



THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATING ENGLISH PHRASAL VERBS IN FICTION

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Abstract: *Phrasal verbs are essential in English fiction, enhancing dialogue and narrative flow. However, their idiomatic nature and multiple meanings make translation challenging. This study explores the difficulties of translating phrasal verbs in fiction, focusing on cultural and linguistic barriers. It also evaluates key translation strategies, such as literal translation, paraphrasing, and cultural adaptation. The findings highlight the need for a flexible approach that preserves both accuracy and the stylistic depth of the original text.*

Keywords: *phrasal verbs, translation challenges, literary translation, idioms, translation strategies, context-based translation, fiction translation, linguistic adaptation*

Fiction is not only about telling a story but also about immersing the reader in a particular linguistic and cultural experience. English, like many Germanic languages, frequently uses phrasal verbs, which are combinations of a verb and a preposition or adverb. These constructions often carry meanings that are not directly derived from their individual words, making them difficult to translate into other languages.

For example, consider the phrase "run out of", which means "to have no more of something". A word-for-word translation into another language might not make sense, requiring a more natural equivalent. This challenge is even more significant in fiction, where the tone, style, and character voice must remain consistent.

In literary works, phrasal verbs are commonly used in dialogues and descriptions, making them a crucial element of storytelling. A poor translation may lead to unnatural phrasing, loss of meaning, or even cultural misunderstandings. This paper explores why phrasal verbs are difficult to translate in fiction and examines different strategies that can help preserve their meaning while maintaining the fluidity of the target text.

Translating phrasal verbs in fiction is a highly demanding task due to several linguistic and cultural factors. These challenges can be grouped into semantic complexity, structural differences, cultural adaptation, and stylistic concerns.



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One of the primary difficulties in translating phrasal verbs is their polysemy, meaning that a single phrasal verb can have multiple meanings depending on the context[3]. This can lead to ambiguity if the correct meaning is not identified before translation.

For example:

"Break up": 1) The couple broke up last week. (ended their relationship), 2)The police broke up the fight. (intervened and stopped), 3)The call broke up due to bad reception. (became unclear or disconnected)[2].

A translator must carefully analyze the context before choosing the appropriate equivalent in the target language. Otherwise, an incorrect translation could confuse the reader or change the original meaning.

English allows for phrasal verb flexibility, meaning that objects can sometimes be placed between the verb and the particle (e.g. "turn the lights off" vs. "turn off the lights")[7]. However, many languages do not have this structure, making direct translation unnatural.

For instance, in Uzbek and many other languages, there is often a single-word verb equivalent instead of a two-word phrasal verb[1]. Consider:

"Give up" → "Taslim bo'lmoq" (one verb instead of two words)

"Find out" → "Aniqlamoq" (single word equivalent)

Because of these differences, translators must decide whether to:

- 1. Use a single-word equivalent (which might slightly change the nuance).**
- 2. Paraphrase the meaning using a descriptive phrase.**
- 3. Borrow an English term if no direct equivalent exists.**

Many phrasal verbs are tied to English-speaking cultures and may not have a natural equivalent in other languages. For instance, the phrase "kick the bucket" is a colloquial way to say "die." A word-for-word translation would make no sense in Uzbek, Russian, or Arabic. Instead, translators must use a culturally appropriate equivalent, such as:

Uzbek: "Ko'zi yumildi" (his eyes closed - a poetic way to say someone passed away).

Russian: "Отдать концы" (to give up the ends - similar idiomatic phrase).

Another example is "Hit the sack", which means "go to bed." Instead of a literal translation, a translator might use:

Uzbek: "Uxlashga ketmoq" (go to sleep).

Thus, translators must balance literal meaning with cultural readability to ensure that the translated text feels natural to the target audience.



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Phrasal verbs often contribute to tone, character identity, and emotion in fiction. In literary dialogues, authors use phrasal verbs to make characters sound more natural and informal. If translated poorly, the character's personality might change. For example, in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter, characters like Hagrid use informal phrasal verbs that emphasize his friendly and unrefined speech[8]. A translation that replaces all phrasal verbs with formal equivalents might make him sound too educated, losing his original personality.

Consider this dialogue:

English: "I reckon you should give it a go!"

Too formal translation: "I believe you should attempt it."

Better translation: "O'ylaymanki, sinab ko'rishing kerak!" (Maintains natural tone).

Thus, literary translators must ensure that phrasal verbs match the original character's voice and style.

Since there is no single "perfect" way to translate phrasal verbs, translators use several key strategies based on the context, tone, and linguistic differences.

1. Using a Single-Word Equivalent

This is the most common method, especially when the target language lacks phrasal verb structures.

"Take after" → "O'xshamoq" (Uzbek).

"Run into" → "Duch kelmoq" (Uzbek).

This method is concise but can sometimes lose the nuanced meaning of the original.

2. Paraphrasing the Meaning

When a direct equivalent does not exist, translators explain the concept instead of translating word-for-word.

"Make up for lost time" → "Yo'qotilgan vaqtni qoplash uchun ko'proq ishlamoq." (Uzbek)

"Turn in" (meaning "go to sleep") → "Tinch dam olish uchun joyiga borish." (Uzbek)

This approach preserves the meaning but can make the sentence longer.

3. Literal Translation

In some cases, a direct translation works if the target language shares a similar concept.

"Turn off the lights" → "Chiroqni o'chir." (Uzbek - same structure).

"Call off the meeting" → "Uchrashuvni bekor qil." (Uzbek - direct match).



However, this method only works for non-idiomatic phrasal verbs.

4. Cultural Adaptation

This method is useful for idiomatic expressions that do not make sense when translated directly.

"Bite the bullet" (meaning "endure pain") → "Chidamoq" (Uzbek).

"Hit the books" (meaning "study hard") → "Ko'p o'qimoq" (Uzbek).

Here, the meaning is maintained, but the metaphor is adapted.

5. Borrowing the English Term

In cases where the term is widely recognized, the translator might keep the English version.

"Check-in" → "Check-in qilish" (Uzbek).

"Log out" → "Log out qilish" (Uzbek).

This is common in technical and modern language, but it is less useful for literary fiction.

While various translation strategies exist for handling phrasal verbs, choosing the appropriate one largely depends on the context in which the phrasal verb appears[7]. In fiction, context is not only determined by the literal meaning of the verb but also by characterization, tone, and cultural implications.

For instance, formal texts may require single-word substitutions, while dialogues and casual speech might better preserve the original phrasal verb structure or paraphrase its meaning. Additionally, literary translators must decide whether the target audience will understand certain idioms or metaphors or if they need adaptation.

Another critical factor is genre. In literary works such as classic novels, poetry, or historical fiction, where the language carries strong cultural or historical significance, the translator must consider preserving stylistic elements. In contrast, modern or young adult fiction allows for more contemporary, flexible translation choices, sometimes even borrowing from English.

Ultimately, translating phrasal verbs in fiction requires a dynamic approach, combining multiple strategies rather than relying on a single method. Translators often make case-by-case decisions, ensuring that each instance of a phrasal verb retains its intended nuance, readability, and emotional impact.

Conclusion

Translating phrasal verbs in fiction requires a deep understanding of both languages and cultures. The biggest challenges include semantic complexity, structural differences, and cultural adaptation.



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Different translation strategies-single-word equivalents, paraphrasing, literal translation, cultural adaptation, and borrowing must be used based on the context. The ultimate goal is to maintain the natural flow and emotional depth of the original text while making the translation accessible and meaningful to readers in the target language.

Since-fiction often relies on expressive and conversational language, handling phrasal verbs correctly is essential for producing a high-quality translation. A skilled translator balances accuracy and creativity, ensuring that the translated text feels as authentic and engaging as the original.

The translation of phrasal verbs in fiction presents linguistic, cultural, and stylistic challenges that demand a nuanced approach. Since phrasal verbs often carry multiple meanings, idiomatic expressions, and emotional depth, a direct translation is rarely sufficient. The key to effective translation lies in understanding the original context, choosing the most appropriate strategy, and balancing accuracy with naturalness in the target language.

As this analysis has shown, different techniques-such as using single-word equivalents, paraphrasing, literal translation, cultural adaptation, and borrowings. English terms can be applied depending on the text's tone, audience, and linguistic constraints. While there is no universal rule for translating phrasal verbs, the most successful translations ensure that the original intent and expressive power of the text are preserved.

Fictional works rely heavily on characterization, mood, and dialogue, making it essential for translators to maintain the vibrancy and authenticity of the original work. Thus, mastering phrasal verb translation is not merely a technical process but an artistic and intellectual challenge, requiring deep knowledge of both languages and cultural sensitivity.

As translation studies continue to evolve, further research into corpus-based approaches, machine translation improvements, and bilingual cognitive processing may provide new insights into overcoming phrasal verb translation difficulties. Understanding and addressing these challenges will ultimately lead to more fluid, engaging, and accurate literary translations, enriching the reading experience for global audiences.

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