

LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF IDIOMS AND PROVERBS RELATING TO MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE

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Abstract: *This study studies the linguistic features of 105 idioms and proverbs relating to marital relationships in English and Vietnamese from a comparative perspective. The study focuses on semantic categories and pragmatic functions. The findings indicate that both languages reflect shared concerns such as marital harmony, commitment, and mutual support, yet they differ in linguistic realization. Vietnamese idioms and proverbs tend to be more explicit and prescriptive, frequently encoding moral instruction and social norms through parallel structures. In contrast, English idioms and proverbs are generally more implicit and metaphorical, allowing greater interpretive flexibility depending on context. Concerning pragmatics, Vietnamese proverbs function as instruments of moral guidance, whereas English ones primarily serve interpretive and experiential roles. The study underscores the close relationship between language, culture, and pragmatic force, offering implications for translation, intercultural communication, and language pedagogy.*

Keywords: *English, Vietnamese, idioms, proverbs, similarities, differences, linguistics*

I. Introduction

Idioms and proverbs are considered a “living library” of knowledge, experience, and cultural identity in any country worldwide. For both Vietnamese and English people, the family is the cornerstone of social structure, with the marital relationship serving as its core nucleus. The language used to describe this bond is normally fixed expressions that are highly figurative and carry profound philosophical views on human life.

In globalization, cultural and language exchange becomes vital, which

helps strengthen mutual understanding among nations as well as people. The rationale for choosing this topic derives from the increasing depth of global cultural exchange. In fact, misinterpreting idioms and proverbs in daily communication can lead not only to linguistic misunderstandings but also to cultural cognitive bias. For example, Vietnamese people often describe harmony in marriage through the image of “*Thuận vợ thuận chồng, tát biển Đông cũng cạn*” (draining the East Sea), while English people use the concept

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of “*on the same page*” to talk about the marital agreement, as in the example, “*The Browns are on the same page about raising their children.*” However, the emotional nuances and underlying metaphors in English and Vietnamese remain distinctly different. Therefore, this article aims to deconstruct these layers of meaning of idioms and proverbs relating to marital relationships to unveil the similarities and differences in linguistics between the two nations.

II. Literature review

2.1. Overview of previous researches

There has been some research on idioms and proverbs that express marital relations. Nguyen (2009) in her study: “*idioms, proverbs and sayings relating to relationship*” researched idioms, proverbs, and sayings expressing relations such as friends, love, and family. The writer divided family relations into two subgroups: the relation between husband and wife and the relation between parents and children. However, the researcher only analyzed these relations with regard to cultural aspects. Pham (2025), on the other hand, used cognitive linguistics to compare marriage-related metaphors in English and Vietnamese proverbs and idioms. Four metaphorical groups: destiny, gender roles, compatibility and harmony, and stages of marriage were studied. The researcher found significant parallels and divergences that reflected the social institutions, religious convictions, and cultural underpinnings of both societies. The writer also showed that Vietnamese metaphors were affected by Buddhism, Confucianism, and extended family systems, whereas English metaphors were influenced by Christianity, Western philosophy, and the nuclear family model. The study offered

a fresh viewpoint on how language and culture interact in the domains of cognitive and comparative linguistics.

Lan and Shiguo (2024) studied English proverbs about love and marriage. They found that English proverbs were linguistic expressions and cultural wisdom inheritance. Their findings also revealed that individualism, rationalism, romanticism, realism, etc., were the most common themes in English proverbs and values. They concluded that English proverbs about love and marriage were an abundant source of linguistic and cultural insights, which are of great importance for cross-cultural communication and education. Similarly, in linguistics, Orlova (2021) presented a comparative structural and semantic analysis of English and Russian proverbs on marriage. The researcher also took a close look at male and female perspectives on marriage, noting that English proverbs more often expressed a critical attitude and highlighted the benefits of bachelorhood, whereas Russian proverbs generally viewed marriage positively, though many reflected marital hardship and conveyed women’s perspectives. The analysis revealed both shared and language-specific lexical, syntactic, and figurative characteristics, reflecting common human experience as well as distinct historical and cultural backgrounds.

These researchers, to some extent, all studied idioms and proverbs expressing marital relations linguistically or culturally. However, in-depth studies of linguistic features and grammar structures were limited. Therefore, the research “*Linguistic features of idioms and proverbs relating to marital relationships in English and Vietnamese*” aims to fill the study gap.

2.2. Idioms and proverbs in English and Vietnamese

In Webster's dictionary (1996), idioms are defined as expressions whose meanings cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of the individual words they contain; instead, they have a *figurative* or *non-literal* meaning that is understood through conventional use within a language.

Similarly, Ammer (1997) defined an idiom as a set phrase of two or more words that means something different from the literal meaning of the separate words.

Vietnamese idioms are defined by Hoang (2003, p. 915) as "a fixed set of words that are commonly used, whose meaning cannot usually be simply explained by the meanings of the words that make it up." From Nguyen's (2010) point of view, idioms are widely used in spoken language as well as in the creation of Vietnamese poetry and literature due to their conciseness and high expressiveness."

In general, idioms in English and Vietnamese are based on the overall meaning of the words.

In the Oxford Learner's Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 2024), proverbs are well-known phrases or sentences that offer advice or convey a generally true statement. Similarly, proverbs are defined as complete sentences with rhymes that convey life experience, moral lessons passed down from one generation to another.

Idioms and proverbs related to marital relationships

Idioms and proverbs related to marital relationships reflect culturally embedded understandings of love, commitment, and interpersonal dynamics. Expressions such as "*marriage is a two-way street*" and "*it*

takes two to tango" or "*Thuận vợ thuận chồng, tát biển Đông cũng cạn*" (when husband and wife are united and work together, they can overcome even the greatest challenges in life) emphasize mutual responsibility and cooperation, which align with principles in *Social Exchange Theory*, where relationships are maintained through balanced contributions and rewards (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Similarly, proverbs like "*love is blind*" illustrate how emotional attachment can shape perception, a concept closely related to *Attachment Theory*, which explains how individuals form emotional bonds and maintain intimacy (Bowlby, 1969). In addition, idioms such as "*a stormy marriage*" or "*give someone the cold shoulder*" highlight conflict and communication breakdown, which are central concerns in marital communication studies (Gottman, 1999). Therefore, idiomatic expressions not only serve as linguistic tools but also reflect theoretical perspectives on how marital relationships function and develop.

2.3. Concept of semantic categories

The concept of semantic categories refers to the classification of meaning into different functional domains based on shared semantic features. In Semantics, categorization is essential for analyzing how meaning is structured and interpreted in language. According to Lyons (1977), semantic classification enables the systematic organization of lexical items and their relationships within a language. Similarly, Leech (1981) emphasizes that categorizing meaning facilitates a clearer understanding of both conceptual and associative aspects of language.

In this study, semantic categories are used as the main analytical framework to classify idioms and proverbs related to

marital relationships. The classification is based on nine categories, including Marital harmony & unity, Lifelong commitment & fidelity, Shared hardship & mutual support, Love & emotional bonds, Compromise, respect & conduct, Duty & moral responsibility, Shared daily life & cohabitation, Family happiness & prosperity, Conflict & marital tension. These categories provide a comprehensive framework for examining how different aspects of meaning are represented in idiomatic expressions, thereby supporting the analysis and interpretation of the research data.

2.4. Cross-cultural pragmatics

Cross-cultural pragmatics is a subfield of Pragmatics that studies how language use varies across cultures and how meaning is interpreted in context. It emphasizes that successful communication depends not only on grammar but also on cultural norms, shared knowledge, and social conventions. Differences in speech acts and politeness strategies may lead to pragmatic failure, when speakers from different cultures misunderstand each other despite using correct language (Thomas, 1983). Therefore, cross-cultural pragmatics highlights the importance of pragmatic competence in intercultural communication (Leech, 1983).

III. Methodology

3.1. Subjects of the study

Subjects of the study are 105 idioms and proverbs expressing marital relationships in English and Vietnamese collected from *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*, *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* and the *Vietnamese Idiom and Proverb Dictionary*. After being collected, idioms and proverbs are analyzed linguistically to find out similarities and differences.

3.2. Research methods

The key methods of the study are comparative, qualitative, and quantitative, which are employed throughout the research to identify commonalities and differences between English and Vietnamese idioms expressing marital relationships regarding linguistics. Furthermore, other techniques such as statistics and semantic analysis aligned with charts and tables are also used to ensure the reliability and validity of the research.

IV. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Findings

4.1.1. English idioms and proverbs relating to marital relationships

Table 1 presents the distribution of 55 English idioms and proverbs related to marital relationships across nine semantic categories. The data show a clear predominance of positive and normative marital values.

Among the categories, *marital harmony & unity* was the highest with 18.2%, followed closely by *lifelong commitment & fidelity* with 16.4%, nearly 2% lower than the number of idioms and proverbs in the first category. *Shared hardship & mutual support*, *Love & emotional bonds* and *Compromise, respect & conduct* ranked the third, fourth and fifth positions with 14.5%, 12.7%, and 10.9% respectively. These categories indicated that, alongside affection, marriage was also framed as a relationship requiring moral discipline, mutual respect, and responsible conduct.

In contrast, categories associated with everyday routine and material outcomes were less prominently represented. *Shared daily life and*

cohabitation (7.3%) and *family happiness and prosperity* (7.3%) suggested that practical or economic aspects of marriage received relatively limited proverbial attention. The least frequent category was *conflict and marital tension* (3.6%), demonstrating a strong tendency to

downplay disagreement in English idioms and proverbs. This imbalance suggested that English proverbial wisdom favored idealized representations of marriage, prioritizing harmony, commitment, and emotional bonds over the acknowledgment of marital conflict.

Table 1. Semantic Categories of English idioms and proverbs

No.	Semantic Categories	Idioms/proverbs(n)	Percentage (%)
1	Marital harmony & unity	10	18.2%
2	Lifelong commitment & fidelity	9	16.4%
3	Shared hardship & mutual support	8	14.5%
4	Love & emotional bonds	7	12.7%
5	Compromise, respect & conduct	6	10.9%
6	Duty & moral responsibility	5	9.1%
7	Shared daily life & cohabitation	4	7.3%
8	Family happiness & prosperity	4	7.3%
9	Conflict & marital tension	2	3.6%
Total		55	100%

4.1.2. Vietnamese idioms and proverbs relating to marital relationships

Table 2 illustrates the number of Vietnamese idioms and proverbs across nine semantic categories related to marital relationships. Overall, the data reveal a strong emphasis on positive, value-oriented aspects of marriage, with minimal attention paid to conflict.

The most prominent category is *marital harmony and unity* (18%), indicating that harmony was the central conceptualization of marriage in the dataset. This is followed closely by *lifelong commitment and fidelity* (16%), which highlights the importance of permanence and loyalty as defining marital ideals.

Table 2. Semantic Categories of Vietnamese idioms and proverbs

No.	Semantic Categories	Idioms/proverbs (n)	Percentage (%)
1	Marital harmony & unity	9	18.0%
2	Lifelong commitment & fidelity	8	16.0%
3	Duty & moral responsibility	7	14.0%
4	Love & emotional bonds	6	12.0%
5	Family happiness & prosperity	5	10.0%
6	Shared hardship & mutual support	5	10.0%
7	Shared daily life & cohabitation	4	8.0%
8	Compromise, respect & conduct	4	8.0%
9	Conflict & marital tension	2	4.0%
Total		50	100%

The highest number of idioms and proverbs was in the category *Marital harmony & unity*, with 18%. *Lifelong commitment & fidelity* and *Duty & moral*

responsibility were the second and third highest numbers, which accounted for 16% and 14% respectively. *Love & emotional bonds* was the fourth highest

number, which was 2% higher than *Family happiness & prosperity* and *Shared hardship & mutual support* on the fifth position. *Shared daily life and cohabitation* (8%) and *compromise, respect and conduct* (8%) suggested that routine aspects of married life were less salient in proverbial discourse than moral and affective values. As in other datasets, *conflict and marital tension* was the least represented category (4%), indicating a cultural preference for idealized and normative representations of marriage that prioritized harmony and stability over disagreement.

4.1.3. Distribution of English idioms and proverbs v.s Vietnamese idioms and proverbs

The bar chart illustrates the distribution of English and Vietnamese idioms and proverbs related to marital relationships across nine semantic categories. Overall, both languages display a strong tendency to emphasize positive and normative aspects of marriage rather than conflict.

Specifically, categories such as *marital harmony and unity*, *lifelong commitment and fidelity*, and *shared hardship and mutual support* accounted for the highest frequencies in both datasets, indicating that marriage was predominantly conceptualized as a stable, cooperative, and enduring partnership in both cultures.

A notable similarity can be observed in categories related to everyday interaction and interpersonal ethics. The numbers for *shared daily life and cohabitation* and *compromise, respect, and conduct* were identical in English and Vietnamese, suggesting a shared cultural understanding of marriage as grounded in daily cooperation and mutual consideration. Likewise, the category of *shared hardship and mutual support* showed equal representation in

both languages, reinforcing the universal value placed on solidarity and resilience within marital relationships.

Despite these similarities, certain differences revealed culture-specific emphases. Vietnamese idioms and proverbs outnumber their English counterparts in categories such as *duty and moral responsibility*, *family happiness and prosperity*, and *marital harmony and unity*. This pattern reflected the strong influence of collectivist and Confucian values in Vietnamese culture, where marriage is closely associated with moral obligations, family bonds, and social harmony rather than solely with individual fulfillment.

In contrast, English idioms and proverbs were slightly more frequent in categories related to love and emotional bonds, lifelong commitment and fidelity, and conflict and marital tension. Although conflict-related expressions remained limited overall, their greater presence in English suggested a comparatively more explicit acknowledgment of emotional complexity and marital challenges. This tendency aligned with a more individual-oriented cultural perspective, in which personal emotions and relational difficulties were more openly verbalized.

Finally, the category of *conflict and marital tension* was the least represented in both languages, indicating a shared preference for idealized portrayals of marriage in proverbial discourse. Rather than focusing on disagreement, both linguistic traditions prioritized harmony, endurance, and mutual responsibility. Generally speaking, the chart demonstrated that while English and Vietnamese idioms and proverbs converged on core marital values, they diverged subtly in how cultural priorities of collectivism versus individual emotional expression were linguistically encoded.

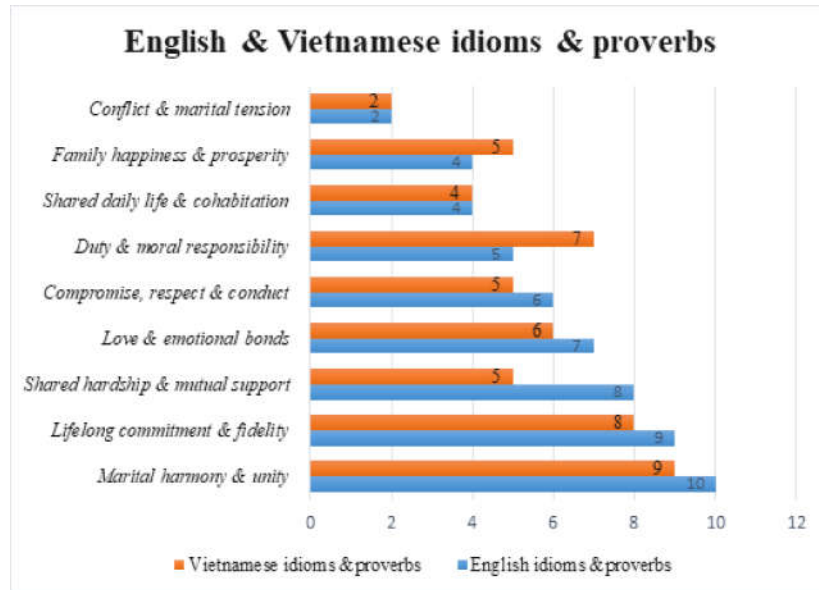


Figure 1. Distribution of English idioms and proverbs v.s Vietnamese idioms and proverbs

Here are some examples of English and Vietnamese idioms and proverbs related to marital relationships across some of the semantic categories above.

Regarding *marital harmony & unity*, English people say: “*Two hearts that beat as one*” while Vietnamese say “*Thuận vợ thuận chồng, tát Biển Đông cũng cạn*” (*Spousal unity makes the impossible possible*). These proverbs mean that when a wife and husband are on the same page, they can overcome any difficulties in their life.

“*Till death do us part*” (Married for life), “*For better, for worse*” (Staying together in bad or good conditions) are used to talk about *Lifelong commitment & fidelity* in English, whereas “*Đầu bạc răng long*” (To stay together for life), “*Ăn đời ở kiếp*” (To spend one’s whole life together) are used to convey *Lifelong commitment & fidelity* in Vietnamese.

In terms of *Love & emotional bonds*, English people think that love often goes together with marriage by saying “*Love and marriage go hand in hand*” or “*Love deepens through marriage*”. From

another perspective, Vietnamese people emphasize the close-knit tie between a wife and a husband as in the idioms “*Nghĩa vợ chồng sâu nặng*” (Deep marital bonds) or “*Vợ chồng nghĩa cả tình dày*” (Strong emotional and moral bonds).

4.2. Discussion

Concerning linguistics, there are some similarities between English and Vietnamese idioms and proverbs related to marital relationships.

First, both English and Vietnamese employ metaphors to conceptualize marriage abstractly such as *to tie the knot* (marriage as binding) in English and “*chung thuyền*” (marriage as a shared journey) in Vietnamese. More specifically, abstract marital commitment is conveyed by using concrete physical actions (tie the knot) or objects (*chung thuyền*) (in the same boat), which supports the findings of Pham (2025), who emphasized that marriage is commonly conceptualized through metaphorical domains like unity, journey, and destiny.

Second, both English and Vietnamese idioms and proverbs reflect lexical fixedness, as in “*Like husband, like*

wife.” or “*Thuận vợ thuận chồng, tát biển Đông cũng cạn*”. In both cases, changing word order or substituting synonyms may weaken idiomatic meaning, showing strong formulaicity.

In spite of sharing similar communicative functions, English and Vietnamese idioms and proverbs relating to marital relationships are of great difference in their linguistic realization. Vietnamese idioms and proverbs tend to be longer with more complex structures, frequently using parallelism, repetition, and balanced clause patterns that improve rhythm and moral lessons. For instance, “*Sống chết có nhau*” (To stand by each other through life and death), “*Trước sau như một*” (Faithful and consistent) shows parallelism, “*Đồng vợ đồng chồng*” (Unity between husband and wife) uses repetition, “*Com không lành, canh không ngọt*” (A disharmonious marriage) employs a balanced clause pattern. This also supports Orlova’s (2021) claim that proverbs reflect both shared and language-specific structural features shaped by cultural contexts. Furthermore, the emphasis on moral obligation and collectivist values in Vietnamese expressions aligns with Lan and Shiguo’s (2024) conclusion that proverbs serve as carriers of cultural values, while the conciseness and individual-oriented meanings in English idioms correspond to their findings on themes such as individualism and rationalism.

Concerning lexical terms, Vietnamese idioms and proverbs often reflect moral obligation and family bonds through terms denoting duty, harmony, and relational responsibility, reflecting a collectivist orientation as in “*Chồng giận thì vợ bớt lời*” (Compromise keeps marital harmony).

In contrast, English idioms and proverbs are generally shorter and more

concise with simple syntactic and lexical structures. They emphasize individual emotion and personal experience, using metaphors drawn from everyday objects and actions rather than nature-based imagery. Pragmatically, Vietnamese proverbs are more explicitly prescriptive, directly instructing proper marital behavior, whereas English ones tend to be more implicit and interpretive, allowing greater flexibility in meaning depending on context. For example, “*Chồng giận thì vợ bớt lời, com sôi nhỏ lửa mấy đời không khô*.” (Compromise keeps marital harmony) instructs specific behaviours (when husbands are angry, wives should be calm and patient), indicating a prescriptive function in Vietnamese proverbs. However, English proverbs such as “*Marriage is a lottery*” or “*Love is blind*” convey evaluative meanings rather than explicit behavioral prescriptions, thereby allowing speakers to interpret them flexibly according to specific communicative contexts.

In summary, although English and Vietnamese idioms and proverbs related to marital relationships share basic linguistic features such as fixedness and metaphorical meaning, they differ remarkably in structures, lexical choice, and metaphorical grounding. Specifically, Vietnamese idioms and proverbs are linguistically richer in parallelism and moral explicitness, whereas brevity and emotional abstraction are common in English idioms and proverbs.

V. Conclusion

By analysing 105 idioms and proverbs related to marital relationships from a linguistic perspective, the study reveals some similarities and differences between the two languages. Both English and Vietnamese idioms and proverbs

are linguistically rich in fixed lexical expressions and metaphorical meanings. Vietnamese excels in musicality and the richness of agricultural metaphors, reflecting a sentiment-based culture, as in “*Cơm sôi nhỏ lửa chẳng đời nào khê*” (When the rice is boiling, lower the fire and it will never burn), comparing marriage to the delicate process of cooking rice, the staple food of Vietnam, whereas English demonstrates strengths in pragmatism, directness, and flexible structure, reflecting a reason-based culture that values the individual.

The study contributes to cross-linguistic idiom and proverb research by demonstrating how pragmatic force and cultural values interact in shaping idiomatic and proverbial meanings. It also offers implications for translation, intercultural communication, and language teaching, where sensitivity to implicitness, prescriptiveness, and cultural norms is essential. Future research may expand the dataset to further explore the dynamic relationship between language, culture, and social values in English and Vietnamese idioms and proverbs.

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ĐẶC ĐIỂM NGÔN NGỮ CỦA THÀNH NGỮ, TỤC NGỮ LIÊN QUAN ĐẾN QUAN HỆ HÔN NHÂN TRONG TIẾNG ANH VÀ TIẾNG VIỆT

Ngô Thị Thanh Thảo¹

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này khảo sát các đặc điểm ngôn ngữ của 105 thành ngữ và tục ngữ liên quan đến quan hệ hôn nhân trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt từ góc độ so sánh. Nghiên cứu tập trung vào các phạm trù ngữ nghĩa, và biện pháp tu từ. Kết quả cho thấy cả hai ngôn ngữ đều phản ánh những mối quan tâm chung như sự hòa thuận trong hôn nhân, sự cam kết và hỗ trợ lẫn nhau, nhưng lại khác nhau về cách thể hiện ngôn ngữ. Thành ngữ và tục ngữ tiếng Việt có xu hướng rõ ràng và mang tính quy phạm hơn, thường thể hiện các bài học đạo đức và chuẩn mực xã hội thông qua các cấu trúc song song. Ngược lại, thành ngữ và tục ngữ tiếng Anh thường mang tính ngụ ý và ẩn dụ hơn, cho phép sự linh hoạt hơn trong diễn giải tùy thuộc vào ngữ cảnh. Về mặt ngữ dụng học, tục ngữ tiếng Việt đóng vai trò là công cụ hướng dẫn đạo đức, trong khi tục ngữ tiếng Anh chủ yếu đóng vai trò diễn giải và trải nghiệm. Nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh mối quan hệ chặt chẽ giữa ngôn ngữ, văn hóa và ngữ dụng học, đưa ra những hàm ý cho dịch thuật, giao tiếp liên văn hóa và phương pháp giảng dạy ngôn ngữ.

Từ khóa: Tiếng Anh, tiếng Việt, thành ngữ, tục ngữ, điểm tương đồng, điểm khác biệt, ngôn ngữ học

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