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NHÀ XUẤT BẢN XÂY DỰNG

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39 ₆	142	Nhân tố ảnh hưởng đến quyết định trở thành người làm việc tự do (Freelancer) của sinh viên đại học và người mới ra trường tại Hà Nội <i>Phan Thúy Thảo, Nguyễn Thu Trang, Lưu Trung Hiếu, Phạm Xuân Sơn</i>	438
39 ₉	143	Nghiên cứu các nhân tố ảnh hưởng đến quyết định lựa chọn Trường Đại học Thủy lợi của sinh viên khoa Kinh tế và Quản lý <i>Phan Thúy Thảo, Trần Thị Cẩm Thúy, Lê Tú Anh, Hồ Xuân Minh</i>	441
	144	Lượng giá giá trị cảnh quan khu du lịch đồi chè huyện Đồng Hỷ, tỉnh Thái Nguyên <i>Vũ Ngọc Luân, Nguyễn Thị Thủy</i>	444
40 ₂	145	Nghiên cứu các nhân tố kinh tế ảnh hưởng đến khả năng sinh lời của các doanh nghiệp xây dựng trên thị trường chứng khoán Việt Nam <i>Tô Minh Hương</i>	447
40 ₅	146	Cộng sinh Công nghiệp - Đô thị - Dịch vụ thúc đẩy phát triển kinh tế tuần hoàn ở Việt Nam <i>Lê Minh Thoa</i>	450
40 ₈	147	Vốn xã hội và chuyển đổi số của các doanh nghiệp khởi nghiệp tại Việt Nam: Vai trò trung gian của sự tiếp cận nguồn lực <i>Trần Nha Ghi, Lê Xuân Bảo, Hà Kiên Tân</i>	453
41 ₁	148	Nghiên cứu các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến sự hài lòng của người dân về chất lượng dịch vụ hành chính công tại huyện Tiên Lữ, tỉnh Hưng Yên <i>Nguyễn Thiện Dũng, Đào Công Hiên</i>	456
41 ₄	149	Nguồn vốn con người và tăng trưởng kinh tế tại các tỉnh Phú Thọ, Lạng Sơn, Hòa Bình <i>Đỗ Thanh Thu, Hoàng Thị Thanh Thanh</i>	459
41 ₇	Tiểu ban: Kỹ thuật Tài nguyên nước		
42 ₀	150	Xây dựng bản đồ cực trị khí hậu trường mưa cho Việt Nam <i>Nguyễn Tiến Thành</i>	465
42 ₃	151	Ứng dụng viễn thám thành lập bản đồ giám sát thời gian sinh trưởng cây lúa <i>Nguyễn Anh Hùng, Lê Hải Trung</i>	468
42 ₆	152	Ứng dụng mô hình Mike Flood đánh giá ngập lụt tại lưu vực Nam Nhiêu Lộc - Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh <i>Nguyễn Anh Hùng, Lê Hải Trung</i>	471
	Tiểu ban: Ngôn ngữ Anh		
42 ₉	153	Strategies to enhance English reading comprehension teaching a literature review <i>Nguyễn Thị Hương Lan</i>	477
	154	Misconceptions of learner autonomy: A review of literature on language education <i>Son Van Nguyen</i>	480
43 ₂	155	English-Vietnamese translation of nominalization in geological texts by transposition procedure <i>Nguyễn Thị Cúc</i>	483

156	Factors influencing students' interaction in virtual English classrooms <i>Lã Nguyễn Bình Minh</i>	171
157	Teacher praise revisited and some pedagogical implications <i>Nhạc Thanh Hương</i>	172
158	Textbook adaptation strategies: How the book compact has been adapted in the course TA1 at Thuyloi University <i>Lâm Thị Lan Hương</i>	173
159	An introduction to task - based approach in English teaching <i>Nguyễn Thị Hồng Anh</i>	174
160	Alignment between ESP teaching at a technical university and requirements from workplace <i>Dương Thủy Hương</i>	175
161	Teaching English via zoom clouds meeting <i>Vũ Đình Hưng</i>	176
162	Using movie dubbing in the English pronunciation training course for the 1 st year English-major student's at Thuyloi University <i>Phạm Thị Linh Thùy</i>	177
163	Transitivity analysis of "a tale of two cities" <i>Nguyễn Đạo Lý Nhân Phúc</i>	178
164	Students' perceptions on the effectiveness of breakout rooms in zoom for pairwork in speaking lessons <i>Phạm Thị Hồng Nhung</i>	179
165	Advantages of break-out rooms and channels in Microsoft Teams in teaching speaking skills for students at a university <i>Nguyễn Hồng Vân</i>	180
166	To measure or not to measure: That continues to be the question <i>Tran Thi Ngoc Ha</i>	181
167	Online extensive reading: A qualitative study on students' perspectives at Thuyloi University <i>Ta Minh Phuong</i>	182
168	A study on english similes <i>as...as</i> and their Vietnamese equivalents <i>Nguyễn Thị Thảo</i>	183
169	Investigating students' reluctance to speak English in class <i>Nguyen Phuong Linh</i>	184
170	Reasons for English - Vietnamese code-switching in conversations of Vietnamese engineers <i>Nguyễn Thị Thu Phúc</i>	185

A STUDY ON ENGLISH SIMILES AS...AS AND THEIR VIETNAMESE EQUIVALENTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the linguistic treasure of any nation, similes represent a minor-yet-significant part in expressing physical and spiritual aspects of that nation. To learners of foreign languages, the application of similes in communication, to some extent, demonstrates their proficiency in using the language.

Wikberg (2008) defines a simile as 'a figurative expression used to make an explicit comparison of two unlike things by means of the prepositions *like*, *as...as*, or the conjunctions *as*, *as if*, *as though*.' According to Bredin (1998), what distinguishes a simile from a comparison is asymmetry, i.e. it is possible to reverse the elements available in a comparison, while such an inversion in a simile is unacceptable in terms of meaning.

With regard to function, similes effectively serve as a useful device for making the language far more descriptive and captivating than the adjectives on their own. Obviously, the statement '*The film was as exciting as watching paint dry*' is likely to capture more attention and exert more dramatic effect than the simple version '*The film was very boring*.'

With great interest in such culturally-bound expressions as similes, this study is meant to investigate syntactic and semantic features of English similes with *as...as* and to make a plausible interpretation for the similarities and differences between English similes and Vietnamese equivalents.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

The research adopts a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The

techniques to be applied in this study involve: statistical technique (aiming at collecting English similes and their Vietnamese equivalents), analytical technique (aiming at analyzing their semantic - cultural properties) and contrastive technique (aiming at figuring out and explaining the ratio of similarities and differences). The data for investigation include 210 English similes presented in *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* and the website *phrase.org.com*.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. Syntactic and semantic analysis of *as...as* similes

Structurally, the *as...as* simile is composed of three elements: (1) the **ground**, which represents the property described by the whole simile; (2) the **vehicle**, which symbolizes the source used for the comparison and (3) the **formal indicators** *as...as*. Apart from the inherent and invariable indicators, the other two elements are investigated as follows:

3.1.1. The ground

The ground describes a common feature between the target entity and the vehicle. As for English similes, it always takes the form of an adjective denoting a different property, which may be semantically concerned with physical appearance, quality, personality traits, feelings and emotions. These properties represent the most dominant and typical features of the vehicles in terms of speed (*lightning*, *a tortoise*), wisdom (*an owl*, *Solomon*) and the like. Remarkably, several

properties that are supposed to describe the physical attributes of inanimate objects turn out to feature human personality traits as in: *as hard as nails* and *as dumb as a box of rocks*.

3.1.2. The vehicle

The vehicle is normally a noun or noun phrase, occasionally followed by a prepositional phrase as in *(as drunk as) a skunk at a garden party* or *(as plain as) the nose on your face*. In a few similes, the vehicle takes the form of a gerund like *(as easy as) taking candy from a baby* and *(as difficult as) nailing jelly to the wall*.

Semantically, the vehicle involves entities of various types, ranging from animate to inanimate objects. Analysis of the data collected shows that inanimate objects account for the majority of the vehicles (47,1%), which proves the immense diversity of images for comparison, whereas the second largest portion (23.8%) is occupied by animals, whose typical properties are used to refer to human personalities or emotions. Noticeably, a few similes (7.1%) make use of cultural images, which may, to some extent, hinder the full comprehension due to cross-cultural differences, as in: *(as mad as) a March hare* or *(as old as) Methuselah*. The remainder is constituted by other concepts namely natural world, human beings, body parts and actions.

3.2. Categorization of English similes in terms of their Vietnamese equivalents

The categorization of the English similes and their Vietnamese equivalents is presented in Figure 1 below.

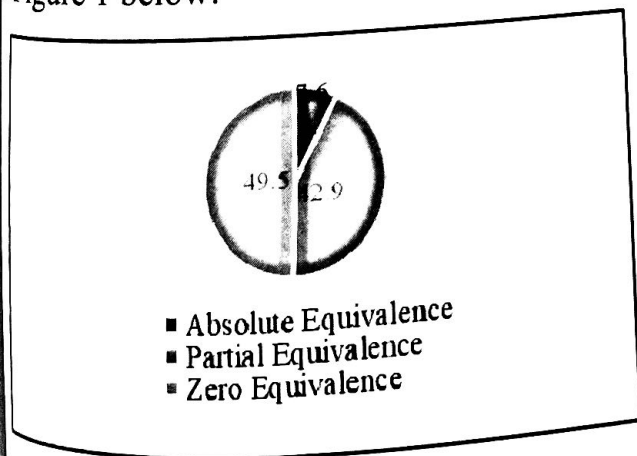


Figure 1. Categorization of equivalence

3.2.1. Absolute equivalence

This category involves English similes with syntactically and semantically complete Vietnamese equivalents, which means that the three components of the similes remain the same. It is revealed from the chart that 7.6% of the English similes belong to this group despite significant differences in the two cultures, as in the subsequent similes:

as sour as vinegar - chua như giấm
as light as feather - nhẹ như lông hồng
as timid as a rabbit - nhát như thỏ đế
as slow as a tortoise - chậm như rùa

These pairs of similes are identical, not only in the structure but also in the use of the vehicle and the ground to be compared. This can be explained by the fact that British and Vietnamese people, as human beings, admittedly share certain common perceptions of the surrounding world, which are then reflected in their languages. Certain states of emotions are universally perceived, regardless of what culture people belong to, and it is at this point that Western and Eastern cultures converge, resulting in the above-mentioned complete coincidences. From culture to culture, there exist shared human experiences that are expressed through languages, which lead to the same idea expressed in the same way in different cultures. Thanks to the mutual availability of the sources for comparison in both English and Vietnamese, there exist identical similes in the two languages.

3.2.2. Partial equivalence

This group embraces English similes with some modifications in the Vietnamese equivalents, typically the vehicle. It is evident from the chart that a large number of English similes (42.9%) employ dissimilar images for comparison in Vietnamese. This is definitely resulted from the significant differences between the two cultures, within which the languages exist. Inarguably, similes are derived from local culture and customs, which have been shaped in the community for a long period of time. The dissimilarity in geography, history, customs, habits and ideology will be reflected in the people's own expressions.

English and Vietnamese represent totally dissimilar cultures, namely Western and Oriental ones, thus disagreement is definitely unavoidable. These differences are rooted in the two possible conditions:

(1) The unavailability of the source in the language, which are shown in the following typical illustrations:

as red as a beetroot - *đỏ như gác*

as big as a bus - *to như con voi*

as quiet as a church mouse - *im như thóc*

Obviously, it was not until recent years that such images as *beetroot*, *bus*, and *church* were present or popular in Vietnam; as a result, different sources which were familiar images to Vietnamese people like *gác*, *con voi*, or *thóc* are utilized to complete the comparison.

(2) The higher familiarity of the entities described in the similes. A typical illustration for this type is the simile: *as strong as a horse* - *khỏe như trâu*. Human physical strength is normally associated with the horse in British culture since this animal is frequently present in daily life; it can carry much greater load than its own weight and do heavy jobs like ploughing, transporting and racing for long duration. In contrast, the image of *trâu* is actually more familiar to Vietnamese people due to agricultural customs of wet rice growing, thus the simile *khỏe như trâu* (*as strong as a buffalo*) is more comprehensible. Other similes of this group include: *as black as pitch* - *đen như cột nhà cháy* or *as dry as a bone* - *khô như ngói*.

3.2.3. Zero equivalence

This group, which accounts for nearly half of the similes (49.5%), consists of English similes with no official equivalents in Vietnamese. This, repeatedly, can be traced back by the nature and function of language. People from different cultures possess varied ideologies and each society perceives the world in a different way, which influence the languages in general and the ways of expressing ideas in particular. Similes in one language may express a sense that does not exist in another language. The choice as to which quality chosen for making a comparison is simply a matter of preference;

consequently, British people have created expressions of figurative comparisons that can not be found in Vietnamese, and vice versa, as the following similes:

as useless as a chocolate teapot

as queer as a nine-bob note

as snug as a bug in a rug

as obstinate as a mule

Due to the unavailability of equivalent idioms in Vietnamese, the feasible strategies of translation involve paraphrasing (which may risk losing the stylistic impact of the simile) and literal translation of component words (which may risk losing the semantic impact of the simile), the selection of which is dependent on specific expressions.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the investigation of English similes and their Vietnamese equivalents has proved that merely a minor percentage is reserved for absolute equivalence between the two languages, whilst the majority is accounted for by partial and zero resemblance. It has been interpreted by the fact that similes, like idioms, are highly culturally-bound, whereas British and Vietnamese cultures represent highly dissimilar cultures namely Western and Eastern ones. Differences in cultures definitely result in different ways of thinking, which are then reflected in the languages. With regard to language teaching, this study highlights the significance of introducing cultural background of language usage, which enables learners to use the learnt language appropriately within the right cultural context, thus achieving the overall targets of language teaching and learning.

5. REFERENCES

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