Phonetic Typology of Languages in Vietnam
and a Common Transcription for Them

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I. Introduction

For a long time the teaching and learning of the minority languages in primary school for mountainous regions has been an incentive policy of the Ministry of Education in Vietnam. Nevertheless, in reality, carrying out this policy has been very difficult and unsuccessful. In fact, the motivation for learning and teaching ethnic minority languages is low, besides their primer books, the children have nothing to read. The minority script is not used outside the classroom. For what purpose should the children learn reading and writing in minority languages and after a short time forget it? This is a difficult question for a teacher in the highland schools. If it is only a first step to acquaint children to the Vietnamese alphabet, it would be better to begin directly with Vietnamese, a means of communication in the whole country.

On the contrary, intellectuals of ethnic minorities are craving for an alphabet to write in their own language. Every year more and more folksongs and poems are printed in bilingual books, even in cases where the minority languages are still without an alphabet (i.e., Muong, Yao, Yay). In these cases, the Vietnamese alphabet is used for transcribing with some creative initiatives. The shortcoming is individual initiatives differing from the transcriptions of different editors of the same language. For example, the affricate [ts] in Yao is written ts by one editor, xch by another. The Tay-Nung alphabet was created forty years ago, and was taught only in primary school during a short time (in the 1960s), and then forgotten. This alphabet is not popularized for use in society. Even Tay-Nung speakers in broadcasting stations of the Tay-Nung regions don’t know this alphabet. They write
news for reading in broadcasts with their individual transcription, as Yao speakers are doing.

This reality proves that alphabets for minority languages are necessary, at first for intellectuals, employers involved in cultural activities, and for broadcasting. Only when the alphabets are popularized for use in society will teaching minority languages in school be successful with increased motivation.

In this situation, it would be useful to create a large and convenient alphabet, based on Vietnamese, that could be applied to various languages in Vietnam. This alphabet would draw on the experience of the official alphabet used for education, individual transcriptions of linguists, and ethnic minority intellectuals, and would have to be taken from a survey of the different types of phonetic systems of languages in Vietnam.

So the phonetic typology presented in this paper is geared toward this practical purpose. It is not a contribution to historico- or geographically-linguistic research.

Material in this paper is collected from scientific articles, dissertations, primers, text books, and bilingual books. It includes thirty phonetic systems and fourteen script systems. Besides the phonetic systems of languages in Vietnam, it includes twelve phonetic systems of dialects and languages at the border of the neighbouring countries also examined to make up the deficit of unknown dialects and languages in Vietnam. Following is a typology of tone and sound systems, but types of sounds are not studied.

**Suprasegmental systems**

1. Tonal system.

Almost all languages in Vietnam can be divided into two types: tonal languages and non-tonal languages with binary registers or phonations. Tonal languages containing a system of tones (from
3 to 8) are: Viet-Muong, Thai-Kadai, Hmong-Yao, Lolo groups, and the Cham language. We consider high/low pitch syllables with final voiceless stops (jusheng - in Chinese) as variants of rising/descending tones in other syllables. Therefore, except Hmong with 8 tones, other languages have from 3 to 6 tones.

The Vietnamese script system of 6 tones is marked by 5 diacritic signs and with one tone not marked a, à, á, â, ã, a. This is from the great initiative of European missionaries in the sixteenth century for the Vietnamese script. These 4 marks over the letter and one mark under the letter can be compiled for 4 more tones: à, á, â, ã. In this way, a proposed 10-tone system could be marked. It is regrettable that this convenient diacritic system would not be used to mark the 8 tones of the Hmong languages. They are marked by adding consonant letters at the end of the words, an imitation of Hmong scripts in China. Because of the inconvenience of the different ways to write the tonal system, Hmong geographical names are written on Vietnamese maps with Vietnamese style tone marks.

2. Non-tonal languages with binary registers or phonations.

Instead of a tonal system, there are binary registers or phonations in Austroasiatic and Austronesian languages in the Central Highlands and in the central mountain range Truong Son. The preglottalization of voiced stops b, d, j, g causes the variations in the position of the vocal cords in different phonation types. Thus, a creaky voice usually has a low pitch as well as a particular voice quality. Depending on one of the other feature attracting researchers: low pitch or voice quality, vowel under the influence of phonation is described and transcribed in different ways:

- Koho with two pitches high/low: e/è
- Bru with contrast lax/tense: e/ê
- Pakoh with contrast lax/tense: e/ee
- Rongao with contrast lax/tense: è/e
- Jeh with contrast lax/tense: e/è
Hrê with contrast clear/gruff: e/è
Sedang with contrast clear/laryngealized: e/é

In addition, “length . . . has been treated as suprasegmental if it applies to a whole class of segment, such as all vowels: (Maddieson, Pattern of Sounds, p. 162). Therefore, length contrast in the whole vowel systems of the Bahnar, Ede, Jarai, and Chru languages can be treated as a suprasegmental feature.

In the following section, the facts of suprasegmental property are presented. Only systems of basic vowels include really segmental units. Other types of binary contrast vowels reflect the contrast between segmental and suprasegmental features.

II. Typology of vowel systems

Diphthongs, triphongs, or vowel combinations are always a matter of dispute. They are not mentioned in this brief survey. Vowel systems of languages in Vietnam can be divided into two types: systems of basic vowels and systems of binary contrast vowels.

1. System of basic vowels.

The system of basic vowels includes from 5 to 11 vowels. In Hmong Lenh, there are 5 vowels; in Vietnamese, Muong, Tay, Laha, Pupeo, and Yao, there are 11 vowels.

Vowels and Letters of Vietnamese, Muong, Tay

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Vowels and Letters of Hmong Lenh

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