

## IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS UNPACKED: ENGLISH AND GERMAN IDIOMS IN TRANSLATION

**Shukurova Visola**

*BA student at Uzbekistan State World Languages University*

*visolashukurova6@gmail.com, +998883330262*

*Scientific advisor: **Jamilya Abduganieva***

*Uzbekistan State World Languages University*

*PhD in pedagogical sciences*

*Head of English Language Translation Theory Department*

*+998 90 188 73 23*

*[jamilya.valiewa@yandex.com](mailto:jamilya.valiewa@yandex.com)*

**Abstract:** *This article explores the intricate process of translating idiomatic expressions between English and German, shedding light on the challenges, strategies, and implications of idiomatic translation. Idioms, deeply rooted in language and culture, pose unique difficulties for translators due to their figurative meanings and cultural specificity. Drawing upon insights from translation studies, linguistics, and cultural analysis, this article examines the complexities of idiomatic expression and the art of linguistic adaptation. Through a combination of theoretical frameworks, case studies, and comparative analysis, the article offers a comprehensive exploration of idiomatic translation, highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity, linguistic proficiency, and strategic decision-making in bridging linguistic and cultural divides. By delving into the nuances of idiomatic expression and its translation, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural communication and the challenges of interlingual communication in today's globalized world.*

**Keywords:** *idiomatic expressions, translation, English, German, cross-cultural communication, linguistic adaptation, cultural sensitivity, comparative analysis, language and culture, translation studies, idioms, figurative language, intercultural communication, linguistic nuances, cultural specificity, language proficiency, cultural differences, communication strategies, language translation, cultural exchange, global communication.*

**Introduction:** The translation of idiomatic expressions represents a fascinating yet challenging aspect of language and culture, particularly when bridging the gap between English and German. Idioms, deeply embedded in





linguistic traditions and cultural contexts, present unique hurdles for translators due to their figurative meanings and cultural specificity. This introduction sets the stage for an in-depth exploration of idiomatic expression translation, focusing on its topicality, novelty, and methodology. In today's interconnected world, effective cross-cultural communication is more crucial than ever. Idiomatic expressions are a fundamental part of language and play a significant role in conveying cultural nuances and shared experiences. As such, the translation of idiomatic expressions between English and German is highly topical, reflecting the ongoing need for intercultural understanding and communication in diverse global contexts. While the translation of idiomatic expressions is not a new phenomenon, the specific focus on comparing English and German idioms represents a novel approach to the study of translation and language. By examining idiomatic expression translation through a comparative lens, this article offers fresh insights into the complexities and nuances of interlingual communication, shedding light on previously unexplored aspects of linguistic adaptation and cultural exchange.

This article employs a multifaceted methodology to explore the translation of idiomatic expressions between English and German. Drawing upon insights from translation studies, linguistics, and cultural analysis, the methodology integrates theoretical frameworks, case studies, and comparative analysis to provide a comprehensive examination of idiomatic translation. By analyzing real-world examples and employing systematic comparison, this methodology offers valuable insights into the challenges, strategies, and implications of idiomatic expression translation. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural communication and the intricacies of idiomatic expression translation. By examining the topicality, novelty, and methodology of idiomatic translation, this introduction sets the stage for a nuanced and insightful exploration of language and culture in translation practice.

### **Similar characteristics of phraseology in two languages**

**Shared Cultural Themes:** Idioms in different languages often reflect similar cultural themes or experiences. This phenomenon highlights the universality of certain cultural concepts and the ways in which they are expressed linguistically. For example, idioms related to weather, animals, or common human activities may have equivalents in multiple languages, illustrating shared cultural values, beliefs, and experiences. In English and German, idiomatic expressions often draw on shared cultural themes such as:





❖ **Weather:** Both English and German idioms frequently reference weather phenomena to convey various meanings and emotions. For example, idioms like "under the weather" in English and "schlechtes Wetter haben" (to have bad weather) in German are used to indicate feeling unwell or in low spirits.

❖ **Animals:** Idioms involving animals are prevalent in both English and German, reflecting the significance of animals in cultural symbolism and folklore. For instance, idioms like "the early bird catches the worm" in English and "Der frühe Vogel fängt den Wurm" (The early bird catches the worm) in German convey the importance of being proactive and seizing opportunities.

❖ **Food and Drink:** Food-related idioms are common in both English and German, reflecting the centrality of food in cultural traditions and social interactions. Idioms like "spill the beans" in English and "die Katze aus dem Sack lassen" (to let the cat out of the bag) in German are used to describe revealing a secret or disclosing information prematurely.


❖ **Nature:** Both languages feature idioms that draw on nature imagery to express various concepts and emotions. For example, idioms like "to see the forest for the trees" in English and "den Wald vor lauter Bäumen nicht sehen" (not to see the forest because of all the trees) in German highlight the challenge of maintaining perspective amidst complexity.

❖ **Work and Leisure:** Idioms related to work, leisure, and everyday activities are found in both English and German, reflecting shared experiences and cultural values. Idioms like "burning the midnight oil" in English and "bis spät in die Nacht arbeiten" (to work until late at night) in German convey the idea of working diligently or putting in extra effort. *These examples demonstrate how idiomatic expressions in English and German draw on shared cultural themes to convey meaning and communicate effectively within their respective linguistic and cultural contexts. By recognizing and understanding these shared cultural themes, translators and language learners can navigate idiomatic expression more effectively and facilitate cross-cultural communication.*

**Conceptual Metaphors:** Conceptual metaphors are cognitive frameworks that structure our understanding of abstract concepts by mapping them onto more concrete, tangible domains. Idiomatic expressions often rely on conceptual metaphors to convey complex ideas in a succinct and vivid manner. Here are examples of conceptual metaphors found in idiomatic expressions in English and German, along with references to add:

❖ **Time is Money:** This conceptual metaphor equates time with a valuable commodity, highlighting the importance of efficiency and productivity. Idioms such





as "time is ticking away" in English and "die Zeit verstreicht" (time is passing) in German reflect this metaphorical understanding of time (**Lakoff & Johnson, 1980**)<sup>46</sup>.

❖ Emotions as Containers: This metaphorical framework conceptualizes emotions as substances that can be contained, controlled, or released. Idioms like "to bottle up emotions" in English and "seine Gefühle unterdrücken" (to suppress one's feelings) in German draw on this metaphor to describe emotional regulation (**Lakoff & Johnson, 1980**).

❖ Relationships as Journeys: This metaphorical concept treats relationships as physical journeys, with stages, milestones, and destinations. Idioms such as "to take the next step" in English and "einen Schritt weitergehen" (to take a step forward) in German reflect this metaphorical understanding of relationships (**Lakoff & Johnson, 1980**).

❖ Ideas as Objects: This metaphorical framework conceptualizes abstract ideas as tangible objects that can be grasped, manipulated, or shared. Idioms like "to grasp the concept" in English and "das Konzept begreifen" (to understand the concept) in German draw on this metaphor to describe understanding and comprehension (**Lakoff & Johnson, 1980**).

❖ Life as a Journey: This pervasive metaphor treats life as a journey with its ups and downs, twists and turns, and eventual destinations. Idioms such as "life is a rollercoaster" in English and "das Leben ist wie eine Achterbahnfahrt" (life is like a rollercoaster ride) in German embody this metaphorical understanding of life (**Lakoff & Johnson, 1980**).

**Borrowed or Loan Translations in both languages:** Borrowed or loan translations, also known as calques, are linguistic phenomena where expressions or phrases from one language are translated literally into another language, preserving the structure and meaning of the original expression. This process often results from the influence of one language on another, leading to the adoption of foreign expressions or idiomatic constructions.


1. English Borrowed or Loan Translations:

- "Double entendre" (from French): Literally means "double meaning" and is used in English to refer to a phrase with two interpretations, often one of which is risqué or humorous (**Bassnett & Mason, 1997**).

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<sup>46</sup> Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press





- "Cul-de-sac" (from French): Literally means "bottom of the bag" and is used in English to refer to a dead-end street or situation (Newmark, 1988).

2. German Borrowed or Loan Translations:

- "Handschuh" (from Middle High German): Literally means "hand shoe" and is used in German to refer to a glove (**Bassnett & Mason, 1997**).

- "Fernsehen" (from German): Literally means "far-seeing" and is used in English to refer to television (**Newmark, 1988**).

### **Globalization and cultural exchange in the phraseology of both languages**

1. Language Contact and Borrowing: Globalization fosters language contact, leading to the borrowing of words, phrases, and idiomatic expressions between languages (Crystal, 2003). English, as a dominant global language, often serves as a source of loanwords and idiomatic expressions for other languages, including German (Crystal, 2003). Similarly, German contributes to the linguistic repertoire of other languages through its unique idiomatic expressions and phraseology (Görlach, 2002).


2. Media and Popular Culture: The proliferation of global media channels facilitates the dissemination of idiomatic expressions and cultural references across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Sapiro, 2010). English-language media, in particular, exerts a significant influence on the phraseology of other languages, including German, through the adoption of English idioms and expressions in translated content and everyday discourse (Pennycook, 2010).

3. Travel and Tourism: Increased travel and tourism promote cultural exchange and linguistic interaction between speakers of different languages (Graddol, 2006). Tourists and travelers often encounter idiomatic expressions specific to the regions they visit, leading to the exchange of linguistic knowledge and the incorporation of foreign expressions into their own language repertoire (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008).

4. Education and Academia: Globalization has led to the internationalization of education and academic exchange programs (Marginson, 2011). In academic settings, the exchange of ideas and research findings often involves the use of idiomatic expressions and specialized phraseology, contributing to the enrichment and diversification of language use in both English and German academic discourse (Phillipson, 1992).

5. Business and Trade: In the context of global business and trade, multilingual communication is essential for successful negotiations and





collaborations (Grin, 2010). As a result, idiomatic expressions related to commerce, finance, and entrepreneurship are frequently exchanged and adapted between English and German-speaking business communities (Wright & Phillips, 2016).

### **Linguistic and Cognitive Universals**

Linguistic and cognitive universals refer to patterns, principles, or features that are common to all human languages and cognitive systems, regardless of their specific linguistic or cultural context. These universals provide insights into the fundamental nature of human language and cognition, shedding light on the ways in which language is structured, processed, and used across diverse linguistic communities. Here's a more detailed exploration of linguistic and cognitive universals:

- **Structural Universals:** Structural universals pertain to the underlying organization and form of language. These include features such as phonological systems (e.g., the distinction between consonants and vowels), grammatical categories (e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives), and syntactic rules (e.g., word order patterns). Structural universals highlight the commonalities in how languages organize linguistic elements and convey meaning, despite surface-level differences in vocabulary and grammar.

- **Semantic Universals:** Semantic universals concern the conceptual organization of meaning and the ways in which language represents and categorizes the world. These universals reflect fundamental cognitive processes and conceptual frameworks shared by all humans. For example, the distinction between animate and inanimate entities, the use of spatial metaphors to conceptualize time, and the categorization of events into states, actions, and processes are semantic universals that shape language and thought across cultures<sup>47</sup>.

- **Pragmatic Universals:** Pragmatic universals relate to the principles and conventions governing language use in social interaction. These include conversational maxims (e.g., Grice's maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner), politeness strategies, and discourse organization patterns. Pragmatic universals reflect the communicative functions of language and the ways in which speakers convey meaning, negotiate social relationships, and achieve communicative goals in discourse<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> Gudykunst, W. B., & Ting-Toomey, S. (1988). *Culture and interpersonal communication*. SAGE Publications.

<sup>48</sup> Kövecses, Z. (2010). *Metaphor: A practical introduction*. Oxford University Press.





- **Cognitive Universals:** Cognitive universals encompass general cognitive processes and mechanisms that underlie language acquisition, processing, and comprehension. These include mechanisms such as categorization, memory, attention, and inference-making, which are integral to language use and comprehension. Cognitive universals highlight the role of cognition in shaping language structure and function, as well as the bidirectional relationship between language and cognition<sup>49</sup>.

- **Functional Universals:** Functional universals refer to the communicative functions and purposes served by language across different cultures and contexts. These include functions such as expressing desires, beliefs, intentions, and emotions, as well as coordinating social interactions, transmitting knowledge, and negotiating meaning. Functional universals underscore the adaptive nature of language and its role in fulfilling a wide range of communicative needs and social functions<sup>50</sup>.

Overall, linguistic and cognitive universals provide valuable insights into the nature of human language and cognition, revealing the commonalities and shared principles that underlie linguistic diversity and variation. By identifying universals across languages and cultures, linguists and cognitive scientists can uncover the fundamental properties of language and cognition, as well as the ways in which they are shaped by universal cognitive processes and social interactions.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this article has provided a comprehensive exploration of the translation of idiomatic expressions from English to German and vice versa. Through an examination of relevant literature, theoretical frameworks, case studies, and comparative analysis, several key insights have emerged regarding the complexities, challenges, and implications of idiomatic translation.

Firstly, idiomatic expressions play a crucial role in language and culture, reflecting unique cultural perspectives, historical contexts, and linguistic nuances. Their figurative meanings and cultural specificity pose challenges for translators, who must navigate these complexities to ensure accurate and effective communication in the target language.

Secondly, the translation of idiomatic expressions requires a nuanced understanding of both source and target languages, as well as the cultural contexts

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<sup>49</sup> Talmy, L. (2000). *Toward a cognitive semantics*. The MIT Press.

<sup>50</sup> Croft, W., & Cruse, A. D. (2004). *Cognitive linguistics*. Cambridge University Press.





in which they are embedded. Translators must consider various factors, including structural differences, semantic connotations, and pragmatic usage, in order to convey the intended meaning of idioms while maintaining fidelity to the original text.

Thirdly, different translation strategies may be employed to address the challenges of idiomatic translation, including literal translation, cultural adaptation, and idiomatic equivalence. Each strategy has its own advantages and limitations, and the choice of strategy may depend on factors such as the context of the translation, the target audience, and the intended effect. Furthermore, the translation of idiomatic expressions has important implications for cross-cultural communication, linguistic proficiency, and cultural exchange. By facilitating the transfer of cultural knowledge and promoting intercultural understanding, idiomatic translation contributes to the enrichment of language and the promotion of global communication and cooperation. In light of these insights, it is evident that the translation of idiomatic expressions is a complex and multifaceted process that requires careful consideration of linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic factors. By employing appropriate translation strategies and fostering a deep understanding of both source and target languages and cultures, translators can effectively bridge the gap between languages and facilitate meaningful communication in diverse cultural contexts. Further research in this area is warranted to explore additional aspects of idiomatic translation and its implications for language, culture, and society.

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