An investigation into idiomatic expressions containing numbers in English and Vietnamese \ Nghiên cứu những thành ngữ có các từ chỉ số trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt. M.A Thesis Linguistics: / Nguyễn Thị Thủy Tiên

1. Rationale of the study

English has been a very important international means of communication in almost fields of life such as economy, politics, culture and education. The mastering of English is not an easy matter because it requires a large number of linguistic issues such as grammar and pronunciation to have effective communicative activities. Among these issues, vocabulary plays a vital role due to its meaning creating. In vocabulary teaching and learning, idiom is an issue with which English learners and teachers are concerned because idioms are frequently used to make conversations more natural, interesting and concise in daily communicative activities. Thus, the effective use of idioms is a necessary requirement for any language learners who have desire to master it.

Numbers which are very common in our daily life and have certain cultural characteristics also appear in idioms. Idiomatic expressions containing numbers bring about interesting diverse meanings to our utterances and writings. Personally, in daily life of Vietnamese and English, I see that numbers have certain significance. People admire some numbers and vice versa. All of those are factors that give me the inspirations to choose this topic.

2. Aims of the study

In summary, this study is aimed at:

- To explore the roles of numbers in the meanings of idioms in English and Vietnamese.
- To find out the similarities and differences in the contribution of numbers to the meanings of idioms in English and Vietnamese.

In order to achieve these aims, the following question should be answered:

- What are senses do numbers contribute to the meanings of idioms in English and Vietnamese?

3. Scope of the study

The study is focused on revealing what types of English and Vietnamese idioms numbers appear in and their connotative meanings in these idioms.

4. Methods of the study

The study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods. By virtue of quantitative method, data have been collected from, literary works, books of idioms and semantics and newspapers, websites and dictionaries in both English and Vietnamese. The qualitative method is adopted to interpret the collected data.

5. Design of the study

The study is consisted of three parts:

The first part is **Part A "INTRODUCTION".** This part provides a brief account of issues which are rationale, aims, scope, methods, and design of the study.

The second part is **Part B "DEVELOPMENT".** This part is consisted of two chapters. Chapter 1, theoretical background, provides the theoretical information about meanings, sense, idioms, brief information about numbers in English and Vietnamese and the review of previous studies on idioms. Chapter 2 is concerned with research question, data collection, analysis framework, data analysis.

The last part, **Part C, "CONCLUSION",** summaries the major findings of the study, provides implications and suggestions for further studies. .

PART B: DEVELOPMENT

CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Meaning

Lyons (1997:1) said, "Semantics is generally defined as the study of meaning, and this is the definition which we shall initially adopt". Thus core issue in the field of semantics is the meaning. In *Understanding English Semantics* by Dr. Nguyen Hoa (2004), the definition of meaning is explained as follow : "According to C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards (1923) in *"The meaning of meaning",* a number of meanings can be associated with this term" :

- An intrinsic property
- The other words annexed to a word in a dictionary
- The connotation of a word
- The place of anything in a system
- That to which the user of symbol ought to be referring
- That to which the interpreter of a symbol

  - refers
  - believes himself to be referring
  - believes the user to be referring

Spangler and Werner (1989:50) states that one can have three main attitudes: *positive* (favourable), *neutral* (impartial), or *negative* (unfavourable). Thus, a word can have positive, neutral and negative connotation. They suggest the following example :

Positive	Neutral	Negative
lady	woman	dame
pleasingly plump	overweight	fat
jolly, entertaining	a sense of humor	silly, dizzy
highlights her assets	wears makeup	paints her face
confident, friendly	outgoing	domineering
brilliant, clever	intelligent	know-it-all

Keith Alan, (2001:147) states *"the connotations that arise from encyclopedic knowledge about its denotation and also from experiences, beliefs, and prejudices about the contexts in which the expression is typically used."* For example, the word BOY has the connotation 'STRONG' – positive meaning and LION the connotation 'CRUEL' – negative meaning.

Siregar (2005) claims that there are two kinds of meaning in semantics: Linguistic meaning and Speaker meaning. Linguistic meaning is determined by the meaning of its constituents and their grammatical relations. Speaker meaning is what a speaker means in producing an utterance. It consists of literal meaning and non-literal meaning. Literal meaning does not make hearers have difficulty understanding what the speaker means. However, we mean something different from what our words mean by speaking non-literally. In that case, it is called *non-literal meaning*. Using idioms is a way of using non-literal meaning because the meaning of an idiomatic expression cannot be predicted either lexically or grammatically.

1.2. Sense

According to Hoa, Nguyen (2004), sense is a philosophical term for meaning. Sense is the realization of meaning in speech. Sense relationship is also an important of the study of language because a word does not only have meaning but also contribute to the meaning of a larger unit, a phrase, a clause, a sentence.

Hoa, Nguyen (2004) suggests that there are two kinds of sense relation. They are substitutional and combinational. Substitutional relations exist between members of the same grammatical category and combinational relations hold between items of different grammatical categories.

1.3. Definitions of idioms

According to Cruse (1986: 37), an idiom is an "expression whose meaning cannot be inferred from the meanings of its parts when they are not parts of idioms". Fernando (1996) shares the same view of the definition of idioms. At the same time, he has a broad view when considering idioms as multi-word expressions whose meanings are not derived from the meanings of their constituents or their syntactic structures or consist the meaning of one of its constituents while the other constituent denotes a concept which it does not denote in other linguistic contexts. Idioms even accept restricted variation such as literal idioms 'on *the contrary, a happy new year'*.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary provides the definitions of "idiom" as "a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words".

Palmer (1990) defines idioms as group of words whose meaning can not be inferred from the meanings of separate words. Semantically, an idiom is a language unit like a word. However, grammatically, an idiom does not function like a word. Idioms are grammatically restricted.

1.4. Characteristics of idioms

According to Nunberg, Sag & Wasow's (1994, p. 492-93), six characteristics of idioms are as follow:

• **Conventionality**: The meanings of idioms can not be deducted from "knowledge of the independent conventions that determine the use of their constituents when they appear in isolation from one another"

• **Formal inflexibility**: The numbers of syntactic frames in which idioms appear are limited. Thus, idioms are syntactically restricted.

• **Figuration**: The meanings of idioms are non-literal, or figurative thanks to the involvement of idioms in metaphors (*take the bull by the horns, time as a substance, time as a path, love as war, and up is more*), metonymies (*lend a hand, count heads*), hyperboles (*not worth the paper it's printed on*).

• **Proverbiality**: Idioms are used to illustrate familiar situations of social life. The situations are similar to folksy, familiar images (*climbing walls, chewing the fat, spilling beans*).

• **Informality**: Idioms have a tendency to appear in colloquial speech.

• **Affect**: Evaluative or affective stances can be inferred from the use of idioms.

1.5. Classification of idioms

Based on the scalar categorization, Fernando (1996: 35) divides idioms into three types: Pure idioms, semi-idioms and literal idioms.

Based on the Halliday (1985), Fernando (1996: 72) suggests the functional categorization of idioms which divides idioms into ideational idioms, interpersonal idioms and relational idioms.

1.6. Idioms and proverbs

In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, a proverb is defined as "a well-known phrase or sentence that gives advice or says something that is generally true, for example *'Waste not, want not'*". Another definition by Vu Ngoc Phan (2000: 39) is that a proverb as "a complete saying expressing one idea of comment, experience, morality, justice or criticism".

Proverb and idiom has their typical characteristics. Whereas an idiom is an equivalent unit to a word or a phrase as parts of sentence, a proverb is a complete sentence or a phrase expressing a full idea. The second one is the function. A proverb is "a well-known phrase or sentence that gives advice" and expresses "one idea of comment, experience, morality, justice or criticism". As a result, it has perceptive function, aesthetic function and educational function. On the contrary, idioms have no the three functions because of not demonstrating judgments, giving advice or stating general truth about life.

1.7. Idioms and collocations

Idiom and collocation have both similarity and difference. Howard Jackson (1990: 256) regards collocation as "a lexical relationship of mutual expectancy, the presence of a particular lexical item gives the rise to the greater chance likelihood that other lexical items belonging to the same area of meaning will also occur." Besides, Chistra Fernando (1996:27) views collocation as the company words keep. In terms of difference, the meaning of an idiom can not literally derive from the meanings of its constituent; however, the meaning of a collocation is the combination of the literal meanings of its separate words. Moreover, collocations are not as restricted as idioms in terms of word substitution. Whereas, word substitution can make an idiom lose its idiomatic meaning and no longer be an idiom, a collocation accepts that despite the change in its meaning but remains as another collocation.

1.8. Idiom and 'dead' metaphor

Cruse (1986) suggests that idioms and dead metaphor should be distinguished. While a metaphor, a kind of hidden comparison is an expression referring to one particular thing or object which is different from the thing or the object literally described in this expression, a dead metaphor is a metaphor in which words lose direct meanings and have only figurative meanings. Thus, idioms and dead metaphors are interpreted in the same way. As far as syntax is concerned, both dead metaphors and idioms are fixed. A dead metaphor will no longer be a dead metaphor if its syntactic structure is changed.

1.9. Numbers in English and Vietnamese

1.9.1. Numbers in English

According to Graham Flegg (2002) in the book "Numbers: Their history and meaning", cardinal numbers are the basic numbers used for counting such as one, two or nine. Ordinal numbers are used for indicating order.

Numbers are a part of language. They are frequently used in daily activities such as counting, arranging orders, making measurements or giving assessment. As the relationship between language and culture is inseparable, numerical words play a role in human cultural communication.

In English culture, there are certain numbers considered as lucky numbers in human psychology such as number 'three' and number 'seven'. On the contrary, the number 'two' is considered as an unlucky number or number 'thirteen' is also the first avoided number in western culture due to its unlucky meaning.

1.9.2. Numbers in Vietnamese

In daily life, we can see that numbers are usually used in Vietnamese daily activities such as talking about age, sizes of shirts and shoes. In addition, they bring about certain cultural colors. According to Mingtan (2002) in "How to attract Asian women", there are unlucky numbers such as three and four. However, numbers 'six, eight, nine' are considered as lucky numbers.

1.10. Review of previous studies on idioms

Studies on idioms have been paid a lot of attention by many researchers. Thus, it can be said that the collection of idioms researches is not small.

In Viet Nam, there have been studies on English and Vietnamese idioms such as *"Idiomatic expressions containing the word 'dog' in English and Vietnamese"* by Tu, Dao Thanh (2007) and *"An investigation into the English words and idioms denoting happiness."* Lam, Nguyen Thi Van (2002). Gap identified here is in Vietnamese, there seems to be the shortage of numerical idiom researches. Thus this study on idiomatic expression containing numbers in English and Vietnamese was carried out to find out the contribution of numbers to the meanings of idioms in English and Vietnamese.

CHAPTER 2: THE STUDY

2.1. Research question

In order to the above aims, the study tries to find out the answers to the following question:

What are senses do numbers contribute to the meanings of idioms in English and Vietnamese?

2.2. Data collection

This study is about idioms so idioms are collected from many sources such as books on semantics and idioms, newspapers, websites, dictionaries and literal works. Popular idioms containing lucky and unlucky numbers in English and Vietnamese were collected. 157 idioms were collected. There are 72 English numerical idioms and 85 Vietnamese numerical idioms.

2.3. Analytical Framework

The analysis of data is based on the following theoretical framework by Fernando (1996) introduced in the literature review. Fernando (1996) divides idioms into ideational idioms, interpersonal idioms and relational idioms in order to explore the meanings of idioms and their functions. Based on that, it can be inferred what the roles of the numbers appearing in idioms are.

In order to explore the contribution of numbers to the connotative meanings of idioms in English and Vietnamese, the study also takes the theoretical view of connotative meanings by Spangler and Werner (1989). The meanings of numbers in idioms in English and Vietnamese are analyzed and divided into three types: Positive meaning (expressing favorable attitude), neutral meaning (expressing impartial attitude), and negative meaning (expressing unfavorable attitude).

2.4. Data analysis

There are 157 idioms containing numbers which are collected. Among which, there are 72 English numerical idioms and 85 Vietnamese ones.

2.5. Major findings

The study collects the total number of 157 numerical idioms involving 72 English ones and 85 Vietnamese ones for the analysis in order to find the answer to the research question about the senses numbers contribute to the meanings of idioms in English and Vietnamese.

The findings of the study provided the answers to that research question:

- In English idioms, number 1 is a remarkable number. It appears 26 times and has the most contribution to the meanings of all three types of idioms: Ideational, interpersonal and relational. Number 1 is the most positive and neutral number and number 2 is the most negative number.

- In Vietnamese idioms, number 3 is used the most. There are 30 ideational idioms containing this number among the total number of 80 ideational idioms. Number 3 is a significant number in Vietnamese idioms. It is not only the most positive number but also the most neutral and negative number. The reason is that the number of idioms containing '3' is much more than that of idioms containing other numbers.

- In both English and Vietnamese idioms, numbers mostly contribute to the idiomatic meanings to express message content. Among 157 idioms, there are 142 ideational idioms consisting 62 English ones and 80 Vietnamese ones.

PART C: CONCLUSION

1. Implications

The findings of the study suggest some implications for the teaching and learning English. Numbers contribute certain connotative meanings to idioms, thus when using these idioms, English learners and teachers should pay attention to idiomatic connotative meanings for appropriate context. The same numbers in different idioms in English and Vietnamese have different contribution to their idiomatic meanings. Therefore, when translating English numerical idioms into Vietnamese, language users should be attentive to the attitudes of speakers implied in these idioms in order to have reasonable and close translations.

2. Suggestions for further studies

The collected number of English and Vietnamese numerical idioms in this study is limited and the analysis is only focused on the senses numbers contribute to the meanings of idioms in English and Vietnamese. Thus, it has not revealed all semantic and grammatical features of numbers in English and Vietnamese idioms. Thus, it is suggested that further researches into English and Vietnamese numerical idioms be carried out to find out more numerical idioms, to explore more semantic features or grammatical features of

numbers in English and Vietnamese idioms and to explore more significant numbers in idioms in English and Vietnamese.