

# COUNTABILITY AND UNITY IN THE CLASSIFICATION OF VIETNAMESE NOUNS

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## 1. [+COUNT]

The concept [+count] is found in the lexicon of most languages, for all language communities have their own ways of cognitive development and ways of denominating things in their lives. In his book *Notes on philosophy* Lenin stated: "By perception through feeling we get things and by perception through reason we get their names". Names are types of "badges" used to distinguish things, kinds of "signals" used to represent them, and give explanations for them in order to be aware of things as a whole [20,86]. By denomination, according to Cao Xuan Hao, language communities may resort to one out of the three following ways. ① merely accounting for the stuffs of which things are made, for example: *giấy* 'paper', *than* 'coal', *bò* 'cow', *vải* 'cloths', *muối* 'salt'(Vietnamese), *ash*, *cour*, *absinthe*, *georgette* (English), *shu*'book', *jiu* 'drink', *miao* 'cat'(Chinese); ② simply accounting for their existing forms, ex: *hòn* 'bar/ piece', *cái* 'piece', *mét* 'metre', *kí* 'kilogram' (Vietnamese), *ge* 'piece', *jìn* 'kilogram' (Chinese) ③ accounting for both of the above-mentioned criteria, i.e. both stuffs and outward appearance, for example: *giọt* 'drop', *tỉnh* 'province', *tầng* 'storey'(Vietnamese), *book*, *admosishment*, *admonition*, *ale*, *analysis*. If the first way is applied we get mass terms and the meanings of these noun groups specify the properties of the things mentioned, the properties which differentiate them from others. If the second way is used, it results in unit nouns; and things indicated by the second way of denomination are said to be discrete items having their own boundaries which help isolate them from the others. Their semantic contents, however, do not signify any notion of the properties of the things mentioned. If the third way is taken into account we get nouns bearing both the characteristics of unit nouns and mass nouns. And whether these nouns are treated as mass nouns or unit nouns depends on a particular context.

There are few language communities that adopt merely one out of the three above-mentioned cases. On the contrary, they are generally employed integratedly by all language communities. Theoretically, it is possible that in some languages one or two ways are taken into account. But from the viewpoint of language users, it is hard to imagine that pure appearance or pure content is sufficient to name all things in a language. The difference found in languages may derive from different preferences in ways of denomination. The English people, for example, prefer the third case. Alternatively, to Vietnamese and Chinese people - the second and the first are preferred.

"In traditional grammar [+count] discrimination has not been accounted. Yet it is, linguistically. A focus in noun phrase analysis due to its approach to explaining the distribution of a noun in accordance with the use of articles and quantifiers. Count nouns are nouns treated linguistically as divisible entities by combining them with such forms as '*much*' or '*some*' [31,96].

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Thus it is not accidental that noun classification in general linguistics is often based on the criterion [+count]. Jespersen [15], Chomsky [7], Allan [1] all admitted that [+count] in general contrastivity is one of the most typical feature specifications of denominative units in most languages. Chomsky insisted that like the three criteria [+broad], [+back], [+round] which are necessary and sufficient for vowels/consonants discrimination, the four criteria [+common], [+count], [+animate], [+human] do necessitate and suffice to discriminate nouns from other parts of speech [7,79-86]. Cao Xuan Hao was more persistent with the idea: the advent of [+count] contrastivity alone is enough to help distinguish nouns and noun phrases from other parts of speech and other phrases. Otherwise, it is almost impossible to imagine [+count] contrastivity would be dismissed from the grammar of a language .

Contrastivity is a “passage” which, on the one hand, reveals the way of structurization in each language and tells us how people name things in their language and, on the other hand, reveals the means of functional sentence perspective as well as the way in which a noun phrase is formed.

According to Lyons [+count] has a close relationship with [+number], the most common manifestation of which can be seen in singularity / plurality (of a noun). This distinction results from whether we accept things as [+count] or not (those objects may be individual or collective). The fact that a thing would be treated as an object or more than an object, a group of objects or a mass depends on many criteria on a large-scale since the lexical structure of each language is an open system which is both diverse and complicated [21,445-448]. Each community has its own ways of expressing and denominating things and each language has its own distinction between [+count]. For instance, the researchers all agree that in European languages most of names objects are count nouns whereas this is not the case in Vietnamese and Chinese: they are non-count nouns and classifiers must be placed between numerals or numerical quantors . Let’s compare.

Vietnamese:	<i>hai cái <u>nồi</u> mới</i>	instead of	<i>*hai <u>nồi</u> mới</i>
	<i>mỗi cái <u>chén</u></i>	instead of	<i>*mỗi <u>chén</u></i>
	<i>những <u>tấm</u> <u>bảng</u></i>	instead of	<i>*những <u>bảng</u></i>
	<i>ba cái <u>bút</u></i>	instead of	<i>*ba <u>bút</u></i>
Chinese:	<i>san <u>tiáo</u> <u>bì</u> ‘ba cái bút’</i>	instead of	<i>*san <u>bì</u></i>
English:	<i>two pencils, five knives</i>		

Nowadays [+count] is the most dominant tendency in noun classification, because this specification is considered the most suitable feature for the internal structure of many languages and many researchers have elaborately analysed it in the languages they dealt with.

Though without any explicit statements a great number of researchers interested in classifying nouns in terms of [+count], whether at level (1) or level (n), have identified the terms [+count] nouns with unit nouns, in other words, count nouns and unit nouns signify the same content (see [24],[4],[5], [14])<sup>1</sup>.

In Vietnamese language, the terms [+count} and {-count} are used more commonly than those of unit and mass. However, in reality the term [+count] usually brings about

<sup>1</sup> This miscomprehension results in listing the nouns as quotted into the list of count nouns by some authors. This brings about a misunderstanding that countable nouns merely consist of names of stuffs.

miscomprehension. ① miscomprehension objects in reality for those in languages. For example, in our lives, no one can deny that *money, star, chicken, book, pen*, are countable. They are, however, uncountable in Vietnamese language<sup>1</sup>, for no one says *\*hai tiền*<sup>2</sup>, *\*hai gà*, *\*ba bò*. except for some irregular cases. ② miscomprehension of [+unit] for [+count] because these categories are closely associated but are not identical. Some nouns are [+count] (in any case) but [-unit]. Furthermore, they have grammatical, syntactic and pragmatic features different from those cases regarded as unit nouns. Take the nouns, for instance, *sinh viên* ‘student’, *phóng viên* ‘reporter’, *kí giả* ‘journalist’, *khán giả* ‘audience’, *danh thủ* ‘champion’, *ẩn ngữ* ‘ambiguity’, *chế độ* ‘regime’: they can be combined with numerical quantors<sup>3</sup> e.g. they are count nouns and can stand alone to make noun phrases or can occur with prepositions to make adverbial phrases. However, due to the fact that they indicate the meaning of species, but neither that of unit of measurement, nor of discrete items, they do not mean discrete, isolated items with definite size, these words are [-unit] and cannot be combined with peculiar ‘tool’ words of unit nouns (such as quotifiers *all, half*<sup>4</sup>), neither implying [+number] nor [+definite] determinative/indeterminative significance. Furthermore, these nouns can precede unit nouns whereas unit nouns cannot. Ex:

- a. *mỗi [hai] (em) học sinh*    *\*ăn nửa học sinh*                      *từng chàng [anh] cầu thủ*  
     ‘each[two] schoolchildren’    ‘eat half schoolboy’<sup>5</sup>                      ‘each player’
- b. *\*mỗi quyển bộ (sách)*    *đọc nửa quyển (sách)*                      *\*từng thằng đứa (học trò)*  
     ‘each volume series (book)’    ‘read half of the( book)’                      ‘each the (school)boy’

Some may wonder if mass terms can be mistakenly used for naming stuffs. The word “mass” reminds us of something shapeless, indiscrete. In fact, this miscomprehension is not only faced by Vietnamese but also by English, the people who coined the term. In his work on mass nouns Burge affirmed: “The distinction between stuffs and *objects* in language and in reality is not identical. It is not always that mass nouns indicate. Such nouns as *fruit, clothing, apparatus, hardware*, do not indicate stuffs at all. They indicate objects. Some words which seem to indicate stuffs are not mass nouns.” Ex *quantity, aggregate*. [3,3].

The use of “unit nouns” and “mass nouns” is relatively popular in modern linguistics

<sup>1</sup> In archaic Vietnamese, money was considered a unit nouns. So we heard in the past : *hai tiền, mấy tiền*.

<sup>2</sup> For simplicity, the writer adds numerals to numerical quantors (những, các, mấy, mỗi “every”, từng “each”, mọi “all”) under the title ‘quantors’ when a clear distinction is not necessary.

<sup>3</sup> *Half* manifests its abilities to combine like that of unit nouns (*two affectionate halves, each half, eat this half and leave the other*). Yet unlike unit nouns *half* does not express the existing forms, it expresses a fraction (one of the two equal parts of thing). Like other quotiers, it differs from other quantitative elements (numerals, whole quantitative terms, quantitative terms, quantors, quantitative predicates, numerical articles). “It does not state number or quantity of thing (or things) expressed by nouns. Instead, it shows a certain fraction of thing (or things) mentioned in the sentence. irrespective of the singularity/ plurality of the noun phrase in question.” [5, 366]. What is more, unlike other unit nouns, *half* can occur with unit nouns (like other quantifiers). Let’s compare: *half of the joint (of meat), half of the (cake), \* the piece volume (book), \* the copy volume (book)* and so on.

Except for *all, half* the fractional noun phrases or noun phrases indicating percentage, such as *two-third, one-third, ninety eight %* can be quantized.

<sup>4</sup> In mentioning this case, Cao Xuan Hao gives a very interesting example. He supposes that there were two devils who had caught a schoolboy and discussed whether they ate all or half. It is unlikely to say *\*eat all schoolboy* or *\*eat (the upper) half of schoolboy*, and *leave (the lower) half of schoolboy*. One should, in this case, say: *eat all the boy* or *eat half of the boy* or briefly *eat all* or *eat half*. *Boy* is used as unit noun, so it can be quantized whereas *schoolboy* though countable, it is a mass noun. So it cannot be quantified. This is contrary to what had been assumed by some author that in the linguistic conception of Vietnamese people, human-beings are sacred and cannot be quantized.

<sup>5</sup> As called by Cao Xuan Hao.

(Chomsky [7], Lyons [21], Sharvy [29], Cao Xuan Hao [5], Krifka [16]). In Vietnamese unit nouns all specify entities perceived by Vietnamese people as a means to calculate, weigh, measure, and count. So using the term unit nouns can avoid not only miscomprehension brought about by count nouns but also reminds us of units to weigh, measure, count, can *cân* 'kilogram', *tắc* 'equals to 10 centimeters) or "units of cultural features"<sup>1</sup>, ex: *tỉnh* 'province', *từ* 'word', *luận cứ* 'arguments'. Mass nouns, though unfamiliar at first hearing, once put in the unit/mass contrastivity refer to "things" with no boundary, things that are not perceived as isolated entities by their appearance.

## 2. [+UNIT]

In most of the literature on Vietnamese grammar intension and extension of the concept [+unit] has not been attentively regarded as other essential grammatical concepts. It is, however, implicitly or explicitly mentioned here and there by some authors. Nguyen Tai Can was a pioneer in systemizing a unit nouns with full descriptions. Such words as *con* 'piece', *cái* 'bar', *chiếc* 'sheet', in his opinion are parts of unit nouns (besides *yến* 'ten kilogrammes', *tạ* 'quintal', *tấn* 'ton', *tháng* 'month', *ngày* 'day', *huyện* 'district', *tỉnh* 'province') [24,117-135]. Other researchers such as Hoang Tue [11,251-256], Le Can – Phan Thieu [19, 117-119], Cao Xuan Hao [5,241-254 và 265-304], [6,1-16], Ho Le [12,96-103] all referred to unit nouns and also given many specific and clear explanations on the grammatical specifications of these classes of nouns. In Vietnam Diep Quang Ban was perhaps the first author to mention the concept of unit. The concept of unit, in his opinion, conveys two meanings: ① unit is understood as a certain means to measure homogeneous things, to divide them into equal parts; alternatively, ② unit is interpreted as separate items among the others of the same characteristics which are grouped in accordance with some criterion. He also discriminated their significances into pairs of comparative categories: separate unit and quantity unit; separate unit and collectivity; separate unit and species [10,32-36].

In general, unit is employed to express the three demarcations: ① quantity to measure homogeneous things, to divide them into conventionally equal parts. Within this meaning, unit nouns are used to measure and thus to count things<sup>2</sup>. ② "separate items" among the others of the same characteristics grouped in accordance with a certain criterion. By this significance, unit nouns are not used to measure or weigh but to count. ③ A component of a system or a certain whole (such as *tỉnh* 'province', *huyện* 'district', *trung đội* 'platoon', *đại đội* 'company') – or "units of cultural value"<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> As a noun, its function is nominating. However, the function of nominating, and that of being unit of weighing, measuring, and counting of 'met', 'ta', 'tan' and those of 'con', 'cái', 'chiec', 'quyen' are not identical.

<sup>2</sup> Almost all words in this group are Sino-Vietnamese.

<sup>3</sup> In some quarters, it is claimed that Vietnamese nouns fall into three categories of [number] – singularity, plurality and neutrality [10, 49-50], [25, 232-233]. Neutrality, according to these authors, can stand for both singularity and plurality and is marked by a zero marker. For example, *breed cat*, *bit dogs*, *eat sweets*, *buy books*, *feed cows*, and so on. This is derived from the idea that the significance of the number of mass nouns is "completely determined by context". In fact, the question of neutrality is closely related to defining classifiers, and the thorough treatment of grammatical distinctions between mass nouns and unit nouns. According to traditional wisdom, classifiers are not nouns, therefore, they play a marginal role in noun phrases. Thus if [number] in Vietnamese is merely attributed to nouns, we must accept the equipollent opposition around the core *buffalo* in the following case: *the buffalo/ the buffaloes/ buffaloes* as the opposition of singularity/ plurality/ neutrality. However, once classifiers were treated as nouns (by a great number of authors), the question of neutrality was excluded from discussion. The central element of the opposition remains *the*: *the [buffalo]* and *the [buffalo]es*. i.e. the singularity/plurality opposition. Noun phrase containing classifiers such as *the [buffalo]* and *the [buffalo]es* is a typical type