

A LOOK AT NORTH-CENTRAL VIETNAMESE

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1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is twofold.¹ First, this paper presents phonetic and lexical field data on regional varieties of Vietnamese in North-Central Vietnam, a set of data that is not widely accessible from other sources. Second, it shows how the data, along with other information about other Vietic languages (such highly conservative languages as Rục (Nguyễn V. L. 1993, Nguyễn T. C. 1995), Thavung (Ferlus 1974 and 1979, Hayes 1984 and 1992), and Arem (Trần 1990)), underscore the archaic nature of the speech in this region and the important data for historical linguistic studies in this region.

Vietnamese is often divided into three main regional variants: Northern, Central, and Southern Vietnamese.² The differences between these variants are mainly phonological, but notable differences are evident among non-basic content vocabulary and, though less commonly, even more basic vocabulary and the functional part of the lexicon. In basic and grammatical vocabulary, it is in Central Vietnamese, in contrast with both Northern and Southern Vietnamese, that the differences are most striking. North-Central Vietnamese--generally thought of as the regional variety spoken in the provinces of Thanh Hoá, Nghệ An, and Quảng Bình--has also drawn attention (Emeneau 1951, Ferlus 1998, Guignard 1911, Maspero 1912, Nguyễn T. C. 1995, Thompson 1985), but besides the four general regional divisions, relatively little has been published about other local varieties.³ This paper presents phonological and lexical data on several local varieties of North-Central Vietnamese.

In 1997, I took speech recordings of several varieties of Vietnamese from the North-Central province of Nghệ An, in addition to representative standard speech from Hà Nội, Huế, and Hồ Chí Minh Cities. The data were collected by the use of (1) wordlists aimed primarily at identifying a full range of the phonetic realizations of tones and (2) sentence lists that provided ways to find distinctive etymologies.⁴ The data show that, although North-Central Vietnamese (hereafter, NCV) cannot be easily grouped with either Northern or Central Vietnamese and shares certain phonological and lexical characteristics with both, there are a few details that suggest a closer connection to Central Vietnamese. In addition, this paper deals with the language/dialect/accent continuum in Vietnam and the historical implications of linguistic data with respect to regional diversity and linguistic affiliation. NCV shows both conservative (segmental and lexical) characteristics and innovations (notable variety in realizations of tones). The sections in this paper include discussion on (1) dialect versus regional accent and vocabulary, (2) the genealogical position of North-Central Vietnamese, (3) some significant field data on NCV, and (4) the implications of that data. Table 6 following this article presents a tentative summary of tone systems amongst the varieties of Vietnamese studied.

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2 Dialect versus Regional Accent/Vocabulary

The three traditional regional dialects, namely Northern Vietnamese (NV), Central Vietnamese (CV), and Southern Vietnamese (SV), have as their generally accepted regional centers Hà Nội, Vinh, Huế, and Hồ Chí Minh City (cf. Nguyễn Đình Hoà's Vietnamese-English dictionary (1966) and Thompson's Vietnamese grammar (1985)). Dialect neutralization has taken place along the well-traveled coastline,⁵ with some convergence towards regional center standards, while the restricted inner highlands have, as seen in data for this paper, maintained much smaller regional linguistic distinctions.

As the distinction between language, dialect, and accent is often not a clear one, it is necessary to consider the difference in Vietnamese. The difference between a dialect and simply a regional accent is the difference of more basic vocabulary, morphology, and syntax, though not so different as to cause significant interference in communication. Central Vietnamese has a significantly lower degree of comprehensibility to both speakers of Northern and Southern Vietnamese, a fact both linguistically predicted and anecdotally supported. In Vietnam, such is also the case for NCV, which has not only notable phonological distinctions (especially of tones), but also distinctions in basic vocabulary (such as 'knee' and 'head') and even distinctions in the etymologies for various grammatical vocabulary. This supports the claim that NCV is a distinct dialect with various local varieties.

It should also be noted that NCV is regarded as a kind of curiosity. It has been posited an archaic pocket by Maspero (1912) and later by Nguyễn T. C. (1995). In addition to the archaic linguistic features of rural NCV, there are also speakers of the closely related but more conservative Mường and highly conservative Minor Vietic languages. While Vietnamese has no complex initial consonant clusters, Mường does of obstruents plus [l]. More significantly, the Minor Vietic languages, with their more basic or even incipient tone systems, have complete presyllables with Mon-Khmer morphology. While this raises the issue of language contact as a source of mutual influence, in fact, put together, this scenario makes this region of Vietnam unique with regards to the historical background of Vietnamese, having all three subbranches of Vietic in one small region.

3 The Linguistic Position of North-Central Vietnamese

North-Central Vietnamese, as represented by speech in the city of Vinh, can be historically grouped with Central Vietnamese, as represented by the speech of Hue, due to their primary similarities in the unmarked tones and both grammatical and content vocabulary. The 'even' tones (*ngang* and *huyền*) generally have the same contour, as in Table 1. Also, they share several notable grammatical lexical items, as in Table 2.

Table 1: *Phonetic realizations of 'level' tones*

	NV	SV	CV	NCV
Ngang tone	33	33	35	35
Huyền tone	21	21	33	33

Table 2: Vietnamese lexical variants

Gloss	NV	SV	CV	NCV
‘thus’	vậy	vậy	rửa	rửa
‘how’	sao	sao	răng	răng
‘where’	đâu	đâu	mô	mô
‘this’	này	này	ni	ni

Nonetheless, NCV maintains a modern dialectal distinction from CV since the segmental phonological distinctions are great enough for interference in interregional communication (as discussed in section 4). There are, in addition, some notable lexical distinctions, for example, differences within the region for the word expressing negation (*nỏ* ‘no/not’, as opposed to several other mainstream alternatives *không*, *chẳng*, and *chả*) and the reflexive (*chắ* ‘each other’ versus standard *nhau*), spoken in Thành Chương Vietnamese in Nghệ An province (Alves and Nguyễn forthcoming).

4 Segmental Characteristics

NCV is phonologically conservative, maintaining more segmental phonemic distinctions than any of the other three main regional varieties of Vietnamese. In Table 3, the regional variations are shown with respect to Vietnamese Quốc Ngữ orthography (QN hereafter), which represents the original maximal number of phonemic distinctions in Vietnamese.

Table 3: Realizations of Quốc Ngữ in Regional Varieties

QN	NV	NCV	CV	SV
s	s	ʃ	ʃ	ʃ
x	s	s	s	s
tr	c	ʈ	ʈ	ʈ
ch	c	c	c	c
r	ʒ	ɹ	ɹ	ɹ
d	ʒ	ʝ	ʝ	ʝ
gi	ʒ	ʒ	ʝ	ʝ
v	v	v	ʝ	ʝ
-nh	ɲ	ɲ	n	n
-n	n	n	n/ŋ	n/ŋ
-ng	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ
-ch	c	c	t	t
-t	t	t	t/k	t/k
-c	k	k	k	k

In geographic terms, the number of phonemic distinctions decreases either north or south of the region where NCV is spoken. Table 3 shows a geographic range of distinctions among varieties of Vietnamese, with NCV in the center. Whereas NCV has distinct phonemes for all the QN sounds, NV, CV, and SV all show mergers as indicated by the lack of lines between certain cells in the table.

5 Field data on NCV

Linguistic data were collected through acoustic phonetic recordings using SIL's Winccil.⁶ Speakers were given word lists (monosyllabic and bisyllabic words and short phrases and sentences). NCV shows a significant amount of both segmental and tonal variation, mostly restricted to specific lexical items, though some represented differences in phonemic systems. Some lexical differences were found between the rural and metropolitan varieties of central Vietnamese, as shown in Table 4. The tone values are indicated by the numbers 1 to 5, which show the starting and finishing points of the tones, while 'g' indicates glottalization accompanying tones. In Tables 4, the regional variants from Vinh downward are rural NCV variants. Major cities are named as cities, while the remainder of the examples show small townships (*xã*) preceded by their subregional districts (*huyện*).

Table 4: NCV lexical variants for 'lighter'

'lighter' bật lửa			
Location	QN	IPA	Tone Value
Hà Nội City	bật lửa	bət liə	22-31
Huế City	bật lửa	bək liə	22-31g
Nha Trang City	bật lửa	bək liə	22-35
Vinh City	bật lửa	bət liə	22-31g
Thành Tương, Thành Tương	bật lò	bət lɔ	22g-31g
Nam Đàn, Nam Trung	mậy lả	me la	22-31g
Nghi Lộc, Nghi Ân	bật lò	bət lɔ	22-31
Nghi Lộc, Nghi Hưng	mậy lửa	me lɔ	35-31
Nghi Lộc, Nghi Khanh	bật lửa	bət liə	22-31g
Nghi Lộc, Nghi Lâm	mậy lửa	məj liə	31g-31g

As another indication of the high degree of dialectal variation, Table 5 shows diphthongization and additional vocalic mutation. Nghi Ân township is especially conservative; it leaves unrounded the pronunciation of words with back vowels followed by final velars, such as the Sino-Vietnamese word *không* "not/nebulus" pronounced in Nghi Ân as /k^hoŋ/ instead of the standard /xauŋ^m/.

Table 5: *Nghi Lộc, Nghi Ân Speech*

Gloss	QN	NV	Nghi Ân	Category
‘dishonest’	gian	zan	juən	a:ə
‘series’	loạt	lwat	luət	
‘outside’	ngoại	ɲwaj	ɲuəj	
‘toss’	quáng	kwaŋ	kwəŋ	
‘uncle’	bác	bak	bək	a:ɔ
‘gold’	vàng	vaŋ	vɔŋ	
‘gait’	dáng	zaŋ	zɔŋ	
‘exit’	ra	ra	rɔ	
‘must’	phải	faj	fɔj	
‘left’	trái	taj	tɔj	
‘ghost’	ma	ma	mɔ	
‘to pass’	quá	kwa	kɔ	
‘river (Sino-Vietnamese)’	hà	ha	hɔ	

Another lexical difference was strictly urban versus rural. The word for ‘older sister’ is in the data consistently *chị* in the major cities, while the rural areas showed variously *ả* and *o*.

Finally, in field data, the tones in this region show a very high amount of phonetic variation according to township, as can be seen in Table 6 (at the end of this article). Despite the small geographic region studied, the varieties of NCV show substantial linguistic differences. Most tone variation is among the phonetically non-level *trắc* tones, though even the level *bằng* tones show some variation.⁷ There is a phonetic distinction in some varieties between the *sắc* tone in open and syllables with final voiceless stops.

6 Implications

This paper has presented various phonetic and lexical data on North Central Vietnamese, which is, though closer typologically to Central than to Northern Vietnamese, a distinct main dialect of Vietnamese with local variation even at the township level. NCV shows the largest number of segmental phonemic distinctions and amount of regional phonetic variation, particularly tones. Moreover, a high amount of archaic vocabulary and phonemic preservations further highlight the conservative aspects of NCV and fill in some of the blanks that link Vietic with other Mon-Khmer languages.

While not directly stated, these dialectal distinctions are reflective of the historical spread and differentiation of modern Vietnamese. Historical records show that during the Chinese Han dynasty, there existed in modern North and North-Central Vietnam the historical regions of Giao Chi and Cửu Chân respectively (Taylor 1983), corresponding to the north versus central dialect division in Vietnam, as noted by Ferlus 1999. Thus, NCV maintains a significant geographic position between these two historically significant regions and near both Mường and Minor Vietic languages. The amount of regional variation is interesting as it identifies the known time depth of the speech in the area for diversification to have occurred.

Table 6: Tone Contour in Varieties of Vietnamese⁸

Area	City/Town	Ngang	Huyền	Sắc (Open)	Sắc (Closed)	Nặng	Hỏi	Ngã
North	Hà Nội City	33	21	24	45	22g	31	35g
South	Hồ Chí Minh city	33	21	45		23	24	
Central	Huế City	35	33	13g	45	22	31g	
	Vinh City	35	33	11	11/55	22	31	13g
	Nam Đàn, Nam Trung	35	33	13g	13g/45	22	31	
	Thành Chương, Thành Tường	35	33	11g/13g		22g	31	
	Nghi Lộc, Nghi Khanh	35	33	55		53		44
	Nghi Lộc, Nghi Hưng	44	33	45		22	31	31/13g
	Nghi Lộc, Nghi Lâm	35	33	13g	45	22	31	31/13g

Notes

1. The data for this paper was collected with the invaluable assistance of Mr. Nguyễn Duy Hương of the Institute of Linguistics in Hà Nội. However, all mistakes in this paper of content, presentation, and ideas are mine alone.
2. See Thompson 1985 and Friberg 1973. The French colonial period saw the division of Vietnam into the three regions recognized as dialectal boundaries though administrative boundaries have existed in North Vietnam since the Han dynasty, two millennia ago (see Taylor 1983 for historical details and Ferlus 1999 on the relationship between those ancient divisions and modern dialectal differences).
3. Two such works are Vương 1981 and Hoàng 1989.
4. Thanh Chương Vietnamese data (Alves and Nguyễn) were presented at the Eighth SEALS conference held in Kuala Lumpur in 1998.
5. Acknowledged in personal communication with Vietnamese linguists.
6. The phonetic software was downloaded at www.sil.org.
7. The *bằng* (meaning 'level') category refers to the mid-level/*ngang* and mid-falling tones/*huyền* tones, while the *trắc* (meaning 'uneven') category refers to all other Vietnamese tones, which have more distinctive contours and sometimes glottalization.
8. This table is certainly tentative as the data collected were based on very few subjects. Moreover, the issues of describing phonemic representations of Vietnamese tones are complicated by other factors (cf. Alves 1995 and Pham 2003).

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