Semantics of Vietnamese directional verbs

SOPHANA Srîchampa
Mahidol University

In Vietnamese there are some verbs indicating direction of movement. The five verbs whose semantics are discussed in this paper are: (1) ra /rä¹/ “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 /sœŋ⁵/ “go down, climb down”, and (5) sang /saŋ¹/ “go over, come over, cross”.

The semantics of the five directional verbs are as follows:

Ra /rä¹/ “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:

\[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{ra} \\
\text{narrow}
\end{array} \rightarrow \begin{array}{c}
\text{wide}
\end{array} \]

Vào /va:w²/ “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:

\[ \begin{array}{c}
vào \\
\text{wide}
\end{array} \rightarrow \begin{array}{c}
\text{narrow}
\end{array} \]

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

\[ \begin{array}{c}
lên \\
\text{high}
\end{array} \rightarrow \begin{array}{c}
\text{low}
\end{array} \]
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.
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) Tối vào nhà vì trời mưa.
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:
North (wide)

vào ra

Central

South (narrow)

(3) Từ thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, anh ra
/tuʔ2 thanŋ2 fo5 ho2 ci5 mıŋ1 anı1 za1/
from city Ho Chi Minh you go out

Hà Nội bằng gì?
/ha2 noj6 baŋ2 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 seʔe4 vaŋ2 thanŋ2 fo5 ho2 ci5 mıŋ1 maŋ5 nəŋ2/
I will go in city Ho Chi Minh several day

“I will go to Ho 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 Nghe An nghỉ mạt.
/toj1 tuʔ2 haʔ2 noj6 vaŋ2 nje6 anı1 n̥i3 maŋ5/
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
/ox1 toj1 vuə2 tuʔ2 hwe5 za1/
grandfather I just from Hue go out

Hà Nội an Têt.
/ha2 noj6 an1 tɛt5/
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 hə2 zən1/
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 hə2 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 vəa2 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 central to a peripheral area, such as:

(10) Chủ tịch tỉnh đi xuống huyện.
/cu3 tie6 tın3 di1 suəŋ5 hwən2/
governor do down district
"The governor goes to the district."

(11) Tôi báo cáo lên viện trưởng.
/toj1 baəw5 kəaw5 len1 viən6 cuən3/
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) Bô cháu lên cơ quan.
/bo⁵ cau⁵ len¹ ko¹ 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 mo³ ku³ 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 động cửa vào.
/me⁶ doŋ⁵ ku³ 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
beu ra /bew¹ za¹/ “display to “
bóc lọ ra /bo:k⁶ lo⁶ za¹/ “expose”
cói ra /koj³ za¹/ “take off”
nong ra /noŋ¹ za¹/ “stretch out”

- verb + vào
dây vào /daŋ⁶ va:w²/ “cover”
khép vào /χep⁵ va:w²/ “shut (without locking)”
cuốn vào /kuən⁶ va:w²/ “roll up”
dong vào /dəŋ⁵ va:w²/ “close”
- verb +.len
nàng.len /nâŋ len⁵/ “lift up”
dun.len /dun⁵ len⁵/ “boil”
toc.len /tok⁵ len⁵/ “blow up”
hêt.len /het⁵ len⁵/ “shout”

- verb + xuong
ha. xuong /ha⁶ suəŋ⁵/ “lower”
cui. xuong /ku⁵ suəŋ⁵/ “bow”
quy. xuong /kwi² suəŋ⁵/ “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.

REFERENCES