

# Segmental variation of Vietnamese in northeastern Thailand\*

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## Abstract

The objectives of this investigation are to study the lectal variation of Vietnamese in the upper northeastern region of Thailand, covering 14 provinces, in regard to consonants and vowels, and to uncover the patterns of variation of Vietnamese in this region across three generations. The informants were divided into three age groups: 40 and under, 41-59 and 60 and over, regardless of where they were born and/or how long they had lived in Thailand. A wordlist containing 281 lexical items relevant to languages of the Việt-Mường branch was used to elicit data for auditory analysis.

The findings reveal that Thai Vietnamese (TV) is descended from two major subtypes of Vietnamese: Northern Vietnamese (NV) and Central Vietnamese (CV). NV is found in a few pockets in the northwest, while the CV type is found throughout the region. For NV speakers, alveolar-palatal retroflexes [ʈ ʂ] are merged with the non-retroflex counterparts [c s] and trill [r] with voiced alveolar fricative [z]. As for CV speakers, retroflexion and trill remain distinct phonemic units but the voiced alveolar fricative is merged with the palatal semi-vowel [j]. However, for most young generation speakers, the voiced alveolar fricative is replaced by the palatal semi-vowel in all contexts.

Variation of the final consonant phoneme [-ɲ] is the most diverse since this phonetic unit is a marked feature of Vietnamese and other languages of the Mon-Khmer family. Most older generation NV speakers have maintained the phoneme syllable-finally, whereas the phoneme varies from [-ŋ], [-n] to [-p] for younger NV and CV speakers.

With respect to variation of vowels, it is found that the [-eŋ] sequence of Vietic, which is [-aŋ] in modern Vietnamese manifestation, is still preserved. Another remarkable finding from this study is the preservation of monophthongization of modern Vietnamese diphthongs.

The investigation also reveals that the double closure of final consonants after back rounded vowels is still maintained among older generation speakers but completely non-existent among young speakers, except for a few with some Vietnamese education. The loss is relatively predictable since double closure is no longer phonemically significant. Without it, mutual intelligibility is still possible. Many of these changes appear to be simple unmarkings of more marked areas of the parent phonological systems, but others defy such facile accounts.

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## Introduction

Vietnamese is the national language of Vietnam and is classified under the Việt-Mường branch of the Mon-Khmer subfamily, Austroasiatic family. The language was originally of the atonal type, like many other MK languages. Nonetheless, it at present has six fully developed tones, perhaps due to the influence of ten centuries of Chinese rule from 111 B.C to A.D 939. This aspect of the language led Henri Maspero to categorize Vietnamese with Chinese and Tai until Haudricourt (1954) proved that Vietnamese tones had evolved from syllable final consonants, and was a later development as a result of long linguistic contact with and influence from Chinese. It is estimated that the first three tones were developed by the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and that by the 12<sup>th</sup> century the language had acquired all six tones (Haudricourt, 1954).

Ethnically Vietnamese people can be found throughout Thailand, but are mostly concentrated in the eastern and northeastern regions of the country. Pussadee Chandavimol (1998) notes that the Vietnamese entered the kingdom beginning in the Ayuthaya period during the reign of King Narai the Great (1656-1688) to the early Rattanakosin period during the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868). Nevertheless, there is little detail of their arrival in Thailand. There were two major reasons for resettlement in Thailand: (1) escape from political and religious persecution and (2) as prisoners of wars. Political and religious refugees left their country by ship and settled in Ayuthaya and Chanthaburi provinces. They were mostly Catholic converts who, at that time, were suppressed and persecuted at home. During a period encompassing the reigns of King Rama I through King Rama V (1786-1910), several groups entered the country in large numbers and settled in Bangkok, Chanthaburi, and the Northeast. Many of them originated from Huế and Hà Tiên of Central Vietnam. During the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868), a large number who were escaping religious persecution and famine were from the South, along with many from the Central and North-Central regions. This latter group entered Thailand through Laos and was settled in Nakhorn Phanom, Nongkhai and Sakon Nakhorn provinces.

Khajatphai Burusphat (1978:9-12) states that the Vietnamese residing in northeastern Thailand entered the country through Laos between 1945-1946, after World War II. The approximate number was around 51,700. Those coming via Vientiane were northern Vietnamese, and settled in Nong Khai Province, while those coming via the Thakhaek District of Laos were Central Vietnamese and settled in Nakhon Phanom's city center, That Phanom District, and Mukdahan Province.

Bui Quang Tung (1958), cited in Pussadee Chandavimol (1998:123-125), investigated Vietnamese language use in Vietnamese communities in Bangkok and Chanthaburi provinces. It was found that the Vietnamese language in these areas showed many archaic forms that could not be easily understood by homeland Vietnamese. Many lexical items and expressions had been borrowed from Thai. Furthermore, the intonations were also Thai-like. As a consequence, conversations between Vietnamese in Vietnam and Vietnamese in Thailand required interpreters. The author further predicted that, within one

or two generations or around 50 years at the most, the Vietnamese would be completely and successfully assimilated with the mainstream Thai.

Like all languages, Vietnamese has many regional and sociolinguistic varieties with their own unique characteristics from North to South. Nguyen (1990:49-68) has revised slightly the traditional view that Vietnamese possesses three regional forms - Northern, Central and Southern, to include a new North-Central type. The speech of Hanoi in the North is considered the standard, used as a medium of instruction, in public discourse and is the official language. The following aspects are distinctive characteristics of each dialect. North-Central, as in Vinh, has three retroflexes; the affricate [tʂ], the voiceless fricative [ʂ], and the voiced fricative [ʐ]. Also only in the NC variety are the graphemes <d->, <gi-> and <r-> all pronounced differently. The Central form exemplified by Huế speech has only five tones, with *hỏi* and *ngã* tones pronounced identically with a long rising contour. It is regarded as archaic and difficult for speakers of other varieties to understand because many archaic forms of vocabulary and voice quality are preserved. Despite the archaica of CV, Alves and Nguyen (1998) and Alves (2002) feel that the NC variety is even more archaic than Huế. The initial /z-/ in the standard variety corresponds to the semi-vowel /j-/ in the NC variety, and the palatal finals /-ch/ and /-ɲ/ to /-t/ and /-n/ respectively. Finally, the Southern form as spoken in Saigon or Ho Chi Minh City makes the distinction between non-retroflex and retroflex initials, and diphthongs are pronounced as monophthongs, e.g., /iəp/ becoming /ip/, /iət/ and /iəc/ becoming /i:c/ so Việt becoming /vi:c/ or /uəm/ becoming /um/.

Thompson (1987) presents a view of the dialectology that categorizes Vietnamese into seven types in addition to the standard dialect of Hà Nội. The Tonkin dialect in the Tonkin delta area, particularly at Phat-diem province, demonstrates a gradual vowel change from the standard one, which could be distinctively perceptible. In Vinh, retroflex consonants become distinctive and there are many characteristics considered intermediate between Hà Nội and Huế. Thompson also confirms that in Huế, the *hỏi* and *ngã* tones have merged to a long rising contour with glottal stricture and triphthongs having become diphthongs in all environments. As for Đà Nẵng, the *hỏi* and *ngã* tones have merged like those of Huế, but without glottal stricture, and *hw-* becomes *w-*. In Bas-Annam in south central Vietnam, initial *v-* becomes *j-* in all contexts. Diphthongs in Saigon become monophthongs in all environments. As for Southern Cochinchina in the southern part of Saigon, *f-* changes to *p-*, *Cw-* to *w-*, and *gw-* to *j-* respectively.

Variation or language variation is defined as differences in phonology, grammar or word choice within a language in relation to region, social class and/or educational background, or degree of formality of a situation in which language is used (Richards, Platt and Weber 1985:305). A regional variety or lect is defined as a variety of a language, spoken in one part of a country, which differs somewhat in vocabulary, grammar, and/or pronunciation from other forms of the same language (ibid., 80).

The focus of this study is on the phonology of Vietnamese as used by the Vietnamese Thais residing in the northeastern region of the country. In this study, the Vietnamese Thais are divided into three age groups: 60 and over, 41-59, and 40 and under. The first group represents the older generation, many of whom are thought to have taken part in the migration from Vietnam. The second group represents the middle generation who were born in Thai territory. They may or may not have been educated in the formal education system, while the last group represents the present generation who were born in Thailand and have been exposed to the Thai formal education system and media. The purpose of this age categorization is to find out how the language varies among the three generations and in what direction changes have tended to occur.

Vietnamese in Thailand is categorized into three main forms. The southern vernacular is spoken in the eastern part of Thailand, namely in Trat, Rayong, Chanthaburi, and Arunyaprathet provinces. The characteristics of this variety are similar to those of Ho Chi Minh City (Sujika Phuget 1996). The central and northern varieties of Vietnamese are spoken in the northeastern region of Thailand. The central dialect, the dominant one, is spoken in the entire region except Udon Thani, Nong Khai, Khon Kaen, and Loei provinces, where the northern form is mostly used. In addition, the northern form is also widely spoken in Bangkok, where Vietnamese communities are concentrated. The predominantly Central Vietnamese in the northeastern region is for historical reasons. When Vietnamese refugees came into Thailand, they were put in specially designated zones in Nakhon Phanom and Ubon Ratchathani provinces before they were repatriated back to their country when the situation in their homelands abated, or sent to the refugee camp in Nakhon Ratchasima province, awaiting refugee status to further migrate to a third country or remain on Thai soil as refugees.

## Objectives

The objectives of this investigation were to study lectal variation in Vietnamese in the northeastern region of Thailand in regard to consonants and vowels, and to discover the variation of Vietnamese in this region across the three generations of Thai-Vietnamese speakers.

## Methodology

A Vietnamese wordlist devised by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) ([www.sil.org](http://www.sil.org)) was used to elicit data for consonant and vowel variation analysis. The wordlist consisted of 281 lexical items relevant for the Việt-Mường branch.

The selection of key informants was based on one representative for each generation in a speech community. If there was more than one dialectal variant within a single speech community, the number of representatives was selected in accordance with the number of dialectal variants. There are



approximately 50 speech communities covering 14 provinces in the northeastern region, which included Amnatcharoen, Chaiyaphum, Kalasin, Khon Kaen, Loei, Mukdahan, Nakhon Phanom, Nongbua Lamphu, Nong Khai, Roi Et, Sakon Nakhon, Ubon Ratchathani, Udon Thani, and Yasothon.

### Data analysis

Auditory impressions were used to determine variation among segmental phonemes, namely, consonants and vowels. The data were divided according to the three age groups in addition to the northern (miền Bắc) and the central (miền Trung) dialects, which were predominantly spoken in the northeastern region. The analysis emphasized variations of initial consonants, final consonants, and vowels among the informants of the three age groups.

### The findings

Before the analysis results are presented, a brief summary of the phonological systems of standard Vietnamese, or the Hà Nội variety, is now provided so that overall features of TV can be compared to the NV norm. The phonological features considered are only consonants and vowels.

There are 22 consonantal phonemes in the standard variety /b- d- -p t c k ʔ th- v- z- ʎ- f- s- x- h- m n ɲ l- w j/. There are 11 monophthongs and three diphthongs. There is no phonemic distinction between short and long vowels, except /a/ and /a:/. The single vowels are /i e ε a a: ə ɤ u ɔ o u/ and the diphthongs are /iə uə uə/ (Adapted from Thompson, 1987:19-20). The variations included in this finding are those of initial consonants, final consonants, and vowels among speakers in the three age groups. As the language spoken in the region is thought to contain speakers who originally spoke Standard/Northern Vietnamese (NV) and Central Vietnamese (CV), note was taken of whether the Thai Vietnamese (TV) data represented a NV or a CV type as well as whether the variation at each point differed from the described NV and CV norms.

### Variations of the initial consonants in Thai Vietnamese (TV)

Of the 22 consonantal phonemes, all can occur in TV in the initial position of the syllable, except [p] which appears only finally except in a few, mostly French loan words, e.g., pin ‘battery’. Nonetheless, there are eight phonemes found in this investigation that are variables across the three generations and that also correspond to the parent group whether Central Vietnamese (CV) or Northern Vietnamese (NV). These phonemes are /c ʃ s z r x ɣ v/ and their variants are [t] vs [tɕ], [ʃ] vs [s], [z] vs [j], [r] vs [j] or [t], [x] vs [kh], [ɣ] vs [x] or [kh], and [v] vs [w]. The eight phonemes are recorded in the standard *quốc ngữ* orthography with nine graphs as follows:

Table 1. Phonemes distinguishing northern and central Vietnamese varieties found in northeastern Thailand

Quốc ngữ	Phonemic symbol	Example word		
tr-, ch-	c	trời	/cɤ̌j/	‘sky’
s-	s	say	/saj/	‘drunk’
x-	s	xương	/suwəŋ/	‘bone’
gi-	z	gió	/zɔ́/	‘wind’
d-	z	dừa	/zuèə/	‘coconut’
r-	z	rửa	/zuə/	‘to wash’
kh-	x	khỉ	/xi/	‘monkey’
g-, gh-	ɣ	gà	/ɣà:/	‘chicken’
v-	v	voi	/vɔj/	‘elephant’

The phonemic transcription above is based on that of the standard variety used in education and in the media. As shown above, different written scripts (alphabets) have the same phonemic representations in the standard language, such as *tr-* and *ch-*, *s-* and *x-*, and *gi-*, *d-*, and *r-*. Nevertheless, these phonemes are pronounced distinctively and differently by speakers originally from the central region of Vietnam. In addition, speakers of different generations in northeastern Thailand make distinctions among these various phonemes, which are the main focus of this investigation. It is to be noted that all the standard phonemic representations follow Thompson (1987).

<*tr-*> is pronounced as the voiceless palatal stop [tɕ] in the standard variant but as the voiceless alveolar retroflex affricate [ɬ] in the central variant. Other variants include [j] and [z], and less commonly found variants are [t] and [tr]. As for the latter two variants, they were not found in the first generation but mostly found in the third generation, and they were not considered the ‘correct’ forms of pronunciation by older speakers. It was revealed from this investigation that most of the Vietnamese speakers in the region originated from the central region of Vietnam, since the central variant was mostly used (about 55%) by the first generation and 65% by the second generation. However, positive attitude towards the central variety decreased in favor of the standard variants in the third generation. One explanation for such a shift might be historical unmarking, *ceteris paribus*. That is, more marked segments will become less marked through linguistic change. The non-retroflex variant is easier to pronounce in contrast to other variants used by the older generation. Another explanation might be due to the influence of a contact language, Thai, that they have all been exposed to. Thai does not have the retroflex affricate, but it does have the denti-alveolar affricate. As a consequence, phonetic transfer between the two languages could take place.

A point to note is that the occurrence of the correspondence of [j] and [z] is somewhat irregular, as they occur in only certain words and it is more of a speaker’s idiosyncrasy rather than a rule, particularly among NV speakers.

For example, *trời* [zɤ̌j] ‘sky’ for the variant [z] and *trầu* [jèw] ‘betel chew’ for the variant [j].

<s-> and <x-> are pronounced identically to [s] in NV or the standard variety, but carry different pronunciations in the CV variety. For the CV variety, words written with the initial <s-> are pronounced as the voiceless palatal retroflex fricative [ʂ], whereas those with the initial <x-> are pronounced as the voiceless palatal fricative [s]. The variable forms are another indicator that differentiates an NV speaker from a CV speaker. The investigation reveals that among CV speakers, the use of the retroflex variant increases with age. The use of the variant among the first and second generations outweighed that of the non-retroflex variant, 75% and 66%, respectively. However, for the third generation, the opposite was found, with 38% of the speakers showing a retroflex and 61% of the speakers demonstrating a non-retroflex variant. Two explanations for this development present themselves: (1) there is no perceptual need to retain a retroflex and context almost always resolves any ambiguity and, (2) the retroflex sound is presumably a more marked and, thus, more fragile sound developmentally and likely to disappear. For instance, *suong* /ʂuəŋ/ ‘fog’ and *xuong* /suəŋ/ ‘bone’ could be pronounced identically and they could be understood with the help of the context, particularly for young speakers speaking the CV variety. Moreover, the retroflex fricative does not exist in Thai and if such a feature appears, the speakers would be regarded as having a speech defect. Thus, there are both internal and contact motivations for TV speakers to evolve in the second and third generations toward the less marked and more ‘Thai-like’ non-retroflex.

<gi-> and <d-> are pronounced as [z] in the NV variant and as [j] in the CV variant. However, the majority of the younger generation are likely to use the latter form than the former one, regardless of that manifestation of *gi-* and *d-*. From my field work, it was found that very few of them retained the [z] variant even though this form is found in the speech of their parents. This change might have arisen because they were more proficient and at ease in Thai than Vietnamese, and Thai does not have this phoneme. From my observation during the data collection period, young speakers did not seem to be able to perceive and put into practice the [z] variant despite repetition and coaxing by their parents. Only the ones who had formally studied standard Vietnamese to some extent when they were young could pronounce it. Other variants in the set include [t̚], [t], and [t̚ɕ], which were found in the second and third generations. Nevertheless, these occurred only in certain words with a change of tone as well, for instance, *già* /zà:/ ‘old age’ becoming [t̚a:] or [ta:] or [t̚ɕa:]. However, the [t̚ t̚ t̚ɕ] variants never occurred with words beginning with <d-> but only with <gi->.

Another special lexical item worth noting is <gi> ‘what’, which is pronounced as [zì] in the NV variant and [jì] in the CV variant. As expected, the central variant outnumbered the standard one in terms of use, but this pattern declined with age. The variant [t̚ɕ] is exclusively used by the CV variant speakers, accompanied by a change of tone from the low tone (*huyền*) to the mid or level tone (*ngang*), becoming [t̚ɕì] rather than [t̚ɕi].

<**r-**> is pronounced as [z] in the NV variant and [r] in the CV variant. The first generation still retained the two forms distinctively, but for the second and third generations who used the NV variant, the variant [z] is rapidly being replaced by the variant [j]. This phenomenon is particularly widespread among speakers in the third generation if they are only exposed to the spoken form of the language. Younger speakers replace the variant [z] with [j] in all contexts because they are unable to pronounce the former variant, and for them, [z] is auditorily [j]. This development could be regarded as an important case of phonological substitution as younger speakers appear to produce [j] even though they must have heard [z] in others and equate these two manifestations as derived from a common source. Regarding the variant [t], which could be considered a peculiar form, it occurs only in certain words and is used by only some CV speakers. It was found in Tha Rae district of Sakon Nakhon province and Don Phaeng district of Nakhon Phanom province in words such as *rắn* ‘snake’ becoming [tán].

<**kh-**> is pronounced as voiceless velar fricative [x] in both NV and CV varieties. However, this variant could be realized as voiceless aspirated velar stop [kh] in the second generation and more so in the third generation, while the original form is still retained in the first generation. For instance, the word *không* ‘not’ could be pronounced either [xon] or [khon] by younger speakers. One explanation of the variation is unmarking of the fricative to become a stop due to close proximity of the point of articulation of the two variants. The two variants share all sound properties except manner of articulation. [kh] is less marked whereas [x] is a fricative and more marked. In daily communication in the Thai environment, [kh] is more logical in terms of use than [x], since it is phonemically less marked and more often heard in the external language. In addition, there is competing candidate that could cause confusion when the two variants are used interchangeably.

<**g-**> is pronounced as voiced velar fricative [ɣ] in both NV and CV varieties. Most of the words beginning with <**g**> or <**gh**> retain the original pronunciation, as in the word *gà* /ɣà:/ ‘chicken’. Yet there are some words that could vary from [ɣ] to [x] or [kh], especially among younger speakers as in the word *gãi* /ɣãi:/ ‘to scratch’ becoming [xãi:] or [khãi:]. As shown in the sample word, the variation does not occur only in the initial consonant but also in the tone as well. In this case, the tone has been changed from the glottalized rising tone (ngã) to the falling-rising tone (hỏi).

<**v-**> is pronounced as voiced labio-dental fricative [v] in both standard and central varieties. The original pronunciation is retained among speakers in the first generation. However, it has become more labialized among younger speakers, particularly among the third generation. From field observation, it was ascertained that about 90% of young speakers had labialized this phoneme, replacing it with the voiced bilabial semi-vowel variant [w]. This phenomenon is not unusual, considering the linguistic environment the Vietnamese find themselves in. They are surrounded by Thai speaking communities and are bombarded by Thai media, education and daily communication. The Thai language does not have the voiced labio-dental

phoneme /v/. Consequently, this phoneme is very much likely to be replaced by the bilabial semi-vowel phoneme /w/.

The variation of the initial phonemes in this investigation could be summarized in the following table.

Table 2. Variation of the initial consonants

QN	tr	s	x	gi-	d	r	kh	g, gh	v
IPA	c	s	s	z	z	z	x	ɣ	v
Gen. I	t c j z	ʃ s ʃ	s ʃ	j z	j z	r z	x	ɣ	v
Gen. II	t c j t	ʃ s	s	j z t c	j z	r j z t	x kh	ɣ x kh	v w
Gen. III	t c t z tr	ʃ s	s	j z t c t	j z	r j z t	x kh	ɣ x kh	v w

Variation of the final consonants

Of the 22 consonantal phonemes, ten can occur syllable-finally, which include /-p -t -k -c -m -n -ɲ -ŋ -w -j/. With regard to variation, stop phonemes do not vary much, and /-k/ and /-c/ seem to make very little distinction, almost being merged together when they function as the final consonants. The variation occurs most with the nasal phonemes, particularly the palatal nasal /-ɲ/, with various variants in every generation. Variants of other phonemes are sporadic, which can be detailed as follows:

The variants of the final consonantal phoneme /-t/ are [-ŋ] and [-j]. From the data, there was only one word with these variants, *rót* /zʔt/ ‘to fall or drop’. Besides the final consonant, the tone of the word had also undergone a change from high tone (sắc) to level tone (ngang), becoming [ruŋ], [rʔj], and [jʔj].

The variants of the final consonantal phoneme /-n/ are [-m] and [-ŋ], which were found among speakers in the second and third generations. These variants occur only in certain words, which might be described as idiosyncrasy. The words are *cán* /kán/ ‘to bite’ variably realized as [kám], *rán* /zán/ ‘snake’ and *gan* /ɣa:n/ ‘liver’ as [rán] and [ɣá:ŋ] respectively. The change of [-n] to [-ŋ] is one seen in other languages as well. In Japanese [-n] is often



pronounced [-ŋ], *san* ‘three’ [san~saŋ]. The velar may thus represent an unmarking in word final position.

The variants of the final consonantal phoneme /-ɲ/ are variably realized as [-ŋ], [-n] and [-p] in their respective rank of frequency. The variation of this phoneme is more noticeable in the younger age groups. Most of the first generation retained the phoneme with few cases using the variants. However, almost all of the third generation used the variants instead of the phoneme, in particular, the nasal variants. This finding was similar to that of Premsrirat (1995 and 1999) in the Khmu and Khmer languages. It was found in this investigation that vowel change are usually accompanied with variants from /a:/ to /ɛ/ as in:

cánh	/ká:ɲ/→[kếŋ] or [kén]	‘wing’
anh	/ʔa:ɲ/→[ʔɛŋ] or [ʔɛn] or [ʔa:n]	‘older brother’
lạnh	/lạ:ɲ/→[lɛŋ] or [lɛn]	‘cold’
xanh	/sa:ɲ/→[sɛŋ] or [sɛn]	‘green’

In the example words above, /-ɲ/ is in the environment where it is preceded by the vowel /a:/. When the phoneme is preceded by other vowels, e.g., /i/ in *Kinh* ‘the Kinh ethnicity’ or *Quang Binh* ‘the city of Quang Binh’, the result remained the same. That is, there is no contrast between *Kinh* and *Kin* or *Binh* and *Bing*. (Vietnamese will always spell these *inh* and not *ing*.)

The variant [-ŋ] is used more often than the variant [-n], 64% and 29% respectively. It should be pointed out that the rule ordering of the assimilation process should be proposed as follows:

- (1) [-ɲ] → [-ŋ]
- (2) [a] → [ɛ]

This is due to approximation of places of articulation of the above vowels and final consonants. However, Alves and Nguyen (1998) found that the phenomenon is an earlier form of Vietic sequence /-ɛŋ/ which has developed into /-aŋ/ in modern Vietnamese. The form is still preserved in NCV where Thanh-Chương variety (TCV) in Nghệ-An Province represents. The finding in this study may confirm that many TV residents in the areas of investigation originated from the North-Central region of Vietnam and they have perhaps maintained the conservative form of this final consonant. It is thus concluded that the appearance of [-ŋ] in place of [-ɲ] may be either a retention of a former stage of Vietnamese of the NCV type or possibly is just an unmarking of the geographically and typologically rare final palatal nasal. As in many historical studies, multiple causes may conspire to eliminate certain sounds from the language inventory.

Table 3. Some correspondences of standard and TCV

Gloss	Quốc Ngữ	Modern Viet.	TCV
pastry	bánh	bap <sup>24</sup>	bɛ:ŋ <sup>11</sup>
soup	canh	kap <sup>11</sup>	kɛ:ŋ <sup>35</sup>
fishy	tanh	tap <sup>11</sup>	tɛ:ŋ <sup>35</sup>
thatch	tranh	cap <sup>11</sup>	ʈɛ:ŋ <sup>35</sup>
green/blue	xanh	sap <sup>11</sup>	sɛ:ŋ <sup>35</sup>

(Alves and Nguyen, 1998)

As for the variant [-p], only one word from the wordlist was found, that is,

dánh /dǎ:ŋ/ → [dəp]                      ‘to hit’

The variants of the final consonantal phoneme /-ŋ/ are [-m], [-w] and [zero]. As for the variant [-m], it was found in one word, which the majority of the informants used. The word is *miệng* /miəŋ/ ‘mouth’, which is replaced by /mom/ and, of course, the vowel is monophthongized from /iə/ to /o/. This is perhaps an assimilation from the initial consonant. The variant [-w] was found in the word *mỏng* /mɔŋ/ ‘thin’, which was pronounced by some speakers in Na Jok community of Nakhon Phanom province as [mǎw], accompanied by the vowel change. With regard to the deletion of the final /-ŋ/, it was found in Phang Khon district of Sakon Nakhon province by some speakers in the third generation. When the final consonant was deleted, a change in tone also took place and the word was *đông lạnh* /doŋ lǎ:ŋ/ ‘freezing’, becoming [dò lɛ̃ŋ]. The deletion of a final at the end of the first element of a compound is not too surprising. This compound is presumably a Han-Viet loan word with the head on the right and reduced stress on the first syllable, thus weakening its closure.

The variant of the final consonant phoneme /-w/ is [zero]. When there was deletion of the consonantal phoneme, there was an accompanying change of both vowel and tone. Such a variation was not found in the first generation and it was peculiar to certain areas of the region. The consequence is that the variants have become homophonous.

trâu /cəw/ → [tu:] or [tu:]                      ‘buffalo’  
trầu /cəw/ → [tu:]                      ‘betel chew’

The variants of the final consonantal phoneme /-j/ are [-n], [-ŋ], and [zero]. This variation was found only in the second and third generations and it was found in areas of Mukdahan, Amnat Charoen and Chaiyaphum provinces. All of them spoke the central variety of Vietnamese. When the variation took place, there was an accompanying change of either tone or vowel or both.

cây /kəj/ → [kən]                      ‘tree’  
rồi /ròj/ → [roŋ]                      ‘already’  
lưỡi /lụəj/ → [lụə]                      ‘tongue’

The variants of open syllables are [-j] and [-n] and the variation is sporadic in terms of lexical items and localities. Moreover, there was an accompanying change of either tone or vowel or both. It is noted here that the modern manifestations of Vietnamese are derived from the deletion of the final consonants of the conservative forms which many TV speakers have still retained.

rễ	/rễ/	→ [ren] or [rɛn]	‘root’
chí	/cí /	→ [tɕốj] or [tɕáj]	‘louse’
chà	/cà:/	→ [tɕùj]	‘to rub’

In conclusion, the variations of the final consonants could be summarized in the following table. It is significant that /-m/ is the least marked or most preserved coda and /-ɲ/ the most marked coda in Thai Vietnamese.

Table 4. Variation of the final consonants

	-p	-t	-k	-c	-m	-n	-ɲ	-w	-j	open
Gen. I		ɲ					ɲ n p	m		j
Gen. II		j				m	ɲ n p	m w	ϕ n ɲ	j n
Gen. III		j				ɲ	ɲ n p	m ϕ	ϕ n ɲ ϕ	j n

Variation of the vowels

The vowel system of standard Vietnamese is composed of eleven monophthongs and three diphthongs. Vowel length is not phonemically significant for the monophthongs except /a/ and /a:/. From this investigation, it was noticeable that variation of the vowels was most frequently found in the second generation. This phenomenon is not uncommon, as they are a transitional generation. In the environment where the old generation maintains the conservative forms whereas the younger generation adopts the less marked and less conservative forms of the vowels, the transitional generation is caught between the two polarized ends of original and newly created norms. The variation of the vowels among the three generations could be detailed as follows:

The variants of the high front vowel /i/ are [ə] and [a]. The two variants were used by the second generation while only the variant [ə] was found in the first and third generations. The variants were found only in one word from the wordlist and they were used by both northern and central speakers.

chí	/cí /	→ [tɕốj] or [tɕáj]	‘louse’
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The variants of the mid front vowel /e/ are [iə] and [ɛ]. Diphthongization of this single vowel was carried out by all speakers except a few old informants in the first generation, who still maintained the monophthong. This was found in the Don Mong, Tha Uthen (Chai Buri) and Sa Phang Thong communities in Nakhon Phanom Province. With regard to the variant [ɛ], it was found at Ban Noi Nai community of Mukdahan Province by speakers of the third generation.

giết	/zét/	→ [zíət] or [jíət]	‘to kill’
rễ	/zẽ/	→ [rɛn]	‘root’

The variant of the low front vowel /ɛ/ is [ə]. The variation might be sporadic or unconditioned, since it was found only in one community, Na Jok of Nakhon Phanom Province, and was used by speakers of the second generation. In addition to the vowel change, the final consonant of the word was also altered from voiceless bilabial stop /p/ to voiceless apico-alveolar stop /t/.

hẹp	/hɛp/	→ [hət]	‘narrow’
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The variant of the low central short vowel /a/ is [ə]. This variant was found only among informants in the third generation and it was found only in two words. However, this finding may indicate that a sound shift is taking place among younger speakers, since the majority of them do not know how to read and write Vietnamese. Therefore, any deviation from the norm could be tolerated.

chà	/cà:/	→ [tɕə̀j]	‘pestle’
dày	/zàj/	→ [zə̀j] or [jə̀j]	‘thick’

The variants of the low central long vowel /a:/ are [ɛ], [ə], [ɔ], and [u]. The variants of this vowel are the most numerous and the variation has taken place in all generations. Moreover, it has occurred mostly with words ending in <–*nh*> or /-ɲ/, with change of this final consonant to either [-ŋ] or [-n]. The variant [ɛ] was most frequently found, while other variants were found sporadically.

The variant [ɛ] was mostly found to occur with words ending with the palatal nasal /-ɲ/, due probably to phonetic assimilation and preservation of conservative forms of the language among speakers who originated from the North-Central region of Vietnam.

anh	/ʔa:ɲ/	→ [ʔɛŋ] or [ʔɛn]	‘older brother’
cánh	/ká:ɲ/	→ [kɛ́ŋ] or [kɛ́n]	‘wing’
lạnh	/lạ:ɲ/	→ [lɛ́ŋ] or [lɛ́n]	‘cold’
xanh	/sa:ɲ/	→ [sɛ́ŋ] or [sɛ́n]	‘green’

The variant [ɔ] was found only in one word from the wordlist and the tone of the word was also changed. The word was *ná* /ná:/ ‘crossbow’ becoming [nɔ́:]. The variant [ə] was found in all three generations with

changes of either tone or final consonant or both. **Đánh** /dǎ:ŋ/ ‘to hit’ became [dǎp]. The changes to final stops are dramatic. As for the variant [u], the variation took place in the second and the third generations and is found in the word **chà** /cà:/ ‘to rub’ becoming [tɕùj].

The variants of the low unrounded central vowel /ə/ are [u:] and [a:]. When the variation occurred, changes in the tones usually accompanied it and the variation was found only in the second and the third generations.

trâu	/cəw/	→ [tʰu:] or [tʰu:]	‘buffalo’
trầu	/cəw/	→ [tu:] or [tɕà:w]	‘betel chew’
đầu	/dəw/	→ [dà:w]	‘head’

The variant of the mid central vowel /ɤ/ is [u] and the variation was found only in the first generation in the Don Mong community of Nakhon Phanom Province. Furthermore, this finding might be sporadic as it was found in only one word.

rót	/zʰít/	→ [rʊŋ]	‘to fall, drop’
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The variant of the high unrounded central vowel /ɯ/ is [ɤ] and the variation was found only in one speech community, Ban Noi Nai of Mukdahan Province.

trúng	/cuíŋ/	→ [tʰɤŋ]	‘egg’
rừng	/zuìŋ/	→ [rɤŋ]	‘forest’
sừng	/suìŋ/	→ [sɤŋ]	‘horn’

The variant of the low back vowel /ɔ/ is [a], and this variation was found only in the second generation in one speech community, Na Jok of Nakhon Phanom Province. In addition, there was a change of the final consonant of the word from /ŋ/ to /w/. The assumption of such a change was that phonetically the word was pronounced with the double closure of the final consonant [mɔ̃ŋ<sup>w</sup>]. As time has lapsed, the final consonant has been dropped completely and the second articulating particle has become the replacement of the original consonant.

mỏng	/mɔ̃ŋ/	→ [mǎw]	‘thin’
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The variants of the mid back vowel /o/ are [ɔ], [u], and [a]. The variant [ɔ] was not found in the first generation, as they still retain the original. However, the variant was found in the second and third generations in various speech communities throughout the region. This finding indicates that the variation of [o] to [ɔ] has taken place among younger speakers.

chồng	/còŋ/	→ [tɕòŋ]	‘husband’
không	/xoŋ/	→ [xɔŋ] or [khɔŋ]	‘not’
khô	/xo/	→ [xɔ:] or [khɔ:]	‘dry’



The variant [u] was found only in the second generation in the speech communities of Na Jok of Nakhon Phanom, Tha Rae of Sakon Nakhon, and Muang of Yasothon. The upward glide from central to high vowels might be a peculiar aspect of the variety where they were originally from Vietnam because other younger speakers did not seem to pick up the variety at all. It is also to be noted that the variation occurred with the words ending in the palatal semi-vowel /j/, not with other phonemes. This change might also be called ingliding.

gỏi	/yój/	→ [kúj]	‘knee’
thổi	/thỏj/	→ [thuǰ]	‘to blow’
tôi	/toj/	→ [tuj]	‘I’
ngồi	/ηòj/	→ [ηùj]	‘to sit’
lội	/lọj/	→ [lụj]	‘to swim’

The variant [a] was found only in the first and second generations in the word meaning ‘loincloth’. This Vietnamese word is replaced by the Thai word in the third generation, since during the fieldtrip, nobody in this generation knew the Vietnamese word. The variation took place in Na Jok and Don Mong communities of Nakhon Phanom, and the final consonant /-n/ was added to the originally open syllable.

khố	/xó/	→ [xán]	‘loincloth’
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The variants of the diphthong /iə/ are [o] and [u] and both were variants of the word *miệng* /miəŋ/ ‘mouth’. The majority of the informants used the variant [mom], whereas in some speech communities, the variant [mum] was used. The upward glide to [u] might be a peculiar aspect of certain geographical localities. This could be supported by many northern Thai communities, e.g., my own. In this community, the diphthong /uə/ has been monophthongized to /ɤ:/ in all environments, regardless of age, education or economic status. Despite being surrounded by diphthong-using communities, there has been no effect on this monophthongization. So /huəŋ/ ‘house’ becomes [hɤ:n] and /duəŋ/ ‘moon, month’ becomes [dɤ:n].

The variants of the diphthong /uə/ are [a:], [u], and [ɤ]. The variants [u] and [ɤ] occurred in the same word in the wordlist and they were found in the first and second generations. The word was *lưỡi* /luǽj/ ‘tongue’ becoming [luǽj] or [luèj] or [lɤj], with a tone change. As for the variant [a:], it was found in several words including the word *lưỡi*. It is noticeable that this monophthongization has taken place in speech communities where the central variety of Vietnamese was spoken. The variants are usually accompanied by tone change.

lưỡi	/luǽj/	→ [la:j] or [là:j]	‘tongue’
nước	/nuốk/	→ [ná:k]	‘water’
người	/ηuèj/	→ [ηà:j]	‘person’
lửa	/luǽ/	→ [lǎ:]	‘fire’
đường	/duèŋ/	→ [dà:ŋ]	‘road’

As for the word *nước* ‘water’, Diffloth G and Ferus M, cited in Nguyễn Tài Căn (1995:285), reconstructed the protoform of the word as \**ḍak*. It could be possible that the central variety has still maintained the protoform of the vowel, while other varieties have completely undertaken the diphthongization process of the word. Again the analyst is found on the horns of dilemma of deciding whether a sound development is retention, innovation, or borrowing. In this case, it appears that retention may be the best answer.

The variant of the diphthong /uə/ is [ɔ]. This variation also has taken place among all three generations speaking the central variety.

ruôi	/rùəj/	→ [ròj]	‘a house fly’
ruột	/ruət/	→ [rət]	‘intestine’
muối	/múəj/	→ [mố:j]	‘salt’
muỗi	/muǎj/	→ [mɔ:j]	‘mosquito’
lúa	/lúə/	→ [lố:]	‘field rice’

In addition, some open syllable words have their variant [-j] as the final consonant. In this type of variation, the vowels of the original or standard words were changed as well, either from high vowel to low vowel or from low vowel to high vowel.

chí	/cí /	→ [tɕốj]	‘louse’
chà	/cà:/	→ [tɕùj]	‘to rub’

In conclusion, vowels variation could be summarized in the following table.

Table 5. Vowels variation

	i	e	ɛ	a	a:	ə	ɤ	ɯ	ɔ	o	u	iə	ɯə	uə	open
Gen. I	ə	ia e			ɛ ə ɔ		u			a o		o	a: ɯ	ɔ	j
Gen. II	ə a	ia	ə		ɛ ɔ u ə	u		ɤ	a	ɔ u a		o u	a: ɤ ɯ	ɔ	j
Gen. III	ə	ia ɛ		ə	ɛ ə u	u a				ɔ		o	a: ɔ	ɔ	j

Special feature

Another aspect of Vietnamese worth noting is double closure of final consonants after back rounded vowels in words like *khong* [xoŋ<sup>m</sup>] ‘not’ or *học* [hạuk<sup>p</sup>] ‘to study’. The investigation reveals that this phonetic feature is still

maintained among older generation speakers but has been completely dropped among young speakers except among a few of those having had some education in standard Vietnamese when they were young. The drop of this feature is relatively predictable since it is not phonemically significant. Mutual understanding is still possible without this feature. Moreover, the double closure phenomenon is extremely rare cross-linguistically and marked as a sound type. Its disappearance is not unexpected.

**A comparison of some lexical items of north-central Vietnamese (NCV) with Thai Vietnamese (TV)**

The following table lists correspondences of lexical items of NCV represented by Thanh-Chương variety (TCV) with those of Vietnamese in the northeastern region of Thailand found in this study. Alves and Nguyen (1998) conducted research in Thanh-Chương, which is a district in the western hills of Nghệ-An province, a short distance from the border of Laos. The correspondences confirm that many Thai Vietnamese originated from the north-central region of Vietnam. Of the 50 lexical items, ten are found to be exact correspondents, whereas the rest are not basic vocabulary items so they are not covered in the wordlist used in this study. If more items were investigated, greater correspondences might be found.

Table 6. Some correspondences of NCV and TV

Gloss	Quốc Ngữ	Modern Viet.	NCV	TV
buffalo	trâu	cəw	tu: <sup>11</sup>	tu:/tu:
road	đường	duəŋ	da:ŋ <sup>33</sup>	dà:ŋ
person	người	ŋuəj	ŋa:j <sup>33</sup>	ŋà:j
water	nước	nuək	na:k <sup>11</sup>	ná:k
fire	lửa	luə	la: <sup>31</sup>	lả:
I	tôi	toj	tu:j <sup>33</sup>	tu:j
pastry	bánh	báp	bɛ:ŋ <sup>11</sup>	bếŋ
green/blue	xanh	saj	sɛ:ŋ <sup>35</sup>	sɛŋ
where	đâu	dəw	mo: <sup>35</sup>	mo:
tree	cây	kəj	kə:n <sup>35</sup>	kə:n

(Adapted from Alves and Nguyen, 1998)

**Discussion**

The findings are generally in line with the universal aspect of language variation in that the older generation tends to maintain the language of their home region, whereas the following generations show deviation from their parents and grandparents. One force for change in younger generations is undoubtedly the wider contact with education, the media and socialization, which they have experienced in contrast to their elders, who are confined to their own respective communities and have regular communication with interlocutors of their generation who share the same linguistic norms. Furthermore, Vietnamese in Thailand is considered a minority language

isolated from the motherland. What was spoken in the first generation of immigrants has still been preserved up until the present time due to limited contacts with other Vietnamese groups and geographical isolation from mainland Vietnam. As a consequence, linguistic forms may remain intact for generations among older speakers. This is in accordance with the wave theory of language variation (and change) in that variation of the language is most active and diverse at the epicenter of the wave of change and less active at its periphery. Vietnamese in Thailand is at the periphery, therefore, conservative and archaic forms of the language are still maintained, for instance, monophthongization of present-day diphthongs and other conservative lexical items. These findings may be beneficial in historical linguistic terms when attempts to reconstruct protoforms of the language are carried out. These findings may serve as examples of a transitional period in the long process prior to the language becoming tonal, as the present manifestation shows, and also may help us understand how historical change can occur in the microcosm of the village or region in groups isolated from the mainstream. Lastly, it is to be noted that several kinds of developments remain somewhat mysterious, e.g., why a palatal nasal can develop into [-p] or [z/j] into [t]. Are these retentions, innovations, or conspiracies of the two?

## Conclusion

This analysis of the variation in consonants and vowels among the three generations of Vietnamese speakers in northeastern Thailand revealed that the first generation still retained most of the more marked aspects of the language. This might be due to geographical isolation from the motherland, away from the linguistic center, Vietnam, where language shift was an on-going process. For many years, Vietnamese speakers in Thailand were virtually cut off from communicating with those in Vietnam. As a consequence, the archaic linguistic forms they brought with them when they left the country have been maintained among themselves. The influence of Thai initially had little or no impact on their language, since the first generation was not allowed to attend school because of their immigrant status. The majority of them are alien cardholders and are illiterate in the Thai language. Still, some of them have managed to learn to read and write Thai through self-instruction. Besides, their Vietnamese had become so fossilized that it is hard for aspects of the second language to penetrate. Nonetheless, most of them are fluent in Thai and Vietnamese at the verbal communicative level. In some cases, particularly those speaking the central variety, archaic forms of the Việt-Mường languages before they had undergone changes are still preserved and in use.

Innovative variations have been found among the transitional generation with some influences from the archaic forms of the first generation as well as the new linguistic environment. The second generation was allowed access to Thai compulsory four-year primary education, although they were descendants of Vietnamese immigrants with alien status and were still regarded as a security threat. The majority of them are now literate in Thai and the influence of the language on their Vietnamese is clearly noticeable.

As for the third generation, no restrictions have been imposed on their education because they are all Thai citizens in the eyes of the law and the state is obliged to practice equality of opportunity. Consequently, very few of them have studied Vietnamese formally. One reason for their neglect of their ancestors' language is that there is little or no value in the language for them to climb up the economic, social, and educational ladder. The majority of them are illiterate in Vietnamese and if they can speak it, they have adopted the less marked aspects of the language in their linguistic repertoire.

As an investigator, I was impressed at the level of retention of regional features of Vietnamese. Vietnam, as a country, was occupied by foreign powers throughout a sizeable part of its history. Resistance to external forces is often manifested in retention of archaic linguistic forms and lack of borrowing especially when the community feels itself under threat. The TV situation shows both retention and innovation, perhaps retention found in speakers who were not embraced by the majority population and innovation and contact influence by speakers who have grown up in a more egalitarian Thai society.

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