

COUPLING AS A TEXT-BUILDING, MYTH-EVOKING STRATEGY  
IN VIETNAMESE

IMPLICATIONS FOR SECOND LANGUAGE READING<sup>1</sup>

John C. Schafer

I would like to depart from the conventional structure of the academic essay and begin, not with a statement of thesis, but with a series of illustrations.

Illustration I: The Vietnamese Myth of Origin

Long ago before there were people in the world King Lạc Long [the dragon of Lạc], whose home was the realm of water, met the beautiful Âu Cơ, the fairy Queen of the mountains. Love developed between them and soon Âu Cơ gave birth to a sack of 100 pearly eggs from which sprang 100 beautiful sons. The family lived happily for some time, but then Lạc Long explained to Âu Cơ that they could not remain together forever because he was from the realm of water, she from the high mountains. Âu Cơ agreed. They decided that she should take 50 sons and dwell in the mountains and he should take 50 sons and return to the sea. The children who went with Âu Cơ became the ancestors of the Vietnamese highlanders, well-known for their skills in hunting and upland farming. Those who went with Lạc Long became the ancestors of Vietnam's lowland farmers and fishermen. Lạc Long gave the firstborn of his sons the title Hùng Vương. He became the founder of the Hùng Vương Dynasty which lasted from 2879 to 258 B.C.

Vietnamese still celebrate Hùng Vương Day which falls on the tenth day of the third month of the lunar calendar. Vietnamese refer to themselves as *con rồng cháu tiên*, the children of dragons and fairy spirits. When they wish to refer to their country they use the couple words *đất nước* [lit.: land (and) water] or *non nước* [lit.: mountain (and) water].<sup>2</sup>

Illustration II: A Vietnamese Proverb

The work of a father is like Mt. T'ai;/ the duty of a mother is like water flowing from a wellspring. (*Công cha như núi Thái-sơn, / nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra.*)

Illustration III: *Trung Hiếu* 'Loyalty—Filial Piety'

In a Vietnamese encyclopedia, the following story is offered as an explanation of the coupling word *trung hiếu*:

During the reign of King Chiêu Vũởng there was a mandarin named Thạch Chủ who was well-known for his honesty, fairness, and sincerity. One day, while on an official tour, he learned of the existence of a gang of murderers. After conducting an investigation, he learned that his own father was the chief culprit. Turning his carriage around, Thạch Chủ sped back to the palace and reported to the king as follows: "The killer is the father of this your humble subject. I cannot arrest my father. I also cannot for the sake of my father disregard the law. To be a mandarin and disregard the law is intolerable, so please, your highness, punish this your humble subject for his crime."

The king decreed: "I waive punishment in your case."

Immediately Thạch Chủ replied: "To be a son and not honor one's father is to be impious [not *hiếu*]; to be a subject and not uphold the laws of the land is to be disloyal [not *trung*]. Being lenient is a favor a king can dispense; accepting responsibility for improper actions is a duty a subject must perform."

As soon as he had finished speaking, he drew out a sword and committed suicide in front of the king.

## Illustration IV: HỒ Chí Minh Lecturing Cadres

"We must be loyal [*trung*] to the party, pious [*hiếu*] with the people." (*Phải trung với đảng, hiếu với dân.*)<sup>3</sup>

Illustration V: The *Kim Vân Kiều*, an Early Nineteenth Century Verse Narrative

The *Kim Vân Kiều* has been called the national epic of Vietnam. It is the story of a girl, Thúy Kiều, who must choose between *hiếu* 'filial piety' and *tình* 'love'. One day during a walk in a garden she meets and falls in love with the scholar Kim Trọng; they exchange vows of eternal devotion. Shortly thereafter Thúy Kiều's father is unjustly accused and thrown into prison. The only way Thúy Kiều can help him is to let herself be sold into marriage to the evil Mã Giám Sinh. By agreeing to this marriage she sacrificed *tình* for *hiếu* and finds the latter a 'heavier' virtue:

By what means could she save her flesh and blood?

When evil strikes, you bow to circumstance.

As you must weigh and choose between your love and filial duty, which will turn the scale?

She put aside all vows of love and truth—  
a child first pays the debts of birth and care.

Resolved on what to do, she said: "Hands off—  
I'll sell myself and Father I'll redeem."<sup>4</sup>

## Illustration VI: The Scholar and the Lady Tavern Keeper

The following story occurs in a Vietnamese book on how to compose poems—in the section that explains how to *đối* 'oppose'.<sup>5</sup> It is offered as an illustration of the dangers, in opposing, of not hearing out the complete state-

ment of one's opponent before one opposes it. The scholar appears foolish because in Vietnamese his reply to the tavern keeper is unpleasing both in rhythm and sense.

There once was a young man who failed his exams. On the way home he stopped off at a tavern to rest for the night before continuing his journey. Noticing that the owner appeared to be an attractive and educated woman, he began to flirt with her.

Annoyed by his rude behavior, the lady tavern owner decided to fend off his advances in a clever manner. Therefore she said to him: "Since, as you say, you have just returned from taking the exams, probably you are very good with words. So let me present to you some words to *đãi* [oppose]; if you can oppose them, then I'll agree to shut down my inn and follow you."

The young scholar, confident he would win, told the woman to go ahead.

She offered the word *night*; he opposed it with *day*.

She said *late*; he opposed it with *early*.

She said *chicken*; he opposed it with *pig*.

She said *crow*; he opposed it with *cry*.

She said *cock-a-doodle-do*; he countered with *pawk-pawk*.

She next offered *tavern owner*; he countered with *Confucian scholar*.

She said *wake*; he opposed it with *lie*.

She said *up*; he countered with *down*.

She said *to*; he said *in order to*.

She offered *worry*; he countered with *count*.

She said *money*; he said *rice grain*.

Then the tavern owner said: "Now I'll read what I said and you read what you said." She read as follows: "Late at night, when the rooster crows cock-a-doodle-do, the tavern owner wakes to worry about money."

Then the young scholar read his words: "Early in the morning, when the pig cries pawk pawk, the Confucian scholar lies and counts rice grain."

The tavern owner was about to speak when the young scholar said "Forget it!" and quickly left the tavern without saying another word.

#### Illustration VII: Pham Quynh's Analysis of Duty and Rights

Pham Quynh, a well-known man of letters in early twentieth-century Vietnam, became the editor of a prestigious and influential journal called *Nam-phong* 'Southern Ethos.' Although he has been attacked by historians for collaborating with the French colonialists, Pham Quynh saw his role as helping the Vietnamese people achieve a synthesis of the best of Western and Eastern values. Those who disagree with his politics admit the high quality of his intellect. Here is how he begins an essay called "What Is Duty?" which appeared in *Nam-Phong* in 1917.<sup>6</sup>

In Confucianism there is a saying: "If one wants to begin the study of Confucius and Mencius, first one must be able to distinguish *nhân*

[duty] from *lợi* [rights].

Confucian scholars referred to *nhĩa*, i.e. what we call *nhĩa vụ*; they referred to *lợi*, i.e. what we call *quyền lợi*. The two views represented by *nhĩa vụ quyền lợi* [duty—rights] are actually the basis of ethics. What is the proper relationship between duty and rights? This is an important question that people of all generations and countries must consider. To answer it is to explain the meaning of human life.

In general, earlier societies respected duty more than rights. In fact, of the two views represented by duty and rights only duty was important: no one thought about rights. In addition, those in a society who, because of their position, had rights in regard to others considered those rights as duties. The king in regard to a subject, the father in regard to his child, the husband in regard to his wife all had their special rights, and also their special duties. The king had the right to rule his people, but that right entailed the obligation to see to it that his people were contented and enjoyed peace; the father had the right to govern his child, but that right entailed the responsibility of bringing that child to maturity; a husband had the right to direct his wife, but that right entailed the responsibility of keeping the family prosperous and happy. In sum, in earlier times the rights view was the minor view. Nowadays it seems that just the opposite is the case: the minor has become the major and the major has become minor; rights are respected more than duty.

This change has come from Europe...

Illustration VIII: Nguyễn Bé's Philosophy of *Chung-Thủy*

Nguyễn Bé was an assistant province chief and instructor in the School for Revolutionary Development Cadres at Vũng Tàu under the regime of Nguyễn Văn Thiệu. While he held these positions, he wrote of a philosophy he called *Chung Thủy*, a system of thought and conduct that he hoped would save Vietnam. *Chung Thủy* [lit.: end—beginning] means faithful, loyal. It is commonly used in reference to women: a faithful wife, for example, is *chung thủy*; she is with her husband in the beginning and in the end.

In Nguyễn Bé's system, *chung thủy* has many meanings. It means, among other things, loyalty, honesty, and an awareness of consequences. This last meaning, he says, is the most important:

The third and most important meaning of *Chung Thủy*: Think to the end, i.e., the consequence, each time you start acting...

As we know, the Western philosophy knows only the start, or the beginning of an act, the *thủy*, but doesn't know the *chung*, its end, i.e., cannot anticipate the consequence or know where the future will lead. Thus, the saying, "knowledge for the sake of knowledge", illustrates sufficiently that the effect of Western philosophy is that Western discoveries are only the results of chance and the inquisitive temperament. Therefore, the results can be either good or bad. Nuclear weapons, weapons which today are a grave threat to human life, are the nat-

ural consequences of the Western philosophical system which does not think to the end.

As for the East, still harboring many illusions, still slumbering in the past with a lack of will to act,...it hesitates to throw itself into practical endeavors, i.e., it does not want to start, it will not begin.<sup>7</sup>

#### Illustration IX: A Man-in-the-Street Analysis of the American Withdrawal from Vietnam

On a Saigon street corner in 1973 a Vietnamese civil servant in the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu administration was discussing the decline in American support for the government of the Republic of Vietnam with an American who spoke Vietnamese. "The trouble with Americans," he said, "is that they have *thủy* [beginning] but no *chung* [ending]. That is the whole of the problem."

#### Illustration X: HỒ Chí Minh on the Essential Qualities of a Movement

A movement must be continuous and have a true substance. It shouldn't just be all form; it shouldn't have 'the head of an elephant and the tail of a mouse' [*đầu voi đuôi chuột*].<sup>8</sup>

#### Illustration XI: Understanding Vietnamese Love Stories

A principal of a high school in Huế, speaking in Vietnamese to an American, was trying to help his guest understand a Vietnamese love story that he (the American) had just read. Here is a translation of what he said: "To understand this story, and many modern Southern Vietnamese stories, you must understand the concept of *duyên nợ* [lit.: predestined affinity—obligation]. Vietnamese believe that marriage is a matter of *duyên* or *nợ*. If one's mate turns out to be lovely and compatible, then that is an occurrence of *duyên*; if, on the other hand, one's mate becomes unpleasant and incompatible, then one has assumed a *nợ*, an obligation. People whose spouse is all *nợ* may wonder what they did wrong in their previous incarnation to deserve such a fate.

What do these illustrations add up to? How do they relate to problems encountered in teaching non-native speakers of English how to read?

For me these illustrations support Benjamin Lee Whorf's assertion that "people act about situations in ways which are like the ways they talk about them."<sup>9</sup> People whose word for loyalty or faithfulness is *chung thủy* 'end—beginning' will tend to see loyalty and faithfulness in a certain way. In judging whether a man is loyal and faithful, they will tend to ask themselves whether his behavior at the end of an episode is consistent with his behavior at the beginning, whether, as Vietnamese say, "his before and after are like one" [*trước sau như một*]. In telling a story or conducting a revolution, they will want to see it through to completion lest people observe that it has the head of an elephant but the tail of a mouse.

This is not to say that only Vietnamese judge a man to be loyal when his end behavior is consistent with his beginning, or that only Vietnamese may

pause to consider whether fate was kind or unkind to them in marriage, or that only Vietnamese desire to see things through to completion. The point is not that the language one speaks determines one's view of the world. Language doesn't determine—it constrains. It makes certain conclusions regarding events more likely than others. Vietnamese are encouraged to perceive certain situations in a special way, and to feel and act strongly when they find themselves in these situations, because their language instills in them certain predispositions. What is true for Vietnamese is true for all peoples. When events and our language tend toward congruence, this affects us strongly. When it occurs, we believe we have gained an insight, stumbled upon a truth.

What aspect of the Vietnamese language has this power to predispose? There are probably many aspects that are responsible for different predispositions, but the one I would like to discuss here, the one that is found in the above illustrations, is *coupling*—the juxtaposing of two items that are antithetical, or nearly antithetical, in meaning.

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of coupling in Vietnamese language and culture. Vietnamese describe their country as emerging from the reconciling of oppositions between dragon and fairy, sea and mountain, water and land. The creation of nationhood is mirrored in the process of idiomization of the coupled expressions *con rồng cháu tiên* ['children (of) dragon (and) grandchildren (of) fairy'] and *đất nước* ['land (and) water']. Some time ago these expressions ceased to be taken literally—dragons merged with fairy spirits, land united with water—and the people, country, and language of Vietnam entered the world. Much of Vietnamese political and social history can be seen as an extended argument on the proper relations between the members of the coupling words *Hán Việt* 'Sino-Vietnamese' and *trung hiếu* 'loyalty—filial piety'. Debate throughout the centuries on the proper conduct of men and women, at least among the more Sinicized elements of the population, has been a commentary on *trung trinh* 'loyalty (primarily for men)—chastity (primarily for women)'.

Coupling was defined above as the juxtaposing of antithetical elements. More precisely, it is the placing of members which are syntactically and semantically equivalent in topographically equivalent places in a text.<sup>10</sup> Each word from the game of *đổi*, or opposing, described in Illustration VI, for example, is coupled with another.

Tavern keeper: *Đêm khuya gà gáy ó-ó, / chị quán thức dậy mà lo đong tiền.* [lit.: 'night late rooster crow doodle—do mistress tavern get up and worry coin money.']

Scholar: *Ngày sáng heo kêu cục-tác, / thầy nho nằm xuống đặng tính hạt thóc.* [lit.: 'day early pig cry pawk-pawk, master Confucian lie down to count grain rice.']

*Night* is coupled with *day* (1) because the two words are in syntactically equivalent positions in their respective sentences, (2) because the two words are semantically related: they belong to the same thought-mass<sup>11</sup> "parts of the day", and (3) because they occupy equivalent topographical positions in

their respective lines: both occupy the first slot. The other couplings (*late* and *early*, *rooster* and *pig*, etc.) also exhibit these three equivalences.

In freer English translations members of couplings often cannot be as starkly opposed as they are in Vietnamese because, when writing in English, one must insert many articles, prepositions, and subordinating connectives. In a freer English translation of the above exchange, for example, *night* and *day* could not be so starkly opposed because the English phrase "late at night" and "early in the morning" have an unequal number of words. *Night* and *day* would therefore be pushed into inequivalent topographical positions. Because oppositions in Vietnamese are presented against a background uncluttered with prepositions and subordinating connectives, they stand out in bold relief. The fact that the Vietnamese language allows this stark opposition of elements may partially explain why coupling has become an important rhetorical strategy in the Vietnamese tradition.

But many English texts contain couplings. Samuel Johnson, the eighteenth-century man of letters, is well known for his balanced style. There are probably occasions when people of all cultures would find symmetry of expression pleasing and appropriate. So what makes Vietnamese coupling special? It is special because, whereas coupling for English writers is primarily a matter of style, for Vietnamese it has been more than a stylistic embellishment: it has been a way of solving problems. Coupling in Vietnamese is what Western rhetoricians call a "heuristic procedure"; it is a way of using language to discover things about the world. Admittedly we also compare and contrast in writing essays and "weigh" alternatives in making decisions, but because coupling has not traditionally been a guiding aesthetic principle, it has not influenced the way we approach the world as much as it has the Vietnamese. So many Vietnamese proverbs are coupled phrases or sentences that it becomes impossible in the Vietnamese tradition to separate the process of coupling from the process of acquiring conventional wisdom.

Both fictional and real characters employ this process: they juxtapose words and phrases to display for themselves in stark terms the nature of their dilemma. Then they make a choice. In Illustration II Thạch Chủ weighs the virtues of loyalty and filial piety. When neither virtue tips the scale, he chooses suicide as the only alternative. In Illustration V Thúy Kiều weighs the demands of love and filial piety. When she realizes the latter is "heavier", she decides to sell herself to save her father. In Illustration VII Phạm Quỳnh weighs *nhĩa vụ* 'duty' and *quyền lợi* 'rights' and finds that the former should be given more weight in developing countries such as Vietnam. Coupling is undoubtedly an important ingredient of many Vietnamese texts—even of those that contain only a sprinkling of coupling words and phrases—because it is a part of the inference-generating process that the text creators went through preparatory to writing down their ideas.

How often is coupling present in the actual words of a text? It is not, of course, the way sentences are constructed in normal conversation. People do not make sure their utterance opposes the previous utterance of their interlocutor unless, like the scholar and the tavern keeper in Illustration

VI, they are playing the game of *đổi*. Nevertheless, coupling is, as Nguyễn Văn Ngọc points out, "the ABCs of Vietnamese, the writer's first step."<sup>12</sup> It was a prominent feature of almost all Vietnamese written texts until the early twentieth century. Throughout Vietnamese history, diplomatic notes, examinations, and stories were composed by coupling one phrase with another, or one line with another, or one section of a text with another. Vietnamese writers knew that if they didn't use coupling, their readers would think they were unlearned. The emergence of prose—writing with no rhyme and little or no coupling—is a recent development in Vietnam, an event which occurred simultaneously with Vietnam's change from a traditional to a modern state. Even in modern prose, however, one still finds considerable coupling between and within sentences, and in conversation coupling, while not common between utterances, does occur within utterances in the form of coupling words and four-syllable idiomatic expressions.

Coupling remains prevalent in modern Vietnamese in part because four-syllable expressions continue to be popular. We have them also in English—"First come, first served"; "Last hired, first fired"—but the Vietnamese have many more than we do, and they use them much more often. It is a rare conversation that does not contain at least one. Below I have written the coupling words that sum up Illustrations I, X, and XI; also included are the four-syllable idiomatic expressions that can be generated from the coupling words:

- Illustration I *tiên rồng* [lit. 'fairy spirit—dragon']: the ancestors of the Vietnamese, the Vietnamese race;  
*con rồng cháu tiên* [lit. 'children (of) dragon (and) grandchildren (of) fairy spirit']: the Vietnamese people.
- Illustration X *đầu đuôi* [lit. 'head—tail']: from beginning to end;  
*đầu voi đuôi chuột* [lit. 'head (of) elephant (and) tail (of) mouse']: good start and bad finish.
- Illustration XI *duyên nợ* [lit. 'predestined affinity—obligation']: fate (particularly in regard to marriage);  
*may duyên rui nợ* [lit. 'good luck predestined affinity, bad luck obligation']: if one is lucky, one's spouse will be compatible; if one is unlucky, one's spouse will be an obligation.

If coupling in Vietnamese is a text-building strategy and heuristic procedure, what are comparable strategies and procedures in the English tradition? I would nominate the following: arranging items in a linear order, classifying into categories, and considering issues as problems to be solved by the application of method—usually the scientific method consisting of the stages *analyze, hypothesize, test, conclude, and then act*.

The preceding statement exemplifies these procedures at work. In it I have arranged American heuristic devices in a linear sequence according to a principle which I haven't yet made explicit, but which is roughly related to chronology and degree of consciousness. I'm assuming that the scientific



method came later and that it is a more consciously applied device than the devices of arranging things in temporal sequence or classifying them according to some criterion. But I'm not sure of these things. By arranging I'm also inventing, discovering things about my topic. The above statement is also a classification. In it I divide "Important Heuristic Devices Used by Americans" into three types. And the essay of which this sentence is a part is a loose application of a problem-solving method. In it I take a problem—the difficulty of comprehending foreign language texts—which I assume is solvable. I then analyze the problem, primarily by giving illustrations of texts which on first hearing or reading I only partially understood. I then hypothesize: comprehending second language texts is difficult because the inference-making processes that contributed to their formation are unfamiliar. I do not submit my hypothesis to an empirical test, but the reader is invited to reread my illustrations to see if they are more comprehensible after he/she has learned about the importance of coupling as a text-building strategy. I shall state my conclusions and suggestions for action later.

Besides serving a heuristic function, coupling in Vietnamese is also involved in myth-evoking, in activating in a hearer's or reader's mind units of stored cultural knowledge. Myth-evoking is not a separate process but a part of text-building. It enables a speaker or writer to say much with few words by exploiting shared knowledge. Most Vietnamese coupling words and four-syllable expressions are rich in associations. Some have been recontextualized so many times they have become touchstones to the history of an entire civilization. For Vietnamese, coupling words such as *trung hiếu* 'loyalty—filial piety', *chung thủy* 'faithfulness', and *duyên nợ* 'predestined affinity (or lack of it) in marriage' and four-syllable expressions such as *trai tài gái sắc* 'men have talents, women have looks', *nấu sủ xôi kinh* [lit. 'to cook histories, to steam classics'] 'to study hard', and *chống Mỹ cứu nước* 'oppose the Americans, save the country' evoke certain pre-texts, or, if one prefers the terminology of Van Dijk and researchers in Artificial Intelligence and computers, they activate frames—"units of conventional knowledge according to which mutual expectations and interactions are organized."<sup>11</sup>

Following Roland Barthes, I prefer to call the knowledge evoked by these Vietnamese expressions myths. Some may think a coupling word is too small to evoke an entire myth,<sup>12</sup> but, Barthes points out, "a minute form (a word, a gesture, even incidental, so long as it is noticed) can serve as signifier to a concept filled with a very rich history."<sup>14</sup> A fringe of hair on the forehead, for example, can be used to suggest "Romanness" in a performance of *Julius Caesar*.<sup>15</sup>

There are, says Barthes, two systems: a linguistic system and a myth system. The latter "gets hold of" the first and uses it to build its own system. Whether we are dealing with language or another sign system, such as pictures, there is *meaning* and *form*. If I am at the barber's, says Barthes, and am presented with a copy of *Paris-Match* showing a young Negro in French uniform saluting the French tricolor, this is what I see: this Negro saluting is the *meaning* of the picture. But, continues Barthes, this pictorial sign becomes

involved in "a second-order semiological system" which is myth. This picture tells me that "France is a great empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors." This second system is parasitical on the first. The meaning of the picture is a crucial input to the myth-producing system, but after it becomes *form*, the meaning becomes impoverished". One must "put the biography of the Negro in parentheses", says Barthes, as one understands the *Paris-Match* picture as myth.<sup>16</sup>

When coupling words are used to evoke myths in Vietnamese, their original meaning, like the biography of the Negro soldier, is often obscured. *Trung hiếu* 'loyalty—filial piety', for example, means loyalty, primarily to one's king, and piety towards one's parents, but it is also a shorthand expression used to evoke the entire mythology of Confucianism. When used by Vietnamese, the meaning of *trung hiếu* is by no means completely suppressed. Meaning, says Barthes, is never completely killed by a myth-evoking sign:

But the essential point in all this is that the form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal. One believes that the meaning is going to die, but it is a death with reprieve; the meaning loses its value, but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment. The meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation: the form must constantly be able to be rooted again in the meaning and to get there what nature it needs for its constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form which defines myth.<sup>17</sup>

Because Hồ Chí Minh knew that the coupling word *trung hiếu* was one of the richest words in the Vietnamese language, a word that had been a source of spiritual nutriment for centuries of Vietnamese history, he called on it to nourish the new myth combining Marxism and patriotism that he was attempting to form. Vietnamese must, he said, be loyal [*trung*], but not to the king, as under the old feudal system, but to the party; they must be pious [*hiếu*], not just to members of their immediate family, but to all the people in the nation family of Vietnam.

But with coupling words things become slightly more complicated than the above analysis suggests because many have two meanings: a non-idiomatic meaning, which emerges when the two halves are read separately, and an idiomatic meaning, which arises when the two halves are taken as a whole. The degree of idiomaticity of coupling words varies. *Ruột thịt* [lit.: intestine (and) flesh], which means kin or blood relationship, is heavily idiomatic; *buôn bán* [lit.: to buy (and) sell], which means business or commerce, is moderately idiomatic; *lâu mau* [lit.: long time—short time], asked in questions such as *ngài tới đây lâu mau rồi?* [lit.: You arrive here long time short time already?], is only slightly idiomatic.

Eric H. Lenneberg and others have objected to the work of researchers

whose conclusions about a culture are based on a literal interpretation of expressions, pointing out that many expressions that are "alive" for the foreign analyst have long been "dead"—as dead as the proverbial doornail—metaphors for the native speaker.<sup>18</sup> Although a foreign analyst of English might note that breakfast originally meant to break a fast, this argument runs, Americans aren't aware of this notion when they sit down to eat their cornflakes. This objection does not hold for Vietnamese coupling words and four-syllable expressions because, for Vietnamese, analysis of the meaning of the separate halves of a coupling word or expression is an accepted rhetorical technique. The non-idiomatic meaning of words is thus constantly being revived. Scholars, seeking both wisdom and rhetorical power, return to the meaning of the parts of coupling words, as Nguyễn Bê returns to the literal meaning of the parts of *chung thủy* in Illustration VIII, and as Hồ Chí Minh returns to the meaning of *gia đình* 'family' in the following excerpt from a speech:

*Gia đình* has an old meaning and a new meaning, a narrow meaning and a wide meaning. *Gia* is the house; *đình* is the courtyard. In other words, the suggestion was one should worry only that the father and mother, wife and children in one's own house were warm and well-fed and content; if others were poor and miserable, that was of no concern. But this is selfish, not right.

According to the new meaning, *gia đình* is wider. It includes, for example, one's fellow workers in a factory, in an agency, in a village cooperative—all these people must come together and love each other like brothers and sisters in one *gia đình*. Understood in an even wider sense, *gia đình* includes all the people in the country...<sup>19</sup>

The original non-idiomatic meaning of coupling words is also restored when speakers and writers split a coupling word (as Hồ Chí Minh splits *trung hiếu* in Illustration IV) and then use the halves as pivotal weights to balance a longer expression.

But even if the speakers of a target language seldom recapture the original, non-idiomatic meaning of a word, students attempting to learn that target language should not be discouraged from seeking it out, as much can be learned in the search. The knowledge that our ancestors thought of eating in the morning as breaking a fast, whereas Vietnamese conceived of it as *ăn cơm sáng* [lit.: eat rice morning], is not trivial information; it could lead the student to explore some interesting cultural and linguistic differences.

In any event, the question of whether teachers should or should not encourage students to dwell on the literal meaning of expressions is an academic one: students will dwell on it whether we want them to or not. Anyone reading second language texts will inevitably read expressions literally on the first encounter. In learning to become a fluent reader of a second language, one must move from a consideration of the literal meaning of idiomatic expressions to an understanding of the degrees of idiomaticity they have assumed, and then proceed from this understanding to an awareness of the myths they evoke in the minds of native speakers.

What constructions in English correspond to Vietnamese coupling words?

Multi-word verbal expressions such as *to put up with*, *to get ahead*, *to drop out*, *to fall in love*, and *to run for office* are similar in many respects. Like Vietnamese coupling words, many have an idiomatic meaning. The meaning of *to put up with*, for instance, cannot be deciphered by considering its parts. They are also like coupling words in that the degree of idiomaticity varies greatly from expression to expression. *To run for office*, for example, is idiomatic, but less so than *to put up with*; at least its individual elements are useful clues to its idiomatic meaning.

When foreign students of English encounter idiomatic multi-word verbal expressions, they have to learn to consider them as conceptual units. If they know in which syntactic positions idiomaticity often occurs, they will not be surprised when they encounter it in those positions and thus should be able to quickly readjust an erroneous meaning prediction. For example, foreign students may at first reading understand the sentence *He decided to feel out the committee and get its reaction to the proposal* literally, but if they are prepared to encounter idiomaticity in multi-word verbal expressions like *to feel out*, they should be able to backtrack quickly and locate the cause of their miscomprehension. Similarly, Americans can read Vietnamese much more fluently if they are prepared for idiomaticity in two-syllable coupling words and four-syllable expressions. In reading the Vietnamese text of Illustration VI, I came across a sentence containing the words *trêu hoa ghẹo nguyệt*, which literally mean 'to tease flowers (and) tempt the moon'. The passage was about a scholar who stopped off at a tavern after failing his exams. Nothing yet had been said about flowers or the moon, so I was confused until I realized *trêu hoa ghẹo nguyệt* was a four-syllable idiomatic expression meaning to flirt with or court a girl.

Like Vietnamese coupling words and expressions, English multi-word verbal expressions also evoke myths. Expressions such as *to get ahead*, *to drop out*, and *to fall in love*, in addition to conveying an idiomatic meaning, also refer to conventional knowledge shared by members of American society. *To get ahead*, for example, evokes a philosophy of life as clearly as does the Vietnamese coupling words *trung hiếu* or *chung thủy*. The multi-word verbal expression *to fall in love* evokes knowledge in a native speaker which is much more extensive than simply the understanding that *fall* is to be taken figuratively.

In conclusion, I think that we who teach ESL reading classes should be aware that how students whose native language is not English write or read texts depends a great deal on how their native language predisposes them to perceive situations. Kenneth and Yetta Goodman and Frank Smith have shown that "reading is only incidentally visual,"<sup>20</sup> that the knowledge crucial to reading lies "behind the eyeball."<sup>21</sup> Readers who read texts in their own language will do so, they suggest, because they know what to expect. It is reasonable to assume that readers who have trouble reading texts in a second language falter because they have not yet developed a new set of expectations. If this assumption is correct, examination of what the second

language reader brings to texts in the form of predispositions and expectations should be an important part of reading research.

Goodman stresses that good readers make predictions that they later confirm or revise, but he does not always make clear on what basis fluent readers make these predictions. His semantic cue system encompasses the entire experiential and conceptual background of the reader. The knowledge that may feed into the reading process is unquestionably vast, but it also must be organized in some way—in terms of frames or scripts or myths. Further exploration of how a reader's prior knowledge is categorized, and of the ability of short expressions such as Vietnamese coupling words and English multi-word verbal expressions to evoke larger units of conventional knowledge, seems timely.

Finally, I think we as teachers of ESL reading should include more presentations on etymology and idiomaticity. At the very least, discussion of these topics should provide the student with a mnemonic crutch to aid in vocabulary retention. But it also should improve students' reading ability, and for advanced students, it can turn into a fascinating course in the history of the culture of the speakers of the target language.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Professor Alton L. Becker, Department of Linguistics, University of Michigan, who helped me think through many of the issues discussed in this article. It first appeared in *Learning to Read in Different Languages*, edited by Sarah Hudelson, a volume in the Linguistics and Literacy Series, Roger W. Shuy, General Series Editor, published in 1981 by the Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C. With the editors' permission, it is reprinted here in a slightly revised version.
- <sup>2</sup> See "Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ" in *Beyond the East Wind*, a collection of Vietnamese folktales translated by Duong Van Quyen and Jewell R. Coburn, illustrated by Nena G. Ullberg (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Burn, Hart and Co., 1976), pp. 7-11.
- <sup>3</sup> "Thủ gửi thanh-niên" 'A letter for young people', 2 September 1965, reprinted in *Bàn về Công-tác Giáo-dục* 'Discussing Action in Education' (Hà-nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Sự Thật, 1972), p. 93.
- <sup>4</sup> The *Kim Vân Kiều* was written by Nguyễn Du (1765-1820). I am quoting here from Huỳnh Sanh Thông's translation, *The Tale of Kiều* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 33.
- <sup>5</sup> Diên Hùng, *Phép Làm Thơ* 'Rules of Poetic Composition' (Sài-gòn: Khai Trí, 1961), pp. 39-40.
- <sup>6</sup> Phạm Quỳnh, "Nghĩa vụ là gì?" 'What is duty?' in *Thường Chi Văn Tập* 'A Collection of the Writings of Thường Chi [= Phạm Quỳnh's pen name]', (Sài-gòn: Bộ Quốc-Gia Giáo-Dục), Vol. I, pp. 9-16.
- <sup>7</sup> Nguyễn Bá translated his essays and compiled them in a work called "Study

of the New Essence of Life: *Chung Thủy*", Sài-gòn, ca. 1969. (Mimeographed.) The passage quoted is from this work, pp. 10-11.

- <sup>8</sup> Quoted by Hoàng Văn Hành in "Suy-nghi về cách dùng thành-ngữ qua văn thơ của Hồ Chủ Tịch" 'Reflections on the way Chairman Hồ used idiomatic expressions', *Ngôn Ngữ* 3 (1973): 11.
- <sup>9</sup> Benjamin Lee Whorf, "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language", in *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. John B. Carroll (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1956), p. 148.
- <sup>10</sup> The additional requirement of topographical equivalence is what distinguishes Vietnamese couplings from the couplings Samuel R. Levin finds in English poetry. In Levin's approach, two elements do not have to occupy the same physical location in their respective phrases to make a coupling. See Samuel R. Levin, *Linguistic Structures in Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1962), pp. 30-41.
- <sup>11</sup> The notion of "thought-mass" comes from Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* (Memoir 7, Indiana University Publications in Anthropology and Linguistics) (Baltimore, 1953), pp. 29ff.
- <sup>12</sup> Quoted by Nguyễn Đình Hoà in "Parallel Constructions in Vietnamese", *Lingua* 15 (1965): 133.
- <sup>13</sup> Teun A. van Dijk, "Semantic Macro-Structures and Knowledge Frames in Discourse Comprehension," in *Cognitive Processes in Comprehension: Proceedings of the XIIth Carnegie-Mellon Symposium on Cognition*, eds. Patricia Carpenter and Marcel Just (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1977), p. 21.
- <sup>14</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), p. 120.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- <sup>18</sup> Eric H. Lenneberg, "Cognition in Ethnolinguistics", *Language* 29 (1953): 465-66.
- <sup>19</sup> Quoted by Cù Đình Tú in "Tìm hiểu cách Hồ Chủ Tịch giảng giải các khái niệm cho quần chúng", 'Exploring Chairman Hồ's style of explaining his views to the people', *Ngôn Ngữ* 2 (1973):32-33.
- <sup>20</sup> "Reading Is Only Incidentally Visual" is the title of an article by Paul A. Kolers. It appears in *Psycholinguistics and the Teaching of Reading*, ed. Kenneth S. Goodman and James T. Fleming (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1969), pp. 8-16. See also Kenneth S. Goodman and Yetta M. Goodman, "Learning About Psycholinguistic Processes by Analyzing Oral Reading", *Harvard Educational Review* 47 (1977): 332, and Frank Smith, *Comprehension and Learning: A Conceptual Framework for Teachers* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975).
- <sup>21</sup> Frank Smith, *Understanding Reading* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), pp. 68-79.