VERBAL CLASSIFIERS IN VIETNAMESE

Nguyễn Phú Phong
Centre de Recherches Linguistiques Asie Orientale,
EHES/CRNS
& Université Paris 7, Paris, France

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 Cân, 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 con mưa [NP] /2 Cln-outburst rain/  
two outbursts of rain
(6b) mưa hai con [VP] /rain 2 Clv-outburst/  
it falls two outbursts of rain

If tiếng in (5a,b) and con 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 tư) 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 con 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 Cln turn out to be capable of functioning as Clv. Examples (8a,b) and (9a,b):

(8a) quá tim [NP] / Cln-fruit heart/ the heart
(8b) đấm hai quá [VP] /punch 2 Clv-fruit/
    send two punches
(9a) ngọn đèn [NP] / Cln-peak lamp/ a lamp
(9b) gió vải ngọn [VP] /wind some Clv-peak/
    it blows some winds

2. +COUNT verb and –COUNT verb

Using the Clv cái as a unit for counting to study the discreteness of verbs, we can divide Vietnamese verbs into two classes: +COUNT verb (Vc) and –COUNT verb (Vm). Cái is the best candidate to test the discreteness of verbs because cái as Clv functions as a substitute for verbs.

Vc : Q ≥ 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 Clv-cái /
    Ron gives three blows

Vm : Q = 1; the quantification is possible only with Q equal to one. In this case the Clv 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 Clv/ have a drink
    but (11‘) *uống hai cái / drink 2 Clv/
    (Note that in French we can say boire un coup, but not *boire deux coups)

3. Two subclasses of +COUNT verb

The Vc can be divided further into 2 subclasses, Vc₁ and Vc₂: the Vc₁, or a word of the same form, can replace the Clv in the [VP: V... Q Clv] while the Vc₂ 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 cuốc1 hai cuốc2 ‘He makes/strikes two digs with a hoe’

Cuốc ‘to hoe up’ is a Vc1 in contrast to cuộí ‘to smile’, a Vc2, because cuộí is not directly enumerated by Q, and (13a) is grammatical, but not (13b):

(13a) Nó cuộí hai cái /he smile 2 Clv-cái/
He has two smiles

(13b) *Nó cuộí hai cuộí

The Vc1 which is enumerated directly by a numeral Q can eventually function as a unit counter for other nouns. Therefore cuốc2 in (12b) is a unit of measure ‘hoeful’ (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 cuốc2 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 Vc1 cuốc1 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 ClØ while N goes with a Cl ≠ Ø.

Thus a lexical unit like **cuộc** 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>Nv</th>
<th>Clm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kep</td>
<td>pincers</td>
<td>a pinch</td>
<td>quantity taken with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to pinch</td>
<td></td>
<td>a pair of pincers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>roi</td>
<td>whip</td>
<td>a stroke with a whip</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>búa</td>
<td>hammer</td>
<td>a hammer stroke</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dao</td>
<td>knife</td>
<td>Ø</td>
<td>a slash with a knife</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

(19) Nó ngủ dậy một cái, cái rôi nó ăn sáng,
he wake up one Clv cái done he breakfast
  cái rôi nó đi học.
cái 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 cái, in certain syntactic configuration, functions as a grammatical cohesive device. In these two examples, either cãiz or rôi can be suppressed and (19) for instance has two variants, (19a) and (19b):

(19a) Nó ngủ dậy một cái, rôi nó ăn sáng, rôi nó
di học (cãiz > Ø)

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

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

References


