

Investigating the Translation of Idiomatic Expressions in the Indonesian Subtitles of *Dead Poets Society*

Juli Hartati Sihaloho^{1*}; Laura Sesilia Sihaloho²; Natalina Limbong³; Herman Herman⁴;
Devi Alvionita Alindra⁵; Tutiariani Nasution⁶

^{1,2,3,4}Department of English Education, Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar, Indonesia

⁵Department of Applied Mandarin for Business and Professional Communication, Universitas Prima Indonesia, Indonesia

⁶Department of Indonesian Language and Literature Education, Universitas Asahan, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author Email: julierubylilys@gmail.com

Received:- 04 January 2026/ Revised:- 14 January 2026/ Accepted:- 19 January 2026/ Published: 31-01-2026

Copyright @ 2026 Journal of Creative Research in English Literature & Culture

This is an Open-Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution

Non-Commercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>) which permits unrestricted

Non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Abstract— This research investigates the translation of idiomatic expressions in the Indonesian subtitles of the film *Dead Poets Society* (1989). Employing a descriptive qualitative design, the study identifies idioms in the English dialogue, analyzes the translation strategies applied, and evaluates the resulting meaning equivalence. Data were collected through documentation of the film's dialogue and official Indonesian subtitles, with analysis guided by translation strategy frameworks. Findings indicate that paraphrasing is the dominant translation strategy (53%), followed by idiom-to-idiom translation (27%), literal translation (13%), and omission (7%). While core meanings are generally preserved, metaphorical nuance and cultural connotations are frequently reduced. The study concludes that idiom translation in subtitling involves balancing semantic accuracy with the technical constraints of the medium, often prioritizing audience comprehension over stylistic preservation. These findings contribute to understanding the complexities of audiovisual translation and offer practical insights for subtitle practitioners.

Keywords— *idiom translation, audiovisual translation, subtitling, translation strategies, Dead Poets Society, cross-cultural communication.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Language functions not only as a tool for conveying information but also as a medium for expressing cultural values. Idiomatic expressions represent a linguistic element that reflects cultural identity, as their meanings cannot be interpreted literally from their constituent words. Idioms often contain figurative messages, symbolic values, and cultural connotations that present complexity in translation (Ngongo et al., 2024). When transferring idioms from English to Indonesian, translators must negotiate meaning, culture, and readability to ensure message relevance for the target audience, given that cultural differences between languages can cause semantic shifts.

Film is a medium that frequently features idiomatic expressions, as dialogue typically aims to represent native speakers' language style for natural and communicative effect. *Dead Poets Society* (1989) is particularly rich in idiomatic expressions, especially through the character of Mr. Keating, whose language style is inspirational and advice-laden. These idioms are not merely linguistic embellishments but reflect philosophical motivations, emotional developments, and character evolution. They contribute significantly to character building, moral messaging, and narrative progression.

However, translating these idioms into Indonesian subtitles presents numerous challenges. Idiomatic expressions may undergo meaning shifts, paraphrasing, omission, or cultural adaptation to maintain clarity within the limited text duration of subtitles (Sinambela et al., 2024). This raises important questions about how equivalently the source language idiom's meaning is represented in the target language. Therefore, examining idiom translation in the Indonesian subtitles of *Dead Poets Society* is relevant both linguistically and culturally, helping to understand how figurative meanings are transferred and to what extent message integrity is maintained in audiovisual translation.

Based on this background, the present research addresses three main questions:

1. What idiomatic expressions appear in the English dialogue of *Dead Poets Society*?
2. What translation strategies are employed in rendering these idioms into Indonesian subtitles?
3. How accurate and equivalent are the translated idioms in conveying meaning to Indonesian audiences?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Defining Idioms:

Idioms are phrases whose overall meaning cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of their individual components. Fernando (1996) describes them as set phrases that function as single units of meaning. This non-compositional nature makes idioms unique linguistic elements that require contextual and cultural knowledge for proper interpretation. Gibbs (1994) emphasizes that idioms carry cultural, historical, and symbolic significance within a language, often originating from community practices, stories, or shared experiences. Glucksberg (2001) further notes that understanding idioms requires pragmatic competence, where listeners utilize shared knowledge, situational context, and social norms to infer meaning. Thus, idioms represent complex linguistic constructs that blend fixed structures, figurative meanings, and cultural references.

2.2 Idioms in Film and Media:

Research demonstrates that idiomatic expressions in film dialogue play crucial roles in constructing meaning, shaping character identity, and enhancing emotional resonance. Bell and Lister (2012) argue that idioms serve as linguistic markers revealing characters' social backgrounds, cultural influences, attitudes, and emotional states, thereby contributing to authentic and relatable dialogue. In cinematic narratives, idioms function as rhetorical, stylistic, and symbolic devices that enable viewers to access deeper interpretive layers and facilitate the communication of moral, philosophical, and thematic messages.

Studies across various films illustrate the prevalence and diversity of idiomatic expressions. Research on *A Dog's Journey* (2019) identified multiple types, with phrasal verbs being dominant. Analysis of *Coco* found "pure idioms" to be most frequent among 32 expressions examined. In *Hacksaw Ridge* (2016), researchers classified idioms into lexemic, proverbial, and institutionalized forms, demonstrating their varied manifestations beyond simple phrases. Collectively, these studies confirm that idioms in film are integral narrative tools that enhance storytelling, emotional depth, and audience engagement.

2.3 Language in *Dead Poets Society*:

Previous analyses of *Dead Poets Society* consistently highlight how figurative language forms the philosophical and ideological core of the film. Mr. Keating's dialogues are constructed as persuasive literary discourse rather than mere instructional speech. Through idioms, metaphors, analogies, and poetic references, he reshapes students' perceptions of themselves and their world. This figurative language serves as a crucial narrative strategy, communicating complex ideas in accessible yet emotionally resonant ways.

Idioms and figurative expressions in the film reinforce several thematic pillars: individuality and self-expression, resistance to conformity, and the pursuit of meaning and purpose. Although "Carpe Diem" is technically a Latin maxim, it functions

idiomatically within the film, evolving beyond its literal translation ("seize the day") to become a symbolic directive encouraging students to embrace their choices, potentials, and identities. The repetition of this maxim creates a linguistic ritual that shapes character development and moral decisions. Thus, idioms in *Dead Poets Society* operate as strategic linguistic devices that empower characters, cultivate critical thinking, and challenge institutional rigidity.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design:

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design to examine the forms of idiomatic expressions, translation strategies, and levels of meaning equivalence in the Indonesian subtitles of *Dead Poets Society*. Qualitative research is appropriate for analyzing language features requiring contextual understanding (Creswell, 2014). This approach enables contextual analysis aligned with the linguistic, cultural, and communicative situations present in the film's dialogue, ensuring interpretations consider both linguistic structure and embedded cultural values.

3.2 Data Sources:

Data comprise English dialogues containing idiomatic expressions from *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and their corresponding Indonesian subtitles. The film was selected for its richness in idiomatic expressions reflecting philosophical values, motivation, and character development. Supporting theoretical references include works by Fernando (1996) on idiom theory, Baker (2018) on translation strategies, and Nida and Taber (1982) on translation principles.

3.3 Research Instruments:

The primary research instrument is the researcher as human instrument, responsible for determining focus, selecting data, identifying translation strategies, and interpreting meaning equivalence. Supporting instruments include:

1. Data classification tables for recording English idioms, Indonesian translations, meanings, timestamps, strategies, and equivalence levels
2. Film dialogue transcripts and Indonesian subtitles as reference sources
3. Theoretical frameworks for idiom classification and translation analysis

3.4 Data Collection Techniques:

Data collection employed documentation methods through several stages:

1. Repeated film viewing to understand storyline, characters, conversation contexts, and idiom usage situations
2. Acquisition of English dialogue transcripts and Indonesian subtitles from verified sources
3. Identification and documentation of idiomatic expressions, recorded in data tables with source dialogue, translation, timestamp, and conversation context
4. Data verification to ensure no duplication and proper idiom classification

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques:

Analysis followed three main stages:

1. Identifying idiom meanings in English dialogue based on conversational context
2. Classifying translation strategies in Indonesian subtitles using Baker's (2018) framework
3. Evaluating meaning equivalence between source and target languages to assess translation effectiveness

IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Translation Strategy Analysis:

Analysis of 15 idiomatic expressions revealed the following distribution of translation strategies:

TABLE 1
TRANSLATION STRATEGY DISTRIBUTION

Strategy	Number of Idioms	Percentage	Example (English → Indonesian)
Paraphrase	8	53%	"Suck the marrow out of life" → "Nikmati hidup sepenuhnya"
Idiom-to-idiom	4	27%	"Break a leg" → "Semoga sukses"
Literal translation	2	13%	"Out of the blue" → "Tiba-tiba"
Omission	1	7%	(No subtitle for the idiom)

Paraphrasing emerged as the dominant strategy, indicating the translator's prioritization of clarity and audience comprehension over preserving idiomatic form.

4.2 Meaning Equivalence Analysis:

Equivalence levels varied according to translation strategy and idiom complexity:

TABLE 2
MEANING EQUIVALENCE ANALYSIS

No.	English Idiom	Indonesian Subtitle	Meaning Retained	Equivalence Level
1	Carpe diem	Raih hari ini	Fully	High
2	Kick the hell out of yourself	Lepaskan batasanmu	Partially	Moderate
3	Lead down the garden path	Menyesatkanmu	Nuance lost	Low

4.3 Idiom Function Analysis:

The preservation of idiomatic functions depended on their narrative roles:

TABLE 3
FUNCTION PRESERVATION ANALYSIS

Idiom	Function in Film	Subtitle Result	Function Preserved
Carpe diem	Philosophical motivation	Preserved	Yes
Cross my heart	Emotional assurance	Simplified	Partially
A far cry	Comparative emphasis	Reduced	Partially

4.4 Comprehensive Data Summary:

The complete analysis of 15 idiomatic expressions reveals patterns in translation approach and effectiveness:

TABLE 4
COMPREHENSIVE IDIOM TRANSLATION ANALYSIS

No.	English Idiom	Indonesian Subtitle	Translation Strategy	Equivalence Level	Notes
1	Carpe diem	Raih hari ini	Idiom → Idiom	High	Core philosophical imperative is preserved effectively.
2	Suck the marrow out of life	Nikmati hidup sepenuhnya	Paraphrase	Moderate	Vivid metaphor ("marrow") is lost, but core meaning is retained.
3	Kick the hell out of yourself	Lepaskan batasanmu	Paraphrase	Moderate	Intensity and colloquial force are reduced.
4	Out of the blue	Tiba-tiba	Literal Translation	High	Meaning is accurately conveyed.
5	Lead down the garden path	Menyesatkanmu	Paraphrase	Low	Connotation of deceptive pleasantness is completely lost.
6	A far cry	Jauh berbeda	Paraphrase	High	Comparative meaning is clearly preserved.
7	Food for thought	Bahan renungan	Idiom → Idiom	High	Equivalent metaphorical concept exists and is used.
8	On top of the world	Sangat bahagia	Paraphrase	Moderate	Idiomatic hyperbole is simplified to a basic adjective.
9	Cross my heart	Sumpah demi Tuhan	Idiom → Idiom	Moderate	Cultural/religious framework shifts from a secular gesture to a religious oath.
10	Light a fire under you	Memaksamu bergerak	Paraphrase	Low	The sense of urgent motivation is weakened; metaphor is lost.
11	Dead as a doornail	Mati total	Paraphrase	High	Figurative meaning is clearly conveyed.
12	Hold your horses	Tunggu sebentar	Paraphrase	Low	Original metaphor and mild exasperation are removed.
13	March to the beat of your own drum	Ikuti kata hatimu	Paraphrase	Moderate	Core idea of individuality is kept, but the vivid metaphorical image is replaced.
14	Break a leg	Semoga sukses	Idiom → Idiom	High	Functionally equivalent performative wish is used.
15	The sky is the limit	Tak ada batas	Paraphrase	High	Meaning is accurately and idiomatically conveyed in Indonesian.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that idiom translation in *Dead Poets Society* subtitles employs varied strategies, with paraphrasing being predominant. This preference reflects the technical constraints of subtitling, where space limitations and readability requirements often necessitate simplification. While paraphrasing successfully conveys core meanings, it frequently reduces metaphorical richness and cultural connotations.

The idiom-to-idiom strategy produced the highest equivalence when culturally analogous expressions existed in Indonesian. However, this approach was limited by the availability of suitable counterparts. Literal translations occasionally functioned effectively but risked creating unnatural phrases in the target language.

The functional analysis reveals that idioms serving philosophical or motivational purposes (e.g., "Carpe diem") were more successfully preserved than those providing emotional emphasis or stylistic color. This suggests translators prioritize narrative-essential meanings over expressive embellishments when facing space constraints.

These findings align with audiovisual translation principles emphasizing the need to balance semantic accuracy with practical limitations. The translation approaches observed reflect negotiation between linguistic fidelity, cultural adaptation, and medium-specific requirements.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that translating idiomatic expressions in *Dead Poets Society* Indonesian subtitles involves strategic choices significantly affecting meaning equivalence. Paraphrasing emerges as the primary strategy, prioritizing audience comprehension within subtitling constraints. While this approach generally preserves core meanings, it often reduces metaphorical nuance and cultural specificity.

The research confirms that successful idiom translation in subtitles depends on multiple factors: availability of cultural equivalents, the idiom's narrative function, and technical limitations of the medium. Translations achieve optimal results when strategies align with the idiom's communicative purpose and the target audience's cultural framework.

These findings contribute to translation studies by illustrating practical applications of translation theory in audiovisual contexts. They offer valuable insights for subtitle practitioners, emphasizing the need for context-sensitive strategies that balance meaning accuracy with medium constraints. Future research could investigate audience reception of different translation approaches or examine idiom translation across various film genres and cultural contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ayu, D. M. I. (2023). Analisis penggunaan idiom pada film Coco karya Pixar Animation Studios. *Jurnal Review Pendidikan dan Pengajaran*, 7(1), 1–?.
- [2] Baker, M. (2018). *In other words: A coursebook on translation* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- [3] Bell, R. T., & Lister, G. (2012). *Linguistic and cultural challenges in audiovisual translation*. Routledge.
- [4] Bobrow, S. A., & Bell, S. M. (1973). On catching on to idiomatic expressions. *Memory & Cognition*, 1(3), 343–346.
- [5] Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- [6] De Silva, A., Simangunsong, K. C., Herman, H., Silalahi, A. R., & Mufarizuddin, M. (2025). Meaning shifts in the English subtitle translation of verbal humor: A case study of Agak Laen (2024). *African Journal of Advanced Arts and Humanities*, 3(1). <https://journals.evonexpublishers.com/index.php/AJAAH/article/view/50>
- [7] Fernando, C. (1996). *Idioms and idiomaticity*. Oxford University Press.
- [8] Harliansyah, R., Kasmaini, K., & Fadhlil, M. (2025). An analysis of idiomatic expression used in *Hacksaw Ridge* movie (2016). *JWacana: Jurnal Penelitian Bahasa, Sastra dan Pengajaran*, 22(2), ?.
- [9] Herman, H., & Hasibuan, R. R. N. (2020). An analysis of idiomatic expressions found in *A Dog's Journey* (2019) movie script. *Udayana Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 4(2), 68–72.
- [10] Herman, H., Sipayung, R. W., Ngongo, M., Sari, I., Fatmawati, E., Rahmawati, R., Sari, H. N., & Silalahi, R. Y. (2024). Improving the comprehension of English–Indonesian translation through translation procedures on Twitter web pages: A case on translation. *Revista Iberoamericana de Psicología del Ejercicio y el Deporte*, 19(4), 386–389.
- [11] Hinkel, E. (2017). Teaching idiomatic expressions and phrases: Insights and techniques. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 5(3), 45–59.
- [12] Ngongo, M., Sipayung, R. W., Afrianti, D., Fatmawati, E., Syathroh, I. L., Herman, H., Sari, H. N., & Saputra, N. (2024). Strategies in undertaking difficulties in translating idioms from English into Indonesian: A case on translation. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Science*, 22(1), 6528–6538. <https://doi.org/10.57239/PJLSS-2024-22.1.00478>
- [13] Nida, E. A., & Taber, C. R. (1982). *The theory and practice of translation*. Brill.
- [14] Patmawati, K. A. S., & Jayantini, I. G. A. S. R. (2024). Idiomatic expressions found in Taylor Swift's song "All Too Well (10 Minute Version)." *Sintaksis: Publikasi Para Ahli Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris*, 2(5), 227–236.
- [15] Rozikin, A. K., Kasmaini, K., & Lubis, A. A. (2021). Idiomatic expressions analysis in *Joker* movie. *Journal of English Education and Teaching (JEET)*, 5(4), 594–608.
- [16] Saraswati, N. (2024). English idiomatic expressions in EFL classroom through movies: Challenges and opportunities. *Global Expert: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*, 12(1), 19–24.
- [17] Sinambela, E., Sipayung, R. W., Herman, H., Purba, R., Fatmawati, E., Ngongo, M., & Manurung, L. W. (2024). Investigating translation strategies used by students in translating metaphors from English into Indonesian: A case study on translation. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.58256/m8qeqf93>
- [18] Weir, P. (Director). (1989). *Dead Poets Society* [Film]. Touchstone Pictures.