TRANSLATING *ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM*

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on metaphor translation by novice translators for a specific phrase, 'elephant in the room'. This study also intends to close a gap by examining how novice translators translate this particular phrase and whether they can distinguish between literal and metaphorical meanings. This research employs Kövecses' concepts on metaphor translation. The data was collected from the questionnaire that was filled out by the participants. There are five sentences with literal and metaphorical meanings containing the phrase 'elephant in the room' are translated by the participants. Besides that, there are some questions related to the strategies the participants applied while translating. The results show that the phrase 'elephant in the room' with metaphorical meanings is challenging to translate. The participants also applied the concepts given by Kövecses. The conclusions of this study are the 'elephant in the room' reveals important insights into the complexity of metaphorical translation. It emphasizes the interaction of language, culture, and cognition in communicating implicit meanings across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Keywords: elephant in the room; metaphor; translation

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini berfokus pada penerjemahan metafora oleh penerjemah pemula untuk frasa 'elephant in the room'. Penelitian ini juga bermaksud untuk menutup kesenjangan penelitian terdahulu dengan mengkaji bagaimana penerjemah pemula menerjemahkan frasa khusus ini dan apakah mereka dapat membedakan antara makna literal dan makna metaforis. Penelitian ini menggunakan konsep yang diusung oleh Kövecses dalam penerjemahan metafora. Data dikumpulkan dari kuesioner yang diisi oleh peserta. Ada lima kalimat dengan dua kalimat yang memiliki makna literal dan tiga kalimat yang bermakna metaforis mengandung frasa 'elephant in the room' yang diterjemahkan partisipan. Selain itu, ada beberapa pertanyaan terkait strategi yang diterapkan peserta saat menerjemahkan. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa frasa 'elephant in the room' dengan makna metaforis sulit untuk diterjemahkan. Partisipan juga menerapkan konsep yang diberikan oleh Kövecses. Kesimpulan dari penelitian ini adalah 'elephant in the room' mengungkapkan pentingnya memiliki wawasan atau pengetahuan mengenai kompleksitas penerjemahan metaforis. Hal ini menekankan perlu adanya interaksi antara bahasa, budaya, dan kognisi dalam mengkomunikasikan makna implisit melintasi batas-batas linguistik dan budaya.
Kata kunci: *elephant in the room; metafora; penerjemahan*

INTRODUCTION

Translation studies are one of the branches of applied linguistics. Thus, the mastery of understanding linguistics plays an important part in the discussion related to translation. However, these two disciplines have a unique relationship (Rojo & IIbarretxe-Antuaño, 2013; Kalda & Uusküla, 2019). One of which is when discussing metaphor. As Mohammed (2023) pointed out, discussions about metaphors may interest practitioners from the other fields as they require them to find the right equivalents to express metaphors in other languages. Li and Dai (2023, p. 776) added that "metaphor and metonymy, as a complicated linguistic device and cognitive mechanism, has long been ignored although it helps create abundant implications and aesthetic value in poetry". It means that there are relationships between linguistics and meaning in metaphor.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) affirmed that metaphor is a cognitive tool for understanding and experiencing abstract concepts through a more apparent context. Chakir (2023) supported Lakoff and Johnson by highlighting that metaphors are considered as literary devices so that the writer can attract the interest of readers. Metaphor is a figurative language that is often found in literary works, especially novels (Darmapratiwi & Pratiwi, 2024). For example, the metaphor of '*elephant in the room*'.

The phrase *'elephant in the room'* refers to an obvious, significant issue or problem that everyone is aware of but avoids discussing, typically because it is uncomfortable, sensitive, or controversial. This metaphorical *elephant r*epresents the conspicuous nature of the issue that cannot be easily ignored. In everyday language, the '*elephant in the room*' refers to "*a serious problem that everyone is*

aware of but which they ignore and choose not to mention." (Farlex Partner Idiom Dictionary). This phenomenon can occur in various settings, including social gatherings, workplaces, families, or even public discourse. However, people consciously or unconsciously choose not to acknowledge or address it directly in conversation or action.

The term is believed to have its roots in the early 20th century. As Grammarist.com stated, the phrase *elephant in the room* was first used in America in the early 1950s by Charleston Gazette who said, "Chicago, it's an old Indian word that means to get the elephant out of your room." The phrase underscores situations where everyone is aware of a problem or issue. However, no one acknowledges it directly. It highlights the discomfort or awkwardness associated with discussing sensitive topics. Besides, it points to the unspoken tension or discomfort that arises from avoiding important discussions. By not addressing the 'elephant,' people may unintentionally allow misunderstandings or unresolved issues to persist. In addition to that, ignoring the '*elephant in the room*' can strain relationships and hinder effective communication. It can lead to missed opportunities for problem-solving or conflict resolution.

Hence, in the field of translation studies, dealing with the phrase *'elephant in the room'* poses interesting challenges due to its cultural and linguistic implications. The '*elephant in the room*' may not have direct equivalents in all languages. Translators need to find culturally appropriate expressions that convey the same meaning and connotation (Zhao, 2024). This involves understanding how different cultures perceive and handle sensitive or uncomfortable topics.

Translating metaphors like '*elephant in the roo*m' also requires capturing not just the literal meaning but also the metaphorical essence. It involves finding expressions or idioms in the target language that evoke a similar image of something obvious yet unaddressed. As Newmark (1988, p. 104) said, a metaphor serves two main purposes: first, it can be used to referentially describe an idea, person, object, quality, action, or mental process more fully and succinctly than can be achieved through literal or physical language; second, it can be used pragmatically to simultaneously appeal to the senses, pique interest, clarify, please, delight, or surprise. In addition, metaphor is a cultural mediator between the human mind and the living and non-living beings that surround it which allows the development of knowledge to occur (Mohammed, 2023). Meanwhile, in the words of Wang, Liu, and Jia (2023) and Wang (2024), they emphasized that translators should not just focus on the meaning of the words literally, but they are also necessarily to consider the differences in ways of thinking and cultural modes between the source text and the target text.

Newmark added that that metaphor incidentally demonstrates a resemblance, a common semantic area between two or more or less similar things, namely the image and the object. Identifying and addressing the '*elephant in the room*' appropriately can affect the coherence and flow of the text. Failing to translate this metaphor effectively could lead to confusion or loss of the intended message. Thus, when encountering a grammatical but nonsensical sentence, it is important to consider its metaphorical meaning and cultural knowledge's compatibility (Alghbban & Maalej, 2023). Even if the writing is faulty, it is unlikely

that someone would intentionally write nonsense in a sensible text (Newmark, 1988, p. 106).

Consideration of how the target audience will interpret the metaphor is crucial. Translators must ensure that the chosen expression resonates with the cultural and linguistic expectations of the readers or listeners. Mandelblit, as cited in Dagnev and Chervenkova (2024), asserted that in metaphor translation, translators can have two choices, namely choose an equivalent target metaphor, or render the source text (ST) metaphor by choosing a target text (TT) simile, or by a paraphrase, a footnote, an explanation, or omission.

In addition to the idea of how metaphors are expressed interlingually, Kövecses (2005) recommended the following concepts:

1. Metaphors of similar mapping conditions and similar lexical realization;

2. Metaphors of similar mapping conditions but different lexical realization;

3. Metaphors of different mapping conditions but similar lexical realization;

4. Metaphors of different mapping conditions and different lexical realization.

Several studies related to metaphor translation have been conducted. First, Al-Jarf (2023) conducted a study on time metaphors in English and Arabic. She investigated the parallels and contrasts between English and Arabic time metaphorical expressions, as well as the challenges that student translators face in

translating them, the translation strategies they employ, and the reasons for translation flaws. The findings showed that several translation strategies were used to translate the time expression, such as literal translation, partial translation, paraphrasing, synonyms, and superfluous translations.

Research by Qiu (2023) analyzed metaphorical phenomena in idioms and suggests that various translation strategies, including literal translation concepts, free translation connotations, and cultural transformation, can effectively convey deep meanings and semantic functions. He used the relevance translation theory by Gutt in analyzing his data.

Another study by Dagnev and Chervenkova (2024) examined the relationship between linguistic competence requirements specified by EMT, analyzed by PACTE, and conceptual metaphor research. This study evaluates an experiment with three groups of translators: two non-professionals and one group of professional translators/university lecturers. Although not definitive, the findings indicate that metaphoric ability is important for translators. Although not directly related to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphoric awareness is essential for high-quality translation.

This conceptual idea on metaphors has been discussed by various scholars. Khmelnytskyi (2024) stressed that there are differences between conceptual metaphors in a source text and target text. For example the word *anger* which has a negative connotation and negative conceptual in the source text. However, if *anger* is perceived as *struggle*, then its conceptual meaning is positive.

Thus, research focusing on metaphor translation with a neutral concept, such as the phrase '*elephant in the room*' has not been analyzed. Therefore, this

research aims to fill the gap by analyzing whether or not they can identify which sentences have literal meanings and which sentences have metaphorical meanings and analyzing how novice translators translate this phrase by following Kövecses (2005) concepts in translating metaphor.

For this research, the writer utilizes Kövecses' concepts on how metaphors are translated. The findings of this research are expected to investigate which concept is chosen by novice translators, especially to translate the phrase '*elephant in the roo*m'.

METHODS

The research applies the descriptive qualitative method in metaphorical translation by using Kövecses' concepts. This qualitative research is expected to provide a fresh explanation of metaphor translation and translation strategies.

The data is taken from the questionnaires that are given to novice translators at Universitas LIA. By novice translators here are student translators who are in the sixth semester and above. The novice translators are asked to answer a questionnaire which has two parts. The first part is they are asked to translate five sentences that contain the phrase 'elephant in the room', while the second part is answering open-ended questions related to their experience while translating those sentences. The data are then analyzed by cross-checking the accuracy of their translation to the answers in part two of the questionnaire to check whether or not they succeeded in translating the phrase '*elephant in the room'*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented from the answers on the questionnaire given to 20 novice translators. The responses on the source text were analyzed to answer the first question. The analysis shows that novice translators can identify the sentences with the phrase *elephant in the room* have literal meaning and which have metaphorical meaning.

As we can see from Figure 1, most students said that sentences number 1 and number 2 are easy to translate. The distribution of participants who answer number one is 17 participants or 85%, while for number 2 has 16 answers (80%). It is true that sentences 1 and 2 have only the literal meaning of the phrase *elephant in the room.*

1. Which sentences are easy to translate? (You can pick several choices)
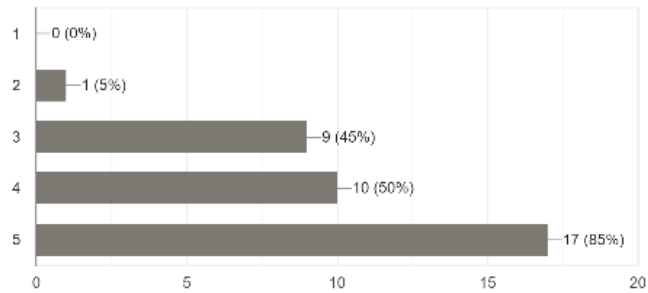20 responses
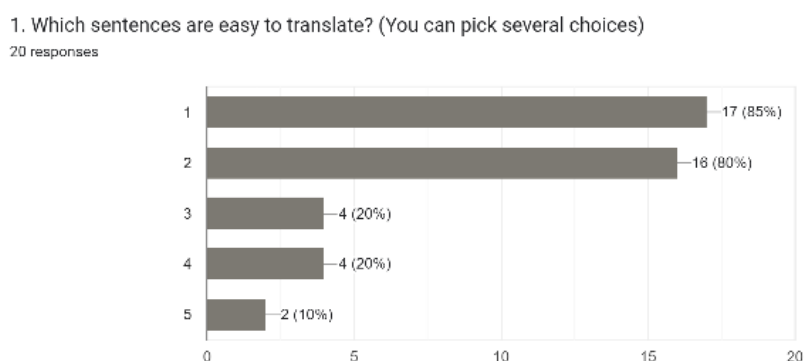
Figure 1. Students' Responses on the Sentences that are Easy to Translate

As for question number 2 on which sentences are difficult to translate, participants answered that sentences number 3 to 5 are difficult to translate with the distributions of 9 answers (45%), 10 answers (50%), and 17 answers (85%) respectively. The answers are shown in Figure 2 below.

2. Which sentences are difficult to translate? (You can pick several choices)
20 responses

Figure 2. Students' Responses on the Sentences that are Difficult to Translate

Congruent with the participants' answers in Figure 1, the response in Figure 3 shows that they can identify that sentences number 1 and 2 have literal meanings.

3. Which sentences have literal meanings? (You can pick several choices)
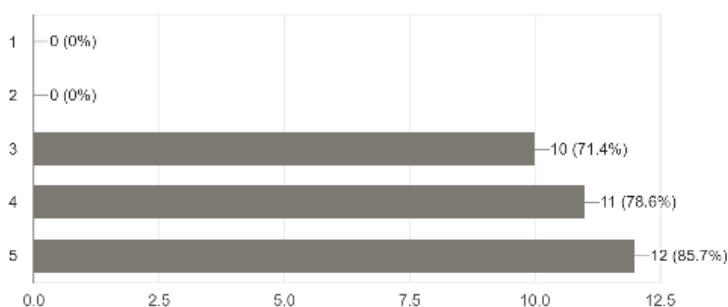14 responses
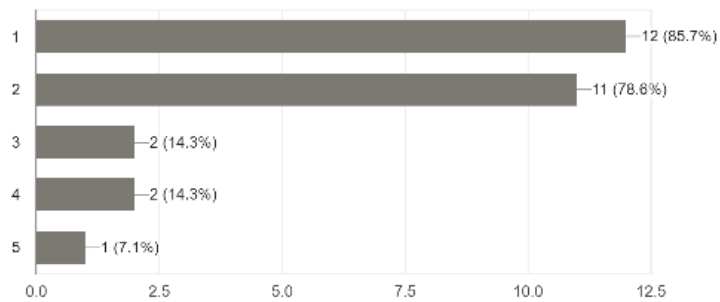
Figure 3. Students' Responses on the Sentences With Literal Meaning

Similarly, the participants are also able to identify that sentences number 3 to 5 have metaphorical meanings. This can be seen from Figure 4.

4. Which sentences have metaphorical meanings? (You can pick several choices)
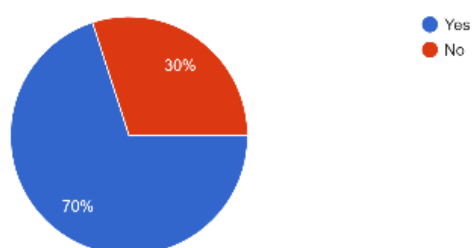14 responses

Figure 4. Students' Responses on the Sentences With Metaphorical Meaning

In addition to how participants translated the source text, Figure 5 presents data on the participants' use of dictionaries during the translation process. It highlights the frequency and reasons behind consulting dictionaries, underscoring their role in aiding the understanding and translation of complex phrases.

5. Did you consult any dictionaries while translating?
20 responses

Figure 5. Students' Responses on the Use of Dictionaries

Meanwhile, Figure 6 delves more into the reasons why participants used dictionaries. This figure helps elucidate the specific challenges faced by the translators, such as unfamiliar vocabulary or complex idiomatic expressions.

Figure 6. Students' Responses on the Reasons of Using Dictionaries

The interesting thing from the answers to the questionnaire is about the difficult words or phrases to translate in general, not necessarily focusing on the metaphor *elephant in the room.* Table 1 shows words or phrases that participants found challenging to translate, along with the percentage of participants who identified each word as difficult. For instance, "skirmish" was difficult for 62% of participants, "the elephant in the room" for 56%, and "wildlife" for 32%. This table helps pinpoint specific lexical challenges encountered during the translation process.

**Table 1. Frequency on Difficult Words to Translate**

No	Word/Phrase/Sentence	Percentage (%)
1	Skirmish	62
2	Peace talks	12.5
3	The elephant in the room	56
4	Wildlife	32
5	Despite	12.5
6	Border	12.5
7	Exhibit	6.25
8	Life-sized	6.25
9	The children's birthday party was jungle-themed..	6.25

Figure 7 details how frequently participants relied on online sources for translation assistance. This figure provides insight into the tools and resources used by novice translators to overcome translation challenges.

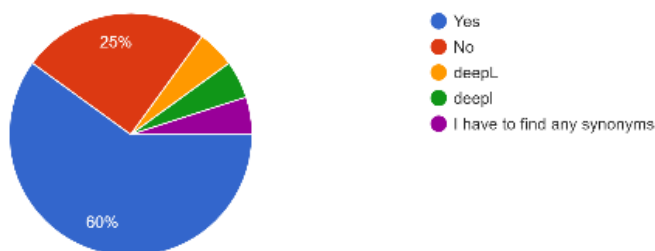**Figure 7. Students' Responses on the Use of Online Sources**

Figure 8 explores which websites were most frequently consulted by participants. It gives an overview of the digital resources that novice translators find most useful.
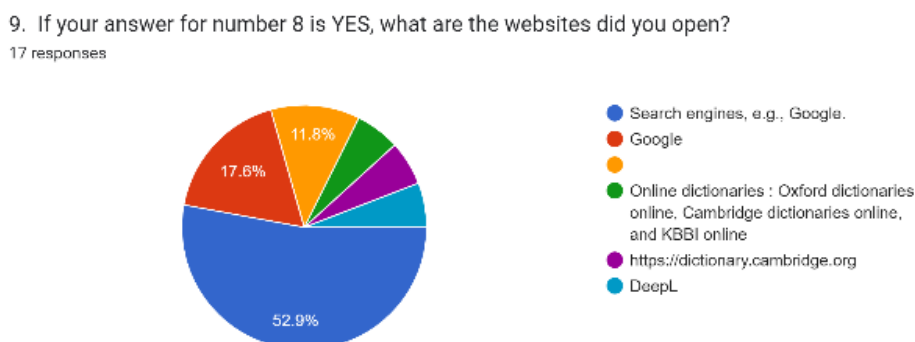
Figure 8. Students' Responses on the Uses of Website

Figure 9 below focuses on the use of machine translation by participants. It illustrates the extent to which machine translation tools were used and the reasons behind their usage, highlighting their role in the translation process.
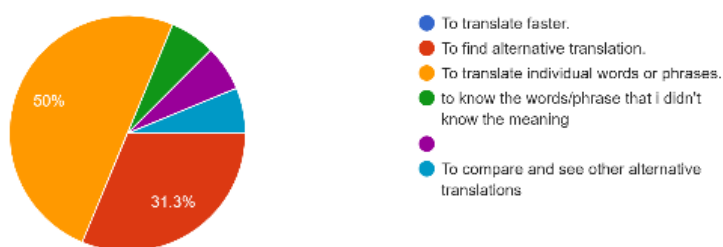
Figure 9. Students' Responses on the Uses of Machine Translation

Figure 10 provides an analysis of why participants chose to use machine translation. Understanding these reasons can offer insights into the perceived benefits and limitations of machine translation tools among novice translators.

Figure 10. Students' Responses on the Reasons of Using Machine Translation

Table 2 categorizes the translation techniques used by participants based on Kövecses' concepts. It shows the frequency of different mapping conditions and lexical realizations employed in the translations. This table helps to understand the

strategies applied by novice translators to convey the metaphorical meaning of the phrase '*elephant in the room*'.

Table 2 shows that for the sentences number 1 and 2, the participants successfully translated the phrase '*elephant in the room*' by using similar mapping conditions and similar lexical realization. It means that the participants are aware that the sentences have literal meanings. Meanwhile, sentences number 3 to 5 have metaphorical meanings. Many participants are unable to render the phrase correctly as they just translated the phrase as it is. Thus, the translations are considered void. The good thing is that there are still some participants who can grasp the meaning of the phrase although they are paraphrasing it. The equivalent for *elephant in the room* in Indonesian is *buah simalakama* or the term '*ngeri-ngeri sedap*' which was quite popular a few years ago. Both of these metaphors describe difficult situations or major problems that people ignore or avoid, even if the problem is obvious and has a significant impact. However, the meaning between the two is not the same. *Buah simalakama* specifically refers to a situation where all the options present carry bad consequences, similar to how '*elephant in the room*' indicates a big problem that is not talked about or faced. Another choice for a more direct metaphor of the *elephant in the room* is *gajah di pelupuk mata*, which also implies a significant issue or problem that is being ignored or not addressed, even though it is obvious and impactful.

Table 2. Frequency of Translation Techniques to Translate
'*elephant in the room*'

No	Translation Techniques	%
1a	= mapping condition, = lexical realization	100%
b	= mapping condition, ≠ lexical realization	0
c	≠ mapping condition, = lexical realization	0

d	$\neq$ mapping condition,$\neq$ lexical realization	0
2a	= mapping condition, = lexical realization	100%
b	= mapping condition, $\neq$ lexical realization	0
c	$\neq$ mapping condition, = lexical realization	0
d	$\neq$ mapping condition,$\neq$ lexical realization	0
3a	= mapping condition, = lexical realization	0
b	= mapping condition, $\neq$ lexical realization	0
c	$\neq$ mapping condition, = lexical realization	0
d	$\neq$ mapping condition,$\neq$ lexical realization	35%
4a	= mapping condition, = lexical realization	0
b	= mapping condition, $\neq$ lexical realization	0
c	$\neq$ mapping condition, = lexical realization	0
d	$\neq$ mapping condition,$\neq$ lexical realization	45%
5a	= mapping condition, = lexical realization	0
b	= mapping condition, $\neq$ lexical realization	0
c	$\neq$ mapping condition, = lexical realization	0
d	$\neq$ mapping condition,$\neq$ lexical realization	45%

This study's results align with previous research conducted by **Dagnev and Chervenkova (2024).** They stated that the ability to understand metaphorical meanings in the source text will be beneficial for participants in translating the source text successfully. If participants can understand that the sentences have metaphorical meanings, then they will be cautious in rendering the sentences. They can do research or consult the dictionaries to find the meanings first before translating.

In addition to the techniques in translating metaphorical meanings, this study presents fresh input on how metaphor can be translated. The previous studies by **Al-Jarf (2023)** and **Qiu (2023)** provided a classic approach on translation strategies on metaphor. Meanwhile, Kövecses provides a different point of view on translating metaphors.

CONCLUSION

The *'elephant in the room'* phenomenon holds significant relevance within translation studies, offering key insights into the challenges and strategies translators face when dealing with implicit meanings and cultural nuances. Originating from a metaphorical expression denoting an obvious but unaddressed issue, this phenomenon underscores the complexities of translating idiomatic and culturally specific phrases across languages.

One of the primary insights from the 'elephant in the room' in translation studies is the importance of context and cultural sensitivity. Translators must navigate not only linguistic differences but also cultural contexts that shape the interpretation and impact of idiomatic expressions. For example, while the literal translation of '*the elephant in the room*' into Indonesian would be 'gajah di ruangan,' conveying its metaphorical meaning requires understanding how Indonesians perceive and discuss unspoken issues.

Furthermore, the *'elephant in the room'* phenomenon underscores the challenges of preserving metaphorical richness and rhetorical devices in translation. Metaphors play a crucial role in language by encapsulating complex ideas and emotions through imaginative comparisons. Translating metaphors requires not only linguistic proficiency but also creativity and cultural insight to capture the metaphor's figurative meaning and evoke a similar response in the target audience.

In conclusion, the '*elephant in the room*' offers valuable insights into the complexities of metaphorical translation within translation studies. It underscores the interplay between language, culture, and cognition in conveying implicit meanings across linguistic and cultural boundaries. By examining this metaphor, scholars and practitioners can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges,

strategies, and ethical considerations involved in translating idiomatic expressions and metaphors, contributing to more effective cross-cultural communication and linguistic mediation.

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