

# A Study on the Types, Mechanisms, and Socio-Cultural Motivations of Semantic Evolution in Sino-Vietnamese Words

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Sino-Vietnamese words constitute an important component of the Vietnamese lexical system and are also a significant product of the long-term linguistic and cultural exchange between China and Vietnam. During historical development, a large number of Sino-Vietnamese words underwent varying degrees of semantic change in Vietnamese, forming complex and diverse phenomena of semantic evolution. Taking Sino-Vietnamese words in modern Vietnamese as the research object, this paper employs diachronic comparison, semantic analysis, and language contact theory to systematically investigate the major types of semantic evolution, patterns of semantic reconstruction, and their socio-cultural motivations. The study finds that semantic evolution in Sino-Vietnamese words mainly manifests in three basic forms: semantic extension, semantic narrowing, and semantic shift. Under the combined influence of language contact and socio-cultural transformation, some Sino-Vietnamese words have undergone significant semantic reconstruction.

*Keywords:* Sino-Vietnamese words, semantic evolution, language contact, socio-culture, lexical semantics

## Introduction

Sino-Vietnamese words refer to vocabulary items derived from Chinese and historically borrowed into the Vietnamese language system. Due to the long-standing political, economic, and cultural exchanges between China and Vietnam, Chinese once occupied an important position in Vietnamese social life. A large number of Chinese words were absorbed into Vietnamese and gradually formed a vast Sino-Vietnamese lexical system. Even today, Sino-Vietnamese words remain widely used in politics, culture, education, science, and technology, exerting profound influence on the modern Vietnamese vocabulary system.

This paper mainly adopts diachronic comparison, semantic analysis, and contrastive linguistic methods. Through the analysis of semantic changes in representative Sino-Vietnamese words in modern Vietnamese, it summarizes the patterns of evolution and explores the major socio-cultural factors influencing semantic development.

## Main Types of Semantic Evolution in Sino-Vietnamese Words

### Semantic Extension

Semantic extension refers to the continuous expansion of a word's range of usage on the basis of its original meaning, thereby generating new additional meanings. After entering Vietnamese, many Sino-Vietnamese words gradually broke through their original semantic limitations as social life and linguistic environments changed.

For example, the word “文化 (văn hóa)” in Classical Chinese mainly referred to “civil governance and moral education”, emphasizing ritual systems and educational functions. In modern Vietnamese, however, “văn hóa” not only refers to traditional culture, but is also widely used to denote lifestyle, behavioral norms, corporate culture, and many other modern meanings, showing a clear expansion of semantic scope.

Another example is “革命 (cách mạng)”, which originally emphasized political regime change, but in modern Vietnamese can also refer to technological revolution, educational revolution, industrial revolution, and various forms of social transformation, demonstrating a clear tendency toward semantic generalization.

### **Semantic Narrowing**

Semantic narrowing refers to the process in which the semantic scope of a word gradually shifts from a broad range to a more specific domain, thereby restricting its usage and semantic functions.

For example, “博士 (bác sĩ)” originally referred in Chinese to a learned scholar or a person holding a high academic degree, but in modern Vietnamese “bác sĩ” specifically means “doctor” (medical doctor), showing a clear narrowing of meaning.

### **Semantic Shift**

Semantic shift refers to the development of new semantic directions during the evolution of a word, sometimes resulting in meanings greatly different from the original sense.

For example, “方便 (phương tiện)” in Chinese generally means “convenient”, whereas in Vietnamese “phương tiện” mainly means “means”, “tools”, “vehicles”, or “methods”, indicating a significant semantic shift.

Another example is “思想 (tư tưởng)”, which in modern Vietnamese not only denotes general ideas and thoughts, but also carries strong political and ideological connotations. This change reflects the influence of social ideology on semantic development.

## **Semantic Reconstruction and Its Patterns**

### **Manifestations of Semantic Reconstruction**

Semantic reconstruction refers to the process in which words establish new semantic systems in a new linguistic environment. During long-term use, some Sino-Vietnamese words gradually weakened their original meanings while new semantic structures were formed. This reconstruction is mainly manifested in the following aspects:

First, the strengthening of polysemy.

The same Sino-Vietnamese word may have different meanings in different contexts, thereby forming a complex semantic network.

For example, “文化 (văn hóa)” in Classical Chinese mainly referred to “civil governance and moral education”, emphasizing ritual cultivation and cultural refinement. In modern Vietnamese, however, “văn hóa” not only means “culture” in the traditional sense, but is also widely used in expressions such as “corporate culture (văn hóa doanh nghiệp)”, “traffic culture (văn hóa giao thông)”, and “internet culture (văn hóa mạng)”. Its semantic scope has expanded significantly and demonstrates characteristics of polysemy.

Second, the emergence of new meanings.

Some Sino-Vietnamese words in modern Vietnamese have developed meanings that did not originally exist in Chinese.

For example, the Sino-Vietnamese form corresponding to “方便”, namely “phương tiện”, mainly refers to “tools”, “means”, or “vehicles” in Vietnamese, such as:

- phương tiện giao thông (means of transportation);
- phương tiện truyền thông (media of communication).

These meanings have clearly diverged from the original Chinese core meaning of “convenience” and formed an entirely new semantic system.

### **Patterns of Semantic Reconstruction**

#### 1. Localization pattern:

After entering the Vietnamese language, Sino-Vietnamese words gradually adapt to the local linguistic environment and cultural cognitive system of Vietnam, and their semantic development demonstrates a clear tendency toward localization. Although many Sino-Vietnamese words originate from Classical Chinese, these words have not completely preserved their original Chinese meanings during long-term usage. Instead, they have continuously been influenced by Vietnamese national culture, social customs, and modes of thinking, thereby forming new meanings with distinctive Vietnamese linguistic characteristics.

For example, “博士 (bác sĩ)” in Classical Chinese originally referred to “a learned scholar” or an official academic title, whereas in modern Vietnamese it specifically means “doctor” (medical doctor). This change reflects the localized adjustment of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary within Vietnam’s occupational system.

#### 2. High-frequency words evolve first:

Sino-Vietnamese words with higher frequency of use are more likely to undergo semantic change because frequent usage enhances their capacity for semantic extension across different contexts. Frequently used words more easily enter various social domains and continuously generate new semantic functions during long-term communication.

For example, high-frequency Sino-Vietnamese words such as “文化 (văn hóa)”, “思想 (tư tưởng)”, “革命 (cách mạng)”, and “经济 (kinh tế)” possess rich and complex semantic layers in modern Vietnamese. These words not only preserve their original basic meanings but also continuously develop new abstract meanings, metaphorical meanings, and specialized meanings.

#### 3. Social demand-driven pattern:

Social development continuously creates new expressive needs, thereby driving Sino-Vietnamese words to develop new semantic functions. As the modernization process of Vietnamese society accelerates, numerous new phenomena, institutions, and ideas continue to emerge. Consequently, the traditional lexical system must rely on semantic extension or semantic reconstruction to meet practical communicative demands.

Particularly in the fields of politics, technology, economics, and media, many Sino-Vietnamese words have been endowed with new contemporary meanings. For example, “革命 (cách mạng)” in ancient times mainly referred to “dynastic change”, whereas in modern Vietnamese it not only refers to political revolution, but can also denote “technological revolution”, “industrial revolution”, and “digital revolution”, among other forms of modern social transformation.

#### 4. Cultural adaptation pattern:

At different historical periods, Sino-Vietnamese words have continuously adapted to socio-cultural changes in Vietnam, thereby achieving semantic adjustment and reconstruction. Language is not only a tool of communication, but also an important carrier of cultural transmission and cultural identity. Therefore, semantic change is often closely related to socio-cultural transformation.

For example, words such as “民主 (dân chủ)”, “自由 (tự do)”, and “社会主义 (xã hội chủ nghĩa)” possessed different semantic connotations during different historical periods, and their semantic changes were clearly influenced by political and cultural environments.

## **Major Factors Influencing the Semantic Evolution of Sino-Vietnamese Words**

### **Internal Linguistic Factors**

First, competition within the lexical system promotes semantic change. When multiple words express similar meanings, some Sino-Vietnamese words undergo semantic adjustment in order to establish new functional divisions.

Second, changes in grammatical structures also influence semantic development. Words continuously acquire new semantic nuances through different collocational environments.

In addition, the principle of linguistic economy encourages semantic simplification or generalization in order to improve communicative efficiency.

### **External Factors**

#### 1. Changes in social institutions:

Changes in Vietnam’s socio-political system have exerted significant influence on the semantic development of Sino-Vietnamese words. As language is a product of social development, semantic change is often closely related to national institutions, political ideology, and adjustments in social structure. During different historical periods in Vietnam, many Sino-Vietnamese words continuously acquired new semantic connotations as political environments changed.

For example, the word “革命 (cách mạng)” in Classical Chinese originally referred to “dynastic replacement” or “the replacement of the Mandate of Heaven”, carrying strong connotations of traditional monarchical politics. However, during the 20th-century Vietnamese national liberation movement and socialist revolution, “cách mạng” gradually evolved into a modern political term referring mainly to national independence, social liberation, and socialist construction. Later, its meaning further expanded to include “technological revolution”, “industrial revolution”, and “digital revolution”, thereby continuously broadening its semantic scope.

#### 2 Sino-Western cultural exchange:

After the introduction of Western culture into Vietnam, a large number of modern concepts required expression through Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, thereby promoting the emergence of new meanings in certain words. Since the 19th century, with French colonial rule and the arrival of Western modern civilization in Vietnam, numerous new concepts related to science, education, politics, law, and economics emerged. In order to meet the expressive demands of modern society, Vietnamese extensively employed Sino-Vietnamese word-formation methods to translate Western concepts.

For example, words such as “经济 (kinh tế)”, “哲学 (triết học)”, “政治 (chính trị)”, “科学 (khoa học)”, and “民主 (dân chủ)” all originate from the Chinese lexical system, yet their modern meanings have been deeply influenced by Western ideological systems. Their meanings in traditional Chinese differ significantly from their actual usage in modern Vietnamese.

#### 3 Influence of globalization:

Modern media and Internet communication have accelerated the speed of semantic updating, making it easier for Sino-Vietnamese words to develop new semantic functions. Under globalization, information spreads

more rapidly and language contact has become increasingly frequent, causing the semantic evolution of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary to become more dynamic and open.

First, the Internet and mass media continuously create new social contexts, enabling traditional Sino-Vietnamese words to acquire new contemporary meanings. For example, expressions such as “网络文化 (văn hóa mạng)”, “数字经济 (kinh tế số)”, and “媒体传播 (truyền thông đa phương tiện)” have driven traditional Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary into new semantic domains.

Second, global technological development has continuously increased the specialization of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary. A large number of scientific, economic, and international political terms spread rapidly through news media and international communication, increasing both the frequency of use and the semantic complexity of Sino-Vietnamese words in modern Vietnamese.

#### 4. Strengthening of national linguistic consciousness:

As Vietnamese national cultural identity continues to strengthen, some Sino-Vietnamese words increasingly reflect local cultural characteristics in their semantics. Especially during the process of modern Vietnamese nation-building, Vietnamese society has continuously emphasized linguistic independence and indigenous cultural values, which has significantly influenced the semantic development of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary.

On the one hand, although some Sino-Vietnamese words retain forms derived from Chinese, their semantics have clearly become Vietnamese in character. For example, words such as “家族 (gia tộc)”, “传统 (truyền thống)”, and “祖国 (tổ quốc)” place stronger emphasis on Vietnamese national spirit and national identity in modern Vietnamese.

### **Socio-Cultural Background Analysis of Semantic Evolution in Sino-Vietnamese Words**

The semantic evolution of Sino-Vietnamese words is not merely a linguistic phenomenon, but also a profound reflection of socio-cultural development. As an important component of social culture, language develops and changes in close relation to historical environments, social systems, cultural exchange, and national identity.

First, the long-term cultural exchange between China and Vietnam laid an important foundation for the formation and development of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary. Since ancient times, China and Vietnam have maintained close relations in geography, politics, economics, and culture. Particularly during the feudal period, Chinese culture exerted profound influence on Vietnamese society. Chinese characters long served as Vietnam's official writing system and as a tool for knowledge transmission, occupying a central position in political administration, educational systems, literary creation, and academic research.

With the spread of Confucian culture, a large number of Chinese vocabulary items related to political ethics, social institutions, and educational thought entered the Vietnamese linguistic system. For example:

- “忠诚 (trung thành)”;
- “仁义 (nhân nghĩa)”;
- “礼仪 (lễ nghi)”;
- “道德 (đạo đức)”.

These words not only retained elements of Chinese cultural characteristics, but also gradually became integrated into the traditional Vietnamese system of social values.

On the one hand, some Sino-Vietnamese words have gradually detached themselves from their original Chinese cultural context and developed new meanings that conform to Vietnamese socio-cultural psychology.

For example, words such as “祖国 (tổ quốc)”, “民族 (dân tộc)”, and “团结 (đoàn kết)” possess strong emotional connotations of nationalism and national identity in modern Vietnamese.

### Conclusion

The semantic evolution of Sino-Vietnamese words is the result of the combined influence of language contact and socio-cultural transformation. Through the analysis of semantic extension, semantic narrowing, and semantic shift in Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, this paper finds that Sino-Vietnamese words exhibit complex and dynamic developmental tendencies in modern Vietnamese. At the same time, semantic reconstruction reflects the capacity of language to adapt to social demands and changing cultural environments.

The study demonstrates that the factors influencing the semantic evolution of Sino-Vietnamese words include not only internal linguistic mechanisms, but also external factors such as social institutions, cultural exchange, modern media, and national identity. The semantic evolution of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary not only reflects the developmental patterns of the Vietnamese lexical system, but also reveals the linguistic and cultural interaction involved in Sino-Vietnamese cultural exchange and Vietnam’s modernization process.

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