

# PASSIVE AND ERGATIVE IN VIETNAMESE<sup>1</sup>

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## 0.0. INTRODUCTION

Vietnamese, which appears to be an Austroasiatic language, is spoken by approximately 28 million people in the country of Viet-Nam, along the coastal area of the Indochinese peninsula. There are three major dialect areas: North, North-Central, and South (including South-Central), though dialect differences are not great. The dialect used in this study is South Vietnamese. Some sentences used have been taken from Liem (1969); all sentences used have been checked for grammaticality with Dr Nguyễn-Đặng Liêm, a native speaker of Vietnamese.

Glosses are arbitrary in terms of tense or aspect, since these are usually situationally understood. The term *ông đó*, used extensively in this paper, can be glossed as '*that man*', '*that gentleman*', '*that grandfather*', or '*he*'. Conventional orthography is used.

## 0.1. THE PROBLEM

Vietnamese is an accusative language; i.e., in the unmarked transitive sentence, the grammatical subject (the noun phrase immediately preceding the verb) is in the agent case. In this paper, an analysis is made of the structure of transitive Vietnamese sentences which translate into English as passive sentences.

These consist of two distinct types. One is a construction which takes a so-called submissive verb which requires a verb complement which is an embedded sentence. The other is a seemingly ergative construction which takes a transitive verb and a grammatical subject which is in the object case. Verbs in Vietnamese are not morphologically marked for active or passive.

I will define passive sentences as sentences whose grammatical subject is in the object case, whose verb is in a marked form (when the language permits) or there is some marker for passive voice (such as a submissive morpheme), and whose agent when it occurs is a marked noun phrase. It is concluded from the analysis that Vietnamese has no true passive and those sentences which appear to be ergative sentences are, in fact, object-topicalised sentences.

## 1.0. THE GRAMMAR

1.1. We can write the following rules for the underlying structure of the sentences given.

- (1) 1.  $S \rightarrow NP^V (NP) (LP)$   
 2.  $NP \rightarrow \left\{ \left( \begin{array}{c} \text{Nu} \\ \text{Pl} \end{array} \right) (Cl) N (S) \right\} (Det)$   
 3.  $LP \rightarrow (Loc) N$

S = Sentence  
 NP = Noun Phrase  
 V = Verb  
 LP = Locative Phrase  
 Nu = Number  
 Pl = Plural  
 Cl = Classifier  
 N = Noun  
 Det = Determiner  
 Loc = Locative preposition

These rules are far from being descriptively exhaustive; it is hoped they will work for the constructions presented.

## 1.2. JUSTIFICATION OF THE RULES

### 1.2.1. $S \rightarrow NP^V (NP) (LP)$

My analysis of the Vietnamese sentence differs basically from those of others (cf. Liem, Manley, Taylor, Thompson) in that I consider the subject noun phrase, as well as the verb phrase, to be an obligatory element of Sentence. I do not, at this point, agree with Tim Manley that the predicate is the only obligatory element in the base component, or that such surface representations as

- (2) ngủ /sleep/ '(Someone) is sleeping.'  
 đọc sách /read book/ '(Someone) is reading a book.'

(from Thompson) are grammatical in the base component. I prefer to take the view that there is an obligatory noun phrase in the base which occurs on the surface as the subject, and, in accordance with Chomsky (1965), when it is recoverable (understood) through identical prior reference it can be deleted on the surface. I consider the sentences in (2) to be examples of this process since I believe that they cannot be discourse initial and that their subjects are anaphoric.

Sentence adverbials, negative, interrogative and other sentence elements are not touched upon, nor are verb phrase adverbs.

What, like Manley, I have called stative verbs are elsewhere called descriptive verbs (Taylor), extended state verbs (Thompson, 1965a, p. 218), and predicate adjectives (Liem, 1969, p. 107), and usually translated into English as adjectives with copulative verbs. As is to be expected, stative verbs behave differently from other verbs, mostly in that they can be attributes in the noun phrase and, I think, they can never be followed by NP or S.

Below are examples of the expanded S.

- (3) NP            V  
 ông đó       lạnh  
 man that    cold  
 'That man is cold.'
- (4) NP            V            NP  
 ông đó       mua       sách  
                  buy       book  
 'That man bought a book.'
- (5) NP            V            NP        LP  
 ông đó       mua       sách     ở Sài Gòn  
 'That man buys books in Saigon.'

$$1.2.2. \text{ NP} \rightarrow \left\{ \left( \left( \begin{array}{c} \text{Nu} \\ \text{Pl} \end{array} \right) \right) (\text{Cl}) \text{ N} (\text{S}) \right\} (\text{Det})$$

This is a very simplified expansion of a very complex noun phrase, but I think it should be adequate to handle the present problem. Most nouns, not all, require a classifier when preceded by a number. With the occurrence of both a number and a classifier, the noun is optional. It seems reasonable to suppose that this is a derivational phenomenon, as Mr Starosta suggests, and that it is handled by a derivational rule:

## (6) [+Cl] → [+N]

Examples of NP expansion are:

(7) Nu Cl → N Det V N  
 hai người đó mua sách  
 two person that buy book  
 'Those two people are buying books.'

(8) Nu N V N  
 hai ông mua sách?  
 'You (two gentlemen) are buying books?'

(9) N S: Conj... V - N Det V  
 ông mà mua sách đó đi  
 who go  
 'That man who bought the books is going.'

The relative pronoun mà occurs before embedded sentences which are attributes of N. This sentence is uncomfortable without adverbial elements or added verbs to "soften" it, but I feel sure it is grammatical.

## 1.2.3. LP → (Loc) N

Place-nouns following verbs of direction generally occur without a locative particle. I have analysed the word ở in this paper as a locative particle meaning 'in', but since it also occurs as a verb meaning 'to be in; live at', it should probably have two entries in the lexicon.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.3. A SAMPLING OF LEXICON

ông 'gentleman, grandfather' đại-diện 'representative' con 'offspring'

[+N  
+Title  
...]

[+N  
+Title  
...]

[+N  
+Title  
...]

sách 'book'

đồ 'thing'

cỏ 'grass'

năm 'year'

[+N  
...]

[+N  
...]

[+N  
+Mass  
...]

[+N  
-[+Cl]  
...]

họ 'they'

tôi 'I'

Sài Gòn a city

[+N  
+Pr  
-[+Pl]  
...]

[+N  
+Pr  
+((+Nu)) [+Pl]  
...]

[+N  
+location  
...]

bị 'suffer something unpleasant'

[+V  
+Subm  
...]

được 'benefit from something'

[+V  
+Subm  
...]

phải 'be obliged to do or undergo something'

[+V  
+Subm  
...]

giết 'kill'

[+V  
+ NP  
+[animate]\_\_  
...]

mua 'buy'

[+V  
+ NP  
+[human]\_\_  
...]

chọn 'choose'

[+V  
+ NP  
+[animate]\_\_  
...]

làm 'do, make'

[+V  
+ {NP} S  
...]

cho 'give'

[+V  
+ {NP} S  
...]

đi 'go'

[+V  
- NP  
...]

lạnh 'be cold'

[+V  
+Stative  
...]

mát 'be cool'

[+V  
+Stative  
...]

vô-dụng 'be useless'

[+V  
+Stative  
...]

đó 'that, there'

[+Det  
...]

người 'person, people'

[+Cl  
+human  
...]

cuốn 'volume, roll'

[+Cl  
...]

hai 'two'

[+Nu  
...]

ở 'in, at'

[+Loc  
...]

những 'plural'

[+Pl  
- [+Pr]  
- [speaker/hearer]  
...]

chúng 'plural'

[+Pl  
+ [+Pr]  
...]

#### 1.4. CONVENTIONS AND REDUNDANCY RULES

Convention: When an NP of a constituent sentence is identical with an NP of its matrix sentence, the constituent NP is deleted.

RR.1 [+Stative] → [- {NP} S]

RR.2 [+Subm] → [+ S]

RR.3 [+Pr] → [- [+Nu] \_\_  
- [+Cl] \_\_  
- [+Det]  
+human]

RR.4 [+Title] → [+human  
±speaker/hearer]

RR.5 [+speaker/hearer] →  $\begin{bmatrix} -[+Cl] \_ \\ - \_ [+Det] \end{bmatrix}$

RR.6 [+Mass] →  $\begin{bmatrix} -[+Pl] \_ \\ -[+Nu] \_ \\ -[+Cl] \_ \end{bmatrix}$

RR.7 [+human] → [+animate]

## 2.0. SUBMISSIVE VERBS

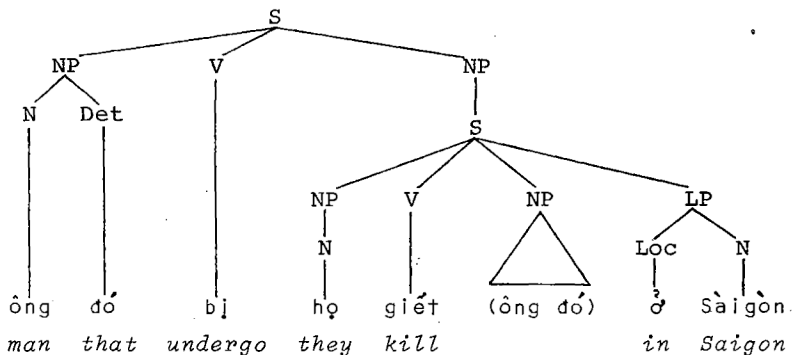
2.1. Liem (1969, p. 103) gives five words which he classifies as verbs and which have a sense of submission, "all having a general lexical meaning of 'to undergo an action' or 'to be obliged to do something' and a particular different nuance". These are as follows:

- (10) bị *under an unhappy experience*  
 mắc *undergo a setback [Hoa: 'to be caught in']*  
 chịu *undergo a burdensome experience*  
 phải *undergo an indifferent experience, or an obligation*  
 được *undergo a happy experience*

Thompson (1965a, pp. 228-9) calls these "momentary action verbs of very generalised meaning which most frequently appear with a descriptive complement" and includes *do 'be accomplished, caused, effected by, be dependent on, the result of'*.

2.2. If these items are marked in the lexicon as [+V] and [+Submissive] and Redundancy Rule 2 requires a sentential complement, application of the grammar to sentence (11) gives the underlying structure shown.

- (11) ông đó bị (họ) giết ở Sài Gòn. 'That man was killed (by them) in Saigon.'



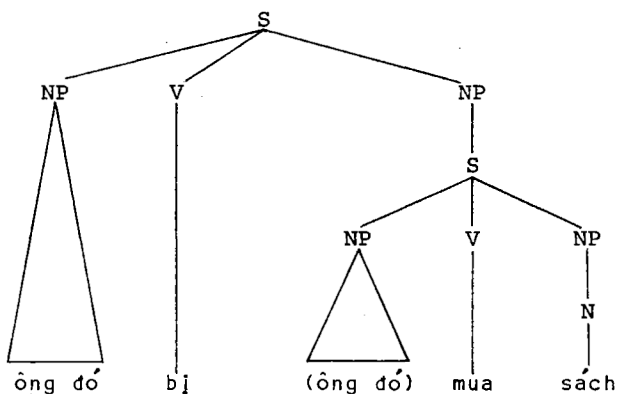
The parentheses around the embedded *ông đó* indicate obligatory deletion of the identical constituent NP, according to the convention. The embedded subject *họ* is optionally deleted (optionally chosen for the surface); i.e. (12) is also grammatical.

(12) *ông đó bị giết ở Sài Gòn.* 'He was killed in Saigon.'

2.3. Submissive verbs take three types of verb complements. Sentences like (11) above easily translate as passive sentences because the grammatical subject of the matrix sentence is identical to the object of the embedded verb.

The other two types differ from the first in that the grammatical subject of the embedded verb is identical to the subject of the matrix sentence. In fact, these two types are called Submissive Actional Complements by Liem, whereas he calls the first type Submissive Passive Complements (1969, pp. 18, 103). The first of these "active" types takes a regular verb, either transitive with an object noun phrase or intransitive. The second takes a stative verb. Examples of both types are given.

(13) *ông đó bị mua sách*  
*gentleman that undergo buy book*  
 [-pleasant]  
 'He is [has the misfortune to be] obliged to buy books.'



The following can also occur.

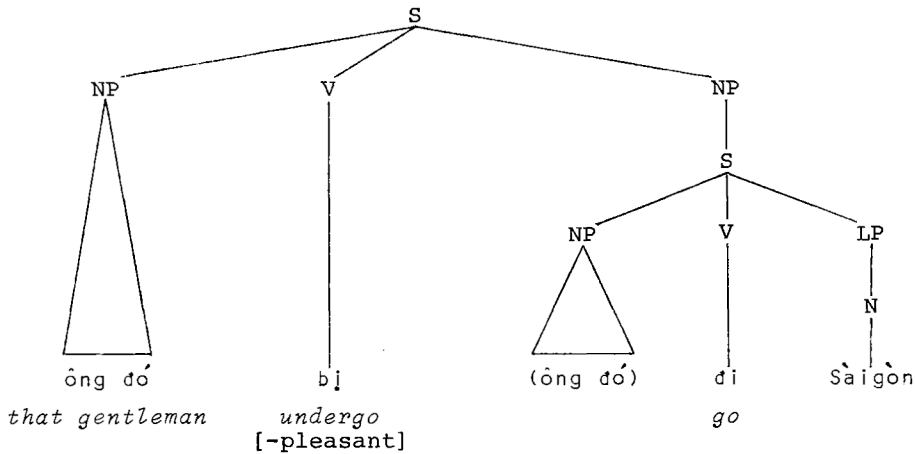
(14) *ông đó được mua sách*  
*undergo*  
 [+pleasant]  
 'He has the good fortune to be able to buy books.'

- (15) ông đó phải mua sách  
           undergo  
           [+necessary]

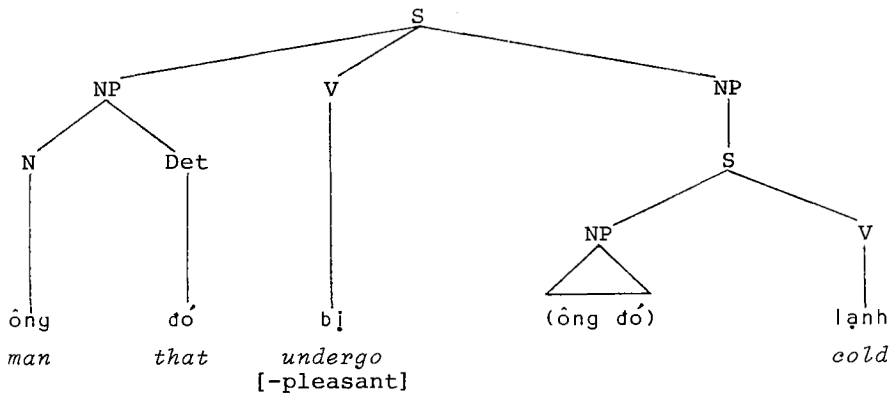
*'He is obliged to buy books.'*

Sentences with intransitive verb, (16), and with stative verbs, (17) and (18), follow.

- (16) ông đó bị đi Sài Gòn.  
       *'He unfortunately had to go to Saigon.'*

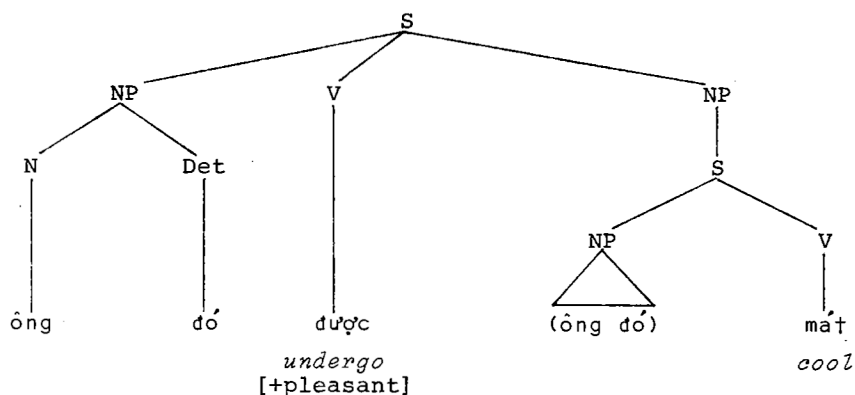


- (17) ông đó bị lạnh  
       *'That man has the misfortune of being cold.'*



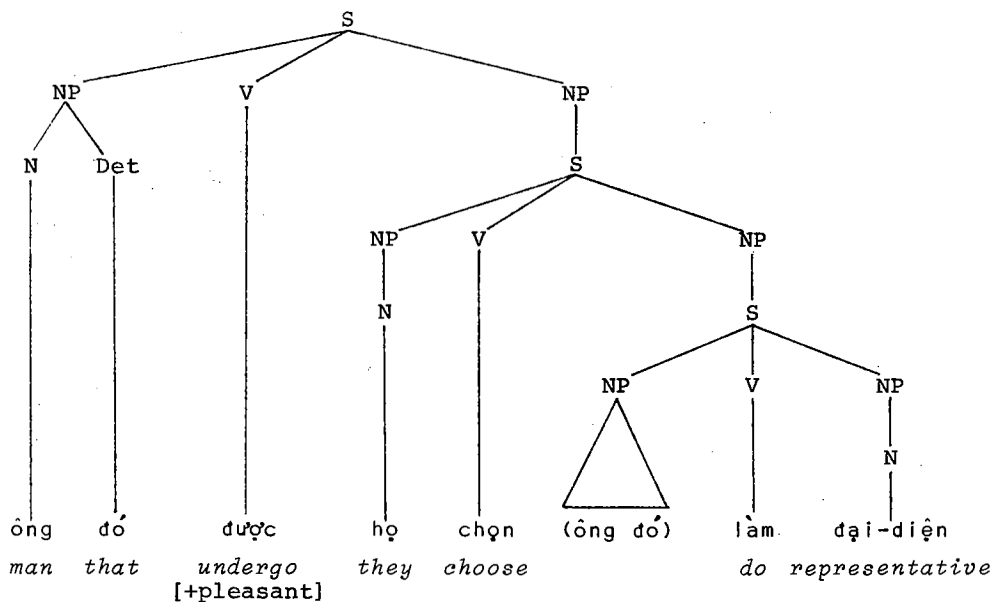
- (18) ông đó được mát  
       *'That man has the good fortune of being cool.'*





Following are more examples.

(19) (from Liem 1969, p. 19; with slight lexical changes)



'That man had the good fortune of their choosing him to be the representative.'

(20) (from Liem, 1969, p. 20)

năm ngoài ở đó nó thường bị họ cho đồ vô-dụng  
 year preceding in there he usual undergo they give thing useless  
 (inferior)

'Last year there, he was frequently submitted to the misfortune of having them give him useless things.'

## 3.0. ERGATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

We have the following grammatical sentence:

- (21)
- 
- NP                      V                      NP                      LP  
 |                      |                      |                      |                      |                      |  
 N                      bán                      N                      Det                      Loc                      N  
 |                      |                      |                      |                      |                      |  
 họ                      they                      sách                      đó                      ở                      Sài Gòn  
 they                      sell                      book                      that                      in                      Saigon
- 'They sell that book in Saigon.'*

The only "passive" form this sentence would have is:

- (22) sách đó bán ở Sài Gòn  
*'That book is sold in Saigon.'*

Since (22) does not have an agent, since there is no overt marker for the passive voice, and yet since the sentence grammatical subject is the goal of the verb, perhaps this is an ergative construction rather than a passive construction (cf. the definition of passive in Sec. 0.1.). More sentences of this type are:

- (23) nhà này mua năm ngoái  
*house this buy year preceding*  
*'This house was bought last year.'*  
 (from Liem, 1969, p. 11)
- (24) chuyện này thường nghe ở Sài Gòn  
*story this usual hear*  
*'This story is usually heard in Saigon.'*
- (25) sách đó bán nhiều  
*book that sell much*  
*'That book has sold a lot.'*
- (26) nhà này bán  
*house this sell*  
*'This house is for sale.'*

However, Liem lists (23), *nhà này mua năm ngoái*, as an Emphatic construction, and he suggests, in private discussion, that all these sentences may be topicalisation, with the object NP moved to the beginning of the sentence for focus and the subject NP deleted (a common phenomenon in Vietnamese). This view is strengthened by the fact that each of

these sentences can take an agent NP with the only change in meaning being specification of the agent, and the agent NP occurs *only in the grammatical subject (unmarked) position*, i.e. immediately preceding the verb.

(23a) nhà này tôi mua năm ngoái

I

'This house I bought last year.'

(24a) chuyện này người-ta thường nghe ở Sài Gòn

people

'This story people usually hear in Saigon.'

(25a) sách đó họ bán nhiều.

they

'That book they've sold a lot of.'

(26a) nhà này tôi bán

I

'This house I'm selling.'

When ergative sentences have agent NPs, these NPs are marked (cf. Fillmore 1968 and Hohepa 1969). Furthermore, the occurrence of the agent in the subject position when it is present suggests that the logical object, instead of being the grammatical subject, is a preposed topic and there is optional occurrence of an agent.

For these reasons, I consider sentences (23)-(26) and their counterparts (23a)-(26a) to be topicalisations and not ergative sentences.

#### NOTES

1. This paper is a revision of portions of "Is b<sub>i</sub> really passive and will Vietnamese find the true ergative?", a term paper written for a class in Advanced Analysis under Stanley Starosta at the University of Hawaii, December 1969. Mr Starosta has been helpful in the examination of, but he should not be held responsible for, the ideas presented.

2. I have since revised this notion in a paper on this topic, in which I suggest that, in Vietnamese, Chinese, Thai, and Khmer, certain verbs which have certain lexical case frame features can undergo a lexical derivation rule which allows them to occur as derived prepositions marking case forms on nouns.

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