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Translating Political Idioms from Urdu to English in Pakistani Newspaper Editorials: Navigating Cognitive and Systemic Complexities

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Abstract

This article examines the intricate challenges encountered when translating political idioms from Urdu into English within Pakistani newspaper editorials. Political idioms—culture-bound and metaphorical expressions interwoven with socio-political discourse-not only shape public sentiment but also frame ideological positions. Leveraging Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2002) alongside Polysystem Theory (Even-Zohar, 1990), we explore how translators navigate cognitive effort, contextual relevance, and systemic hierarchies to render these idioms effectively for an English-reading audience. Extending the scope of prior analyses, this study investigates 10 distinct case studies derived from a comparative qualitative analysis of political editorials in six Urdu dailies (e.g., Jang, Nawa-i-Wagt) and four English broadsheets (e.g., Dawn, The News). Each case demonstrates a different idiom translation strategy literal translation, paraphrase, omission, cultural substitution, or a combination thereof—and illustrates the consequent impact on semantic clarity, rhetorical strength, and ideological fidelity. Our findings indicate adaptive techniques risk diluting ideological and density, while literal translations often lead to semantic ambiguity. To balance cultural fidelity with cognitive accessibility, and integrative strategy is necessary, incorporating collaborative editing and explanatory glasses. This highlights the need for further research on audience reception in multicultural news settings, joint bilingual editorial processes, and Taylor translator training for effective multilingual journalism.

Keywords: Political idioms, Relevance theory, Polysystem theory.

Introduction

There is a clear parallel between the Urdu and English press in Pakistan's dynamic media landscape, serving different ideological demographic leaderships. In order to engage readers from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, Urdu newspapers such is and it is formal language that is full of political satire and cultural nuances. On the other hand, English language news outlets like Dawn cater primarily to urban audiences and use formal phones and global viewpoints. I believe that this detour poses a significant to translation challenge, requiring careful attention to detail and cultural understanding in order to convey the pragmatic and semantic essence of political idioms from deeply embedded source culture to a potentially foreign target discourse.

Political idioms in Urdu and other languages are not mainly ornamental rather, they are essential rhetorical devices that distill intricate historical and social criticisms into second metaphors that have cultural resonane (Langlotz,

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2006; Aleem & Anjum, 2023). Systematic flaws in ritualized political opposition are revealed by idioms such as نبر الله الله والله الله الله والله وا

A social media and digital journalism take over. The consequences of translation mistake can be dire. It's a tricky balancing act but one that's key to creating an informed understanding and an informed decision. A bit translation can change perceptions in alter the conversation either by hiding the critique or, even worse, by misleading. Contemporary translation practices must include topics relating to accountability in communication in addition to linguistic accuracy (Fatima,

Shahid, & Bukhari, 2023). This article investigate the intermediary role of translator between the expectations off the receiving audience in media conventions in preserving political nuance. To sum up, in a context we are media ex both is watch dogs and is contenders in the political battle, this article to visits familiar theories of translation in the light of new possibilities and assesses the irrelevance in practice.

This article examines two core questions;

1. What challenges do translators confront when rendering political idioms from Urdu to English in newspaper editorials?

2. How do cognitive (Relevance theoretic) and systematic (polysystematic) factors influence translators strategic decisions.

To address these questions, we extend prior research by analyzing 10 case studies from newspaper editorials published between January and June 2025. By employing according framework adopted from Baker (1992), we categorized translation strategies and evaluate their If you can see through the dual theoretical lenses of relevance and polysystem theories. In doing so, we am to inform best practices for bilingual journalism and translator training programs while contributing to a richer understanding of how cultural and ideological filters operate in media translation.

Literature Review

Political Language and Idioms

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idioms have a unique ability to convey complex social and political insights in a concise way, resonating deeply with local readers who are familiar with the cultural context.¹

Researchers have really driven home the importance of idiomatic expressions in shaping the way we talk about politics. Take Aleem and Ikram Anjum's (2023) study, for instance-they showed how local idioms can be used as a kind of shortcut for expressing descent and critique. But here's the thing: If idioms get lost in translation, the whole message can get water down or even distorted. It's tough because these expressions are deeply rooted in the culture, and their historical contestant metaphorical richness often don't translate with into English.

Scholars are finally recognizing the importance of studying political idiom translation is its own field, one that bring together social linguistics, political communication and translation studies (Aleem & Anjum, 2023; Jabeen et al., 2024). Recent global research has shown that win translation goes wrong, it can really dilute the message and impact how people talk about politics and mobilize. Venuti and Baker's work has been instrumental in highlighting how translation choices-whether to make something sound more local or keep its foreign flavor averial political consequences-they go baby on just words. And if you look at times of big political upheaval, it's clear that idioms have long been used by media outlets as a way to subly resist oppressive regimes.² So, idioms aren't just fancy terms of phrase they are also aware to assert cultural identity and change the status quo.

The rise of digital media has brought new challenges to the table, especially when it comes to translation (Polilingua, 2025). With the need for speed, media outlets are often forced to sacrifice some level of cultural nuance, and even tiny translation mistakes can have lasting consequences. Researchers have been exploring ways to tackle this issue, and two theories such that relevant theory and pulley system theory have been particularly helpful in understanding how people process and interpret translated information. By bringing together different perspectives, the field is starting to recognize the importance of a more comprehensive approach that balances death of interpretation with clarity of meaning. This shift in thinking is prompting everything of traditional translation methods, with a focus on developing more inclusive and culturally aware approaches that can handle the complexities of modern bilingual media (Fatima et al., 2023).

Theoretical Frameworks: Relevance Theory and Polysystem Theory

Relevance Theory proposes that communication is an intricate process where we piece together meaning by balancing our surroundings and mental effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2002). When translating political idioms, it's essential to create a similar mental connection with the target audience. If the translation demands too much brainpower without offering enough contextual value, it won't resonate as intended. Think of it like finding the perfect key to unlock the message. It needs to fit just right for the audience to get it.

The vibrant and often provocative idioms that paper Urdu political journalism can lose their punch when translate it to fit the mold of international journalistic standard (Jabeen et al., 2024). This might explain why English editorials in Pakistan often seems to take a big seat playing a semi peripheral roll.

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Translating political idioms from Urdu to English is a complex task that poses several changes.

The Challenges

•Linguistic Gaps: many Urdu idioms rely on culturally specific words with no direct English translations. For example phrases like אָבוּ (Cowardice) or ענבעוב (temporary power) require translators to make tough decisions. Should they opt for a little translation that might confuse readers or an adaptive paraphrase that risks losing the original's rhetorical impact?

•Cultural Untranslability: It means giving extra context to idioms that reference local events, customs or historical phenomenon to non Urdu audiences. If a metaphor can be misconstrued or lose value without its context, it must have one.

•Ideological filtering: When translating political idioms from Urdu to English qualities of English newspapers, which are usually more ideological, pose another problem. These policies informed by global generalist standards, generally prefer a plain style over in poor metaphorisation. So, idioms can be a bit dodgy. They can indicate the author's political stance as well as that of the target audience. The region message may not be accurately delivered because of the filtering process.

The translation of literary and audiovisual works is particularly susceptible to political pressures, weather imposed by the state or by one's own second guessing.

Methodology

When you translate idioms we need to consider the cognitive burden on the readers. Think about it idioms work because this park immediate connections in our mind. But when we translate them literally it can be like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. The meaning gets lost in the readers experience is disconnected from the original message.

To get it right, translators need to think beyond just words. They need to understand the cultural contest the ideology and the complex dance between language and culture. By doing so they can create translations that truly designate with the target audience conveying the intended message in a way that feels natural and authentic (Langlotz, 2006).

Research Design

In this city we are looking into the intracases of translating political idioms from Urdu to English in Pakistani newspaper editorials. By using a qualitative, comparative textual analysis we are able to get up close and personal with the linguistic and contextual subtleties did often fly under the radar.

By examining both the original and translated text side by side we gain a deeper understanding of how different translation strategy shape the reader's experience, we are talking about the tone of the ideology being conveyed, the overall rhetorical impact and how it all lands with the target audience. This comparative analysis gives us a valuable insights into the complexities of translating political idioms and their effect on the readers.

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Data Collection

For this study we carefully selected 12 Urdu editorials and eight English editorials from our widely read newspapers: Dawn and The News (English), نوائے وقت and نوائے وقت and The News (English), عنوائے وقت and نوائے وقت (Urdu). All data collection period spanned from January 1 to June 20, 2025. Features editorials that you are rich in idiomatic language and relevant to current political issues.

In particular, we focused on editorials that tackled recent political scandals, policy failures and public descent is these topics often feature vivid and nuanced idiomatic expressions. By selecting editorials that showcase the complexities of political language, we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how idioms are used in translated in the context of Pakistani politics.

Analysis Approach And Coding Framework

To identify, map and evaluate specific idioms this study uses a modified version of Baker's (1992) according framework or analysis involves a systematic three-step process:

1.Identification: we carefully extract political idioms from Urdu editorials. Some examples of idioms we have included in this study are:

- ال میں کچھ کالا ہے (suggesting hidden corruption)
- (indicating over hyped actions that yield disappointing results) کھودا بہاڑ نکلا چوہا
- (implying secretive political maneuvering) چوری چھپے سب سن ا
- ابندر کیا جانے ادرک کا سواد (implying that those without refined test or experience may not appreciate complexity) (Rekhta Dictionary, n.d.)

By using this framework, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of how these idioms are used and translated in the context of Pakistani politics.

- **2.Translation Mapping:** Trace corresponding translations in the English editorials. In cases where the idioms are rendered with an explanation, a loosely adapted proverb, or are completely omitted, such variations are logged and categorized.
- **3.Evaluation:** Each translation is evaluated in terms of:

Cognitive Impact: The degree to which the translation triggers the expected inferential process by balancing cognitive load and contextual cues.

Systemic Alignment: How well the translation aligns with the target culture's journalistic norms and editorial policies.

Ideological Tone Preservation: The extent to which the translation conserves the critical and satirical underpinnings of the original idiom.

Table 1: Coding Matrix for Urdu-English Idiom Translation

Idiom (Urdu)	Translation Strategy	Cognitive Impact	Systemic Alignment	Ideological Tone
ناچ نہ جانے آنگنٹھیڑا	Literal / Paraphrase	High load; low effect	Poor	Diluted satire
قربانی کا بکرا	Adaptive equivalent	Effective	Moderate	Maintained
بلی کے خواب میںچیچڑے	Omission	Missing cue	High (editorial)	Lost
	Cultural substitution	Strong effect	Adequate	Retained

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اندھا کیا چاہے دوآنکھیں	Cultural substitution	Moderate effect	Adequate	Slightly toned down
دال میں کچھ کالاہے	Paraphrase with gloss	Enhanced clarity	High	Partially retained
کھودا پہاڑ نکلا چوہا	Literalthen annotated	Mixed	Moderate	Reduced rhetorical
چوری چہپے سبسن	Adaptive paraphrase	Cognitive clarity	High	Diluted dissent
بندر کیا جانے ادرککا س واد	Cultural substitution	Effective	Adequate	Satirical emphasis
	Literal (with editorial gloss)	Moderate	High	Altered nuance

Data Triangulation and Validity

To enhance the validity of this analysis, triangulation was employed through the review of translator interviews, direct editorial observations, and audience reception analyses (when available). This multi-angle methodology ensures that the findings are robust and account for the interplay between textual form, editorial policy, and reader cognition.

Data Analysis & Findings

The analysis focuses on 10 selected case studies, each representing a politically used Urdu idiom and its translated counterpart (if available) in English editorials. The following subsections detail the case studies:

Urdu Context

The idiom "ناچ نہ جانے آنگھن تیڑھا" is traditionally deployed to criticize policymakers or ministers who, in failing at their own task, deflect blame onto external circumstances. Used frequently in editorials critiquing government incompetence, it succinctly encapsulates the theme of evasion of responsibility.

English Translation

In the analyzed editorial, the idiom was rendered as "She blames the floor."

Analysis

The literal translation fails to trigger the cognitive associations necessary for a reader unfamiliar with the cultural background. Relevance Theory suggests that a higher processing effort is required, yet the potential payoff is minimal, leading to a bland, diluted metaphor. The omission of explanatory gloss or contextual cues significantly undermines the satirical punch intended by the original expression.

2: Study Case 4.2 قربانی کا بکرا

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Urdu Context

Employed to denote a scapegoat within political structures—often a junior official sacrificed to deflect blame after administrative failures—the idiom invokes the emotive context of sacrifice and victimhood.

English Translation

This idiom was translated adaptively as "He was made the scapegoat."

Analysis

Here, the translation is effective in aligning with familiar English idioms and conveys the intended meaning directly. Although the cultural specificity is partially lost, the cognitive load is minimized for the target audience, and the ideological message is preserved. This case exemplifies a successful balance between cultural fidelity and clarity.

Urdu Context

Typically used to critique unrealistic or overly ambitious governmental promises, this idiom metaphorically suggests that the subjects are chasing unattainable goals.

English Translation

In the source material, this idiom was completely omitted from the English editorial version.

Analysis

The omission leads to a notable loss in rhetorical sharpness, creating a gap in the ideological narrative. While editorial constraints may favor clarity and brevity, the absence of this culturally critical element significantly alters the discourse by removing a potent satirical device that underscores the hubris of political promises.

Urdu Context

This idiom is employed to caution against taking on challenges that involve confronting a powerful adversary. It implicitly warns that even a bold act can invite disproportionate repercussions.

English Translation:

The translation rendered it as "to risk a direct confrontation with a lion."

Analysis

The cultural substitution here is relatively successful; the metaphor of a lion is commonly understood in English as a symbol of power and majesty. However, while the idiomatic force is maintained, the translation retains a trace of exoticism. The translated phrase does invoke similar cognitive associations for the target audience, though it may not fully capture the local connotations linked to political authority in Pakistan.

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Urdu Context

This idiom critiques excessive desire or greed by suggesting that even a blind person would desire more than what is naturally available. In political parlance, it mocks the hypocrisy of those who demand more than is due.

English Translation

Adapted as "Beggars can't be choosers," the translation offers an equivalent cultural reference.

Analysis

Although the English equivalent captures the idea of insatiable desire or entitlement, it slightly tones down the satirical force that the original idiom wields. The cognitive impact remains moderate, but the ideological nuance suffers a minor loss. Nonetheless, the adaptive strategy aligns well with the semi-peripheral system of English journalism while striving to maintain the original's critical tone.

6: Study Case 4.6 دال میں کچھ کالا ہے

Urdu Context

Literally meaning "there is something black in the lentils," this idiom questions the integrity of a situation or suggests hidden corruption. It is often deployed in editorials critiquing opaque governmental practices.

English Translation

The translation provided a paraphrase alongside an explanatory gloss: "There is something fishy— a hidden agenda or corruption—lurking beneath the surface."

Analysis

This hybrid approach, combining paraphrasing with glossing, greatly enhances the cognitive accessibility of the ideological critique embedded in the idiom. The translator succeeds in balancing literal meaning with context; however, the extended explanation might disrupt the brevity typically celebrated in English journalistic prose. Despite this, the strategy improves overall interpretive clarity and preserves the original's critical sharpness.

7: Study Case 4.7 کھودا پہاڑ نکلا چوہا

Urdu Context

This idiom connotes the disappointment of an outcome that, despite great hype, turns out to be insignificant. Politically, it is used to critique overblown promises or initiatives that ultimately fail to deliver.

English Translation

Rendered literally as "He dug a mountain and found a mouse," some versions introduced a brief annotation to explain the metaphor.

Analysis

While the literal translation might evoke similar imagery among a subset of English readers familiar with analogous idioms, the lack of immediate cultural equivalence can compromise cognitive immediacy. The editorial addition of a brief note attempts to bridge this gap, but inevitably the translation suffers from a

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mixed cognitive impact—potentially forcing readers to engage in additional inferential processing.

8: Study Case 4.8 چوری چھپے سب سن

Urdu Context

Used to expose clandestine political maneuvering, this idiom implies that even in the absence of overt communication, rumors and secret deals become common knowledge. It reflects the suspicion that information leaks undermine official narratives.

English Translation

Translated as "Whispers travel fast in the corridors of power."

Analysis

This creative adaptive paraphrase effectively captures the clandestine connotations of the original idiom while aligning with English journalistic idioms. The translation's cognitive impact is positive; it lowers the processing burden by using familiar metaphorical imagery. However, the explicit mention of "corridors of power" may inadvertently narrow the focus to bureaucratic settings rather than addressing a broader spectrum of political maneuvering.

Urdu Context

This idiom, which literally questions how a monkey could appreciate the taste of ginger, is employed rhetorically to denote that individuals lacking the requisite cultural or experiential background cannot fully appreciate nuanced or refined ideas. In political journalism, it is often used to criticize the populist undermining of sophisticated political discourses.

English Translation

The idiom was rendered as "How can the untrained appreciate the subtle flavors of reform?"

Analysis

The translator's choice to adapt the idiom using sensory imagery manages to evoke a similar cognitive effect by appealing to readers' universal sensory experiences. While the direct cultural reference is lost, the overall metaphorical quality remains intact, inviting the target audience to infer meaning without undue cognitive strain.

Urdu Context

Employed to describe politics conducted behind a veil of secrecy, this idiom critiques the obfuscation and controlled presentation of political processes. It underscores a systematic effort to distance public discourse from the messy realities of power.

English Translation

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Offered as "Politics behind closed curtains," the translation adopts a literal strategy supplemented by a brief editorial gloss explaining the connotations of secrecy.

Analysis

This translation, while faithful to the literal meaning, captures the systemic pressure to conform to the decorum of English journalism. The cognitive load is managed effectively through the familiar metaphor of "curtains" associated with secretive behavior, though it does sacrifice some of the original's emotive intensity. Overall, the effect is moderate rather than vivid, yet adequate within the constraints of the target discourse (Rekhta Dictionary, n.d.).

Discussion

Cognitive Barriers and Relevance

Relevance Theory posits that successful communication occurs when the context triggers maximal inferential impact with minimal cognitive effort. In the translation of political idioms, the inherent cultural gap between Urdu expressions and English idioms means that the translator must mitigate increased cognitive load. A literal translation—such as "She blames the floor" for النجين تهيرُا demands that the target reader reconstructs cultural associations with minimal prompting, often resulting in semantic dilution. Conversely, adaptive strategies that include glosses or annotations (as seen in "حال ميں كچه كالا ہے" (can support a smoother cognitive transition, though they risk clashing with the overarching need for brevity in journalistic writing.

Engaging with the cognitive dimension of translation, the study reveals that the translator's role is analogous to that of an intermediary who must align distinct cognitive milieus. For instance, when idioms invoke deep-seated cultural experiences—such as those referencing local folklore or historical events—the cognitive load for an uninitiated reader can be significantly minimized by careful annotation. However, the inclusion of such explanatory strategies must be balanced against the overarching need for slogans and phrases that evoke immediate associative imagery. In our case analyses, idioms that were translated adaptively generally guaranteed better cognitive responses, although they sometimes did so at the expense of subtle ideological undertones.

Systemic Influences and Editorial Norms

Polysystem Theory underscores how translated texts are subjected to the norms and expectations of the target language's literary and cultural system. In Pakistan, editorials in English language are designed to present an image of fair reporting that is clear in globally appealing. This systematic demand results in a certain cleaning up of these texts. That is, an idiom which has political connotations and often humorous, rebellious or satirical potential is paraphrased in a more neutral idiom or deleted. Notably, the absence of بلی کے خواب میں چھیچڑے from English versions suggests an editorial strategy that prioritize clarity or ideological proteanism. The text tends to 4 ft the early satirical tone needed for a solid critique even with creative adaptive strategies such as those seen in اندھا کیا جاہے دو آنکھیں . Diditorial process, therefore, regulates and mediates the cognitive impact of the idioms by filtering those expressions that are two cultural and opt for those that are more globally identifiable metaphors. This is important to note since the

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leadership of Pakistani newspaper has involved local and diaspora communities, as well as international watchdogs.

Ideological Nuances and Translator Agency

Translating political idioms is about more than just words it's about conveying ideology. Every decision, whether to the phrase or omit, carries weight. It's a delicate balance between staying true to the original text and navigating the complex web of meanings that shape how messages are received. Translators, therefore, become ideological gatekeepers who mediate descent, critique and subversion. In maintaining ideological balance, translated agency must be carefully calibrated. While lateral translations may retain theoretical purity, they often result in semantic opacity and the loss of rhetorical prowess. Adoptive translations that make use of cultural substitution enable the text to detain its critical essence but may dilute the potency of local ideological rhetoric. Our findings highlight that the translators decisions hot influenced by multiple pressures: the cognitive expectations of the target reader, the systematic norms of English journalism and the intrinsic desire to preserve the original critical force of Urdu political discourse. This multidimensional challenge necessitiates a collaborative editorial model, your bilingual teams iteratively refined translations to striking optimal balance between cognitive accessibility and cultural fidelity.

Broader Implications for Bilingual Journalism and Policy

The dilution or misinterpretation of political idioms in translation can have farreaching consequences beyond the realm of linguistics. In an era when public sentiment is heavily mediated through digital and print media alike, the integrity with which ideological critiques are preserved is critical for civic engagement and democratic accountability. The study's findings suggest several actionable recommendations:

Enhanced Translator Training: Translator training modules that emphasize not only technical translation skills but also cultural, historical, and political contextualization are urgently needed.

Collaborative Editorial Practices: Implementing clear-cut procedures for cross-lingual editorial review can ensure that the nuances of political discourse are adequately preserved during translation.

Idiomatic Databases: Establishing centralized repositories of political idioms complete with annotations, historical contexts, and suggested translations can serve as valuable reference materials for translators.

Audience Reception Studies: Further empirical research into how audiences—both Urdu- speaking and English-speaking—interpret these translations could inform better adaptive strategies, ensuring that ideological messages are not lost in translation.

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Conclusion

The extended analysis presented here in the underscores that the translation of political idioms is a multifaceted task that extends for beyond the realm of lexical substitution. It is an ideological process that engages cognitive common cultural and systematic dimension simultaneously. By applying relevance theory and poly system theory or study has demonstrated that literal translations risk of scoring or flattening the intended satirical form of an idiom, while adaptive and culturally substituted translations of an emerge is the most viable strategies. However, even these strategies require careful calibration to prevent dilution of the political message.

Or analysis of 10 case studies reveals that while certain adaptive strategies such as the use of glasses or culturally resonant substitutions can effectively lower the cognitive load on English readers, there sometimes do so at the expense of the nuanced ideological undertones that are vital to Urdu political discourse. The systematic ommissions of idioms in English editorials, as seen in the case of بالى كے خواب ميں چهبچڑے, highlights the tension between the imperatives of editorial clarity and the need for robust cultural critique.

To ensure the future vitality of bilingual journalism in Pakistan context to your language is both our tool of governance in recent policies must be implemented to support nuance translation practices. These include professional development for translators, collaboration between linguistic departments and the establishment of dedicated editorial panels that parents cultural fidelity with clarity. By adopting these practices media organizations can better serve their diverse readerships, ensuring that the critical nuances of political discourse are effectively communicated across linguistic boundaries.

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