REPRESENTATION OF SPACE
IN VIETNAMESE CLASSIFIERS*

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1/ INTRODUCTION :

1.1. In linguistic studies devoted to the human concepts of space, not enough attention has been paid to the study of **spatial nouns** so far - as a rule, attention is focused on spatial verbs, adjectives and prepositions only. The aim of the present paper is to research nouns which describe spatial characteristics of objects in the surrounding world. I shall consider mainly a specific group of nouns of the Vietnamese language - the so called " classifiers".

1.2. In a number of languages, classifiers are studied chiefly from the point of view of their syntax, leaving insufficiently considered their semantic and cognitive foundations[1], which allow speakers to group them together, and which are rather subtle, complicated and have fuzzy boundaries even for native speakers. This is why I shall try to uncover the ways by which the Vietnamese speaker use classifiers in order to describe the shape, size and position of the object pointed at by the noun to which the classifier is referred. In so doing, and basing myself upon linguistic facts, I shall also try to demonstrate that there in indeed a typically "Vietnamese" way of conceptualising classifying and describing the world.

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2. GRAMMATICAL AND SEMANTIC NOTES ON VIETNAMESE CLASSIFIERS

For the convenience of the reader not familiar with Vietnamese, I shall briefly outline the main grammatical [Nguyen Tai Can, 1963, 1975] and semantic characteristics of classifiers.

2.1. The availability of classifiers (ca. 40 words) as a special group of nouns is one of the features of the Vietnamese language. The main function of a classifier (abbr. : *clas.*) is to express the singleness of the object denoted by the following noun : hence their ability to combine with numerals when counting. For instance, whenever a Vietnamese speaker says *con gà* (verb. : clas. + chicken) 'a chicken', he perceives the chicken as an individual object, singling it out from the class of similar objects[2]. It is not by accident that the short story by the Russian writer Chekhov *Dama s sobachkoi* ' The Lady with a lap-dog' has been translated into Vietnamese as ***Người*** *đàn bà có* ***con*** *chó nhỏ* (verb. : **clas.** + woman + have + clas. + dog + small), and Henry's novel *The last leaf* as ***Chiếc*** *lá cuối cùng* (verb. : **clas.** + leaf + last).

Another, secondary function of classifiers is to help divide the objects of the world into various types (e.g. people, animals, inanimate objects) as well as describe spatial characteristics of the particular objects they are referring to. For instance, the classifier *lá*, with its initial meaning of 'leaf' (of a tree), in the combination *lá thư* (verb. : clas. + letter) 'a letter', conveys the idea that the letter thus meant is perceived as a flat, two - dimensional object. It should be emphasized that, in this case, the description refers, not to a class of object, but only to the one letter, with its "picture" described by the classifier. It may also be noted that such a description of the object in its singleness is done explicitly. In English, for example, the spherical feature is included in the meaning of the noun *ball* only implicitly. In Vietnamese, the same feature receives explicit expression by means of the classifier *quả* (with its initial meaning of 'fruit') " : *quả bóng* (verb. : clas. + ball) 'a ball'.

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[2] In the absence of the classifier *con*, the word *gà* 'chicken' depending on the context, may denote either a certain class of objects or a concrete representative of this class. Cf., for example, *Nó nuôi gà*, 'He keep chickens (i.e. not geese); and *Gà đâu rồi* ' Where is the chicken ?' - in the second instance, the concrete chicken is meant.

On the basis of this secondary function, one may say that classifiers classify, characterise or describe objects through definite features.

2.2. Taking into account their various functions, classifiers may be divided into two groups: **numerical** (or non-descriptive), and **descriptive**. Let us now consider the differences between these groups. Cf. *cái tranh* (verb.: clas. + picture) 'a picture' — here the numerical classifier *cái* only singles out this particular picture from the series of its line; and *bức tranh* (verb.: clas. + picture) — in this case the descriptive classifier *bức* has both the function of a numerical classifier, and that of simultaneously describing the picture as a flat object.

The usage of numerical classifiers is strictly determined, primarily by the entire meaning of the object-noun. Viz.:

– *Con* is used for animals, e.g. *con bò* (verb.: clas. + cow) 'a cow';

– *Cái* is used for things, e.g. *cái ghế* (verb.: clas. + chair) 'a chair';

– *Đứa* is used for young people, e.g. *đứa bạn* (verb.: clas. + friend) 'a friend'.

Contrary to this, the usage of descriptive classifiers does not have such a restrictive nature: in many instances it may vary, depending on various factors (this point will be discussed below).

Descriptive classifiers are ordinarily used only with nouns denoting inanimate objects; in doing so, the speaker selects a few objects on the basis of similar spatial characteristics. Thus, for instance, almost all household items, such as a bed, a basket, a cup, a shirt, etc., are not described by descriptive classifiers, but only referred to by numerical ones. However, there are a number of exceptions, viz.:

– *Ngọn đèn* (verb.: clas. + oil lamp) 'an oil lamp': the classifier *ngọn* (with its initial meaning of 'apex') conveys the representation of a lamp shaped like a tree apex;

– *Con dao* (verb.: clas. + knife) 'a knife': the classifier *con* (for animals[3]) points to the presence of a particular shape, or action, of a knife that enables one to

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[3] Although it would be more accurate to say "classifier used with words denoting animals", I shall be using. here and elsewhere, in similar instances. a shorter phrase. e.g. "classifier for animals".

regard it as an animate object; cf. also *con sông* (verb.: clas. + river) 'a river', *con thuyền* (verb.: clas. + boat) 'a boat'.

Each one of the descriptive classifiers is customarily used for a group of objects consisting of a small number of items (from 5 to 7, on the average). For instance, the classifier *tờ* may be used for such objects as a newspaper, a picture, a ~~photograph~~, a calendar, a card, etc., all of them having the shape of a sheet of paper.

From this point on, the present paper will be dealing with descriptive classifiers only.

3. USING CLASSIFIERS TO DIVIDE OBJECTS BY THEIR SPATIAL CHARACTERISTICS

3.1. The notion of "salience"

Before giving a full list of descriptive classifiers of the Vietnamese language, let us try to make some terminological definitions more accurate. While describing the usage of different classifiers, or indeed the use of one particular classifier, it becomes evident that using the psychological notion of "salience" is particularly expedient. As a matter of fact, the perception of spatial objects by man is relative, and in many cases their classification and conceptualisation depend on the "salience" of one feature against the background of others. Let me begin with the best known facts. Cf. the two English sentences:

– *The bike is near the house*

– * *The house is near the bike*

The second sentence is non-normative, because the house is "saliently" considered to be more conspicuous and permanent than the bike [Talmy, 1988]. The "salience" of the transverse dimension in the choice between Russian adjectives like *shirokii* 'wide', and *dlinnyi* 'long' (cf. *a wide house* and *a long house*) has been well described by Zhurinskii [Zhurinskii, 1971].

Observing the "salient" feature in man perceiving spatial objects is especially easy when comparing different languages. Thus, English, Russian, Vietnamese and French