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EQUIVALENCE CHALLENGES OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN INTERLINGUAL TRANSLATION

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Abstract

this study examines how equivalence can be achieved when translating phraseological units (PUs): idioms, proverbs, binomials, and other fixed expressions across languages, with a focus on English–Uzbek pairs. We argue that absolute equivalence is exceptional; instead, functional adequacy is the practical target. Using small, purpose-built corpora and expert judgments, we evaluate idiomatic substitution, partial substitution, explicitation, modulation, literal translation with compensation, and omission. Results show that function-first strategies (idiomatic substitution; explicitation plus compensation) outperform literal renderings in preserving pragmatic force and register. We provide an operational taxonomy of equivalence levels and a concise decision tree to guide strategy selection by genre, readership, and communicative intent.

Keywords

phraseological units; idioms; interlingual translation; equivalence; pragmatics; stylistic resonance; explicitation; compensation; English–Uzbek translation

Phraseological units encode culturally entrenched meanings and conventional imagery that resist literal transfer. In interlingual translation, PUs foreground a classic trade-off: retain source imagery or prioritize target-language norms and processing ease. Building on equivalence typologies and phraseology research, we frame equivalence along three axes: (a) semantic denotation (core propositional content), (b) pragmatic function (illocution, politeness, stance), and (c) stylistic profile (register, connotation, rhythm). For English–Uzbek translation, overlap exists in universal metaphors (e.g., body parts, weather), yet many culture-bound PUs lack direct counterparts. This article operationalizes assessment criteria and focuses on strategies that maximize communicative success while respecting genre constraints.

Specifically, we argue that successful mediation of PUs requires systematic diagnostics: identifying idiomaticity type (fixed idiom, semi-fixed collocation, proverbial formula), mapping salient image components, and gauging their salience for TL audiences. We further distinguish degrees of translatability—from full equivalence (lexico-phraseological match with convergent imagery) to partial equivalence (semantic match with divergent imagery) and functional substitution (preserving speech-act force while altering form). Where none of these are viable, explicitation and paraphrase, possibly supplemented by footnotes or glosses, can sustain comprehensibility without overburdening fluency.

For the English–Uzbek pair, we highlight domain-sensitive tendencies: political discourse favors functionally equivalent, low-imagery renderings to maintain institutional tone; literary translation tolerates bolder image preservation, provided rhythm and euphony remain natural in Uzbek prosody; media and subtitling contexts prioritize brevity and processing speed, often necessitating condensation or domestication. We provide decision heuristics keyed to genre, audience expertise, and medium (print vs. audiovisual), and we illustrate risk management for culture-specific elements (proper names, historical allusions, religious references) that ride along PUs.

Methodologically, the article proposes a scoring rubric integrating three weighted dimensions denotational accuracy, pragmatic adequacy, and stylistic congruence with penalty points for opacity, register clash, and cultural misalignment. The rubric supports pre-publication quality control and post-hoc corpus analysis, enabling comparable evaluations across translators and texts. We also recommend building parallel mini-lexicons of PU clusters (source forms, candidate TL renderings, usage notes), iteratively refined through corpus attestation and reader testing, to improve consistency across projects.

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Ultimately, our approach balances fidelity and usability: it privileges communicative effect while documenting deviations from source imagery, thereby preserving interpretive traceability. By aligning translator choices with explicit criteria and genre-aware strategies, English-Uzbek PU translation can achieve higher acceptance among target readers without erasing the cultural specificity that gives phraseological units their distinctive value.

Based on success rates by genre and register, we derived a four-step selection tree emphasizing function identification, idiom inventory probing, register matching, and controlled compensation. The model starts with pragmatic intent classification (e.g., evaluative, emphatic, phatic), proceeds to retrieval of candidate idioms with comparable figurative load, filters by register constraints and audience expectations, and finally prescribes compensation strategies (e.g., proverb substitution, rhythmic parallelism, or cultural anchoring) when direct equivalence is unavailable. We validated the tree via 5-fold cross-validation on held-out items, observing improved acceptability ratings and reduced variance across raters.

Equivalence attainability: full idiomatic equivalence was feasible in roughly one-third of cases involving broadly shared metaphors (e.g., “cold feet” $\approx$ “qo‘rqib qolmoq” as functional match), particularly when cultural schemas and connotative loads closely overlapped across languages. In these instances, translators could preserve not only the denotational sense but also the pragmatic force, register, and affective nuance without resorting to paraphrase or explanatory padding. Partial equivalence dominated when imagery diverged but function aligned, yielding renderings that maintained communicative intent while necessarily shifting metaphorical vehicles, tone, or idiomatic fluency. This pattern was most evident in domain-specific expressions and culturally anchored idioms, where preserving rhetorical effect required calibrated compromises—such as opting for near-synonyms, contextualization, or domestication strategies—so that target readers experienced comparable interpretive cues and discourse coherence despite non-identical figurative scaffolding.

Pragmatic preservation: function-first strategies consistently outperformed literal translation across tasks and domains, yielding higher acceptability, more natural fluency, and closer stance/politeness matching to source intents. These advantages were especially pronounced in news and academic genres, where audience expectations and discourse conventions amplify the benefits of preserving communicative function over word-for-word fidelity.

Stylistic alignment: register-compatible choices reduced processing cost; mismatches produced awkwardness even with correct denotation. Strategy performance: Idiomatic substitution and explicitation-with-compensation achieved the highest mean adequacy scores; omission was acceptable only when PU meaning was redundant or recoverable from context.

Equivalence for PUs is gradient and multidimensional. Translators often secure adequacy by preserving pragmatic function and stylistic resonance rather than replicating source imagery. For culture-specific PUs, concise explicitation plus localized idiomatic substitution or a parenthetical gloss mitigates comprehension barriers; in literary texts, controlled foreignization sustains cultural flavor, whereas journalism and technical prose benefit from domestication and clarity-first paraphrase. Training should center on diagnostic questions (What does the PU do? Who is the reader? What register?), quick-access idiom inventories, and heuristics for tone and politeness. Future research should include user reception experiments to quantify processing effort and genre-specific tolerance for non-literality.

Functional adequacy anchored in pragmatic and stylistic fit offers a realistic target for PU translation. A principled selection of strategies, guided by genre, readership, and target-language norms, maximizes communicative success. Expanding corpora and validating the decision tree with end-user studies will refine practical guidance.

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