

CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR ABOUT PERSONALITY IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE IDIOMS OF BODY PARTS

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ABSTRACT

Research on idioms from cognitive linguistics' point of view, especially through conceptual metaphor and conceptual metonymy, has been growing steadily among semantics linguists. From the conceptual metaphor theory of cognitive linguistics, this article examines the role of conceptual metaphor about personality in English and Vietnamese idioms with the aim of evaluating the importance of conceptual metaphor in idiom's illiteral meaning formation.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, conceptualization, conceptual domains, idioms.

TÓM TẮT

Ấn dụ ý niệm về tính cách con người trong thành ngữ có chứa yếu tố chỉ bộ phận cơ thể người tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt

Việc nghiên cứu thành ngữ từ quan điểm ngôn ngữ học tri nhận, đặc biệt là dưới góc độ ẩn dụ ý niệm và hoán dụ ý niệm đang ngày càng được giới nghiên cứu ngôn ngữ quan tâm trong lĩnh vực ngữ nghĩa học. Với hướng tiếp cận từ lý thuyết ẩn dụ ý niệm của ngôn ngữ học tri nhận, bài báo khảo sát vai trò của các ẩn dụ ý niệm về tính cách con người trong thành ngữ chứa yếu tố chỉ bộ phận cơ thể người của tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt để đánh giá vai trò của ẩn dụ ý niệm trong việc tạo lập nghĩa hàm ẩn của thành ngữ.

Từ khóa: ẩn dụ ý niệm, hoạt động ý niệm hóa, miền ý niệm, thành ngữ.

1. Introduction

Metaphor has long been acknowledged to be an effective rhetorical device, especially in literary languages. According to the common understanding, metaphor is a device by which the name A of an object “a” is used to name after objects of “b”, “c”, “d” as there are similarities among these objects. In other words, metaphor is a device for meaning transformation based on the rules for connections of similarities. In the work of “Metaphor we live by” which was published in 1980, Lakoff and Johnson proved that metaphor was not simply related to using a certain object to refer to other objects. Metaphor is not only employed in literary language, but also comes up very frequently in our daily dialogues. This key point of conceptual metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson has drawn special attention in the field of cognitive linguistics. In this paper, English and Vietnamese idioms of body parts about personality are analyzed and contrasted from the light of conceptual metaphor theory.

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The paper then discusses how illiteral meanings of these idioms were created and implications for language teaching.

2. Conceptual metaphor and meanings of idioms

In the opinion of cognitive linguists, metaphor is a device through which the human vague experiences are conceptualized based on the more detailed experiences. Lakoff (1987) suggested that many of our experiences were formed by metaphor through a limited number of image schemas, such as those about containment. This image schema was created by a container with inner space, outer space and viewed in a three-dimensional space. Lakoff's survey pointed out that the image schema of containment was applicable for metaphor with a large number of categories of non-spatial concepts. For example, although the categories of linguistics and emotion are non-spatial, they are still conceptualized into a container as in the terms of "empty words" and "to be in love" in English.

Conceptual metaphor once viewed at the most basic level is the basis for the formation of meanings for many idiomatic structures. For example, the idiom "to let off steam" can be split into two constituent parts of "let off" and "steam". Its general meaning can be understood as the discharge or release of anger. According to analysis by Lakoff (1987) and Kovecses (2002), anger is commonly understood metaphorically as "MIND IS A CONTAINER" and "ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER". In this case, the establishment of the relations between the explicit meaning of "steam" and the implicit meaning of "anger" can be fully understood both experimentally and cognitively because steam carries power that can get the engines running. "Steam" is viewed as heated water vapor and the discharge of steam expresses the anger gradually cooling down. To clarify the role of conceptual metaphor in the formation of idiomatic meanings, in the scope of this article, we shall focus on analyzing the conceptual metaphors related to the conceptual domain of human personalities through a number of idioms in English and Vietnamese containing elements of human body parts.

3. Conceptual metaphors of human personalities in idioms containing elements of human body parts in English and Vietnamese

3.1. Personalities referred to as materials

In English and Vietnamese, we can come across a number of idioms describing human personalities through materials. For instance, to describe someone of kind nature, who is always caring and helping the others, the idiom "to have heart of gold" can be used as in this example: "*She'll do anything for anyone - she's got a heart of gold*". Gold, since the ancient times, has been considered a rare metal with multiple functions and been admired by everyone. In this case, we see that gold is used to describe the worthy human qualities through the icon of a golden heart. So, the conceptual domain of human personalities has been conceptualized under the

conceptual domain of materials. Also with the metaphor “PERSONALITIES ARE MATERIALS” in English, there are other idioms as follows:

- *He wouldn't help his own mother if she needed it - he's got a heart of stone.*
- *She has a heart of glass and is emotionally weak.*
- *She is of pure heart.*

The idiom “heart of stone” refers to those who are too tough, emotionless, and unmoved toward difficulties of the others. So, the use of the icon of stone to depict human personalities is obviously due to some reasons, not arbitrariness. Similarly, we all know that objects made of glass are very fragile. From this point, one can infer that people whose hearts are made of glass are emotionally weak, prone to emotional shock and in need of protection from other people. The idiom “of a pure heart” carries the original meaning of purity, without the mix with other materials, and is used to refer to people who have good qualities, with almost no character flaws. In the cases of these idioms, we see that the implicit meaning is very closely related to the explicit meaning, and that we can understand such implicit meaning without much difficulty through the conceptual metaphor of “PERSONALITIES ARE MATERIALS”.

In Vietnamese idioms with elements of human body parts, the conceptual metaphor of “PERSONALITIES ARE MATERIALS” is quite widely used. However, while the heart is conceptualized by English people to be where human emotions and personalities are contained, the belly is considered to be a container of human thinking and emotions in the Vietnamese traditional culture. Therefore, the conceptual metaphor of “PERSONALITIES ARE MATERIALS” primarily comes up in idioms having elements related to the belly such as “gan” (liver) or “lòng” (bowel):

- *dạ ngọc gan vàng (to have a stomach of pearl and a liver of gold)*
- *gan vàng dạ sắt (to have a liver of gold and a stomach of iron)*
- *gan chai phổi đá (to have a liver of wood tar and lungs of stone)*
- *gan sành dạ sỏi (to have a liver of crockery and a stomach of stone)*
- *lòng lim dạ sắt (to have a heart of ironwood and a stomach of iron)*
- *lòng son dạ sắt (to have warm bowels and a stomach of iron)*
- *mặt sắt đen sì (to have a blackened iron face)*
- *mặt sứa gan lim (to have a jellyfish-like face and an ironwood-like liver)*
- *mặt chai mày đá (to have a face of wood tar and eyebrows of stone)*

The color of gold never fades, and pearls are always bright forever with time. Therefore, the idiom “to have a stomach of pearl and a liver of gold” is used to refer to the human faithfulness. Also with such conventional understanding about the properties of materials, the idiom “to have a liver of gold and a stomach of iron” is used to depict

the lovers' faithful hearts, who vow to wait for each other no matter how long it may take. In the idiom "to have a liver of wood tar and lungs of stone", the wood tar in this case is a natural resin emitted by wild trees and shall become very hard once dried. The liver being as tough as wood tar, and the lungs as hard as stone in this case refer to a person who is very brave, courageous, and fearless when confronting challenges. The idiom "to have a liver of crockery and a stomach of stone" conveys a similar meaning. The idiom "to have a heart of ironwood and a stomach of iron" or "to have a jellyfish-like face and an ironwood-like liver" also features a similar conceptualization. Ironwood is a precious hard kind of wood; and iron is also a wear-resistant kind of metal. So, the people whose bowels as hardened as ironwood and iron are those who are strong-willed, never breaking their words once said, and not influenced by anyone when already having decided to do something. Jellyfish is specie of mollusk, with umbrella-like shape, drifting about the sea regardless of day or night. Therefore, the people who have "jellyfish-like face, ironwood-like liver" ostensibly look weak and cowardly, but when coming across things they become tougher, more gritty and daring to endure every torture than the other reckless. Particularly, the two idioms of "to have a face of wood tar and eyebrows of stone" and "to have a blackened iron face" are often used for criticism and negative intentions. The idiom "to have a face of wood tar and eyebrows of stone" refers to the people who no longer know what shame is. Regardless of how they are scolded or ironically talked about, they keep despising it as if there is no problem at all. Iron face is a blackened face, looking emotionless and soulless like a piece of iron, thus the metaphorical meaning of this idiom is for ridiculing those who have power but are too mean and pitiless to the poor. Through the above examples, we see that the conceptual metaphor of "PERSONALITIES ARE MATERIALS" appears quite frequently in idioms containing elements of human body parts in Vietnamese.

3.2. *Personalities referred to as the shape of the eyes*

The idioms that contain elements of human body parts in English and Vietnamese also include a part that conceptualizes human personalities through the shape of the eyes. For instance, the idiom "to have eyes like a hawk" is used to refer to meticulous people, who always pay attention to details, such as in the following example: "*The supervisor has eyes like a hawk, so be careful she doesn't catch you eating at your desk*". The meaning of this idiom is derived from the image of the eagle that is always soaring high to bring everything into view when preying and is ready to swoop down anytime. In addition, English has the idioms such as "to have bedroom eyes", "to have goo-goo eyes", or "to have googly eyes" to indicate perverts who try to seduce other people. These idioms depict the big eyes, always looking at the others with lust with a negative connotation. So, when English people comment on someone using these idioms, the person who is subject to such comment is not respectable. Similarly, the idiom "to make sheep's eyes at somebody" borrows the image of a sheep's big naïve eyes to describe someone who is constantly staring at other people and making them

uncomfortable. So, all of the above idioms describe the conceptual domain of human personalities through the shape of the eyes. The conceptual metaphor of “PERSONALITIES ARE THE SHAPE OF THE EYES” obviously plays a role in the formation of meanings for the above idioms.

The conceptual metaphor of “PERSONALITIES ARE THE SHAPE OF THE EYES” also comes up in idioms containing elements of human body parts in Vietnamese as in the examples below: *mắt trắng môi thâm* (to have white eyes and dark lips)

- *to mắt hay nói ngang* (a big-eye often talks perversely)
- *môi thâm mắt trắng* (to have dark lips and white eyes)
- *mắt dơi mày chuột* (to have eyes like a bat and eyebrows like a mouse)
- *mắt cú vọ* (to have eyes like an owl)
- *mắt điều hâu* (to have eyes like a hawk)
- *mắt trâu đực* (to have eyes like a male buffalo)
- *rậm râu sâu mắt* (to have dense beard and hollow eyes)
- *mắt như mắt lợn luộc* (to have eyes like a boiled pig's)
- *mắt ốc nhồi, môi chuối mỡ* (to have eyes like snails and lips like fat bananas)

People who are indicated with “to have white eyes and dark lips” are ugly. This idiom refers to people with wicked intentions, ungratefulness, and harmfulness. Conventional understanding tells us that the bats' eyes are small but delicate, and so too for the mice's. These two species usually work surreptitiously at night time. So, the idiom “to have eyes like a bat and eyebrows like a mouse” is used to indicate crafty people. We tend to guard against those people when communicating with them. The idioms of “to have eyes as dry as a snake”, “to have eyes like an owl”, and “to have eyes like a coin-tossing hole” have similar meanings, and are often used to describe people who look dishonest and betraying. Idioms such as “to have eyes like snails and lips like fat bananas”, “to have eyes like a boiled pig” or “a big-eye one often talks perversely” all use the images of eyes which are big, always wide open and staring out emotionlessly to refer to those who are impertinent and unruly. So, in the conceptual metaphor of “PERSONALITIES ARE THE SHAPE OF THE EYES” there are similarities between English and Vietnamese idioms.

3.3. *Whether the hands being clean or dirty indicating personalities*

The idiom “to keep one's hands clean” or “to have clean hands” is derived from the fact that after a crime is committed; blood often stains on the criminal's hands. It is the conceptual metaphor of “CLEAN HANDS ARE A SIGN OF SINCERITY” that helps us understand the metaphorical meaning of this idiom: “a clean person”. In another case, likewise, the idiom “to wash one's (dirty) hands of something” has the

metaphorical meaning of: “pushing the liabilities resulting from your wrongdoings to another person to evade your responsibilities”. Thus in English idioms, clean hands are a sign of honesty.

- *Politicians can leave the lies and smear campaigns to journalists and keep their own hands clean.*

- *I should imagine he couldn't wait to wash his hands of the whole project.*

- *The royal family don't usually dirty their hands with politics.*

While clean hands are the symbol of honesty, dirty hands are the symbol of the assiduous and painstaking virtues. Evidences can be found in English idioms as follows:

- *Unlike other bosses, he's not afraid to get his hands dirty and the men like that in him.*

In Vietnamese, there are idioms with metaphorical meanings: “dirty hands symbolize assiduousness and painstakingness”, such as:

- *chân lấm tay bẩn (To have dotted legs and dirty hands)*

- *chân lấm tay bùn (To have dotted legs and muddy hands)*

- *chân bùn tay đất (To have muddy legs and soiled hands)*

- *hai tay vầy lỗ miệng (To barely feed the month with two hands)*

With a culture of water rice farming, the image of industrious farmers has long been associated with the soil and mud in their own rice fields. Therefore, the above idioms are used to refer to those who have been working hard, exposing themselves to sunlight and rain on their fields throughout the year. Through the above examples and analysis we can see that, although the conceptual metaphor “whether the hands being clean or dirty indicating personalities” does not appear much both in English and Vietnamese, it is evidence indicating the abundance of the conceptualization of human body parts.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the three groups of conceptual metaphors relating to the above conceptual domains of human personalities shows that conceptual metaphor obviously contributes significantly to the formation of implicit meanings of idioms. We also see that the meanings of idioms can be inferred once the conceptual metaphor and appropriate conventional understanding are determined. This is a notable point because it has long been supposed that idioms are sustainable combinations in terms of structure, stable in terms of semantics; and the meaning of an idiom is that of the whole combination. The survey of idioms from the standpoint of cognitive linguistics has contributed greatly in delivering us a more complete perspective on the implicit meanings of idioms.

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