

# Translating Business Idioms: Challenges, Strategies and Solutions

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## Abstract:

Translation of business idioms is a complex process, given the fact that these expressions are deeply rooted in culture and constitute part of the specialized world of business language. The current study targets the issues of translating business idioms and examines whether the original meaning of business idioms is preserved, changed, or lost in the process. Based on the analysis of a CNN article and its CNN Arabic translation, the research identifies key difficulties and examines strategies that can be employed to minimize meaning loss while ensuring clear and accurate business communication.

**Keywords:** Business idioms, business language, translation challenges, translation strategies.

## 1- Introduction:

Idioms are regarded as an important part of language that reflect cultural aspects and affect communication in various fields including business.

Business language is most commonly associated not only with objectivity and with accuracy, but with figurative language also. Business idioms represent a particular challenge for translators, as their meaning goes typically beyond their literal meaning, which makes them difficult to translate accurately into another language.

One of the key difficulties in this process is to preserve both the target meaning and stylistic impact of these idioms in the target language. This is even more complex when translating from English to Arabic as they are two languages belonging to different linguistic families as well as cultural backgrounds, therefore having significant structural and semantic differences.

Despite increasing globalization of business communication, there is still a lack of research on the translation of English business idioms into Arabic. While studies have been carried out on idioms in general, they have not addressed business idioms, which often carry specialized meanings when applied in business and professional settings. This research gap leads to the following crucial questions: How can English business idioms be translated into Arabic by translators in a way that keeps their meaning and cultural dimension intact? What are the principal challenges they face, and how can they be overcome?

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This study hypothesizes that the most effective strategies of translating business English idioms into Arabic is through equivalence, adaptation, and paraphrasing. Literal translation is sometimes successful but most often not sufficient due to variations in culture and context.

## 2- Business language:

Business language, like other scientific and technical fields, is highly specialized and extends beyond General Language (GL) to serve precise and functional purposes. In both professional and academic contexts, it takes the form of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), characterized by a structured and objective prose style. LSP differs from general language due to its specialized terminology, clearness, precision, and expert knowledge, all of which are important in business and economic communication.

Business English deals with language used in the business world, with specialized terminology being the main feature. It is quite challenging to define its accurate scope because it overlaps with other areas of economic and professional communication. In simpler words, business is an economic activity engaged in the production and distribution of goods and services to meet human desires. As a result, Business English includes terms related to various sectors of economy, such as production, management, companies, trade, market trends, employment, marketing, accounting, banking, financial markets, transport, logistics, etc. Yet, as Vicente points out, “*unlike other ESPs, business language shows a high degree of emotive meaning, abstract processes like metaphors that bring about a great number of idioms and figurative expressions.*”<sup>1</sup> Although economists argue against the use of idioms, claiming that metaphors or idioms lack the scientific aspect, studies indicate that business idioms are widely used in English. Moreover, business idioms frequently appear in business communication, contradicting the assumption that scientific language should be entirely clear, precise, and free of figurative expressions, and specialized dictionaries, such as *Oxford Dictionary of Business Idioms*, have been created to list and explain these idioms. Thus, the frequent use of these idiomatic expressions in business context highlights their significance in business language.

## 3- Business idioms:

Idioms play a crucial role in language, as they convey meanings that go beyond the literal interpretation of individual words. According to *The Cambridge Dictionary*, an idiom is “*a group of words whose meaning, considered as a unit, is different from the meaning of each word taken separately.*”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Peter Newmark defines an idiom as “*a group of words whose meaning cannot be predicted from the meaning of their constituent words*”<sup>3</sup>.

Mona Baker discusses idioms in her coursebook on translation, along with fixed expressions. She describes them as “*frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and, in the case of idioms, often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components*”<sup>4</sup>. She further notes that “*like single words, idioms and fixed expressions may be culture-specific*”<sup>5</sup>. These definitions emphasize the fixed nature of idioms and their figurative meanings, which cannot be understood simply by analysing their individual words. Their meaning remains stable, and they are often closely related to a specific culture.

On the basis of this overall understanding, business idioms are fixed expressions that are most commonly used in economic and business context, where their meanings go beyond the literal understanding of each individual word. They help simplify complex

ideas, and add sophistication to professional communication, which make them an integral part of business language.

#### **4- Translation of business idioms:**

Translation of business idioms is a challenging task due to their figurative nature, cultural aspect, and the specificity of business discourse. Unlike general idioms, business idioms are closely related to economic and business contexts, which means they must be translated in a way that convey their intended meaning and relevance in professional communication. However, several key difficulties arise in this process:

##### **4-1 Lack of direct equivalent:**

Business idioms are hard to translate as most of them do not have direct equivalents in other languages. Expressions like *move the needle*, which means to bring meaningful change or make real progress, loses its intended meaning when translated literally. Translators then have to seek alternative expressions that will carry the same meaning as the original expression.

##### **4-2 Cultural and conceptual differences:**

Business idioms are often related to culture which means they are not necessarily translatable into other languages. For instance, expressions like *hit the ground running*, meaning to begin a task enthusiastically and efficiently, may not be as significant as in cultures where such metaphors are not familiar. Translators should try to recreate these idioms in order to ensure that their intended meaning is preserved and clear in a business context.

##### **4-3 Ambiguity and multiple meanings:**

Some idioms have multiple meanings depending on the context in which they are used. For example, *raise the bar* generally suggests raising expectations or standards in a working or competitive situation. However, in different contexts, it may suggest raising difficulty, which makes success harder to achieve. Translators must take into consideration the intended nuance to ensure that the expression is relevant and accurate in the target language.

##### **4-4 Maintaining clarity and readability:**

Business language prioritizes clarity and precision. While idioms can add expressiveness to communication, they can also create confusion and misunderstandings if they are translated inappropriately. A literal translation may mislead the intended meaning, making the text difficult to understand, particularly for non-native speakers. It is important to strike a balance between idiomatic expression and clarity in communication for an effective translation.

Translating business idioms requires more than linguistic ability; it requires cultural awareness, contextual understanding, and flexibility. Being aware of these challenges, translators will be able to make rational decisions that preserve the intended meaning of idioms and make them understandable to the target audience.

#### **5- Strategies and solutions for translating business idioms:**

Given the challenges of translating business idioms, various strategies can be used to ensure accuracy, clarity, and cultural appropriateness. Scholars such as Mona Baker and Peter Newmark have proposed different strategies to idiom translation, focusing on the importance of meaning over form and the need for adaptability.

### 5-1 Finding an equivalent idiom in the target language:

One of the most effective strategies is using an idiom of similar meaning and form in the target language. *“This strategy involves using an idiom in the target language which conveys roughly the same meaning as that of the source-language idiom and, in addition, consists of equivalent lexical items.”*<sup>6</sup>. Thus, this method preserves both the figurative meaning and the stylistic effect. For example, the English idiom *Turn something on its head* meaning *“to cause something to be the opposite of what it was before”*<sup>7</sup> has an equivalent in Arabic: *“قلب الشيء رأسًا على عقب”*. However, as Baker points out *“this kind of match can only occasionally be achieved”*<sup>8</sup> because idioms are often culture-specific. Moreover, *“it is also possible to find an idiom or fixed expression in the target language with a similar meaning to that of the source idiom, but with dissimilar form, i.e. which consist of different lexical items.”*<sup>9</sup>.

### 5-2 Paraphrasing the Idiom:

When no equivalent idiom exists in the target language, paraphrasing can be an effective alternative. Instead of maintaining the idiomatic form, the translator conveys the meaning in a direct way. For example, the English idiom *hit the ground running*, meaning to start a task with energy and efficiency, might be translated into Arabic as *البدء في العمل بسرعة وكفاءة* which conveys the idea without relying on a figurative expression.

According to Baker *“paraphrasing is the most commonly used strategy for idioms when a match cannot be found in the target language or when it seems inappropriate to use idiomatic language in the target text”*<sup>10</sup>, as it ensures clarity and prevents misinterpretation. However, it may result in a loss of expressiveness.

### 5-3 Translation by omission:

In certain cases, omitting an idiom entirely may be a practical solution. If an idiom lacks an equivalent in the target language, is difficult to paraphrase, or does not fit the style of the translated text, it is preferable to omit it. As Baker notes that *“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 target language, its meanings cannot be easily paraphrased, or for stylistic reasons.”*<sup>11</sup>

### 5-4 Literal Translation:

Literal translation is often seen as the most direct approach, particularly in formal and written business contexts. As Newmark explains, *“literal translation is likely to work best and most with written, prosy, semi-formal, non-literary language, and also with innovative language, worst and least with ordinary spoken idiomatic language.”*<sup>12</sup>. This suggests that in business texts, where clarity and precision are essential, opting for a direct translation of idioms can sometimes be the best choice.

Newmark further argues that *“literal translation is the only correct procedure if the SL and TL meaning correspond, or correspond more closely than any alternative.”*<sup>13</sup>, This means that when an idiom has a direct and clear equivalent in the target language, a literal

translation is the most effective option. For instance, the English idiom *time is money* can be translated directly into Arabic as *الوقت هو المال* because the metaphor is understood all over the world.

Literal translation is an important strategy in translating business idioms, but its effectiveness depends on whether the target audience can get the intended meaning without ambiguity.

## 6- Methodology and analysis:

In this research, we will present an analytical study of a selected corpus of two texts. The first text is a business article from CNN entitled “Since Trump took office, stocks are down and bitcoin has plunged. What's going on?” written by John Towfighi and published on February 25, 2025. The article covers some of the most significant economic issues, including the stock market performance, cryptocurrency fluctuation, and inflation.

The second text is the Arabic translation of the same article, published by CNN Arabic under the title “الأسهم والبيتكوين ضحايا تعريفات ترامب ومخاوف التضخم”, translated by Miry Ragheb and published on the same date. This study offers the opportunity to examine how business idioms have been translated into Arabic by identifying the challenges encountered and assess the strategies used to preserve their meaning in a new linguistic and cultural context.

### 6-1 Analysis of example 1:

#### Source text:

“All three major US stock indexes are *in the red* since President Donald Trump took office on January 20; the Nasdaq is down more than 1% since the start of 2025.”<sup>14</sup>

#### Arabic translation:

“وجميع مؤشرات الأسهم الأمريكية الرئيسية الثلاثة في المنطقة الحمراء منذ تولي ترامب منصبه في 20 يناير، كما انخفض مؤشر ناسداك الذي يعتمد على التكنولوجيا بنحو 2 بالمئة منذ بداية عام 2025.”<sup>15</sup>

#### Translation Analysis:

In this paragraph, we have identified the business idiom *in the red*, which means “*spending and owing more money than is being earned*”<sup>16</sup>. In this context, it refers to experiencing financial loss or decline. However, the phrase was literally translated into Arabic as *في المنطقة الحمراء*, which means the translator has preserved the idiomatic form, but he does not effectively convey the intended financial meaning to the target audience, as the expression is not commonly used in Arabic with the same connotation.

### 6-2 Analysis of example 2:

#### Source text:

“As investors brace for uncertainty, they are likely moving away from stocks into safer assets like government bonds and *dumping risky assets* like cryptocurrencies.”<sup>17</sup>

#### Arabic translation:

"ومع استعداد المستثمرين لحالة عدم اليقين، فمن المرجح أن يتعدوا عن الأسهم إلى أصول أكثر أماناً مثل السندات الحكومية والتخلص من الأصول الخطرة مثل العملات المشفرة."<sup>18</sup>

### Translation analysis:

The business idiom *dumping* in this passage refers to “*the selling of goods in large quantities at prices below the market rate*”<sup>19</sup>, while literally it means “*to get rid of something*”<sup>20</sup>. In this context, it describes the act of selling off assets rapidly which is perceived as risky. In the Arabic text, it was literally translated into *التخلص من الأصول الخطرة*, which conveys accurately the meaning but loses the figurative nuance of *dumping*, which implies urgency and large-scale selling.

### 6-3 Analysis of example 3:

#### Source text:

“Walmart, a bellwether for the US economy, spooked investors last week after it signaled slower sales in 2025 than previously expected.”<sup>21</sup>

#### Arabic translation:

"وأثارت شركة وول مارت، التي تعد مؤشراً للاقتصاد الأمريكي، مخاوف المستثمرين الأسبوع الماضي بعد أن أشارت إلى تباطؤ المبيعات في عام 2025 مقارنة بالتوقعات السابقة."<sup>22</sup>

### Translation Analysis:

The business idiom *bellwether* is used to mean “*a leader or an indicator of trends*”<sup>23</sup>. In this paragraph, it refers to a company or sector that signals the overall direction of the economy. In the Arabic translation, it was paraphrased as *مؤشر للاقتصاد الأمريكي*, which conveys the intended meaning but removes the idiomatic aspect. Although this translation ensures clarity for the target audience, it loses the metaphorical nuance that links the term to its original reference which is a bellwether sheep leading a flock.

### 6-4 Analysis of example 4:

#### Source text:

“Nvidia (NVDA), Palantir (PLTR) and Tesla (TSLA) were leading the selloff in stocks on Tuesday. Palantir, a star of 2024, has fallen about 30% in the past five days.”<sup>24</sup>

#### Arabic translation:

"وكانت أسهم إنفيديا وبالانتر وتيسلا تقود عمليات البيع في الأسهم اليوم الثلاثاء."<sup>25</sup>

### Translation analysis:

In this paragraph, the business idiom *selloff* is used as a noun to mean “*a sudden sharp decline in security prices accompanied by increased trading volume*”<sup>26</sup>. In this context, it refers to a rapid and widespread selling of assets that causes a price drop. However, it was paraphrased as *عمليات البيع*. Therefore, we can observe the re-expression of the meaning in a more general way, which conveys the idea of leading sales rather than a sudden liquidation of assets.

## 6-5 Analysis of sample 5:

### Source text:

"It's clear that the majority of traders believe there's some froth in the market, but on balance they also feel like there's still **more room for the bulls to run**," said James Kostulias, head of trading services at Charles Schwab."<sup>27</sup>

### Arabic translation:

"وقال جيمس كوستولياس، رئيس خدمات التداول في تشارلز شواب "من الواضح أن غالبية المتداولين يعتقدون أن هناك بعض الرغبة في السوق التي تسبق حدوث فقاعة للأسهم، ولكن في المجمل يشعرون أيضاً أن هناك **مجالاً أكبر للمضاربين على الارتفاع**".<sup>28</sup>

### Translation analysis:

The business idiom *bull run*, also known as a *bull trend* in this passage, refers to "a period in the financial market when the prices of certain assets continue to rise"<sup>29</sup>. In the text, the phrase *more room for the bulls to run* refers to the fact that the stock market has even more space for improvement and that bullish investors anticipate even more price increase. It signifies the hopefulness of investors despite concerns that the market is overvalued. The translator has paraphrased the idiom in Arabic as *مجالاً أكبر للمضاربين على الارتفاع*, which conveys the general idea of a continued bull run. However, the figurative nature of the original idiom, which likens investors to powerful bulls running freely, is lost in translation. This adaptation prioritizes clarity over figurativeness to make the meaning more explicit for the target audience.

## 7- Findings and discussion:

The analysis of the five selected samples revealed key findings regarding the translation of business idioms from English into Arabic:

- Literal Translation may preserve the idiomatic form but may sound unnatural or fail to convey the full meaning in Arabic.
- Paraphrasing is used to make understanding easier, but can result in a loss of the form of the idiom and its figurativeness, which is an essential stylistic feature of business language.
- Most business idioms are originated in English, a dominant language used in business and economics. As a result, their equivalents in Arabic are difficult to find or just do not exist.
- The limited use of Arabic language in business studies reduces the number of well-established Arabic equivalents for the majority of business idioms, posing another difficulty for translators.

## 8- Conclusion:

This study explored the challenges involved in translating English business idioms into Arabic, focusing on the impact of linguistic and cultural differences. Through the examination of a selected corpus from CNN and CNN Arabic, we examined how idioms are translated and assessed the effectiveness of different translation strategies.

The findings have confirmed that business idioms often lack direct Arabic equivalents, which means that translators have to rely on strategies such as paraphrasing and cultural adaptation. The analysis revealed that some idioms could be translated literally without losing their meaning but losing their figurativeness, while others required reformulation to convey the intended meaning accurately.

Lastly, the study highlights the importance of adopting flexible translation strategies that take into consideration both linguistic accuracy as well as cultural appropriateness. As business communication is constantly increasing in terms of languages and regions, translators must refine their understanding of idiomatic expressions and adapt their methods to ensure clarity, effectiveness, and cultural appropriateness in their work.

## 9- Footnotes:

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