

A Contrastive Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in Vietnamese and Korean Expressions of Sweetness Focusing on “Ngọt/Ngọt Ngào” and “달다/달콤하다”

Thi Huyen Bui

Faculty of Korean Language and Culture, Dai Nam University, Vietnam

ABSTRACT: This qualitative contrastive study examines conceptual metaphors expressed through sweet-taste terms in Vietnamese and Korean, focusing on *ngọt/ngọt ngào* and *달다/달콤하다*. The data comprise dictionary senses and attested examples documented in previous studies of taste terms, semantic extension, and conceptual metaphor. The analysis distinguishes contextual meanings from basic gustatory meanings, groups expressions by target domains, and compares the mappings and lexical realization patterns in the two languages. The findings reveal shared mappings in which the pleasurable experience of sweetness structures positive emotions, love, attractive sounds and speech, desirable outcomes, rest, dreams, and other valued experiences. Expressions of sweetness may also acquire negative evaluative meanings when they are used to conceptualize temptation, flattery, or an attractive appearance that conceals risk. A major cross-linguistic difference concerns lexical packaging: Vietnamese *ngọt* extends productively into several abstract domains, whereas Korean commonly distributes these functions among *달다*, *달콤하다*, and the bound form *단-*. Thus, *ngọt* and *달다* correspond at the prototypical level but are not fully equivalent on a one-to-one basis. The study contributes to Vietnamese–Korean contrastive semantics and offers implications for translation and vocabulary instruction.

KEYWORDS: conceptual metaphor; gustation; sweetness; Vietnamese; Korean; contrastive semantics.

I. INTRODUCTION

Taste is one of the primary sensory channels through which humans evaluate food and certain aspects of their environment. The semantic and discursive functions of taste terms, however, extend well beyond the description of sensations perceived by the tongue. In everyday communication, speakers draw on gustatory qualities to characterize sounds, speech, people, emotions, social relationships, and broader life experiences. Expressions such as *giọng nói ngọt* ‘a sweet voice’, *tình yêu ngọt ngào* ‘sweet or tender love’, and *trái ngọt của thành công* ‘the sweet fruits of success’ in Vietnamese, as well as *달콤한 목소리* ‘a sweet voice’, *달콤한 사랑* ‘sweet love’, and *달콤한 유혹* ‘a sweet or enticing temptation’ in Korean, demonstrate that sweetness functions as a highly productive source domain in metaphorical conceptualization.

According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device used in literary language but also a cognitive mechanism through which an abstract domain of experience is understood in terms of a more concrete one [1], [5]. The experience of sweetness is strongly embodied. Sugar, honey, and energy-rich foods generally produce pleasurable sensations, and sweetness therefore tends to be associated with goodness, satisfaction, and positive value. This evaluative association, however, is not uniformly positive. Excessive sweetness may become cloying, overly sweet speech may arouse suspicion, and an attractive offer may function as an enticing lure that conceals potential danger. Such shifts in evaluative polarity make the source domain of SWEETNESS particularly suitable for examining the relationship between broadly shared embodied experience and language- and culture-specific forms of conventionalization.

In Vietnamese–Korean contrastive research, Vietnamese *ngọt* ‘sweet’ is commonly treated as the equivalent of Korean *달다* (dalda, ‘to be sweet’). This correspondence is valid at the level of literal gustatory meaning but becomes insufficient when extended and metaphorical meanings are considered. Vietnamese permits the direct use of “*ngọt*” in expressions such as “*giọng ngọt*” (a sweet voice), “*lời ngọt*” (sweet words), “*nụ cười ngọt*” (a sweet smile), and “*ngọt bùi*” (‘life’s joys and comforts’), the latter conventionally referring to shared happiness or favorable life experiences. In Korean, many seemingly corresponding meanings are more naturally expressed through “*달콤하다*” (dalkomhada, ‘to be sweet, pleasant, or enticing’), its adnominal form “*달콤한*”, or the combining form “*단-*”, as in “*달콤한 말*” (sweet words), “*달콤한 미소*” (a sweet smile), “*단잠*” (deep or sweet sleep), and

A Contrastive Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in Vietnamese and Korean Expressions of Sweetness Focusing on “Ngọt/Ngọt Ngào” and “달다/달콤하다”

“단꿈” (a sweet dream). Treating “ngọt” and “달다” as fully equivalent on a one-to-one basis may therefore obscure the internal functional differentiation within the lexical field of sweetness in each language.

This study addresses the following four research questions. First, which major target domains are conceptualized through expressions denoting sweetness in Vietnamese and Korean? Second, which conceptual mappings are shared because they are grounded in similar embodied experiences of sweetness? Third, how do the two languages differ in their selection of lexical units and in the ways they package metaphorical meaning? Fourth, what implications do the contrastive findings have for translation and for teaching Korean to Vietnamese learners? By addressing these questions, the study seeks to clarify the shared semantic network structured by the source domain of SWEETNESS while also identifying the limits of the assumed equivalence between “ngọt” and “달다”.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Studies on Conceptual Metaphor and the Semantic Extension of Taste Terms

Lakoff and Johnson [1] laid the foundation for the view of metaphor as a system of mappings between a source domain and a target domain. Johnson [2] emphasized the role of the body and image schemas in the structuring of meaning, while Sweetser [3] showed that the development from sensory meaning to cognition, evaluation, and discourse relations can be explained through systematic cognitive pathways. Kövecses [4], [5] further clarified the two dimensions of metaphor: on the one hand, it has a relatively universal embodied basis; on the other hand, it is shaped by cultural, historical, and discursive environments. With regard to sensory terms, Williams [6] proposed common directions of transfer in synesthetic metaphor, thereby demonstrating that words associated with one sensory modality can be recruited to describe experience in another.

International studies of taste confirm that sweetness is generally associated with positive evaluation, although it does not necessarily have the same semantic range in all languages. In their contrastive study of Polish and English taste adjectives, Zawisławska and Falkowska [24] argued that metaphorical productivity is determined not only by biological foundations but also by culinary traditions, prototypical substances associated with particular tastes, and cultural symbolism. Vainik [25] examined emotion words motivated by taste in Estonian and identified a relationship between evaluations of pleasant versus unpleasant tastes and positive versus negative emotions. From the perspective of experimental psychology, Zhou and Tse [26] showed that sweetness is prominently associated with positive emotion words, whereas bitterness, sourness, and spiciness tend to be associated with negative polarity. The corpus-based study by Zhang, Lahlou, and Azam [27] further confirmed the simultaneous roles of metaphor and metonymy in the development of polysemy in taste terms.

B. Studies on Taste Terms and “ngọt” in Vietnamese

In Vietnam, studies in cognitive linguistics have provided both theoretical foundations and data for research on semantic extension [9], [10]. Nguyễn Thị Huyền [12] examined *ngọt* ‘sweet’ in relation to its English equivalent, thereby showing that a taste term can extend to sound, manner of speaking, and pleasant states. In a subsequent study, Nguyễn Thị Huyền [13] systematized the metaphorical mechanisms of semantic extension in Vietnamese taste terms. Võ Thị Mai Hoa [14] compared taste metaphors in Vietnamese, Chinese, and English and identified mappings such as SMELL IS TASTE, VISION IS TASTE, HEARING IS TASTE, and EMOTION IS TASTE. Phan Thị Mỹ Loan [15] investigated differences in the transfer of taste terms to other sensory domains in Vietnamese and Japanese, emphasizing the role of both shared experience and the specific conventions of each linguistic community.

The study most directly relevant to the present topic is that of Ho Trinh Quynh Thu and Nguyen Thi Thanh Ha [16]. Based on data from eight English and Vietnamese novels, the authors identified 87 metaphorical expressions containing “sweet” and “ngọt,” whose target domains included smell, hearing, vision, touch, emotion, and manner of behavior. This study demonstrates the usefulness of a metaphor identification procedure and shows that “ngọt” has considerable potential for semantic extension. However, the English–Vietnamese comparison does not address the functional distribution among “달다,” “달콤하다,” and “단-” in Korean. Vũ Thị Sâm [17] examined the mapping mechanism from the source domain TASTE to the target domain LIFE in Vietnamese and English; the findings suggest that taste terms can structure human qualities, emotions, and social activities. Thus, research on Vietnamese has described the relevant target domains with considerable clarity, but a comparison focused on the Korean–Vietnamese lexical field of sweetness remains lacking.

C. Studies on “달다” and Expressions of Sweetness in Korean

In Korean, Jeong Su-jin [18] was among the early scholars to approach expressions involving “단맛” ‘sweet taste’ from a cognitive perspective. The study showed that gustatory meaning can extend to evaluation and psychological states on the basis of the relationship between bodily sensation and everyday experience. In another study, Jeong [19] examined the semantic extension of taste terms and identified the roles of metaphor and metonymy in the movement from material properties to abstract domains.

A Contrastive Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in Vietnamese and Korean Expressions of Sweetness Focusing on “Ngọt/Ngọt Ngào” and “달다/달콤하다”

Kim Hae-mi [20] analyzed the “달다” group, including “달다, 달작지근하다, 달콤하다, 들콤하다, 들척지근하다,” using Conceptual Blending Theory. An important finding was that degrees of sweetness perceived as pleasant are associated with positive states and attitudes, whereas unpleasant sweetness is associated with negative evaluation. Kim Sun-ja and Song Wonchan [21] compared groups of adjectives denoting sweetness in Korean and Chinese and found that both languages extend from physical evaluation to aesthetic evaluation and psychological impressions; however, Korean shows more salient semantic extensions into the olfactory and auditory domains. Moon Keum-hyun [22] examined fixed expressions containing the five basic taste terms using dictionary data, corpus data, and a user survey; the author showed that sweetness is primarily associated with favorable feelings and situations and is contrasted with bitterness in many expressions.

Lee Sun-hee and Kim Mi-geum [23] compared “달다” (dalda, ‘to be sweet’) and “甜” in terms of morphology, dictionary meaning, and corpus examples. The study identified extensions into smell, hearing, emotion, vision, touch, and language, while also recording both positive and negative values. These studies provide rich descriptions of Korean, but their primary comparative language is Chinese. Few published studies have directly focused on the relationship between the systems of “ngọt/ngọt ngào” and “달다/달콤하다” (dalkomhada, ‘to be sweet, pleasant, or enticing’) in Vietnamese and Korean.

D. Research Gaps and the Direction of the Present Study

The review reveals three research gaps. First, most Korean studies describe “달다” within Korean itself or compare Korean and Chinese, whereas Vietnamese studies primarily compare Vietnamese with English, Chinese, or Japanese. Second, many studies use the name of a single central word while in practice analyzing an entire group of related words; correspondences among related lexical items have not always been clearly explained. Third, the negative evaluative uses of sweetness have generally been documented only fragmentarily and have not been systematically analyzed alongside its positive uses within a Vietnamese–Korean framework. This article addresses these three gaps by taking “ngọt” and “달다” as the prototypical centers while extending the scope to “ngọt ngào,” “달콤하다,” and “단-” where necessary to ensure functional equivalence.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Conceptual Metaphor, Embodiment, and Domain Mapping

Conceptual metaphor is understood as a mechanism for organizing knowledge in which an often abstract target domain is partially structured by a more concrete source domain [1], [5]. The conventional notation used in this article is TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN. In the expression “giọng nói ngọt” ‘sweet voice,’ the target domain is SOUND and the source domain is SWEETNESS; the attribute “pleasant to taste” is mapped onto “pleasant to hear.” A mapping does not transfer the entire structure of the source domain but selects only those properties that are appropriate to the context. Accordingly, “ngọt” in relation to sound does not convey physical information such as sugar content or temperature, but activates only pleasurable value, softness, and attractiveness.

The embodied basis of the mapping lies in physiological and interactive experience. Sweetness is commonly associated with sources of energy and pleasurable sensations; children are exposed to milk and sweet foods from an early age; and in social life, sweet foods are also associated with celebrations, gifts, and hospitality. Nevertheless, on the basis of this shared experience, each language selects different forms of lexicalization. According to Kövecses [4], universality and cultural variation are not mutually exclusive: the same bodily experience may generate similar mappings, whereas lexical history, word-formation patterns, and discourse conventions give rise to differences.

B. The Relationship among Metaphor, Metonymy, and Synesthetic Metaphor

Not every extended meaning of a taste term is purely metaphorical. When sweetness evokes a pleasurable state and that pleasurable state is used to evaluate an event or situation, there may be a metonymic motivational chain: SWEETNESS → PLEASANT SENSATION → POSITIVE EVALUATION. Metaphor becomes explicit when the structure of the gustatory domain is projected onto another domain, as in PLEASANT SOUNDS ARE SWEET. In many cases, metonymy provides the experiential basis for metaphor. Therefore, the article does not treat the boundary between them as absolute but considers the mechanism that is most prominent in each expression.

Synesthetic metaphor refers to a case in which a word associated with one sensory modality describes experience in another sensory modality [6]. “Mùi thơm ngọt,” “giọng ngọt,” “달콤한 향기,” and “달콤한 목소리” represent transfers from taste to smell or hearing. This direction of transfer is motivated by the coordination of the senses in eating experiences and by speakers’ need to use familiar properties to describe sensations that are difficult to quantify. However, conventionalized synesthetic expressions may be treated as polysemous meanings of a word, while their original historical and cognitive mechanisms remain metaphorical.

A Contrastive Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in Vietnamese and Korean Expressions of Sweetness Focusing on “Ngọt/Ngọt Ngào” and “달다/달콤하다”

C. Data Sources and Scope of Analysis

The study uses verifiable secondary materials and does not generate frequency data. The Vietnamese sources include *Từ điển tiếng Việt*, edited by Hoàng Phê [11], together with examples and classifications published in [12]–[17]. The Korean sources include entries from *Từ điển tiếng Hàn cơ sở* and *Từ điển tiếng Hàn chuẩn*, provided by the National Institute of Korean Language [28], as well as expressions recorded in [18]–[23]. Familiar examples without quantitative sources are used as illustrative linguistic data and are not used to draw inferences regarding frequency or statistical prevalence.

Table I. Scope and Sources of the Analytical Materials

Data category	Vietnamese	Korean	Function in the study
Dictionaries	<i>Từ điển tiếng Việt</i> [11]	Dictionaries of the National Institute of Korean Language [28]	Identifying basic meanings, derived meanings, and combinatory possibilities
Specialized studies	[12]–[17]	[18]–[23]	Verifying examples and comparing the findings with previous studies
Fixed expressions	ngọt bùi; mật ngọt; nói ngọt; trái ngọt	단맛을 보다; 단잠; 단꿈; 달콤한 유혹	Analyzing conventionalization, value opposition, and word formation
Focal units	ngọt; ngọt ngào	달다; 달콤하다; 단-	Ensuring function-based comparison rather than mechanical dictionary pairing

D. Identification and Contrastive Procedure

The analytical procedure applies the principles of MIP [7] and MIPVU [8] at a level appropriate for qualitative contrastive research. First, each unit is placed in context, and its contextual meaning is identified. Next, the study identifies the basic meaning, which in this dataset is typically concrete and gustatory and, where applicable, more directly related to bodily experience and historically older. If the contextual meaning differs from the basic meaning but can be understood through a relationship of similarity or domain mapping, the lexical unit is identified as metaphor-related in the given context. The expressions are then grouped according to target domain, the projected properties are identified, and the units through which they are expressed in the two languages are compared.

The contrastive analysis is conducted at three levels. The conceptual level examines whether the two languages share the same mapping model. The lexical level examines whether corresponding expressions are realized through simple words, derived words, compounds, or syntactic constructions. The pragmatic-evaluative level examines whether an expression carries positive or negative polarity or whether its evaluation depends on context. This multilevel approach is particularly necessary because conceptual similarity does not entail formal equivalence.

A limitation of the study is that it does not employ two sufficiently large, balanced, and comparable corpora and therefore does not draw conclusions about normalized frequencies or statistically significant differences. The findings reflect semantic networks and patterns of expression attested in dictionaries and previous studies. This provides a foundation for a larger-scale corpus-based study examining collocational productivity and genre-based distribution.

IV. LEXICAL–SEMANTIC FOUNDATIONS OF THE ITEMS UNDER COMPARISON

A. The Semantic Field of “ngọt/ngọt ngào” in Vietnamese

The prototypical meaning of *ngọt* ‘sweet’ is the characteristic taste of sugar or honey. From this meaning, Vietnamese has developed several directions of semantic extension: describing pleasant sensations in other sensory modalities, as in “giọng ngọt” and “mùi thơm ngọt”; evaluating speech and behavior, as in “nói ngọt” and “lời ngọt”; expressing emotional states, as in “tình yêu ngọt ngào”; denoting favorable outcomes, as in “trái ngọt” and “quả ngọt”; and referring to the sharing of good things in life, as in “ngọt bùi.” *Ngọt ngào* ‘sweet, tender, pleasant, or affectionate’ enhances descriptive force and often performs an emotive function in abstract domains. Variants such as “ngọt xót,” “ngọt lịm,” or “mật ngọt” may imply a high degree of sweetness; in appropriate contexts, such intensity may produce an evaluation of artificiality or danger.

An important characteristic of Vietnamese is that “ngọt” can occur directly before or after a noun and combine flexibly with nouns denoting sound, speech, states, and achievements. Because Vietnamese is an isolating language, semantic extension is

A Contrastive Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in Vietnamese and Korean Expressions of Sweetness Focusing on “Ngọt/Ngọt Ngào” and “달다/달콤하다”

commonly expressed through syntactic combinations and reduplicative forms rather than morphological modification. This enables the single form “ngọt” to cover a relatively broad semantic range, from gustatory meaning to social evaluation.

B. The Semantic Field of “달다/달콤하다” and the Element “단-” in Korean

“달다” (dalda, ‘to be sweet’) is a basic taste adjective denoting a taste similar to that of sugar or honey. In predicate constructions, it occurs naturally with food, beverages, and gustatory sensations. Extended meanings of “달다” appear in certain expressions and fixed constructions, but in many abstract domains Korean favors “달콤하다” (dalkomhada, ‘to be sweet, pleasant, delightful, or enticing’). “달콤하다” retains its association with sweetness, has a strong descriptive function, and commonly occurs in “달콤한 목소리,” “달콤한 사랑,” “달콤한 말,” and “달콤한 유혹.” This group also includes lexical items expressing different degrees and nuances, as analyzed by Kim Hae-mi [20].

In addition, Korean uses “단-” in several lexicalized compounds: “단잠” means sound or pleasant sleep, “단꿈” means a pleasant or sweet dream, and “단맛” means sweet taste. This word-formation mechanism compresses the source domain of SWEETNESS into a nominal structure. Accordingly, a meaning expressed in Vietnamese through a free combination may correspond to a compact lexicalized compound in Korean. This difference is morphological and lexical and does not necessarily indicate a difference at the level of conceptual metaphor.

C. Asymmetrical Equivalence

“Ngọt” and “달다” correspond most directly in sentences describing taste, such as “Món này ngọt” and “이 음식은 달다.” When they extend into abstract domains, however, the relationship becomes asymmetrical. “Giọng nói ngọt” more commonly corresponds to “달콤한 목소리” than to “단 목소리”; “tình yêu ngọt ngào” corresponds to “달콤한 사랑”; and “giấc ngủ ngọt” or “giấc ngủ ngon” may correspond to the compound “단잠.” Therefore, the object of comparison must be the field of expressions denoting sweetness, within which “ngọt” and “달다” occupy prototypical positions but do not exclusively express every mapping.

TABLE II. LEXICAL CORRESPONDENCES AMONG EXPRESSIONS OF SWEETNESS

Function	Vietnamese	Korean	Comment
Description of taste	ngọt	달다	Direct correspondence in the prototypical meaning
Abstract description	ngọt; ngọt ngào	달콤하다	Korean often favors the descriptive form 달콤하다
Conventionalized expressions	giấc ngủ ngọt/ngon; giấc mơ ngọt ngào	단잠; 단꿈	Korean compresses meaning through the element 단-
Degree/negative evaluation	ngọt xót; lời mật ngọt	지나치게 달콤한 말; 달콤한 유혹	Negative polarity is commonly activated by context and co-occurring words

V. SIMILAR CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR MODELS

A. PLEASANT EXPERIENCES AND DESIRABLE THINGS ARE SWEET

The most general mapping is PLEASANT/DESIRABLE THINGS ARE SWEET. The experience of tasting sweet food produces pleasure; this property is projected onto objects and situations that bring satisfaction. In Vietnamese, “ngọt” may be used to evaluate a moment, a memory, or an outcome as pleasant. In Korean, “달콤한 시간,” “달콤한 순간,” and similar combinations also use sweetness to represent time that is worth enjoying. At the conceptual level, both languages select the pleasurable property of the source domain without transferring other physical characteristics of sugar or honey.

This model is foundational and enables more specialized mappings. Positive emotions, love, attractive speech, and success are all instances of desirable experiences or positively valued entities. The semantic network is therefore not a list of discrete meanings but a radial structure extending from the prototype: SWEETNESS → PLEASANT SENSATION → POSITIVE EVALUATION → SPECIFIC TARGET DOMAINS. This explanation is consistent with the findings of Kim Hae-mi [20], Moon [22], and psychological studies of the association between sweetness and positive emotion [26].

A Contrastive Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in Vietnamese and Korean Expressions of Sweetness Focusing on “Ngọt/Ngọt Ngào” and “달다/달콤하다”

B. POSITIVE EMOTIONS, LOVE, AND HAPPINESS ARE SWEET

The expressions “tình yêu ngọt ngào,” “hạnh phúc ngọt ngào,” “kỉ niệm ngọt ngào,” “달콤한 사랑,” “달콤한 행복,” and “달콤한 추억” are all based on the mapping POSITIVE EMOTIONS ARE SWEET. The source domain provides the properties of pleasantness and attractiveness, making the experiencer wish to maintain or repeat the experience. The target domain is not necessarily a single emotion but may also be a relational state, a memory, or a feeling of satisfaction.

In love, sweetness commonly represents a harmonious, romantic, and highly pleasurable stage. Vietnamese uses “ngọt ngào” productively in song lyrics, literature, and mass communication. Korean uses “달콤하다” in a similar manner, particularly in the adnominal construction “달콤한 사랑.” This similarity may be explained by shared embodiment and by the fact that both communities associate sweet foods with gifts, celebrations, and care. However, conclusions concerning frequency or preferred genres require separate corpus research; the present article identifies only the existence and shared structure of the mapping.

An important branch is GOOD MEMORIES ARE SWEET. Memories do not physically possess taste, but when recalled, they produce a pleasant state similar to tasting something sweet. The mapping allows speakers to evaluate an entire past experience through a concise sensory property. This mechanism also shows that taste metaphor can compress multiple components: pleasure, intimacy, value, and the desire to preserve the experience.

C. PLEASANT SOUNDS AND ATTRACTIVE SPEECH ARE SWEET

“Giọng ngọt,” “tiếng hát ngọt,” and “lời nói ngọt” in Vietnamese, together with “달콤한 목소리,” “달콤한 노래,” and “달콤한 말” in Korean, instantiate the mapping HEARING IS TASTE. This is a typical synesthetic metaphor: a pleasurable gustatory sensation is mapped onto an agreeable auditory experience. Võ Thị Mai Hoa [14] identifies the mapping from taste to hearing in multiple languages; Kim Sun-ja and Song Wonchan [21] likewise regard hearing as a prominent domain of extension for Korean expressions of sweetness.

However, “lời ngọt” does not refer only to vocal quality. It may evaluate the content, attitude, and communicative purpose of speech. In “nói ngọt để thuyết phục,” sweetness represents an agreeable manner of expression that reduces the recipient’s resistance. Similarly, “달콤한 말” may refer either to sincere words of affection or to attractive words intended to influence the listener. The mapping therefore develops from PLEASANT SOUNDS ARE SWEET to PERSUASIVE DISCOURSE IS SWEET.

This development illustrates the relationship between metaphor and metonymy. A pleasant vocal quality may metonymically evoke a friendly attitude, which in turn contributes to a positive evaluation of the utterance. When “ngọt” is associated with a strategy of influence, it may shift toward negative polarity, as analyzed in Section V.F. A noteworthy contrastive point is that Vietnamese readily uses “ngọt” as a predicate or a postnominal modifier with nouns such as “giọng” and “lời,” whereas Korean generally uses “달콤하다”.

D. ACHIEVEMENTS, BENEFITS, AND SUCCESS ARE SWEET

Vietnamese contains expressions such as “trái ngọt,” “quả ngọt,” and “hương vị ngọt của thành công.” Here, the process of sustained work and effort is conceptualized as the process of planting and tending a tree, while a favorable result is a ripe fruit with a sweet taste. The metaphors ACHIEVEMENT IS FRUIT and POSITIVE VALUE IS SWEET operate together. Sweetness not only describes the emotion following success but also evaluates the result itself as well-earned and worth savoring.

Korean may use “성공의 단맛,” “승리의 단맛,” or “단맛을 보다” to refer to favorable aspects, benefits, or the feeling of success. These expressions demonstrate the same mechanism: positive experiences in life are “tasted.” When contrasted with “쓴맛을 보다”—to taste bitterness—the system establishes oppositions between success and failure, favorable circumstances and hardship. Vietnamese also has the pair “ngọt bùi/cay đắng,” although its patterns of combination and degree of fixedness do not completely coincide with those of Korean.

The mapping SUCCESS IS SWEET highlights the reward at the end of a process while concealing costs, conflict, or elements of chance. This is the selectivity of metaphor. In educational and management discourse, the expression “trái ngọt” may encourage perseverance because it presents achievement as a sensory reward. In translation, “성공의 단맛” may be rendered as “vị ngọt của thành công,” “niềm vui thành công,” or “trái ngọt thành công,” depending on the broader structure of the text.

E. SLEEP, DREAMS, AND PLEASANT REST ARE SWEET

Korean has the compounds “단잠” and “단꿈.” “단잠” does not mean sleep that literally has a sweet taste but rather sound, deep, or pleasant sleep; “단꿈” refers to a pleasant or sweet dream and may also extend to an attractive hope. Vietnamese may use “giấc ngủ ngọt” and “giấc mơ ngọt ngào,” but it also commonly uses words outside the domain of taste, such as “ngủ ngon” and “giấc mơ đẹp.” At the conceptual level, both languages may understand PLEASANT STATES OF REST ARE SWEET; at the lexical level, Korean displays a higher degree of compression and lexicalization through “단-”.

A Contrastive Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in Vietnamese and Korean Expressions of Sweetness Focusing on “Ngọt/Ngọt Ngào” and “달다/달콤하다”

This provides a clear example of why the analysis should not be restricted to the two forms “ngọt” and “달다.” If only “달다” is searched for, a researcher may overlook “단잠,” even though it provides direct evidence that sweetness is used to conceptualize a state of rest. Conversely, translating “단잠” as “giấc ngủ ngọt” in every context may sound unnatural; “giấc ngủ ngon” is often a more appropriate functional equivalent. Contrastive metaphor analysis must distinguish conceptual equivalence from surface-level translational equivalence.

F. TEMPTATION AND INGRATIATION ARE SWEET; DANGER MAY BE CONCEALED BY SWEETNESS

Sweetness is not used solely to conceptualize positive experiences. In “mật ngọt chết ruồi,” “lời mật ngọt,” “ngọt xót,” “달콤한 유혹,” and “달콤한 제안,” attractiveness becomes a means of concealing an intention or risk. The mappings may be generalized as TEMPTATION IS SWEET and AN ATTRACTIVE APPEARANCE IS SWEET. This does not completely negate the pleasant value of sweetness. On the contrary, the negative mechanism operates precisely because sweetness is attractive. It is this pleasantness that causes the experienter to lower their guard.

In Vietnamese, expressive intensifying elements or idiomatic constructions commonly activate negative evaluation: “ngọt xót” suggests excessiveness and insincerity, while “mật ngọt” may be neutral in an affectionate context but negative when associated with deceptive behavior. In Korean, “달콤하다” generally acquires negative polarity from the noun with which it combines, such as “유혹,” or from a warning context. In other words, Vietnamese has several means of encoding attitudinal meaning within the word form itself, whereas Korean more often establishes evaluative polarity at the level of the combination and discourse.

The negative branch shows that the model “sweetness = good” is insufficient to explain all the data. A mechanism of intensity and pragmatic inference must be added: MODERATE SWEETNESS → PLEASANTNESS; EXCESSIVE SWEETNESS/SWEETNESS USED TO EXERT INFLUENCE → SUSPICION, ARTIFICIALITY, TEMPTATION. Kim Hae-mi [20] identified the relationship between the degree of pleasure and evaluative polarity; Lee and Kim [23] likewise recorded both positive and negative values in the semantic extension of sweetness terms.

TABLE III. MAJOR MAPPINGS AND ILLUSTRATIVE EXPRESSIONS

Conceptual metaphor	Vietnamese	Korean	Mapped property
PLEASANT THINGS ARE SWEET	khoảnh khắc ngọt ngào	달콤한 순간	Pleasure, desire for continuation
EMOTION/LOVE IS SWEET	tình yêu ngọt ngào	달콤한 사랑	Positivity, intimacy, attractiveness
SOUND/SPEECH IS SWEET	giọng ngọt; lời ngọt	달콤한 목소리; 달콤한 말	Pleasant to hear, softness, persuasiveness
ACHIEVEMENT IS SWEET	trái ngọt; vị ngọt thành công	성공의 단맛; 단맛을 보다	Reward, satisfaction
REST/DREAMS ARE SWEET	giấc mơ ngọt ngào	단잠; 단꿈	Pleasantness, tranquility, desirability
TEMPTATION IS SWEET	mật ngọt; ngọt xót	달콤한 유혹; 달콤한 제안	Surface attractiveness, concealed danger

VI. DIFFERENCES IN CONCEPTUALIZATION AND EXPRESSION

A. Differences between the Conceptual Network and the Semantic Range of Individual Words

The greatest similarity between the two languages lies at the conceptual level, whereas the most prominent differences occur in their lexical ranges. “Ngọt” can directly enter into many abstract combinations, while “달다” is more strongly constrained to gustatory meaning and certain fixed expressions. When referring to love, voice, invitations, or temptation, “달콤하다” is generally the more natural choice. Therefore, concluding that Korean “lacks” a corresponding metaphor merely because “달다” is not found would be methodologically incorrect. The broader lexical field and its relevant functional constructions must be examined.

Conversely, grouping “달다” and “달콤하다” together without distinction also results in a loss of information. “달다” maintains a more direct and neutral association with taste, whereas “달콤하다” is generally more descriptive and emotive and is better suited to abstract domains. Vietnamese makes a partial distinction through “ngọt” and “ngọt ngào,” but the boundary between their uses does not correspond completely to that found in Korean. This is a many-to-many relationship of equivalence organized around the prototype of sweetness.

A Contrastive Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in Vietnamese and Korean Expressions of Sweetness Focusing on “Ngọt/Ngọt Ngào” and “달다/달콤하다”

B. Differences in Word-Formation Patterns and Degree of Lexicalization

Vietnamese primarily uses simple words, reduplicative forms, and free combinations: “ngọt,” “ngọt ngào,” “ngọt xốt,” “lời ngọt,” and “trái ngọt.” Korean employs both independent adjectives and word-forming elements: “달다,” “달콤하다,” “단잠,” “단꿈,” and “단맛.” The morphological pattern of Korean allows an evaluation based on sweetness to be compressed into a compound word, whereas Vietnamese generally maintains an analytic structure. This difference may lead Vietnamese learners to produce Korean combinations following a “noun + 달다” pattern or to translate “ngọt” word for word as “달다”.

The degree of lexicalization also affects metaphor identification. In “단잠,” native speakers may no longer clearly perceive the gustatory comparison each time the word is used; the expression has become a familiar lexical unit. Nevertheless, the element “단-” preserves a relatively transparent semantic relationship with “달다” within the synchronic lexical network. MIP/MIPVU enables researchers to identify metaphor-related words synchronically by comparing contextual and basic meanings; the procedure itself does not establish an expression’s historical origin or measure its degree of conventionalization.

C. Differences in the Expression of Evaluative Polarity

Both languages exhibit a shift from positive to negative evaluation, but the means of expression differ. Vietnamese commonly encodes attitude through reduplicative forms or idioms: “ngọt xốt” has almost acquired an inherent implication of doubt regarding sincerity, while “mật ngọt chết ruồi” directly presents the dangerous consequences of attractiveness. Korean generally retains “달콤하다” in the sense of attractiveness, while negative polarity is generated by a noun such as “유혹,” by an adverb indicating degree, or by a warning context. Therefore, in translation, the meaning of the adjective alone should not be compared; the evaluative structure of the entire combination must also be analyzed.

This difference is also related to communicative style. In Vietnamese, “nói ngọt” may be used to describe a communicative act, emphasizing the careful choice of words in order to achieve a purpose. Korean has “달콤한 말을 하다,” but in many contexts it may instead select words denoting flattery, agreeable speech, or a direct description of ingratiating behavior. This article does not attribute this difference to a fixed cultural characteristic; the current data permit only observations about lexical choices and are insufficient to generalize about the broader communicative practices of the two speech communities.

D. The Sweet–Bitter Opposition and the Structure of Life Experience

Sweetness is commonly organized in opposition to bitterness. Vietnamese has “ngọt bùi, cay đắng” and “chia ngọt sẻ bùi,” emphasizing the shared enjoyment of favorable things and the shared endurance of hardship. Korean has “단맛과 쓴맛,” “인생의 단맛과 쓴맛,” and “쓴맛을 보다,” through which life is structured as a sequence of experiences that can be tasted. Both systems exploit the opposition between pleasure and unpleasantness, but their fixed pairs and ranges of use do not completely coincide.

In Vietnamese, “bùi” commonly combines with “ngọt” to create a positive value carrying nuances of affection and sharing, while “cay đắng” forms the opposite pole. In Korean, “달다–쓰다” creates a direct opposition between two tastes. This difference shows that the conceptual network is also shaped by each language’s internal idiomatic system: one language may combine sweetness with richness, while another contrasts sweetness with bitterness. Therefore, the study of an individual word must place it in relation to other tastes and to the symbolic structure of the entire field.

TABLE IV. PROMINENT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO LANGUAGES

Dimension	Vietnamese	Korean	Analytical implication
Lexical distribution	“ngọt” has a broad range of use; “ngọt ngào” increases emotive force	Functional distribution among 달다, 달콤하다, and 단-	“Ngọt” and “달다” should not be paired on a one-to-one basis
Word formation	Simple words, reduplicative forms, and analytic combinations	Adjectives and compounds containing 단-	Compounds must also be included in data collection
Negative polarity	ngọt xốt; mật ngọt; warning idioms	달콤한 유혹; polarity depends on the noun/context	The entire combination and its pragmatic function must be analyzed
Taste opposition	ngọt bùi / cay đắng	단맛 / 쓴맛	Differences in idiomatic and symbolic structures

VII. DISCUSSION

A. Embodied Universality and Linguistic–Cultural Variation

The contrastive findings support the hypothesis that the experience of sweetness provides a shared basis for positive mappings. Both Vietnamese and Korean use sweetness to structure positive emotions, love, attractive sounds, and achievements. This is consistent with the embodied perspective [1], [2] and with cross-linguistic findings [14], [24]–[26]. However, universality is present only at the level of the general model. At the level of concrete expression, each language selects its own lexical items, constructions, and oppositional pairs.

The case of “ngọt–달다” reveals three levels of variation. The first is lexical variation: Korean uses “달콤하다” in many contexts in which Vietnamese uses “ngọt.” The second is morphological variation: “단잠/단꿈” have no direct structural equivalents in Vietnamese. The third is pragmatic variation: “ngọt xót” encodes suspicion within the word itself, whereas “달콤한” generally requires a noun or context to generate negative polarity. Therefore, cross-linguistic metaphor research needs to proceed from conceptual structure to linguistic form rather than infer an entire system from a single translated word.

B. The Radial Semantic Network and the Mechanism of Polarity Reversal

The semantic network of sweetness can be modeled around the central meaning “a taste like sugar or honey.” From this center develops the node of “pleasure,” followed by “positive evaluation,” “emotion,” “sound/speech,” “achievement,” and “rest.” The negative branch is not separate but develops from the very property of attractiveness: because sweet objects are readily accepted, sweetness may become a means of temptation. The polarity-reversal mechanism takes the form SWEETNESS → ATTRACTIVENESS → LOWERED VIGILANCE → DANGER/DECEPTION.

This analysis explains why “달콤한 사랑” is positive whereas “달콤한 유혹” is generally negative, and why “lời ngọt” may refer either to affectionate words or to ingratiating speech. Evaluative polarity is not an invariant property of the word but the result of interaction among the prototype, degree, the accompanying noun, and the communicative context. This observation helps avoid the simplistic classification of sweetness as invariably positive.

C. The Value of Using the Field of Expressions as the Unit of Comparison

One methodological contribution of the study is its proposal to use the “field of expressions denoting sweetness” rather than only two individual words as the unit of comparison. This approach retains the focus on “ngọt” and “달다” while allowing the inclusion of items that perform the same conceptual function. Comparison at the field level makes it possible to identify both similarities concealed by morphological differences and genuine differences in semantic range.

However, expanding the scope does not mean grouping together every related word without distinction. “Ngọt ngào” and “달콤하다” must be described in terms of nuance, syntax, and degree of conventionalization, while “단-” must be treated as a word-forming element rather than an independent word. Future corpus research should code each form separately before comparing them at the level of metaphorical models.

VIII. IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSLATION AND TEACHING

A. Implications for Korean–Vietnamese Translation

In translation, the key principle is to prioritize functional and connotative equivalence. “달다” in its gustatory meaning is generally translated as “ngọt,” but “달콤한 목소리” may be translated as “giọng nói ngọt/ngọt ngào”; “단잠” is usually more naturally rendered as “giấc ngủ ngon”; and “달콤한 유혹” may be translated as “sự cám dỗ ngọt ngào” or “lời mời hấp dẫn đầy cám dỗ,” depending on the context. Conversely, “nói ngọt” should not always be translated by a construction containing “달다”; a word referring to flattery, agreeable speech, or a gentle manner of speaking may be required.

Translators need to identify three factors: the target domain, evaluative polarity, and degree of conventionalization. Literal translation may preserve the image but sound unnatural, whereas paraphrastic translation may sound natural but obscure the metaphorical network. The optimal choice depends on the purpose of the text. In literature and advertising, preserving the image of sweetness may be important; in informational texts, a functionally equivalent expression may be more appropriate.

B. Implications for Teaching Korean Vocabulary to Vietnamese Learners

In teaching, “달다 = ngọt” should not be introduced as the only relationship. After presenting the basic meaning, teachers need to construct a lexical network consisting of 달다 – 달콤하다 – 단맛 – 단잠 – 단꿈 and place it alongside ngọt – ngọt ngào – vị ngọt – giấc ngủ ngon – giấc mơ đẹp. Presenting vocabulary as a semantic network helps learners understand why certain word-for-word translations are unnatural and reduces transfer errors from Vietnamese.

Appropriate exercises include classifying literal and metaphorical meanings, selecting correctly between “달다” and “달콤하다,” translating according to context, and analyzing the positive or negative polarity of “달콤한.” Teachers may also use

A Contrastive Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in Vietnamese and Korean Expressions of Sweetness Focusing on “Ngọt/Ngọt Ngào” and “달다/달콤하다”

the oppositional pairs “단맛–쓴맛” and “ngọt bùi–cay đắng” to discuss idiomatic differences. This approach integrates vocabulary, culture, and translation competence within the same instructional unit.

TABLE V. SUGGESTED TREATMENT OF SELECTED EXPRESSIONS IN TRANSLATION AND TEACHING

Source expression	Suggested equivalent	Point to note
이 음식은 달다	Món này ngọt	Direct equivalence in gustatory meaning
달콤한 목소리	giọng nói ngọt/ngọt ngào	Synesthetic metaphor; should not be translated rigidly as “giọng 달다”
단잠을 자다	ngủ một giấc ngon/say	Functional equivalence should be prioritized
달콤한 유혹	sự cám dỗ ngọt ngào/hấp dẫn	The warning polarity of the context should be retained
nói ngọt	부드럽게 말하다 / 달콤한 말을 하다 / 아첨하다	Select according to meaning: speaking gently, using attractive words, or flattering
trái ngọt của thành công	성공의 결실 / 성공의 단맛	Choose between the FRUIT metaphor and the TASTE metaphor

IX. CONCLUSION

This study contrasts conceptual metaphors expressed through Vietnamese and Korean terms of sweetness, focusing on “ngọt/ngọt ngào” and “달다/달콤하다.” The two languages share an embodied foundation: the pleasant experience of sweetness is used to structure positive emotions, love, attractive sounds and speech, achievements, sleep, dreams, and other desirable experiences. At the same time, sweetness may serve as a source domain for temptation and insincerity when its attractiveness is used to conceal an intention or risk.

The most important difference does not lie in whether a metaphor exists in one language but not in the other; rather, it lies in lexical distribution and the ways in which meaning is packaged. Vietnamese allows “ngọt” to extend directly into multiple domains while also employing “ngọt ngào,” reduplicative forms, and idioms to express different nuances. Korean distributes these functions among “달다,” “달콤하다,” and the element “단-,” producing compounds such as “단잠” and “단꿈.” Therefore, “ngọt” and “달다” correspond directly only at the prototypical center; across the broader semantic network, their relationship is many-to-many and function-dependent.

Methodologically, the article demonstrates that contrastive metaphor analysis needs to integrate three levels: conceptual mapping, lexical and word-formation structures, and pragmatic values. This approach helps avoid two extremes: mechanically equating translated words and claiming differences solely on the basis of surface forms. A limitation of the study is that it has not employed balanced comparable corpora or conducted a systematic frequency analysis. Future research should construct two genre-comparable corpora, apply a metaphor identification procedure with two coders, analyze collocational patterns and their frequencies, and assess intercoder reliability. Such findings would permit a more accurate evaluation of the productivity of each mapping and the degree of conventionalization in Vietnamese and Korean.

REFERENCES

- 1) Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- 2) Johnson, M. (1987). *The body in the mind: The bodily basis of meaning, imagination, and reason*. University of Chicago Press.
- 3) Sweetser, E. (1990). *From etymology to pragmatics: Metaphorical and cultural aspects of semantic structure*. Cambridge University Press.
- 4) Kövecses, Z. (2005). *Metaphor in culture: Universality and variation*. Cambridge University Press.
- 5) Kövecses, Z. (2010). *Metaphor: A practical introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- 6) Williams, J. M. (1976). Synaesthetic adjectives: A possible law of semantic change. *Language*, 52(2), 461–478.
- 7) Pragglejaz Group. (2007). MIP: A method for identifying metaphorically used words in discourse. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 22(1), 1–39.

A Contrastive Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in Vietnamese and Korean Expressions of Sweetness Focusing on “Ngọt/Ngọt Ngào” and “달다/달콤하다”

- 8) Steen, G. J., Dorst, A. G., Herrmann, J. B., Kaal, A. A., Krennmayr, T., & Pasma, T. (2010). *A method for linguistic metaphor identification: From MIP to MIPVU*. John Benjamins.
- 9) Lý Toàn Thắng. (2009). *Ngôn ngữ học tri nhận: Từ lý thuyết đại cương đến thực tiễn tiếng Việt* [Cognitive linguistics: From general theory to Vietnamese practice]. Nhà xuất bản Phương Đông.
- 10) Trần Văn Cơ. (2007). *Ngôn ngữ học tri nhận: Ghi chép và suy nghĩ* [Cognitive linguistics: Notes and reflections]. Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội.
- 11) Hoàng Phê (Ed.). (2011). *Từ điển tiếng Việt* [Vietnamese dictionary]. Trung tâm Từ điển học Vietlex & Nhà xuất bản Đà Nẵng.
- 12) Nguyễn Thị Huyền. (2013). Từ NGỌT tiếng Việt trong sự so sánh với đơn vị tương đương tiếng Anh [Vietnamese NGOT in comparison with its English equivalent]. *Từ điển học và Bách khoa thư*, 4, 66–69.
- 13) Nguyễn Thị Huyền. (2014). Phương thức chuyển nghĩa ẩn dụ của các từ chỉ vị trong tiếng Việt [Metaphorical mechanisms of semantic extension in Vietnamese taste terms]. *Từ điển học và Bách khoa thư*, 3, 73–79.
- 14) Võ Thị Mai Hoa. (2016). Sự giống nhau về ẩn dụ ý niệm “vị giác” trong ba ngôn ngữ Việt–Hán–Anh [Similarities in conceptual metaphors of taste in Vietnamese, Chinese, and English]. *Tạp chí Khoa học Đại học Sư phạm Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh*, 5(83), 45–50.
- 15) Phan Thị Mỹ Loan. (2018). Từ chỉ vị và những khác biệt ở các từ chuyển nghĩa trong tiếng Việt và tiếng Nhật [Taste terms and differences in semantic extension in Vietnamese and Japanese]. *Nghiên cứu Ngôn ngữ Văn hóa, Đại học Osaka*, 44, 127–147.
- 16) Ho, T. Q. T., & Nguyen, T. T. H. (2022). Metaphorical expressions with “sweet” in English and “ngọt” in Vietnamese. *Communication, Society and Media*, 5(1), 27–37.
- 17) Vũ Thị Sâm. (2023). Mapping mechanism of source “taste” onto target “life” in Vietnamese and English. *Vietnam Social Sciences*, 1(213), 77–90.
- 18) Jeong, Su-jin. (2003). 국어 ‘단맛’ 표현의 인지적 의미 해석 [A cognitive interpretation of the meaning of Korean “sweet taste” expressions]. *언어과학연구*, 24, 303–320.
- 19) Jeong, Su-jin. (2005). 미각어의 의미 확장 양상 [The aspects of semantic extension in taste terms]. *한국어 의미학*, 18, 149–174.
- 20) Kim, Hae-mi. (2014). ‘달다’ 계열 어휘의 의미 확장과 개념화 양상 연구 [A study of semantic extension and conceptualization in the 달다 lexical group]. *한국어 의미학*, 44, 29–58.
- 21) Kim, Sun-ja, & Song, Wonchan. (2015). 한·중 단맛 형용사의 의미 확장 대조 연구 [A comparative study on the semantic expansion of adjectives meaning “sweet” in Korean and Chinese]. *한국언어문화*, 56, 87–107.
- 22) Moon, Keum-hyun. (2015). 미각어 관련 고정표현에 나타난 다의화와 인지적 의미의 양상 [A study on polysemization and cognitive meaning in fixed expressions containing taste terms]. *새국어교육*, 102, 391–427.
- 23) Lee, Sun-hee, & Kim, Mi-geum. (2019). 한중 미각어 ‘달다’, ‘甜’ 계열 어휘의 의미 확장 및 의미구성 양상 대조 연구 [A contrastive study of semantic extension and semantic construction in the Korean 달다 and Chinese 甜 lexical groups]. *중국학논총*, 64, 75–98.
- 24) Zawislawska, M. A., & Falkowska, M. H. (2018). “All my sour–sweet days I will lament and love”: A comparative analysis of metaphors with the basic taste adjectives in Polish and English. *Cognitive Studies | Études cognitives*, 18, Article 1675.
- 25) Vainik, E. (2018). Emotion meets taste: Taste-motivated emotion terms in Estonian. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 71, 129–154.
- 26) Zhou, Y., & Tse, C.-S. (2020). The taste of emotion: Metaphoric association between taste words and emotion/emotion-laden words. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, Article 986.
- 27) Zhang, T., Lahlou, H., & Azam, Y. (2023). A corpus-based cognitive linguistic analysis of taste words: The case of English “bitter” and Chinese ku. *KEMANUSIAAN: The Asian Journal of Humanities*, 30(Suppl. 1), 43–72.
- 28) National Institute of Korean Language. (n.d.). *Standard Korean Language Dictionary and Basic Korean Dictionary* [Online dictionaries]. Retrieved July 31, 2026.



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.