

# Personal pronouns and pluralization in Vietnamese\*

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Vietnamese has two distinct systems of personal pronouns, a fact which does not seem to have been recognized in previous work on the subject (see Luong, Hy V. 1990; L.C. Thompson 1965; Truong Q.D. 1982). In this paper I will first present my analysis of the two systems in terms of morphology and semantics and then discuss an important aspect of personal pronouns, namely pluralization.

## 1. The two systems of personal pronouns

Thompson's (1965:248) personal pronouns table reproduced below is a good basis for discussion.

TABLE 1. PERSONAL PRONOUNS  
(Thompson 1965)

LEVEL	FIRST (Speaker)	SECOND (Hearer)	THIRD (Referent)	GENERAL
RESPECTFUL	tôi			
SUPERIOR	ta			
FAMILIAR				mình
ABRUPT	tao	mày bây (pl)	nó	

Thompson's four-level distinction can be reduced to a two-way distinction, vertical (V) and horizontal (H). The V pronouns reflect social hierarchy; the H pronouns do not. And it is interesting to note that the H pronouns—the abrupt ones, following Thompson—are morphologically related to other deictics like demonstratives, as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2. DEICTICS

Person:	I: <i>tao</i>	you: <i>mày</i>	he: <i>nó</i>
Place	D0: <i>đâu</i> which place	D1: <i>đây</i> this place	D2: <i>đấy</i> that place
			D3: <i>nọ</i> place overthere

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Position	<b>nào</b> which	<b>này</b> this	<b>(n)ấy</b> that
Quantity:	<b>bao nhiêu</b> how much	<b>bấy nhiêu</b> this much	<b>bấy nhiêu</b> that much
Manner:	<b>sao</b> which way	<b>vày</b> this way	<b>vấy</b> that way

Note that both the demonstratives and the H personal pronouns incorporate the following subsyllabic morphemes: D0 (Indefinite): /-Aw/; D1 (Proximal): /-ây/+even tone; D2 (Medial): /-ây/+oblique tone; D3 (Distal): /-o/+oblique tone. For more details on Vietnamese demonstratives, see Nguyễn P.P. (1992a:127-136.)

It is clear that H pronouns and the demonstratives of place, position, quantity and manner tabulated above are formed with the same three basic forms (in bold): *-ây*, *-o* and *-âu* or *-ao*, the last two being variants of the same morpheme /-Aw/. The only difference between demonstratives and personal pronouns lies in the semantics of /-Aw/; this subsyllabic morpheme forms indefinite words in demonstratives while it marks the 1st person in personal pronouns.

Two other pronouns, namely *ta* '1st superior' and *bay* '2nd pl' from Thompson's list are also morphologically related to demonstratives. Considered as plural pronouns, they will be discussed in the section devoted to pluralization.

The last two pronouns, *tôi* and *mình*, have no morphological relationship whatsoever with demonstratives. The reason is that they are of nominal origin. As nouns, *tôi* and *mình* respectively mean 'servant' and 'body'. As shown in Thompson's table, *tôi* always refers to a 1st person speaking respectfully while the person of *mình* is general, i.e. *mình* can refer to any one of the three persons: *I*, *you* and *he* or to all of the three, in which case *mình* means 'we inclusive [I+you+he]'. The person assigned to *mình* is determined by the context. For this reason, *mình* contrary to *tôi*, cannot be an anchoring term of the V system and deserves a special treatment. *Tôi* as pronoun 1st sg is attested in every Vietnamese dictionary and grammar.<sup>1</sup> *Tôi* 'I' then with its residual nominal meaning 'servant' is the single member the V system. The two systems H and V with only the singular pronouns are summed up in table 3:

TABLE 3. V AND H SYSTEMS

	FIRST	SECOND	THIRD
H System :	<i>tao</i>	<i>mầy</i>	<i>nó</i>
V System :	<i>tôi</i>		

<sup>1</sup> By claiming « such Vietnamese lexical units as *mình*, *tôi*, [...] have been often misclassified as pronouns in the current literature », Luong, Hy V. (1990, p. 126) seems to deny the fact that a lexical unit can belong to more than one category or part of speech. Such a point of view is not well founded since it would reject all grammaticalization processes that turn a full lexical word into a grammatical word, and so, put it into two—or more—different categories, a common phenomenon in Vietnamese as well as in many other languages.

The 2nd person/addressee slot in the V system is empty. Now we can use a noun, ordinarily a kin term (*bà* 'grandmother', etc.), a status term (*thầy* 'professor', etc.), as a filler. The relationship, grammatical as well as semantic, between the paired *I-you* terms is very close. On the grammatical level, a noun used to indicate the addressee as opposed to *tôi* 'I' functions as a *you*, i.e. a 2nd person pronoun. On the semantic level, because of its meaning 'servant', *tôi* denotes social status with regard to the addressee, and the kin term—if such a term is used to designate the addressee—in return has its semantics modified so as to express social status with respect to *tôi*. This explains why in the pair *tôi/I-bà/you*, *bà* is no longer 'grandmother' but only 'madam'. Thus a noun, especially a kin term, may function as a personal pronoun, and have its semantics "socialized".

Note that opposite to *tôi* 'I' in the V system, we may have a multitude of expressions of *you*, realized by one of the numerous kin terms or status terms while the *tao* 'I' in the H system admits only a single *you*, namely *mầy*. In philosophy and literature, the notion of "ego" is expressed as the noun phrase *cái tôi* (not \**cái tao*): just as French with "le moi", Vietnamese expresses the philosophical notion of "I" with the pronoun of social contrast, not with the purely grammatical H pronoun.

The possibility of a noun functioning as 1st person pronoun should be considered as well. When *you* in the pair *I-you* is a kin term, the latter's converse term can be used to mean *I*. Thus the pair *cha-con* « father-child » can be used to render *I-you* and in this case, only the context can tell when *cha* is *I* and when it is *you*: *cha* pronounced by the father means *I*, while pronounced by the child means *you*. The same is true with *con*. In this case, the relationship that holds between *I* and *you* now reflects true parental relations.

## 2. Pluralization

Due to the different nature of the two V and H systems, pluralization offers some interesting problems. Because of the great number and variety of plural forms, it is difficult to produce an exhaustive list of them. It is useful then to show how and with what elements plural pronouns are obtained. Pluralization can be achieved in many ways.

### 2.1 Morphology

L.C. Thompson considered *ta* as '1st superior'. In fact, *ta* is best defined as 'we (inclusive)'. Remember that the *I-you* opposition in the H system results from the morphemic opposition /-Aw/-/Ay/ which amounts to the phonemic contrast /-w/-/y/. *Ta* with the subsyllabic morpheme /-a/ neutralizes this contrast and therefore can refer to both *I* and *you*, i.e. *we* (incl.). That *ta* 'we (incl.)' in many instances refers to an "I superior" is a common phenomenon: think for example of the use of *we* and *nous* in English and French respectively.

*Bay* 'you (pl)' admits *bây* as a variant, and this variant is to be found in the demonstrative expression *bây nhiều* 'this much'. The opposition PERSON/QUANTITY

for this item in the deictic system amounts to the opposition *bây Ø/bây nhiều; nhiều* is a derivative of *nhiều* 'many, numerous'.

Another plural pronoun, *họ* 'they', may be added in this category. Many authors think that *họ* 'they' is borrowed from the Chinese *hộ* 戶 'door, family' but we may posit that *họ* is formed with the same subsyllabic morpheme /-o/ as *nó* 'he' and therefore *họ* should be of Vietnamese origin.

## 2.2 Syntax

Syntactic coordination and quantification are two more ways of forming plural pronouns:

### 2.2.1 Coordination

Plural pronouns can be formed by "prefixing" the singular pronouns in Table 3 with the morpheme *chúng* of Chinese origin, i.e., 眾, meaning 'many, the people'. We obtain then: *chúng tao/chúng tôi* 'we', *chúng mày* 'you (pl)' and *chúng nó*. But *chúng* by itself is able to function as a personal pronoun meaning 'they'. Therefore a plural pronoun such as *chúng tao* should be considered as a syntactic coordinate compound and not a derivative compound with base and prefix.

– *chúng tao/chúng tôi* 'we [*chúng*'they'+*tôi/tao*'I]'. The person referred to by *chúng tao/chúng tôi* is clearly «1st + 3rd». The 1st person in *chúng tao/chúng tôi* is always singular because of the unicity of *I* (E. Benveniste 1966:233); the 3rd person component can be interpreted as singular or plural.

– *chúng ta* 'we (incl.)', see below.

– *chúng mày* 'you (pl)' [*chúng*'they'+*mày*'you (sg)']. The person referred to by *chúng mày* can be: a) the 2nd person only, and in this case *chúng* functions as a mere plural marker of *mày* and *chúng mày* can be replaced by the plural form *bay*; b) the combined person [2nd+3rd] and in this case *chúng* is a constituent in the syntactic coordinate compound *chúng mày*.

– *chúng nó* 'they' [*chúng*'they'+*nó*'he'] 'they'. *Chúng* in combination with *nó* does not add a person of different role. For this reason, *chúng* in *chúng nó* is characterized as a plural marker.

With regard to the above analysis of plural pronouns, two types of plurals must be distinguished: *metonymic* and *mathematical*. A 3rd person plural is necessarily homogeneous (or "mathematical" in De Fornel's terminology) since it cannot include a 1st or 2nd person term. Conversely, a 1st person plural is necessarily combined or "metonymic": "we" is a combination of "I" and of 2nd or 3rd person elements. The "I" element is privileged, hence the term "metonymic". As for the 2nd person plural, it may consist either of a homogeneous series of singular 2nd persons, in which case we have a "mathematical" second person plural, or of a combination 2nd and 3rd person elements (a "metonymic" 2nd person plural). Thus, pluralization applied to personal pronouns is best explained in terms of combination, not in terms of multiplication. The way persons of different roles, 1st: speaker (S), 2nd: addressee (A), and 3rd: neither speaker nor addressee (O), combined are denoted in Vietnamese can be illustrated as follows:

First person: *chúng ta* (S+A+O); *ta* (S+A); *chúng tao, chúng tôi* (S+O)

Second person: *chúng mày* (A+O)

Third person: *chúng nó* (O)

It may be noted that Vietnamese has two distinct varieties of the 1st person plural inclusive, one (*ta*) which does not extend to the 3rd person, and one (*chúng ta*) which does. The primacy of the 1st person over the other two is very clear because it can include both of them while the only possibility of extension of the 2nd person is to include the 3rd, and the 3rd can never include any 1st or 2nd person elements. This difference in the power of inclusion explains the need to distinguish two types of pluralization, metonymic and mathematical, cited above.

It is possible to substitute some elements of Vietnamese origin, either simple nouns or compound nouns, for *chúng* in the above examples so as to obtain the plural forms. Thus with *bọn* 'gang' or *tụi* 'coterie, clique', we have:

*bọn/tụi tao, bọn/tụi tôi* 'we (excl.)', *bọn/tụi ta* 'we (incl.)'

*bọn/tụi mày* 'you (pl)'

*bọn/tụi nó* 'they'.

With compounds like *cha con* 'father child', we then have:

*cha con tao, cha con tôi* 'we (excl.), father and child(ren)'

*cha con ta* 'we (incl.), father and child(ren)'

*cha con mày* 'you, father and child(ren)'

*cha con nó* 'they, father and child(ren)'.

The compounds used in this way are formed with a kin term or a status term and its converse<sup>2</sup>. For example, besides *cha con*, the following can be used: *anh em* 'elder brother younger sibling', *vợ chồng* 'wife husband', *chú cháu* 'uncle nephew'..., *thầy trò* 'professor student', *chủ tớ* 'master servant'... The compounds as a whole are labels for relations between people referred to by the pronouns.

But instead of substituting, we may just add. Thus, from a simple pronoun *mày* 'you (sg)', one of the following combinations is possible to render "you (pl)":

*bọn/tụi chúng mày* 'you (pl)'

*bọn cha con chúng mày* 'you, father and child(ren)'

*tụi cha con chúng mày* 'you, father and child(ren)'

The difference in meaning between, for example, *tụi chúng mày* 'you (pl)' and *tụi cha con chúng mày* 'you, father and child(ren)' is clear. In addition to expressing a "you plural" like the first expression, the second one further indicates the kind of relationship that holds together the persons that compose *you*.

<sup>2</sup> For a definition of *converse term*, see G.A. Miller & P.N. Johnson-Laird, 1976: 365.

### 2.2.2 Quantification

Instead of *chúng* in the plural forms, we can have a determiner [Q CI] composed of a number [Q] and a classifier [CI] (usually *đứa* 'individual' or *thằng* 'individual male'). Then, in place of *chúng tao*, *chúng tôi*, *chúng mày* and *chúng nó*, we may have (with Q: *ba* '3'):

*ba đứa/thằng tao*, *ba đứa/thằng tôi* 'we (excl.) three'  
*ba đứa/thằng ta* 'we (incl.) three'  
*ba đứa/thằng mày* 'you three'  
*ba đứa/thằng nó* 'they three'

Like *chúng*, the quantifier [Q CI] accomplishes a metonymic pluralization with regard to the 1st person, a metonymic or a mathematical pluralization with the 2nd person, and only a mathematical pluralization with the 3rd person. Therefore, in spite of the structural equivalence between the noun phrase [NP → Q CI N] and the pronominal phrase [Pr P → Q CI Pr], pluralization in the two categories may be of different nature: with a NP, pluralization is always accomplished on a mathematical basis.

The CI in the expression [Q CI Pr] can also be realized by one of those compounds cited in 2.2.1 to obtain more forms of plural pronouns:

*ba cha con tao*, *ba cha con tôi* 'we (excl.) three, father and children'  
*ba cha con ta* 'we (incl.) three, father and children'  
*ba cha con mày* 'you three, father and children'  
*ba cha con nó* 'they three, father and children'

### 2.2.3 Pluralization and hierarchical distinction

If *chúng* is defined as a 3rd pl pronoun, then the compound *chúng N* must be considered as a plural personal pronoun. Take, for instance, a noun which is a kin term: *anh* 'elder brother', then *chúng anh* is a pronoun. But which is the person of *chúng anh*, first, second, or third? It must be first person. Why? Because the reading of *chúng anh* as *you* (pl) or *they* would imply that *chúng* is a possible homogeneous (mathematical) pluralization operator with regard to *anh*. But *chúng*, which is used indistinctly for persons, animals and objects, is not apt to "multiply" a status term like the hierarchical *anh* 'elder brother'. Thus *chúng anh* can only be interpreted in terms of a conjunction of *chúng* 'they', and *anh* 'elder brother', i.e. a metonymic pluralization. We saw that pluralization of this nature occurs in the 1st as well as in the 2nd person. However, a combination of a superior *anh* 'you-elder brother' with an inferior *chúng* 'they' is semantically ill-formed. On the other hand, only the 1st person has power to evaluate itself hierarchically so as to match with the 3rd person *chúng* 'they', and for this reason, *chúng anh* can only be "we [I-elder brother +they]".

The question now is how to pluralize *anh* 'you (sg) elder brother' to render "you (pl) elder brothers"? Note that in this case it is a matter of mathematical

pluralization and then a plural marker will do. A noun functioning as a personal pronoun is always marked as [+definite] and for this reason it requires a [+definite] plural marker. This helps to oppose two plural markers in Vietnamese; one is *những* [Pl, -definite], the other is *các* [Pl, +definite] because *các*, and not *những*, goes with nouns used as pronouns. In the case at hand, we have *các anh* 'you elder brothers'.

Is it possible for the expression *các anh* to have another reading, namely, "they elder brothers"? In other words, can *anh* in *các anh* be interpreted as "he elder brother" instead of "you"? Remember that *anh* is a noun and thanks to the interlocutive setting, it is marked as [+definite] to be read as *I* or *you*. Without the interlocutive setting, *anh* by itself is a [-definite] noun and cannot function as a pronoun. That leaves out the possibility of reading *anh* as "he, elder brother". However, in the Southern dialects (from Đà Nẵng southward), we can have *anh* 'he, elder brother' which is a kind of personal pronoun morphologically related to the noun *anh* 'elder brother'. To obtain the derivative *anh*, we combine the base *anh* with the deictic tonal morpheme *sắc* semantically equivalent to *that*. (For more details on this tonal morpheme and its segmental partners, see Nguyễn P.P. 1992a: 134-5.) We now have the following distinctions:

*chúng anh* 'we (excl.) elder brothers'  
*các anh* 'you elder brothers'  
*các anh* 'they elder brothers'

## 2. Conclusion

I have discussed Vietnamese personal pronouns from different aspects and levels: morphology, syntax and semantics; singular and plural in relation with hierarchical and non-hierarchical considerations. Despite the length of the paper, the subject is far from exhausted. I have to leave out the study of *minh*, an important pronoun, as well as the notion of plurality in relation with *nó* '3rd sg' in its use now as an anaphoric, now as a deictic. Many items from Thompson's absolute pronouns (1965:251) are not accounted for because they are either dialectal or « primarily archaic and literary » in the author's own words. In summary, the following points have to be stressed:

- It is necessary to distinguish two distinct systems of personal pronouns and two different organizations of the person in Vietnamese;
- Two different types of pluralization, metonymic and mathematical, have to be considered;
- Pluralization of Vietnamese personal pronouns in many cases involves not only the category of number, but also hierarchical semantics and the relations between the persons under consideration.

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