VERBAL CLASSIFIERS IN VIETNAMESE

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I. Introduction

Vietnamese is a classifier language, or more exactly, a numeral classifier one. As such, the following sequence is found for the paradigm combination of quantifier (Q), classifier (Cl), and noun (N):

(1) Q Cl N

Example (2):

(2) *hai con chó* /two animate dog/ two dogs

However for the purpose of topicalization, the N can be moved out of the sequence (1), and we have now : N…Q Cl, as in (3) :

(3) *Chó*, Ron có *hai con* /dog Ron have 2 Cl/
    As for dogs, Ron has two

Concerning Vietnamese nominal classifiers, the problems at issue are the following:

- Is the classifier a grammatical/empty word or a lexical/full word ?
- If Cl is a lexical word, then do classifiers form an open class or a closed class? How to 'define' a Cl if it is a member of an open class ?
- If Cl is a lexical word, which one, the Cl or the N, in the sequence (1) is the head of the NP ?

II. Verbal Classifiers in Vietnamese

1. What is a verbal classifier?

According to Greenberg (1972:28), "The logical possibility exists, then, that a language might have a system of verbal classifiers each of which would be used with a particular

class of verbs and an accompanying numeral". Leech
(1969:134-5) also notes that "…not only noun meanings but
verb meanings can include the factor 'countability'". The
existence of a verbal classifier (Clv) is confirmed in
Vietnamese : a Clv is a morpheme/word which is used to
count the verb, or more properly the action/process expressed
by the verb, *in a VP*. Example (4a):

> (4a) *Nó tát hai cái* /he slap 2 Clv/
> He slaps twice (He gives 2 slaps)

Cái in (4a) is considered a Clv, a unit counter for the V
tát 'slap'. The Clv *cái* can be substituted by another Clv like
cú 'coup' (*cú* might be a loan word from French *coup*), or by
the V *tát* itself and in this case we can say that *tát* is its own
Clv. Therefore, we have (4b) and (4c) synonymous to (4a):

> (4b) *Nó tát hai cú*
> (4c) *Nó tát₁ hai tát₂*

In (4a), the semantic interpretation of *cái* is obtained by
referring *cái* to the V *tát*, *cái* is anaphoric of the V it counts.
Besides this semantic/quality value, *cái* has a quantity value:
cái means a single instance/unit of an act/process expressed by
the V. Emeneau (1951:93) recognizes this feature by saying
that the class meaning of Vietnamese classifiers is "one unit
quantity or number of that denoted by the noun". Now we can
represent the Cl, Cln as well as Clv, by the formula Cl<1,Qlt>
where 1 means that Cl always counts as a unit, but a unit to be
distinguished from the numeral *one* because endowed with
some semantic properties (Qlt).

Cú in (4b) is quasi-synonymous to *cái* in (4a) because *cú*
also refers to an action (*coup* in French means *sudden action*).

In (4c) *tát₂* is the cognate verbal noun (of the V *tát₁*). It is
analysed as a Clv because it is directly enumerated by a
numeral. Any item in Vietnamese which has the potentiality to
be enumerated directly by a numeral, can function as a Cl.
Classifier is then a functional class, not a morphological class;
the opposition empty word/full word used by some authors
(Nguyên Tài Cân, 1975) is not valid.

Note that in contrast to the paradigm combination for noun classifier [Q Cln N], for verbal classifier, we have [V…Q Clv].

Clv issued from the cognate verbal noun aside, the number of Clv proper is not as important and various as Cln. Furthermore, Clv and Cln usually overlap when Cln is for a N of action or process; in this case N and V are distinguished in terms of syntax, not in terms of morphology. Examples (5) and (6):

(5a) *hai tiếng la* [NP] /2 Cln-sound scream/
two screams

(5b) *la hai tiếng* [VP] /scream 2 Clv-sound/
scream twice; make two screams

(6a) *hai cơn mưa* [NP] /2 Cln-outburst rain/
two outbursts of rain

(6b) *mưa hai cơn* [VP] /rain 2 Clv-outburst/
it falls two outbursts of rain

If *tiếng* in (5a,b) and *cơn* in (6a,b) are respectively the same morpheme, categorized once a Cln, once a Clv because of different syntactic configurations, we cannot say the same thing with *cái* in (7a) and (7b) below :

(7a) *hai cái bàn* /2 Cln-*cái* table/ two tables

(7b) *tát hai cái* /slap 2 Clv-*cái* / slap twice

Indeed, Vietnamese grammars agree to consider the Cln *cái* in (7a) a grammatical/empty word (hư từ) defined by only one semantic feature [-ANIMATE] because *cái*-Cln goes with almost every noun for inanimate object, 'nonliving thing'. This feature evidently cannot apply to *cái*-Clv in (7b) whose semantic features are those it takes from the V it substitutes for. *Cái*-Cln, although considered an empty word is defined nevertheless by the semantic feature [-ANIMATE] (in contrast to the Cln *con* defined by [+ANIMATE]) while *cái*-Clv has no such a feature.

Note that besides the opposition *cái*-Cln/*cái*-Clv, we have to distinguish still many other *cái* such as *cái*-predeterminer/definite article, *cái*-pronoun (see below), *cái*-

ADJ 'female', *cái*-ADJ 'main, chief'. Are all these values of *cái* related ? This is a question worth answering.

Some classifiers which at first glance should be categorized solely as Cln turn out to be capable of functioning as Clv. Examples (8a,b) and (9a,b):

(8a) *quả tim* [NP] / Cln-fruit heart/ the heart

(8b) *đấm hai quả* [VP] /punch 2 Clv-fruit/
    send two punches

(9a) *ngọn đèn* [NP] /Cln-peak lamp/ a lamp

(9b) *gió vài ngọn* [VP] /wind some Clv-peak/
    it blows some winds

2. +COUNT verb and –COUNT verb

Using the Clv *cái* as a unit for counting to study the discreteness of verbs, we can divide Vietnamese verbs into two classes: +COUNT verb (Vc) and –COUNT verb (Vm). *Cái* is the best candidate to test the discreteness of verbs because *cái* as Clv functions as a substitute for verbs.

Vc : $Q \geq 1$; the counting by means of *cái* can be made with a number superior to *one*. Example (10):

(10) *Ron đánh ba cái* /Ron blow 3 Clv-*cái* /
    Ron gives three blows

Vm : $Q = 1$; the quantification is possible only with Q equal to *one*. In this case the Clv *cái* is an individualizer permitting to single out an instance of an act/process of the verb but not to count. Example (11) :

(11) *uống một cái* /drink 1 Clv/ have a drink

but (11') **uống hai cái* /drink 2 Clv/

(Note that in French we can say *boire un coup*, but not **boire deux coups*)

3. Two subclasses of +COUNT verb

The Vc can be divided further into 2 subclasses, Vc1 and Vc2 : the Vc1, or a word of the same form, can replace the Clv in the [VP: V...Q Clv] while the Vc2 cannot. Therefore, above