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A FOLK TAXONOMY OF TERMS FOR SPIRITS AND GHOSTS IN VIETNAMESE: AN ETHNOSEMANTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract: This study delves into an exploration of terms referring to spirits and ghosts in Vietnamese. Specifically, the research organizes those terms according to a folk taxonomy within the scope of ethnosemantics – an extension of linguistic anthropology, following five levels proposed by Berlin. This classification is based on semi-structured interviews with nine Vietnamese informants from three different age groups, as well as perusal of various documentary sources. Concurrently, the study incorporates Nida's componential analysis approach to understand the relations between those terms. The research findings reveal insights into Vietnamese cognition and culture, notably highlighting the emphasis on familial solidarity, ritual formality and moral education of people embedded within the terminology. Besides, the lexicon also reflects the belief in *linh* (sacred) in Vietnamese cosmology - meaning the spiritual world is dynamic and interacts with the human world. Terms containing the lexeme *linh* demonstrate respect and awe.

Keywords: folk taxonomy, ethnosemantics, componential analysis, spirits, ghosts

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HỆ THỐNG PHÂN LOẠI DÂN GIAN CÁC THUẬT NGỮ TÂM LINH TRONG TIẾNG VIỆT: MỘT PHÂN TÍCH DƯỚI GÓC NHÌN NGỮ NGHĨA DÂN TỘC HỌC

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Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này đi sâu vào khám phá các thuật ngữ chỉ linh hồn và ma quỷ trong tiếng Việt. Cụ thể, nghiên cứu sắp xếp các thuật ngữ này theo một hệ thống phân loại dân gian dựa trên khung lý thuyết của ngành ngữ nghĩa dân tộc học (ethnosemantics) – một nhánh của nhân học ngôn ngữ - theo năm cấp độ do Berlin đề xuất. Hệ thống phân loại này được xây dựng dựa trên các cuộc phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với chín người cung cấp thông tin thuộc ba nhóm tuổi khác nhau, cũng như dựa trên việc nghiên cứu các nguồn tư liệu thành văn. Đồng thời, nghiên cứu cũng kết hợp phương pháp phân tích thành tố nghĩa của Nida để tìm hiểu mối quan hệ giữa các thuật ngữ đó. Kết quả nghiên cứu mang đến những hiểu biết sâu sắc về nhận thức và văn hóa của người Việt, đặc trưng bởi sự đề cao sự gắn kết gia đình, tính trang trọng trong nghi lễ và việc giáo dục đạo đức con người vốn được ẩn chứa trong hệ thống thuật ngữ dân gian. Bên cạnh đó, hệ thống từ vựng này cũng phản ánh niềm tin vào khái niệm *linh* trong thế giới quan của người Việt - niềm tin cho rằng thế giới tâm linh là một thế giới động và có sự tương tác với thế giới con người. Đồng thời, các thuật ngữ có chứa từ tố *linh* đều thể hiện sự tôn kính và ngưỡng vọng.

Từ khóa: hệ thống phân loại dân gian, ngữ nghĩa dân tộc học, phân tích thành tố nghĩa, linh hồn, ma quỷ

1. Introduction

In modern society, the spiritual world still remains mysterious to humans from various cultures. Despite the abundance of relevant folk tales, there is no consensus among people whether this realm is real or purely imaginary. This mystery stems from the limitations of knowledge and understanding of humanity in general and of science in particular (Stark & Finke, 2001).

Because human capacity is not limitless and nature is so vast, full of fascinating mysteries, people have to rely on supernatural forces to gain strength and to explain the incomprehensible phenomena that have been and are happening in life (Tran, 2013). As a result, they have built temples for gods to entrust their spirituality, faith, and hope. In addition, in their minds, there are other supernatural forces that has always haunted, harmed, and hindered humans, which are evil spirits or ghosts. The deeper those beliefs take root, the more terms are coined and used to refer to those unseen forces.

According to Lounsbury (1956, p. 159), “both grammar and vocabulary hold clues to a people’s world view”. Adopting the same premise, this study aims to delve deep into terms for spirits and ghosts in Vietnamese language in order to understand Vietnamese people’s world view. This objective is fundamentally grounded in the belief that the lexical encoding of spiritual concepts serves as a profound semiotic index that reflects both collective sociocultural

frameworks and internalized ideologies. Specifically, the researcher will arrange those terms in a hierarchical order to identify the relations between them. Besides, the study will examine the semantic features of those terms (with more focus on ghost terms), then revealing related Vietnamese cognition and cultural values.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. *How are terms for spirits and ghosts in Vietnamese semantically organized?*
2. *What are the cultural characteristics connoted through terms for spirits and ghosts in Vietnamese?*

2. Literature Review

2.1. Ethnosemantics

As widely accepted in the field of linguistics, *semantics* is the study of meaning of words, phrases and sentences with the focus on what the words conventionally mean (Yule, 2022). And the prefix *ethno-* originates from the Greek *éthnos*, which means ‘people or nation’. The concept of *ethnosemantics* was developed by a group of cultural and linguistic anthropologists in the 1950s (Sharifian, 2014), with key figures including Harold C. Conklin, Ward Goodenough, Charles O. Frake, and Floyd G. Lounsbury. Specifically, it is “the study to find out the cultural systems or a world view of an ethnic group through the analysis of their terms used” (Engchuan, 2023, p. 448). In other words, *ethnosemantics* is a combination of anthropological perspectives and cognitive sciences with a view to studying the way meaning is structured in different cultural settings (Nakhilawi, 2016). Within the scope of ethnosemantics, there is a working assumption that “linguistic form implies meaning, therefore one must begin with the actual forms, ideally forms that are obligatory or widespread in the language, follow their usage, and map out their implications – which can, and often does, lead to surprises” (Sharifian, 2014, p. 56).

2.2. Componential Analysis

Nida (1975) proposes *componential analysis*, which is foundational for ethnosemantics. According to Nida (1975), *componential analysis* is a technique that examines referential meaning by pinpointing the essential and adequate features, or components, that differentiate one word’s meaning from another within a shared semantic domain. A semantic domain is defined as a cluster of connected meanings that have certain components in common. The foundational idea of this method is that meaning only exists through distinctions and contrasts.

The components of meaning are classified into three types:

- **Common components:** the features that are shared by all meanings within a specific semantic domain. For example, kinship terms (*father*, *mother*, *sister*, etc.) share the common components [+human], [+kinship].
- **Diagnostic components:** the features that distinguish one meaning from others in the same domain. For instance, the meaning of *father* has the components [+male] compared to *mother* with [-male].
- **Supplementary components:** the features that are typically associated with a meaning but are not necessary to distinguish it from other meanings in a specific set. For example, the meaning of *mother* may have the components like [+caring] and [+loving].

The relations between meanings can be categorized into four primary ways:

- **Inclusion:** The meaning of one word is entirely included within the meaning of another. For example, the meaning of *dog* is included in the meaning of *animals*.
- **Contiguity:** Meanings are distinct from each other but occupy a well-defined and restricted semantic domain. For instance, the meanings of *walk*, *run*, and *hop* are contiguous because they all fall into the semantic domain of *actions that require legs*.
- **Overlapping:** Meanings are closely related and can be substituted for one another in some contexts, but they are not identical. For example, the meanings of *happy* and *joyful* overlap.
- **Complementation:** Meanings share some features but show marked contrasts. For instance, *buy* vs. *sell* and *good* vs. *bad*.

2.3. Folk Taxonomies

Folk taxonomies have been used in ethnosemantic studies for analyzing how native people categorize things. Initially, folk taxonomies were employed in the field of biological classification (Berlin et al, 1973). Specifically, Berlin (1992) first proposed five levels in the ethnobiological classification of plants:

- + **Unique beginner:** the highest and top inclusive rank consisting of only one term that includes all terms under it.
- + **Life form:** the body form that represents a kind of organism.
- + **Generic:** a general class or group.
- + **Specific:** a particular class.
- + **Varietal:** the lowest of the taxonomy that deviates from a specific kind.

This approach has been broadened to other realms of human cognition, including research concerning folk taxonomies (Hengsuwan & Prasithrathsint, 2014). Therefore, this study also adopts this hierarchical organization in classifying terms for spirits and ghosts in Vietnamese.

2.4. Previous Studies

Although not directly related to the theme of ghost terms, the study of Engchuan (2023) provides a typical example of an ethnosemantic study. The study examines the names of 1,637 Muslim mosques in Thailand's southern border provinces, employing a componential analysis to explore how Islamic faith and culture are reflected and sustained through these names. Semantically, a large majority (70%) of names are directly related to Allah, with others connected to Prophet Muhammad or other prophets. Meanings also extend to concepts of good deeds, virtue, and harmony. This strong connection to Islamic religious figures and virtues highlights the unwavering faith of Muslims in these areas.

Regarding research into ghost terms, Hengsuwan and Prasithrathsint (2014) investigate the folk taxonomy of terms for spirits and ghosts in Thai language. This study categorizes ghost terms in compliance with the five levels of Berlin (1992) presented above: *unique beginner*, *life form*, *generic*, *specific* and *varietal*, reflecting the Thai folk world view. Specifically, it reveals that Thai culture is closely related to nature. The majority of Thai ghost terms show that ghosts have fixed dwelling places. Moreover, for female ghost terms, there are titles as part of their structure, for example *naaη* (female title) and *mêê* (mother) are placed before the terms to mark the female gender: *naaη-máay* (female tree spirit), *mêê-thoɔɔranii* (goddess of the land), etc. Conversely, male ghost terms are unmarked in Thai language.

As for Vietnamese language, even though there exist several related materials (e.g. Tran, 2013; Van, 2023), there has been no ethnosemantic research on Vietnamese terms for spirits and ghosts, which is a research gap for this study.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Procedures

The research primarily employs the method of *componential analysis* proposed by Nida (1975) in combination with desk research and semi-structured interviews. The specific procedures are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Research Procedures of the Study

Procedures	Details	Purposes
Step 1: Desk research	+ Research for information related to Vietnamese terms for spirits and ghosts from books, the Internet and other existing sources + The main material used in this study is the book “Ma quỷ dân gian ký [The Encyclopedia of Vietnamese Folk Ghosts]” by Van (2023), which is a reliable and well-researched source	+ Identify common terms for spirits and ghosts in Vietnamese + List the semantic components related to terms for spirits and ghosts in Vietnamese
Step 2: Semi-structured interviews	+ Conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews with 9 Vietnamese informants (List of the interview questions are specified in Appendix).	+ Cross-check the information from desk research + Retrieve further insights into how Vietnamese people are aware of the concepts of <i>spirits</i> and <i>ghosts</i>
Step 3: Classify the semantic components of each term	+ There are 3 types of semantic components: 1/ Common components 2/ Diagnostic components 3/ Supplementary components	+ Identify the semantic features of those terms
Step 4: Identify the semantic relations between the terms	+ There are 4 types of semantic relations: 1/ Inclusion 2/ Contiguity 3/ Overlapping 4/ Complementation	+ Pinpoint the semantic relations between those terms
Step 5: Arrange the terms in a folk taxonomy	+ Arrange those terms in a table using 5 levels of classifications proposed by Berlin (1992)	+ Scientifically arrange those terms + Reveal information concerning Vietnamese cognition and cultural values

3.2. Informants

All 9 adult informants belong to the ethnic group *Kinh* or the *Viet people*, which constitute over 85% of the population in Vietnam. Besides, the researcher intentionally chooses informants from three different age groups in order to ensure the representativeness of the data collected. The demographic information can be found in Table 2.

It should be acknowledged that the number of informants is rather minimal, which is

one of the limitations of the study. Nevertheless, the primary purpose of those interviews is not to generalize the overall population's perceptions but to validate and contextualize the written data from Van (2023)'s book "Ma quỷ dân gian ký [The Encyclopedia of Vietnamese Folk Ghosts]", ensuring that the taxonomy captures language-in-use rather than solely historical sources.

Table 2

Demographic Information of the Informants

Age groups	Gender	
	Males	Females
Group A: 18-29 years old	1	2
Group B: 30-49 years old	1	3
Group C: over 50 years old	1	1
Total	3	6

Then, each informant is assigned a code. For example: B2 (B: this informant belongs to Group B, 2: the numerical order).

4. A Folk Taxonomy of Terms for Spirits and Ghosts in Vietnamese

The overall findings of the research are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3

Folk Taxonomy of Terms for Spirits and Ghosts in Vietnamese

Unique beginner	Life form	Generic	Specific	Varietal
<i>tâm linh</i> 'spirituality'	<i>linh hồn</i> 'spirits in general' = <i>vong hồn</i> 'spirits of the dead' = <i>vong linh</i> 'more formal term for spirits of the dead'	<i>ma quỷ</i> 'ghosts in general'	<i>ma</i> 'ghosts' = <i>vong</i> 'death'	+ <i>cô hồn</i> 'wandering ghosts' + <i>vong nhi</i> 'infant ghosts' + <i>ma lai</i> 'feces ghosts' + <i>ma trinh nữ</i> 'female virgin ghosts' + <i>ma vú dài</i> 'female long-breasted ghosts' + <i>ma le</i> 'tongue-protruding ghosts' + <i>ma lon</i> 'can ghosts' + <i>ông kẹ</i> 'kidnapping ghosts' + <i>ma xó</i> 'house ghosts' + <i>ma chó</i> 'dog ghosts' + <i>linh miêu</i> 'cat ghosts' + <i>ma thần vòng</i> 'hanging ghosts' + <i>ma men</i> 'drunk ghosts' + <i>ma da</i> 'water ghosts', etc.
			<i>quỷ</i> 'evil ghosts or demons'	+ <i>quỷ nhập tràng</i> 'human-possessing demons' + <i>quỷ sứ</i> 'hell demons', etc.
		<i>tổ tiên</i> 'spirits of ancestors' = <i>ông bà</i> 'male and female'		

		ancestors' = <i>gia tiên</i> 'family's ancestors' = <i>hương linh</i> 'ancestors worshiped with incense' = <i>cửu huyền</i> 'nine generations'		
	<i>thần linh</i> 'divine deities'	<i>thần</i> 'gods'	<i>thiện thần</i> 'good gods'	+ <i>thổ thần</i> 'god of earth' + <i>thủy thần</i> 'god of water' + <i>sơn thần</i> 'god of mountain' + <i>ông thiện</i> 'god of good deeds', etc.
			<i>ác thần</i> 'evil gods)	+ <i>thần chết</i> 'god of death' + <i>ông hổ</i> 'tiger god' + <i>ông ác</i> 'god of evil things', etc.
		<i>thánh</i> 'saints'		
		<i>tổ nghề</i> 'patron deities for traditional occupations'		

4.1. The First Level: Unique Beginner

The *unique beginner* is a lexical item that has the broadest meaning. It is represented by the term *tâm linh* with the English equivalent 'spirituality'. According to Tran (2013), in Vietnamese language, *tâm* means 'human inner experience' and *linh* means 'sacredness or holiness'. Together, the compound word *tâm linh* means 'how humans are aware of the sacredness or holiness in nature and society'. To further understand this term, the 5 semantic components are extracted from the interviews with the informants, which are: [+a set of beliefs], [+invisible world], [+supernatural phenomena], [+inexplicable], and [+interactive with the human world] as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4

Unique Beginner: Tâm linh 'Spirituality'

Semantic components	Tâm linh 'spirituality'
[A set of beliefs]	+
[Invisible world]	+
[Supernatural phenomena]	+
[Inexplicable]	+
[Interactive with the human world]	+

* Note: + = positive

All informants agree that *tâm linh* 'spirituality' is an umbrella term to refer to a set of beliefs that are deeply ingrained in Vietnamese culture. Most importantly, those are beliefs about the world which is invisible to mortal eyes. However, Informant C1 and A1 believe that *người nhẹ bóng vía* 'people who are spiritually sensitive' may encounter ghosts in their lives.

Besides, *tâm linh* also involves supernatural phenomena such as ghost haunting/possessing, black magic, or love charms. In addition, one crucial feature is that those phenomena are inexplicable using logical reasoning or scientific grounds. For example, Informant B2 experienced an accident in which she slipped and fell down more than 15 steps of a staircase but sustained only minor scratches. She admits not being able to explain the case and claims that possibly the spirit of her deceased father helped her.

Moreover, the lexeme *linh* in the word *tâm linh* denotes the meaning ‘the power to affect the material world’. In other words, *tâm linh* represents an active agent that can interact and interfere with human life. For instance, Informant B2 also believes that people can communicate with ghosts using *bàn cầu cơ* ‘a spirit board’ in order to seek winning lottery numbers.

4.2. The Second Level: Life Form

As specified in Table 5, all informants agree that the concepts of *linh hồn* ‘spirits in general’ and *thần linh* ‘divine deities’ are included in the concept of *tâm linh* ‘spirituality’. Besides, there is one common component of *linh hồn* and *thần linh* spotted from the interviews, which is [+a type of energy]. To specify, Informant B3 shares her belief that both *linh hồn* and *thần linh* are actually fields of energy that can only be felt by psychics.

Table 5

Life Form: Linh hồn ‘Spirits in General’ and Thần linh ‘Divine Deities’

Semantic Components	Linh hồn ‘spirits in general’	Thần linh ‘divine deities’
[Having all semantic features of <i>tâm linh</i> ‘spirituality’]	+	+
[A type of energy]	+	+
[Highly respectable]	±	+
[Giving blessings for humans]	±	+
[Related to death]	+	-
[Deified entities]	-	+
Semantic relation	Contiguity	

* Note: + = positive, - = negative, ± = optional

On the other hand, there are diagnostic components to distinguish between the two concepts *linh hồn* and *thần linh*. Specifically, *linh hồn* owns the features: [±highly respectable], [±giving blessings for humans] and [-deified entities]; while *thần linh* possesses the features: [+highly respectable], [+giving blessings for humans] and [+deified entities]. In other words, in Vietnamese cognition, *linh hồn* entities may or may not receive high level of respect and give blessings for humans; but *thần linh* entities are surely well-esteemed, sacred and protective of human life.

Moreover, *linh hồn* has the feature [+related to death], contrasting sharply with that of *thần linh* [-related to death]. To clarify, in Vietnamese culture, despite the belief that *linh hồn* exists simultaneously in the human mortal body, *death* is the turning point for the actualization of *linh hồn*. According to Tran (2000, pp. 136-138), *linh hồn* can be defined as follows:

Within humans exist both the material and the spiritual. The spiritual, being abstract and difficult to grasp, was deified by ancient people into the concept of *the spirit*, and the spirit became the focal point of belief systems... Death, therefore, signifies the body's transition from a state of activity to one of stillness. According to the philosophy of *yin* and *yang*, the spirit moves from the *Yang realm* ‘the living world’ to the *Yin realm* ‘the underworld’. This is *the other side*. Vietnamese

people believe that death is to return to one's ancestors in the realm of *cửu tuyền*¹ 'nine springs', fostering the belief that even in the realm of nine springs, ancestors frequently return to visit, look after, and bless their descendants. This belief forms the basis of ancestor worship.

Besides, in order to emphasize the association between *linh hồn* and *death*, in Vietnamese, there are two other overlapping terms for the concept, which are *vong hồn* and *vong linh* (both literally mean *spirits of the dead*). To further explain, *vong* means *death* in the two terms. And compared to the former, the latter is more formally used with the nuance of respectability due to the presence of the lexeme *linh* 'sacred'.

On the contrary, no informants highlight the connection between *thần linh* and *death*. Instead, *thần linh* is more associated with eternal existence.

To summarize, *linh hồn* and *thần linh* are two distinct terms but included within the semantic domain of the concept *tâm linh*, forming a contiguous semantic relation.

4.3. The Third Level: Generic

4.3.1. Semantic domain of *linh hồn* 'spirits in general'

Within the semantic domain of *linh hồn* 'spirits in general', there are two terms including *ma quỷ* 'ghosts in general' and *tổ tiên* 'spirits of ancestors'. The semantic components of the two terms can be found in Table 6.

Table 6

Generic: Ma quỷ 'Ghosts in General' and Tổ tiên 'Spirits of Ancestors'

Semantic components	Ma quỷ 'ghosts in general'	Tổ tiên 'spirits of ancestors'
[Having all semantic features of <i>linh hồn</i> 'spirits in general']	+	+
[Bothersome]	+	-
[Evil entities]	±	-
[Family members]	-	+
[Highly respectable]	-	+
[Giving blessings for humans]	-	+
Semantic relation	Contiguity	

* Note: + = positive, - = negative, ± = optional

All informants differentiate between *ma quỷ* and *tổ tiên*. As for *ma quỷ*, the term itself is a compound of the two lexemes *ma* 'ghosts' and *quỷ* 'evil ghosts or demons' with the following semantic components: [+bothersome], [±evil entities], [-family members], [-highly respectable] and [-giving blessings for humans]. Overall, the term *ma quỷ* is deemed to have negative connotations by the informants. Specifically, those entities are believed to be not in the family circle and disturb human activities (if not receiving proper offerings). For instance, Informant C1 believes that "*ma quỷ* bring bad luck to her family business and shoo her customers away". Besides, *ma quỷ* may harm human health or even threaten their life as an act of revenge, but not all *ma quỷ* are malevolent entities. In addition, from the perspective of the informants, *ma quỷ* are not supposed to bring good luck to humans, thereby not receiving high respect from them.

¹ A euphemism to refer to 'the realm of the deceased' in Vietnamese culture, which means 'the eternal resting place'.

As for *tổ tiên*, more positive connotations are found comprising [-bothersome], [-evil entities], [+family members], [+highly respectable] and [+giving blessings for humans]. To be specific, *tổ tiên* are protectors of their descendants, giving guidance and blessings for later generations. In return, posterity is expected to worship their ancestors on the family's altar and host *đám giỗ* 'death anniversary' of each deceased family member annually as a way to commemorate and express gratitude for their ancestors.

Furthermore, there are four other equivalent terms of *tổ tiên* identified from the interviews with the informants: *ông bà* 'male and female ancestors', *gia tiên* 'family's ancestors', *hương linh* 'ancestors worshiped with incense' and *cửu huyền* 'nine generations'. It should be noted that those terms are used interchangeably with the term *tổ tiên*, forming an overlapping relation between them. Semantically, the four terms only slightly differ from each other, each highlighting one extra nuance. Those supplementary semantic components reveal certain aspects of Vietnamese culture (as specified in Table 7):

- Firstly, the term *ông bà* 'male and female ancestors' clearly reflects [+the principle of yin and yang]: *ông* is an honorific expression to refer to male ancestors and *bà* is an honorific expression to address female ancestors. The compound *ông bà* is a natural combination both in linguistic sense and cultural context of Vietnam.

- Secondly, the Sino-Vietnamese term *gia tiên* 'family's ancestors', with *gia* meaning 'family' and *tiên* meaning 'before', indicates [+sense of familyhood]. This term is usually used more in formal contexts to emphasize the strong bond between one and their ancestors.

- Thirdly, the Sino-Vietnamese term *hương linh* 'ancestors worshiped with incense', with *hương* means 'incense' and *linh* means 'sacred', shows the feature [+ritualized]. In Vietnamese culture, ancestors are considered sacred and worshiped through the ritual of burning incense sticks on a regular basis. It is disrespectful when one fails to burn incense for their ancestors for a long time. And this may result in the disconnection with the ancestors.

- Lastly, the Sino-Vietnamese term *cửu huyền* 'nine generations', with *cửu* means 'nine' and *huyền* means 'mystical', represents the feature [+continuation of generations]. The term denotes the nine generations: self (the present), four generations before self (the past) and four generations after self (the future). Actually, this is an umbrella term to refer to both those who are still alive and those who are dead. However, the informants in the study use the term *cửu huyền* to refer to 'ancestors'. The researcher posits that this is a *metonymic use* of the term *cửu huyền*, which means using a term with a broader sense to refer to the concept with a narrower sense. This is due to the practice of worshiping *cửu huyền* on the altar of each Vietnamese family. Moreover, the term indicates that ancestors and descendants are closely connected, and this also signifies a profound aspiration for the perpetuation of future generations.

Table 7

Generic: *Tổ tiên* 'Spirits of Ancestors' – Extra Nuances of Equivalent Terms

Semantic components	<i>Ông bà</i> 'male and female ancestors'	<i>Gia tiên</i> 'family's ancestors'	<i>Hương linh</i> 'ancestors worshiped with incense'	<i>Cửu huyền</i> 'nine generations'
[The principle of yin and yang]	+			
[Sense of familyhood]		+		
[Ritualized]			+	
[Continuation of]				+

generations]	
Semantic relation	Overlapping

* *Note*: + = positive

In summary, *ma quỷ* and *tổ tiên* are two different terms but belong to the same semantic domain of *linh hồn*, forming a contiguous semantic relation.

4.3.2. Semantic Domain of *thần linh* ‘Divine Deities’

Within the semantic domain of *thần linh* ‘divine deities’, the informants all agree that there are three sub-categories: *thần* ‘gods’, *thánh* ‘saints’, and *tổ nghề* ‘patron deities for traditional occupations’, establishing a contiguous semantic relation between them. The semantic components of each term are specified in Table 8.

Table 8

Generic: Thần ‘Gods’, Thánh ‘Saints’ and Tổ nghề ‘Patron Deities for Traditional Occupations’

Semantic components	<i>Thần</i> ‘Gods’	<i>Thánh</i> ‘Saints’	<i>Tổ nghề</i> ‘Patron deities for traditional occupations’
[Having all semantic features of <i>thần linh</i> ‘divine deities’]	+	+	+
[Human-origin]	±	+	+
[Ultimate power]	-	+	-
[Founders of traditional occupations]	-	-	+
Semantic relation	Contiguity		

* *Note*: + = positive, - = negative, ± = optional

The term *thần* has the feature [±human origin], which is different from *thánh* and *tổ nghề* with the feature [+human origin]. According to Vietnamese beliefs, *thần* can be either nature-origin (e.g. *thổ thần* ‘god of earth’, *thủy thần* ‘god of water’ and *sơn thần* ‘god of mountain’) or human-origin. Besides, *thần* entities are guardians of a restricted land or aspect of life.

As for the term *thánh*, although rather analogous to the meaning of *thần*, its diagnostic feature is [+ultimate power]. Vietnamese people believe that *thánh* entities are more omnipotent and occupy a more elevated standing in the Vietnamese psyche, protecting humans in various aspects of life. Moreover, *thánh* are believed to have human origin. As mortals, they were highly acclaimed for their outstanding talents or unwavering morality.

Lastly, the term *tổ nghề* holds the diagnostic feature [+founders of traditional occupations]. They used to be mortals and laid the foundation for the development of a traditional occupation. In Vietnamese culture, the act of *tổ nghề* worshiping reflects the spirit of gratitude, acknowledging the profound contributions of those who established livelihoods for later generations.

4.4. The Fourth Level: Specific

4.4.1. Semantic Domain of *ma quỷ* ‘Ghosts in General’

Within the semantic domain of *ma quỷ* ‘ghosts in general’, there are two sub-terms including *ma* ‘ghosts’ and *quỷ* ‘evil ghosts or demons’, forming a contiguous semantic relation. Their semantic components are presented in Table 9.

Table 9*Specific: Ma ‘Ghosts’ and Quỷ ‘Evil Ghosts or Demons’*

Semantic components	Ma ‘Ghosts’	Quỷ ‘Evil ghosts or demons’
[Having all semantic features of ma quỷ ‘ghosts in general’]	+	+
[Human-form manifestation]	±	-
[Harm humans]	±	+
Semantic relation	Contiguity	

* Note: + = positive, - = negative, ± = optional

The informants all agree on the difference between the two terms *ma* and *quỷ*. Upon analysis of the interviews, the researcher identifies the difference: *ma* receives the feature [+human-form manifestation] while *quỷ* adopts the feature [-human-form manifestation]. Specifically, most informants visualize *ma* as a blurred image wearing white aodai² and still in human shape. Furthermore, some *ma* entities can also be in animal shape (e.g. *linh miêu* ‘cat ghosts’ and *ma chó* ‘dog ghosts’). In contrast, *quỷ* entities no longer manifest themselves as humans. To further illustrate, Informant A3 shares: “Though originating from a human, *quỷ*’s outward form has lost all human semblance, resembling a wild beast. Its face is ferocious and filled with murderous intent, with jagged fangs that seem eager to tear humans apart”.

Besides, *ma* has the feature [± harm humans] while *quỷ* receives the feature [+harm humans]. To be specific, *ma* entities are not always malicious. Informant C1 believes that “*vong nhi* (infant ghosts) may accompany, protect and bless their birth mother”. However, it is acknowledged that *ma* can also afflict the living as Informant B4 shares: “*ma da* (water ghosts) must wait underwater to drag someone to drown, so that person can take their place. Only then can *ma da* be reincarnated”. As for *quỷ*, those entities surely harm humans in different ways. Informant B3 says: “*Quỷ* carry immense resentment, existing for many years, harming people until they die. It even latches onto a family through multiple generations”. Compared to *ma*, *quỷ* entities are much more insidious and vicious.

In addition, there is an equivalent term of *ma*, which is *vong* ‘death’. This term *vong* literally means ‘death’ in Vietnamese, equating *ghosts* with *death*. Here is a *metonymic* use of the term *vong* because *death* is one crucial component in the concept *ma*. Clearly, *ma* and *vong* form an overlapping semantic relation. However, based on the data from the interviews, *vong* holds an extra nuance of [+strong attachment]. Informant B1 says: “Basically, *ma* and *vong* are similar in meaning. But *vong* suggests a more adhesive feeling, as if it would follow and stick to the host”. In fact, in Vietnamese, there are other expressions to attest to this point such as *vong theo* ‘ghosts that follow the host’, *vong dựa* ‘ghosts that depend on the host’ and *vong nhi* ‘infant ghosts’ that follow their birth mother.

4.4.2. Semantic Domain of *thần* ‘Gods’

Regarding the concept *thần* ‘gods’, there are two sub-terms *thiện thần* ‘good gods’ and *ác thần* ‘evil gods’, establishing a complementary semantic relation. This reflects the principle of *yin* and *yang* in Vietnamese culture: there should be a balance between positive and negative aspects of social life. Although both *thiện thần* and *ác thần* entities are revered by humans, as specified in Table 10, *ác thần* entities have two diagnostic components [+destructive power]

² The traditional costume of Vietnam is used to prepare the deceased for burial before the coffin lid is closed.

and [+feared by humans] while *thiện thần* entities hold the features [-destructive power] and [-feared by humans]. Specifically, *ác thần* represents disasters or misfortunes (e.g. *thần chết* ‘god of death’ and *thần hổ* ‘tiger god’). On the other hand, *thiện thần* symbolizes blessings or protection for humans.

Table 10

Specific: Thiện thần ‘Good Gods’ and Ác thần ‘Evil Gods’

Semantic components	Thiện thần ‘Good gods’	Ác thần ‘Evil gods’
[Having all semantic features of thần ‘gods’]	+	+
[Destructive power]	-	+
[Feared by humans]	-	+
Semantic relation	Complementation	

* Note: + = positive, - = negative

4.5. The Fifth Level: Varietal

As can be seen from Table 3, at varietal level, in Vietnamese, there is a predominant number of terms for *ma* ‘ghosts’ compared to that of *quỷ* ‘evil ghosts or demons’ and *thần* ‘gods’. Thus, the article will focus more on terms for *ma*. The descriptions of the most common ones identified from the interviews can be found in Table 11.

Table 11

Varietal: Descriptions of Common Terms for Ma ‘Ghosts’ in Vietnamese

Terms for Ma ‘Ghosts’	Descriptions
<i>Cô hồn</i> ‘wandering ghosts’	Wandering, lonely or hungry ghosts, typically the spirits of someone who died tragically or without proper burial, believed to suffer from perpetual hunger and needing offerings to find peace.
<i>Vong nhi</i> ‘infant ghosts’	Ghosts of the unborn or aborted infants, usually accompanying their birth mother.
<i>Ma lai</i> ‘feces ghosts’	A terrifying mythical creature often described as a disembodied head with its entrails dangling below, flying at night to seek out and consume the feces of humans.
<i>Ma trinh nữ</i> ‘female virgin ghosts’	The spirit of a young, unmarried woman who died prematurely, often tragically, and is believed to linger due to unfulfilled desires or an unjust end, sometimes seeking to possess or harm the living.
<i>Ma vú dài</i> ‘long-breasted ghosts’	A terrifying female ghost characterized by extraordinarily long, pendulous breasts that she uses to entangle or attack her victims. She is believed to be a deceased mother, eternally searching for her baby to breastfeed.
<i>Ma le</i> ‘tongue-protruding ghosts’	A type of ghost that protrudes its long tongue to scare people.
<i>Ma lon</i> ‘can ghosts’	A mysterious spiritual game popular among rural children, involves inviting the spirit of a deceased child to possess a can. Players place the can on the ground, light incense, pray, and then observe if the can moves and interacts with anyone.
<i>Ông kẹ</i> ‘kidnapping ghosts’	A frightening mythical figure used by adults to scare children into good behavior, often depicted as a dark, shadowy, or monstrous entity that kidnaps or preys on disobedient kids.

<i>Ma xó</i> 'house ghosts'	A type of ghost that is worshiped at a corner of the house to protect the homeowner from burglaries.
<i>Ma chó</i> 'dog ghosts'	In appearance, dog ghosts have white fur and a red nose. At nightfall, when negative energy is strongest, they stand up, lean on their sticks, put on hats, and clatter across the homeowner's roof. They cause trouble, bringing misfortune to the household. They are an omen for the decline of human morality.
<i>Linh miêu</i> 'cat ghosts'	Those cat ghosts are the embodiment of darkness. Vietnamese people believe they can revive the dead. However, the souls within these reanimated individuals are demonic souls, not their original ones.
<i>Ma thần vông</i> 'hanging ghosts'	The spirits of those who died by suicide or were murdered through hanging. These spirits carry resentment and seek to lure and haunt others into ending their own lives, just as they did.
<i>Ma men</i> 'drunk ghosts'	The spirit of someone who died due to heavy drinking or an alcohol-related incident, often believed to wander aimlessly and continue to crave alcohol in the afterlife.
<i>Ma da</i> 'water ghosts'	A type of vengeful water ghost, believed to be the spirit of someone who drowned, who lingers in the water where they died and tries to pull others down to their death to take their place.

Through the descriptions of the above terms, the researcher can postulate the following discoveries:

+ *Firstly*, the notion of ghosts adopting [+animal's form], though represented by a limited lexicon, endures in the Vietnamese psyche. Those beings are associated with animals integral to their daily lives (e.g. cats and dogs). Such animals are believed to harbor malevolent spirits that provoke human fear.

+ *Secondly*, ghosts are believed to be able to inhabit objects to interact with humans [+object haunting]. This concept is reflected via the Vietnamese children's game *ma lon* 'can ghosts', which suggests that while the spiritual world is invisible, it can still manifest and influence the physical world.

+ *Thirdly*, in Vietnamese culture, [+ritual formality] is highly esteemed. There's a prevailing belief, for example, that a properly conducted funeral and the interment of remains strictly in line with ancestral traditions ensure the peaceful rest of the deceased's spirit. Should these practices not be followed, it is thought that the spirit will be transformed into restless, vengeful, and eternally hungry spirits like *cô hồn* 'wandering ghosts'.

+ *Fourthly*, those terms are deeply imbued with both [+ancestral experience] and [+didactic purpose], serving to guide younger generations. For example, the concept of *ma da* 'water ghosts' is used to impress upon children the importance of vigilance in deep aquatic environments. Or children who exhibit disobedience are cautioned about being captured by *ông kẹ* 'kidnapping ghosts'. Or the imagery of *ma lai* 'feces ghosts' encourages individuals to adopt a more hygienic lifestyle, thereby preventing illnesses associated with defecation. Moreover, *ma chó* 'dog ghosts' functions as an embodiment of moral degradation, prompting individuals to maintain conscientiousness in all their interpersonal behaviors. Collectively, these narratives represent profound moral instructions passed down by the ancestors to their descendants.

+ *Lastly*, those terms primarily reflect [+causes of death] and [+earthly regrets]. For instance, *vong nhi* 'infant ghosts' refers to infants who died prematurely but whose souls, still clinging to the mortal world, haunt their birth mothers. *Ma vú dài* 'female long-breasted ghosts' describes the ghosts of a deceased mother perpetually searching for her child to nurse. In

addition, *ma men* ‘drunk ghosts’ denotes the spirits of those who died due to excessive consumption of alcohol or *ma thần vồng* ‘hanging ghosts’, who died of hanging. Clearly, those spirits met a tragic demise, their earthly aspirations unfulfilled and karmic debts unpaid; and thus, they linger among the living until their time of reincarnation arrives.

5. Conclusions

In essence, terms for spirits and ghosts in Vietnamese serve as a vivid reflection of the Vietnamese worldview and cultural depth. Through chilling and spectral oral narratives passed down through generations, Vietnamese ancestors sought to impart invaluable life lessons to their descendants, guiding them toward truth, goodness, and beauty. Furthermore, those expressions embody the fervent desire for intergenerational continuity and underscore the intrinsic bond with family, a cornerstone of Vietnamese culture. Moreover, the terminology surrounding ancestors and ghosts highlights the importance of ritual in Vietnamese culture. Should a spirit not receive proper burial and worshiping through complete rites, it risks becoming a malevolent spirit, forever unable to return home.

This research also further reveals the inherent feature *linh* ‘sacred’ within Vietnamese beliefs: although the spiritual realm remains unseen, it mysteriously pervades and influences the material world. Furthermore, words in the Vietnamese language containing the lexeme *linh* convey a nuanced sense of reverence and awe.

The study recognizes several limitations. Firstly, it does not cover all spiritual terms in Vietnamese, concentrating only on common ones. Furthermore, the limited number of informants means the findings cannot be generalized to the entire Vietnamese population. Lastly, some informants are rather young and have not fully developed their understanding of the spiritual world, which means their beliefs are based exclusively on their personal life experiences.

As for future research, linguists could examine the historical data of spiritual terms in Vietnamese to understand how their sacred meanings are actively constructed in everyday language along the continuum of time. Furthermore, a closer discourse analysis of traditional ghost stories would reveal how the linguistic structure and narrative flow of these tales help pass down moral lessons across generations.

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APPENDIX

Semi-Structured Interview – List of Questions

1. What is your understanding of the concept 'tâm linh' (spirituality)?
2. In your opinion, do 'linh hồn' (spirits) and 'thần linh' (deities) fall under the concept of 'tâm linh' (spirituality)?
3. Are there other terms for 'tổ tiên' (ancestors)? Are 'tổ tiên' a type of soul? Do you think 'tổ tiên' are similar to ghosts?
4. Do you believe in 'ma' (ghosts) and 'quỷ' (demons)? Have you ever had a paranormal experience? How do you define a ghost? In your imagination, what characteristics do ghosts have regarding their physical appearance, color, and clothes?
5. How do 'ma' (ghosts) and 'quỷ' (demons) differ in terms of their nature and physical appearance (based on how you visualize them)?
6. In your opinion, are 'ma' (ghosts) and 'vong' (spirits of the dead) the same concept?
7. What do you think 'cô hồn' (wandering ghosts) are?
8. List the types of 'ma' (ghosts) you are familiar with. Can you name any types of 'ma' (ghosts) that do not take a human form?
9. In your opinion, what causes someone to become a ghost after they die?
10. Why do you think people often tell ghost stories to one another?