

SEMANTIC FEATURES OF COMBATING AND PREVENTING MARITIME DRUG-RELATED CRIME TERMS IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE

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Abstract: *This study conducts a comparative semantic analysis of 517 English and 450 Vietnamese terms related to combating and preventing maritime drug-related crimes. Drawing from legal and operational corpora, the research examines the characteristics of denotation, connotation, and polysemy across four functional domains. The findings reveal a model of Semantic Functionalism: while both languages prioritize denotative precision to ensure legal clarity, English terminology favors conceptual generalization, serving as a strategic interface for international frameworks such as UNCLOS. Conversely, Vietnamese relies on granular specification, serving as a tactical interface for detailed operational measures and entity classification. The study concludes that recognizing these distinct functional roles is essential for standardizing terminology and enhancing the interoperability of international law enforcement forces.*

Keywords: *Coast Guard terms, drug-related crime terms, drug control, semantic features*

I. Introduction

Combating maritime drug crime, an increasingly complex transnational security concern, requires strong collaboration between international law enforcement authorities (UNODC, 2023). Mutual comprehension is the cornerstone of this valuable collaboration, and the specialized language system significantly influences it. In a high-risk field, differences in the semantics of terms can lead to misinterpretations, negatively affecting the effectiveness of coordination and intelligence sharing.

According to Cabré (1999), specialized terms are lexical units that convey precise meanings within a specific field, thereby supporting effective communication. In the combat and prevention of drug-related crime at sea, ambiguity or inconsistency in the semantic interpretation of terms can lead to serious legal misunderstandings and operational errors, and significantly diminish the effectiveness of international coordination.

In reality, the terminology system on preventing drug crime at

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sea in Vietnamese and English exists fundamental differences. Strategic phrases such as “struggle and prevention” in Vietnamese have a different semantic scope and expressive nuances compared to specific professional terms such as “counter-narcotics” or “interdiction” in English. Similarly, the term “Coast Guard” also has its own connotations compared to “Coast Guard”. Although there have been many studies on maritime discourse and terminology in general (Franceschi, 2014), the field of maritime law enforcement, especially under the lens of English-Vietnamese comparison, still has an academic gap. Filling this gap is urgent in the context of increasingly robust cooperation between the Vietnam Coast Guard and international partners, which requires a solid common language foundation.

This study was conducted to directly address the above problem, with two main objectives:

(1) Analyze and clarify the semantic characteristics of core terms related to drug crime prevention at sea in English and Vietnamese;

(2) Point out the basic similarities and differences between the terminology systems related to drug crime prevention at sea in the two languages.

To achieve these objectives, the paper will focus on answering the following two research questions.

- What are the semantic characteristics of the core terms on drug crime prevention at sea in English and Vietnamese?

- What are the basic semantic similarities and differences between the terms systems related to drug crime prevention at sea in the two languages?

II. Literature review

2.1. Previous studies

Research on maritime security has identified transnational drug crime as a serious challenge and emphasized international cooperation as a key solution (Smith, 2020; UNODC, 2023). The focus of these studies is often on strategic, legal, and operational aspects (Jones, 2021), while the fundamental role of language in ensuring effective cooperation has received little attention. The Coast Guard, as the primary actor in maritime law enforcement, has been extensively analyzed with respect to its legal status and operational functions (Till, 2018; Raymond, 2020). However, these studies largely ignore the semantic features of the terms used to name the forces, an important factor in shaping identity and perception.

In linguistics, studies on “Maritime English” have made significant progress. The works have been analyzed at the levels of discourse and safe communication conventions (Franceschi, 2014), as well as at complex semantic processes and relations such as metaphor, metonymy, and polysemy within the system of maritime technical terminology (Ohienko, 2017; Hristova, 2023). These analyses show that the academic community has recognized the importance of maritime specialized language. However, these studies are mainly limited to maritime safety and commercial ship operations and have not yet extended to the field of law enforcement.

From this, a dual research gap becomes apparent. First, there is a lack of work applying semantic analysis methods to the terminology system of the field of maritime crime prevention. Second,

there is almost no systematic cross-linguistic comparison study between the corresponding terms in English and Vietnamese. This paper aims to directly address this gap, thereby providing an insight into how language shapes thinking and action in maritime security cooperation, an area of great significance both theoretically and practically.

2.2. Theoretical background

2.2.1. Overview of terms

2.2.1.1. Definition of a term

A term is a word or a phrase that designates a specific concept within a particular field of science, technology, or a profession. Unlike general vocabulary, which can be polysemous and rich in connotative meaning, a term is created with the highest requirements for precision and monosemy. According to Sager (1990), a term is “the linguistic representation of a concept” within a systematic conceptual structure. In modern terminology studies, Cabré (1999) emphasizes that a term is not merely a lexical unit but also a unit of knowledge, embodying a concept that has been agreed upon and standardized by a community of experts. Therefore, a term can be understood as a linguistic unit (a word or phrase) that denotes a specialized concept precisely, monosemously, and systematically.

2.2.1.2. Characteristics of a term

Researchers have identified several characteristics of terms; however, the three core and most widely accepted attributes include:

- Precision: A term must accurately and fully reflect the intention of the concept it represents, leaving no room for ambiguity or confusion.

- Systematicity: Terms within a specialized field do not exist in isolation but are organized into a coherent system that reflects the logical relationships between concepts (e.g., superordinate-subordinate, whole-part, cause-effect relationships).

- Internationality: In the context of globalization, many scientific and technological terms tend to become internationalized to facilitate the exchange of information and cooperation. Internationality is particularly crucial in fields requiring transnational cooperation, such as crime prevention.

2.2.2. Overview of combating and preventing maritime drug-related crimes terms

2.2.2.1. Definition

Based on the foundational theories presented, the terms for combating and preventing maritime drug-related crimes can be as a systematic collection of lexical units (words and phrases) used in the legal, operational, and related scientific domains to precisely and unambiguously designate concepts related to the subjects, acts, procedures, means, and measures employed by functional forces (such as Coast Guard, Navy, and Border Patrol) to prevent, detect, investigate, and handle drug-related criminal activities occurring in maritime zones under national sovereignty and jurisdiction, as well as on the high seas.

2.2.2.2. Classification

The terms used in combating and preventing maritime drug-related crimes can be classified into several distinct categories based on their semantic and functional roles within legal and operational contexts.

- Terms denoting Drug-Related Crimes and Criminal Acts: This category comprises terms that designate the illegal

acts themselves, which are the primary focus of prevention and enforcement efforts. These terms directly and unambiguously describe the nature of the crime, such as “*drug trafficking*” (*buôn bán trái phép chất ma túy*), and “*money laundering*” (*rửa tiền*).

- Terms denoting operational and legal measures for combat and prevention of drug-related crime at sea: The words in this category relate to the rules, practices, and acts implemented by the authorities, such as “*drug interdiction*”, which is followed by “*arrest*” (*bắt giữ đối tượng*).

- Terms denoting Entities Related to Drug-Related Crimes: This category focuses on lexical units identifying the entities directly involved in or affected by criminal activities and law enforcement actions like a “*drug syndicate*”, physical items like a “*smuggling vessel*” (*tàu buôn lậu ma túy*), and people like a “*drug offender*” (*tội phạm ma túy*).

- Terms denoting Legal Provisions/Frameworks for Combat and Prevention of Drug-Related Crime at Sea: These terms describe the basic legal concepts, such as “*jurisdiction*” (*quyền tài phán*), the enforcement tools such as Vietnam’s “*Law on Drug Prevention and Control*” (*Luật Phòng, chống ma túy*), and the mechanisms for international cooperation, such as the “*mutual legal assistance treaty (MLAT)*”.

2.3. Semantic features

A strong theoretical foundation is necessary to ascertain the objective meaning of specialized lexical units. While semantic analysis can encompass dimensions such as collocation, metaphor, or conceptual mapping, this study restricts its scope to Denotation, Connotation, and Polysemy. This exclusion is intentional, prioritizing the strict legal requirement

for terminological precision and unambiguous referential meaning over cognitive associations, which are reserved for future theoretical research.

Denotation: This is the basic, objective meaning of a term, directly referring to a concept or object in reality (e.g., narcotics, smuggling). In specialized language, denotation is often prioritized for its precision and monosemy.

Connotation: These are additional shades of meaning, often emotional, attitudinal, or suggestive qualities. Although specialized terms typically limit connotation to ensure objectivity, certain nuances may still exist depending on the specific legal or operational context.

Polysemy: This refers to words with multiple meanings. In terms, polysemy is minimized for clarity. This study analyzes how terms convey a singular, specialized meaning in the context of combat and the prevention of drug-related crime at sea, and clarifies their semantic network through relations such as synonymy.

III. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The study uses a mixed methodology, mostly depending on in-depth qualitative analysis, and quantitative statistical techniques to measure frequency and distribution trends. To maintain scientific rigor and objectivity when surveying specific language traits, this study design is situated within the corpus linguistics and applied linguistics framework. The study looks at three key components of each term from a semantic perspective: Polysemy, Connotation, and Denotation.

3.2. Research objects

This study is based on a specialized multilingual corpus comprised of 517

English terms and 450 Vietnamese terms. To ensure representativeness and balance across the domain, the corpus was stratified into two primary categories: Legislative/Legal Frameworks (providing high-level strategic terminology) and Operational/Enforcement Documents (providing practical, field-specific terminology).

The sources were selected from official, legal, and scholarly documents to ensure high reliability:

- English Corpus (International & Operational Standards): Includes foundational conventions such as the UN Drug Convention (United Nations, 1988), UNCLOS (United Nations, 1982), and UNODC (2023) reports. To capture operational realities, it also incorporates the Navy Supplement to the DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms (U.S. Department of the Navy, 2021).

- Vietnamese Corpus (Domestic Legal & Specialized Standards): Includes Luật Cảnh sát biển Việt Nam (Law on Vietnam Coast Guard, 2018) and specialized legal decrees. Operational terminology was drawn from official Vietnam Coast Guard Command documents and specialized dictionaries such as the Từ điển hàng hải (Cung, 2004).

3.3. Data selection, collection, and analysis procedures

A specialized electronic corpus was compiled from collected documents to serve as the basis for analysis. First, specialized terms were extracted using Sketch Engine in a three-stage process: (1) initial identification via frequency and collocation analysis; (2) refinement by removing polysemous words and validating terms against the theoretical framework of Nguyễn (1998); and (3) final

filtering in consultation with maritime law enforcement experts to ensure accuracy. The resulting corpus was then subjected to semantic and contrastive analysis. The semantic analysis examined each term's denotation, connotation, and polysemy.

IV. Findings and discussion

4.1. Findings

Following corpus collection and pre-processing, the relevant terms were systematically categorized into four core groups for contrastive analysis.

4.1.1 Terms denoting combat and prevention of drug-related crimes at sea

In addition to the previously discussed directness and monosemy, terms in this category also distinctly illustrate the function of denotation in specialized and legal language. They are intended to identify legal notions while reducing the polysemy and connotative ambiguities frequently present in everyday speech.

Denotation: Terms in both English and Vietnamese prioritize strong denotative meanings to ensure legal and operational clarity. English terms like “*illicit drug production*” directly indicate unlawful acts through explicit modifiers. According to Luật Cảnh sát biển Việt Nam (2018), Vietnamese terms such as “*buôn bán trái phép chất ma túy*” (*illicit drug trading*) exemplify this absolute priority of denotation, with “*trái phép*” (*illicit/illegal*) ensuring unambiguous legal identification.

Connotation: The meaning of terms is drastically diminished to preserve objectivity and impartiality, two important semantic attributes. The terms “*drug offender*” in English and “*tội phạm ma túy*” in Vietnamese are examples of terms that identify people based on their legal status without any negative emotional overtones.

Polysemy: “*buôn bán*” in Vietnamese and “*production*” in English are two words that can be polysemous in the general language but turn monospermous when used settings and combined with other words. While

“*rửa tiền*” in Vietnamese and “*money laundering*” in English, when used alone, can refer to a variety of illegal funding sources, their meaning is limited when the qualifier “*từ ma túy*” (connected to drugs) is added.

Table 1. Statistics on Terms denoting “*combat and prevention of drug-related crimes at sea*”

Language	Total number of terms investigated	Number of terms	Percentage
English	517	135	26.11%
Vietnamese	450	95	21.11%

The group accounts for 26.11% of English and 21.11% of Vietnamese terms. The high frequency of keywords greatly aids law enforcement’s ability to detect and address drug-related crimes at sea. Vietnamese terms are slightly less common than English terms (26.11%). Vietnamese terms use labels for specific acts more clearly, reflecting the subtleties of domestic legislation; on the other hand, English terms tend to generalize phrases (like “*drug trafficking*”) in international situations.

4.1.2. Terms denoting operational/legal measures for combat and prevention of drug-related crimes at sea

The Coast Guard uses this set of terms to describe specific activities to combat and prevent drug-related criminality at sea. The terms used in this category are examined to make clear the phases in the chain of action, from the first recognition of the violation to the last management.

Denotation: There is no ambiguity in this collection of phrases because they are precisely constructed and clearly indicate actions or processes with specific goals. The fact that “*controlled delivery* (of drugs)” and information gathering are related to rigorous analytical preparation

and sophisticated investigation tactics, respectively, gives anti-drug initiatives more legitimacy. The subtleties of local law are reflected in Vietnamese, which frequently employs more specific labels for specific acts than phrases (like “*drug trafficking*”) in international contexts.

Connotation: The connotation is minimized when talking about operational and legal procedures to maintain professionalism and objectivity. Terms such as “*bắt giữ đối tượng ma túy*” (Vietnamese) or “*arrest (for drug offences)*” (English) are defined by the legal act of depriving liberty, rather than by emotions or attitudes towards the arrested person.

Polysemy: Polysemy is minimized in these terms for precision in legal/operational contexts, ensuring a specialized meaning (e.g., “*operation*”). Legal actions, including “*bắt giữ đối tượng ma túy*” (*arresting drug suspects*) and “*truy đuổi tội phạm ma túy*” (*hot pursuit*) (United Nations, 1982), adhere to international principles. Distinctions like “*detention*” vs. “*arrest*” clarify legal requirements, while “*controlled delivery* (of drugs)” and “*joint counter-narcotics patrols*” exemplify complex, transnational cooperation.

Table 2. Statistics on terms denoting operational/legal measures for combat and prevention of drug-related crimes at sea

Language	Total number of terms investigated	Number of terms	Percentage
English	517	120	23.21%
Vietnamese	450	110	24.44%

Vietnamese terms (24.44%) are higher than English (23.21%). To promote clarity and uniformity at home, Vietnamese legal and operational documentation typically describes actions in more detail. On the other hand, because of their worldwide application and the vast evolution of international legal systems, English documents, particularly international ones, may generalize ideas more widely.

4.1.3. Terms denoting entities related to drug-related crime

This term focuses on specific lexical units used to identify people or things directly impacted by crimes involving drugs or law enforcement actions.

Denotation: Terms are defined with strict denotation, allowing no ambiguity, and directly indicate legal parts, illicit purposes, or the material nature of entities in the context of drug-related crime. The clear semantic distinction between “*tội phạm ma túy*” (drug offender) and “*ngghi phạm ma túy*” (drug suspect) in Vietnamese (Luật Cảnh sát biển Việt Nam, 2018) or “drug offender” and “drug suspect” in English is crucial for determining legal status and corresponding rights.

Connotation: The aim is to determine an entity’s position or objective attributes along the criminal chain rather than

relying on personal opinions or tendency the English term “*drug offender*” and the Vietnamese term “*tội phạm ma túy*” are neutral terms that only refer to the person’s shown or suspected legal activity; they lack the emotive or moralistic meanings of “evil doer” or “culprit”.

Polysemy: The polysemy within this group of terms is minimized in the legal and maritime operational context to guarantee that a single, exact designation is absolute. These terms must accurately classify individuals (e.g., “*tội phạm ma túy* / “*drug suspect*”, as per Luật Cảnh sát biển Việt Nam (2018). This semantic rigor is paramount, guaranteeing consistency and legality in all communications and operational activities of the law enforcement agency.

Vietnamese terms (25.56%) are more prevalent than English (21.28%), indicating that Vietnamese legal documents classify entities more meticulously. The precise documentation of legal ramifications illustrates the phrase’s crucial importance in operational guidance and legal application. Vietnamese tend to use more specialized terms, which offer important insights into how concepts related to entities and their role in preventing and combating drug-related marine crime are expressed.

Table 3. Statistics on terms denoting entities related to drug-related crimes

Language	Total number of terms investigated	Number of terms	Percentage
English	517	110	21.28%
Vietnamese	450	115	25.56%

4.1.4. Terms donating legal provisions/frameworks for the combat and prevention of drug-related crimes at sea

This list of terms refers to the legal documents or domains that serve as the foundation for all efforts to prevent and combat marine drug-related crime.

Denotation: Terms carry precise denotative meanings as binding rules, provisions, or legal systems that define the legal framework for combating and preventing drug-related crime at sea. Their denotation has specific applications. “*Anti-narcotics laws*” are

one example of a fundamental legal document. According to UNCLOS (United Nations, 1982), “*Quyền tài phán về ma túy*” (jurisdiction over drug offenses) and “jurisdiction” are examples of indicators of complicated legal power. Terms like “mutual legal assistance treaty (MLAT)” highlight global cooperation mechanisms.

Connotation: This group establishes fundamental power and legal tools for enforcement actions. These terms, like “anti-narcotics laws”, define crimes and their associated punishments.

The legal authority boundaries in the complicated marine realm are made clear by

Table 4. Statistics terms denoting legal provisions/frameworks for the combat and prevention of drug-related crimes at sea

Language	Total number of terms investigated	Number of terms	Percentage
English	517	152	29.40%
Vietnamese	450	105	23.33%

This group reflects the foundational nature of legal frameworks in combating drug-related crime at sea. English terms are significantly more prevalent, which is attributed to English’s role as the primary language in international legal forums and multilateral conventions. Its corpus accumulates more terms for abstract legal concepts and mechanisms (UNCLOS (United Nations, 1982)). While Vietnamese legal documents comply with international regulations, their internal term development may focus more on national specifics.

4.2. Discussion

The comparative analysis reveals that while both English and Vietnamese prioritize denotative precision and monosemy to ensure legal clarity, they employ distinct lexicalization strategies. English terminology favors conceptual generalization, acting as a hypernymic language suitable for

terms such as “jurisdiction” (per UNCLOS (United Nations, 1982)) and “*Quyền tài phán về ma túy*” (jurisdiction over drug offenses). These terms address the possibility of working together across conventional boundaries of territorial sovereignty to combat maritime drug trafficking.

Polysemy: Although the terms that make up legal terms have broad meanings, their polysemy is closely regulated to maintain clarity and monosemy, which enables them to distinguish between certain legal concepts. The term “*vùng biển có nguy cơ cao về ma túy*” (*high-risk maritime drug zone*) designates a marine area for criminal activity, rather than the more general term “zone”.

international frameworks (e.g., UNCLOS (United Nations, 1982)), whereas Vietnamese relies on granular specification to guide operational measures and entity classification.

This dominance of denotation aligns with Cabré (1999) and Sager (1990) on terms as stable knowledge units. However, extending Franceschi’s (2014) work on maritime safety, this study argues that in law enforcement, semantic ambiguity leads to jurisdictional collisions rather than physical accidents. Furthermore, while Smith (2020) focused on strategic cooperation, this research highlights the linguistic mechanisms enabling it. The specific operational modifiers in Vietnamese terms (e.g., “*trái phép*”) also provide linguistic evidence for the dual civilian-military nature of Coast Guards noted by Raymond (2020).

Finally, the study proposes a model of Semantic Functionalism: English serves as the strategic interface connecting nations, while Vietnamese acts as the tactical interface for enforcement. This dichotomy suggests that translation challenges in this field arise not from lexical mismatches but from a functional semantic gap where terms differ in their operational application.

V. Conclusion

This study successfully investigated the basic semantic components of language about marine drug criminality by comparing Vietnamese and English. The results indicate a discernible difference in the conceptual focus of the two languages, even though denotation and monosemy are essential for accuracy. Specifically, compared to English, the Vietnamese terms system emphasizes connected entities and practical operational measures within the framework of international law. In particular, the Vietnamese terminology system emphasizes related entities and practical operational measures within the context of the international legal system more than English does. These crucial discoveries provide term standardization with an empirical foundation, enabling the efficient operation of procedures and documentation. However, the analysis is constrained by its emphasis on the lexical semantics of formal texts. Therefore, future research must extend to pragmatic analysis in real operational contexts and conduct a detailed assessment of translation equivalence to enhance practical applicability.

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ĐẶC ĐIỂM NGŨ NGHĨA CỦA CÁC THUẬT NGỮ VỀ ĐẤU TRANH VÀ PHÒNG CHỐNG TỘI PHẠM LIÊN QUAN ĐẾN MA TÚY TRÊN BIỂN TRONG TIẾNG ANH VÀ TIẾNG VIỆT

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Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu phân tích đối chiếu đặc điểm ngữ nghĩa của 517 thuật ngữ tiếng Anh và 450 thuật ngữ tiếng Việt trong lĩnh vực đấu tranh và phòng chống tội phạm ma túy trên biển. Dựa trên nguồn ngữ liệu pháp lý và nghiệp vụ, nghiên cứu khảo sát các đặc điểm về nghĩa sở chỉ, nghĩa hàm chỉ và tính đa nghĩa trên bốn nhóm chức năng. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy mô hình Chức năng luận ngữ nghĩa: trong khi cả hai ngôn ngữ đều ưu tiên tính chính xác của nghĩa sở chỉ nhằm đảm bảo sự minh bạch pháp lý, hệ thống thuật ngữ tiếng Anh thiên về xu hướng khái quát hóa khái niệm, đóng vai trò như một giao diện chiến lược phù hợp với các khuôn khổ quốc tế như UNCLOS. Ngược lại, tiếng Việt chú trọng sự chi tiết hóa, đóng vai trò như một giao diện tác nghiệp phục vụ các biện pháp nghiệp vụ cụ thể và phân loại đối tượng. Nghiên cứu kết luận rằng việc nhận diện các vai trò chức năng khác biệt này là yếu tố then chốt để chuẩn hóa thuật ngữ và nâng cao khả năng phối hợp hoạt động của các lực lượng thực thi pháp luật quốc tế.

Từ khóa: thuật ngữ Cảnh sát biển, thuật ngữ tội phạm ma túy, kiểm soát ma túy, đặc điểm ngữ nghĩa

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