

Structural and Semantic Properties of Idiomatic Pairs in English and Vietnamese: A Contrastive Analysis

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Abstract—There are idiomatic pairs in both English and Vietnamese. While idiomatic pairs in Vietnamese have been extensively researched from different views, it seems that there have been few thorough studies of idiomatic pairs across English and Vietnamese. This paper looks into the structural and semantic properties of idiomatic pairs in English and Vietnamese using the framework of idiom analysability (Langlotz, 2006). This is a contrastive analysis that presents the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese idiomatic pairs in terms of structural and semantic properties, including grammatical and componential patterns, semantic compositions, and transparent-opaque components. A manual search of Giang's (2018) idiom collection yielded a corpus of 231 English and 2374 Vietnamese idiomatic pairs, which served as the data for the study. The findings of this study indicate that the biggest difference between English and Vietnamese idiomatic pairs lies in their distribution in each language. There are much more idiomatic idioms in Vietnamese than in English. Grammatically, idiomatic pairs in both languages are formed by two syntactically equivalent component parts. In Vietnamese, the components that create idiomatic pairs are even, and in English, they are odd. Semantically, the majority of English and Vietnamese idiomatic pairs are able to be analysable, and their meanings are at least motivated in some way.

Index Terms—idiomatic pairs, structural properties, semantic properties, component parts, idiom analysability

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a strong and adaptable communication tool as well as a cultural repertory. Since idioms reflect the previous culture of a community, they are regarded as unique linguistic units in a language's vocabulary. To put it another way, idioms are crucial to the linguistic ontologization of feelings, ideas, experiences, and other phenomena because they capture the richness and diversity of human social interactions. In some cases, idioms can develop an extragrammatically anomalous structure (Fillmore et al., 1988), which means that the general syntactic rules of the language are unable to interpret them. This is why idioms sometimes cause confusion and frustration for both non-native speakers and native speakers. As a result, in order for the hearer and the speaker to correctly understand an idiom and place it inside a relevant semantic domain, they need to have a shared frame of reference. However, idioms are a topic of ongoing interest to linguists and lexicographers due to their complexity, as well as their commonality, abundance, and availability (Fellbaum, 2006). The reason for this is that idioms express a wealth of cultural information by illustrating both the exploitation of the natural world and the vibrant social lives of people throughout history (Giap, 1996; Lan, 2003).

Idioms abound in both Vietnamese and English, and speakers frequently use a broad variety of idiomatic terms that usually have figurative meanings. Cowie et al. (1993) state that one telltale sign of a native command of the language and a valid indicator of the proficiency of non-native speakers is the accurate and appropriate use of idioms that are, in the broadest sense, idiomatic. Stated differently, one characteristic that sets native competency in a given language apart is idiomatic competence. Thus, it is impossible to naturally improve a language without learning idioms, which are a necessary component of language (Giang, 2018).

Idiomatic pairs are a kind of idiom that can be found in both English and Vietnamese. Although idiomatic pairs in Vietnamese have been studied, it seems that there have been relatively few studies on idiomatic pairs in English and much fewer comprehensive studies of idiomatic pairs across English and Vietnamese. Therefore, by using data from a

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language other than Vietnamese, our linguistic analysis of idiomatic pairs in English and Vietnamese will greatly advance this research field. The study undertakes a contrastive analysis of idiomatic pairs in terms of their structural and semantic properties in English and Vietnamese. There are two main points of interest: (1) similarities and differences in structural properties, including grammatical and componential patterns, between the idiomatic pairs in English and Vietnamese; and (2) similarities and differences in semantic properties, including semantic compositions and transparent-opaque components, between such idiomatic pairs.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. *Idiom Definition*

In English, there are already several definitions of idioms as well as a variety of approaches to idiomaticity. However, finding the features (or properties) that will sufficiently capture all the idioms in a language while rejecting all the non-idioms is the most difficult task when attempting to define an idiom (Fernando & Flavell, 1981). Over time, idiom definitions have evolved from being conventional to being flexible (Liu, 2003). Here are some well-known and influential definitions of English idioms. An English idiom has been defined as:

(i) “[a] group of words with set meanings that cannot be calculated by adding up the separate meanings of the parts. Some idioms are virtually unchangeable. Others allow a limited amount of manipulation. Some idioms allow certain transformations but not others” (Bolinger, 1975, p. 100).

(ii) “a fixed phrase that has its own special meaning. It is often impossible to guess the meaning of the whole phrase from the meanings of the separate words that is formed from” (Longman dictionary of language and culture, 1992, p. 12).

(iii) “its meaning is not a function of the meanings of its parts and the way these are syntactically combined; that is, an idiom is a non-compositional expression” (van der Linden, 1992, p. 223).

(iv) “a phrase or sentence whose meaning is not clear from the meaning of its individual words and which must be learnt as a whole unit” (Hornby, 1995, p. 67).

(v) “an indivisible unit whose components cannot be varied or varied only within definable limits. No other words can be substituted for those comprising. Nor are the words of an idiom usually recombinable” (Fernando, 1996, p. 30).

It is obvious that several distinct standards have been used to define English idioms. Moon (1998) defined idioms as having three characteristics: conventionality, noncompositionality, and fixity. It seems that there hasn't been much agreement reached over idioms after this, though. Actually, there has been some conversation about this subject lately. Furthermore, according to Lakoff (1987), the conventional and tried-and-true procedures, standards, and techniques created for normal language and its related phenomena do not apply to idioms since they are syntactically and semantically non-standard.

In Vietnamese, an idiom has typical features of its own. Given below is a summary of the defining features of a Vietnamese idiom. Such an idiom:

(i) “is a fixed group of words which is firm in terms of structure, complete and figurative in terms of meaning, and is widely used in daily speaking” (Hanh, 2008, p. 31).

(ii) “is a fixed group of words or a clause in a sentence that is used as a word and has an identifier function” (Luc & Dang, 2009, p. 29).

(iii) “is a set of fixed, commonly used words whose meaning cannot be explained simply by the meanings of the words that make it up” (Phe, 2017, p. 1210).

(iv) “(1) is a fixed unit whose components can be unvaried or varied under definable control; (2) is regarded as a complex scene with a bipartite semantic structure: a literal reading and an idiomatic meaning; (3) has the meaning which is usually different from the meanings of the combination of its components; (4) expresses a pure concept” (Giang, 2018, p. 12).

The definitions given above show that there are various approaches to defining an idiom. Generally, the majority of linguists hold the same opinion that an idiom is a fixed phrase whose meaning cannot be deduced from the meanings of its constituent parts. In the present study, from a cognitive view, an idiom in both English and Vietnamese (1) is a phrase whose components are commonly fixed; (2) is considered a complex scene with a bipartite semantic composition that can be analyzable: a literal reading and an idiomatic reading; (3) has meaning that usually differs from the literal meanings of its components but is at least partly motivated; (4) conveys a pure concept (Giang et al., 2024).

B. *Idiom Classification*

There have been several attempts to classify English idioms. According to Fernando and Flavell (1981), there are “two main headings: the ‘formal’ idiom family and the ‘concept’ idiom family,” which in reality typically overlap to some degree. Fernando and Flavell (1981) also classified idioms into four categories based on their semantic perspective: transparent (e.g., *slowly but surely*), semi-transparent (e.g., *as white as a sheet*), semi-opaque (e.g., *spill the beans*), and opaque (e.g., *kick the bucket*). In terms of parts of speech concerns, Seidl and McMordie (1988) offered eight categories of idioms, including key words with idiomatic uses, idioms with nouns and adjectives, idiomatic pairs, idioms with prepositions, phrasal verbs, verbal idioms, idioms with key words from special categories, and idioms with comparisons. Grammatically, Cowie et al. (1993) divided English idioms into clause patterns, possessive clause patterns,

phrase patterns, and noun phrase patterns with repeated elements. From a cognitive view, Nunberg et al. (1994) classified idioms into two categories: idiomatic phrases and idiomatically combining expressions. Fernando (1996) added that there are three categories of idioms in English, based on pragmatic and discursive analysis (ideational idioms, interpersonal idioms, and relational idioms). Moon (1998) and colleagues identified five functional kinds of idioms that are informational, evaluative, situational, modalizing, and organizational.

The classification of idioms in Vietnamese is mostly based on their constructions. Luc and Dang (2009) classified Vietnamese idioms into seven types according to the quantity of words that comprised the idioms and their compositions: idioms with three single words or more, idioms with a single word and a compound, idioms with two compounds, idioms as simple sentences, idioms with alliterations or compounds, idioms with symmetrical comparisons, and idioms with summary comparisons. Actually, Vietnamese idioms have two symmetrical portions to their common patterns. Idiom structures are also created through the connecting of rhymes, typically interior rhymes. These features preserve the idioms' fixation and unwavering qualities while also making them simpler to utter and recall. Tu (1983) classified Vietnamese idioms into three kinds according to their expressive functions: idioms expressing things, idioms expressing properties, and idioms expressing activities. Structurally, there are three main groups of idioms in Vietnamese: idioms with symmetrical structures, idioms with comparative structures, and idioms with non-symmetrical structures (Duc, 1995). Hanh (2008) emphasized the formation of idiomatic meanings and classified Vietnamese idioms into three main categories: symmetrical figurative, non-symmetrical figurative, and similitized. Semantically, Vietnamese idioms can be transparent, semi-transparent, semi-opaque, or opaque (Giang, 2018).

The classifications of idioms in both English and Vietnamese above clearly show that idioms are traditionally classified due to their syntactic characteristics, while the categorization of idioms from a cognitive perspective is based on their semantic features. In this study, idioms in English and Vietnamese are divided into idiomatic pairs (e.g., *wear and tear* in English, and *chạy ngược chạy xuôi* 'run back run forth' [manage to do something with much difficulty] in Vietnamese), comparative idioms (e.g., *as busy as a bee* in English, and *khỏe như voi* 'strong like elephant' [very strong]), and ordinary idioms (e.g., *paint the town red* in English, and *đẽo cày giữa đường* 'shape plough middle road' [be indeterminate in one's position]) (Giang, 2023).

C. Idiomatic Pairs

According to Seidl and McMordie (1988), idiomatic pairs in English are idioms having pairs of adjectives (e.g., *black and white*), pairs of nouns (e.g., *body and soul*), pairs of adverbs (e.g., *slowly but surely*), pairs of verbs (e.g., *hit and miss*), or identical pairs (e.g., *bit by bit*). More specifically, Giang (2023) stated that English idiomatic pairs are formed by pairs of words or phrases linked together by coordinators such as *and*, *or*, *but*, or *by*. Since pairs of words or phrases are joined together by coordinators, these pairs often have syntactically equivalent roles.

In Vietnamese, idiomatic pairs have been normally called "symmetrical idioms" (Duc, 1995; Hanh, 2008; Giang, 2018). The aforementioned authors claim that these idioms have two symmetrical component parts in their meanings and words, which is why they are known as symmetrical idioms. However, some idioms that Duc (1995), Hanh (2008), and Giang (2018) gave for illustrations, such as *theo đóm ăn tàn* 'follow spill eat cinder' [be a sycophant], *chọn mặt gửi vàng* 'choose face send gold' [a trusted person], *bới lông tìm vết* 'dig up hair find trace' [a nitpicker], etc., do not show a symmetrical relationship. The two component parts of these idioms do not have relationships of opposite meanings or opposite words. The criteria for identifying a type of idiom given by the above authors do not cover all idioms established by two component parts. Giang (2021) argued that any idiom in Vietnamese formed by pairs of words, phrases, or clauses with syntactically equivalent roles is called an "idiomatic pair." This name is based on the criteria of identifying a consistent type of idiom and covering all idioms with two component parts.

Thus, idiomatic pairs in both English and Vietnamese are established by two syntactically equivalent component parts. In English, the two component parts of the idiomatic pairs are linked together by coordinators, while Vietnamese idiomatic pairs do not have this property.

III. METHODS

The current study is a contrastive analysis. According to Chaturvedi (1973), the contrastive analysis highlights the importance of the mother tongue in translation and second language acquisition. The first step that has to be taken is to describe and analyze both languages independently in order to determine which structural and semantic features of the two languages are notably different from one another. After the independent description and analysis, sorting out the similar and dissimilar properties of the two languages is necessary.

In this study, we examine how the collected English and Vietnamese idiomatic pairs are similar to and different from each other from a cognitive-linguistic perspective through idiom analysability (Langlotz, 2006). Idiomatic pairs (231 English and 2374 Vietnamese entries) are described and analyzed according to grammatical properties (Taylor, 2002) and semantic properties (Fernando, 1996; Langlotz, 2006). The data are restricted to idiomatic pairs collected from Giang's (2018) collection of English and Vietnamese idioms (4134 English and 4053 Vietnamese idioms). Vietnamese data are semantically translated for the convenience of contrastive analysis. To indicate the actual words in the original language, a word-for-word translation is also provided.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A hand search of 4134 English and 4053 Vietnamese idioms in Giang's (2018) collection helps establish a corpus of 231 English and 2374 Vietnamese idiomatic pairs. It means that 5.59% of our English data are idiomatic pairs, whereas idiomatic pairs in Vietnamese account for 57.81%. From our corpus, the structural and semantic properties of idiomatic pairs in both English and Vietnamese are described and analyzed separately before giving the similarities and differences between them.

A. Structural Properties of Idiomatic Pairs in English and Vietnamese

The structural properties of idiomatic pairs in English and Vietnamese are described and analyzed in terms of grammatical and componential patterns.

(a). Grammatical Patterns

Idiomatic pairs in English are pairs of words or phrases joined together by coordinators such as *and* (e.g., *body and soul*), *or* (e.g., *by hook or by crook*), *but* (e.g., *slowly but surely*), and *by* (e.g., *bit by bit*). These coordinators are used to combine two syntactically equivalent component parts of the idioms. Such two component parts are:

- pairs of nouns or noun phrases: *body and soul*, *bread and butter*, *the birds and the bees*, etc.
- pairs of adjectives: *black and white*, *cut and dried*, *slow but sure*, etc.
- pairs of verbs or verb phrases: *aid and abet*, *come rain or come shine*, *lose the battle but win the war*, etc.
- pairs of adverbs: *backwards and forwards*, *first and foremost*, *slowly but surely*, etc.
- pairs of pronouns: *all or nothing*, *one and all*, *such and such*, etc.
- pairs of conjunctions: *as and when*, *if or when*, etc.
- pairs of prepositional phrases: *by hook or by crook*, *for better or for worse*, etc.

As shown above, each idiomatic pair has a pair of syntactically equivalent component parts. That is, the two component parts belong to the same word class. They must be both nouns, noun phrases, adjectives, verbs, verb phrases, pronouns, conjunctions, etc. However, there are still idiomatic pairs that do not follow this grammatical rule. The idiom *by and large* is an example. The first component part (*by*) is an adverb, but the second one (*large*) is an adjective, and they are linked by *and* (coordinator). Thus, the two component parts are not syntactically equivalent. This is an unusual phenomenon in English grammar but is normal in idioms since idioms themselves have special characteristics, including syntactic properties. Similarly, the idiom *so and so* has two nouns joined together by *and*, but it is considered a lexeme.

In Vietnamese, idiomatic pairs consist of two component parts with similar grammatical properties, linked together according to the principle of independence in form and without coordinators. Specifically, idiomatic pairs can be:

- pairs of noun phrases: *mẹ tròn con vuông* 'mother round baby square' [a healthy delivery], *chân ướt chân ráo* 'foot wet foot dry' [begin doing a new job, activity, etc.], *đầu voi đuôi chuột* 'head elephant tail mouse' [good plan but bad result], etc.
- pairs of verb phrases: *thay lòng đổi dạ* 'change bowels change belly' [be fickle], *chạy ngược chạy xuôi* 'run back run forth' [manage to do something with much difficulty], *ăn cháo đá bát* 'eat soup kick bowl' [be shifty], etc.
- pairs of prepositional phrases: *trên đe dưới búa* 'on anvil below hammer' [in a dilemma], *trên bến dưới thuyền* 'at wharf on boat' [a bustling trading scene], *trong họ ngoài làng* 'within family outside village' [close relatives], etc.
- pairs of adjective phrases: *bầm gan tím ruột* 'bruising liver bruising intestine' [feel extremely heartbroken], *béo trương béo nứt* 'fat bloated fat cracked' [be extremely fat], *bất di bất dịch* 'no move no leave' [be immutable], etc.
- pairs of clauses: *tay bắt mặt mừng* 'hand shake face happy' [feel extremely happy], *đầu xuôi đuôi lọt* 'head pass tail pass' [a good beginning makes a good ending], *ông ăn chả bà ăn nem* 'he eat pork bologna she eat spring roll' [Adultery is committed by both the husband and the wife, typically one after the other], etc.

In this study, we consider a verb phrase as a phrase that begins with a verb as a head followed by other elements; a noun phrase as a phrase with a noun as a head combined with a pre- or post-modifier (mainly a post-modifier), or both; a prepositional phrase as a phrase that begins with a preposition followed by other elements; an adjective phrase as a phrase with an adjective as a head combined with a pre- or post-modifier, or both; a clause as a phrase that acts as a sentence with a subject and a predicate. Although made up of two phrases or two clauses, when building sentences, idiomatic pairs still function as independent sentence elements.

(b). Componential Patterns

In terms of componential patterns, English idiomatic pairs are established with an odd number of components. In the present study, each component is regarded as a word. Idiomatic pairs usually have three components (e.g., *bits and bobs*, *body and soul*, *blood and thunder*, etc.). Additionally, idiomatic pairs may include five components (e.g., *come rain or come shine*, *the quick and the dead*, *the birds and the bees*, etc.) or even seven components (e.g., *the fat years and the lean years*, *lose the battle but win the war*, etc.).

For idiomatic pairs, the first component parts are usually different from the second ones. However, there are still idiomatic pairs in which a component in the first part coincides with another in the second one (e.g., *come rain or come shine*, *for better or for worse*, *the birds and the bees*, etc.). In some cases, the pairs of component parts in the idioms are the same (e.g., *bit by bit*, *so and so*, *such and such*, etc.). In particular, the first component part (on) can be inverted to

the second one (off) in the idiom *on and off*. A variant of this idiom is *off and on*, and it also has the same idiomatic meaning as *on and off*.

In Vietnamese, idiomatic pairs are built with an even number of components. There are usually four components in each idiomatic pair (e.g., *nói cạnh nói khéo* 'say innuendo say innuendo' [abuse with innuendoes], *chạy ngược chạy xuôi* 'run back run forth' [manage to do something with much difficulty], *khen nức khen nở* 'praise much praise much' [be full of praise for somebody], *mẹ tròn con vuông* 'mother round baby square' [a healthy delivery], etc.). In addition, idiomatic pairs may consist of six components (e.g., *được đằng chân lân đằng đầu* 'obtain legs reach heads' [be greedy], *trâu lội ngược bò lội xuôi* 'buffalo wade back ox forth' [have a difference of opinion with somebody], etc.), or even eight components (e.g., *trong nhà chưa tỏ ngoài ngõ đã tường* 'in house opaque at alley transparent' [The matter needed to be kept secret, but internally it was unknown, and outsiders were already talking about it], *con rô cũng tiếc con diếc cũng muốn* 'anabas also regret crucian carp also want' [be greedy with hesitation], *bán mặt cho đất bán lưng cho trời* 'sell face to soil sell back to sky' [a hard life], etc.). In fact, an idiomatic pair having eight components is formed by two idioms with comparisons (e.g., *nói như rồng leo làm như mèo mửa* 'say like dragon climb do like cat vomit' [Talking is good, but doing is bad]).

The components of idiomatic pairs in Vietnamese all have rhythms. According to Hanh (2008), the rhythms of idiomatic pairs can be specified as follows:

- sound repetition: the first component of the first part has the same sound as the first component of the second one (e.g., *chân ướt chân ráo* 'foot wet foot dry' [begin doing a new job, activity, etc.]);
- consonance: the tone of the first and last components in the first part must be of the same pitch as the tone of the first and last component in the second one (e.g., *mẹ tròn con vuông* 'mother round baby square' [a healthy delivery]);
- rhyme: the rhyme of the last component in the first part matches the rhyme of the first component in the second one (e.g., *đầu tắt mặt tối* 'head off face dark' [have to work hard all the time, from one job to another, with no time to rest]);
- double beat: double beat appears in idiomatic pairs to create emphatic, enhancing rhythms (e.g., *năm bè bảy mối* 'five part seven relationship' [There is no common unity in an organization or group]).

In terms of form, the two component parts constituting an idiomatic pair have an independent syntactic relationship and, in principle, can be reversed in order without their idiomatic meaning changing. In fact, there are two types of inversions of the order of the components of idiomatic pairs. The first type involves the second component part being inverted to the front, for example: *sa cơ lỡ bước/lỡ bước sa cơ* 'fall chance miss footstep/miss footstep fall chance' [be unlucky to fall into dire straits], *bầm gan tím ruột/tím ruột bầm gan* 'bruising liver bruising intestine/ bruising intestine bruising liver' [feel extremely heartbroken], *mát mái xuôi chèo/xuôi chèo mát mái* 'cool oar advantage row/advantage row cool oar [have a good job], etc. The second type is to simply invert one component of the first part for one component of the second one. *Con ông cháu cha/con cha cháu ông* 'child grandfather grandchild father' [children of the rich and powerful in society], *cao chạy xa bay/xạ chạy cao bay* 'high run far fly/far run high fly' [someone has escaped and disappeared], *lòng cá dạ chim/lòng chim dạ cá* 'bowel fish stomach bird/bowel bird stomach fish' [be evil-minded, treacherous, fickle, disloyal, etc.] are the examples.

The ability to reverse the order of the components of idiomatic pairs has created variants with the same idiomatic meanings, if any, only differing in nuances. However, there are also idiomatic pairs whose components cannot be reversed, such as *đầu tắt mặt tối* 'head off face dark' [have to work hard all the time, from one job to another, with no time to rest], *tay bắt mặt mừng* 'hand shake face happy' [feel extremely happy], *đầu xuôi đuôi lọt* 'head pass tail pass' [a good beginning makes a good ending], etc.

B. Semantic Properties of Idiomatic Pairs in English and Vietnamese

The semantic properties of idiomatic pairs in this study are examined from two perspectives: semantic compositions and transparent-opaque components.

(a). Semantic Compositions

The meanings of the two component parts of idiomatic pairs in English are able to be synonymous (e.g., *aches and pains, bits and pieces, as and when*, etc.), antonymous (e.g., *ancient and modern, dead or alive, for better or for worse*, etc.), similar (e.g., *bag and baggage, all day and every day, any and every*, etc.), or different (e.g., *body and soul, bricks and mortar, milk and water*, etc.). These pairs of meanings are combined together to create idiomatic meaning in three ways: combination, selection, and purpose. Firstly, for the combination, the meanings of the first and second component parts are joined together to represent a new meaning, which is called "idiomatic meaning". For example, *body* goes with *soul* in the idiomatic pair *body and soul*, which is paraphrasable as "completely." In fact, not all pairs of component parts in idiomatic pairs are combined to create new meanings. There are some English idiomatic pairs whose idiomatic meanings coincide with the actual meanings of the component parts. The idiom *slow but sure* is an example. Secondly, the selection of semantic combinations allows the choice to occur between the first and second component parts of the idiomatic pairs. Let's have a look at the idiom, *dead or alive*. In this idiom, *dead* is the first choice, and *alive* is the second one. The combination of *dead* and *alive* creates a choice in the idiomatic meaning of the idiom: whether *dead* (possibly killed) or *alive*. The final direction of the meaning combination between the two component parts of the idiomatic pairs is purpose. The second component part is the purpose of the first one. *Lose the battle and win the war* go

together to form the idiomatic pair *lose the battle but win the war*, which means “endure a small setback or failure but eventually attain a bigger, more significant, or overall accomplishment or victory”.

In Vietnamese, idiomatic pairs are based on two component parts that are syntactically equivalent. According to Hanh (2008), these two component parts can be synonymous (e.g., *thay lòng đổi dạ* ‘change bowel change stomach’ [be treacherous], *đổi trắng thay đen* ‘change white replace black’ [acts of distorting the truth, turning right into wrong, and wrong into right], *mồm năm miệng mười* ‘mouth five mouth ten’ [say all the others’ words], etc.), antonymous (e.g., *đầu voi đuôi chuột* ‘head elephant tail mouse’ [good plan but bad result], *mặt nặng mày nhẹ* ‘face heavy eyebrow light’ [an attitude of annoyance, frustration, or anger towards someone], etc.), similar (e.g., *hứa hươu hứa vượn* ‘promise stag promise gibbon’ [promise a lot, but not keep the promise], *nói ngon nói ngọt* ‘speak delicious speak sweet’ [speak sweetly and pleasantly to seduce or persuade someone], etc.), or different (e.g., *theo đóm ăn tàn* ‘follow spill eat cinder’ [be a sycophant], *chọn mặt gửi vàng* ‘choose face send gold’ [a trusted person], *bới lông tìm vết* ‘dig up hair find trace’ [a nitpicker], etc.). In the idiom *thay lòng đổi dạ*, *thay lòng* and *đổi dạ* are two verb phrases that are synonymous. The idiom is paraphrasable as “unfaithful, ungrateful (in love); disloyal, betrayal (in politics)”. More specifically, the component *thay* in the first part is synonymous with the component *đổi* in the second one, and the same goes for *lòng* and *dạ*.

The meaning of *đầu voi* is opposite to that of *đuôi chuột* in the idiom *đầu voi đuôi chuột* ‘head elephant tail mouse’ [big plans but limited results]. Here the antonymous relationship comes from pairs of opposite meanings: *đầu - đuôi* and *voi - chuột*. Literally, an elephant's head is much bigger than a mouse's tail, and the idiomatic meaning is a combination of both component parts. The elephant's head is associated with big things, and the mouse's tail represents small things. This combination of the two opposite parts creates the meaning of the idiom: big plans but limited results. In the idiom *nói hươu nói vượn* ‘talk stag talk gibbon’ [brag], *nói hươu* and *nói vượn* are not synonymous, but they are similar. The component *nói* in the first part coincides with that in the second one; *hươu* in the first part is not synonymous with *vượn* in the second one but they express the same way of *nói*. In other words, the meaning of the first part is close to that of the second one, and the idiom means “brag”. Another example that shows the different relationship in terms of meaning between the two component parts of the idiom is *theo đóm ăn tàn* ‘follow spill eat cinder’ [be a sycophant]. The meanings of *theo đóm* and *ăn tàn* in the idiom *theo đóm ăn tàn* ‘follow spill eat cinder’ [be a sycophant] are completely different.

In fact, there are four directions in the semantic relationship of the two component parts forming idiomatic pairs in Vietnamese: combination (e.g., *đầu trộm đuôi cướp* ‘head steal tail rob’ [thieves, swindlers], *mắt tròn mắt dẹt* ‘eye round eye flat’ [be extremely surprised or scared], *thở ngắn than dài* ‘breathe short moan long’ [groan], etc.), selection (e.g., *một mất một còn* ‘one lose one stay’ [fight fiercely without compromise], *một sống một mái* ‘one live one die’ [fight to the end, fiercely, irreconcilably], *một sống hai chết* ‘one live two die’ [fight to the end, fiercely, irreconcilably], etc.), causality (e.g., *gieo gió gặt bão* ‘sow wind meet storm’ [People who live evil lives and like to cause trouble and harm others will never have good results], *miệng ăn núi lở* ‘mouth eat mountain break’ [If you just eat without working, no matter how much you have, it will all be gone], *già néo đứt dây* ‘hard tie break rope’ [Being too stubborn and refusing to compromise leads to failure], etc.), and purpose (e.g., *theo đóm ăn tàn* ‘follow spill eat cinder’ [be a sycophant], *chọn mặt gửi vàng* ‘choose face send gold’ [a trusted person], *bới lông tìm vết* ‘dig up hair find trace’ [a nitpicker], etc.). For causality, idiomatic pairs can be made explicit by adding words such as *thì (sẽ)*, *tất (sẽ)*, *ắt (sẽ)*, *nên*, etc. between the two component parts (e.g., *tin bọm (nên) mất bò* ‘believe swindler (so) lose ox’ [People who are foolish or gullible will be cheated of money and property by swindlers]). Similarly, if the second component part of an idiomatic pair is the purpose of the first one, adding *để*, *cốt để*, *nhằm*, *nhằm để*, etc. between the two component parts can make it explicit (e.g., *há miệng (để) chờ sung* ‘open mouth (to) wait fig’ [People who are lazy don't want to work but want to eat]).

(b). Transparent-Opaque Components

There are two degrees of motivation for idiomatic pairs in English: transparent and semi-opaque. For transparent idiomatic pairs, the component parts are all explicit. It means that the idiomatic meanings of these idiomatic pairs can be derived from the literal meanings of the component parts. *Dead or alive* [whether dead (possibly killed) or alive] is an example. In this idiom, the components (*dead*, *or*, and *alive*) are transparent. To some extent, the literal reading of the idiom and its idiomatic meaning are the same. Semi-opaque idiomatic pairs are idioms whose components are quite opaque but possibly interpretable. The idiom *body and soul* belongs to this type of idiomatic pair. A man always consists of two parts: *body* and *soul*. *Body* involves material value, and *soul* refers to spiritual value. It implies that *body* and *soul* serve as a whole man, from which the idiomatic meaning of the idiom comes from (Giang, 2018). Thus, the idiom *body and soul* is understood as “completely”.

In Vietnamese, idiomatic pairs can be transparent, semi-opaque, or opaque. *Bàn đi tính lại* ‘discuss one discuss again’ [discuss something carefully] is a transparent idiomatic pair since its components (*bàn*, *đi*, *tính* and *lại*) are all explicit. *Kén cá chọn canh* is an idiomatic pair whose components are quite opaque but possibly interpretable. In this idiom, *kén cá* (the first part) and *chọn canh* (the second part) are both verb phrases that indicate the action of selecting. Thus, the meanings of the first and second component parts are synonymous. This semantic composition creates a repeated selection, and therefore, the idiom *kén cá chọn canh* ‘chose fish select soup’ is understood as “be too picky”. With a similar interpretation, we can clarify many semi-opaque idiomatic pairs such as *mồm năm miệng mười* ‘mouth

five mouth ten' [say all the others' words], *xanh vỏ đỏ lòng* 'green cover red bowel' [people whose outward appearance is completely contrary to their inner nature], *mặt sứa gan lim* 'face nettles liver ironwood' [stubborn people], etc. Of course, this interpretation is not easy. It can only be done by native speakers with a lot of experience. Opaque idiomatic pairs involve idioms whose idiomatic meanings cannot be derived from the meanings of their components. The components of these idioms are implicit, i.e. the idioms are completely opaque. The idiom *già kén kén hom* 'old cocoon jam bamboo frame' (one who is very picky will fall into a slump and worry), is an example. The idiomatic meaning of this idiom totally differs from the sum of the meanings of its constituent parts, i.e., *già*, *kén*, *kén* and *hom* are completely implicit (Giang, 2018).

However, the idiom *già kén kén hom* 'old cocoon jam bamboo frame' [one who is very picky will fall into a slump and worry] can be motivated by conventional knowledge. According to Hanh (2008), *già kén kén hom* is an idiomatic pair derived from the silkworm feeding trade in Vietnam. Similarly, *qua cầu rút ván* 'pass bridge withdraw board' [be ungrateful, treacherous] is an idiomatic pair originating from a story about two students, Liu Cai and Le Chau, and *áo vải cờ đào* 'blouse cloth flag red' [national hero] originates from the event of King Quang Trung's death in 1788.

C. Contrastive Analysis

(a). Similarities

Idiomatic pairs are found in both English and Vietnamese. In terms of grammatical patterns, idiomatic pairs have two syntactically equivalent component parts, which are constructed in pairs of noun phrases (e.g., *the birds and the bees* in English, and *mẹ tròn con vuông* 'mother round baby square' [a healthy delivery] in Vietnamese), pairs of verb phrases (e.g., *lose the battle but win the war* in English, and *thay lòng đổi dạ* 'change bowels change belly' [be fickle] in Vietnamese), and prepositional phrases (e.g., *by hook or by crook* in English, and *trên đe dưới búa* 'on anvil below hammer' [in a dilemma] in Vietnamese).

A further similarity is that the meanings of the two component parts of idiomatic pairs in both languages can be synonymous (e.g., *aches and pains* in English, and *thay lòng đổi dạ* 'change bowel change stomach' [be treacherous] in Vietnamese), antonymous (e.g., *ancient and modern* in English, and *đầu voi đuôi chuột* 'head elephant tail mouse' [good plan but bad result] in Vietnamese), similar (e.g., *bag and baggage* in English, and *hứa hươu hứa vượn* 'promise stag promise gibbon' [promise a lot, but not keep the promise] in Vietnamese), or different (e.g., *body and soul* in English, and *bới lông tìm vết* 'dig up hair find trace' [a nitpicker] in Vietnamese). The semantic relationship of the two component parts forming idiomatic pairs in English and Vietnamese conforms to combination (e.g., *body and soul* in English, and *đầu trộm đuôi cướp* 'head steal tail rob' [thieves, swindlers] in Vietnamese), selection (e.g., *dead or alive* in English, and *một mất một còn* 'one lose one stay' [fight fiercely without compromise] in Vietnamese), or purpose (e.g., *lose the battle but win the war* in English, and *theo đóm ăn tàn* 'follow spill eat cinder' [be a sycophant] in Vietnamese).

A final similar property noted in both English and Vietnamese involves motivation degrees of idiomatic pairs. These idioms can be transparent (e.g., *dead or alive* in English, and *bàn đi tính lại* 'discuss one discuss again' [discuss something carefully] in Vietnamese), or semi-opaque (e.g., *body and soul* in English, and *kén cá chọn canh* 'chose fish select soup' [be too picky] in Vietnamese).

(b). Differences

Apart from the properties shared by both languages, the findings of the study have revealed some striking differences between English and Vietnamese. The primary difference lies in the distribution of idiomatic pairs in English and Vietnamese. Although idiomatic pairs appear in both languages, the idioms are far more popular in Vietnamese than in English, with as many as 57.81% in Vietnamese as against the figure of 5.59% in English.

The grammatical patterns of idiomatic idioms found in English but not in Vietnamese involve pairs of nouns (e.g., *bread and butter*), pairs of adjectives (e.g., *black and white*), pairs of verbs (e.g., *aid and abet*), pairs of adverbs (e.g., *backwards and forwards*), pairs of pronouns (e.g., *all or nothing*), or pairs of conjunctions (e.g., *as and when*). However, idioms as pairs of clauses are distinctive in Vietnamese (e.g., *tay bắt mặt mừng* 'hand shake face happy' [feel extremely happy]). It is noted that the two component parts of the idiomatic pairs in English are combined together by coordinators such as *and*, *or*, *but*, etc., while Vietnamese idiomatic pairs do not have this property. In terms of componential patterns, idiomatic pairs in English are formed with an odd number of components (e.g., *slow but sure*) but with an even number of those in Vietnamese (e.g., *ăn cháo đá bát* 'eat soup kick bowl' [be shifty]). In addition, idiomatic pairs whose component parts can be reversed in order without changing their idiomatic meanings are very popular in Vietnamese (e.g., *bầm gan tím ruột/tím ruột bầm gan* 'bruising liver bruising intestine/ bruising intestine bruising liver' [feel extremely heartbroken]). In English, idiomatic pairs hardly have this feature except for *on and off*, which can be realized as *off and on*.

In terms of semantic compositions, causality—the direction in the semantic relationship of the two component parts forming idiomatic pairs—is unique in Vietnamese (e.g., *gieo gió gặt bão* 'sow wind meet storm' [People who live evil lives and like to cause trouble and harm others will never have good results]). Additionally, opaque idiomatic pairs are only found in Vietnamese (e.g., *già kén kén hom* 'old cocoon jam bamboo frame' [one who is very picky will fall into a

slump and worry]). The idiomatic meanings of these idioms cannot be derived from the literal meanings of their component parts; however, they can be motivated by conventional knowledge.

V. CONCLUSION

Idiomatic pairs are available in both English and Vietnamese. Nevertheless, these idioms are much more prevalent in Vietnamese than in English. In terms of grammatical properties, idiomatic pairs in both languages are established by two syntactically equivalent component parts. The components forming idiomatic pairs are odd in English (with coordinators) and even in Vietnamese (without coordinators). In terms of semantic properties, most idiomatic pairs in English and Vietnamese are able to be analyzable and have meanings that are at least partly motivated (Langlotz, 2006). The meanings of the two component parts of idiomatic pairs can be synonymous, antonymous, similar, or different (Hanh, 2008). These pairs of meanings are linked together to create idiomatic meanings in four directions: combination, selection, causality (only in Vietnamese), and purpose. Furthermore, idiomatic pairs can be transparent, semi-opaque, or opaque (only in Vietnamese) (Fernando & Flavell, 1981). The results demonstrate that there is a close relationship between the forms and contents of idioms and between their literal and idiomatic meanings. In other words, the association between the literal reading and the idiomatic reading is analyzable in most cases.

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