

# ***NÓI LÁI* AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE SYLLABLE**

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Representational units like the segment and syllable remain controversial and are claimed by some to be artifacts of literacy. Drawing on three centuries of Vietnamese *nói lái*—a linguistic form in which parts of words are switched—in oral folk tales, poetry, discourse, and popular culture, this paper documents the structure of eight *nói lái* types. The data provide compelling evidence for (i) the psychologically reality of the ‘segment’, ‘feature’, ‘tone’, ‘syllable’, ‘onset’, and ‘rhyme’ as constituents of phonological representations; (ii) the autonomy of phonology, and (iii) the independence of phonological constituents from literacy and the constraints of both the *nôm* and *quốc ngữ* writing systems for Vietnamese.

Keywords: Vietnamese, *nói lái*, phonology, segmentation, syllable, feature, tone, subsyllabic constituents, onset, rhyme, literacy, writing systems, *nôm*, *quốc ngữ*, folk tales, Hồ Xuân Hương.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This paper explores the rich types, uses, culture, and history of *nói lái* in Vietnamese ordinary conversation and verbal arts, and the evidence that *nói lái* data present for the structure of the syllable, and the phonology of Vietnamese. *Nói lái* is a linguistic device in which parts of two spoken words can be switched to construct two other implied words. It is used by a speaker to convey one message while actually saying another.

The first two goals are to explain the structural patterns and discourse uses of *nói lái* in forms like those in (1) and (2) below. In (1), the speaker says “*bà Phán Cảnh*”, deferentially referring to the topic person as “Madam Phan Canh” with title, but implies and is understood by the listener as ‘saying’ something quite different.

(1)	Speaker’s utterance	<i>Nói lái</i> – intended meaning
	<i>Bà Phán Cảnh</i>	→ <i>Bà Cảnh Phán</i>
	[ʋba ʌfan ʋkəp]	[ʋba ʌkəp ʋfan]
	madam title name	madam wing wooden bed
	‘Madam Phan Canh’	‘Madam as wide as a wooden bed’

The *nói lái* in (1) operates on the syllable independently of tone, while the example in (2) below operates on a subsyllabic constituent. The context for (2) was one in which a collaborator under the French colonial administration was presented with a congratulatory panel featuring two Chinese characters *quần thần* for which the Vietnamese would be *bầy tôi*, with a straightforward meaning (Nguyễn Đình-Hoà 1997:29). As in (1), however, the *nói lái* conveys quite a different message.

(2)	Panel inscription	<i>Nói lái</i> – intended meaning
	Sino-Vietnamese <i>quần thần</i>	
	Vietnamese <i>bầy tôi</i>	→ <i>bồi tây</i>
	‘the king’s subject’	‘servant in a French household’

A third goal of the paper is to explore the relationship between the syllable, segment, literacy and two types of orthography. *Nói lái* is an oral folk form, highly valued and used productively, widely, and creatively by Vietnamese speakers for centuries, long before literacy moved from the elite class and became widespread in the twentieth century. The *nói lái* forms provide evidence for the syllable, segment, and feature as phonological units, the constituent

structure of the syllable, and the suprasegmental status of tone. That *nói lái* has been and continues to be appreciated and used productively by Vietnamese who do not read provides evidence that phonological constituents are independent of reading and writing. Similarly, it will be argued that the forms of *nói lái* are independent of the constraints of two very different Vietnamese writing systems: (1) the *nôm* calligraphic, demotic writing system, used by a small, elite group of Vietnamese scholars for literature, political essays, philosophy, and religious and medical works from about the 10<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and (2) the modern Roman-type alphabetic writing system, *quốc ngữ*, which came into wide use in the 1940's and is used today.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The phonological system of Vietnamese is briefly described in section 2.0. The basic types of *nói lái* are presented in section 3.0. The next sections trace *nói lái* historically from oral folk tales and folk stories that date back to at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century (section 4.0), to the poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (section 5.0), and finally to 20<sup>th</sup> century political *nói lái* of the Vietnam War years and modern Vietnam (section 6.0). Discussion and conclusions follow (section 7.0). The appendix presents the *quốc ngữ* orthography and the corresponding sounds of the graphemes.

## 2. VIETNAMESE

A Mon-Khmer language, Vietnamese is the national language of about 80 million citizens of Vietnam and is spoken by many other millions of Vietnamese living in China, several countries in Southeast Asia, and in a number of countries around the world including the United States, where for example the population of Vietnamese-Americans in San Jose, California, numbers about 85,000 (2000 Census), the largest concentration in any city outside of Vietnam. In Vietnam, there are three main dialects: the northern dialect (Hanoi), the central dialect (Hue) and the southern dialect (Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon). The three dialects are mutually

intelligible, and the dialect of national broadcast in Vietnam is the northern dialect.

Since *nói lái* structurally operates on the phonological units of Vietnamese, we briefly describe the relevant aspects of the phonological system in this section before turning to the verbal art form. Phonemically and abstracting away from some dialect variation, there are basically twenty-two consonants, two glides, eleven simple vowels and three diphthongs, a large number of possible V-V combinations, and six tones.

2. 1. Consonants

Vietnamese consonants and glides are given below in Table 1.

	labial <sup>1</sup>	dental	retrofl/ pal-alv	palatal	velar	glottal
voiced unaspirated stops <sup>2</sup> and affricates	b	d				
voiceless unaspirated stops and affricates <sup>3</sup>	p <sup>4</sup>	t	t <sup>5</sup>	c	k	(ʔ) <sup>6</sup>
voiceless aspirated stops and affricates		t <sup>h</sup>				
voiced fricatives	v	z <sup>7</sup>			y	
voiceless unaspirated fricatives	f	s	ʃ <sup>8</sup>		x	h
voiced nasals	m	n		ɲ	ŋ	
voiced laterals		l				
trill/tap		r <sup>9</sup>				
voiced glides	w			j		

Table 1. Vietnamese consonants

*Table notes:*

1. /f,v/ are labio-dental, and the rest are labial.
2. The voiced stops /b, d/ may be phonetically voiced implosives for some speakers (cf. Thompson 1965: 4-5).
3. Only voiceless stops /p, t, k/ and nasals occur in word-final position, where oral stops are unreleased. The stops /p, t, k/ are unaspirated in word-initial position. The unaspirated palatal /c/ is similar to English [tʃ] but with less frication.
4. /p/ occurs in word-final position and does not occur today in word-initial position except in borrowed words, such as pin ‘battery’. It is a phoneme with limited distribution.
5. /ʈ/ is pronounced as a voiceless retroflex stop [ʈ] in Southern and Central dialects and as a voiceless [c]/[tʃ] in the Northern dialect.
6. The voiceless glottal stop [ʔ] sometimes occurs before vowel initial words. It does not serve to distinguish meanings and is not a phoneme.
7. /z/ is pronounced as a voiced fricative [z] in the Northern dialect and as a semivowel [j] in Southern and Central dialects.
8. /ʃ/ is pronounced as a palato-alveolar [ʃ] or a retroflex [ʂ] in Southern and Central dialects, and as an alveolar [s] in the Northern dialect.
9. /r/ is pronounced as a rolled [r] or a retroflex fricative [ʐ] in Southern and Central dialects, and as a voiced fricative [ʒ] in the Northern dialect.

## 2.2 Vowels

The simple vowels and diphthongs of Vietnamese are given in Table 2 below.

	<i>Front</i>		<i>Back</i>	
		<i>Unrounded</i>	<i>Rounded</i>	
high	i	ɯ	u	
mid	e		o	
	ɛ	ǎ	ə	ɔ
low		ă	a	
diphthong	ie	ɯə	uo	

*Table 2. Vietnamese vowels and diphthongs*

### 2.3. Tone

The tones of Vietnamese are given in Table 3 below. The pitch numbers are based on acoustic data and are approximate values. These are not necessarily the phonological numbers of Chao's system for tone pitch levels (Chao 1930), but like the Chao system, the scale descends from high to low, 5-to-1. Since Vietnamese has only one simple rising tone and one simple falling tone, the IPA rising and falling symbols are used here phonologically for *sắc*, /*˧˨˦*/ (phonetically [˧˨]) and *huyền*, /*˧˨˩*/ ([˧˨]) tones.

IPA Symbol	Level	Contour	Phonetic Description	Pitch Height		
				beg	mid	end
High register tones						
˧		ngang	mid level tone	3	3	3
˧˨˦		sắc	high rising tone	3	4	5
˧˨˦˩		ngã	glottalized falling-rising tone (laryngealization at middle point)	3	2?	4
Low register tones						
˧˨˩		huyền	low falling tone	3	2.5	2
˧˨˩˦		hỏi	falling-rising tone	3	1	3
˧˨˩˦˩		nặng	glottalized falling tone (laryngealization at end point). Also shorter than other tones (about 2/3 the length of others).	3	1	?

Table 3. Vietnamese tones

The separation of tones into high and low registers in Table 3 is based primarily on synchronic phonetic evidence. The phonological structure of the tone system can be analyzed in several different ways due to the historical development of the tones (as hypothesized for

example by Haudricourt 1954) and on how the tones pattern in the language in reduplication and other processes (e.g. Thompson 1965: 140ff). For the purposes of the present paper, we treat the phonological structure of the tone system as given in (3) and (4) below. Only the northern dialect contrasts the *hỏi* and *ngã* tones.

(3) Phonological tone system: historical development and patterning in reduplication processes

Upper

<i>ngang</i> high level	<i>sắc</i> high rising	<i>hỏi</i> ‘high’ falling-rising
no tone diacritic	acute diacritic	part circle diacritic
		(above)

Lower

<i>huyền</i> low falling	<i>nặng</i> low fall	<i>ngã</i> ‘low’ rising broken
	broken	
grave diacritic	dot diacritic (below)	tilde diacritic

As seen in (3), the tones pattern in two sets, upper and a lower ‘registers’. For many styles of poetry, the *ngang* and *huyền* tones are both ‘even’ tones and the other four ‘rough’, as in (4).

(4) Phonological patterning of the tones in poetry

even	//	rough	rough
<i>ngang</i>		<i>sắc</i>	<i>hỏi</i>
<i>huyền</i>		<i>nặng</i>	<i>ngã</i>

## 2.4. Word and syllable

Phonologically, words in the language are one or two syllables of the form CV(C)T, where C represents a consonant, V represents a simple vowel, glide+vowel, diphthong, or vowel-vowel /vowel-glide combination, (C) represents an optional final consonant, which is either a nasal or voiceless stop, and T represents the tone. Most syllables begin with a consonant, but many do not have a final C.

Historically, words could begin with two consonants. No modern Vietnamese dialect has retained any of these consonant clusters, which though existed as sounds at least up to the seventeenth century. In the *quốc ngữ* orthography, some consonant phonemes are written as two consonant symbols. Syllables in Vietnamese then are typically CV(C), with an obligatory tone. The onset, as well as the coda consonant, is optional. There are several phonotactic constraints: (i) only rising and glottalized falling tones, the *sắc* and *nặng* tones, may occur with final stop codas; (ii) only back vowels (but not schwa) may occur with velar codas; (iii) glides can occur either before or after vowels, with /w/ only occurring before [-round] vowels, and only after non-bilabial consonants except in borrowed words (e.g., *voan*, *búyt*). These constraints play a role in *nói lái*, since they control which way sounds in a pair of words can be manipulated.

### 3. STRUCTURE AND DISCOURSE TYPES OF *NÓI LÁI*

*Nói lái* or ‘speaking backwards’, is a type of word play that has been a part of the Vietnamese culture and linguistic repertoire for a very long time, many hundreds of years at the very least. While the earliest scholarly documentation of *nói lái* in the West may be the works of Chéon (1905) and Cordier (1917) (cited in Lu 1972), it is found in Vietnamese poetry going back to at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and as an oral form, it is part of classic folk tales and folk songs that have been learned and handed down for generations. It is a productive, widely used colloquial, oral speech form (where it can be signaled by subtle prosodic cues as well as context), and is considered to be “clever usage” (Nguyễn Đình-Hoà 1997: 29) and often used to entertain or to criticize. Today throughout Vietnam, it can be heard on the street and found in written forms in signs on the street, political subtext writings, pen names, and popular poetry. It is used frequently in mocking or sarcasm contexts, discourse settings where directness is avoided, in double-entendres, vulgar expressions, and symmetrical verses, among many other uses. For example,



symmetrical sentence couplets comprise a common traditional Vietnamese verbal art that probably originated from Chinese scholarship where it was originally done only in written Chinese. In parallel sentences, *nói lái* is one of the tricks used to create the parallelism. In this very popular, verbal performance art, one scholar will make up one sentence or phrase and challenge another scholar to respond with another sentence or phrase with a parallel structure and symmetrical idea. If the structure of the first sentence contains a *nói lái* phrase, the challenge is much more difficult.

As was shown in (1) and (2) above, the basic idea of *nói lái* is for the speaker to use a pair of words that gives the sentence one overt meaning but where if the underlying *nói lái* relationship between two words is recognized by the listener, the sentence has a dramatically different reading. The spoken or written utterance that occurred in the discourse and that is the base form for the *nói lái* interpretation is called *nói xuôi*, ‘speaking with the flow (forward), speaking naturally’. (In the text examples, it is presented on the left (as in examples (1) and (2) above), and the speaker’s intended meaning, the *nói lái* ‘speaking backwards’ form, is on the right.) The *nói lái* relationship depends on several possible types of switching parts of each word to the other word, with the requirement that the result of the switching is two other, actually occurring words of Vietnamese. The speaker can use any of several rules to derive two implied words that then produce the double-meaning sentence. The rules operate mostly on word pairs but can also be applied on phrases or sets of three or four words. If a three-word unit is the base, the speaker generally leaves the middle word intact, and switches parts of the two words at each end of the unit. If a four-word unit is the base, any two words can form a pair and be switched. Word pairs of similar syllables and tones, e.g., *lan man*, *lanh chanh*, cannot be used.

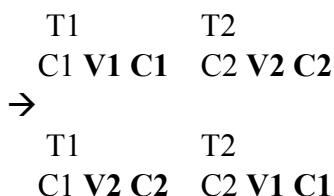
On the surface there are eight structural types, which we diagram in this section as operations on a structure in which consonants and vowels are represented on one level and the tones on a higher level

(linked to the vowel nucleus) and where the units that switch position are given in bold face (e.g. (5) below). In the discussion section, we more fully analyze these data in terms of syllable structure. To illustrate the uses of *nói lái*, a number of examples will be given for each type. To better illustrate the range of uses, a larger number of examples is given for one of the types, the first one discussed. Sources of the examples are given in the text if from a published source. Since *nói lái* is an oral phenomenon, many of the examples in the text are from contemporary spoken Vietnamese rather than from, say, a literary source. These examples were collected by the second author in Vietnam and are identified in the text below by the city where it was heard (e.g. “collected in Hue”).

### 3.1. Type 1

In Type 1, the vowel and final consonant switch together, leaving in place the initial consonant and tone. In terms of syllable structure, the rhyme minus the tone is switching. (As noted, the coda is optional in Vietnamese.) This is diagrammed as Type 1 under (5) below.

(5) Type 1. Switching the vowel, final consonant, but not the initial consonant and tone



Examples of Type 1 are given below in (6) through (13) (and (2) above), with the Vietnamese words that were spoken by the speaker, the *nói xuôi*, given on the first line to the left of the arrow, and the intended *nói lái* to the right of the arrow. A phonetic transcription if needed is given on the next line (with tones indicated if relevant),

and the gloss in the next line below. A brief description of the context follows.

- (6) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*rùa công*                      → *rồng cua*                      Type 1  
 [ʋuə ʔkoŋm]                      [ʋoŋm ʔkuə]  
 ‘turtle phoenix’                      ‘dragon crab’

Context: speaking mockingly about precious animals surrounding an altar. The turtle and the phoenix are common symbolic animals displayed on either sides of an altar. With *nói lái*, the speaker mocks their seriousness by implying that they are just a combination of ‘dragon’ and ‘crab’. Collected in Hue.

Example (7) is from an old folk story but illustrates a common use of *nói lái*. In the story, the two main participants are trying to arrange when they will meet but without other listeners knowing both when they are meeting and that they are meeting. While (7) provides the actual *nói lái*, the correct interpretation (and larger discourse goal) has been negotiated through earlier events. See section 4.0 on *nói lái* in folk stories.

- (7) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*tái môi*                      → *tối mai*                      Type 1  
 [ʔtai ʔmoj]                      [ʔtoj ʔmai]  
 ‘pale lips’                      ‘tomorrow night’

Context: hidden message in a folk story.

In the next two examples, three words are the input in effect to the *nói lái*, and in both (as is the norm), the switch involves words one and three, skipping over the medial word.

- (10) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*bầy tôi*                      → *bồi tầy*                      Type 1  
[ʋbej ɬtoj]                      [ʋboj ɬtej]  
‘the king’s subject’            ‘servant in a French household’  
Context: The double meaning is meant to be a criticism during the French period against those mandarins who on the outside claimed to be faithful subjects to the king but were actually pro-French and acted for the benefits of the French.
- (11) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*có chi*                      → *ký cho*                      Type 1  
[ɭkə ɬci]                      [ɭki ɬco]  
‘having something’            ‘giving one’s signature’  
Context: Here underlying meaning is a criticism against bribery, with the meaning that the person in authority will only give his/her signature of approval if the person in need offers something. Collected in Ho Chi Minh City.

(12) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*đá bèò*                          → *đéo bà*                      Type 1  
[ʈda Ɂbew]                      [ʈdew Ɂba]  
‘kicking the water fern’        ‘swear word by a woman’  
Context: swearing. Collected in Hanoi.

In the Type 1 examples in (14), we present two examples of parallel sentences. The parallelism is a function of *nói lái* (Type 1 in (14)) operating on the first two words, which derives the third and fourth words of the sentence.

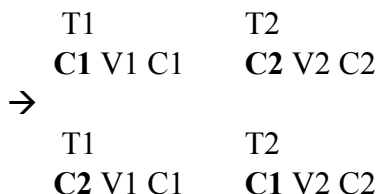
In (15) is an example of Type 1 that also shows a common function of *nói lái*. *Thế Lữ* is the pen name of a famous Vietnamese poet (1907-1989), whose real name is *Thư Lễ*.

- (15) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*Thứ Lễ*                      → *Thế Lữ*                      Type 1  
 [ʈʰu ʔlɛ]                      [ʈʰe ʔlɯ]  
 Real name                      Pen name

### 3.2 Type 2

In Type 2, only the onset moves, leaving the rhyme intact. As mentioned above, historically, the onset could be one or more consonants, but today is only one consonant. This is diagrammed in (16) below.

- (16) Type 2. Switching only the onset (first consonant) of each word:



Examples of Type 2 are given in (17) and (18).

- (17) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*đủ ngói*                      → *ngủ đói*                      Type 2  
 [ʈdu ŋoɔj]                      [ŋu ʈdoɔj]  
 ‘enough tiles’                      ‘sleeping hungry’

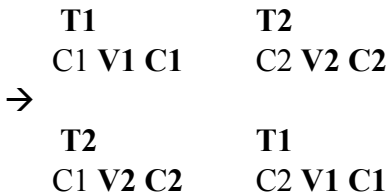
Context: A passer-by’s comments on a newly built house, that it has enough tiles; however the other reading is that in order to complete the house, the owners must have used up a lot of money and now have to sleep on an hungry stomach. Collected in Hue.

- (18) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*Phán Thực*      →   *Thán Phục*      Type 2  
 [ʌfan ʋʔtʰuk]      [ʌtʰan ʋʔfuk]  
 Real name                      Pen name

### 3.3 Type 3

In Type 3, we find that the vowel, final consonant and tone switch as a unit, leaving in place the initial consonant. Here, we find the total rhyme switching. This type is diagrammed in (19).

- (19) Type 3: switching the vowels, final consonants and tones, but not the initial consonant



Examples of Type 3 are given below in (20) through (23).

- (20) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*đóc xòn*                      → *đòn xóc*                      Type 3  
 [ʈɔkɤp ʋɔn]                      [ʋɔn ʈɔkɤp]  
 ‘đóc + personal name’                      ‘carrying poles’

Context: mocking of the name *Xòn*. Collected in Hue.

A young girl was sent to borrow a pair of carrying poles from Mr. *Xòn*. By the time she reached the man’s house, she already discovered a funny way to relate the objects with their owner, and said, *Ông Xòn, cho ba tui mượn cái đóc xòn* ‘Mr. Xon, my father would like to borrow your *đóc xòn*’ (speaking backwards: *đòn xóc*). Although the young girl did not say ‘carrying poles,’ but used the man’s name to refer to the carrying poles, the man recognized the *nói lái*, which ties his name to an ordinary object, and became very upset and refused to lend the carrying poles. (Actual event.)

In example (21) below, we have a well-formed *nói lái* from the southern dialect, which does not distinguish between final ‘y’ and ‘i’.

- (21) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*hột cay*                      → *hai cột*                      Type 3  
 [ʋʰot ʈkai]                      [ʈhai ʋʰkɔt]  
 ‘spicy bean’                      ‘two pillars’

Context: folk story (see (42) below).

The *nói lái* in (22) is from the central and southern dialects which do not distinguish between *hỏi* and *ngã* tones.

- (22) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*thái dũng*                      → *thủng dái*                      Type 3  
 [ʈʰai ʋzũŋm]                      [ʋʈʰũŋm ʈzai]  
 ‘grand bravery’                      ‘having a hole in the testicles’

Context: mocking of the names *Thái* and *Dũng*. Collected in Hue.



Note that in (23) as in (20) and (21), a voiceless stop final rhyme switches.

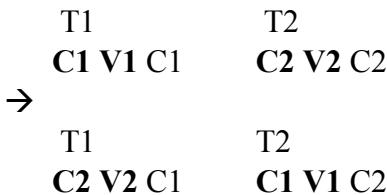
- (23) *Nói xuôi*                      →    *Nói lái*  
       *nhút củ*                        *nhử củt*                                      Type 3  
       [ɲɯt ʋkɯ]                      [ɲɯ ʋkɯt]  
       ‘one act’                        ‘baiting faeces’

Context: mocking of the Sino-Vietnamese expression *nhất cử lưỡng tiện* (literal translation ‘one act two conveniences’, or ‘killing two birds with one stone’), perhaps as a way to make fun of snobs who use big words. Collected in Hue.

### 3.4 Type 4

In the fourth type, we find that the initial consonant and vowel switch. This is diagrammed in (24) below. Examples of Type 4 all contain words with final voiceless stops. The initial consonant and vowel do not form a constituent in a syllable. This is a possible *nói lái* in Vietnamese due to a phonotactic constraint in the language that limits the tones that can cooccur with final voiceless stops, and the general *nói lái* constraint that tones anchor the template. We return to Type 4 in the discussion section.

- (24) Type 4. Switching the first consonant and the vowels only:



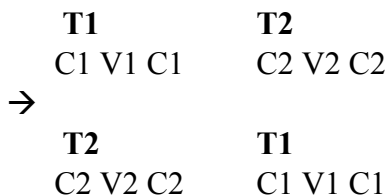
An example of Type 4 is given in (25) below.

- (25) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
       *con vịt*                      → *vìn cọt*                      Type 4  
       [ɬkɔn ʋʔvit]                [ɬvin ʋʔkɔt]  
       animal duck                pull down + no meaning

### 3.5 Type 5

Tone is a suprasegmental and operates independently of segments in most languages. A logically possible type of *nói lái* one might expect would be one in which only the tones switch, as characterized in (26) as Type 5. In fact, only one example could be found (see (27) below). The rarity of this type of *nói lái* may be due to a functional factor: since all the segments remain *in situ*, the expression may not be viewed as tricky and clever as the other types. However, there appears to be a formal explanation, and we return to this question in the discussion.

(26) Type 5. Switching only the tone.



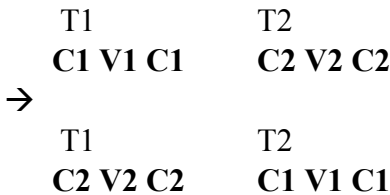
The Type 5 example in (27) is a type of parallel sentence: *bí mật bị mất*, which means ‘The secret is lost’. It is a possible *nói lái* that leaves in place the final voiceless stop of the second word, because each of the tones in the pair of words are tones that can co-occur with final voiceless stops (in fact the only two tones that can): the corresponding upper and lower rough *sắc* and *nặng* tones (cf. (3) above).

- (27) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*Bí mật*                      → *bị mất*                      Type 5  
 [ʌbi ʋmăt]                      [ʋʔbi ʌmăt]  
 secret                      be lost  
 Sentence: *bí mật bị mất* ‘The secret is lost.’ Collected in Hanoi.

### 3.6 Type 6

In the sixth type of *nói lái*, the entire syllable except for the tone switches. This is diagrammed in (28). Example of Type 6 are given in (29) and (30).

- (28) Type 6. Switching everything except the tone:



The example of Type 6 *nói lái* given in (29) below is from a famous 17<sup>th</sup> Century *Trạng Quỳnh* story. The *Trạng Quỳnh* tales are based on the life of a real scholar, named *Nguyễn Quỳnh* (1677-1748), who stood for the people against the hypocritical monarchy. In the story from which example (29) is taken, Dr. *Quỳnh* offered the King a bottle of hoisin sauce, which was poor people’s food, but he labeled it with Sino-Vietnamese characters that meant “Grand Vent”. The King was very insulted because he was offered such mundane food, but he did not know what the characters for “Grand Vent” meant. Dr. *Quỳnh* explained, “Well, ‘Grand Vent’ means ‘big wind’. If there is a big wind, then the statues must worry. ‘Statues worry’ (*tượng lo*) is *lọ tượng* (bottle of hoisin sauce)”.

- (29) *Nói xuôi* → *Nói lái*  
*tượng lo*                      *lọ tương*                      Type 6  
 [ʋʔtuəŋ ɭɔ]                      [ʋʔlɔ ɭtuəŋ]  
 ‘statue worries’                      ‘bottle of sauce’  
 Context: folk story

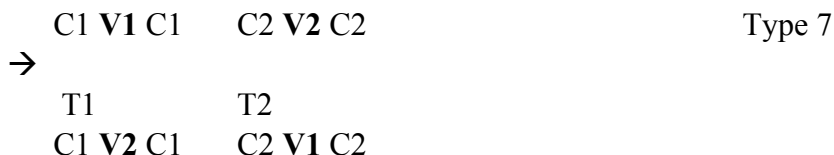
Example (30) is a Type 6 pen name *nói lái* that operates over the first and third words of the writer’s real name.

- (30) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*Đặng Trần Thi*                      → *Thị Trần Đăng*                      Type 6  
 [ʋʔdăŋ ʋɿn ɭtʰi]                      [ʋʔtʰi ʋɿn ɭdăŋ]  
 Real name                      Pen name

### 3.7 Type 7

In another type of *nói lái* example, it appears that only the vowel switches, as diagrammed in (31) below with examples given in (32) and (33). This could be a logically possible type: on the assumption that any constituent of the syllable can switch, the nucleus could indeed switch alone. However, only words of parallel syllable structures may participate in this type of *nói lái*. Thus, while *đầu tiên* ‘the first thing’ could technically be turned into *điều tân* (meaningless expression), it is not an acceptable *nói lái* form. What can be found are word pairs such as *sáng rực* ‘bright spreading light’– *súng rạc* (meaningless expression) in which both words have filled codas. In all the examples that could be found, the final consonant is a voiceless stop.

- (31) Type 7. Switching the vowels only:



- (32) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*băng cực*                      → *bưng cặc*                      Type 7  
 [ɬbǎŋ ʋʔkuk]                      [ɬbuŋ ʋʔkǎk]  
 ‘iceberg’                      ‘carry penis’  
 Context: Insult. Collected in Hue.

In example (33) below (from Lữ Huy Nguyên 1971), the shift in coda consonant place of articulation appears to be an exception to the general rules, but it is a natural process for the Vietnamese *nói lái* player. It is not common, but does show that segments are decomposed into distinctive features, which then may function independently in the *nói lái*.

- (33) *Nói xuôi*                      → *Nói lái*  
*cương quyết*                      *quyên cước*                      Type 7  
 [ɬkwuəŋ ɬkwet]                      [ɬkwen ɬkwuək]  
 ‘determined’                      ‘collect nylon thread’  
 Context: mocking. Lữ Huy Nguyên 1971

### 3.8 Type 8

In the eighth and final type of *nói lái*, the speaker says two nonsense syllables that when ‘reversed’ according to one of the basic six types above yield two real words with the speaker’s intended meaning. As a formal operation, this is a type of reduplication that begins with reduplication of the two intended words and a second step of *nói lái* that together yield the non-words of the utterance (cf. Bao 1990). This is schematically diagrammed in (34).

- (34) Type 8. Reduplication with *nói lái*  
 Non-word non-word                      →                      Intended two words

Examples of Type 8 are given in (35) through (38) below. In each, the speaker creates a circumlocution by using the nonsense

words. For example, in describing (36), Nguyễn Đình-Hoà 1997 observes that a mother would “playfully say *dắm đái* (no meaning) when she wants to avoid the phrase ‘(Baby) wet his/ her pants’.

- (35) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
       *tiền túng*                      → *túng tiền*                      Type 8 + Type 6 (/Type 2)  
       [ʈtiɛn ʋtɯŋ]                      [ʈtɯŋ ʋtiɛn]  
       (no meaning)                      short of money

- (36) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
       *dắm đái*                      → *đái dằm*                      Type 8 + Type 6  
       [ʈzəm ʋdaj]                      [ʈdaj ʋzəm]  
       (no meaning)                      ‘wet pants’      Nguyễn Đình-Hoà (1997: 28-29)

- (37) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
       *thái dúi*                      → *thúi dái*                      Type 8 + Type 2 (/Type 3)  
       [ʈtʰaj ʈzuj]                      [ʈtʰuj ʈzaj]  
       (no meaning)                      ‘rotten testicles’

In the next three sections, we present an historical view of *nói lái* and its different genres and cultural uses, beginning with the oldest forms from the oral culture (section 4.0), turning next to the eighteen century poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương who wrote poems using the demotic *nôm* script (section 5.0), and concluding with political *nói lái* from the Vietnam War years and contemporary Vietnam (section 6.0).

#### 4. ORAL CULTURE AND THE OLDEST FORMS OF *NÓI LÁI*

The oldest forms of *nói lái* are found in folk songs, folk tales, proverbs, and children’s riddles. The folk forms have been handed down for generations and are popular to this day across all walks of life and in each of the dialect areas throughout Vietnam. While it is

difficult to precisely date the forms from the oral culture, several can be dated back to the seventeen century.

One of the most well-known folk songs is in (38). A young man came calling to ask his sweetheart out the next night, but he did not want anybody in the family to know, so he sang as in (38a):

- (38a) Hò σ... cau khô trầu héo tái môi. Type 1  
 ‘dried areca nut and withered beetal leaf make the lips  
 pale’

The last two words also mean *tối mai* ‘tomorrow night’. The girl inside the house heard her love’s song, but could not go out with him until the night after, so she sang:

- (38b) Cam tươi quýt ngọt tốt mùi. Type 1/  
 ‘fresh orange and sweet tangerine have good Type 3  
 sections.

The last two words also mean *túi mốt* ‘the night after tomorrow night’. And so the two young lovers arranged their secret appointment.

In (39a) is another famous folk song, and its *nói lái* is diagrammed in (39b).

(39a) Folk song.

*Con cá doi nằm trên cái cối đá*

*Con chim đa đa đậu nhánh lá đa*

*Chồng gần sao em không lấy mà em đi lấy chồng xa*

*Lỡ mai mẹ yếu cha già*

*Bát cơm, chén nước, chén trà ai dâng?*      Vũ Ngọc Phan (1998)

The “doi” fish lies on the stone mortar

The “đa đa” bird clings on the banyan twig

A husband near your home, why don’t you marry

Tomorrow when your Mom is weak, your Dad is old

A bowl of rice, a glass of water, a cup of tea –

who is going to offer them to your Mom and Dad?

(39b) *Nói xuôi*

*cá doi*

[ʎka ʎdoj]

fish doi

‘a kind of fish’

*Nói lái*

→ *cối đá*

[ʎkoj ʎda]

mortar stone

‘stone mortar’

Type 1/Type 3

In (40) below is a *nói lái* from another well-known folk song: “the ‘doi’ fish lies on the stone mortar, the female cat lies on the roof’s pillar, my parents are poor, so you left my love”. In (41), the symbols *k* and *c* both represent /k/, but the grapheme *k* can only precede the graphemes *e*, *i*, and *ê*; and the grapheme *c* occurs before *a*, *ă*, *â*, *o*, *ô*, *ơ*, *u*, and *ư*.



(40a) *Con mèo cái nằm trên mái kèo.*

(40b)	<i>Nói xuôi</i>	<i>Nói lái</i>	
	<i>mèo cái</i>	→ <i>mái kèo</i>	Type 3
	[ʋmɛw ʌkaj]	[ʌmaj ʋkɛw]	
	cat female	roof beam	
	‘female cat’	‘roof’s beam’	Lữ Huy Nguyên (1971)

Example (41) is also from a folk song “The racing fish and the stone crab”.

(41)	<i>Nói xuôi</i>	<i>Nói lái</i>	
	<i>cá đua</i>	→ <i>cua đá</i>	Type 3
	[ʌka ʈduə]	[ʈkuə ʌda]	
	fish race	crab stone	
	‘racing fish’	‘stone crab’	Lữ Huy Nguyên (1971)

Vietnamese folk tales are often centered on *nói lái*, as we saw earlier in the example from the 17<sup>th</sup> century *Trạng Quỳnh* tales (29). In (42) below is another centuries old folk story known throughout Vietnam. The story revolves around three *nói lái*, the first is a Type 6, the second a Type 3 (also shown in (21) above), and the third a Type 6.

(42) Folk story – “Speaking letters”

Once there was a rich man who was looking for the best man who would match his daughter. He wanted this man to know a lot about the letters, and posted on the gate of his house a sign saying “Whoever wants to marry my daughter are welcome to talk letters with me”. One year past and there was no young man who dared to come to talk letters with the rich man, until one day, a student of letters came to his gate to meet the challenge. The rich man said, “go with me”. So out they went into the

village. There they saw a wedding. The rich man pointed to the groom and the bride and said, “OK, show me your good letters”. The young man replied in Sino-Vietnamese, “One male, one female”. “Very good,” the rich man said. They continued to go for some time, then they saw a pagoda with two pillars at the gate. The rich man pointed to the pillars and asked the young man again to show his letters. The young man said in Sino-Vietnamese, “One pillar and another pillar make two pillars.” “Excellent!”, the rich man said. Then they went to the river bank and saw a husband and wife fishing. The young man said in Sino-Vietnamese again, “Husband and wife searching for fish”. The rich man was very happy to himself, thinking that he had found a man of good letters to be his son-in-law.

Now there was another young man who did not know even half of a letter, and had been following the two men and overheard every thing the learned young man said. The next day, he came to see the rich man and said, “I’d like to talk letters with you to marry your daughter.” The rich man said, “OK.” and took him to the garden. He pointed to a pineapple and asked the young man to show his letters. The young man remembered what the other young man had said, and went, “one female, one male”. The rich man was puzzled, “It’s a pineapple, why do you say ‘one male and one female’?” The young man was quick, “Well, the pineapple is also called *trái gai* (fruit of prickles). *Trái gai* speaking backwards is *gái trai* (girl and boy). Doesn’t *gái trai* mean ‘one female one male’?” The rich man agreed that that was a good answer.

Then he came to the pepper vine with some pepper beans on them. The young men said without having to be asked, “one pillar and another pillar make two pillars”. The rich man shook his head, “It’s a pepper bean plant, why do you talk about pillars?” The young man quickly responded, “Well, pepper beans are also called *hột cay* (spicy seed), speaking backwards, isn’t it ‘*hai cột*’ (two pillars)?” [see (21) above].

The rich man was amazed at his knowledge, and pointed to a purple eggplant next to the pepper vine, “So what would you say about this?” The young man recited, “husband and wife searching for fish.” “What! how do you go from eggplants to husband and wife fishing?” The young man said, “Well, isn’t it true that the lady of the household knows that you like eggplants and has planted it here? that’s why I said ‘husband and wife’, and ‘searching for fish’ is *tìm cá*, speaking backwards isn’t it *cà tìm*?”

The rich man was not only impressed with the second young man’s good letters but also his knowledge’s width and depth, and married him to his beautiful daughter, with a large dowry.

*Nói lái* is common in oral ‘challenges’, like the well-known challenging proverbs in (43). In (43a), the low pay of teachers is memorialized, and in this proverb, the *nói lái* operates as in (43b). (Note that /z/ is spelled either as “gi” or “d” in Vietnamese.)

(43a) It is said,

*thầy giáo tháo giày, tháo cả ủng,*  
*thùng cả áo, đem giáo án mà dán áo*

‘teachers take off their shoes, take off all their boots, have holes all over their shirts, use their lesson plan (paper) to paste on their shirts’.

(43b)	<i>Nói xuôi</i>		<i>Nói lái</i>	
	<i>thầy giáo</i>	→	<i>tháo giày</i>	
	[ʈʰej ʈzaw]		[ʈʰaw ʈzej]	
	‘teachers’		‘take shoes off’	

Type 3

<i>tháo cả ủng</i>	→	<i>thùng cả áo</i>	
[ʈʰaw ʈka ʈuŋ]		[ʈʰuŋ ʈka ʈaw]	
‘take all boots’		‘have holes all over shirts’	

Type 1/3

<i>giáo án</i>	→	<i>dán áo</i>	Type 3
[ʌzaw ʌan]		[ʌzan ʌaw]	
‘lesson plans’		‘paste on shirts’	

In (44a) is the response to the challenge, with its structure in (44b).

- (44a) *nhà trường nhường trà, nhường cả hoa, nhòa cả hương, lấy  
lương hưu để lưu hương*  
‘the school gives away the tea, gives away all the flowers,  
fades away the fragrance, uses retirement pension to retain  
the fragrance’

- (44b) *Nói xuôi* → *Nói lái*  
*nhà trường*      *nhường trà*      Type 1/Type 3  
[ʌ̆na ʌ̆tɰəŋ]      [ʌ̆nɰəŋ ʌ̆tɰa]  
‘school’      ‘give away  
tea’

<i>nhường hoa</i>	→	<i>nhòa hương</i>	Type 1
[ʌ̆nɰəŋ ʌ̆hwa]		[ʌ̆nɰwa ʌ̆hɰəŋ]	
‘give away all the flowers’		‘fade away the fragrance’	

<i>lương hưu</i>	→	<i>lưu hương</i>	Type 1
[ʌ̆lɰəŋ ʌ̆hɰw]		[ʌ̆lɰw ʌ̆hɰəŋ]	
‘retirement pension’		‘retain the fragrance’	

In (45) is another example of a challenging verse, where the response must match the sentence in (45) in syntax, rhythm, tones, and *nói lái* structure. So far, the challenge has not been met. (Lữ Huy Nguyễn 1971).

- (45) *bò lang*                      *chạy vào làng Bo*                      Type 6  
 [ʋbɔ ɬlan]                      [ʋlan ɬbɔ]  
 cow patterned run enter village Bo  
 ‘The patterned cow ran into the Bo Lữ Huy Nguyên (1971)  
 Village.’

Also in Lữ Huy Nguyên (1971) are several examples of children’s riddles. In (46a), the riddle is “When leaving, it saws the tree top, when coming back, it still saws the tree top. What is it?” The answer to the riddle is ‘a horse’ (46b).

- (46a) *Khi đi cưa ngọn, khi về cũng cưa ngọn.*  
 ‘When it starts, it cuts the top of the tree; when it returns it still  
 cuts the top of the tree. What is it?’  
 Answer: *con ngựa* ‘a horse’

- (46b) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*cưa ngọn*                      → *con ngựa*                      Type 1  
 [ɬkɯə ʋɣɔn]                      [ɬkɔn ʋɣɯə]  
 saw tree top                      classifier for animal horse  
 ‘to saw tree top’                      ‘a horse’  
 Children’s riddle                      Lữ Huy Nguyên (1971)

In (47), the question of the riddle is “What falls from the sky and is quick to curl?”, and the answer is an areca leaf stem.

- (47) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*mau cò*                      → *mò cau*                      Type 1/3  
 [ɬmăw ɬkɔ]                      [ɬmɔ ɬkăw]  
 quick curl                      leaf stem areca  
 ‘quick to curl’                      ‘areca leaf stem’  
 Children’s riddle, Lữ Huy Nguyên (1971)

*Nói lái* is also a common structure in teases, jokes and insults like those in (48), (49) and (50).

(48) Tease.

<i>Nói xuôi</i>		<i>Nói lái</i>	
<i>lấy chồng</i>	→	<i>chống lấy</i>	Type 6
[lɛi ʋɔŋ]		[ʋɔŋ lɛi]	

‘getting a husband’

‘protecting against the mud’

Context: common tease for girls who are at the age to get married.

(49) Joke.

Everything about the king has to be referred to with an honorific term *long*, meaning ‘dragon’. The king’s body is called *long thể*, his robe is called *long bào*, his bed is called *long sàng*. Thus, the joke begins, when the king lost his throne and had to seek refuge abroad, we call it *long vưu* (*nói lái* – *lưu vong*, derogative term for being a refugee in a foreign country), and when he has to work for a living, we say *long đạo* (*nói lái* – *lao động* ‘to work’).

- |    |  |          |
|----|--|----------|
| a. | <i>long vưu</i> - <i>lưu vong</i>              | Type 1/3 |
|    | royal +no meaning - live in exile (derogatory) |          |
| b. | <i>long đạo</i> - <i>lao động</i>              | Type 1   |
|    | royal path – to labor activity                 |          |

## (50) Insult.

Once there was a fellow who played the flute very badly but was extremely proud of his skills. Every where he went, he asked people, “What do you think of my flute skills?”. One time a person replied, “Your flute sounds like that of Teacher *Chu Lỗ Khâm* in China”. The young fellow was very excited even though he didn’t know who Teacher Chu was. Little did he know that the name was made up, and that the *nói lái* name of the “teacher” is *Châm Lỗ Khu* ‘piercing the annus’. Collected in Hue.

Type 3

In this section, we have looked at *nói lái* in folk tales and other spoken forms. Vietnam has a rich poetic tradition that is also part of the oral culture, including a two-thousand year tradition of singing poetry, poems known as *ca dao*, short poems typically four lines that must be sung (Seaman 2002). In the next section, we turn to the poetry of one of Vietnam’s most renowned poets, Hồ Xuân Hương, who wrote using the *nôm* script and whose poems are in the *lu shih* tradition. Her poems also are part of oral culture of Vietnam, recited and passed down through generations.

## 5. EIGHTEENTH CENTURY *NÓI LÁI*

### 5.1. The poet Hồ Xuân Hương

Born probably between 1775 and 1780, Hồ Xuân Hương was an unusual woman in many ways. Few Vietnamese women during traditional times achieved stature as poets. Apparently having received a classical education before her family’s financial reversals, Hồ Xuân Hương mastered a male, Confucian poetic tradition, chose to write in the *nôm* script, a writing system that represented the Vietnamese spoken language, rather than in Chinese (the language of the elites in Vietnam at the time), and even more surprisingly broke rigid norms for proper female behavior and discourse. Challenging

and questioning the status of women, male authority, Buddhist practices, and the social order of her times, she wrote scathingly funny, irreverent poems that often were ribald double entendres, a poem-within-a-poem, using *nói lái*, puns, imagery, symbols and all the resources of language and sound to craft perfect four and eight line verse on forbidden topics.

“...how did she get away with the irreverence, the scorn, and the habitual indecency of her poetry? The answer lies in her excellence as a poet and in the paramount cultural esteem that Vietnamese have always placed on poetry, whether in the high tradition of the literati or the oral folk poetry of the common people. Quite simple, she survived because of her exquisite cleverness at poetry.... It was her own skill in composing two poems at once, one hidden in the other, which captured her audiences – from common people who could hear in her verse echoes of their folk poetry, proverbs, and village common sense, to Sinophile court mandarins who bantered with her in verse, who valued her poetic skills, and who offered her their protection. Her verbal play, her wicked humor, her native speech, her spiritual longing, her hunger for love, and her anger at corruption must have been tonic.”

Balaban (2000a: 5)

Not a great deal is known about her life. Scholars agree she came from the Hồ family and lived in Northern Vietnam. She is believed to have had a tea shop in what is now Hà Nội, where she was often challenged by young men to compete in verbal duels. She was married twice, and like her mother, was the second wife, a concubine. Most likely a Mahayana Buddhist, she writes movingly about Buddhist compassion, but is as forceful in her criticism and mockery of religious corruption and individual monks as in her critique of injustice and corruption in the secular world. She is



believed to have died in the early 1820s. Fewer than 150 of her poems have survived.

### 5.2 *Lu shih* poems

Poems in the *lu shih* tradition in which she wrote are eight lines long and each line has seven syllables. The first, second, fourth, sixth, and eighth line rhyme, and the tones at the ends of these lines must be even tones (see (4) above). Often there is syntactic parallel structure within the poem. The variation on the *lu shih* that is called *chueh-chu* (or ‘broken off lines’) is four lines long. (See Liu 1962.)

In (51) is a Hồ Xuân Hương poem that is popular today in Vietnam. It is presented first in the *nôm* script (51a) in a form believed to be close to the original (Durand 1968, 25. Balaban 2000b, 54), and is given in (51b) in modern *quốc-ngữ* orthography. The English translation for this poem (Balaban 2000b, 55) is due to John Balaban, an American poet who has worked on capturing her poems in English for many years (cf. Seaman 2002). This poem, ‘Swinging’, is representative of Hồ Xuân Hương’s poems in several ways. It describes a rural activity and scene while expressing a woman’s inner feeling. Its rhyme and tone structure are a perfect *lu shih* poem. Its meaning occurs on several levels, one of which is erotic. As in several of her poems like *Dệt cửi* ‘Weaving at night’, *Lấy chồng chung* ‘On sharing a husband’, *Tự tình thơ*, *Tự tình*, and *Tự tình (Chiếc bách)* ‘Confessions I-III’ (Durand 1968; Balaban 2000b), Hồ Xuân Hương meditates sadly here on the low status of women.

(51) *Vịnh leo đu* ‘Swinging’

(51a) *Chữ nôm* script – Durand (1968: 25), Balaban (2000b: 54).

詠 躑 躑

倦	櫓	嗜	埃	窖	窖	橈
得	辰	蓮	打	几	魁	曉
糲	踣	躑	鶴	堪	堪	脍
媽	挽	駿	螭	譌	譌	悉
罌	牀	裙	紅	魁	法	派
仁	行	躑	玉	躑	雙	雙
邇	春	色	別	春	庄	佐
櫓	擲	珍	耒	魯	補	空

(51b) *Quốc-ngữ* orthography  
*Vịnh leo đu*

*Tám cột khen ai khéo khéo trông  
 Người thì lên đánh kẻ ngồi trông  
 Trai du gối hạc khom khom cật  
 Gái uốn lưng ong ngửa ngửa lòng  
 Bốn mảnh quần hồng bay phấp phới  
 Hai hàng chân ngọc ruỗi song song  
 Chơi xuân đã biết xuân chẳng tá  
 Cột nhỏ đi rồi lỗ bỏ không.*

Swinging (as translated in Balaban 2000b: 55).

Praise whoever raised these poles.  
 for some to swing while others watch.  
 A boy pumps, then arcs his back.  
 The shapely girl shoves up her hips.  
 Four pink trousers flapping hard,  
 two pairs of legs stretched side by side.  
 Spring games. Who hasn't known them?  
 Swing posts removed, the holes lie empty.

The swings of this poem are the swings put up in the field for children to play on during the season when parents are working, a common practice in rural Vietnam. The swings are then removed at the end of the season. The young boy and girl are equals as children, swinging. But beneath the pastoral description is a more erotic meaning for spring games. In this inner poem, the older woman reflects back on its loss and feels abandoned.

The next two poems 'Quan Su Pagoda' (52) and 'Life of a Monk' (53) are classic ribald double entendres of Hồ Xuân Hương, and in each, the inner poem uses *nói lái* to convey the 'hidden' message.

(52) *Vịnh chùa Quán Sứ* 'Quan Su Pagoda'

(52a) *Chữ nôm* script -- Durand (1968: 111), Balaban (2000b: 80).

詠 厨 館 使

館	使	鞫	席	景	永	消
晦	探	師	具	到	坭	扞
掎	鯨	小	底	恍	空	攔
長	曷	媿	客	點	吏	扞
創	暝	空	几	摳	喪	機
晷	秩	空	埃	抹	技	綦
吒	刼	塘	修	鞫	搥	弔
景	慍	添	嘖	嬭	情	扞

(52b) *Quốc-ngữ* orthography*Vịnh chùa Quán Sứ*

*Quán Sứ sao mà cảnh vắng teo  
 Hỏi thăm sư cụ đảo nơi neo  
 Chày kinh, tiểu để chuông không đám  
 Tràng hạt, vãi lần đếm lại đeo  
 Sáng ban không kẻ khua tang mít  
 Trưa trật nào ai móc kẽ râu  
 Cha kiếp tu hành sao lắt léo  
 Cảnh buồn thêm chán nợ tình đeo*

## Quan Su Pagoda

Quan Su here, why is it so quiet and empty  
 I'd like to ask where the head monk is  
 The novice has left the drum stick without striking  
 The old Buddhist woman keeps counting and putting on the  
     string beads  
 The day is bright, no one is stirring up the drum  
 The noon is high, no one is digging the mossy cracks  
 Damn it, how tricky is the path of monkhood  
 this sad scene only makes heavier the clinging debt.

Here, Hồ Xuân Hương is concerned over the neglect of one of the north's most revered and famous temples. On the surface level, the poet is concerned that the Buddhist symbols of the bell, drum, and gong are being unused, and no one is digging the mossy cracks. But on another level these objects imply something else. Here the poet atmospherically suggests that the monk and nun are engaged in more earthly activities which are the cause of the neglect and decline of the temple, and she also criticizes the abbot for absence. The *nói lái* in (53) and (54) convey the poet's harsh contempt for the Buddhist monks whom she felt were hypocrites, a contempt that is found also

in ‘Life of a Monk’ in (55) below and in several of her other poems, including *Ni sư* ‘Buddhist Nun’ and *Chùa xưa* ‘Old Pagoda’ (Durand 1968, Balaban 2000b).

- |      |   |   |  |        |
|------|---|---|--|--------|
| (53) | <i>Nói xuôi</i><br><i>đáo nơi neo</i><br>[ʌdaw ɲəj ɲew]<br>‘where (polite style)’           | → | <i>Nói lái</i><br><i>đéo nơi nao</i><br>[ʌdew ɲəj ɲaw]<br>‘where (vulgar style)’                             | Type 1 |
| (54) | <i>Nói xuôi</i><br><i>đếm lại đeo</i><br>[ʌdem ʋɲlaj ɲdew]<br>‘counting and then put<br>on’ | → | <i>Nói lái</i><br><i>đéo lại đêm</i><br>[ʌdew ʋɲlaj ɲdem]<br>‘not to come by in the<br>night (vulgar style)’ | Type 1 |

The poem in (55), ‘Life of a monk’, is a four line *chueh-chu* poem.

(55) *Vịnh sư hoạnh dân* (also known as *kiếp tu hành*) ‘Life of a Monk’

(55a) *Chữ nôm* – Durand (1968: 132), Balaban (2000b: 84).

詠 師 橫 淫

丐	劫	修	行	礮	礮	扌
為	之	沒	齒	小	樵	消
船	慈	拱	憫	術	西	竹
債	鑿	朱	鍼	沛	論	繚

(55b) *Quốc-ngữ* orthography  
*Vịnh kiếp tu hành*

*Cái kiếp tu hành nặng đá đeo*  
*Vị gì một chút tẻo tèo teo*  
*Thuyền từ cũng muốn về Tây Trúc*  
*Trái gió cho nên phải lộn lèo*

Life of a monk

The life of a monk is as heavy as carrying stone  
Who cares about the little things  
The boat of religion would want to go to Buddha's home  
But the adverse wind came, and the halyard was  
entangled.

In Mahayana Buddhism, one travels to the Buddha of the Western Peace, living a pure life of wisdom and compassion in order to be reincarnated in the Pure Land, or Western Paradise, a spiritual realm figuratively ‘west’, in the direction from which Buddhism first arrived (from India). ‘West’ is also a metaphor for death. In the poem, the monk is the boat, the Mahayana symbol of the “boat of compassion”. He is not able to reach the Western Paradise where Buddha Amitabha lives, because the halyard lines of the boat’s sail have become tangled by an adverse wind that misdirects the boat. But in the inner poem of the *nói lái*, as shown in (56) and (57), the poet wickedly accuses the monk of carnal desire and knowledge, saying that the ‘little things’ heavily burdening the monk are the ‘adverse wind’ of sexual desires and that the ‘entangled halyard’ that prevents him from reaching the Western Paradise of ‘Buddha’s home’ is sexual activities. (Initial *tr* and *ch* in (56) are pronounced the same in the northern dialect.)

(56)	<i>Nói xuôi</i>	<i>Nói lái</i>	
	<i>trái gió</i>	→ <i>chó dái</i>	Type 1/Type 3
	[ʎai ʎɔ]	[ʎɔ ʎai]	
	‘adverse wind’	‘dog’s testicle’	

(57)	<i>Nói xuôi</i>	<i>Nói lái</i>	
	<i>lộn lèo</i>	→ <i>lẹo lồn</i>	Type 1/Type 6
	[ʎʔlon ʎew]	[ʎʔlew ʎlon]	
	‘entangled halyard’	‘copulating vagina’	

In the next section, we move to the twentieth century and contemporary *nói lái*.



## 6. TWENTIETH CENTURY POLITICAL *NÓI LÁI*

As a creative way to carrying double meanings *nói lái* is used frequently in political discourse<sup>1</sup>. During the Vietnam war, *nói lái* was used as an effective and creative way to criticize and satirize the American government's strategies in the war. The examples below in (58) through (62) are politically sensitive *nói lái* from the Vietnam War era, section (5.1). In section 5.2, examples (63) through (65) are similar *nói lái* from contemporary Hanoi.

### 6.1 Vietnam War

In a poem entitled “New Year Fortune Telling for the Sick Uncle Sam in Vietnam” (Vũ Tú Nam, 1971) is a complex parallel sentence “*bình định khó mà đình bệnh, leo thang tất phải theo lang,*” that means ‘it’s tough for peaceful settlement to cease the disease, and escalation inevitably leads to a visit to the traditional herbal doctor’, a criticism of U.S. policy. Peaceful settlement was one of the anti-communism strategies in South Vietnam, and escalation refers to the escalation of the war. The parallel structure of the *nói lái* in the poem is given in (58) and (59).

(58)	<i>Nói xuôi</i>	<i>Nói lái</i>	
	<i>bình định</i>	→ <i>đình bệnh</i>	Type 6
	[ʋbɪn ʋɔ̃dɪn]	[ʋdɪn ʋɔ̃bɪn]	
	peace settled	cease disease	
	‘peaceful settlement’	‘cease the disease’	

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors report the following examples for their linguistic structure and function only. The views expressed in the examples are those of the original sources.

- (59) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*leo thang*                      → *theo lang*                      Type 1/Type 3  
 [ɬlew ɬ<sup>h</sup>aŋ]                      [ɬ<sup>h</sup>ew ɬaŋ]  
 climb ladder                      follow traditional herbal doctor (derogatory)  
 ‘escalating’                      ‘to follow the traditional herbal doctor’  
 Context. An anti-American poetry column, in a poem entitled  
 “New Year Fortune Telling for the Sick Uncle Sam in  
 Vietnam. Vũ Tú Nam, 1971.

Also in this spirit, a parallel sentence (illegally) posted at the American military headquarters in the Mekong Delta and in Quang Ngai province read, ‘*Tìm diệt*’ *bãi Cửu Long, bị sóng Cửu Long chìm tiệt* – ‘*dồn dân*’ *bờ Trà Khúc, như đò Trà Khúc giần Giôn*, “‘Seek and destroy’ in the Mekong delta, and the waves of the Mekong will drown you all – ‘Concentrate the people’ by the Tra Khuc river, and the Tra Khuc will beat up Johnson to pieces” (Lữ Huy Nguyên, 1971). The *nói lái* are in (60) and (61) below.

- (60) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*tìm diệt*                      → *chìm tiệt*                      Type 2  
 [ɬim ɬ<sup>h</sup>ziet]                      [ɬim ɬ<sup>h</sup>tiet]  
 seek destroy                      submerge in water completely  
 ‘seek and destroy’                      ‘drown’  
 Context: mocking the ‘search and destroy’ tactic of the  
 American army in the Vietnam war.

- (61) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*dồn dân*                      → *giần Giôn*                      Type 1/  
 [ɬzon ɬzǎn]                      [ɬzǎn ɬzon]                      Type 6  
 collect people                      beat John  
 ‘moving people into one place’                      ‘beat Johnson’  
 Context: Parallel sentences (illegally) posted at the American  
 military headquarters in the Mekong Delta and Quang Ngai  
 Province.

As often the case, the ulterior message of the Vietnam War *nói lái* in (62) was considerably different from the spoken words.

(62) <i>Nói xuôi</i>	<i>Nói lái</i>	
<i>hạ cờ Tây</i>	→ <i>hạ cây tơ</i>	Type 1
[ʋʔha ʋkə ʔtǎy]	[ʋʔha ʋkǎy ʔtə]	
low flag west	low dog young	
‘to lower the Western flag’	‘kill the young dog (for meat)’	

## 6.2 Modern Day Vietnam

The examples of Type 6 given in (63) through (64) are politically sensitive *nói lái* collected in modern day Vietnam. In (63) and also (64) is a double-layered *nói lái* used to make fun of the People’s Army.

(63) <i>Nói xuôi</i>	<i>Nói lái</i>	
<i>quân đội nhân dân</i>	→ <i>quân giận nhân đôi</i>	Type 6
[ʔk <sup>w</sup> ǎn ʋʔdoj ʔnǎn ʔzǎn]	[ʔk <sup>w</sup> ǎn ʋʔzǎn ʔnǎn ʔdoj]	
army people	army angry multiplied double	
‘the army of the people’	‘the army angry double’	

(64 <i>Nói xuôi</i>	<i>Nói lái</i>	
)		
<i>quân giận nhân hai</i>	→ <i>quân hại nhân dân</i>	Type 6
[ʔk <sup>w</sup> ǎn ʋʔzǎn ʔnǎn ʔhai]	[ʔk <sup>w</sup> ǎn ʋʔhai ʔnǎn ʔzǎn]	
army angry multiplied double	army harms people	
‘the army angry multiplied by two’	‘the army which harms the people’	

Context: Mocking the People’s Army. Collected in Hanoi.

A person who resists changes in the reformation movement is called Mr. *Nguyễn Như Vân*, which by the flip of *nói lái* is ‘Mr. Still the Same’, as shown in (65).

- (65) *Nói xuôi*                      *Nói lái*  
*Nguyễn Như Vân*      → *Vân Như Nguyễn*                      Type 6  
 [ŋʔʌŋ<sup>w</sup>ɛn ɲu ɲən]      [ŋʔʌvən ɲu ɲ<sup>w</sup>ɛn]  
 personal name                      ‘staying the same’  
 Context: The personal name is sometimes used to refer to someone who resists changes, i.e. is anti-reformation. Collected in Hanoi.

## 7. DISCUSSION

The *nói lái* presented in the preceding four sections are of eight surface types, diagrammed in section 3.0 for simplicity of presentation as a string operation on segmental units of a consonant “C”, vowel “V”, and tone “T”. We turn in this section to a closer examination of the structures of *nói lái* and the issues raised.

### 7.1. The structure of *nói lái* forms

Type 8 is unique among the *nói lái* types: it has invented words as the utterance. Formally, this is a type of reduplication as shown in (34), above (cf. Bao 1990). The actual utterance is created through first reduplicating the intended *nói lái* words to produce a base form to which a basic *nói lái* operation of Type 1-7 is applied. Basic reduplication is a common word-formation operation in Vietnamase; for example, it is a productive derivational process, and many two-syllable words are either total or partial reduplications.

The basic string operations of *nói lái* are in Types 1-7. The vowel and final consonant move in Type 1 – “VC#” ; and this string plus the tone move in Type 3 – “VC+T#”. The initial consonants switch in Type 2 – “#C”. The initial consonant, vowel, and final

consonant (but not tone) switch in Type 6 – “#CVC#”. Each of these types and Type 8 are common.

In contrast, Types 4, 5, and 7 are restricted and less common. In Type 4, the initial consonant and vowel move – “#CV”. In Type 7, the vowels alone switch between words – “V”. However, in all the examples of Types 4 and 7, the words involved end with a final voiceless stop. As was noted in section (1.4), there is a phonotactic constraint on the syllable in Vietnamese in which final stop codas may only occur with the rising and glottalized falling tones, the *sắc* and *nặng* tones, respectively (see also section 1.3). Type 5, in which only the tone switches, is at best extremely rare. Even when we look at the other *nói lái* types, in the majority of examples, the tones, though clearly suprasegmental, do not move. With respect to Type 5, only one example could be found, and it is special also in that it is the *nói lái* of a parallel sentence. The only other type in which tones move is Type 3. Thus, it will be assumed that the dominant constraint on *nói lái* is that tones do not move, that tones in effect anchor the *nói lái* surface structure template. Given this constraint that is particular to *nói lái*, and the general phonotactic constraint in the language that restricts final stop codas to two particular tones, Type 4 can be treated as a phonotactically constrained variant of Type 6, and Type 7 then as a phonotactically constrained variant of Type 1, where the “#CVC#” or the “VC#”, respectively, switch but not the tones. The final consonant in these cases is forced to remain in situ, since the tone that controls its distribution does not shift.

But is *nói lái* a string operation or does it operate on a prosodic level, that of the syllable and its constituents?

## 7.2 The syllable and syllabic constituents

The syllable as a unit and its internal constituent structure have been controversial in much of twentieth century phonological theory. Replaced by a segmental symbol in a linear phonotactic string of segments in classical generative phonology and effectively banished to the margins of the theory as so-called ‘weak and strong clusters’

(Chomsky and Halle 1968), the syllable re-emerged to a central explanatory position in two post-*Sound Pattern of English* nonlinear theories in the 1970's, the autosegmental theory of tone and the metrical theory of stress and rhythm. In the 1980's and 1990's, two theories were developed that explored the central role played by the syllable as a domain in particular phonological rules and constraints and as a constituent in morphological processes like reduplication and infixation. The syllable and the other units of the prosodic hierarchy, the phonological word, foot, and mora (but *not* subsyllabic constituents like the rhyme), played a crucial explanatory role in prosodic morphology (e.g. McCarthy and Prince 1986/1993) and the related developments of optimality theory, the theory that continues to be a dominant phonological theory today.

Yet debate continues. Within phonological theory, the primary debate is over the constituent structure of the syllable: Is the rhyme a necessary subsyllabic constituent? Is the mora the only constituent of the syllable? Neither? Bao 2000, for example, notes that the issue of whether the syllable has internal structure or not is “by no means a settled matter in generative phonology” and repeats the argument that phonological processes like partial reduplication demonstrate a highly articulated structure of the syllable which may vary from language to language; and Rubach 1998 argues that the moraic theory *must* be augmented with a rhyme constituent. In contrast, Yip (2003), focusing on the problem that pre-nuclear glides present for consistent boundary demarcation, argues *against* the basic onset-rhyme distinction (in a reversal of her previous work) and instead a return to simple linear phonotactics of segments, with *no* appeal to sub-syllabic constituencies, an argument also advanced in Pierrehumbert and Nair (1995).

Let us review the basic types as re-analyzed in section 7.1. We have now the operations as in (66).

(66) Primary *nói lái* operations.

- (i) Type 1    **T1**                      **T2**  
                  **C1 V2 C2**            **C2 V1 C1**

Type 7 – Phonotactically constrained variant of Type 1: C2 is voiceless stop

- T1**                              **T2**  
                  **C1 V2 C1\***                  **C2 V2 C2\***

- (ii) Type 2    **T1**                      **T2**  
                  **C2 V1 C1**                  **C1 V2 V2**

- (iii) Type 6    **T1**                      **T2**  
                  **C2 V2 C2**                  **C1 V1 C1**

Type 4 – Phonotactically constrained variant of Type 6: C2 is voiceless stop

- T1**                              **T2**  
                  **C2 V2 C1\***                  **C1 V1 C2\***

- (iv) Type 3    **T2**                              **T1**  
                  **C1 V2 C2**                  **C2 V1 C1**

- (v) ?Type 5    **T2**                              **T1**  
                  **C1 V1 C1**                  **C2 V2 C2**

If we recast our primary *nói lái* operations in terms of phonological constituents, we see in each type in which the tone, vowel, or onset consonant moves alone that the segment is an autonomous, psychologically real unit (and in (33) above we found indirect evidence for the feature) but that overall the constituents are prosodic, as shown in (67). Many traditional analyses of the syllable structure of Indo-European languages have used the constituents “onset” and “rhyme”, where the latter in turn is composed of the “nucleus” and “coda”. To account for tone in tone languages, Bao

(1990), for example, projected an  $n$ -bar level for the rhyme, which he represented as “Rhyme”. The “Rhyme” may be created through an adjunction process that adjoins tone to the rhyme node, thus creating a new constituent of the syllable. This new constituent is the “Rhyme” node, the daughters of which are “rhyme” and “tone”. The lower ‘rhyme’ node branches to the nucleus and coda.

(67) Prosodic constituents of *nói lái* operations

- (i) Types 1 and 7 operate on the “rhyme” (nucleus + coda).
- (ii) Type 2 operates on the “onset”.
- (iii) Types 6 and 4 operate on the syllable excluding the tone.
- (iv) Type 3 operates on the “Rhyme” projection (rhyme + tone).
- (v) ?Type 5 operates on tone only.

As (67) shows, *nói lái* is a prosodically-based rule. It operates on the three syllabic constituents of the onset (67 ii), rhyme (67 i), and “Rhyme” (67 iv). Because of the simplified phonotactic structure in Vietnamese, which permits only singleton consonants in the onset, the onset as a constituent is coextensive with the ‘segment’ as a phonological unit. The operation of (67 iii) is prosodic in that the suprasegmental tone projects to and anchors the *nói lái* template, and the switching step of Types 6 and 4 operates on the residue, the syllable without tone, similar to how prosodic circumscription works in prosodic morphology (cf. McCarthy and Prince 1986/1993) (with the reverse in rare ?Type 5). We return to this issue in the next section.

According to Nguyễn Đức Dân (1972), the pre-vocalic glide may participate in the switch. So, for example, *quan tài* may yield either *cai toàn* or *quai tàn*. In our search, we found no examples in context of this kind of *nói lái*. Such examples would indeed illustrate the dual nature of pre-vocalic glides either as part of the onset (as a secondary articulation on a consonant or as an independent consonant in the onset cluster) or as a component of a complex



nucleus, the problem for consistent syllable boundary demarcation that Yip (2003) noted. Haas (1969, reprinted in Haas 1978) discusses this issue: “...in the structure of the Burmese syllable the position of noninitial w is somewhat ambivalent. It normally belongs with the Initial but in some instances it can be taken as part of the Final (1978: 35)”. Specifically, in Burmese disguised speech, initial [Cw] is treated as an inseparable unit, with one exception: the avoidance of combinations like \*CwuT and \*CwiT takes precedence over the intactness of the initial consonant cluster (Haas 1969/1978: 35). Here too as with the Vietnamese constraint on tone and final voiceless stops, the phonotactic rules of the language act as well-formedness constraints on the word game.

Given the constructed examples in Nguyễn Đức Dân (1972), there presumably are *nói lái* examples in context like *quan tài* as either *cai toàn* or *quai tàn*. The marginality of this as a problem for consistent boundary demarcation is not sufficient in our view to jettison the core generalizations, cases that overwhelmingly operate on prosodic units and specifically on constituents of the syllable. We note too that, in Vietnamese, while the prevocalic [u] is claimed to either go with the main vowel or not, in diphthongs, the double vowels, *iê uơ uô*, the first element is never separated from the second.

### 7.3. Tone

Vietnamese *nói lái* show clearly that tone is a suprasegmental prosodic unit. Thus, the *nói lái* Types 6 and 4 that operate on the syllable excluding the tone (in (67iii)) are properly prosodic (as is ??Type 5). However, tone per se is not a unit of the prosodic hierarchy. In a theory like that of McCarthy and Prince (1986/1993), word formation operations like reduplication and infixation (and similarly, *nói lái*) may only operate on authentic units of prosody, the mora, syllable, foot, and prosodic word. Though like classical reduplication in other respects, Types 6 and 4 must then fall outside

the range of strict prosodic circumscription and thus outside the theory itself.

Similarly, if we were to assume that *nói lái* operates *solely* on proper constituents of the syllable (which is the case in (67i), (67ii), and (67iv)), then we would no longer be able to handle Types 6 and 4 (67iii), because in a hierarchical syllable, tone is not independent of the rhyme/Rhyme. Rather, we analyze (67iii) as an optional projection of tone to the *nói lái* template itself. This autosegmental projection frees the tones from the rest of the syllable and permits the switching operation in Types 6 and 4 to operate on the syllable residue, the CVC onset-rhyme.

If we look at word games in other languages, we also find that tones may function within the rhyme or independently of the rhyme. In the Thai word game called *khamphuan* ('word-reverse' or 'reversed speech'), the tone moves with the rest of the rhyme: [kôn jàj] 'big bottom' > [kàj jôn] 'chicken wrinkled' (Haas 1978: 27; Surinramont 1973). Tone moves with the rhyme vowel and coda also in Burmese *z<sup>h</sup>g<sup>h</sup>leynv* ('speech-disguise' or 'disguised speech'): [kaw? yowx] 'straw' > [kowx yaw?] 'nine (people)' (Haas 1978: 28). Haas represents the tones in this example as follows: the "?" an extra high pitch; and "x" the long high tone. In contrast, Hombert (1986) reports that in the Bakwiri disguised speech word game, syllables exchange places, but the tones are left behind, as in [kó ndì] 'rice' > [ndí kò].

Unlike Thai, Burmese, and Bakwiri, Vietnamese *nói lái* has several different rules and permits tones both to move within the syllable in the rhyme or to function suprasegmentally, independently of the rhyme or rest of the syllable. This duality for tone is not unlike the dual nature of pre-nuclear glides, an option within language that is available within language games as well. Both options are available in Vietnamese perhaps because the goal of *nói lái* is to create two levels of meaning, real words on two different levels, necessarily drawing on the full lexicon and phonology of the language, whereas in the Thai, Burmese, and Bakwiri word games

that have one rule, the goal is simply to disguise the language, and any one rule alone does that.

#### 7.4. *Phonological units*

The *nói lái* data provide striking evidence for the reality of several constituents of phonological representations—the syllable, onset, rhyme, tone, segment, and feature. Representational units like these and others are critical to the explanation of phonological structure and change in all languages. That they play a similar role in *nói lái*, word games, and other creative uses of language is a noncontroversial finding among phonologists (and most linguists) but contrary to assumptions in some other fields.

According to some theories of reading, the rhyme and the segment are seen as central to the early development of “phonological awareness”, which in turn is regarded as a necessary precursor for learning to read (e.g. Schatschneider et al. 1999). Moreover, a speaker’s inability to detect or parse the rhyme and smaller segment units is viewed as a major component of dyslexia (e.g. Bradley and Bryant 1983, 1985). A causal linkage between reading and the syllable is so strong that for some scholars the mental representation of the internal structure of the syllable is *dependent* on learning to read some type of written orthography (e.g. Ventura, Kolinsky, Brito-Mendes and Morais 2001). Indeed, some specialists question whether segments segment-sized units (such as phonemes) even exist in the absence of learning to read an alphabetic writing system and perhaps any writing system (cf. Morais et al. 1985; Read et al. 1987; Mann 1987; Tolshinsky and Teberosky 1997; Ladefoged 2004).

Is there a causal relationship between Vietnamese orthography, learning to read, and *nói lái*? To look at this, we turn to the Vietnamese writing systems.

### 7.5. Orthography

There are two writing systems for Vietnamese, the *chữ nôm* and *chữ quốc ngữ*. We discuss briefly in this section both writing systems and the history of literacy.

At some point after Vietnam's independence in 939 A.D., the classical Chinese Han script was replaced by *chữ nôm*, a demotic system of writing that placed Vietnamese characters alongside Han or Chinese characters. According to Coulmas (1996), *chữ nôm* was devised probably in the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Vietnam, and "the earliest known document is a stele in Ho Thanh Son, Vietnam, with an inscription dating from 1343 listing the names of twenty villages" (Coulmas 1996: 85). There are various methods of using characters, radicals, and diacritics, and there have been changes that the *nôm* characters have undergone throughout the history of the Vietnamese language. The development of the *nôm* writing system helped preserve much of Vietnam's classical and folk literature (Nguyễn Đình-Hoà 1990).

The Roman alphabetic writing system, *chữ quốc ngữ*, was developed gradually in the seventeenth century, but it was not widely used until the twentieth century. As noted for example by Nguyen and Kendall (2003), "mass literacy was a top priority for the revolutionary nationalist leadership fighting for Vietnam's independence from the French. Although Vietnam historically had a long educational tradition based on the Confucian canon and elite mastery of Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese (Han *nôm*) ideographs, illiteracy prevailed during the colonial period." (Nguyễn and Kendall 2003: 29). The conventional orthography, *quốc ngữ* "immensely helped the literacy campaign since the 1940s" (Nguyễn Đình-Hoà 1997: 34). It is used throughout Vietnam now, and the present literacy rate is estimated at 85 percent (Nguyễn and Kendall 2003: 29).

In section (5), we presented the 18<sup>th</sup> century poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương, who wrote using the *chữ nôm* script. *Nôm* uses Chinese characters (and some Chinese-like characters) for writing

Vietnamese words. There are three basic types. In the first, a character is used for the syllable it represents in Chinese (regardless of meaning) if that syllable is the same or phonetically very similar to one in Vietnamese. In the second type, a character is used for the Chinese meaning even though there is a different pronunciation of the word in Vietnamese. For the third type, new characters were formed that did not exist in Chinese; these were formed using elements of Chinese characters.

We can see how these worked by looking back at the poem “Life of a monk” in (55a). The poem is four lines with rhymes at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> lines and two *nói lái*, one of which is based on the last word in line 4. Each character combines a radical for the meaning and a phonetic component. The character at the end of line one combines the radical for ‘hand’ (on the left) with the phonetic component (on the right) for Chinese *dao* (in pinyin orthography) to represent the phonetically similar Vietnamese word *đeo*, ‘to carry’: 扌. The character at the end of line two combines the radical for ‘water’ (on the left) with the phonetic component (on the right) for Chinese *xiao* to represent the Vietnamese word *teo*, ‘shrink’: 消. The character at the end of line four combines the radical for ‘silk’ (on the left) with the phonetic component (on the right) for Chinese *liao* to represent the Vietnamese word *lèo*, ‘stretch’: 纛. The *nói lái* for this line is given in (57). The important point to note is that it is not possible to factor the character into components of the syllable, tone, vowel, or phonological units of any kind. This is true for all the characters. Examination of the characters at the ends of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> lines of (51a), ‘Swinging’, and (52a) ‘Quan Su Pagoda’ with the corresponding rhymes in (51b) and (52b), respectively, clearly illustrate the same fact. The *nôm* writing system does *not* segment into the phonological constituents of the *nói lái*, and the structures of *nói lái* precede *quốc ngữ* by centuries.

While the *nôm* writing system is not decomposable into phonological units, the elites in Vietnam during these centuries received a classical Chinese education, learning to read, write, and

speak Chinese, and many may be assumed to also have learned *fǎnqiè*, a method to indicate the pronunciation of Chinese characters. This method consists of using two characters whose syllabic values are commonly known for their initial and final sounds, respectively. For example, *míng* could be represented by combining the initial of *m(à)* and the final of *(y)íng*. In this example, tone 2 of *míng* must be represented by a word that has tone 2 in the final. There are also Chinese language games that are based on *fǎnqiè*. These ‘*fǎnqiè* languages’ are also constructed by first dividing a syllable from a source word into an initial and a final (as are the Southern Min Taiwanese secret languages discussed in Li 1985). The initial is combined with a new final-with-tone, and the original final with a new initial. The added novel initial and final-with-tone vary across each of the variant ‘languages’, which Chao 1931 identifies using its variant for *ma* 55 ‘mother’: [may-ka], [mey-ka], [man-t’a], etc. For example, the basic structure for [may-ka] is: [ma 55] > [may 15] + [ka 55] ‘mother’. (See also Bao 1990.)

In *fǎnqiè* as a philological tool and in these *fǎnqiè* languages, the tone is not independent of the rhyme. In contrast, in Vietnamese *nói lái*, tone is a separable unit independent of the rhyme. Thus, for example, in the Type 1 *nói lái* in both ‘The Life of a Monk’ and in ‘Quan Su Pagoda’, the rhyme switches leaving the tone behind. This separability of tone and the segmental content of the rhyme in Vietnamese *nói lái*, as well as the complexity of the switching rule types are innovations.

As we have argued, the fact that *nói lái* was used and valued highly for centuries by Vietnamese speakers who could not read means that the phonological units of *nói lái* are accessed and used independently of the writing system and independently of learning to read a written language. As to an indirect connection, we have shown that the *nói lái* units are not represented in these writing systems. Given the oral language and oral folk literature evidence, it is not likely that *nói lái* was created by elites (either those who did read or those who knew the philological tool of *fǎnqiè* though this

cannot be proved one way or the other). And there is no reason to believe that the accessibility of *nói lái* units is mediated through an orthography for illiterate *nói lái* speakers, or that a stylistic device that causally depended on learning to read could transfer to the oral culture and be widely used and enjoyed by unschooled, illiterate speakers. The prosodic units and basic structures of *nói lái* are accessible and used creatively and productively today as well as hundreds of years ago, because they operate in language generally.

APPENDIX  
VIETNAMESE ORTHOGRAPHY AND PRONUNCIATION

Vowels

Monophthongs

Orthography	I i	Ê ê	E e	A a	Ă ă	U' ur	Â â	Ơ ơ	O o	Ô ô	U u
Phonetic	[i]					[u]					[u]
Symbol		[e]								[o]	
			[ɛ]				[ə̌]	[ə]	[ɔ]		
				[a]	[ă]						

Diphthongs

Orthography	ia, iê		ua, uô		ura, urơ
Phonetic	[ie]		[uo]		[uə]
Symbol					

Consonants and Glides – Orthographic symbol on left, IPA symbol on right

B b	[b]	Đ đ		[d]					
P p	[p]	T t		[t]	Tr tr	[t̚]	Ch ch	[c]	C c/ K k/ Q q [k]
		Th th		[tʰ]					
V v	[v]	D d / R r / Gi gi		[z]			G(h) g(h)		[ɣ]
Pf	[f]	X x		[s]	S s	[ʃ]	Kh kh		[x] H h [h]
M m	[m]	N n		[n]		Nh nh	[ɲ]	Ng(h) ng(h)	[ŋ]
O o	[w]	L l		[l]	R r	[r]	I i / Y y		[j]



# Tones

Tone Name	Phonetic symbol	Orthographic mark using the letter <u>a</u>	Combined with vowels
Mid level	˥	a	a ă â e ê i o ô õ u u y
High rising	˨˨˩	á	á á á é é í ó ó ó ú ú ý
Glottalized falling-rising	˨˨˩˩	ã	ã ã ã ě ě ě ĩ ĩ ĩ õ õ õ ũ ũ ũ y
Low falling	˨˩	à	à à à è è ì ò ò ò ù ù ù y
Falling-rising	˨˩˩	â	â â â ě ě ě í ó ó ó ú ú ú y
Glottalized falling	˨˩˩˩	a	a ă â ě ě i o ô õ u u y

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