

Verb Concatenation in Vietnamese

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1.0 Introduction.

In his book, The Grammar of Lahu, James A. Matisoff shows that Lahu, a Tibeto-Burman language of the Loloish group, is "remarkable for the apparent ease with which two or more verbs may be strung together or concatenated by simple juxtaposition to form complex verbal nuclei (1973:199). He calls these serial verb constructions "verb concatenations." In each concatenation there must be a head verb or  $V_h$ . Other verbs which occur either to the head's left, or to its right, or which flank the head on both sides, are called versatile verbs. Those which occur before the  $V_h$  are pre-head versatiles ( $_vV$ ); those which come after the  $V_h$  are post-head versatiles ( $V_v$ ). Versatile verbs stand in a subordinate relationship to the head, both syntactically and semantically.

This phenomenon is not restricted to Lahu alone. Barbara Abbott (1972) has shown that Vietnamese also has some kind of versatile verbs. Although she is on the right track in her approach, it is inevitable that there exist some misunderstandings in her analysis, as she herself modestly admits. It is the purpose of this paper to revise Abbott's survey. On syntactic grounds, her classification of versatile verbs is reshuffled.

And at various suitable points, comparisons are made between the Lahu and Vietnamese verb-concatenation systems. In spite of this ambitious intention, the present survey is by no means as comprehensive as I would wish. Although I am a native speaker of Vietnamese, I feel I should check my intuitions with many other speakers and assemble more data in order to buttress my analysis.

Before going on to the Vietnamese versatile verb system, it is worth restating the criteria for versatile verbhood as detailed by Matisoff. I have followed Matisoff's approach and outline in this paper. In order to qualify for versatile verbhood, a verb must meet the following requirements:

- (1) it must be a true verb -- either stative or non-stative -- capable of occurring alone as the only verb in its VP;
- (2) it must be characterized as having the property of "juxta-pository productivity;" that is, it must be capable of concatenating with a large number of other verbs in a subordinate relationship to them.

While the first requirement is purely syntactic, the second may be said to be syntactic-semantic.

Matisoff mentions that verb concatenation in Lahu provides the kind of information that other languages (like English) can only convey through "a formally disparate array of subordinating devices: complementary infinitives, -ing complements, modal auxiliaries, adverbs, prepositional phrases, even whole subordinate clauses" (1973:200 ff). This is also true of Vietnamese. However, unlike in Lahu, I have not been able to find in Vietnamese any kind of verb concatenation which conveys the same information as subordinate clauses do in English. Figure 1 shows the gamut<sup>1</sup> of English subordinating devices versus Vietnamese juxtaposition.

## 2.0 Non-versatile types of verbal constructions, multiverbal and otherwise.

Not every verbal syntagma in Vietnamese constitutes a true versatile concatenation. There are a number of other construc-

Figure 1. The gamut of English subordinating devices vs. Vietnamese juxtaposition.

<u>Complementary Infinitives:</u>	<u>-ing Complements:</u>	<u>Adverbs:</u>
khó đọc 'hard to read'	bận đọc 'busy reading'	đọc lại
bắt đầu đọc 'begin to read'	chán đọc 'bored reading'	'read again'
		vứt đi
<u>Modal Auxiliaries:</u>	<u>Prepositional Phrases:</u>	'throw away'
phải đọc 'must read'	đọc cho 'read for'	
nên đọc 'should read'	đọc nhầm 'read in error'	

tion types which resemble versatile concatenations on the surface. In general, these are easily distinguishable from true versatile concatenations. However, natural languages do not always operate according to strict, airtight rules. Thus there exist cases which are problematic. In 2.1-2.5 we present an account of these other non-versatile constructions, most of which (2.2-2.5) are multiverbal.

2.1 V + P<sub>V</sub> and P<sub>V</sub> + V sequences. Verb particles (P<sub>V</sub>) are bound morphemes which occur either before or after verbs and "serve to elucidate the meaning of the verb in a variety of ways, conveying notions of aspect, directionality, subjective attitudes toward the verbal event, etc." (Matisoff, 1973:315). Although some of the verb particles are quite comparable to versatile verbs semantically, they do not meet the requirements for verbhood syntactically. Thus, sequences of V + P<sub>V</sub> and P<sub>V</sub> + V are not really "multiverbal" at all.

Verb particles are divided into pre-verb particles and post-verb particles. The former occur before their verb, the latter after. Some of the pre-verb particles are:

<u>rất</u> 'very'	<u>Cô ấy rất đẹp</u>	'She is very beautiful.'
	1 2 3	1 2 3
<u>hơi</u> 'slightly'	<u>Tôi hơi hiểu anh</u>	'I understand you slightly.'
	1 2 3 4	1 3 4 2
	<u>Cái này hơi nhỏ</u>	'This thing is rather small.'
	1 2 3 4	2 1 3 4

[Rất may occur only before stative verbs, while hơi can precede both stative and non-stative verbs.]

So far, I can find only two post-verb particles.<sup>2</sup> They are:

thay 'mildly exclamatory'      Đau-đau thay phận đàn-bà!

1                      2                      3                      4  
'How painful is the lot of women!'

luôn 'directly, all at once'      Bạn tôi bị đau đi luôn nhà thương

1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      7  
'My friend got sick and went  
directly to the hospital.'

## 2.2 False concatenations.<sup>3</sup>

It is quite often observed that a series of verbs which appear in juxtaposition on the surface really belong to separate underlying VP's, or even to separate underlying sentences. Such verbs are said to be in "false concatenation."

2.21 False concatenations and và-deletion. This is the case involving conjoined VP's in a single sentence where the verbs represent a series of temporally consecutive actions. Consider the following examples:

- (1) quay lại<sup>4</sup> 'turn around' and nhìn 'look':

Hồng quay lại nhìn con chó      'Hong turned around and looked  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      1                      2                      3                      4  
at the dog.'

- (2) bị đau 'get sick' and đi nhà thương 'go to the hospital':

Bạn tôi bị đau đi nhà thương rồi      'My friend got sick and  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      2                      1                      3  
went to the hospital already.'

- (3) ngồi 'sit' and nhai 'chew':

Bà ta ngồi im-lặng nhai trầu      'She sat quietly and chewed  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      1                      2                      3                      4  
betel nut.'

- (4) ở 'live, be at' and đến 'come':

Anh ở đâu đến?      'Where did you come from?' (Where did you  
1                      2                      3                      4                      3                      1  
live and come?)