

# A contrastive analysis of food idioms in English and Vietnamese

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the similarities and differences in food idioms between English and Vietnamese, offering insights into the cultural contexts from which these idioms originate. Through a detailed analysis of selected idioms, the research highlights how culinary practices, social norms, and historical contexts shape linguistic expressions. The findings reveal both universal themes and unique cultural elements, enriching our understanding of how different societies conceptualize and articulate their experiences through language.

**Keywords:** Vietnamese idioms, Food idioms, English idiom, contrastive analysis

## 1. Introduction

Idioms are a vital component of any language, encapsulating cultural values, beliefs, and daily experiences. Food idioms, in particular, offer a unique window into the culinary habits and social norms of a culture. This study provides a contrastive analysis of food idioms in English and Vietnamese, aiming to uncover the cultural nuances and shared human experiences embedded in these linguistic expressions.

## 2. Content of the research

### 2.1 Literature Review

#### 2.1.1 Food Idioms in Language

Idioms are fixed expressions whose meanings cannot be inferred from the literal meanings of the words that comprise them (Fernando, 1996). They often reflect cultural norms, values, and historical contexts, providing a rich source of information about a society (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Food idioms are prevalent in many languages, as food is a universal aspect of human life. They often draw on everyday experiences and cultural practices, making them particularly vivid and relatable (Gibbs, 1994). Previous studies have examined food idioms in various languages, noting both universal themes and unique cultural elements (Sharifian, 2011).

The study of food idioms reveals not only linguistic creativity but also shared human experiences across different cultures. Researchers have identified several common themes in food idioms, such as abundance and scarcity, quality and value, and behavior and character. These themes often reflect societal attitudes towards food and eating, as well as broader cultural values.

For instance, idioms about abundance often use food to symbolize wealth and prosperity. In English, the phrase “living high on the hog” describes a life of luxury, derived from the idea that the best cuts of pork come from the upper parts of the hog. Conversely, idioms about scarcity may use food to illustrate poverty or deprivation. The Russian idiom “сидеть на хлебе и воде” (to sit on bread and water) signifies living with the bare minimum, emphasizing the importance of bread as a basic sustenance.

Furthermore, food idioms can serve as cultural markers, reflecting historical and regional variations in cuisine and dietary practices. For example, the English idiom “as American as apple pie” underscores the cultural significance of apple pie in the United States, representing national identity and tradition.

In conclusion, food idioms provide a fascinating lens through which to explore the intersection of language, culture, and society. They offer insights into how different cultures perceive and articulate their experiences with food, revealing both universal themes and unique cultural elements (Sharifian, 2011).

#### 2.1.2 English and Vietnamese Idioms

English idioms often reflect Western dietary habits and historical contexts, using foods like bread, butter, and apples to convey meanings (Baker, 2011). Vietnamese idioms, on the other hand, frequently feature rice and other staples of Vietnamese cuisine, emphasizing communal values and moral lessons (Nguyen, 2007).

## 2.2 A contrastive analysis of food idioms in English and Vietnamese

### 2.2.1 The Cultural Context of Food Idioms

#### English Food Idioms

In English-speaking cultures, food idioms often reflect everyday culinary practices and social customs. Many English idioms are derived from foods that are staples in Western diets, such as bread, butter, apples, and cakes. These idioms are used to convey emotions, describe situations, and offer advice in a way that is both colorful and relatable. For example, the idiom “*apple of my eye*” denotes someone who is cherished above all others. This phrase has biblical origins, signifying something precious and valued. Another common idiom, “*piece of cake*,” is used to describe something that is very easy to do, reflecting the enjoyment and simplicity associated with eating cake. English food idioms also reflect historical and cultural practices. The idiom “*spill the beans*,” for instance, likely originated from an ancient method of voting in Greece, where beans were used to cast votes. Similarly, “*bring home the bacon*” comes from medieval England, where bacon was a prized meat, symbolizing success and prosperity.

#### Vietnamese Food Idioms

Vietnamese idioms emphasize collective well-being and moral values, mirroring the culture’s communal orientation. For instance, “*ăn cơm nhà vác tù và hàng tổng*” (*eat rice from home but carry the communal gong*) implies taking on communal responsibilities while using personal resources. This idiom underscores the importance of community service and the interconnectedness of individual and collective responsibilities in Vietnamese society.

Vietnamese food idioms also reflect the agricultural nature of Vietnamese society. Idioms like “*cá không ăn muối cá ươn*” (*fish that doesn’t eat salt rots, meaning children who don’t listen to their parents will suffer*) highlight the importance of traditional wisdom and the consequences of neglecting it. Another idiom, “*một giọt máu đào hơn ao nước lã*” (*one drop of red blood is worth more than a pond of clear water*), emphasizes familial bonds over superficial relationships, with blood and water symbolizing family and outsiders, respectively.

### 2.2.2 Similarities in Food Idioms

#### Universal Themes

Despite cultural differences, English and Vietnamese share universal themes in their food idioms, particularly in describing human emotions and behaviors. Both languages use food-related metaphors to convey various emotional states, making these idioms relatable across cultures. In

English, “*Cool as a cucumber*” describes someone who remains calm and composed, even in stressful situations. This idiom uses the coolness of a cucumber as a metaphor for calmness. In Vietnamese, “*Nóng như lửa*” (*hot as fire*) describes someone who is very angry or excited. The use of temperature to describe emotional intensity is a common thread in both languages. These idioms highlight a shared human tendency to relate physical sensations, like temperature, to emotional experiences.

#### Social Interactions

Food idioms in both languages often describe social interactions and relationships, illustrating how food-related actions can be metaphorically extended to communication and behavior. In English, “*Spill the beans*” means to reveal a secret, likening the action to beans spilling out of a container. In Vietnamese, “*Nói toạc móng heo*” (*speak bluntly, literally “to tear the pig’s claw”*) means to speak very frankly or reveal something bluntly. Both idioms convey the act of revealing hidden information, whether it’s a secret or a blunt truth, demonstrating how food-related actions are used metaphorically to describe communication styles.

#### Personal Qualities

Idioms in both languages also frequently describe personal qualities and characteristics using food metaphors. In English, “*Bad egg*” refers to someone who is untrustworthy or problematic. The rotten egg imagery suggests something that looks fine on the outside but is bad inside. In Vietnamese, “*Đầu tôm*” (*shrimp head*) describes someone who is not very intelligent, likening their head to that of a shrimp, which is considered less substantial. These idioms use food items to convey judgments about personal traits, reflecting how deeply culinary metaphors are embedded in language.

### 2.2.3 Differences in Food Idioms

#### Cultural Specificity

The cultural specificity of each language is evident in the choice of foods featured in idioms, reflecting the dietary staples and culinary traditions of each culture. In English idioms, “*Bread and butter*” refers to the essential elements or main source of income, with bread and butter being basic, everyday foods in Western diets. “*Sour grapes*” signifies resentment over something one cannot have, derived from Aesop’s fable “*The Fox and the Grapes*,” where the fox, unable to reach the grapes, declares them sour.

In Vietnamese Idioms, “*Được ăn cả, ngã về không*” means risking everything for a potential gain,

akin to the English “*all or nothing*.” The imagery of “*eating all or falling to nothing*” reflects the high stakes involved. “Ăn ốc nói mò” means to speak without understanding, literally translating to “eat snails and speak vaguely.” The act of eating snails, which are often associated with careful picking, contrasts with speaking carelessly.

These differences underscore the unique culinary landscapes and cultural contexts from which these idioms emerge, with English idioms often reflecting Western foods and Vietnamese idioms drawing from local cuisine.

### Perceptions and Values

The values and perceptions reflected in food idioms can also differ significantly, highlighting distinct cultural priorities and social norms. In English Idioms, “*Bring home the bacon*” means to earn a living, with bacon representing a desirable and nutritious food. It emphasizes individual responsibility and the importance of providing for one’s family. “*Eat humble pie*”: This idiom means to apologize or accept humiliation. The phrase originates from “*umble pie*,” made from animal entrails, which was considered a humble dish. It underscores the value of humility and contrition.

In Vietnamese Idioms, “Ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây” means to show gratitude, literally translating to “eat the fruit and remember the one who planted the tree.” It emphasizes the importance of remembering and appreciating those who have helped us. “Ăn ở như bát nước đầy” means to live harmoniously, literally “*live like a full bowl of water*.” It reflects the value placed on harmony and balance in relationships.

These idioms highlight the importance of gratitude, harmony, and community in Vietnamese culture, contrasting with the individualism and straightforwardness often emphasized in English idioms.

### Metaphorical Extensions

The way food idioms are metaphorically extended to other aspects of life also differs between the two languages, reflecting different cultural experiences and histories.

In English idioms, “*Big cheese*” refers to an important person. The term “*cheese*” in this context comes from the Persian word “*chiz*,” meaning a thing, and was later adopted in British slang to mean something significant. “*Cherry-pick*” means to choose the best or most desirable items from a group, similar to selecting the ripest cherries from a tree.

It reflects the selective process in Western societies where the best is often pursued.

In Vietnamese idioms, “Đầu cá nấu giấm” means to start something with high expectations but finish with disappointment, similar to the English “*a flash in the pan*.” The imagery of starting with a fish head (a high-quality ingredient) and ending with vinegar reflects expectations versus reality. “Ăn bơ làm biếng” means to be lazy and enjoy a carefree life, literally translating to “*eat butter and be lazy*.” It reflects the idea that those who enjoy luxury often become idle.

These idioms demonstrate how cultural products and practices shape the metaphorical use of language, providing unique insights into each culture’s worldview.

### 3. Conclusion

A contrastive analysis of food idioms in English and Vietnamese reveals both universal human experiences and unique cultural perspectives. While some idioms reflect shared emotions and social behaviors, others highlight the distinct culinary and cultural landscapes of each language. Understanding these idioms not only enriches our linguistic knowledge but also offers a deeper appreciation of the cultural contexts they embody. Food idioms serve as a fascinating window into the soul of a culture, reflecting its values, traditions, and everyday experiences. By exploring and comparing these idioms, we gain valuable insights into how different cultures perceive and articulate their world, ultimately fostering a greater understanding and appreciation of the diversity and richness of human language and experience.

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