of the main reasons idioms are difficult to understand is the failure to recognize them as idioms. The more difficult an expression is to understand, the more likely it will be recognized as an idiom, for example:
 - *She feels under the weather.*
 - *She pulled his leg.*
2. Some idioms have reasonable literal interpretations, for example:
 - *While we were sitting in the kitchen, she spilled the beans.*

3. The non-literal meanings of idioms, for example:

◦ *They got cold feet.*

4. Being unfamiliar with the expression.

5. Lacking the cultural knowledge necessary to understand and use idioms.

4 Why are idioms difficult to translate?

1. Lack of an equivalent idiom in the TL
2. A TL equivalent that has a different context of use
3. Frequency of idioms in written texts vary from language to another

5 Strategies for translating idioms

- Using a TL expression with the same or similar meaning and form
- Using a TL expression with the same or similar meaning but different form
- Paraphrasing the SL idiom

6 Examples

◦ A true friend does not stab in the back.

◦ الصديق الحقيقي لا يطعن في الظهر.

◦ She can't believe her eyes/ears.

◦ لا تستطيع أن تصدق عينيها/أذنيها.

◦ Our company is on the black list.

◦ شركتنا مُدرجة في القائمة السوداء.

◦ Let's turn a new page.

◦ لنفتح صفحة جديدة.

◦ My car is second hand.

◦ سيارتي مستعملة.

◦ There's too much monkey business.

◦ إن هناك كثير من الأمور التي تدعو إلى الريبة/ الأمور المريبة.

◦ There is a crying need for more schools.

◦ هناك حاجة ماسة للمزيد من المدارس.

◦ The thief was caught red-handed.

◦ قُبِضَ عَلَى اللصِّ مَتَلْبِساً.

◦ You can return books to the library after hours.

◦ يمكنك إعادة الكتب إلى المكتبة بعد ساعات الدوام.

◦ This new medicine is a double-edged sword.

◦ الدواء الجديد سلاح ذو حدّين.

◦ The ideas discussed in the meeting are ahead of their time.

◦ إن الأفكار التي تمت مناقشتها في الاجتماع سابقة لعصرها.

◦ It's raining cats and dogs.

◦ إنها تمطر بغزارة/ إنها تمطر كأفواه القرب.

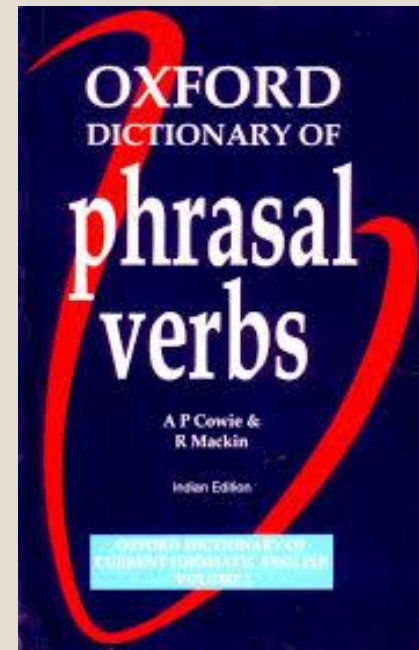
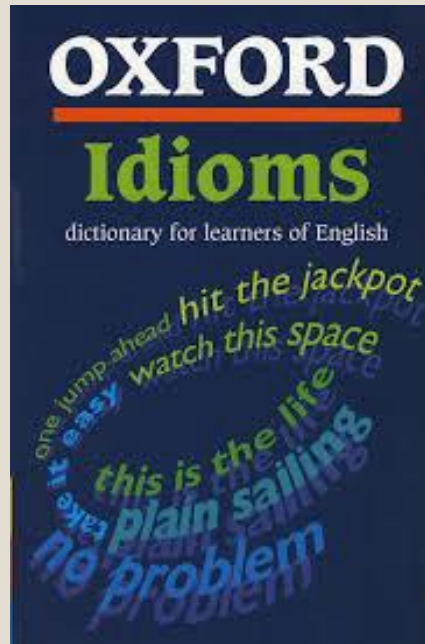
◦ He stood his ground although some people objected.

◦ تمسك برأيه بالرغم من اعتراض بعض الأشخاص.

◦ The team discovered their opponent's Achilles' heel.

◦ اكتشف الفريق نقطة ضعف خصمهم.

7 Dictionaries



8 Useful websites

- Oxford Learner's Dictionary: <http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>
- Online Oxford Collocation Dictionary of English: <http://oxforddictionary.so8848.com/>
- Al-Faisal Dictionary: http://www.alfaisaldictionary.com/themes/GREY_RED/Default.aspx?PN=Home&LANG=EN
- قاموس المعاني: <http://www.almaany.com/>
- مشروع المصطلحات الخاصة بالمنظمة العربية للترجمة: http://www.aot.org.lb/Attachments/Attachment44_107.pdf

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