

**FORUM**

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**VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE – A HERITAGE**

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**1. Introduction**

According to Herodotus, an ancient Greek historian, languages, along with races, creeds, and customs are the key factors that make up the identity of an ethnic group. Nowadays, these attributes are still used to distinguish between ethnicities. Language is an indispensable part of every culture. Until now, research into Vietnamese has affirmed that the Vietnamese language is rich and beautiful. However, it seems that all of the studies purely describe language without offering an insight into its beauty, its richness, and the contribution of the Vietnamese language to Vietnamese culture.

In fact, there are many fallacies about Vietnamese. Some believe that, as a language with multiple origins, Vietnamese does not have its own identity. Moreover, some still confuse spoken and written language, which exists only as a complement to the spoken form. As a result, they hastily conclude that Vietnamese words have

either Chinese or western origins due to the use of Chu Nom and the Latin script in writing. To understand universal human values, we need to avoid extreme nationalism. The importance of cultural exchange is undebatable. Indeed, there is no culture that dares to assert that it is entirely pure and immaculate. Every contact enriches the culture. In essence, cultures are receptive to change and transformation. Vietnamese culture sets a prime example. The Vietnamese language is one of the elements of Vietnamese culture that clearly show this characteristic.

Our heritage is the values we have received from the past, are living within the present and will pass on to the next generations. Is the Vietnamese language our national heritage? The article is aimed to prove the true value of the Vietnamese language to Vietnamese culture.

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## **2. Vietnamese is a constantly evolving language.**

Is the Vietnamese language today the same as the language used by Nguyen Trai 600 years ago, by King Ly Thai To in his declaration to move the capital in the 10th century, or by Hai Ba Trung when exhorting the people to revolt in 40 A.D. The answer is both "yes" and "no". On the one hand, they are not the same since several centuries are long enough for the phonetic, lexical, and grammatical aspects of a language to change, especially a language with a long history and continuous contact with other languages like Vietnamese. On the other hand, the core characteristics of the Vietnamese language still remain through the ages.

In terms of phonetics, Vietnamese linguists have adopted the comparative method to recover the linguistic history and reached the conclusion that the sounds of the modern Vietnamese language share the same origin. In linguistics, languages are grouped into branches and families based on their origin or, in other words, the original language from which they have been developed. The classification of Vietnamese into the Viet – Muong subgrouping of the Vietic sub branch of the Austroasiatic language family says a lot about the origin of the Vietnamese language. Nguyễn Tài Căn (1995) traced the origin of all consonants and vowels in Vietnamese by looking at the languages

in the same branch and family, and languages that have contact with Vietnamese such as the Tay - Thai language group (also known as Thai - Kadai or Kra - Dai) and Chinese (from ancient to medieval times). In terms of initial consonants, he pointed out the origins of the nasal sounds M, N, NH, NG; the stops B, D, CH, K; the fricatives V, D, GI, G; and the origins of the sound groups "T, TH, X", "PH, KH, H" and "TR, S, R, L". In addition, he divided the Vietnamese vowels into three groups according to the place of articulation: the front vowels E, Ê, I, ÎÊ, the central vowels A, Ă, U', O', A, U'O', and the back vowels O, Ô, U, UÔ. When tracing the origin of the final sounds, he considered the final consonants in pairs -M/-P, -N/-T, and -NG/-C, along with the two semi-vowels -U, -I. The prevocalic -W- is also believed to have come into existence over 1000 years ago as Vietnamese came into contact with the Chinese language. Finally, the formation of Vietnamese tones can be explained through the generation of the high and low registers, along with the formation of the three contours: level, non-level and not broken, and non-level and broken.

It is easy to trace the origin of the sounds when limiting the scope of the research to the early stage of the Vietnamese language or, in other words, the time when Vietnamese first took on the appearance of an independent language. The consonant M originates from the sound \*b, and the

consonant N stems from \*d. The formation of the consonant B from \*p and the consonant D from \*t is a result of the sonorization process. The origin of the sound group T, TH, X can be traced back to the sounds \*s, \*ś and \*č<sup>h</sup>. The sounds V, D, GI, G, R were formed through the process of spirantization. Meanwhile, the simplification process stripped away all consonant clusters by turning them into single consonants. For example, kl and tl were converted into TR and CH, pl and bl into TR and GI, and ml into L and NH. Although not as varied as that of the consonants, the transition of the vowels is still proof of the continuous development of Vietnamese phonetics. It consists of the formation of the diphthong UO from A, UÔ from O, and IÊ from E, the process of turning a close front vowel into a diphthong which is a combination of a central vowel and the sound -j (e.g., I turns into ÂY and AY, and Ê turns into AY and AI), along with the process of forming a wide diphthong by combining a rounded back vowel and the sound -w (e.g., U turns into AU and ÂU, and Ô turns into AO).

The sounds in Vietnamese have had a long and continuous history of development. The modern Vietnamese language is no longer the same as the original version. The ending consonants -P, -T, -C, -M, -N, -NG/-NH also appear in the other languages in the Mon - Khmer branch, suggesting that these sounds have existed since

the beginning of Vietnamese. However, Vietnamese is also different from those languages because it has its own development process. For example, the R consonant in today's Vietnamese language used to be the \*-s- sound in the Proto Viet - Chut, and can be traced back to the \*-h- sound in the Proto Viet - Katu, which originated from \*-h- and \*-s- in the Proto Mon - Khmer branch.

2.2. The vocabulary of Vietnamese is made up of many word classes of different origins. For that reason, many linguists assert that Vietnamese is a multi-source language. However, given the thousands of years of Vietnamese history, we cannot draw a hasty conclusion. Through long-term contact with other languages in the region, the vocabulary of Vietnamese has been enriched with new concepts and identifiers.

Looking at the Vietnamese vocabulary today, it is not difficult for us to recognize the old words that are still in use. The word class that has its origin in the Viet - Muong subgrouping of the Mon - Khmer branch of the Austroasiatic language family is the core word class with the basic vocabulary such as: *mắt* [eyes], *mũi* [nose], *mỏ* [beak], *sừng* [horn], *tóc* [hair], *xương* [bone], *răng* [tooth], *đi* [go], *chạy* [run], *ho* [cough], *ngáy* [snore], *nóng* [hot], *cứng* [hard], *dài* [long], etc. Besides, there are words of Tay - Thai origin which appeared later but also encompasses basic concepts of social

organization and farming such as: *bố* [father], *nàng* [girl], *lưng* [back], *ức* [breast], *vai* [shoulder], *nếp* [sticky rice], *tẻ* [rice], *nụ* [flower buds], *ngọn* [top of the tree], *chùm* [bunch], *mương* [ditch], *đập* [dam], *đồng* [field], *đường* [road], *bãi (đất)* [yard (soil)], *vãi (mạ)* [scatter (rice seeds)], etc. to supplement the Austroasiatic vocabulary source. Vietnam's long and extensive exposure to the Han culture has led to the formation of a huge number of Sino-Vietnamese words, making a significant contribution to the Vietnamese vocabulary, especially in terms of culture. Although words of European origin appeared in small numbers in Vietnam in the seventeenth century and have only started to exercise a great influence on the Vietnamese vocabulary in the past century, they have proven their value in the context of increasing globalization.

The Vietnamese vocabulary today is the result of a constant process of receiving new concepts from other cultures. Research into the origins of different word classes clearly shows the sustained expansion of the vocabulary throughout history.

2.3. Grammar has great stability, for it is a set of rules for language use that a language community collectively establishes and voluntarily goes by. Vocabulary is constantly updated with the new concepts that emerge from everyday life, while phonetics

progresses slowly under the phonological rules as Vietnamese interacts with other languages. The grammar seems to change only if there is really special language contact. Cao Xuan Hao (2001) emphasized the constancy of the “soul of the Vietnamese language”, which is actually the spirit of Vietnamese people expressed in syntactic structures.

Research into the Vietnamese corpus reveals that colloquialism is inherent in the formation of sentences. The influence of everyday speech can be the reason why the syntactic structures in Vietnamese do not show the same relations between grammatical elements as in European languages. In Vietnamese, a subject is not always the agent of an action or a state. Instead, a Vietnamese sentence begins with a topic, which then serves as a basis to introduce relevant contents. Statements like: “Tôi tên là Quang.” [I – name – is – Quang]; “Làng này, lúa tốt lắm.” [This village, the rice – is – very good]; “Quyển sách trên bàn, tôi đọc hôm qua rồi.” [The book on the table, I – read – yesterday] are completely natural in Vietnamese and show the subjects “I”, “This village”, and “The book on the table” as the basis for introducing relevant contents. In the Nom translation of “Truyện kỳ mạn lục giải âm” by Nguyen The Nghi (in about the 16th century), it is not difficult to find similar structures such as: “*Chung huyện Vĩnh Lại phủ Hạ Hồng xưa nhiều thủy tộc.*” [Vinh Lai district,



Ha Hong county – in the past – many – aquatic animals] (Long đình đối tụng lục), “*Sự đã đường ấy, cần rốn nào kịp.*” [The situation – is – like – this – no time – to do anything] (Khoái Châu nghĩa phụ truyện), “*Lộ Thanh Hóa thửa đất đều những núi như vậy.*” [Thanh Hoa, the land – has – mountains – like that] (Na Sơn tiều đối lục), etc. This syntactic structure can also be found in traditional sayings such as proverbs: *Có kiêng có lành* [There is – abstaining, there is – auspiciousness = If you're careful, you won't get in trouble], *Tay làm hàm nhai* [Hands – do, mouth – eat = If you work hard, you will get results], *Trong ấm ngoài êm* [The inside – warm, the outside – soft = If it's all right on the inside, then it's fine on the outside], etc. Without this syntactic structure, it is difficult to understand the proverbs like: *Nát dẻo, sống bùi* [If the rice is mushy, it should be said to be sticky, and if the rice is raw, it should be said to be sweet], *Mềm nắm, rắn buông* [If it feels soft, we must hold it firmly, if it feels hard, we should let go.], *Nhiều no, ít đủ* [If you have a lot, you can enjoy it, if you have a little, you can still use it], and so on.

As a result of the contact with other languages, especially with French by the end of the 19th century, Vietnamese grammar has undergone major changes towards greater complexity. For example, more constituents have been added to the phrasal structures. Complex sentences have been formed by adding

subordinate clauses to simple sentences. Sentences with multiple components that have the same syntactic function have also appeared, etc. However, it can be seen that the core syntactic structure of the Vietnamese language is still fully preserved despite the language contact.

Vietnamese has been shaped through its interactions with other languages. The Proto Viet - Muong branch was split into the Viet - Muong and Poong – Chut subgroupings. When coming into contact with the Chinese language, the Viet-Muong sub-branch was again split into two languages. One of them stayed in the mountainous areas and became the Muong language, and the other moved down to the Red River delta to become Vietnamese. Since then, through contact with Chinese as well as subsequent exposure to French and other Western languages, Vietnamese has gradually become richer and more modern.

### **3. Vietnamese language goes hand in hand with the nation's culture and history**

On the journey to develop the nation, Vietnam has turned challenges into opportunities. Vietnam is a small country that has close contact with many great civilizations. Nevertheless, instead of being assimilated, Vietnam still maintains its autonomy and identity and develops well. The key reason lies in its interaction with other cultures. (Cultural) contact is a familiar

topic in the study of cultures of different countries and regions. For Vietnam, contact is a special characteristic. Owing to cultural contact and exchange, Vietnam has established its own identity by selectively absorbing cultural expressions and attributes of the surrounding cultures. From an early stage, interactions with other Southeast Asian ethnic groups, especially the Tay-Thai group, allowed the Vietnamese to form an ethnic community with fundamental survival capacity. Long-term contact with the Han culture helped that ethnic community to develop into a country with strict norms. In addition, the recent contact with French and other Western civilizations has promoted Vietnam's integration into the modern world. Obviously, each of these contacts has left an imprint in Vietnamese perhaps because language is a dynamic element of culture or the fate of a national language is often closely linked with that of the nation.

3.1. With quite convincing linguistic evidence, the Vietnamese language is classified into the Viet - Muong group of the Mon - Khmer branch of the Austroasiatic language family. Indeed, the tropical mountainous areas that used to be the living space of the ancient Vietnamese are clearly reproduced via the ancient vocabulary such as: *rú* [mountain], *rừng* [forest], *đá* [stone], *măng* [bamboo shoot], *tre* [bamboo], *khái* (con hổ) [tiger], *gấu*

[bear], *trăn* [python], *rắn* [snake], *sóc* [squirrel], *nai* [deer], *gà* [chicken], *trâu* [buffalo], *đỉa* [leech], *muỗi* [mosquito], *ruồi* [fly], *chấy* [lice], *rận* [louse], *mọt* [weevil], *sâu* [worm], *kiến* [ant], *rết* [centipede], etc. In contrast, it is harder to find old words related to water areas such as rivers, lakes, seas, aquatic animals, etc. The ancient Vietnamese mainly lived by hunting and gathering. Their methods for exploiting natural resources and tools are reflected on the words of Mon - Khmer origin, which are still in use today, such as: *bắn* [shoot], *giết* [kill], *chẻ* [split], *cắt* [cut], *bẻ* [break], *rễ* [root], *gốc* [stump], *lá* [leaf], *trái* [fruit], etc.. However, if we consider the vocabulary when Vietnamese was still part of the Viet and Muong language, we can see that, besides the words of Mon - Khmer origin that refer to phenomena around human beings such as natural phenomena, domestic and production tools, the organization of the primitive life, numbers, directions, mode of address, etc., there is a lexical system derived from the Tay - Thai languages that reflects the society operating model of an agricultural economy. For example, with words related to tools and means of agricultural production such as: *guồng* [water wheel], *mương* [ditch], *đập* (nước) [dam], *nong*, *sàng*, *mủng* [types of sieve], *dâm* (mạ) [plant (young rice)], *vãi* (mạ) [scatter (rice seeds)], *rẫy* [field in the mountains], *đồng* [field], *quê* [hometown] , etc., words about plants: *nếp* [sticky rice], *tẻ* [rice],

*thóc* [rice seed], *ngọn* [top of the tree], *cà* [Vietnamese eggplant], *đậu* [beans], *(khoai) môn* [taro], *(bí) ử* [pumpkin], *(rau) muống* [water spinach], *(rau) cải* [brassicaceae], *ngó (sen)* [young leaf stalk of lotus tree], *mướp* [lufsa], *ớt* [chili], *sả* [lemongrass], *quế* [cinnamon], etc.. and words for cooking utensils and dishes associated with rice such as: *đôi* [bowl], *muôi* [ladle], *đĩa* [plate], *rượu* [wine], *bún* [rice vermicelli], *(cơm) lam* [the type of rice that is cooked in a bamboo tube], etc., we can imagine a nation specializing in agricultural cultivation, which made a transition from the primitive and spontaneous economic model (hunting and gathering) to an organized and planned production model (agriculture). That transition must have been brought about by the Vietnamese learning wet rice farming from the ancient Tay-Thai people.

3.2. Vietnam's interaction with the Chinese language and culture has been going on for a long time, starting with a thousand years of Northern domination (from 179 BC when Au Lac merged with Nam Viet, and especially after 111 BC, when the Han dynasty imposed colonial rule in Giao Chi and Cuu Chan, to 905 when the Khuc gained actual control of Tinh Hai, and Ngo Quyen's victory on the Bach Dang River in 938) and continuing into the following centuries. Heavily influenced by the Han culture, Dai Co Viet, Dai Viet, and Dai Nam (the names of Vietnam in three different periods) used the

regime and classics of the Chinese civilization as a base to build a feudal system. Even though Vietnam escaped China's direct impositions, the political, economic, and cultural contact between Vietnam and China has never been broken off. In any case, China is still a great civilization, especially in the Middle Ages, when the achievements of this civilization were used as a yardstick by neighboring countries and cultures. Sino-Vietnamese words and the way those words are read based on the phonetic system of Vietnamese (the Sino-Vietnamese reading) are a living testimony of the Sino-Vietnamese cultural contact. With the use of Chinese characters in administrative communication, the Vietnamese feudal dynasties actively learned from the construction of political institutions, social life, and cultural background of the Han culture. The Vietnamese language, with the basic vocabulary of a hunter-gatherer tribe that switched to wet-rice farming later on, could not express abstract cultural concepts. Perhaps, this is the reason for a large number of words of Chinese origin to be actively adopted into Vietnamese. For example, words related to the spiritual life such as *bút* (筆) (*pen*), *sách* (冊) (*book*), *quyển* (volume), *trà* (茶) (*tea*), *vịnh* (詠) (*chant*), *kiếm* (劍) (*sword*), etc.; or words showing the organization of a society based on



institutions such as *quân tử* (君子) (*gentleman*), *trượng phu* (丈夫) (*husband*), *thục nữ* (淑女) (*lady*), *giang sơn* (江山) (*country*), *quốc gia* (國家) (*nation*), *thiên hạ* (天下) (*world*), *phồn hoa* (繁華) (*bustling*), *phú quý* (富貴) (*wealth*), *công danh* (功名) (*fame*), *sự nghiệp* (事業) (*career*), *hư vị* (虛位) (*imaginary*), *bổ nhiệm* (補任) (*nominate*), *thoái vị* (退位) (*abdicate*), *etc.* or the abstract concepts of Confucianism - Buddhism - Taoism such as *danh* (名) (*name*), *mệnh* (命) (*fate*), *trung dung* (中庸) (*neutral*), *chính tâm* (正心) (*righteousness*), *không* (空) (*emptiness*), *sắc* (色) (*good look*), *tướng* (相) (*appearance*), *khổ* (苦) (*bitterness*), *niệm* (念) (*miss*), *huệ* (惠) (*benefit*), *đạo* (道) (*the way*), *vô vi* (無爲) (*do nothing*), *nguyên* (元) (*fundamental*), *khí* (氣) (*air*), *tĩnh* (靜) (*quiet*), *etc.* were introduced into Vietnamese to create a cultural foundation for the country.

3.3. In the second half of the nineteenth century, like many other Far Eastern countries, Vietnam witnessed the historical clash between the East and the West. It was this historic confrontation that pushed Vietnam to transform and modernize to keep pace with other civilizations. It is undeniable that the Western

civilization has played an important role in shaping modern Vietnamese culture. For example, the introduction of tango, rumba, and waltz dances to Vietnam pushed Vietnamese music to transcend the influence of traditional Chinese music to form two mainstream modern music genres: marching and love songs. Similarly, in literature, the New Poetry movement abandoned the stylized forms of Chinese-influenced poetry for free verse poems to express their individuality as opposed to the community spirit that was common in poetry before. In addition, the movements in modern thought such as the reform trend, the ideology of liberalism and charity, the Democratic Movement, Marxism, and so on have broadened the Vietnamese's worldview. In terms of linguistics, the imprints of Western languages such as French, Russian, and English on Vietnamese are proof of each stage of Vietnam's integration with the world. Among the Western languages that influenced Vietnamese, French left the most significant imprint on the memory of the Vietnamese people as Vietnam had contact with French culture for more than 100 years under the French colonial rule and also due to the "civilization" policy of the French colonialists. French was the evidence of a different, modern world the Vietnamese knew for the first time. In addition to many scientific and technical terms, French loanwords also exist in many aspects of life such as:



clothes and clothing styles like (áo) may ô [maillot], (áo) bu-dông [blouson], găng tay [gant], (áo) sơ-mi [chemise], (bộ) com-lê [complet]; food and cuisine like bơ [beurre], bánh-quy [biscuit], ga tô [gateau], kem [crème], súp [soupe]; beverage like bia [bière], cà phê [café], ca cao [cacao], si-rô [sirop], (rượu) vang [vin]; materials like bột [bâche], cao su [caoutchouc], các-tông [carton], mút [mousse], len [laine]; flowers and fruits like cà rốt [carotte], lay-ôn [glaïeul], su hào [chou-rave], ti-gôn [antigonon], súp lơ [chou-fleur]; transport like ca-nô [canoë], buýt [bus], cốp xe [coffre], nhà ga [gare], xăng [essence]; houses and rooms like căng-tin [cantine], xà-lim [cellule], ki-ốt [kiosques], toa-lét [toilette], vi-la [villa]; everyday objects like ba-toong [bâton], bi-đông [bidon], (tủ) búyp-phê [buffet], xô (đựng nước) [seau], ri-đô [rideau]; toys and entertainment like như xiếc [cirque], phim [film], bi [bille], búp bê [poupée], xi-nê [cinéma]; and so on and so forth. The French loanwords brought with them a series of new concepts which reflect a civilized and modern world that was completely new to a purely agricultural Asian nation. Not as varied and broadly used as French loanwords, Russian loanwords only appear in Vietnamese in small numbers, for example bôn-sê-vích [Большевик/ bolshevik], xô-viết [совет/ soviet], tờ-trốt-kít [троцкизм/ trotskyist], Mác-xít [Марксизм/ Marksist], (ấm) sa-mô-va [самовар/ samovar], etc., but they still reflect an important period of the

nation's history, when Vietnam became close to the Soviet Union as the two shared the same ideology. Since Doi Moi, Vietnam has started to integrate into the world. English has given Vietnam access to contemporary concepts and global trends. English loanwords related to information technology, music, fashion, entertainment, commerce, etc. has helped enrich the Vietnamese vocabulary, for example: đi-ô-xin [dioxin], ra-đa [radar], com-pu-tơ [computer], chát [chat], i-meo [e-mail], mic [micro], (chạy) sô [show], phết-ti-van [festival], (nhạc) rốc [rock], (bản) hít [hit], vớt-chờ [voucher], etc. Overall, it is clear that contact with Western cultures has given Vietnam better access to modern concepts, phenomena, and trends. The loanwords of French, Russian and English origins in Vietnamese today reflect the constant effort of the Vietnamese people in improving the nation's intellectual base.

It all stems from communication needs. There are sometimes no suitable existing word in Vietnamese to capture new concepts or things, so the Vietnamese people have to adopt words from foreign languages into their native language. It may seem like a normal communication phenomenon, but in fact, it manifests a much more important matter. For Vietnam, interactions with other cultures are a vital step to shape the national cultural identity. On the one hand, each cultural

contact leaves its imprint on the Vietnamese language. On the other hand, via language, it is possible to see the progress in the nation's history more clearly. The Vietnamese language is a piece of valuable and reliable evidence, just like the archaeological artifacts in the ground.

#### **4. Studying Vietnamese to understand the Vietnamese mindset and culture**

The relations among language, thought, and culture are so obvious that they seem to become an axiom, but to fully understand the origin of these relations is not easy. It is due to the multidimensional interactions and the overlaps of the three aspects. Language is a conduit for thought. Language is the form (the material side) while thought is the content (the hidden spiritual side). The products of thought are always represented by a material shell. When something is invented, there is an urgent need for it to be named. With an official name, the new concept can be understood more clearly by people. On the one hand, there is no doubt that thought is expressed through language. On the other hand, language also participates in the process of forming thoughts. Thought is formed by personal experience; however, it cannot be stored and communicated between different communities and from generation to generation without language. Therefore, language has influenced thought by helping

concretize and abstract it. Owing to language, people can identify things and phenomena more accurately. Only after people know the name can they really understand the concept. How can a tea table, dining table, and desk be distinguished? Obviously, the differences are perceived through their names, which highlight the distinctive characteristics of each object. However, language not only dissociates thoughts as part of the concretization process, but also helps group them under categories. In Vietnamese, there are words like chó [dog], cá [fish], and voi [elephant] which represent specific animals, but what does the word “con vật” [animals] refer to in reality? Animals are the general category that language creates to name a broader, more abstract concept. Tasmanians have their own names for each type of tree, but there is no generic term for trees. As such, language not only creates a spiritual world that is richer than the real world but also defines categories that help people systematize their knowledge. Language is also an expression of culture, or to put it another way, culture is also reflected via language. Your voice reveals your ethnicity. Based on clothes, eating habits, musical instruments, etc., we can only guess a person's nationality. However, when he speaks, we immediately know his ethnic origin. Language is the identity card for ethnicity. As such, it contributes to shaping the cultural



identity of a nation. Given that culture is defined as all that is created by humans and language is inherently a man-made product, it is safe to say that language is culture. More precisely, language is an expression of culture. For example, folk songs and proverbs are cultural products; the names of products, places and phenomena such as ditches, communal houses, and rituals hold cultural values; the creation of cultural symbols such as the image of the Vietnamese Mother shows the spirit of the culture expressed by language. It is from the continuous enrichment of language that culture has an extra impetus to diversify. As such, language research cannot just focus on the structure of the speech itself, but also needs to pay attention to the interaction of language with thought and culture, thereby offering an insight into the mindset of the language community and its cultural background. The same can be said for the goal of researching Vietnamese. In other words, studying Vietnamese is not just about seeing how Vietnamese people speak but explaining why they say that and what in their minds or cultural background determines the language expressions that they use.

Language is a unique phenomenon; however, its perception changes according to the growth of thought and is always governed by cultural norms. Therefore, Vietnamese people see the world differently from people of other ethnic groups. It may be difficult for

foreigners to understand why Vietnamese people say “Tôi lên bộ” [I am going up the Ministry] (Why do they use “up” instead of “to”?). The reason is simple - there is a social hierarchy and a perception of directions as in “I go upstairs.” in Vietnamese culture. Such an analysis provides a better understanding of Vietnamese culture, which is quite oriental even in modern times as it considers individuals greatly inferior to the authorities. Another example is the category of “Rau” (Vegetable). The concept of “Vegetable” in Vietnamese is not completely identical to “Vegetables” in English or “Les légumes” in French. In the Vietnamese culture, Rau are distinguished from Củ (plants with enlarged roots or stems located underground), so root vegetables such as carrots, potatoes, kohlrabi, etc. are vegetables or les légumes in Western cultures but are not considered as vegetables by the Vietnamese, although the Vietnamese still think of them as plant foods. The Vietnamese also classify vegetables into a range of subcategories, such as species that provide leaves like spinach and those that provide the whole body like water spinach and squash, etc. Vietnam is located in the tropical belt with diverse plants. Is that the reason why Vietnamese people perceive a variety of plants as food sources and collectively call them “vegetables”? In a comparative study on linguistic symbols in Tang and Nom poetry, we

pointed out that, besides the similarities which result from the contact with the Han culture, Vietnamese authors also used different language expressions in Nom poetry which reflect the distinctive features of the nation. First, the vocabulary reflects the natural world of a tropical land in contrast to the standardized canonical images of Tang poetry. Second, the rustic meaning in Nom poetry breaks the influence of the conventional and symbolic style that Tang poetry is known for. Finally, there is also the combination of nouns and verbs as a determinative phrase to describe real life in Nom poetry, such as “Lá vàng trước gió khẽ đưa vèo” [Golden leaves swaying in the wind] (Nguyen Khuyen), which is quite different from the calm and melancholy watercolor painting that Tang poetry often portrays, such as “Lạc diệp thu phong tảo” (Falling leaves, early autumn wind) (Ly Bach). By comparing the linguistic symbols in Tang and Nom poetry, it is not difficult to see that the Vietnamese have been active and selective in absorbing knowledge of the Chinese civilization.

The study of Vietnamese is not merely aimed at drawing up the rules for speaking Vietnamese accurately. As an expression of the national identity, language reveals some of the quintessential values inherent in the perception and life of the Vietnamese people. Research into Vietnamese will

offer insights into the culture as well as the mind of Vietnamese people.

## **5. Conclusion**

In a speech at the memorial ceremony for Nguyen Du held by Khai Tri Tien Duc Association in 1924, the editor-in-chief of Nam Phong journal Pham Quynh made a statement that is often cited today: “Truyện Kiều còn tiếng ta còn. Tiếng ta còn nước ta còn!” [If the story of Kieu is there, our language is there. If our language is there, our country is there!]. Does the Vietnamese language really play a decisive role in the fate of this nation? Vietnamese would not exist without the Vietnamese people and the community that provides a Vietnamese-speaking environment. It is safe to say that the nation must have independence for the language to exist and develop. However, language is important to shaping the spirit and cultural identity of each nation. This article wants to affirm that, as a heritage of Vietnam, the Vietnamese language will continue undertaking the task of nurturing the national spirit.

The three main points of this article are as follows: (1) Vietnamese is a constantly evolving language, (2) the Vietnamese language goes hand in hand with the nation's culture and history, and (3) the aim of researching Vietnamese is to understand the Vietnamese mindset and culture. These aforementioned points correspond with the three attributes of a heritage:



(1) linking the past, the present, and the future, (2) being bonded to a specific subject (the subject of the heritage), and (3) having distinctive characteristics that are typical of the nation. With these three attributes, the Vietnamese language deserves to be passed on from generation to generation.

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