



# TUYỂN TẬP BÁO CÁO HỘI NGHỊ TOÀN QUỐC

## KHOA HỌC TRÁI ĐẤT VÀ TÀI NGUYÊN VỚI PHÁT TRIỂN BỀN VỮNG (ERSD 2024)

HÀ NỘI 14 - 11 - 2024

ERSD 2024



NHÀ XUẤT BẢN GIAO THÔNG VẬN TẢI

# **TIỂU BAN NGÔN NGỮ HỌC**

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## Translation of animal idioms in English into Vietnamese

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### ABSTRACT

Idioms represent a substantial section in any language, and the acquisition of idioms definitely demonstrates the foreign language learner's proficiency in using the language. Apparently, the names of animals appear abundantly in English idioms, and it is the translation of these idioms into the student's mother tongue that may pose enormous obstacles owing to huge dissimilarities between the two languages and cultures. The study used the qualitative methods to analyze different feasible strategies towards translating English idioms with animals into Vietnamese on the basis of the range of equivalences between the two languages. Statistical technique is applied with the aim of collecting English idioms with animals and their translation in Vietnamese; analytical technique is used for the analysis of the semantic-cultural properties of the idioms; contrastive technique is employed aiming at classifying different strategies towards translating English idioms in to Vietnamese. The study employs the idiom translation strategies proposed by Baker; namely, using idioms that are completely equivalent in meaning and structure, using idioms that are equivalent in meaning but different in structure, and translation by paraphrase. The analysis and contrast of idioms in the two languages reveal that there exist very few idioms that are absolutely identical in the two languages; while the majority of English idioms with animals have partial equivalents or even none equivalents in Vietnamese. In such cases, different images can be used to convey the same meaning or the meaning of English idioms must be paraphrased to ensure accurate understanding of Vietnamese learners' of English.

**Keywords:** English animals idioms; equivalence; translation strategy

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### 1. Introduction

In the linguistic treasure of a nation, idioms serve a significant role in expressing the material and spiritual aspects of that nation. For foreign language learners, mastering the idioms of that foreign language is somewhat synonymous with the ability to understand and use that foreign language as fluently as a native speaker. The transference of idioms poses a significant challenge in the field of translation studies, due to their intrinsic cultural and linguistic nuances. Idioms are deeply rooted in the cultural and social contexts of their languages. Among these, animal idioms, which reference animals to convey specific meanings, present unique translation difficulties due to the symbolic meanings that animals carry in different cultures. This paper is intended to investigate the strategies towards translating animal idioms from English into Vietnamese, aiming to analyse the strategies employed by translators and the cultural implications of these translations.

### 2. Literature review and research method

#### 2.1. Literature review

##### 2.2.1. Definition of an idiom

The concept of *Idiom* has been approached from a variety of aspects. According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003) an idiom is defined as "*a phrase which means something different from the meanings of the separate words; the way of statement typical of a person or a people in their use of language.*" According to the Vietnamese Dictionary of the Institute of Linguistics, an idiom is "*a set of fixed words that are used in common use and whose meaning cannot usually be explained simply by the meaning of the words that make it up.*"

Larson (1998) defined an idiom as "*an ambiguous term, used in conflicting ways. In lay or general use, idiom has two main meanings. First, an idiom is a particular means of expressing something in*

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language, music, art, and so on, which characterizes a person or group. Secondly, an idiom is a particular lexical collocation or phrasal lexeme, peculiar to a language”.

Baker (2018) distinguished idioms from collocation by the transparency of meaning and flexibility patterning. According to her, idioms are “frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components”. Five actions that may result in the loss of the meaning of an idiom includes: changing the order of the words in an idiom, deleting a word from it, adding word to it, replacing one word by another one, and changing its grammatical structure.

### 2.1.2. Translation of idioms

Behind the language of a nation there always exists the culture of that nation. The history of language and the history of culture always go together, cooperating and complementing each other. This explains why the meaning of a word contains specific information about the geographical, natural, historical, economic, social, artistic aspects and other features of that nation. Klaudy (2003) states that ‘translators should be not only linguistic but also cultural mediators’, and it should be part of their professional competence to know the two cultures and be able to ‘compare and assess the geographical, historical, social and cultural aspects of two language communities and develop strategies to bridge the gaps between different cultures.’ For this reason, Baker (2003) asserts that an idiom in one language may or may not have an equivalent idiom in another language.

English, being a language rich in idiomatic expressions, often uses animals to convey characteristics or situations metaphorically. For instance, English idioms like ‘let the cat out of the bag’ or ‘a butterfly in one’s stomach’ carry specific connotations that may not have direct equivalents in other languages. Vietnamese, on the other hand, has its own set of idiomatic expressions and cultural references to animals. The translation of these idioms requires not just linguistic proficiency but also a deep understanding of the cultural contexts of both languages. Baker (1992) states that ‘The main problems that idiomatic or expressions pose in translation relate to two main areas: the ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly and the difficulties in rendering various aspects of meaning that an idiom or fixed expression conveys into the target language.’

Obviously, animals can carry similar or different metaphorical meanings in different cultures, which can complicate the translation process. For example, in both cultures, a fox is often associated with cunning and deceit (*as sly as a fox*) and a wolf symbolizes fierce and cruelty (*a wolf in a sheep’s clothing*). On the contrary, an owl in British culture represents seniority and wisdom (*as wise as an owl*) whereas in Vietnamese culture, it is considered as a symbol of bad luck, death and ugliness. Understanding these cultural differences is crucial for effective translation. Newmark (1988) introduces the notion of cultural equivalence, a notable procedure in which a word in the source language can be substituted by another word in the target language with the same stylistic function, but possibly with different meanings, for example *Don Juan* in English can be translated into *Sở Khanh* in Vietnamese. Another clear evidence can be seen in the English idiom: ‘*Birds of the same feather flock together*’ whereas Vietnamese people have this one: ‘*Ngưu tầm ngưu, mã tầm mã*’. The image of *birds* in English is transferred into the image of *ngưu* (buffalos) and *mã* (horses) in Vietnamese. This procedure results from the substitution of an idiom with another with corresponding communicative value. The use of cultural equivalence in translation conveys familiar impression on readers because it refers to familiar concepts with target readership. Such transference, however, is not always applicable since one popular concept or idiom in one culture may be totally unfamiliar to people from another.

Baker (2018) proposes 5 principal strategies towards translating idioms as follow:

Strategy 1: ‘Using an idiom of similar meaning and form. This strategy involves using an idiom in the target language which conveys roughly the same meaning as that of the source-language idiom, and, in addition, consists of equivalent lexical items.’

Strategy 2: ‘Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form. It is often possible to find an idiom in the target language which has a meaning similar to that of the source idiom but consists of different lexical items.’

Strategy 3: ‘Borrowing the source language idiom. Just as the use of loan words is a common strategy in dealing with culture-specific items, it is not unusual for idioms to be borrowed in the original form in some contexts.’

Strategy 4: ‘Translation by paraphrase. This is by far the most common way of translating idioms when a match cannot be found in the target language or when it seems inappropriate to use idiomatic language in the target text because of differences in stylistic preferences of the source and target languages.’

Strategy 5: ‘Translation by omission of entire idioms. As with single words, an idiom may sometimes be omitted altogether in the target text. This may be because it has no close match, its meaning cannot be easily paraphrased, or for stylistic reasons.’

## 2.2. Research methods

The research adopts qualitative methods. The techniques to be applied in this study involve: statistical technique (aiming at collecting English idioms with animals and their translations into Vietnamese), analytical technique (aiming at analyzing their semantic-cultural properties) and contrastive technique (aiming at figuring out and classifying specific strategies that are appropriate for each idiom). The data for investigation include English idioms presented in *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*. The analysis of translation strategies of English idioms with animals into Vietnamese will adopt theoretical framework suggested by Baker (2018); namely, using idioms that are completely equivalent in meaning and structure, using idioms that are equivalent in meaning but different in structure, and translation by paraphrase.

## 3. Findings and discussion

Out of the five strategies towards translating idioms proposed by Baker (2018), strategy 3 regarding borrowing the source language idioms seems to be an impractical way since there exists almost no such idioms in Vietnamese. In addition, strategy 5 will not be mentioned in this research for the reason that the choice remains greatly dependent on each translator’s style and context. The research aims to focus on the detailed analysis of the three remaining strategies to towards translating English idioms with name s of animals into Vietnamese.

### 3.1. Using an idiom of similar meaning and form

This approach entails employing an idiom in the target language that closely matches the meaning of the source language idiom and contains equivalent vocabulary. In other words, the idiom in the target language conveys the same meaning and uses the same corresponding words as in the source language.

Take ‘*crocodile tears*’ for example. The literal translation of ‘*crocodile tears*’ maintains both the imagery and the idiomatic meaning, ensuring clarity and cultural relevance. This idiom, understood globally, preserves its connotation of insincerity in both English and Vietnamese contexts. Regarding cultural value, this strategy highlights shared human experiences and expressions, demonstrating how some metaphors transcend cultural boundaries. It reflects a cultural understanding that extends beyond linguistic differences. Some idioms that can be translated using this strategy are listed below:

English Idioms	Meanings	Vietnamese
‘ <i>Crocodile tears</i> ’	Fake or insincere tears.	<i>Nước mắt cá sấu</i>
‘ <i>A wolf in sheep’s clothing</i> ’	A person who seems benign but is threatening in reality.	<i>Sói đội lông cừu</i>
‘ <i>Fight like cats and dogs</i> ’	Have angry arguments all the time	<i>Cãi nhau như chó với mèo</i>
‘ <i>Fish out of water</i> ’	Someone who is in an unfamiliar or uncomfortable situation.	<i>Như cá mắc cạn</i>

However, this kind of perfect match between the two cultures can only be achieved occasionally. It can be explained by the fact that the more the two cultures are identical to each other, the more cases of such equivalents can be created; contrarily, when the cultural differences are clearly remarkable, then the possibility of making such an absolute equivalent of the idiom is decreased to its lowest degree. In fact, Britain and Vietnam clearly own dissimilar cultures, so there exists a limited number of absolute equivalents of animal idioms in the two languages.

### 3.2. Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form

This strategy involves using an idiom in the target language that conveys a similar meaning to the

source language idiom but does not share the same vocabulary. Put in other words, the lexical elements of the source language idiom are not preserved in the target language; instead, a semantic equivalent replaces the original lexical items. Structural adaptation adjusts the idiom's components to align with the linguistic and cultural conventions of the target language, while maintaining the original meaning.. For example, the English idiom *'Kill two birds with one stone'* can be translated into *'Một mũi tên trúng hai đích'*. This translation preserves the concept of achieving two objectives with a single action. By adapting the structure, the translation remains clear and effective.

Below are some typical English idioms of this type and their Vietnamese equivalents.

English Idioms	Meanings	Vietnamese
<i>'To kill two birds with one stone'</i>	To accomplish two objectives with one action.	<i>Một mũi tên trúng hai đích/ Một công đôi việc</i>
<i>'A leopard can't change its spots'</i>	A human character, particularly if it is flawed, is unlikely to change.	<i>Chó đen giữ mực</i>
<i>'Stubborn as a mule'</i>	Very stubborn	<i>Thân lừa ưa nặng</i>
<i>'The early bird catches the worm'</i>	People who begin or arrive ahead of others are more likely to achieve success.	<i>Trâu chậm uống nước đục</i>
<i>'Teach an old dog new tricks'</i>	Teaching someone new skills or altering their habits or character is extremely challenging.	<i>Tre già khó uốn</i>
<i>'To kill the goose that lays the golden eggs'</i>	To undermine or halt the primary source of your income.	<i>Tham bát bỏ mâm/ Tham thì thâm, lằm thì thiệt</i>
<i>'Every dog has its day'</i>	Everybody experiences success or happiness at some point in their life.	<i>Ai giàu ba họ, ai khó ba đời</i>
<i>'Birds of a feather flock together'</i>	People who share similar interests or traits often group together.	<i>Ngưu tầm ngưu, mã tầm mã</i>
<i>'A straw that breaks the camel's back'</i>	The final incident in a series of negative events that makes you feel you can no longer tolerate a bad situation.	<i>Giọt nước tràn ly/ Già néo đứt dây</i>
<i>'Don't count your chicken before they hatch'</i>	You shouldn't make plans based on something positive happening until you are certain that it has actually occurred.	<i>Đừng đếm cua trong hang</i>

This strategy highlights the significance of cultural context in idiomatic expressions. The adaptation respects Vietnamese linguistic patterns and ensures the idiom's comprehensibility and relevance. Although the animal and imagery differ, the connotative meaning is preserved, ensuring the idiom's relevance in Vietnamese.

### 3.3. Translation by paraphrase

Paraphrasing can be considered as the most frequent method for translating idioms due to the impossibility to find an equivalent in the target language or variations in stylistic selections. As a matter of fact, there exist a large quantity of English idioms with animals without any equivalences in Vietnamese. Consequently, the translator is supposed to paraphrase the idiom from the source language to make sure the meaning of the idioms is comprehensible to Vietnamese learners of English. This strategy involves omitting of the lexical item denoting animals in the target language and providing an explanation of meaning of the idiom. Take the idiom *'butterflies in one's stomach'* as an example. Due to the fact that there is no equivalent idiom in Vietnamese, it has to be translated to *'lo lắng bồn chồn'* (*feeling anxious*), resulting in the disappearance of the lexical item *'butterflies'* in the target language. This procedure trades off specific animal images for a more direct expression of the idiom's meaning in the target language. The phrase communicates the sensation of nervousness or anxiety without relying on the metaphor of *butterflies*. While the visual imagery is lost, the emotional impact is more or less retained. Below are some typical examples of this type.

English Idioms	Meaning	Vietnamese
'Like a bull in a China shop'	Being inattentive in their movements or actions.	Vụng về lóng ngóng
'Butterflies in one's stomach'	Feeling nervous or anxious.	Lo lắng bồn chồn
'An elephant in the room'	An obvious issue or challenging situation that people prefer to avoid discussing.	Điều hiển nhiên mà mọi người luôn né tránh
'The world is your oyster'	You can do what you want or go where you want.	Bạn có nhiều cơ hội ở phía trước
'Pigs might fly'	There is no chance at all of something happening/	Chỉ khi Mặt Trời mọc đằng Tây
'Let the cat out of the bag'	Accidentally reveal a secret, often without meaning to.	Bí mật lộ tẩy
'Put a cat among the pigeons'	To say or do something that stirs up trouble or provokes widespread anger.	Làm mọi thứ rối tung/ xáo trộn
'A snake in the grass'	An unpleasant person who cannot be trusted.	Kẻ thù giấu mặt
'Let sleeping dogs lie'	Let things be; we shouldn't bring up a negative situation that most people have already moved on from.	Chuyện đã qua hãy để nó qua
'To have a bee in one's bonnet'	Keep talking about something again and again because you think it is important.	Luôn bận tâm/ ám ảnh về điều gì

Regarding cultural value, omission can simplify translation and avoid potential confusion when the metaphorical image is not universally understood. However, this approach might lead to a loss of the idiom's stylistic and cultural richness. Although omitting animal imagery can be practical in certain situations, it may also diminish the idiomatic value and cultural profoundness. This strategy, though effective in conveying the core meaning, might strip the expression of its stylistic richness and cultural identity.

#### 4. Conclusion

The translation of animal idioms from English to Vietnamese manifests the fine balance between maintaining the figurative meaning and adapting to cultural contexts. While some idioms are translated directly, others require substitution of animals or metaphorical constructs to preserve the intended meaning. This analysis reveals the significance of cultural awareness and linguistic creativity in translation practices, highlighting both the challenges and strategies involved. Ultimately, translating idioms involves more than just a linguistic task; it also requires cultural negotiation. By grasping and employing suitable translation strategies, translators can reconcile language differences, providing translations that are both precise and culturally meaningful. This process highlights the broader role of translation in promoting cross-cultural communication and comprehension.

In summary, the translation of animal idioms from English to Vietnamese represents a broad scope of study that intersects linguistic, cultural, and practical considerations. By examining the strategies used and the cultural implications of these translations, this research is hoped to contribute to the broader field of translation studies and enhances Vietnamese learners' competence in intercultural communication.

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## TÓM TẮT

### Dịch thành ngữ tiếng Anh chứa tên động vật sang tiếng Việt

Nguyễn Thị Thảo

*Trường Đại học Mở - Địa chất*

Thành ngữ luôn chiếm một phần quan trọng trong bất kỳ ngôn ngữ nào và khả năng sử dụng thành ngữ chắc chắn thể hiện trình độ của người học ngoại ngữ. Trong tiếng Anh có nhiều thành ngữ chứa tên các loài động vật, và việc dịch những thành ngữ này sang tiếng Việt có thể gây ra những trở ngại to lớn do sự khác biệt lớn giữa hai ngôn ngữ và nền văn hóa. Bài viết nhằm phân tích các chiến lược khả thi trong việc dịch thành ngữ tiếng Anh có tên động vật sang tiếng Việt trên cơ sở mức độ tương đương giữa hai ngôn ngữ. Các phương pháp được sử dụng cho nghiên cứu bao gồm: phương pháp thống kê với mục đích thống kê các thành ngữ tiếng Anh chứa tên động vật và dịch nghĩa của các thành ngữ này trong tiếng Việt; phương pháp phân tích nhằm phân tích các đặc điểm ngữ nghĩa - văn hoá của các thành ngữ; phương pháp đối chiếu so sánh nhằm mục đích phân loại các thành ngữ theo các chiến lược dịch phù hợp. Nghiên cứu sử dụng các chiến lược dịch thành ngữ đề xuất bởi Baker như sử dụng thành ngữ tương đương hoàn toàn về nghĩa và cấu trúc, sử dụng thành ngữ tương đương về nghĩa nhưng khác về cấu trúc, và phương pháp diễn giải. Qua phân tích và đối chiếu thành ngữ trong hai ngôn ngữ cho thấy chỉ có rất ít thành ngữ giống nhau tuyệt đối trong hai ngôn ngữ; còn phần lớn các thành ngữ tiếng Anh có chứa tên động vật chỉ tương đương một phần hoặc thậm chí không có sự tương đương trong tiếng Việt; trong những trường hợp như vậy, có thể sử dụng các hình ảnh khác nhau để truyền đạt ý nghĩa tương tự hoặc phải diễn giải ý nghĩa của các thành ngữ tiếng Anh để người học có thể hiểu được.

*Từ khóa:* thành ngữ tiếng Anh chỉ động vật; phương thức dịch tương đương; chiến lược dịch thuật