

# VIETNAMESE INITIAL CONSONANT CLUSTERS IN QUỐC NGỮ DOCUMENTS FROM THE 17<sup>th</sup> TO EARLY 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURIES

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## Abstract

This paper presents a few claims based on documents written in the Vietnamese *Quốc Ngữ* Roman orthography. The fact that Vietnamese once had initial consonant clusters *bl*, *ml*, *mnh* (/mɲ/) and *tl* is well known. Early Vietnamese *Quốc Ngữ* spellings indicate that the change of *mnh* (/mɲ/) to *nh* (/ɲ/) was complete by the end of the 17th century and that the change from *tl* to *tr* (/t/) was complete by the end of the 18th. However, some words show variant spellings with *m* or *b* (e.g. *mồ hôi* ~ *bồ hôi* ‘sweat’) and with *ml* or *bl* (e.g. *mlớn* ~ *blớn* ‘big’). These alternate spellings *m* ~ *b* and *ml* ~ *bl* suggest that the correspondences upon which proto-Vietic \*/b/ is based need to be modified: rather than Vietnamese /m/ from Vietic \*b and \*p, the correspondence should be Vietnamese /m/ and /b/ and Vietic \*b and \*p. Early documents show the following: first, alternations between *m* and *b* and *ml* and *bl* recorded in early *Quốc Ngữ* writing provide additional evidence for the reconstruction of a proto-Vietic voiced implosive bilabial oral stop \*/b/ rather than a prenasalized stop \*/mb/ or glottalized stop \*/ʔb/; second, spellings from 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century documents show *ml* in seven words and *bl* in fifteen, indicating an incomplete change of *ml* to either *nh* or *l*, depending on dialect, and either *bl* to *gi* (/z/) in Northern dialects or *bl* to *tr* (/t/) elsewhere. The implication is that some features of early Austroasiatic initials persisted in Vietnamese up to 250 to 300 years ago.

**Keywords:** Vietnamese, Vietic, Quốc Ngữ, historical phonology, orthography

**ISO 639-3 codes:** vic

## 1 Introduction

*Quốc Ngữ* (literally ‘national language’), the Romanized alphabet that is now standard for writing Vietnamese, was developed in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century primarily by the missionaries Francisco de Pina and Alexandre de Rhodes. Extant documents in *Quốc Ngữ* dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries show spellings *bl*, *ml*, *mnh*, and *tl* representing initial consonant clusters *bl*, *ml*, *mnh*, and *tl*.<sup>1</sup> In addition, a number of words show spellings that alternate between *m* and *b* on the one hand and *ml* and *bl* on the other. These clusters have disappeared entirely in modern Vietnamese. The *Quốc Ngữ* evidence allows us to reconstruct the steps and the timing of these changes.

The documents used in this study from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries consist of books, letters and some dictionaries. They are listed in Table 1.

<sup>1</sup> I am excluding the cluster /p/, represented by the letters *pl*, which was not recorded in the *DALL*. Rhodes did mention this cluster in his *A Brief Report of the Language of Annam or Tonkin*: “... sometimes, even rarely, they add *l* to *p*, e.g. *plàn* ...” (de Rhodes 1651:8, Vietnamese version). In addition, in his *A Voyage to Cochinchina in the Years 1792-1793* (pp. 90-93), Barrow provided a list of words, five of which show that Vietnamese in Cochinchina contained sounds represented by corresponding letters of *bl* (e.g. *mat bloei* = mặt trời ‘the sun’; *blái* = trái ‘fruit’; *blang* = trăng ‘the moon’; *tl* (e.g. *telung* = trứng ‘egg’); *kl* (e.g. *klang* = trăm ‘hundred’). However, in this paper, I will only be discussing *bl*-, *ml*-, *mnh*-, and *tl*-as recorded in *Dictionarium Annamiticum Lusitanum, et Latinum*.

**Table 1:** 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Century *Quốc Ngữ* Documents

<b>17<sup>th</sup> century</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Dictionarium Annamiticvm Lusitanvm, et Latinvm</i> (sic) (Vietnamese Portuguese Latin Dictionary), (Rhodes 1651)</li> <li>• <i>History of Annam</i> by Bento Thiện in 1659 (Đỗ 2008:187-198)</li> <li>• One letter by Bento Thiện in 1659 (Đỗ 2008:185-186)</li> <li>• One letter by Igesico Văn Tín in 1659 (Đỗ 2008:183-184)</li> <li>• Two letters (No. 1 and 2) by Domingo Hảo in 1687 (Đoàn:32-35)</li> <li>• Three letters (No. 3, 4 and 5) in 1688, 1689 (Đoàn 2008:36-42)</li> </ul>
<b>18<sup>th</sup> century</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thirty five letters and requests numbered from 6 to 40 (Đoàn 2008:43-129) mostly written by Vietnamese people from 1702 to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (including one document written in 1802)</li> <li>• <i>Dictionarium Anamitico Latinum</i> (Vietnamese-Latin Dictionary) by P. de Behaine, 1772-1773; (Archive des Missions Etrangères de Paris, 2001)</li> </ul>
<b>19<sup>th</sup> century</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sách số sang chép các việc</i> (The Records) by Philippe Bình, a native Vietnamese speaker written in 1822 (with some supplemented pages in 1824, 1825, 1826, 1827, 1829, 1830, 1831, 1832) (Bình, Philiphê 1968)</li> <li>• Two letters (No. 41, 42) written in 1818 and 1825 by non-native Vietnamese speakers (Đoàn 2008:130-135)</li> <li>• <i>Dictionarium Annamitico Latinum</i> (Vietnamese Latin Dictionary) by Taberd, 1838 (Literature Publishing House-Center for National Studies. 2004). The author of this Dictionary, Taberd, is an European</li> </ul>

Among documents of the 17<sup>th</sup> century listed here, the 1651 *Dictionarium Annamiticum Lusitanum, et Latinum* (DALL hereafter) was compiled by Rhodes, a European missionary, who spoke and wrote fluent Vietnamese. While letter No. 5 was written by non-native Vietnamese speakers, the rest (including the *History of Annam*, a small historical book) were written by native Vietnamese speakers. Letters were written to communicate with each other among Catholics. Twenty-five of them were written by native Vietnamese speakers. The rest were written by non-native Vietnamese speakers. Behaine, the author of *Dictionarium Anamitico Latinum* (Vietnamese-Latin Dictionary), was also European.

## 2 Results of the investigation and discussion

One issue that needs clarifying prior to investigation and discussion of initial consonant clusters recorded in *Quốc Ngữ* documents in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries is whether the spellings in those documents truly reflect Vietnamese phonetics at the time those documents were written. The reason for this question is that spelling did not always accurately represent the phonemic system of the language at the time records were made.

First of all, the spelling in *Quốc Ngữ* documents in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and *Dictionarium Annamiticum Lusitanum et Latinum* (1651) did accurately represent the initial consonant clusters in Vietnamese at the time. Those initial consonant clusters were not only recorded in *Quốc Ngữ* with the Romanized alphabets but also clearly described and analyzed by Rhodes in *Linguae Annamiticae seu Tunchinensis Brevis Declaratio* in and DALL. He wrote, “The language of the people in Tonkin has a liquid sound *l* added to other consonants, e.g. *blả, soluere* ‘pay, return’; and in some provinces or regions, they pronounce *t* instead of *b*, e.g. *tlả, soluere* ‘pay, return’, but *b* is more popular in the capital; *l* can occur after *m*, e.g. *mlễ, ratio* ‘reason’. Sometimes, even rarely, *l* can be added to *p*, e.g. *plàn, deuluere* ‘roll, overflow’, while others may pronounce it simply as *làn* without *p*. But *l* very frequently occurs with *t*, e.g. *tla, condire* ‘add more ingredients/spices to food’; *tle, canna indica* ‘bamboo’, whereas many people may just pronounce such consonants as *t*, which is revealed through frequent encounters” (Rhodes 1991:8 of the Vietnamese translation). He also noted, “there is a confusion between *tr* and *tl*, which is revealed through frequent encounters” (Rhodes 1991:9).

The spellings of initial consonant clusters in *Quốc Ngữ* documents of the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries also prove their actual phonetic existence rather than mere traditional writing habits. This is testified in Taberd’s

1838 description and analysis in the preface to his *Dictionarium Anamitico-Latinum*. He states, “L is pronounced in the same way as in Latin or French, e.g. *la* (voiciferari ‘shout’), *lá mái* (lacuna ‘wall coating’). People in Dang Ngoai (Tonkin) normally add *B* to *L*, so they say *blả* (solvere ‘pay, return’) while in some provinces in Dang Trong (Annam) adjacent to Dang Ngoai, people say *tlả* instead of *blả*. They also add *M* before *L*, and instead of *lời* (verbum ‘words/speech’), they say *mlời*” (Nguyen K. X. 1994:36, in Vietnamese, viii in Latin). Taberd also states, “The people in Dang Ngoai say *blời* instead of *trời* ‘heaven, sky, God’ and *tlon* instead of *tron* ‘slippery’. Also, some say *tlời* instead of *trời* (Nguyen K. X. 1994:38 in the Vietnamese version, and pages viii to ix in the original Latin text).<sup>2</sup> Taberd’s remarks recorded in his *Dictionarium Anamitico-Latinum* cited here prove that he used the Roman alphabet to record actual Vietnamese phonetics at the time he had first-hand experience in the country.

### 2.1 An investigation of spellings *bl*, *ml*, *mnh*, and *tl* in 17<sup>th</sup> century documents

Among the Vietnamese lexical entries written in Vietnamese in DALL are a number of words with spellings *bl*, *ml*, *mnh*, and *tl*. (In this study, I refer to both the *Quốc Ngữ* letters and actual phonemes. That is why *Quốc Ngữ* letters are often used. To refer phonemes, backslashes /.../ are used).

Table 2 shows the numbers of such words as well as the total numbers of times such words are attested in the dictionary.<sup>3</sup> The figures in Table 2 show how unevenly the four clusters *bl*, *ml*, *mnh* (/mɲ/), and *tl* are represented in DALL.

**Table 2.** Numbers of words containing written clusters and total number of occurrences

	<i>bl</i>	<i>ml</i>	<i>mnh</i>	<i>tl</i>
No. of different words with the clusters	101	26	3	109
Total no. of occurrences	410	121	5	459

In the letters of Thiện and of Văn Tín in 1659 of *the History of Annam* by Bento Thiện (Đỗ 1972), and in the five letters numbered 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 in *Chữ Quốc Ngữ thế kỷ XVIII* (Đoàn 2008), we found six words (including one proper name) with the spelling *ml*, nine with *bl*, and eleven with *tl*, as shown in Table 3. Of the 26 words in Table 3, all except *blâm* were recorded in DALL. In the table, column A refers to five letters from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, column B to letters by Igesico Văn Tín and Bento Thiện, and column C to *History of Annam*.

<sup>2</sup> In Nguyen Khac Xuyen’s translation, it was printed as “*blon* thay vì ‘instead of’ *tron*”. I contrasted it with the Latin original and corrected it as “*tlon* thay vì *tron*”.

<sup>3</sup> 101 words contain *bl*: 97 entries under the letter B, and 4 other entries: *cấp blaó* [column 88], *lê blệt* [column 406], *bồ blin* [column 477], *blay tay* [column 672]. The cluster *bl* is recorded 408 times in the dictionary. 26 words contain *ml*: 23 entries under the letter M, including the proper name “nước Mlời” (the country of *Mlời*, i.e. Champa; and three other entries: *hèn mlạt* [column 320], *khóa mlạc* [column 370], *mlút* [column 436]). *ml* is recorded 121 times in the dictionary. There are three words with *mnh*: under the letter M and *mnhật* under the entry *mlật*. *mnh* is used five times in columns 468, 469, 471, 471, 457 (entry *nhằm*) of the dictionary. There are 109 words with *tl*: 102 under the letter T and 7 other entries: *bơi tlêi* [column 53], *tlẻ mỏ* [column 473], *tlon ngót* [column 535], *quan tlaõ* [column 699], *tla* [column 818], *tlắt* [column 832]), *thước xá* [column 880. This word was reprinted *lước xá*). *tl* is recorded 459 times in the dictionary.

**Table 3.** *ml, bl, and tl in other documents of the 17<sup>th</sup> century*

No.	Early Spellings	Modern Vietnamese	Gloss	A	B	C
1	mlát	nhát	slice			+
2	mlạt	nhạt	bland		+	
3	mlễ	lễ	reason, argument	+	+	
4	Mlôi	proper noun	old name of Champa			+
5	mlời	lời	words	+	+	
6	mlón	lón	big			+
7	blá	trả	return, pay back	+	+	+
8	blai	trai (người)	boy, son			+
9	blái	trái (quả)	fruit	+		+
10	blái	trải	spread, roll out			+
11	blâm	lầm /nhầm	mistake, mistaken	+		
12	blâu	trầu	piper betele (type of betel)			+
13	blọn	trọn	all, complete			+
14	blở	trở (lại)	come back	+	+	+
15	blời	trời	sky, heaven, God	+	+	+
16	tlao	trao	give			+
17	tlây	trầy	depart, leave for		+	+
18	tlâu	trâu	buffalo			+
19	tlẻ	trẻ	young			+
20	tlên	trên	on/above/over			+
21	tlò	trò (học-)	student			+
22	tlong	trong	in, inside			+
23	tlôm	trộm	burglar			+
24	tlôn	trôn	hide / evade			+
25	tlông	trông	look, expect			+
26	tlước	trước	before, primary			+

## 2.2 Alternate pronunciations attested by documents from the 17<sup>th</sup> century

### 2.2.1 An investigation of alternate spellings recorded in DALL

From comments by the author of DALL (i.e. Rhodes), such as “sharing the same sense”, “is said”, “better”, “see”, it is possible to conclude that at the time the dictionary was compiled, there existed in the Vietnamese language a number of alternate pronunciations in the initials of certain words. Rhodes realized this, so he recorded these variants and noted them in his glossaries. He also assessed their popularity and their degree of standardization. We compiled a list of alternate pronunciations in the Rhodes’ dictionary in Tables 4 to 11.

**Table 4:** 22 words with alternate spellings *tl-tr*<sup>4</sup> in DALL

	Early Spellings		Modern Vietnamese	Gloss
1	tla	- tra	kéo ra	pull out
2	tlám	- trám	(cây) trám	canarium (species of tree)
3	tlàng	- tràng	trường (học)	school
4	tlàng	- tràng	trường (dài)	long
5	tlàng	- tràng	tràng thuế	tax agency
6	tlàng hột	- tràng hột	tràng hạt	beads
7	tlão	- trũ	(bên) trong	in(side)
8	tláo	- tráõ	tróng (cổ)	put on a yoke
9	tlão	- traõ	trong (- sạch)	clean (clear)
10	tlát	- trát	trát (nhà)	plaster (a wall)
11	tlắt	- trắt	(ăn) trắt	bite a grain of rice
12	tlầu	- trầu	trầu	husk
13	tlẽn (tlàng)	- trẽn	(trơ) trẽn	shameless
14	tlọc	- trọc	trọc	bald
15	tlóũ	- tróũ	trống (cái -)	drum
16	tloù	- troũ	trông	look
17	tróũ trái	- tlóũ trái	trống trái	empty, spacious, open
18	tlon	- tron	tron	smooth, slippery
19	tlóp	- tróp	tróp (- bánh)	bake
20	tlọt	- trọt	trọt/trượt	slide, slither
21	tlùng	- trùng	trùng (thùng)	leaking (having a hole)
22	tlúng	- trúng	trúng	egg

**Table 5:** Eleven words with alternate spellings *bl-tl*<sup>5</sup> in DALL

	Early Spellings		Modern Vietnamese	Gloss
1	blai	- tlai	người con trai	boy, man, son
2	blan	- tlan	(cái) bàn	table
3	blang	- tlang	cùm	shackle, fetter
4	blat	- tlat	trát	plaster (a wall)
5	blét	- tlét / tlát / trát	trát	plaster (a wall and fill fractures if there are any)
6	blích	- tlích	(cá) trích	herring
7	blỏ	- tlỏ	trỏ	point
8	blon ngót	- tlon ngót	ton hót	tattle
9	blọn	- tlọn	trọn	all/complete
10	blúc blác blóc blác	- tlúc tlác	lúc lắc	swing/oscillate/rock
11	blót	- tlót	trót (môi)	protruding, pouted (lips)

<sup>4</sup> In *Dictionarium Annamiticum Lusitanum, et Latinum*, Rhodes noted, “there is a confusion between *tr* and *tl*, which is revealed through frequent encounters” (p.9 of the Vietnamese translation).

<sup>5</sup> Another study (Hoàng 1991) reveals 11 words containing the alternate spellings *bl-tl*, e.g., *blà-tlả*, but it does not include *blét-tlét*. We also found only *tlả* ‘an earthenware pot for stewing fish’, but not *tlả* (= *blả* = *trả* [lại]) ‘to return something’.

**Table 6:** Ten words with alternate spellings ml-l in DALL

	Early Spellings	Modern Vietnamese	Gloss
1	mlả - lả	điên khùng	mad, crazy
2	mlác - mác	(sứt) mẻ	jagged, broken
3	mlạc - mạc	nhạc	music
4	mlặt - lặt	nhặt	pick up
5	mlê - lê	lê/nhê	pull out
6	mlộ - lộ	lộ/nhộ	dirty/stained
7	mlỡ/ mlở - lỡ	lỡ/nhỡ	miss (e.g. a bus, a train)
8	mlớn - lớn	lớn	big
9	mlút - lút	lút	inundated (over head and ears)
10	mlụt - lụt	lụt	flooded

**Table 7:** Five words with alternate spellings bl-l or bl-b in DALL

	Early Spellings	Modern Vietnamese	Gloss
1	blan - bàn	(cái) bàn	table
2	blet - liệt <sup>6</sup>	liệt	paralyze
3	blỏ - lỏ	lỗ	(vulgar) male genitals
4	blốc - loúc	trốc/lốc	whirlwind
5	bluông - luóng	trông	low mountain pass

**Table 8:** Four words with alternate spellings ml-mnh [and l, nh] in DALL

	Early Spellings	Modern Vietnamese	Gloss
1	mlặt - nhạt	nhạt	bland
2	mlầm - mnhầm, lằm, nhằm	nhầm	mistake/mistaken
3	mlặt - nhạt, mnhặt	nhặt	pick up
4	mlẽ - nhẽ	nhẽ/lẽ	reason/argument

**Table 9:** Four words with alternate spellings tl-l in DALL

	Early Spellings	Modern Vietnamese	Gloss
1	tlánh - lánh	tránh	avoid
2	tlíu tlo - líu lo	líu lo	twitter
3	tlộn tlo - lộn lạo	lộn lạo	noisy, messy
4	tlúc tlác - lúc lác	lúc lác	swing/oscillate

**Table 10:** Three words with alternate spellings bl-tr in DALL

	Early Spellings	Modern Vietnamese	Gloss
1	blá - trá	(đối) trá	lie (tell a lie)
2	blở - trở	trở (về)	return
3	(ma) blơi - (ma) trôi	ma trôi	ghost

<sup>6</sup> The word *liệt* in Table 7 is listed under the entry ÔM ‘sick(ness)’.

**Table 11:** One word with alternate spellings *tl-t*<sup>7</sup> in DALL

Early	Spellings	Modern Vietnamese	Gloss
1	(boi) tlêi - (boi) tãi	boi trái	rowing

2.2.2 An investigation of alternate spellings in other documents from the 17<sup>th</sup> century

Alternative spellings were also found in other documents from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Alternate spellings with initial *m* and *b* and with *ml* and *bl* will be illustrated in Sections 2.7. and 2.8. Two such alternations are listed in Table 11.

**Table 11:** Alternate spellings *tl-tr* and *b-tr*

Spellings with initial <i>tl</i>	Spellings with initial <i>tr</i>
<i>học tlò</i> (Đỗ 2008:195) ‘student’	<i>học trò</i> (Đỗ 2008:190, 195) ‘student’
<i>tlaõ</i> ([bên]trong) (Source: Rhodes) ‘in/inside’ <i>tlong ấy</i> (Đỗ 2008:183) ‘inside there’	<i>trong nhà</i> (Đỗ 1972:188) ‘in the house’ <i>trong Nghệ an</i> (Đỗ 2008:190) ‘in Nghe an’
<i>kẻ tlôm</i> (Đỗ 2008:185) ‘burglar’ <i>ăn tlôm</i> (Đỗ 2008:188) ‘steal, burgle’	<i>cướp trôm</i> (Đỗ 2008:191) ‘pillage’ <i>ăn trôm cướp</i> (Đỗ 2008:191) ‘pillage’
<i>tlăm</i> (= 100) (Source: Rhodes)	<i>trăm trận trăm thua</i> (Đỗ 2008:192) fight 100 battles lose 100 battles, i.e. always defeated
Spellings with initial <i>bl</i>	Spellings with initial <i>tr</i>
<i>blở lại</i> (Đỗ 2008:184) ‘come back’	<i>trở đi trở lại bên nào</i> (letter No. 3, Đoàn 2008:36) ‘go back and forth on which side’
<i>blở về</i> (Đỗ 2008:188) ‘return’	
Blở. <i>blở lại</i> (Source: Rhodes) ‘come back’	
<i>blở đi blở lại</i> (Source: Rhodes) ‘go back and forth’	

2.2.3 Alternate spellings *tl-tr* in DALL and other 17<sup>th</sup> century documents

Even though a large number of words with initial *tl* (109 different words, 459 occurrences) appear in DALL (from column 801 through column 816 in the Latin text, pages 230 to 233 in the Vietnamese language translation), Rhodes makes a highly significant observation under the entry “*tla*”: “*Tla* ... some say *tra*, i.e. *l* was changed to *r*, and it is normally the same with the subsequent syllables” (column 801 in the Latin text, page 230 in the Vietnamese translation). This observation means from the lemma *tla* of the dictionary onward, all the lemmas spelled *tl* could also be spelled *tr* (*t/*). Indeed, in the entries following his note, DALL records 86 lemmas under the letter “T” with *tr*. Why, then, did Rhodes continue to record *tl* in some cases? We can only assume that he made a choice based on his view of what was more frequent in spoken usage or what was merely spoken by “some” when the data for his dictionary was collected. Vietnamese writers of *Quốc Ngữ*, on the other hand, may have wanted to make a distinction between Sino-Vietnamese and non-Sino-Vietnamese words by consistently using *tr* rather than *tl* in Sino-Vietnamese words. This may explain why Thiên used both options *tl* and *tr* in the same sentence.

- (1) Nước Ngô *tlước* hết mới có vua *trị* là Phục hi  
 country Wu before, primarily all have King rule to be Fuxi  
 ‘The country of Wu primarily had the ruler Fuxi’ (Đỗ 2008:187)

<sup>7</sup> In *Dictionarium Annamiticum Lusitanum, et Latinum* Rhodes noted, “The language of the people in Tonkin has a liquid sound *l* added to other consonants [...]. But *l* very frequently occurs with *t*, e.g. *tla*, *condire* ‘add more ingredients/spices to food’; *tle*, *canna indica* ‘bamboo’, whereas many people may just pronounce such consonants as *t*; which is revealed through frequent encounters” (page 8 of the Vietnamese translation). In the present day, in some dialects of counties: Giao Thủy, Xuân Trường, Hải Hậu of the Nam Định province (in northern Vietnam), people pronounce *tâu* ‘buffalo’, *túng* ‘egg’, *teo* ‘to hang’, *tên* ‘upper, on’, *te* ‘bamboo’, *tống* ‘drum’ etc., instead of *trâu* (← *trâu*), *trúng* (← *trúng*), *tréo* (← *tréo*), *trên* (← *trên*), *tré* (← *tré*), *trống* (← *trống*), among others.

In sentence (1), *thuộc* [trước] ‘before, primarily’ is not a Sino-Vietnamese word; *trị* [cai trị] ‘rule’, on the other hand, is.

These examples show that in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, *tl* was merging with /t/. This was yet another sound change among initial consonants leading to mergers.<sup>8</sup>

### 2.3 Investigation of initial spellings *bl*, *ml*, *mnh*, and *tl* in documents from the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries

#### 2.3.1 The cluster *mnh*

In documents of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century that we investigated, we no longer found the cluster *mnh* that used to appear in DALL (1651).

#### 2.3.2 The cluster *bl*

In 35 letters from the 18<sup>th</sup> century (from letter No. 6 written in 1702 to No. 40 written in 1802) (Đoàn 2008:43-129), *bl* appeared in nine words. In letters number 41 and 42 (early 19<sup>th</sup> century) (Đoàn 2008:130-135), *bl* was used in eight words. In *Records* (1822), *bl* was used in thirteen words. The words are listed in Table 11.

**Table 12:** Words spelled with *bl* and number of citations in documents from the 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries

Early Spellings	Modern Vietnamese	Gloss	No. of instances: 18 <sup>th</sup> cent. (35 letters)	No. of instances: 19 <sup>th</sup> cent. Letters No. 41, 42	No. of instances: 19 <sup>th</sup> cent. The Records
blả	trả	return, pay back	6	2	89
blá	trá- dối trá	lie (tell a lie)	11	1	16
blai	(người) trai	boy, man			16
blái	quả	fruit			23
blái	giải/trải	spread, roll out			1
blàn	tràn	overflow		1	
blang	trăng	moon			3
bláo	tráo (trở)	shifty, untrustworthy	1		
blo	tro	ash	1		2
blọn	trọn	all, complete	11	2	22
blôi	trời (trăng)	tell, say to, last words before death	2	1	15
blồng	trồng	plant, grow			2
blở	trở (xuống)	downward	7	1	1
blời	trời	sky, heaven, God	20	1	216
blón	lớn	big	1	1	91

For the words spelled with *bl* in *the Records*, the current figures are derived from the entire document with 600 handwritten pages. For the word *blời*, its 216 occurrences included 163 occurrences of the abbreviation *D.C.B.* (*Đức chúa Blời* ‘God’). Except for *blón*, all of the words were recorded in DALL.

#### 2.3.3 The cluster *ml*

In 35 letters from the 18<sup>th</sup> century (letters No. 6 to No. 40 in Đoàn 2008), *ml* was retained in 6 words; in *The Records* (1822), it was retained in two words; and in letters No. 41 and 42 (19<sup>th</sup> century) it was retained in four words. Table 13 contains a list of words that retained *ml* in these documents.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> It seems evident that the sound change in the initial consonant clusters exerted influence on spelling. For example, *trái* ‘wrong’ was written with *bl*: *mắc phải sự blái này* ‘commit this wrong doing’ (Đoàn 2008:39).



**Table 13.** Words retaining *ml* and instances in documents of the 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries

Early Spellings	Modern Vietnamese	Gloss	No. of instances: 18th cent. (35 letters)	No. of instances: 19th cent., Letters No. 41, 42	No. of instances: 19th cent., The Records
mlắm	lắm	many		1	
mlầm	lầm	mistake	2	1	
mlẽ	lẽ	reason, argument	55	2	42
mlỡ	lỡ	miss	3		
mlở (bláo -)	tráo trở	untrustworthy	1		
mlời	lời	word	111	3	70
mlớn	lớn	big	5		

For the words *mlắm* and *mlở* (*bláo mlở*), this is the only time I found *lắm* ‘many, much’ spelled as *mlắm* and (*bláo*) *blở* ‘untrustworthy’ spelled as (*bláo*) *mlở*. The author spelling *mlắm* is the author of letter No. 41 in 1818. The author of spelling *mlở* is the author of letter No. 25 in 1759. They were both non-native Vietnamese speakers. It is likely that the authors’ spellings are errors resulting from influence of similar-sounding words. Of the seven words in this table, all except *mlắm* and *mlở* were recorded in DALL (1651).

Thus, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, *ml* survived only in a few words. Among the four words spelled with *ml* in *The Records* and letters No. 41 and 42, we find these examples.

- *mlắm* and *mlở* (*bláo mlở*) possibly a misspelling, as mentioned above.
- *mlầm* occurred once in letter No. 41 (Đoàn 2008:130-133), but in all 6 occurrences in *The Records*, it is consistently spelled it as *nhầm* ‘be mistaken, mistake’ (not *mlầm*).<sup>10</sup>
- *mlẽ* and *mlời* were still recorded in *The Records*.

This shows that by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, *ml* had virtually disappeared. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, though spellings with *bl* and *ml* were still found, the number of cases had already sharply declined compared to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, suggesting that the pronunciations *bl* and *ml* were losing ground in popular usage.

#### 2.3.4 The cluster *tl*

In 37 letters (No. 6 through No. 42) from the 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Đoàn 2008) and in the entire *The Records* (early 19<sup>th</sup> century), *tl* did not occur at all. However, it did survive in some other notable documents of the same period.

- *Dictionarium Anamitico Latinum* by Pigneaux de Behaine (1772-1773), which still contained two instances of *tl*: *tla* “tra xét” ‘interrogate’ and *tla tri* “tra xét nguyên cớ” ‘elicit the causes/reasons’. Other words are spelled *tr* (/t/) instead of *tl*.
- The book *A voyage to Cochinchina in the years 1792-1793* by Barrow (1792-1793) recorded *tl* in the word *trúng* (*telung*) ‘egg’, and *kl* in the word *trăm* (*klang*) ‘hundred’ (p. 90-93).

Regarding the two instances of *tl* in Pignau de Behaine’s *Dictionarium Anamitico Latinum*, it should be noted that that this work was based solely on the Vietnamese language spoken in Cochinchina. Rhodes’ *DALL*, on the other hand, was based on the language in both Tonkin and Cochinchina. So the lexicon recorded by Barrow belonged to the language of Cochinchina only. It is likely that by the time the *Dictionarium Anamitico Latinum* was compiled, documents in *Quốc Ngữ* reflected a complete merger of /t/ into /t/. Any cases of *tl* occurring in the data would be a rare remnant. The rare cluster *kl* is attested in *A Voyage to Cochinchina in the Years 1792-1793* even though it had completed its merger long before the loss of *tl*.

Thus, it is possible to posit that by the later half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the spelling *tl* ceased to be used and /t/ had completed its change. Throughout the country, /t/ had merged into /t/.

<sup>9</sup> In this table, the numbers in the columns and rows represent the number of times that a cluster occurred in the corresponding documents.

<sup>10</sup> For example, *đã nhầm mà nghe* ‘mistaken when hearing’ (Behaine 2001:104), *chẳng nhầm nữa* ‘no longer mistaken’ (Behaine 2001:104), *đã nhầm nhờ* ‘already mistaken’ (Behaine 2001:241).

## 2.4 Alternate pronunciations in documents from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries

*Sách số sang chép các việc* records eight cases of alternative spellings with *bl* (for /bl/) and *gi* (for /z/). Eventually, the spelling *gi* became dominant, as shown in Table 14.

**Table 14:** Alternate pronunciations in *Sách số sang chép các việc*

Early Spellings	Modern Vietnamese	No. of Occurrences	Modern Vietnamese	No. of Occurrences	Gloss
blá	trả	89	giả	1	return, pay back
blai	con trai	16	giai	3	boy, son
blái	trái, giải	1	giải	1	spread, roll out
blái	trái, quả	23	giái	5	fruit
blói (blăng)	trối	15	giỏi (-giăng)	10	tell, [say] to, last words before death
blồng	trồng	2	giồng	8	plant, grow
blo	tro	2	gio	6	ash
blở	trở lại	1	giở	100	return, come back

In 35 letters from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and two from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were no alternate spellings with initials *bl* and *gi*, although there were words with the initial *bl* that did not alternate, as in Table 14.

**Table 15:** Words with *bl* that did not alternate in letters from the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries

Early Spellings	Modern Vietnamese	No. of Occurrences	Gloss
blá	trả	8	return, pay back
blàn	tràn	1	overflow
bláo	tráo (trở)	1	shifty, untrustworthy
blo	tro	1	ash
blói	trối	3	tell (say, speak) to, last words before death
blở	trở lại	8	return, come back
blời	trời	21	sky, heaven, God

Tables 14 and 15 indicate that the choice of initial *gi* (/z/) instead of *bl* (/bl/) in *The Records* was an increasingly strong trend. The spelling *gi* also predominates over *bl* (*giở* ‘return, come back’: 100 occurrences-*blở* ‘return, come back’: one occurrence).<sup>11</sup> Philippe Bình intended to show the distinction by consistently using *giở* [*giở về* / *giở lại*] ‘return, come back’ (as /bl/ merged into /z/-*gi* in the Northern dialect).<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, like Thiện in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, he consistently wrote *tr* in *trở* ([*cản*] *trở* ‘prevent, block’, a Sino-Vietnamese word) as well as in other Sino-Vietnamese monosyllabic words, and in Vietnamese words whose initial consonant *tr* (/t/) was derived from *tl* (/tl/), e.g. “*nhiều con trẻ blai*” ‘many young boys/sons’ (Bình 1968:401) and “*trái ý*” ‘against smb’s will’ (Bình 1968:67, 68). *tr* in these words originated from *tl* (*tlê*, *tlái*), while *bl* in *blai* merged into *gi* (/z/) in the Northern dialect. Later, *gi* merged with *tr* throughout the country. On the whole, by this time, *bl* had been replaced almost completely by *gi* and *tr*.

<sup>11</sup> *The Records*: “*mà tôi blở xuống thì thấy các Thầy đang ăn*” (Bình 1968:152).

(2) *mà tôi blở xuống thì thấy các thầy đang ăn*  
 CNJC 1S come back down CNJC see PL priest FUT eat  
 ‘When I came down, I saw them eating.’

<sup>12</sup> I use /z/ to record retroflex spelled *gi/GI* (vs. /z/ spelled *d/D*) in *Quốc Ngữ* writing in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, 19<sup>th</sup> century (and up to now). In modern Vietnamese, /z/ (GI) had merged with /z/ even though orthographically, etymologically, *gi/GI* and *d/D* are still preserved (e.g. *gia* (gia đình) ‘family’ = *da* ‘skill’ = /za/). In most of Northern dialects, /z/ spelled *gi/GI* and /r/ (trilled; eg. *ra* ‘go out’) spelled *r/R* merged into /z/.

### 2.5 Remarks on the change of *bl*, *ml*, *mnh* (/mɲ/), and *tl* from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century

Comparison of the results of the investigation of *bl*, *ml*, *mnh* (/mɲ/), and *tl* based on documents from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and those from the 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (including the *Dictionarium Annamitico-Latinum*, 1772-1773 and the *Dictionarium Annamitico-Latinum*, 1838) yields the data in Table 16.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 16.** Number of words retaining clusters in different sources

Initial consonant clusters	No. of words: 17 <sup>th</sup> cent.	No. of words: 18 <sup>th</sup> -early 19 <sup>th</sup> cent.
/tɺ/ (tɺ)	109	2
/bɺ/ (bɺ)	101	15
/mɺ/ (mɺ)	26	7
/mɲ/ (mnh)	3	0

For the words with *tl* in this Table, I found only entries *tla* and *tla trỉ* in the *Dictionarium Annamitico Latinum* 1772 -1773, not included in Rhodes' DALL. For the words with *bl*, except for *blón*, the rest were recorded in DALL. For the words with *ml*, except for *mlám*, and *mlỏ*, the rest were recorded in DALL. The words *mlám* and *mlỏ* were probably misspelled. (See Table 13 in the Section 2.3.3).

#### 2.5.1 In the 17<sup>th</sup> century

For the change of *bl*, *ml*, *mnh* (/mɲ/), and *tl* in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, based on the documents under investigation, I found the following.

- The cluster *mnh* (/mɲ/) had virtually disappeared. The spelling *mnh* appeared only in 3 entries with 5 instances in DALL. No other documents show any occurrence of *mnh*.
- By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, *bl* and *ml* had not yet completed their change. *bl* was still retained in at least 101 different words, and *ml* was retained in 26 different words (see Table 2). In particular, *bl* or *ml* in such words as *blả* 'pay, return', *blai* 'boy, man, son', *blái* 'spread, roll out', *blám* 'mistake/mistaken', *blỏ* 'return', *blời* 'sky, heaven, God', *mlẽ* 'reason', *mlời* 'words', *mlón* 'big' were retained quite consistently.
- For instance, *nhà blai* 'the groom's family' (Đỗ 1972:194), *đã blỏ lại* 'already came back' (Đỗ 1972:33), *ĐC blời blả công cho Thầy* 'God pays you' (Đỗ 1972:184), *bắn súng mlón* 'fire the big gun' (Đỗ 1972:193), *làm quan mlón* 'being a high-ranking mandarin' (Đỗ 1972:190], *mlạt dạ* 'faded trust, no longer believe' (Đỗ 2008:185).
- The cluster *tl* was retained in the highest number of entries, 109 entries in DALL alone, with 459 instances.

Should these figures reflect progress in the evolution of these consonant clusters, *ml* would be closest to its completion. The clusters *bl* and *tl* did not show much variation and were far from final completion.

While some consonant clusters had been lost through mergers, others were still underway, showing cases of convergence instead of complete merger. Table 17 shows some examples of the convergence of *bl* and *tl*, *ml* and *mnh*.

<sup>13</sup> The calculations are based on the following: the 17<sup>th</sup> century data is based on the quantity of words retaining consonant cluster recorded in DALL plus the quantity of words retaining the same consonant clusters recorded in other documents of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, minus the quantity of shared entries (See table 1, table 2.). Data from the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries include the number of words retaining consonant clusters recorded in the *Dictionarium Annamitico Latinum* (1772-1773) and *Dictionarium Annamitico Latinum* (1838) plus the number of words retaining that consonant cluster recorded in other documents of the 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, minus the quantity of shared entries.

**Table 17:** Examples for convergence of *bl* and *tl*, *ml* and *nh*

blai	- tlai	→	trai / giai	boy, man, son
ma blơi	- ma trôi	→	(ma) trôi	ghost
lỡ	- mlỡ / mlở	→	lỡ / nhỡ	miss
mlặt	- nhạt, mnhặt	→	lặt / nhặt	bland
blan	- tlan	→	bàn	table
blở	- trở	→	trở / giở	return, come back
lụt	- mlụt	→	lụt	flood
mlầm	- mnhầm, lầm, nhầm	→	lầm / nhầm	mistake

The alternate spellings or the shift in spellings show that because the changes (merger or convergence) of the clusters *bl*, *ml*, *nh* (/mɲ/), and *tl* had not reached their final completion in the given period, some words retained initial *tl*, *bl*, or *ml*, while others had changed to *b*, *t*, *l*, or *tr* (/t/).

**Table 18:** Examples for the change of *bl* to *l* and *ml* to *l* in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<b>blọn</b> ‘all/complete’: 35 instances - Letters No. 6, 7, 8, 13, 17, 36, 37, 38, 39 (2 instances), 40, 41 (2 instances) (Đoàn 2008): 13 instances; - <i>The Records</i> : 22 instances;	<b>lọn</b> ‘all/complete’: two instances - Letter No. 15 (Đoàn 2008:70): one instance - <i>The Records</i> (Binh 1968:312): one instance
<b>blối</b> ‘tell, say to, last words before death’: three instances - Letters No. 38, 39, 41 (Đoàn 2008).	<b>lối</b> ‘tell, say to, last words before death’: one instance. - Letter No. 38 (Đoàn 2008:118).
<b>blón</b> ‘big’: 93 instances - <i>The Records</i> : 91 instances - Letter No. 38 (Đoàn 2008:117): 1 instance, -Letter No. 41 (Đoàn 2008:132): 1 instance	<b>lón</b> ‘big’: one instance - <i>The Records</i> (Binh 1968:123)
<b>blời</b> ‘sky, heaven, God’: 265 instances: - <i>The Records</i> : 216 instances - Letter No. 1: two instances; No. 2: two instances; No. 4: three instances; No. 5: three instances; No. 6: 15 instances; No. 10: one instance; No. 15: one instance; No. 19: one instance; No. 39: two instances; No. 41: one instance (Đoàn 2008). - Letter by Văn Tín (Đỗ 2008): four instances; - Letter by B. Thiện (Đỗ 2008): three instances; <i>History of Annam</i> (Đỗ 2008): eleven instances	<b>lời</b> ‘sky/God’: one instance Letter No. 42 (Đoàn 2008:134): 1 instance
<b>mlắm</b> ‘many’: one instance - Letter No. 41 (Đoàn 2008:132)	<b>lắm</b> ‘many’: 25 instances - ( <i>The Records</i> 25 instances)
<b>mlời</b> ‘word’: 144 instances - Letters, No. 1 to No. 42 (Đoàn 2008): 134 instances - Letter by Văn Tín (Đỗ 2008): two instances; letter by B. Thiện: (Đỗ 2008): six instances; - <i>History of Annam</i> (Đỗ 2008): two instances	<b>lời</b> ‘word’: one instance - Letter No. 41 (Đoàn 2008:131)

### 2.5.2 The 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *bl* and especially *tl* sharply increased their rate of change. Pigneaux de Béhaine's *Dictionarium Annamitico Latinum* (1772-1773) only recorded two words with *tl* and no instance of *bl*. In Taberd's *Dictionarium Annamitico Latinum* (1838: viii-ix) of the *Introduction* did mention *bl* and *tl*, but the entries in the dictionary did not record any actual words with *bl* and *tl*, nor did they occur in other documents of the same period. This means that by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, *tl* (/t/) had completed its change to *tr* (/t/) in standard Vietnamese.

The table 12, 13 and 16 also show that in the documents from the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries under investigation, fifteen entries still retained spelling *bl* (i.e. /bl/) and seven entries still retained spelling *ml* (i.e. /ml/). Thus, by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the change of *bl* to *gi* (/z/) or *l* and *ml* to *l* or *nh* (/ɲ/) could be regarded as virtually complete, except for a few cases.

The common feature in the change of *bl* to *l* and *ml* to *l* in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries is the loss of one of the components, as reflected in alternate pronunciations recorded in various documents, together with their occurrences as in Table 18. The letters No. 15, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41 were written by non-native Vietnamese speakers.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.6 Alternate pronunciations of *m* and *b*, *ml* and *bl*

This section reviews alternate pronunciations with *m* and *b*, *ml* and *bl* revealed by the spellings in documents from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### 2.6.1 Corresponding alternate pronunciations of *m* and *b* in DALL

Investigating DALL, I found that this dictionary recorded five words with spellings that varied between *b* and *m*. They are listed in Table 19.

**Table 19:** Corresponding alternate pronunciations with *m* and *b* in DALL

Modern Vietnamese	Data Recorded in DALL
<i>bù nhìn</i> 'scarecrow, effigy, dummy, figurehead'	<i>mồ đin</i> (column 47) - <i>bồ nhìn</i> (column 47), <i>bồ blanh</i> (column 569), <i>bồ đin</i> (column 569), <i>bồ blin</i> (column 477), <i>mồ đin</i> (column 472, 477) <i>bồ [dìn]</i> (column 473) <sup>a</sup>
<i>bùi nhùi</i> 'tinder nest for building a fire, an ember'	<i>mùi nhùi</i> (column 478) / <i>môi nhôi</i> (column 478) - <i>bùi dùi</i> (column 478), <i>mùi dùi</i> (column 489) - <i>bùi nhùi</i> <sup>b</sup> (column 58)
<i>củ nâu</i> 'Dioscorea cirrhosa'	<i>mồ nâu</i> (column 473) - <i>bồ nâu</i> <sup>c</sup> (column 47)
<i>bồ hòn</i> 'Sapindaceae, Sapindus saponaria'	<i>mồ hòn</i> (column 473) - <i>bồ hòn</i> <sup>d</sup> (column 47)
<i>bồ quân</i> 'Flacourtia jangomas, dian coffee plum'	<i>mồ cuên</i> (column 47, 473) - <i>bồ cuên</i> <sup>e</sup> (column 47)

The following are notes on the data corresponding to the superscripts letters in Table 19.

- a. Rhodes did not clearly write *bồ đin*; just *bồ*, idem (same meaning) in the same entry as *mồ đin*.
- b. The *Đại Nam Quốc Ngữ* (1899) (Author: Nguyễn Văn San; verified, translated and abridged by Lã Thị Minh Hằng. Hanoi, 2013) contained the word *bùi dùi* (*nhùi*).
- c. The *Chỉ Nam ngọc âm giải nghĩa* (transcribed and abridged by Trần Xuân Ngọc Lan. Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1985) contained the word *bồ nâu* (page 222). The *Đại Nam Quốc Ngữ* also contained *bồ nâu*.
- d. The *Chỉ Nam ngọc âm giải nghĩa* contained *mồ hòn* (pages 220 and 221). The *Đại Nam Quốc Ngữ* also contained *bồ hòn*.
- e. The *Đại Nam Quốc Ngữ* contained *bồ quân*.

<sup>14</sup> In fact, according to Hoàng (1972:12), in the 1960s to 1970s, /t/ was still preserved in four local varieties: Vĩnh Thái, Vĩnh Tú, Vĩnh Nam, Vĩnh Trung located in the North of Vĩnh Linh county, Quảng Bình province.

In other documents from different times, I found five more words with alternating spellings *m* and *b*, including those in Table 20.

**Table 20:** Corresponding alternate pronunciations with *m* and *b* in other documents

<b>mồ hóng-bồ hóng</b> 'soot'	<i>mồ hóng</i>	DALL (column 472)
	<i>bồ hóng</i>	Đại Nam quốc ngữ <sup>a</sup>
	<i>mồ hóng-bồ hóng</i>	Vietnamese today
<b>mồ đục-bồ đục</b> 'kidney'	<i>mồ đục</i>	DALL (column 473)
	<i>bồ đục</i>	Vietnamese today
<b>mồ hôi-bồ hôi</b> 'sweat'	<i>mồ hôi</i>	DALL (column 472)
	<i>mồ hôi</i>	Đại Nam quốc ngữ
	<i>mồ hôi-bồ hôi</i>	Dictionary of Vietnamese (1994) <sup>b</sup>
<b>xoi mới -xoi bó</b> 'nosey'	<i>xoi mới-xoi bó</i>	Dictionary of Vietnamese (1994)
	<i>xoi mới-xoi bó</i>	Từ điển Việt nam (Dictionary of Vietnam) <sup>c</sup>
	<i>xoi bó</i>	Việt Nam từ điển (Vietnam Dictionary) <sup>d</sup>
	<i>xoi bó</i>	Đại Nam Quốc âm tự vị (Vietnam Dictionary) <sup>e</sup>
<b>mạ-bạ</b> 'plate'	<i>bạ</i>	DALL (column 16, 17)
	<i>mạ</i>	- Dictionarium Annamitico Latinum <sup>f</sup> - Dictionarium Annamitico Latinum <sup>g</sup> - Dictionary of Vietnamese (1994) <sup>b</sup> etc.

The following are notes on the data corresponding to the superscripts letters in Table 20.

- a. Nguyễn Văn San (1899). Verified, translated and abridged by Lê Thị Minh Hằng. Hanoi, 2013.
- b. *Từ điển tiếng Việt* (Dictionary of Vietnamese). Hoàng Phê (chief editor). Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1994.
- c. *Từ điển Việt nam* (Vietnam Dictionary). Thanh Nghị. Thời thế Publishing House. Sài Gòn, 1958.
- d. *Việt Nam từ điển* (Vietnam Dictionary). Khai Trí Tiến Đức. Hà nội Imprimerie Trung Bắc Tân văn. Mặc Lâm Publisher, 1931.
- e. *Đại Nam Quốc âm tự vị*. Huỳnh Tịnh Paulus Của. Saigon Imprimerie REY, CURIOL & Cie, 4, rue d' Adran, 4. 1895-1896.
- f. *Dictionarium Anamitico Latinum*. (Vietnamese-Latin Dictionary) by de Behaine, 1772 - 1773. (Archive des Missions Etrangères de Paris, 2001).
- g. *Dictionarium Annamitico Latinum*. (Vietnamese-Latin Dictionary) by Taberd, 1838. (Literature Publishing House-Center for National Studies).

### 2.6.2 Alternate pronunciations *ml-bl*:

In the documents investigated, I found three words showing alternate spellings of *ml* and *bl*, as follows.

(1) For *mọ-bọ* 'dirty, stained with soot'

- *Lọ nôi, Mọ nôi* 'soot' (DALL, column 418)
- *Blọ. Blọ áo* 'a smudge of shirt / blouse' (DALL, column 44)

(2) For *mlâm-blâm* 'mistake, mistaken'

- *mlâm*: recorded in DALL
- Three instances in letter No. 25 written in 1759, letter No. 39 written in 1792, letter No. 41 written in 1818, including *sự mlâm lỗi* 'mistake, wrongdoing' (Đoàn 2008:87), *chớ mlâm* 'don't be mistaken' (Đoàn 2008:124), *cho nên mlâm* 'so [somebody] is mistaken' (Đoàn 2008:130).
- *blâm*:
- recorded in two instances in the two letters written by Domingo Hao in 1687: *blâm lỗi sự gì* 'mistake something, doing something wrong' [Đoàn 2008:33], *blâm lỗi môi gì* 'mistake some word, a slip of the tongue' (Đoàn 2008:35).

(3) For *mlón-blón* 'big'

- *mlón*:
- Recorded in DALL (1651): *MLón. Đến mlón* 'until (someone) grows big'.

- Two instances in *History of Annam* by B. Thiên (Đỗ 2008): *súng mlón* ‘big gun’ (Đỗ 2008:193), *quan mlón* ‘high-ranking mandarin’ (Đỗ 2008:190).
- Four instances in letter No. 6: *quan mlón* (Đoàn 2008:43), *quan mlón* (Đoàn 2008:43), *sự lỗi mlón* ‘big mistake’ (Đoàn 2008:44), *hòm mlón* ‘big trunk’ (Đoàn 2008:47).
- One instance in letter No. 10: *dấu mlón* ‘big mark’ (Đoàn 2008:58).
- *blón*:
  - One instance in letter No. 22 written in 1759: *quan blón* ‘high-ranking mandarin’ (Đoàn 2008:84).
  - One instance in letter No. 38 written by Gortynense in 1792: *rất cao blón* ‘very tall and big’ (Đoàn 2008:117).
  - One instance in letter No. 41 written in 1818: *sông blón* ‘big river’ (Đoàn 2008:132).
  - 91 instances in *The Records* (1822),<sup>15</sup> e.g., *sông blón* ‘big river’ (Binh 1968:132), *khi đã blón* ‘when grown up’ (Binh 1968:66), *dưa chuột quả blón* ‘big cucumbers’ (Binh 1968:578), *cây blón* ‘big tree’ (Binh 1968:578).

### 2.6.3 Issues and discussion of variant pronunciations of *m* and *b* and *ml* and *bl*

Two issues should be illustrated as follows. First, is it possible that the existence of alternate pronunciations with *m* and *b* and *ml* and *bl* such as *mỏ hòn-bỏ hòn* ‘Sapindaceae, *Sapindus saponaria*’, *mùi dùi-bùi nhùi* ‘tinder nest for building a fire, an ember’, *mlộ-blộ* ‘dirty/stained’, *mlón-blón* ‘big’ is due to inaccurate recording work or misspelling? Based on documents investigated (see Sections 2.7.1. and 2.7.2.), I posit that the existence of alternate pronunciations presented in the Table 21 is not due to inaccurate recording work or misspelling.

**Table 21:** The alternate pronunciations with *m* and *b* and *ml* and *bl*

Alternate pronunciations		Gloss
mỏ đin	- bỏ nhìn	scarecrow, effigy, dummy, figurehead
mùi dùi	- bùi nhùi	tinder nest for building a fire, an ember
mỏ nâu	- bỏ nâu	dioscorea cirrhosa
mỏ hòn	- bỏ hòn	sapindaceae, sapindus saponaria
mỏ cuên	- bỏ cuên	flacourtia jangomas, dian coffee plum
mỏ hóng	- bỏ hóng	soot
mỏ đục	- bỏ đục	kidney
mỏ hôi	- bỏ hôi	sweat
xoi mới	- xoi mới	nosy
mạ	- bạ	plate
mlộ	- blộ	dirty/stained
mlâm	- blâm	mistake/mistaken
mlón	- blón	big

The sufficient grounds for this position are as follows.

- Rhodes’ differentiation of variant pronunciations with *m-b* of the above 5 words *mỏ đin-bỏ nhìn*, *mùi dùi-bùi nhùi*, *mỏ nâu-bỏ nâu*, *mỏ hòn-bỏ hòn*, *mỏ cuên-bỏ cuên*, together with clear lexicographical notations for each case such as “*having the same meaning*”, “*some say*”, “*better*”, “*see*”, etc., shows that he clearly understood that they were variant, and recorded them as such. Moreover, Rhodes consistently distinguished *m* and *b* in other words containing *ml*, *bl*, and he also observed the distinction between *ml* and *l* (*mlón-lón* ‘big’), and *bl* and *b* (*blan-bàn* ‘table, desk’). Such results suggest that his differentiation in spelling of *ml-bl* in *mlộ-blộ* reflect actual variations which he noted despite the fact he was a foreigner. Apart from these, variant pronunciations with *m-b* are also maintained up to the present day: *mỏ hóng-bỏ hóng* ‘soot’, *mỏ đục-bỏ đục* ‘kidney’, *mỏ hôi-bỏ hôi* ‘sweat’, *xoi mới-xoi mới* ‘nosy’.
- There is a span of nearly 200 years from the *DALL*, Văn Tín’s letter, Domingo Hào’s letters to Philippe Binh’s *The Records* (Binh 1968), so the spelling of the corresponding variant

<sup>15</sup> *The Records* (page 123) show *blón* 91 times, with only one instance of *lón*: *phải có 5 dây đỏ lón ở 5 đầu tượng chịu nạn* ‘there must be five big red ropes on the five heads of the statue of crucified Jesus’.

pronunciations with *ml-bl* of three entries *mlo-blô* ‘dirty/stained’, *mlàm-blàm* ‘mistake’, *mlón-blón* ‘big’ in documents written at so widely separated points of time cannot be accidental.

- The representation in spelling of variant pronunciations by Philippe Bình, Domingo Hảo, Văn Tín and other Vietnamese would have been based on their native speaker intuition. Such respected scholars, living in different times, could not all be making the same spelling mistakes.

Thus, there are sufficient grounds for me to posit that these authors recorded in writing what they heard and differentiated in the language.

Secondly, were the corresponding alternate pronunciations *m ~ b* and *ml ~ bl* noted above unsystematic phenomena, or were they part of a series of variant pronunciations? My answer here is this: They were not unsystematic phenomena, but part of series of variant pronunciations that appeared in the period under investigation. They reflect historical phonetic changes which had been going on, and which had not been completed.<sup>16</sup> More specifically, the variant spellings reflect:

**Table 22:** Variant spellings recorded in document from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century

Variant pronunciations	Sources of Data
bl-tl	Rhodes' Dictionarium Annamiticum-
bl-b	Lusitanum, et Latinum
bl-l	Letters of the 17th century
bl-tr (/t/)	Letters of the 18th century
ml-l	The Records
ml-mnh (/mɲ/) [and l/ nh (/ɲ/)]	(see Sections: 2.3., 2.7.1., and 2.7.2.)
tl-l	
tl-tr (/t/)	
tl-t	
bl-gi	The Records <sup>17</sup>

#### 2.6.4 Tendencies of the change of the variant pronunciations *m ~ b* and *ml ~ bl*

There exist certain distinctions among the variant pronunciations *m ~ b* and *ml ~ bl* under consideration here. Words with *m ~ b* were generally antecedent to contemporary disyllabic words, whereas those showing *ml ~ bl* were antecedent to contemporary monosyllabic words. Moreover, words that show variants /m/ ~ /b/ in our *Quốc Ngữ* texts are, in most cases, no longer in use in modern Vietnamese, while those with /b/ are still common. Exceptions include *bồ nâu* ‘Dioscorea cirrhosa’, which has become modern [củ] *nâu*-with a monosyllabic option; and *mồ hôi* ‘sweat’, which is more common than *bồ hôi*, and *xoi mới* ‘nosy’, which is more common than *xoi bó* (Dictionary of Vietnamese 1994). The items *muốn* [ngủ] and *buồn* [ngủ] ‘want to sleep’ are both retained but as separate words with different lexical functions). Examples are shown in Table 23. Note that in contemporary Vietnamese, *mồ nâu* and *bồ nâu* became monosyllabic *nâu*.

<sup>16</sup> This excludes *pl*, which Rhodes did not include in his dictionary; he did mention it in *A Brief Report of the Language of Annam or Tonkin* as (see footnote 1) “... sometimes, even rarely, they add *l* to *p*, e.g. *plàn* ...” (Rhodes 1651: 8, Vietnamese version). On the other hand, Barrow in *A Voyage to Cochinchina in the Years 1792-1793* (Barrow 1792-1793) provided a short list of words, among which 5 words show that the Vietnamese language in Cochinchina then included such sounds as *bl* (as in *mat bloei* ‘the sun’, *blái* ‘fruit’, *blang* ‘the moon’, *tl* [telung] ‘egg’, *kl* [klang] ‘hundred’, pages 90-93). However, as we are concerned only with *bl-*, *ml-*, *tl-* recorded in *DALL*, I put those other issues aside for the moment.

<sup>17</sup> See Section 2.4.



**Table 23: Merging of *m* and *b* into *b***

bồ blanh-bồ đin, mô đin-bồ (đin), bồ nhìn-mô đin, bồ blin-mô đin	→	bù nhìn	‘scarecrow, effigy, dummy, figurehead’
mồi nhồi/mùi nhùi-bùi dùi, mùi dùi-bùi nhùi, bùi nhùi-mùi dùi	→	bùi nhùi	‘tinder nest for building a fire, an ember’
bồ hòn-mô hòn	→	bồ hòn	‘Sapindaceae, Sapindus saponaria’
mồ nâu-bồ nâu	→	(củ) nâu	‘Dioscorea cirrhosa’
bồ cuên (quân)-mồ cuên (quân)	→	bồ quân	‘Flacourtia jangomas, dian coffee plum’

Meanwhile, among the corresponding alternate spellings with *ml* / *mnh-bl* (e.g. *mlâm-blâm* ‘mistake/mistaken’, *mlón-blón* ‘big’, *mlọ-blọ* ‘dirty/stained’), those with original initial *ml* (/ml/) and *mnh* (/mɲ/) were preserved and latter, *ml* and *mnh* are spelled *nh* (/ɲ/) or *l* (/l/) in the modern orthography. Yet *bl* in *blở* ‘return, come back’ had already evolved into *gi* (/z/) (*giở* [*lại*] ‘return, come back’), on its way to merging with *tr* (/t/) throughout the country, which in turn yielded such pair as *giở-trở* ‘return, come back’, *giăng-trăng* ‘moon’, *giầu-trầu* ‘piper betel’, and so on, of which forms *trở*, *trăng*, *trầu*, among others are considered more standard and more popular, while the others are regarded as a dialectal variants.

DALL recorded an intermediary form of *mnh* in the words *mnhâm* ‘mistake/mistaken’, *mnhẽ* ‘reason, argument’, *mnhạt* ‘bland’, along with *mlâm* ‘mistake/mistaken’, *mlẽ* ‘reason, argument’, and *mlạt* ‘bland’. All cases of *ml* in this dictionary merged into *nh* and/or *l*, depending on the dialect. Examples are shown in Table 24.

**Table 24: Merging of *ml*, *mnh* into *nh* and/or *l***

Early Spellings	Modern Vietnamese	Gloss
mlâm-mnhâm-blâm	→ nhâm-lâm	mistake/mistaken
mlón-blón	→ nhón-lón	big
mlộ-blộ	→ nhọ-lọ	dirty/stained
mlặt-mnhặt	→ nhặt-lặt	pick up
mlạt	→ nhạt-lạt	bland
mlẽ-mnhẽ	→ nhẽ-lẽ	reason/argument
mlỡ	→ nhỡ-lỡ	miss (e.g. a bus, a train)
mlạc-mạc	→ nhạc	music
mlẽ	→ nhẽ-lẽ	pull out

For pronunciation variants with *nh-l* found in contemporary Vietnamese, (e.g. *nhâm-lâm* ‘mistake/mistaken’, *nhón-lón* ‘big’, *nhọ-lọ* ‘dirty/stained’, *nhặt-lặt* ‘pick up’, *nhạt-lạt* ‘bland’, *nhẽ-lẽ* ‘reason, argument’, *nhỡ-lỡ* ‘miss’ [e.g. a bus, a train], *nhẽ-lẽ* ‘pull out’, etc.), one form is considered more standard and popular, while the other is regarded as a dialectal variant depending on the dialect. They can also be re-distributed semantically as well: the variants become semantically specialized, forming doublets.

### 2.7 What may variant pronunciations *m ~ b* and *ml ~ bl* indicate?

Scholars of Vietnamese linguistics, including Maspero (1912), Haudricourt (1950), Barker (1963), Соколовская (Sokolovskaja, 1978), Ferlus (1982, 1991), Diffloth (1989, 1990), Nguyễn Tài Căn (1995) have argued that in proto-Mon-Khmer, and then proto-Vietic (proto-Viet-Muong and proto-Viet-Chut), there existed a single initial consonant which evolved into /m/ in Vietnamese and /b/ or /p/ in other Vietic languages (Muong, Ruc, and Arem). Examples are shown in Table 25.

Table 25: Data in Vietic languages

	Modern Vietnamese	Ruc Language <sup>18</sup>	Muong Language <sup>19</sup>	Arem Language <sup>20</sup>	Proto-Vietic <sup>21</sup>
bamboo shoot	mǎŋ <sup>1</sup>	taʔbǎŋ <sup>1</sup>	paŋ	abaŋ	tbaŋ
salt	muoi <sup>5</sup>	bɔi <sup>3</sup>	poj <sup>3</sup>	bɑ:jʔ	bɔ:jʔ
to draw (water)	muk <sup>5</sup>	buk <sup>3</sup>	puk <sup>3</sup>	bɔk	bɔ:k
to vomit	mɯɣ <sup>4</sup>	bah <sup>1</sup>	pa <sup>4</sup>	abah	bah

Based on correspondences between Vietnamese /m/, and /b/ or /p/ in other Vietic languages, along with other kinds of evidence, Maspero (1912), Соколовская (1978), and Barke (1963) reconstructed the ProtoVietic \*/mb/. In contrast, Haudricourt (1950), Gregerson (1969), Ferlus (1982) reconstructed \*/ʔb/; and Diffloth (1989, 1990), Nguyễn Tài Căn (1995), Ferlus (1991, 2014), Nguyễn Văn Lợi (2010), and Shimizu Masaaki (2015), reconstructed proto-Vietic implosive \*/b/, a voiced implosive bilabial stop.

Traces recorded in the more or less phonemic *Quốc Ngữ* writing which I have presented above indicate that both /m/ and /b/, not /m/ alone, are preserved in Vietnamese. The series of variant pronunciations /m/-/b/ or /ml/-/bl/ recorded in the 17<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> documents are reflexes that support and reinforce the reconstruction of \*/b/, which was spelled *b/B* by Rhodes and other Vietnamese of the 17<sup>th</sup>-early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. I am in favor of the reconstruction of \*/b/.

Rhodes himself, the author of *DALL*, did describe the sound that he represented with the letter *b/B* as follows: "... this *b* is not completely similar to our *b*; when pronouncing it, we should not exhale; rather, we have to inhale right at the time the mouth opens, or the lips open, just like when one wants to pronounce *m* but then ends up pronouncing *b* ..." (Rhodes, page 6).<sup>22</sup>

Prototypes \*/mb/, \*/ʔb/, or \*/b/ are merely different variants depending on different scholars' views who may consider certain phonological features the most typical ones, such as prenasalized, preglottalized, or implosive sounds.

According to data presented in this study, in the history of the changes of Vietnamese \*/b/, (a) variant pronunciations (/m/ and /b/) and (b) "discrepancies" in the identification, differentiation and records of the alternation of *m* and *b* all show that from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, in a number of words, the shift from \*/b/ to /m/ was still ongoing.

### 3. Conclusions

In the past, a general observation about historical phonetic changes in Vietnamese has been stated as follows: the change of initial clusters of the Vietnamese language recorded in *DALL* reached its completion by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This statement is not totally accurate. My investigation of the documents concerned show that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the initial clusters *bl*, *ml*, *mnh* (/mŋ/), *tl* had alternate pronunciations in a considerable number of words (see Sections 2.2. and 2.3.). These alternate pronunciations reveal continued change taking place in the pronunciation of clusters and that in certain, cases changes were still ongoing into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, evidence from *Quốc Ngữ* documents proves the existence of clusters *bl*, *ml*, *mnh* (/mŋ/), and *tl*. Moreover, initial consonant alternations between *m* and *b* and *ml* and *bl* provide evidence for

<sup>18</sup> The data is that of Русская Академия Наук-Национальный Центр Общественных и Гуманитарных Наук СПб, 2001. (Russian Academy of Science-National Center of Social Sciences and Humanities of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> The data is that of Академия Наук СССР-Комитет Общественных и Гуманитарных Наук СПб, 1987. (Academy of Science of the Soviet Union-Committee of Social Sciences and Humanities of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> The data is that of Ferlus (2014).

<sup>21</sup> The data is that of Ferlus (2014).

<sup>22</sup> Analyzing the manner of articulation described by Rhodes from the theoretical perspective of airstream mechanism, I find that Rhodes' description of the pronunciation of the sound captures highly delicate details. It is clear that inhalation occurs when this sound is pronounced, which produces typical phonetic features: it is implosive, with the glottis not completely closed, which makes it a stop sound, and part of the air from the lungs moves into the pharynx. This causes the vocal cords to vibrate, resulting in a voiced sound.

the reconstruction of an initial \*/b/ in proto-Vietic. All of these initials were undergoing changes in the time period examined.

a) It is possible to posit that by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the change of *mnh* (/mɲ/) to *ml* or *l* was complete. The *DALL* only recorded 3 words with *mnh*: *mnhật* ‘pick up’, *mnhâm* ‘mistake/mistaken’, and *mnhẽ* ‘reason/argument’ in 5 citations. Given the explanation noted in the dictionary (*mlặt, nhặt, mnhặt*, idem [column 469]; *mnhâm*, vide *mlâm* [column 471]; *mnhẽ* vide *mlẽ* [column 471]; *nhẽ, mlẽ* idem. vide *mlẽ* [column 549]; *mlẻ* and *lẻ* [column 469]), we can see that the author regarded the forms *mlặt, mlâm, mlẽ, mlẻ* as the more standard than their corresponding words with the initials *mnh* and *nh*. This proves that words with initial *mnh* were not regarded as standard by Rhodes. For him, the standard was *ml* or *l*.

b) The *Dictionarium Anamitico Latinum* 1772-1773 by Pigneau de Béhaine only recorded 2 synonyms with initial *tl*, namely *tla* ‘interrogate’, and *tla tri* ‘investigate the cause’, which suggests that *tl* had virtually completed its change by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The *DALL* recorded 109 different words, but documents in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries recorded only 2 (see Section 2.4.4.).

c) The two clusters *bl* and *ml* continued to be retained in spelling of a few words in written documents until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when reaching the final stage of their trajectory. In documents under investigation of the 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, *bl* was still retained in 15 words, and *ml* in 7 words, which were the last recorded traces of these two initial clusters in the historical of Vietnamese phonology. The change from *bl* to *gi* (/z/) and *ml* to *l* or /nh (/ɲ/) could be regarded as more or less complete by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The alternations between the initials transcribed as *m* and *b*, *ml* and *bl* in the documents under investigation indicate four significant points.

- First, they offer evidence to support the reconstruction of ProtoVietic \*/b/ (a controversial phoneme that attracted much attention).
- Second, from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the shift from \*/b/ to /m/, in a number of words, was still ongoing.
- Third, they provide rare but clear evidence in Romanization of a kind that has not been previously adduced in the reconstruction of \*/b/.
- Fourth, the variation between the initials *m* and *b* on the one hand, and *ml* and *bl* on the other, shows us that the change from Vietic \*/b/ to modern /m/ or /b/ was still ongoing in the period under discussion.

Finally, it is worth noting that some features of early Austroasiatic initials persisted in Vietnamese up until 200 to 300 years ago. The phonetic changes in the 17<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries cover a very short time in the entire history of the Vietnamese language, yet they reveal important information about how sound change evolves.

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