

# SPATIAL POSITIONING “TRÊN-DƯỚI”<sup>1</sup>

## IN VIETNAMESE

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Linguistics, now on the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is again enjoying a surge of research of the connection between language and subjective perception, and the human “image” in language. An important theoretical foundation of this dimension of linguistics is “language—the world residing between the world of external phenomena and the internal world of humans” (Humboldt, 1984: 130). The “human image” can perhaps be restored within linguistic terms for the following reasons:

- a. In the semantic field of every natural language, there is a reflection of the sensitivity towards and conceptualization of the world, that is, a “way of seeing” and a “way of thinking” about the native speaker’s world that binds each member of that cultural and linguistic community.
- b. The semantic structures of a language are also a way of seeing what is latent in the world because those structures are not universal; while they are partly universal, they are also specific (e.g., to a cultural group). Therefore, different linguistic communities see the world in part differently from each other, that is, through their own linguistic prism.
- c. On one hand, the way of seeing the world in each language is “innocent” (*ngây thơ*) because it perceives many things that are different from a scientific perspective. On the other hand, this way of seeing the world is not “primitive” (*sơ khai*) because it can be more complex and pleasurable than a wholly scientific perspective. For example, recent research about the internal world of humans (on linguistic terms see Artjunova 1994; Stepʹanov 1997) has acknowledged that representations of internal worlds are the results of experiences accumulated over thousands of years and countless generations, showing people the way into their inner spiritual worlds.
- d. In the semantics of every natural language, the native speaker’s way of seeing the world manifests itself in a system of “view points” (*quan điểm*) that express representations which are “quotidian” (*đời thường*), “innocent” (*ngây thơ*), “fatalistic” (*tiên khoa học*) regarding physics, geometry, biology, psychology, and aesthetics, etc. Those modes of representation are not random but rather organize and create a system of innocent conceptualizations (*hệ thống khái niệm ngây thơ*), and they can be expressed through investigations of the vocabulary and grammar of language.

By way of continuing the thinking on this topic, I would like to respond by speaking about the “human” factors of a “innocent physics” and an “innocent geometry” (*vật lý học ngây thơ và hình học ngây thơ*) manifested in spatial expressions in Vietnamese.

When speaking about the particularities of perception in spatial conceptualization and the codes of spatial relations of language, people still bring up

<sup>1</sup> *Trên* is usually translated into English in the following ways, “top, superior; up, on, on top of, over, above.” *Dưới* is usually translated as “bottom, lesser; down, in, below). In Vietnamese, *trên* and *dưới* are nouns as well as prepositions.

the familiar universals—those that originated principally in the research of the linguistics and psychology of native speakers of Indo-European languages:

- (a) Naive human perception (*quan niệm ngày thơ của con người*) about the essence and nature of space is “ego-centric” (*ngã vi trung*) as Miller and Johnson-Laird have commented: “Egocentric use of the space concept places ego at the center of the universe. From this point of origin, ego can lay out a three-dimensional co-ordinate system that depends on his own orientation” (1976: 394-395).
- (b) Furthermore, that perception is “anthropomorphic,” (*có tính chất ‘nhân hình’*) as Lyons generalized: “But in man’s world—the world as man sees it and describes it in everyday language—he is, in the most literal sense, the measure of all things” (1977: 690).
- (c) In spatial location and spatial orientation, people use a system of coordinates (*hệ các tọa độ*) or frames of reference (*các khung qui chiếu*) to construct a foundation for “trên—dưới” (the upright posture) and asymmetry (*sự không cân đối*) of the structure of a human body (e.g., ‘trước—sau’ in the frontal plane and ‘phải—trái’ of the lateral plane). Moreover, the system of coordinates can be projected (*chiếu*) from the one who speaks to others in the conversation or to the body that is being located and oriented. Among aspects of space, following Lyons (1978: 690), *trên—dưới* surpass all consideration about psychology and materiality, and are also essential aspects to consider in language. People usually move following their line of vision, face frontward, and come into face-to-face contact with their interlocutors at an appropriate distance so they may see each other. The ground has an important role as a plane fixed by a system of coordinates and boundaries. Living above the ground and under the pull of gravity, people are conscious, for example, that the sky is located above.

In order to participate in the analysis of these assumptions raised above and below, I will present the mode of spatial positioning following the framing of the upright posture “trên—dưới” in the Vietnamese language. However, in the scope of this paper, I will consider more details of the concept “trên” (rather than analyze carefully the concept of “dưới”) and several other important notions so that we may understand what the position of “trên” is in the Vietnamese language.

### 1. The concept of “trên” in the Vietnamese language

In Vietnamese, the part of an object (or region of space) that has the perspective of “trên” is always that part “higher in comparison to the remaining parts” if:

--adjective (origin) of the system of coordinates of the ground (or the center of the earth).

And :

--that object must be in its canonical position (*ở trong tư thế chính tắc*).

The concept “trên” has a role in the mode of naming words such as:

Concept / Linguistic expression

trên { đầu “head of a person”  
ngọn “top of a tree”  
đỉnh “top of a mountain”

*trần* “ceiling of a house”  
*nóc* “top of a wardrobe” . . .

for example: ~~Đầu~~ <sup>đầu</sup> (head of a person): “the uppermost part of the human body”

- *đỉnh* (top of a mountain, slope, or head): “the very uppermost part of a thing in an upright position”
- *trần* (top of a house, vehicle): “the plane lying horizontal on the uppermost part . . .” (following *Vietnamese Dictionary*, Institute of Linguistics, 1997).

## 2. The notion of absolute orientation (*định hướng tuyệt đối*)

If the word *trên* is only governed by the construction of the object (but a part of it has the attribute of being located above), then we have “absolute orientation (*định hướng tuyệt đối*). For example, in the expression *tóc trên đầu* (hair on the head), the word *trên* is always used with the word *đầu* (head), even though we see the uppermost thing of a person from the left or right, or from front or back, in the usual upright position, lying down, or even upside down (*trồng cây chuối*).

Figures

H.1    H.2    H.3

With respect to this aspect, we can see that Vietnamese is a language that uses absolute orientation, even when someone is not in an upright position (the starting point for the system of coordinates in spatial positioning). For example, when a person is lying horizontally, then the spatial relationship *trên*—*dưới* between the located object and the reference object maintains the absolute status quo:

Figure

H.4

- (1) *Sách ở trên đầu*. “The book is above the head.”
- (2) *Bút ở dưới chân*. “The pen is below the leg.”

A person with a back-ache can request the masseur to:

- (3) *Anh đấm lên trên nữa*.  
(You) rub up high. (That is towards the head)
- (4) *Anh đấm xuống dưới nữa*.  
(You) rub down low. (That is towards the leg)

Even so, these principles of spatial positioning and orientation can be used to frame those things that are not “human.”

- (5) *Mọi người chạy lên phía trên đầu máy bay*.  
Everyone ran up to the top of the airplane.

In order to explicate the location situation in figure (3), it is difficult to find a spatial expression such as:

- (6) \**Tóc dưới đầu anh bạc nhiều quá!*  
The hair under head (your) is so gray!

When the use of the word *trên* does not belong to the structure of something, but instead to other different factors governing it, we will have “relative orientation” (*định hướng tương đối*). For example:

- (7) *Quyển sách ở trên hộp.*  
The book is on top of the box.

This feature explains the following figure:

Figure H.5

Here surface A can be considered *mặt trên* or the “top” of the box only at the moment of the utterance; if we turn the box upside down, then in the new figure, surface A will be turned into the *mặt dưới* (bottom) of the box.

Similarly with locative utterances:

- (8) *Nam chơi ở trên nhà Việt*  
Nam plays up in Viet’s house.

This sentence holds true only if the person who speaks lives on the ground floor, for example, and the apartment of Việt is on the third floor. On the other hand, if the person who speaks is on the fifth floor, then it is obvious that the locative sentence must be:

- (9) *Nam chơi ở dưới nhà Việt.*  
Nam plays down in Viet’s house.

What is important to note is that this mode of positioning *trên—dưới* can be cancelled (*có thể bị triệt tiêu*) and transformed into a different position if the distance is close or remote as in the following spatial account:

Figure H.6

In this figure, the speaker lives on the third floor in a building to the left, and Nam (who is the subject of the location) is in Viet’s room (the location) on the fifth floor in the building to the right. In this case, we can only wait for the person who utters the locative sentence as follows:

- (10) *Nam chơi ở bên nhà Việt.*  
Nam plays over in Viet’s house.

But not the following sentence:

- (11) \**Nam chơi ở trên nhà Việt.*  
Nam plays above in Viet’s house.

even though the place ~~the place~~ where Nam plays is actually higher than the position of the speaker. Using the word *bên* in sentence (10) expresses that there is a separation between the ego-space (*không gian của chủ thể*) and another space as in the following examples.

- (12) *Hôm nay Nam được nghỉ ở nhà* (*không gian chủ thể*)