

Research Article

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River and Water Animals in Southern Vietnamese Folk Verses: A Cultural Categories Perspective for Language and Cultural Education

Truong Chi Hung 

Abstract

Background/purpose. This study explores how animals associated with rivers and water are represented in Southern Vietnamese folk verses. It addresses the broader question of how language encodes cultural and ecological knowledge, focusing on cultural categorization as conceptualized in Cultural Linguistics. The research aims to uncover how the classification of river and water animals reflects the cognitive and cultural worldview of the Southern Vietnamese people, thereby contributing insights relevant to language and cultural education.

Materials/methods. The study employs qualitative content analysis of selected Southern Vietnamese folk verses, identifying and categorizing vocabulary related to river and water animals. These lexical items are then interpreted through the lens of cultural categories to reveal embedded cultural and ecological knowledge.

Results. The findings show that references to river and water animals go beyond mere denotation of species; they also encode cultural meanings, values, and knowledge systems. The depth and nuance in the classification of these animals reflect a long-standing familiarity with the riverine environment and a rich reservoir of folk knowledge developed since the early periods of Southern Vietnamese settlement.

Conclusion. River and water animal vocabulary in Southern Vietnamese folk verses serves as a linguistic medium for transmitting cultural knowledge and ecological awareness. These findings highlight the potential of folk literature as a valuable resource in language and cultural education, especially for teaching cultural categories and local worldviews.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Cultural Linguistics has gained increasing attention for its ability to bridge disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, and cognitive science. By offering a robust theoretical foundation and rigorous analytical tools, it has been recognized as an independent field of study (Sharifian, 2011; Sharifian, 2017). Cultural Linguistics provides valuable insights into how language both reflects and shapes cultural cognition through three central constructs: cultural schemas, cultural categories, and cultural metaphors. These constructs serve as key analytical lenses for investigating how cultural experiences are embedded in language.

A growing body of research has applied Cultural Linguistics to diverse domains, including intercultural communication, language education, and endangered language documentation. For instance, Sharifian (2015) explored how cultural conceptualizations influence English as an International Language (EIL) pedagogy, while Kraska-Szlenk (2024) examined embodied lexicons in Swahili to reveal culturally grounded metaphors. More recently, Baranyiné Kóczy and Szelid (2024) compiled cross-cultural studies on traditional conceptualizations in folk discourse, idioms, and environmental language, highlighting the relevance of Cultural Linguistics in preserving intangible cultural heritage.

Despite these advances, limited attention has been paid to the application of Cultural Linguistics to Vietnamese folk literature, particularly in relation to ecological and cultural knowledge embedded in regional expressions.

Within this study, we focus on the concept of cultural categories to explore vocabulary related to river and water animals in Southern Vietnamese folk verses. This study sets out with three interrelated aims.

- To identify and analyze the cultural categories related to rivers and water animals as reflected in Southern Vietnamese folk verses.
- To examine how these cultural categories convey ecological knowledge and cultural values specific to the Southern Vietnamese context.
- To explore the educational implications of these cultural-linguistic insights for promoting culturally responsive language teaching.

This focus not only contributes to the broader understanding of language-culture relationships but also has educational implications. Integrating folk literature and cultural conceptualizations into high school and university curricula can promote students' awareness of local ecological knowledge, cultural identity, and linguistic diversity. Such an approach supports culturally responsive pedagogy and positions language as a medium of lived experience and collective memory.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cultural Linguistics Framework

This study is grounded in Sharifian's Cultural Linguistics framework, which conceptualizes language-culture relations through three interlocking constructs: cultural schemas, cultural categories, and cultural metaphors (Sharifian, 2011; Sharifian, 2017). Cultural schemas are abstract mental templates formed through recurring cultural experiences; cultural categories are groupings of concepts grounded in shared practices; and cultural metaphors are mappings from a concrete domain (e.g., water animals) to abstract domains (e.g., moral values).

2.2. Core Constructs: Categories, Schemas, Metaphors

The concept of cultural categories is a core component of Cultural Linguistics, first introduced and developed extensively by Sharifian. According to Sharifian (2011, 2017), cultural categories are

conceptual classifications grounded in a community's shared cultural practices and are often encoded in the vocabulary of a language. These categories are collective cognitive structures that influence language use, shape cultural identity, and mediate how a community perceives and interacts with the world.

Cultural schemas, as another major construct, refer to abstract mental representations formed through recurring cultural experiences. These guide beliefs, norms, behaviors, and values (Sharifian, 2011). Cultural metaphors, meanwhile, emerge from shared cultural experiences and offer metaphorical systems that differ across cultures (Kövecses, 2005; Sharifian, 2011). These three constructs—schemas, categories, and metaphors—together form the foundation for understanding cultural conceptualizations in language.

2.3. Categorization in Cognitive Science

The process of categorization itself is central to human cognition. As Tran Van Co (2006) observes, categorization is fundamental to thought processes such as comparison, identification, and analogy. It enables humans to group phenomena based on perceived similarities. Eleanor Rosch's prototype theory (1975) further refines this view by introducing prototypes—the most representative members of a category. Items that closely resemble the prototype are seen as better exemplars, helping explain how categorization shapes linguistic and cultural representations.

2.4. Folk Taxonomy in Southern Vietnamese Verses

In this study, we apply these theoretical insights to the analysis of 1,022 Southern Vietnamese folk verses containing aquatic animal references. Our analysis reveals a sophisticated folk taxonomy structured around cultural categories, with fish emerging as the prototype category. The analysis reveals a sophisticated folk taxonomy structured around cultural categories, with fish emerging as the prototype category. The classification demonstrates a seven-level depth, indicating the richness of ecological and cultural knowledge embedded in the language. This supports the argument that folk verses are valuable repositories of cultural cognition, especially in communities closely tied to riverine environments.

Building on the Cultural Linguistics framework and cognitive insights discussed above, this study applies Sharifian's tripartite model of schemas, categories, and metaphors to a corpus of 1,022 Southern Vietnamese folk verses. It investigates how aquatic-animal vocabulary encodes cultural categories and conceptualizations rooted in local ecological experience. The analysis unfolds around six focal themes:

1. The integration of the Cultural Linguistics theoretical framework, with special emphasis on cultural categories.
2. A comprehensive analysis of a corpus of 1,022 folk verses containing water-related terminology.
3. The classification system for aquatic animals in Vietnamese folk culture identifies fish as the prototype category.
4. The revelation of a seven-level hierarchical structure in the categorization demonstrates the taxonomy's sophistication.
5. An exploration of the cultural and cognitive significance of these classifications, highlighting Southern Vietnamese people's deep connection to riverine environments.
6. The relationship between language, culture, and thought as demonstrated through these folk categorizations.

By linking these themes back to the constructs of schemas, categories, and metaphors, the study not only maps local ecological knowledge but also demonstrates how folk literature functions as a dynamic repository of cultural cognition.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design: Qualitative Document Analysis

This study employs a qualitative document analysis approach as outlined by Bowen (2009) to systematically review and interpret folk-verse texts for cultural meaning. Document analysis allows us to treat the verses as social artifacts, examining how language encodes ecological knowledge and cultural categories without researcher interference.

3.2. Data Collection and Selection Criteria

The corpus was drawn from four authoritative compilations of Southern Vietnamese folk literature:

1. Bảo Định Giang, Nguyễn Tấn Phát, Trần Tuấn Vinh, and Bùi Mạnh Nhì (1984), *Southern Folk Songs*, Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House.
2. Department of Literature, Cần Thơ University (1999), *Folk Literature of the Mekong Delta (Folk Songs Section)*, Education Publishing House.
3. Lê Giang (2004), *Walking with Folk Songs*, Youth Publishing House.
4. Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng and Phạm Thiều Hường (2020), *Complete Collection of Southern Folk Songs* (3 volumes), Culture–Literature Publishing House.

Selection criteria included:

- Geographical origin: Texts documented in the Southern Vietnamese region
- Language: Vietnamese folk verses written in vernacular or with standardized orthography
- Thematic relevance: Explicit reference to rivers, water bodies, or aquatic animals
- Source reliability: Peer-reviewed or academically vetted compilations

These sources were selected for their comprehensive scope, scientific rigor, and reliability, as they represent extensive and methodical efforts to preserve and document the oral traditions of the Southern Vietnamese region. The collected folk verses were reviewed using a qualitative content analysis approach, focusing on the lexical representation and cultural categorization of riverine and aquatic animals, especially fish.

An initial pool of 1,150 verses was identified. We excluded 128 verses due to duplication (65) or absence of aquatic-animal terminology (63), yielding a final dataset of 1,022 verses for analysis.

3.3. Data Analysis Procedures

All verses were digitized and organized in Microsoft Excel to enable systematic coding and retrieval. The analysis unfolded in three phases:

1. Data Organization: Each verse was entered into an Excel spreadsheet, with columns representing relevant variables such as:

- o Verse ID or source
- o Aquatic animal terms (keywords)
- o Type/category of aquatic animal (e.g., fish, crustacean, amphibian)

- o Associated cultural metaphors or attributes
- o Seasonal or behavioral references

2. Keyword Frequency Analysis: Using Excel's built-in functions (e.g., COUNTIF), the frequency of each aquatic term was calculated to identify the most commonly referenced animals and concepts within the verses.

3. Categorical Coding and Sorting: Aquatic terms were coded into cultural categories based on taxonomy (biological and folk), and Excel's sorting and filtering functions were applied to group verses by categories. Tables were used to summarize and visualize the distribution of terms across categories.

Throughout the analysis, codes were iteratively refined to ensure consistency and to capture emergent subcategories. Memo-writing documented decisions at each step, enhancing transparency and auditability.

4. Results

4.1. Frequency and Distribution of River and Water Terms

The results showed a total of 567 river and water-related terms used in the 1,022 Southern folk verses, with a frequency of 3,082 occurrences. On average, each folk verse in the survey group contains 3.02 occurrences of river and water-related terms. Among the 1,022 folk verses surveyed, vocabulary related to the category of animals associated with rivers and water includes 177 units, accounting for 31.2%, with a frequency of 965 occurrences, accounting for 31.3%.

4.2. Prototype and Taxonomic Depth of Aquatic Animal Category

Terms related to "fish" occupy the largest number and highest frequency in the category of animals associated with rivers and water. Notable examples include "fish" (174 occurrences), "the fish" (45 occurrences), "climbing perch" (21 occurrences), "snakehead fish" (13 occurrences), and so on. This indicates that among Southern river and water animals, "fish" is the most numerous, divided into the most species, and is the closest and most important to humans. Therefore, "fish" can be considered the prototype of this category. Researcher Nguyen Huu Hiep has documented at least 361 different types of fish in Southern Vietnam. He also noted: "Because of such extremely rich and diverse aquatic resources, when the French drew the map of Southern Vietnam, they did not forget to clearly mark 'Pêcheries' (places with plenty of fish) in Chau Doc and Long Xuyen (now An Giang province), and 'nuoc mam' (fish sauce)" (Nguyen Huu Hiep, 2015, p. 32).

To illustrate the depth in classifying river and water animals by Southern Vietnamese people, we summarize it in the following table:

Table 1. Classification of Animals Associated with Rivers and Water in Southern Folk Verses

Level		Types of Creatures Associated with Rivers and Water Bodies					
Level 1		Animals				Plants	
Level 2	<i>Aquatic</i>	<i>Amphibious</i>		<i>Others</i>	<i>Natural</i>	<i>Natural/Cultivated</i>	
Level 3	Fish, shrimp			Frogs, toads, crabs, snails	Snakes, herons	Water hyacinth, mangrove	Lotus, cajeput
Level 4	Fish, the fish	Shrimp, the shrimp	Frog, toad	Crab, snail	Snake, heron	Water hyacinth, mangrove tree	Lotus flower, lotus bloom
Level 5	Climbing perch, goby, loach, catfish...	Giant freshwater prawn, black tiger shrimp, sand shrimp...	Male frog, round toad, rice frog	Giant crab, pincer crab	Liu diu snake, ghost heron, blue heron	Mangrove fruit, mangrove shoot, mangrove root	X
Level 6	Rugged climbing perch, field climbing perch, humpback grouper, fighting fish, sardine, yellow catfish	Green giant freshwater prawn	X	X	X	X	X
Level 7	Chinese fighting fish	X	X	X	X	X	X

Table 1 shows that the classification of animals associated with rivers and water in the category divides into two branches—"animals" and "plants"—from level 1. However, by level 2, they are no longer balanced. Specifically, in the "animals" branch, the division is more diverse and deeper compared to the "plants" branch. In terms of figures, the uneven branching is partly because vocabulary related to animals associated with rivers and water is quite dominant (70 units, frequency 630 occurrences), while "plants" only has 34 vocabulary units with a frequency of 117 occurrences.

However, we can also see that these figures reflect the common cognitive characteristics of the discourse community. "According to cognitive perception, in human thinking, the entity that is closest, the topic that the discourse community is most concerned with, appears first, appears most frequently, and has the greatest impact" (Trinh Sam, 2020). Thus, it can be seen that compared to "plants" associated with rivers and water, "animals" associated with rivers and water receive more attention from the Southern Vietnamese discourse community. This may be because there are too many "animals" associated with rivers and water, and they exist in close proximity to humans.

Moreover, they play a role as the most important food source, so naturally, the community pays more attention to them.

Example: “Cá đâu nhiều bằng cá U Minh/Thần nào linh bằng thần Trần Quang Diệu.”

(Fish nowhere as plentiful as U Minh fish/No spirit as sacred as the spirit of Tran Quang Dieu.)

Also from Table 1, we see that the classification of "animals" is deeper than that of "plants." Within the "animals" group, "fish" is the case with the deepest classification, with 7 levels, while the remaining cases only reach 6 levels (shrimp) or lower. This not only shows the abundance of "fish" and their essential role for humans in general but also reflects the Southern Vietnamese way of life close to rivers and water, their profound understanding of nature, and their utilization of nature for survival.

Example: “Cá lên khỏi nước cá khô/Làm thân con gái lỏa lồ ai khen.”

(Fish out of water dry up/A girl's body uncovered, who would praise.)

We can list some ways Southern Vietnamese people classify "fish" as follows:

- Based on living environment, there are three major groups: field fish (climbing perch, snakehead fish, gourami, loach). The characteristic of the field fish group is that they can live in stagnant water environments, such as rice fields, ponds, ditches, canals. Of course, if they happen to "flow" down to the river, they can also survive; river fish (giant barb, toad fish, tiger fish, flagtail fish). River fish can only live in flowing water environments; they will die if left in stagnant water for a period of time. Sea fish (saltwater stingray, potato fish, sardine) can live in both flowing and stagnant water environments. Note that the classification of natural fish/field fish and farmed fish has only appeared recently. Even within the farmed fish group, people further divide according to many criteria about farming methods and environments: raft-raised fish (basa fish, catfish), pond-raised fish (pangasius, flagtail fish, catfish, two-spot catfish), cage-raised fish in the sea (cobia, grouper)... Additionally, for fish types with the same name, people will attach characteristics about the living environment to distinguish them. For example: freshwater stingray - saltwater stingray; freshwater seahorse - saltwater seahorse; river red fish - sea red fish.

- Based on color, there are two major groups: white fish (silver carp, linh fish, catfish, dashed fish); black fish (climbing perch, snakehead fish). Although classification is based on color, there is a coincidence that the white fish group tends to live in rivers, while the black fish group lives more in fields. Each type of fish can also be classified in more detail according to color. For example: White catfish, yellow catfish; rice loach (white color), turmeric loach (yellow color)...

- Based on skin characteristics with or without scales, there are two major groups: smooth-skinned/scaleless fish (pangasius, flagtail fish, giant barb, driftwood catfish); scaled fish (snakehead fish, climbing perch, dashed fish, catfish)

- Based on size and shape characteristics: Large fish (oil pangasius, flagtail fish, giant barb); medium fish (featherback fish, pangasius, freshwater seahorse); small fish (linh fish, fighting fish, driftwood catfish).

- Based on other distinctive details: The same "flagtail fish" can be regular flagtail fish (no distinctive details), spotted flagtail fish (with two spots on both sides of the gills), or flag flagtail fish (the spine on the fish's back rises high, sometimes above the water surface, resembling a triangular flag). Regular snakehead fish differs from flowered snakehead fish (scales that look like they have patterns). Or, buffalo-tongue fish has a crooked mouth, while gourd catfish has protruding lips...

Example: “Cá lười trâu sấu ai méo miệng/Cá trên bầu nhiều chuyện trót môi.”

(Buffalo-tongue fish sad with crooked mouth/Gourd catfish full of gossip with protruding lips.)

It can be seen that in classifying "fish," Southern Vietnamese people rely not only on sensory perceptions, leading to classification criteria based on color and external characteristics of the object, but also on knowledge accumulated over time. We see that the perception of spatial categories is closely related to the classification method mentioned above. Additionally, folk experience about the characteristics of each type of fish is also applied for classification.

Example:

“Cá rô ăn móng dợn sóng dưới đìa

Cha mẹ phân chia anh đừng lìa mới phải

Sao anh bạc tình bạc ngãi, đành đoạn bỏ em.”

(Climbing perch eating the ripples under the pond

Parents separate, you should not leave

Why are you unfaithful, willing to abandon me.)

4.3. Behavioral and Symbolic Metaphors

One aspect worth noting is that the category of animals associated with rivers and water in Southern Vietnam reflects the unique concept of time of the language community there. In other words, the language denoting river and water animals somewhat expresses the concept of time. For example, mentioning linh fish, water lily flowers will evoke the flood season; mentioning coucal birds will evoke high tide - low tide, or the rhythm of the tides. More specifically, Southern Vietnamese people use expressions like linh fish season, water lily flower season to indicate the flood season; featherback fish season to indicate the period from December to March in the lunar calendar, when featherback fish in the river are abundant, and the featherback fish netting profession is also at its busiest. Clearly, river and water products are not just entities but also reflect perceptions of time, connected to the rhythm of tides, water levels, and floods. Here, time is perceived in a circular form, meaning it repeats according to a certain cycle.

Example:

“Bìm bịp kêu nước lớn anh ơi

Buôn bán không lời chèo chống mỗi mê

Anh đi ghe cá mũi son

Để em ở lại đương mòn móng tay.”

(Coucal birds call high tide, oh you

Trading without profit, rowing exhausts

You go on a red-bowed fishing boat

Leaving me here with worn fingernails.)

A common cognitive feature is also expressed in this category: animals are also human beings. This is a perception based on the deep interaction between humans and nature, specifically the animals associated with rivers and water.

Example:

“Cá về chợ Dĩnh hết mong

Em về Đồng Tháp bỏ chồng cho ai.”

(Fish to Dinh market without hope

I return to Dong Thap, leaving husband for whom.)

Animals associated with rivers and water also reflect the extremely pristine natural landscape of Southern Vietnam, fraught with risks and challenges for the early settlers from the first days of "carrying swords to open up the country."

Example:

“Chèo ghe sợ sấu cắn chun

Xuống sông sợ đũa, lên rừng sợ ma.”

(Rowing a boat afraid of crocodiles biting feet

Down to the river, afraid of leeches, up to the forest, afraid of ghosts.)

Surveying the vocabulary belonging to the category of animals associated with rivers and water in Southern folk verses, we found many borrowed terms from other languages, mainly Khmer. Typical examples include: driftwood catfish (trey kanchos, where "trey" means fish, "kanchos" is pronounced as "chot"); similarly, linh fish (trey lenh), snakehead fish (trey rot), knife fish (trey so-lat). This is a manifestation of the harmonious lifestyle and cultural exchange between Vietnamese and other ethnic communities in the region.

Example:

“Bắt con cá lóc nướng trui

Làm mâm rượu trắng đãi người phương xa.”

(Catch a snakehead fish to grill

Make a tray of white wine to treat people from afar.)

Another aspect in Southern river and water culture is that the "activities" of animals (eating ripples, swimming, hunting prey, reproducing) and their "states" (such as hiding in water hyacinth, hiding, getting caught in nets) are observed and interpreted by humans through a cultural lens. These aspects not only reflect biological characteristics but also carry symbolic, metaphorical meanings, and are tied to the life and livelihood of people in the river water regions.

We can list some groups of activities and states of animals in this category as follows:

- Movement activities: Wade, swim, crawl, slither, (eel) polish
- Prey hunting activities: Seek prey, follow prey
- Metabolic activities: Make bubbles, blow bubbles, eat ripples, gulp
- Danger avoidance activities: Jump, avoid prey, hide, dive
- Resting states: Hide shadow, hide in water hyacinth, fold fins
- Passive states: Caught in nets, in traps
- Abnormal states: Red gills, rotten gills, peeling fins, lethargic

First, the activities and states of animals associated with rivers and water demonstrate the keen observation and thorough understanding of the nature of river water by Southern Vietnamese people.

Example:

“Cá tươi thì xem cái mang

Người khôn xem lấy hai hàng tóc mai.”

(Fresh fish, look at the gills

Wise people, look at the two rows of sideburns.)

Or,

“Cá dưới sông khi lội khi nhào

Đường chông gai em đừng nệ, chỗ sang giàu em đừng ham.”

(Fish in the river sometimes swim sometimes flip

Thorny path, don't mind, wealthy places, don't desire.)

Additionally, it shows a common cognitive feature: nature is human, river water animals are human, activities and states of river water animals are also human.

Example:

“Cá không ăn câu kêu rằng con cá dại

Cá cắn câu rồi đổ tại con cá tham.”

(Fish not biting the hook, called a foolish fish

Fish biting the hook, blamed for being greedy.)

Or,

“Vùi bùn sen vẫn là sen

Lục bình rau muống khó chen được vào.”

(Buried in mud, lotus is still lotus

Water hyacinth and water spinach hardly squeeze in.)

Dialectal imprints are also clearly expressed through the subcategory, indicating activities and states of animals associated with rivers and water. Typically, for words denoting the movement activity of animals in water, we counted the word "wade" (Southern dialect) appearing up to 77 times, while the word "swim" (national language) appears only 4 times.

Example:

“Sông dài cá lội huyên thuyên

Lòng anh muốn bắt con cá lội riêng một mình.”

(Long river, fish wade noisily

My heart wants to catch the fish wading alone.)

In conclusion, the quantification of 567 distinct water-related terms and the identification of 177 animal-category items directly answer the first study aim by mapping which cultural categories of rivers and water animals appear in Southern Vietnamese folk verses and how frequently they occur. Our prototype analysis of "fish" and the seven-level depth revealed that it addresses the second study purpose by showing how these categories encode local ecological knowledge (e.g., habitat, seasonal rhythms) and reflect cultural values (e.g., food centrality, temporal cycles). The discussion of temporal conceptualizations and Khmer loanwords further illuminates the second study aim, demonstrating the interplay between environmental experience, intercultural contact, and cultural cognition. While the third study aim focuses on pedagogical implications, the detailed folk taxonomy and metaphorical patterns documented here lay the empirical foundation for culturally responsive

language teaching by pinpointing which animal-related concepts and metaphors students should engage with.

5. Discussion

This study employed the theoretical framework of Cultural Linguistics to investigate the cultural conceptualizations embedded in the vocabulary of Southern Vietnamese folk verses, with a specific focus on aquatic animals. By drawing on Sharifian's (2011) notion of cultural conceptualizations—which views language as a repository of cultural cognition and collective memory—the research demonstrated that folk taxonomies in this tradition reflect more than biological classification; they encode shared cultural knowledge and ecological awareness.

5.1. Depth and Cultural Cognition

Our identification of a seven-level folk taxonomy for aquatic animals, with fish as the prototype, converges with Rosch's (1975) prototype theory and Sharifian's (2011, 2017) schema-category model in demonstrating that communities rank cognitive salience by frequency and centrality. However, unlike prior studies focusing on broad metaphors or schemas, our analysis reveals an unusually deep hierarchical structure in a single folk corpus, underscoring the Southern Vietnamese people's intricate ecological knowledge and systematic categorization of their riverine environment. This depth addresses the research gap by extending Cultural Linguistics applications to Vietnamese folk literature, which has been largely overlooked.

5.2. Metaphor, Anthropomorphism, and Shared Worldviews

Consistent with Kövecses (2005) and Sharifian (2011), we found that fish behaviors are framed metaphorically to express moral and social values. Our data add new insight by documenting specific anthropomorphic traits—loyalty, cleverness, social roles—assigned to individual fish species in everyday folk verses, illustrating how cultural empathy and collective memory are transmitted through language.

5.3. Temporal and Ecological Conceptualizations

The cyclical time encoded in terms like “featherback fish season” mirrors environmental semantics studies (Nguyễn, 2015). Unlike earlier work that treats seasonal references as peripheral metaphors, our findings position these temporal markers as central organizational principles in folk cognition, linking ecological rhythms directly to community time-sense.

5.4. Cultural Exchange and Linguistic Borrowing

Sharifian (2017) emphasizes that cultural conceptualizations evolve through contact. Our study documents extensive Khmer loanwords for fish species (e.g., *trey kanchos*), providing concrete evidence of interethnic linguistic exchange in the Mekong Delta. This nuance enriches the literature by showing how folk taxonomies absorb and integrate external cultural elements.

5.5. Addressing the Research Gap

By applying Sharifian's tripartite framework to Southern Vietnamese folk verses, we fill the gap in research on Vietnamese oral traditions within Cultural Linguistics. We demonstrate that folk literature is not only a repository of biodiversity knowledge but also a dynamic matrix of cultural schemas, categories, and metaphors specific to a riverine community.

5.6. Pedagogical Implications

This study contributes both theoretically and methodologically to the field of Cultural Linguistics and ethnolinguistics in several ways. Integrating the findings of this study into language and environmental education offers valuable opportunities to foster both ecological literacy and cultural

awareness. Drawing on the intercultural pedagogy framework proposed by Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), as well as the environmental learning model developed by Ballantyne, Fien, and Packer (2001), Southern Vietnamese folk verses can serve as rich educational resources that bridge linguistic, cultural, and ecological domains.

One practical application is to introduce students to local ecological knowledge through classification exercises based on the seven-level folk taxonomy of aquatic animals. These activities not only enhance vocabulary acquisition but also deepen students' understanding of how communities organize and transmit environmental knowledge through language. In addition, the verses' frequent references to seasonal cycles—such as the “featherback fish season”—can stimulate classroom discussions on cultural conceptualizations of time and nature. These discussions can be linked to UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development principles, encouraging students to see environmental rhythms as culturally meaningful and cyclically patterned.

Another pedagogical strategy involves comparative language study. By analyzing Khmer-Vietnamese loanwords embedded in the folk verses, students can explore the dynamics of linguistic borrowing and intercultural contact. This approach promotes intercultural competence and highlights the multicultural fabric of the Mekong Delta region. Furthermore, the use of anthropomorphic metaphors in the verses—where fish are portrayed with human traits such as cleverness or loyalty—can be used to explore moral and social values embedded in community narratives. As Lubis (2023) suggests, folklore can be a powerful tool in environmental education, helping learners connect emotionally and ethically with the natural world.

Ultimately, embedding folk literature into school curricula not only contributes to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage but also cultivates interdisciplinary skills. It positions language learning as a gateway to ecological stewardship, cultural empathy, and a deeper sense of place. Through this integration, students are encouraged to engage critically with their cultural environment and to view language as a living medium of collective memory and ecological wisdom.

5.7. Limitations

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the folk verses were sourced from four major scholarly collections. While these are recognized for their academic reliability, they may not fully capture the oral traditions or lesser-documented local variants across Southern Vietnam, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the study treats the folk verses as culturally stable artifacts. However, meanings and usage may have evolved over time. Future studies could incorporate historical linguistics or diachronic analysis to trace how conceptualizations have changed. Moreover, focus on Aquatic Animals: While this narrow focus allowed for a deep exploration of one domain, it also excluded other potentially rich cultural categories in Southern Vietnamese folk knowledge, such as plants, birds, or farming tools. Comparative studies across domains could yield a more comprehensive model of folk categorization. Lastly, some cultural nuances and metaphorical meanings in the original Vietnamese may be lost or altered in translation, affecting the interpretation of certain verses. Future work could include bilingual or trilingual analysis to address this issue.

6. Conclusion and Suggestions

In summary, the category of animals associated with rivers and water in Southern folk verses can be summarized with the following characteristics: (1) Reflects the abundance of river and water products, shown through the quantity and frequency of related vocabulary; (2) Reflects the subject's river water experience through the depth of object classification in the category; (3) Reflects the cognitive characteristics of the subject, both through direct observation and based on the relationship between objects and space, objects and time, objects and prominent behavioral traits;

(4) Reflects the perception: nature is human, river water animals are human; (5) Reflects the pristine, hazardous Southern Vietnamese landscape of earlier times; (6) Reflects the cultural and linguistic relationships between ethnic groups in the region.

Through examining the vocabulary related to river and water animals in Southern Vietnamese folk verses, we recognize the close relationship between three components: language, culture, and thought. This both reinforces the theoretical foundation of Cultural Linguistics and opens up many promising new research directions. In particular, applying the theory of cultural categories, an aspect of Cultural Linguistics, to study specific cases in Vietnamese remains a vast and promising field.

Declarations

Author Contributions. The author is solely responsible for the conceptualization, literature review, methodology, data analysis, writing—original draft preparation, and review and editing of the manuscript. The author has read and approved the final version of the article.

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Data Availability Statement. The data supporting the findings of this study consist of publicly available Southern Vietnamese folk verses, which were collected from published sources. All materials used in the analysis are cited in the manuscript and available in the public domain.

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