



## PHẦN GIỚI THIỆU

### Introduction

This chapter provides a brief overview of the history of the Vietnamese writing system and a description of the major characteristics of the Vietnamese language in comparison to English.

Five characteristics of the Vietnamese language:

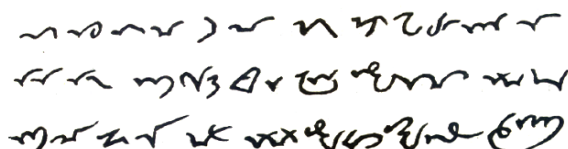
- monosyllabic: phonologically, the language is comprised of one-syllable word
- tonal: Vietnamese has six tones, five of which need marks.
- non-inflectional: a Vietnamese word contains a syllable and its form cannot be altered with prefixes or suffixes
- head initial: except for words of Sino original, the main noun can be modified by many modifiers following their head noun(s).
- synthetic: Vietnamese is a word order language; highly contextual for intention and implicature.



## I. Tổng Quát – Background

The Vietnamese language is spoken roughly by eighty-two million people in Vietnam and three million others abroad. Known as part of the Austroasiatic language family, it was the first in the area to be romanized.

Prior to the period of Han domination (2758?–207BC), the Vietnamese language was believed to have had its own writing system, namely *chữ con giun* the ‘crawling worm characters’<sup>1</sup>.



As soon the domination (111BC – 938AD), was established the Han imposed their writing system onto Vietnam, called *chữ Nho* ‘Sino-originals’. This system lasted through the trials and tribulation of the history of Vietnam – almost as long as two thousand years to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The following is an example of a line in the verse story titled *Chinh Phụ Ngâm* ‘The Warrior’s Awaiting Wife’<sup>2</sup> by Đặng Trần Côn.

Câu thơ chữ Hán của Đặng Trần Côn:

天地風塵，紅顏多迤

(Thiên địa phong trần, hồng nhan đa truân)

The need for its own writing system became crucial after Vietnam gained her independence in the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and Hàn Thuyên is assumed to have been the inventor of a demotic system called Nôm (a variant of Nam, meaning ‘south’) in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. This demotic system did not seem to work perfectly because of its complication and inconsistency, but its existence existed abreast of *chữ Nho* until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite some defects, many great works in *Nôm* appeared during the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. This period marked the most glorious period in the history of Vietnamese literature. Here is an example of the unbeatable translation of the above line from *chữ Nho* to *chữ Nôm*<sup>3</sup> by Đoàn Thị Điểm:

<sup>1</sup> Trần Ngọc Thêm, *Tìm Về Bản Sắc Văn Hoá Việt Nam*, 1997:96. Tác giả Nguyễn Xuân Quang gọi là *chữ nòng nọc*.

<sup>2</sup> Lạc Nghị, *Sách Tra Chữ Nôm Thường Dùng*, Hội Ngôn Ngữ Học, 1991 (back cover)

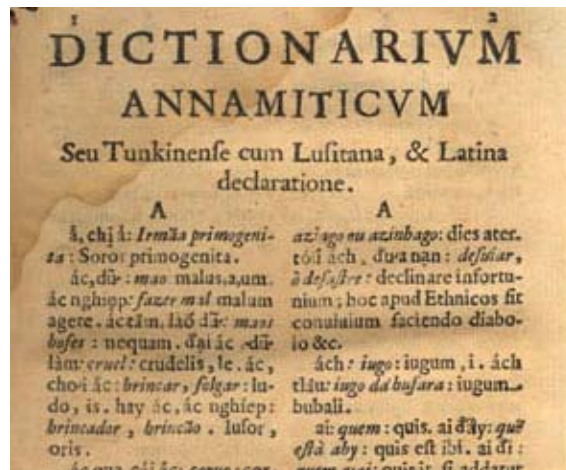
<sup>3</sup> Lạc Nghị, *Sách Tra Chữ Nôm Thường Dùng*, Hội Ngôn Ngữ Học, 1991 (back cover)

Đoàn Thị Điểm diễn Nôm:

課 丞 坦 沒 干 隴 涪  
客 騰 紅 翹 餒 迺 遭

(Thuở trời đất nổi cơn gió bụi,  
Khách má hồng nhiều nỗi truân chiến)

As early as the mid-16th century, many Catholic missionaries arrived in Vietnam to evangelize the masses to Christianity. They found *chữ Nho* and *chữ Nôm* both difficult for their tasks. In an effort to popularize the evangelization, quite a few missionaries tried to render Vietnamese in the Latin alphabet with additional diacritical marks. The first romanized orthography was around 1632. In 1909 romanized Vietnamese script became official as *chữ quốc ngữ* ‘national script’<sup>4</sup>. This new system of writing is more effective and convenient than the *Nôm*.



In short, the Vietnamese language has undergone four writing systems, and the fourth one, in use today, is an adapted version of the Latin alphabet with addition of tonal marks and some new letters.

## II. Đặc Tính Của Tiếng Việt – Characteristics of The Vietnamese Language

The Vietnamese language has five major characteristics:

<sup>4</sup> A page of the first Vietnamese-Latin Dictionary, Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia (website: [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org))

## A. Đơn Âm Tiết – Monosyllabic

The Vietnamese language is *phonologically monosyllabic*. Each word – short or long – is implosively articulated as one syllable.

- a) Short words: *A! Ê! em ma con cung không*  
 b) Long words: *huỳnh Nguyễn khuyhng nguệch nghiêng*

The longest word in Vietnamese may be *nghiêng* ‘inclined’ with 7 letters; still it has three sounds [ŋ<sup>h</sup>ɛŋ]. And the shortest word is *a* [ah].

## B. Thanh Giọng – Tonal

Vietnamese has six tones whose order as found in alphabetized dictionaries is as follows: **unmarked, high rising, low falling, low rising, high broken** and **low broken**. (Words that are phonotactically non-existent are followed by an underscore):

a) <b>không dấu</b>	( )	<i>ta</i>	<i>tã_</i>	<i>tâ_</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>tê</i>	<i>ti</i>	<i>to</i>
‘unmarked’		<i>tô</i>	<i>tơ_</i>	<i>tu</i>	<i>tr</i>	<i>ty</i>		
b) <b>dấu sắc</b>	( ´ )	<i>ta</i>	<i>tắ_</i>	<i>tá_</i>	<i>té</i>	<i>té</i>	<i>tí</i>	<i>tó</i>
‘high rising’		<i>tố</i>	<i>tớ_</i>	<i>tú</i>	<i>tứ</i>	<i>tý</i>		
c) <b>dấu huyền</b>	( ` )	<i>ta</i>	<i>tằ_</i>	<i>tà_</i>	<i>tè</i>	<i>tề</i>	<i>tì</i>	<i>tò</i>
‘low falling’		<i>tồ</i>	<i>tờ_</i>	<i>tù</i>	<i>từ</i>	<i>tỳ</i>		
d) <b>dấu hỏi</b>	( ˇ )	<i>ta</i>	<i>tắ_</i>	<i>tắ_</i>	<i>tẻ</i>	<i>tẻ</i>	<i>tỉ</i>	<i>tỏ</i>
‘low rising’		<i>tổ</i>	<i>tổ_</i>	<i>tủ</i>	<i>tử</i>	<i>tỷ</i>		
e) <b>dấu ngã</b>	( ˘ )	<i>ta</i>	<i>tắ_</i>	<i>tắ_</i>	<i>tẻ</i>	<i>tẻ</i>	<i>tĩ</i>	<i>tỗ</i>
‘high broken’		<i>tỗ</i>	<i>tở_</i>	<i>tủ</i>	<i>tử</i>	<i>tỷ</i>		
g) <b>dấu nặng</b>	( . )	<i>ta</i>	<i>tắ_</i>	<i>tậ_</i>	<i>tẹ</i>	<i>tệ</i>	<i>tị</i>	<i>tộ</i>
‘low broken’		<i>tộ</i>	<i>tợ_</i>	<i>tụ</i>	<i>tự</i>	<i>tự</i>		

These tonal marks play a crucial part in denoting the meaning of a word. Changing the mark significantly changes the meaning! Many attempts have been made to get rid all of the tonal marks but in vain. Here is how these marks affect the meanings:

<b>ba</b>	<b>bá</b>	<b>bà</b>	<b>bả</b>	<b>bã</b>	<b>bạ</b>	or
‘three’	‘cling’	‘grandma’	‘she’	‘waste’	‘record’	
<b>ma</b>	<b>má</b>	<b>mà</b>	<b>mả</b>	<b>mã</b>	<b>mạ</b>	
‘ghost’	‘cheek’	‘but’	‘grave’	‘appearance’	‘rice seedling’	

## C. Cách Thể – Non-inflectional

Although the Vietnamese language has been romanized, it has no “real”

prefixes or suffixes as do European languages. Everything comes in the form of a word, or more specifically, a one-syllable word!

Verb: *gặp* ‘to meet’

Verb phrase: *gặp ông ấy* ‘to meet him’

Sentence: *Tôi gặp ông ấy.* ‘I meet him.’

Adverb: *đã* ‘already’ (tense marker):

*Tôi đã gặp ông ấy.* ‘I already met with him.’

*Tôi sẽ gặp ông ấy.* ‘I will meet with him.’

*Tôi gặp ông ấy.* ‘I am meeting him now.’

Noun: *việc làm* ‘job’ *bàn ghế* ‘furniture’

*sự làm việc* ‘working’

Adjective: *đẹp* ‘pretty’ *new* ‘mới’

Sentence: *Hoa đẹp* ‘Flowers (are) beautiful.’

*Bộ bàn ghế mới.* ‘A new set of table and chairs’

Adverb: *giỏi* ‘well’ *nhANH chóng* ‘quickly’

*Nam làm giỏi.* ‘Nam works well.’

*Cô ta làm việc giỏi.* ‘She works well.’

*Anh ấy làm việc nhanh chóng.* ‘He does the work quickly.’

Preposition: *trong* ‘in’ > *trong nhà* ‘at home’

*tại* ‘at’ > *tại phi trường* ‘at the airport’

In brief, Vietnamese does not have any inflectional forms like *-ed*, *-ing*, and the plural *-s* *-es* and so forth.

#### D. Tiên Vị Ngữ – Head Initial

Except for cardinal numbers, which always appear before a noun, all other Vietnamese modifiers follow the head-noun they modify. The following examples show how the modifiers of the two languages mirror. The terms in bold type are modifiers:

*nhà* ‘house’

*nhà mới* ‘new house’

*nhà mới màu trắng* ‘new white house’

*xe* ‘car’

*xe cũ* ‘old car’

*xe cũ rẻ tiền* ‘inexpensive old car’

*xe cũ rẻ tiền màu đỏ* ‘red inexpensive old car’

## E. Ngôn Ngữ Tổng Hợp – Synthetic Language

Vietnamese is a word order language. Switching the position of a word in an utterance or a sentence generally means changing the context. In addition, this reflects perfectly the sentimentalism of the Vietnamese people: contextual and synthetic.

### 1. Ngôn Ngữ Thứ Vị – Word Order Language

Vietnamese is a word order language. In other words, words in a sentence play important roles in conveying their parts to complete the idea conveyed by the sentence:

*Mẹ tôi đến thăm bà Ba.* ‘My mom came to see Mrs. Ba.’

*Ba bà đến thăm mẹ tôi.* ‘Three women came to see my mom.’

*Bé Tý thấy con vịt.* ‘Little Joe saw a duck.’

*Bé Tý thích vịt con.* ‘Little Joe likes the duckling.’

### 2. Ngôn Ngữ Nội Dung – Contextual Language

To some extent, Vietnamese is highly hierarchical and contextual. For this reason, many grammarians maintain that the language has no grammar, or peculiarly, no word classes. Let’s view these dialogs:

*A: Thưa bác, ở đây có ai tên Nam không ạ?* ‘Sir/Ma’am, is there anyone named Nam here?’

*B: Có. Cậu hỏi làm gì?* ‘There is. What do you want him for?’

*A: Cho cháu gặp được không?* ‘Can I see him?’

*B: Nó không có nhà.* ‘He’s not home.’

According to the conversation, A appears to be a person much younger than the addressed. *Bác* is a term for kinship used to call a stranger as to show respect to the elderly. B calls A *cậu* because he is much older than A.

*C: Chị ơi, có Bình ở nhà không?* ‘Hi sister, is Bình home?’

*D: Mới về, ăn ba miếng, đi lại rồi.* ‘Just came home, ate some then left.’

*C: Chị biết mấy giờ Bình về không?* ‘Do you know when Bình will be back?’

*D: Ai mà biết.* ‘Who knows?’ (I don’t know/I have no idea.)

In this conversation, D’s answers have no subject. This is called “empty subject” and listeners are supposed to understand what the subject should be. The last utterance *Who knows?* implies that “I” don’t know.” Or

*Đang làm việc nói chuyện lâu không được.* ‘Working cannot talk very long.’ (I am working now; we can’t have a long conversation.)

*Tát cho một cái bậy giờ!* ‘Give a slap at the face!’ (Behave! Otherwise I will give you a slap in the face.)

The sentences don’t have a subject; still they are understood very well by the listener. What a language!

### 3. Tính Chất Tổng Hợp – Synthetic Characteristic

Unlike English, which is more analytical, Vietnamese is highly synthetic. For ‘education’: *the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment, and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life*<sup>5</sup>, one can find just a half of its equivalent in Vietnamese: *giáo dục*. The term *giáo dục* has two parts: *giáo* ‘to train one’s knowledge’, and *dục* ‘to nurture one’s physical growth’. Or another: *ngăn chặn* ‘prevent and stop’ is a term for two ideas: ‘preventing someone from doing something or something to happen, and terminating someone’s action or something that is happening’.

In short, the Vietnamese language views things from a broader range and gradually narrows them down to a focused existence.



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<sup>5</sup> Random House Dictionary, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1993

## Tóm Tắt – Summary

The Vietnamese language is one of several major languages in Southeast Asia. Through the history of Vietnam, it is known to have had four orthographical forms:

*chữ con giun* ‘crawling worms’

*chữ Nho* ‘Sino-original’

*chữ Nôm* ‘demotic system’ and

*chữ quốc ngữ* ‘national script’.

Five characteristics of the Vietnamese language:

- *đơn âm tiết* ‘monosyllabic’
- *thanh giọng* ‘tonal’
- *cách thể* ‘non-inflectional’
- *tiền vị ngữ* ‘head initial’
- *ngôn ngữ tổng hợp* ‘synthetic language’
  - *ngôn ngữ thứ vị* ‘word order’
  - *ngôn ngữ nội dung* ‘contextual’
  - *tính chất tổng hợp* ‘synthetic’

