

Characteristics and Distribution of the Variants of Maternal Kinship Terms in Son Tay Dialect (Hanoi)

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Abstract: The paper describes the features and geographical distribution of local variants of 4 words in Son Tay dialect, Hanoi: mother, grandmother, mother's brother and mother's sister. Approaching local variants from both the directions of Dialectology and Geolinguistics, the study achieves 3 results: (1) Describes the features of the local variants of 4 words: mother (mẹ, mệ); grandmother (bà ngoại, bà vãi); mother's brother (bác, cậu); and mother's sister (già, bá, bác, cô); (2) Explains their existence with chronological data by reconstructing the history of words, with the data on the languages having origin and contact relationships. The results show that variants reflect the linguistic contact between Vietnamese and the Viet-Muong languages, as well as Mon-Khmer and Austronesian, Tai-Kadai and, especially, Chinese; (3) Maps the geographic distribution of variants, explains their distribution in space, and shows their relationship to their changes in time.

Key words: dialect, Son Tay dialect, variant, reconstruction, distribution map.

1. Introduction

Son Tay – xu Doai (the Land of Doai) – is the cradle of the ancient Vietnamese (Tran Quoc Vuong, 1997; Lam Ba Nam, 1997; Nguyen Luong Bich, 1997), one of the four areas protecting Thang Long (Hai Dong, Son Tay, Son Nam, Kinh Bac). Although the administrative boundaries have changed over time, this is thus still a special land in terms of history, culture and language, to the west of the Capital. According to many researchers, xu Doai is the place where “the structure of wet rice culture of Thang Long capital is preserved” (Pham Duc Duong, 1997). The two major centers of xứ Đoài during the Tran, Le and Nguyen dynasties were the two towns of Quang Oai and Quoc Oai, which belong to the districts of Quoc Oai, Thach That and Ba Vi today (Dang Van Tu, Nguyen Ta Nhi, 2011: 15-17). In addition, Ba Vi is also said to be the place of existence and development of the ancestral inhabitants of the Vietnamese and Muong people (Lam Ba Nam, 1997), considered the ‘original area’ of the Viet – Muong

TRỊNH, Cẩm Lan. 2023. Characteristics and distribution of the variants of maternal kinship terms in Son Tay dialect (Hanoi). In Trịnh Cẩm Lan, Trần Thị Hồng Hạnh, Hiroyuki Suzuki and Mitsuaki Endo (eds.) *Proceedings of the fifth International Conference on Asian Geolinguistics*, 203–216. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8374677>

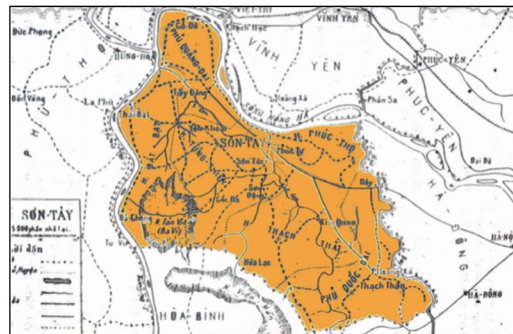
Common people (Tran Quoc Vuong, 1997). These are the two centers for receiving and spreading the culture – language of xu Doai (the Land of Doai).

The two maps below provide a basic visualization of xu Doai. Map 1 shows the location of xu Doai with Thang Long - Hanoi, with the remaining three area of xu Dong, xu Son Nam and xu Kinh Bac, forming four towns. Map 2 is Son Tay province during the French colonial period. This map shows that the boundaries of xu Doai have some historical changes, but the basic shape remains.



Map 1. Location of Sơn Tây – xứ Đoài in the cultural space of the Northern Delta (one of the four towns of Thang Long)

Source: Trần Anh Tuấn, 2019.



Map 2. Map of Sơn Tây province during the French colonial period (1924)

Source: Đỗ Đình Nghiê, Ngô Vi Liê, Phạm Văn Thu, 1930: 101.

The land belonging to the above districts is also an area with a special dialect, called Son Tay dialect. A special feature of this language is a special timbre in the pronunciation of certain phonemes of the system including tones, some vowels and consonants (Nguyen Tai Thai, 2015; Trinh Cam Lan, 2023). In addition, Son Tay dialect also has many different lexical variations, as the result of the convergence of many dialects. In particular, there are many distinctive features showing that this is a dialect area that still preserves many ancient features of Vietnamese.

The aim of the present study of Son Tay dialect is to: (1) describe the lexical-semantic characteristics of local lexical variations of some kinship words from the maternal side (mother's side), using contemporary materials; (2) compare, and find the etymological origin of, these variations, based on chronological data, to explain the causes of their existence; and (3) produce maps showing the geographical distribution of variations in this space.

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2. Methods and materials

The study was conducted via a survey of 82 places in three districts, Quoc Oai, Thach That and Ba Vi, in the old Land of Doai which is said to be the cradle of the Son Tay dialect.

The data set of this paper is the lexical variants of mother's kinship words in the Son Tay dialect.

In order to explain the presence of these variations, the paper describes synchronously the semantics of variants, while also using the method of comparison and reconstruction of the etymology and finding the historical relationships, to explain the presence of these variants. The comparative results help to further explain the characteristics of the variants and their origins.

3. Results and discussions

The surveyed kinship words of the maternal side consist of 4 words with different variants, that is: (1) indicating "a woman with a child, speaking in relation to her child" (Hoang Phe, 2015: 984) with two words, *mẹ* /mɛ²¹/ and *mệ* /mɛ²¹/; (2) referring to "mother's sister, can be used to address" (2015: 38) with words such as *bác* /bak³⁵/, *già* /za³²/, *cô* /ko³³/, *bá* /ba³⁵/; (3) referring to "mother's brother, can be used to address" (2015: 212) with two words, *bác* /bak³⁵/, *cậu* /kɤw²¹/; and (4) referring to "grandmother, which can be used to address" (2015: 36) with two words, *bà ngoại* /ba³²ŋwaj²¹/, *bà vãi* /ba³²vaj³²⁵/.

When studying the lexical differences between dialects, according to Hoang Thi Chau, it is necessary to distinguish two different types: the first, they are partially different words due to the historical development of Vietnamese itself (usually due to phonetic changes); and the second, they are completely different words because they have different origins (Hoang Thi Chau, 2004: 100-101). In trying to explain the origin of the lexical variants, we will examine the origins of the lexical variants from these two perspectives.

3.1. Characteristics and distribution of variants indicating “mother”

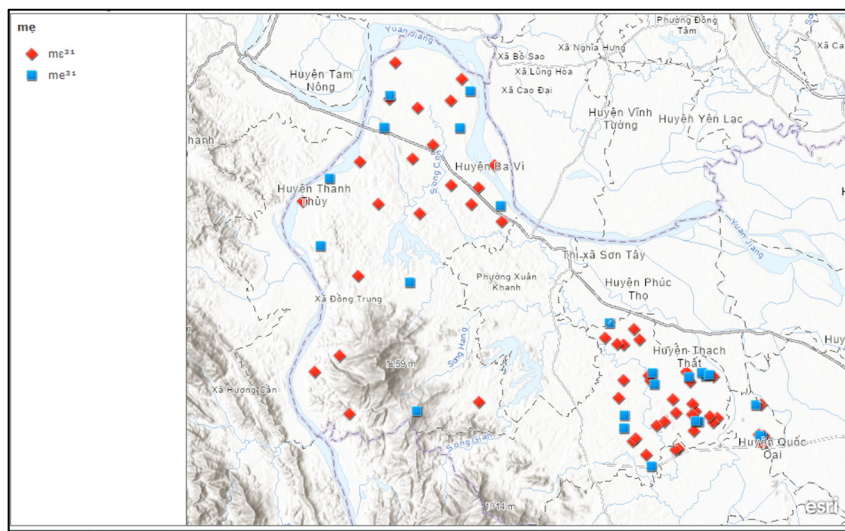
Mẹ (mother) is a word in modern Vietnamese with many local variants such as *bằm* /bǎm³²/, *bu* /bu³³/, *má* /ma³⁵/, *mạ* /ma²¹/, *me* /me³³/, *mế* /me³⁵/, *mệ* /me²¹/, *nạ* /na²¹/ and *u* /ʔu³³/ (Hoang Phe, 2015: 985). Besides *mẹ* (common variant), in the study area there is also a dense presence of the word *mệ* in all 3 districts, especially in Ba Vi. These are two different words of the first type, which due to phonetic changes have two different vowels, but with both are the front vowels.

In terms of chronology, in the 17th century, the word *mẹ* was noted to be common in Vietnamese (A. de. Rhodes, 2021: 199). Variants of this word in the Muong dialects, as noted by Nguyen Van Tai, are quite rich, with *me*, *mệ*, *mạng*, *bằm* (Nguyen Van Tai, 2005: 240). Other Austroasiatic languages include /*mɛɛʔ/, /*mɛʔ/, /*maeʔ/, /*mee/, /*mèe/ (F.E. Huffman, 1977). In Proto Mon-Khmer, the reconstructed form of *mẹ* is /*meeʔ/ (Vu Duc Nghieu, 2011: 74). In some other branches of Mon-Khmer, there are also similar forms. For example, there are /*meeʔ/ in Proto West-Bahnaric, /*me:/ in Proto South-Bahnaric, /*me:ʔ/ in Proto Central-Bahnaric, /*maa, mɛʔ/ in Bana, /*me/ in Old Khmer, and /*mae/ in Khmer (A Database of Basic Austronesian Vocabulary – Basic South Asian Vocabulary Database). In terms of etymology, *mẹ* and *má/mạ* are the two forms found in both Austroasiatic and Tai-Kadai languages (Alves 2017). Thus, these reconstructions show the origins of *mẹ* quite clearly.

The relationship between the Mon-Khmer origin, Austroasiatic family with *mẹ* and *mệ* is also supported by synchronous data which shows that these variants are still used quite commonly in the Central dialect, a dialect that preserves many of the original elements of the Vietnamese language. In particular, the *mệ* variant is also found in the Muong Bi, Ba Trai and Muong Khoi regions (the Muongs in or near the former Ha Tay area) and other Muongs in Thanh Hoa, Nghe An and Ha Tinh (Nguyen Van Tai, 2005: 240). This shows that the *mệ* variant in Vietnamese, that is quite common in the study area, is most likely due to the preservation of the ancient pronunciation variant of the Vietnamese language, which is thus still retained by the Muong language. Variations

of the word *mẹ* in other Vietnamese dialects are also very rich (*băm, bu, má, mạ, me, mệ, mế, mệ, nạ, u - /bĩm³², bu³³, ma³⁵, ma²¹, me³³, me³⁵, me²¹, na²¹, ʔu³³/*) (Hoang Phe, 2015: 985), but the words *mệ* and *mạ* are very common in North Central Vietnam (Nguyen Nha Ban, 1999). They, Ha Tay and North Central Vietnam, are spaces with Viet - Muong cohabitation and/or contact .

The spatial distribution of these variations can be observed in the following map, in which both variants are shown to be widely distributed; however, *mẹ* is the later, more modern, more densely distributed variant.



Map 3. Distribution of variations of the words *mẹ*

3.2. Characteristics and distribution of words for mother's sister

In the group of kinship words, the word for mother's sister has the most variants: the word *già* appears at 61/82 places of the investigation, *bác* appears at 10/82 places, *bá* appears at 8/82 places, and *cô* appears at 3 places. These four lexical variants have quite fundamental differences.

Firstly, *già* is the word most used in the area. This word is annotated as mother's sister and is a local word, synonymous with *bá* (Hoang Phe, 2015: 605). In the Vietnamese Dialect Dictionary, *già* is also annotated as mother's sister, used in the Northern dialect (Pham Van Hao, 2009: 194). In Muong language, data from Nguyen Van Tai show that, among the words for father (or mother) older sister, there is *già/gĩa* (2005: 174). In Chut language, the father (or mother) older sister is /ja:³²/, while in Proto Mon-Khmer there is /*ja?/ (A Database of Basic Austronesian Vocabulary). With

the current data, 'as no further source can be found to help in further in-depth discussion about the origin of this word, we temporarily accept this as a native word, an ancient variant of Vietnamese (at least from the Proto Mon-Khmer period) which is still preserved and used in some Viet and Muong dialects.

The second most commonly occurring word is *bác*. According to the Vietnamese dictionary, *bác* is "father's brother or father's sister-in-law (can be used to address)" (Hoang Phe, 2015: 38). This is a word that is widely used in Vietnamese dialects. In terms of origin, *bác* is a kinship word of Chinese origin. According to Alves, in Chinese loanwords in Vietnamese, there are a series of kinship words such as *bác* (伯 *bo*), *cô* (姑 *gū*), *cậu* (舅 *jiǔ*, Sino-Vietnamese: *cũu*), *chú* (叔 *shū*, Sino-Vietnamese: *thúc*) and *chị* (姊 *jiě*, Sino-Vietnamese: *tì*). They are said to be Chinese loanwords at a very early stage (Early Sino-Vietnamese loanwords). These words might have been borrowed from ancient Chinese in the early period of Sino-Vietnamese contact (early AD – Qin dynasties, Han to early Tang dynasties), and were borrowed not only into the Viet-Muong languages but into many other Southeast Asian languages (Alves, 2017). However, in many areas of the Northern Dialect (including Son Tay) in the last few decades, *bác* has tended to move from the paternal side to the maternal side, to refer to mother's sister (and thus competes in terms of use with *già* – an native and older variant).

The third is the word *bá* /ba³⁵/. This word is sometimes thought to be a Sino-Vietnamese word, related to *bác* /bak³⁵/ (Tran Thi Hong Hanh, 2021), and now, *bá* still appears in limited combinations such as *anh em thúc bá* and *thúc bá huynh đệ*. However, this is a word with a very complex etymological origin. Nguyen Van Tai's data also show that the word for father's sister-in-law or father's sister in Vietnamese corresponds to *bả*, *pả*, *bá*, *pá* and *zà/zạ* (/ba²³³, pa²²³, ba³⁵, pa³⁵, za³², za²¹/) in the Muong dialects (Nguyen Van Tai, 2005: 174). This leads the present researcher to immediately think of the relationship with Muong language, which is evident in the vast majority of the above phonetic variations. However, in turn, *bá* in both Vietnamese and Muong languages is said to be a word of Thai origin (Tai loanword) from the Proto-Vietic period, meaning that its history of borrowing is quite deep. Based on historical phonological evidence, Alves suggests that /*bə:ʔ/ in Proto-Vietic means daughter-in-law and /*pa:ʔ/ in Proto-Vietic means wife of father's brother (i.e. uncle-in-law) or father's (mother's) sister (i.e. aunt) who is now called *bá* (in many places of the North to the North of Central), all of which are of Thai origin (Alves, 2020). The Tay – Nung – Viet dictionary and the Thai – Viet dictionary both have *pả* entries that are annotated as *bá* (means father's sister); while the Thanh Hoa Thai – Viet dictionary also has *pá*

and is also annotated as father's sister (Tran Thi Hong Hanh, 2021). All this evidence supports a Tay – Thai origin for *bá* in the Viet – Muong languages.

From the above it can be seen that these languages use *bá* to refer to the father's sister, but in the Son Tay dialect, *bá* is used to call the mother's sister. Thus, meaning of *bá* changes from the paternal side to the maternal side.

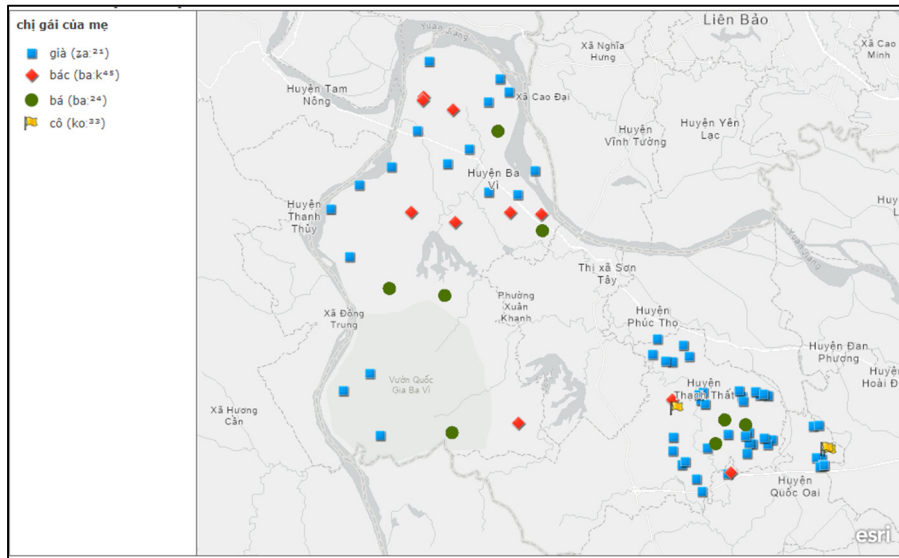
The word *cô* /ko³³/ is a word with a phonetic form different from the rest. In the Hoang Phe Dictionary, *cô* is referred to as father's younger/older sister [can be used to address] (Hoang Phe, 2015: 331). In the Vietnamese - Portuguese - Latin Dictionary, *cô* is interpreted as father's sister (2021: 101). In Muong language, the words, /va⁶, va⁵, ko², ba³, ɣwa⁵, ɔ¹ and ɔ^{2/1}, are used to call the *father's sister* (Nguyen Van Tai, 2005: 200). In terms of origin, *cô* is a Sino-Vietnamese loanword, borrowed from around Tang dynasty into Proto Viet-Muong, to refer to father's sister (Alves 2017). Thus, in both the original and borrowed form, *cô* was originally a word to call a blood-related woman in the same generation as the father (paternal side) but without distinction between the older and the younger. However, in the Son Tay dialect, there is a phenomenon of using *cô* to refer to the mother's sister. This means that *cô* has changed in meaning. Accordingly, the distinction between the older and the younger is inherently absent, and the distinction between the paternal side and the maternal side is blurred, or even lost, and only the distinction of gender remains. In the Muong data of Nguyen Van Tai, father's older sister is used as *bả*, *pả*, *bá*, *pá* and *zà/zạ*, with no form related to *cô*. In terms of languages that can be contacted, the word for mother's sister in the Tay Thai languages is *pả*, and in the Cham language, *kabăk* is an unrelated form.

Considering all the sources, so far, we have not found a contact that can lead to the transfer of meaning from the paternal side to maternal side. However, it is a fact that, in the Hanoi and surrounding areas, in the last few decades, there has been a quite common trend: calling a mother's younger sister as *cô* (instead of *dì*, the word commonly used before to call mother's younger sister) but mother's older sister as *bác*. Thus, the distinction between the paternal side and maternal side of both these words has tended to fade but the upper-lower distinction still exists. We think of an endogenous cause in Vietnamese, which is a self-semantic change. The first cause is to transfer *cô* from the paternal side to the maternal side, but only to call mother's younger sister. Then, due to the influence of the non-discrimination of older – younger in many kinship words in Vietnamese such as *dì* (mother's older/younger sister), *cậu* (mother's older/younger brother) and *cô* (father's older/younger sister), *cô* (in the maternal side) gradually has a new semantic feature (older – younger non-discrimination), to call both

¹ We use the author's phoneme recording.

mother's older/younger sister. Of course, this is just a hypothesis and can be re-discussed or even disproved when more available and convincing data is found.

The spatial distribution of these variations can be observed in the following map.



Map 4. Distribution of variants for mother's older sister

It can be seen that *giã*, an Austroasiatic variant, is distributed densely and widely in this space; but *bá* and *bác*, variants borrowed by contact, are more sparsely distributed; while *cô*, the new variant (showing the trend of modernization in meaning), only appears in the suburbs of Hanoi. This is a gravity model (a dialect feature spreads, as a 'jumping' type, between urban centers and then to surrounding rural areas).

3.3. Characteristics and distribution of variants for mother's older brother

To refer to the mother's older brother, Sơn Tây dialect uses two words, *bác* /bak³⁵/ and *cậu* /kɿw²¹/. The word *bác* is found in 62/82 places, while the word *cậu* is found in 20/82 places. These are also two words that have a fundamentally different form. Theoretically, dissimilar origins can be considered.

Bác, as mentioned, is a Sino-Vietnamese word (Alves, 2017). The Vietnamese dictionary considers *bác* as a common word, interpreted to mean father's brother or father's sister-in-law (can be used to address) (Hoang Phe, 2015: 38). Thus, although it is a common word with a wide range of use in all regions, although at first including both the original meaning in Chinese (Dao Duy Anh, 2013:15) and the meaning in

Vietnamese, *bác* is now only used to refer to the paternal side. The maternal side meaning (mother's brother) is probably the meaning formed later.

The Vietnamese - Portuguese - Latin dictionary uses “cậu” to refer to the mother's brother (A. de. Rhodes, 2021: 91). In Muong language, to call the mother's older/younger brother, there are also the words *cụ* /ku⁵/, *cậu* /kǎw⁵/ and *gụ* /yu⁵/ in different dialects (Nguyen Van Tai, 2005: 188). In the Vietnamese Dialect Dictionary, *bác* is not annotated as a local word. Perhaps, the word *bác* is used to refer not only to the father's brother but also to the mother's brother, in many regions of the Northern dialect, because the distinction between paternal and maternal side gradually disappears, and accordingly, the meaning of the word is expanded. This is a trend of modernization in meaning seen in some other kinship words such as *cô* analyzed above.

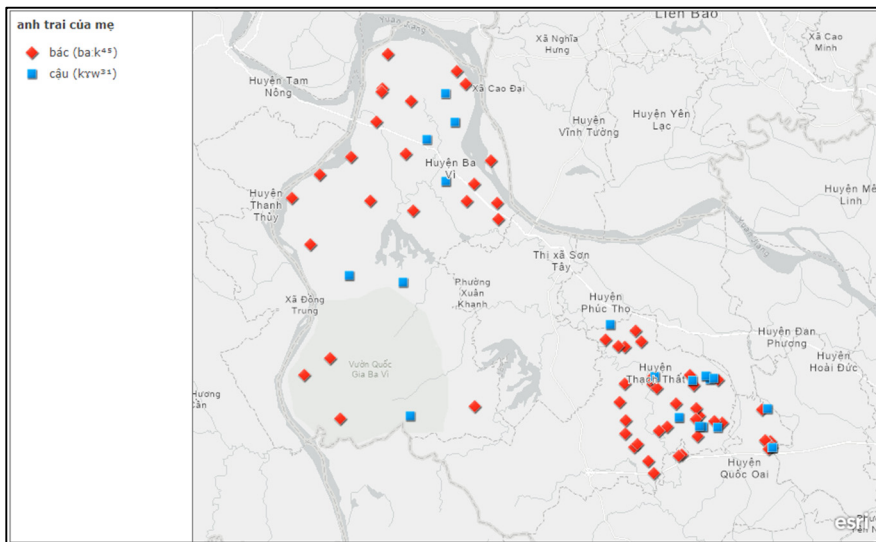
Along with *bác*, Sơn Tây dialect also uses *cậu* /kǎw²¹/ to call the mother's older brother, a word with a different phonetic form. According to Hoang Thi Chau, completely different words such as these are often due to different origins (2004: 101). However, the materials we found were not like this. Going back in history, we see that the Vietnamese - Portuguese - Latin dictionary has *cậu* /kǎw²¹/ (A.de.Rhodes, 2021: 91) to call the mother's older brother. In the 30 Muong dialects, there are 3 words (actually 3 phonetic variants) *cụ* /ku⁵/, *cậu* /kǎw⁵/ and *gụ* /yu⁵/ (Nguyen Van Tai 2005: 188), that are used to call the mother's older brother (Nguyen Van Tai, 2005: 188). Two dialects of Cuoì, at Thai Hoa and Tan Hop (Nghe An), also use /yu⁵⁴/ and /ku^{31?}/ (Nguyen Huu Hoanh 2022) with the meaning of mother's older brother. The word *cậu* in Proto Viet – Muong was restored by Alves as /*guB/ (M.Alves 2020). Although located in the center of the Northern dialect, Sơn Tây's use of *cậu* is not the same as in the Northern dialect, but more like the Central dialect and other ethnic minority languages of the same family in the Central region. As such, the *cậu* variant in Sơn Tây is much older than in the regions around. According to historians and ethnographers, the Viet Muong residents migrated from North Central Vietnam along the valleys of the western mountains to the North, and stopped in Hoa Binh, Sơn La, Phú Thọ and Sơn Tây provinces. In addition, Sơn Tây is one of the stops of these groups of residents (Tran Quoc Vuong 1997, Lam Ba Nam 1997).

Synchronic data show that, in Vietnamese dialects, Central and Southern dialects also use *cậu* to call the mother's older/younger brother (Pham Van Hao 2009: 88). As mentioned, the results of Alves' research on Chinese loanwords in Vietnamese show that the word *cậu* (舅 jiǔ, Sino-Vietnamese: cǔu) belongs to the Chinese loanwords from early contacts. According to Alves, *cậu* is one of a group of words that Benedict (1947) calls 'colloquial' words (basic, native words), as opposed to the official Sino-

Vietnamese reading of Chinese characters (Alves 2017). Vu Duc Nghieu also points out that *câu* is a Vietnameseized Sino-Vietnamese word (2011: 143). Thus, *câu* is a Chinese loanword but has a very deep history, from very early contacts; and because of this, it is also present in Proto Viet – Muong, Muong, Cuoi languages as it was just mentioned.

However, it is possible to discuss Alves' result further by showing that *bác* (伯 bo) and *câu* (舅 jiǔ, Sino-Vietnamese: cữu) are both Chinese loanwords from the early contact period. This is the period where Viet and Muong had not been divided. However, the question arises, why is the form of *bác* absent in Muong and Vietic languages? Meanwhile, *câu* is widely present in many languages related to Vietnamese, with many similar or very similar forms as the result of a historical phonetic evolution.

The spatial distribution of these variants can be observed in the map 5.



Map 5. Distribution of variants of the word for mother's older brother

3.4. Characteristics and distribution of variants indicating the woman who gave birth to the mother (grandmother)

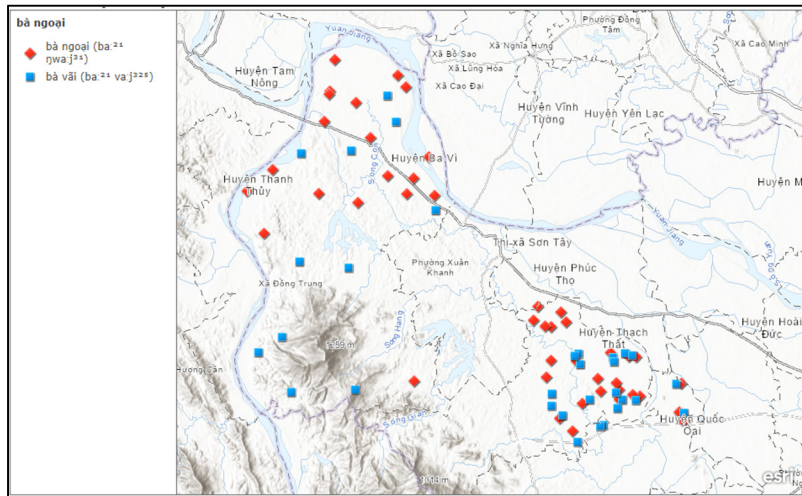
To refer to the woman who gave birth to the mother (grandmother), the districts of Quoc Oai, Thach That and Ba Vi use two words, *bà ngoại* /ba³²ŋvaj²¹/ and *bà vãi* /ba³²vaj³²⁵/.

The word *bà ngoại* was found in 49/82 survey places, and the word *bà vãi* was found in 33/82 survey places. In Vietnamese, *bà ngoại* is considered a word from the

common vocabulary and is a Chinese loanword (Alves 2017). The Sino-Vietnamese dictionary also shows that both *bà* (婆) and *ngoại* (外) have Chinese etymological origins (Dao Duy Anh 2013: 416).

In the Northern dialect of Vietnamese, the word for grandmother has another variant which is *bà vãi* (Pham Van Hao 2009: 29). The Vietnamese - Portuguese - Latin dictionary has the word *uãi* with the meaning of ancestor, and has the combination *oũ bà oũ uãi* (*ông bà ông vãi*) to refer to ancestors in general (A. de. Rhodes, 2021: 316). The word *uãi* in this dictionary is possibly *uãi/vãi* in the combination *bà vãi*. The Muong language has *mệmộng*, *bá ngwại*, *pá ngwại* (Nguyen Van Khang 2002), while the Muong dialects have a series of variants such as *bà ngwại*, *mẹ mộng*, *mẹ nòn*, *mẹ ông* and *mộng mụ* (Nguyen Van Tai, 2005: 173). The results of pre-linguistic reconstruction show that, in Proto Mon-Khmer languages, there are the forms, */*yaay/*, */*jaʔ/* and */*jaaj/* (Tran Thi Hong Hanh, 2022). With these data, it is possible to infer that *uãi/vãi* with the meaning of maternal in *bà ngoại* is from Austroasiatic origin. The word, *bà vãi*, is a combination of a Chinese element, 婆 (*pó*), and a Austroasiatic element, *uãi/vãi*. The Austroasiatic word (*vãi*) is competed with by the Chinese loanword and has gradually receded in use in certain regions. Sơn Tây is one of the regions where many ancient elements of Vietnamese are retained, with *bà vãi* as evidence of this.

The spatial distribution of these variants can be observed in the map 6.



Map 6. Distribution of words of grandmother

What is present on the map shows that, although the Chinese variant is very common, the Austroasiatic variant still has a very strong vitality. The dense distribution of *bà vãi* shows that this area can be characterised as quite an ancient linguistic space.

Thus, among the words for maternal kinship, the word *già* (referring to the mother's older sister) and *vãi* (referring to the grandmother) can be considered as of Mon Khmer origin. The distribution of these two elements evenly throughout the map shows that the ancient elements (Proto-Mon Khmer vocabulary) on the migration path of the Proto-Vietic inhabitants were still preserved before being transformed by exposure to the Tai languages (to borrow *bá*) and contact with Chinese (to borrow *bác*, *bà ngoai* and other Chinese kinship words such as *bác*, *cô*). What is shown on the map (synchronous) is quite consistent with most of our reconstructions along the chronological scale.

4. Conclusion

The results of this research allow us to confirm the following points:

1. Son Tay dialect preserves many ancient elements of Vietnamese: from Austroasiatic, Proto Mon-Khmer, Proto Viet Muong and Viet Muong.
2. Son Tay dialect preserves many consequences of contact between Vietnamese and geographically close languages from very ancient times: Tai and Chinese languages.
3. The geographical distribution of variants shows that native variants and Early Chinese loanwords from the Vietic period tend to predominate. This situation is quite similar to the ancient dialect island like the Central dialect we all know (Trinh Cam Lan 2021, Trinh Cam Lan 2023a, b).
4. Both Son Tay and Central dialect are two geographic areas witnessing deep Viet – Muong contact.

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