

## CREATING WRITTEN LANGUAGE FOR ETHNIC MINORITIES THE CASE OF BHNONG LANGUAGE (QUANG NAM PROVINCE)

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Building a written language for Vietnamese ethnic minorities that have not had one has long been a major focus of the Vietnamese government and the Communist Party. From a linguistic perspective, this is an important and glorified duty for Vietnamese linguistics. All of these have been specified in the legal framework of Vietnam, from our Constitution to legal and sub-legal documents, such as governmental decrees, circulars, decisions, and resolutions.

Directions for research on building a written language are based on the construction of recorded written letters and then a written language based on the Latin system, which is relevant to the spoken language and the official writing system of Vietnam. This task consists of two fundamental parts which are: 1/ exploring and describing linguistic units such as words, phrases, sentences and other units, then clarifying the existing set of rules of spoken language that govern the functions of these linguistic units; 2/ using this set of rules as a foundation for the rules of the written

language. All of these work will be realized in the study of linguistics including a research on phonetics and proposal of setting up phonogram system; a compilation of books such as bilingual Vietnamese-ethnic and ethnic-Vietnamese dictionaries; a research on grammatical rules; language learning books, including textbooks and workbooks,...

Reality shows that research on the construction of a written language for ethnic minorities in Vietnam will have tremendous impact on many different fields. Politically, the research will contribute to the mission of uniting all Vietnamese minorities. Culturally, the research will also help ethnic minorities first obtain a written language besides the spoken one then build a written culture besides the existing folklore culture, contributing to the construction of a progressive culture imbued with national identity. Last but not least, this research will contribute to the development of Vietnamese linguistics.

Recognizing the important and significance of a research on the

construction of a written language for ethnic minorities, a number of researchers from the Institute of Linguistics (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences) have collaborated with the Party, authorities, Vietnamese Fatherland Front, and the residents of Phuoc Son district, Quang Nam province to conduct and implement a research on turning the Bhnong language into a written one for the Bhnong people living in the district. Two dissertations that have been put in place are: *Research on the completion of Bhnong letters and compilation of Bhnong language book* in 2007-2008, and *Research on the compilation of a Bhnong language work book* in 2010, with a total of five books published in 2011.

In this paper, we will present an overview of the evolving process of a written Bhnong language. Currently, we are conducting research on the birth of a developed written Bhnong language in the future, besides the spoken Bhnong language. The problems mentioned in the article are only suggestive and are open to further discussion. However, in our opinion, to have a written language Bhnong in practice, along with the spoken Bhnong, it is necessary to build a written Bhnong first. In other words, the written Bhnong played an extremely important role in transforming the spoken Bhnong language into a written one.

### **I. The Bhnong Language: Overview**

Currently in Phước Sơn District, Quảng Nam Province, there are about 15,000

native Bhnong speakers. Based on the current studies, Bhnong is considered a local group and are classified ethnically as Giê-Triêng along with other local groups: Giê, Ve, Triêng.

Bhnong people live in *plơ* (with an estimated number of over 20 *plơ*s) distributed in three regions: high, medium, and low in ten communes and Khâm Đức town, Phước Sơn district.

Fortunately, many native Bhnong people, especially some Bhnong intellectuals, confirmed that there is a standard Bhnong language – known as Kadhoat, used in five different *plơ*.

+ *Plơ* Kadhoät Mơ (Hamlet 2, Phước Mỹ Commune, Phước Sơn District)

+ *Plơ* Kadhoät Katôy 1 (Phước Mỹ Commune, Phước Sơn District)

+ *Plơ* Kadhoät Katôy 2 (Phước Mỹ Commune, Phước Sơn District)

+ *Plơ* Kadhoät Xum (Hamlet 4, Phước Chanh Commune, Phước Sơn District)

+ *Plơ* Kadhoät (Hamlet 6, Phước Hiệp Commune, Phước Sơn District).

Are there variations of the Kadhoät language in each *plơ*, and if so, how different are they? These questions still need further linguistic research.

Given the current situation of the Bhnong language, many linguistic studies on Bhnong language have been conducted. In fact, these studies have contributed actively to the construction of a written Bhnong language.

## II. The written Bhnong language

Derived from the spoken Bhnong, the written Bhnong language has a separate system-structure. This system-structure is characterized and determined by three components:

- Materials of the written Bhnong language,
- The casting of material by Bhnong characters
- Folklore Bhnong filters

Here are the descriptions of these three components' portraits.

### 1. Materials of the written Bhnong language

The materials used to construct the written language are derived from the existing spoken Bhnong language. It includes linguistic units and the linguistic set of rules which govern the functions of these units in areas belonging to linguistics, lexicon, grammar, semantics and practicality.

The Bhnong phonetic units and the phonetic rules play an important role, especially in providing a clear recognition and a specific portrait of the present Bhnong language. This direct source of supply has been experienced and regarded as the Bhnong standard language - Kadhoat, and in the future, this source will be enriched from the standard Bhnong and from the language of Bhnong people in other places. These sources are the input for generating the written Bhnong language; however, this language will certainly have to go through a constant selection and filtering process over time with the

contribution of the wisdom and soul of the native Bhnong people. We believe that this process, if happening smoothly, will not be shorter than the average life expectancy of the Bhnong people.

### *Bhnong Phonetics:*

Below, we will briefly introduce the phonetic units and the phonetic rules of the standard Bhnong language - Kadhoat (Hamlet 2, Phước Mỹ Commune, Phước Sơn District), which are the basis for visualizing the portrait of Bhnong language. The phonetic units of standard Bhnong language here actually make up a phonological system; other units of Bhnong phonology and the phonological rules allow and govern these units to create a multitude of new combined units.

+ Standard Bhnong has at least 33 consonant phonemes and 16 consonant combinations as initial syllables.

+ In the standard Bhnong language, at least 19 single vowel phonemes and at least 12 double vowels are used as the nuclei of syllables.

+ Standard Bhnong has at least 16 terminal consonants.

The Bhnong phonetic rules or laws permit and regulate the combinations of phonemes, forming combined units with larger sizes. In fact, our research has specified the syllabic system and the types of Bhnong syllables, including:

+ The syllabic system: Theoretically, standard Bhnong has 527 syllables (31 main syllables x 17 terminal syllables). However, in reality, only 288 syllables

actually exist. The remaining 239 syllable exist by logica but are not real.

+ There are 16 types of Bhnong syllables, presented in the following table:

No.	Type of syllable	Example
1	V	i, as in 'isă' (the past)
2	V <sub>1</sub> V <sub>2</sub>	ɛe (have), ei (connecting noun clause 'that')
3	V <sub>1</sub> V <sub>2</sub> V <sub>3</sub>	uo (to erode)
4	CV	ca (to eat), mi (second person pronoun)
5	CV <sub>1</sub> V <sub>2</sub>	mă (rice), kɛe (to look, to see), k <sup>h</sup> ɛe (the moon, a month)
6	CV <sub>1</sub> V <sub>2</sub> V <sub>3</sub>	tuoj (slow), ɛuo (smoke), suo (a long time)
7	VC	on (to ask), ɣh (younger sibling)
8	V <sub>1</sub> V <sub>2</sub> C	ajh (swollen)
9	CVC	ɣăt (grass), dɛum (red), ruh ('time' as an occurrence)
10	CV <sub>1</sub> V <sub>2</sub> C	lɛam (good), tajh (to speak), saj (to plant)
11	CV <sub>1</sub> V <sub>2</sub> V <sub>3</sub> C	ɛajh (wounded)
12	C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> V	bɛlu (leg), kl (husband), bɛri (forest)
13	C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> V <sub>1</sub> V <sub>2</sub>	kraw (to call), plāj (a fruit)
14	C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> V <sub>1</sub> V <sub>2</sub> V <sub>3</sub>	bɛre (kidney)
15	C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> VC	bɛrɛl (fast, soon), kloh (like, love, want), klɛm (stab, crash)
16	C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> V <sub>1</sub> V <sub>2</sub> C	priet (banana), bɛraj (tired)

These are the types/kinds of Bhnong language's real syllables, which we discovered and tested, based on the data of Bhnong vocabulary units during our research from 2007 to present.

*Vocabulary and grammar:*

The vocabulary-grammar unit, along with its rules, is no less important than the Bhnong language's phonetics.

First of all, there are words and other elements in the Bhnong vocabulary with

various forms. Our research has determined that the Bhnong vocabulary reserves are divided to the following layers: *monosyllables, disyllables, trisyllables and quadrisyllables.*

- A monosyllable's phonetics is made up of one single syllable, for example:

lah (to go), ca (to eat), hot (to drink), kɛt (to sleep), pe (to do), ɛlɛ (tree), tɛ (sunlight),.....

- A disyllable's phonetics is made up of two syllables. There are three discovered groups in which one disyllable can belong to, in particular:

Group 1: Disyllables in which both elements are of independent meanings, and can be separated to create sentences, for

example:

atukazɣh (clothes), ɣieh zɛ (house), bɛri dɛɛa (country), peɛca (to do business), klɛɛcie (fields), bɛriɣɛ (woods),...

Group 2: Disyllables in which one element has an independent meaning, while the other has no meaning and it has to be attached to the other element, for example:

tatajh (*to speak*), lad<sup>le</sup>e<sup>le</sup> (*other*), xahno<sup>le</sup>n (*to sit*), rama<sup>le</sup>ng (*evening*), sateoq (*to follow*), pahum (*to wash*),...

In this group are also nouns which are used for naming. Masculine names consist of <sup>le</sup> + given name, for example: <sup>le</sup> ci<sup>le</sup>, <sup>le</sup> ujh, <sup>le</sup> ih, <sup>le</sup> sim, <sup>le</sup> cien, <sup>le</sup> so,...; feminine names consist of <sup>le</sup>i + given name, for example: <sup>le</sup>i ha<sup>le</sup>, <sup>le</sup>i h<sup>le</sup>j<sup>le</sup>, <sup>le</sup>i<sup>le</sup>im, <sup>le</sup>i t<sup>le</sup>an, <sup>le</sup>i<sup>le</sup>ät, <sup>le</sup>i hip, <sup>le</sup>i<sup>le</sup>ien, <sup>le</sup>i<sup>le</sup>än, <sup>le</sup>i<sup>le</sup>j<sup>le</sup>,.....

Group 3: Disyllables in which both elements have no meanings and they are always combined together, for example: dha<sup>le</sup>m dha<sup>le</sup>m (*male teenager*), chhêchhê (*women*), chhohchhoh (*female teenager*), pôhpah (*hurry*), nhuknhil (*to scrub*),... ..

- A trisyllable's phonetics is made up of three syllables, and can belong to one of the following groups:

Group 1: Trisyllables in which the third syllable is a duplicate of the second, for example:

tato<sup>le</sup> to<sup>le</sup> (*to steal*), as in "manujhtato<sup>le</sup> to<sup>le</sup>" (*thief*)

pat<sup>le</sup> t<sup>le</sup> (*to teach*), as in "manujh pat<sup>le</sup> t<sup>le</sup>" (*teacher*)

manah nah (*to love*), as in "änmanah nah" (*lover*)

ka<sup>le</sup>a<sup>le</sup>a<sup>le</sup> (*old*), as in "manujhka<sup>le</sup>a<sup>le</sup>a<sup>le</sup>" (*elder*)

t<sup>le</sup>s<sup>le</sup>t<sup>le</sup>s<sup>le</sup>t<sup>le</sup> (*small*), as in "plej t<sup>le</sup>s<sup>le</sup>t<sup>le</sup>s<sup>le</sup>t<sup>le</sup>" (*small village*),.....

Group 2: Trisyllables whose third syllable is a duplicate of the first, for example:

ră<sup>le</sup>t<sup>le</sup>w<sup>le</sup>ră<sup>le</sup> (*dry*)

t<sup>le</sup>t<sup>le</sup>w<sup>le</sup>t<sup>le</sup> (*draught*)

ut la ut (*en masse*)...

Group 3: Trisyllables whose first syllable serves as a prefix, for example:

pa<sup>le</sup>satat (*to break (a string)*), withsatat (*broken (string)*)

pa<sup>le</sup>sa<sup>le</sup>aj (*lengthen*), with sa<sup>le</sup>aj (*long*)

pa<sup>le</sup>ta<sup>le</sup>j<sup>le</sup>h (*to break*), vs. ta<sup>le</sup>j<sup>le</sup>h (*broken*)

pa<sup>le</sup>sa<sup>le</sup>n<sup>le</sup>n<sup>le</sup> (*to put*), with sa<sup>le</sup>n<sup>le</sup>n<sup>le</sup> (*sit*)...

Group 4: Trisyllables whose main syllable's first consonant is repeated at least once

avo<sup>le</sup>vă<sup>le</sup> (*stagger*)

sad<sup>le</sup>o<sup>le</sup>d<sup>le</sup>a<sup>le</sup> (*tipsy*)...

- A quadrisyllable's phonetics is made up of four syllables, and it can belong to one of the following groups:

Group 1: Quadrisyllables in which at least one duplicate of a syllable (such as the third one is the duplicate of the first one), OR of the first syllable and the first consonant of the second is observed

raho<sup>le</sup>ra<sup>le</sup>j<sup>le</sup> (*intelligent*)

lamun lab<sup>le</sup>at (*gentle*)

lam<sup>le</sup>n lab<sup>le</sup>at (*smooth*)

lahă<sup>le</sup> la<sup>le</sup>o (*this place/that place*)

ramă<sup>le</sup> ram<sup>le</sup>l (*dark*)

Group 2: Quadrisyllables in which all four syllables have independent meanings and can be separated, OR in some cases, the first two are attached while the latter stand separately, for example:

b<sup>h</sup>o<sup>h</sup>za<sup>h</sup> k<sup>h</sup>l<sup>h</sup> sǎ<sup>h</sup> (*ancestor*)

b<sup>h</sup>ala<sup>h</sup>o<sup>h</sup> sǎ<sup>h</sup> (*currently*)

rala<sup>h</sup>o<sup>h</sup> sǎ<sup>h</sup> (*recently*)...

Our recent research has proven the existence of the stressed syllables. We also consider it an element of the written Bhnong language. There are many forms of stressed syllables; each comes with a certain size of the word, in particular:

- For disyllables, there are two forms of stressed syllables :

Form 1: ●●:

sas<sup>h</sup>h (*roof*)

lad<sup>h</sup>e<sup>h</sup> (*other*)

ra<sup>h</sup>eh (*old*)

pa<sup>h</sup>um (*condense, focus*)

ka<sup>h</sup>a<sup>h</sup> (*old age*)...

Form 2: ●●:

pe<sup>h</sup>ca (*to do business*)

atuk<sup>h</sup>az<sup>h</sup>h (*clothes*)

petsaj<sup>h</sup> (*to plane*)

b<sup>h</sup>ǎn k<sup>h</sup>e (*to raise (animals)*)

pen<sup>h</sup>ǎj (*to dwell*)...

- For trisyllables, there are two forms of stressed syllables as well:

Form 1: ●●●:

pa<sup>h</sup>satat (*to break (a string)*)

pa<sup>h</sup>ta<sup>h</sup>yo<sup>h</sup>jh (*to break*)

pa<sup>h</sup>sa<sup>h</sup>aj (*lengthen*)

pa<sup>h</sup>sa<sup>h</sup>n<sup>h</sup>n (*to put*)

pa<sup>h</sup>b<sup>h</sup>ah<sup>h</sup>l (*to polish*)...

Form 2: ●●●:

tato<sup>h</sup>to<sup>h</sup> (*to steal*)

pat<sup>h</sup>t<sup>h</sup> (*to teach*)

manah nah (*to love*)

tab<sup>h</sup>k<sup>h</sup>b<sup>h</sup>k<sup>h</sup> (*white*)

sa<sup>h</sup>aj<sup>h</sup>aj (*far*)...

- Similarly, for quadrisyllables there are two forms of stressed syllables:

Form 1: ●●●●:

b<sup>h</sup>o<sup>h</sup>za<sup>h</sup> k<sup>h</sup>l<sup>h</sup> sǎ<sup>h</sup> (*ancestor*)

b<sup>h</sup>ala<sup>h</sup>o<sup>h</sup> sǎ<sup>h</sup> (*recently*)

rala<sup>h</sup>o<sup>h</sup> sǎ<sup>h</sup> (*currently*)

at<sup>h</sup>w<sup>h</sup>akloh (*to commit adultery*)

yo<sup>h</sup>ah lo<sup>h</sup>yo<sup>h</sup>ah tieh (*front, back*)...

Form 2: ●●●●:

ka<sup>h</sup>muom ka<sup>h</sup>mam (*greasy*)

ra<sup>h</sup>ot ra<sup>h</sup>t (*winded, sinous*)

ra<sup>h</sup>xi<sup>h</sup> ra<sup>h</sup>u<sup>h</sup> (*jumping*)

ram<sup>h</sup>am<sup>h</sup>l (*evening, dark*)

makutmakit (*superficial*),...

In fact, the written Bhnong language has even more elements which have been intentionally overlooked, such as Bhnong intonation. This reality indicates the abundant resources which are considered redundant. This shortcoming is partly caused by phonetic transcription in general, and in particular, the Bhnong written language.

## 2. Bhnong characters as the casing materials

The Bhnong character system serves as the casing of the spoken language,

forming the written language. It consists of 39 characters and spelling rules. All of them are conventional regarding the sound-character relationship.

The Bhnong alphabet consists of 39 characters: a, a<sup>◌̣</sup>, ă, â, b, c, đ, e, e<sup>◌̣</sup>, ê, ê<sup>◌̣</sup>, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, o<sup>◌̣</sup>, ô, ô<sup>◌̣</sup>, ơ, ơ<sup>◌̣</sup>, o<sup>◌̣</sup>, p, q, r, s, t, u, u<sup>◌̣</sup>, v, w, x, y, z.

However, the current completed form of the character system, with regard to other aspects, is reasonable and not arbitrary.

There are also spelling rules. These rules are in fact derived from the practical speaking rules of the Bhnong language. In other words, you write it the way you speak it. It is also the principle of the Bhnong written characters, based on the general transcription of spoken languages of the world, including the Vietnamese standard language. This principle was largely experienced through the survey of 10.000 Bhnong words in our linguistic research projects between 2007 and 2011.

Bhnong spelling rules, as mentioned, do not only consist of the general knowledge of the phonological system, but also cover many other larger units such as logics of the syllables and words. As for the multi-layered Bhnong words like monosyllables, disyllables, trisyllables, quadrisyllables and larger vocabulary units, we proposed three appropriate spelling rules: *detached*, *attached* and *detached-attached*. These three rules are applied with assigned functions, and have proven to be highly practical during the compilation of the

books BhouBhnong (The Bhnong language) and The Bhnong language workbook. Monosyllables follow the detached rule, and polysyllables with more than two syllables followed both the detached and attached rules, according to each case. The semantics of the Bhnong language are rigorously considered.

### 3. The Bhnong folkloric filter

As a whole, the written Bhnong language must be filtered through the folkloric filter. Naturally, this filtering process results in the written and spoken language being clearer, purer and more civilized.

At this point, we can make the following assessments:

The casing of the Bhnong written characters is the spelling methods. In fact it has covered the whole language. The presence of a large portion of the language is reflected therein. It makes distinguishing the phonological, semantics and grammar aspects possible. Moreover, the sound and character relationship and their similarities are revealed.

The aspects which the casing fails to shield, clearly, are the stressed syllables and intonations (if recognized at all). In addition, the linguistic characteristics also definitely belong to this gap.

It is necessary that there are more constructive discussions about these unsolved problems, and about what our research team has achieved. Our predictions are thoroughly based, when the Bhnong language is really

transforming into a new era of the written language.

Nowadays, the Vietnamese language is increasingly influencing the Bhnong language in all Bhnong people generations, especially the youth. As a result, more Bhnong people are achieving greater fluency in Vietnamese than in Bhnong, and more Bhnong people are incapable of speaking their own language. It means that the Bhnong language is currently facing deep social problems, with signs of becoming an obsolete language.

In response, the foreseeable tasks are in one hand transferring the achievements with the Bhnong language for the native speakers. As every project regarding the constructions of the ethnic minority languages' written systems are conducted by the Vietnamese Kinh people, the true potentials only lie in the hands of the native speakers. In addition, it is necessary to carry out linguistic researches on the unsolved problems so as to perfect the written systems for the Bhnong in particular, and the Vietnamese ethnic minorities in general□

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