

## Problems of Translating Idioms of Number

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### Abstract:

*English is a language particularly rich in Idioms. Without idioms English would lose much of its variety and humor both in speech and writing. Learning idioms must be considered an integral part of vocabulary learning. Idioms of number are very popular in everyday English language or the common conversations. It is hard to get to the end of the day without encountering some of them.*

*This paper deals mainly with English idioms of number which is considered critical for ESL teachers as well as learners and translators. Such idioms of number as “one foot in the grave”, “seventh heaven” and “dressed up to the nines” are much more straightforward and easy to decode and then to translate into Arabic, whereas others like “back to square one”, “at sixes and sevens”, “forty winks” are rooted in history and may cause difficulty for ESL learners to translate into Arabic. It is hypothesized that without a complete knowledge of both SL and TL cultures, the ESL learner will be at a complete loss to comprehend and then translate idioms of number. The idioms of number used in this paper are divided into three categories in terms of equivalence: first, those with total equivalence in terms of function; second, those with partial equivalence and third, those with no equivalence or untranslatable which represent the most difficult area for ESL learners to be translated into Arabic. It is found through this paper that most ESL learners are unfamiliar with idioms of number; therefore fail to achieve the equivalence. Furthermore, Some English idioms of number can be translated into its equivalent in Arabic are institutionalized (specific to culture or language). In other words,*

*though a considerable number of English idioms of number have Arabic counterparts, most of them are culture - specific.*

**Key words:** idioms of number, equivalence, culture, ESL learners, SL, TL

## **1. IMPORTANCE OF USING IDIOMS AND IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS**

An idiom is a group of words which has, as a whole, a different meaning from the meaning of its constituents. On the other hand, the idiomatic expression is not always grammatical, but it is established, accepted and used by native speakers of the language with a fixed structure and meaning. Idioms are used in different situations from friendly conversations and business meetings to more formal and written contexts. Without knowledge of idiomatic expressions, language learners' spoken and written English will remain stilted and foreign –sounding (Watson, 1998: 30). Idiomatic expressions have socio-cultural, historical, or political origins mostly. But despite the fact that many similar expressions can be found across languages, a lot of do not coincide exactly in their linguistic or semantic meaning and use (Laufer, 2000; Lionats, 2001; Zarei & Koosha, 2003).

Since English is so highly idiomatic and figurative, idiomatic expressions make up the heart of the language, giving it colour, feeling, charm and precision (Adkins , 1968 : 35). Thus to be competent in understanding and using idioms is in fact paramount to have a good command of the depth of vocabulary. Furthermore, knowledge of idioms correlates highly with vocabulary breadth (Milton, 2009; McGavigan, 2009)

Accordingly, the frequent use of idioms makes ESL learners fluent speakers. Moreover, idiomatic expressions that give language variety help ESL learners cope with culture, customs, and lifestyle of the TL.

## 2. DEFINITION OF AN IDIOM

Different viewpoints appear to define idioms and understand what constitute them. According to the Webster dictionary an idiom is “an expression whose meaning can not be predicted from the usual meanings of its constituent elements“. But for Cain et al (2005: 66) an idiom is a “ figurative expression that usually can be interpreted literally but that takes a non literal meaning when used in a specific context”. Hartmann et al (1976:106-107) state two definitions for an idiom:

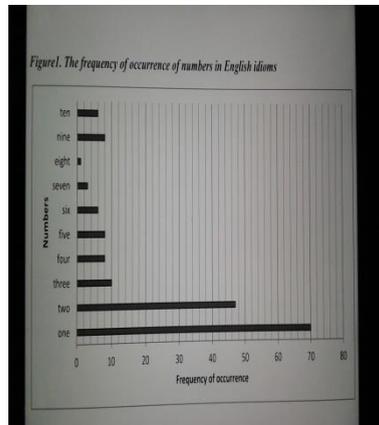
- (a) a group of words which has a special connotation and usually equal to the sum of the meanings of the individual words and which can not be translated literally into another language without the special meaning being lost, e.g. *that's not my cup of tea* .
- (b) A term used in a more technical sense by some linguists to refer to a linguistic or non –linguistic convention which takes on a certain symbolic significance in its context, e.g. a certain word or utterance used as a ‘password’ or understood only by a restricted audience or a certain look, gait or secret sign, etc.

## 3. ENGLISH NUMBER IDIOMS

In fact, the main function of numbers is to count things. In addition, they may express some additional meaning which reflect cultural point of view including number symbolism. Thousands of English number idioms can be found. The most common idioms of number used in this research are chosen and collected from different sources: *Idioms Organizer: Organized by metaphor, topic and key word (1992)*, *Longman Idioms Dictionary (2000)*, *The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms (2004)*.

Depending on its occurrence, the most common numbers used in the English idioms are *one* and *two*. Nevertheless, the most symbolic number but the least common one in the English

idioms is *seven*. On the other hand, those that are distinguished as not productive in the English idioms are numbers *six*, *eight* and *ten*. See Fig.1 below:



This paper is concerned only with English idioms of cardinal numbers : (*one , two , three , four ,five , six , seven , eight, nine, ten , twenty two , forty and fifty*) .

The most frequently used numbers in English idioms are *one* and *two*. These numbers do not have any symbolic meaning in the culture of English. Number *one* refers to something or somebody superior to all the others. However, number *two* is frequently associated with thinking or hesitating (e.g. *be in (or of ) two minds*) .Furthermore , it is used in the meaning of two alternatives or two conflicting and opposite principles (e.g. *ride two horses (at the same time), serve two masters.*)

Although number *three* does not communicate any specific meaning in the English idioms, it holds positive associations more frequently than negative ones (e.g. positive: *three cheers for*, negative: *three sheets to (or in) the wind*).

Number *four* in the idioms is typical for the meaning of four directions (e.g. *to the four winds*).

Number *five* is associated with the part of the body, namely, the hand (e.g. *give me five* is used when you want to hit someone's hand with your hand to show that you are very pleased). This idiom is assigned to slang and communicates

positive meaning. Besides, it is frequently used to refer to time (e.g. *take five* is a short form of ‘a five –minute break ‘that means to take a short break to relax )

Number *six* mainly has negative associations (e.g. *at sixes and sevens* gives the meaning of being in a state of total confusion ; this idiom originated as gambling slang and may be an alteration or corruption of Old French *cinque* (five) and *sice* (six).

Number *seven* is considered the most symbolic though the least common number in idiom. Originally, it is associated with something magical (e.g. *seven –league boots* means the ability to travel very fast on foot, but originally it comes from the French fairy story of *Hop-O’ My-Thumb*, in which magic boots enable the wearer to travel seven leagues at each stride .

Number *eight* is rare in the English idioms and only one idiom can be found (e.g. *one over the eight* means slightly drunk)

Number *nine* is used with the word ‘cloud’ which gives the idiom *on cloud nine* that refers to a ten –part classification of clouds in which *nine* was second highest .*On cloud nine* is interchangeable with the idiom *in seventh heaven* that communicates the meaning of being extremely happy .

Number *ten* is used in the original sense of counting something (e.g. *count to ten* implies counting to ten under your breath to prevent yourself from reacting angrily to something.)

However, the English idioms of number included in this research are (30) and can be summarized in table (1) below with their meanings:

|    | <b>English Idioms of Number</b>   | <b>Meanings</b>  |
|----|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1. | One foot in the grave (informal ) | Often humorous. Very old or very ill and close to death  |
| 2. | Back to square one                | Back to the starting point with no progress made.<br>Square one : may be a reference to a board game such as snakes and ladders , or may come from the national division of a football pitch into eight numbered |

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|     |                                   |  |
|-----|-----------------------------------|--|
|     |                                   | sections for the purpose of early radio commentaries   |
| 3.  | All in one piece                  | Safely , without damage  |
| 4.  | Put two and two together          | To make a correct guess or to draw conclusions   |
| 5.  | Be in (or of ) two minds          | Undecided  |
| 6.  | Two sandwiches short of a picnic  | A stupid or crazy person   |
| 7.  | As phony as a three-dollar bill   | Phony not genuine  |
| 8.  | Three Rs                          | The three basic skills in school- reading , (w)riting , (a)rithmetic   |
| 9.  | Three cheers for                  | Three successive hurrahs expressing appreciation or congratulation of someone or something.  |
| 10. | Four eyes (slang)                 | Used especially by children to refer to someone who wears glasses.(rude expression)  |
| 11. | On all four                       | Crawling on your hands and knees like a baby   |
| 12. | A four letter word                | A vulgar word  |
| 13. | Take five                         | To take a short break (about five minutes) to relax  |
| 14  | Five O'clock                      | Patch of stubble on the face of a man who hasn't shaved for at least a day   |
| 15. | Give me five (slang or informal)  | Hit someone's hand with your hand to show that you are very pleased.   |
| 16. | At sixes and sevens               | Being in a state of total confusion or disarray  |
| 17  | Six feet under (informal)         | Dead and buried (Traditional depth of a grave)   |
| 18. | Six of the best                   | A canning as a punishment .Traditionally with six strokes of the cane  |
| 19. | Seventh heaven                    | A situation of great happiness or a state of ecstasy ( from late Jewish and Muslim theology)   |
| 20. | Seven –league boots               | The ability to travel very fast on foot (French fairy story of <i>Hop-O'- My – Thumb</i> )   |
| 21. | Behind the eight ball ( informal) | In a difficult or dangerous position   |
| 22. | Pieces of eight                   | To describe money .Pieces of eight were old Spanish coins .The coin was worth eight reales. It can be found in historical pirate movies. |

|     |   |  |
|-----|---|--|
| 23. | On cloud nine                           | Being extremely happy  |
| 24. | The whole nine yards                    | Everything possible or available   |
| 25. | Dressed (up) to the nines<br>(informal) | Wearing fancy or very smart clothes for a special occasion   |
| 26. | Ten a penny                             | So common as to be practically worthless   |
| 27. | Nine times out of ten                   | On nearly every occasion   |
| 28  | Catch 22                                | A frustrating situation or difficulty from which there is no escape because of mutually conflicting or dependent conditions. (No –win situation ) .It is a classic statement taken from Joseph Heller's novel <i>Catch -22</i> |
| 29. | Forty winks                             | (Short nap) sleep  |
| 30. | Fifty-fifty                             | Dividing something equally   |

**Table (1) English Idioms with Meanings**

#### 4. TRANSLATING ENGLISH IDIOMS OF NUMBERS

Although there is a considerable number of English (SL) idioms of number that have Arabic (TL) counterparts , others may not have and therefore restricted to SL culture .Consequently ,when translating idioms of number from English (SL) into Arabic (TL) a translator may encounter serious problems .

According to Larson idioms should be translated with great care (1984:143) .He emphasized that: “the real danger comes in translating an idiom literally, since the result will usually be nonsense in the receptor language “

However, four strategies are recognized when translating idioms:

- a. Using an idiom with same meaning and form.
- b. Using an idiom with similar meaning but different form.
- c. Using paraphrase.
- d. Using omission.

(Baker, 1992: 69 )

It is to be mentioned that only three of these strategies will be adopted in this paper namely, a, b, and c

#### 4.1 Total Equivalence (similar in form and meaning)

Baker's strategy (a) translating the SL idiom with its very similar TL idiom in form and meaning means that the TL idiom should convey the same meaning and be of equivalent lexical item. (1992:70). This can be seen in the English idioms of number such as,

4.1.a It's no use of talking to the owner. The poor man has *one foot in the grave*.

4.1. b He's *in two minds* about whether or not to accept the offer.

4.1. c "Aha, *four eyes* ! You're nicked!

4.1. d Hi there little buddy, *give me five!*

The above idioms of number can be translated into their Arabic equivalents or counterparts where both form and meaning are similar. They can be rendered into the Arabic equivalents successively:

(4.1.a) رجله في القبر

(4.1.b.) ذو عقلين

(4.1.c) أربع عيون

(4.1.d) أعطني كفك

#### 4.2 Partial Equivalence (similar meaning but dissimilar form)

This strategy (b in Baker's words) indicates that the SL idiom should be translated with similar meaning but dissimilar form in the TL. Here the lexical item of an idiom is not maintained; instead the meaning of SL idiom is preserved. The following idioms of number are of good examples:

(4.2.a) We were able to *put two and two together* and discover who was sending the unwanted messages.

(4.2.b) The woman's excuses are so *phony as a three – dollar bill* and I do not believe any of them.

(4.2.c) I got down *on all fours* trying to find the coin I had dropped.

(4.2.d) The city worker stopped to *take five* after working hard all morning.

(4.2.e) He's *at sixes and sevens* .He's is confused about what to do.

(4.2.f) Sorry, I'm really *behind the eight ball* this month I can't make a contribution.

(4.2.g) My sister has been *on cloud nine* since she won the money in the contest.

(4.2.h) I hope it doesn't rain for the field trip , but the chances are probably *fifty –fifty* .

In these instances, the meaning of the SL idioms of number can be rendered into roughly the meaning of the TL idiom using a single or a group of words but not as an idiom itself .The translation of the above idioms of number into Arabic can be as:

( 4.2.a) أخذاً بالأسباب

(4.2.b) زائفة

(4.2.c) يمشي على أربع

( 4.2.d) يأخذ خمس دقائق استراحة

(4.2.e) رأساً على عقب

(4.2 f.) مفلس

(4.2g.) سعيدة جدا او في قمة السعادة

(4.2.h) بصورة متساوية او بالتساوي

### 3. NON - EQUIVALENCE (or zero equivalence)

Baker (1992: 68) points out three main problems of translating idioms. One main problem may be the lack of equivalence in the TL. Some idioms are culture – specific which means they may refer to some specific item or event common to that particular culture. Accordingly, it is difficult to translate such idioms. The translator is advised to use paraphrasing when facing an idiom in the SL that does not have a corresponding idiom in the TL .This can be found with such English idiom of number as *Catch 22*.For example:

(4.3.a) I can't get a job without a work permit, and I can't get a work permit without a job .It's a *catch 22 situation*.

Here, it is very difficult for the translator to render such an idiom into the TL even if he uses paraphrasing because according to Newmark while using this strategy components of sense will be missing or added as well as the emotive or pragmatic impact will be reduced or lost.(1988:109). Thus, *Catch 22* can be rendered into *الموقف الخاسر* which seems quite different in terms of form .It can be considered a culture – specific idiom . It is a classic statement taken from Joseph Heller's novel *Catch -22*.

Another problem that Baker mentions is that idioms may be used in both literal and idiomatic sense at the same time .Here if the TL idiom does not correspond to the SL idiom in terms of form and meaning , it is not easy to make a play of words and transfer the meaning .(Ibid)

Such a case can be seen with English idiom of number like *seventh heaven*. For example:

(4.3.b) The woman has been in *seventh heaven* since she moved to the new department.

In order to be able to make good translation and transfer the pun, the translator must find an equivalent in the TL. In Arabic the equivalent to *seventh heaven* can be *في السماء السابعة او في قمة السعادة*

However, this idiom is also culture –specific. In late Jewish and Muslim theology, there were considered to be seven heavens, and the seventh of these was the highest, where a state of eternal bliss was to be enjoyed.

Nevertheless, it is recommended that the translator should use the strategy of paraphrasing when encountering such type of idioms of number in the SL that have no or zero equivalence in the TL. But this does not help the translator to render the effect or impact of the SL idiom into the TL.

In brief, the table below shows the translation of some English idioms of number with its equivalent in Arabic:

| English Number Idioms          | Total Equivalence (Literal Translation) | Partial Equivalence       | None-Equivalence (Zero Equivalence) |
|--------------------------------|---|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| One foot in the grave          | رجله في القبر                           |                           |                                     |
| In two minds                   | ذو عقليين                               |                           |                                     |
| Four eyes                      | اربع عيون                               |                           |                                     |
| Give me five                   | اعطني كفاك                              |                           |                                     |
| put two and two together       | يضع اثنين واثنين سوياً                  | أخذاً بالأسباب            |                                     |
| phony as a three – dollar bill |   | زائفة                     |                                     |
| on all fours                   | على اربع                                | يمشي على اربع             |                                     |
| take five                      | خذ خمسة                                 | خذ خمس دقائق استراحة      |                                     |
| at sixes and sevens            | عند الستات والسبعات                     | راساً على عقب             | في حالة ارتباك شديد                 |
| behind the eight ball          | خلف الكرة الثامنة                       | مفلس                      |                                     |
| on cloud nine                  | في السماء التاسعة                       | في قمة السعادة            |                                     |
| fifty –fifty                   | خمسون في خمسون                          | بالتساوي او بصورة متساوية |                                     |
| Catch 22                       | امسك 22                                 |                           | الموقف الخاسر                       |
| Seventh heaven                 | السماء السابعة                          | في قمة السعادة            |                                     |
| Forty winks                    | اربعون غمزة                             |                           | قيلولة او غفوة                      |

## CONCLUSION

This paper comes up with the following conclusions:

1. Unfamiliarity with English idioms of number.
2. Idioms of number need careful consideration of the cultures of SL and TL on the part of the translator since such idioms express uniqueness of language and culture in which they are originated.
3. According to the investigation of the translation of some English idioms of number three categories can be identified starting from the less difficult to the more difficult :

- a. Idioms of number with total equivalence, i.e. both SL and TL have corresponding functions and expressions (similar form and meaning).
- b. Idioms of number with partial equivalence in terms of function, i.e. expressions and functions are language - specific or culture - specific. (similar meaning and dissimilar form )
- c. Idioms of number with no equivalence or zero equivalence and can not be translated or untranslatable. Therefore, paraphrasing which is the most appropriate strategy is suggested to be used.

To sum up, identical idioms of number are the easiest to master and comprehend and then to be translated into TL whereas the different idioms of number are the most difficult to comprehend and thus untranslatability may occur.

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