

Lexicography in Vietnam - Its Appearance and Development

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1. Vietnamese Lexicography: Theory and Practice

1.1 Many shortcomings will be inevitable while discussing the issue of Vietnamese lexicography on a wide scale because of the great lack of documents and their unorganized and non-systematic condition.

Looking at the primary documents on the history of Vietnamese lexicography, we have tried to systematize and describe the history of dictionary compilations in Vietnam, pointing out their characteristics.

Dictionaries are the oldest type of linguistic products. Those that are considered actual dictionaries did not appear formerly. The GLOSSARIES eventually began to take on the character of a dictionary. In glossaries, historically they generally described or explained not only the usual words but also the unusual words or those that were rarely used, including scientific and professional terms. In general, the explanation in GLOSSARIES brought out the conceptual and encyclopedic characteristics.

Those characteristics were well recognised by Asian lexicologists in the glossaries of the *Veda*, Bibles of Ancient India, and particularly in the glossaries of Ancient China, as, for example, *The Book of Poems* (Kinh Thi), *The Book of History* (Kinh Thu), *The Book of Rites and The Spring and Autumn Annals* (Kinh Xuan Thu), etc., appearing from the eleventh to the sixth century B.C. One of the glossaries of Vietnam, written in the Vietnamese ideographical characters, called **Nom**, was the *Chi nam ngoc am*. It remains until the present. It was translated and annotated into the national language (with the roman alphabet used as the official writing system in Vietnam today).

This dictionary appeared about the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century, and was written in the form of poetry. The *Chi nam ngoc am* contained 3,394 entries in which more than 1,060 entries were scientific and professional terms. The glossaries and dictionaries which appeared quite early in Vietnam have shown that Vietnamese lexicography was born quite a long time ago but it is a strange thing that the Vietnamese theoretical lexicography only appeared during the last years of this present century. Dictionaries of all kinds have been made in spite of the absence of a theory of lexicography.

To be precise, in some of the dictionaries published at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century, there were a few pages reserved for a short lexicological summary, as described in the *Words and lexicological inventory of the modern Vietnamese language* by Prof. Nguyen Van Tu, published in 1976.

A few articles about lexicography appeared in some linguistic magazines in the form of short book reviews about a certain newly published dictionary. In 1982, Dr. Nguyen Trong Bau reserved a whole chapter (the 5th chapter of an anthology) discussing the classification and types of dictionaries.

From 1984 through 1986, the magazine *Encyclopedic Knowledge* was edited by the National Center for Encyclopedic Dictionaries of Vietnam. It has published some articles concerning the editing of Encyclopedias, pointing out the problems of theoretical lexicography. But unfortunately the magazine ceased its publishing in 1987. Theoretical lexicography is still an actual necessity to be encouraged and it should go hand in hand and side by side with practical lexicography in order to be a complete scientific branch of Vietnamese linguistics.

1.2 The Writing System of the Vietnamese Language

Dictionaries only appeared when there was a writing system that was generally used as the national language. This was quite a delicate problem in Vietnam in its historical situation. Some Vietnamese lexicographers believe that the Vietnamese **Nom** characters were invented by Vietnamese as early as the tenth century. **Nom** was the pictographic writing to record ideas of the Vietnamese language as well as the pronunciation. Many of the grand writers and poets of Vietnam had written using the **Nom** characters for their greatest and their best works in the Vietnamese literature.

Despite their real existence, the Vietnamese pictograms have never yet been recognized as national Vietnamese writing even until today. The national writing then continued to be only Chinese characters in all official texts of the State, in education, and in examinations and publishing of all written works. Under the Chinese domination, the ruling class obligated the Vietnamese to use the system of Chinese characters and later this system became the Vietnamese national writing until during the twenties of this present century.

The **Nom** characters have existed parallel with the Chinese characters, but they were only used by some intellectuals. That is why it was nothing extraordinary that even in the beginning, as in the time following, dictionaries have been only bilingual ones, the foreign and the Vietnamese language, e.g. Chinese-Vietnamese (**Nom**), or Vietnamese (**Nom**)-Chinese.

The second period of systematizing the Vietnamese written language was marked by the edition of the *Dictionarium annamiticum, lusitanum et latinum* in 1651 by the Christian missionary Alexandre De Rhodes. It was a polilingual dictionary comparing the Vietnamese language with other foreign ones. The Vietnamese writing here used the roman alphabet and followed phonetic principles. This Vietnamese writing was invented by some of the European missionaries with the cooperation of some Vietnamese priests. At the time of the publishing of this dictionary, this new system of Vietnamese writing was largely used by the foreign missionaries to preach and to translate the Bible into the Vietnamese language, but only a very few of the Vietnamese priests and the Catholics learned it. Most of the Vietnamese people did not know about the existence of the romanized writing, nor did their contemporary authorities.

And so at that time, there were in Vietnam three systems of writing Vietnamese: the Chinese characters for official papers of the State, the Vietnamese **Nom** script used by the people and the romanized Vietnamese writing for priests and Catholics. It was only in our present century that the roman system of writing has been able to become the national writing system for the Vietnamese language. Step by step, this system has driven the Chinese characters (while being official writing) into being a foreign language. This also explains why for so long there were only Vietnamese and foreign language bilingual dictionaries in Vietnam.

1.3 History of Dictionary Compilation in Vietnam

We can divide the history of Vietnamese dictionary compilation into three periods with their clear characteristics.

- 1) The first period began with the edition of the *Chi nam ngoc am* during the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries. It was a dictionary written in poetry, with encyclopedic type explanations, and it was bilingual, comparing Chinese characters and Vietnamese Nom script. This period was ended with the edition of the *The Vietnamese Language Dictionary*, in two volumes in 1895-1896 by Huynh Tinh Paulus Cua (Vietnamese). It was a linguistic dictionary explaining the Vietnamese language written with the National writing (modern Vietnamese writing).

This first period which lasted for 400 years was characterized by the appearance of some ten great dictionaries, mainly written bilingually: Vietnamese with the foreign language or vice-versa, in which the Vietnamese was written in both Nom characters and modern latinized alphabets. It was the period of bilingual and polilingual comparative dictionaries. Another important characteristic was that all the authors of the Vietnamese-foreign language dictionaries were foreign Catholic missionaries.

- 2) The second period lasted from 1895 until 1945, before the August revolution of 1945, the year of the foundation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

This period opened with the Vietnamese, two volume, monolingual dictionary, written in national writing and by Vietnamese. Later on several monolingual Vietnamese dictionaries appeared. There were Vietnamese-French, Vietnamese-Chinese bilingual dictionaries and others, all edited by the Vietnamese themselves. The Vietnamese language and the national writing, although considered national languages, were generally treated with contempt and the French language was still officially used for teaching and examinations for even an elementary degree. In this period, Vietnamese authors were the main ones who wrote dictionaries. Here appeared, for the first time, scientific and terminological dictionaries.

- 3) The third period, from 1945 until today.

The Vietnamese language and the national writing have been used as the official national language since 1945. The State of the Democratic Republic attached a great deal of importance to this and encouraged and created favorable conditions for the development of the Vietnamese language. It was the blooming time for the Vietnamese language. Despite the hardships and difficulties of two long-lasting wars, hundreds of technical dictionaries of all branches of science were published. Many of these were specialized encyclopedias and were written at the same time as the complete Vietnamese encyclopedia. They were printed in first edition. The complete encyclopedia is still in process.

However, the theory of Vietnamese lexicography is still not given enough importance for guiding the rapid development of Vietnamese lexicography.

2. The New Developments of Vietnamese Lexicography

2.1 The formation of terminological systems and terminological dictionaries.

In developing countries, linguistics is also rapidly developing in the area of specialized vocabulary and scientific terminology. That is the norm. Unsatisfied with its original or borrowed vocabulary inventory, each scientific branch has to form its own terminological system to answer the new social development. It is the same in all the various branches of science, technology and other specialties. According to an incomplete statistical study, nearly 90% of new words are technical terms. All kinds of technical dictionaries have been edited and almost all of them were bilingual, comparing Vietnamese and a foreign language or vice-versa. They included English-Vietnamese, French-Vietnamese, Vietnamese-Japanese, Indonesian-Vietnamese, Thai-Vietnamese, Lao-Vietnamese, Khmer-Vietnamese and Russian-Vietnamese. Only after that have monolingual Vietnamese technical dictionaries and special encyclopedias been published.

Monolingual Vietnamese linguistic dictionaries of all kinds have been published more and more.

2.2 The twenty-first century: types of new dictionaries

While making the encyclopedias, their authors have found that the quantity of entries for the natural sciences are more and more numerous than those of social sciences. Going along with the magnificent development of science and technology is the explosion of information about its modern technology.

With the coming of the twenty-first century, the practical significance of documents providing information and reference materials, such as dictionaries, will increase in significance throughout the century.

The dictionary will have to become a kind of synthetical reference book for receiving information quickly, for having exact knowledge, and for searching for new information. At the same time it will play the role of linguistic and cultural education for readers (the philological character of the dictionary).

The generalized characteristics of the encyclopedia and its description of concepts and things with a super-language will be very necessary in the linking of information. The explanation of word meanings in the linguistic dictionary will be of great help. Various definitions of word meanings (explanations of entries) will be shorter, their information more compressed and more complete, and naturally it will demand the help of the newly invented technology of the country.

Therefore, a new type of dictionary is needed: that is, the encyclopedic-synthetic-explaining dictionary. The reason is that before the beginning of the twenty-first century in Vietnam there will actually be a series of specialized explaining dictionaries (even for narrow specialties) as well as a *National Complete Encyclopedia*, so that the explanation or the description of the entries of future dictionaries of the next century will need to be very meticulous and complete, as well as to have certain specialized entries.