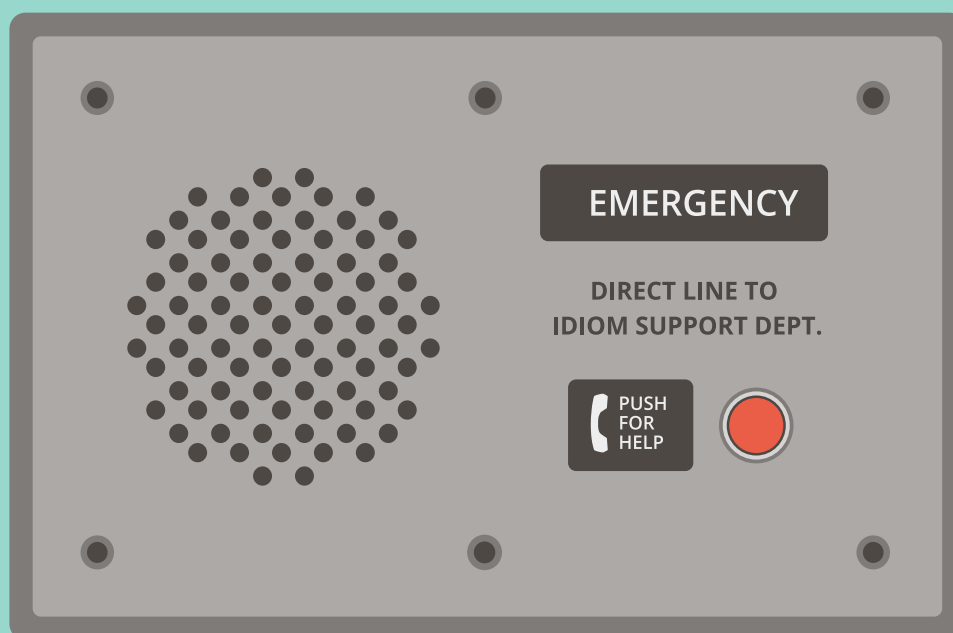


#10: Idiom SOS



What are idioms?

Idioms are expressions “whose meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of the constituent words” (Collins English Dictionary). For example, you can’t deduce the meaning of to sit on the fence from “to sit” or “fence”.

Most idioms include cultural references, which make them tricky to translate. In British English, for example, to send someone to Coventry means “to ostracise someone”. One theory relates this to liverymen of centuries past - when expelled from a London Guild, they went to Coventry, where Guilds had no influence.

Translating Idioms

The first step is to unravel the idiom’s meaning in the source language. If you don’t already understand it, online idiom dictionaries can help. For instance:

- German:
www.redensarten-index.de/suche.php
- Spanish (Chile):
www.mainframe.cl/diccionario/diccionario.php

It’s now time to translate the phrase. There are five options:

1. **An identical idiom.** This is the Holy Grail when translating idioms. However, more often than not, there won’t be an exact equivalent in the target language.
2. **An idiom with the same meaning and similar imagery.** Is there an idiom that uses a similar theme? For instance, translating the Spanish *ser pan comido* (lit: to be bread eaten) as to be a piece of cake.
3. **An idiom with the same meaning**, but different imagery. For example, the German phrase *ein Tropfen auf den heißen Stein* (lit: a drop on the hot stone) corresponds to the English “drop in the ocean”.
4. **Paraphrasing.** Where there’s no direct or indirect equivalent, paraphrase the idiom. For instance, you could paraphrase the Spanish *estar hecho un ají* as “to be furious”.
5. **Omission.** If you’ve exhausted all other avenues, consider omitting the idiom – but only do this if no significant meaning is lost. Otherwise, head back to option 4 and paraphrase!

Posted by Daniel Harper,
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Other Lessons

To talk about the lesson or ask questions, join our discussion in the [Translator Forums](#).