

## CULTURAL IMPRINTS IN VIETNAMESE HAND-BASED APPROXIMATE MEASUREMENT ITEMS: A COGNITIVE AND CROSS-LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Trần Thị Minh<sup>a</sup> & Phạm Thị Hà<sup>b</sup>

(Received 08 December 2025; revised 25 December 2025; accepted 29 December 2025)

### Abstract

This study examines Vietnamese lexical items denoting approximate measurement based on the human hand, such as *gang* (hand span), *đốt* (finger joint), *sải* (arm span), *nắm* (a handful of), *nhúm* (a pinch of), and *vốc* (a double handful of), etc. Grounded in cognitive linguistics and linguistic-cultural theory, the research explores how these items encode a culturally specific worldview shaped by Vietnam's agrarian way of life. Using qualitative semantic analysis, twelve lexical items are classified into two subsystems, length/distance and quantity/amount, and compared with their English counterparts. The findings indicate that Vietnamese preserves a parallel system of embodied, imprecise measurement alongside standardized scientific units. This coexistence reflects an epistemology that privileges experiential approximation and human-centered perception rather than absolute precision. The study contributes to cross-linguistic research on measurement, embodiment, and linguistic worldview.

**Keywords:** cognitive linguistics; linguistic worldview; Vietnamese; embodied measurement; hand-based items; cross-linguistic comparison

### 1. Introduction

In contemporary linguistics, language is no longer viewed merely as a neutral tool for communication but as a culturally embedded system that reflects how speakers conceptualize and categorize reality. Cognitive linguistics, in particular, emphasizes that linguistic meaning is grounded in human experience and shaped by culturally specific modes of perception. One influential notion in this tradition is the concept of the *linguistic worldview* - the idea that each language encodes a particular way of seeing and structuring the world (Trier, 1931; Stepanov, 1996).

<sup>a</sup> TICES, Thang Long University (minhtt@thanglong.edu.vn)

<sup>b</sup> Hanoi National University of Education (hapt@hnue.edu.vn)

Measurement constitutes a revealing domain for investigating linguistic worldview. While modern societies rely on standardized, scientifically defined items, many languages retain systems of approximate measurement rooted in the human body. Vietnamese is a striking example, as it maintains a rich set of lexical items that denote measurement by hand and arm and remain active in everyday usage. This study aims to investigate these hand-based approximate measurement items in Vietnamese in order to uncover the cultural and cognitive principles underlying their persistence. In particular, the paper addresses the following questions: (1) How are Vietnamese hand-based measurement items semantically structured? (2) What cultural worldview do they reflect? (3) How do they differ from corresponding items in English?

## 2. Literature review and theoretical framework

### 2.1. Cultural identity and linguistic imprint

This study adopts a multi-layered theoretical framework integrating philosophical linguistics, structural semantics, and cultural linguistics. At the philosophical level, Humboldt conceptualized language not as a static product (*ergon*) but as an ongoing activity (*energeia*), through which speakers continuously construct and interpret reality (Humboldt, 1836/1999). From this perspective, language does not merely label a pre-existing world; rather, it actively shapes human perception and cognition. Central to Humboldt's thought is the idea that each language embodies a distinctive *Weltansicht* (worldview). According to Humboldt, "the diversity of languages is not a diversity of signs and sounds but a diversity of views of the world" (Humboldt, 1836/1999, p. 60). This idea has been further developed in Slavic and cognitive linguistic traditions. According to Stepanov (1996), language encodes a culturally mediated model of reality that guides perception and interpretation. This view aligns closely with the theory of embodied cognition proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), which argues that abstract concepts are grounded in bodily experience.

At the structural-semantic level, Trier's lexical field theory explains how worldview-based orientations are systematically encoded in vocabulary, as lexical items form relational systems that segment reality in language-specific ways (Trier, 1931).

At the cultural-linguistic level, Stepanov's notion of the **linguistic picture of the world** emphasizes that language stores historically accumulated cultural experience and everyday practices, allowing linguistic structures to be interpreted as cultural imprints rather than neutral representations (Stepanov, 1996).

These perspectives are further supported by contemporary cognitive linguistics, including embodied realism (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), alternate construals (Wąsik et al., 2012), and conceptual integration, forming a non-deterministic framework in which language reflects culturally grounded construals without being assumed to determine cognition.

In Vietnamese linguistics, scholars have repeatedly emphasized the close relationship between language, culture, and cognition. Lý Toàn Thắng (2005) demonstrates that Vietnamese lexical structures encode experiential and culturally grounded ways of thinking. Nguyễn Đức Tồn (2002) also argues that language serves as a repository of collective cultural knowledge accumulated through generations.

## ***2.2 Measurement as a cultural and cognitive category***

The human body functions as a primary cognitive reference point. Measurement based on body parts such as hands, arms, feet is therefore not arbitrary but reflects a fundamental human strategy for making sense of the physical world. Measurement systems are not neutral technical conventions but expressions of how a speech community habitually relates to space, quantity, and material reality.

A key theoretical pillar is embodied realism, which holds that human reason and linguistic meaning are grounded in bodily experience rather than abstract, disembodied cognition (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Hand-based measurement items emerge directly from physical interaction with the environment and therefore constitute a primary illustration of this principle. Cognitive linguistics assumes that fundamental mechanisms such as categorization, schematization, and quantification are rooted in shared bodily experience and recurrent patterns of action.

The emergence and productivity of hand-based measurement items are further explained through the mechanisms of conceptual metaphor and conceptual metonymy. Metaphor enables speakers to understand abstract domains such as quantity or magnitude through more concrete bodily domains, while metonymy allows a salient, easily perceivable aspect (e.g., a hand span) to stand for a measurement unit. In this way, a physical gesture becomes conventionalized as a linguistic measure. These processes illustrate how bodily experience is systematically mapped onto abstract conceptual structure.

Historically, measurement systems developed long before scientific standardization and were deeply embedded in everyday practices. Stepanov (1996) notes that early measurement relied heavily on the human body, resulting in items that were inherently

approximate and variable. In Vietnamese, this legacy remains visible in a wide range of lexical items denoting non-exact measurement.

Nguyễn Tài Căn (1975) and Phạm Đức Dương (2007) point out that Vietnamese uniquely preserves both precise and approximate measurement systems in parallel. Many approximate items arise through metonymic transfer from body parts or bodily actions, such as extending the arms or grasping objects with the hand (Đinh Văn Đức, 2001). These items are not marginal or archaic but are actively used in daily communication.

Cross-linguistic research suggests that while many European languages once possessed similar body-based items, modernization and scientific development have led to their standardization or disappearance. As Kramsch (1998) and Lado (2003) observe, Western languages increasingly favor precision and abstraction, reducing the role of embodied, context-dependent measurement.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the semantics and cultural underpinnings of Vietnamese hand-based measurement vocabulary. A set of ten Vietnamese lexical items denoting approximate measurements by hand or arm was selected based on clear criteria. First, all chosen terms represent conventionalized units of measure derived from hand/arm references, ensuring they are genuinely lexicalized (listed as entries in authoritative sources) rather than ad-hoc descriptive phrases. Second, the items were drawn from *Hoàng Phê's* Vietnamese dictionary (1998) for their frequency and cultural salience, meaning they are well-attested in everyday usage and culturally significant. The selection spans two semantic domains – length/distance and quantity/amount – in order to provide a comprehensive view of this subsystem. Specifically, the items analyzed include *cánh* (“arm” as a length measure), *đốt* (“finger joint”), *gang* (“hand span”), *sải* (“arm span”), *bốc* (“a handful of”), *dúm/nhúm* (“a pinch of”), *ôm* (“an armful of”), *nắm* (“a handful of”), *túm* (“a small bunch grabbed in hand”), and *vốc* (“a double handful of”). Each of these terms encodes an inherently approximate magnitude (since individual hand sizes vary) and reflects a traditional, body-based mode of quantification in Vietnamese.

In the analysis, each selected item’s lexical meaning and usage were examined through its dictionary definitions and example contexts, focusing on semantic nuances and typical collocations. We qualitatively analyzed how these words function as units of estimation in Vietnamese (for instance, their tendency to co-occur with numerals and measure phrases, and any pragmatic constraints on their use). To address the cross-

linguistic dimension, the study explicitly compares the Vietnamese terms with their closest English equivalents. This involved consulting English reference materials (e.g. the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2020) for definitions and usage examples of candidate equivalents like *handful*, *span*, *pinch*, etc. The principles of comparison included examining semantic granularity (the level of detail each language encodes; e.g. Vietnamese distinguishes *nhúm*, *nắm*, *vốc*, *ôm*, whereas English might subsume several notions under “handful” or “bundle”), embodiment in meaning (whether the term explicitly incorporates a body-part reference, as *gang* “hand-span” does, versus English *span* which does not), and degree of lexicalization (whether English uses a single lexical item or a phrase to convey the same concept, as with *vốc* requiring “double handful”). By analyzing dictionary meanings alongside real usage, we clarified how each Vietnamese item’s meaning converges or diverges from English usage. For example, we assessed whether English has a direct single-word counterpart or only an approximate translation, and noted cases where English standardized measures (e.g. *hand* in horse height) historically arose from body-based approximations. This comparative approach ensures that our analysis not only details the Vietnamese system on its own terms but also highlights cross-linguistic contrasts in how languages encode measurement concepts.

#### 4. Analysis and results

Before examining specific words, it is necessary to clarify what counts as an “approximate measurement item” in this study. We use this term to refer to a lexicalized unit of measure that conveys an imprecise quantity or length, typically grounded in a human-body reference, and used conventionally in the language. In other words, an approximate measurement item is a single lexical item (or a compound fixed expression) that signifies “about this much” of something, as determined by hand/arm size or action, rather than an exact numeric value. Such terms differ from casual ad hoc estimations or purely descriptive phrases because they are established parts of the vocabulary with agreed meanings. For instance, *nắm* (“a handful”) is a lexical item indicating an approximate quantity (what fits in one grasp of the hand), whereas saying “*khoảng một nắm*” or “*about a handful*” in English is a free phrase using the general word “about.” The items of interest here are those that Vietnamese speakers can use without additional qualifiers to estimate an amount or distance in a culturally normalized way. These stand in contrast to non-lexical strategies of estimation (e.g., simply using terms like *khoảng* “approximately” with a standard unit, or gesturing with one’s hand without naming a unit). In summary, the lexicalized approximate measurement terms are those encoded in

the dictionary with specific meanings (e.g. *gang* as a measure of length) as opposed to spontaneous or purely context-dependent estimations.

Having defined the scope, the analysis classifies the Vietnamese hand-based measurement items into two subsystems: (1) length/distance terms vs. (2) quantity/amount terms, reflecting the primary types of dimensions they measure. In the following subsections, we examine each group in detail, illustrating their meanings, usage patterns, and any metaphorical extensions. We also compare each item with English expressions to identify cross-linguistic similarities or gaps. This reveals how Vietnamese preserves a finer-grained set of approximate measures than English, underscoring cultural and cognitive differences in approaching measurement.

#### 4.1 Length and distance items

- **đốt** (*measurement unit*) (*based on the finger*) (*a length equivalent to one finger joint*).

Example: *Cho hai đốt nước là đủ rồi.*

(“Two finger-joints of water are enough.”)

- **gang** (*measurement unit*) (*based on the hand*) (*a length equivalent to the distance from the tip of one finger to the tip of another when the hand is stretched*).

Examples: *Thêm vài gang nữa là được cái bếp đẹp rồi; Tôi đánh một con dao, cán ba gang, lưỡi một sải, mài bảy ngày* ([www.cinet.gov.vn](http://www.cinet.gov.vn)).

(“Add a few more hand-spans and the stove will look good”; “I forged a knife, with a handle three *gang* long and a blade one *sải* long, polishing it for seven days.”)

- **sải** (*measurement unit*) (*based on the arms*) (*a length equivalent to the distance between the two hands when the arms are fully extended*).

Example: *Từ đầu sân này đến đầu sân kia dài khoảng ba sải thôi.*

(“From one end of the yard to the other is about three arm-spans.”)

The distances measured by these items cannot be precise, since the size of hands, arms, arm spans, and finger joints varies from person to person. Nevertheless, to a certain extent, they function as practical and convenient “measuring tools” for estimating distance or size in situations where measuring instruments are unavailable and absolute precision is not required.

Because these items function as approximate measurement items, they typically co-occur with numerals in pre-modifying position. For example: *Vậy là cứ được ba bốn vốc tôm, tôi lại ném lên bờ cho Bống một con tôm càng* ([www.veffa.info](http://www.veffa.info)); *Mảnh vườn nhỏ của bà tôi chỉ rộng chừng vài sải nhưng cũng đủ thứ rau cỏ xanh tươi.*

(“Every three or four handfuls of shrimp, I would throw one crayfish ashore for Bồng”; “My grandmother’s small garden is only a few arm-spans wide, yet it contains a rich variety of vegetables.”)

At the same time, these items generally do not combine with post-modifying elements, except when the specific measuring body part is explicitly specified, such as *tay* ‘hand’ or *ngón tay* ‘finger’. For example: *Tuyết ở đây chỉ dày chừng một hai thước, ngón cỏ nhô lên ba đốt ngón tay*. ([www.scribd.com](http://www.scribd.com)) “The snow here is only one or two feet thick, and the grass tips rise about three finger joints above it.”)

The meanings of these words as measurement items are, for the most part, not their original meanings. Rather, they arise through semantic shift from lexical items denoting parts of the hand or arm (e.g. *cánh tay*, *đốt ngón tay*) or from verbs describing hand actions (e.g. *sải tay* ‘to stretch the arms fully’). These shifts occur primarily through metonymy, motivated by objective experiential factors, and have become conventionalized in everyday usage. In some cases, further metaphorical extensions develop to express more abstract meanings. For instance, in the expression *Hai nhà cách nhau chỉ hai gang mà sao chẳng thấy sang chơi thế này* (“The two houses are only two *gang* apart, yet there is no visiting”), *gang* still functions as a unit of measurement, but no longer refers strictly to the physical distance between fingertips. Instead, it conveys the abstract notion of *very close proximity*. This metaphorical meaning is also attested in Vietnamese folk poetry: *Ước gì sông rộng một gang / Bắc cầu dài yếm cho chàng sang chơi* (“If only the river were one hand-span wide, I would lay down my yếm strap as a bridge for you to cross.”)

Distance items derived from hand-related body parts and actions in Vietnamese may thus be considered highly distinctive. When translated into English, no direct equivalent is available that fully captures their semantic specificity. For example, *gang* is often translated as *span*, which in English is defined as “the width of something from one side to the other.” While both refer to an indeterminate distance, *gang* explicitly encodes the measuring instrument (the human hand), whereas *span* does not.

Similarly, *đốt*, denoting both a finger joint and a measurement based on that joint, has no counterpart in English. This reflects a fundamental difference in how Vietnamese and English segment objective reality within the semantic field of body parts. Such differences in linguistic categorization contribute to what scholars describe as the *linguistic picture of the world*.

Within philosophy and linguistics, the notion of the linguistic picture of the world has been interpreted in various ways. Larochette defines it as the total conceptual content

through which a language represents reality; O'Hman argues that humans form their worldview not independently but through language; and Trier maintains that each language divides reality in its own way, thereby constructing its own conceptual system (as cited in Đỗ Hữu Châu, 2005). Nevertheless, according to the principle of linguistic complementarity, the “core” elements of these worldviews, particularly basic body-part terms, tend to coincide across languages. Comparative studies of body-part lexicons in English and Vietnamese confirm that primary meanings often correspond, consistent with the universal principle of “*man as the measure of all things*.” However, secondary meanings such as those related to measurement highlight cultural and cognitive differences more sharply.

Returning to Vietnamese approximate distance items, it is evident that clarification in English translation often requires phrasal constructions, for example translating *sải tay* as *arm's length* or *full span of the arms*. The unit *hand* may be regarded as a partial equivalent of *gang tay* and is attested in multiple cultures. In English-speaking countries such as the UK, the US, Australia, and Canada, *hand* is used as a unit for measuring the height of horses.

Overall, hand-based distance items such as *sải* and *đốt* rarely function as independent measurement items in English. To explain this phenomenon, cultural and linguistic differences between Vietnamese and English-speaking societies must be taken into account. While many cultures conceptualize approximate distance, not all develop distinct lexical labels for such items. Moreover, as societies undergo scientific and technological development, approximate measures may gradually become standardized. The English unit *foot* - defined as 12 inches or 30.48 centimeters - may have originated as an imprecise body-based estimate before being standardized through scientific convention. Similarly, *hand* has been standardized as a unit equal to four inches.

This suggests that historically, other languages may have possessed approximate body-based measurement terms that were later lost or formalized under pressures of standardization. In Vietnamese, however, the continued coexistence of precise and approximate measurement systems constitutes evidence of a culturally relative approach to quantification, deeply rooted in agrarian ways of life.



## 4.2 Quantity and amount items

Alongside hand-based items used to estimate distance and length, Vietnamese also possesses a set of lexical items employed to quantify amount through manual action. These expressions do not denote exact numerical values but function as approximate measurement items grounded in everyday experience. The following analysis focuses on quantity-denoting items formed through the use of the hand - particularly the palm and fingers - and examines their meanings, combinatory patterns, and semantic extensions in actual usage.

- **Bốc** (*quantity*) (*contained in the palm of the hand*) (*used to take loose or soft materials*) (*using the entire palm, with the hand in a downward-facing position*)

Example: *Con bé cầm mấy bốc gạo đi đâu kia!*

(Hey, where's that girl going with a few handfuls of rice?)

- **Dúm / nhúm**

1. (*quantity*) (*small*) (*taken in a single action*) (*with the fingers gathered together*).

Example: *Tôi đút vào túi quần cho nó nửa thanh lương khô BA-70, quỳ thả một nhúm đất khẩn thầm...* (vântuyen.net)

(“I slipped half a BA-70 ration bar into his trouser pocket, knelt down, and dropped a small pinch of soil while praying silently.”)

2. (*quantity*) (*very small*).

Example: *Thành Cát Tư Hãn chỉ một dúm kỵ binh làm sao đánh bại trăm vạn quân Kim* ([www.scribd.com](http://www.scribd.com))

(“How could Genghis Khan, with only a tiny handful of cavalry, defeat hundreds of thousands of Jin troops?”)

- **Ôm** (*quantity*) (*contained neatly within the span of both arms*)

Example: *Lành vợ một ôm lá khô ném vào rồi châm lửa đốt.* (<http://www.thuvien-ebook.com>)

(“Lành gathered an armful of dry leaves, threw them in, and set them on fire.”)

- **Nắm**

1. (*small mass*) (*tightly compressed*) (*formed by curling the fingers into the palm and holding firmly*).

Example: *Mang mấy nắm cơm đi đường ăn cho đỡ đói.*

(“Take a few handfuls of rice to eat on the way.”)

2. (*quantity*) (*loose material*) (*able to be held tightly in the palm*).

Example: *Có đứa vốc cả nắm gạo ập vào mồm, nhai rào rào* ([www.cinet.gov.vn](http://www.cinet.gov.vn))

(“Someone scooped an entire handful of rice into his mouth and chewed noisily.”)

3. (*quantity*) (*very small or depleted*).

Example: *Người chỉ còn nắm xương, nắm da.*

(“The person was reduced to skin and bones.”)

- **Túm** (*quantity*) (*items of the same kind*) (*held together in the palm*).

Example: *Trước cửa hàng phở thường treo vài túm tỏi.*

(“Several small bunches of garlic are often hung in front of the noodle shop.”)

- **Vốc** (*quantity*) (*used to take loose material or liquid*) (*contained in the palm*) (*using a cupped hand or both hands*) (*with the hand facing upward and fingers tightly gathered*).

Example: *Anh ấy vãi cả vốc nước lên mặt.*

(“He splashed a full double handful of water onto his face.”)

Among the words denoting approximate measurement items in Group 2, some items have more than one meaning referring to non-exact quantification, such as *nhúm* and *nắm*. Like the distance-measuring items, these words do not express exact quantities but nevertheless function as effective items when estimation is required. The only instrument used for quantification here is the human hand, primarily the palm. Moreover, most of these words encode the shape of the hand, allowing the hearer to perceive not only the quantity but also the physical form of the measured object.

As with Group 1 and Group 2 words usually combine with numerals placed before them. However, unlike distance items, they typically require a noun following them to avoid semantic incompleteness. Due to their origin as transitive verbs, they normally select an affected object, and after semantic shift into measurement items, the noun that follows becomes the object being measured. The specific semantic features of each word lead to differences in the material properties of the nouns they can modify.

Because of the semantic features (*hand facing upward*) and (*fingers tightly gathered*), *vốc* is the only word in this group that can combine with nouns denoting liquids, since one can *vốc nước* (“scoop water”) but not *bốc nước*, *nắm nước*, or *túm nước*. With the semantic features (*quantity*) and (*contained within an arm-span*), *ôm* cannot combine with liquid nouns, nor with small loose materials, unless an additional noun denoting a container is present (one may *ôm hoa* or *ôm rom*, but not *ôm cát*, *ôm muối*, or *ôm gạo*).

The quantitative meanings of these words are generally not their original meanings but arise mainly through semantic shifts. To identify these as transferred meanings, reference is made to dictionary data and to common patterns of semantic change in Vietnamese, particularly the container-contained metonymy. Names of containers often

function as non-exact quantifiers, such as *túi* (bag), *thúng* (basket), *cốc* (cup), *xẻng* (shovel), *muôi* (ladle), *thìa* (spoon), *bát* (bowl), *rổ* (basket), and *sọt* (lattice basket).

When examining approximate hand-based quantity items in Group 2, it can be observed that all these words originally functioned as verbs, which can be regarded as their primary meanings. In accordance with general principles of language development and under the influence of culturally shaped modes of thinking, these words underwent a semantic shift via the action-unit metonymy, enriching the Vietnamese inventory of approximate measurement items. Some words further developed secondary metaphorical meanings expressing insignificance or scarcity, such as *dúm/nhúm* and *nắm*. Examples: *Ở đây chỉ có một dúm người thôi*; *Người chỉ còn nắm xương, nắm da*.

The mechanism by which measurement meanings are formed through action-unit metonymy is not uncommon in Vietnamese and can also be observed in items such as *xúc*, *mức*, and *xâu*, which involve actions performed with tools.

Semantic comparison between these items and their counterparts in other languages can help clarify cultural and national characteristics embedded in vocabulary.

Most Group 2 items, particularly palm-based quantifiers such as *vốc*, *nhúm*, *dúm*, and *nắm*, are translated into English using the word *handful*. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2020), *handful* is defined as “the amount of something that can be held in one hand,” and metaphorically as “a small number of people or things.” However, closer examination shows that this definition does not fully encompass the meaning of *vốc*, which requires the expression *a double handful* in English. Furthermore, *handful* does not encode specific information about hand shape or posture.

Other words such as *túm*, *ôm*, *xách*, and *véo* have approximate equivalents in English, but these are not derived through semantic shift from actions that create the items. Instead, they are independently named items, such as *bundle*. Even *handful* itself is not the result of semantic transfer but rather a morphological derivation from *hand*. This difference reflects the influence of language typology and culturally conditioned modes of word formation. Overall, these comparisons clearly show that Vietnamese divides objective reality within the domain of quantity measurement more finely than English.

## 5. Discussion

The analysis of Vietnamese hand-based approximate measurement items demonstrates that these expressions constitute a coherent linguistic subsystem grounded in bodily experience, entrenched lexical conventions, and culturally shaped modes of quantification. Although such items do not provide numerically precise values, they function effectively as conventional tools for estimation in everyday contexts, particularly where experiential judgment and practical adequacy are prioritized. In Vietnamese daily life, being “approximately right” often suffices for communicative purposes – a reflection of pragmatic attitudes that prioritize usefulness over exactness.

From a Humboldtian perspective, the persistence of hand-based measurement items in Vietnamese reflects a human-scaled worldview in which bodily experience serves as a primary reference point. Expressions such as *hai gang* (“two hand-spans”) or *một nắm gạo* (“a handful of rice”) construct meaning through experiential accessibility rather than numerical precision, supporting Humboldt’s claim that language actively shapes perception by organizing reality around culturally salient, human-sized experience (Humboldt, 1836/1999). Measurement, in this sense, is not a neutral technical operation but a linguistically mediated way of relating the world to the human body.

At the level of lexical organization, the Vietnamese system exhibits a high degree of semantic granularity. Distinctions such as *nhúm* vs. *nắm* vs. *vốc* vs. *ôm* form a tightly structured lexical field that encodes fine-grained differences in quantity, hand posture, and bodily configuration. These terms are not interchangeable; each is constrained by specific semantic and pragmatic features, resulting in a finely articulated system of approximate quantification. In contrast, English (as well as other Western languages) tends to collapse such distinctions into a smaller set of general terms (e.g., translating all of the above as “handful” or using broad terms like “bunch”). This indicates a lower lexical differentiation in the semantic domain of informal measurement in English, consistent with an orientation toward standardized measurement.

From Stepanov’s cultural-linguistic perspective, the roots of this Vietnamese pattern lie in sociocultural practice and history. Vietnam’s long agrarian tradition has meant that for centuries most measurements in daily life were made with the body or whatever was at hand, not with standardized instruments. In a traditional farming or market context, approximation and sufficiency were not merely tolerated but valued as perfectly adequate for the tasks at hand. For example, a farmer dividing seedlings or a cook measuring rice could rely on arm-spans or handfuls, guided by a sense of “just

enough” for their purpose. The continued coexistence of embodied, hand-based measures alongside modern metric units is therefore culturally meaningful rather than a backward relic. It reflects a worldview in which practical sufficiency often outweighs the need for absolute precision. Indeed, Vietnamese culture harbors the notion of *đủ dùng*, or “enough to use,” illustrating that knowing an exact number is less important than knowing one has roughly the required amount. This cultural emphasis on functional adequacy helps explain why speakers still find these traditional terms useful and appropriate in many contexts. As Nguyễn Tài Căn (1975) and Phạm Đức Dương (2007) observe, Vietnamese uniquely preserves its indigenous system of non-exact, body-based measures in parallel with scientific measurements, a dual system that carries the imprint of its history and way of life. These lexical habits encode accumulated community experience from activities like cooking, farming, and trade, where exact measurement is often unnecessary or impractical. In short, the resilience of hand-based measurement terms is supported by cultural attitudes that do not demand pinpoint accuracy in everyday exchanges, instead privileging a shared understanding of “about how much” based on human experience.

Taken together, the findings align with cognitive-linguistic accounts that emphasize embodiment, construal, and cultural mediation in meaning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Wąsik et al., 2012). The contrast with English suggests that Vietnamese speakers operate with a culturally shaped frame in which relative sufficiency and experiential judgment are more salient than numerical exactness. An agrarian-influenced worldview, in which doing things “by eye” or “by hand” is normalized, has left a linguistic trace in the form of these vivid measurement terms. The sustained parallel use of precise and imprecise measurement systems in Vietnamese highlights a culturally embedded tolerance for approximation, revealing how language can preserve multiple modes of understanding the world – one grounded in scientific exactitude and another in lived, body-based experience.

In contemporary Vietnamese, hand-based approximate measurement expressions are most prevalently used in informal, spoken contexts where precision is not critical. Daily conversation provides many opportunities for their use: for instance, family members discussing recipes may say *một nhúm muối* (“a pinch of salt”) or *một nắm gạo* (“a handful of rice”) when cooking, relying on shared intuition rather than exact weights. In describing physical dimensions, a person might mention *vài gang* (“a few hand-spans”) to convey the width of a small yard or the length of a piece of cloth in casual talk. Such expressions frequently appear in marketplace interactions and rural settings. Vendors and buyers in traditional markets might still transact in terms like *nắm* or *ôm* –

for example, selling vegetables by the bundle or asking for a double-handful of peanuts – especially when trading in small quantities where using scales is unnecessary. The use of these terms in face-to-face bargaining situations fosters a sense of familiarity and trust, as both parties draw on a common embodied understanding of quantity. Furthermore, hand-based measures feature in oral storytelling and folk expressions, lending imagery and cultural flavor. Folktales, proverbs, and folk songs may reference units like *gang* or *sải* to describe distances in a picturesque, relatable manner (as seen in the folk verse about a river “*one hand-span wide*” serving as a metaphor for closeness). In these narrative contexts, the expressions not only convey measurement but also carry connotations of tradition and locality.

In terms of sociolinguistic variation, these approximate measurement items are widely understood across regions of Vietnam, though there may be minor dialectal preferences (for instance, the synonym *dúm* for *nhúm* “pinch” in some areas). Generally, the core set of terms is part of the national lexicon and is taught or picked up informally by speakers from an early age, often through family interaction and observation. There is some indication that rural and older generations make more frequent use of these expressions, reflecting the greater relevance of traditional measures in agrarian lifestyles. Urban younger speakers, while fully comprehending terms like *gang* or *nắm*, might use them less often in daily city life where standard units (meters, kilograms) are prevalent and goods come pre-packaged. Nonetheless, even younger Vietnamese employ these terms in casual settings or to evoke a folksy, relatable tone. Importantly, register and formality influence usage: one would not use an approximate term like *ôm* (“armful”) in a formal report or business transaction, but it is perfectly natural in everyday conversation, storytelling, or other informal communications. Thus, these hand-based measurement items thrive in the oral, colloquial strata of the language, serving as a linguistic marker of shared cultural background and pragmatic efficiency. Their ongoing use in appropriate social contexts underlines their role in keeping Vietnam’s cultural heritage alive in language, even as precise metrics dominate in formal domains.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has investigated Vietnamese hand-based approximate measurement lexical items as a culturally embedded and cognitively motivated subsystem of the lexicon. The analysis demonstrates that these expressions are not peripheral or obsolete, but systematic and conventionalized linguistic resources that remain productive in contemporary

Vietnamese. Their continued use indicates that approximation constitutes a meaningful mode of quantification rather than a transitional stage toward standardized measurement.

From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, the findings reinforce the centrality of embodiment and linguistic worldview in meaning construction. Vietnamese hand-based measurement items encode magnitude through bodily experience, anchoring quantification in perceptual and motor schemas rather than abstract numerical scales. In doing so, they reflect a culturally preferred construal of measurement that prioritizes human-scale perception and experiential sufficiency.

The cross-linguistic comparison with English highlights important differences in lexical organization and cultural orientation. Whereas English has largely reduced or standardized body-based measurement terms, Vietnamese preserves a finer degree of semantic differentiation, particularly in the domain of quantity. This contrast illustrates how languages segment shared experiential domains in distinct ways, shaped by historical, social, and cultural conditions.

Finally, the pragmatic distribution of these items confirms that approximate measurement in Vietnamese is context-sensitive and functionally motivated, occurring primarily in informal, embodied, and interactional settings. The coexistence of approximate and precise measurement systems thus reflects a culturally embedded tolerance for approximation, offering insight into how language sustains multiple epistemic modes of knowing and measuring the world.

**Note:** This article is a revised and substantially expanded version of Trần Thị Minh & Phạm Thị Hà (2016), “*Hiểu thêm về nhóm từ chỉ đơn vị tính toán, đo lường trong tiếng Việt được xác định bằng tay*” (*Understanding More about the Measure Words Estimated by “Hand”*), *Journal of Language and Life* (Vietnam), pp. 9–15. The present study develops the earlier work by providing a more detailed theoretical grounding and a deeper semantic, cultural, and cross-linguistic analysis.

## References

- Dürscheid, C. (2005). *Linguistik und Kultur: Eine Einführung*. Universitätsverlag eidelberg.
- Hoàng Phê (1998). *Từ điển tiếng Việt* [Vietnamese Dictionary]. Nxb. Hong Duc.
- Humboldt, W. von. (1999). *On language: On the diversity of human language construction and its influence on the mental development of the human species* (M. Losonsky, Ed.; P. Heath, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. Original work published 1836)
- Kramsch, C. (1998). *Language and culture*. Oxford University Press.

- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lado, R. (2003). *Linguistics across cultures* (Vietnamese trans.). Nxb Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội. (Original work published 1957)
- Lý Toàn Thắng (2005) *Ngôn ngữ học tri nhận từ lí thuyết đại cương đến thực tiễn tiếng Việt* [Cognitive linguistics: From general theory to Vietnamese practice], Nxb Khoa học xã hội.
- Nguyễn Đức Tồn (2002). *Tìm hiểu đặc trưng văn hóa - dân tộc của ngôn ngữ và tư duy ở người Việt* [Exploring Language, culture, and Vietnamese cognition]. Nxb Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội.
- Nguyễn Tài Cẩn (1975). *Noun classes in modern Vietnamese*. Nxb Khoa học Xã hội.
- Oxford University Press. (2020). *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary*. <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com>
- Phạm, Đức Dương (2007). *Bức tranh ngôn ngữ-văn hóa tộc người ở Việt Nam và Đông Nam Á* [Linguistic and cultural worldviews in Vietnam and Southeast Asia]. Nxb Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội.
- Stepanov, Y. (1996). *Language and culture*. Oxford University Press.
- Trier, J. (1931). *Der deutsche Wortschatz im Sinnbezirk des Verstandes*. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Wąsik, Z., Czajka, P., & Szawerna, M. (Hrsg.). (2012). *Alternate construals in language and linguistics* (Philologica Wratislaviensia: Acta et Studia, Bd. 8). Philological School of Higher Education in Wrocław Publishing.