

Oath Expressions in Vietnamese Prose (1930–1945) and Reflections of Vietnamese Cultural Characteristics

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ABSTRACT: The article “Oath Expressions in Vietnamese Prose (1930–1945) and Reflections of Vietnamese Cultural Characteristics” examines 127 oath expressions found in Vietnamese prose works, demonstrating that oaths vividly reflect the distinctive cultural identity of the Vietnamese people. These oath expressions embody cultural elements through two major aspects: first, the use of spiritual symbols such as *Heaven, Earth, deities, and ancestors*; and second, the speaker’s self-attribution of harm or loss, including being punished by Heaven, losing honor, or even sacrificing one’s life. Through this analysis, the article contributes to clarifying the interrelationship between language and culture within the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people.

KEYWORDS: Oath expressions; Language; Culture; Literary works; Spirituality.

1. INTRODUCTION

(1) Culture is understood as the totality of material and spiritual values created and accumulated by humankind throughout history in the course of practical activity. It represents the spiritual life of human beings and their interaction with the natural and social environment.

The culture of a nation, including that of Vietnam, is expressed not only in daily human behavior but also through literary works.

Language and culture share a close and interdependent relationship. Language serves as both the medium and the condition for the emergence, development, and interaction of elements within the cultural ecosystem. Conversely, culture—as a social phenomenon—exerts a strong influence on the formation and evolution of language, shaping the distinctive characteristics of each national language.

(2) From a cultural perspective, our statistical analysis of several Vietnamese prose works from 1930 to 1945 reveals that, like other speech acts, the oath speech act in Vietnamese generally—and oath expressions in particular—clearly reflects the unique cultural traits of the Vietnamese people.

Our data analysis shows that Vietnamese cultural elements manifest in oath expressions through two main aspects:

The first is the use of spiritual and sacred symbols within oath expressions.

The second is the speaker’s (*Sp1*) self-attribution of potential harm or loss when making an oath.

This study aims to clarify how Vietnamese speakers employ cultural elements in the act of making oaths, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the Vietnamese language in relation to its cultural identity and promoting its appropriate and culturally grounded use among readers.

2. CULTURAL FACTORS REFLECTED IN OATH EXPRESSIONS IN VIETNAMESE PROSE (1930–1945)

2.1. Oath Expressions Reflecting Cultural Elements through the Use of Spiritual Symbols by the Speaker (*Sp1*)

2.1.1. The General Structural Model of an Oath Expression

The general structural model of an oath expression can be represented as follows:

$S1 = Sp1 + \text{performative verb of oath-taking (ĐTNH)} + \text{with } Sp2 / \text{before } X / \text{with } X + (\text{that}) + S2$

(*Sp1*: the speaker producing the oath expression; *ĐTNH*: the performative verb of oath-taking; *Sp2*: the hearer; *X*: the entity witnessing the oath; *S2*: the propositional content or act being sworn to.)

In this structure, the element *X* refers to the witness of the oath (for example, “swear by *X*,” “swear before *X*”), which is invoked by the speaker (*Sp1*) to increase the persuasive power and credibility of the oath.

The element *X* is often a spiritual or sacred entity that does not exist in the material world, such as ghosts, spirits of the dead, deities, Buddha, or sacred goddesses in temples. It may also refer to supernatural forces such as *heaven, the sun, or heaven*.

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and earth. These spiritual symbols possess sacred and authoritative significance for human beings. The speaker invokes them in oath expressions to enhance the persuasive and solemn force of their commitment.

It should be noted that spiritual elements carry different meanings across different cultures, depending on the collective consciousness and belief systems of the linguistic community.

According to Tran Ngoc Them [4, p.49], Vietnamese culture belongs to the type of wet-rice agricultural civilization. Within this system, dependence on nature and communal self-governance are fundamental characteristics that shape human thought and psychology. These cognitive and psychological features are reflected in the spiritual symbols that are invoked in Vietnamese oath expressions.

Oath expressions in Vietnamese prose from 1930 to 1945 bear strong imprints of these spiritual elements. The spiritual symbols invoked in oaths most vividly represent the supernatural forces that determine the life and productivity of wet-rice agriculture, as well as religious symbols closely associated with Vietnamese beliefs.

2.1.2. Spiritual Symbols Reflected in Oath Expressions as Supernatural Forces

a) General Remarks

As mentioned earlier, Vietnamese culture belongs to the type of wet-rice agricultural civilization. Like other peoples whose cultures are based on agrarian civilization, the Vietnamese highly value the power of nature, since their working life depends greatly on natural conditions.

While nomadic cultures exalt strength and regard power as an ultimate goal — as reflected in the Roman maxim “*Might makes right*” — agrarian culture emphasizes goodness and morality, upholding the belief that “*Good always triumphs over evil.*”

For this reason, as noted by Nguyễn Thị Thu Nga [5, p.87]: “The Vietnamese often invoke symbols of natural power not only to affirm or make a vow, but also to highlight the moral orientation and virtuous qualities of human beings.”

b) Quantitative Remarks

According to our collected data, among 127 oath expressions, there are 11 instances in which the speaker (*Sp1*) invokes supernatural forces as witnesses to the oath. This accounts for approximately 8.66% (11/127) of the total corpus.

c) The Supernatural Elements Invoked by *Sp1* in Oath Expressions

The supernatural forces most commonly invoked by *Sp1* in oath expressions are Heaven, the Sun, and Heaven and Earth. The following examples illustrate typical forms:

- Supernatural force: Heaven

Example (1):

(a) “*I swear, if I had cheated, Heaven would not bear witness! Truly, my family’s field is only two mau and seven sao (about 9,720 square meters)*”. [8, p.41]

(b) “*I swear before Heaven above as my witness; we have lived and worked together all our lives—have I ever struck you, even once?*” [10, p.279]

(c) “*Truly, Heaven above bears witness. I swear that if I have come here to persuade the child to go with me and give her to another, may Heaven strike me dead.*” [5, p.282]

- Supernatural force: the Sun

Example (2):

“*I swear by the Sun! If I ever do wrong again... then I am no better than a dog!*” [5, p.94]

- Supernatural force: Heaven and Earth

Example (3):

“*I swear by Heaven and Earth, I will throw you from this terrace to the street below like a dog! Get out!*” [7, p.413]

These examples show that the witness *X* (Heaven, the Sun, Heaven and Earth) invoked by the speaker (*Sp1*) serves to increase the persuasive and solemn effect of the oath on the hearer (*Sp2*). If these supernatural entities—invoked as witnesses—were omitted, the oath expressions would lose much of their force and credibility.

Such elements hold sacred and authoritative significance in the consciousness of a people shaped by an agrarian wet-rice culture. This observation has been confirmed by numerous scholars of language and culture. In her study of supernatural powers, Nguyen Thi Thu Nga emphasizes:

“In the Vietnamese spiritual consciousness, nature possesses not only immense strength and infinite power but also represents righteousness itself—it always stands on the side of justice, fairness, and moral reason.” [3, p.86]

2.1.3. Spiritual Symbols in Oath Expressions as Religious Elements

a) General Remarks

According to our statistical data, apart from supernatural forces, many oath expressions also invoke spiritual elements associated with Vietnamese religion and belief systems.

Religious symbols in Vietnamese culture differ from those of other peoples—particularly Western nations. In Western societies, which are rooted in nomadic cultural traditions, the spiritual worldview is typically monotheistic, in which a single supreme deity governs all divine and human affairs.

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In contrast, the Vietnamese spiritual worldview is polytheistic, a trait deeply rooted in the consciousness of agrarian communities. Because of their dependence on nature, people in agricultural societies tend to venerate natural phenomena—rivers, mountains, banyan trees, spirits of the land, and household deities.

Over time, these indigenous beliefs have merged with both native and foreign religions. The Vietnamese have harmonized indigenous practices - such as the worship of Mother Goddesses, ancestors, and tutelary deities - with imported religious systems, including Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

This blending is the root of the multi-religious character found in Vietnamese oaths. For example, Buddhists may invoke the Buddha as witness to their sincerity, while Christians may call upon God to affirm their truthfulness. Such invocations reveal distinct cultural features in Vietnamese oath expressions, reflecting the inclusive and syncretic nature of Vietnamese spirituality.

b) Quantitative Remarks

Out of the 127 oath expressions collected, 16 instances (approximately 12.60%) contain references to religious or divine elements within Vietnamese belief systems. These references often include invocations of *ghosts* or *spirits*, as illustrated in the following example:

Example (4):

“You, the parents who gave birth to these children! I swear by the spirits on my shoulders—if I have stolen even a grain of rice from your family, may Heaven and Earth destroy me.” [8, p.291]

Thus, it can be said that when Vietnamese people seek to affirm or bind themselves to a promise, they tend to invoke any deity or spiritual power as witness to their oath. This suggests that the emphasis is not on the specific function of a particular god but rather on the mystical and supernatural power of divine forces in general.

2.1.4. *Spiritual Symbols in Oath Expressions as Reflections of Vietnamese Customs and Traditions*

a) General Remarks

One of the most distinctive and easily recognizable Vietnamese customs is ancestor and deity worship. The rituals of worshipping ancestors, deities, and spiritual entities (such as Buddha, God, the Earth God, or local guardian spirits) are deeply respected in Vietnamese culture.

In particular, ancestor worship is nearly universal—every family has an ancestral altar. Vietnamese people always remember their roots and uphold the moral principle of “*When drinking water, remember its source.*” For this reason, the ancestral altar is typically placed in the most sacred and prominent part of the home. Most Vietnamese families never forget anniversaries or death days of their ancestors, lighting incense to honor and express gratitude to them.

Because of this deep respect for ancestry and origins, when making oaths, Vietnamese speakers often invoke the spirits of their forebears as witnesses. When something sacred and revered is called upon as a witness to an oath, the statement gains greater persuasive and moral force.

b) Quantitative Remarks

Among the 127 oath expressions analyzed, 26 instances (approximately 20.47%) contain elements related to Vietnamese customs and traditions.

Example (5):

“I swear, before these two men, and before the spirits of my parents, that I will not punish...” [10, p.343]

Example (6):

“I will love these children as if they were my own. They will be well educated. I swear before the spirit of their late father...” [8, p.122]

Beyond ancestor worship, another notable aspect of Vietnamese culture is the high regard for lineage preservation and procreation—a trait not shared by all cultures. In some societies today, it is common for married women to choose not to have children; however, in Vietnamese culture, most women strongly desire motherhood.

For Vietnamese women, children are the most precious treasure, often valued above life itself. They are willing to sacrifice everything for their offspring. Thus, when a woman dares to swear by her own child’s life - as in the case of Thù’s wife in *Worn Life* - it reflects the utmost seriousness of the oath and the depth of her sincerity.

Example (7):

“I swear that if I have ever gambled secretly, may Heaven not let that child be mine.” [5, p.720]

In this example, Thù’s wife swears by her child’s life to convince her husband that she has never gambled. Her act of invoking the child’s life in such a dire oath serves as a desperate attempt to affirm her innocence and regain her husband’s trust.

In summary, the cultural significance of spiritual symbols invoked in Vietnamese oaths originates from the agrarian, wet-rice civilization of Vietnam. The Vietnamese revere natural forces that directly influence agricultural life -such as rain, wind, thunder, and the heavens and earth.

In early times, when science was underdeveloped, people were entirely dependent on the whims of nature, which was often unpredictable and destructive - bringing floods, droughts, and storms. Out of both fear and reverence, they deified natural phenomena, transforming them into sacred spiritual symbols and addressing them with respectful titles such as Lord Heaven, Lady

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Earth, or Mother Water. These entities became deeply rooted in the Vietnamese spiritual consciousness and are frequently invoked in oath expressions.

Likewise, the awareness of preserving one's lineage is another defining feature of Vietnamese culture. For Vietnamese people, children and descendants are invaluable treasures, surpassing all material possessions. Hence, only in moments of ultimate affirmation do Vietnamese individuals take oaths invoking their children or descendants—an act that epitomizes sincerity, devotion, and moral gravity.

2.2. Oath Expressions Reflecting Cultural Elements through the Speaker's Self-Attribution of Harm or Loss

One of the principles of politeness in communication is “Minimize benefit to oneself, maximize loss to oneself” [1, p.261]. This principle not only expresses politeness in interaction but also enhances the persuasive force of the speaker's utterance.

Persuading others by self-imposing mental or physical loss or harm is a way of swearing that is not unique to the Vietnamese; it is also found in many other Eastern cultures. However, the Vietnamese mode of expression differs in certain cultural nuances.

In the oath expressions we analyzed, the harm or loss invoked by Vietnamese speakers is often associated with punishment by supernatural forces, loss of personal honor and dignity, or loss of life itself. These self-imposed consequences reflect specific cultural traits embedded in the Vietnamese worldview.

Among the 127 recorded oath expressions, 74 instances (approximately 58.27%) fall into this type. These can be further divided into subcategories depending on the nature of the element *X* invoked by the speaker.

2.2.1. Oath Expressions in Which the Speaker Invokes Harm or Loss upon Themselves as Punishment from Natural Forces

As mentioned earlier, under the influence of wet-rice agricultural culture, the Vietnamese people have always worshiped, revered, and at times feared the powers of nature—such as rain, sunlight, drought, floods, and storms. In the Vietnamese consciousness, these natural forces possess tremendous power. It is commonly believed that those who suffer harm or disaster caused by nature must have done something wrong and are therefore “punished by Heaven.”

Consequently, to persuade others to believe in their sincerity or in the truth of their commitment, speakers (*SpI*) often invoke self-inflicted harm—both physical and spiritual—as punishment from natural forces. Such expressions may include formulas like “*May Heaven and Earth annihilate me,*” “*May lightning strike me dead,*” “*May Heaven destroy my lineage,*” and similar variants.

Examples (8):

(a) *Kiên pointed his finger toward the sky and swore:*

“We, the members of this association, if we ever again agree to serve the enemy, may Heaven destroy our entire lineage! (...) From this day forward, we shall forever treat one another as brothers, united in heart and mind to eliminate the enemy, remaining loyal until death. Whoever breaks this oath, may Heaven and Earth, ghosts and spirits, wipe out their descendants.” [7, p.29]

(b) “*I swear before Heaven and Earth as witnesses - if you betray me, may lightning strike you dead instantly.*” [8, p.193]

(c) “*Heaven above bears witness - if I have truly come here to persuade the child to go away so that I may give her to someone else, may Heaven strike me dead!*” [5, p.219]

(d) “*If I am joking, may Heaven and Earth annihilate my whole family!*” [10, p.222]

(e) “*We, six hundred comrades, bound by brotherhood and loyalty, swear to live and die together, to expel the invaders and save the people. Whoever proves disloyal or unfaithful, may Heaven and Earth annihilate them!*” [7, p.116]

All the above examples illustrate that the speakers (*SpI*) invoke self-inflicted harm and loss—such as death or the extinction of one's lineage—as consequences of punishment by natural forces (*Heaven, Heaven and Earth, lightning, divine retribution*). These expressions demonstrate how the Vietnamese concept of moral accountability before nature and fear of divine punishment deeply shapes the cultural character of oath-taking.

2.2.2. Oath Expressions in Which the Speaker Invokes Harm or Loss Related to Personal Honor and Dignity

In general, every individual values and consciously strives to preserve their honor and dignity. Vietnamese people have many proverbs and sayings emphasizing the importance of moral integrity and self-respect, such as: “*Even torn paper must keep its margin,*” “*Better to be poor but clean,*” “*A good name is worth more than riches,*” and “*Good wood is better than good paint.*”

Because honor is held in such high esteem, it is considered sacred in the Vietnamese consciousness. When one needs to affirm or solemnly commit to something, they are willing to invoke this most precious and revered value in an oath.

However, unlike Westerners—who typically swear directly by saying “*I swear on my honor*”—the Vietnamese often take “cursed oaths” by degrading themselves, comparing their worth to that of lowly animals such as dogs, buffaloes, or oxen.

It is worth noting that in Western nomadic cultures, such animals are viewed positively because they assist in herding livestock; thus, they are symbols of loyalty, courage, and intelligence. In contrast, within the Vietnamese agrarian and communal context, these same animals are seen as representing coarseness or baseness. Therefore, by comparing themselves to dogs or cattle,

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Vietnamese speakers symbolically lower their moral and social standing, using self-deprecation as a means to prove sincerity and humility.

Example (9):

“I swear by the sun—if I ever do wrong again, I’m no better than a dog.” [10, p.143]

Alongside such self-degrading comparisons, Vietnamese speakers sometimes voluntarily lower their social status—for instance, by declaring themselves the “child” or “servant” of the listener—to further strengthen the credibility of the oath.

Example (10):

“You’re just imagining things!”

“I swear, if I’m lying, I’ll be your child.” [8, p.200]

Here, the speaker (*Sp1*), who initially stands on an equal social footing with the listener (*Sp2*), deliberately lowers their position by offering to become the listener’s subordinate (“child”), thereby intensifying the persuasive effect of the oath. This self-humbling act reflects a distinct Vietnamese cultural value—one rooted in the profound respect for honor, integrity, and moral propriety.

From examples (8), (9), and (10), it is clear that when the speaker (*Sp1*) invokes harm or loss to their personal honor or dignity, these oaths carry a deeply cultural imprint. For Vietnamese people, personal honor is not assessed in isolation but is evaluated over time and through the collective moral judgment of the community.

2.2.3. Oath Expressions in Which the Speaker Invokes Harm or Loss Related to Their Own Life

The cultural meaning of self-attributed harm or loss reaches its most profound expression when the speaker invokes loss of life—that is, when death itself is used as the ultimate pledge in an oath.

Across all cultures, attitudes toward life and death vary, but they share one essential understanding: life is precious, and death is fearful.

In Western culture, the focus is existential; people tend to value present life rather than what happens after death. Hence, their worldview often reflects the idea that “*Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.*” In Western oaths, when death is invoked, it is usually in a general or abstract sense, for example: “*I shall die,*” “*I shall not enter heaven,*” or “*I shall fall into hell.*”

In contrast, Vietnamese oath expressions also invoke death, but in ways that are more vivid, concrete, and often gruesome. The forms of death are described with painful specificity: “*to die without a whole body,*” “*to die without closing one’s eyes,*” “*to be beheaded,*” “*to die an unnatural or sudden death,*” “*to die without seeing one’s family,*” “*to die on the streets,*” “*to perish with one’s entire lineage,*” or “*to die without a burial place.*”

Even less extreme cases still involve severe bodily harm, such as *losing limbs, becoming blind, having one’s head crushed*, and so on.

The causes of death mentioned in these oaths are equally diverse—ranging from divine punishment (*being struck by lightning, cursed by gods or Buddha*) to suicidal acts (*throwing oneself into a river*).

Below are several examples of oath expressions in which harm to life is invoked:

Example (11):

(a) “*I swear before the goddess in this temple. If I abandon you, may she twist my neck and kill me—may I not live another day.*” [6, p.6]

(b) “*I swear to you, if I am lying, may a train crush me to dust.*” [10, p.180]

(c) “*If I cannot marry you, I vow to throw myself into this river.*” [8, p.121]

(d) “*I swear... I swear... If I stole that basket of fish, may I die without closing my eyes, without seeing my mother again.*” [8, p.249]

(e) “*I swear, if I ever touched another woman, may Heaven cripple my hand!*” [9, p.124]

The losses invoked in these oath expressions are diverse yet highly specific. The deaths described involve both physical destruction and spiritual torment, along with clearly stated causes.

In particular, the physical depictions of death—*being strangled by deities, crushed by a train, struck by Heaven, or losing one’s limbs*—reflect the extreme vividness and emotional intensity of Vietnamese oath-taking. Such expressions reveal how deeply ingrained the concepts of divine justice, karmic retribution, and moral accountability are within Vietnamese cultural consciousness.

3. CONCLUSION

The cultural factors reflected in the oath expressions analyzed in this study are manifested in two major aspects.

First, the speaker (*Sp1*) employs spiritual and sacred elements when making an oath.

Second, the speaker (*Sp1*) attributes harm or loss to themselves through the oath expression.

According to our statistical data, 53 instances belong to the first category, while 74 instances fall into the second. Each category, in turn, contains several subtypes that illustrate different ways in which Vietnamese cultural characteristics are expressed through the act of oath-taking.

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The following table summarizes the types of oath expressions analyzed in this study from the cultural perspective of the Vietnamese people.

Table 1. Summary of Oath Expression Types from a Cultural Perspective

Types of Oath Expressions	Cultural elements reflected through Sp1's use of spiritual symbols in the oath	Cultural elements reflected through Sp1's self-attribution of harm or loss	Total
Number of cases	53	74	127
Percentage (%)	41,73	58,27	100

In summary, this paper not only reveals the distinctive cultural characteristics of the Vietnamese people as reflected in oath expressions found in several Vietnamese prose works from 1930 to 1945, and in Vietnamese prose in general, but also helps Vietnamese language users understand and employ oath expressions more effectively and appropriately, in accordance with Vietnam's cultural identity.

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