

The Lexical-Semantic Field Describing the Beautiful Appearance of Women in Selected Vietnamese Short Stories Assoc

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Abstract: Female characters have a significant role in Vietnamese literature. Short story authors provided a fairly thorough portrayal of social life through a system of female characters. In this study, we have selected a number of literary works from this period in order to examine the lexical-semantic field system employed to describe women's appearances. Analyzing the semantic fields in literary works - especially those by authors commonly included in secondary school curricula - helps us understand not only the semantic relationships between lexical units within a language system but also the distinctive linguistic features that shape each author's unique writing style. Furthermore, this research has practical implications, as it contributes valuable resources for teaching Literature in secondary schools using an integrated approach.

Keywords: lexical-semantic field, semantic field, subfield, women, short stories.

INTRODUCTION

The study of language semantics has received attention from researchers worldwide since the late 19th century. This field has progressed through three main periods: pre-structuralism, structuralism, and post-structuralism. Building on the achievements of international scholars, a number of Vietnamese linguists, such as Nguyễn Văn Tu and Đỗ Hữu Châu, have introduced the theory of semantic fields to Vietnam. Đỗ Hữu Châu, in particular, provided the most comprehensive and detailed presentation of this theory. However, research has generally focused on examining specific systems within the lexical level. Studies that are application-oriented and directly linked to literary works taught in schools remain an "untapped ground" requiring further exploration.

Female characters occupy an important position within Vietnamese literature. Specifically, in modern Vietnamese short stories, authors utilize the system of female characters to present a relatively comprehensive perspective on the social life of the time. In this study, we select a number of literary works to investigate the lexical-semantic field system used to describe the external appearance of women. Specifically, we focus on exploring the lexical-semantic field that describes women's beautiful, pleasing, or positive appearance. This line of research contributes to the development of interdisciplinary studies and reinforces the understanding of the relationship between language, literature, and culture. Furthermore, this research has practical implications, as it contributes valuable resources

for teaching Vietnamese Literature in secondary schools using an integrated approach, thereby enriching students' vocabulary.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The concept of the semantic field has attracted the interest of Vietnamese linguists, including Hoang Phe, Do Huu Chau, and Nguyen Thien Giap. However, these scholars have primarily investigated systems at the lexical level. The analysis of lexical-semantic fields within literary works has not yet received adequate attention. Although several studies have examined lexical-semantic fields related to categories such as people, animals, and plants, and have explored the operation of semantic fields in various contexts (social, historical, cultural), and some have even contrasted semantic fields in Vietnamese with those in other languages, research focusing on the semantic fields used by specific authors remains small and fragmented. Therefore, surveying the operation of the lexical-semantic field in literary works is still a necessary and novel area, particularly in the current context of implementing the new General Education Program.

The Concept of the Lexical Field

The lexical field, also known as the lexical-semantic field, refers to a systematic organization of vocabulary units that are semantically related.

The term emerged in the 1920s–1930s, with Jos Trier being the first to introduce the concept of the "field," derived from Humboldt's theory that language reflects the spirit of a nation and F. de Saussure's theory of linguistic structure. Trier

defined the lexical field as the scope of concepts expressed by words in a language, where concepts could be grouped into fields using the lexical units of a particular ethnic language. He suggested that the lexical field covers the conceptual field like a cloak or a covering cloth. However, the concepts and meanings of words are not entirely identical. Consequently, Trier's initial concept of grouping concepts to form lexical fields was considered not directly relevant to the meaning of words or linguistics in general.

Following Trier's initial concept, later linguists such as G. Ipsen, L. Weisgerber, G. Muller, and W. Porzig developed the concept of the lexical field in various directions, based on purely linguistic criteria.

Theories of semantic fields were introduced to Vietnam starting in the 1970s and quickly drew the attention of linguists, including Nguyen Van Tu, Do Huu Chau, Nguyen Thien Giap, Do Viet Hung, Bui Minh Toan, and Le Quang Thiem.

Classification of Lexical Fields

There are numerous conceptions of the lexical field, leading to various classification systems. Fundamentally, researchers typically divide lexical fields into three types: the paradigmatic field, the syntagmatic field, and the associative field.

The Paradigmatic Field (Vertical Field, Oppositional Field)

The paradigmatic field consists of hierarchical classes of lexical units of varying magnitudes, organized from the most general categorical semantic features down to smaller categorical features, then to specific type/class features, and finally to individual semantic features. For example, the lexical field of marriage can be divided into subfields such as people, rituals, gifts, attire, love, and marital status. Within the marriage rituals subfield, words include first visit, betrothal ceremony, bringing the bride home, wedding ceremony, ancestor worship ceremony, marriage), cup-sharing ritual), matchmaking ritual), and bride's ceremony.

The Syntagmatic Field (Horizontal Field, Combinational Field)

The syntagmatic field originates from the linear nature of linguistic signs. Signs must follow sequentially in a chain and cannot appear simultaneously; hence, the linear relation is also called the horizontal relation or the syntagmatic relation. Thus, the syntagmatic field comprises "classes of words that are closely related in terms

of usage but are never found in the same syntactic position" [2, p.138].

Words in the syntagmatic field contribute to the realization of certain semantic features of the central word. The syntagmatic field reveals the characteristics of a word in its operational process, including its semantic relations and structures.

The Associative Field (Composite Field)

According to Charles Bally, every uttered word is a stimulus that can become the center of a semantic associative field [8, p. 98]. Therefore, the associative field is a collection of words all evoked by association with a central word. The words in an associative field primarily include those belonging to the paradigmatic and syntagmatic fields, meaning they have homogeneous and oppositional structural relations in meaning with the central word.

The associative field is highly subjective, dependent on the personal life experiences, conditions, and environment of each individual, and is thus often unstable. Consequently, it is less helpful in discovering internal structural semantic relations but is effective in interpreting phenomena in literature.

SEMANTIC FIELDS AND LITERARY LANGUAGE

The Referential Semantic Field and Literary Language

The two methods of lexical meaning transfer are metonymy and metaphor. It can be observed that words within a referential semantic field often transfer meaning in a specific direction. Metaphorical transfer frequently occurs within a referential field; that is, words in one referential field often transfer collectively to another referential field. For example, when the word fire transfers to the field of emotional and psychological states, it brings along co-field words like blazing, glowing, flaring, kindling), and fading/ashes. The field of fire can also transfer to the field denoting social struggles. Many co-field words transfer accordingly: fire of national liberation struggle, the struggle movement remains smoldering and cannot be extinguished.

It is important to note that when a semantic field is used correctly within its own domain, its evocative power diminishes or vanishes due to neutralization within the context. When words transfer fields, they bring with them the impressions and associations of the original field to the new one,

imbuing the new field with the old field's associative impressions.

In literature, words within a sentence or passage often align with the same field to create congruence in the referential semantic field. This can manifest as a dominant figure (i.e., metaphor, metonymy) governing the passage, sentence, or work. The dominant image belongs to a specific referential field, drawing other co-field words along with it.

The Conceptual Semantic Field and Literary Language

When reflecting reality in a work, the author expresses it through their language. A work can only reflect one aspect of reality. To highlight this homogeneity, the words used must also contain common features, creating what is called semantic resonance among the words. This semantic resonance is based on the inherent homogeneous semantic features in the words, or, in other words, on the common semantic feature of a conceptual field (or a group of words within a field).

Semantic resonance does not only occur with words. It can also govern the syntactic structure, phonology, and rhythm. In other words, the writer often coordinates all linguistic elements and means to create formal perfection in their work.

The Associative Semantic Field and Literary Language

This field holds significant power, explaining word usage, particularly in literary works. It explains phenomena like clichés, the preference for selecting certain words for speaking or writing, and the avoidance or taboo of specific words. Setting aside differences in theme, thought, factual details, and imagery, the linguistic appearance alone is enough to distinguish a literary work of one era from another. To succeed, authors must not only possess talent but also demonstrate keen adaptation to their era, especially concerning language, which changes over time, consequently altering the semantic fields. Therefore, authors must not merely follow old paths but also strive to be ahead of their time. Only then can their works be embraced by the public. The connection to life and the times is not solely the task of writers but also of language and literature researchers and educators, who must constantly renew their thoughts and feelings, cultivate their knowledge, and continuously reform and renew their own language.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions of this study, we primarily employ the following research methods and procedures:

Componential Analysis Method: This method serves as the foundation for dissecting semantic fields into subfields, second-level subfields, and word groups. It also forms the basis for analyzing the directions of semantic transfer of words belonging to the lexical-semantic field describing women in Vietnamese short stories.

Descriptive Method: This is the main method, used in conjunction with the componential analysis method, to address the research questions. Based on the collected linguistic data, we proceed to descriptively analyze the semantic characteristics and symbolic meanings of words belonging to the lexical-semantic field describing women in Vietnamese short stories. This contributes to affirming the cultural characteristics of the Vietnamese people that govern the use of words within this field, both in Vietnamese short stories and in the Vietnamese language in general.

Statistical Procedure: This procedure aims to determine the quantity and percentage of words in each semantic field, thereby establishing the subfields and word groups within each semantic field. Additionally, the transfer of meanings and their symbolic significance are statistically analyzed, serving as a basis for observations regarding the cultural, linguistic, and cognitive characteristics in the Vietnamese use of language.

In addition to the Componential Analysis Method, the Descriptive Method, and the Statistical Procedure, we also apply other linguistic research methods, such as the Contextual Analysis Method and the Case Study Method, to address the specific problems posed in this study.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Due to the constraints of a single article, we do not aim for a complete survey of the characteristics of the lexical-semantic field describing the beautiful appearance of women in Vietnamese short stories. Instead, we select representative authors whose works are featured in the general education curriculum and are familiar to students, specifically Nam Cao, Thach Lam, Nguyen Hong, and Nguyen Cong Hoan. These authors also have numerous works focusing on female characters.

Specifically, we surveyed 16 female characters with beautiful appearances from the following four representative authors:

- Nam Cao: Kha (Love Story), Mrs. Tu (Chi Pheo), To (A Souvenir Story);
- Thach Lam: Hau (Sunlight in the Garden), Lien (The Flute Sound), Khanh, Le Minh (The Old Friend), Lien - Hue (New Year's Eve), Tam (The Peddler Girl), Lan (The Girl in Pink Silk);
- Nguyen Hong: Miss Du (Miss Du), Quyen (In Misery), Vinh (Night Eatery), Le Ha (The Girl);
- Nguyen Cong Hoan: Keu (Miss Keu, Modern Girl).

The number of surveyed works for each author is not uniform because we only selected prominent

female characters from works frequently appearing in the general education curriculum. Furthermore, this also depends on the volume of each author's works focusing on women.

Survey Results

Appearance encompasses the shape, face, demeanor, gestures, and overall external manifestation of a character. Describing appearance serves to individualize the character and express the author's artistic perspective and writing style. Concurrently, the description of appearance helps reveal the character's personality. To gain a clear view of the lexical field describing the beautiful/pleasing/positive appearance of female characters, we surveyed the following referential fields: Face, Eyes, Cheeks, Hair, Skin, Legs, Hands, Figure, and Clothing.

Table 1: Survey of the Lexical-Semantic Field Describing the Beautiful Appearance of Women in Selected Vietnamese Short Stories

No	Beautiful/Pleasant Appearance (Category)	Frequency	Percentage (%)	No	Beautiful/Pleasant Appearance (Category)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Face	66	11.6	5	Legs	28	4,9
2	Eyes	89	15.6	6	Hair	36	6,4
3	Cheeks	42	7.5	7	Eyebrows	12	2,1
4	Hands	78	13.7	8	Figure	78	13,8
				9	Clothing/Attire	138	24,4
	Total					567	(100 %)

Lexical Field Indicating Facial Features

- Facial Features: pretty, well-proportioned, fresh, youthful, oval, pleasant to look at, phúng chubby/plump, pretty, rosy, ruddy, red-pink, cool white,...
- Psychological States Expressed by Face: cheerful, jovial, gentle/kindly, dreamy, joyful, elated, happy,...
- Facial Actions: turn away, turn down, turn, bow), look up,...

Examples:

- Du: - She has a cool white face.
- Her face is still fresh and bright.
- Keu: oval face
- Le Ha: a dreamy face turning away

Lexical Field Indicating Eye Features

- Eye Features: big), jet black), velvet eyes, dove eyes),...
- Psychological States Expressed by Eyes: shy/embarrassed, happy, dreamy,...
- Eye Capability: sharp), playful), bright,...
- Eye Actions: open, look up, cast, look, blink, look down,...

- Eyes Expressing Personality: playful, gentle, benevolent, kindly, innocent),...

Examples:

- To: She has a pair of dove eyes.
- Kha: playful eyes
- Quyen: eyes looking up dreamily
- Vinh: Vinh's eyes are sparkling

Lexical Field Indicating Cheek Features

- Cheek Features: ruddy/flush, smooth,...
- Cheek Color: rosy, blushing pink, light red, very light red, slightly reddish, slightly red, red-pink, flushed red, peach pink, ruddy)...
- Psychological States Expressed by Cheeks: flushed, hotly flushed, shy, bashful, blushing red, joyful,...

Examples:

- To: ruddy cheeks
- Quyen: A few rays of sunlight piercing through the sail highlighted the rosy color of her cheeks.
- Vinh: Cheekbones blushing pink
- Tam:

She bowed her face to the stall, feeling the boy's affectionate gaze weighing down on her. Tam's cheeks were very lightly red.

Four eyes met: Tam's cheeks were flushed red, her hands didn't know what to do.

Tam bowed her face, her two cheekbones blushing red with shyness, thinking of the teacher... whom she had immediately loved upon first meeting.

Lexical Field Indicating Hand Features

- Hand External Features: tiny and pure white, bamboo shoots - delicate fingers, slender, ruddy, small/delicate, pretty/neat, cute/dainty, slender),...
- Hand Actions: cradle face), cover face, tuck/push back, hug, loop/embrace, stroke, fondle, loop),...
- Hand Physical State: wet, hot, cold, trembling),...

Examples:

- Kha: tiny and pure white fingers
- To: raised her hand to tuck back her hair
- Hue: covered her face with her slender hands
- Le Minh: small, neat hand trembling

Lexical Field Indicating Features of Other Parts

In addition to the Face, Eyes, Cheeks, and Hands, which appear in large numbers, other parts such as Hair, Legs, and Eyebrows are mentioned less frequently but play an important role in expressing the external beauty of the female characters.

Hair

- Hair Color: black, jet black, white, dotted with white strands, gray, silver white, silvery white, white, shining black, yellow,...
- Hair Scent: fragrant, slightly fragrant, faintly fragrant,...
- Hair Style/State: loose, bun, braid),...

Examples:

- Hau: jet black hair with a faint fragrance
- Lien: shining black hair strand
- Keu: hair neatly braided

Legs

- Leg Features: small), small/delicate, pretty/neat, slender),...
- Leg Color: rosy, red-pink,...

Examples:

- To: slender legs
- Tam: placed her small, delicate foot
- Lan: ruddy heels

Eyebrows

- Eyebrow Features: dark/thick, long, black, willow-leaf eyebrows,...
- Eyebrow Actions: relax, contract/knit, frown),...

Examples:

- To: her lips, round and bright red like coral, and a pair of willow-leaf eyebrows
- Vinh: Suddenly Vinh smiled, her dark, long eyebrows relaxed.

Lexical Field Indicating Figure/Stature

- Beautiful Figure: well-proportioned, full-figured, sturdy build, plump and fair, soft/flexible, slender/fragile, voluptuous, small/delicate, graceful, slender, fresh/youthful, neat and small/slender, swaying/twisting, graceful/flowing, graceful/flowing,...

Examples:

- Kha: neat and small/slender
- Keu: slender figure

Then she went to her friend's house, borrowed a newly tailored dress to try on, and adopted a graceful posture... She walked back and forth. She swayed. She flowed

Lexical Field Indicating Clothing/Attire

The attire of women in the works of these authors is expressed through a rich vocabulary field. We have surveyed and categorized the following fields:

- General Clothing: padded jacket, soft padded jacket, silk blouse, old-style tunic, thin white blouse, white tunic, red wool sweater, black velvet shirt, thin black silk tunic, blouse with snap buttons, silk blouse, pink silk blouse, white áo dài, white blouse, thin black silk tunic, tunic/blouse, long brown tunic, brown tunic, white fine silk tunic, pink bomber jacket, purple silk blouse, thin red silk blouse, calico blouse, brown Buddhist robes, thin silk garment, delicate silk garment, pink silk piece, serge skirt, serge trousers, bodice, silk trousers with red waistband, delicate garment,...
- Accessories: glasses, conical hat, clogs, scarf, square scarf, velvet scarf, handkerchief, raw silk belt, silk sash, leather cap, small round mirror,...
- Clothing Characteristics: new, beautiful, fitting,...
- Jewelry: earrings, pair of bracelets, necklace, bracelet, flower-shaped gem, bangle/bracelet, ring, small-faced ring,...
- Cosmetics/Makeup: powder box, wax box, red wax stick, powder puff,..

Examples:

- Lan: the hem of the pink silk áo dài flew lightly paired with beautiful red-waistband silk trousers
- Lien: lightly dotted her face with the powder puff
- Quyen: the velvet scarf loosely draped

DISCUSSION

Female characters in Thach Lam's short stories are rarely given extensive attention regarding their external appearance. This is because Thach Lam tends towards introspection, specializing in deeply exploring the inner world of his characters. When reading his works, it is often difficult for the reader to form a concrete image of the character's physical appearance. Thach Lam advances the story not through actions and events but primarily through the psychological development, focusing on the changes in the character's emotional state. For instance, when describing the appearance of the character Tam, Thach Lam only uses words related to her psychological state. The images of "very light red cheeks", "flushed red", and "two cheekbones blushing red with shyness" indicate her bashfulness during her first emotional stirrings. This contrasts completely with the "ruddy cheeks full of vitality" of To. Tam's face is similar; Thach Lam does not delve into describing specific beautiful features but uses very general words like "pretty" or "neatly pretty". The author's language is gentle yet profound and subtle. Thach Lam's character portraits are often not detailed or specific but direct the reader toward the inner world, the depth of the soul, with profound artistic intent. The external beauty of his female characters contributes to reflecting their inner goodness. Thach Lam aims for a holistic beauty of both form and soul, which is typically demure, gentle, and natural. For this reason, the beautiful/pleasing appearances of the female characters in Thach Lam's writing share many similarities.

Similar to Thach Lam, Nguyen Hong often describes the external appearance of his female characters consistently with their personality traits. However, while Thach Lam uses general terms for appearance, Nguyen Hong provides very specific descriptions. The beautiful features the author frequently focuses on are the face, eyes, and cheeks. The harmony between the soul and personality creates very distinctive female characters in Nguyen Hong's writings. The female characters in Nguyen Hong's works are typically hardworking, impoverished laborers living in

alleys and city outskirts—those who endure many disadvantages or are shunned by society due to harsh feudal customs—yet they all possess a deeply commendable inner beauty. For example, Nguyen Hong used specific, delicate, and highly expressive words to describe the "cool white face", "light and warm voice", "straight, high nose", and "fresh and bright face" of Du. Through this, the author helps the reader perceive her inner beauty—a kind, gentle woman who deeply loves her child. Similarly, in the characters Quyen and Vinh, two young women from laboring families, every external feature reflects their vibrant vitality, from their eyes to their cheeks and lips: "sparkling", "rosy cheek color", "blushing pink" and "dewy fresh".

In Nam Cao's short stories, female characters with beautiful appearances appear less frequently than those with unattractive appearances. Notably, there is often a "degree of incongruity" between appearance and personality in his characters. Pretty girls like Kha and To are often coquettish, selfish, and superficial. To is corrupted by the lure of food/materialism, while Kha's figure and demeanor clearly mark her as a spoiled, naive, and coquettish girl from the city. Nam Cao's language is concrete, truthful, vivid, and highly incisive. Thus, when describing the appearance of characters, especially beautiful/pleasing female characters, he creates very lively portraits, from their physique to their actions.

Unlike the three writers above, Nguyen Cong Hoan is an author who favors describing the external appearance of his characters, rarely delving into the inner world. He often harbors little sympathy for his female characters. This might be due to the influence of feudal ideology, which resulted in a lack of objectivity in his evaluation of these characters. The character Miss Keu a new, modern girl—is a typical example. To satirize the "Youthful – Westernized" trend and her flirtatious and pretentious behavior, Nguyen Cong Hoan employed a satirical tone to create a Miss Keu with an "oval face" and "slender figure" who walks like a puppet: "swaying", "flowing", and "walking back and forth". The interesting characteristic that defines his unique style is his use of the lexical field describing a beautiful/pleasing appearance that does not align with inner beauty, unlike his contemporaries. Instead, his purpose is to satirize, ridicule, and even condemn the women of that era.

CONCLUSION

The study of semantic fields within literary works, particularly those by selected authors taught in schools, not only reflects the semantic relationships between lexical units in a language system but also highlights the distinctive linguistic features that constitute the author's writing style through their selection and use of lexical-semantic fields. This research holds practical significance by demonstrating the artistic value of the works—specifically the art of character construction—and contributes valuable resources for teaching Vietnamese Literature using an integrated approach in secondary schools. Crucially, the survey results regarding the semantic field of women generally contribute to enriching the vocabulary and developing the linguistic competence of high school students. In summary, research on semantic fields reveals the semantic relationships of the vocabulary system, emphasizing that words do not exist in isolation but are interconnected within a specific semantic domain.

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