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FLOWER-RELATED METAPHORS IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE IDIOMS AND PROVERBS: A COGNITIVE–CULTURAL COMPARISON

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how floral imagery contributes to figurative meaning in selected English and Vietnamese idioms, proverbs, and conventionalized expressions. Using conceptual metaphor theory and qualitative contrastive analysis, it examines shared conceptual motivations alongside language-specific lexicalization and cultural interpretation. Four associations structure the discussion: flowers and human beauty or youth; blooming and development or favourable outcomes; roses and thorns as coexisting pleasure and difficulty; and floral growth or decay as a representation of transience. The analysis suggests that conceptual similarity does not necessarily result in interchangeable expressions. Some seemingly close translation pairs diverge in conventionality, semantic focus, or pragmatic effect. A three-level approach—conceptual mapping, linguistic conventionality, and contextual use—is proposed for contrastive interpretation and pedagogical application. Since the examples constitute a purposive illustrative selection rather than a systematically sampled corpus, the conclusions are qualitative and do not imply frequency-based generalizations.

Keyword: cognitive linguistics; conceptual metaphor; flower imagery; English–Vietnamese comparison; idioms; proverbs

1. INTRODUCTION

Figurative expressions provide an accessible point of entry into the relationship between language, cognition, and culture. Familiar objects and events in the physical world can supply a conceptual basis for speaking about emotions, personal characteristics, social relationships, and the course of life. In this respect, flowers are a particularly revealing source of imagery: they may be admired for their appearance, associated with particular stages of growth, or understood through the contrast between blossoms, thorns, and fading petals. Yet the linguistic meanings attached to such images are not necessarily identical across speech communities.

English and Vietnamese both contain expressions in which floral vocabulary carries evaluations of people, experiences, and outcomes. Some are immediately comparable, as in the image of a rose bearing thorns; others express related notions through distinct lexical and cultural resources. A translation that matches the broad moral of two sayings may nevertheless obscure differences in conceptual imagery, idiomatic status, and use. These distinctions matter in contrastive semantics and in the teaching of figurative English to Vietnamese learners.

This study examines a purposively selected set of flower-related expressions in English and Vietnamese. Rather than claiming a new corpus-based survey, it seeks to classify their figurative meanings, establish defensible levels of correspondence, and identify mismatches that matter for translation and English-language instruction. Two questions guide the analysis: (1) Which conceptual associations organize the selected expressions? (2) How do the English and Vietnamese examples converge or diverge in imagery, meaning, and communicative use?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Metaphor as conceptual mapping

Within cognitive linguistics, metaphor is not confined to a decorative feature of literary language. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that patterns of everyday expression are related to systematic ways of conceptualizing one domain of experience through another. Kövecses (2002) develops this account in terms of source domains, target domains, and correspondences between

their salient features. Plant growth, for example, can offer a source model for describing human development: emergence corresponds to a beginning, blooming to flourishing, and fading to decline. These connections are meaningful because they organize more than an isolated word choice.

A distinction is necessary between an underlying conceptual association and a particular linguistic expression. The association DEVELOPMENT IS PLANT GROWTH may motivate more than one phrase, while an expression containing a plant word need not be metaphorical in every context. Conversely, two sayings can communicate a comparable lesson without using the same source domain. The analysis must therefore move beyond literal word matching to ask which features are projected, what evaluation is communicated, and how stable the expression is in ordinary usage.

2.2. Conventionality, culture, and phraseological categories

An idiom is commonly treated as a relatively fixed multiword unit with a meaning that cannot always be predicted by a literal reading of its parts. A proverb, by contrast, is normally a self-contained, socially recognizable saying that offers a generalized observation or piece of advice (Mieder, 2004). The categories may overlap in figurative motivation but are not interchangeable. A simile such as "as fresh as a daisy," an idiom such as "a bed of roses," and a proverbial sentence such as "Every rose has its thorn" differ in grammatical form, communicative function, and degree of propositional completeness.

Cultural variation further complicates the relationship between shared experience and verbal expression. Kövecses (2005) shows why common bodily and environmental experiences can coexist with culturally distinctive metaphorical selections. The fact that speakers recognize the beauty or brief lifespan of a flower does not establish that they possess equivalent idioms, use them with equal frequency, or attach the same social implications. For this reason, the comparative unit in the present article is an attested-looking expression considered alongside its conventional interpretation, rather than the mere occurrence of an English or Vietnamese flower name.

3. MATERIALS AND ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The study employs a small-scale qualitative contrastive design. The illustrative dataset includes the English expressions "every rose has its thorn," "as fresh as a daisy," "come up roses," "a bed of roses," "a shrinking violet," "a late bloomer," and "April showers bring May flowers," together with Vietnamese expressions such as "tươi như hoa," "cuộc đời nở hoa," and "mặt hoa da phấn." Potentially questionable pairings are discussed critically rather than assumed to be equivalent. The Vietnamese lexical material is considered in the context of Vietnamese idiom and proverb studies, including Nguyễn Lân (1989); however, individual entries and page numbers in that dictionary have not been checked directly. Consequently, the expressions are treated as illustrative examples, not as a dictionary-verified corpus.

The analysis proceeded through four steps. First, items were separated provisionally into idioms, proverbs, similes, and other figurative phrases. Second, the literal floral scenario and the intended figurative meaning were identified. Third, a source-to-target mapping was proposed only where the image made a defensible contribution to the interpretation. Fourth, the English item was compared with its Vietnamese candidate at three levels: shared conceptualization, lexical or imagistic similarity, and pragmatic equivalence in context. English glosses of Vietnamese examples are explanatory, not claims that the gloss itself is a conventional English idiom.

The examples are purposively selected and lack systematically recorded information about historical circulation, regional distribution, and corpus frequency. The discussion accordingly emphasizes semantic interpretation and transparent classification rather than distributional claims. In particular, a Vietnamese explanatory rendering is not taken as evidence of an established proverb. Examples that require further lexicographic verification are identified as such, and no claims are made about having inspected particular entries or pages of Nguyễn Lân (1989).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Floral imagery as an evaluative source domain

Across the selected expressions, the flower is not a single, invariant symbol. Its colour, freshness, blossoming, fragility, and coexistence with thorns license different metaphorical readings. A useful analytical distinction separates evaluations of a person from evaluations of an event or a life situation. Expressions such as "as fresh as a daisy" foreground vitality, whereas "come up roses" profiles a successful outcome. In both cases, a positive property associated with plants is projected onto a non-plant target; nevertheless, the target and evaluative purpose differ.

The Vietnamese comparison offers similar flexibility. "Tươi như hoa" employs a visible attribute of flowers to describe freshness or a radiant appearance, whereas "cuộc đời nở hoa" associates blooming with a life that is flourishing or turning towards favourable circumstances. These phrases share a broadly favourable image without necessarily belonging to the same phraseological class. Their comparison illustrates a possible common conceptual resource rather than a one-to-one bilingual dictionary correspondence. The expression "cuộc đời nở hoa" is analysed here as a transparent figurative construction; its degree of lexical conventionality requires separate corpus-based investigation.

4.2. Beauty, youth, and the social evaluation of persons

The simile "as fresh as a daisy" describes someone as lively or refreshed, especially after sleep or exertion. The Vietnamese expression "tươi như hoa" likewise draws on floral freshness to evoke a bright, appealing appearance or disposition. Their conceptual overlap is considerable, but their communicative ranges should not be assumed identical. In particular, the English phrase emphasizes renewed energy, whereas the Vietnamese wording may foreground outward radiance. Their juxtaposition is an interpretive comparison rather than an assertion of fixed bilingual dictionary equivalence.

The Vietnamese expression "mặt hoa da phấn" evokes an idealized facial appearance and complexion through a combination of floral and cosmetic imagery. This is more stylistically elaborate than the understandable English comparison "pretty as a flower," which should not automatically be classified as a fixed idiom. The comparison is strongest at the conceptual level—HUMAN BEAUTY IS FLORAL BEAUTY—and weaker as evidence of phraseological equivalence. Its conventional status, historical usage, and register would need to be established from directly consulted Vietnamese lexical sources before stronger claims can be made.

A further comparison between "lovely flowers fade fast" and "hồng nhan bạc phận" is instructive because the two formulations are not semantically identical. The English sentence evokes the swift fading of attractive flowers; the Vietnamese phrase relates feminine beauty to an unfortunate destiny. The themes of beauty, impermanence, and adversity may intersect, but adversity cannot be inferred directly from the physical fading of flowers. This is therefore a thematic comparison, not an equivalent translation, and no claim is made that the English sentence is an established proverb.

4.3. Blooming as development, opportunity, and success

The developmental sequence of a plant offers a productive framework for understanding human achievement. In "a late bloomer," delayed flowering maps onto the emergence of a talent or ability later than is typical. The expression does not simply mean that a person acts slowly; it can convey the positive judgment that achievement may arrive after an initially unremarkable period. Accordingly, "chậm mà chắc" ("slow but sure") is not a full equivalent: it praises a reliable manner of proceeding, rather than delayed maturation or recognition. This difference changes the perspective from the time of development to the manner of action.

The expression "come up roses" portrays a situation that ends favourably. "Cuộc đời nở hoa" similarly employs blossoming to picture a positive change or flourishing life. The images are closely related, but their subjects and customary contexts are not necessarily identical: the English phrase readily evaluates how a particular event turns out, while the Vietnamese phrase can suggest a broader turn in personal circumstances. Context, rather than a shared flower word, should determine whether one can translate the other.

A third expression, "April showers bring May flowers," organizes the seasonal relationship

between rain and flowering as a moral relation between hardship and later benefit. The Vietnamese "trong cái rủi có cái may" is a useful functional comparison insofar as both invite a hopeful reading of an adverse situation. However, the Vietnamese phrase emphasizes good fortune within or following misfortune without reproducing the English expression's temporal sequence or botanical mechanism. The mapping ADVERSITY PRECEDES BENEFIT is shared broadly; the concrete source image is not. The Vietnamese saying is independently attested in an educational language column, which pairs it more directly with "a blessing in disguise" (VnExpress, 2023).

4.4. Roses, thorns, and the limits of a shared image

In "Every rose has its thorn," desirable qualities coexist with a source of pain or difficulty. The Vietnamese "hồng nào mà chẳng có gai" is a close image-based correspondence: both draw on the same flower and its sharp protective structures. This pair offers stronger evidence for cross-linguistic similarity than examples that merely express positive attitudes towards flowers. Even here, however, the intended lesson should be described carefully. The proverb concerns the coexistence of attractive and undesirable aspects; it does not necessarily assert that every achievement must involve hardship. The Vietnamese phrase also appears in published bilingual teaching materials, but the consulted evidence does not establish its historical age, geographical distribution, or independent paremiological status (Edu2Review, 2020).

The expression "a bed of roses" introduces a related but distinct evaluation. In a negative sentence such as "Life is not a bed of roses," the rose image conveys the absence of an effortless or comfortable existence. The Vietnamese "nhung êm đệm ấm" evokes softness and comfort, and may work as an explanatory counterpart when the context concerns luxury. It does not preserve the floral image and should not be presented as a proverb with identical usage. Comparing the two expressions highlights the difference between a broadly comparable evaluative target and divergent source domains.

The expression "stop and smell the roses" offers a further cautionary case. It encourages attention to ordinary pleasures and a less hurried way of living. The Vietnamese sentence "sống như ngày mai ta sẽ chết" ("live as though tomorrow were your last day") implies a different kind of urgency and may encourage action rather than quiet appreciation. These expressions are therefore poor equivalents despite their shared concern with how to live. An explanatory Vietnamese translation such as "hãy chậm lại để tận hưởng những điều đẹp đẽ quanh mình" better communicates the intended meaning without falsely presenting it as a fixed idiom.

4.5. Floral identity, shyness, and fading

A "shrinking violet" denotes a shy, reserved, or unassertive person. Its botanical image personifies a flower as withdrawing from public attention. The Vietnamese "như hoa xấu hổ" is understandable as an image-based description but requires caution as a claimed lexicalized counterpart. "Hoa" and "xấu hổ" can create a transparent figurative comparison, yet transparency alone does not show that the complete phrase has the same established status as the English idiom. The broader inference—that low visual prominence can symbolize social reticence—is more secure than the claim of exact cross-linguistic lexical identity.

The English colloquial expression "pushing up daisies," referring to someone who is dead and buried, illustrates a partly metonymic association: plants imagined as growing over a grave evoke burial and death. No independently validated Vietnamese idiomatic counterpart is provided in the present dataset. The example is therefore discussed as an English-language floral expression only, rather than as evidence of a bilingual pairing.

4.6. Degrees of cross-linguistic correspondence

Table 1 summarizes illustrative comparisons at three levels: conceptual association, image choice, and contextual suitability.

English expression	Vietnamese expression / rendering	Assessment
Every rose has its thorn	Hồng nào mà chẳng có gai	Close image and central meaning; check context
As fresh as a daisy	Tươi như hoa	Shared freshness image; different usage ranges

Come up roses	Cuộc đời nở hoa	Related blooming metaphor; different scope
A late bloomer	Chậm mà chắc	Only partial thematic overlap; not equivalent
April showers bring May flowers	Trong cái rủi có cái may	Comparable optimistic lesson; different imagery
Stop and smell the roses	Hãy chậm lại để tận hưởng những điều đẹp đẽ quanh mình	Explanatory translation; not a fixed-idiom match
A bed of roses	Nhung êm đệm ấm	Overlapping comfort evaluation; different source image

Three patterns emerge. First, the same visible feature of a flower can ground comparable mappings in both languages, especially when the flower functions as a positive evaluative image or when the rose–thorn contrast is retained. Second, conceptual agreement does not guarantee phraseological equivalence: "a late bloomer" and "chậm mà chắc" focus on different dimensions of time and action. Third, translation sometimes requires a non-idiomatic explanation rather than an elegant but misleading proverbial match. This is particularly important for expressions with distinct pragmatic orientations, such as the contrast between smelling the roses and living urgently.

4.7. Implications for translation and English language teaching

For translation, the findings favour a meaning-first procedure. The translator should first identify the intended evaluation in context, then determine whether the target language has an established expression with a comparable pragmatic effect, and only afterwards consider whether floral imagery should be preserved. A literal image is useful when the bilingual expression genuinely converges, as with roses and thorns. Where the images diverge, accuracy may require a different metaphor or a concise paraphrase. The decision must account for register, whether the expression sounds natural, and the speaker's communicative purpose.

In English-language instruction, flower-related expressions can be organized as a short conceptual network rather than as an isolated memorization list. Learners might first group "a late bloomer," "come up roses," and "a bed of roses" by their target meanings, then identify their literal source scenes. Next, they can compare each item with a Vietnamese expression and label the relationship as close equivalent, related meaning, or no established equivalent. Short contextual dialogues can test whether a proposed translation remains appropriate when speaker attitude, time reference, and communicative intention change.

A further pedagogical benefit is the cultivation of metalinguistic caution. Students should be encouraged to distinguish a recognized idiom from a newly created simile, a proverb from a descriptive phrase, and a translation gloss from an established counterpart. This approach allows cross-cultural comparison to inform vocabulary learning without implying that all attractive linguistic parallels are validated phraseological facts.

4.8. Reconsidering the category of "flower-related metaphor"

A final issue concerns the boundaries of the object of study. The presence of a floral word is a useful first search criterion, but it does not automatically establish metaphor. A person may literally receive roses, refer to their scent, or describe a flowering garden without invoking a second conceptual domain. Conversely, a conventional expression can contain a floral word and depend partly on metonymy, as illustrated by daisies associated with graves. The analytical category must therefore be narrower than "any saying containing a flower." Its members should be selected through an explicit relation between botanical imagery and a distinct human or social target.

An important distinction remains between an analytical illustration and a finding about a language community. Several seemingly plausible flower expressions have yet to be documented with independently verified dictionary entries, authentic usage contexts, or frequency evidence. This does not mean that the expressions never occur; it means their status as established idioms or proverbs cannot be asserted confidently on the

current evidence. A more extensive study should report each expression's source, genre, register, contextual use, and basis for translation, allowing independent assessment of both inclusion and interpretation.

The framework could be tested in future corpus research. A defined list of floral lexical items could guide searches in monolingual and comparable bilingual corpora; literal uses could then be screened out before independent annotators classify figurative targets and mapping types. The Vietnamese candidates could additionally be checked against relevant lexicographic works, including Nguyễn Lân (1989), with precise page or entry details recorded at the point of consultation. A second evaluation would distinguish literal translation, established functional equivalents, and context-dependent paraphrases. These are methodological recommendations, not procedures claimed to have been completed in the present study.

5. CONCLUSION

The selected flower-related English and Vietnamese expressions display several recurring conceptual associations: beauty and vitality, development and success, pleasure and difficulty, and human vulnerability. Some comparisons retain a common image and closely aligned meaning, while others share only a general theme. Contrastive analysis must therefore distinguish conceptual motivation, linguistic conventionality, and contextual communicative function rather than equating floral vocabulary with idiomatic equivalence.

This study contributes a cautious qualitative classification of a limited illustrative selection and identifies several translation pairings that require qualification. Its principal limitation is the absence of a documented, systematically sampled bilingual corpus and direct entry-by-entry verification of all Vietnamese examples. Further research should retrieve expressions from cited dictionary editions and naturally occurring texts, document their contexts, and assess variation in frequency, genre, and pragmatic meaning. The present findings should be understood as grounded interpretive comparisons, not broad claims about all English- and Vietnamese-speaking communities.

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