

An Analysis of Recently Created and Disappearing Vietnamese Idioms

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Abstract An Idiom is a unit in the lexical system, it is like an uninterrupted river, always flowing, moving, changing and developing. During significant socio-cultural changes in society, people add idioms and eliminated old idioms almost simultaneously. This paper analyzed some popular Vietnamese idioms. This analysis utilized a survey questionnaire that was administered to two groups: Older adults (over the age of 30) and younger people. This paper analyzed three main idiom groups, and is divided into three categories: Recently created Vietnamese - of which did not have American English equivalent - idioms, and idioms that are disappearing and idioms that have disappeared from current communication. Based on survey findings from these three idiom groups, this paper illustrated “rules” of how recently created idioms and archaic Vietnamese idioms were formed. This paper also briefly discusses the socio-cultural nuances in which idioms became standard use. Furthermore this paper offers timely recommendations on how to collect new idioms and why it is important to preserve old idioms.

Keywords: *idioms, new idioms, old idioms, Vietnamese idioms, American idioms, translation of idioms*

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1. Introduction

In the forefront of major social, cultural and historical changes, the linguistic system changes, adjusts, and supplements existing sociolinguistic needs to perform its functions: to express peoples’ linguistic needs. There were over 4,700 documented idioms in the Vietnamese idiom system alone. They were formed at different times, from different sources, creating the current rich idiomatic tapestry. However, the Vietnamese idioms system is not a firm and stable system, as idioms are always moving, changing and developing. These idioms are like a continuous flowing river with the old idioms disappearing and the ones are created to meet the demands of a changing society - to name those things that are made visible by obscure images. This paper analyzes a variety of idioms and provides an explanation of the process of forming recently created idioms and the disappearance of archaic Vietnamese idioms.

2. Literature Review

Most Vietnamese linguists [1,2] postulate that idioms are phrases have firm and stable structures syntax; and that contained linguistic and vibrant meanings, and are widely used in everyday communication. Idioms have two

salient characteristics: structural morphology, and colorful meanings [1,3]. Lexical research analyses indicates that idioms are a special type of unit, containing hidden cultural imprints, thinking, and perceptions. Vietnamese idioms, Hoang Van Hanh [2] and other Vietnamese researchers report that Vietnamese idioms consists of two large sections: pure Vietnamese idioms and idioms borrowed from Chinese.

Vietnamese idioms are made by employing three methods: identify the free word combination, how new idioms are created according to existing idioms and the link of idioms within their socio-cultural sources. Hanh indicates states that idioms are identified a “free word” combination and the analogy method based on the salient patterns of plays the formation of idioms. Tieu Ha Minh [4] writes that the formation of idiom form proverbs through folks tales, fairy tales, fables, jokes and everyday expressions.

The meaning shift of words is a phenomenon that happens frequently and popularly in communication activities. Words can move from meaning to meaning, making a word with a meaning to have multiple meanings. The main motivation for the transformation of words is the communicate demand, the new name things, new activities and new properties demand. Besides, the meaning shift of words is also influenced by a lot of psychological and social factors. Words can be changed the meaning due to the reasons of taboo, due to litotes... In addition, the change of meaning of words also depends on popular concepts and ideas at a certain historical period.

The two important methods that govern the transformation of words are metaphor and metonymy. Both of these methods rely on association. However, metaphor meaning sift is a method of transferring meaning based on the similar association between two things; also metonymy meaning sift based on close association.

3. Methods

We use the following methodology: descriptive and, survey methods and the procedures: comparative and, statistical procedures.

4. Research Contents

To understand the process of forming and disappearing of Vietnamese idioms, these idioms were divided into three main groups.

The first group consisted of: recently created idioms with a stable lexical trend, and firm semantic structures. They are currently used in daily communication.

The second group consisted of: disappearing idioms, that have a very limited used in communication today.

The third group consisted of: disappeared idioms, where traces of these idioms are only found in the dictionaries of Vietnamese idioms, or used by older people.

To explain the formation and disappearance of Vietnamese idioms, we used a survey and investigation methods that were implemented as follows:

Firstly, we selected some typical idioms and designed the survey questionnaire to investigate their use. Each idiom was investigated at four levels. They were: (1) understood, and use; (2) do not understand, and do not use; (3) have heard and thus don't use; (4) have not heard and logically do not use.

Two groups were surveyed: older adults over the age of 30, 7X generation (born between the 1970 and 1979) and; 9X generation (born between 1990 and 1999). Older adults who were mainly teachers and lecturers with bachelor's and above education levels. Young people were pupils in secondary schools and high school. 240 questionnaires were equally divided and administered to the two groups.

It is a daunting task to investigate all Vietnamese idioms; therefore the researchers chose newly created and interesting idioms and idioms that were based on archaic words or some aspect of the social-cultural milieu, of past era. In this paper, the researchers choose only some typical idioms, and idioms with ancient words, or idioms reflect the stamp of certain era (Foreign occupation, subsidized food commodities). Then, we analyze the process by which the forming and disappearing of these idioms occurred in order to formulate lexical rules for analyzing how these idioms were formed and are/or will disappear.

5. Research Findings

5.1. The Recently Created Idioms

Vietnamese society has dramatically changed in the last two decades. These changes have had a great impact on

the thinking and behavior of the Vietnamese, and these changes are reflected in how language is used. These changes are reflected of the new social phenomenon, and many new Vietnamese idioms are a reflection of the new social phenomena.

It can be argued that originally idioms were "free formed" phrases. These free phrases were repetitive in speech, and gradually became fixed as part of the linguistic lexicon, in this way idioms were created. Even with new idioms, the same phenomenon occurs.

In this article, the researchers chose some typical idioms, for which there are no equivalent idioms in English, for example the idioms: '*phi công trẻ lái máy bay bà già*' (toy boy and cougar woman- young pilots fly old lady plane) '*hạ cánh an toàn*' (to land safely), *từ A đến Z* (from A to Z). In the following paragraphs the researchers will analysis some idioms in order to present a clearer understand about their formation.

In order to discuss the phenomena (and thus the idiom) that, "old women loved and married a younger man," in Vietnamese, the phrase '*young pilots fly old lady plane*' is examined. How was this phrase formed? How did flying action refer to personal emotion? This researcher analyzed each language component.

Firstly, the phrase '*young pilots fly old lady plane*' comes from aeronautic field, with a Subject-Verb structure. '*Young pilots*' (subject) mean young men, *Fly* is an action verb, with an object (*old lady plane*). This is an unequal structure in two main parts of phrase. Other idioms with similar structure were '*chân dẫm đã chân chiêu*', (to stagger ones' feet along), '*cả vú lấp miệng em*' (A big breast can fill up the child's mouth), '*ngàn cân treo sợi tóc*' (hang by a single hair), "*ma cũ bắt nạt ma mới*" (To bully the newcomers)

In terms of meaning, there were two possible interpretations in this phrase. The first interpretation is an explicit meaning. *Young pilots* mean young men. *Fly* is an action verb, expresses an action to control airplane. What does *old lady plane* mean? During the American War when American armed forces invaded Vietnam, the US used many planes to bomb Vietnam; this included the MS500 airplane. This was a rough sounding plane with an obsolete shaped, a slow speed, its engines is trembling, causing a sleepy-humming sound. It was used to train pilots at the early stages of their flying program. Besides, '*ba già*' (*old lady*) word means old women. Women who were older women were seen as "old", not attractive and slower than young ones. From the similarities between *the old lady (old women)* and the MS500 plane, '*ba già*' (*old lady*) this phrase changed its meaning to the MS500 plane, creating phrase *old lady planes*. Thus, the meaning of this phrase is to control the MS500 plane.

The meaning shifted from *the old lady (old women)* to express a kind of plane and thus the metaphor, based on the similarity in characteristic and nature of both *old lady* and the MS500 plane.

Society changed, and along with social changes came liberation of expression, a change in social mores and the expression of personal emotional needs - openly. It appeared that older women had high emotional needs - and were not satisfied, emotionally. So, they looked to young men to satisfied their personal needs. From this reality, the phrase, '*young pilots fly old lady planes*' came

to express a literal and figurative meaning. The plane, meant an older women with high emotional needs. The 'young pilots' phrase also changes its meaning - to mean a young or middle aged men, who fulfills that need. So, the phrase 'young pilots fly old lady plane' extends its metaphorical meaning to a popular social phenomenon that older women fall in love with young men - to have their emotional and physical needs satisfied.

Thus, the formation of this phrase is quite oblique and complicated. From its original meaning, *old ladies are older women*, to a kind of plane, basing on similar reference and vice-versa.

Nowadays, this phrase is widely used in Vietnamese daily language. As it has gradually stabilized in structure and meaning. A recent search indicated that there are 913,000 recorded Google hits of this phrase, indicating its popularity.

The survey findings of this idiom were quite interesting, but not surprising: The survey questionnaire indicated that 100% of both groups confirmed that they knew and understood its meaning and use. It is speculated that the amorous nature of the idiom is attributed its popularity.

Synonymous with the idiom, 'young pilots fly old lady plane', Vietnamese also has another phrase 'young man eats old coconut' with the hidden metaphorical meaning: younger men loved or married older women. This phrase is a recently created idiom, and it is recorded in the book idioms. [5]

Related to the metaphorical reference to an airplane, Vietnamese also uses the phrase 'to land safely'. Firstly, 'to land safely' is a term used in the aeronautic field. According to airplane terminology the landing is last step in a flight, when the plane is in the air or on ground at the airport runway. In case of bad weather such as a storm, a gale, heavy raining or thick snow, pilots have to communicate with the ground flight control to help the plane land safely. Safety here means a safe landing, that avoid air crash or damage or injury in the landing. This term comes from the aeronautic field, and its extended meaning was extended become part of the national language. At the same time, its meaning has change to mean, to land does not only mean to stop but also show the retirement of government officials. Safety means to avoid air accidents but also not to be found out, investigated for embezzlement or corruption. Nowadays, this phrase is used to express: the officials retired peacefully, not being fined, investigated for wrong doings during working tenure. The double entendre meaning is a result of a metaphorical shift.

The survey findings for this idiom: 'to land safely' were as follows: 95.8% of responses from young people affirmed that they understood and used this phrase, only 2.5% of them had never heard the phrase. Furthermore, 100% of older adults stated the understood and used this phrase. The survey results were a reliable evidence to affirm that the phrase 'to land safely' has become to mean a stable and firm structure, and widely used in daily communication.

The phrase 'from A to Z' is also a recently created idiom, and has same lexical structure to the phrases, 'young pilots fly old lady plane' and 'to land safely'. There are 29 letters in the Vietnamese alphabet, from A to Y. There are 25 letters in Latin alphabet, start at the letter

A and finish by to the letter Z. So, letter Z always stands at the end of any language alphabet (and letter A is at the 1st position). Saying, 'from A to Z' means from the first to the final letter in the alphabet. From this original meaning, 'from A to Z' phrase expands its meaning to a process of tasks with different orders and periods. These orders can be extended, brief, long, short, simple - or complicated, but they have a finality [6]. In terms of structure, this idiom is similar to the phrase, 'from ancient to present,' 'from start to finish'.

In current Vietnamese speech and culture, this idiom is used to refer to asking for a job by providing under-the-table money through intermediaries. This idiom has a negative connotation.

Survey findings of this phrase were: Ninety-eight point three per cent of young people affirmed to understand and use this phrase; 100% of older people stated that they understood and used this phrase. The results showed that the phrase, 'from A to Z' has become a popular idiom with everyone in Vietnam.

From the analysis of the above idioms, we can conclude: that lexical systems and idioms have made the transition from phrase to idiom; the changing social phenomena reflects these new lexical phenomena. When any phrase is widely used and familiar in daily communication, and it is stabilized its structure and meaning, we accept these phrases as new idioms.

5.2. The Old Idioms

As a rule, language generates new terminology in order to explain new social phenomena, and to meet peoples' communication needs. How do old idioms fare next to new idioms ones? Will they last? Will they coexist or morph into a new meaning? Basing on the survey results, this researcher realized that some idioms are gradually disappearing. They are idioms that reflect and signal the passing of, a socio-cultural phenomenon era, an era that leaves a feeling of nostalgia for those who remember them. With the passing of social phenomena, these idioms are no longer in vogue, and disappear. Moreover, the idioms that survive became unknown, and difficult to understand to future generations. These phrases will probably disappear in the future. The phrase 'mặt nhợt như mặt sổ gạo' (A gloomy face looks like losing rice notebook) is a good example. Its content depicts a miserable situation when someone loses their rice notebook. During the era when the government subsidized food commodities, everything was bought and sold by official government distribution centers. Each official family was issued a notebook to buy food and other necessities for daily subsistence. It was called, *The food notebook*. It was a notebook made of black paper, with blurred printing and was - extremely precious. For every Vietnamese family, the notebook was a lifeline, without it people lived a misery, hunger and even face starvation. Families who lost. *The food notebook*, would have a face pale, grayish looking face, and they would have shaking limbs, signifying a frightening existence. Based on fact that, the Vietnamese has formed the phrase, 'mặt nhợt như mặt sổ gạo' (A gloomy face looks like losing rice notebook). A variation of this phrase was, 'sad like losing rice notebook', or the abbreviation phrase: 'like losing rice notebook'.

Subsequently the subsidized era ended, and the rice notebook was no longer needed. People have kept it as a souvenir, to reminder of the difficult times. Survey findings of this phrase were: 99.1% of older people affirmed to understand and use this phrase, only 0.8% of them have never heard this phrase, whereas 84.2% of young confirmed to know this phrase. So, the differences between the two subjects shows that the young generation know and understands this idiom much less than older adults.

In the Vietnamese idioms treasure, many idioms are being formed, to reflect the social phenomenon of the time. So, when asked about these idioms, many young people didn't know, understand, and/or never heard these idioms. The phrase '*am o hoi te*' (*Not to have a clear-cut attitude*) is typical idiom. Basing on words in these idioms, we are sure that it was created during the French occupation of Vietnam. At that time, areas occupied by French were called, *vùng tề* (*invaded areas*). To rule, the French established, '*Te organizations*', equals to an office at the commune level. Staff in this organization were called '*Te group*'. They had the lowest administrative position and power; they were ordered, punished and fined if they did not complete their tasks. They lived in villages and were responsible for the administering the French laws to the local villagers. When they did something against the interests of the villagers, they would be subjected a curse and/or libel. Because of mandarins and villagers' contrasting rights and interests, the '*te group*' would just "hem and haw" to the villagers to avoid annoyance, antagonism - and ridicule. From the above fact, the phrase '*Not to have a clear-cut attitude*' means: someone without a defined manner of acting. This idiom also means to do something irresponsibly or with a lackadaisical attitude.

However, this organization disappeared, after the defeat of the French. So the phrase '*Not to have a clear-cut attitude*' has also disappeared. Survey findings for this idiom were surprising, with the 9X generation: up to 87.5% answers of young people affirmed to never having heard or used this idiom; only 4.2% of them stated that they used this phrase, and 8.3% of them had ever heard this idiom. For the older adults, up to 46.6% of them answer that they didn't know, used or had heard about this idiom. Results of survey affirmed the fact that this idiom will soon disappear. It is just a memory for the older generation. In the near future, these idioms will be saved in idiom dictionaries.

Aside from the disappearing idioms, some current idioms are no longer used, in other words, they have absolutely disappeared in modern society. These idioms were created in the old/ancient days. Idioms that were created many centuries ago, such as the idiom '*noi da xao thit*', were formed during the XV - XVI centuries; and idioms such as: '*thang ngo con di*', were prominent during the feudal period such as the idiom: '*venh vao nhu kho ro phai lam*' (Being warped and deformed), '*xan vay quai cong*' (The gesture of a shrewd and resourceful woman in the past), '*cho duoc ma thi ma da sung*' (*After death, the doctor*). Most these idioms are now unfamiliar and difficult to understand as they don't relate to current life.

We have surveyed the current status of old idioms with young people. The results are shown in the table below:

Table 1. Result of survey using old idioms for young general

Idioms	Not understand, not use (%)
<i>venh vao nhu kho ro phai lam</i> Being warped and deformed	95.8%
<i>cho duoc ma thi ma da sung</i> After death, the doctor	94.2%
<i>xan vay quai cong</i> The gesture of a shrewd and resourceful woman in the past	91.2%

The results of survey showed that: a high percentage of young people don't understand/use these idioms.

From analysis above, it is evident that the formation and disappearance of Vietnamese idioms are affected by many factors. Some of them were:

Firstly, it is a social reality. Society in general and Vietnam society in particular is in a continuously change. Old things disappeared, new things appeared. These changes have an impact on idiom formation.

Secondly, social-cultural changes influences and forms new language units. However, not all changes are recorded or develop into idioms. The analysis of recently created idioms of the last 20 years, revealed that most idioms' contents reflect a negative aspects of modern life, such as: '*young pilots fly old lady plane*,' '*from A to Z*,' and '*eat cakes and pay money*'.

And finally, an important factor that influences the formation of new idioms is the structure of lexical rules. New idioms are not formed by chance, they are controlled by language: phonetic, semantic and word-association rules. Any phrase with a stable and close structure, with symbolic meaning and widely used can be classified as new idiom. Of course, their old-new features were also relative exactness. These recently created idioms are not static, as language is a reflection of social phenomenon; they will not be new in the future, in other words, they will become old idioms and probably disappear.

6. Discussions

This research and the evolution of the analysis raised several issues and questions regarding the research, analysis and interpretation of Vietnamese idioms.

This research raised the following issues:

Firstly, what are the verbal lexical configurations that have evolved through time and through changing socio-cultural changes.

Secondly, how has social media contributed to the longevity and termination of idioms.

In the case of newly created idioms, the researchers believes that idioms dictionary editors, need to promote the collection of new idioms and add these idioms to the Vietnamese idioms dictionary. Typical idioms such as: '*young pilots fly old plane*,' '*from A to Z*,' '*to land safely*,' '*inside and outside legs*' are idioms that are found in the idiom dictionaries such as, '*Vietnamese proverbs, idioms in Action Function*,' by Lien Kim Do Thi [5], and coincidentally found and referenced with definitions and videos on Google and YouTube. Many new and old idioms have not been collected in this dictionary.

There some phrases that are widely used in daily communication, but have not yet been formalized in their

structure and meaning, to be classified as idioms. It is this researcher's opinion, that these phrases need to be tested, through usage and popularity.

As for the disappeared idioms or those are on the way to disappearing, universities and research publications must take the lead to encourage and appropriately document idioms - in dictionaries of idioms; as they are of linguistic and historical significance. It is acknowledged that archaic idioms will be replaced by the new ones. However, each lost idiom is a lost treasure as these idioms speak of the Vietnamese socio-historic milieu. Their disappearance means losing traditional cultural values as these idioms are a linguistic heritage of Vietnamese life. It is though language that cultural values, and socio-cultural phenomenon are recorded.

And thirdly, the researchers plan to continue and enlarge the scope of the study of Vietnamese Idioms (both newly formed and disappearing idioms) by recording the voices of the different Vietnamese age groups to document the syntactical use of these idioms. Idioms are

not just an academic exercise, and the utilization of social media such as as establishing an idiom blogs, podcasts, and equally important posting Youtube videos, thus bringing the use and appreciation of Vietnamese idioms to all; not just academicians.

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