

Structural Metaphor of The Culinary Domain in Vietnamese Idioms and Proverbs

- Thị Phương (Middle names) Lan (Name), Bùi (Surname)

- PhD student at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City,

- Lecturer at the Academy of Public Administration and Governance, Ho Chi Minh City Campus.

Abstract: This paper investigates the structuring mechanism of structural metaphor in the culinary domain through an analysis of 408 Vietnamese idioms and proverbs. Drawing on an integrated framework combining Kövecses's extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Sharifian's Cultural Linguistics, the study identifies four major structural-metaphor models and analyzes their mapping mechanisms. The findings show that structural metaphor accounts for the highest proportion of the data, at 60.8%, operating on a shared embodied foundation while being culturally elaborated along a moral-communal orientation. These results open up practical applications for bilingual lexicography and language teaching.

Keywords: structural metaphor, idioms, proverbs

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I. Introduction

Food and eating constitute one of the most fundamental domains of human experience, closely bound up with the needs of survival and social life. In cognitive linguistics, the culinary domain is regarded as a universal source domain that supplies the material for conceptualizing abstract target domains such as morality, social relations, emotion, and intellect [Lakoff & Johnson (1980): 45-48; Kövecses (2005): 37-39]. Idioms and proverbs, as highly symbolic fixed expressions, become a site where language, cognition, and culture intersect, reflecting how linguistic communities conceptualize the world through the experience of eating and drinking [Gibbs (1994): 76-87].

Among the three types of conceptual metaphor distinguished by Lakoff and Johnson, structural metaphor plays a pivotal role in concretizing abstract concepts (target domains) such as gratitude, morality, behavioral norms, or power by means of a more concrete or familiar concept (source domain) [Kövecses (2010): 37-45]. In doing so, it enables people to grasp intangible, abstract notions through everyday material experience, while also clarifying the cognitive mechanism at work through its cultural context [Johnson (1987): 104-110].

In Vietnam, studies of Vietnamese culinary idioms and proverbs have so far tended toward collection, classification, and structural-semantic description [Nguyễn Đức Dân (1986): 1-11; Nguyễn Thị Bảy (2016): 45-60], while the cognitive mechanisms governing the formation of metaphorical meaning have not yet been fully explored.

Proceeding from this state of affairs, this paper pursues three objectives: (1) to determine the position and proportion of structural metaphor within the culinary corpus as a whole; (2) to identify a number of prominent models of structural metaphor in the culinary domain; and (3) to analyze the universality and cultural specificity of these models across the embodied, culturally elaborated, and linguistic-expression levels.

Theoretical Background

Structural metaphor is the most complex and systematic type of metaphor, in which the entire structure of a concrete experiential domain (the source domain) is used to organize and understand another, abstract experiential domain (the target domain). Unlike orientational metaphor, which supplies only a basic spatial orientation frame (such as up/down, in/out), and ontological metaphor, which assigns only a single physical property (such as treating emotion as a container), structural metaphor allows us to systematically map a complex network of relations, including elements, attributes, relations among elements, and actions/events from the source domain onto the target domain [Lakoff (1987): 267-268].

Lakoff & Johnson (1980) argue that this is the most common type of metaphor in natural language and plays a key role in structuring human thought about abstract domains such as love ("LOVE IS A JOURNEY"), time ("TIME IS MONEY"), life ("LIFE IS A JOURNEY"), or argument ("ARGUMENT IS WAR"). In each case,

we do not merely borrow a few isolated features but transfer an entire cognitive schema from a familiar source domain onto an abstract target domain.

In the culinary domain, structural metaphor is especially richly represented, because eating is one of the most basic and universal of human activities while also being deeply cultural. Culinary structural metaphors typically map from three main sources: (i) the structure of a meal (the dishes and the relations among them) onto social relations; (ii) the process of cooking/consuming food onto intellectual or social processes; and (iii) culinary rituals (such as family meals or feasts) onto complex social events (Newman (2009): 1-17).

The proverb "*com lành canh ngọt*" (lit. "wholesome rice, sweet soup") is a paradigmatic example of structural metaphor type (i) — mapping from the structure of a meal onto social relations. This proverb instantiates the metaphor **FAMILY HARMONY IS THE QUALITY OF A MEAL**, in which the entire structure of a traditional Vietnamese meal — with rice (the staple), soup (the accompanying dish), and the balance between them — is systematically mapped onto the target domain of family relations, particularly the marital relationship. Nguyễn Thị Bầy (2014) argues that this metaphor is not a simple comparison but rather encodes an entire cultural schema of the Vietnamese family meal as the central symbol of social cohesion. More importantly, this metaphor reflects the collectivist values and interdependence characteristic of Vietnamese culture: family happiness is not the sum of individual happinesses but the quality of a harmonious whole — just as a good meal is not the sum of its individual dishes but their harmonious combination.

II. Data and Research Methodology

The research corpus comprises 408 idiom and proverb units belonging to the culinary field in Vietnamese, collected from authoritative dictionary sources, namely the Dictionary of Vietnamese Idioms (Nguyễn Như Ý et al., 1997) and the Dictionary of Vietnamese Proverbs (Nguyễn Đức Dương, 2010). The selection criteria were: (i) the idiom must contain at least one element belonging to the culinary domain (a food name, a cooking utensil, an eating behavior, or a taste term); (ii) the idiom must carry a symbolic meaning beyond its literal sense of eating; and (iii) the idiom must be attested in at least two dictionary sources or show a high frequency of use in textual corpora.

The analytical procedure was carried out in four steps. The first step was to identify structural metaphors in the corpus, based on the criterion that a unit must involve an abstract concept (morality, social relations, emotion) that is organized, shaped, and understood through a detailed, well-defined structure drawn from another concept (the source domain). The second step was to code the source and target domains according to an established category system comprising eight main categories: Morality and Life Values (ETH), Natural Law (NAT), Labor and Material Life (LAB), Social Relations (SOC), Adaptation to Circumstance (ADP), Fate and Fortune (FAT), Knowledge and Experience (KNW), and Attitudes toward Wealth (AFW). The third step was to analyze the mapping mechanism and the image schema operating within each metaphor model, identifying the systematic correspondences between elements of the source domain and elements of the target domain.

The analytical framework was built on Kövecses's three-level model: the universal level examines the shared image schemas and embodied experience common to the linguistic community; the culturally elaborated level analyzes how cultural values, beliefs, and practices shape the concretization of the metaphor [Palmer (1996): 114-120]; and the level of linguistic expression examines the images, vocabulary, and grammatical structures specific to each language [Kövecses (2020): 25-30]. The analytical method combined qualitative and quantitative approaches: quantitative analysis to determine the distributional proportion of metaphor types and their degree of equivalence, and qualitative analysis to interpret the cognitive mechanisms and cultural factors governing variation.

III. Results and Discussion

Quantitative Distribution of Structural Metaphor in the Corpus

The analysis of 408 Vietnamese culinary idioms and proverbs shows that structural metaphor accounts for the highest proportion, at 60.8% (248/408). This figure reflects the strong dynamism and generalizing power of the culinary domain in organizing cognitive categories. Structural metaphor not only "objectifies" but also "systematizes" experience, establishing a systematic correspondence between the sequence of eating actions (preparation — consumption — digestion — storage) and the sequence of moral-social actions (acting — benefiting — reacting — sustaining).

Some Major Models of Structural Metaphor

The Model **THE FUTURE IS THE NEXT SEASON, RESOURCES ARE SEED GRAIN, WASTE IS EATING THE SEED GRAIN**

This structural-metaphor model creates a structured mapping system between the entire source domain (the agricultural process) and the target domain (the economic and moral cycle).

The idiom "*Ai muốn nuôi con chó có ăn thóc giống*" (lit. "whoever wants to raise children must not eat the seed grain") carries a profound admonitory force, advising people not to squander precious resources but to preserve them for the future. "Seed grain" is an image intimately tied to wet-rice agricultural life, symbolizing reproductive potential and growth — the very source of future harvests. "Eating the seed grain" means consuming the resource necessary for reproduction, leading to an unsustainable future. The phrase "raising children" does not simply refer to nurturing one's offspring but also implies intergenerational responsibility: older generations must think of those who come after and ensure they have the resources to continue living and developing.

This structural metaphor creates a structured mapping system between the entire source domain (the agricultural process) and the target domain (the economic and moral cycle).

The source domain is the agricultural cultivation cycle, comprising a recurring sequence of actions: keeping seed, sowing, tending, harvesting, and setting aside a portion as seed for the following season. This is a cyclical temporal structure in which the stages are tightly linked by causal relations and maintain the sustainability of the whole system. The target domain mapped from this structure is the cycle of resource management and intergenerational responsibility, with corresponding stages: preserving capital, investing for development, harvesting benefits, and sustaining resources for the next generation.

The structural mapping mechanism operates on the basis of formal and functional similarity between the two action sequences, whereby the farmer's material experience of sustaining the harvest is metaphorized into a life philosophy and a model of sustainable resource management across generations.

Within the source domain, "seed grain" is not ordinary rice but a special portion set aside, not to be eaten immediately. It carries within it the potential for reproduction: a single seed sown can yield hundreds of new grains. The act of "eating the seed grain" breaks this cycle — it satisfies immediate hunger but destroys the capacity to produce food in the future. This is a short-sighted decision with serious consequences: once the seed is consumed, the farmer will have nothing to sow the following season, leading to famine and crisis.

This structure is systematically mapped onto the target domain. "Seed grain" corresponds to any type of resource with future profit-generating potential: savings for business, land for cultivation, knowledge to be passed on, or any asset capable of generating long-term value. "Eating the seed grain" corresponds to depleting these resources for short-term gain: spending all one's savings on luxuries, selling land for wasteful spending, or failing to invest in children's education. "The next season" corresponds to the future, particularly the future of the next generation. "The cultivation cycle" corresponds to the cycle of sustainable development: each generation must preserve and grow resources to pass on to the next, forming an unbroken continuous chain.

According to Kövecses (2020), this is a case of systemic mapping, in which an entire sequence of physical actions in one domain is re-conceptualized in a structured way within the abstract domain. It is not a single isolated element that is mapped but the entire network of relations among the elements — causal, temporal, and value relations — that is transferred from the source domain to the target domain. Specifically, the causal relation "keeping seed → having a next season" is mapped onto "preserving resources → having a future"; the temporal relation "present → future" is structured according to the agricultural cycle; and the value relation "seed is more precious than rice for eating" is mapped onto "investment capital is more precious than immediate consumption".

From a cultural perspective, the idiom foregrounds the intergenerational and filial-rearing ethic through the phrase "whoever wants to raise children" — placing the responsibility of nurturing the next generation as the central motive for thrifty behavior. This reflects the deep-seated family and collectivist values of Vietnamese culture: adults live not only for themselves but must also think of their children and grandchildren. "Raising children" here does not simply mean providing daily food but ensuring a long-term future for the next generation — a weighty moral responsibility. "Eating the seed grain" is therefore not only economically imprudent but also morally irresponsible toward one's descendants.

The Model **EFFICIENCY IS THE RATIO BETWEEN EXPENDITURE AND INTAKE**

This is a complex form of structural metaphor in which the entire system of economic evaluation is structured through the bodily experience of expending energy and taking in food.

The idiom "*Ăn bát cháo chạy ba quãng đồng*" (lit. "eat a bowl of rice porridge, run three field-lengths") depicts the absurdity of an action in which the effort expended is disproportionate to the benefit received. "A bowl of porridge" symbolizes a small, negligible reward — porridge being a simple dish that fills the stomach temporarily but has little nutritional value; "three field-lengths" symbolizes toil and a long journey — a "field-length" (quãng đồng) being a unit of distance across the vast paddy fields, and "three lengths" indicating a considerable distance that must be run with great effort. The stark imbalance between the large effort (running three field-lengths) and the small reward (one bowl of porridge) creates a satirical effect, criticizing economically imprudent decisions or actions not worth undertaking.

The source domain comprises two measurable bodily action sequences. The energy-expenditure sequence is "running three field-lengths" — a physical activity requiring considerable physical effort, burning

calories, causing fatigue, and potentially increasing hunger. The energy-intake sequence is "eating a bowl of porridge" — ingesting a small amount of food that provides limited energy. Within the human body, there is a natural energy-balance system: energy expended must be compensated for by energy taken in through eating. When the energy expended (running three lengths) greatly exceeds the energy taken in (one bowl of porridge), the body falls into a state of deficit that is unsustainable.

The mapping mechanism transposes this bodily energy-balance structure onto the domain of evaluating rational behavior. "Running three field-lengths" is mapped onto any kind of effort, labor, time, or resource that must be expended to achieve a goal — this is the input cost. "A bowl of porridge" is mapped onto the benefit, outcome, or reward obtained from that effort — this is the output benefit. The proportional relation between these two elements becomes the criterion for evaluating rationality: if the cost far exceeds the benefit, the action is deemed irrational and not worth doing; if the benefit is greater than or commensurate with the cost, the action is deemed rational and worth doing.

The crucial point in this structural metaphor is that the entire system of economic evaluation is mapped on the basis of embodied experience of energy balance. According to conceptual metaphor theory, people understand the abstract notions of "being worthwhile" or "efficiency" not through abstract mathematical calculation but through concrete bodily experience of expending and replenishing energy. This is a form of embodied economics: basic economic principles such as efficiency, optimization, and the cost-benefit ratio are rooted in the biological experience of survival. The human body is itself inherently a micro-economic system that must manage its resources (energy) efficiently in order to survive and thrive.

This structure reflects a balance schema: when input and output are proportionate, the system is stable; when there is severe imbalance (such as running a great deal but eating little), the system becomes unsustainable. This metaphor also activates a causal schema: an action (running, pressing) leads to a result (obtaining porridge, obtaining juice), and this relationship must be strong enough to justify the action. When the result is too small relative to the action, the causal relationship ceases to be reasonable, and the entire chain of action is judged to be absurd.

From a cultural perspective, the use of the images "field" and "porridge" ties the idiom to rustic, agrarian life. "Field-length" evokes the image of the vast rice paddies across which farmers must travel a great deal in the course of cultivation. "Porridge" is a simple dish, generally regarded as plain, unprized food. The contrast between "three field-lengths" (far, arduous) and "a bowl of porridge" (little, simple) is exaggerated to produce a strong rhetorical effect. The idiom has a folk flavor and is commonly used to advise others against pursuing goals unworthy of the effort involved, or self-deprecatingly to describe one's own wasted efforts.

*The Model **ILLOGICAL ACTION IS MISALLOCATED BENEFIT***

This is a complex metaphorical model concerning the mismatch between benefit and responsibility, between enjoyment and contribution, between receiving and giving.

The idiom "*Ăn cây táo, rào cây sung*" (lit. "eat from the jujube tree, fence the fig tree") describes inconsistent and illogical conduct: benefiting from one source (eating from the jujube tree — harvesting and enjoying its fruit) while directing one's caretaking effort toward another (fencing the fig tree — protecting and investing in it). "Fencing" here means building a protective enclosure and providing careful tending. This action reveals confusion in loyalty and obligation: one fails to invest in the source that benefits oneself (the jujube tree) and instead tends to an unrelated source, or one belonging to someone else (the fig tree). This results in imbalance and injustice: the jujube tree feeds us, yet we do not care for it, while the fig tree receives our care, yet we do not benefit from it.

Analyzing the structure of this model, we find that the source domain consists of three main elements: "eating" (the act of benefiting), "fencing" (the act of caretaking and protection), and two different trees (jujube and fig). The natural relational structure ought to be: whichever tree's fruit one eats, one should fence and tend that same tree — a logical reciprocal relation between enjoyment and contribution. In agricultural practice, this is an obvious principle: whichever tree feeds us, we must tend that tree so it continues to bear fruit. If we eat fruit from the jujube tree but go and fence the fig tree instead, the jujube tree will lack care and may die or stop bearing fruit, while the fig tree is well tended but its benefit belongs to someone else (or to no one, if no one eats the figs).

The mapping mechanism transposes this natural relational structure onto the domain of evaluating social and moral behavior. "The jujube tree" is mapped onto the source of benefit one is currently enjoying: a benefactor, the organization paying one's salary, a relationship that is generating value, or any source that is sustaining one. "The fig tree" is mapped onto another source from which one derives no benefit: perhaps a rival of the benefactor, a competing organization, or a relationship that brings one no value. "Eating" is mapped onto benefiting, receiving favor, or being supported. "Fencing" is mapped onto investing effort, caretaking, protecting, or serving.

The metaphor criticizes mismatched action: benefiting from A while investing in B. This is a form of illogicality because it violates the principle of reciprocity and fairness: whoever grants us a favor, we ought to repay that person, not someone else. This action is not only economically illogical (failing to sustain one's own

source of benefit) but also socially immoral (ingratitude toward one's benefactor, betrayal of loyalty). The result is an imbalance in the social exchange system: the giver goes unrewarded, while the non-giver reaps the benefit of one's effort.

The idiom operates within an exchange schema: resources move between parties, and this movement must follow the principle of reciprocity and fairness. In the ideal exchange schema, there is a clear correspondence: A gives B something, and B must give A something equivalent in return. When this correspondence is broken — B receives from A but repays C — the entire exchange system falls into imbalance and injustice. The metaphor structures our understanding of fairness and obligation through this simple structure of material exchange.

According to Kövecses (2020), this is a paradigmatic example of cross-domain mapping: the same causal schema and exchange structure are expressed through two different experiential domains while retaining their structural coherence.

From a cultural perspective, the idiom anchors its metaphor in the agricultural environment and the experience of cultivation. "Jujube" and "fig" are two familiar fruit trees found in Vietnamese home gardens, and "fencing" (building a protective enclosure or providing careful tending) is a concrete agricultural activity. This image evokes rural life, in which every tree in the garden has value and must be properly cared for. Misallocating effort to the wrong tree is not only wasteful but leads to loss: the tree that feeds us, if neglected, will die, while the effort poured into the tree that does not feed us is wasted. The idiom carries a morally critical tone, censuring ingratitude and disloyalty.

The Model **FALSE FRIENDSHIP IS CONDITIONAL CONSUMPTION**

This is a complex metaphor concerning the quality and sincerity of a relationship, in which the structure of conditional behavior in material situations is mapped onto the structure for evaluating friendship.

The idiom "*Ăn cỗ tìm đến, đánh nhau tìm đi*" (lit. "seek out the feast, flee the fight") describes the type of person who appears only when there is benefit to be had and vanishes when trouble arises — a form of opportunistic, insincere friendship. "Seeking out the feast" means that when there is a party, merriment, or benefit, this person actively and eagerly seeks it out. "Fleeing the fight" means that when there is trouble, conflict, or danger, this person instead tries to disappear and avoid it. "Seeking out" and "fleeing" create a sharp contrast in attitude: on one side, eager, proactive engagement (seeking out); on the other, deliberate avoidance (fleeing — purposefully staying away). This inconsistency exposes the nature of false friendship: present only when there is benefit to be gained, absent when help is needed.

The source domain of this metaphor comprises two entirely opposite social situations. The first is "the feast" — a large gathering, a joyful and abundant occasion where everyone enjoys good food together and socializes. This is an occasion for pleasure, requiring no sacrifice or effort, only attendance and enjoyment. The second is "the fight" — conflict, trouble, danger, a situation in which one's friend truly needs support, protection, or at least a comforting presence. This is an occasion demanding courage, sacrifice, and the risk of becoming embroiled in trouble. In a genuine friendship, a good friend will be present in both situations: sharing in joy when there is joy, standing alongside one another in hardship. But the person criticized in this idiom displays a clearly selective attitude: "seeking out" (proactive, eager) when there is a feast, "fleeing" (proactively avoiding) when there is a fight.

The mapping mechanism transposes this entire structure of conditional behavior onto the domain of evaluating the quality of friendship. "The feast" is mapped onto any favorable, joyful, beneficial situation in life: success, prosperity, power, or any occasion on which associating with someone brings benefit to the friend. "The fight" is mapped onto any difficult, risky, dangerous situation in life: failure, poverty, illness, legal trouble, or any adversity in which helping might disadvantage the friend. "Seeking out" is mapped onto an eager, proactive attitude of associating with someone when benefit is perceived. "Fleeing" is mapped onto an evasive attitude of cutting off contact when there is a risk of becoming implicated.

The core relational structure mapped in this metaphor is a sequence of conditional behavior based on personal gain, leading to a lack of sincerity in the relationship and ultimately giving rise to a form of false friendship. In the schema of genuine friendship, a friend's presence does not depend on circumstance: the friend is present both in good times and in hardship, sharing in both joy and sorrow. Here, friendship is understood as an unconditional commitment grounded in trust, honesty, and empathy, rather than in calculations of personal benefit. In the schema of false friendship, by contrast, the relationship is conditioned by benefit: the friend appears only when there is gain and withdraws when there is disadvantage. The bond in this case is a form of hidden transaction — friendship is no longer an end in itself but becomes a means of obtaining material or social benefit. This structure reflects a universal moral-social mapping: genuine affection stands opposed to self-interested behavior. Whereas genuine friendship is sustained by long-term commitment and trust, false friendship exists only within a short-term framework of benefit, lacking a moral foundation and any durability over time.

The use of the verb "seek" (*tìm*) in both cases — "seeking out" and "fleeing" (lit. "seeking to go") — emphasizes the deliberate, intentional nature of the behavior. This person is not accidentally present or absent but

actively "seeks" (searches for, deliberately moves toward) when there is benefit, and actively "seeks to flee" (looks for a way to escape, deliberately moves away) when there is harm. This deliberateness makes the behavior all the more reprehensible: it is not weakness or helplessness but calculated, willful selfishness.

From a cultural perspective, the metaphor is anchored in a specific social context — the communal feast and interpersonal conflict. The "cỗ" (ceremonial feast) is an important cultural element in traditional Vietnamese society: every significant event (a wedding, a death anniversary, a festival) involves a feast, and who attends and who does not is a marker of social relationships. "Attending the feast" is not merely a matter of enjoyment but also an expression of attachment, congratulation, and shared joy. Conversely, "the fight" represents a serious conflict situation in rural society, one in which a true friend must be ready to stand by their friend's side, offering protection and support. These two images are highly concrete and close to communal life, easy to visualize, and carry a strong emotional charge.

IV. Conclusion

It can be seen that the system of culinary metaphor forms a multi-layered conceptual network, in which source domains such as eating, drinking, rice, porridge, trees, or dishes function as central nodes governing the entire conceptual network. These elements represent not merely physiological behavior but are also bound up with a system of moral, social, and cultural values.

This metaphorical network reflects the community-morality structure characteristic of Vietnamese culture. "Eating" is not an isolated individual act but a thread linking the person to society and nature. Each idiom or proverb is a link in this network, where values such as affection, loyalty, fairness, and moderation are symbolized through concrete culinary imagery.

We may conclude that the network of culinary metaphor in Vietnamese is a morally elaborated network, in which the human body, social relations, and the natural environment are linked into a harmonious symbolic system. This also provides clear evidence for Sharifian's (2017) argument that, in collectivist communities, linguistic cognition cannot be separated from cultural cognition.

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