

# Vietnamese Demonstratives Revisited\*

Nguyễn Phú Phong  
Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique

In this paper, I will try to show that Vietnamese demonstratives are to be analyzed not only in terms of distance but also in terms of space. I will first present L.C.Thompson's analysis and then my own.

## 1. Morphological Structure

In his *Vietnamese Grammar* (1965:142) Thompson lists the basic demonstratives in the table reproduced below:

	Unspecified	Close to Speaker or Newly Introduced	* Remote Already Identified
	-ao/-âu (even)	-ay/-ây (even)	-ây/o (short)
PLACE đ- (first register)	đâu 'wherever'	đây 'here'	đấy 'there'
REFERENCE n- (second register)	nào 'whichever'	này 'this'	nọ '(an) other, that'
PROPORTION b- (first register)	bao 'to whatever extent'	bây 'to this extent'	bấy 'to that [such] extent'
MANNER s- (first register)/ v- (second register)	sao 'however'	vày 'this way, thus'	vậy 'that way, so'

Table 1. Basic demonstratives (Thompson 1965)

Thus Thompson is the first—if not the only author so far—to have arranged demonstratives according to their morphological features, so as to show their semantic interrelationships. In doing so, he points out the existence of subsyllabic

---

\*I would like to thank M.C. Paris (Université de Paris VII), and I. Tamba-Mecz (Université de Strasbourg II) for their helpful discussion and critical comments. Special thanks are due to J.A. Matisoff (University of California, Berkeley) and Boyd Michailovsky (CNRS Paris) for their valuable remarks and assistance in the English version of this paper.

morphemes in Vietnamese, a fact that the vast majority of students of Vietnamese have hardly recognized.

However, Thompson seems to be so preoccupied with the morphological regularity of the system he posits that he misses some important points, i.e. such frequently occurring items as (n)ấy, đó, kia,<sup>1</sup> are not to be found in Table 1. To integrate these additional items, Thompson's table (with manner and proportion demonstratives deleted) may be modified as follows:

	D° (Indefinite)	D1 (Proximal)	D2 (Medial)	D3 (Distal)
+NOM(inal)	đâu place-what <sup>(2)</sup>	đây place-this	đấy place-that <sub>1</sub>	
±NOM(inal)			đó (place- )that <sub>1</sub>	kia (place- )that <sub>2</sub>
-NOM(inal)	nào what	này this	(n)ấy that <sub>1</sub>	nọ that <sub>2</sub>

Table 2. Basic demonstratives (modified)

Table 2 makes clear the following points:

1) The opposition of the initials *đ*-/*n*- correlates with the opposition of *Place+Reference* vs. *Reference* instead of Thompson's *Place* vs. *Reference*. My English glosses stress this difference: *đây* bears the same contrastive relationship with *này* as 'Place-this' does with 'this'. In other words, all the demonstratives in the +NOM series are semantically broken down into two components (*Place* and *Position*) whereas those in the -NOM series have only one component, namely *Position*.

2) A +NOM demonstrative is a free morpheme. A -NOM demonstrative is a bound one. Consequently, the phonological contrast of *đ*-/*n*- also reflects the syntactic contrast between free and bound, except in the case of *đó* where this opposition is neutralized.

3) By labelling his columns *-ao/-âu*,<sup>3</sup> *-ay/-ây* and *-ây/-o*, Thompson implies that *-ao* and *-âu* are in fact two variants of a single morpheme (let us transcribe it abstractly as /-A<sub>w</sub>/), and that *-ay*, *-ây*, and *-o* may be interpreted as three variants of another underlying morpheme, say /-A<sub>y</sub>/. There is indeed other evidence for the alternation of *-ao/-âu* as in:

*tao, tau* 'I'; *rào, giậu* 'fence'

<sup>1</sup> In fact, Thompson did mention and discuss them as "other forms" (p.253) implying that they are not basic demonstratives.

<sup>2</sup> The Vietnamese order Noun-Dem is maintained in our translation.

<sup>3</sup> The difference *-ao/-âu* cited by Thompson in the Vietnamese standard orthography is merely a difference between /a/ and /ã/ since the pronunciation of *ao* and *âu* is respectively /aw/ and /ãw/. My postulated /-A/ is realized as either *-a* or *-ã* in the context of /nasal\_\_ y/ so we can have *này/nã*. Otherwise /-A/ is realized as *-ã*.

But there is no morphophonemic evidence for any alternation among *-ay*, *-ây* and *-o*.

So, instead of two, I postulate three subsyllabic morphemes, namely */-Aw/*, */-Ay /* and */-o / [ɔ]*. Moreover, we also find these three forms in the system of personal pronouns: *tao/tau* 'I', *mây/mây* 'you', *nó* 'he, she, it'.

4) In place of a two-term system, there should be a three-term system (the unspecified *D°* not included) with:

-Ay in D1 and D2  
-o in D2 and D3  
*kia* in D3

Notice that D2 is the term where we have at the same time *-Ay* and *-o*. As we will see later, this is because D2 occupies an intermediate morphological/semantic position between D1 and D3.

(5) Following Fillmore (1982:48), I have labeled *D°*, D1, D2 and D3 respectively as Indefinite, Proximal, Medial and Distal but, as it will become clear in the following pages, such semantic categorization does not fully reflect other interpretations of deictic markers.

(6) For lack of a one-to-one correspondence between Vietnamese and English, I translate *kia* and *nó* in D3 as 'that<sub>2</sub>'. While 'that<sub>2</sub>' corresponds to 'over there', 'that<sub>1</sub>' corresponds to 'there'.

## 2. Interpretation and functioning

### 2.1 A reexamination

Semantic interpretation of Vietnamese demonstratives so far has not been entirely satisfactory. Take for instance *đây* which is translated by the English 'here' (Thompson 1965: 142). However, *The Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, Oxford, gives the meaning of 'here' as 'in, at, to this point or place'. Therefore the meaning of 'here' can be broken down into three elements:

Location/Direction <i>in, at, to</i>	Position/Deictic orientation <i>this</i>	Place <i>point/place</i>
---	---	-----------------------------

In contrast, *đây* has only two of these three elements, namely Place and Deictic orientation. Let us examine an English sentence and its translation into Vietnamese such as:

(1) 'he arrives at the market'  
*nó đến chợ*

The verb *đến* is equivalent to 'arrive-at', i.e. the semantics of *đến* incorporate the location/direction element expressed by 'at'. So when we replace *chợ* by *đây* we

obtain a grammatical sentence where *đây* is a nominal exactly like *chợ* 'market'. (This fact also accounts for the use of verbs like *đến* 'arrive', *đi* 'go', etc. as coverbs of direction). Moreover, dictionaries give the meaning of *đây* as *chỗ này*, lit. 'place, this'; the substitution of *chỗ này* for *đây* is possible in many cases (see also ex. 3 infra). Taking account of this semantic interpretation of demonstratives, we can now return to Table 2. where in the  $\pm$ NOM category we have e.g. *đó* glossed as '(place-)that<sub>1</sub>' 'place' being a notional concept and 'that<sub>1</sub>' a deictic marker. The parenthesized notation (*place*) means that the demonstrative can be interpreted either as having incorporated the component *place* or not. So the presence or absence of the semantic component *place* justifies the division of demonstratives into three lexico-syntactic series: +NOM, -NOM and  $\pm$ NOM. The morphemes of the +NOM series have each a referent of their own and can function as independent NP's. Those of the -NOM series have no referent of their own: they are only indexical terms which, added to a noun, permit us to single out the referent designated by the noun, either ostensively, or by relative ordering, or by reference to knowledge shared by the participants in the speech act—in short, with the internal or external parameters of the utterance.

So the +NOM demonstratives refer to a *place* and at the same time situate it in space/time. On the other hand, the -NOM demonstratives, since they are not free morphemes, require a noun whose referent they situate in space/time. The two items *đó* and *kia* are not involved in this distinction:

(2) *đó là anh nó* (đó +NOM)  
 place-that<sub>1</sub> be brother him  
 'That is his brother.'

(3) *người đó là anh nó* (đó -NOM)  
 person that<sub>1</sub> be brother him  
 'That person is his brother.'

So far, the semantic interpretation of D1, D2, D3 is quite clear. But how about D°? D° can be considered as the neutral term with respect to D1, D2, D3. As such, D° may have two different semantic interpretations:

a) Intrinsically neither as D1, nor as D2, nor as D3 but, it can be contextually interpretable as any of them. Thus D° is an unspecified term that is used as a question-word:

(4) *chỗ nào/đâu mưa?*  
 place-what rain  
 'Where does it rain?'

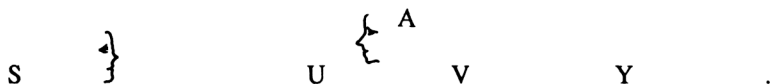
b) Alternatively D° may incorporate the positions of D1, D2 and D3, all at the same time. In this case, the 'what' must be translated as 'every':

(5) *chỗ nào/đâu cũng mưa*  
 place-every also rain  
 'it rains everywhere.'



However counter-examples can be found to challenge this 'egocentric' point of view. The interpretation of the example above is correct if the speaker *S* and the addressee *A* are side by side, looking in the same direction (they are in tandem). Yet if we suppose that they are face to face, and *U*, *V* and *Y* retain the same positions, but only *U* is in the visual field of both the speaker *S* and his addressee *A*, then the example above should be modified as follows:

- (7) *đây/đấy là bà U; kia là bà V và bà Y*  
 'Here/there is Mrs. U; over there are Mrs V and Mrs Y.'



In (7), *đây* will be used if *U* is closer to the speaker than to the addressee; other than that, *đấy* would be more appropriate.

As we see from this simple example, we have a dichotomy D1,D2/D3 instead of a trichotomy D1/D2/D3. The dichotomy is made in accordance with the distinction between inside space (the space shared by the speaker and his addressee in the utterance situation) and outside space (i.e. space beyond the speaker and addressee).

#### 2.4 Inside space/ Outside space

We have seen that the relative positions of the participants in an utterance situation are important factors in interpreting the demonstratives.

In tandem, the I and the YOU become a WE, and the interpretation of demonstratives should be based on this WE.

Face to face, the space shared by I and YOU is different from the space when they are in tandem. But in both cases the parameter involved should not be I (the speaker) but WE (speaker and addressee):

I // YOU (in tandem)	<i>đây</i>	<i>đấy, đó</i>	<i>kia</i>
WE	inside space	outside space	
I <-> YOU (face to face)	<i>đây đấy, đó</i>	<i>kia</i>	

It follows from this representation that (a) D1 *đây* is always in the inside space, (b) D3 *kia* is always in the outside space, (c) the D2 *đấy, đó* are sometimes part of the inside space (and can then be used as 2nd personal pronouns YOU, see Sec. 2.5), but sometimes they are part of the outside space (then they are anaphoric, see Sec. 2.8). The choice in D2 is predictable from the morphology of its components: *đấy* goes with *đây*-D1; *đó* goes with *nợ*-D3 and *nó* 'he, she, it'.

### 2.5 Place and person

Place can be used (metaphorically) for person. It is easy now to understand why +NOM demonstratives can replace personal pronouns. *Đây* 'the place where I am' may refer to the person that occupies that place, namely 'I'. Similarly, *đấy* 'the place where you are' may mean 'you'. Example:

- (8) *đây đi chợ, đấy có đi không?*  
 D1 go market D2 aff. go neg.  
 'I'm going to the market. What about you?'

### 2.6 Space and time

Space and time are related. The Vietnamese demonstratives illustrate this relationship on both the morphological and the functional levels.

a) Morphological:

*này/này* 'this' (Place-Dem)

*nay* 'now' (Time-Dem) *hôm nay* 'today' (*hôm* 'evening')

(*n*)*ấy* 'that' (Place-Dem)

*nãy* 'recent' (Time-Dem) *khi nãy* 'a moment ago' (*khi* 'moment')

b) Functional:

*Kia* is a Time-Place demonstrative. Compare *chỗ kia* 'the place over there' and *ngày kia* 'the day after tomorrow'.

*Đây* can have a spatial as well a temporal reference. For example, (9) *Tao đi đây* has the reading of 'I am going somewhere (to a place I know)' if it is the answer to the question: *Mày đi đâu?* 'Where are you going?', but can be interpreted as 'I am going right now' if the corresponding question is *Mày chưa đi à?* 'Aren't you going yet?'.

### 2.7 Contrastive distances/spaces

In Table 2., *kia* seems to be an isolated form among morphemes having -*Ay* and -*o* as roots. Yet this morphophonemic isolation is only superficial—actually *kia* can be used as a base to derive several other deictic morphemes indicating different time/place positions. Since *kia* is exclusively a marker for non-participant space, its derived morphemes then refer to positions in that space. The derivation should obey a certain tonal ordering: we start with the *ngang* (high level)

tone of the base, then go to the *huyền* (low level) tone:<sup>4</sup>  
*kia* 'over there'; *kià* 'farther than over there'

These two forms are found in dictionaries. However, the possibility of tonal derivation does not quite end there. Consider the expression:

- (10) *ngày kia, ngày kià, ngày kĩa, ngày kĩa, ngày kĩa*  
 'on and on into the future'

It seems clear that the terms must be in order of increasing remoteness, nevertheless we also find:

- (11) *ngày kia, ngày kià, ngày kĩa, ngày kĩa, ngày kĩa*  
 or (12) *ngày kia, ngày kià, ngày kĩa, ngày kĩa, ngày kĩa*

Indeed, the last three terms may be in any order at all. Thus we have an expression a bit like the English "farther and farther and farther ..." in which each term is taken as more extreme than the one preceding. However, unlike the English example, the terms in the Vietnamese expressions are all different, with the first two fixed and with the requirement that any further term must each be on a different oblique tone. Contrastive tones result in contrastive distances/spaces.

## 2.8 Tonal morpheme and Anaphora

Demonstratives locate and identify individuals not only by their position in the extra-linguistic situation but also by reference to the correlated expression in a textual context. In the last case, demonstratives are anaphoric. Example:

- (13) *Mày có biết ông A không? ông ấy/đó là ai?*  
 you aff. know Mr.A neg Mr. that be who  
 'Do you know Mr. A? Who is he?'

In (13) it is possible in the Southern dialects (from Danang southward) to replace *ông ấy/đó* by *ông*. To explain this phenomenon, we postulate the existence of a tonal morpheme.

Note that on the morphological level, D1 is contrasted to D2 as *ngang/huyền* (level) tones to *sắc* (high rising) tone. As the vocalic nuclei are unstable (we have the alternation *đấy/đó*, and in some dialects (*n*)*ấy* can be replaced by *nó*, and *ấy* by *í*), the -NOM D2 can then be realized only by its most prominent and charac-

<sup>4</sup> The present Vietnamese (Northern dialects) tonal system is:

	level		oblique		
register	high	<i>ngang</i> ( ) *	<i>sắc</i> ( ^ )	<i>ngã</i> ( ~ )	* unmarked
	low	<i>huyền</i> ( ` )	<i>nặng</i> ( . )	<i>hỏi</i> ( ? )	

In the Southern dialects, the *hỏi* and *ngã* tones are collapsed into one oblique mid rising tone that may be marked either by the sign ? or the sign ~ in writing.



teristic feature, the *sắc* tone, which thus becomes a morpheme by itself. This *sắc* tone combines with the tone of the word it modifies to give a mid rising broken tone which has all the features of the tone resulting from the collapse in the Southern dialects of the *hỏi* and *ngã* tones from the Northern dialects (See note 4). For this reason the resulting tone may be marked either by the sign ' or ~ in writing.

- (14) *bên* (*áy*)      *bến*      'that side'  
 (15) *bà* (*áy*)      *bá*      'that grandmother, she'.

One exception should be pointed out: a *sắc* tone cannot combine with another *sắc* tone. This fact explains why with a base like *chú*, it is impossible to derive *chú* (*áy*) — \**chú*.

That the *sắc* tone combined with any of the other three tones (*ngang*, *huyền*, *nặng*) results in a neutralized *ngã*/*hỏi* tone is very understandable since (i) the combining tones are shorter than the long resulting tone; (ii) the *hỏi*/*ngã* tone is mid rising in the Southern dialects, so that its register is neutralized with respect to high and low. The Southern *hỏi*/*ngã* thus has the contour, height and length appropriate for the combination of these tones.

The segmental partners of this tonal morpheme are nouns that can be used as substitutes for personal pronouns such as kinship terms and locative nouns, i.e. items that can incorporate a deictic marker so as to refer to individuals whether these are specified with respect to person, place or time.

### 3. Conclusion

In these few pages, it is impossible to accomplish an exhaustive study of demonstratives in Vietnamese. My aim is merely to "revisit" the morphology in relation to the lexico-syntactic and conceptual features of this category. In doing so, I have pointed out (a) the need to integrate other demonstrative forms into Thompson's table; (b) the importance of the distinction between Place and Position (deictic orientation); (c) the interrelationship between Space and Distance, and between Place and Person; (d) and the close connexion of Space with Time (through morphological and functional features). (e) A tonal derivational morpheme is also postulated.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cadiere, L. 1957. *Syntaxe de la langue vietnamienne*. Paris: PEFEO.  
 Coulmas, F. 1982. Some remarks on Japanese deictics. In J. Weissenborn & W. Klein, eds., *Here and There. Cross-Linguistic Studies on Deixis and Demonstration*. p. 201-221. Amsterdam: J. Benjamins.  
 Fillmore, Ch. 1982. Towards a descriptive framework for spatial deixis. In R. J. Jarvella & W. Klein, eds., *Speech, Place and Action*. p. 31-59. London; J. Wiley.  
 Fraser, Th. & Joly, A. 1979. Le système de la deixis. Esquisse d'une théorie d'expression en anglais. *Modèles Linguistiques* 1.2: 97-107.

- Hill, C. 1982. Up/down, front/back, left/right. A contrastive study of Hausa and English. In J. Weissenborn & W. Klein, eds., *Here and There. Cross-Linguistic Studies on Deixis and Demonstration*. 13-42. Amsterdam: J. Benjamins
- Lyons, J. 1980. *Sémantique linguistique*. Paris: Larousse
- Paris, M.C., Tamba-Mecz, I. & Nguyen Ph. Ph. 1987. L'espace: sa structuration linguistique dans trois langues d'Asie Orientale (chinois, japonais, vietnamien). *Espace et Civilisation*. Action Interdisciplinaire Programmée de l'Université de Paris VII.
- Thompson, L.C. 1965. *A Vietnamese Grammar*. Seattle: The University of Washington Press.

Received: Thompson Festschrift

164, rue Edouard Tremblay  
94400 Vitry sur Seine, France