

"PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN FILM TRANSLATION: THEIR SEMANTIC AND LINGUO-CULTURAL FEATURES"

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Abstract

Phraseological units—idioms, fixed expressions, proverbs, collocations, and set phrases—are among the most distinctive and culturally loaded elements of language. In cinematic discourse, they perform functions that go beyond mere semantic contribution: they construct character identity, encode social and historical context, evoke humor or irony, and create emotional resonance. Translating these units for film audiences therefore involves not only rendering meaning across languages but also preserving pragmatic effects, cultural connotations, rhythm, and audiovisual synchronicity. The translation of phraseological units in film sits at the intersection of linguistics, translation studies, and film studies, presenting a complex set of semantic and linguo-cultural challenges that demand specialized strategies and nuanced decision-making.

Key words: demand, strategies, constraints, decision-making

INTRODUCTION

Films as multimodal texts pose constraints and opportunities that written texts do not. A phraseological unit in a film is embedded in a network of visual cues, actor intonation, musical underscoring, editing rhythm, and mise-en-scène. These semiotic resources can either reinforce or mitigate the meaning and effect of an utterance. For instance, an idiom uttered with ironic intonation and a knowing glance may signal subtext that a literal translation cannot carry. Moreover, the temporal and spatial constraints of subtitling and dubbing—line length, readability time, lip-synchronization—limit the translator's capacity to provide lengthy explanatory renderings. Consequently, film translators must often balance fidelity to source-language phrasing with the need for brevity, naturalness, and cultural intelligibility in the target language.

The semantic properties of phraseological units complicate the translation task. Many such units are semantically non-compositional: their meaning cannot be directly derived from the meanings of constituent words. Idioms like “kick the bucket,” proverbs like “you can’t have your cake and eat it,” or colloquial set phrases such as “to shoot the breeze” encapsulate meanings, scriptable contexts, and pragmatic force that are language-specific. Translators must decide whether to seek an equivalent idiom in the target language that conveys comparable denotation and connotation, to paraphrase into a non-idiomatic expression, or to employ strategies such as calque, compensation, or explicitation. Each option entails trade-offs: an equivalent idiom might preserve naturalness and register but risk a shift in cultural nuance; a paraphrase may preserve denotative meaning but lose rhetorical punch or humour; a calque could sound artificial or unintelligible.

Linguo-cultural features of phraseological units are equally significant. Many idioms originate in historical events, local customs, religion, folklore, or sociolects, carrying cultural references that are opaque to outsiders. A phrase invoking culturally specific items (e.g., food, legal institutions, folk characters) or historical metaphors may provoke loss of meaning or misinterpretation when translated literally. For example, a proverb grounded in agrarian metaphors might not resonate in an urbanized target culture, while jokes dependent on national myths or political figures may either fall flat or cause unintended offense. The translator’s cultural competence and the intended audience’s cultural proximity determine whether to domesticate (adapt) the expression—making it culturally familiar—or foreignize it—retaining its source-culture flavor and relying on the audience to infer meaning from context.

The choice between subtitling and dubbing further shapes translation strategies. Subtitling imposes tight spatial and temporal limits: each subtitle must be concise, readable within a short on-screen duration, and synchronized with the corresponding utterance. This frequently necessitates compression and reduction, forcing translators to prioritize essential semantic and pragmatic information. Dubbing, by contrast, affords more verbal space but requires lip-synch and voice

matching, thus in fluencing lexical choices and prosodic patterns. The dichotomy affects how phraseological units are treated: subtitlers may favor concise equivalents or paraphrases, while dubbers might attempt to fit idiomatic renderings into timing and mouth movements, occasionally inventing alternative idioms that fit the target language rhythmically and culturally.

Humour and irony embodied in phraseological units present particular difficulties. Jokes often exploit lexical ambiguity, phonetic similarity, culturally specific stereotypes, or polite-taboo dynamics; when these mechanisms are tied to fixed expressions, literal translation is unlikely to reproduce the comedic effect. Translators can implement strategies such as substitution (replacing a joke with a culturally equivalent joke), explicitation (explaining the joke in brief), or compensation (introducing humor elsewhere to balance loss). However, the ethics of substitution—altering authorial intent or cultural identity for the sake of immediate audience comprehension—raises theoretical and practical debates. In literary film translation, where fidelity to authorial voice is prized, translators may opt for foreignization, preserving the original flavor while accepting residual opacity.

Characterization is another domain where phraseological units are integral. Characters' sociolects, regional accents, education levels, and personality traits are often signaled through their habitual use of certain set phrases or idioms. Accurate translation must thus preserve the associative indexicality of such units: an uneducated, rural character invoking local proverbs should not be rendered into a cosmopolitan idiom that erases his or her social positioning. Translators need to find target-language devices—dialectal equivalents, archaisms, or marked lexical choices—that deliver comparable sociolinguistic cues without resorting to caricature or stereotype. This requires delicate calibration and, ideally, collaboration with directors and actors in dubbing or with subtitle editors to ensure consistency across the filmic text.

Technological advancements and digital workflows have introduced new tools and corpora that can assist translators. Parallel corpora, bilingual phrasebanks, and machine translation post-editing offer resources for identifying potential equivalents or gauging frequency and naturalness of candidate translations. Nonetheless, automatic solutions are often inadequate for phraseological nuance, as statistical models may favor high-frequency literal renderings that fail to capture idiomaticity or cultural subtext. Human expertise remains indispensable for evaluating pragmatic appropriateness and for creative reformulation when necessary. Integrative approaches that combine computational suggestion with human judgment have shown promise, enabling efficient generation of candidate translations while preserving interpretive control.

From a theoretical standpoint, the translation of phraseological units in film benefits from a multidimensional framework that considers semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and multimodality. Semantic analysis identifies the degree of compositionality and the core propositional content. Pragmatic analysis assesses illocutionary force, implicature, and speaker stance. Sociolinguistic profiling situates the utterance within registers, dialects, and identity markers. Multimodal analysis inspects how visuals, sound, performance, and editing co-construct meaning. A comprehensive translation decision should weigh these dimensions, guided by translation brief—whether the priority is fidelity, audience accessibility, market requirements, or artistic integrity.

Empirical research has highlighted recurring patterns and pitfalls. Studies comparing subtitled and dubbed versions often find that subtitlers resort to higher rates of reduction and explicitation, while dubbers may produce more domesticated idiomatic renderings. Audience reception research indicates that viewers are generally tolerant of slight shifts in idiomatic content when the pragmatic effect is preserved; however, fans of culturally specific films or literati may object to domestication. Moreover, research into cross-cultural humour has underscored that compensatory strategies—where some humorous elements are sacrificed but others

are amplified—can maintain overall comedic balance, though this demands creative latitude and close collaboration with production teams.

Practical recommendations emerge from both theory and practice. First, early involvement of translators in the production pipeline—script translation, director briefings, and preview screenings—enhances contextual understanding and allows for negotiated solutions that respect both source text integrity and target audience comprehension. Second, building annotated glossaries of recurring phraseological units for a given film or franchise aids consistency across episodes or sequels. Third, leveraging multimodal clues—gestures, visuals, and sound effects—can allow translators to economize verbal content, using subtitles to signal only what cannot be inferred. Fourth, adopting a flexible, audience-aware stance—opting for domestication when target viewers lack cultural scaffolding, and for foreignization when preserving the source’s cultural identity is crucial—strikes a pragmatic balance.

Nevertheless, significant research gaps remain. Quantitative studies on the comparative effectiveness of specific translation strategies for different types of phraseological units are limited. There is a need for longitudinal reception studies tracking how audiences internalize culturally marked phraseological translations. Furthermore, the rise of streaming platforms and global distribution has altered audience expectations and tolerances; research should explore how these shifts affect preferences for foreignization versus domestication. Finally, ethical questions—such as the translator’s responsibility to preserve minority cultures onscreen and the potential for linguistic homogenization—deserve further normative inquiry.

In conclusion, phraseological units are pivotal carriers of meaning, culture, and voice within films. Translating them effectively demands sensitivity to semantic opacity, cultural embeddedness, multimodal context, and performative nuance. While practical constraints—time, space, and market pressures—inevitably shape translation choices, a principled, context-sensitive approach that combines linguistic analysis, cultural insight, and creative problem-solving can

preserve both the communicative function and the artistic essence of phraseological expressions. Continued interdisciplinary research and collaborative practice will enhance translators' capacity to negotiate the delicate balance between fidelity and accessibility in the cinematic translation of phraseological units.

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