CULTURAL BARRIERS IN TRANSLATING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Sevarakhon Dekhkonova
Independent Researcher

Abstract: *Figurative language – including idioms, metaphors, proverbs, and other non-literal expressions – is deeply embedded in culture, making it a valuable yet challenging component of communication. Translators often encounter cultural barriers when working with figurative expressions, since many such expressions rely on culture-specific knowledge, historical events, or social customs that may have no equivalent in the target language. This article examines the nature of these cultural barriers and their impact on translation. We review literature on idiomatic and metaphorical translation, highlighting how cultural context, connotation, and conceptual differences complicate the translation of figurative phrases. Drawing on recent studies and examples, we analyze common challenges (such as non-equivalence and untranslatability) and discuss strategies translators use to overcome them (such as paraphrase, cultural substitution, or explicitation). We emphasize the translator's role as a cultural mediator: success often depends on the translator's cultural awareness and ability to adapt or explain culturally charged imagery for a new audience. The discussion considers implications for translator training and language education, suggesting that understanding and addressing cultural gaps is essential for conveying the intended meaning and maintaining communication effectiveness across languages.*

Keywords: *cultural barriers, figurative language, translation, idioms, metaphors, cross-cultural communication*

Introduction. Figurative language – such as idioms, metaphors, similes, and proverbs – enriches communication by conveying meanings and emotions in vivid, culturally resonant ways. These expressions often pack complex ideas or shared cultural wisdom into concise phrases that native speakers grasp intuitively. As Tyfekçi and Vula (2024) note, idioms in particular preserve a language's "local and cultural essence," offering insights into a society's values and history. For example, the English proverb "to kill two birds with one stone" encapsulates a common strategy for efficiency. Non-native speakers, however, may find such expressions opaque or confusing if they lack the cultural and historical background behind the imagery. Understanding idioms and metaphors thus requires more than linguistic proficiency; it requires familiarity with the speaker's cultural context.

Translators, who work across languages and cultures, face a particular challenge with figurative language because it often carries non-literal meanings that do not readily map to another language. Idiomatic expressions are typically “fixed patterns of language” whose meaning cannot be deduced from the individual words. For instance, the English idiom “kick the bucket” (meaning “to die”) has no obvious connection between its literal wording and its meaning. Lar-son (1984) observes that idioms carry emotive connotations that native speakers understand but outsiders may miss. Indeed, Tyfekçi and Vula (2024) point out that translators without the requisite cultural knowledge can easily misinterpret idioms: they may interpret “kick the bucket” literally or fail to appreciate the idiom’s emotional weight. Such misinterpretation highlights how a lack of cultural familiarity turns figurative phrases into translation pitfalls.

The core of the problem is cultural barriers – difficulties arising when the source and target cultures differ in background knowledge, values, or worldview. Wu (2015) emphasizes that “there is no language without culture” and urges translators to maintain cultural context from source to target. When a source expression invokes cultural concepts (religion, folklore, humor, social practices, etc.) that are unfamiliar to the target audience, a cultural “gap” or “blank” can emerge. Himood (2009) defines a cultural barrier in translation as occurring “when a translator faces trouble in comprehending or contacting a certain culture”. In practice, this means that expressions rooted in one culture may not “make sense” or carry the same impact in another. For example, Wu (2015) discusses a Chinese idiom invoking Buddhism (“Buddha wears gold clothing, man wears an elegant dress”, meaning “clothes make the man”). This idiom relies on knowledge of Buddhist imagery and Chinese social attitudes. A Western reader or translator unfamiliar with these cultural elements will struggle: “Translators and readers who lack knowledge of Chinese culture may encounter difficulty understanding such an idiom”.

This article explores how cultural barriers complicate the translation of figurative language. We first review relevant literature on figurative translation, focusing on the interplay of culture and meaning. We then analyze specific issues and examples of cultural barriers (in idiom and metaphor translation) and survey common translation strategies used to bridge these gaps. In the discussion, we consider the implications of our analysis for translation practice and language learning, underscoring the translator’s role as a mediator of culture.

Literature Review. The literature on translation of figurative language consistently highlights that idioms, metaphors, and similar expressions are culturally bound and thus pose unique challenges. Tyfekçi and Vula’s (2024) literature review emphasizes that

idioms encapsulate cultural knowledge and historical allusions. They cite Larson (1984) to define an idiom as a phrase whose meaning cannot be inferred from its parts. As a result, idioms often carry emotive and cultural connotations specific to the source community. For instance, they note that idioms may reveal a society's values or shared experiences, offering "insights into the cultural heritage of a community". Concretely, the idiom "turn a blind eye" originated in British naval history and carries the cultural narrative of Admiral Nelson's defiance. Without knowledge of that history or analogous cultural references, a translator may not fully convey the idiom's nuance.

This cultural specificity leads directly to untranslatability issues. As Poshi and Lacka (2016, cited in Tyfekçi & Vula 2024) argue, idioms are often "opaque" to non-natives: a literal translation yields little meaning and can mislead readers. The notion of cultural untranslatability arises when a source feature has no counterpart in the target culture. Himood (2009) discusses Nida's (1964) taxonomy, noting that certain cultural categories (ecology, material culture, social and religious phenomena) create equivalence gaps. For example, color symbolism varies by culture (white for purity in one context, mourning in another), and translators must navigate these differences. In practice, the "cultural gap between the source language and target language can make the translation process difficult" especially when languages are distant, as Tyfekçi and Vula observe. They conclude that idioms are "culturally bound expressions," and translators must understand cultural roots and social context to find any equivalent meaning. In summary, idiomatic translation demands not only linguistic skill but deep cultural awareness.

Metaphors likewise function at the intersection of language and culture. Cognitive linguists argue that metaphors reflect entrenched conceptual mappings (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). From a translation perspective, Alghbban and Maalej (2023) use the term "cultural filtering" to describe how translators handle metaphors. They posit that metaphor can carry culturally loaded ideas, and translators act as filters who sometimes block unfamiliar cultural content to avoid "smuggling" it into the target language. In their framework, if a source metaphor invokes a concept alien to the target culture, the translator must either adapt it or explain it; there is no one-size-fits-all procedure. This view aligns with earlier theory: Newmark (1980) suggests translating metaphors creatively or replacing them with target-culture metaphors, effectively substituting one cultural image for another. The key point is that culture shapes metaphor interpretation, and when cultures differ, literally transferring metaphoric imagery often fails.

Research on teaching and processing figurative language further underscores cultural effects. Wu's (2015) study of English idiom translation by Chinese learners finds that translators often rely on literal meaning when lacking cultural clues. Many participants

rendered idioms word-for-word or guessed meanings from context, resulting in errors. Wu concludes that a translator's cultural experience significantly influences their ability to render idioms. She notes the notion of exoticism: when a phrase contains culturally "exotic" elements, it may become a "cultural blank" to the reader. For example, an idiom referencing a Buddhist temple has rich connotations for those familiar with the tradition, but for others it may seem meaningless. Wu explicitly calls this a cultural barrier (e.g. the "religious cultural barrier" in translating a Chinese idiom involving Buddha). In sum, both theory and empirical studies emphasize that translation competence hinges on cultural understanding.

Finally, the literature outlines some classical strategies for coping with figurative phrases. Tyfekçi and Vula (2024) describe several approaches drawn from the idiom translation literature: paraphrase (explaining the meaning rather than literal words), omission (dropping the idiom if no equivalent exists), and finding a linguistic equivalent (using a target-language idiom that conveys a similar meaning). For example, if an English idiom has no Uzbek counterpart, the translator might replace it with a comparable Uzbek idiom or rephrase the idea in straightforward terms. They emphasize that whichever strategy is chosen, the translator must consider both the linguistic meaning and the cultural context of the original. The goal is to preserve not just the denotation but the effect of the expression. As Tyfekçi and Vula note, a careful translator "must analyze the meaning and intention behind the original idiom and find a suitable alternative that conveys the same message", all while being "aware of any cultural sensitivities" and preserving the idiom's impact.

Main Analysis: Cultural Barriers in Figurative Translation

Bridging the cultural divide is at the heart of translating figurative language. We identify several key types of cultural barriers encountered when translating idioms and metaphors, illustrated with representative examples and strategies for handling them.

1. Lack of Equivalence: One of the most common barriers is the simple absence of a direct equivalent in the target culture. Many idioms refer to cultural artifacts, customs, or beliefs that another culture may not share. For instance, the English idiom "by the skin of one's teeth" (meaning to narrowly escape failure) relies on a unique Hebrew-based image and has no standard counterpart in most other languages. A literal word-for-word translation would bewilder readers. Translators may resort to paraphrase ("narrowly," "just barely") or find a loosely equivalent expression. Tyfekçi and Vula (2024) underscore that without an equivalent idiom, translators typically must paraphrase idioms to convey the message. This strategy involves explaining the idea in plain terms, but it requires "a thorough comprehension of both linguistic and cultural contexts" to retain the

original's flavor. If done well, the meaning is preserved; if done poorly, much of the idiom's color and cultural resonance is lost.

2. Cultural References and Imagery: Some figurative expressions contain culturally specific references (animals, foods, historical figures, etc.) that carry particular connotations. Consider English animal idioms: "cold turkey" (to quit something abruptly) or "black sheep" (an outcast). These rely on culturally grounded imagery (the association of turkeys with gobbling or black sheep with rarity). In cultures without these associations, the idioms are inexplicable. Translating such idioms often requires substituting a different metaphor familiar to the target culture. Tyfekçi and Vula point out that idioms often "reflect a society's history, values, and beliefs". For example, the English idiom "carrying coals to Newcastle" (meaning to do something unnecessary) makes sense only with knowledge of Newcastle's coal history. A translator might choose to replace it with a different proverb or phrase that conveys futility in the target culture. The barrier here is that the referent of the metaphor has no purchase on the new audience's experience, so translators must either domesticate (find a culturally analogous image) or foreignize (retain it and explain it).

3. Connotation and Tone: Even when an idiom is semantically translatable, its connotations or pragmatic force may differ. An idiom might carry humor, irony, or a taboo that is culturally specific. For example, comparing someone to a "black sheep" in English is negative, but if the target culture associates black sheep differently (perhaps as special or lucky), the metaphor would misfire. Tyfekçi and Vula (2024) note that idioms often carry "subtle connotations or imagery that may be difficult to capture in a paraphrase". In practice, the translator must be sensitive to tone: a flippant or humorous idiom in one culture might sound disrespectful or confusing in another. Maintaining pragmatics requires cultural judgment.

4. Pragmatic and Ideological Differences: Some figurative language involves pragmatic usage or social norms that vary by culture. For example, English speakers say "give someone a green light" to mean approval (green as "go"), but in some cultures green may not symbolize permission. Moreover, metaphoric frames can differ: English commonly uses war metaphors ("fighting climate change"), whereas another language might not use that schema. Translating such metaphors literally can clash with the target culture's ideology or may simply sound unnatural. Wu (2015) found that social values deeply influence idiom comprehension: her Chinese student participants sometimes missed English idioms because the underlying social or religious values were unfamiliar. In other words, cultural assumptions about politeness, honor, or taboo shape how figurative phrases should be interpreted and rendered. If these assumptions differ, a

translator faces the barrier of differing pragmatics and may need to reframe or omit certain expressions.

5. Conceptual Metaphors and Worldview: At a deeper level, entire metaphorical frameworks can be culture-specific. The cognitive metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY may be universal, but the particular images drawn (road, path, obstacles) can have different nuances. Some cultures might conceptualize life with different metaphors (e.g. circular destiny, or embedded in ancestry). This means translating metaphoric expressions requires understanding the target culture's conceptual system. Alghbban and Maalej (2023) stress that metaphor translation works best from a cultural perspective, examining whether the source and target cultural concepts are compatible. If a metaphor's cultural "content" does not align, translators trigger a kind of filtering process: they might adapt the metaphor to a more neutral one, or choose an entirely different expression.

Example – Chinese to English Idiom: Wu (2015) illustrates several of these barriers with specific examples. One Chinese idiom uses Buddhist imagery: "门当户对" (literally "doors are equally matched"), meaning a marriage between families of similar social status. The form (parallel characters) and the concept of family matching are culturally embedded. Wu notes that such idioms often lose their linguistic artistry in translation: when translated into English, "most linguistic attributes are disappearing". Translators might resort to the strategy of "semantic translation plus annotation", perhaps offering a brief explanation or footnote. She warns that the "exoticism" of unfamiliar idioms can become a "cultural blank or barrier": a Western reader encountering "佛要金装，人要衣装" (Buddha wears gold attire; man wears clothes) without context will miss its meaning entirely. In such cases, preserving foreign color may require lengthy glosses, while domesticating (using an English proverb like "fine feathers make fine birds") sacrifices the original's cultural reference.

Overcoming Barriers: The literature suggests that overcoming these barriers is a matter of balancing fidelity to the source with intelligibility for the target audience. Translators may employ strategies such as:

Equivalence: Find an idiom in the target language that carries a similar meaning or function. This maintains figurative style, but often replaces one cultural image with another.

Paraphrase/Explanation: As discussed, paraphrasing conveys the literal meaning but loses figurative flair. Tyfekçi and Vula (2024) emphasize that paraphrase must be done carefully to "ensure that the rephrased expression retains the same impact and efficacy as the original". Translators often augment such explanations with contextual cues to hint at the original nuance.

Omission or Generalization: In some cases, the figurative expression may be omitted entirely if it is peripheral to the main message (especially in highly formal or technical texts). This, however, risks flattening the text.

Cultural Footnotes: In literary or academic translation, footnotes or glosses can preserve the original phrase and supply cultural background. This preserves authenticity but interrupts the flow of reading.

Hybrid Solutions: Use part equivalent idiom and part explanation (e.g. partial cognates or calques that evoke some original imagery). This requires high creativity.

Importantly, all these solutions depend on the translator's cultural competence. Tyfekçi and Vula argue that skilled translators must be "aware of any cultural sensitivities that may arise" and select equivalents with insight into both cultures. As Nida (1964) earlier noted, the translator must aim for dynamic equivalence, reproducing the effect of the source text on the target reader. That often means adapting or reshaping figurative language for the target cultural context.

Discussion. The analysis confirms that cultural barriers fundamentally shape the translation of figurative language. Even highly proficient bilinguals can falter when they lack cultural context. Tyfekçi and Vula's (2024) findings illustrate that translating idioms is rarely a straightforward linguistic task. Instead, it is a negotiation between two cultural worldviews. Their study on English-to-Albanian idioms, for example, highlights that without cultural awareness, translators may resort to inappropriate literalness or omit the idiom entirely, undermining the richness of the text. Similarly, Wu's (2015) educational study indicates that learners' cultural experiences significantly affect their idiom translation accuracy. These findings imply that translator education and training should emphasize cultural literacy alongside language skills. Familiarity with source-culture history, literature, and social norms emerges as crucial.

On a theoretical level, the concept of "cultural filtering" (Alghbban & Maalej 2023) suggests that metaphor translation should be approached case-by-case, rather than by rigid rules. This aligns with the idea that culture cannot be "one size fits all." Translators must constantly assess whether a source expression's cultural content is compatible with the target context. When incompatibility arises, a decision must be made: foreignize by preserving the original metaphor (and risking confusion), or domesticize by replacing it (and altering the text's tone). In many cases, a middle ground is used, combining a translation with a brief commentary or cultural signpost. For example, a news translator might include a parenthetical explanation or a short appositive clause to clarify a cultural reference. This practice, however, is more common in academic or literary translation; in commercial or journalistic contexts, space constraints may force more direct solutions (often at the cost of subtlety).

Another important implication is the role of audience. Cultural barriers are most acute when the target audience has little exposure to the source culture. For literary translators working between distant cultures (e.g., translating English idioms into Uzbek or Uzbek into English), bridging strategies are essential. In contrast, within closely related cultures, many idioms may have near-equivalents or shared semantic bases, reducing the barrier. Therefore, understanding the target readership's background is part of the translator's job. Some recommendations from the literature include consciously teaching or footnoting cultural context (e.g. teaching idioms with real-life examples, as Tyfekçi & Vula suggest), or using glossaries for highly culture-bound terms.

Finally, the discussion must acknowledge that absolute equivalence is often impossible. A translation will inevitably carry traces of cultural adjustment. What matters is preserving communicative function: as Nida (1964) argued, it is acceptable to deviate from form so long as the same impact is achieved. In other words, a good translation of figurative language may not mirror the source words, but it should mirror the source effect. Achieving this often requires domesticating the idiom (using a local metaphor) or explicating it. Both approaches are compromises made in recognition of cultural difference. Translators thus act as cultural brokers, making choices that may make the text more accessible (by altering it) or more foreign (by retaining it). The best approach depends on the text's purpose, genre, and audience.

Conclusion. Figurative language embodies the deep interplay between language and culture. When translating idioms, metaphors, and proverbs, translators confront cultural barriers stemming from differences in knowledge, values, and imagery. Our review shows that these barriers manifest as lexical gaps, unfamiliar connotations, and divergent worldviews, any of which can thwart a literal translation. To overcome them, translators must apply flexible strategies—paraphrase, find analogous expressions, or employ explicitation—while leveraging their cultural insights. As Tyfekçi and Vula (2024) argue, successful translation of figurative language hinges on cultural understanding and cross-cultural awareness.

In practice, this means translators (and learners) should cultivate not only language fluency but also intercultural competence. Training programs might include studies of common idioms across cultures, exposure to source-culture media, and awareness of pragmatic differences. Future research could explore specific strategies' effectiveness or examine figurative translation in emerging contexts (such as digital media or AI-mediated translation). For now, the key lesson is clear: bridging cultural gaps is essential for conveying figurative meaning. Even if a perfect equivalence is unattainable, mindful

adaptation can ensure that the translated text resonates with the target audience as if it were native, thus fulfilling the ultimate goal of cross-cultural communication.

REFERENCES

1. Alghbban, M. I., & Maalej, Z. (2023). Cultural filtering of metaphor translating: A cognitive science perspective. Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies, 7(1), 70–100.
2. Himood, Z. F. (2009). Strategies for overcoming cultural barriers in translation. Tikrit University Journal for Humanities, 16(10), 2–8.
3. Tyfekçi, N., & Vula, E. (2024). The complexities of translating idioms across cultural boundaries. Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, 13(2), 285–303.
4. Wu, M.-C. (2015). Cultural experience, familiarity with English idioms and translation: A mixed method approach. Translation Journal, 19(1). Retrieved from https://translationjournal.net/January-2015/cultural-experience-familiarity-with-english-idioms-and-translation-a-mixed-method-approach.html.