LANGUAGES OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN VIET NAM

NEW FEATURES OF THE CURRENT SITUATION OF THE MUONG LANGUAGE IN VIETNAM (related to the study of the Muong vocabulary system, in comparison and contrast with Vietnamese vocabulary)

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ABSTRACT: The Muong are one of the 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam and rank among the six largest ethnic minorities, with a population exceeding one million. Due to a significant population increase (from 914,398 in 1989 to 914,398 in 2019) and the influence of various social factors, the Muong people are now distributed throughout the country, living interspersed among other ethnic groups—most notably the Kinh. Unlike other ethnic minorities, the Muong people are considered to share the same origins as the Kinh people; consequently, the Muong and Vietnamese languages not only stem from a common language family but also belong to the same linguistic typology (isolating language). All these characteristics are exerting a profound impact on the vitality and state of the Muong language. Based on empirical research, this article highlights several emerging characteristics of the current situation regarding the Muong language. Notable among these are: a decline in Muong language proficiency among the younger generation; the erosion of the Muong language's once-exclusive role as the primary medium of communication within the family, as it increasingly shares this function with Vietnamese; and the growing prevalence of Vietnamese elements in Muong-language communication—a phenomenon dominated by lexical borrowing. This underscores the critical need for focused research on the Muong lexicon in relation to the Vietnamese lexicon. Such an inquiry would not only clarify the historical and contemporary ties between the two languages but also contribute to shaping the future vitality of the Muong language.

KEY WORDS: Language situation; Language attitudes; Muong language; Vietnamese language; influence; vocabulary.

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1. Introduction

The Muong people constitute one of the 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam, and one of the 53 ethnic minority groups. Unlike many other ethnic minority groups, the Muong are unique to Vietnam and share a common origin with the Kinh (Viet) people. Consequently, the Muong language possesses not only the general characteristics common to ethnic minority languages in Vietnam but also distinct features arising from its shared linguistic lineage and typological affinity with the Vietnamese language, as both branched off from a common ancestral root. This highlights the situation of the Muong language.

This article examines several new characteristics of the current situation of the Muong language, highlighting changes that have occurred since earlier studies (Nguyen Van Khang, 2002). Social shifts, including changes in population size, settlement patterns, and material and spiritual life,.. have influenced the Muong–Vietnamese bilingual landscape. Elements of the Vietnamese, such as its phonology, grammar, vocabulary, and communicative styles,.. have increasingly permeated the Muong language, with vocabulary being the most significantly affected. Furthermore, the linguistic competence and usage patterns of the Muong people have shifted, with Vietnamese progressively

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overshadowing Muong. There has also been a change in the linguistic attitudes of the Muong people, particularly among the younger generation: while they may express appreciation for their mother tongue, in practice, they consistently prioritize the use of Vietnamese. Two developments are particularly noteworthy: First, the introduction of two Muong writing systems, one from Hoa Binh province (2016; now associated with Phu Tho province) and another from Thanh Hoa province (2026). Second, the plan to incorporate the Muong language into the general education curriculum as an elective subject (initiated in 2026, with implementation scheduled for 2027).

This article examines several new features of the Muong language's context. These new features impact the structural system (phonetics, vocabulary, grammar) as well as the function and usage characteristics of the Muong language

2. Overview and theoretical framework

2.1. Research Overview

Although the Muong language is an ethnic minority language, its connection to the origins and history of the Vietnamese language has consistently drawn the attention of linguists—both domestic and international—particularly those focused on the history of Vietnamese (Ferlus M., 1991; Alves M., 2019; Nguyen Van Tai, 2004; Pham Duc Duong, 1979; Tran Tri Doi, 2022; Hoang Van Hanh, 1998; etc.). Furthermore, the guidelines and policies of the Vietnamese Communist Party and the State regarding the preservation and promotion of ethnic minority languages—especially those of ethnic groups that lack a writing system—have been actively implemented by scientific institutions and individual scholars. The Muong language is one of the ethnic minority languages that lacks a traditional writing system; furthermore, as it is spoken by one of the six largest ethnic minority groups, the study and investigation of this language have consistently been a subject of scholarly attention (Hoang Thi Chau, 1994, 2014; Institute of Linguistics, 1987; Nguyen Van Khang, 2002, 2016, 2024; etc.).

To preserve and promote the Muong language and create a Muong writing system, the first step is to survey and describe the linguistic situation of the Muong language. This task has been carried out over many years to varying degrees; most notably, the work of Nguyen Van Khang provides the most comprehensive description of the Muong linguistic situation, serving as a foundation for the development of a Muong script (1992, 1997, 2019). However, because the language situation is intrinsically linked to the sociolinguistic context, it has evolved over time. Consequently, the current state of the Muong language differs significantly from that of the past.

2.2. Theoretical Foundations: Language Situation and Language Attitudes

2.2.1. Language Situation

The *language situation* is one of the most critical concepts in sociolinguistics. It serves as the foundation for any research into how languages are used and provides the basis for developing language policies (within the realm of macrosociolinguistics). A language situation refers to the circumstances under which languages or language varieties exist and function within a specific territory or social community. In linguistic terms, a language situation may involve a single language or language variety, or it may encompass multiple languages and varieties.

In terms of scope, a language situation can be defined by a territory or a social community; this scope may be very broad (e.g., global or regional), broad (e.g., national), or narrow, even very narrow (e.g., a village or a specific group of people). A language variety is a term used to describe any specific form of a language, whether defined by geographical or social parameters. Language varieties are generally categorized into two main groups: those related to the user (who is speaking) and those related to the usage (how the language is employed within a specific context). (Nguyen Van Khang, 2014).

A language situation is defined by three fundamental criteria: quantitative, qualitative, and evaluative.

- *Quantitative criteria:* focus on specific statistical data and the scale of a language's presence within a community, including: the number of languages/varieties (the total number of languages existing in a multilingual society, or the number of varieties within a speech community); the number of users (the total number of individuals who use a specific language or language variety); the scope of communication (the extent to which a language or variety is used across different domains—for example, within the family, the broader community, administrative settings, schools, etc.); and the number of dominant languages or varieties (the count of those languages or varieties that play a primary role and hold a position of functional superiority within a society).

- *Qualitative criteria:* examine languages from the perspective of their structural essence and genetic (origin-based) relationships: the independent status of a language (determining whether a given communication system is a truly independent language or merely a variant of another language) and structural relationships (the degree of proximity, similarity, or difference in systemic structures—such as phonology, vocabulary, and grammar—among languages or variants within the same region).

- *Evaluative criteria:* assess the political status, legal standing, and social value of a language: its legal status (the extent to which it is recognized—e.g., as a national language, an official language, a language of an ethnic minority, etc.) and its social prestige (the attitudes, respect, and assessments held by the social community toward that language or language variant).

2.2.2. Language Attitudes

Language attitudes are understood as the perspectives, thoughts, emotions, prejudices, and evaluations that an individual or a community holds toward a language or a language variety (such as a specific dialect or accent). Language attitudes consist of three primary components: the cognitive component (knowledge, beliefs, or preconceptions about a language—for instance, perceiving one language as "prestigious" while viewing another as "common" or "non-standard"); the affective component (feelings of affection and pride, or conversely, discomfort and prejudice, when hearing or using a particular language or accent); and the behavioral component (how individuals act based on these attitudes—such as choosing to learn a language, concealing a regional accent, or prioritizing the use of a foreign language over one's native tongue). Language attitudes play a pivotal role in shaping the domains of language use, as well as influencing language change and language policy. They reflect how communities perceive and evaluate languages, which in turn affects language choice, education, and social interactions.

There are three types of language attitudes:

Language loyalty refers to a deep attachment, a sense of pride, and an active effort to protect and preserve the language or linguistic variety of one's own ethnic group or community. This attitude manifests in the consistent use and transmission of one's language or linguistic variety, as well as efforts to prevent it from fading away under the encroachment of other languages or linguistic varieties.

Language inferiority, by contrast, involves a psychological apprehension—a feeling that one's own language or linguistic variety is inferior, impoverished, valueless, or less rich than the language or linguistic variety of another group (particularly when compared to a more dominant or widespread language). This attitude often manifests as hesitation or shame, leading individuals to avoid using their own language or linguistic variety in public; ultimately, this can result in the abandonment of one's own language in favor of adopting another language or linguistic variety.

Language disdain or stigmatization refers to an attitude of undervaluing, disparaging, or holding in contempt the languages or language varieties that are not one's own—whether they belong to another ethnic group, community, or even another individual. This attitude manifests as the belief that one's own language or language variety (associated with one's own ethnic group, community, or self) is the standard or is more "advanced," while viewing the languages or varieties of others as

inferior—perceiving them as backward, vulgar, or lacking in refinement. This phenomenon is also known as linguistic chauvinism.

Language attitudes extend beyond the language itself; they serve as a social reflection of class-based prejudices, cultural pride, and power imbalances. These attitudes can directly impact daily life in various ways, such as: Social opportunities—certain languages or language varieties may lead to unfair biases in areas like employment, housing, or the legal system. Language shift or maintenance—a language or variety may fall into decline if it faces negative social prejudice, whereas it may be preserved and fostered if supported by positive sentiments, such as a sense of community pride.

3. Research Methodology

Field research: Data and empirical findings regarding the status of the Muong language were gathered through fieldwork conducted between April and June 2026 in the provinces of Phu Tho, Hoa Binh (formerly Hoa Binh province), and Thanh Hoa.

A mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating both quantitative methods (surveys and statistical data) and qualitative methods (observation, note-taking, and interviews).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Demographic and residential characteristics of the Muong ethnic group in relation to the Muong language

3.1.1. Demographic characteristics

According to the 2019 Population and Housing Census, the Muong ethnic group is one of six ethnic minorities with a population exceeding one million (in descending order: Tay, Thai, Muong, Hmong, Khmer, and Nung). By comparing population figures across different periods—based on statistics from the decennial Population and Housing Censuses—one can outline the demographics of the Muong ethnic group as follows**:**

Table 1. *Population of the Muong ethnic group over different periods*

No.	As of year	Population (persons)	Growth rate
1	1989	914.398	
2	1999	1.137.515	Increase of 223.117 persons (24.4%) compared to 1989
3	2009	1.268.963	Increase of 131.448 persons (11.56%) compared to 1999 Increase of 354.565 persons (38.78%) compared to 1989.
4	1919	1.452.095	Increase of 537.697 persons (58.80%) compared to 1989. Increase of 314.580 persons (27.66%) compared to 1999. Increase of 183.132 persons (14.43%) compared to 2009

Source: Compiled from the Population and Housing Censuses of 1999, 2009, and 2019

- The Muong ethnic group is a populous ethnic minority with a relatively high population growth rate. Notably, between 1989 and 1999, the population increased by nearly 25%. Specifically, the Muong population grew by 24.4% from 1989 to 1999, 11.6% from 1999 to 2009, and 14.43% from 2009 to 2019. Over a 20-year period (from 1989 to 2009), the Muong population increased by 38.78%, and over a 40-year period, it grew by 58.80%.

- Population size is a key factor in ensuring the preservation and promotion of the mother tongues of ethnic minority groups. The growth of the Muong population over time indicates that the Muong ethnic group is not only being sustained but continues to thrive. Theoretically—and in practice—this implies that the number of people who speak the Muong language is steadily increasing. An upward trend in the number of individuals using a language for communication serves as evidence of that language

3.1.2. Characteristics of population distribution

Currently, with a population of nearly 1.5 million, the Muong people are spread across almost the entire territory of Vietnam.

a. Population distribution between urban and rural areas in relation to gender

***Table 2**. Population distribution by urban-rural area in relation to gender*

Population in 2019 (number of people)		**1 452 095**	
		729 889 (50,27%)	722 206 (49, 73%)
Urban areas	97 915 (6,74%)	46 014 (47%)	51 901 (53%)
Rural areas	1354 180 (93, 26%)	683 875 (51%)	670 305 (49%)
		Male	Female

Source: 2019 Population and Housing Census

With a relatively balanced gender ratio (the proportion of females is slightly higher than that of males by nearly 2%), the Muong people primarily reside in rural areas—specifically, within their own villages and hamlets. Rural life is deeply intertwined with kinship and blood ties, strong community bonds, as well as traditional customs, rituals, and practices. This serves as a vital factor in the preservation and promotion of the Muong language: children born and raised in these environments are naturally introduced to the Muong language and culture, while the Muong people themselves utilize their language in daily village interactions, religious rituals, ceremonial offerings, and life-cycle events (such as weddings and funerals).

b. Current geographical distribution of the Muong population in Vietnam by region

***Table 3.** Summary of Muong population distribution by region*

Region	**Population**	**Rural**	**Urban**
Nationwide	**1 452 095**	**1 354 180 (93,25%)**	**97 915 (6,74%)**
Midlands	886 000	833 987	52 013
Red River Delta	114 300	98 088	16 212
North Central Coast	382 703	372 408	10 295
Central Highlands	43 571	37 116	6 455
Southeast	24 130	11 524	12 606
Southwest	1 391	1 057	334

Source of statistics: 2019 Population and Housing Census

The Muong people reside in large numbers across the midlands, the North Central region, and the Northern Delta. Their traditional territory stretches from Yen Bai, Phu Tho, Son Tay, and Hoa Binh, extending through Ninh Binh and Thanh Hoa, and reaching as far as Nghe An and Quang Binh. Significant populations are concentrated in three provinces (as historically defined): Hoa Binh (549,026 people), Phu Tho (218,404 people), and Thanh Hoa (376,340 people). Additionally, there are substantial Muong populations in the Central Highlands and the Southeast region—a result of two waves of migration from the North to the South: the first to the Central Highlands in the 1990s, and the second to the Southeast region in the 2000s. The Muong people primarily inhabit rural areas, with the exception of those in the Southeast region, where many settled to work in industrial zones (most notably in Binh Duong).

c. Current geographical distribution of the Muong people

The Muong people currently reside in 34 provinces across Vietnam, spanning from the North to the South. Based on population size within these areas, their distribution can be categorized into three levels. This is summarized as follows:

***Table 4**. Summary of the geographical distribution and population size of the Muong people by province/city today*

No.	Population size	Province/city (population: number of people)
1	100.000 ≤ 1.000.000	**02:** Phú Thọ (768.722), Thanh Hoá (376.340)
2	10.000 ≤ 100.000	**08:** Sơn La (84.676), TP. Hà Nội (62.239), Ninh Bình (28.546), Lào Cai (19.401), Bắc Ninh (17.496), Đắk Lắk (15.887), Hồ Chí Minh city (13.906), Lâm Đồng (12.306).
3	1.000 ≤ 10.000	**12:** Đồng Nai (9.543), Gia Lai (8.785), Quảng Ngãi (8.327),Thái Nguyên (5.825), Hưng Yên (3.207), Hải Phòng (2.364),Tuyên Quang (2.406), Lai Châu (1.707), TP. Đà Nẵng (1.108), Quảng Ninh (1.390), Điện Biên (1.292), Nghệ An (1.247).
4	1.00 ≤ 1000	**12:** Khánh Hoà (899), Tây Ninh (873), Lạng Sơn (808), Hà Tĩnh (776), Quảng Trị (359), Đồng Tháp (251), TP. Cần Thơ (240), Vĩnh Long (156), An Giang (320), Cao Bằng (317), Cà Mau (232), TP. Huế (240).

Source of statistics: 2019 Population and Housing Census

Looking back into the past, as previously mentioned, the traditional settlement pattern of the Muong people has long been characterized by their habitation along the valleys and mountain slopes flanking the Da River—with the majority concentrated in the former Hoa Binh and parts of the former Phu Tho provinces—as well as within the basins of the Ma (Mã) and Buoi (Bưởi) Rivers (in the mountainous western region of Thanh Hoa Province). The Muong people have historically lived in clustered villages situated at the foot of mountains, on hillsides, or on gentle terrain near rivers and streams. They reside in communities known as *quêl* (villages or hamlets), practicing settled agriculture—primarily wet-rice cultivation—alongside animal husbandry and various handicrafts. Each *quêl* or *làng* serves as a concentrated settlement for specific clans. Within each clan, designated leaders oversee ancestral rites and manage community affairs. Clan ties exert a strong influence on rituals, customs surrounding marriage and funerals, and activities that foster community cohesion. These practices have forged a deep sense of unity among the Muong people, which, in turn, has helped sustain the role and function of the Muong language.

Notably, the policy of ethnic equality upheld by the Party and the State of Vietnam has created favorable conditions for the Muong people—as well as members of other ethnic groups, including the Kinh—to live together in Muong-inhabited areas, and indeed throughout the entire country. A similar pattern is observed within the various Muong regions themselves: the Muong people move between these areas, fostering an integrated way of life among individuals hailing from different Muong communities.

These are the social factors that exert a significant influence on the Muong language. For instance, based on population size, UNESCO categorizes the vitality of a language into six primary levels to determine its degree of endangerment: 1) Safe: the language is used by all generations and is continuously passed down; 2) Vulnerable: the language is still spoken by children, but its use is restricted to the domestic sphere; 3) Definitely endangered: children no longer learn the language as their mother tongue at home; 4) Severely endangered: the language is spoken only by the grandparental generation, while the parental generation understands it but does not use it to

communicate with their children; 5) Critically endangered: the youngest speakers are elderly and use the language only to a limited extent; 6) Extinct: no one remains who speaks the language. According to UNESCO's six-level classification, the following observations can be made:

Regarding the Muong language as the mother tongue of the Muong ethnic group, it maintains a high level of vitality because: 1) the population is large and has been growing over time (by an average of over 10% per year); and 2) there are 10 areas with concentrated Muong populations (each with 10,000 people or more), among which Hoa Binh and Thanh Hoa provinces each have a Muong population exceeding 100,000. When considering the Muong language in terms of the specific regional variants spoken by different Muong groups, the language appears across all six levels of the classification:

At Level 1: In Muong villages where the population is exclusively or predominantly Muong, the language is used and passed down across generations; children typically use Muong within the family, while primarily using Vietnamese in broader social interactions.

At Level 2: This category comprises Muong communities that reside in areas intermixed with other ethnic groups (primarily the Kinh people). - At level 3: this category includes Muong families who make a conscious decision to use only Vietnamese, with the aim of helping their children integrate more easily into a Vietnamese-language educational environment.

At levels 4–5: Muong families have migrated to southern provinces, where they have fully integrated into the Vietnamese (Kinh) community. These groups consist of fewer than 500 Muong individuals residing in these provinces. Due to the vast geographical area, the scattered nature of their settlement, and the fact that they live alongside the Kinh people, there are few opportunities for the Muong to communicate in their own language. Compounded by the influence of Vietnamese—the national language—the Muong language in these communities is fading rapidly. Adults have little opportunity to speak Muong with one another; even Muong couples often switch to Vietnamese for communication within their own households. Furthermore, those who marry individuals from other ethnic groups (primarily the Kinh) and reside within Kinh communities have shifted entirely to speaking Vietnamese. As for the children, they adopt Vietnamese as their sole language from birth. Some children, even those born in Muong-inhabited areas in the North who were once able to communicate in the Muong language, began to lose their proficiency shortly after migrating with their families to new regions; eventually, over time, they forgot the language entirely.

It should also be emphasized that the intermingled settlement of various ethnic groups is a common characteristic across all regions of Vietnam. Field surveys indicate that while single-ethnic communities may exist in small hamlets or villages, administrative units at the commune or district level (as formerly defined—now primarily at the commune level) are characterized by a multi-ethnic, intermingled pattern of residence. This is also true for the Muong people. Most notably, however, among Muong populations that have migrated, this intermingled settlement has been accompanied by a profound integration into the local host communities, leading to a significant narrowing of the communicative function of the Muong language.

First, the settlement of the Muong people in distinct, localized groups has limited opportunities for members of the community from different areas to interact or communicate with one another using the Muong language. Consequently, regional variants of the Muong language have emerged, with the differences between them widening over time.

Second, in each locality, the Muong live interspersed with the Kinh (Vietnamese) people and other ethnic groups, which has facilitated varying degrees of linguistic contact and interaction between the Muong language, the Vietnamese language, and the languages of other ethnic minorities.

Third, Vietnamese—serving as a common language for communication—is being used increasingly widely by ethnic minority groups in general, and the Muong people in particular. Furthermore, the Vietnamese language itself possesses various regional variants; as a result, the Muong language in any given locality is influenced by Vietnamese to varying degrees.

The two patterns of settlement—homogeneous (exclusively Muong) and mixed (Muong living alongside the Kinh and other ethnic minorities)—have led to specific linguistic consequences:

1) Homogeneous settlements, consisting of "exclusively Muong" villages or those predominantly inhabited by the Muong, have provided the most favorable conditions for the Muong language and culture to be preserved and for their distinct identity to be robustly maintained.

In terms of language specifically, this settlement pattern has allowed the Muong language to be preserved and flourish in its authentic form. This is clearly evidenced by the fact that, in certain areas, the Muong language retains its linguistic identity through a complete, structured system—encompassing phonology, grammar, and lexico-semantics—that features distinctively Muong characteristics. Examples include the retention of consonant clusters at the beginning of syllables (e.g., *tlải* – "fruit"), the preservation of the consonant *-l* at the end of syllables (e.g., *kâl* – "tree"), and the use of long vowels such as (oo) and *u:* (uu). It is precisely this "authentically Muong" quality that allows us to trace "vestiges" of the ancient Vietnamese language within the Muong tongue. Examples include specific terms—such as *tlôốc/klôốc/chôốc* (corresponding to the Vietnamese *trốc/*head and *tlu/klu/chu* (corresponding to the Vietnamese *trâu/*buffalo, or *tru* as used in the Nghệ dialect)—as well as various Muong place names that hint at the historical connection between the Vietnamese and Muong languages. In Lac Son (Phu Luong), for instance, one finds hamlets such as *tlám* (trám; Canarium fruit), *khal* (khái/hổ; tiger), *tluông* (chuông; bell), pheo (reminiscent of the term *tre pheo;* bamboo thicket), among others.

2) The pattern of intermixed settlement—where villages are inhabited by Muong people alongside Kinh people and members of other ethnic minorities—creates favorable conditions for Muong cultural life to come into contact with the cultures of other ethnic groups.

From a linguistic perspective, this settlement pattern has led to the emergence and active use of a "mixed" form of the Muong language in daily communication. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that the Muong language, in various localities, appears to be "opening up" to incorporate elements from the Vietnamese language. This has resulted in the parallel existence of linguistic variants, forming pairs consisting of a standard (pure Muong) form and a variant (mixed Muong) form. Examples include: *ti-đi* (to go), *tất-đất* (land/earth), *tuôi-đuôi* (tail), *tlu-lu-chu* (buffalo), *tăm-đăm-phái* (right/correct), and *chiêu-chái* (left). In certain areas of Muong Vang (Lac Son, Hoa Binh), the second tone in the Muong language is perceived to be very similar to the thanh huyền (falling/low-register tone) of the Vietnamese dialect spoken in Son Tay; meanwhile, in some parts of Muong Bi (Tan Lac district), the second tone of the Muong language is pronounced identically to the thanh huyền of the Vietnamese language.

3.2. The Spoken Communicative Function of the Muong Language

The Muong language is the mother tongue of the Muong ethnic group; primarily, it serves as a medium of communication within the Muong community. However, as is well known, Vietnam is a multi-ethnic and multilingual nation where Vietnamese functions as the national language. In regions inhabited by ethnic minorities—specifically those where the Muong people reside—various ethnic groups, including the Muong, live in close proximity to one another. These circumstances give rise to notable patterns in language use among the Muong: 1) The Muong people do not rely solely on their own language but also utilize Vietnamese for communication; 2) Some Muong individuals are also capable of using the languages of other ethnic groups that share the same geographical area; 3) The multilingual environment in Muong-inhabited regions enables the Muong people to switch between languages during communication (e.g., through code-switching or code-mixing). These interactions facilitate the adoption by the Muong language of vocabulary and modes of expression—or communicative styles—from Vietnamese, and potentially from other related ethnic minority languages as well.

3.2.1. Languge Competence of the Muong People

First and foremost, the term "language/linguistic competence" as used here is understood in the broadest sense: the ability to know and use one or more languages for communication in the daily lives of members of an ethnic minority group. Accordingly, in the context of the Muong people, linguistic competence refers to the ability to use both the Muong language and Vietnamese for communication (speaking).

Regarding Muong-Vietnamese bilingual competence in communication, we have conducted numerous surveys on this subject since 1992. The findings can be summarized as follows:

(i) Regarding competence in the Muong language:

It can be generally observed that almost all Muong people know the Muong language and are capable of communicating in it. Evidence:

Surveys conducted in the 1990s (Nguyen Van Khang, 1992) indicated that there were still some Muong individuals who could not speak the Muong language, even though they lived within a Muong environment. Even in the town of Man Duc in Tan Lac District, Hoa Binh, there are some Muong children under the age of 14 who cannot speak the Muong language. This situation also occurs sporadically in other areas.

Surveys conducted between 2018 and 2020 indicate the existence of a small number of Muong individuals who do not speak the Muong language—a trend showing a slight increase among the younger generation. This group includes not only the children of Muong families living in towns and urban centers but also the children of Muong migrants who reside in scattered, small-scale settlements (categorized as the fourth group, consisting of a few hundred individuals per province). Specifically, during a 2019 survey in Dong Nai, we encountered middle school students from the Muong and Thai ethnic groups (who had migrated to the area) who could not speak their own ethnic languages (Nguyen Van Khang, 2023)

A survey conducted between April and June 2026 across four primary schools in Thanh Hoa and Hoa Binh (located in Phu Tho province)—carried out to support the development of a Muong language curriculum for the primary level—revealed that approximately 95%–98% of Muong children are able to speak the Muong language upon entering the first grade. Among those who speak the language, however, some are only able to understand what is said to them and use a limited number of simple Muong words or basic sentences.

In investigating the reasons why a small number of Muong children do not speak the Muong language, we have identified two primary causes. First, some children are reluctant to learn Muong and opt for Vietnamese instead, as it is more convenient. Second, some families do not prioritize teaching the Muong language to their children; they often envision their children pursuing education or employment in cities, towns, or industrial zones—or even moving abroad—in the future. In such scenarios, the Muong language is perceived as unnecessary; some even argue that learning Muong might actually hinder a child's proficiency in Vietnamese. Additionally, some Muong children are born into families with mixed ethnic backgrounds—where only one parent is Muong—and reside in areas where the Muong language is not spoken. Others are born to Muong parents but live in environments where the Muong language is not in use.

(ii) Regarding Vietnamese language proficiency:

It can be stated, as a general observation, that most Muong people know the Vietnamese language. By way of comparison, the Vietnamese language proficiency among the Muong is more consistent and generally better than that of other ethnic minority groups. "The vast majority of Muong people know and speak Vietnamese fluently—with the obvious exception of those in very remote areas or the elderly, who may know little to no Vietnamese" (Mr. Cao Son Hai, Thanh Hoa). While in the 1990s, approximately 10% of the Muong population—primarily the elderly—lacked the ability to communicate in Vietnamese (though they could understand it to varying degrees), today, thanks to

developments in social and living conditions, all Muong people are able to communicate in Vietnamese to varying levels of proficiency.

- Surveys conducted in the 1990s revealed that some individuals did not have full command of the Vietnamese language, falling into two categories: 1) those who could understand but not speak it; and 2) those with limited listening and speaking ability. Notably, there were no Muong people who lacked any knowledge of Vietnamese whatsoever. Regarding gender, there was a slight disparity in Vietnamese language proficiency—with women scoring approximately 2% to 4% higher than men. According to a study by Pham Tat Thang (1987) in Muong Coi (Hoa Binh province), 98.4% of the 128 Muong women surveyed were able to communicate in Vietnamese with relative fluency, compared to 97.1% of the 138 Muong men. Our own survey, conducted in 1992 in the communes of Phong Phu and Dich Giao (Tan Lac district, Hoa Binh province), yielded similar results. This can be explained by the fact that, at the time, Muong men in rural areas—with the exception of those involved in social or public activities—were primarily engaged in farming and livestock rearing, whereas Muong women, in addition to their domestic responsibilities, were also involved in trading at local markets. The very environment of Vietnamese-language interaction in the marketplace has created conditions for more frequent and improved use of the Vietnamese language (Nguyễn Văn Khang, 1992).

Among school-aged children, a survey of 168 Muong primary school students revealed that 85.7% possess good Vietnamese communication skills. Nevertheless, nearly 5% of Muong children either cannot speak Vietnamese at all or have very limited proficiency (some even enter the first grade with little to no ability to speak the language).

From a socio-occupational perspective, there are clear variations in Vietnamese language proficiency among the Muong people. Generally, those engaged in broader social activities—including individuals who have moved away from their home villages for work or maintain only partial ties to them—demonstrate the highest level of Vietnamese proficiency. Conversely, proficiency tends to be lower among those engaged exclusively in traditional agriculture, particularly individuals whose daily lives are confined to farming and household chores.

- Surveys conducted in 2019 and 2026 in Thanh Hoa and Hoa Binh provinces indicate that all Muong individuals are now capable of communicating in Vietnamese. This shift is driven by increased interaction between different regions, greater contact with the Kinh majority, and the widespread reach of Vietnamese-language media—featuring a diverse and rich array of programming—which has penetrated even the most remote villages and neighborhoods. “Pre-school” classes in Vietnamese are being offered, etc

3.2.2. Spoken Language Communication Among the Muong People

First, an overview of language communication among the Muong people

The Muong people use both the Muong language and Vietnamese in their communication. The extent to which they use the Muong language, Vietnamese, or a combination of both—through code-mixing and code-switching—depends on various factors, such as their place of residence, the individuals with whom they are communicating, and the specific communicative context. However, in areas with a large Muong population—especially where they live in concentrated communities—the Muong language serves as the primary medium of communication within both families and the broader community. This remains true even when a few Kinh individuals reside in these areas (in such cases, these Kinh individuals also use the Muong language for community interaction). Furthermore, the Muong language is frequently used in local administrative affairs, particularly at the grassroots level—within villages, hamlets, or production teams

Second, family communication:

In Muong communities, when all family members are of Muong ethnicity, the language used for communication is the Muong language. When interacting with guests, the choice of language depends on the specific individuals involved: generally, the Muong language remains the primary

medium (provided both the host and the guest are fluent in it). If a guest cannot speak Muong, the conversation shifts to Vietnamese; in cases where a guest is proficient in Muong, there may be an alternation between Muong and Vietnamese. Notably, for discussions concerning external matters—such as schooling—many families switch directly to Vietnamese. When asked why, the common response is that it is "more convenient" or simply because "everything is in Vietnamese anyway." Unlike those who use the Muong language as their primary means of communication, some Muong families choose to speak mainly in Vietnamese—a deliberate decision intended to improve their children's Vietnamese language proficiency and thereby facilitate their schooling.

Muong families living interspersed with the Kinh ethnic community, or residing in cities, towns, industrial zones, or commercial hubs, often speak Vietnamese out of habit—both within the family and in broader social settings. They typically reserve the Muong language for occasions such as visits to their home villages or interactions with fellow Muong acquaintances. Muong families who live interspersed with the Kinh ethnic community—or who reside in cities, towns, industrial zones, or areas centered on trade—often speak Vietnamese as a matter of habit, both within the family and in their broader social interactions, rather than speaking the Muong language. They typically only use the Muong language when returning to their home villages or when interacting with fellow Muong people they know well.

Third, administrative and official communication:

In administrative contexts, the use of Vietnamese is the established standard, and thus it is employed by everyone. In practice, however, even within public institutions, Muong individuals often engage in bilingual communication—using either the Muong language exclusively, or a mix of Muong and Vietnamese—especially during internal discussions or informal consultations among themselves. This tends becomes increasingly pronounced at the groundswell level. In meetings among commune-level officials, for instance, Muong is the primary language of communication (with Vietnamese used only when formal minutes must be recorded). In meetings held by production teams or work units, Muong is used 99% of the time. Notably, while official documents are read in Vietnamese, the Muong people revert to their own language when discussing the content among themselves**.**

Fourth, social interaction:

The communicative practices of the Muong people in social settings are highly diverse. Being proficient in both the Muong and Vietnamese languages, the Muong people demonstrate great linguistic flexibility. Observations at local markets in Muong areas, as well as within Muong communities situated along national highways, reveal that the Muong typically use their own language when conducting transactions or greeting one another. However, upon encountering members of the Kinh ethnic group, they immediately switch to Vietnamese. It is common for a Muong individual to alternate between Muong and Vietnamese—or even the languages of other ethnic groups—during multi-party interactions, such as when Kinh, Muong, and people from other ethnic backgrounds are all involved in a transaction. This multilingual environment arises because those present at the markets may include local Muong, Kinh, or members of other ethnic groups, as well as visitors from elsewhere, such as travelers passing through by vehicle or tourists. Such an environment serves as an ideal setting for the Muong people to exercise their communicative flexibility.

It is not only in markets that the Muong people use both the Vietnamese and Muong languages; this also occurs in other public spaces—such as train stations, bus terminals, shops, post offices, and even out in the fields. The frequency with which one language is used over the other depends on factors such as the person being addressed (whether they are Muong or Vietnamese) and the setting in which the interaction takes place. It can be stated with certainty that in daily life, when interacting with other Muong people, the Muong language is used. When communicating with Kinh people (or members of other ethnic groups), the Muong language may be used—provided the other person is sufficiently proficient in it—otherwise, Vietnamese is used. At times, both languages are employed through code-

switching (alternating between Muong and Vietnamese) or code-mixing (incorporating Vietnamese elements into Muong speech, or occasionally inserting Muong terms into Vietnamese speech).

Thus, it is evident that the Muong people's consciousness and habitual mode of communication involve the use of the Muong language. Instances where Muong speakers—while conversing in their own language—switch to Vietnamese, or alternate between Muong and Vietnamese, typically occur when the discussion turns to topics such as social issues, politics, current events, or education. Why is this the case? As previously noted—and as confirmed by the vocabulary data we collected for the compilation of our Muong-Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Muong dictionaries—the Muong lexicon primarily consists of terms related to the traditional life and distinct cultural heritage of the Muong people. Conversely, a significant portion of the vocabulary used in contemporary life is derived from Vietnamese (though often adapted to Muong-style pronunciation).

Fifth, communication within the school environment:

In the classroom, both teachers and students use Vietnamese. However, when both the teacher and the students are of Muong ethnicity, the following may occur:

Teachers might use the Muong language to explain concepts related to the lesson to ensure better understanding, or to share a lighthearted remark, making the classroom atmosphere more lively, cheerful, and open. For instance, in the early grades of primary school (such as grades 1 and 2), during reading lessons, teachers generally use Vietnamese to explain vocabulary. Yet, there are times when, despite repeated explanations in Vietnamese, some students still do not fully grasp the meaning of certain words; in such cases, the teacher may use the Muong language to clarify. The terms that students find difficult or impossible to understand are often those referring to objects, phenomena, or concepts that do not exist—or have never been encountered—in the students' own local environment. For example, back in the 1990s, in certain remote and isolated Muong communities, terms like *vỉa hè* "sidewalk," *hè phố* "pavement," *đèn xanh* "green light," or *đèn đỏ* "red light" were entirely unfamiliar to the children. But today, things are different; the words that are difficult for Muong students to understand tend to be reduplicative words or Sino-Vietnamese terms.

Among students, the Muong language is still used during private conversations in the classroom. At times, it is even used to prompt one another when answering questions—particularly during lessons taught by teachers who are not of Muong ethnicity and have limited proficiency in the Muong language. During breaks, students use both Muong and Vietnamese, though Muong is spoken far more frequently; many students explain that they find it "easier" and more "comfortable" to use.

Fifth, the language attitude of the Muong people regarding the use of the Muong language in communication:

There is a Muong saying: "Different Muong regions mean different dialects; different parents mean different cooking pots." Simply put, this means that Muong people speak the specific dialect of the region to which they belong. It follows that the Muong language consists of various distinct variants.

Unlike the national language, the languages of ethnic minorities—including the Muong language—generally lack a unified or standardized form. Furthermore, Muong communities often reside in areas interspersed with the Kinh people (or, at times, with other ethnic minority groups). The Muong language is shaped by various sociolinguistic factors, most notably two: historically, Muong communities lived in relative isolation, with difficult transportation and limited opportunities for interaction or communication with one another in their own language; additionally, the Muong language in each community has been subject to contact with specific regional dialects of Vietnamese, as well as with the languages of other ethnic minority groups. The influence of these factors has led to a situation where the Muong language, within each individual Muong community, has gradually developed its own distinct characteristics, resulting in various regional variants. It is also worth noting that, as the Muong and Vietnamese languages share a common origin, they possess a significant number of shared terms. Furthermore, as the national language, Vietnamese exerts a profound influence on Muong—most notably through the incorporation of Vietnamese vocabulary into the daily speech of

the Muong people. However, these terms are pronounced according to the specific phonological patterns of the Muong language as spoken in different localities. This particular phenomenon reflects a "reverse effect" in the way primary school students use the Vietnamese language.

In the process of using both the Muong and Vietnamese languages for communication, Muong students often exhibit a phenomenon of mixing the two—referred to as code-switching or code-mixing. In other words, they may intersperse Vietnamese words while speaking Muong, or vice versa.

This issue gives rise to two questions:

Question 1: Can Muong people from different regions communicate with one another? Surveys conducted in the 1990s revealed significant variations in the Muong language across different areas, which posed considerable challenges to communication.

Question 2. Do the Muong people incorporate ("mix in") many Vietnamese words when speaking the Muong language? 100% of the respondents stated that it is inevitable to include Vietnamese words when speaking Muong, as many terms do not exist in the Muong language and must therefore be borrowed from Vietnamese. 90% of those surveyed noted that "if any Vietnamese words are used, it is only to a small extent." They further explained that while some individuals—such as the younger generation—may incorporate a significant number of Vietnamese words, the elderly tend to use fewer, as they still recall the traditional Muong vocabulary.

3.3. The Issue of a Muong Writing System

The question of a traditional or indigenous Muong writing system has long been a subject of interest. Key questions include: 1) Why does the Muong ethnic group lack a traditional or ancient writing system? 2) Given their significant population and well-known historical and cultural traditions, why was a Muong writing system not developed or created earlier? Many argue that because the Muong language branched off from a common ancestral language shared with Vietnamese—and remains very close to Vietnamese—there was no need for a separate writing system.

The Muong people's perspective on a Muong writing system: It can be said that the vast majority of Muong people believe their language requires a writing system; in fact, many argue that it is already far too late to begin developing a unified Muong script. Notably, Muong intellectuals—as well as those from the Muong ethnic group serving in administrative, governmental, or organizational roles—place great importance on the need for a Muong writing system, reasoning that only such a system can most effectively reflect the Muong language and culture. According to the Muong people, although they share a common historical origin, the Vietnamese and Muong languages have, over time, evolved into two distinct languages**.**

3.3.1. From Individual Writing Practices to the Development of a Standardized Muong Writing System

a. Using the National Script (Chữ Quốc ngữ) to Transcribe the Muong Language

Observations and discussions with members of the Muong ethnic group reveal that, ever since the introduction of the *Chữ Quốc ngữ* (the Latin-based Vietnamese national script), the Muong people—both the general population and those engaged in research on Muong culture—have employed this script in their own unique ways to document their activities. For instance, *Mo* practitioners (ritual specialists), ceremonial officiants, and ordinary individuals have all used *Chữ Quốc ngữ*—each according to their own personal conventions—to record ritual incantations, traditional Muong folk songs, daily tasks, and personal correspondence in the Muong language. This practice continues today, with Muong individuals frequently using the national script for communication on social media. Furthermore, Muong intellectuals have utilized *Chữ Quốc ngữ* to compile and publish works on Muong culture, such as *Tèẻ tất tèẻ rác* (The Birth of Land and Water) (Vương Anh and Hoàng Anh Nhân, 1975), *Thường rang bọ mẹng* (Bùi Thiện, 1973), and *Vốn cổ văn hóa Việt Nam* (Ancient Cultural Heritage of Vietnam) (Trương Sĩ Hùng and Bùi Thiện, 1995).

b. Research and development of a writing system for the Muong language

Given that the Muong language lacked a writing system, several linguists dedicated to the language undertook the task of developing one. Notable proposals for a Muong script include those by: Nguyen Kim Than (1961), M. E. Barker (USA), Hoang Thi Chau (1994), and a group of authors comprising Hoang Van Hanh, Nguyen Nhu Y, Nguyen Van Khang, Phan Xuan Thanh, and Bui Chi (1995).

3.3.2. Development of the Muong Writing System: A Breakthrough

a. Legal Basis: Decision No. 53/CP regarding the languages and writing systems of ethnic minorities (issued on February 22, 1980, by the Government Council—now the Government) stipulates that provincial People's Committees are authorized to "decide on plans for improving or developing new writing systems for the ethnic minorities within their respective provinces."

Currently, there are official writing systems for the Muong language:

The Muong writing system for Hoa Binh Province: This system was approved by the Hoa Binh Provincial People's Committee via Decision No. 2295/QĐ-UBND, dated September 8, 2016. It is based on the Muong language as spoken in Hoa Binh. On June 28, 2019, the Hoa Binh Provincial People's Committee issued Decision No. 1349/QĐ-UBND, approving a project for the teaching and learning of the Muong ethnic language for the 2018–2025 period, with a vision extending to 2035, within Hoa Binh Province.

Muong Writing System for Thanh Hoa Province: The People's Committee of Thanh Hoa Province issued Decision No. 2677/QD-UBND, dated [day/month], 2026, approving the Muong ethnic writing system for Thanh Hoa Province. This writing system is based on the Muong language of Hoa Binh (as previously established).

The Muong writing system is intended for the implementation of the "General Education Curriculum for the Muong Language at the Primary Level," as mandated by the Ministry of Education and Training. It is developed based on the existing Hoa Binh Muong writing system, with adjustments and additions to ensure consistency in its application.

Related documents: Plan No. 16/KH-BGDĐT, dated January 10, 2026, issued by the Ministry of Education and Training, concerning the assessment, development, appraisal, and promulgation of the General Education Curriculum for the Co Tu and Muong languages at the primary level; and Decision No. 860/QD-BGDĐT, dated April 10, 2026, regarding the establishment of a committee to develop the General Education Curriculum for the Muong language.

3.4. Issues arising in the study of the Muong lexical system within a new linguistic context

The new characteristics of the linguistic context surrounding the Muong language both reflect and influence every aspect of its contemporary state—from its structural system (phonology, grammar, and lexico-semantics) to its usage in communication. Consequently, the study of the Muong lexicon must be approached from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives: the synchronic perspective reveals the current state of the Muong lexical system, while the diachronic perspective provides insight into and explains the broader relationship between the Muong and Vietnamese languages, as well as the specific lexical connections between them. The procedure is as follows:

1) Compile a list of Muong words, including their variants (cross-referenced with Vietnamese), to serve as a corpus for investigation and research.

2) Conduct a description and analysis to identify:

a. Words unique to the Muong language.

b. Words shared by both Muong and Vietnamese (in terms of etymological origin).

c. Muong words borrowed from Vietnamese that have undergone transformation under the influence of the Muong linguistic structure.

d. Phonetic and lexical variants of the Muong language across different regions.

Specific research tasks: Examine fundamental semantic fields—such as those pertaining to the natural world, body parts, natural phenomena, numerals, and agricultural production. The findings will

facilitate the reconstruction of the core vocabulary shared by Muong and Vietnamese, thereby contributing to demonstrating the common (Mon-Khmer) origin of both languages.

This study specifically examines vocabulary fields related to food, clothing, spirituality, etc., in the Muong language to understand the unique cultural characteristics of the Muong people.

It investigates the semantic changes of words sharing the same phonetic form but whose meanings have altered. For example, words currently commonly used in Muong may have narrowed meanings and limited use in Vietnamese.

It examines the corresponding phonetic-lexical variations between Muong words in different Muong dialects, in comparison with Vietnamese, to understand the linguistic relationship between Muong and Vietnamese.

It examines Vietnamese words in modern Muong that have been Muongized to assess the influence of Vietnamese on Muong and the potential for Muongization of loanwords from modern Vietnamese.

4. Conclusion

Unlike other ethnic minority groups in Vietnam, the Muong people share a common origin with the Viet (Kinh) people; consequently, the Muong language shares the same language family and the same isolating typological characteristics as the Vietnamese language. The current sociolinguistic situation of the Muong language reveals a notable phenomenon: despite a significant increase in the Muong population, the language is facing decline across all domains. Specifically, Vietnamese is increasingly used in daily communication, including within the family and there is a marked rise in the integration of Vietnamese elements into Muong speech, most notably through the adoption of Vietnamese vocabulary. As a result, the Muong lexicon now comprises both ancestral terms shared with the Viet (common to both Muong and Vietnamese) and a substantial influx of modern Vietnamese vocabulary. Studying the Muong language's vocabulary within its linguistic context reveals the vitality of the language through its lexicon, while also shedding light on the continuous process of contact between these two languages.

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Những đặc điểm mới về cảnh huống tiếng Mường hiện nay ở Việt Nam (liên quan đến việc nghiên cứu hệ thống từ vựng tiếng Mường, trong sự so sánh và đối chiếu với từ vựng tiếng Việt)

Tóm tắt: Mường là một trong 54 dân tộc ở Việt Nam và là một trong 6 dân tộc thiểu số có số dân đông nhất (trên một triệu người). Sự tăng mạnh về số dân (914.398 người/ năm 1989, 914.398 người/năm 2019) và sự tác động của hàng loạt các nhân tố xã hội, người Mường hiện cư trú trải ra khắp đất nước và cư trú đan xen với các dân tộc khác , nhất là với dân tộc Kinh. Khác với các dân tộc thiểu số khác, dân tộc Mường được coi là cùng một gốc với dân tộc Kinh, theo đó tiếng Mường và tiếng Việt vừa cùng nguồn gốc vừa cùng loại hình học ngôn ngữ đơn lập. Tất cả những đặc điểm này đang tác động mạnh mẽ đến đời sống của tiếng Mường. Bài viết này, từ khảo sát thực tế, chỉ ra một số đặc điểm mới của cảnh huống tiếng Mường hiện nay. Trong đó đáng chú ý là: năng lực tiếng Mường của giới trẻ đang suy giảm; chức năng giao tiếp của tiếng Mường trong gia đình vốn được coi "độc quyền" nay đang phải chia sẻ nhiều với tiếng Việt; sự pha trộn yếu tố tiếng Việt trong giao tiếp bằng tiếng Mường ngày một phổ biến. Chiếm ưu thế của sự pha trộn này là các yếu tố từ vựng. Điều này đặt ra cho việc tập trung nghiên cứu từ vựng tiếng Mường trong mối quan hệ với từ vựng tiếng Việt là hết sức cần thiết: chỉ ra được mối quan hệ Mường-Việt cả trong quá khứ và hiện tại, góp phần vào "định hình" sức sống của tiếng Mường trong tương lai.

Từ khoá: Cảnh huống ngôn ngữ; thái độ ngôn ngữ; tiếng Mường; tiếng Việt; ảnh hưởng; từ vựng.