

# SCRIPT ISSUES OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN VIETNAM

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the article is to provide a comprehensive overview of script issues of 52 ethnic minorities in Vietnam in five main areas: Truong Son Tay Nguyen, Tay Bac, Viet Bac, Central Vietnam, and Southern Vietnam. To achieve this aim, the researchers adopted an interdisciplinary approach, which is language-culturology, language-ethnography/ anthropology, along with a sociolinguistic approach. With the combination of two main methods, namely Field Research Methods of Linguistics and Expert Interviews, the study analyzes the relationship between script and culture, the importance of script in preserving information and ethnic culture in Vietnam, the advantages as well as the limitations of traditional and new scripts existing among ethnic minorities in Vietnam. From the findings, the researchers made recommendations on the creation of scripts for ethnic groups without written language and on the preservation of the traditional scripts with highly ethnic cultural value, which is regarded as National Cultural Heritage.

*Keywords:* Language, scripts, ethnic groups, ethnic culture

## 1. Introduction

Language is one of the elements of culture. For each ethnic minority, language is the most important element of ethnic culture, so when determining the composition of an ethnic group, scientists are often interested first in the language they use. Language is one of the important criteria to form ethnic groups. It is no coincidence that ethnologists classify ethnic groups according to language family. An obvious example is the classification of Asian ethnic groups into such groups as (1) the Indo-European ethnic groups, (2) the Austroasiatic ethnic groups, (3) the Austronesian ethnic groups, (4) the Sino-Tibetan ethnic groups, (5) the Tai-Kadai ethnic groups, (6) the Smit-Khmit ethnic groups, (7) the Tuyee ethnic groups, (8) the Altaic ethnic groups, and (9) the Hmong - Yao ethnic groups (Mai Ngoc Chu, 2015).

Besides, language is not only a component of culture but also a means of recording and transmitting the culture of the ethnic group. For the ethnic groups that do not have a written script, the language 'records' the ethnic culture in the form of oral transmission from one generation to another. Of course, 'words are but wind', so 'recording' by word of mouth is greatly limited by space and time. To overcome those limitations, people have created a script system, which is a great invention of mankind and an effective means of recording and transmitting ethnic culture. Since the introduction of scripts, the folklore treasures of the ethnic groups have not fallen into a state of being lost or embellished, exaggerated, and added to with each retelling, which can be compared to the popular proverb 'a tale never loses in the telling'.

Script is a system of symbols used to record spoken language. It is regarded as a description of spoken language through the use of symbols or signs. The earliest scripts that were found on the walls of caves of prehistoric people were associated with artwork. In the development history of human society, script has played a very important role, especially as a

means of recording information. Without script, it would be impossible to have books and newspapers recording the inventions and scientific and technical achievements of ancestors to pass on to their descendants. Undoubtedly, the spoken word is a physical manifestation of language, which still has certain restrictions and limitations. Therefore, it is not likely to transmit information clearly and broadly, nor can it keep information as long as the written scripts. It can be seen that the limits of spoken language are transcended by written language<sup>1</sup>. Script is a wonderful and great achievement of mankind that is the ideal medium for information transmission, knowledge storage, and creativity stimulation. It may be claimed that since script was invented, human society has advanced to an era of civilization that is far higher than it was when human language just had one form, the sound language<sup>2</sup>.

The scripts of ethnic groups in the world are quite diverse because there have been thousands of scripts existing in ethnic groups<sup>3</sup> so far. However, if categorized, they fall into the following three broad categories:

*Ideograph*<sup>4</sup>. This is the oldest human script. The principle of ideograph is that each script represents the meaningful content of a word. The ideograph has no relation to the sound aspect but only to the meaning of the language. The relationship between ideas and scripts is a direct relationship between Script and Idea. Sinograph (Chinese character) is a typical example of the ideograph.

*Phonograph*. Unlike the ideograph, the phonograph does not care about the content and meaning of the word, but only records the sound sequence of that word. The phonograph is a representation of phonetics rather than meaning. The relationship between scripts and ideas is an indirect relationship through sound: Script, Sound and Idea. A series of European scripts such as English and French are phonographs.

*Mixed scripts*. This is a combination between ideograph and phonograph. Pali - Sanskrit script belongs to this category (Mai Ngoc Chu, 2015).

Spoken language was first developed with the emergence of humans, but written scripts appeared later. Up to now, both globally and in Vietnam specifically, many ethnic groups do not have the written form of their own languages. Therefore, creating scripts for these ethnic groups and improving scripts of the ethnic groups with their available scripts is a crucial task that multi-ethnic countries have been undertaking. This effort, to which UNESCO given considerable attention and consistent supports, has profound political relevance in addition to cultural significance.

Vietnam is a multiethnic, multilingual nation. Since the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1945), and after the unification of the nation (1975), the Government and people of Vietnam have made significant efforts in preserving and developing the ethnic languages. One of the practical things to accomplish the goal of equality among ethnic groups is to create scripts for the existing ethnic groups in the territory of Vietnam. Then from the establishment of scripts, Vietnam has introduced some scripts of ethnic minorities to teach in schools. The Institute of Linguistics, Hanoi Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh Vietnam National University and the Ministry of Education and Training have implemented many useful activities in the creation and dissemination of ethnic scripts. Up to now, after a period of

implementation, there needs to be an in-depth study on this topic, that is, on the script issues of ethnic minorities in Vietnam.

With the aforementioned method of stating the problem, this article aims to provide a thorough, comprehensive, and systematic view of the script issues of ethnic minorities in Vietnam. From that basis, the present study can initially make some suggestions in creating scripts for the ethnic groups that have not had written languages yet and improving those of the ethnic groups that have already had scripts.

## **2. Theoretical background**

Before 1975, Vietnam was divided into two regions, with the existence of two states: The Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North and the Republic of Vietnam in the South. A good thing in common is that studies of ethnic languages was methodically conducted by linguists and ethnologists in both regions. In the North, there were two notable research centers, namely Hanoi Vietnam National University and the Institute of Linguistics, and in the South, there was the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

Linguists and ethnologists in the Northern Vietnam emphasized studying languages of ethnic groups in Tay Bac, Viet Bac and North Central regions. Linguists from the Summer Institute of Linguistics in the Southern Vietnam focused on the languages of ethnic groups in the Truong Son Tay Nguyen region. Researchers in the North studied ethnic languages mainly from the theoretical viewpoints of Russia and Prague (Functional Linguistics School) with the aim of finding out the linguistic typological features of the ethnic languages, setting scripts for ethnic groups that have not had a written script, and improving the written language of ethnic groups who have already had traditional scripts. Meanwhile, with the support and coordination of American linguists, who followed the American Descriptive School and pragmatic purposes, researchers in the South primarily investigated ethnic languages in order to create scripts for native speakers of Truong Son Tay Nguyen. At that time, scripts were established based on the Latin alphabet for 18 ethnic languages in this area (Ly Tung Hieu, 2017).

After the reunification of the country (1975), the creation and modification of the script as well as the implementation of teaching languages and scripts of ethnic groups continued to be conducted. In the north, they were Tai, Hmong and Tay-Nung languages. In the South, some ethnic languages with traditional scripts were soon taught in schools. Cham and Khmer languages have been experimentally taught since the 1977-1978 school year. Then, in the early 1980s, numerous languages of ethnic groups in Tay Nguyen that had written scripts and large populations such as Rhade, Bahnar, and Jrai were also taught experimentally in schools. The introduction of these languages into teaching was carefully prepared from the curricula and materials to the teaching staff, so the quality of teaching and learning was getting better and better. On the basis of experimental teaching results, the Ministry of Education and Training coordinated with localities to develop and issue a number of programs and textbooks for ethnic languages. By 2017, the Ministry of Education and Training had issued eight ethnic language programs (Cham, Khmer, Jrai, Bahnar, Rhade, Hmong, Mnong, Tai) and six sets of ethnic language textbooks (Cham, Khmer, Jrai, Bahnar, Hmong, Rhade).

Thus, in Vietnam, a number of ethnic languages have already had scripts and some of these script systems are also being taught in schools. However, there are still many ethnic

languages that have not had scripts yet, and the current script system also has many controversial problems.

The above scientific content has been investigated by many researchers. Some notable authors and works can be named as follows. Hoang Thi Chau (2006) discussed the situation and policy of establishing and popularizing ethnic minority scripts in Vietnam, Nguyen Huu Hoanh et al. (2013) studied the language and script of ethnic minorities in Vietnam; Ly Tung Hieu (2017) approached the cultural studies of the Truong Son Tay Nguyen area, Ta Van Thong and Ta Quang Tung (2017) studied the languages of ethnic groups in Vietnam, and Mai Ngoc Chu (2005) examined the ethnic languages in Vietnam from a regional perspective. Other scholars in the field include Dang Nghiem Van (2003), Doan Van Phuc et al. (2019), and Schroch et al. (1966).

Drawing on the results from these scholars, this study continues to deeply explore the issue from the perspective of sociolinguistics, language and culture, and language and ethnicity.

### 3. Data and methods

Vietnam currently has 53 ethnic languages, in which the Kinh ethnic group (the Vietnamese) has the largest population (85.4% of the population with 78.32 million people). The Vietnamese language of the Kinh people (the Vietnamese) became the national language and the script of the current Vietnamese language is the Quoc Ngu script. The remaining 52 ethnic languages account for 14.6% of the population. The materials for this article were taken from 52 ethnic minority languages throughout the territory of Vietnam<sup>5</sup>. Specifically, the researchers took data on ethnic languages in five areas where ethnic minorities live as follows:

- The first area is the Tay Bac region, according to ethnic-cultural characteristics, including the provinces of Son La, Dien Bien, Lai Chau, Lao Cai, Yen Bai and a part of Hoa Binh province. Compared to other regions in the whole territory of Vietnam, Tay Bac region is the most linguistically 'dense' area, which means that this is an area with the greatest number of ethnic languages. There are 22 ethnic languages here, and some provinces like Lai Chau and Dien Bien have up to 15 ethnic languages. The two most common languages are Tai and Hmong.
- The second area is the Viet Bac region, including the provinces of Cao Bang, Bac Can, Tuyen Quang, Lang Son, Thai Nguyen and Ha Giang. Viet Bac is also a region containing many ethnic minority languages with a total of 16 languages spoken here. The province with the leading number is Ha Giang, which has 12 languages. The most common language is Tay - Nung.
- The third area is the Central region of Vietnam (The Middle), which is a long and narrow piece of land, belonging to the provinces of Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Thua Thien - Hue, Quang Nam, Da Nang, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan, and Binh Thuan. Many ethnic languages in this area belong to the Mon - Khmer group (Bahnar, K'ho, O'du, Paco - Ta'o'ih, Bru - Van Kieu) and Malayopolynesia (Cham, Raglei, etc.).
- The fourth area is the Truong Son Tay Nguyen region, including the provinces of Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Lam Dong and Dak Nong. This is an area with many Austronesian languages, which are related to those in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei (Rhade, Chru, Jrai, etc.).
- Lastly, Nam Bo (the Southern region of Vietnam) includes provinces surrounding Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho City such as Dong Nai, Binh Duong, Long An, Tien Giang, An Giang, Kien Giang, Ben Tre, Tay Ninh, Ha Giang, Binh Phuoc, and Ba Ria - Vung Tau. In this area, Khmer

is the most common language, which is available in 10 provinces. In addition, this area also has languages such as Stieng, Maa, Choro, and Mnong.

For the present study, the researchers adopted *an interdisciplinary approach*, which is language - culturology, language - ethnography/anthropology. The rationale behind this approach stems from the fact that the script issues are not only within the scope of linguistics but also related to many fields of culture, anthropology, and ethnology. With an interdisciplinary approach, the script issues will be viewed in a more comprehensive and inclusive way. Additionally, within the scope of linguistics, the researchers approached and addressed issues *in the field of sociolinguistics*.

In the process of investigation and study, the researchers used two main methods, which are *Field Research Methods of Linguistics* and *Expert Interviews*.

*Field Research Methods of Linguistics* is about going to the places where ethnic minorities reside to get 'living' materials about the existence or non-existence of ethnic scripts. The posed questions include: Is the ethnic script traditional or newly created? Is there one or are there many sets of scripts? Who is the author of the script? How popular is the ethnic script? How ethnic scripts are taught? What are the aspirations of the indigenous people about the ethnic script? and among others. The study subjects are indigenous people of different ages, genders and educational levels. The research sites are some provinces in Truong Son Tay Nguyen, Tay Bac, Viet Bac, Central Vietnam, and Southern Vietnam, where ethnic minorities in Vietnam are concentrated.

*Expert Interview* is an 'in-depth' interview method. Experts here are regarded to be intellectuals such as teachers, leaders, managers, culturists, artists, and researchers. In addition to answering the above questions, experts were also interviewed in depth about their opinions and views on the issues being raised and how to solve them. Our many years of fieldwork experience show that the opinion of indigenous intellectuals is extremely important because they really represent the voice of the 'insiders', for their ethnic group. However, during the fieldwork investigation, only after obtaining 'living' materials from ordinary indigenous people, did the researchers interview experts to avoid prejudices imposed from the beginning. Moreover, when there are 'living' materials in hand, listening and exploiting expert's opinions will be more effective because the researchers can ask the experts questions that arise during the data collection process. In addition, in the expert interviews, the researchers paid special attention to *the opinions of shamans, fortune-tellers, and healers who frequently use sets of traditional scripts. It can be said that they possess a profound and thorough mastery of the traditional script of the ethnic group to which they belong*. Thus, their viewpoints are crucial, especially in conserving the traditional script and addressing its flaws.

In addition to the two main methods of Field Research Methods of Linguistics and Expert Interview, the researchers also employed several other techniques that are frequently used by linguists.

First, *a method of theory synthesis* was used, offering the possibility of collating, evaluating and combining theories for practical use of the study. The synthesis was divided into three stages: (i) *synthesis preparation*, in which portions of pertinent theories were extracted and summarized; (ii) *synthesis*, in which theories were compared for points of convergence and

divergence and those points were brought together; and (iii) *synthesis refinement*, in which the synthesis was probed for additional theoretical insights. This method helps to collect and refer to many issues in the field of scripts in general and the scripts of ethnic minorities in Vietnam in particular.

Second, *a method of comparing and contrast* was applied to distinguish between scripts and complementary means of communication, clarifying the similarities and differences between scripts and these means of communication. Besides, this method helps to compare different classifications of Vietnamese ethnic scripts.

Third, *by a method of analyzing and describing*, the study examines the connection between script and culture, the significance of script in maintaining ethnic culture and knowledge in Vietnam, and the benefits and drawbacks of traditional and new scripts used by ethnic minorities in Vietnam.

Fourth, *a method of deductive and inductive reasoning* was applied to accumulate knowledge, draw comments and conclusions to offer suggestions for developing scripts for ethnic groups without written languages and for preserving traditional scripts that place a high priority on ethnic culture.

Last, *quantitative statistical methods* were applied for the data analysis process. A *descriptive statistical method* was used for summarization, calculation, and description of data related to the number of ethnic languages, language families, languages of each language family, and ethnic groups with or without scripts. Then, *an inferential statistical method* was used to estimate typical ethnic scripts with high frequency of use. From those results, the researchers could draw the trend of classification and script usage of ethnic minorities in Vietnam.

With the above research methods, some of the obtained results will be presented in the subsequent section.

#### **4. Findings and discussion**

In terms of the language family, the 52 ethnic languages in Vietnam belong to four language families as follows: 1) Austroasiatic, 2) Tai-Kadai, 3) Austronesian, 4) Sino-Tibetan.

The Austroasiatic language family has 29 languages: Bahnar, Bru - Van Kieu, Choro, Cor, K'ho, Katu, Yao, Jeh-Tariang, Hmong, H're, Khmer, Maa, Mnong, Muong, Pa-Hng, San Diu, Ta'oih, Sedang, Stieng, Brau, Cheut, Khang, Khmu, Tho, Mang, Hakka Chinese (Ngai), O'du, Rmam, Sinmul. The Tai-Kadai language family has 11 languages: Tai, Tay - Nung, Lao, SanChay, Bouyei, Gelao, Nhang, Lachi, Laha, Lu, Qabiao. The Sino-Tibetan language family has seven languages: Hoa, Hani, Yi, Lahu, Phunoi, Sila, and Pula. The Austronesian language family has five languages: Cham, Rhade, Jrai, Chru, and Raglei.

The Austroasiatic language family has 19 scripts: Bahnar, Bru - Van Kieu, Choro, Cor, K'ho, Katu, Yao, Jeh-Tariang, Hmong, H're, Khmer, Maa, Mnong, Muong, Pa-Hng, San Diu, Ta'oih, Sedang, Stieng. The Tai-Kadai language family has four scripts: Tai, Tay - Nung, Lao, and SanChay. The Sino-Tibetan language family has three scripts: Hoa, Hani, and Yi. The Austronesian language family has five scripts: Cham, Rhade, Jrai, Chru, and Raglei. The ratio of languages that have scripts over the total language number of the language family is as follows:

Austroasiatic 65.4% (19/29), Tai-Kadai 36.3% (4/11), Sino-Tibetan 42.8% (3/7), and Austronesian 100% (5/5).

Overall, 31 of the 52 ethnic minority languages have scripts, making up 62.2% of the total. The other 21 languages, which account for 37.8% of the total, lack written scripts. Therefore, theoretically, Vietnam still needs to establish script systems for 21 ethnic languages. The explanation is that all ethnic groups have equal cultural rights, including the right to have their own scripts, in accordance with the principles of UNESCO. It is important to note that the aforementioned 21 ethnic minorities are all small-population ethnic groups, and linguistic communication primarily occurs among middle-aged and senior members of the community. Besides, many families today, especially those with young children, exclusively speak the national language, which is Vietnamese. Therefore, a large number of languages are at risk of disappearing in the near future. Consequently, the essential mission of Vietnam now (as well as of multi-ethnic and multilingual countries in the world) is to protect languages that are in danger of extinction. Obviously, creating scripts for endangered languages and instructing children of ethnic minorities in both oral and written forms are the greatest ways to preserve them. Additionally, folklore is extremely abundant among Vietnam's ethnic minorities, particularly in the form of folk songs, proverbs, riddles, poetic stories, epics, myths, fables, fairy tales, and so on. However, folklore is only passed down orally in ethnic groups without a script; therefore, a lot of it 'falls off' with time. The aforementioned sorts of folklore will be accurately recorded when there are written languages. That is one of the most efficient ways to support the protection and maintenance of ethnic culture. Therefore, despite the fact that it has not been formally taught in schools, it is vital to urgently create scripts for the 21 ethnic groups that lack a written language. Another issue is that, once a script has been established for ethnic groups without written languages, it is crucial to spread that script throughout the entire community; otherwise, the created script will soon perish prematurely. Experience in introducing scripts to ethnic minorities demonstrates that script teaching is not only for young people but also for the elderly. Of course, teachers apply various cutting-edge techniques according to the learners' ages. For children, scripts can be taught through comics. For the elderly, it is possible to teach scripts associated with the recording of folk works that have long existed only in oral form. Teaching the elderly to rewrite the folk songs, folk verses, idioms, proverbs, riddles, etc. that they have memorized will make them thrilled and proud of their traditional culture. When native speakers are able to write and use the script, the community's sense of protecting their mother tongue will be enhanced. Therefore, with 21 ethnic groups that do not have a written script, the establishment and dissemination of script is the top task in protecting ethnic culture.

Among the 31 scripts of ethnic minority languages, they can be classified into two groups: traditional scripts and new scripts.

The group of traditional scripts was largely acquired from the two great cultures of the East, namely China and India. From China, Chinese characters were transmitted to Vietnam and received by Vietnamese Confucianists. This script is associated with the popularity of Confucianism and Northern Mahayana Buddhism. Then, on the basis of Chinese characters, a type of script with Southern characteristics was born, which is the Nom script of the Vietnamese people, of the Tay - Nung people, etc. Nom script is a cultural achievement that has been evaluated to be of great value by the scientific community, and needs to go through the procedures to request

UNESCO to recognize it as a world cultural heritage. The Sanskrit script spread from India to many Southeast Asian nations, including Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, which are known for their devotion to Brahminism and Theravada Buddhism. Khmer, Cham, Tai, and Lao scripts fall under this category in Vietnam. Because the Khmer population is concentrated in the Southern provinces, the Khmer script is the most widely used and has the greatest vitality among the four scripts mentioned above. Khmer became the primary language in a sizable region and the Khmer script (appearing from the sixth century) was formally taught in schools. The survey results show that, among the scripts of ethnic minorities in Vietnam, Khmer script has the widest spread and teaching Khmer script also achieves the greatest success. Not only can almost 100% of the children of the Khmer ethnic group use Vietnamese language and Vietnamese script (the national language), but they can also master Khmer language and Khmer script (the language of the ethnic group). The Cham script, the oldest in Southeast Asia, was created no later than the fourth century and was preserved by scholars and dignitaries of the Cham people. Traditional Cham culture is a famous culture in Southeast Asia associated with the Champa state in history. Cham script has become a means of recording the imprint of Champa culture. However, unlike Khmer script, Cham script is less likely to have the power to spread to the community. Today, the Cham ethnic group is divided into many different branches, some of which keep the traditional Brahmin culture and the other that switch to Islamic culture. The religious and dialectal variances have prevented the Cham community from using a single traditional Cham script that is unified for the entire community. The Tai script, which was developed in the sixth century and had eight different character types, was derived from the Indian Sanskrit script through the Khmer alphabet. In the cultural treasures of the Tai people, the traditional Tai script is considered a spiritual heritage, crystallizing the wisdom of the ancestors. It is preserved in ancient books recording literature, customs, customary law, history or in family annals, genealogies, and it has scientific value in literature, local studies, ethnology, anthropology, history of social development of the Tai ethnic group (Ly Tung Hieu, 2017). Lao script is also used among Laotian intellectuals to document traditions, ceremonies, and other things. Thus, it can be affirmed that all traditional scripts of ethnic minorities in Vietnam have high historical-cultural values. It is necessary to consider them as National Heritage in order to have effective policies and preservation measures.

The group of new scripts adopted the Latin graphology, appearing later. The earliest are four sets of scripts born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century created by French scholars, namely Bahnar script (1861), Jrai script (1918), Rhade script (1923), K'ho script (1949). New sets of scripts were established by scientists from the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) in the South, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, in the North, new sets of scripts were created by scientists of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. These are scripts such as Sedang, Mnong, Raglei, Bru - Van Kieu, Katu, Ta'oih, Tai, Tay - Nung, etc. There are 26 ethnic minorities in all having Latinized scripts. Remarkably, in some ethnic minorities, although they have the Latin alphabet, there is not one but many Latin script systems or many variations of a script system. The K'ho script is an example. The earliest script was developed by the French in 1949, followed by another writing system created by SIL in 1960, and finally a modification of this system by Vietnamese linguists in 1983. Besides, ethnic groups such as Katu, Ta'oih, Bru - Van Kieu have both written scripts made by SIL and by the National Front for the Liberation of the South (Ta Van Thong & Ta Quang Tung, 2017). Then there is the case in which the same ethnic group, such as Tai, Tay-Nung, Hmong and Cham, uses both a traditional script and a Latinized

script. The question of which script system should be adopted requires a formal response from linguists and executives.

Looking back at how ethnic minorities have attempted to address their writing issues in the past, it becomes clear that simply abandoning traditional scripts in favor of Latinized scripts is not always the most efficient approach. Latin letters are phonographs that are easy to read and write, thus teaching students to read and write more rapidly. This is an advantage. However, this benefit only achieves optimal results when the ethnic group uses the Latinized script, which is the only type of script used by that community. This is not always the case for ethnic communities who have already used a traditional script. The lesson on the use of Latinized Tai script is an example. The sixth century saw the beginning of the traditional Tai script, as was already mentioned. The Latinized Tai script was approved in 1981 and is now used to print ethnic art pages in regional books and periodicals as well as a *Tai-Vietnamese dictionary*. However, those who acquired the Latinized Tai script cannot access the Tai cultural heritage recorded in the traditional Tai script. Therefore, after two unsuccessful attempts to issue a new Tai script, in light of the survey findings of eight different types of ancient Tai script characters, the authors of the Tai Studies Program have completed the unified Vietnamese Tai script and deployed it to seven provinces where Tai people live. Likewise, the Cham script is in a similar situation. Those who learn the new Akhar Thrah Cham script cannot read the Akhar Thrah on texts and epitaphs (Ly Tung Hieu, 2017).

As mentioned above, script is a means of recording and transmitting ethnic culture. With the function of reflecting and preserving, the script of an ethnic group is closely related to the history, beliefs, customs and cultural values of that ethnic group. And once attached to the ethnic community for a long time, the script becomes an organic element constituting the ethnic culture, a means of preserving, practicing, and promoting the beliefs, customs and habits of the ethnic group. The populace in ethnic groups will feel as though they have lost a significant piece of their history and culture if the script is taken away. Therefore, it requires careful planning to replace the traditional script with a completely new set of script; otherwise, the ethnic community will respond harshly and the replacement will be ineffective. Reality shows that only what is too unreasonable of the traditional script system should be modified.

In addition to the traditional scripts and latinized new scripts, in some ethnic minorities in Vietnam, there are sets of ‘ancient’ scripts. These are the pictographs of the Pa-Hng ethnic group and the cuneiform scripts of the Yi ethnic group. These two types of script can be found in texts with religious themes. The pictographs of the Pa-Hng ethnic group represent things and phenomena that are real or only in their imagination. The cuneiform script of the Yi ethnic group is regarded as a ‘sacred relic’ used to record ceremonial offerings. However, because these scripts are incomplete, they are not used by native speakers. They are only taken into account as *historical vestiges of the emergence of ethnic scripts*.

According to another classification, the ethnic scripts of Vietnam can be divided into three types as follows.

*Ideograph systems*: These are script systems with a history of many centuries: Hoa script, Hakka Chinese (Ngai) script, San Diu script, and Pa-Hng script.

*The script systems that are half-ideographic and half-phonographic* (combining ideograph and phonograph): Nom Tay script, Nom Nung script, Nom Kinh script, and Nom Ngan script.

*Phonograph systems*: Sanskrit graphological scripts such as traditional Tai script, traditional Cham script, Khmer script, Lu script, Lao script, and Latinized graphological scripts such as Jrai, Rhade, K'ho, Chru, Choro, PaCo – Ta'oih, Bru - Van Kieu, Katu, Raglei, Tay - Nung, Muong, Bahnar, H're, Cham (Hroi), Cor, and Sedang.

In terms of graphology, the scripts of ethnic minorities in Vietnam can be classified into five types:

- Sanskrit graphology: traditional Tai script, traditional Cham script, Khmer script, Lao script, and Lu script.
- Square graphology: the traditional script of the Tay - Nung, Trai (Cao Lan), and Yao.
- Pictograph graphology: the script of the Pa-Hng ethnic group.
- Cuneiform graphology: the script of the Yi ethnic group.
- Latin graphology: Bahnar, Rhade, K'ho, Jrai, Sedang, H're, Raglei, Cor, Chru, Paco – Ta'oih, and Bru - Van Kieu.

In general, it can be said that the scripts of ethnic minorities in Vietnam are quite diverse and rich in terms of origin, formation and graphology (Ta Van Thong & Ta Quang Tung, 2017). The variety of scripts is one of the 'proofs' for the diversity of ethnic culture in Vietnam.

## 5. Conclusions

Through surveying the script issues of ethnic minorities in Vietnam, some comments and recommendations can be made as follows.

Firstly, Vietnam is a multi-ethnic, multi-language country. Most of the ethnic groups in Vietnam have written scripts (31/52 languages). The scripts of ethnic minorities in Vietnam are classified into two types: traditional scripts and new scripts. The traditional scripts adopted characters from China and India. These are precious, rare, and highly valuable sets of scripts in terms of ethnic culture. Traditional scripts are used and preserved by ethnic intellectuals, shamans, fortune-tellers, geographers, healers, and so on. Traditional scripts are used to record the laws of belief, religion, folklore works, customs and traditions, rituals, etc. of the ethnic groups. Meanwhile, the new scripts were established according to the Latin alphabet. The new scripts have the advantage of being easy to learn and remember. The dissemination of the new scripts among young people is generally favorable. Many new scripts have been introduced into the school's teaching and have brought about good effects.

Secondly, in Vietnam, up to now, there are still 21 ethnic languages without scripts. In principle, these ethnic groups need to have their own written language, so developing scripts for these ethnic groups is an important and urgent task. Moreover, in Vietnam today, the languages of the ethnic groups without scripts are endangered languages. Creating scripts for these languages and teaching them to ethnic minorities will be one of the good ways to 'save' those languages from disappearing. It also means contributing to 'saving' an ethnic culture that is standing on the edge of the abyss. Endangered languages can be compared to patients, and the

written script is like one of the medicines that contribute to the recovery of the sick. The evidence demonstrates that ethnic languages with written scripts, particularly those taught in schools, are more vibrant and have a stronger capacity to ‘defend them’ against the threat of extinction brought on by the dominance of powerful languages.

Thirdly, at present, the phonemic phonograph in the Latin alphabet is easy to learn and remember. Thus, when creating scripts for ethnic groups that do not have a written script, they should follow the phonemic phonograph system. In order to establish the script correctly, Vietnamese phonetics – phonology researchers need to carefully investigate the phonemic systems of ethnic languages that do not have a written script. In the past, Vietnamese linguists at the Institute of Linguistics, Hanoi Vietnam National University, and Ho Chi Minh Vietnam National University conducted many field investigations to collect data on phonetics – phonology systems of most ethnic languages in Vietnam, especially the ethnic minorities in Tay Bac and Tay Nguyen. These are valuable materials that can be exploited to develop scripts for ethnic groups who do not have a written language.

Fourthly, traditional script is a valuable ethnic cultural heritage that needs to be protected. The correction of the traditional script, if necessary, needs to be implemented carefully with the consensus input of linguists, ethnologists, anthropologists, cultural scientists, and especially the opinion of the ethnic community who is the owner of that script. Protecting traditional scripts is both a legitimate aspiration of ethnic minorities and a unified view of social and humanities scientists. However, how to protect it is something that needs to be considered and studied in a methodical way to be able to achieve the highest efficiency. In our opinion, for the traditional scripts in Vietnam today, on the one hand, it is necessary to preserve the positive elements with historical and cultural value to the fullest extent possible. On the other hand, it is still required to correct the limitations in terms of linguistics to make the script better, more complete, and to improve its ‘power’ in preserving ethnic culture.

Fifthly, up to now, some ethnic minority scripts have been taught in schools. This is a great effort of the Ministry of Education and Training along with the leaders of the provinces. However, it is not enough for the dissemination of scripts to rely solely on schools, even if schools are the best places to teach literacy. The written scripts need to be made available to the entire population in a variety of ways. The more the script ‘sticks’ to each person in the community, the more vitality it has. From our viewpoints, the folklore treasures of the ethnic minorities in Vietnam today are extremely rich and diverse. *In order to both preserve the traditional culture of the ethnic group and promote the role of archiving information of the ethnic script, all folk compositions such as folk songs, idioms, proverbs, riddles, fairy tales, fables, poetry stories, epics and so on should be recorded in the script of that ethnic group.* This practice also contributes to raising national pride, encouraging love for the language, script and culture of the ethnic community.

Sixthly, currently, in the whole territory of Vietnam, only eight ethnic languages (Hmong, Cham (Hroi), Khmer, Jrai, Bahnar, Rhade, Tai, Mngong) have been taught in schools methodically with the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. This is the best way for ethnic minority languages to be effective, to have deep and wide dissemination, which contributes to protecting ethnic languages from being weakened and endangered. However, at present, in Vietnam, many languages are in a ‘critical’ condition. According to researchers, the number of

endangered languages in Vietnam today is 28 (Nguyen Van Loi, 1999). Therefore, in the coming time, the Ministry of Education and Training needs to increase the number of ethnic languages taught in schools. For ethnic groups with a very small population (under 1000 people), if they cannot organize teaching ethnic languages in a methodical manner with four skills, *special classes need to be organized for students to learn the script of their own ethnic group*. In the context of Vietnam, from our perspectives, it is advisable to develop a model of *special classes* in as many ethnic groups as possible. Not only does that work have practical effects in the dissemination of ethnic scripts, but it also contributes to ‘instilling’ the love for their mother tongue into the hearts of children.

Lastly, as mentioned above, in some ethnic groups of Vietnam today, there is a situation that many sets of scripts exist in parallel. For example, in ethnic groups such as Tai, Tay, and Nung, there are both traditional scripts and new scripts in Latin graphology; In the Cham ethnic group, there are three types of script: The traditional phonographic Cham script in Sanskrit graphology, the Cham Bani script and the Cham Jawi script in Arabic graphology, and the new Cham script in Latin graphology. There are also ethnic groups that have only one type of Latin script, but there are two variations appearing at two different times. For example, in the K’ho and the Raglei ethnic groups, one version of Latin script was created in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and another version was in the 1960s and 1970s. In the Hmong ethnic group, around 1901 saw the creation of one Latin script variant, and 1961 witnessed the creation of another. When teaching Latin script, which has numerous varieties, the most recently created script is usually chosen to use. That is absolutely appropriate because the new script variant has been edited, removing the limitations of the older version. However, the situation is more complicated for ethnic groups like the Tai, Tay, Nung, and Cham, who use both traditional and new scripts. Currently, new scripts are taught in schools so that students can read and write more effortlessly and easily. That is the right approach for the school. However, as mentioned above, perhaps, in addition to teaching new scripts in schools, there should also be special classes in ethnic communities that teach traditional scripts so that later, there would be still indigenous people to read and exploit the ancient texts of their fathers, which have high cultural values. It is also a way to preserve traditional scripts.

## Notes

1. First of all, it is spatially limited. On the part of the speaker, no matter how delicate, thin and tight the vocal cords are, the sound output will only reach a certain height. On the part of the listener, if the listener stands too far away from the speaker, he/ she will not be able to perceive the sound and meaning of the words that the speaker emits because the human ear can only hear other people's voices within a certain limited range. In the old days, when two people lived in two different villages, it would not be possible to communicate with each other using the language of sounds. Spatial distance clearly becomes a problem for communication between people. Sound language is also limited in terms of time. Spoken words are received only at the time they are spoken. Past that time, ‘words are but wind’. It is due to the fact that the sound does not exist anymore. The memory of spoken words depends on the memory of each person. For the previous society, when the means of recording, playing back and transmitting sound had not yet developed, the later generations could not store and transmit the voice of their ancestors. Today, we cannot imagine the voices of great men several thousand years ago because of the limitations of the sound language. Being aware of the limitation of sound language as regards space and time, people have developed techniques to get beyond spatial and temporal shortcomings of sound language.

Through a long process, humanity's 'effort' has paid off: Script systems were born one after another (Mai Ngoc Chu, 2015).

2. In the history of script, people often refer to the early script systems, which have made great contributions to the history of human civilization. They are Egyptian script, Mesopotamian script, Indian script and Chinese script. According to researchers, the Egyptians' creation of the script to record their voices around 5,000 years ago was one of their most significant inventions. Today, it has been reported that the Egyptian script symbol system includes about 750 hieroglyphic symbols and 20 phonographic symbols. Egyptian hieroglyphs are carved in stone, on the walls of temples, shrines, palaces and pyramids. In Mesopotamia, the Sumerian script appeared around the fourth millennium BC. This script system has about 600 characters. Like the Egyptian script, the Mesopotamian script (which is represented by the Sumerian script) is a great spiritual asset of the inhabitants of this area. Archaeological evidence shows that the inhabitants of Mesopotamia used their own script to record scientific knowledge, literary works, political and economic situations, and so on. The Indian script was born more than 2000 years ago. However, that early script no longer exists. Around 800 BC appeared the Kharosthi script, then the Brami script. Then from these two scripts, in the sixth century BC, to record Indo-European languages, people modified the Devanagari alphabet. From here, the Sanskrit script was created. Later in northern India, in order to spread Buddhism easily, the Sanskrit script was modified into a simpler script: the Pali script. The Tai, Lao, Cham (Hroi) and Khmer scripts in the Indochinese Peninsula were also created on the basis of the Pali - Sanskrit script of India (Mai Ngoc Chu, 2009).

3. Before the script officially appeared, mankind had some complementary means of communication. The similarity between script and complementary means of communication is that both rely on visual impressions (different from audio communication based on auditory impressions). This has prompted some people to incorporate complementary means of communication in the written script, making the concept understood in a very broad sense. For example, in some tribes of the Americas, people have a form called Wampum. These are sets of seashells, mussel shells with different colors and arrangements that are strung and worn on the belt to remember the events. Complementary forms of communication are not just artifacts but they can be paintings. Compared with the use of artifacts, the complementary form of communication through drawings is somewhat close to the original form of writing, i.e. pictograph (Nguyen Thien Giap, 1995). However, it should be emphasized that these complimentary means of communication have many limitations. The contents that they convey are not understood by everyone. The written script is different, because it is made for everyone. Additionally, the written script has the power to communicate all the various aspects of social life, including abstract concepts - which complimentary means of communication cannot 'reach'. Therefore, complimentary means of communication are not considered to be script.

4. The most typical examples of ideograph are numbers, marks, for example: 1, 2, 3, +, -, %, >, <, =, etc. For example, the Vietnamese, Indians, Americans, British, and others can all understand the number 2 when it is written, despite the fact that people in each country pronounce it differently. Because each ideographic script directly represents the content and meaning of a word, in principle the number of symbols created to record ideas must be equal to the number of words. In spite of not being limitless, a language has a very large number of words; hence, there will also be a very large number of symbols used to symbolize its meaning. Meanwhile, the

human brain has a finite capacity for remembering. This is inconvenient, which is the main limitation of ideographs. Phonograph consists of two types: syllabic phonograph and phonemic phonograph. For syllabic phonograph, each symbol represents a syllable. Japanese is an example. For phonemic phonographs, each symbol represents a phoneme. The Vietnamese Quoc Ngu script, English and French scripts are all phonemic phonographs. The phonograph is simpler than the ideograph because the number of symbols used for recording syllables and phonemes is much less than the number of symbols used for recording ideas. In terms of script forms, formerly phonographic symbols may have been drawings or hieroglyphic lines as in ancient Egyptian script. Today the phonographic symbols of modern script systems have been perfected to a very simple level. The Latin alphabet, which is used in many nations, is an obvious example. In phonograph, phonemic phonograph is significantly simpler than syllabic phonograph because the number of phonemes in a language is much less than the number of syllables. This is the reason why in the conclusion section of this article, it is recommended that when creating scripts for ethnic minorities in Vietnam that do not have a written language, they should choose phonemic phonograph.

5. Ethnographically, Tay and Nung are considered two different ethnic groups, so Vietnam is regarded as a country with 54 ethnic groups, in which Kinh (the Vietnamese) is the main ethnic group, and the remaining 53 are ethnic minorities. However, linguistically, Tay and Nung languages are the same language, which is called the Tay - Nung language. Therefore, except for Vietnamese as the national language, there are 52 ethnic minority languages.

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## VẤN ĐỀ CHỮ VIẾT CỦA CÁC TỘC NGƯỜI THIỂU SỐ Ở VIỆT NAM

**Tóm tắt:** Bài viết cung cấp một cái nhìn toàn diện về thực trạng tình hình chữ viết của 52 dân tộc thiểu số ở Việt Nam trên địa bàn năm khu vực chính là Trường Sơn Tây Nguyên, Tây Bắc, Việt Bắc, Trung Bộ và Nam Bộ. Để đạt được mục đích nghiên cứu này, chúng tôi đã áp dụng hướng tiếp cận liên ngành ngôn ngữ-văn hóa học, ngôn ngữ-dân tộc học/nhân học, cùng với hướng tiếp cận chuyên ngành ngôn ngữ học xã hội. Với sự kết hợp của hai phương pháp chính là điều tra điền dã ngôn ngữ học và phỏng vấn chuyên gia, bài viết phân tích mối quan hệ giữa chữ viết và văn hoá, tầm quan trọng của chữ viết trong việc lưu giữ thông tin và lưu giữ văn hoá tộc người ở Việt Nam, những mặt tích cực, ưu điểm cũng như những mặt hạn chế của chữ viết cổ truyền và chữ viết mới đang hiện hữu ở các tộc người thiểu số ở Việt Nam. Từ kết quả nghiên cứu, chúng tôi đề xuất kiến nghị về việc đặt chữ viết cho các tộc người chưa có chữ viết và bảo vệ những chữ viết cổ truyền có giá trị cao về văn hoá tộc người với quan niệm chữ viết cổ truyền là di sản văn hóa quốc gia.

*Từ khóa:* Ngôn ngữ, chữ viết, tộc người, văn hoá tộc người