umbrella of ‘relying on the context to disambiguate meanings’, which, among other
things, means using our knowledge of collocational patterns to decode the meaning
of a word or a stretch of language. Using our knowledge of collocational patterns
may not always tell us what an idiom means, but it could easily help us in many cases
to recognize an idiom, particularly one which has a literal as well as a non-literal
meaning.

3.2.3 The translation of idioms: difficulties

Once an idiom or fixed expression has been recognized and interpreted correctly,
the next step is to decide how to translate it into the target language. The difficulties
involved in translating an idiom are totally different from those involved in interpreting
it. Here, the question is not whether a given idiom is transparent, opaque or
misleading. An opaque expression may be easier to translate than a transparent
one. The main difficulties involved in translating idioms and fixed expressions may be
summarized as follows:

(a) An idiom or fixed expression may have no equivalent in the target language. The
way a language chooses to express, or not express, various meanings cannot be
predicted and only occasionally matches the way another language chooses to express
the same meanings. One language may express a given meaning by means of a single
word, another may express it by means of a transparent fixed expression, a third may
express it by means of an idiom and so on. It is therefore unrealistic to expect to fi nd
equivalent idioms and expressions in the target language as a matter of course.

Like single words, idioms and fixed expressions may be culture-specifi c. Formulae such as Merry Christmas and say when which relate to specific social or
religious occasions provide good examples. Bassnett-McGuire (1980:21) explains
that the expression say when is ‘directly linked to English social behavioural patterns’
and suggests that ‘the translator putting the phrase into French or German has to
contend with the problem of the non-existence of a similar convention in either TL
culture’. Less problematic, but to some extent also culture-specifi c, are the sort of
fixed formulae that are used in formal correspondence, such as Yours faithfully and
Yours sincerely in English. These, for instance, have no equivalents in Arabic fi
mial correspondence. Instead, an expression such as wa tafadalu biqbuul fa’iq al-ihtiraam
(literally: ‘and be kind enough to accept [our] highest respects’) is often used, but it
bears no direct relationship to Yours faithfully or Yours sincerely. The same mismatch
occurs in relation to French and several other languages.

Idioms and fixed expressions which contain culture-specific items are not neces-
sarily untranslatable. It is not the specific items an expression contains but rather the
meaning it conveys and its association with culture-specific contexts which can
make it untranslatable or difficult to translate. For example, the English expression
to carry coals to Newcastle, though culture-specific in the sense that it contains a
reference to Newcastle coal and uses it as a measure of abundance, is nevertheless
closely paralleled in German by Eulen nach Athen tragen (‘to carry owls to Athens’).
Both expressions convey the same meaning, namely: to supply something to someone who already has plenty of it (Grauberg 1989). In French, the same meaning can be rendered by the expression *porter de l’eau à la rivière* ‘to carry water to the river’. Palmer (1976) explains that in Welsh it rains ‘old women and sticks’ rather than ‘cats and dogs’, and yet to most intents and purposes both expressions mean the same thing.

(b) An idiom or fixed expression may have a similar counterpart in the target language, but its context of use may be different; the two expressions may have different connotations, for instance, or they may not be pragmatically transferable. *To sing a different tune* is an English idiom which means to say or do something that signals a change in opinion because it contradicts what one has said or done before. In Chinese, *chang-dui-tai-xi* (‘to sing different tunes/to sing a duet’) also normally refers to contradictory points of view, but has quite a different usage. It has strong political connotations and, in certain contexts, can be interpreted as expressing complementary rather than contradictory points of view.7 *To go to the dogs* (‘to lose one’s good qualities’) has a similar counterpart in German, but whereas the English idiom can be used in connection with a person or a place, its German counterpart can only be used in connection with a person and often means to die or perish. Fernando and Flavell (1981) compare *to skate on thin ice* (‘to act unwisely or court danger voluntarily’) with a similar Serbian expression: *navuci nekoga na tanak led* (‘to pull someone onto the thin ice’). The Serbian idiom differs from the English one in that it implies forcing someone into a dangerous position. Though similar in meaning, the contexts in which the two idioms can be used are obviously different.

(c) An idiom may be used in the source text in both its literal and idiomatic senses at the same time (see 3.2.2 (a) above). Unless the target-language idiom corresponds to the source-language idiom both in form and in meaning, the play on idiom cannot be successfully reproduced in the target text. The following extract is from a passage which constituted part of the British Translators’ Guild Intermediate Examinations for all languages (1986).

In creating Lord Peter Wimsey, Dorothy L Sayers demonstrated all the advantages of the amateur private eye. As a wealthy dilettante he was able to pursue the clues without the boring necessity of earning a living. His title as the younger son of a duke pandered to reader snobbery and to the obsessive fascination of some readers with the lifestyle of the aristocracy, or with what they imagined that lifestyle to be. He had sufficient influence to be able to poke his nose into the private affairs of others where less aristocratic noses might have been speedily bloodied.

The above play on idiom can only be reproduced in languages such as French or German which happen to have an identical idiom, or at least an idiom which refers to interfering in other people’s affairs and which has the equivalent of *nose* in it.
Another example comes from _Arab Political Humour_ by Kishtainy (1985). Although this book was originally written in English, the writer quotes jokes and anecdotes of Arab origin, so that English is in fact the target language here. The following joke emerged after the defeat of the Arab forces in 1967, which resulted in the annexation of Arab territory by Israel:

Egypt’s Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal Amin, was horrified to see President Nasser ordering a tattoo artist to print on his right arm the names of all the territories seized by Israel like Sinai, Gaza, Sharm al-Shaykh, Jerusalem, the Golan Heights.

‘Why are you doing this?’
‘Lest I should forget them.’
‘But why tattooed? What will you do if we get them back?’
‘If we get them back _I'll cut off my right arm._’

(Kishtainy 1985:157–158; my emphasis)

Unless you are an Arab speaker, you will find it difficult to appreciate the humour of the above passage, which relies totally on the manipulation of literal and idiomatic meanings. To cut off one’s arm, or cut off one’s right arm for emphasis, is an idiom which is similar in meaning to _pigs might fly_ in English. It means that something is impossible or at least highly unlikely to happen. Neither this English expression nor any other English idiom with a similar meaning can be used to replace ‘I’ll cut off my right arm’ in the above passage, because the literal meaning of the Arabic expression is as important as its idiomatic meaning in this context. The literal translation that the author gives above is just as ineffective since the non-Arab reader has no access to the idiomatic meaning. This book was translated into Arabic by Al-Yaziji in 1988 and, not surprisingly, the jokes work much better in the Arabic version.

It is also possible, and with more recent technological developments increasingly common, to produce plays on idiom by drawing on the visual and verbal channels simultaneously. Chaume Varela (1997:323) discusses an example from Quentin Tarantino’s _Pulp Fiction_, where the following exchange takes place:

Vincent: Come on, Mia. Let’s go get a steak.
Mia: You can get a steak here, daddy-o. Don’t be a …
(Mia draws a square with her hands. Dotted lines appear on the screen, forming a square. The lines disperse.)

Used idiomatically, as part of expressions such as ‘don’t be square’ and ‘you’re so square’, _square_ means ‘old-fashioned’, ‘boring’. Mia plays on both meanings, the literal and the idiomatic, but uses a combination of verbal and visual channels to communicate her message. According to Chaume Varela (ibid.), the Spanish dubbed version of the film adopts the following solution (back-translation added; italics in original):
Vincent: Vayamos a comernos un filete.
Mia: Puedes comerte uno aquí, colega. No me seas …

Back-translation:
Vincent: Let’s go and grab a steak.
Mia: You can eat one here, mate. Don’t be …

A better solution for Mia’s line, Chaume Varela argues, would have been ‘Puedes comerte uno aquí, mente cuadriculada’ (lit.: You can eat one here, grid-mapped/square mind). Someone who is described as ‘mente cuadriculada’ in Spanish is understood to be very rigid and unwilling to accommodate other people’s suggestions – a meaning that overlaps to some extent with ‘old-fashioned’ and ‘boring’ as signalled by square in English.8 The play on idiom can be reproduced in this instance, but not without some shift in meaning.

This type of verbal-cum-visual play on idioms is not restricted to multimodal environments such as film, web pages and television advertisements. In Figure 5, the title of an article which appeared in New Scientist on 5 February 2000 (p. 41) makes use of the same strategy. It plays on the idiomatic meaning of ‘It’s a funny old world’, an expression normally used when something doesn’t make sense, when some aspect of the world seems strange and incomprehensible, or when we wish to communicate, more graphically, that ‘the world is upside down’, as it were.

Figure 5  Title of article in New Scientist
(d) The very convention of using idioms in written discourse, the contexts in which they can be used, and their frequency of use may be different in the source and target languages. English uses idioms in many types of text, even in serious, international magazines such as *New Scientist* (see Figure 5), and especially frequently in advertisements, promotional material and the tabloid press. The following example from a glossy brochure released in 1989 by the former car manufacturer Austin Rover illustrates the heavy use of idioms in this type of English written discourse. The whole passage is highly idiomatic and very informal in style. The main idioms are highlighted in bold:

METRO
Your own sense of style is all your own. Brilliant. Colourful. Original.
With loads of **get up and go**.
There’s a car **after your own heart**. The new 1989 Metro. Sporty new models which look great – and **don’t hang around**. A new range. With vivid new colours and trim. Full of fresh ideas. Luxurious. And wickedly stylish. **Get going** in the new Metro GTA. Where else would you find 73PS performance, alloy wheels and looks like that – at such a price?
Or **show what you’re made of** at the wheel of the new Metro Sport. It’s got style. And a performance engine that says **it’s a lot more than just a pretty face**.
Fancy something really special in the sports luxury department? With a sunroof, central locking, tinted glass and a lot more, the new Metro 1.3GS is **just the ticket**. And so is the price.

*(Today’s Cars, Austin Rover, 1989)*

Using idioms in English is thus very much a matter of style. Languages such as Arabic and Chinese, which draw a sharp distinction between written and spoken discourse and where the written mode is associated with a high level of formality, tend, on the whole, to avoid using idioms in written texts. Fernando and Flavell (1981:85) discuss the difference in rhetorical effect of using idioms in general and of using specific types of idiom in the source and target languages and quite rightly conclude that ‘[t]ranslation is an exacting art. Idiom more than any other feature of language demands that the translator be not only accurate but highly sensitive to the rhetorical nuances of the language.’

### 3.2.4 The translation of idioms: strategies

The way in which an idiom or a fixed expression can be translated into another language depends on many factors. It is not only a question of whether an idiom with a similar meaning is available in the target language. Other factors include, for example, the significance of the specific lexical items which constitute the idiom, that is whether they are manipulated elsewhere in the source text, whether verbally
or visually, as well as the appropriateness or inappropriateness of using idiomatic language in a given register in the target language. The acceptability or non-acceptability of using any of the strategies described below will therefore depend on the context in which a given idiom is translated. The first strategy described, that of finding an idiom of similar meaning and similar form in the target language, may seem to offer the ideal solution, but that is not necessarily always the case. Questions of style, register and rhetorical effect must also be taken into consideration. Fernando and Flavell are correct in warning us against the ‘strong unconscious urge in most translators to search hard for an idiom in the receptor-language, however inappropriate it may be’ (1981:82).

(a) Using an idiom of similar meaning and form

This strategy involves using an idiom in the target language which conveys roughly the same meaning as that of the source-language idiom and, in addition, consists of equivalent lexical items. This kind of match can only occasionally be achieved.

**Example A**

Source text (*A Hero from Zero*, Lonrho:21):

The Sultan’s magnificent income was distributed impulsively at his command. The rain fell on the just and on the unjust.

Target text (French, p. 21):

Le revenue fabuleux du Sultan était distribué sur un simple ordre de sa part. La pluie tombait aussi bien sur les justes que sur les injustes.

The fantastic income of the Sultan was distributed on a simple order on his part. The rain was falling on the just as well as on the unjust.

**Example B**

Source text (*Language and Society* (1985), 16:7):

Five days into what would be the final clash, Pawley tried to force Speaker Jim Walding’s hand into calling a vote with or without the Tories.
Target text (French, p. 7):

Au cinquième jour de ce qui allait se révéler l’affrontement final, M. Pawley tenta de forcer la main au président de la chambre Jim Walding pour qu’il décrète une mise aux voix, avec ou sans la participation des conservateurs.

On the fifth day of what was going to prove to be the final confrontation, Mr. Pawley tried to force the hand of the president of the Chamber, Jim Walding, to declare a placement of the vote, with or without the participation of the conservatives.

Example C
Source text (A Hero from Zero, Lonrho:85):

The Fayeds have turned the pre-bid House of Fraser strategy on its head.

Target text (Arabic, p. 94):

والذا يكون الأخوة فايد قد قلبوا استراتيجية هاوس أوف فريزر السابقة على عرض الإملاك، رأسا على عقب.

And with this the Fayed brothers have turned the strategy of the House of Fraser previous to the offer of ownership head over heel.

The Arabic expression, which means ‘upside down’, is similar in form only to another English idiom, head over heels, meaning ‘very much in love’.

Example D
Source text (Masters of the Universe):

Perhaps Granamyr wanted to show us that things aren’t always what they seem.
Target text (French):

Peut-être Granamyr voulait-il nous montrer que les choses ne sont pas toujours ce qu’elles paraissent.

Perhaps Granamyr wanted to show us that things are not always what they seem.

(b) Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form

It is often possible to find an idiom or fixed expression in the target language which has a meaning similar to that of the source idiom or expression, but which consists of different lexical items. For example, the English expression One good turn deserves another and the French expression À beau jeu, beau retour (‘a handsome action deserves a handsome return’) use different lexical items to express more or less the same idea (Fernando and Flavell 1981).

Example A
Source text (China’s Panda Reserves):

The serow, a type of wild mountain goat, is very much at home among the rocky outcrops of Sichuan.

Target text (Chinese):

喜马拉雅山羚羊，是野生山羊的一种，在四川的多岩断层露头之间十分自在。

The serow, a type of wild mountain goat, is totally at ease in Sichuan’s many rocky levels.

The Chinese idiom used to replace very much at home is shi fen zi zai. It consists of a measure word based on a ten-point scale, plus ‘self at ease’. The measure word means ‘100 per cent’, but the scale used is out of 10 rather than out of 100.

Example B
Source text (Masters of the Universe):

Feel the force of my fist, frozen fiend!
Target text (German):

Dir werde ich einheizen, du Scheusal!

I will make things hot for you, monster!

The above statement is addressed to an ice monster. The German expression *Dir werde ich einheizen* means literally, or as near literally as possible, ‘I will put the heating on to you’.

(c) Borrowing the source language idiom

Just as the use of loan words is a common strategy in dealing with culture-specific items (see Chapter 2), it is not unusual for idioms to be borrowed in their original form in some contexts. In Figure 6, taken from a promotional leaflet available to visitors to the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester (UK), *Out of this World* refers to a space gallery that is signposted as such throughout the Museum. It is of course a play on the idiomatic meaning of *out of this world* (‘fantastic’, ‘superb’), and the more concrete meaning of ‘from another galaxy, beyond the earth environment’, referring to what a visitor might expect to see in a space gallery.

Figure 6 Original version of Manchester Museum of Science and Industry leaflet
All versions of this promotional leaflet (French, Italian, Spanish, German and Japanese) retain the idiom/name of the space gallery in English, in the image as well as the main text (see Figures 7–11).

(d) Translation by paraphrase

This is by far the most common way of translating idioms when a match cannot be found in the target language or when it seems inappropriate to use idiomatic language in the target text because of differences in stylistic preferences of the source and target languages. You may or may not find the paraphrases accurate; the examples below are quoted as they appear in the original documents to illustrate the strategy of paraphrase rather than to explain the meanings of individual idioms.
Example A
Source text (Austin Montego – car brochure):

The suspension system has been fully uprated to take rough terrain in its stride.

Target text (Arabic):

ونق رفعت طاقة نظام التعليق بحيث يتغلب على وعورة الأرض.

The capacity of the suspension system has been raised so as to overcome the roughness of the terrain.

Example B
Source text (Language and Society (1985), 15:22):

Programmes to teach heritage languages to ethnic youngsters in upper elementary or high school are all quite laudable, but if it is merely a question of trying to reinforce or replant first language competence already lost for all practical purposes, then this is rather like shutting the stable door when the horse has bolted.
Target text (French, pp. 22–23):

Ces cours, qui seraient dispensés dans les dernières classes de l’élémentaire ou au secondaire constituent certes une initiative louable; mais c’est peut-être trop peu trop tard, car dans bien des cas ces jeunes n’ont plus qu’un vague souvenir de leur langue ancestrale.

These courses, which would be given in the last classes of elementary or to the secondary, certainly constitute a laudable initiative; but it is perhaps too little too late, because in a good many cases these youngsters have no more than a vague memory of their ancestral language.

Example C
Source text (A Hero from Zero, Lonrho:iii):

Lonrho’s directors then agreed not to bid without the prior permission of the Department of Trade. We were to regret signing that undertaking, and I do not think that any public company should agree to open-ended ad hoc restraints of this kind. It was subsequently used by Norman Tebbit, as Secretary of State at the Department of Trade and Industry, to unfairly restrain a Lonrho bid while he pushed another pony past the post.

Target text 1 (French, p. iii):

… Cela fut, par la suite, utilisé par Norman Tebbit, alors ministre du Commerce et de l’Industrie, afin de repousser injustement une offre de Lonrho et dans le même temps favoriser un autre candidat.

… This was used afterwards by Norman Tebbit, then minister of Commerce and Industry, in order to reject unfairly an offer from Lonrho and at the same time to favour another candidate.

Target text 2 (Arabic, p. 9):

وقد استغل هذا التعهده فيما بعد من قبل نورمان تيبيت باعتباره وزيرًا للتجارة والصناعة، حين أعاد دون عدل عرض لونرو بينما أعاد متسابقًا آخر على إنهاء السباق.
… This undertaking was later exploited by Norman Tebbit in his capacity as Minister of Trade and Industry when he unjustly restrained Lonrho’s offer while helping another competitor to reach the end of the race.

Example D
Source text (Language and Society (1985), 16:4):

One frequent criticism of the Manitoba Government throughout the language controversy was that it never seemed to get a handle on the issue.

Target text (French, p. 4):

Tout au long de la controverse linguistique, on reprocha fréquemment au gouvernement du Manitoba de ne pas réussir, selon toute apparence, à maîtriser la situation.

For the whole length of the linguistic controversy, the government of Manitoba was reproached frequently for not succeeding, by all appearances, in mastering the situation.

Example E
Source text (Saving China’s Tropical Paradise – World Wide Fund for Nature text which accompanied a slide show):

Best news of all is the decision to develop a system of five nature reserves totalling 2000 sq.kms. where representative examples of the region’s unique ecosystems will be protected for the future.

Target text (Chinese):

最好的消息是决定发展一个由五个自然保护区组成的共2000平方公里面积的体系。在这一体系中该区独特生态系统中有代表性的动植物得到保护。
The best news is a decision to develop a system of 2000 sq.kms. consisting of five reserves. In such a system representative animal and plant species within the unique ecosystem of this area will be protected.

‘The best news is’ does not have the status of a fixed expression in Chinese. Although it looks very similar in back-translation to Best news of all, it is just a paraphrase of the English expression.

(e) Translation by omission of a play on idiom

This strategy involves rendering only the literal meaning of an idiom in a context that allows for a concrete reading of an otherwise playful use of language. The example in Figure 12 comes from a promotional leaflet handed out to visitors at the Wedgwood factory and exhibition – home of the famous British brand of pottery and ornamental china, in Stoke-on-Trent, UK.

Something that comes or is handed on a plate is made easy to acquire. The English text plays on the idiomatic meaning of the expression as well as the concrete meaning of plate, which is particularly salient here given that Wedgwood are famous for producing crockery. This play on idiom is very difficult to reproduce in other languages. The Japanese translation (Figure 13) opts for sacrificing the idiomatic meaning in this instance.

Figure 12  Original version of Wedgwood leaflet
The caption in Japanese literally reads: ‘The craft of famous people has been continually poured for centuries into a single plate’.

(f) Translation by omission of entire idiom

As with single words, an idiom may sometimes be omitted altogether in the target text. This may be because it has no close match in the target language, its meaning cannot be easily paraphrased, or for stylistic reasons. Here is an example from A Hero from Zero (p. vi):

It was bitter, but funny, to see that Professor Smith had doubled his own salary before recommending the offer from Fayed, and added a pre-dated bonus for good measure.

Target text (Arabic, p. 12):

وكان من المؤسف، بل ومن المضحك، أن يتمكن البروفسور سميث من مضاعفة راتبه مرتين قبل أن يتقدم بتصويته لقبول عرض فايد، وأن يضيف إلى ذلك مكافأة يحدد سلفاً موعد حصوله عليها.

It was regrettable, even funny, that Professor Smith had been able to double his salary twice before offering his recommendation to accept Fayed’s offer, and that he added to this a bonus, the date of which had been previously decided on.
One strategy which cannot be adequately illustrated, simply because it would take up a considerable amount of space, is the strategy of compensation. Briefly, this means that one may either omit or play down a feature such as idiomaticity at the point where it occurs in the source text and introduce it elsewhere in the target text. This strategy is not restricted to idiomaticity or fixed expressions and may be used to make up for any loss of meaning, emotional force or stylistic effect which may not be possible to reproduce directly at a given point in the target text. Mason (1982:29) explains that, because they were unable to translate specific puns at the points at which they occurred in the text, the translators of Astérix 'have sometimes resorted to inserting English puns (of equivalent impact rather than equivalent meaning) in different frames of the cartoon'. For a detailed discussion of compensation as a translation strategy, see Harvey (1995, 1998).

Using the typical phraseology of the target language – its natural collocations, its own fixed and semi-fixed expressions, the right level of idiomaticity, and so on – will greatly enhance the readability of your translations. Getting this level right means that you will avoid unintentionally producing a text that feels ‘foreign’. But naturalness and readability are also affected by other linguistic features, and these will be discussed at various points in the following chapters.

1. Choose one English word and find its first dictionary equivalent in your target language. Make a list of some common collocations of the English word. Make an independent list of the most typical collocations of your target-language equivalent. Compare the two lists and comment on the differences and similarities in the collocational patterning of the two items.

2. Make a list of some common collocations of an English word of your choice.
   (a) Suggest some common collocations in your target language which convey similar meanings to those of the English collocations. Comment on any difference in meaning.
   (b) If there are no common collocations in your target language which express meanings similar to those conveyed by the English collocations, suggest circumlocutions which can be used either as paraphrases or footnotes to convey the meanings of the English collocations in question (if necessary) to a target reader.

3. Make a list of some English idioms with which you are familiar and which have close counterparts in your target language. Comment on any differences in meaning, form or context of use between each English idiom and its ‘equivalent’ in your target language.

4. Make a list of some common English expressions or idioms that you feel would be difficult to translate into your target language, for example because they relate to specific English habits or social occasions. Try, to