AN INVESTIGATION OF VIETNAMESE CLASSIFIER CONSTRUCTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to investigate typical classifier constructions in Vietnamese and primary semantic functions of Vietnamese classifiers. Three types of common classifier constructions in Vietnamese classifier systems reviewed in the literature were used as a theoretical guide for the study. The subjects included 10 teachers and 379 students at the faculty of Foreign Languages at University of Thu Dau Mot. The data obtained were analyzed in terms of frequency, percentage, mean score and standard deviation. The analysis of data pointed out that such two-element classifier constructions as CL + Dem, CL + WH-word, CL + N, and Numeral + CL were used most often among the participants. In addition, helping a noun to be counted was found to be the primary semantic function of Vietnamese classifiers.

Keywords: Vietnamese, classifiers, classifier constructions, numeral classifiers, semantic function.

INTRODUCTION
Background

Vietnamese, the official language of Vietnam, is a Mon-Khmer language of the Austroasiatic language family. It is known as a tonal, isolating and non-inflectional language with four regional accents: Northen (Hanoi), North Central (Vinh, NgheAn Province), Central (Hue, ThuaThien Province), and Southern (Ho Chi Minh City or Saigon). An important feature of Vietnamese is that it has a very complex numeral classifier system.

In recent time, there has been increased interest in Vietnamese, particularly Vietnamese classifiers. For example, Le (2010) provided an overview of English and Vietnamese classifiers, by contrasting their similarities and differences. Nguyen (2008) analyzed deep structure of meaning, etymology, collocation and usage of classifiers '*con*' and '*cái*'. A corpus-based analysis of Vietnamese 'classifiers' *con* and *cái*was conductedbyPham &Kohnert (2007) and the acquisition of Vietnamese classifiers was carried out by Tran (2011). However, very few studies have investigated the typical classifier constructions in Vietnamese. Le (2010)'s study examined common types of Vietnamese classifiers, but it did not provide common classifier constructions in Vietnamese. In this study, the researcher will investigate the common classifier constructions in Vietnamese.

Aim and significance

This research aims to examine common classifier constructions in Vietnamese and major semantic function of Vietnamese classifiers. The study seeks to partly fill the gap in the field of Vietnamese classifiers.

Research questions

The study will be conducted to seek for the answer to the following research questions:

1. What are the most typical classifier constructions in Vietnamese classifier system?
2. What are the semantic functions of Vietnamese classifiers?

LITERATURE REVIEW
Definition of classifiers

There has been a variety of definitions of classifiers over the past few years. For instance, classifiers, according to Lock (1996 as cited in Aziz, 2009), could classify the thing. Take the phrase 'assistant instructor' for example. '*Assistant*' here functions as a classifier to sub-classify the word *instructor*. It implies that Lock's focus was on sub-classification function of classifiers. Celce-Muria and Larsen-Freeman defined a classifier construction as a phrase consisting of a countable noun followed by of that precedes another noun, as in a drop water (1999 as cited in Aziz, 2009, p.18). Whereas, Fromkin et al. (2003 as cited in Aziz, 2009, p.18) defined a classifier as a 'grammatical morpheme that marks the semantic class of a noun'. Goddard (2005) defined classifier as "a word which categorizes the referent according to some salient social, physical or functional property" (p.95). Compared to other linguists, Goddard gave more weight to the referent. The classifier may possibly categorize inanimate referents according to their physical nature (shape and material), function or both. This viewpoint is quite similar to what Aikhenvald (2000) defined classifiers. According to Aikhenvald, classifiers could be words to categorize word classes based on an attribute such as shape, function, or animacy. Matthew (2007, p.58, as cited in Aziz, 2009, p. 18) defines a classifier as 'a form which marks a noun of a specific semantic class and which has to accompany a numeral'. To sum up, classifiers have been defined in a number of ways from linguists to linguists and remained highly controversial over years. Concurrently, it also reveals that classifiers could be utilized to categorize the words in light of their features and should go with a numeral.

Aside from the English language, there have not existed many definitions of classifiers in Vietnamese although "Vietnamese is one of several Asian languages with a complex numeral classifier system." (Tran, 2011, p.1). In English, "one has to choose for most nouns between a singular and a plural (e.g. candle vs. candles)" (Wierzbicka, 2014, p.130), whereas Vietnamese nouns "do not in themselves contain any notion of number or amount. In this respect they are all somewhat like English mass nouns such as *milk, water, flour,* etc." (Thompson, 1967, p.193). In other words, most Vietnamese nouns might be unable to be counted. If that is the case, "Vietnamese can use classifiers to individuate nouns to make them countable" (Tran, 2011, p.16). It is the most typical of all Vietnamese substantial structures – "a numeral as numerator with a head consisting of a classifier complemented by a following noun (e.g., *một***con***chó* a dog, *ba***cái***ghế* three chairs)" (Thompson, 1967, p.193). Apart from English classifiers, the meaning of a Vietnamese classifier cannot be specified in isolation, "it always has to be accompanied by a noun" (Tran, 2011, p.47). In a word, the most typical function of Vietnamese classifier (CL) is to individuate a noun according to the structure (a numeral + CL + a Noun).

Classifier constructions in Vietnamese

According to Aikhenvald (2000), there exist many types of classifiers in languages. They are grouped into five major categories: noun classifiers, numeral classifiers, classifiers in possessive constructions, verbal classifiers and locative and deictic classifiers. Of these several types of classifiers in languages, numeral classifiers are said to be the most common. They are found predominantly in languages of East and Southern Asia such as Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese (Tran, 2011; Oi-man, 2006).

In Vietnamese "the classifier is obligatory in the presence of a numeral" (Tran, 2011, p.8). According to Tran (2011), Vietnamese classifiers can be used in anaphoric construction where classifiers are considered as a pronoun to replace the omitted head noun (Diep, 2004; Dinh, 1997; Hoang, 1996; Phan, 1988 ;Nguyen, 1975 as cited in Tran, 2011). "When used like this, the classifier appears with a modifier, but without a noun. It is functioning as a noun substitute, similar in some ways to English *one* (as in: a big *one*)" (Goddard, 2005, p.104). This structure, therefore, can be depicted as (a numeral + CL). Tran (2011) also agreed that Vietnamese classifiers have characteristics of functors or grammatical morphemes or 'form words', they have often been considered meaningless. "The meaning of a classifier cannot be specified if it stands alone; it always has to be accompanied by a noun" (Tran, 2011, p.47), possibly according to the structure (CL + Noun). The prototypical classifiers are "*cái* for inanimate objects, *con* for animate, non-human objects, and *người* for human beings." (Nguyen, 2004, p.86; Cao,1998 & 2000 as cited in Le, 2010). To sum up, the discussion may indicate the most common classifier constructions in Vietnamese: (CL + Noun), (Numeral + CL + Noun), (A numeral + CL). A summary of possible two- to four-element classifier phrases in Vietnamese is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Possible two- to four-element classifier phrases in Vietnamese
(adapted from Tran, 2011, p.7)

Possible classifier constructions in Vietnamese		
Two-element classifier constructions	**Three-element classifier constructions**	**Four-element classifier constructions**
a. CL + Dem	a. CL + N + Dem	a. CL + N + Adj + Dem
b. CL + Wh-word	b. CL + N + Wh-word	b. CL + N + Adj + Wh-word
c. CL + Adj	c. CL + N + Adj	c. Numeral + CL + N + Dem
d. CL + N	d. CL + N + Poss	d. Numeral + CL + N + Poss
e. Numeral + CL	e. Numeral + CL + N	e. Numeral + CL + N + Wh-word
f. Numeral + N	f. Numeral + CL + Dem	f. Numeral + CL + N + Adj
	g. Numeral + CL + Poss	g. CL + CL + N + Rel. Clause
	h. Numeral + CL + Wh-word	
	i. Numeral + CL + Adj	
	j. CL + CL + Rel. clause	

Semantic functions of classifiers

According to the research by many linguists (Aikhenvald, 2000; Denny, 1986; Greenberg, 1978), classifiers have two primary functions: quantifying and individuating as well as classifying and categorizing.

Quantifying and individuating

As indicated in Greenberg (1978 as cited in Aikhenvald, 2000), a numeral classifier is viewed as a unit of collectively. The quantifying function of numeral classifiers is the same as the noun refers to some kind of mass and the classifier gives a unit of this mass (Denny, 1986, p.298 as cited in Aikhenvald, 2000). Denny emphasized the reason why nouns are often removed from numeral phrases rather than classifiers (e.g. in anaphoric construction). That is because classifiers are utilized to enumerate the type of individual whereas nouns only specify some of their properties. In short, a numeral classifier functions as a unit to help a noun to be counted.

Classifying and categorizing

The second function of classifier is to provide information about sorts, or classes, of units. Classifiers can give the verb predicates to nouns, and conversely it also offers verbs information about a nominal argument (Aikhenvald, 2000). The function of adding information to the nominal is of great importance in cases when different classifiers are used with the same noun. For example, the choice of a classifier for humans may depend on their social status. In Vietnamese, classifiers for people are most varied including classifiers showing respect (e.g. đức, đấng, bậc, sư, thầy, vị, ông, bà, etc.) and classifiers for the ordinary (kẻ, tay, lão, mụ, thằng, con, đứa, etc) (Tran, 2010). Likewise, when "inanimate nouns appear with different classifiers", that is, such nouns share different aspects of their meaning. (Aikhenvald, 2000, p.319). This function is highly significant in the system of Vietnamese classifiers.

Generally speaking, the semantic function of classifiers is to help a noun to be counted and add information to the nominal. The second function may be of semantic importance in the Vietnamese classifier system.

METHOD
Participants

The teacher respondents included 10 teachers who have been teaching semantics at the faculty of Foreign Languages at University of Thu Dau Mot. The learner respondents were comprised of 379third- and fourth-year students at the faculty of Foreign Languages at University of Thu Dau Mot. Those students have already finished the subject 'Semantics' by the time the study was carried out.

Instruments

In this survey, the quantitative data were collected through the questionnaires. All of the response items in the questionnaires were specially designed according to yes-no items and 5-point Likert scale items.

Procedure

The first questionnaire was distributed to all student respondents in the beginning of October 2014 while the second questionnaire was administered to teacher respondents in the middle of

October 2014. All the questionnaires to learners were collected immediately, but the questionnaires to teachers were gathered few days later. The data was collected near the end of the semester (beginning of October) when all student respondents were going to take the final examination in Semantics. The data obtained by that time would be more reliable.

Data analysis

The data obtained from both questionnaires will be combined and analyzed in terms of frequency, percentage and mean score to fulfill the main goals of the study. The first objective was to investigate common classifier constructions in Vietnamese. The second objective was to examine semantic functions of Vietnamese classifiers. All responses provided from yes-no questions in the questionnaires to teacher and student respondents were coded and calculated in terms of frequency and percentage. All question items designed on a five point Likert scale were particularly analyzed in terms of mean score and standard deviations. For both questionnaires to teacher and student respondents, the mean score above or equal to 3.0 showed regular use of Vietnamese classifier constructions, but conversely below 3.0 indicated less common constructions. Overall, the data was interpreted on the basis of two main objectives of the study and led to the answer to the research questions and the findings of the study.

RESULTS
Common classifier constructions in Vietnamese

According to the survey, a high percentage of respondents (95.1%) gained knowledge of classifiers in Vietnamese which could exist in the constructions including two, three or even four elements. Regarding two-element classifier constructions, Table 2 below pointed out that such constructions as CL + Dem, Cl + Wh-word, CL + N, and Numeral + CL were most familiar with the participants. The constructions CL + Wh-word and CL + N reached a high peak at 94.9% and 94.3% respectively.

Table 2: Two-element classifier constructions

	YES		NO	
	Count	**Percent**	**Count**	**Percent**
CL + Dem	360	**92.50%**	29	7.50%
CL + Wh-word	369	**94.90%**	20	5.10%
CL + Adj	260	66.80%	129	33.20%
CL + N	367	**94.30%**	22	5.70%
Numeral + CL	361	**92.80%**	28	7.20%
Numeral + N	292	75.10%	97	24.90%

In terms of three-element classifier constructions as shown in Table 3, the majority of the subjects reached an understanding of classifier constructions investigated. However, the data analysis revealed that there remained three most common classifier constructions including CL + N + Possand Numeral + CL + N (both at 93.8%), and Numeral + CL + Dem (at 90.5%).

Table 3: Three-element classifier constructions

	YES		NO	
	Count	**Percent**	**Count**	**Percent**
CL + N + Dem	282	72.50%	107	27.50%
CL + N + Wh-word	297	76.30%	92	23.70%
CL + N + Adj	344	88.40%	45	11.60%
CL + N + Poss	365	**93.80%**	24	6.20%
Numeral + CL + N	365	**93.80%**	24	6.20%
Numeral + CL + Dem	352	**90.50%**	37	9.50%
Numeral + CL + Poss	287	73.80%	102	26.20%
Numeral + CL + Wh-word	345	88.70%	44	11.30%
Numeral + CL + Adj	264	67.90%	125	32.10%
CL + CL + Rel. clause	316	81.20%	73	18.80%

There was the same general tendency for four-element classifier constructions. As the data presented in Table 4 below, most of the constructions stayed highly popular among the sample.

Table 4: Four-element classifier constructions

	YES		NO	
	Count	**Percent**	**Count**	**Percent**
CL + N + Adj + Dem	338	**86.90%**	51	13.10%
CL + N + Adj + Wh-word	316	81.20%	73	18.80%
Numeral + CL + N + Dem	338	**86.90%**	51	13.10%
Numeral + CL + N + Poss	333	**85.60%**	56	14.40%
Numeral + CL + N + Wh-word	329	**84.60%**	60	15.40%
Numeral + CL + N + Adj	323	83.00%	66	17.00%
CL + CL + N + Rel. Clause	321	82.50%	68	17.50%

The most common classifier constructions wereCL + N + Adj + Dem and Numeral + CL + N + Dem (both at 86.9), just over Numeral + CL + N + Poss (85.6%) and Numeral + CL + N + Wh-word (84.6%).

To sum up, it can be concluded that 389 Vietnamese teachers and students participating in the survey gained much experience of classifier constructions in Vietnamese. In other words, classifiers have been widely-used in different parts of Vietnam and well-known by many Vietnamese people.

Frequency of using earlier classifier constructions

The next part of the questionnaire was constructed to investigate frequency of using the earlier classifier constructions. All responses given by the respondents were related according to five point Likert scale: 1 (Never), 2 (Rarely), 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Often), 5(Always). The mean score (above or equal to 3.0) measured regular use of Vietnamese classifier constructions, and conversely.

Table 5: Two-element classifier constructions

Classifier constructions	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Mean	Std. Deviation
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	5		
CL + Dem	11 2.8%	37 9.5%	54 13.9%	100 25.7%	187 48.1%	**4.07**	1.119
CL + Wh-word	7 1.8%	18 4.6%	54 13.9%	107 27.5%	203 52.2%	**4.24**	0.977
CL + Adj	49 12.6%	97 24.9%	99 25.4%	85 21.9%	59 15.2%	3.02	1.258
CL + N	18 4.6%	29 7.5%	78 20.1%	113 29%	151 38.8%	**3.90**	1.139
Numeral + CL	17 4.4%	47 12.1%	85 21.9%	102 26.2%	138 35.5%	**3.76**	1.182
Numeral + N	64 16.5%	88 22.6%	81 20.8%	87 22.4%	69 17.7%	3.02	1.350

According to Table 5, there wasan increased frequency of using two-element classifier constructions in Vietnamese (average mean score is 3.67, just over 3.0). Fourmost popular classifier constructions were CL + Dem (M=4.07), CL + Wh-word (M=4.24), CL + N (M=3.90) and Numeral + CL (M=3.76).It can be concluded that Vietnamese people tended to say 'cáinày' (CL + this), 'cáinào' (CL + which), 'con đường' (CL + street), or 'bacái' (Numeral + CL), 'năm con' (Numeral + CL).

In comparison to the first group, average mean score of the second categorywas slightly lower (3.49 and 3.67 respectively). The data in Table 6 below displayed a substantial proportion of using three-element classifier constructions in Vietnamese.

Table 6: Three-element classifier constructions

Classifier constructions	Never 1	Rarely 2	Sometimes 3	Often 4	Always 5	Mean	Std. Deviation
CL + N + Dem	54 13.9%	86 22.1%	97 24.9%	94 24.2%	58 14.9%	3.04	1.272
CL + N + Wh-word	39 10%	81 20.85	96 24.7%	95 24.4%	78 20.1%	3.24	1.266
CL + N + Adj	20 5.1%	64 16.5%	99 25.4%	107 27.5%	99 25.4%	3.52	1.183
CL + N + Poss	13 3.3%	25 6.4%	88 22.6%	113 295	150 38.6%	**3.93**	1.081
Numeral + CL + N	15 3.9%	52 13.4%	97 24.9%	115 29.6%	110 28.3%	**3.65**	1.138
Numeral + CL + Dem	16 4.1%	40 10.3%	93 23.9%	118 30.3%	122 31.4%	**3.75**	1.128
Numeral + CL + Poss	26 6.7%	85 21.9%	95 24.4%	99 25.4%	84 21.6%	3.33	1.223
Numeral + CL + Wh-word	16 4.1%	51 13.1%	88 22.6%	108 27.8%	126 32.4%	**3.71**	1.168
Numeral + CL + Adj	51 13.1%	83 21.3%	95 24.4%	84 21.6%	76 19.5%	3.13	1.312
CL + CL + Rel. clause	23 5.9%	58 14.9%	86 22.1%	105 27%	117 30.1%	**3.60**	1.224

As identified in Table 6, classifier constructions widely used in Vietnamese remained CL + N + Poss (M=3.93), Numeral + CL + Dem (M=3.75), and Numeral + CL + Wh-word (M=3.71), Numeral + CL + N (M=3.65), and CL + CL + Rel. clause (M=3.60).This could come to the conclusion that such structure as'cáinhàcủatôi' translated as (CL + house + of + I) or (CL + N + Poss) was accepted in different parts of Vietnam, with highest mean score (M=3.93). The other four constructionswere also of great popularity in Vietnamese,for instance, 'haicáinày' (Two + CL + this), or 'haicáigì?' (Two + CL + which), 'haicáinhà' (Two + CL + house), and 'cái con màbạnthấylúcnày' (CL + CL + which you have just seen).

Table 7: Four-element classifier constructions

Classifier constructions	Never 1	Rarely 2	Sometimes 3	Often 4	Always 5	Mean	Std. Deviation
CL + N + Adj + Dem	21 5.4%	82 21.1%	93 23.9%	98 25.2%	95 24.4%	3.42	1.217
CL + N + Adj + Wh-word	16 4.1%	75 19.3%	110 28.3%	96 24.7%	92 23.7%	3.44	1.164
Numeral + CL + N + Dem	19 4.9%	52 13.4%	102 26.2%	110 28.35	106 27.2%	**3.60**	1.162
Numeral + CL + N + Poss	33 8.5%	67 17.2%	85 21.9%	119 30.6%	85 21.9%	3.40	1.239
Numeral + CL + N + Wh-	25	60	108	93	103	3.49	1.215

word	6.4%	15.4%	27.8%	23.9%	26.5%		
Numeral + CL + N + Adj	28 7.2%	71 18.3%	106 27.2%	96 24.7%	88 22.6%	3.37	1.219
CL + CL + N + Rel. Clause	23 5.9%	46 11.8%	86 22.1%	113 29%	121 31.1%	**3.68**	1.198

According to the data analyzed in Table 7 above, there was a widespread use of earlier four-element classifier constructions (average mean score is 3.48, much higher than 3.0).The most frequent classifier constructions were Numeral + CL + N + Dem (M=3.60) and CL + CL + N + Rel. Clause (M=3.68). The result implied that Vietnamese people tended to use such constructions as 'bacáinhàđó' (Three + CL + house + that), and 'cái con chómàbạnthấylúcnãy' (CL + CL + dog + that you have just seen).

In short, classifier constructions in Vietnamese may include two elements, three elements and even four elements. The use of two-element classifier constructions seems to be the most popular, with the highest average mean score (3.67 compared to 3.48 and 3.49 respectively).The most typical classifier constructions found out in the study can be summarized in Table 8 below.

Table 8: The most typical classifier constructions found out in the study

Most typical classifier constructions in Vietnamese		
Two-element classifier constructions	Three-element classifier constructions	Four-element classifier constructions
CL + Dem	CL + N + Poss	Numeral + CL + N + Dem
CL + Wh-word	Numeral + CL + Dem	CL + CL + N + Rel. Clause
CL + N	Numeral + CL + Wh-word	
Numeral + CL	Numeral + CL + N	
	CL + CL + Rel. clause	

Semantic function of Vietnamese classifiers

According to the data analyzed, many of the participants (81%) admitted that they had certain understanding of semantic function of classifiers in Vietnamese. Only a minority of them used classifiers without knowledge of their semantic function.

Table 9: Semantic function of Vietnamese classifiers

	YES		NO	
	Count	**Percent**	**Count**	**Percent**
Help a noun to be counted	316	*81.20%*	73	18.80%
Add information to the nominal.	290	*74.60%*	99	25.40%

It can be revealed from Table 9 that Vietnamese classifiers performed two primary functions: help a noun to be counted and add information to the nominal. However, Vietnamese people had a tendency to use classifiers to count a noun (81.2%). The second semantic function of Vietnamese classifiers is not as popular as the first one. Adding information to the nominal

suffered a lower rate at approximately 74.6%. It was, therefore, obvious that the main semantic function of classifiers in Vietnamese was to count a noun.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

From the earlier discussion of results, the researcher summarizes the main findings responding to the research questions of the study.

Research question 1: What are the most typical classifier constructions in Vietnamese classifier systems?

According to the data analyzed, the most typical classifier constructions in Vietnamese could be comprised of two elements, three elements and even four elements, but two-element classifier constructions were found most common among participants. Concerning this first category, such constructions as CL + Dem, CL + Wh-word, CL + N, and Numeral + CL were used more often. Although less popular than the first group, three- and four-element classifier constructions remained at high frequencies. Vietnamese residents were also in favor of many three-element classifiers constructions, for instance, CL + N + Poss, Numeral + CL + Dem, Numeral + CL + Wh-word, Numeral + CL + N, CL + CL + Rel. clause and four-element constructions, for example, Numeral + CL + N + Dem and CL + CL + N + Rel. clause.

Research question 2: What are the semantic functions of Vietnamese classifiers?

As the data reveals, two major semantic functions of Vietnamese classifiers were to help a noun to be counted and add information to the nominal. However, it sounds more popular for Vietnamese to use classifiers to count a noun rather than to add information to the nominal.

LIMITATION

To begin with, the sample size of the present study was relatively small, including 10 teachers and 379 students at the faculty of Foreign Languages atUniversity of Thu Dau Mot. Thus, it is recommended that the sample size in the future studies should be expanded to increase the reliability of the findings.
Second, the study was only conducted at the faculty of Foreign Languages atUniversity of Thu Dau Mot. The population of the study just included teachers and students at this university. Accordingly, the future studies could consist of teachers and students from many other educational institutions in Vietnam.

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