

The Prototype "Water" and Related Subcategories in Southern Vietnamese Folk Poetry (A Cultural Linguistic Study)

Truong Chi Hung

An Giang University, University of Social Sciences and Humanities - Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City (VNU HCM), Vietnam

ABSTRACT: This article is based on the theoretical and analytical framework of Cultural Linguistics proposed by Sharifian F. (2003, 2011, 2017), primarily focusing on the cultural category aspect, to examine vocabulary related to "water" in Southern Vietnamese folk poetry. The goal is to clarify how the perception of "water" reflects the cognitive and cultural worldview of the people of Southern Vietnam, thereby contributing meaningful insights to language and cultural education. This study employs qualitative content analysis of 2006 selected Southern Vietnamese folk poetry to identify and classify vocabulary related to the term "water". These vocabulary units are then interpreted from the perspective of cultural categories to clarify the cultural and ecological knowledge they contain. Preliminary survey results show that the concept of "water" in the Southern Vietnamese dialect remains universal, but has some distinctive features compared to other cultural regions. People in Southern Vietnam perceive "water" as having many characteristics similar to "human beings." This perception is based on cultural metaphors: RIVERS AND WATER ARE LIKE HUMAN BEINGS. It can be affirmed that vocabulary related to "water" in Southern Vietnamese folk poetry plays a role as a linguistic means of conveying cultural knowledge and ecological awareness. These findings highlight the potential of folk literature as a valuable source of material in language and cultural education.

KEYWORDS: Water, Southern Vietnamese folk poetry, cultural category, prototype.

I. INTRODUCTION

"Categories" are considered abstract containers, containing objects with certain common attributes. Sharifian F. (2003) first introduced the concept of cultural categories and also presented in detail the concept of cultural categories and their relationship with language. This is also one of the three core elements of Cultural Linguistics: Cultural Categories, Cultural Schemas, and Cultural Metaphors.

Sharifian argues that cultural conceptualization is not equally ingrained in everyone's mind but is instead expressed in a dispersed manner across the minds of a cultural group. Two key types of cultural conceptualization are cultural schemas and cultural categories. In subsequent works (2011, 2017), Sharifian F. continued his research focusing on the complex relationship between language, culture, and thought, particularly how cultural categories are formed, reflected, and maintained through language. "Cultural categories are conceptual categories that are culturally constructed, most clearly reflected in the vocabulary of languages" (2017, p. 30). Within each category, there are always elements that stand at the center, more prominent than others. These representative elements are called "prototype".

Sharifian F. (2017) reinforces and develops Eleanor Rosch's views on prototype while integrating them into the study of cultural categories. Specifically, Sharifian argues that cultural categories are not fixed or universal, but change depending on the cultural context, and the "typical" members of a category can differ between cultures. Not every element of a category has the same degree of "typicality"; this typicality is established by culture rather than rigid logical rules. Human cognition is a continuous process through communication and thinking. Therefore, concrete or abstract images in the human mind will be categorized into a certain category. This image is called a prototype if it enables humans to perceive reality. The element of the category that is closer to this image will be judged as the best or most prototype compared to other versions. The elements closest to the prototype are called central elements, to distinguish them from peripheral elements (far from the lexical form). The central elements of a category are recognized more quickly, understood more quickly, and used more frequently. In terms of vocabulary, "prototype of a word is the core content of a polysemous word; they bind all the meanings of a word into a unified semantic structure and are inward-oriented, meaning they are directed towards the semantic vocabulary system of a particular language." (Tran, 2006, p.266)

The Prototype "Water" and Related Subcategories in Southern Vietnamese Folk Poetry (A Cultural Linguistic Study)

II. FINDINGS

A. The concept of "water" and its relationship with other subcategories

Like all peoples around the world, the lives of Vietnamese people in general, and those in Southern Vietnam in particular, are inseparable from "rivers and water." Especially with a rice-farming civilization that has existed for thousands of years, along with a rich riverine culture, it can be affirmed that "rivers and water" is a prominent cultural category, deeply ingrained in the consciousness of every Vietnamese person. Rivers and water, from their natural forms, have become cultural symbols and are clearly expressed through language.

To complete this paper, we conducted a corpus survey of 2006 Southern Vietnamese folk poetry related to the category of riverine culture. These folk poetry contain vocabulary related to rivers and water, reflecting the way the subject matter is selected and classified, and to some extent, the cultural conceptualization of the discourse community. While it is impossible to satisfy all selection criteria, this is a reliable, representative, and relevant source of data for this paper.

The survey results show that the number of words related to rivers and water used in 2006 Southern folk poetry is 809 units, with a frequency of 6,390 occurrences. On average, each surveyed folk song has 3.19 occurrences of words related to rivers and water. Rivers and water is a large cultural category, which can be divided into smaller categories, called subcategories, such as: (1) Forms, characteristics and movement of water; (2) Objects and related elements containing natural and artificial objects; (3) Means associated with rivers and water; (4) Human activities related to rivers and water; (5) Animals associated with rivers and water and activities and states of animals associated with rivers and water; (6) Place-names associated with rivers and water. The division of subcategories is only relative, because in reality there are elements that are in one subcategory but can still be classified in another.

Order	subcategories	Number	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)
1	Forms, characteristics and movement of water	102	12,6	1.482	23,2
2	Objects and related elements containing natural and artificial objects	101	12,5	1.286	20,1
3	Means associated with rivers and water	68	8,4	803	12,6
4	Human activities related to rivers and water	157	19,4	1.116	17,4
5	Animals associated with rivers and water and activities and states of animals associated with rivers and water	265	32,8	1.442	22,6
6	Place-names associated with rivers and water	116	14,3	261	4,1
	Total	809	100	6.390	100

Table: Subcategories of the category of riverine culture in Southern Vietnamese folk poetry

The Prototype "Water" and Related Subcategories in Southern Vietnamese Folk Poetry (A Cultural Linguistic Study)

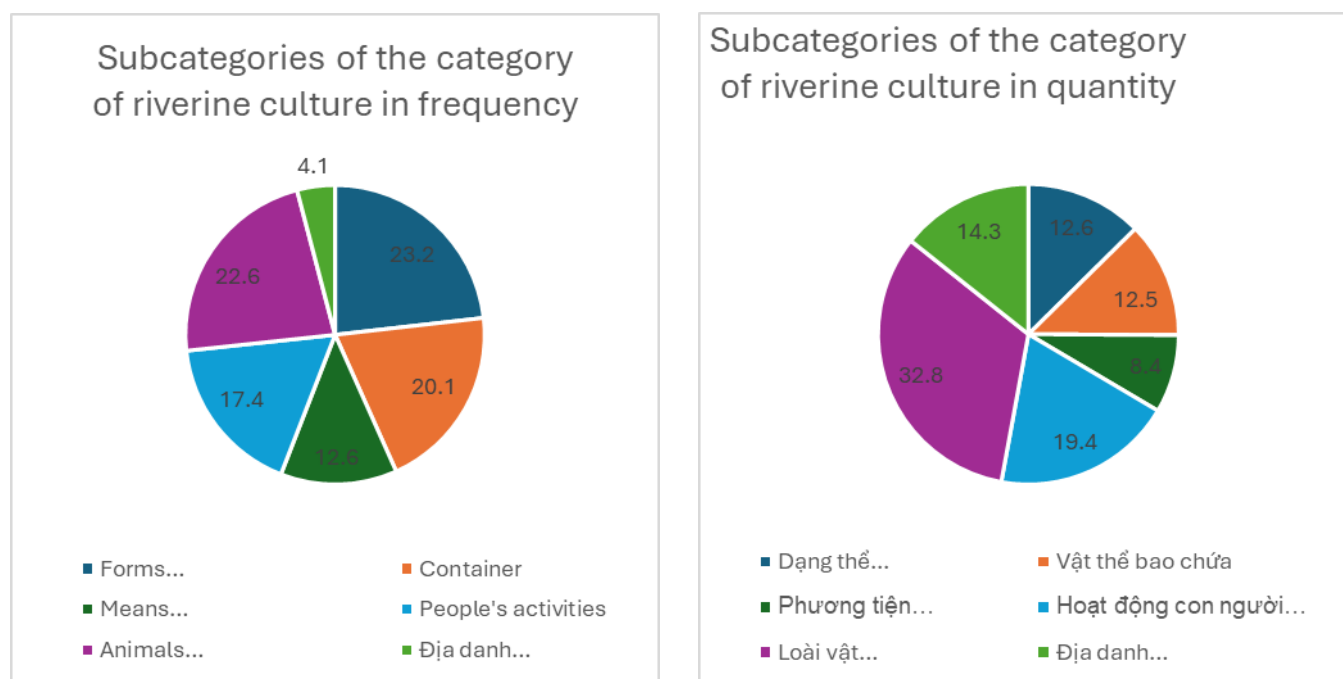


Chart: The proportion of Southern Vietnam's riverine cultural categories by quantity and frequency

Table 1 and Chart 1 show that the number and frequency of words belonging to the subcategories do not differ significantly. The subcategory of animals associated with rivers and water, and the activities and states of animals associated with rivers and water, has the highest number and frequency of words, at 32.8% and 22.6% respectively. The lowest in number is the subcategory of means associated with rivers and water (8.4%), while the lowest in frequency is the subcategory of placenames associated with rivers and water (4.1%). These figures can be explained based on the impact of reality on the subject's cognitive process. It is said that cultural linguistics inherits the theoretical framework of cognitive science, especially cognitive linguistics. According to cognitive theory, concepts are constructed based on the interaction between the subject and the objective world, and the interaction between the subject and themselves. In this interaction process, the reality that is closest and appears most frequently has the greatest impact. Therefore, based on the number and frequency of the above-mentioned subcategories, we can somewhat outline the cognitive and realistic picture of the waterways of Southern Vietnam.

As discussed, cultural categories are essentially a form of cultural conceptualization, forming cultural concepts in the form of categories through the interaction of linguistic communities. Therefore, cultural categories in different linguistic communities often include different allegiances in terms of quantity, semantics, and pragmatics. This is a result of the differences in the distinct cultural conceptualization systems within each community. In the category of riverine culture in Southern Vietnamese folk poetry, "water" is considered a prototype, appearing 515 times. Beside its high frequency, the establishment of the prototype of "water" is also based on its generative capacity and relationship with other subcategories. This can be summarized into the following model:



The Prototype "Water" and Related Subcategories in Southern Vietnamese Folk Poetry (A Cultural Linguistic Study)

Exemplification: 1. Forms; 2. Containers; 3. River transport; 4. Human activities associated with rivers and water; 5. Animals associated with rivers and water; 6. Riverine landmarks

Model: The relationship between the "WATER" prototype and riverine cultural subcategories

According to Nguyen Van Chien (2004), the lexical meaning of the prototype "water" includes: (1) liquid form; colorless, odorless, transparent when pure; exists in nature such as rivers, lakes, seas; (2) liquid used to identify and classify geographical structures (river water, seawater, well water); (3) liquid secreted from the body (tears, runny nose, urine); (4) liquid used to identify and classify metals (molten cast iron, molten steel, molten copper); (5) liquid used to identify and classify natural phenomena (rainwater, brackish water, saltwater); (6) liquid used to identify and classify spices and food (lemon juice, coconut milk, fish sauce, broth); (7) liquid used to identify and classify beverages (orange juice, lemonade, coconut water); (8) liquid used for daily life (pure water, tap water, filtered water, ice); (9) liquid used to identify and classify objects and phenomena (waterborne diseases, water snake, water dragonfly); (10) liquid used in religious activities (holy water, divine water, fairy water, sacred water); (11) land in which people of one or more ethnic groups live together under a socio-political regime and belong to a certain state (country, nation, country, Vietnam); (12) the action, the fast or slow pace of a horse (gallop, gain the change); (13) the move of a chess piece (chess move); (14) the way of acting to escape a predicament or create an advantageous position (only the option of surrendering, all options are exhausted); (15) the position of the action (being at a disadvantage, gaining the advantage); (16) the degree of the action (being as cruel as that); (17) the number of times water is used for a certain activity (tea is the first water, herbs is brewed for the second time); (18) a coating or outer layer for durability and beauty (whitewash, very durable plating); (19) the natural shine and gloss of a certain type of object (marble with a glossy finish, wood with a glossy finish). (Nguyen, 2004, pp.120-133)

A common characteristic of human interaction with nature is that it relies on one experiential plane to perceive another. Through the tangible, material, concrete, and easily observable attributes of one object or phenomenon, one projects the immaterial, abstract, and intangible characteristics of another. Cognitive models based on this projection have been formulated into a theoretical framework by epistemology, and many achievements have been recognized by the linguistic community. More specifically, in the process of experiencing interaction with "water," or more broadly, the river environment, one perceives "rivers and water" as a tangible, physical entity. However, when projecting the characteristics of water onto the characteristics of humans and society, it is no longer an experience of human-nature interaction, but essentially a cultural metaphor.

Trinh Sam (2025) surveyed the lectures of monk Minh Dang Quang (mendicant Buddhist sect), and found many concepts about water, in relation to other categories, such as: (1) water and adaptability; (2) water and balance; (3) water and cohesion; (4) water and flow; (5) water and purification; (6) water and purity; (7) water and eternity; (8) water and the practitioner; and especially, (9) Buddha-nature is water nature. These concepts were formed through the experiential process of monk Minh Dang Quang, using his understanding of the world of rivers and water and entities related to rivers and water as objects of contemplation, thereby forming Buddhist practices and a relatively systematic and consistent theoretical basis. The distinct, yet both harmonizing and progressive, doctrines of Master Minh Dang Quang, based primarily on the characteristics of rivers and water, were one of the reasons why the mendicant order reached the lives of the people of Southern Vietnam at that time. This was because it aligned with the cultural understanding of the Vietnamese people in general and the people of Southern Vietnam in particular, with fairly universal principles: rivers and water are the closest entities, therefore they appear first; rivers and water are the closest entities, therefore they appear most frequently; rivers and water are the closest entities, therefore they have the greatest impact. (Trinh, 2025, p.284).

Also based on interactive experiences and "poetic" observations, people in Southern Vietnam have long described the characteristics of "water" through folk riddles:

“(What)

Cannot be cut

Cannot be torn apart

Cannot be dried

Cannot be burned?”

The original text in Vietnamese:

“(Cái gì)

Chặt không đứt

Bứt không rời

Phơi không khô

Chạm không cháy?”

Meanwhile, Vietnamese folk tales often have an abstract view of "water," linking it to the origins of ethnic groups. For example, the legend of Lac Long Quan and Au Co, with the hundred eggs that hatched into a hundred children, is considered the basis for the idiom "from the egg to the water," referring to the initial, not yet clearly formed, stage. The legends of "Giving Birth

The Prototype "Water" and Related Subcategories in Southern Vietnamese Folk Poetry (A Cultural Linguistic Study)

to the Land and Water," the motif of ethnic group formation after great floods of the Lo Lo people, The Muong people are proof of the concept that water is the source of life. Therefore, in Vietnamese, the concept of "water" is associated with national symbols, ethnicity, and origins. To perceive the world, the human brain undergoes conceptualization and categorization in various ways. Relying on the physical form, posture, and movement of our bodies is a fairly common method of cognitive activity. The Vietnamese use the method of simultaneous experience and analogous experience to perceive rivers and water, thus forming the idea that the beginning of rivers and streams is also the starting point of humanity. These ideas are more or less related to the common cognitive models of some cultures, including Vietnam: The river is life; The river is human life; The journey of the river is the journey of human life; The movement of water is human behavior; Water is humanity, and so on.

For example:

"A deep river depends on its source.

A tall tree depends on its roots; if the tree wears away, the river dries up."

The original text in Vietnamese:

"Sông sâu mà lại phụ nguồn

Cây cao phụ cội, cây mòn sông khô."

As we know, cultural categories are not immutable or uniform, but depend on context and cultural region. From this perspective, in the language of Southern Vietnam, besides universal concepts of "water" similar to the general understanding, there are also some unique features. While in cultural regions with few rivers and canals, such as mountainous and hilly areas, "water" is scarce, requiring people to be constantly conscious of water conservation, in Southern Vietnam, the concept of "water conservation" is almost nonexistent, except in a few specific areas: the Bay Nui region (in An Giang province) and the saline and acidic coastal areas of the Southwest. In other words, in the mindset of people in Southern Vietnam, "water" is always abundant, sometimes even excessively so (during the rainy season and flood season). Furthermore, the rivers and waterways of Southern Vietnam carry abundant silt, resulting in a plentiful supply of fish and shrimp. From this, the people of Southern Vietnam have formed the concept of equating "water" with the meaning of "abundance" or "very much" (of things). Expressions such as "money flows in like water," "spending money like water," "the crowds flocking to the city are growing," "overflowing emotions," and "poetry overflowing" are quite common in Southern Vietnam. It can be said that, through the allusion to "water" and related forms within this subcategory, we see how the people of Southern Vietnam conceptualize life as a dynamic, flexible, and unfixed flow. This gradually materializes into a free, open, and expansive lifestyle. On the other hand, water has become a symbol of softness and fluidity, so riverine culture is often associated with a carefree, easygoing, and sometimes indecisive personality, for example: "If you see ducks on the street, you'll herd them; if you see a girl, you'll flirt with her; if you see a temple, you'll become a monk."

B. The concept of "water" and its relationship with other subcategories

The subcategory of related forms and characteristics, and the movement of water in 2006 Southern Vietnamese folk poetry, comprises 102 words, accounting for 12.6%, with a frequency of 1,482 occurrences, accounting for 23.2%. The different forms of water reflect the way the people of this region arrange and classify objects. Among them are forms with a formal and elegant nuance, which are of Chinese origin, such as: thủy (water), lệ (tear), lệ (tears), châu (pearl)... Besides these, forms related to water within the category such as: nước mắt (tears), mồ hôi (sweat), mưa (rain), sinh (mud), bùn (mud), bọt (foam), phèn (alum)... are purely Vietnamese words. The use of many "scholarly" words related to the forms of "water" in Southern Vietnamese folk poetry and literature in general is noteworthy, according to Nguyen Van Trung (2015, pp. 90-91), there are the following reasons: (1) The intermingling and harmonious life in the countryside of the two Vietnamese and Chinese migrant communities inevitably involves cultural exchange through customs and lifestyles (p. 74); (2) Confucianism in the new land is different from the old land; the pioneering life has filtered and discarded what is formal and ritualistic, only retaining the core essence (p. 86); (3) Resisting the French assimilation policy, ignoring Western culture and promoting traditional culture based on Confucianism. Southern folk poetry have many colloquial words related to rivers and water, but also many words and expressions that are academic and scholarly. This not only reflects the characteristics of the Southern language, but also relates to cultural exchange and the process of migration and cohabitation.

For example:

"Putting away the oar, I watch him shed tears.

My heart aches, my heart is filled with sorrow."

And, a semantically equivalent sentence:

"Lying awake at night, tears flow freely.

Mother loves her son-in-law more than her own son."

The original text in Vietnamese:

"Cất mái chèo loan em nhìn chàng rơi lệ

Thôn thức gan vàng, thói dãi tăn nan."

The Prototype "Water" and Related Subcategories in Southern Vietnamese Folk Poetry (A Cultural Linguistic Study)

Và, một câu tương đồng khác:

“Đêm nằm nước mắt lã lơi

Mẹ thương con rể hơn trai trong nhà.”

Human cognitive processes are carried out through various methods, but primarily through the senses. Through observation and perception of the surrounding world, reality is reflected in the brain. This process also facilitates the organization and classification of objects and phenomena, known as categorization, and the formation of categorical patterns. The movement of water reflects the Southern Vietnamese people's understanding of time, closely linked to their riverine culture. Specifically, in addition to the universal concept of time, people in Southern Vietnam are also aware of time associated with the tidal cycle on a daily basis (high tide - low tide), on a monthly basis (high tide - low tide), and on a yearly basis (flood season - dry season; rising tide - falling tide). This relates to their life experiences, labor and production practices, and the characteristics of their living environment connected to rivers and waterways. Almost every cultural region associated with wet rice agriculture pays attention to the tidal cycle to ensure efficient irrigation. The people of Southern Vietnam are no exception. But besides that, they also pay attention to the daily high and low tides. This is because it allows them to row boats and canoes over long distances on the river while saving energy and doing so quickly. Boats and canoes traveling downstream are faster than those traveling upstream; to determine whether the tide is flowing downstream or upstream, they must observe the times of high tide, still tide, and low tide. Furthermore, it's important to understand the natural flow pattern: during low tide, water flows from smaller natural containers to larger ones: from ditches to streams, from streams to canals, then from canals to rivers, and from rivers to the sea. Conversely, during high tide, the flow reverses.

Calculating the daily high-low tide cycle, combined with the monthly low-high tide cycle, not only facilitates navigation on waterways but is also related to fishing practices in Southern Vietnam. According to folk experience, during high tides, the water level in rivers and canals is higher than during low tides, making fishing more difficult. Fishermen in Southern Vietnam mostly work sparingly during high tides. However, during low tides, when rivers and canals are shallow, fishing becomes extremely busy. The low tides of the month, combined with the low tides of the day, allow for abundant fishing. The tide pattern is related to the lunar cycle. Furthermore, people in Southern Vietnam rely on various natural signs to recognize changes in the tides.

Example:

“The bittern is calling, "The water is rising, husband!"

Trading is unprofitable, rowing is tiring and exhausting.”

The original text in Vietnamese:

“Bìm bịp kêu nước lớn anh ơi

Buôn bán không lời chèo chống mỗi mê.”

From a cultural perspective, the concept of time, as defined by the tidal cycle mentioned above, belongs to folk knowledge. However, in essence, this folk knowledge is related to empiricism and the way language is categorized. As we know, empiricism is a shared experience and a physical experience, related to physical, cognitive, and social experiences. Modern linguistics affirms that language structure is not entirely arbitrary but is more or less directly or indirectly related to experience. Intelligence and language are not abstract, independent entities but are products of our experiences. Three common empiric methods are recognized: physiological empiricism, natural empiricism, and social empiricism. In this context, natural self-experience reflects the process of the subject's interaction with the surrounding physical environment. The impact of the environment on the human nervous system follows the principle that what is "closest usually appears first, most frequently, and has the greatest impact in the mental system of the discourse community" (Trinh, 2025, p. 184). That is why, in the riverine environment of Southern Vietnam, the movement of the water holds a crucial position in the conceptualization process of Vietnamese culture. It not only leaves its mark on daily speech but also shapes the behavior of the migrants there.

It's worth adding that Southern Vietnam is the only region where the annual flood season occurs, lasting from around the beginning of July (in July, the water overflows the banks) to the end of October in the lunar calendar. During these flood months, rice fields, roads, and even houses are submerged. Previously, people in Southern Vietnam had little awareness or action to control the flood season, living with it as an inevitable annual occurrence. This led to a linear perception of time associated with the flood season, like a straight line. However, because the flood season happens every year, it also created a sense of cyclical time, like a circle, repeating itself.

The survey data also reveals an extended ontological metaphor, also known as projection on the human scale, which is very common in the subcategory concerning the related forms, characteristics, and movement of water. Within this subcategory, we encounter a series of words that are inherently characteristic of human activity and state, but are used here in connection with water, such as: standing water, crawling water, jumping water, pushing water, returning water, rising water, crashing waves, lapping waves... (Water without legs cannot be called standing water / Fish without worship cannot be called sacred fish). In the process of conceptualization, humans not only interact with objective reality but also use their own bodies to project and perceive the world. Through frequent interaction with the riverine environment, people in Southern Vietnam build a conceptual system

The Prototype "Water" and Related Subcategories in Southern Vietnamese Folk Poetry (A Cultural Linguistic Study)

based on the material and non-material characteristics of this reality, simultaneously projecting their own being onto it. In other words, people in Southern Vietnam use their experiences of their own characteristics and activities to attribute them to the rivers and water. This reflects the folk belief that nature is like humanity, and that rivers and water are like humanity. Furthermore, it demonstrates the deep connection between the people of Southern Vietnam and the rivers and water, their close and harmonious way of life with the rivers and water, and the way they interact with the riverine environment.

III. CONCLUSIONS

It can be said that the typical form of water, along with its related forms, characteristics, and movement, reflects many aspects of the thinking methods and the way people in Southern Vietnam perceive, classify, and evaluate phenomena related to rivers and water. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the Southern Vietnamese people's perception of time is linked to the daily, monthly, and yearly cycles of the water tides. An expanded ontological perception is also explored, projecting many human activities into the movement of water, demonstrating a deep connection between humans and nature, and with rivers and water. The survey also reveals the worldview and evaluation scale of Southern Vietnamese people regarding the reality of rivers and water, based on the cultural metaphor: RIVERS AND WATER ARE HUMAN BEINGS.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the Library of An Giang University and the Library of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University – Ho Chi Minh City, for their valuable support in providing access to academic resources, reference materials, and research databases. Their professional assistance and well-curated collections significantly contributed to the development of the theoretical framework and literature review of this study. This work would not have been completed in its present form without their institutional support.

REFERENCES

- 1) Nguyen, V. C. 2004. Toward establishing the Vietnamese cultural lexicon (A study of language and culture). Social Sciences Publishing House.
- 2) Sharifian, F. 2003. On cultural conceptualisations. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 3(3), 187–207.
- 3) Sharifian, F. 2011. Cultural conceptualisations and language: Theoretical framework and applications. John Benjamins.
- 4) Sharifian, F. 2017. *Cultural Linguistics*. John Benjamins.
- 5) Tran, V. C. 2006. *Cognitive linguistics: Notes and reflections*. Social Sciences Publishing House.
- 6) Trinh, S. 2025. *Vietnamese: Strange yet familiar*. Trê Publishing House.



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.