

Interpreting Political Idioms from English to Arabic: A Relevance-Theoretic Analysis of the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debates

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Abstract: This paper examines how English idiomatic expressions used during the 2024 U.S. presidential debates were interpreted into Arabic. It focuses on idioms used by Trump, Biden, Harris, and the moderators, and applies Relevance Theory to study how Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya interpreters rendered them. The idioms were selected based on their frequency, centrality, and anticipated impact on the source audience. The Arabic interpreting strategies were categorized into literal interpretation, explicitation, adaptation, omission, and misinterpretation. The analysis reveals a constant tension between linguistic efficiency and pragmatic fidelity. Omission emerged as the most common strategy (35.6%), particularly when interpreters faced culturally opaque idioms. Literal interpretation (26.7%) and explicitation (22.2%) strategies were used when close Arabic equivalents were available, but often failed to convey the original pragmatic meaning. Adaptation (6.7%) and misinterpretation (8.9%) were the least frequently used. The findings suggest that many current strategies fall short when applied in the fast-paced environment of live political broadcasts. This highlights the need for more focused interpreter training. Future research should include feedback from Arabic-speaking audiences and interviews with interpreters to provide a more complete understanding of how meaning is managed, adjusted, or lost during live interpretation of political debates.

Keywords: debate strategies, English-Arabic interpreting, political discourse, political idioms, relevance theory

1. Introduction

Idioms may be viewed as strategic resources used by speakers in political arguments. They can provide different shades of meaning, confront opponents, or address political initiatives (Musolff 2016). These expressions, as Jaworska (2021) and Jones, Jaworska, and Aslan (2021) have identified, contribute to the framing of political issues and the formation of political identities. They thus shape how public opinion is formed. Donald Trump employed idioms in the 2024 U.S. presidential election debates to fulfill specific rhetorical functions, primarily persuasion (Jesudas and Mohammed 2025).

The translation of idioms into Arabic may not be a simple task when performed live. The reason is that idioms are cultural allusions that cannot always be translated using direct equivalents. Even literal interpretations can be misleading in meaning or even alter the pragmatic intent, although the literal understanding of these idioms can seem acceptable linguistically (Farghal and Almannan 2015; Baker

2018). Interpreters thus stick to a limited number of repetitive strategies, which may include verbatim translations, paraphrasing, or even the exclusion of idiomatic material. The manner in which such decisions are made may be influenced by time pressure and processing limitations. Consequently, meaning and rhetorical effect are conveyed to the audience based on the strategy of the interpreter and not on the source message (Al-Salman and Al-Khanji 2002; Setton and Dawrant 2016).

Political idioms are thus essential rhetorical devices in presidential debates, particularly in persuasive contexts. In live broadcasts across languages, their interpretation becomes more complex. This study examines how Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya interpreters rendered idiomatic expressions used during the 2024 U.S. presidential debates into Arabic. The idioms analyzed were produced by Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, and the debate moderators.

1.1 Study rationale

Despite the substantial body of research on political discourse and figures of speech interpreted from English into Arabic, there is a significant gap in interpreter-focused literature applying Relevance Theory to live Arabic idiom interpretation in political debates (Shunnaq 1993; Almanna 2021). Most studies of Trump's 2016–2020 debates have analyzed metaphors, irony, symbolism, and their role in conveying his message. Pöchhacker (2016) says that a large volume of interpretation research concentrates on conference interpreting in major European languages. The researcher points out that many language pairs and contexts were underexplored. More recently, Wang and McLaughlin (2022) examined how interpreters address ideological and cultural sensitivities in politically charged contexts.

This study fills a considerable research gap regarding the application of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) to the Arabic interpretation of idioms in the Trump–Biden and Trump–Harris 2024 U.S. presidential debates. In doing so, it also introduces a set of clear guidelines for identifying and categorizing idioms, which are then systematically applied to linguistic material from the 2024 debates. The study offers a linguistic analysis of idioms, explores the strategies used in their interpretation, and identifies the political functions of idioms in political debates.

1.2 Objectives

This study aims to fulfil the following objectives:

- (1) To identify and categorize idioms used in the 2024 U.S. presidential debates based on frequency, centrality, and impact.
- (2) To identify and evaluate the strategies employed by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya Arabic interpreters in their Arabic interpretations.
- (3) To apply the principles of Relevance Theory and suggest recommendations for interpreters.

1.3 Statement of the problem

Interpreting idioms in presidential debates is particularly demanding because pragmatic meaning and rhetorical force are often lost when interpreters rely on literal translation, paraphrasing, or omission (Al-Salman and Al-Khanji 2002; Farghal and Almanna 2014). In the 2024 U.S. presidential debates, the frequency, centrality, and impact of idiomatic expressions in Trump's discourse amplify these challenges for Arabic interpreters decoding idioms for which direct Arabic equivalents are often absent. The pressure of live broadcast settings, combined with the unpredictable figurative language used by Trump, Biden, Harris, and the moderators, makes the task even harder and heightens the chances of misinterpretation or diminished communicative effect.

Idioms, as a form of figurative language, carry particular weight in political debates. Yet no study has examined how Arabic interpreters managed idiomatic expressions in the Trump 2024 debates with Biden and Harris. Previous studies have addressed such devices as repetition, rhetorical questions, hyperbole, and metaphor, but none of them has applied Relevance Theory to this context. This paper fills this gap by applying Relevance Theory to the Arabic interpretations of the 2024 debate idioms. It also examines the tactics used by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya interpreters, such as literal translation, paraphrasing, and omission, and evaluates their ability to capture pragmatic meaning.

1.4 Research questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

- (1) Which types of idioms were used in Donald Trump's 2024 presidential debates based on frequency, centrality, and impact?
- (2) What interpretive strategies did Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya Arabic interpreters employ and how do these strategies align with the principles of Relevance Theory?
- (3) To what extent do these interpretive choices preserve or alter the original idioms' meaning and intent?

2. Literature review

This section identifies gaps in previous related research and supports analyzing Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya's Arabic interpretations of idiomatic expressions in Trump's 2024 presidential debates. Furthermore, the overview of Trump's use of idiomatic language in political discourse during his 2024 debates promotes an understanding of idiom use. The section—in light of RT—mentions important theoretical principles in translation and interpreting before providing a review of empirical studies on political interpreting.

2.1 Idioms in political speech and debates

Candidates running for the presidency sometimes use rhetorical devices, such as idioms, in election campaigns to familiarize their audiences with their positions on political, economic, and social issues (Musolff 2016). Jaworska and Vásquez (2022) say that idioms are not only stylistic devices but also tools that help

politicians create identities and influence their voters. In an earlier study, Charteris-Black (2011) explained that idioms can strengthen political arguments and emotional bonds with the audience. They also provide a way to challenge opponents, offer new perspectives, or reinforce familiar views through cultural references to better persuade audiences.

Donald Trump is known for his use of idioms to clarify his message to his viewers. He uses certain phrases such as “drain the swamp” to mean the fight against corruption, and “fake news” to refer to misleading media. Mercieca (2020) and Rowland (2021) said that using idioms can shape the political style known to Trump’s audience. Trump’s style presents ideas in simple terms and questions opponents’ credibility. It also promotes unity among his base and others who share his views. In addition, Trump mixes politics and entertainment by relying on dramatic and entertainment-oriented strategies. O’Brien (2020) refers to this as “kayfabe presidency.” Political speeches are therefore turned into theatrical events that attract the audience’s attention.

Kaussler, Kristiansen and Delbert (2021) said that Trump’s idiomatic language includes repetition, metaphors, and idioms to increase the impact on the audience. Furthermore, Trump’s use of idioms is not for decoration purposes only; it is central to his style of communication (Mercieca 2020). Trump focuses on known cultural and emotional expressions to frame complex issues to avoid logical debates. In doing so, he appeals to the feelings of his supporters more than to a policy debate that is based on reason. In spoken political discourse, idioms are often multimodal. This refers to the combination of spoken words with visual acts to strengthen the persuasive effect (Poggi and Vincze 2009; Kjeldsen and Hess 2021).

2.2 Interpreting idioms: Challenges and strategies

Idioms, be they Arabic or English, cannot be considered only in terms of their linguistic or cultural references. They reflect distinct historical, societal, or even political values. The rendering of such expressions can be complex when political or ideological content is involved since the meaning depends on interpreting cultural signals and the intent behind the words.

The literal translation of idioms does not guarantee effectiveness because their meanings, in many cases, extend beyond their individual words. Farghal and Almann (2014) said that faulty results are a consequence of literal interpretations. To take the cultural context into account, the authors suggested adopting functional and pragmatic strategies. Baker (2018) preferred rendering idioms as whole expressions. In addition, she said that a literal translation of “kick the bucket” produces a phrase that makes little sense structurally or semantically. Furthermore, translating idioms literally without adaptation can be offensive (Qassem and Vijayasarithi 2015). In this context, interpreters’ cultural awareness can help them better understand idioms and consequently render them accurately. An idiom like “the ball is in your court” requires some familiarity with sports because literal rendering of such an idiom, without adaptation, can cause confusion.

Idioms reflect tone and intent and, if misinterpreted, their meaning can be lost or reshaped. Almrayat, Farghal and Haider (2025) argue that idioms in political

debates can be used to promote political agendas. Their rendering therefore requires translators to account for rhetorical force and meaning. Mohammed (2025) emphasizes that failure to do so results in translations that compromise the rhetorical force of the source. Hence, conveying idiomatic meaning requires equal focus on intent and text.

Idioms pose a challenge in translation because their meanings go beyond the literal words. As a result, various strategies have been recommended by scholars. Baker (2018) proposed different solutions to address these challenges. She said that translators may apply idioms that are identical in form and meaning, select those with similar meanings but different forms, paraphrase, or delete the idioms. Bahumaid (2010) found through his research on English–Arabic dictionaries that paraphrasing is the dominant choice, reflecting the difficulty of finding direct equivalents. However, paraphrasing idiomatic expressions does not reflect essential stylistic and cultural elements.

2.3 Empirical studies on political interpreting

Many recent studies on the interpretation of idioms in political discourse between Arabic and English outline interpreter strategies for syntactic, lexical, and cultural challenges, and ways to maintain accuracy under pressure. Issa, Ahmad, and Al Ersan (2021) conducted a qualitative study on three expert Arabic interpreters working for Al Jazeera, RT Arabic, and France 24 Arabic when dealing with cultural terms in Donald Trump’s January 20, 2017 inaugural speech. Each rendition was treated as an individual case. They transcribed all three simultaneous renditions and coded every strategy: transcoding, omission, addition, and cultural equivalents. Forty-two extracts with cultural references and political connotations were examined. The study’s outcomes showed a predominance of transcoding and addition, whereas omission and paraphrasing were less prevalent. In addition, the researchers found that the use of cultural equivalents was more prominent in texts featuring cultural references. One of the findings showed that interpreters’ levels of speed and accuracy improved. However, their performance reflected clear gaps in their cultural mediation and linguistic accuracy. A specialized training program can therefore improve their interpretation skills.

Al-Zahran (2021) discussed the syntactic differences in English–Arabic simultaneous interpretation. The author focused on SVO and VSO word order when initial subjects were complex. Obama’s 2009 Cairo address, Brahimi’s 2014 UN remarks at the UN, and Trump’s 2017 speech in Riyadh were examined in the study. The findings showed that interpreters did not postpone interpretation until the verb appeared. The flexibility of Arabic syntax helped them render English SVO structures.

Al-Zahran and Jamoussi (2022) studied structural differences between English SVO and Arabic VSO in political speech interpreting. They explained that these differences can be problematic for interpreters. The authors examined 10 Arabic interpretations of three English speeches and found that interpreters often employed marked SVO more than unmarked VSO. One of the findings showed that SVO is a distinctive aspect of English-Arabic simultaneous interpreting. The

researchers found that the interpreters employed a form-based processing strategy. They followed English structure to manage syntactic differences and cognitive load. This means that interpreters can use Arabic flexible word orders to facilitate their interpretation tasks—a practical adaptive strategy under pressure.

AlDayel and Alotaibi (2024) conducted a study to identify the difficulties faced by interpreting trainees when interpreting between English and Arabic. The authors mainly focused on the types of errors that interpreting trainees make during simultaneous interpretation and the causes of such errors. To assess the English–Arabic interpreting tasks of 31 female students, AlDayel and Alotaibi adopted the eclectic model of Musa and Al-Maryani (2021). Omission turned out to be the most frequent error in both directions. Omission, according to AlDayel and Alotaibi, was used to deal with fast delivery, specialized terms, as well as syntactic differences. In addition to omission, hesitation errors were more prevalent when interpreting from English into Arabic. The authors recommended developing training programs that strengthen language skills, provide practice on fast speech, and build specialized vocabulary.

2.4 Interpreter agency and mediation

Alduhaim and Alkhaldy (2019) explored how Arabic-to-English interpreters dealt with unfamiliar political discourse terminology during the Libyan uprising. The authors evaluated the way interpreters worked through issues related to language, culture and politics. The study relied on a corpus of speeches of Muammar Gaddafi in the Arab Spring and CNN press conferences with Libyan officials. A qualitative content analysis of the speeches was adopted. The results show that there is a tendency to use omission, addition, and approximation in a patterned manner. The expressions delivered rapidly were often excluded in cases where the literal translation would lead to a loss of meaning. In other instances, interpreters made additions to make things clear to the target audience. In the process of maintaining textual coherence, approximation, especially in rendering figurative language, was a key issue. It can be noted here that such practices point to the role interpreters play in transferring meaning and reshaping the narratives that the speaker wants the audience to receive.

Moreno-Bello (2021) discussed how interpreters employ certain strategies in conflict areas. She says that linguistic as well as cultural factors can influence the decisions taken by interpreters. The author organized semi-structured interviews with seven military and civilian interpreters who were working with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon at the time of conducting the research. Background factors were not decisive as expected in dealing with linguistic and cultural issues under increased pressure. Through the application of the narrative theory developed by Baker (2006), the analysis classified the cases of interference into four narrative dimensions: relationality, particularity, genericness, and normativeness. Mediation, as the analysis shows, turned out to be the most outstanding observation. The data obtained during the interview shows that interpreters often played the role of unofficial mediators in communication; in all cases, even though they became agentive in dealing with ideological interference,

they never interfered in military operations or hierarchies. On this basis, the study argues that targeted training programs could strengthen interpreters' contextual judgment and decision-making in conflict-related interpreting settings.

2.5 Arabic interpretation of Trump's expressions

Djeffal and Benmokhtari (2022) examined the lexical diversity in the Arabic translations of the Trump-Biden 2020 presidential debate. Their study was focused on determining the interpretative strategies that France 24 and Al Arabiya interpreters employed and also determining the extent to which the political expressions were different in various renditions. The study adopted an analytic framework of the taxonomy of translation strategies developed by Delisle (1999). The authors hypothesized that the interpreters who were under time limitations would tend to use more paraphrasing or omission. Through empirical evidence, it was found that omission was the most common strategy. The comparisons showed that the Al Arabiya interpretation displayed more accuracy and fidelity as compared to that of France 24. The research concluded with a list of recommendations that would guide the further research into the Arabic interpretation of U.S. presidential debates.

Obeidat (2020) discussed the specific challenges that relate to the Arabic interpretation of Donald Trump's unpredictable discourse. The paper used Relevance Theory by Gutt (1998) to examine the idiomatic expressions used by Trump in his political debates. The data are based on the reporting of the first Trump-Clinton presidential debate by CBS News and the live Arabic translation that was broadcast on Sky News Arabia. Segments that were problematic were rated based on three criteria: accuracy, acceptability, and comprehensibility. The analysis shows that Trump's language is known for its lack of lexical clarity, high speed of speech, and code-switching, leading to interpretation difficulties. Additionally, omission and elaboration were used by the interpreters when faced with interpretation challenges.

Adopting Austin's (1962) Speech Act Theory, Behnas (2022) analyzed the political discourse used in the 2020 Trump-Biden U.S. presidential debates. The pragmatic aspects of the political discourse were examined. The five categories of speech acts are: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Through qualitative discourse analysis, the researcher analyzed debate transcripts by classifying the speech acts produced by both candidates. The formal characteristics and communicative intent were the classification criteria. The findings indicated that assertives and directives were the most commonly used speech acts by the speakers. Trump mostly resorted to accusations and imperatives, whereas Biden resorted more to rebuttals and appeals to ethos. In conclusion, the author argued that Speech Act Theory provides open-ended tools to understand political discourse.

Although some contributions have been made in the field, as can be seen in the sections above, there are still unresolved tensions in the literature. The main tensions associated with such situations are connected with the ways in which interpreters are supposed to deal with idiomatic meaning in live interpretation.

Whereas some studies (e.g., Obeidat 2020) mention omission as a coping strategy, others (such as AlDayel and Alotaibi 2024) relate it to miscommunication. Moreover, there are not many studies that have evaluated idiom interpretation through a theory-based model like Relevance Theory. This paper fills these gaps by assessing interpreter strategies in real time. It further explores the effects of each decision on pragmatic meaning in politics.

2.6 Theoretical framework: *Relevance Theory* in live Arabic interpretation of political discourse

Relevance Theory (RT) was proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995), who argued that relevance guides human communication. They claimed that individuals attempt to obtain the most communicative benefits while putting in the least amount of effort to comprehend messages. RT has played a significant role in the study of translation and interpretation. It assists researchers in investigating the ways in which meaning is conveyed between languages that have dissimilar grammatical structures, such as English and Arabic. The key ideas in Relevance Theory are the following.

2.6.1 Ostensive-inferential communication

Relevance Theory (RT) was proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995), who argued that relevance guides human communication. They explained that individuals attempt to obtain the most communicative benefits and invest the minimum amount of effort to comprehend messages. RT has played a significant role in translation and interpretation studies. It assists researchers in investigating the ways in which meaning is conveyed between languages that have dissimilar grammatical structures, such as English and Arabic. The key ideas in Relevance Theory are the following:

- (1) Trump's idiom "drain the swamp" (anti-establishment rhetoric) was rendered by Al Jazeera interpreter as جففت المنبع ("I dried up the source"). This change gives the idiom a more literal sense and illustrates an intention to eliminate corruption.
- (2) "She was the border czar" was interpreted as مسؤولة عن ملف الهجرة, highlighting the role rather than rendering the idiom literally.

It is important to note that live debates can place interpreters under pressure to balance communicative clarity with processing speed. They often prioritize inferences according to the target audience's expectations.

2.6.2 Contextual assumptions

Contextual assumptions are essential to how relevance is determined and how communication is understood. Given this, Arabic interpreters can rely on shared knowledge between Trump's idiomatic expressions and the target Arab audience.

- (1) **Cultural Gaps:** The idiom “fair and square,” said twice by Trump, was omitted by the interpreter, suggesting it was perceived as too vague or contextually unnecessary.
- (2) **Ideological alignment:** This refers to the process by which interpreters convey not only the literal meaning of the original message but also reflect the speaker’s ideological standpoint in the target language. The rendering of “weaponized the Justice Department” as وزارة العدل يستخدمونها سلاحاً is an example of ideological alignment.

2.6.3 Optimal relevance in real-time

Optimal relevance ensures that (a) the information which an utterance conveys is worth the listener’s effort to process, and (b) the speaker could not have communicated that information more relevantly by another utterance than the one used (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 158).

- (1) **Idiom adaptation:** Adaptation plays a key role when idiomatic expressions cannot be interpreted literally. An example of adaptation is the rendering of “run on a problem instead of fixing a problem” into تجاهل المشكلة بدلاً من إصلاحها.
- (2) **Trade-offs:** Because of the constraints of real-time speech, interpreters may delete elements that have low relevance. Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera interpreters did not render “gotaways” and “fair and square.” This reflects their tendency to prioritize the most salient content.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

I adopted a qualitative research design to explore how Arabic interpreters rendered idiomatic expressions in Donald Trump’s 2024 presidential debates. The analysis applies Relevance Theory to show how interpreters render the selected idiomatic expressions. This approach allows close examination of how source and target meaning are constructed, negotiated, and transferred.

The core of the analysis is interpretive and is grounded in Relevance Theory. The quasi-quantitative frequency counts and percentages were used descriptively to highlight patterns in strategy use. In addition, these quantitative elements support the qualitative analysis by illustrating the relative frequency of interpretive choices. These elements do not constitute a separate statistical component and are not intended for a quantitative analysis.

3.2 Data collection

The data I collected for the study contains idiomatic expressions used by different speakers in Donald Trump’s debates during two key debate events:

- (1) The Trump–Biden presidential debate (sourced from Roll Call¹)
- (2) The Trump–Harris debate (sourced from Rev.com²)

The corresponding Arabic interpretations were collected from two major Arabic-language news broadcasters:

- (1) Al Jazeera (for Trump-Biden debate)
- (2) Al Arabiya (for Trump-Harris debate)

The English transcripts were sourced from Roll Call for the Trump–Biden debate and Rev.com for the Trump–Harris debate. These are publicly available and time-stamped records. The corresponding Arabic interpretations were retrieved from the official YouTube broadcast recordings of Al Jazeera (Trump–Biden) and Al Arabiya (Trump–Harris). The idioms were aligned with the Arabic interpretations using timestamps for accuracy. Omission was marked as “N/I” (Not Interpreted) based on absence of corresponding Arabic output during the relevant segment.

3.3 Selection criteria

I selected the idiomatic expressions based on three main criteria:

- (1) **Frequency:** The number of times an idiom appeared across the debates.
- (2) **Centrality:** The idioms in the study were considered central if they reflected one of the four dominant thematic domains of the presidential debates—Power and Policy, Political Attacks, Economy, or Election Campaigns. The idioms appeared in key moments such as policy challenges or candidate rebuttals.
- (3) **Expected impact:** Musolff (2016) and Jaworska (2021) claim that idioms in political discourse serve to frame critical topics, develop the identity of the speaker, and shape audience perception. They are mostly used to challenge opponents or make political statements. The choice of idioms in this study was based on their expected communicative and rhetorical effect as inferred from their strategic use in debate settings. The observable indicators used to operationalize the anticipated impact included the placement of the idiom in high-stakes debate moves, repetition or emphasis of the idiom, its rhetorical role in making a core policy statement or delegitimizing an opponent, and its topic salience within the thematic areas of the study. This criterion was selected heuristically and was not considered a measure of reception.

Note: Some idioms mentioned only once were included if they were central to the debate (e.g., “drain the swamp”).

3.4 Procedures

The selected idioms were categorized into four thematic groups reflecting core debate topics:

- (1) Power and Policy
- (2) Political Attacks
- (3) Economy
- (4) Election Campaigns

Everyday idioms were excluded since they do not form the cornerstone of the debates. The emphasis was therefore placed on political idioms. The identity of the original speaker was recorded for every idiom.

3.5 Interpretation strategy classification

Based on translation studies and relevance-theoretic principles, I analysed and classified the Arabic interpretations into:

- (1) **Explicitation:** Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) indicated that explicitation is a type of translation strategy through which a translator attempts to transfer the implicit source-language text or information to the target language. One of the examples of explicitation in the paper is “*Weaponized the Justice Department*,” which was translated into Arabic as وزارة العدل يستخدمونه سلاحاً (literally: they use the Justice Department as a weapon). The Arabic version clearly explains the figurative meaning of the Justice Department as a political instrument. This approach may be useful in the case of culturally opaque idioms. Considering Relevance Theory, explicitation may assist interpreters in achieving optimal relevance, that is, in conveying the intended meaning to the maximum and minimizing the processing load.
- (2) **Adaptation:** According to Vinay and Darbelnet (1995: 39), adaptation is a special form of equivalence, namely situational equivalence. It is used when there is no direct counterpart to the situational context of the source idiom in the target culture. Interpreters are able to create a new expression in the target language that will perform the same communicative role as the original. Among the more obvious instances of adaptation in the current study, one can mention the translation of the term “drain the swamp” into جففت المنبع (literally: I dried up the source). Even though the literal meaning is altered, the adapted version retains the pragmatic purpose of addressing political corruption. This adaptation appears to be applied to preserve communicative value under live interpreting conditions. Since time was a constraint, the interpreters did not have time to find direct cultural equivalents. In the light of Relevance Theory, this adaptation reduced interpreter effort and allowed time to produce relevant interpretations.
- (3) **Omission:** Pöchhacker (2016) contended that omission may be employed as a reduction strategy by the interpreter. Besides, interpreters apply this strategy to address real-time processing limitations. The Arabic version of the idiom “fair and square” was omitted in the present research. The speaker, Trump, used the expression to reflect fairness or legitimacy. Omitting the expression in Arabic, therefore, resulted in a loss of the speaker’s intended message. According to Relevance Theory, omission disrupts the principle of optimal relevance by deleting contextual evidence. Such relevance could have guided the audience’s interpretation of the speaker’s intended meaning. As Pöchhacker (2016) said, omissions are a type of reduction strategy interpreters usually employ when cognitive load or time pressure prevents full rendition. Here, omission can be considered a trade-off through which

the interpreter's effort is reduced and the intended meaning is sacrificed. In addition, omission here can be linked to the interpreter's unfamiliarity with the idiomatic expression. Interpreters are therefore left with no option but to delete the idiom due to time constraints.

- (4) **Literal interpretation:** Literal translation, according to Vinay and Darbelnet (1995), is used when the source language and target language offer direct structural and conceptual correspondence. In the present paper, translating "Let it rot" into *اتركه يتعفن* is taken as a literal translation. It is in line with Vinay and Darbelnet's (1995) definition of literal translation. Moreover, this kind of rendering does not interfere with the syntactic and semantic acceptability of Arabic. Applying the Relevance Theory approach, we observe that such interpretation achieves optimal relevance, in that it requires the least processing effort and preserves the tone and the intended meaning of the speaker.
- (5) **Misinterpretation:** The present study includes misinterpretation alongside the other strategies only for percentage calculation. Misinterpretation is not a technique, but a misunderstanding. Moreover, it may be caused by the interpreter's lack of familiarity with idiomatic expressions because of linguistic or cultural differences. According to Chesterman (1997) and Gile (2009), misinterpretation is not an intentional or purposeful method, but a mistake or an unintended consequence. They say that, in situations where interpreters encounter unfamiliar idioms, experience high cognitive load, or lack sufficient contextual information, they may violate optimal relevance (Wilson 1995; Saridaki 2023).

3.6 Data analysis

To analyze each interpretation strategy of idiom meaning, I employed the content analysis method as a part of a qualitative research design. I based the analysis on the connection between the source meaning, interpreter decisions, and the principles of Relevance Theory. Practically, this adopted methodology ensures a systematic and repeatable procedure for understanding the process of negotiating and transferring idiomatic meaning in sensitive political speech.

3.7 Inter-coder reliability

In order to ensure the reliability of coding decisions, two translation studies professors with expertise in Arabic–English interpreting independently reviewed the selected idioms. They also reviewed the idiom classification by theme (e.g., Power and Policy, Political Attacks, Economy, and Election Campaigns) and the assigned interpretation strategies. Both coders were provided with the coding scheme and definitions prior to the review. After coding independently, the results were compared. The inter-coder agreement rate was 91%. The discrepancies between the two reviewers and the researcher were resolved through discussion.

4. Analysis

In this section, I carefully examine the Arabic interpretations of idioms used during the 2024 U.S. presidential debates. In the analysis, I focus on the strategies that Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya interpreters employed to render the idiomatic expressions. Following a systematic analysis, I categorized the idioms according to the debate themes: policy and power, political attacks, economy, and election campaigns.

Each table includes the original idiom, the speaker (Trump, Biden, Harris, or moderators), the frequency of occurrence, the Arabic interpretation strategies, and an assessment of the strategies based on Relevance Theory. In addition, the analysis of the examples points to interpretation choices and some challenges interpreters are expected to face. It also includes an examination of Relevance Theory principles in Arabic political interpreting. Furthermore, Relevance Theory is used here to assess the extent to which interpretation strategies are effective.

In practice, the analysis section below aims to show how the interpretation strategies preserved, shifted, reduced, or omitted the idiomatic meaning and intent. Idiom meaning was affected by the choice of the strategies. In some examples, we can notice that literal interpretation or adaptation preserved the idiomatic meaning. The Arabic renderings of “*Hand-selected*” as *اختار* and “*Out of rut*” as *يخرج من المأزق* reflect the meaning that the speaker intended to communicate. In contrast, the rendering of “*Pay up*” into *يدفع* shows a kind of reduction in pragmatic force. Despite its accuracy, the literal interpretation weakened the confrontational tone. It therefore reduced the contextual effect. In other cases, the interpretation strategy involved shifts in meaning. The interpreter misinterpreted “*Bounce-back jobs*” into *الوظائف التي انسحب منها ووظائف للمهاجرين*. This led to a complete message shift from economic recovery to migration. Due to omission, the idiomatic meaning was completely lost as shown in idioms like “*fair share*.”

Table 1. Total strategy frequency (40 idioms with 90 occurrences)

Strategy	Occurrences	Percentage % (of 90)
Omission	32	35.6
Literal interpretation	24	26.7
Explicitation	20	22.2
Misinterpretation	8	8.9
Adaptation	6	6.7

Table 2. Strategy frequency in Power and Policy idioms

Strategy	Occurrences	Percentage % (of 31)
Omission	12	38.7
Literal interpretation	9	29.0
Explicitation	3	9.7
Adaptation	5	16.1
Misinterpretation	2	6.5

Table 3 presents the relevance-theoretic coding scheme used to evaluate interpreted renderings in the analysis tables. The codes represent degrees of optimal relevance achieved, preservation of contextual effects, recovery of intended implicature, and reduced interpreter production effort in omission cases.

Table 3. RT assessment coding scheme

Code	Meaning
ORA	Optimal relevance achieved
ORP	Optimal relevance partially achieved
ORN	Optimal relevance not achieved
ORC	Optimal relevance compromised
LPE	Low interpreter production effort (omission cases)
CE+	Contextual effects preserved
CE±	Contextual effects partially preserved
CE−	Contextual effects not preserved
Imp+	Intended implicature recovered
Imp±	Intended implicature partially recovered
Imp−	Intended implicature not recovered

Table (4) shows that Trump used 11 power and policy idioms (27 occurrences) compared to Harris's 3 idioms (4 occurrences). He relies on populist and argumentative messaging as well as vivid language to make problems seem more urgent and to mobilize supporters to dominate the debate. This strongly points to Trump's heavy reliance on figurative language to frame political issues, criticize rivals, and intensify political debates. Trump's idioms here reflect his careful use of rhetoric to maximize persuasive impact, create vivid imagery, and connect with audiences on an emotional level. Harris, on the other hand, seems to use fewer idioms to reflect her style, which focuses on policy. Furthermore, clarity marks her style of communication. Ingram (2024) argues that she prefers to focus on policy matters and avoid confrontational language, which Trump uses. The selected idioms refer to different issues that are important to the voters. These include corruption and the need for fundamental change. In addition, the idioms in this category were carefully used to attack political opponents. Decline, deceit, and policy failure are among the accusations.

Table 4. Power and Policy idioms

	Idiom	Speaker(s)	Freq.	Interpretation	Strategy	RT Assessment
1.	A failing nation	Trump (T-B) 5 Trump (T-H) 2	7	1 :TB 2دولة ،N/I فاشلة، 3دولة فاشلة، 4دولة فاشلة، 5 دولة فاشلة أمة فاشلة، أمة فاشلة	Omission + literal Interpretation	Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp- Literal: ORA; CE+; Imp+
2.	Defund the police	Trump (T-H)	3	إزالة تمويل الشرطة، N/I وقف تمويل الشرطة	Explicitation + omission	Explicitation : ORA; CE+; Imp+ Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-
3.	Let it rot	Trump (T-H)	3	، N/I ، N/I اتركه يتعفن	Omission + literal Interpretation	Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp- Literal: ORP; CE±; Imp±
4.	She was the border czar	Trump (T-H)	3	مسؤولة عن ملف الهجرة، N/I 3+2	Adaptation + omission	Adaptation: ORP; CE±; Imp± Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-
5.	Catch and release	Trump (T-B)	3	1 دوريات N/I 3+2	Misinterpretation (Cultural Misfit) + omission	Misinterpretation: ORN; CE-; Imp- Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-
6.	Fair and square	Trump (T-B)	2	N/I	Omission	Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-

	Idiom	Speaker(s)	Frq.	Interpretation	Strategy	RT Assessment
7.	Run on a problem instead of fixing a problem	Harris (T-H)	2	تجاهل المشكلة بدلاً من اصلاحها	Explication	Explication : ORA; CE+; Imp+
8.	Gotaways	Trump (T-H)	2	N/I	Omission	Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-
9.	Sold us out	Harris (T-H)	1	باعنا اياه	Misinterpretation	Misinterpretation: ORN; CE-; Imp-
10.	Drain the swamp	Trump (T-B)	1	جففت المنبع	Adaptation (Partial, idiom shift)	Adaptation: ORP; CE±; Imp±
11.	Weaponized the Justice Department	Trump (T-H)	1	وزارة العدل يستخدمونها سلاحا	Explication	Explication : ORA; CE+; Imp+
12.	Weaponization of election	Trump (T-B)	1	تسليح الانتخابات	Literal Interpretation	Literal: ORP; CE±; Imp±
13.	Chart a course for two-states solution	Harris (T-H)	1	يكون لدينا مسار لحل الدولتين	Literal Interpretation	Literal interpretation: ORA; CE+; Imp+
14.	Selling our country down the tubes	Trump (T-H)	1	تبيع بلدنا	Adaptation/Omission (idiom omitted)	Adaptation: ORP; CE±; Imp± Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-

The four interpretation strategies used by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya interpreters are in line with Relevance Theory principles. The interpreters used

omission 12 times (38.7%), the most frequently used strategy. They seem to have used it when encountering culturally opaque idioms like “fair and square” and “gotaways.” To reduce interpreter production effort under live interpreting constraints, the interpreters sacrificed contextual effects and intended implicatures, resulting in cases where optimal relevance was not achieved. Literal interpretation was used 9 times (29%), as in “failing nation” interpreted as دولة فاشلة. In several cases, literal interpretation achieved optimal relevance (e.g., ORA: CE+; Imp+), while in others it only partially preserved contextual effects and implicature (e.g., ORP: CE±; Imp±). The interpreters used explicitation, the third strategy, 3 times (9.7%), as in “Weaponized the Justice Department” interpreted as وزارة العدل ويستخدمونها سلاحًا and “run on a problem” rendered as تجاهل المشكلة. These renderings preserved contextual effects and intended implicature, achieving optimal relevance (ORA). The fourth interpretation strategy used is adaptation (5 times, 16.1%). The rendering of “drain the swamp” into جففت المنبع is one of the examples of adaptation. Such adaptations typically resulted in partial preservation of contextual effects and implicature (ORP: CE±; Imp±). Misinterpretation occurred 2 times (6.5%), as in “catch and release” دوريات, indicating that some idioms were inaccurately rendered, leading to a loss of contextual effects and failure to recover intended implicature (ORN: CE-; Imp-). Cases involving partial or absent preservation of contextual effects and implicature reflect situations where optimal relevance was partially achieved or not achieved, consistent with Clause (a) of Relevance Theory.

Three main interpretation patterns feature in the analysis of Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya interpretations. Firstly, when faced with source material requiring greater interpretive complexity, the interpreters adopted omission (38.7% of the cases). They seem to have given priority to reducing interpreter production effort over strict adherence to source discourse. In addition, the interpreters opted for a pragmatic adaptation of Relevance Theory principles due to the practical constraints and pressures of live interpreting. Secondly, the interpreters used literal interpretation (29.0%), as in “Let it rot” → اتركه يتعفن, and explicitation (9.7%), as in “defund the police” → إزالة تمويل الشرطة, for idioms with cross-cultural translatability. Adaptation (16.1%) was used to contextually adjust idioms when direct idiomatic equivalents were unavailable. Misinterpretation represents 6.5 percent of the cases. This points to the challenges and risks that interpreters face during real-time idiom interpretation. Additionally, the interpreters did not always manage to preserve the connotations of political idioms (e.g., “Drain the swamp” → جففت المنبع). These cases correspond to the partial preservation of contextual effects and implicature (ORP). They did not recover the intended implicature of “Catch and release”—criticizing immigration policy → دوريات (ORN: CE-; Imp-). These interpretation patterns clearly show that Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya interpreters had to balance the advantages of linguistic efficiency (“Weaponization of election” → تسليح الانتخابات against pragmatic fidelity (“border czar” → مسؤولية عن ملف الهجرة).

Table 5. Strategy frequency in Political Attacks idioms

Strategy	Occurrences	Percentage % (of 23)
Literal Interpretation	11	48
Omission	6	26
Explicitation	6	26

The idiomatic expressions (9 idioms with 23 occurrences) that Trump, Biden, and Harris used in their presidential debates reflect their rhetorical strategies as well as their personalities. Practically, Trump's idioms (7 with 16 occurrences) are clearly blunt, combative, and dramatic, and often seem to intentionally cause negative reactions or to show that his opponents (Biden: 2 idioms with 4 occurrences, and Harris: 1 idiom with 3 occurrences) are untrustworthy. On the other hand, Biden's idioms reflect more personal and relatable language emphasizing empathy. The types of idioms that Harris uses can be classified as transparent, particularly when bringing dishonesty to light. Using these idioms can make her presence in debates appear clear and assertive.

Table 6. Political Attacks idioms

	Idiom	Speaker	Frq.	Interpretation	Strategy	Assessment
15.	Trump: suckers and losers (3) + Biden 1 Losers and suckers (Biden 1+ Trump 1)	Trump (T-B) 4 Biden (T-B) 2	6	2 ، N/I 1 :T أغبياء وفاشلون، بايدن، N/I 3 فاشلون. فاشلاً، فاشلون وحمقى	Omission + explicitation (explicitly conveys insult, not idiomatic)	Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp- Explicitation: ORP; CE±; Imp±
16.	Rip off	Trump 2 (T-B) Trump 2 (T-H)	4	2 :Tb 1 تسرق، سرقة في خطاب هاريس ، N/I 2 ، N/I 1	Literal Interpretation (not idiomatic) + omission	Literal: ORP; CE±; Imp± Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-
17.	A bunch of lies	Harris (T-H)	3	من الكثير الأكاذيب	Literal Interpretation (direct equivalent)	Literal: ORA; CE+; Imp+

	Idiom	Speaker	Frq.	Interpretation	Strategy	Assessment
18.	Play games	Trump (T-B)	3	1 اللعب مع، 2 يعلب معي، 3 N/I	Literal translation (not idiomatic) + omission	Literal: ORP; CE±; Imp± Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-
19.	Torn our country apart	Trump (T-H)	2	بث الانقسام، مزق بلادنا	Explication (clarifies division and destruction)	Explication: ORA; CE+; Imp+
20.	Screw around	Biden (T-B)	2	يعبث، يعبث	Literal Interpretation	Literal: ORA; CE+; Imp+
21.	Living in hell	Trump (T-B)	1	نعيش في جحيم	Literal Interpretation	Literal: ORA; CE+; Imp+
22.	crooked administration	Trump (T-H)	1	N/I	Omission	ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-
23.	Throw him out like a dog	Trump (T-H)	1	يزاح مثل الكلب	Literal Interpretation	ORP; CE±; Imp±

The first strategy among the three strategies employed by the interpreters is literal translation. The interpreters used it in 11 instances (48%) when they were able to find direct Arabic equivalents. An example of this strategy is “Rip off” rendered as سرقة. It is important to note that this rendering supports clarity in this example but only partially preserves contextual effects and intended implicature due to the loss of colloquial nuance (ORP; CE±; Imp±). In addition, the interpreters used omission in 6 cases (26%) to deal with culturally opaque idioms such as “crooked administration.” This strategy reduces interpreter production effort under live interpreting constraints but results in a loss of contextual effects and intended implicature (ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-). Furthermore, the interpreters used explication in 6 cases (26%). The interpretation of “torn our country apart” as بث الانقسام is considered an example of explication. This rendering preserved contextual effects and intended implicature, achieving optimal relevance (ORA; CE+; Imp+).

The use of literal translation (48%) was effective when Arabic equivalents were available. “A bunch of lies” was literally interpreted as الكثير من الأكاذيب, preserving contextual effects and intended implicature and therefore achieving optimal relevance (ORA; CE+; Imp+). On the other hand, the interpreters used

explicitation in 26 percent of cases, which helped reflect the source meaning and pragmatic intent. They rendered “suckers and losers” into فاشلون وأغبياء و فاشلون وحمقى. These renderings conveyed the insulting force of the expression but weakened its idiomatic rhetorical compactness, resulting in partial preservation of contextual effects and implicature (ORP; CE±; Imp±). Omission, also present in 26 percent of cases, diminished pragmatic depth and rhetorical impact, as shown in the expression “crooked administration,” which the interpreter omitted. In such cases, omission led to a loss of contextual effects and intended implicature, meaning optimal relevance was not achieved (ORN; LPE; CE−; Imp−).

Table 7. Strategy frequency in Economy idioms

Strategy	Occurrences	Percentage % (of 17)
Omission	7	41.2
Literal	3	17.6
Explicitation	5	29.4
Misinterpretation	2	11.8

The language that Trump uses in presidential debates reflects his viewpoints on political and economic issues. He used different idioms such as “get credit for,” “bounce-back jobs,” and “pay up” in his presidential debates with Biden and Harris to point clearly to his claimed role in economic success. His use of language here aims to shape public opinion. Biden focuses more on tax fairness and economic equity. He uses idioms such as “fair share” to highlight the need for wealthier Americans and corporations to contribute more in taxes. When Trump uses language, he focuses on personal achievements through economic imagery. Biden’s language, on the other hand, shifts toward fairness and shared responsibility.

In their interpretation of the debates, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya interpreters used four strategies aligned with Relevance Theory to render Economy idioms. First, they adopted omission (7 times, 41.2%) to interpret idioms like “Fair share,” resulting in a loss of contextual effects related to fairness and collective justice and failure to recover intended implicature (ORN; LPE; CE−; Imp−). Not interpreting “fair share” resulted in a loss of Biden’s intended message. Second, explicitation was used 5 times (29.4%), exemplified by “through the roof” translated as ترتفع بشكل صاروخي and “get credit for” rendered as يعزى إلينا الفضل. The rendering of “through the roof” preserved contextual effects and intended implicature (ORA; CE+; Imp+), whereas the renderings of “get credit for” only partially preserved attribution-related contextual effects and implicature (ORP; CE±; Imp±). Third, the interpreter used literal interpretation 3 times (17.6%), in “Pay up” يدفع, partially preserving contextual effects and intended implicature while weakening the pressurizing force of the idiom (ORP; CE±; Imp±). However, the idiomatic nuance — pressurizing someone to pay—was lost. Fourth, misinterpretation occurred in 2 occurrences of one idiom (11.8%) in “Bounce-back jobs” وظائف للمهاجرين or الوظائف التي انسحب منها, therefore introducing semantic distortion. These renderings failed to preserve contextual effects and did not recover intended implicature, meaning

optimal relevance was not achieved (ORN; CE-; Imp-). Omissions and misinterpretation did not account for the source meaning of “fair share” and “bounce-back jobs,” respectively.

Table 8. Economy idioms

	Idiom	Speaker	Frq	Interpretation	Strategy	Assessment
24.	credit for: 5 T (T-B) get credit for (2) take credit for (3) T 1, D 1, B 1 T-H: T give credit for, 2 N/I	Trump (5 times) Biden (1 time) Davis, moderator, (1 time)	7	2: قمنا بجهود كثيرة، يعزى إلينا الفضل D , N/I 1 , T :3 تحفتي ب، N/I ينسبون إلي الفضل، N/I	Explication + omission	Explication: ORP; CE±; Imp± Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-
25.	Bounce-back jobs	Trump: 2 times (T-B) 1 (T-H)	3	1 وظائف للمهاجرين، 2 ،N/I TH: الوظائف التي انشأها منها	Misinterpretation + omission	Misinterpretation : ORN; CE-; Imp- Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-
26.	Pay up	Trump (T-H)	3	يدفع	Literal Interpretation	ORP; CE±; Imp±
27.	Through the roof	Trump (T-H)	2	ترتفع بشكل صاروخي N/I	Explication + omission	Explication: ORA; CE+; Imp+ Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-

	Idiom	Speaker	Frq	Interpretation	Strategy	Assessment
28.	Fair share	Biden (T-B)	2	N/I	Omission	ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-

Interpreters can be challenged by fidelity to the source and the linguistic norms of the target. Occurring in 41.2 percent of cases, omission resulted in a loss of contextual effects and intended implicature, meaning optimal relevance was not achieved, as with the omission of “Fair share.” Explicitation, used in 29.4 percent of cases, was effective in rendering idioms like “through the roof” into *ترتفع بشكل صاروخي*, preserving contextual effects and intended implicature and achieving optimal relevance (ORA; CE+; Imp+). Literal interpretation, which was applied in 17.6 percent of cases, was practical when direct equivalents existed, as in “Pay up” → *يدفع*, but only partially preserved contextual effects and implicature (ORP; CE±; Imp±). The interpreter did not accurately render one idiom in two occurrences (11.8% of cases). This worsened meaning loss, as in “Bounce-back jobs.” In these cases, contextual effects were not preserved and intended implicature was not recovered (ORN; CE-; Imp-). The source meaning was completely shifted when “Bounce-back jobs” was rendered into *الوظائف التي انسحب منها* and *وظائف للمهاجرين*.

Table 9. Strategy frequency in Election Campaign idioms

Strategy	Occurrences	Percentage % (of 19)
Omission	7	36.8
Explicitationss	6	31.6
Misinterpretation	4	21.1
Literal	1	5.3
Adaptation	1	5.3

Table 10. Election Campaign idioms

	Idiom	Speaker	Frq	Interpretation	Strategy	Assessment
29.	Lost by a whisker	Muir 3 (T-H) Trump 1	4	1 لم تترجم، Trump بشكل ضئيل جداً، N/I 3 ، N/I 4 ،	Omission + explicitation	Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp- Explicitation: ORP; CE±; Imp±

	Idiom	Speaker	Frq	Interpretation	Strategy	Assessment
30.	in the throes of addiction	Tapper (T-B)	3	2+1 لم تترجم، 3 يكابدون	Omission + Explicitation	Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp- Explicitation: ORP; CE±; Imp±
31.	The same old, tired playbook	Harris (T-H)	2	نفس الكلام المتكرر	Explicitation	ORP; CE±; Imp±
32.	burn pits	Biden (T-B)	2	N/I بيرن بيت،	Misinterpretation + omission	Misinterpretation : ORN; CE-; Imp- Omission: ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-
33.	All still very much in play	Muir (T-H)	1	N/I	Omission	ORN; LPE; CE-; Imp-
34.	Break through the stalemate	Muir (T-H)	1	التوصل لصفقة	Misinterpretation	ORN; CE-; Imp-
35.	Came up a little bit short	Muir (T-H)	1	بأنك خسرت	Explicitation	ORP; CE±; Imp±
36.	Hand-selected	Harris (T-H)	1	اختار	Literal Interpretation	ORP; CE±; Imp±
37.	bring down the price around the kitchen table	Biden (T-B)	1	سنعمل على حل هذه المشكلة	Misinterpretation	ORN; CE-; Imp-

	Idiom	Speaker	Frq	Interpretation	Strategy	Assessment
38.	Cap rent	Biden (T-B)	1	تخفيض اسعار الايجار	Explicitation	ORP; CE±; Imp±
39.	Out of rut	Trump (T-B)	1	يخرج من المأزق	Adaptation	ORP; CE±; Imp±
40.	Manchurian candidate	Trump (T-B)	1	المنشوري	Misinterpretation	ORN; CE-; Imp-

The speakers in this category used different idioms to highlight their political viewpoints on certain issues. Muir, the moderator, used “lost by a whisker” 3 times, while Trump used it once. The idiom means that the candidate nearly missed success, emphasizing the competitive nature of political contests. The idiom “in the throes of addiction” refers to someone extremely involved in a difficult battle. This points to the severity of the challenge. Harris used “the same old, tired playbook” to criticize Trump’s predictable methods. The term “burn pits” is originally a military term. Biden used this idiom to describe exposure to dangerous environments. Muir said “still very much in play” to say that the issue in question can extend over time. He meant to say that the present moment remains open to intervention rather than pointing to a forthcoming resolution. The expression “break through the stalemate” refers to overcoming a sustained inaction, indicating that movement and resolution have political meanings and are not only procedures. In Arabic interpretation, rendering “hand-selected” as اختار shifts the meaning from the selection process to the act of choosing. This resulted in only partial preservation of contextual effects and intended implicature (ORP; CE±; Imp±). Biden’s use of “bring down the price around the kitchen table” and “cap rent” is intended to show that he wants to show economic policy issues in familiar terms. He was referring to financial support for typical families. Trump used “out of rut” to mean moving away from stagnation. He also used “Manchurian candidate” to say that Biden may be accused of outside influence. However, the rendering المنشوري did not preserve the contextual effects or intended implicature of foreign influence accusations (ORN; CE-; Imp-). Using idiomatic language can strengthen audience engagement in political contexts. However, it makes interpretation difficult because of the embedded meanings that cannot be directly transferred into Arabic.

The analysis of the Arabic interpretations of 12 election campaign idioms shows different strategies used by the interpreters. Omission was the most frequent. It was adopted in 7 instances (36.8%). The interpreters used explicitation in 6 cases (31.6%). For example, the idiom “The same old, tired playbook” was rendered as نفس الكلام المتكرر, resulting in partial preservation of contextual effects and intended

implicature (ORP; CE±; Imp±). Furthermore, the interpreters misinterpreted 4 occurrences (21.1%) of the idioms, resulting in loss of contextual effects and failure to recover intended implicature (ORN; CE−; Imp−), especially for culturally specific or complex idioms (e.g., “burn pits” → بـيرن بيت, “Manchurian candidate” → المنشوري). Among the strategies, literal interpretation and adaptation were used the least—each occurred only once (5.3%).

In terms of the effectiveness of interpretation strategies, explicitation was the most successful in 6 instances. However, it preserved contextual effects and intended implicature only partially (ORP; CE±; Imp±), with some loss of nuance. When using literal interpretation and adaptation, the interpreters also preserved contextual effects and intended implicature only partially (ORP; CE±; Imp±) in the single instance of each strategy (100% each), as seen in “Hand-selected” → اختار and “Out of rut” → يخرج من المأزق. On the other hand, when the interpreters used omission and misinterpretation, optimal relevance was not achieved, as contextual effects were not preserved and intended implicature was not recovered (ORN; CE−; Imp−). In 7 omission cases and 4 misinterpretations, optimal relevance was not achieved in 11 idiom cases (57.9%). However, they were able to partially preserve contextual effects and intended implicature in 8 cases (42.1%), corresponding to instances where optimal relevance was partially achieved (ORP).

The analysis of the interpreted idioms shows that omission was used more than other strategies (7 times, 36.8%). Explicitation was nearly as common (6 times, 31.6%), while misinterpretation accounted for four cases (21.1%). Adaptation and literal interpretation were only found once each (5.3%). The strategies were different in terms of their preservation of contextual effects and attempted implicature recovery; explicitation usually achieved partial optimal relevance (ORP), whereas omission and misinterpretation led to instances where optimal relevance was not attained (ORN).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of the Arabic interpretation of election campaign idioms by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya interpreters reveals that they had difficulties. It was necessary to strike a balance between clarity and pragmatic fidelity. This negotiation appears challenging in political situations. Omission was the most common strategy used on the quantitative level. It occurred in 32 cases out of 90 cases (35.6%). Idioms are usually based on cultural and political allusions for which there might not always be a direct Arabic parallel. The interpreter did not consider the idiomatic meaning of the source when they left out “fair and square.” The omission here is in line with the “coordination effort” in Gile’s (2009) Effort Models. The interpreters used omission when they were under time pressure as an adaptation strategy. Moreover, they also applied it in cases where they did not have Arabic equivalents. This finding reinforces an unresolved tension in the literature: omission can function as a coping mechanism under live processing pressure, yet it simultaneously increases the risk of miscommunication when omitted items carry core rhetorical or policy force. In the present dataset, omission of high-salience idioms, especially those framing fairness or accountability, shows how effort-

saving choices can systematically reduce contextual effects in political debate interpreting.

The next two strategies that interpreters most frequently used are literal interpretation (24 cases - 26.7%) and explicitation (20 cases - 22.2%), respectively. The strategies indicate that there are Arabic counterparts. This enabled interpreters to take into consideration the source meaning. However, the literal translation of “failing nation” was دولة فاشلة, and the explicitation of the phrase “Weaponized the Justice Department” was وزارة العدل يستخدمونه سلاحًا. Explicitation is efficient and complies with the principle of optimal relevance as postulated by Sperber and Wilson (1995). The weaknesses of these approaches are evident in reference to some cultural or political idioms. For example, the figurative structure was preserved in the interpreting of the phrase “drain the swamp” as جففت المنبع. However, the interpretation did not reflect the anti-corruption connotation, which is very important to the original context. This is what was referred to as implicature failure by Gumul (2010). Another example is the interpreter’s rendering of “catch and release” into دوريات (patrols), where the altered a legal procedure denoted by the source idiom was altered to a deceptive emphasis on law enforcement. The challenge of finding a linguistic and pragmatic equivalent may be observed in these examples.

A comparatively limited number of instances involved adaptation (6 out of 90 cases, 6.7%) or misinterpretation (8 out of 90 cases, 8.9%). Adaptation is used by interpreters when no direct Arabic equivalents are available. Using this strategy, the interpreters aim to maintain communicative purpose and optimal relevance. Misinterpretation, however, can occur because of unfamiliarity with cultural expressions, high cognitive load, and insufficient contextual information. Interpreters can produce interpretations that distort the source meaning if they lack cultural or contextual knowledge. These cases show that interpreters can compromise the intended source pragmatic meaning during live political interpreting.

The interpreters were challenged by the idiomatic language used by Trump, Biden, and Harris. Trump, for example, relied on idioms that are considered populist and combative. He used them to increase emotional engagement and to make issues memorable (Musolff 2016; Mercieca 2020). Biden and Harris, on the other hand, seem to prefer idioms that show empathy and fairness as in “fair share” or “the same old, tired playbook.” Idioms having direct Arabic equivalents were rendered through explicitation or literal interpretation. Opaque idioms, however, were either omitted or misinterpreted. In this context, cultural competence and contextual awareness can play a significant role in political interpreting (Baker 2018; Djefal and Benmokhtari 2022; AlDayel and Alotaibi 2024).

When rendering Economy and Election campaigns idioms, the interpreters used different strategies. These included omission, literal translation, and explicitation, which were used to render “get credit for,” “pay up,” and “through the roof.” An example reflecting an accurate rendering is the interpretation of “through the roof” as ترتفع بشكل صاروخي. However, the interpreters completely omitted some idioms as in “fair share.” “Bounce-back jobs” was misinterpreted.

Explication appeared as a dominant strategy when rendering the election campaign idiomatic expressions. It, however, partially reflected the meaning of idioms like “lost by a whisker” or “in the throes of addiction.” More serious losses occurred due to omitting “all still very much in play” or misinterpreting “Manchurian candidate” in the Arabic rendering.

The present study aims to build on the research conducted by Obeidat (2020), Behnas (2022) and Djeflal and Benmokhtari (2022). What makes it a valuable contribution to the literature on interpretation is that it offers a detailed investigation of idiomatic expressions in political discourse. In addition, when comparing the current study to the previous studies, one can notice that the use of omission is common when interpreters are under cognitive pressure. The application of Relevance Theory is something new in this study in discussing the Arabic interpretation of idioms. Different strategies including literal interpretation, explication, adaptation, and omission are also discussed. Furthermore, this study shows how idiomatic meaning is preserved, altered, reduced, or completely omitted in Arabic. It also addresses interpreter agency and the decisions interpreters make during live interpretation.

The conclusions drawn in this research lead to important implications for interpreting and translation. Misinterpretation and the evident dependence on omission are among the key problems that the paper has examined. They underscore the weaknesses of literal translation in cases where interpreters are under both time and cognitive constraints. In addition, this analysis examines Relevance Theory in terms of its significance for decision-making. Interpreters need to evaluate the cost of processing effort in relation to the communicative purpose (Setton and Dawrant 2016). Pedagogically, the analysis highlights the need to provide specific training in idiomatic language, particularly in political discourse. The reason is that the interpretation of an idiom cannot be done solely through lexical knowledge but also through cultural awareness and communicative intent (Farghal and Almannan 2015; Mohammed 2025).

In addition to the above suggestions, the interpretation of idioms in politics should be perceived as a linguistic and cultural activity. As the Arabic versions of the idiomatic expressions in the 2024 U.S. presidential debates show, most of the issues that were identified in previous studies continue to exist. Such conclusions demonstrate that cultural awareness is central to the construction of political meaning. Future research recommendations include providing more specific training for interpreters and investigating audience reception. These recommendations can improve analytical awareness of political interpreting.

There are several limitations in the design of this study that can influence the analysis, results, and scope of conclusions. The paper only focuses on the Arabic interpretations of idiomatic expressions used by Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, and the moderators during the 2024 U.S. presidential debates broadcast on CNN and ABC News. Debates from the 2016 and 2020 election cycles were not included because they have already been the subject of previous research.

In this study, I focus on idiomatic expressions and exclude other figures of speech. This facilitates a more detailed analysis of the Arabic interpretations of

idioms. Future research can build on the findings to examine other important figures of speech in presidential debates.

There are two methodological constraints I could not address here due to space and focus. These are audience reception feedback and interpreters' interviews. Discussing Arabic audience reception feedback can help us understand how idiom interpretation functions in live political discourse interpretation. Interpreter interviews can highlight strategic decision-making but are omitted due to space limitations. This study is limited to the classification and frequency of idioms and interpretation strategies. It also focuses on the integration of Relevance Theory.

Endnotes

¹ <https://rollcall.com/factbase/trump/transcript/donald-trump-debate-first-presidential-joe-biden-june-27-2024/>

² <https://www.rev.com/transcripts/harris-vs-trump-presidential-debate>

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