

# The Semantic Change of RA and VÀO in Vietnamese in Contrast to Their Equivalents in English

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the semantic change of the two words denoting spatial orientations RA and VÀO in Vietnamese, in contrast to their translation equivalents in English. Originally expressing spatial meanings, these words have gradually been used to represent abstract concepts. This fact results from the semantic change involving orientational metaphors and container metaphors. The bilingual Vietnamese-English data used in this study were mainly extracted from the collection “*Tình yêu sau chiến tranh: Tuyển tập truyện ngắn Việt Nam đương đại*”, including short stories by 45 Vietnamese writers, and the English translation “*Love after war: contemporary fiction from Viet Nam*,” translated by 19 Vietnamese and American translators. In addition, this study also used data extracted from Vietlex Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English. The results show that non-spatial meanings of RA and VÀO are systematically derived from spatial experiences of Vietnamese native speakers, and four clusters of non-spatial meanings have been identified: (1) getting into and out of a situation; (2) appearance and disappearance; (3) knowing; (4) support and exclusion. These extended conceptualizations are clearly reflected in both Vietnamese and English languages. However, the process of encoding non-spatial concepts varies across linguistic communities.

**Keywords:** *ra, vào, conceptualization, orientational metaphor, container metaphor.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Vietnamese words denoting spatial location and orientation have been gradually extended from spatial meanings to a rich set of non-spatial meanings to express abstract concepts. These extensions reflect a process in which abstract domains are conceptualized and coded in terms of physical-spatial domains. It is easy to find spatial expressions referring to abstract realities, such as “*phát lên như điều gặp gió*” (luck rises like a kite in the wind), *kinh tế xuống dốc* (economic downturn), *bàn ra* (dissuade), *vun vào* (speak in favor of), etc. Originally being associated with spatial motions, *lên*, *xuống*, *ra*, and *vào* in these cases express non-spatial concepts rather than their basic meanings.

This study investigates the semantic change of RA and VÀO in Vietnamese in contrast to their equivalent expressions in English. Placing emphasis on the meaning extensions involving orientational metaphors and container metaphors, the study aims to answer the

following questions: 1) How are the spatial meanings of RA and VÀO extended to non-spatial meanings? 2) What are the main non-spatial meaning clusters of these words to be derived via orientational metaphors and container metaphors?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) [3] suggested a new direction for studies on metaphorical systems, especially the extensions of meaning involving spatial expressions. They believe that metaphors partially structure our everyday concepts and are systematically reflected in our language. Accordingly, the spatial orientations, such as up-down, in-out, front-back, etc., arise from our interactions with the physical environment and then have been gradually used to code abstract concepts. These metaphorical conceptualizations are not arbitrary but grounded in human experiences.

## 2.1. Meaning extensions via orientational metaphors

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980) [3], orientational metaphors are grounded in our physical and cultural experiences. Therefore, a wide range of abstract concepts are regularly given spatial orientations, which are often associated with the human body in the process of experiencing and interacting with the surrounding physical environment. Similarly, Tyler and Evans (2003) [9] also claim that spatial concepts are systematically extended to provide a set of non-spatial meanings and that the human body takes a significant role in the process of conceptualization. Our body is often perceived as a coordinating system for spatial location and orientation in three-dimensional space. In the Vietnamese language, this is very obvious, such as *lên đầu* (up to the head) – *xuống chân* (down to the foot); *tiến lên phía trước* (upward) – *lùi lại sau* (backward); *hít vào* (inhale) – *thở ra* (exhale).

Originally expressing physical relations, the spatial words in Vietnamese as well as in English have gradually been used to code abstract concepts such as *emotions, health, good or bad judgment, virtue, and time*. These non-spatial meanings are derived via spatialization metaphors; however, these metaphors based on the same objective realities may vary from culture to culture. In other words, a particular spatial scene may be conceptualized in different ways across language communities. To explain this phenomenon, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) [3] argue that the meaning of any linguistic expression is always meaning to someone, a hypothetical member of a language community. That is why the spatialization metaphors share some similarities and differences across cultures.

Actually, the theory of conceptual metaphor in general and orientational metaphor in particular have been developed by different cognitive linguists (Langacker, 1987 [4], 1991 [5], 2008 [6]; Lee, 2001 [7]; Tyler & Evans, 2003 [9]; Croft, 2004 [1]; Evans, 2019 [2]). Most of them agree that a metaphor is essentially a device to conceptualize one domain in terms of another. In other words, we use our experiences in a source domain to structure experiences and concepts in a target domain. By way of illustration, Lee (2001) [7] gave the following examples:

- (1) *He has a **high** reputation in the department.*
- (2) *He occupies a relatively **low** position in the firm.*

In (1) and (2), the source domain is the vertical dimension in the physical world, and the target domain is the social position. Thus, source domains are usually everyday experiences in the physical world, while the target domains are abstract concepts. Basically, the process of conceptualization starts from physical experiences and is systematically extended to non-physical domains [8].

## 2.2. Meaning extensions via container metaphors

The human body is usually conceived as a container with a boundary separating the interior and exterior area. This spatial configuration is called *containment schema*, which is related to three structural components: interior, boundary, and exterior. This conceptualization is reflected in the meanings associated with the spatial particles in English, such as *in, into, out, out of*, etc. Metaphorically, this containment is projected onto bounded objects, and even with entities that have no visible boundaries, humans impose an invisible boundary on getting an inside and an outside, such as 'step into the dark' (Lee, 2001 [7]).

From the basis of experience moving into and moving out of such spatial configurations, the container metaphors are formed. We conceptualize abstract, non-spatial entities, such as events, activities, states, etc., as containers. As a result, the spatial configuration of containment is commonly associated with the notions of delimitation, opacity, safety, and support, etc. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980 [3]; Tyler and Evans, 2003 [8]).

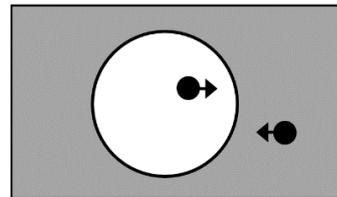


Figure 1. Experiential bases of container metaphors

Figure 1 illustrates how a container metaphor works. In this diagram, the circle represents the category that is conceptualized as a container (state, situation, visual field, perception area, etc.), the circumference of the circle is the boundary, and the square represents the exterior area. Consider the following examples:

- (3) *Anh quyết học giỏi để vượt **ra khỏi** cảnh **bần hàn**.* (He is determined to study well to get out of poverty.)

- (4) *Em gái tôi rơi vào tình trạng cực kỳ nguy cấp.*  
(My sister fell into an extreme emergency.)

(Vietlex Corpus)

The situations described in (3) and (4) provide good illustrations of container metaphors in which the source domains are the experiences of spatial orientation associated with bounded configurations, and the target domains are abstract categories. We conceptualize the poverty in (3) and the emergency in (4) as containers and conceptualize the action of escaping from such situations in terms of experiences in spatial orientations.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study is an attempt to explain the semantic change of the two orientational words in Vietnamese RA and VÀO in contrast to their equivalent expressions in English. The bilingual Vietnamese-English data used in this study were mainly extracted from the collection “*Tình yêu sau chiến tranh: Tuyển tập truyện ngắn Việt Nam đương đại*,” including short stories by 45 Vietnamese writers, and the English translation “*Love after the war: contemporary fiction from Viet Nam*,” translated by 19 Vietnamese and American translators.

Totally, the primary data include 275 contexts of RA, 355 contexts of VÀO, and their translation equivalents in English. In addition, this study also uses supplementary data extracted from Vietlex Corpus (Corpus of Vietnamese language founded by Vietnam Lexicography Center) and Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

All the data were collected and analyzed by the corpus tools of VietCorpus ([www.vietcorpus.com](http://www.vietcorpus.com)). Since the study focuses on finding out the clusters of non-spatial meaning and explaining how orientational metaphors and container metaphors work to form the semantic network for RA and VÀO, the qualitative techniques are mainly applied. A descriptive analysis and comprehensive interpretations of data allow clarifying the meaning extensions of RA and VÀO in contrast to their equivalents in English.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Generally, the data analysis shows that orientational metaphors and container metaphors generate extensive semantic networks around the basic meaning of each spatial word. The semantic network associated with RA and that of VÀO are almost extended in ‘parallel’ patterns, and through that process of extension, contrast sets of meanings

are derived. In our full analysis, four clusters of non-spatial meanings have been identified: (1) getting into and out of a situation; (2) *appearance* and *disappearance*; (3) *knowing*; (4) *support* and *exclusion*.

#### 4.1. The cluster of getting into and out of a situation

As mentioned, the experiences of moving VÀO (into) and RA (out of) a container provide a grounding for spatialization metaphors whose target domains are events, activities, states, and situations. These realities include both spatial and temporal dimensions. In Vietnamese and also in English, it can be seen that such realities are usually conceptualized as containers.

It is widely noted that different types of states may be conceptualized as containers, and as a result, RA and VÀO are used to code the activities entering or exiting from a life circumstance or a mental state. Consider the following examples:

- (5) *Chị đã nuôi được một phó tiến sĩ bằng ba lần số lương chính của y, vất y ra khỏi cảnh thất nghiệp.* (Nguyễn Quang Thân, *Vũ điệu của cái bô*)

*(She was supporting a scholar with a master's degree on a salary three times that of his official salary, and by doing so had plucked him out of his interminable unemployment.)*

- (6) *Theo em thì chính những người như các anh sẽ đưa chúng ta ra khỏi cuộc khủng hoảng.* (Nguyễn Quang Thân, *Vũ điệu của cái bô*)

*(As far as I'm concerned, it is precisely people like you who will lead us out of the crisis.)*

- (7) *Nó đang hồn nhiên đôn bô nó vào một bi kịch.* (Ngô Ngọc Bội, *Những mảnh vụn*)

*(She was forcing him into a tragically awkward position.)*

- (8) *Có những lúc con người rơi vào trạng thái ngẩn ngơ, lơ đãng trong thinh không, chìm đắm trong một màn sương bồng bồng dịu nhẹ.* (Hồ Anh Thái, *Trong sương hồng hiện ra*)

*(Sometimes people fall into a puzzled state, as if they are floating in a void, immersed in a soft curtain of mist.)*

In these examples, there are some similarities in the way of conceptualizing and encoding the experiential bases between Vietnamese and English. Non-spatial realities such as unemployment (5), crisis

(6), tragic situation (7), puzzled state (8) are conceptualized in terms of a spatial configuration of containment. At the same time, the orientations related to that spatial configuration are also encoded by corresponding linguistic expressions: *ra khỏi* and *vào*.

Similar spatialization metaphors also exist in English. The English translation of (5), (6), (7), and (8) all involve metaphorical expressions: *out of his unemployment, out of the crisis, into a tragically awkward position, into a puzzled state*. In reality, such metaphors can be seen widely in our daily language:

- (9) *We all lie to get **out of** trouble on occasion.*  
 (10) *They fall **in** love and get married.*  
 (11) *Israel and the West were drawn **into** the crisis.*

(COCA)

It can be seen that both in Vietnamese and in English, mental states or life circumstances are usually conceptualized in terms of a spatial configuration of containment. Activities of getting into and out of those states or circumstances are coded by linguistic expressions denoting spatial orientations *VÀO* (into) or *RA* (out of) a spatial configuration.

In Vietnamese, the pair of orientations *RA* – *VÀO* may be interfered with by another linguistic component; in certain situations, *VÀO* is replaced by *ĐI* to form another contrasting pair: *RA* – *ĐI*. They are often collocated with adjectives to express some changes in the health, prosperity, or physical appearance of a person. In this new pair, *RA* is often associated with a positive meaning, while *ĐI* is often associated with a negative meaning, such as becoming younger or older, more beautiful or uglier.

- (12) *Không có bộ râu rậm rì, gã **trẻ ra** rất nhiều.*  
 (Phạm Ngọc Tiên, *Tại tượng*)  
*(He'd shaved his thick beard and **looked** much younger.)*
- (13) *Thu là loại xinh gái, lại biết ăn diện nên nó cũng chẳng **già đi** bao nhiêu.* (Ngô Ngọc Bội, *Những mảnh vụn*)  
*(Thu is the pretty type, and she really knows how to dress, so she **didn't look** much older.)*
- (14) *Cơ sở làm hương trầm của người càng phát triển, mẹ tôi càng béo **đẹp ra**.* (Trần Thùy Mai, *Thương nhớ Hoàng Lan*)

*(His incense-making workshop did better with every passing day, and Mother **became** more and more **beautiful**.)*

The adjectives *trẻ* (young), *già* (old), and *đẹp* (beautiful) denote the physical appearance of a person; however, when referring to a change or comparison as *trẻ ra* (12), *già đi* (13), *đẹp ra* (14), they imply two new semantic features: (1) there is a certain change, (2) there is a judgment or comment of the speaker. In these situations, when expressing equivalent meanings, native English speakers usually use a comparative adjective followed by a linking verb. Sometimes, the construction 'more and more' can be used to emphasize a progressively increasing extent, as in (14).

#### **4.2. The cluster of appearance and disappearance**

As mentioned above, the spatial configuration of containment consists of three components: interior, boundary, and exterior. Among these, the boundary functions as a barrier that prevents the observer from seeing the observed object. This provides a grounding for two specialization metaphors, and two extended meanings are derived: *appearance* and *disappearance*. The experiential basis for this cluster may fall into one of the following cases:

First, the point of view is in the exterior area, and the boundary is opaque and closed, i.e. being unable to see through. When the observed object is moving from the exterior into the interior, it *disappears* from the visual field of the observer. In contrast, when it is moving from the interior to the exterior area, it *appears* in the visual field of the observer.

Second, the point of view is in the interior area, and the boundary is also opaque and closed. When the observed object is moving from the exterior into the interior, it *appears* in the observer's visual field. On the contrary, when it is moving out of the boundary, it *disappears* from the observer's visual field.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980) [3], our visual field is usually conceptualized as a container. The entities coming into our visual field are associated with 'appearance' meaning. This is also true in the Vietnamese language. Consider the following examples:

- (15) *Sao chôi **hiện ra**.*  
 (16) *Bình Minh **ló dạng**.*  
 (Vietlex Corpus)

(17) *The stars came out.*

(18) *The Sun came out.*

(COCA)

The spatial scenes in (15) and (16) denote the entities which are moving from the exterior into the visual field and *can be seen* by the observer. Therefore, this spatial orientation is associated with appearance meaning and coded by corresponding linguistic forms: ‘hiện ra’, ‘ló dạng’. In English, the scenes are also conceptualized similarly, as in (17) and (18).

In contrast, the spatial scenes in (19) and (20) involve a viewpoint being outside an opaque boundary, and the entities are moving through the boundary into the interior. In other words, they are escaping from the observer's visual field when moving through an opaque boundary: smoke (19) or a multiplex entity (20). These scenes are usually associated with the notion of disappearance.

(19) *Chỉ một lát, nó đã biến mất sau làn khói và dòng người, dòng xe trên phố.* (Võ Thị Xuân Hà, *Lúa hát*)

*(In a moment, it had disappeared into a cloud of gas fumes and the streams of people on the street.)*

(20) *Biên lẫn vào giữa toán thợ mỏ đi làm sớm.* (Hồ Anh Thái, *Cuộc săn đuổi*)

*(Bien infiltrated into a group of miners on their way to work.)*

In English, these orientations are also lexicalized by spatial particles: ‘disappeared into a cloud of gas fumes’ (19) and ‘infiltrated into a group of miners’ (20). It can be seen a metaphorical similarity between English and Vietnamese in these situations. However, in English, the meaning of disappearance is not only coded by ‘into’ but also by ‘out’. Consider:

(21) *The fire went out, and she lit it again.*

(22) *The light went out, and the house was dark again.*

(COCA)

Interestingly, in (17) and (18), the spatial particle ‘out’ denotes the meaning of *appearance*; however, in (21) and (22), it expresses an opposite meaning: *disappearance*. Again, the key issue here is the position of the observer, i.e., the viewpoint. In all these situations (17), (18), (21), and (22), the particle *out* does not denote physical motions but non-spatial concepts in nature. This is another evidence showing the influence of spatial experiences on human conceptualization.

The above analysis suggests that there are some differences between conceptualizing and lexicalizing the same scenes across language communities. Especially for this cluster of non-spatial meaning, in English, a spatial scene can be observed from different points of view; and for each point of view, it may be conceptualized and coded in different ways. That explains why the constructions of ‘out’, ‘out of’ may be used to denote opposite meanings: appearance and disappearance.

### 4.3. The cluster of knowing

Basically, this cluster of meanings is a consequence of the previous cluster. From the experience of seeing something in one’s visual field such as “*sao chổi hiện ra*” (a comet comes out), “*bình Minh ló dạng*” (the Sun comes out), the conceptualization is extended to structure experiences in a new domain. Consider:

(23) *Cái kim trong bọc lâu ngày cũng lòi ra.* (The needle in the wrapper will come out, i.e. the truth will out.)

(24) *Cháy nhà lòi ra mặt chuột.* (Rats desert a falling house.)

(Vietlex Corpus)

The orientation from the interior to the exterior of a container becomes a grounding to construct abstract concepts (*sự thật được tỏ lộ* / the truth is revealed). In this case, an abstract domain is conceptualized in terms of a concrete reality via a metaphorical pattern. RA in (23) and (24) does not denote a physical movement but an impact on our understanding. In other words, it is no longer the experience of seeing but the experience of knowing. ‘Cái kim’ (the needle) in (23) or ‘chuột’ (the rat) in (24) does not refer to a physical entity but an invisible reality, what we become aware of rather than what we see. In English, there are also similar metaphors.

(25) *The secret is out if it was ever in.*

(26) *The cat's out of the bag, or rather the man's out of the mask.*

(COCA)

The appearance of the *secret* in (25) and the *cat* in (26) refers to realities in the domain of perception rather than the domain of senses. These sentences involve a process in which an unknown reality becomes a known one. Thus, RA in Vietnamese and *out, out of* in English express a completely new meaning: *knowing*. The *secret* in (25) or the *cat* in (26) does not denote an entity in the physical world

but abstract realities. This type of metaphorical conceptualization can be seen both in Vietnamese and English.

In some cases, VÀO is replaced by ĐI, and a new contrast pair is formed: RA - ĐI. The members of this pair are often combined with some verbs or adjectives to denote a change in perception, such as *nhớ ra* (remember), *quên đi* (forget), *hiểu ra* (understand), *ngu đi* (become stupid).

(27) *Thầy nhớ ra em rồi.* (Lê Minh Khuê, *Thầy giáo dạy triết*)

(Now I remember you.)

(28) *Chuyện vui chơi một thời, chúng ta hãy cùng quên đi.* (Hồ Anh Thái, *Lá quốc thư*)

(Our transitory pleasures and fun have to be forgotten.)

To some extent, the above situations show that besides the similarities, there are still differences in conceptualizing the objective reality across language communities. These differences lead to different interpretations and encodings of the same event.

#### 4.4. The cluster of support and exclusion

Human experiences when being inside a spatial configuration of containment generate a series of new concepts. For instance, Tyler and Evans (2003) [9] believe that a baby, when sitting in the mother's lap wrapped in her arms, often has a safe and loved experience. It is such experiences that gradually ground in the way we conceptualize and lexicalize abstract realities. The boundary of the containment can be associated with either spatial configurations (house, room) or abstract realities (family, organization). What happens inside the boundary is often associated with concepts of closeness, acceptance, etc., while what happens outside the boundary is often associated with concepts of distance and not being accepted.

Another experiential basis associated with the construction of this meaning cluster involves the movements whose reference point is the human body. The orientation toward the human body is often associated with the concept of closeness and support, while the orientation away from the human body is associated with the notion of distance, exclusion, or opposition. As a result, non-spatial meanings are derived, such as *bàn vào*, *vun vào*, *nói vào* (support, speak in favor of), *bàn ra*, *nói ra* (dissuade), etc. Consider the following examples:

(29) *Kẻ bàn ra, người bàn vào, kẻ tán thành, người phản đối, bên nào cũng có một phần lẽ phải cả.*

(Some people support, others dissuade, some agree, others oppose, each side has their own argument)

(30) *Ai phạm điều bất chính cũng bị xã hội loại ra.*

(Everyone who commits iniquity is excluded from society.)

(Vietlex Corpus)

In (29) and (30), RA and VÀO are combined with a verb to denote a *consideration*, *support*, *disapproval*, or *exclusion*. Usually, verb-RA constructions are associated with *disapproval* or *exclusion*, while verb-VÀO constructions express the notion of *support* or *acceptance*. In English, there are also quite similar extensions. Tyler and Evans (2003) provide various types of linguistic evidence that the spatial particle 'out' is used to code exclusion meaning, such as: "*The report left out a number of vital facts.*" or "*They voted out the unpopular member.*" In these situations, the boundary functions as a barrier blocking an object from the interior, which is associated with experiences of closeness or acceptance. It is this experiential basis that forms the 'exclusion' meaning. At this point, the lexicalization in English is quite similar to that in Vietnamese.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is a fact that the semantic networks of RA and VÀO are extended to non-spatial meanings via spatialization metaphors, especially orientational metaphors and container metaphors. The clusters of non-spatial meanings are derived systematically and grounded in spatial experiences. Vietnamese native speakers regularly conceptualize abstract realities in terms of physical-spatial relations and lexicalize them in terms of corresponding linguistic forms.

While retaining their spatial meanings, RA and VÀO have developed a set of non-spatial meanings. RA is extended to denote activities getting out of a situation, a change in physical appearance, a change in perception (knowing), appearance, or exclusion. In contrast, VÀO (sometimes replaced by ĐI) is associated with non-spatial concepts, such as falling into a situation, a change in appearance, disappearance, or acceptance.

The meaning extensions of RA and VÀO and their equivalent expressions in English are systematic

and quite similar. However, there are some differences in lexicalization, i.e., in the way how non-spatial concepts are coded in linguistic expressions.

In short, the non-spatial meanings of RA and VÀO are derived from how Vietnamese native speakers actually experience and interact with the physical world. Based on such physical experiences, they expand their understanding to non-spatial domains. This extended conceptualization is obviously reflected in both Vietnamese and English languages. Gradually, these non-spatial meanings are conventionally associated with these spatial words, enriching their semantic networks.

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