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# Exploring The Challenges of Translating Idioms in Comic: Cultural and Linguistic Perspectives

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**Abstract**

Idioms are essential components of everyday communication, reflecting the core of a language yet posing considerable translation challenges. Due to their unique linguistic and cultural backgrounds, idioms often do not have direct equivalents in other languages. This cultural specificity prevents a universal translation method, making it important to focus on the intended pragmatic meaning rather than literal translation, as literal word-for-word translations can cause confusion. This research explores key idioms found in "Popeye" comic and discusses translation strategies utilizing Baker's 1992 framework. It starts by defining and categorizing idioms and concludes with recommendations for effective translation techniques and procedures.

## 1. Introduction

Translation is used to transfer meaning across different languages. Translation is used to transfer meaning across different languages. A written or spoken source language (SL) text is replaced with its corresponding target language (TL) text, whether in written or spoken form. Often, though, translators encounter challenges in finding exact equivalents for certain SL elements. According to Culler (1976), languages hold concepts that can vary significantly from one another because each language perceives and categorizes the world in its own way. When we analyze different languages, we observe that distinct cultures have recognized similar social phenomena and, based on their unique knowledge and experiences, have created their own expressions. In conclusion, the differences among languages pose challenges for translators; the greater the divergence in concepts between languages, the harder it becomes to convey messages accurately. Several factors complicate the translation process, including the transfer of form, meaning, style, proverbs, idioms, and more. Before delving further into this discussion, it is essential to define idioms in order to differentiate them from non-idioms.

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Idioms are unique linguistic expressions that reflect the culture and material life of a particular society. They play a crucial role in preserving the local flavor and cultural essence of a language. According to Larson (1984:20), an idiom is a combination of words whose overall meaning differs from the sum of its individual parts. Larson (1984:142) also notes that idioms often carry emotional connotations that are not present in other vocabulary. Dictionary of American Idioms 5th Edition (2013) defines these expressions as fixed word groups with a meaning that is distinct from the individual words' definitions. A key characteristic of idioms is that they cannot be translated word-for-word, as their meaning is not derived from the typical definitions of their component words. In essence, idioms are linguistic units that encapsulate cultural concepts, require contextual understanding, and often defy literal translation due to their unique meanings.

For example, the idiom "piece of cake," which means something that is very easy to do. In Indonesian is translated as “mudah.” Here there is nothing to do with the cake. We can see that if this idiom will be translated word by word as “sepotong kue” which makes no sense to readers. It’s a figurative expression, and understanding its cultural context is necessary to recognize that it describes an easy task, not an actual piece of cake. This illustrates how idiomatic expressions can lose their intended meaning when translated literally, emphasizing the need for understanding the cultural context of phrases. Based on the above background information, two issues were identified. The first, what are the categories of idiom? The second, what translation strategies are used ?

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Definition of Idioms*

An idiom is a fixed phrase or expression whose meaning cannot be deduced solely from the literal interpretation of its individual words. It is a figurative linguistic unit that conveys a particular concept, idea, or emotion that is culturally shared within a language community (Crystal, 2003). For example, the phrase "spill the beans" is an idiom meaning to reveal a secret, not literally dropping beans. Idioms serve as cultural markers, reflecting shared beliefs, customs, or experiences of a particular group (Liu, 2010). They are characterized by their fixed structure and non-literal meanings, which are often understood through context rather than the literal sense of the components (Makkai, 1972).

Mona Baker (1992), in her book titled In Other Words, states that idioms are fixed expressions in a language that typically do not permit much, if any, variation in their structure. Additionally, their meanings cannot usually be inferred from the meanings of the individual words they consist of. She identifies five criteria for idioms, which are as follows 1) The order of the words in an idiom cannot be changed. The arrangement of the words is set, and their positions cannot be altered. An example, "break the ice" which means to initiate social interaction or ease tension. Rearranging the words, such as "the ice break," would not carry the same meaning and would disrupt the idiomatic expression. 2)The words in an idiom cannot be omitted. As language users, we are not allowed to remove any part of the idiom. An example, "hit the nail on the head" which means to do or say something exactly right. Removing any part of this idiom, such as "hit the nail" or "on the head," would cause it to lose its meaning and sound incomplete. 3) There are no extra words that might be added to an idiom. An idiom does not allow for the addition of extra words. Adding words can disrupt the established meaning and structure. An example, "let the cat out of the bag" which means to reveal a secret. By adding extra words, such as "let the little cat out of the bag," would disrupt the idiomatic structure and change or obscure the intended meaning. 4) No words in an idiom can be replaced by another word. In an idiom, words cannot be substituted with others. Replacing any words alters the idiom's original meaning and disrupts its established form. An example, "bite the bullet" which means to endure a painful or difficult situation with courage. If it is replaced by any word, such as "bite the apple," it changes the

meaning and no longer conveys the original idiomatic expression. 5) The grammatical structures of an idiom cannot also be changed. An example, "hit the sack." This phrase means to go to bed or to sleep. Changing the structure to something like "the sack is hit" would alter its meaning and make it nonsensical in the context of the idiom.

### *2.2 Categories of Idioms*

Translating idioms can be challenging for translators, particularly if they are unfamiliar with the cultural nuances between the source and target languages. The major challenge is identifying idioms and differentiating between idiomatic and non-idiomatic expressions. To aid in comprehending idioms more effectively, they can be classified into five categories (Baker, 1992):

#### *2.2.1 Colloquialism*

Colloquialism refers to expressions that are typically not used in formal speech or writing. Colloquial language is seen as suitable for casual, everyday, familiar, or informal dialogue, rather than formal communication. These expressions are commonly used in everyday conversations. For example, "Santai" which means "relaxed" or "chill." It is commonly used in casual conversations to describe a laid-back attitude or to tell someone to take it easy. For example, "Tenang, santai aja" means "Relax, take it easy."

#### *2.2.2 Proverbs*

Proverbs is a short, a simple way of speaking, commonly known saying that conveys wisdom, truth, or cultural beliefs through metaphorical and memorable language, often passed down from generation to generation (Wolfgang Mieder, 1985:119). Example of proverb in Indonesian "rajin pangkal pandai" which means "diligence is the beginning of intelligence" or "hard work leads to smartness." It emphasizes that consistent effort and hard work are essential for success and gaining knowledge.

#### *2.2.3 Slang*

Slang refers to the use of very informal words and phrases that deviate from the standard language conventions. It's often employed to express ideas that might be considered inappropriate or taboo in a more casual manner. According to Dumas and Lighter (1978), slang can diminish the formality or seriousness of speech or writing by substituting a traditional term with a non-standard one. People often use slang to inject humor and entertainment into their conversations. An example of slang can be "gengges " which means annoying or irritating. It's commonly used in informal conversations among friends to describe something or someone that is bothersome or irritating. For example, "Dia itu gengges banget" means "He/She is really annoying."

#### *2.2.4 Allusions*

Allusions is a figure of speech that refers to a place, event, literary piece, myth, or artwork, either overtly or implicitly. According to Abrams (1971), it involves a short mention, whether clear or subtle, of a person, location, event, or another literary work or excerpt. To give an example of allusion we can refer to the expression of "His resilience is like David facing Goliath,"

This alludes to the biblical story of David and Goliath, symbolizing someone who faces a seemingly impossible challenge with courage and faith, just as David did when he fought Goliath in the biblical. In Indonesian, this could be translated as " "Ketabahannya seperti Daud melawan Goliat." This keeps the reference to a known historical event, while adapting it into the Indonesian language.

*2.2.5 Phrasal Verbs*

Phrasal Verbs is formed by combining a verb with a preposition, an adverb, or both. The meaning of a phrasal verb can frequently differ from the meaning of the original verb. They are often used informally in daily conversation instead of more formal verbs. For instance, In translating “give up” the translator has no problem during his process of translation because it has an equivalent in Indonesian as “menyerah”. The meaning and the sense is the same in both Indonesian and English languages. This can be true for many phrasal verbs, as their contextual meanings can align well with phrases in Indonesian. However, it's important to consider that not all phrasal verbs will have direct counterparts, and some may require additional explanation to convey the same meaning accurately. For example, "Look after" which means to care for or supervise someone or something. In Indonesian, there isn't a direct single-word equivalent that covers all contexts. Instead, it can be translated as "merawat" (to care for) or "mengurus" (to manage or take care of). However, depending on the context, the translator might need to add an explanation, like "merawat anak" (take care of a child) or "mengurus pekerjaan" (manage work), to accurately convey the intended meaning.

### *2.3 Translation Strategies*

The way in which an idiom or a fixed translation can be translated into another language depends on many factors. They are:

#### *2.3.1 Using an idiom of similar meaning and form*

This strategy involves using in idiom in the TL that conveys roughly the same meaning as that of the SL idiom and, in addition consists of equivalent lexical terms (Baker, 1992: 72).

#### *2.3.2 Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form*

It is often possible to find an idiom or fixed translations in the TL which has a meaning similar to that of the source idiom or translations but which consists of different lexical items (Baker, 1992: 74).

#### *2.3.3.Translation by Paraphrase*

This is by far the most common way of translating idioms when a match cannot be found in the TL or when it seems inappropriate to use idiomatic language in the target text because of differences in stylistic preferences of the SL and TL. The paraphrases may or may not find it accurately; the example below illustrates strategy of paraphrase (Baker, 1992:74).

#### *2.3.4 Translation by omission*

As with single words, an idiom may sometimes be omitted altogether in the target text. This may be because it has no close match in the TL, its meaning cannot be easily paraphrased, or for stylistic reasons (Baker, 1992: 77)

This research utilizes translation strategies proposed by Mona Baker (1992), providing a theoretical basis for their analysis and illustrating them with practical examples. It combines theoretical discussions of existing translation frameworks with a practical, case-study-based analysis of the challenges and strategies involved in translating idioms between English and Indonesian.

## 3. Research Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative, descriptive approach to examine the challenges of translating idioms. It defines and categorizes idioms, then analyzes specific examples from a source text from the comic book Big Nate, applying and illustrating established translation strategies proposed by Mona Baker (1992). This is a form of qualitative data analysis where the focus is on in-depth examination of specific examples. The analysis highlights the cultural and linguistic differences between the source language (English) and target language (Indonesian) languages, demonstrating how these differences affect the translation process and the choices translators must make. The overall method is a blend of theoretical review and practical case study analysis.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The translation of an idiom is influenced by the context in which it is used. There are various translation strategies available, and it is crucial for the translator to determine which approach will help readers of the target language understand the idioms effectively. When translating an idiom from the source language, the translator must be mindful of its meaning. They may need to adjust certain elements of the idiom to maintain its sense and convey it to the target language audience. If an equivalent idiom does not exist in another language, the translator should not omit it but instead provide additional explanation to enhance the reader's understanding of its meaning. Fernando and Flavell note that translators often feel a “strong unconscious urge to search hard for an idiom in the receptor language, even if it is not entirely appropriate” (1981: 82).

The strategies outlined in this study are those suggested by Mona Baker (1992). These strategies will be further demonstrated through examples of idiomatic expressions in both English and Indonesian as the source languages (SL) and target languages (TL) in The Big Nate comic book.

### *4.1.1 Using an Idiom of Similar Meaning and Form*

SL: Don't worry, Olive. When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

TL: *Jangan khawatir, Olive. Saat situasi sulit, orang yang kuat akan bangkit dan berjuang*.

The idiom "When the going gets tough, the tough get going" is the category of Proverbs. Proverbs are simple, traditional sayings that express a truth or piece of advice based on common sense or cultural experience (Baker, 1992). They are often metaphorical and convey general wisdom or moral lessons. Proverbs offer insight or advice, symbolizing shared wisdom that helps guide behavior or decision-making in everyday life. The translation of the idiom "When the going gets tough, the tough get going" into the Indonesian "*Saat situasi sulit, orang yang kuat akan bangkit dan berjuang*" effectively captures the intended meaning in context. According to the Dictionary of American Idioms 5th Edition (2013), “when the going gets tough, the tough get

going" is a well-known American idiom implying that resilient people take action and do not give up when faced with adversity. It uses a metaphor of "the going" (the situation) becoming difficult. In Indonesian the meaning "*Saat situasi sulit, orang yang kuat akan bangkit dan berjuang*" literally means "When the situation is tough, strong people will rise and fight." While not a fixed idiom, it faithfully preserves the meaning with a similar structure: an initial condition (tough situation) followed by an action (rise and fight), maintaining the same encouraging tone. In the comic, this kind of idiomatic expression emphasizes Popeye's resourcefulness and resilience. It also frames the scene around perseverance, which is a core theme in Popeye stories. The translator opts for a phrase that closely mirrors the structure and spirit of the original, facilitating an easy understanding for readers without losing the motivational essence. Using an idiom of similar meaning and form helps retain narrative tone, cultural resonance, and character voice across languages. In comics, where brevity and impact are essential, this approach effectively preserves the story's motivational message.

*4.1.2 Using an Idiom of Similar Meaning but Dissimilar Form*

SL Even if I'm battered and bruised, I always believe that every cloud has a silver lining.

TL: *Walaupun tubuhku berlepotan luka, aku percaya bahwa selalu ada hikmah di balik setiap kesulitan.*

The idiom "every cloud has a silver lining" is the category of Proverbs. "Every cloud has a silver lining" provides reassurance that even negative situations contain positive elements, fostering resilience and hope. The imagery of a dark cloud with a shining edge (a silver lining) symbolizes the presence of positivity amid adversity, emphasizing a hopeful perspective. The translation of "every cloud has a silver lining " into "*Selalu ada hikmah di balik setiap kesulitan*" is an example of using an idiom with a similar meaning but a different form to effectively convey the same message in the target language. In American, "every cloud has a silver lining" is a metaphor describing the belief that even bad situations have a hopeful side or positive aspect hidden within. It uses the imagery of a dark cloud with a shining edge (Makkai, 2013). Indonesian expression "*selalu ada hikmah di balik setiap kesulitan*" when translates to "there is always wisdom behind every difficulty," which is not an idiom but a common phrase emphasizing that hardships contain lessons or positives. The American English idiom is metaphorical and very vivid, widely recognized in Western cultures. The Indonesian phrase is more straightforward, emphasizing lessons or insights gained from problems rather than a metaphor involving clouds. It functions equivalently in conveying optimism but in a different literary style. This kind of translation preserves the motivational tone and aligns with Popeye's resilient character, even though the imagery and phrase structure differ. The translator chooses a different cultural phrase that expresses the same optimistic sentiment while avoiding a literal translation that might feel unnatural or unfamiliar. Using idioms of similar meaning but dissimilar form allows translators to adapt language to cultural contexts while maintaining the story's tone and message. It ensures that the core sentiment of perseverance and hope remains intact, even if the specific expressions differ.

*4.1.3 Translation by Paraphrase*

SL: No matter how tough things get, I always say, when life gives you lemons, make lemonade.

TL: Meskipun keadaan sulit, aku selalu percaya bahwa kita harus tetap optimis dan mencari solusi.

The idiom "when life gives you lemons, make lemonade" is the category of Colloquialism. Colloquialism refers to informal, conversational language or expressions commonly used in everyday speech within a particular culture or region. These expressions often capture the tone,

style, and colloquial speech patterns of native speakers and are typically not suitable for formal writing. NTC's American Idioms Dictionary (2000) defines the original idiom "when life gives you lemons, make lemonade" is a well-known American colloquial saying that uses a vivid metaphor “lemons and lemonade” to imply turning negative circumstances into positive outcomes. In SL "when life gives you lemons, make lemonade" uses a vivid metaphor involving lemons and lemonade to suggest positivity. In TL it does not translate the idiom directly; instead, it paraphrases the core meaning—focusing on maintaining optimism and seeking solutions despite difficulties. The literal idiom may not be familiar or have the same cultural resonance in Indonesia, so the translator chooses to paraphrase, expressing the intended lesson instead of a direct idiomatic translation. The paraphrased avoids cultural mismatch, making it more accessible and natural for Indonesian readers. This strategy allows the translator to preserve the moral lesson and tone of the original dialogue without forcing an idiom that might seem awkward or unfamiliar in the target language. "Translation by paraphrase" involves rephrasing the original message in different words that carry the same meaning, rather than translating idioms literally. It is especially useful when idioms do not have direct equivalents or when cultural differences make literal translation ineffective. Translation by paraphrase focuses on conveying the original message’s intent, tone, and moral in a way that feels natural and culturally appropriate in the target language. Using colloquial expressions and paraphrasing techniques helps maintain the natural, spontaneous feel of dialogue, essential in comics and casual narratives. It ensures that the moral and emotional impact of the original message is preserved while respecting linguistic and cultural differences—an approach fundamental when direct translation of idioms is either impossible or culturally inappropriate. This exemplifies how colloquialism functions as a practical category for translating expressions meant to resonate emotionally and culturally within everyday language contexts.

*4.1.4 Translation by Omission*

SL: Don’t worry, Olive. No need to cry over spilled milk. Everything will be fine.

TL: Jangan khawatir, Olive. Semua akan baik-baik saja.

The idiom "cry over spilled milk" is the category of Proverbs. "Cry over spilled milk" signifies the futility of being upset about something irreparable, emphasizing acceptance and moving on. This proverb is a well-known cultural expression in English-speaking contexts, often invoked to encourage perspective and emotional resilience. The translation provided is an example of translation by omission. In the source language (SL) sentence, the idiom "cry over spilled milk" means to be upset about something that cannot be changed or undone. In the target language (TL) sentence, this idiomatic expression is omitted, "*Semua akan baik-baik saja*." The Indonesian equivalent idiom or phrase for "cry over spilled milk" may not be as widely recognized or may sound awkward if translated directly. To maintain clarity and natural flow, the translator chooses to omit the idiom altogether. The omission simplifies the dialogue, preventing potential confusion or unnatural language in the target audience. The idiom "cry over spilled milk" is culturally specific to English-speaking contexts. The TL focuses on reassurance "*semua akan baik-baik saja*" without emphasizing the nuance of accepting past mistakes, which, while slightly diminished in depth, keeps the message straightforward and accessible. In the context of a comic, especially for younger readers or those unfamiliar with the idiom, omitting the idiom prevents confusion and keeps the story moving smoothly. It prioritizes clarity over idiomatic richness, which is a common and practical strategy in translation. Translation by omission is an effective strategy when an idiom or phrase may not be familiar or easily understood in the target language. It helps maintain

clarity and ensures that the core message and emotional tone of the dialogue are preserved without forcing an awkward or culturally inappropriate expression, which is particularly important in visual narratives like comics. This approach underscores the importance of adapting cultural references thoughtfully to foster understanding and emotional connection across diverse audiences.

## 5. Conclusion

Translating idioms presents significant challenges due to their cultural specificity and the frequent lack of direct equivalents between languages. The research demonstrates the application of various translation strategies: using idioms of similar meaning and form, using idioms of similar meaning but dissimilar form, paraphrase, and omission—to address these challenges. The choice of strategy depends heavily on context. The study uses a qualitative approach, analyzing examples from Popeye comic book to illustrate these strategies and highlight the linguistic and cultural differences that impact the translation process. Thus, the findings underscore the need for translators to carefully consider contextual nuances and choose the strategy that best conveys the idiom's meaning in the target language while maintaining the overall tone and style of the original text.

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