

ENGLISH IDIOMS CONTAINING THE WORD "HEART" AND ITS SYNONYMS IN VIETNAMESE IDIOMS: A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS FROM CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

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Title:

Những thành ngữ tiếng Anh có chứa từ "heart" và từ đồng nghĩa với "heart" trong thành ngữ tiếng Việt: đối chiếu nhìn từ góc độ văn hóa

Từ khóa:

Thành ngữ, Tiếng Việt, tiếng Anh, trái tim,

Keywords:

Idioms, heart, Vietnamese, English

TÓM TẮT: Ngày nay, quá trình quốc tế hóa, toàn cầu hóa đang diễn ra với tốc độ cao. Tiếng Anh đã trở thành ngôn ngữ phổ biến nhất trên toàn thế giới. Tuy nhiên, để thành thạo tiếng Anh nói chung và thành ngữ tiếng Anh nói riêng là điều không hề dễ dàng. Trên thực tế, thành ngữ tiếng Anh là những cách diễn đạt mang tính tượng hình với nhiều ý nghĩa khác nhau. Ấn dụ trong thành ngữ tạo nên sự phong phú, đẹp đẽ, cách thức giao tiếp tinh tế, sinh động và sinh động của tiếng Anh nói chung. Người học tiếng Việt gặp nhiều khó khăn khi học thành ngữ tiếng Anh. Người học tiếng Việt gặp rất nhiều khó khăn khi học tiếng Anh. Điều đó một phần là do sự khác biệt giữa hai nền văn hóa. Với mục tiêu tìm hiểu thành ngữ tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt dưới góc độ văn hóa, bài viết này tập trung nghiên cứu thành ngữ có từ "heart" trong tiếng Anh và từ đồng nghĩa với từ "heart" trong tiếng Việt.

ABSTRACT: Nowadays, the process of internationalization and globalization is taking place at a high speed. English has become the most popular language all over the world. However, it is not easy to master English in general and English idioms in particular. As a matter of fact, English idioms are figurative expressions with different meanings. Metaphor in idioms creates the richness, beauty, sophisticated and vivid way of communication and liveliness of English language in general. Vietnamese learners have a large number of difficulties in learning English idioms. It results from the differences between two cultures. With a view to exploring English and Vietnamese idioms in the light of culture, this article has focused on idioms containing the word "heart" in English and its synonyms in Vietnamese ones.

1. Introduction

It is undeniable to say that English has become an important international language; therefore, mastering this foreign language is of great importance. However, it is not easy to master all English aspects especially idioms. As a matter of fact, English idioms are figurative expressions with different

meanings. Metaphor in idioms creates the richness, beauty, sophisticated and vivid way of communication and liveliness of English language in general. In Vietnamese, idiom is a significant linguistic unit, which contributes to the diversification of not only language but also Vietnamese culture. Specifically, many words referring to parts of

human body are used in both English and Vietnamese idioms. One very important part in human body is the *heart*. Having taken human- body- based idioms into consideration, the researcher found that there are many English idioms containing the word “*heart*” and their meanings are extremely interesting.

While the English use the word “*heart*” to reveal the world of deep emotions, feelings and attitudes; the psychological and spiritual world is generally expressed figuratively and metaphorically by many parts in the body such as “*stomach*”, “*bowels*” or “*liver*” “*mind*” (*bụng, ruột, gan, tâm*) in Vietnamese. In fact, there are both similar and different points of idioms containing the word “*heart*” and its synonyms in Vietnamese in the light of culture. Regarding similarities, in both cultures, heart is considered as the centre of all things in material and mental life. Consequently, idioms containing “*heart*” in English and its synonyms in Vietnamese express the most important part in people’s body, very deep feelings in mental life such as love, happiness, sadness, determination and courage. In terms of differences, the dissimilarities between Vietnamese and English cultures have big influence on the way of using idioms in general and *heart-based* idioms in particular. Specifically, the reason for using more words to indicate this most important part of the body in Vietnamese culture results from the richness in the treasure of folk literature. In other words, the differences between English and Vietnamese language specifically – it is idiom - lead to these differences in culture.

2. Theoretical framework and Methods

2.1. Definitions of culture

Many definitions of “culture” are given from different perspectives.

The term was first used in this way by the pioneer English Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in his book, *Primitive Culture*,

published in 1871. Tylor said that culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”

According to Jahoda (2012:300), the concept of ‘culture’ is probably indispensable, yet it cannot be defined definitively. Regarding to Hofstede (2001), culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others. Hofstede's work offers further explanations and insights into the nature of culture including cultural dimensions, cultural software, influence on behaviors, deep and surface culture, dynamic nature.

However, Nguyen Quang in many his books has emphasized the feature of “hidden patterns” of culture. As for him, “culture” refers to the informal and often hidden patterns of culture share. The hidden nature of culture has been compared to an iceberg, most of which is hidden under water. Like an iceberg, most of the influence of culture on an individual cannot be seen. The part of culture that is exposed is not always that which creates cross- cultural difficulties, the hidden aspects of culture have significant effects on behaviors and on interactions with others. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Culture Organization) gives another definition of culture as follows: *Culture is a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.*

2.2. The relationship between language and culture

According to Kramsch (2000:3), language is the principle means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in

contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways.

Language expresses cultural reality

Language embodies cultural reality

Language symbolizes cultural identity

Language and culture always exist together and reinforce each other. The relationship between them was so inextricable that we could not understand or appreciate the one without the knowledge of the other.

The American (cognitive) linguistic anthropologist Michael Agar has described the concept of “languaculture” in his book *Language Shock. Understanding the culture of conversation (1996)*. The book gives us an inspiring introduction to the connection between language and culture on a differential sense, providing many examples and indications as to how layman can investigate culture and language

2.3. Definitions of idioms

Jackson & Amvela and Palmer (2000:66) supposed that an idiom may be defined as a phrase the meaning of which cannot be predicted from the individual meanings of the morphemes it comprises. Jenifer and W.Mc Mordie in *English idioms and How to use* (Oxford University Press, 1978) also defines “an idiom is a number of words which taken together, meaning something different from the individual words of the idioms when they stand- alone”. In the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (1992), an idiom is seen as “an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning can not be worked out from its separate parts”. In general, all these researchers supposed that in terms of semantics, idioms’ meaning is not simply the meanings of constituent making up the phrase. In terms of syntax, there are many different opinions about it. Most of the authors only consider phrases as idioms; on the other hand, according to A.S Hornby in

the Oxford Advance Learners (Oxford University Press, 1995), an idiom is defined as “phrase or sentence whose meaning is not clear from the meaning of its individual words and which must be learnt as a whole unit”. It means that besides phrases, Hornby considered sentence as a syntactic unit to found idioms. In “*Từ điển thành ngữ, tục ngữ Việt Nam*” by Nguyễn Lân (1993), he supposed that “Thành ngữ là những cụm từ cố định dùng để diễn đạt một khái niệm”.

As a matter of fact, idioms are originated from human in general and human culture in particular. Idioms and culture have a very close relationship in which some cultural features are shown and expressed through idioms. In “*Từ điển thành ngữ Hoa – Việt*”, the authors Nguyễn Văn Khang and Bùi Như Ý showed the relationship between idioms and culture “Thành ngữ của mỗi dân tộc có nguồn gốc sâu xa từ trong phong tục, tập quán, lễ nghi, tôn giáo, tín ngưỡng và triết học. Ngoài yếu tố ngôn ngữ phải có một vốn văn hóa rộng, sâu mới có thể hiểu được thành ngữ”

2.4. Characteristics of idioms

a. Semantic characteristics

Semantic features of idioms are concerned about its features of meaning. Curry (1995) proposed that the meaning of an idiom is “the special chemical mixture of meaning of all components which is completely new in quality”. It means that it is very important not to understand idioms literally way but metaphorically. Idioms are embodied with metaphorical expressions and they must be understood metaphorically. In terms of meaning, idioms can range from positive, neutral to negative meaning.

b. Syntactic characteristics

Idioms are called “set- expressions”. It means that the components in idioms are stable and cannot be substituted. They cannot be changed or varied in the way literal expressions are normally varied, whether in

speech or in writing. Idiom is impossible to be changed from active into passive and vice versa. Idioms may take many different forms or structures. An idiom can have a regular structure, irregular or even a grammatically incorrect structure such as “to be at large”.

2.5. Characteristics of English and Vietnamese culture according to Hofstede’s Value Dimension

According to Hofstede’s Value Dimension, Vietnamese and English cultures have 5 value dimensions shown in this table below:

| Dimensions | Vietnamese | English |
|--|---|--|
| Individualism / | -Vietnam is considered a fairly | -English belong to |
| Collectivism | collectivist culture -Vietnamese culture is strongly orientated around family and community family comes before oneself and to bring pride to family is the ultimate goal | individualism |
| High Uncertainty Avoidance - Low Uncertainty | -Vietnam is classified as a Low Uncertainty Avoidance culture -Vietnamese are welcoming to outsiders and are less tense and more relaxed | -English tends to be high uncertainty avoidance |
| Power Distance | -Vietnam is a social republic state and has a high power distance . | -Low power distance |
| Masculinity/ Femininity | -Masculinity is highly valued in Vietnam. | -Equal power in gender |
| Long-Term/ Short-Term | - Vietnam is high on long-term orientation . They are hard-working and respect their superiors. | |

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Similarities

As stated above, the “heart” is the organ responsible for making sure that blood is supplied to every part of one’s body. If the “heart” stopped working properly, one person’s life would be impossible. Because of this, people often refer to something that they consider being the most important and influential part as the “heart”. Moreover, the “heart” is situated at the chest, almost in the centre of the human body. As a result, “heart” is often regarded as the place from which the deepest feelings come. All these things can be seen clearly in idioms. Both in English and Vietnamese, idioms containing the word “heart” and its synonyms in Vietnamese refer to the most important part in the body physically and mentally.

3.2. Expressing feelings: love, happiness, unhappiness

In English, many idioms containing the word “heart” show very deep feelings such as love, happiness or unhappiness as follows:

- + *break my heart*
- + *aching heart.*
- + *died of a broken heart*
- + *gives heart to somebody*
- + *heart leap*
- + *heavy heart*
- + *followed his heart*
- + *from the bottom of her heart*
- + *My heart goes out to*
- + *Open her heart to me*

If some one “*break your heart*”, they make you feel very sad and unhappy, usually because they end a love affair or close relationship with you. For example:

“There is no excuse my friend
For *breaking my heart*, *breaking my heart* again
This is where our journey ends
You're *breaking my heart* again”

(Lyrics of the song “*Breaking my heart*” by Richter, Jascha)

If “*your heart goes out to somebody*”, you sympathize very deeply with his or her problems. For example:

“I see the tears you cry
They're tears I cannot dry
Know what you're going through
My heart goes out to you”

(Lyrics of the song “*My heart goes out to you*” by Anders Bagge, Rick Nowels, Allan Rich)

If you “*give heart to somebody*”, it means that you love his/ her very much. For example:

“I give all my money for a slice of daily bread
I give forty honest hours to a boss I never met
And I gave my soul to Jesus at the age of twenty-two
So there ain't much left to offer
But I *give my heart to you*”

(Lyrics of the song “*Give my heart to you*” by Jr. Aldridge; Bob Di Piero)

Similar to English idioms, we can find many Vietnamese ones containing *heart*'s synonyms (*lòng, bụng, gan, ruột, tâm, dạ*) to express the deepest feelings such as:

- + *tận đáy lòng (from the bottom of the heart)*
- + *tan nát cõi lòng (break the heart)*
- + *ghi lòng tạc dạ (weigh heavily on one's heart)*
- + *tím ruột bầm gan (heart-wrenching pain)*
- + *rát ruột như bào (heart-wrenching)*

These phrases are used a lot in literature, especially in poetry

“Bấy lâu *tím ruột bầm gan*
Bây giờ cõi mở muôn ngàn *uất căm*”
(Xuân Diệu)

And Nguyễn Du in “*Truyện Kiều*” also used some idioms containing the word “*ruột*” to express emotion of characteristics such as:

“*Sinh đà *rát ruột như bào**”

Nơi ra chẳng tiện trông vào *chẳng đàng*”

3.3. *Expressing determination and courage*

Besides idioms to show love, happiness or unhappiness, there are also several idioms using “*heart*” to refer courage or determination.

- + *Lose heart*
- + *Take heart*
- + *with all one's heart*
- + *finds it in one's heart to*
- + *heart sinks*
- + “*a sinking of your heart*”

If you “*take heart*”, you become more courageous. For example:

“So *take heart*
Let His love lead us through the night
Hold on to hope
And take courage again”

(Lyrics of the song “*Take heart*” by Joel Timothy Houston)

On the contrary, if you “*lose heart*”, you feel discouraged and lose determination to continue what you are doing.

If your *heart sinks*, or if you feel “*a sinking of your heart*”, something which you hear or see, makes you feel very discouraged and depressed.

“And my heavy *heart sinks* deep down under you”

(Lyrics of the song “*Love Song*” by Sara Bareilles)

In Vietnamese, we can also find some idioms to express strong courage and determination như *dạ sắt gan vàng, gan vàng dạ sắt, dạ ngọc gan vàng (heart of gold)*

If someone always has strong will and does not begin to flinch when meeting difficulties, we say he has “*dạ sắt gan vàng*”, “*dạ ngọc gan vàng*”

For example:

Hà Tĩnh ta ơi! *gan vàng dạ sắt*, dù mưa

roi nắng gắt, dù bom đạn quân thù, ta vẫn đi lên đi lên ta hát bài ca mà Đảng bắt nhịp cho ta.

(Lyrics of the song “*Bài ca Hà Tĩnh*” by Đỗ Dũng, Lương Văn Trọng)

3.4. Expressing people’s characteristics

“*Heart*” is also used to describe people’s characteristics. One person whose *heart of gold* is very kind and helpful. For example:

I want to live, I want to give, I've been a miner for a *heart of gold*

(Lyrics of the song “*Heart of gold*” by Neil Young)

Someone with *heart of stone* is normally cold. Other idioms of this feature are *from the heart* and *heart- to- heart*.

There are many idioms containing such words as “*bụng*” and “*dạ*” describing the nature of a bad person who always speak the good things but in fact is heartless and wicked such as *miệng bồ tát, dạ ót ngâm, miệng nam mô, bụng bồ dao găm* (*heart of stone*)

In fact, there have been many scholars doing research on the semantic field of words denoting parts of human body or comparing that of the two languages. According to Nguyễn Đức Tồn in the article “*Tiếng gọi bộ phận cơ thể trong tiếng Việt với biểu trưng tâm lý, tình cảm*” (Văn hóa dân gian, No 3, 1994), theoretically we can say that each country can, with its own conceptions, identify a particular psychological phenomenon of a particular human- body part and vice versa. Furthermore, a particular part of human body can have different functions symbolizing different psychological and emotional phenomenon. As a result, studying idioms containing human- body parts in general and the word “*heart*” in particular can help to discover typical features of a nation and understand more about its culture and national soul.

All these things above show the fact that “*heart*” and its synonyms in Vietnamese

such as “*gan, “lòng” “ruột” “tâm” “dạ” “bụng”*” are used to refer to a very important part in our body, very deep part in mental life, courage and determination. These idioms somehow express the characteristics of both English and Vietnamese. Both English and Vietnamese highly appreciate “*heart*” both physically and mentally. Physically, *heart* is the most important part in human body, which guarantees the activities of other parts. Mentally, *heart* is the root of all human feelings such as love, hate, happiness, unhappiness, resentment and so on. The “*heart*” symbolizes the passion, the affection of the soul itself identified with the physiological principle of vitality and common to humans and animals alike. In Vietnamese culture, “*heart*” is normally associated with psychological states related to thought, spirit and feelings. It brings about the effects on other parts inside human body such as belly (*bụng*), bowel (*ruột*), liver (*gan*) and stomach (*dạ*).

3.5. Differences

Idioms containing “*heart*” in English and its synonyms in Vietnamese reflect, to some extent, some social features of these two countries. Consider these following examples:

Nhìn bề ngoài của anh ta không ai nghĩ anh ta lại là loại người “*miệng nam mô, bụng bồ dao găm*”

His love to her is no word to express. He *gives all his heart to her*.

Consider English example above, possessive adjective “*his*” appears in the idiom. There are many heart- based idioms in which possessive determiners and possessive pronoun tend to be exactly put before the word “*heart*” such as: do one’s heart good (*khiến ai trở nên vui vẻ*); eat one’s heart out (*đau khổ, buồn bã; ghen tị thêm thường*), follow one’s heart (*hành động theo tình cảm*), give one’s heart to somebody/ something (*yêu thương ai/ cái gì*). This feature

somehow reflects individualism in English society. It is shown clearly through linguistics. In fact, people living in different regions in England and coming from different class speak different English. There is English for the poor and English for the rich. Individualism result in showing one person's own characteristics in heart- based idioms.

In contrast, using possessive words does not exist in Vietnamese idioms in general and idioms containing heart's synonyms in particular. This feature, to some extent, expresses one characteristic of Vietnamese people- that is collectivism. As a matter of fact, Vietnam is known as a nation of long and hard history. One thousand out of four thousand years of its existence, the country had been under the control of Chinese feudalism. In its modern history, Vietnam had been colonized by the French for 80 years and in war against the American for 25 years. However, the courageous people of this land are not assimilated. On the contrary, they succeed in acculturating the new things brought to them by their conquerors in years of being ruled. Vietnamese people always live together in unity and have high community spirit. Vietnamese people always conform to normal social conventions, which are orally and documentarily defined. This very remarkable feature of society is shown in many Vietnamese idioms with symbols and meanings created and determined by society.

In terms of English and Vietnamese language, there are some differences:

Words in Vietnamese idioms can be changeable such as “*Ghi lòng tạc dạ*” or “*Tạc dạ ghi lòng*”; “*dạ sắt gan vàng*” or “*gan vàng dạ sắt*”. This phenomenon does not happen in English idioms containing the word “*heart*”. It results from linguistic feature of English and Vietnamese.

When studying heart- based idioms, it is

noticeable that we rarely find an English idiom containing the word “*heart*” and another word denoting different part of human body. On the contrary, this phenomenon is very popular with Vietnamese idioms such as “*đứt ruột đứt gan*”, “*mát gan mát ruột*”, “*nẫu gan nẫu ruột*” and “*bầm gan lộn ruột*”. In fact, nearly every idiom in Vietnamese seems to be symmetrical. As a matter of fact, symmetry is one of many principles which Vietnamese people usually have in their way of thinking. People from the Orient in general and Vietnamese people in particular traditionally believe that this world is created partly according to the symmetrical principles, in which man is considered to be the centre. This principle has great influence on the Vietnamese literature, especially folk songs, proverbs and idioms.

English people use only the word

“*heart*” to denote many concepts whereas Vietnamese people have many words such as “*gan*”, “*lòng*” “*ruột*” “*tâm*”, “*bụng*”, “*dạ*”. In fact, with Vietnamese people, the world of feelings and emotions is expressed through all parts inside the belly. This feature can reflect another feature in Vietnamese culture. National tradition, customs and natural and social conditions have formed qualities of carefulness, sophistication and high evaluation to things and people. As a result, with the same concept of being the most important part of human body, English use one word “*heart*” and Vietnamese use much more than that.

Many Vietnamese idioms with the

words “*gan*”, “*lòng*” “*ruột*” “*tâm*” are originated from old stories in the past. For example, the idiom “*gan cóc tí*” is originated from a very old legend “*Cóc kiện trời*”, and so on. As a matter of fact, Vietnamese culture is rich in old legends which reflects plentiful emotional life of Vietnamese people and river- imprinted culture.

In many Vietnamese idioms containing heart's synonyms, there are not a few to show strong determination and courage. This fact may result from Vietnamese's long history struggling against invaders. As a result, in order to get freedom, Vietnamese people had to be courageous, determined and consistent. Therefore, idioms such as "*Gan vàng dạ sắt, gan đồng dạ sắt, lòng gang dạ thép, ghi tâm khắc cốt*" and so on appear much in Vietnamese idioms.

4. Conclusion

In general, this article acts as a contrastive analysis on English and Vietnamese cultures basing on idioms containing the words "*heart*" and its synonyms in Vietnamese ones. The study has focused on both the similarities and differences. It is undeniable to say that idiom is a mirror reflecting the cultural features. In fact, people of one culture express their feeling, attitudes and behaviors through literature material, among which is idiom. Idioms are figurative expressions that help to show attitudes toward something shortly and vividly. There are some main findings as follows. First of all, in terms of similarities, both English and Vietnamese use the word "*heart*" and its synonyms to indicate the most important part in human body both physically and mentally. Feelings such as love, happiness, sadness, determination or courage and people's characteristics are expressed through these kinds of idiom by both English and Vietnamese. Some syntactic structures can be seen in idioms in both languages. Furthermore, the study has found some differences in the light of culture between English and Vietnamese. They are individualism and collectivism of English and Vietnamese culture, linguistic differences. These differences result from the dissimilarities in culture such as people's characteristics, history's origin and people's way of thinking.

In general, the article acts as a contrastive analysis between two cultures basing on one linguistic unit (idiom). This unit is considered as one of the most complicated and interesting parts of any languages. However, not all learners can use idioms fluently and naturally. They have difficulties in understanding, translating and memorizing due to its strange grammatical structures, poor knowledge of mother tongue and cultural gap between two nations. Because of these difficulties in learning idioms, teachers also encounter many problems when dealing with this linguistic unit. Moreover, translating of idioms is not an easy task. It requires the translators the ability to deal with the two languages, two cultures. In order to solve these above problems, the author would like to give some following suggestions to Vietnamese learners. Firstly, teachers should provide some recognizable features of idioms for learners because some students find it difficult to recognize idioms. Another important thing is that the meanings of idioms cannot be guessed from its parts. Hence, teachers, when introducing an idiom, should not only use it in given contexts but also explain clearly its figurative meaning. For those who want to master idioms, they must firstly be hard working. They are advised to learn by heart idioms because idioms have various structures and illogical in combinations. Some idioms are grammatically incorrect; therefore, it is not easy to remember. Moreover, when learning idioms, it should be born in mind that the collocation of an idiom should not be disturbed and the form of the words should not be changed. For example, *to make both ends meet* is an idiom, which is incorrectly used as in the sentence "Today, the middle class people find it difficult to *make both their ends meet*" Secondly, learner's knowledge of mother tongue should be regularly enriched and widened. Thirdly, understanding English culture is also

necessary for understanding the similarities and differences in the form of idioms between two nations.

As for translators, some following detailed hints are given. First, the translators should use an idiom of similar meaning and form such as “*as black as ink*” and “*tối đen như mực*” in equivalent. Moreover, using idioms of similar meaning but dissimilar form should be encouraged such as “*as dumb as statue*” and “*câm như hến*” in equivalent. Next, culture and language competence must be enriched. It helps the translators come to the root of the idiomatic expressions instead of attacking his minds to words and literal meaning. Last but not least, the translators should enhance the skill of mobilizing appropriate translation methods. In fact, there are two translation methods including communicative and semantic methods. In each situation, the translator should take notice to find appropriate method.

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