REPRESENTATION OF SPACE IN VIETNAMESE CLASSIFIERS*

Ly Toan Thang
Institute of Linguistics

1/ INTRODUCTION:

1.1. In linguistic studies devoted to the human concepts of space, not enough attention has been paid to the study of spatial nouns so far - as a rule, attention is focused on spatial verbs, adjectives and prepositions only. The aim of the present paper is to research nouns which describe spatial characteristics of objects in the surrounding world. I shall consider mainly a specific group of nouns of the Vietnamese language - the so called "classifiers".

1.2. In a number of languages, classifiers are studied chiefly from the point of view of their syntax, leaving insufficiently considered their semantic and cognitive foundations¹, which allow speakers to group them together, and which are rather subtle, complicated and have fuzzy boundaries even for native speakers. This is why I shall try to uncover the ways by which the Vietnamese speaker use classifiers in order to describe the shape, size and position of the object pointed at by the noun to which the classifier is referred. In so doing, and basing myself upon linguistic facts, I shall also try to demonstrate that there in indeed a typically "Vietnamese" way of conceptualising classifying and describing the world.

¹ Excep some outstanding studies such as that by Lakoff [1986] and the article by Friedrich [1970]
* This is improved and shortened version of my previous paper "The shape, size, and position of the object in cognition and language", published in the Russian journal of linguistics Voprosy Yazykoznaniya, 1992, No 5. I am grateful to Mr. R. Jacques for his editing the English text.
2. GRAMMATICAL AND SEMANTIC NOTES ON VIETNAMESE CLASSIFIERS

For the convenience of the reader not familiar with Vietnamese, I shall briefly outline the main grammatical [Nguyen Tai Can, 1963, 1975] and semantic characteristics of classifiers.

2.1. The availability of classifiers (ca. 40 words) as a special group of nouns is one of the features of the Vietnamese language. The main function of a classifier (abbr. : clas.) is to express the singleness of the object denoted by the following noun : hence their ability to combine with numerals when counting. For instance, whenever a Vietnamese speaker says con gà (verb. : clas. + chicken) 'a chicken,' he perceives the chicken as an individual object, singling it out from the class of similar objects2. It is not by accident that the short story by the Russian writer Chekhov Dama s sobachkoi 'The Lady with a lap-dog' has been translated into Vietnamese as Nguoi dam ba co con cho nho (verb. : clas. + woman + have + clas. + dog + small), and Henry's novel The last leaf as Chiec la cuoi cung (verb. : clas. + leaf + last).

Another, secondary function of classifiers is to help divide the objects of the world into various types (e.g. people, animals, inanimate objects) as well as describe spatial characteristics of the particular objects they are referring to. For instance, the classifier la, with its initial meaning of 'leaf' (of a tree), in the combination la thu (verb. : clas. + letter) 'a letter', conveys the idea that the letter thus meant is perceived as a flat, two-dimensional object. It should be emphasized that, in this case, the description refers, not to a class of object, but only to the one letter, with its "picture" described by the classifier. It may also be noted that such a description of the object in its singleness is done explicitly. In English, for example, the spherical feature is included in the meaning of the noun ball only implicitly. In Vietnamese, the same feature receives explicit expression by means of the classifier quai (with its initial meaning of 'fruit') : quai hong (verb. : clas. + ball) 'a ball'.

2 In the absence of the classifier con, the word gá 'chicken' depending on the context, may denote either a certain class of objects or a concrete representative of this class. E.g., for example, Nao nho gá, 'He keep chickens (i.e. not geese); and Qa dan roi 'Where is the chicken ?' - in the second instance, the concrete chicken is meant.
On the basis of this secondary function, one may say that classifiers classify, characterise or describe objects through definite features.

2.2. Taking into account their various functions, classifiers may be divided into two groups: numerical (or non-descriptive), and descriptive. Let us now consider the differences between these groups. Cf. cái tranh (verb.: clas. + picture) ‘a picture’ — here the numerical classifier cái only singles out this particular picture from the series of its line; and búc tranh (verb.: clas. + picture) — in this case the descriptive classifier búc has both the function of a numerical classifier, and that of simultaneously describing the picture as a flat object.

The usage of numerical classifiers is strictly determined, primarily by the entire meaning of the object-noun. Viz.:

- Con is used for animals, e.g. con bò (verb.: clas. + cow) ‘a cow’;
- Cái is used for things, e.g. cái ghế (verb.: clas. + chair) ‘a chair’;
- Đưa is used for young people, e.g. đưa bạn (verb.: clas. + friend) ‘a friend’.

Contrary to this, the usage of descriptive classifiers does not have such a restrictive nature: in many instances it may vary, depending on various factors (this point will be discussed below).

Descriptive classifiers are ordinarily used only with nouns denoting inanimate objects; in doing so, the speaker selects a few objects on the basis of similar spatial characteristics. Thus, for instance, almost all household items such as a bed, a basket, a cup, a shirt, etc., are not described by descriptive classifiers, but only referred to by numerical ones. However, there are a number of exceptions, viz.:

- Ngon denn (verb.: clas. + oil lamp) ‘an oil lamp’: the classifier ngon (with its initial meaning of ‘apex’) conveys the representation of a lamp shaped like a tree apex;
- Con dao (verb.: clas. + knife) ‘a knife’: the classifier con (for animals\(^3\)) points to the presence of a particular shape, or action, of a knife that enables one to

\(^3\) Although it would be more accurate to say “classifier used with words denoting animals”. I shall be using here and elsewhere in similar instances, a shorter phrase, e.g. “classifier for animals”. 
regard it as an animate object; cf. also con sông (verb.: clas. + river) ‘a river’,
con thuyền (verb.: clas. + boat) ‘a boat’.

Each one of the descriptive classifiers is customarily used for a group of objects
consisting of a small number of items (from 5 to 7, on the average). For instance, the
classifier tờ may be used for such objects as a newspaper, a picture, a photograph, a
calendar, a card, etc., all of them having the shape of a sheet of paper.

From this point on, the present paper will be dealing with descriptive classifiers
only.

3. USING CLASSIFIERS TO DIVIDE OBJECTS BY THEIR SPATIAL CHARACTERISTICS

3.1. The notion of “saliency”

Before giving a full list of descriptive classifiers of the Vietnamese language, let
us try to make some terminological definitions more accurate. While describing the
usage of different classifiers, or indeed the use of one particular classifier, it becomes
evident that using the psychological notion of “saliency” is particularly expedient. As
a matter of fact, the perception of spatial objects by man is relative, and in many
cases their classification and conceptualisation depend on the “saliency” of one
feature against the background of others. Let me begin with the best known facts. Cf.
the two English sentences:

– * The bike is near the house
– The bike is near the house

The second sentence is non-normative, because the house is “saliency” considered to
be more conspicuous and permanent than the bike [Talmy, 1988]. The “saliency” of
the transverse dimension in the choice between Russian adjectives like shirokii
‘wide’, and dlinnyi ‘long’ (cf. a wide house and a long house) has been well described
by Zhurinskii [Zhurinskii, 1971].

Observing the “saliency” feature in man perceiving spatial objects is especially easy
when comparing different languages. Thus, English, Russian, Vietnamese and French
speakers alike "see" a road as a plane; this is shown by the use of particular prepositions: *On the road*, *na doroge*, *trên đường*, *sur la route*. On the other hand, speakers of Tay (one of the Thai languages of Northern Vietnam) perceive it as a enclosed area limited on both sides, and would say: *chang tùng* (verb.: inside the road); cf. *chang sluôn* 'in the house', 'inside the house' [Hoang Van Ma et al., 1971]. It would be appropriate at this point to recall the polemic between Bennett [Bennett 1971] and Leech [Leech, 1969] concerning the fact that, in Bennett's opinion, in the English phrase *on the road*, the road is seen as a plane, while, according to Leech, it is perceived rather as a line.

Let us now come back to the descriptive classifiers. For instance, such objects as swords and sabres are long objects, like rifles (guns), spears and lances. Nevertheless, unlike the latter, the former are "saliently" perceived as being flat (with insignificant thickness and width): so, for a sword or a sabre, the Vietnamese speaker uses the classifier *thanh*, the initial meaning of which associates it with the adjective *thanh* 'thin' (referred to a person's figure or body features); whereas for a rifle, a spear or a lance, the classifier *cây* (initial meaning: 'tree') is used instead, i.e. these objects are "saliently" seen as "tree-like". One more example: a wall has a length, a width and a height, i.e. it has every "right" to be perceived by *màn* as a three-dimensional body (cf. *a high wall*, *a long wall*, and *a thin wall*). However, in the combination *bức tường* (verb.: clas. + wall) 'a wall', the descriptive classifier *bức* shows that in Vietnamese the given wall is regarded only as something similar to a letter or a photograph (cf. *bức thư* 'a letter', *bức ảnh* 'a photograph', i.e. with the "salient" feature of a plane, two-dimensional surface.

Of interest in this connection are some data on classifiers in the Tarascan language [Friedrich, 1970]: fruits are usually qualified as three-dimensional objects; bananas, however, as two-dimensional. Or, to take another example, although animals are commonly qualified as one-dimensional, frogs and toads are seen as threedimensional, because they are thought to be "rounded" (cf. also the Navaho language, in which they are perceived as mud-like objects).
3.2. The notion of "meaning" in classifiers

In dictionaries of the Vietnamese language, the meaning of classifiers is generally
defined as follows: "...used to point at a separate unit of objects having the shape...". As I believe, however, it would be more accurate to say that they have no proper
meaning in the narrow sense of the word. Strictly speaking, they have no significate,
nor do they have any denotate. Reflected in their content, there is only a pre-
conceptual, visual and sensory image of one concrete representative of the whole
class of objects denoted by the following noun; this is the case even when the
meaning is metaphorical as, for instance, the classifier lâ 'tree leaf'. In other words,
one is dealing here only with an immediate perception of the real world, not with its
epistemic cognition.

Further on, I shall still be speaking of the classifiers' "meaning", but this is to be
understood in a psychological sense of the term like, for example, something that
Leont'ev has called "object meaning" [Leont'ev, 1983].

From the view-point of semantic etymology, descriptive classifiers may be
divided into two groups: the first one consists of classifiers, the derivative meaning of
which is clearly associated with the initial meaning of the corresponding nouns; for
instance: quá 'fruit', lâ 'leaf of a tree', ngon 'top or apex of a tree', cây 'tree', que
'small stick', tờ 'sheet', döm 'flow', sợi 'thread'. The second group comprises
classifiers deprived of such a metaphorical meaning: vién, búc, etc. It is expedient to
note that many Vietnamese classifiers are of floromorphic (not anthropomorphic)
character.

3.3. List of the most widely used descriptive classifiers, and division of objects by
classifiers

The following classification takes into account two factors: the "salience" of a
particular spatial feature for human perception, and the "object-meaning" of
classifiers; it will be built up in the following manner:

a) the classifiers will follow one another according to the weakening of their
"meaning";
b) in defining each individual classifier, I shall be pointing out mainly the “salient” spatial properties of the objects they are referred to.

In this way, descriptive classifiers divide objects into three different groups:

A. The group of cubic objects:

A1. The classifier *quả* ‘fruit’ and its dialectal synonym *trái* is used to describe “fruit-like” objects of “saliently” rounded shape: *quả thân* (verb.: clas. + kidney) ‘a kidney’, *quả tim* (verb.: clas. + heart) ‘a heart’, *quả trứng* ‘an egg’, *quả dịi* ‘a hill’, *quả bó ng* ‘a ball’, *quả địa cầu* ‘a globe (earth)’, *quả lửa* ‘a grenade’, *quả bom* ‘a bomb’, etc.

A2. The classifier *ngọn* ‘top or apex of a tree’ is used to describe “apex-like” objects of “saliently” conical shape: *ngọn núi* ‘a mountain’, *ngọn tháp* ‘a tower’, *ngọn đèn* ‘an oil lamp’; cf. combinations including the word *ngọn*, in which the following noun denotes a “matter” (substance) but not an “object”: *ngọn lửa* ‘a flame’, *ngọn gió* ‘a wind’.

A3. The classifier *hòn* is used to describe objects having a volume, and a “saliently” rounded shape *hòn núi* ‘a mountain’, *hòn đảo* ‘an island’, *hòn đạn* ‘a (round) bullet, a shot (from a cartridge)”; and the like; cf. combinations of the word *hòn* with nouns of substances: *hòn đá* ‘a stone’, *hòn đất* ‘a clod (of earth)’.

A4. The classifier *viên* is used to describe objects “saliently” small in size and of rounded shape: *viên thuốc* ‘a pill’, *viên bi* ‘a marble (for children’s games)’, and others; cf. combinations including the word *viên*, in which the following noun denotes a matter: *viên đường* ‘a sugar-lump’.

---

4 Further on, I shall no longer give the verbatim translation (between brackets) of the examples, for clearness’ sake.
B. The group of flat objects:

B1. The classifier là 'leaf (of a tree)' is used to describe "leaf-like" objects: là thư 'a letter', là cờ 'a flag', là phổi 'a lung', là gan 'a liver', and the like.

B2. The classifier tô 'sheet' is used to describe "sheet-like" objects of "saliently" rectangular shape: tô báo 'a newspaper', tô truyền đơn 'a leaflet', tô tranh 'a picture' (i.e. a reproduction without a frame); cf. combinations of the word tô with a noun denoting a matter (substance): tô giấy 'a sheet of paper'.

B3. The classifier bức is used to describe flat objects "saliently" occupying a vertical position: bức tường 'a wall', bức vách 'a partition (between rooms)', bức hình phong 'a screen', etc.

B4. The classifier tấm is used to describe flat objects that are "saliently" thin, and in a horizontally oriented position: tấm ảnh 'a photograph', tấm thảm 'a carpet', tấm màn 'a curtain', and the like; cf. combinations including the word tấm, in which the following noun denotes a matter: tấm gỗ 'a wooden board', tấm vải 'a piece of fabric'.

B5. The classifier thanh is used to describe flat objects of "saliently" elongated shape and small width: thanh kiếm 'a sword', thanh guong 'a sabre', etc.; cf. combinations of the word thanh with a noun of matter: thanh gỗ 'a wooden plank', thanh sô-cô-la 'a chocolate bar'.

C. The group of linear objects:

C1. The classifier cây 'tree' is used to describe "tree-like" objects of "saliently" cylindrical shape and vertical position: cây cột 'a pillar', cây giáo 'a spear', cây nến 'a candle', and the like; cf. combinations of the word cây with a noun of matter: cây gỗ 'a log (wood)'.

C2. The classifier que 'small stick' is used to describe "stick-like" objects "saliently" small in size: que diêm 'a match', que tăm 'a (bamboo) toothpick';
cf. combinations of the word que with a noun of matter: que sát 'a (small) iron stick'.

C3. The classifier dòng 'flow, stream' is used for linear objects occupying a "saliently" horizontal position: dòng sông 'a river', dòng suối 'a rivulet'; cf. combinations of the word dòng with a noun of matter: dòng nước 'a water flow'.

C4. The classifier sợi 'fibre, thread' is used for linear objects "saliently" small in diameter and occupying a horizontal position: sợi dây 'a cord, a string', sợi tóc 'a (head) hair'; cf. combinations of the word sợi with a noun of matter: sợi chỉ 'a thread'.

It should be noted that Vietnamese scholars of linguistics believe these classifiers to combine only with names of "objects", not of "matters" (substances) [see, for example, Nguyen Tai Can, 1963]. On account of this, the above classification includes some examples containing the name of "matters" — in the modest form of: "cf." — only to contrast them with those containing the name of "objects".

My description of Vietnamese descriptive classifiers reflects the universal "minimal" perception by man of different shapes of objects — round, flat, and long [Friedrich, 1970], as descriptions of the usage of classifiers in other languages have already shown it.

A further step, revealing the mode of cognizing space in its specificity, can be taken only by analysing the decisive facts at work in the selection of classifiers.

4. ABSOLUTE AND RELATIVE ORIENTATION IN DESCRIBING THE SPATIAL PROPERTIES OF AN OBJECT

While spatially measuring the objects of the outer world, man, on the one hand, operates with relative quantities. For instance, with the help of the descriptive classifier quả 'fruit', man brings together "fruit-like" objects that are fairly different in volume and shape: a mountain, a heart, a bomb, a globe. On the other hand, human
spatial perception may be absolute: a letter, for example, is considered as a plane (as a tree leaf); it follows that the classifier quà ‘fruit’ cannot be applied to it.

The use made of descriptive classifiers provides the basis for singling out two types of orientation, used in describing the spatial characteristics of objects: absolute orientation and relative orientation.

4.1. Absolute orientation in description:

This type of orientation implies the association of only one descriptive classifier with each object. Its use depends on the following factors:

1. *The shape of the object.* As has been demonstrated above, the classifier quà ‘fruit’ is steadily used with several objects having a rounded shape: the very generalising numerical classifier cái (for inanimate objects, in most cases) cannot be substituted for it. One may say quà tim ‘a heart’, but not *cái tim ‘a heart’. The classifier tở ‘sheet’ works in a similar fashion in combination with the noun báo ‘newspaper’: one may say tở báo ‘a newspaper’. not *cái báo ‘a newspaper’. A good example may also be found in the description of man’s lungs: to refer to one of them, the classifier lâ ‘tree leaf’ is used; whereas to describe the object as a whole, the word будет is used instead, conveying the image of a “bunch (of bananas)”, cf. lâ phó vs. будет phó.

2. *The size of the object.* The relevance of this factor becomes evident when comparing the two classifiers quà ‘fruit’, and vién. While quà is used for three-dimensional objects of “saliently” rounded shape and (relatively!) big size, such as a ball, a globe, a shell; vién applies exclusively to small objects like a candy, a pill, a bullet.

It would be more difficult to describe this factor in the classifiers quà and hòn. At first sight, they are not distinct in qualifying the object’s size, cf. quà núi ‘a mountain’, and hòn núi ‘a mountain’. Nevertheless, their difference is revealed through such oppositions as: quà núi ‘a mountain’ — hòn non bộ ‘scale model of a mountain’ (in a garden or ornamental water-works); cf. also
the pair: *quá đất* '(terrestrial) globe, planet Earth' — *hòn đất* 'a clod (of earth)'.

The differences in the usage of the classifiers *cây* 'tree', and *que* 'stick': the former is used for a pillar, a lance, a rifle, a candle, whereas the latter denotes a match, a toothpick.

3. The position of the object in space. This factor is revealed by the content of two classifiers: *cây* 'tree', and *bức*, both pointing to the object's position along a vertical axis. The former is referred to objects in a vertical position, that have a cylindrical shape: so *cây* 'tree' may be used with nouns denoting objects like a column, a pole, a spear, a pen; but not for objects like a string, a cord, a thread.

The second classifier — *bức* — points to the vertical placement of flat objects like a wall, a partition. Note that the flaps of a door, "standing" (i.e. vertically placed) though they are, are still described by means of the classifier *tấm* (horizontal position): *tấm cánh cửa* (verb.: clas. + flap + door) 'a door flap'. This may be explained by the fact that the flap has no independent or isolated position of its own, being attached to the door-frame.

4.2. Relative orientation in description

This type of orientation implies that various classifiers, the use of which depends on definite factors, may describe the same object in different ways. These factors are:

1. The salient character of the object's shape. A particular orientation in description is determined by the concrete shape of the object, as fixed by the viewer at the very moment of speech. For example, a mountain will be described with the help of the classifier *quá* 'fruit' whenever the speaker strives to single out its roundish parts against the background of its spatial properties. But in the case he likes better to "see" its conic form, he would use the classifier *ngọn* 'apex' instead. The use of the classifiers *lá* 'tree-leaf' and *ngọn* 'apex' is similarly correlated to describe a flag. The same factor is also relevant to the cases in which the
classifier _con_ (conventional translation: ‘live being’, for animals; is used to
describe the zoomorphic appearance of an object. Cf. _động sống_ (verb.: clas.

Sometimes, a choice can be made between two salient properties of shape
and position of the same object. Cf. the use of the classifiers _ngọn_ ‘apex’
(alluding to a shape), and _cây_ ‘tree’ (alluding to a vertical position), in: _ngọn bút_

2. _Modes of selecting the salient position of an object._ Objects like carpets, curtains,
blinds, and their like may have two positions in space: they either “hang” or “lie”.
Owing to this, one can describe such items depending on what salient position
they occupy at the moment of speech — a vertically oriented position or a
horizontally oriented one. This is exactly the factor that predetermines the use of
either classifier in the pairs: _bức_ (vertical position) and _tấm_ (horizontal position);
cf.: — _bức thảm_ ‘a carpet’ (a tapestry covering a wall), and _tấm thảm_ ‘a carpet’
(covers a floor);
— _bức ảnh_ ‘a photograph’ (hanging on a wall), and _tấm ảnh_ ‘a photograph’
(kept in an album).

Here are some more interesting facts in the case of pictures:
a) for framed pictures, only the classifier _bức_ (vertical position) may be used, not
the classifier _tấm_ (horizontal position): _bức tranh_ ‘a picture’;
b) for prints (printed reproductions without a frame), the classifier _tờ_ ‘paper
sheet’ is the only one to be used: _tờ tranh_ ‘a picture’.

3. _The size of the object as salient feature._ Objects like pearls are described by two
classifiers: _viên_ — when of large size, and _hạt_ ‘grain. seed’ — when of small
size: cf. _viên ngọc trai_ ‘a pearl’, and _hạt ngọc trai_ ‘a (small) pearl’.
5. TOWARDS A PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

Pondering the linguistic facts mentioned along this paper, we may assume that, in natural languages, there are indeed specific ways of classifying and describing objects and their properties (spatial properties, in the case, of descriptive classifiers).

This inference would be more convincing if we considered the combinations "numerable word + noun of matter", like a *bit of wood*, and "descriptive' quasi-classifier' + noun of matter", like *hòn đá* 'a stone'.

Here is an example. Some English or Russian sentences seem very strange to Vietnamese people, such as :

- Eng. : *White clouds are flying over us*;
- Russ. : *Ja ljubljju smojet' vesennije vody* 'I like to look at springtime waters'.

The reason for this is that, in the given instances, the substances "cloud" and "water" are described without the help of any numerable word. Unlike objects, substances can be counted, and may acquire "a shape", only by way of their mass or pieces, or of the products derived from them. Concrete forms in which substances exist are denoted in Vietnamese whenever they are described (by attributes) or counted (by numerals). Thus, the English and Russian sentences quoted above should be translated into Vietnamese as follows :

- Eng. sentence : *Những dàn mây trắng đang bay trên đầu chúng tôi* (verb. : number index + cluster, heap + cloud + white + time index + fly + over + head + we);
- Russ. : sentence : *Tôi thích ngắm nhìn những dòng nước mùa xuân* (verb. : 1 + like + look + number index + flow, stream + water + spring).

The point of these two examples is the necessary presence of two words in Vietnamese : dàn 'cluster, heap', and dòng 'flow, stream', which outline the substances "cloud" and "water".

Examining the use of such words in Vietnamese has opened up prospects for research into the modes of conceptualizing space : I shall return to this topic in a subsequent paper.
REFERENCES

Bennett D.C 1971 Spatial and temporal uses of English prepositions. London

Friedrich P. 1970 Shape in grammar Language V. 46 No. 2 (pt 1)

Hoang Van Ma, Luc Van Pao, Hoang Chi 1971 Ngữ pháp tiếng Tây - Nùng. Hà nội

Lakoff G. 1986 Classifiers as a reflection of mind. Noun Classes and Categorization (Ed. by C.Craig). Amsterdam


Zhurinskii A.N. 1971 O semanticeskoi structure prostranstvennyx prilagatel'nyx. Semanticheskaja structure slova. Moskva