



From Culinary Images to Cultural Meanings: A Contrastive Study of Food-Related Phraseological Units in English and Vietnamese

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Abstract

Food-related phraseological units provide valuable insights into the relationship among language, cognition, and culture because they use familiar culinary experiences to express abstract meanings. However, systematic comparisons of English and Vietnamese food-related phraseology remain limited, particularly studies integrating semantic, pragmatic, and cultural dimensions. This study therefore examines similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese food-related phraseological units through a qualitative contrastive approach. The dataset comprised 60 purposively selected, dictionary-based units, including 30 English and 30 Vietnamese expressions. They were classified into three thematic categories: food items, eating and drinking activities, and taste and cooking expressions. The analysis focused on semantic transparency, meaning-construction mechanisms, conventional communicative functions, and cultural connotations. The findings indicate that both datasets rely on metaphorical extension, symbolism, and evaluative meaning to conceptualize behaviour, emotions, interpersonal relationships, hardship, and achievement. Differences were observed primarily in lexical imagery and culturally conventionalized associations. The English units frequently draw on foods associated with British and American dietary traditions, whereas the Vietnamese units more often refer to rice-based meals, agricultural experience, family relations, gratitude, and social harmony. In both languages, the selected units serve functions such as evaluating behaviour, describing life experiences, expressing attitudes, conveying advice, and managing interpersonal relationships. These findings contribute to contrastive phraseology and intercultural communication while offering potential implications for language teaching and translation. As the study is based on a small, purposively selected dataset, the identified patterns should be interpreted as preliminary rather than representative of English and Vietnamese phraseology as a whole.

Keywords: food-related phraseological units; contrastive linguistics; semantic transparency; pragmatic functions; cultural connotations; intercultural communication.

Article information: Received: 12/04/2026;

Accepted: 09/06/2026;

Published: 25/06/2026

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1. Introduction

Phraseological units constitute a central component of language and include a broad range of conventionalized multiword expressions, such as idioms, proverbs, proverbial expressions, formulaic sayings, and other fixed or semi-fixed combinations. Although these categories differ in structure and degree of figurativeness, they share properties such as conventionality, relative fixedness, restricted compositionality, and recurrent use within a speech community [1], [13], [2]. Their meanings may be fully or partially unpredictable from those of their individual

components, requiring speakers to draw on phraseological, contextual, and cultural knowledge rather than literal interpretation alone.

Phraseological units are therefore important not only as linguistic structures but also as resources for communication and cultural representation. They encode conventional ways of evaluating people, describing experiences, expressing attitudes, and managing social relationships. Their interpretation can be particularly challenging for second-language learners and translators because familiarity with the component words does not necessarily provide access to the conventional meaning of the whole expression. Research on formulaic language consequently emphasizes the importance of phraseological competence in language comprehension, production, and second-language proficiency [12], [2].

From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, the meanings of many phraseological units are not entirely arbitrary. They may be motivated by conceptual metaphors, metonymic associations, embodied experiences, and culturally conventionalized symbolic relationships. Kövecses and Szabó [3], for example, demonstrate that conceptual mappings can explain important aspects of idiomatic meaning and facilitate the interpretation of expressions whose meanings are not directly compositional. Recent psycholinguistic research further indicates that phraseological processing is influenced by familiarity, semantic transparency, contextual assumptions, stored figurative knowledge, and individual cognitive differences [4]. Phraseological meaning therefore emerges through an interaction among linguistic convention, conceptual motivation, discourse context, and cultural knowledge.

Within this broader field, food-related phraseological units constitute a particularly productive area of investigation. Food, eating, drinking, taste, and cooking are universal domains of embodied experience, but their social meanings and symbolic associations vary across cultures. Familiar culinary experiences are frequently extended to conceptualize abstract phenomena such as emotions, personality traits, interpersonal relationships, social status, morality, hardship, and achievement. Studies of food-related phraseology have shown that metaphor and metonymy provide important mechanisms through which culinary images acquire figurative meanings [5].

Food-related phraseological units also preserve culturally salient knowledge concerning dietary practices, family life, social relations, material conditions, and moral expectations. Because communities differ in their culinary traditions and historically significant food practices, comparable meanings may be expressed through different lexical images. Conversely, similar food items may acquire different symbolic meanings across languages. Research on figurative phraseology therefore stresses that cultural knowledge is essential to explaining why particular images become conventionalized and how their meanings vary across linguistic communities [6], [7].

Cross-linguistic research has examined phraseological units from semantic, cognitive, pragmatic, cultural, and translational perspectives. Studies comparing food-related proverbs and idioms have identified both shared conceptual tendencies and culture-specific patterns in lexical selection, figurative interpretation, and communicative function [6], [5]. These findings suggest that food-related phraseology reflects an interaction between common embodied experiences and culturally situated processes of meaning construction. However, direct equivalence across languages is not always possible: two expressions may perform similar communicative functions while drawing on different food images, whereas expressions

containing comparable lexical items may differ substantially in meaning or use.

Research on English and Vietnamese phraseology has similarly addressed semantic structure, cognitive motivation, cultural symbolism, and cross-linguistic comparison. Recent studies have compared food idioms in English and Vietnamese and investigated broader categories such as relationship-related expressions and comparative idioms [8], [9]. In particular, Truong et al. [9] demonstrate the value of systematic contrastive analysis by comparing substantial datasets of English and Vietnamese comparative idioms from a cognitive perspective.

Nevertheless, several gaps remain. First, previous studies have often focused on individual categories, such as idioms, proverbs, comparative expressions, or particular lexical fields. This narrow categorization may exclude related conventional expressions that perform comparable semantic and communicative functions. Second, semantic properties, pragmatic functions, and cultural connotations are frequently examined separately, although these dimensions interact in the construction and interpretation of phraseological meaning. Third, systematic comparisons of English and Vietnamese food-related phraseological units remain limited, particularly studies adopting a broader operational definition that includes idioms, proverbs, proverbial expressions, and other fixed or semi-fixed units.

The present study addresses these gaps through a qualitative contrastive analysis of a balanced, dictionary-based dataset comprising 30 English and 30 Vietnamese food-related phraseological units. In this study, a food-related phraseological unit is operationally defined as a conventionalized fixed or semi-fixed expression containing lexical elements associated with food, beverages, eating, drinking, taste, or cooking and conveying an established figurative, evaluative, proverbial, or culturally conventionalized meaning. This definition encompasses idioms, proverbs, proverbial expressions, formulaic sayings, and comparable conventional multiword units.

The analysis considers three interrelated dimensions: semantic properties, conventional pragmatic functions, and cultural connotations. Semantic analysis examines degrees of transparency and mechanisms of meaning construction, including metaphorical extension, metonymic association, and culturally established symbolism. Pragmatic analysis considers the conventional communicative functions associated with the selected units, while cultural analysis examines the social experiences, values, and symbolic associations reflected in their food-related imagery.

The study has three objectives: to identify and classify the selected English and Vietnamese food-related phraseological units; to examine their semantic properties, pragmatic functions, and cultural connotations; and to compare the patterns observed in the two datasets. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. *What major categories of food-related phraseological units are represented in the selected English and Vietnamese datasets?*
2. *How are the selected food-related phraseological units characterized in terms of semantic properties, pragmatic functions, and cultural connotations?*
3. *What similarities and differences emerge from the contrastive analysis of English and Vietnamese food-related phraseological units?*

By addressing these questions, the study provides a multidimensional account of selected English and Vietnamese food-related phraseology. It contributes to contrastive phraseology by examining how comparable meanings and communicative functions may be constructed

through different culturally salient images. The findings may also have potential implications for language education, translation, and intercultural communication. In language teaching, contrastive analysis may help learners distinguish literal meanings from conventionalized interpretations. In translation, it may support the selection of semantic, pragmatic, and culturally appropriate equivalents rather than direct lexical substitution [11].

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

This study adopted a qualitative, descriptive, and contrastive research design to examine food-related phraseological units in English and Vietnamese. The qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to interpret conventional figurative meanings, identify phraseological characteristics, and explore culturally associated meanings rather than test statistical relationships or make population-level generalizations. The study was situated within the framework of contrastive linguistics, which enabled the systematic comparison of phraseological units across the two languages. The unit of analysis was the individual food-related phraseological expression. For the purposes of this study, a food-related phraseological unit was defined as a conventionalized fixed or semi-fixed multiword expression containing a lexical element associated with food, beverages, eating, drinking, taste, or cooking and conveying an established figurative, proverbial, evaluative, or culturally conventionalized meaning. The analytical framework comprised three interrelated dimensions: semantic properties, pragmatic functions, and cultural connotations. Semantic analysis focused on the degree of semantic transparency and the mechanisms through which figurative meanings were constructed. Pragmatic analysis considered the conventional communicative functions associated with each expression, whereas cultural analysis examined the values, practices, experiences, and symbolic associations reflected in the selected units. The contrastive design was used to identify both shared phraseological patterns and language-specific features in the English and Vietnamese datasets. Because the data were collected primarily from dictionaries and linguistic reference works rather than naturally occurring discourse, the pragmatic categories identified in this study were interpreted as conventional or potential communicative functions. They should not be understood as direct observations of interactional effects in specific communicative contexts.

2.2. Data collection

The dataset comprised 60 food-related phraseological units, including 30 English units and 30 Vietnamese units. A purposive, dictionary-based sampling strategy was used to construct a balanced dataset for qualitative comparison. The English units were documented in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionaries, Cambridge Dictionary, Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, the Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms, and McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs [14]-[18]. The Vietnamese units were drawn from Hoàng Văn Hành [19], Nguyễn Lân [20], Nguyễn Thiện Giáp [21], and Vũ Dung et al. [22]. Appendix A lists every unit included in the analysis.

The use of equal-sized datasets was intended to facilitate analytical comparability between the two languages. It was not intended to establish the statistical representativeness of food-related phraseology in English or Vietnamese. Accordingly, the dataset should be regarded as a

purposively selected sample rather than an exhaustive corpus of food-related phraseological units.

The selection of the units was guided by four inclusion criteria. First, an expression had to be a conventionalized fixed or semi-fixed multiword unit rather than a freely generated lexical combination. Second, it had to contain at least one lexical element associated with food, beverages, eating, drinking, taste, or cooking. Third, the expression had to convey an established figurative, proverbial, evaluative, or culturally conventionalized meaning that extended beyond a purely literal interpretation. Fourth, the expression had to be documented in an established lexicographical or scholarly source.

Purely literal combinations, context-dependent creative metaphors, and expressions lacking sufficient phraseological documentation were excluded. Closely related formal variants were treated as a single unit unless they differed substantially in meaning or communicative function. For organizational and comparative purposes, the selected units were classified into three thematic categories according to their most salient lexical domain: food items; eating and drinking activities; and taste and cooking expressions.

Where an expression contained lexical elements associated with more than one category, it was assigned to the category represented by its most prominent phraseological image. The thematic classification was used primarily to organize the dataset and facilitate comparison across broadly corresponding lexical domains. It was not treated as an exclusive theoretical taxonomy of food-related phraseology.

2.3. Data analysis

The data were analyzed through a systematic qualitative coding and contrastive procedure. Each phraseological unit was examined individually before patterns were compared across the English and Vietnamese datasets.

The analysis was conducted in three main stages. In the first stage, the selected units were identified, documented, and classified according to language and thematic category. Their conventional meanings were established with reference to the lexicographical and scholarly sources from which they were collected.

In the second stage, each unit was analyzed along three dimensions.

First, the semantic analysis examined the degree to which the conventional meaning could be inferred from the lexical components of the expression. The units were therefore considered in terms of relative semantic transparency, including relatively transparent, semi-transparent, and opaque expressions. Where relevant, the analysis also identified meaning-construction mechanisms such as metaphorical extension, metonymic association, analogy, and culturally conventionalized symbolism.

Second, the pragmatic analysis identified the principal conventional communicative functions associated with the units. These included evaluating personal character or behaviour, describing situations and life experiences, expressing emotions and attitudes, conveying advice or moral instruction, and managing interpersonal relationships. Because the study did not employ a discourse corpus, these categories represented functions inferred from established meanings and documented usage rather than functions observed directly in naturally occurring interaction. Third, the cultural analysis examined recurrent food images and the social, historical, and cultural associations conventionally linked to them. Particular attention was paid to references to dietary practices, agricultural experience, family and community relations, moral

expectations, economic conditions, and culturally salient understandings of success and hardship. Cultural interpretations were limited to patterns observable within the selected dataset and were not intended to represent all English- or Vietnamese-speaking communities.

In the final stage, the findings from the two datasets were compared to identify similarities and differences in semantic transparency, meaning-construction mechanisms, communicative functions, lexical imagery, and cultural associations. Descriptive frequency counts were used where appropriate to summarize the distribution of the units across categories. These counts served an organizational and descriptive purpose only and were not used for inferential statistical analysis.

The results of this procedure provided the basis for the comparative findings and the subsequent discussion of shared tendencies and language-specific phraseological patterns.

3. Results

3.1. Food-related phraseological units identified in English and Vietnamese

The dataset comprised 60 food-related phraseological units, including 30 English units and 30 Vietnamese units. An equal number of expressions was selected for each language to support a balanced qualitative comparison. The units were organized into three thematic categories according to their most salient lexical domain: food items, eating and drinking activities, and taste and cooking expressions.

The source base comprised five English lexicographical works [14]-[18] and four Vietnamese dictionaries or linguistic reference works [19]-[22]. All items included in the analysis are listed in Appendix A.

As shown in Table 1, each thematic category contained 10 English and 10 Vietnamese units. This equal distribution was introduced for analytical comparability and should not be interpreted as representing the actual frequency or distribution of food-related phraseological units in either language.

Table 1. Distribution of food-related phraseological units in the dataset

Thematic category	English	Vietnamese	Total
Food items	10	10	20
Eating and drinking activities	10	10	20
Taste and cooking expressions	10	10	20
Total	30	30	60

The balanced dataset provided the basis for the analysis of semantic properties, conventional communicative functions, and cultural connotations. The complete inventory is reported in Appendix A so that every finding can be traced to the analyzed units.

3.2. Semantic properties, pragmatic functions, and cultural connotations

3.2.1. Semantic properties of English and Vietnamese food-related phraseological units

The semantic analysis indicated that the selected English and Vietnamese units varied in their degree of semantic transparency. Some expressions were relatively transparent because their conventional meanings could be partially inferred from their lexical components. Others were semi-transparent or highly opaque and therefore required established phraseological or cultural knowledge for interpretation.

The analysis also identified several mechanisms through which phraseological meanings

were constructed, including metaphorical extension, metonymic association, culturally conventionalized symbolism, and evaluative meaning. Because semantic transparency and meaning-construction mechanisms represent different analytical dimensions, they are presented separately in Table 2.

Table 2. Illustrative semantic properties of food-related phraseological units

Analytical dimension	Category	English examples	Vietnamese examples
Degree of semantic transparency	Highly opaque	<i>spill the beans; big cheese</i>	<i>ăn cháo đá bát; treo đầu dê bán thịt chó</i>
	Semi-transparent	<i>bring home the bacon; worth one's salt</i>	<i>đáng đồng tiền bát gạo; no cơm ăm cật</i>
	Relatively transparent	<i>sell like hot cakes</i>	<i>cơm lành canh ngọt</i>
Meaning-construction mechanism	Metaphorical extension	<i>butter someone up</i>	<i>gạo châu củi quế</i>
	Evaluative meaning	<i>bad egg; have egg on one's face</i>	<i>đắng cay ngọt bùi</i>

The examples demonstrate that both languages extend concrete experiences associated with food, eating, taste, and cooking to represent abstract domains such as behaviour, emotional states, interpersonal relationships, social conditions, and moral evaluation. However, the lexical images through which these meanings are expressed differ substantially.

In the food-item category, the English expressions in the selected dataset frequently contain lexical items such as *bacon*, *beans*, *cheese*, *eggs*, and *salt*. The Vietnamese expressions more frequently refer to culturally familiar items such as *cơm* (rice or cooked rice), *cháo* (rice porridge), *canh* (soup), *bánh* (traditional cakes), and *thịt* (meat). These lexical differences reflect the availability and cultural salience of particular food images in the two linguistic communities. Nevertheless, the food items in both datasets are used to construct meanings related to social position, responsibility, deception, gratitude, harmony, and personal character. The eating-and-drinking category contains expressions whose figurative meanings are developed from actions rather than food objects alone. In the English dataset, eating-related actions are used to conceptualize communication, responsibility, humility, dependency, and interpersonal conduct. Vietnamese units similarly draw on acts of eating and drinking to represent gratitude, diligence, reciprocity, dependency, and socially evaluated behaviour.

The taste-and-cooking category demonstrates how sensory and transformational experiences are extended into abstract domains. Taste expressions frequently describe emotions, attitudes, and experiences of hardship or satisfaction, whereas cooking-related images may represent preparation, cooperation, change, or the management of difficult situations.

Across the sample, the two languages relied on similar mechanisms, but lexical realization diverged: Vietnamese units favored rice-based meals and agricultural imagery, while English units more often drew on foods conventionalized in British and American usage.

3.2.2. Conventional pragmatic functions of English and Vietnamese food-related phraseological units

The selected phraseological units were associated with a range of conventional communicative functions. These included evaluating character or behaviour, describing situations and life experiences, expressing emotions and attitudes, conveying advice or moral instruction, and

managing interpersonal relationships.

Because the dataset was primarily dictionary-based, these categories represent potential or conventional communicative functions inferred from established meanings and documented usage. They do not constitute direct observations of the units in naturally occurring interaction.

Table 3. Conventional pragmatic functions of food-related phraseological units

Pragmatic function	English examples	Vietnamese examples
Evaluating character or behaviour	<i>bad egg; bite the hand that feeds you</i>	<i>ăn cháo đá bát; ăn không ngồi rồi</i>
Describing situations and life experiences	<i>a piece of cake; have a lot on one's plate</i>	<i>đắng cay ngọt bùi; ăn bữa nay lo bữa mai</i>
Expressing emotions and attitudes	<i>have egg on one's face; not my cup of tea</i>	<i>ăn miếng trả miếng; cay đắng cuộc đời</i>
Conveying advice or moral instruction	<i>bite off more than one can chew; cry over spilled milk</i>	<i>uống nước nhớ nguồn; ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây</i>
Managing interpersonal relationships	<i>chew the fat; swallow one's pride</i>	<i>bánh ít đi bánh quy lại; cơm lành canh ngọt</i>

Evaluation constitutes a prominent communicative function in both datasets. English units such as *bad egg* and *bite the hand that feeds you* convey negative judgments concerning personal character or behaviour. Vietnamese units such as *ăn cháo đá bát* and *ăn không ngồi rồi* similarly evaluate conduct, particularly ingratitude, passivity, and failure to meet socially expected responsibilities.

Phraseological units in both languages are also used to describe situations and life experiences. Expressions such as *a piece of cake* and *have a lot on one's plate* characterize the difficulty of a task or the extent of an individual's workload. Vietnamese units such as *đắng cay ngọt bùi*, *gạo châu củi quế*, and *ăn bữa nay lo bữa mai* are associated with changing life experiences, high living costs, and economic hardship.

Several units convey attitudes or emotional responses. For example, *have egg on one's face* expresses embarrassment, while *not my cup of tea* indicates dislike or lack of interest. Vietnamese expressions such as *ăn miếng trả miếng* and *cay đắng cuộc đời* communicate retaliatory attitudes or painful emotional experiences.

Other units perform advisory or morally instructive functions. English expressions such as *bite off more than one can chew* and *cry over spilled milk* caution against assuming excessive responsibility or continuing to regret an irreversible event. Vietnamese expressions such as *uống nước nhớ nguồn* and *ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây* conventionally promote gratitude and recognition of the contributions of previous generations or benefactors.

Food-related units may also support interpersonal interaction. *Chew the fat* refers to informal conversation, whereas *swallow one's pride* may describe the decision to suppress pride in order to accept help, apologize, or restore a relationship. Vietnamese expressions such as *bánh ít đi bánh quy lại* and *cơm lành canh ngọt* emphasize reciprocity and harmonious relations.

The functional categories overlapped substantially. Variation appeared mainly in emphasis: the English sample more often encoded individual circumstances and practical judgment, while the Vietnamese sample more often foregrounded gratitude, reciprocity, conduct, and relational harmony. This comparison describes the sampled units only.

3.2.3. Cultural connotations of English and Vietnamese food-related phraseological units

The selected phraseological units contain cultural associations that extend beyond their literal food-related meanings. Their lexical imagery reflects dietary practices, everyday experiences, historically familiar forms of work and subsistence, social expectations, and conventional understandings of success and hardship.

Although both datasets use food as a source domain for representing abstract experience, the particular foods and symbolic associations differ according to their linguistic and cultural contexts.

Table 4. Cultural connotations represented in the selected datasets

Cultural aspect	English phraseological units	Vietnamese phraseological units
Everyday lifestyle and dietary practices	References to bread, butter, pie, cheese, tea, bacon, and beans reflect culturally familiar dietary images.	References to rice, porridge, soup, traditional cakes, fruits, and shared meals reflect rice-based cuisine and everyday domestic life.
Social and moral values	Several units concern responsibility, competence, honesty, independence, and practical judgment.	Several units emphasize gratitude, reciprocity, appropriate conduct, solidarity, and relational harmony.
Representations of success and hardship	Food imagery is used to describe opportunity, achievement, effort, workload, and individual challenges.	Food imagery is used to describe perseverance, scarcity, economic hardship, shared experience, and changing life circumstances.
Cultural symbolism	Food commonly functions as a metaphor for individual behaviour, circumstances, and social interaction.	Food frequently functions as a symbol of family life, social relationships, agricultural experience, and collective memory.

Within the English dataset, lexical items such as bread, butter, cheese, pie, bacon, and beans function as familiar metaphorical vehicles for representing work, personal achievement, responsibility, social status, and everyday circumstances. These images are associated with historically established British or American dietary practices, although their phraseological meanings have become conventionalized and no longer depend on direct reference to food.

The Vietnamese dataset contains frequent references to rice, porridge, soup, cakes, fruits, and meals. Such images are associated with domestic life, shared eating practices, rice cultivation, economic conditions, and interpersonal obligations. Expressions involving meals and food production may consequently carry connotations of gratitude, reciprocity, family relationships, community cooperation, and the difficulties of material life.

A further difference concerns the scope of cultural symbolism represented in the selected units. Several English expressions use food primarily to characterize individual behaviour, competence, preferences, or circumstances. Several Vietnamese expressions connect food with wider moral and relational themes, including indebtedness, remembrance, reciprocity, and harmonious coexistence.

Nevertheless, the contrast should not be treated as an absolute opposition between individualistic and collectivist cultures. Both datasets contain expressions related to personal conduct and social relationships. The observed differences indicate tendencies within the

selected sample rather than fixed attributes of the two languages or their speakers.

Food imagery thus operates as a shared symbolic resource, while the associations attached to particular foods reflect distinct culinary and social histories.

3.3. Similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese food-related phraseological units

Table 5 consolidates the contrast across the three analytical dimensions.

Table 5. Principal similarities and differences between the selected datasets

Analytical aspect	Similarities	Differences
Semantic properties	Both datasets employ metaphorical extension, symbolism, evaluation, and varying degrees of semantic transparency.	English units frequently contain food images associated with British and American dietary traditions, whereas Vietnamese units more frequently draw on rice-based meals and agricultural experience.
Conventional communicative functions	Units in both languages evaluate behaviour, describe experiences, express attitudes, convey advice, and manage interpersonal relationships.	Several English units emphasize personal circumstances and practical judgment, whereas several Vietnamese units emphasize moral responsibility, gratitude, reciprocity, and relational harmony.
Cultural connotations	Both datasets use food imagery to encode culturally shared knowledge and interpretations of human experience.	The selected English units more often represent work, personal challenges, and individual behaviour, whereas the Vietnamese units more often evoke family life, material hardship, agricultural traditions, and collective relationships.

At the semantic level, both English and Vietnamese phraseological units extend concrete food-related experiences into abstract conceptual domains. Food items, taste, cooking, and acts of eating or drinking are used to describe character, emotions, circumstances, moral conduct, and social relationships. The meaning of many units cannot be derived solely from their individual lexical components and therefore depends on conventional phraseological knowledge.

The principal semantic difference lies in lexical representation. The English units draw on items such as bread, butter, cheese, pie, bacon, beans, eggs, and tea. The Vietnamese units more frequently contain references to rice, porridge, soup, traditional cakes, fruit, meat, and shared meals. These contrasts illustrate how comparable abstract meanings may be constructed through culturally different food images.

At the pragmatic level, both datasets contain expressions with evaluative, descriptive, expressive, advisory, and interpersonal functions. However, the selected English units more frequently characterize individual preferences, workloads, competence, and personal responsibility. The selected Vietnamese units contain more explicit moral instruction and references to gratitude, reciprocity, appropriate conduct, family relationships, and social harmony.

At the cultural level, the two datasets demonstrate that food functions as a repository of shared

knowledge and collective experience. The English units reflect culturally familiar dietary images and practical experiences associated with work, achievement, and personal circumstances. The Vietnamese units more frequently evoke rice-based cuisine, agricultural life, domestic meals, material hardship, and socially valued relationships.

The comparison indicates shared cognitive and communicative resources alongside language-specific lexical choices and cultural associations.

Because the inventory was purposively constructed and evenly balanced by category, the observed distributions are descriptive of this sample and not population estimates.

4. Discussion

Across the 60 units, concrete culinary experiences became resources for construing behaviour, emotion, relationships, hardship, and achievement. This pattern accords with cognitive accounts in which conceptual metaphor and metonymy motivate conventional expressions rather than treating them as wholly arbitrary [3], [10].

Transparency varied independently of figurative motivation. Some units offered lexical cues to their established meanings; others depended on familiarity, cultural knowledge, and contextual expectations. This aligns with evidence that canonical and creatively varied idioms are processed in relation to familiarity, transparency, context, and individual cognitive differences [13], [4], [23].

The strongest contrast concerned the images chosen, not the underlying mechanisms. English expressions favored bread, butter, cheese, bacon, beans, and other foods entrenched in British and American usage; Vietnamese expressions foregrounded rice, porridge, soup, traditional cakes, and shared meals. The comparison therefore supports the view that embodied experience supplies a common conceptual base while local culinary histories shape conventional lexical realization [5], [7].

The pragmatic pattern was similarly overlapping but not identical. Both sets were used to judge conduct, describe circumstances, express attitudes, advise, and negotiate relationships. In this sample, English items more often framed competence, workload, preference, or individual responsibility, whereas Vietnamese items more often invoked gratitude, reciprocity, duty, and relational harmony. These are sample-bound distributions, not evidence of a binary contrast between individualist and collectivist cultures.

For teaching, the analysis suggests presenting each unit through four linked elements: literal image, conventional meaning, communicative function, and cultural association. Such pairing can help learners recognize why lexical substitution is often inadequate. In translation, a functionally comparable target-language expression should take precedence over word-for-word reproduction when imagery and pragmatic force diverge [11], [12].

The design nonetheless imposes clear limits. Purposive selection and equal category sizes support close comparison but cannot estimate frequency or productivity. Because pragmatic functions were inferred from dictionary meanings rather than observed in discourse, claims about use remain provisional. Cultural interpretation also involved researcher judgment. Corpus evidence, contextualized examples, and independent coding would allow future research to test the present categories.

5. Conclusion

Food-related phraseology in the two languages showed a shared reliance on metaphorical extension, symbolism, and evaluation, but the lexical vehicles were culturally specific. The English sample emphasized foods common in British and American traditions; the Vietnamese sample more often linked rice-based meals and eating practices with hardship, gratitude, reciprocity, family, and social harmony.

The study's main contribution is to connect semantic transparency, conventional function, and cultural association within one contrastive framework. For pedagogy and translation, the practical implication is straightforward: interpreting or replacing a food-related unit requires attention to what it means, what it does in interaction, and which cultural associations its image activates.

These conclusions apply only to the purposive dictionary-based inventory in Appendix A. Larger corpus-based studies with authentic contexts are needed to establish frequency, variation, and real-time discourse effects.

Appendix A. Complete dataset inventory

The English units were selected from [14]-[18], and the Vietnamese units from [19]-[22]. Expressions are listed in the form analyzed; pronoun variants were normalized where necessary.

Thematic category	English phraseological units (n = 30)	Vietnamese phraseological units (n = 30)
Food items	1. a piece of cake; 2. apple of one's eye; 3. bad egg; 4. big cheese; 5. bring home the bacon; 6. butter someone up; 7. have egg on one's face; 8. sell like hot cakes; 9. spill the beans; 10. worth one's salt	1. bánh ít đi bánh quy lại; 2. cơm không lành, canh không ngọt; 3. cơm lành canh ngọt; 4. gạo châu củi quế; 5. há miệng chờ sung; 6. no cơm ấm cật; 7. treo đầu dê bán thịt chó; 8. ăn cháo đá bát; 9. đáng đồng tiền bát gạo; 10. cơm áo gạo tiền
Eating and drinking activities	1. bite off more than one can chew; 2. bite the hand that feeds you; 3. chew the fat; 4. cry over spilled milk; 5. drink like a fish; 6. eat humble pie; 7. eat one's words; 8. have a lot on one's plate; 9. swallow one's pride; 10. wolf down one's food	1. ăn nên làm ra; 2. ăn không ngồi rồi; 3. ăn như tằm ăn rỗi; 4. ăn no rừng mỡ; 5. ăn miếng trả miếng; 6. uống nước nhớ nguồn; 7. ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây; 8. nhậu nhẹt bê tha; 9. chè chén say sưa; 10. ăn bữa nay lo bữa mai
Taste and cooking expressions	1. as easy as pie; 2. cook up a story; 3. half-baked idea; 4. in hot water; 5. leave a bad taste in one's mouth; 6. not my cup of tea; 7. simmer down; 8. spice things up; 9. sweeten the deal; 10. too many cooks spoil the broth	1. chua ngoa đánh đá; 2. cơm sôi bớt lửa; 3. cay đắng cuộc đời; 4. ngọt bùi nhớ lúc đắng cay; 5. đắng cay ngọt bùi; 6. đồng cam cộng khổ; 7. ngọt như mía lùi; 8. nếm mật nằm gai; 9. nhạt như nước ốc; 10. mặn mà tình nghĩa

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed to Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Validation, Writing - Original Draft, and Writing - Review & Editing. Pham Thi Hong Que additionally undertook Supervision and Project Administration. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics Statement

This study analyzed published linguistic materials and did not involve human participants, animals, personal data, or any intervention. Institutional ethics approval was therefore not required.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

All data analyzed in this study are included in the article and Appendix A. The phraseological units were drawn from the published dictionaries and reference works listed in [14]-[22].

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

Generative AI (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used solely to assist with language editing and improving the clarity of the manuscript. The authors reviewed, edited, and verified all content and took full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

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