

# **English and Vietnamese collocations**

## **A contrastive analysis**

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**THESIS**

**submitted for**

**the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy,  
Department of Linguistics,  
Macquarie University.**

**June, 2001**



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On the completion of this thesis I owe a big debt of gratitude to many people and organizations for their help. Firstly, I must thank four very special men of learning: the late Mr. Lê Minh Thịnh, the late Father Lê Văn Lý, Dr. Hoàng Gia Linh, and the late Professor Nguyễn Đình Hoà who influenced me in my formative years and set me on the path to my lifelong fascination with English, Linguistics, and Translation.

Since I arrived in Australia in 1974, I have become an avid reader of *The Daily Telegraph* newspaper, as well as ethnic Vietnamese-language newspapers. I also watched television shows such as 'Good Morning Sydney' and 'The Today Show', as well as listened to Vietnamese broadcasts on 2EA, 3EA, and SBS Radio Stations. To these media outlets, I owe much to the honing of my bilingual skills as they apply to the everyday world. I am particularly indebted to the *Việt Nam Thời Nay* (Vietnam News Today) and *Việt Nam Nhật Báo* (Vietnam Daily News) newspapers for carrying a series of my articles on community information translation during the 1998-99 period and the Sydney Vietnamese Program of SBS Radio for broadcasting, in early 1999, a series of interviews in which I discussed the search for translation equivalence between English and Vietnamese.

Other organizations that have afforded me tremendous help are the libraries of University of Western Sydney Macarthur (UWSM), Monash University, and Macquarie University. Also the libraries of London University's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and Georgetown University in Washington

D.C., as well as the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters' (NAATI) samples of translation test papers, the Macquarie University's English Corpus (Ozcorp), and the Cobuild Project at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom. I must also thank UWSM, and the many language as well as interpreting and translation students I had contact with for 15 years, for allowing me the forum to gain feedback from my work, and in helping me to become a more competent and resourceful teacher.

The many people with whom I had dialogue and consultations include Gwyneth Fox and Stephen Bullon from the Collins Cobuilt English Dictionary Editorial Team, Professor Huỳnh Sanh Thông of Yale University, Dr. Bửu Khải of Edith Cowan University in Western Australia, Dr. Peter Paul of Monash University, and Mr. Nguyễn Ngọc Phách of Deakin University in Victoria. Professor Colin L. Yallop, my former supervisor, Mr. David Blair, my former associate supervisor, and Dr. Eddie Ronowicz, my current supervisor, are owed much credit for their comments and expert guidance.

No work such as this could have come to fruition without the help of the most important people of all--the people who helped to put it all together. They are often 'unsung heroes', but I owe my heartfelt thanks to the efforts they have made. Firstly, my nephew Trần Đình Phước whose skills in word-processing, as well as formatting, coding and typing Vietnamese data, have proven invaluable. Then, Mr. Philip Coen, a friend and colleague, with his excellent command of Vietnamese and computer expertise, helped me devise a code for storing and retrieving Vietnamese data from the computer system. Mrs. Trần Thị Trọng, a Mathematics teacher at Wiley Park Girls' High School, helped compile

collocational competence test results into graph form.

Ms. Lorraine Patrick, an ESL teacher and a former student of Vietnamese, helped with the typing of a large part of my English data and thesis. Mrs. Elaine Sheppard, a former school principal, helped and urged me ever onward with her constant support, consultations, proof-reading and stylistic corrections in her capacity as a native speaker of English. Whatever oversights may be encountered in this work are fully my responsibility.

Finally, my devoted wife Anh Thu, who has always given me moral support and encouragement, both at home and on overseas trips. Her sacrifice and patience during the seemingly never ending period when I attempted this thesis, is surely appreciated. Our daughters, Michelle Mỹ-Duyên and Pamela-Anne, are also no doubt a good source of encouragement. To my late parents for the wonderful love and care they gave to their only son, for I know they are smiling with pride from the Isles of the Blessed.

To these organizations and people that have helped shape my destiny, thank you. I trust that my work will justify the faith you placed in me when I first began this long journey exploring the ever-changing world of languages, in particular, learning how to have 'a way with words'.





## **ABSTRACT**

### **English and Vietnamese collocations A contrastive analysis**

This thesis aims at searching for a way to improve the translator's skills in English and Vietnamese by enhancing their knowledge of word-combinations. An attempt has been made in this study to illustrate that lack of a solid knowledge of collocations in translation results in the loss of naturalness of the target language. Numerous collocational mismatches made by professional translators have been detected in learned journals as well as in community information publications. This thesis also makes observations on different aspects of collocational patterning of English and Vietnamese based on random samples of the data collected. Research results show instances of a wide range of non-direct translation equivalence inherent in word-combinations of the languages under investigation.

This thesis starts off with a journey through personal experience to the realization that the knowledge of collocation is a necessary pre-requisite leading to competence in translation. Chapter One provides greater insight into the notion of collocation by reviewing the literature on related studies, which results in the choice of a broader definition of collocation for this research. Chapter Two highlights the cause-to-effect relationship between collocation and translation in the Australian translation scene. Chapters Three and Four deal with the structural, semantic, and thematic aspects of collocational patterning of English and Vietnamese, based on a survey of fixed and relatively fixed expressions.

Chapter Five provides a contrastive perspective of collocation patterning between the two languages under investigation with particular reference to non-comparable collocational patterns. Chapter Six outlines some of the implications for the future training of professional translators with special emphasis on the teaching of vocabulary in ‘chunks’ of words. Various types of vocabulary and collocation exercises and tests were mentioned, including a special collocational competence test which was designed and conducted in Hanoi for Vietnamese students and for native and near-native English speakers in Sydney.

## DECLARATION

I certify that this work has not  
been submitted for the award of  
any other degree to any other  
university or institution.



.....

Frank N. Trinh



## PREFACE

The foundation of this work was stimulated by my desire, as a translator, to have access to combinations of English words at my fingertips, which was later reinforced by the work of Sinclair and his Cobuild Project.

Based on its research into corpus linguistics, the Cobuild Project, a joint initiative of the University of Birmingham and the Collins Publishing house, has produced a series of state-of-the-art publications. Among these, mention can be made of the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (1987) and the *Collins Cobuild English Grammar* (1990), which were based on the latest optical scanning computer technology, in compiling and examining a corpus of 150,000,000 words of contemporary English, as well as the *BBC English Dictionary* (1991), which was based on a corpus of 70,000,000 words from BBC World Service programs and 10,000,000 words from American Public Radio Network program.

My interest in combinations of words was not fulfilled by Sinclair's novel methodology in lexicography, as I had no access to his Project corpus. However, I was fortunate enough to have a hands-on experience in establishing concordance by using the 20,000,000-word Macquarie University's English Corpus (Ozcorp), which helped me occasionally access the collocability of a particular 'node'. My own repertoire, as well as my first-hand knowledge of word-combinations in both English and Vietnamese, have been applied to my data collection. This is not a grand-scale corpus, à la Sinclair, but a limited one, established for the purpose of writing this thesis on collocation.

The data collection had a somewhat 'serendipity' quality about it, and I found great delight and fascination in finding those interesting combinations. Along the road to writing this thesis, I have encountered obstacles which have added much to my understanding as to why a project such as this has not been previously attempted for Vietnamese. The reason is that there is no international standard in computer technology to deal with Vietnamese tone and other diacritical marks. This lack of uniformity means a machine cannot read them accurately. However, my biggest problem was that, working alone, I became so deeply involved in collecting data that I found myself unable to fully realise my original ambition, as I had set a monumental task which had no ending. At the same time I had been immersing myself in translating approximately 45,000 words of text into English and approximately 5,000 words of mostly NAATI translation texts into Vietnamese for my own interest. This work may have been time-consuming, but ultimately led to a greater insight into the problems encountered by the translator .

Sinclair again became my inspiration, for his work in the setting-up of parallel and comparable corpora, made me also realize the importance of finishing my work. His approach of scanning hundreds of millions of words of text has been now used in building up parallel and comparable corpora in seven other languages, and is supported by the Council of Europe.

So, while waiting for computer technology to catch up, as a translator, I have developed my own comparable corpus. It is only a small slice, with my research focused on a manageable amount of lexical items and their combinations. I have gone far beyond my initial fascination with words, and am now thinking about

developing a bi-directional bilingual dictionary of English and Vietnamese collocations, after my doctoral dissertation has been completed. The time spent gathering data has not been wasted, for it is not just the basis for my thesis, it is also the backbone of my proposed dictionary project as well as for many valuable language and translator training programs of the future.

I hope my efforts will be of benefit to many people. I am confident that language learners and teachers, lexicologists, lexicographers, translators and interpreters, and those cross-cultural researchers of Vietnamese and English will find something of value in my work. It has been a long, hard labour, but it has also been a 'labour of love'.





## Introduction

### 0.0 A personal encounter

This introduction will explore a journey through personal experience to the realisation that the knowledge of collocation is a necessary pre-requisite leading to competence in translation.

#### 0.1 A broadcaster's interest

My interest in what I now understand as 'collocation' began when I was employed by the BBC World Service, Vietnamese Section in the early 1980s as a translator and broadcaster. This position was based in London. It involved, in part, translating news items, news dispatches, commentaries, and other material into the Vietnamese language for broadcasting to Vietnam. Although much of my waking time was spent translating into the Vietnamese language, I also devoted considerable time to reading English-language newspapers, listening to English-language radio broadcasts and watching English television.

At this time, I was developing an interest in the way in which some words seemed to me to combine together in a seemingly unusual, but meaningful, way. The *domino effect*, an *uphill struggle* and a *runaway success* were some of the combinations which I noted. At the time my activity in noting and thinking about these matters was in the nature of a hobby, and so I would put it aside when more pressing matters arose. Nevertheless, I continued to have an interest in the phenomenon.

## 0.2 An examiner's concern

Upon returning to Australia, I obtained a university lecturer's position which involved training Vietnamese interpreters and translators and later I was appointed as an examiner by a national body that accredits professional translators and interpreters. This, among other things, meant marking translation assignments submitted by my students as well as marking translation papers from and into English done by NAATI candidates. In the discharge of my duty, without a native English speaker's intuition, I sometimes found myself at a loss in determining which combinations of English words in a given text were acceptable translations and which were not. I remember once giving my students a passage (APPENDIX 1) to translate into English which described the actions of a man who went to a market and grabbed everything in sight without paying. When demand was made for payment, he then apologized to the merchants for what he did and promised them that he would pay for the goods when he became rich. In his apology he said:

- |     |            |             |           |            |            |           |               |            |            |
|-----|------------|-------------|-----------|------------|------------|-----------|---------------|------------|------------|
| (1) | <i>Lửa</i> | <i>tham</i> | <i>nó</i> | <i>bốc</i> | <i>lên</i> | <i>mờ</i> | <i>cả hai</i> | <i>con</i> | <i>mắt</i> |
|     | fire       | greed       | it        | rise       | up         | blur      | both          | CLASS      | eye        |

Two students, in particular, rendered the following translations:

- (1a) *\*The fire of greed has evaporated and made me blind. And*  
(1b) *\*The flame of greed has made both of my eyes blurred.*

Neither of these sentences violates the basic patterns of English grammar; but, with my familiarity with English and in consultation with native speakers of English, I made the following comments to those students concerned:

In sentence (1a): *(greed) has made me blind* is correct. However, the expression *(greed) has made me blind to my faults* would be more semantically appropriate

and collocationally typical. In fact, a better translation would be *(greed) has clouded my vision*. The word ‘evaporate’ does not co-occur with ‘fire’. This word is used when describing gaseous or steamy substances. The phrase *the fire of greed* is a more acceptable, although unusual collocation, than *the flame of greed*.

Sentence (1b): *(greed) has made both of my eyes blurred* would not be an expression used by native speakers. Native speakers might say *my eyes became blurry* or *my eyes were blurry*, and less typically *my eyes became blurred* or *my eyes were blurred*. Also native speakers would not say *\*both of my eyes*, even though this is an acceptable expression in Vietnamese. ‘Eyes’, in its plural form, is used by native speakers, indicating ‘both eyes’. The *flame of greed* is an unusual collocation, as ‘flame’ is commonly used in association with ‘passion’, ‘anger’, or ‘desire’. Therefore, even though the words *flame of greed* or *fire of greed* may be acceptable collocations, a native speaker of English would probably just say *greed*. And the whole sentence could be translated as *greed blinded me*, or *greed has blinded me*.

During the course of my public examination marking, I came across a Vietnamese passage (APPENDIX 2) relating to the distribution of fake everyday pharmaceuticals throughout the world which had caused numerous deaths and disabilities because of impurities. The title of the passage was:

(2)	<i>Tình-trạng</i>	<i>chế-tạo</i>	<i>thuốc men</i>	<i>giả</i>
	situation	manufacture	medicine	fake

which was rendered by some candidates as:

- (2a) The manufacture of *\*false medicine*
- (2b) The manufacture of *\*counterfeit drugs*

Would it have been better, if *\*false medicine*, *\*counterfeit drugs* had been translated as *fake medicine* or *fake pharmaceuticals*?

The problem faced by most candidates lies in the fact that the Vietnamese word 'giả', in combination with a wide range of words, could be translated as having the meaning of 'artificial', 'assumed', 'bogus', 'copied', 'counterfeit', 'fake', 'false', 'forged', 'imitation', 'prosthetic', 'replica', 'sham' and all other words associated with something 'not being genuine'. It is therefore evident that in translating the above text, the Vietnamese translator faces the dilemma of having to decide which of the words at his or her disposal is the most typical in English.

In (2a), 'false' does co-occur with 'medicine' in English, but this co-occurrence is used to mean the practice by someone who takes on the role of a 'charlatan' or 'fake doctor', promising cures which he or she cannot effect.

In (2b), 'counterfeit' is used particularly in describing 'official coinage' or 'banknotes', and not with 'drugs'. Although the term 'drugs' can be used in the sense of 'medicines', it is also used to denote 'substances that some people smoke or inject into their blood to induce stimulating effects'. Its use therefore should be avoided as it might create ambiguity in this particular context.

### **0.3 A translator's trap**

Problems in word distributional range are not only confronted by aspiring translators who are in this case my students and the candidates concerned, but they are even encountered by translators of international standard of any language into English. In his book, *The Third Language* (1981), Alan Duff writes about imperfections found in writing in learned journals and the work of

professional translators working for EEC organisations. Among the examples of various types mentioned in his book, many can be identified as collocational mismatches. Let's consider the following examples:

- (3) David Oistrakh, one of the world's *\*ace violinists*, is among the few who happily combine all these merits. (Duff: 31)

The translated phrase *\*ace violinists* should be better rendered as *top violinists* as the word *ace* is used for sporting situations, and would not be used in the world of the Arts, particularly in the field of classical music.

- (4) In other words, to be able to take collective security measures for the restoration of peace and international security, it is not *\*indispensably necessary* that aggression had been committed. (Duff: 23)

The combination *\*indispensably necessary* does not occur in English, for indeed, if something is *\*indispensably necessary*, then it must be simply 'necessary'. However, *absolutely necessary* is possible.

- (5) The situation *\*opened a wedge* between the intellectuals and the masses--a wound that, in the case of Argentina at least, *\*healed poorly and late*. (Duff: 16)

Here the word 'wedge' is incorrectly used alongside 'open'. A *wound* can *open*, but a *wedge* is *introduced* or is *driven*. However, even if the translator had used *driven/introduced a wedge* to be collocationally appropriate, he should have perceived that this phrase is not used in an abstract sense as required in this context. The phrase 'caused a rift' would be a better semantic replacement. The expression '*a wound \*healed poorly and late*' would sound less typical of translationese had it been rendered as '*a wound healed badly*'.

- (6) People are eager to change their life. They yearn for knowledge and struggle to get it. Knowledge means economic improvement for the *\*recipient*. (Duff: 17)

The term 'recipient' does mean 'one who receives', but what is received is usually in some way tangible; ie. *an award, a present, a telegram, or news*. One can, certainly, *receive an education*, but *knowledge is acquired*. The phrase 'for the recipient' could be omitted without any loss of meaning.

For an advanced translator, Newmark once noted,

Translation is sometimes a continual struggle to find appropriate collocations... If grammar is the bones of a text, collocations are the nerves, more subtle and multiple and specific in denoting meaning, and lexis is the flesh. (Newmark, 1988: 213).

#### 0.4 A foreigner's guide

Non-native speakers cannot cope with some collocational types which are arbitrary and non-predictable and they must have a guide to help them choose between the typical (ie. *make an estimate, commit treason*) and the untypical (ie. *\*make an estimation, \*commit treachery*) combinations, given the fact that 'estimate' and 'estimation' are synonymous, so are 'treason' and 'treachery'. Even native speakers may need at times to revert to a list of collocations to decide which verbs collocate with such nouns as in 'acquittal', 'counsel', 'copyright' (BBI, 1986: xxxi). The truth of the matter is one can *make/cause/announce/bring in an acquittal* or *give/offer/provide counsel*. While *copyright* is *granted* or *registered*, one can *infringe* or *hold copyright*.

For a foreign language learner, Newmark once wrote,

A foreigner appears to go on making collocational mistakes however long he lives in his adopted country, possibly because he has never distinguished between grammar and lexicology. An educated native will also make mistakes in collocation, particularly if he is under the influence of interference, but he will correct himself intuitively. (Newmark, 1981: 180).

## **0.5 A researcher's topic**

This thesis recognises the importance of collocation and a growing awareness that words are complex entities, particularly in the context of translation. The thesis explores the subtlety, the multiplicity and the specificity of word combinations in English and Vietnamese languages. Recent bibliographies on collocation reveal that Vietnamese studies on this subject have never been attempted. Some studies of English collocations and their applications have been published in the form of monolingual English dictionaries: *Dictionary of English Style* (1920), *The Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary* (1942), *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English* (1975, 1979, 1983), *BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English* (1986), *Collins Cobuild English Collocations on CD-ROM* (1995). The situation is less commendable in bilingual dictionaries; so far, only two collocational dictionaries have been produced involving the Russian and Arabic languages (Al-Kasami: 1981; Abu-Ssaydeh: 1994).

## **0.6 Purpose of this thesis**

This thesis will serve the purpose of (1) demonstrating through personal experience that a solid knowledge of collocation is essential to competence in translation; (2) reviewing literature on the notion of collocation; (3) providing an overview of translation problems in relation to collocation in the Australian context; (4) making a survey of English and Vietnamese collocational patterning; (5) examining the collocational patterning contrasts of both languages in relation to translation; and (6) outlining some of the implications for future training of professional translators.



