Fixed Expressions and Culture-specific Phenomena

- a translation study of a guidebook

Marie Hansson
Abstract

The aim of this study is to classify and analyse certain areas of interest that occurred in translation of parts of the guidebook *Edinburgh*, published by Phaidon Press. The analysis focuses on the translation of fixed expressions (idioms and metaphors) and culture-specific phenomena (proper nouns and terminology). The theoretical model of Vinay and Darbelnet and the translation strategies by Rune Ingo are used as the basis of the analysis.

The analysis of fixed expressions shows that the majority are translated with fixed expressions in the target language, according to Ingo’s translation strategies. Some of the fixed expressions in the source text are replaced by regular expressions. A few regular expressions in the source text are replaced by Swedish fixed expressions; two English fixed expressions are translated word for word.

The second part of the analysis deals with the translation of culture-specific phenomena, i.e. proper nouns and terminology. The result shows that the procedures *borrowing* and *adaptation*, from Vinay and Darbelnet’s model, are the most common ways of translating culture-specific phenomena in this study.

Keywords: idioms, metaphors, simile, proper nouns, terminology, culture-specific phenomena, translation model, translation strategies
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

1. **Introduction**
   1.1 Aim
   1.2 Method and material

2. **Theoretical background**
   2.1 Fixed expressions
      2.1.1 Idioms
      2.1.2 Metaphors
   2.2 Culture-specific phenomena
   2.3 Translation strategies
      2.3.1 Vinay and Darbelnet
      2.3.2 Ingo

3. **Analysis**
   3.1 Fixed expression
      3.1.1 Idioms
      3.1.2 Metaphors
   3.2 Culture-specific phenomena
      3.2.1 Proper nouns
      3.2.2 Terminology

4. **Conclusion**

5. **References**
   Primary material
   Secondary material
   Secondary material – Internet sources
   Parallel texts
1. Introduction

“Translation is not a matter of words only: it is a matter of making intelligible a whole culture.” (Anthony Burgess)

The present study discusses some of the semantic and lexical problems that arose in translation of texts taken from a guidebook for Edinburgh. Etymologically, the word *translate* derives from Latin and means to *carry* or *bring across* (www.oed.com). It may sound rather simple, but in order to produce a translation that is true to the source text, there are several different aspects that have to be kept in mind, for example style, meaning, aim, content and connotations. In addition to this, the target reader and target culture need to be taken into account. Therefore, a skilled translator does not only have to have considerable knowledge of the two languages in question, but also familiarity with the topic of the current translation. Research is consequently an important part of a translator’s workday.

Tourist information and travel guidebooks are written to attract people to a certain destination and to help them along the way. When it comes to both content and language, such texts are culturally bound, for obvious reasons. The terminology will also, in most cases, be coloured by the focus of the text, for instance history, architecture or gastronomy, and the language will reflect the envisioned reader. This kind of text is especially interesting when looking at translation from a pragmatic point of view.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this study is to classify and analyse certain aspects that occurred in translation of parts of a guidebook from English into Swedish. Focus will be on how to deal with translation of:

- fixed expressions (idioms and metaphors)
- culture-specific phenomena (proper nouns and terminology)
1.2 Method and material

The material for this study was gathered in two steps. First, I translated parts of a guidebook for Edinburgh from English to Swedish. During the translation process, the text was carefully examined and notes relevant to the study were taken throughout the work. Certain areas of interest were identified as the basis of this study (see section 1.1 above).

Dictionaries used when translating the source text (henceforth ST) were primarily *Norstedts stora engelsk-svenska ordbok* (third edition, 2000), *Merriam-Webster Online* and *Oxford English Dictionary* (websites). The Internet and parallel texts on tourism, art and architecture were consulted in order to find the correct terms. Both these sources turned out to be important aids in creating a varied and fluent target text (henceforth TT). The Internet was also useful in identification of the fixed expressions during the translation process.

The second step in gathering material for the present study was categorizing and analyzing the areas of interest chosen for this study. I used Vinay and Darbelnet’s theoretical model presented in *Introducing Translation Studies* by Jeremy Munday (2001), and Rune Ingo’s strategies for translating fixed expressions found in *Konsten att översätta* (2007). These will be presented in more detail in section 2.3.

When classifying the fixed expressions in the ST for the analysis, I used *Norstedts engelska idiombok* and [www.freedictionary.com](http://www.freedictionary.com). The fixed expressions in the TT have primarily been classified with the help of *Svenskt språkbruk*.

The primary material for this study consists of a guidebook about Edinburgh. It was published by Phaidon Press in 2008 and is part of a series of travel guides. According to Phaidon’s website, they are ‘the world’s leading publisher of books on the visual arts’. This explains the focus of the travel guide: design, architecture and (Scottish) culture. There are terms and proper nouns that may not be known to a Swedish reader, and the language is informal and figurative, with fixed expressions such as idioms and metaphors.

The target reader will most probably be to a potential visitor to Edinburgh, with a special interest in the topics mentioned above. Since the focus of the travel guide differs from the typical guidebook, because of its narrow and specialized scope, the book calls for a reader
with previous knowledge of these topics. This would also be the case when it comes to readers of the TT (i.e. the translation). Tourist guides are generally informative, but in this case expressive as well.

2. Theoretical background

This section contains definitions of the first area of interest in this study, namely the fixed expressions (idiom and metaphor), followed by a presentation of culture-specific phenomena. Last, the theories used in the analysis will be presented.

2.1 Fixed expressions

2.1.1 Idioms

According to Rosamund Moon (1998:3), *idiom* is a complicated term since it has a double meaning in general use. An idiom can be defined as a way of expressing something in language, music or art, which is typical for a person or group. A more narrow definition, which accords with this study, may be found in a dictionary: “an expression in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself […] having a meaning that cannot be derived from the conjoined meanings of its elements” (Merriam-Webster Online). This will be the definition used in the present study.

Idioms are frozen patterns, which do not allow any change in form unless the writer (or speaker) is making a joke or a pun, see example (6). Mona Baker emphasizes the fact that idioms cannot “be deduced from their individual components” (1992:63). Mostly, idioms consist of at least two words (*Norstedts engelska idiombok*, 1998:III).

2.1.2 Metaphors

*Metaphor* is the other kind of fixed expressions to be analysed in this study. There are several different definitions of the term, the simplest one being that a metaphor is “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them” (Merriam-Webster Online). This will be the definition used in this analysis.

Murray Knowles and Rosamund Moon (2006:7-8) note that metaphors are examples of non-literal language and that they comprise comparison or identification. The comparison in a
metaphor is implicit. This can be seen in the word *fox* that literally means an animal, while the metaphorical meaning is ‘a cunning person’. A simile is very like a metaphor. For the purposes of the present study, similes will be included in the category of metaphors, even though this definition would not work in another context. The main difference between the two is that the meaning of a simile is explicit. Similes start with the words *like* or *as*. The phrase *he is a fox* is a metaphor, while *he is like a fox* is a simile.

2.2 Culture-specific phenomena

Apart from fixed expressions, the present study also deals with the translation of culture-specific phenomena. These phenomena are difficult to translate since there is seldom an entry in a dictionary or a rule to follow. According to Elisabeth Tegelberg (1:2005), every language has its own vocabulary that refers to cultural phenomena of that particular language. It is important to make a distinction between the different phenomena. Some of them lack an equivalent in the target language, for example the Swedish word *Systembolaget*, while others have an equivalent but the cultural context is different, for example various kinds of natural phenomena. It is, however, important for the translator to keep as much as possible of the essence of the ST.

I have divided culture-specific phenomena into two groups in my analysis: on the one hand proper nouns, and on the other hand terms. The category of proper nouns contains names of buildings, people and places, while the category of terms in the ST concerns Scottish culture, design and architecture. In order to find suitable terms in the target language, parallel texts on the subject were used. During the translation process, the main focus was to find a term in the target language, which was as close as possible to a term in the source language, bearing the target reader and cultural context in mind.

The strategies used when translating the culture-specific phenomena will be presented in section 2.3 below.
2.3 Translation strategies

In this section, I present the strategies and methods suggested in the literature concerning translation of the areas of interest dealt with in the present study.

2.3.1 Vinay and Darbelnet

As for translating fixed expressions and culture-specific phenomena, the translation model of Vinay and Darbelnet (Munday, 2001:56-58) offers a few different strategies. They divide their model into two parts: direct (literal) and oblique (free) translation. These, in their turn, comprise seven different procedures.

Direct translation includes three of the seven procedures. The first one is borrowing, which implies that a word from the ST is used in the TT without any change. The reasons for employing this procedure are diverse. It may be used to add a foreign flavour to the text or to fill a lexical gap in the target language, as in example (1) below:

(1) …while others, such as One Royal Circus (see p022), offer posh B&B-style service. (016) … medan andra, som till exempel One Royal Circus (se s. 022), är ett slags finare bed and breakfast.

The second direct translation procedure is calque, also known as loan translation, where common words and expressions in the source language are transferred to the target language using literal translation, for example skyscraper that has become skyskrapa in Swedish. Both borrowing and calque tend to become integrated in the target language, according to Vinay and Darbelnet (Munday 2001:56) Literal translation is the third procedure and is word-for-word translation. Vinay and Darbelnet state that this is the most common procedure between languages of the same family or culture. The translation below (2) is an example of literal translation.

(2) Start your day with a great Scottish breakfast or some delicious pancakes at Urban Angel… (032) Börja dagen med en stor skotsk frukost eller några läckra pannkakor på Urban Angel…

There are four other procedures to choose from in Vinay and Darbelnet’s model (Munday, 2001:56-58), when direct translation is not possible. One of the oblique translation procedures is adaptation, which means replacing an expression in the ST with one that fits the cultural context of the target language, in order to get the message through (3):
Another procedure is *equivalence*, which refers to translation processes where the semantic information of an expression in the ST is kept intact, while using completely different words in the TT. Vinay and Darbelnet note that this procedure is especially useful when translating fixed expressions (Munday 2001:58). This is illustrated in example (4) below:

(4) But it has a lot of competition *on the horizon*. (016)  

*Transposition* implies a change of grammar from the ST to the TT, where an adverb might become a verb phrase like in “he *happily* offered his advice” translated as “han *var glad* att få lämna några råd”, or a verb might become a noun. According to Vinay and Darbelnet (Munday, 2001:57), this is one of the most common procedures used by translators.

The last procedure *modulation* is when the translator looks at a situation from a different perspective compared to the source language. Ingo (2007:152) exemplifies this procedure with the English phrase “he *entered* the highway”, which becomes “han *kördde ut* på motorvägen” in Swedish.

### 2.3.2 Ingo

According to Ingo (2007:144-45), there are four strategies available when translating idioms, which are also applicable to other kinds of fixed expression:

1. Translate the fixed expression with another fixed expression. Example (5) below demonstrates how an English idiom is translated with a Swedish equivalent.

(5) Delis may be two a penny nowadays, but there are few that have *stood the test of time* so determinedly as Valvona & Crolla. (084)  

2. Translate the fixed expression word for word. Below is a modified example (6) of the English idiom *jokes aside*, which is translated directly into Swedish to keep the sense.
Irony aside, the university was fortunate that prosperous Scottish brewery owner William McEwan financed the building of this semi-circular neoclassical amphitheatre. (012)

3. Translate the fixed expression with a regular expression that covers and explains the sense. This strategy is similar to Vinay and Darbelnet’s procedure equivalence, see example (4).

4. Translate a regular expression with a fixed expression (7).

…as gusty winds do everything in their power to stop you in your tracks. (034)

Ingo points out that it is of utmost importance for the translator to keep the stylistic and semantic level of the ST (2007:144-5). Therefore, the translator should use strategy 1 as often as possible when translating fixed expressions. Strategy 2 should be seen as a last resource. The translator might succeed in creating a new idiom or a conceivable expression, but mostly the result will be an expression that is easily misunderstood in the target language, if not completely incomprehensible.

If the translator, after thorough research, does not find an equivalent of a certain fixed expression, strategy 3 might work seen from a semantic point of view, even if the style of the ST will be affected. Strategy 4 may, in some cases, compensate for other fixed expressions that have been lost during the translation process and thus maintain the stylistic level, but it should not be used too often.

Ingo (2007:123) also brings up the importance of cultural adaptation, just like Vinay and Darbelnet, and he mentions the use of additions or clarifications, where the translator adds extra information, such as a noun or an adjective, to render the target text more accessible without changing the meaning. Below is an example (8) of an addition that explains a rugby competition perhaps not known to the intended reader:

…such as the Six Nations, for which tickets are like gold dust. (090)
3. Analysis

This part of the study is divided into two main sections dealing with each of the areas of interest, namely fixed expression and culture-specific phenomena.

3.1 Fixed expressions

3.1.1 Idioms

As I mentioned in section 1.2, the stylistic level of the guidebook translated in this study is informal and figurative. It offers a range of fixed expressions (idioms and metaphors) to deal with. According to Ingo, it is important to keep the style and semantics of the ST (2007:144). Therefore, he recommends translating a fixed expression with another fixed expression in the target language whenever possible.

A large part of the idioms in the ST have perfect equivalents in the target language. These are consequently easy to translate and need no extra work. This is illustrated in the two examples below:

(9) …while the Georgian splendour of the New Town’s broad streets and sweeping terraces is enough to give the first-time visitor goosebumps. (003)

(10) If you’re in search of some of the city’s best Italian cooking, head for Bella Mbriana… (040)

In (9) and (10) the English idioms have been translated by recognized idioms in Swedish. The Swedish idiom has been categorized by means of the thesaurus Svenskt språkbruk.

One of the most challenging idioms to translate throughout the guidebook, because of its complicated lexical form, was the expression to within an inch of one’s life. It is clearly an idiom, since its meaning can not be understood from the separate words. According to a dictionary the expression means: ‘almost to the point of death’ (Merriam-Webster Online). The translation of the idiom given by Norstedts stora engelsk-svenska ordbok is halvt fördärvad, which gave the version below (11):

(11) This project may have involved renovating the Lady Glenorchy church to within an inch of her life…

…även om man kan tycka att projektet mest gick ut på att renovera Lady Glenochy Church halvt fördärvad.
When googling halvt fördärvad, there were almost 8,000 hits. The expression mostly turns up together with the Swedish word for laugh: skratta sig + halvt fördärvad. One could argue that the Swedish expression is not as strong as the English one, and that it has both a negative and positive connotation. In this case, the intention is to point out that the renovation was quite brutal. The Swedish expression is an idiom and therefore suitable for this translation in order to keep the stylistic level.

Idioms in the ST lacking an idiomatic equivalent in the target language put translators to the test. In such cases, one of Ingo’s three remaining strategies has to be employed. First, we will consider strategy 3 where a fixed expression is translated by a regular expression, which covers the sense. This might be the second best solution, even if the style of the TT will be altered (Ingo 2007:145). In one’s tracks is an English idiom that means on the spot (Merriam-Webster Online). In the TT the expression is translated with a regular Swedish word (12):

(12) …as gusty winds do everything in their power to stop you in your tracks. (034) …då stormvindar gör allt som står i deras makt för att genast sätta p för din färd.

As I have already established, the ST is filled with idioms. Most of them have been replaced with idioms in the TT. Some have been replaced with Swedish regular expressions, since it has not been possible to find a good equivalent in every case. Conversely, there are a few non-idiomatic expressions in the ST that have been replaced with a Swedish idiom in the translation. Ingo (2007:145) does not recommend this strategy, but he admits that it is a way of compensating for “lost” fixed expressions in order to keep the stylistic level. Consider the following example (13):

(13) Or set your sights a little further and head to one of the luxury hotels in the Highlands. (096) Eller sikta lite högre och styr kosan mot ett av lyxhotellen på det skotska höglandet.

In the example above the English expression is not categorized as an idiom according to the definition in section 2.1.1. The Swedish expression, however, is seen as an idiom according to Svenskt språkbruk.

The last strategy deals with idioms being translated word for word. Ingo points out that this strategy should be used carefully (2007:144). The result may become incomprehensible to the reader. In this study, there are only two examples where this strategy has been employed. The
first one is mentioned in section 2.3.2. The other one is really an English idiom that is
replaced by an identical Swedish idiom. One could argue that it is also a case of literal
translation, see example (14) below,

(14) But it wouldn’t be a retreat if it was around the corner, would it? (097) Men det skulle inte vara mycket till tillflyktsort om huset låg runt hörnet, eller hur?

3.1.2 Metaphors

Among the fixed expressions in the text, there are some metaphors. A metaphor is an analogy
with an implicit message, which is intended to evoke an image. The metaphors in the ST have
also been translated according to Ingo’s four strategies. As mentioned in section 2.3.2, it is
preferable to translate a fixed expression in the ST with a fixed expression in the target
language (Ingo 2007:144). Examples (15) and (16) below illustrate two English metaphors
that have been translated with Swedish equivalents:

(15) Delis may be two a penny nowadays, but there are few that have stood the test of time so determinedly as Valvona & Crolla. (084) Delikatessaffärer är vardagsmat numera, men det finns få som undgått tidens tand så tydligt som Valvona & Crolla

(16) A pinnacle of the old city, it also acts as a striking contrast to Edinburgh’s 18th- and 19th-century architecture. (009) Som kronan på verket i den gamla staden står slottet också i slående kontrast till Edinburghs 1700- och 1800-tals arkitektur.

One meaning of vardagsmat is food you eat every day. In this study the expression is a
metaphor since it implies something else than the actual food. It creates an image of
something that is plentiful. The same goes for pinnacle. It could be interpreted as a turret, but
in this case it has to do with something important and imposing metaphorically speaking.

In contrast to idioms, which cannot be understood by looking at their separate parts, the words
in a metaphor are usually comprehensible to the reader, as in example (17) and (18) below.
According to Ingo (2007:119), metaphors are also flexible, especially literary metaphors that
can be the work of the author. Some of these metaphors disappear at once, while others
eventually become a fixed part of the language.

(17) … and Dance Base (see p089) have been praised for stitching threads of modernity into the old fabric. (064)

(18) …och Dance Base (s. 089) har lovordats för att ha broderat moderna trådar i det gamla tyget.
Equally, it will be the promenade along the newly developed docks at Leith or the sharp climb to admire one of the city’s many breathtaking views that will lodge in your mind. (032)

På samma sätt kan en promenad längs det upprustade hamnområdet Leith eller en brant klättring för att få en hisnande utsikt över staden vara det som stannar kvar i minnet.

This flexibility is especially evident in similes (Ingo 2007:119). Here, the message is also explicit compared to metaphors in general (19):

…for which tickets are like gold dust. (090)  
…då biljetterna är ett hett byte.

3.2 Culture-specific phenomena

3.2.1 Proper nouns

The most common kind of proper nouns that caused problems in the ST is names of buildings. The first thing to think about during the translation was whether or not to translate these proper nouns into Swedish. Since the ST is a guidebook whose main purpose is to help people around a specific city, keeping the name in English makes most sense. I decided to employ Vinay & Darbelnet’s procedure borrowing (Munday 2001:56), i.e. to use the proper noun from the ST directly in the target language. The next step was to decide if the definite article the should be maintained in the TT. According to Svartvik & Sager (1977:176), most names of cinemas, hotels, theatres and such are used with the definite article. For most of the hotels, it seemed to be an important part of the name. The capital letter was used in the source language. This is illustrated in the example (20) below:

For this kind of intimate accommodation, The Edinburgh Residence (opposite) and The Howard (see p020) are the best options… (016)

För den här typen av boende är The Edinburgh Residence (se s. 017) och The Howard (se s. 020) de bästa alternativen…

This was also the case with some of the other buildings mentioned in the ST. Here (21), the definite article was used in the TT because of the capital letter.

…who was also responsible for The Scottish National Portrait Gallery on Queens Street (tfn 624 6200) (012)

Samme man ritade även The Scottish National Portrait Gallery på Queen Street (tfn 624 6200).

Conversely, some other buildings and venues in Edinburgh were mentioned using the without a capital letter, and they were consequently translated into Swedish without it, as you can see in example (22):
According to the translator Hinchliffe (2005:12-13), there are no rules for how to translate proper nouns, but some conventions can be distinguished. Apart from leaving the names untranslated (borrowing), a translator can use the recognized or official translation (23).

This is also a common way of translating historical names, even if Hinchliffe questions if this procedure really can be looked upon as an act of translation. It is rather a use of a parallel form (2005:20-21). The Roman wall mentioned in the ST is named after the emperor Antoninus. He has got a recognized name in the target language, see example (24) below:

Another useful method when translating culture-specific phenomena is adding a clarification (Nissan – river Nissan) (Hinchliffe 2005:13). According to Vinay and Darbelnet, this procedure is called adaptation (Munday 2001:58), and was sometimes used translating the geographical names in and around Edinburgh. Ingo points out that this can be an effective strategy to create a balance in the TT and help the reader, but it should be used for pragmatic reasons only (2007:123). It should not create a new text. In (25) different parts of Edinburgh have been given some extra information.

3.2.2 Terminology
The focus of the guidebook is the visual arts, according to the publisher’s website. Design, architecture and (Scottish) culture are the topics of the ST. This in turn influences the terminology of the translation. Finding the correct architectural term demanded a great deal of research. The best way to find a good equivalent in the TT was through parallel texts. The
term *terrace* is used several times in the ST describing different parts of the city. The first translation in *Norstedts stora engelsk-svenska ordbok* is *terrass* or *avsats*. The second one is *husrad*, which fits the context, but turned out to be difficult to integrate in the target language. In order to create flow in the TT, other options had to be employed. Example (26) below illustrates another choice of words, while in (27) the term is omitted altogether.

(26) …New Town’s broad streets and sweeping *terraces*… (003) …New Towns georgianska prakt med breda gator och svepande *husfasader*…

(27) Located in a magnificent Georgian house on a quiet *West End terrace*… (017) …i det magnifika georgianska huset i lugna *West End*…

Another challenging architectural term was *iconic building*. There was no entry in a dictionary for this word, yet it seemed to be a well-known term in this context. After consulting a number of parallel texts, a Swedish equivalent appeared: *ikonbyggnad*. A search on google.se gave 494 hits. The term occurs on specialized websites concerning urban planning and architecture. According to Vinay and Darbelnet’s translation model this is an example of *calque* (Munday 2001:56).

Scottish culture is present throughout the ST. Keeping as many of these specific terms, employing the translation procedure *borrowing*, makes the translation stay close to the original. It also adds a foreign flavour to the TT, according to Vinay and Darbelnet (ibid:56).

*Hogmanay* is the Scots word for 31 December. One way of translating this word could be to use the more common term *New Year’s Eve* and omit the word used in the source language. This would get the message through to the reader. In this case and context, since culture is a part of the focus of the ST, it seems natural to stay as close to the original as possible. In example (28) below, *nyår* is used in the running text with a clarification in parenthesis:

(28) At *Hogmanay* and during the Festival, there’s notoriously no room at the inn… (016) Det är allmänt känt att det är svårt att få tag på ett rum runt *nyår* (skottarnas *Hogmanay*) och under den stora kulturfestivalen…

Another typical Scottish term is *Highland Games*, which imply competitions held around the country to celebrate Celtic and Scottish culture. In this case (29), an addition has been made before the word. The envisioned reader probably understands English so the word *games* will be understood.
In addition to rugby, American football and The Highland Games have been played here. (090)

Förutom rugby har man ibland även kunnat titta på amerikansk fotboll och de typiskt skotska Highland Games.

Some typical Scottish words that have not been maintained in the TT are wynd and loch. They have been translated with gränd and sjö. These have been adapted to the target language, but without additions or clarifications (Ingo 2007:153). One could argue that keeping these words would have added a cultural colour to the translation. On the other hand, these words occur in a context where they are not in focus. It would have taken too much space in the translation to explain them.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to classify and analyse certain areas of interest that occurred in translation of parts of the guidebook Edinburgh, published by Phaidon Press. The analysis was based on fixed expressions (idioms and metaphors) and culture-specific phenomena (proper nouns and terminology). The terms idiom and metaphor were defined. The theoretical model of Vinay & Darbelnet and the translation strategies by Rune Ingo were used in this study.

The results of the first part of the study, namely fixed expressions, showed that Ingo’s first strategy was used the most during the translation process. The majority of the fixed expressions in the ST were translated with fixed expression in the source language. Some of the fixed expressions were replaced by a regular expression in the TT. Only a few regular expressions in the ST were translated with Swedish fixed expressions. Two fixed expressions were translated word for word.

The translation of metaphors differed somewhat from the translation of idioms. Metaphors can be looked upon as fixed expression, but they are much more flexible and there is some room for alteration. Since the metaphor can be understood through looking at its separate words, the author has the possibility to change it. This also goes for the translator.

The second part of the analysis dealt with culture-specific phenomena, i.e. proper nouns and terminology. The proper nouns were names of buildings, people and places. To keep the cultural flavour of the ST and to help the reader when visiting Edinburgh, most names were
not translated at all. Vinay and Darbelnet’s procedure *borrowing* was used. The official Swedish name was used for historical people, and in some cases *adaption* was applied.

The terminology analysed in this study was primarily translated with the help of parallel texts. These terms were translated into Swedish when possible, or were kept in English in the TT and then adapted.

This paper concentrated on translation of fixed expressions and culture-specific phenomena from a guidebook. The scope was narrowed down to certain areas of interest. Further analyses could concern translations of the same topics, but in other kinds of text. A wider study could deal with fixed expressions, but also include collocations and/or phrasal verbs.
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