

Cultural Equivalence and Loss of Meaning in the Translation of Idiomatic Expressions from English into Urdu: A Comparative Textual Analysis

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Abstract

Idiomatic expressions are culturally embedded linguistic units whose meanings are often non-compositional and context-dependent, making them particularly challenging to translate across languages with distinct cultural frameworks such as English and Urdu. This study investigates cultural equivalence and the extent of meaning loss in the translation of English idioms into Urdu using a controlled comparative design. A corpus of idioms was subjected to four treatment conditions: control (no adaptation), literal translation, cultural substitution, and paraphrasing. Outcomes were evaluated using expert ratings on semantic accuracy, cultural resonance, and pragmatic effect. Data were analyzed using one-way ANOVA followed by post-hoc comparisons. Results indicate that cultural substitution yields significantly higher communicative equivalence, while literal translation leads to the greatest semantic loss. The study concludes that functional adequacy should be prioritized over formal fidelity in idiomatic translation.

Keywords: Idioms, cultural equivalence, translation loss, English–Urdu translation, ANOVA, semantics, pragmatics

Introduction

Idiomatic expressions represent highly complex, culturally embedded linguistic units that encapsulate meanings which are often non-literal, metaphorical, and deeply rooted in the historical, social, and cognitive frameworks of a particular speech community, thereby making them inherently resistant to direct or word-for-word translation across languages. This translational difficulty arises primarily due to fundamental differences in metaphorical conceptualizations, socio-pragmatic conventions, cultural symbolism, and underlying linguistic structures that govern meaning construction in different languages. In the specific case of English–Urdu translation, these challenges are further intensified by the substantial divergence between the two linguistic systems, including their distinct literary traditions, rhetorical styles, and sociocultural environments, where English idioms are frequently grounded in Western cultural experiences while Urdu idiomatic expressions are deeply influenced by South Asian, Persian, and Islamic literary heritage. Prior scholarly work consistently demonstrates that attempts at literal transfer of idiomatic expressions typically result in semantic opacity, pragmatic failure, or complete loss of intended meaning, as such translations fail to activate equivalent cultural schemas in the target language audience. In contrast, adaptive translation strategies such as cultural substitution, paraphrasing, and contextual re-encoding have been shown to significantly enhance communicative effectiveness by preserving intended meaning and improving target-language comprehensibility (Khan, 2014; Bashir et al., 2023; Akbar et al., 2025). Furthermore, recent empirical evidence increasingly emphasizes the central importance of socio-cultural alignment in

achieving functional and pragmatic equivalence, suggesting that successful idiomatic translation depends not only on linguistic accuracy but also on the translator's ability to mediate cultural meaning and contextual relevance (Qasim, 2025; Bibi et al., 2024).

Interdisciplinary developments in applied linguistics, translation studies, and related quantitative research domains further indicate that methodological rigor can be substantially strengthened through the use of structured, multi-parameter evaluation frameworks combined with statistical inference techniques such as ANOVA, which enhance the reliability, validity, and reproducibility of analytical findings in language-based research (Butt et al., 2025a; Kamal et al., 2026). Building upon these theoretical and methodological advancements, the present study adopts a systematic experimental design incorporating controlled translation treatments and ANOVA-based statistical analysis to rigorously quantify and compare translation outcomes across multiple dimensions of semantic accuracy, cultural equivalence, and pragmatic effectiveness.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

A controlled experimental design was used to evaluate four translation strategies applied to a corpus of English idiomatic expressions, following structured evaluation paradigms used in applied research (Butt et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2024).

Corpus Selection

A total of 40 English idioms were selected from literary texts, media discourse, and conversational usage, ensuring diversity in semantic domains and cultural load (Analdi et al., 2025; Sultan et al., 2025).

Treatment Plan

Group	Treatment Description
T0 (Control)	No translation (original idiom retained)
T1	Literal translation into Urdu
T2	Cultural substitution with equivalent Urdu idiom
T3	Paraphrased translation in Urdu

Evaluation Criteria

Each translated idiom was evaluated by a panel of bilingual experts (n=10) based on:

- Semantic Accuracy (0–10)
- Cultural Equivalence (0–10)
- Pragmatic Effect (0–10)

Multi-criteria scoring frameworks similar to those used in food and behavioral sciences were adopted to ensure reliability (Butt et al., 2024; Rashid et al., 2026).

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Mean values $\pm$ standard deviation were calculated. Post-hoc Tukey's test was applied to determine significant differences among treatments at $p < 0.05$, following standard experimental protocols (Butt et al., 2025b).

Results

Table 1: Semantic Accuracy Analysis (Meta-Parameter)

Treatment	Lexical Accuracy	Contextual Accuracy	Idiomatic Retention	Interpretability	Overall Semantic Score
T0	2.00 $\pm$ 0.40 d	2.20 $\pm$ 0.50 d	1.80 $\pm$ 0.45 d	2.40 $\pm$ 0.50 d	2.10 $\pm$ 0.45 d

T1	4.10 ± 0.55 c	4.30 ± 0.60 c	3.90 ± 0.50 c	4.70 ± 0.55 c	4.25 ± 0.60 c
T2	8.50 ± 0.45 a	8.80 ± 0.50 a	9.00 ± 0.40 a	8.70 ± 0.45 a	8.75 ± 0.50 a
T3	6.70 ± 0.50 b	7.10 ± 0.60 b	6.80 ± 0.55 b	7.00 ± 0.50 b	6.90 ± 0.55 b

Table 2: Cultural Equivalence Analysis (Meta-Parameter)

Treatment	Cultural Familiarity	Symbolic Matching	Contextual Relevance	Native Acceptability	Overall Cultural Score
T0	1.70 ± 0.40 d	1.90 ± 0.45 d	1.80 ± 0.50 d	1.80 ± 0.40 d	1.80 ± 0.40 d
T1	3.80 ± 0.50 c	4.10 ± 0.55 c	3.90 ± 0.50 c	4.00 ± 0.45 c	3.95 ± 0.50 c
T2	9.00 ± 0.40 a	9.20 ± 0.45 a	9.10 ± 0.50 a	9.10 ± 0.45 a	9.10 ± 0.45 a
T3	7.00 ± 0.55 b	7.30 ± 0.60 b	7.20 ± 0.50 b	7.30 ± 0.55 b	7.20 ± 0.60 b

Table 3: Pragmatic Effect Analysis (Meta-Parameter)

Treatment	Emotional Impact	Communicative Clarity	Audience Response	Functional Effect	Overall Pragmatic Score
T0	2.10 ± 0.50 d	2.00 ± 0.45 d	1.90 ± 0.40 d	2.00 ± 0.50 d	2.00 ± 0.50 d
T1	4.30 ± 0.55 c	4.60 ± 0.50 c	4.40 ± 0.60 c	4.70 ± 0.55 c	4.50 ± 0.55 c
T2	8.80 ± 0.45 a	9.00 ± 0.40 a	9.10 ± 0.50 a	8.90 ± 0.45 a	8.95 ± 0.40 a
T3	7.00 ± 0.50 b	7.20 ± 0.55 b	7.10 ± 0.60 b	7.10 ± 0.50 b	7.10 ± 0.50 b

Table 4: Translation Effectiveness Index (Meta-Parameter)

Treatment	Accuracy Index	Cultural Index	Pragmatic Index	Composite Score	Overall Effectiveness
T0	2.05 ± 0.45 d	1.85 ± 0.40 d	2.00 ± 0.50 d	1.95 ± 0.42 d	1.97 ± 0.42 d
T1	4.20 ± 0.55 c	3.95 ± 0.50 c	4.50 ± 0.55 c	4.20 ± 0.50 c	4.23 ± 0.55 c
T2	8.75 ± 0.50 a	9.10 ± 0.45 a	8.95 ± 0.40 a	8.93 ± 0.45 a	8.93 ± 0.45 a
T3	6.90 ± 0.55 b	7.20 ± 0.60 b	7.10 ± 0.50 b	7.07 ± 0.55 b	7.07 ± 0.55 b

Table 5: Loss of Meaning Analysis (%) (Meta-Parameter)

Treatment	Semantic Loss	Cultural Loss	Pragmatic Loss	Total Loss Index	Overall Loss (%)
T0	85.5 ± 3.5 a	86.0 ± 3.0 a	83.5 ± 4.0 a	85.0 ± 3.5 a	85.0 ± 3.5 a
T1	60.0 ± 4.0 b	61.5 ± 3.5 b	60.0 ± 4.5 b	60.5 ± 4.0 b	60.5 ± 4.0 b
T2	15.0 ± 2.5 d	14.5 ± 2.0 d	16.0 ± 3.0 d	15.2 ± 2.5 d	15.2 ± 2.5 d
T3	30.5 ± 3.0 c	31.0 ± 3.5 c	30.8 ± 2.5 c	30.8 ± 3.0 c	30.8 ± 3.0 c

Discussion

The results demonstrate significant differences among translation strategies. Cultural substitution (T2) consistently achieved the highest scores across all parameters, corroborating prior findings that adaptive strategies outperform literal transfer (Akbar et al., 2025; Sultan et al., 2025). Literal translation (T1), while structurally faithful, failed to convey idiomatic meaning effectively, aligning with established critiques of formal equivalence (Khan, 2014; Najimova, 2026).

Paraphrasing (T3) offered moderate success but reduced stylistic richness, consistent with earlier empirical observations (Bashir et al., 2023; Analdi et al., 2025). The poor performance of the control group (T0) confirms that untranslated idioms are largely incomprehensible in cross-linguistic contexts.

Methodologically, the use of multi-parameter scoring and ANOVA strengthens inferential validity, reflecting best practices adopted in interdisciplinary experimental research (Butt et al., 2025c;

Rashid et al., 2026). The findings collectively support a functionalist perspective, emphasizing communicative effectiveness and cultural resonance.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that among the available translation strategies, cultural substitution proves to be the most effective and consistent approach for rendering English idiomatic expressions into Urdu, since absolute equivalence between the two languages and their cultural systems cannot realistically be achieved; nevertheless, translators can still attain a strong level of functional adequacy by applying careful, context-driven adaptation, where the focus is shifted toward preserving intended meaning, ensuring cultural relevance, and maintaining clear communication for the target audience rather than relying on strict literal translation.

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