

Strategies for Translating English-Vietnamese Weather-Related Idioms: A Focus on Cultural Equivalence

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Abstract—Translation is inherently a process of cultural transfer, requiring the translator to navigate not only linguistic barriers but also the conceptual gaps between source and target languages. Idioms, particularly those derived from natural phenomena like weather, present significant challenges due to their culturally specific nature. This study examines translation strategies for English-Vietnamese weather-related idioms, applying the framework of functional equivalence and the decision-making process in translation. By analyzing a corpus of weather-related idiomatic expressions, this research classifies translation strategies into formal correspondence, functional equivalence and adaptation. The findings suggest that when literal translation fails to achieve semantic and pragmatic equivalence, translators must act as decision-makers - choosing strategies that prioritize naturalness and cultural relevance over structural rigidity. This paper aims to provide a practical guide for translators to navigate the complexities of idiomatic translation while maintaining the target language's stylistic integrity.

Keywords— Translation Strategies, Cultural Equivalence, Weather Idioms, Functional Equivalence, English-Vietnamese Translation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Translation has historically served as a critical bridge in human progress, facilitating the exchange of language and culture. As Roman Jakobson aptly noted, languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey rather than in what they *can* convey. Within this context, idioms function as complex linguistic units that reflect the unique thought patterns and environmental experiences of a speech community. Weather-related idioms, in particular, are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of a society, posing substantial difficulties for translators.

The challenge lies in achieving what scholars define as "equivalence," a core, albeit debated, concept in translation studies. As proposed by Nida (1969) and Halliday (1992), translation is not a mere reproduction of words but a process of creating meaning that functions effectively within the target context. When translating idioms from English to Vietnamese, the translator faces the tension between *formal correspondence* (trying to keep the original structure) and *dynamic equivalence* (trying to keep the original impact).

This article investigates the strategies employed when translating weather-related idioms, analyzing whether the "universalist" view of shared human concepts or the "relativist" view of language-specific differences dominates these expressions. By identifying effective strategies -ranging

from literal translation to creative adaptation - this study seeks to illuminate the translator's role as a creative decision-maker, ensuring that the translated text is not merely a linguistic replica but a functional equivalent.

1.1. Background

Translation has played a pivotal role throughout human history, functioning as a vital bridge wherever cultural and linguistic intersection occurs. Beyond mere linguistic transfer, translation actively transforms society, thereby contributing to the formation of individual identity and cultural heritage. Although reflection on translation has accumulated over centuries, the academic discipline of "translation studies" remains a relatively young and complex field that integrates linguistics, literature, and social sciences. In the modern era, the significance of translation lies not only in professional practice but also in its capacity to facilitate deeper understanding between different linguistic and cultural systems.

1.2. Problem Statement

Despite its importance, translation remains fraught with challenges, particularly when dealing with idioms. As noted by scholars, the core concept of "equivalence" - the fundamental requirement of translation—remains a persistent subject of debate in the field. Translators often struggle with "translation difficulty," a phenomenon arising from the cultural and semantic gaps between languages. Weather-related idioms exemplify this complexity; while weather is a universal human experience, the metaphors and conceptual frameworks used to describe it are often deeply rooted in the specific worldview of each language.

The problem is exacerbated by the "relative" nature of concepts; different languages do not always possess specific correlations for complex expressions. For instance, a translator must decide whether to adhere to the source text's structure or to prioritize the cultural "naturalness" of the target language. Because translation is essentially a process of "meaning creation" and decision-making, failing to navigate these semantic and cultural disparities can result in translations that feel artificial or lose their intended impact.

1.3. Objectives

This study aims to analyze effective translation strategies for English-Vietnamese weather-related idioms, with a focus

on achieving cultural equivalence. The research objectives are as follows:

- To evaluate the application of "formal correspondence" versus "dynamic equivalence" when translating weather-related metaphors, as these serve as essential theoretical frameworks for translation practice.
- To provide a practical approach to the translator's decision-making process, ensuring that the translated output maintains logical coherence and functional significance in the target language.

1.4. Significance

This study's significance stems from its contribution to both translation theory and pedagogical techniques. By examining the linguistic and cultural discrepancies between English and Vietnamese, this study intends to provide readers with a framework to build their own "thinking structure" for better understanding both the source and target languages. Furthermore, this analysis serves as a guiding "signpost," encouraging aspiring translators to move beyond rigid, literal translations and instead develop a nuanced approach to capturing the essence, content, and cultural depth of a text. Ultimately, this research provides a foundation for students and independent researchers to explore text and language, serving as a steppingstone for the continuous development of translation skills.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Concept of Equivalence: Universalism vs. Relativity in Translation

The concept of "equivalence" remains the most critical, yet contentious, issue in translation studies. The debate is largely framed by two opposing cognitive stances: the universality of concepts, proposed by Noam Chomsky, and the relativity of concepts, advocated by George Steiner. Chomskyan universalism posits that because all humans share a similar brain structure, deep structural similarities exist across all languages, rendering translation theoretically possible through these shared deep structures. Conversely, Steiner, in *After Babel*, rejects this view, arguing that language is inherently relative and that different languages often lack specific correlations. This fundamental divide has led to a schism among theorists, with some rejecting equivalence entirely and others, such as Baker and Kenny, viewing it as an essential framework for translation practice. Despite these disagreements, equivalence persists as a necessary requirement for translation, as translation is, at its core, a form of communication where the target text must relate back to the source text.

2.2. Functional Semantics: Halliday's View on "Meaning Creation" and the Importance of Context

M.A.K. Halliday (1992) posits that the primary function of translation is the realization of a process he calls "meaning creation," without which translation cannot exist. Halliday argues that for a linguistic theory to be relevant to translation, it must prioritize functional semantics, where "function" is the fundamental organizing concept around which all human

language has evolved. Crucially, Halliday asserts that absolute semantic equivalence between any two languages is impossible; instead, translators should seek the "equivalence of function in context". According to this model, a translator must identify the most appropriate equivalent from among various potential variants, based on the specific contextual conditions of the target text. Thus, linguistics provides not a theory of equivalence, but a "theory of context" that allows the translator to navigate hierarchical linguistic components - from morphemes to clauses - to select the most accurate meaning within a specific setting.

2.3. Translation as a Decision-Making Process: Levý's Framework for Choosing the Best Equivalent Based on Situational Constraints

Jirí Levý (1967) reframes translation as a "process of decision making," a perspective that offers a highly practical approach for translators by highlighting the agentive role they play in selecting the most appropriate level of equivalence. Levý's framework is composed of three integral steps: Situation: Recognizing the lexical mapping, where the source language may offer a unique unit that requires a choice between two or more equivalents in the target language. Instruction I: Identifying the classes of potential vocabulary choices, such as selecting between "positive" or "negative" registers for a given word.

Instruction II: Making the final selection based on the specific context. This framework is significant because it moves beyond abstract theory, acknowledging that translation requires the translator to actively weigh alternatives and make informed choices to achieve the best possible target-language output.

2.4. Idioms and Metaphors: Characteristics of "Dead Metaphors" vs. Living Cultural Symbols

The translation of metaphors and idioms requires a distinct approach that acknowledges their role beyond mere literary decoration. Peter Newmark (1988) posits that the scope of metaphor encompasses various figurative expressions, including idioms, proverbs, and personifications, serving two primary functions: referential and aesthetic. The perception of these devices was further expanded in the 1980s by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who moved metaphors from a purely literary tool to a central component of human conceptualization.

A critical distinction must be made between "dead metaphors" (or "stale metaphors") and living cultural symbols. Dead metaphors are those that have become so embedded in everyday language such as "your argument is not sound" that speakers often cease to recognize them as metaphors at all. According to Lakoff (1987), such metaphors have lost their original "spice," and thus, translators need not prioritize them over the naturalness of the target text. In contrast, living cultural symbols, which are often deeply tied to historical or religious references, require rigorous negotiation, as they are not easily translated and may fail to convey the original meaning if rendered literally.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, contrastive analysis design to examine the translation of English and Vietnamese weather-related idioms. The research is grounded in the necessity of cross-linguistic comparison, as translation is deemed impossible without identifying both similarities and differences between languages. By systematically contrasting the linguistic structures of English and Vietnamese, this study aims to isolate the points where cultural and semantic friction occurs, thereby providing a clear basis for evaluating translation choices. This design is consistent with the view that while languages may share deep structures, they often reflect distinct "thought patterns" that necessitate a comparative approach to fully grasp the complexities of meaning transfer.

3.2. Data Collection

The corpus for this research is purposively selected from authoritative idiomatic dictionaries and representative literary works. This dual-source approach ensures a balance between standard linguistic definitions and the expressive use of language in context. The data collection focuses on selecting English weather-related idioms and their corresponding renderings in Vietnamese translations, including works that demonstrate varying degrees of cultural adaptation. The research examines the chosen idioms within their actual communicative functions rather than in isolation by using literary materials, which are multifaceted products of several variables, including cultural and social context.

3.3. Analytical Criteria

The analysis is guided by the core translation criteria established in the theoretical framework, specifically the dichotomy between "formal correspondence" and "dynamic equivalence" as developed by Eugene Nida. Each translated idiom is evaluated based on the following criteria:

Formal Correspondence: Assessing whether the translation attempts to reproduce the original lexical and grammatical structure of the source text.

Dynamic Equivalence: Determining whether the translation successfully reconstructs the target reader's subjective perception, ensuring naturalness and cultural compatibility in the target language.

Decision-Making Process: Following the framework suggested by Levý, the analysis examines the translator's "situational" choices, evaluating how the translator navigates the constraints of the source text to select the most appropriate equivalent based on the specific context and the target audience's needs.

This analytical framework ensures that the translation choices are assessed not merely by their literal accuracy, but by their effectiveness in maintaining the functional and aesthetic integrity of the idiom within the Vietnamese cultural context.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section analyzes the collected corpus of weather-related idioms, evaluating them through the lenses of formal correspondence, functional equivalence, and cultural adaptation. Translation is fundamentally a process of "meaning creation"; if this process is not executed with contextual awareness, the essence of the source text is lost. The following analysis demonstrates that translation strategies for idioms are rarely binary; rather, they exist on a continuum shaped by the translator's decision-making process.

To ensure a rigorous analysis, the collected corpus of weather-related idioms has been categorized into three distinct groups based on their linguistic and cultural alignment, as illustrated in the following sections. This tripartite framework facilitates a deeper evaluation of the specific translation strategies necessitated by each idiom's inherent cultural and semantic properties:

Group 1 (Formal Correspondence): Idioms exhibiting a high degree of linguistic and conceptual overlap.

Group 2 (Functional Equivalence): Idioms where the semantic meaning is preserved, but the figurative imagery differs significantly.

Group 3 (Cultural Adaptation): Idioms where the cultural gap is substantial, necessitating descriptive translation or creative adaptation.

4.1. Analysis of Formal Correspondence (Group 1)

Group 1 consists of idioms where the imagery of the source language (English) is directly transferable to the target language (Vietnamese). These idioms typically reflect universal human experiences with nature, aligning with the "universalist" view of language, which suggests that human beings share a common cognitive structure.

TABLE 1: Formal Correspondence Analysis of Weather Idioms

No	Source Idiom	Target Idiom	Rationale
1	<i>As cold as ice</i>	<i>Lạnh như băng</i>	Shared physical sensation
2	<i>As clear as day</i>	<i>Rõ như ban ngày</i>	Universal light-perception
3	<i>As hot as fire</i>	<i>Nóng như lửa</i>	Universal physical sensation
4	<i>As deep as the sea</i>	<i>Sâu như biển</i>	Shared metaphorical depth
5	<i>As fast as lightning</i>	<i>Nhanh như chớp</i>	Shared cognitive experience
6	<i>The calm before the storm</i>	<i>Sóng lặng trước cơn bão</i>	Universal nature-based imagery

In this group, the translator employs formal correspondence, where lexical and grammatical structures are reproduced with high fidelity. These idioms often qualify as "dead metaphors" because their metaphorical origins are so deeply ingrained in daily language that they function as standard descriptors. Because these images (*ice*, *fire*, *lightning*, *sea*) are universal across both cultures, the "map" (the target language idiom) closely matches the "territory" (the source language idiom). Consequently, the translator faces minimal difficulty, allowing for a seamless transition that preserves both stylistic tone and meaning without requiring complex adjustments.

4.2. Analysis of Functional Equivalence (Group 2)

Group 2 encompasses idioms where the source imagery is culturally specific, making literal translation ineffective. Here, the translator must shift from structural imitation to functional equivalence. As Halliday argues, meaning is "the equivalence of function in context," meaning the translator must prioritize the intended communicative effect over the original wording.

TABLE 2: Functional Equivalence vs. Literal Translation

No	Source Idiom	Literal Translation (Error)	Functional Equivalence	Strategy
1	<i>Raining cats and dogs</i>	Mưa mèo và chó	Mưa như trút nước	Free Translation
2	<i>Storm in a teacup</i>	Cơn bão trong tách trà	Chuyện bé xé ra to	Functional shift
3	<i>Steal someone's thunder</i>	Cướp sấm của ai đó	Cướp công / Làm lu mờ	Contextual priority
4	<i>As slow as a snail</i>	Chậm như ốc sên	Chậm như rùa	Imagery adjustment
5	<i>As fresh as a daisy</i>	Tươi như hoa cúc	Tươi như hoa	Cultural adaptation
6	<i>To weather the storm</i>	Thời tiết hóa cơn bão	Vượt qua sóng gió	Meaning preservation

Literal translation of *Storm in a teacup* fails because "teacup" as a metonymy for conflict is not a shared cultural standard in Vietnam. A literal rendering would create an unintelligible image, violating the principle of "meaning creation". Similarly, *As slow as a snail* is often translated as *Chậm như rùa* (Slow as a turtle) because the turtle is the more culturally established animal for lethargy in Vietnamese discourse. By opting for these functional equivalents, the translator abandons the source imagery in favor of the functional intent. This confirms that translation is an active decision-making process where the translator interprets the "situational" intent of the source text rather than its surface structure.

4.3. Analysis of Cultural Adaptation (Group 3)

Group 3 addresses idioms where neither direct mapping nor simple functional equivalence suffices. These require deeper cultural mediation to bridge the "semantic vacuum."

TABLE 3: Strategies for Non-Equivalent Idioms

No	Source Idiom	Semantic Gap	Strategy	Justification
1	<i>Take a rain check</i>	Postponement	Descriptive/Explanation	Bridging semantic vacuum
2	<i>Under the weather</i>	Illness	Descriptive/Explanation	Cultural mapping failure
3	<i>Every cloud has a silver lining</i>	Optimism	Creative Adaptation	Preserving moral intent

When translating *Every cloud has a silver lining*, the translator faces a significant cultural gap. The English idiom is based on the visual metaphor of a cloud's bright border, but the Vietnamese proverb Trong cái rui có cái may (In

misfortune, there is fortune) is based on the philosophical dichotomy of fate. Here, the translator acts as an interpreter, identifying that the source text aims to convey optimism amid adversity. Adhering to the "relativist" view of language, the translator accepts that these two cultures utilize different conceptual "maps" to describe the same territory, necessitating a creative adaptation that resonates with the Vietnamese reader. This reinforces the idea that translation is not a mechanical task but one that requires "creative adaptation" to resonate with the target reader's cultural expectations.

4.4. The Decision-Making Process

The translation of weather-related idioms is fundamentally governed by the translator's ability to navigate the complex interplay between register, discourse structure, and audience expectations. Central to this process is the categorization of idioms into the three groups identified above. Each category demands a different decision-making strategy, as defined by Levý's framework for translation as an active, agent-driven process.

In terms of register: High-formality texts (legal/political) limit the translator's agency, often requiring stricter adherence to formal structures (Group 1). Conversely, literary discourse invites the creative flexibility needed for Group 2 and 3 adaptations, where the goal is to maintain the narrative voice rather than syntactic literalism.

In terms of discourse structure: Given that Vietnamese relies heavily on paratactic rhythm, the translator must decide whether to retain the English syntactic flow or adapt the idiom's structure to match Vietnamese rhythmic patterns such as the common four-syllable structure in idioms like *Nhanh như chớp* thereby avoiding "artificiality" and preserving the naturalness of the target language.

In terms of translator's agency: The translator must constantly distinguish between "intentional" and "unintentional" changes in the message, ensuring that the chosen strategy whether it be formal, functional, or adaptive remains aligned with the author's original objective.

Ultimately, effective translation of weather-related idioms is an exercise in flexibility. Rigid adherence to any single theory treating it as dogmatic inevitably leads to poor results. True mastery lies in the translator's ability to balance the source's semantic structure with the target language's cultural expectations, proving that translation is as much an art of informed decision-making as it is a science of linguistics.

V. CONCLUSION

5.1. Summary of Findings

This study has demonstrated that the translation of weather-related idioms is far from a binary operation; rather, it is a nuanced process situated along a continuum of strategies, ranging from formal correspondence to cultural adaptation. By categorizing the corpus into three distinct groups, the research clarifies that there is no universal "golden rule" that guarantees success for all idioms. Instead, the most effective approach is governed by the translator's flexibility. As evidenced by the analysis of Groups 1, 2, and 3, the success of a translation relies on the translator's ability to act as an active decision-

maker, tailoring strategies whether structural imitation or functional substitution to the situational constraints of the source text. The findings confirm that translation is fundamentally a process of "meaning creation" that requires deep contextual awareness, rather than a reliance on a "one-size-fits-all" method.

5.2. Implications

The implications of this research serve as a caution against the "dogmatic" application of rigid translation theories. As the source text warns, theoretical frameworks can quickly become rigid or irrelevant if they are not adapted to the specificities of the text at hand. Translators should avoid treating theory as a set of static commands; instead, they must cultivate a deep contextual awareness to respond to the richness and linguistic idiosyncrasies of the target language. For example, the study highlights that respecting the unique paratactic structure and the rhythmic requirement of the Vietnamese language is often more critical for the reader's reception than preserving a source metaphor that lacks cultural resonance. Consequently, theory should function as a "signpost" rather than a strict mandate, guiding the translator toward natural and culturally compatible expressions that align with the target audience's cognitive expectations.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

While this research has provided a foundational analysis of weather-related idioms, it is not without limitations. The study was constrained by its focus on a specific subset of natural phenomena, which, while illustrative, does not capture the full spectrum of metaphorical expressions rooted in the natural world. This limitation opens several avenues for future inquiry. Future research should aim to expand the corpus to

include broader semantic categories such as flora, fauna, and geographical features, which offer their own distinct sets of cultural and conceptual metaphors. Broadening the scope of the corpus in future studies will likely provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different natural domains are conceptually mapped across the English and Vietnamese languages. Such research would further refine our collective grasp of idiomatic translation, moving the field closer to a more integrated and sophisticated understanding of cross-cultural linguistic transfer.

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