Language Contact  
and Convergence Areas  
(The Case of Vietnam)  

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1. Vietnam is a nation of many peoples and languages. According to government statistic figures and the Ethnology Institute, Vietnam today has 54 distinct nationalities comprising hundreds of regional groups. The languages of these nationalities belong to different linguistic stocks of SE Asia (Matisoff 1993, as quoting from Benedict 1972; 1973).  

On the other hand, Vietnam today is a single united country from the north to the south. This unity came about after many millenia of the intergration of the people as well as territories and after thousands of years of the struggle for the independence and the unification of the country and their safekeeping.  

What was the state of linguistic communication of this multiethnic community in the past, and what is its present condition today? What are the different kinds of relations among these languages existing in Vietnam today? How have they in the past, and now, had an influence on each other? What are the internal (structural) and external (socio-cultural) factors which are playing roles in the process of interaction.

2. The specific feature of the foundation of Vietnam was that Vietnam established its identity through both interconnection with other cultures by intermarriage and through ethnic integration. Examples of intermarriage are given in history by the Lý
princesses with different Lords or tribal chieftains, Huyễn Trần Princess with Champa King Chế Mân, Nguyễn Princess with Cambodia King Chay Chetta II ... Integration was a result of the small ethnic group concentration on the Việt nuclei. Those were the cases of different tribal or regional groups under the Dính, Lê, Lý, and Trần Dynasties, and the cases of Mạc Cửu, Trần Thượng Xuyên, and Dương Ngạn Dịch under the Nguyen Dynasty. Like in most parts of the world, people here had to struggle in order to enlarge their existing living ground. But it is necessary to say that after the conflicts between the local powers, almost all the simple and humble peoples have been living and working together in harmony. All of these above-mentioned situations required a corresponding linguistic communication.

3. According to a recent Vietnamese study, the earliest inhabitants of Van-Lang ... the name of the Vietnamese realm in the time when the founder of the state united all the tribes under his authority ... were Austroasiatic speaking people. Modern scholars tend to see the language of these nuclei people as belonging to the Proto-Viet Muong (Hà & Phạm 1978). From such a starting point, the Vietnamese linguistic life engaged in close contact with other languages, a situation which largely determined the responses of the enlarging former Van-Lang community into a multiethnic one: Âu-Lạc and An-Nam under Han domination, Dai Viet in the first independence period, then Vietnam in contemporary time.

Members from this multiethnic community "adapt their speech to circumstance and differentiate it from one interlocutor to another." The linguistic intercourse makes the cooperation become a pressing necessity, and "everyone will soon learn enough of the other man's language to establish communication" (A. Martinet). In the specific situations of Vietnam the co-existence and mutual understanding require interlocutors to imitate each other during their attempt to communicate. The earliest
inhabitants of Vietnam tried to imitate in their speech the languages of their interlocutory. Perhaps at the beginning it was neither common nor accurate. But step by step that kind of communication became more popular, and shaped previously unilingual groups into bilingual groups among each small community.

4. The purpose of this paragraph is to help clarify the questions which arose in section 1.

4.1. From the birth of the country, the Vietnamese language has always played a key role among the various languages in contact. During its history, Vietnam has experienced some language contact relations: Viet (or V-M) Thai-Kadai, Viet-Han, Viet-Mainland Austronesian languages, Viet-other Austroasiatic languages, and finally Viet-West languages. (Bui 1996). For all linguistic processes, the most important are interstructural. But in the case of Vietnam each kind of contact contributed its share in the widening of linguistic communication and also brought over some modifications and changes of original form.

4.2. As well known, evidence of this situation is the example of such Han-Viet (Sino-Vietnamese) words in Vietnamese today. It consisted not only of obvious loan-words borrowing from Chinese classical works, from the speech of Han officials, nobles, and literati who came to rule Vietnam, but also of colloquial words from humble and simple people who migrated from China to Vietnam and became a part of the Vietnamese population. Their speech was in contact with Vietnamese and was regulated by the mechanisms of interference.

The lexical elements enriched Vietnamese vocabulary in their status quo, and as constituent components for the derivation of new words. Also, we could say the same for Vietnamese lexical elements in other languages of minorities.
4.3. With respect to phonology, the languages of Vietnam today without exception have almost "the adjustments in words ... to these areal features are traces under the categories of (1) phonological word shape and (2) phoneme inventories" (Lee 1974). Many years ago these areal features were pointed out by E. W. Lee (1974) for Chamic languages; by D. Thomas, Mier, Wallace, Haupers, Thomas and Headley for Mon-Khmer languages; and by Chao, Haas, and Simmonds for Chinese and Tai languages. They contain the following facts:

a. Shift to ultimate stress in poly/disyllabic words.
b. Reduction to monosyllables.
c. Development of consonant clusters as consequence of monosyllabisation.
d. Rearrangement of the phoneme inventories (increasing number of vowel qualities in main syllables, reduction of number of word final consonants, etc.).
e. The prosodic feature and the development of voice register (or phonation type) can lead to gradually shaping of the linguistic phenomenon which some linguists call tones (for instance the case of Cham).

4.4. From the point of view of the potential area of interference we would like firstly to refer to the similarities in function and in structure of some grammar constructions in languages of Vietnam. Six languages in comparison are representatives of the main groups in Vietnam: Cham < Austronesian, Tay < Thai, Ksng Mul < Khmuic, Pacôh < Katuic, and Mnong < Bahnaric.

4.4.1. Orientational and directional constructions. There is in almost all the languages of Vietnam a group of moving action verbs which can occur as coverbs and which are direction/ orientation of the main verbs in constructions (see Table 1). The coverbs or orientation (CO) and coverbs of direction (CD) often