



A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS ON SEMANTIC FEATURES OF ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE IDIOMS DENOTING ANIMALS

Ha Kim Anh, Vương Thị Hai Yên

Hanoi Metropolitan University, Viet Nam

Email address: 221001337@daihocthudo.edu.vn

<https://doi.org/10.51453/2354-1431/2024/1226>

Article info

Received: 22/9/2024

Revised: 20/10/2024

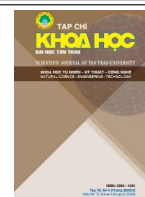
Accepted: 28/10/2024

Keywords:

*Animal, contrastive
analysis, idioms,
semantic features*

Abstract:

This study investigates the semantic features of idioms related to animals in both English and Vietnamese, aiming to identify the similarities and differences in how these two languages employ animal-related expressions to convey cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors. Idioms are an integral part of linguistic expression, reflecting unique cultural contexts. A comparative analysis of idioms involving animals in English and Vietnamese will provide insights into the linguistic and cultural nuances that shape these expressions. The research employs a qualitative and contrastive methodology, analyzing selected idioms through semantic categories such as symbolism, metaphorical meaning, and cultural associations. The analysis reveals that while both languages use animals to express human characteristics, the specific animals and the qualities they represent often differ due to cultural influences. For instance, English idioms frequently use animals like lions and foxes to symbolize courage and cunning, whereas Vietnamese idioms employ animals such as buffaloes and chickens to denote hard work and resilience. The article highlights the influence of cultural contexts on the selection of animals in idiomatic expressions and offers insights into how idioms can reflect cultural beliefs. This research contributes to the fields of linguistics, translation studies, and intercultural communication, offering a deeper understanding of animal symbolism in language.



SO SÁNH ĐỐI CHIẾU CÁC ĐẶC ĐIỂM VỀ NGŨ NGHĨA CỦA THÀNH NGỮ CHỨA TỪ LIÊN QUAN ĐẾN ĐỘNG VẬT TRONG TIẾNG ANH VÀ TIẾNG VIỆT

Hà Kim Anh, Vương Thị Hải Yến

Trường Đại học Thủ Đức, Việt Nam

Địa chỉ email: 221001337@daihocthudo.edu.vn

<https://doi.org/10.51453/2354-1431/2024/1226>

Thông tin bài viết

Ngày nhận bài: 22/9/2024

Ngày sửa bài: 20/10/2024

Ngày duyệt đăng: 28/10/2024

Từ khóa:

Động vật, so sánh đối chiếu,
thành ngữ, ngữ nghĩa.

Tóm tắt

Nghiên cứu này điều tra các đặc điểm ngữ nghĩa của thành ngữ liên quan đến động vật trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt, từ đó định những điểm tương đồng và khác biệt trong cách hai ngôn ngữ này sử dụng các thành ngữ liên quan đến động vật để truyền tải các giá trị văn hóa, niềm tin và hành vi. Thành ngữ là một phần không thể thiếu của biểu hiện ngôn ngữ, phản ánh các bối cảnh văn hóa độc đáo. Phân tích so sánh các thành ngữ liên quan đến động vật trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt cung cấp những hiểu biết sâu sắc về các sắc thái ngôn ngữ và văn hóa. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp định tính và đối chiếu, phân tích các thành ngữ được chọn thông qua các danh mục ngữ nghĩa như biểu tượng, ý nghĩa ẩn dụ và liên kết văn hóa. Phân tích cho thấy rằng mặc dù cả hai ngôn ngữ đều sử dụng động vật để biểu thị các đặc điểm của con người, nhưng cách sử dụng các loại động vật để sắc thái tượng trưng mà chúng đại diện thường khác nhau do ảnh hưởng của văn hóa. Ví dụ, thành ngữ tiếng Anh thường sử dụng các loài động vật như sư tử và cáo để biểu thị sự dũng cảm và xảo quyệt, trong khi thành ngữ tiếng Việt sử dụng các loài động vật như trâu và gà để biểu thị sự chăm chỉ và kiên cường. Nghiên cứu làm nổi bật ảnh hưởng của bối cảnh văn hóa đối với việc lựa chọn hình tượng các động vật trong các thành ngữ và cung cấp những hiểu biết sâu sắc về cách thành ngữ có thể phản ánh văn hóa. Nghiên cứu này đóng góp vào các lĩnh vực ngôn ngữ học, nghiên cứu dịch thuật và giao tiếp liên văn hóa, cung cấp sự hiểu biết sâu sắc hơn về biểu tượng động vật trong ngôn ngữ.

1. Introduction

Idiomatic expressions, particularly those involving animals, have become a focal point in cross-linguistic and cultural studies in recent years. Animal idioms are essential tools for understanding how different cultures use symbolic representations to convey values, beliefs, and shared experiences (Gibbs, 2006). International research has highlighted the varied cultural meanings associated with animals, with studies showing that while animals like dogs symbolize loyalty in Western languages, they can have different connotations in Eastern cultures. For instance, Boers (2003) explored animal idioms in English, focusing on how animals represent human characteristics, while K  ksoy and U  kun (2020) examined the symbolic role of animals in Turkish and English idioms, emphasizing the cultural nuances behind them. In Vietnam, scholars have also turned their attention to idioms, particularly those involving animals. Vietnamese research, such as Nguyen's (2022) study on the cultural meanings of idiomatic expressions, reveals how animals are deeply intertwined with the country's agricultural history and local beliefs. The idiom "m  nh như trâu" (strong as a buffalo), for example, reflects the importance of buffaloes in Vietnamese farming culture. However, despite significant work in studying idioms within each language, there is a lack of comparative studies focusing on animal-related idioms between English and Vietnamese.

This research aims to fill that gap by comparing the semantic features of animal idioms in English and Vietnamese, seeking to uncover the similarities and differences in how these two languages use animals metaphorically. A comparative study of animal idioms is crucial for improving cross-cultural understanding and translation, as idioms often carry non-literal meanings that can pose challenges for language learners (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Research question

- 1) What are the semantic features of idioms denoting animals in Vietnamese?
- 2) What are the semantic features of idioms denoting animals in English?
- 3) What are the similarities and differences of idioms denoting animals in English and Vietnamese in terms of syntactic and semantic features?

The structure of this paper is as follows: First, the literature review will summarize relevant research on idioms and their cultural significance in both English and Vietnamese. Next, the methods section will describe data collection and analysis procedures, followed by detailed results that answer the research questions. Lastly, the discussion will interpret the findings in the context of cultural and linguistic implications, highlighting how these idioms both reflect and shape perceptions within their respective cultures. This structure provides a comprehensive approach to understanding the significance of animal idioms and their role in cultural expression.

2. Literature review

Contrastive analysis is a technique in linguistics used to identify and compare the structural and semantic features of different languages, focusing on how elements in one language correspond to those in another (James, 1980). This approach is particularly valuable in the study of idioms, as it enables researchers to examine the similarities and differences in how idiomatic expressions function in various linguistic and cultural contexts. On the other hand, cognitive semantics plays a critical role in the study of idioms. Cognitive semantics, a key subfield of cognitive linguistics, investigates how language reflects the mind and how the meanings of words and phrases are shaped by our cognitive and cultural experiences (Langacker, 1987; Talmy, 2000). According to this perspective, idioms are

not merely arbitrary expressions but are rooted in shared cultural experiences and conceptual metaphors that shape how we understand and categorize the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Animal-related idioms, in particular, are prime examples of how culture influences cognition and language. As Gibbs (1994) notes, idioms are cultural artifacts that reflect the society in which they are used, offering a lens through which we can interpret historical, social, and cultural developments.

The study of idioms has garnered significant scholarly attention due to their unique cultural and semantic complexity. Internationally, research on idiomatic expressions, particularly those involving animals—has evolved through cognitive and cultural linguistic frameworks, illustrating how idioms convey culturally specific meanings. Theoretical frameworks like conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) have been foundational, proposing that idioms are not arbitrary but rooted in metaphorical concepts shaped by cultural experiences. Studies by Kövecses (2010) and Gibbs (1994) expanded this perspective by examining how cultural models inform metaphorical language. In English, animal idioms such as “eagle eye” or “stubborn as a mule” reflect societal perceptions of animals and their characteristics, demonstrating a language’s cultural imprint. Similarly, recent comparative studies highlight the challenges of translating idioms, as the meanings behind animal symbols may differ between cultures (Baker, 1996). However, while these studies examine idioms broadly, they often lack focused contrastive analyses between English and non-Western languages like Vietnamese, revealing a theoretical gap in idiom studies across culturally divergent languages.

In Vietnam, although there are numerous comparative studies on English and Vietnamese idioms, research specifically focusing on animal-related idioms remains limited. For instance,

Giang (2011) investigates idiomatic variations and synonyms in English and Vietnamese, touching upon how animal idioms reflect cultural nuances but stopping short of a systematic contrastive analysis. Other studies, such as Nguyen and Do (2017), have delved into the broader cultural implications of idioms in Vietnamese, providing foundational insights that could be extended to animal-related expressions. Similarly, Le (2018) proposed that Vietnamese idioms often employ animals familiar in East Asian cultures, such as buffalo and tigers, and the meanings ascribed to these animals can differ markedly from those in Western cultures. Despite these insights, comprehensive analyses that juxtapose animal idioms across both languages are scarce. The majority of research in Vietnam has focused on describing idiomatic expressions and their cultural implications, rather than conducting systematic contrastive analyses with English. This gap presents an opportunity for future research to systematically compare and contrast animal-related idioms in English and Vietnamese, thereby enriching our understanding of how different cultures utilize animal symbolism in language.

The primary theoretical gap in the existing literature lies in the limited application of contrastive analyses that specifically address semantic features of animal-related idioms between English and Vietnamese. While cross-cultural idiom studies exist, they tend to focus on metaphorical differences at a broader level rather than on the cultural symbolism tied to animals (Katz, 1998; Geeraerts, 2010). Most studies utilize cognitive frameworks yet do not delve into how animal symbolism is semantically encoded differently across cultures. Additionally, while Vietnamese studies have emphasized the significance of animals in idioms, they often lack the comparative perspective with English idioms, which would allow for a deeper exploration of linguistic and cultural differences. Addressing these gaps could illuminate the unique roles of

animals within English and Vietnamese idioms, potentially enhancing translation practices and cross-cultural understanding (Dang, 2024).

3. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, contrastive approach to analyze the semantic features of English and Vietnamese animal-related idioms, grounded in cognitive semantics and conceptual metaphor theory. The qualitative approach is chosen because it enables an in-depth examination of the cultural and cognitive dimensions underlying idiomatic expressions, which cannot be fully captured through quantitative analysis. This contrastive analysis, comparing idioms across English and Vietnamese, is effective for revealing both universal and culturally specific elements in the semantic construction of animal idioms, as it focuses on comparing semantic structures and cultural nuances in two distinct linguistic contexts.

This study uses a two-part analytical framework based on contrastive analysis and conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) to identify and compare the semantic features of animal idioms in both languages. While contrastive analysis allows for a systematic comparison between English and Vietnamese idioms, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (2003), serves as a theoretical foundation for understanding how metaphorical meanings in idioms are based on conceptual mappings between animals and human characteristics.

Data for this study is collected from a combination of sources including idiom dictionaries, TV shows, bilingual magazines, and grammar books written by English and Vietnamese linguists. English idioms are primarily drawn from established idiom dictionaries such as *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* (Ammer, 2013) and online resources like the *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary*. Vietnamese idioms are collected from sources like “*Từ điển thành*

ngữ, tục ngữ Việt Nam” (Nguyễn Lâm, 2002) and other reputable Vietnamese idiom databases. To ensure accuracy and cultural relevance, idioms are chosen based on their popularity, frequency of use, and cultural significance, as observed in corpus analyses from sources such as the British National Corpus and the Vietnamese National Corpus.

The researcher will read and pick out idioms denoting animals from the sources, finding typical examples in which they are used. With the help of the *Cambridge Dictionary* and *Oxford Dictionary*, this research will analyze the literal meaning of these idioms and classify them into different groups. Finally, the researcher will compare the semantic features of idioms relating to animal words in English versus Vietnamese for similarities and differences based on their underlying cultural features.

4. Results

4.1. *Semantic features of idioms denoting animals in Vietnamese*

4.1.1. *Reflection of agricultural life*

Given Vietnam’s historical and cultural reliance on agriculture, many Vietnamese idioms that involve animals are rooted in this context. Animals such as buffaloes, cows, and chickens, integral to farming life, embody values like resilience, hard work, and simplicity.

Example 1: Mạnh như trâu (Strong as a buffalo)

Từ Điển Thành Ngữ và Tục Ngữ Việt Nam

This idiom uses a simile to compare a person’s strength to that of a buffalo, an animal known for its endurance and ability to perform hard labor in rice fields. The buffalo is symbolic of resilience and work ethic in Vietnamese culture. This simile not only highlights the physical strength required in farming but also reveres the buffalo, a staple in Vietnamese agricultural life.

Example 2: Bò đeo lục lạc (A cow wearing a bell)

Thành Ngữ Học Tiếng Việt

This phrase conveys the idea of maintaining modesty and restraint, much like a cow with a bell that avoids drawing unnecessary attention. In Vietnamese culture, humility and caution are seen as virtues, and the bell symbolizes the visibility that can lead to unwanted consequences if one acts ostentatiously.

4.1.2. Expression of social and moral lessons

Many Vietnamese idioms that include animals communicate moral and social lessons, drawing on traits attributed to animals as symbols of specific ethical values. These idioms often serve as cautionary tales or social criticisms, reinforcing the importance of loyalty, gratitude, and integrity.

Example 3: Nuôi ong tay áo (Raising a snake in one's sleeve)

Từ Điển Thành Ngữ và Tục Ngữ Việt Nam.

By using the metaphor, this idiom warns of ingratitude and betrayal, suggesting the danger of helping untrustworthy individuals. The snake, symbolizing betrayal and deceit, can harm the very person nurturing it. In Vietnamese culture, this idiom serves as a cautionary reminder to be discerning in relationships, valuing loyalty and trust.

Example 4: Chó cắn áo rách (A dog bites a torn shirt)

Tục Ngữ, Ca Dao, Dân Ca Việt Nam

This idiom employs personification to criticize individuals who exploit others' vulnerabilities, with the dog representing an opportunist who takes advantage of the weak or misfortunate. The torn shirt symbolizes poverty or struggle, and this idiom expresses disapproval of people who harm those who are already suffering.

These idioms highlight the Vietnamese cultural emphasis on loyalty and trustworthiness, particularly in familial and communal relationships.

By attributing moral qualities to animals, these expressions capture culturally valued ethics that are essential in Vietnamese society.

4.1.3. Emphasis on family and community values

Vietnamese animal idioms also emphasize the significance of family and community, reflecting the collectivist nature of Vietnamese society. Animals in these idioms frequently symbolize familial bonds, social roles, and the duties associated with maintaining harmony within these structures.

Example 5: Gà trống nuôi con (A rooster raising its chicks)

Ngôn Ngữ và Văn Hóa Việt Nam

This idiom signifies the self-sacrificing role of a single parent, typically a father, who takes on both paternal and maternal responsibilities. In this idiom, the rooster, usually associated with protection and leadership, serves as a metaphor for resilience and devotion within the family structure. This expression underscores the Vietnamese ideal of family loyalty and the willingness to endure hardships for loved ones.

Example 6: Như gà mất mẹ (Like a motherless chick)

The idiom depicts someone who is lost or vulnerable, often in a familial context. Chickens are a common domestic animal in Vietnamese households, and this idiom employed simile conveys a sense of helplessness akin to that felt by chicks without a mother's guidance. This idiom reflects a cultural understanding of family support as crucial to individual well-being, mirroring the centrality of familial bonds in Vietnamese society.

These idioms illustrate the profound role of animals in expressing values that are fundamental to the Vietnamese social structure, where family and community take precedence over individual interests.

4.1.4. *The personification of animal characteristics to convey human traits*

In Vietnamese idioms, animals are often personified to represent specific human qualities or flaws, enabling speakers to convey complex social insights in a relatable way. This personification aligns with Conceptual Metaphor Theory, where animals embody human attributes, thereby enriching the figurative language with culturally specific associations.

Example 7: Lươn lẹo như lươn (Slippery as an eel)

Thành Ngữ Học Tiếng Việt

This idiom is used to describe someone who is evasive or deceitful. The eel's slippery nature makes it difficult to catch, symbolizing individuals who are untrustworthy or avoid responsibility. This idiom illustrates how Vietnamese culture perceives certain undesirable human traits and attributes them to specific animals familiar in Vietnamese waters and markets.

Example 8: Đần như heo (Dumb as a pig)

Từ Điển Thành Ngữ và Tục Ngữ Việt Nam

Similarly, “đần như heo” denotes foolishness or naivety. The pig, often raised for its value as livestock, is perceived as simple-minded in Vietnamese culture. This idiom captures societal attitudes toward intelligence and conveys disapproval of thoughtlessness or ignorance, often humorously, in everyday discourse.

These idioms, by attributing human traits to animals, allow for nuanced communication that captures Vietnamese social attitudes and evaluations of behavior. The choice of animal reflects the Vietnamese speaker's cultural familiarity and engagement with these animals, making these idioms resonant and effective in social contexts.

4.1.5. *Humor and satire in everyday expressions*

Humor is another essential component of Vietnamese idioms. Vietnamese idioms denoting

animals also exhibit a playful or satirical tone, often serving as humor to critique societal behaviors or individuals' characteristics. This humor is prominent in colloquial language and folk literature, where animal idioms add a layer of wit and irony to everyday speech.

Example 9: Mèo già hóa cáo (An old cat becomes a fox)

TV show “Táo quân - 2014”

“An old cat becomes a fox” is a humorous way to describe someone who has grown sly or cunning with age. Cats are viewed as clever animals, but the fox represents an even greater level of cunning, suggesting that age brings wisdom and, sometimes, slyness. This idiom not only portrays age as an asset in becoming more skillful or shrewd but also humorously acknowledges that cunning can develop over time.

Example 10: Chó sủa nhầm cây (Barking up the wrong tree)

Ngôn Ngữ và Văn Hóa Việt Nam

This idiom is similar to the English expression and humorously points to someone making a misguided effort. The dog is used as a symbol of persistence, but its barking at the wrong tree highlights futility, reflecting Vietnamese appreciation for humor in everyday misunderstandings.

This use of satire and humor through animal idioms demonstrates the flexibility and creativity inherent in Vietnamese idiomatic expressions, reflecting a cultural appreciation for irony and subtle criticism.

4.2. *Semantic features of idioms denoting animals in English*

4.2.1. *Idioms conveying emotional states*

Animal idioms are also prevalent when expressing emotions, as certain animals embody specific emotional states or responses. English speakers use these idioms to vividly illustrate feelings such as anger, pride, or deceit. For example,

“mad as a hornet” suggests aggression, while “crocodile tears” alludes to insincere displays of sadness. These idioms resonate deeply due to the culturally established emotional associations of each animal, helping listeners instantly understand complex emotional undertones.

Example 11: Mad as a hornet

Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms

This idiom conveys intense anger or agitation, drawing on the aggressive behavior associated with hornets when provoked. Describing someone as “mad as a hornet” vividly illustrates their fury, likening their intensity to that of a stinging insect. This example demonstrates how animal behaviors are metaphorically applied to human emotions, amplifying the expression of anger through relatable imagery.

Example 12: Proud as a peacock

Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms

The peacock is a symbol of vanity, and “proud as a peacock” describes someone who is excessively proud or boastful. This idiom leverages the bird’s ostentatious plumage and proud display to convey human arrogance. The expression underscores how English idioms use animal symbolism to capture complex social emotions, in this case linking the visual splendor of a peacock with pride.

4.2.2. *Idioms expressing social behaviors and interactions*

English idioms with animal references are frequently used to describe social behaviors, mirroring patterns observed in animal communities. Animals like bulls, monkeys, and birds are associated with certain social characteristics—disruptiveness, playfulness, and sociability, respectively. These idioms offer insights into social dynamics and human interactions by linking them to familiar animal behaviors, enriching language with metaphorical depth.

Example 13: Like a bull in a china shop

The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms.
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

This idiom refers to someone who is clumsy or disruptive in delicate situations, drawing on the imagery of a large bull causing chaos in a fragile setting. By using similes to compare a person’s behavior to a bull’s potential for destruction, the idiom vividly describes social mishaps, highlighting English’s use of exaggerated animal traits to comment on human behavior.

Example 14: Birds of a feather flock together

Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms

This idiom emphasizes the tendency for similar individuals to group together, much like birds of the same species. By drawing on observable animal behavior, the idiom conveys social cohesion among like-minded individuals, illustrating how human social preferences mirror natural patterns.

4.2.3. *Idioms reflecting human traits and characteristics*

In English, animal idioms are commonly used to depict human traits, adding vivid imagery to language. Specific animals are frequently associated with particular qualities: a “fox” symbolizes cleverness, an “eagle” represents sharp observation, and a “bee” conveys industriousness. By employing these idioms, speakers can succinctly communicate complex personality traits through familiar animal symbolism.

Example 15: “As sly as a fox”

McGraw-Hill’s Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs

The fox is often seen as a symbol of cunning, and the idiom “as sly as a fox” describes someone who is particularly clever and strategic. In Western folklore, the fox is portrayed as intelligent and crafty, reinforcing its association with subtlety and shrewdness. This metaphor succinctly conveys a person’s ability to be strategic or manipulative,

aligning with the fox's reputation in popular culture.

Example 16: "Busy as a bee"

The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms

Employing simile, this idiom draws on the industrious nature of bees, describing individuals who are particularly hardworking or active. Bees, known for their hive-centered industriousness, represent productivity and community effort. The phrase "busy as a bee" emphasizes diligence and dedication, showcasing how animal behaviors are used to encapsulate human traits.

4.2.4. Idioms indicating foolishness or naivety

Animal idioms in English often depict foolishness or naivety, using animals perceived as unintelligent or defenseless to communicate human shortcomings. Terms like "silly goose" or "sitting duck" illustrate how certain animals embody human traits of innocence or vulnerability, creating relatable idioms that critique but soften judgments of behavior.

Example 17: Donkey's years

Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms

This phrase metaphorically uses the donkey's reputation for longevity and stubbornness to imply an extended period. It is a humorous, exaggerated expression, conveying prolonged time through the association with an enduring animal.

Example 18: Sitting duck

McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs

A "sitting duck" describes someone at risk or an easy target. Drawing on the vulnerability of a stationary duck, this idiom captures naivety in contexts where someone is unaware of impending danger, illustrating how English idioms use animal imagery to depict helplessness.

4.3. The similarities and differences of idioms denoting animals between English and Vietnamese in terms of semantic feature

4.3.1. The similarities

Both English and Vietnamese languages often assign specific animal traits to represent human qualities, which makes communication vivid and relatable. The use of animal idioms to signify human traits is common in cross-cultural linguistics, where animal symbolism reflects societal views (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Idioms such as "as cunning as a fox" in English and "khôn như cáo" in Vietnamese both use the fox to signify cleverness. In English, the phrase "as stubborn as a mule" illustrates someone's refusal to change their mind. Vietnamese has a similar idiom, "bướng như lừa," which conveys a comparable meaning.

In English and Vietnamese, idioms denoting animals also reflect emotional states, utilizing animals to represent specific feelings or attitudes. This cross-cultural trend shows that animals like cats, dogs, or snakes appear in both English and Vietnamese to express similar sentiments. English uses "crocodile tears" to signify insincere sadness, while Vietnamese has the idiom "nước mắt cá sấu," literally translating to "crocodile tears" with the same meaning.

The English idiom "as proud as a peacock" and the Vietnamese "tự hào như công" both use the peacock to indicate vanity or pride. Both languages utilize metaphor and personification to attribute human-like emotions to animals, which aligns with studies on emotional metaphor use across cultures (Kövecses, 2010).

There are also cultural symbols of animals in English and Vietnamese idioms. Certain animals like foxes, snakes, and oxen carry similar symbolic meanings in both languages, influenced by their cultural representations. For instance, both languages use snakes to imply deceit: "snake in the grass" in English parallels Vietnamese's "rắn bò" (snake-like behavior). These cross-cultural analyses of symbolic meaning demonstrate that shared representations of animals reflect broader cultural archetypes (Gibbs, 2006).

4.3.2. The differences

4.3.2.1. Cultural-specific animal symbolism

While certain animals have universal associations, others differ due to specific cultural perceptions. In Vietnamese culture, certain animals are revered or feared due to their role in cultural narratives, while in English-speaking cultures, different animals may hold significance for similar traits.

In English, bees are a symbol of industriousness in the idiom “busy as a bee.” This phrase underscores the bee’s role in Western agriculture and ecosystems, often associated with productivity and efficiency. In Vietnamese, the ant (“kiến”) is more commonly associated with hard work and perseverance due to its prominent role in local environments and agriculture, represented in the idiom “chăm chỉ như kiến” (hardworking as an ant). These differences arise from environmental exposure and cultural significance. Bees have symbolic importance in Western traditions, connected to productivity and colony life. In contrast, Vietnamese society may observe the perseverance of ants, common in local agricultural life, as an example of hard work.

4.3.2.2. Contextual differences in usage

Some idioms in English have no direct equivalent in Vietnamese due to unique environmental or cultural contexts, leading to different ways of expressing similar ideas. The English idiom “it’s raining cats and dogs” describes heavy rain, an expression derived from British folklore and old sayings. In Vietnamese, heavy rain is more straightforwardly expressed through “mưa như trút” (raining like pouring), without reference to animals. The difference is rooted in folklore and linguistic history. The English idiom may derive from a time when animals took shelter during storms, sometimes being washed into the streets. Vietnamese culture, lacking this specific folklore, uses a simpler, more descriptive phrase

that aligns with direct expressions commonly found in Vietnamese language structures.

On the other hand, English has the idiom “like a fish out of water” to signify feeling uncomfortable or out of place. Vietnamese, however, may use “lạc đàn” (lost from the flock) instead of referring to fish, as being out of place is associated with separation from a group or family rather than an individual’s environment. These expressions reflect cultural perceptions of belonging. English idioms frequently use individualistic analogies, like a single fish out of water, while Vietnamese idioms, coming from a more collectivist culture, focus on group dynamics and familial connection.

4.3.2.3. Humor and irony in animal idioms

English idioms tend to use humor, sarcasm, or irony more freely in their comparisons, often to make the expression more memorable. In Vietnamese, idioms are generally more literal, though there are exceptions. In English, the idiom “a fish out of water” can be seen as humorous, capturing a person’s discomfort in an exaggerated, lighthearted way. In Vietnamese, “như cá trên cạn” (like a fish on dry land) is a more serious depiction, emphasizing hardship rather than humor. The English use of irony or humor in language reflects the culture’s tendency toward playfulness in speech. Vietnamese expressions tend to prioritize straightforward communication, especially in idioms, which often convey the speaker’s view directly without exaggeration.

The English idiom “crying wolf” (to raise a false alarm) uses the image of a wolf to create a slightly ironic situation where a person harms their own credibility by pretending to be in danger. Vietnamese idioms typically lack this degree of irony and instead use expressions like “giả vờ” (pretending) with more straightforward language. The reason is that English’s ironic tone may come from folklore, where stories were often moral tales with a humorous or ironic twist. Vietnamese language, with its Confucian influence, may favor

direct communication, particularly in situations concerning trustworthiness or reliability.

4.2.3.4. Influence of mythology and folktales

Many English idioms derive from Western myths or stories, whereas Vietnamese idioms often draw from local folklore and Chinese influences. The English idiom “white elephant,” meaning a burdensome or costly possession, has roots in Southeast Asian culture but has become widely used in English. In Vietnamese, however, elephants (“voi”) are seen as valuable and powerful, and the idiom does not exist. An explanation is that English-speaking countries adapted the “white elephant” idiom through British colonial encounters, associating it with wastefulness. In Vietnamese culture, elephants are positive symbols of strength and prosperity, aligning with local values that do not interpret elephants negatively.

Another example is that dragons hold different connotations in English and Vietnamese. In English idioms, dragons are often depicted as dangerous or fearsome, stemming from European myths. In contrast, Vietnamese and Chinese cultures view dragons positively as symbols of power, luck, and authority, as seen in idioms like “mạnh như rồng” (strong as a dragon). Western folklore often portrays dragons as villains or obstacles, influencing their role in idioms as menacing creatures. In East Asian cultures, the dragon’s positive associations reflect its role in royal symbols and festivals, resulting in idioms that use the dragon to convey strength and fortune rather than danger.

5. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that while English and Vietnamese share some similarities in animal idioms, such as using animals to represent common traits and emotions, they also have distinct differences due to cultural, contextual, and environmental influences. The

unique selection of animals in idioms reflects each culture’s historical context, environmental landscape, and mythological heritage, providing valuable insights into how language conveys shared human experiences while also preserving cultural identity. These insights underscore the importance of cultural understanding in semantic analysis, particularly in the use of animal idioms, as they reveal both universal and culture-specific perspectives embedded within each language.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to those who have supported and guided me throughout the completion of this research titled, “A Contrastive Analysis on Semantic Features of English and Vietnamese Idioms Denoting Animals.”

First and foremost, my heartfelt appreciation goes to my academic advisor, Dr. Vuong Thi Hai Yen, for their invaluable guidance, patience, and expertise. Their constructive feedback and unwavering support have been instrumental in shaping this research and enhancing my analytical skills.

I am also grateful to the faculty members at Hanoi Metropolitan University for providing a conducive environment and the necessary resources to conduct this study. My gratitude extends to my classmates and friends, whose encouragement and insightful discussions have enriched my understanding of linguistic theories and methodologies.

Thank you all for your contributions to the completion of this paper.

REFERENCES

Ammer, C. (2013). *The American Heritage dictionary of idioms*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

- Baker, M. (1996). *In other words: A coursebook on translation*. Routledge.
- Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms (1998). Cambridge University Press.
- Dang, T. K. C. (2024). Challenges of Translating Idiomatic Expressions: A Cross-Linguistic Analysis at a University in Hanoi, Vietnam. *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.47191/ijsshr/v7-i10-39>
- Evans, V., & Green, M. (2006). *Cognitive linguistics: An introduction*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fernando, C. (1996). *Idioms and idiomaticity*. Oxford University Press.
- Geeraerts, D. (2010). *Theories of lexical semantics*. Oxford University Press.
- Gibbs, R. W. (1994). *The poetics of mind: Figurative thought, language, and understanding*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gibbs, R. W. (2006). Metaphor interpretation as embodied simulation. *Mind & Language*, 21(3), 434–458. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0017.2006.00285.x>
- Giang, D. N. (2011). Synonyms and idiomatic variations in English and Vietnamese. *VNU Journal of Science, Foreign Languages*, 27(1), 273-280. Retrieved from <https://js.vnu.edu.vn/journal/ForeignLanguages/>
- James, C. (1980). *Contrastive analysis*. Longman.
- Katz, A. N. (1998). Idioms: Structural and psychological perspectives. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 30(3), 387–390. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0378-2166\(98\)00020-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0378-2166(98)00020-4)
- Kövecses, Z. (2010). *Language, thought, and culture: An introduction to linguistic anthropology*. Routledge.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2003). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226470993.001.0001>
- Le, H. M. (2018). Animal symbolism in Vietnamese and English idioms: A comparative analysis. *International Journal of Linguistic Research*, 12(3), 210-225. Retrieved from <https://linguisticresearch.org/articles/animal-symbolism>
- Nguyen, L., & Do, M. (2017). Cultural reflections in Vietnamese idioms: A study of societal values. *Journal of Vietnamese Cultural Studies*, 5(2), 145-160. Retrieved from <https://journal.vietnamculturalstudies.vn/articles/145>
- Nguyen, V. K. (2022). A study on English animal idioms from the perspectives of cultural metaphor and their translation into Vietnamese. *Journal of Foreign Language Studies*, 69-85. <http://dx.doi.org/10.56844/tckhnn.68.131>
- Nguyễn Lâm. (2004). *Từ Điển Thành Ngữ và Tục Ngữ Việt Nam*. Nhà xuất bản Văn Hóa Thông Tin.
- Nguyễn Đức Dân. (2005). *Thành Ngữ Học Tiếng Việt*. Nhà xuất bản Đại học Quốc gia TP.HCM.
- Nguyễn Văn Khang. (2018). *Ngôn Ngữ và Văn Hóa Việt Nam*. Nhà xuất bản Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội.
- Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms (2010). Oxford University Press.
- Spears, R. A. (2005). *McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs*. McGraw-Hill.
- Vũ Ngọc Phan. (2001). *Tục Ngữ, Ca Dao, Dân Ca Việt Nam*. Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội.