

# The contrastive analysis in the Vietnamese and English idioms of parts of body

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**Abstract:** *Idioms exist in every language and cannot be deduced merely by studying the words in the phrases. If language learning only relied on linguistic messages without consideration of cultural features, misunderstanding and distortion of target language texts would definitely be unavoidable and the communication would absolutely break off. This paper compares and contrasts four parts of human body in English idioms translated into Vietnamese to identify their figurative meanings. Accordingly, the implication and recommendations are drawn in language learning and teaching.*

**Keywords:** *Language, culture, idioms, the English idioms of parts of human body, figurative meaning*

## 1. Introduction

The issue of human communication is one of the most important subjects attracting numerous studies of linguists, anthropologists, psychologists, and philosophers. Because it is the most important means for communication among human beings, the relation between language, culture, and their mutual interactions have high significance. Like other types of figurative language, idioms appear to be the natural decoders of customs, cultural beliefs, social conventions, and norms. For this reason, learning idioms provides learners with a significant chance to acquire information about the underlying parameters of a language. Awareness of figurative language particularly idioms will improve teaching and assist learners to have better communication strategies.

## 2. Content

### 2. 1. *The relationship among idioms, language and culture:*

#### *\* What is language?*

A definition is cited from Collins English Dictionary: “A language is a structured system of communication. Language, in a broader sense, is the method of communication that involves the use of – particularly human – languages”.

A deeper aspect viewed by Duranti (2003) is “Languages, understood as the particular set of speech norms of a particular community, are also a part of the larger culture of the community that speaks them. Languages differ not only in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, but also through having different “cultures of speaking”.

#### *What is the idiom?*

According to Aksan (1988) cited in Gocmen (2012), idioms- if not taken or adopted from another nation as a result of cultural relations with it- are words that reflect the world view of a nation that speaks a language, its lifestyle, environmental conditions, customs and beliefs, the assets and concepts it gives importance, briefly its material and spiritual culture; displays the way that nation thinks, even its jokes and its inventions, and these words are important from these aspects of literature and folklore, as well as linguistics. Besides, these elements the inner structure and semantic features of each language.

#### *\* What is culture?*

The term “culture” refers to all the characteristics that a particular group of people learn to share in common (Allwood, 1985). Newmark (1988:94) defines culture as “the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression”.

In a broad sense, culture can be seen as the property of a community (the subject of culture); throughout the timeline of shaping and developing, that cultural subject has built up a gigantic collection of experiences and knowledge about the universe and humanity.

#### *\*Idioms and their semantic features:*

Idioms, which carry the traces of a certain cultural heritage and experiences of a society, generally have a specific meaning other than their literal meanings. Therefore, they may not seem meaningful when translated into another language. Many popular Vietnamese idioms when translated into English fail

to convey figurative meanings of source language idioms. For example, “*Áo gấm đi đêm*” (Walking in the night while wearing silk) means to do a useless thing; “*Bán trời không văn tự*” (To sell the sky without entering into a contract) means a person who is not afraid of any consequences.

On the other hand, some English idioms of the colour white translated into Vietnamese and vice versa fail to depict the specific meanings, so it should be found the equivalent phrases or paraphrases to convey the intended meanings.

#### **\*Idioms and their cultural features**

Idioms exist in every language. They are words or phrases that are not meant to be taken literally. In Vietnamese and English cultures, the “blue” is understood quite differently. The blue is considered the colour of the clear sky, river or the sea in sunlight and creates the feeling of peace, serenity or quietness. As a result, the blue colour features positive meanings in the languages. The images of the blue sky, rivers or paddy fields have comfortable, peaceful impression on people in the Vietnamese language such as “*màu xanh hòa bình*”, “*tuổi xanh*” (youth). Blue, however, features negative meaning in the English language, which expresses sadness, depression.

Language not only conveys direct meanings by words and structures, but also it carries the culture of its speakers. The ideal and complex relationship between language and culture shows us that language is closely related to culture that influences each other, develops together and ultimately forming what it is to be human

#### **\*The research methods**

The author analyzes and contrasts the idioms of parts of human body in English and Vietnamese to discover the similarities and differences of meanings in four parts of human body (Head, Ear, Heart and Hand). There are 40 samples of the Vietnamese and English idioms and expressions in parts of human body collected and analyzed. The samples are collected from different kinds of sources from Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary 5th Edition (1995), Lac Viet Dictionary of Vietnamese-English Idioms and Proverbs Explained (1997) and some others a English idioms about parts of human body.

### **2.2. Findings and discussion**

#### **Contrastive analysis on the figurative meaning of parts of human body in English and Vietnamese**

#### **idioms**

As mentioned above, language and culture have an interdependent relationship and language is strongly influenced by its culture as the core value of that culture. It is clear that no culture is the same as other cultures. As a result, the figurative meaning of words in each language is both similar and different due to the effects of its culture.

Parts of the human body mentioned in terms of the figurative meanings in English idioms are head, ear, neck, heart and hand. Through the comparison between two languages, cultural elements have significant effects on the understanding of meanings of parts of the human body in English idioms and it clarifies the close relationship between language and culture.

#### **\* Idioms of head**

bite/snap sb’s head off *mắng nhiếc thậm tệ*  
bring sth to a head/ come to a head *đưa cái gì đạt tới đỉnh điểm*

bury/hide one’s head in the sand *tránh nhìn nhận sự thật*

can’t make head nor tail of sth *không hiểu tí gì*  
do sb’s head in *làm ai bối rối/ khó chịu*  
do sth standing on your head *làm điều gì rất dễ dàng*

get into one’s head that *hiểu một cách đầy đủ, nhận thức rõ*

give sb their head *để cho ai hành động một cách tự do*

have a good head on your shoulders - *có khả năng thực tiễn, từng trải, lão luyện*

keep one’s head above water *giữ không bị mắc nợ; dùy trì công việc*

#### **\*Idioms of ear**

be all ears *nghe chăm chú*

be out of one’s ear *đột nhiên bị sa thải*

be up to one’s ears in sth *ngập đến mang tai*

sb’s ears are flapping *nghe trộm*

play it by ear *ứng biến, ứng tác*

shut/ close one’s ears to sth *bỏ ngoài tai*

with half an ear *chú ý lỏm, bằng nửa ta*

8. falls on the deaf ears *bị bỏ ngoài tai; bị lờ đi*

9. walls have ears *tai vách mạch rừng*

10. a word in sb’s ears *lời rỉ tai ai*

#### **\*Idioms of heart**

break sb’s heart *làm cho ai cảm thấy rất buồn/ xé lòng*

by heart *thuộc lòng/nhập tâm*

have a heart of gold *tấm lòng vàng*

heart and soul *mãnh liệt, thiết tha*

one's heart is in the right place *có tình cảm chân thật hoặc tốt*

sb's heart sinks *cảm thấy buồn/ suy sụp về*

let one's heart rule one's head *để cảm xúc quyết định lý trí*

home is the place where the heart is *chiếm được tình cảm của ai*

steal/ win sb's heart *chiếm được tình cảm của ai*

sick at heart *đau buồn/ khổ sở*

\*Idioms of hand

at the hands of sb/ at sb's hands *do ai gây ra*

be a good/ bad/poor hand at sth *có kỹ năng hoặc kinh nghiệm nào đó*

bind/tie sb hand and foot *tước bỏ tự do hành động của ai*

force sb's hand *bắt ai phải hành động hơi sớm*

(be) hand in a glove (with sb) *ăn cánh với ai*

6. hand in hand -*tay nắm tay*-*gắn bó với nhau*

7. hands are tied *trói tay; không thể làm được*

8. hold sb's hand *giúp đỡ ai*

9. take sb in hand *uốn nắn ai*

10. live from hand to mouth *sống lần hồi, sống chật vật*

Through contrastive analysis on the figurative meanings of parts of body in English idioms, the findings indicate the use of language in interaction goes beyond simply exchanging information about realistic ideas and objects amongst people. If learners only rely on the linguistic meanings to translate English idioms into Vietnamese, it absolutely fails to convey the source language meanings. As a result, it can be said that culture plays a very important role in language learning and teaching.

### 3. Conclusion

The relationship between language and culture is interdependent. Each language has its own cultural effects which define its meaning nuances. It is obvious that language is more than a mere system of sounds and grammar rules. A certain language always exists in close relation to its socio-cultural context. The fact that the meanings of idioms are not definitely related to grammatical rules or the lexical meaning of each word but based on the cultural features. If one is unaware of the culture behind a language, the communication will definitely break down

It can be said that where there is language, there is the idiom. Learning to use common idioms and

expressions will make learners' English sound more native, so it is a good idea to master as many idioms as possible. English idioms and expressions are an important part of everyday English. They come up all the time in both written and spoken English. Because idioms do not always make sense literally, learners will need to familiarize themselves with the meaning and usage of each idiom. That may seem like a lot of work, but learning idioms is fun, especially when learners compare English idioms to the idioms in their own language. It is very important to have a firm understanding of each culture's idioms.

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