

# VERBAL CLASSIFIERS IN VIETNAMESE

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## I. Introduction

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

(1) Q Cl N

Example (2):

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

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

(3) *Chó, Ron có hai con* /dog Ron have 2 Cl/

As for dogs, Ron has two

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

- Is the classifier a grammatical/empty word or a lexical/full word ?

- If Cl is a lexical word, then do classifiers form an open class or a closed class? How to 'define' a Cl if it is a member of an open class ?

- If Cl is a lexical word, which one, the Cl or the N, in the sequence (1) is the head of the NP ?

## II. Verbal Classifiers in Vietnamese

### 1. What is a verbal classifier?

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

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

(4a) *Nó tát hai cái* /he slap 2 Clv/

He slaps twice (He gives 2 slaps)

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

(4b) *Nó tát hai cú*

(4c) *Nó tát hai tát*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Some classifiers which at first glance should be categorized solely as Cl<sub>n</sub> turn out to be capable of functioning as Cl<sub>v</sub>. Examples (8a,b) and (9a,b):

(8a) *quả tim* [NP] / Cl<sub>n</sub>-fruit heart/ the heart

(8b) *đấm hai quả* [VP] /punch 2 Cl<sub>v</sub>-fruit/  
send two punches

(9a) *ngọn đèn* [NP] /Cl<sub>n</sub>-peak lamp/ a lamp

(9b) *gió vài ngọn* [VP] /wind some Cl<sub>v</sub>-peak/  
it blows some winds

## 2. +COUNT verb and -COUNT verb

Using the Cl<sub>v</sub> *cái* as a unit for counting to study the discreteness of verbs, we can divide Vietnamese verbs into two classes: +COUNT verb (V<sub>c</sub>) and -COUNT verb (V<sub>m</sub>). *Cái* is the best candidate to test the discreteness of verbs because *cái* as Cl<sub>v</sub> functions as a substitute for verbs.

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

(10) *Ron đánh ba cái* /Ron blow 3 Cl<sub>v</sub>-*cái* /  
Ron gives three blows

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

(11) *uống một cái* /drink 1 Cl<sub>v</sub>/ have a drink  
but (11') \**uống hai cái* /drink 2 Cl<sub>v</sub>/

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

## 3. Two subclasses of +COUNT verb

The V<sub>c</sub> can be divided further into 2 subclasses, V<sub>c1</sub> and V<sub>c2</sub> : the V<sub>c1</sub>, or a word of the same form, can replace the Cl<sub>v</sub> in the [VP: V...Q Cl<sub>v</sub>] while the V<sub>c2</sub> cannot. Therefore, above

instead of (4a) we can have (4c), or below instead of (12a) we also have (12b). The two examples (12a) and (12b) are synonymous :

(12a) *Nó cuốc hai cái* /he hoe up 2 Clv-*cái* /

He makes/strikes two digs with a hoe

(12b) *Nó cuốc<sub>1</sub> hai cuốc<sub>2</sub>* 'He makes/strikes two digs with a hoe'

*Cuốc* 'to hoe up' is a Vc<sub>1</sub> in contrast to *cười* 'to smile', a Vc<sub>2</sub>, because *cười* is not directly enumerated by Q, and (13a) is grammatical, but not (13b) :

(13a) *Nó cười hai cái* /he smile 2 Clv-*cái* /

He has two smiles

(13b) \**Nó cười hai cười*

The Vc<sub>1</sub> which is enumerated directly by a numeral Q can eventually function as a unit counter for other nouns. Therefore *cuốc<sub>2</sub>* in (12b) is a unit of measure 'hoe(ful)' (shall we say a Cl of measure ?) for *đất* 'soil' in (14) :

(14) *Nó cuốc hai cuốc đất* /he hoe 2 hoe(ful) soil/

He digs up two hoe(ful)s of soil

#### 4. Verbal noun (Nv)

Note that *cuốc<sub>2</sub>* in (12b) should be analysed as a noun, or more exactly a verbal noun (Nv). Indeed the nominal status of this lexical unit is fully justified as the Vc<sub>1</sub> *cuốc<sub>1</sub>* is replaced by the verb *cho* 'to give' to obtain (15) which is synonymous to (12b):

(15) *Nó cho hai cuốc* 'He gives/makes two digs with a hoe'

The Nv *cuốc* 'action made with a hoe' in (15) has to be distinguished with the N *cuốc* 'the physical hoe' in (16) where *cuốc* has a Cl, namely *cái*. Example (16) :

(16) *hai cái cuốc* 'two hoes'

The opposition between (15) and (16) is then [Q Nv] / [Q Cl N] (*hai cuốc* / *hai cái cuốc*). And if we posit a Cl null (ClØ), the opposition above becomes [Q ClØ Nv] / [Q Cl N]. Noun

and verbal noun of the same form differentiate in that Nv takes a Cl $\emptyset$  while N goes with a Cl  $\neq \emptyset$ .

Thus a lexical unit like *cuốc* can belong to 4 different syntactic classes : N ‘a (physical) hoe’; Nv ‘action made with a hoe’; V ‘to hoe up’; Clm (Cl of measure) ‘hoeful’. Some more examples :

	N	V	Nv	Clm
<i>kẹp</i>	pincers	to pinch	a pinch	quantity taken with a pair of pincers
<i>roi</i>	whip	to whip	a stroke with a whip	$\emptyset$
<i>búa</i>	hammer	to hammer	a hammer stroke	$\emptyset$
<i>dao</i>	knife	$\emptyset$	a slash with a knife	$\emptyset$

### 5. V classifier or VP classifier ?

Transitive verbs take objects (O) as in (17) :

- (17) *John tát Bill hai cái* /John slap Bill 2 Clv-*cái* /  
John slaps Bill twice

The word order in the VP above is then [VP: V Oe Oi], with *Bill* as an *external object* (Oe) and the quantification construction Q Cl/*hai cái* as an *internal object* (Oi) (or *cognate object* following Chao 1965:132).

A question arises concerning (17) : Is the Cl *cái* a unit counter for the V *tát* only or for the whole expression *tát Bill* [V Oe] ? The answer is that the Clv is a unit counter for the whole VP (except Oi), not for the only V: the Clv *cái* in (17) for its semantic value refers back to the VO [*tát Bill*] and means “slaps Bill”; *hai cái* should be interpreted as “two slaps on Bill”.

That *cái* should be considered as a VP classifier is clearer in example (18) :

- (18) *Mày viết dùm nó lá thư một cái, cái gì rồi*  
you write help he Cl letter one Clv Cl done  
*muốn làm gì cũng được.*  
want do what also good

You just help him to write the letter, this being done  
you can do what you want.

In (18), *cáiz* is the substitute for *cáii* which in turn is the Clv of the VP [*viết dùm nó lá thư*] so that *cáiz rồi* means “once the letter being written”. Here while *cáii* is a Clv, *cáiz* functions as a pronoun. Note that any Cl can substitute for a NP[Cl N] and thus function as a pronoun. The pronoun *cáiz* in (18) is a kind of cohesive device that links up two messages of an utterance by means of co-referentiality: *cáiz* refers to *cáii* which in turn refers to the VP it anaphorizes. In Vietnamese spoken language this kind of cohesive device by *cáii* is often used. Example (19):

- (19) *Nó ngủ dậy một cái, cái rồi nó ăn sáng,*  
 he wake up one Clv *cáii* done he breakfast  
*cái rồi nó đi học.*  
*cáii* done he go to school

He wakes up, then he takes breakfast, then he goes to school.

(18) and (19) illustrate the case where an individual quantifier, namely the classifier *cáii*, in certain syntactic configuration, functions as a grammatical cohesive device. In these two examples, either *cáiz* or *rồi* can be suppressed and (19) for instance has two variants, (19a) and (19b) :

- (19a) *Nó ngủ dậy một cái, rồi nó ăn sáng, rồi nó*  
*đi học (cáiz > Ø)*

- (19b) *Nó ngủ dậy một cái, cái nó ăn sáng, cái nó đi học*  
*(rồi > Ø)*

It is clear from (19a) and (19b) that *cáii* can replace *rồi*, the latter is considered by Nguyễn Đình Hoà (1966) as a conjunction translated into English as *then*.

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