Backtranslation as a Quality Control Tool in Translation Studies: Challenges and Practical Insights

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Abstract:

Backtranslation, once considered a supplementary procedure in translation evaluation, has evolved into a significant tool for ensuring semantic accuracy and cultural equivalence. Rather than merely re-translating texts, it allows researchers and practitioners to uncover subtle shifts in meaning, tone, or idiomatic intent that may otherwise go unnoticed. This paper explores backtranslation as a quality control mechanism within translation studies, combining theoretical perspectives with real-world case studies. Examples are drawn from Azerbaijani, French, Russian, and Turkish to highlight common challenges such as semantic drift, idiomatic loss, and pragmatic failure. By analyzing authentic data, the study emphasizes how backtranslation can serve as a mirror—reflecting not only linguistic discrepancies but also the deeper cultural mismatches that surface through language. Beyond its methodological relevance, the article adopts a human-centered approach, recognizing that behind every translation lies a human effort to preserve voice, emotion, and intention. The findings of this paper offer practical insights for translator training, multilingual content development, and AI-supported translation tools, reaffirming the value of backtranslation in today's global communication landscape.

Keywords

backtranslation, translation accuracy, semantic shift, idiomatic loss, pragmatic failure, quality assessment, Azerbaijani-English translation

1. Introduction

In an increasingly multilingual world, translation is more than a technical act—it is a negotiation between meanings, cultures, and intentions. Yet, even the most carefully crafted translations can contain subtle shifts that alter the tone, distort idiomatic meaning, or reduce cultural nuance. This is where *backtranslation* enters the conversation—not as a mechanical retranslation of text, but as

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a reflective method to assess what may have been lost, added, or unintentionally reshaped during the translation process.

Backtranslation has gained recognition in both academic research and professional translation practice as a quality control technique. Originally used in psychological and sociolinguistic studies to verify the reliability of translated survey instruments, it has now expanded into broader translation contexts, including legal, medical, and literary fields. Despite debates around its limitations, backtranslation continues to provide valuable insight into how meaning travels—or fails to travel—between languages.

This paper explores backtranslation as a tool for evaluating translation quality. By analyzing authentic examples from Azerbaijani, French, Russian, and Turkish, the study illustrates how semantic drift, idiomatic loss, and pragmatic failure can emerge across languages. While the analysis remains rooted in linguistic observation, it also acknowledges the deeply human element behind translation: a translator's attempt to carry not just words, but intentions, emotions, and cultural depth.

2. Theoretical Background

The concept of backtranslation has long occupied a place in the broader conversation on translation theory, particularly in discussions surrounding equivalence, fidelity, and meaning transfer. While often associated with empirical disciplines such as psycholinguistics and public health—where it is used to ensure the reliability of translated questionnaires, its theoretical underpinnings are firmly rooted in translation studies.

One of the earliest advocates for meaning-based translation, Eugene Nida (1964), emphasized the importance of *dynamic equivalence*, where the impact on the target audience should mirror that of the original. Backtranslation, in this light, becomes a practical tool to evaluate whether such equivalence has been maintained. If the back translated version diverges notably from the original, it often signals a problem—not just with word choice, but with cultural or contextual mismatch.

Peter Newmark (1988) also addressed the tension between *semantic* and *communicative* translation, two approaches that often come into play during backtranslation analysis. While semantic translation focuses on the literal meaning, communicative translation prioritizes the effect on the reader. Backtranslation offers a window into whether these two aims have been balanced—or whether one has overshadowed the other.

Juliane House (1997) further contributed to the field by promoting *translation quality assessment* frameworks, many of which rely on identifying mismatches in meaning, register, and cultural appropriateness. Backtranslation, when applied critically, serves as a diagnostic tool within such frameworks.

Although some scholars like Gile (2009) have warned against over-reliance on backtranslation, subjectivity and variability in re-translation remains valuable when used alongside other evaluative strategies.

In sum, the theoretical foundation of backtranslation is neither narrow nor static. It connects deeply with the core principles of translation: faithfulness, functionality, and intercultural understanding. It is this theoretical richness that makes backtranslation more than a test—it is a lens through which we re-experience the translated message.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative approach to explore how backtranslation can reveal potential distortions in meaning, particularly in idiomatic and culturally embedded expressions. Rather than relying on experimental data, the methodology centers around real-world examples collected from professional and academic translations between English and four other languages: Azerbaijani, Turkish, Russian, and French.

The selection of languages was purposeful. Azerbaijani was chosen as the author's native language and provides rich, culturally nuanced expressions often prone to semantic shift when translated. Turkish, due to its close typological relation to Azerbaijani and its broad use in regional media, offers contrastive insights. Russian, historically influential in post-Soviet translation practice, presents challenges in tone and pragmatic clarity. French, widely referenced in translation studies, allows for comparison with a language that is rich in idiomatic density and metaphorical usage.

A total of 12 idiomatic expressions were selected from existing corpora, published literary translations, and online resources such as multilingual dictionaries and language learning platforms. Each expression was translated into English, then independently back translated into the source language by a bilingual translator who had not seen the original. This allowed for a more objective evaluation of any semantic shift or idiomatic loss.

The main analysis focused on three key indicators:

1. **Semantic drift** – whether the core meaning had shifted.

2. **Idiomatic loss** – whether figurative or cultural meaning had been diluted or lost;

3. **Pragmatic failure** – whether the tone, politeness, or intended effect had been altered.

All examples were categorized based on the type of deviation observed. Additional commentary was provided on the cultural significance of the original expressions and the limitations of backtranslation in capturing non-literal meaning. Each case is documented with its source and, where applicable, with references to academic or professional usage.

This methodology aims not to measure translation "errors" in a prescriptive way, but to offer an exploratory framework through which backtranslation becomes a tool for reflection and deeper cross-linguistic understanding.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

Back-Translation and Idiomatic Challenges in Multilingual Contexts

Back-translation, a method widely used in translation quality control, involves translating a text back into its original language by a separate translator to detect potential errors or shifts in

meaning. While effective in identifying literal mistranslations, this technique often fails when handling idiomatic or culturally bound expressions. The issue becomes more critical when the target text contains idioms, metaphors, or nuanced cultural references. Mirzayev (2024) similarly highlights the significance of phonological awareness in preventing misinterpretation during translation, especially when subtle pronunciation differences can cause a drift in meaning.

Multilingual Idioms in Backtranslation

Language	Idiom (Original Language)	Literal Translation	Actual Meaning	Backtranslation Result	Problem Identified
Azerbaijani	Ağzından bal damır	Honey is dripping from his mouth	Speaks sweetly or flatteringly	Honey dripping from the mouth	Idiomatic loss
Azerbaijani	Qarnı ac, könlü tox	Stomach is empty, soul is full	Principled despite hunger	The stomach is empty, but the soul is full	Cultural abstraction
Azerbaijani	Gözünün üstündə qaş var	You have an eyebrow over your eye	Being unfairly criticized	You have an eyebrow over your eye	Pragmatic failure
Turkish	Pabucu dama atılmak	His shoe was thrown on the roof	Losing value or status	His shoe was thrown to the roof	Semantic drift
Turkish	Kulağı delik olmak	To have a pierced ear	Being well-informed	He has an ear piercing	Idiomatic misreading
Turkish	Burnunun dikine gitmek	To go in the direction of one's nose	Acting stubbornly	Goes where his nose leads	Pragmatic failure
Russian	Вешать лапшу на уши	To hang noodles on one's ears	To deceive or lie	Hanging noodles on ears	Figurative misunderstanding
Russian	Без царя в голове	Without a tsar in the head	Foolish or lacks judgment	No tsar in the head	Cultural mismatch
Russian	Держать язык за зубами	Keep your tongue behind your teeth	Keep a secret / stay silent	Keep the tongue behind the teeth	Pragmatic shift
French	Appeler un chat un chat	To call a cat a cat	To speak frankly	Calling a cat a cat	Minor idiomatic shift
French	Avoir le cafard	To have the cockroach	To feel depressed	Having a cockroach	Semantic confusion
French	Donner sa langue au chat	Give one's tongue to the cat	To give up on guessing	Give the tongue to the cat	Idiomatic distortion
German	Ich verstehe nur Bahnhof	I only understand train station	I don't understand anything	I only understand train station	Literal confusion
German	Da steppt der Bär	The bear dances there	It's a lively place/event	The bear is dancing there	Contextual misunderstanding
German	Tomaten auf den Augen haben	To have tomatoes on one's eyes	To ignore something obvious	Has tomatoes on the eyes	Visual metaphor loss

1. Azerbaijani Idioms in Back-Translation

Let's consider the Azerbaijani idiom "Ağzından bal damır", which literally translates as *"Honey is dripping from his mouth"*. In Azerbaijani, it means someone speaks sweetly or flatteringly. A back-translator unfamiliar with the idiom might render it literally back into English or another language, misrepresenting the actual meaning. The original metaphor may even be misread as sarcasm.

Another idiom, "Qarnı ac, könlü tox", meaning *"The stomach is empty, but the soul is full"*, can confuse back-translators who are unaware of its deeper meaning—referring to someone who values dignity or principles over material needs.

2. Turkish Idioms and Back-Translation Issues

In Turkish, the idiom "Pabucu dama atılmak" (literally "his shoe was thrown on the roof") means someone has lost their value or is no longer important. A literal back-translation creates a surreal image, losing the intended connotation of social rejection.

Similarly, "Kulağı delik olmak" (to have a pierced ear) is used for people who are well-informed or insiders. A back-translation might focus on the physical detail, missing the metaphorical implication altogether.

3. Russian Idioms and Semantic Shifts

The Russian idiom "Вешать лапшу на уши" (veshat' lapshu na ushi), literally "to hang noodles on one's ears", means to deceive or fool someone. Back-translation may cause humorous confusion unless cultural context is considered.

Another example is "Без царя в голове" (bez tsarya v golove) – "without a tsar in the head", meaning someone is foolish or lacks judgment. The political metaphor, once back-translated, can seem absurd or offensive without the cultural background.

4. French Idioms in Translation and Back-Translation

The French expression "Appeler un chat un chat" (to call a cat a cat) means to speak frankly. When back-translated, it may lose its metaphorical straightforwardness and sound unnecessarily literal.

Another idiom, "Avoir le cafard" (to have the cockroach), means feeling blue or depressed. A literal back-translation might be puzzling and even comical in English, diverging from its emotional nuance.

5. German Idioms in Translation

A famous German idiom is "Ich verstehe nur Bahnhof", which means "I don't understand anything" but literally translates as *"I only understand train station."* Back-translators unfamiliar with the idiom might misinterpret it as a context-specific or travel-related statement.

Similarly, "Da steppt der Bär" (literally "The bear dances there") is used to describe a lively party. A literal translation misses the cultural vibrancy of the phrase.

AI-Based Backtranslation vs. Human Interpretation

In addition to human-translated idioms, this study includes selected expressions tested through AI-based backtranslation using Google Translate. The goal was to observe how well current translation algorithms handle figurative language.

One example is the Azerbaijani idiom "Gözünün üstündə qaş var", which culturally implies unjustified criticism or confrontation. Google Translate renders it into English as *"You have an eyebrow over your eye"*. When translated back into Azerbaijani, the literal expression returns, but the cultural nuance is entirely lost.

Another case involves the Turkish idiom "Burnunun dikine gitmek" (*to go in the direction of one's nose*) meaning someone who insists on their way. Google Translate fails to capture the defiant or stubborn connotation, instead translating it literally and back without reflecting attitude or intent.

These AI backtranslation results highlight a critical gap in machine understanding of idiomatic and pragmatic meaning. While translation engines are improving, they remain limited in handling figurative language, especially when expressions are culturally loaded or context-dependent.

Such findings reinforce the ongoing necessity of human translators—not just for linguistic fidelity, but for preserving emotional tone, intent, and cultural identity.

5. Discussion

The findings from multilingual idiom analysis reveal a consistent pattern: backtranslation struggles most when confronted with figurative, idiomatic, or culturally specific expressions. While the technique performs adequately with literal or neutral text, it often fails to detect pragmatic and emotional shifts that idioms inherently carry.

For instance, expressions like "Da steppt der Bär" (German) or "Pabucu dama atılmak" (Turkish) lose their vibrant connotations when backtranslated literally. The phrase "The bear is dancing there" might seem whimsical but fails to convey the idea of a lively gathering. Similarly, "Qarnı ac, könlü tox" (Azerbaijani) retains surface meaning in backtranslation, yet its deeper sense of moral dignity is not fully captured.

One of the most striking observations was how AI-based tools like Google Translate handled idioms. While they excel at surface-level equivalence, they largely fail to recognize idiomatic or emotional nuance. Mirzayev (2024) confirms this in his comparative analysis, showing that while machine translation can replicate literal meaning, it often misrepresents emotional tone, pragmatic intent, and culturally bound expressions. For example, translating "Gözünün üstündə qaş var" into English and back returns a structurally correct sentence that carries none of the implied social critique present in the original. Similar concerns about how pronunciation-related nuances can distort meaning in translation have been addressed by Mirzayev (2025), who highlights the challenges caused by phonetic interference during cross-linguistic transfer.

These cases demonstrate that backtranslation, though useful, must not be treated as a foolproof method for translation validation. It is best employed as a complementary technique, especially when evaluating culturally rich or metaphorically loaded content. Mirzayev (2024) similarly

emphasizes that without targeted training on pronunciation and phonetic awareness, translators may fail to recognize shifts that alter meaning even when the words appear accurate.

Moreover, the discrepancies observed across languages underscore the importance of translator intuition and cultural competence. This aligns with Mirzayev's (2024) findings that first language interference can cause syntactic and semantic shifts in second language production, which in turn affects the accuracy of translated content. No algorithm or double translation method can yet replace the human ability to grasp tone, intent, or context-dependent meaning. The act of translation is, at its core, an act of interpretation—and backtranslation is only a mirror. Sometimes, what it reflects is not what was intended, but what was possible to perceive from the surface. Mirzayev (2024) links this interpretative dimension to Bloom's Taxonomy, suggesting that higher-order thinking can enhance students' ability to evaluate meaning shifts in translation exercises.

Therefore, translator training should include not only linguistic theory and vocabulary work but also a deep dive into figurative language, culture-specific references, and context-aware evaluation. Backtranslation exercises can serve as a powerful pedagogical tool, not just for error detection, but for sparking critical reflection on how language functions across cultural boundaries. As emphasized by Mirzayev (2023), applying an eclectic approach to phonetic and phonological variation in translation pedagogy enhances learners' ability to detect subtle differences that may otherwise lead to semantic distortion. Mirzayev (2024) further supports this view by demonstrating how Total Physical Response (TPR) methods, when integrated with eclectic strategies, contribute to developing students' phonetic awareness, a key factor in preventing meaning distortion during translation.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study sets out to explore the role of backtranslation as a tool for evaluating the quality of translation, particularly when it comes to idiomatic and culturally embedded language. Through an analysis of multiple idioms across five languages—Azerbaijani, Turkish, Russian, French, and German—it became clear that while backtranslation can help detect shifts in literal meaning, it often falls short in capturing the deeper cultural, emotional, and pragmatic layers of language.

The comparison between human and AI-based backtranslations further reinforced this insight. While AI tools like Google Translate can replicate the surface structure of an idiom, they often overlook its social context, implied tone, or metaphorical richness. For example, Mirzayev (2024) points out how subtle vowel variations such as the schwa can influence semantic perception, which is often overlooked in backtranslation or automated tools. This reinforces the importance of human translators, whose cultural awareness and interpretive skills remain irreplaceable.

Backtranslation remains a valuable resource, especially in translation training, comparative analysis, and initial quality checks. However, it should never be used in isolation. Its effectiveness increases significantly when combined with critical thinking, cultural knowledge, and context-aware analysis.

Recommendations:

1. Use backtranslation in tandem with cultural commentary. A simple return to the source language is not enough—context must be considered.

2. Include backtranslation in translator training programs as a reflective tool, not just an assessment method.

3. When working with idiomatic or metaphorical content, prioritize human revision over automated validation.

4. Further research should explore how AI tools can be trained to better understand cultural markers in language, potentially using hybrid human-machine collaboration models.

In a world where communication increasingly crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries, understanding what gets lost—and what can be recovered—through backtranslation is more relevant than ever. And while technology continues to evolve, translation, at its heart, remains a deep human endeavor.

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