

Idioms With Comparisons in English: Conventional Comparative Images From Animals, Objects and Materials

Truong Thi Thuy

Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Labour and Social Affairs, Hanoi, Vietnam

Le Vien Lan Huong

Foreign Languages Department, Vietnam Military Medical University, Hanoi, Vietnam

Hoang Tuyet Minh

Faculty of Applied Linguistics, International School, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam

Dang Nguyen Giang*

Faculty of Languages, Tan Tao University, Tay Ninh, Vietnam

Abstract—Idioms with comparisons are regarded as a prevalent category of idioms in English. They comprise three component parts, namely comparative contents, conventional comparative images, and comparative connectors, wherein the conventional comparative images elucidate the comparative contents (Thúy et al., 2025). The aim of the research is to interpret the conventional comparative images of idioms with comparisons, which helps to make the idiomatic meanings explicit. This study utilizes a predominantly qualitative mixed-method approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). There are 397 idioms with comparisons concerning the conventional comparative images from animals, objects and materials collected by a manual search of English idiom dictionaries. It is revealed in the study that the proportion of conventional comparative images from animals (31.55%) is higher than those from objects and materials (27.53%). Conventional comparative images can come from the shapes, appearances, typical characteristics, personalities, activities, reactions, relationships, body parts, etc., of animals; originate from objects, encompassing their shapes, prominent external features, and properties; or be materials presented through their properties, colors, and nuances.

Index Terms—idioms with comparisons, conventional comparative images, animals, objects, materials

I. INTRODUCTION

Numerous efforts have been undertaken to generate idioms in English (Conklin, 1962; Weinreich, 1969; Chafe, 1970; Fraser, 1970). Idiomatologists including Smith (1925), Chafe (1970) and Makkai (1972) concur that almost every idiom displays specific periods in its construction. The authors assert that idiomatization occurs through diachronic evolution and that generative rules do not sufficiently explain idiomatization.

Fernando and Flavell (1981) are the scholars who recognize the shortcomings of earlier linguists. They assert that idiom and idiomatization are distinct concepts. They concentrate on the characteristics of idioms, including morpho-syntactic construction, semantic attributes, homonymy, and syntactic features. They also investigate several concerns that emphasize an idiom as a lexeme that is noncorrelative in its syntax and hence figurative regarding its component parts. The most definitive and nuanced criterion for determining idiomatization is unequivocally the semantic aspect. Fernando and Flavell (1981) delineate the transparent-opaque continuum for the analysis of idioms. In defining an idiom, three specific characteristics are emphasized: (1) a noncorrelative syntax leading to figurativeness, (2) homonymy, and (3) institutionalization (Fernando & Flavell, 1981).

From a cognitive perspective, Nunberg et al. (1994) categorize idioms in English into (1) idiomatic expressions whose meanings are not able to be inferred from their individual components and (2) idiomatically combined expressions where the constituent parts have identifiable contributions to their figurative meanings. According to Fernando (1996), English idioms are divided into (1) literal idioms, (2) semi-idioms, and (3) pure idioms. Taylor (2002) discusses the correlated themes of idioms and constructions. The themes are correlated, as both idioms and constructions can be viewed as figurative units that link a phonological depiction to a semantic interpretation. His view suggests that constructions are typically defined at a high level of generalization, allowing for a broad range of expressions. Nonetheless, the range of usage for a construction may not be entirely predictable; constructions exhibit varying levels of idiomatization. Idioms typically require specification at a more detailed level of abstraction. Taylor

* Corresponding Author.

(2002) also indicates that the distinction between idioms and compositions is a gradient, fundamentally related to the level of diagrammatic representation at which a unit is defined. Langlotz (2006) examines several forms of adnominal modification in specific variants of idioms with verbs in English. He supposes that the aspects of idiom transparency arise from the language users' capacity to reinterpret the double semantic pattern through conceptual metonymies and metaphors (Langlotz, 2006).

Giang, in his book published in 2018, classifies idioms in English into three types: idiomatic pairs, idioms with comparisons, and ordinary idioms. His study presents an initial investigation into the comparative contents of English idioms with comparisons from a cognitive view. Idioms with comparisons are considered a common kind of idiom in English. They consist of three component parts: comparative contents, conventional comparative images and comparative connectors, in which the conventional comparative images help make the comparative contents transparent (Thúy et al., 2025). According to Thúy et al. (2025), the comparative contents of idioms with comparisons can be either closed or open, with closed comparative contents being more common and shown through different language units like adjectives, verbs, verb phrases, and adverbs. Closed comparative contents by adjectives account for the largest number and appear through the highest average number of idioms. Open comparative contents are categorized into (1) open comparative contents with "as" and (2) open comparative contents with "like". Open comparative contents of idioms with comparisons are completely implicit, and each open comparative content aligns with a single idiom with comparison.

Thus, although idioms with comparisons in English are described and analysed in some research pieces, their conventional comparative images have not been investigated. In this study, the conventional comparative images of idioms with comparisons in English are from animals, objects and materials that are the most popular (see Table 1).

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. *Idioms From a Cognitive View*

There have been a number of authors who have studied English idioms from a cognitive perspective. Some of these authors include Fernando and Flavell (1981), Gibbs (1995), Kövecses and Szabo (1996), Fernando (1996), Taylor (2002), Langlotz (2006), Trào (2017), Giang (2018), Tién (2022), Thúy et al. (2025), etc. Fernando and Flavell (1981) and Giang (2018) believed that idioms in English appear from entirely transparent to entirely opaque. In other words, semantically, idioms can be transparent, semi-transparent, semi-opaque, or opaque. It means that most idioms have aspects of their idiomatic meanings that can be identified, according to this semantic property.

Gibbs (1995) indicated that cognitive-semantic processes, which include metaphors, metonymies, and conventional knowledge, drive most idioms. According to Gibbs (1995), all of the interpretations of idioms are based on people's perceptions about the world around, which produces the metaphorical mapping of a source domain into target domains. For the purpose of elucidating idiomatic meanings, Trào (2009) and Tién (2012) employed the conceptual metaphor theory that was first introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). A number of conceptual metaphor models were presented in these studies, including SADNESS IS PAIN, HAPPINESS IS INSANITY, ANGER IS FIRE, FEAR IS PHYSICAL WEAKNESS, DISGUST IS DISLIKE OF FOOD, etc. These conceptual metaphor models are established from the emotion idioms related to SADNESS, HAPPINESS, ANGER, DESIRE, FEAR, and DISGUST.

Nunberg et al. (1994), Langlotz (2006), and Giang (2018) all agreed that the majority of idiomatic meanings may be extracted from the constituent parts that comprise idioms through people's perceptions. For example, the idiom "spill the beans" can be understood by interpreting the verb "spill" as the action of revealing information and "the beans" as the information. This interpretation allows the idiom to convey the meaning of "divulge the information". Actually, due to the fact that they are completely opaque, many idioms are difficult to interpret. Conventional knowledge, on the other hand, may serve as the inspiration for these idioms. Let's look at the idiom "pull someone's leg". It is believed that this idiom came from the practice of tugging a man's legs as he was being hanged in order to speed his death and decrease the amount of anguish he endured (Fernando & Flavell, 1981, p. 27). "Make gentle fun of" is the current meaning of this idiom, which has undergone a lengthy process of semantic alteration.

To conclude, from a cognitive view, it is believed that idioms in the English language are capable of being interpreted and have meanings that are at least somewhat motivated (Langlotz, 2006; Giang, 2018; Thúy et al., 2025). In other words, the meanings of idioms can be determined by interpreting the meanings of their individual constituent parts or by seeking for their semantic motivation through conventional knowledge.

B. *Conventional Figurative Images of Idioms*

The fundamental principle of conventional figurative language theory (CFLT), introduced by Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2005), is the conventional figurative image that forms the meanings of conventional figurative units, such as idioms. A conventional figurative image is a conceptual framework that links the lexical form to the real meaning of an idiom. It is a crucial component of its lexicalized significance (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2018).

Let us examine the specifics of the conventional figurative image and its connection to analogous concepts in the study of linguistic meaning, particularly in relation to our comprehension of figurative language. In addition to the visual element, three essential notions that constitute the basis of CFLT are (1) inner form, (2) conventional figurative image, and (3) etymological memory (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2018).

The phrase “inner form” appears to be relevant solely within the context of Russian language studies and could be substituted with terms such as source domain, source frame, conventional figurative image, or basic classification (Dobrovol'skij, 2016), particularly when examining figurative language in frame semantics or cognitive linguistics. This assumption is not totally accurate, as the definitions of these terms are not completely the same. In contemporary linguistics, the “inner form” of a lexical unit (word or idiom) is defined as a semantic paradigmatic relationship between the target lexeme and the meanings linked to its constituent elements and the underlying conventional figurative images (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2018).

The term “conventional figurative image” is fundamentally equivalent to “inner form”. The difference between an inner form and a conventional figurative image is that the former pertains to the basic interpretation of the figurative sign, whereas the latter is conceptual rather than semantic. The two notions differ from the image component, which represents a portion of the lexicalized meaning of a certain idiom. The internal structure of a lexical item consists of the conventional figurative image formed in its content plane and the reasoning underlying its lexicalized meaning. Speakers determine the inherent meaning of a lexical item from the definitions of its component morphemes or words (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2018).

Etymological memory, or cultural memory, denotes the vestiges of an idiom's figurative history that persist in contemporary awareness. The modern meaning of a phrase often differs from its original derivation. The effectiveness of an idiom typically depends on synchronic motivation, specifically how most speakers automatically create the motivational “bridges”. In certain rare instances, an idiom possesses constraints on its usage that can only be comprehended by an examination of its historical context; specifically, this idiom cannot be employed in scenarios that deviate from its original meaning, regardless of speakers' awareness of its origins. The etymological importance of a certain conventional figurative unit is often crucial (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2010).

The image component is significant as it links two dimensions of the idiom's significance: its true figurative interpretation and the literal meaning of the words that form the conventional figurative image. The conventional figurative image consists of linguistically meaningful fragments of an image comprehensible to most languages. A notable feature of the image component is its exclusive use of the vestiges of the original concept that are relevant to the authentic meaning, rather than referencing every detail of the traditional figurative image. This method enables us to concentrate on the conceptual frameworks that act as the semantic connection between the source and destination ideas. There exists a notable distinction between “cracking a nut with a sledgehammer” and “shooting at sparrows with cannons” in terms of conventional figurative image. The inner form, rather than the image component, encompasses all relevant mental components. These images communicate the same overarching concept that remains constant in its semantic explanation. The conceptual nuances must be elucidated as relevant elements of the idiom's content plane, as native speakers recognize these facets of conventional figurative imagery during idiom processing.

For idioms with comparisons in the present study, the conventional comparative images help make comparative contents transparent. It means that the relationship between comparative contents produces the figurative meanings of idioms with comparisons. Conventional figurative images can be the degrees, manners, or attributes of comparative contents (Thúy et al., 2025).

C. Identifying Idioms With Comparisons

According to Seidl and McMordie (1988), idioms in English are classified into eight distinct groups, one of which idioms with comparisons belong to. The two subcategories of idioms with comparisons are idioms with “as...as” (e.g., *as tricky as a monkey*) and idioms with “like” (e.g., *swim like a fish*). Giang (2018) stated that there exist three types of idioms in English: idiomatic pairs (e.g., *safe and sound*), idioms with comparisons (e.g., *as tall as a giraffe*), and ordinary idioms (e.g., *spill the beans*). Idioms with comparisons comprise three component parts, including comparative contents, conventional comparative images, and comparative connectors (Thúy et al., 2025). In the idiom *as gaudy as a peacock*, “gaudy” is the comparative content, “a peacock” is the conventional comparative image, and *as...as* is the comparative connector. Apart from “as...as”, “like” and “as” are also the comparative connectors of idioms with comparisons, as in *run like a hare* and *as things stand*. The comparative contents may be absent in some idioms. Nevertheless, the comparative connectors and conventional comparative images are the essential constituent parts of idioms with comparisons. The comparative contents as adjectives often align with “as...as”, and those as verbs or verb phrases are associated with “like” (Thúy et al., 2025).

In the English language, idioms with comparisons are composed of three component parts, which include comparative contents, conventional comparative images, and comparative connectors (Thúy et al., 2025). According to Thúy et al. (2025), these idioms are deemed to be semi-transparent, and the conventional comparative contents offer assistance to the comparative contents in the process of generating the idiomatic meanings. In the semi-transparent idioms, there are some components that are explicit and others that could be implicit (Giang, 2018). The idiom *as tall as a giraffe* is an example. “Tall” (the comparative content) is transparent, whereas “a giraffe” (the comparative conventional image) is nontransparent. This interpretation shows that the figurative meanings of idioms can be inferred from the interpretation of their constituent parts.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a predominantly qualitative mixed-method approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This approach focuses on qualitative analysis, with fundamental numeric counts serving as supplementary evidence and aiding in pattern discovery. This methodology is ideal for research aimed at investigating and elucidating the meanings of idioms, as it facilitates a comprehensive analysis of linguistic and stylistic attributes that quantitative measures cannot adequately represent. The qualitative approach is chosen since the research aims to comprehend the formation of idiomatic meanings through their conventional comparative images, rather than to measure or quantify linguistic data. This study outlines the theoretical background of English idioms in general and idioms with comparisons through their conventional comparative images in particular and includes examples, explanations, and interpretations that lead to conclusions based on deductive reasoning.

The data collection tool utilized in the study is a manual search of English idiom dictionaries. Anshen and Aronoff (1999) affirm that dictionaries serve as essential sources for the scientific study of languages due to their “objective and easily verifiable reference”. English idioms with comparisons are from four contemporary dictionaries. A total of 672 idioms with comparisons are collected, of which 397 contain conventional comparative images related to animals, objects, and materials, accounting for 59.08%. These 397 idioms with comparisons are presented in a Word file and stored under different groups of the conventional comparative images: conventional comparative images from (1) animals and (2) objects and materials. Upon the collection and classification of data, the conventional comparative images underlying the idioms with comparisons were delineated and interpreted. In each group of conventional comparative images, comments are illustrated by examples with explanations and discussion. For ease of description and analysis, the illustrative examples are encoded with numbers in parentheses.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Idioms with comparisons in English consist of comparative contents, conventional comparative images, and comparative connectors, where the comparative contents are normally transparent (Thúy et al., 2025). The comparative contents, combined with the conventional comparative images by the comparative connectors, create new meanings that we call “idiomatic meanings”. Table 1 shows that conventional comparative images from animals appear in 212 idioms, representing 31.55%, while the conventional comparative images from objects and materials account for the lower percentage (27.53%).

TABLE 1
CONVENTIONAL COMPARATIVE IMAGES FROM ANIMALS AND OBJECTS AND MATERIALS OF IDIOMS WITH COMPARISONS IN ENGLISH

No	Conventional comparative images	Number of idioms with comparisons	%
1	Conventional comparative images from animals	212	31.55
2	Conventional comparative images from objects and materials	185	27.53
3	Others (conventional comparative images from humans, natural phenomena, plants, and foods and drinks)	275	40.92
Total		672	100

A. Conventional Comparative Images From Animals

According to Cambridge Dictionary Online (n.d., para. 3), an animal is “a living thing that can move and eat and react to the world through its senses, esp. of sight and hearing”. In the present study, animals include all living creatures, such as domesticated animals, wild animals, land animals, aquatic animals, and even insects. Conventional comparative images of animals depict various characteristics in terms of shapes, personalities, living habits, typical natures, etc. In some cases, body parts are also considered conventional comparative images of animals.

Each animal has different physical characteristics. Whales have elongated bodies, smooth skin, and various colors, such as blue-gray, black, or white. They have large heads, dorsal fins, pectoral fins, and transverse caudal fins that allow for agile movement. Whales breathe through lungs via blowholes on their heads, have bone structures similar to land animals, but live entirely underwater. They are mammals that are enormous in size and have extremely keen hearing. “A whale” in (1) is a conventional comparative image that denotes the degree of the comparative content (big). (1) means something huge, enormous, or massive, often used to describe a person, animal, or object of impressive size, or sometimes even to present large bets in gambling. The conventional comparative image of a whale’s enormous size creates a strong impression of its large scale. Similarly, giraffes are distinguished by their extremely long necks (up to 2.4 m), large bodies (the tallest mammals in the world, which can be over 5 m tall), long and strong legs, and unique spotted coats (yellow, black, and white) that are not identical to any two individuals, helping them easily find food in tall trees and effectively defend themselves with powerful kicks. Thanks to these characteristics, “a giraffe” in (2) has become a conventional comparative image for indicating extreme height (tall). (2) means that someone or something is extremely tall, taller than the rest.

(1) *as big as a whale*

(2) *as tall as a giraffe*

Besides indicating the size and height of animals, conventional comparative images align with the animals’ outward

appearances. Crows are characterized by their large size, robust bodies, glossy black plumage (some have bluish-purple sheens) or spotted plumage, and strong beaks and legs. “A crow” in (3) is a conventional comparative image showing the black color of the crow’s feathers. (3) is extremely dark, pitch black, or completely without light, similar to the blackness of night, black ink, or coal, but it also carries a deeper figurative meaning related to the image of the crow, indicating change, intelligence, cunning, messenger of the gods, or omen of transformation, death, or prophecy. The conventional comparative image in (4) is associated with “a turkey-cock”. The turkey-cock has a large body, broad chest, wide back, colorful plumage (usually blackish-purple, reddish-brown, or white with a metallic sheen), a bald head with rough, bright red skin, a long, dangling comb and wattles, a long, wide-spreading tail like a peacock, large, strong legs, quick and energetic movements, and a majestic posture. Based on the comparative content of (4), the conventional comparative image only refers to the red head of the turkey-cock. (4) is used to describe someone whose face is red with anger or embarrassment. Similarly, peacocks are famous for their brilliant plumages, especially their long, shimmering tails with eye-like patterns to attract mates. Peahens have more subdued grayish-brown plumages for camouflage. Both peacocks and peahens have crests of feathers on their heads, but the shapes of the crests are variable due to different species. Peacocks can be as long as 2.1 m (1.5 m for the tails) and weigh up to 12 kg. Their feathers make up 60% of their body weight. “A peacock” in (5) is a conventional comparative image that shows how gaudy the content is. (5) means something or someone that is too flashy, showy, or ostentatious, often in a way that is not very attractive or vulgar. The peacock’s fancy plumage gets attention but is not very elegant. It implies that excessive showiness in color and decoration could be perceived as cheap or out of style, rather than beautiful.

(3) *as black as a crow*

(4) *as red as a turkey-cock*

(5) *as gaudy as a peacock*

Typical characteristics of an animal are presented in several conventional comparative images of idioms with comparisons in English. For example, hares run fast; fish swim well; monkeys are clever, etc. “A hare” in (6) is a fast-running herbivorous mammal of the genus *Lepus* and family *Leporidae*, closely related to rabbits but usually larger, with longer ears and hind legs, and black ear tips. Unlike rabbits, hares are mostly solitary, not living in burrows but in shallow nests on the ground, and their newborn babies are already fully furred and have open eyes. The idiomatic meaning of (6) is to move or run extremely fast, often in a frantic, hurried, or uncontrolled way, similar to the image of a rabbit running away from danger. (7) not only means excellent swimming and gliding smoothly in the water but also refers to techniques that mimic fish for maximum efficiency, focusing on body rotation, minimizing water resistance, and creating smooth, energy-saving propulsion for endurance. “A fish” in (7) is an image of a natural swimming skill and a training principle to reduce resistance and use whole-body movement, not just arm and leg movement, to produce propulsion. (8) expresses intelligence, mischief, or cunning, often in a playful way, since monkeys are known for their agility, dexterity, and sometimes stealthiness, such as breaking into dangerous places or tricking others, reflecting resourcefulness but potentially troublemaking. The idiom also emphasizes the elusiveness, or cleverness of a person in solving problems in an unusual way, similar to how monkeys can play mischievous tricks on others.

(6) *run like a hare*

(7) *swim like a fish*

(8) *as tricky as a monkey*

Conventional comparative images of animals can be associated with their personalities. Cats are small carnivorous mammals, notable for their keen senses (sharp ears and eyes), agility, dexterity (climbing and maintaining balance when falling), and clean, independent nature, but they are also fond of being close to their owners. They have diverse coat colors, graceful or round faces, and well-proportioned bodies and prefer to sleep during the day and be active at night. One of the typical personalities of cats is calmness, shown through their preference for rest, gentle movement, lack of attention, freedom of exploration, and subtle expression of emotions. “A cat” in (9) is a conventional comparative image denoting its idiomatic meaning. (9) describes someone who is very calm, relaxed, and quiet, like a cat lying in the sun, showing no worry or anxiety, although they can also worry. The idiom emphasizes a state of serenity and contentment. (10) expresses an ecstatic joyful carefree mood, comparing someone’s bright mood to a lark, famous for its cheerful singing, especially at sunrise. It describes a person full of cheerful spirit, contentment, and general happiness, usually without any worries in the world. The meaning of (11) describes someone who is extremely idle, slow, and likes to lie around doing nothing, similar to how lizards often lie motionless in the sun. The idiom expresses a conventional comparative image of a lizard lying still in one place to describe someone who is extremely lazy or lethargic.

(9) *as calm as a cat*

(10) *as cheerful as a lark*

(11) *as lazy as a lizard*

Conventional comparative images of idioms with comparisons can also come from the animals’ activities or reactions in specific circumstances. (12) means that someone has little or no money. This idiomatic meaning is derived from the fact that a mouse living in the church faces difficulty finding food since the churches, unlike houses or barns, are empty. It is an old idiom, appearing in the 17th century (Cowie et al., 2009), that refers to a person with little property or wealth, since church mice have nothing to eat. (13) denotes a person who is extremely anxious, restless, and unable to sit still

because of extreme insecurity, like the image of a cat moving on the surface of hot bricks. The idiomatic meaning of (14) refers to someone who is easy, natural, and proficient in an activity or situation, similar to a duck swimming instinctively without needing to be taught. This idiom originates from the observable fact that ducklings, born on land, immediately feel comfortable and proficient in water, doing so with ease, since it is their instinct.

(12) *as poor as a church mouse*

(13) *like a cat on hot bricks*

(14) *like a duck to water*

The relationships between different animals are the conventional comparative images of some idioms with comparisons in English. (15) describes a protector, overly anxious and concerned about a single vulnerable individual, often to the point of being irritating, like the image of a hen protecting her only chick from perceived threats. The idiom emphasizes over-caring for someone. (16) is another example. This is an old idiom referring to intense, constant quarreling, stemming from the historical notion that cats and dogs are natural enemies, as they have different body languages and instinctive roles. The idiom evokes the image of fierce conflict, even though in reality, animals do not usually fight in that way.

(15) *like a hen with one chicken*

(16) *fight like cats and dogs*

Animal body parts, such as teeth, ears, legs, and backs, can serve as conventional comparative images of idioms with comparisons. (17) means something extremely rare, almost nonexistent, because hens, like most birds, do not have teeth, making it impossible to find teeth in a hen. It is an exaggeration used in American English from the mid-19th century, according to Cowie et al. (2009), to emphasize the difficulty of obtaining something, linked to the absurdity of a hen having teeth. "A bug's ear" in (18) is invisible and becomes a conventional comparative image for extreme smallness. This idiom is used to describe babies or small adorable things, probably appearing in the early 20th century (Cowie et al., 2009). The crooked image of the dog's hind leg in (19) represents dishonesty. Although the exact origin of the idiom is unknown, it likely stems from canine anatomy. (19) is used to refer to dishonest people, shady dealings, or anything lacking honesty and integrity, such as in the context of politics or the sale of used cars. (20) shows another aspect of the animals' body parts. The distinguishing feature of a duck's back is its impermeability. (20) implies that criticism, problems, or negative comments have no effect on the person, similar to how water actually slides off the duck's oily impermeable feathers without ever soaking in. The meaning of the idiom is being unaffected, unbothered, or having a strong resilience to negativity, like drops of water clinging to and sliding off the back without ever soaking in.

(17) *as scarce as hen's teeth*

(18) *as cute as a bug's ear*

(19) *as crooked as a dog's hind leg*

(20) *like water off a duck's back*

A comparative content can go with different conventional comparative images. (21), (22), and (23) have the same content but different conventional comparative images, which lead to different idiomatic meanings. "A beaver" in (21) is a semi-aquatic rodent distinguished by its sturdy body, thick waterproof fur, webbed hind legs and a flat paddle-like tail for swimming, and a set of sharp hard incisors that continuously grow. They have eyes located high on their heads for observation while swimming and can hold their breath for a long time, have musk glands to mark territory, and live in herds. Beavers are hardworking and persistent and have excellent construction skills for their ability to build dams and houses underwater by biting down trees and using mud and stones meticulously; they are nocturnal, excellent swimmers and divers, have tightly knit social systems and high vigilance, use their tails to signal danger to their peers, and are natural engineers capable of adapting to changes in their environment. "A bee" in (22) is a highly organized social insect with three body parts (head, thorax, and abdomen), six legs, four wings (mostly), two eyes, and hairy bodies to help collect pollen. Bees live in colonies, use sounds and scent to communicate, and build nests with wax or propolis to store honey and raise larvae. Bees are hardworking, disciplined, organized, self-sacrificing, and highly cooperative. They show clear roles in bee society (queen, worker, and male), always prioritizing the interests of the colony, contributing to common goals such as gathering food, building and protecting the nest, and even having the ability to learn and sense complex things like humans. "An ant" in (23) is a social insect with three body parts (head, thorax, and abdomen), six hooked legs, bent antennae for sensing smells, and strong jaws. Ants live in organized colonies with clearly defined roles (queen, worker, and male), communicate through pheromones, and possess extraordinary strength (carrying objects 50 times their body weight). Ants are known for their diligence, hard work, self-sacrifice for the community, perseverance, solidarity, and high sense of responsibility towards their nest, working tirelessly for the common good. (18), (19), and (20) mean someone who is extremely active, diligent, and hardworking, always busy with work, like the personalities of beavers, bees, and ants.

(21) *as busy as a beaver*

(22) *as busy as a bee*

(23) *as busy as an ant*

The image of an animal can represent many different characteristics and contents. "A pig" in (24) symbolizes excessive obesity or severe overweight, emphasizing the considerable size or mass of a person or thing. "A pig" in (25) denotes extreme gluttony and insatiable greed, stemming from the long-standing reputation of pigs to eat everything

without leaving anything behind. They are often depicted scrambling for food and eating large amounts very quickly, leading to this idiom describing a hoarder or gluttonous eater. “A pig” in (26) produces extreme joy, simplicity, and contentment, finding pleasure in things that others might consider dirty or undesirable (mud) because it is natural to them, keeping them cool and protecting their skin. It signifies absolute contentment and comfort in their surroundings, like a pig wallowing in mud. (27) is an idiom meaning to sweat profusely, but it is ironic since pigs do not sweat heavily. The idiom probably originates from the cooling method of rolling in mud or, historically, from the production of “pig iron”, where the cooled metal looked like it were sweating, symbolizing heat or extreme exertion, rather than the actual physiology of a pig.

(24) *as fat as a pig*

(25) *as greedy as a pig*

(26) *as happy as a pig in muck*

(27) *sweat like a pig*

Thus, the conventional comparative images of idioms with comparisons help clarify the idiomatic meanings based on the comparative contents. Conventional comparative images can come from the shapes, appearances, typical characteristics, personalities, activities, reactions, relationships, body parts, etc., of animals. A single comparative content can be associated with different comparative images, leading to different idiomatic meanings. Furthermore, the image of an animal can go with different comparative contents, also creating many different idiomatic meanings.

B. Conventional Comparative Images From Objects and Materials

According to Cambridge Dictionary Online (n.d., para. 1), an object is “a thing that you can see or touch but that is not usually a living animal, plant, or person”. In other words, objects in a broad sense mean tangible things, such as a physical item (for example, a book, a plate, a hat, etc.). Material is “a physical substance that things can be made from” (Cambridge Dictionary Online, n.d., para. 1). Materials refer to the basic substances or components that make up objects, products, or structures, such as wood, metal, plastic, or fabric, possessing unique properties (such as hardness, ductility, and transparency) that determine their best use for specific applications, from everyday items to advanced scientific components.

Conventional comparative images come from the shapes of objects. Let’s look at examples (28), (29), and (30). (28) is a common idiom used to describe something, usually an eye, that is perfectly round and wide, similar to the image of a shallow round saucer used under a teacup. This idiom refers to eyes that are very wide open, usually due to fear, surprise, shock, or astonishment. That someone or something is very plump, round, or bulky, like the cylindrical and bulging shape of a wooden barrel, is the meaning of (29). It usually represents a heavy round body, often concentrated in the abdominal or chest area. “A rake” is a conventional comparative image of (30). (30) involves a person who is extremely thin or slender. It signifies a lack of body mass, often unhealthy, or a very thin physique.

(28) *as straight as an arrow*

(29) *as round as a barrel*

(30) *as skinny as a rake*

Conventional comparative images are also based on the prominent external features of objects. Each object has its own typical look, such as a billiard ball being round and smooth, a board being flat, a ramrod being straight, etc. (31) is an idiom used to describe someone who is completely bald. It refers to a completely smooth scalp, like the smooth surface of a billiard ball. “A board” in (32) is a conventional comparative image that expresses the degree of the comparative content (flat). (32) refers to a surface, a landscape, or an object that is completely flat, smooth, and totally without any bumps, curves, or heights. It emphasizes the absolute degree of flatness. (33) describes someone standing or sitting in a particularly upright posture, often implying a formal, tense, or strict attitude. This idiom originates from the image of a ramrod, a long, hard metal or wooden rod used to push gunpowder down the barrel of a musket.

(31) *as bald as a billiard ball*

(32) *as flat as a board*

(33) *as straight as a ramrod*

The colors of objects are conventional comparative images of some idioms. The degrees of the comparative contents can be attached to the colors of objects such as “the ace of spades” in (34) and “a sheet” in (35). (34) refers to something completely black or without light, associated with the image of the large, elaborately decorated black spade on the ace card in a standard deck. This idiom, dating from the 19th century (Cowie et al., 2009), highlights the contrast between the deep black ink and the white background of the card. (35) is an idiom describing a person whose face becomes extremely pale due to shock, fear, or illness. It derives from a sheet, used as a conventional comparative image showing a face that has completely lost its color and blood.

(34) *as black as the ace of spades*

(35) *as white as a sheet*

Each object has its own properties; for example, “a new pin” in (36) is bright, “a feather” in (37) is light, “a billiard-table” in (38) is smooth, etc. (37) refers to someone or something extremely clean, tidy, and shiny, stemming from the polished, spotless appearance of a new pin. This idiom emphasizes a state of perfection, often implying a meticulously groomed person or a spotless space. (37) is an idiom used to describe something extremely light. “A feather” in (37), composed of branched structures with thousands of small openings, possesses minimal weight and high aerodynamics,

providing strength without adding unnecessary weight. “A billiard-table” in (38) is considered extremely smooth because it is constructed of a solid, high-density slate base, covered with a high-grade felt, specially designed to ensure the ball's movement is flat, consistent, and frictionless. (38) is an idiom describing an extremely flat, even surface without bumps or rough spots.

(36) *as bright as a new pin*

(37) *as light as a feather*

(38) *as smooth as a billiard-table*

Conventional comparative images are derived from the properties of materials. Each material has its own typical properties, such as “rock” being hard in (39), “lead” being heavy in (40), and “leather” being tough in (41). Conventional comparative images express the degrees of the properties through the comparative contents. (39) is an idiom used to describe something extremely hard, solid, firm, or not easily molded, associated with the dense and hard nature of stone. In fact, the idiom also refers to spoiled food (e.g., bread), frozen food, or firm, taut muscles. The nature of lead is heavy and is expressed in (40). (40) denotes something extremely heavy, difficult, or oppressive, referring to the high density and considerable weight of lead compared to common metals such as aluminum or iron. The idiom is also used to express excessive physical or mental weight. Similarly, leather has toughness, and “leather” in (41) exhibits a degree of toughness. (41) describes the extremely high strength, resilience, and abrasion resistance, stemming from the material's dense fiber structure and the strength-enhancing effect of the tanning process. Leather maintains its structural integrity under the action of force, making it a visual representation of physical strength or endurance.

(39) *as hard as rock*

(40) *as heavy as lead*

(41) *as tough as leather*

Conventional comparative images come from the colors and nuance of materials. “Coal” in (42), “pitch” in (43) and “silver” in (44) create vivid conventional comparative images of several idioms. (42) means that something is extremely dark, pitch black, or intensely colored. The idiom denotes the deepest black, often used to describe hair, eyes, the night sky, or to convey a gloomy, evil, or dense darkness. Also black, but “pitch” in (43) has a different nuance. (43) refers to a thick, black, sticky substance, like asphalt used for waterproofing, symbolizing a deep, intense black. (44) denotes excellent reflectivity, like a mirror, and the white metallic sheen of polished silver, often used to describe something shiny, pure, or new. Silver has the highest optical reflectivity of all metals, making it the conventional benchmark for brilliance.

(42) *as black as coal*

(43) *as black as pitch*

(44) *as bright as silver*

Objects and materials are personified and carry conventional comparative images of human characters, attitudes, and styles. (45) is an English idiom using wordplay, in which “camp” (extravagant/quirky style) is synonymous with “camp” (a campsite with many tents). The idiom characterizes someone or something as excessively artificial, ostentatious, or extravagant. (46) involves someone or something that is extremely unintelligent, stupid, or lacking in judgment. It is a conventional comparative image of a person's cognitive abilities to a box of rocks, implying that they lack intellectual capacity.

(45) *as calm as a row of tents*

(46) *as dumb as a box of rocks*

Objects or materials in different contexts create typical conventional comparative images. (47) refers to a strongly provocative action that is sure to provoke anger or a violent reaction. This idiom originates from 19th century bullfighting and mistakenly implies that the bull hates the color red when in fact the animal is agitated by the movement of the cloak (Cowie et al., 2009). (48) describes an action performed extremely easily, quickly, and with almost no hindrance. The conventional comparative image mimics the smooth, gentle movement of a hot knife cutting through butter. The idiom refers to tasks or situations that encounter no hindrance whatsoever. (49) is another example representing a nearly impossible task, symbolizing the search for a small object in a large, cluttered, or chaotic environment with extreme difficulty (the image of a needle in a haystack). This idiom emphasizes the extreme difficulty due to the contrast between the tiny, hard-to-find needle and the enormous, equally overwhelming mass of hay.

(47) *like a red rag to a bull*

(48) *like a (hot) knife through butter*

(49) *like a needle in a bundle of hay*

A content can be associated with conventional comparative images of different objects and materials. The comparative content, hard, is expressed at different degrees, such as “flint” in (50), “nails” in (51), “rock” in (52), “stone” in (53), “steel” in (54), and “iron” in (55). Let's have a look at an example. (51) is used to describe an extremely strong person, resilient, emotionally cold, or not easily subdued, originating from a 19th-century association with the extremely high physical hardness of metal nails in construction. The idiom implies that someone is not easily hurt, discouraged, or moved by emotions and is often used to show a person who is tough or sometimes emotionless. Similarly, (55) refers to something or someone who is extremely tough, physically resilient, or not easily subdued. It signifies strength, durability, and inflexibility and is often used to denote muscles, material, or a person's unwavering,

stubborn, cold, and steadfast determination.

- (50) *as hard as flint*
- (51) *as hard as nails*
- (52) *as hard as rock*
- (53) *as hard as stone*
- (54) *as hard as steel*
- (55) *as hard as iron*

The image of an object or material can represent different characteristics and contents. “Dirt” is a conventional comparative image associated with three contents: “cheap” in (56), “common” in (57), and “poor” in (58). (56) means something extremely cheap, very low in price, or considered a great bargain. It presents goods, services, or items priced at the lowest possible level. This idiom sometimes expresses surprise at a very low price. (57) refers to something, a person, or a situation that is extremely ordinary, nothing special, or very common. It suggests something that can be found everywhere, has low value, is nothing special, and is not unique. It can also indicate a lack of sophistication or elegance. (58) is extremely destitute, poor, having very little money and material possessions. It refers to a person living in difficult financial conditions, often struggling to meet basic needs. It is an idiom that emphasizes extreme poverty, akin to having nothing at all. “A button” is a conventional comparative image of two contents: “bright” in (59) and “cute” in (60). (59) describes someone, usually a child, who is quick-witted, intelligent, alert, or cheerful. This idiom originates from the tradition, often in the military, of polishing metal buttons until they shine, associating the shiny appearance of the button with intellectual sharpness. Similarly, (60) involves an object or person, usually a child, who is small, charming, and attractive. This idiom probably originated in the early 20th century as a variation of *as bright as a button* or a transformation of “acute” (intelligent/sharp).

- (56) *as cheap as dirt*
- (57) *as common as dirt*
- (58) *as poor as dirt*
- (59) *as bright as a button*
- (60) *as cute as a button*

Conventional comparative images can originate from objects, encompassing their shapes, prominent external features, and properties. Materials are also conventional comparative images of several idioms, presented through their properties, colors, and nuances. Objects and materials are also personified, carrying conventional comparative images related to human personalities, attitudes, and styles. Objects and materials under different contexts also yield different conventional comparative images. Furthermore, a single content can be expressed through multiple conventional comparative images of different objects and materials. In contrast, the image of an object or material can represent different characteristics and contents.

V. CONCLUSION

Conventional comparative images play a crucial role in conveying the idiomatic meanings of idioms with comparisons in English. They symbolize the comparative contents through the comparative connectors to create the idiomatic meanings. The high proportion of conventional comparative images involving animals, objects, and materials demonstrates that these groups of images are frequently used by humans to express their ideas through idioms. The conventional comparative images from animals are perceived through the diverse characteristics of the animals, such as their shapes, appearances, typical characteristics, personalities, activities, reactions, relationships, body parts, etc. The conventional comparative images from objects are associated with their shapes, prominent external features, and properties, while those from materials align with their properties, colors, and nuances. Furthermore, one comparative content can be expressed through multiple conventional comparative images, or several comparative contents can be linked to a single conventional comparative image to establish various idiomatic meanings of idioms with comparisons.

REFERENCES

- [1] Anshen, F., & Aronoff, M. (1999). Using dictionaries to study the mental lexicon. *Brain and Language*, 68, 16-26.
- [2] Chafe, W. (1970). *Meaning and the structure of language*. University of Chicago Press.
- [3] *Cambridge Dictionary Online*. (n.d.). Retrieved January 6, 2026, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/#>
- [4] Conklin, H. C. (1962). Lexicographical treatment of folk taxonomies. *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 28(2), 119-141.
- [5] Cowie, A. P., Mackin, R., & McCaig, I. R. (1993). *Oxford dictionary of English idioms*. Oxford University Press.
- [6] Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Sage publications.
- [7] Dobrovol'skij, D. (2016). The notion of “inner form” and idiom semantics. *Études et travaux d'Eur'ORBEM*, 1, 21-36.
- [8] Dobrovol'skij, D., & Piirainen, E. (2005). *Figurative language: Cross-cultural and cross-linguistic perspectives*. Elsevier.
- [9] Dobrovol'skij, D., & Piirainen, E. (2010). Motivation and etymology. *Yearbook of Phraseology*, 1, 73-96.
- [10] Dobrovol'skij, D., & Piirainen, E. (2018). Conventional figurative language theory and idiom motivation. *Yearbook of Phraseology*, 9(1), 5-30.
- [11] Fernando, C. (1996). *Idioms and idiomaticity*. Oxford University Press.
- [12] Fernando, C., & Flavell, R. (1981). *On idiom: Critical views and perspectives*. University of Exeter.

- [13] Fraser, B. (1970). Idioms within a transformational grammar. *Foundation of Language*, 6(1), 22-42.
- [14] Giang, Đ. N. (2018). *Idioms in English and Vietnamese*. VNU Publishing House.
- [15] Gibbs, R. (1995). Idiomaticity and human cognition. In M. Everaert, E. van der Linden, A. Schenk, & R. Schreuder (Eds.), *Idioms: structural and psychological perspectives* (pp. 97-116). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- [16] Kövecses, Z., & Szabo, P. (1996). Idioms: A view from cognitive semantics. *Applied Linguistics*, 17(3), 326-355. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/17.3.326>
- [17] Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- [18] Langlotz, A. (2006). Occasional adnominal idiom modification – A cognitive linguistic approach. *International Journal of English Studies*, 6(1), 85-108.
- [19] Makkai, A. (1972). *Idiom structure in English*. Mouton.
- [20] Nunberg, G., Sag, I. A., & Wasow, T. (1994). Idioms. *Language*, 70(3), 491-538. <https://doi.org/10.2307/416483>
- [21] Seidl, J., & McMordie, W. (1988). *English idioms*. Oxford University Press.
- [22] Smith, L. P. (1925). *Words and idioms*. Constable & Co, Ltd.
- [23] Taylor, J. R. (2002). *Cognitive grammar*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198700333.001.0001>
- [24] Thúy, T. T., Hương, L. V. L., Minh, H. T., & Giang, Đ. N. (2025). Comparative contents of idioms with comparisons in English and Vietnamese from a cognitive view: A contrastive analysis. *World Journal of English Language*, 15(7), 146-155. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v15n7p146>
- [25] Tiên, T. B. (2012). *Nghiên cứu thành ngữ biểu thị tâm lý tình cảm trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt từ bình diện ngôn ngữ học tri nhận* [A study of emotion idioms in English and Vietnamese from a perspective of cognitive linguistics] [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Vinh University.
- [26] Tiên, T. B. (2022). Universality vs. cultural specificity of anger metaphors and metonymies in English and Vietnamese idioms: a cognitive linguistic perspective. *Russian Journal of Linguistics*, 26(1), 74-94. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-24951>
- [27] Trào, N. V. (2009). *Emotion expressing idioms in English and Vietnamese: A contrastive analysis* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. The University of Queensland.
- [28] Trào, N. V. (2017). The cross-cultural analysis of the metaphorical conceptualization of happiness in English and Vietnamese. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics*, 14(2), 275-302. <https://doi.org/10.1075/rcl.14.2.02ngu>
- [29] Weinreich, U. (1969). Problems in the analysis of idioms. In J. Puhvel (Ed.), *Substance and structure of language* (pp. 23-81). University of California Press.

Truong Thi Thuy is a lecturer at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Labour and Social Affairs, Hanoi, Vietnam. She received her Bachelor's degree in English from Hanoi Open University, and her Master's degree in TESOL from Hanoi University. She is now a PhD student at Hanoi Open University. Her research interests include Idioms in English and Vietnamese, Contrastive Linguistics and English Language Teaching and learning.

Le Vien Lan Huong, who received her Ph.D. in Linguistics in 2023 from Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, is currently a lecturer of English at Vietnam Military Medical University. She has written multiple scientific papers published domestically and internationally. Her major research interests include Cognitive Linguistics, Contrastive Linguistics, and English Language Teaching and Learning.

Hoang Tuyet Minh earned her Ph.D. degree in Linguistics from Institute of Linguistics in Vietnam in 2008. She is currently an Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at International School, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam. She has published over 60 articles, 7 books and textbooks related to syntactic and semantic features of relational verbs, comparative rhetoric, and prototypes of high-speed movement in English and Vietnamese. Previously, she was a member of Five Open Universities (OU5) of Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU). She is now serving as an Editor of the Journal of Language & Life and Journal of Science, Hanoi Open University.

Dang Nguyen Giang is a senior lecturer and currently the Dean of the Faculty of Languages, Tan Tao University, Tay Ninh, Vietnam. He received his Bachelor's degree in English from Thai Nguyen University, his Master's degree in English Linguistics from the University of Languages and International Studies (ULIS), his Ph.D. in English Linguistics from Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU-HN), and his Associate Professor Title of Applied Linguistics from the University of Labour and Social Affairs. His research interests include Idioms in English and Vietnamese, Contrastive Linguistics and English Language Teaching and Learning.