

# The absence of classifiers in numeral classifier constructions in Vietnamese

Trang Phan\*

*To Liliane, who inspires me to always look beyond assumptions*

Vietnamese is a so-called obligatory numeral classifier language. Nevertheless it is possible to have direct combination between a numeral and a bare noun in the absence of a go-between classifier. The goal of this squib is to investigate the seemingly unusual cases of such Numeral-N phrases.

In Gil's (2008) typology of numeral classifiers, the world's languages are divided into three types on the basis of whether classifiers are absent, optional or obligatory in numeral constructions. Vietnamese is considered as belonging to the third type in which a numeral cannot quantify a noun without the presence of a classifier based on examples like (1):

- (1) hai \*(con) chó  
two CLF dog  
'two dogs' (Gil's example 2008: 4)

Gil notes, though, that in Vietnamese there is a specialised style of speech, namely food ordering at food stalls and restaurants, in which numeral classifiers are frequently omitted, as seen in (2).

- (2) Context: At the noodle bar where there is a choice between two kinds of noodle soup (chicken or beef), a group of 5 customers might simply order as follows:

Ba gà hai bò  
Three chicken two beef  
'Three bowls of chicken soup and two bowls of beef soup.'

---

\*My special thanks go to Eric Lander for proofreading and commenting on the earlier version of the squib. Needless to say, all errors are mine

(Gil's example 2008: 5)

Gil excludes those specific contexts and still classifies Vietnamese as an obligatory numeral classifier language (Gil 2008: 5).

In this squib, I take issue with Gil's classification by showing that the optionality of Vietnamese classifiers in numeral constructions is not limited to those special contexts, rather the optionality of classifiers in Vietnamese numeral constructions can be understood in a systematic and productive way. More precisely, there is in fact a large group of Vietnamese nouns which do not need a classifier in combination with a numeral.<sup>1</sup>

In the literature on Vietnamese, it has been proposed that Vietnamese nouns can be divided into two main types: classified nouns that require a classifier to be quantified (as in (1)), and non-classified nouns that can be counted directly in the absence of classifiers (Emeneau 1951, Thompson 1965, Nguyễn 1975, Nguyễn 2002, Tran 2011, a.o.), as illustrated by the Numeral-N phrases in (3).

- (3) a. Hai ngày/tỉnh/ bàn/ túi/ bạn/ sinh-viên/vận-động-viên  
two day/ province/ table/ bag/ friend/ student/athlete  
'two days/provinces/tables/bags/friends/students/athletes.'
- b. Một-trăm ngày/tỉnh/ bàn/ túi/ bạn/  
one-hundred day/ province/ table/ bag/ friend/  
sinh-viên/vận-động-viên  
student/athlete  
'one-hundred days/provinces/tables/bags/friends/students/athletes.'

This phenomenon is not novel cross-linguistically. The same Numeral-N pattern is found in Korean (Hwang 2012) but with two restrictions:<sup>2</sup> Numeral-N is only possible if the NP (i) refers to common human nouns and (ii) is combined with numerals below five, as seen in (4).

- (4) a. \*tases kapang  
five bag

---

<sup>1</sup> See Gil (2008), Aikhenvald (2000) and Greenberg (1974) for similar phenomena cross-linguistically.

<sup>2</sup> Her et al. (2015) also observes that Numeral-N phrases can be licensed in Chinese in limited contexts, in an idiom for instance:

- (i) wu ma huan liu yang  
5 horse trade 6 goat  
'Trading 5 horses for 6 goats.'

- 'five bags'
- b. \*ney wuntongsenswu  
four athlete  
'four athletes'
- c. \*payk haksayng  
one-hundred student  
'one hundred students' (Hwang's examples: 2012: 65–66)

Unlike in Korean, Numeral-N phrases in Vietnamese are productive regardless of the noun type and the numeral type, as shown in (3), which clearly suggests that, contra Gil's classification, Vietnamese seems to better fit with optional numeral classifier languages.

In fact, a Numeral-N phrase can appear as the object or the subject of sentences, and can be interpreted as indefinite or definite in Vietnamese:

- (5) Tôi vừa viết thư giới-thiệu cho **hai sinh-viên**. **Hai sinh-viên** đều  
1SG just write letter recommend give two student. Two student both  
học ngôn-ngữ-học.  
study linguistics  
'I have just written recommendation letters for two students. The two students both study linguistics.'

That is to say, a Numeral-N phrase can have the same distribution and interpretation as a fully-fledged Numeral-CLF-N phrase:

- (6) Tôi vừa viết thư giới-thiệu cho **hai bạn sinh-viên**. **Hai bạn**  
1SG just write letter recommend give two CLF student. Two CLF  
**sinh-viên** đều học ngôn-ngữ-học.  
student both study linguistics  
'I have just written recommendation letters for two students. The two students both study linguistics.'

This seems to suggest that a Numeral-N is indeed a Numeral-CLF-N underlyingly. The question is where the covert CLF component resides: in the Numeral or in the N?

One account is proposed by Nguyễn (2002) in which the numeral in Numeral-N phrases is considered as a 'zero classifier' (in his terminology) carrying the individuating function.<sup>3</sup> Consider Nguyễn's minimal pair in (7):

<sup>3</sup> In order to account for the optionality of the classifier in numeral constructions, Borer (2005:

- (7) a. Người đã lên mặt-trăng.  
 Person ANT up moon  
 'Human beings went to the moon.'  
 b. Hai người đã lên mặt-trăng  
 two person ANT up moon  
 'Two people went to the moon.' (Nguyễn's examples: 2002: 17)

In the absence of the numeral, the bare noun in (7a) is interpreted as generic, whereas the addition of the numeral *hai* 'two' in (7b) forces a specific reading. Putting it differently, the absence of a classifier in Numeral-N phrases, according to Nguyễn (2002), results from the fact that the numeral serves two functions at the same time: to individuate and to count.

A scrutiny of the Vietnamese data, however, reveals that this analysis cannot be true since apart from numerals, the bare noun can also co-occur with a number of other elements in the absence of classifiers: it can immediately follow a quantifier (8a) or a plural marker (8b), and can directly precede a demonstrative (8c) or a relative clause (8d).

- (8) a. Mọi *sinh-viên*  
 Every student  
 'Every student'  
 b. Các/những *sinh-viên*  
 PL student  
 'The students.'  
 c. *Sinh-viên* này  
 Student this  
 'This student.'  
 d. *Sinh-viên* mà tôi vừa viết thư giới-thiệu  
 student RC 1SG just write letter recommend  
 'The student that I have just written a recommendation letter for.'

That is to say, the absence of the classifier in the Vietnamese Numeral-N construction is derived from the fact that the bare noun is underlyingly a CLF-N phrase (along the lines of Cheng & Sybesma's 1999 proposal for Chinese). That is, rather than assuming that numerals, quantifiers, plural markers, demonstratives and the RC marker all individually combine with a zero classifier, we can take the much simpler approach that it is just the noun that combines with the

---

117–118) also suggests that in such languages, numerals can function as dividers.

individuating classifier.

This account is further supported by the fact that the bare noun indeed can function as either the object or the subject of the sentence, and can obtain either indefinite (underlying bare N) or definite (underlying CLF-N) readings, as in (9):

- (9) Tôi mời cả **sinh-viên** và giáo-viên đến dự tiệc. **Sinh-viên** thì  
1SG invite all student and teacher come attend party Student TOP  
say bí-tử, giáo-viên thì còn tỉnh-táo.  
drunk DEG teacher TOP still awake  
'I invited both students and teachers to come to the party. The students  
were very drunk, the teachers were still awake.'

To conclude, in this squib, I have contested Gil's 2008 classification of Vietnamese as an obligatory numeral classifier language based on a wider range of empirical patterns in which the overt classifier is absent. I further put forward the idea that the absence of the classifier in Numeral-N constructions is indicative of the fact that the bare noun is not so bare in Vietnamese.

## References

- Aikhenvald, A.Y. 2000. *Classifiers: A typology of noun categorization devices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Borer, H. 2005. *Structuring sense. vol.1, in name only*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cheng, L. & Sybesma, R. 1999. Bare and not-so-bare nouns and the structure of NP. *Linguistic Inquiry* 30. 509–542.
- Emeneau, M. 1951. *Studies in Vietnamese (Annamese) grammar*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Publications.
- Gil, D. 2008. Numeral classifiers. In M.S. Dryer, D. Gil & B. Comrie (eds.), *The world atlas of language structures online*. Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. <http://wals.info/feature/55>.
- Greenberg, J. 1974. Studies in numerical systems I: Double numeral systems. *Stanford Working Papers on Language Universals* 1. 75–89.
- Her, O.S., Ching-Perng, C. & Hui-Chin, T. 2015. Justifying silent elements in syntax: The case of a silent numeral, a silent classifier, and two silent nouns in Mandarin Chinese. *International Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 2. 193–216.

- Hwang, S.H. 2012. *The acquisition of Korean plural marking by native English speakers*: Georgetown University dissertation.
- Nguyễn, P.P. 2002. *Những vấn đề ngữ pháp tiếng Việt: loại từ và chỉ thị từ [Issues of Vietnamese grammar: Classifiers and demonstratives]*. Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất bản Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội.
- Nguyễn, T.C. 1975. *Từ loại danh từ trong tiếng Việt hiện đại [The word class of nouns in modern Vietnamese]*. Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất bản Khoa học xã hội.
- Thompson, L. 1965. *A Vietnamese grammar* Mon-Khmer Studies XIII-XIV. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.
- Tran, J. 2011. *The acquisition of Vietnamese classifiers*: University of Hawaii at Manoa dissertation.