

French language in Vietnam

French was the official language of **Vietnam** from the beginning of French colonial rule in the mid-19th century until independence under the Geneva Accords of 1954, and maintained *de facto* official status in South Vietnam until its collapse in 1975. Vietnam contains the largest of the three Francophone communities in Southeast Asia, the others being found in Laos and Cambodia. French is spoken by over 5% of the population and is sometimes used in international relations and education.^[1]

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History

The French language's presence in Vietnam began in the 18th century when French explorers and merchants began sailing near the Indochina coast. When the French replaced the Portuguese as the primary European power in Southeast Asia in the 1790s by helping to unify Vietnam under the Nguyen Dynasty and later colonizing Southern Vietnam, they introduced the French language to locals. French became the governing language of French Indochina, which included present-day Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Many Vietnamese began learning French, which replaced the native Vietnamese and royal court Chinese languages and eventually the Vietnamese language's official script was in the Latin alphabet.^[2] The building of missionary and government schools spread the French language among educated Vietnamese and it soon became the language of the elite classes by the end of the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, the French language began spreading to the urban masses and became the primary language of education. A French pidgin called Tây Bồi was developed among Vietnamese servants in French households and those who spoke partial French. Nevertheless, at the French language's height in Vietnam between the 1900s and 1940s, a large number of Vietnamese did not speak French well or learn the language and some revolutionaries refused to learn the colonial language, though ironically speeches and papers written to promote independence were written in French. During World War II, Japan briefly occupied Vietnam and established Vietnamese as the sole official and educational language.^[3]

The influence of the French language in Vietnam slowly began to decline after World War II as revolutionary movements increased and their works began to be written more in Vietnamese. Poorer and generally, more rural populations began to resist French rule and guerrilla forces, the Viet Minh attacked the French and sparked the First Indochina War. The French language however, continued its presence in government, education and media in areas not held by the Viet Minh. At the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the Viet Minh defeated the French and Vietnam gained its independence, though the nation was soon divided into a communist, Soviet-oriented north, and pro-French, pro-U.S. government in the south.^[4] Fearing persecution by the communist government, hundreds of thousands fled to the south, including French-educated and speaking elite. Despite the Vietnam War erupting shortly afterwards, French continued a healthy presence in South Vietnam, where it was an administrative and educational language.^[5] The sharpest decline of the French language in Vietnam was after the Fall of Saigon in 1975 as the communist government imposed Vietnamese as the sole official and educational language on the entire nation, including the south, which was in a transitional phase until 1976.

The number of students receiving their education in French in Vietnam declined to about 40% by the 1980s and continued to decline well into the 1990s.^[1] Additionally, a large number of French-speakers who were anti-communist fled Vietnam and immigrated to nations such as the United States, France, Canada (most particularly Quebec and Ontario) and Australia. As of 2000, only about 5% of students received their education in French. Meanwhile, the rise of the English language caused a further decline in the status of French in Vietnam as English became seen as the language of international trade, commerce and diplomacy. While English is now the most studied foreign language, in recent years French has been revived in Vietnamese education and the nation is a member of La Francophonie. Furthermore, French has somewhat of a diplomatic language position in Vietnam.

In higher education and professions, French remains the principal language and many educated Vietnamese continue to speak French, especially among the elderly population, a legacy of the colonial era. Recently, the number of secondary schools using French as main language of instruction has increased in many localities and schools in major cities.^[6] Vietnam has also recently become a destination for students from other parts of Asia to come and study the French language.^[7] Communities of returned refugees from France and Quebec as well as students who have studied in Francophone nations have also added to the French-speaking population of Vietnam.

Dialect characteristics

Vietnamese French is based on standard French, but contains words that have been influenced not only by Vietnamese but also by Chinese and English, the latter due to U.S. presence in the south during the Vietnam War. Additionally, the pronoun *vous* used as the formal and plural form of you is used not only to address elders but also to adults of the same age unlike Standard French, where *tu* is used among adult friends of the same age.

Despite these minor differences, the form of French taught at Vietnamese schools and colleges is that of standard French.

Influence on Vietnamese

The Vietnamese language contains a significant number of French loanwords and placenames. The majority of words having French origin are those relating to objects, food and technology introduced to the Vietnamese during the colonial era. Additionally, the Vietnamese alphabet came to be written in a Latin-based script instead of Chinese script traditionally used by the former royal court. It became heavily promoted by the French colonial government, which got rid of Chinese influence on the Vietnamese education system by imposing a French-based system.^[8]

Below are some notable words that have made their way into standard Vietnamese from French:



The Saigon Railway Station sign features a loanword from French.

Vietnamese	French	English
ăng-ten	antenne	antenna, aerial
ba toong	bâton	cane
bê tông	béton	concrete
bi-da	bille	billiards, Snooker
(bút) bi	(stylo à) bille	ballpoint pen
bơ	beurre	butter
búp bê, búp bê	poupée	doll
cà phê	café	coffee
ca-pô	capot	hood/bonnet (of a car)
cao su	caoutchouc	rubber
cờ-lê	clé	wrench
cùi dĩa	cuillère	spoon
ga	gare	railway station
(bánh) ga tô	gâteau	cake
(chỉ) len	laine	wool
ma đăm	madame	madam, ma'am, Mrs.
mề đay	médaille	medal
(khăn) mùi xoa	mouchoir	handkerchief
ô tô buýt	autobus	motor bus
(bánh) patê sô	pâté chaud (obsolete)	savoury puff pastry
(cục) pin	pile	battery
(đèn) pha	phare	headlamp
phanh	frein	brake
phệc-mơ-tuya	fermeture	zipper
phim	film	movie
pho mát, phô mai	fromage	cheese
(áo) sơ mi	chemise	shirt
(quần) si/xi líp	slip	underwear
tăng xông	tension	hypertension
(táo) trái bom	pomme	apple
tuốc-nơ-vít	tournevis	screwdriver
vô lăng	volant	steering wheel
xà lách	salade	lettuce
xa lát	salade	salad
xà phòng, xà bông	savon	soap
xăng, ét-xăng	essence	gasoline
xu chiêng	soutien-gorge	bra

Despite the decline of French in the late 1970s to 2000s, Vietnam continues to have a French-media market and presence. A small number of French-language newspapers used to circulate in the country, most dominately the now extinct *Saigon Eco* and the only remaining state-owned paper - *Le Courrier du Vietnam*. News broadcasts as well as television programs in French are shown on Vietnamese television channels daily Radio broadcasts in French are also present^[1]

See also

- French language in Laos
- French language in Cambodia
- French Indochina
- French Cochinchina
- Annam (French protectorate)
- Tonkin (French protectorate)

Notes and references

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External links

- Official website of Le Courrier du Vietnam
- Official website of La Francophonie

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