



## A Comparative Analysis of Colour Idioms in Vietnamese, Thai and Indonesian Languages

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### Abstract

This study aims to compare idioms referring to “colour” in Vietnamese, Thai and Indonesian languages. Vietnamese is an Austroasiatic language while Indonesian originates from the Austronesian language and Thai comes from the Kra-Dai language family. Due to this difference, these three languages have idioms representing the same way of people’s thinking. These languages represent culture in ASEAN regions. The idioms are used as a tool of communication in society. The data studied were collected from dictionaries and books about idioms in the three languages, such as the Vietnamese-English-Thai Dictionary, Vietnamese novels and poetry, Thai idioms collection books and an Indonesian Dictionary. There are 14 idioms found matched and divided into different categories that allowed an examination of literal and actual meanings in each language. In principle, the idioms express human actions, thoughts, and characters based on their social background. This work could help non-native speakers of Vietnamese, Thai or Indonesian languages to identify the meaning of difficult expression and enhance the language teaching.

**Keywords:** Colour Idioms, Comparative Study, Culture, Indonesian Idioms, Vietnamese Idioms, Thai Idioms, Compare Idioms

### Introduction

Language is a part of culture that reflects religion, belief, ethics, behavioural norms and habits of people, and that influences language use. Idioms play an important role in many kinds of vocabulary as a demonstration of cultural life through which connections and relationships between language and history of a country may be considered. Idioms are a tool for the identification of the development process of a culture (Tài, 2013) and a part of folklore appearing in daily stories of people living in the countryside, passed on from generation to generation through a thousand years of history (Lân, 2017). Understanding idioms in different languages means understanding how people think in different countries. Furthermore, understanding of different cultures can connect people who live in different areas. Idioms may be defined as multi-word lexical units that tend to acquire meanings which are not predictable from their individual parts. It is therefore necessary to learn definitions of idioms in each language. In this paper, idioms from Vietnamese, Thai and Indonesian languages are examined.

To begin with, the classification of temperature and colour can be conceived as a mental process. It is hardly surprising that physical properties and colours have served as a starting point for a psychological and conceptual view of word meaning at the heart of cognitive linguistics. This mental process of classification (that complex nature becomes clearer as we go on) is commonly called categorization, and its products are the cognitive categories, e.g. the colour categories red, yellow, green, blue, etc. (another widely used term is ‘concept’) (Ungerer & Schmid, 2006). As Sir Isaac Newton points out, light is the source of colours, which identifies seven basic colours in the light spectrum: red, orange, yellow, green, cyan, indigo, and purple (Ames, 1996). The culture of each country reflects the meaning of idioms on colour. For example, in Vietnamese, Thai and Indonesian, the colour “red” usually refers to luck or good news.



### Definition of Idioms in Vietnamese, Thai and Indonesian

In Vietnamese, idioms are defined by many scholars such as Trinh Duc Hien, Le Dinh Tu, Vu Ngoc Can or Hoang Van Hanh (as cited in Tài, 2013, p. 102).

*“Thành ngữ tiếng Việt là những tổ hợp từ ngữ cố định có cấu trúc từ hoặc câu nhưng hoàn toàn thuộc phạm trù cấp từ, được mã hoá, hầu hết có tính chất cách điệu nghệ thuật, và chỉ làm một thành phần trong câu nói.”*

(Kieu Van as cited in Tài, 2013, p. 89)

As shown in the citation, Vietnamese idioms are fixed components with a structure of words or phrases, but completely categorized at the level of the word and encrypted. Most of them are related to literacy and contributed to one part of the saying.

There are many studies of comparatives of idioms between Vietnamese and other languages such as Chinese, French or Russian (Tài, 2013, pp. 104–105). This study hopes to contribute a new point of view about idioms by comparing Vietnamese with Thai and Indonesian.

Vietnam is an agricultural country, so many idioms are related to daily life of farmers with main activities such as cultivating, planting and farming. Idioms are created from the vocabulary of other occupations, especially handicrafts. A considerable vocabulary is found in idioms related to folk games, religious beliefs, tales, and characters from literature and folk tales, as well as historical figures and from nature (Huong, 2017).

In Indonesian, idioms are constructed with two words with different meanings which give rise to a third meaning.

*“Idiom adalah konstruksi yang maknanya tidak sama dengan gabungan makna unurnya, misalnya: kambing hitam.”*

(as cited in Penyusun, 2008, p. 517)

Idioms or idiomatic expressions are often defined as “set phrases” or “fixed phrases” (as cited in Spears, 2000, p. xi). For example, the word *kambing hitam* does not refer to a sheep with black skin but a person who is accused of wrong-doing. This idiom is also found in Thai “แกะดำ” which has the same meaning.

Idioms are expressions with a meaning that is not obvious from the individual words. For example, the idioms “*He was green with envy*” means that he was very envious whereas “*He appeared to be rather green*” means he looked pale and sickly. The best way to understand an idiom is to see how it is used in context. If someone says, “This tin opener’s driving me round the bend! I think I’ll throw it away and get a new one.”, the context and common sense tell us that “*drive round the bend*” does not mean driving a car around a curve in the road. The context tells us that the tin opener is not working properly and it has an effect on the person using it (as cited in McCarthy & Felicity, 2002, p. 6). Like other linguistic items or units, idioms perform a variety of functions, including ideational (offering information and evaluation), interpersonal (serving to facilitate and maintain meaningful and effective interaction), and textual where it provides cohesion in a discourse (Liu, 2008, p. 41).

Most lexical items have literal meanings (Schmitt, 2010, p. 53). For example, land is literally a place where most people live. Other references, however, can be interpreted idiomatically: “The land of smiles” as a reference to Thailand. One might assume that the literal meaning would usually be most frequently used, but research into formulaic language has shown that the idiomatic meaning is far more frequent, e.g. Ungerer & Schmid (2006) which indicates that the idiomatic meaning is more commonly used in society.

In Thai, Yingluck Ngamdee (Ngamdee, 2003) refers idioms as “...ถ้อยคำที่เรียบเรียงขึ้นโดยมีความพิเศษไม่ตรงกับความหมายที่ใช้ตามปกติ ทั้งนี้อาจเป็นคำที่มีความหมายโดยนัยหรือเปรียบเทียบเป็นสถานะคำพูดที่รวมใจความยาวๆ ให้สั้นกะทัดรัด” (*trans.* “...multi-word lexical units that are not used for direct meanings. There is a unique meaning. Some idioms can be used as a metaphor. Idioms can replace longer phrases or sentences.” Yingluck Ngamdee also mentions that idioms in Thai have different meanings as shown 1, 2, 3 and over 3 words. Example:

1 word – “เธอคนนั้นแต่งตัวเปรี้ยวมาก” “That girl dresses very sour”; “sour” in this sentence means “modern”

2 words – “อย่ามาตบตาฉัน” “Don’t hit my eyes”; “hit eyes” means “cheating”

3 words – “เขายันทำงานตัวเป็นเกลียว” “He works until his body like a screw”; “body like a screw” means “diligent and hardworking”

Over 3 words – “ป๋ามาลีรู้ตื้นลึกหนาบางของคุณนายสุรียั้หมด” “Malee knows shallow deep thick and thin of Suree”; “shallow deep thick thin” means “know a lot of details”

### **Words that Refer to “Colour” in Three Languages**

“Màu sắc” means colour in Vietnamese. The Vietnamese flag has two colours: yellow and red. In the Tet festival (The Vietnamese New Year), the main colours used to decorate are red (referring to good luck, e.g. gift of money in a red envelope), the yellow (refers to joy, e.g. the traditional dresses “Ao dai”). There are other colours that Vietnamese people often use such as black, meaning of bad news or death; white, meaning innocence or death; blue, meaning peace. Following the author, the words indicating colours play an important role in the culture of each country. Moreover, the words indicating colours can change their initial meaning when being a component of idioms. For example: “số đỏ” normally “đỏ” means red but in this idiom, “đỏ” means luck, so “số đỏ” can be understood as having a chance or a good opportunity.

Additionally, there are many studies about the symbol of colours in Vietnamese, e.g. “Hoa cỏ và màu sắc trong thành ngữ tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt” about English and Vietnamese idioms on flowers and colours, “Vài nét đặc trưng văn hoá dân tộc thể hiện qua các từ chỉ màu sắc” about some characteristics of traditional culture through colour words and “Tính biểu trưng của từ ngữ chỉ màu sắc trong tiếng Việt” about the symbolism of colour words in Vietnamese (as cited in Mai, 2012).

In Indonesian, colour is called *warna* from sanskrit (*varṇa*). Indonesia recognizes the rainbow colour spectrum with the acronym *Merah putih* or acronym of *merah jingga kuning hijau biru nila ungu*. The Indonesian flag consists of two colours red and white. Red is a symbol of bravery and white is a symbol of holiness. The colour white for people in the south of Sulawesi is a symbol of death. Javanese culture: a yellow flag in front of the house indicates there has been death in that house. Toraja culture believes that red is a symbol of blood.

Colour in Thai language written /si:/ “สี”. Thai flag has three colours; white means religion, red means nation and blue means king (Suwanwattana, 2010, p. 1). In addition, Colour is a symbol of each day in a week such as Sunday is red, Monday is Yellow, Tuesday is pink, Wednesday is green, Thursday is orange and Friday is blue Saturday is purple. Thai people have a belief about colour from Hindu belief. Colour is related to life such as clothes, food, art handmade products, buildings, temple. This reflects belief, religion, environment and astrology (Anukul, 2009, p. 44).

According to Weisgerber, each language is associated with a nation and each language expresses a notion about the world (as cited in Mai, 2012). Furthermore, the research of grammatical categories in languages can lead to an intensive understanding about its culture (Whorf as cited in Mai, 2012). In this article, the culture of three countries as Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia will be discovered through idioms on colors. Even though the



comparison of three languages seems to be complicated, this research will be a database and a tool for communication in these languages.

### Objectives of Study

The objective of study was to compare the literal meaning, actual meaning and form idioms referring to “colour” in Vietnamese, Thai and Indonesian languages.

### Methodology

The study used the following methods:

1. Literature research aims to collect the idioms from different resources such as dictionaries, novels, poetry and academic papers by other researchers.

- Thai Idioms Collection Books (Khun Wichitmattra (Sa-nga Kanjanakpan), 1998);
- Vietnamese Idioms Dictionary (Lân, 2017);
- Indonesian Dictionary “Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia” (Penyusun, 2008);
- Vietnamese Dictionary (Phê, 2016);
- Poetry “Truyện Kiều – Nguyễn Du” (Kim & Kì, 2017);
- Novel “Bỉ vỏ” (Hồng, 2016)

There are 18 Thai idioms, 20 idioms Vietnamese idioms and 40 Indonesian idioms collected from various resources.

2. Semantic analysis: after finding the idioms, it is necessary to list them into two categories: literal meaning and figurative meaning. The selection of idioms is based on the type of idioms according to McCarthy & Felicity (2002).

3. Comparative and contrastive analysis aims to find out the resemblance and the difference between the meanings of idioms in three languages. Hence, we can see the difference of the thoughts or of the habit or people living in these areas.

**Table 1** Category of Idioms

No	Same Type Form	Different Type Form
1	Idioms with same literal and actual meaning (Table 2)	Idioms with same literal and actual meaning (Table 3)
2	Idioms with different literal meaning but same actual meaning (Table 4)	Idioms with different literal meaning but same actual meaning (Table 5)
3	Idioms with same literal meaning but different actual meaning (Table 6)	Idioms with same literal meaning but different actual meaning (Table 7)

(as cited in A-Comparative-Study-on-Idioms-of-the-Human-colour-in-Hyu)

### Results

This research looked at the difference in perception of ideas or thoughts of Vietnamese, Thai and Indonesian idioms. It collected the data by making three categories. Each category was divided into two types of form: same and different.

**Abbreviation Used in the Tables**

C = Colour, N = Noun, A = Adjective, Adv = Adverb, V = Verb and Pre = Preposition

In this research, found 14 idioms were found and matched with three languages.

**Table 2** Idioms Refer to “Colour” with Similarities in Literal, Actual Meaning and Form

No	Thai	Vietnamese	Indonesian	Form	Actual Meaning
1	ใบเหลือง (Yellow Card)	thẻ vàng (Card Yellow)	Kartu Kuning (Card Yellow)	N + C	Card in the soccer game to give warning
2	ใบแดง (Card Red)	thẻ đỏ (Card Red)	Kartu Merah (Card Red)	N + C	- Pass selection of soldier - Making a player out of the game
3	ไฟแดง (Light Red)	đèn đỏ (Light Red)	Lampu Merah (Light Red)	N + C	Menstruation period of women
4	บัญชีดำ (List Black)	sổ đen (List Black)	Daftar Hitam (List Black)	N + C	People, group of names who are to be banned
5	ไฟเขียว (Light Green)	đèn xanh (Light Green)	Lampu Hijau (Light Green)	N + C	Giving permission, allow to do
6	ธงขาว (Flag White)	cờ trắng (Flag White)	Bendera Putih (Flag White)	N + C	- Give up from war - Give up from a game

From List Thai, Vietnamese, and Indonesian Idioms, there are 6 Idioms Matched

**Table 3** Idioms with Same Literal and Actual Meaning but Different Form

No	Thai	Vietnamese	Indonesian	Form of Words			Actual Meaning
				T	V	I	
1	หน้าแดง	đỏ mặt	Merah Muka	(Face Red) N + C	(Red Face) C + N	(Red Face) C + N	To be embarrassed

From List Thai, Vietnamese, and Indonesian Idioms, there are 1 Idioms Matched

The first category in Table 2 and Table 3 (in Thai Vietnam and Indonesian Idioms) shows seven idioms in the same literal and actual meaning: the six idioms with the same form (N + C) and one idiom with a different form (C + N), respectively. All idioms are not originally from three countries. These idioms apply English idioms, for example “Blacklist”. There are also two idioms that come from sport: red card and yellow card or from the traffic light: red light and green light.

The usage of idioms represents the human emotion, for example, “face red” in Thai “เวลาที่เธอเจอกับเขา เธอมักจะเดินหน้าแดงไปจนถึงประตูเลย” (When meeting him, she always has a red face); in Vietnamese “Sau khi gặp Minh, Hà quay mặt đi và nhìn thấy một cái mặt đỏ ở trong gương: cô ấy đã thương thầm nhớ trộm anh từ rất lâu rồi”. (After meeting Minh, Ha turned back and saw a red face in the mirror: she has fallen in love with him long time ago) and in Indonesian – “Pria yang berbaju pink itu merah muka” (The man with the pink shirt feel embarrassed).

**Table 4** Idioms with Different Literal Meaning but Same Actual Meaning and Same Form

No	Thai	Vietnamese	Indonesian	Meaning and Form of Words			Actual Meaning
				T	V	I	
1	ฟ้ามืดดำ	cánh đen tối	Awan Kelabu	(Sky Black) N + C	(Situation Black) N + C	(Sky Grey) N + C	Bad Day
2	ผ้าขาว	trang giấy trắng	Lembar Kertas Putih	(Clothes White) N + C	(Sheet of Paper White) N + C	(White Sheet of Paper) N + C	Pure, Innocent
3	นาทีทอง	cơ hội ngàn vàng	Peluang Emas	(Minute Golden) N + C	(Opportunity Golden) N + C	(Opportunity Golden) N + C	Good Opportunity

From List Thai, Vietnamese, and Indonesian Idioms, there are 3 Idioms Matched

**Table 5** Idioms with Different Literal Meaning but Same Actual Meaning and Different Form

No	Thai	Vietnamese	Indonesian	Form			Actual Meaning
				T	V	I	
1	หน้าแดง	tóc xanh	Masih Hijau	(Cheek Red) N + C	(Hair Green) N + C	(Still Green) Pre + C	To be young

From list Thai, Vietnamese, and Indonesian Idioms, there are 1 Idiom Matched

The second category in Table 4 and Table 5 shows the different literal meaning but same actual meaning. There are four idioms matched; three idioms with the same form and one idiom with a different form. For example, the actual meaning of idioms “bad day” in Thai uses “dark sky” whereas in Vietnam uses “situation black” and Indonesian uses “grey sky”. These idioms have the same form: N + C as follows:

Th - “ในวันที่ฟ้ามืดดำ อย่างน้อยเรายังมีพ่อกับแม่คอยให้กำลังใจ”

(On the day with black sky, we still have parents to encourage us.)

VN - “Hôm qua chính là cánh đen tối của chị Vân: chị đã bị mất hết cả tiền lẫn việc”

(Yesterday was Van’s black situation: she lost both money and job.)

IDN - Pria itu awan kelabu karena ditinggal oleh sang kekasih

(That boy is sad because his girlfriend left him.); This idiom reflects the “bad” thing or situation with the “black shade colour” in three countries.

The idiom can express human characters, for example “young age or teenager” in Thai uses “แก้มแดง” (red cheek) whereas Vietnamese language uses “tóc xanh” (green hair) and Indonesian uses “Masih hijau” (still green). With such meaning, each language uses a different colour to represent the meaning of the idiom, “red” and “green”. Different forms reveal in each idiom: N + C (Th and VN) and Adv + C (IDN) as in the following sentences.

Thai - “แก้มแดง” “สาวแก้มแดงได้กล่าวขอบคุณกับเขา” “The young girl said Thank You to him”.

Vietnamese - “Đi xem nhóm nhạc hôm ấy chỉ có toàn là bọn tóc xanh” (Only teenagers came to see the concert on that day).

Here, the actual meaning idiom “young” in Thai and Vietnamese is related to the human character and part of body. Likewise, in Indonesian - “Orang itu masih hijau” (That person is still young.) is related to the plant (When the plant is still young, it has the green colour. When it is old, it turns brown.).



**Table 6** Idioms with the Same Literal Meaning, Different Actual Meaning and Same Form

No	Thai	Vietnamese	Indonesian	Actual Meaning		
				T	V	I
1	ตาฟ้า	mắt xanh	Bermata Biru	Beautiful Eyes		
	(Eyes Blue)	N + C	(Eyes Blue)	Western People	(meanings from “Truyện	Western People
	N + C	(Eyes Blue)	N + C		Kiều”, Nguyễn Du)	

From list Thai, Vietnamese, and Indonesian Idioms, there is 1 Idiom Matched

**Table 7** Idioms with the Same Literal Meaning, Different Actual Meaning and Different Form

No	Thai	Vietnamese	Indonesian	Actual Meaning		
				T	V	I
1	ตาขาว	mắt trắng dã	Putih Mata			
	(White Eyes)	(White Eyes)	(White Eyes)	Cowardly	Cruel	Making another be shame or dishonour
	N + C	N + C	C + N			
2		giấy trắng mực đen				
	ดำและขาว	(p. 419)	Hitam Putih			
	(Black and White)	(Sheet of Paper	(Black White)	Good and	A proof, an	The rule, before
	C + C	White and Ink Black)	C + C	Bad	evidence	making agreement should be clear
		N + C + N + C				

From list Thai, Vietnamese, and Indonesian Idioms, there are 2 Idioms Matched

The category in Table 6 and Table 7 has the same literal meaning but different actual meaning. One idiom has the same form whereas two idioms have different forms. For example, in the literal idiom “eye white” means “cowardly” in Thai but means “cruel” in Vietnamese and “making another shy” in Indonesian. The similar form is N + C in Thai and Vietnamese, but C + N in Indonesian, expressed in the following sentences:

- In Thai – “เขาช่างเป็นคนขี้เขลตาขาวอะไรเชื่อนี้!” (How coward he is!): When people are shocked or afraid of something, their eyes are wide open, and this makes the white part of the eyes larger than the black part.
- In Vietnamese – “Tôi biết ngay là cô ta độc ác, nhìn mắt trắng dã thế kia cơ mà” (I have known that she is cruel by looking at her white eyes): The person who has more white part in the eyes, rather than the black part, is regarded as a cruel one.
- In Indonesian: “Ia membuat rekannya putih mata di depan pimpinan” (He makes his friend dishonoured in front of the leader): When people are humiliated, they do not want to see or meet others. Physically, the black eye is the organ for seeing. People want to lose it and have only the white eye. The literal meaning idiom “white eye” represents a different perspective on human characters and thoughts.

## Discussion

The first category of idioms in Table 2 and Table 3, the idioms are based on similarity, both literal and actual meanings such as the use of ‘yellow’ in the idiom ‘yellow card’ in sport games and other contexts. For the three countries, this idiom infers a warning. The ‘red card’ in the three countries means preventing a player from playing. The ‘light red’ has a similar meaning: the menstruation period of women. Most idioms in this category reveal that the three countries have adopted English idioms to understand each other with the same idioms.

The second category of idioms in Table 4 and Table 5 uses the same colours: grey, green and black. Located in the same region and geography, it is possible that the three countries share the same cognitive of colours. On



the contrary, the difference of actual meanings needs to be aware of by language users in understanding the cultural background in each country through idioms as part of communication. For an example, the colour idiom expresses “human body” and “plant” in all three countries. The actual meaning “young” in Thai idiom uses “red cheek” to refer to a little girl as she has soft and smooth skin that makes her cheeks rosy. The idiom “tóc xanh” (tóc-hair, xanh-green) in Vietnamese signifies young people because they have dark and thick hair that looks like green grass. In Indonesian, “masih Hijau” (still green) relates to green plant.

The third category of idioms in Table 6 and Table 7 shows different meanings of similar literal idioms in the three countries. The colour “blue” in the idiom “blue eyes” gives different meanings. Thailand and Indonesia have the same thoughts of western people who have blue eyes. However, the idiom “mắt xanh” (mắt-eye, xanh-blue) in Vietnamese signifies a beautiful girl because the blue colour in Vietnamese can be understood by the black eyes, and the person with black eyes is seen as a pretty one. The colour “xanh” in Vietnamese can be used for both colours, green and blue. To distinguish the two colours, it is necessary to add more elements: “xanh lá cây” (green – “lá cây” signifies the leaf) and “xanh nước biển” (blue – “nước biển” signifies the sea water). The different meaning of idioms in the three countries relates to the blue colour. For instance, the idioms “ดำและขาว” (black and white) in Thai express good and bad according to Buddhist beliefs. The idiom “giấy trắng mực đen” (giấy-paper, trắng-white, mực-ink, đen-black) in Vietnamese signifies the clarity of things, e.g. a proof to demonstrate that someone is right. That is, when writing something on a paper with black ink, it is much clearer.

As part of the ASEAN Community, Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia have similar and different perspectives on colours idioms. Countries in the same region may have language contact and exchange. Therefore, colour idioms can be part of communication tools in the ASEAN Region by understanding resemblances and differences in colour idioms.

### Conclusion

Due to resources and experiences, the study is not an exemption of limits and personal points of view. Once an idiom is found in Vietnamese, there is probably no idiom matched in other languages and vice-versa. The majority of idioms have similar, literal and actual forms. Most of the idioms found consist of two words or compound words. Most of the forms are a combination of Noun + Colour or Colour + Noun. The colour used in idioms is Black, Red, Blue, White, Gold, Green.

People use idioms on colour to express human action, character and thought. Idiom usage in different languages is influenced by the context of the original language, and idioms show similar and different perspectives of people in ASEAN countries. This result gives an input for learners, teachers and translators. There are more idioms to be found in further research.

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