

Ss Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje
Универзитет „Св. Кирил и Методиј“ во Скопје

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WHEN TRANSLATION GOES WRONG: TRANSLATING IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to illuminate specificities of literary translation, focusing on translating idiomatic expressions as highly expressive parts of the lexicon with a strong connotative dimension. More specifically, the paper will outline problems which arise when idiomatic expressions are translated inappropriately and the ways in which these situations affect the translation itself. The methodology of the research includes a corpus-based study of examples, as well as a comparative analysis of inappropriately translated idiomatic expressions from English into Macedonian, with an emphasis on the effects and influences they have on the translation and its overall stylistic dimension. Ultimately, this paper will also provide guidelines for overcoming translation problems with an educational purpose – to raise the awareness of what literary translation really means and the standards that it should meet.

Key words: original, translation, style, idiomatic expression, stylistic effect

1. Introduction

Literary translation and the challenges it poses to translators have always been a vital issue. To translate a literary text and to create a translation that has the necessary stylistic effect on the reader, who will then be able to assess it as ‘readable and smooth’, is far from an easy task. On the contrary, it is an intricate procedure which requires mastery of languages and cultures, as well as quality of being a creator and an artist, bearing in mind that literary texts have a distinctive aesthetic and communicative dimension. This dimension is essential and it should, by all means, be reflected in the translation itself.

Recognition of the stylistic dimension of the original, and its appropriate rendering into the target language will ensure a high-quality translation which appeals to the reading audience. Therefore, tackling and discussing issues and challenges related to literary translation, as well as suggesting guidelines for overcoming them is of prime importance.

1.1 Style and its relevance to translation

Apart from specific use of language (Eagleton, 2008: 9; Leech and Short, 1981: 2; Parks, 1998: 9) and foregrounding (Leech, 1969: 57, МихајЛОВСКИ, 2007: 78-79), which are both intended to ensure artistic effect, literary texts have another vital feature – **style**. The concept of style has always been in the spotlight of intellectual thought and the attempts to define it are numerous. Plato's reflections on style reveal that he considered it to be “the distinctiveness or the quality of the literary work” (МИНОВА-ЃУРКОВА, 2003: 11); for Buffon, it is “the man himself”, while according to Leo Spitzer, “it is the expression of the author's individuality” (ibid).

When it comes to ‘measuring’ the style of an artistic work, Leech and Short explain that style is restricted to choices of *manner* rather than *matter*, of *expression* rather than *content* (Leech and Short, 1981: 15-16). The author is consciously motivated to prefer particular linguistic choices over others depending on the function or the meaning he/she wants to create. All linguistic choices have a specific meaning and stylistic function and they are intended to produce an artistic effect upon the reader (ibid).

Furthermore, they explain that “style is regarded as a function of **frequency** and **prominence**. To find out what is distinctive about a certain text, we work out the frequency of the features it contains, and then measure these figures against equivalent figures which are ‘normal’ for the language in question. (ibid: 43). Prominence is considered to be the phenomenon of linguistic highlighting, which is the basis for a reader's subjective recognition of a style. A feature is prominent if it draws the reader's attention” (ibid: 48).

These considerations are very important in the context of translation. Speaking of translating a specific stylistic feature - to translate a literary work means not only to convey the content from one language to another, but also to transfer the manner in which the content is communicated from the source to the target language in order to create maximum stylistic and artistic effect on the reader. Since style is an essential element of the original, it is logical to conclude that it is also of vital importance for the translation process.

When it comes to style and translation, “the translator should pay attention to what is unique to the text and the words in it, he should be aware of the schemes in the text and to bear in mind the function of the text. To pay

attention to style in translation means to consider how all these factors are reflected in the text and then in its translation” (Boase Beier, 2006: 2).

Style is important for the translator because “it can make a difference between a lively, highly readable translation and a stilted and artificial text that strips the original of its artistic and aesthetic essence – its soul” (Landers, 2001: 7). Consequently, the key point is “how to perceive the style of the source text and how its effect is conveyed or changed, to what extent it is preserved in the translation and how the reader will experience its effect on the original” (Boase Beier, 2006: 5-6).

Bearing in mind the observations mentioned above, as well as the aim of this research, if idiomatic expressions are frequent in a text and the reader intuitively feels their presence, they may be considered a stylistic feature of the original. Their presence in the original creates an effect on the reader - a feature that translators should be aware of, and they should be capable of tackling it in the appropriate manner for maximum stylistic effect in the translation itself.

This is not an easy task because to be able to convey the meaning of idioms in the translation, the translator should be aware of their complexity. Namely, idiomatic expressions belong to the group of words which have emotional and expressive nuances. Boyadziev defines idioms as “expressions which occur as a result of assigning new meaning to free word combinations. They are used in speech to add expressiveness to what is being communicated” (Бояджиев, 2002: 302).

In addition, idiomatic expressions are highly connotative; apart from the denotative meaning, they also contain additional stylistic nuances and associative components which serve as a basis for assessment and pragmatic elements dependent on culture and tradition, stereotypes, and the ways in which language is used within a society. All these factors make up the expressive stylistic nuances of idiomatic expressions, which reflects their emotional assessment and imagery components (Ристић, 2004: 22-23).

To convey the meaning of idiomatic expressions as an important stylistic feature of the original would mean to have an insight into their multifaceted nature and the socio-cultural dimension they have, as well as to be able to blend it with the target language and culture so that the reader experiences the effect they are supposed to have.

2. Analysis and methodology

The examples used in the analysis are excerpted from the short story collection *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*¹ by Raymond Carver,

¹ Carver, R. (2009). *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. London: Vintage Books

written in English, and its Macedonian translation². The author and his short stories³ have been chosen because of the authentic language used, rich in informal vocabulary and expressions. Understandably, these short stories abound with idiomatic expressions; in the context of this paper, their importance is perceived through the fact that together with other language features found in the original, they depict characters that speak little, but say a lot, and convey strong and powerful messages of their dull, mundane and marginalized lives. Inability to recognize this would mean failure for the translator.

Since the aim of this paper is to tackle the challenges of literary translation, focusing on translating idiomatic expressions as highly expressive parts of the lexicon with a strong connotative dimension, as well as to outline problems which occur when they are translated inappropriately, a corpus-based study of selected examples will be carried out, as well as an analysis of the inappropriately translated idiomatic expressions from English into Macedonian⁴. The effects and influences which they have on the translation and its overall stylistic dimension will be emphasized and discussed and, where necessary, alternative translations will be offered with a view to providing guidelines for overcoming translation problems, as well as to raising the awareness of what literary translation means and the standards that it should meet.

Example 1⁵

O: “The man’s going off the deep end,” Dad said. “Clear crazy if he don’t watch out.”

T: Човекот е многу вознемирен,“ рече тато. „Чиста лудост ако не се чува.“

AT: „Човекот жив се изеде/јаде/ги губи нервите/забегува“, рече тато. „Ќе побудали, ако не се чува.“

According to the Cambridge Dictionary Online, *to go off the deep end* is an informal idiom which means *to suddenly become very angry or emotional over something*.

² Карвер, Р. (1990). *За што зборуваме кога зборуваме за љубовта*. Скопје: Култура

³ Carver is one of the leading representatives of minimalism (dirty realism). ‘Dirty realism’ is a term coined by Bill Bufford. It appears in the 60s and 70s of the 20th century and it refers to a relatively passive minimalist movement of American short story, whose representatives are Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, and Tobias Wolff. The laconic prose and the elliptical style in dirty realism originate from Hemingway. (The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English, Cambridge University Press, 1993: 260)

⁴ For the purpose of this study, various examples of inappropriately translated idiomatic expressions from the corpus have been analysed. The analysis focuses on a selection of these, showing the most characteristic and representative ones.

⁵ In the analysis, **O** stands for original, **T** stands for translation, **AT** stands for alternative translation offered by the authors of the paper.

The analysis shows that by using the stylistically neutral expression *тој е многу вознемирен*, the translator neglects the connotative stylistic aspect of the original. Thus, the translation loses the expressiveness and the imagery which should be its hallmark instead. In Macedonian, there are several idiomatic expressions used to express a state of anger or nervousness, such as *жив се јаде/изеде, губи/изгуби нерви*, and they mean *to become angry about something* (Македонска фразеологија со мал фразеолошки речник), while in the colloquial register, the word *забега* (*to lose one's mind, control over something; to go crazy*) is very often used. Any of these expressions would be a much more suitable translation in this context because of the expressiveness and the vividness they possess.

Example 2

O: *She unbuttoned her coat and put her purse down on the counter. She looked at L.D. and said: "L.D. I've had it. So has Rae. So has everyone who knows you. I've been thinking it over. I want you out of here. Tonight. This minute. Now. Get the hell out of here right now."*

T: *Го откопча палтото и ја остави чантата на столчето. Погледна во Л. Д. и рече: „Л. Д. Доста ми беше. И на Рај. И на сите што те знаат. Размислив за тоа. Сакам да си одиш одовде. Вечерва. Овој миг. Сега. По ѓаволите оди си веднаш сега.“*

AT: *Го откопча палтото и ја остави чантата на шанкот. Погледна во Л. Д. и рече: „Л. Д. Доста ми е. И на Рае. И на сите што те знаат. Размислував. Сакам да си одиш одовде. Вечерва. Овој миг. Сега. Губи се/тргни ми се од пред очи/криши глава оттука/ веднаш сега.“*

According to the Cambridge Dictionary Online, the expression *get the hell out of somewhere* means *to leave a place quickly* and it is used in rather informal situations, like the one in the example above, which describes a family quarrel.

In the Macedonian translation, the translator uses the expression *по ѓаволите*, most probably because of the word *hell* from the original expression, and then he combines it with the stylistically neutral *оди си*. This option is justified to a certain extent, since the expression *по ѓаволите* is used in Macedonian as a swear-word, although it lacks the necessary expressiveness and frequency of usage. Macedonian has several other expressions which would be far more suitable in the context above, like *губи се, магла, маглосај се, да те нема, очи да не ти видам, криши глава, истави/тргни ми се од пред очи* (Македонска фразеологија со мал фразеолошки речник). They all mean *to leave a place quickly*, but they express it in a very explicit and colourful way.

Example 3

O: *Myrna went to the meetings, and then she went over to Mr. Fixit's house to cook for him and clean up. His kids were no help in this regard. Nobody lifted a hand around Mr. Fixit's house, except my wife when she was there.*

T: *Мирна одела на состаноци, а потоа одела во куќата на г. Фиксит, да му готви и да чисти. Неговите деца не биле од никаква полза во тој поглед. Никој не подигал рака во куќата на г. Фиксит, освен жена ми кога била таму.*

AT: *Мирна одеше на состаноци, а потоа одеше во куќата на г. Фиксит, да му готви и да му чисти. Немаше фајде од неговите деца. Никој со прст не мрдаше во куќата на г. Фиксит, освен жена ми кога беше таму.*

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the idiom *not lift/raise a finger/hand to do something* as an expression which means *to do absolutely nothing to help somebody with something*.

In the Macedonian translation, the expression from the original is translated literally as *подига рака*. *Подига рака* in Macedonian sounds awkward in contexts like the one in the example above and it does not contain the necessary meaning and colourfulness. There are other examples which would be more suitable in this context, like, for example, *не мрда со прст, ни со прст не мрда, не мрда ни со мал прст*, which are far more expressive and stylistically more appropriate.

Example 4

O: *I think maybe Myrna really loved the man. But he also had a little something on the side – a twenty-two-year-old named Beverly. Mr. Fixit did okay for a little guy who wore a button-up sweater.*

T: *Мислам, можеби Мирна навистина го сакаше човекот. Но и тој имаше нешто малечко настрана – една дваесетидвегодишна која се викаше Беверли. Г. Фиксит добро постапуваше како мал човек што носи елек закопчан до вратот.*

AT: *Мислам, можеби Мирна навистина го сакаше човекот. Но и тој се онадеше/се ебаваше со една дваесетидвегодишна која се викаше Беверли. За едно кускуле со џепмер закопчан до гуша, тоа беше супер, не беше лошо.*

According to the Cambridge Dictionary of Idioms, the expression *on the side* means *secretly*. Example 4 describes a secret relationship with another woman.

The sentence *He also had a little something on the side* is literally translated with *И тој имаше нешто малечко настрана*. This sentence is unintelligible in this context and it is confusing for a Macedonian reader. Bearing in mind the informality of the context in the original, the translator should have found a more colloquial and informal translation, like, for example *онаду, се* и *ебава, се*, both of which mean *to lead a promiscuous life, to seek/have a lot of sexual partners*. These expressions live up to the stylistic standards of the original and, despite being more explicit, are far more suitable in this context.

Example 5

O: *The brunette glanced back onto the highway. It seemed to Jerry that she was looking at him in the right kind of way. But with a girl you could never be sure. “We’ll be seeing you!” Bill said as they went speeding by. “**It’s in the bag**,” Jerry said. “You see the look that cunt gave me?” “I don’t know,” Bill said.*

T: *Црнката погледна назад. На Џери му се стори дека гледа во него како што треба. Но со девојка човек никогаш не може да биде сигурен.*

„Ќе се видиме!“ викна Бил додека брзо поминуваа.

*„Ја **имам в торба**,“* рече Џери. *Го виде погледот што ми го упати таа чанта?“*

„Не знам,“ рече Бил.

AT: *„Ќе се видиме!“* викна Бил додека брзо поминуваа. *„Ја **имам/печена е/моја е**“,* рече Џери.

As it is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary of Idioms, *if something is in the bag – you are certain to get it or to achieve it*. In the example above, the character from the story is certain that the girl he is talking about likes him.

The translator once again translated the original literally with *ја имам в чанта*. The expression *ја имам в чанта* sounds ridiculous in the context given in the original. An expression with similar meaning to *it’s in the bag* could be *има нешто в џеб*, while there are other more colloquial idioms which could be taken as stylistically appropriate in this context, like, for example, *моја е, ја имам, печена е, завршена работа*, etc. (Македонско-англиски речник на идиоми).

Example 6

O: *“**Keep your nose out of** things you don’t know anything about,” said L.D. “I can’t take anybody seriously who sits around all day reading astrology magazines.”*

T: *„**Држи си го носот подалеку** од работите за кои не знаеш ништо,“* рече Л. Д. *„Не можам да го сфатам сериозно никого што по цел ден седи и чита списанија по астрологија.“*

АТ: „Не никај го носот/не мешај се/не плеткај се во работи за кои не знаеш ништо“, рече Л. Д.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary Online, *to keep your nose out of something* means *to not become involved in other people's activities or relationships*.

It is obvious that the expression from the original is literally translated into Macedonian with the expression *го држи носот подалеку од (нешто)*. This expression is understandable for a Macedonian reader, but it is not a fixed expression with regular usage, which is why it sounds rather awkward and unnatural. There are fixed expressions which mean *to become involved in other people's activities or relationships* such as *ника нос (секаде), се меша/плетка во нешто*, or, more freely, *во секоја манџа е мирудија* (Македонска фразеологија со мал фразеолошки речник); their connotative dimension is stronger, making them better solutions in this context.

Example 7

О: “*That fellow over there who has our place is cheating. I can't believe my eyes,*” James said.

Т: „*Оној тип онаму што ги зазел нашите места мами. Не можам да им поверувам на очиве,*“ рече Џемс.

АТ: „*Оној тип онаму што ги зазел нашите места мами. Не ми се верува/да видиш да не веруваш*“, рече Џемс.

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the idiom *to not believe your eyes/ears* as an expression which means to be so surprised by what you see or hear that you think you are imagining it. This idiomatic expression is translated literally in the Macedonian version of the story with *не можам да им поверувам на очиве*, which in Macedonian sounds rigid and unnatural because it is rarely used in such a form to describe a situation where somebody is surprised at what they see or hear. When somebody is very surprised by what they see or hear, in Macedonian they would say *не ми се верува, да видиш да не веруваш*. These are fixed expressions with regular usage in Macedonian and are quite expressive, which makes them better translations in this case.

3. Findings and discussion

Having analysed the examples of inappropriately translated idiomatic expressions from English into Macedonian, attention will now be paid to the effects these unsuccessful translations have on the quality of the translation itself.

Table 1
Effects on translation

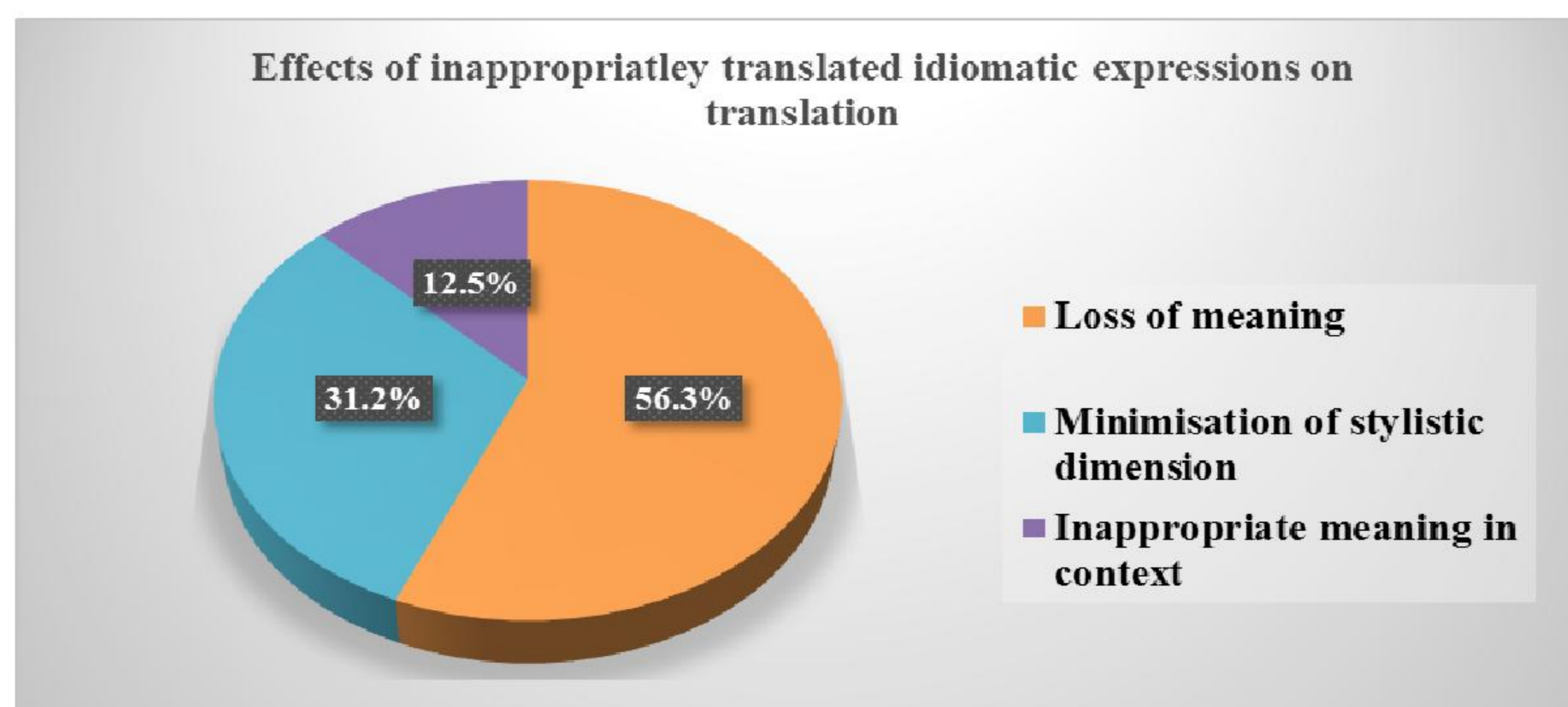
Effect	Number of cases	Percentage
Loss of meaning	9	56.3%
Minimisation of stylistic dimension	5	31.2%
Inappropriate meaning in context	2	12.5%
Total	16	100%

The analysis shows that when it comes to how inappropriately translated idiomatic expressions affect the translation itself, three effects can be perceived, and they are shown in Table 1 above. It can be noticed that most of the analysed examples of inappropriate translations result in **loss of meaning in the translation** (56.3%); two other effects are also evident in the translation, such as **minimisation of stylistic dimension** (31.2%) and **inappropriate meaning in context** (12.5%).

In most of the analysed examples, it can be noted that the idiomatic expressions are translated literally, which means that the translator changed the overall context and did not keep the meaning from the original in the translation. Hence, the translation abounds in ridiculous constructions and expressions which impair the reading and make the whole impression about the story unusual and strange. Thus, idiomatic expressions lose their colouring and their expressiveness, which are their most important elements; this tendency has a considerable influence on the translation itself and negatively affects the overall stylistic impression on the reader. Cases of minimised stylistic value and inappropriate meaning in context can also be noticed in the translation, which comes as a result of overlooking the stylistic dimension of the original.

Chart 1 shows that when it comes to inappropriately translated idioms, the effect of loss of meaning is more prevalent than the other two. This indicates that in cases like these, the translation loses a considerable amount of meaning, sense, and expressiveness, and does not meet the necessary stylistic standards.

Chart 1



4. Conclusion

When it comes to the way in which inappropriately translated idioms influence the translation itself, the analysis shows that three effects are evident: **loss of meaning, minimisation of stylistic dimension and inappropriate meaning in context.**

This means that when idiomatic expressions are translated literally, the context and their connotative dimension, which is strongly expressive and stylistically marked, are not taken into consideration. This produces bizarre constructions and phrases in the translation, which obstruct the reading of the text and make it sound rigid and artificial. Furthermore, the imagery of the idioms is spoiled, which means that their vital element is missing from the translation and in a situation like this the reader is deprived of the stylistic effect that he/she should experience while reading. In addition, when idiomatic expressions are translated inappropriately, instances of minimised stylistic value and words or phrases with meaning different from the one in the original may be noted, which means that the style of the original has been neutralised. This has a negative effect on the reader because it changes his/her impression of the text and the mental image that should be created while reading.

The findings of this survey aim at understanding the seriousness of literary translation, as well as the importance of style for literary translation. Speaking of idioms as an important stylistic feature of the original, it is absolutely necessary to translate them with all their expressive charge and energy because ignoring them and their expressive nuances in translation will result in reading a dull and monotonous translation, a translation without spirit. This is exactly what happens when translating idiomatic expressions goes wrong.

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