

# Subtitling Idiomatic Expressions from English into Arabic: *Enola Holmes* as a Case Study

Aishah M. Mubaraki<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English Language, Al-Khafji University College, University of Hafr Al Batin, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Aishah M. Mubaraki, Khafji City, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: ammobaraki@uhb.edu.sa

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## Abstract

Translation involves conveying a text's pragmatic, cultural, and semantic components to a different language. On the other hand, idiomatic expressions pose a challenge to translators because they are culturally distinctive and incorporate various cultural nuances. This study employs a qualitative case study approach to identify the most frequently used subtitling strategy for translating idioms in the movie *Enola Holmes* (2020). Additionally, it aims to examine the influence of various types of idioms on the subtitler's selection of subtitling strategies. Pedersen's taxonomy for rendering extra-linguistic cultural references in subtitling was selected for data analysis as it was expressly created for audiovisual translation. The results show that substitution was the most frequently used translation strategy for subtitling idioms, particularly in subtitles that were remarkably pure and semi-idiomatic. The second most dominant strategy was the official equivalent, which was applied to render all three types of idioms. Direct translation was the third most used strategy, especially in subtitling literal idioms. Further research could investigate how the strategy used to translate idiomatic expressions affects the audience's overall interpretation of the implicit meaning of colloquial expressions.

**Keywords:** translation, subtitles, idioms, translation strategies

## 1. Introduction

Dáz Cintas and Remael describe subtitling as (2014, p. 8):

A translation practice that consists of presenting a written text, generally on the lower part of the screen, that endeavors to recount the original dialogue of the speakers as well as the discursive elements that appear in the image (letters, inserts, graffiti, inscriptions, placards and the like) and the information that is contained on the soundtrack (songs, voices off).

Subtitling is a complex process that involves more than simply translating words from the source language (SL) into the target language (TL). It encompasses translating different aspects of a film, such as the culture and emotions portrayed by the characters. This is when a subtitler needs to translate idiomatic expressions from the source language (SL) to the target language (TL).

According to Baker (1992), idioms are defined as “frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components” (p. 63). Bassnett argues that “the translation of idioms takes us a stage further in considering the topic of which meaning and translation, for idioms, similar to puns, are culture bound” (1980, p. 32). Moreover, idioms can be culturally specific and have associated meanings that vary from one culture to another. This issue can pose an even more significant challenge for the subtitler. Therefore, the subtitler must be familiar with both the source language (SL) and target language (TL), as well as the corresponding cultures, to select the most suitable subtitling strategy for translating idioms and their communicative meanings. They also need to consider the technical constraints of subtitling.

This study analyzes the Arabic subtitles of English idioms found in the *Enola Holmes* movie, an exciting title released on Netflix in 2020. The film tells the story of Enola's journey in search of her missing mother, ultimately solving the case of the disappeared marquis. It encompasses genres such as action, fantasy, family, and mystery. *Enola Holmes* was selected for analysis because it contains different types of idioms, comprising 25 pure idioms, 20 semi-idioms, and 16 literal idioms (Fisara et al., 2021). Thus, it presents an interesting case for identifying the subtitling strategies used to translate these idioms from English into Arabic.

The present study aims to investigate the subtitling strategies used in translating idioms in the movie *Enola Holmes*, addressing the following research questions:

1. What subtitling strategies were used for translating idioms in the movie *Enola Holmes* (2020), and what general patterns can be identified in the English subtitles?
2. What impact might different types of idioms have had on the subtitler's choice of subtitling strategy?

## 2. Review of Literature

The presence of idiomatic expressions makes translating audiovisual materials significantly more complex. As standard components of everyday language, idioms constitute a challenging aspect of translation. Since they are linguistically and culturally specific, they often find it difficult, if not impossible, to find direct equivalents across languages. There are no standardized translation procedures due to the cultural embeddedness of idioms. For example, the English idiom 'To kick the bucket', which implies death, is considered culturally rude and requires a softer translation. Similarly, 'To pull someone's leg,' meaning to jest, lacks a straightforward equivalent in numerous languages, including Arabic, and its origin remains uncertain.

Baker (1992) states that “the main problems that idiomatic and fixed expressions pose in translation relate to two main areas: the ability to recognize and interpret the idiom correctly, and the difficulties involved in rendering the various aspects of meaning that an idiom or a fixed expression conveys into the target language” (p. 65). Therefore, it is commonly believed that one of the most challenging tasks translators face is translating idiomatic expressions. The challenge lies in replacing lexical and grammatical units across different languages and entirely omitting necessary elements from the source language text. Awwad (1990) identifies two significant difficulties in translating idioms: first, misinterpreting the writer's or speaker's intentions, and second, acknowledging cultural differences between languages regarding traditional and innovative idioms. According to Bassnett (1980), “idioms should be translated based on the function of the phrase: the source language idioms should be replaced by a target language idiom that has the same meaning” (p. 24).

Baker (1992, pp. 68–71) suggests that translators face the following main difficulties when translating idioms:

1. An idiom or fixed expression may not have an equivalent in the TL. The way one language chooses to express or not express different meanings cannot be assigned, and it rarely matches how another language chooses to express the same meaning. A language can convey a particular meaning through a fixed expression, an idiom, or a single word.
2. An idiom or fixed expression may have a comparable equivalent in the TL, but the context in which it is employed may differ. Thus, the two expressions may have different meanings or not be pragmatically convertible.
3. An idiom can be employed in the source text literally and idiomatically. Unless the TL idiom matches the SL idiom in both form and meaning, this idiom cannot be successfully reproduced in the TL.
4. The very conventions of using idioms in written speech, the context in which they may be used, and the frequency of their use may differ in the SL and TL.

According to Newmark (1988, p. 28), comparing meaning equivalence with frequency equivalence is especially difficult when translating idiomatic language into non-idiomatic language. Furthermore, he argues that the main problem in translating idioms is not grammatical but lexical—that is, selecting the appropriate words, collocations, and fixed expressions to convey the idiom accurately.

Mollanazar (2004, p. 52) argues that the first step in translating idioms is to recognize them. Translators can fall into the trap of translating idioms literally. However, such word-for-word translation of idioms often has absurd consequences, sometimes with humorous effects. Moreover, Straksiene (2009) argues that the primary issue in translating idioms is the lack of equivalence at the idiom level. Although all languages have idioms, it is not easy to find an equivalent in the TL that matches the idiom of the SL in both meaning and form.

Translators must, therefore, use suitable strategies to overcome these obstacles. According to Newmark (1981), “idiom(s) should never be translated word for word” (p. 125). He notes that translators must ensure that, for most texts, 1) their translations make sense and read naturally, and 2) they employ standard syntax, idioms, and terminology appropriate to the context in which they are written. As Larson (1984) emphasizes, translating word-for-word idioms into another language has an absurd effect. While the literal form of idioms cannot be preserved, using a word or phrase with the same meaning in the TL can provide an appropriate translation.

Baker (1992, pp. 26–43) states that the most appropriate strategies for translating idioms are: 1) using an idiom of comparable meaning and frame to the SL idiom (it must generally transfer the same meaning and consist of comparable lexical items); 2) using an idiom of comparable meaning but the diverse form (in this case, the lexical items of an idiom are not maintained, with a semantic equivalent given instead); 3) translation by paraphrasing (using this type of strategy, a translator conveys the meaning of an idiom by employing a single word or a group of words that roughly correspond to the meaning of the idiom itself); 4) translation by omission (the translator omits an idiom in the TL due to the lack of an equivalent in the TL).

In addition, Baker (1992, p. 68) argues that idioms that contain culturally specific items can be translated. Thus, Mollanazar (2004) presents two techniques for translating an idiom: either to employ a relevant idiom from the target language (TL) as its equivalent or, if there is no appropriate idiom in the TL, to use the idiomatic meaning instead.

Idiomatic expression subtitling has been the subject of several studies, including Tyasrinestu and Ardi (2020). Their study focused on analyzing patterns of idiomatic expressions and translation techniques employed in *The Good Doctor* television series. Applying Hockett's theory, they identified five forms of idioms in the series: substitute words, proper nouns, slang words, word images, and compound sentences in English. In addition, they found that six of Vinay and Darbelnet's translation techniques were employed. The most employed translation technique was to create equivalent expressions while certain idioms were omitted.

Kusuma and Rini (2020) investigated how idioms were translated in the subtitles of the film *Inside Out*, applying Newmark's theoretical framework to evaluate the effectiveness of the translation. Their results indicated that functional equivalence was the predominant

translation strategy for idioms within the film.

In another study, Manipuspika and Winzami (2021) examined idioms and their translations in the subtitles of the film Murder on the Orient Express. Seidl and McMordie's framework was employed for idiomatic expression classification, while Baker's theory informed the analysis of translation strategies. The study found that phrasal verbs were the most common type of idiom, with paraphrasing as the primary approach to translation. They attributed this to the frequent lack of direct idiomatic equivalents, which compelled translators to paraphrase to convey meaning (Baker, 1992).

Agung (2022) analyzed the translation techniques employed for idiomatic expressions in the subtitles and dubbing of WandaVision (2021), assessing whether these translations leaned more toward the source or target language. A qualitative descriptive method was employed, with data analyzed using Pedersen's taxonomy for cultural references in subtitles. The study demonstrated that diverse strategies were applied to both subtitles and dubbing. Subtitling employed substitution, literal translation, generalization, and a combination of substitution and omission, influenced by constraints on space and time. Her research concluded that both subtitling and dubbing are primarily TL-oriented.

The data in the current study will be analyzed using Pedersen's (2011) taxonomy of strategies, which includes seven main strategies: retention, direct translation, official equivalent, specification, generalization, substitution, and omission (Figure 1).

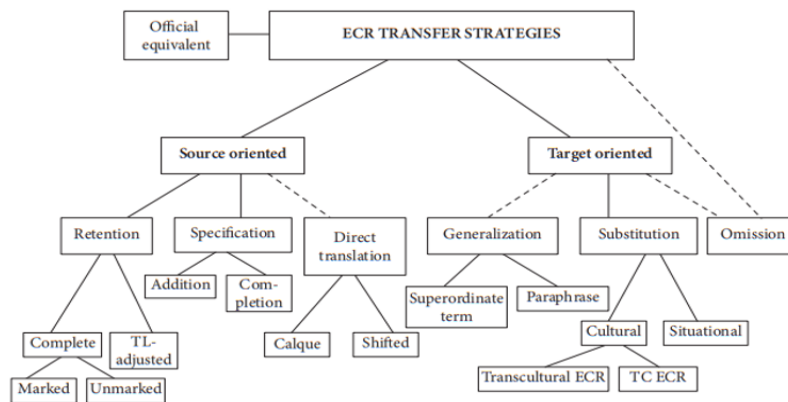


Figure 1. Typology of translation methods and strategies

Official equivalents possessing a unique standing are treated separately from general translation orientation. For the analysis, it is crucial to outline the primary translation strategies: 1) retention, keeping the source text unchanged or slightly adjusting it for the target language; 2) specification, making the subtitle more explicit than the source text; 3) direct translation, altering only the language without semantic changes; 4) generalization, making the translation less specific than the source text; 5) substitution, replacing the extra-linguistic cultural reference (ECR) in the source text with a different one from the source or target culture; 6) omission, eliminating the source text ECR in the TL, often used in subtitles due to space constraints; 7) official equivalence, employing a pre-established, official term in the TL. Pedersen (2011) asserts that various translation strategies can be combined to address translation issues. The current study examines idiomatic subtitle strategies in the film Enola Holmes.

3. Method

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to analyze the data, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. This approach, also used by Alshargabi et al. (2022), enhances understanding by merging qualitative and quantitative perspectives. Their study, for instance, provided a more comprehensive view of how linguistic theories on negation relate to student translation obstacles. It also enabled an empirical evaluation of student difficulties that pure theoretical analysis might overlook. In this study, the data comprised idioms and their corresponding subtitles from Enola Holmes, with the aid of online dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster, to clarify the meanings of the idioms. Data were then classified using Pedersen's (2011) framework. The quantitative analysis calculated the frequency of each subtitling strategy to identify the most common strategy for translating idioms. Simultaneously, the qualitative analysis investigated how the type of idiomatic expression affected subtitler decisions. The work of Fisara et al. (2021), which categorized idioms from the Enola Holmes movie into 25 pure idioms, 20 semi-idioms, and 16 literal idioms, served as the basis for classifying idiomatic expressions in this study. A "pure idiom" is a phrase or expression that has a metaphorical meaning distinct from its literal meaning. A "semi-idiom" is a phrase or expression that combines elements of both idiomatic and literal language. It may have a figurative meaning, but it can also be understood literally. A "literal idiom" is a phrase or expression understood based on its literal or actual meaning rather than its figurative or metaphorical meaning.

4. Data Analysis

This section presents the results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses.

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

Subtitling idiomatic expressions presents unique challenges and limitations that must be considered during the audiovisual translation. The

translator must choose the most suitable translation strategy to enhance understanding of the source text message. In the *Enola Holmes* movie, various strategies were employed for subtitling idiomatic expressions, including substitution, direct translation, omission, official equivalent, and a combination of direct translation and specification. A detailed analysis is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Percentage usage of subtitling strategies in the translation of idioms in the *Enola Holmes* movie

Subtitling strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Substitution	31	51%
Official equivalent	17	28%
Direct translation	10	16%
Omission	2	3%
Direct translation + specification (addition)	1	2%
Total	61	100%

The data in table 1 indicate that the subtitler used the substitution strategy (51%) at a markedly higher rate than the official equivalent strategy (28%) and the direct translation strategy (16%). The omission strategy (3%) and the integration of direct translation and specification (addition) strategies (2%) were the least favored strategies. This highlights a clear preference for the substitution strategy in the subtitling of this movie, where idioms are replaced with non-idiomatic expressions.

Table 2 illustrates the percentage usage of the subtitling strategies based on the type of idiom.

Table 2. Percentage usage of subtitling strategies in the translation of the different types of idiomatic expressions in the *Enola Holmes* movie

Type of idioms	Subtitling strategy	Frequency	Relative frequency
Pure idioms	Substitution	17	68%
	Official equivalent	5	20%
	Direct translation	1	4%
	Omission	1	4%
	Direct translation + specification (addition)	1	4%
	Total	25	100%
Semi-idioms	Substitution	11	55%
	Official equivalent	7	35%
	Direct translation	1	5%
	Omission	1	5%
	Direct translation + specification (addition)	0	0%
	Total	20	100%
Literal idioms	Substitution	3	19%
	Official equivalent	6	38%
	Direct translation	7	44%
	Omission	0	0%
	Direct translation + specification (addition)	0	0%
	Total	16	100%

As shown in table 2 when translating pure idioms, the subtitler used the substitution strategy at a markedly higher rate (68%) than the official equivalent (20%) and other strategies. The substitution strategy was used most frequently for translating semi-idiom translations (55%). This preference may have been motivated by the fact that the substitution strategy could be applied when the subtitler could not find an equivalent in the TL. However, for translating literal idioms, the subtitler used the direct translation strategy (44%) more frequently than the official equivalent (38%) and substitution strategies (19%). This may be because the literal idioms in the target text have the same meaning and forms in the SL.

#### 4.2 Qualitative Analysis

As mentioned in the previous analysis section, the idioms in the *Enola Holmes* movie can be classified into pure idioms, semi-idioms, and literal idioms.

##### 4.2.1 Pure idioms

ST: ‘The bowler hat man will be **hot on your trail**...’ (00:33:49–00:33:51)

TT: ‘الرجل ذو القبعة سيكون في أثرك...’

The pure idiomatic expression ‘hot on your trail’ in the text above is defined as ‘chasing and close to catching’ in the Merriam-Webster dictionary. The subtitler opted to translate it as ‘في أثرك’ in the subtitle. This demonstrates a substitution strategy, where the idiomatic phrase is transformed into a non-idiomatic equivalent. However, the original idiomatic phrase retains its meaning.

ST: ‘**The beating heart** of England.’ (00:35:14–00:35:15)

TT: ‘قلب "إنجلترا" النابض.’

Here, the subtitler used an official equivalent strategy to translate a pure idiomatic expression with a ready-made official term in the target context. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the pure idiomatic expression ‘the beating heart of something’ in the above text means ‘the most important part of something’. It was translated into ‘قلب "انجلترا" النابض’ using the official equivalent strategy.

#### 4.2.2 Semi-idioms

ST: ‘Look, I believe our recent **brush with death**.’ (00:30:12–00:30:14)

TT: ‘اعتقد أن تجربتنا الأخيرة مع الموت’

The semi-idiomatic expression ‘brush with death’ is used in the text above. The Cambridge Dictionary defines a brush with something as a situation in which you experience something or almost experience something unpleasant. The subtitler translated the idiom into ‘تجربتنا مع الموت’ in the subtitle, employing the substitution strategy to translate the semi-idiomatic expression. This strategy was used because the idiom lacks an Arabic idiomatic equivalent. Thus, the subtitler replaced the idiomatic expression with a non-idiomatic one that conveyed the same meaning as the idiom.

ST: ‘You **look the spit of** her...’ (00:42:57–00:42:58)

TT: ‘أنت نسخة طبق الأصل منها.’

The semi-idiomatic expression ‘look the spit of her’ means ‘to look exactly like’. It was translated into ‘نسخة طبق الأصل’ in the subtitle. The subtitler employed an official equivalent in the target text, effectively conveying the semantic meaning of the idiom.

#### 4.2.3 Literal idioms

ST: ‘**Keep your mouth shut!**’ (01:04:44–01:04:46)

TT: ‘أبق فمك مغلقاً.’

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the expression ‘Keep your mouth shut!’ means ‘to not say something or to not talk about something’. The subtitler employed a direct translation strategy, translating ‘Keep your mouth shut!’ as ‘أبق فمك مغلقاً’. The meaning of the idiom is successfully transmitted in the subtitle.

ST: ‘I like to keep **ahead of the times**.’ (00:12:31–00:12:33)

TT: ‘أن أسبق العصر.’

Based on the definition in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the idiom ‘ahead of the times’ means ‘at an earlier or previous time’. It was translated into ‘أسبق العصر’. In this case, the subtitler used an official equivalent that effectively conveys the idiom’s meaning in the target language (TL).

## 5. Discussion

According to the compiled data, the substitution strategy was the most frequently used in subtitling the idioms, especially pure idioms, and culturally influenced semi-idioms. In these cases, the subtitler used non-idiomatic phrases or words to ensure that the figurative meaning of the idioms was conveyed in the target text and was generally understood by the target audience. The present result aligns with earlier investigations (Al-assaf, 2016; Al-Shawi & Mahadi, 2012; Bahumaid, 2010), which documented a tendency to employ non-idiomatic vocabulary to express the intended meaning of an idiom. Baker (1992) refers to this approach as a “paraphrasing strategy.”

The findings of this study also showed that the official equivalent was the second most dominant strategy in subtitling all three types of idioms analyzed. The subtitler used an idiom with a similar meaning to the SL idiom, regardless of its form.

Subtitlers may attempt to bring the source text closer to the target audience. The third most used strategy was direct translation, with the results indicating that it was frequently used to render literal idioms. A possible explanation for this finding is that literal idioms can be understood in their actual or literal sense rather than in their connotative or figurative meaning.

## 6. Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the translation strategies commonly used in subtitling idioms in the movie *Enola Holmes*. It also examined the impact of the type of idiom on the subtitler’s choice of subtitling strategy. The findings indicated that the substitution strategy was the primary approach used for subtitling idioms, exceptionally pure idioms, and semi-idioms that may contain culturally bound items. However, the analysis revealed that the connotative meaning of the idioms was effectively transferred into the target language. This investigation revealed that the official equivalent was the second most used strategy for translating all three types of idioms in the movie. The findings also showed that literal idioms, whose meaning makes sense, were translated using a direct translation strategy. In general, the connotative meaning of the idioms was transferred into the target text.

The current study has limitations that should be acknowledged. The analysis was limited to identifying the most frequently used subtitling strategy for translating idioms in the movie *Enola Holmes* and investigating the impact of different types of idioms on the subtitler’s choice of subtitling strategy. Future research could explore strategies for dubbing idiomatic expressions in the same movie, such as *Enola Holmes*. It would be interesting to compare the strategies used in subtitling and dubbing to investigate how much a translator applies similar strategies in different translation techniques. To further this descriptive analysis, a reception study could explore how the strategy used to translate idiomatic expressions influences viewers’ overall understanding of the implied meaning of the idiom expressions.

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**Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

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