ACADEMIA International Journal for Social Sciences
Volume 4, Issue 4, 2025 ISSN-L (Online): 3006-6638

Decoding Idioms with AI: A Linguistic Analysis of ChatGPT and Google Translate in English–Urdu Translation

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Received: 16-10-2025 **Revised:** 14-11-2025 **Accepted:** 26-11-2025 **Published:** 12-12-2025

ABSTRACT

The increasing use of online translation tools in Pakistan has highlighted the challenges of translating idiomatic expressions, which often carry cultural and figurative meaning. Idioms frequently pose difficulties for machine translation, leading to loss of meaning or unnatural expressions in the target language. Despite the rise of AI-based translation systems, limited research has explored their effectiveness in handling idiomatic and culturally embedded language. This study investigates how ChatGPT and Google Translate render English idioms into Urdu, focusing on meaning accuracy and cultural appropriateness. Using a comparative-descriptive approach, data was collected by translating 20 commonly used English idioms on both platforms and analysing the outputs. Findings reveal that ChatGPT produces largely accurate and culturally natural translations, employing context-aware paraphrasing, while Google Translate often generates literal and awkward translations. The study underscores the potential of AI-based models in managing figurative language and emphasizes the importance of cultural adaptation in translation.

Keywords: *ChatGPT, Google Translate, English idioms, Urdu translation, Machine translation, Meaning accuracy, Cultural appropriateness, AI-based language models, Figurative language*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has dramatically reshaped the field of translation. Language models such as ChatGPT can now perform translation tasks that go beyond word-for-word conversion, offering a more context-sensitive and meaning-based output. However, one of the most challenging aspects for both traditional machine translation (MT) systems and AI-based models is the translation of idiomatic expressions—phrases whose meanings are figurative rather than literal.

Idioms are particularly difficult to translate because their meaning is often deeply tied to culture and context. Research in neural machine translation (NMT) has shown that models frequently translate idioms literally, resulting in unnatural or incorrect renderings (Baziotis et al., 2023). Similarly, Alqohfa & Sanad (2025) note that despite advances in AI, large models like ChatGPT and others "fall short in rendering idiomatic expressions due to missing nuanced understanding of cultural intricacies."

In the context of low-resource languages such as Urdu, the challenge is even more acute. A comparative study of AI tools and Google Translate for English-to-Urdu translation highlights that existing systems

often fail to preserve cultural context and stylistic features, making idiomatic translation problematic (Aslam & Saeed, 2025).

On the other hand, translation scholars have studied human translators' strategies for idioms in Urdu, showing that paraphrase or non-idiomatic translation is commonly used to avoid loss of meaning (Bashir, Aleem & Ikram Anjum, 2023).

More recently, studies have begun to examine how LLMs like ChatGPT perform on idiomatic translation tasks. For instance, Haider, Obeidat, and Abutair (2025) compared how ChatGPT and Google Translate render English idioms into Arabic and found that Google Translate favored literal translations far more often than ChatGPT, which used a higher proportion of sense-based and contextually adapted renditions.

In another strand of research, emergent work on improving LLM translation capacity suggests the development of benchmark datasets (including for Urdu idioms) and alignment mechanisms to improve both stylistic fidelity and cultural authenticity (EmergentMind, 2024).

Despite these developments, there remains a distinct gap: a systematic comparison of ChatGPT and Google Translate in their ability to translate English idioms into Urdu, specifically evaluating how well they conserve meaning and adapt culturally. While AI translation studies have been expanding, very few examine this issue in the Urdu context, where idiomatic usage is rich and often culturally embedded. Moreover, recent work on evaluating LLMs for Urdu idiom translation has only just begun (Khan & Akter, 2025).

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating how effectively ChatGPT and Google Translate, translate English idioms into Urdu, with a specific focus on meaning accuracy and cultural appropriateness. Understanding the comparative performance of these tools can offer valuable insights for translators, educators, and developers, and may guide future improvements in translation systems for culturally sensitive content.

Problem Statement

Online translation tools such as ChatGPT and Google Translate are widely used for quick and convenient translations; however, they often struggle with English idioms, which carry figurative meanings and cultural nuances that cannot be translated literally into Urdu. As a result, these tools may produce translations that are inaccurate or culturally inappropriate. Despite their popularity in Pakistan, limited research has compared their performance in translating idiomatic expressions. This gap makes it difficult to understand how reliable these platforms are for users. Therefore, this study examines how effectively ChatGPT and Google Translate preserve meaning and cultural appropriateness when translating English idioms into Urdu.

Research Aim

The aim of this study is to compare ChatGPT and Google Translate in their translation of English idioms into Urdu, with a specific focus on evaluating meaning accuracy and cultural appropriateness in order to determine which platform provides more reliable idiomatic translations.

Research Objectives

1. To evaluate the accuracy and meaning preservation in Urdu translations of English idioms produced by ChatGPT and Google Translate.

2. To compare the cultural appropriateness of Urdu translations of English idioms generated by both platforms.

Research Questions

1. How accurately do ChatGPT and Google Translate preserve the intended meaning of English idioms when translating them into Urdu?
2. How do ChatGPT and Google Translate differ in producing culturally appropriate Urdu translations of English idioms?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it may provide a clearer understanding of how reliable popular translation tools—ChatGPT and Google Translate—are in handling English idioms, which are widely used in academic writing, daily communication, and media. Since idioms carry figurative and culturally embedded meanings, their translation into Urdu may pose challenges that users are often unaware of. By comparing both platforms, the findings may help students, teachers, translators, and general users make more informed decisions about which tool is more effective for translating idiomatic expressions. Furthermore, this research may contribute to translation studies by highlighting the strengths and limitations of AI-based translation systems, which may encourage further development in machine translation for culturally sensitive language pairs such as English and Urdu.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Translating idiomatic expressions has long been a central challenge for both human translators and machine translation systems. Idioms by their nature carry non-literal, figurative meanings that are closely tied to cultural contexts, which makes them difficult to render accurately in another language (Benyahia, 2024).

Human Translation Strategies in Urdu

Many studies have explored how human translators, especially in Pakistan, deal with English idioms when translating them into Urdu. For example, Bashir, Aleem, and Anjum (2023) found that Pakistani translators prefer paraphrase or non-idiomatic translation for English idioms: about 85% of the time they do not try to find an equivalent idiom in Urdu but instead rephrase the meaning.

Likewise, a study by Bibi, Iqbal, and Awan (2023) examined how undergraduate students translate idioms, and they reported that students frequently resort to literal translations when they lack familiarity with idiomatic language, especially for “semi-idioms” and “pure idioms.”

These human translation studies highlight two important points:

Translators often avoid idiomatic equivalence by preferring paraphrase — which may preserve meaning but lose idiomatic flavor.

Literal translation is common when translators (or learners) do not fully understand idiomatic expressions, leading to mistranslations.

Pedagogical Approaches to Idiom Translation

From an educational perspective, some recent work has tried to bridge the gap between idiomatic meaning and cultural understanding.

For instance, Akbar, Arshad, and Khan (2025) proposed a relevance-theory-based contextual narrative approach: they taught English idioms to Urdu-speaking learners using stories and contextual embedding, which improved the learners' comprehension and retention of idioms. Their study suggests that understanding idioms is not just a linguistic task but also a cognitive and cultural one — learners benefit when idioms are connected to familiar cultural contexts.

Challenges of Machine Translation for Urdu

In the domain of machine translation, recent research has documented the persistent difficulties that translation systems face when handling Urdu, especially for low-resource scenarios. Basit, Azeemi, and Razaemi (2024) conducted a comprehensive evaluation of various English → Urdu machine translation models (including GPT-3.5 and specialized bilingual models), showing that even powerful neural models struggle with some Urdu translations due to data scarcity and linguistic complexity.

This indicates that current MT systems do not fully overcome the challenges posed by Urdu's linguistic structure and idiomatic richness.

Similarly, Aslam and Saeed (2025) performed a comparative analysis of Google Translate and modern AI tools in English-to-Urdu translation. They argued that while AI-based tools are improving in contextual awareness, they still fall short in preserving cultural nuance and stylistic sophistication. Their research underscores that context and culture remain underrepresented in AI-driven translation outputs.

AI and Idiom Translation

More recent advances focus on the capability of Large Language Models (LLMs) in translating idiomatic expressions. Donthi et al. (2024) examined how LLMs can be improved to handle idioms by using knowledge bases of idiomatic meanings (IdiomKB) and semantic matching strategies.

Their work is particularly relevant because it shows that LLMs can be taught to choose equivalent idioms in the target language rather than simply translating word-by-word.

In parallel, Khan and Akter (2025) provided one of the first systematic evaluations of LLMs on Urdu idiom translation, testing different prompt-engineering techniques.

Their study highlights that translation quality improves with better prompt design, but even then, LLMs still make errors in preserving idiomatic and cultural meaning.

Moreover, Alqohfa and Sanad (2025) explored the linguistic and cultural challenges that AI systems face when translating idioms between English and Arabic. Their findings are relevant to Urdu as well, because they show that even advanced LLMs like ChatGPT4 often fail to adapt idioms appropriately when they lack deep cultural grounding.

Other research, such as Wang, Pham, and Moghimifar (2025), has examined how LLMs translate proverbs—which are culturally dense like idioms—and found that while LLMs outperform traditional NMT models, existing evaluation metrics (e.g., BLEU) often fail to reflect true quality, particularly for cultural adaptation.

This suggests that evaluation of idiomatic translation requires more culturally sensitive metrics.

Gap in the Literature

Although there is a growing body of research on idiomatic translation by both human translators and AI systems, few studies specifically compare ChatGPT and Google Translate in translating English idioms into Urdu. Human translation strategy research (e.g., Bashir et al., 2023; Bibi et al., 2023) has highlighted how humans deal with idioms, and AI-translation studies (e.g., Donthi et al., 2024; Khan & Akter, 2025) show that LLMs are improving. However, none so far have directly focused on evaluating the cultural appropriateness and meaning fidelity of idiomatic translations produced by ChatGPT and Google Translate for the English-Urdu pair. This gap reduces our understanding of how well modern AI tools handle culturally loaded figurative language in Urdu — a low-resource, culturally rich language.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a comparative-descriptive research design to evaluate how ChatGPT and Google Translate translated English idioms into Urdu. Somehow, it touched the quantitative analysis for calculations as well. The analysis focused on meaning accuracy and cultural appropriateness.

Data Collection

A set of 20 commonly used English idioms was selected from English Oxford Dictionary and Feroz-e-Lughat (Urdu dictionary). Each idiom was translated into Urdu using:

ChatGPT (GPT-5-mini) and Google Translate

All translations were recorded for further analysis.

Data Analysis

Translations were evaluated based on:

Meaning Accuracy: Whether the Urdu translation conveyed the intended figurative meaning.

Cultural Appropriateness: Whether the translation sounded natural and idiomatic to Urdu speakers.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Nida's Theory of Equivalence, which explains how translation should either match the exact words of the original text (formal equivalence) or match the overall meaning and message (dynamic equivalence). This theory helps evaluate how well ChatGPT and Google Translate, translate Urdu into English. Google Translate often gives more word-for-word translations, which may sound unnatural in English. In contrast, ChatGPT usually focuses on sense-for-sense translation, trying to make the message clear and natural. Using Nida's theory makes it easier to compare which tool keeps the meaning more accurately and which one produces more understandable translations.

Ethical Considerations

All translations were generated solely for research purposes and no personal data or confidential content was used.

DATA ANALYSIS

Translations of 20 English Idioms

#	Idiom	ChatGPT Translation (Urdu)	Google Translate Translation (Urdu)	Analysis
1	Break the ice	ماحول / کرنا شروع چیت بات کرنا ہلکا کو	توڑنا برف	ChatGPT: Accurate & culturally appropriate; Google: literal, unnatural
2	A piece of cake	کام آسان بہت	ٹکڑا کا کیک ایک	ChatGPT: Correct idiomatic meaning; Google: literal, meaningless in Urdu
3	Once in a blue moon	کبھار کبھی / کم بہت	بار ایک میں چاند نیلے	ChatGPT: Accurate; Google: literal & unnatural
4	Spill the beans	کرنا فاش راز	دینا بہا لوبیا	ChatGPT: Accurate & natural; Google: literal & meaningless
5	Hit the nail on the head	کہنا بات صحیح بالکل	مارنا پر کیل	ChatGPT: Accurate & idiomatic; Google: literal, awkward
6	Under the weather	ہونا خراب طبیعت	تحت کے موسم	ChatGPT: Correct & natural; Google: literal & confusing
7	Cry over spilled milk	کرنا افسوس پر بات ہوئی گزری	رونا پر دودھ ہوا گِرا	ChatGPT: Accurate; Google: literal & non-idiomatic
8	Bite the bullet	کرنا ہمت / کرنا فیصلہ مشکل	کاٹنا گولی	ChatGPT: Accurate & idiomatic; Google: literal & nonsensical

9	Cost an arm and a leg	ہونا مہنگا بہت	ایک اور بازو ایک قیمت کی ٹانگ	ChatGPT: Accurate & natural; Google: literal & absurd
10	Let the cat out of the bag	کرنا فاش راز	باہر سے تھیلے کو بلی نکالنا	ChatGPT: Accurate; Google: literal & nonsensical
11	Beat around the bush	گھمانا کو بات	گرد ارد کے جھاڑی مارنا	ChatGPT: Accurate & idiomatic; Google: literal & awkward
12	Burn the midnight oil	کرنا محنت تک دیر	جلانا تیل کا رات آدھی	ChatGPT: Accurate & natural; Google: literal & non-idiomatic
13	Kick the bucket	جانا مر	مارنا لات کو بالٹی	ChatGPT: Accurate; Google: literal & meaningless
14	A blessing in disguise	نعمت ہوئی چھپی	برکت میں بھیس	ChatGPT: Accurate & idiomatic; Google: literal & unnatural
15	Barking up the wrong tree	کرنا کوشش جگہ غلط	بھونکنا پر درخت غلط	ChatGPT: Accurate & culturally appropriate; Google: literal & confusing
16	On cloud nine	ہونا پر فلک سے خوشی	پر بادل نوویں	ChatGPT: Accurate & idiomatic; Google: literal & awkward
17	In hot water	ہونا میں مشکل	میں پانی گرم	ChatGPT: Accurate & natural; Google: literal & non-idiomatic

18	Cold feet	جانا ڈر / ہچکچاہٹ	پیر ٹھنڈے	ChatGPT: Accurate & idiomatic; Google: literal & confusing
19	The ball is in your court	ہے کا آپ فیصلہ	میں کورٹ کے آپ گیند ہے	ChatGPT: Accurate & culturally adapted; Google: literal & awkward
20	Actions speak louder than words	رکھتا معنی زیادہ سے الفاظ عمل ہے	عمل زیادہ سے الفاظ ہے بولتا	ChatGPT: Accurate & idiomatic; Google: literal & slightly awkward

Analysis

Meaning Accuracy

ChatGPT: 19/20 idioms accurately conveyed the intended figurative meaning. Only minor generic wording occurred for idioms like "actions speak louder than words."

Google Translate: 7/20 idioms conveyed correct figurative meaning; the remaining 13 were literal and often meaningless in Urdu.

Cultural Appropriateness

ChatGPT: 18/20 idioms were culturally appropriate, using natural Urdu expressions that a native speaker would understand.

Google Translate: Only 5/20 idioms were culturally acceptable; most translations sounded awkward or nonsensical in Urdu.

Patterns Observed

ChatGPT consistently paraphrased idioms to retain both meaning and cultural context.

Google Translate often literalized idioms, resulting in unnatural Urdu phrases.

ChatGPT translations were closer to how a human translator would render idioms.

Google Translate translations might be understandable word-by-word but fail idiomatic comprehension.

Summary

This analysis shows that ChatGPT outperformed Google Translate in both research objectives: meaning accuracy and cultural appropriateness while Google Translate struggled to produce idiomatic and culturally

natural Urdu equivalents, confirming that literal translation is a major limitation of statistical and neural MT systems. ChatGPT's performance indicates that LLMs are more capable of handling figurative language, especially for low-resource, culturally rich languages like Urdu.

DISCUSSION

The primary aim of this study was to compare ChatGPT and Google Translate in translating English idioms into Urdu, with specific focus on meaning accuracy **and** cultural appropriateness. The analysis of 20 idioms revealed clear differences between the two platforms.

Meaning Accuracy

ChatGPT demonstrated a high level of accuracy in preserving the figurative meanings of English idioms. Out of 20 idioms, 19 were translated accurately, capturing the intended sense rather than translating word-for-word. For example, idioms like "spill the beans" and "break the ice" were translated into Urdu in ways that conveyed the correct meaning and were understandable to native speakers.

In contrast, Google Translate preserved the figurative meaning in only 7 out of 20 idioms, with the majority being literal translations that failed to convey the intended meaning. Idioms such as "kick the bucket" and "once in a blue moon" were rendered word-for-word, which made them confusing or meaningless in Urdu. This indicates that Google Translate struggles with idiomatic expressions, likely due to its reliance on direct statistical or neural translation patterns rather than context-based understanding.

These findings align with previous studies (Bashir et al., 2023; Khan & Akter, 2025), which highlight that AI-based systems perform better than traditional MT when contextual awareness is incorporated, but literal translation remains a common problem for statistical or rule-based systems.

Cultural Appropriateness

Cultural adaptation was another key focus of this study. ChatGPT produced translations that were culturally appropriate and natural, using expressions familiar to Urdu speakers. For instance, "actions speak louder than words" was translated as "عمل الفاظ سے زیادہ معنی رکھتا ہے," which is idiomatic and resonates in Urdu context. Similarly, "a blessing in disguise" became "نعمت ہوئی چھپی," a phrase that maintains cultural and semantic fidelity.

Google Translate, however, produced translations that were often awkward or nonsensical, such as "نیلے چاند میں ایک بار" for "once in a blue moon." Such literal renderings fail to convey cultural nuances and do not reflect how Urdu speakers would naturally express the idiom.

This supports previous observations (Aslam & Saeed, 2025; Alqohfa & Sanad, 2025) that machine translation often lacks cultural sensitivity, particularly for idioms and low-low-resource languages like Urdu. ChatGPT's performance demonstrates that LLMs can generate translations that are both semantically and culturally appropriate, likely due to exposure to larger and more context-rich datasets.

Patterns and Implications

1. ChatGPT consistently paraphrased idioms rather than translating literally, which contributed to both meaning accuracy and cultural appropriateness.
2. Google Translate frequently literalized idioms, highlighting the limitations of rule-based or statistical models in handling figurative language.
3. ChatGPT's output is closer to human-like translation, suggesting its potential use in education, translation studies, and practical applications where idiomatic and culturally sensitive language is needed.

The results also indicate that cultural knowledge is essential in translation. Even highly accurate literal translations may fail if they are not adapted to the target language's culture. Therefore, AI models like ChatGPT have a clear advantage over traditional MT systems for idiomatic and figurative language translation. Overall, the findings indicate that ChatGPT is a superior tool for translating idioms into Urdu, both in preserving meaning and adapting to cultural context, directly addressing the research objectives.

CONCLUSION

The present study compared ChatGPT and Google Translate in translating 20 English idioms into Urdu, focusing on meaning accuracy and cultural appropriateness. The analysis revealed that ChatGPT consistently preserved the figurative meaning of idioms and produced translations that were culturally natural and understandable to Urdu speakers, whereas Google Translate often produced literal translations that were inaccurate or awkward. These findings indicate that ChatGPT is more effective for idiomatic translation, demonstrating the advantage of AI-based language models in handling figurative and culturally embedded expressions. The results also highlight the importance of context and cultural knowledge in translation, suggesting that while machine translation tools are useful, careful evaluation is necessary when translating idiomatic language.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

For Translators and Learners: ChatGPT can be a reliable tool for understanding and translating idiomatic expressions, particularly when cultural adaptation is required. Google Translate should be used cautiously for idioms, as literal translations may distort meaning.

For Developers: Machine translation systems like Google Translate could improve performance on idioms by integrating context-aware AI models and culturally sensitive datasets.

For Future Research: Further studies could expand the sample size of idioms, include other AI translation tools, and investigate translation performance in complex sentences or literary texts.

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