ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE IDIOMS:
FROM TRADITIONAL TO COGNITIVE VIEW

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ABSTRACT

Classification and identification of idioms have always been an issue for linguists in nearly all languages. Referring to both Vietnamese and English literature of idioms, this article analyzes the current problems arising in traditional view and then discuss the alternative view from cognitive linguistics. From the analysis of some English and Vietnamese idioms, this article suggests that image schemas play an important role in forming idioms' meaning.

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistics, Image schema, English idioms, Vietnamese idioms, cognitive processes.

TÓM TẮT

Thành ngữ tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt: từ cách tiếp cận truyền thống
đến cách tiếp cận tri nhận

Việc nhận diện và phân loại thành ngữ luôn là vấn đề khó đối với các nhà ngôn ngữ học ở gần như tất cả các ngôn ngữ. Qua việc phân tích các quan điểm đã có trong ngôn ngữ học tiếng Việt và tiếng Anh về thành ngữ, bài báo này nêu ra những khó khăn từ cách tiếp cận truyền thống đối với thành ngữ và thảo luận một cách tiếp cận khác từ ngôn ngữ học tri nhận. Thông qua phần phân tích dẫn chứng từ thành ngữ tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt, bài báo chứng minh rằng các lược đồ hình ảnh đóng vai trò quan trọng trong quá trình tạo lập nghĩa của thành ngữ.

Từ khóa: Ngôn ngữ học tri nhận, Lược đồ hình ảnh, thành ngữ tiếng Anh, thành ngữ tiếng Việt, các quá trình tri nhận.

1.   Introduction

Although idiom is a familiar lexicological concept studied from many aspects, so far there have been still many issues that have not been agreed among researchers. In Vietnamese linguistics literature, there are lots of different concepts stated by researchers. Generally, all those discussions in the literature of Vietnamese idioms refer to two characteristics belonging to two basic aspects of idiom: formal structure and meaningful content.

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Researchers such as Nguyen Van Tu, Dai Xuan Ninh, Do Viet Hung, Le Huu Tinh have outlined the characteristics of the semantic role of the elements that constitute idiom. According to these researchers, the elements that constitute idiom have lost or nearly lost their independence in the ability to create meaning and help realize the meaning of the combination. Meanwhile, other researchers did not mention this feature. In addition, the function equivalent to the word in term of identity and in term of concept manifestation of idiom was mentioned in the statement of the researchers such as Nguyen Thien Giap, Nguyen Huu Quynh, Nguyen Cong Duc, Vu Duc Nghieu, etc.

In English, idiom is also a subject matter researched by many people and in many aspects. As in Vietnamese and other languages, problems about identification and classification of English idioms are also complicated with diverse opinions (Langlotz 2006). Discussing this issue, the researcher Fellbaum (1993 quoted in Langlotz 2006) exclaimed: "The analysis of proverb on the aspects of morpheme, lexicon and structure requires a very considerable undertaking."

2. Issues arising from traditional classification and identification in Vietnamese linguistics

Language practice shows that identification and distinction of idiom from the neighboring units such as locutions, proverbs, the units that were previously known as compound words do not always reach a consensus.

For distinction of idioms from locutions, the problem apparently seems pretty clear. Idioms have function of identification and naming in a suggestive, polished and iconic way while locution is also consistent fixed phrase used in all types of documents to perform the functions of integration and creation of text, the functions of semantic usage of sentences (to emphasize, be polite, disclaim, deny, be sulky, be irony ...). Take a look at the followings in Vietnamese locutions for example: "chẳng có lý do gì" (there is no reason), "của đáng tội" (in truth), "tóm lại" (in short), "thiết nghĩ" (considering that), "đáng chú ý" (it is noticeable that), etc.

However, to distinguish idioms from compound words and proverbs in Vietnamese, the situation is more complicated and still in debate (Nguyen Thien Giap, 1975; Do Huu Chau, 1981; Vu Duc Nghieu, 1999). For instance, the units such as *"đen thui" (coal black), "trẻ măng" (very young), "dẻo kẹo" (very lithe)* ... are considered compound words by some people and shortened idioms by others (Truong Dong San for example); the units such as *"được đằng chân, lân đằng đầu" (give him an inch and he will take a yard); "có chí làm quan, có gan làm giàu" (no guts, no glory), "cờ đến tay ai người ấy phất" (strike while the iron is hot)* ... have been considered idioms by some people while the others have identified them as proverbs (proverbs are also ready-made units, have fixed nature but generally show a judgment, conclusion, life experience, philosophy ...).

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In general consideration, the fundamental characteristics of idiom are agreed by most researchers include the following points: Idiom is a fixed phrase (syntactic group), a language unit that is ready-made and able to participate in constituting a sentence like words; It has a solid and stable structure; It has identification function; It has complete and highly iconic meaning. However, the nature of individual constituents in the making of idiomatic meaning is still a debate.

3.   The cognitive linguistic view of idiom

While the idiom researchers under the traditional view focus on investigating the structural and formal aspects of idiom, some cognitive linguists have a different view. Famous cognitive linguists such as Lakoff and Johnson (1999), Gibbs (1997) used a systematic method to review the nature of semantics in idiom and the relationship between structure and semantics of language. They have made important theories about lexicological semantics based on how we recognize, conceptualize and categorize the world around them. According to linguistic survey work carried out in this new discipline, idiom is apparently a subject matter that cannot be taken lightly. With the principle that language is not an autonomous cognitive ability, the cognitive linguistics launched a new look compared to the generative grammar of language nature: "Language knowledge (i.e. knowledge of the meaning and form) is basically conceptual structure and semantic expression is basically conceptual expression ... the expression about syntax, morphology, and phonology is also basically conceptual expression; because the sound must be generated at the output and be received, understood at the input of the cognitive processes that govern speaking and listening, reading, writing - which are two processes related to the brain " (Ly Toan Thang, 2005). It is from this fundamental viewpoint that the people following the school of cognitive linguistics think most of idioms are products of the conceptualization process and this is not merely a matter of language. Gibbs (1997) confirmed "idioms do not exist as an independent semantic unit in the vocabulary system but their nature is the part of a metaphorical concept system". Explaining this, Gibbs suggests that the metaphorical meaning of idioms and the explicit meaning contact with each other through the cognitive mechanisms such as metaphor, metonymy and background knowledge. Therefore, idioms are formed together with the formation of concepts in human thinking.

An important premise of cognitive linguistics is "when engaging in any linguistic activity, we also unconsciously mobilize a lot of cognitive abilities and cultural knowledge, we establish the interlacing relationships, and handle huge amount of information" (Fauconnier, 2004). Language itself cannot express meaning but only activates the meaning creation process in certain contexts with the support of cognitive abilities and certain cultural patterns. The above concept has put on a number of important questions for the deep research in the nature of idioms. *If idiom is considered*

metaphorical concept, the metaphorical meanings of many idioms can be inferred by establishing cognitive schemas about the relationship between the source concepts and target concepts. With this, we can describe the metaphorical meanings of many idioms in almost all languages clearly and in more details. This would be useful for foreign language teaching and learning because idiom is always the language unit that causes most difficulties to learners. Once the cognitive map about relationship between the source concept and target concept is made, we could think about finding the similarities between peoples in establishment of relationships between source concept and target concept. In other words, if surveying idiom in this new direction, we can rely on the similarities in peoples' world recognition in order to predict the metaphorical meaning in language of different ethnic groups and important element in this process is image schema.

4.   The role of image scheme in idiom formation

Steen (1997) states that a very large collection of images of the surrounding world exists in the memory of each person. This image collection will be different depending on the specific environment in which they live. For example, for the Vietnamese, normally, images such as "ông Bụt" (Buddha), "chùa bà Đanh" (Ba Danh temple), "vua Hùng" (Hung King), "cây tre" (bamboo), "rau muống" (water morning glory), "áo dài" are quite familiar while it is difficult for the British to imagine them. Those images are formed from the process of recognizing the world and constituting what Lakoff (1987) called "image schema". In Steen's opinion, the cognitive image schemas are not affected by the context, they reside in each person's consciousness. For example, the Vietnamese people hardly use image of ông Bụt, but this image still remains very long in our memories and it will show up when required.

Cognitive image is the basic to form new idioms and helps us reflect the meaning of the old idioms. Lakoff (1987) calls them imageable idioms, and thinks that in many cases, the meaning of idiom is not hard to infer. This view is different from the traditional view that considers idiom the sustainable combination that does not seem to have any relationship between its constituent units and its actual meaning. In other words, we cannot speculate on the meaning of idioms because meaning of idioms is completely arbitrary. Furthermore, Lakoff does not tend to confirm that the meaning of all idioms can be inferred from the meaning of their constituent units. However, in the case that the cognitive images of the same object or phenomenon in different ethnic groups coincide, the ability to infer the meaning of idiom is quite high.

One example is how we learn the meaning of the English idiom "to do something with one's eyes shut." To interpret this idiom, the first thing we should do is to find important keywords in the idiom, in other words it is the word having the cognitive image. In this case, since the word having the cognitive image is the word "eye". It is that background and experiences that tell us that when doing something while shutting

both eyes means working without paying careful attention and observation. Results of experimental psychology and neural physiology said that 90% of information acquired by human in normal conditions is through the visual pathway. From which we can infer the meaning of the idiom mentioned above is that when doing something very easy we do not need to be laborious. But why in the idiom above, the word "eye" is used rather than an other single word such as "mouth" for example. Is it because in our minds, the image of eye is conceptualized, representing the observation and careful attention? If we close our eyes, we do not observe anything. As such, it is the eye cognitive concept representing observation, attention, and carefulness that helps us decipher the meaning of the idiom above.

In some of his experiments outlined in the article "Idioms and psychological image: Basis of metaphor for the meaning of the idioms" in the journal Cognition, Gibbs (1997) proved that in a group of idioms, the structural units could contribute in a systematic way for the entire block of idioms. To prove their points of view, two authors gave out the example of the English idiom "to spill the beans." According to these two authors, metaphorical meaning of this idiom can be inferred because the word "beans" means the mystery and action "spill" (melt) means to reveal a secret.

Likewise in Vietnamese, we can deduce the metaphorical meaning of multiple idioms like "giết gà dùng dao mổ trâu" (Killing a chicken with buffalo-killing knife) by analyzing the meaning of the constituent units. We all know that "buffalo-killing knife" is a large knife specialized for slaughtering big cattle while "chicken" is very small poultry. The use of "buffalo-killing knife" to kill "chicken" is a work conflict with common logic: It costs too much to solve one small thing, which is not worthy. Thus, we can see that the traditional concept assuming that meaning of idiom emanates from the whole block of idiom and it is difficult to infer from the constituent units needs reconsidering.

Gibbs (1997) also said that we had available potential knowledge to decipher the mechanism of metaphor. Therefore, although the idioms using the same mechanism of metaphor are under different forms, the meaning of the metaphor image is still cognited by the speaker in the same way. For example, the British conceptualize the metaphorical meaning of two idioms "to spill the beans" and "to let the cat out of the bag" as disclosure of secret although the metaphorical meaning is built from two different images. Two Bulgarian linguists, Janyan and Andonova (2000), also conducted experiments on ability to recognize the meaning of the strange idioms in Bulgarian students and also drew out a similar conclusion: between the metaphorical meaning of the unknown idiom and the psychological images that it evokes, there is a very close link. Creating the psychological images shall help a lot for the decoding process of metaphorical meaning formation.

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5.   Summary

From the viewpoint of cognitive linguistics, idioms are products from the world conceptualization process of the human. Because the constituent units of idioms have a connection with the thinking activities, the meaning of idioms can be generated from the meaning of the constituent units through the cognitive mechanisms governing the conceptualization activity. As a result, the traditional view claiming that idioms' meaning should be learnt by heart in language teaching should be reconsidered in the light of cognitive linguistics.

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