Translating English Idioms and Collocations

Rochayah Machali
School of Modern Language Studies UNSW

Abstract: Learners of English should be made aware of the nature, types, and use of English idioms. This paper disensses the nature of idioms and collocations and translation issues related to them.

Key words: English idioms, English collocations

English is a language rich in idioms, which is why learners of English should be made aware of their nature, types, and use. In this paper idiom is defined as 'a group of words which have different meaning when used together from the one they would have if you took the meaning of each word individually' (Collins Cobuild dictionary, 1990 edition).

The above definition is practical in the sense that it can be used as a cover term for both idiom and collocation, which are explained further below. In addition to looking at idiom this way, it is best to view idiom in terms of its function (rather than its form). It is important, therefore, to analyse idiom in its context and occurrence and a text. Indeed, the meaning of idiom can only be inferred through its meaning and function in context, as shown in the examples below (from Fernando, 1996).

(1) *bread and butter*, as in 'It was a simple bread and butter issue' (see further below);
(2) *bless you,* which is usually used in the context of cordial expressions;
(3) *go to hell,* which indicates that there is a conflict among interlocutors in an interpersonal contact;
(4) *In sum,* which indicates relations among portions and components of a text.

Without its context, it is hard, for example, to see that when an interlocutor says 'It is a bread and butter issue', s/he does not actually talk about edible things, but rather, an issue or a topic of discussion pertinent to daily life. So, in what follows, it is important to start first of all with the discussion of the nature of idiom and a concept related to it, such as 'collocation'. Then, we discuss translation issues related to idiom, and how learners of English can benefit from such discussion and distinction.

COLLOCATION AND IDIOM DEFINED

When a text producer produces a text, to a certain extent s/he usually combines old and new meanings of the word and word-combination s/he is using, as in the following text (From Fernando, 1996:2):

> It was a simple bread and butter issue. I examined my bread very closely to see where it is buttered (as it appeared in *The Australian*, 29 June 1991, the Review section).

In the above example, the words *bread and butter* are used as an idiom whose meaning and word components are known to the general readers. We can easily translate this idiom into '*persoalan sehari-hari*', due to the fact that 'bread and butter' are consumed every day. However, we encounter new meaning in *my bread* and *(is) buttered* in the sentence that follows. A free translation of this would be '*Saya mengamatinya secara cermat untuk melihat [letak] persoalannya bagi saya*' (I examine it closely to see where it matters for me). In other words, text producers tend to produce meaning from an established idiom.

So, how do we know that a combination of words is an idiom? Fernando (op cit) suggests three ways of recognizing idioms:

(1) that is a combination of words, for example *red herring, make up, smell a rat, the coast is clear;* however, even a word can be an idiom, though there is a debate over this, and we are not going into this debate here;
(2) the idiom is something which is accepted and used although it first started as something new and ad hoc;
(3) the meaning of an idiom cannot be obtained from its words.

The above characteristics of an idiom are very general and can be used to identify not just idiom but also proverbs, simile, collactions, etc.

However, some experts do distinguish idioms from collocations. While the word (components) in a collocation can freely go with other words, it is not the case with idioms. Therefore, the words 'rosy' and 'cheek' in the collocation 'rosy cheek' can collocate with other words as in 'plump cheeks' or 'rosy dawn' to form other collocations. On the other hand,an idiom can be as free in its combination as well word order and is more fixed in its word collocation, for example while we can say 'red herring', we cannot say '*red tuna'. In the same way, while we can say 'bread and butter', we cannot say 'butter and bread'.

TRANSLATING COLLOCATIONS: POSSIBLE PROBLEMS

Collocation can be formed by juxtaposing two words or more in a language, for example in English we can combine the words 'rule' and 'bend' to form a collocation, for example 'to bend the rules'. However, in seeking for an equivalent collocation in Indonesian, we need to choose a different verb to collocate with the word 'rule', ie. '*melanggar* (per)aturan' (ie *violate* rather than *bend*).

Other restrictions also apply in the English collocation, for example we cannot use the word 'bend' in its negative form in this context as in '*the rules are unbendable'. Rather, for example, the collocation 'the rules are inflexible' is still acceptable in English. Moreover, the kind of words that can form a collocation differs from language to language, as can be observed from the following Table (from Baker, 1992:48):

	unblemished	*Spotless*	*flawless*	*Immaculate*	*impeccable*
performance	-	-	+	+	+
argument	-	-	+	-	?
complexion	?	?	+	-	-
behaviour	-	-	-	-	+
kitchen	-	+	-	+	-
record	+	+	-	?	+
reputation	?	+	-	?	?
taste	-	-	?	?	+
order	-	-	?	+	+
credentials	-	-	-	-	+

Notes:
+ indicates acceptable collocation;
- indicates uncceptable collocation;
? indicates that the collocation is questionable but maybe acceptable in certain dialects.

So, for example while the noun 'performance' can collocate with adjectives 'flawless', 'immaculate' and 'impeccable', it does not collocate with 'unblemished' and 'spotless'. When we look at the Table with Indonesian examples in mind, we can produce quite different patterns of collocations, for example the adjectives 'flawless' (*tanpa cacat*) and 'spotless' (*tak bernoda*) can collocate with the noun 'kitchen' (*dapur*). Thus we can produce collocations such as '*dapur tak bercacat*' in Indonesian, which is not acceptable in English (according to the above Table).

In this way, translators working with English or English learners should observe words are in collocation. Literal translation from one's mother tongue would result in unacceptable collation, eg '*flawless kitchen'.

English learners and translators also should keep in mind that there are two kinds of collocations: unmarked and marked. For example, 'War breaks out' is an acceptable collocation in English: war (an unwanted or negative thing) collocates with 'breaks out', thus forming an 'unmarked' collocation. However, a text producer can use 'breaks out' to form a marked collocation by collocating it with 'peace' (peace has 'positive' connotation compared to the word 'war' above). The text below provides a good example of how the marked collocation is used:

> Some tout at the book fair wanted me to take UK rights in a book on *glasnost* and the crisis of peace. Essays by past and present hawks, re-appraisals of strategy. Could real ***peace break out*** after all? (Baker, op cit, p.51).

For unmarked and general collocation, translators may find it relatively easy to translate it into Indonesian, for example 'perang pecah' for 'war breaks out', thus keeping it as 'unmarked' as it is in the original. However, it would be hard to produce a collocation that is as marked as it is in English for 'peace breaks out' in Indonesian. There maybe a shift from 'marked' to 'unmarked' in the Indonesian version, as in 'perdamaian tercapai'.

Translators and learners of English should also be aware of the fact that some collocations maybe register specific, for example while 'tolerable' and 'error' would normally not go together, they can be an acceptable collocation in Statistics.

Just as problems may occur in the translation of English collocations into Indonesian and vice versa, the same problems may occur when we deal with idioms.

TRANSLATING IDIOMS

An idiom is fixed in nature, for example the idiom 'bury the hatchet' cannot be changed into '*bury a hatchet', and in the same way, 'the long and the short of it' cannot be changed into '*the short and the long of it'.

A translator working with English may easily recognize an idiom if it violates 'truth conditions', as in 'it is raining cats and dogs', 'storm in a teacup', 'jump down someone's throt', etc. However, when the idiom is not of this nature, it is harder to recognize, and translators may just think of it as an ordinary expression, with the consequence of either losing its tone or losing its meaning. The following example illustrates this (from Baker, p.66).

> This can only be done, I believe, by a full and frank *airing of the issues*. I urge you all to *speak your minds* and not to *pull any punches*.

Here, it is harder to see the italicized words as idioms compared to the more obvious ones mentioned earlier (ie those which violate truth conditions). There are two sources which may cause misinterpretation: The first possible source is that there are idioms which can mislead readers/users; they do not sound idiomatic at all, but at a closer look, careful readers would find the 'hidden' idioms. An example given by Baker (loc cit) is 'drain the radiator' in the following text:

> I've just done my stint as rubber duck, see, and pulled off the grandma lane into the pitstop to *drain the radiator*.

On first reading, readers may be inclined to interpret it in terms of a truck driver making a stop and do something with the radiator of the truck. Only careful readers would interpret the words 'drain the radiator' as an idiom, ie 'to urinate; to use the toilet'.

The second source of misinterpretation is when the words in an idiom have equivalents in the target language (ie in Indonesian) but with totally different meaning. A good example is the idiom 'to take someone for a ride'. In a general context, an Indonesian reader may take it to mean 'taking someone [maybe a guest visiting the town] to go around in one's car or motorbike', while a careful reading of the idiom in context may give quite a different meaning, ie cheating someone in some way.

STRATEGIES IN TRANSLATING IDIOMS

There are four possible strategies for translating an idiom (Baker, op cit, p.72 ff):

(1) by using an idiom that is similar in form and meaning, for example 'big head' in *He had a big head since ...*, where we can have 'Dia berbesar kepala sejak...';

(2) by using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar in form, as in 'kutu buku' for *book worm;*

(3) by paraphrasing, as in the following example from *Opera Kecoa* by Nano Riantiarno (Translated into English by McGlynn):
'Padahal ini bukan kesalahan saya. Ini kesalahan *oknum*'.
'And this wasn't even my fault. There must be someone behind this'.

(4) by ellipsis, as in the following example from *Opera kecoa:*
'*Dan kamu diam saja. Mustinya tadi kau usir mereka. Kumis saja dipelihara segede jempol, nyali segede kutu anjing.*
'And you keep quiet. You should have thrown them out".
Here, the whole underlined sentence is deleted, probably for avoiding misinterpretation in English. While it is true that 'thick moustache' can mean 'macho', in the context of homosexuality (which is what the whole play is about), this can be interpreted by English readers, in English culture, as symbols of homosexuality.

These strategies are not only good for training translators in order to interpret idioms better as well as translating them, they can also be good for training English learners in recognition of idioms by using bilingual texts (source language and target language texts).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Collocation and idiom are often grouped into one and the same notion by translators and by English language learners. It has been shown in this paper that the two should be distinguished carefully, both for purposes of recognizing them in text and context as well as for purposes of training and translating. Failure to recognize either of them in a text may cause a distortion of meaning.

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