THE SYNTAX AND SEMANTICS OF "CLASSIFIED" NPS IN VIETNAMESE AND IN ENGLISH

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Vietnamese is frequently characterized as a "classifier language". The creation of this exotic concept is motivated by the obligatory use of what is traditionally called a "classifier" at the beginning of NPs whose "head" is represented by a noun which, when translated into a European language, gives a "noun proper" denoting a perfectly countable object – an animal, a plant, a tool, etc. But in fact this pretended "heading noun" is not the head of the "classified" NP at all: although the object it seems to refer to is countable, itself is not: it cannot be quantified and has no number. The noun bó in Nước bó 'to breed cows/a cow', or in Bò đàn có 'cows/a cow browses grass' is neither singular nor plural. The "classifier" có 'animal' (or, more exactly 'an animated item') in có bó này 'this cow' (word by word 'this bovine animal' – cf. những có bó này 'these cows'), on the other hand, is always specified as for number (by zero for the singular and by cá¢ or nởt or a numerative for the plural). Such words as có are commonly characterized as "function words" or "empty words" because of the relative abstractness of their meaning and of their boundness – they cannot occur alone (without a numerative, a demonstrative or a noun modifier) as a NP. ¹

Grammatically, such nouns as bó 'cow(s)' or giày 'shoe(s), gkeh 'chair(s), phao 'gun(s)', công 'fuzz', which constitute the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese nouns (some 90%), are just as uncountable as English cattle, footwear, furniture, artillery, ordinance, fuzz (police), thunder, lightning, poetry, fiction, semantics, etc. Semantically, they are not names of objects, because objects are countable: they are rather names of species properties, of substance (stuff) or qualities ². It is commonly

1 Vietnamese possesses some 140 such "classifiers", of which only 4 seem to fit the label of "classifiers": cái 'thing', có 'animal', cây 'plant', người 'person', all the others, which bear exactly the same grammatical properties (but are often recognized as "nouns" when authors know French nouns which can be considered as their counterparts), are names of quantifiable units and can be accurately translated into English by such count nouns as thing, object, head, item, article, drop, bit, stick, piece, part, slice, sheet, pile, heap, stack, pair, set, dozen, pack, group, herd, gang, mob, crowd, knock, blow, tap, gust, burst, flash, sound, fruit, instance, case, access, attack, process, game, match, séance, party, degree, number, moment, hour, minute, meter, inch, department, branch, etc.

2 There are no adjectives in this language. This language has only verbs, which can be grammatically distinguished as static vs. dynamic. The so-called "adjectives" in school grammars are in fact those static verbs that can be translated into French by adjectives (nevertheless, these static verbs which can be translated into French by verbs, as có 'to have' dăng 'to stand, 'đa 'to dwell', in spite of their obvious static meaning, are called "dòng tự" which means textually "dynamic word" – the common term for verbs. All of those verbs (and "adjectives") can be nominalized by being headed by a unit noun (traditionally called a "classifier"). Almost all qualities or other abstract notions are designated by similarly formed NPs (commonly characterized as "classified NPs").
believed that mass nouns have no plural, i.e. are invariably singular. In fact they are
either plural nor singular. They merely do not partake at all in the grammatical
category of number, which follows directly and naturally from their uncountability.
To say that they are always singular is as nonsensical as to say that such forms as
English adjectives, demonstratives, infinitives or participles are always singular.\(^1\)
Mass nouns, just like these word forms, have no number at all. Because they
designate not things, but properties, and the sole difference between them and
adjectives or participles resides in the fact that the properties they designate are not
isolated from the object they are used to label to constitute a special word, but are
built in the noun itself which represents the bearer of those properties. Such is the
essence of the meaning and formation of mass nouns, including deadjectival ones
(e.g. greatness), and of denominal adjectives as well (e.g. bovine).

Only the mentioned above semantic properties of mass nouns can explain their
otherwise surprising demand for a "classifier" in certain circumstances, namely when
the NP is 1. quantified by many, few, each or by a numeral, or quotified by a fraction
(half, the third of, a/the whole, the/an entire, all the); 2. modified by certain adjuncts,
in particular adjectives meaning or implying unicity or plurality (see further) and
clausal modifiers denoting telic or punctual events.

There is no clearcut distinction between things and properties in the real world.

There are no things without properties, and there are no properties existing
apart from things. Moreover, things are perceived as such thanks to certain properties
they bear, especially their visible, illusive or imaginary discreteness in space or in
some other dimension viewed metaphorically as space-like. Objectively, a hole is
nothing at all. But it exists für uns as a (countable) thing merely because it is
perceived as such thanks to the boundaries that delimit it from what is not it, i.e. from
its background, which objectively is a real thing which exists materially in the real
world but is hardly perceived as such when the hole is in focus. On the other hand,
properties are easily conceived as something abstractable from things thanks to their
seeming quasi-ubiquity and unboundedness (which also makes them appear to us as
an indivisible and uncountable, i.e. non-discrete, mass).

The corollary of this state of affairs is that the distinction of things and
properties is essentially subjective (cognitive) and consequently may be in a certain

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\(^1\) The misunderstanding is somehow related to the claim made by some linguists (e.g. Keith Allan 1980)
who argue that countability is a property not of Nouns, but of NPs. This claim is possible only when one
ignores the distinction between basic and derived use of nouns. The use of Celebrity for instance as a
mass noun is certainly more basic than its use as a count noun, which involves an obvious synecdoch.
Generally, a shift from a mass use to a count use, and vice versa, involves necessarily a semantic shift
from "property" to "thing" (or "unit"), and vice versa. And that represents a further evidence for the
biunivocal correspondence of grammatical countability to semantic reity.

\(^2\) Are perceived as "things" not only discrete individual items, but also sets or groups of them, or anything
else, provided that they represent forms "pregnant" enough to be perceived as Gestalten — a phenomenon
fairly well studied in Gestaltpsychologie.
measure arbitrary. Languages seem to differ in their choice of the modes of denomination (conceptualization) of what they need to name. There are in all four of them:

1. Naming the (substantial or species) property only:

2. Naming the form (of existence as a discrete unit) only

3. Naming synthetically the form and the property by a single noun.

4. Naming analytically the two by a hypotactic NP, the Head of which being represented by a Unit Noun and the Modifier by a Mass Noun.

Languages seem to make use of all the four modes of denomination showing nevertheless some preference for one or the other according to the general typological tendency of the language in question, known as analyticity vs. syntheticity. Analytic languages tend to name things analytically (1, 2, 4), while synthetic languages prefer to name things synthetically (3). This results in a the greater number of "classifiers" and mass nouns (especially those which seemingly designate countable things) in the formers and the much more rare use of "classifiers" in the latters. Hence the notion of "classifier languages" used for the formers is somewhat misleading: all languages use "classifiers", although in some of them "classifiers" are not lexicalized as nouns but as affixes (the classical example is Bantu languages).

As the analytic mode of naming things used in "classifier languages" may sometimes give rise to somewhat cumbersome NPs, the latters often resort to the use of only one of the two nouns which constitutes the analytic NP.

What is said above results in the absolute majority of mass nouns in analytical languages such as Vietnamese or Chinese, and the relative rarity of mass nouns denoting things or animals in synthetical languages such as IndoEuropean. The former are traditionally called "classifier languages", but the distinction which underlies the term is too clearcut to be realistic. Almost all languages have classifiers – more exactly unitizers or unit nouns. The difference is just quantitative.

But even much more noticeable is the fact that uncountable nouns in such analytic languages as Vietnamese, just like such English nouns as cattle, furniture, artillery, thunder, lightning, jazz, poultry, are not names of countable objects, i.e. what is perceived as units, and this is precisely the reason why they are uncountable and need a unitizer, i.e. an operator that converts the NP into a unit, being itself the name of a unit, while what constitute the remaining part of the NP represents its modifier(s), including the "noun proper" which in descriptions of Vietnamese is commonly characterized as the head of the NP. Our claim is that the designata of mass nouns are properties, including those of species of things, but not things as such, which are designated by unit nouns, including the so-called "classifiers", which function as the head of the "classified" NPs.
In school grammars of Vietnamese, nouns, as a word class, are defined after such authors as Lê Văn Lý by distributional criteria as "words capable of being quantified by nhằng 'marker of indefinite plural', cặc 'marker of definite plural', mây 'some, how many', mỗi 'each', mọi 'every', từng 'each at a time' một 'one' (used as an indefinite article singular)", which they use as "mots-témoins" to test nominality. If these authors had really made use of these criteria in their grammar, we would have a list of unit nouns including all of what they call "classifiers". But Lê Văn Lý excluded a priori the words he "knows" in advance to belong to the "word class" of classifiers, while his list of nouns include items which can by no means be quantified by the mentioned "mots-témoins" besides those unit nouns which can be translated into French by nouns.

The use of the mentioned "mots-témoins" as a criterion of nominality is fairly reasonable, but it serves only as a pretext and is in fact completely ignored by its users themselves, and this fact, until recently, has never been denounced in the literature.

All Vietnamese unit nouns, including those characterized as "classifiers", partake in the grammatical category of number 1, while mass nouns do not. In Vietnamese as well as in English, it makes no sense to say that they have not a plural, being always singular. Such uncountable nouns as giày 'footwear' may refer to a shoe, a pair of shoes or however many pairs of shoes one likes (cf. nuôi bò 'to breed cows / a cow', uống nước 'to drink water', sợ sấm 'to be afraid of thunder', instead of nuôi một/mấy con bò, uống một/mấy ngum nước, sợ nhằng tiếng sấm). So that if one wants to specify the number, one has to unitize the NP by using giày not as the head noun, but as a modifier to a countable unit noun – which is solely capable of heading a NP specified as for number.

Be that as it may, such is the conclusion the correct use of the mentioned "mots-témoins" – all of them proposed quantifiers – might have led to. But the majority of the scholars involved in the controversy prefer to deny the nominal nature of the unitizers and to devise the concept of "classified vs. unclassified NP", which results from a rather aprioristic consideration that some unit nouns are void of any semantic content (less prejudiced writers would say instead that their meaning is more abstract and less material than that of typical nouns) and deliberately ignore the presence of the classifier in the NP by saying that all nouns are countable, provided that some of them are preceded by a classifier, interpretation which leads to the distinction between classified and unclassified NPs (Emeneau 1951). The exclusive use of the unit noun (the mass noun which denotes its species or substance being deleted) is a most common ellipsis. The exclusive use of the mass noun on the other hand, involves an obvious synecdoche.

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1 Plural is marked by nhằng, cặc, mây, singular by một, mỗi, từng and [zero] (a unit noun (and a classifier as well) with no preceding quantifier is necessarily singular).