

LANGUAGES

Exploring the Intersection of Vietnamese Culture and Language

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Abstract

The Vietnamese language is intricately intertwined with the cultural values, social structures, and historical backgrounds of Vietnam. This research gives insight into the correlation between Vietnamese culture and the Vietnamese language based on Hostede's framework (1980). Two cultural aspects of Hofstede's study, including hierarchy and collectivism, are investigated to offer an in-depth examination of how they are mirrored in the Vietnamese language. The participants of this study were Vietnamese students of English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) at Tan Tao University, Vietnam, speaking English in a daily academic environment. The findings revealed that hierarchy and collectivism have long influenced the use of the Vietnamese language in terms of pronouns, honorifics, and collective words. This study not only corroborates the discipline of sociolinguistics but also gives vital insights into cross-cultural communication and intercultural understanding.

Keywords: Vietnamese culture, correlation, Hostede's framework, hierarchy, collectivism.

Introduction

Humans are no different from other living things in the universe in that they have their own distinctive ways of conversing with and comprehending others of their own kind. They utilize language to connect with one another and establish a society in which humans are at the center. Throughout that framework, culture is constructed based on principles that individuals believe are moral and must be followed, or that are simply developed by human habit. As this research focuses on investigating how Vietnamese culture affects the Vietnamese language, several things will be disclosed to elucidate this relationship. It focuses on addressing two important arguments that enhance the thesis: Culture shapes the way Vietnamese people use their language, reflecting the fact that Vietnam is a hierarchical and collectivist nation. Before suggesting some possible solutions to these difficulties, considerable investigation and debate will be conducted.

Literature Review

Overview on Language and Culture

Language

Language is a means of communication that aids individuals in comprehending what others desire to convey. The fundamental basis of language is not

something that exists or is formed before human birth, but rather a process of learning and experience. According to Robins and Crystal [1], children can understand and learn a new language based on a process of interacting with their parents and the practice of speaking and correcting mistakes from a very young age, thereby forming and widening the language vocabulary so that they can use it and communicate in life. Chase [2] states that out of using language to communicate in life, the objective of language usage is to enable individuals to show their thoughts and somehow shape the way they perceive everything, from their point of view to others'. Indeed, language is more than simply a means of communication; it also enables individuals to freely develop and produce new ideas, resulting in multifaceted views and opinions on life. As Emmitt and Pollock (1997) note, language is an assemblage of random indicators that are accepted by numerous individuals in a group or among people in society (as cited in Sepora et al. [3]). Alternatively, Henry Sweet, a language expert and phonetician in English, claims: "Language is the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds combined into words"(as cited in Robins & Crystal [1], para. Definitions of language). From these definitions, it can be seen that the most significant value of language is that it helps people to grasp the intentions of others, making it

much easier to convey information and express the thoughts and attitudes of an individual in society as a whole.

Vietnamese Language

According to Britannica (2023), "Vietnamese" or "Tiếng Việt" is Vietnam's official language and was spoken by more than 70 million people in the early twenty-first century. It is a member "of the Viet-Muong sub-branch of the Vietic branch of the Mon-Khmer family", which is an Austroasiatic stock (para. 1). Until now, the number of people who speak this language has climbed to roughly 86.5 million all across the globe (Lo [4], sect. Facts about Vietnamese, para. Language Classification). Among those, roughly 5.3 million are residing overseas in over 130 countries [5].

People have remarked that Vietnamese is an exceptionally sophisticated language with various tones that separate it from other languages. As many people are aware, Vietnam has a lengthy and tough history, which has influenced the language. Each period of Vietnamese development has its own linguistic traits, which occasionally overlap or are independently distinct from those of earlier periods [6]. This strongly promotes the perception that Vietnamese culture is rich and traditional. Language, in some senses, is intrinsically tied to culture, which existed at the same time and influenced each other.

Culture

Culture has traditionally been related to the emergence and development of humans during the last millions of years [7]. On the path of evolution, biological or instinctual impacts eventually lessened as mankind obtained the intelligence to change the natural world for itself. By this period, human nature was no longer instinctual but cultural. Man's capacity for creativity to create the world transcends that of any other animal, and only man depends on culture rather than instinct to secure the survival of his species. Humans have the power to build culture, and as a member of a community, one acquires culture, preserves it, and transmits it from generation to generation. However, there is not actually a specific definition for the term. According to Kroeber and Kluckhohn [8], there are 164 distinct conceptions of culture. On the one hand, UNESCO defined culture as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it relevant, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs" [9]. On the other hand, in his research, Hofstede [10] characterized culture as the programming of the mind that separates a particular group of human beings from another group. Another frequent view of culture is that it is a way of life that encompasses the type of cuisine, clothes, behavior, and beliefs as well as the knowledge received (Pappas & McKelvie, 2022). It may be argued that culture is a term with vast implications and a wide range of possible interpretations that touches on all facets of a person's material and

spiritual existence. Each cultural notion expresses a unique viewpoint and assessment of people. In its widest meaning, culture is all the values developed by man on the basis of the natural environment.

Vietnamese culture

There are considerably more cultures than the nearly three thousand that Price [11] claims anthropologists have documented. Among these cultures, Vietnam, with its thousand years of recorded history, stands out as one of the richest in terms of cultural values. Generally, Vietnamese culture corresponds to the lives of Vietnamese people. It is the expression of creative thought, the sense of language, history, economics, politics, society, morals, and aesthetics of the Vietnamese people. Despite having been affected by many different cultures, from China, France, Japan, and America, Vietnamese culture has been able to preserve its own characteristics [12].

In our research, Hofstede's cultural study is used as guidance to give a deeper understanding of the correlation between Vietnamese culture and language. According to Hofstede Insights [13], Hofstede is a Dutch professor who is recognized as one of the pioneers in studying cultural factors and their effects on human behavior. Two key components of Vietnamese culture are used as the framework in the research, as follows:

- Vietnam puts great emphasis on hierarchical order (high Power Distance). In Hofstede Insights' study [14], Vietnam demonstrates a considerable degree of hierarchy, indicating a social structure that is characterized by the concentration of authority. According to Thanh [15], this is clearly evident in the profound reverence for elders, the significance attached to social status, and the prominence of hierarchical relationships in personal and professional situations. In life, Vietnamese people tend to accept this type of social construction where they all agree that each of them has a stable position in society; and every individual is aware of their own role in the family, in school, and in society [14].
- Vietnam is a collectivist society. According to Phan [16], Vietnam is a great example of a collectivist society. This can be explained by its geographical location and historical context. Vietnam is located under China and, therefore, has been strongly influenced by Chinese culture for thousands of years. Since then, the idea of Confucianism has been penetrating to all aspects of people's lives. Confucianism, at its core, promotes the idea of valuing groups over individuals, or so-called collectivism [17].

In this research, these two cultural components will be examined and studied to see how they are correlated with the Vietnamese language.

The Intersection between Culture and Language

According to Rabiah [18], language and culture have a close and inseparable relationship. On the one hand,

Tariq et al. [19] state that "language is a carrier of culture" (p. 1153). It can be said that the formation and development of a language often reflect the cultural values of a specific community. As Raikan et al. [20] note, language not only serves as a tool for communication and information transmission but is also an important means of reflecting cultural aspects. It is a bridge between people and culture, with the ability to convey and express aspects such as the worldview, value system, history, and traditions of a community.

On the other hand, culture also influences language. Rabiah [18] indicates, "Human language is different because human cultures are different" (p. 8). Each group of people and nation has a unique history of formation and development, leading to differences among languages worldwide. Therefore, it can be said that culture makes the language of each country distinct and unique. Furthermore, according to Kuo and Lai [21], culture serves as the foundation for establishing rules and principles of language usage, including expressions, vocabulary choices, and communication styles.

Parallel to the above opinions, there are several studies giving examples of the correlation between language and culture. China and America, two nations with contrasting cultural systems, are taken as examples for illustration. In China, a socialist country, the group is always valued more than the individual, which stands in stark contrast to the cultural values of the United States, where individualism is considered a top priority. This contrast is evident in language, both in terms of naming conventions and the order of listing location addresses. According to Gao [22], Chinese culture places a strong emphasis on family; hence, the last name is always placed before the first name. Conversely, in American culture, a person's first name goes before their last name. Chang [23] gives the following example to demonstrate this cultural difference:

Table 1: Comparison of Chinese and American Names

Chinese name	American name
李小朋 + 李 is the first name + 小朋 is the last name	John Smith + John is the first name + Smith is the last name

Another example is the order in which addresses are listed. In Chinese, larger geographical entities are placed before smaller ones. Therefore, as Baker [24] notes, an address in Chinese would typically start with the country, followed by the country, town, area, street, flat, and name. Conversely, in English, smaller geographical entities are presented first.

Methodology

Participants

The majority of participants are English majors (85%) and Business majors (25%) at Tan Tao University, whose academic level varies from second to final

year and whose age range is between 19 and 22. They come from the South, South West, and Central Vietnam, which adds to the variety of viewpoints due to their respective dialects. They are all Vietnamese who speak their native language effortlessly and are well-versed in Vietnamese culture. There are 30 students, including sixteen females (53%) and fourteen males (47%), participating in the study.

Data collection and analysis method

The research employed a quantitative strategy by assessing the online survey responses delivered to participants. The survey was developed to guarantee optimum accessibility and convenience for respondents. Additionally, to optimize response rates and promote participation, clear instructions, including emphasizing its goal, confidentiality measures, and estimated completion time, were given at the beginning of the survey.

The Google Form link was used to create a total of 10 questions, which were split into two categories: gap-filling questions and multiple-choice questions. The questions were then delivered online to 30 participants (see the Appendix).

Results and Discussion

For the first survey question, the results revealed that the majority of respondents agreed that Vietnamese culture had a significant impact on the linguistic characteristics of the Vietnamese language, with 43% choosing 5, 37% opting for 4, and 20% going to 3. The result from question 2 also indicated that 73% of the participants recognized the significant importance of cultural awareness in comprehending the Vietnamese language. They reasoned that from a very early age, they have been informed about the traditional beliefs of the Vietnamese and how vital it is for the preservation of national cultural values. In particular, when it comes to literary analysis, cultural literacy aids students in learning more effectively and quickly. For example, without understanding Vietnam's male chauvinist feudal society, people cannot properly understand the reason for the tragic circumstance of "Thúy Kiều" in *The Tale of Kiều* by Nguyễn Du - one of the famous Vietnamese poets. Furthermore, culture deepens our comprehension of language, including the rationale behind and practical application of many linguistic idioms to various things and contexts. It is also said that understanding cultural norms helps them know how to behave in a discussion and guides them on when and how to express themselves politely and respectfully.

Additionally, this research is based on data from Hofstede's discoveries concerning the two key aspects of Vietnamese culture, allowing it to infer the root causes and linguistic manifestations of these cultural traits. Using the information gleaned from the study of participant replies, we also arrived at the following two primary supporting arguments for the claim that culture shapes the way Vietnamese people use their language:

Hierarchical aspect of the Vietnamese language

In Vietnam, the hierarchical aspect of society is strongly ingrained in both language and culture. It is appropriate when people state that Vietnamese culture puts an essential emphasis on social status, age, and authority, which is reflected in various aspects of their language. According to Vo [25], the socio-cultural hierarchy and conventions that exist in Vietnam have partly shaped how Vietnamese people really behave, particularly via language. The way Vietnamese people communicate in daily situations reveals how they see cultural distinctions. Salama [26] once observed that in East Asian civilization, hierarchy is always put first, and people of lower status must pay respect to their superiors. This is known as the hierarchical structure in Vietnamese culture, and it has a key effect on how Vietnamese people utilize their language. According to the data that we obtained (Figure 1), for question number 3, 93.3% of the participants chose "agree" or "strongly agree". Further, with affirmation 4 (Figure 2), around 83.3% agree with this assertion. Alternatively, when participants are asked to choose to agree or disagree with statement number 5, 100% of them answer they agree. These three facts clearly support the thesis that hierarchy in Vietnamese society correlates with the way individuals utilize their language.

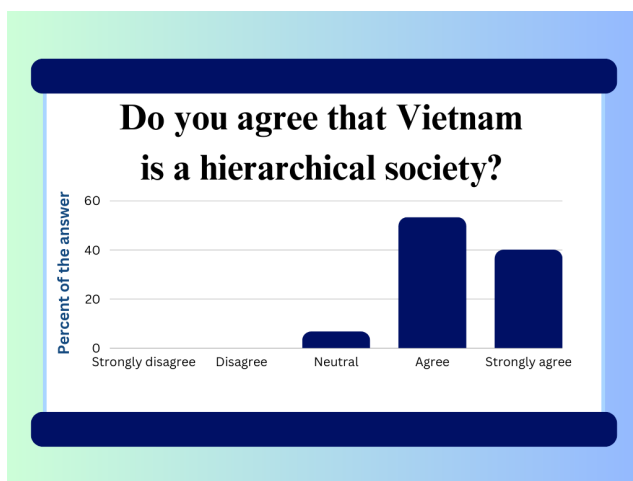


Figure 1: Hierarchical society in Vietnam

Hierarchy in Vietnam is demonstrated by a measurement, which is used to analyze a country's culture. The measure that we are referring to is Hofstede's power distance dimension. On a scale from 0 to 100, Vietnam is classified at 70, which is a high-power distance nation [27]. Power distance is the factor that indicates the power among a group of individuals in which their position is in a social system, and further shows the tolerance of unequal power distribution [28]. He also believes that in a high power distance country like Vietnam, people accept and follow the hierarchy without any disapproval.

This has influenced how Vietnamese people use their language in daily life as well as in business. Typically, several pronouns are used to address different objects in conversation. Some responses to question 6

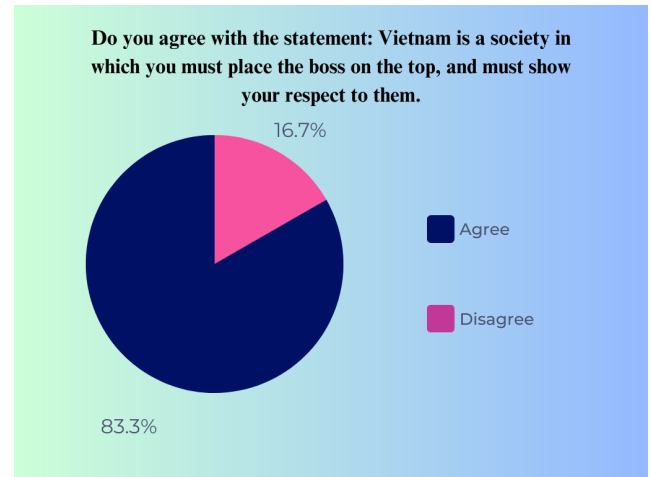


Figure 2: Respect for authority in the workplace

are "Con chào cô/chú ạ!" (Hi, aunt/uncle!), "Em chào anh/chị ạ!" (Hi, brother/sister!), "Cháu chào bà ạ!" (Hi, granny!). Pronouns such as "con", "em", and "cháu" all suggest a lower role in a conversation and express the speaker's respect for the listener. Vietnamese pronouns commonly distinguish between age and social order, indicating respect and position within the group. Different pronouns are used to address individuals of different ages or social positions. For example, "em" is used to address younger or lower-status individuals, "anh" is used for older or higher-status males, and "chị" is used for more senior or higher-status females.

Besides using pronouns, Vietnamese also utilize honorifics as a technique for distinguishing status. In the examples provided above, we observe that at the conclusion of each phrase, the speaker employs the term "ạ" (exclamation word) as a method to convey politeness. Additionally, in the saying: "Đã thưa mẹ con mới đi học về" (Hi mom, I just came home from school), the phrase "đã thưa" fulfills the function of paying respect to the mother when the youngster gets returned from school. In general, the hierarchical aspect of Vietnamese society infuses language and culture, affecting how individuals communicate, engage, and show respect to one another. Language serves as a tool for strengthening social hierarchies, expressing respect, and preserving harmony within the Vietnamese cultural structure.

Collectivism aspect of the Vietnamese language

Collectivism is a cultural belief that stresses the value of the collective or community above individual interests [29]. It has coexisted alongside humanity since the days of hunter-gatherers [30]. Gathering in big groups created favorable conditions, generating collective strength to enable primitive humans to hunt and find food easier to sustain their survival. However, with the enormous development of new machinery and technology, people's lives have become considerably simpler. As a consequence, collectivism has lost its status and is increasingly reduced to individualism. There are just a few socialist nations in the world that still pursue this collectivism, and

Vietnam is a notable example.

Strengthening this assertion, our survey results for question 7 (see Figure 3) also show that the majority of the participants (77%) prefer themselves as collectivists, while being neutral accounts for just a small number (23%), and no individualist viewpoint could be found.

Where would you place yourself in terms of your personal values and beliefs?
30 câu trả lời

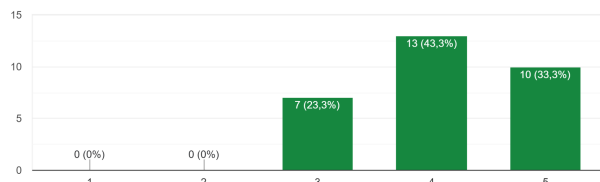


Figure 3: Personal values and beliefs

It is obvious that the Vietnamese language is greatly influenced by characteristics of this collectivist perspective, as expressed in the regular usage of collective phrases, idioms, and proverbs.

Firstly, Dao [31] found that Vietnamese people typically use collective nouns to refer to groups of individuals, rather than individual names or pronouns. This may be explained from a historical viewpoint. Vietnam experienced thousands of years under Chinese dominance and hundreds of years invaded by the French and American empires; thus, they needed to band together to fight for freedom. It was the power of solidarity that guided the Vietnamese people through many brutal wars. From a political standpoint, Vietnam is a nation following the socialist principle, which promotes collectivism and the connection between people.

According to the result of question 8 (see Figure 4), 77% decided that collectivism has an essential role in developing and utilizing the Vietnamese language, and 23% of the opinions are neutral.

To what extent do you believe collectivism is reflected in Vietnamese vocabulary?
30 câu trả lời

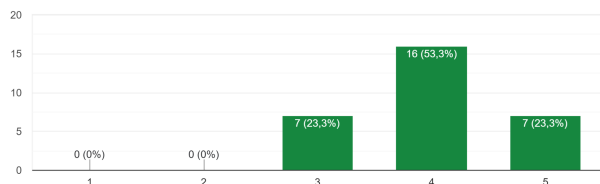


Figure 4: Collectivism is reflected in the use of Vietnamese language

Therefore, it can be said that the use of collective words is a part that is always present in the subconsciousness of Vietnamese people. Following are some examples from the data:

"**chúng ta, chúng tôi, tụi tao, tụi mình**" (we); "**các bạn, tụi bây**" (you); or "**mọi người**" (everyone) appeared as the most used words

in conversation. Moreover, words such as "**nam giới, phái mạnh**" (men, males), "**nữ giới, phái yếu, phái đẹp**" (women, females), "**dân tộc ta, nhân dân ta**" (our people), "**nhóm**" (group), etc. are commonly used to address or refer to group of people or things, highlighting the collective identity and unity. In addition, a distinctive feature of Vietnamese is the widespread use of collective words that were originally used to refer to things, also used to refer to humans. For example, the words "**bầy, đàn**" (herd), or "**nhà**" (house). Vietnamese people often call "**đàn con, bầy con**" (children) and "**đàn gái/đàn trai**" (bride's family/groom's family) or "**đàn ông/đàn bà**" (men/women). They usually say "**Đàn gái tới chưa**" but do not say "**Họ hàng cô dâu tới chưa**" (both are literally translated as "Has the bride's family come yet?")

Interestingly, the term "**gia đình**" (family) from our collected data is also in line with the concept of collectivism. If we divide it, we will get two separate words that are completely meaningful. The word "**gia**" itself means "home", in which everyone in a family lives together. Now we add the word "**đình**" which means "village", a bigger place where many houses live together. Therefore, the word "**gia đình**" implies that each family is an essential part of a shared community. Many families unite to form a village, and many villages will make up a larger community of an administrative unit of Vietnam.

Secondly, Vietnamese proverbs and idiomatic expressions also convey and reinforce the collectivist mindset. In our survey results, we acknowledged that one of the most famous Vietnamese sayings about collective solidarity is "**Một cây làm chẳng nên non, ba cây chụm lại nên hòn núi cao**".

Table 2: Meaning of the proverb

Literal meaning	Figurative meaning
One tree cannot amount to anything, three of them together can look like a mountain.	" Một cây " (one tree) refers to a single, solitary existence as opposed to " ba cây " (three trees) which refers to a large collective. " chụm lại " means solidarity, unity of one heart, and " núi cao " implies destination, success or victory.
<i>Một cây làm chẳng nên non, ba cây chụm lại nên hòn núi cao. (Together we can change the world.)</i>	

This proverb guides people to unite with others in society to build a rich, beautiful, and strong nation against all difficulties and hardships, as well as the invasion of the enemy.

Some other examples extracted from our survey include, "**Buôn có bạn, bán có phường**" (If you trade,

you should have friends), "**Một con ngựa đau cả tàu bỏ cỏ**" (A stinging horse, an abandoned ship), "**Chết cả đồng còn hơn sống một người**" (When a horse is sick, the whole stable refuses grass), "**Đoàn kết thì sống, chia rẽ thì chết**" (United we stand, divided we fall), "**Bẻ đũa không bẻ được cả nắm**" (A house divided against itself cannot stand), "**Đồng cam cộng khổ**" (To share joys and sorrows). Therefore, the pronoun used in these proverbs in particular and the proverbs in general can be said to mirror the collectivist concept of Vietnamese people.

Conclusion

Vietnamese language and culture are two elements that cannot be separated since they have an effect on each other. In this research, the emphasis on the Vietnamese culture's correlation with the use of the Vietnamese language plays a vital part in the complete investigation. This study sheds light on the notion that it is the culture that shapes the way Vietnamese people use their language. Vietnamese culture is strongly supported by these two cultural dimensions, including power distance and collectivism, in the relationship between culture and the language used. Power distance demonstrates how Vietnamese culture is significantly influenced by a hierarchical society, thus influencing the use of the language across the entire nation as well as among people who speak Vietnamese. This enables individuals to utilize the correct vocabulary as well as a suitable technique to communicate with certain objects. Further, the conclusion from the collectivist aspect of Vietnam plays a large part in the linguistic system of Vietnam, developing the image of being collectivist rather than individualist. Instead of using individual pronouns like "tôi" (I, me), Vietnamese people like using terms in a collectivist form (such as "**chúng ta**" (we), "**mọi người**" (everyone), etc.), as seen in the proverbs and idioms in Vietnamese literature.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable

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Competing interests

None

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Appendix

List of online survey questionnaires

- 1) On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly unimportant and 5 being strongly important, how important do you think cultural values are in shaping the linguistic features of the Vietnamese language?
- 2) In your personal experience, how has an understanding of Vietnamese culture enhanced your understanding and interpretation of the Vietnamese language?
- 3) On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly disagreeing and 5 being strongly agreeing, do you agree that Vietnam is a hierarchical society?
- 4) Do you agree with the statement: Vietnam is a society in which you must place the boss on the top, and must show your respect to them?
- 5) Do you agree that there are differences in the language used between elderly and young people when they have conversations with different objects?
- 6) Please write a regular greeting when you meet an older person (example: Con chào cô ạ!).
- 7) On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly individualistic and 5 being strongly collectivist, where would you place yourself in terms of your personal values and beliefs?
- 8) On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly unimportant and 5 being strongly important, to what extent do you believe collectivism is reflected in Vietnamese vocabulary?
- 9) Please provide an example of any Vietnamese proverbs (tục ngữ) or idioms (thành ngữ) that are related to unity or collectivism.
- 10) Please provide one collective word that you often use in daily conversations.