

Applying Tagmemic Theory in Translating *Sangkuriang*: A Case Study of Cultural and Idiomatic Expressions

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the application of Kenneth L. Pike's Tagmemic Theory in translating cultural and idiomatic expressions found in the Indonesian folklore *Sangkuriang* into Korean. By employing a qualitative descriptive method, the research uses Indonesian *Sangkuriang* version as a source language and Korean as a target language as primary data. Segments containing idioms and cultural expressions, both explicitly and implicitly, were identified and analyzed using the tagmemic unit (function–class–slot). The aims of this study are formulated to 1) describe the concept of language as a system of interrelated and interacting units, with a focus on how these units function in the context of translation output, and 2) explain how language units such as words, phrases, clauses, and sentences function in the context of language transfer, both in communication situations and in larger language structures. The analysis reveals that literal translations often fail to convey the original sense and function to reach the cultural meaning of idioms and expressions. Several expressions require idiomatic or context-sensitive translation strategies to maintain communicative effectiveness. The study concludes that Tagmemic analysis is useful in identifying shifts in meaning and evaluating the appropriateness of translation choices. It emphasizes the importance of cultural and functional equivalence, particularly when dealing with texts rich with local values and stylistic features.

Keywords: *Tagmemic Theory, Translation Studies, Idiomatic Expressions, Culture Perspective, Sangkuriang, Folklore Translation*

I. Introduction

Translating literary texts is a process that goes far beyond transferring meaning from one language to another; it involves conveying cultural values, aesthetic depth, and communicative functions that are embedded in the linguistic and cultural fabric of the source text. Folklore, as a form of oral literature, presents unique challenges in translation due to its rich symbolism, implicit cultural references, and stylistic features that reflect the worldview of its originating community (Huang, 2024; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2022; Juherni et al., 2024; Mochammad et al., 2025).

A culturally faithful translation of folklore must not only focus on semantic equivalence but also consider functional and cultural accuracy. This becomes especially significant when dealing with idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and humor—elements that are deeply rooted in specific cultural and linguistic contexts (Raharjo, 2025; Nida et al., 2003; Sachiya et al., 2025). Literal translations often fail to capture these elements effectively, leading to a loss of meaning, tone, and cultural resonance (Tarigan et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2025; Mahdori et al., 2025).

The Indonesian folktale Sangkuriang, originating from the Sundanese oral tradition, serves as a rich example of such challenges. The tale incorporates mythological themes, moral lessons, and dialogic interactions that reflect local wisdom and linguistic creativity. Translating Sangkuriang into Korean, however, is not straightforward. Korean and Indonesian are typologically and culturally distinct languages. Korean is an agglutinative language with honorific systems, context-dependent pragmatics, and unique syntactic orders, while Indonesian is relatively analytic and does not rely heavily on context-bound expressions or grammatical hierarchy. These structural differences pose significant challenges, particularly when translating culturally-loaded idiomatic expressions.

Moreover, Korean culture carries its own set of idioms, values, and humor that may not align directly with those in Sangkuriang. Translators must thus identify equivalent expressions that serve a similar function and impact, rather than merely translating words. To bridge this gap, a linguistic model that accounts for both form and function is necessary.

Kenneth L. Pike's Tagmemic Theory (1967) offers a compelling framework for this task. Tagmemics views language as composed of tagmemes—units consisting of a slot (position in structure), class (grammatical form), and role (communicative function). This theory allows translators to analyze how language units operate within specific contexts and how their functions contribute to the meaning of the text as a whole. In the case of translating from Indonesian to Korean, this perspective is particularly valuable because it enables the translator to go beyond surface structures and identify target language expressions that fulfill equivalent functional roles.

Using Tagmemic Theory, translators can analyze idiomatic and humorous expressions in Sangkuriang by identifying their semantic functions and seeking Korean equivalents that achieve a similar pragmatic effect, even if the linguistic forms differ. This functional alignment is crucial for preserving the communicative intent and cultural significance of the original text.

Furthermore, Tagmemic analysis supports an understanding of how different language units—words, phrases, clauses—interact and contribute to the discourse structure of the text. This is especially important in translating Sangkuriang, where implied meanings and culturally nuanced references play a vital role. Misinterpreting these elements could result in significant shifts in meaning or tone in the Korean version.

Therefore, this study investigates the application of Tagmemic Theory in translating idiomatic and cultural expressions from the Indonesian folktale Sangkuriang into Korean. It aims to demonstrate how this approach can help identify shifts in meaning, maintain communicative and cultural equivalence, and guide more accurate and culturally sensitive translation practices. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to the field of translation studies by offering insights into cross-cultural linguistic transfer between Indonesian and Korean in the context of folklore translation.

II. Literature Review

Tagmemic Theory

Tagmemic Theory was first developed by Kenneth L. Pike as a linguistic approach that attempts to explain the relationship between form and function in language. In this theory, the main unit of analysis is called a tagmem, which is a linguistic unit consisting of three main components: function (what is done in the structure), class (the type of word that fills that function, such as nouns, verbs), and distribution (the position of the element in a sequence or sentence context). According to Pike (1967), language is not only a system of symbols, but also a behavioral system that reflects the social and cognitive functions of language users.

The principle of tagmemic analysis is the importance of understanding language structure hierarchically and contextually. With this approach, a clause or sentence is not only explained in terms of its morphological or syntactic form, but also from how its elements play a role in conveying meaning and communicative purpose. Pike states that language can be studied holistically through a combination of functional patterns, word classes,

and distribution contexts, which is very helpful in dealing with complex texts such as literary works or folklore.

Translation of Idioms and Humor

Translating idioms and humor is one of the main challenges in translation research because it is contextual and closely related to the source culture. According to Larson (1998), an idiom is an expression whose meaning cannot be guessed from the meaning of each word, so the translator must look for an equivalent meaning, not an equivalent form. If an idiomatic equivalent in the target language is not available, the translator can use paraphrase or transfer it to a non-idiomatic form with an equivalent meaning. Likewise, humor is often based on wordplay, cultural references, or pragmatic situations, so the translator must have a deep understanding of the source and target cultural contexts.

Nida (1964) introduced the concept of dynamic equivalence, namely the equivalence of meaning that is oriented towards the response of the target reader. In the context of idioms and humor, this principle allows the translator to change the form to maintain the communicative effect or function. Baker (2018) also emphasized that idioms can be a barrier to translation if the translator does not master the semantic and pragmatic context. Therefore, strategies such as cultural substitution, paraphrasing, or even omission (with compensation elsewhere) can be applied to maintain the cohesion and literary effect of the original text.

Previous Research

Although still limited, several studies have tried tagmemic theory with translation, especially in the context of sentence structure or morphology analysis. Research by Wahidah (2015), for example, uses a tagmemic approach to analyze translation errors of compound sentences in English-Indonesian translated novels. She shows that by analyzing the function and distribution of elements in tagmemes, translators can better understand structural errors and improvements based on appropriate patterns in the target language.

On the other hand, there are also studies that focus more on translating idioms and humor, such as a study by Setyawan (2020) who analyzed the translation of idioms in Javanese folklore into English. This study highlights how translators face difficulties in maintaining local cultural values and humor styles. Although it does not use tagmemics explicitly, the study shows the need for a deeper linguistic approach to understanding idiomatic functions and communicative effects, which opens up opportunities for tagmemic theory to be applied in the development of literary translation strategies.

III. Research Methodology

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to describe in depth the process of translating idiomatic and cultural expressions in the *Sangkuriang* folktale from Indonesian into Korean. This approach was chosen because it is able to reveal the meaning, function, and semantic and cultural shifts that occur during the translation process, especially in the context of oral literary texts that are rich in cultural symbolism and distinctive language styles. The data sources in this study consist of two types, namely the *Sangkuriang* story text in the Indonesian version as the source language, and the translated version in Korean as the target language. Data were collected through documentation techniques and in-depth reading of both versions of the text, focusing on segments that contain idiomatic expressions, contextual humor, and local cultural symbols that have the potential to change meaning in the translation process. After the data was collected, the analysis process was carried out using the Tagmemic theory developed by Kenneth L. Pike. This theory analyzes language based on three main components, namely function, class, and slot or distribution. Function refers to the role of language units in sentence structures such as subjects, predicates, or objects; class refers to the type of language unit such as noun, verb, or phrase; while slot describes the position and pattern of occurrence of language units in sentence or discourse structure. Through this analytical framework, this study examines how idioms and cultural expressions in the source text are translated into Korean by considering the equivalence of function and meaning.

IV. Results

This study focuses on the analysis of idiomatic expressions and humor within the *Sangkuriang* folktale and how these elements are translated from Indonesian into English. The analysis employs the Tagmemic theory by Kenneth L. Pike, which emphasizes the roles, classes, and distribution of linguistic units.

Idiomatic Expression

Table 1. Idiomatic Analysis in the *Sangkuriang* Text

No.	Source Idiom (Indonesian)	Korean Translation	Function	Class	Slot (Distribution)	Evaluation & Suggestion
1	Hatinya bagai air di daun talas (His heart is like water on a taro leaf)	그의 마음은 잎사귀 위의 물처럼 흔들렸다 (His heart trembled like water on a leaf)	To express emotional instability	Idiomatic noun phrase (simile)	Descriptive predicate	The literal imagery is unfamiliar to Korean readers. Consider using a natural Korean idiom like 마음이 오락가락하다 (“his heart sways back and forth”) for better clarity.
2	Dia naik darah mendengar itu (He boiled with anger)	그는 그것을 듣고 분노가 치밀었다 (Anger surged upon hearing that)	To express anger or emotional outburst	Idiomatic verbal phrase	Main predicate	The Korean idiom 분노가 치밀다 accurately conveys the function and intensity of the expression; well-translated.
3	Dia banting tulang demi hidup anaknya (He worked himself to the bone for his children)	그는 자식을 위해 뼈 빠지게 일했다 (He worked until his bones broke for his child)	To indicate sacrifice and hard work	Idiomatic full sentence	Narrative clause	The Korean idiom 뼈 빠지게 일하다 is semantically and functionally equivalent. Clear and effective translation.
4	Mulutmu harimaumu (Your mouth is your tiger)	네 입이 너를 잡아먹을 수도 있어 (Your mouth can devour you)	A warning about one's words	Idiomatic noun phrase	Independent clause	The literal translation is confusing. Use culturally familiar Korean expressions like 말이 씨가 된다 (“your words can become reality”) or 말 조심해라 (“watch your words”).
5	Sudah jatuh tertimpa tangga pula (When it rains, it pours)	설상가상이다 (Misfortune on top of misfortune)	To express compounded misfortune	Idiomatic sentence	Narrative commentary	The Korean idiom 설상가상 directly matches the meaning and pragmatic function. Excellent equivalence.
6	Kepalanya pusing tujuh keliling (His head spun in circles)	그는 머리가 빙빙 돌았다 (His head was spinning)	To express deep confusion or stress	Idiomatic verbal phrase	Character's internal narrative	The Korean expression 머리가 빙빙 돌다 is commonly used and accurately conveys the psychological condition. Functionally and

						contextually appropriate.
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This table presents eight examples of idioms in the *Sangkuriang* folktale, both in Indonesian and their English translations. Each idiom is analyzed based on three main elements in Tagmemic theory: function (what is the meaning or role of the expression in context), class (its grammatical form), and distribution (its position or environment of occurrence in the sentence structure).

An example such as “*Hatinya bagai air di daun talas*” is literally translated as “His heart was like water on a taro leaf.” Structurally, this translation is appropriate, but it loses the idiomatic meaning that can be understood by English speakers. Tagmemic analysis shows that the emotional function of the idiom is not well conveyed in the target culture. Therefore, the proposed solution is to replace it with a target idiom that has a similar function, such as “unstable like a flickering flame.”

In contrast, some idioms such as “*Dia naik darah*” or “He boiled with anger” show successful translations because they have well-established idiomatic equivalents in English and convey the same function and distribution.

This table shows the importance of understanding not only the meaning of each word, but also its idiomatic meaning and cultural context so that the meaning remains functional in the target language.

Indonesian

Hatinya Bagai air di daun talas

S V O

Korean

그의 마음은 잎사귀 위의 물처럼 흔들렸다

S S O+V

Indonesian

Dia naik darah

S V O

Korean

그는 그것을 듣고 분노가 치밀었다

S (adv.) S+V

Indonesian

Dia banting tulang demi hidup anaknya

S V O

Korean

그는 자식을 위해 뼈 빠지게 일했다

S (O modifier) V

Indonesian

Mulutmu harimaumu
S O (predikatif)

Korean

네 입이 너를 잡아먹을 수도 있어
S O V

Indonesian

(Dia) jatuh tertimpa tangga pula
S (implisit) V V + O

Korean

설상가상이다
S + V (idiom)

Indonesian

Kepalanya pusing tujuh keliling
S V O (modifier)

Korean

그는 머리가 빙빙 돌았다
S S V

The structure shown in the table illustrates how each idiom, both in Indonesian and Korean, follows the basic SVO (Subject–Verb–Object) pattern, even though some idioms may not appear straightforward at first glance. The “S” indicates the subject or doer of the action, the “V” marks the verb or action, and the “O” shows the object or the affected element. By tagging these components under each word, the syntactic structure becomes clearer, making it easier to analyze how meaning is conveyed in each language. This method helps identify whether the idioms maintain their grammatical roles across languages or if adjustments are needed in translation to preserve both form and function.

Humor Analysis

Table 2. Contextual Humor Analysis in the *Sangkuriang* Text

No.	Source Idiom (Indonesian)	Korean Translation	Function	Class	Slot (Distribution)	Evaluation & Suggestion
1	<i>Kalau kamu menikahi aku, dunia bisa runtuh!</i>	네가 나와 결혼하면 세상이 무너질 거야!	Dramatic rejection (hyperbole, irony)	Hyperbolic sentence	Closing line in important dialogue	Fairly communicative, but could be strengthened idiomatically: “장난이지? 세상이 무너지겠다!”
2	<i>Anjing lewat saja malu lihat tingkahmu!</i>	너 같은 것 보면 개도 부끄러워할 거야!	Hyperbolic mockery	Metaphorical sentence	Character's emotional outburst	Still stiff; better to use idiomatic Korean: “개도 얼굴을 못 들겠다”
3	<i>Ini gara-gara batu licin, bukan aku ceroboh!</i>	미끄러운 돌 때문이지, 내가 실수한 게 아니야!	Defensive humor	Exculpatory sentence	Comedy scene	Appropriate, but could be shortened for comic effect: “돌 탓이야, 내가 아냐!”
4	<i>Kamu tidur seperti kerbau mati</i>	너는 죽은 소처럼 자는구나	Hyperbolic simile	Idiomatic phrase	Casual comment	Literal translation sounds foreign in Korean; more idiomatic: “돌처럼 자더라”
5	<i>Pintarnya kamu, sampai lupa caranya jalan!</i>	너 똑똑해서 걷는 법도 잊었나 봐!	Sarcasm / irony	Ironic sentence	Comeback in dialogue	Effective in sarcasm, Korean structure is natural
6	<i>Ups, itu gaya baru membangunkan ayam!</i>	어머, 닭 깨우는 새로운 방법이네!	Spontaneous humor	Exclamatory sentence	Character's reaction to spontaneous event	Well-translated and natural, light humor effect is preserved

Based on Kenneth L. Pike's Tagmemic theory, which views language as composed of functional units (tagmemes) involving function, class, and distribution, the translation of humorous expressions in the folk story *Sangkuriang* requires more than just lexical equivalence. It demands a deep contextual and cultural understanding to maintain the rhetorical and communicative effects of the original.

For instance, in the expression "Kalau kamu menikahi aku, dunia bisa runtuh!" ("If you marry me, the world might collapse!"), the function is a dramatic rejection conveyed through hyperbole and irony. Its class is a hyperbolic declarative sentence, and its distribution is as a closing remark in an important dialogue. In the Korean translation ("네가 나와 결혼하면 세상이 무너질 거야!"), the sentence is grammatically correct but may lack the ironic emotional weight familiar to Korean audiences. A more effective rendering might be "장난이지? 세상이 무너지겠다!" ("You must be joking! The world might fall apart!") — a version that better preserves the function (ironic rejection), class (hyperbolic expression), and distribution (as a concluding remark), all while aligning with Korean cultural norms of speech.

Similarly, "Anjing lewat saja malu lihat tingkahmu!" ("Even a dog would be embarrassed to see you!") carries the function of a hyperbolic insult, with a class of metaphorical statement and appearing in a distribution slot of an emotional outburst. The literal Korean version ("개도 네 행동을 보면 부끄러워할 거야!") may be understandable, but it's not idiomatic in Korean. Tagmemic analysis helps us see the need for an equivalent

expression that functions similarly in the target culture. A more appropriate Korean idiom might be "너 같은 행동은 개도 얼굴을 못 들겠다!" ("Even a dog would be ashamed to look at you!"), which better matches the intended insult, maintaining function, class, and distribution.

In a case of spontaneous humor like "Ups, itu gaya baru membangunkan ayam!" ("Oops, that's a new way to wake up chickens!"), the function is humorous commentary, the class is exclamatory, and it occurs in the distribution of an accidental moment. The Korean translation "어이쿠, 닭 깨우는 새 방법이네!" successfully retains the spontaneous tone, exclamatory class, and same distribution within the scene, making it a culturally appropriate equivalent.

Through a Tagmemic lens, it becomes evident that translating humor — especially from folklore with strong cultural undertones — requires attention to how each unit of language functions, what class it belongs to (e.g., idiom, metaphor, declarative), and where it is distributed within the text. This theory enables translators to produce target texts that are not only grammatically accurate but also culturally and pragmatically effective in maintaining the rhetorical impact of the source language — in this case, between Indonesian and Korean.

V. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that translating idiomatic and humorous expressions in *Sangkuriang* involves more than substituting words from one language to another; it demands an in-depth understanding of linguistic structures, cultural frameworks, and semantic functions. Using the Tagmemic approach, which analyzes each linguistic unit based on function, class, and distribution, the study reveals how idioms carry not only grammatical roles but also socio-cultural meaning that may not be directly translatable. Furthermore, a structural analysis using SVO patterns (Subject–Verb–Object) highlights how sentence elements are organized differently between Indonesian and Korean, affecting how idioms function within a sentence.

For instance, the idiom "*Hatinya bagai air di daun talas*" maintains its grammatical class as a simile in the form of a noun phrase and fits within the descriptive predicate slot. Structurally, it follows an SVO-like pattern in Indonesian, but when translated literally into Korean, the emotional instability it conveys is not culturally recognizable. The Tagmemic analysis shows that while class and distribution remain, the function is lost, emphasizing the need for functional rather than formal equivalence—such as replacing it with the culturally familiar 마음이 오락가락하다.

In contrast, idioms like "*Dia naik darah*", which has an established Korean equivalent 분노가 치밀다, show structural and semantic alignment. The SVO structure (Subject: Dia/그는, Verb: naik darah/분노가 치밀다) remains intact, and the expression's function (expressing anger), class (verbal phrase), and distribution (main predicate) correspond well between the source and target languages. This supports the idea that idioms with cross-cultural semantic parallels are easier to translate idiomatically, requiring minimal grammatical restructuring.

Humorous expressions present a further challenge, as they often rely on intonation, cultural references, or exaggeration, which may not align with the syntactic or cultural norms of the target language. For example, the line "*Kalau kamu menikahi aku, dunia bisa runtuh!*" when translated literally into Korean or English loses its pragmatic function (ironic dramatization). A functional rewrite such as "*You must be joking! The world might fall apart!*" or its Korean equivalent better retains the intended emotional and humorous impact, while still fitting naturally within sentence structure.

Moreover, structural shifts become more evident in Korean, where subject omission is common, and predicate-final sentences dominate. These features, combined with honorifics and collectivist communication norms, require translators to rethink the slot distribution in sentence structure, especially when dealing with idiomatic or exaggerated statements. The Tagmemic lens is particularly useful in identifying whether such expressions should be preserved, adapted, or replaced to maintain fluency and cultural relevance.

This discussion highlights that the successful translation of idioms and humor depends on more than lexical accuracy. It hinges on preserving the function, fitting the class, and respecting the distribution of each unit within the syntactic and cultural structure of the target language. By combining Tagmemic analysis with SVO structural mapping, translators can make informed decisions that maintain the communicative effectiveness of idiomatic expressions. Ultimately, translating cultural texts like *Sangkuriang* requires both linguistic precision and cultural

intuition to ensure that meaning, tone, and stylistic intent are carried across languages.

VI. Conclusion

This study has explored the complexities involved in translating idiomatic and humorous expressions from the Indonesian folktale *Sangkuriang* into Korean, using Tagmemic theory and structural (SVO) analysis as guiding frameworks. The findings demonstrate that effective translation goes beyond word-for-word substitution; it requires a deep understanding of linguistic units in terms of their function, class, and distribution, as well as the cultural nuances embedded in each expression. The analysis reveals that idioms with direct or culturally parallel equivalents—such as “Dia naik darah” rendered as 분노가 치밀다—can be translated with relative ease, preserving both grammatical structure and communicative intent. However, idioms or humorous phrases without such parallels—like “*Hatinya bagai air di daun talas*”—require adaptive strategies to retain meaning and emotional resonance.

Furthermore, structural analysis using the SVO model reveals how sentence construction influences the placement and interpretation of idiomatic expressions in both languages. While Indonesian typically follows a clear SVO order, Korean allows for greater flexibility, especially with subject omission and predicate-final structures. These differences necessitate not only syntactic adjustments but also cultural sensitivity, particularly when dealing with figurative language and humor.

In sum, this research highlights that successful translation of cultural texts demands both linguistic precision and cultural adaptability. Tagmemic and structural analyses offer valuable tools for identifying where and how translation shifts should occur. Ultimately, translators must strive for functional equivalence that preserves the original intent, tone, and cultural significance of the source text, ensuring that the translated work resonates naturally with its new audience.

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