

CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON ANIMAL-RELATED IDIOMS IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE

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TÓM TẮT

Title: Ảnh hưởng văn hóa trong các thành ngữ liên quan đến động vật trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt

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Nghiên cứu này phân tích ảnh hưởng văn hóa trong các thành ngữ liên quan đến động vật trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt thông qua phân tích đối chiếu. Thành ngữ là các cụm từ cố định, mang ý nghĩa khác biệt với nghĩa đen của từng từ, phản ánh bối cảnh văn hóa và lịch sử của ngôn ngữ. Nghiên cứu đã phân tích 611 thành ngữ tiếng Việt và 207 thành ngữ tiếng Anh, tập trung vào tần suất, ý nghĩa ẩn dụ và giá trị biểu tượng. Kết quả cho thấy các loài động vật nuôi như chó và mèo thường tượng trưng cho sự trung thành và sự khôn ngoan trong cả hai ngôn ngữ, nhưng ý nghĩa cụ thể khác nhau do ảnh hưởng văn hóa. Động vật hoang dã và huyền thoại cũng có ý nghĩa biểu tượng khác nhau do niềm tin và truyền thống địa phương. Nghiên cứu giúp cải thiện giao tiếp liên văn hóa và sử dụng thành ngữ hiệu quả hơn, góp phần làm sáng tỏ mối liên hệ giữa ngôn ngữ và văn hóa.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the cultural influences on animal-related idioms in English and Vietnamese through a comparative linguistic analysis. Idioms are fixed expressions whose meanings often differ from the literal meanings of their individual words, reflecting the cultural and historical backgrounds of each language. The research examines 611 Vietnamese idioms and 207 English idioms involving animal terms, focusing on their frequency, metaphorical meanings, and cultural symbolism. Findings reveal that while domesticated animals like dogs and cats are commonly used in both languages to express loyalty and cunning, their connotations differ due to cultural influences. The study also identifies that wild animals and mythical creatures have distinct symbolic meanings shaped by local traditions and beliefs. This study helps improve intercultural communication, and uses idioms more effectively, contributing to clarifying the relationship between language and culture.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Idioms are an essential part of any language, reflecting the linguistic creativity and cultural heritage of a community. They are fixed expressions whose figurative meanings cannot be easily inferred from the individual words that make them up (Gairns & Redman, 2015). Due to their figurative nature, idioms are widely used in everyday

communication, literature, and media, contributing to the richness of a language. Among the various types of idioms, animal-related idioms hold particular significance as they often embody cultural beliefs, traditions, and worldviews associated with animals in different societies.

In both English and Vietnamese, numerous idioms incorporate animal names, yet their meanings and cultural

connotations often differ. For example, while the English idiom “*as quiet as a mouse*” is used to describe complete silence, the Vietnamese equivalent is “*lặng như tờ*” (silent like a sheet of paper), which does not involve an animal. These differences arise from distinct cultural perceptions and historical influences, making the study of animal-related idioms a valuable area for linguistic and cultural research.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although animal-related idioms are prevalent in both English and Vietnamese, their meanings and implications are deeply rooted in cultural traditions. The same animal may carry different symbolic meanings in different cultures. For instance, while a fox in English symbolizes cunningness and trickery (*as sly as a fox*), in Vietnamese, the equivalent expression often involves a cat (*ranh như mèo*). This variation poses challenges for language learners in understanding and translating idioms accurately, as direct translations often fail to capture the cultural nuances.

Despite the importance of idioms in language learning and cross-cultural communication, limited comparative studies have been conducted to explore the cultural influences on English and Vietnamese animal-related idioms. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the similarities and differences between these idioms, focusing on their cultural backgrounds and metaphorical representations.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to achieve two main objectives. First, it focuses on analyzing

the most commonly appearing animal species in English and Vietnamese idioms, thereby clarifying the similarities and differences in terms of meaning and usage. Second, the research seeks to identify the cultural and historical factors that have influenced the differences in the construction and interpretation of animal idioms in the two languages. This will contribute to improving the effectiveness of learning and translating these idioms.

The study will address two key research questions:

1. Which animal species appear most frequently in English and Vietnamese idioms, and do they carry similar or different cultural meanings?
2. What cultural and historical factors have influenced the differences in the use and meaning of animal idioms in these two languages?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Idioms in English and Vietnamese

Idioms are an essential part of the vocabulary system of any language, reflecting the distinctive expressions of each nation. Researchers have proposed various definitions of idioms, emphasizing their fixed structure and the difference between the meaning of the whole phrase and the literal meanings of individual words. According to the Longman Idioms Dictionary (1998, p. 870), “An idiom is a sequence of words which has a different meaning as a group from the meaning it would have if you understood each word separately”. Similarly, Christine Ammer (1997) defines an idiom as “a set phrase of

two or more words that means something different from the literal meaning of the individual words”. Thus, idioms can be understood as stable combinations of words that carry figurative meanings, which cannot be interpreted literally.

In addition to the above definitions, some researchers also highlight the specific nature of idiom usage. Alice Maclin (2001, p. 167) states that “An idiom is a phrase or word used in a special meaning that you cannot understand just from knowing the dictionary definition and the grammar of the part” [5]. This indicates that an idiom is not merely a fixed word combination but also holds a special semantic value. Understanding an idiom requires grasping the overall meaning of the entire phrase rather than the literal meaning of its individual components.

In Vietnamese, idioms are also defined in various ways. According to the Vietnamese-English Dictionary by the Institute of Linguistics (1993, p. 809), “An idiom is a phrase or sentence whose meaning cannot be clearly understood by simply adding up the meanings of individual words but must be interpreted as a whole unit”. Hoàng Phê (2003, p. 915) defines an idiom as “a fixed combination of words that is commonly used and whose meaning cannot usually be explained by the meanings of the individual words that make it up”. This shows that Vietnamese idioms are not only fixed in form but also highly symbolic, requiring interpretation beyond the literal meaning of the component words.

Professor Nguyễn Lâm (2010) also emphasizes the concise and expressive nature of Vietnamese idioms: “Idioms are widely used in both everyday speech and literary works. They are brief, meaningful, figurative, and highly expressive”. These characteristics make idioms an important part of daily communication, reflecting the cultural identity of each nation.

In conclusion, there are two main approaches to defining idioms in both English and Vietnamese: one based on the overall meaning of the phrase and the other based on the grammatical structure of the idiom. Both approaches highlight the fixed nature, figurative meaning, and semantic difference between the idiom and the literal meanings of individual words. This suggests that idioms are not only a linguistic phenomenon but also an integral part of culture, reflecting the worldview and way of thinking of each community.

2.2 Concept of Culture

Culture is a broad and complex category that has been studied from various perspectives. Throughout human history, researchers have proposed numerous definitions of culture to reflect its nature and role in society.

According to the *Vietnamese Dictionary* compiled by the Center for Vietnamese Language and Culture – Ministry of Education and Training, edited by Nguyễn Như Ý, “Culture consists of the material and spiritual values created by humans throughout history”. This definition emphasizes that culture includes not only spiritual values such as ideology, religion, and customs but also

material achievements created by humans during the process of social development.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) expanded the concept of culture in 2002 by stating: “Culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of a society or a social group. It encompasses not only art and literature but also lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs”. From this perspective, culture is a comprehensive entity that extends beyond artistic products to include the way of life, beliefs, and social behaviors of a society.

Based on these perspectives, culture can be seen as a product of human creativity resulting from the interaction with nature and society. It not only distinguishes different nations but also serves as the foundation for shaping the identity and mindset of each community. Culture exists in both material values (such as architecture, clothing, and technology) and spiritual values (such as beliefs, customs, and language), reflecting how humans perceive the world and transmit knowledge from one generation to the next.

In the context of idiom research, culture plays a crucial role in the formation and development of figurative language units. Idioms are not merely tools of expression but also embody the unique cultural values of each nation. Cultural differences among language communities can lead to variations in the use and interpretation of idioms. Therefore, studying idioms from a cultural

perspective not only enhances understanding of language but also sheds light on the thought patterns and worldviews of different cultures.

2.3 The Relationship Between Culture and Language

Language and culture share a close, interdependent relationship that cannot be separated. Language is not merely a tool for communication but also reflects the worldview, thinking, and lifestyle of a community. At the same time, culture serves as the foundation that shapes the formation and development of language.

According to Nguyễn Đức Tồn (2008, p. 47), “Language is an essential medium and a condition for the emergence, development, and functioning of other elements within culture. Language is one of the most distinctive components of any national culture. It is within language that the characteristics of a nation’s culture are most clearly preserved. The life of each community and each nation in a specific historical period will determine the content of the language of that era”. This statement highlights the role of language in preserving and transmitting cultural values across generations.

Language not only reflects but also shapes human thought and perception of the world. Accordingly, people from different cultural backgrounds, using different language systems, will have different ways of perceiving the world. For example, while English has multiple words to describe different shades of blue (such as blue, cyan, navy), some other languages do not distinguish these shades as clearly, influencing how native

speakers perceive and interpret color in everyday life.

Idioms serve as a typical example of the relationship between language and culture. Idioms not only reflect the mindset of a community but also embody historical, religious, and customary elements. For instance, in English, the idiom “as wise as an owl” originates from the image of the owl associated with the Greek goddess Athena, who symbolizes wisdom. In contrast, in Vietnamese culture, owls (especially barn owls) are considered bad omens, and there is no equivalent idiom that associates owls with wisdom.

Cultural differences are also evident in the use of animal imagery in idioms between languages. For example, the English idiom “as stubborn as a mule” is commonly used to describe someone who is very stubborn. Meanwhile, in Vietnamese, the image of a crab is used with a similar meaning in the idiom “ngang như cua” (as stubborn as a crab). This reflects differences in living environments and the role of animals in human labor and daily life, leading to variations in metaphorical imagery across languages.

In conclusion, language is not just a system of symbols used for communication but also a medium for transmitting and preserving culture. Culture determines the content and usage of language, while language acts as a tool for spreading and maintaining cultural values over time. This interaction is particularly evident in idioms, where each phrase not only conveys linguistic meaning but also deeply reflects the thinking and traditions of a community.

Studying animal-related idioms in English and Vietnamese helps clarify the connection between language and culture while providing valuable insights into the cultural characteristics of these two language communities.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Methodology

This study employs a combination of qualitative, quantitative, and comparative-contrastive methods to analyze animal-related idioms in English and Vietnamese.

First, the qualitative method is used to analyze the symbolic meanings and cultural nuances of animal idioms in each language. This approach aims to clarify how cultural factors, beliefs, and lifestyles influence the use and interpretation of these idioms.

Second, the quantitative method is applied to collect statistical data and classify animal idioms based on criteria such as frequency of occurrence and the most commonly used animal species. Data will be gathered from reliable sources, such as the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms (for English) and the Vietnamese Idiom Dictionary by the Institute of Linguistics (for Vietnamese).

Third, the comparative-contrastive method will be employed to identify similarities and differences in the meaning and usage of animal idioms between English and Vietnamese. The study will compare idioms involving the same animal species but with different meanings to explain the cultural and historical differences between the two languages.

The combination of these methods ensures scientific rigor and objectivity, providing a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between language and culture through the lens of animal idioms.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study were collected and analyzed using a systematic approach, based exclusively on two primary and reputable sources to ensure consistency, reliability, and cultural relevance.

a. Data Selection Criteria

The selection of idioms followed specific criteria:

Animal-related content: Only idioms that explicitly mention animal names (e.g., *ngựa quen đường cũ*, “a dark horse”) were included.

Fixed structure and figurative meaning: The expressions had to be idiomatic in nature—structurally stable and conveying a non-literal meaning.

Cultural relevance: Priority was given to idioms that reflect cultural values, traditional beliefs, and symbolic interpretations within their respective societies.

Trusted sources: For Vietnamese: *Từ điển thành ngữ tiếng Việt phổ thông* by Nguyễn Như Ý (2002), published by the Social Sciences Publishing House. For English: *Oxford Idioms Dictionary for Learners of English* (Toby, J., Ed., 2002), Oxford University Press.

From these two sources, a total of 611 Vietnamese idioms and 207 English idioms were selected for analysis.

b. Analytical Procedures

The analysis in this study was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative approaches in an integrated manner. In terms of quantitative analysis, the idioms were systematically categorized into three primary groups based on the types of animals they referenced: domesticated animals (such as dogs, cats, and buffaloes), wild animals (such as lions, tigers, and birds), and symbolic or mythical animals (such as dragons and phoenixes). A frequency analysis was then carried out to determine which animal species appeared most frequently in idiomatic expressions, as well as how these were distributed across the three categories in each language.

Complementing this, the semantic and cultural analysis focused on interpreting the idioms within their original dictionary contexts, with particular attention given to their metaphorical meanings and cultural symbolism. Where idiomatic expressions with conceptual or functional equivalents existed in both English and Vietnamese, the analysis explored both the shared metaphorical logic—such as the similarity between “*Ngưu tầm ngưu, mã tầm mã*” and “*Birds of a feather flock together*”—and the cultural divergences in symbolism, as seen in the image of the dragon, which represents sacred power in Vietnamese culture but is often portrayed as a fearsome or dangerous creature in Western contexts. Importantly, all semantic interpretations and cultural comparisons were conducted manually without the use of automated tools, in order to maintain the depth, nuance, and

contextual sensitivity required for accurate linguistic and intercultural analysis.

In summary, the study draws on two authoritative sources to ensure high-quality, culturally rich data. The combined use of statistical classification and in-depth semantic analysis provides a cross-cultural perspective on how animals are conceptualized and symbolized through idiomatic language in English and Vietnamese.

4. Findings and Discussion

The process of data collection and analysis identified 207 idioms involving animal names in English and 611 idioms involving animal names in Vietnamese. This data will be used to conduct a deeper analysis of the linguistic characteristics and cultural influences reflected in animal-related idioms in both languages.

4.1 *Characteristics of Animal-Related Idioms in English*

In terms of quantity, animal-related idioms in English are unevenly distributed across three main groups:

Domesticated animals – This group includes animals that have been tamed and live closely with humans, playing significant roles in production, protection, or companionship. For example, dogs, cats, horses, and cows frequently appear in English idioms, symbolizing loyalty, hard work, or wisdom.

Wild animals – This group consists of animals that live in natural habitats and are not domesticated. They often represent strength, danger, or human traits. Animals like lions, tigers, foxes, and

hawks are commonly used in idioms to express courage, cunning, or intelligence.

Symbolic animals – This group includes mythical animals that carry sacred or symbolic meanings in culture and beliefs. Dragons, phoenixes, and unicorns are typical examples in this group, often appearing in idioms to represent nobility, power, or good fortune.

Statistics on English Animal Idioms

The study identified 207 animal-related idioms in English. The distribution of animal names in these idioms is divided into three main groups, reflecting the prominence of certain animals in the culture and language of English-speaking communities:

Wild animals accounted for the highest proportion, with a total of 44 names, representing 66.67% of all animal-related idioms. Among these, Bird was the most frequently used animal, appearing in 16 idioms (equivalent to 7.80%), followed by Fish with 12 idioms (5.85%). Other animals like Frog, Bear, and Snake appeared only once each, making up 0.49% of the total.

Domesticated animals ranked second in frequency, with a total of 18 names, accounting for 27.27% of all idioms. In this group, Dog was the most frequently used animal, appearing 21 times (10.24%), followed by Horse with 17 instances (8.29%). Other animals, such as Pigeon and Cockerel, had the lowest frequency, each appearing only once (0.49%).

Symbolic animals had the lowest representation, with only 4 names,

making up 6.06% of the total idioms. In this group, Dragon was the most commonly used symbol, appearing twice (0.98%), followed by Dodo, Cuckoo, and Swan, each appearing once (0.49%).

4.2 Characteristics of Animal-Related Idioms in Vietnamese

The study identified 611 animal-related idioms in Vietnamese. The distribution of animal names in these idioms is divided into three main groups, reflecting the prominence of certain animals in Vietnamese culture and language use:

Wild animals accounted for the highest proportion, with a total of 74 names, representing 87.06% of all animal-related idioms. Among these, Fish was the most frequently mentioned animal, appearing in 39 idioms (equivalent to 6.38%), followed by Bird with 20 idioms (3.27%). Some other animals, such as Snakehead fish (cá lóc), Squirrel (sóc), and Centipede (rết), appeared only once each, making up 0.16% of the total.

Domesticated animals ranked second in frequency, with a total of 8 names, accounting for 9.41% of all surveyed idioms. In this group, Dog was the most frequently used animal, appearing 53 times (8.67%), followed by Buffalo with 28 instances (4.58%). Other animals, such as Goat and Donkey, had the lowest frequency, appearing only once each, representing 0.33% and 0.16%, respectively.

Symbolic animals had the lowest representation, with only 3 names, accounting for 3.53% of the total idioms. In this group, Dragon and Phoenix were

the most commonly used symbols, each appearing 7 times (1.15%), followed by Luan bird (chim loan), which appeared 5 times (0.82%).

4.3 Similarities and Differences Between Animal-Related Idioms in English and Vietnamese

Animal-related idioms in English and Vietnamese display significant similarities and differences, reflecting the unique cultural characteristics of each language. Below is a detailed analysis of the similarities and differences between the two idiom systems:

4.3.1 Similarities in Animal - related Idioms

From a structural perspective, idioms in both English and Vietnamese frequently use animal nouns, most of which are single words rather than compound or phrase-based nouns. In English, commonly used animal nouns include goat, dog, cat, and horse. Similarly, in Vietnamese, the most frequently used nouns include trâu (buffalo), bò (cow), chó (dog), mèo (cat), gà (chicken), and vịt (duck). The use of single-word animal nouns in idioms reflects the close relationship between humans and animals, highlighting similarities in linguistic thinking in both English and Vietnamese-speaking communities.

Moreover, many idioms involving animals convey similar meanings in both cultures. For example:

The English idiom “Birds of a feather flock together” (People with similar interests and views tend to associate with each other) corresponds to the

Vietnamese idiom “Ngưu tầm ngưu, mã tầm mã” (Buffalo seeks buffalo, horse seeks horse), reflecting a shared cultural view of social relationships.

The English idiom “Every dog has his day” (Everyone will have their moment of success) is similar to the Vietnamese idiom “Sông có khúc, người có lúc” (A river has bends, people have ups and downs).

The English idiom “Never offer to teach a fish to swim” (Don’t teach someone what they already know) corresponds to the Vietnamese idiom “Đừng múa rìu qua mắt thợ” (Don’t show off your skills in front of an expert).

This demonstrates that despite differences in language and culture, the way English and Vietnamese speakers perceive and reflect reality through idioms is remarkably similar.

In terms of frequency, dogs are the most commonly referenced animals in both English and Vietnamese idioms:

In English, dogs appear in 21 idioms (10.24%), making them the most frequently mentioned domestic animal. In Vietnamese, dogs appear in 53 idioms (8.67%), also ranking highest among domestic animals.

This reflects the significant role of dogs in both cultures as loyal, protective companions and symbols of human-animal bonding.

Apart from dogs, other frequently used animals in idioms in both languages include:

In English:

- Horse – 17 idioms (8.29%)

- Bird – 16 idioms (7.80%)
- Cat – 16 idioms (7.80%)
- Fish – 12 idioms (5.85%)

In Vietnamese:

- Fish – 39 idioms (6.38%)
- Buffalo – 28 idioms (4.58%)
- Cat – 27 idioms (4.42%)
- Chicken – 25 idioms (4.09%)

This pattern reflects the shared importance of these animals in daily life, agriculture, and cultural symbolism in both English and Vietnamese societies.

Additionally, animal-related idioms in both languages are typically structured in fixed phrases with consistent grammatical patterns. These idioms can be classified into three main types:

Noun phrases

In English: “*Big fish*” (a powerful person); “*A black sheep*” (a troublemaker in a family)

In Vietnamese: “*Chó cắn áo rách*” (A person already in trouble encountering more difficulties); “*Mèo mù vớ cá rán*” (A blind cat finding a fried fish – to be lucky by chance)

Verb phrases

In English: “*Kill the fatted calf*” (To celebrate); “*Cry wolf*” (To give a false alarm)

In Vietnamese: “*Rung cây dọa khỉ*” (To shake a tree to scare a monkey – to intimidate someone) “*Chó sủa bóng*” (A dog barking at a shadow – to overreact out of fear)

Adjective phrases

In English: “*As busy as a bee*” (Very busy); “*Like a cat on hot bricks*” (Very nervous)

In Vietnamese: “*Bẩn như ma lem*” (As dirty as a ghost – very dirty); “*Hôi như cú*” (As stinky as an owl – very smelly)

The structural and semantic similarities between English and Vietnamese animal idioms suggest that, despite cultural and historical differences, both English and Vietnamese speakers share common patterns in how they perceive and conceptualize the natural world. The widespread use of animal metaphors reflects the deep connection between human life and the animal world in both cultures.

4.3.2 Differences in Animal - related Idioms

Despite many similarities, English and Vietnamese animal-related idioms also display significant differences in terms of quantity, frequency, and cultural symbolism. These differences reflect variations in natural conditions, historical contexts, and cultural thinking between the two nations.

In terms of quantity, Vietnamese idioms involving animal names are significantly more numerous than those in English. Specifically, the body of Vietnamese idioms includes approximately 611 animal-related idioms, whereas English contains only about 207. This discrepancy may be attributed to the deep-rooted connection between Vietnam’s agrarian culture and animal symbolism.

Regarding distribution, wild animals are the most frequently represented group in both languages: In English, wild animals account for 66.67% of all animal-related idioms. Among them, birds appear most frequently with 16 idioms (7.80%), followed by fish with 12 idioms (5.85%). In Vietnamese, wild animals represent an even higher proportion, about 87.06%. Fish is the most frequently mentioned animal in this group, appearing in 39 idioms (6.38%). Furthermore, the symbolic significance and cultural representation of certain animals differ between the two languages. For example: In English, the horse symbolizes strength and nobility (as strong as a horse). In Vietnamese, the buffalo is a symbol of hard work and diligence (*hiền như trâu* – as gentle as a buffalo), reflecting the influence of rice farming culture on Vietnamese identity.

These differences reflect the distinct cultural mindsets and living conditions of English and Vietnamese speakers, where different animals hold different symbolic and practical significance in daily life.

4.3.3 Cultural Characteristics in Animal Idioms

The differences between English and Vietnamese animal-related idioms not only reflect variations in quantity and frequency but also highlight the cultural characteristics of each nation. Language is not only a means of communication but also a repository of cultural values, ways of thinking, and lifestyles of different communities. Idioms, with their figurative nature, reflect how people perceive the world around them. When analyzing

animal-related idioms in English and Vietnamese, the differences between the two cultures become apparent. English idioms often feature animals common in Western life, while Vietnamese idioms prioritize animals closely tied to agricultural life, such as buffalo, chicken, fish, and dragon. This difference reflects not only linguistic habits but also the distinct living environments, belief systems, and cultural identities of each society.

The image of the dog appears frequently in both English and Vietnamese idioms, but its symbolism differs significantly. In English, dogs are generally seen as loyal and faithful companions. Idioms such as “A dog is a man’s best friend” or “Every dog has his day” reflect the belief that everyone, regardless of their social standing, will have a moment of success. In Western culture, dogs symbolize loyalty, protection, and sometimes perseverance and resilience. In contrast, in Vietnamese idioms, dogs often carry negative connotations. Expressions such as “Chó chui gầm chạn” (A dog hiding under a bed) refer to someone poor and living under another’s protection, while “Chó cắn áo rách” (A dog bites a torn coat) implies that the weak are often mistreated. This difference may stem from the traditional Vietnamese view of dogs as working animals for guarding homes rather than pampered pets as in Western culture.

The symbolism of the cat also differs between the two cultures. In Western culture, cats are viewed as independent and mysterious. Idioms such as “Curiosity killed the cat” warn against excessive

curiosity, while “A cat has nine lives” reflects the idea of resilience and the ability to survive adversity. However, in Vietnamese culture, cats are often associated with bad luck and poverty. The belief that a cat’s meow (“meo meo”) sounds like the Vietnamese word for “poverty” (“nghèo”) reinforces this negative association. Vietnamese idioms such as “Mèo đến nhà thì khó, chó đến nhà thì sang” (If a cat comes to the house, it brings bad luck; if a dog comes, it brings prosperity) reflect this belief. Cats in Vietnamese idioms are also linked to deceit and weakness, as seen in “Mèo mả gà đồng” (A stray cat and a wild chicken) and “Mèo nhỏ bắt chuột con” (A small cat catching a small mouse), which describe dishonesty and limited capability.

A major cultural difference between English and Vietnamese idioms lies in the symbolic roles of the horse and the buffalo. In Western culture, horses symbolize strength, speed, and victory. Idioms such as “Work like a horse” (To work hard) and “Hold your horses” (Be patient) highlight the horse’s importance in transportation and warfare. In Vietnamese culture, however, the buffalo holds greater significance due to its role in rice farming. The idiom “Con trâu là đầu cơ nghiệp” (The buffalo is the foundation of a farmer’s career) reflects the central role of the buffalo in Vietnamese agricultural life. While Western cultures value speed and strength symbolized by the horse, Vietnamese culture emphasizes hard work and patience symbolized by the buffalo.

The image of the chicken also reveals cultural differences. In English, chickens

are used in idioms to reflect cowardice or naivety, such as “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch” (Don’t be overly confident about uncertain outcomes) and “Chicken-hearted” (Cowardly). In Vietnamese, chickens hold greater cultural significance, symbolizing rural life and family structure. Idioms such as “Gà què ăn quần cối xay” (A lame chicken eating around the millstone) describe people stuck in difficult circumstances, while “Khôn nhà dại chợ” (Smart at home, foolish at the market) reflects someone’s limited success outside familiar surroundings. The image of the rooster appears in Vietnamese idioms as a symbol of responsibility and struggle, as seen in “Gà trống nuôi con” (A rooster raising chicks), which refers to single parenting.

In Western culture, the lion is a powerful symbol of royalty and strength, as seen in idioms such as “The lion’s share” (The biggest and most valuable part) and “Brave as a lion” (Very courageous). In Vietnamese culture, however, the tiger holds this symbolic status. Idioms like “Dữ như hổ” (As fierce as a tiger) reflect the tiger’s reputation for strength and power. The saying “Hổ phụ sinh hổ tử” (A tiger father produces a tiger son) emphasizes inherited strength and ability. This difference reflects the natural habitats of these animals—lions are native to Africa and Western heraldry, while tigers are native to Asia and central to Vietnamese symbolism.

The dragon represents one of the most striking contrasts between Western and Vietnamese cultural symbolism. In Western culture, dragons are depicted as

dangerous and destructive creatures, as shown in idioms like “Slay the dragon” (Defeat a dangerous enemy) and “Here be dragons” (Unknown and dangerous territory). In contrast, in Vietnamese culture, dragons are revered as symbols of power, nobility, and divine protection. The idiom “Con Rồng cháu Tiên” (Children of the Dragon and Fairy) reflects Vietnamese pride in their mythical ancestry. The difference stems from contrasting views of dragons as threats in Western mythology versus protective deities in Eastern tradition.

The image of the bird also reflects different cultural values. In English, birds symbolize freedom and opportunity, as seen in idioms like “The early bird catches the worm” (Hard work leads to success) and “Birds of a feather flock together” (Like-minded people tend to associate with each other). In Vietnamese culture, however, birds can symbolize both freedom and captivity. The idiom “Cá chậu chim lồng” (Fish in a bowl, bird in a cage) describes restriction and lack of freedom. This reflects the contrast between Western individualism and the more communal nature of Vietnamese society.

The symbolism of fish also varies between the two cultures. In English, fish often represent abundance and opportunity (“There are plenty of fish in the sea”) but also discomfort (“Like a fish out of water”). In Vietnamese, fish idioms frequently reflect struggle and hierarchy, such as “Cá lớn nuốt cá bé” (Big fish eat small fish), symbolizing exploitation by the powerful. The idiom “Cá chép hóa rồng” (The carp transforms into a dragon)

reflects the Vietnamese belief in perseverance and eventual success.

The image of the pig carries different connotations in the two cultures. In English, pigs often symbolize greed and dirtiness (“Eat like a pig”, “When pigs fly”), while in Vietnamese, pigs are associated with both negative and humorous traits. Idioms such as “Lợn lành chữa thành lợn què” (Turning a healthy pig into a lame pig) reflect attempts to fix something but making it worse, while “Nằm ườn như lợn chờ cám” (Lying like a pig waiting for feed) describes laziness.

In conclusion, idioms in both English and Vietnamese reflect the relationship between humans and the animal world, but cultural differences lead to varied symbolic meanings. Understanding these similarities and differences not only enhances language comprehension but also facilitates more effective learning and translation between English and Vietnamese.

4.4 Discussion

The findings of this study on animal-related idioms in English and Vietnamese not only provide in-depth insights into linguistic and cultural characteristics but also align with several previous studies on the relationship between language and culture.

Compared to Ammer (1997), who emphasized that idioms reflect societal values, the current research reinforces this perspective. The frequent appearance of animals such as dogs, cats, fish, buffaloes, and horses in both languages illustrates their prominent roles in daily life—from

companionship (dog) and labor (buffalo) to symbols of wisdom (owl, fox).

Gairns and Redman (2015) pointed out that misinterpreting idioms can lead to misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. The current findings clearly demonstrate this through cases where the same animal, such as the cat, conveys positive meanings in English (independence, agility) but carries negative connotations in Vietnamese (poverty, misfortune).

Nguyễn Đức Tồn (2008) emphasized that language is a medium that reflects national culture. This idea is well-supported by the study, showing that Western cultures tend to value strength and individualism (lion, horse), whereas Eastern cultures highlight diligence, endurance, and collectivism (buffalo, fish).

Furthermore, this research expands on conclusions drawn from the Oxford Idioms Dictionary and the Vietnamese Idioms Dictionary, offering quantitative data on frequency, grammatical structures, and metaphorical significance of animal idioms in both languages.

In summary, this study not only confirms existing theoretical views on the language-culture relationship but also contributes empirical evidence by applying both quantitative and qualitative analysis. It highlights the importance of accurate idiom comprehension in cross-cultural contexts and enriches the understanding of how cultural values are encoded in language.

5. Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the cultural influences on animal-

related idioms in English and Vietnamese, highlighting the similarities and differences in their usage and interpretation. Animal idioms in both languages often carry metaphorical meanings, but the symbolic value of specific animals varies due to distinct cultural beliefs and social norms. For example, dogs symbolize loyalty and companionship in English but tend to have negative connotations in Vietnamese; similarly, owls represent wisdom in English but are seen as bad omens in Vietnamese culture. Idioms are not only linguistic expressions but also cultural symbols, reflecting how each community perceives and relates to the animal world.

However, the study has certain limitations. The data primarily comes from dictionaries and reference materials, which may not fully capture idioms used in daily communication and regional dialects. The

study is limited to English and Vietnamese, lacking comparison with other languages, which reduces the generalizability of the findings. The quantitative analysis mainly focuses on frequency statistics without exploring the nuanced meanings and contextual use of idioms.

To address these limitations, future research should expand the scope to other languages, such as Chinese, Japanese, and French, to identify common and unique patterns in animal idioms. Combining contextual analysis and field surveys would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how native speakers use idioms in real-life communication. The findings could be applied to language teaching and cross-cultural communication, helping learners better understand and accurately use idiomatic expressions.

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