

## *Original Paper*

# Metaphorical Expressions with “Sweet” in English and “Ngọt” in Vietnamese

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### ***Abstract***

*On the foundation of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the 4-step metaphor identification procedure by Pragglejaz Group, the paper discovers 87 metaphorical expressions containing the word “sweet” in English, equivalent to “ngọt” in Vietnamese through an investigation into four English and four Vietnamese novels composed in the 20th century. These gustatory expressions are found to be used to describe other senses, including olfaction, audition, vision, and tactition. Besides, the metaphorical expressions with “sweet” and “ngọt” are also employed to talk about emotion and manner. Despite several resemblances between English and Vietnamese metaphorical expressions containing the words “sweet” and “ngọt”, which are shed light upon by the universality of metaphors and human embodied experience, there are some differences in expressing the world via these two words between the two languages that are assigned to distinctive linguistic characteristics in each language.*

### ***Keywords***

*metaphorical expressions, conceptual metaphors, sweet, ngọt, metaphoric universality and variations*

## **1. Introduction**

The views considering metaphor as a unique rhetorical device of literary and poetic language has been changed since the birth of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980. According to CMT, metaphors play an important role in everyday life of human beings. It is found pervasive in daily conventional language and understood via conceptual metaphorical mappings related to embodied experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). In the same vein, Gibbs, Lima and Francozo (2003) provide evidence for that human metaphorical thought and language develops on the base of embodied experience. More specifically, Muler et al. (2021) reveal the experience involving senses, taste included,

is often used to metaphorically express human cognition and emotions. Moreover, Kelly (2014) demonstrates that taste-related metaphors are more recurrently used and more effective in everyday communication related to emotions than the word in its literal sense with the same meaning. One of the tastes that may appear the most frequently in linguistic metaphors is sweetness (Bagli, 2016).

Sweetness is known as the taste bringing pleasant and satisfying feelings to human beings. It is thus employed to describe the experience of gratification and positive emotional values (Barcelona, 2008; Zawisławska & Falkowska, 2018), which is also proved by Ho and Phan (2016), who arrive at a conclusion that “sweetness is used to convey the bliss the persons in love experience”. Besides, in line with the statistics by Chan et al. (2013) on an overwhelming number in favor of this taste in figurative association with love, Akuno et al.’s (2018) findings represent sweetness as the most prolific source domain to express various abstract concepts of pleasure and love (Akuno et al., 2018). In addition, sweet taste is metaphorically utilized to convey the happiness and good things a person has or perceives through other senses (namely, vision, olfaction, audition, and somatosensation) (Pham, 2017). In other words, metaphors related to sweetness are prevalently exploited to depict pleasurable sensations or positive feelings which are quite popular in conventional languages in different cultures around the world. So far, there have been several studies on metaphors related to sweetness in different languages such as Chinese (Yu, 1998), English in comparison with Polish (Zawisławska & Falkowska, 2018), Chinese-Vietnamese (Pham, 2017). However, there appears to be a gap in researching the metaphors attached to sweetness, especially linguistic metaphors with “sweet” in English, equivalent to “ngọt” in Vietnamese. As a result, the paper is carried out with a view to making sense of and finding out possible similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese metaphorical expressions comprising “sweet” and “ngọt”. It is hoped to facilitate the use of metaphors with these words in English and Vietnamese communication.

## 2. Method

A comparative investigation into metaphorical expressions comprising “sweet” in English and its equivalent “ngọt” in Vietnamese is mainly carried out by using contrastive analysis which is characterized as the scientific description and comparison of two or more languages to identify their similarities and differences by Joze-Tajareh (2015). It is a preliminary study conducted based on the data collected from English and Vietnamese novels published in the 20th century including *In cold blood* by Truman Capote, *The old man and the sea* by Earnest Hemingway, *The heart is a lonely hunter* by Carson McCullers, *Gone with the wind* by Margaret Mitchell, *Con gái người tình* (The flame’s daughter) by Hà Thu, *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (The sorrow of war) by Bảo Ninh, *Thời xa vắng* (A Time Far Past) by Lê lựu, and *Một khoảng trời yêu thương* (A space of love) by Châu Liên. To make sure of the accuracy, validity and reliability of the data for the research, we use Pragglejazz Group’s (2007) and

the extension of Pragglejaz’s procedures of metaphor identification in discourse, including four steps (cited in Ho & Phan, 2016): (1) Read the entire text-discourse to establish a general understanding of the meaning. Next, (2) determine the lexical units in the text-discourse. Then (3) take into account what comes before and after the lexical unit, determine if it has a more basic contemporary meaning in other contexts than the one in the given context. If yes, decide whether the contextual meaning contrasts with the basic meaning but can be understood in comparison with it. If yes, (4) mark the lexical unit as metaphorical. Besides, as a comparison of cultures should be involved in the scope of a contrastive study (Lado, 1957, extracted from Johansson, 2008), cultural influences on English and Vietnamese metaphorical expressions containing “sweet” (“ngọt”) will also be discovered through descriptive methods.

### 3. Result

Investigating eight novels (four in English and the same number in Vietnamese) as mentioned in section 2, we discovered 43 expressions with “sweet” in English and 42 expressions with “ngọt” in Vietnamese unevenly distributed into 6 conceptual metaphors that are shown in the following table.

**Table 1. Conceptual Metaphors Underlying Metaphorical Expressions with “Sweet” in English and “Ngọt” in Vietnamese**

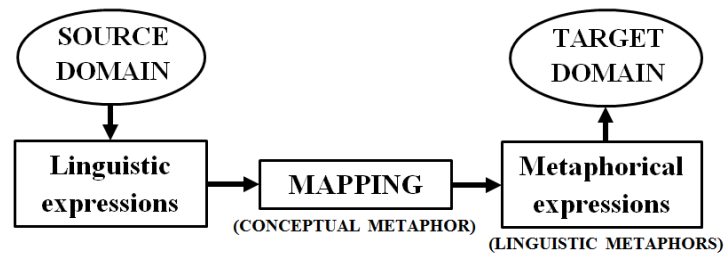
Conceptual metaphors	English metaphorical expressions	Vietnamese metaphorical expressions
HEARING IS TASTING	7	14
SMELLING IS TASTING	8	2
TOUCHING IS TASTING	0	1
APPEARANCE IS A NUTRIENT// SEEING IS TASTING	4	2
EMOTION/ SENTIMENTAL OBJECT IS A NUTRIENT	18	23
MANNER IS A NUTRIENT	6	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>42</b>

As can be seen from the table, metaphorical expressions containing the word “sweet” in English and its equivalent-“ngọt” in Vietnamese is mainly understood via two source domains- nutrient and tasting. It is, in fact, unsurprising that these two domains are applied to understand the sweetness expressed in language because of special relationships between taste and nutrient. The findings by Astrid et al. (2016) reveal the nutrient-signaling function of taste and that sweet taste is one of the signals for the presence of nutrients.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Out of line with traditional views on metaphor as a rhetorical device mainly used in literary language, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) argues that metaphor is pervasive in our everyday language. It does not operate at lexical level but works as a matter of thought and is manifested in language through metaphorical expressions. CMT thus distinguishes metaphorical expressions (or linguistic metaphors) from metaphorical concepts (or conceptual metaphors). The essence of a conceptual metaphor is the understanding of a concept in terms of another through cross-domain mappings, the principal mechanism of meaning transfers in metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). These mappings are understood as the projections of basic knowledge elements from a source to a target through the structure TARGET DOMAIN IS/AS SOURCE DOMAIN. Mapping is systematic, partial, and unidirectional, laid from the source to the target and could be schematically presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Conceptual Mapping** (Ho & Phan, 2016)

In this structure, a source domain is the conceptual domain from which the input of the mapping comes. A target domain is the conceptual domain showing the output of the mapping that people strive for understanding. The linguistic expression “her singing voice is so sweet”, for example, is a metaphorical expression understood via the conceptual metaphor HEARING IS TASTING. In this case, HEARING is a target domain while TASTING is a source domain. As sweetness is a pleasing taste, the “sweet singing voice” refers to a perception of pleasant and attractive sounds.

### 4.2 Metaphorical Expressions Expressing Sweetness under Tasting Metaphors

Human beings perceive the world via their senses, including touch, sight, hearing, smell, and taste. Sweetness is one of the basic tastes they can physically differentiate through their tongue. However, the truth of the matter is that sweet taste is still expressed in terms of other senses (namely, somatosensation, vision, audition, and olfaction) with the evidence from the novels mentioned in section 2.

#### 4.2.1 HEARING-AS-TASTING Metaphor

Hearing is a mechanical process showing the ability to receive and interpret information through ears.

Meanwhile, tasting relies on chemical interactions and deals with information through tongue. It is likely that the two senses are not related to each other but the language used in communication, especially the linguistic expressions with the word “sweet”, demonstrates the opposite.

(1) *She could hear clearly the sweet voice* (Mitchell, *Gone with the wind*)

(2) *Her laughter was sweet* (Carson McCullers, *The heart is a lonely hunter*)

The word “sweet” in (1) and (2) obviously does not refer to gustation but audition since it is used as a modifier of the nouns “voice” and “laughter”. As “sweet” denotes a pleasing and satisfying taste, “sweet voice/laughter” describes pleasant sounds that are easy to hear and make the hearer satisfied. The expressions “sweet voice” and “sweet laughter” may thus not be literally made sense but should be explicated figuratively. In these cases, the expressions are metaphorically understood via the metaphor of hearing as tasting. Such metaphorical expressions can be found in Vietnamese.

(3) *Cả hai bên đều nói năng ngọt xớt* (Lê Lưu, *Thời xa vắng*)

(Both parties talk [to each other] sweetly.)

(4) *Giọng nói của bà sao mà êm ru và ngọt lịm.* (Châu Liên, *Một khoảng trời yêu thương*)

(How smooth and sweet her voice is.)

Similar to “sweet” in English, “ngọt” in Vietnamese refers to the taste of sugar. When the sound is expressed to be “ngọt xớt” or “ngọt lịm” (sweet), it is understood as being gentle and easy to hear, bringing about hearers’ pleasant and enjoyable feelings.

Besides “ngọt xớt” and “ngọt lịm”, “ngọt ngào” is also found in Vietnamese.

(5) *Tiếng Khánh Dung ngọt ngào như suối chảy* (Hạ Thu, *Con gái người tình*)

(Khanh Dung’s voice is as sweet as a flowing stream.)

Vietnamese dictionary distinguishes three words “ngọt xớt”, “ngọt lịm”, and “ngọt ngào” although they are all referring to the sweetness. “Ngọt xớt” is defined as “(often used to present sounds) very sweet and gentle, easy to hear. “Ngọt lịm” is “so sweet that the taste penetrates into the body, causing a pleasant and enjoyable feeling”. Meanwhile, “ngọt ngào” is “generally sweet and pleasant”. In example 5, the word “ngọt ngào” is used to depict a person’s voice but not something that can be eaten or tasted. It is hence a metaphor where the sound is interpreted in terms of the taste.

#### 4.2.2 TASTING metaphors for other Senses

Besides hearing, other senses (smelling, touching and seeing) are also expressed in terms of tasting.

(6) *In the kitchen there were rich, sweet odors.* (Carson McCullers, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*)

(7) *the sweet blood smell all over me* (Hemingway, *The old man and the sea*)

Both “odor” and “smell” are a sensation one has through stimulations of the olfactory organ- the nose. However, the smell and odor in examples 6 and 7 are “sweet”, which is perceived by the gustatory organ- the tongue. Therefore, the expressions in 6 and 7 are probably unperceivable logically but they are rather pervasive and conventional in use. “Sweet smell” or “sweet odor” is, in fact, a linguistic

metaphor interpreted through the conceptual metaphor SMELLING IS TASTING. A similar perception is expressed in Vietnamese.

(8) *Nhất là về đêm hương hoa như thể được cô đậm, ngọt, ngào ngọt, thấm thấu vào giấc ngủ* (Bảo Ninh, *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh*) (Particularly at night, the floral scent seems condensed, sweet, pervasive, and absorbed into the sleep)

“Hương hoa” (the scent of flowers) is obviously denoting to a characteristic odour but defined as “ngọt” (sweet) in example 8. In line with “sweet odour/smell” in English, “hương hoa ngọt” (sweet scent of flowers) in Vietnamese is an evidence of the SMELLING-AS-TASTING metaphor.

Not only olfaction but tactition (the sense of touch) is also metaphorically comprehended in terms of gustation, namely sweet taste.

(9) [...] *nơi có chiếc lò sưởi ấm áp ngọt ngào* (Hạ Thu, *Con gái người tình*)  
(the place with a warm sweet heater)

The warmth from “chiếc lò sưởi” (heater) can be felt naturally through skin or the sense of touch but how can one taste it? The sweet taste in this case surely does not result from any gustatory stimulation but it is the pleasant feeling coming from the heater through human tactile sensitivity. In other words, “ngọt ngào” (sweet) in example 9 is metaphorically used and understood. It reveals the existence of the conceptual metaphor of TOUCHING-IS-TASTING.

One more sense that is also often expressed in terms of gustatory sensation, i.e. sweet, is vision.

(10) [...] *she told him with a sweet smile.* (Mitchell, *Gone with the wind*)

(11) [...] *she looked so sweet and pretty* (Truman Capote, *In cold blood*)

Smile is a happy or friendly expression on the face. It can be discerned via human eyes. Meanwhile, the adjective “sweet” is employed to represent a smile (in 10) which cannot be recognized via the tongue. Likewise, the girl in (11) is characterized to be “sweet” in appearance which cannot be distinguished by gustatory sense. In these cases, “sweet” should not be apprehended literally but figured out through the SEEING-AS-TASTING metaphor.

(12) [...] *cô bồ có sắc đẹp của một cục đường ngọt ngào.* (Châu Liên, *Một khoảng trời yêu thương*)  
(his beloved’s beauty is as sweet as a lump of sugar)

How can a person taste someone’s beauty? And how beautiful is a lump of sugar? Why is a girl’s beauty compared to a lump of sugar? In fact, the case is not simply interpreted word for word but non-literally. Similar to the expressions in (10) and (11), “sắc đẹp ngọt ngào” (sweet beauty) should also be shed light on figuratively via the SEEING-AS-TASTING metaphor and someone or something that is considered as being sweet is kind and attractive.

As the look, the beauty, and the smile all refer to the appearance of someone or something, the expressions of “sweet smile”, “sweet beauty” or “sweet look” are metaphorical and understood through the metaphorical concept APPEARANCE AS A NUTRIENT, where the appearance is shown as

something edible and tastes sweet.

In brief, the adjective “sweet”, which inherently belongs to gustation, is used to manifest other senses, including audition, olfaction, tactition, and vision. No matter where it appears in text, “sweet” brings a pleasant feeling to the reader and makes the thing/ person it describes pleasant and attractive. In addition to the conceptual metaphors relating to human senses, “sweet” can be found in metaphorical expressions under nutrient metaphors.

#### 4.3 Metaphorical Expressions Expressing Sweetness under Nutrient Metaphors

Besides the nutrient metaphor used for the appearance as mentioned above, this metaphor is also applied for the comprehension of other concepts manifested by the word “sweet” in English and “ngọt” in Vietnamese.

##### 4.3.1 EMOTION-AS-NUTRIENT Metaphor

Emotion is any mental experience with reference to such feelings as happiness, love, fear, anger, or hatred (Cabanac, 2002), which can be categorized as positive (i.e., love) or negative (i.e., anger). Discussing the manifestation of emotion in language, Kovecses (2000) states that a large number of emotional expressions are metaphorically used and understood, which is found to be true to linguistic expressions with “sweet”.

(13) “[...] *he held my hand. To give me courage.*”, -“*Very sweet.*” (Truman Capote, In cold blood)

(14) *tình iu, nó đẹp đẽ, [...] ngọt ngào* (Hạ Thu, Con gái người tình)

(Love, it is beautiful [...], sweet)

The emotion the boy gives to the girl in example 13 is considered to be “sweet”. As emotion is an abstract concept while “sweet” refers to food or drink. In this context, “sweet” is a metaphorical expression underlying the conceptual metaphor EMOTION IS A NUTRIENT. Unlike “sweet” in (13) that does not mention any particular kind of emotion, “ngọt ngào” in (14) represents love, which may bring the happiness or pleasant feelings on, making it lovely and agreeable.

The adjectives “sweet” in English and “ngọt” in Vietnamese are utilized not only to explain emotion itself but to depict the sentimental object.

(15) *She's a real sweet person, your mother.* (Truman Capote, In cold blood)

(16) *Nàng [...] là tất cả hương hoa, mật ngọt, mà cuộc đời ban thưởng cho một người con trai có quá nhiều đau khổ.* (Hạ Thu, Con gái người tình)

(She [...] is all floral scent and sweet honey that the life grants a favor to the man with great misery)

The sentimental objects in examples 15 and 16 are human beings, who are understood in terms of nutrient, hence being “sweet” or “ngọt”. Through the sweetness, these objects are perceived lovely, kind, and satisfying.

In short, “sweet”/ “ngọt” is metaphorically used to describe both emotion and emotional objects that are characterized to be enjoyable, creating a good feeling of pleasure.

#### 4.3.2 MANNER-AS-NUTRIENT Metaphor

Manner is defined as the way in which one acts and behaves towards the others. It is found to be represented in terms of a nutrient via the word “sweet” in English.

(17) *He loved her pertness, her high spirits and the quaint sweet manner she had of showing her love for him.* (Mitchell, *Gone with the wind*)

(18) *Buddy always has such a sweet way with peoples that I don't ever worry concerning him* (Carson McCullers, *The heart is a lonely hunter*)

Obviously, the adjective “sweet” in (17) and (18) does not refer to the taste of food or drinks but to someone’s manner. The descriptions appear to be strange and conflicting but they are completely acceptable. The wordings are, in fact, metaphorical expressions under the conceptual metaphor MANNER IS A NUTRIENT, where a person’s manner is interpreted and expressed in terms of a nutrient, namely “sweet”. As “sweet” is a pleasant and satisfying taste, a person with “sweet manner” is comprehended to be nice and lovely.

In summary, the adjective “sweet” in English and its equivalent “ngọt” in Vietnamese is metaphorically utilized rather pervasively in language. Though it is used to talk about anything/anyone, “sweet” makes the reader think of positive feelings towards the things/persons it describes.

#### 4.4 Similarities and Differences between Metaphorical Expressions with “Sweet” in English and those with “ngọt” in Vietnamese

According to CMT, conceptual metaphor is universal; it is hence similar between different languages and cultures, which is once again demonstrated in this paper. As can be seen from Table 1, most of the conceptual metaphors underlying metaphorical expressions with the word “sweet” (equivalent of “ngọt”) are found in both English and Vietnamese, namely TASTING metaphors for hearing, smelling, seeing and NUTRIENT metaphors for appearance, emotion, manner. Besides, metaphorical expressions containing “sweet” are rather similar between the two languages, such as sweet voice/sound, equivalent to giọng nói/tiếng nói ngọt (see examples 1,2,4,5); sweet odor/smell, similar to hương ngọt (in examples 6,7,8); corresponding expressions of sentimental objects as in the following examples.

(18) *She’s a real sweet person.* (Truman Capote, *In cold blood*)

(19) *Anh [...] ngọt ngào, khôn ngoan* (Châu Liên, *Một khoảng trời yêu thương*)

(He [...] is sweet, wise)

Obviously, there are several similar metaphorical expressions with the adjective “sweet” (ngọt) between English and Vietnamese thanks to the universality of conceptual metaphor. Moreover, metaphor is also a result of embodiment experience (Phan & Ho, 2020). Because sweetness is the preferred taste that generally brings pleasant and satisfying feelings to human beings, (Kohlmeier, 2015; Molitor, 2021), as human vocabulary may not be enough to express the contentment and pleasure one perceives, the terms of sweet taste are used instead.



However, metaphor is a matter of thought which is affected by cultural features; accordingly, metaphors coming into different cultures may be different. Our investigation reveals two distinctive conceptual metaphors, i.e. the metaphor of TOUCHING AS TASTING (which only appears in Vietnamese) and the MANNER-AS-NUTRIENT metaphor (just discovered in English). Furthermore, language and culture are intertwined and unseparated; therefore, metaphorical expressions are under cultural influences (Phan & Ho, 2020), which is generally right in our investigation.

As can be seen from the examples above, the simple word “sweet” is used in most of the cases whilst complex words are frequently used in Vietnamese. That is, the adjective “ngọt” is usually modified by another component to make different meanings of the words, such as “ngọt ngào” (see more in example 5), “ngọt lịm” (see more in example 4), ngọt xót (see more in example 3). While “ngọt ngào” refers to a general flavor, “ngọt lịm” reveals a strong feeling of pleasure and joy. In another lens, “ngọt xót” represents the sounds that is gentle and pleasant to ears. A little differently, English shows a situation in which an affix is used, namely “sweetish” (slightly sweet).

(20) *He smelled the keen, sweetish odor of gin* (Carson McCullers, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*)

The difference may be shed light on by distinctive characteristics of word structure in each language. In English, the affixes are bound morphemes attached to roots to form new words with different meaning. In (20), it is sweetish, meaning “slightly sweet”. By contrast, an affix in Vietnamese can stand alone as a syllable (tiếng) (e.g., ngọt xót, ngọt lịm). While “xót” often refers to a negative meaning, “lịm” with the meaning of “too X to be unconscious” carries an expressive and evaluative meaning.

One more difference in our investigation is the using of compound words. Some of them are found in Vietnamese, including “ngọt ngào” (in example 5) and “ngọt bùi” (in example 21) but they appear not to be discovered in English.

(21) [...] *đôi bạn thân, ngọt bùi cùng chia sẻ* (Hà Thu, *Con gái người tình*)

Structurally, “ngọt ngào” may be formed by shortening the phrase “ngọt như ngào đường” (to be as sweet as being sugared); “ngọt bùi” is a compound adjective which is a combination of “ngọt” (sweet) and “bùi” (delicious and fatty). It is used to imply the happiness and pleasure that can be shared in (21). If there is no similar phenomenon in English, it is because English vocabulary contains fewer compound adjectives formed by “sweet”.

In short, there are some similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese conceptual and linguistic metaphors with the word “sweet”. The similarities are made clear by the universality of metaphor and of embodied experiences. The differences may be interpreted by the distinctions in word formation between English and Vietnamese.

## 5. Conclusion

In the light of CMT, the paper investigates metaphorical expressions with the words “sweet” in English

and “ngọt” in Vietnamese extracted from eight novels published in the 20th century, four in each language. The findings show 43 English linguistic metaphors containing “sweet” and 42 ones with “ngọt” in Vietnamese which are identified based on Pragglejaz Group’s four-step metaphor identification procedure in discourse. Interestingly, the metaphorical expressions containing “sweet” in English are found rather similar to those in Vietnamese, such as sweet voice/sounds and giọng nói/tiếng nói ngọt, sweet smell/odor and hương ngọt, and someone sweet. In other words, these expressions are employed to describe other senses (such as hearing, smelling, and seeing), emotion and sentimental objects in both languages. However, there is a little difference between the two languages. When the MANNER-AS-NUTRIENT metaphor is discovered just in English, the TOUCHING-AS-TASTING metaphor only appears in Vietnamese. The similarities are explained by the universality of conceptual metaphors and of human embodied experience. The differences are represented by the distinctive word structure between English and Vietnamese. Nevertheless, the limited scope of the investigation may result in some unsatisfying comparisons to some extent. Therefore, it is necessary to do more researches to have a fuller picture of metaphorical expressions with “sweet” in English compared to the ones with “ngọt” in Vietnamese.

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