

The Ethnic Nature in the Linguistic Expression

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1. There still remains much work to be done in the area of linguistics, for the advancement of the knowledge of everyone: the lexicographer can collect and clearly define new words or redefine old words when necessary. The updating, completing, and replacement of words often demands constant effort to modernize the information contained in each entry of monolingual as well as multilingual dictionaries.

But, in this paper, we would like to deal with another question, namely, the definition, or more specifically, the illustrations of the most common words in linguistic dictionaries. Because of documentation limitations, this present analysis is only based on some monolingual and bilingual dictionaries recently published in Vietnam.* In the following, I will examine especially the linguistic expressions of my mother tongue (the Tày-Nùng language) in comparison with Vietnamese.

2. We are living in a time when all ethnic groups want to preserve their own cultural character. This character is expressed and preserved in their vernacular. It is the comprehension of all the subtle uses of linguistic expressions in a given language that allows one to get a feeling for the ethnic identity of that language group. We can easily identify the linguistic life of the most useful words, for example those concerning one's daily food.

Because rice is the most important food of the whole area, everyone needs help from the lexicographer for comprehension of the diverse cultivating, harvesting, preserving and processing habits of the various language groups. Even just glancing at the lexical non-correspondences between the vernacular vocabularies in the area, we notice that each language is full of words and expressions specifically related to the habits of its speakers.

In Vietnam, we can use a rich imagination when we compare two languages, for example, Vietnamese (the national language) and Tày-Nùng (a minority language).

Vietnamese distinguishes contrastive rice forms by four words. The difference between these four nouns can be identified by means of the subject of the sentence. Compare:

V:	Trâu ăn lúa	E:	'The buffalo eats rice' (plants)
	Chim ăn thóc		'The bird eats rice' (unhusked grain)
	Gà ăn gạo		'The chicken eats rice' (uncooked grains)
	Người ăn cơm		'The man eats rice' (cooked)

*for example:

1. NGUYEN LUC, LƯƠNG VAN DANG, *Vietnamese Locutions*, Hanoi, Social Sciences Editions, 1978.
2. *To Tell Legends on Locutions and Proverbs*, Hanoi, Social Sciences Editions, Vols. 1 and 2, 1988, Vol. 3, 1991
3. LUC VAN PAO, *Locutions in Tày-Nùng Language* (explained in Vietnamese), Hanoi, Social Sciences, 1991.

In contrast, the Tày and the Nùng peoples have only one word in their languages: **khẩu**. When necessary, they differentiate **khẩu các /coóc** 'unhusked rice'; **khẩu slan** 'husked, uncooked rice'; and **khẩu slúc** 'plain cooked rice'.

This word is also found in idiomatic expressions: **Vần còn pần khẩu coóc nhằng thư**. 'In days gone by, there was rice at hand' = 'before, he was very rich.' **Cáy tốc bôm khẩu slan**. 'Chicken falls down into food tray' = 'he has good luck.'

The Vietnamese expression **cướp cơm chim** (lit. 'steal bird's food') means 'make a profit out of the poor' or 'take food out of someone's mouth' which is the equivalent of **xo mè nọc đốc mè nu** (lit. 'ask mother bird mother rat') in the Tày-Nùng language.

It is also possible to combine two Vietnamese words into a composite noun:

thóc + gạo --> **thóc gạo** 'rice' (in general)

thóc + lúa --> **thóc lúa** 'cereals'

These two Vietnamese composite nouns are equivalent to the composite noun, **khẩu nặm** of the Tày-Nùng language (lit. 'rice and water'): **khẩu nặm dú dang khen** (lit: 'rice and water is in shirt'), 'one has everything one needs', but in Vietnamese, **cơm nước (xong)** (lit. 'rice water finished') means 'after dinner.'

In Vietnamese, the contrast between **cơm** 'cooked rice' and **gạo** 'raw rice' can be shown in the following expressions:

cơm áo gạo tiền	(lit. 'cooked rice shirt, raw rice money') 'daily necessities'
cơm chưa ăn gạo còn dấy	(lit. 'cooked rice not yet eaten, raw rice still there') 'reserved part'
hơn cơm rẻ gạo	(lit. 'more cooked rice, cheap raw rice') 'easy material life', 'cheap goods'

The contrast between **thóc** and **gạo** are also indicated in the following expressions:

gạo bồ thóc đồng	(lit. 'raw rice in storing basket, unhusked rice in mounds') 'rich, wealthy'
dâm bị thóc chọc bị gạo	(lit. 'pierce unhusked rice basket, pierce raw rice basket') 'incite to do wicked things'

In Vietnamese expressions, **lúa** can occasionally replace **thóc**: **lúa cao gạo kém** (lit. 'rice plant tall, raw rice poor') or **thóc cao gạo kém** (lit. 'unhusked rice tall, raw rice poor') 'hard times'.

The differences between **thóc**, **gạo** and **cơm** are also marked by means of the comparative predicates which contain those nouns.

câm/(im or nín) như thóc	(lit. 'dumb [silence] like unhusked rice') 'suffer in silence'
chuyện nở như gạo rang	(lit. 'talk blown-up like puffed raw rice.') 'happy, lively, loud conversations with laughter'

như cơm bữa (lit. 'like cooked rice meal')
'often', 'frequently'

The literal translation in English as well as in the Tày-Nùng language of these expressions is not simple because these languages do not have four respective equivalents. In our preliminary collection, we found thirty expressions containing **khẩu** 'rice' in Tày-Nùng. In Vietnamese, three expressions contain **lúa** 'rice plants', ten contain **thóc** 'unhusked rice', eleven have **gạo** 'uncooked rice grains', and forty-six have **cơm** 'cooked rice'.

Upon examining the verb usage in these two languages we also find a contrast. For example, the word **kin** in Tày-Nùng has four equivalents in Vietnamese:

kin khẩu	=	ăn cơm	'to eat rice'
kin nắm	=	uống nước	'to drink water'
kin din	=	hút thuốc	'to smoke a cigarette'
kin nôm	=	bú	'to nurse' or 'to drink milk'

On the other hand, many phenomena point in the other direction. A common Vietnamese word may have several equivalents in Tày-Nùng. For example, the Vietnamese word, **chuồng** is equivalent to:

láng (vài)	'buffalo stable'
coọc (mu)	'pigsty'
lâu (pất, cây)	'chicken coop'
táu (mạ)	'horse stable'

It is noteworthy that in Vietnamese, **chuồng ngựa** 'horse stable' is also called **tàu (ngựa)**, as preserved only in the expression: **một con ngựa đau cả tàu bỏ cỏ** (lit. 'one animal horse sick, whole stable throws out grass') 'If one horse is ill, the whole stable refuses to eat.'

We can also find such contrasts in the verbs. The common words **xem** and **nhìn** 'look, watch' in Vietnamese correspond with four Tày-Nùng words, namely: **đóm** 'to see', **lè** 'to see, to look'; **ngòi** 'to watch something'; **chiếm** 'to reflect upon something'.

It is remarkable that for most of these expressions there is no lexico-semantic correspondence between these two languages in Vietnam. In other words, the use of the vocabulary is specific to the culture and the thinking of a language community, and this needs to be identified and demonstrated by the lexicographer.

We do not yet have linguistic dictionaries that provide a differentiated and complete comprehension of these typical uses. We would therefore like to profit from the occasion of this conference to discuss possibilities of cooperation between myself and other linguists for the compilation of the necessary linguistic materials from other languages in our region. This would then enable us to elaborate a multilingual dictionary of the common words and their uses. If we pay more attention to language-specific distinctions, the lexicographers may have a part in contributing, not only to better mutual understanding among the different ethnic groups, but also in the promotion of a common advance into the twenty-first century.

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