

# A CLASSIFICATION OF VERBS IN VIETNAMESE AND ITS PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS\*

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## INTRODUCTION

For over a generation, there was the conviction that the best language teaching materials are based upon a contrastive analysis of the language to be learned and the language of the learner. Allied with the conviction was the hypothesis that the new linguistic system, and by extension, the new cultural behaviour, should be established as a set of new habits by drill, drill which would ensure overlearning. Such a pedagogical philosophy was systematised mainly by Charles C. Fries (1945) and Robert Lado (1957).

However, all this firm belief in contrastive analysis seems to be in the past, at least for some people. The generative-transformational theory claims that language behaviour is rule-governed behaviour, and consequently that language learning should be in the form of a process of internalising the creative rules in the new language, and not just that of mere habit forming.

Before such a theoretical dilemma, a language teacher may be tempted to make the most use of existing linguistic theories to improve teaching materials as best as he could. With this pragmatism in mind, I am trying to present a contrastive analysis of Vietnamese and English on the case,

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clause, and sentence levels in this study.

On the theoretical linguistics ground, this analysis of cases, clauses, and sentences in Vietnamese in contrast with English will make an attempt to utilise both tagmemics (Brend 1970, 1972a, and 1972b, Cook 1969, Longacre 1964, Pike 1954, 1955, 1960, 1966, and 1971) and a case grammar model (Fillmore 1968, 1969, and 1971) called lexibase (Manley 1972, Starosta 1971a, 1971b, 1972a, 1972b, 1972c, 1973, Taylor 1972). Such an eclectic combination of tagmemics and case grammar is not new either in the field of general linguistics (Cook 1970, 1971a, 1971b, and 1972, Heidi Platt 1970, John T. Platt 1971) or in Southeast Asian linguistic analysis (Liem 1971a, 1971b, 1972a, 1972b, 1973a, and 1973b). Case grammar studies on Vietnamese can be found in Clark 1971a and 1971b, Ha 1970, Manley 1969, Taylor 1968, and Tran 1971, and a tagmemic analysis of Vietnamese can be seen in Liem 1969.

In that this study is tagmemically oriented, it recognises firstly the hierarchical levels in syntax and secondly the grammatical unit or tagmeme as composed of a slot and a filler class. The concept of hierarchies in syntax makes it possible to single out the clause and sentence levels for this study, and consequently it is unnecessary to write, at the very beginning, phrase structure rules of the entire base component, a matter of mandatory nature in a transformational analysis (Chomsky 1965:88ff.). The grammatical slot of the tagmeme at the clause level has been pointed out by Becker (Becker 1967a and 1967b), Fries (Fries 1970), and Young, Becker, and Pike (Young, Becker, and Pike 1970) as having not only the overt syntactic relationships (case realisations or case forms) but also the covert meaning relationships (case relations) with the predicative verb which is considered to be central in the clause (Chafe 1970).

In that this paper is also case grammar oriented, it recognises the case relations between various nouns and the predicative verb in the clause (or proposition in Fillmore's terminology). The type of case grammar utilised here introduces both the overt case realisations (or case forms) and covert case relations into the grammar as syntactic features assigned to nouns by verbs (Starosta 1971a, 1971b, 1972a, 1972b, and 1973).

In that this is also a contrastive analysis of Vietnamese and English, the study will present not only the particular construction in Vietnamese but also will point out similarities or differences in parallel constructions in English. However, specific types of drills to teach the patterns will not be suggested because generally drills on case forms and case relations in Chapter I\* will be substitutional, whereas they will be

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\*This paper is an excerpt from a larger work.

surface-to-surface transformational on the clause and sentence levels in subsequent chapters. The phrase level has been purposely omitted in this study because there are not many similarities on that level in Vietnamese and English. The reader is referred to Liem 1969, chapters III and IV, pp. 75-163 for an analysis of the phrase level in Vietnamese. Particular attention should be paid to the verb phrase on pages 75-108, the noun phrase on pages 109-131, and the cross-level tagmemes and cross-level constructions on pages 160-164 of the 1969 study.

## CLASSIFICATION OF VERBS

The following verb classification is based upon identificational-contrastive features such as the presence or absence of nuclear case form/case relation tagmemes. There are sixteen classes of verbs in the proposed classification. According to their hospitality to case-marked tagmemic slots, verbs in Vietnamese can be classified into sixteen groups as indicated in Chart IV. The sixteen verbs representative of their classes will be listed below with their hospitable case-marked tagmemic slots. It is noted that all the case-marked tagmemic slots, except the slot [+O, +OBJ] hosted by the submissive verbs, can be filled by noun phrases. When they can be filled by other than noun phrases, they will be so indicated. Numbers will refer to the examples found earlier in this study. Learning problems for the English speaking student will be pointed out, if any. A list of sample verbs in each group will be given as examples for the preparation of substitution drills.

### 1. là 'be'

The verbs in this class host [+NM, +OBJ] and [-K] (or caseless) tagmemic slots:

[+[+NM, +OBJ] \_\_\_ [-K]]

$\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{noun phrase} \\ \text{verb phrase} \\ \text{clause} \\ \text{prep. phrase} \end{array} \right\}$	}	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{noun phrase} \\ \text{verb phrase} \\ \text{clause} \\ \text{prep. phrase} \end{array} \right.$
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Both [+NM, +OBJ] and [-K] slots can be filled by a noun phrase, a verb phrase, an independent clause, or a prepositional phrase:

Ông ấy là bác-sĩ. (2.1.)

*He is a doctor.*

[+NM  
+OBJ]

[-K]

[noun phr.] [noun phrase]

Đi là chết.

*To go is to die.*

[verb phr.] [verb phr.]

Ông ấy đi là ông ấy khôn.

*he go be he intelligent (He was wise to have gone.)*

[clause] [clause]

Từ đây đến đó là hai dặm.

*From here to there is two miles.*

[prep. phrase] [noun phrase]

The filling of the [+NM, +OBJ] slot hosted by an equational verb such as là 'be' by a verb phrase or an independent clause in Vietnamese is a learning problem on the production level for English speakers who are used to a *To* verb phrase, or a dependent clause introduced by *That* in the same slot in English:

*To go is to die.*

[+NM  
+OBJ]

[-K]

[to verb phr.] [to verb phr.]

*That he went was a good move.*

[that clause] [noun phr.]

The verb là 'be' seems to be the lone verb of its class. There is another similar verb, làm 'to exercise the profession of' in that it is also an equational verb:

Ông ấy làm bác-sĩ.

*He is a doctor (professionally).*

[+NM  
+OBJ]

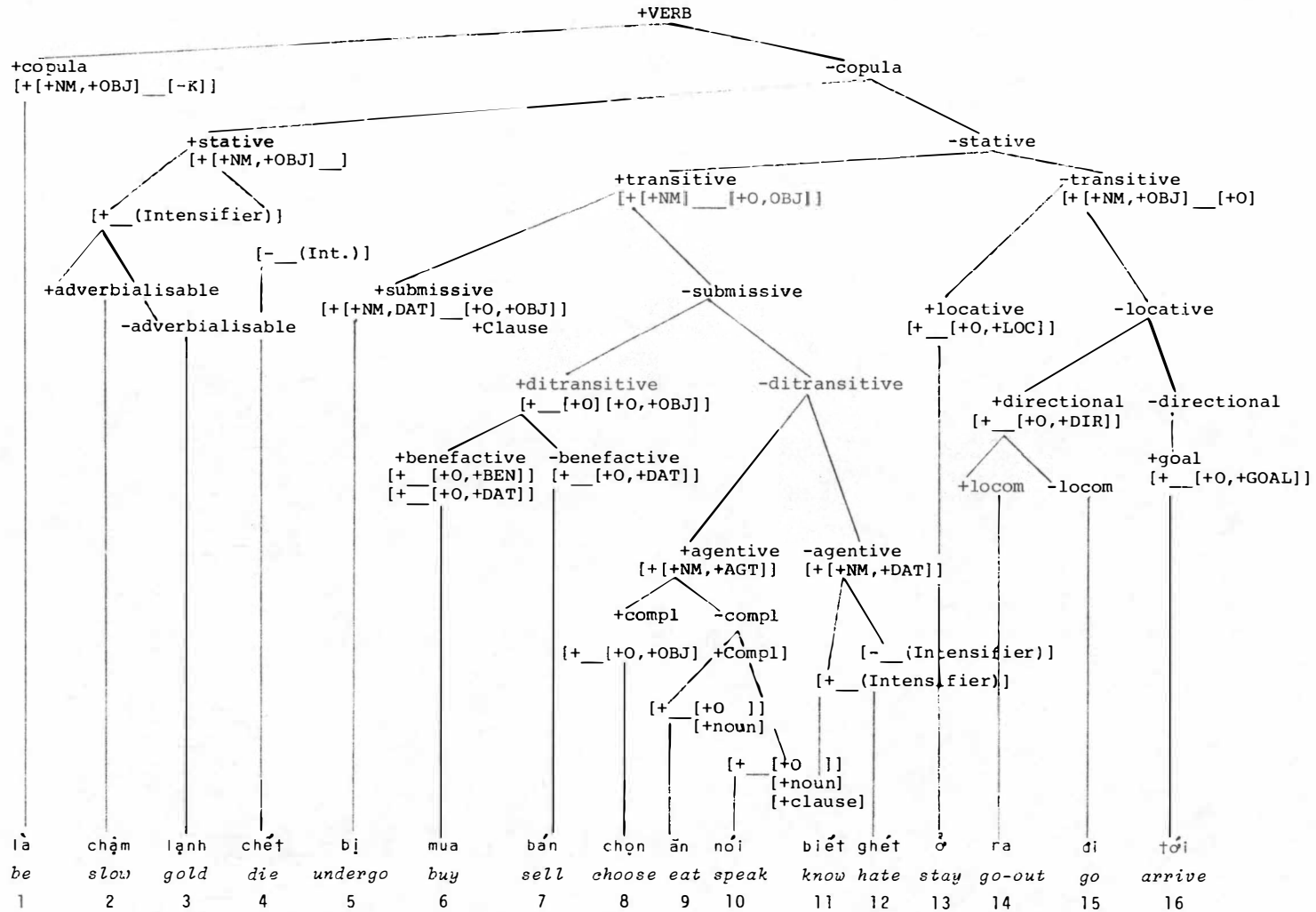
[-K]

[noun phr.] [noun phr.]

## 2. chậm 'slow'

The verbs in this class are stative verbs, host a [+NM, +OBJ] slot, can be adverbialised, and can be followed by an Intensifier:

CHART IV  
VERBS



[+[+NM, +OBJ] \_\_\_ (Intensifier)]

Ông ấy chậm lắm. (2.2a.)

*he slow very*

*He is very slow.*

[+NM] [Intensifier]  
[+OBJ]

Ông ấy đi chậm.

*He went slowly.*

[+NM] [+MANNER]  
[+OBJ] [adverbialised]

The class of stative verbs presents two learning problems for English speakers. Firstly, they are not introduced by a copula or equational verb like in English, and secondly, they function as adverbs. Note the equivalent English clauses:

*He is very slow.*

[+NM] copula  
[+OBJ]

*He went slowly.*

[+NM] [MANNER]  
[+OBJ] [adverb]

Examples of verbs in the class: *lẹ* 'fast', *giỏi* 'good, well', *dở* 'bad, badly'.

### 3. *lạnh* 'cold'

The verbs in this class are stative verbs, host a [+NM, +OBJ] slot, cannot be adverbialised, and can be followed by an intensifier:

[+[+NM, +OBJ] \_\_\_ (Intensifier)]

Ông ấy lạnh lắm. (2.2b.)

*he cold very*

*He is very cold.*

[+NM] [Intensifier]  
[+OBJ]

Being also stative verbs, these verbs present a learning problem for English speakers because they are not introduced by a copula like their English equivalents are:

*He is very cold.*

[+NM] copula  
[+OBJ]

Examples of verbs in the class: nóng 'hot', vui 'gay', buồn 'sad', đau 'sick'.

#### 4. chết 'to be dead'

The verbs in this class are stative verbs that host a [+NM, +OBJ] slot and that cannot take an intensifier. Incidentally, there are also reasons to consider these verbs intransitive:

[+[+NM, +OBJ] \_\_\_ ]]

Ông ấy chết. (2.2c.)

He died.

[+NM  
+OBJ]

The class of verbs does not present a learning problem since it behaves like its equivalent class of verbs in English.

Examples of verbs in the class: sống 'live', sinh 'be born'.

#### 5. bị 'be adversely affected'

The transitive submissive verbs in the class host [+NM, +DAT] and [+O, +OBJ] slots. The [+O, +OBJ] slot is only filled by a clause:

[+[+NM, +DAT] \_\_\_ [+O, +OBJ]]

Ông ấy bị đi. (3.1a.)

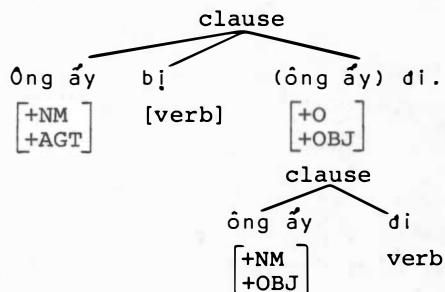
He was forced to go.

[+NM  
+DAT]

[+O  
+OBJ]

[clause]

The phrase structure tree for the clause is as follows, with the Nominative in the embedded clause being deleted obligatorily:



Ông ấy bị họ đánh. (3.1b.)

*he was forced they beat*

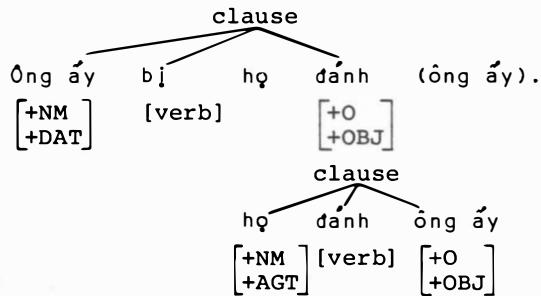
*He was beaten by them.*

[+NM]  
[+DAT]

[+O]  
[+OBJ]

[clause]

The phrase structure tree for the clause is as follows, with the Nominative in the embedded clause being optionally deleted and with the Objective in the embedded clause being obligatorily deleted:



The class of transitive submissive verbs presents a semantic and a structural problem. The semantic problem stems from the fact that the verb utilised always carries an adversative or a benefactive connotation. The structural problem is that of the embedded clause.

The two verbs in the class are: bị 'be adversely affected', and được 'happily experience'. Following are examples with được:

Ông ấy được đi.

*he happily experience go*

*He was allowed to go.*

[+NM]  
[+DAT]

[+O]  
[+OBJ]

Ông ấy được họ khen.

*they praise*

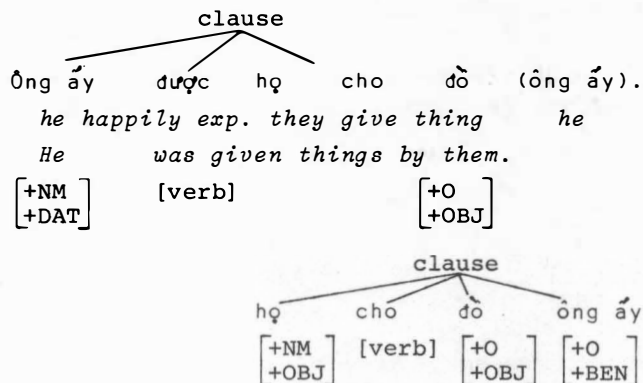
*He was praised by them.*

[+NM]  
[+DAT]

[+O]  
[+OBJ]

It is noted that the obligatorily deleted Objective case form in the embedded clause does not necessarily host an OBJECTIVE case relation as in the above examples. It can also host a BENEFACTIVE case relation:





## 6. mua 'buy'

The class of bi-transitive **BENEFACTIVE** verbs is characterised by the fact that its verbs host [+NM, +AGT], [+O, +BEN] or [+O, +DAT], and a [+O, +OBJ] slots:

$\left[ \begin{smallmatrix} +\text{NM} \\ +\text{AGT} \end{smallmatrix} \right]$     \_\_\_     $\left[ \begin{smallmatrix} +\text{O} \\ +\text{BEN} \end{smallmatrix} \right]$      $\left[ \begin{smallmatrix} +\text{O} \\ +\text{OBJ} \end{smallmatrix} \right]$   
    $\left[ \begin{smallmatrix} +\text{O} \\ +\text{DAT} \end{smallmatrix} \right]$

Ông ấy     mua     tôi     sách.

*He            bought me        books.*

$\left[ \begin{smallmatrix} +\text{NM} \\ +\text{AGT} \end{smallmatrix} \right]$                                  $\left[ \begin{smallmatrix} +\text{O} \\ +\text{BEN} \end{smallmatrix} \right]$      $\left[ \begin{smallmatrix} +\text{O} \\ +\text{OBJ} \end{smallmatrix} \right]$

$\left[ \begin{smallmatrix} +\text{O} \\ +\text{DAT} \end{smallmatrix} \right]$

The sentence is ambiguous in that it may mean either '*He bought the books for me (on my behalf).*' or '*He bought the books and gave them to me.*' The former interpretation is a **BENEFACTIVE** case relation, and the latter a **DATIVE** case relation. It is noted that the sentence can contain a Dative case form rather than an Objective case form, and the ambiguity still exists:

Ông ấy     mua     cho     tôi     sách.

*He            bought            give        me        books.*

$\left[ \begin{smallmatrix} +\text{NM} \\ +\text{AGT} \end{smallmatrix} \right]$      $\left[ \begin{smallmatrix} +\text{D} \\ +\text{DAT} \end{smallmatrix} \right]$      $\left[ \begin{smallmatrix} +\text{O} \\ +\text{OBJ} \end{smallmatrix} \right]$

$\left[ \begin{smallmatrix} +\text{D} \\ +\text{BEN} \end{smallmatrix} \right]$

The class of verbs does not present a serious learning problem to students, except the inherent ambiguity between a **BENEFACTIVE** and a **DATIVE**.

## 7. bán 'sell'

The class of bi-transitive DATIVE verbs is characterised by the fact that its verbs host [+NM, +AGT], [+O, +DAT], and [+O, +OBJ] slots:

[+[+NM, +AGT] \_\_\_ [+O, +DAT] [+O, +OBJ]]

Ông ấy bán tôi sách. (7)

He sold me books.

[+NM]	[+O]	[+O]
[+AGT]	[+DAT]	[+OBJ]

The class of verbs does not present a learning problem since its counterpart in English has the same syntactic features. It is however noted that the DATIVE case relation can be realised by the Dative case form, and yet, is placed before the [+O, +OBJ] tagmeme, a matter that, in English, would depend upon the relative lengths of the two tagmemes:

Ông ấy bán cho tôi sách.

He sold to me books.

[+NM]	[+D]	[+O]
[+AGT]	[+DAT]	[+OBJ]

Also, due to phonetic harmony requirements, the shorter of the two post-verbal tagmemes is placed before the longer one:

Ông ấy bán tôi nhiều sách và báo.

He sold me many books and newspapers.

[+NM]	[+O]	[+O]	[+O]
[+AGT]	[+DAT]	[+OBJ]	[+OBJ]

Ông ấy bán sách cho Ông Bà Nguyễn-văn-Trương.

He sold books to Mr & Mrs Nguyen-van-Truong.

[+NM]	[+O]	[+D]
[+AGT]	[+OBJ]	[+DAT]

Examples of verbs: gửi 'send', chuyển 'transfer', giúp 'help', sang 'transfer'.

## 8. chọn 'choose'

The verbs in this transitive class host [+NM, +AGT] and [+O, +OBJ] tagmemes, and their [+O, +OBJ] tagmeme can be optionally complementalised:

[+[+NM, +AGT] \_\_\_ [+O, +OBJ] (Complement)]

Ông ấy chọn bà ấy làm đại-diện.

He chose her to be representative.

[+NM]	[+O]	[+Complement]
[+AGT]	[+OBJ]	

The relationship between the [+O, +OBJ] tagmeme and its complement is as follows:

bà <sup>á</sup> làm đại-diện.  
*She is representative.*  
 [+NM] copula [-K]  
 [+OBJ]

The class of verbs presents a learning problem because the complement to the OBJECTIVE case must be introduced by a copula in Vietnamese, while the English similar construction does not usually have a copula:

*They elected her representative.*  
 [+NM] [+O] [+Complement]  
 [+AGT] [+OBJ]

Examples of verbs: cử 'to elect', lựa 'choose', bỏ phiếu 'cast vote'.

#### 9. ăn 'eat'

The verbs in this transitive class host [+NM, +AGT] and [+O, +OBJ] tagmemes. The [+O, +OBJ] tagmemic slot can be filled only by a noun phrase and it cannot be complementalised:

[+[+NM, +AGT] \_\_\_ [+O, +OBJ]]  
 Ông <sup>á</sup> ăn thịt.  
*He ate meat.*  
 [+NM] [+O]  
 [+AGT] [+OBJ]

The class of verbs does not present any learning problem since there is an equivalent class in English.

Examples of verbs: uống 'drink', hít 'inhale', nhả 'secrete', nuốt 'swallow'.

#### 10. nói 'speak'

The verbs in this transitive class host [+NM, +AGT] and [+O, +OBJ] tagmemes. The [+O, +OBJ] slot can be filled by either a noun phrase or a dependent clause introduced by rằng 'that':

[+[+NM, +AGT] \_\_\_ [+O, +OBJ]]  
 [noun phr.]  
 [dep. clause]

Ông ấy nói chuyện này.

*He told this story.*

[+NM  
+AGT]

[+O  
+OBJ]

[noun phr.]

Ông ấy nói rằng Ông Hải đi.

*He said that Mr Hai went.*

[+NM  
+AGT]

[+O  
+OBJ]

[dep. clause]

The class of verbs does not create a learning problem because there exists an equivalent class in English.

Examples of verbs: kể 'recount', khuyên 'advise', bảo 'tell', tin 'inform' (which is different from the same form meaning 'believe').

#### 11. biết 'know'

The verbs in this transitive class host [+NM, +DAT] and [+O, +OBJ] tagmemes. Their [+O, +OBJ] slot can be filled by either a noun phrase or a dependent clause introduced by *rằng* 'that':

[+[+NM, +DAT] \_\_\_ [+O, +OBJ]]  
[noun phr.]  
[dep. clause]

Ông ấy biết bà ấy. (3.2a.)

*He knows her.*

[+NM  
+AGT]

[+O  
+OBJ]

[noun phr.]

Ông ấy biết rằng bà ấy đi rồi. (3.2b.)

*He knows that she went already.*

[+NM  
+DAT]

[+O  
+OBJ]

[dep. clause]

The class of verbs does not present a learning problem since there is an equivalent class in English.

Examples of verbs: thấy 'see', nghe 'hear', hiểu 'understand', nghĩ 'think'.

#### 12. ghét 'hate'

The verbs in this transitive class host [+NM, +DAT] and [+O, +OBJ]

tagmemes. They differ from the previous verb class in that they can be modified by an intensifier. Their [+O, +OBJ] slot can be filled by either a noun phrase or a dependent clause introduced by *rằng* 'that':

[+[+NM, +DAT] (Intensifier) \_\_\_\_ [+O, +OBJ]]  
   [noun phr.]  
   [dep. clause]

Ông ấy      rất      ghét      bà      ấy.

He    very much   hated    her.

+NM	[intensifier]	+O
+DAT		+OBJ
		[noun phr.]

Ông ấy      sợ      rằng      bà      ấy      sẽ      đi.

He    is afraid    that    she    will go.

+NM	+O
+DAT	+OBJ
	[dep. clause]

The class of verbs does not present a learning problem since there exists an equivalent class in English. It is noted however that the intensifier in English in this case is 'very much', and not 'very' as in Vietnamese:

He      likes    her      very much.

+NM	[intensifier]
+DAT	+OBJ

Examples of verbs: giận 'angry', buồn 'sad', thích 'like', ưa 'prefer'.

### 13. Ở 'stay at, be at'

The verb ở stands by itself as an intransitive locative verb, and occurs very frequently either as a main verb or as a co-verb. It hosts [+NM, +OBJ] and [+O, +LOC] tagmemes when it is a main verb:

[+[+NM, +OBJ] \_\_\_\_ [+O, +LOC]]

Ông ấy      ở      Saigon. (2.3a.)

He    stays in    Saigon.

+NM	+O
+OBJ	+LOC

As a co-verb, ở functions as a locative preposition introducing a Locative case relation:

Ông ấy sống ở Saigon.  
*He lives in Saigon.*  
 [+NM] [+OBJ] [+L] [+LOC]

The verb ở presents a learning problem on the production level in that its LOCATIVE case relation is cast in an Objective case form in Vietnamese whereas in English the same case relation is cast in a Locative case form. It is incidentally noted that Hawaiian English has the same construction as in Vietnamese:

Lucky you live Hawaii.  
 [+NM] [+OBJ] [+O] [+LOC]

#### 14. ra 'go out'

The verbs in this intransitive class are characterised by their being directional and having a [+locomotion] feature. They host [+NM, +OBJ] and [+O, +DIR] tagmemes:

[+[+NM, +OBJ] \_\_\_ [+O, +DIR]]  
 Ông ấy ra Saigon. (2.3b.)  
*He went out to Saigon.*  
 [+NM] [+OBJ] [+locom] [+O] [+DIR]

The verbs in this group are also co-verbs. As such, they function as directional prepositions introducing a Directional case relation:

Ông ấy đi ra Saigon.  
*He went out to Saigon.*  
 [+NM] [+OBJ] [+Di] [+DIR]

The class of verbs presents a learning problem on the production level in that their DIRECTIONAL case relation is cast in an Objective case form whereas in English the same case relation would be cast in a Directional case form. It is also incidentally noted that such a [+O, +DIR] tagmeme exists in Hawaiian English:

He went Halewa.  
 [+NM] [+OBJ] [+O] [+DIR]

Examples of verbs: vô 'go in', lên 'go up', xuống 'go down', lại 'go back'.

## 15. đi 'go'

The verbs in this intransitive class are characterised by their being directional and having a [-locomotion] feature. They host [+NM, +OBJ] and [+O, +DIR] tagmemes:

[+[+NM, +OBJ] \_\_\_ [+O, +DIR]]

Ông ấy đi Saigon. (2.3c.)

*He went to Saigon.*

[+NM] [-locom] [+O]  
[+OBJ] [+DIR]

The verbs in this group are also co-verbs. As such, they function as a directional preposition introducing a Directional case form:

Ông ấy gửi sách đi Saigon.

*He sent books to Saigon.*

[+NM] [+O] [+Di]  
[+AGT] [+OBJ] [+DIR]

The class of verbs presents a learning problem of the production level in that their DIRECTIONAL case relation is cast in an Objective case form whereas in English the same case relation would be cast in a Directional case form.

## 16. tới 'arrive'

The verbs in this intransitive class are characterised by their having a [+goal] feature. They host [+NM, +OBJ] and [+O, +GOL] tagmemes:

[+[+NM, +OBJ] \_\_\_ [+O, +GOL]]

Ông ấy tới Saigon. (2.3d.)

*He arrived at Saigon.*

[+NM] [+goal] [+O]  
[+OBJ] [+GOL]

The verbs in this group are also co-verbs. As such, they function as a goal preposition introducing a Goal case form:

Ông ấy gửi sách tới Saigon.

*He sent books to Saigon.*

[+NM] [+O] [+GL]  
[+AGT] [+OBJ] [+GOL]

The class of verbs presents a learning problem on the production level in that their GOAL case relation is cast in an Objective case form

whereas in English the same case relation would be cast in a Goal case form, with the rare exception of verbs such as *reach* which host [+NM, +AGT] and [+O, +OBJ] tagmemes:

*He reached his destination.*

+NM		+O
+AGT		+OBJ

Examples of verbs: *đến* 'arrive', *về* 'return', *qua* 'go over', *sang* 'go over'.

### 17. *có* 'have'

This verb could be classed in the transitive DATIVE group discussed in 2.2.11. above. Thus, it would host [+NM, +DAT] and [+O, +OBJ] tagmemes:

[+[+NM, +DAT] \_\_\_ [+O, +OBJ]]

*Tôi có sách.*

*I have books.*

+NM		+O
+DAT		+OBJ

However, the verb stands out of the group in that it can occur without a Nominative. It means 'there is', 'there are', etc.:

*Có sách ở đây.*

*There are books here.*

+O		+L
+OBJ		+LOC

The pattern presents a learning problem for English speakers on the production level. As for the teaching of all the classes of verbs above, substitution drills could be prepared to teach this existential pattern.



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