
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Idioms Across Cultures: A Corpus-Based Study of Translation Strategies in Amy Tan's Novels

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how English idioms are translated into Arabic in literary contexts, focusing on Amy Tan's novels *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Hundred Secret Senses*. The purpose is to investigate which strategies translators employ when faced with culturally and linguistically distant idiomatic expressions, and to assess how these strategies affect meaning transfer and stylistic impact. A specialised parallel corpus of 150 idioms was compiled, with 75 idioms drawn from each novel. Idioms were identified using Fernando's definition of idiomaticity and analysed according to Baker's taxonomy of translation strategies. The analysis combined quantitative counts of strategy use with qualitative readings of context to reveal patterns and explain translation choices. A chi-square test was applied to determine whether distributions differed significantly between the two novels. The results show a clear hierarchy of strategies. Omission was the most frequently applied (46.0%, 69 cases), reflecting the difficulty of finding Arabic counterparts for culturally bound idioms. Idioms of similar meaning but different form accounted for 25.3% (38 cases), demonstrating that translators often preserved figurative meaning while reformulating the expression in culturally accessible terms. Paraphrase was used in 18.0% of cases (27 idioms), while idioms of similar meaning and form were rare, appearing in only 10.7% (16 idioms). Statistical testing confirmed that the distributions across the two novels did not differ significantly. The findings highlight the cultural and linguistic distance between English and Arabic, which constrains direct idiomatic equivalence and pushes translators toward strategies that prioritise readability and functional adequacy. While omission ensures fluency, it reduces figurative richness, and paraphrase simplifies meaning at the expense of stylistic effect. By contrast, reformulation strategies show how translators balance semantic fidelity with cultural intelligibility. Overall, this study contributes empirical evidence about idiom-translation practices in modern literary texts. It underscores the need for culturally informed, meaning-oriented approaches in translator training and offers insights for cross-cultural literary translation.

KEYWORDS

idiom translation, Arabic-English, corpus-based study, Baker's strategies, literary translation, cultural equivalence, paraphrase, cross-cultural translation

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Idioms are a distinctive feature of all languages, combining figurative meaning with fixed lexical form. Their semantic opacity makes them difficult for both learners and translators, since the meaning of an idiom cannot usually be deduced from its individual components (Shojaei, 2012). As Rana (2016) notes, idioms are widely used in everyday communication, yet native speakers often employ them unconsciously, leaving non-natives struggling to grasp their figurative sense.

The English language is especially rich in idiomatic expressions, which appear in both formal and informal registers and play a significant role in shaping style and nuance. However, this idiomatic richness complicates cross-cultural translation. Idioms are often culture-bound, reflecting the values, beliefs, and everyday experiences of a speech community. When rendered into a typologically and culturally distant language such as Arabic, translators face considerable challenges of equivalence, style, and cultural intelligibility (Adelnia & Dastjerdi, 2011; Oualif, 2017).

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In the context of globalisation, the translation of idioms has become increasingly important for enabling cross-cultural communication, yet it remains one of the most persistent challenges in translation studies. Literary texts, in particular, depend heavily on idioms for figurative and stylistic effect, making their translation both necessary and problematic.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although translation studies have produced extensive theoretical insights, idioms remain difficult to render faithfully across languages. Al Mubarak (2017) observes that idiom translation between English and Arabic is especially problematic because of deep linguistic and cultural differences. The challenge is magnified in literary works, where idioms not only convey meaning but also contribute to characterisation, voice, and style.

Existing scholarship has often discussed idioms in general terms or in educational contexts, but relatively few studies have systematically investigated idiom translation in modern English novels rendered into Arabic. This leaves an empirical gap in understanding how translators handle idioms across culturally and linguistically distant languages, particularly within the domain of contemporary literature.

Amy Tan's novels, such as *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), are rich in culturally embedded idioms. Their Arabic translations offer a valuable opportunity to examine how translators negotiate between semantic fidelity and cultural accessibility, and to document the actual strategies employed.

1.3 Research Questions

This study addresses the following questions:

1. What is the overall distribution of Baker's (2011) idiom-translation strategies in the Arabic translations of idioms from *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Hundred Secret Senses*?
2. Do the strategy distributions differ between the two novels?
3. What challenges do translators face when rendering culturally bound idioms, and how are these addressed in context?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study makes several contributions to the field of translation studies. First, it provides empirical evidence on idiom-translation practices in English–Arabic literary translation, an area that has received limited scholarly attention. Second, by applying a corpus-based methodology to two idiom-rich novels, it demonstrates how quantitative analysis of strategy frequency can be combined with qualitative interpretation of context. Third, the findings have practical implications for translator training and literary translation practice, highlighting the need for culturally informed, meaning-oriented solutions when direct equivalence is unavailable.

Beyond these disciplinary contributions, the study also sheds light on how idioms function in Amy Tan's portrayal of immigrant identity and cross-cultural experience, and how these features are mediated for Arabic-speaking readers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Translation of Idioms

The concept of translation has been defined by various authors as the craft of replacing a statement or written message in one language with another statement or message in another language (Alhaysony, 2017). It is also considered a replacement of textual material in a language through equivalent content material from the target language (Aldanani, 2019).

Afshunpour and Memari (2014) provide thoughtful insights regarding idiom translation, indicating that it requires consideration of meaning and translation of certain phrases. Some idioms are culture-bound, and in languages with consistent idiomatic expressions, one idiom is usually substituted by another phrase. In idiom translation, there is no basis in the linguistic aspects of the phrase or similar image within the phrase, but rather in the function of the idiom. Thus, the source language phrase can be replaced by another language phrase with the same purpose in the target language culture.

Studies indicate that learning and understanding idioms has always been difficult (Alhaysony, 2017). This is partly because translating literary works involves symbols, aesthetics, and metaphoric characteristics that impact readers. Today, translation of modern literature incorporates an intercultural element embracing cultural diversity (Dickins, Hervey & Higgins, 2017). This explains why literary translators need competence in both target and source cultures to deliver accurate interpretations.

Idioms are defined as fixed expressions whose meaning cannot be inferred from the denotative meanings of the words constituting the idiom (Dickins, Hervey & Higgins, 2017). They are used interchangeably in written and spoken discourse with features including metaphorical nature, non-literal meaning of constituents, fixed and unchangeable syntactic form, and invariable meanings. In translating idioms, languages are separated by cultural boundaries, like the Semitic language (Arabic) and the Indo-European language (English). Translation of idioms involves three tasks: recognition of an idiom in a source language, its interpretation, and establishing its equivalent that accurately translates the source text into a target text, creating the same impact among readers.

2.2 Previous Studies Related to Translating Idioms

Figurative language, such as idioms and other expressions, is an important aspect of using and learning a language. Studies show that in linguistics, idioms are used figuratively and have arbitrary meanings (Rana, 2016). The use of figurative speech in areas like advertising derives from classical rhetoric, and these figures of speech are used not only in academic texts but also in everyday conversations (Rana, 2016). Idioms and other figurative language have become common in formal and informal conversations and in spoken and written contexts, hence their relevance in everyday life (Rana, 2016). Due to their everyday use, idioms have garnered attention from different scholars, though they still lack extensive research compared to other linguistics fields.

The ambiguity in definitions, characteristics, and elements comprising idioms has partly been why idioms and idiomatic expressions haven't been extensively explored by scholars due to ideological disagreements. Different definitions have been provided, with debates about whether idioms need to be ambiguous to be classified as such or whether they comprise more than one word. Idioms differ in nature, such as in their degree of modifiability and figurativeness, yielding the view that idioms are attributed more to their figurative degrees and literal language. Previous researchers have explored various topics within the context of idiom use and idiomatic expressions, including the significance of teaching idioms to second language learners and the effect of idioms on languages, such as English, in various contexts.

Idioms and other figurative expressions have been used to evaluate their influence in shaping how non-natives process them in a second language. Studies intended to understand whether exposure to native expressions affects non-natives and facilitates comprehension in the second language (Carrol, Conklin & Gyllstad, 2016). An investigation comparing Swedish idioms and congruent idioms aimed to ascertain whether items existing in both languages are utilised during processing. Results indicated that knowledge of the first language by non-natives is critical in early processing stages, and exposure to idiomatic expressions facilitates native-like processing in the second language.

Other studies have investigated animal-related idioms in human language in both Chinese and English. Duan, Cui, and Gao (2014) reveal that despite differences between the two languages in history, culture, customs, religions, thinking patterns, and geographical environments, both dialects express and explain emotions and social events through animals. Regarding cultural animal metaphors in both languages, many animal idioms have similar cultural connotations: cunning, greedy, and cruel for a wolf; timid and meek for a deer; adorable for a lamb; peaceful for a dove; and stupid and inflexible for a donkey. Other animal idiomatic metaphors contrast between the languages; for instance, in Britain, "fish" refers to people (e.g., "a big fish" means a tycoon, and "a queer fish" means a strange man), while in Chinese culture, it symbolises good wishes and abundance.

The use of idioms and idiomatic expressions has been explored in educational institutions. Robo's study (2014) addresses challenges faced by language translators, especially teachers, in teaching idioms and the main strategies used in delivery. Since idiomatic expressions are crucial to English, their translation and use require competence in the target language, making it difficult for primary and secondary school teachers. Translation strategies proposed included identical pairs of idioms, identical messages, and borrowing/loan translation.

Additional literature investigated the abilities of EFL prospective teachers to translate idioms and measure their awareness of available translation strategies (Abdelazim, 2019). The study comprised four-year English majors thought to be highly aware of English courses and translation. Results indicated 86.05% of these EFL prospective teachers failed the translation test, while 40.42% were unaware of translation strategies. This indicates the problematic nature of idiom translation in English and the lack of awareness of strategies for translating literary works, idiomatic expressions, and figures of speech between languages.

Research has also been conducted on the influence of idioms and their translation in the movie industry. Movies are among the most influential and popular mass media, and subtitles are inseparable from movies. Studies investigated procedures and strategies used to translate Hollywood movie titles from English to Persian. Translation procedures included borrowing, calque, literal translation, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation. Several Hollywood movie titles from 2010 were included in the study, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Clash of the Titans*, *Unstoppable*, *Inception*, *Iron Man 2*, *Needle*, and *Robin Hood* (Lotfollahi & Moinzadeh, 2012). The most frequently used translation strategies were literal translation and transliteration.

2.3 Difficulties in Translating Idiomatic Expressions

The difficulties encountered during idiom translation have been attributed to the ambiguity of their characteristics, definitions, and classification (Kovács, 2017). Translation is considered a process of rendering features and aspects of various target texts semantically, pragmatically, and culturally into another language. Studies show that translating idioms from one language to another involves various difficulties, including lexical, stylistic, grammatical, and cultural challenges (Ayuningtyas, Ifadah & Aimah, 2017). Other studies suggest that translating idiomatic expressions with culturally bound aspects has been challenging for many translators, partly because of culture-bound elements (Ayuningtyas et al.). Translation difficulties are usually analysed based on the quality of the translation product, and if less than half of the translated content is successful, it means the translator still faces difficulties in translating specific meanings of idiomatic expressions.

The English language is rich in idioms, as indicated by Rana (2016). Native English speakers commonly use idiomatic expressions daily, making idioms an indispensable part of the English language. This challenges non-English speakers to learn such expressions. Studies indicate that understanding these idioms, even by native speakers, has been problematic among varieties of

languages like American, Canadian, British, and Australian contexts (Rafatbakhsh & Ahmadi, 2019). Difficulties include the non-literalness of idioms, meaning they don't mean what they say literally. For example, "he spilt the beans" has little to do with literally spilling beans, making the literal sense of the phrase obscured and harder to recognise and accurately translate to another language (Irujo, 1986).

Additionally, there is the challenge of non-exposure or inadequate exposure to idioms, explained by native speakers using simplified language when speaking with non-native or second language speakers. Exposure of non-native speakers to idioms usually occurs in non-interactive situations, which are not as effective in extending idiom meanings. Such exposure would be more beneficial in interactive situations where learners can clarify meanings and receive feedback (Kovács, 2017). The challenge of correctly using idioms arises because of variations in formality, such as slang, colloquialisms, and formal idioms. Therefore, recognising and knowing idioms is not enough for a translator; understanding the context in which these idioms may be used is crucial.

Other challenges include the difficulty of obtaining the right equivalent for a particular word other than an adaptive one. Idiomatic expressions are defined as frozen language patterns allowing little or no variation in form while carrying meanings whose components cannot be individually inferred (Hashemian & Arezi, 2015). The lack of an equivalent fixed expression or idiom in the target language (TL) is another challenge. Adelnia and Dastjerdi (2011) express that problems arise when source language (SL) text is exchanged with related TL text. This problem manifests as a single word in one language with the same meaning in another, making it unrealistic to find equivalent idioms in the TL. This reflects the need for translators to know both cultures to assess and compare social, cultural, and geographical aspects to provide accurate understanding of language aesthetics and semantics.

Other studies indicate that challenges come from using an idiom in different contexts when it has a similar counterpart in the TL (Adelnia & Dastjerdi, 2011). The idiom in the SL usually has a similar connotation/meaning in the TL, but usage constraints include situations, contexts, and events where a translator can use the idiom. Idioms may be used in both idiomatic and literal senses in the source text (ST) simultaneously. This creates problems when translating to a target text (TT) because if the SL doesn't correspond with the TL, the idiom may not be successfully reproduced in the TT. Another problem is the differences in conventions between SL and TL relating to idiom use in particular contexts, written discourse, and frequency of use (Baker, 1992). All these problems impact idiom translation from one language to another.

Furthermore, culture presents serious challenges during idiom translation; hence, a translator should have a solid foundation in the TL culture. Research shows that "difficulties arise in the two processes of interpreting and translating idioms and fixed expressions from one language into another" (Shojaei, 2012). This is attributed to different connotations and aesthetics of various languages that reduce or bridge the gap between TL and SL. This has been exemplified through social factors resonating with both English and Arabic cultures, where some idioms are connected to the social context of the cultures (Oualif, 2017), including customs, morals, beliefs, and emotions. For instance, the idiom "He is backed up" in Arabic has socio-cultural connotations, including a preference for extended families with many brothers and sons by Arabs due to social rankings attributed to such aspects.

Another difficulty is poor competency of idioms by students and a general lack of cultural awareness in the idiomatic context. Poor student competency has been attributed to the deprivation of learning opportunities in the classroom. Other attributions include intentional omission of idioms, cultural differences, unknown vocabulary, and lack of experience with idiomatic expressions. These limitations stem from pragmatic, syntactic, and semantic features which make it harder to recognise, comprehend, and convert idiom meanings from source to target languages.

2.4 Strategies used in Translating Idiomatic Expressions

2.4.1 Idioms of similar form and meaning

This strategy involves translating idioms by replacing the source language idiom with a target language idiom that has a relatively similar meaning and linguistic form (Rasul, 2018). While this strategy would seem ideal, Baker highlights that finding matching idioms between SL and TL is uncommon (Baker, 2011). Idioms like "Lion's share" and "Two sides of the same coin" have similar meanings and forms across languages like Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and English. However, while structurally, the word "lion" is shadowed by "share" in the English idiom, the words are written starting with the equivalent of "share" in other languages (French, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish). The same principle applies to "two sides of the same coin". Table 1 illustrates examples of idioms with similar meaning and form across languages.

Table 1. Idioms with similar meaning and form (examples)

English	Lion's share	Two sides of the same coin
Arabic	حصة الأسد	وجهان لعملة واحدة
French	Part du lion	les deux faces d'une même médaille
Kurdish	پشکی شێر	دوو رووی یهك دراو
Persian	سهم شیر	دو روی يك سكه

Turkish	aslan payı	aynı paranın iki yüzü
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Even with this strategy, it's challenging to obtain idioms with identical structure and semantics across languages. However, similar cultures are likely to find related idioms, and fewer linguistic differences increase the likelihood of finding structurally and semantically related idioms (Baker, 2011).

2.4.2 Idioms of the same meaning but with different form

This approach depends on finding an idiom with a related connotation in the TL but with differing lexical items. It's appropriate when the first strategy fails to find direct equivalents regarding form and content. With this strategy, different metaphorical symbols in various languages deliver the same message, requiring the translator to find an equivalent idiom. Examples include "When pigs fly" and "It's all Greek to me" in English, which maintain their meaning in other languages despite different forms, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Idioms with similar meaning but dissimilar form (examples)

English	When pigs fly	It's all Greek to me
Arabic	لما يبيض الديك (when roosters lay eggs)	يتحدث باللغة الصينية (as if speaking in Chinese)
French	la semaine des quatre jeudis (when a week has two Thursdays)	c'est de l'hébreu pour moi (it's Hebrew to me)
Kurdish	كه نه مه له مانگ بيرا (when a month has no Saturday)	وه كه نه وهی گوز بژمێرن بۆ من (as if counting walnuts to me)
Persian	وقت گل نی (when it is time of flowers)	من از این چیزها سر در نمی آورم (I can't get my head around it)
Turkish	kırmızı kar yağınca (when snow turns red)	anladımsa Arap olayım (as if I understand Arabic)

2.4.3 Translation by paraphrase

This strategy involves replacing an idiom with plain non-idiomatic language (Rasul, 2015). However, translation using this strategy can be problematic, resulting in loose or nonsensical expressions in the TL. Various strengths and weaknesses have been highlighted, including loose, free, and somewhat under-translation of idioms in the TT and introduction of information not contained in the ST (Chesterman, 1997). This strategy is nonetheless an indispensable procedure used by professional translators, as Al-Shawi and Tengku Mahadi (2017) explain, despite inevitable problems when translating from English into Arabic.

2.4.4 Translation by omission

This strategy involves presenting source text ideas equivalent to the target text in a concise, simple, and brief form (Sharma, 2015). It achieves acceptable translations in the target culture and helps avoid awkwardness and redundancy in the TL, especially when the SL is redundant. Other literature indicates this strategy is used as a last resort when some words in the SL may result in either awkward messages or repetitions. However, it produces a readable and smooth translation, providing accurate meaning in the TL.

2.4.5 Other strategies

The strategy of compensation is another approach where an idiom is either omitted or played down at a particular point in the source text and introduced in another part of the target text. Using natural fixed and semi-fixed expressions with the right level of idiomaticity impacts the readability of the translated text (Baker, 2011). When translators successfully use these aspects, it makes the target text feel less foreign to the target audience.

Omission and compensation have commonalities, involving omission and transposition of idioms in the source text to other points or removal in the target text. Some researchers and translators use these strategies simultaneously to achieve the same outcome. Both strategies involve moving an idiom from one point to another, making them relevant in translating idioms appropriately to enhance, maintain, and retain the anticipated connotation of the source text idiom. Additionally, these strategies make it easier for readers to understand the target text without complicating it with expressions.

Though deemed unnecessary by scholars, borrowing source language idioms in their original form can help deal with culture-specific items in particular contexts. Baker reveals it's normal for single words to be occasionally directly borrowed from source texts, whereas borrowing entire proverbs, fixed expressions, and idioms is impossible (Baker, 2011). Therefore, verbatim borrowing of source language idioms is not possible. In this context, the expression is identified not as an idiom but as a single word, such as using "Out of this World" as a brand name for a space gallery in a promotional leaflet (Baker, 2011).

While borrowing source language idioms may seem unnecessary, it provides a foundation for using an ST idiom at a particular point in the TT, especially when explaining culture-specific items where the ST idiom has no equivalent in the target text.

However, as literature indicates, single words are mostly borrowed since borrowing fixed expressions or entire proverbs is impossible.

Other translation strategies include equivalence, calques (loan translation), transposition (changing one part of speech without changing sentence meaning), modulation, and adaptation (Hassan & Tabassum, 2014). These strategies may relate to Baker's four strategies commonly used by authors, scholars, writers, teachers, and students in translating literary works like novels, movies, and plays.

2.5 Translation of Idioms and Fixed Expressions

Previous definitions of idioms highlight their nature as phrases whose sum exceeds the sum of individual parts. The fixed form of idioms and other figurative expressions indicates they are spoken without full knowledge of their meanings, leading to erroneous crafting of fixed expressions (Nordmann & Jambazova, 2016). Some literature contrasts idiom definitions by highlighting that fixed expressions include idioms, similes, sayings, frozen collocations, proverbs, and grammatically ill-formed collocations. Other literature reveals some fixed expressions, like idioms, are used for convenience and simplicity during everyday interactions (Murdoch, 2017). Fixed expressions usually have more transparent meanings, indicating the meaning can be inferred from individual parts of the phrase. For instance, "Merry Christmas" has a literal interpretation associated with social events or specific occurrences.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample of Study

The study focused on two novels by Amy Tan, an American author known for portraying the immigrant experience and the lives of Chinese American women. These included her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), translated into Arabic by Randah Abu Baker, and *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), translated into Arabic by Asif Alkhaldey. Both texts were selected to identify approaches employed by translators in rendering idiomatic expressions from English into Arabic.

In this study, English served as the source language (SL) and Arabic as the target language (TL). The research aimed to investigate idiomatic usage in the original texts, examine their Arabic renderings, and consider the socio-cultural and linguistic factors shaping the translation of idioms.

Amy Tan, born in 1952 in Oakland, California, is a prominent Chinese American novelist. Her debut, *The Joy Luck Club*, has been translated into more than 25 languages. Other works include *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005), and *The Valley of Amazement* (2013).

3.2 Methodological Approach and Corpus Design

This study adopted a corpus-based methodology to systematically analyse translation patterns of idiomatic expressions. The corpus approach provided quantifiable evidence of translation strategies and enhanced the objectivity of the analysis through structured data collection and coding procedures.

3.2.1 Corpus Compilation and Selection Criteria

Following McEnery and Wilson's (2001) principles of corpus design, a specialised parallel corpus was compiled, consisting of 150 idioms and their Arabic translations extracted from the two novels. To ensure balanced representation, 75 idioms were drawn from each novel.

The selection criteria were guided by Tognini-Bonelli's (2001) framework for specialised corpus design:

1. **Text Selection:** Entire novels were analysed rather than excerpts to preserve contextual integrity and ensure comprehensive representation of the author's idiomatic usage.
2. **Idiom Identification:** Idioms were identified according to Fernando's (1996) definition of idiomaticity as conventionalised multiword expressions with semantic opacity. The process involved:
 - Initial reading of both source and target texts,
 - Systematic examination of each chapter for idiomatic expressions,
 - Verification through consultation of specialised dictionaries, and
 - Validation by two independent linguists in cases of uncertainty.
3. **Balanced Sampling:** Following Biber's (1993) recommendation, equal representation was maintained across both novels to allow valid comparative analysis.

3.2.2 Corpus Structure and Analysis Framework

The corpus was organised into a parallel structure containing:

- the source text idiom (English),
- the target text translation (Arabic),
- a back-translation for verification,
- classification of the translation strategy, and

- contextual information.

This structure supported both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of analysis:

1. **Quantitative Analysis:** Frequency distributions of strategies were calculated to identify overall patterns and differences between the novels.
2. **Qualitative Analysis:** Contextual examination of individual cases highlighted issues of cultural specificity, semantic shift, metaphor preservation, and contextual appropriateness.

The analysis was guided by Toury's (1995) descriptive translation studies framework, which focuses on identifying translation norms rather than prescriptive evaluation. Baker's (2011) four-strategy taxonomy (idioms of similar meaning and form, idioms of similar meaning but different form, paraphrase, and omission) provided the main analytical categories.

3.3 Instrumentation

Two main instruments were employed in this study: the researcher and the datasheet.

(a) The Researcher as Instrument

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. In this study, the researcher identified idioms in the source and target texts, interpreted their meanings, and coded the translation strategies. To reduce subjectivity, ambiguous cases were verified using specialised idiom dictionaries and validated by two independent linguists.

(b) The Datasheet as Instrument

A structured datasheet was designed to systematically record idiomatic expressions, their translations, and their classification. Each entry captured:

- the source text idiom,
- the target text rendering,
- a back-translation for verification,
- the identified translation strategy (following Baker, 2011),
- the level of equivalence (full, partial, or none), and
- contextual notes on semantic or cultural considerations.

The datasheet framework, with four worked examples, is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Example of Datasheet Structure for Idiom Translation Analysis

No.	Source Text Idiom (English)	Target Text Translation (Arabic)	Back-Translation	Translation Strategy	Equivalence	Contextual Notes
1	<i>Spill the beans</i>	أفشى السر	Disclosed the secret	IDF	Full	Figurative meaning preserved with a culturally natural equivalent.
2	<i>Lion's share</i>	حصة الأسد	Lion's share	ISMF	Full	Direct equivalent exists in both languages; metaphor retained.
3	<i>Break the ice</i>	كسر الجمود	Break the rigidity	TP	Partial	Figurative nuance reduced; translated literally to maintain readability.
4	<i>Kick the bucket</i>	مات	Died	TO	None	Stylistic effect lost; plain verb used instead of idiom.

Note. ISMF = Idiom of Similar Meaning and Form; IDF = Idiom of Similar Meaning but Dissimilar Form; TP = Translation by Paraphrase; TO = Translation by Omission.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analysis process involved systematically applying the corpus framework outlined in Section 3.2 and recording results in the datasheet structure shown in Table 3. Each idiomatic expression identified in *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Hundred Secret Senses* was paired with its Arabic translation, back-translated for verification, and then coded according to Baker's (2011) four strategies: idioms of similar meaning and form (ISMF), idioms of similar meaning but different form (IDF), paraphrase (TP), and omission (TO).

For each entry, the level of equivalence was also assessed (full, partial, or none), and contextual notes were added to capture semantic or cultural considerations. This ensured that both the quantitative distribution of strategies and the qualitative aspects of idiom rendering were represented.

The data were then organised for two complementary purposes:

1. **Quantitative Analysis:** The frequency of each strategy was calculated to identify overall patterns and to compare usage between the two novels.
2. **Qualitative Analysis:** Individual idioms were examined in context to highlight cultural specificity, semantic shift, and the extent to which figurative meaning was preserved or reduced in translation.

This dual procedure provided a balanced foundation for interpreting translation tendencies, combining measurable distributions with contextual insights.

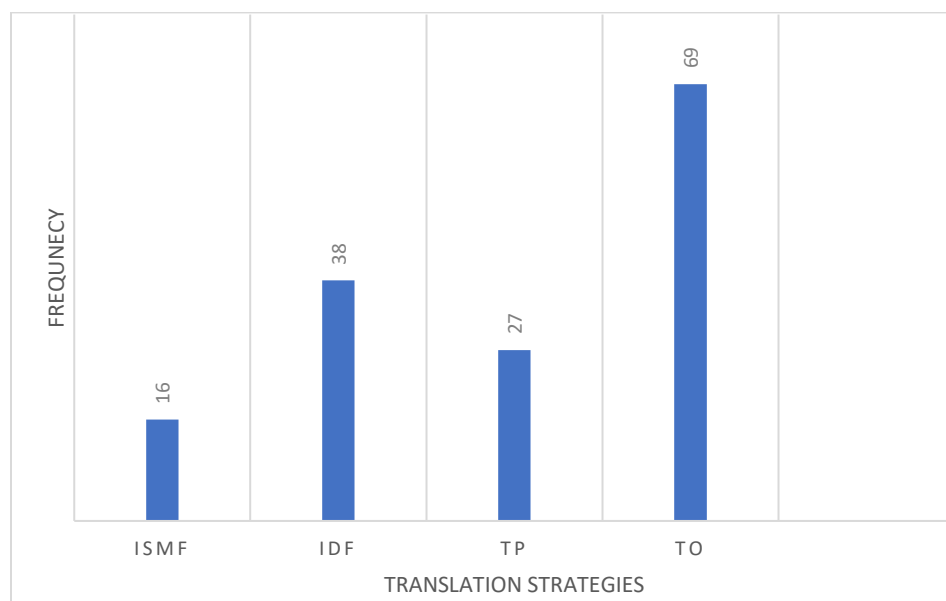
4. Findings and Discussion

A total of 150 idioms were extracted (75 per novel) and coded using Baker's (2011) typology. The overall distribution appears in Table 4 and Figure 1.

Table 4. Distribution of translation strategies for idioms (N = 150)

No.	Strategy of translation	Frequency	Percentage
1	Using an idiom of similar meaning and form	16	10.7%
2	Using an idiom of similar meaning and dissimilar form	38	25.3%
3	Translation by paraphrase	27	18.0%
4	Translation by omission	69	46.0%
Total		150	100.0%

Figure 1. Frequency of translation strategies across both novels (N = 150)



As shown in Table 4 and Figure 1, omission was the most frequently employed strategy (46.0%), reflecting the difficulty of finding Arabic equivalents for culturally bound English idioms. IDF ranked second (25.3%), indicating a strong tendency to preserve idiomatic meaning while altering form. ISMF was comparatively rare (10.7%), underscoring limited idiomatic overlap between English and Arabic. Paraphrase was least used (18.0%), suggesting translators generally avoided explanatory prose unless necessary.

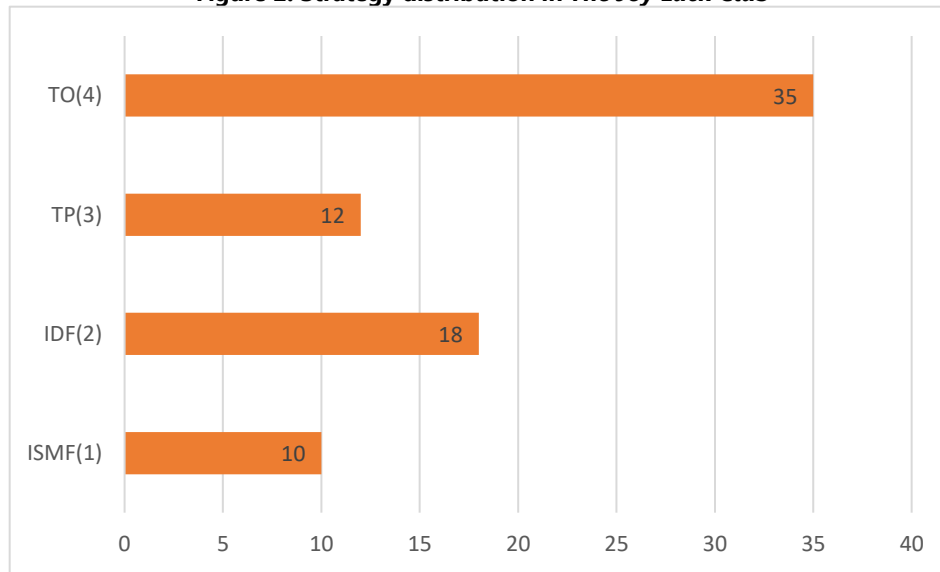
4.1 Novel-Specific Distribution

Both novels show similar profiles, with omission dominant (46.7% in each). Table 5 presents the distribution of strategies in *The Joy Luck Club*, and Table 6 presents those in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate these distributions visually.

Table 5. Translation strategies in *The Joy Luck Club* (N = 75)

No.	Strategy of translation	Frequency	Percentage
1	Using an idiom of similar meaning and form	10	13.3%
2	Using an idiom of similar meaning and dissimilar form	18	24.0%
3	Translation by paraphrase	12	16.0%
4	Translation by omission	35	46.7%
Total		75	100.0%

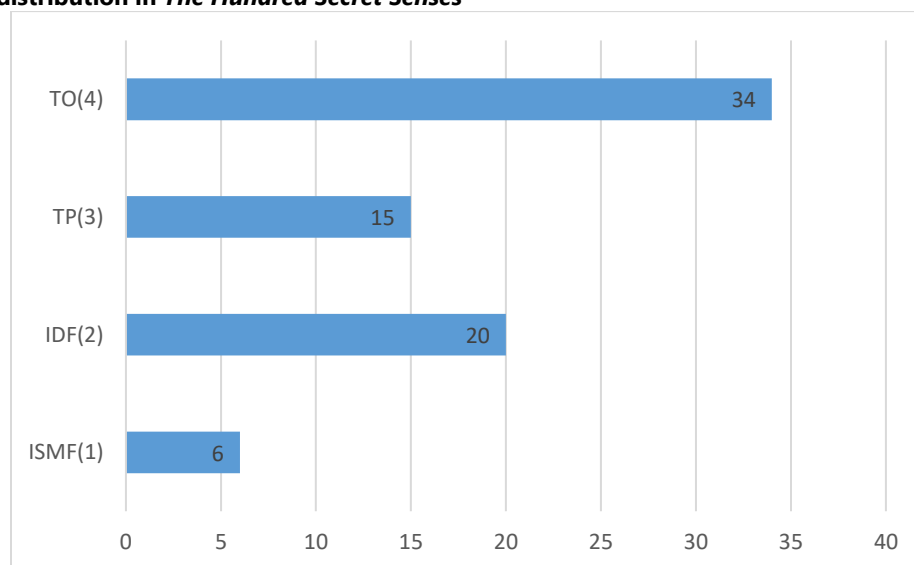
Figure 2. Strategy distribution in *The Joy Luck Club*



In *The Joy Luck Club*, omission was the most frequently applied strategy (46.7%), followed by IDF (24%). ISMF was used in 13.3% of cases, indicating a slightly greater availability of idioms with equivalent forms compared to *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Paraphrase accounted for 16%, showing that explanatory reformulation was occasionally used when direct equivalents were lacking.

Table 6. Translation strategies in *The Hundred Secret Senses* (N = 75)

No.	Strategy of translation	Frequency	Percentage
1	Using an idiom of similar meaning and form	6	6.7%
2	Using an idiom of similar meaning and dissimilar form	20	26.7%
3	Translation by paraphrase	15	20.0%
4	Translation by omission	34	46.7%
Total		75	100.0%

Figure 3. Strategy distribution in *The Hundred Secret Senses*

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, omission again dominated (46.7%), closely mirroring the pattern in *The Joy Luck Club*. IDF was the second most frequent strategy (26.7%). Paraphrase was used slightly more often here (20% vs. 16%), whereas ISMF was less common (6.7%).

A chi-square test of independence found no significant association between novel and strategy, $\chi^2(3, N = 150) = 1.45$, $p = .69$, Cramér's $V = 0.10$. Thus, the distributions are statistically similar across the two texts.

4.2 Strategy-by-Strategy Patterns

Idioms of Similar Meaning and Form (ISMF)

This strategy accounted for 10.7% overall, reflecting the rarity of idiomatic expressions that align in both form and meaning between English and Arabic. The slightly higher frequency in *The Joy Luck Club* (13.3%) compared with *The Hundred Secret Senses* (6.7%) suggests that some idiomatic overlap was text dependent.

Examples include:

- *Eye for an eye* → العين بالعين (a direct equivalent in both form and meaning).
- *The tip of the iceberg* → قمة جبل الجليد (same metaphorical image retained).
- *To kill two birds with one stone* → يقتل عصفورين بحجر واحد (structural and semantic match across both languages).

Idioms of Similar Meaning but Different Form (IDF)

With 25.3% overall, IDF emerged as the second most common strategy. This indicates that translators frequently preserved idiomatic meaning while reformulating the expression with different lexical items or imagery in Arabic. Usage was consistent across both novels (24% in *The Joy Luck Club* and 26.7% in *The Hundred Secret Senses*).

Examples include:

- *Don't count your chickens before they hatch* → لا تقل فول حتى يصير بالمكيول (literally: "Don't say beans until they are in the measuring pot").
- *It's raining cats and dogs* → تمطر بغزارة (literally: "It's raining heavily").
- *The last straw* → القشة التي قصمت ظهر البعير (literally: "the straw that broke the camel's back").

Paraphrase

Paraphrase accounted for 18.0% overall, with 16% in *The Joy Luck Club* and 20% in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. This strategy allowed translators to render meanings in plain, non-idiomatic language where no Arabic equivalent existed, though it often came at the expense of figurative and stylistic resonance.

Examples include:

- *To burn the midnight oil* → سهر طويلاً يعمل (literally: "He stayed up late working").
- *Hit the nail on the head* → أصاب المعنى بدقة (literally: "He expressed the meaning precisely").
- *To bury the hatchet* → صالح صديقه (literally: "He reconciled with his friend").

Omission

Omission dominated across the dataset, with 46.0% of idioms rendered this way overall and nearly identical frequencies in both

novels (46.7% each). This strategy was generally used when neither direct nor indirect equivalents were available, or when retaining the idiom risked confusing target readers. In some cases, omitted meanings appeared partially compensated elsewhere in the text, though this practice was inconsistent.

Examples include:

- *To let the cat out of the bag* translated simply as كشف السر ("revealed the secret"), omitting the animal imagery.
- *Bite off more than you can chew* reduced to حاول ما لا يستطيع ("attempted what he could not manage").
- *Once in a blue moon* rendered as نادراً ("rarely"), with the figurative imagery omitted entirely.

4.3 Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a clear hierarchy among Baker's (2011) idiom translation strategies, with omission the most frequently employed (46.0%), followed by idioms of similar meaning but different form (25.3%). Paraphrase (18.0%) and idioms of similar meaning and form (10.7%) were less commonly used. This hierarchy directly answers RQ1, which sought to establish the overall distribution of strategies across the corpus. The results reflect both the linguistic distance and the cultural asymmetry between English and Arabic, which limit the availability of direct or near-direct equivalents for idiomatic expressions.

The prevalence of omission underscores the challenges translators face when confronted with culturally bound metaphors, figurative language, or expressions lacking Arabic parallels (RQ3). For instance, the English idiom *once in a blue moon* was reduced to نادراً ("rarely"), omitting its metaphorical imagery entirely. While omission can ensure fluency and prevent awkward renderings, it simultaneously reduces the stylistic density of the target text, sometimes weakening the rhetorical and cultural impact intended by the source. This finding is consistent with Shojaei's (2012) and Oualif's (2017) observations that cultural non-equivalence is one of the most persistent barriers in idiom translation.

The significant use of IDF indicates that translators frequently prioritised functional adequacy over formal equivalence, preserving idiomatic meaning while allowing surface form to shift. For example, *the last straw* was rendered as القشة التي قصمت ظهر البعير ("the straw that broke the camel's back"), preserving the idiomatic sense but drawing on culturally familiar imagery. This pragmatic strategy resonates with Toury's (1995) descriptive translation studies framework, in which translation norms tend to favour readability and acceptability in the target culture. It also provides an answer to RQ3, highlighting how translators navigate culturally bound idioms through adaptation rather than omission.

The use of ISMF (10.7% overall, 16 idioms) confirms Baker's (2011) claim that exact equivalents are rare, particularly between languages from different families with divergent cultural traditions. Examples include *to kill two birds with one stone* translated as يقتل عصفورين بحجر واحد, where both the form and meaning align almost perfectly. The higher proportion of ISMF in *The Joy Luck Club* compared to *The Hundred Secret Senses* suggests that opportunities for direct idiomatic equivalence were context-specific rather than systematic, addressing RQ2 regarding cross-textual variation.

Paraphrase, accounting for 18.0% of cases, demonstrates that translators occasionally resorted to explanatory, non-idiomatic language when no natural Arabic equivalent was available. For example, *to burn the midnight oil* was translated as سهر طويلاً ("he stayed up late working"), which conveys the meaning but not the figurative imagery. Although paraphrase provides clarity, it often comes at the expense of figurative and stylistic resonance. This restraint may reflect a desire to preserve literary economy and avoid diluting the aesthetic quality of the novels, though it also risks a loss of metaphorical nuance. Taken together, these patterns illustrate that idiom translation between English and Arabic is not a matter of direct substitution but of strategic negotiation between semantic fidelity, cultural intelligibility, and stylistic preservation. The dominance of omission and IDF demonstrates that translators privilege accessibility for the target readership, even when this reduces idiomatic richness. These tendencies align with broader debates in translation studies about the tension between domestication and foreignisation (Venuti, 1995) and highlight the pressures faced when mediating between culturally and linguistically distant languages.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that omission and reformulation dominate the translation of idioms from English into Arabic, while direct equivalence is rare. These findings highlight the cultural and linguistic distance between the two languages and the necessity for translators to prioritise meaning and clarity over form. The results are significant for both theory and practice: they confirm the challenges of idiom translation in line with descriptive and functionalist perspectives, and they emphasise the importance of cultural competence and flexibility in translator training. More broadly, the study contributes to understanding how figurative language is negotiated across cultures, offering insights relevant to translation pedagogy, literary practice, and cross-cultural communication.

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