

# Comparative Contents of Idioms with Comparisons in English and Vietnamese from a Cognitive View: A Contrastive Analysis

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Received: December 27, 2024

Accepted: March 6, 2025

Online Published: May 15, 2025

doi:10.5430/wjel.v15n7p146

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v15n7p146>

## Abstract

Idioms with comparisons are common in both English and Vietnamese. These idioms are formed by three component parts, namely comparative contents, comparative connectors, and comparative conventional images (Giang, 2023). This article uncovers the comparative contents of idioms with comparisons in English and Vietnamese in the light of cognitive linguistics through idiom analysability (Langlotz, 2006). This contrastive analysis presents the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese idioms with comparisons in terms of their comparative contents, including closed comparative contents and open comparative contents. A manual search of Giang's (2018) idiom collection helped to establish a corpus of 672 English and 731 Vietnamese idioms with comparisons, which served as the data for the research. The results of this study show that the most significant difference between English and Vietnamese idioms with comparisons lies in the distribution of categories of comparative contents. The closed comparative contents of idioms with comparisons in Vietnamese are more prevalent than those in English, and vice versa for open comparative contents. The average proportion of closed comparative contents through idioms with comparisons in English is slightly higher than that of those in Vietnamese. The open comparative contents can be possibly and impossibly explicit; however, the possibly explicit open comparative contents of idioms with comparisons are unique in Vietnamese.

**Keywords:** idioms with comparisons, comparative contents, closed comparative contents, open comparative contents, cognitive view

## 1. Introduction

In addition to being a cultural heritage, language is a powerful and flexible communication instrument. Idioms are recognized as distinct linguistic units in a language's vocabulary since they represent the history of a community. Giang, Trung, and Minh (2024) supposed that idioms capture the variety and complexity of human social interactions, which is why they are essential to the linguistic ontologization of feelings, ideas, experiences, and other phenomena. Linguists and lexicographers are still interested in idioms because of their complexity, prevalence, and accessibility (Fellbaum, Geyken, Herold, Koerner & Neumann, 2006). This is because idioms provide a lot of cultural information by showing how humans have used the natural world and how social life has been active throughout history (Giap, 1996; Lan, 2003).

Idioms are available in both Vietnamese and English, and speakers commonly employ a wide range of idiomatic phrases, most of which have figurative connotations. According to Cowie, Mackin, and McCaig (1993), the correct and proper use of idioms that are, in the broadest sense, idiomatic is one telltale sign of a native command of the language and a valid indicator of the proficiency of non-native speakers. In other words, idiomatic competence is one quality that distinguishes native proficiency in a particular language. Since idioms are an essential part of language, it is therefore difficult to naturally improve a language without knowing them (Giang, 2018).

Idioms with comparisons are a type of idiom that are popular in both English and Vietnamese. Although idioms with comparisons in these languages have been studied from different perspectives, there seem to have been no comprehensive studies of comparative contents of these idioms across English and Vietnamese from a cognitive view. Therefore, our linguistic analysis of the comparative contents of idioms with comparisons in English and Vietnamese will significantly enhance this research field by employing data from these two languages. The research undertakes a contrastive analysis of idioms with comparisons in English and Vietnamese in terms of their comparative contents. There are primarily two areas of interest: (1) similarities and differences in closed comparative contents between idioms with comparisons in English and Vietnamese; and (2) similarities and dissimilarities in open comparative contents between such idioms with comparisons.

### 1.1 Idioms from a Cognitive View

In both English and Vietnamese, there have been several authors, such as Fernando and Flavell (1981), Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994),

Geeraets (1995), Gibbs (1995), Kövecses and Szabo (1996), Fernando (1996), Taylor (2002), Langlotz (2006), Trao (2017), Tien (2022), Giang (2023), etc., who study idioms from a cognitive view. According to Fernando and Flavell (1981) and Giang (2018), idioms appear from completely transparent to completely opaque. By this, they meant that semantically, there are four types of idioms: transparent, i.e., all the component parts are explicit (e.g., *slowly but surely* in English and *bày mưu tính kế* ‘display plot count plan [concoct a plot for somebody to follow] in Vietnamese); semi-transparent, i.e., some component parts are explicit and the others are implicit (e.g., *as drunk as a lord* in English and *nhanh như chớp* ‘quick as lightning’ [extremely quick] in Vietnamese); semi-opaque, i.e., all the component parts are implicit but possibly analyzable (e.g., *as a thief in the light* in English and *như cá nằm trên thớt* ‘like fish lie on chopping board’ [in a dangerous situation] in Vietnamese); and opaque, i.e., all the component parts are implicit (e.g., *kick the bucket* in English and *già kén kén* ‘old cocoon stuck bamboo frame’ [one who is very picky will fall into a slump and worry] in Vietnamese). This classification indicates that most idioms carry possibly identifiable component parts of their idiomatic meanings.

Gibbs (1995) stated that the majority of idioms are motivated by cognitive-semantic mechanisms, including metaphors, metonymies, and conventional knowledge. For example, *blow your stack*, *flip your lid*, *hit the ceiling*, etc., are called “anger idioms”, which are primarily inspired by the conceptual metaphors. Indeed, ANGER IS HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER is a conceptual metaphor activating the linguistic realizations of the anger emotion. According to Gibbs (1995), when people imagine anger idioms, they know that the action is caused by pressure, which can be stress or frustration; that once the pressure builds, it is difficult to control; that sometimes the violent release of the pressure happens unintentionally (like when the stack blows or the ceiling is hit); and that once the violent release has occurred, it is hard to stop it (like when the stack blows or the lid flips). All of these interpretations are based on people's perceptions about heated liquid or vapor condensing and rising out of containers. They observed that people's consistent mental images and particular knowledge about these images for various idioms about anger are motivated by the metaphorical mapping of a source domain (hot fluid in a container, for example) into target domains (the emotion of anger).

Trao (2009) and Tien (2012) used conceptual metaphor theory initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) to explain idiomatic meanings in English and Vietnamese. In these studies, they provided several conceptual metaphor models, such as HAPPINESS IS INSANITY, SADNESS IS PAIN, ANGER IS FIRE, DISGUST IS DISLIKE OF FOOD, FEAR IS PHYSICAL WEAKNESS, etc., which are developed from the emotion idioms associated with HAPPINESS, SADNESS, ANGER, DISGUST, FEAR, and DESIRE. Similarly, Giang (2023) investigated Vietnamese concepts of love through idioms and gave nine common conceptual metaphors for love in Vietnamese idioms: LOVE IS FAITHFULNESS, LOVE IS A UNITY, LOVE IS AN INAPPROPRIATE RELATIONSHIP, LOVE IS A PASSION, LOVE IS A CHOICE, LOVE IS CLOSENESS, LOVE IS NOSTALGIA, LOVE IS FATE, and LOVE IS BETRAYAL. The research results prove that conceptual metaphors, to some extent, are also considered one of the useful devices for analyzing idiomatic meanings.

According to Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994), Langlotz (2006), and Giang (2018), most idiomatic meanings can be derived from the component parts forming idioms through human perceptions. For instance, the idiom *spill the beans*, which implies “divulge the information”, can be understood by considering the verb *spill* as the action of divulging and *beans* as the information. Similarly, the idiom *cua sừng làm nghé* ‘saw horn become calf’, meaning “one who is old tries to be young and innocent” in Vietnamese, can be analyzed in this way: *cua sừng* [sawing horns] refers to *người già lớn tuổi* [the old], while *làm nghé* [becoming a calf] corresponds to *cổ làm ra vẻ trẻ trung, ngây thơ* [try to be young and innocent] (Giang, 2018). In fact, it is difficult to analyze some idioms such as *pull someone's leg* in English or *qua cầu rút ván* ‘pass bridge withdraw board’ [be ungrateful] in Vietnamese, since they are totally opaque. However, these idioms can be motivated by conventional knowledge. The idiom *pull someone's leg* in English is an example. This idiom is thought to have originated from the custom of yanking a man's legs as he was being hanged in order to hasten his demise and lessen his suffering. After a protracted process of semantic modification, this idiom today means “make gentle fun of” (Fernando & Flavell, 1981, p. 27). In Vietnamese, *qua cầu rút ván* ‘pass bridge withdraw board’ [be ungrateful] is an idiom whose idiomatic meaning comes from a story about two students, Liu Cai and Le Chau (Giang, 2018, p. 86).

In conclusion, idioms in both English and Vietnamese, from a cognitive view, are thought to be analyzable and have meanings that are at least partly motivated. It means that the meanings of idioms can be worked out by analyzing the meanings of their individual component parts or looking for their semantic motivation through conventional knowledge.

### 1.2 Idioms with Comparisons in English and Vietnamese

Seidl and McMordie (1988) divided English idioms into eight groups, including those with comparisons. Idioms with comparisons are sub-classified into comparisons with *as...as* (e.g., *as bold as brass*) and comparisons with *like* (e.g., *go like wind*). According to Giang (2023), there are three categories of English idioms: idiomatic pairs (e.g., *cut and dried*), comparative idioms (e.g., *as drunk as a lord*), and ordinary idioms (e.g., *paint the town red*). Idioms with comparisons consist of three component parts, which are comparative contents, comparative conventional images, and comparative connectors. In the idiom *as naughty as a bear*, *naughty* is the comparative content, *a bear* is the comparative conventional image, and *as...as* is the comparative connector. In addition to *as...as*, *like* and *as* are also the comparative connectors of idioms with comparisons as in *work like a slave* and *as a thief in the light*. The comparative contents may not appear in some idioms. However, the comparative conventional images and comparative connectors are the obligatory component parts of idioms with comparisons. The comparative contents expressed by adjectives are often associated with *as...as*, and those as verbs or verb phrases go with *like* (Giang, 2023).

In Vietnamese, Hanh (2008) argued that idioms with comparisons are stable groups of words derived from comparative structures with figurative meanings; for example, *như nước đổ lá khoai* ‘like water off a taro leaf’ [have no effect], *nhanh như chớp* ‘quick as lightning’ [extremely quick], *ăn như mèo* ‘eat like a cat’ [eat very little], etc. Structurally, idioms with comparisons are similar to ordinary comparisons; however, they have some differences. An ordinary comparison usually refers to two people or two things belonging to the same category to show the degrees of similarity or difference, whereas an idiom with comparison relates to two people or two things belonging to different categories to emphasize or exaggerate their certain characteristics (Giang, 2023). For example, *Hùng nhanh như anh trai mình* [Hung is as fast as his brother] is an ordinary comparison. Hung and his brother are both fast, and we do not know how fast they are. *Hùng nhanh như sóc* [Hung is as fast as a squirrel] is an idiomatic comparison because it compares Hung's speed to that of a squirrel. We know how fast Hung is due to the image of a squirrel and its speed. In the idiom *nhanh như sóc*, *nhanh* [fast] is the comparative content; *sóc* [a squirrel] is the comparative conventional image; and *như* [like/as] is the comparative connector. It is noted that the comparative conventional images help to make the comparative contents idiomatic. The comparative connector *như* can be a preposition (e.g., *đẹp như tiên* ‘beautiful as a fairy’ [very beautiful]) or a conjunction (e.g., *như cá gặp nước* ‘like fish meet water’ [feel satisfied when finding the appropriate person in the ideal circumstance]). Apart from *như* [like/as], some other comparative connectors such as *tây* [like/as], *bằng* [as], *tựa* [as], etc., are also found in the Vietnamese idioms with comparisons; nevertheless, *như* [like/as] is by far the most common (Giang, 2023). In some cases, the comparative connector *như* [like/as] may or may not appear in the idioms: *trẻ (như) măng* ‘young (as) bamboo sprout’ [very young], *đen (như) than* ‘black (as) burn’ [very black], *tức (như) lò con người* ‘angry (as) bulging eyes’ [extremely angry], *tức (như) nổ ruột* ‘angry (as) exploding intestines’ [extremely angry], etc. When the comparative connector is absent, some idioms with comparisons tend to become adjectives or adjective phrases, such as *trẻ măng* [very young], *đen than* [very black], *trắng bạc* [extremely white], etc.

Idioms with comparisons in both English and Vietnamese have three component parts: comparative contents, comparative conventional images, and comparative connectors. They are considered semi-transparent idioms, of which the comparative conventional images help the comparative contents create the idiomatic meanings (Giang, 2023). According to Giang (2018), some components of semi-transparent idioms are explicit, and the others are implicit. Let's have a look at *as busy as a beaver* in English and *đẹp như tiên* ‘beautiful as a fairy’ [very beautiful] in Vietnamese. *Busy* and *đẹp* (the comparative contents) are explicit, whereas *a beaver* and *tiên* [a fairy] (the comparative conventional images) are implicit. It means that the idiomatic meanings of the idioms can be derived from the analyzability of the component parts.

## 2. Method

This research is a contrastive analysis. The contrastive analysis emphasizes the significance of the mother tongue in translation and second language learning, according to Chaturvedi (1973). The first stage is to describe and analyze both languages separately in order to identify the structural and semantic aspects of the two languages that differ significantly from one another. Following the independent description and analysis, it is required to classify the similarities and differences between the two languages.

In this study, we examine how the collected English and Vietnamese idioms with comparisons in terms of their comparative contents are similar to and different from each other in the light of cognitive linguistics through idiom analysability (Langlotz, 2006). Idioms with comparisons (672 English and 731 Vietnamese entries) are described and analyzed according to their two kinds of comparative contents: closed comparative contents and open comparative contents. The data are limited to idioms with comparisons gathered from Giang's (2018) collection of 4053 Vietnamese and 4134 English idioms. To facilitate the contrastive analysis, Vietnamese data are semantically translated. A word-for-word translation is also included to show the actual words in the source language.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Comparative Contents of Idioms with Comparisons in English

As presented above, there are three component parts in idioms with comparisons in English: comparative contents, comparative conventional images, and comparative connectors. The comparative contents that appear simultaneously with the comparative conventional images and the comparative connectors are called “closed comparative contents”; the comparative contents that are absent from the idioms belong to “open comparative contents”. We investigated more than 4,000 idioms and obtained 672 idioms with comparisons, of which idioms with closed comparative contents are 531 (accounting for 79.01%) and idioms with open comparative contents are 141 (accounting for 20.99%). Thus, in English, idioms with closed comparative contents are more common than those with open comparative contents.

#### 3.1.1 Closed Comparative Contents of Idioms with Comparisons in English

Closed comparative contents of the idioms with comparisons are available with the comparative conventional images and the comparative connectors, and they are usually explicit. The idiom *as blind as a bat* shows that *blind* (the comparative content) appears simultaneously with *a bat* (the comparative conventional image) and *as...as* (the comparative connector). In this idiom, *blind* keeps its own literal meaning, and *a bat* represents the degree of *blind*, which creates the idiomatic sense. The closed comparative contents can be adjectives, verbs, or verb phrases.

Table 1. Classification of closed comparative contents of idioms with comparisons in English

Types of closed comparative contents	Number of idioms	%	Examples
Closed comparative contents as adjectives	438	82.49	<i>as brave as a lion,</i> <i>as deaf as a beetle,</i> <i>as free as a bird, etc.</i>
Closed comparative contents as verbs/verb phrases	93	17.51	<i>run like the wind,</i> <i>work like a dog,</i> <i>have a memory like a sieve, etc.</i>
Total:	531	100	

Table 1 shows that the closed comparative contents as adjectives (82.49%) are much more common than those as verbs/verb phrases (17.51%). Adjectives are one of the most expressive linguistic units. They can evoke the images and emotions at different levels and are often used to describe the characteristics or properties of things, phenomena, states, or people. The closed comparative contents of idioms with comparisons in English are expressed by different types of adjectives: adjectives of colours (e.g., *as black as ink, as red as a rose, as white as snow, etc.*); adjectives of size (e.g., *as big as a barn-door, as tall as a giraffe, as small as the hairs on a gnat's bollock, etc.*); adjectives of taste (e.g., *as hot as pepper, as sweet as honey, as sour as vinegar, etc.*); adjectives of emotions (e.g., *as happy as a lark, as angry as a bull, as nervous as a cat, etc.*); etc.

Verbs in English are also one of the linguistic units with high expressive ability. They are used to express actions or states of people, animals, or things. The closed comparative contents as verbs are mainly action verbs (e.g., *fight like a lion, speak like a book, work like a Trojan, etc.*) and sometimes stative verbs (e.g., *hate like poison, look like grim death, look like a dying duck in a thunderstorm, etc.*). When verbs go with adverbs, nouns, noun phrases, or prepositional phrases, they become verb phrases. The closed comparative contents as verb phrases are found in several idioms with comparisons, such as *jump around like a cat on hot bricks, have nine lives like a cat, watch someone like a hawk, etc.*

Table 2. Number of closed comparative contents and their average proportion through idioms in English

Types of closed comparative contents	Number of closed comparative contents	Average proportion through idioms with comparisons
Closed comparative contents as adjectives	202	2.17
Closed comparative contents as verbs/verb phrases	58	1.60
Total:	260	2.04

It is revealed in Table 2 that the number of closed comparative contents expressed through idioms is 260, and the average proportion is 2.04 idioms. We investigated 438 idioms with closed comparative contents as adjectives, through which there are 202 contents found (2.17 idioms per content). It means that one content can be expressed through one or several idioms.

The closed comparative contents as adjectives also have the characteristics of adjectives, such as synonymy and polysemy. A content can be expressed by more than one synonymous adjective. For example, *rare* can be replaced by *scarce* in *as rare as hen's teeth*. The idiomatic meaning of *as scarce as hen's teeth* is the same as that of *as rare as hen's teeth*. The meanings of an adjective are not the same in different idioms with comparisons. The adjective *long* is an example: *long* in *as long as a month of Sundays* refers to a long period of time, whereas *long* in *as long as one's arm* is paraphrasable as "a very long list of something".

Theoretically, the closed comparative contents of English idioms with comparisons are explicit; however, in practice, some are implicit, and their idiomatic meanings depend on the comparative images that could make the given contents have opposite meanings. The comparative content *welcome* in *welcome as a skunk at a lawn party* means "unwelcome". Similarly, *poor* is the meaning of *rich* in *as rich as a Jew*.

There are 58 closed comparative contents as verbs or verb phrases represented in 93 idioms with comparisons. On average, each closed comparative content as a verb or a verb phrase is expressed through 1.60 idioms (see Table 2). This is lower than the average rate of closed comparative contents expressed by adjectives. Just like closed comparative contents as adjectives, closed comparative contents as verbs or verb phrases are able to be expressed through one or several idioms.

The closed comparative contents as verbs or verb phrases in English idioms with comparisons are also able to be synonymous. A content can be expressed by more than one synonymous verb or verb phrase. For example, *shake* can be replaced by *tremble* in *shake like a leaf*. Similarly, *speak* in *speak like a book* and *talk* in *talk like a book* are the same.

### 3.1.2 Open Comparative Contents of Idioms with Comparisons in English

Open comparative contents are those that do not appear simultaneously with the comparative images and the comparative connectors. The open comparative contents in English are associated with two comparative connectors, namely *as* and *like*. Table 3 indicates that among 141 idioms collected, there are 24 open comparative contents with *as* (accounting for 17%) and 117 with *like* (accounting for 83%). The comparative connector *as* can go with a noun (e.g., *as a rule*), a noun phrase (e.g., *as a thief in the night*), or a clause (e.g., *as the crow flies*); *like* is able to be followed by a noun (e.g., *like a clock*) or a noun phrase (e.g., *like a duck to water*).

Table 3. Open comparative contents of idioms with comparisons according to each comparative connector in English

Open comparative contents with different comparative connectors	Number of idioms	%
Open comparative contents with <i>as</i>	24	17
Open comparative contents with <i>like</i>	117	83
Total:	141	100

In the data collected, 100% of the open comparative contents of idioms with comparisons in English are implicit. As presented above, implicit open comparative contents are associated with the idioms that only have their own comparative conventional images and comparative connectors, such as *as a general thing, like a cat on hot bricks, like a dog with two tails*, etc. The idiomatic meanings of these idioms are totally from the comparative conventional images. The idiom *like a fly in amber* is an example. In this idiom, the comparative content does not appear at the same time as the comparative conventional image (a fly in amber) and the comparative connector (like). The comparative content of this idiom is completely implicit, and the meaning of the idiom is “forever fixed, preserved.” Thus, the comparative conventional image that a fly is in amber helps bring the meaning of the above idiom.

Unlike closed comparative content, each open comparative content is associated with a single idiom. When appearing in a sentence, these idioms often act as adverbials modifying verbs or clauses, as in the following examples:

*Jenny, you're like a cat on hot bricks. I wish you'd either sit down with a book or some sewing, or go out for a walk.*

*Just how far are you from your nearest neighbour out there?*

*About a mile as the crow flies, but three miles up-river by boat and seven miles round by road.*

### 3.2 Comparative Contents of Idioms with Comparisons in Vietnamese

There are also three component parts in idioms with comparisons in Vietnamese: comparative contents, comparative conventional images, and comparative connectors. The comparative contents are those that appear concurrently with the comparative conventional images and the comparative connectors; the contents that are not available in the idioms are called the open comparative contents. After investigating more than 4,000 idioms, we collected 731 idioms with comparisons, of which idioms with closed comparative contents were 619 (accounting for 84.68%) and idioms with open comparative contents were 112 (accounting for 15.32%). Thus, in Vietnamese, idioms with closed comparative contents are far more abundant than those with open comparative contents.

#### 3.2.1 Closed Comparative Contents of Idioms with Comparisons in Vietnamese

In Vietnamese, the closed comparative contents of idioms with comparisons are usually explicit. That is, the comparative contents appear simultaneously with the comparative images and the comparative connectors. The idiom *ác như hùm* ‘cruel as a tiger’ [very cruel] indicates that *ác* [cruel] (the comparative content), *hùm* [tiger] (the comparative image), and *như* [as] (the comparative connector) are available at the same time. In this idiom, *ác* is unique and cannot be replaced by another content. The closed comparative contents in Vietnamese idioms with comparisons can be expressed by adjectives/adjective phrases, verbs/verb phrases, nouns/noun phrases, or adverbs.

Table 4. Classification of closed comparative contents of idioms with comparisons in Vietnamese

Types of closed comparative contents	Number of idioms	%	Examples
Closed comparative contents as adjectives or adjective phrases	352	56.87	<i>đốt như bò,</i> ‘ignorant as a cow’ [very ignorant] <i>cứng như đá,</i> ‘hard as a stone’ [so hard] <i>chán ngán như cơm nếp nấ,</i> etc. ‘bored as pasty sticky rice’ [feel bored]
Closed comparative contents as verbs or verb phrases	209	33.76	<i>chạy như ma đuổi,</i> ‘run like ghost follow’ [run very fast and feel scared] <i>khóc như mưa,</i> ‘cry like rain’ [cry a lot] <i>giết người như ngóe,</i> etc. ‘kill people like marsh frogs’ [kill a lot of people in cold blood]
Closed comparative contents as nouns or noun phrases	52	8.40	<i>bụng như mở cờ,</i> ‘belly like unfurl flag’ [feel so happy in one’s heart] <i>mặt đỏ như gà chọi,</i> ‘face red like a fighting cock’ [one’s face becomes red because of anger] <i>tiền của như nước,</i> etc. ‘money property like water’

Closed comparative contents as adverbs	6	0.97	[very rich] <i>khư khư như ông từ giữ oản</i> , 'grip like temple guardian keep truncated-cone-shaped cake (a kind of cake made of roast glutinous rice flour)' [grip something in one's arms] <i>nhảm nhảm như chó cắn ma</i> , 'nag like a dog biting a ghost' [peevish and fastidious] <i>oang oang như lệnh vỡ</i> , etc. 'sonorous as a broken musical instrument' [a loud and far-reaching sound (speech)]
Total:	619	100	

Table 4 shows that the closed comparative contents as adjectives or adjective phrases account for the largest number (56.87%), followed by verbs or verb phrases (33.76%), then nouns or noun phrases (8.40%), and adverbs take the smallest proportion of all (0.97%). In the corpus, the closed comparative contents are mainly adjectives, and only a few are adjective phrases, such as *b á tr òn* [very fat] in *b éo tr òn như cối xay* 'fat as a rice grinder' [short and fat], *ng h ệt m ặt* [bewildered] in *ng h ệt m ặt như ng ồng i a* 'bewildered face as a goose shit' [look bewildered], *t ả xanh* [pale] in *t ả xanh như ch ảm đ ỏ* 'pale as indigo pour' [feel too scared], etc. The closed comparative contents of idioms with comparisons in Vietnamese can be expressed by different types of adjectives: adjectives of colors (e.g., *tr ắng như trứng gà bóc* 'white as a peeled egg' [beautiful white skin]; adjectives of size (e.g., *cao như s ếu* 'tall as a crane' [tall and thin]); adjectives of shape (e.g., *tr òn như hạt mít* 'round as a jackfruit seed' [short and fat]); adjectives of taste (e.g., *ng ọt như mật ong* 'sweet as honey' [very sweet]); adjectives of degrees and manners (e.g., *nh ạnh như cắt* 'fast as a kestrel' [extremely fast]); adjectives of quantities (e.g., *đ ồng như kiến* 'crowded as ants' [very crowded (a lot of people in a place)]); adjectives of qualities (e.g., *nh át như cây* 'timid as a fiddler' [scared and shy]); adjectives of sounds (e.g., *ầm ầm như chợ vỡ* 'noisy as a market broken' [very noisy]); adjectives of emotions (e.g., *bu ồn như cha chết* 'sad as father died' [feel so sad]); adjectives of ages (e.g., *tr ẻ như măng* 'young as a bamboo sprout' [very young]); etc.

The closed comparative contents as verbs are mainly action verbs (e.g., *ăn như rồng cuốn* 'eat like a dragon' [eat fast and a lot], *b ắn như v ải đạn* 'shoot like pour bullets' [shoot a lot and continuously], *ch ạy như bay* 'run like fly' [run very fast], etc.), and some stative verbs (e.g., *m ê như điệu đ ỏ* 'adore like farmer's pipe fall' [be crazy about], *m ừng như bắt đ ược vàng* 'rejoice like catch gold' [feel so happy], *s ợ như bò thấy nh àt ảng* 'fear like a cow see abattoir' [feel so scared], etc.). When verbs go with adjectives, nouns, or verbs, they become verb phrases. The closed comparative contents as verb phrases are found in several idioms with comparisons, such as *ăn kh ỏe như thần tr ùng* 'eat a lot like the Death' [eat a lot], *ch ạy nhanh như gió* 'run fast like wind' [run very fast], *coi người như m ẻ* 'treat people like sour Vietnamese fermented rice' [look down on other people], *đ i lại như m ắc c ửi* 'go around like a shuttle' [crowded and bustling], etc.

Table 5. Number of closed comparative contents and their average proportion through idioms in Vietnamese

Types of closed comparative contents	Number of closed comparative contents	Average proportion through idioms with comparisons
Closed comparative contents as adjectives or adjective phrases	156	2.26
Closed comparative contents as verbs or verb phrases	106	1.97
Closed comparative contents as nouns or noun phrases	43	1.21
Closed comparative contents as adverbs	5	1.20
Total:	310	2.00

It can be seen from Table 5 that the number of closed comparative contents expressed through idioms is 310, with the average proportion of 2.00 idioms. 156 closed comparative contents as adjectives/adjective phrases were found after investigating 352 idioms with comparisons, which indicates that, on average, each content is represented in 2.26 idioms. In other words, one content can also be expressed through one idiom or several idioms.

The closed comparative contents as adjectives or adjective phrases in Vietnamese also have their own synonymy and polysemy. A content can be expressed by more than one synonymous adjective. For example, *b ằng ch ản* [calm and indifferent] can be replaced by *b ình ch ản* [calm and indifferent] in *b ằng ch ản như v ại* 'calm and indifferent as a jar' [be calm and indifferent, as if unrelated]. The idiomatic meaning of *b ằng ch ản như v ại* is the same as that of *b ình ch ản như v ại*. An adjective has different meanings in different idioms with comparisons. The adjective *đen* [black] is an example: *đen* [black] in *đen như củ tam thất* 'black as a bulb of panax notoginseng' [black] refers to the colour of a bulb of panax notoginseng (black), whereas *đen* [unlucky] in *đen như chó* 'unlucky as a dog' is paraphrasable as "unlucky." Similarly, *n óng* in *n óng như lửa* 'hot as fire' has four different meanings (Luc & Dang, 2009): (1) melting, very uncomfortable; (2) hot at high temperature (having a fever); (3) very hot-tempered, easily angered; and (4) impatient, restless, uneasy.

There are 106 closed comparative contents as verbs or verb phrases represented in 209 idioms with comparisons in Vietnamese. On average, each closed comparative content as a verb or a verb phrase is expressed through 1.97 idioms (see Table 5). This is lower than the average rate of closed comparative contents expressed by adjectives. Just like closed comparative contents as adjectives or adjective phrases, closed comparative contents as verbs or verb phrases can be expressed through one idiom or several idioms.

Most closed comparative contents as verbs or verb phrases in Vietnamese are specified by other comparative conventional images. However, there are still idioms in which the comparative images concretize the comparative contents, such as *xua như xua ruồi* ‘chase away like chase flies away’ [chase away in a contemptuous way], *chạy như chạy loạn* ‘run like run from the war’ [run very fast], *thúc như thúc tà* ‘urge like urge ghost’ [urge constantly], *mong như mong mẹ về chợ* ‘wait like wait mom back from market’ [look forward to], etc. These do not occur with the idioms whose comparative contents are adjectives or adjective phrases. The closed comparative contents as verbs or verb phrases are also synonymous. A content can be expressed by more than one synonymous verb or verb phrase. For example, *vái* [bow] and *van* [bow] are the same in *vái như tế sao* ‘bow like sacrifice stars’ [bow constantly] and *van như tế sao* ‘bow like sacrifice stars’ [bow constantly].

The closed comparative contents as nouns or noun phrases and those as adverbs make up a small number (8.40% and 0.79%, respectively). Most closed comparative contents as nouns or noun phrases in Vietnamese are represented in one idiom. However, there are still a few that appear in more than one idiom (see Table 10). Specifically, each content is shown in 1.21 idioms (see Table 5). A very special thing is that a lot of the closed comparative contents as nouns or noun phrases are associated with human body parts such as stomachs, faces, intestines, eyes, livers, etc. In fact, some closed comparative contents as nouns or noun phrases describe the characteristics of these human body parts, such as *mặt như chàm đỏ* ‘face like indigo pour’ [feel so scared], *mắt như mắt lợn luộc* ‘eyes like boiled pig’s eyes’ [open wide eyes], *mắt sắc như dao* ‘eyes sharp as knives’ [sharp eyes], etc. The others represent the people’s moods, attitudes, and emotions: *mặt nặng như chì* ‘face heavy like lead’ [feel so nervous], *ruột nóng như cào* ‘intestine hot like scratch’ [feel so restless and anxious], *mắt như nãy lửa* ‘eyes like fire’ [feel so angry], *bụng như mở cờ* ‘belly like unfurl flag’ [feel so happy], etc. For the closed comparative contents as adverbs, on average, there are 1.20 idioms per content (see Table 5). It means that each content can be expressed through more than one idiom.

### 3.2.2 Open Comparative Contents of Idioms with Comparisons in Vietnamese

In Vietnamese, the contents that are not available at the same time with the comparative images and the comparative connectors are also called “open comparative contents”. The open comparative contents are divided into two categories: impossibly explicit open comparative contents and possibly explicit open comparative contents.

Table 6. Categories of open comparative contents of idioms with comparisons in Vietnamese

Categories of open comparative contents	Number of idioms	%	Examples
Impossibly explicit open comparative contents	85	75.90	<i>như cá nằm trên thớt</i> , ‘like fish lie on chopping board’ [in a dangerous situation] <i>như ếch vỡ hoa</i> , ‘like frog catch flower’ [waste effort without any benefit] <i>như hùm mọc cánh</i> , ‘like tiger have wings’ [have more power] <i>như nước đổ đầu vịt</i> , ‘like water off duck head’ [have no effect] <i>như gió vào nhà trống</i> , etc. ‘like wind enter empty house’ [no amount of money is enough]
Possibly explicit open comparative contents	27	24.10	<i>(cãi nhau) như chó với mèo</i> , ‘(quarrel) like cat and dog’ [often quarrel because of incompatibility] <i>(chạy) như cò lông c ông</i> , ‘(run) like sparrow-feather flag’ [run back and forth continuously] <i>(chắc) như đinh đóng cột</i> , ‘(ensure) like nail hammer pillar’ [make sure] <i>(lên) như diều gặp gió</i> , ‘(up) like a kite in wind’ [have a rapid advancement in one’s career] <i>(nhìn) bằng nửa con mắt</i> , etc. ‘(look) like half an eye’ [despise someone]
Total:	112	100	

The results from Table 6 show that the impossibly explicit open comparative contents appear in 85 idioms, accounting for 75.90%. The number of possibly explicit open comparative contents is much smaller than that of impossibly explicit open comparative contents, with 27 idioms out of a total of 112, accounting for 24.10%.

#### i) Impossibly Explicit Open Comparative Contents

Impossibly explicit open comparative contents are derived from idioms that only contain their own comparative images and comparative connectors, such as *như cá nằm trên thớt* 'like fish lie on chopping board' [in a dangerous situation], *như ếch vồ hoa* 'like frog catch flower' [waste effort without any benefit], *như hùm mọc cánh* 'like tiger have wings' [have more power], etc. The comparative contents of these idioms are implicit, and their idiomatic meanings are completely based on the comparative images. The idiom *như nước đổ đầu vịt* 'like water off duck head' [have no effect] is an example. In this idiom, the comparative content does not appear simultaneously with the comparative image *nước đổ đầu vịt* [water off a duck's head] and the comparative connector *như* [like]. The comparative content of this idiom is totally implicit, and the idiomatic meaning is derived from the comparative image *nước đổ đầu vịt* [water off a duck's head] that is paraphrasable as "have no effect" (Luc & Dang, 2009, p. 477). Thus, the comparative image that when pouring water on a duck's head, the water will flow away because of the non-sticky and water-absorbent nature of duck feathers helps to create the above idiomatic meaning.

#### ii) Possibly Explicit Open Comparative Contents

In fact, the comparative contents of some idioms with comparisons in Vietnamese are not available; however, they are possibly made to be explicit from the comparative images and the comparative connectors. For example, *như chó với mèo* 'like cat and dog' [often quarrel because of incompatibility] is an idiom without its explicit comparative content. The comparative content *cãi nhau* [quarrel] can be derived from this idiom, which creates a new idiom with its explicit content, *cãi nhau như chó với mèo* 'quarrel like cat and dog' [often quarrel because of incompatibility]. Thus, the open comparative contents of idioms with comparisons usually do not appear in the idiom, but in some cases they can be explicit, such as *chạy* [run] from *như cò lông cồng* 'like sparrow-feather flag' [run back and forth continuously], *chắc* [ensure] from *như đinh đóng cột* 'like nail hammer pillar' [make sure], *lên* [up] from *như diều gặp gió* 'like a kite in wind' [have a rapid advancement in one's career], etc. Of course, when open comparative contents are used directly with the comparative contents and the comparative connectors, they are considered closed comparative contents. The possibly explicit open comparative contents can be verbs or verb phrases (e.g., *(nhìn) bằng nửa con mắt* '(look) like half an eye' [despise someone], *(cãi nhau) như chó với mèo* '(quarrel) like cat and dog' [often quarrel because of incompatibility], *(chạy) như cò lông cồng* '(run) like sparrow-feather flag' [run back and forth continuously], etc.), adjectives or adjective phrases (e.g., *(béo) như bồ sát cạp* '(fat) as a bamboo basket with a broken rim' [very fat], *(bỡ ngỡ) như chim chích lạc vào rừng* '(bewildered) as a warbler lost in forest [feel new and bewildered], *(oang oang) như lệnh võ* '(sonorous) as a broken musical instrument' [a loud and far-reaching sound (speech)], etc.), or nouns (e.g., *(thế) như vũ bão* '(condition) like a storm' [very powerful]).

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Similarities

Idioms with comparisons are available in both English and Vietnamese. There are three component parts in these idioms: comparative contents, comparative conventional images, and comparative connectors. The comparative contents are usually explicit; the comparative conventional images, on which the idiomatic meanings are based, are implicit; the comparative connectors (*as...as*, *like*, and *as* in English, and *như* [like/as], *bằng* [like/as], and *tựa* [like/as] in Vietnamese) are used to combine the comparative contents and the comparative conventional images. Since the idioms with comparisons frequently have their own explicit comparative contents, the idiomatic meanings depend on the comparative conventional images that represent the degrees, the manners, or the attributes of the comparative contents.

The comparative contents of idioms with comparisons are divided into closed comparative contents and open comparative contents. In both languages, idioms with closed comparative contents (79.01% in English and 84.68% in Vietnamese) are more prevalent than those with open comparative contents (20.99% in English and 15.32% in Vietnamese). The closed comparative contents can be adjectives (e.g., *as brave as a lion* in English and *cứng như đá* 'hard as a stone' [very hard] in Vietnamese), verbs (e.g., *run like the wind* in English and *khóc như mưa* 'cry like rain' [cry a lot] in Vietnamese), or verb phrases (e.g., *have a memory like a sieve* in English and *giết người như ngóe* 'kill people like marsh frogs' [kill a lot of people in cold blood] in Vietnamese). Particularly, the closed comparative contents are expressed by different types of adjectives, such as adjectives of colours (e.g., *as black as ink* in English and *trắng như trứng gà bóc* 'white as a peeled egg' [beautiful white skin] in Vietnamese), adjectives of size (e.g., *as tall as a giraffe* in English and *cao như sếu* 'tall as a crane' [tall and thin] in Vietnamese), adjectives of taste (e.g., *as hot as pepper* in English and *ngọt như mật ong* 'sweet as honey' [very sweet] in Vietnamese), adjectives of emotions (e.g., *as happy as a lark* in English and *buồn như cha chết* 'sad as father died' [feel so sad] in Vietnamese), etc. Additionally, a content can be expressed by more than one synonymous adjective and has different meanings in different idioms with comparisons.

The closed comparative contents as verbs are mainly action verbs (e.g., *speak like a book* in English and *chạy như bay* 'run like fly' [run very fast] in Vietnamese) and sometimes stative verbs (e.g., *hate like poison* in English and *mê như điều đổ* 'adore like hookah fall' [be infatuated with someone] in Vietnamese). One closed comparative content as a verb or verb phrase in both languages is able to be expressed through one or several idioms. On average, the proportion of closed comparative contents as verbs or verb phrases (1.60 idioms per content in English and 1.97 idioms in Vietnamese) in different idioms is lower than that of those as adjectives (2.17 idioms per content in English and 2.26 idioms per content in Vietnamese).

The open comparative contents in English and Vietnamese are those that do not appear simultaneously with the comparative conventional images and the comparative connectors. In fact, there exist impossibly explicit open comparative contents of idioms with comparisons in both languages (e.g., *like a cat on hot bricks* in English and *như cá nằm trên thớt* 'like fish lie on chopping board' [in a dangerous situation] in Vietnamese). It means that the idiomatic meanings of these idioms are completely from the comparative conventional images.



Unlike closed comparative content, each open comparative content is associated with a single idiom. Every open comparative content, as opposed to closed comparative contents, is associated with a particular idiom.

#### 4.2 Differences

Apart from the similarities, the findings of the study have revealed some striking differences between English and Vietnamese in terms of the comparative contents of idioms with comparisons. The major difference lies in the distribution of categories of comparative contents of idioms with comparisons in English and Vietnamese. The closed comparative contents of idioms with comparisons in Vietnamese (84.68%) are more common than those in English (79.01%), and vice versa for open comparative contents (20.99% in English and 15.32% in Vietnamese). The average proportion of closed comparative contents through idioms with comparisons in English (2.04 idioms per content) is slightly higher than that of those in Vietnamese (2.00 idioms per content).

The grammatical patterns of closed comparative contents found in Vietnamese but not in English are adjective phrases (e.g., *chán ngán như cơm nếp nẫu* ‘bored as pasty sticky rice’ [feel bored]), nouns (e.g., *bụng như mở cờ* ‘belly like unfurl flag’ [feel so happy in one’s heart]), noun phrases (e.g., *mặt đỏ như gà chọi* ‘face red like a fighting cock’ [one’s face becomes red because of anger]), or adverbs (e.g., *khư khư như ông từ giữ oản* ‘grip like temple guardian keep truncated-cone-shaped cake (a kind of cake made of roast glutinous rice flour)’ [grip something in one’s arms]). In terms of closed comparative contents as verbs or verb phrases, there are some Vietnamese idioms in which the comparative images concretize the comparative contents, such as *xua như xua ruồi* ‘chase away like chase flies away’ [chase away in a contemptuous way], *chạy như chạy loạn* ‘run like run from the war’ [run very fast], *thúc như thúc tà* ‘urge like urge ghost’ [urge constantly], etc.

The possibly explicit open comparative contents of idioms with comparisons are unique in Vietnamese. For this kind of idiom, the comparative contents are not available; however, they are possibly made to be explicit from the comparative conventional images and the comparative connectors. The idiom *như đinh đóng cột* ‘like nail hammer pillar’ [make sure] is an example. The comparative content *chắc* [ensure] can be derived from the comparative image *đinh đóng cột* [a nail hammered in a pillar] and the comparative connector *như* [like]. In this case, *chắc như đinh đóng cột* ‘ensure like nail hammer pillar’ [make sure] is considered an idiom with closed comparative content.

### 5. Conclusion

Idioms with comparisons appear in both English and Vietnamese. The findings of the study indicate that idioms with comparisons in English are as prevalent as those in Vietnamese. These idioms consist of three component parts: comparative contents, comparative conventional images, and comparative connectors. The comparative contents are usually transparent; the comparative images, on which the idiomatic meanings depend, are opaque; the comparative connectors help to connect the comparative contents and the comparative conventional images. The comparative contents of idioms with comparisons are divided into two categories: closed comparative contents and open comparative contents. Idioms with closed comparative contents in both languages are much more popular than those with open comparative contents. The closed comparative contents can be seen as adjectives, verbs, or verb phrases. The open comparative contents are absent from the comparative conventional images and the comparative connectors. Idioms with comparisons in both languages have open comparative contents that are impossible to express explicitly. It indicates that these idioms’ idiomatic meanings are entirely derived from the comparative conventional images. There is only one idiom linked to one open comparative content.

The main distinction between Vietnamese and English is how the categories of comparative contents of idioms with comparisons are distributed. The closed comparative contents of idioms with comparisons in Vietnamese are more common than those in English, and vice versa for open comparative contents. The average proportion of closed comparative contents through idioms with comparisons in English is slightly higher than that of those in Vietnamese. The grammatical patterns of closed comparative contents found in Vietnamese but not in English are adjective phrases, nouns, noun phrases, or adverbs. Vietnamese idioms with comparisons are special in that they may have the possibly explicit open comparative contents. The comparative conventional images and comparative connectors may make the comparative contents explicit, even though they are not available for this type of idiom.

#### Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

#### Authors’ contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. Each played an integral role in drafting the manuscript and ensuring the quality and integrity of the work. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

#### Funding

Not applicable.

#### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### Informed consent

Obtained.

**Ethics approval**

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

**Provenance and peer review**

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

**Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

**Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

**Open access**

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