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THE RENDERING OF IDIOMS IN TWO TRANSLATIONS
OF NEIL GAIMAN'S NOVEL *NEVERWHERE* INTO SERBIAN:
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Summary: This paper summarizes the results of the author's MA thesis. It deals with the analysis of idioms in two Serbian translations with a time lapse of fifteen years between the translations. The corpus contains 136 lexical units, and is divided into two categories: adequate and inadequate translations, both of which are further sub-classified. The aim is to show both the current and past trends in the translation of idioms from English into Serbian. Although the majority of translations are classified as inappropriate, the division is not entirely black-and-white. Certain categories fall in-between these two extremes, which is visually presented on a scale.

Keywords: idioms, idiomaticity, translation

1. Introduction

Current trends in translating prose fiction novels from English into Serbian are still not as promising as they should be, despite the fact that there are enough competent and qualified translators. This mainly happens because translation as a discipline and as a career is often not taken seriously. This is one of the reasons why this topic is worth discussing.

Translation has always been an important human activity and an act of communication, bridging the gap between different cultures and languages. Due to globalization, it has gained even more momentum in the last few decades. The effects of globalization have made the world a smaller place. As a consequence, more and more people can now come in contact with and study different cultures and languages. This ultimately gives rise to the need to translate more books and novels in a way that truly reflects the original work. However, it takes a lot of effort and knowledge for a translation to be considered a true representation of the original work. Novels are often poorly translated, which misrepresents the author's work and message. Again, this is not so much because of the lack of competent translators, but because of publishing agencies' failure to hire them.

There are many different aspects that can be explored within translation studies. This paper discusses translation from English into Serbian, and more specifically, translating idioms. This paper is based on the MA thesis titled, "The Rendering of Idioms in Two Translations of Neil Gaiman's Novel *Neverwhere* into Serbian: A Critical Analysis." The

thesis focuses on critical analysis of idioms in two translations of Neil Gaiman's prose fiction novel *Neverwhere*, with a time lapse of fifteen years between the two translations. The analysis is based on a corpus of 136 lexical units, although a number of idioms throughout the corpus overlap as a result of the two translations of the same content.

Idiom translation poses a great challenge and a mystery for translators as well as linguists. Idioms are lively expressions which spice up our daily speech and can be found in almost every aspect of conversation. They are language-specific expressions that are common to all languages and are used widely in both written and spoken discourse. Because of their playfulness and creativity, however, they are considered one of the most challenging issues in the realm of translation.

Idiom translation is special because it touches upon both cultural and historic characteristics of a language, which makes them altogether more difficult to render adequately. This is why idiom translation requires an in-depth understanding of both the source and the target language (in this case, the mother tongue). It is essential that the translator has a comprehensive knowledge of both languages so as to be able to truly understand the message they need to convey. Idioms are often mistranslated because their meaning is opaque. The biggest "problem" with idioms is that they cannot be deciphered merely by knowing the meaning of the individual lexemes that make up the idiom. This is why proper idiom use represents the highest level of language proficiency (Prčić 2008: 159). Translating idioms requires more than just an understanding of the overall picture. The translator must also possess an in-depth understanding and interpretation of the source text before they can start translating it.

Despite the fact that idioms make up a prominent part of our daily discourse, as Makkai points out (Makkai 1972: 23), it was only recently that idiomatic expressions have gained a lot of theoretical attention and interest. Additionally, different authors view and define idioms in different ways. The scope of idiomaticity can range significantly depending on the author and their understanding of idioms, which is why, for the purposes of this paper, the working definition will be given in the third section of this paper.

2.Method and Corpus Structure

The material was collected by comparing the source text with its two translations. The first translation was published in 1998 by *Polaris*, while the second one was published fifteen years later, in 2013, by *Laguna*. The prose-fiction novel *Neverwhere* was chosen for this analysis because it is rich in idiomatic expressions and figurative language use.

As far as the method of analysis is concerned, it is a step-by-step process. First, it is necessary to find relevant dictionary definitions for the idioms that are being analyzed, and compare them to the given translation. While doing that, it is crucial to take into account the sentential as well as textual context of the idiom. Once the contextual meaning is determined, it is possible to classify the translation either as adequate or inadequate. The corpus is therefore divided into two broad categories: adequate and inadequate translations. If the translation is classified as adequate, it is necessary to further determine whether the idiom is rendered as an idiomatic lexical unit (using a corresponding or equivalent Serbian idiom) or as non-idiomatic unit. That being said, the two subcategories can be distinguished as idioms rendered as idiomatic and idioms rendered as non-idiomatic lexical units.

The category of inadequate translations is divided into six subcategories: literally translated idioms, translations with inadequate descriptive features, associative features (further subdivided into three categories based on style, interpersonal register and expressive features), phraseological calques, translations where the sentential focus has been changed compared to the original, and translations that do not belong to either of the above-mentioned groups, labelled *other*. The sentential context and dictionary definition are provided for each idiom in the corpus, along with the two translations, a comment, and a suggestion for improvement where deemed adequate.

Each lexical unit in the corpus typically consists of seven parts:

1. Idiom in its base form
2. Definition of the idiom as found in relevant dictionaries (a list of dictionaries used for this purpose can be found in the list of references)
3. Idiom in its original sentential context in English
4. First translation in sentential context
5. Second translation in sentential context¹
6. Comments
7. Suggestions for improvement where deemed adequate

Throughout the corpus the following abbreviations are used:

DEF – definition, i.e. the meaning of the idiom in its sentential context

ORIG – idiom in original context

PREV 1 – first translation, Gejmen, Nil. *Nikadodija*. Polaris, 1998, translated by Mirjana Živković

PREV 2 – second translation, Gejmen, Nil. *Nikadodija*. Laguna, 2013, translated by Nevena Andrić

KOM – comments on the translation(s)

PREDLOG – suggestions for improvement where necessary or where an alternative is possible

ESFRI – *Englesko-srpski rečnik fraza i idioma*, Borivoj Gerzić

Williams-Milosavljević – *Englesko-srpski frazeološki rečnik*, Boško Milosavljević i Margot Williams-Milosavljević

ESFR – *Englesko-srpski frazeološki rečnik*, Živorad Kovačević

ZDP – *Zamke doslovnog prevođenja*, Živorad Kovačević

17. TELL NO TALES (OUT OF SCHOOL)

DEF: *To tell secrets or spread rumors*

ORIG: “*Now, there’s one rat that **won’t be telling any more tales,**” said Mr. Croup.*

PREV 1: „*Evo pacova **koji više neće da priča priče**—, reče gospodin Krup.*

PREV 2: „*E, ovog nisi mogao uhvatiti ni za glavu ni za rep—, reče gospodin Krup.*

KOMENTAR: Prvi prevod je doslovno preveden i kao takav ne prenosi smisao datog idioma.

PREDLOG: Na primer: *trubiti tajne, cinkariti, olajavati.*

Figure 1: Corpus unit

¹ For the purpose of comparison, both translations are included in each corpus unit. The translation being discussed is marked in ***bold italics***, while the second translation is underlined.

For the translation to be classified as either adequate or inadequate there must be criteria of adequacy or inadequacy of the translation. For the purpose of the analysis, the translation is classified as adequate if it satisfies the following criteria:

1. conveys the main descriptive features of the source idiom
2. conveys the associative features of the source idiom depending on the context (in terms of style, register, and expressive features)
3. is coherent and grammatically correct.

Anything that deviates from the above-mentioned criteria was marked as inadequate.

The main aim of the paper is to compare and contrast the chosen idioms in two translations and analyze them critically. Besides the theoretical framework based on works by relevant authors, the materials used in the process of analysis include relevant phraseological dictionaries, which can be found in the list of references.

3. Theoretical Framework and Working Definition

The term 'idiom' generally has different meanings to different authors. According to Cacciari and Tabossi (1993: 27), this is mainly because idioms are rather difficult to define. As Makkai points out, even though idioms have been a prominent part of our daily discourse since antiquity, idiomaticity as a phenomenon has only recently come to scholarly attention (Makkai 1972: 23). Cacciari and Tabossi also indicate that idioms have been largely neglected mainly because they were not seen as a category per se. Rather, they were perceived as "dead metaphors" – more specifically, as "expressions that were once innovative, but are now conventionalized and frozen – and hence scarcely relevant in comparison with metaphor" (Cacciari and Tabossi 1993: xii).

The material for this analysis was chosen in accordance with the working definition of "idiom" that was devised for the purposes of this work. The definition was formulated based on the theoretical considerations of relevant authors whose main views will be presented in the following paragraphs. It was important to devise a working definition because there are disagreements among authors over what expressions should be considered idioms.

In his book, *Idiom Structure in English*, Makkai gives a rather all-embracing definition of idioms from a stratificational point of view. He defines an idiom as "any polylexonic lexeme made up of more than one minimal free form (as defined by morphotactic criteria)" (Makkai 1972: 122). Makkai goes as far as referring to nonce-formations as idioms. In this view, he relies on the third definition from the OED (1970): "a form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc., peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of a language, and often having a signification other than its grammatical or logical one." This means that, according to Makkai, only multiword expressions whose meaning is not transparent are considered idioms. Strassler (1982) also draws on the OED definition (Strassler 1982, as cited in Fernando 1996: 13), and highlights that the most important characteristic of idioms lies in the fact that their meaning cannot be interpreted from the meaning of its individual components.

Classic generative linguists, including Frazer (1970) and Chomsky (1980), have a different understanding of idioms. According to them, the main feature of idioms is not

so much their idiomaticity, but their non-compositionality. Non-compositionality refers to the fact that even though idioms contain more than one lexeme, syntactically and semantically they act as a single lexical unit (Wulff 2008: 35–36). Wulff, on the other hand, does not agree with this. She describes idioms using the corpus-based approach:

In early studies, idiomaticity was equated with non-compositionality, which states that the meanings of the individual lexemes of a phrase do not add up to the meaning of that phrase. More recent research has shown that it is not possible to draw a sharp dividing line between idioms and non-idioms on the basis of this criterion. Instead, non-compositionality appears to be a matter of degree (Wulff 2008: 1).

She states that idioms are idiosyncratic strings whose characteristics may vary and concludes that:

The present results confirm the hypothesis that idiomaticity cannot be reduced to non-compositionality but that it is a complex meta-concept comprising semantic and formal information. Beyond that, an adequate model of idiomaticity must license differences in the weightings of the different parameters and/or parameter levels contributing to overall idiomaticity (Wulff 2008: 166).

Furthermore, Fernando (1996), in her book *Idioms and Idiomaticity*, lists the three most important characteristics, which, in her opinion, define idioms. First, she describes them as conventionalized multiword expressions. Secondly, she points out that their meaning is non-literal in the majority of cases. Finally, she says that they are “indivisible units whose components cannot be varied or varied only within definable limits” (Fernando 1996: 30). That being said, the main characteristics of idioms, according to Fernando, are conventionality, semantic opacity, and compositeness.

Prčić (2008) points out that idiomaticity, as the main feature of idioms, can be formal and semantic. Semantic idiomatization is characterized by decrementation (loss) of the diagnostic features of lexemes that make up the idiom. Formal idiomatization, on the other hand, relates to the fixity of the expression, i.e. it shows whether and to what extent it is possible to modify the expression while maintaining its authenticity. For example, the idiom *you can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs* is changed into *you can't make an omelette without killing a few people*. This particular example clearly shows that it is possible to modify some idioms to a certain extent while retaining their identity. Understandably, not all idioms allow such modifications.

All of the above-mentioned authors have their own view of idioms, yet certain points overlap. Prčić and many other authors define idioms as a habitual co-occurrence of at least two words (Prčić 2008: 158), which concludes that the first important characteristic of idioms is that they are multiword expressions. Therefore, for the purposes of this work, only multiword expressions are regarded as idioms. It is important to note, however, that phrasal verbs will not be seen as idioms. Secondly, another important idiom feature that is discussed throughout the theoretical framework is their semantic opacity, i.e. figurativeness of the expressions. Thirdly, only conventionalized expressions will be qualified as idioms. This means that the expression needs to be established and defined in relevant

dictionaries. The final important characteristic that will be included in the working definition is the relative lexical/formal fixity. This simply relates to the fact that some idioms allow internal changes to a certain degree, while others do not.

Taking everything into account, the working definition for the purposes of this work is as follows:

An idiom is a conventionalized and semantically opaque multiword expression whose component parts are more or less lexically/formally fixed.

4.Results and Discussion

The results of the analysis show that the division between adequate and inadequate translations is not entirely black-and-white, as some categories fall somewhere in between these two extreme ends.

As far as the numbers are concerned, out of 136 lexical units, each category contains the following numbers of units:

1. Adequate Translations (54)
 - 1.1. Idiomatic Lexical Units (34)
 - 1.2. Non-Idiomatic Lexical Units (20)

2. Inadequate Translations (86)
 - 2.1. Literally Translated Idioms (25)
 - 2.2. Inadequate Descriptive Features (23)
 - 2.3. Inadequate Associative Features (23)
 - 2.3.1. Style (Choice of Lexemes) (9)
 - 2.3.2. Interpersonal Register (8)
 - 2.3.3. Expressive Features (6)
 - 2.4. Phraseological Calques (4)
 - 2.5. Sentential Focus (6)
 - 2.6. Other (3)

It is important to point out, however, that some idioms appear more than once since the paper analyzes two translations of the same content.

The results of the analysis can be visually presented on a scale:

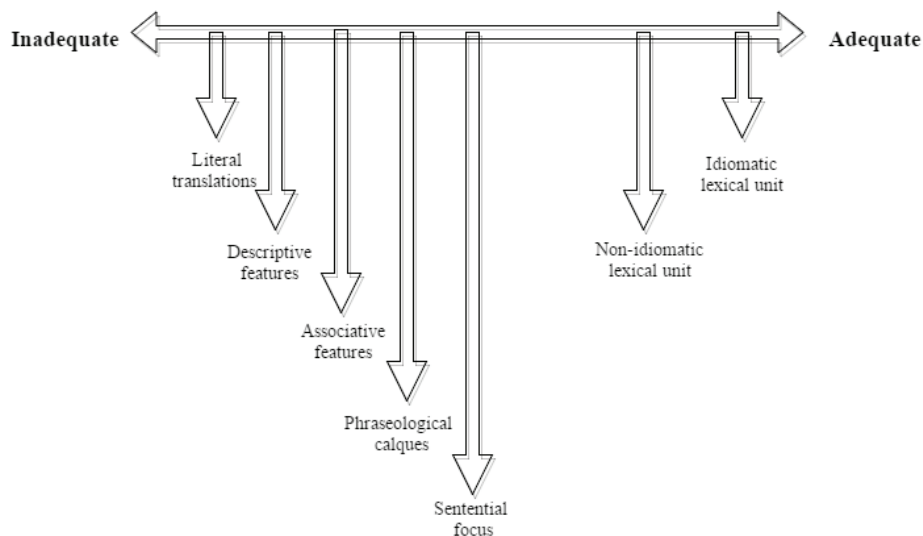


Figure 2: Scale of adequacy and inadequacy of translations

As can be seen in Figure 2, even though they belong to the same category of adequate translations, idiomatic translations are closer to the right end of the scale. This means that this group is categorized as more adequate as a whole than the group of non-idiomatic translations, although in certain instances it is difficult to draw a sharp line. Certain idioms (e.g. *As old as my tongue and a little older than my teeth*) do not have a direct corresponding or equivalent idiom in Serbian, and therefore need to be rendered descriptively.

The category of inadequate translations contains six subcategories. **Literal translations** (e.g. *“As old as my tongue,” said Hunter, primly, “and a little older than my teeth.”* – „*Stara sam kao moj jezik – , odvrati lovac, „i nešto starija od mojih zuba.”*) are found at the leftmost end of the scale because they are classified as the least adequate options. This is due to the fact that idioms are more-or-less semantically opaque, and translating them word-for-word means that the translator did not recognize the idiom in the first place.

The second category of inadequate translations is the ones with **inadequate descriptive features** (e.g. *“Don’t overuse it. A little goes a very long way”* – „*Nemoj je previše koristiti. Može da ti prisedne.*”), which can be found to the right of literal translations, which makes them more adequate than the previous group. This group contains translations whose meaning does not correspond entirely to the meaning of the original idiom, and some of the diagnostic features are either added or missing.

The next group of inadequate translations is the category of **inadequate associative features** (e.g. *“That, Mister Vandemar, would be about the short and the long of it, yes.”* – „*To bi, gospodine Vandemare, nadugačko i ukratko, bilo to, da.*”). This group of translations is classified as more adequate than the previous two because they only con-

tain mistakes in terms of style, register and expressive features. Otherwise, these idioms are rendered more or less accurately, since they convey the relevant descriptive features.

The fourth category contains **phraseological calques**, i.e. the translations which reflect the English construction that has entered Serbian through literal translation (e.g. *Richard was feeling utterly out of his league by now.* – *Sve ovo je već bilo zaista previše za Ričarda.* – from Eng. *be too much for someone*). Again, the meaning is transferred, but the construction is unusual in Serbian, and an alternative translation could have been used instead (e.g. *van čijih sposobnosti*).

The fifth category contains translations where the **focus** of the original sentence has been shifted compared to the original, while the last category is labelled **other** because it contains translations with minor errors in terms of grammar and certain inconsistencies compared to the original sentence. These categories are found in the middle of the scale because they do not carry the same weight as, for instance, literal translations.

5. Conclusion

Idioms are the result of creativity and playfulness with language. As Johnson-Laird notices, “if natural language had been designed by a logician, idioms would not exist” (Cacciari and Tabossi 1993: vii). This creativity and the fact that their meaning is not transparent makes them difficult to translate or even spot.

This work focused on the comparison between the two translations so as to give an insight into the current, as well as the past trends in translating idioms, and how it has changed over the course of fifteen years. Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that literal translations are the category with the largest number of units (25), while the second largest category is mistakes in descriptive features (23). It can also be observed that the first translation from 1998 contains significantly more literally translated idioms than the second one, and more mistranslated idioms in general. The second translation, however, contains more errors in terms of style, register and expressive features, as well as instances of phraseological calques. It is also worth noting that semantically less opaque idioms are generally rendered adequately in both translations.

Rather than having a black-and-white division of adequate and inadequate translations, it is observed that there is a scale of adequacy and inadequacy. For example, mistakes in terms of style or register do not carry the same weight as in the case of literal translations, and that is why they are found towards the middle of the scale. As presented in Figure 2, both categories (adequate and inadequate translations) contain subcategories, which can be visually presented on a scale.

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PREVOĐENJE IDIOMA U DVA PREVODA ROMANA NILA GEJMANA
NEVERWHERE NA SRPSKI JEZIK: KRITIČKA ANALIZA

Sažetak: Rad se bavi kritičkom analizom idioma u dva prevoda proznog dela Nila Gejmana *Nikadodija*, sa rasponom od petnaest godina između dva prevoda. Analiza se zasniva na korpusu koji sadrži ukupno 136 leksičkih jedinica, iako se neki idiomi u korpusu ponavljaju, kao posledica analize dva prevoda istog sadržaja. Materijal je prikupljen upoređivanjem izvornog teksta sa dva prevoda i odabran na osnovu radne definicije idioma, koja je za potrebe ovog rada data u odeljku 2.1.1. Korpus je podeljen u dve široke kategorije: adekvatne i neadekvatne prevode. Kategorija adekvatnih prevoda dalje se deli u dve potkategorije: idiomi prevedeni neidiomatizovanom leksičkom jedinicom i idiomi prevedeni idiomatizovanom leksičkom jedinicom. Kategorija neadekvatnih prevoda deli se u šest potkategorija: doslovno prevedeni idiomi, prevodi sa neadekvatnim deskriptivnim obeležjima, prevodi sa neadekvatnim asocijativnim značenjem (koja se dalje deli u još tri potkategorije koje se tiču odabira leksema, ekspresivnog obeležja i interpersonalnog registra), frazeološki kalkovi, prevodi u kojima je izmenjen rečenični fokus, te kategorija prevoda koji ne pripadaju ni jednoj od gorepomenutih grupa, nazvana *ostali prevodi*. Svaki idiom u korpusu dat je u rečeničnom kontekstu, zajedno sa rečničkom definicijom datog idioma, ispod toga su navedena oba prevoda idioma u rečeničnom kontekstu, komentar i predlog za bolji prevod, gde se smatralo potrebnim. Cilj rada je da se konkretnim primerima ukaže na prošlo i sadašnje stanje u prevodenju idioma iz engleskog u srpski jezik. Uopšteno uzev, rezultati analize pokazuju da od ukupno 136 leksičkih jedinica, više od polovine prevoda klasifikovani su kao neadekvatni, iako podela nije u potpunosti crno-bela, jer određene kategorije prevoda pripadaju negde između ta dva ekstrema. Konkretnije, može se zaključiti da stariji prevod sadrži приметно veći broj doslovno i pogrešno prevedenih idioma, dok drugi prevod uključuje veći broj pogrešnih prevoda koji se tiču ekspresivnih obeležja, kao i frazeoloških kalkova. Takođe, može se приметiti da su semantički prozirniji idiomi u većini slučajeva adekvatno prevedeni.

Ključne reči: idiomi, idiomatičnost, prevodenje