The Lexical-Semantic Field Describing the Unattractive Appearance of Women in Select Vietnamese Short Stories (1930–1945)

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Abstract

Female characters play a significant role in Vietnamese literature. Specifically, in the period of 1930–1945, 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 to examine the lexical-semantic field system employed to describe women's unattractive appearance. 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.

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of word semantics in particular, and linguistic levels in general, has been extensively researched by scholars, yielding various, sometimes conflicting, results. In Vietnam, the study of the Vietnamese language has achieved certain successes, but comprehensively delineating the semantics of all Vietnamese words remains a challenging issue. Practice shows that researchers often focus in-depth on a specific group of words or proceed from words that constitute the semantic nucleus of a semantic field. Therefore, detailed and continuous research is necessary, especially applied research linked to literary works in schools, which continues to be a "fertile ground" for exploration.

In Vietnamese literature, female characters hold a significant position. Specifically, in the short stories of the 1930–1945 period, authors presented a relatively comprehensive view of contemporary social life through the system of female characters. We have selected a number of literary works from this period to investigate the lexical-semantic field system used to describe women's unattractive, aesthetically unpleasing appearance. This research initially aids in the development of interdisciplinary studies, specifically by strengthening and refining research on the relationship between language and literature, and language and culture. Simultaneously, this study has practical significance in contributing materials for the integrated teaching and learning of Literature in secondary schools. In particular, the survey results regarding the semantic field of women's appearance help provide and expand a rich vocabulary for secondary school students.

THE ORETICAL REVIEW

The semantic field is an issue that has attracted the attention of Vietnamese linguists such as Hoang Phe, Đo Huu Chau, and Nguyen Thien Giap. However, these authors have primarily researched only certain systems at the lexical level. The issues surrounding lexical-semantic fields in literary works have not yet received adequate attention and exploration. Many studies have been conducted on lexical-semantic fields related to categories such as humans, animals, and plants, and have examined the operation of these semantic fields in various communicative contexts: social, historical, and cultural. Some authors have also contrasted semantic fields in Vietnamese with their corresponding fields in other languages. Research on semantic fields

within the works of one or more specific authors has also received attention, but these have mainly been small, isolated studies. Therefore, surveying the activity of lexical fields in literary works remains a fresh and necessary issue, especially in the current period, as the new General Education Program is being implemented.

Concept of Lexical Field

A lexical field or lexical-semantic field refers to the systematic organization of vocabulary, comprising words that are semantically related to one another.

This term emerged around the 1920s and 1930s, and Jost Trier was the first to introduce the concept of the field, stemming from Humboldt's theory that language reflects the spirit of a nation and F. de Saussure's theory of language structure. Trier conceptualized the lexical field as the scope of concepts that words in a language express, suggesting that concepts can be grouped into fields using the lexical units of each nation's language. According to him, the lexical field covers the conceptual field like a cloak or a covering sheet. However, the concept and the meaning of the word are not entirely identical. Consequently, J. Trier's actual process of grouping concepts to form lexical fields is not directly related to the meaning of words in particular or linguistics in general.

Acknowledging the limitations of J. Trier's initial concept of the lexical field, 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 the semantic field were introduced to Vietnam starting in the 1970s and quickly garnered the attention of linguists like Nguyễn Văn Tu, Đỗ Hữu Châu, Nguyễn Thiện Giáp, Đỗ Việt Hùng, Bùi Minh Toán, and Lê Quang Thiêm.

Classification of Lexical Fields

Currently, there are various conceptions of the lexical field, leading to different classification systems. Fundamentally, researchers typically divide lexical fields into three types: vertical field, horizontal field, and associative field.

Vertical Field (Paradigmatic Field)

The vertical field is a class of lexical units of different sizes, based on the most general categorical semantic feature down to smaller categorical features, then to class/type features, and finally to specific features. For example, the lexical field of marriage is divided into subfields such as people, ceremonies, gifts, attire, romance, and marital status. The subfield "marriage ceremonies" includes terms like chạm ngõ (initial meeting), ăn hỏi (engagement), đón dâu (bringing the bride home), rước dâu (procession), tân hôn (wedding ceremony), lễ gia tiên (ancestor worship), kết hôn (getting married), lễ hợp cẩn (cup-sharing ceremony), lễ tơ hồng (red thread ceremony), lễ động phòng (nuptial chamber ceremony), and lễ vu quy (bride's departure ceremony).

Horizontal Field (Syntagmatic Field)

The horizontal field initially stems from the linear nature of the linguistic sign: signs must appear sequentially in a chain and cannot occur simultaneously. Therefore, the linear relation is also called the horizontal or syntagmatic relation. Consequently, the horizontal field is defined as "classes of words closely related in terms of usage but never found in the same syntactic position" [2, p. 138].

Words within the horizontal field contribute to the actualization of certain semantic features of the nuclear word. The horizontal field reveals the characteristics of a word during its functioning, as well as its semantic relations and structures.

Associative Field (Synthetic 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, an associative field is a collection of words all evoked by association with a central word. The words in an associative field primarily include those from the vertical and horizontal fields, meaning words that have structural relations of identity and opposition in meaning to the central word.

The associative field is highly subjective, dependent on an individual's life experience, conditions, and environment, and is thus often unstable. Consequently, it is less useful for discovering internal semantic structural relations but is effective for explaining phenomena in literature.

SEMANTIC FIELDS AND LITERARY LANGUAGE

Denotative Field and Literary Language

The two methods of word meaning transference are metonymy and metaphor. It can be observed that words within a denotative field (or referential field) often transfer meaning in a specific direction. Metaphorical transference commonly occurs within the referential field; that is, words in one referential field often collectively shift to another. For example, when the word lửa (fire) transfers to the field of emotions/psychological states, other words co-occurring with it such as hừng hực (blazing), rực (glowing), bốc (flaring up), nhen nhóm (kindling), kéo (drawing), tàn (embers) also transfer to that field. The field of fire can also transfer to the field denoting social struggles. Many words co-occurring with fire also transfer, such as lửa đấu tranh giải phóng dân tộc (fire of national liberation struggle), or phong trào đấu tranh vẫn còn âm ỉ, không thể dập tắt được (the struggle movement is still smoldering, unable to be extinguished).

It is noteworthy that when a semantic field is used correctly within its proper domain, its image-evoking effect is reduced or absent due to contextual neutralization. When words shift fields, they carry over not only their individual meaning but also the impressions and associations of the old field to the new one, causing the new field to inherit the associative impressions of the old field.

In literature, the words in a sentence or paragraph often align themselves within the same field to create congruence in the denotative field. One can speak of the dominant figure (i.e., metaphor, metonymy) of the paragraph, sentence, or work. The dominant image, belonging to a particular referential field, draws other co-field words along with it.

Conceptual Field and Literary Language

When reflecting a certain reality in a work, the writer depicts it using their language. A work can only reflect one aspect of reality. To highlight this homogeneity, the words used for expression must also contain common, mutually compatible features, creating the phenomenon known as semantic resonance among words. This semantic resonance is based on the inherent homogeneous semantic features in the words in other words, based on the common feature shared by a field (or a group of words within a field) in the conceptual field (or notional field).

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

Associative Field and Literary Language

This field holds great explanatory power for word usage, especially in literary works. It helps explain phenomena such as cliché, the preference for selecting certain words for speaking or writing, and the avoidance or taboo of specific words. Even without considering differences in themes, ideas, factual details, or imagery, the linguistic surface alone is enough to prevent confusing a literary work from one era with that of another. To succeed, authors must not only possess talent but also a keen adaptation to the times, particularly to language, which changes over time, causing the semantic fields to change as well. Therefore, authors must not only follow well-trodden paths but also aim to be ahead of their time. Only then will their works be embraced by the public. The connection to life and the era is not only the concern of writers but also of language researchers, literary critics, and literature teachers, who must not only constantly renew their thoughts and feelings and enrich their life experience but also perpetually reform and renew their own language.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions of this study, we primarily employed the following research methods and techniques:

Componential Analysis Method

This method serves as the basis for analyzing the semantic fields into subfields, secondary subfields, and word groups. It is also the foundation for analyzing the directions of meaning transference of words belonging to the lexical-semantic field describing women in Vietnamese short stories.

Descriptive Method

This is the main method, along with componential analysis, used to address the research questions. From the collected linguistic corpus, we proceed to analyze and describe the semantic characteristics and symbolic meaning of the words

belonging to the lexical-semantic field describing women in Vietnamese short stories. This, in turn, helps affirm the influence of Vietnamese cultural characteristics on the use of words belonging to this field in Vietnamese short stories in particular and in the Vietnamese language in general.

Statistical Technique.
This technique aims to determine the quantity and ratio of words in each semantic field, thereby establishing subfields and word groups within each field. Additionally, it involves statistically analyzing the transferred meanings and their symbolic significance as a basis for judging the cultural, linguistic, and cognitive characteristics in the language use of the Vietnamese people.

In addition to the componential analysis method, the descriptive method, and the statistical technique, we also applied other linguistic research methods, such as contextual analysis and case study methods, to address the specific issues raised in this research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Findings
Due to the limited scope of a single article, we do not aspire to fully and comprehensively survey all authors and works over the entire period from 1930 to 1945. Therefore, we endeavored to select representative authors whose works appear in the general education curriculum and are familiar to students, specifically Nam Cao, Thach Lam, Nguyen Hong, Vu Trong Phung, and Nguyen Cong Hoan. These authors are also known for their numerous works focusing on women.

Specifically, we surveyed 27 typical female characters with unattractive appearances in 24 works by the 5 authors:

- Nam Cao: Aunt Hao: Aunt Hao; Chi Pheo: Thi No, Mrs. Tu, Binh Chuc's Wife; Lang Ran: Loi ;Old Hac: Giao Thu's Wife); A Wedding: Dan; The Lesson of Sweeping the House: U Hong; A Love Story: Kha; A Full Meal: Cai Di, Pho Thu; Moonlight: Dien's Wife; Poor/Poverty: Di Chuot; A Souvenir Story): To; Blind/Blindness: Nga; Superfluous Life: Tu.
- Thach Lam: The Old Friend: Lê Minh; Hunger: Mai; Le's Mother's House): Le); The Flute Sound: Lien.
- Nguyen Hong: Old Đen and His Children: Old Đen's Wife; In Desperate Circumstances: Quyen; The Girl/Daughter: Le Ha.
- Vu Trong Phung: One Silver Coin: Bich); The Blind Old Woman: The Blind Old Woman.
- Nguyen Cong Hoan: Filial Piety: Repaying the Father's Kindness: The Master's Mother; Phanh Phach: The Mistress/Wife of the Master.

Similar to female characters with beautiful, attractive appearances, those with unattractive, unpleasing appearances are also described in detail, sometimes even pushed to the point of extremity (exaggeration). This is most evident in the writings of Nam Cao the master of the critical realism literary movement.

Table 1: Survey of the Lexical-Semantic Field Describing the Unattractive Appearance of Women (1930–1945):

No	Beautiful/Pleasant Appearance (Category)	Frequency	Percentage (%)	No	Beautiful/Pleasant Appearance (Category)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Face	130	18.1	8	Nose	16	2.5
2	Eyes	112	16.1	9	Mouth	18	2.6
3	Cheeks	51	6.8	10	Teeth	25	3.5
4	Hands/ Arms	94	12.8	11	Lips	17	2.4
5	Legs/ Feet	46	6.5	12	Figure/Body Shape	83	12.1
6	Hair	28	3.9	13	Attire	68	9.6
7	Skin	22	3.1				
	Total					**710**	**(100 %)**

The survey of the lexical-semantic field describing the unattractive appearance of women shows that the authors describe almost all different aspects of physical appearance. Most authors concentrate on describing attire, face, eyes, cheeks, hands, and figure. Specifically, the lexical field for the face has 130 instances (18.1%); the field for eyes has 112 instances (16.1%); the field for hands/arms has 94 instances (12.8%); the field for figure/body shape has 83 instances (12.1%), and so on.

However, compared to the lexical-semantic field describing the beautiful, attractive appearance of female characters, the field describing the unattractive, unpleasing appearance of female characters has a larger quantity and is described in more detailed, specific, and vivid terms. This can be explained by the fact that most of the writers belonged to the critical realism movement. Their writing is strongly realistic, reflecting the harsh reality of the corrupt and unjust colonial-feudal society of the time, in which women were victims, exploited and oppressed both physically and mentally.

Lexical Field Describing Women with Unattractive Appearance
Lexical Field for Facial Characteristics
- Facial Features: ugly, aged/decrepit, angular, slightly angular, pockmarked like a hornet's nest), a mockery of creation, short, wider than it is long, dark/grimy, shriveled/wrinkled, somewhat pig-like, ugly as a monkey, puffy/bloated, face crumpled like a paper lantern, bony, aloof/defiant.
- Psychological States Manifested on the Face: staring intently, grimacing/frowning, listless/absent-minded, serious), turning

grey/pale, scowling), furious, tired/weary, somber, exhausted, worried,…
- Facial Actions: frown, scowl, crumple up, grimace.

Examples:
- Tu: face is slightly angular
- Loi: face pockmarked like a hornet's nest
- Thi No: Her face was truly a mockery of creation: it was so short that one might think it was wider than it was long,...

Lexical Field for Eye Characteristics
Along with the face, the eyes of the women are described using a rich and diverse layer of words:
- Eye Features: dark circles, purplish, circled, white/pale, bleary with crust, like boiled pork/pale and glassy, large and glaringly white, hooked/sunken, squinted to the size of two beans, prostitute's eyes, bloodshot.
- Psychological States Manifested through the Eyes: sad/gloomy, reproachful, spiteful.
- Eye Capacity: dull/listless, dimming.
- Eye Actions: glare, tare, squint, narrow, flirtatious glance.

Examples:
- Tu: eyelids slightly purplish and circled
- Miss Tu: prostitute's eyes; flirtatious glances
- Old lady: two eyes bleary with crust

Lexical Field for Cheek Characteristics
Cheek Features: sunken, prominent, puckered/slack, sunken, sickly pale cheeks, high cheekbones.

Examples:

- Tu: cheeks were slightly sunken, making the face somewhat angular
- Di Chuot: two sunken cheeks, sickly pale as if one had drowned.

Lexical Field for Leg and Hand Characteristics
i) Legs/Feet
- Leg/Foot Features: ugly, gnarled/shriveled, very short and stubby.
- Leg/Foot Actions: trot/scurry, stomp heavily.
Example: Loi: the very short and stubby legs.

ii) Hands/Arms
- Hand/Arm Features: pale/bluish, ugly, gnarled/shriveled, scrawny/bony, thin/frail, shriveled/wrinkled, very short and stubby, clumsy, all bone, frail, blue veins, thin, translucent pale, pure pale, emaciated.
- Physical States of Hands/Arms: cold, icy cold, loose and slack, wet, trembling, shaking/quivering, hanging limp, splayed out.
Examples:
- Tu: The hand, all clumsy bone... the frail wrist.
- Blind old woman: Two scrawny arms.
- Ninh is mother: The hands were only bone and icy cold. They were loose and slack.

Lexical Field for Other Features
In addition to the face and eyes, other features such as the eyebrows, hair, skin, nose, cheeks, lips, and teeth are also mentioned, albeit in smaller quantities, but they play an important role in expressing the women's external appearance.
i) Hair Condition: disheveled/tangled, unraveled/coming loose, messy, hanging loosely and lifelessly, sparse, sticky/matted.
Example: - Tu: hair matted with sweat.

ii) Skin is divided into two subfields:
- Skin Color: pale white, pale/sallow, pale/pallid, greasy brown, dark, tanned brown, sickly pale as if one had drowned.
- Skin Characteristics: sunburnt/darkened, shriveled/wrinkled.
Example: Le: face and limbs wrinkled like a dried trám fruit.
- Di Chuot: skin sickly pale as if one had drowned.

iii) Nose Characteristics: short, large, bumpy like a tangerine peel, flat and spread out, coarse, broken, flat.
Example: - Thi No: The nose was short, large, red, bumpy like a tangerine peel, flat and spread out, almost vying for space with the lips...

iv) Mouth Actions: chewing softly/muttering, chewing, snoring slightly loudly, snoring like thunder, gaping open.
Example: - Loi: Loi alone was still asleep, her mouth gaping open and snoring like thunder.

v) Teeth Characteristics: large, protruding like an awning, coarse, bucktoothed.
Example: - Old lady: the upper jaw protruded like an awning.

vi) Lip Characteristics: thick, dark/purplish, thick and wet, the color of greyish water buffalo meat, large, chapped, cracked.
Example: - Thi No: two thick lips were made thicker... the lips, which were as determinedly large as the nose, seemed to vie for space; perhaps because of the strain, they were chapped as if cracked.

Lexical Field for Figure/Body Shape
To describe the figure/body shape, the authors use a great number of adjectives:
Figure Characteristics: withered/emaciated, thin, bony/skeletal, scrawny, thin as a stick, weak, gnarled/shriveled, wilted/faded, skinny, all bone, short and small, extremely thin, pale/sallow, fat, majestically fat, round and stout, one and a half times larger...
Examples:
- Mistress: Indeed, she was very fat, a truly majestic fatness, which few could imagine...
- Loi: There was no woman who could be uglier. She was round and stout.
- Aunt Hao: She withered away, she grew frail, truly like a starving cat.
- Thi No: She scurried to her lover's house.

Lexical Field for Attire
Attire is one of the very important elements in describing a character's appearance.
- Attire Characteristics: torn, ragged, sloppy/shabby, missing buttons, too short,

faded/washed out), very large patch, patched in many places, thick/bulky, baggy/loose, askew/disheveled, crooked/distorted.

- *Example:*
- Dan on her wedding day: Dan wore her everyday cloth clothes, meaning a pair of too-short pants adorned with very large patches, and a faded brown top also patched in many places...
- Thi No: the disheveled black skirt, the crooked brassiere/bodice.

DISCUSSION

Each author possesses a distinct writing style with different character types. While the external appearance of Thach Lam and Nguyen Hong's characters often aligns with their inner nature, Nam Cao's characters are frequently grotesque, with vulgar speech and actions, yet fundamentally benevolent. This is an incongruity between the character's appearance and their inner self, which is nevertheless linked into a unified whole. It is closer to more recent novels and short stories because Nam Cao discovered and described characters as they truly are, meaning that within every human being, there are always two sides: saintly and savage. Sometimes Nam Cao's characters evoke a sense of horror in the reader due to the exaggerated portrayal of their features with deformed, grotesque bodies.

Perhaps the author intends to convey that those who are poor and whose human dignity is trampled cannot possess beautiful bodies. The female characters' appearance serves as a powerful denunciation of the rotten, colonial-feudal society. Loi and Thi No are prime examples of this type of unattractive character. For the remaining characters Dan, Aunt Hao, Tu, Di Chuot,…Nam Cao maintains his realistic perspective, using a sharp pen and specific, rich, and angular language to describe them, but with a degree of sympathy, rather than making them as grotesque as Thi No or Loi. Thus, Nam Cao was deeply concerned with the fate of women, especially those oppressed by harsh circumstances.

Through the survey of the lexical-semantic field describing unattractive women, we observe that in Nam Cao's works, most female characters, often of peasant origin, are ugly, crude, and sometimes cruel. This has led some to question the realism and humanistic meaning in Nam Cao's works. However, upon re-reading, one discovers that beneath the cold, sharp, and sober façade of Nam Cao's pen lies a heart filled with deep love for humanity and life. Nam Cao genuinely reflects the diverse and rich reality of life, which contains both beauty and ugliness; if there is extreme beauty, why not extreme ugliness? Therefore, his description of Thi No, Loi, Nhi, etc., is not an insult to humanity. Rather, Nam Cao offers a quite authentic depiction of all facets of life. His female characters mostly have ugly, aged, and somewhat deformed faces, yet deep within their souls lie the simple, unadorned beauty of country folk. His view of humanity is considered progressive. He writes about these ugly people not with contempt but with respect and affection. Such a conception of humanity is comprehensive and profound. On the other hand, by portraying a world of aged, ugly characters, Nam Cao sought to condemn the rotten colonial-feudal society. It was this cruel, ruthless society that deformed human beings, turning them into animals, into rubbish. Every page of his writing reveals a heart of sympathy for the unfortunate, a voice that "extols compassion, charity, justice... It brings people closer to one another" (Nam Cao).

Nguyen Cong Hoan's characters tend towards external description; thus, his language often focuses on external movement, primarily creating images through sight and sound, using iconic words to describe crude, rough, and coarse bodies: plump, puffy, shrunken, disgustingly fat, majestically fat. Generally, his language is that of the masses, naturally and comfortably selected and elevated. Under Nguyen Cong Hoan's pen, the common, small characters are like insects, utterly powerless, often tragically distorted: dark and grimacing face, ugly as a monkey, bleary with crust, bald/balding, squinted eyes.

In general, each author has a different storytelling approach. Nguyen Cong Hoan and Nam Cao both focus on social issues. However, Nguyen Cong Hoan and Vu Trong Phung lean towards satire with a rich and varied spectrum of humor. Nam Cao leans toward the tragedies of the poor. Thach Lam leans toward describing the delicate psychological states of people facing nature, love, and life. Therefore, the language used by these authors also differs. The language of Nam Cao, Nguyen Cong Hoan, and Nguyen Hong is always specific,

employing many strong adjectives and verbs: pockmarked like a hornet's nest, short, grimacing, crumpled, dark/grimy, shriveled, ugly as a monkey, puffy, shrunken), bleary, sickly pale, bumpy), flat/spread out, chewing softly, pure white, dark, black, protruding... Conversely, Thach Lam's language is gentler, more profound, and more discreet: sturdy, short and small, shriveled like a dried trám fruit.

CONCLUSION

Research into semantic fields reveals the semantic relationships within the vocabulary system, as words do not exist in isolation but are all systematically related within a certain semantic domain. The study of semantic fields in literary works, especially those by select authors taught in secondary schools, not only reflects the semantic relationships between lexical units in a language system but also highlights the distinctive linguistic features that define the authors' writing styles through their use of lexical-semantic fields. This research has practical significance in identifying the artistic values of the works, specifically the art of character development, and contributes valuable material for the integrated teaching and learning of Literature in secondary schools. Furthermore, the survey results on the semantic field of women in general help provide

and expand a rich vocabulary and develop the language competence of secondary school students.

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