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## “Bị” and “Được” as Cultural Markers in the Vietnamese Language: A Cultural Linguistic Study

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### ABSTRACT

Vietnamese passive constructions have long captivated researchers in the field of linguistics. While a considerable body of work exists, most studies predominantly focus on the syntactic and lexical contributions of the passive markers “bị” and “được”. This prevailing emphasis often overlooks the profound cultural underpinnings that shape their usage. Moving beyond a purely grammatical lens, this study delves into the cultural significance of “bị” and “được” to explore how these passive markers not only reflect but also actively shape Vietnamese cultural values. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of cultural linguistics and social constructionist theory, our research undertakes a comprehensive analysis of “bị” and “được” across a diverse range of contexts. This includes rich narratives from traditional Vietnamese folktales, providing insights into historical linguistic patterns, as well as nuanced observations from contemporary everyday conversations, capturing current communicative practices. The findings reveal that “bị” and “được” are far more than mere grammatical tools; they subtly encode core Vietnamese cultural values related to agency, responsibility, face, social harmony, and the pervasive concept of fate. This investigation distinctly highlights the unique nature of Vietnamese passive constructions when contrasted with those found in other languages. This research has significant implications for language education and translation. For learners of Vietnamese, grasping the cultural nuances of “bị” and “được” is essential for developing cultural competence. Similarly, for Vietnamese learners of English, recognizing these inherent cultural differences can bridge communication gaps, particularly in translation. Ultimately, this understanding will promote more effective intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** Vietnamese Passive Markers; Cultural Linguistics; Vietnamese Cultural Values; Intercultural Communication

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## 1. Introduction

In Vietnamese, the subtle choice between two small words in passive constructions, “bị” and “được”, can reveal social relationships and cultural beliefs. While these words primarily indicate passive voice, their usage extends beyond mere grammatical constructions, reflecting deeper cultural nuances and social perceptions. Previous research on “bị” and “được” as passive markers has mainly focused on their grammatical functions and syntactic structures<sup>[1-3]</sup>. However, a gap remains in understanding how these markers reflect and shape social interactions, particularly concerning cultural values and norms. This is crucial because language is not merely a tool for communication but also a means of encoding and transmitting cultural values, beliefs, and practices. The nuances of “bị” and “được” go beyond basic functions; they may reflect values and beliefs tied to Vietnamese culture.

Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining the implications of “bị” and “được” in everyday communication and how they underscore the cultural ethos of Vietnam. In particular, this research investigates the use of these markers in various contexts, including folktales and conversations to identify the specific cultural norms and values encoded within them. Ultimately, this research explores how these seemingly simple words reflect and shape social interactions and cultural values in Vietnam, shedding light on the dynamic interplay between language, culture, and society. Understanding these nuances is crucial for language education and translation, particularly for learners of Vietnamese as well as Vietnamese learners of foreign languages.

It is important to note that “bị” and “được” have a range of functions in Vietnamese beyond their role in passive constructions, including indicating possibility, permission, adjectives, and various nuances of meaning<sup>[4, 5]</sup>. However, the scope of this research is specifically limited to an analysis of the cultural significance of “bị” and “được” within passive voice sentences. This study seeks answers to the research question: ‘*How do the Vietnamese passive markers “bị” and “được” reflect and shape underlying cultural values and social perceptions within various communicative contexts?*’

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Overview of “Bị” and “Được” in Vietnamese

In Vietnamese, “bị” and “được” are used to indicate passive voice in Vietnamese sentences, but their functions extend beyond mere grammatical constructions. In Vietnamese passive constructions, the external argument noun phrase (NP) can be realized in various positions depending on the verb class. For certain verbs, the NP can be realized after “Bị/Được” or “Bởi” ( “by” ). For other verbs, the NP must be realized after “Bị/Được” and not “Bởi”<sup>[6]</sup>.

While “bị” and “được” share similarities with passive markers in other languages (e.g., English and Chinese), their usage is deeply intertwined with cultural values and social perceptions, making them a unique feature of Vietnamese grammar<sup>[3-6]</sup>. “Bị” is typically utilized to convey a negative action done to the subject, often translating to the English equivalent of “to be” in the context of something undesirable (e.g., “bị đánh” - “to be hit” ), as illustrated in (1):

(1) Lan bị Nam đánh.

Lan BỊ Nam hit

‘Lan was hit by Nam.’

This usage often emphasizes the subject’s role as a recipient of an action, highlighting their affectedness or lack of agency in the situation. Conversely, “được” indicates a positive outcome or benefit to the subject (e.g., “được.. khen” - “to be praised” ), as in (2):

(2) Lan được thầy giáo khen.

Lan ĐƯỢC teacher praise

‘Lan was praised by the teacher’

Such the usage of the word “được” in (2) can emphasize the role of external forces, luck, or the actions of others in bringing about a positive outcome. However, the nuances of their usage may go beyond these basic functions, reflecting deeper cultural values and beliefs. This will be discussed in details later in this paper. As discussed, while early studies of Vietnamese passive markers “bị” and “được” focused primarily on their syntactic functions, more recent research has begun to delve into their complex semantic and pragmatic roles. This review synthesizes existing scholarship, highlighting this critical area for further investigation and exploring how “bị” and “được” function in different contexts.

## 2.2. Syntactic Functions of “Bị” and “Được”

Foundational research by prominent scholars in Vietnamese linguistics established a basic understanding of the syntactic behavior of “bị” and “được,” outlining their positions within sentences and relationships to other grammatical elements<sup>[1, 4, 5]</sup>. Building on this groundwork, subsequent studies have explored the nuances of their syntactic functions. For instance, “bị” often allows for a subject gap “Chiếc xe đạp bị hỏng.” (The bicycle is broken.), resulting in a more flexible sentence structure where the agent can be omitted or placed in non-canonical positions (e.g., “Cái bánh kem bị Nam ăn hết.” (The cake was eaten by Nam.), or “Hôm qua, tôi bị mất ví.” (Yesterday, I lost my wallet.).

In contrast, “được” tends to adhere to the typical subject-object-verb order of Vietnamese<sup>[6]</sup>. This difference in syntactic behavior suggests that “bị” may be more versatile in accommodating different information structures and discourse functions. However, the classification of “bị” and “được” as passive markers is not universally accepted<sup>[6, 7]</sup>. Some linguists argue “bị” and “được” function more like auxiliary verbs or adverbials due to their appearance in constructions that do not conform to typical passive structures, such as those with unaccusative verbs<sup>[8, 9]</sup>. This perspective challenges the traditional understanding of passives in Vietnamese and raises questions about the precise nature of “bị” and “được”. While this review acknowledges this debate, it maintains that these markers can indeed function as passive markers, shifting focus from agent to patient and expressing varying degrees of agency and affectedness.

## 2.3. Semantic Functions of “Bị” and “Được”

The markers “bị” and “được” are essential in Vietnamese for expressing different shades of the passive voice and related semantic functions, though they operate under distinct pragmatic and syntactic conditions. Diep argues that “bị” implies a lack of volition or an adverse outcome, often evoking a sense of victimization or suffering, while “được” suggests a more positive or beneficial experience, potentially linked to notions of achievement or luck<sup>[10]</sup>. This distinction hints at a deeper connection between these markers and cultural attitudes towards agency, responsibility, and fate.

In particular, “bị” is traditionally linked to passive constructions that convey an adverse or involuntary experience,

indicating that the subject is negatively affected by an action. This phenomenon has been extensively analyzed in studies of Vietnamese passives, showing the syntactic complexity of “bị” and its association with subject gap passives, which raise critical questions about the definition of passivity across languages<sup>[11]</sup>.

In contrast, “được” represents a wider range of functions beyond traditional passive meaning. In translation studies of the English passive voice into Vietnamese, “được” often carries a more positive or permissive connotation compared to “bị”<sup>[12]</sup>. Both markers can denote passivity, but “được” is frequently employed in contexts such as business communication to signal possibility, approval, or success, implying that something “can be done” or is “acceptable”<sup>[13]</sup>. This dual function illustrates the polysemous nature of “được”, which can shift from being a grammatical marker of passivity to an indicator of opportunity or favorable outcomes. This semantic variability is crucial for effective communication in contexts where nuanced differences may lead to distinct interpretations among native speakers<sup>[13, 14]</sup>.

Additionally, the interaction between “bị” and “được” in Vietnamese translation strategies highlights that passive constructions are not uniform, but instead vary based on contextual, pragmatic, and stylistic factors<sup>[12]</sup>. For instance, while translators might choose an active construction in certain situations, data from literary texts suggest that employing “được” or “bị” is not solely a grammatical choice but also a culturally embedded decision that reflects the speaker’s attitude towards the action or its outcome. This cultural dimension signifies that linguistic markers such as “bị” and “được” serve not only as syntactic devices but also as expressive tools communicating modality and evaluative stance<sup>[12, 13]</sup>.

In summary, “bị” and “được” function as critical elements in constructing passive sentences while conveying distinct semantic nuances. “Bị” is predominantly linked to adverse and involuntary actions, contributing to the syntactic complexity of Vietnamese passive forms, while “được” offers a more versatile set of functions, including expressions of possibility, acceptance, and beneficence. The divergent roles of these markers reveal broader implications for translation theory and sociolinguistic practices in Vietnamese, emphasizing the influence of context and cultural intuition in interpreting and producing the passive voice in the language<sup>[11, 12]</sup>.

## 2.4. Pragmatic Functions of “Bị” and “Được”

The pragmatic implications of “bị” and “được” are apparent in their use across different contexts. In formal settings, such as academic writing or official communications, they often emphasize the action rather than the actor, aligning with conventions of objectivity and impersonality<sup>[6]</sup>. This usage may reflect cultural values related to hierarchy and authority, where minimizing individual agency can be seen as a way to show deference or maintain social harmony.

Informal speech often entails nuanced choices regarding passive constructions, reflecting not only syntactic considerations but also a host of pragmatic functions that help the speaker manage responsibility, maintain face, and modulate interpersonal attitudes. Research indicates that the selection of passive markers in informal contexts is driven by factors such as the colloquial tone, the need to hedge responsibility, and the desire to align with information pertinent to everyday communication. For instance, in the Chinese context, speakers choose different passive markers depending on the register and contextual requirements<sup>[15]</sup>. Specifically, the marker “gěi” is frequently employed in informal speech due to its colloquial tone, whereas markers like “bèi” are more closely associated with formal or traditional structures, especially in Taiwan, where “bèi” aligns with established information structure paradigms. Moreover, “ràng” is utilized in contexts that suggest a substitution for more conventional markers when the situation allows a positive nuance<sup>[15]</sup>. This variability underscores that the choice of a passive marker is not merely grammatically driven but is pragmatically motivated by the need to convey subtle distinctions in responsibility and affect in informal discourse. This also suggests that in the Vietnamese language, speakers may strategically use “bị” and “được” to manage interpersonal relationships, express empathy, or negotiate social roles. A culturally informed analysis of informal conversations would provide valuable insights into the subtle ways these markers are used to navigate social dynamics and express nuanced meanings.

The markers also play a crucial role in translation, particularly from English to Vietnamese. “Bị” and “được” are frequently employed to maintain the intended meaning of English passive sentences<sup>[6]</sup>, demonstrating that Vietnamese does not exclusively favor active voice constructions. This highlights the importance of understanding the subtle differences between passive constructions in English and Viet-

namese, which may be influenced by underlying cultural differences in how agency and affectedness are conceptualized.

While some studies have touched upon the cultural implications of “bị” and “được,” a more comprehensive analysis is needed<sup>[6–16]</sup>. For example, how do these markers reflect Vietnamese notions of face, social harmony, and interpersonal relationships? Do they encode specific cultural scripts or expectations about how individuals should respond to positive and negative experiences? Addressing these questions would contribute significantly to our understanding of how language reflects and reinforces cultural values.

This study draws on cultural linguistics to address the identified gaps in the literature and develop a deeper understanding of how “bị” and “được” are embedded in and contribute to the construction of cultural meanings<sup>[17–19]</sup>. By analyzing their usage in diverse contexts, this research aims to identify the specific cultural norms and values encoded within them, such as social harmony, face-saving, and the concept of fate. This investigation will contribute to the growing body of literature on cultural linguistics and provide a more nuanced understanding of the Vietnamese language and culture.

## 2.5. Theoretical Frameworks

The following theoretical frameworks provide a foundation for understanding the relationship between language, culture, and the construction of social reality in the context of Vietnamese passive markers. This research draws upon two theoretical frameworks: cultural linguistics and social constructionism. Cultural linguistics emphasizes the inextricable link between language, culture, and cognition<sup>[17–19]</sup>. It posits that language is not merely a tool for communication but also a means of encoding and transmitting cultural values, beliefs, and practices<sup>[18]</sup>. Therefore, cultural linguistics provides a lens for understanding how linguistic choices, such as the use of “bị” and “được” in the Vietnamese language.

Social constructionism suggests that reality is socially constructed through language and interaction. It emphasizes the role of language in shaping our understanding of the world and our relationships with others<sup>[20]</sup>. By analyzing the discourse surrounding “bị” and “được”, this research aims to uncover how these markers contribute to the social construction of reality in the Vietnamese context, particularly

in relation to power dynamics and politeness norms. The qualitative discourse analysis employed in this study will examine how these markers are used in specific interactions to construct and negotiate social roles and relationships.

These frameworks work together to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language both reflects and shapes social reality. While cultural linguistics highlights the cultural norms embedded in language, social constructionism emphasizes the active role of language in constructing and negotiating those norms in interaction.

### 3. Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative discourse analysis approach, drawing upon critical discourse analysis to examine the cultural significance of the Vietnamese words “bị” and “được”<sup>[21]</sup>. In Vietnamese, “bị” generally indicates adversity or a passive role, while “được” suggests a positive outcome or agency. Data for this study was drawn from a corpus of Vietnamese language sentences compiled using Sketch Engine (Corus). This corpus includes a diverse range of sources, encompassing literature, folklore, and daily conversations. The analysis incorporated multiple methods, including corpus analysis, discourse analysis of conversations, and ethnographic observation.

Corpus analysis utilized the compiled corpus to examine patterns and variations in the usage of “bị” and “được” across different text types, including literary works, folktales, and online forums. Discourse analysis of conversations will analyze transcripts of naturally occurring conversations to understand how “bị” and “được” are used in everyday interactions. By examining the ways in which “bị” and “được” are employed in different conversational contexts, the study sought to uncover the subtle ways in which these words can be used to express social roles and relationships.

Ethnographic observation involved observing social interactions in various settings to provide insights into the contextual factors that influence the choice between “bị” and “được”<sup>[22]</sup>. This method allows for a deeper understanding of how cultural norms and social expectations shape the use of these words in real-life interactions. By observing how individuals use “bị” and “được” in different social situations, the study aimed to identify the unspoken rules and conventions that govern their usage.

Following data collection, the analysis involves close reading and interpretation, focusing on semantic analysis, pragmatic analysis, and cultural analysis. Semantic analysis was employed to examine the subtle nuances of meaning conveyed by “bị” and “được” in different contexts<sup>[23]</sup>. Pragmatic analysis was applied to examine the ways “bị” and “được” are used to achieve specific communicative goals, such as expressing politeness, mitigating face threats, or negotiating social relationships<sup>[24]</sup>. Cultural discourse analysis was utilized to interpret the usage of “bị” and “được” in light of Vietnamese cultural values and norms, such as social harmony, hierarchy, and the concept of fate<sup>[25, 26]</sup>. It is hoped that by combining these methods and analytical approaches, this research will provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural significance of “bị” and “được” in Vietnamese communication, contributing to cross-cultural understanding and potentially informing language pedagogy.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Cultural Connotations of “Bị” and “Được”

#### 4.1.1. “Bị” : Marking of Victimhood and Undesirability

An examination of “bị” and “được” in the context of Vietnamese children’s literature such as folktales and everyday speech provides deeper insights into how these linguistic elements are imbued with cultural meanings. The usage of “bị” often carries a connotation of victimhood or undesirability, reflecting a cultural emphasis on social harmony and the importance of maintaining face.

In Vietnamese culture, where community values are paramount, the implications of being a victim or receiving negative actions are particularly severe. “Bị” can imply a loss of face (thể diện) (as in (3), (4)), a disruption of social harmony (as in (5), (6)) or a transgression against societal expectations (as in (7) (8)). For instance, being the victim of gossip or slander can lead to social ostracism and damage one’s reputation within the community.

(3) Cô ấy **bị** mọi người chê cười.

She PRO BỊ everyone criticize laugh

‘She was ridiculed by everyone.’

(4) Anh ấy **bị** mất uy tín bởi vụ việc đó.

He PRO BỊ lose credibility by incident DEM

‘He lost his credibility because of that incident.’

(5) Họ **bị** hàng xóm xa lánh.

They **BỊ** neighbor ostracize

‘They were ostracized by their neighbors.’

(6) Gia đình anh ấy **bị** chia rẽ bởi vì tranh chấp tài sản.

Family **PRO BỊ** split because dispute property

‘His family was torn apart due to property disputes.’

(7) Cô ấy **bị** chỉ trích bởi hành vi không đúng mực.

She **PRO BỊ** criticize by behavior not proper

‘She was criticized for her inappropriate behavior.’

(8) Anh ấy **bị** lên án bởi vì vi phạm pháp luật.

He **PRO BỊ** condemn because violate law

‘He was condemned for breaking the law.’

These examples illustrate how “bị” can be used to mark someone as a victim of negative actions or circumstances that result in a loss of face, social ostracism, or condemnation. This highlights the importance of maintaining a positive social image and avoiding actions that could disrupt social harmony in Vietnamese culture.

To fully appreciate the weight of “bị” in these contexts, it’s crucial to understand the underlying cultural values at play in Vietnamese society. In Vietnamese culture, “face” (thể diện) is a critical concept tied to honor, reputation, and social standing<sup>[27]</sup>. Losing face can have profound social consequences, affecting relationships, business dealings, and overall well-being. Examples (3) and (4) directly illustrate this. Being ridiculed ( “bị chê cười” ) or losing credibility ( “bị mất uy tín” ) signifies a damage to one’s “face” (thể diện) in the community. This loss can lead to shame, embarrassment, and a diminished sense of self-worth. Vietnamese society leans towards collectivism, where the needs and expectations of the group often take precedence over individual desires<sup>[28]</sup>. Maintaining social harmony is highly valued, and actions that disrupt this harmony are strongly discouraged. Examples (5) and (6) demonstrate the repercussions of disrupting social harmony. Being ostracized by neighbors ( “bị hàng xóm xa lánh” ) or having one’s family torn apart by disputes ( “bị chia rẽ” ) signifies a breakdown in social cohesion, leading to isolation and condemnation. Adherence to social norms and expectations is essential in Vietnamese culture. Transgressions against these norms can result in criticism and social disapproval. Examples (7) and (8) highlight the consequences of violating social norms. Inappropriate behavior ( “hành vi không đúng mực” ) or

breaking the law ( “vi phạm pháp luật” ) leads to criticism ( “bị chỉ trích” ) and condemnation ( “bị lên án” ), signaling a rejection of the individual’s actions by the community.

#### 4.1.2. “Được” as A Reflection of Benefaction and Favor

In contrast, “được” represents the receipt of good fortune or favor, which can be interpreted as a reflection of providential blessings or societal approval (as in (9) and (10)). This marker highlights the Vietnamese cultural value placed on luck and communal support, as well as the importance of social relationships in determining one’s fortunes.

(9) Cô ấy **được** thăng chức.

She **PRO ĐƯỢC** promote

‘She was promoted.’

(10) Lan **được** nhận học bổng toàn phần.

Lan **ĐƯỢC** receive scholarship full

‘Lan received a full scholarship.’

“Được” often implies that the positive outcome is not solely due to individual effort but also thanks to the benevolence of others or fortunate circumstances. This reflects the collectivist nature of Vietnamese society, where individuals are seen as interconnected and reliant on each other for success and well-being, as in (11) and (12):

(11) Gia đình họ **được** trời phù hộ.

Family **PRO ĐƯỢC** God bless protect

‘Their family is blessed by God.’

(12) Cô ấy **được** mọi người yêu quý.

She **PRO ĐƯỢC** everyone love cherish

‘She is loved by everyone.’

The use of “được” can also indicate a passive achievement, which aligns with the Confucian value of humility and the importance of group over individual success<sup>[29]</sup>. By emphasizing the role of external factors or the actions of others, “được” allows individuals to acknowledge their achievements without appearing boastful or self-centered. For example, the sentence: “Cô ấy **được** trao giải nhất” (She won first prize) acknowledges the achievement while maintaining a sense of humility by emphasizing the act of being awarded rather than actively winning. This usage reflects the cultural emphasis on modesty and the importance of attributing success to collective efforts or external factors, rather than solely to individual merit. These examples illustrate how “được” can be used to indicate that someone has received something positive or has been granted a favor. This can be interpreted

as a reflection of their good luck, societal approval, or the strength of their social relationships.

## 4.2. Nuances of “Bị” and “Được” in Context

One interesting example of how “bị” and “được” can convey nuances far beyond simple passive voice is illustrated in the cases of (13) and (14):

(13) Khi còn nhỏ, Nam hay **bị** mẹ đánh.

When still small, Nam often BỊ mother hit

‘When he was young, Nam often got hit by his mother.’

(14) Bây giờ Nam chỉ muốn **được** mẹ đánh như khi anh còn nhỏ.

Now Nam only want ĐƯỢC mother hit like when he PRO still small

‘Now, Nam just wishes he could be hit by his mother like when he was young.’

The word “bị” in Vietnamese is often associated with undesirable or negative events. It emphasizes the unpleasant aspect of an experience, highlighting the act as something unwelcome or unwanted. For instance, in the sentence (13): “Khi còn nhỏ, Nam hay **bị** mẹ đánh” (When he was young, Nam often got hit by his mother), “bị” focuses on the punishment, creating an emotional distance between the child and the mother. “Bị” thus serves as a marker of adversity and lack of agency, reflecting a situation where the subject undergoes an undesired action.

Conversely, “được” is frequently used to indicate possibility, permission, or benefit. In the Vietnamese cultural context, “được” can also reflect a form of privilege or favor. For example, in the sentence (14): “Bây giờ, Nam chỉ muốn **được** mẹ đánh như khi anh còn nhỏ” (Now, Nam just wishes he could be hit by his mother like when he was young), “được” is perceived positively, as an expression of parental love and care.

In Vietnamese culture, light physical discipline from parents is common<sup>[30]</sup>. However, it is interesting when interpreting the meanings of (14) which indicates that “being hit by mother” an expression of love and care, especially when recalling childhood memories. This implies that the parent cared enough to correct the child’s behavior. In this context, “được” highlights the child receiving this attention and correction from their mother. It suggests a sense of closeness and a unique bond between mother and child. The sentence evokes a sense of nostalgia and even affection for

a time when the parent was actively involved in the child’s upbringing.

Similarly, sentences like (15) and (16) may have similar translated version in English, and they are quite similar at first glance. However, these two sentences have significantly different connotations in Vietnamese.

(15) Lan **bị** sếp giao nhiều việc khi mới vào làm.

Lan BỊ boss assign many work when new start work

‘Lan was assigned a lot of work by her boss when she first started.’

(16) Lan **được** sếp giao nhiều việc khi mới vào làm.

Lan ĐƯỢC boss assign many work when new start work

‘Lan was assigned a lot of work by her boss when she first started.’

For (15) - “Lan **bị** sếp giao nhiều việc khi mới vào làm”, this sentence implies that Lan was assigned a lot of tasks by her boss upon starting her job, and this is perceived negatively. The use of “bị” suggests that Lan feels overwhelmed or burdened by the workload. It might even imply that she feels she’s being unfairly treated or taken advantage of.

Conversely, for (16) - “Lan **được** sếp giao nhiều việc khi mới vào làm”, this sentence also means that Lan was assigned many tasks when she started her job, but this time, the connotation is positive. “Được” implies that Lan sees this as an opportunity. She might feel trusted and valued by her boss, or she might be excited to take on the challenge and prove her abilities.

The difference lies in the use of “bị” and “được.” As we’ve discussed, “bị” often carries a sense of adversity or victimization, while “được” suggests a positive outcome or privilege. In the context of work, being assigned many tasks can be seen as either a burden or an opportunity, and the choice of “bị” or “được” reflects this perception. This example highlights the subtle but significant ways that “bị” and “được” can influence the meaning and interpretation of Vietnamese sentences, going beyond a simple passive voice. They can convey a speaker’s attitude, cultural understanding, and the emotional nuances of a situation.

The above finding entails an interesting point about the unique cultural connotations of “bị” and “được” in Vietnamese passive constructions, especially when compared to Chinese, where the passive marker “被” (bèi) does not carry the same nuanced meanings, as in (17), (18), and (19).

(17) 她的钱包被小偷偷走了。

She POSS wallet BEI thief steal go ASP

‘Her wallet was stolen by a thief.’

(18) 你被你的男朋友骗了。

You BEI you POSS boyfriend deceive ASP

‘You were deceived by your boyfriend.’

(19) 河内被誉为国家之心。

Hanoi BEI honor as nation POSS heart

‘Hanoi is known as the heart of the nation.’

In these sentences, “bei” marks the passive voice, but it may not convey any additional connotations about the subject’s experience or the social implications of the action<sup>[14]</sup>. The focus remains on the action itself, without the added cultural and emotional layers that “bị” and “được” would bring in Vietnamese. This difference highlights the unique nature of Vietnamese passive constructions. “Bị” and “được” are not merely grammatical markers but also cultural signifiers, reflecting the values and perceptions of Vietnamese society. They add depth and nuance to the language, allowing speakers to convey a wider range of meanings and emotions.

The above examples illustrate how “bị” and “được” interact with cultural understanding to create very different meanings. It shows that “được” can indicate a sense of privilege, benefit, or even affectional and “bị” emphasizes adversity, unpleasantness, or a lack of agency. This nuanced use of these words demonstrates how deeply cultural values are embedded in the Vietnamese language.

The cultural connotations of “bị” and “được” can also be explored in Vietnamese children’s literature, especially folktales, through a common motif that characters who are kind, respectful, and hardworking often “được” rewards and blessings, while those who are greedy, disrespectful, or lazy often “bị” punishments or misfortunes<sup>[30]</sup>. This reinforces cultural values and moral lessons for children and adults alike<sup>[26–30]</sup>. For example, the tale of *Tấm Cám*, a classic Vietnamese folktale about two stepsisters, highlights how Tấm, the virtuous stepdaughter, “được” divine support (from “Bụt – The Buddha”), and eventually marries the prince. This aligns with the cultural expectation of rewards for virtuous behavior. On the other hand, Cám, the wicked stepsister, “bị” a series of unfortunate events and ultimately meets a tragic end, reinforcing the cultural belief in consequences for negative actions. This usage of “bị” and “được” not only reflects the cultural emphasis on moral conduct but also serves

to construct and transmit cultural narratives about good and evil<sup>[26]</sup>.

Similarly, the tale of *Ấn Khế Trá Vàng* (*The Carambola Tree*) provides a similar example of how “bị” and “được” are used to reinforce cultural values. In this story, two brothers inherit their father’s land. The diligent and kind younger brother “được” a large bird eating fruit from the starfruit tree and repaying by flying him to an island to collect gold. This symbolizing the rewards of his good deeds and kindness. He uses this wealth to help others, further demonstrating his virtuous character. Conversely, the greedy and lazy elder brother “bị” misfortune. He initially receives the larger share of the inheritance. However, just because he is too greedy and envious of the younger brother’s wealth, he trades his property for the hut and tree. When the bird offers the same reward again, the greedy elder brother takes an oversized bag and gathers too much gold, causing the bird to drop him into the sea on the return trip<sup>[30]</sup>. This story reinforces the cultural values of kindness, diligence, and generosity, while highlighting the consequences of greed and laziness. The use of “được” and “bị” in this context not only reflects these values but also serves to construct and transmit cultural narratives about morality and justice. **Table 1** summarizing the diverse functions of “bị” and “được” in passive constructions.

To conclude, the analysis of “bị” and “được” reveals their multifaceted roles in Vietnamese, extending beyond simple passive markers. They function as indicators of agency, emotional tone, and social dynamics, reflecting cultural values and shaping interpersonal interactions. This understanding provides valuable insights into the intricate relationship between language, culture, and communication in the Vietnamese context.

## 5. Discussion

This study delves into the cultural connotations of the Vietnamese passive markers “bị” and “được”, moving beyond their purely grammatical functions. The findings corroborate and expand upon previous research by demonstrating that “bị” and “được” are deeply intertwined with cultural values and social perceptions. While foundational studies on Vietnamese language established the basic syntactic functions of “bị” and “được,” this research reveals their



**Table 1.** Summary of functions of “bị” and “được” in Vietnamese passive constructions.

Feature	“Bị”	“Được”
Primary Grammatical Function	Indicates passive voice	Indicates passive voice
Core Connotation	Negative action done to the subject; victimhood; undesirability	Positive outcome or benefit to the subject
Cultural Values Reflected	Emphasis on social harmony and maintaining face	Emphasis on luck, communal support, and social relationships
Implied Attitude/Emotion	Lack of control, affectedness, potential for negative perception	Positive experience, potential for fortunate circumstances, a sense of privilege, benefit, or even affectional
Examples of Cultural Implications	Loss of face, social ostracism, transgression against societal expectations	Receipt of good fortune or favor, societal approval, providential blessings

significant cultural implications. The findings support the Diep’ s view that “bị” implies adversity or victimization, while “được” suggests a positive or beneficial experience<sup>[10]</sup>. However, this study goes further by explicitly linking these connotations to Vietnamese cultural values such as social harmony, face-saving, and the importance of social relationships, areas that previous research has not fully explored.

Moreover, this study highlights the unique nature of Vietnamese passive constructions compared to other languages, such as Chinese, where the passive marker may “bei” lack the cultural and emotional nuances of “bị” and “được” . This contrast underscores the importance of considering cultural context when analyzing language, as emphasized by Palmer and Sharifian in their work on cultural linguistics<sup>[17–19]</sup>. The analysis of Vietnamese folktales aligns with previous studies that have touched upon the cultural implications of “bị” and “được”<sup>[16]</sup>. However, this research provides more concrete examples of how these markers are used to construct and transmit cultural narratives about morality and justice, reinforcing values such as kindness, diligence, and generosity.

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for Vietnamese learners and teachers of English, particularly in the area of translation. Vietnamese learners often struggle with English passive constructions due to the distinct ways in which the passive voice is expressed in the two languages. While English relies primarily on auxiliary verbs and past participles, Vietnamese employs the markers “bị” and “được” , which carry cultural and emotional connotations that are absent in English. Recognizing these differences can help learners better understand and use English passive

constructions accurately. The cultural nuances of “bị” and “được” pose challenges for translation. Translators need to be aware of the subtle ways in which these markers can influence the meaning and interpretation of a sentence, going beyond a simple passive voice. They need to consider the speaker’s attitude, cultural understanding, and the emotional nuances of a situation to ensure accurate and culturally appropriate translations. English language teachers should explicitly address the differences between Vietnamese and English passive constructions. They should provide learners with ample opportunities to practice using English passive forms in various contexts and help them develop strategies for overcoming the challenges posed by the cultural nuances of “bị” and “được” . By understanding the cultural implications of “bị” and “được” , Vietnamese learners and teachers of English can enhance their language skills and intercultural competence.

In sum, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the Vietnamese language and culture by demonstrating how “bị” and “được” are embedded in and contribute to the construction of cultural meanings. The findings emphasize the need for future research to consider the cultural context of language use, particularly in the study of passive constructions and their implications for cross-cultural communication and language pedagogy.

## 6. Conclusions

This research explores the cultural significance of the Vietnamese passive markers “bị” and “được” , highlighting their roles in reflecting and shaping social interactions. The

findings demonstrate that these markers are not merely grammatical tools but also cultural signifiers, encoding values and norms related to agency, responsibility, and social harmony.

Our research reveals a nuanced understanding of “bị” and “được,” aligning with previous studies while also expanding upon them. Specifically, it underscores the unique nature of Vietnamese passive constructions in contrast to languages like Chinese, emphasizing the importance of cultural context in language analysis. Furthermore, the study provides concrete examples of how “bị” and “được” are employed in Vietnamese folktales to convey cultural narratives about morality and justice.

The implications of this research extend to language education and translation, particularly for Vietnamese learners of English and English-speaking learners of Vietnamese. Recognizing the cultural nuances embedded in “bị” and “được” can help learners and educators navigate the complexities of these markers, leading to improved intercultural communication and language proficiency. In summary, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the Vietnamese language and culture by demonstrating the intricate ways in which “bị” and “được” reflect and shape social interactions, emphasizing the importance of considering cultural context in language analysis.

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## Data Availability Statement

The data used for the study are available from the correspondence author upon reasonable request.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Artificial Intelligence Statement

During the preparation of this work the author Gemini for proofreading the manuscript, improving the language. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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