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学 位 论 文

**Translation of English Idioms in Dictionaries**

词 典 中 英 语 成 语 的 翻 译

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# Translation of English Idioms in Dictionaries

## 词典中英语成语的翻译

### (A Synopsis)

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What is an English idiom? An English idiom has a fixed structure and the meaning is not the combination of the meanings of its component parts. English idioms occupy a great part and play an important role in the English language. English idioms are the essence of the English language, which mirrors the culture of all aspects in the English-speaking nations. It is always of great help for English learners to learn English idioms, through which the learners may know about the people, life, culture, and so forth in English-speaking countries. Up to the present, there are lots of English-Chinese dictionaries published. However, there are some problems with translation of English idioms in dictionaries: like misunderstanding of the original meaning and hence result in the mistranslation; some translation seems to be the equivalence to the English idioms literally, but as a matter of fact, they are not; some translations though convey the same meaning as the originals, their parts of speech are not right. Some tentative suggestions will be submitted in the end. By means of discussing the translation of English idioms in dictionaries, the writer hopes that the translation of English idioms will be improved and be much more correct without any loss of the original connotation. Good dictionaries are supposed to provide the learners or users the accurate translation of English idioms. This thesis is composed of four chapters in total.

In Chapter 1, first of all, it is necessary to make clear what an idiom is. An idiom is a group of words with a meaning of its own that is different from the meanings of its separate words. Then sources of English idioms will be discussed. English idioms have many different sources: some bear relations to customs; some are abound with allusions; some come from the works of literature; some derive from the Bible and some from the ancient Greek and Roman mythology. Having some knowledge of the sources of English idioms

may be of help for the learners of English as well as the compilers of English-Chinese dictionaries.

In Chapter 2, features of English idioms are to be discussed. English idioms can be important rhetoric devices and most of them are abound with parables or similes. Euphony is always employed in idioms which results in the effects of easy understanding, memorization, and easy to say. English idioms belong to a kind of independent, irregular but fixed language. Some of them always violate the rules of grammar and logic. Most of them have their own integrity, which means that every separate word in an English idiom cannot be taken apart or substituted casually.

In Chapter 3, focus will be put on the problems of translation of English idioms in current English-Chinese dictionaries. Some common problems are often seen in the dictionaries, like misunderstanding of the original meaning of English idioms hence results in the mistranslation; some equivalents seem the same literally but not the same in connotation; some parts of speech in translation are not corresponding to the original; some superfluous and unnecessary meanings are added in translation, etc. These problems are to be discussed with sufficient examples in order to demonstrate the present unsatisfactory situations of translation of English idioms in English-Chinese dictionaries.

In Chapter 4, principles of translation and some suggestive ways of translation of English idioms in dictionaries will also be submitted with the purpose of solving the problems in translation and improving the translation. According to the translational theory, when the English idioms are translated into Chinese, they are supposed to have the equivalents in the target language. Based on the translational theory, in practice, there are some ways of translation raised by the writer as: providing equivalents; literal translation or metaphor; substitutive translation; free translation; combination of literal and free translation; translation with notes added. The part of speech should be the same. The commendatory or derogatory connotations should be taken into consideration as well. Cultural backgrounds of certain English idioms should also be identified. The real equivalence in Chinese is needed to correspond to the English idioms; the part of speech should be the same as

the original one; under the condition of no equivalents, literal translation is necessary and additional information or notes should be provided. The necessary and additional information should be added to further illustrate the original meaning. These suggestions are based on the needs of the dictionary users and the analysis of the modern situations of translation of English idioms in English-Chinese dictionaries. This study aims at improving translation of English idioms in English-Chinese dictionaries. This writer hopes these suggestions may be of some help in the translation of English idioms in dictionaries.

**Key words:** translation, idiom and dictionary.

## Abbreviations Used in This Thesis

Brewer —*Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*

CIDI —*Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms*

COD —*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*

LDOCE —*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*

LDOEI —*Longman Dictionary of English Idioms*

OALD —*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*

ODCIE —*Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English*

WNWCD —*Webster's New World College Dictionary*

CED —*A Chinese-English Dictionary* (《汉英词典》)

CDEIP —*A Comprehensive Dictionary of English Idioms and Phrases*  
(《综合英语成语词典》)

DEIBE —*A Dictionary of English Idioms with Bilingual Explanations*  
(《英汉双解英语惯用语词典》)

ECD —*A New English-Chinese Dictionary* (《英华大词典》)

ECDI —*An English-Chinese Dictionary of Idioms* (《英语成语词典》)

FEDEI —*Far East English-English English-Chinese Dictionary of Idioms and Phrases* (《远东英英英汉成语大词典》)

NECD —*A New English-Chinese Dictionary* (《新英汉词典》)

TECD —*The English-Chinese Dictionary* (《英汉大词典》)

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 The purpose of this thesis

There have been quite a lot of English-Chinese dictionaries published in our country, and most of them are for learners of English. Although the compilers of these dictionaries declare that the dictionaries have been compiled independently, they adopted some original English dictionaries and just translated them into Chinese without any change. That is how the dictionary came into being. In this way, of course, the quality of the dictionary cannot be guaranteed. There are lots of errors in translation and it is the same with English idioms. What is worse is that it misleads the learners of English, for most of them usually use the English-Chinese dictionary as an aid to study English instead of using English ones. It becomes an urgent matter to take some steps to solve this situation. The writer of this thesis aims at solving some problems occurred in the translation of English idioms and improving the situation in English-Chinese dictionaries by exploring the translation of English idioms. In the following chapters, the focus will first be put on a study of the sources, then features of English idioms. The ways of translation of idioms will be discussed next and the problems of translation of English idioms in dictionaries will also be in question. Some tentative suggestions will be submitted in the end aiming to solve the problems and improve the translation.

### 1.2 What is an English idiom?

In this chapter, this writer is going to mainly discuss the definition of idioms and the sources of English idioms, so it will be of help for us to understand English idioms better before we proceed to make a further study on translation of English idioms in dictionaries. Before talking about translation of English idioms, it is necessary to make clear what an idiom is. In the following there are some citations from several English dictionaries.

“a group of words with a meaning of its own that is different from the meanings of each separate word put together” ---  
(LDOCE: 706)

“a phrase, construction, or expression that is recognized as a unit in the usage of a given language and either differs from the usual syntactic patterns or has a meaning that differs from the literal meaning of its parts taken together”  
--- (WNWCD: 670)

“An idiom is a fixed group of words with a special different meaning from the meaning of the separate words.”  
--- (LDOEI: I)

“a group of words established by usage and having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words”  
--- (COD: 586)

There are several views on what an idiom really is. Sometimes it is fairly widely defined, for instance as “a linguistic form whose meaning is unclear in spite of the familiar elements it contains” (Makkai, 1969). There is a general agreement that the meaning of an idiom cannot be deduced from those of its components. But the wording “a linguistic form” is somewhat doubtful, since it implies that not only expressions such as *head over heels* and *have a bone to pick with someone* are to be regarded as idioms, but also compounds such as *headlong* and *dog-tired* and *front runner*. It is not a satisfactory definition from a lexicographical point of view, especially if one is considering the idiom as a combinational category and its appearance in a dictionary. It is therefore preferable to treat the concept as having a narrower content, and to consider that an idiom consists of more than one written word.

In a very broad sense, the idioms in question are metaphorical rather than literal. They are more or less invariable or fixed in form or order in a way that makes them different from literal expressions. Because they are metaphorical, one cannot usually discover their meanings just by looking up the individual words in an ordinary dictionary. And it is also because they are more or less

invariable, both in wording and in certain grammatical ways, they cannot be changed or varied in the way literal expressions are normally varied, whether in speech or writing. These expressions, or idioms, tend to have other characteristics in common, although they do not apply generally to every case. Most, but not all, of these expressions are phrases of two or more words. Many of these expressions belong to informal spoken English rather than to formal written English.

Idioms differ from collocations and free combinations. When the expression has the figurative meaning like that of *get cold feet* in English which means to lose confidence or begin to hesitate, no replacement is usually possible. The meaning of the whole cannot be derived from those of the components, since *feet* are not involved at all, it is an idiom. One more example, English expression *face the music*, meaning “not flinch from danger, unpleasantness, or difficulties”, or “to face the difficulties arising from something one has done, esp. to deal with them as bravely as one can” (LDOEI: 227). The expression forms a semantic unit whose meaning cannot be derived from those of components, since *music* is not involved at all. It is usually impossible to change any part of the expression. On the other hand, the whole expression can be replaced by, say, “display courage or show no fear”. It is therefore an idiom.

Any language with a long history may involve a large number of idioms. Idioms are a special kind of phenomenon in language. They are phrases or short sentences that have been widespread and widely used by people for a long period. English idioms include not only colloquialisms and proverbs, but also some slang. There is no explicit distinction between idioms and collocations.

English idioms are filled with colorful meanings on a large scale: some came from the words used in the western social life; some originated from ancient Greek and Roman mythology; some derived from the Bible; some were borrowed from Latin or French, and some even from Chinese expressions; some were from the world literature, written by well-known writers like Shakespeare, Chaucer, and so on; some came from the historical events or stories. These idioms saw the changes as well as the development

of the history and gave rise to slang and colloquialisms in people's daily life, or the words with implied meanings, or the terms full of wisdom and humor, or serious but elegant literary language. Some of them are often seen in the works of literature and art while the others always appear in newspapers and magazines. These show fully the vitality of English idioms.

It is often difficult to understand English idioms and more difficult to translate them correctly and properly. The problems of translating English idioms into Chinese in dictionaries are always complicated, much more so if the two languages are of backgrounds and cultures so different from each other. It requires not only the accurate comprehension of their meanings and implications, but the adequate representation of the same vividness, conciseness, and national color as well.

### **1.3 Sources of English idioms**

In order to translate English idioms properly and accurately, it is very important and also helpful for us to know the sources or origins of these idioms. English idioms are rich in sources. Some bear relations to customs. Some abound with allusion-references to characters or events from their history, legends, literature, religion, and so on. Such references, allusions, and customs are the realizations of the rich cultural heritage of the people who speak the language. Allusions are not always easy to understand and without comprehension there can be little appreciation. In the following the sources of the idioms are to be discussed with adequate examples. In the meantime, cultural background is also involved when the sources are in question, comparisons with Chinese idioms will be made so as to show the difference between Chinese and Western cultural backgrounds.

#### **1.3.1 Customs are one of major sources of English idioms.**

Customs, carried by tradition and enforced by social disapproval of any violation, vary a great deal from country to country. Just as an English proverb goes: *Every country has its customs*. Customs are broadly recognized as not being universally the same. Thus, it serves as a mirror to reflect the social life of the people in different countries.

In Britain when a person was made a knight (a noble cavalier having the title of sir), the monarch would give him a pair of golden spurs (small objects worn on the wheels of boots and used to make the horse go faster). This old custom was mirrored in such idiom as *win/gain one's spurs*. The English idiom *the birds and bees* carries special meaning with reference to the custom of explaining sexual matters to children by describing the habits of the birds, or other animals. Thus talking of the birds and bees is to mention the topic of sexual relations between men and women in a humorous way.

In English language, *throw down the gauntlet* refers to a custom practiced in the Middle Age. Gauntlet, a protective glove, which was worn with a suit of armor, was thrown down in front of a person as a sign that one wished to fight the person. Hence *throw down the gauntlet* means to invite someone to fight, argue, defend himself or his opinion. Whereas *pick/take up the gauntlet* is to accept an invitation to fight or argue. The custom of American Indians who wore feathers as a sign of their bravery in war has found expression in the idiom of *a feather in one's cap* which connotes an honor, success, etc., of which one can be justly proud. Another American Indian custom of burying tomahawks (Indian war axes) can be found in the idiom *bury the hatchet* to mean peace has been made, or agree to be friends after having a long quarrel.

In English-speaking countries, the dog is given the honor of "man's best friend". English-speaking people regard the dog as their "loyal and reliable friend". Special hospitals and food stores for dogs have been built up in some large cities. There are many more idioms in terms of dogs in English than those of in Chinese. What is more important is that most of the English idioms of dogs contrary to Chinese ones, show no contempt for dogs at all. Only a small number of these idioms associate dogs with degradation, owing to the influence of other languages. For instance, the phrase *go to the dogs* comes from the Bible, in which the dog was thought to be degraded. Besides, some fairly common swearwords in English are associated with dogs, such as *You dogs!* Yet such swearing does not change the dog's status. It is still "man's best friend" and lovely pet in the western countries.

A number of idioms of dogs represent man's daily life, such as *dog-tired* and *sick as a dog*, *dog-lazy*. The dog represents the image for persons, as in *a*



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