

Should the Vietnamese Scout Motto “Sắp-Sẵn” Be Changed?

These past several days, I have been aware of the noise made by the very big question that we are facing in the Vietnamese Scouting community of Santa Clara County, and in the Vietnamese Scout Movement. The question is: Should the Vietnamese Scout Motto be “Sắp-Sẵn” or “Sẵn-Sàng?” When I say noise here, it is with a very positive connotation. I appreciate noise like this, noise that attracts and draws people in to engage in meaningful conversations with each other, either through spoken or written words. I have read the essays “*Châm Ngôn Hướng Đạo Sắp-Sẵn hay Sẵn-Sàng*” by Scout Leader Long Văn Trần and “*Sắp Sẵn hay Sẵn Sàng*” by Scout Leader Hữu Minh Trần. I would like to respond in English to encourage younger Scout Leaders and Scouts to join in and give their opinions.

In 1930, when Scout Leader Khắc Văn Trần founded the Scout Movement in Vietnam, he and his fellow Scout leaders adopted the motto “Be Prepared” and translated it as “Sắp-Sẵn.” “Sắp” is commonly heard in the phrase “sắp xếp,” which means to arrange, to prepare. “Sẵn” is commonly heard in the phrase “sẵn sàng,” which means to be ready. Scout Leaders Long Văn Trần and Hữu Minh Trần made some points on why the Vietnamese Scout motto should be changed from “Sắp-Sẵn” to “Sẵn-Sàng.” Scout Leader Long Văn Trần emphasized that “Sắp-Sẵn” is not a proper translation of “Be Prepared.” Therefore, “Sắp-Sẵn” does not accurately embody the meaning and purpose of Scouting. According to him, the phrase Sắp-Sẵn is used in the context where a plan or a program has been clearly determined, and then action is taken; one cannot “Sắp-Sẵn,” or prepare, for something that is not clearly determined. In conjunction, one cannot prepare for something and not take action. He mentions that life is not clearly determined and therefore using “Sắp-Sẵn” as the Vietnamese Scout motto does not fit its usual context. Scout Leader Long Văn Trần also expressed that although “Sắp-Sẵn” is used in a positive context, it can also be used in a negative context, which makes it unfit to be the motto. He gave examples of the use of “Sắp-Sẵn” in both contexts, however, I believe everyone already understands “Sắp-Sẵn” in a positive context. I will only mention here his example of “Sắp-Sẵn” in a negative context. A translation of his example:

“When a Scout leader “sắp-sẵn,” or prepares a task, program or plan and hands it to their Scouts to carry out or take action, then that Scout Leader is the sole person in control. This does not encourage the development of creativity and independence in Scouts. Scouts will only know (or be forced) to take action blindly, not being aware of the work that went into the preparation. Even worse, this would cause Scouts to be more dependent on their leaders. This utterly goes against the principles of teaching, and especially goes against the goals of Scouting.”

To be honest, I can see how the example above puts “Sắp-Sẵn” in a negative context, but I do not understand how this specific example is relevant. I feel that the argument here is based on the possible behavior of individuals, and not on the meaning of “Sắp-Sẵn”. This diverts from the real focus, which is whether or not “Sắp-Sẵn” is equivalent to “Be Prepared.” I mean I can also easily use “Sẵn-Sàng” in a negative context, “Tôi Sẵn-Sàng làm kẻ phá hoại,” meaning *I am ready to be a vandalist*”.

Both Scout Leaders Long Văn Trần and Hữu Minh Trần heavily emphasized on the technicalities of the phrases “Sắp-Sẵn” and “Sẵn-Sàng.” Scout Leader Long Văn Trần believes that the better

Vietnamese translation of “Be Prepared” is “Sẵn-Sàng.” He broke it down to translating “Be” as “được” and “Prepare” as “chuẩn bị.” Together, the Vietnamese translation of “Be Prepared” is “được chuẩn bị,” which he says is the equivalent of “Sẵn-Sàng,” and therefore, “Sẵn-Sàng” is the better translation. In my opinion regarding this particular translation, I do not agree that “được chuẩn bị” can be interchangeable with “Sẵn-Sàng.” “Được chuẩn bị” and “Sẵn-Sàng” seems to work better together as parts of a whole than alone. “Được chuẩn bị” emphasizes on preparation and “Sẵn-Sàng” illustrates readiness to take action; both need to be present for one to be prepared to act. Can one be ready to act if one does not prepare oneself mentally and physically? Or can one’s feeling of readiness be enough to take action, even without adequate preparation?

Technical explanations continue with Scout Leader Hữu Minh Trần giving visuals of side by side comparisons of uses of “Sắp-Sẵn” and “Sẵn-Sàng” in different contexts. He made a point that in many contexts, “Sắp-Sẵn” *sounds* more strange than “Sẵn-Sàng.” I would like to share a story of my own experience regarding the sounding of words in particular contexts. When I was in the ninth grade, I had a wonderful English teacher, who everyday reminded us that just because a sentence sounds weird does not mean it is incorrect or improper. In class, often times, one of us would say a sentence such as, “I’m older than him.” At this point, my teacher would immediately say, “I’m older than he, not I’m older than him.” “I’m older than him” is grammatically incorrect. For in comparative sentences, one always must be careful and not replace subject pronouns (I, he, she, they) with object pronouns (me, him, her, them). But I think most people would agree that they hear “I’m older than him” much more often in everyday language than “I’m older than he.” I also have to admit that using “he” can sound a bit strange in that sentence. But “he” indeed is the grammatically correct pronoun in this case. So, is the sounding of a word or phrase in a sentence really a good enough reason to change a motto that we have been using for 85 years?

Scout Leader Hữu Minh Trần makes another point that “Sắp-Sẵn” is not a commonly heard phrase, and that many Scout parents often ask him to explain the meaning of “Sắp-Sẵn”. As Vietnamese Scouts know, “Sắp-Sẵn” has been the call-and-response tradition passed down from the founders of the Vietnamese Scout Movement. Tradition does not always make sense in everyday life to every single person. What may be my family’s tradition may not be your family’s. What may be my community’s tradition may not be your community’s. In the military, each branch has their own tradition of a yell, such as “hoorah” in the marines, or “hooah” in the army. Now, is “hoorah” or “hooah” commonly heard words, or expressions? Does everyone know the meaning of these words? If no, does that mean the military should change “hoorah” or “hooah” into other words that might make more sense to regular people? I would say definitely not. When a commanding officer yells “Hoorah,” everyone responds, “Hoorah!” They respond to let their commanding officer know they have received and understood their instructions. But “Hoorah” is not merely just a call and a response just like “Sắp-Sẵn” is not merely a call and a response. It has become the soldiers’ tradition. When they yell out “Hoorah,” they yell out with pride. When we say “Hương Đạo Sinh Sắp-Sẵn,” we say it with pride. When outsiders hear “Hoorah” they know that those are soldiers nearby. When they hear “Hương Đạo Sinh Sắp-Sẵn,” they know that those are Vietnamese Scouts, and they know that is *our* tradition. We should be proud that we have a motto, a yell that distinguishes us from other groups and other movements.

I understand concerns about the technicalities of the translation and whether it truly embodies the goals of the Baden Powell's Scout Movement. But "Sáp-Săn" is so much bigger than the those technicalities. The Vietnamese Scout Movement was recognized once before by the World Organization of the Scout Movement in 1957, with "Sáp-Săn" as its motto. "Sáp-Săn" has endured the toughest of times. It was silenced, only to come back louder than ever all around the globe, as the Vietnamese Scout Movement was revived wherever Vietnamese people immigrated to after the war. I believe that the technicalities should be let go, and we should highlight, instead, the history that "Sáp-Săn" carries. To get rid of "Sáp-Săn" as our motto would be to take away a reminder of our inspiring history. I do not believe that we should change our motto just because people do not understand what it means or because it sounds strange. Instead of trying to change our motto, why not take the time to teach others of the history of Vietnamese Scouting and the origin of "Sáp-Săn?" Is that not more valuable and dignifying?

In conclusion, I do not support the proposal that the Vietnamese Scout Motto be changed from "Sáp-Săn" to "Săn-Sàng." I encourage everyone to give their input regardless of whether or not they support this proposal. Multiple perspectives are always beneficial. Everyone should speak and every voice should be heard.

Yours in Scouting,
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