Code Mixing and Loan Words in The Vietnamese Vocabulary

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Abstract

Just like any other language, Vietnamese vocabulary includes many borrowed words from different countries that have influenced Vietnamese culture throughout its history. The majority of the borrowed words are from Chinese, French, and English. This study investigates such loan and borrowed words from cultural point of view. Examples have been drawn from trends among the young, educated Vietnamese who live in big cities in Vietnam and habituated to code mixing or code switching by making use of such English words, that have pure Vietnamese or Sino-Vietnamese equivalent words. The loanword situation in Vietnamese is so complex that it is too difficult to determine what is borrowed and what is original. The reason is perhaps because of the long exposure and extensive time frame and numerous languages in the region. Vietnamese has been linguistically affiliated with hundreds of languages in the past few centuries, but this study confirmed that Vietnamese has a strong database of vocabulary cognates and loan words as a Mon-Khmer language rather than a Tai-Kadai or Sino-Tibetan one. This paper will be a good contribution to semantics of the Vietnamese language as it examines the genealogy and the inheritance of loan words existing in the Vietnamese vocabulary.

Introduction

Vietnamese vocabulary comprises several borrowed words from languages like Chinese, French, and English. In the evolution of the Vietnamese language, it has been influenced by those languages that have influenced its culture, directly or indirectly, for instance, Chinese, French, and English (M. Alves, 2006; Durkin, 2014; Haspelmath & Tadmor, 2009). China ruled Vietnam for roughly 1,000 years; Vietnam was a French colony for about 100 years, and it was under the direct influence of the United States during the Vietnam war (Kang, Phạm, & Storme, 2016). Despite the influence of the Chinese language on Vietnamese, the latter has been able to maintain its identity, owing to its origin and lineage (Phan & Starks, 2020). The Vietnamese and Chinese languages do not have the same origin; they belong to two different language families. Vietnamese belongs to Austroasiatic language family, largely spoken in the Mainland Southeast Asia. Chinese, on the other hand, is a member of the Sino-Tibetan language family, with Burmese and the Tibetic languages as its siblings (Hashimoto, 1978; Phan & Starks, 2020; Sharifian, 2017).

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Historically, Vietnamese was the language of the nomadic tribes that had moved to Vietnam from the northern and eastern parts and communicated with the natives and then created the Viet-Muong language (Sharifian, 2017). Later, under the influence of the Chinese language, it developed its phonetic tones and its own writing system called Chữ Nôm, based on Chinese characters. The Viet-Muong vocabulary however flourished and maintained its originality, with a few exceptions of Sino-Viet code mixing. During this period, a few Catholic Western missionaries also visited Vietnam, and they introduced a few Latin-based characters to learn the Vietnamese language (Haspelmath & Tadmor, 2009). The Roman characters eventually became the national writing system in Vietnam, called Chữ Quốc Ngữ, though each of the Vietnamese popular dialects remained different in pronunciation and vocabulary. This explains why the Vietnamese alphabet comprised the Roman letters while other neighboring countries used their own writing styles such as Chinese, Lao, Thai, and Korean (Durkin, 2014; Sharifian, 2017).

However, there are other differences between Vietnamese and Chinese words and phrases. The Chinese words are read from top to bottom, as they are written in a column (M. J. Alves, 2017; Gong, 2019). The Vietnamese is written and read from left to right and in a row, same as English. The Chinese writing system consists of hieroglyphs, with each Chinese word having its own meaning, while the Vietnamese writing system consists of almost all letters from the Latin alphabet, except letter f, j, w, z, and some new letters such as ă, â, đ, ê, ô, ơ, ư. Unlike Chinese words, not all words in Vietnamese have specific meanings, so they need to be combined with another word to bring their semantic meaning. however, both Chinese and Vietnamese languages have SVO sentence (subject + verb + object) structures (M. J. Alves, 2017, 2019).

Though French was the most popular language for communication in the past century; however, in the modern times (Phuong, 2021), the Vietnamese people wish to learn English as a second language for trade, communication, media interaction and daily conversation (Barker, 1969; Kang et al., 2016; Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020). The Anglo-Vietnamese vocabulary and short sentences have become popular among the Vietnamese youth mainly for social media and hanging around (M. J. Alves, 2009). These words are picked up by them from the entertainment industry, particularly from reality television shows, where hosts refer to use the English words "hello" or "cool" or "Okay" as "English knowledge show off."

The current study aimed to study the loan words or borrowed words in the Vietnamese language, from languages like Chinese, French and English. It was more the traditional Chinese language that influenced the Vietnamese language and created Chinese-Vietnamese words, so popular in daily conversation (Durkin, 2014; Haspelmath & Tadmor, 2009; Scholvin & Meinschaefer, 2018). Often known as *Từ Hán Việt* in Vietnamese, these words and phrases constitute the Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary (M. J. Alves, 2009, 2017; Hashimoto, 1978). For example: 'vợ' (wife), 'chồng' (husband), 'con' (children), 'gà' (chicken), 'trứng' (egg) and like. Other Sino-Vietnamese phrases used in Vietnamese are: 'học sinh' (in Chinese: 學生, student), 'bác sỹ' (in Chinese: 博士, doctor), 'hôn nhân' (in Chinese: 婚姻, marriage).

Both Chinese and Vietnamese languages are monosyllabic, which means every word has a single syllable (M. Alves, 2019; M. J. Alves, 2017; Gong, 2019). This is different from English as English words have one, two, or more syllables. It is estimated that over half of Vietnamese vocabulary is borrowed from Chinese as a result of thousands of years of Chinese domination (Phan & Starks, 2020). In addition, there are many compounds consisting of native Vietnamese words combined with Chinese borrowings (M. Alves, 2019; M. J. Alves, 2019). These words are formed by combining two lexical items into one, e.g., *bàn ghế 'furniture'*(literally, *table chair*). Likewise, there are many French words, e.g., *bia* 'beer' from the French *bierre*, *socola* 'chocolate' from the French *chocolat*, *caphé* 'coffee' from the French *café* used to build loan words (Barker, 1969; Phuong, 2021; Scholvin & Meinschaefer, 2018). Today, the Vietnamese language is being constantly updated through introduction of new scientific and technical vocabulary.

Literature review

Vietnamese is one of the Austro-Asiatic languages with 76 million speakers all around the world including Vietnam, Australia, Canada, China, France, Germany, Netherlands, Philippines, Thailand, United Kingdom, and USA. Like other Austro-Asiatic languages, Vietnamese adopts the analytic pattern, having no inflections in grammar constructions but grammatical patterns expressed through word order and some particles (Hashimoto, 1978). Its words have phonemic tones, head-initial directionality, and modifiers following the words they modify, though it uses noun classifiers as well (Haspelmath & Tadmor, 2009; Scholvin & Meinschaefer, 2018).

As mentioned earlier, its vocabulary is much influenced by Chinese and French vocabularies. Another quality of Vietnamese language is that the pronunciation and spelling of words closely match up. Due to this quality, many of the loan or borrowed words that originally belong to French or English but pronounced in a Vietnamese way. In this way, such words are not far away from being called cognates, that are words borrowed from another language using the same sounds, but adapted to the alphabet of a new language (Haspelmath & Tadmor, 2009). Table 1 lists a few English words borrowed and used as cognates in the Vietnamese (Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020):

Table 1 Vietnamese cognates

	English word	Vietnamese (Pronunciation)	Vietnamese Translation
1.	Mobile phone	Mô-bi phôn	Điện thoại di động
2.	PC (computer)	Pi-xi	Máy tính cá nhân
3.	Laptop	Láp-tóp	Máy tính xách tay
4.	TV (television)	Ti-vi	Vô tuyến truyền hình
5.	Selfie	Seo-phi	Tự chụp/Tự sướng (slang)
6.	Sandwich	Xăng-uých	Bánh mì kẹp
7.	Rock music	Nhạc Rốc	Nhạc Rốc
8.	Pop music	Nhạc Pốp	Nhạc Pốp
9.	Film	Phim	Phim
10.	Show	Sô	Sô
11.	Shorts (pan)	Quần sooc	Quần ngắn/quần đùi
12.	Font	Phông	Phông chữ
13.	Dollar	Đô-la	Tiền đô
14.	Beefsteak	Bít tết	Thịt bò bít tết
15.	Taxi	Tắc-xi	Xe Tắc-xi
16.	Stress	Xì-chét	Căng thẳng

- *Code Mixing: English Words with Vietnamese*

The Vietnamese who live in the United States or other English speaking countries mix some English words while speaking their native language, Vietnamese, though this trend is also noticed more among the young, educated Vietnamese in the metro towns of Vietnam. For example, expressions with code mixing include: Chị có **ok** không? (are you ok?); Hôm nay nhiều việc, **stress** quá đi (too much work today, so stressful); and Em còn **single**, chưa có gia đình (I'm still single, not married).

Such code mixing is rather common in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic situations (Tadmor, 2009), but in Vietnam it has become the part of the Vietnamese showbiz (M. J. Alves, 2009). A few linguists made it a controversial issue; and often ridiculed it as Vietlish = **Viet**namese + Eng**lish,** since mixed English words or sentences were not preferred by the educated, elite class. However, while speaking Vietnamese to another Vietnamese, people tend to do it subconsciously, finding it difficult to avoid such code mixing, and also due to their lazy habit of not able to "find" the right Vietnamese word when they encounter an English word. For a few, it was "time-saving" as one single word in English would require to be substituted by many words in the Vietnamese to express the same meaning (Tadmor, 2009).

- *Vietlish (Loanwords in Vietnamese)*

It is important to understand that loan words are adopted from one language (the donor language) and incorporated into another language without translation which is in contrast to cognates, which are words in two or more languages that are similar because they share an etymological origin (M. J. Alves, 2017, 2019). Several examples can be cited of loan words in Vietnamese, e.g., among the food items are *Bít tết or "Bò bít tết"* (Beef steak) where "Bò" means "beef" and "*bít tết"* is steak; "*Bò Bia"* which means Beef Beer (Bia = Beer); Ô-liu – Olive; Sốt – Sauce; Xa-lát – Salad; Cà rốt – Carrot. Among words of daily life include Vi rút – Virus; Ban nhạc – Band, where Nhạc means "music"; Cạc – Car; Quần soóc – Shorts (pants); Sê-ri – Series; Xì-trét – Stress. Among the loan words in Sports are Gôn – Goal; Sút – Shoot. Among technology are Phông – Font; Tivi – TV; Ra-đi-ô – Radio; Ca-mê-ra – Camera. Among the French Loanwords are Pho mát – Fromage; Bánh gatô – Gâteau; Cà phê – Café; Va li – Valise; Xà bông – Savon; Ba lô – Ballot; Ban công – Balcon; Áp phích – Affiche, and Ca-ra-vát – Cravate (Phuong, 2021; Trang, 2021). Most of these loan words, irrespective of the donor language, have been in Vietnamese for a long time, and assimilated very strongly, that these words are no longer strange to the Vietnamese (Tadmor, 2009; Tang, 2007).

Methodology

- *Research design*

The current research focused on identifying vocabulary items in the Vietnamese language e.g., loan words and borrowed words or words influenced by other languages including English, Chinese and French. The criteria for identification were words related to food, living conditions, social interactions, cultural traditions, etc. as categorized by Cao (2020). In addition, a few words were collected from secondary data sources, including texts in Vietnamese magazines, social media websites and informal conversations through a qualitative (library method) approach.

- *Instruments*

Various specialized dictionaries of English and Vietnamese words were used to confirm the usage and construction of words for their inclusiveness and extensiveness. Among others, Nguyễ Dictionary Project was the primary source of data collection. It proved was useful in validating the core meanings of Sino-Vietnamese and Anglo-Vietnamese characters, particularly those which turned out to be Chinese loans.

- *Data analysis*

To analyze the texts, words and phrases, the comparative and contrastive methods were utilized so that words could be translated with appropriate equivalents in English.

Findings and Discussions

A survey of loan words in Vietnamese revealed that there are several sources, a few of which could be traced historically to as old as Pre-Han Dynasty era (M. J. Alves, 2009). However, there are no written records to support their contact with other languages, except a few Tai loanwords that were found in the database of Nguyễ n Tài Cẩ n (Nguyễn, 2009). The database lists some Chinese loanwords that were borrowed over a period of two thousand years, and also included in Sino-Vietnamese dictionaries with absolute certainty. some of these words were evident of the Sino-Vietnamese contact and dialectal borrowing with enough phonological, semantic, and historical evidence of their being loan words. This claim is consistent with the works of Le Khac (2021); Nguyễn (2009); Nguyen and Nation (2011).

Besides the Chinese contacts, there are also evidences of French and English loanwords based on phonological contacts, as observed by Nguyễn (2009). The French loanwords in Vietnamese were found in a dictionary published by Việ n Ngôn Ngữ Họ c (Le Khac, 2021). The dictionary claimed that 31% of the loanwords bore the Vietnamese lexicon, suggesting that such words did not exist in Vietnamese before being borrowed, and 21% were labeled as coexisting with native Vietnamese vocabulary (Phuong, 2021; Trang, 2021). These loanwords added to Vietnamese mainly dealt with technology or culture. Likewise, the English loan words had a typical cognate identity, i.e., they were borrowed from English using the same sounds, but adapted to the Vietnamese alphabet. Most of these borrowed English words are recognized as either pure Vietnamese or Sino-Vietnamese words and widely used by the Vietnamese. Table 1 exemplifies a few such words.

Likewise, as mentioned earlier, the Vietnamese commonly mix some English words while speaking Vietnamese. Mixing English words is a natural phenomenon among the youth or those who are a part of the Vietnamese showbiz, social media and informal conversations. They do it deliberately as finding the right Vietnamese word for an English word is too difficult for them. Mixing the English words is both "time-saving," as it takes fewer words in Vietnamese to express the same meaning as in English, and also adds to their "show off" when they mix the English words.

A remote perception about loan or borrowed words is that they could be a part of the lost text buried in the past; hence they are different from the texts they we speak today. They could also be a part of the many languages spoken in China when trade grew and new words were invented by the contemporary authorities to name their new merchandise. However, it is hard to accept that any such text was inherited from ancient Chinese texts or borrowed by any existing language. Findings also reveal that most borrowed or loan words relate to food names or those related to culture, living conditions and like. A deeper learning also reveals that a few of these words are also used in the translated novels and literature, in addition to their informal use.

It can also not be denied that most of the Hán-Việt words/phrases being used today are composed of Chinese words in Hán-Việt vocabulary. However, on the contrary, Vietnamese use more often 'nôm' or 'thuần Việt" words in place of Chinese such as "sân bay" instead of "phi trường", "lên thẳng" instead of "Trực thăng", "lính thủy đánh bộ" instead of "thủy quân lục chiến", and so on. Not only the titles of Kim Dung's novels use words from the Han-Viet vocabulary, there are also several Hán-Việt words/phrases such as "không gian tuyến tính" (linear space), hữu cơ (organic), 'sinh vật học' (biology), and like that exist in in Han-Viet vocabulary. Owing to the pre-dominance of loan/ borrowed words, people do not recommend to learn Chinese, rather they wish to learn more about Hán-Việt words, in order to keep Vietnamese clean and clear in meaning.

While tracking the origin of loan/ borrowed words, it is learnt that Sino-Vietnamese still corresponds to Tang dynasty's rhyme styles and therefore it gets closer to Tang Chinese. This feature of Sino-Vietnamese sounds similar to southern Chinese dialects bring it closer to Tang Chinese than northern Chinese. Here are a few examples with their English equivalents: Mī phẩm (美品) cosmetics; Cập nhật (及日) update; Tài khoản (財款) account; Ái nhi (愛兒); pedophilia, Liên lục địa (聯陸地) inter-continent' Nhiệt kế 熱計 thermometer' Diễn đàn 演壇 forum' and Hình học 形學 geometry. These examples show that the Old Han words are the Chinese-original words introduced into Vietnamese. Due to their use for a long time, these words have been assimilated very strongly in Vietnamese (Tang, 2007).

For example, a Viet loan word such as sông (originally k-roːŋ) was borrowed into Chinese, which became 江 (gong1). Hence it is not of Chinese origin, but Viet origin. Another example of Viet loan word is lá, that became 茶 (caa4). Likewise, Indic loan word Cà ri and 咖哩 (gaa3 lei1) came from the Tamil word கறி (kaṟi) or Phật Đà and 佛陀 (fat6 to4) came from the Sanskrit word बुद्ध (Buddha). The English loan words include Tắc xi and 的士 (dik1 si6) derived from English word taxi and ba and 吧 (baa6) from English word bar. The Japanese loan words include Câu lạc bộ and 俱樂部 (keoi1 lok6 bou6) derived from Japanese *wasei kango,* which is a phonetic translation of the English word *club*.

Likewise, Chinese would read a word "茶" as "chá" and Vietnamese would read this as: "trà"; the English word flower is pronounced as "花" "huā"in Chinese and "hoa" in Vietnamese; the English word electricity, "電" is pronounced in Chinese as "diàn" and in Vietnamese as "điện" with pronunciation extremely similar. This feature of similar pronunciation in their language was perhaps the reason why the Chinese people could invent cognates and also use them. Such words exist in great prominence in the Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary (Tran & Tanemura, 2020).

Linguistically, loan or borrowed words would not always establish a genealogical relationship of respective languages, since languages have their own evolution and inheritance. For example, French and Italian can be called *related* languages with a common genealogy because both of them evolved from a single ancestral language, the Latin (Tang, 2007). However, Vietnamese and Chinese are *unrelated* because they evolved from two very different languages: Vietnamese belongs to the Austroasiatic language family, while Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family. Vietnamese has many loanwords from Chinese since Vietnam was under the Chinese rule over 1000 years and hence a strong cultural influence was inevitable, but this does not make two languages related. For instance, Japanese also has many thousands of Chinese loanwords, but the grammar and the lexicon-semantic structure of the two languages are evidently very different. Vietnamese also has many French loanwords as a result of the colonial rule (Trang, 2021), but this also does not make Vietnamese and French related. Thus linguists believe that the number of loanwords and its percentage in the vocabulary does not make two languages related or having a common inheritance.

Since both Vietnamese and Chinese are SVO languages, there are still deep differences between their basic structure and word order. For instance, adjectives and possessive expressions are placed *before* the noun in Chinese (大狗, 我的狗, like in English: big wall, my ball), but after the noun in Vietnamese (chó lớn, con chó của tôi). Relative clauses are placed *after* the noun in Vietnamese (con chó ăn xương, like in English: the book which bears no pictures), but *before* the noun in Chinese (吃骨头的狗) (Tran & Tanemura, 2020). Likewise, Vietnamese grammatical words and Vietnamese noun phrase structures are both minimally influenced by Chinese.

It is evident from the fact that when Vietnamese adopted Chinese grammatical loanwords, they were incorporated in Vietnamese without changing their syntactic structure. As a result, a few Vietnamese comparative words, clause-linking words, negation words had their origin in Chinese, without change in their meanings and/or functions. A good example of this trend are the Vietnamese pronouns. Hence, there is no single universal word for pronouns like "I" or "you", and it has to be chosen from many alternatives depending on the relationship between the speaker and listener, whether the listener is old or young, male or female, and like. In Vietnamese, for "I" and "you" the speaker uses *tôi* and *bạn* if the listener is more or less of the same age as the speaker; *em* and *chị* if the listener is older than the speaker and female; *em* and *anh* if the listener is older than the speaker and male; *chị* and em if the listener is younger than the speaker and female; *anh* and *em* if the listener is younger than the speaker and male. (Yes, if you are younger than your female listener, you call her *chị*; but if you are older than your female listener, then you call yourself as *chị,* interesting.) Many of these pronouns in fact are Chinese loanwords, but in Old Chinese they were originally kinship terms, and they completely changed their grammatical function in Vietnamese, became pronouns.

The loanword situation in Vietnamese is so complex that it is too difficult to determine what is borrowed and what is original. The reason is perhaps because of the long exposure and extensive time frame and numerous languages in the region. Vietnamese has been linguistically affiliated with hundreds of languages in the past few centuries, but this study confirmed that Vietnamese has a strong database of vocabulary cognates and loan words as a Mon-Khmer language rather than a Tai-Kadai or Sino-Tibetan one.

Conclusion

To sum up, a detailed analysis of the Vietnamese vocabulary patterns reveal that its linguistic structure differs from the Sino-Tibetan Chinese. There is of course the Chinese cultural influence but not so strongly. The Chinese influence is restricted to lexical and syntactic, superficially seen in loan words or a few "native words" that have Chinese origin. These are the words borrowed before Tang period, for instance "tươi" 鮮,"búa" 斧 ,"mùi" 味 etc. During the Tang period, these words were replaced with new pronunciation like "tiên","phủ","vị " but the new ones were evident only in formal texts and in compound forms. Moreover, it was also seen that standard Chinese loanwords were "Vietnamized" only in the spoken language as new pronunciations appeared beside the standard ones, for example "vẹn" 完,"vợ" 婦,cờ 其. Since these words existed even before the Tang period, they can be treated as native words, for everyday use, though a common Vietnamese would not even know that these words have a Chinese origin.

Another finding of the study is that a few loan words are Sino-genic (originated from or related to Chinese, and can be written using Chinese characters) or cognates that have similar meanings or pronunciation (not necessarily identical). It suggests that when a loan word expresses a certain idea or concept, it used either a native Vietnamese word (i.e. non-Sinitic) or a Sinitic word. In either case, the choice of the "Chinese language" is important.

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