

**A Study of Figurative Language in Vietnamese Folklore Scripts, Proverbs and Idiomatic Expressions – Challenges for Foreign Learners of Vietnamese Language**

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**Abstract.** It is a fact that Vietnamese language learning has become an interest for many people who want to do business with Vietnamese companies. The literal understanding of the language is sometimes inadequate for mutual understanding between partners due to the varieties of Vietnamese language. Special figures of speech prevent them from successful communication. The paper reviews some background information about figurative language such as metaphor, metonymy in English to show the challenges for foreign learners who are studying Vietnamese at educational institutions across Vietnam. Although the issue of figurative language is massive, the researchers selected some salient figures such as metaphor, metonymy as key issues. The researchers just selected some Vietnamese types of cultural documents such as proverbs, folk songs and idiomatic expressions to illustrate the uses of those mentioned figures of speech. The paper hopes to raise an issue for language educators in terms of integrating figurative language teaching independently in their language programs.

**Key words:** metaphor, metonymy, Vietnamese folklore, proverbs folk songs

## Introduction

### Background

Language acquisition theories pay special attention to the process of acquiring syntax, phonology, morphology, and literal semantics of a particular language. However, what claims underlying those surfaced layout has received inadequate attention. Unfortunately, the figures of speech prove the most challenges for mutual understanding in everyday conversations. They are important and pervasive in language because the relevant cognitive structures are important and pervasive in thought. Figurative meaning is part of the basic fabric of linguistic structure. Most semanticists have assumed that literal meaning can be fully analyzed independently of figurative meaning (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014). People in different parts of the world speak different languages. They express human experience across cultures. That means we are all human, we think somewhat alike, and we express similar thinking based on cultural schemata. Though the wording does not always match exactly, the concepts expressed can be quite similar when expressed figuratively.

Language teaching curriculum developers have tried to integrate cultural understanding into syllabi in order to minimize the misinterpretation of varieties of cultural differences between first language and target languages. It is obvious that traditional ways of teaching (literal focused) have shown limitations and weaknesses in fostering communicative competence in intercultural settings. Non-traditional ways of teaching have influenced the teaching of languages and other disciplines, such as behaviourism philosophy of Thorndike (Thorndike, 1913), Skinner's condition-response method (Skinner & Holland, 1960), the cognitive learning approach of Piaget, Gagne's reductionism, and the multiple intelligence approach of Gardiner (Gardner, 1983; Savitz & Savitz, 2010). The integration of cultural understanding into a language class has been investigated by many researchers in other languages such as Japanese, Chinese, and Korean. There have also been numerous theories along with the idea; critical pedagogy (Crawford & McLaren, 2003), ethnography (Erickson,

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1996; Hall, 1999; Riegenbach, 1999; Saville-Troike, 1996; Schiffrin, 1996), and intercultural education (Bennett et al., 2003; Borrelli, 1991; Buttjes, 1991; Byram, 1991). They all have proved that the integrated lessons bring considerable effects.

During the age of globalization and integration, an effective communicator needs both literal and illiteral knowledge of the target language. Recently, Vietnam has become one of the promising destinations for international enterprises. Consequently, Vietnamese language learning has received attention from learners in the region and in the world because many commercial treaties have been signed between partners. In order to meet the needs of various learners, many institutions have shifted to language training. However, the approaches to teaching Vietnamese language for foreigner have been deficient, so it is not very efficient, especially in improving communicative competence. Many foreign learners find it difficult to master the varieties of the Vietnamese language semantically, syntactically and phonologically. Besides, sometimes the misunderstanding comes from variety of accents and references in different regions along the country from the north to the south.

It is important to raise learners' awareness of culture and intercultural knowledge through the uses of figurative language so that they can build up their communicative competence.

### **Statement of Problem**

Obstacles from lack of cultural understanding have been mentioned in various empirical studies (Ilieva, 1997; Abbaspour, 2012; Aldosari, 2013; Long, 2013; Minh, 2016; Hoa & Vien, 2018). However, a few have directly investigated particular cultural features that lead to misunderstanding the target language (in this case, Vietnamese language). This paper attempts to look at types of figurative language such as metaphors, similes and metonymy that frequently appear in folk songs, idiomatic expressions in Vietnamese which causes confusion for foreigners learning Vietnamese language.

### **Significance of the Study**

Understanding figures of speech in Vietnamese language has been a great challenge for most foreign learners when studying Vietnamese languages at educational institutions across the country. Meanwhile, the study of this linguistic phenomenon has been an exclusive domain of literary scholars and the odd linguist who was interested in rhetoric or stylistics. The study will fill in the gap of providing descriptions of figurative language which are fond in folklore scripts, proverbs and idiomatic expressions in Vietnamese language. Hopefully, the findings would help in developing communicative competence of foreign learners of Vietnamese. The findings would also provide teachers, education administrator guidance in syllabus design.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of the study is to explore the differences between literal Vietnamese and those in illiteral literature context such as folk songs, proverbs, idiomatic expressions. Secondly, the study would raise learners' awareness in comprehending, using and interpreting figurative language during communication process in Vietnamese language.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Culture and Communicative Competence**

The ultimate goal of language learning is the competence to communicate in the target language. However, the literal language is sometimes inadequate to comprehend what the speakers really mean. Many individual and social problems in our societies arise, however, because people are not sufficiently competent with respect to certain aspects of communication. Hymes in the 1960s (1962, 1964) emphasizes that the knowledge of grammatical rules is not

sufficient for speaking a language and for communicating. There is a shared belief in many societies that good communication has many constraints and that one of the most important constraints is the underlying ability of the interlocutors. Scholars and educators have confirmed that teaching a second language is more than formulating a system of linguistic codes in the learner's mind. Communication entails more than exchanges of linguistic phrases. Culture plays a significant role in communication, both intra-culturally and inter-culturally. Communication is a two-way process and people conduct a variety of behaviors to convey themselves. Meanwhile, they interpret others' behaviors to understand others' intentions. These behaviors in communication are formulated by culture. Hall (1976) concisely relates culture and communication as "culture is communication; communication is culture."

The concept of culture denotes 'a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life' (Geertz, 1973: 89). Williams (1976, p.1) describes culture as "the most complicated words in the English language." Culture is complex, because it comes in to play in every aspect of social life, from personal behaviors to group activities, from people's beliefs to their actions, from artifacts to institutional organization.

It is undoubtedly that learning a foreign language necessarily involves becoming familiar with the culture of the community where the language is spoken.

### Why Figurative Language?

Kennedy (1983: 479) defines figurative language as language that uses figure of speech. A figure of speech is a way of saying something other than the literal meaning of the world. Figure of speech may be said occur whenever a writer or speaker, for the sake of emphasis of freshness, departs from the ordinary detonations of words from above quotation. A figure of speech is an utterance as an irony, hyperbole, and simile, personification that use words in non-literal meaning or unusual manner to add clarity and beauty and so on to what is said or written. The effectiveness of such usage, of course, varies widely. Figurative language is the language of the imagination, contrived to create thought its appeal to the imagination. A figure of speech is an intentional deviation from the ordinary usage of language (Kurniawan, 2014: 120). Perrine (1992: 61) shares the same idea that a figure of speech is any way of saying something other than the ordinary way. Language using figures of speech is language that cannot be taken literally (or should not be taken literally only).

In the first chapter of the book entitled "Using Figurative Language", Colston (2015: 3) asked a question "*Why Don't People [just] Say What They Mean?*" The short answer is that figurative language provides a lot of bang for its buck (idiom). Figurative language expresses meaning beyond its correct figurative interpretation. Similarly, Cacciari (1998: 119) raised a question "*Why do we speak metaphorically?*" The possible answer is that "When planning the production of a sentence, a speaker faces several choices, one of which concerns the ways in which each chunk of what that speaker intends to convey will be "shaped": literally, ironically, metaphorically, and so forth" (p.119).

#### **Metaphors**

Metaphor is traditionally taken to be the most fundamental form of figurative language. According to the *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*, metaphors are defined as linguistic images that are based on a relationship of similarity between two objects or concepts; that is, based on the same or similar semantic features, a denotational transfer occurs (p. 744). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (unabridged) defines metaphor as both transfer and analogy: "the figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable." From cognitive linguistic perspective metaphor is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another

conceptual domain (Kövecses, 2010: 4). Metaphor in this sense is described as *conceptual metaphor* which consists of two domains; *source domain* and *target domain*. The former refers to the conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions to understand another conceptual domain. The latter refers to the domain that we try to understand through the use of the source domain. For example, in the sentence *life is a journey*, *life* is the target domain and *journey* is the source domain (p. 4). Hoorn (1997) further defines the domains in metaphors in five definitions. However, for the research purpose of this study, we just review three definitions to clarify the internal meaning of metaphors.

*Definition 1: A-, B-, and C-term*

The A- and B-term are always explicitly present in the text, and are connected by the auxiliary 'to be' (A is B). The C-term is the great unknown. In the example "*love is a rose*", the A-term is '*love*'. The thing with which love is compared is the B-term, '*rose*'. The C-term may be something like '*beautiful, red, tender, and thorny*'. Notice that A- and B-term do not necessarily coincide with grammatical subject and normalized predicate (p.17).

*Definition 2: Literal, metaphoric, and anomalous expressions*

*Literal* is defined as language that is conventionalized and lexicalized as describing the 'real world'. A *metaphor* is emphatically not defined as a logical proposition, because a logical proposition presupposes a fixed division between subject and predicate and claims a truth value. *Anomalous expressions* refer to the mismatch of a word with contextual expectations, which renders the expression highly nonsensical.

*Definition 3: Features*

According to Hoorn, words possess feature sets, such as formal level (syntax, morphology, spelling, and phonology) and meaning level (symbols, semantic connections). The feature set of a word has *common* and *personal* components. The common components refer to the meaning of the word according to the dictionary, while the personal components are the idiosyncratic meanings and associations that an individual member of the speech community attaches to a word.

**Metonymy**

Both of metaphor and metonymy are referred to figures of a language. They sometimes confuse readers because of their actual uses. While metaphor refers to linguistic image, metonymy associates with a conceptual phenomenon. In other words, the former names things, the latter recalls thought. A standard definition is that metaphor is based on similarity and involves two different domains, and metonymy is based on contiguity and involves only one domain (Kövecses 2010). Metonymy is defined in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* as "a figure of speech that consists in using the name of one thing for that of something else with which it is associated". Lakoff and Johnson (1980: Ch. 8) add that metonymy is a phenomenon in natural language, which is usually defined as a figure of speech in which the speaker is using one entity to refer to another that is related to it.

Many scholars have attempted to differentiate the notions of metaphor and metonymy. However, distinguishing between the notions of metaphor and metonymy is "notoriously difficult" (Radden, 2000: 93). Barcelona (2003: 209) found that applying the cognitive theories of metaphor and metonymy to sets of authentic examples was successful but in quite a few other cases they were not so easy to apply, simply because it was not at all easy to decide whether the example in question was metaphorical, metonymic, or both. Taylor (1995) uses cognitive linguistics theory to develop the idea of metonymy-based metaphors even though he discusses metonymy and metaphor separately. Goossens (1990: 323) states that, despite being distinct cognitive processes, it "appears to be the case that the two are not mutually exclusive" leading to his coining of the cover term *metaphonymy* to increase awareness of the fact that metaphor and metonymy can be intertwined.

Like metaphor, metonymy is part of our everyday way of thinking. It is grounded in experience. It is subject to general and systematic principles and structures our thoughts and actions. Literal language, in some cases, is impossible to encapsulate all aspects of our intended meaning in the language that we use. In other words, language always ‘underspecifies’ meaning in that it cannot possibly express everything that is relevant to its interpretation (Radden et al., 2007), and inferences are needed to work out what is meant (Frisson, 2009). We think ‘metonymically’ because it is physically impossible to consciously activate all the knowledge that we have of a particular concept at once, so we tend to focus on a salient aspect of that concept, and use this as point of access to the whole concept (Littlemore, 2015: 5). Langacker (1993) concludes that metonymy is prevalent in language simply because it is a property of our everyday thought processes.

### Figures of Speech in Vietnamese Language

Figurative language is found in many aspects of Vietnamese everyday communication. It is popular to hear hyperboles, metaphors, similes, metonymy, idioms, proverbs, sayings among Vietnamese people’s conversations. The figures of speech are not normally found in formal written scripts, except for special contexts.

#### **Hyperboles**

Hyperbole belongs to metaphoric figure of speech focusing more on “exaggeration”. Is not an arcane rhetorical figure, but it is a common feature of everyday language use. It was a common urge of humans to magnify things and not to be satisfied with (the description of) things as they really are (Claridge, 2011). In Vietnamese language hyperboles represent exaggerations in daily lives to show great passions or gratitude. Let’s have a look at the following example of hyperbole.

[1a] *Một ngày tù bằng ngàn thu ở ngoài.*

The surface meaning is a comparison between a day in the prison and a very long time being outside, thousands of autumn. In fact, nobody can live up to thousands of autumn. This hyperbole’s underlined meaning refers to the hard time of being captured in the prison.

[1b] *Cha mẹ nuôi con bằng trời bằng biển*

*(Parent raises children up like sky and sea)*

*Con nuôi cha mẹ con kể từng ngày*

*(Children take care of parents counting day by day)*

The proverb is a lament when children misbehave with their parents. It is to see the magnifying when the parents’ nurture is compared with sky and sea, the borderless space.

#### **Similes**

Simile is a special kind of metaphor [created by] the explicit use of the word ‘like’ (Booth and Gregory 1987:246). In Vietnamese language similes are expressed through words ‘*như*, *như thế*, *như là*’ or sometimes just two objects are presented.

[2a] *Thương người như thể thương thân*

*(Love other people as you do to yourself)*

The proverb highlights the behaviour between people in the same community.

Another perspective of Vietnamese figurative language is the cultural mega-imagination behind the utterances. Let’s look at the following moralization;

[2b] *Công cha như núi Thái Sơn*

*(The father’s merit is like Thai Son Mountain)*

*Nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra*

*(The mother’s gratitude is like water from the source)*

Thai Son refers to something huge and glamorous. The source in this sense means unlimited affection and gratitude. The whole folklore saying reminds people of the tremendous care-giving that parents devoted to their children.

Direct similes are easily found in Vietnamese folk songs. When showing the desperation of lovers being apart, the cultural images or characters are used in many folklore sayings.

[2c] Sen xa hồ, sen khô, hồ cạn

(Lotus far away from pond, the lotus get dried, the lake get emptied)

Liễu xa đào, liễu ngả, đào nghiêng

(Willow far from peach, both of them turn grogginess)

Anh xa em như thuyền xa bến

(I am far away from you like the boat far away from the pier)

Như Thúy Kiều xa Kim Trọng, biết mấy niên cho tái hội

(Like Thuy Kieu is far away from Kim Trong, for how many years to be united)

The image of 'lotus and pond, willow and peach' represents boys and girls who are in love. Thuy Kieu and Kim Trong are literature characters who appeared in 'Truyện Kiều' written by Nguyen Du to describe a loving affair between a young couple who suffered from desperate love.

In many cases, there the conjunction is not presented.

[2d] Miệng quan, tròn trẻ

The word-by-word translation is "*the syndic's mouth, the child's arse*". The intended meaning refers to the instability of what powerful people said.

#### **Chinese-originated vocabulary**

It is even more challenging for foreigners to understand Vietnamese figurative languages due to Chinese borrowed words, the so-called Chinese Vietnamese words. For example, the proverb

[3a] Tam sao thất bản

In this example, 'tam' means 'three', 'thất' means 'seven'. The literal meaning is 'three copies, seven versions'. The intended meaning is 'after many copies the original meaning becomes less reliable'. The frequent appearances of Chinese originated words in Vietnamese figurative language cause misinterpretations for foreign learners when learning Vietnamese.

[3b] Tiến thoái lưỡng nan

'Tiến' means move forward. 'thoái' means move backward or retreat. 'lưỡng' means both ends or both sides. 'Nan' means hard or impossible. The whole proverb refers to a difficult situation where the subject cannot make a decision.

The fact is that Vietnam had been under Chinese ruling for over a thousand years, many Vietnamese words today originated from China. That adds more challenges for foreigners in understanding Vietnamese language, especially figurative language.

#### **Conclusion**

Understanding figures of speech in the target language is not an easy task for foreign language learners. It is even more difficult for those who would like to master Vietnamese language because of its varieties and cultural interference. Vietnam has long been an agricultural country where communities live closed to each other and willing to assist in difficult time. The folklore cultural images have been truly shown in proverbs, sayings, folk songs and idiomatic expressions.

In order to obtain full understanding of the figures of speeches in Vietnamese language, learners should spend time and efforts to investigate cultural aspects of the culture. Besides, language curriculums should integrate the teaching of culture in combination with field trips study in the Vietnamese language teaching programs for foreign learners of Vietnamese.

#### **Limitation & Suggestion for Further Studies**

The research paper has just briefly raised a not much mentioned issue in Vietnamese language teaching and learning. The deep analysis of the Vietnamese figurative language has

not been mentioned in detail and thoroughly. A much harder effort to make a comparison between English and Vietnamese in terms of structure or semantic domains would be more helpful for foreign language learners of Vietnamese. Another suggestion for further study would be on cognitive concepts between Vietnamese and English that formulate the figure of speeches in the two languages should be more valuable.

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