A CLASSIFICATION OF VERBS IN VIETNAMESE
AND ITS PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS*

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INTRODUCTION

For over a generation, there was the conviction that the best language teaching materials are based upon a contrastive analysis of the language to be learned and the language of the learner. Allied with the conviction was the hypothesis that the new linguistic system, and by extension, the new cultural behaviour, should be established as a set of new habits by drill, drill which would ensure overlearning. Such a pedagogical philosophy was systematised mainly by Charles C. Fries (1945) and Robert Lado (1957).

However, all this firm belief in contrastive analysis seems to be in the past, at least for some people. The generative-transformational theory claims that language behaviour is rule-governed behaviour, and consequently that language learning should be in the form of a process of internalising the creative rules in the new language, and not just that of mere habit forming.

Before such a theoretical dilemma, a language teacher may be tempted to make the most use of existing linguistic theories to improve teaching materials as best as he could. With this pragmatism in mind, I am trying to present a contrastive analysis of Vietnamese and English on the case,

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clause, and sentence levels in this study.

On the theoretical linguistics ground, this analysis of cases, clauses, and sentences in Vietnamese in contrast with English will make an attempt to utilise both tagmemics (Brend 1970, 1972a, and 1972b, Cook 1969, Longacre 1964, Pike 1954, 1955, 1960, 1966, and 1971) and a case grammar model (Fillmore 1968, 1969, and 1971) called lexicase (Manley 1972, Starosta 1971a, 1971b, 1972a, 1972b, 1972c, 1973, Taylor 1972). Such an eclectic combination of tagmemics and case grammar is not new either in the field of general linguistics (Cook 1970, 1971a, 1971b, and 1972, Heidi Platt 1970, John T. Platt 1971) or in Southeast Asian linguistic analysis (Liem 1971a, 1971b, 1972a, 1972b, 1973a, and 1973b). Case grammar studies on Vietnamese can be found in Clark 1971a and 1971b, Ha 1970, Manley 1969, Taylor 1968, and Tran 1971, and a tagmemic analysis of Vietnamese can be seen in Liem 1969.

In that this study is tagmemically oriented, it recognises firstly the hierarchical levels in syntax and secondly the grammatical unit or tagmeme as composed of a slot and a filler class. The concept of hierarchies in syntax makes it possible to single out the clause and sentence levels for this study, and consequently it is unnecessary to write, at the very beginning, phrase structure rules of the entire base component, a matter of mandatory nature in a transformational analysis (Chomsky 1965:88ff.). The grammatical slot of the tagmeme at the clause level has been pointed out by Becker (Becker 1967a and 1967b), Fries (Fries 1970), and Young, Becker, and Pike (Young, Becker, and Pike 1970) as having not only the overt syntactic relationships (case realisations or case forms) but also the covert meaning relationships (case relations) with the predicative verb which is considered to be central in the clause (Chafe 1970).

In that this paper is also case grammar oriented, it recognises the case relations between various nouns and the predicative verb in the clause (or proposition in Fillmore's terminology). The type of case grammar utilised here introduces both the overt case realisations (or case forms) and covert case relations into the grammar as syntactic features assigned to nouns by verbs (Starosta 1971a, 1971b, 1972a, 1972b, and 1973).

In that this is also a contrastive analysis of Vietnamese and English, the study will present not only the particular construction in Vietnamese but also will point out similarities or differences in parallel constructions in English. However, specific types of drills to teach the patterns will not be suggested because generally drills on case forms and case relations in Chapter I* will be substitutional, whereas they will be

*This paper is an excerpt from a larger work.

surface-to-surface transformational on the clause and sentence levels in
subsequent chapters. The phrase level has been purposely omitted in
this study because there are not many similarities on that level in
Vietnamese and English. The reader is referred to Liem 1969, chapters
III and IV, pp. 75-163 for an analysis of the phrase level in Vietnamese.
Particular attention should be paid to the verb phrase on pages 75-108,
the noun phrase on pages 109-131, and the cross-level tagmemes and cross-
level constructions on pages 160-164 of the 1969 study.

CLASSIFICATION OF VERBS

The following verb classification is based upon identificational-
contrastive features such as the presence or absence of nuclear case
form/case relation tagmemes. There are sixteen classes of verbs in the
proposed classification. According to their hospitality to case-marked
tagmemic slots, verbs in Vietnamese can be classified into sixteen
groups as indicated in Chart IV. The sixteen verbs representative of
their classes will be listed below with their hospitable case-marked
tagmemic slots. It is noted that all the case-marked tagmemic slots,
except the slot [+O, +OBJ] hosted by the submissive verbs, can be filled
by noun phrases. When they can be filled by other than noun phrases,
they will be so indicated. Numbers will refer to the examples found
earlier in this study. Learning problems for the English speaking
student will be pointed out, if any. A list of sample verbs in each
group will be given as examples for the preparation of substitution
drills.

1. là *'be'*

The verbs in this class host [+NM, +OBJ] and [-K] (or caseless)
tagmemic slots:

[+[+NM, +OBJ] ___ [-K]]

$$
\begin{Bmatrix} \text{noun phrase} \\ \text{verb phrase} \\ \text{clause} \\ \text{prep. phrase} \end{Bmatrix} \quad \begin{Bmatrix} \text{noun phrase} \\ \text{verb phrase} \\ \text{clause} \\ \text{prep. phrase} \end{Bmatrix}
$$

Both [+NM, +OBJ] and [-K] slots can be filled by a noun phrase, a
verb phrase, an independent clause, or a prepositional phrase:

Ông ấy   là . bác-sĩ. (2.1.)
   He   *is*   *a doctor.*
$\begin{bmatrix} +\text{NM} \\ +\text{OBJ} \end{bmatrix}$ [-K]
[noun phr.]   [noun phrase]

Đi   là . chết.
To go   *is*   *to die.*
[verb phr.]   [verb phr.]

Ông ấy   đi   là . ông ấy   khôn.
 he   *go*   *be*   *he*   *intelligent*   *(He was wise to have gone.)*
[clause]   [clause]

Từ   đây   đến   đó   là   hai   dặm.
From   *here*   *to*   *there*   *is*   *two*   *miles.*
[prep. phrase]   [noun phrase]

The filling of the [+NM, +OBJ] slot hosted by an equational verb such as là *'be'* by a verb phrase or an independent clause in Vietnamese is a learning problem on the production level for English speakers who are used to a *To* verb phrase, or a dependent clause introduced by *That* in the same slot in English:

To go   *is*   *to die.*
$\begin{bmatrix} +\text{NM} \\ +\text{OBJ} \end{bmatrix}$ [-K]
[*to* verb phr.] [*to* verb phr.]

That he went   *was*   *a good move.*
[*that* clause]   [noun phr.]

The verb là *'be'* seems to be the lone verb of its class. There is another similar verb, làm *'to exercise the profession of'* in that it is also an equational verb:

Ông ấy   làm. bác-sĩ.
 He   *is*   *a doctor (professionally).*
$\begin{bmatrix} +\text{NM} \\ +\text{OBJ} \end{bmatrix}$ [-K]
[noun phr.]   [noun phr.]

2.   chậm *'slow'*

The verbs in this class are stative verbs, host a [+NM, +OBJ] slot, can be adverbialised, and can be followed by an Intensifier: