

## LANGUAGE

### Phạm Huy Thông: Considerations on language policy

Trần Thị Minh\*

Phạm Huy Dũng†

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#### Abstract

This study explores Phạm Huy Thông's perspectives on language policy through selected manuscripts and speeches archived in the National Archives Center III. From the collection, 11 key documents on linguistic issues were chosen to highlight his contributions. These writings reflect his dedication to pressing concerns such as language standardization, bilingualism, and foreign language education - topics that remain central in contemporary linguistic discourse.

Phạm Huy Thông emphasized the urgent need for the standardization of Vietnamese in alignment with the nation's educational reforms, advocating collaboration among research institutions, government agencies, and schools. Notable initiatives included addressing orthographic and terminological standardization, producing a *Vietnamese Grammar* and *Vietnamese Dictionary*, and promoting the Latinization of minority languages to ensure their preservation alongside national language development.

In his writings, he proposed scientific and balanced approaches, valuing diverse methods and sources. He outlined the essential principles for scientific terminology - accuracy, systematic organization, national identity, and public accessibility. These ideas demonstrated his recognition of language as a dynamic entity, evolving under societal influences while retaining cultural heritage.

Phạm Huy Thông also explored the aesthetic dimensions of language, the historical significance of Nom script, and the importance of fostering linguistic diversity. His advocacy extended to foreign language education, emphasizing its role in global integration and scientific progress.

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\* Nguyen Tat Thanh University, [tminh@ntt.edu.vn](mailto:tminh@ntt.edu.vn)

† Thang Long University, [phamhuydung@thanglong.edu.vn](mailto:phamhuydung@thanglong.edu.vn)

The study shows his systematic and inclusive approach, calling for gradual and deliberate implementation of language policies. His insights align with ongoing challenges in balancing language preservation, modernization, and societal needs. Future research is needed to fully understand the impact and development of his proposals within Vietnam's linguistic policy framework.

#### 1. Professor Phạm Huy Thông - "Nam quốc kỳ nhân" (A genius of Việt Nam)

Professor Phạm Huy Thông was a brilliant intellectual, talented in various fields, ranging from poetry, law, archaeology, to profound historical studies. During his lifetime, he exemplified dedication to academic career and country love, consistently upholding precious spiritual qualities. Professor Phan Huy Lê once remarked, "Alongside the intellectual brilliance of a scientist with deep interdisciplinary knowledge and the foresight of an administrator, Phạm Huy Thông was also the embodiment of humanism, sophistication, and the elegance formed between the charm of Hanoi and the grandeur of Paris".<sup>1</sup> Journalist Thanh An (2019) referred to him as a "Remarkable Individuals of Vietnam,"<sup>2</sup> and I would like to borrow these words in the introduction.

Professor Phạm Huy Thông came from a wealthy business family on Hàng Bạc Street in Hanoi. From a young age, he demonstrated ambition and profound patriotism. He was not only associated with political and social activities but was also known for his deep passion for the culture and history of the nation. His father, Phạm Chân Hưng, was one of Hanoi's renowned merchants before the August Revolution, but Phạm Huy Thông chose a path of the spirit and aspiration for freedom.

At the young age of 15 or 16, Phạm Huy Thông had already written his name into the history of Vietnamese poetry during Phong trào Thơ mới (the New Poetry Movement) with a soul full of romance and heroic melancholy. He "managed, on a few occasions, to bring Vietnamese poetry with the dreamy atmosphere of Shakespeare's plays and the grandeur of Victor Hugo. Huy Thông also established a small poetry school that included Lam Giang, Phan Khắc Khoan, and a poet who would later leave a profound legacy: Chế Lan Viên." (Hoài

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<sup>1</sup> <https://baotangvanhoc.vn/cau-chuyen-nha-van/pham-huy-thong-nha-tri-thuc-lon-tai-danh/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ttdn.vn/hoi-nhap-va-phat-trien/van-hoa-xa-hoi/gs-pham-huy-thong-nam-quoc-ky-nhan-30057>

Thanh & Hoài Chân, 1942)<sup>3</sup>. His passion for literature and language seemed to have been hidden in the young man's blood.

Later, he went to France to study and graduated with a bachelor's degree in law at the age of 21. He stayed on to pursue a doctorate in law and further studied for master's degrees in history and geography. Through perseverance and dedication, he became a brilliant scholar in different fields.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to his poetic and academic careers, Phạm Huy Thông also had a political career that significantly influenced the nation. According to the Museum of Literature, from 1940 to 1945, he participated in the Association of Vietnamese Patriots in France. In 1946, he was selected as the secretary to President Hồ Chí Minh at the Fontainebleau Conference, an experience that profoundly shaped his thinking and awareness. Meeting President Hồ Chí Minh inspired him to pursue the revolutionary path.

After his activities in France and a period of house arrest in Hải Phòng, he lived in Vietnam and dedicated himself to a political career. From then on, Professor Phạm Huy Thông held numerous key positions, including Deputy Chairman of the Vietnam Committee for Social Sciences (now the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences), Director of the Institute of Archaeology, Rector of Hanoi National University of Education, and a member of the National Assembly for the second and third terms, among others. The marks of his scientific works and policies reflect both his talented leadership and intellectual depth.

In addition to his significant achievements in archaeological research, he also left a mark in different fields of social science research. One notable area is language policy, as reflected in documents preserved at the National Archives Center III, which include 1,338 volumes containing tens of thousands of manuscript pages.

Among these thousands of manuscript pages, we find materials discussing language-related issues, speeches rewritten multiple times, and detailed marginal notes. For example, Document 256 is an opening text for the Oriental Linguistics Conference among Socialist countries. The final presentation consists of 8 pages, but the archive contains 44 pages,

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<sup>3</sup> <https://file.nhasachmienphi.com/pdf/nhasachmienphi-thi-nhan-viet-nam.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://baotangvanhoc.vn/cau-chuyen-nha-van/pham-huy-thong-nha-tri-thuc-lon-tai-danh/>





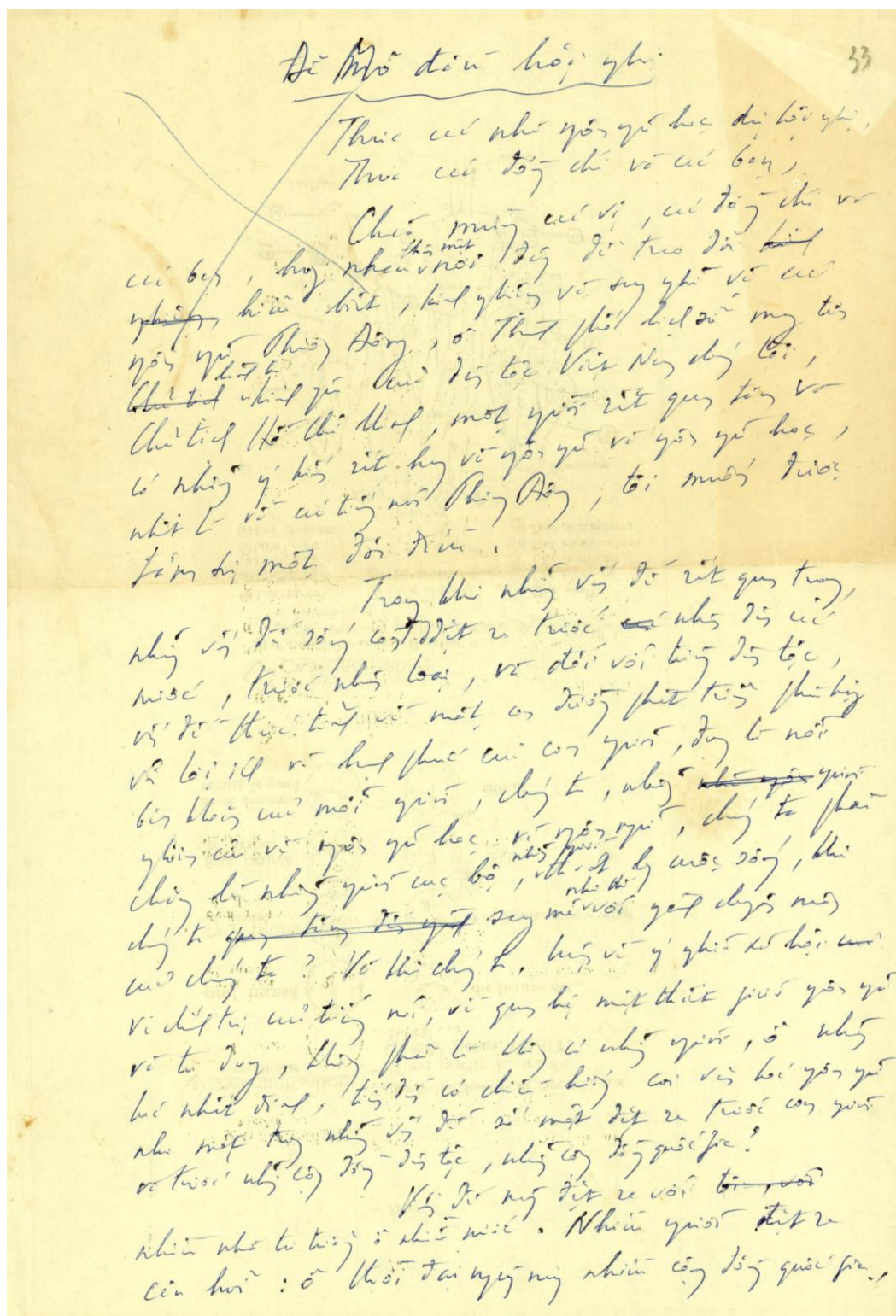
Figure 2: Page 1, handwriting 2<sup>nd</sup>

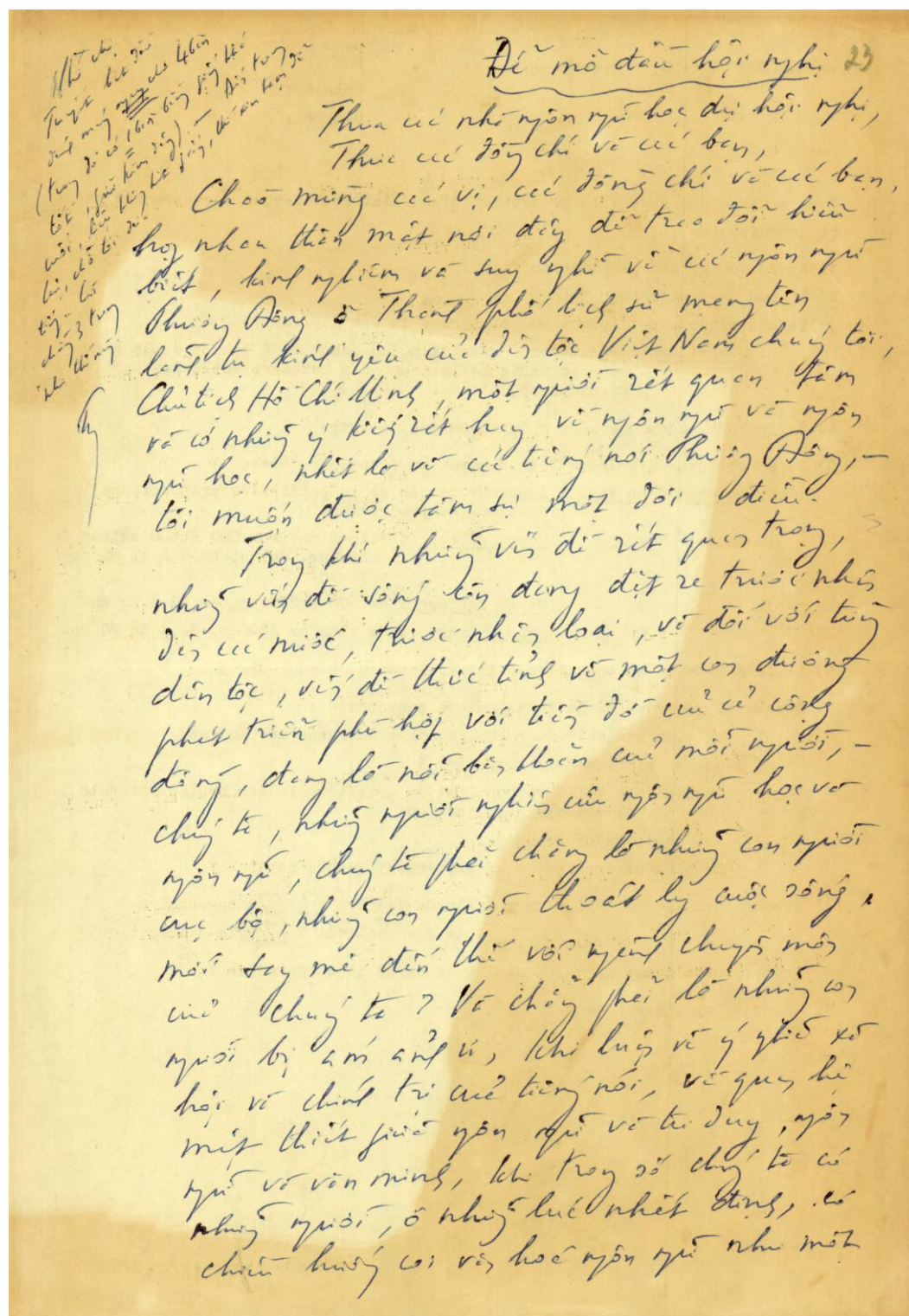
Figure 3: Page 1, handwriting 3<sup>rd</sup>



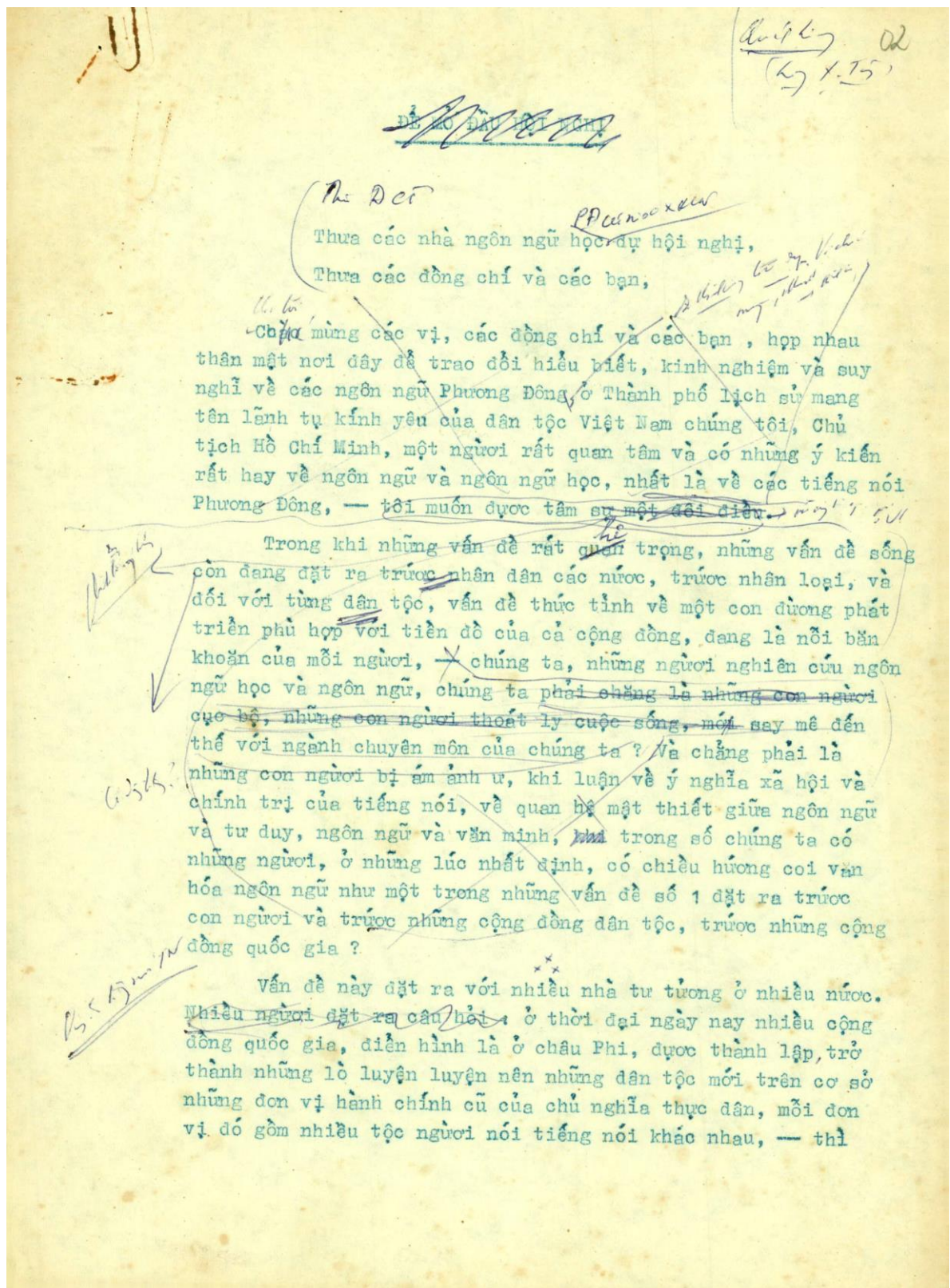
Figure 4: Page 1, typed version 1<sup>st</sup>



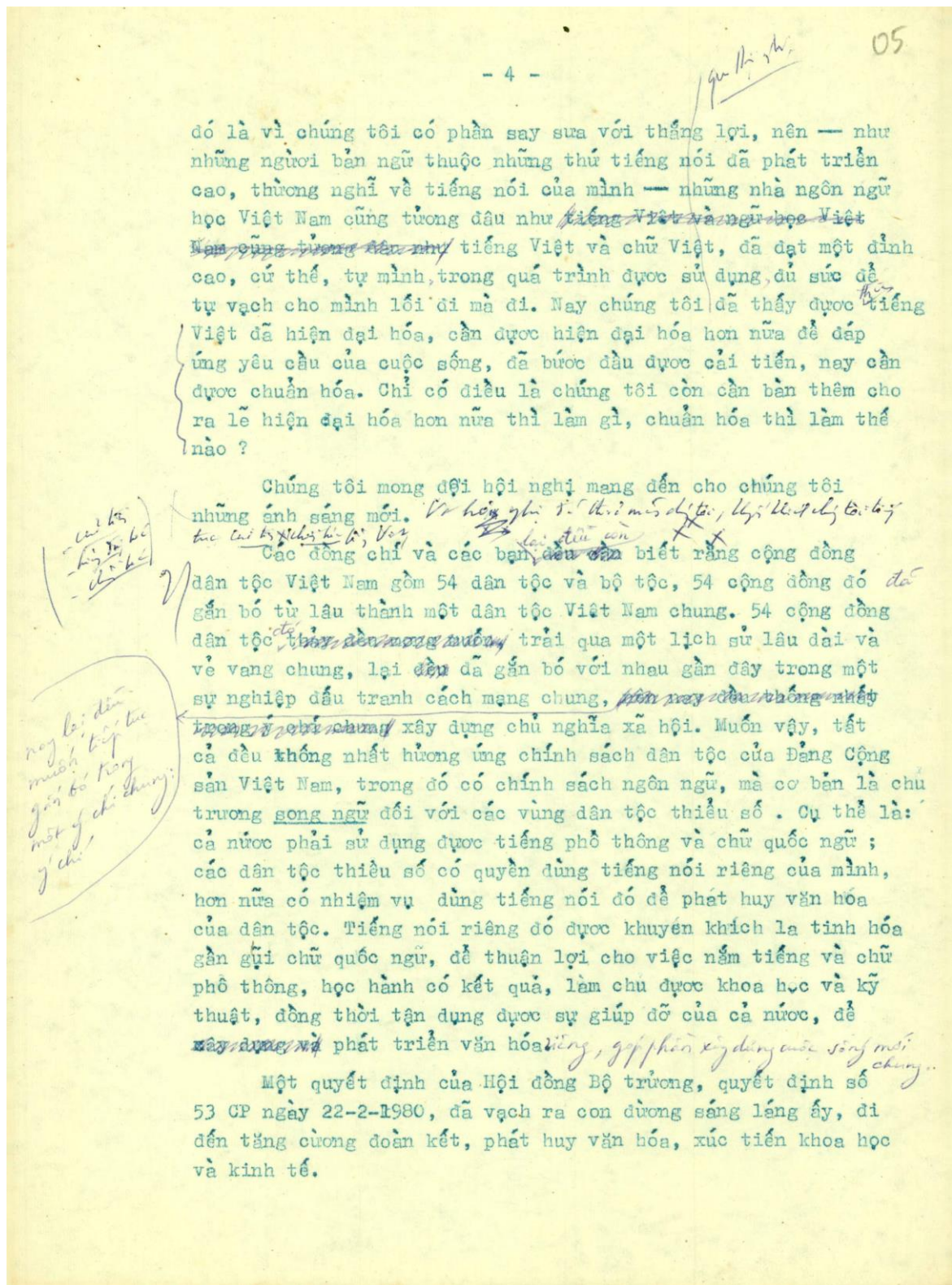
Figure 5: Page 4, typed version 1<sup>st</sup>



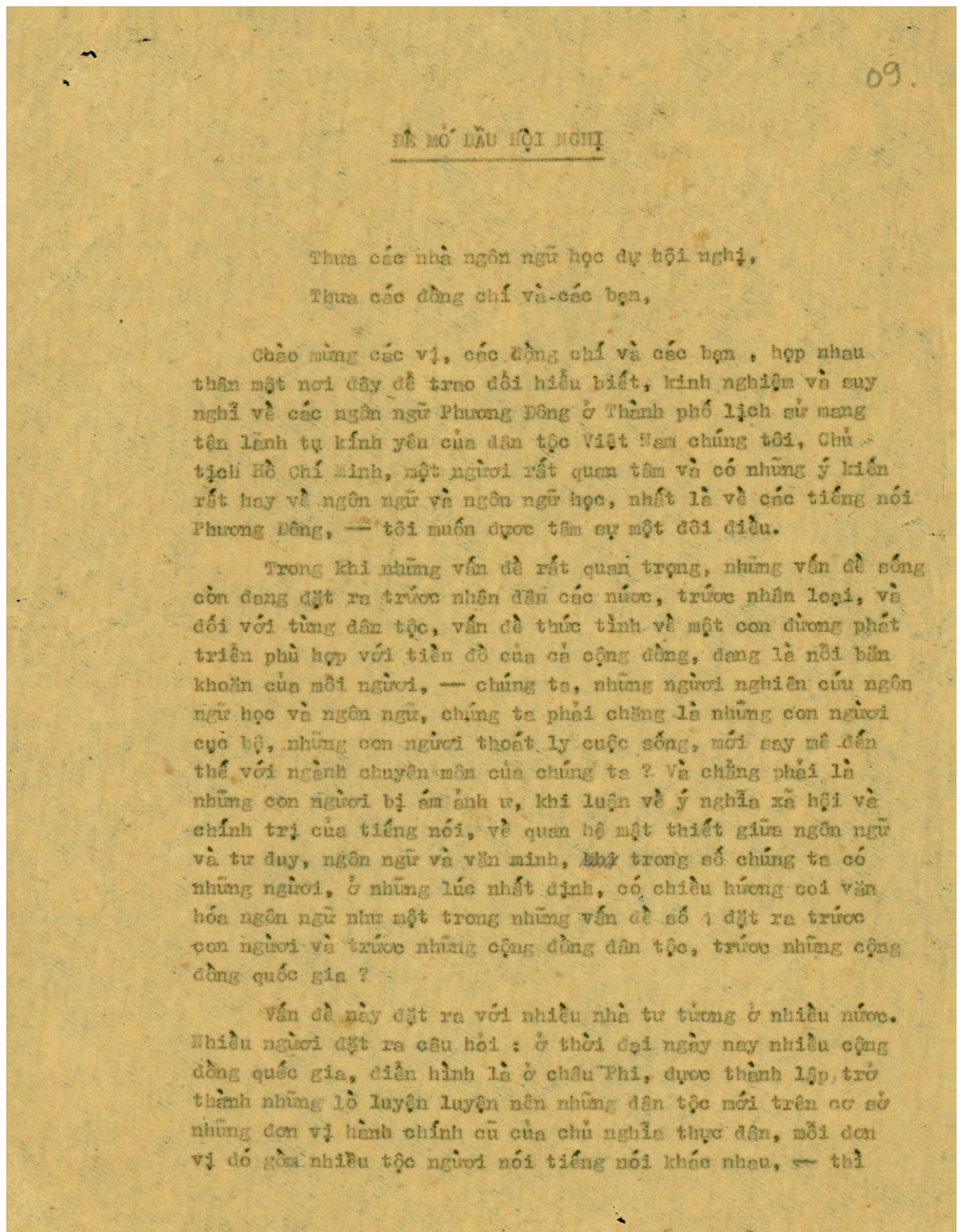
Figure 6: Page 1, typed version 2<sup>nd</sup>



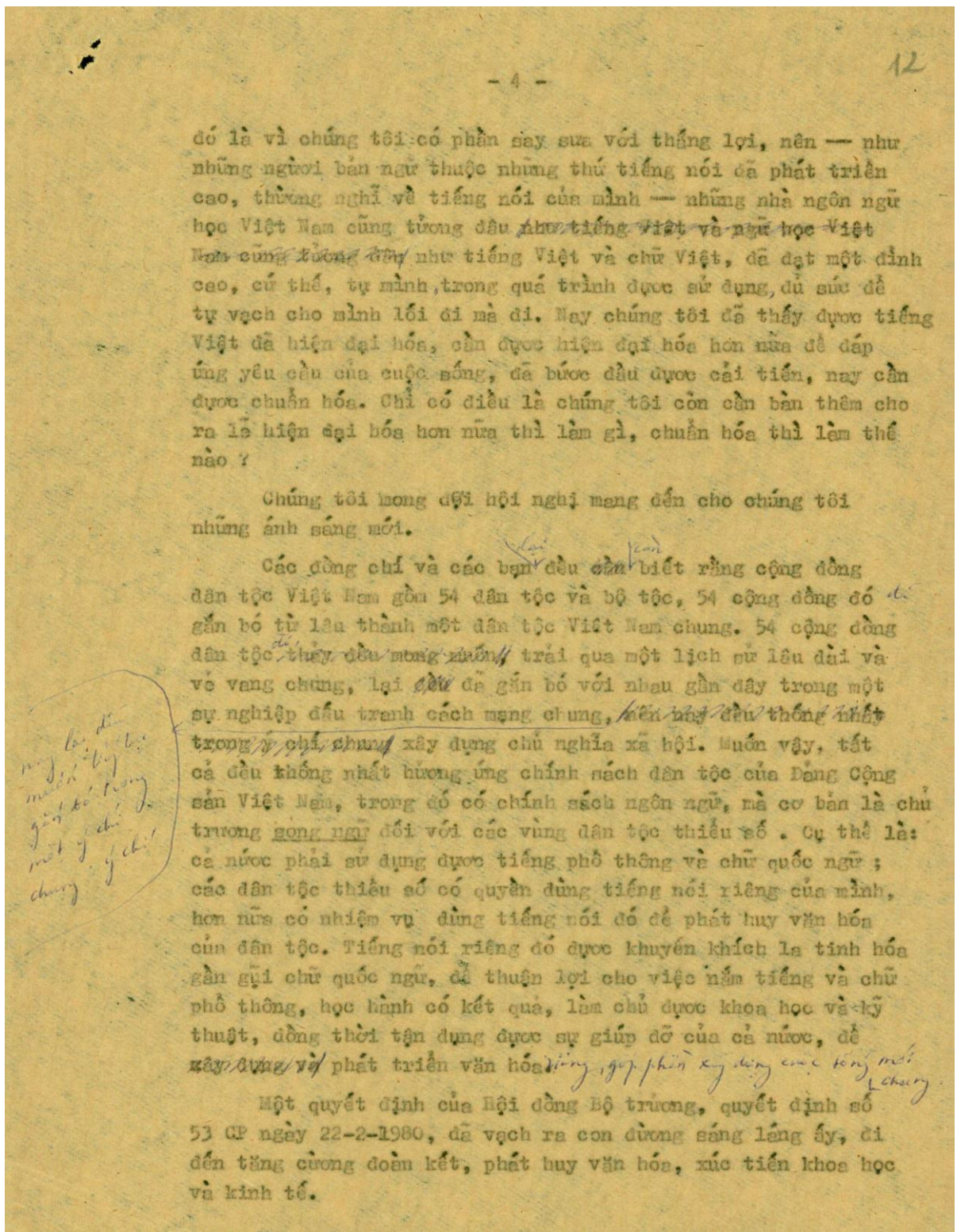
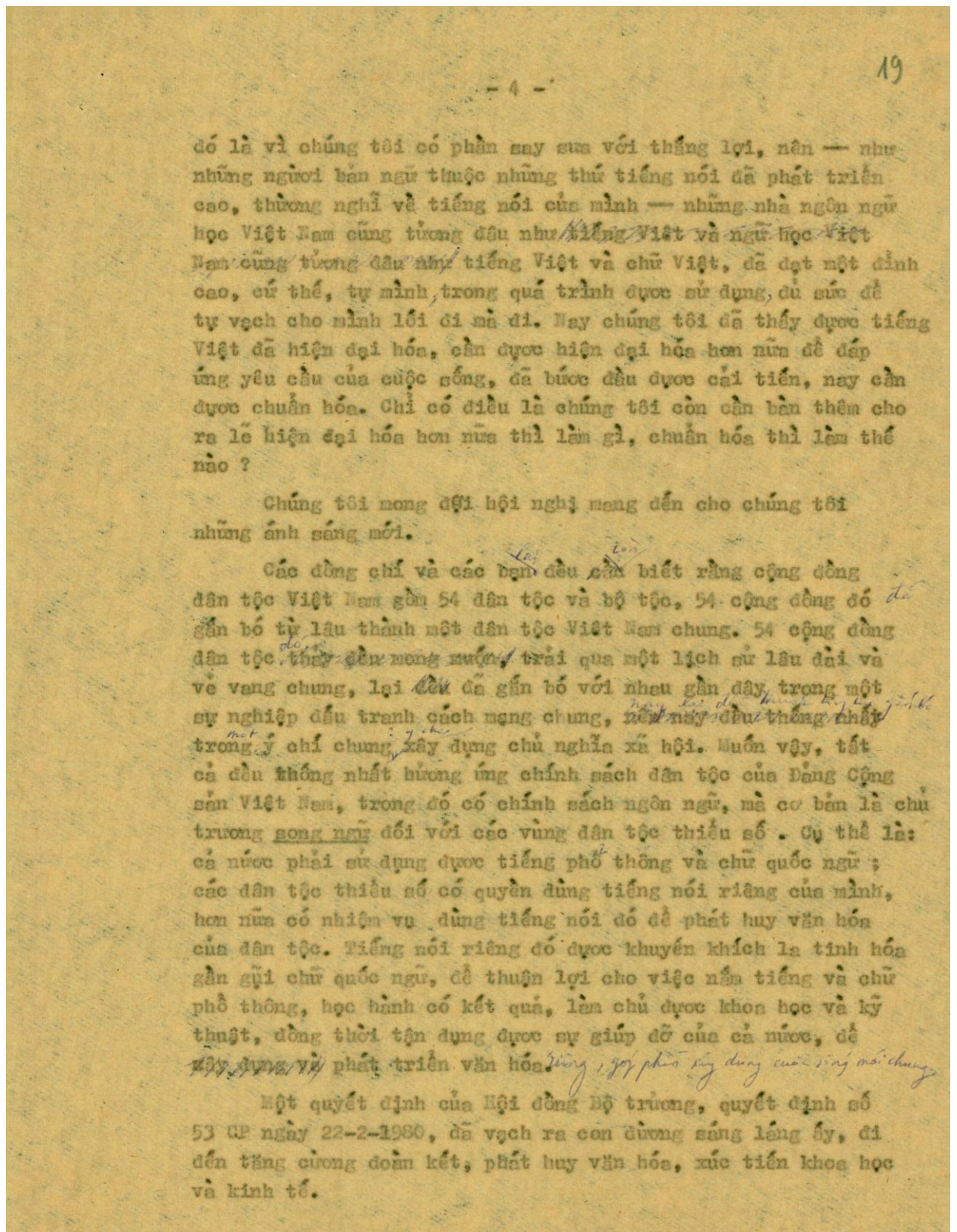
Figure 7: Page 4, typed version 2<sup>nd</sup>



Figure 8: Page 4, typed version 3<sup>rd</sup>



In the typed drafts, at the bottom of each document, he signed his name as "Huy Thông." This signature appears on all three typed versions of this speech.

Figure 9: Final page, typed version 1<sup>st</sup>

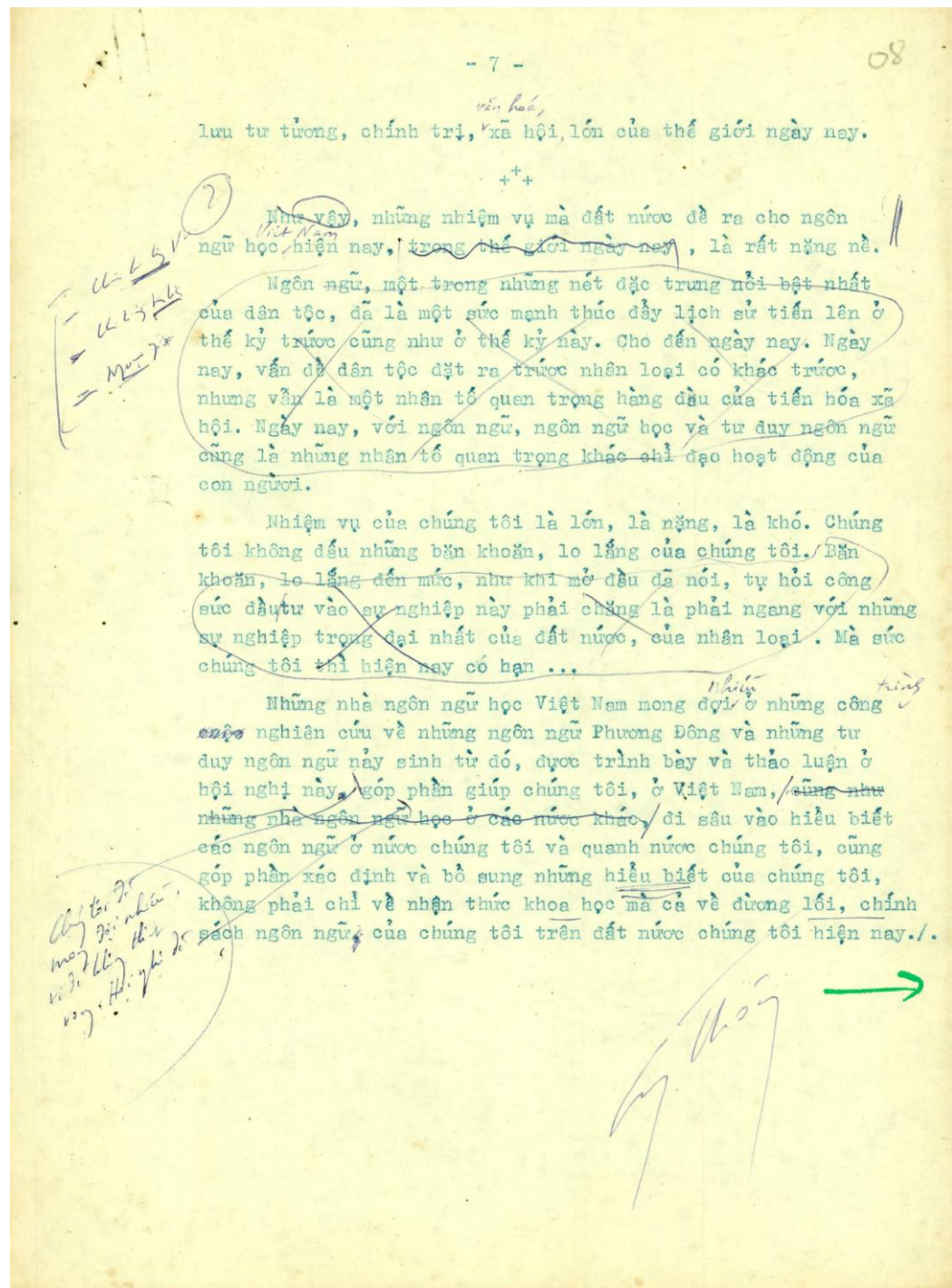




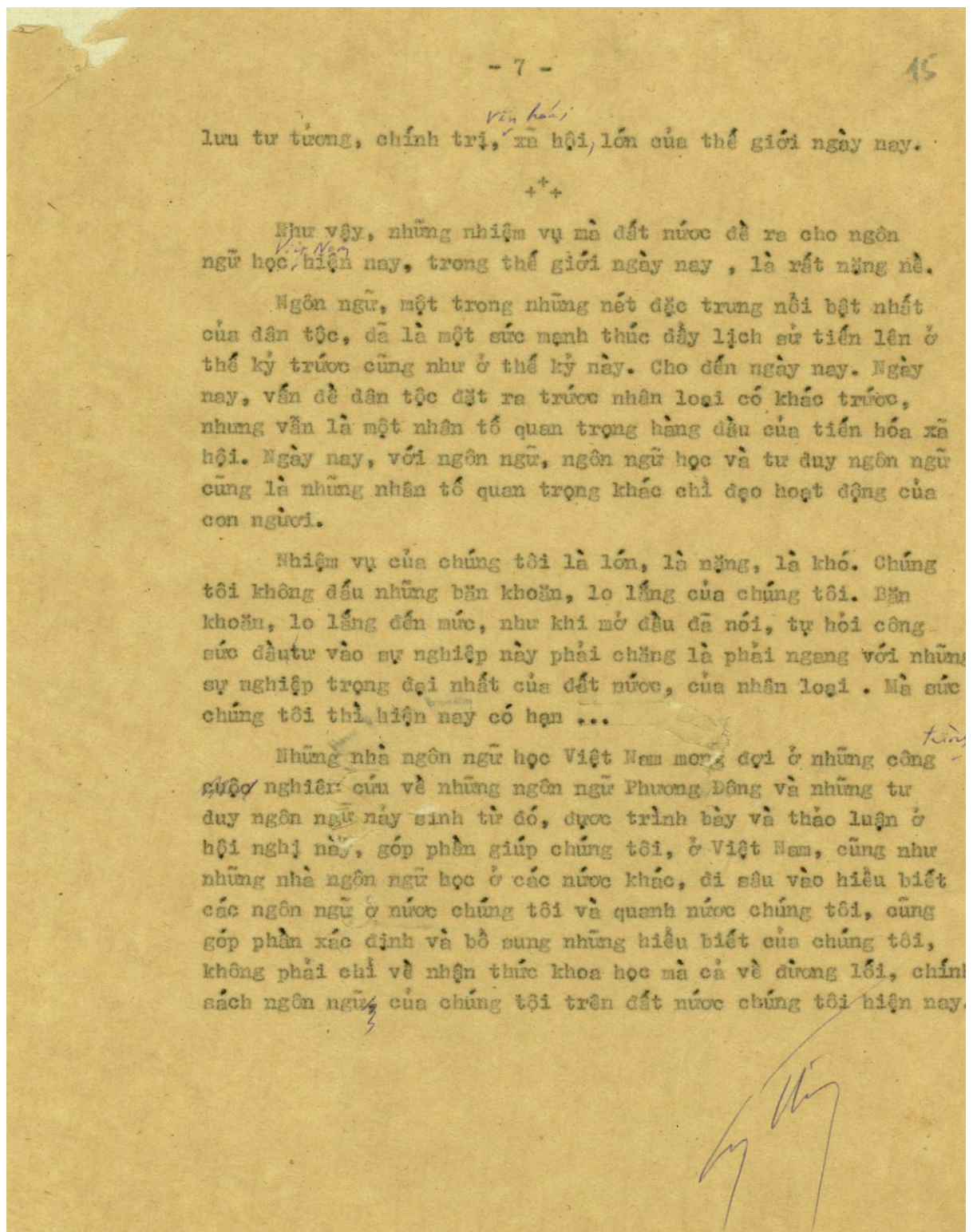
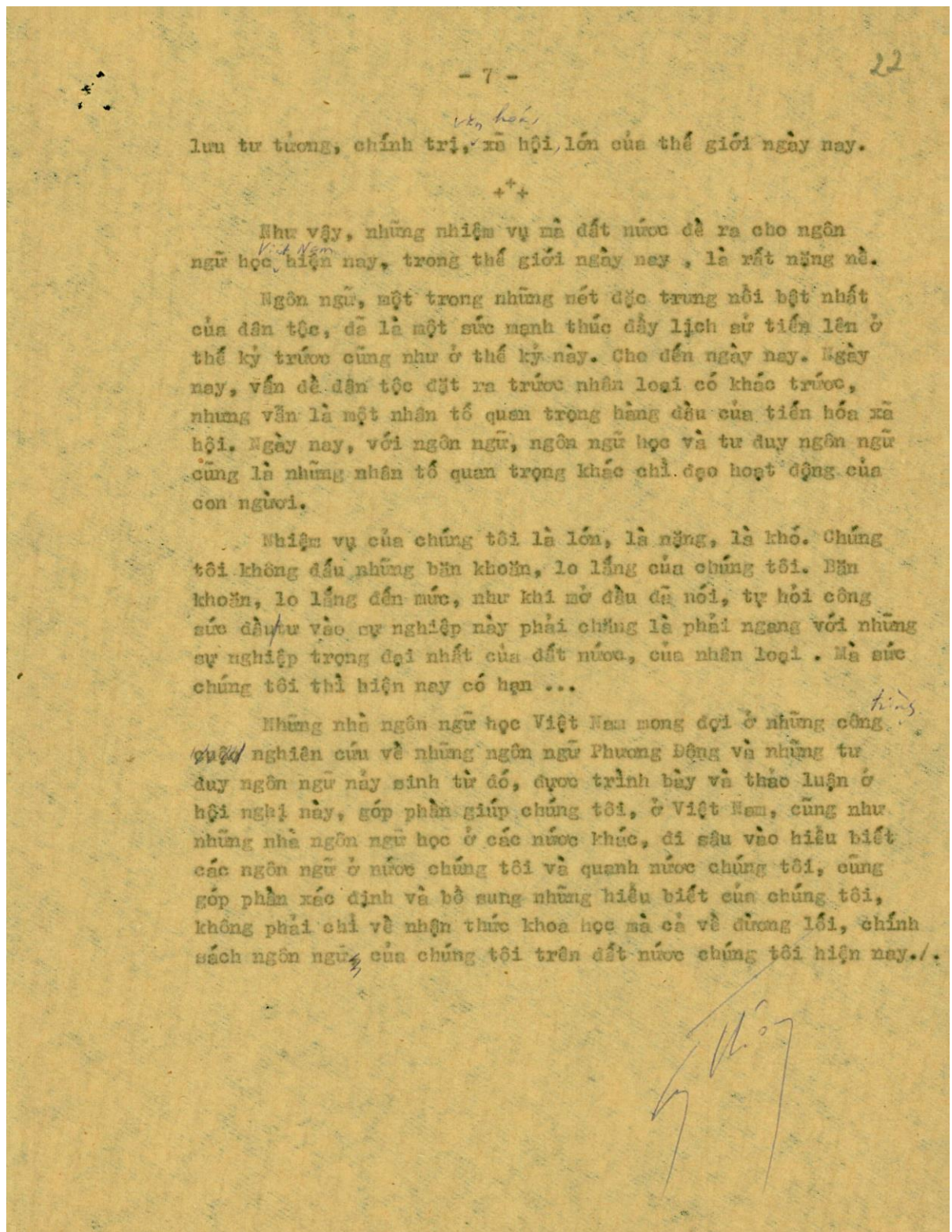
Figure 10: Final page, typed version 2<sup>nd</sup>



Figure 11: Final page, typed version 3<sup>rd</sup>



These drafts, therefore, may hold significant value for studying the dialogue on policy between linguistics scholars and an administrator like Professor Phạm Huy Thông.

The fact that the author of these drafts revised them multiple times demonstrates his seriousness and attention to this field. This is why we have chosen to compile Professor Phạm Huy Thông's writings related to linguistics to share with readers. Our aim is to preserve the memory of a scholar who had a profound influence on Vietnamese society, an illustrious figure of Indochina, and to preserve materials related to the history of language policy in Vietnam.

## 2. **Phạm Huy Thông's perspective on language policy in his discourse**

The National Archives Center III holds a collection of 22 documents numbered from 254 to 275. Additionally, there is an opening speech for the scientific seminar celebrating Slavic Culture and Writing Day (referred to as "Slavo" in Phạm Huy Thông's documents) numbered 220.

After thoroughly examining these manuscripts, we selected 11 writings related to linguistic issues to analyze. Many handwritten drafts are quite difficult to decipher, so we plan to revisit them in the future.

Through the survey of these materials, we observed that Professor Phạm Huy Thông consistently showed deep concern about language policy issues—topics that remain "hot" in today linguistic discussion both nationally and internationally today, such as standardization, bilingualism, and foreign languages.

### 2.1. *Standardization*

Recognizing that the core task of the Institute of Linguistics and the Vietnamese linguistic research community was to gradually implement the State's policy of standardizing the nation's spoken and written language to preserve the purity of Vietnamese, Professor Phạm Huy Thông emphasized that this effort should not be delayed. This urgency was particularly significant because educational reforms were already underway, and the standardization of language and script had to be rooted in the school system.

While awaiting the establishment of a nationwide directive body, he took concrete steps, collaborating with the Institute of Linguistics and the Textbook Compilation Center to address issues related to the standardization of spelling and terminology. The efforts of the research team followed a bottom-up approach but included exchanges with various ministries and agencies, as outlined in the document *Một bước tiến mới trên con đường chuẩn hóa tiếng nói*

và chữ viết (*A New Step Forward on the Path to Standardizing Speech and Writing* - date unknown; Document 265).

In his article *Nhiệm vụ trước mắt của ngành ngôn ngữ học Việt Nam* (*Immediate Tasks of Vietnamese Linguistics*) (date unknown, Document 258), Professor Phạm Huy Thông provided a scientific and convincing overview of critical issues in the national language development policy. These included the urgent need for standardization, emphasizing the importance of compiling *Ngữ pháp tiếng Việt* (*Vietnamese Grammar*) and *Từ điển tiếng Việt* (*Vietnamese Dictionary*); the necessity of establishing a bilingual system, simultaneously Latinizing minority languages to preserve them while protecting cultural heritage; and promoting the use of the national language in minority areas. He also discussed the role of teaching and learning foreign languages for global integration and facilitating the publication of scientific research.

When outlining these tasks, he not only addressed them in general terms but also provided concrete examples. Moreover, his perspective was always multidimensional and comprehensive. For instance, while stressing the urgency of quickly publishing *Ngữ pháp tiếng Việt* (*Vietnamese Grammar*) and *Từ điển tiếng Việt* (*Vietnamese Dictionary*), he also acknowledged the potential contributions of other comparative materials to the development of Vietnamese.

Professor Phạm Huy Thông also dedicated a separate article to introducing the book *Một cuốn ngữ pháp cơ bản phổ thông* (*A Basic Grammar for General Use*) (date unknown; Document 267). In discussing this topic, he demonstrated an objective approach, stating:

*"We understand that grammar can be perceived through various methods, with each observational angle offering its strengths and weaknesses. In the current state of scientific research, it is challenging to affirm which approach best provides the most accurate, profound, and comprehensive understanding of Vietnamese grammar. However, by applying the latest achievements of linguistics to Vietnamese grammar, combined with traditional methods of observation and analysis, we can still grasp the essential highlights and unique features of Vietnamese."*

This perspective illustrates that he did not regard state-assigned materials as the sole authoritative source but respected the value of other resources and contributions. In addition to discussing the *Vietnamese Grammar* and *Vietnamese Dictionary*, Professor Phạm Huy Thông also emphasized the need to develop specialized vocabulary in both the natural and social sciences as part of the standardization process. This remains an open and evolving



issue, requiring continuous research and updates to meet the demands of modern development.

Beyond his general writings on policy, he authored specific articles addressing the standards for scientific terminology, such as *Khoa học, dân tộc, đại chúng - Những tiêu chuẩn của thuật ngữ khoa học* (Science, National Identity, and Popularity – Standards for Scientific Terminology) (December 15, 1970; Document 254). In this article, he discussed the importance of adhering to fundamental standards in developing scientific terminology: scientific accuracy, national identity, and public accessibility. He agreed with the assertion:

*"A good term must, in content, be scientific, meaning it achieves absolute precision and has a tightly organized system. In form, it should carry a national essence, resonate with Vietnamese culture, and be accessible to the public (clear, concise, easy to write, easy to say, and easy to remember)."*<sup>1</sup>

He summarized that scientific content encompasses two key requirements: precision and systematic structure. The standards of national identity and public accessibility are two interlinked aspects of form. He also acknowledged the hierarchy of these standards, asking which should take precedence. While advocating respect for Vietnamese language and its existing writing system to avoid chaos in terminology usage, he emphasized that this did not mean Vietnamese and its terminology should be rigidly confined. Instead, he recognized the dynamic nature of language, with changes often emerging under the pressure of acceptance by the majority of users. This meticulous and multifaceted article, rich in specific examples, requires careful and thorough reading to fully grasp the issues presented.

In addition, Professor Phạm Huy Thông addressed the issue of the Vietnamese writing system. To share his insights with an international audience and encourage diverse perspectives on this matter, he authored a French-language article titled *Vấn đề cải cách chữ viết của Việt Nam* (The Issue of Reforming Vietnam's Writing System) (date unknown; Document 259).

In this article, he acknowledged that while the Vietnamese writing system at the time reasonably reflected the phonetic structure of the language, it still had certain shortcomings, such as inconsistencies between spoken and written forms or outdated rules. However,

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<sup>1</sup> On the issue of using foreign scientific terminology, *Hà Nội, 1968*, p. 62 (as cited in the original reference by Phạm Huy Thông in the article *Khoa học, dân tộc, đại chúng - Những tiêu chuẩn của thuật ngữ khoa học* [Science, National Identity, and Popularity – Standards for Scientific Terminology] (December 15, 1970; Document 254).

decades of research and discussion had concluded that writing reform was not truly necessary, as the existing system was already simple and practical.

The article emphasized that any reform must be grounded in scientific research and practical needs, avoiding arbitrary decisions or subjective judgments. Proposed changes, such as adjustments to vowels, consonants, or the introduction of new symbols, required careful consideration. The ultimate goal was to achieve a balance between practicality and the preservation of cultural and national values.

Finally, the article affirmed that language reform is a collective responsibility, requiring societal consensus and careful evaluation to ensure decisions align with national interests.

Additionally, Professor Phạm Huy Thông emphasized the importance of fostering aesthetic values in communication through the teaching of literature. He also considered the study of linguistic history to be crucial, with the exploration of chữ Nôm playing a significant role.

In his opening speech for the *Ngày văn hóa và chữ viết Slavo* (*Day of Slavic Culture and Writing*) (May 22, 1984; Document 220), he expressed pride and respect for chữ Nôm as part of Vietnam's national history. He regarded the creation of chữ Nôm and later chữ Quốc ngữ as monumental achievements, reflecting the Vietnamese people's resilience and creativity. These accomplishments, he suggested, could be likened to the Bulgarian people's creation of the Slavic script.

He wrote:

*"Just like the Bulgarian people, the Vietnamese people have historically used their own writing systems—chữ Nôm in the past and later chữ Quốc ngữ—to preserve and develop national culture. In doing so, they not only nurtured the national language and enriched their cultural identity but also fought to protect not just their culture, but their national consciousness and the very soul of the nation."*

This statement highlights his deep appreciation for the role of language and writing in shaping and preserving the national spirit and identity of Vietnam. Until recent years, the issue of maintaining the purity of the Vietnamese language and its standardization has remained a significant question for Vietnam's linguistic research community (Nguyễn Văn Khang, 2003; Đỗ Anh Vũ, 2021; Phạm Văn Tình, 2021).

*"Since the late Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng initiated the movement to 'Preserve the Purity of the Vietnamese Language' (Journal of Learning, Issue 4, 1966) until now (2021), 55 years have passed. This movement has been embraced by society as a whole, particularly by the Vietnamese linguistics community, following a 'trajectory' of ups and downs, at times fervent, at times subdued... However, never before has the*



*issue of preserving and protecting the Vietnamese language attracted as much public attention as in recent times.*" (Phạm Văn Tình, 2021).

This approach aligns with Einar Haugen (1985)'s theoretical framework (since 1966) on language standardization, which identifies four stages: *selection*, *codification*, *elaboration*, and *acceptance*. These stages, applied to many national language development processes, provide a useful lens for understanding Vietnam's efforts. For instance, Haugen (1985)'s concept of codification—involving the development of grammar, orthography, and dictionaries—is mirrored in Professor Phạm Huy Thông's call for the immediate publication of *Ngữ pháp tiếng Việt* (Vietnamese Grammar) and *Từ điển tiếng Việt* (Vietnamese Dictionary). Similarly, his work on developing specialized vocabulary echoes Haugen (1966)'s emphasis on elaborating language for diverse functional domains, including education and science. Perhaps now is the time for us to thoroughly reflect on the history of this research and the implementation of these policies.

## 2.2. *Bilingual policy: promoting the national language while preserving minority languages*

When discussing the bilingual policy, Professor Phạm Huy Thông emphasized the need for a synchronized approach that balances scientific development, advancement, and preservation. Specifically, in the report *Về chủ trương đối với chữ viết của các dân tộc thiểu số* (*On the Policy for the Writing Systems of Ethnic Minorities*), prepared by the Subcommittee on Ethnic Minority Scripts under his direction (July 8, 1977 – December 1978; Document 268), the subcommittee identified factors limiting the effectiveness of this work. These limitations, as understood today, were largely due to a lack of collaboration between the state and local communities, and an overly one-sided approach that focused exclusively on promoting the national language without adequately addressing the preservation and development of minority languages.

In this report, Professor Phạm Huy Thông presented detailed analyses of the linguistic situations in various regions and among representative ethnic groups. His proposals, which is still relevant today, reflect principles that contemporary researchers and policymakers continue to find it as a complex issue (Nguyễn Văn Khang, 2023; Vũ Thị Sao Chi & Nguyễn Đức Tồn, 2024).

The principles outlined by Professor Phạm Huy Thông were both objective and scientific:

- **Promote the National Language:** Ensure the widespread use of the national language for effective communication and administration.

- **Respect All Ethnic Languages:** Treat the languages of all ethnic groups with equal respect and importance.
- **Enhance Existing Latinized Scripts:** For ethnic groups that already had Latinized scripts, assess and improve these systems for better usability.
- **Latinize Non-Latin Scripts:** For scripts that were not yet Latinized and were difficult for the Kinh majority to learn and use, consider Latinization for better dissemination.
- **Develop Scripts for Oral Languages:** For languages without written scripts, explore the feasibility of creating a writing system to ensure their preservation and transmission.

In his article *Một chủ trương lớn: chữ viết cho từng dân tộc ít người* (A Major Policy: Writing Systems for Individual Ethnic Minorities) (1980; Document 269), he bridged state policies with the needs of local communities. The article offered scientific, flexible recommendations, emphasizing that language is a dynamic entity requiring continual adaptation. It also highlighted the close relationship between language and its social context (the speakers).

This approach shows Professor Phạm Huy Thông's view that language policy must not only reflect scientific principles but also adapt to societal realities, fostering harmony between linguistic development and cultural preservation. His perspective aligns Cummins's (1983) and Fishman (1989)'s works on language and ethnicity, where Fishman advocates for bilingual policies to sustain linguistic diversity while ensuring the dominance of a national lingua franca. Professor Phạm Huy Thông's focus on Latinizing minority languages reflects a similar goal of preserving cultural heritage while adapting to practical needs.

Professor Phạm Huy Thông's vision of linguistic standardization and preserving the cultural heritage of ethnic minority languages in Vietnam aligns closely with the comprehensive research conducted by Professor Nguyễn Văn Khang. In his seminal works, Nguyễn Văn Khang explored the challenges of maintaining linguistic diversity in Vietnam's ethnic minority regions while addressing the realities of multilingualism. His book *Ngôn ngữ sử dụng ở vùng dân tộc thiểu số Việt Nam* (Language Use in Ethnic Minority Areas of Vietnam) highlights the socio-linguistic dynamics of these regions, emphasizing the need for practical policies that ensure both the preservation of minority languages and their integration into national development (Nguyễn Văn Khang, 2023). These findings resonate with Phạm Huy Thông's advocacy for promoting bilingual education policies and integrating minority languages into national development strategies, as articulated in his writings on the necessity



of standardizing Vietnamese while respecting the cultural essence of ethnic languages. Both scholars provide a multidimensional perspective on how linguistic policies can balance the dual goals of modernization and cultural preservation, a challenge that remains critical in Vietnam's language planning efforts.

### 2.3. *Promoting foreign language learning*

When discussing the development of foreign language teaching and learning, Professor Phạm Huy Thông emphasized the close collaboration between the Institute of Linguistics and educational institutions, such as the University of Foreign Language Education and the National University. In his writings and speeches, he consistently conveyed a deep respect for cultural and linguistic diversity.

His opening speech for the *Ngày văn hóa của đất nước, ngày chữ viết Slavơ* (*National Culture Day and Day of Slavic Writing*) is a prime example of this spirit. In the speech, he demonstrated a profound understanding of the historical formation and significance of the Slavic script while expressing empathy for the Bulgarian people. He drew parallels between the struggles of Vietnam and Bulgaria, noting how both nations, despite the dominance of powerful empires, managed to create their own writing systems—Vietnam with *chữ Nôm* and Bulgaria with the Slavic script.

In the article *Nhiệm vụ trước mắt của ngành ngôn ngữ học Việt Nam* (*Immediate Tasks of Vietnamese Linguistics*) (date unknown, Document 258), Professor Phạm Huy Thông highlighted the necessity of learning foreign languages to disseminate scientific knowledge globally and publish research on an international scale. His vision echoes with the Vietnamese government's comprehensive efforts to reform foreign language education, particularly through the National Foreign Language Project (NFLP) 2008-2020 (Government of Vietnam, 2008). Approved by Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg, this project aimed to enable young Vietnamese graduates to become proficient in foreign languages, empowering them to communicate, learn, and work effectively in an integrated, multilingual, and multicultural environment. This national policy underscores the significance of fostering global integration through language education while strengthening Vietnam's international presence.

Recognizing the need for continued improvement, the government issued Decision No. 2080/QĐ-TTg in 2017 (Government of Vietnam, 2017) to adjust and extend the NFLP for the period of 2017-2025. This phase focuses on enhancing the quality of foreign language

education across all educational levels, introducing foreign languages from preschool, and integrating foreign language teaching into other subjects. This initiative reflects the government's commitment to addressing the evolving needs of the education system and aligns with Professor Phạm Huy Thông's belief in the importance of linguistic exchange as a means of fostering global understanding while preserving national identity and cultural heritage.

By integrating these forward-thinking policies into Vietnam's linguistic strategy, the nation exemplifies how cultural preservation and global integration can coexist, echoing the ideals Professor Phạm Huy Thông advocated throughout his career. These efforts continue to build upon his vision, creating a foundation where language becomes both a bridge to the world and a vessel for safeguarding Vietnam's cultural legacy.

### 3. Conclusion

Through the documents preserved at the National Archives Center III, we can see that Professor Phạm Huy Thông made significant contributions to the social sciences and humanities in Vietnam, one of which is the field of linguistics. With a strategic vision, multidimensional thinking, and a consistent focus on the comprehensive development of the national language and ethnic minority languages, he made important and profound contributions to the development of Vietnam's language policy. These contributions are primarily reflected in three areas: regarding the standardization of Vietnamese, he emphasized the importance of compiling *Ngữ pháp tiếng Việt* (Vietnamese Grammar) and *Từ điển tiếng Việt* (Vietnamese Dictionary), standardizing spelling and writing, developing scientific terminology, preserving the beauty and aesthetics of the language, and exploring the history of Vietnamese, such as research on chữ Nôm; regarding the bilingual policy for ethnic minorities, he paid special attention to implementing the policy in a flexible manner, avoiding imposition or one-sided thinking, while upholding the principles of science and humanity in promoting the national language alongside maintaining and preserving ethnic minority languages; regarding foreign language education, he emphasized the role of teaching and learning foreign languages in the process of integration and scientific development, respecting and finding the beauty in other languages.

When presenting these issues, he always maintained an objective attitude and respected various research resources. Professor Phạm Huy Thông's style of presenting arguments was characterized by caution, scientific criteria, and respect for cultural identity. He always



viewed language as a dynamic entity that needs to be developed flexibly and in accordance with practical needs.

Professor Phạm Huy Thông's achievement lie not only in his research but also in his strategic vision of the role of language in preserving and developing national identity. His contributions remain valuable and continue to inspire modern linguistic researchers.

As the compiler and editor of these materials, I would like to revisit the questions posed in the introduction of this book: When were these specific documents written? What were the domestic and international research and action programs on language policy during that time? Did Professor Phạm Huy Thông work with linguists, and if so, to what extent? How far were his proposals implemented by relevant agencies? What is the value and influence of his discussions (notably the notes he made in the margins of works such as *Ngữ pháp tiếng Việt* or the *Vietnamese-French Dictionary*) on the outcomes of these projects?

These are questions that require careful and thorough research to answer comprehensively. Therefore, I hope that in the future, we can address the dialogue between past and present issues in Vietnam's language policy, as well as Vietnam's policies within a comparative context with the rest of the world.

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