

SIMILARITIES IN WORD FORMATION OF ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE

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ABSTRACT

In their paths to development and perfection under changes and inventions constantly made in the society, languages have continuously been improved in term of vocabulary increase. The growth in number of vocabulary, commonly by deriving, blending and borrowing, has brought about challenges to learners of language in addition to its convenience. This article discusses the similarities in word formation between English and Vietnamese, with an aim to enhance English teaching and learning in current Vietnam context.

Keywords: Similarities, Word Formation, Vocabulary Increase.

INTRODUCTION

Languages are indispensable and interesting means for communication among human beings, and they have constantly developed in parallel with the society's advancement. Martina (2010) affirmed that "because of new inventions and changes, every language is in need of new words – borrowed, derived or otherwise formed – simply because new things need new words. The human community is steadily growing and developing, just as the tool we use to communicate: Language. When new inventions and changes enter our lives, we are in the need of naming them and of course to communicate about them. Language is dynamic, it changes constantly."(p4) Furthermore, language development is seen in the increase of vocabulary as affirmed once again by Martina (2010) "if a new word, however silly it may be, is used by many speakers of a language, it will probably survive and it can happen that one day, it is an everyday word and entered our dictionaries" (p4). In term of word growth, new words are born in several ways as concluded by Martina (2010) "there are many ways to create new words: Borrowing from other languages, blending together from several words or deriving from words we already have".(p 7)

In our teaching and learning of the English language, Vietnamese teachers, and students of English have faced thousands of difficulties in understanding a large number of English words due partly to (i) their constant appearance of new words, and (ii) their strange and complicated word forms, especially compound words whose structures and meanings are definitely difficult for us learners to figure out, and even beyond our reach of experience. These words are ranged from the "simple" ones like "brunch", "hostel", "in-serve" to the more intricate ones, for example "teleworking", "in-depth", "well-to-do", "nine to five", or "bromance", "spork". Likewise, in the recent years, there have surprisingly appeared in Vietnamese hundreds of new words whose meanings are not easy for both foreigners and Vietnamese speakers to understand. We can take some of words for example, "trân quý" (trân trọng + yêu quý [respectful+adorable], "ngoan cố" (ngoan ngoan + cố gắng) [obedient+endeavoring]. In its development and formation of new words, each language is closely connected with different socio-economic and cultural factors because no language is identical to others when they are tracked and considered from origins, number of sounds, words, grammar rules. The English language and the Vietnamese one are far different because "English words are polysyllabic, with most words containing one to five syllables" (Erickson, 2001) while Ngo (2001) concluded that "Vietnamese belongs to the group of Mon-

Khmer languages in the Austroasiatic family of languages” (p 5) and Giang (2007) cited Thompson (1965) as saying that “Vietnamese has been inaccurately reported to be a monosyllabic language with each word equal to one syllable” (p 14). Yet, in this small paper research, we would like to point out some similarities between the English language and Vietnamese language in term of word formation, mainly compounds, and words in use with an aim to exchange experience for language teaching and learning in Vietnam context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is known that words are means of communication, so they play a very crucial role in people’s lives. Words are used to communicate with each other in daily lives although whoever we are or whatever we do. Many assumptions are suggested that words be rule-governed. Whatever words we are speaking - mother tongue or any foreign languages, it all comes from what we have heard, learnt before. In other words, it is also said that words have their own origins. Every word based on a particular way has its own formation. Many researchers have showed the similarities and differences of forming words in English and Vietnamese. According to the Oxford dictionary, a very simple definition of a word is suggested that a word is a single unit of language which means something and can be spoken and written. Nevertheless, its academic definition is that “a word is a unit of language that carries meaning and consists of one or more morphemes which are linked more or less tightly together, and has a phonetic value”. Thanks to this definition, it is concluded that English or Vietnamese words are formed from morphemes. To some certain extends, it is likely that word formation in English and Vietnamese are alike as one linguist suggested that “English and Vietnamese have two ways of forming new words: affixation and compounding” (Giang 2007). More specially, in Nguyen Luong Ngoc’s research, she supposes two kinds of morphemes in English and Vietnamese words: free morphemes and bound morphemes. Free morphemes forming words by themselves can occur alone, which are found in the central place of word structure while bound morphemes cannot occur by themselves.

However, the differences between bound morphemes in English and Vietnamese do exist. In English, bound morphemes which cannot appear alone as separate words are prefixes like pre-,in-, un-,... and suffixes like -ly, -s, -able, etc.. Meanwhile, bound morphemes in Vietnamese cannot occur alone but they are separate words and can function as either compounding or reduplicative elements. As a result, words in English can be formed by one free morpheme only, such as picture, book, film, cinema, or can be a combination of one free morpheme and more bound morphemes like readable, unluckily, etc. Words in Vietnamese can consist of one single morpheme such as máy, xe, nhà, cửa or two free morphemes like nhà máy, máy điện toán, two or more bound morphemes, for example, thi sĩ, quốc kỳ, ra-đi-ô, one free and one bound morpheme such as đồ lòm, xanh lè. In short, although both English and Vietnamese words are formed by morphemes, word structures in these two languages are completely different. In English, in some cases we can add prefixes or suffixes, which are considered bound morphemes, into a word to form a new word having the relation of meaning of the origin word, but we cannot do this in Vietnamese cases. In Vietnamese, when we want to form a new word having the relationship with the origin word, for most of the cases we have to add another separate word.

Some Similarities between English – Vietnamese Word Formation and Use

1. Similarities in noun Formation, Using Affixation

In order for the fact that affixation is the common way of word formation in both English and Vietnamese as Giang (2007) stated above “English and Vietnamese have two ways of forming new words: affixation and compounding” (p 14) to be strengthened, we would mention another Vietnamese linguist – Vu Ngoc Can (1999) who stated in his book entitled “An introduction to linguistics” that “affixation is considered a common way to form new words in inflective languages like Russian, German or English. Affixation is, however, can also be used for non-transformative languages, such as Vietnamese, Chinese or Khmer despite some ideas suggesting that affixation is not clear in those languages” (translated, p 78,79). In the English language, nouns can be formed in different ways, one of which is by adding suffixes into verbs. e.g suffixes are added into roots to form new words.

For examples:

Verbs	suffixes	nouns
vibrate	ion	vibration
develop	ment	development

One of the suffixes is “ing”, a suffix turning verbs into nouns, meaning the performing of an action denoted by the verbs.

For examples:

swim	ing	swimming
read	ing	reading
meet	ing	meeting
paint	ing	painting

In Vietnamese, a noun can be formed by using such words as **cuộc, sự, việc, nỗi, cái**, etc (called nouns in Vietnamese) in combination with a verb. In Vietnamese, these words are, however, placed before the roots not after the roots as in English.

For examples:

nouns	verbs	nouns
cuộc	họp	cuộc họp
sự	quan tâm	sự quan tâm
nỗi	nhớ	nỗi nhớ

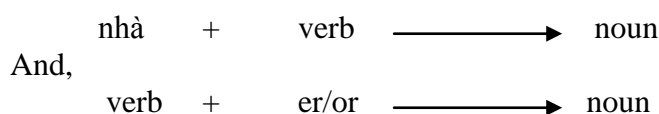
There are two problems arising here. First, should **cuộc, sự, việc...** be named affixes? And second, if any, are they suffixes or prefixes? In linguistics, affixes are not lexical words and they don't usually convey any meanings and they are used to create new words or new word form (new parts of speech). In such background, **cuộc, sự, việc** ..play the same function because nouns denote people's names, things, ideas or concepts but these nouns denote nothing. In Vietnamese, **cuộc, sự, việc** are classified as means of “danh từ hóa” (roughly noun formation agent) (Do, 2003, p66). These nouns are just used to combine with verbs or adjectives to make nouns. In the light of that, we can see some of other similarities in the following cases. In the examples bellow, a certain formulas could possibly be made.

Vietnamese

nhà	+	đầu tư	nhà đầu tư	(investor)
nhà+		cải cách	nhà cải cách	(reformer)
nhà	+	phát minh	nhà phát minh	(inventor)

nhà	+	thám hiểm	nhà thám hiểm(explorer)
nhà	+	tài trợ	nhà tài trợ (sponsor)
English			
read	+	er	reader
sing	+	er	singer
drive	+	er	driver
work	+	er	worker
visit	+	or	visitor

In the first group, “nhà” indicates a person and when it’s followed by a verb (action) to form a noun, meaning a person who does / performs an action denoted by the verb itself. In the second group, “er” sometimes “or” as in visitor, plays the role of a suffix and it combines with the root words for new words which have the same meaning as shown in the former examples. We can draw:



Taking about different elements for word formation, Nguyen (1998) proposed a new term: “bán phụ tố”. They are words which appear regularly in many compounds without changing their original meanings. And in reference to Vietnamese, Nguyen (1998) concluded “In Vietnamese, such words as **viện, giả, sĩ, nhà, hóa**...bear the characteristics of semi- affixes” (p 67). Generally, in most of the cases, if English nouns are formed by affixation, then affixes are suffixes and Vietnamese nouns are formed by combining “bán phụ tố” with verbs or adjectives.

2. Similarities in Compounds

Compounding is the way to form new words by combining two language elements of the same features (e.g. phonemic elements) in a certain order. And this is commonly used in most of languages. (Vu, 1999, p 69).

Examples	
mua bán, thiết hơn, thay đổi	(Vietnamese)
blackboard, inkpot, manpower	(English)

In English and Vietnamese, most of new words, especially nouns (compound nouns), are formed by compounding. Surprisingly, in both languages, we can see these formulas.

	Noun + noun	→	noun
Vietnamese			
Nouns		noun	Compound nouns
đèn		sách	đèn sách
quần		áo	quần áo
nhà		cửa	nhà cửa
vợ		chồng	vợ chồng
xe		cộ	xe cộ
English			
Nouns		Noun	Compound nouns
can		opener	can opener
alarm		clock	alarm clock

hand	bag	hand bag
dog	food	dog food
car	park	car park
Noun + verb	noun	
—————→		
Vietnamese		
Nouns	Verbs	Compound nouns
bánh	vẽ	bánh vẽ
tập	viết	tập viết
sân	phơi	sân phơi
máy	hát	máy hát
đường	chạy	đường chạy
làng	nướng	làng nướng
English		
Nouns	Verbs	Compound nouns
role	play	role play
bus	stop	bus stop
book	store	bookstore
news	print	newsprint
house	work	house work
home	stay	home stay
Noun + adjective	noun	
—————→		
Vietnamese		
Nouns	Adjectives	Compounds
áo	ấm	áo ấm
năm	mới	năm mới
tranh	vui	tranh vui
(bức) điện	khẩn	(bức) điện khẩn
English		
Nouns	Adjectives	Compounds
secretary	general	secretary general
postmaster	general	postmaster general
Amnesty	International	Amnesty International

In their studies about the similarities between English and Vietnamese adjectives, many students, under the supervision by the experienced teacher, have pointed out some differences between the positions of adjectives in relation with nouns. Ho (2010) stated that “For syntactic function, basically, English adjectives have two most popular positions in a sentence. One is before a noun when the adjectives modify for the noun coming after them” (p5) and “For syntactic function, not so complicate as English, Vietnamese adjectives almost always come after nouns”.(p 7). Consequently, In Vietnamese, it is usual for an adjective come after a noun while in English, it is unusual for some adjectives to come after verb as in the following examples.

Adjectives	Nouns	Compounds
high	school	secretary general
personal	computer	personal computer
fast	food	fast food
fist	aid	fist aid
social	security	social security
remote	control	remote control

Similarly, Ho (2009) concluded that “Most importantly and grammatically, when being a modifier, adjectives of English and Vietnamese occur at two opposite sides of the noun. English adjectives usually come before the noun, and this situation is the reverse of that in Vietnamese. According to linguists, it is because of Vietnamese grammar’s flexibility which is influenced by Eastern-oriented culture, following the natural and logical thinking of human beings. That is why, when producing phrases in general and noun phrases in particular, Vietnamese people have a great tendency to put what they first think of or what is more important at the beginning places. Given these senses, structures like “A thick book – quyển sách dày or a beautiful girl – cô gái đẹp” are expected” (p 11).

3. Similarities In Conversion And Word Inversion

Conversion, which is also called “functional change” or “zero derivation”, is the formation of a new word by which one part of speech is transformed to another without adding any more elements. Conversion is commonly seen in noun-verb relation. A noun can become a verb and vice versa.

Examples

Vietnamese

Noun

đá (rock)

bàn (table)

đậu (bean)

điện (electricity)

English

Noun

hand (a body part)

present (a gift)

work (a kind of job)

lecture (teaching notes)

Verb

đá (to kick)

bàn (to discuss)

đậu (to pass)

điện (to phone)

Verb

to hand (to give out)

to present (to show sth)

to work (to do something)

to lecture (to teach)

These pairs of words are either homonyms or “từ đồng âm khác nghĩa” (words of the same phonetic phones but of different meanings) in Vietnamese. They are just different in term of (1) morphology: to hand can take other forms “handed”, “handing”; (2) syntactic: to hand can play the role of predicate like that in “he handed me a watch”: and (3) semantic: to hand is a verb, meaning “to give”, while hand is a part of the body as showed in the examples above.

Inversion can form new words without changing the meaning. In English, we can see such following phenomenon:

oversee	see over
overrule	rule over
overturn	turn over

In the first group (oversee, overrule, overturn), the words are inseparable. This can be an incident in word formation but in the second group (see over, rule over, turn over) the words are separate. They are two element verbs (called phrasal verbs) with the first element being a verb and the second one an adverb (sometimes a preposition). In the formation of phrasal verbs, the choice of adverbs is optional and of random combination but each combination of verb-adverb/verb preposition has its own meaning. These above-mentioned examples may be a sheer coincidence. But actually, such cases tend to grow in number due to changes in modern English. We can see other examples.

oversleep	sleep over
uplift	lift up
inrush	rush in
outspread	spread out
outbreak	break out

In Vietnamese, inversion is also found in verbs although the number of such verbs is quite small. Here are some examples.

ao ước	ước ao	(to desire)
ca ngợi	ngợi ca	(to laude)
cầu khẩn	khẩn cầu	(to pray)

These verbs are compounds and each element in the compound is morphemically free; however, they go with each other like bread and butter. Probably no one can explain why they come into being in such combination and as I think, explanation to that matter is of no use here when we just mean to consider the meaning in its conversion, not the original meaning of each two element in the compounds. We can enjoy more examples.

đấu tranh	tranh đấu	(to struggle)
gào thét	thét gào	(to scream)
bảo đảm	đảm bảo	(to guarantee)
yêu dấu	dấu yêu	(to adore)
bàn luận	luận bàn	(to discuss)

In Vietnamese, such phenomenon can be seen in some of adjectives. For example.

êm ấm	ấm êm	(well-protected)
lo âu	âu lo	(pre-occupied)
bề bộn	bộn bề	(messy)
khủng khiếp	khiếp khủng	(horrible)
đau khổ	khổ đau	(miserable)
hữu hạn	hạn hữu	(limited)

4. Similarities In Word Formation In Which The New Formed Word Changes The Original Meaning Of The Initial Elements

In English and Vietnamese, some of compounds bear new meanings in reference to the initial elements. This phenomenon is of low occurrence in the vocabulary stock of the two languages and it causes either misunderstandings or confusion for language learning, especially for non-native learners. In English, we can see such words described in the chart below

merry (happy)	go (move to new position)	round (of a shape)	merry-go-round (children's play thing)
Eve (human's name)	and (with)	Adam (human's name)	Eve-and-Adam (two fried eggs)
forget (don't remember)	me (personal pro)	not (adverb, none)	forget-me-not (name of flower)
bread (kind of food)	and (with)	butter (kind of food)	bread-and-butter (young and unexperienced)
cat	and	dog	cat and dog

(an animal)	(with)	(an animal)	heavily (rain)
and (with)	a (one)	half	and a half (more important)
any (indefinite adj)	old (being aged)	how (adverb inter)	any old how (of no importance)
sixes (number in plural)	and with	sevens (number in plural)	sixes and sevens (messy/disorder)

In Vietnamese, some compounds are the same. See the chart below

đất (land)	Nước (water)	đất nước (nation)
ô (umbrella)	Dù (parachute)	ô dù (of authority)
vai (shoulder)	vế (thigh)	vai vế (influential)
mâu (spear)	Thuần (shield)	mâu thuẫn (contradictory)

5. Similarities In Words Of Opposite Meanings

In English and Vietnamese, there are hundreds of word usages in which words of opposite meanings occur in pairs. In Vietnamese, according to Trinh (2001), these pairs of words, once in use, are both pretty pleasantly to the ears and receptively (p112).

Examples

Làng **gần** cho đến làng **xa**

Mến yêu trăm vạn mái nhà **lạ quen** (Chế Lan Viên)

Gần # xa lạ # quen

Làm người phải **đần** phải **đo**

Phải cân **nặng nhẹ** phải dò **nông sâu** (folk song)

Nặng # nhẹ nông # sâu

In English, we can also see such cases

Near and **far** I feel you, I hear you. (Song, My heart will go on)

Near # far

Men were running **here** and **there** in the camp. (Escape, New concept)

Here # there

The words in pairs can be in close occurrence (they are next to each other and in English they are called **oxymoron's**) or in open occurrence (they are just here and there in a phrase or a clause). The following occurrences can be regularly seen in daily use.

Close occurrence

Vietnamese

- **Sớm muộn** gì anh cũng biết thôi.
- **Hiền dữ** phải đâu là sẵn tính.
- Bạn bè có chi mà phân biệt **giàu nghèo**.
- **Già trẻ bé lớn** gì cũng không tha.
- Sẵn có rượu, anh ấy lại làm càng. Chẳng biết **đúng sai** gì cả.

English

- The food in that restaurant is **awfully good**.

- The football fans gathered in **small crowds** on the stands.
- She was our **only choice** for the position.
- **Virtual reality** has been in significant in computer technology.

Open occurrence

Vietnamese

Dầu lòng đôi trắng thay đen khó gì	trắng # đen
Em bảo anh đi đi sao anh không đứng lại	đi # đứng lại
Việc ấy không thể làm trong một sớm một chiều	sớm # chiều
Cán bộ nhà nước vẫn hay làm khó làm đễ người dân	khó # dễ
Đừng có than trời trách đất nữa	trời # đất

English

Now and **then** he comes for a visit.

Now # then

Fashion **comes** and **goes** with out any man's wishes.

Comes # goes

He has experienced many **ups** and **downs**.

Ups # down

The **inside** and **outside** market.

Inside # outside

Take it or **leave** it, that's a matter.

Take # leave

Words of opposite meanings are often seen in fixed impressions, proverbs which can best express short, thorough concepts or experience. For examples

Vietnamese

Tham thì **thâm**

tham # thâm

Có làm mới **có ăn**

làm # ăn

Không ai **giàu** ba họ, không ai **khó** ba đời

giàu # khó

Trước **lạ** **sau** **quen**

trước # sau, lạ # quen

Chết **vinh** còn hơn **sống** **nhục**

chết # sống, vinh # nhục

Mất lòng **trước**, **được** lòng **sau**

mất # được, trước # sau

English

Soon **got**, soon **spent**

got # spent

Waste not, **want** not

waste # want

When wine is **in**, wit is **out**

in # out

When all men **speak**, no man **hears**

all # no, speak # hear

Venture **nothing**, lose **anything**

venture # lose, nothing # anything

6. Similarities In Weir Word Combination And Use

In Vietnamese, we are quite familiar with the phrases “quá giang”, “cho quá giang”. “đi quá giang”, which lexically mean getting assisted from someone to move from one river bank to another. Actually, it means “hitch-hike”, or “give some ones a lift” in English. In term of linguistics, it cannot be properly explained but Tran Ngoc Them, who is also linguists (Tran, 1999) said in his famous work “Co so van hoa Viet Nam”, that it was because of cultural features. Explaining the word “quá giang” in Vietnamese (hitch-hike in English), an action a passenger getting a lift in travel mostly in the land, they showed that the word originated from Vietnamese forefather's traveling practice. They traveled mostly on seas, rivers, canals...e.g. by water way not on mainland. “Giang” is a Chino-Vietnamese name for rivers. So “quá giang” is just the way to take a lift when traveling on mainland. In the English language, we can se many cases similar to the above mentioned one and it's impossible to explain why and how they came into being. Take this small case for our example. A foot is a part of the body and it is to stand and run. A nose is also a body part and people just smell

with it. However, the English people say: “foot smell” and “nose runs”. It’s ridiculously mistaken to put that combination but it does make sense. In an article entitled “Weird observation” on a web page (¹), more than 300 entries of such weird uses are listed in form of questions and these thorny questions remain unanswered. Some more examples of weird combination and use of English words are presented below.

Why is the third hand in a watch called the second hand?

Can you sentence a homeless man to house arrest?

Why is it that cargo is transported by ship while a shipment is transported by car?

Why are boxing rings square?

Why is a person that handles your money called a BROKER?

How come overtones and undertones are the same thing?

Why does "closing up" a shop and "closing down" a shop mean the same thing?

And other things

The generals eat in private place and the privates eat in general mess!

The light is out (đèn tắt) but the moon is out. (trăng sáng)

In Vietnamese, except for the previous case of “giang”, we can see another example.

A pig is called “heo” in the South and “lợn” in the North. But people in the North say “nói toạt móng heo” (say it out) while in the south, people name a cake “bánh da lợn” (a kind of cake made from rice, bean, sugar...).

CONCLUSION

Vietnamese and English are two languages with so many distinctive different features. However, there are some similar characteristics in word formation and use. This paper points out some of the similarities in these aspects with an aim to better understand the two languages. The benefits of comparison between English and Vietnamese word formation and word use is presumably to enable students of English to increase new words, thus learn English better because Ade (2014) believed that “apart from mastering these words formation with their examples, learners can generate their own examples and use them creatively” (p9).

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