

**The difficulties which undergraduate English Language  
students encounter in their interpretation of English  
formulaic expression to Arabic**

**Ayman Nazal**

## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the difficulties that undergraduate and graduate students of English Language encounter in their understanding and interpretation of English formulaic expressions to Arabic. Since the majority of formulaic expressions in English or any language potentially contain more than one interpretation, it has been assumed that these expressions constitute a major problem for non-native speakers of English Language particularly for those who do not have adequate pragmatic competence in the target culture. The difficulties that non-native speakers experience in their interpretation of formulaic expression seems to confirm Dell Hyme's (1971, 1974) notion of the importance of acquiring 'communicative competence', in the target culture. Such competence enables the non-native speakers to learn the rules of language use in a variety of social contexts.

The interpretation task which is being used in this study consists of three English formulaic expressions randomly selected to measure both under and graduate students' pragmatic competence in interpreting these formulaic expressions.

The results of this study are based on the written interpretation and solicitation of responses from 83 undergraduates of English Language and 13 graduate students of Applied Linguistics and Translation.

The disparity in their performance on the interpretation task which was administered to both groups unequivocally ascertain the belief that adequate and continued exposure to the target culture is highly essential for the acquisition of literacy and the avoidance of misinterpretation of these expressions. Graduate students have done overwhelming well in comparison with undergraduate whose performance on the same task was mediocre. The performance of graduate students is obviously due to their continued training in translating materials from and into the target culture.

This study emphasizes the importance of providing students of English Language adequate training and courses in pragmatics and translation so that they could acquire some adequate pragmatic competence in the target language. And based on the nature and type of their written responses it is self-evident that inadequate exposure to the target culture

is the main cause for undergraduate's mediocre performance on the interpretation task.

## ***1. Introduction: Literature Review: Some Theoretical Grounding***

### ***1.1. The Language Perspective:***

Since both the process of translation and that of intercultural communication encounter are grounded in both language and culture, then it would be erroneous to ignore the influence of language on the translator/communicator engaged in either process. On this note the question of translation seems to invoke the discussion of several major perspectives on the same subject one of which pertains to the perspective or view which shows the profound influence of language on the perception of its speakers. This perspective has been articulated abundantly by many prominent scholars and linguists primarily by Edward Sapir (1956), who has come up with what is called the "Relativity Hypothesis" which states that differences among languages are very likely to exert a great deal of influence on the habitual thought of their speakers. This amounts to saying that the grammatical structuring of a particular language is very likely to induce its speakers to conceive things under the influence of the grammatical structure of that very language.

Even though Edward Sapir's hypothesis has received a great deal of criticism upon its initiation and formation, it has lots of merits in terms of being able to account for some of the communication break down which results in inter-cross-cultural communication situations. One of the advantages which this hypothesis offers deals with the concept of habitual thoughts which people employ in attending to objects and events across behavioral contexts within culture. For instance, the concept of time in an oriental cultural varies from the same concept in an occidental culture. The keen linguist or ethnographer can detect this variation reflected not only in the grammatical structuring of a particular language but also in the social behavior of the speakers of a particular language. Therefore, language is likely to induce its speakers to see the social world of which they are part of in a particular way. This influence has prompted Sapir to make the following remarks on how language inclines

its speakers to hold a particular social reality which differs from any other social reality of the speakers of any other language.

*“No two languages are sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The world in which different societies live are distinct  
Worlds not merely the same world with different labels attached.  
(Sapir 1956: 69)*

Sapir’s comments are insightful and revealing provided that one has the competence to find out their validity and viability. These findings show several insightful observations one of which is the great influence of one’s language on one’s perception of the social world in which he/she lives in. It also shows the difficulty that both the interpreter and communicator face upon handling the task assigned to either one. Furthermore, these comments incline one to see the fragility of the situation that interpreters and communicators find themselves in. This leads one to deduce that it would be counter-productive to underestimate the impact and influence of a particular language on one’s thinking and perception of the social world.

Another prominent philosopher whose views are highly insightful on this regard is Gadamer (1975, 1976). Gadamer embraces the same of view which purports that language has great influence on the question of translation and the task of translator. For instance, Gadamer claims that the question of translation is tied down by the concept of undecidability. According to Gadamer this undecidability is the source of confusion for many translators for several factors. For instance, language is considered to be the most crucial and determining factor in the translation process; in fact, it is language that changes in translation. Both Derrida and Gadamer acknowledge this impact on the task of the translator. Derrida uses Borge's text of Babel to illustrate not only the impact on translation but also to point out that it is language that causes confusion in meaning.

Secondly, the act of understanding to Gadamer is as crucial to translation as the act of reading. He links both of them to the question of translation since they are essential prerequisites to/for arriving at a good translation. For instance he considers the act of understanding to be a crucial and

decisive factor that too often translators fail to consider in their endeavor to decipher texts. In fact, Gadamer links understanding with concepts of language and interpretation. Thirdly, Gadamer contends that the act of reading is as important as understanding. He brings out the problem of reading in "Round table on Translation", to remind many of us who tend to underestimate the impact and the significance of reading on both translation and on helping translators avoid any confusion or misinterpretation in translation.

In "Man & Language", Gadamer discusses the concept of language, its identity, nature, and relation with man before he begins to tackle the problem of translation. Since one can not speak of the concept of translation without understanding language, Gadamer stresses the fact that it is language that changes in translation; he thinks that what distinguishes human beings from animals is that human beings have "logos",. This implies that man bears a feature that distinguishes him from other animals. Gadamer believes that by language one can acquire familiarity and become acquainted with the world.

Gadamer's views on translation and the task of translator are not striking different from others' views. He thinks that translation is a mode that lacks the perfection and uniqueness that the original text has; in fact, he believes that translation dispossess the original from its character and makes it sound flat. He argues that the obstacle in this endeavor is that translation always lacks a third dimension; this dimension contains what is said in the original. More explicitly, translation will never be as understandable as the original is. Gadamer states that the task of the translator here is not to translate what is said but to position himself in the direction of what is said ( in its meaning).

This language perspective has also drawn a great deal of support from the views of Umberto Eco (1992), a famous semiotician, who claims that the process of translation is an interminable process and that language seems to be the cause of the confusion.

In his discussion of the role of interpreter, Umberto Eco (1992) makes a clear distinction between "acceptable and unacceptable" interpretations and as a result of that he considers the text to be a sacred source where genuine meaning resides. Eco's belief of acceptable and unacceptable interpretation has grown out of the fact that there are different types of

readers /interpreters with varying degrees of competences and this is very likely to manifest itself in their interpretation. To do him justice, one can examine the following quote which is likely to shed light on Eco's genuine position on the question of translation and the task of the interpreter:

*“In some of my recent writings I have suggested that between the intention of the author (very difficult to find out and frequently irrelevant for the interpretation of a text) and the intention of the interpreter who (to quote Richard Rorty) simply ‘beats the text into a shape which will serve for his purpose’, there is a third possibility. There is an intention of the text.” (1992: 25).*

One can easily conceive of the above quote to mean several important things. One of which is the belief which Eco holds and acknowledges the possibility of having acceptable and unacceptable interpretations on the ground that the level of competence of interpreters vary from one to the other and as a result of that it is possible to come across admissible and inadmissible interpretations of the same text.

A second inference which one can deduce from his quote has to do with the type of criteria which Eco lays out for us to decide on the merits of a particular interpretation. Therefore, in Eco's lexicon there is acceptable or unacceptable interpretation on the basis that there is a set of criteria by which the competent interpreter can appeal to in order to accept or reject a particular interpretation. For instance the intention of the original author of the text is not always important since the interpreter may or may not be able to pin down for a variety of reasons which have to do with interpreter's competence or worldview; or when the interpreter is being undermined to pin down the real intention of the author, he/she can and should appeal to the text in which meaning resides.

A third important inference that one can deduce from his comments is that Eco considers the text sacred since if one suspects whether the interpreter is using or interpreting the text, one can always go back to the text to decipher its intention. This confirms the belief which Eco holds firmly that there are acceptable and unacceptable interpretation to any text and this criterion of acceptability is determined by a set of criteria

which Eco points out in his famous book, *Interpretation over Interpretation*.

### **1.2. *The Cultural Perspective:***

The proponents of second perspective, while acknowledging the importance of the language perspective on the question of translation, they distance themselves from it and stress the importance of the cultural dimension on the translation process based on the findings of translation studies (see, Lefevere, 1992; Bassnett, 1991; Newmark, 1988; Venuti, 1995). The proponents of this perspective acknowledge the importance and impact of the cultural dimension on the translation process to the extent that they believe that translation is controlled by the target-culture. Those scholars have relied on the findings of several studies to draw support for the stance they are holding.

This perspective also expresses the views of the post-structuralists or the deconstructionists who embrace Derrida's views on the question of translation which purports that a deconstructive reading of a particular text means the potentiality of being able to arrive at another interpretation with the same level and degree of import and viability as the initial one. Thus to Derrida translation is as good as the original text since the former is serving and expressing a particular point of view with sound credibility.

By and large translators have acknowledged the problems encountered in translation and have attributed most of these constraints to both cultural and linguistic differences among languages. As a result of that many contemporary translator theorists and intercultural communication scholars such as Newmark (1988), Wills (1982), Lefevere (1992), Bakir (2005) have pointed out the importance of translators to possess competences in the languages and cultures which the translator intends to translate. Other translation theorists have called for the use of semiotics and pragmatics as effective mechanisms for arriving at good translation (see Harvey and Higgins, 1992).

In the course of this paper I shall test the credibility and validity of both perspectives (the language and cultural perspective) to see which of them stand the test of viability through an experiment which involves testing

college students on a set of formulaic expressions which require both linguistic and pragmatic competences.

At the same time continue to advance the tentative proposition that the cultural challenges and constraints which undermine the ability of the translator/interpreter to decipher a particular textual material resemble those which are confronted by the communicator in any particular verbal exchange in inter-cross-cultural communication setting/encounter.

## ***2: Research Methodology***

I have conducted study on both undergraduate and graduate students of English language & translation for the sole purpose of testing existing hypotheses on the role of cultural differences and on how students of English language deal with expressions which require two distinct competences in linguistics and pragmatics. In fact, one can consider this study to be a genuine experiment since its scope and number of informants amount to a hundred college students. By all means what matters is the fact that it can be used to provide some important feed back on the pivotal question which I hope to attend to do in this preliminary research paper.

### ***2.1. Research Design***

This research paper studies the difficulties which students of English Language and Translation encounter in translating English formulaic expressions and phrases.

Three formulaic expressions were used to test students' understanding of formulaic expression. The experiment/translation task of these three formulaic expressions was conducted as a major component a final exam administered to both undergraduate and graduate students of English Language and Translation. This translation task was administered to 83 undergraduate and 13 graduate students at An Najah National University, in Nebula, Palestine.

This experiment constituted an important component of a final exam on a translation course for the entire academic semester of 2006-2007. Therefore students were not told that they were being solicited for a particular study and thus they had attended to all questions as part of their final academic exam. Students were asked to provide their own

interpretation in Arabic or English of three formulaic expressions. Students were also told that these formulaic expressions might contain more than one interpretation just to alleviate the level of confusion that some of them might fall into. Students were being told also that these expressions have two distinct meanings: a denotative or linguistic meaning and a connotative/pragmatic one. The formulaic expressions which are given to students are: 'piece of cake', 'welcome aboard', and 'hot stuff'.

## ***2.2. Subjects***

This study was conducted on two groups of college students. The first group consists of 83 undergraduate college students whose major is English language and literature. The majority of them are juniors and seniors. They are native of Arabic and their English Language proficiency is adequate. They have taken a couple of courses in translation. The second group consists of 13 graduate students in the M.A. program in Applied Linguistics & Translation at An-najah University. The majority of them have completed most of the course in their M.A. program.

## ***Analysis and Discussion***

The findings of this experiment have been insightful, informative, and revealing in terms of showing and pointing out the difficulties which college students encounter in accounting for the connotative/pragmatic meaning and in their interpretation of formulaic expression into English and in certain instances for the attainment of both the denotative and connotative meaning. In fact the findings of this study provide and lend great support to the cultural perspective since the majority of students have committed errors and mistakes pertain to connotative/pragmatic matters and therefore one can tentatively advance the proposition that the cultural perspective carries much more weight than the language one in terms of claiming that most of the problems encountered by the translator/communicator are culture-specific. That is to say, translators who are not fully versed in the foreign/target culture are prone to misconstruing a particular message.

The first observation which one can deduce from the results is that there is a wide and conspicuous disparity between the two groups in all their

responses. For example most of graduate students were able to attend to both meanings successfully with regard to the three formulaic expressions. However, there were two graduate students out of the 13 who failed to supply the pragmatic interpretation of the expression “welcome aboard”. And only one graduate student who was not able to provide the pragmatic/cultural interpretation of the expression ‘hot stuff’. In contrast, undergraduate students’ responses were not as satisfactory as their graduate counterparts. This can be attributed immediately to the assumption that their exposure to the use of these formulaic expressions in real-life situations is conceivably rare and infrequent by all means.

In the case of ‘piece of cake’, the situation has taken a different direction. The majority of students (83 undergraduate college students and 13 graduate students in the M.A. Program in applied linguistic and translation) have attended to the connotative meaning of this expression successfully. However, some undergraduates have forgotten or have left the literal or denotative meaning unattended. My read of their written responses is that students seem to have had more exposure and better familiarity with the connotative meaning of this expression than for the other formulaic expressions.

When I inquired further about the level of easiness with which students have dealt with this formulaic expression, I was being told that they have had a great deal of exposure to the social context in which it occurs and therefore students have had some adequate exposure to both its denotative and connotative meaning. Of the 83 undergraduate college students only 4 students failed to supply the connotative meaning of ‘piece of cake’. This overwhelming percentage seems to incline one to deduce that adequate exposure to such expressions is highly conducive to helping students become acquainted with these expressions.

The ironic thing about this particular expression is that while students have captured the connotative meaning of this expression a large number of them failed to provide its denotative meaning. Only 32 out of 83 of them were able to provide the denotative meaning of ‘piece of cake’. This means that students have really forgotten to supply the denotative meaning even though they captured the connotative one easily; or that students have had little exposure to this expression to the degree that

some of them supplied the connotative meaning before the denotative one. I am inclined to favor the first assumption that students have attended to the connotative meaning and have unwittingly forgotten the denotative one since the denotative meaning is highly facile and it is very unlikely that students could not attend to. In fact my solicitation of some students' responses ascertains my adopted belief that it was an oversight for some of them.

With regard to the second formulaic expression 'welcome aboard' students' responses were different from those in "piece of cake", the results are different. 69 out of 83 undergraduate students have successfully provided the denotative meaning of 'welcome aboard', while 14 students out of the same number failed to attend to the denotative/literal meaning of 'welcome aboard'. In comparison with students' responses to the connotative meaning, only 21 students were able to provide an accurate interpretation of the expression 'welcome aboard'. And the remaining 62 of the same group of students were unable to provide the connotative meaning of 'welcome aboard'. This disparity in students responses with regard to this particular expression confirms the plausibility and soundness of my proposition that the crucial problem which confront our English major students has to do with their being unable to capture the connotative meaning since students have had little exposure to the target culture and therefore they are at disadvantage when they have to provide the connotative interpretation of any expression which happens to have more than one interpretation.

In fact when I confronted students and solicited some interpretation for the expression 'welcome aboard', they indicated that they had never heard of the second meaning and therefore one is inclined to conclude that exposure to the use of formulaic expressions is of great importance to helping students account for the interpretation of these formulaic expressions particularly the ones with double-meaning. This appears to confirm the assumption that adequate exposure to the target culture is essential for students understanding of these expressions.

Concerning the last formulaic expression 'hot stuff', students' responses reveal that the disparity in their supplying either interpretation was even. That is to say, 57 out of 83 undergraduate students failed to supply the denotative interpretation; and only 26 of them were able to supply the

proper interpretation for this expression. With regard to the connotative meaning of this expression 50 out of 83 undergraduate students of the same group were also unable to provide the correct interpretation; and only 33 out of the same number were able to provide the correct interpretation. As a result of that, one is inclined to draw the following inferences:

Undergraduate English language students have very little exposure to the expression ‘hot stuff’, to the degree that their responses to both meaning were inadequate.

The second inference which one can draw from their responses is that this expression is the toughest and hardest for students primarily undergraduates in contrast with the previous two expressions. Overall while most of undergraduate have attended to the linguistic meaning of these three expressions, they were unable to satisfactorily provide the pragmatic interpretation of these expressions particular when dealing with ‘welcome aboard’, and ‘hot stuff’.

This study has underscored the soundness and viability of my proposition that the lack of pragmatic competence that our English Language students manifest in their responses and interpretation is a crucial element in contributing to their failure to deal successfully with formulaic expression in translation or intercultural communication encounter. In addition, this study has also underscored the assumption that continued exposure of English Language students to the target culture is highly essential for having proper understanding formulaic expression. The initial discrepancy which this study has revealed between graduates’ and undergraduates’ responses to the same formulaic expressions reveals that undergraduates’ pragmatic competence is not as adequate as their graduate counterparts. This underscores the validity of the assumption that acquiring literacy in the target culture is a key element in minimizing the chances for students to misinterpret this formulaic expression.

This seems to buttress the proposition that acquiring literacy in the target culture is a key to an adequate understanding of intercultural communication or translating written or spoken materials. In dealing with the third expression, ‘hot stuff’, the results were striking shocking

since more than 50 undergraduate college students out of 83 were unable to provide either interpretation. Based on this particular observation, one can conclude that the disparity between graduate and undergraduate in attending to these formulaic expression is so wide which compels one to claim that the type of pragmatic competence that graduate students possess far exceeds that of undergraduate college students. In addition, graduate students seem to have much more exposure to the use of this expression since it is part of their specialization.

#### **4. Conclusion:**

The experiment which this study presented underlie the importance of the exposure to the culture of the target language in order to safe guard any type of translation. One can easily note that the difficulty which students of English confronts is their inadequate acquired literacy in the target culture which is conspicuously visible in their inability to account for the asked interpretation of formulaic expression.

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