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Investigating the Challenges of Translating Slang: A Dilemma to Be Solved

Abstract

Compared to written communication, slang is more frequently employed in conversations and restricted to specific subcultures that understand its meaning. Translating slang can be problematic if the translator wants to convey the context-driven word from the SL to the TL. Like in other languages, the effort used by the translator to convey the tone and cultural meaning along with proper translation and localization of slang make the content more relatable and improve the process of communication. As a guide for this work, we pursue Eble's (2004) categorization followed by Baker's (1992) translational strategies, in addition to Miremadi's (1991) challenges to show how appropriate translation strategies of slang can vary depending on the specific context especially when translating movies which differ from translating a text into another language as translators can add more context for word choices in footnotes. The research paper also proposes the translation of slang expressions from Arabic into English with the challenges embedded in the syntactic, semantic, and cultural levels since slang translation is not a literal process that involves word-for-word, but rather a creative one to find the functional equivalent rather than the exact substitution. The future trajectory of this work is a blend of linguistic ability, cultural nuances through the incorporation of Artificial Intelligence translation systems, with a focus on cultural nuances to establish a trend for adopting new measures in the slang translation process which is spreading globally today due to hyper-speed evolution.

Introduction

Translating slang words and expressions literally without changing them, especially when a direct equivalent seems impossible, is not a simple task. Slang terms need to be adapted to the target language, which makes the process challenging for any translator, even a skilled one. Some slang expressions carry completely different meanings in other languages or may lose their content and meaning when translated literally. While scholars have presented several translation theories to overcome the challenges of translating slang without distorting the sense of colloquialism they carry, there is a risk of unintentionally confusing or even offending the target audience.

In this study, we will examine how Lebanese slang is translated into English, while preserving the sense of colloquialism they carry, and adapting them to the target reader. We will also examine the challenges a translator may face and how to overcome them. But first, let us understand what slang is and the reasons we might want to translate them.

The history of the word “slang” comes from the American Encyclopedia, which defined the term as a street language. The origin of the word goes back to the Scandinavian word, *slengja*, or in other words “to sling”. Another definition appears from the Norwegian dialect word *slenje*. “*slenje*” means abusive speaking. Microsoft Encarta defines slang as informal, non-standard expressions originating from subcultures, yet holds a lower status compared to the standard language (Dumas et al., 1978). According to Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, slang is a type of language consisting of “informal words and expressions that are more common in spoken language, especially used by a particular group of people” and can be used for various purposes. Moreover, slang is an ever-changing set of colloquial words and phrases (Eble, 2004). Many shifts in the world around us are driven by emerging trends, and language is no exception. Slang expressions constantly evolve, shaping the way we communicate. In today’s digital age, memes play a crucial role in our social interactions, becoming a powerful tool for expressing emotions and viewpoints. As a result, slang has transformed into a means of strengthening relationships and fostering more meaningful conversations.

Research Problem

Slang adds vivacity and interest to writing, but what happens when it comes to translating slang into a different language?

The translation of slang entails skills and knowledge to convey the specific meaning. Even though slang is commonly used in different languages, some of its terms and expressions are inappropriate. Consequently, the translator should have a deep understanding of the language to verify the acceptable usage of terms. It is essential to choose not only the most appropriate words and terms but also consider the context of the text and to

coordinate them lexically-semantically, grammatically and stylistically.

The main question this research will seek to answer is: How can translators overcome the challenges of translating slang terms without distorting the sense of colloquialism they carry?

Theoretical Framework

There is no specific model created for slang terms because they are a unique informal language. The best analysis may be by adopting the theoretical model proposed by Seyed Ali Miremadi (1991) and Mona Baker (1992). The focus of this paper is on the collection and analysis of empirical data. The slang terms gathered from translated texts into the target language do not have the same features as the original one. Undoubtedly, translators face numerous challenges when translating slang, and the work is directed toward the clarity and accuracy of the translated slang. Therefore, this research investigates the adequacy of slang translation, in any field, to the target language.

To test the framework, we used an inductive approach to develop a hypothesis based on data collected, analyzed, and interpreted. Not only was a combination of the right tools considered in studying slang translation from Arabic into English, but also elements embedded in the syntactic, semantic, and cultural levels.

Materials and Methods

The selection of slang was taken randomly from journals and newspapers, social media platforms and even televisions channels broadcasting in Arabic. The selection aimed at testing whether the terms translated relied heavily on literal translation or took into consideration the cultural and linguistic differences. Following the verbal interpretation and discussion of the outcomes, we took on an extra mission to present the linguistic challenges translators face according to Miremadi (1991) who divided them into two categories: lexical and syntactic problems while presenting the strategies provided by Baker’s study (1992) on how to translate slang terms in different language combinations by listing examples, types of slang, and challenges with their possible translation highlighting the strategies used.

Value of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its ability to highlight the challenges encountered and to establish a trend for adopting new measures in the translation process. Its findings will reinforce the existing knowledge based on the challenges embedded in the syntactic, semantic, and cultural levels when translating slang terms. The results can be used in future studies to add value to the language.

Limitations of the Study

This research paper explores the different

challenges translators face when it comes to slang language and the different strategies used to make their outcome more efficient. An added focus on artificial tools would be more helpful to improve the process of translation while creating the same effect as in the original language.

Results

The main findings indicate the challenges translators face when misunderstanding the core meaning of slang, which is essential to better convey the message, ensure accuracy, maintain the intended tone, and create the same effect to the target readers. Below we highlight the results that clearly show the effects of misunderstanding the meaning before translation slang.

The Importance of Understanding Slang

Understanding any dialect, informal language or slang shapes the identity of a particular group of people. “Spoken language and its varieties (dialects) shape the identity of the individual throughout their live from birth and help them to reveal their subjectivity within the framework of a separate social group identity” (Akgün, 2024). Thus, understanding the Lebanese slang can help us learn not only a new language, but also a new culture. Moreover, learning the dialect can help us communicate effectively and connect better with others. Lebanese slang words and expressions are usually used in movies, everyday conversation, and modern ways of living. Since they are used daily, they can generate tons of new jargon added to dialect and colloquial expressions, especially words related to a certain group of people. We can also find them on social media such as Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp. Therefore, keeping up with the recent words and expressions will help us participate in the conversation and understand what is being said without feeling distracted.

Additionally, Lebanese slang can help us express our feelings in a different way that is difficult to transmit otherwise, making the ideas natural and easy to understand. It is worth mentioning that learning and understanding the Lebanese slang terms contribute to better translating them into a different language.

The Need for Preserving the Meaning

Slang words cannot be translated literally because they carry meanings that surpass their literal interpretation. Adopting the traditional approach of literal translation is criticized for its “limitations in capturing the essence and nuances of the original text. As a result, new approaches to literary translation have emerged, aiming to overcome these challenges and provide readers with a more authentic and engaging experience” (Arustamyan, 2023).

The Need to Preserve the Core Meaning

The role of translation is to help in connecting cultures across the world. Many slang terms are used to create humor, sarcasm, or emotional depth. The translator should be able to fully understand the

core meaning of the slang term to create the perfect translation and ensure that the translation remains engaging and natural. When a translator fails to recognize these elements, the text loses its impact in the target language. “Culture is a complex area where a translator of any language faces obstacles. The task of the translator is to deliver the same cultural aspects” (Jayasinghe, 2019).

Thus, preserving the core meaning is crucial to ensure that the translated expression conveys the intent and reflects the nuances of the source language. Proper translation builds trust between the translator or communicator and the target audience to ensure accuracy and clarity.

The Importance of Cultural Awareness

As mentioned above, slang words enhance communication between people. Similarly, they can bridge the gaps between different languages, especially in the media. The main purpose of translation is to create “a bilingual act of communication, which at the same time is a bilingual communication, starting from the creation of the original text in English and completing the process of acceptance by the recipient of the translation text” (Krasnova, 2021). Professional translators should find a suitable equivalent despite the challenges faced, to better convey the meaning. That’s how cultural awareness enhances communication.

Discussion

Our study shows the various challenges embedded in the syntactic, semantic, and cultural levels when translating slang since understanding its meaning does not only require language proficiency, but also deep awareness of the culture and context. Skilled translators surpass the literal meaning and translation of slang and dig deeper into the context because informal utterances share “the characteristics of being notorious, heterogeneous, inconsistent, irregular, unorganized, incomplete, shorter, cut-down, reversed-up and changed in favor of the speaker” (Jumanto, 2021).

How the Informal language of Slang Affects Translation

Translating standard language is easier than translating informal language. Translating simple formal sentences is undoubtedly less challenging than translating slangs especially the Lebanese one. Slang language can have cultural backgrounds and hold wordplay that makes it hard for translators to adapt them in the target language. Also, slang carries nuances and connotations that are deeply rooted in social and cultural contexts, making direct equivalence hard between languages. This is particularly evident when translating the Lebanese slang into English. Literal translation would greatly affect the meaning. “In literary translation, formal and stylistic features become of great significance” (Yussef, 2012).

The meaning of a literary text, as formalist critics have shown, is affected by the special organic relationship between the constituent parts, and the

parts and the whole.” In this regard, the role of the translator is to remember that nothing is impossible. Nevertheless, in the realm of translation, there will always be ways to solve the translation of difficult words and different versions become accepted. “When the term is new and an official translation does not yet exist, multiple translation versions can appear. Of course, over time one variant will become the accepted one, but it is possible that the audience accepts one version, while the officials accept another” (Roskoša, 2019). Translators can make their personal interpretation and bring in their own understanding to the style. They often have different word choices for slang terms that capture the nuance and essence of the source language.

One of the most common strategies used to adapt the meaning is to use a similar expression in the target language.

Slang Criteria:

In this section of the study, we will tackle slang criteria to define whether the expression is slang or not. As is known, not every informal word or expression is considered slang. You can find the key points mentioned in reference to how to define slang.

Slang will temporarily lower the speech formality

In this case, informal and colloquial words deviate from standard language conventions. Slang incorporates words and expressions that cannot be used in standard language. It can be used informally in daily conversation.

Slang often replaces equivalents used in formal settings since it becomes part of everyday conversations among people and includes references or inside jokes to make the speech less formal and more personal as described below.

Slang will be familiar especially when used within the same members of the group

We can consider an expression as slang when it is created by a certain group of people and used between each other. This shared knowledge among them creates a sense of group identity. When slang is used within a certain group of people, it creates a sense of humor and becomes more expressive. Someone unfamiliar with the expression can feel distracted and may misinterpret its meaning. For example, teenagers may use slang that is hard for older generations to understand. Many linguists are nowadays wary of hierarchies of language or of generalizing based on the notions of ‘standard’ or ‘nonstandard’ varieties, and sociolinguists are finding the negotiating of roles, relationships, status and power through language, at least by young speakers, to be far more subtle and fluid than previously suggested” (Thorne, 2016). Similarly, professionals in the industries of sports, medicine, technology, or sciences develop slang that can only be understood by them.

Slang manipulates metaphorical terms

As slang is a type of informal dialect, it may be

inappropriate to use it in formal or hierarchical settings and may sound disrespectful. “While slang is widely regarded as a peripheral phenomenon that is complementary to standard language in all respects, it is not confined to any cultural, economic, ethical, political, social, etc. boundaries” (Borys, 2024). However, slang often relies on metaphorical language to form its imagery and create the desired effect. “Slang makes extensive use of metaphorical manipulation, playing on and with meaning and associations in the mind” (Thorne, 2016).

Metaphorical language is more than expressions used by people. A metaphor is not only a matter of language which is secondary, but also a matter of thought and reason. This “mapping is primary, in that it sanctions the use of source domain language and inference patterns for target domain concepts” (Lakoff, 1993).

Challenges of Translating Slang

In the following section of our study, we will cover different essential challenges of translating Lebanese slang into English while highlighting the uniqueness of the original language with its vocabulary and grammar structures. “In cross-cultural communication, the variations in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation between languages pose considerable challenges that can impede mutual understanding and interaction” (Ye, 2024). It is worth mentioning that the challenges and strategies presented can be applied to any language combination. But our article presents examples and practical solutions to translation from Lebanese Arabic into English.

Based on Miremedi’s (1991) linguistic challenges, there exist two main categories: Lexical problems and syntactic problems:

1. Lexical Problems

Miremedi states that in the interpretation of linguistic challenges, words are entities that refer to objects. On the other hand, a word in one language may not be substituted with another word in the other language when referring to the same concept. Miremedi divided linguistic challenges into 5 categories:

1.1 Straight or denotative meaning:

In this case, words of both languages can be matched together. (See Table 1).

1.2 Lexical meaning:

Lexical meaning refers to words or phrases which seem equivalents. Translators must be aware of the intentional meaning. (See Table 2).

1.3 Metaphorical Expression:

This subcategory refers to the challenges of translating idioms and similar expressions. Moreover, metaphors in slang can create new meanings for words. Slang is an informal language that uses metaphors and imagery to express differently. Swear words and slang can be considered metaphors. Miremedi suggested several ways to translate idiomatic expressions:

(a) Distinguishing between ordinary expressions and metaphors.

(b) Accessing the resources of translating metaphors.

(c) Being aware of the constraints and contexts of metaphors before translation. (See table 3)

2.Semantic Voids

This section includes words and expressions that cannot have the same exact meaning. Close equivalents can be found, but the exact one cannot. (See table 4).

In some cases, translators may face the challenge of inequivalence. The inequivalence may be due to extra-linguistic and

intra-linguistic problems. Extra-linguistic factors such as terms and expressions that have referents spoken in a certain

community, but not in the other. Intra-linguistic problems such as words and concepts present in both languages, but their use is completely different. According to Miremadi (1991), this case happens when the system of lexicalization of shared expressions is different from the target language.

3.Syntactic Problems

Syntactic problems are another category for translation problems, specifically subtitling. Languages are different, and as stated by Miremadi (1991), no one can find the same exact structure in both languages. These differences include:

3.1 Word Classes:

This section includes nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. Others such prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, etc. The word class can change from one language to another to convey the meaning. (See table 5).

3.2 Grammatical relations

This section includes the constituents in a sentence most notably between a verb and its argument such as the subject, object or complements. For example, subject verb agreement in English and other ways of grammar conjugation. (See table 6).

3.3 Word order

Word order refers to how the Subject, verb, and object appear in a sentence. This may also vary from Arabic into English. (See table 7)

The slang expression starts with a noun in Arabic whereas in English a verb is at the beginning.

3.4 Style

Style can differ between languages especially between Arabic and English. Translators may run across different challenges throughout the translation process. Mistakes are integral elements to learning and acquiring knowledge. Since languages are different and have different characteristics, translation becomes essential. There are several patterns to fill the gaps as much as possible and overcome the challenges. Even though there are many challenges to overcome, a translator's capacity to wisely use the strategies available is pivotal.

4. Categorization of Lebanese Slang

Slang categorization is a necessary aspect of sociolinguistic research, offering a nuanced understanding of how language varies across different social groups, contexts, and regions. By

categorizing slang, translators can uncover different challenges they may face.

Slang can be categorized based on various criteria such as origin, usage, and demographic factors. For instance, some slang may emerge from sub-cultures or communities, while others gain popularity and become widespread through media.

Slang according to Eble (2004) can be classified into:

a. Colloquial: It is an informal word or phrase used in familiar conversation. (Eble, 2004) states that it is related to the spoken part of language and cannot be used in formal texts. Moreover, colloquial expressions can be understood by the whole part of society and in all regions approximately.

b. Dialect: This type of slang refers to words and expressions that are related to a certain group of people, or city.

c. Profanity: Profanity or offensive words are used for cursing. They are also called "vulgar". It includes taboo terms which are totally informal.

d. Religious colloquialism: This type presents words and expressions related to religion and is used by a certain religion or group of people. These expressions are used every day.

e. Neutral colloquialism: This type is a register of language like a formal one. It is understood and used by society. Although it is spoken informally, it sounds familiar to the standard one.

After we have presented the categorization, we will be presenting the strategies used to overcome the challenges.

5.Strategies Used for Translating Lebanese Slang

In this section, we will be indicating how the strategies provided by Baker (1992) can help translate slang into different language combinations.

a. Translation by a more general word: It is considered one of the most effective strategies to deal with non-equivalence. Baker believes this is applicable to all languages especially in the semantic field because the meaning is not language dependent.

b. Translation in a more neutral or less expressive way: This is another strategy applicable in the semantic field of structure. It is applicable to translate cursing and offensive words, especially in the field of subtitling to create a more respectful tone on screen.

c. Translation by cultural substitution: It involves replacing a cultural word or expression with a target one while taking into consideration their impact on the target reader. This method makes the translated text more natural and fluid to the target reader.

d. Translation using loan words: It is used to deal with culture-specific words, modern concepts, and buzz words. In the first time the repeated word is used with an explanation, while in the next time the word can be used on its own. It is also applicable for translating names.

e. Translation by paraphrase using unrelated words: This strategy is applicable when the concept in the source language is not lexicalized in the target language.

f. Translation by omission: Even though it is drastic, it is also useful when unnecessary information can be omitted.

g. Translation by illustration: This strategy can be used when the target equivalent item does not cover some aspects of the source item, and the equivalent item refers to a physical entity which can be illustrated. This is to avoid over-explanation and to be straight to the point.

h. Equivalence: In addition to the above-mentioned strategies, we would also like to add a new strategy known as equivalence. Even though we may find cultural differences, similarities may also occur between languages that fill the cultural gaps. We do not always face inequivalence between languages.

We will provide in the appendix a list of words highlighting Baker's strategies, types of slang and challenges encountered with more accurate translation. (See table 8).

Artificial Intelligence and Slang Translation

Following the challenges and strategies used when translating Lebanese slang into English, we will shed light on Artificial Intelligence in slang translation. Can AI translate slang words - more specifically the Lebanese one - into English while preserving the meaning and cultural connotations?

Technology has undoubtedly gained much interest. AI tools cannot always handle the translation of slang in subtitling, particularly in maintaining cultural nuances and contextual meaning while addressing technical constraints. "Cultural equivalence in translation is determined by the following four factors: type of the original text, the importance of cultural color in the original text, the purpose of translation, the reader type of the target text" (Sathisha, 2020).

AI tools can help with the translation of informal language. Compared to human translation, online translation substantially improves the process. "Future research in AI-based translation will take a multi-faceted approach that includes improving training data, evolving neural architectures, and incorporating contextual awareness, with an emphasis on improving the accuracy and comprehension of translations in their context" (Amini, et al 2024). However, these tools face considerable challenges while translating Lebanese slang into English. AI tools rely on pre-trained models and machine learning algorithms that analyze vast corpora of translated texts. And while slang is evolving, AI can become context-dependent, making it difficult for it to accurately translate the meaning and preserve cultural references.

To address this, AI-powered tools integrate Natural Language Processing (NLP) to recognize informal expressions and try to suggest the best equivalent and most suitable equivalent for it. Some of the systems use sentiment analysis to recognize the meaning and adapt the content as much as possible through localization or transliteration, to maintain the effect. "Constant growth in intelligent translation has allowed it to evolve significantly over recent decades to become more logical and closer to human translation" (Moneus et al., 2024).

Despite these advancements, AI translation systems cannot always accurately convey the meaning and preserve cultural references to create the same effect. Technical advancements in AI-based translation "have been evolving significantly to enhance efficiency and standards in the field of language translation, facilitating worldwide contact and highlighting the escalating need for inventive technical remedies that could address the longstanding challenge posed by language barriers or restrictions" (Mohamed et al., 2024). As such, AI tools still struggle with ambiguity, regional variations, offensive slang, understanding wordplay and metaphors present in slang. In that case, they can make a literal translation leading to misinterpretation. We should always remember that AI translations must be revised by humans to generate a perfect translation, free from misinterpretations.

Conclusion

In summary, learning slang is essential before translating it because it helps us maintain the same tone and create a similar effect to target readers. In translation, slang presents unique types of challenges because they hold a certain image in them that cannot be conveyed literally. The rapid evolution of slang can be one of the challenging factors because it is context dependent. To overcome them, translators can rely on Mona Baker (1992) strategies such as paraphrasing using related and unrelated words, generalization, equivalence, literal translation when applicable, and cultural substitution. While AI tools have witnessed a huge advancement, they still struggle with contextual nuances and regional variations often requiring human revision to avoid misinterpretations. Simultaneously, understanding slang and mastering the meaning is highly required by translators to create an effective cross-cultural translation.

Author Note

Data analysis was based on analytical framework which included theoretical models or hypotheses to help identify patterns, relationships, and anomalies. Techniques included visualization tools (charts, graphs) to present findings clearly. Ethical considerations were respected to protect participant confidentiality and ensure informed consent. Interpretation and reporting were used to draw conclusions that align with the research questions in a transparent and meaningful way. We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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