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## Exploring Vietnamese Given Names: The Onomasticon of a Tonal Language

### Abstract

In Vietnamese, every given name is not only a word but also a tone, where pitch contour carries as much meaning as semantics or grammar. Vietnamese given names (VGNs) intertwine linguistic form with cultural meaning, functioning as both identifiers and reflections of social values. Unlike naming systems that privilege surnames, Vietnamese practices foreground given names, which derive directly from common words and retain both semantic content and tonal identity. This study proposes a dual classification of VGNs, integrating semantic categories (nature, virtues, human traits) with grammatical classes from which the names are derived (nouns, adjectives, verbs, numerals), and demonstrates how tones enrich and differentiate each dimension. Analysis of a dataset of 878,338 university entrance examination candidates (2006) shows that tonal variation distinguishes otherwise identical proprial forms, as in *Huong* (derived from the noun ‘scent’, mid-level tone) vs *Hường* (derived from the verb ‘enjoy’, high-rising broken tone). Such contrasts expand the onomasticon while ensuring communicative clarity. The findings further reveal sociolinguistic dimensions: rising tones are culturally linked with masculinity, falling tones with femininity; disyllabic two-tone names have become especially prevalent among females, marking a generational shift; and numeral names in Southern Vietnam illustrate how tones embed naming within kinship and regional identity. By situating this taxonomy within Vietnam’s isolating, tonal language system, the study highlights tone as not merely phonological but a cultural resource that structures naming creativity, identity, and belonging, offering new insights for onomastics, linguistics, and cultural studies.

### Keywords

Vietnamese; anthroponymy; given names; tonal language; pitch pattern; cultural symbolism; naming practices

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## **Вьетнамские личные имена: ономастикон в тональном языке**

**Аннотация**

Во вьетнамском языке каждое личное имя представляет собой не только лексическую единицу, но и тональную форму, где тональный контур обладает значимостью, сопоставимой с семантикой и грамматикой. В отличие от систем именования, где центральное место занимает фамилия, во вьетнамской традиции ключевым элементом является личное имя, которое всегда представляет собой дериват апеллятивной лексемы и сохраняет как семантическую нагрузку, так и тоновую специфику этой лексемы. По этой причине вьетнамские личные имена функционируют одновременно и как средства идентификации лица, и как система выражения социально-культурных смыслов. В настоящем исследовании предлагается классификация вьетнамских личных имен, основанная на семантических и грамматических признаках лексем, от которых они образованы. В основе анализа лежит корпус, включающий имена 878 338 абитуриентов вьетнамских университетов (2006 г.). Автор демонстрирует, что вариации тона позволяют разграничивать проприальные формы, совпадающие по сегментной структуре: например, *Huong* (от существительного со значением ‘аромат’, ровный тон) и *Hường* (от глагола со значением ‘наслаждаться’, средний понижающийся-повышающийся тон). Подобные контрасты одновременно расширяют ономастикон и обеспечивают функционально-коммуникативную однозначность имени. Показано, что тональные вариации обладают социолингвистической значимостью: восходящие тоны культурно ассоциируются с маскулинностью, нисходящие — с феминностью; двусложные двутоновые имена получили широкое распространение у женщин, что отражает поколенческие изменения; числовые имена, характерные для Южного Вьетнама, демонстрируют включенность тональной организации в систему родственных и региональных идентичностей. Анализ ономастикона в контексте изолирующего языка с тональным строем позволяет заключить, что тон функционирует не только как фонологическая характеристика, но и как культурный ресурс, структурирующий процессы номинации, построения идентичности и формирования чувства принадлежности.

**Ключевые слова**

вьетнамский язык; антропонимы; личные имена; тональный язык; тональный контур; культурная символика; практики именования

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## 1. Introduction

Personal names have long been a subject of linguistic and cultural inquiry, reflecting a society's values, beliefs, and traditions. While strict Millian perspectives view personal names as mere phonological units functioning to identify or distinguish individuals, most onomasticians regard them as a rich cultural-linguistic phenomenon. Vietnamese personal naming practices, particularly given names, exemplify this complexity, as they are deeply embedded in the nation's cultural ethos and communicative norms [Le 2005; Nguyen, K. T. 1975; Nguyen, V. K. 2010; Pham 1996; Tran 1976]. Each given name carries a unique origin and meaning, often influenced by ethnic, cultural, and personal values, making naming an intentional act steeped in tradition.

Unlike in many other languages, Vietnamese given names (VGNs henceforth) serve as the primary means of addressing individuals in both formal and informal contexts [Le 2005; Nguyen, V. K. 2010; Pham 1996]. They frequently stand alone, replacing the full name structure, such as when a man named *Phạm Minh Chính* is referred to simply as *ông Chính* 'Mr. Chinh'. The significance of VGNs extends beyond their linguistic function to include social nuances. They are typically accompanied by kinship terms, such as *anh* 'elder brother', *chị* 'elder sister' or *bà* 'Mrs., grandmother', which signify respect and contextual relationships. The omission of these kinship terms, considered inappropriate in Vietnamese culture, further highlights the societal role of naming in constructing interpersonal dynamics [Nguyen, V. K. 2014; Tran 2001].

Naming practices in Vietnam diverge significantly from those in other cultures, where surnames (family names) may dominate the identity framework. In Vietnam, surnames are inherited and largely uniform, while naming creativity is reserved for given and middle names [Le 2005; Nguyen, V. K. 2014]. These practices are shaped by both objective and subjective factors [Nguyen, T. 1967; Le 2005]. Objective influences include geographical landmarks or historical events, while subjective ones encompass parents' aspirations or the psychophysiological traits of their children [Le 2005; Nguyen, V. K. 2010; Pham 1996]. This duality imbues VGNs with semantic richness and socio-cultural resonance.

However, despite the profound cultural and linguistic importance of VGNs, academic classifications of these names have often focused on either their semantic meanings or grammatical properties in isolation. There remains a lack of comprehensive frameworks that integrate both dimensions, enriched by the language's tonal system, providing a holistic understanding of Vietnamese naming practices. This article addresses this gap by proposing a taxonomy of VGNs, grounded in semantic and grammatical characteristics, with a focus on how tones enhance their meaning and structure. By synthesizing prior works, analyzing

real-world data, and situating naming practices within broader socio-cultural and linguistic contexts, this study aims to illuminate the intricate interplay between language and culture in Vietnamese naming.

The structure of this article is organized into five sections. The *Theoretical Framework* explores the linguistic and cultural foundations of Vietnamese naming practices. The *Methodology* outlines the data sources and analytical methods used to classify Vietnamese personal names (VPNs henceforth). The *Taxonomies of Vietnamese Given Names* examines these characteristics, emphasizing tonal influences within semantic and grammatical frameworks. The *Discussion* delves into the cultural, historical, and linguistic implications of these classifications, incorporating comparative perspectives. Finally, the *Conclusion* summarizes the key findings and suggests directions for future research. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to the fields of onomastics, linguistics, and cultural studies by offering a nuanced understanding of Vietnamese naming traditions and their broader significance.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. A Brief Account of Vietnamese Personal Names

Vietnam, with a population exceeding 96 million according to the 2019 Census, is a culturally diverse nation comprising 54 ethnic groups [Nguyen, V. K. 2024]. The majority, 85.3%, belong to the Kinh ethnic group, also referred to as Viet or Vietnamese. This group wields noteworthy influence across Vietnam's political, economic, and cultural landscapes and is often synonymous with the term *Vietnamese*. While other ethnic groups contribute to the nation's cultural diversity, the Kinh community shapes the predominant linguistic norms, including the structure and use of VPNs [see Tran 2001].

VPNs generally refer to the naming conventions of the Kinh people, though the term can also encompass the names of individuals from other ethnic groups. This article focuses primarily on the Kinh naming system while retaining the broader designation of VPNs. Within this context, VPNs usually emphasize given names but can also include the entire structure of names, consisting of family names, middle names, and given names.

The structure of VPNs is typically described using two models:

Model 1: family name + middle name + given name

Model 2: family name + given name.

As Nguyen, V. K. [2024: 4] highlights, although Vietnamese onomasticians may disagree on specific facets of each component of VPNs, they hold "a prevailing consensus" on the existence of these two overarching models of VPNs in Vietnamese culture.

Vietnamese surnames are typically monosyllabic, such as *Nguyễn*, *Trần*, or *Lê*, which are among the most common [Le 2005]. However, compound or multisyllabic surnames also exist, albeit rarely (e.g., *Tôn Nữ Thị Ninh*, *Đặng Lê Nguyễn Vũ*). These compound surnames often carry historical, aristocratic or familial significance [Nguyen, V. K. 2010; 2024].

The middle name serves several functions, including distinguishing individuals with common surnames and adding meaning or nuance to the given name. While most middle names are monosyllabic, some are disyllabic or polysyllabic. Scholars like Phan [1972] and Nguyen, K. T. [1975] argue that a name may even include multiple middle names. Nguyen, V. K. [2024] takes the name *Lê Thị Thu Hằng* as an example. In this name, *Thị* and *Thu* are sometimes viewed as distinct middle names. However, an alternative interpretation suggests *Thị* is the sole middle name, while *Thu* forms part of the disyllabic given name *Thu Hằng*, meaning ‘autumn moon’. Such poetic interpretations reflect the cultural significance of names in Vietnamese society.

The given name is the most personalized component and is often used in social interactions. VGNs can be monosyllabic or compound. Monosyllabic names are traditional and constitute the majority, accounting for 83% of given names [Pham 1996]. However, there is a growing trend toward disyllabic given names, which allow for richer meanings and clearer gender distinctions. For example, a name like *Đức Hạnh* ‘virtue’ is typically male, while *Thúy Hạnh* ‘elegance’ is associated with females [Nguyen, V. K. 2024].

Compound given names are especially valued for their ability to express connotative meanings like beauty, moral virtues, and aspirations. Names like *Thu Thảo* ‘generous Autumn’, *Tuyết Ngọc* ‘snow pearl (a gem/pearl as clear as snow)’, or *Trung Thành* ‘loyalty’ exemplify this tradition [Nguyen, V. K. 2010]. In informal contexts, compound names may be shortened by omitting the first syllable, as in *Thu Huyền* becoming *Huyền*.

The structure of VPNs has evolved over centuries, influenced by historical, cultural, and linguistic factors. Le [2005] and Nguyen, V. K. [2010; 2024] report a shift from simpler naming conventions (Model 2) to the more elaborate structure (Model 1). This reflects a growing emphasis on individuality and cultural depth.

## 2.2. Linguistic Characteristics of Vietnamese Given Names

VGNs reflect the tonal and monosyllabic nature of the Vietnamese language. There are six tones in modern northern Vietnamese (the Vietnamese dialect officially taught at school). These tones are composed of contours of pitch combined with certain other features of voice production [Thompson 2009]. The six phonemic tones — mid-level (*ngang*), low-falling (*huyền*), high-rising (*sắc*), low-falling-rising

(*hỏi*), high-rising broken (*ngã*), and low-falling broken (*nặng*) — distinguish meanings within words and names, enriching their semantic and grammatical roles [Nguyen, V. L. & Edmondson 1998]. For example, *Mai* (mid-level tone) means ‘apricot’ — a feminine noun associated with beauty, while *Mãi* (high-rising tone) means ‘roof’ or ‘female chicken’ and is rarely used due to its mundane connotation. This linguistic structure creates challenges in distinguishing gender based solely on names, especially monosyllabic ones. However, compound names often include gender-specific morphemes, such as *Thúy* (feminine) or *Đức* (masculine), which help clarify gender. Despite this, the assignment of gender to names remains culturally relative and lacks strict rules [Le 2005; Nguyen, V. K. 2010].

Vietnamese is an isolating language, a typological classification characterized by its lack of inflectional and derivational morphology. Each word typically consists of a single morpheme, with grammatical functions and relationships expressed through word order, auxiliary words, or context rather than morphological markers [Mai et al. 2002; Thurgood et al. 1985]. This structural simplicity, combined with a reliance on tones to distinguish lexical meanings, influences Vietnamese naming practices, as the language’s isolating nature allows words from various semantic fields to serve as given names, with tones adding phonological and thus semantic depth, e.g., *Huòng* (low-falling tone, ‘rosy, pink’) vs *Hướng* (high-rising broken, ‘enjoy’) [Nguyen, V. K. 2010; Pham 1996]. Another notable feature is the stable, uninflected form of Vietnamese names, which aligns with the analytic nature of the language. Names are not truncated formally, but in informal contexts, the second or last syllable of polysyllabic given names often replaces the whole name structure for ease of communication.

In the context of naming, tones interact with semantics and grammar to create meaningful labels that reflect cultural values and social expectations. The semantic aspect focuses on the denotative and connotative meanings of names, often derived from their homonymous appellatives. For example, the name *Dương* may signify and refer to ‘the Sun’, ‘Yang’, ‘male’, ‘positive’, ‘ocean’, ‘uprightness’, ‘sound’, ‘blue’, etc., depending on the cultural or personal context of its use. Meanwhile, the grammatical aspect emphasizes the structural role of words used as names (such as nouns, adjectives, verbs, or even numerals), enhanced by tonal variation that refines their identity and perception. All this reveals the profound linguistic diversity embedded within the intricate framework of Vietnamese naming conventions.

### 2.3. Cultural and Historical Context

Vietnamese naming practices are deeply intertwined with the country’s environmental, historical, and sociocultural landscape. Understanding the cultural



and historical influences on VPNs offers insight into the linguistic and social evolution of the Vietnamese people, particularly the majority Kinh population.

Vietnam's rich biodiversity and natural surroundings are prominently reflected in its naming practices. Names derived from nouns related to flora and fauna — such as *Lan* 'orchid', *Hổ* 'tiger', and *Quế* 'cinnamon' — capture the connection between Vietnamese culture and the tropical environment. These names are not arbitrary; they often carry symbolic meanings tied to beauty, strength, or longevity. For example, *Tùng* 'pine' symbolizes resilience and endurance, while *Mai* 'apricot' represents renewal and elegance [Le 2005; Nguyen, V. K. 2010].

Additionally, the names of natural phenomena and geographic features *Hải* 'sea', *Sơn* 'mountain', *Vân* 'cloud', *Phong* 'wind' and *Nhật* 'sun' highlight Vietnam's reverence for the natural world. This reflects a worldview shaped by a predominantly agricultural lifestyle, where the natural environment significantly influences cultural identity and daily life.

The evolution of Vietnamese names also reflects the nation's historical journey, shaped by distinct eras of cultural and political transformation. In terms of Sino-Vietnamese influence, during periods of Chinese rule and cultural exchange, many Vietnamese names incorporated Sino-Vietnamese elements, reflecting Confucian values such as morality (*Hiền*), loyalty (*Trung*), and filial piety (*Hiếu*). Today, the vast majority of VGNs are derived from Sino-Vietnamese words, with purely Vietnamese names now exceedingly rare, accounting for just 0.2% of given names [Pham 1996: 16]. This preference highlights a societal inclination toward polysemous names. Unlike purely Vietnamese words, which are typically unambiguous in meaning, Sino-Vietnamese terms, characterized by their polysemy and nuanced connotations, fulfill this preference effectively [Nguyen, V. K. 2010].<sup>1</sup> As a cultural stereotype, given names of Sino-Vietnamese origin are perceived as more “cultured” and “literate” compared to indigenous Vietnamese names. While people may not always recognize which names have Chinese origins, they tend to choose names that sound more refined and offer a diversity of meanings [Le 2005; Nguyen, T. G. 2002]. In the colonial era, the French introduced new naming practices, such as middle names that emphasized Catholic saints and French-influenced naming conventions; however, such practices have never been the main naming stream. The rise of nationalism and revolutionary movements foregrounded names symbolizing patriotism, resilience, and aspirations for independence, encapsulating the dynamic

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<sup>1</sup>Chinese has had a profound impact on the Vietnamese language due to three key factors: (1) a thousand years of Chinese rule, (2) the use of Chinese as the primary language for administration in both its written and spoken forms, and (3) its continued role as a significant source of borrowed words [Edmondson 2006; Hoang 1991]. Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, derived from Chinese, constitutes up to 80% of the lexicon in certain semantic domains [Mai et al. 2002; Nguyen 2002].

interplay between language, identity, and historical context. Names like *Chiến Thắng* ‘victory’, *Thống Nhất* ‘unification’ or *Hoà Bình* ‘peace’ gained prominence during the struggle for independence and national unification, reflecting collective aspirations and historical milestones. Vietnamese naming practices are also inspired by well-known historical figures. Parents often choose names of national heroes or cultural icons, such as *Quốc Tuấn* and *Quang Trung*, to honor their contributions and instill pride and aspiration in the next generation. Sino-Vietnamese names’ tonal variations, such as *Tuần* (low-falling tone, ‘week, patrol’), *Tuấn* (high-rising tone, ‘talented’), *Tuân* (mid-level tone, ‘obey’), amplify their polysemy, a key feature of the taxonomy explored in this study.

Naming in Vietnam offers a profound reflection of the country’s social structure and cultural values, underscoring the significance of familial bonds, morality, and aesthetic ideals. One notable aspect is the integration of kinship and social hierarchies into naming conventions. Kinship terms such as *anh* ‘older brother’, *bà* ‘grandmother’, or *ông* ‘grandfather’ are often used as prefixes, signifying respect and reinforcing social cohesion [Le 2005; Nguyen, V. K. 2014]. Names are not merely personal identifiers but are imbued with familial aspirations and communal significance. The selection process often involves elders or respected individuals within the family, whose choices reflect shared values and hopes, further embedding names within the broader framework of Vietnam’s collectivist traditions.

Gender roles in Vietnamese naming practices reveal nuanced insights into societal expectations and values. In Vietnamese society, the distinctions between male and female names frequently act as semantic indicators of gender, with male names reflecting qualities such as strength and leadership, while female names emphasize attributes like beauty and moral virtue. Male names tend to align with qualities expected of societal leaders, while female names often align with virtues of gentleness and caregiving [Le 2005; Le & Pham 2021]. Traditionally, female names like *Thúy* ‘graceful’ or *Hiền Thục* ‘gentle and virtuous’ emphasize beauty, morality, and gentleness. Conversely, male names such as *Tuấn Tài* ‘talented’ or *Trung Nghĩa* ‘loyalty and honor’ are associated with qualities of strength, intellect, and nobility [Le 2005; Pham 1996]. These gendered attributes have historically aligned with societal roles and ideals. However, modern times are witnessing a gradual shift in these conventions, with parents increasingly choosing names that reflect more egalitarian values, blurring traditional gender distinctions [Nguyen, V. K. 2010]. This evolution signifies a cultural adaptation to broader global influences and shifting perceptions of identity.

Modernization and urbanization have further transformed naming practices in Vietnam, reflecting a blend of tradition and contemporary influences. Compound names with multiple syllables, such as *Ánh Hằng* ‘moonlight’ or *Đức Nhân* ‘moral



man', are gaining popularity as they convey deeper and more nuanced meanings. Meanwhile, rural names rooted in agrarian life, such as *Lúa* 'rice' or *Sắn* 'cassava', have declined in urban settings where they are perceived as less modern [Le 2005]. This transition highlights the dynamic interplay between Vietnam's rich cultural heritage and the rapidly changing social landscape, as naming practices adapt to reflect evolving values and lifestyles.

### 3. Methodology

This study is grounded in a comprehensive dataset comprising the names of 878,338 university entrance examination candidates in Vietnam in 2006. These names were collected from the records provided by the Ministry of Education and Training and represent a broad demographic cross-section of Vietnamese society. The dataset includes candidates from both rural and urban areas across different regions, offering valuable insights into regional variations and naming trends.

To ensure a robust theoretical foundation, this research builds on the classifications and analyses of VPNs by scholars such as Pham [1996] and Le [2005]. Their works provided essential frameworks for categorizing Vietnamese names by meaning, cultural significance, and grammatical features. These prior studies informed the dual taxonomy proposed here, allowing for a selective synthesis of established approaches with new empirical data.

This study categorizes VGNs using a dual framework: semantic-lexical classification and grammatical-lexical classification, with tones enhancing both dimensions.

*Semantic classification:* VGNs are categorized based on their meanings and associations with tangible entities or abstract concepts, with tones amplifying these distinctions and reflecting cultural values.

*Grammatical classification:* VGNs are mostly secondary derivatives of existing appellative words, including nouns, adjectives, verbs, and numerals, which highlights the linguistic adaptability of the language. The grammatical categories of the primary appellatives vary both quantitatively and qualitatively.

By integrating these two perspectives enriched by tonal analysis, this study moves beyond traditional classifications to capture the multifaceted nature of VGNs. The dual framework highlights the interplay of language and culture, revealing how naming practices are both shaped by and reflective of societal norms and linguistic structure.

While the dual taxonomy offers a structured framework for classifying VGNs, certain limitations must be addressed. One key challenge is *homonymy*, as Vietnamese is a tonal language where identical spellings can convey different

meanings based on tone. For instance, the name *Bằng* may be chosen from the noun meaning ‘equality’ or ‘certificate’, adjective ‘equal’ or ‘just’, preposition ‘by’. The parts of speech associated with a name cannot be determined until the namer clarifies its specific connotative meaning. Interpreting these meanings often requires cultural, situational or contextual knowledge that written statistical data alone cannot provide.

Lastly, the *cultural contextualization* of names adds another layer of complexity. The significance of a name often hinges on subjective factors, such as family traditions or personal histories, which are not easily captured by semantic or grammatical frameworks. Take the name *Kỳ Anh* as an example. The name *Kỳ Anh* carries layered meanings, reflecting both linguistic and personal significance. As individual appellative words, *Kỳ* can mean ‘wonderful’ or ‘flag’ while *Anh* may symbolize “heroic qualities” or evoke notions of nobility and mystery. Combined, *Kỳ Anh* may be interpreted as ‘wonderful man’, embodying aspirations of excellence and admiration. However, the choice of this name might also hold sentimental value, as it could be inspired by a specific location. This could signify the place where the name bearer’s parents first met, adding a deeply personal narrative to its selection (*Kỳ Anh* is the name of a district in Nghệ An province, the respective given name can thus be a derivative from this specific toponym). As a result, these taxonomies may fail to account for the deeper familial or cultural meanings that make VGNs so rich and subtle. Tonal homonymy further complicates classification within this framework, requiring contextual insight beyond statistical analysis.

Despite these limitations, the dual taxonomy offers a valuable lens for analyzing Vietnamese naming practices, providing a structured understanding of their linguistic and cultural dimensions. By integrating semantic and grammatical perspectives, this methodology seeks to illuminate the intricate interplay between language, identity, and tradition in Vietnamese society.

## 4. Classifying Vietnamese Given Names

### 4.1. Semantic Classification

VGNs draw their semantic richness from both tangible entities and abstract concepts, with tones amplifying distinctions and adding cultural depth. Within the dataset, several broad semantic domains emerge, most notably nature-related names, abstract virtues, and human traits, with additional groups including historical, geographic, and other culturally specific references.

Nature-related names are especially prominent. For example, *Lan* (‘orchid’, mid-level tone) and *Mai* (‘apricot’, mid-level tone) reflect elegance and renewal, whereas tonal variations shift meanings: *Mái* (‘roof’, high-rising tone) is rare due

to mundane associations. Fauna-derived names such as *Hổ* ('tiger', low-falling-rising tone) symbolize strength, while *Long* ('dragon', mid-level tone) evokes imperial power. Names referencing natural features are also widespread, such as *Sơn* ('mountain', mid-level tone) and *Hà* ('river', low-falling tone).

Abstract and moral virtues also play a major role in Vietnamese naming. For instance, *Hiếu* ('filial piety', mid-level tone) and *Trung* ('loyalty', mid-level tone) reflect Confucian ideals, while *Phúc* ('blessing', high-rising tone) underscores aspirations for happiness. Tonal variation enhances nuance: *Chính* ('upright, major', high-rising tone) vs *Chinh* ('warfare', mid-level tone) or as *Dũng* ('brave', high-rising broken) vs *Dụng* ('use', low-falling broken).

Names associated with human traits and qualities highlight generational and gendered preferences. Masculine names often employ rising tones, such as *Tuấn* ('talented', high-rising tone), while feminine names frequently favor falling tones, such as *Hiền* ('graceful', low-falling tone). Among older generations, virtue-oriented names like *Hiền* and *Trinh* ('chastity') were common, whereas younger parents increasingly prefer dynamic, modern-sounding names like *Minh* ('intelligent', mid-level tone) or *Tuấn* (high-rising tone, 'talented').

Tone direction itself does not appear to be directly associated with femininity or masculinity; rather, it is the semantic shift produced by tonal variation that signals gendered associations. Contemporary trends show that disyllabic, two-tone names are increasingly common among females. Among 900 top university freshers nationwide in 2006, only 41 male students (4.56%) bore two-tone names, compared with 362 female students (40.22%), indicating that such names are approximately nine times more prevalent among females [Nguyen, V. K. 2010].

In sum, the semantic taxonomy reveals how tones enrich meaning across cultural categories: names tied to nature, virtues, and human traits are selected not only for their denotative value but also for their tonal qualities, which subtly align with gender, generational, and cultural preferences. Tones serve as a critical mechanism, differentiating and enriching the semantic content of VGNs across these interconnected domains.

## 4.2. Grammatical Classification

VGNs derive from words of different grammatical classes, with tones enhancing their phonological identity within the language's analytic structure. Nouns constitute the majority of given names (about 80% of VGNs [Pham 1996]), as they naturally denote entities, qualities, or ideas. Examples include *Ngọc* ('gem', low-falling broken tone) and *Hải* ('sea', mid-level tone), both of which underscore the semantic weight of nouns in naming practices. Celestial nouns, such as *Hằng* ('moon', 'goddess of moon', low-falling tone), further highlight the symbolic richness of this category.

Adjectives also appear frequently in Vietnamese naming, often associated with personal virtues or aesthetic qualities. For instance, *Hiền* ('kind, graceful', low-falling tone) and *Thiện* ('good, virtuous', low-falling broken tone) exemplify how adjectives encode cultural ideals. Many feminine names are derived from adjectives, emphasizing attributes such as beauty, gentleness, or moral virtue.

Verbs, though less common, introduce aspirational and emotive dimensions. Names like *Thương* ('love', mid-level tone) and *Ước* ('wish, desire', high-rising tone) convey parental hopes and emotional resonance. Tonal contrasts sometimes create pairs across categories, as in *Hiền* (adjective, 'kind') vs *Hiển* (verb, 'to display, manifest'), illustrating how tone shapes both meaning and grammatical role.

Numerals are traditionally used to signal birth order. Names such as *Nhất* ('first', high-rising tone), *Hai* ('second', mid-level tone), and *Ba* ('third', low-falling tone), etc., to *Mười* ('ten', low-falling tone) demonstrate this practice. Though less widespread than nouns or adjectives, they reflect the cultural flexibility of Vietnamese in transforming functional lexical classes into personal names. It is worth noting that numerals are characteristic of Southern Vietnamese address practices, where they function as markers of birth order in a distinctive manner. In kinship and informal interactions, individuals are frequently referred to not by their given names but by an ordinal numeral denoting their position among siblings. Notably, the sequence begins with *Hai* 'two' designating the eldest child, thereby displacing *một* or *nhất* 'one' from use. Subsequent siblings follow this shifted pattern like *Ba* 'three' for the second child, *Tư* 'four' for the third, and so forth, establishing a systematic but regionally specific convention.

Tonal variation can also distinguish between lexical items that belong to different parts of speech, e.g., *Bằng* ('equal, by', adjective/preposition, low-falling tone) vs *Băng* ('ice', noun, mid-level tone) or *Tuy* ('despite', mid-level tone) to *Tụy* ('devoted', adjective, low-falling broken tone). An illustrative case of tonal differentiation across categories can be seen in the following three forms used as VPNs: *Hương* ('scent; countryside', noun, mid-level tone), *Hường* ('rosy', adjective, low-falling tone), *Hướng* ('direction, way', noun, rising tone), and *Hưởng* ('enjoy', verb, high-rising broken tone). Although orthographically similar, these names derive from different grammatical classes, with tonal contrasts serving as the main cue to their distinct semantic and functional roles. Such examples underscore how tones expand the range of Vietnamese naming by transforming a shared orthographic base into multiple, culturally meaningful choices. These are separate lexical items in Vietnamese, not semantic derivations. Their existence illustrates how tones support functional and semantic diversification in naming.

Together, these grammatical-lexical categories reveal that Vietnamese given names derive from diverse parts of speech, with tones refining their meanings

and roles. Rather than functioning solely as phonetic markers, tones interact with grammar to create a nuanced system of categorization that reflects both linguistic adaptability and cultural symbolism.

## 5. Discussion

Vietnamese naming practices are deeply rooted in cultural and historical contexts, yet their distinctiveness lies in how the tonal system interacts with these traditions. While references to nature, virtues, and historical ideals have long shaped name choice, tones enrich these categories by distinguishing homophonous forms (e.g., *Thanh* vs *Thành*) and adding symbolic nuance. The following discussion therefore emphasizes how tones intersect with semantics, grammar, gender, and generational trends, situating Vietnamese naming within a broader tonal framework.

### 5.1. Linguistic Observations

VGNs reflect the language's isolating and analytic nature, offering a distinctive combination of structural simplicity and semantic richness. With little or no inflection or formal derivation, virtually any lexical word can serve as a name [Le 2005; Nguyen, V. K. 2010]. This results in a broad pool of naming sources, encompassing nouns, adjectives, and verbs. The tonal system further enhances this diversity, as identical spellings may convey distinct meanings depending on tone and context. In other words, the isolating and tonal nature of Vietnamese profoundly shapes VGNs, with tones enriching both semantic and grammatical possibilities.

Tone itself does not function as a grammatical marker, yet tonal contrasts frequently differentiate meanings across lexical categories. As noted in the taxonomy above, the set *Hương* ('scent; countryside', noun, mid-level tone), *Hường* ('rosy', adjective, low-falling tone), *Hướng* ('direction, way', noun, rising tone), and *Hưởng* ('enjoy', verb, high-rising broken tone) demonstrates how tone alone can differentiate otherwise identical orthographic forms across multiple grammatical categories. In the discussion of Vietnamese naming, this example is particularly revealing: it shows that tonal contrasts do more than expand lexical diversity, they also prevent semantic collapse in the onomasticon. In practice, tones ensure that homophonous spellings remain distinct as names, while kinship terms and contextual cues further reduce the possibility of confusion [Le 2005; Nguyen, V. K. 2014]. This illustrates how the tonal system functions not simply as a phonological feature but as a cultural and communicative resource, allowing Vietnamese names to preserve semantic depth and grammatical range without sacrificing clarity.

Names typically preserve the tonal structure of their base words. Thus, *Thanh* ('blue, clear', mid-level tone), *Thành* ('success', low-falling tone), and *Thảnh*

(‘leisurely, relaxed’, low-falling-rising tone) remain distinct when used as names, preventing semantic collapse in the onomasticon. Homophonous sets distinguished only by tone are relatively common, but confusion in real life is mitigated by kinship terms (e.g., *ông Thành* vs *chị Thanh* — ‘Mr.’ and ‘sister’ respectively) and contextual cues [Le 2005; Nguyen, V. K. 2014]. This demonstrates that tonal differentiation not only adds semantic depth but also ensures communicative clarity.

Sociolinguistically, tones interact subtly with gender and generational preferences. No single tone direction is intrinsically masculine or feminine, yet cultural associations often link rising tones with dynamism and masculinity, and falling tones with softness or femininity [Pham 1996; Le 2005]. Generational shifts further illustrate tonal preferences: older practices favored monosyllabic names with stable or falling tones encoding virtues (e.g., *Hiền*, *Trinh*), while younger parents increasingly adopt disyllabic names that combine contrasting tones.

Comparatively, Vietnamese naming practices stand apart from many world languages. In English, names like *John* derive from ancient (often non-English) forms with little transparent meaning for modern speakers, while Japanese names combine kanji for aesthetic and semantic effect [Mai et al. 2002; Thompson 2009]. By contrast, Vietnamese names derive directly from common words and preserve their tonal structure. This means that every Vietnamese name carries both lexical meaning and tonal identity, resisting the Millian notion of names as “mere labels” and instead affirming their semantic and cultural resonance.

Together, these observations show that tones in Vietnamese names operate on multiple levels: they differentiate meanings within an isolating framework, sustain grammatical diversity across categories, and signal subtle sociolinguistic trends. The tonal system thus not only enriches the taxonomy of Vietnamese given names but also underscores their unique role in linking language, identity, and culture.

## 5.2. Sociolinguistic Dimensions

Vietnamese naming practices also reflect sociolinguistic dynamics, particularly in relation to gender, generation, and regional variation. Tone plays a central role in shaping these patterns by influencing how names are chosen, perceived, and socially interpreted.

Gendered associations are often reinforced through tonal choices. While no single tone is inherently masculine or feminine, cultural preferences frequently align rising tones with dynamism and masculinity, and falling tones with gentleness or femininity [Pham 1996; Le 2005]. Compound names also reveal such tendencies, as tonal contrasts between syllables often contribute to perceived harmony and balance. For example, *Hiền Thục* ‘graceful and virtuous’ combines



a low-falling tone with a mid-level tone, reinforcing feminine ideals of elegance and moral virtue.

Generational differences further demonstrate shifting tonal preferences. Older naming conventions typically favored monosyllabic names with stable tones, many of which encoded moral virtues (e.g., *Trung* ‘loyalty’, *Hiếu* ‘filial piety’). In contrast, contemporary trends show a marked rise in disyllabic, two-tone names, particularly among females. Among 900 top university freshers nationwide, disyllabic two-tone names were disproportionately concentrated among females, while male students overwhelmingly retained monosyllabic or single-tone names [Nguyen, V. K. 2010]. This imbalance highlights a generational shift in which tonal variety has become increasingly associated with modern femininity, whereas masculine naming practices remain more conservative.

Regional variation adds another important layer. As noted earlier, numerals are widely used in Southern naming traditions to indicate birth order, and their tonal realizations contribute to this distinctive practice. Crucially, these numeral names are integrated into everyday address: kinship and informal interactions often substitute ordinal numerals for given names, beginning with *Hai* ‘two’ to designate the eldest child, followed by *Ba* ‘three’, *Tư* ‘four’, and so forth. This convention, in which tones differentiate and systematize ordinal naming, is characteristic of Southern Vietnam and less common in the North, where symbolic or Sino-Vietnamese compounds dominate [Le 2005; Nguyen, V. K. 2010]. Thus, tonalized numeral names not only exemplify the adaptability of the lexicon but also function as regional markers of identity embedded in kinship and social practice.

Taken together, these sociolinguistic perspectives demonstrate that tones in Vietnamese names are not merely phonological features but cultural resources. They shape gendered naming preferences, signal generational shifts in aesthetic taste, and reflect regional traditions. In doing so, tones ensure that Vietnamese names continue to function as both linguistic expressions and markers of social belonging.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has examined Vietnamese given names through an integrated semantic-lexical and grammatical-lexical taxonomy, emphasizing the central role of tone in shaping their structure and meaning. Unlike in many languages, where names often lose their lexical transparency, Vietnamese names derive directly from common words and preserve both semantic content and tonal identity. This feature makes the Vietnamese onomasticon uniquely complex, where tone not only enriches meaning but also sustains grammatical and cultural diversity.

The semantic taxonomy highlights how tones differentiate and nuance categories such as nature, abstract virtues, and human traits, while the grammatical taxonomy demonstrates how tones refine nouns, adjectives, verbs, and even numerals when adapted as names. Tonal contrasts, as illustrated by sets such as *Hương/Hường/Hướng/Hưởng*, prevent semantic collapse across orthographically similar forms, expanding naming possibilities while maintaining communicative clarity.

The discussion further shows that tones carry sociolinguistic weight. Rising tones are often associated with masculinity and dynamism, while falling tones resonate with femininity and gentleness, though these associations are not rigid. Generational shifts reveal a growing preference for disyllabic, two-tone names among females, marking a departure from the monosyllabic, stable-toned names of earlier generations. Regional differences, particularly the tonalized use of numeral names in the South, further demonstrate how tones embed naming within kinship practices and cultural identity.

Taken together, these findings underscore that tones are not merely phonological features of Vietnamese but cultural resources that shape identity, social belonging, and aesthetic preference. By integrating semantic and grammatical classifications with tonal analysis, this study contributes to onomastics, linguistics, and cultural studies, offering a more comprehensive framework for understanding how Vietnamese naming practices link language, culture, and identity. Future research could expand this approach by examining diachronic trends and cross-dialectal tonal variation to explore whether tonal “fashions” evolve over time.

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