

A comparison study of proverbs related to plants in English and Vietnamese

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Abstract: Proverbs and metaphor are so popular in both Vietnamese and many other languages. Using these in teaching and communicating helps to get the purpose of language effectively. In this article we can clearly understand the difference between proverbs and metaphor. Moreover, we will be have a big surprise when comparing some plant proverbs in English and Vietnamese.

Keywords: Proverbs, metaphor, comparison, type, difference...

1. Introduction.

“Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish— a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language” (Lawler, 1983). Since proverbs are a kind of metaphorical expression, the viewpoint leads to the misconception that only when teaching literature should learners of second language be presented with proverbs. As a result, communication breakdown between people from different speaking-regions occurs. Grammar structures frames the conversation, but words and expressions are the necessary basis for an utterance to be comprehensible (Harmer, 1991). Because some teachers and learners fail to acknowledge that during daily talks, proverbs are subconsciously used by native speakers to express several ideas, they also fail to improve the English communicative competence. Besides, according to Low, as cited in his book “Metaphor and Education” (Gibbs, 2008), the aim of learning a language is not simply to learn the fields and skills but also to explore the cultures, which ultimately build up someone’s language acquisition.

2. Content.

2.1. Proverbs:

“Proverbs claim to be a compendium of the wise sayings of several different individuals” (Constable, 2010). They are the results of experiences which have been achieved and passed down from generation to generation. “In the home and in other community settings alike, proverbs are used to pass on rich cultural traditions, to transmit folklore, and to communicate expected codes of behavior” (Information and Communication Technologies in the College of Agriculture Sciences, 2001). As precious treasures which carry great value of a whole nation, proverbs can be used in nearly every aspects of life. They are usually short and rhyming (Nguyen, 2007), thus easy

to learn and remember.

According to Meider (2004), some proverbs have both connotation and denotation, especially regarding the scope of this study about plant proverbs. Therefore, it is best to analyze them in context, culture, religion, etc. (Meider, 2004). As cited in Le (2009), “subgenres include proverbial comparisons (e.g. “as like as two peas”), proverbial interrogatives (e.g. “Does a chicken have lips?”), and twin formulas (e.g. “The higher the tree, the sweeter the plum”) (Meider, 2004)”. Meanwhile, according to Wikipedia, Arora (1984) has categorized the stylistic features of proverbs into four types:

+ alliteration (Forgive and forget)

+ parallelism (While the grass grows, the horse starves)

+ rhyme (No herb will cure love)

+ ellipsis (As the tree, so the fruit)

2.2 Typology of plant proverbs:

According to Bradbury (2002), two cognitive theories of proverb use are metaphor and symbolic activities. Regardless of which theory is applied in the processes of creating and inheriting proverbs, the images of the plants always appear in the mind of the users. Those images are necessarily graphical and specific, in other words, it can be a tree, a flower, a kind of fruit, and so on. Based to that acknowledgement, plant proverbs are divided into the following sub-groups (Sučková, 2010):

Tree proverbs:

This group involves proverbs containing at least one “tree” word (e.g. as the tree falls, so shall it lies) or its subordinate lexeme (e.g. great oaks grow from little acorns).

Part of tree proverbs:

As the name suggested, in this type of proverb, the image mentioned is part of the tree. For example:

“root”, “thorn”, “leaves”, etc.

Fruit proverbs: Not only in English but also in Vietnamese does the majority of proverbs fall into this type. They are sayings in which the “fruit” image appears and plays the most important role in their meaning. For example: “fruit” as in “A tree is known by its fruit” or “apple” as in “a rotten apple spoils the barrel”

Other plant proverbs: Proverbs belonging to this group contain “lexemes that are neither trees nor do they have distinct blossoms” (Sučková, 2010). Some words to notice are “straw”, “grass”, “weed”, etc.

Flower proverbs: Inferentially, these proverbs are groups of words which have at least one lexeme relating to flower and kinds of flower. A well-known saying which is already classified as a flower proverb is “every rose has its thorn.” ellipsis (As the tree, so the fruit)

2.3. Metaphor:

In the book “A Handbook to Literature”, Holman (1985) bases on Richard’s theory of features of a metaphor to come up with the definition of “tenor” and “vehicle”. “The tenor is the idea being expressed or the subject of the comparison; the vehicle is the image by which this idea is conveyed or the subject is communicated” (Holman, 1985). Take the proverb “Don’t judge a tree by its bark” as an example:

VEHICLE	TENOR
A tree	A person
Bark	Appearance/look

Together with “vehicle”, “tenor” helps to form the figurative meaning of an expression, the hidden message behind literal words. In the example above, with the images of “tree” and “its bark”, the proverb offers a conception that “we shouldn’t judge anyone only by their appearance”.

“Through a metaphor, some qualities are transferred from a source domain to a target domain” (Semantic Theory: Metaphor and Metonymy, 2005), thus a metaphor has a cross-domain characteristic (Lakoff, 1993). How one domain is related to another depends on the minds of the giver and the receiver of the saying, therefore, understanding what a metaphor is trying to convey involves the reproduction of an image or symbol and the ability to link them to particular context.

Image of plants in idioms and proverbs in English and Vietnamese: Humans and plants are two organisms in the universe. Ever since the first presence of human on earth, through centuries of living, people and plants have always had a close and harmonized connection to each other. Plants provide habitat (i.e. fields,

forests...), offer food and supply, and even worked side by side helping people during wars.

HUMANS IN PLANT PROVERBS

Don’t judge a tree by its bark. (We shouldn’t judge anyone by their appearance)

An apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. (Children resemble their parents)

A rotten apple spoils the barrel. (An immoral person can have a bad influence on a group)

PLANT PROVERBS REFLECT FACTS

Corn is the staff of life. (Corn is one of the main supplies for people)

While the grass grows the horse starves. (Good things cannot happen if we don’t get to work)

IDEAS IN PLANT PROVERBS

- “Root” implies basis or causes

Money is the root of all evil. (Money causes troubles)

- Fruits are achievements

Forbidden fruit is the sweetest. (The great satisfaction when we accomplished an almost-impossible task)

The higher the tree, the sweeter the plum. (We can have great success even in difficult situation)

Life is just a full bowl of cherries. (Life is full of satisfactory)

- Flowers are achievements

Every rose has its thorn. (Every achievement is accompanied with challenges)

Under the thorn grows the roses. (We can have great success even in difficult situation)

- “Other plants” stands for bad things

Don’t let the grass grow round your feet. (Don’t let it be too late to do things)

Weeds grow apace. (Bad things happen fast)

2.4. A comparative study of plant proverbs in English and Vietnamese.

Similar expressions:

Proverbs are representatives of a country’s culture, values and customs. Since no two countries are alike, each one possesses its own unique proverb collection. However, the process of human minds, i.e. the abilities to think, to perceive, to remember and to reproduce a conception, operates in the same way. In the case of proverbs, both in English-speaking countries and Vietnam, there still exist some similar expressions which base on similar concepts and experiences of people from two communities.

English

Every rose has its thorn

Forbidden fruit is the sweetest

A drowning man will catch a straw

Vietnamese

Hồng nào mà chẳng có gai

Quả cấm, quả ngọt

Chết đuối vớ cả cọng rơm

Ill weeds grow apace Cỏ dại mọc nhanh
Oaks may fall when reeds stand the storm Đến khi cả gió mới biết
As fresh as a daisy cây cứng mềm
Tươi như hoa

Different expressions have close meanings:

In comparison with the similar proverbs in two languages, the different ones seem to be account for a bigger amount. Though the “vehicle”, i.e. the metaphorical image used to compare, are not exactly the same; the idea and value are equivalent. Below are some pairs of corresponding proverbs in English and Vietnamese (Le & Tram, 1986) and (Nguyen, 2007):

English	Vietnamese
Corn is the staff of life	Cơm tẻ là mẹ ruột
Every bean has its black	Mía có đốt sâu đốt lành
There’s a small choice in rotten apples	Không có cá lấy rau má làm ngon
When the grass grows the horse starves	Há miệng chờ sung
The fairest rose at last withered	Măng mọc có lúa, người ta có thì
Make hay while the sun shines	Uôn tre từ thuở còn non Dạy con từ lúc con còn lên ba

2.5. Cross-cultural differences:

The differences in the “vehicle” chosen also lie in the familiarity of the plants with people. For example, the Western countries consider “corn” as one of their main daily food, whereas in Vietnam, “rice” is the most important ingredient for almost all dishes. In the case of the proverb “every bean has its black”, despite the fact that “đậu” (bean) belongs to the five grains in Vietnam, it is not frequently seen in proverbs. Instead, “mía” (sugarcane), which can be easily found in countryside provinces, is used. Similarly, “lúa”, “rau má”, “măng”... are prior choices thanks to their casualness with Vietnamese.

Previous discussion has partly explained for the reason why lot of proverbs in both English and Vietnamese cannot be found any equivalents in terms of plants. Here are some illustrations for this point:

VIETNAMESE EXCLUSIVE PLANT PROVERBS:

- Người đẹp vì lụa, lúa tốt vì phân (*The tailor makes a man*): Different looks make people different.
- Mạnh vì gạo, bạo vì tiền (*Money makes the mare go*): Money is the power to deal with anything.
- Trồng dưa được dưa, trồng cà được cà (*As you sow, so shall you reap*): People will have to accept whatever result of their actions.
- Xay lúa thì khỏi bể em (*A man cannot spin and reel at the same time*): People cannot do two things or be at two places at the same time.

ENGLISH EXCLUSIVE PLANT PROVERBS:

- As like as two peas in a pod (*Giống nhau như hai giọt nước*): Two things are exactly alike.
- He that loves the tree loves the branches (*Yêu nhau yêu cả đường đi, ghét nhau ghét cả tông chi họ hàng*): When people are in love, they love everything about their lovers.
- The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree (*Cha nào con nấy*): Children resemble their parents.
- The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence (*Đứng núi này trông núi nọ*): Some people can never be satisfied with what they already have.

3. Conclusion.

Because of the important role proverbs play in enhancing students’ capabilities of communicating, translating and understanding cultures of the target language, their presentations need to be integrated in the process of second-language teaching and learning. Adapted from (Elkiliç, 2008), here are some suggested stages and methods applied when teaching proverbs:

- Proverbs containing cultural aspects should be taught comparatively.
- Proverbs containing potential interference - due to the source or target language culture - should be given priority.
- Most common proverbs should be taught first.
- In specific situation proverbs should not be neglected, on the contrary, they should be taught explicitly in text as well as in isolation.

There’s an old Chinese proverb: “Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand”. The most essential part of teaching and learning is how to let students involve themselves in the progress of activities, and how to blow on the sparks of motivation inside of them. If students are encouraged and allowed to participate actively in the lesson, “they will widen their knowledge in idioms, improve their ability to use them when necessary and make them part of their active vocabulary” (Urrea). In the lesson, teachers and learners should co-operate to gain the most benefits and achieve the most successful outcome.

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