

A STUDY ON LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF METAPHORS IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE IDIOMS RELATED TO COLOURS

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Abstract: *To obtain effectiveness in daily communication and reduce the “burden” of cramming with a large number of vocabularies, people change the meanings of words. In fact, metaphors and metonymies are two popular ways to change the meanings of words. This study is centered around metaphors in 181 English and Vietnamese idioms related to colors. The comparative method, quantitative, qualitative, and semantic analysis are used throughout this study to find similarities and differences between metaphors in English and Vietnamese idioms related to colors in terms of linguistics and culture.*

Keywords: *metaphor, similarities, differences, English, Vietnamese idioms.*

I. Introduction

In daily communication, people often use words and word-equivalent units to represent things and phenomena in their lives. However, if people only use words or create more and more new words, the number of words will be very large in the vocabulary system of a language. That can hinder communication because people have to remember too many linguistic symbols or words. To overcome this situation, people change the meaning of words to meet human communication needs. The change in words' meaning can occur in a narrowing or expanding scope, in which the tendency to expand the meaning is the most common. One of

the ways to expand the meaning of words commonly used in languages is metaphor.

In this article, the researcher conducted a study of metaphors expressed through the use of colors in English and Vietnamese idioms.

The main purpose of this article is to determine the linguistic and cultural features of metaphors in English and Vietnamese idioms relating to colours. The research results will become valuable reference sources for English learners.

II. Literature review

2.1. Overview of previous studies

Many researchers have studied idioms related to colors. Truong Thi

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Suong Mai (2012) highlighted the relationship between language and culture in her graduation paper, “Characteristics of Vietnamese language and culture through idioms and proverbs indicating colours (compared with English).” In her opinion, Vietnamese and English were different due to cultural differences.

Grodka, Machulianska, and Shapa, in the article “Cultural-Linguistic Aspect of Teaching and Learning Spanish Colour Idioms and Symbols,” indicated the effectiveness of acquiring foreign language skills in the unity of language and culture. They got study results from the period of teaching Spanish idioms to first- and second-year students at Odessa National Polytechnic University in the school year 2018-2019.

Gaipova, on the other side, tried to figure out the influence of undergraduate students’ color perceptions on their translation from English into Kurdish. The study results showed that undergraduate students faced many difficulties in translating idioms relating to colors due to their lack of cultural background.

Hamilton (2016) and Thinard (2019) conducted research on colors and metaphors. Thinard focused on studying metaphors of several colors, such as “black,” “grey,” and “white,” while Hamilton conducted a study on metaphors of more colors. However, no studies compare metaphors’ linguistic and cultural features in English and Vietnamese idioms. Thus, this study helps to address the study gap.

2.2. What is an idiom?

Christine Ammer (1997) states, “An idiom is a set phrase of two or more words that means something different

from the literal meaning of the individual words.” [2].

In Vietnamese, idioms are defined by Hoang Phe (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.” [7] According to Professor Nguyen Lan (2010), “idioms are widely used in spoken language as well as in the creation of Vietnamese poetry and literature. Idioms are concise, suggestive, and have high expressiveness.” [14]

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

2.3. What is a metaphor?

Metaphor is a way of changing the meaning of words by taking the name of one thing or phenomenon to refer to another thing or phenomenon based on the similarity of a certain characteristic between those two things or phenomena. Metaphors are also called implicit comparisons as in “*human life is journey*”.

In the *Advanced Learner’s English dictionary*, metaphor is defined as an imaginative way of describing something by referring to something else that is the same in a particular way. [1, p.901]

In the *Vietnamese Dictionary*, metaphor is defined as the use of words based on implicit comparison. [7]. Huu Dat (2011) shares the same idea when he regards metaphor as a method of comparison that uses the names of one type to name things of another type based on the similar relationship between them. According to the author, people also call metaphor an implicit comparison, a one-sided comparison. [8, p. 372] For example, “*She has a good head on her shoulder.*” means “*She is an intelligent girl.*”.

Nguyen Duc Ton (2002) defines metaphor as the substitution of names of things, phenomena, etc., that do not belong to the same type based on association, identifying them according to certain characteristics and attributes existing in them. [13]

In the example “*the leg of the table*” and “*the teeth of a saw*,” the metaphoric transformation is based on similarity of shape.

The above authors all agree that metaphor is a substitution, using the name of one thing or phenomenon to refer to another object, thing, or phenomenon based on similarity.

Metaphors are often created based on similar characteristics:

(i). *Appearance, shape*

E.g. a head of cabbage, a hand of bananas.

(ii). *Size*

E.g. jumbo jet plane

(iii). *Location*

E.g. foot of the mountain, bottom of a page

(iv). *Color*

E.g. Orange, banana color...

(v). *Function*

E.g. key to success

(vi). *Behaviour, manners*

E.g. crocodile’s tears, an angel

(vii). *The transition from concrete to abstract*

E.g. Kernel is a specific word, referring to the inner part of the fruit, it is converted to denoting the central, most

important part of the matter; Grasping denotes a specific movement of the hand, but it can also be said: grasping the situation, grasping the cards...

(viii). *Attributes, qualities, quality*

E.g. The adjective “khô” (dry) originally means little or no water but has the combination *tình cảm khô khan* (no emotion).

2.4. *The Concept of Culture*

There has been much research work on culture up to now. These studies all begin by providing definitions of what culture is. According to Nguyen Nhu Y, “Culture is the material and spiritual values created by humans throughout history.” [15]

In the *Advanced Learners’ English dictionary*, “Culture consists of activities such as the arts and philosophy, which is considered to be important to the development of civilization and people’s mind.” [1, 342]

Generally, culture involves activities that are spiritually and materially important to humans and society.

2.5. *The relationship between culture and language*

Language and culture are closely interconnected and inseparable. Language is the essence of national culture, and it is through language that culture is transmitted. The changes and development of language always accompany the changes in culture. According to linguist Nguyen Duc Ton (2008, p.47), “Language is an essential means and a condition for the emergence, development, and functioning of other elements of culture. Language is one of the most characteristic elements of any national culture. It is within language that

the characteristics of a national culture are most clearly preserved. The life of each community, each nation in a specific era will determine the content of the language of that era.” In summary, language and culture are closely intertwined. Generally, the existence of a culture is determined by language, but language itself is an independent element of national culture, a component of cultural identity.

III. Methodology

3.1. Research Methods

The comparative method is used throughout this study to find similarities and differences between metaphors in English and Vietnamese idioms related to colors in terms of linguistics and culture. However, the writer must conduct statistics and describe idioms that contain colors in the Dictionary of English and Vietnamese Idioms and Proverbs.

In addition, to clarify the nature of the research object and to ensure the validity of the statistics collected, the writer also uses many other supporting

research methods such as quantitatives, qualitatives, semantic analysis, etc. along with charts and tables.

3.2. Data Collection

English and Vietnamese idioms related to colors are collected from three main dictionaries: *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*, *the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*, and the *Vietnamese Idiom and Proverb Dictionary*. In total, 181 English and Vietnamese idioms related to 10 colors, *black, blue, brown, green, grey, golden, pink, purple, red, and white*, were collected. After that, the idioms are analyzed to find out whether their meanings are transferred metaphorically or not.

IV. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Findings

The study results of English and Vietnamese color idioms collected from idiom dictionaries [2], [18] and the Vietnamese Idiom and Proverb dictionary [22] show as follows:

4.1.1. Distribution

Table 1: Numbers of idioms in English and Vietnamese

Colors	English idioms		Vietnamese idioms	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Black	16	16.66	23	27.06
Blue	18	18.75	0	0
Brown	5	5.21	0	0
Green	13	13.54	16	18.82
Grey	3	3.13	0	0
Golden	7	7.29	11	12.94
Pink	6	6.25	3	3.53
Purple	5	5.21	2	2.35
Red	16	16.67	24	28.24
White	7	7.29	6	7.06
Total	96	100	85	100

The number of idioms related to colors in English and Vietnamese is shown in Table 1, with 96 and 85, respectively.

The number of English idioms related to *blue* was the highest, accounting for 18.75%, while *red* appeared as the most common in Vietnamese idioms (28.24%), approximately 10% higher than *blue* in English idioms. *Red* and *black* were in the second and third places in English idioms, with 16.67% and 16.66%, respectively. However, *black* and *green* were the second and third common colors used in Vietnamese idioms. This is followed by *red* and *black* in English idioms, with green at 13.54%, only 0.6% higher than *golden*, which was fourth place in Vietnamese idioms. The number of English idioms related to *grey* was the lowest, with 3.13%. No Vietnamese idioms related to *grey*, *blue*, and *brown* were collected in the study.

In summary, the frequency of colors in English and Vietnamese idioms is different due to the impact of various cultural, linguistic, and historical factors that shape each language's metaphorical and symbolic associations with colors. The reflection of color perceptions and their symbolic meanings between British and Vietnamese cultures vary. For example, in English, *red* symbolizes passion, anger, or love (e.g. "seeing red"), while in Vietnamese, *red* symbolizes luck, prosperity, and celebration (e.g. "red envelope" for giving gifts on Tet holiday or at weddings).

4.1.2. Transformation of meaning

Word meaning changes occur in four common aspects: comparison, metaphor, metonymy, and hyperbole. In this article, the writer only surveys the phenomenon of the metaphorical transfer of meaning of words related to colors in English and Vietnamese idioms.

Table 2: Metaphors in English and Vietnamese idioms

Colors	English idioms		Vietnamese idioms	
	Metaphor	Percentage	Metaphor	Percentage
Black	16	18.39	22	52.38
Blue	18	20.68	0	0
Brown	5	5.75	0	0
Green	10	11.49	2	4.76
Grey	3	3.45	0	0
Golden	5	5.75	4	9.52
Pink	6	6.9	1	2.38
Purple	5	5.75	2	4.76
Red	13	14.94	5	11.9
White	6	6.9	6	14.3
Total	87	100	42	100

Table 2 provides information about the number of metaphors in English and Vietnamese idioms related to colors. Generally, metaphors using colors in English idioms were much higher than those in Vietnamese idioms. The number of metaphors in English idioms related

to *blue*, *black*, and *red* was in the top three with 20.68%, 18.39%, and 14.94% respectively. In Vietnamese idioms, however, metaphors using *black*, *white*, and *red* were the highest, with 52.38%, 14.3%, and 11.9%, respectively. Metaphors related to *grey* in English idioms were

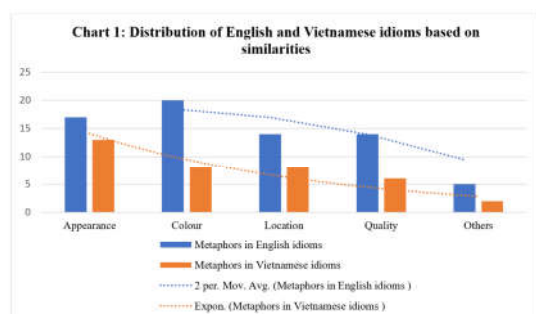
the lowest (3.45%), while there were no metaphors in Vietnamese idioms using *blue*, *grey*, and *brown*. In short, *black* and *red* are the most popular colors employed as a tool to express metaphors in British and Vietnamese cultures.

4.1.3. Metaphors in English and Vietnamese idioms

Metaphors of words denoting colors in English and Vietnamese idioms mainly rely on the similarities of appearance, location, quality, behavior, and color.

Chart 1 provides information about the distribution of English and Vietnamese idioms based on similarities. As can be seen from Chart 1, metaphors based on the similarity of color in English idioms were the highest, with 20 idioms accounting for 22.99%, while in Vietnamese idioms, metaphors based on the similarity of appearance were the highest, with 30.95%. The similarity of behavior was the second highest in both English and Vietnamese metaphors.

Unlike Vietnamese metaphors, metaphors based on similarities of location and quality in English idioms were in third place with 16.09%. The similarity of colour in Vietnamese metaphors was ranked the third.



Here are some examples of metaphors based on similarities in appearance, color, location, quality, and behavior.

Green with envy: *very envious or jealous*

E.g. *she is always **green with envy** whenever anyone in class gets a higher score than hers.*

In British culture, “Green” is considered a feeling of jealousy or desire for something someone else possesses. In the past, it was believed that envy or jealousy could make someone sick with a “green” appearance, similar to a bad physical condition like “*xanh như tàu lá*” (*green-like leaves*).

Trắng như tuyết (White as snow):
Trắng và trong sạch (white and pure)

E.g. *She is as **white as snow**.*

This metaphor uses similarity in colors. When snow falls, it’s white. Therefore, “Snow” often represents purity and cleanliness. “*White as snow*” is used to talk about clean outward appearance and purity in people’s personalities or actions.

Be in someone’s black books *be in disfavor with someone.*

E.g. *John is in his **friends’ black books** because he often pokes his nose into their business.*

The metaphor “in someone’s black book” relies on the similarity of behaviour. It implies that someone’s bad or inappropriate behaviour leads to disfavour or negative impression.

Scream/yell blue murder: *make an extravagant and noisy protest.*

E.g. *The little boy **yelled blue murder** when he couldn’t get what he wanted.*

The metaphor in this English idiom relies on the similarity of behavior. “Blue murder” refers to a strong protest, like a person screaming loudly and fiercely.

Đổi trắng thay đen (*Change white to black*): *Chê người làm đảo lộn phải trái* (*Criticize somebody who confuses right and wrong*)

E.g. *Don't believe him. He often "changes white to black."*

The metaphor “*Đổi trắng thay đen*” (change white to black) is based on a similarity of behavior. It refers to someone who intentionally changes something pure or clear (symbol of white) into something false, deceptive, or corrupt (symbol of black).

In the pink: *in extremely good health and spirits*

Although John's grandma is over 80, she is pink.

The metaphor “*in the pink*” is based on similarity of appearance. *When someone is physically healthy, pink* is often associated with a rosy complexion.

4.2. Discussion

Analyzing metaphors in English and Vietnamese idioms provides insight into the similarities and differences in linguistic and cultural features between Britain and Vietnam. Although they are quite different, the origins and structures of English and Vietnamese share some similarities in using images and symbols to express subtle meanings in life and typical cultural characteristics.

There are some commonalities between English and Vietnamese idioms.

In terms of linguistics, the structure: “Colour + as.....” is used to express emotions, conditions, or degrees of the objects of metaphors in both English and Vietnamese such as *black as coal* (in English) or *Đen như mực* (black as ink) (in Vietnamese). In addition, contrasting colors are often used in metaphors in both English and Vietnamese idioms when referring to transitional or change

situations. For example, Vietnamese people use two contrasting colors, *black* and *white*, in the idiom “*đổi trắng thay đen*” (Change *white* to *black*) to describe a complete change from good to bad or from right to wrong. Similarly, British people use *black and white* to indicate clarity and distinction between right and wrong. Another similarity between metaphors in English and Vietnamese idioms is that *black, white, and red* are the most popular colors to describe the appearance, quality, location, natural phenomenon, etc.

Metaphors in English and Vietnamese idioms have some differences. The first difference is in culture and religion. In British culture, Christianity impacts the symbolism of colors in which certain colors refer to specific qualities or emotions. *Black* in English is often related to darkness, evil, or bad luck (e.g. “*black sheep*,” “*A black mark against somebody*,” or “*black spot*”). On the other hand, the symbolism of colors in Vietnam is greatly influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism. *Black* is often associated with death, misfortune, or evil (e.g. “*Đen bạc đồ tình*” (unlucky at gambling, lucky at love), “*Số phận đen đui*” (black fate)). The second is the social differences. *Green* and *blue* appear frequently in English idioms because of their association with nature. For example, “*green thumb*” is used to talk about someone who is good at gardening, or “*feeling blue*” refers to sadness. In Vietnamese idioms, *red* or *black* are more prevalent because they are related to wealth and spiritual status (e.g. “*cơ hội vàng*” (*golden opportunity*)). Last but not least, the final difference originates from daily life, nomadic lifestyles, and nature. In English, *blue* and *green* frequently appear in nature. As a result, there are many idioms connected to these colors. For example, “*Out of blue*” (something happens unexpectedly) derives from *blue*, the color of the sky, which implies vastness

and unpredictability. Unlike the British, Vietnamese people's daily lives often have a close connection with agriculture and festivals, so *red* (the color of celebration or festivals) and *yellow* (the color of rice) frequently appear in Vietnamese idioms.

In short, there are similarities and differences between metaphors in English and Vietnamese idioms in terms of culture, linguistic structures, history, and social beliefs. The variation of metaphors related to colors offers an insight into the way British and Vietnamese people employ colors to express feelings, behavior, quality, etc.

V. Conclusion

Based on the survey of 181 idioms in three English and Vietnamese idiom dictionaries, the researcher initially believes that the number of idioms related to 10 colors such as "black," "blue," "green," "grey," "red," "white," "brown," "pink," "purple," and "golden" does not significantly differ. However, the number of metaphors in English idioms doubles those in Vietnamese.

The difference between the two languages in terms of using metaphorical elements through color is that Vietnamese people tend to make more direct and specific comparisons between objects than the British. Furthermore, differences in metaphors in English and Vietnamese come from different histories, cultures, religions, and lifestyles.

Besides the differences, the study results show some commonalities in metaphors between English and Vietnamese idioms from linguistic perspectives, such as using the structure "Colour + as....." and employing contrasting colors to show emotions, relations, behavior, etc.

However, within the scope of an article, showing cultural differences

through linguistic signals as above is not general enough. The researcher will continue to conduct surveys on more idioms with the hope of contributing to figuring out the similarities and differences in language and thinking between Britain and Vietnam in the following articles.

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NGHIÊN CỨU ĐẶC ĐIỂM NGÔN NGỮ VÀ VĂN HÓA TRONG PHÉP ẨN DỤ CỦA THÀNH NGỮ TIẾNG ANH VÀ TIẾNG VIỆT LIÊN QUAN ĐẾN MÀU SẮC

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Tóm tắt: Để đạt được hiệu quả trong giao tiếp hàng ngày và giảm bớt “gánh nặng” phải nhồi nhét một lượng lớn từ vựng, người ta thay đổi nghĩa của từ. Trên thực tế, ẩn dụ và hoán dụ là hai cách phổ biến được sử dụng để biến đổi nghĩa của từ. Nghiên cứu này tập trung vào phép ẩn dụ trong 181 thành ngữ tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt liên quan đến màu sắc. Phương pháp so sánh cùng với định lượng, định tính, phân tích ngữ nghĩa được sử dụng xuyên suốt trong nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm ra những điểm tương đồng và khác biệt giữa ẩn dụ trong thành ngữ tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt liên quan đến màu sắc về mặt ngôn ngữ học và văn hóa.

Từ khóa: ẩn dụ, nét tương đồng, khác biệt, thành ngữ tiếng Anh, tiếng Việt.

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