

Colloquial Reduplicative Words in Nguyen Duy's Poetry after 1986

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<p><i>After 1986, Vietnamese poetry witnessed a strong paradigm shift from the majestic epic echoes to the hidden corners of private life and worldly affairs, leading to the trend of "everyday-ization" of poetic language. In this context, Nguyen Duy emerged as a unique poetic phenomenon by seamlessly blending the traditional luc bat (six-eight) meter with a modern perspective, especially through the maximum utilization of colloquial reduplicative words. This article surveyed 153 poems across four poetry collections ("Mother and You", "Distant Road", "Returning", "Dust"), thereby gathering statistics and classifying 44 colloquial reduplicatives, including disyllabic, trisyllabic, and quadrisyllabic reduplicatives. The analysis results show that this vocabulary class not only helps the poet break academic and conventional molds to vividly depict nature and human psychology, but also possesses highly evocative and expressive qualities, thereby conveying profound life philosophies. The research contributes to affirming Nguyen Duy's talent as a master "wordsmith" and elucidates the vital role of popular language in the modernization process of contemporary Vietnamese poetry.</i></p> <p>Keywords: Colloquial reduplicative words, Nguyen Duy's poetry, Vocabulary, Reduplicative words.</p>
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1. Introduction

Colloquial words are a vocabulary class existing in both spoken and written forms, though primarily in the former, authentically reflecting the daily life of the masses. When utilized in literature, particularly in poetry, this vocabulary helps break academic and conventional molds, broadening the communicative scope of the text to express everyday details authentically, captivantly, and with strong expressive nuances. Among various colloquialisms, colloquial reduplicative words (từ láy khẩu ngữ) represent a typical category possessing both highly evocative and expressive qualities, as well as a distinctly informal and popular tone.

After 1975, and especially since the Doi Moi (Renovation) milestone in 1986, Vietnamese poetry witnessed a paradigm shift. As the majestic epic echoes of wartime faded, poetry returned to the flow of worldly affairs, the hidden corners of private life, and the complexities of human existence. This shift in artistic thinking inevitably demanded a transformation in linguistic means. Poets became deeply aware that the laudatory, heroic vocabulary was no longer adequate to contain ordinary reality with its struggles, sorrows, and even satire. Consequently, the trend

of "everyday-ization" and "prosaicization" of poetic language began to surge.

In this context, Nguyen Duy emerged as a unique poetic phenomenon, an unmistakable linguistic personality. Although he is a poet forged in the smoke and fire of war, the post-1986 period was truly when his pen reached its maturity in both philosophy and style. His poetry is a seamless blend of the traditional national soul (expressed through the luc bat / six-eight meter) and a modern, edgy perspective. A striking feature of Nguyen Duy's poetry in this period is his art of utilizing vocabulary. He maximally mobilized everyday vocabulary, particularly colloquial reduplicatives, to construct a poetic world that is both sharp and edgy, yet pure and innocent.

With this significance, through the statistics, classification, and contextual analysis of this colloquial reduplicative vocabulary, this article aims to decode Nguyen Duy's meaning-making mechanisms and artistic intentions. The article not only contributes to affirming the word-organizing talent of a master "wordsmith" but also elucidates the vital role of popular language in the modernization process of contemporary Vietnamese poetry.

2. Content

2.1. Colloquial words and colloquial reduplicative words

2.1.1. Colloquial words

In linguistics and stylistics, "colloquialism" is a concept that has drawn the attention of many researchers and has been defined from various perspectives. The Vietnamese Encyclopedic Dictionary defines colloquial language as: "Language existing primarily in spoken form, used to exchange thoughts and feelings in daily life. The common form is dialogue. It has basic characteristics of short utterances, simple structures, a tendency toward emotional nuances, and many phonetic variants" [2, 496].

Agreeing with this view but emphasizing stylistic opposition, author Hoang Phe in the Vietnamese Dictionary posits that colloquial language is: "Ordinary spoken language, used in daily life, possessing stylistic features opposed to the written style" [4, 496].

Expanding into the realm of stylistics, author Dinh Trong Lac in the work Vietnamese Stylistics classified colloquialisms into a specific functional stylistic system: "The daily life style is an appropriate model to construct a class of utterances (texts) manifesting the roles of communicative participants in everyday life" [3, 122].

From these academic viewpoints, a general overview can be reached:

- Colloquial words are words or phrases used in everyday language.
- When existing in literary works, colloquial words not only bring liveliness, satire, or intimacy but also act as a potent rhetorical device.

2.1.2. Colloquial reduplicative words

Colloquial reduplicative words are lexical units that adhere to the phonetic coordination mechanism of Vietnamese reduplicatives but carry the stylistic features of spoken language. Regarding vocabulary - semantics and expressiveness, this word class has the following prominent identifying features:

- Informality and everyday nature: Colloquial reduplicatives exhibit a casual, popular nuance, bearing the strong breath of actual life (even "sidewalk" or "dusty" language).
- High evocative and expressive value: Due to the characteristics of the reduplication mechanism, colloquial reduplicatives possess the resonance to extremely delicately simulate complex psychological states, shapes, sounds, or casual actions of humans in everyday communication.

Colloquial reduplicatives are the crystallization of the aesthetic nature of Vietnamese sound creation and the authenticity and sharpness of folk language. Introducing this word class into poetry is an artistic operation demanding the writer's bravery, aiming to strip away conventionality to bring poetry closer to the heartbeat of life.

2.2. Colloquial reduplicatives in Nguyen Duy's poetry after 1986

Surveying 153 poems in the collections: "Me va em" (Mother and You), "Duong xa" (Distant Road), "Ve" (Returning), "Bui" (Dust), we found 44 occurrences of colloquial reduplicatives in the categories of disyllabic, trisyllabic, and quadrisyllabic reduplicatives. Below are the specific survey results:

Table 1. Survey table of colloquial reduplicatives in 4 poetry collections of Nguyen Duy

Type of reduplicative	Disyllabic (Full)			Trisyllabic	Quadrisyllabic	Total
Quantity	Disyllabic (Full)	Disyllabic		6	7	44
		Partial: Initial Consonant	Partial - Rhyme			
Percentage	7	7	17	13,6%	15,9%	100%

2.2.1. Disyllabic reduplicatives

2.2.1.1. Full disyllabic reduplicatives

Full disyllabic reduplicatives are words that perfectly repeat the components of the syllable structure. However, in reality, to meet the rules of phonetic harmony, rhyming, and to create smooth, rhythmic pronunciation, there has appeared a form of full reduplicative with a change in tone or a difference in the final consonant. In Nguyen Duy's poetry, this special reduplicative form is not merely a

phonetic phenomenon but has become a powerful tool, helping the author carve sharp, evocative, and unconventional poetic ideas.

The first case is the full reduplicative with a tonal change, typical in the poem "Dear Thi No":

*"Dear peerless Thi No
the moon is voluptuously naked with you"*
(Excerpt from Dear Thi No)

Instead of following the traditional depiction of beauties with conventional poetic materials, Nguyen Duy brought Thi No – the symbol of "deviation" in literature – into the poetic picture with a modern and bold perspective. Acting as the "poetic eye" in the stanza is the reduplicative “ngôn ngôn” (voluptuously / overwhelmingly abundant). Structurally, this is a full reduplicative with a tonal shift in the low register (changing from the heavy tone of the base morpheme to the falling tone of the preceding syllable). The deep resonance of this reduplicative immediately creates a strong visual impression, evoking a sensual beauty brimming with the vitality of the moonlight, while perfectly harmonizing with the instinctual physical form of humans. Nguyen Duy's descriptive technique is both satirical and extremely serious, thereby breaking away from dogmatic aesthetic molds. The urgent, overflowing rhythm of the word “ngôn ngôn” is the very echo of the lust for life, the lust for love, and the ego fiercely desiring earthly happiness.

Besides tonal changes, Nguyen Duy also ingeniously utilizes the full reduplicative form with final consonant modification, creating a profound resonance for the poetic idea. For example, the verses in “Square Sky”:

*"The sun is my heart
the luminous moon is your love
waking is day, sleeping is night
tilting are the two roofs of two distant
homelands".*

(Excerpt from Square Sky)

In this stanza, to measure the soldier's love, Nguyen Duy used a coordinate system of cosmic proportions: "sun" and "moon". The reader's attention converges on the reduplicative “vành vạnh” (luminous / crystal clear). From a phonetic perspective, this is a phenomenon of final consonant dissimilation to break the stifling constraint, creating openness and resonance for the sound. Placed in context, “vành vạnh” not only describes the bright, intact clarity of the moon unclouded by any wisp, but is also the materialization of a faithful, transparent, and resolute love. The soft phonetic transition of the reduplicative syllable creates a melodious, soothing musicality, while affirming the strength of inner faith: the soldier takes the fulfillment and brilliance of romantic love as a solid fulcrum, thereby gaining infinite strength to overcome the reality of bombs and bullets, shouldering the mission of protecting the peace of the homeland.

2.2.1.2. Partial disyllabic reduplicatives

Partial disyllabic reduplicatives are words with a repetition of one component in the syllable structure. This type includes two sub-categories: consonant reduplicatives and rhyme reduplicatives. According to statistics from Nguyen Duy's poetry collections, partial disyllabic reduplicatives

appear 24 times, accounting for 54.5% of total reduplicatives. Although consonant reduplicatives are used quite impressively by the poet, quantitatively, rhyme reduplicatives dominate with 17 words, compared to 7 consonant reduplicatives. The appearance of this vocabulary class has contributed significantly to depicting character images and revealing profound inner worlds in his poetry.

Consonant reduplicatives are words that repeat the initial consonant, while the rhyme portion of the two syllables differs. Based on position, they are divided into consonant reduplicatives with the base morpheme in front and those with the base morpheme behind. In Nguyen Duy's poetry, consonant reduplicatives often carry high colloquialism, rich in visual and auditory value. For instance, when recreating the image of Mother Dop – an intelligent, sharp-tongued woman embodying the satirical spirit of feudal-era folk literature, the poet writes:

*"Dear demure Thi Dop
munching and tapping the wooden bell so dryly
stop acting so snappish with each other
we're old now, might as well bow to each other".*

(Excerpt: Dear Thi Dop)

The reduplicative snappish/petulant (ngúng ngoảng) in the stanza not only realistically describes the sharp gestures and manners of Mother Dop when bantering with the village mayor but also reveals a deeply sarcastic and satirical attitude. Nguyen Duy borrowed this image to create folk satirical laughter, exposing the nature of people in the old society.

From another perspective, consonant reduplicatives take on the semblance of nature, blending with pristine, rustic love:

*"Remember the river flowing lap-lapping (ôp oạp)
The wind writhing (oằn oại), panting (hồn hển) the
alluvial sky".*

(Excerpt: Dear Thi No)

In just two brief lines of poetry, a series of highly colloquial reduplicatives is maximized. The word "ôp oạp" (lap-lapping) describes the sound of water gently lapping the banks of the deserted river, combined with "oằn oại" (writhing) – a word with both visual and auditory nuances to evoke the uncomfortable twisting posture of the wind. Finally, the sound of hurried, deeply earnest whispering breaths is encapsulated in the word "hồn hển" (panting). These three reduplicatives are associated with the images of the river, wind, and sky, making nature seemingly stir, synchronize, and harmonize with the innocent, instinctual love of Chi Pheo and Thi No.

Besides consonant reduplicatives, rhyme reduplicatives are words that repeat the rhyme portion, while the initial

consonant differs. The elements in rhyme reduplicatives must adhere to complete rhyme identity and comply with the "same register" phonetic harmony rule. Nguyen Duy's poetry uses a very diverse system of rhyme reduplicatives such as: *lận đận, chên vên, lũng thũng, lẳng nhằng, lỏn vỏn, loay hoay, lếch thếch, lảng nhàng...* When writing about the arduous hidden corners of poetry lovers who must shoulder the burden of livelihood through journalism, he describes:

*"Heaven incites poets to do journalism
working like buffaloes, being chaotic (láo nháo), bustling around (lãng xãng)
clicking away black and white photos
tossing and turning the rice pot of royalties so draggingly (nhì nhằng)

Trudgingly (Lếch thếch) trailing a string
of gaping, crawling (lóc nhóc) mouths
feeding dependents with clumsy love poems
trivial articles are sometimes
'Firefighting'
existing sluggishly (lai rai) and dreaming
ordinarily (lãng nhàng)".*

(Excerpt: Royalty Debt)

A series of rhyme reduplicatives placed side by side creates a lively yet chaotic sound chain. The words "chaotic" (*láo nháo*) and "bustling around" (*lãng xãng*) sketch a hurried, tangled, disorderly pace of life that seemingly achieves no significant results. Furthermore, "trudgingly" (*lếch thếch*) and "crawling" (*lóc nhóc*) evoke an untidy appearance and the slow, exhausted posture of a human life struggling to make a living. The tragedy of the artist is pushed to its peak when the poet uses the phrases "sluggishly" (*lai rai*) and "ordinarily" (*lãng nhàng*) to emphasize a stalling, temporary existence. The noble poetic dream is now suffocated, shrunk into ordinary, unremarkable things.

Not just limited to the life of making a living, rhyme reduplicatives also sneak into the poet's sports lens:

*"Getting closer day by day – poetry and football
Straight and fast – less tangled (lãng nhằng) twisting
Aiming at the goal of the fans' hearts
Assaulting with the beauty of talent".*

(Excerpt: Poetry and football)

The colloquial reduplicative "tangled/complicated" (*lãng nhằng*) highlights the decisive playing style of the once-resounding Kiev team. Through this, Nguyen Duy implicitly affirms that football and poetry are two yet one. Both reject cumbersomeness, both aim to connect fans' hearts with original beauty and genuine talent.

More specially, rhyme reduplicatives are also a powerful tool for Nguyen Duy to convey his life philosophy. In the poem "Oh darling, the wind... (*Em ơi, gió...*), the natural wind is personified through the lens of reduplicatives:

"Oh darling, the wind – the wind is reckless (loang toàng)

Flashing streaks of blood-lightning spewing across the clouds.

*Oh darling, the wind – the wind is sulky (tuầy huầy)
The guild of bees and butterflies flutters flirtatiously and loosely (lòng thòng)."*

(Excerpt: Oh darling, the wind...)

The reduplicatives "loang toàng", "tuầy huầy", "lòng thòng" dissect each layer of the wind's personality. The wind here is not merely a natural phenomenon but a reflection of the multidimensional inner self of humans: sometimes fierce and flashy, sometimes sulky, and other times coquettish and pampered. Through this, the author implicitly asserts that everyone carries such fierce, complex winds within to weave a multi-colored life.

Finally, when mocking his own poetic career – a drifting, floating profession – the poet still accepts committing to it with a burning love. He writes:

*"Just sinking and floating with the crowd
personally identifying that I am nothing
just a floating step of migration
putting the luc bat step forward to walk windingly (loảng ngoảng)".*

(Excerpt: Poetry subsidy)

The reduplicative "loảng ngoảng" (windingly/intricately) appears at the end of the stanza like a completely tolerant smile of Nguyen Duy. Even knowing the path of poetry is an overlapping tangled mess, even being just a grain of sand in the crowd, he remains steadfast in "putting the step forward" to the rhythm of the nation's luc bat to continue the migratory journey of his life.

2.2.2. Trisyllabic reduplicatives

Trisyllabic reduplicatives are a unique linguistic phenomenon, in which three syllables have strict phonetic coordination. The common feature of trisyllabic reduplicatives in Vietnamese is that there is always a base element with vocabulary meaning and the ability to operate independently. The remaining two syllables are created by repeating the base syllable along with certain tone-changing rules: the second syllable usually carries a level tone (*thanh bằng*), while the first and third syllables have a contrast in register (high - low) or level - oblique (*bằng - trắc*). Flexibly applying this rule, Nguyen Duy introduced 6 highly colloquial trisyllabic reduplicatives into his poetry. Their appearance not only enriches the artistic vocabulary but

also affirms his talent in filtering and transforming everyday speech into delicate poetic language.

Examining the poem “Kieng” (Abstaining), we encounter a highly evocative and graceful trisyllabic reduplicative:

*"An unjust illness, cruel heaven punishes me
licking lips, sipping the un-distant era of rampage
Ending the yeast means ending the staggering
ending the spell, a shadow hallucinates into myself
The mortal world loses some sparkle
you girls lose some prettiness (xinh xinh xinh) by
several parts".*

(Excerpt: Abstaining)

The reduplicative “very pretty/cute” (xinh xinh xinh) both emphasizes the graceful, charming beauty of the girls and creates a swaying rhythm for the verse. Hidden behind that rhythm is the author's endless regret about an enthusiastic youth, about beauties full of vitality now gradually fading under the cruelty of time. Nguyen Duy demonstrates the bravery of a modern poet when using natural colloquial materials without being vulgar; conversely, he elevates them to convey the delicate vibrations of the soul.

Writing about the rural theme, Nguyen Duy's pen is always heavy with love and deep understanding for the hard human life. In the poem “Oh People!” (Dân ơi), he borrows a trisyllabic reduplicative to describe the severity of natural disasters:

*"This year again floods bleach the fields
Our homeland again has its crops completely
stripped (tông tông tông)
Our village again struggles in the water
Our hearts again become wild with frogs and toads".*

(Excerpt: Oh People!)

The reduplicative “completely stripped” (tông tông tông) fully portrays the utter loss, the desolate, bare scenery of the fields after the great flood. The crops are washed away until nothing is left, villages sink into a sea of water, and then the chorus of frogs and toads rises with wild desolation. The verse is like a twisting sigh, expressing the poet's profound empathy for the misery of poor farmers having to brace themselves against nature.

Not only used to describe external landscapes, trisyllabic reduplicatives are also used by Nguyen Duy as a powerful means to reveal a torn inner world. The poem “No” (Debt) rises like a declaration of the invisible debts of human life:

*"Owe love, owe hate, owe affection
shattering into pieces (toác toàng toang) are so
many debts
Owe life this creaking body
owe the road the corpse burying its traces."*

(Excerpt: Debt)

The reduplicative “shattering into pieces” (toác toàng toang) sounds like a harsh noise, pushing the state of debt and the bursting of emotions to its peak. We owe life the emotions of joy, anger, love, and hate; we owe a sincere heart, owe our youth and our own lives. The urgent, breaking echo of the phrase evokes the helplessness and precariousness of humans before the cycle of karma. From there, the poet conveys a profound life philosophy: the greatest debt of human life is gratitude and affection. To repay that debt, we can only treat each other with trust and love, live sincerely, kindly, and be more responsible for ourselves.

Particularly, the uniqueness in using colloquial trisyllabic reduplicatives is also clearly shown through a composition printed in the collection “Bui” (Dust):

*"Canned beer, a sluggish can-person
bulging enormously (ễnh ềnh ệch) completely bare
(hòn hòn hon) pitch black (thùi lụi)".*

(Excerpt: Boston, 21.6.1995)

This is a highly unconventional combination of words. The reduplicative “ễnh ệch” originally refers to a bloated object occupying a large space, now transformed into “ễnh ềnh ệch” complying with the level tone rule in the second syllable. Similarly, “hòn hòn hon” creates a rhythmic contrast between the oblique tone and level tone. Placing two trisyllabic reduplicatives successively in one line of poetry creates a strange rhythm, imbued with a satirical quality. Through this, Nguyen Duy once again affirms: reduplicatives not only have visual and evocative value but are also a powerful tool to construct graceful, wondrous melodies. Those seemingly rustic, everyday words, through the hands of the word-crafter, become incredibly vivid and break free from conventional molds.

2.2.3. Quadrisyllabic reduplicatives

Quadrisyllabic reduplicatives are words containing four syllables in their structural composition, where at most one syllable or a pair of adjacent syllables has a true vocabulary meaning. It can operate independently, lying in the phonetic coordination with the remaining syllables or pairs of syllables according to certain rules, creating a generalized meaning. Through the survey, we found that quadrisyllabic reduplicatives account for a small number (7 words).

In the poem “Mute Busker” (Xâm ngôn), to describe the sound of the lute at different pitches and tones, the author wrote:

The lute sounds plink-a-plink-plink (tung tung tung tung)

the buffalo insults the buffalo-tying rope.

...

The lute sounds pling-a-pling-pling (tinh tinh tinh tinh)

the heart insults the heartless form
The positive realm insults the negative realm
the sacred realm insults the secular realm
The lute sounds twang-a-twang-twang (tang tâng
tàng tang)
the fair player insults the foul player.

(Excerpt: Mute Busker)

A series of onomatopoeic quadrisyllabic reduplicatives such as “tung tung tung tung”, “tinh tinh tinh tinh”, or “tang tâng tàng tang” were mobilized to vividly describe the lute's sound. The flexible rotation of tones within the same reduplicative structure not only recreates catchy, strange sounds but also creates a background music layer carrying a mocking, destructive echo. The repetition of these syllables is not merely to evoke sound, but also to build rhythm and ingeniously rhyme with the preceding verse. Behind those seemingly playful sounds is a language sketching the hustle and complexity of human life. Nguyen Duy brought those very "worldly" words into poetry to illuminate the hidden corners of worldly affairs and private life. This diverse, daily-life-infused linguistic picture is the mirror reflecting the poet's inner world – a place filled with contemplation, reflections, and yearning for a distant memory.

The brilliance of Nguyen Duy's words leaves an even deeper impression when he uses quadrisyllabic reduplicatives with a visual and psychologically expressive nature, typically in the poem “White shirt, rosy cheeks” (Áo trắng má hồng):

"A white shirt is this white shirt
itchy and restless (ngứa nga ngứa ngứa) the
lovegrass in my heart
suddenly that friend gets married
leaving me behind in the middle of a gray-skied
winter

A white shirt is a flying white shirt
faintly appearing and disappearing (thấp tha thấp
thoáng) fragile days and months
who dyed the green forest to be green
who dyed the rosy cheeks to be rosy all year round."

(Excerpt: White shirt, rosy cheeks)

The phrase "ngứa ngứa" (itchy) originally expresses a physical discomfort on the skin, requiring soothing. However, through Nguyen Duy's poetic lens, this reduplicative is stretched into "ngứa nga ngứa ngứa", ingeniously transformed into a restless, churning state hidden deep in the mind. It is the vibration, the stirring to the point of anxiety before the pure beauty of the white-shirted figure in school days. Following that stream of emotion, the disyllabic reduplicative "thấp thoáng" (originally used to describe an object visually appearing

and disappearing) is expanded into the quadrisyllabic reduplicative "thấp tha thấp thoáng". This transformation stretches the dimensions of space and time, helping the reader clearly feel the fragility and transience of those dreamy days. By placing these two quadrisyllabic reduplicatives side by side, the poet successfully depicted the mood of nostalgia and endless regret for a pure, beautiful school time that is now only a memory.

The philosophical depth through the lens of quadrisyllabic reduplicatives continues to be sharply exploited by Nguyen Duy in the poem “Gap ma” (Meeting a ghost):

"Stutteringly and panickingly (Ngáp nga ngáp
ngoáng) crying ghost
it turns out I meet my own shadow on the road".

(Excerpt: Meeting a ghost)

The quadrisyllabic reduplicative "ngáp nga ngáp ngoáng" carries the echo of haste and clumsiness, brilliantly expressing the panicked, anxious state of humans when facing fear. In this context, the poet used it to mock his own moment of panicked startling when mistaking his own shadow for a demon. With a realistic and highly evocative stroke, the verse transcends an ordinary narrative to convey a profound humanistic message: sometimes, the greatest fear does not come from the objective world but originates from the blindness, illusion, and cowardice within each of us. Imagination creates demons, and humans scare themselves with their own shadows when they lack the courage to see through their true selves.

3. Conclusion

It can be affirmed that colloquial reduplicatives in Nguyen Duy's poetry not only construct a unique poetic melody but also draw readers closer to the breath of life and the soul of the Vietnamese language. Thanks to its diverse phonetic structures and intense expressive power, this vocabulary class has crossed the boundaries of everyday speech to become a sparkling ornament of linguistic art. The creative and flexible application of reduplicative structures not only affirms the "rustic poetry" artistic style imbued with Nguyen Duy's essence but also shows the poet's extremely sharp capacity to evaluate and grasp the objective world. On the contemporary Vietnamese literary forum, his art of using reduplicatives remains an indelible mark, leaving profound ripples in the hearts of readers across many generations.

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