Numerical idioms in English and Armenian

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Abstract. The article presents a contrastive study of Armenian idiomatic expressions constituting numerals. The research mainly reports research findings from linguocultural and translation perspective. The findings suggest that English idioms with numbers are translated into mother tongue according to three main categories of equivalence: full equivalence, partial equivalence and non-equivalence. And in terms of equivalence is dominant partial equivalence.

Keywords: contrastive study, idiomatic expression, full equivalence, partial equivalence and non-equivalence.

Introduction. Idioms are found in every language and learning them is an important aspect of language mastery. The English language is no exception as it contains a large number of idioms, which are extensively used. Idiomatic expressions have socio-cultural, historical, or political origins mostly. But despite the fact that many similar expressions can be found across languages, a lot of do not coincide exactly in their linguistic or semantic meaning and use (Lauffer 2000: 206). Since English is so highly idiomatic and figurative, idiomatic expressions make up the heart of the language, giving it colour, feeling, charm and precision (Adkins 1968 : 35). Thus to be competent in understanding and using idioms is in fact paramount to have a good command of the depth of vocabulary.

There is not clear-out definition of idioms. Even amongst scholars, it is difficult to find what precisely is or is not an idiom, because of the diversity of the class and the multiplicity of generalized definitions that fail to convey their actual characteristics. It is mainly defined as a complex item which is longer than word-form but shorter than a sentence and each constituent part in idiom patterning does not contribute to the overall meaning of the phrase. The reason for this semantic anomaly derives mainly from the fact that an idiom is not built up word by word according to the grammar of the language, but is a non-compositional phrase which is learned, stored and recycled as a single chunk. It is clear that idioms appear to contain more meaning than roughly do their equivalent literal phrases.

“The words of a language often reflect not so much of the reality of the word, but the interest of people who speak it” (Baker 2006: 18) In other words, idiomatic figures not only express factual meaning but also convey certain evaluative (Baker 2006: 18). In other words, idiomatic figures not only express factual meaning but also convey certain evaluative content towards the relevant phenomenon.

Perhaps the most exhaustive definition of an idiom is presented by Raymond Gibbs “by the term idiom the speaker should learn “dead” metaphors and speech gambits3 by arbitrarily pairing each phrase some non-literary meaning without any awareness of why these phrases mean what they do” (1994: 695).

Baker states that idioms are “frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and often carry meaning which cannot be deduced from their individual components” (1992: 63). She excluded five things that normally cannot be done to an idiom, as it will lose its sense:

1. Cannot change the order of the word in an idiom.
2. Cannot delete a word from it.
3. Cannot replace a word to it.
4. Cannot add a word to it.
5. Cannot change its grammatical structure.

The process of translating idioms and fixed expressions from one language into another is a fine work which obliges a translator to have a good knowledge of both languages and cultures being shared or transferred as well as being able to identify and cope with the contingent problems in the process of finding an efficient equivalent for the inter-lingual idiom pairs. (Larson 1984)

People of different languages use completely different expressions to convey a similar meaning, in a way that while an expression might be completely tangible and easy-to-understand for the interlocutors of a specific language, the same set of words and expressions may seem fully vague and dim and even in some cases nonsense to the speakers of the other. This originates in the fact that each language has got some items that are completely different from the corresponding items in another language. It is found that most translators are unfamiliar with idioms of number; therefore fail to achieve the equivalence. (Larson 1984) Different scholars of linguistics suggest different strategies of translating idiomatic expressions. According to Baker idioms should be translated with great care (1984:143). She emphasized that “the real danger comes in translating an idiom literally, since the result will usually be nonsense in the receptor language. However, three strategies are recognized when translating idioms:

a) Using an idiom with the same meaning and form.

b) Using paraphrase.

c) Using omission.

Total Equivalence – translating the SL idiom with its very similar TL idiom in form and meaning means that the TL idiom should convey the same meaning and be of equivalent lexical item.

Partial Equivalence – this indicates that the SL idiom should be translated with similar meaning but with the help of paraphrasing.

Non-Equivalence – points out three main problems of translating idioms. One main problem may be the lack of equivalence in the TL. Some idioms are culture – specific which means they may refer to some specific item or event common to that particular culture. Accordingly, it is difficult to translate such idioms. Nevertheless, it is recommended that the translator should use the strategy of paraphrasing when encountering such type of idioms in the SL that have no or zero equivalence in the TL. But this does not help the translator to render the effect or impact of the SL idiom into the TL.


According to Newmark “figures of speech and multi-word expressions are some of the most challenging translation difficulties” (Newmark, 1988: 104). Translating idioms is difficult, since idioms are frozen chunks of words whose
overall meaning differ from the meanings of the words involved. He believes that the main problems, a translator faces, are not grammatical but lexical, i.e. words, collocations, and fixed phrases or idioms.

He distinguishes between the translation of idioms and idiomatic translation and says that idiomatic translation "reproduces the message of the original but tends to distort nuances of meaning by preferring colloquialisms and idioms where these do not exist in the original" (Newmark, 1988: 47).

Larson provides that a literal word-for-word translation of the idioms into another language will not make sense. The form cannot be kept, but the receptor language word or phrase which has the equivalent meaning will be the correct one to use in translation. Larson suggests that "translators who want to make a good idiomatic translation often find figures of speech especially challenging" (Larson 1984: 49). He states that the main strategies in translating idioms are:

1. Using an idiom of similar meaning and form to the source language idiom.
2. Using an idiom of similar meaning but different form (in this case the lexical items of an idiom are not preserved, it is translated as a semantic equivalent).
3. Translation by paraphrasing, using this kind of strategy a translator transfers the meaning of an idiom using a single word or a group of words which roughly corresponds to the meaning of idiom but is not an idiom itself.
4. Translation by omission, this strategy implies that sometimes an idiom may be omitted, leaving no traces in the target language.

1 Category of Total Equivalence

Averaging across several set of translation strategies for making further insights into the research we adopted Baker’s procedure. Hence, the idioms of number are divided into three categories in terms of equivalence:

1. Those with total equivalence in terms of function;
2. Those with partial equivalence;
3. Those with no equivalence or untranslatable which represent the most difficult area for translators to be translated into Armenian.

Here are adduced some examples of Total equivalence:

- Julia switched the light off and went to bed, but she couldn’t sleep. She was in two minds the whole night. (W.S. Maughan p 74).
- Ծերուկն ինտուիցիայի մի փառառից: Ազատ էր բնակել հատկապես պարստ հաճախ։ (լեզվի բառով 37)

As for the expression “to be in two minds” we are faced with the interesting fact that this idiom goes back to the early sixteenth century, although the number two was not fixed. John Palsgrave a priest of Henry VIII of England’s court who was also known as a tutor in the royal household, and as a textbook author wrote (1530) “I am of diverse minds”, Dickens used “I was in twenty minds”, and only in the twentieth century came into use the expression “to be in two minds”. This idiom was first recorded in 1853, but variants such as “diverse minds” and “twenty minds” date back to the early 1500s and are still used as synonyms.

(https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/be+of+two+minds)
- I wonder what the heck he was still living for. His one foot is in the grave, his days are numbered. (J. D. Salinger p33)
- Ես սկսել էր այս թեիտնում՝ երկու մտնում: Այստեղ եւ այս վարձու հաշվին են՝ եւ ջամային (լեզվի համար 37)

The cited passage is furnished with two good examples of phrases. The first phrase “one foot in the grave” has been current in English since 17th century. The first example of the expression in print is found in Philip Massinger’s and Nathan Field’s play “The Fatal Dowry” (1632) “When one foot’s in the grave” (https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/one-foot-in-the-grave.html). The two phrases find their equivalents in the native language. It is noteworthy to mention that in the second case the English word “grave” is paraphrased into multi-word combination այդքան ներսից։ 

- Old Spencer was a good teacher at all. He was all stooped over and whatever he told went in one ear and out the other. (J. D. Salinger p34)
- Աներիք՝ նշված են՝ որ զանգակացած էր։ Նկարկած չկրթված էր։ Նկարման բառով էր։ (լեզվի բառով 41)

The expression “to go in one ear and out the other” traces back to 1385, and began to circulate in Geoffrey Chaucer’s poem. However, the idea dates back at least to the Roman orator Quintilian, who worked in the first century and used to say: “The things flow right through the ears”. As we can see, the original expression had somehow another architecture.

- And most important nine times out of ten they have more humility than the unscholarly thinker. Do you follow me at all? (J. D. Salinger p49)
- Ես, ինչպես բացառեն է՝ աշխարհի ձևի փատրուկ համարը չեն պատմիչապես, բնակչությունը անակարգում։ (լեզվի բառով 53)

The use of idiom goes back to the early 17th century. The following idiomatic expression means that “something happens on nearly every occasion or is almost always the case”. The same meaning implies the added Armenian expression անակարգում։ (U. Ստեփանյան, Ա. Սպենսեր, Հայոց բառիկապատմականություն պատմության 1975: 557).

- He told me everything, immediately and in one breath. Holmes. (A.C. Doyle p 124)
- Ես նա նման պատմելու էր միակ պատմմամբ։ (լեզվի բառով 127)

In Armenian the phrase “in one breath” is rendered as այդքան պատմելու իսկ գրավում։ In this case the word գրավում implores the translation with emphasis and stylistic coloring.
space- ընդհատելու արդյունքներ, անապահ փլրհավորումը.

(լ. Արամյան, Արմեն այրվանիչ պատմության համար, 1976:324). In these examples the translator maintains the color of ST.

- He was not only a good fellow, but a brilliant detective. Sherlock was always one step ahead of others, in everything. (A.C. Doyle p 278)

- արամյան չորս հաշվի թիվը նշված, հատկապես այս գծում են նշվող ռուգեկան անհանգստանում զուտness

As far as we have been speaking about the history of idiomatic expressions it should be noted that since at least the 19th century, “one step ahead” referred to a literal step forward. Early evidence for its metaphorical use comes in the late 1800s. An 1876 religious anthropology text, for instance, describes Hindu theology taking “one step ahead of the philosophical thought of primitive man”, the phrase using walking as a metaphor for advancement. The phrase was in common idiomatic use in the 20th-century, widely found in a range of written texts by the 1980s. “One step ahead” commonly appears in the longer phrase, “one step ahead of the game”, referring to someone who is more prepared or able to beat the competition. It also frequently occurs in “one step ahead of the law”, describing criminals able to evade capture or outfox authorities. (https://www.dictionary.com/el/slang/one-step-ahead/#)

The first use of the phrase “one chance in a million” can be traced to the end of 18th century. The idiom is used to show an extremely rare or unlikely chance, opportunity, or possibility. After addressing the issue of the origin of expression we will address the question how the phrase “one chance in a million” is transferred into the TL. Though it is a challenging task for the translator he solved it artistically; idiomatic expression losing its semantic and structural integrity is paraphrased into Armenian as a multi-word free combination զուտակ քաղաքականության ռազմական լինելուց.

II Category of Partial Equivalence

- Ackley has been missing for a few days, and nobody worries about him. Everybody knows a cat has nine lives. (J.D. Salinger p 19)

- Էկլին ձենի ազատությունը, զուտների համար, որ նույն տարեկանության մեջ համարում: Շերլոքը համարվում է զուտակ գերեզմանական ճիշտ ճիշտ.

In the above-mentioned examples the ST is paraphrased into TT referring to the way of thinking in TL society. The meaning of these two idioms in both languages is the same but it is expressed with two different lexicum units. The word “cat” is translated as զուտ. The idiom comes from Shakespeare’s play Romeo and Juliet. In Act 3 Scene 1, Tybalt asks, “What wouldst thou have with me?” and Mercutio replies, “Good king of cats, nothing but one of your nine lives.” The number nine has mystical significance in many cultures: In both Christianity and Hinduism, the number nine symbolizes divine completeness; in Chinese culture, nine is a lucky number; in Norse mythology, the universe is divided into nine worlds; and in Greek mythology, there are nine muses. Cats in particular are known for surviving extremely precarious situations, that’s why they are said to have nine lives. In the English culture “nine” is also considered a magic number, which could also be part of the reason cats are attributed with nine lives. Cats have been both worshipped and feared throughout the ages and seen as magical creatures. The myth that cats have multiple lives exists across the world, however it’s not always nine lives, and the number varies from different cultures. In certain regions of Spain it is believed that cats have seven lives, while Turkish and Arabic legends say cats have six lives. (https://www.literrobot.com/blog/2019/10/07/do-cats-have-nine-lives/)

In the Armenian culture the zoonym cat is transferred as “dog”. The idiom implies the same meaning; it means to keep managing to get out of difficult situations without being hurt or harmed. However, in the Armenian culture “dog” is symbolically associated with loyalty and vigilance, often acting as guardian and protector.

- After that evening, she was on the cloud nine; she cares about nobody but Tom. (W.S Maugham p 135)

- Այդ էքլինը համարվում է զուտակ գերեզմանական ճիշտ ճիշտ.

The message of these two idioms is the same but the English idiomatic constituent “nine” is substituted by “seven” in TT. This idiom is culture-specific and that’s why it fails to achieve full equivalency in the TL. A commonly heard explanation is that the expression originated as one of the classifications of cloud which were defined by the US Weather Bureau in the 1950s, in which ‘Cloud Nine’ denotes the fluffy cumulonimbus type that is considered so attractive. Another explanation is that the phrase derives from Buddhism and that Cloud Nine is one of the stages of the progress to enlightenment of a Bodhisattva (one destined to become a Buddha). Whereas in Armenian is used number seven. The roots of its explanation can be found in Aristotle’s philosophy. According to Aristotle’s theory, the sky is seven steady crystalline hemispheres embedded in each other. Stars and planets are attached to each celestial “sphere”. The seventh heaven is high. So, imagining yourself in the seventh heaven is the same as being on top of happiness, on top of world. (https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/on-cloud-nine.html).

Here is another grounding. In both Jewish and Christian traditions, “seven” signifies totality of perfection, and completeness:

- Jesus spoke seven last words from the Cross.
- The Our Father contains seven petitions.
- There are seven days in a week and seven days of creation, apparently connected to the four primary lunar phases being roughly 7 days each.

According to another statement number “nine” in the Bible signifies divine completeness:

- Jesus Christ, the son of God, died exactly at the 9th hour of the day when he was crucified on the cross.
- It is on Ab 9, in the Hebrew Calendar, which the total destruction of Jerusalem Temple began. (https://numerologynation.com/number-9-biblical/)

As for the Armenian equivalent նույն տարեկանության (heaven) it is believed to be the home of God where good people go when they die; kingdom of Heaven. (A.S. Hornby Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2010: 697)

- Ackley, that peculiar guy, always brought hundred and one reasons, why he was absent from Mr. Spencer’s classes. (J.D. Salinger p51)
From these examples it could be deduced that the English idiom "to bring hundred and one reason" finds its appropriate equivalent in Armenian in the pattern հազարում ու երկու առավելակերպ։ In the architecture of this expression the word "hundred" is rendered into TL as հազար։ The origin of the phrase traces back to the 18th century.

Hours passed one after another, and Poirot, that brilliant detective interrogated them one by one. (A. Christie p 254)

The cited passage is furnished with two good examples of phrases. The first phrase is not translated in TL as an idiom. The idiom "one after another" has been current in English since 18th century. The phrase could belong to the medieval American English but there is no noted evidence for the same. It is noteworthy to mention that in the second case seeking a workable meaning the translator has chosen the pattern հազար առ հազար making an emphasis on its cultural loading. This idiom traces back about A.D. 1000, showing one thing or person immediately after another.

Sherlock, you were perfect as always. You killed two birds with one stone satisfying two arguments with one answer. (A.C. Doyle p 254)

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In the above adduced examples there is non-equivalency in the TL. The idiom of number is culture-specific and is rendered into Armenian as a compound nominal predicate, because of the lack of its relevant item in Armenian. The idiom originally (19th century) means to refer to the very last moment before an event or deadline. (https://www.theidioms.com/the-eleventh-hour/)

We have now come to further step of our analysis, namely to the consideration of idioms not having equivalents in TL as they are culture-specific or Non-equivalents. Here are some examples.

One of my troubles, is I never take care too much when I lose something. Guys say I take care of number one only which drive my teachers crazy. (J.D. Salinger p 43)

The English idiom phrase "to bring hundred and one reason" finds its counterpart specific and in TL it is rendered into Armenian as a compound nominal predicate, because of the lack of its relevant item in Armenian. The idiom originally (19th century) means to be selfishly absorbed in protecting your own person and interests (informal).

In the above adduced examples there is non-equivalency in the TL. The idiom of number is culture-specific and in TL it loses its coloring and informality. The phrase nowadays is more often used as "three sheets to the wind", rather than the original "three sheets in the wind". The earliest printed citation can be found in Pierce Egan’s “Real Life in London”, 1821: (https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/three-sheets-to-
The idiom is translated free as it is culturally charged in SL. The origin of idiom goes back to early 18th century. If something happens once in a while, it happens sometimes, but not very often.

Now, the last million dollar question. How many types of plant species are found in India? (Who wants to be a millionaire? 2019)

The most frequently heard attempts to explain the phrase’s derivation involve number nine with clothing in classes, nobody paid attention to him.(J.D. Salinger p.72)

The numerical idiom is paraphrased into the mother tongue in TL. A pun on the idiom was taken from an advertisement published in The Age (Melbourne, Victoria, Australia) on 6 September 1950 for Southgate, Melbourne. The idiom “one sandwich short of a picnic” indicates mentally deficient, or slightly crazy.

And even when he put his two cents’ worth in classes, nobody paid attention to him. (J.D. Salinger p.72)

The same non-equivalency can be inferred in the above-cited examples. In TL the English idiom of number is a little bit paraphrased referring the way of thinking in TL society. This is an Afro-American expression of the 20th century. Since five suggests five fingers on your hand. It is a common gesture to give someone a five means your open hand.
far we have been speaking about the history of idiomatic expressions it should be noted that the phrase is used since the late 1800s, and means to think seriously about whether one really wants to do something before doing it. (Merriam Webster dictionary 1828: 210)

• Watson, I think we must put two and two together to understand who killed René. (A.C. Doyle p 153)

• Կաթիլ, թե է կան կաթիլ որպեսզի կան կաթիլ ամուսնություն. կաթիլի հանդիպումը եթե է կան կաթիլ ամուսնությունը կան կաթիլ (p 155)

The idiomatic is translated as կաթիլ կաթիլ ունեն implying to discuss something in details - համարվում է կաթիլ կաթիլ ունեն (A.C. Doyle p 1976:194). The translator solved this task very skillfully which brings closer target reader to source culture. The idiomatic traces back to the middle 18th century from French or Latin.

• Look Watson, these two letters are two peas in a pod. Seems they have been written by the same person. (A.C. Doyle p 235)

• «Դոյլ» Ֆորստեր, ամերիկացի նկարիչները երկու խաղ երկու համ ունեն են: Կաթիլան ու նախի երկու խաղ էր պատմում (p 237)

In the above-mentioned examples the English idiomatic number is paraphrased into Armenian as the pattern of կաթիլ կաթիլ ունեն implying to discuss something in details - համարվում է կաթիլ կաթիլ ունեն (A.C. Doyle p 1976:194). The difference between the word “pea” and its Armenian evident կաթիլ կերպ է կարծում (Merriam Webster dictionary p 293). The data of analysis displayed that English idioms with number can be translated into Armenian according to three categories of equivalence. It’s astoundingly interesting that in the triad of equivalence prevails partial equivalence; at the top of hierarchy of equivalence stands the partial type. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that in contrastive languages the same meaning of the phrase is worded differently because of different linguocultures. The non-equivalence is in the second place with its number of examples as they are culture-specific and are only understandable in the source language. And the fewest examples belong to total equivalence that is a result of mental cognition of various outlooks and cultural identification of the source and target languages.

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