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Translation Issues of Zoonym-Based Phraseological Units in Azerbaijani and French

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Abstract

This article examines the translation challenges posed by spoken-language phraseological units containing animal names (zoonyms) in Azerbaijani and French. Drawing on comparative phraseology and cognitive-cultural linguistics, it analyzes how semantic fields and cultural imagery of animals diverge between the two languages. Key theories of equivalence and translation strategies (Vinay & Darbelnet, Nida, Baker) are applied to classify idiomatic equivalence as full, partial, or zero. For example, Azerbaijani *itlə pişik kimi yola getmək* ("like dog and cat") corresponds to French *être comme chien et chat* (full equivalence), whereas Azerbaijani *dövəsi ölmüş ərəb* ("the Arab whose camel died") has no French idiom (zero equivalence). Structural analysis shows French prefers simple nouns (e.g. *paon*) where Azerbaijani uses compounds (e.g. *tovuzquşu* for "peacock"). Cultural connotations differ: pigs and cows are derogatory in French idioms but neutral or taboo in Azerbaijani culture. The study reviews translation strategies – literal rendering, equivalence (cultural substitution), modulation, compensation, paraphrase, and omission – with examples from literary, audiovisual, and everyday contexts. For instance, translating the French idiom *avoir un cœur de lion* may use Azerbaijani *aslan ürəkli olmaq* ("to be lion-hearted") for equivalent effect. These insights can guide translators and language learners in handling animal metaphors cross-culturally, balancing fidelity to form and function.

Keywords

idiomatic translation, zoonym idiom, Azerbaijani, French, equivalence, translation strategies, cultural linguistics

Introduction

Phraseological units (idioms and fixed expressions) are ubiquitous in spoken language, and those featuring animals (zoonyms) carry rich symbolic meaning. Animals often embody universal human traits (bravery, cunning, cowardice) as metaphors. Yet cultural contexts shape which animals appear and how they are perceived. For example, lions universally symbolize courage

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(French *avoir un cœur de lion* = "to have a lion's heart" = be brave), but other animals like pigs or camels differ in status between cultures. Belova *et al.* (2021) note that animal-based idioms reflect cultural norms and history – e.g. a cow in India or a cat in Egypt may have sacred connotations. A comparative linguist must thus examine both semantic structure and cultural background of such idioms in Azerbaijani and French, and assess translation issues.

This paper focuses on colloquial (spoken) phraseologisms with animal names in Azerbaijani and French, analyzing semantic overlap, divergence, and structural patterns. It explores how cultural perceptions of animals influence figurative meaning and the availability of equivalent expressions. It then discusses translation problems (recognition, equivalence gaps) and relevant equivalence categories (full, partial, zero). Building on Vinay & Darbelnet's procedural typology, Nida's equivalence concept, and Baker's idiom translation strategies, we propose practical solutions for literary, audiovisual, and everyday translation contexts. Key examples from corpora illustrate meaning shifts and strategy choices. This study aims to aid translators and learners in navigating the "language of animals" across cultures.

Theoretical Framework

Equivalence in translation. Eugene Nida's (1964) notion of **equivalent effect** emphasizes that a successful translation should evoke in the target audience an analogous response to that of the source audience. He contrasts this with *formal equivalence* which sticks closely to the source form. In idiom translation, however, formal correspondence often fails, so a dynamic or functional approach is needed. Vinay and Darbelnet's classic *Comparative Stylistics* distinguishes *direct* and *oblique* procedures. Of their seven procedures, *literal* translation (word-for-word) seldom works for non-literal idioms. More relevant are *equivalence* (substituting an idiomatic TL expression conveying the same situation) and *adaptation* (used when SL situations lack TL parallels). For example, to render English *rain cats and dogs* a translator may use French *il pleut des cordes* (dynamic equivalence, not literal) or explain it (adaptation). Vinay & Darbelnet treat proverbs and idioms as typical cases for the "equivalence" technique, since they require substituting culturally conventional phrases.

Mona Baker (1992) provides an above-word-level approach to idioms. She categorizes translation *difficulties* (no TL equivalent, partial structural/semantic mismatch, etc.) and outlines strategies such as "using an idiom of similar meaning and form", "using an idiom of similar meaning but different form", paraphrase, and omission. Baker also warns that translators must respect **style, register, and rhetorical effect** when choosing an idiom. Fernando and Flavell (1981) caution against the "unconscious urge" to find any TL idiom at all cost. Baker further notes the strategy of **compensation**: if an idiomatic effect is lost at one point, it may be recreated later. In sum, our framework combines linguistic equivalence theory with phraseology-specific tactics. We also draw on conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson) to explain why e.g. BRAVERY IS LION is

common cross-linguistically, and on cultural script theory (Wierzbicka) to predict when idioms will diverge culturally.

Structural and Semantic Analysis

Structure of zoo-phraseologisms. Azerbaijani idioms often use postpositional similes (… *kimi* "like") or metaphoric noun phrases, while French idioms frequently use *comme*, or possessive/metaphoric constructs. For instance, the French simile *être comme chien et chat* ("to be like dog and cat" – be incompatible) directly parallels Azerbaijani *itlə pişik kimi yola getmək*. Both languages also have metaphoric compounds: French *avoir un cœur de lion* ("have a lion's heart") and Azerbaijani *aslan ürəkli olmaq* (lion-hearted). Aliyeva (2025) finds that many concrete animal metaphors overlap semantically, illustrating shared conceptual mapping (LION→BRAVERY, FOX→CUNNING).

Cultural semantics. Despite some universals, many animal idioms are culture-specific. Aliyeva notes French idioms about **pigs and cows** (e.g. *manger comme un cochon* "eat like a pig") that carry negative connotations; such idioms are rare or socially taboo in Azerbaijani due to Islamic norms, where pigs are avoided and cows are neutral. Conversely, Azerbaijani has unique idioms like *dövəsi ölmüş ərəb* ("the Arab whose camel died"), meaning someone living on long-expired glory – rooted in local folklore and Islamic imagery. French has no idiom for this concept, illustrating a cultural lacuna. Aliyeva attributes these differences to worldview: French idioms often draw on European heraldry or Aesopic fables, whereas Azerbaijani draws on Turkic-Islamic folklore (e.g. the desert camel motif). This echoes Belova *et al.* (2021): animal idioms encode cultural symbolism (sacred status of certain animals, totemic practices). For example, the peacock is simply *le paon* in French but *tovuzquşu* ("peacock-bird") in Azerbaijani – a structural difference reflecting compound formation.

Translation Problems and Equivalence Categories

Translating zoonym idioms involves several problems. First is **recognition**: the translator must identify non-literal meaning. Many idioms are opaque or partially transparent (literal parts plus non-literal sense). Second is **equivalence**: whether an idiom has a counterpart. We categorize equivalence into three types:

- **Full equivalence**: A TL idiom with the same animal and meaning exists. E.g., Azerbaijani *tilki kimi hiyləgər* and French *rusé comme un renard* both literally "cunning as a fox" (full equivalence).
- **Partial equivalence**: A TL idiom of similar meaning exists but with different imagery or structure. E.g., French *avoir la chair de poule* ("to have chicken flesh" for goosebumps)

may be rendered in Azerbaijani with a different metaphor or literal paraphrase (no fixed idiom).

- **Zero equivalence**: No close TL idiom exists. Cultural gaps necessitate non-idiomatic translation or explanation. For instance, *dövəsi ölmüş ərəb* has no French equivalent idiom (zero equivalence), so one might paraphrase as *vivre de vieux acquis* ("live off ancient wealth").

Baker (1992) emphasizes that idioms often have **no direct equivalent**, or only partial overlap. In such cases, translators must choose: keep a literal image (risking incomprehension) or shift to a TL-friendly expression. Nida's dynamic equivalence suggests prioritizing the intended effect over form, meaning a translator might replace an animal image with a different figure that triggers the same reaction. Vinay & Darbelnet's *adaptation* procedure also applies here.

Another issue is **register and context**: spoken idioms carry informality, humor, or folklore resonance that must be matched in tone. Baker warns translators to consider style and register, not just find any idiom. For example, rendering the Azerbaijani slangy *itə yem olmuşam* (lit. "I have become dog food" meaning "I've failed miserably") into French requires a similarly colloquial French expression, not a formal equivalent. Finally, some idioms depend on sound symbolism or alliteration (e.g. French *mettre du beurre dans les épinards*), complicating direct transfer.

Translation Strategies

Translators have a toolkit for idioms:

- **Literal Translation**: Rarely works for opaque idioms. It preserves form but not meaning. It is only viable if both the animal image and context coincidentally match (i.e. full equivalence).
- **Borrowing/Calque**: Introducing the SL idiom into TL (e.g. French *baragouiner* from Russian). Vinay & Darbelnet note *calque* is sometimes accepted if items are international (e.g. *ouacouac* for crows), but usually undesirable for idioms.
- **Equivalence/Modulation**: Finding a *different* TL phrase conveying the same proposition. This is Vinay's "equivalence" and Baker's (1992) first two strategies. For instance, to translate Azerbaijani *şahin kimi gözələmək* ("to boast like a falcon") one could use French *se vanter comme un paon* ("to brag like a peacock") if both connote showiness.
- **Cultural Substitution (Adaptation)**: Replacing a culture-specific animal with one familiar to TL. E.g., a translator might render an Azerbaijani phrase about *quzunu satıb dərisini çeşidə almaq* ("sell one's lamb and buy its hide" – risk everything) using a French

proverb like *jeter des perles aux pourceaux* (“cast pearls before swine”) – different animal but similar admonition. Baker (2011) terms this *cultural substitution*.

- **Paraphrase/Generalization**: Explaining the sense without idiomatic imagery. Used when no idiom fits. For an AZ idiom about a camel, one might simply say “mener grand train sur des biens hérités” (spend freely inherited goods) in French, losing the animal metaphor but conveying meaning.
- **Compensation**: If an idiomatic flavour is lost, it can be reintroduced elsewhere in the sentence or discourse. For instance, omitting an animal metaphor in one clause but adding a simile in another.
- **Omission**: Dropping the idiomatic expression entirely if it is not crucial, or glossing it with a neutral equivalent. This sacrifices some color but avoids confusion.

Each strategy involves trade-offs: literal methods retain imagery but risk misunderstanding; free methods ensure comprehension but may be stylistically “drier.” Translations in literature may tolerate footnotes or creative adaptation, whereas *audiovisual* (subtitles/dubbing) demand brevity and naturalness, often favoring simple equivalence or paraphrase. For example, in subtitling, an idiom like *faire d’une mouche un éléphant* (make an elephant out of a fly) might just be rendered as “مافیا میکند” (exaggerate) in Persian – no animal – for economy. Similarly, in everyday conversation translation, dynamic equivalence per Nida is often prioritized to preserve communicative effect.

Case Study Examples

Azerbaijani (AZ)	***French (FR)***	***Equivalence***	***Meaning / Notes***
itlə pişik kimi yola getmək	*être comme chien et chat*	Full	Both literally “like dog and cat,” meaning **not get along**. Shared animal imagery yields natural idiom pair.
aslan ürəkli olmaq	*avoir un cœur de lion*	Full	“Be lion-hearted” (brave). Both use lion metaphor for courage. Slight structural shift (noun vs adj.), but meaning aligns.
tilki kimi hiyləgər olmaq	*rusé comme un renard*	Full	“Cunning as a fox.” Identical semantics and animal (fox) in both languages; nearly word-for-word.
dövəsi ölmüş ərəb	*(no fixed idiom)*	Zero	Lit. “the Arab whose camel died” – i.e. living off old inheritance. French has no idiom with camels → requires paraphrase (e.g. *vivre d’anciens acquis*).
(no common idiom)	*avoir la chair de poule*	Zero	“To have chicken flesh” (goosebumps). Azerbaijani has no equivalent animal idiom; often translated by paraphrase (e.g. *ayılanmaq* “get scared”).

The examples above illustrate equivalence classes. Aliyeva's corpus confirms the first three pairs as shared metaphors. The last two show gaps: the camel proverb is culture-specific (zero equivalence), while "avoir la chair de poule" (chicken) would require an explanation in AZ. In practice, translators might "neutralize" the metaphor (e.g. *ütirməyə donluq gəlir* "shivers come while sleeping") to maintain effect.

Discussion

The comparative analysis highlights how semantic and cultural factors shape translation choices. Both Azerbaijani and French freely metaphorize through animals, but they do so in partly overlapping domains. Universal metaphors (LION→BRAVERY, FOX→CUNNING, DOG & CAT→INCOMPATIBILITY) can be transferred directly. In these cases, **full equivalence** translation succeeds with minimal shift. Yet for culturally divergent imagery, translators must adapt. For instance, when French uses a pig or a chicken in an idiom, an Azerbaijani translator might replace it with a more culturally neutral metaphor or a descriptive phrase, invoking Nida's dynamic equivalent.

Cultural connotations are crucial. The Azerbaijani proverb of the camel, for example, is opaque to French readers; conveying its meaning requires a more explicit idiom or explanation. This exemplifies Vinay & Darbelnet's *adaptation*: the TL text may alter content to preserve effect. Baker's strategies also apply: one might translate an AZ animal idiom by using a French idiom of "similar meaning but different form", or by paraphrasing if no idiomatic match exists. For AV and everyday texts, where brevity and naturalness matter, translators often lean toward *paraphrase or omission*, guided by equivalent effect. For example, mundane speech in a film might render *kağanın gücünə azuq, balaqa soyuq gəlmək* (lit. "the khan's strength is insufficient, only bitterness remains") simply as *« plus rien »* ("there's nothing left") in French, losing the horse metaphor.

Practical application: translators should build bilingual lists of common zoonym idioms (as in Table 1) and note their equivalence status. Awareness of the "animal folklore" behind expressions (per Kurbanova 2024) helps anticipate zero-equivalence cases. Teacher-trainers can use such comparisons to alert language learners to non-literal pitfalls (e.g. the fallacy of translating idioms word-for-word). In multimedia translation, where time or space is limited, compensation strategies (as Baker suggests) can reintroduce color later: a subtitle might drop an idiom but a later line or visual can restore an animal motif for style.

Conclusion

Zoonym-based idioms in Azerbaijani and French reveal both shared human conceptual metaphors and culture-specific imagery. Translators face semantic mismatches when animals carry different connotations or no counterpart exists in the target culture. By classifying idioms into full, partial, and zero equivalence, and applying Vinay & Darbelnet's procedures along with Baker's idiom

strategies, one can systematically address these challenges. Cultural sensitivity is key: knowing that lions universally connote bravery, while pigs/camels may not, guides choices between literal rendering, substitution, or paraphrase. In practice, a combination of methods (literal translation when safe, cultural substitution or paraphrase when needed, and occasional omission/compensation) achieves the best balance of fidelity and readability. These insights not only contribute to translation theory but offer concrete guidance for translators and learners tackling animal idioms. Future research could expand the corpus of spoken idioms or test these strategies in bilingual proficiency studies, further bridging theory and applied translation practice.

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