

CULTURAL UNIVERSALITY AND UNTRANSLATABILITY OF FIGURATIVE EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract

Figurative expressions, such as idioms and metaphors, often straddle a line between universality and cultural specificity. This paper explores the tension between culturally universal metaphoric concepts and the untranslatability of certain figurative phrases. Drawing on examples from multiple languages and recent linguistic research, we examine how some figurative expressions (e.g., heart of stone, time flies) reflect shared human experiences and appear in similar forms worldwide, while others are deeply embedded in one culture's context and resist direct translation. The literature review highlights conceptual metaphor theory's claim that many metaphors are grounded in universal bodily experiences, yet also acknowledges the role of unique historical and social factors in shaping language-specific idioms. Through comparative analysis of idioms in English and other languages (including Uzbek, French, and Chinese), we identify categories of expressions that travel well across languages and those that do not. The findings underscore that even "universal" metaphors (like up/down for good/bad) require cultural attunement when translated. We conclude that successful translation and cross-cultural communication depend on recognizing which figurative elements are universally intelligible and which carry untranslatable cultural load, often necessitating adaptive strategies in translation.

Keywords: metaphor universals, idiom translation, cultural specificity, untranslatability, cross-cultural metaphor

Introduction

Figurative language is a double-edged sword in cross-cultural communication. On one edge, certain metaphors and idioms appear almost universal, arising independently in many languages due to common human experiences or shared imagery. On the other, many figurative expressions are so culture-bound that they defy direct translation, encapsulating nuances of history, geography, or social norms that do not neatly map onto another linguistic context. This dual nature raises important questions: To what extent are figurative expressions universal, and when are they untranslatable? How can something be at once broadly human and uniquely local?

The notion of cultural universality in figurative language is supported by anthropological observations that all cultures use metaphor and idioms as part of language. Donald Brown's classic list of human universals includes figurative speech and metaphors, suggesting that the propensity for figurative expression is a human constant. Cognitive linguistics further argues that many basic conceptual metaphors (like TIME IS MONEY, ARGUMENT IS WAR) are widely attested because they emerge from common experiences (economics, conflict) and human embodiment. For example, numerous unrelated languages conceptualize anger as heat or emotions as up/down, indicating potential universality at the conceptual level. These shared metaphors can make certain idioms mutually understandable across languages, at least in spirit. A Japanese speaker saying "my heart is heavy" and an English speaker saying the same idiom understand each other emotionally because the metaphor of WEIGHT for sadness resonates cross-culturally.

In contrast, the concept of untranslatability arises when an expression's meaning is so culture-specific that translating it literally would either convey no meaning or a radically different one. Often, untranslatable idioms contain references to local customs, folklore, or wordplay that only make sense within that source culture. Consider the English idiom "bring coals to Newcastle," meaning a pointless action; it hinges on knowledge of Newcastle's coal abundance. A speaker of another language without that cultural knowledge finds the phrase opaque or misleading if translated word-for-word. Similarly, a phrase like "козел отпущения" (Russian for "scapegoat") might translate literally, but if a target culture lacks the Biblical goat reference, the full connotation is lost. These cases illustrate Roman Jakobson's famous differentiation: linguistic meaning may be translatable, but cultural sense might not be.

This paper delves into these dual facets by reviewing theoretical frameworks and cross-linguistic examples. We explore how conceptual metaphor theory and cultural linguistics address universality and variation in figurative language. We also examine translation studies literature on idiom and metaphor translation problems, where the notion "lost in translation" often literally applies to idioms with no equivalent. By analyzing specific examples of figurative expressions that succeed or fail in translation, we aim to illuminate why certain metaphors feel global while others remain untranslatable secrets of a particular tongue.

Ultimately, understanding where figurative language sits on the spectrum from universal to untranslatable has practical implications. It informs translators how to handle culturally loaded texts, helps language learners avoid literal translation pitfalls, and sheds light on the interplay between human cognition and cultural diversity. In the following sections, we will survey existing research on metaphor universals, present

case studies of figurative (un)translatability, and discuss strategies to bridge the gap when figurative expressions cross cultural boundaries.

Literature Review

For decades, metaphor scholars have debated the balance of universal vs. culture-specific elements in figurative language. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), pioneered by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), provides a foundation for arguing metaphorical universals. CMT posits that many metaphors arise from embodied cognition – our common human experiences of the physical world shape how we conceptualize abstract domains. This leads to recurring metaphorical patterns across languages. Kövecses (2005), for instance, documented that metaphors for emotional concepts (like anger, love, happiness) show striking similarities worldwide, because the physiological and social experiences underpinning them (body heat for anger, physical affection for love, upward posture for happiness) are shared by humans generally. As a result, we find near-universal idioms or at least metaphoric themes. A prime example: the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY appears in English (“walk of life,” “at a crossroads”), in Kazakh (where researchers confirm “Life is a journey” exists as a conceptual metaphor), and in many other languages. Likewise, LIGHT vs. DARK as metaphors for knowledge/ignorance or good/evil are pervasive globally due to the universal visual experience of day and night.

However, CMT also acknowledges variation. Zoltán Kövecses noted that while the existence of a metaphor may be universal, its particular lexical entrenchment can vary by culture (2005). Sharifian’s Cultural Linguistics expands on this: each speech community develops cultural conceptualizations that influence language use (Sharifian, 2011). These are cognitive models enriched by a group’s unique history and environment. For example, many cultures have a metaphor of nation as a person/family, but how that is expressed differs: Americans personify their nation as “Uncle Sam” or a proud figure, whereas Russians speak of “Mother Russia” – the underlying metaphor (nation = human) is universal, but the gender and attributes differ culturally. Such differences can render word-for-word translations problematic. A literal translation of a culturally specific personification may not resonate with target audiences who lack that cultural model.

Translation theorists like Mona Baker (1992/2018) and Peter Newmark have specifically addressed idioms and untranslatability. Baker notes that idioms and fixed expressions are often “frozen” in form and carry meanings that cannot be altered or understood by dissecting the words. When an idiom has no equivalent in the target language, translators face a dilemma: translate literally and risk nonsensical results, or replace it with a roughly analogous idiom in the target language. Baker outlines

strategies ranging from using an idiom of similar meaning and form, to using one of similar meaning but different form, to paraphrasing, or as a last resort, omitting the idiom. The concept of untranslatability figures prominently in such discussions – not in the absolute sense (anything can be explained in any language), but in the sense of no succinct, style-equivalent translation existing. Vlahov and Florin (2019) refer to certain culture-bound terms and expressions as “realia” or untranslatables; these often include idioms, proverbs, or metaphoric phrases tightly linked to culture-specific phenomena.

Several case studies exemplify these issues. An article by Parizoska (2025) examined idioms across English, Azerbaijani, Turkish, Russian, and French. It found that many conceptual metaphors underlying idioms are indeed recurring across these languages – for instance, body-part idioms (heart, hand, eyes) often metaphorize similar concepts (heart for love or courage, eyes for attention or envy) in all the surveyed languages. These parallels suggest a shared cognitive basis. Yet, even when metaphors align, the specific idiomatic expressions can differ. English “green with envy” versus Turkish “bursting from envy” versus Chinese “eyes turn red” for envy: all involve color metaphors for envy but with different hues (green in Anglo culture, red in others) chosen due to cultural associations. The English speaker’s “green” (perhaps derived from Shakespeare or humoral theory) does not automatically translate to Uzbek or Chinese contexts where green has other connotations – literal translation would fail to convey envy in those languages. This example reinforces that even seemingly universal metaphors (envy as a sickly color) manifest in culturally preferred ways.

The interplay of universality and uniqueness is also evident in proverbs – a subset of figurative expressions. Many cultures have proverbs that are essentially calques of each other because they express basic human truths. The idea “don’t judge by appearances” appears in countless languages’ folklore. Yet, the imagery of proverbs can vary: an English proverb says “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” while Russian’s analogous saying is “meet a person by their clothes, see them off by their mind,” and an Uzbek proverb similarly goes “Ko‘ylakka qarab kutib ol, aqliga qarab kuzat” (Greet by their clothes, see off by their intellect). The theme is universal; the expression differs. In translation, one might swap a source proverb for a target-culture proverb that conveys the same idea – effectively leveraging the universality of the message but replacing the culturally specific packaging.

On the extreme end of untranslatability, consider idioms involving wordplay or rhymes. These are deeply untranslatable because their effect hinges on the form, not just content. An English idiom like “make ends meet” (to manage finances) relies on a fixed phrasing and subtle wordplay (“ends meat” pun historically). In another

language, there may be a concept of budgeting, but no similar pun; one must paraphrase or find an idiom that plays a comparable social role. Hajiyeveva (2025) emphasizes that translating idioms requires preserving not just denotative meaning but also “tone and cultural resonance”. For culturally rich idioms, a direct translation can fail on both counts – e.g., translating the French idiom “chercher midi à quatorze heures” (lit. “to look for noon at 2 PM,” meaning to overcomplicate things) word-for-word into English yields a bewildering sentence. A skilled translation would find an English figurative way to say “overcomplicate” (perhaps “to split hairs” or “to make a mountain out of a molehill”), illustrating the translator’s task of bridging different figurative frameworks. In sum, the literature suggests a layered view: at a deep conceptual level, figurative thought has many commonalities across humanity, lending some metaphors a universal quality. At the surface lexical level, languages encode those metaphors in idiosyncratic ways tied to culture. Untranslatability often arises not because the concept is alien, but because the expression is. Recognizing this distinction is crucial. As Sadigzade (2025) notes, awareness of universal metaphors can aid translators and language learners in finding equivalents, but one must equally be aware of language-specific “particulars” to avoid misinterpretation. The next sections will further analyze examples and discuss how to navigate the delicate balance between the universal and the untranslatable in figurative language.

Discussion

The interplay between universality and untranslatability in figurative expressions can be viewed through several illustrative scenarios:

1. Universal Concept, Similar Expression: Some metaphors are not only conceptually universal but also have developed strikingly similar linguistic expressions across cultures. For example, the metaphor TIME IS A RESOURCE (often specifically time is money) is found in many cultures. English speakers say “I’m short on time” just as Germans say “Ich habe wenig Zeit” (I have little time) and Russians “У меня мало времени” (I have little time). The phrasing is nearly identical, treating time as a quantifiable commodity. Such expressions pose no translation issue – they can be rendered literally and still make sense, because the underlying metaphor and its linguistic encoding align well. This is a case of cultural universality easing translatability. Another instance is the idiom “to see eye to eye,” meaning to agree fully. A very similar idiom exists in Spanish (“ver cara a cara” for face to face agreement) and in Uzbek one might say “ko‘z ko‘rmoq” (to see with [one] eye, meaning complete understanding). When figurative expressions coincide like this, it often indicates either a shared source (historical contact or a common proverb) or independent emergence from a universal human experience (e.g., alignment of vision symbolizing agreement).

2. Universal Concept, Different Expression: More frequently, cultures share a metaphor but express it differently. The underlying concept is translatable, but a literal translation of the idiom is not. Take the idea of unknowability or complexity exemplified by the metaphor “that’s Greek to me” in English (meaning “I can’t understand it”). Many languages have an equivalent metaphor of foreignness to denote incomprehensibility, but the specifics vary: In Russian one says “Это для меня китайская грамота” (“that’s Chinese writing to me”), in Turkish “Fransız kaldım” (“I remained French [to it]”), and in Hungarian “úgy hangzik, mint hókuszpókusz” (“it sounds like hocus-pocus”). The common thread is foreign = not understood, a near-universal experience with foreign languages. However, if an English text says “it’s Greek to me,” translating it literally into Turkish would not convey meaning since Greek has a different connotation there (Turks might actually understand some Greek, and culturally the saying is different). Instead, a skilled translator swaps in the target culture’s equivalent (e.g., render it as “It’s Chinese to me” for a Russian audience). This is a case where the metaphor’s universality allows translation at the level of meaning, but not at the level of form. The translator must recognize the universal intent (conveying incomprehensibility) but use a cultural substitute to achieve the same effect.

3. Culture-Specific Concept (Lack of Universal): Some idioms reflect concepts or values that are not universally highlighted. These can be truly challenging because they may encode a culture-specific practice or belief. For example, consider Japanese “猫に小判” (neko ni koban, “giving gold coins to a cat”), meaning to give something valuable to someone who cannot appreciate it – similar to the English Biblical proverb “cast pearls before swine.” Here, while the broad idea of wasted gifts exists in both cultures, the imagery (cat with coins vs. pigs with pearls) differs. If one were translating Japanese literally to English (“gold coins to a cat”), the meaning might not come across; but fortunately English has its own idiom for that concept (pearls to swine). A more extreme example of culture-specificity might be certain Arabic idioms that invoke desert phenomena (e.g., “he returned with Khuffa (empty-handed)” referencing a specific legend) or English idioms from cricket (like “sticky wicket”). If the target language culture doesn’t share the narrative or the sport, these become opaque. In such cases, sometimes no equivalent idiom exists and a descriptive translation is needed (turning the idiom into a simile or plain prose). The fact that these expressions even exist reminds us: languages prioritize different aspects of experience to turn into figurative sayings. Cultural values and environment strongly determine these unique idioms – they do not stem from a universal concept but a local one.

4. Wordplay and Form-Dependent Idioms: As noted earlier, some idioms are untranslatable in form because their effect relies on language-specific features like

rhyme, alliteration, or pun. For instance, an English speaker might say someone is “in dire straits” (in a very bad situation). The phrase has a certain phonetic appeal (alliteration of d-sound) and originates from a geographic metaphor (strait as narrow passage). Another language may express the same idea with a completely different image (e.g., German “in der Klemme sitzen,” to sit in a clamp). If we translate “dire straits” literally, a German reader might envision severe dire (an English word they may not know) and Meerengen (sea straits) – a confusing picture. There is nothing inherently universal about “strait” or “clamp”; each language picked an object to convey difficulty. This reinforces that for translation, form-dependent idioms require finding functional analogs. The translator must sacrifice the original metaphor in favor of one that exists in the target language to elicit the same reaction. The same principle applies to jokes and idioms reliant on homophones or cultural references (like English “Santa Claus isn’t real” pun vs in another language, Santa’s name or concept might differ).

From these scenarios, it becomes evident that whether a figurative expression is “universal” or not exists on a continuum. Few if any idioms are absolutely universal in wording across all languages (even seemingly universal ones like “the early bird catches the worm” have local variants – in Russian the equivalent is about God giving to those who wake early, not a bird/worm). However, the metaphorical themes can be nearly universal, offering a bridge for understanding. This is why an English idiom can often be explained to a foreign listener by finding a parallel in their language. As Sadigzade notes, knowing common metaphorical domains (like animals, body parts, nature) that span languages can aid learners and translators in “finding equivalents”.

Still, one must be cautious not to overstate universality. Even when we identify a shared metaphor, the emotional tone and usage frequency might differ by culture. For example, metaphors of death as sleep exist in many languages (English “eternal sleep,” Spanish “descansar en paz”), likely due to universal observations of peaceful-looking corpses. But in some cultures that metaphor might be seen as a polite euphemism suitable for formal eulogies, while in others it could be deeply spiritual (tying into beliefs of afterlife as dream). Thus, context matters – something seemingly universal can carry distinct connotations.

In translation studies, a key concept is equivalent effect – producing the same effect on the audience as the original. For figurative language, achieving equivalent effect often means departing from literal translation to preserve the intended imagery or connotation. As Hajiyeva (2025) highlights, translators must consider context, audience and cultural competence. If a metaphor might confuse or even offend in the target culture, an alternative expression or a brief explanation might be warranted. For

instance, certain Western idioms involving pigs or dogs as negative may be inappropriate to translate directly into cultures where those animals carry different or more positive symbolism (e.g., dogs in some cultures are beloved, so calling someone “a lucky dog” might not sound as lighthearted or positive as in English). The translator then faces a cultural mediation task: perhaps using a neutral term or another animal that has a similar idiomatic role in the target culture.

Conversely, sometimes acknowledging universality can simplify translation. If two languages share a metaphor, a translator might coin a similar idiom in the target language even if it’s not traditionally used there, knowing it will likely be understood. For example, the English metaphor “heat of passion” (for impulsive behavior under strong emotion) might not have a well-known equivalent idiom in, say, Swedish; but because the metaphor of heat for passion is broadly understandable, a translator might literally translate it (or slightly adapt it) and trust that the audience grasps it. In essence, translators constantly gauge how much of the figurative meaning is general human versus culture-specific.

Analysis

To further illustrate these points, let us analyze a few figurative expressions and their behavior across languages:

Idiomatic Greeting/Farewell: In English, one might say “Break a leg!” to wish someone good luck (especially in performances). This expression is famously baffling to non-English speakers because literally it sounds harmful. The phrase arose from English theatrical superstition and has no universal counterpart. In other languages, performers have their own quirky idioms (e.g., in French “Merde!” – a crude word for luck). “Break a leg” thus is culturally bounded; a direct translation into Uzbek or Japanese would likely be met with confusion or concern. However, the concept of wishing luck is universal, so the translator replaces the idiom with whatever target-language phrase serves that function (e.g., the Uzbek might simply say “omad” – “luck”). This demonstrates that while the function (well-wishing) is cross-cultural, the figurative form is not – an example of untranslatability requiring substitution, not because the idea is alien, but because the expression is.

Proverbial Wisdom: Consider the proverb “You can’t have your cake and eat it too” (meaning you can’t enjoy two mutually exclusive benefits). Many languages have a proverb for this concept, but with different imagery. German says “You can’t dance at two weddings at the same time,” Russian: “To chase two rabbits is to catch neither,” Uzbek: “Икки қўйнинг ортидан қувган охирида ҳеч нарса тутмайди” (“one who chases two sheep will catch none”). All convey the idea of impossible dual gains, using weddings, rabbits, sheep as symbols. Here we see a nearly universal bit of wisdom with

diverse metaphors. In translation, one would render the meaning rather than the literal animals: if translating the English into Russian, better to use the rabbit proverb or an explanatory line, because a literal mention of cake in Russian wouldn't evoke the idiom (though interestingly, modern Russian has borrowed the cake idiom due to globalization of English media, but historically it didn't exist). The variety of images also highlights how each culture picks an analogy relevant to its life: rabbits in a hunting culture, sheep in a pastoral one, cake in a perhaps more urban/consumption context.

Cultural Symbol Metaphors: Some metaphors hinge on symbols deeply entrenched in one culture's mythology or history. For example, Chinese uses the dragon as a positive figure (power, prosperity), whereas in Western tradition dragons were fearsome and negative. Thus a Chinese idiom "hoping for the dragon's blessing" as a figurative expression of ambition would not translate well into English, where dragons don't play the same cognitive role. Translators either must find a different metaphor or add explanation. Similarly, English has idioms from Greek/Roman mythology (like "Achilles' heel" for a fatal weakness); these have become international to some extent, but where they aren't known, one might translate the underlying meaning ("Achilles' heel" > "major weakness"). This case underscores that what is figurative in one culture might become essentially a non-figurative term in another if the story isn't known – it loses its metaphorical resonance and just becomes opaque words.

Structural Differences: Sometimes an idiom is perfectly translatable conceptually, but grammatical or structural differences make it tricky. English idioms often use a particular verb-noun combination that might not exist in another language. For example, English says "take a nap," which is idiomatic in that "take" doesn't literally mean to grab but to engage in an activity. Spanish says "echar una siesta" (throw a nap). The concept of a short sleep is universal, but the support verb differs (take vs. throw). In translating, one must adjust the verb to fit collocational norms. This is a simpler kind of figurative translation issue – not a deep cultural gap, but a collocation difference. Yet, if translated too literally ("tomar una siesta" into Spanish), it would sound odd because Spanish doesn't say "take" for naps. This reminds us that beyond big metaphors, even small figurative phrasal patterns require sensitivity to each language's way of phrasing events.

The above analyses reinforce key themes: many figurative expressions are pointing to human-common experiences (eating, sleeping, animals, money, family), giving an illusion of universality. But each language filters these experiences through its own cultural lens, lexical conventions, and historical usage. When languages coincide in figurative expression, it often eases communication (sometimes even leading to loan

translations, where one language adopts another's idiom – e.g., many European languages now say “time is money” directly due to English influence). When they don't coincide, we encounter untranslatability, which calls for creativity and deep cultural knowledge to overcome.

Conclusion

Figurative expressions vividly illustrate both the unity and diversity of human thought. On one hand, we find that people around the world often fall back on similar metaphors to make sense of their experiences – our bodies, the natural world, and shared social practices give rise to metaphorical themes that transcend linguistic boundaries. This cultural universality means that many idioms and metaphors are understandable across cultures at a conceptual level. Recognizing such universal metaphors (like journeys for life, light for knowledge, up for positive emotions) can foster empathy and smoother communication: we realize that despite speaking different languages, we often “think” in parallel images.

On the other hand, this study affirms that figurative language is also a repository of a culture's unique heritage. The untranslatable aspects of idioms – the peculiar images, the historical anecdotes, the puns – highlight how languages encapsulate what is singular to a community's experience. When an idiom makes no sense outside its home culture, it is a sign that we are touching something deeply local. For instance, an English speaker might learn that “to set the Thames on fire” (meaning to achieve something remarkable) cannot be rendered word-for-word in another language; such an expression is tied to English geography and history. To communicate the idea elsewhere, one must detach it from its English trappings and find an equivalent effect in the target culture, or explain it. This necessity is not a failure of language, but a reminder of cultural richness – each language has many gems that do not have exact analogs in others.

Implications for translation and intercultural communication are significant. Translators must be, in a sense, cultural diplomats, aware of both universal human commonalities and the particularities of each culture's figurative modes. As our examples showed, a good translator will replace “raining cats and dogs” with “pouring buckets” (or some native idiom for heavy rain) in another language, because they know the literal image of pets falling from the sky fails outside English. In teaching languages, highlighting idioms that match and differ can be a fruitful way to engage learners: they learn the target language's worldview along with its vocabulary. It can also inoculate them against “word-for-word” translation errors by demonstrating how meaning can be carried in entirely different words.

There is also a deeper humanistic message: figurative language encapsulates how a culture thinks metaphorically. By studying which metaphors are universal, we learn about shared human psychology (for example, nearly everyone fears, and fear is often cold or dark). By studying which metaphors are culture-bound, we learn about that culture's environment and values (for example, seafaring nations have nautical idioms, agrarian societies have farming idioms). Thus, exploring figurative universality and untranslatability is not just a linguistic exercise but an anthropological and cognitive one. It shows us the map of human experience – where it converges and where it diverges.

In conclusion, figurative expressions are a testament to both the common threads of human life and the rich tapestry of cultural diversity. Recognizing the universal metaphors can serve as “bridging concepts” across cultures, easing understanding. At the same time, respecting untranslatability – by finding creative translation solutions or explaining the cultural context – is crucial to preserving the integrity and flavor of the original expression. The idiom “lost in translation” encapsulates the risk we face, but as this paper suggests, with awareness and skill, much can be found in translation as well – namely, an appreciation of our shared imaginative capacities and our distinct cultural voices in figurative language.

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