

## English Varieties in the Mekong Region: The Interference of Vietnamese Culture with Target Language Usage

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### Abstract

As language and culture have an organic relationship with each other, when using English, it is inevitable that users will be influenced by the culture and living habits of their country. The Mekong region countries are characterized by distinct features of climate, soil, rivers, culture, religion, and so on. From that perspective, this article aims to shed light on how such features influence the way Vietnamese people speak English. To fulfill the aims of the study, I first used the comparative method to examine some aspects of Vietnamese and Western (specifically British) culture. Next, I used the error analysis method to analyze sentence samples containing cultural elements from 146 essays in different disciplines to determine the effects of cultural differences between the two countries on Vietnamese users' English expressions. The findings indicate that there are some differences stemming from climate conditions, lifestyle, living conditions, ideas about animals, religion, literature and so on. I hope that the results of this study will help Vietnamese learners of English have a broader view of the English varieties being used and help teachers suggest some pedagogical implications appropriate for teaching English as a foreign language to learners from Vietnam and other Mekong region countries.

**Keywords:** English varieties, Asian Englishes, culture interference, target language, the Mekong region, Vietnam

### Introduction

Mutual influence and infiltration are prevalent in the fields of culture and language. International exchanges between countries bring new developments to the languages of each nation. Vietnam in particular and countries in the Mekong region in general are strongly attracted to new industrial processes. Consequently, language development undergoes a silent competition between national and international languages, or among languages of different ethnic groups within the same multi-ethnic, multilingual nation.

The Mekong region is characterized by historical, political, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity where English serves as a means for intra- and international communication (Kirkpatrick, 2010; Low and Pakir, 2018). The spread of English to the member countries of the Mekong region has occurred mainly through the forces of colonization, international trade, and religion, and has been deepened by the forces of globalization over the last 50 years. English spread to Myanmar through British colonization and to other Southeast Asian countries, namely Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam mainly through the driving forces of globalization such as tourism, international trade and international educational mobility (Kirkpatrick, 2010; Low and Pakir, 2018). Like Vietnam, other Mekong region countries such as China, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia also chose English as the main foreign language to communicate with outsiders. It can be seen that in recent years, countries in the Mekong region have created all conditions for the development and spread of English. English courses are held everywhere. Additionally, these nations are seeing an increase in the publication of English self-study and conversational books, as well as television programs that teach English. In addition, more and more students and professionals are being sent abroad for training in English-speaking nations. In other words, not only does English serve the purpose of communicating with people outside the Mekong region, but it is also being used as the *lingua franca* among different ethnic groups within the region.

However, the use of English also poses a number of complex problems for the countries of the Mekong region. It is known that language, in addition to its function of expressing ideas, is also a storehouse of thoughts and feelings, reflecting the culture of that nation. When using English, it is inevitable that users will be influenced by the culture and living habits of their country. It can be seen that the language standard deviation of English learners and speakers has been happening in countries in Southeast Asia in general and in the Mekong region in particular. Socio-cultural researchers have realized that in Southeast Asia, a new English language is forming, which is Southeast Asian English. This is not a kind of poor language that mimics English, but a vigorous new form of English, reflecting the creativity of English speakers in this area.

There is no doubt that because of the distinct characteristics of climate, soil, rivers, culture, religion and so on, the use of English in the Mekong region will certainly have diverse and characteristic variations. Thus, this study was conducted to investigate how cultural characteristics in this region will influence the way Vietnamese people use English. From there, I hope that it will lay the groundwork for a broader study of English usage in countries in the Mekong region in general.

## Literature Review

### The Relationship between Language and Culture

The definition of culture and language must be clarified first before I can examine how the two are related. In this study, I uphold Byram's (2008) definition of culture as "common beliefs, values, and behaviors of a social group," where a "social group" might be anything from a small family to a large country. In addition, I retain Kramsch's (2009) version of language because it discusses the relationship between language and socially-shared realities or cultures, even if they are only temporary. According to Kramsch (2009), language is used not only as a tool for information exchange, but also as a symbolic system with the power to

create and shape symbolic realities, such as values, perceptions, and identities through discourse.

These ideas relating to language and culture were also mentioned in earlier research by Dell (1972), in which language is defined not just as sounds or writings; rather, it is the sounds and writings that make sense. However, meaning is not something general and immutable, existing in the middle of nowhere or in rigid, lifeless dictionaries. Meaning is always associated with a context in which there is a speaker/writer, one or more listeners/readers, in a certain atmosphere, and with social and emotional relationships and certain communication purposes. If meaning is always linked to context, then, according to Dell (1972), the key to understanding language in context is to start not with language but with context. Context, in that broad sense, is culture. Culture includes all material and spiritual products created by humans during the process of formation, existence, and development. This is also the meaning of the terminology being used in the research of many fields of the social sciences and humanities, such as literature, linguistics, history, philosophy and so on.

As Sapir-Whorf (2001) argues, different thoughts are brought about by the use of different forms of language. One is limited by the language used to express one's ideas. People who share a culture but speak different languages will have diverse worldviews because different languages will impose different limits. Nevertheless, language has cultural roots, and it reflects and transmits culture from one generation to the next (Emmitt and Pollock, 1997). Sharing the same line of research, Wardhaugh (2002) recognized the close relationship between language and culture, concluding that it was not possible to understand or appreciate one without knowledge of the other. However, this relationship can be expressed not only externally in specific material means, but also through an internal relationship (Stern, 2009). According to Stern (2009), one of the language's most crucial functions—the function of thought—forms the basis for this internal interaction. Without language, people cannot think. In other words, language serves as the foundation for all cognitive processes in humans.

Based on these studies, language and culture have a complicated relationship from my point of view. They are linked together. A certain population is generally highlighted by a distinct language. When you communicate in a different language, you are also communicating in that language's culture. Without personally gaining access to a culture, it is impossible to comprehend it. In addition to learning the alphabet, word structures, and grammar rules of a new language, learning a new language also entails learning about the traditions and behavior of that society. Because of how deeply established language is in a society, it is crucial to consider the culture of that society when learning or teaching a language.

#### **Research on Culture-related Interference in the World**

The influence of culture on language acquisition has been considered in many studies. Peterson and Coltrane (2003) discussed culture in second language (L2) teaching. They cited the thesis of Goode et al. (2003), according to which culture is an integrated pattern of human behavior including thoughts, communication, language, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesy, etiquette, manners, interactions and expected roles, relationships and behaviors of a race, ethnicity, religion, or social group, and the ability to pass these on to succeeding generations. This definition is important because it affirms language as part of culture. Therefore, cultural factors can affect L2 learning fluency. Goode et al. (2003) even pointed out that language competence alone is not enough for language learners to become proficient in that language. The use of formal or informal language depends on cultural situations.

Subsequently, Shukla (2011) maintained that language is embedded in culture, investigating whether an Indian's and a Westerner's perceptions of the world differed. These variations are dependent on subtle factors, such as how things are perceived. Shukla (2011) also discussed how associative contexts of certain words can have a different meaning in the context used in the author's country, India. Also, certain words that have context in England do not have context in India because the meanings or situations are not practiced or used in the country.

Moreover, Choudhury (2014) commented that language learning not only implies knowledge of its grammar rules, and the denotative meanings of words, but also involves cultural phenomena, including the way of life, habits and customs, history, and everything else that is part of culture.

Similarly, Mishina-Mori et al. (2018) studied whether there is an indication of cross-linguistic influence in expressions among school-age Japanese and English bilingual learners. They concluded that there were incidents of cross-linguistic influence in using certain expressions in bilingual school-age children. Additionally, learning two languages at the same time can interfere with learning each language.

#### **Research on Culture-related Interference in the Mekong Region Countries**

In the Mekong region in general and in Vietnam in particular, the question of whether indigenous culture has influenced English usage as a foreign language has attracted many different opinions of scholars and researchers.

Yang (2019) concluded that under the influence of Chinese language and culture, including Chinese word formation, sentence structure, traditional idioms, narrating patterns and thinking modes, the emergence of a new version—Chinese English—appears to be unavoidable. Therefore, Chinese learners and teachers should emphasize both the fundamental rules of the English language and the traditions of the Chinese language and culture when learning and teaching English, and develop a Chinese way of English language acquisition. Regarding English usage in Cambodia, Stephen and Suksiri (2010) conducted a questionnaire probing students' views on the notion of Cambodian English, as well as their preferences for learning different varieties of English. The study suggests some evolution of the status of English, from English as a foreign language (EFL) to English as an international language. Following the same line of research, Robert and David (2014) explored the effects of culture on Thai learners of English. The issue of English usage was also discussed in Wannapa (2017), describing the

past events and the present situation, and closing with a discussion of the future of English in the country. From this study, it can be seen that the long existence of English in the country has had some influence on its usage and the attitudes of Thais. In addition, the current status of English as the dominant international language worldwide has a great impact on English usage in Thailand today. Moreover, teaching English as a foreign language is also an important issue with scholars in Laos and Myanmar such as Ya (2019), and Achren and Kittiphanh (2020).

In recent years in Vietnam, many linguists have begun to conduct research on the topic of Vietnamese English. An early work was that of Miller (1976) on the phonetic problems of Vietnamese learning English. Next, in 1986, the issue of phonetics continued to be discussed in Hoang Thi Thanh Giang's doctoral thesis on contrast analysis of Vietnamese and English sound systems in the United States (Hoang Thi Thanh Giang, 1986). In 2003, focusing on the discourse segment, Pham Dang Binh's doctoral thesis emphasized culture-language interference errors in the discourse of Vietnamese learning English (Pham Dang Binh, 2003). In addition to these studies, Vietnamese English (or Vietlish) has also been my top concern in recent years. In my linguistics doctoral thesis, I investigated the impacts of Vietnamese and English grammatical differences on English expressions (Phan Thi Ngoc Le, 2017). Also, in my study on native language interference with target language usage (Phan Thi Ngoc Le, 2018), I continued to focus on specific instances from some ASEAN countries of native language (L1) interference on L2 in the grammatical structures of the second language learners' writing. This study also identified the effect of the differences and/or similarities between the structures of L1 and L2 on the target language.

### Research Gap

From the works listed above, I found that studies of the problem of such factors affecting second languages have been limited to the Inner Circle countries where English is the mother tongue, and in those Outer Circle countries where English is used as a second language such as Malaysia,

the Philippines, and Nigeria. However, few studies have been conducted much in the countries of the Expanding Circle, such as Vietnam and other Mekong region countries. Although I have written on this topic, these works were mainly focused on grammatical aspects. The interference of culture is still a topic that few researchers have studied in depth. Obviously, the culture of a country can cause interference in users' target language acquisition because of the differences in cultural ways of learning.

Because of the above remaining problems, I wanted to conduct a study to see if the culture of Vietnamese residents in the Mekong region has influenced English expressions or not. Thus, by highlighting the fundamental distinctions between Vietnamese and English culture, this article focuses on looking at how these cultural distinctions affect the English expressions of Vietnamese users.

### Research Study Design

To conduct this research, I collected data from 146 essays/assignments written in English by Vietnamese students. These are assignments in different disciplines such as languages, literature, economics, biotechnology, and agriculture under the undergraduate training programs of a number of universities in Vietnam. To ensure that I could collect a variety of assignments from different disciplines, I contacted groups of students studying at universities with the above training majors, and requested their permission formally for the use of their essays/assignments for the study. All of these students were informed about the purpose and the procedure of the research. I also clarified how the data from their assignments would be used in the study and guaranteed that all these data would be viewed only by the researcher, which assured the confidentiality of data. The anonymity of students was also assured when some sentence samples from their writing were quoted in the study.

The sentence samples containing cultural elements in the simile expressions of Vietnamese students from these materials were discussed

and compared with Vietnamese and English idioms and proverbs which are provided by well-known and reliable resources, including the following: English Similes Dictionary, Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs, Cambridge Idioms Dictionary, Dictionary of Vietnamese Idioms and Proverbs, Vietnamese Idiom Dictionary, and Vietnamese–English Dictionary of Idioms and Proverbs.

Based on the entry standards of English-language undergraduate programs in Vietnam, each student must have at least a level 3 ability in English according to the 6-level foreign language competency framework for Vietnam (equivalent to B1) for all major groups to ensure that students can study and write an essay in English as a mandatory requirement. This criterion can partly ensure that these students have a relatively similar level of English.

### **Research Methodology: Data Collecting Methods**

The main research methods used in this study include the comparative method and the error analysis method.

First, the comparative method was used in the process of comparing some cultural aspects between Vietnam and the West (specifically Britain) and relating the uses of some cultural aspects in expressions in Vietnamese (source language) with equivalent usage in English (target language).

Second, in order to analyze the English expressions by Vietnamese students, the study was based on the error analysis method of Corder (1967). Error analysis includes the following steps:

- Step 1: Collect errors
- Step 2: Identify errors
- Step 3: Describe errors
- Step 4: Explain errors
- Step 5: Evaluate errors

There have been many studies of errors applying this procedure to achieve the research goal. However, most of those studies ruled out step 5, the evaluation of errors, because it required the researcher to do a lot of work at once. In addition, doing this step also required the

researcher to apply a separate research method. Therefore, in this study, I followed Corder's (1967) error analysis procedure but excluded step 5. According to the trend of error analysis, there are two basic types of errors:

(1) *Interlingual errors*: those errors caused by the influence of the learner's mother tongue on the target language product of the learner, especially in areas where the two languages are very different.

(2) *Intralingual errors*: those caused by factors within the structure of the target language, not by the influence of the mother tongue.

Because my study was to identify the source of the cultural interference with target language usage, I focused on analyzing interlingual errors.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

For the data analysis procedure, I first applied the inferential method to estimate the main cultural aspects appearing in English expressions of Vietnamese students from preliminary analysis of students' essays. In addition, the descriptive method was also used for description of various characteristics of Vietnamese cultural aspects that affect Vietnamese learners' English expressions. The results obtained are discussed in the following section.

### **Results and Discussions**

As mentioned above, I gathered 146 essays/assignments written in English from Vietnamese students. Based on the error analysis method, I collected and analyzed 1646 sentence samples containing cultural elements in the simile expressions of Vietnamese students. Among them, 455 non-standardized English expressions were found, which accounted for 27 percent. The data indicate that in the essays, the number of English sentences with errors appears at an average rate. The results of this investigation are quite reasonable because at this English level (equivalent to B1), students can be independent in using English structures.

When analyzing English expressions by Vietnamese students, it is obvious that there are some comparative expressions that are influenced by Vietnamese culture. The difference in comparative images between English and Vietnamese idiomatic expressions results from differences between the two cultures. In a broad sense, to talk about culture, we need to talk about nature, because, above all, culture is a reflection of nature, in which nature is adjusted by humans to meet their needs in all aspects of life (Eleanor et al., 2006). The cultural identity of a country is rooted in historical conditioning. Therefore, we need to understand the geographical characteristics of countries because they play an important role in the formation and development of cultures, the formation of economies, political organizations, customs and so on (Susan, 2006). Culture is, first and foremost, a reflection of a community as it deals with climatic and geographic challenges as well as socio-historical conditions (Ngoc and Van den Born, 2019). From these perspectives, some prominent cultural factors of Vietnam and Britain were compared and contrasted to explain the Vietnamese users' inappropriate English expressions, as described below.

### **The Effects of Climate Conditions on Culture**

The first difference between Vietnam and the UK lies in climate conditions. According to Climate Change Knowledge Portal (2021), Vietnam has a tropical climate zone, and the yearly monsoon has an impact across the entire nation. Monsoon circulations, which bring substantial rainfall to the north and south from May to October and to the central regions from September to January, correspond to rainy seasons. The UK, in contrast, has a temperate climate. This often means that Britain experiences warm, rainy summers and cool, damp winters. Extremes of heat or cold, drought, or wind are uncommon in Britain compared to other countries. The weather in Britain is also quite unpredictable.

When analyzing Vietnamese users' English expressions, it can be found that Vietnamese people have some comparative expressions related to the weather, like example (1) below:

Example 1: Meeting friends from afar is *like a drought meeting a shower*.

The above expression refers to an encounter, which is expected with a long-awaited state of mind. It can be seen that "drought" and "shower" are two common weather phenomena in a tropical country like Vietnam. Meanwhile, since the weather in the West is diverse and mild weather, and it is characterized by snow (Climate Change Knowledge Portal, 2021), the British use the image "snow" quite often in their expressions. One example can be seen below:

Example 2: Mike is *snowed under* with work. He cannot come and watch the game with us tonight. (In *English Weather Idioms*, Rebecca, 2020)

This expression refers to the situation of having too much work to do or having a lot of matters to deal with at once. Thus, it is apparent that, based on the specific characteristics of the climate in each country, people often use familiar images associated with common weather phenomena in those places.

In addition to these differences, it is noticeable that regarding the weather, there are also a few similar expressions shared by the two countries. Although Vietnam's weather is tropical, weather variation between seasons and regions is usual. Therefore, it is found that both the Vietnamese and the British use the image "the weather" to refer to a person whose mood or attitude is volatile regularly. That is why the idiomatic expression, "as changeable as the weather" (in *English Weather Idioms*, Rebecca, 2020), is used in both countries.

### **The Effects of Cultural Differences in Lifestyle and Living Conditions**

In addition to the weather, there are also obvious distinctions between Vietnam and Britain in terms of lifestyles and living conditions. According to Le Van Toan (2016), Vietnamese culture originated in wet rice areas in the Red River delta more than four thousand years ago. Therefore, wet rice farming is the mainstay of Vietnamese culture. Like Vietnam where agriculture is the main focus of economy (Dezan, 2021), the importance of agriculture to the British economy is emphasized by

the fact that Britain has 149,000 farm businesses (Joanna, 2022). However, while Vietnamese culture is based primarily on wet rice farming, in Britain, arable farming is the most common type of farming, in which wheat is the most extensively planted arable crop (Rudi and Rina, 2019). Flour, made from ground wheat, can be found in a wide variety of foods, including bread, cakes, biscuits, and morning cereals, which may be very rare products in Vietnam. In daily life, people come into contact with production tools and animals directly or indirectly for their agricultural production (Maitah et al., 2020). The lifestyle and living conditions of each country are associated with different agricultural practices, and have an impact on the Vietnamese and British comparative images.

When analyzing some sentence patterns of Vietnamese students, I found that Vietnamese people often have comparative expressions mainly based on wet rice agricultural production. Some examples can be seen below.

Example 3: This story is told over and over again, which is *as tough as a rag*.

Example 4: These troubles cling to us *as tough as leeches*.

When Vietnamese people use the comparison “*as tough as a rag*” in example (3), it refers to a situation that seems to last forever, annoying the people involved. Moreover, in example (4), a *leech* (known as *đũa* in Vietnamese) is a kind of worm that will attach itself to the skin of an animal or human and be difficult to remove. Hence, it also describes a situation where individuals are uneasy and annoyed because it goes on forever. And since the majority of Vietnamese people are farmers, working in the field is necessary. Wet rice farming, in particular, requires farmers to spend excessive amounts of time in water, which is home to numerous species of animals, including, leeches. This animal’s distinctive trait is how strongly it sticks to the skin. Thus, when used in expressions like example (4), Vietnamese users refer to the things that are confusing, dragging, procrastinating, and persistent.

However, in the idiomatic expressions with similar meanings, the British compare them to *old leather* and *boots*, as in this sentence:

“*This steak is as tough as old boots*” (in *English Similes Dictionary*, Elyse, 2013). The British often make clothes, shoes, and boots from animal skins which are strong and durable and can shield them from the cold winter weather.

### **The Effects of Cultural Differences in Animal Conceptions**

In the writing samples collected, animals are also used as a common simile representing specific cultural features of each country. Thus, their meanings also vary across cultures.

Examples can be found easily in comparisons of power, as in the one below.

Example 5: When he reached the top of the hill, he felt *as strong as a buffalo*. (In Britain: *as strong as a horse* (in *English Similes Dictionary*, Elyse, 2013))

According to Paulene et al. (2021), the buffalo is a domesticated animal commonly found in Southeast Asia. It is a highly valued agricultural animal for smallholders and its image is related to wet rice civilization. As a result, when Southeast Asian people in general and Vietnamese people in particular want to talk about hard work or strength, they often think of the strength of buffalo. That image can be found not only in idioms but also in many proverbs and Vietnamese folk songs. In the past, the pioneers of cultivation considered buffaloes as a basic factor in agricultural production as in the simile in *Dictionary of Vietnamese idioms and proverbs*: “*The buffalo is the head of business*” (Nguyen Lan, 2015), because the buffalo can perform the hard and important work in the fields for agricultural production. In other words, the buffalo was considered to be an important element of the former agricultural life, so buffalo has really entered the spiritual world of Vietnamese people for thousands of years. For the Vietnamese, buffalo is a strong and industrious animal. The above information might explain why Vietnamese people often compare the strength of a person to the strength of a buffalo. By contrast, in Britain with a history of nomadic culture, the people relate a man’s power to a horse rather than a buffalo. That is the reason for the English expression, “*as strong as a horse*”

(in *English Similes Dictionary*, Elyse, 2013). Horses traditionally were used to pull plows and carts and are now used for recreation. Particularly, horses are much faster than buffalo, and can carry a weight many times greater than their own. Therefore, if a person is compared to a horse, he must be very strong.

In addition to using different animals to compare strength, there are a few differences in dog-related connotations between Vietnam and Britain. According to Phuoc Buou (2018), in ancient times, when Vietnamese life depended solely on farming and animal husbandry, dogs were the animals closest to humans. Dogs were raised for domestic, farming, and husbandry needs. At home, they assisted people in looking after their property; while in the field, they helped to drive away attackers from the cultivated land. Dogs acted as watchdogs and guards for those working alone in the wild or in the fields, not pets; therefore, dogs often carry a hard and strenuous connotation following idiomatic expressions. First, “Cho ngap phai ruoi” (in *Vietnamese idiom dictionary*, Bich Hang, 2019), or “The dog caught a fly in its mouth while yawning,” refers to a coincidence or someone’s achievement being caused by good luck. Second, “Cho gia giu xuong” (in *Vietnamese idiom dictionary*, Bich Hang, 2019), or “The old dog holds the bone,” describes an incapable person who is nevertheless greedy for a position or property. Moreover, Vietnamese proverbs also mention the bites of a dog. “Cho can ao rach” (in *Vietnamese idiom dictionary*, Bich Hang, 2019), or “Dogs bite the torn shirt,” describes a troubled person getting into more trouble. However, in many English-speaking countries, dogs are loved and regarded as lovable pets, and even become human friends, and are usually not kept as watchdogs and guards like in Vietnam. Dogs are well-raised and even protected by law. In the UK, it is illegal for a person to continue driving after hitting a dog (Helens, 2019). Because of their great affection for dogs, British people use images of dogs with positive connotations, for example, *to be a lucky dog*, *to dress like a dog dinner* (in *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, Jennifer, 2015).

Another example of differences is that of words used to describe a person who is not very bright. The British often refer to a donkey: *as*

*stupid as a donkey* (in *English Similes Dictionary*, Elyse, 2013). However, Vietnamese people will compare someone to a cow, as in the expression, *stupid as a cow* (Kandle, 2021). This difference can be easily explained because in a tropical agricultural country like Vietnam, people are already familiar with animals such as cows, chickens, and so on. However, the British are acquainted with both horses and donkeys, which are much more difficult to train than horses.

### **The Effects of Cultural Differences in Other Aspects**

Finally, the interference of culture is also reflected in some other aspects like the religion, idealism, and literature of each country. One example from collected writing samples can be illustrated in the following:

Example 6: One common feature in almost all Vietnamese fairy tales is that the authors always want to construct an image of the main character *as gentle as the Buddha*, and have a happy ending.

Unlike Britain where the official religion is Christianity (Paola, 2020), Mahayana Buddhism is one of the major religions in Vietnam; therefore, Vietnamese culture is heavily influenced by this religious heritage (Phuong Vu, 2017). This can explain why in example (6), a person’s gentleness and kindness can be compared to that of the Buddha, a very kind being who is said to be able to protect the poor and the weak and bring them happiness (“Gautama Buddha,” 2022). Moreover, in Vietnamese, there are a number of idiomatic expressions related to characters in Buddhist books or temples, such as the following example:

Example 7: The first impression of that man was that he was *as fat as Di Lac* (Mr. Maitreya).

In the example, Mr. Maitreya is a fat man with a protruding belly who represents prosperity and wealth. According to Buddhist tradition, “Mr. Maitreya is a bodhisattva who is prophesied to appear on Earth, achieve complete Enlightenment, and teach the Dharma” (“Maitreya,” 2022). Similar to that comparison, there is also an expression, *as thin as Arhat*, in which Arhat is the name of a statue of a highly enlightened being at the temple, worshiped by the Vietnamese.

From these examples, it can be seen that the religious tradition of Buddhism has a significant influence on Vietnamese culture, which eventually leads to the inclusion of religious images in language expressions.

As regards literature, culture interference is also reflected in images of famous characters in literary works, as seen in the example below.

Example 8: This woman is *as jealous as Hoan Thu*, which can lead her to be dangerous and do harm to others.

In this example, comparing a jealous person to Hoan Thu comes from the image of the character Hoan Thu, who is an extremely jealous cruel woman in the famous work, *The Tale of Kieu* by the great poet Nguyen Du. Moreover, the Vietnamese often think of jealousy whether this person is a man or a woman. By contrast, the British when talking about jealousy, often think of Othello (a male character), as in the phrase, *as jealous as Othello*. Othello is a famous literary work by William Shakespeare that focuses on the dangers of jealousy. In Othello, the protagonist gives in to jealousy when he is led to believe that his wife has been unfaithful wife. In the end, Othello kills his wife and then commits suicide (Bevington, 2022).

In addition, the use of comparative images partly reflects the British and Vietnamese way of thinking and observing the world. One illustration is shown below.

Example 9: The main plot's good intention in wishing to know more of the intelligent young lady, *as pretty as a fairy* that made him delighted, really drew the attention from the readers.

In addition, there are other Vietnamese expressions with the word *fairy*, such as "*as happy as a fairy*" (in *Vietnamese idiom dictionary*, Bich Hang, 2019). A fairy is not a real person but exists only in the imagination of poor farmers, who always want a better life. By contrast, a British way of describing feelings of happiness would be to say: *as happy as a king* (in *English Similes Dictionary*, Elyse, 2013). This comparison is due to the fact that a king seems to live happily in a lavishly decorated palace, eat the finest food, hold high power, and is

admired by many people. The state of happiness mentioned here is quite specific because the king is a real person. Apparently, the British tend to think more concretely and realistically than the Vietnamese.

## Conclusion

This study investigated whether Vietnamese culture has influenced the English expressions of Vietnamese users, initially using the comparative technique to gather data and compare some cultural elements of Vietnam with those of the West (specifically Britain). The study found that because of the cultural differences between Vietnam and Britain, Vietnamese and British people use different comparative imagery in their expressions. Those differences may stem from climate conditions, lifestyle and living conditions, conceptions of animals, religion, literature, and so on.

From the findings of this study, I suggest some pedagogical implications appropriate for teaching English as a foreign language to learners from Vietnam and other Mekong region countries. First, teachers should raise students' awareness of the similarities and differences between British and native idiomatic expressions. The teacher should compare and explain why they are similar or different. Second, it will be helpful if teachers encourage students to use English comparative expressions in their daily lives as frequently as possible. There should not be any worry about communication failures or the number of idiomatic expressions acquired because even native speakers cannot remember all of them. The importance is that students should try to memorize some useful ones that are common in daily communication. Finding Vietnamese equivalents, if possible, is vital for Vietnamese language learners. Despite the cultural differences, there are still several idioms that are easily translated into Vietnamese without losing their meaning.

I view this study as the next step in the series of studies I have done on language transfer with the aim of finding various characteristics of English when it is widely spoken in the Vietnamese community.

Culture is a very broad field, covering many aspects of society. Therefore, the desire to generalize the findings for culture interference may need further research on a larger population and a greater variety of research materials for a more comprehensive and thorough picture. It is hoped that the results obtained will be able to help Vietnamese learners of English have a broader view of the English varieties being used so as to have appropriate target language approaches for both teachers and learners. From there, I also hope to create the foundation for a larger investigation of English usage in the Mekong region countries in general.

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