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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.

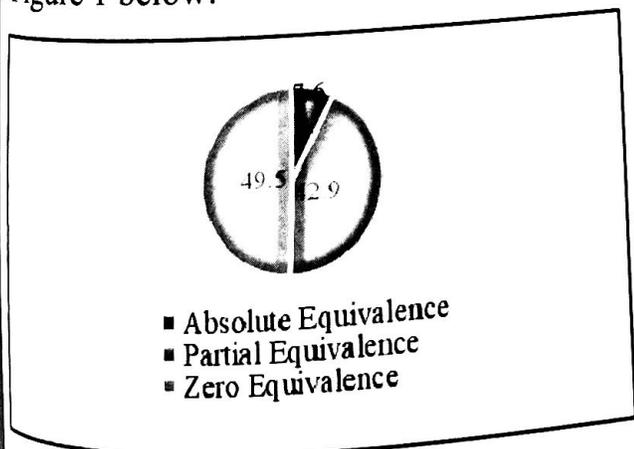


Figure 1. Categorization of equivalence

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 his 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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