

AN INVESTIGATION ON SEMANTIC FEATURES OF ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE PROVERB DENOTING PERSEVERANCE

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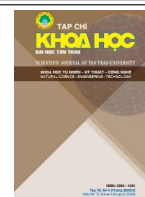
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Abstract:

This study presents a contrastive analysis of English and Vietnamese proverbs focusing on the theme of perseverance, examining their semantic features through a cross-cultural linguistic perspective. The research employs contrastive analysis to illuminate the intricate relationships between these proverbial expressions in both languages, exploring how they reflect and transmit cultural wisdom about persistence and determination. Through systematic examination of an extensive corpus of proverbs from both languages, this investigation delves into their semantic characteristics, underlying meanings, and cultural implications. The study reveals both striking parallels and notable divergences in how these two distinct linguistic traditions conceptualize and express the virtue of perseverance. These findings contribute to our understanding of how different cultures encode similar moral principles through distinct linguistic patterns and metaphorical frameworks. Furthermore, the research demonstrates how these proverbial expressions serve as valuable pedagogical tools in language acquisition and cultural understanding. The practical implications of this study extend to language teaching methodologies, translation practices, and cross-cultural communication. Additionally, the findings provide valuable insights for educators and learners in developing more effective approaches to teaching and learning proverbs in both languages. This research ultimately aims to enhance intercultural competence and promote a deeper appreciation of how different societies express and value perseverance through their proverbial wisdom.



NGHIÊN CỨU CÁC ĐẶC ĐIỂM NGŨ NGHĨA CỦA TỤC NGŨ TIẾNG ANH VÀ TIẾNG VIỆT VỀ SỰ KIÊN TRÌ

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Tóm tắt

Nghiên cứu này phân tích đối chiếu về tục ngữ Anh và Việt tập trung vào chủ đề kiên trì, xem xét các đặc điểm ngữ nghĩa của chúng thông qua góc nhìn ngôn ngữ liên văn hóa. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phân tích đối chiếu để làm sáng tỏ mối quan hệ phức tạp giữa các biểu thức tục ngữ này ở cả hai ngôn ngữ, khám phá cách chúng phản ánh và truyền tải trí tuệ văn hóa về sự kiên trì và quyết tâm. Thông qua việc kiểm tra có hệ thống một tập hợp lớn các tục ngữ từ cả hai ngôn ngữ, cuộc điều tra này đi sâu vào các đặc điểm ngữ nghĩa, ý nghĩa cơ bản và ý nghĩa văn hóa của chúng. Nghiên cứu này cho thấy cả những điểm tương đồng nổi bật và sự khác biệt đáng chú ý trong cách hai truyền thống ngôn ngữ riêng biệt này khái niệm hóa và thể hiện đức tính kiên trì. Những phát hiện này góp phần giúp chúng ta hiểu được cách các nền văn hóa khác nhau mã hóa các nguyên tắc đạo đức tương tự thông qua các mô hình ngôn ngữ và khuôn khổ ẩn dụ riêng biệt. Hơn nữa, nghiên cứu chứng minh cách các biểu thức tục ngữ này đóng vai trò là công cụ sư phạm có giá trị trong việc tiếp thu ngôn ngữ và hiểu biết văn hóa. Ý nghĩa thực tế của nghiên cứu này mở rộng đến các phương pháp giảng dạy ngôn ngữ, thực hành biên dịch và giao tiếp liên văn hóa. Ngoài ra, những phát hiện này cung cấp những hiểu biết có giá trị cho các nhà giáo dục và người học trong việc phát triển các phương pháp tiếp cận hiệu quả hơn để dạy và học tục ngữ ở cả hai ngôn ngữ. Mục đích cuối cùng của nghiên cứu này là nâng cao năng lực liên văn hóa và thúc đẩy sự đánh giá sâu sắc hơn về cách các xã hội khác nhau thể hiện và coi trọng sự kiên trì thông qua trí tuệ mang tính tục ngữ của họ..

1. Introduction

When learning a new language, it is crucial to delve into not just its vocabulary, but also its culture and customs. Sapir (1951) highlights that “every cultural pattern and every single act of social behavior involves communication in either an explicit or implicit sense.” Language is the primary medium for this communication Mahahi (2012). A meaningful way to connect with a new culture is by examining its proverbs and sayings. Bank (2010) claims that “Proverbs are condensed culture.” Furthermore, Mieder (2004) observes that “The wisdom of proverbs has guided people in their social interactions for thousands of years throughout the world.” Consequently, proverbs are a significant cultural heritage that warrants respect and preservation.

The exact origins of Vietnamese proverbs remain uncertain, as they have been passed down orally and continuously adapted over generations. These proverbs encompass a wide array of themes, often reflecting human experiences related to work, family, and social ties. In particular, proverbs that highlight resilience are common in Vietnamese folk literature. Throughout our lives, we encounter sayings that resonate deeply with our experiences. For example, familiar phrases like “Có công mài sắt, có ngày nên kim” and “Chớ thấy sóng cả mà ngã tay chèo” have influenced our understanding from a young age. These proverbs play an essential role in teaching individuals to strive to look forward, never give up in any circumstances, and honor their ancestors, history, and cultural traditions about those values. For these reasons, I am motivated to pursue the study titled **“Proverbs Denoting Perseverance in English and Vietnamese: A Contrastive Analysis.”** This study will focus on research questions:

1. What are the semantic features of English and Vietnamese perseverance proverbs?

2. What are the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese perseverance proverbs aspect of semantic features?

3. What are the implications of learning English and Vietnamese perseverance proverbs?

This study has four sections. Section 1 is the general introduction of this study, Section 2 is the research methodology. Section 3 is a review of the existing relevant studies. Section 4 presents the description of English and Vietnamese perseverance proverbs to point out the similarities and differences. Section 5 gives the explicit answers to the questions and suggests some learning implications.

2. Methodology

This study utilizes a mixed-methods approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze perseverance proverbs in English and Vietnamese. This comprehensive framework is designed to explore the aspect of language and culture effectively.

2.1. Contrastive Analysis: The contrastive analysis method will be utilized to compare and contrast the semantic features of perseverance proverbs in both English and Vietnamese. This analysis aims to uncover similarities and differences in how perseverance is articulated in each language, thereby highlighting cultural distinctions.

2.2. Synthetic Analysis: Following the contrastive analysis, a synthetic analysis will be conducted to synthesize the collected data. This will facilitate the drawing of conclusions regarding the overarching themes and distinctions in perseverance proverbs between the two languages.

2.3. Data collection instrument

In the study, the majority of the proverbs were gathered from books, dictionaries, articles, and other relevant sources.

. A few dictionaries in Vietnamese and English were selected as the data source: “Proverbs: A Handbook” Mieder (2004), Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs (5th edition) Simpson & Speake (2008). The dictionary of proverbs with facts on file” Martin (2002).

“Tục ngữ, Ca dao, Dân ca Việt Nam” Phan (2010), Từ điển Thành ngữ & Tục ngữ Việt Nam (Nguyễn, 2014), “Ca dao, tục ngữ Việt Nam” Thu (2010)

In this paper, data is primarily collected through observation and content analysis. The proverbs used for description and analysis regarding semantic components are sourced from reliable materials. In this manner, I gathered approximately 40 proverbs related to perseverance in both English and Vietnamese. Subsequently, I analyzed the contents of these proverbs to clarify the study, making it easier for readers to grasp its content

2.4. Data Analysis Procedures

Once the data collection is complete, the author employs various research methods to analyze the data, identify and compare the semantic features of the proverbs, offering insights into their meanings and cultural significance to address the research questions established earlier in the study.

3. Literature Review

1.1. Definition of perseverance proverbs

Perseverance is a universally admired virtue associated with resilience, determination, and enduring challenges to achieve one’s goals. Proverbs denoting perseverance are those that reflect themes of persistence and tenacity, often conveying the moral wisdom to “keep going” or to be patient despite difficulties. These proverbs serve as linguistic expressions of cultural attitudes toward hard work, resilience, and the pursuit of success in the face of adversity (Mieder, 2004).

In English, examples of perseverance proverbs include **“When the going gets tough, the tough get going”** and **“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again”** both encouraging persistence and patience. Vietnamese proverbs, such as **“Có công mài sắt có ngày nên kim”** (literal translation: “With effort, an iron bar can be made into a needle”), **“Cần cù bù thông minh.”**(Diligence compensates for intelligence.) emphasize similar virtues, focusing on gradual improvement and the rewards of sustained effort. Such proverbs provide insight into cultural expectations around persistence, often drawing on everyday imagery to convey moral lessons.

1.2. Semantic Features of Perseverance Proverbs

The semantic structure of proverbs is unique because they frequently use metaphor, symbolism, and imagery to convey abstract meanings. Perseverance proverbs are often structured around **metaphors of nature, labor, or transformation**, which are easily relatable and vividly represent resilience (Norrick, 1985). For example, English proverbs about perseverance commonly use physical endurance or transformation metaphors, as in **“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,”** and **“Slow and steady wins the race”** illustrating persistence in terms of incremental progress. In Vietnamese, perseverance proverbs similarly rely on agrarian metaphors or images of cumulative effort, such as in **“Kiến tha lâu cũng đầy tổ”** (meaning “Ants carrying bit by bit will eventually fill their nest”). This proverb reflects an emphasis on patience and collective effort, resonant with the country’s historical agrarian lifestyle. Semantically, perseverance proverbs tend to highlight specific values, with English proverbs often emphasizing individual achievement and resilience, while Vietnamese proverbs focus more on patience, humility, and collective progress (Dobrovol’skij & Piirainen, 2005).

1.3. Previous studies

Proverbs have attracted many scholars all over the world. There are some books whose

authors mentioned some aspects of proverbs. “Proverbs and their lessons” written by Richard (1861) provides a comprehensive overview of the origin, characteristics, distribution, meaning, and importance of proverbs in English-speaking cultures. Exploring how they reflect cultural wisdom and social norms across the English-speaking world. On the other hand, “ American proverbs about women” by Kerschen (2012) is an analysis of the treatment of women as reflected in popular sayings that reinforce traditional folk wisdom. Additionally, “The Fact on File Dictionary of Proverbs” by Martin (2002) offers complete definitions of commonly used proverbs organized in alphabetical order. The book “Proverbs: A Handbook” by Mieder (2004) is an inclusive and comparative survey of paremiology and focuses on Anglo-American proverbs in English language context.

In Vietnam, many linguists have paid much attention to proverbs. Thu (2010) and Lân (2012) shared the same ideas of classifying Vietnamese proverbs as every aspect of our lives in two books “Ca dao, tục ngữ Việt Nam” and “Tục ngữ, ca dao Việt Nam”

respectively. In addition, Lân (2014) compiled a dictionary in which proverbs were both literally and figuratively explained in the alphabetic order. Hùng (2007) collected a number of English proverbs and their Vietnamese equivalences which were helpful for learners of English. Finally, Phan (2010) made a collection of proverbs and folksongs in terms of content and classified them into many categories.

Overall, the existing literature reveals several gaps that warrant further investigation. The research gap in existing studies centers on the lack of focused analysis on perseverance proverbs

specifically. While there is substantial work on the general classification and cultural context of proverbs, few studies examine proverbs related to perseverance in either English or Vietnamese contexts. Additionally, there is a limited comparative analysis that looks specifically at perseverance proverbs across these two languages, which leaves unexplored how resilience and determination are expressed differently in English and Vietnamese. Existing resources also lack a detailed examination of the semantic features such as metaphor, imagery, and symbolism unique to perseverance proverbs, which are crucial for understanding cultural perspectives on resilience. Furthermore, though some studies categorize Vietnamese proverbs by life themes, they rarely address the nuanced expressions of perseverance within these themes. That is the reason why this study aims to fill these gaps by providing a comparative semantic analysis of English and Vietnamese perseverance proverbs, highlighting linguistic features and cultural meanings, and providing a new perspective in the field of comparative paremiology.

1.4. Perseverance proverbs in English and Vietnamese

Description of perseverance proverbs in English

Perseverance proverbs in English are a collection of wise and succinct sayings that emphasize the importance of persistence, determination, and resilience in the face of adversity. These proverbs serve as timeless reminders to stay motivated and never give up on our goals and dreams. They encapsulate the belief that success often requires continuous efforts, even in the face of setbacks or obstacles. The proverbs seem to discuss perseverance using both literal and figurative language, such as metaphors, exaggeration, and (de)personification.

1.4.1. Proverbs with literal meaning

Proverbs about perseverance in English often employ literal language to convey the essence of perseverance as an explicit encouragement like:

“No pain, no gain”

This proverb uses literal language to emphasize the idea that success requires effort and sacrifice. It suggests that enduring hardships and challenges is necessary to achieve significant gains or accomplishments.

“Fall down seven times, stand up eight”

This proverb employs literal language to convey the importance of resilience and perseverance. It suggests that even in the face of repeated failures or setbacks, one must continue to rise and persistently pursue their goals.

Cause-and-Effect Relationships:

“Practice makes perfect”

This proverb emphasizes the cause-and-effect relationship between practice and mastery. It suggests that consistent practice and repetition are essential for achieving excellence in any endeavor. The proverb encourages individuals to persevere and continue working towards improvement.

“Hard work brings rewards” or “When the going gets tough, the tough get going”.

It is evident that, when expressed clearly, perseverance proverbs employ poetic devices like puns, such as “going, tough” in “When the going gets tough, the tough get going”

1.4.2. Proverbs with figurative meaning

English perseverance proverbs also convey figurative or metaphorical meanings to express the concept of perseverance. The semantic features of proverbs conveying figurative meaning can be characterized as follows:

a) Figurative language diversity

English perseverance proverbs often rely on a range of figurative devices, including metaphors, similes, and idiomatic expressions to convey the

concept of perseverance. This diversity allows for a wide array of imaginative and creative expressions. For example:

“When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.”

This proverb employs a metaphor to compare challenging situations (lemons) to raw materials for making something positive (lemonade). It encourages individuals to adopt a positive and proactive attitude towards adversity, emphasizing the transformative power of perseverance. By making lemonade out of lemons, one can extract something beneficial from a seemingly negative circumstance.

“Keep your eye on the prize”

This proverb uses a metaphorical expression to emphasize the importance of staying focused and committed to achieving a goal.

b) Symbolic representation

English perseverance proverbs often use concrete and tangible symbols to represent the virtue of perseverance. These symbols can be easily understood and universally relatable. For example:

“A rolling stone gathers no moss.”

This proverb employs the symbol of a rolling stone to convey the idea that constant movement and progress prevent stagnation.

“Bend the tree while it’s young.”

This proverb compares the flexibility of a young tree to the adaptability and resilience of a person. It suggests that it is easier to instill perseverance and resilience in someone at a young age.

“Every cloud has a silver lining.”

This suggests that difficult situations often have a positive aspect, encouraging people to remain hopeful and persistent.

4.1.3. Cultural context

English perseverance proverbs often reflect individualistic values, emphasizing self-reliance, personal effort, and resilience. These proverbs highlight the importance of individual determination and the ability to overcome obstacles through one's actions. They draw on symbols and experiences that resonate with Western cultural backgrounds. For examples:

“The early bird catches the worm.”

“Don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today.”

These proverb reflects the cultural value of diligence and promptness. It suggests that those who take initiative and act early are more likely to find success or opportunities.

“Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

This proverb reflects the cultural value of patience and the understanding that great achievements require time and effort. It encourages perseverance and long-term commitment to reach ambitious goals.

There are references to god, heaven, or angels in English proverbs of resolve.

“Faith can move mountains.”

“God helps those who help themselves”

“Heaven helps those who persevere.”

4.2. Description of perseverance proverbs in Vietnamese

Proverbs in Vietnamese in this essay can be divided into two categories, including proverbs with literal language and proverbs with figurative language.

4.2.1 Proverbs with literal meaning

Vietnamese proverbs with literal language usually state explicitly that we must be persistent even if there are a lot of hindrances. Like all proverbs, Vietnamese proverbs of perseverance or persistence make the judgment of one attribute. Therefore, conclude the consequences or benefits

of practicing this in real life. These Vietnamese proverbs usually follow the cause-and-effect relationship: For example:

“Cố công mài sắt, có ngày nên kim”

(By grinding iron, one can become a needle):

This proverb highlights the importance of perseverance and dedication. It draws on the metaphor of grinding iron to convey the idea that with persistent effort, one can accomplish great things. The process of grinding iron symbolizes the transformation and refinement that comes with continuous hard work.

“Có chí thì nên” (If you have the will, you can)

“Luyện mãi thành tài, miệt mài tất giỏi”
(Train forever to be a talent, diligently all good).

Having a strong determination all hindrances can be overcome. This proverb encourages individuals to believe in themselves and their abilities, emphasizing that with enough willpower, they can overcome obstacles and achieve their goals.

4.2.2. Proverbs with figurative meaning

a) Figurative language diversity

Vietnamese perseverance proverbs tend to employ a more limited range of figurative devices. They often rely heavily on metaphor, using vivid and evocative imagery to convey the concept of perseverance. For example:

Regarding metaphors, Vietnamese proverbs usually specify that the process is more important than the result as in **“Thất bại là mẹ thành công”** (failure is the mother of success) or **“Kiên nhẫn là mẹ thành công”** (Patience is the mother of success).

Also, some Vietnamese proverbs can be a combination of many different figures of speech, for example, synecdoche, metaphor, exaggeration, and paradox like **“Chân cứng đá mềm”**. (Foot

is hard, and stone is soft). The foot as a part to represent a human being (synecdoche); the stone is the difficulties (metaphor); the foot is hard, and the stone is soft is a paradox in which the human foot is exaggerated to overpower stone.

b) Symbolic representation

Vietnamese perseverance proverbs often draw inspiration from cultural and natural symbols such as the five elements that constitute life (mental – water – wood – fire-earth) as in: “Lửa (fire) thử vàng (gold), gian nan thử sức” (Fire proves gold, adversity proves men) or “Nước (water) chảy, đá (stone) mòn” (As water wears away stone)

Animal metaphors in “Kiến (ant) tha lâu đầy tổ” (Many a little makes a mickle) or “Còn gà trống, gà mái thì còn gà giò” (chicken), “Trăm bó đuốc cũng vớ được con ếch (frog)” (A hundred torches can still catch a frog), etc, that may require cultural familiarity or contextual understanding. These symbols add richness and depth to the proverbs but may require some interpretation.

One notable aspect of Vietnamese perseverance referents is the presence of God, but this God is seen as a barrier rather than a helper because Vietnamese culture holds that fate is predetermined. Vietnamese proverbs can sometimes discourage people from moving forward or convince them to be passively accepting, rather than serving as an encouragement. For example: “Mưu sự tại nhân, thành sự tại thiên” (No matter what you do, God will decide if you can succeed) or “Sống chết có số, phú quý do trời” (Life and death are predetermined, wealth and honor come from heaven).

4.2.3. Cultural context

Vietnam is a country that is a part of the Eastern aqua-cultural civilization. Therefore, the Vietnamese proverbs closely reflect the mindset of the Eastern people. They emphasize collective values and community support in the face of challenges. They draw on cultural symbols and

experiences specific to Vietnamese traditions and beliefs. For an example:

“Một cây làm chẳng nên non, ba cây chụm lại nên hòn núi cao”

(One tree alone does not make a forest; three trees together can create high mountains).

“Góp gió thành bão.” (Many small contributions can create a storm).

These proverbs emphasize the value of collaboration and unity, it suggests that perseverance combined with collective effort can achieve significant accomplishments.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Discussion

5.1.1. The similarities of Vietnamese and English perseverance proverbs

a. Literal meaning

It is evident from the examples and analysis provided that English and Vietnamese proverbs play a significant role in and have an impact on our daily lives.

Both English and Vietnamese perseverance proverbs highlight the importance of putting in effort and working hard to achieve desired outcomes. They convey the idea that success and positive results require perseverance and overcoming obstacles.

- There are some similarities between the ways that Vietnamese and English choose images to represent the perseverance theme. For example, the English phrase **“Constant dripping wears away stone”** and the Vietnamese phrase **“Nước chảy đá mòn”** both refer to water and stone.

Both types of proverbs establish a cause-and-effect relationship between perseverance and success. They suggest that enduring difficulties, overcoming obstacles, or consistently working towards a goal will eventually lead to favorable outcomes.

b. Figurative meaning

Both English and Vietnamese proverbs utilize figurative language to convey the concept of perseverance. They employ metaphors and symbolic actions to represent the transformative nature of perseverance.

c. Cultural context:

Both English and Vietnamese proverbs have been shaped by historical events, cultural values, beliefs. They reflect the collective wisdom and experiences of their respective societies.

5.1.2. The differences of English and Vietnamese perseverance proverbs

a) Literal meaning

While both languages emphasize hard work, the specific language and imagery used in proverbs may differ. English proverbs may draw on nature, sports, or historical events, while Vietnamese proverbs may refer to local traditions, folklore, or historical figures.

b) Figurative meaning

English and Vietnamese proverbs reflect the cultural values, belief, and experiences specific to each language and culture. English proverbs may draw on cultural references that are specific to English-speaking contexts, while Vietnamese proverbs may refer to historical figures, events, or traditional practices that resonate with Vietnamese culture.

The metaphors and symbolic objects used in English and Vietnamese proverbs may differ. English proverbs may use lemons, stones, or other elements from nature, while Vietnamese proverbs may use materials like iron, fire to represent perseverance and transformation. These differences reflect the cultural symbolism and linguistic traditions of each language.

c) Cultural context

English and Vietnamese proverbs differ in their cultural context and the specific situations they address. English proverbs may draw from

Western cultural practices and references, and prioritize individual efforts and self-reliance, while Vietnamese proverbs often place more emphasis on collective values and community support. These cultural contexts influence the choice of metaphors and analogies used in the proverbs.

5.2. Conclusion

The contrastive analysis of perseverance proverbs in English and Vietnamese highlights both similarities and differences in how the concept of perseverance is expressed in these languages. The semantic distinctions reflect the cultural and linguistic preferences of each society. Most proverbs related to perseverance in both languages convey figurative meanings, necessitating an understanding of stylistic devices such as similes, metaphors, metonymy, and hyperbole. To grasp the meaning of any proverb, one must analyze it within its specific context. This understanding is essential not only for effective communication but also for appreciating the artistic value of the proverbs. Using perseverance proverbs appropriately can enhance the power of communication.

From the main findings of semantic features of English and Vietnamese denoting perseverance proverbs, the study suggests some implications for learning. While some individuals find learning English and Vietnamese straightforward, others encounter significant challenges, often due to a lack of “natural ability” or ineffective teaching methods. Beyond linguistic skills, the key factors influencing the success of learning proverbs in these languages are cultural awareness and the ability to apply linguistic knowledge in conversational contexts. Therefore, both teachers and students should strive to master their native language and cultural aspects. Teachers should recognize that language especially proverbs is a tool for communication that conveys ideas in specific contexts. An effective strategy is to create opportunities for students to practice proverbs in context. Teachers can suggest scenarios for

using proverbs during speaking exercises and encourage students to infer meanings through contextual clues and background knowledge. After presenting proverbs in context, it's important to review previously studied proverbs. Additionally, teachers should equip learners with strategies to understand figurative language. By enhancing their awareness of proverbs, including their literal meanings and underlying metaphors, students will become more adept at interpreting figurative language independently. Integrating proverbs into grammar lessons can also be beneficial by providing examples that illustrate sentence structures. Furthermore, we believe that greater emphasis should be placed on learning perseverance proverbs and their Vietnamese equivalents to English learners to enhance their understanding of translation.

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