The Structure and Semantic Relations of Rhetorical Comparisons of the Tay Ethnic Group's Idioms, Proverbs and Folk Verses

Ha Thi Chuyen

Abstract

This study investigates the semantic structure of figurative comparisons in Tay idioms, proverbs, and folk songs, with the aim of clarifying how language reflects cultural worldviews. The objective is to identify structural patterns and meanings of comparison in relation to Tay cultural identity. A corpus of 2,251 linguistic units was collected and analysed. Structural classification identified five major patterns (A–x–y–B; A–y–B; x–y–B; y–B; A–B). Semantic interpretation was conducted through a two-layered system of literal and figurative meaning. The semantic nucleus typically resides in the compared object (B) rather than the property (x). Comparative structures may express either similarity or contrast, with the latter more frequent and rhetorically powerful. The findings also reveal that the Tay figurative worldview is deeply rooted in nature, emotion, and communal values. These results underscore the need to situate minority languages within their cultural–social contexts rather than restricting analysis to formal description. Practically, the study contributes to identifying the rhetorical identity of the Tay language, supports the preservation and teaching of folk literature and provides a foundation for constructing indigenous rhetorical discourse in the broader South–Southeast Asian intercultural space.

Keywords

Rhetorical comparison, semantic relations, Tay folklore, idioms and proverbs, indigenous linguistics, Southeast Asia.

Introduction

In the context of increasingly interdisciplinary and transregional cross-cultural studies in South Asia, minority language linguistics not only fulfills the function of preserving and systematising indigenous knowledge but also plays a crucial role in expanding the scope of cultural and linguistic comparison. The Tay people—one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Vietnam, residing in a cultural contact zone influenced by both Indian and Chinese civilisations—possess a rich corpus of oral literature notably characterised by proverbs, idioms, and folk poetry. Among these, the rhetorical device of simile appears with high frequency and occupies a central role in constructing metaphorical images rich in symbolism. These serve to convey layered meanings related to moral values, individual emotions and communal aesthetic perceptions. Nonetheless, in-depth studies on the semantic structure of similes in Tay folklore remain relatively limited, both in terms of analytical depth and interdisciplinary engagement. Addressing this gap, the present paper is oriented towards three main objectives:

First, to analyse the formal structure and semantic relations of similes found in Tay proverbs, idioms and folk poetry in order to clarify the mechanisms of meaning formation and expression within the context of oral folklore.

Second, to identify specific cultural characteristics reflected through symbolic comparative expressions, including reduced or elliptical structures and images associated with nature and the socio-economic life of the community.

Third, through pragmatic and cultural analysis, the artlce seeks to contribute to the expansion of academic discourse on indigenous rhetoric, particularly within the trajectory of cross-regional comparative studies of minority languages and cultures in South and Southeast Asia.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis, to examine figurative comparisons in Tay idioms, proverbs, and folk songs. A total of 2,251 linguistic units were collected from published sources (Tran, 2013; Hoang & Trieu 2014) including 782 idioms, 1,034 proverbs and 435 folk songs. Among these, 140 idioms, 183 proverbs and 141 folk songs were identified as containing comparative structures. Each comparison was classified into one of five structural

models: A–x–y–B, A–y–B, x–y–B, y–B, and A–B, where A = tenor (the compared entity); x = property (typically an attribute); y = comparative marker (e.g., *như, bằng, bấu nhẳn* "like, as, as if"); B = vehicle (the compared object).

The research procedure was carried out in four stages. First, linguistic units containing comparisons were extracted from the corpus. Second, each element within the comparative structure was semantically tagged to determine its functional role as tenor, attribute, marker or vehicle. Third, the data were categorised and statistically processed to determine frequency and distributional patterns across structural types. Finally, pragmatic and cultural–semantic analysis was conducted to interpret symbolic associations and imagery characteristic of the Tay worldview, closely tied to their natural environment and cultural cognition.

Results

1. Core Components in the Comparative Structure of Tay Idioms, Proverbs and Folk Songs

A complete simile in language typically consists of four basic elements: the compared entity (A), the property (x), the comparative marker (y), and the compared object (B). In this structure, A represents the subject that the speaker intends to highlight; x denotes the salient feature; y functions as the linking device—commonly words such as "like," "as," or "similar to"; and B provides the image that evokes concrete associative meaning.

Example:

Vietnamese: *Mặt em tròn như vầng trăng*

English: Her face is as round as the moon.

Tay language: *Pác van pện thương ỏi*

Table 1: *Basic Elements in the Structure of Comparison*

Element	***Role***	***Vietnamese Example***	***English Example***	***Tay Example***
A—the compared entity	Main subject	*Mặt em*	*Her face*	*Pác*
x—property	Salient feature	*tròn*	*round*	*van*
y—comparative marker	Grammatical marker	*như*	*like*	*pện*
B—compared object	figurative imagery	*vầng trăng*	*the moon*	thương ỏi

Not all comparisons contain all four elements—A, x, y, and B. In practice, many comparisons in folk literature appear in an elliptical or implicit form, consisting of only two or three elements while still maintaining expressive effectiveness. In some cases, the property (x) or the comparative marker (y) may be omitted, requiring the audience to infer the meaning based on context. Moreover, the elements within a comparison structure are often flexibly transformed to suit poetic rhythm, folk imagery or the cultural nuances of specific communities. This flexibility contributes to the richness and vividness of folk discourse.

Thus, the basic elements in the comparison structure of Tay idioms, proverbs, and folk verses generally correspond to those found in conventional comparative constructions.

2. The Semantic Structure of Comparison in Tay Idioms, Proverbs and Folk Verses

The semantic structure of comparison refers to the system of elements and semantic relationships that constitute a *comparison*—a common rhetorical device used to create associations between two entities in order to highlight characteristics, emotions or symbolic meanings. Although comparison exists in most languages, its structure and meaning can vary depending on linguistic and cultural factors.

In Tay idioms, proverbs and folk verses, the semantic structure of comparison is not merely the sum of individual word meanings; rather, it forms an integrated whole abstracted from the meanings of its constituent elements. The referential meaning of comparison in Tay folk expressions differs from the referential meaning of each lexical unit, as the comparison brings the imagery to life vividly and engagingly. Furthermore, this meaning structure is often associated with either abstracted or contextualised communicative situations.

The semantic structure of comparison in Tay idioms, proverbs, and folk verses consists of both a *surface structure* and a *deep structure*. The surface structure refers to the literal meaning that can be inferred from the lexical form of the expression, commonly known as the explicit or denotative meaning. In contrast, the deep structure encompasses the implied or symbolic meaning that can be interpreted from a given comparative construction. The deep structure is built upon the foundation provided by the surface structure. For example, in the comparative expression "*mè cáy rục, lục nàng tiên*" ("Mother is a toad, daughter is a fairy" in Hoang

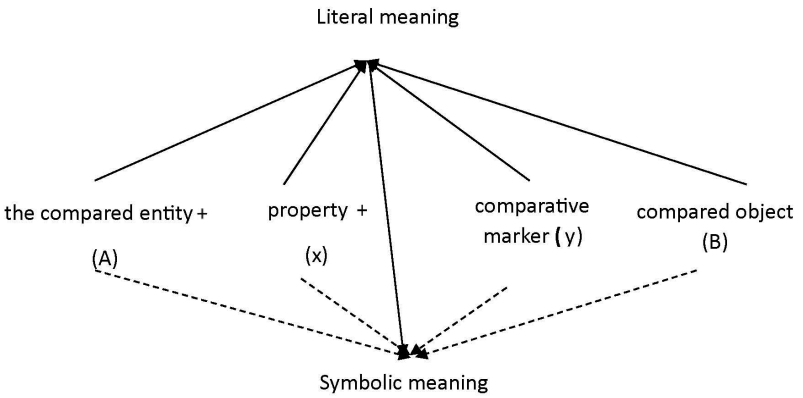
& Trieu, 2014, p. 105), the meaning does not derive directly from the literal interpretation of the words. Instead, it is anchored in the symbolic meanings: *cáy rục* (toad) connotes ugliness, while *tiên* (fairy) connotes beauty. The proverb encapsulates a valuable life lesson: even if the previous generation may be flawed or unattractive, the next generation can still be beautiful and promising.

The symbolic meaning is constructed upon the foundation of literal meaning. As such, it reflects the cognitive and cultural worldview of each ethnic community. In order to grasp the symbolic meaning, the receiver must rely on both linguistic and cultural associations. For example, in the Tay proverb *"pỏ mè thai phai nà lở"* (Tran, 2013, p. 446), the literal meaning is "When parents die, the dam's barrier collapses." The Tay people use a direct associative image—*phai nà lở* (the collapsing dam barrier)—to evoke the emotional and structural breakdown experienced by children upon the death of their parents. Interpreting the symbolic meaning of this comparison thus requires a deep understanding of Tay's cultural context.

For those familiar with Tay culture, the symbolic significance of *phai nà* (dam barrier) becomes evident through its crucial role in both production and daily life. Traditionally, the Tay lived in largely self-sufficient communities with extensive cultivation practices and underdeveloped irrigation systems. To provide water for rice fields, they devised various methods to divert and store water for agriculture. In small streams with mild slopes, the Tay would construct simple earthen or bamboo dams to retain and regulate water flow. These water barriers were typically made by weaving bamboo or combining split bamboo slats, secured between two large bamboo poles or tree trunks to prevent shifting, and placed across the stream. To anchor the bamboo panels and prevent them from being swept away, they would weave baskets filled with cobblestones collected from the streambed and fasten them to the structure. Such cultural knowledge allows the receiver to fully appreciate the depth of the comparison: the collapse of a dam barrier symbolises the collapse of familial stability and support. By contrast, for individuals with limited knowledge of Tay culture, the symbolic power of the comparison may be significantly diminished.

The relationship between the two layers of meaning—literal and symbolic—in Tay idioms, proverbs, and folk verses can be illustrated through the following diagram:

Figure 1. *The Relationship Between the Two Layers of Meaning in Comparative Structures of Tay Idioms, Proverbs and Folk Verses*



Example: *Pác van pện thương ỏi* ("Words as sweet as sugarcane juice" in Hoang & Trieu, 2014, p. 158). In this comparative structure, *pác* (words) is the subject of comparison, *van* (sweet) is the comparative basis or attribute, *pện* (like) is the comparative marker, and *thương ỏ*i (sugarcane juice) is the object of comparison. The literal meaning of this idiom is derived from the combination of the meanings of its constituent elements. In contrast, the symbolic meaning relies on associative interpretation. The Tay people use the idiom *Pác van pện thương ỏi* to express a culturally grounded insight: "A person who speaks sweetly and cleverly is often not sincere." The relationship between *pác* (speech) and people, *van* (sweet) and clever persuasion, and *pện thương ỏi* (like sugarcane juice) is not directly reflected in the symbolic meaning.

Thus, the relationship between the elements of the comparative structure and the literal meaning is direct and is therefore represented by a solid arrow in diagrams. Meanwhile, the connection between the comparative elements and the symbolic meaning is inferential and indirect, which is represented by a dashed arrow.

3. Semantic Relations within Comparative Structures

3.1. The Semantic Core of Comparison in Tay Idioms, Proverbs and Folk Verses

Within a comparative structure, the semantic load tends to concentrate on a particular element—this is referred to as the *semantic core* of the comparison. A typical comparative structure consists of four compo-

nents: among these, the compared object (B) is generally well-known and culturally familiar, while the comparative marker (y) functions merely as a grammatical connector, indicating the degree of comparison. Consequently, the property (x) and the compared entity (A) are the two components that exert the greatest influence on the semantic content of the structure.

The property (x) serves to identify the salient feature of an object or phenomenon that is being highlighted in the comparison, even though any object may possess numerous aspects. When a comparative structure lacks the attribute (x), the receiver must rely on contextual cues and associative reasoning to identify the shared feature between A (the compared entity) and B (the comparative item). On the other hand, the compared entity (A) is considered the most critical component of the structure, as it constitutes the focal point of the comparison. Without it, the comparative construction would not exist.

Therefore, the semantic core of comparison in Tay idioms, proverbs, and folk verses can be classified into two main types:

The first type of comparative structure is one in which the semantic core lies in the comparative basis (x). This refers to structures where the property (x) appears explicitly on the surface level of the expression: *Pác ả bặng pác ca vàn* ("Mouth wide open like the beak of a young crow just leaving the nest" in Hoang & Trieu, 2014, p. 153). In this example, the presence of the comparative basis (x): ả (wide open) plays a crucial role in directing attention to the salient feature being compared. This guides the receiver's interpretation to focus solely on the intended attribute, disregarding other possible aspects of comparison.

According to the data in Figure 2, comparative structures in which the semantic core lies in the comparative basis (x) account for 183 instances, comprising 30.6% of all comparisons found in Tay idioms, proverbs, and folk verses.

The second type is where the semantic core lies in the item being compared (B). In this structure, the comparative basis (x) is absent.

Kin khẩu như kin rài lồng toọng
Kin phiắc như kin nguội lồng cò

("Eating rice is like eating sand down the throat;

Eating vegetables is like eating poison leaves down the throat" in Hoang & Trieu, 2014, p. 497).

In this example, the absence of the attribute (x) shifts the semantic load to the compared item (B). For instance, in *Kin khẩu như kin rài lông toọng* ("Eating rice is like eating sand down the throat"), the interpretation relies on *kin rài lông toọng* (eating sand down the throat). The receiver must use prior knowledge and cultural understanding to identify the shared experiential or emotional quality between *kin khẩu* (eating rice) and *kin rài lông toọng* (eating sand).

In the context of Tay idioms, proverbs and folk verses, when the comparative basis (x) is present, it typically bears the full semantic burden of the comparison. However, when it is absent, this burden is transferred to the item being compared (B). That said, the comparative items (B) used in these structures are often highly familiar and culturally embedded among the Tay people. This familiarity allows speakers to omit the comparative basis (x) without diminishing the interpretability or expressive value of the structure.

Nả nắc bặng chùn ("Face as heavy as lead") → Nả bặng chùn ("Face like lead" in Tran, 2013, p. 125).

Muối khẩu quý pện muối ngọc ("A grain of rice is as precious as a pearl") → *Muối khẩu pện muối ngọc* ("A grain of rice like a pearl" in Tran, 2013, p. 360).

In a corpus comprising 140 idioms, 183 proverbs, and 141 folk verses, a total of 603 comparative structures were identified. Among these, 123 comparative structures contain the core meaning located in the base of comparison (x), while 480 comparative structures lack the core meaning in the base of comparison (x).

Figure 2: *Semantic Nucleus of Comparison in Tay Idioms, Proverbs and Folk Songs*



Figure 2 illustrates the distribution between two groups of comparative structures in Tay idioms, proverbs, and folk songs. The group in which the semantic nucleus is located in the basis of comparison (x) accounts for a relatively small proportion, only about one-fifth of the total. In contrast, the group in which the semantic nucleus is not situated in the basis of comparison (x) overwhelmingly dominates, making up nearly four-fifths of the total.

This indicates that, within the Tay folk corpus, the semantic nucleus tends not to concentrate in the basis of comparison (x) but is instead primarily projected onto the compared object (B). This feature represents a significant characteristic, reflecting the rhetorical mindset of the Tay people: comparison does not emphasise isolated attributes, but rather integrates them into the imagery, symbolism and cultural context of the compared object.

3.2. Semantic Relationships Among Comparative Structures

As noted above, Tay idioms, proverbs and folk songs may contain two or more comparative structures. Accordingly, the semantic relationship among them is examined based on the meaning of each comparative structure. Based on these relationships, we divide the semantic connections of comparative structures in Tay idioms, proverbs, and folk songs into two types of combinations: *equivalent semantic combinations* and *contrastive semantic combinations*.

An equivalent semantic combination refers to the relationship in which the compared element and the compared-to element are semantically similar, proximate or related. In this type, the compared elements and the compared-to elements across structures must be semantically equivalent, proximate or connected.

For example: *Cần chài tự va kim, cần nhình tự bjoóc ngần* ("Men are like yellow flowers, women are like coin flowers"; Tran, 2013, p. 45), where the compared entity (A1 = *cần chài* "men"; A2 = *cần nhình* "women") denotes human beings, and the compared object (B1 = *va kim* "yellow flower"; B2 = *bjoóc ngần* "coin flower") denotes objects. Here, A1, A2, and B1, B2 represent semantically proximate phenomena.

Because the compared and compared-to elements in equivalent combinations are semantically similar, proximate or related, this relationship does not strongly highlight the rhetorical effect of comparison. Consequently, equivalent combinations are relatively infrequent in Tay idioms, proverbs and folk songs.

By contrast, a contrastive semantic combination occurs when the compared and compared-to elements across structures stand in opposition to one another.

Example:

Thân noọng như nộc tủm tẩư tàng
Thân ví như phượng hoàng chang hả

("My body is like a heron on the ground,

Your body is like a phoenix soaring in the sky" in Hoang & Trieu, 2014, p. 440).

In this example, *thân noọng* (my body) [A1] and *thân ví* (your body) [A2] stand in contrast based on gender roles or social status. The comparative items *nộc tủm* tẩư tàng (a heron on the ground) [B1] symbolise humility or lowliness, whereas *phượng hoàng chang hả* (a phoenix flying in the sky) [B2] symbolises nobility and greatness. The use of semantic opposition thus heightens the contrast between the compared elements, thereby enhancing the expressive and rhetorical power of the comparison.

According to the survey on the semantic relationships among comparative structures in Tay idioms, proverbs, and folk songs, we obtained the following results:

Figure 3: *The Semantic Relationship Among Comparative Structures in Tay Idioms, Proverbs and Folk Songs*

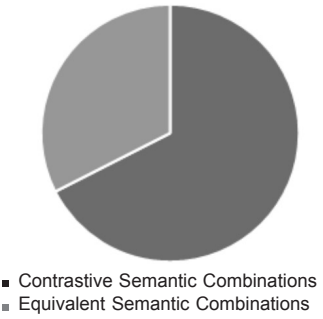


Figure 3 shows that, among a total of 151 double comparative structures containing elements A and B in Tay idioms, proverbs, and folk songs, contrastive semantic combinations of opposition account for 102 structures (67.5%), while equivalent semantic combinations make up only 49 structures (32.5%). This demonstrates that the Tay tend to

employ comparisons based more on contrast and opposition than on parallelism or equivalence. Such a choice not only highlights conciseness and rhetorical nuance but also reflects figurative thinking and aesthetic perception within the cultural–linguistic life of the community.

Discussion

The findings show that the comparative structures in Tay idioms, proverbs and folk songs generally resemble those in other languages, consisting of four elements: (A) the compared entity, (x) the property, (y) the comparative marker, and (B) the vehicle of comparison. However, not all four elements are always present. Ellipsis, reduction or implication frequently occur, requiring the audience to rely on context and cultural experience for interpretation. This reflects the flexibility of folk discourse and underscores the crucial role of background knowledge in meaning-making. These results are consistent with the observations of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Kövecses (2005) that figurative comparison always operates at the intersection of linguistic structure and cultural context.

A significant finding is that comparison in Tay folklore does not remain confined to surface meaning (literal) but extends into deeper symbolic meaning. Familiar images such as the toad, the fairy, the water dam (*phai nà*), or the sugarcane road (*thường ỏi*) are re-created as cultural symbols. This aligns with the cognitive-semantic perspective that figurative meaning is grounded in cultural schemas and folk knowledge (Ungerer & Schmid, 1996). Full appreciation of comparative meaning is possible only when the audience understands the lived contexts, labor practices and value systems of the Tay community.

Statistical analysis of 603 units shows that in 80% of cases, the semantic nucleus of comparison does not reside in the attribute (x) but is concentrated in the vehicle (B). This is a crucial feature: the expressive meaning of comparison relies less on abstract attributes and more on concrete, highly symbolic imagery. This suggests a distinctive cognitive tendency—Tay thought privileges figuration over abstract generalisation. As a result, comparison takes on an "iconic–symbolic" character, contrasting with languages such as English, which more often emphasise attribute-based comparison.

The survey also reveals that compound comparisons based on opposition (contrastive relations) account for a high proportion (67.5%), significantly exceeding those based on coordination (similarity). This

highlights the Tay community's rhetorical preference for contrast as a means of emphasising differences in qualities, roles, or social values. Such expression not only produces artistic effect but also serves didactic and critical functions. While common in much world folklore, the high frequency of oppositional relations in Tay data underscores a particular emphasis on contrastive expression.

Overall, the findings indicate that comparison in Tay idioms, proverbs, and folk songs exhibits both universality (the four-part structure, the interplay of literal and figurative meanings, as in many other languages) and particularity (the prioritisation of symbolic meaning, the predominance of human–nature relations and the emphasis on opposition). This clearly supports the view that linguistic structures cannot be separated from their cultural–social environments. Accordingly, this study contributes not only to the description of Tay linguistic features but also to affirming the role of cultural cognition in interpreting folk linguistic phenomena. Future research may extend the scope of investigation to other Tay settlements or conduct cross-linguistic comparisons with related Tai-Kadai languages such as Thai and Lao. Moreover, combining qualitative methods (interviews with native speakers, discourse analysis of contemporary usage) and quantitative approaches (corpus-based statistical processing) would provide a more comprehensive understanding of comparative structures in Tay folk discourse.

Conclusion

This study examines the structural patterns and semantic values of comparison in Tay idioms, proverb, and folk songs. Findings show that comparison is both universal—with four basic components, two layers of meaning, and flexible reductions—and culture-specific, as meaning often centers on the compared object (B). This reflects a symbolic–intuitive worldview, human–nature harmony, and a preference for oppositional comparison in Tay folk discourse.

Theoretically, the study demonstrates that comparison functions not only as a stylistic device but also as a cognitive tool embodying experience, environment, and cultural values. It contributes to minority language research by advocating an interdisciplinary, culture-based approach beyond formal description.

Practically, the research highlights the rhetorical identity of the Tay language, supports the preservation and teaching of folk literature and enriches discourse on indigenous rhetoric in the South and Southeast Asian context.

Limitations include a focus only on idioms, proverbs and folk songs, with emphasis on semantics while leaving aside phonological, pragmatic and poetic aspects. Future work should broaden the corpus to other Tay genres, compare regional variations, and engage with other Tai-Kadai languages. Interdisciplinary approaches promise a deeper understanding of comparison in the linguistic and cultural life of the region.

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***Ha Thi Chuyen**, PhD, is a lecturer at Tan Trao University, Vietnam, with research interests including linguistics and language pedagogy.*

chuyendhtt@gmail.com