| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Expressions of Impossibility in Arabic and English: Unveiling Students' Translation Difficulties

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| **ABSTRACT**

Expressions of impossibility refer to events that can never or rarely happen, tasks that are difficult or impossible to perform, people or things that are of no use and things that are impossible to find. This study explores the similarities and differences between English and Arabic expressions of impossibility, and the difficulties that student-translators have with them. A corpus of English and Arabic expressions of impossibility was collected, analyzed and compared. Data analysis showed that English and Arabic expressions of impossibility fall into 4 categories: (i) those that are identical in form and meaning in both languages (to look for a needle in a haystack, when salt blossoms, when heaven falls on earth); (ii) those that are similar in meaning but differ in wording (when pigs fly, on cloud nine, not in a million years); (iii) those used in English, but have no equivalents in Arabic (when hell freezes over, dance on a land mine); and (iv) those used in Arabic but have no equivalents in English (يريه النجوم في عز الظهر to show someone the stars at noon/in daylight). Responses to a translation test showed that student-translators could translate fewer than 35% of the test items correctly and left many blank. Expressions of impossibility that are similar in English and Arabic were easy to translate, whereas opaque ones (ghost of a chance, near the knuckle, dance on a land mine, عين الشمس ما تتغطى لما تشوف حلمة the sun cannot be covered with a sieve; إنك لا تجنى من الشوك العنب you cannot reap grapes from thorns; بغربال ودنك when you see your ear's lobe; العين ما تقاوم مخرز the eye cannot defy a n awl). English expressions of impossibility were more difficult to translate than Arabic ones as they contained unfamiliar lexical items. Literal translation, explanation/paraphrase, partial translation, and extraneous translation were the most common strategies in that order. Detailed results and recommendations are given.

1. Introduction

Expressions of impossibility refer to events that can never or rarely happen *(when pigs fly, when hell freezes over, once in a blue moon);* tasks that are difficult or impossible to perform *(a snowball's chance in hell; like finding a needle in a haystack);* people or things that are of no use *(as much use as a one-legged man at an arse-kicking contest);* and things that are impossible to find (*as rare as hen's teeth*)[1].

Expressions of impossibility are common in general use in all languages as German –*(Wenn Weihnachten und Ostern auf einen Tag fallen!* "when Christmas and Easter are on the same day"); French *(quand les poules auront des dents*, "when hens have teeth; and

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_idioms_of_improbability

quand les coqs pondront des œufs, "when roosters lay eggs"); Italian (*quando gli asini voleranno* ("when donkeys will fly"); Spanish (*cuando las vacas vuelen*, "when cows fly"); Portuguese (*no dia de São Nunca* "on Saint Never's day"); Russian (когда рак на горе свистнет, "when the crawfish whistles on the mountain"); Danish (*når der er to torsdage i én uge*, "when there are two Thursdays in one week"); Romanian *(când va zbura porcul*, "when pigs fly"); Finnish (*sitten kun lehmät lentävät*, when the cows fly); Hungarian (*majd ha piros hó esik* "when red snow falls"); Dutch (*als Pinksteren en Pasen op één dag vallen*, "when Pentecost and Easter are on the same day"); Polish (*na święty Nigdy*, "till St. Never's Day"); Malay (*menunggu kucing bertanduk* "to wait until a horned cat walks by"); Persian (وقت گل نى "when the reed plant blossoms"); Korean (해가 서쪽에서 뜨겠다, *"Sun might rise from the West"*); Chinese (太陽從西邊升起, *when the sun rises in the West*")[2].

In Arabic, expressions of impossibility exist in Standard Arabic (SA) as well as Colloquial local dialects (CA). Common people use expressions of impossibility quite heavily in daily speech. Historically (more than 1500 years ago), Arabs believed in three impossibles الغول والعنقاء والخل الوفي *(the ogre, the phoenix/gryphon, and the faithful friend).* Different versions of the same expression of impossibility exist in several local Arabic dialects. Arabic has a wide range of similes and hyperboles used in differing from one region to another. In some Arab countries of the Arabian Gulf, one would say إذا حجت البقرة على قرونها "*when the cow goes to pilgrimage on its horns*". In Egypt, they say في المشمش "*when apricots bloom*" and in Palestine, they say لما ينور الملح "*when salt blossoms*" or "*when salt flowers*"[3]. Expressions of impossibility convey emotions and impressions through metaphor. They activate the imagination. Some are funny and convey sarcasm. Expressions of impossibility do not occur in specialized fields.

Although expressions of impossibility are very common in all languages, they have not received sufficient attention from researchers. Few studies in the literature were found. For example, Glukhova & Glukhov (2008) investigated expressions of impossibility and inevitability used in Mari verbal charms to denote impossible or inevitable events, actions and processes. Metaphoric similes and folklore hyperboles are used to express the notions of impossibility (improbability) and inevitability. The Mari people consist of two Volga–Finnic nations living in central Russia, with a population of 605,000 as of 2002. Their sacred and esoteric texts consist of ethnic prayers and charms. A Mari charm – shüvedyme, shüvedyme mut – is an oral text containing a wish, a command or a will, a rhythmically organized verbal formula used in rituals.

Another study by Ajayi (2022) analyzed forms and pragmatic functions of "impossibility" expressions in Yoruba informal interactions within the framework of Mey's Pragmatic Acts (2001). Findings revealed that slang expressions of "impossibility" in Yoruba fall into structure-function-oriented, function-oriented, and danger-oriented types. They are used to express challenge, threat, caution, rejection, rejection with warning, disapproval and discountenance and rebuke with a slangy dare in Yoruba informal interactions. Participants in Yoruba informal interactions use physical acts (facial expression) and contextual elements as voice, shared experiential knowledge, shared cultural knowledge, inference and relevance to deconstruct the pragmatic imports of impossibility expressions.

A study by Levy (1971) classified the types of impossibility into logical and physical impossibility. Logical impossibility affirms what is self-contradictory, and hence is necessarily false, while physical impossibility affirms merely what happens to be contrary to fact, and hence it is only contingently false. Similarly, Aksoy, 2014) classified expressions of impossibility as perceived by civil lawyers into temporary–permanent impossibility (when performance is temporarily impossible vs when performance remains permanently impossible), partial–total impossibility (when only part of the obligation becomes impossible to perform vs when the entire obligation cannot be performed at all), and objective–subjective impossibility (when performance of an obligation is impossible for everyone vs when performance is impossible for the debtor, but someone else can still perform it).

Regarding the structure of expressions of impossibility, Aksoy (2020) examined conditional statements as a Quranic style used in expressions of impossibility in the Holy Quran. Likewise, Khuzina & Khairullina (2017) anayzed the expression of modality as demonstrated by infinitive constructions to denote possibility and impossibility in modern Russian. They indicated that there are subjective modal values of reliability/probability and, objective-modal meanings of reality/unreality, and predicate modality of possibility, impossibility and so on.

Due to lack of studies that investigate expressions of impossibility in Arabic, this study aims to explore expressions of impossibility in English and Arabia and the difficulties that student-translators have in translating them. It also aims to (i) compare English and Arabic expressions of impossibility and explore the similarities between them; (ii) give examples of expressions of impossibility that exist in both English and Arabic, those that are similar in meaning but differ in form (wording), those that exist in English only, and

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[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_idioms_of_improbability

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_idioms_of_improbability

those that exist in Arabic only; (iii) reveal the types of translation errors that students make with examples from students' translations; (iv) the translation strategies that student-translators follow; and (iv) the sources of errors (interlingual and intralingual) in translation expressions of impossibility. The pragmatic aspects of expressions of impossibility, grammatical structure used in expressions of impossibility and the types of expressions of impossibility (logical, physical, objective–subjective, partial–total, temporary–permanent and others) will not be the focus of the current study.

Findings of the current study are significant to translation students and instructors as they will raise their awareness of the types and sources of difficulties that students have in translating expressions of impossibility in order to provide students with extra practice in translating this type of formulaic expressions, especially because they have a metonymic meaning.

2. Methodology
2.1 The Subjects
A sample of 37 translation students in their senior year at the College of Language Sciences (CLS), King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, participated in the study. The students were majoring in English-Arabic and Arabic English translation. They completed 37 hours of language course (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Academic Writing, Editing and Revising, Grammar, Syntax, Morphology, and Vocabulary,), 13 hours of linguistics courses (Introduction to Linguistics, Semantics and Pragmatics, Text Linguistics, Discourse Analysis, 4 hours of Language and Culture courses; and Use of Dictionaries in Translation); 35 hours of translation courses (Introduction to Translation, General Translation from Arabic to English, General Translation from English to Arabic, Computer-Assisted, Political and Media, Financial and Economic, Scientific and Technical, Medical, Islamic, Literary, Legal Translation, Problems of Translation, and Translation Project); 8 hours of interpreting courses (Simultaneous, Liaison and Consecutive); and 8 hours of Arabic language courses (Academic Writing, Syntax, Stylistics Applications). All the participants are native speakers of Arabic, with English as their target language.

In the Vocabulary course, translation students study a sample of general English collocations, idioms, and binomials. In the translation courses, they practice translating collocations, idioms, binomials, and metaphorical expressions which they casually encounter in the texts they translate in the various fields. In addition, the students never received any direct instruction in the meanings and usages of English and Arabic expressions of impossibility and the contexts in which they are used, whether in the Arabic language courses or in the translation courses they take.

2.2 Sample of Expressions of Impossibility
A corpus of 155 (95 Arabic & 60 English) expressions of impossibility that are common in Standard as well as some local Arabic dialects spoken in different Arab countries was collected from several online resources and from some Arab informants, in addition to the author's own collection as a native speaker of Arabic and a translation instructor. To be included in the sample, each expression of impossibility should denote something that cannot be done, attained, fulfilled, or can never happen. It should refer to something that is counterfactual, a hypothetical, or a contrary-to-fact scenario as in "*If pigs could fly, we'd have bacon rain,* لو تنطبق السما على الأرض *when the skyfalls on earth;* لما البقرة تحج على قرونها *when the cow goes to pilgrimage on its horns"*. An expression of impossibility should also imply a paradox in a person, situation, or action) having seemingly contradictory qualities, a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense (بلط البحر *to tile the sea;* بيضة الديك *the rooster's egg;* يمشي على شوك *walk on thorns;* عمر الدم ما يصير مية *blood never becomes water*).

Expressions of impossibility occurring in the Holy Quranic are not included in the current study.

The Arabic corpus was verified by two professors at the Arabic department to make sure that the sample includes expressions of impossibility only and does not include mere phrases or sentences. In addition, the translations, comparisons, and categorization of English and Arabic expressions of impossibility were verified by two professors of English-Arabic translation. Discrepancies in the translation, comparison, and categorization judgments were solved by discussion.

2.3 Analysis of English and Arabic Expressions of Impossibility
2.3.1 Comparison of English and Arabic Expressions of Impossibility
Each English expression of impossibility was translated into Arabic and each Arabic expression of was translated into English. Then, expressions of impossibility in both languages were compared and classified into the following:
1) Expressions that are identical in their conceptual basis (meaning) and linguistic form (wording) in both Arabic and English as in:
   - يا مدور الأبره بأرض إلهيام ,ابرة طاحت في بحر ,ابرة في كومة قش *a needle in a haystack* ;يبني قصورا في الهواء *castles in air* ; لو تنطبق السما على الارض*when heaven falls on earth* لما ينور الملح *when salt blossoms* ;*when salt glows; cry over spilt grasping* ;نجوم السما اقرب لك ولا في الاحلام - بعيد عن اسنانك– *beyond your wildest dreams* ;يبكي على اللبن المسكوب *milk* ;يتضارب/يتشاجر مع خياله *fighting your shadow* ;يتعلق بقشة *hard to swallow* ما ينزل من زوري. *at straws*

2) Expressions that are the same in their conceptual basis, but are different in their linguistic form.as In:
- *when* ; ولا بعد 100 سنة *never/not in a million years*; أَضْغاثٌ أَحْلام *pie in the sky* ; في سابع سما طاير من الفرح *on cloud nine*
اضرب *get blood from a stone* ;من سابع المستحيلات / من رابع المستحيلات *twelfth of never*; لما تطير/ في المشمشـ *pigs fly* في المشمش
. عشم ابليس في الجنة *not to have a chance in hell* ;الأرض تطلّع بطيخ

3) Expressions that exist in English only but have no equivalent in Arabic as in the following examples:
- *when hell freezes over; clear as mud; cold hell ; cold day in hell; dance on a land mine; eat one's cake and have it too; lightning in a bottle ; on a cold day in July.*

4) Expressions that exist in Arabic only but have no equivalents in as in the following:
- ينفخ *to show someone the stars in daylight;* يريه النجوم في عز الظهر *beyond the sun, father than the sun;* وراء الشمس *when the donkey goes up (climbs) the minaret;* لما الحمار يطلع على المئذنة *blow in a pierced waterskin;* في قربة مقطوعة *when the cow goes to pilgrimage on its horns;* لما تحج البقر على قرونها *when the crow greys;* لما يشيب الغراب حلم ابليس *an eye cannot defeat an awl;* العين ما تقاوم مخرز *bird's milk;* لبن العصفور *Satan's dream of heaven;* في الجنة *an eye cannot be higher than the eyebrow;* بعيد ع/على اسنانك *too far from your teeth;* العين ما يسلط البحر *until* حتى يدخل الجمل في سم الخياط *you may ride the highest of your horses;* اعلى ما في خيلك اركبه *tile/pave the sea;* تعلى على الحاجب *even if you plant yourself as a tree;* لو يتزرع شجرة *the ship robe goes through the needle hole;* لو يرجع في بطن امه *even if you go back in your mother's womb, i.e., even if you become a foetus again* ; لو يروح في سابع سما *even if he goes to the seventh heaven;* لو يطير *if he flies;* ودنك *when you see the lobe of your ear.* لما تشوف حلمة Here, the Arabic expressions of impossibility were literally translated in order for the reader to understand the analogy and paradox herein.

5) ***Culture-specific expressions of impossibility***
- *Eat one's cake and have it too; Flying pig; Ghost of a chance; Pie in the sky ; When pigs fly; Wild goose chase; Dodged a bullet; Dance on a land mine; Curve ball (from baseball terminology).*
- *blow in a* ينفخ في قربة مقطوعة *trusting a man is like trusting water in a sieve;* يا مأمنة للرجال يا مأمنة المية في الغربال *pierced waterskin;* لما يطلع الحمار على المئذنة *we said it is a he goat, they said milk it.;* قلنا لهم تيس قالوا احلبوه *it is a goat even if it flies;* عنزة ولو طارت *the three impossibilities: the ogre, the* المستحيلات الثلاثة الغول والعنقاء والخل الوفي *phoenix and the faithful friend;* لما يشيب الغراب *when the crow greys ;* لما تحج البقر على قرونها *when the cow goes for pilgrimage on its horns ;* حلم ابليس في الجنة *like Satan dreaming of heaven.*

2.3.1 Multiple Arabic Expressions of Impossibility with the Same Meaning
- *like* يا مدور الأبره بأرض إلهيام *a needle in a haystack ;* ابرة طاحت في بحر *like a needling in a sea;* ابرة في كومة قش *searching for a needle in the land of wandering:* they all denote futile efforts and the impossibility of achieving something.
- *a can* ايه يعمل الترقيع في الثوب البالى *how can a beautician beautify an ugly face;* إيش تعمل الماشطة في الوجه العكر *patching fix a worn-out garment;* وهل يصلح العطار ما أفسد الدهر *can an apothecary fix what time has spoiled;* ذيل *a dog's tail cannot be straightened.* الكلب ما يتعدل
- نقول ثور/تيس يقولوا احلبوه *we say it is a bull/he goat, they said milk it;* عنزة ولو طارت *it is a goat even if it flies: showing a paradox.*
- يا طالب الدِّيس من ذنب النّمس يحرّم عَليك ذُوق العسل *If you seek molasses from a mongoose' tail, you will never taste honey ;* يا طالب الدهن من عصاعيض الكلاب *seeking fat from a dog's coccyx ;* يا مستنى السمنة من دهن النملة عمرك ما حتقلي *if you expect to get ghee from an ant, you will never fry.*
- لما تشوف حلمة ودنك *when you see your* لما يشوف الجمل عوجة رقبته *until the camel sees the bend of its neck ;* ear's lobe.

2.3.2 Lexical Structure of Arabic Expressions Of Impossibility
- *Animals: Bird:* لبن العصفور; *Bull:* نقول ثور يقولوا احلبوه; *Camel:* حتى يلج الجمل في سم الخياط , لما يشوف الجمل عوجة رقبته; *Cow:* لما تحج البقر على قرونها; *Crow:* لما يشيب الغراب; *Dog:* ذيل الكلب ما يتعدل; *Donkey:* لما يطلع الحمار على المئذنة; *Fish:* يبيع سمك في البحر; *Goat:* عنزة ولو طارت , قلنا لهم تيس قالوا احلبوه; *Horses:* اعلى ما في خيلك اركبه; *Mongoose:* او سنامه; *Mule:* حدّ يقول البغل في الإبريق; *Rooster:* يا طالب الدِّيس من ديل النّمس يحرّم عَليك ذُوق العسل بَيْضةُ الدّيك *a rooster's egg.*
- *Call for prayer:* يؤذن في خرابة *as calling for prayer in a desolate place ;* يؤذن في مالطة *as calling for prayer in Malta.*
- *Sun, sky, stars:* في سابع سما; لو *cannot cover the sun with a sieve;* عين الشمس ما تتغطى بغربال *;* ابعد من عين الشمس *the stars are much obtainable;* نجوم السما اقرب لك *if he goes to the seventh sky/heaven;* يروح في سابع سما *seeing the stars in daylight.* في عز الظهر

- *Body parts:* لما تشوف حلمة ودنك ; العين ما تقاوم مخرز ;لما تحج البقر على قرونها ;العين ما تعلى على الحاجب.
- *Food & drink:* في المشمش ; دق عمر الرايب ما يبقى حليب *yoghurt never becomes milk again;* لبن العصفور *bird's milk;* البيضة ما تكسر حجر *If you pound water, you will get water;* المي وهي مي *if the sky is going to rain dumplings, it would have had dough clouds.* لو السماء حتمطر زلابية كانت غيمت عجين;
- *Pilgrimage:* يرزقنا الحج والناس راجعة *May we go to pilgrimage when people come back from it, i.e., after it is over.*
- *Satan:* عشم ابليس في الجنة; *As Satan's aspiration to be in heaven.*
- *Hell:* None

2.3.3 Meanings Implied in Arabic Expressions of Impossibility
- *Futile efforts:* ينفخ في الرماد *blowing in ashes;* يبحث عن ابرة في كومة قش *looking for a needle in a haystack;* يغرف من البحر بالفنجان *scooping the sea water with a cup;* ينفخ في قربة مقطوعة *blowing in a pierced ;* يضرب في حديد بارد *beat cold iron.* الحمار حمار ولو بين الخيول *a donkey is a donkey even if grows among horses;* ربي
- *Challenge:* لو يروح في سابع سما *even if he/she goes back to his/her mother's womb;* لو يرجع في بطن امه *if he goes to the seventh sky;* لو يطير *if he flies;* فالج لا تعالج *paralysis cannot be treated;* بعيد ع/على اسنانك *too far from your teeth;* يبلط البحر ; اعلى ما في خيلك اركبه; لو يتزرع شجرة
- *Stubbornness:* عنزة ولو طارت *it is a goat even if it flies.* قلنا لهم تيس/ثور قالوا احلبوه *we told them it is a bull, but they said milk it;*
- *Funny:* اللي *like seeking molasses from a mongoose' tail;* يا طالب الدبس من ذنب النمس النّمس يحرّم عَليك ذُوق العسل *a woman with hair will not gain more than what a bald woman has gained ;* إيش تعمل أخذته القرعه تأخذه أم الشعور *how can a beautician beautify an ugly face ;* شو بدي اترجى منك يا سفرجلة وكل عضة بغصّة الماشطة في الوجه العكر *what can I expect from a quince when I choke with every bite*
- *Incongruity:* البيضة ما تكسر حجر *an egg does not break a stone;* نقول ثور يقولوا احلبوه *we told them it is a bull, but they say milk it;* العين ما تعلى على الحاجب *the eye cannot be higher than the eyebrow.* العين ما تقاوم مخرز *the eye cannot defy the awl ;*
- Things that are impossible to fix or cannot be done: فالج لا تعالج; دق المي وهي مي *even if you pound the water, it will remain water;* حتى يلج الجمل في سم الخياط *scooping the sea with a cup ;* يغرف من البحر بالفنجان *when the shop rope goes through the needle hole.*

2.4 The Expressions of Impossibility Translation Test

The subjects took an expressions of impossibility test that consisted of 20 English and 20 Arabic expressions of impossibility that were randomly selected from the expressions of impossibility corpora, and which covered expressions of impossibility in all categories. The items were presented in isolation. The test instructions specified what the test items were. The students were asked to translate each English expression of impossibility to Arabic and each Arabic expression of impossibility to English. The students were not allowed to use any kind of dictionary, whether paper, mobile apps or online. The students were given open time to respond to the test.

The Arabic Subtest
نجوم السما اقرب لك، عمر الرايب ما يبقى حليب، يبحث عن ابرة في كومة قش، ابرة طاحت في بحر، عمره الدم ما يصير ميه، يبكي على اللبن المسكوب ، ابعد من عين الشمس، عين الشمس ما تتغطى بغربال، يريه النجوم في عز الظهر، إنك لا تجنى من الشوك العنب، في المشمش، كمن يغرف من البحر بالفنجان، حتى يلج الجمل في سم الخياط، لبن العصفور، ينفخ في قربة مقطوعة، حلم ابليس في الجنة، لما تشوف حلمة ودنك، الشمعة لا تغلي إبريق الشاي، لما يشيب الغراب، يد وحدة ما تصفق.

The English Subtest
a snowball's chance in hell, as difficult as nailing jelly to a tree, as rare as hen's teeth, dance on a land mine, eat one's cake and have it too, like squeezing water from a stone, ghost of a chance, grasping at straws, if the sky falls, we shall catch larks, lick your own elbow, near the knuckle, not to have a chance in hell, on cloud nine, pie in the sky, teach a goldfish to play the clarinet, the first of never = a day that will never come, to catch lightning in a bottle, when pigs fly, when salt blossoms, wild goose chase, ~~once in a blue moon, never in a million years, a vicious cycle,~~

2.5 Analysis of the Translation Test Responses

The students' written responses to the expressions of impossibility test items were marked by the author. To be marked correct, each English and Arabic expression of impossibility had to be translated correctly, either by an equivalent expression of impossibility, a literal or explanatory equivalent. Mistranslations were compiled and subjected to further analysis. Translation strategies were classified into: (i) leaving the answer blank (avoidance); (ii) literal translation; (iii) paraphrase (explanation); (iv) partial translation, and (v) providing extraneous equivalents.

The expressions of impossibility translation error corpus consisted of a total of 740 blank responses, 338 correct responses and 402 incorrect responses. Results of the students' responses are reported quantitatively and qualitatively.

The percentages of expressions of impossibility in each category were computed.

2.6 Reliability
Reliability of the expressions of impossibility test scores was calculated using the Kuder-Richardson 21' formula as it estimates the internal-consistency of the test items from a single administration of the test. The reliability coefficient of the test scores was .71.

Inter-scorer reliability was also calculated by having a colleague who taught translation mark a sample of answers and by comparing both analyses. There was a 96% agreement between the two scorers in identifying meanings and expressions available in both English and Arabic and those that are available in one language only and classifying the faulty responses into translation strategies. Disagreements were solved by discussion.

3. Results
3.1 Students' Responses to the English and Arabic Expressions of Impossibility Test
The translation test results showed that undergraduate translation students rendered 740 blank responses. The typical student in the sample left 40% of the Arabic test items and 55% of the English test items blank, with a range of 0 to 95 blank items on the Arabic subtest and 12% to 90% blank items on the English subtest. Examples of expressions of impossibility that the students failed to translate correctly or blank (without any response) are: لما تشوف حلمة ,حتى يلج الجمل في سم الخياط ,إنك لا تجنى من الشوك العنب ,ينفخ في قربة مقطوعة ,ودنك , *as difficult as nailing jelly to a tree, dance on a land mine, ghost of a chance, grasping at straws, near the knuckle, wild goose chase.*

In addition, student translators in the current study had more difficulty in translating expressions impossibility from English to Arabic than Arabic to English. They responded to 60% of the Arabic test items of which 35% were correctly translated and 25% incorrectly translated. They responded to 45% of the English test items of which 20% were correctly translated and 25% were incorrectly translated. Expressions of impossibility that are identical in English and Arabic were correctly translated. In some cases, the students gave a variety of correct responses (translations) as in the following examples: ابرة طاحت في بحر ,يد وحدة ما تصفق, *a needle*, في المشمش, قصورا في الهواء *castles in air*; كمن يغرف من البحر بالفنجان ,يبكي على اللبن المسكوب ,يبحث عن ابرة في كومة قش , لما ينور الملح *when salt blossoms*; لو تنطبق السما على الارض *when heaven falls on earth*; ابرة في كومة قش *when salt glows; cry over spilt milk* يبكي على اللبن المسكوب *beyond your wildest dreams* ولا في الاحلام بعيد عن اسنانك ; *grasping at straws* ما ينبلع/ ما ينهضم، ما ينزل من زوري *hard to swallow* يتعلق بقشة.

Some of the expressions of impossibility that are the same in their conceptual basis but are different in their linguistic form were also easier to translate than those that exist in English only or Arabic only as in *on cloud nine* في سابع سما طاير من الفرح; *never/not in a million years* سنة 100 اضرب الأرض تطلّع بطيخ *get blood from a stone* ; لما تطير/ في المشمش *when pigs fly*; ولا بعد 100 *a chance in hell* لما يشيب الغراب : لو يرجع في بطن امه ; نجوم السماء اقرب له.

Some of the equivalents given by some students were even remarkable as in *grasping at straws* يتعلق بقشة; لما ينور الملح *when salt blossoms, when salt glows; hard to swallow* ما ينهضم; *once in a blue moon* مرة في العمر , مرة كل فين وفين.

3.2 Strategies Utilized in Translating Expressions of Impossibility
Analysis of the error data revealed some strategies that students in the current study utilized in translating expressions of possibility. These are summarized below.

1) **Literal translation: Here,** *the students gave a word-for-word translation of the expressions of possibility whether in English or Arabic as in the following examples:*
   - نجوم السما اقرب لك the stars are closer to you; the stars in the sky are near you.
   - عمر الرايب ما يبقى حليب: Yoghurt will not become milk again.
   - يبحث عن ابرة في كومة قش: looks for a needle in a stack of straw; looks for a needle in a pile of hay.
   - ابرة طاحت في بحر: a needle fell in the sea.
   - عمره الدم ما يصير ميه: blood cannot become water.
   - يبكي على اللبن المسكوب: cry over the milk he spilled.
   - ابعد من عين الشمس: far from the eye of the sun.
   - عين الشمس ما تتغطى بغربال: you cannot cover the eye of the sun.
   - يريه النجوم في عز الظهر: showed him the stars in the middle of the day; showed him the stars at noon; saw the stars at noon.

- كمن يغرف من البحر بالفنجان: fill water from the sea with a cup.
- لبن العصفور: the bird's milk.
- إنك لا تجنى من الشوك العنب: you don't get grapes from
- الشمعة لا تغلي إبريق الشاي: cannot make tea on a candle; you cannot boil tea with a candle.
- لما يشيب الغراب: when the craw becomes old.
- يد وحدة ما تصفق: one hand does not clap.
- as rare as hen's teeth: أمر نادر مثل أسنان الدجاج
- like squeezing water from a stone: يعصر الماء من الصخرة. يخرج الماء من الصخور؛ مثل اخراج الماء من الصخور
- grasping at straws: متمسك بقشة
- not to have a chance in hell: ليس له فرصة للذهاب الى جهنم
- on cloud nine فوق الغيوم
- pie in the sky كعكة في السماء
- never in a million years مرة كل مليون عام ; مرة كل مليون سنة
- to catch lightning in a bottle نور في القارورة , يضع النور في القارورة ,
- when pigs fly عندما تطير الخنازير

2) *Paraphrase/explanation*

For some expressions of impossibility, the students gave several explanatory equivalents with varying syntactic structures. Here, the students knew what the expression means but failed to provide an exact equivalent as in the following examples:

- ابرة طاحت في بحر: looking for something small in the sea, you cannot find a needle in the sea water, he is wasting time looking for something.
- ابعد من عين الشمس: too far to reach; farther than the sun; beyond the sun, too far to be reached.
- إنك لا تجنى من الشوك العنب: do good things to be rewarded with good things. If you do bad things, you will not get good results.
- حلم ابليس في الجنة / عشم / طمع/ امل: Satan has no hope of going to heaven, Satan will not go to heaven.
- عمر الرايب ما يبقى حليب: Yogurt can never become milk again.
- عمره الدم ما يصير مية : family relationship is stronger than friendship, your brother is closer to you than your friends
- في المشمش: in the apricot season, do not have too much hope.
- كمن يغرف من البحر بالفنجان: wasting effort and time doing something.
- لبن العصفور: it is not available as birds do not have milk, it is rare like brid's milk.
- لما يشيب الغراب: when the crow becomes old, when the crow has grey hair..
- لو يرجع في بطن امه : *If his mother becomes pregnant,*
- يريه النجوم في عز الظهر he gave him a hard time.
- You cannot blow a balloon with a hole.
- like squeezing water from a stone: لا يمكن استخراج الماء من الصخور

3) *Partial* translation where the students translated part of the expression only because of lexical problems as in:

- عين الشمس ما تتغطى بغربال you cannot cover the sun.
- لما تشوف حلمة ودنك When you see your ear.
- حتى يلج الجمل في سم الخياط until the camel enters.
- ينفخ في قربة مقطوعة blow in a broken.
- if the sky falls, we shall catch larks, اذا وقعت السماء.
- lick your own elbow في كوعه.
- near the knuckle قرب.
- on cloud nine فوق الغيوم.
- teach a goldfish to play the clarinet لا يمكن ان تعلم السمكة لعب.
- انك لا تجني من الشوك العنب: you will not get any grapes.
- to catch lightning in a bottle, في قارورة.
- wild goose chase صيد الاوزة.

4) *Extraneous Equivalents*

Here, some students gave a translation that is too far-fetched and has nothing to do with the denotative nor connotative meaning of the expression as in the examples below.

- eat one's cake and have it too يصنع كعكة ويأكلها.
- when pigs fly عندما يطير في السماء.
- lick your own elbow ما يعرف كوعه من بوعه.
- wild goose chase صيد الإوز في البراري.

- ghost of a chance الخوف من الشبح, شبح المحاولة, لا يحاول خوفا من الشبح.
- if the sky falls, we shall catch larks الطيور تطير في السماء, الطيور على الأرض, اذا وقعت السماء اصطياد الطير

3.3 Error Sources

Students' faulty responses to the Arabic and English expressions of impossibility test showed lack of background knowledge, lack of proficiency and inadequate linguistic and translation competence in both languages especially English. Items that were left blank, extraneous equivalents, literal translations, paraphrase and explanatory equivalents reflect comprehension problems as well. The students looked at each expression as consisting of discrete words, not as a whole unit with a fixed metonymous/underlying meaning. This means that the students looked at the surface structure and ignored the underlying meaning. Many students in the sample seemed to have semantic problems with the English expressions as they could not access the meaning of some lexical items and hence the overall meaning of the whole expression as in the following examples: *near the knuckle, dance on a land mine, a snowball's chance in hell, as rare as hen's teeth, as difficult as nailing jelly to a tree*. Although the lexical items in *eat one's cake and have it too, on cloud nine, ghost of a chance, pie in the sky* are known to the students, they could not access their underlying meaning due to inadequate cultural competence. They had lexical problems with Arabic expressions of impossibility as لما يشيب الغراب، ينفخ في قربة مقطوعة ، حتى يلج الجمل في سم الخياط، لما تشوف حلمة ودنك. These weaknesses reflect unfamiliarity with some English expressions of impossibility, the meaning of lexical items within them and the English equivalents to some Arabic lexemes within the Arabic expressions of impossibility. The data showed no interlingual errors resulting from transfer from L1 to L2 or vice versa. In most cases the weaknesses are not due to pragmatic and cultural factors.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Although the Arabic expressions of impossibility are comprehensible and they all refer to events that can never or rarely happen, tasks that are difficult or impossible to perform, people or things that are of no use, and things that are impossible to find, the students had several translation difficulties and followed several faulty strategies in translating them. The difficulties that students in the current study have, the translation strategies that they followed and translation error sources are similar to those revealed by other studies conducted by the author with other groups of students at CLS in translating other type of metaphors, multi-word units, collocations and fixed expressions such as ibn (son) and bint (daughter) fixed expressions (Al-Jarf, 2023b); numeral-based formulaic expressions (Al-Jarf, 2023c); time metaphors (Al-Jarf, 2023d); dar (house) and bayt (home) expressions (Al-Jarf, 2022a); color-based metaphorical expressions (Al-Jarf, 2019); om- and abu-expressions (Al-Jarf, 2017); binomials (Al-Jarf, 2016); English neologisms (Al-Jarf, 2010); English word + preposition collocations (Al-Jarf, 2022lb); word+particle collocations (Al-Jarf, 2009); multiple Arabic equivalents to English medical terms (Al-Jarf, 2018); English and Arabic polysemes (Al-Jarf, 2022b); English and Arabic Acronyms (Al-Jarf, 2023a).

To develop students' competence in translating multi-word expressions, idioms, metaphors and fixed expressions, this study recommends that expressions of impossibility be integrated in the Problems of Translation course that the students. English expressions of impossibility can also be integrated in the vocabulary courses the students take. Where possible, English expressions of impossibility should be translated by equivalent Arabic expressions of impossibility that have an identical meaning (See Section 2.3.1). Multi-word expressions, idioms, metaphors and fixed expressions, collocations and binomials should be directly taught in those courses. The students may keep their own categorized glossaries of idioms, metaphors, collocations, and binomials together with their equivalents. They can also note the usage of such expressions while reading and in everyday language as many are used in daily communication. Translation instructors may raise students' awareness of the differences between English and Arabic idioms, metaphors, collocations, binomial and expressions of impossibility, which ones are identical, which ones. The students pay attention to the word order of the English and Arabic equivalents they provide, the singular and plural forms and the grammatical agreement between their elements especially in Arabic (Al-Jarf, 2007; Al-Jarf, 2000; Al-Jarf, 2022c; Al-Jarf, 2020). To understand their meanings, the students may look up English expressions of possibility in an English-English dictionary. However, they should not resort to Google Translate and other AI assistants or tools as they give faulty equivalents, equivalents with a faulty word order, and semantic, syntactic, contextual, and orthographic inaccuracies (Al-Jarf, 2024a; Al-Jarf, 2024b; Al-Jarf, 2021a; Al-Jarf, 2016a).

Since studies that investigate expressions of impossibility, in Arabic in particular are rare, this study recommends that future research explore expressions of impossibility in the Holy Quaran and Prophet Mohammad's Hadiths as they contain unique examples using a variety of grammatical and rhetorical devices. These aspects are still open for further investigation in the future.

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