



Research Article

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Idiomatic Similes in English and Vietnamese: A Contrastive Analysis

Vu Mai Phuong

M.A, University of Finance - Marketing,
Vietnam

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Abstract

Simile is deemed to be the simplest, yet frequently used in both English and Vietnamese discourse, which has become an essential and enduring part of daily speech as well as literature. A proper understanding of similes in both languages is a bridge to effective communication in the target language when learners have a chance to access extra-linguistic aspects and apply them to develop their linguistic competence considerably. However, due to its close relation with metaphor, in-depth research on simile itself has been somewhat limited and neglected. This paper is devoted to the exploration of similarities and differences between the use of idiomatic similes in English and Vietnamese. Based on the grounds of this contrastive analysis, some recommendations for teaching and learning similes within EFL context will be proposed and discussed.

Keywords: idiomatic similes; Vietnamese; metaphor; contrastive analysis; teaching English

1. Introduction

Simile is deemed to be the simplest, yet frequently used in both English and Vietnamese discourse, which has become an essential and enduring part of daily speech as well as literature. In communication, similes can enhance the imagery in both spoken and written language, making comparisons more impressive. In language learning, examples of similes can help learners expand their vocabulary and develop their cultural competence when making associations with those in their mother tongue. However, due to its close relation with metaphor, in-depth research on simile itself has been somewhat limited and neglected. Moreover, in Vietnam, little attention has been paid to develop students' idiomatic competence in an EFL context. Therefore, this paper is devoted to the exploration of similarities and differences between the use of idiomatic similes in English and Vietnamese. Based on the grounds of this contrastive analysis, some recommendations for teaching and learning similes within EFL context will be proposed and discussed.

2. Theoretical Background

There is a general confusion in the public mind between similes and metaphor due to the existence of the same underlying conceptual metaphor, the same source and target domains in their structures. Under discussion by Israel, Harding and Tobin (2004), simile is considered as a distinctive figure of speech which requires an explicit comparison construction to make itself distinguish from metaphor.

Sharing similar ideas, Ivandekić (2011) confirmed the most widely recognized distinction between similes and metaphor is whether the underlying conceptual metaphor is made explicit in their structures or not. Hence, she defined simile as a figure of speech pertaining to the comparison between “two unlike entities” (p.179) by the use of copulas *as* and *like*. She then gave a more in-depth analysis of similes when asserting that “two **unlike** entities” is a salient feature to distinguish metaphoric similes from literal similes which are no more than direct comparisons. Pierini (2007) also suggested a way to discriminate between literal and non-literal similes by reversing their topic and vehicle. In that case, the literal simile is still understandable while the non-literal one becomes nonsense, or its meaning gets severely distorted.

Similes have been viewed at different angles and thus classified according to various criteria by numerous scholars. Among them, idiomatic similes and creative similes were considered as the two extremes of the scale ranging from conventionalized and fixed expressions to totally fresh and unexpected ones found in literary works. Hrdličková (2023) emphasized the need for English language learners with high proficiency levels to be able to acquire and use conventionalized similes efficiently to enhance their language skills. Therefore, idiomatic similes in English and Vietnamese would be the focus of the discussion below.

3. A Comparison of English and Vietnamese

3.1 Similarities

According to Fromilhague (as cited in Pierini, 2007, p. 23) a simile in English has a tripartite structure, which can be also observed in Vietnamese, comprising:

- ‘Topic’, or *comparandum* (*cd*): the target domain, “the entity described by simile”
- ‘Vehicle’, or *comparatum* (*ct*): the source domain, ‘the entity to which the topic is compared’
- *Comparator* (*c*): a comparison marker which explicitly links *comparandum* with *comparatum*

In addition, there exists *tertium comparationis* (*tc*), the ‘similarity feature’, by which a comparison between two entities are drawn. This component can be overtly or covertly expressed in a simile.

Three basic patterns below can be found in both English and Vietnamese similes:

Table 1:

English	Vietnamese
<i>as</i> (tc) <i>as</i> (ct) (tc) + <i>like</i> (ct) <i>like</i> (ct)	(tc) + <i>như</i> (ct) <i>như</i> (ct)

Despite the fact that different cultures have their own aesthetic perspectives on human beauty, some inevitable coincidences can still be found in the way English and Vietnamese people expressing themselves through idiomatic similes. In this paper, the similarities in the way native speakers of English and of Vietnamese apply similes in their speech will be illustrated following the classification of target domain into five categories: the domain of human beings, the domain of animals, the domain of objects, the domain of abstract concepts and other domains. Each domain will be subdivided into smaller sections and then analyzed according to the conceptual metaphors marked (Ivandekić, 2011). Among them, similarities are mostly noticed in the domain in which human beings and objects are focused on. In both languages, human beings are the subject of most similes which refer to the relationship between people, their physical appearance, emotions, behaviors and features of character. The following pairs of idioms are considered equivalent from both lexical and semantic aspects:

Table 2:

Domains		English	Vietnamese
The domain of human beings	Physical appearance	1as pretty as a picture 2as white as snow	đẹp như tranh trắng như tuyết
	Character traits	3as fierce as a tiger 4as slow as a snail 5as timid as a hare	đữ như cọp chậm như sên nhát như thỏ đế
	Feelings and states	6as wet as a drowned rat 7as quick as lightening 8as thick as ants	ướt như chuột lột nhanh như chớp đồng như kiến
	Behavior and Interpersonal relationship	9to cry like a baby 10to stick like a leech 11to fight like cat and dog 12to spend money like water 13to follow like a shadow 14like father like son	khóc như đứa trẻ bám dai như đĩa đánh nhau như chó với mèo tiêu tiền như nước như hình với bóng cha nào con nấy
The domain of objects		15as hard as a rock 16as heavy as lead 17as smooth as velvet	cứng như đá nặng như chì mịn như nhung
The domain of abstract concept		18time flies like an arrow.	thời gian như thể tên bay.
Miscellaneous domains		19as loud as thunder 20as red as blood 21as smooth as velvet	vang như sấm đỏ như máu mịn như nhung

3.2 Differences

Firstly, it is noted that similes in Vietnamese formed with rhymes and reduplicatives considerably outnumber those in English: *một nụ cười bằng mười thang thuốc bổ*, *chị em dâu như bầu nước lạnh*, *lừ đừ như ông Tư vào đền*, *lúng túng như thợ vụng mất kim*, *lanh chanh như hành không muối*....

Secondly, similes are overtly signaled with a few comparison makers such as ‘like’, ‘as’, ‘as if’,... in English while the range of those function words in Vietnamese is clearly greater in number, for example: ‘là’, ‘như’, ‘tựa’, ‘bằng’, ‘hệt’, ‘như thể’, ‘tựa như’, ‘như là’, ‘chẳng khác gì’, ‘giống’,... Moreover, differences between English and Vietnamese similes are recognized in the two cases below:

3.3 Same topic – different vehicle

In the first stance, there is a widespread agreement that idiomatic similes mainly originate from the observation and connection people make during their daily life and labor. That is to say cultural background should be taken into account in explanation about the way the same values of content are expressed via different images in English and Vietnamese similes. Consider, for example, the animal imagery which is a rich source of vehicles used in idiomatic similes. As there has been a close bond between language and culture, cultural dissimilarities lead to marked variations in the way particular animal images are used for creating an association with human characters, feelings or behaviors. In an example given by Tô Minh Thanh (2008) to illustrate the above proposition, “*Tom eats like a horse*” in English should be equivalent to “*Tom ăn như heo*” in Vietnamese rather than to

“Tom ăn như ngựa.” Thus, it is essential to perceive that in nomadic culture, British people have a close attachment to farm animals like *horse*, *donkey* or *lamb*, and farm products like *butter*. Yet, from the standpoint of Vietnamese, the images of animals such as *buffalo*, *pig*, *cat*, *dog*, *chicken*, or *local crops* are much more popular within the context of rice-production agriculture in their country:

Table 3:

English idioms	Literal translation	Vietnamese equivalence
(1) as silly as a sheep/ a goose	ngu như cừu/ như ngỗng	ngu như bò
(2) as stubborn as a mule	lì như la	lì như trâu
(3) as gentle as a lamd	hiền như cừu	hiền như củ khoai
(4) as fat as butter	mập như bơ	mập như heo

Besides cultural factors, some similes in English and Vietnamese were brought into being by religion. Whilst English similes referring to religion mainly derive their source domain from Bible (e.g. *as rich as Creosote*, *as wise as Solomon*, *fallen like Lucifer...*), Vietnamese similes originate from Buddhist characters and symbols (e.g. *vững như chùa Bà Đanh*, *hiền như Bụt...*).

In actuality, a lot of pairs of similes in the two languages can be found to show how the same topic connotes different images:

Table 4:

english idioms	literal translation	vietnamese equivalence
as dry as a bone	khô như xương	khô như gối
as easy as abc	đễ như abc	đễ như trở bàn tay
as merry as a cricket	vui như đế	vui như tết
as red as a beetroot	đỏ như củ cải đường	đỏ như gấc
as ugly as a scarecrow	xấu như bù nhìn	xấu như ma lem
as alike as two peas in a pod	giống nhau như hạt đậu trong vỏ	giống nhau như hai giọt nước
as poor as a mouse church	nghèo như chuột nhà thờ	nghèo rớt mồng tơi

3.4 Same vehicle – different topic

Some idiomatic similes in English and Vietnamese may contain the same lexical component as the source domain which actually refers to different topics with different values of content. To make it clear, let us consider some following examples:

as light as a feather – ‘nhẹ tựa lông hồng’

In the English language, people use this idiom with the sense of “very light in weight”, whilst Vietnamese speakers employ it to express one’s viewpoint (especially from a brave soldier’s perspectives) in which his own death is just a trivial matter and therefore, he is willing to sacrifice his life for a noble purpose.

as bright as day – ‘rõ như ban ngày’

English people often use this simile to depict a place or a moment of time which is full of light without darkness, whilst Vietnamese people, besides the above sense, further refer to it as a state in which everything is clear without vagueness or skepticism.

4. Pedagogical Implication

Through a contrastive analysis of idiomatic similes in English and Vietnamese, teachers can anticipate some problems learners may have when they encounter this figure of speech within the EFL context. While awareness of similarities can facilitate learners’ memorization, notice of

differences can ensure the accurate use of idiomatic similes in spoken and written English. Teaching idiomatic similes should be incorporated into teaching vocabulary and reading, especially for advanced learners, to enrich their cultural and linguistic knowledge so that they can apply this invaluable resource to develop both receptive and productive skills. Grasping the meaning of many idiomatic similes also assists learners in reading between the lines, listening effectively and speaking naturally.

For learners of lower level, similes are striking examples of comparative forms ‘...as (adjective/adverb) as...’ and ‘...(verb) like...’ in grammar lessons. Students’ creativity can be enhanced through the activity of generating their own similes by combining the topic, adjective or verb with the vehicle. However, the teacher should bear in mind that idiomatic similes are necessarily taught and learnt in meaningful contexts such as dialogues or stories rather than through a list of discrete items so that learners can retain them easily and later on, use them effectively in their own communicative contexts.

Moreover, there is a presence of similes in which the source domain relates specifically to well-known characters or persons in the history or literature of each nation. Learners should be equipped with adequate background information about the origin of those similes to get a better grasp of their meanings and functions as well.

Since cultural and historical gaps are the major hindrance faced to learners in understanding the precise meaning of English idiomatic similes, literal translation should be avoided. Instead, figurative meanings should be prioritised and therefore, teachers have to find the optimum equivalence of the target simile for learners to recall without causing alien feelings among them.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, English and Vietnamese discourses are replete with idiomatic similes used to portrait and evaluate people and phenomena in relation to other aspects of life. A proper understanding of similes in both languages is a bridge to effective communication in the target language when learners have a chance to access extra-linguistic aspects and apply them to develop their linguistic competence considerably.

It will be beneficial to both students and teachers if a future study can be conducted to investigate frequently used idiomatic similes employed by native English speakers in order to include them in the teaching materials. In addition, valuable research should explore common problems inherent in translating similes from English to Vietnamese and vice versa. Furthermore, future work should be undertaken to explore the differences and similarities in the interpretation of similes among children and adult EFL students.

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