AN INVESTIGATION INTO SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC FEATURES OF ENGLISH IDIOMS

Bui Thi Kim Loan[*]

Binh Dương University
504 Binh Duong Avenue, Thu Dau Mot City, Binh Duong Province, Vietnam

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate syntactic and semantic features of English idioms. The data of this study were 6,500 English idioms collected from Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the eighth edition (OALD8) and described quantitatively and qualitatively. The data were analyzed and presented with statistics, percentages, and content analysis. The findings demonstrated syntactic and semantic features of English idioms. Syntactically, English idioms were categorized into nominal, verbal, adjectival, adverbial, prepositional, conjunctional and interjectional idioms. Semantically, the findings showed the meanings of idiomatic variants, idioms used as slang, humorous idioms, idioms with proper names, idioms used in various fields, idioms used formally and informally, and so forth. The results of this study are beneficial to teachers of English, foreign language students as well as translators who have difficulty in identifying English idioms and translating them into Vietnamese. In addition, the study gives some implications for teaching and learning English idioms in Vietnamese contexts.

Keywords: syntactic, semantic, features, English idioms, translation

1. Introduction

It is undeniable that English idioms are considered difficult for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners to translate. Baker (2011) maintains that:

> The main problems that idiomatic and fixed expressions pose in translation relate to two main areas: the ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly; and the difficulties involved in rendering the various aspects of meaning that an idiom or a fixed expression conveys into the target language. These difficulties are much more pronounced in the case of idioms than they are in the case of fixed expressions. (p. 68)

It is observed that EFL learners in Vietnam encountered numerous challenges with the identification and interpretation of English idioms. Especially, in the second semester of 2021-2022 school year, the researcher was assigned to teach six Translation 2 classes at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Van Lang University, and the students from these classes had difficulty in translating English idioms into Vietnamese because they could not identify syntactic and semantic features of the English idioms. This encouraged the author to carry out this study with the aim of investigating syntactic and semantic features of English idioms to help EFL learners learn and use English idioms more effectively and communicatively.

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[*] Corresponding author.
 Email address: buithikimloanpt@gmail.com

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Idiom

There have been numerous definitions of idiom. OALD8 defines an idiom as a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words, and this dictionary also presents another semantic sense of idiom as the kind of language and grammar used by particular people at a particular time and place. Larson (1984, p. 20) defines that an idiom is 'a string of words whose meaning is different from the meaning conveyed by the individual words'. It can be inferred that an idiom must contain at least two words. Several idiom dictionaries classify idioms as phrases as well as clauses or sentences, therefore, idioms also consist of proverbs, sayings and maxims.

Baker (2011, p. 67) distinguishes that 'idioms and fixed expressions are at the extreme end of the scale from collocations in one or both of these areas: flexibility of patterning and transparency of meaning'. He explains that idioms allow 'little or no variation in form' and 'often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components'. From the above definitions of the idiom, it can be said that idioms are used with distinctive meanings (e.g., literal and figurative), grammar and use.

2.2. Syntactic Features of English Idioms

Syntactically, Baker (2011) thinks that speakers and writers cannot (1) change the order the words in an idiom, (2) delete a word from an idiom, (3) add a word to an idiom, (4) replace a word with another, and (5) change idioms' grammatical structure. It can be understood that there are few variations of idioms in terms of the replacement of lexical items and grammatical structures. Besides, Makkai (1972) maintains that an idiom is composed of at least two words and conventional expressions. Baker (2011) adds that some idioms having 'situation- or register-specific formulae perform a stabilizing role in communication' (p. 68). For example, some of them are 'Many happy returns' (*Chúc mừng sinh nhật*), 'Merry Christmas' (*Chúc mừng Giáng sinh*), and 'Yours sincerely' (*Trân trọng*). Flavel and Flavel (2000, p. 6) maintain that idioms are 'very fixed grammatically'. It can be said that constituents of idioms cannot be separated in most cases.

Baker (2011, p. 68) highlights that 'a person's competence in actively using the idioms and fixed expressions of a foreign language hardly ever matches that of a native speaker', and it is not easy to know 'when and how an idiom can be manipulated'. As regards the importance of idioms, Larson (1984) states that the translators need to 'use idioms fluently and competently in the TL', i.e. target language (p. 116). Therefore, it is believed that if EFL learners are exposed to English idioms in a variety of communicative situations, they will acquire a certain number of English idioms and be able to use them in daily communication and for professional purposes.

It can be said that recognizing English idioms syntactically or structurally is important. Arnold (1986, p. 172) classifies idioms based on syntactic structure or parts of speech into seven kinds. These comprise (1) nominal idioms, (2) verbal idioms, (3) adjectival idioms, (4) adverbial idioms, (5) prepositional idioms, (6) conjunctional idioms, and (7) interjectional idioms. Unlike Arnold, Koonin (1970, p. 140) divides English idioms into four types from a functional perspective. These consist of (1) nominative idioms, (2) nominative-communicative idioms, (3) interjectional idioms, and (4) communicative idioms. In this study, only Arnold's (1986) categorization of idioms was used to investigate syntactic features of English idioms with the scope of 484 idioms with body parts extracted from OALD8. The classification of

English idioms with body parts based on syntactic structure helps EFL learners identify English idioms with body parts in specific communicative situations. EFL learners need to locate English idioms in the text and infer their functional use so that they can translate them into Vietnamese easily and lively.

2.3. Semantic Features of English Idioms

Semantically, Nguyen and Nguyen (2019) find that figurativeness is one of the typical features of idioms. Figurative meanings can be expressed by using simile, metaphor, metonymy, rhetoric and exaggeration. They add that English idioms can express meanings positively, neutrally or negatively. They also maintain that meanings of appreciation and attitude are integrated into idioms to express meanings of respect, approval, disagreement, disregard and sympathy. Besides, Ambrose (2008) maintains that learning vocabulary of English requires being aware of denotative and connotative meanings to infer figurative meanings of idioms.

In the context of teaching and learning English, Chen and Lai (2013) argue that rote learning and memorization of idioms are a waste of time and effort because learners learn idioms without associating forms with meanings. They maintain that meanings of idiomatic expressions are arbitrary and not predictable. From this view, it can be easily seen that it is essential for teachers of English to design tasks that help their EFL learners recognize and use English idioms in a variety of communicative contexts. Additionally, Baker (2011, p. 75) finds that English idioms are used in a variety of text types; serious, international magazines; advertisements; promotional materials and tabloid press. Teachers of English should introduce English idioms in various contexts so that they can use them in real communication in future, whereas EFL students need to actively learn English idioms through learning sources (e.g., books, movies, YouTube videos and so forth) that they can be exposed to.

More importantly, Thyab (2016) adds that all speakers of English language should know and be proficient in employing idiomatic expressions in English. Some people argue that idioms are only used in spoken language or informal conversations; however, Laflin (1996) insists that idiomatic expressions are utilized in both formal and informal situations. Baker (2011, p. 75) states that 'using idioms in English is thus very much a matter of style'. He also distinguishes 'written and spoken discourse' and argues that 'written mode is associated with a high level of formality, tend, on the whole, to avoid using idioms in written texts'. In reality, idioms can be used in both formal and informal situations according to communicative purposes. In general, using idioms in real communicative situations is a signal of a proficient and fluent learner like native speakers of language. EFL learners should take 'questions of style, register and rhetorical effect' into consideration when using English idioms to serve communicative purposes (Baker, 2011, p. 76). Therefore, English idioms are of great importance in the process of learning EFL.

In addition, there have been a great number of studies on difficulties or challenges in learning and using English idioms. Gibbs et al. (1997) emphasizes that even native speakers find learning and understanding idioms hard. In other words, there are some cases in which speakers would not like to express their ideas explicitly and literally, so they have to use idioms to express their ideas implicitly. This can avoid hurting other people's feelings and saving their face. Kövecses and Szabó (1996) remark that idioms are a challenge for L2 learners. Later, Chen and Lai (2013) observe that learners who are less exposed to target language have difficulty in understanding conceptual metaphors because of not knowing cultural conventions. This means that the lack of background knowledge such as cultural knowledge also brings some

challenges for EFL learners to communicate successfully if they only base on literal meanings of idioms without being aware of origins of these culture-specific idioms. Furthermore, Baker (2011) shows difficulties in translating idioms because they are sometimes 'transparent, opaque or misleading' (p. 71), and stresses a transparent idiom can be more difficult than an opaque one. Newmark (1988) maintains that idioms had better 'never be translated word-for-word' (p.125), which means that the meaning of idioms cannot be inferred literally in most cases. Baker (2011, pp. 71-75) summarizes some difficulties of rendering idioms as follows:

(1) An idiom or fixed expression may have no equivalent in the target language.

(2) An idiom or fixed expression may have a similar counterpart in the target language, but its context of use may be different; the two expressions may have different connotations, for instance, or they may not be pragmatically transferable.

(3) An idiom may be used in the source in both its literal and idiomatic senses at the same time. Unless the target-language idioms correspond to the source-language idiom both in form and in meaning, the play on idiom cannot be successfully reproduced in the target text.

(4) The very convention of using idioms in written discourse, the contexts in which they can be used, and their frequency of use may be different in the source and target languages.

Baker (2011, p. 69) places an emphasis that 'the more difficult an expression is to understand and the less sense it makes in a given context, the more likely that a translator will recognize it as an idiom'. The easily recognized idioms are 'it's raining cats and dogs' (*trời mưa như trút nước*), 'throw caution to the wind' (*không còn thận trọng*), 'storm in a tea cup' (*việc bé xé ra to*), 'jump down someone's throat' (*phản ứng rất giận dữ*), and 'food for thought' (*điều đáng suy nghĩ*)'. Moreover, some ill-formed idioms include 'put paid to' (*phá hỏng*), 'by and large' (*đại loại*), 'the world and his wife/friends' (*mọi người*)'. Lastly, some literally untranslated idioms with simile-like structure are 'like a bat out hell' (*rất nhanh*) and 'like water off a duck's back' (*như nước đổ đầu vịt*)'. Moreover, Baker (2011, pp. 69-70) maintains that idioms easily misinterpreted are caused by the fact that some idioms are 'misleading', and have similar surface counterparts but convey 'partially different meanings'. Also, Duff (1989) points out that translating fixed expressions such as simile structure, metaphor, idioms, proverbs, sayings, slangs, and verbal idioms are challenging for translators. It is thought that introducing these idioms and fixed expressions along with their meanings in the target language is of importance to help EFL learners acquire English idioms easily.

Moreover, Baker (2011) points out two main problems of translating idioms. These comprise 'the ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly' and 'rendering the various aspects of meaning that an idiom or a fixed expression conveys into the target language' (p. 68). This means that recognizing idioms in contexts is vital to interpret and choose the most appropriate meanings of idioms. It is known that a great number of English idioms can convey a variety of meanings; therefore, translators need to choose proper semantic senses. Knowing how to use a dictionary to look up idioms is required for EFL learners to make sense of the idioms. According to Komissarov (1985, as cited in Arono & Nadrah, 2019), translators need to pay much attention to figurative, literal and affective meanings; register, and national color in the process of translation. Additionally, Rizq (2015) comments that idioms are culture-based because they convey numerous meanings related to culture, heritage, history and customs of native speakers. It can be said that EFL learners should not translate idioms literally in most cases and they have investigated hidden figurative meanings in most idioms. Besides, they

should use English idioms to be appropriate for different communicative situations, which means that they have to choose proper idioms to be used formally and informally in various registers/fields and cultures.

To deal with numerous challenges related to identifying, understanding and utilizing English idioms, multiple researchers suggest a variety of effective ways to translate English idioms into another language. First, Baker (2011, p. 76) suggests six strategies to translate idioms as follows:

(1) Using an idiom of similar meaning and form.
(2) Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form.
(3) Borrowing the source language idiom.
(4) Translation by paraphrasing.
(5) Translation by omission of a play on idiom.
(6) Translation by omission of entire idiom.

Additionally, Nida and Taber (1969) distinguish two sorts of equivalence including formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. They maintain that dynamic equivalence is more effective than formal equivalence because the former focuses on the similar force of meaning while the latter pays attention to the message. Indeed, it is difficult to find all totally equivalent idioms, even no found equivalent idioms in several cases because some idioms originate from history, geography and culture. Hence, translators sometimes translate these idioms by paraphrasing or ignoring them.

In fact, Baker (2011, p. 69) advises that translators should approach 'good reference works and monolingual dictionary'. Or it is better to 'consult native speakers of the language' to make sense of the meanings of the idioms in a particular context. Nevertheless, it is argued that using monolingual dictionary greatly helps EFL learners' idiom comprehension. Besides, in EFL contexts it is difficult for students to have many chances to communicate with native speakers to comprehend English idioms.

Boers (2008) suggests that it is difficult for teachers to teach students how to memorize idioms by heart and that teachers should teach them systematically, which makes comprehension and memorization of idioms far easier. It is essential for teachers of English to find innovative and motivating methods to design various tasks to help their EFL learners realize, understand and use idioms in formal and informal communications properly.

2.4. Previous Studies

There have been numerous studies, theses and dissertations on English idioms from different perspectives in the world and Vietnam. Gass and Selinker (2001) pointed out the importance of idioms. They observed that non-native speakers found lexical errors more than grammatical ones when they communicated with native speakers. They suggested that formal instruction of idiom input was essential.

Similarly, Thyab (2016) carried out a study on the necessity of idiomatic expression to EFL learners. He found that recognizing the image and origin of idioms could help figure out figurative meanings of idioms in contexts. He also observed that non-native speakers of English were not able to use idiomatic expressions because they could not understand and use idiomatic meanings appropriately. He suggested that interpreting the original contexts in which the original image was based on helped understand meanings of derived idioms.

Chen and Lai (2013) investigated the teaching of English idioms in an EFL class from cognitive approach. They analyzed the students' written essays before and after the instruction

of English idioms. The findings revealed that the students used more idioms that were conceptual metaphors. The results also showed the students employed English idiomatic expressions that had conceptual metaphor equivalences in the source language. They highlighted the significance of culture and teaching English idioms cognitively.

Alrishan and Smadi (2015) investigated the challenges that foreign language students faced when they translated English idioms into Arabic. The findings revealed that the students found it hard to translate these English idioms due to vague contexts. This could be explained by the fact that the students lacked background knowledge to express English idioms with cultural meanings into Arabian and they did not have an interest in English idioms.

Amos and Abas (2021) examined elementary school students' comprehension of English idioms in Nairobi. Their study was aimed to find out at which age the students began to identify and interpret L2 idioms. Sixty students were grouped into three age ranges such as 5-8, 9-12 and 13-16. The findings revealed that the students could understand a few idioms at the age of 5, and they could comprehend idioms literally. However, when they were from 12 to 16, they understood non-literal meanings of idioms properly. They found out that the factor of age had an impact on the students' idiom comprehension. They thought that it was essential for the students to be exposed to language and acquire it at the early age. Their study also gave some implications for language teachers, material designers and language learners.

In Vietnam, Nguyen (2009) examined grammatical and semantic features of English idioms expressing happiness. She found that some English idioms including 'in seventh heaven', 'on cloud nine', 'on top of the world', 'over the moon', 'thrilled to bits' and 'walk on air' were used informally and expressed happiness. The study suggested that translators should pay attention to the meanings of these idioms based on contexts.

Nguyen and Nguyen (2019) explored English idioms with human-body parts and their Vietnamese equivalents. They used a case study to compare and contrast the translation of versions of two English novels. The findings showed that there were some equivalent and non-equivalent references found in Vietnamese translation of English idioms in these two novels. The findings indicated that there were 106 English idioms with 31 human-body parts in which six parts such as eye (14 idioms), hand (12), head (10), heart (8), foot (8) and face (7) were used the most in the two English novels.

Nguyen and Phan (2000) studied the syntactic and semantic features of English and Vietnamese idioms containing 'Go". It was a quantitative and qualitative research. They analyzed the idioms collected through Google books and demonstrated the combination of idioms containing 'Go' with its components. They found that both English and Vietnamese idioms were expressed in the forms of nominal, adjectival and adverbial phrases. They explored that English idioms in the forms of nominal, verbal, prepositional, and adverbial phrase had a rapport with semantic features. Syntactically, the findings revealed that idioms containing 'Go' could combine with simple and complex nominal phrases; preposition; adjective, and adverb. Semantically, the findings showed that English and Vietnamese idioms expressed hidden meanings and were metaphorical expressions to avoid hurting other people's feelings in some cases. The study also gave some implications for translation, teaching and learning foreign languages.

Nguyen (2021) investigated translation challenges with English phraseological units into Vietnamese. The qualitative study analyzed 241 English phraseological units with proper names. The findings revealed that these units were culture-specific and metaphorically used. The study showed some difficulties in translating these idioms and suggested appropriate

translation strategies for cross-linguistic phraseological units with proper names from English into Vietnamese.

Based on some gaps from the previous studies related to the size of surveyed data and research methods, this study was conducted to investigate the syntactic and semantic features of English idioms. To fulfill the purposes of the study, the study was seeking to answer the following research questions:

(1) What are the syntactic features of English idioms?
(2) What are the semantic features of English idioms?

3. Methods

This study was carried out to help EFL learners at the faculty of foreign languages at Van Lang university be aware of syntactic and semantic features of English idioms in order that they could translate English idioms into Vietnamese effectively in Translation 2 course. The main study subjects of this study were 6,500 English idioms collected from OALD8 which was updated and translated into Vietnamese.

At first, the researcher collected all English idioms from the dictionary called OALD8, and then the data of these idioms were typed and synthesized into a compiled file with 6,500 English idioms. To answer the two research questions, the researcher only analyzed 484 with body parts of these 6,500 idioms to investigate the syntactic features of English idioms due to time constraints, whereas the data with 6,500 English idioms were sorted out to examine the semantic features. All the idioms were collected, typed, and saved as a Microsoft Word file.

This study employed quantitative and qualitative methods to seek the answer for the two research questions. The research used frequencies, percentages, tables and content analysis to present the findings of the study.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Syntactic Features of English Idioms

This study employed Arnold (1986)'s classification of idioms to find out the answer for the first research question. Table 1 presents the categorization of 484 English idioms with body parts based on syntactic structure. The English idioms are grouped into seven types including nominal, verbal, adjectival, adverbial, prepositional, conjunctional, and interjectional idioms. The syntactic categorization of English idioms helps EFL learners recognize where the idioms are in the clause, and then they can guess the meanings of idioms in some situations.

Table 1

Classification of English Idioms With Body Parts

Classification of English idioms with body parts (The data collected from OALD8)		
1. Nominal idioms	- the long arm of sth - a firm hand	quyền lực, thẩm quyền kỷ luật sắt
2. Verbal idioms	- keep an eye on sb/sth - turn a blind eye (to sth)	chăm sóc; trông chừng vờ không biết

3. Adjectival idioms	- weak at the knees	bủn rủn
	- easy on the ear/eye	dễ nghe/ưa nhìn, dễ nhìn
4. Adverbial idioms	- at your mother's knee	khi còn rất nhỏ
	- (straight) from the horse's mouth	từ nguồn tin đáng tin cậy
5. Prepositional idioms	- in the public eye	nổi tiếng
	- for sb's eyes only	chỉ cho ai xem
6. Conjunctional idioms	- on the one hand / on the other hand	trái lại/ ngược lại
7. Interjectional idioms	- my foot!	cái con khỉ!

The statistics in Table 2 indicate that there are 292 out of 484 English idioms with body parts in the form of verbal phrase. The verbal idioms make up the highest percentage of 60.33%, followed by prepositional phrase with 72 idioms (14.88%) and nominal phrase with 50 idioms (10.33%). Noticeably, 25 idioms with body parts in the form of clause. The findings reveal that most of the English idioms with body parts are verbal idioms, which can bring some translation challenges to EFL learners. This finding is in line with Duff's (1989) study that translating verbal idioms is problematic.

Table 2

Statistics of English Idioms With Body Parts

Kinds of phrase	English idioms with body parts (Quantity)	Percentages
Adjectival phrase	27	5.58%
Adverbial phrase	18	3.72%
Nominal phrase	50	10.33%
Verbal phrase	292	60.33%
Prepositional phrase	72	14.88%
Clause	25	5.17%
Total	**484**	**100%**

Moreover, the analysis of 484 English idioms with body parts demonstrates that 21 body parts are found in the analyzed data in Table 3 below. It can be seen in Table 3 that some body parts are used much more than others. Particularly, English idioms with 'hand' have the highest percentage of 18.39%, followed by head (13.02%), eye (12.60%), face (8.81%), back (7.88%), and foot (6.61%). It can be inferred that people often use these body parts in daily activities; therefore, most English idioms with body parts use these six body parts.

Table 3

Statistics of Body Parts in 484 English Idioms

Number	Body parts	Numbers of English idioms with body parts	Percentages
1	Arm	12	2.48%
2	Back	38	7.85%
3	Chin	3	0.62%
4	Ear	23	4.75%
5	Elbow	5	1.03%
6	Eye	61	12.60%
7	Face	43	8.88%
8	Foot	32	6.61%
9	Forearm	1	0.21%
10	Hair	4	0.83%
11	Hand	89	18.39%
12	Head	63	13.02%
13	Hip	2	0.41%
14	Knee	7	1.45%
15	Leg	11	2.27%
16	Mouth	26	5.37%
17	Neck	16	3.31%
18	Nose	21	4.34%
19	Shoulder	12	2.48%
20	Thumb	7	1.45%
21	Toe	8	1.65%
Total		484	100%

Additionally, 5 out of 6.500 English idioms are not used in passive voice. This indicates that grammatical structures of these idioms are fixed, so the order of constituents in the idioms cannot be changed. EFL learners should pay attention to the translation of these idioms by not using 'bị' or 'được' in Vietnamese.

Table 4

English Idioms Not Used in Passive Voice

English idioms not used in passive voice	Vietnamese meaning
snap out of it/sth snap sb out of it/sth	cố gắng thoát khỏi buồn khổ; giúp ai thoát khỏi buồn khổ

steal a march (on sb)	làm trước/đi trước ai một bước
steal the show	thu hút sự chú ý hoặc tán thưởng hơn người khác
wet the/your bed	tè dầm
wet yourself/wet your pants/knickers	đái són

Fifth, 56 out of 6,500 English idioms are used with exclamation marks. The findings reveal that most of these English idioms with exclamation marks are used in informal situations. EFL learners should update these idioms so that they can communicate well with native speakers and interpret what the speakers mean in daily conversations.

Table 5

English Idioms With Exclamation Marks

English idioms with exclamation marks	Vietnamese meaning
(just) you wait!	hãy đợi đấy!
big deal!	không có gì ghê gớm
button it!	câm miệng, im mồm!
shut your mouth/face!	im mồm!
so there!	cứ thế thôi!

Finally, 70 out of 6,500 idioms have the form of questions with question marks. Using English idioms with question marks help speakers express their ideas functionally. Normally, questions are used to ask information from the listener; however, some English idioms are not used for asking information but for expressing things and states functionally.

Table 6

English Idioms With Question Marks

English idioms with question marks	Vietnamese meaning
Any luck?	có thành công không?
Heads or tails?	sấp hay ngửa?
What's his/her face?	người mà không nhớ tên
What's in aid of?	để làm gì?
What's the deal?	có chuyện gì thế
What's up with that?	thật ngu ngốc/vô lý

In general, in the investigation of syntactic features with the data of 484 English idioms with body parts demonstrates that most of the English idioms have the forms of verbal phrase (60.33%), prepositional phrase (14.88%) and nominal phrase (10.33%). Some English idioms containing exclamatory and question marks express functionally different meanings, whereas others are not used in passive voice.

4.2. Semantic Features of English Idioms

Based on the above synthesized literature review related to the semantic features of

idioms in general, particularly English ones, the second research question of this study is addressed. Semantically, the findings reveal that in addition to idioms whose origin are British English and American English, there are also some idioms from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Wales. This suggests that EFL learners should use idioms properly in specific communicative situations like the saying 'when in Rome, do as Romans do' (*Nhập gia tùy tục*). For instance, to express someone having trouble, EFL learners can use the expression 'have trouble' in British English and American English, but they have to use the idiom 'come short' in South African English. EFL learners are required to be aware of language variation so that they can communicate well in international communications in which English is used.

Table 7

Idiomatic Variants in English

Idiomatic variants in English	Vietnamese meaning	Australia	New Zealand	South Africa	Wales
not much chop	không tốt/hữu ích lắm	X	X		
within cooee (of)	không xa	X	X		
not have a bar of sth	không làm gì; cho qua; bỏ qua		X		
come short	gặp tai nạn/ rắc rối			X	
make a plan	lên, lập kế hoạch			X	
by there	ở đó, đến đó				X

Second, some English idioms are used as slangs. Slangs are used by a group of people for some purposes; for example, the idiom 'be on the game' (*làm gái mại dâm*) is mainly used by people involved in prostitution. The findings reveal there are 54 slangs out of 6.500 English idioms.

Table 8

English Idioms Used as Slangs

English idioms used as slangs	Vietnamese meaning
a crock of shit	đồ giả
a piece of piss	việc ngon ơ/dễ ợt
be on the game	làm gái mại dâm
be/ go up the spout	hỏng; bị hỏng, không hoạt động
beat it	cút đi
beat the rap	tẩu thoát
blow chunks	nôn

Third, the data analysis of OALD8 demonstrates that 93 among 6,500 English idioms are used with humorous meanings. It can be said that communicative purposes determine the choice of idioms that are used formally, informally, humorously or ironically. Some humorous idioms are 'a big cheese' (*nhân vật quan trọng*), 'a knight in a shining armour' (*anh hùng đội trời đạp đất*), or 'an early bird' (*người thức dậy rất sớm, người đến rất sớm*). The findings show

that if EFL learners translate these idioms literally, they cannot comprehend what the idioms are about. EFL learners are advised to read a variety of materials in which English idioms are used humorously to create a comfortable atmosphere for communicative participants.

Table 9

English Idioms With Humorous Meanings

English idioms with humorous meanings	Vietnamese meaning
a big cheese	nhân vật quan trọng, quyền lực
a gentleman/lady of leisure	người đàn ông/phụ nữ rỗi việc/nhàn hạ
a knight in shining armour	anh hùng đội trời đạp đất
a point of humour	thể diện
a shrinking violet	người rất nhút nhát/rụt rè, con cầy sấy
a/the pecking order	hệ thống thứ bậc
an early bird	người thức dậy, đến …rất sớm

Fourth, 31 of 6,500 English idioms contain proper nouns which denote people, things, places and countries. Normally, proper nouns are capitalized anywhere in a clause and maintained in the translation; however, some proper nouns in the English idioms in Table 10 are not kept in the target translation. The idioms such as 'when in Rome (do as the Romans do)' and 'Rome wasn't built in a day' containing the proper noun 'Rome' are translated into Vietnamese without mentioning the place 'Rome'.

Table 10

English Idioms With Proper Nouns

English idioms with proper nouns	Vietnamese meaning
(on) Shanks's pony	đi bộ
a/the sword of Damocles	mối nguy hiểm chực chờ
any/every Tom, Dick or Harry	người bình thường
as American as apple pie	rất Mỹ, đặc Mỹ
not for all the tea in China	bất kể phần thưởng lớn đến đâu
when in Rome (do as the Romans do)	nhập gia tùy tục
work like a Trojan	làm việc cật lực
before you can say Jack Robinson	rất nhanh; trong chốc lát
Rome wasn't built in a day	có công mài sắt, có ngày nên kim

Fifth, 16 out of 6,500 English idioms are used as taboos. Online Oxford dictionary defines taboo as 'a cultural or religious custom that does not allow people to do, use or talk about a particular thing as people find it offensive or embarrassing'. EFL learners need to be careful to use English idioms with taboo meanings.

Table 11

English Idioms Used as Taboos

English idioms used as taboos	Vietnamese meaning
can't be arsed (to do sth)	chả thèm làm
lick sb's boots lick sb's arse	xu nịnh
my arse	có ngu mới tin
not know your arse from your elbow	rất ngu ngốc
work you arse off	làm việc cật lực

Sixth, the analysis of 6,500 English idioms reveals that the idioms are employed in various fields and registers in Table 12. There are 45 idioms used in the field of literature, two for law, one for sports, two for business, four for computer, two for army, two for ship, eight for clothes, four for automobile, two for drinks, four for machine, one for meat, three of food, two for meals, and one for music. The findings also show that English idioms are used in formal and informal fields/registers. The findings of this study are similar to Baker's (2011) study on English idioms having situation- or register-specific formulae. For instance, some examples of register-specific formulae include 'a/the still small voice' (*tiếng nói của lương tâm*) used in the register of literature, 'aid and abet' (*tòng phạm*) in the field of law, or 'under separate cover' (*trong bao thư riêng*) used in the register of business.

Table 12

English Idioms Used in Various Fields or Registers

Fields/Register	English idioms used in various fields	Vietnamese meaning
Literature	a/the still small voice	tiếng nói của lương tâm
Law	aid and abet	tòng phạm
	of unsound mind	không chịu trách nhiệm vì mất năng lực hành vi (bị bệnh tâm thần)
Sports	out of bounds	ra ngoài đường biên
Business	under separate cover	trong bao thư riêng
Computer	be/come on line	dùng hoặc được kết nối với máy tính / Internet / liên lạc bằng máy tính
Army	(stand) at ease	nghỉ
Ship	leave into sight/view	hiện ra, nhô ra
	take the helm	bắt đầu lái tàu thuyền
Clothes	off the peg (Br.) off the rack (NA.)	may sẵn
Automobile	nose to tail	chạy chậm sát nhau và theo hàng dài

Drinks	on the house	miễn phí
Machine	on the blink	không còn hoạt động đúng cách
Meat	on the hoof	bán khi thú vẫn còn sống
Food	melt in your mouth	mềm và ngọt
Meal	on the side	món phụ
Music	to the accompaniment of sth	theo nhạc đệm

Seventh, there are 10 out of 6,500 English idioms which are used as old idioms. This suggests that EFL learners should be aware of these old English idioms so that they use them in appropriate situations. It can be easily seen that the old idiom 'your obedient servant' (*kính thư*) is not much used in formal letters and emails nowadays. Other formulaic expressions such as 'yours sincerely', 'sincerely yours', 'yours faithfully' and 'yours truly' can replace 'your obedient servant', but they have the same meaning with this old idiom. In informal letters and emails, this old idiom can be replaced with 'yours ever' or 'ever yours' (*thân mến, thân ái*) at the end of the letter or email.

Table 13

Old English Idioms

Old English idioms	Vietnamese meaning
a devil of a job/time	công việc/thời gian rất khó khăn/khó chịu
be up to your (old) tricks	ngựa quen đường cũ, vẫn chứng nào tật ấy
fall sick take sick	ngã bệnh
look here	dùng để phản đối điều gì
make merry	vui đùa, ăn chơi
not quite the thing	không khỏe mạnh, bất thường
on the shelf	quá thì, quá lứa
play fast and loose (with sb/sth)	lập lờ hai mặt

Eight, 200 out of 6,500 English idioms are used formally. In some formal communicative situations, using formal idioms is preferred. Recognizing and distinguishing formal idioms and informal ones is a challenge for EFL students; therefore, they should scrutinize formal and informal idioms in English and practice using these idioms in academic and formal situations.

Table 14

English Idioms Used Formally

English idioms used formally	Vietnamese meaning
a man of the match	thầy tu, tăng lữ
a point of departure	điểm xuất phát, khởi điểm
be no/a stranger to sth	quen thuộc; không quen thuộc
be of service (to sb)	có ích
by dint of sth/of doing sth	bởi, nhờ, bằng
by water	bằng tàu/thuyền
by/in virtue of sth	nhờ, vì
call sth into play	sử dụng, tận dụng
come to sb's knowledge	được ai biết

Ninth, there are 1803 out of 6,500 English idioms used informally. Most English idioms are used in informal situations, and EFL learners can find these informal idioms in daily conversations. That is the reason why numerous researchers argue that EFL learners have to master a great number of English idioms to be proficient and fluent like native speakers of English.

Table 15

English Idioms Used Informally

English idioms used informally	Vietnamese meaning
(a) fat chance (of sth/doing sth)	mơ đi
(all) by/on your lonesome	một mình
(all) in good time	đúng lúc
(as) clear as mud	không rõ; khó hiểu
(as) sure as eggs is eggs	hoàn toàn đúng
(get/have) itchy feet	muốn đi tới nơi khác; muốn làm khác biệt
(have) bough it	bị giết

Furthermore, 28 out of 6,500 English idioms use simile structure with 'as…as'. It can be seen that there is no translation of simile with 'as…as' into 'như' in Vietnamese in most cases. The translation of 'as…as' into 'như' into Vietnamese is found in the idiom '(as) clear as a day' (*rõ như ban ngày*), whereas other English idioms are translated into Vietnamese without using the word 'như', for example, 'as bald as a coot' (*trọc lốc*), 'as blind as a bat' (*mù, không thấy rõ*), 'as bright as a button' (*thông minh, sáng dạ*), or 'as clear as mud' (*khó hiểu*). The findings of this study are the same as Baker's (2011) study that ill-formed idioms (e.g., simile-as/like structure) bring challenges for translators. Hence, translators cannot base on literal meanings of the words in an idiom to infer the meaning of the whole idiom, but they have to infer some hidden meanings of the idiom.

Table 16

English Idioms With Simile-as Structure

English idioms with the simile-as structure	Vietnamese meaning
(as) a matter of course	việc/chuyện đương nhiên
(as) bald as a coot	trọc lốc
(as) blind as a bat	không thấy rõ; mù
(as) bright as a button	thông minh, sáng dạ
(as) clear as day	rõ như ban ngày
(as) clear as mud	không rõ; khó hiểu

Eleventh, 21 out of 6,500 idioms are used with ironic meanings. Using English idioms that express irony should be taken into consideration for reasons of politeness strategies.

Table 17

English Idioms With Ironic Meanings

English idioms with ironic meanings	Vietnamese meaning
a bright spark	người sáng dạ
a likely story	chuyện cứ như thật
a pearl of wisdom	lời nhận xét thông thái
ten out ten (for sth)	đúng, rất giỏi
there's/ that's … for you	đó là điển hình của bạn
tough luck	tội nghiệp chưa/đáng thương nhỉ

Also, the analysis of 484 English idioms with body parts reveal that some synonymous English idioms with body parts are found. To express the meaning of '*gậy ông đập lưng ông*', EFL learners can choose one of these English idiomatic variants with body parts such as 'make a rod for your back', 'cut off your nose to spite your face', or 'shoot yourself in the foot'. Similarly, some idiomatic variants including 'with a flea in your ear', 'tear your hair (out)', 'foam at the mouth', and 'wring sb's back' carry the same meaning of '*tức giận*'.

Table 18

Synonymous English Idioms With Body Parts

Number	Synonymous English idioms with body parts	Vietnamese meaning
1	Make a rod for your own back	
2	Cut off your nose to spite your face	
3	Shoot yourself in the foot	Gậy ông đập lưng ông
4	Cut off your nose to spite your face	
5	With a flea in your ear	
6	Tear your hair (out)	Tức giận

| 7 | Foam at the mouth |
| 8 | Wring sb's neck |

Thirteenth, 175 out of 6,500 English idioms are proverbs and sayings. It is observed that most proverbs and sayings are in the form of clause. These idioms often express figurative or metaphorical meanings, so EFL learners need to take them into consideration.

Table 19

English Idioms Used as Proverbs and Sayings

English idioms used as proverbs and sayings	Vietnamese meaning
Absence makes the heart grow fonder	càng xa càng nhớ
Beauty is in the eye of the beholder	đẹp xấu là tùy mắt mỗi người
Seeing is believing	thấy mới tin
Too many cooks spoil the broth	lắm thầy thối ma
Give a dog a bad name	tiếng xấu đồn xa
An eye for an eye	ăn miếng trả miếng
Familiarity breeds contempt	thân quá hóa nhờn

Generally, to some extent this section synthesizes a variety of semantic features of 6,500 English idioms. English idioms are used functionally to express different meanings in communication. This section presents the typical statistics and translation of English idioms used as idiomatic variants, slangs, taboos, and old English idioms; with humorous and ironic meanings, and simile-as structure; in different fields/registers and formal/informal situations; and as synonymous idioms and proverbs/sayings.

4.3. Discussion

The findings of this study disclose some certain syntactic and semantic features of English idioms. Syntactically, based on Arnold's (1986) classification of idioms, this study found some analyzed idioms that belonged to this author's categorization including nominal, verbal, adjectival, adverbial, prepositional, conjunctional, and interjectional idioms. Grammatically, some English idioms were not used in passive voice. It was also noticeable that there were some variations of idioms. This means that some British English idioms had their American English variants or others (i.e., Australian, South-African, and Welsh ones).

Furthermore, the analysis of 484 English idioms demonstrated that the idioms in the form of verbal phrase had the highest percentage with 60.33%, followed by prepositional phrase (14.88%), nominal phrase (10.33%), adjectival phrase (5.58%), clause (5.17%), and adverbial phrase (3.72%). The results of this study on linguistic features had an impact on EFL learners' idioms translation during Translation 2 course.

Semantically, the above findings of this study pointed out that English idioms were used differently functionally, and they hence conveyed various meanings thanks to a diversity of communicative situations. The findings demonstrated that English idioms could be used as slangs, taboos, proverbs and sayings. There were also some English idioms with proper nouns related to people, things, places and countries. English idioms were also used humorously and ironically. Interestingly, English idioms were employed in various fields or registers which

included literature, law, sports, business, computer, army, ship, clothes, automobile, drinks, machine, meat, food, meals, and music. Some old English idioms and idioms with simile-as structure were found in the findings, while a great number of idioms were utilized in formal and informal situations. Additionally, English idioms with exclamatory and question marks were observed in the findings.

Compared to previous studies, the findings shared some similarities in syntactic and semantic features with other researchers' findings. Nevertheless, the findings of this study were different from other studies to various extents.

First, Thyab (2016) found idioms which were used in some domains such as entertainment, sports and cooking, but the findings of this study indicated that English idioms were used in numerous fields or register including (1) literature, (2) law, (3) sports, (4) business, (5) computer, (6) army, (7) ship, (8) clothes, (9) automobile, (10) drinks, (11) machine, (12) meat, (13) food, (14) meal and (15) music. It could be seen that the findings of this study were in line with Thyab's study in some domains such as sports and cooking (meat, food and meal) as presented in Table 12.

Second, the findings of this study on idioms with proper nouns were a little different from Nguyen's (2021) findings. This meant that Nguyen (2001) mainly focused on translation of investigating one aspect of proper nouns, i.e. proper names, but this study investigated all aspects of proper nouns denoting things, people, places, countries and proper names that could be seen in Table 10.

Third, the findings of this study were not totally similar to Nguyen and Nguyen's (2019) study on English idioms with human-body parts. Particularly, they examined 106 idioms with human-body parts and explored that 31 human-body parts were used in these 106 English idioms; however, the findings of this study investigated 484 English idioms with body parts and found 21 body parts in the analyzed data. Also, there were some differences in frequency and percentages of these idioms in two researches. The six body parts were most used in Nguyen and Nguyen's (2019) study including eye (14 idioms), hand (12), head (10), heart (8), foot (8) and face (7), whereas the findings of this study indicated the most used six body parts in English idioms were hand (89), head (63), eye (61), face (43), back (38), and foot (32). The above differences suggest further studies on English idioms in English and Vietnamese.

Finally, the findings of this study were not totally similar to Nguyen and Phan's (2020) one on syntactic and semantic features of English and Vietnamese idioms. They investigated syntactic features of English idioms in the forms of nominal, verbal, adjectival, adverbial and prepositional phrases, whereas this study added two more ones including conjunctional and interjectional phrases. The two authors' findings on semantic features of English and Vietnamese idioms mainly focused on metaphorical meanings without analyzing other types of idiomatic meanings found in slangs, terms or variants similar to this study's findings.

5. Conclusion

The main findings of this study indicate that syntactically English idioms are grouped into seven types including nominal, verbal, adjectival, adverbial, prepositional, conjunctional and interjectional idioms. The analysis of 484 English idioms with body parts present numerous examples for these seven types of English idioms based on parts of speech or syntactic structure. Interestingly, 24 idioms in the form of clauses were found in the analysis of 484 English idioms containing body parts. Semantically, English idioms mainly convey figurative meanings that

cannot be deduced from literal meanings or a combination of meanings from all constituents of an idiom. To interpret the hidden figurative meanings of most English idioms in a variety of communicative contexts, EFL learners need to use their background knowledge about literal meanings of lexicon, culture, geography, history, customs and practices and so on. The analysis of 6,500 English idioms in the OALD8 demonstrates that idioms can be used to express meanings differently according to formal and informal situations. There are some variations of English idioms in British English, American English, Australian English, South African English, Welsh English, and Canadian English. The analysis of 6,500 idioms illustrates that English idioms are used as slangs, taboos, proverbs and sayings. Furthermore, numerous idioms contain exclamatory/question marks, simile-as expression, and proper nouns denoting people, things, places and countries that are culture-specific. English idioms are also employed in a variety of fields or registers to serve different communicative purposes. Lastly, some English idioms are synonymous to convey the exactly/nearly same ideas.

From the main findings of syntactic and semantic features of English idioms with the scope of 6,500 English idioms, particularly 484 idioms with body parts, the study suggests some implications for teaching English idioms to EFL learners at Van Lang University. This study bears some limitations. This study mainly focused on the categorization of 484 English idioms containing body parts syntactically without classifying all 6,500 English idioms due to time limitation. Further studies should investigate English idioms syntactically and semantically with more data of 6,500 idioms and research tools such as interviews or written tests.

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TÌM HIỂU ĐẶC ĐIỂM CÚ PHÁP VÀ NGỮ NGHĨA CỦA THÀNH NGỮ TIẾNG ANH

Bùi Thị Kim Loan

Trường Đại học Bình Dương,
Số 504 Đại lộ Bình Dương, Thành phố Thủ Dầu Một, Bình Dương, Việt Nam

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu các đặc điểm cú pháp và ngữ nghĩa của thành ngữ tiếng Anh (TNTA). Ngữ liệu khảo sát gồm 6.500 TNTA được sưu tầm từ từ điển Oxford, tái bản lần thứ 8 (sau đây viết tắt là OALD8), được miêu tả định lượng và định tính. Ngữ liệu khảo sát được phân tích và trình bày dưới dạng các thống kê, tỉ lệ phần trăm và phân tích nội dung. Kết quả khảo sát cho thấy về đặc điểm cú pháp, TNTA có dạng danh ngữ, động ngữ, tính ngữ, trạng ngữ, giới ngữ, liên ngữ và thán ngữ. Về đặc điểm ngữ nghĩa, kết quả cũng làm sáng tỏ ngữ nghĩa của các biến thể thành ngữ, thành ngữ được dùng như tiếng lóng, thành ngữ chứa tên riêng, thành ngữ được sử dụng trong các ngữ vực khác nhau, thành ngữ được sử dụng trong tình huống trang trọng và thân mật, v.v. Điều này sẽ giúp ích cho các giáo viên, sinh viên, biên phiên dịch viên trong việc nhận diện TNTA cũng như dịch chúng sang tiếng Việt. Bên cạnh đó, nghiên cứu đưa ra một số đề xuất cho việc dạy và học TNTA.

Từ khóa: cú pháp, ngữ nghĩa, đặc điểm, thành ngữ tiếng Anh, dịch thuật