ABSTRACT
Metaphors reveal a great deal about our perception, judgment and value. They could be considered as the significant scaffolding surrounding serious efforts at developing comprehensive descriptions, explanations and predictions of phenomena, events, and conceptualisation. Metaphors can generate insights about how things are perceived in reality. A metaphor indirectly or implicitly indicates our perception and attitudes, particularly in relation to the social values. If a hospital is perceived metaphorically as a home, this metaphor brings with its positive features held by the metaphor users such as warmth, care, security, kindness etc. On the contrary, if a hospital is perceived as a clinical factory, it reveals negative images and feelings such as cutting the flesh, indifferent, fear, cool blood etc. A study based on narrative research methodology of Vietnamese migrants’ perception of health concepts in an intercultural discourse was conducted. It attempted to understand the cultural meaning that Vietnamese migrants used to interpret and value health concepts and issues in terms of their Vietnamese metaphors applied to the Australian context.

1. Introduction
Metaphor is commonly treated as a literary feature which good writers use to add colourful shades of meaning to words and expressions. Beautiful women are roses who need to be treated with love and gentle care and cunning men are foxes who need to be constantly watched and deserved to be hunted and destroyed. Ways with metaphor are an important skill in creative writing. It is true that metaphor has traditionally played a unique role in literature. However, metaphor permeates ever aspect of human communication, not just in literature. The Internet is a communication superhighway; human brain is divided into two hemispheres, and there are different schools of philosophical thoughts dealing with existentialism.

Thus, metaphor is a linguistic device language users employ to make sense of the world. Most metaphors are ready-made and used widely in a culture or social discourse while others are freshly created by individuals during the process of communicative interaction. Ready-made metaphors strongly reflect cultural perceptions and attitudes which have been in existence in a culture for many years. People of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds use different metaphors in communication and this can lead to miscommunication due to different interpretations of cultural metaphors.
Australia is a multicultural society which has attracted migrants around the world to choose it as their second homeland. Though many migrants have settled firmly in Australia, their world views and attitudes still reflect their cultural heritage and this, to a great extent, is due to the cultural metaphors that they have inherited and now use in a new cultural discourse.

A study was conducted to examine how Vietnamese migrants make sense of health issues in Australia through their Vietnamese metaphors. It was a narrative study involving four Vietnamese migrants of different backgrounds. The narrative data was based on oral and written interview, mainly their reflections of their life experiences in Australia through narrative texts.

2. **What is metaphor?**

When we say ‘a dog is an animal’ and ‘a soldier is a human being’, we assign some inherent features to these two common nouns. However, when we say ‘a soldier is an animal’, we extend the meaning of the nouns ‘soldier’ and ‘animal’, or more importantly we establish a new link between these two concepts. Basically there are two meanings: literal meaning and metaphorical meaning. Literal meaning normally indicates what is said and metaphorical meaning reveals what is meant.

Several terms are sometimes used interchangeably to discuss metaphorical meanings. They are simile, analogy, and metaphor.

Simile is linguistically marked by comparative markers as seen in the following examples:

- Tim acts like a tiger when he is hungry.
- Teachers sometimes behave like parents.
- Her friend is as strong as a horse.

These expressions use similes to compare two different entities. Another kind of comparison is called analogy, in which a word has its basic meaning and extended meaning; for example ‘sister cities’ are cities which rank themselves as sisters.

Metaphor is not only a hidden comparison without using comparative linguistic markers. It is primarily a device for shifting the meaning focus, and attempting to add meaning or redefine the original lexical meaning. Thus, we use metaphors such as ‘Bank robbers are beasts’; ‘The government is a big bully’, and ‘Schools are prisons’.

In this study the term ‘metaphor’ is used broadly to cover simile, analogy and metaphor.

3. **Vietnamese health metaphors**

The relationship between language and culture has been studied in sociolinguistics, particularly in intercultural communication.

As the Vietnamese culture is predominantly influenced by three philosophical thoughts, namely Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, it is interesting to note the influence of these philosophies on Vietnamese communication and interaction. From the Vietnamese point of view, communication requires the following awareness:
A manifestation of some understanding of those philosophical thoughts in formal discourses as well as in daily communication with others. For instance, in a conversation one often hears direct or indirect reference to acts or statements made by Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist scholars.

Wisdom is the ultimate goal of traditional scholarly achievement. Proverbs and ancient sayings are often used to strengthen one’s arguments in a discussion. Speakers, particularly elderly people, tend to use them in teaching wisdom to young people. For instance, ‘cô nhân có câu’ (there is an old saying), ‘ca dao có câu’ (a proverb says that), are widely used.

Cultural meaning: word meaning is determined by its cultural meaning. The word ‘teacher’ for instance conjures up different images depending on our cultural perception. Metaphorically, to some Westerners a teacher is traditionally seen as an expert in a particularly field whereas in Vietnamese culture, teacher is perceived as a source of knowledge and wisdom, who guides students how to live harmoniously. The word ‘friend’ in Vietnamese does not only include a denotative meaning of a person who is close to us but also includes some cultural expectations such as loyalty, caring, sacrifice.

Cultural protocol: this is the normal procedure which structures an interaction among members of a culture. For instance, in a conversation involving two participants of different age, the older person is expected to take an advisory role and this can be seen in the numbers of turn-taking, topic initiation, responses, and commentary statements and reinforcement. It is most interesting to observe the interaction of family members at a dinner table. For the Vietnamese, dinner is not just an eating routine, but more importantly, a communicative activity which enables family members to share life together. A Vietnamese dinner normally lasts a long time as everybody wants to talk. Dinner is, therefore, a speaking setting. Due to difference of cultural protocol, foreigners tend to feel uneasy about the Vietnamese habit of eating and speaking at the same time. This is also another instance of cross-cultural communication.

The domain of affective communication can be a rich source of studying intercultural interaction. Affective communication deals with expression of feelings, emotion, and self-esteem. The language of science involves primarily the cognitive aspect of communication whereas the language of emotion deals with quite a different world. Bickley (1982:110) points out that in addition to their referential functions, words also have emotive functions which express affective or volitional attitudes in others. The term ‘emotive’ covers ‘love’, joy, hope, wonder, desire, reverence, obedience, amusement, sympathy, social, moral and religious feeling, rage, fear, grief, horror, disgust... Vietnamese people ‘tend’ to share their inner world readily whereas Westerners ‘tend’ to keep their personal life as a private property which can be shared only with special others. This difference can create a communication gap between Vietnamese speakers and Westerners and easily leads to suspicion and mistrust on each side. Vietnamese speakers may see Westerners as remote, unfriendly or uncaring whereas Westerners may misinterpret Vietnamese speakers as trivial, emotional or intrusive.

Vietnamese health concepts and issues provide interesting insights into the beliefs and behaviours of Vietnamese people towards life, health and death. According to Buddhism, there are four stages which everyone has to go through: sinh (birth), lao
(aging), benh (sickness) and tu (death). However, it not a linear development but a natural cycle of interaction between birth, death and rebirth.

A well-known Vietnamese song-writer expressed this life-death view in his popular song among Vietnamese people entitled ‘Cat Bui’ (sand and dust):

“Hat bui nao hoa kiep than toi de mot mai toi ve lam cat but”

(which dust made up my body so that one day my body turns back into dust)

This ‘natural’ cycle is metaphorically similar to the come-and-go of four seasons (spring, summer, autumn and winter) in a human life. Thus sickness is unavoidable. This does not mean that people should not look after their health. Health is seen as one of the most important factors in life as indicated metaphorically in the following Vietnamese proverb:

Suc khoe la vang

(Health is gold)

When people are sick, they need to have medicine, not just to wait for death to ‘knock at their doors’.

Com thi rau, dau thi thuoc

(Vegetable goes with rice and medicine goes with sickness)

Those in good health must look after sick patients

La lanh dum la rach

(The good leaves protect the worn-out leaves)

However, if medicine and appropriate treatments fail, sickness is a revelation of their destiny and it should be accepted:

Trois keu ai nay da

(When God call, reply: ‘yes’)

The Vietnamese concept of health consists of three main aspects: physical, mental and spiritual. They are not three unrelated domains. The mind-body balance is very much influenced by the Yin-Yan principle of Taoism. Physical sickness can be seen as the cause of Yin-Yang imbalance in the body as well as in the mind. Traditional prevention and treatment are heavily based on this principle. For example there are Yin-foods and Yang-foods for health enhancement and Yin-medicine and Yan Medecine for different treatments.

Cara Jepsen (2003) quoted Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese spiritual leader living in France, who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967 by Martin Luther King, Jr, giving the following metaphor about health.

"When you look out through the window in the time of a storm you can see the trees out there suffer, bending back and forth before the force of the wind. You may have the feeling that the tree is going to break, to be blown away every time a strong emotion comes to us. We may have the impression that we are about to crack. But if we know how to look deep down to the level of the trunk of the body--if we know that the tree is deeply rooted in the soil--then that feeling of fragility and vulnerability will not be there."
4. The study

When migrants are in a new country which has different perceptions and interpretation of health concepts and different expectations of health-related behaviours, predictably they encounter many problems. This study was conducted to search for some insights into this question. It was primarily a narrative research. Four Vietnamese migrants were invited to participate in this study. The four migrants were chosen as they were very close to the researchers. The reason is that the researchers were interested in the meanings embedded within the texts gathered in the different ‘conversations’ between the tellers and the researchers as well the meanings outside the actual text, which Fairclough (1995) refers to as ‘absences from texts’.

A great deal more work is needed on the development of socially relevant models for text analysis. Take the case of absences from texts. Textual analysis can often give excellent insights about what is ‘in’ a text, but what is absent from a text is often just as significant from the perspective of sociocultural analysis. (p.5)

The four participants were a grandmother (aged 90), a couple (husband and wife, aged 54 and 50), and a male factory worker (42). All the participants have been to Australia for at least 10 years. Ethnographic research tools were used: note-taking, informal discussion and personal stories told by the participants. The focus was on cultural metaphors on health issues.

The following categories of health metaphors emerged from the data analysis.

Life is a journey

Health is perceived metaphorically as a journey. This perception indicates the holistic view of health. If life is a journey, it is a process in which travelers can expect joy, hardship, challenge, routine, and unpredictability.

When I am very sick a few years ago, I first felt very miserable. I started to get very annoyed with everything and with myself too. But thanks God, I am better now. When you are sick, you are like a different person. No longer patient and happy! Now looking back, I laugh at myself. It is not normal if we are healthy and happy and everything is OK. Life is not like that.

Metaphorical leper

Vietnamese family is very close unit in which all members of the family live and share their activities as well as things together. Thus, the notions of ownership and individual property create problems among members of families, particularly between the young generation and the old one.

I was very upset when my son shouted at me because I used his toothbrush. I told him that I washed his toothbrush carefully after use but he did not like it. I only use it when my toothbrush was lost somewhere. I was treated like leper. I think he is very selfish and rude... When God creates elephants, He also creates grass for them.

In Vietnamese, leprosy is perceived as the most horrible disease. Lepers are social outcasts. This term is often used metaphorically to refer to people who are dirty and dangerous to society.
Doctor as life creator

Medical doctors hold a very prestigious position in Vietnamese culture. The two words ‘ky su, bac si’ (engineer and doctor) are symbols of academic success and social power.

It made us laugh so much when our friend’s son wanted to be a butcher. It was so silly of him. Everyone can be a butcher. You don’t need to go to school to become a butcher. We want to make sure that our son will get into the medical school. It is very tough as to get in, you must have the highest marks. He is very keen to be a doctor. When he graduates as a doctor, we can take retirement. Doctors are very smart people. They give life to those who are going to lose it. Doctors are the second God!”

Hospital as ghost house

There is a big contrast between hospitals in Vietnam and Australia, particularly for those who had some horrible experiences in a poorly equipped hospital in Vietnam.

Last time when I was admitted into a hospital here in Sydney, I was treated as a hotel guest. I was given clean bed sheets and towers whenever I need them. It is quite a contrast to the ones we had in Vietnam right after the fall of Saigon. Even mentioning it makes my hair stand! When I was very sick, my family took me to a public hospital. I was put in the same bed with other serious patients. It was like a prison. I could not sleep at all as each time I moved my legs or arms, I could feel the body of another patient.

Hospitals in Vietnam have been improved a great deal. This is due to economic development. Some hospitals have been privatized and those who can afford the expensive costs can expect high standard of treatment. However, the image of hospital as a ghost house still haunts many Vietnamese people.

Family as health workers

In Vietnam, the primary source of health care is the family. Old people are often cared for by their family members when they are weak or sick. They are sent to hospital only when they need special treatment by health workers.

I don’t want to be sent to a hospital in Australia as I feel very lonely there. It is like an exile to me. Last time when I was there for treatment of my broken leg, I could not speak English and tried to use hands to gesture the staff but they did not know what I wanted. At home, I could do what I want. My family are my health workers.

Poor health as a metaphor of God’s punishment!

Superstition tends to grow in social environments where ignorance and poverty dominate. Some Vietnamese people perceive poor health or serious medical problems as the result of the patients’ cruelty in their previous life or as the result of a complicated birth giving case (de nguoc). Thus, the metaphor ‘de nguoc’ is used to refer to someone who is cheating and lying.

Mrs. K has had many problems lately. One bad thing happened and a few moths later another bad thing occurred. Three years ago, her husband got a car accident, luckily he did not die. Last year her daughter was diagnosed with cancer and now her other daughter has asthma. She now eating only
veggie ‘an chay’ two weeks a month to praise that her daughters’ health. Perhaps she was cruel in previous life and now she has to pay for it.

Sickness as a rough sea

If life is seen as a series of beautiful dream, sickness is just like a nightmare which comes and goes. This perception treats sickness as an obvious part of life, which reminds people of a Yin-Yang existence.

Some of my friends were so healthy and suddenly one day their health turned upside down and they did not know why! They felt so hopeless and felt so scared. There are things we can do and things we cannot do. I have given up smoking when I realised that smoking was bad for me. Exercise is good and I try to do things around the house to get fit. However, if suddenly I get sick, I have to accept it. Our body is like a sea, sometimes calm, sometimes rough. We have to learn to accept it!

5. Conclusion

Migrants moving to Australia have brought with them their cultural metaphors. These metaphors can be constructive in the sense that they provide some powerful guidance for migrants to maintain their cultural heritage. However, cultural metaphors can cause some difficulty for migrants to adapt to the new cultural environment due to different worldview. In the health area, it is important for health workers in Australia to be aware of the health metaphors that Vietnamese migrants use to guide them through new experiences. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.146) point out:

A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies.

References


