

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

A MULTI LEVEL PERSPECTIVE OF CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR “AN UNHAPPY MARRIAGE IS A CONTAINER” IN ENGLISH, VIETNAMESE AND KOREAN

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ABSTRACT: Metaphors are fundamental to communication and cognition, as they offer insights into our understanding of various life aspects. This study explores the conceptual metaphor AN UNHAPPY MARRIAGE IS A CONTAINER across English, Korean, and Vietnamese, using newspaper headlines as data sources. The analysis reveals that this metaphor frames marriage as a bounded space, reflecting a shared cognitive strategy to articulate the abstract concept of marriage through the more concrete domain of containers. By examining how this metaphor is employed across different languages, the study highlights how marriage is perceived as both a space of confinement and a potential site for escape. The findings suggest that the act of ending marriage is metaphorically akin to escaping from a container, symbolizing a transition to new possibilities. This cross-linguistic comparison not only enriches our understanding of marriage but also underscores the universal cognitive patterns underlying the conceptualization of interpersonal relationships.

KEY WORDS: Conceptual metaphor; Unhappy marriage as a Container; Cognitive framing; image schema; mental space.

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1. Introduction

Metaphors play a crucial role in both communication and cognition as they express, reflect, and reinforce various interpretations of different facets of our lives. Therefore, studying metaphors, especially conceptual metaphors, helps reveal the unique characteristics of the human mind and its cognitive processes.

The conceptual metaphor UNHAPPY MARRIAGE IS A CONTAINER represents one of the metaphors employed to conceptualize marriage. Not only linguistic experts but also authors examine this metaphor. Richo (1991), in his book *How to Be an Adult*, characterizes relationships as “a crucible in which the human tasks of holding on and letting go can be *fulfilled*.” This expression highlights how marriage, as a conceptual framework, functions as a domain where individuals manage intricate emotional interactions.

This research specifically investigates the metaphor UNHAPPY MARRIAGE IS A CONTAINER as expressed in English, Korean, and Vietnamese, using online posts about marriage as data sources. By examining how this metaphor is employed across these languages, the study sheds light on perceptions of marriage, particularly unhappy marriage, through the embodied experience of containers. This comparative approach enhances our understanding of the cognitive and cultural aspects of marriage, highlighting the diverse ways individuals conceptualize and experience this fundamental component of human life.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Conceptual metaphor

According to cognitive linguistics, metaphor is a fundamental cognitive mechanism that shapes human thought and activity, influencing both every day and poetic language (Turner, 1987). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that the human conceptual system is inherently metaphorical, emphasizing that metaphor is pervasive in daily life, not only in language but also in thought and action. They contend that our ordinary conceptual system, which guides both thinking and acting, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. Metaphor involves interpreting an abstract concept through a more concrete

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and clearer one. Kövecses (2002: 4, 248) described a conceptual metaphor as follows:

CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (A) = CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (B)

A conceptual metaphor refers to the understanding of one domain through another.

- (1)
 - a. They feel trapped in their marriage.
 - b. Their relationship has become an empty shell.
- (2)
 - a. Their marriage is missing key ingredients like trust and communication.
 - b. Without effort from both sides, the marriage will burn out.

Expressions (1) and (2) employ conceptual metaphors: "MARRIAGE IS CONTAINER" and "MARRIAGE IS COOKING". Abstract notions such as 'marriage' are comprehended through tangible instances like 'container' or 'cooking'. The utilization of conceptual metaphors enhances our comprehension of metaphorical language phrases. By likening marriage to a container in (1), these expressions focus on the emotional and psychological boundaries of the relationship, suggesting either entrapment ("trapped") or a lack of fulfillment ("empty shell"). This metaphor conveys how individuals perceive their marital experiences in terms of space and capacity. Similarly, in (2), marriage as cooking highlights the active, collaborative effort required to sustain a relationship. Phrases like "missing key ingredients" and "burn out" illustrate the balance and care necessary to maintain a successful marriage. These metaphors draw on everyday, relatable experiences to articulate the dynamics and challenges of marital life. Such metaphors not only make abstract concepts more accessible but also reveal cultural and cognitive patterns in how people perceive and communicate about relationships.

2.2. Four levels of conceptual metaphor

According to Kovecses (2017), metaphors exist at varying levels of schematicity, image schemas being the most schematic and scenarios the least schematic. Kovecses employs mental spaces and scenarios interchangeably.

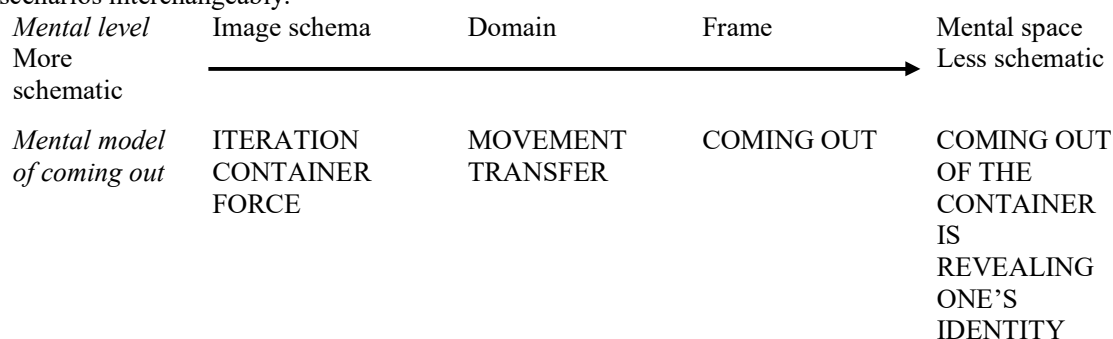


Fig. 1. A cline of schematicity: Coming out from a multilevel perspective
(Based on Kovecses 2017, Tomasz 2022)

- Image schema:

Johnson (1987) is the primary advocate of Image Schema Theory. According to Johnson, image schemas are recurring skeleton patterns of a preconceptual origin that emerge from our quotidian physiological and social experiences. According to Hampe (2005) and Peña (2008), picture schemas are described as 'directly meaningful, highly schematic, continuous, analogue, internally structured and highly adaptable gestalts', 'recurring patterns of experience that are abstract and topological in nature' (Peña 2008). The most frequently referenced schemas include the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL image schema (Cienki 2005), OBJECT (Szwedek 2011), and CONTAINER (Pagán 2016).

ITERATION image schema

The iteration image schema consists of two image schemas: source-path-goal and process. Johnson (2017: 182) asserts that source-path-goal can be utilized to depict "any process or activity." This makes a relationship between source-path-goal and process.

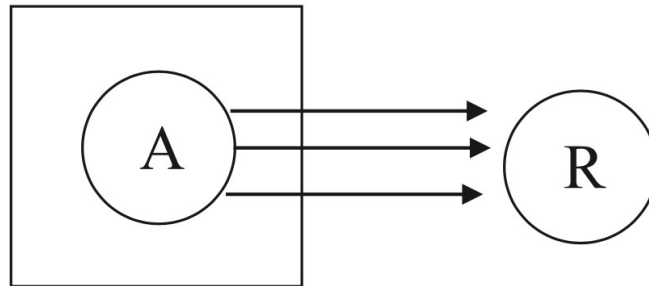


Fig. 2. A schematic representation of *ITERATION* complex image schema (adapted from Tay D (2022))

In Figure 2, the arrows illustrate the process of repetition in relation to the schema. The incorporation of the Agent and Recipient roles, vital for understanding this image schema, improves the visual depiction. Individuals who decide to come out must regularly disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity; hence, each coming out is distinct, yet adheres to a constant conceptual framework that transcends varied experiences.

- *CONTAINER image schema:*

According to Otieno (2019), the CONTAINER image schema is crucial for comprehending the human being as a reservoir of power, emotions, feelings, and social position. Santibanez (2002) observes that the CONTAINER image schema consistently activates secondary image schemas, such as FULL-EMPTY, EXCESS, and IN-OUT, which are essential for articulating many abstract phenomena related to containers. Furthermore, the CONTAINER image schema is appropriate for this analysis because, as Vernillo (2019) elucidates, it facilitates spatial reasoning in three dimensions concerning abstract things.

- *Domain:*

In the context of conceptual metaphors, a domain refers to a structured body of knowledge that encompasses the understanding we have of a particular concept or experience. Littemore (2015) describes domains as coherent and relatively stable bodies of information, which guide how we think about and categorize the world around us. These domains are not isolated but are interconnected with other domains, allowing us to form complex networks of understanding. Domains serve as the foundation upon which metaphors are constructed, enabling us to map knowledge from one area (the source domain) to another (the target domain).

Kovecses's (2006) hierarchy places domains above schematic structures because they are more comprehensive and organized. Schemas, like container or path schemas, provide a basic cognitive structure for understanding the world, but domains incorporate these schemas and expand upon them by adding more specific, culturally informed, and context-dependent knowledge. For instance, the domain of LOVE might include a variety of schemas such as HEALTH, JOURNEY, or CONTAINER, which can be employed in metaphorical mappings. These domains thus act as cognitive resources that allow individuals to make sense of abstract or complex concepts by drawing on familiar and concrete experiences.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) provide a broader definition of domains as the conceptual components used in metaphorical mappings. They argue that these domains serve as cognitive tools for structuring our thinking. For example, in the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR, the WAR domain includes knowledge about battles, strategies, victories, and defeats, which are mapped onto the

concept of an ARGUMENT, making the abstract concept of argumentation more tangible and understandable. The TIME domain, for instance, can be mapped onto concepts like MONEY in metaphors like TIME IS MONEY, where time is viewed as a valuable resource that can be "spent," "saved," or "wasted."

Domains are flexible and can vary across cultures and contexts. For example, the LOVE domain in Western cultures may be understood differently than in other cultures due to varying social practices, values, and beliefs surrounding love and relationships. This highlights the role of cultural experience in shaping the metaphors that arise from specific domains. Additionally, the organization and structuring of domains often reflect a combination of universal cognitive processes and specific cultural contexts, making them a dynamic and complex element in understanding conceptual metaphors.

In sum, domains in conceptual metaphor theory serve as crucial cognitive structures that not only provide the content and framework for metaphorical mappings but also shape how we perceive and understand complex abstract concepts. They allow us to make sense of the intangible by relating it to more familiar, concrete domains, providing insight into both individual cognition and broader cultural thought patterns. Through metaphorical mappings, domains facilitate deeper understanding and communication of otherwise difficult-to-explain ideas, making them an essential tool in human cognition and communication.

- *Frame*:

A 'frame' is commonly understood as background information that (i) pertains to a specific aspect of the environment, (ii) shapes expectations and inferences in both speech and behavior, and (iii) is linked to particular lexical and grammatical choices in language. Entman (1993) provides an inclusive definition of "framing" to address its varied uses across different fields in communication. He argues that salience and selection are key elements of framing. In the context of communication, framing involves emphasizing particular features of a perceived reality to support a specific definition of a problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or recommended actions related to the subject being discussed. Entman (1993) identifies at least four points in the communication process where frames can be identified: the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture (p. 52). Our approach to framing begins with the 'text', specifically focusing on the patterns and choices in metaphor usage that emerge naturally in verbal communication, although all four aspects are relevant to our study.

- *Mental space*:

Fauconnier (1994) defined mental space as a transient and incomplete representational framework that speakers create when contemplating or discussing an observed, imagined, past, present, or future circumstance. Instead of being the same as domains, mental spaces—or simply "spaces"—are dependent upon them. They represent specific scenarios that are organized by designated domains.

According to Kovecses (2017), mental spaces use frames as structural signals, but contextual information expands on the broad structures observed in frames. Mental regions can also be grouped into one or more frames. Stated differently, they may represent the realizations of a single frame or they could be based on a synthesis of roles and relationships from several frames. Because mental spaces usually deal with particular instances of roles and interactions rather than generic ones, they are therefore much more specialized than frames. Like frames and domains, they arrange experience coherently while operating at a very specific and intellectually rich level. Additionally, online processing uses frames to enhance local comprehension by structuring mental spaces. While frames and domains are conventional knowledge structures in long-term memory, mental spaces in working memory are virtual representations of what we understand from our experiences.

3. Research method

The research sample was collected and analyzed to answer the following question: (1) Do Vietnamese, English and Korean express the metaphor AN UNHAPPY MARRIAGE IS A

CONTAINER in the same way? (2) What do these mappings reveal about the thought processes and cognitive perspectives of Vietnamese, Korean and English-speaking people regarding unhappy marriage.

The sample used in this article includes 10 articles/internet topics regarding to unhappy marriage. The data includes article titles, phrases, and excerpts from self-help guides, personal reflections, and advice columns in English, Vietnamese, and Korean. Sources were gathered from online publications and blogs where individuals express their feelings and seek advice about unhappy marriages. The linguistic forms in the Vietnamese and Korean sample are translated literally in to English to provide a genuine view of the mappings from the aspects of the source domain CONTAINER to the target domain UNHAPPY MARRIAGE.

Table 2. Data sample (Article titles)

Language	Article/Internet Topics Title
English	I'm stuck in an unhappy marriage
	8 Steps on How to Get out of an Unhappy Marriage Easily
	What To Do When You Can't Leave An Unhappy Marriage
	Why I Stayed in a Marriage That Was Making Me Miserable
Vietnamese	Bước ra khỏi cuộc hôn nhân 'ai cũng thèm muốn' Translation: <i>Get out of the marriage that everyone dreams for</i>
	"Đào tẩu" khỏi cuộc hôn nhân địa ngục Translation: <i>"Escape" from a hellish marriage</i>
	Làm sao thoát khỏi cuộc hôn nhân đắng? Translation: <i>How to escape a bitter marriage?</i>
Korean	나는 불행한 결혼 생활에 갇혀 있는 것 같아요 Translation: I feel like I'm trapped in an unhappy marriage.
	마야, 결혼에 대한 솔직한 심경 "결혼하면 내가 그 속에 갇혀버릴 듯" Translation: "I feel like if I get married, I'll end up being trapped in it."
	나는 결혼으로 도망쳤다. 도망쳐봐야 제자리 걸음인것을 Translation: "I ran away into marriage, but running away just kept me in the same place."

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. CONTAINER Image Schema

The image schema CONTAINER, which supports the speaker's metaphorical statements like those in instances 3-11 below, may be found in the data sample (the pertinent expressions are underlined). According to this paradigm, marriage is a confined area from which people may feel confined, trapped, or forced to leave.

- (3) I'm stuck in an unhappy marriage
- (4) 8 Steps on How to Get out of an Unhappy Marriage Easily
- (5) What To Do When You Can't Leave An Unhappy Marriage
- (6) Bước ra khỏi cuộc hôn nhân 'ai cũng thèm muốn'
- (7) "Đào tẩu" khỏi cuộc hôn nhân địa ngục
- (8) Làm sao thoát khỏi cuộc hôn nhân đắng?
- (9) 나는 결혼으로 도망쳤다. 도망쳐봐야 제자리 걸음인것을

(10) “마야, 결혼에 대한 솔직한 심경 “결혼하면 내가 그 속에 갇혀버릴 듯”

(11) 나는 불행한 결혼 생활에 갇혀 있는 것 같아요

These examples demonstrate that marriage is metaphorically construed as a CONTAINER, reflecting how speakers cognitively perceive it as a space of confinement or entrapment. The metaphorical expressions underscore the significance of the CONTAINER schema in shaping human experience and articulation of abstract concepts such as marriage. The conceptual metaphor “unhappy marriage is a container” suggests that people experience an unhappy marriage as being trapped or confined within an inescapable space. In cognitive linguistics, container metaphors represent abstract experiences using the image of a physical boundary or space that limits movement or freedom. The idea is that emotions, relationships, or situations (like marriage) are conceptualized as spaces that people either feel “inside” or “outside” of.

4.2. UNHAPPY MARRIAGE IS A CONTAINER Frames

In the conceptual metaphor “unhappy marriage is a container,” the idea of marriage is framed as a bounded space or enclosure that restricts individuals. Different aspects of this metaphor can be analyzed using frame semantics (as in the cognitive linguistics approach), where certain scenarios or emotions related to being in an unhappy marriage are understood through the container metaphor. The speakers conceptualize marriage as a container, leading to the perception that entering into marriage is akin to stepping inside a bounded space. In English, this notion is evident in expressions such as “in a relationship.” Similarly, in Vietnamese, expressions like “bước vào hôn nhân” (enter into marriage) and “mắc kẹt trong hôn nhân khi cưới chạy bầu” (stuck in a marriage due to a pre-marital pregnancy) convey the idea of being enclosed within the institution of marriage. In Korean, the expression “갇혀 있다” (stuck in) also reflects this containment metaphor. Consequently, when individuals seek to end a marriage, they often conceptualize it as an attempt to escape or exit from this container.

In applying frame semantics, these scenarios are understood as different sub-frames of the larger “unhappy marriage is a container” metaphor. Each frame evokes different conceptualizations of confinement, escape, or containment of emotions, shaping how people communicate and understand marital dissatisfaction. For example, people feel trapped or confined within the boundaries of the marriage, unable to escape the negative emotions or circumstances in *Confinement and Restriction Frame*. Example: “I’m stuck in an unhappy marriage” or “갇혀 있는 것 같아요” (I feel trapped) in Korean. This reflects a strong sense of physical and emotional imprisonment, with the marriage acting as a closed-off space that limits freedom. In *Escape Frame*, the desire to escape or break free from the unhappy marriage is expressed as needing to exit the container. Example: “Get out of an unhappy marriage” or “Đào tẩu khỏi cuộc hôn nhân địa ngục” (Escape from the hellish marriage) in Vietnamese. The action of leaving or fleeing is framed as a movement from inside to outside the container. In *Containment of Negative Emotions Frame*, emotions such as sadness, frustration, or misery are contained within the marriage. The metaphor in the example “Why I stayed in a marriage that was making me miserable” frames unhappy marriage as a container holding negative experiences, which the individual is forced to endure while inside.

These expressions underscore the pervasive influence of the CONTAINER schema across different languages, highlighting how the cognitive framing of marriage as a container shapes the way individuals think about and articulate their experiences within and outside of this institution.

4.3. Domain

The domain for the conceptual metaphor “UNHAPPY MARRIAGE IS A CONTAINER” lies in the intersection of several cognitive, emotional, and social spaces. The primary domain would be RELATIONSHIPS and EMOTIONS, particularly focusing on the emotional experience of being in an unhappy marriage. Examples (3)-(11) demonstrate a metaphorical mapping where the target

domain is AN UNHAPPY MARRIAGE, and the source domain is CONTAINER. AN UNHAPPY MARRIAGE, as an abstract concept, lacks a tangible form, making it challenging to grasp directly. To communicate and understand this abstract concept, languages like Vietnamese, English, and Korean utilize the more concrete and familiar domain of CONTAINER. By mapping the intangible nature of marriage onto the physical experience of being inside a container, these languages enable speakers to conceptualize marriage in terms of spatial boundaries, where one can enter, remain trapped, or seek to escape.

This metaphorical structure reflects a broader cognitive pattern in which relationships, in general, are understood through the lens of containment. The use of the CONTAINER schema across these diverse languages suggests a universal cognitive strategy to make sense of complex social constructs through more concrete, spatial experiences. Thus, we can generalize this pattern to conclude that RELATIONSHIPS ARE CONTAINERS, highlighting a common metaphorical approach to conceptualizing interpersonal connections.

4.4. Mental spaces

When discussing marriage, speakers often blend the domains of JOURNEY and CONTAINER, creating a complex mental space where individuals in a marriage are conceptualized simultaneously as travelers on a journey and as people confined within a container or enclosed space. This blending of metaphors allows for a richer, more nuanced understanding of the marriage experience, where the dynamics of progression and movement (as in a journey) coexist with the sense of restriction or entrapment (as in a container).

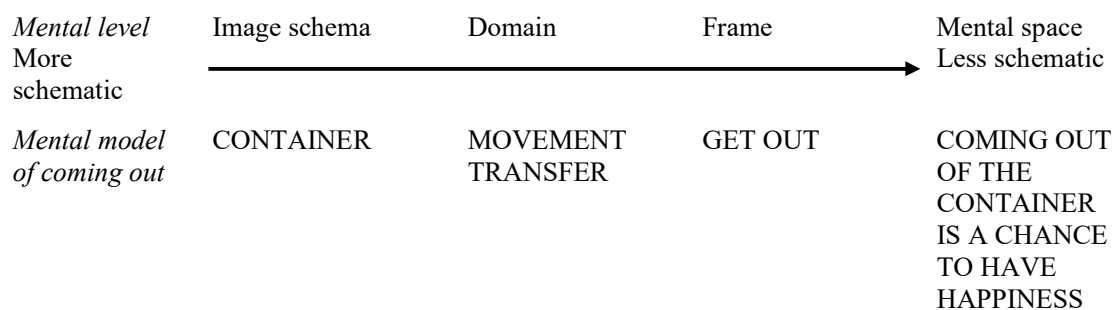


Fig. 3. A cline of schematicity: GET OUT from a multilevel perspective

This cognitive merging results in a multi-layered metaphorical structure, where the experience of marriage is understood through the interplay of different conceptual domains. As illustrated in Figure 3, we can identify and merge four levels of metaphors, each contributing to the overall conceptualization of marriage. These levels might include: (1) MARRIAGE IS A JOURNEY, where individuals navigate the course of their relationship; (2) UNHAPPY MARRIAGE IS A CONTAINER, where the relationship is seen as a bounded space; (3) THE SPOUSES ARE TRAVELERS, who are on a journey; and (4) THE SPOUSES ARE CONFINED, experiencing marriage as a restrictive space.

By integrating these metaphorical levels, speakers are able to convey the complexity of marriage, capturing both its dynamic and confining aspects, and thus providing a more comprehensive cognitive framework for understanding the institution of marriage.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, a common cognitive strategy based on common human experiences of containment is revealed by the metaphorical mapping of UNHAPPY MARRIAGE IS A CONTAINER across English, Korean, and Vietnamese. To express the intricacies of marriage relationships, speakers of these languages rely on their embodied perception of physical spaces, such as containers. They are

able to make the abstract idea of marriage more concrete and approachable by framing it as a confined, contained area through the use of this conceptual metaphor.

From a multi-level perspective, we can further conclude that the act of leaving a marriage is metaphorically akin to escaping from a container. This imagery not only signifies liberation from confinement but also suggests the potential for movement toward new opportunities and experiences, much like stepping out of a closed space into the broader world. This rich metaphorical framework highlights how deeply intertwined our physical and social experiences are in shaping our understanding of complex human relationships.

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Góc nhìn đa tầng về ẩn dụ ý niệm “HÔN NHÂN KHÔNG HẠNH PHÚC NHƯ MỘT VẬT CHỨA” trong tiếng Anh, tiếng Việt và tiếng Hàn

Tóm tắt: Bài viết này nghiên cứu ẩn dụ "HÔN NHÂN KHÔNG HẠNH PHÚC NHƯ MỘT VẬT CHỨA" trong tiếng Anh, tiếng Hàn và tiếng Việt thông qua các bài đăng về hôn nhân trên internet. Ẩn dụ này mô tả hôn nhân như một không gian bị giới hạn, nơi các cá nhân có thể cảm thấy bị giam cầm hoặc cần phải thoát ra. Bài viết sử dụng phương pháp phân tích ẩn dụ để so sánh cách ba ngôn ngữ này hình dung hôn nhân qua hình ảnh của những không gian chứa đựng. Kết quả cho thấy, việc thoát khỏi hôn nhân thường được hình dung như việc rời khỏi một vật chứa, tượng trưng cho cơ hội tìm kiếm những trải nghiệm mới và tự do hơn.

Từ khóa: Ẩn dụ ý niệm; Hôn nhân; vật chứa; lược đồ hình ảnh; không gian tâm lý; đối chiếu ngôn ngữ.

APPENDIX

Language	Article/Internet Topics Title	Source
English	I'm stuck in an unhappy marriage	https://www.relate.org.uk/get-help/im-stuck-unhappy-marriage
	8 Steps on How to Get out of an Unhappy Marriage Easily	https://romantified.com/unhappy-marriage-but-cant-leave/
	What To Do When You Can't Leave An Unhappy Marriage	https://life-care-wellness.com/when-you-cant-leave-an-unhappy-marriage/
	Why I Stayed in a Marriage That Was Making Me Miserable	https://time.com/6202816/marriage-status-bump-privilege/
Vietnamese	Bước ra khỏi cuộc hôn nhân 'ai cũng thèm muốn' Translation: <i>Get out of the marriage that everyone dreams for</i>	https://vnexpress.net/buoc-ra-khoi-cuoc-hon-nhan-ai-cung-them-muon-4427848.html
	"Đào tẩu" khỏi cuộc hôn nhân địa ngục Translation: <i>"Escape" from a hellish marriage</i>	https://dantri.com.vn/an-sinh/dao-tau-khoi-cuoc-hon-nhan-dia-nguc-20221225092440166.htm
	Làm sao thoát khỏi cuộc hôn nhân đắng? Translation: <i>How to escape a bitter marriage?</i>	https://www.phunuonline.com.vn/lam-sao-thoat-khoi-cuoc-hon-nhan-dang-a1480736.html
Korean	나는 불행한 결혼 생활에 갇혀 있는 것 같아요 Translation: I feel like I'm trapped in an unhappy marriage.	https://www.bonobology.com/ko/결혼-생활에-갇힌-것-같은-느낌/
	마야, 결혼에 대한 솔직한 심경 "결혼하면 내가 그 속에 갇혀버릴 듯" Translation: "I feel like if I get married, I'll end up being trapped in it."	http://www.dailygrid.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=65453
	나는 결혼으로 도망쳤다. 도망쳐봐야 제자리 걸음인것을 Translation: "I ran away into marriage, but running away just kept me in the same place."	https://brunch.co.kr/@minhye-writer/14