

CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN ANIMAL-RELATED IDIOMS IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE

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<https://doi.org/10.63506/jilc.1001.457>

(Received: 07/12/2025; Revised: 20/04/2026; Accepted: 27/04/2026)

Abstract: This study investigates how conceptual metaphors and cultural frameworks manifest in animal-related idioms in English and Vietnamese. Drawing from Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the study analyzes 367 idioms, including 160 in English and 207 in Vietnamese, which were classified into structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors. The findings reveal that ontological metaphors dominate both languages, while cultural symbolism influences metaphor selection and interpretation. English idioms tend to exhibit descriptive and individualistic tones. In contrast, Vietnamese idioms more frequently reflect moral values and social hierarchies, which can be traced back to long-standing agrarian traditions and established socio-ethical norms. Cultural divergence is especially notable in the use of symbolic animals, tone, and metaphor function. The paper highlights metaphor as both a cognitive and cultural construct, with implications for cross-cultural communication, translation, and language pedagogy.

Keywords: Animal-related idioms; cognition; conceptual metaphor; culture; idioms

ẢN DỤ Ý NIỆM VÀ ẢNH HƯỞNG VĂN HÓA TRONG THÀNH NGỮ LIÊN QUAN ĐẾN ĐỘNG VẬT TRONG TIẾNG ANH VÀ TIẾNG VIỆT

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này khảo sát cách ẩn dụ ý niệm và hệ giá trị văn hóa thể hiện qua thành ngữ liên quan đến động vật trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt. Nghiên cứu phân tích 367 thành ngữ, gồm 160 thành ngữ tiếng Anh và 207 thành ngữ tiếng Việt, dưới khung lý thuyết Ẩn dụ ý niệm (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), được phân loại theo ba nhóm: ẩn dụ cấu trúc, ẩn dụ bản thể và ẩn dụ định hướng. Kết quả cho thấy ẩn dụ bản thể phổ biến hơn cả; sự khác biệt văn hóa thể hiện rõ qua biểu tượng động vật, sắc thái biểu đạt và chức năng ẩn dụ. Thành ngữ tiếng Anh có xu hướng thiên về sắc thái miêu tả và đề cao tính cá nhân. Ngược lại, thành ngữ tiếng Việt thường phản ánh các giá trị đạo đức và trật tự xã hội, điều có thể được lý giải từ truyền thống nông nghiệp lâu đời và các chuẩn mực đạo đức – xã hội đã được thiết lập. Nghiên cứu góp phần làm rõ bản chất nhận thức và văn hóa của ẩn dụ, đồng thời đề xuất hướng ứng dụng trong giảng dạy, dịch thuật và giao tiếp xuyên văn hóa.

Từ khóa: Thành ngữ liên quan đến động vật; tri nhận; ẩn dụ ý niệm; văn hóa; thành ngữ

1. Introduction

Idioms, especially those related to animals, serve as valuable linguistic and cognitive tools for understanding how different cultures perceive abstract human experiences. These expressions are not simply ornamental but encapsulate ways of thinking that are deeply rooted in cultural, historical, and social contexts. In particular, animal-related idioms reflect the symbolic roles of animals in human cognition and behavior, revealing conceptual frameworks such as emotion, morality, power, and social relationships.

The framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), established by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), posits that human understanding of abstract domains is structured by metaphorical mappings from more concrete and familiar experiences. This theory has become foundational in cognitive linguistics, providing a lens through which idiomatic expressions can be systematically analyzed. In the case of animal-related idioms, this lens allows us to see how animal characteristics are metaphorically mapped onto human traits and behaviors. For instance, the English idiom “the black sheep of the family” metaphorically represents social deviance, whereas the Vietnamese idiom “mèo khen mèo dài đuôi” reflects cultural attitudes toward vanity and self-praise. These examples highlight not only metaphorical structure but also cultural divergence in moral judgment, social hierarchy, and emotional perception.

Although animal-related idioms have been explored in many languages, comparative studies between typologically and culturally distant languages such as English and Vietnamese remain limited. While English has been widely examined in metaphor research, Vietnamese idioms, particularly those involving animals, have not received extensive analysis within the framework of CMT. Moreover, existing studies often take a descriptive or structuralist approach, focusing on form rather than on cognitive or cultural functions. As a result, the metaphorical nature of Vietnamese idioms remains underexplored in global scholarship.

Given this research gap, the present study aims to investigate conceptual metaphors in animal-related idioms in both English and Vietnamese. The study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What conceptual metaphors are found in animal-related idioms in English and Vietnamese?
- (2) What are the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese in the use of conceptual metaphors in animal-related idioms, considering cultural influences?

2. Theoretical background and literature review

2.1 Conceptual metaphor theory

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), has reshaped the way metaphor is understood in both linguistics and cognitive science. It argues that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device but a fundamental mechanism of thought. According to CMT, humans use familiar and concrete domains, referred to as source domains, to make sense of more abstract and complex experiences, referred to as target domains. This mapping is grounded in embodiment, that is, in our physical and sensory experiences, and is further shaped by cultural context.

CMT classifies conceptual metaphors into three main types. Structural metaphors involve mapping one complex concept onto another, such as ARGUMENT IS WAR, as evidenced by phrases like “defend your position” or “attack the point.” Ontological metaphors treat abstract

concepts as objects or substances, as in the metaphor MIND IS A MACHINE, illustrated by the expression: “His brain shut down.” Orientational metaphors structure concepts using spatial orientation derived from bodily experience. For example, the metaphors HAPPY IS UP and SAD IS DOWN are expressed in idioms such as “feeling low” or “on top of the world.” These types of metaphors provide the basis for categorizing animal-related idioms in this study.

In both English and Vietnamese, animal imagery is a common source domain for conceptual metaphors, reflecting how humans interpret behavior, morality, and emotion through observable animal traits. However, while the cognitive mechanisms underlying these metaphors are shared across cultures, the metaphorical elaborations often differ due to cultural symbolism, environmental interaction, and historical narratives.

2.2 Idioms as cognitive and cultural expressions

Idioms are typically defined as fixed or semi-fixed multi-word expressions whose meanings are not deducible from their literal components. From a cognitive linguistic perspective, however, idioms are not random or opaque. As Langlotz (2006) and Gibbs (2011) argue, many idioms are motivated by metaphorical and metonymic patterns that reflect shared conceptual structures. For example, the idioms “let off steam” and “blow your top” are tied to the metaphor ANGER IS A HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER, grounding emotional expression in physical sensation.

In Vietnamese, idioms such as “trâu chậm uống nước đục” (literal translation: the slow buffalo drinks muddy water; approximate English equivalent: the early bird catches the worm) demonstrate metaphorical mappings such as SUCCESS IS SPEED or OPPORTUNITY IS TIMELINESS. These expressions are deeply embedded in agrarian realities, reflecting a practical logic of resource distribution based on experience. While such idioms arise from physical and environmental observations, a different subset of Vietnamese animal idioms - as noted by researchers like Hoang (2004), Nguyen (2009), and Tran (2012), more explicitly reflects Confucian values and social hierarchy. For instance, idioms involving animals like the dragon or the tiger are often used to encode moral teachings and power structures that go beyond mere environmental experience.

Idioms in both languages function beyond mere linguistic convenience; they encode emotional patterns, social norms, and cultural identity. They are not just expressions but miniaturized worldviews. Therefore, understanding their metaphorical structure provides access to the cognitive and cultural logics that govern them.

2.3 Comparative studies on animal idioms

Comparative research on animal idioms is still developing, especially across culturally distant languages such as English and Vietnamese. In English, idioms such as “a lone wolf,” “the lion’s share,” or “a snake in the grass” reveal metaphorical constructions of independence, dominance, and betrayal. Vietnamese idioms, on the other hand, include expressions such as “cá lớn nuốt cá bé” (literal translation: the big fish eat the small fish; approximate English equivalent: dog-eat-dog), highlighting power dynamics and injustice in hierarchical contexts. While both languages use animals to express abstract social concepts, the specific animals chosen and their moral framing vary greatly.

Ngo (2021) examined idioms in English and Vietnamese involving animal references and found that although the metaphor HUMANS ARE ANIMALS is common in both, English idioms tend to highlight individuality and agency, whereas Vietnamese idioms stress collectivity, morality, and social order. Tran (2022) compared metaphorical images of the same animal in both languages and showed that while dogs are consistently seen as loyal companions in English, they often carry negative connotations in traditional Vietnamese idioms. However, this distinction should be interpreted with caution. While idioms like “ngu như chó” (as stupid as a dog) reflect social insults, Vietnamese literature and cultural narratives often portray dogs with deep empathy and affection, such as 'Cậu Vàng' in Nam Cao's 'Lão Hạc,' where the animal is a loyal, human-like companion. These contrasting layers suggest that Vietnamese animal imagery is not monolithic but reflects a complex spectrum of emotional and social associations. Some studies have also undertaken cross-linguistic analyses of animal-related idioms.

In addition, Le (2024) investigated specific animal-related metaphors such as those involving dogs, highlighting how the same animal can evoke conflicting connotations across cultures. In English, “work like a dog” implies diligence and commitment, while in Vietnamese, “ngu như chó” conveys ignorance and insult. These conflicting connotations underscore the necessity of cultural interpretation in metaphor analysis. While traditional Vietnamese idioms often associate dogs with negative traits, contemporary Vietnamese perspectives have increasingly embraced loyalty as a primary characteristic of the animal, reflecting a shift in cultural perception.

Despite these valuable contributions, three major gaps remain in the existing literature. Most studies (e.g., Le, 2024; Tran, 2022) focus on individual animals or selected idiomatic examples, such as dog-related expressions, rather than examining a large and diverse corpus of animal idioms. As a result, the overall metaphorical system underlying animal imagery in the two languages remains insufficiently explored.

Although several studies (such as Ngo, 2021; Tran, 2022) acknowledge cultural differences in idiomatic meanings, they tend to describe surface-level semantic contrasts without systematically identifying the conceptual metaphor mappings that motivate these expressions. Consequently, the cognitive mechanisms underlying cross-linguistic similarities and differences have not been fully clarified.

Previous comparative studies in the Anglo-Vietnamese context (e.g., Ngo, 2021; Le, 2024) rarely combine conceptual metaphor analysis with a broader examination of cultural models. The interaction between metaphor structure and cultural values, such as individualism, social hierarchy, agrarian experience, and moral evaluation, therefore remains underdeveloped in the literature.

To address these gaps, the present study analyzes a larger dataset of 367 animal-related idioms in English and Vietnamese through the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). By identifying metaphor types, conceptual mappings, and their cultural motivations, the study seeks to provide a more systematic account of how animal imagery reflects both shared cognitive patterns and culture-specific conceptualizations.

2.4 Cultural framing in metaphorical meaning

Cultural models and embodied cognition both play roles in shaping metaphorical thinking. As Kövecses (2005) and Gibbs (2011) emphasize, while basic metaphors like UP–DOWN or INSIDE–OUT are rooted in shared physical experience, the way these metaphors are extended and used varies by culture. According to Kövecses (2005), metaphors in Western cultures often emphasize individual agency, objectivity, and linear time. In contrast, Eastern metaphors frequently highlight harmony, hierarchy, and cyclical or relational thinking. This distinction is further supported by Hoang (2004) and Nguyen (2009), who agree that Vietnamese cultural models prioritize collective harmony and social hierarchy, which in turn shape the metaphorical conceptualization of animals in the language.

Vietnamese idioms are especially rich in moral and philosophical undertones associated with Confucian teachings. Animals are used not only for descriptive metaphor but also for ethical instruction. Idioms such as “cáo mượn oai hùm” (the fox borrows the tiger’s power) critique deceit and the misuse of authority, while “mèo mả gà đồng” (stray cat, field chicken) conveys moral deviance. These idioms reflect collective norms and social evaluation.

English idioms, by comparison, often focus on behavior or emotion without overt moral judgment. Phrases like “cry wolf” or “let sleeping dogs lie” are more pragmatic in tone. This reflects the individualist, secular worldview that dominates English-speaking cultures, where personal experience and efficiency often outweigh communal or moral implications (Hofstede, 2011; Kövecses, 2005; Triandis, 1995).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative contrastive approach based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) to investigate how animal-related idioms in English and Vietnamese reflect both universal cognitive patterns and culturally specific worldviews. Idioms are approached not as fixed linguistic units but as metaphorical expressions shaped by underlying cultural and cognitive systems.

A total of 367 idioms were examined, including 160 in English and 207 in Vietnamese. The sample size was determined through an exhaustive search of the primary sources. Following the three established criteria, the researcher reviewed all entries in both dictionaries to identify every idiom that met the study’s requirements. The resulting difference in quantity (160 vs. 207) reflects the actual distribution of animal-related metaphors within these comprehensive academic sources, rather than from pre-determined or selective sampling. This difference also reflects variations in dictionary coverage as well as differing cultural emphases on animal imagery.

English idioms were selected from the *Oxford Idioms Dictionary for Learners of English* by Toby (2001), while Vietnamese idioms were drawn from *Từ điển thành ngữ tiếng Việt phổ thông* by Nguyen (2002). These sources were chosen for their academic credibility and comprehensive coverage. The expressions included in the study had to meet three criteria: they contained a clear reference to animals, conveyed metaphorical rather than literal meaning, and held emotional or cultural significance. Expressions considered slang, archaic, dialectal, or purely comparative without metaphorical meaning were excluded to ensure analytical consistency and cross-linguistic relevance.

It should be noted that although the study primarily focuses on idioms, several figurative expressions included in the dataset may overlap with proverbs, literary quotations, or culturally fixed expressions. This is particularly relevant in Vietnamese, where the boundary between idioms, proverbs, and conventional metaphorical sayings is often fluid. Therefore, the study adopts a broader cognitive-linguistic perspective, emphasizing metaphorical animal expressions rather than restricting the analysis to idioms in the narrow structural sense.

To ensure the representativeness of the dataset, the 367 identified idioms were categorized into eight main groups based on the nature and cultural significance of the animals featured. The selected dataset encompasses a wide range of animal categories to ensure a holistic representation of animal imagery in both languages. Specifically, the idioms feature domestic animals (e.g., dogs, cats, buffaloes, horses, and chickens), wild animals (e.g., tigers, lions, foxes, wolves, and elephants), aquatic creatures (e.g., fish, shrimp and crocodiles), and insects (e.g., ants, bees, butterflies). Furthermore, mythical animals of high cultural importance, such as the dragons and phoenixes, were also included due to their significant metaphorical roles in Vietnamese and English conceptual frameworks. This classification provides the structural basis for the subsequent comparative analysis.

Table 3.1 summarizes the distribution of animal-related idioms by animal group in both English and Vietnamese.

Table 3.1

Idiom Statistics by Animal Group

No.	Animal Group	Vietnamese Idioms	English Idioms	Total Idioms
1	Mammals	75	99	174
2	Birds	41	30	71
3	Reptiles	5	1	6
4	Amphibians	5	1	6
5	Fish	14	13	27
6	Crustaceans & Mollusks	31	3	34
7	Insects & Small Creatures	26	12	38
8	Mythical Creatures	10	1	11
	Total	207	160	367

Data analysis was conducted manually through a three-phase coding process. The first phase involved grouping idioms based on the animals they featured. In the second phase, the idioms were classified into structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors following Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Structural metaphors were identified when a complex abstract concept was understood through the structure of another conceptual domain. Ontological metaphors were identified when abstract experiences, emotions, social roles, or personal qualities were conceptualized as concrete entities or beings. Orientational metaphors were identified when metaphorical meaning was organized through spatial schemas such as up/down, inside/outside, or movement toward and away from a reference point. Classification decisions were based on the dominant conceptual mapping underlying each idiom. The third phase focused on identifying how these metaphor types were framed within each culture. This structure allowed the study to explore both the internal patterns within each language and the differences between the two languages.

The study also examined symbolic contrasts between the two languages, specifically focusing on cases where the same animal source domain evokes divergent cultural associations across English and Vietnamese.

All coding and interpretation were carried out by the researcher in order to maintain consistency in applying theoretical principles. While this approach supports conceptual depth and coherence, it also presents limitations in terms of subjectivity. Future research may benefit from involving multiple coders or using corpus-based methods to enhance objectivity and replicability. Ethical concerns were minimal, as the study did not involve human participants, and all sources are properly cited. Cultural sensitivity was maintained throughout, especially in handling idioms that might carry negative or stereotypical implications. The aim was not to reinforce cultural bias, but rather to better understand how metaphor reflects and constructs meaning within cultural contexts.

In conclusion, the methodological design combines a strong theoretical foundation, reliable data sources, and a structured analytical process to provide a comprehensive understanding of how animal idioms function as both cognitive and cultural representations in English and Vietnamese.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Conceptual metaphor types in animal-related idioms

The analysis of 367 idioms, including 160 English idioms and 207 Vietnamese idioms, revealed three dominant metaphor types: ontological, structural, and orientational. These categories follow the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which proposes that metaphorical thinking systematically maps concrete domains, such as animal traits, onto abstract concepts.

The distribution of metaphor types across both languages is shown in Table 4.1. Ontological metaphors were the most prevalent, comprising 219 idioms across both languages (101 English, 118 Vietnamese). Structural metaphors followed with 139 instances (55 English, 84 Vietnamese), while orientational metaphors were rare, accounting for only nine idioms in total (4 English, 5 Vietnamese). This distribution suggests that both English and Vietnamese idioms primarily rely on ontological reasoning, in which emotions, personalities, and social roles are conceptualized as entities, while structural metaphors play a secondary role and orientational metaphors remain marginal.

Table 4.1

Frequency of Metaphor Types in English and Vietnamese Idioms

Type of Conceptual Metaphor	English Idioms	Vietnamese Idioms	Total
Ontological Metaphor	101	118	219
Structural Metaphor	55	84	139
Oriental Metaphor	4	5	9
Total	160	207	367

Beyond the classification into metaphor types, the analysis identified several recurring conceptual metaphors that structure animal-related idioms in both languages. These metaphors reveal how animal imagery is systematically used to conceptualize human emotions, personality traits, social relations, and life experiences.

Within the ontological category, several conceptual metaphors were frequently observed, including PERSONALITY IS ANIMAL NATURE, EMOTION IS AN ANIMAL CREATURE, FEAR IS A CREATURE, and FREEDOM IS ESCAPE. For example, the English idiom “as sly as a fox” and the Vietnamese idiom “gian như cáo” both conceptualize human personality through animal characteristics. Likewise, “have butterflies in your stomach” and “kiến bò trong bụng” metaphorically represent anxiety through the image of small creatures moving within the body. These expressions illustrate how abstract emotional states are understood as tangible entities that can be perceived and experienced.

Within the structural category, the analysis revealed recurring metaphors such as SOCIAL POWER IS A PREDATOR–PREY RELATIONSHIP, DOMINANCE IS ANIMAL STRENGTH, and SOCIAL STATUS IS ANIMAL HIERARCHY. In English, “the lion’s share” conceptualizes privilege and dominance through the strength of a powerful animal. Similarly, the Vietnamese idiom “cá lớn nuốt cá bé” (big fish eat small fish) represents social inequality through predator-prey relations, while “cáo mượn oai hùm” (the fox borrows the tiger’s power) conceptualizes authority as derived animal strength. These metaphors demonstrate how social relationships are understood through patterns observed in the animal world.

Oriental metaphors, although less frequent, also emerged in the dataset. Common patterns include DESPAIR IS DOWNWARD MOVEMENT, SUFFERING IS DOWN, and FREEDOM IS UPWARD MOVEMENT. For instance, the English expression “a dog’s life” evokes a low and undesirable condition associated with hardship and suffering. Similarly, the Vietnamese idiom “chuột chạy cùng sào” (a rat running to the end of a pole) employs spatial imagery to express extreme limitation and hopelessness. These metaphors demonstrate how bodily and spatial experiences contribute to the conceptualization of abstract states.

Further language-specific analyses are presented in Tables 4.2 and 4.3.

Table 4.2

Major Conceptual Metaphors in English Animal–Related Idioms

Type	Conceptual Metaphor	Example
Ontological	Personality is animal nature	as sly as a fox
Ontological	Fear is a creature	have butterflies in your stomach
Ontological	Information is a hidden object	let the cat out of the bag
Structural	Dominance is animal power	the lion's share
Structural	Social status is animal hierarchy	top dog
Oriental	Suffering is down	a dog's life

Table 4.3

Major Conceptual Metaphors in Vietnamese Animal–Related Idioms

Type	Conceptual Metaphor	Example
Ontological	Personality is instinct	gian như cáo
Ontological	Emotion is animal movement	kiến bò trong bụng
Ontological	Freedom is escape	cá chấu chim lồng
Structural	Power is animal strength	cáo mượn oai hùm
Structural	Social hierarchy is predator–prey relation	cá lớn nuốt cá bé
Oriental	Despair is down	chuột chạy cùng sào

The findings indicate that both English and Vietnamese share several underlying conceptual metaphors despite cultural differences. In both languages, animals are frequently used to conceptualize personality, emotion, power, and social relations. However, the frequency and elaboration of these metaphors differ. Vietnamese idioms exhibit a somewhat more pronounced tendency to employ structural metaphors associated with social hierarchy, moral evaluation, and communal values, whereas English idioms appear to marginally favor ontological metaphors that emphasize individual psychology and personal experience. Although the percentage of structural metaphors in Vietnamese (40.6%) is only slightly higher than that in English (34.4%), the qualitative analysis reveals that Vietnamese expressions are more frequently elaborated around collective socio-ethical frameworks. These results suggest that while the cognitive mechanisms underlying metaphor are broadly shared, their linguistic realization is shaped by distinct cultural models and value systems.

4.2 Cross-linguistic comparison of conceptual metaphors in animal-related idioms

The comparative analysis of animal-related idioms in English and Vietnamese reveals both convergences and divergences in metaphorical conceptualization. While both languages share foundational metaphor structures based on embodied cognition, their elaborations differ significantly due to cultural framing. This section first discusses the cognitive similarities between the two languages before turning to their culturally embedded differences.

4.2.1 Similarities between English and Vietnamese

Both English and Vietnamese employ the three core metaphor types, namely ontological, structural, and orientational, to express human traits, emotional states, and social relationships through animal imagery. These patterns affirm the universality of metaphor as a cognitive process. For instance, both languages utilize the metaphor HUMANS ARE ANIMALS to map animal traits onto human behavior.

One common pattern is the use of animal characteristics to express personality. In English, the idiom “as sly as a fox” associates cunning with foxes. A near-identical mapping appears in Vietnamese with “gian như cáo” (as cunning as a fox). This parallel suggests a shared conceptual metaphor, though the evaluative tone in Vietnamese often carries stronger moral weight.

Another point of convergence is the metaphor SOCIAL STATUS IS ANIMAL HIERARCHY. Both languages express ideas of dominance and submission through predatory imagery. The English idiom “the lion’s share” implies power and privilege, similar to the Vietnamese idiom “cá lớn nuốt cá bé” (the big fish eats the small fish), which reflects exploitation within a hierarchical system.

Additionally, emotional states are frequently metaphorized as animal behavior in both languages. For example, “have butterflies in your stomach” (English) and “kiến bò trong bụng” (ants crawling in one’s stomach) both express anxiety through animal-based imagery. These examples reflect how embodied experience with animals becomes a common source domain for metaphorical understanding.

Table 4.4*Shared Conceptual Metaphors in English and Vietnamese Animal Idioms*

Metaphor Type	Conceptual Mapping	English Example	Vietnamese Example
Ontological	Personality is animal trait	As sly as a fox	Gian như cáo
	Emotion is animal reaction	Have butterflies in your stomach	Kiến bò trong bụng
Structural	Deception is animal-like behavior	Cry wolf	Mèo già khóc chuột
	Social power is predator-prey dynamic	The lion's share	Cá lớn nuốt cá bé
Orientalional	Despair is downward movement	Like a rat in a corner	Chuột chạy cùng sào

These common metaphorical patterns support the idea that idioms are not arbitrary but are grounded in shared ecological and bodily experience. However, while the structure of these metaphors may be similar, the cultural values attached to them often differ, as discussed next.

While previous studies such as Ngo (2021) and Tran (2022) mainly identified overlapping metaphorical patterns across English and Vietnamese idioms, they often remained descriptive in scope. In contrast, the present study systematically integrates Conceptual Metaphor Theory with a contrastive framework to reveal not only the shared mappings but also the frequency distribution of metaphor types. By quantifying 367 idioms and classifying them into structural, ontological, and orientational categories, this study provides empirical evidence of how ontological metaphors dominate both languages, a point that earlier works did not address in depth. This combination of qualitative and quantitative insights highlights the novelty of the present research.

4.2.2 Cultural influences on conceptual metaphor differences

Despite structural similarity, significant differences emerge in the moral tone, symbolic associations, and social function of idioms in each language. These differences reflect the distinct cultural worldviews underlying English and Vietnamese.

In English, animal idioms often function descriptively and emphasize behavioral observation without moral instruction. For instance, “a cold fish” describes emotional detachment but carries minimal ethical judgment. In contrast, the Vietnamese idiom “nước mắt cá sấu” (crocodile tears) criticizes fake emotions and implies insincerity, which is viewed as a moral failure rather than merely a personality trait.

Vietnamese idioms frequently reflect indigenous ethical frameworks shaped by agrarian life, where social harmony and communal stability are paramount. Structural metaphors in this context often carry prescriptive messages derived from everyday observations. For example, the idiom “trâu buộc ghét trâu ăn” (the tied buffalo hates the grazing one) metaphorizes jealousy. Rather than a formal Confucian doctrine, this expression reflects a practical moral insight drawn from agricultural reality, critiquing envy to maintain village solidarity. Such idioms serve as social correctives, promoting moral awareness through the lens of common experience rather than exclusively through imported ideological structures.

In addition, symbolic meanings of specific animals diverge across the two languages. While dogs in English are often associated with loyalty and companionship, as reflected in expressions such as “as faithful as a dog,” they frequently represent humiliation or ignorance in Vietnamese idioms, as seen in “ngu như chó” (as stupid as a dog) or “chó chui gầm chạn” (dog crawling under

a shelf – symbolizing shame). However, it is important to note that while traditional Vietnamese idioms historically utilized animals like the dog to convey negative or humiliating connotations, contemporary perspectives have increasingly aligned with global views, generally accepting loyalty as a core characteristic of dogs. Such contrasts reveal how metaphorical meaning is dynamic and heavily influenced by evolving cultural values, even when underlying cognitive patterns appear similar on the surface

These differences also extend to mythical animals. English idioms occasionally reference the phoenix (e.g., “rise from the ashes”) as a symbol of renewal, with secular or personal meaning. Vietnamese idioms, by contrast, often include dragons and phoenixes with collective, sacred, or national symbolism. Expressions like “cá chép hóa rồng” (carp becomes dragon) promote perseverance and social mobility, while “con rồng cháu tiên” (descendants of dragons and fairies) reinforce national pride and mythological heritage.

Table 4.5

Cultural Framing of Key Animal-Related Concepts in Idioms

Animal	English Interpretation	Vietnamese Interpretation
Dog	Loyalty, hardship	Stupidity, shame, low status
Lion/Tiger	Strength, dominance	Power, danger, borrowed authority
Fox	Cunning	Cunning, often associated with moral negativity
Buffalo	Rarely metaphorical	Hard work, patience, agrarian virtue
Dragon	Mythical, rare (phoenix-focused)	Sacred power, national identity, transformation

This comparison highlights that while metaphorical reasoning may be universally structured, its elaboration is deeply shaped by culture. Vietnamese idioms often carry corrective or didactic functions, promoting ethical conduct. English idioms, in contrast, tend to emphasize individualistic expression, humor, or pragmatism.

These findings align with previous scholarship (e.g., Kövecses, 2005; Gibbs, 2011), which emphasizes that metaphors are both embodied and culturally mediated. They also illustrate the importance of cultural context in translation and language teaching, as idioms may mislead if interpreted solely through linguistic form.

Earlier research, for example Le (2024) emphasized single animal case studies such as dog-related idioms to demonstrate cultural divergence. While valuable, these narrow analyses did not extend to broader metaphorical systems. The present study advances beyond such limitations by uncovering how different cultural frameworks, including Confucian moral codes, agrarian traditions, and symbolic mythology, collectively shape the metaphorical elaboration of animal idioms. This comprehensive perspective explains why the same animal, such as the dog or the dragon, can embody drastically different values across languages. Thus, the contribution of this study lies in moving from isolated descriptions toward an integrated account that links metaphorical patterns with cultural models, offering both theoretical development and applied implications for teaching, translation, and cross-cultural communication.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Recapitulation

This study examined 367 animal-related idioms in English and Vietnamese through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, classifying them into ontological, structural, and

orientational types. The findings indicate that ontological metaphors, which personify emotions and psychological states, are the most prevalent in both languages, while structural and orientational metaphors appear less frequently.

Despite shared cognitive foundations, significant differences in metaphorical elaboration were uncovered. English idioms tend to be more focused on behavioral description and personal experience, whereas Vietnamese idioms frequently reflect a blend of communal norms and social hierarchies associated with agrarian traditions and Confucian influences. These cultural nuances are particularly evident in the framing of specific animals. While traditional Vietnamese idioms historically utilized animals like the dog to convey negative or humiliating connotations, this study acknowledges that such imagery is not monolithic; modern perspectives increasingly align with global views that recognize positive traits such as loyalty. Thus, while metaphor types may be universal in structure, their cultural elaboration remains dynamic, multi-layered, and context-dependent.

5.2 Theoretical and practical contributions

Theoretically, this study demonstrates that metaphor is simultaneously embodied and culture-bound, acting as a site where universal cognition and local cultural models intersect. By integrating cognitive and cultural linguistic frameworks, the research contributes to bridging the gap between metaphor analysis and cultural pragmatics.

Practically, the findings provide a framework for language pedagogy, suggesting that grouping idioms by metaphor type can help learners grasp the underlying logic of expressions rather than relying on rote memorization. In translation and intercultural communication, an awareness of these diverse cultural frames is essential to prevent semantic distortion and ensure effective cross-cultural understanding.

5.3 Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations remain. The dataset was primarily drawn from standard dictionaries, potentially overlooking contemporary or regional idioms. Future studies could adopt a corpus-based approach to capture more authentic, real-time language use. Furthermore, as the analysis was conducted by a single researcher, incorporating multiple coders in future projects would enhance methodological rigor. Expanding research into other metaphorical domains, such as weather or plant imagery, would also provide a more comprehensive understanding of how culture and cognition interact.

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