

*A Semantic Study on Verbs of Human Senses in English under Cognitive Linguistics (Versus Vietnamese)*

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**Abstract**

Cognitive Linguistics is a recontextualizing approach. In contrast with formal semantics, the conception of meaning that lies at the basis of this approach is not restricted to a referential, truth-functional type of meaning. Cognitive Linguistics embodies a fully contextualized conception of meaning. Meaning is not just an objective reflection of the outside world; it is a way of shaping that world. If meaning has to do with the way in which we interact with the world, it is natural to assume that our whole person is involved. The meaning we construct in and through the language is not a separate and independent module of the mind, but it reflects our overall experience as human beings. Languages may embody the historical and cultural experience of groups of speakers (and individuals). The article refers to a semantic research on conceptual metaphor of verbs of human senses in English and Vietnamese. The result will contribute to clarify the similarities and differences in thinking deeply hidden behind the cognitive mechanisms of native speakers (English and Vietnamese) in order to innovative English teaching methods in approaching cognitive linguistics, especially in teaching advanced English and translating for students in Vietnam.

Keywords: Cognitive linguistics, sensory verb, human senses, conceptual metaphor, cognitive mechanisms

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## **Introduction**

Cognitive Linguistics refers to a particular branch of linguistics associated with scholars such as George Lakoff, Ronald Langacker, Charles Fillmore, and Gilles Fauconnier. Following van Hoek (1999:134): “Cognitive Linguistics is not a single theory but is rather best characterised as a paradigm within linguistics, subsuming a number of distinct theories and research programs. It is characterised by an emphasis on explicating the intimate interrelationship between language and other cognitive faculties. One of the basic tenets of the cognitive linguistics approach is that human cognition—the production, communication and processing of meaning. Another is that human cognition is independent of language: linguistic expressions of cross-domain mappings are merely surface manifestations of deeper cognitive structures that have an important spatial or analog component (Johnson 1987, Lakoff 1987, Langacker 1987). Cognitive Linguistics, then, comprises a number of theories which attend to various aspects of conceptual structure, including conceptual metaphor theory, mental space theory, frame semantics and cognitive grammar. In the study, we focus on the embodiment in semantic field through conceptual metaphors in order to clarify really meaning of verbs of human senses in English and Vietnamese.

## **Aims of the study**

- Finding theoretical background about cognitive linguistics, embodiment and conceptual metaphors.
- Contributing my bit to the cognitive theory of metaphor, to cross-cultural communication as well to bring out of the meaning of conceptual metaphors in verbs of human senses in English and Vietnamese.
- Distinguishing similarities and differences between conceptual metaphors in verbs of human senses in English and Vietnamese.
- Giving suggestions in teaching and learning translating English into Vietnamese and vice visa.

## **Research questions**

- In what dimensions do conceptual metaphors reveal the similarity and/or difference in the two languages in English and Vietnamese human senses through cognitive view?
- What explanations can be made for the similarities and/or differences in semantic field of conceptual metaphor of verbs of human senses in the two languages?
- What implications could be drawn out from the findings in terms of teaching and translating English into Vietnamese?

## **Objectives and Scope of the Study**

We focus on studying conceptual metaphors in English and Vietnamese under basis of cognitive linguistics. However, in the limitation of the research, we only concern with semantic field of verbs that express human senses in two languages through embodiment with the hope of inheriting the previous researches, especially the metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson as a base.

## Data

The linguistic data, on which this study is based, are all derived from ordinary language used by and familiar to native speakers. The data are mainly taken from magazines, novels, short stories, folk/popular songs and everyday language talking about people's human senses (emotions).

## Methods of the Study

- Critical Discourse Analysis
- Critical Metaphor Analysis
- Contrastive analysis
- Description
- Quality and quantity

## Main ideas in Cognitive Linguistics

The most fundamental tenet in this model is **embodiment** (Johnson 1987, Lakoff 1987, Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999). Cognitive Linguistics argues that both the design features of languages and our ability to learn and use them are accounted for by general cognitive abilities, kinaesthetic abilities, our visual and sensorimotor skills and our human categorisation strategies, together with our cultural, contextual and functional parameters (Barcelona 1997:8). It is the result of what Lakoff calls "**the cognitive commitment**" (Lakoff 1990:40). Mental and linguistic categories are not abstract, disembodied and human independent categories; we create them on the basis of our concrete experiences and under the constraints imposed by our bodies. Human conceptual categories, the meaning of words and sentences and the meaning of linguistic structures at any level, are not a set of universal abstract features or uninterpreted symbols (Barcelona 1997:9). They are motivated and grounded more or less directly in experience, in our bodily, physical, social and cultural experiences, because after all, "we are beings of the flesh" (Johnson 1992:347).

The second main idea is related to the theory of linguistic meaning. For Cognitive Linguistics, meanings do not exist independently from the people that create and use those (Reddy 1993); all linguistic forms do not have inherent form in themselves, they act as clues activating the meanings that reside in our minds and brains. This activation of meaning is not necessarily entirely the same in every person, because meaning is based on individual experience as well as collective experience (Barcelona 1997:9). Therefore, for Cognitive Linguistics, we have no access to a reality independent of human categorisation, and that is why the structure of reality as reflected in language is a product of the human mind. Semantic structure reflects the mental categories which people have formed from their experience and understanding of the world.

One of the basic tenets of the cognitive linguistics approach is that human cognition - the production, communication and processing of meaning - is heavily dependent upon mappings between mental spaces. Another is that human cognition is independent of language: linguistic expressions of cross-domain mappings are merely surface manifestations of deeper cognitive structures that have an important spatial or analog component. These mappings take several forms, but perhaps the most

dramatic form and the form we will be primarily concerned with here is what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson refer to as “**conceptual metaphor**,” where part of the structure of a more concrete or clearly organized domain (the *source* domain) is used to understand and talk about another, usually more abstract or less clearly structured, domain (the *target* domain) (Johnson 1987, Lakoff 1987, Langacker 1987).

### **Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics View (Conceptual Metaphor)**

In traditional theories, metaphor is usually portrayed as a relatively rare and somewhat “deviant” mode of communication thrown in to add rhetorical spice, but one fully reducible to some equivalent literal paraphrase. Metaphor understood in this way is thus viewed as a purely optional linguistic device.

Nowadays, metaphor is, in fact, primarily a matter of *thought*, not language. Lakoff and Johnson’s 1980 book *Metaphors We Live By* changed the way linguists thought about metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson observed that metaphorical language appears to relate to an underlying metaphor system, a “system of thought”. In other words, they noticed that we cannot choose any conceptual domain at random in order to describe relationships like marriage. They consider the example “LOVE IS A JOURNEY”. This pattern led Lakoff and Johnson to hypothesise a conventional link at the conceptual level between the domain of LOVE RELATIONSHIPS and the domain of JOURNEYS. According to this view, LOVE, which is the target (the domain being described), is conventionally structured in terms of JOURNEYS, which is the source (the domain in terms of which the target is described). This association is called a **conceptual metaphor** which is ubiquitous and unavoidable for creatures like us. Thought is not a manipulation of symbols but the application of cognitive processes to conceptual structures. Meaning structures come not only from the direct relationship with the external world but also from the nature of bodily and social experience (how humans experience with the world) and from human capacity to project from some aspects based on this experience to some abstract conceptual structures.

### **The basic paradigm of verbs of human senses in English and Vietnamese**

The semantic field of verbs of human senses includes *vision, hearing, touch, smell and taste*. They can be classified in three different groups according to the semantic role of their subjects: experience, activity (Viberg 1984:123), and “percept” (Gisborne 1996:1). The “experience” group is traditionally described as “the receiving of an expression by the senses independently of the will of the person concerned” (Poutsma 1926:341) such as “*He saw Fred and George look at each other*” (Harry Potter 2000). This classification can be found in Vietnamese such as “*Họ thấy chúng tôi đi với nhau*” (*They see we go each other*). The second group of verbs refers to an “unbounded process that is consciously controlled by a human agent” (Viberg 1984:123). These verbs are called “active perception verbs” (Poutsma 1926:341, Leech 1971:23, Rogers 1971:206, 1972:304). As the verb *listen* in “*Jane was deliberately listening to the music*” (from Gisborne 1996:1) accepts the adverb *deliberately*, it can be classified as an agentive verb; while in “*Jane deliberately heard the music*” the infelicity of this adverb with *hear* indicates that it is an experience verb. In Vietnamese, we have “*Tôi nhìn ông, chỉ thấy phía sau lưng, nhưng khi ngọn roi vụt xuống tôi có thể hình dung gương mặt ông se lại như thế nào*” (*I look at him from his back, but when he whips the rod into me, I could imagine his pain*) (from I

am Beto, Nguyen Nhat Anh 2012:45). Viberg (1984) establishes the differences between experience and activity verbs on the one hand and copulative verbs on the other, on the basis of what he calls “base selection”, i.e. the choice of grammatical subject among the deep semantic case roles associated with a certain verb. In the former case, verbs are “experiencer-based”; that is to say the verb takes an animate being with certain mental experience as a subject. In the latter case, verbs are “source-based” or “phenomenon-based”, as the verb takes the experienced entity as a subject. The last group is formed by those verbs whose subjects are the stimuli of the perception as illustrated in “*Harry, trying to say “Shh!” and look comforting at the same time*” (Harry Potter 2000). Following this, I conducted to apply it to Vietnamese illustrated in the following sentence “*Tôi nhìn Bino, tiếp tục thấy lạ lẫm*” (I look at Bino, I still feel strange) (from I am Beto, Nguyen Nhat Anh 2012:158).

According to B. Iraide Ibarretxe-Antuñano (1999), it is important to notice these verbs in cases such as hearing there is a different verb belonging to this sense cognition for each group. In the other cases however, there are not different lexical items for each group. This does not imply that the distinction between experience, activity, and percept is less important in these cases (Miller and Johnson-Laird 1976:618), but that, as Lehrer (1990:223) points out, only one polysemous verb corresponds to the three of them.

### **Cognitive semantics in verbs of human senses in English and Vietnamese**

Cognitive semantics began in the 1970s as a reaction against the objectivist world-view assumed by the Anglo-American tradition in philosophy and the related approach, truth conditional semantics, developed within formal linguistics. Eve Sweetser, a leading cognitive linguist, describes the truth conditional approach in the following terms: ‘By viewing meaning as the relationship between words and the world, truth-conditional semantics eliminates cognitive organization from the linguistic system (Sweetser 1990:4). In contrast to this view, cognitive semantics sees linguistic meaning as a manifestation of conceptual structure: the nature and organisation of mental representation in all its richness and diversity, and this is what makes it a distinctive approach to linguistic meaning (Vyvyan E. and Melanie G. 1998).

A fundamental concern for cognitive semanticists is the nature of the relationship between conceptual structure and the external world of sensory experience. In other words, cognitive semanticists set out to explore the nature of human interaction with and awareness of the external world, and to build a theory of conceptual structure that is consonant with the ways in which we experience the world. One idea that as emerged in an attempt to explain the nature of conceptual organisation on the basis of interaction with the physical world is the bodily embodied cognition thesis. As we saw, this thesis holds that the nature of conceptual organisation arises from bodily experience, so part of what makes conceptual structure meaningful is the bodily experience with which it is associated (Vyvyan E. and Melanie G. 1998).

Sweetser (1990) investigates the multiple meanings in the semantic field of English verbs of human senses. She shows that lexical polysemy cannot be understood independently of human cognitive structure. The fact that everyday cognition is metaphorically shaped, at least partially, helps us to understand the way in which the

senses of polysemous words are related.

**Vision** is the capability of the eye(s) to focus and detect images of visible light on photoreceptors in the retina of each eye that generates electrical nerve impulses for varying colors, hues, and brightness. In the case of vision, Sweetser identifies a basic metaphorical understanding of this sense that leads to the connection of vision to intellectual activity. Some vision terms involve physical perceptions or manipulations and have correlates in the domain of intellectual operations. As important as the routes for sense perception are the patterns that unify these semantic changes. In this case, Sweetser suggests three reasons for this parallelism between vision and intellection: (i) Vision is our primary source of objective data about the world. It gives us more information than any of the other senses, and it appears that children rely most heavily on visual features in their early categorisation. (ii) The focusing ability of vision that enables us to pick up one stimulus at will from many, to differentiate fine features. (iii) Vision is identical for different people who can take the same viewpoint. Therefore, it seems to provide a basis for shared public knowledge. It is by far the most studied sense of the five. The semantic field of sight has been analysed not only from the point of view of polysemy (Bauer 1949, Prévot 1935, García Hernández 1976, Alm-Arvius 1993) but also from the language acquisition perspective (Landau and Gleitman 1985, C. Johnson 1999). From the above concept of vision, in daily life, humans use words of this sense to express their ideas by their cognition and bodily experience. In this case, “*see*” means “*understand, foresee, consider, to imagine / visualize, to consider / regard / judge, to revise / study*” which are extended meanings relating physical vision with the intellect or mental activity. Let’s consider these examples: “*See why I’ve got to go back to Hogwarts? It’s the only place I’ve got*”, “*I see.....a clever plan,*”, “*Harry couldn’t see any way out of his situation*”, (from Harry Potter 1999), “*I see him as a good teacher*”. This situation also appears in Vietnamese, as in “*Thấy gì làm ấy*” (What we see we do) “*Lúc đầu Văn thấy ê chề, tủi cực lắm...*” (At first time Van feels so bitterly, , deplore..) “*Tôi thấy cô ấy nói như chim hót*” (I see she speaks as birds sing) (from Cánh đồng bất tận, Nguyễn Ngọc Vũ 2010:102), “*Mấy thằng bạn rượu phấn khởi gấp bốn lần Kha Ly, thấp thoáng đâu đó đã thấy màu tương lai*” (My wine friends look exciting four times than Kha LY, they see the color of future) (from Bãi vàng, đá quý, trầm hương, Nguyễn Trí, 2012:119). However, “*see*” which means “*study*” is only found in English “*I see how to use these documentaries*”, this meaning is used in Vietnamese. Additionally, in English, we can find conceptual metaphor of “*see*” relating social relationships “*to meet, to visit, to receive, to go out with, to get on badly*” as in “*See you next summer!*” (from Harry Potter 1999) or “*That couple can’t see each other*”. “*We have been seeing each other for a decade*”, “*Malfoy, ...sour each time he saw them at it*” (from Harry Potter, 1999:210), In Vietnamese, learners can receive the similarity to English in these meanings, except the meaning “to go out with, for example: “*Sau khi chia tay, họ nhìn nhau không còn tốt đẹp*” (After divorcing, they get on badly), “*Đã lâu cô ấy không nhìn thấy con mình*” (She has not seen her children for a long time), “*Tôi chưa bao giờ thấy một người nào đẹp như vậy*” (I have never met a girl like that).

**Hearing** is the sense of sound perception. In Sweetser’s opinion, the sense of hearing is similar to the sense of vision, the most salient sense. Hearing shares with vision some of its characteristics when speaking about mental activity, but it is not the same kind of activity. In hearing, the voluntarily on-off control of vision is no longer

applicable; we cannot control the reception of sounds. The function of hearing is regarded as linguistic communication, as a means of intellectual and emotional influence on each other; this is carried out in an effective manner via the vocal organs and the auditory sense-channel. The sense of hearing therefore is connected to: (i) Heedfulness and internal receptivity, (ii) Internal reception of ideas, understanding what is heard. The verbs used for the analysing are *hear* and *listen* in English, *nghe* and *nghe thấy* in Vietnamese. In English, cognitive meanings include “*to understand, to heed, to pay attention, to obey, to be told, informed*”, as in “*Listen to what I’m telling you*”, “*I told you to listen to your mother*”. In Vietnamese, we consider “*Nghe đây, ngày mai chúng ta được nghỉ làm*”. (Pay attention! We’ll have a day-off tomorrow).

**Touch** has always been related to the field of emotions. The verbs used for the analysing are *touch* and *feel* in English, *sờ* and *sờ thấy* in Vietnamese. The sense of *touch* has often been related to two fields: the general sense of perception and the emotional feeling. In English, the meanings which have been discovered are *to partake, to check, to reach, to deal with*”, as in “*I didn’t touch a penny from your money*”, “*He touched everything in her bag*”, “*He touched the high point in his career*”, “*I wouldn’t touch that work*”. As Sweetser states, in many languages, at least one of the words that denotes ‘emotional feeling’ is related to the domain of physical feeling (Sweetser 1990:37) and consequently, expressions such as wounded, stroked, touched, which belong to the touch and tactile domain can also be used for emotional sensations. She also states that the verb meaning ‘*to feel*’ in the sense of *touch* is the same as the verb indicating general perception. In Vietnamese, the verb for ‘to touch’ *sờ thấy* is used in some forms (‘to pay, ‘to partake, ‘to check’, ‘to reach’, experience verbs), as in *Tôi không sờ vào đồng nào của anh* (I don’t partake any money of you), *Anh ta sờ sau lưng liệu có bị trầy không* (He checked his back whether there was any scratch), *Đứng lên ghế, cậu bé sờ vào râu của bố* (Standing on the chair, the little boy reached his father’s beard), *Tôi không sờ đến công việc đó* (I don’t pay attention to that work) (Tran Thi Thuy Oanh 2014).

**Smell** is generally considered a weaker source domain for metaphorical meanings in comparison with the other senses (Caplan 1973, Viberg 1984, Sweetser 1990). The sense of taste seems to be linked to personal likes and dislikes in the mental world. Perhaps the reason why this is so lies in the fact that the sense of taste is most closely associated with fine discrimination. According to Buck, the verbs used for the analysing are *smell* and *sniff* in English, *ngửi* and *ngửi thấy* in Vietnamese. The meanings as to trail, to disdain, to guess are found in English, for example “*The dog was smelling the ground looking for the hare*”, “*The critics sniffed at the adaptation of the novel to film*”, “*The police have been smelling the crime round here*”. But they are not used in Vietnamese, except “to guess”, as “*Tên trộm đã ngửi được mùi tiền trong túi bà ấy*” (The robber guessed there was money in her bag).

**Taste** is generally linked to personal likes and dislikes in the mental world. Perhaps the reason why this is so lies in the fact that the sense of taste is most closely associated with fine discrimination. This makes the sense of taste very accurate from a descriptive point of view, as it allows us to express ourselves very precisely when we want to describe a taste. It is worth noting, as a contrast, the case of smell, which as Aristotle pointed out, lacks any independent classification of smells similar to that of tastes. The verbs used for the analysing are *taste* and *savour* in English, *nếm* and

*nếm thấy* in Vietnamese. to experience something, to produce a feeling (enjoy/dislike), as “*He has tasted the frustration*”, “*They started to taste the other team’s defeat*” in English, “*Họ đã nếm đủ mùi khủng khiếp*” (They experienced horrors enough) in Vietnamese.

### **Embodiment in conceptual metaphors of human senses in Vietnamese**

One of features of Vietnamese is that adjectives can be considered as theme or “verb” in sentences, for instance in “*Cô ấy ngon nhĩ*” (She looked delicious). Therefore, Vietnamese has many ways to express their feelings with countless interesting illustration for experimental hypothesis itself through experiencing senses (*taste, touch, smell, hearing, sight*).

- The original meaning of the **visual** sense only: short, long, high, low, good, bad, rectangular, round, distorted, big, small, fuzzy, clearly ..., for example: “*Câu nói tròn vành rõ chữ*” (The speech is round, clear), *Giọng to thế, hơi dài thế*” (That’s a big voice and a long breath).

- The original meaning of the sense of taste just like: *sour, sweet, savory, salty, pale, bitter, tart, spicy, warm, numb* ..., people expand concepts in embodying: “*Giọng nói cô ấy chua quá*” (Her voice is too sour), “*Chị vào phòng, không khí nhạt quá, chị lại ra ngoài*” (*She came in. The atmosphere was too tasteless. She went out again*)...

- The initial feeling from **hearing** such as: noisy, rumbling ... through human experience, people use them to express the meanings as noisy characteristics, noisy days.... We consider the sentence “*Cô bé ồn ào cả ngày*” (She is noisy all day).

- The words to that initial feeling of touch as: *soft, smooth, rough, rough, lumpy, smooth* ... used to refer to feelings such as: *rough shape, smooth pocket, smooth voice*...

- The original meaning only from the sense of **smell**: *aromatic, pungent, spirited, notorious, fishy*... is used to describe the feelings, such as “*Hợp đồng thơm phức*” (This contract is aromatic).

In fact, in the metaphor result, there is a particularly noteworthy, they are hidden example, using the name of the sense of belonging to this sense to name the feelings of other senses or the intellectual, emotional feelings" (Vietnamese Lexical and semantic, Đỗ Hữu Châu 159-160). However, the author just stops at the mentioned phenomena and early comments without questioning learn, explains why there are such phenomena.

In Vietnamese, the phenomenon called multiple sensory sensation is used to name the feelings of other senses or switch to just the nature of intellectual, emotional, is quite common.

In short, through Cognitive linguistics, the meaning of human senses moved through the human body experiences.



## **Conclusion**

Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. The mapping of several target domains such as “see” means “go out” is only found in English data, but not in Vietnamese. It is seen that the English tend to describe things and state in a more concrete way while in Vietnamese. On the other hand, the influence of natural condition is also shown in both languages. Due to the differences between two languages on structure and function of word, some adjectives of human senses can be used as “verb” in speech, especially through embodiment or human experiences, people transfer the significance of their cognition on things by conceptual metaphor for their purposes. As Lakoff and Goerge state “Normally, we do not notice the fact that we use metaphors every day, Lakoff established the term “conceptual metaphor” to emphasize the fact that with our conceptual systems we have a metaphorical structure that allows us to conceptualize one domain in terms of another. It is helpful if teachers understand the root underlying similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese metaphors to teach their students the target language. For interpreters and translators as well as Vietnamese students, metaphors shed light and take advantages of the cultural models and norms shared in a given time in a given community.

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