

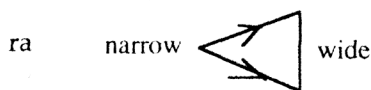
Semantics of Vietnamese directional verbs

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In Vietnamese there are some verbs indicating direction of movement. The five verbs whose semantics are discussed in this paper are: (1) *ra* /za¹/ “go out, come out”, (2) *vào* /va:w²/ “come in, go in, move in”, (3) *lên* /len¹/ “go up, get up, climb up”, (4) *xuống* /suəŋ⁵/ “go down, climb down”, and (5) *sang* /saŋ¹/ “go over, come over, cross”.

The semantics of the five directional verbs are as follows:

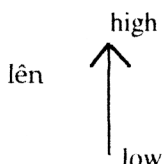
Ra /za¹/ “go out, come out” goes from a narrow point and moves to a wider point. It only refers to direction, not to personal relations. The schema of this verb may be diagrammed as follows:



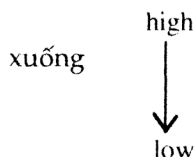
Vào /vaw²/ “come in, go in, move in” goes from a wide point and moves to a narrow point. It only refers to direction. The schema of this verb may be diagrammed as follows:



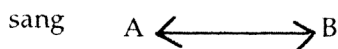
Lên /len¹/ “go up, get up, climb up” goes from a low point and moves to a higher point. It can be used with both a direction or a personal relation



Xuống /suəŋ⁵/ “go down, climb down” goes from a high point and moves to a lower point. It can be used with a direction or a personal relation.



Sang /saŋ¹/ “go over, come over, cross” is used with movement in a horizontal direction.



These five verbs can refer to only a specific place, not just a general direction, as in the following examples:

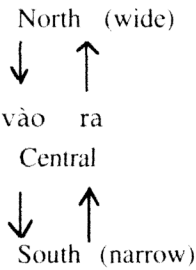
- (1) Chúng ta hãy **ra** phòng khách.
 /cuŋ⁵ ta¹ haʔaj⁴ za¹ fəŋ² ɣac⁵/
 we Imp mk go out living room
 “Let’s go out to the living room.”

In (1), the speaker perhaps is in the bedroom (narrow place) and invites the other to go to the living room (wide place).

- (2) Tôi **vào** nhà vì trời mưa.
 /toj¹ vaw² ɲa² vi² cəj² muə¹/
 I come in house because sky rain
 “I walked into the house because of the rain.”

In (2), perhaps the speaker was in the yard (wide place) and moved into the house (narrow place).

These verbs have wider usages as when there is an implication of geographic direction of the movement. The starting point and the destination are in a geographic relation with each other: east-west, north-south. The shape of Vietnam is like the letter ‘S’ that has the widest part in the North and the narrowest part in the South. Vietnam is divided into three regions: the North, Central and the South. So the direction from a ‘northern province’ to a ‘southern province’ is *vào* ‘come in, go in, move in’; movement in the opposite direction with the verb *ra* ‘go out, come out’, as represented in the following schema:



- (3) Từ thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, anh ra
 /tu² tha² fo⁵ ho² ci⁵ mĩn¹ ɲ¹ za¹
 from city Ho Chi Minh you go out
- Hà Nội bằng gì?
 ha² noj⁶ ba² zi²/
 Ha Noi by what
- “From Ho Chi Minh City, how do you go to Hanoi?”

- (4) Tôi sẽ vào thành phố Hồ Chí Minh mấy ngày.
 /toj¹ se²ɛ⁴ va:w² tha² fo⁵ ho² ci⁵ mĩn¹ mɛ⁵ ɲaj²/
 I will go in city Ho Chi Minh several day
- “I will go to Ha Chi Minh City for several days.”

In (3), from Ho Chi Minh City in the South to Hanoi in the North, the verb *ra* ‘go out’ is used. In (4), the speaker perhaps is in the Central or on the North and wants to go to Ho Chi Minh City in the South. Therefore, the verb *vào* ‘go in’ is used. The same as in (5), from Hanoi to Nghe An in the Central, the verb the verb *vào* ‘go in’ is used. In (6), from Hue in the Central up to Hanoi in the North, *ra* ‘go out’ is used.

- (5) Tôi từ Hà Nội vào Nghệ An nghỉ mát.
 /toj¹ tu² ha:² noj⁶ va:w² ɲe⁶ ɑ:n¹ ɲi³ mat⁵/
 I from Hanoi go in Nghe An go on holiday
- “I am from Hanoi to Nghe An for holiday.”

- (6) Ông tôi vừa từ Huế ra
 /oŋ¹ toj¹ vuɔ² tu² hwe⁵ za¹
 grandfather I just from Hue go out
- Hà Nội ăn Tết.
 ha:² noj⁶ ɲ¹ tet⁵/
 Hanoi celebrate New Year’s Day
- “My grandmother just came from Hue to Hanoi for New Year’s Day celebration”

Within a region, the vertical direction for relationship between any two provinces, the verb *lên* 'go up, get up, climb up' is used for south-to-north movement and *xuống* 'go down, climb down' for north-to-south movement, as in the following examples:

- (7) Tôi **lên** Hà Giang.
 /toj¹ len¹ ha² zaŋ¹/
 I go up Ha Giang
 "I go up to Ha Giang." (the northmost province near the border of China/ The speaker is in Hanoi.)

- (8) Tôi **xuống** Hà Nội.
 /toj¹ suəŋ⁵ ha² noj⁶/
 I go down Ha Noi
 "I go down to Ha Noi." (The speaker is in Ha Giang.)

For the horizontal direction between two provinces (east ---> west or west ---> east), the verb *sang* "go over, come over, cross" is used, as in:

- (9) Tôi vừa **sang** Lai Châu về.
 /toj¹ vuə² saŋ¹ laj¹ caw¹ ve²/
 I just go over Lai Chau return
 "I just returned from Lai Chau."

Moreover, the verbs *xuống* 'go down' and *lên* 'go up' can convey a personal relationship. The verb *xuống* conveys the direction from a high-ranking person to a low-ranking person or from a central to a peripheral area, whereas the verb *lên* conveys the direction from a low-ranking person to a high-ranking person, or from a peripheral to a central area, such as:

- (10) Chủ tịch tỉnh đi **xuống** huyện.
 /cu³ tic⁶ tịj³ đi¹ suəŋ⁵ hwiəŋ²/
 governor do down district
 "The governor goes to the district."
- (11) Tôi báo cáo **lên** viện trưởng.
 /toj¹ ba:w⁵ ka:w⁵ len¹ viəŋ⁶ cwaŋ³/
 I report up director
 "I reported to the director."

Some people have the idea that an office is an important place, or that the location of a house should be south of an office, therefore the verb *lên* often used, as in:

- (12) Bố cháu lên cơ quan.
 /bo⁵ caw⁵ len¹ kə¹ kwan¹/
 father niece go up office
 "My father goes to the office."

The starting point of the direction is the most important which indicates the narrow point or wide point. If from the narrow point to the wider, the directional verb *ra* "exit" is used with an action verb. Whereas from the wider point to the narrow, the verb *vào* 'go in, come in' is used with an action verb. Many action verbs occur frequently with directional verbs, such as: *đi ra* 'go out', *mở ra* 'open out' and *nói ra* 'speak out', as follows:

- (13) Tôi đi ra phố.
 /toj¹ di¹ za¹ fo⁵/
 I go exit street
 "I go out to the street."

- (14) Tôi mở cửa ra.
 /toj¹ mə³ kuə³ za¹/
 I open door exit
 "I opened the door."

In (13), the speaker is in the house, which is a narrow point, and is going to the street, which is a wider point, as is the case in (14), too.

- (15) Mẹ đóng cửa vào.
 /mɛ⁶ đɔŋ⁵ kuə³ va:w²/
 mother close door into
 "Mother closes the door."

There are sets of verbs that are fixed with certain directional verbs, as in the following examples:

- verb + *ra*

- | | | |
|------------------|---|---------------|
| bêu ra | /bew ¹ za ¹ / | "display to" |
| bộc lộ ra | /bok ⁶ lo ⁶ za ¹ / | "expose" |
| cởi ra | /kəj ³ za ¹ / | "take off" |
| nong ra | /nɔŋ ¹ za ¹ / | "stretch out" |

- verb + *vào*

- | | | |
|-----------------|--|--------------------------|
| đậy vào | /daj ⁶ va:w ² / | "cover" |
| khép vào | /xɛp ⁵ va:w ² / | "shut (without locking)" |
| cuộn vào | /kuən ⁶ va:w ² / | "roll up" |
| đóng vào | /dɔŋ ⁵ va:w ² / | "close" |

- verb + *lên*

nâng lên	/nɒŋ ¹ len ¹ /	“lift up”
đun lên	/ɗun ¹ len ¹ /	“boil”
tốc lên	/tok ⁵ len ¹ /	“blow up”
hét lên	/het ⁵ len ¹ /	“shout”

- verb + *xuống*

hạ xuống	/ha ⁶ suəŋ ⁵ /	“lower”
cúi xuống	/kuj ⁵ suəŋ ⁵ /	“bow”
quỳ xuống	/kwi ² suəŋ ⁵ /	“kneel”

(Nguyễn Kim Thán 1997: 208)

Due to the fact that the shape of Vietnam is long and narrow, the meanings of some verbs are related to the location of the starting point and the destination in terms of the north-south, east-west directions. When directional verbs are used to refer to personal relationships, they also convey authority. However, if the speakers, especially foreigners, understand the directional of the components verbs clearly, they can communicate with the Vietnamese people accurately and can use directional verbs appropriately.

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Received: 10 March 2000

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