

## **The polysemy and extended meanings of water or “NƯỚC” lexeme in the Vietnamese language**

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### **Abstract**

This article aims at illustrating the polysemy of water or “nước” lexeme in the Vietnamese language. The author chose the explanation of this polysemy in the view of Vietnamese scholars and under the prototype method. Both of these ways mentioned the idea of the first meaning of a lexeme and its extended meanings. The findings show that there are 8 meanings of the “nước” lexeme. They are 1) the first or prototypical meaning “colorless, odorless, transparent liquid- stays in lakes, rivers, seas” 2) level of something colored or covered, the shiny cover 3) a speed of a horse 4) general speed measurement 5) a turn in a chess game 6) a country 7) way of action in changing a situation 8) a good characteristic. The polysemous meanings of nước are produced by metaphor and metonymy. The significance of this research conveys that there is a relationship between a specific ethnic mind and its concept of forming its language.

**Keywords:** polysemy; Vietnamese language; prototype; nước; extended meanings

### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่ออธิบายพหุนัยของน้ำหรือคำว่า ‘nước’ ในภาษาเวียดนาม ผู้เขียนเลือกคำนิยามพหุนัยในมุมมองของนักวิชาการชาวเวียดนาม และภายใต้ทฤษฎี prototype ทั้งสองได้กล่าวถึงแนวคิดเรื่องความหมายแรกของศัพท์และความหมายที่ขยายออกไปผลการวิจัย พบว่ามี 8 ความหมายของคำว่า ‘nước’ คือ 1) ความหมายแรกหรือความหมายต้นแบบ ‘ไม่มีสี ไม่มีกลิ่น ของเหลวใส อยู่ในทะเลสาบ แม่น้ำ ทะเล’ 2) ระดับสี ความเงางาม 3) ความเร็วของม้า 4) การวัดความเร็วทั่วไป 5) การเดินทางมากรุง 6) ประเทศ 7) วิธีดำเนินการเพื่อการ เปลี่ยนแปลง สถานการณ์ 8) ลักษณะนิสัยที่ดี พหุนัยของ nước เกิดจากการอุปมา และคำพ้องความหมายความสำคัญของงานวิจัยนี้บ่งบอกว่า มีความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างโลกทัศน์ของมนุษย์ กับแนวคิดใน การสร้างภาษาของตนเอง

**คำสำคัญ:** polysemy; Vietnamese language; prototype; nước; extended meanings

### Introduction

Water or “nước” in Vietnamese is an interesting word in the Vietnamese concept. As Vietnam is a country that has a lot of rivers, has more than 3000 km of land beside the sea, and the tropical climate caused a lot of floods in the country every year, water is something very close to the Vietnamese people’s experience. To take an example of water and its closeness in our daily life, let’s look at the meaning of the capital name of the country: Hanoi which in Vietnamese means the settlement among rivers. Nguyen Cong Duc and Nguyen Huu Chuong (2004) argued that when a word first appears, it has only one meaning. Then human creativity might have formed meaning after meaning for each word based on the similarity of things and concepts around them [1]. This phenomenon may lead to the existence of polysemy in languages.

Pasaribu, and Truly (2014) defined polysemy as follows: “Polysemy is described as the association of two or more related senses with a single word form”. The author proved the definition with the study on the polysemy of *hot* lexeme by using componential analysis and the prototype theory. Then he pointed out that there were 11 polysemous lexical items of *hot* and showed its semantic network as the result. These 11 meanings of *hot* were extended by metaphor. Nguyen Cong Duc and Nguyen Huu Chuong (2004) wrote that a word was considered polysemy when it had 2 meanings or more. The meanings were systematically related to each other by rules. The extension of lexical meanings had to base on 2 rules: logical and related rules. The logical rule gave 2 dimensions for the extension of the meanings which can be extended or shrunk. The related rule produced the extension by metaphor and metonymy. The authors then gave examples of the word “thu hoạch” (to

harvest) which in Vietnamese was originally used to convey the act of harvesting cereal crops or vegetables...etc. Then the word came to be used extendedly as *grasping knowledge as a whole*: *Bản thu hoạch của học sinh* (The student's harvest (written data) or 'The student's report' (elicited data)). They showed the shrunk case in the example of the word "*phản động*" in Vietnamese which used to be meant the act of doing something opposite but is now used to talk about the act of betraying the revolution or the enlightenment processes [2]. This study is based on the idea that water was very familiar to the Vietnamese experience. Kovecses (2010) explained that "usually lexemes which are extremely basic human experience have more than one semantic representation" (as cited in Pasaribu, truly. 2014). With this idea, this study then aims at finding out the prototypical meaning, and the extended senses, and discuss the relationship between the prototypical meaning and the extended senses of the word water or "*nước*". The result of this study also tries to show that human observation of nature would partly help to form human creativity in using language in general.

The data of the lexeme "*nước*" found in 18 sentences taken from texts; internet and native speakers' interview show that the word *nước* contains more than one meaning. The data are limited to the single word *nước*, which means that the study will exclude the idiomatic construction of the word. The found data about the concept of *nước* will be analyzed in 3 steps. First, this paper discusses the prototypical meaning of the word *nước* based on the feature criteria of a prototype, which is supported by the prototype theory. Next, this paper will try to discuss how the lexeme *nước* gets its extended meanings by applying the radial network representation in the theory. Finally, this study presents a radial set of the lexeme *nước* to show a semantic network of the senses and explain the relationship between the literal word and the extended senses of the word.

Thus, the study is divided into three sections. The first one is the literature framework which will review in detail the theory ground of this paper. The second part will be the findings and discussions. There, the paper discusses the prototypical meaning, the extended senses of the word *nước*, as well as how these senses related to each other. The final part will be the conclusion.

### Literature Framework

The study is based on the framework of prototype theory. Below are the discussions of how suitable these theories are related to the ground of this research. Prototype theory can be used to find the polysemy of a word. It bases on the family resemblance, and

prototypical and extended meanings to draw out the radial network for a polysemy. Family resemblance is the polythetic classification or similarity classification [3]. The classification here is categorized in patterns. Each extended meaning shares a pattern that overlaps the sets of properties that define a polysemy. The polysemy of Hot stays in the family resemblance of A Scale of Temperature and can be explained by conceptual metaphor [4]. There are 2 steps to developing a prototype:

- 1) Identify various prototype effects
- 2) Develop a radical set model of semantic structure as a generic model underlying the prototype effects [5].

Necessary and sufficient attributes to decide on features of a prototype are the following (first proposed by Geeraerts 1989) [6]:

- a. Prototypical categories exhibit degrees of typicality; not every member is equally representative for a category.
- b. Prototypical categories are blurred at the edges.
- c. Prototypical categories cannot be defined by employing a single set of criteria attributes.
- d. Prototypical categories exhibit a family resemblance structure, or more generally, their semantic structure takes the form of a radial set of clustered and overlapping readings.

By this, Pasaribu, and Truly Almendo (2014) showed that the prototypical meaning of the word *hot* was used to describe a very high degree of temperature. It was a scale used to describe a high degree of temperature [7]. The typical Hot was the scale high degree. It formed a radial set of a polysemy which shared a family resemblance of the scale of high degree. Therefore, the polysemous lexical items of hot must meet at the edge of the scale of a high degree. Let's take an example from the article to see the idea clearer.

(5) *The fighting became hot and heavy.*

Hot in (5) was used to talk about intense activity. The conceptual metaphor was there in the example [A SCALE OF COMPETITION IS A SCALE OF TEMPERATURE]. Example (5) could be re-written as *the fighting became intense and heavy*.

Nguyen Cong Duc and Nguyen Huu Chuong (2004) mentioned one way of classifying a polysemy which is based on similarity. In this way, it was divided into the prototypical meaning and the non-prototypical meanings. They elaborated that the prototypical meaning can be conveyed by that word/ lexeme only while they remain meanings can be substituted

by other words. For example, the word “*nắm*” had the prototypical sense of “hold some’s hand”:

“Anh nắm tay em sôi nổi vụng về”

Brother holds his sister’s hand eagerly and clumsily. (Written data)

I hold your hand eagerly and clumsily (elicited data)

The word “*nắm*” had its extended meaning of “understanding something”.

“Đã *nắm* được bài chưa?”

Did hold the lesson yet? (Written data)

Did you understand the lesson yet? (Elicited data)

The extended meaning of “understanding something” of “*nắm*” now can be replaced by another word “*hiểu*” (understand).

“Đã *hiểu* được bài chưa?”

Did you understand the lesson yet? (Elicited data) [8]

In other words, extended meanings can be distinguished if they can be replaced by other words. This will not happen with the prototypical meaning.

The **radial network** shows the semantic network for a polysemy. In this network, there are central and noncentral radial category members. The noncentral senses can be motivated by the central or the prototypical one. The noncentral ones are called the extended senses. They clustered around the prototypical meaning. These two kinds of meanings are “related by a variety of possible links such as image schema transformations, metaphor, metonymy, or by partial vis-a-vis holistic profiling of distinct segments of the whole sense” [9]

### Data Collection

This research is carried out by using the qualitative descriptive method to describe the current language phenomenon. First, it gathers the data, analyses the data, and then presents it according to the steps grounded by the method. A dictionary was used to give a glimpse at the systematic data of the word “*nước*” as well as a first base to look up the extended meanings of the word. By the way, the collected data from the Internet was used instead to solve the problem that some meanings of the words are not found in the dictionary.

**Findings and Discussions (18 pt., Body text 16 pt.)**

This part, of this paper, starts with the discussion on the prototypical meaning of the word “*nước*” based on the criteria of a prototype. Next, it applies “a variety of possible links” mentioned above to find the extended senses of the word “*nước*”. Finally, after getting all the types of senses, the researcher will try to show the relation of the prototypical meaning with its extended senses through a semantic network.

**Prototypical meaning of lexeme *Nước* (water) in Vietnamese**

Vietnamese dictionary defines the meaning of *nước* which can be translated as follows water is a colorless, odorless, transparent liquid. When it is a pure substance, it stays in lakes, rivers, and seas.

- (1) *Nước mưa trong vắt.* [10]

Water rain pure so. (Written data)

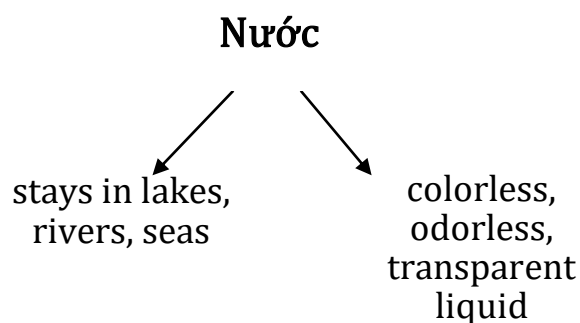
The rainwater is so pure. (Elicited data)

- (2) *Nước lũ tràn qua quốc lộ 1 vào nhà dân.*[11]

Waterfloods overflowed highway 1 into people’s houses. (Written data)

The floodwater overflowed highway 1 into the people’s houses. (Elicited data)

After identifying the prototype effects of *nước*, this paper develops those in the following radical and general set model of semantic structure.



**Figure 1.** Model of the semantic structure of “*nước*” or water in Vietnamese

As we know, human cognition of language is rooted in their lived experience. The definition of *nước* in Vietnamese above mentioned the location of water in nature, too. It may link to the other concepts in Vietnamese people’s cognition. When the native speakers

observed the nature around them frequently, they remembered the characteristics of a phenomenon in their brain. In their cognition, these image schemas were printed so deeply that they could be popped up easily. Wherever they encountered new things or new concepts, they would make a relation with their previous experiences with the new. Then, they would find the most similar words to express the new concept or thing understandably.

In the next section, this paper will elaborate on the extended senses of the word “น้ำ”.

The Vietnamese people observe water in many dimensions. Water in nature can reflect the sunlight, and moonlight and looks shiny at that time. Water in the sea can move in and out by the force of the moon. Then people see water coming in and out, up and down under the shape of waves. Water can exist in a flood, too. When a flood happens, water moves up or down. Flood water may occupy the space or capture people and things. As a result, people and things have to stay still in or inside the water.

- (3) Một trong những tác động của biến đổi khí hậu là hiện tượng nước biển dâng. [12]

One effect of climate change is sea-level rise. (Written data)

One of the effects of climate change is the rise of sea level. (Elicited data)

- (4) Nước lũ bủa vây Kinh thành Huế [13]

Flood captured Hue Citadel. (Written data)

The flood captured the Hue Citadel. (Elicited data)

- (5) Xe bị ngập nước và chết máy là một trong những tình trạng không hiếm hoi ở Sài Gòn vào mùa mưa [14]**

Vehicles drown water and dying engine is one of the situations not rare in Saigon during the rainy season. (Written data)

Out of worked vehicles as drowning in water is not a rare situation in Saigon during the rainy season. (Elicited data)

At this step, this research shows another wider radial set of the semantic structure of “น้ำ”, where the meanings include both its prototype effects and related cognitive

concepts by the native speakers.

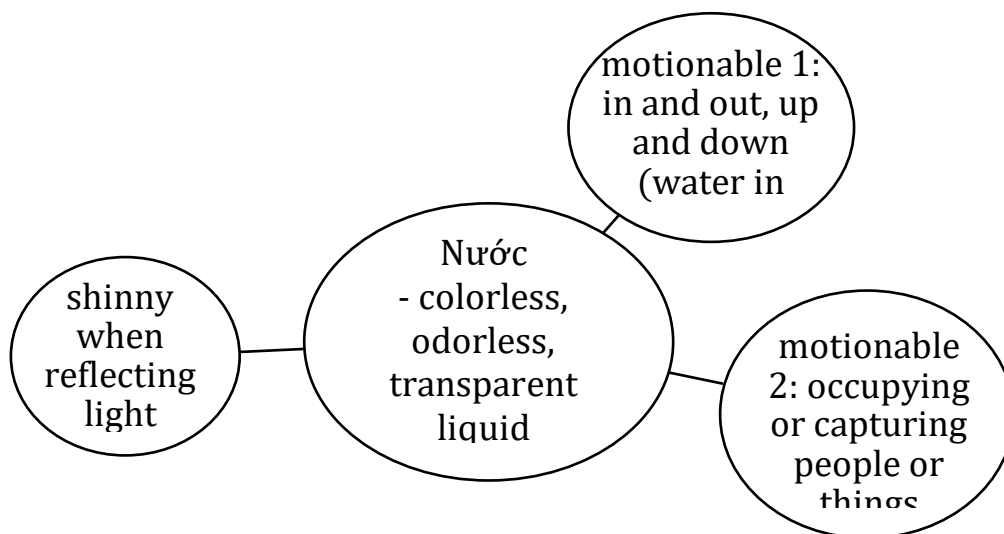


Figure 2. A wider radial set of the semantic structure of “nước”

There are then 7 extended meanings of the word “nước” found in 18 sentences taken from various Internet Vietnamese texts which can be online newspapers, online novels, and social networks. Below, these extended senses and the possible reason for the extension, and the idea of each extended meaning could be replaced by another word according to the idea of Nguyen Cong Duc and Nguyen Huu Chuong’s polysemy definition.

#### Level of something colored or covered outside

The extended meaning about *the level of something colored or covered* might be withdrawn from its first form which used to be liquid as water. Then, the extended meaning of *shiny cover* must be originated from the speaker’s observation of water under sunlight.

- (6) Chiếc xe máy có nước sơn sáng bóng. [15]

Motorbike has water paint shiny. (Written data)

The motorbike has a shiny painted cover. (elicited data)

- (7) Lớp phủ thống nhất nên inox có nước mạ vàng đẹp, mịn hơn. [16]

Coating all over so that stainless has water plating gold beautiful, smooth more. (Written data)

With an all-over coating, the stainless steel has a more beautiful, and smoother gold-plated cover. (Elicited data)

We can replace the word “nước” with the word a *colored level or covered level*. It is metonymically extended from the literal “nước”.



### The shiny cover of something (*limitedly combine*)

By comparing the shiny water, the native speakers then come up with other things that have the same appearance, they just call that shiny cover the same word.

- (8) Viên ngọc này nước rất đẹp. [17]

Diamond this water very beautiful. (Written data)

This diamond has a beautiful polish appearance. (Elicited data)

- (9) Vòng gỗ này mang lâu ngày lên nước ngày càng đẹp và mượt mà [18].

Wooden bracelet this wear a long-time up water day more beautiful and polish.

(Written data)

This wooden bracelet has been worn for a long time so that its cover is more and more beautiful and silkily polished. (Elicited data)

At this time, another word can be used instead. That is “the cover”. Again, this extended is a metonymy of “nước”.

### A country

The extended meaning of “*a country*” resulted from the observation of the speaker when they saw the large area of the water, maybe in seas. Then, they expressed their understanding of a country which was normally a very broad area by the same word “nước”.

- (10) Nước Việt Nam giàu và đẹp. [19]

Water Vietnam rich and beautiful. (Written data)

Vietnam is a rich and beautiful country. (Elicited data)

- (11) Thái Lan là một trong những nước tham gia sáng lập ASEAN [20].

Thailand is one of many waters that participate in the foundation ASEAN. (Written data)

Thailand is one of many countries which participated in the foundation of ASEAN. (Elicited data)

The ground for this extension can be explained by the conceptual metaphor [THE VAST AREA OF A COUNTRY IS LIKE THE VAST AREA OF WATER].

### A speed of a horse

This extended meaning is related to the motion of water in nature. The meaning that implied *a speed of a horse* was the similarity of a sea wave. Sometimes, the wave comes quickly or slowly.

- (12) Con ngựa phi nước đại. [21]

Horse run water big. (Written data)

The horse runs at its very quick speed. (Elicited data)

- (13) Ngựa nước kiểu Pháp phát triển chủ yếu từ ngựa Norman được lai với ngựa Anh thuần chủng [22].

Horse water slow French develop mainly from horse Norman hybridize with horse England genuine. (Written data)

The French horse, which runs at a slow pace in the parade, used to be hybridized between a Norman horse and a genuine English horse. (Elicited data)

It is metonymically extended from the literal “nước”. To match the modern world, the Vietnamese extended the usage of the word to talk about *general speed measurement* as a metaphor.

#### **A turn in a chess game affects the game**

With the meaning of *a turn in a chess game*, the native speakers may think of the image schema of a wave that comes toward and comes back as they could do that mostly in a turn in the chess game.

- (14) Anh ta chỉ cho tôi một nước cờ khi tôi đấu với Nam. [23]

He showed me a water chess when I play with Nam. (Written data)

He showed me a wise turn in my chess game with Nam. (Elicited data)

- (15) Ở cờ tướng kế hoạch là toàn thể 1 phương án, hay một chiến lược gồm nhiều nước đi

In chess, a plan is a whole one program or a strategy that combines much water go. (Written data)

In a chess game, a plan is a whole plan or a strategy that consists of many moving turns. (Elicited data)

This can be counted as metonymically extended from the prototypical meaning

#### **Way of action in changing a situation**

In Vietnam, the flood happened so frequently in the past to now, so that people often confronted the situation that water captured them around and they had to decide to survive. Therefore, the extended meanings of a *way of action in changing a situation or weaker/stronger position or unsustainable level of the situation* must be imagined relatedly to this situation.

- (16) Quân địch bị bao vây chỉ còn nước ra đầu hàng. [25]

The enemy captured only the remaining water out of surrender. (Written data)

The enemy was captured to the last action of surrender. (Elicited data)

- (17) Tứ Lang còn nói vậy nữa thì Hoàn Hoàn *chỉ còn nước chui xuống đất* vì xấu hổ mất!

Tu Lang also speaks like that Hoan Hoan only retains water into the ground because of being ashamed. (Written data)

If even Tu Lan also talked like that, I would have only one way to escape which is retaining the ground as I was ashamed. (Elicited data)

One more time, the extended sense is motivated metonymically.

#### Good characteristic

As the daily life activities of making tea and washing something needed water as a compulsory part, and the action happened more than 1 time then the Vietnamese just used the word to count the time of action for short. Through this meaning, the natives connected to the value of each time of using water. Thus, they used the concept to compare someone's ability with the same word.

(18) Anh ta chỉ được cái nước nói nhiều chứ có làm ăn gì ra hồn đâu.[27]

He just has water talkative but does what become shape. (Written data)

He is just good at talking, but a loser. (Elicited data)

This meaning is extended metaphorically.

A summary of the 8 distinct senses is given in the table and figure below:

**Table 1** The 8 distinct senses of Nước

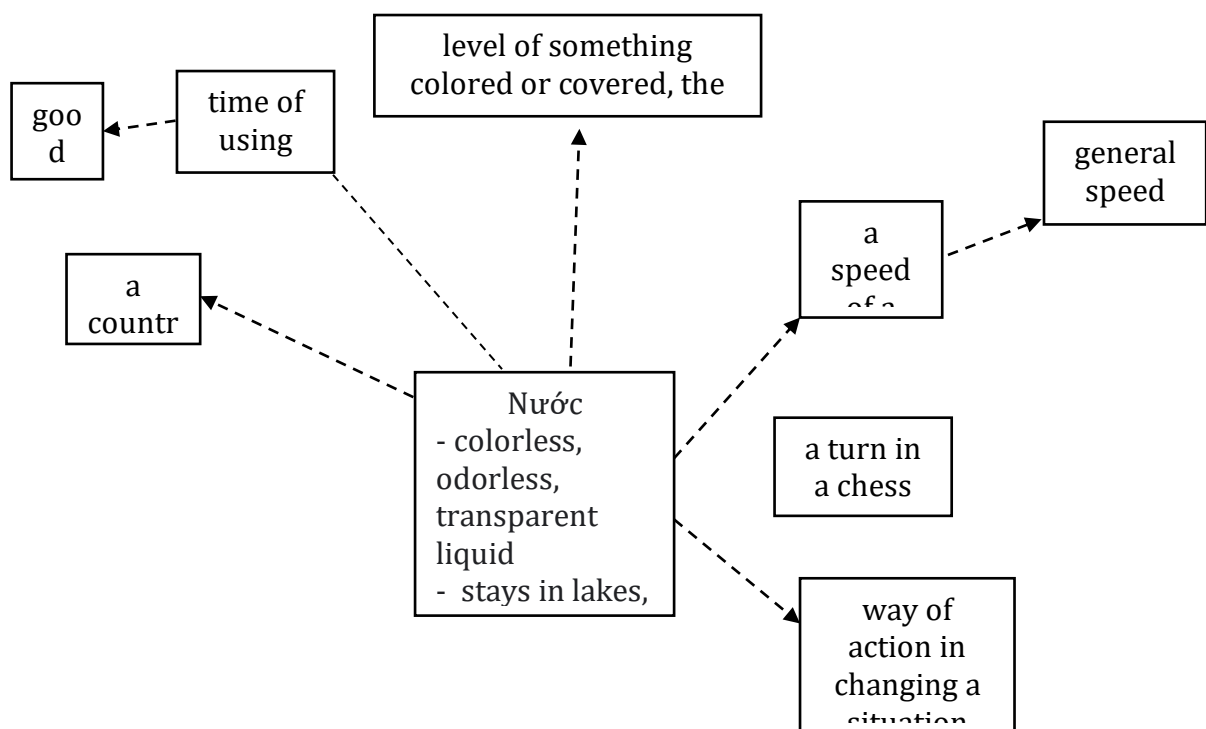
No.	The meanings of Nước	Vietnamese examples	Translation
1.	Water (prototypical) means “a colorless, transparent, odorless liquid, stays in seas, lakes, rivers”.	(10) Nước mưa trong vắt.	- The rainwater is so pure.
2.	Water means level of something colored or covered outside	(16) Lớp phủ thống nhất nên inox có nước mạ vàng đẹp, mịn hơn.	With an all-over coating, the stainless steel has a more beautiful, and smoother gold-plated cover.
3.	Water means the shiny cover of something ( <i>limitedly combine</i> )	(18) Vòng gỗ này mang lâu ngày lên nước ngày càng đẹp và mượt mà	This wooden bracelet has been worn for a long time so that its cover is more and more beautiful and silky.

4.	Water means a country	(19) Nước Việt Nam giàu và đẹp.	Vietnam is a rich and beautiful country.
5.	Water means a speed of a horse	(21) Con ngựa phi nước đại.	The horse runs at its very quick speed.
6.	Water means a turn in a chess game which affects the game	(23) Anh ta chỉ cho tôi một nước cờ khi tôi đấu với Nam.	He showed me a wise turn in my chess game with Nam.
7.	Water means a way of action	(25) Quân địch bị bao vây chỉ còn nước ra đầu hàng.	The enemy was forced to the last action of surrender.
8.	Water means a good characteristic	(27) Anh ta chỉ được cái nước nói nhiều chứ có làm ăn gì ra hồn đâu.	He is just good at talking, but a loser.

- The semantic network of the lexeme 'good'



semantic extension



**Figure 3.** The radial network of 8 distinct senses of Nước**Conclusion**

This research analyses a prototypical meaning and 8 extended senses of the word “nước”. The prototypical meaning of the word indicates “- colorless, odorless, transparent liquid- stays in lakes, rivers, seas”. The prototypical meaning of “nước” in Vietnamese contained 2 directions for producing the polysemy. Those were the literal and the metaphorical meaning directions due to the specific ethnic cognition of the natural phenomenon surrounding them. The Vietnamese people observed the look of water and the motion of water. Then they related it to the concepts they wanted to convey in their language. The extended senses of the word “nước” are: 1) level of something colored or covered outside 2) the shiny cover of something 3) a country 4) a speed of a horse 5) a turn in a chess game 6) a way of action 7) a good characteristic. The various senses of the word “nước” exist because of metonymical and metaphoric extensions. The relation of the senses enables us to draw the semantic network of the polysemy of the lexeme nước.

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