

## A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR “IDEAS ARE FOOD” IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE

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### ABSTRACT

*In the realm of cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor refers to the understanding of one idea or concept in regard to another. This particular metaphor has received serious attention in language teaching worldwide. However, there has been little research on the use of conceptual metaphors in Vietnamese EFL classrooms. Therefore, the contrastive analysis of the conceptual metaphor “IDEAS ARE FOOD” in English and Vietnamese based on the cognitive approach aims to investigate the benefits and contributions of teaching English through conceptual metaphors in Vietnamese EFL classrooms.*

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphor, unidirectionality, mapping, target and source domains.

### TÓM TẮT

**Nghiên cứu so sánh đối chiếu phép ẩn dụ ý niệm “Ý TƯỞNG LÀ THỨC ĂN” trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt**

*Trong lãnh vực ngôn ngữ học tri nhận, ẩn dụ khái niệm dùng để chỉ sự hiểu biết của một ý tưởng hay khái niệm này thông qua một ý niệm khác. Phép ẩn dụ này nhận được rất nhiều sự quan tâm trong việc giảng dạy ngôn ngữ trên toàn thế giới. Tuy nhiên, có rất ít nghiên cứu về việc sử dụng phép ẩn dụ khái niệm trong lớp học ngôn ngữ ở Việt Nam. Cũng chính vì lẽ đó, tác giả đã tiến hành phân tích đối chiếu hình ảnh ẩn dụ ý niệm “Ý TƯỞNG LÀ THỨC ĂN” trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt dựa trên cách tiếp cận tri nhận nhằm tìm hiểu những lợi ích và đóng góp của việc giảng dạy tiếng Anh thông qua các ẩn dụ ý niệm trong lớp học ở Việt Nam.*

**Từ khóa:** ẩn dụ ý niệm, tính một chiều, tính liên kết, mã nguồn, mã đối chiếu.

### 1. Introduction

A research student, Phil Isherwood, in cultural and creative studies at the University of Bolton, once wrote a poem.

#### Food for thought

<i>Chewing on the half-baked.</i>	<i>I tried the candy floss</i>
<i>Had to suck it and see.</i>	<i>Of fluffy inspiration, so</i>
<i>What I couldn't digest</i>	<i>sweet to get your teeth into</i>
<i>only ate away at me.</i>	<i>But leads to constipation</i>
<i>Years of stodgy literature,</i>	<i>Best aphorism appetizers</i>
<i>chewing on the cud,</i>	<i>before a poem or two</i>

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snuffling for morsels  
*buried* deep in mud.

fully fed with metaphors  
 I can *leave my mind to stew*

Are these italicized words qualified as metaphors? Traditionally, metaphors have been regarded as an important figure of speech exclusively employed in literary works. The formation of metaphors is believed to take root in the language itself, not in the process of thought. That claim would be perfectly acceptable when even native speakers find this way of talking so normal and natural to articulate their ideas. However, take a more critical look at the given examples, it can be seen that the way native speakers convey their ideas stems from the way they think of food, but this association is so conventional that it goes unnoticed. Until the 1980 publication of “Metaphors We Live By” by Lakoff and Johnson, new insights have been offered into how language is structured through our conceptual system on the basis that language expressions are actually metaphorical in nature. The investigation of my paper would therefore aim to shed light on these research questions below:

1. How is the metaphor “IDEAS ARE FOOD” conceptualized in English and Vietnamese?
2. What are differences and similarities in the conceptual metaphor “IDEAS ARE FOOD” between English and Vietnamese?
3. What are the reasons for these differences and similarities?
4. What are the implications for teaching and learning the conceptual metaphor “IDEAS ARE FOOD”?

## **2. Theoretical background and definitions**

### **2.1. Literature review**

Until now, serious studies have been undertaken on the conceptual metaphor “IDEAS ARE FOOD”. For example, McGlone (1996) made a systematic interpretation of how people come up with the conceptual metaphor “FOOD FOR THOUGHT”. Ruiz (2007) conducted the analysis of “ACQUIESCENCE IS SWALLOWING” in fairy tales. The mappings “FOOD AS THOUGHT” or “IDEAS ARE FOOD” are also extensively investigated by Su (2000, pp. 395-42). However, there is little research on the conceptual metaphor “IDEAS ARE FOOD” in Vietnamese despite the fact that food plays a prominent part in Vietnamese cultures. Therefore, it is hoped that this paper would make a great contribution to the understanding of how Vietnamese and English people conceptualize IDEAS as FOOD from which explanations based on cultural and historical differences can be provided.

### **2.2. What is “conceptual metaphor”?**

In ordinary opinion, metaphor is considered as a unique device for poetic expressions or extraordinary thoughts. However, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) pointed out that “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (p.3). These particular conceptual systems enhance our perception of the surroundings and determine our behaviors towards others. The structure of abstract concepts is characterized through underlying

associations with more concrete ones, thereby allowing us to form logical connections among various entities. In the realm of cognitive linguistics, metaphorical expressions are good presentations of the metaphorical thoughts. “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.5). However, when a metaphor becomes conventional, it is employed unconsciously and passes unrecognized. These unnoticed associations are considered as conceptual metaphors. In order to grasp a better understanding of what has been discussed so far, we now examine the concept - TIME, and the conceptual metaphor - TIME IS MONEY in Western cultures proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.8-9).

How do you *spend* your time these days? I’ve *invested* a lot of time in her.

You’re *wasting* my time. *Put aside* some time for ping pong.

You need to *budget* your time. You don’t *use* your time *profitably*.

It is obvious that the concept of work and time is closely related in Western cultures where incomes are paid by the hour, the week, or the year. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that time is deemed as a tremendously valuable commodity, a limited resource, or even money. Thus, Western people conceive of time as a kind of thing that can be “spent, wasted, budgeted, and invested wisely or poorly.” This illuminating example has shown what is meant by conceptual metaphor.

### 2.3. Key principles of conceptual metaphor

#### A. The unidirectionality of metaphor

This means that metaphor mappings construct from a source domain to a target domain but not vice versa. For example, Evans and Green (2006) illustrated that while the concept of LOVE was structured in term of JOURNEY, there was no such conventional structure JOURNEY in terms of LOVE. From their viewpoint, travelers are not generally considered as lovers, or car crashes as “heartbreak” and so on.

#### B. Motivation for source and target domains

As Kövecses (2010) put it, “the source domains are typically more concrete or physical and more clearly delineated concepts than the targets, which tend to be fairly abstract and less-delineated ones” (p.38). From his findings, some of the most common source domains are *the human body* (the head of the department), *health and illness* (she hurt my feelings), *animals* (he is a wily old fox), *plants* (a budding theory), *buildings and construction* (a towering genius) while some of the most common target domains consist of *emotion* (she was deeply moved), *desire* (he is burning to go), *thought* (he searched for the memory), *society and nation* (what do we owe society?), *politics* (the President plays hardball). However, what is the motivation for the source and target domains? Consider an abstract IDEA domain as illustrated in the sentence “I find it hard to swallow her claim”. It is noted that IDEA is structured in terms of FOOD because our understanding of IDEA derives from our experience with FOOD. From our perception, food is eaten and digested by the body in much the same way idea is processed and taken in by the mind. Through such real-life experience, we come to realize that there is a similar correspondence between the way food and idea are

understood, which gives birth to the conceptual metaphor “IDEAS ARE FOOD”. In short, the interaction with everyday activities is the motivation for the target domain to be structured in terms of the source domain.

### C. Mappings

Lakoff (1993) proposed that metaphor can be defined as “a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system” (p.203), which involves a tightly structured set of correspondences. In order to understand this concept, we now take a look at the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY in which LOVE (the target domain being described) is conventionally structured with regard to JOURNEY (the source domain in terms of which the target domain is described). In his perspective, entities in the target domain will correspond systematically to those in the source domain. For instance, LOVERS become TRAVELLERS (we’re *at a crossroads*), who travel on a certain ROUTE (our relationship *went off course*), by a particular MEANS OF TRANSPORT (we’re *spinning our wheels*), and finally reach a destination (this relationship is *a dead-end street*).

## 3. Findings and discussion

### 3.1. The conceptual metaphor: ideas are food in english

#### 1. FORMING AN IDEA IS COOKING AND PREPARING FOOD

I am sure that his story is *cooked up* perfectly.

You shouldn’t pay any attention to his *half-baked* idea.

The book has offered *warmed-over* theories into human understanding.

*Raw facts* can be found in many report papers.

Let’s let that idea *simmer on the back burner*.

That idea has been *fermenting* for years.

Ideas were beginning to *jell* in my mind.

She was *grilled* by lots of questions.

Some key points in my speech got *boiled down*.

#### 2. THINKING IS CHEWING OVER THE FOOD

She *chewed over* how to deal with a difficult colleague like Peter.

#### 3. LEARNING IS EATING

She devoured the whole book just in a week.

Choose the topic that you can get your teeth into.

She drinks *in* all the information because the professor is so great.

#### 4. ACCEPTING IS SWALLOWING

I find it hard to *swallow* her claims.

#### 5. UNDERSTANDING IS DIGESTING

He paused, waiting for her to digest the information.

It took me several days to absorb the fact that she was dead.

The committee will need time to *assimilate* this report.

#### 6. PROVIDING INFORMATION IS FEEDING

Gossip and speculation are constantly fed to us by the media.

Teachers shouldn't *spoon-feed* students.

### 7. NEEDING IDEAS IS HUNGRY

Our country is *hungry* for innovative ideas.

### 8. FEELING IS TASTING OR SMELLING THE FOOD

What he said left a bad taste in my mouth.

The argument smells fishy.

We are having a meaty discussion.

She has a salty sense of humor.

What a bitter word I have ever heard!

The travel brochure is mouth-watering.

What a *tasteless* joke!

### 9. EATING IS HAVING SEX

I am a man with a normal *appetite*.

## 3.2. The conceptual metaphor: ideas are food in Vietnamese

### 1. FORMING AN IDEA IS COOKING AND PREPARING FOOD

Những thông tin đã được xào nấu kỹ càng để công kích chính quyền non trẻ  
[The information has been cooked up to attack the newly-built government.]

Dữ liệu thô cần phải được thu thập.

[Raw data needs to be collected.]

Những suy nghĩ chưa chín tới.

[These are just half-baked ideas.]

Ý tưởng ấy đã bị ủ giấm từ rất lâu.

[This idea has long been buried.]

Ý tưởng này bắt đầu lên men trong tâm trí của anh ta.

[This idea starts to ferment in his mind.]

Anh ấy đang nấu ý định trả thù từ rất lâu

[He has been harboring the idea of revenge for a long time.]

### 2. THINKING IS CHEWING OVER THE FOOD

*Gặm nhấm* kí ức là một trong sở thích quái dị của anh ta.

[One of his odd hobbies is *chewing over* memories.]

Mày *nhai* bài này xong chưa đó?

[Have you *chewed* this lesson yet?]

### 3. LEARNING IS EATING

Anh ta chỉ biết *ngốn* sách

[He only *devoured* books.]

Ý tưởng này *ngốn* mất hai tháng để hoàn thiện.

[This idea took us two months to work on.]

### 4. ACCEPTING IS SWALLOWING

Tôi không thể nào *nuốt trôi* những lời cô ta nói

[I could not *swallow* what she said.]

### 5. UNDERSTANDING IS DIGESTING

Cái đọc chỉ thành cái có được khi chúng ta biết *tiêu hóa* nó.

[What we read only works, when we know how to *digest* it.]

Anh ấy quả là một đứa chậm tiêu.

[He is such a stupid person.]

Phan Châu Trinh đã *hấp thụ* những tư tưởng mới của nền văn hóa tiến bộ.

[Phan Châu Trinh absorbed innovative ideas from a civilized culture.]

## 6. PROVIDING INFORMATION IS FEEDING

[Cần ngăn chặn việc *đút* kiến thức cho học sinh trong thời kì hiện nay.]

It is crucial to prevent *food-speeding* students in today's world.

## 7. NEEDING IDEAS IS HUNGRY.

Chúng ta *đói* những tư tưởng tiến bộ.

[We are *hungry* for radical ideas.]

## 8. GETTING IDEAS IS UNDESIRABLE

Họ hoàn toàn rơi vào trạng thái *bội thực* ý tưởng.

[They are all in the situation where they could not take any ideas in.]

## 9. FEELING IS TASTING OR SMELLING THE FOOD

Bài nói của anh ấy có *mùi* của định kiến.

[His speech is full of prejudice.]

Những lời nói *ngọt ngào* dễ lấy lòng người khác.

[*Sweet* words are likely to win people's hearts.]

Sự thật ấy sẽ làm *đắng* lòng nhiều người.

[The truth will *embitter* many people.]

Vị *mặn* của chất muối cuộc đời.

[The *salty taste* of life.]

Luôn mỉm cười dù sự đời *chua chát*.

[Always smile even when things turn *sour*.]

Đây có lẽ là vị *cay* đáng giá mà khán giả được nếm bởi người đàn ông này.

[This is perhaps a very worthy *spicy* taste the audience gained from this man.]

## 10. EATING IS HAVING SEX

Chồng thì *ăn chả*, vợ thì *ăn nem*.

[The husband has a secret affair so does the wife.]

Anh ấy *chán cơm, thèm phở*.

[He is fed up with his wife and tries to find another woman.]

### 3.3. Similarities and differences

#### A. Similarities

One of the noticeable similarities is direct translation from English into Vietnamese. For example, "I can't *swallow* what he said" is translated into "tôi không thể *nuốt trôi* những lời anh ta đã nói" or "he has *absorbed* innovative ideas" into "anh ta đã *hấp thụ* những tư tưởng mới". What these examples suggest is that English and Vietnamese people do share some similar sets of conceptual mappings in terms of the "IDEAS ARE FOOD" conceptual metaphor. To have a further view on this point, the

notion “IDEAS ARE FOOD” is universally understood despite great differences in syntactic structures between the two languages. Therefore, when making references to the conceptual metaphor “IDEAS ARE FOOD”, there seems to be an existing underlying similar cognitive mechanism in certain aspects among people of different languages.

Another similarity is the systematicity of the conceptual metaphor “IDEAS ARE FOOD” between the two countries. As mentioned earlier in this paper, metaphorical mappings construct from a source domain to a target domain not vice versa. Although Vietnamese has a strikingly different syntactic structure from English, these examples in the section “THE CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR: IDEAS ARE FOOD IN VIETNAMESE” have made it clear that this systematicity is perfectly valid in Vietnamese. This would suggest that the human beings’ thoughts are also systematically processed when forming a conceptual metaphor. The logic in thinking can be shown through the example “ông ăn chả, bà ăn nem”. “Chả” and “nem” in some sense have similar ingredients and preparation process. Therefore, it would be clearly understandable to the hearers when saying “ông ăn chả, bà ăn nem” but awkward when saying “ông ăn chả, bà ăn bánh mì” where “chả” and “bánh mì” have no connections. This example somehow lends credence to the systematicity in human thoughts when devising a conceptual metaphor. However, more research needs to be conducted to confirm this claim.

### **B. Differences**

The first disparity is that the sub-mapping “EATING IS HAVING SEX”. Although there is an English metaphorical expression “I am a normal man with normal *appetite*” implying a normal sex appeal, it is not commonly used. In Vietnamese, there are quite a few conceptual metaphors on the topic of sex. However, they can be used with an intention of insult. One of the prime reasons for this is that Vietnam is an agricultural country and traditional values are highly cherished. Food in particular plays an integral part in Vietnamese people’s lives. It is inextricably related to social norms and relationships, even moral lessons are reflected in Vietnamese eating etiquette. The expressions “ông ăn chả, bà ăn nem” and “chán cơm, thèm phở” lend great support to this claim. From the formal rules of eating, Vietnamese people make a connection with rules of behaving. The sentence “ông ăn chả, bà ăn nem” is not only a conceptual metaphor, but it also implies a criticism of an unfavorable aspect of family relationship—the unfaithfulness among the husband and wife.

A further point of difference is that Vietnamese people do not relate the concept of idea to the burner as “*let the idea simmer on back burner*”. It is my own belief that the discrepancy stems from the historical development between the two countries. In the past, Vietnam was a poor agricultural country where people used oil or coal to cook their food. Hence, the image of a burner is not well established in the Vietnamese’s mindset. In contrast, Western countries were more developed with the invention of various labor-saving gadgets to improve their lives. Consequently, they tend to use the

image of machines such as the burner when referring to an idea.

The final dissimilarity is that the English do not conventionally link ideas with vinegar. Again, this is because of the fact that Vietnamese people are quite keen of using vinegar to add flavors and preserve their food, whereas English people are not. As a result, the conceptual metaphor “ý tưởng bị *ngâm giấm/ủ giấm*” does not find any matched translation in English.

#### **4. Implications and suggestions**

##### **4.1. Implications for foreign language teaching and learning**

It is clear that a profound knowledge of the similarities and differences in the conceptual metaphor “IDEAS ARE FOOD” would be of great help in teaching and explaining metaphors to students. Teachers can introduce students to a new interpretation of metaphors. They are not simply a literary device but more importantly the process of thought. The formation of metaphors is based on underlying associations with everyday activities. In addition, teachers can make their lessons more gripping by requiring the students to collect some examples of the metaphorical concept “IDEAS ARE FOOD” in English and Vietnamese. It is likely that when doing so, students will find learning more rewarding and intriguing with a lot of new information about conceptual metaphors they have never known before. Furthermore, teachers can introduce students to various conceptual metaphors related to IDEAS such as “IDEAS ARE PEOPLE”, “IDEAS ARE PLANTS”, “IDEAS ARE PRODUCTS”, and “IDEAS ARE COMMODITIES”. The more students are exposed to different mappings, the more interested they would be in the lessons. Students will come to realize that conceptual metaphors are so commonplace in everyday life that people could link their experience with numerous concepts. Finally, the explanation of conceptual metaphors may help students grasp the concept of systematicity in humans’ thoughts. This may sound academic but the point is that students will discover the logic in human thinking by themselves via giving them some clues as to why people connect their experience with this image but not the others or why English people have a different metaphorical image from Vietnamese people.

##### **4.2. Implications for cross-cultural communication**

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) has made a very persuasive point that while some conceptual metaphors are universally understandable, others are different from culture to culture. It means that the metaphorical structure of certain concepts will be closely related to cultural values. There are some conceptual metaphors which are universally common while the others only exist in specific countries. As a result, the emphasis should be laid on the dissimilarities between the two countries in the hope of clearing any fundamental misunderstandings in communication. For example, the sub-mapping “EATING IS HAVING SEX” is not prevalent in English at all. Therefore, the usage of this sub-mapping should be limited to reduce misunderstanding when we communicate with an Englishman. Nevertheless, the similarities in the conceptual metaphor “IDEAS ARE FOOD” should deserve attention in terms of language use, too. My suggestion is that because the metaphorical mappings are conventional in humans’ thoughts, they are widely employed

in speech and writing. So, the effort to learn and use conceptual metaphors is highly appreciated to tailor our native language to more natural use of the target language.

#### 4.3. *Implications for translation practice*

It is obvious that there are cases where direct translation would work perfectly such as “too much information to digest” (quá nhiều thông tin để tiêu hóa), or “I find it hard to swallow her words” (thật khó để nuốt trôi những lời cô ta nói). However, as suggested above, cultural differences will cause some difficulties in translation. For instance, it would be inappropriate to translate “this is the meaty part of this chapter” into “đó là phần thịt nhất của tác phẩm”, or “bài nói của anh ta có mùi của định kiến” into “there is a smell of prejudice in his speech”. The point is that when translating conceptual metaphors, expert knowledge of other countries’ culture, geography and history is required for the proper understanding of how people conceptualize their own worlds. In dealing with how to translate conceptual metaphors effectively, Ahrens and Say (1999) suggested three key principles. First, if a similar image-schema mapping exists, and the mapping structure is the same, then employ an exact translation. Second, if a similar image-schema exists, but the conceptual metaphors mapped differently for a particular case in the target language, use an explanatory simile or replace with another instance in the target language carrying the same meaning (from the same conceptual metaphor). Third, if the image-schema mapping does not exist in L2, either translate directly with an attached explanation or use an explanatory simile. Berrada (2007) also raised a crucial translation point that conceptual metaphors should be placed in a specific context and time period. One example he demonstrated is the conceptual metaphor “*he is a sour lemon*”, which means a person with a *tart inclination* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Britain. However, it then changed to be linked with a *gullible* person, a *sucker*. With this in mind, he proposed that translators should consider the temporal settings in which the conceptual metaphors are invented. Because of the author’s limited knowledge, more cases where the interpretation of conceptual metaphors undergoes changes in meaning are not illustrated in this paper. Therefore, more investigation should be focused on this interesting point.

#### 4.4. *Suggestions*

Due to the lack of knowledge and experience in dealing with cognitive linguistics, the present study only makes a specific discussion on the conceptual metaphor “IDEAS ARE FOOD”. In addition, some explanations for the similarities and differences may not have strong supporting evidence owing to the fact that they are chiefly demonstrated from the researcher’s knowledge and understanding. As a result, it is essential that more work be done to confirm certain claims in the study. Furthermore, there are other common conceptual metaphors related to IDEAS such as “IDEAS ARE PLANTS”, “IDEAS ARE PEOPLE”, “IDEAS ARE COMMODITIES”, and “IDEAS ARE PRODUCTS”. Hence, it is suggested that research should be carried out to explore the metaphorical mappings and make a comprehensive analysis of them. It will, as a result, contribute tremendously to the understanding of how people from different countries conceptualize their ideas.

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(Received: 18/8/2015; Revised: 27/11/2015; Accepted: 23/02/2016)