

# Co Tu People's use of language, attitudes and aspirations towards their ethnic language and writing system<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *The article presents the latest survey on the situation of language use and attitudes of Co Tu people towards their ethnic language and writing systems. The result shows that Co Tu people are bilingual (Co Tu-Viet), most of them have a good command of their mother tongue and Vietnamese in daily communication. Therefore, Co Tu language is considered safe (not endangered). The article also raises the issue that needs to be agreed upon in the selection of scripts for the Co Tu people in the situation where there is a conflict between the two scripts being used in Quang Nam and Thua Thien Hue provinces.*

**Keywords:** Co Tu Ethnic Group, Co Tu Language, Language Ability, Language Attitude, Co Tu Script, Language in Danger, Language Conservation

## Introduction

The Co Tu ethnic group can also be written as Ka Tu, Ca Tu, Katu, Ca Tu, Cờ - Tu... At present, the name “Co Tu” is used in the electronic information portals of the Government and across various media channels. According to the 2019

Population and Housing Census, there are 74,173 of Co Tu people in Vietnam, with a population growth rate of 1.86% (General Statistics Office, 2020: 45). The residential areas of the Co Tu people are situated in the Truong Son mountain range. In the eastern part of the Truong Son range, the Co Tu predominantly reside in Quang Nam province, concentrating mostly in the districts of Tay Giang, Nam Giang, and Dong Giang. Some groups reside in Thua Thien Hue province, primarily in the district of Nam Dong, and a smaller number in A Luoi district. To the west of the Truong Son range, a few Co Tu groups live in Kham Muon province within the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

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<sup>1</sup> The article culminates the research outcomes of a project titled “Synthesizing Research Findings and Proposing Recommendations to the Government and Relevant Agencies on Some Urgent Issues for Preserving and Promoting the Role and Identity of Ethnic Minority Languages and Scripts”, with project code DTDL.XH-06/19. The project is led by Professor Dr. Nguyen Van Hiep from the Institute OF Linguistics, who is the principal investigator for this project, which spanned from 2020 to 2022.

This article focuses on elucidating common issues regarding the residential areas, spoken language, and written script of the Co Tu people in the two provinces of Quang Nam and Thua Thien Hue. It examines the language use situation of the Co Tu in these two provinces, focusing on their language usage, language proficiency, as well as the attitudes and aspirations of the Co Tu people towards the utilization of their spoken language and script. It also explores the desires and aspirations of the Co Tu people, comprising both Co Tu compatriots and local Co Tu leaders, regarding the preservation and development of their own spoken language and script. In addition, the article discusses the issue of selecting a written script for the Co Tu as there are two different Co Tu scripts concurrently in use. The linguistic data used in this analysis consists of 300 survey responses that the research group collected from 300 collaborators in the districts of Tay Giang (Quang Nam) and A Luoi (Thua Thien Hue)<sup>1</sup> during April 2022 as part of the research project.

<sup>1</sup> Some information regarding the demographics of the respondents is as follows:

In terms of gender, males constitute 56.3% while females constitute 43.7% of the respondents.

Regarding age groups, individuals between 18 and 35 years old account for 20%, those aged between 36 and 55 make up 40.7%, and those above 55 years old represent 39.3%.

Regarding educational attainment, 9.3% are illiterate, 1.7% have attended literacy classes, 44.7% have completed primary school, 23% have completed lower secondary education, 11.3% have completed upper secondary education, and 10% possess a college or university degree.

In terms of occupation, 76% are engaged in agriculture, while the remaining respondents are involved in other professions.

## 1. Co Tu Language and Co Tu Script

### 1.1. Co Tu Language

According to linguists, the Co Tu language belongs to the Katuic group within the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austroasiatic language family, which is part of the South Asian linguistic system (Austroasiatic). The Katuic group is a large linguistic category comprising various languages distributed across Vietnam, Laos, and Northeastern Thailand. It encompasses two subgroups, namely Katuic East (including Co Tu, Pa Co, Ta Oi, Ir, Nghe, Kantu) and Katuic West (Bru, Kui, So) (Refer from: Nguyen Huu Hoanh, Nguyen Van Loi, 1998: 8-10). In terms of syllabic structure, Co Tu is a classic sesquisyllabic language. In this regard, a phonological word in Co Tu typically comprises one main syllable and can have one, two, or three preceding subsidiary syllables. Co Tu is considered to have 24 consonants, 18 vowels, and 6 diphthongs (Refer from: Nguyen Huu Hoanh, Nguyen Van Loi, 1998: 17-27, 31). In Vietnam, the Co Tu language comprises several regional dialects, including the lowland Co Tu spoken in districts such as Tay Giang, Dong Giang, and Nam Giang in Quang Nam province. The highland variant of Co Tu is also spoken in the same districts of Quang Nam, but concentrating towards the mountainous regions bordering Laos. There is another variant known as the Phuong dialect, a type of Co Tu spoken in districts Nam Dong and A Luoi in Thua Thien Hue province.

Regarding lexical variations, research conducted by David Thomas suggests that different Co Tu dialects share 62-72% common vocabulary, while the common vocabulary between Co Tu and other Katuic languages such as Bru, Pa Co, and Ta Oi

ranges from 42-55% (Cited from: Nguyen Huu Hoanh, Nguyen Van Loi, 1998: 12). In a recent study, Nguyen Huu Hoanh (2021) pointed out significant lexical disparity of 42.3% between the Co Tu language spoken in Thua Thien Hue province and that spoken in Quang Nam province.

Dialectal variations within the Co Tu languages also extend to phonology. According to Nguyen Huu Hoanh and Nguyen Van Loi (1998: 13), the Phuong dialect (spoken in Nam Dong and A Luoi districts) incorporates certain vowel sounds not present in other Co Tu dialects. Nguyen Huu Hoanh (2021) also observes that phonological differences in the Co Tu languages between the two provinces are relatively diverse and complex. Nevertheless, these differences lie mainly in shifting the vowels to be more open (oo> o, eé> é, é> eé...) or to similar sounds (ú> ú, o> oo, ê> ó...), and thus do not significantly impact the phonological influence of these lexical units.

### **1.2. Co Tu Script**

Currently, there are two main Co Tu scripts in use in Vietnam. One script is used in the Co Tu region of Quang Nam province, primarily in Tay Giang, Nam Giang, and Dong Giang districts, with Tay Giang being the most densely populated area for the Co Tu people. This script was developed by Bh'riu Liéc, an intellectual and local leader of the Co Tu people.

The other script was developed by researchers from the Institute of Linguistics (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences) and is currently used in pilot classes from grades 1 to 6 in the Co Tu region of Thua Thien Hue province, with a focus on the districts of Nam Dong and A Luoi.

Furthermore, there is another Co Tu script

found in the “Katu-Vietnamese-English Dictionary” compiled by Nancy A. Costello and published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, United States, in 1991. All of these scripts employ the Latin alphabet.

Because of the competition in usage among these scripts, we aim to provide further details about the two Co Tu scripts currently in use in Quang Nam and Thua Thien Hue provinces.

The Bh'riu Liéc's Co Tu script is developed by Bh'riu Liéc, a Co Tu intellectual and former Secretary of the Tay Giang District Party Committee who has consistently endeavored to revive the script of his ethnic group. After years of collecting, researching, and systematizing vocabulary units and word meanings, he compiled the “Common C'tu Language Dictionary - Culture of the C'tu Village” with the aspiration that Co Tu people would learn the script in order to preserve and promote their language and cultural heritage.

After the dictionary was put into use and received input from the Co Tu community in Tay Giang district, Mr. Bh'riu Liéc made additions and revisions to enhance its completeness. At a recent symposium on standardizing the Co Tu script, some consensus was reached on refining the orthography of the script. Many agreed with Mr Bh'riu Liéc on the use of vowels (a, o, u, ư), combinations of double vowel letters (ua, ưo, oa), consonants (b, c, d, t...), and consonant clusters (th, ch, tr,..). The Co Tu script distinguishes itself from the Vietnamese script through the inclusion of two additional consonants (z, j), three final consonants (h, l, r) following a vowel (ah, ol, ur), four combinations of double vowel letters (oo, oo, oo, êê), five long vowels (aa, ii, uu, ur, ôô), and 20 combinations of

consonant clusters (bh, bhl, đh, zr, dz...). According to various opinions expressed at this symposium, the Co Tu script must incorporate diacritical marks such as the unmarked, acute (´), underdot (.), and the emphasis (ˆ) to enunciate more easily and accurately, such as in amé (mother), achi (bush-hook), k’đi (disdain)... To facilitate the writing and reading of polysyllabic words, many suggested that there should be a comma placed above the final letter of the subsidiary syllable to separate the subsidiary syllables and the main syllable [...]. In addressing this limitation, many also agreed to replace the vowel (o) in between subsidiary syllables with an apostrophe (’), for instance, transforming đhoroluonh into đh’r’luonh, and caay into k’ay...<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, through various rounds of revisions, it can be asserted that Bh’riu Liéc’s Co Tu script has achieved a certain degree of standardization (See: Bh’riu Liéc, 2006, 2018, 2022).

\* Regarding the Co Tu script developed by the Institute of Linguistics

In 1998, authors Nguyen Huu Hoanh and Nguyen Van Loi published the book *Tiếng Ka Tu* (Social Sciences Publishing House). Subsequently, authors from the Institute of Linguistics received an order from the Department of Science and Technology of Quang Nam province to develop a script for the Co Tu people in Quang Nam. At the same time, they also need to compile a Vietnamese-Co Tu dictionary and develop Co Tu language learning materials.

Upon evaluating the Co Tu script previously used before 1975 and the script adopted by the Department of Education of Quang Nam - Da Nang for developing the textbook 1986, Nguyen Huu Hoanh (2009: 49-63) highlighted both positive aspects and limitations of the previously used script. The previous Co Tu script contained all the irrationalities of the Vietnamese script. Furthermore, it exhibited several inconsistencies: the phonemic system did not correspond with written characters, as the script’s developers lacked linguistic expertise in segmenting or synthesizing phonemes. The author of this article proposes that the construction of the Co Tu script should satisfy the following criteria: each phoneme should be represented by a single symbol; the script must relatively accurately reflect the systematic nature of phonemes; constructing the Co Tu script should be based on the Vietnamese script; in addition to Vietnamese, the revision of the Co Tu script should also consider its relation to the scripts of other closely-related ethnic groups, such as Pa Co, Ta Oi, Bru-Van Kieu; the modification of the Co Tu script should be undertaken within the context of modern technology in printing and publishing.

With this approach, since 2005, the Institute of Linguistics, in collaboration with the Department of Science and Technology of Quang Nam, has developed a new Co Tu script and used it to compile a series of books, including “Tiếng Cơ Tu”, “Ngữ pháp Cơ Tu”, “Từ điển Việt - Cơ Tu”, and “Cơ Tu - Việt”. The People’s Committee of Quang Nam province has yet to officially recognize and implement the Co Tu script developed by the Institute of Linguistics,

<sup>1</sup> Refer from: Bh’riu Quân, *Reviving the Cơ Tu Script*, The Information Portal of the Nam Giang District, <http://namgiang.quangnam.gov.vn/Default.aspx?tabid=109&Group=14&NID=138&tim-lai-chu-viet-co-tu>

despite it having undergone a pilot phase. It was only around 2016 that the People's Committee of Thua Thien Hue province officially recognized and implemented this script, enabling the Department of Education and Training of Thua Thien Hue to compile Co Tu language textbooks from grade 1 to 6 under a pilot program, sponsored by the Faro Fund (Norway).

**2. Research results<sup>1</sup>**

**2.1. Spoken and written language skills of the Co Tu**

The spoken and written language skills of the Co Tu people are understood as their ability to use their mother tongue, Vietnamese, languages of other ethnic groups in the region, and foreign languages. Language skills, as examined and studied in various aspects, encompass listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. On the question that assessed which languages the Co Tu people can speak, the survey results of the research project indicate the following percentages: 100% of respondents can speak their mother tongue, 90.7% can speak Vietnamese, 5.7% can speak some other languages from the region, and a small number (7.7%) can speak foreign languages (Table 1).

**Table 1. The languages that the Co Tu are able to use**

Tieng	Yes	No
Co Tu	300 (100%)	0 (0%)
Vietnamese	272 (90.7%)	28 (9.3%)
Other ethnic languages	17 (5.7%)	283 (94.3%)
Foreign languages	23 (7.7%)	277 (92.3%)

<sup>1</sup> Note: All tables in this article are synthesized from the survey results of the research project.

In general, regarding language skills, most Co Tu residents living primarily in Thua Thien Hue and Quang Nam provinces can speak two languages, which are the Co Tu language and Vietnamese. Very few people can speak three or four languages. Survey results indicate that the bilingualism of the Co Tu language and Vietnamese is the most common trend within the Co Tu community.

Assessing language proficiency in comparison between the native language (Co Tu), Vietnamese, and other ethnic languages, survey results reveal the following: The highest proficiency level is observed in the native language, with 100% proficiency. For Vietnamese, those with the highest proficiency account for 11%, the second-highest proficiency is at 73.3%, while those with lower and basic proficiency levels constitute a very small percentage, primarily limited to simple communication (Table 2).

**Table 2. Evaluating language fluency among the mother tongue (Co Tu), Vietnamese, and other ethnic languages**

Language	Most fluent	Second-most fluent	Third most-fluent language	Least fluent
Co Tu	300 (100%)	0	0	0
Vietnamese	33 (11%)	220 (73.3%)	2 (0.7%)	17 (5.7%)
Other ethnic languages		8 (2.7%)	4 (1.3%)	5 (1.67%)

Based on the common language proficiency assessment scale, we have formulated five levels of language proficiency in ascending

order: Level 1 - Capable of uttering a few simple sentences such as greetings and self-introductions but may not comprehend others' speech; Level 2 - Can understand and respond to basic questions like name, age, place of origin, etc.; Level 3 - Able to provide directions to strangers; Level 4 - Capable of describing in detail about life, family, work, etc.; Level 5 - Can engage in debates and arguments.

The survey results of the research project regarding the language proficiency of the Co Tu people in relation to various common languages and other ethnic languages, as per the five-level scale above, indicate the following: 100% of surveyed individuals demonstrate the highest language proficiency in their native language, being able to engage in debates and arguments using this language. Regarding the common language, they also possess relatively high language proficiency, with 38.7% being proficient at Level 5, 31% at Level 4, and 17.3% at Level 3. In regard to other ethnic languages, none demonstrate language proficiency at Level 5 or 4, with a mere 3.3% having proficiency at Level 3 (Table 3). In general, the Co Tu people exhibit high proficiency in both the Co Tu language and the Vietnamese language, while their proficiency in other languages remains quite low.

**Table 3. Language skills of the Co Tu according to 5 levels (%)**

Language	Level 5	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1
Co Tu	100.0				
Vietnamese	38.7	31.0	17.3	2.3	1.3
Other ethnic languages	0	0	3.3	1.3	1.0

On written language skills: the percentage of those who can read and write Co Tu and Vietnamese are relatively high (Table 4).

**Table 4. Literacy rate of the Co Tu (%)**

Language	Able to read	Not able to read	Able to write	Unable to write
Co Tu	42.0	56.0	38.7	61.3
Vietnamese	90.7	9.3	58.3	41.7
Script of other ethnic languages	4.0	94.0	0	100.0

Among the surveyed participants who are literate, we have surveyed their literacy acquisition, and the research project's results indicate the following: the majority of the Co Tu ethnic people who can read and write in the Vietnamese language have acquired these skills through formal education in the school system. Additionally, a very small number have acquired literacy in the common language in a few other places (local organizations conducting literacy classes) (Table 5).

**Table 5. Where the Co Tu learned reading and writing**

Place of learning	Vietnamese (272 people can read)	Co Tu (126 people can read)	Other ethnic languages (12 people can read)
Family	5 (1.7%)	49 (16.3%)	0
School	265 (88.3%)	90 (30.0%)	0
Other	2 (0.7%)	53 (17.7%)	12 (4.0%)

## 2.2. Attitudes towards language and script

The language attitude is manifested through the level of satisfaction of the native speakers with their spoken language and written script and the community's

awareness of the necessity or unnecessary of a particular language in various aspects of their life.

The survey results of the research project regarding the satisfaction level with the Co Tu script among the Co Tu people in Thua Thien Hue and Quang Nam provinces show the following: 36.3% responded as satisfied, 22.3% responded as dissatisfied, and the remaining 41.4% responded as unsure (with the reason being that they either do not know the Co Tu script or have not been exposed to it, thus unable to assess).

The satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the Co Tu people with the Co Tu script may be subjective and personal, as there are cases where Co Tu people may not know their ethnic script but still evaluate it as unsatisfactory.

Considering that a significant number of the Co Tu people do not know how to read and write in their ethnic language, a question arises: if there are classes available locally to teach the Co Tu script, would they attend? The survey results of this study indicate that the majority of respondents expressed a willingness to attend (67.7%). Among them, some individuals, even though they already know how to read and write in Co Tu, still wish to further their education. Approximately 2.7% responded that they would attend if they had the time. The remaining 29.7% indicated that they would not attend, as some already knew the Co Tu script, while others gave reasons such as being too old or lacking the time for further education.

For those who expressed a desire to attend these classes, their primary motivations

**Table 6. Is learning other languages more important than learning Co Tu? (%)**

	Yes	Not sure	No	Do not know
Is learning Vietnamese more important than learning your ethnic language?	36.0	3.0	60.3	0.7
Is learning other ethnic languages in the region more important than learning your ethnic language?	1.0	1.0	97.0	1.0
Is learning foreign languages more important than learning your ethnic language?	8.0	4.7	80	7.3

**Table 7. The Co Tu's opinion regarding preserving the language and script of the Co Tu (%)**

	Agree	Not sure	Do not agree	Do not know
The writing script is needed to preserve the culture of our ethnicity	100.0	0	0	0
The writing script is needed to preserve the language of our ethnicity	100.0	0	0	0
It's important to teach our ethnic language in schools	98.0	1.0	0.3	0.7
Primary schools need to teach using our ethnic language as well as Vietnamese at the same time	97.3	1.0	0.3	1.4

were to preserve their traditional culture and maintain the uniqueness of their ethnic identity. In contrast, among those who did not wish to learn the Co Tu script, there were a variety of reasons, including factors related to gender, age, time constraints, or already having knowledge of the Co Tu script, thus not seeing the need for further education.

Regarding the preference of Co Tu people for speaking, reading, and writing their ethnic language, the survey results of this study revealed an unanimous response: 100% believed that knowing how to speak their ethnic language was necessary, 98.3% emphasized the importance of being able to read their ethnic script, and 98% agreed that knowing how to write in their ethnic script was essential. The proportion of respondents who answered “no” or “difficult to answer” was very small.

In terms of the importance of learning the Vietnamese language compared to the Co Tu language, the survey results indicated that 36% considered learning the Vietnamese language to be more important than learning the Co Tu language. They viewed the Vietnamese language as a means to facilitate education, livelihood, and everyday communication. However, 3% were unsure; 60.3% believed that learning the Vietnamese language was not more important than the Co Tu language (stating that both languages were equally important), and the remaining 0.7% responded with “not sure” (Table 6).

Furthermore, the vast majority (97%) of respondents stated that learning a different ethnic language within the region is not as important as learning their own ethnic language. Additionally, when asked about the significance of learning a

foreign language compared to their ethnic language, the majority leaned toward the answer “no” (80%), indicating that they consider learning a foreign language to be less important than learning their own ethnic language. A small minority (8%) held the view that learning a foreign language is more important because it helps them integrate and develop, while also have opportunities to interact with foreigners.

Regarding the opinions of the Co Tu people on the preservation of their spoken language and script, the survey results reveal that: The majority of the Co Tu ethnic people believe that script is crucial for the preservation of their culture and the safeguarding of their spoken language. Additionally, they express a desire for their ethnic language to be taught in schools (Table 7). This is a positive sign and provides a favorable foundation for efforts to preserve and protect the spoken language and script of the Co Tu ethnic group.

### **3. Conclusion and recommendations**

The survey results of this research on the language use and language attitudes of the Co Tu people indicate the following: The Co Tu people are highly bilingual in Co Tu and Vietnamese; this means the Co Tu language is secured and is not at risk of endangerment. The majority of Co Tu individuals can proficiently use both their native language and Vietnamese in their daily communication.

From the survey results, we would like to propose the following recommendations:

Firstly, regarding the standardization of a single Co Tu script: There is a need for discussion to reach a consensus on the most effective adoption of the Co Tu script for practical use. Currently, there

are two different sets of Co Tu scripts used concurrently in the Co Tu communities in Quang Nam province (Tay Giang, Nam Giang, Dong Giang districts), and a different script is used in Thua Thien Hue province (Nam Dong and A Luoi districts). In terms of linguistic science, the character set constructed by the Institute of Linguistics exhibits a higher degree of scientific rigor. This is due to the fact that the linguists developed it based on phonetic principles and the construction of a script to phonetically represent the language. The character set created by the Institute of Linguistics boasts advantages in terms of the scientific aspect of script development. The Bh'riu Liéc's character set has other strengths. Bh'riu Liéc is an intellectual figure among the Co Tu people who holds a deep sense of ethnic pride and a strong desire to reinforce the linguistic and cultural identity of the Co Tu community. Therefore, Bh'riu Liéc's character set carries strengths in terms of the "emotional" aspect as it represents the sentiments of a Co Tu community member. Bh'riu Liéc's character set is also considered to inherit a script that was established and used by revolutionary cadres for disseminating materials during the resistance against the United States. This historical connection strengthens the use of this script, as Unseth (2005) highlights a "glorious past" is an important factor in selecting the script. We believe that a scientific workshop is necessary for the founders of the scripts and other seasoned linguistics, along with local authorities, and reputable members of the Co Tu community to facilitate scientific discussions, analysis, and adjustments to work towards a unified script for the Co Tu people, building upon the foundation of the

Co Tu script developed by the Institute of Linguistics.

Secondly, teaching and learning of the Co Tu spoken language and script. The teaching and learning of the mother tongue of the Co Tu people have yielded favourable outcomes in experimental classes, especially among primary school students. This initiative has been sponsored by the Faro Foundation (Norway). It represents a commendable model that warrants further investigation for potential replication. With the Institute of Linguistics as the coordinating body, the Faro Foundation has provided funding to the Department of Education and Training in Thua Thien Hue province to establish experimental Co Tu language classes for students from grade 1 to grade 3. Subsequently, this program has been extended to students from grade 4 to grade 6 at selected schools in Nam Dong and A Luoi districts, Thua Thien Hue. Textbooks were compiled under the supervision of the Department of Education and Training in Thua Thien Hue and tailored to align with the current curriculum. Classroom teachers are local Co Tu community members who receive additional support from the Faro Foundation.

We believe that schools are the best places to enhance Co Tu language proficiency. Currently, under the new general education program (since 2018), eight ethnic minority languages have been selected to develop textbooks and to be included in elective subjects from grade 1 to grade 12. The criteria for selecting a language are: sufficient number of speakers, availability of existing textbooks, and availability of existing experimental classes. The Co Tu language satisfies these criteria, requiring only the standardization of the Co Tu

script for implementation. Leaders at all levels, along with representatives of the educated Co Tu community, should engage in practical activities to ensure that the Co Tu language is chosen for the development of textbooks and introduced into the curriculum at general education schools. Thirdly, regarding the promotion of the Vietnamese language (commonly referred to as the popular language) within the Co Tu community: The Vietnamese language has been affirmed as the national language according to the 2013 Constitution of Vietnam. Therefore, the learning of Vietnamese is an important issue for the Co Tu people. Insights gathered through the survey conducted in this research project indicate that for the Co Tu people, Vietnamese is a very important language in their daily communication. Consequently, the promotion and teaching of Vietnamese are deemed necessary to facilitate cultural exchange and the dissemination of knowledge among different ethnic groups more effectively. Proficiency in the Vietnamese language is also a prerequisite for Co Tu youth to pursue higher education, acquire specialized knowledge, and make meaningful contributions to the nation's development and security □

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