

Idiom variants and synonymous idioms in English and Vietnamese: The similarities and differences

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Abstract. Idioms in both English and Vietnamese are regarded as special language units because they usually have their own typical fixed properties. However, in fact, we can see a lot of idioms violating the principles of these fixed properties. They are idiom variants and synonymous idioms. This article is about their signs and forms as well as the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese in terms of these.

Key words: idiom variants, synonymous idioms, forms, language units, fixed properties.

1. Introduction

Several linguists give a lot of definitions about an idiom based on its fixed properties. For example, “An idiom is a phrase or sentence whose meaning is not clear from the meaning of its individual words and which must be learnt as a whole unit” [1]. Sharing the same point of view, Thomas (1979) [2] regards an idiom as a fixed group of words with a special different meaning from the meaning of several words. H.V. Hanh (2008) [3] states that idioms are fixed groups of words having stable forms and fully figurative meanings. The fixed properties of an idiom can be realized as follows:

- The words of an idiom are generally fixed. It means that the components forming an idiom are unchanged in using.

- The fixed characteristic of structure of an idiom is expressed by the fixed order of the components forming an idiom.

In fact, there are a lot of idioms violating the principles of their fixed properties such as to swear like a bargee/ to swear like a trooper, to die a dog's death/ to die like a dog, one in a thousand/ one in a million, etc in English, and *nước đổ đầu vịt/ nước đổ lá khoai, dãi gió dầm mưa/ dầm mưa dãi gió, cùng hội cùng thuyền/ đồng hội đồng thuyền*, etc. in Vietnamese. This gives us the question: Are the idioms above the idiom variants or synonymous idioms? This issue will be clarified in both English and Vietnamese, and then the similarities and differences between the two languages in terms of the question studied will be given.

In addition, descriptive method, componential analysis and contrastive method would be mainly carried out throughout the research procedure. Deductive and inductive methods are also used in several steps of the process. In the study, the Vietnamese language is regarded as the target and the English one as

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the source language (the base language). In some cases, the opposite may be used (the English language as the target and the Vietnamese one as the source language). The sources for the description and analysis are from materials and references written by linguists in English and in Vietnamese as well as some bilingual reference books available in Vietnam. The process, in general, can be divided into two stages which are always applied in a quick-minded and active way.

Stage 1: During the process of investigating materials from various sources, the signs and the forms of idiom variants and synonymous idioms in both English and Vietnamese are systematically described and analyzed.

Stage 2: Due to the results from stage 1, a careful contrastive analysis is taken to find out the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese about the field of the study.

1.1. What is meant by “idiom variants”?

“Variant is something that differs in form only slightly from something else, as a different spelling or pronunciation of the same word” [4]. It can be said that phonetic variation of words has its own limitation performed by synonyms. It means that the forms of the words change but their meanings are the same. That a word is pronounced in two ways makes two phonetic variants of a word.

Fernando and Flavell (1981: 25) [5] state that idiom variants are such pairs or triplets as: *bury the tomahawk/ hatchet, lead someone a merry chase/ dance, not to touch something with a ten-foot/ barge pole, blow one’s stack/ cool/ top, hit the hay/ sack*, etc. These authors identify idiom variants with synonymous idioms. In the pair *hit the hay/ sack*, *hay* and *sack* can be interchangeable, but they do not belong to the same field of meaning. It means that *hit the hay* and *hit the sack* are not idiom variants; they are synonymous idioms.

Therefore, idiom variants are idioms having the same contents, grammatical structures and different components belonging to the same field of meaning [6].

1.2. What is meant by “synonymous idioms”?

Synonymy (synonymia in ancient Egyptian) means “the same name” and displays the relationship between two expressions which are literal but not identical [7]. Literality is the correspondence or something in the same denotatum (events, objects), or something in the same significance (something displayed belongs to the language). In other words, expression A and expression B are synonymous if their outsides are not the same (form A is different from form B) but their insides are the same (content A = content B). Synonymous units including synonymous words and idioms are the exceptions of the synonymous expressions.

Therefore, synonymous idioms are idioms having the same contents but different structures or having the same structures but different components belonging to different fields of meaning [6].

Idioms are language units functioning as words; however, they are formed by many lexical words. Therefore, synonymous idioms are more complex than synonyms of words because they are connected with idiom variants.

2. Idiom variants and synonymous idioms in English and Vietnamese

2.1. Signs of idiom variants in English and Vietnamese

Idiom variants are available in both English and Vietnamese. However, the signs and contents of idiom variants in each language are different.

It can be said that idiom variants are different forms of the same idioms. It means that the form of an idiom has changed but its content is still the same. That the components of an idiom are replaced by the others, or that the order of the components of an idiom changes makes the different forms of an idiom.

In English, it is easy to realize that the components, especially verbs and nouns, of an idiom can be replaced by units which are synonymous or belong to the same field of meaning. For example, the verb *get* in the idiom *to get one's back up* can be replaced by the verb *put*, but the content of the idiom is still the same. We can see this in a lot of idioms such as *to get one's blood up/ to have one's blood up*, *to welcome with open arms/ to greet with open arms*, and *to find the length of someone's feet/ to know the length of someone's feet* which are idiom variants. The idiom variants in English are the other forms of idioms whose contents are the same as the original idioms. In other words, when one (or more components) of the original idiom is (are) replaced by another (other components) belonging to the same field of meaning, we consider this an idiom variant. These can be concretized as follows:

- A verb (a verb phrase) replaced by another belonging to the same field of meaning: *to get one's back up/ to set one's back up/ to put one's back up*.

- A noun (a noun phrase) replaced by another belonging to the same field of meaning: *to take into one's head/ to take into one's mind*.

- An adverb replaced by another belonging to the same field of meaning: *to come apart/ to come asunder*.

- A conjunction replaced by another belonging to the same field of meaning: *to make as if/ to make as though*.

- An adjective replaced by another belonging to the same field of meaning: *to have a great mind to/ to have a good mind to*.

In addition, like words, English idioms can form sentences; therefore, some components of

the idioms such as possessive adjectives, objects of personal pronouns can themselves change in order to keep the agreement among the components in the sentences.

In Vietnamese, idioms having phonetic variants are considered as idiom variants: *chôn nhau cắt rốn/ chôn rau cắt rốn*, *bày binh bố trận/ bài binh bố trận*, *buồn như trâu cấn/ buồn như chấu cấn*, *ân sâu nghĩa nặng/ ơn sâu nghĩa nặng*, *bắt mũi chưa sạch/ vắt mũi chưa sạch*, *năm châu bốn bể/ năm châu bốn biển*, etc. That the order of the components of an idiom is not the same also makes idiom variants: *mật ít ruồi nhiều/ ruồi nhiều mật ít*, *da mỗi tóc bạc/ tóc bạc da mỗi*, *chân trong chân ngoài/ chân ngoài chân trong*, *dãi nắng dầm mưa/ dầm mưa dãi nắng*, *năm châu bốn bể/ bốn bể năm châu*, *gạo chợ nước sông/ nước sông gạo chợ*, *cá chậu chim lồng/ chim lồng cá chậu*, etc. When the components of an idiom are replaced by units which are synonymous or belong to the same field of meaning, we also call these idiom variants: *dữ như hùm/ dữ như cọp*, *cùng hội cùng thuyền/ đồng hội đồng thuyền*, *binh hùng tướng mạnh/ quân hùng tướng mạnh*, *giả mù giả điếc/ giả đui giả điếc*, *vẽ đường cho hươu chạy/ vạch đường cho hươu chạy*, etc.

Idiom variants in Vietnamese are quite multiform and complicated. How they are expressed depends on the speakers' habits in different parts of country. Due to what given above, it can be said that the variation limitations of words are synonymy. Therefore, the variation limitations of idioms are synonymous idioms.

2.2. Signs of synonymous idioms in English and Vietnamese

Although English and Vietnamese are two different languages, synonymous idioms in both are available. It can be said that synonyms are different words with identical or at least similar meanings. Words that are synonyms are said to

be synonymous and the state of being a synonym is called synonymy. In the figurative sense, two words are often said to be synonymous if they have the same connotation. Synonyms can be any parts of speech (e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, or prepositions), as long as both members of the pair are the same part of speech.

In English, many synonyms evolved from a mixture of Norman French and English words, often with some words associated with the Saxon countryside (“folk”, “freedom”) and synonyms with the Norman nobility (“people”, “liberty”). Two idioms are said to be synonymous if they have different structures but the same meanings. *Not to turn a hair* (verbal phrase) and *without turning a hair* (prepositional phrase) are synonymous idioms. This kind of synonymous idioms is not very common in English. When a preposition of an idiom is replaced by another but its content is the same, it can be considered as a synonymous idiom: *to escape by the skin of one’s teeth/ to escape with the skin of one’s teeth, to be beyond belief/ to be past belief, to be down in health/ to be down at health*, etc.

As we know, idioms are the language units which are about the same as words. Therefore, they are able to be synonymous with words. Two idioms are also said to be synonymous idioms if they have different components belonging to different fields of meaning, but their contents are the same. For example, the base form *as drunk as* has its own synonymous idioms such as *as drunk as a fish, as drunk as a lord* and *as drunk as a skunk*.

Like in English, in Vietnamese, the base forms of idioms also have their own synonymous idioms. For example, the base form *nhanh như* has its own synonymous idioms such as *nhanh như sóc, nhanh như ăn cướp, nhanh như cắt, nhanh như chớp, nhanh như gió* and *nhanh như điện*. However, each of

these idioms has its own meaning specifying different nuances of its common root meaning.

Words and synonymous idioms can make a clear distinction between them about their meaning nuances. For example, in Vietnamese *đen* (black) normally means “the color of coal” or “the color of Indian ink”. They can be used for all objects. However, it has different meaning nuances in the idioms relating to the colors of complexion.

Each of synonymous idioms has its own meaning nuance. It is easy to realize that the meaning nuance of each synonymous idiom comes from the images originally creating idioms. Therefore, we can regard idioms and their synonymous words as notional synonymous units. It means that units expressing the same notion or the same fact do not only have different figurative styles but also different meaning nuances. For example, the idiom *nước đổ đầu vịt* has negative meaning nuance and informal style, *but* its synonymous idiom *nước đổ lá khoai* has neutral meaning nuance and formal style.

2.3. Forms of idiom variants in English and Vietnamese

As we know, idioms are regarded as variants of each other when they have the same contents, grammatical structures and different components belonging to the same field of meaning. Due to these criteria, we can realize idiom variants through their forms as follows:

i) Phonetic variants

In English, it seems that there are no phonetic variants because English articulate system is very close and fixed. However, in Vietnamese, it is not difficult to find out phonetic variants such as *trở/ giờ mặt như bàn tay, ân/ ơn sâu nghĩa nặng, buồn như chấu/ trấu cắn, chôn rau/ nhau cắt rốn, gà trống/ sổng nuôi con, giờ cao đánh sẽ/ khẽ, trường/*

tràng giang đại hải, dát/ nhát như cây, etc. It is clear that the meanings of phonetic variants in Vietnamese are the same and they also have the same meaning nuances. Nevertheless, they have different style nuances. For example, *nhát như cây* is neutral and formal, but *dát như cây* is negative and informal.

ii) *Idiom variants basing on the change of their component orders*

This kind of variants is very rare in English (e.g. *off and on/ on and off*), but it is quite common in Vietnamese. These idiom variants have their own different forms:

Form 1: ABCD = CDAB

These idiom variants consist of four syllables. It means that they are phrases consisting of two disyllabic coordinate compound words: *chén thù chén tạc/ chén tạc chén thù, chức trọng quyền cao/ quyền cao chức trọng, chạy ngược chạy xuôi/ chạy xuôi chạy ngược*, etc.

Semantically, disyllabic compound words in the idiom variants above refer to phenomena which usually go together. When these phenomena are used together, they become idioms having general meanings.

Although these idiom variants have different forms, they have the same meaning and style nuances as their base idioms. However, how often they are used is sometimes different. For example, the idiom variants such as *chia loan rẽ phượng* and *cửa Khổng sân Trình* are more popular whereas *chia phượng rẽ loan* and *sân Trình cửa Khổng* are not very often used.

Form 2: AxBy = AyBx

These idiom variants consist of four syllables. In other words, they are phrases consisting two disyllabic compound words. Form 2 is different from form 1 because only one component in form 2 changes its position: *lòng cá dạ chim/ lòng chim dạ cá, dạn gió dày sương/ dày gió dạn sương, xa chạy cao bay/ cao chạy xa bay*, etc.

Form 3: AxAy = AyAx

As can be seen from form 3, these idiom variants also consist of four syllables. They are phrases in which a single word is twice used with a disyllabic coordinate word: *nói vượn nói hươu/ nói hươu nói vượn, nở mặt nở mày/ nở mày nở mặt, kể khoan kể nhặt/ kể nhặt kể khoan, chết dờ sống dờ/ sống dờ chết dờ*, etc.

In addition, beside the forms above, idiom variants in Vietnamese have three special forms as follows:

- Four syllables idioms coming from Sino are Vietnamized and become Vietnamese idioms: *Hà Đông sư tử/ sư tử Hà Đông*.

- Idioms having subject - predicate - complement forms changed into complement - predicate - subject ones are also considered as idiom variants: *xương bọc da/ da bọc xương*.

- Idioms having “*nư X với Y*” forms changed into “*nư Y với X*” ones are idiom variants: *nư nước với lửa/ nư lửa với nước*.

iii) *Contractive variants and the contrary*

In English this kind of idiom variants is rare. It sometimes appears on the mass media. They no longer keep the full form of the idiom but add some more components to make it more vivid, particularly effective when writing articles.

There are two kinds of contractive variants in Vietnamese:

- Idiom variants are contractions of their base idioms: *treo đầu dê bán thịt chó/ treo dê bán chó, lợn lành chữa thành lợn què/ lợn lành thành lợn què, lúng búng như ngậm hột thị/ như ngậm hột thị*, etc.

- Idiom variants come from their contractive base idioms: *dại như đĩa/ đại như đĩa đối, đội trời đạp đất/ đầu đội trời chân đạp đất, lên như diều/ lên như diều gặp gió*, etc.

These variants are usually used in specific contexts; therefore, they are easy to understand and restore their base idioms.

iv) Idiom variants coming from idioms of other languages

English idioms can be formed by using borrowings as their components. The idiom *Saigon moment* is an example in which *Saigon* is a borrowing coming from Vietnamese. However, idiom variants coming from idioms of other languages are not available in English.

In Vietnamese, there are a lot of idiom variants coming from idioms of other languages, especially Sino. In order to make it easy to understand, Sino idioms are Vietnamized and have Vietnamese meaning nuances: *bình địa ba đào/ đất bằng nổi sóng, quốc sắc thiên hương/ sắc nước hương trời*, etc.

In general, the meanings of these idiom variants are similar to those of their Sino idioms Vietnamized. However, Sino idioms Vietnamized are more general and formal than their variants. This is the reason why Sino idioms Vietnamized are usually used in books.

v) *Idiom variants with their components replaced by synonyms*

In both English and Vietnamese, these idiom variants are available. However, they are more common in Vietnamese. In English the components of idioms are usually replaced by others whose meanings are close. Meanwhile, the components of Vietnamese idioms can be replaced by synonyms or others whose contents are close: *to come apart/ to come asunder, to have a great mind to/ to have a good mind to, to get wise to someone/ something*, etc in English; *mát lòng mát dạ/ mát lòng mát ruột, nắm đặng cán/ nắm đặng chuôi, bày mưu tính kế/ bày mưu lập kế*, etc in Vietnamese.

The contents of these idiom variants are similar to those of their idioms. Nevertheless, their style nuances and frequencies of using are sometimes different. It is clear that base idioms are more used and common than their variants.

vi) *Idiom variants with their components replaced by words or expressions having the same lexical-semantic field*

When the components of idioms are replaced by other words or expressions belonging to the same lexical-semantic field, they are considered as idiom variants. These variants are available in both English and Vietnamese: *there is no stopping someone/ there is no holding someone, to get a share of the cake/ to get a slice of the cake, to give it to someone – to hand it to someone*, etc in English; *lòng lang dạ thú/ lòng lang dạ sói, ăn no vác nặng/ ăn no gánh nặng, chiêm kê mùa thối/ chiêm kê mùa úng*, etc in Vietnamese.

In general, the frequencies of using idiom variants and their base idioms in English are the same. In addition, the contents and style nuances of idiom variants in English are similar to those of their base idioms. However, these are not the same in Vietnamese. It means that their pragmatic meanings are different. For example, that we can say *nặng như đổ lửa, nặng như hầm*, or *nặng như thiêu* depends on how hot it is.

Due to the contents and the forms of idiom variants and their base idioms with their components replaced by words or expressions having the same lexical-semantic field, we can consider this kind of idiom variants as an intermediary between variation and synonymy.

2.4. *Forms of synonymous idioms in English and Vietnamese*

Idioms are said to be synonymous when they have the same contents but different structures or have the same structures but different components belonging to different fields of meaning. In order to realize synonymous idioms, we focus on two criteria: contents and grammatical structures. Contents are based on the same or different images. Grammatical structures are based on the same or different structures. These two criteria also help us realize synonymous idioms in both English and Vietnamese as follows:

i) Figurative and literal synonymous idioms

These synonymous idioms are quite common in Vietnamese but not available in English. Two idioms are said to be synonymous when they have the same contents (this one is figurative, and the other is literal): *ăn thừa nói thiếu/ ăn gian nói dối, ăn đơm nói đặt/ ăn không nói có, ăn sóng nói gió/ ăn to nói lớn*, etc.

ii) Synonymous idioms having the same figurative contents due to different images

These synonymous idioms are available in both English and Vietnamese. Idioms having different grammatical structures or different components basing on different images, but the contents are said to be synonymous: *to have a head on one's shoulders/ to have one's head screwed on the right way, as busy as a heaver/ as busy as a bee*, etc in English; *mèo mù vớ cá rán/ ăn mày gặp chiếu manh, chạy như cò lông công/ chạy ngược chạy xuôi, rán sành ra mỡ/ vắt cổ chày ra nước*, etc. in Vietnamese.

3. Conclusion

3.1. The similarities

- Idiom variants and synonymous idioms in both English and Vietnamese are quite common. They can be distinguished by two criteria: contents and grammatical structures. Contents are based on the same or different images. Grammatical structures are based on the same or different structures.

- It can be said that idiom variants and synonymous idioms in both English and Vietnamese have the same meaning nuances but different figurative style nuances.

- In English and Vietnamese, the idiom components which can be replaced by others to make their variants and synonymous ones are mainly verbs and nouns.

- Signs of idiom variants in both languages can be realized by the components belonging to the same field of meaning. And synonymous idioms have their own signs through the components belonging to different field of meaning.

- Like English, the base forms of Vietnamese idioms also have their own synonymous idioms, and they have meanings specifying different nuances of their common root meanings.

- Idiom variants have their own forms such as idiom variants basing on the change of their component orders, contractive variants and the contrary, idiom variants with their components replaced by synonyms, and idiom variants with their components replaced by words or expressions having the same lexical-semantic field which are available in both English and Vietnamese.

- Synonymous idioms having the same figurative contents due to different images is the form which is also available in both English and Vietnamese.

3.2. The differences

- It seems that idiom variants and synonymous idioms in Vietnamese are more common, more complex and more multiform than those in English because the English idioms are more stable and closer.

- Some forms of idiom variants such as *phonetic variants, idiom variants basing on the change of their component orders, contractive variants and the contrary, and idiom variants coming from idioms of other languages* are very common in Vietnamese, but they are very rare or not available in English.

- The frequencies of using idiom variants and their base idioms in English are the same. In addition, the contents and style nuances of idiom variants in English are similar to those of their base idioms. However, these are not the

same in Vietnamese. It means that their pragmatic meanings are different.

- *Figurative and literal synonymous idioms* is the form which is very current in Vietnamese but not available in English.

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Biến thể thành ngữ và thành ngữ đồng nghĩa trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt: những điểm tương đồng và khác biệt

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Tóm tắt. Thành ngữ trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt là những đơn vị ngôn ngữ đặc biệt luôn mang những đặc tính cố định điển hình. Tuy nhiên, trong thực tế ngôn ngữ, chúng ta vẫn bắt gặp những thành ngữ vi phạm những đặc tính cố định điển hình này. Chúng là các biến thể thành ngữ và thành ngữ đồng nghĩa. Bài viết này bàn về những dấu hiệu và hình thái của hai kiểu dạng thành ngữ trên cũng như sự tương đồng và khác biệt của các đơn vị hữu quan trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt.

Từ khóa: biến thể thành ngữ, thành ngữ đồng nghĩa, hình thái, đơn vị ngôn ngữ, đặc tính cố định.