

The Irrationality of the Vietnamese Language and Suggestions for Improvement

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1. Introduction

The Quoc-ngu characters known as the Vietnamese language or Vietnamese are written in Vietnamese, and the language built on the principle of recording in Latin language (Nguyen Thien Giap, 2016, *Dictionary of Linguistics*). The Vietnamese language is known as the language created by Western missionaries when they came to Vietnam for preaching the words from the seventeenth century. While they were preaching, they borrowed Latin letters to record names, religious names, people's names, or words for communication for the purpose of preaching, translating, and printing religious texts. Initially, the recording of Vietnamese, in Latin alphabet, was not uniform because each cleric had their own way of writing in their own language. Later, during the first half of the seventeenth century, they built a more or less uniform writing style, and the Vietnamese language was born since then.

According to Nguyen Thien Giap (2016), many Vietnamese people made some collaboration or contributed to the birth of Quoc ngu characters to some extent, however, the role of Western missionaries from Portugal, Italy, and France is worth the contribution to the birth of the language. Of them was Alexandre de Rhodes from France, who summed up and perfected the construction of the language through drafting and publishing in Rome in 1661 three important works, including *Annam-Lusitan-Latin Dictionary* (1651) commonly referred to as *Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin Dictionary*, the *Concise Report of Annamese-Chinese or the Oriental*, and the *Eight-Day Teaching*.

Since the language was born, it has developed and transformed to achieve its present perfection. Today, Quoc-ngu consists of 29 letters in uppercase and lowercase respectively as in A (a), Ă (ă), Â (â), B (b), C (c), D (d), Đ (đ), E (e), Ê (ê), G (g), H (h), I (i), K (k), L (l), M (m), N (n), O (o), Ô (ô), Ó (ó), P (p), Q (q), R (r), S (s), T (t), U (u), U' (ư), V (v), X (x), và Y (y). The

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letters borrowed from the Latin alphabet system have changed slightly to match the Vietnamese language. The alphabet has 17 letters for consonants and 12 letters for vowels. In addition to the letters, the language also has 6 tones, including flat tone (ngang), hanging (huyền), sharp (sắc), asking (hỏi), tumbling (ngã) and heavy (nặng) for 6 diacritic marks accordingly, which are flat tone (no mark), acute accent (´), grave accent (`), hook above (̣), tilde (˜) and dot below (̣).

The Vietnamese language is a writing system used to record the sound based on the Latin alphabet system, with additional diacritics to record the sound characteristics. Basically, it follows the principle that each letter is used to represent a sound, each sound is represented by only one letter, and how each letter is pronounced is how it is written, and there is a high degree of compatibility between the writing and pronunciation. In addition, the fact that the number of letters is very small results in easy spelling, and it may be convenient for learning and reading. These characteristics make the language simple, accessible, and easy to learn and remember.

However, the Vietnamese language is said to have some unreasonable aspects, and therefore is incomplete. Because of the inadequacy of the language, for the past few years, the language has always been studied by linguists and language researchers and proposed solutions to improve it accordingly. The article discusses the inconsistency of the language and suggests solutions to the irrationality of the language.

2. Irrational issues of the Vietnamese language

According to researchers, the Vietnamese language is based on the principle of phonetics, which means the writing records as closely as the speaking sounds. The phonetic alphabet uses each letter to represent a phoneme, and between a phoneme and a letter forms a one-to-one relationship. In fact, however, a quadrangle is not entirely in accordance with the recording principle, there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between phonemes and letters. In addition, the heterogeneity of the rules of the diacritics, *i* and *y*, for example, and other unreasonable numbers have made the language not yet reached the highest scientific level.

2.1. The issue of multiple letters or a combination of letters to represent a phoneme.

A phoneme is represented by different letters. Specifically, the [k] in the Vietnamese language is written in three different letters, including *c*, *k*, *q*. For the word "cò kè" as an example, both *c* and *k* are pronounced [k]; or the word "quân", *q* is pronounced [k]. The rule stated here is that the [k] is denoted by the letter *k* when going with the preceding vowel sound (i, e, ε), denoted by the letter *q* if there is a phoneme of *w*, and denoted by the letter *c* for the

remaining cases. In addition, in some cases, a phoneme is represented by pairing two or three letters together, such as **ch** as in **chanh**, **gh** as in **ghế**, **nh** as in **nhớ**, **kh** as in **khóc**, **th** as in **thoải (mái)**, **ng** as in **ngang**, **ngh** as in **nghề nghiệp**, **gi** as in **gia**, or **tr** as in **trong**. A more complicated case is when one phoneme is represented by two different letters of **-nh** and **-ng** as in "**cảnh**" and "**kể**", both **-nh** and **-ng** in these two words are transcribed the same sound as [ɲ]; hence, "**cảnh**" and "**kể**" are pronounced as [kɛɲ] (Đoàn Thiện Thuật, 2003).

2.2. The issue of using a letter to write a variety of phonemes

These are cases where a letter is written by two or more distinct tones. For example, the letter **g** records the [g] sound in **gà**, **gù**, but records [z] in **giêng**, **gì**, or **giá** (in the Northern dialect), or records the [d] sound in the word **đi** (in the Southern dialect). This shows that not all letters represent a single phoneme.

2.3. The cases of gi, ng, and ngh

According to researchers, **gi** is the spelling of the Italian language, and the Vietnamese language borrowed it and used it to represent the affricate sounds. For example, **gi** is just a sign for a first syllable, and it is used to combine with **a**, **u** as in **gi-à**, **gi-ặt**, and **gi-ũ**. However, when it is paired with vowel **i**, only one letter is used. Obviously, Vietnamese does not have the word **gi-i** (gii), but the word **gì**. This case also makes it difficult for learners, especially for foreigners to learn the Vietnamese language. The students are often confused when to write **ng** as in **ngôn ngữ**, and when to write **ng** as in **ngang**, and when to write **ng** as in **nghề nghiệp**, or **nguyên nhân**.

2.4. The "i" and "y"

Another inadequacy of the Vietnamese language is agreed to have come from the implementation of the decision of the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam in 1984 when the letter **i** was asked to be used instead of **y**. Although this standard is not applied to such situation as double vowels, triple vowels and proper names, there are still many limitations in the implementation. For example, **mĩ thuật** instead of **mỹ thuật** will be written, which is readily and easily accepted; however, if **i** is equal to **y**, then **uy** will be changed into **ui**, or **ay** is transformed to **ai**. More intricately, if we write two words as in **tuy** and **tui**, we will know they differ from each other in terms of sounds and meanings. Specifically, for the word **tui**, the letter **i** is phonetically pronounced as a short vowel [j] and i is pronounced [tuj], while the word **tuy** is pronounced [twi]. If the word **tuy** is asked to be written as **tui**, this suggestion does not solve the

problem of pronunciation but also leads to difficulty in semantic interpretation. Similarly, if *y* as in the word **hay** is replaced with *i*, it will mislead to the word **hai** that means number two.

Additionally, the syllable **a** of the word **hai** has a long vowel [a] and the syllable **i** is a semi vowel [j], so the word **hai** is transcribed as [haj], while the syllable **a** of the word **hay** has a short vowel [ă] and semi-vowel *y* pronounced as [j], so **hay** is transcribed as [hăj]. Another irrationality in replacing *y* with *i* as **nguyên**, and **quyết** is that it will be changed into **nguiên** and **quieét**, which confuses people how to pronounce them and whether the adjacent **u** and **i** should be pronounced one sound or two sounds.

2.5. The inconsistent bar marking rules

The "old style" and "new style" bar marking rules have recently caused inconsistencies in teaching spelling in schools and for printing and publishing purposes. Old style rules are based on the view of keeping the diacritical marks in the middle of each word for the balance purpose. The old style of bar marking can be summed up through the example of the phrase **bị hoảng mất** in which the word **bị** and **mất** have a vowel, so the dot is placed on **i** and the rising mark is placed on **a**, while **hoảng** has two vowels and the rising mark is placed in the middle for the balance purpose. For the "new style" rules that are based on phonetics, the diacritic marks are placed on the letter position for the main tone. Thus, the rising mark shifts from **hóa** to **hoá** in the aforementioned **hóa** since **a** is the main vowel in **hóa**. Traditionally, the issue is that placing accent marks is a way of expressing the pronunciation of a certain word, not expressing the way it is written. Therefore, it cannot be used to decide how to put a mark, and it also causes difficulty processing the Vietnamese language already established on the computer.

2.6. Some other inadequacies

Regarding the writing that does not accurately reflect the phonetic aspect of the word, or phonetically with the written word, considering the letters used to represent two sounds. That is, the [w] sound is represented as **o** and **u** as in **hoà/hào, mùa/màu**, and **cao/cau**, and the [y] sound is recorded as **i** and **y** as in **mai/may**, and **tai/tay**. We see that the difference between **tai/tay** is not in the final vowels of **i** and **y** but in the vowel sound [a]. For the word **tai**, the sound [a] is long, but it is short in the word **tay**. By the same token, the sound [a] in the word **cao** is long but short in the word **cau**. Bafflingly, in the current writing, the vowel **a** in **anh ach** is commonly thought of as a long vowel, but in fact it is a short vowel. Therefore, due to various inadequacies, many solutions have been suggested to improve the Vietnamese language.

3. Suggested Solutions for Improvement

Since the Vietnamese language was born, it has developed and changed to reach the level of perfection like it is today. However, the language has some unreasonable aspects, and therefore, it is incomplete. It is irrationality that, for many years, the language has been proposed solutions to improve accordingly by linguists and researchers. If change or modification is needed, that modification should be made based on the principles of economy, rationality, concise grammar rules, and native speakers' perception (Đoàn Thiện Thuật, 2003). Therefore, it may focus on the following issues:

Firstly, it is recommended that **d** be used to represent [d] and replace **đ** with it, **z** represented by [z] to replace **d** and **gi** with it, and **f** written by [f] to replace **ph**.

Secondly, the letters **c**, **k**, **q** should refer to a single form, that is **k**, and use **c** for **ch**. For the final sound, replace **-c** as in **học** with **-k** as in **họk**. For the pre-vocalic and post-vocalic **u** and **o**, it is suggested that **u** and **o** should be uniformly represented by one single form of **w**. Therefore, **sao** will be changed into **saw**. Another issue taken into account is the vowel length. It is suggested the letter **a** as in **ay**, **au** should be replaced with **ă**. Hence, **sao** will become **saw**, and **sau** will be turned into **săw**. Thus, it is possible to see the unity in both orthography and phonetics.

Thirdly, the issue of **i** and **y** should be unified in writing by one single vowel [i]. That means, the semi vowel [-y] should be changed into **i** in all cases. For example, it should be written as **i tế, iêu, li kì, kĩ thuật** instead of **y tế, yêu, ly kỳ, và kỹ thuật**, respectively. In the cases of **uy** and **ui**, we can use the accent marking or diacritics to determine what it means and then how to write them accordingly. For example, we write **túi** as early stipulated, but **túy** should be written as **tuí**; we write **thúi**, but **thủy** should be written as **thuỉ**. Similarly, we should write the letter **a** in **ay** and **au** by **ă**. Hence, **tay** should be written as **tăi**, **hãy** for **hay**, or **mãi** for **may**.

Finally, for the unreasonable issue of reading and writing the Vietnamese language, as in the case of the endings **-nh**, **-ch**, **-ng**, and **-c**, it is necessary to agree on the principle of distribution of Vietnamese vowels before the final sounds **-nh**, **-ch**, **-ng** and **-c**. Specifically, the distribution rule states that the front vowel sounds are distributed before **-nh**, **-ch** as in **-inh**, **-ich**, and the back vowel sounds are distributed before **-ng**, **-c** as in **-ang**, **-ac**. For the cases “**anh**”, “**ach**” should be written as “**enh**”, “**ech**” so that the above distribution rules of the front vowel sounds are consistent and not exceptional. Likewise, the word **long lanh** should be written or

cognized as *long lenh* (*long lenh* for proper spelling rules although the last syllable is *long leng*), and *róc rách* should be written as *róc réch* so that the rhyme rules of *o-e* as in *mon men*, *cót két*, and *khò khè* are consistent, easy to remember, and neither exceptional nor confusing.

3. Conclusion

The Vietnamese language has a history of more than 300 years and has been associated with the development of Vietnamese history. In the development process, the language has evolved accordingly to match the development in different periods. The issue of mismatch between the sound and the letter exists in all languages. Such inadequacies of the languages in general and of the Vietnamese language in particular can be confusing and difficult for learners, especially foreigners to learn Vietnamese. Because of the inadequacies of Vietnamese, there have been many suggestions to improve or reform the language to make it standardized. However, as earlier mentioned, it is not common for a writing system or a language in the world to achieve an absolute perfection. From the common fact, one can see that if the need to improve the Vietnamese language, the work should be done in a strict, consistent and scientific manner. For the Vietnamese people, the language has become the spiritual flesh in their mind and their individual emotional life of because each Vietnamese letter is thought of as having a physical symbol but also a spiritual symbol. Therefore, although the Vietnamese language is unreasonable or imperfect, it is widely agreed that one cannot reform to "standardize" it by randomly adding or subtracting this letter or another at one's own subjective view.

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