THÀNH TỐ NGỮ NGHĨA CỦA THÀNH NGỮ VÍ VON TRONG TIẾNG ANH VÀ TIẾNG VIỆT

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Bài viết bàn về thành tố ngữ nghĩa của thành ngữ ví von trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt. Kết quả nghiên cứu chỉ ra sự tương đồng và khác biệt giữa thành ngữ ví von tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt trên hai bình diện: (1) mức độ thúc đẩy tường minh của các thành tố, và (2) kết cấu ngữ nghĩa của các thành tố. Phân tích thành tố, miêu tả, so sánh và đối chiếu là các phương pháp chính được sử dụng trong nghiên cứu này.

Từ khóa: *thành ngữ ví von, thành tố ngữ nghĩa, mức độ thúc đẩy tường minh, kết cấu ngữ nghĩa.*

The paper discussed the semantic components of similized idioms in English and Vietnamese. The findings of the study pointed out the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese similized idioms in terms of (1) motivation degrees, and (2) semantic framework of the components. Componential analysis, descriptive analysis, comparison and contrast were main methods used in the present study.

Key words: *similized idioms, semantic components, motivation degree, semantic framework.*

SEMANTIC COMPONENTS OF SIMILIZED IDIOMS IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE

An investigation of similized idioms in English and Vietnamese in terms of semantic components is carried out in the current study. Data for the present analysis of English and Vietnamese are mainly collected from 10 dictionaries listed in Sources of Data.

The collected data forms a corpus of 4,134 idioms in English and 4,053 idioms in Vietnamese. It is realized in the corpus that 516 (12.48%) of our English data are similized idioms whereas similized idioms in Vietnamese are 699 (17.25%).

The semantic components of similized idioms in the present study are analyzed according to Katz & Fodor's *componential theory* (1963). It refers to the motivation degrees (transparent, i.e. all the components are explicit; semi-transparent, i.e. some components are explicit and the other are implicit; semi-opaque, i.e. all the components are implicit but possibly interpretable; and opaque, i.e. all the components are implicit) (Fernando & Flavell, 1981; Fernando, 1996), the associations between the literal readings and the idiomatic meanings (Langlotz, 2006), and the semantic compositions of the component parts (Hành, 2008).

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1. What is meant by 'similized idioms'?

Hành (2008, p. 101) states that similized idioms are fixed groups of words coming from comparisons and having the figurative meanings such as *rách như tổ đỉa* (all tattered and torn), *khỏe như vâm* (very strong)*, như cá nằm trên thớt* (be in a dangerous situation), *nhảy như choi choi* (jump continuously), etc. Structurally, it is realized that a similized idiom is similar to an ordinary comparison; however, they differ from each other in some respects. An ordinary comparison refers to two things belonging to the same category to show the degrees of their similarity or difference. On the contrary, a similized idiom involves one thing which is put in the same line with another of a different category to emphasize or exaggerate certain properties. It is called idiomatic comparison which is used to make the language more vivid. Let's have a look at the following examples:

(i) *She is as rich as her sister.*

(ii) *She is as rich as Croesus* (She is very rich).

Sentence (i) is an ordinary comparison since it refers to two people of the same category. The woman's sister is rich and the woman is rich, too, but we do not know how rich she is. However, sentence (ii) is an idiomatic comparison in which the comparison is made between a woman and Croesus. It shows how rich the woman is; we can refer to it by imagining the property Croesus has.

In the present study, similized idioms are regarded as fixed groups of words which are formed by their specific comparative means such as *as … as, like, as*, etc in English (Seidl & McMordie, 1988) and *như, tựa, bằng, tày*, etc in Vietnamese (Hành, 2008). In terms of structural components, similized idioms are under construction of *as A as B* (e.g. *as mad as a hatter* (abnormal in behaviour)), *A like B* (e.g. *swear like a bargee* (be foul-mouthed)), *[…] like B* (e.g. *like a dog with two tails* (delightedly)), *[…] as B* (e.g. *as a thief in the light* (unobserved)) in English, and *A như B* (e.g. *đẹp như tiên* (very beautiful)), *(A) như B* (e.g. *(bụng) như mở cờ* (feel very happy and contented)), *như B* (e.g. *như vịt nghe sấm* (understand nothing)) in Vietnamese.

2. Motivation Degrees of Semantic Components

In our collected data, there also exist two motivation degrees of similized idioms: semi-transparent and semi-opaque.

2.1. Semi-transparent Similized Idioms

It is realized in this investigation that about 77.52% of our English data and about 82.69% of our Vietnamese data are semi-transparent similized idioms (see Figure 1). The semi-transparency of similized idioms refers to the idioms having both explicit and implicit component parts. The meanings of these idioms are from one component or one component part of the idioms (Đức, 1995; Hành, 2008).
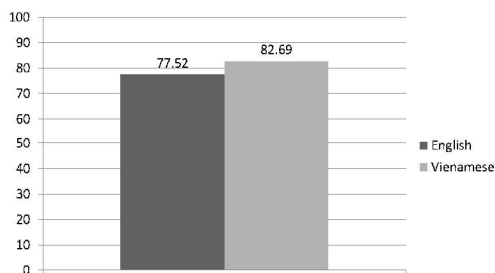
Figure 1: Distribution of semi-transparent similized idioms

Figure 2: Semantic components of semi-transparent similized idioms in English and Vietnamese

For the similized idioms with *as A as B/A like B* form in English and *A như B* form in Vietnamese, A is usually explicit for B being implicit (see Figure 2). The meanings of the idioms are focused on *A*, and *as B/như B* usually indicates the degree, the manner or the attribute of A (see Section 3.2). *As busy as a beaver* (very busy) in English and *đẹp như tiên* (very beautiful) in Vietnamese are the examples. The meanings of these idioms are focused on *busy* and *đẹp*. *As a beaver* and *như tiên* indicate the degrees of *busy* and *đẹp*. It is noteworthy that some similized idioms are constructed in *as A as B/A like B* (*A như B* in Vietnamese) in which both A and B are implicit (see the next section).
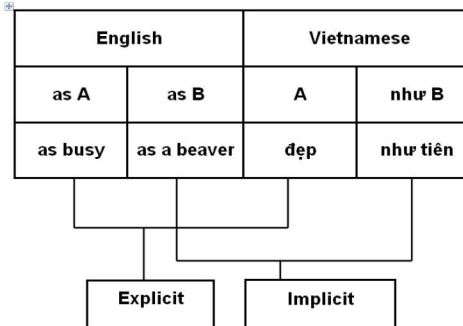
It is quite easy to analyze the association between the literal reading and the idiomatic meaning of this idiom type (see Figure 3). Since A is explicit, the work we have to finish is analyzing B. Let's have a look at the idiom *as busy as a bee* (very busy) in English and *chậm như rùa* (very slowly) in Vietnamese. A (*busy/chậm*) are completely explicit; however, the problem is that we do not know how busy/slow A is. Understanding the nature of *bee* and *rùa* (tortoise) helps to clarify the degree of A.

Figure 3: The association between the literal reading and idiomatic meaning of *as busy as a bee* in English and *chậm như rùa* in Vietnamese

2.2. Semi-opaque Similized Idioms

In our data of similized idioms, 22.48% in English and 17.31% in Vietnamese are semi-opaque (see Figure 4). The similized idioms with *as/like B* form in English and *như B* form in Vietnamese are usually semi-opaque. The constituents of these idioms are quite opaque but possibly interpretable (see Figure 5). Let's have a look at *like water off a duck's back* (have no effect) in English and *như nước đổ đầu vịt* (have no effect) in Vietnamese. The act of pouring water on the duck's back/head brings no results because one of the properties of the feather is water resistance. It means that the duck's back/head cannot keep any water. This helps us relate to the fact that doing something does not bring any desired results. In any case, the content of B can be deduced in this way. Here are some more examples: *like a lamb* (good-natured), *like a duck to water* (feel comfortable), etc in English and *như chó với mèo* (be always conflictive), *như cá nằm trên thớt* (in a very dangerous situation), *như mèo thấy mỡ* (covet something), etc in Vietnamese.
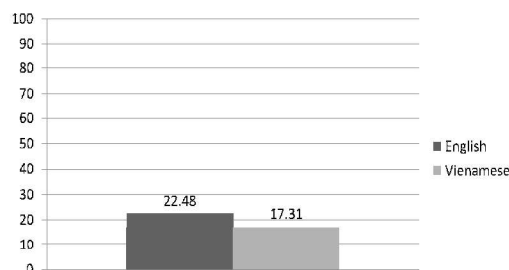

Figure 4: Distribution of semi-opaque similized idioms in English and Vietnamese
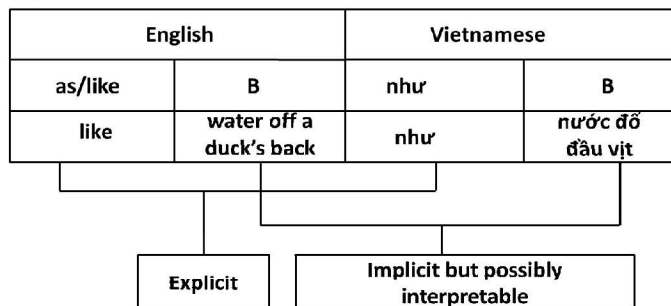

Figure 5: Semantic components of semi-opaque similized idioms in English and Vietnamese

As introduced in the section above, although some similized idioms are constructed in *as A as B/A like B* in English and *A như B in* Vietnamese, they are still semi-opaque. *As black as coal* (very dirty) and *đen như chó* (very unlucky) are the examples. As can be seen from (iii) and (iv), A does not refer to the colour; it describes the nature of B (see Figure 6). *Coal* makes the others dirty when being touched. Generally, the Vietnamese do not appreciate *dogs*. They are usually treated in a bad way and killed for food. It is the reason why *dogs* are regarded as unlucky animals. This analyzability shows that 'the constituent structures of the idioms profile the literal scenes, whereas the idiomatic meanings

denote the semantic extensions from these conceptualizations' (Langlotz, 2006, p. 90).

(iii) Look at your hands, boy, they are *as black as coal* – you can't come to the

table like that (Cowie, Mackin & McCaig, 1993, p. 17).

(iv) Tháng này mình *đen như chó* (very unlucky), làm việc gì cũng hỏng ăn.

English	Vietnamese
IDIOMATIC MEANING	IDIOMATIC MEANING
very dirty	gặp nhiều điều không may
Analyzability ↑	Analyzability ↑
as black | as coal	đen | như chó
LITERAL READING	LITERAL READING

Figure 6: The association between the literal reading and idiomatic meaning of *as black as coal* in English and *đen như chó* in Vietnamese

3. Compositions of Semantic Components

The structural components of similized idioms can be constructed in *as A as B, A like B* or *like/as B* in English, and *A như B, như B* or *AB* in Vietnamese. The typical feature of these idioms in both languages is that they have both the topic of comparison (A) and the subject compared (B) (in some cases A can be omitted). Existentially, the relationship between A and B can be **visibility** and **invisibility**.

3.1. Visibility

Visibility refers to similized idioms whose component parts (A and B) are available. In some cases, A is omitted; however, it can be easily deduced from B. Thus, visibility is sub-divided into transparency and semi-transparency:

(a) Transparency: A and B are both available: *as solid as a rock* (very hard), *as smooth as a baby's bottom* (very smooth), *spend money like water* (spend money freely), etc in English, and *nóng như lửa* (be very bad-tempered), *đỏ như son* (very red), *đẹp như tiên* (very beautiful), *gầy như con mắm* (very thin), etc in Vietnamese.

(b) Semi-transparency: B is available and A is omitted but possibly deduced from B. The idiom *như choi choi* (jumb continuously) is an example. *Choi choi* is B from which *nhảy* (A) is inferred. This type of relationship is only found in our Vietnamese data: *như nắc nẻ* (laugh oneself helpless), *như cờ lông công* (manage to do something with much difficulty), *như bồ sứt cạp* (very big), etc.

3.2. Invisibility

The existence of A and B is one of the criteria for similized idioms to be established. However, there are several idioms constructed in *as/like B* in English and *như B* in Vietnamese, i.e. A is omitted and impossibly deduced from B. Indeed, A is still invisibly existential and completely opaque. This is the reason why these idioms can themselves denote pure concepts. This type of relationship is found in both English and Vietnamese: *as a rule* (almost always), *as a matter of fact* (simply), *like a duck to water* (feel comfortable), *like a cat on hot bricks* (nervously), etc in English, and *như nước đổ lá khoai* (have no effect), *như vịt nghe sấm* (impossible to understand), *như ngàn cân treo sợi tóc* (in a very dangerous situation), etc in Vietnamese).

The compositions of semantic components of similized idioms are also motivated by the relationship between A and B. In fact, B can be the degree of A (e.g. *as solid as a rock* (very hard) in English and *tối như hũ nút* (very dark) in Vietnamese); the manner of A (e.g. *swear like a bargee* (be foul-mouthed) in English and *nhảy như choi choi* (jump

continuously) in Vietnamese); the attribute of A (e.g. *like peas in a pod* (the same) in English and *như nước đổ lá khoai* (have no effect) in Vietnamese).

4. Semantic Components of English and Vietnamese Similized Idioms Compared

In this section, we point out the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese similized idioms in terms of semantic components.

4.1. Similarities

Similized idioms can be semi-transparent (e.g. *as busy as a beaver* (very busy) in English and *đẹp như tiên* (very beautiful) in Vietnamese), or semi-opaque (e.g. *like water off a duck's back* (have no effect) in English and *như nước đổ đầu vịt* (have no effect) in Vietnamese). The typical semantic feature of similized idioms in both languages is that they have both the topic of comparison (A) and the subject compared (B) (in some cases A can be omitted). The existential relationship between A and B in the semantic compositions of similized idioms can be visibility or invisibility (see Table 1).

Main types	Sub-types	Realization
Visibility	Transparency	A and B are both available.
Invisibility		A is omitted and impossibly deduced from B.

Table 1: The existential relationship between A and B of similized idioms found in both English and Vietnamese

Additionally, in the semantic compositions of similized idioms, B can be the degree of A (e.g. *as smooth as a*

baby's bottom (very smooth) in English and *tối như hũ nút* (very dark) in Vietnamese); the manner of A (e.g. *spend*

money like water (spend money freely) in English and *nhảy như choi choi* (jumb continuously) in Vietnamese); the attribute of A (e.g. *like peas in a pod* (the same) in English and *như nước đổ lá khoai* (have no effect) in Vietnamese).

4.2. Differences

Apart from the features shared by both languages, the analysis of the data has revealed some significant differences between English and Vietnamese symmetrical idioms in terms of semantic components. The primary difference lies in the motivation degrees of semantic components, which are illustrated in Figure 7.
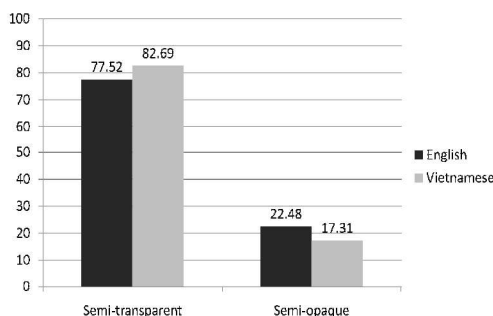

**Figure 7: Motivation degrees of
similized idioms
in English and Vietnamese**

Figure 7 shows the differences between English and Vietnamese in terms of motivation degrees of semantic components of similized idioms. Both languages share a quite similar rate of semi-transparent similized idioms (77.52% in English and 82.69% in Vietnamese) and semi-opaque similized idioms (22.48% in English and 17.31% in Vietnamese). In terms of compositions,

the existential relationship between A and B of similized idioms refers to semi-transparency, i.e. B is available and A is omitted but possibly deduced from B. This type of relationship in the semantic compositions is unique to Vietnamese.

5. Conclusion

In the present study, the semantic components of similized idioms in English and Vietnamese are investigated under their motivation degrees and compositions. The motivation degrees of semantic components conform to semi-transparent and semi-opaque. The compositions of semantic components of similized idioms refer to the relationship between the topic of comparison (A) and the subject compared (B) (sometimes A can be absent). The existential relationship between A and B is divided into visibility including transparency and semi-transparency (only distinctive in Vietnamese), and invisibility. In the semantic compositions, B can be the degree, the manner, or the attribute of A. The findings of the study reveal that similized idioms in both English and Vietnamese are possibly interpretable.

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