

PASSIVE AND ERGATIVE IN VIETNAMESE¹

MARYBETH CLARK

0.0. INTRODUCTION

Vietnamese, which appears to be an Austroasiatic language, is spoken by approximately 28 million people in the country of Viet-Nam, along the coastal area of the Indochinese peninsula. There are three major dialect areas: North, North-Central, and South (including South-Central), though dialect differences are not great. The dialect used in this study is South Vietnamese. Some sentences used have been taken from Liem (1969); all sentences used have been checked for grammaticality with Dr Nguyễn-Đặng Liêm, a native speaker of Vietnamese.

Glosses are arbitrary in terms of tense or aspect, since these are usually situationally understood. The term *ông đó*, used extensively in this paper, can be glossed as '*that man*', '*that gentleman*', '*that grandfather*', or '*he*'. Conventional orthography is used.

0.1. THE PROBLEM

Vietnamese is an accusative language; i.e., in the unmarked transitive sentence, the grammatical subject (the noun phrase immediately preceding the verb) is in the agent case. In this paper, an analysis is made of the structure of transitive Vietnamese sentences which translate into English as passive sentences.

These consist of two distinct types. One is a construction which takes a so-called submissive verb which requires a verb complement which is an embedded sentence. The other is a seemingly ergative construction which takes a transitive verb and a grammatical subject which is in the object case. Verbs in Vietnamese are not morphologically marked for active or passive.

I will define passive sentences as sentences whose grammatical subject is in the object case, whose verb is in a marked form (when the language permits) or there is some marker for passive voice (such as a submissive morpheme), and whose agent when it occurs is a marked noun phrase. It is concluded from the analysis that Vietnamese has no true passive and those sentences which appear to be ergative sentences are, in fact, object-topicalised sentences.

1.0. THE GRAMMAR

1.1. We can write the following rules for the underlying structure of the sentences given.

- (1) 1. $S \rightarrow NP^{\wedge}V (NP) (LP)$
 2. $NP \rightarrow \left\{ \left(\begin{array}{c} \{Nu \\ Pl\} \\ S \end{array} \right) (Cl) N (S) \right\} (Det)$
 3. $LP \rightarrow (Loc) N$

S = Sentence
 NP = Noun Phrase
 V = Verb
 LP = Locative Phrase
 Nu = Number
 Pl = Plural
 Cl = Classifier
 N = Noun
 Det = Determiner
 Loc = Locative preposition

These rules are far from being descriptively exhaustive; it is hoped they will work for the constructions presented.

1.2. JUSTIFICATION OF THE RULES

1.2.1. $S \rightarrow NP^{\wedge}V (NP) (LP)$

My analysis of the Vietnamese sentence differs basically from those of others (cf. Liem, Manley, Taylor, Thompson) in that I consider the subject noun phrase, as well as the verb phrase, to be an obligatory element of Sentence. I do not, at this point, agree with Tim Manley that the predicate is the only obligatory element in the base component, or that such surface representations as

- (2) ngủ /sleep/ '(Someone) is sleeping.'
 đọc sách /read book/ '(Someone) is reading a book.'

(from Thompson) are grammatical in the base component. I prefer to take the view that there is an obligatory noun phrase in the base which occurs on the surface as the subject, and, in accordance with Chomsky (1965), when it is recoverable (understood) through identical prior reference it can be deleted on the surface. I consider the sentences in (2) to be examples of this process since I believe that they cannot be discourse initial and that their subjects are anaphoric.

Sentence adverbials, negative, interrogative and other sentence elements are not touched upon, nor are verb phrase adverbs.

What, like Manley, I have called stative verbs are elsewhere called descriptive verbs (Taylor), extended state verbs (Thompson, 1965a, p. 218), and predicate adjectives (Liem, 1969, p. 107), and usually translated into English as adjectives with copulative verbs. As is to be expected, stative verbs behave differently from other verbs, mostly in that they can be attributes in the noun phrase and, I think, they can never be followed by NP or S.

Below are examples of the expanded S.

- (3) NP V
 ông đó lạnh
 man that cold
 'That man is cold.'
- (4) NP V NP
 ông đó mua sách
 buy book
 'That man bought a book.'
- (5) NP V NP LP
 ông đó mua sách ở Sài Gòn
 'That man buys books in Saigon.'

$$1.2.2. \text{ NP} \rightarrow \left\{ \left(\left(\begin{array}{c} \text{Nu} \\ \text{Pl} \end{array} \right) \right) (\text{Cl}) \text{ N} (\text{S}) \right\} (\text{Det})$$

This is a very simplified expansion of a very complex noun phrase, but I think it should be adequate to handle the present problem. Most nouns, not all, require a classifier when preceded by a number. With the occurrence of both a number and a classifier, the noun is optional. It seems reasonable to suppose that this is a derivational phenomenon, as Mr Starosta suggests, and that it is handled by a derivational rule:

(6) [+Cl] → [+N]

Examples of NP expansion are:

(7) Nu Cl → N Det V N
 hai người đó mua sách
 two person that buy book
 'Those two people are buying books.'

(8) Nu N V N
 hai ông mua sách?
 'You (two gentlemen) are buying books?'

(9) N S: Conj... V - N Det V
 ông mà mua sách đó đi
 who go
 'That man who bought the books is going.'

The relative pronoun mà occurs before embedded sentences which are attributes of N. This sentence is uncomfortable without adverbial elements or added verbs to "soften" it, but I feel sure it is grammatical.

1.2.3. LP → (Loc) N

Place-nouns following verbs of direction generally occur without a locative particle. I have analysed the word ở in this paper as a locative particle meaning 'in', but since it also occurs as a verb meaning 'to be in; live at', it should probably have two entries in the lexicon.²

1.3. A SAMPLING OF LEXICON

ông 'gentleman, grandfather' đại-diện 'representative' con 'offspring'

[+N
+Title
...]

[+N
+Title
...]

[+N
+Title
...]

sách 'book'

đồ 'thing'

cỏ 'grass'

năm 'year'

[+N
...]

[+N
...]

[+N
+Mass
...]

[+N
-[+Cl]
...]

họ 'they'

tôi 'I'

Sài Gòn a city

[+N
+Pr
-[+Pl]
...]

[+N
+Pr
+((+Nu)) [+Pl]
...]

[+N
+location
...]