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## Mother Tongue Interference in English Sentence and Idiom Translation: A Study among Tamil-speaking Students

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### ABSTRACT :

This study examines mother tongue interference in the English translation performance of 40 second-year BA Tamil Literature students of Madras Christian College, Chennai, Tamil Nadu (25 females, 15 males) tasked with translating three Tamil sentences and three Tamil idioms into English. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative error analysis and quantitative performance scores. It revealed a significant L1 (Tamil) interference. Sentence translation (Task 1) yielded a mean score of 2.0/3 (SD = 0.8), with errors like article omission and word order interference reflecting Tamil's syntactic structure. Idiom translation (Task 2) was significantly more challenging (M = 0.3/3, SD = 0.5), with literal translations and semantic shifts indicating cultural and pragmatic barriers. Statistical analyses (t-tests, chi-square) confirmed a performance gap between tasks and distinct error patterns. Findings suggest that Tamil's structural and cultural features interfere in the production of accurate English phrases and expressions, particularly for idioms. Pedagogical implications include explicit instruction in English grammar and idiomatic expressions to mitigate L1 interference.

**Keywords:** Syntactic Transfer, Structural Errors, Pragmatic Awareness, Cultural Misinterpretation, Typology-informed pedagogical approach

### 1. Introduction

Mother tongue interference, or the influence of a first language (L1) on second language (L2) production, is a universal challenge in language acquisition, particularly in translation tasks where syntactic, lexical, and cultural differences between languages are pronounced. For Tamil-speaking students learning English as an L2, structural differences—such as Tamil's subject-object-verb (SOV) word order, lack of articles, and inflected verb system—often are the reason for errors in English translation. Idiomatic expressions invite an additional challenge, requiring cultural and pragmatic understanding beyond literal translation.

### 2. Objectives of the Study

The objectives were to:

1. Identify patterns of L1 interference in sentence translation (Task 1), focusing on syntactic and lexical errors.
2. Analyze errors in idiom translation (Task 2), emphasizing cultural and pragmatic challenges.
3. Compare performance between tasks and genders.
4. Explore pedagogical strategies to address interference.

By combining qualitative error analysis with quantitative performance metrics and statistical tests, the study provides insights into the nature of Tamil-to-English translation difficulties and informs language teaching practices.

### 3. Literature Review

Mother tongue interference, often referred to as language transfer, significantly impacts second language acquisition, particularly in contexts involving structurally and culturally distant languages (Odlin, 1989; Gass & Selinker, 2008). Tamil and English differ typologically, syntactically, and pragmatically, making transfer errors common among Tamil-speaking learners.

#### 3.1. Structural and Syntactic Transfer

Structural differences between Tamil and English include word order (SOV vs. SVO), use of articles (absent in Tamil), and verb conjugation patterns. These differences result in errors such as article omission, incorrect auxiliary usage, and misordered sentences (Selvam & Vijayakumar, 2017). For

instance, learners may produce sentences like "I am book reading," directly mapping Tamil syntax onto English.

### 3.2. Lexical and Semantic Interference

Tamil lexical items often have broader or culturally embedded meanings, which complicates one-to-one translation into English. Verbs like "படிக்கிறேன்" may refer to both "reading" and "studying," leading to lexical mismatches (Krishnamurthy, 2010).

### 3.3. Idiomatic Expressions and Cultural Transfer

Translation of idioms is particularly prone to interference due to cultural specificity. Baker (1992) and Newmark (1988) emphasize that idioms are often untranslatable word-for-word. Tamil idioms like "மூக்கு மேல் கோபம்" cannot be rendered directly without distortion.

### 3.4. Pragmatic and Discourse-level Challenges

Laufer (2000) highlights that L2 learners may fail to understand the pragmatic functions of idioms, metaphors, and culturally embedded expressions. Tamil's extensive use of metaphor and indirect reference complicates English idiomatic usage, as learners may not grasp connotative meaning.

### 3.5. Existing Research Gaps

While syntactic transfer has been well documented in Tamil-English contexts (Selvam & Vijayakumar, 2017), idiomatic and pragmatic interference remains underexplored. This study attempts to do a small-scale study by examining both sentence-level and idiom-level translation.

## 4. Methodology

A mixed-method approach was used requiring both qualitative and quantitative analyses.

### 4.1. Participants

The study included 40 second-year BA Tamil Literature students (25 females, 15 males) from Madras Christian College in Tamil Nadu. All were native Tamil speakers with intermediate English proficiency based on their academic curriculum.

### 4.2. Procedure

The tasks were administered in-class, paper-based, with Tamil instructions to ensure comprehension and clarity. Participants were given 20 minutes.

### 4.3. Tasks

#### 4.3.1 Sentence Translation Task (Task 1)

Task 1 assessed syntactic transfer and structural understanding of English. The students translated three sentences from Tamil.

Q1: Naan puthagam padikiren (நான் புத்தகம் படிக்கிறேன்)

Q2: Avan palliku nadanthan (அவன் பள்ளிக்கு நடந்தான்)

Q3: Kulanthaigal poongavil vilayadugirargal (குழந்தைகள் பூங்காவில் விளையாடுகிறார்கள்)

#### 4.3.1 Idiom Translation Task (Task 2)

Task 2 assessed vocabulary and pragmatic awareness. The students three idioms from Tamil.

Q1: Kaikoodi vanthathu (கைகூடி வந்தது) which means "Success"

Q2: Mooku mel kobam (மூக்கு மேல் கோபம்) which means "Very angry"

Q3: Kaiku ettinadhu vaiku ettavillai (கைக்கு எட்டியது வாய்க்கு எட்டவில்லை) which roughly translates to the possibility of failure or unforeseen hindrances arising at the last moment, preventing the desired outcome

### 4.4. Data Collection and Scoring

Each response was scored for accuracy and acceptability. In the idiom translation task, responses preserving meaning despite lexical and grammatical errors were scored as correct.

#### 4.5. Data Analysis

- **Qualitative:**

Responses for Task 1 were categorized into fifteen error types:

1. Article Omission
2. Article Misuse/Overuse
3. Auxiliary Omission
4. Verb Form/Agreement Error
5. Tense Error
6. Word Order Error
7. Prepositional Error
8. Spelling Error
9. Subject Replacement
10. L1 Literal Translation
11. Plural Error
12. Apostrophe Misuse
13. Fragment
14. Semantic Confusion
15. Article Redundancy

Responses for Task 2 were categorized into seven types:

1. Literal Translation
2. Approximation / Semantic Shift
3. Pragmatic Confusion
4. Acceptable / Near Correct
5. Semantic Shift
6. Literal Translation with Grammatical Error
7. Literal Translation / Pragmatic Mismatch

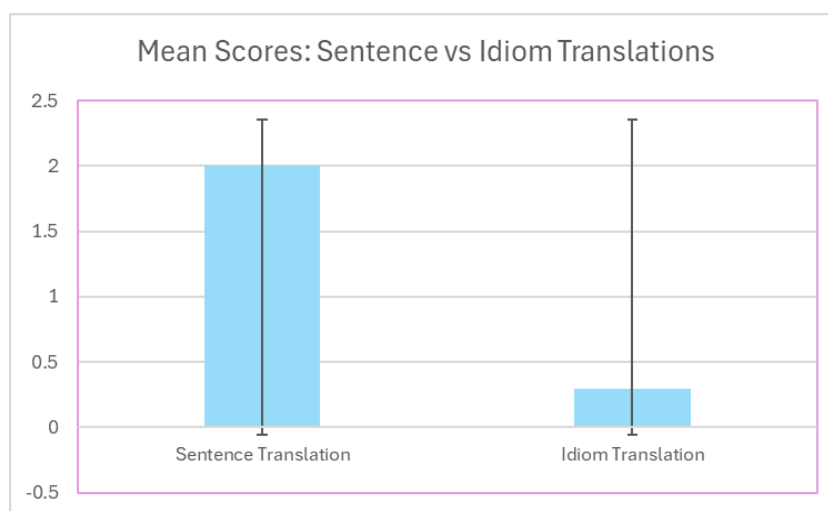
- **Quantitative:** Scores and statistical analyses (paired t-test, chi-square, independent t-test) were conducted

### 5. Data Analysis

#### 5.1. Quantitative Results

- Task 1 Mean Score: 2.0/3
- Task 2 Mean Score: 0.3/3
- Total Mean Score: 2.3/6

Figure 1:



Mean(Task 1) > Mean(Task 2) → Students performed significantly better in Task 1, i.e., sentence translation.

### 5.1.1. Paired t-test

This test compared Task 1 and Task 2 scores to assess performance differences. Task 1 significantly outperformed Task 2 ( $p < 0.001$ )

**Table 1 – Paired Sample T-Test.**

Measure 1	Measure 2	t	df	p
Task 1 Score	Task 2 Score	9.458	3.9	<0.001

p-value  $< 0.05 \rightarrow$  Statistically significant difference

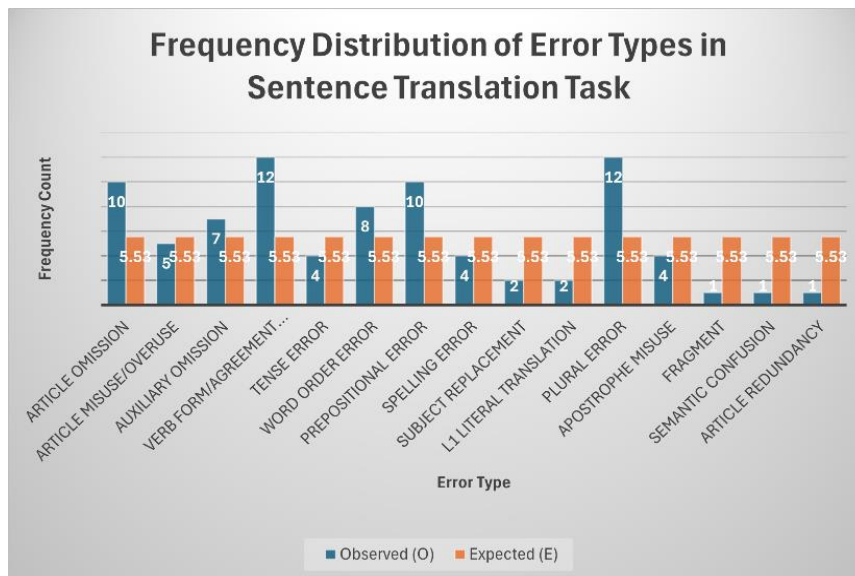
### 5.1.2. Independent t-test

Examined gender differences in Total scores and it was found that there was no significant gender-based score difference

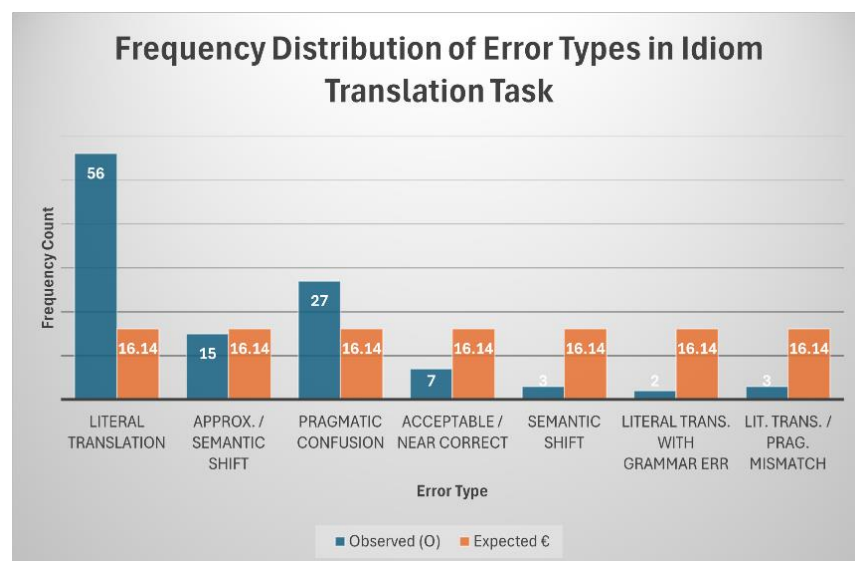
### 5.1.3. Chi-square test

Chi-square test was done to analyze error type distribution between tasks and it was found that there is a significant variation in error type

**Figure 2:**



**Figure 3:**



## 5.2. Qualitative Analysis

Responses were reviewed to identify the recurring errors and the pattern of errors. Task 1 errors reflected the influence of Tamil's syntactic features and Task 2 showed cultural and pragmatic challenges like "literal translations", "semantic shifts" and "pragmatic confusion". There is a tendency to directly render Tamil imagery and misinterpret culturally loaded terms. The chi-square tests conducted on both the **sentence translation task** and the **idiom translation task** revealed **statistically significant results** ( $\chi^2 = 111.17$  and  $\chi^2 = 177.68$  respectively, both  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that the distribution of error types in each task is **non-uniform**. This strongly supports the hypothesis that Tamil-speaking learners tend to make **specific, recurring types of errors**, rather than random ones, when translating into English—errors which can be linked to patterns of **cross-linguistic transfer**.

## 6. Discussion

The study provides empirical evidence for the influence of Tamil on English translation among the learners. The dominance of syntactic errors in sentence translation aligns with Tamil's grammatical features, such as absence of articles and SOV word order. The difficulty of idiom translation underscores the role of culture in language acquisition. In the sentence translation task, the most frequent errors were verb form errors, article omission, prepositional errors and word order interference. These error types are due to the structural differences between Tamil and English in verb morphology, absence of a definite/indefinite article system in Tamil and contrasting sentence structures (SOV vs SVO). In the Idiom translation task, "literal translations" and "pragmatic confusion" dominated among the other error types showing the lack of idiomatic awareness. This demands attention to the challenges in pragmatic competence and figurative language use where literal encoding happens rather than the grasping of contextual meaning.

### 6.1 Linguistic Implications

Students rely on Tamil word order and vocabulary scope when translating, leading to syntactic approximations, semantic mismatches, and literal decoding. These results align with Gass and Selinker's (2008) model of negative transfer and support Krashen's Input Hypothesis by highlighting the need for meaningful input.

### 6.2 Cultural and Pragmatic Implications

Idiomatic expressions pose unique challenges due to their metaphorical and culturally bound meanings. Learners failed to grasp the pragmatic nuances of idioms, leading to literal translations or unrelated interpretations. This confirms Laufer's (2000) claim that idioms are among the last L2 features to be acquired.

### 6.3 Limitations and Score

The limited sample size and lack of a formal English proficiency test constrain the generalizability of findings. However, the study offers a replicable framework for larger-scale or comparative research.

## 7. Pedagogical Implications

### 7.1 Contrastive Grammar Instruction

Explicitly compare and contrast Tamil and English syntactic structures (SOV vs. SVO, article usage, prepositions) in classroom teaching. This will enable the learners to be aware of the sentence patterns and structures.

### 7.2 Focus on Figurative Language

Design tasks, activities, and exercises that gradually introduce idiomatic expressions with Tamil equivalents and cultural context, moving from literal to figurative use.

### 7.3 Scaffolded Translation Tasks

Start with sentence-level translation and slowly progress to figurative and discourse-level translation tasks with feedback mechanisms.

### 7.4 Integrated Skills Approach

Encourage reading, listening, and discussion activities using idioms in context (literature, media, dialogues).

### 7.5 Assessment and Feedback

Incorporate translation and idiom recognition in assessments. Provide individualized feedback on pragmatic and semantic accuracy.

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## 8. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Tamil mother tongue interference significantly affects English translation, especially with idiomatic expressions due to deep structural and cultural differences. Errors are not only made along syntactical lines but also from gaps in pragmatic awareness. Addressing these issues through contrastive teaching methods and targeted idiomatic instruction can enhance learners' translation proficiency. The findings reveal the need for a typology informed pedagogical approach where language instruction explicitly addresses both form-based transfer and meaning-based mismatches, helping learners build proficiency across all linguistic levels.

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