

A Look at North-Central Vietnamese

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, this paper presents phonetic field data on regional varieties of Vietnamese in North-Central Vietnam, data that is not easily widely accessible from other sources. Second, it shows how this data, along with other information about other Vietic languages (such as highly conservative languages as Ruc (Nguyễn V. L. 1993, Nguyễn T. C. 1995) and Arem (Trần 1990), underscores the archaic nature of the speech in this region and the important information for historical linguistics in this region.

Vietnamese is often divided into three main regional variants: Northern, Central, and Southern Vietnamese.¹ 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 the latter aspect (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 Hóa, Nghệ An, and Quảng Bình—has also drawn attention (Maspero 1912, Emeneau 1951, Thompson 1985, Nguyễn, Tài Cẩn 1995, Ferlus 1998), but besides the four general regional divisions, relatively little has been published about other local varieties.² 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 City.³ 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 papers include (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.

2. Dialect versus Regional Accent/Vocabulary

As noted the traditional three regions, namely Northern Vietnamese (NV), Central Vietnamese (CV), and Southern Vietnamese (SV), have as their informally 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)). There has been dialect neutralization occurring along the well-traveled coastline,⁵ with some convergence towards regional center standards, while the restricted inner highlands have, as based on the data collected 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 numerous 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 Tài Cẩn (1995). In addition to the archaic linguistic features of rural NCV, there are also speakers of the closely related but more conservative Muong and highly conservative Minor Vietic languages. While Vietnamese has no

complex initial consonant clusters, Muong 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.

	NV	SV	CV	NCV
“ngang”	33	33	35	35
“huyền”	21	21	33	33

Table 1: Phonetic realizations of ‘level’ tones

Gloss	NV	SV	CV	NCV
“thus”	vậy	vậy	rửa	rửa
“how”	sao	sao	rang	rang
“where”	đâu	đâu	mô	mô
“this”	này	này	nì	nì

Table 2: Vietnamese lexical variants

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’, as opposed to several other mainstream alternatives không, chẳng, and chả) and the reflexive (chắc ‘each other’), spoken in Thanh 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. 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.

QN	NV	NCV	CV	SV
s	s	ʃ	ʃ	ʃ
x	s	s	s	s
tr	c	t̚	t̚	t̚
ch	c	c	c	c
r	ʒ	ɹ̥	ɹ̥	ɹ̥
d	ʒ	j	j	j
gi	ʒ	z	j	j
v	v	v	j	j
-nh	ɲ	ɲ	n	n
-n	n	n	n/ɲ	n/ɲ
-ng	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ
-ch	c	c	t	t
-t	t	t	t/k	t/k
-c	k	k	k	k

Table 3: Realizations of Quốc Ngữ in Regional Varieties

5. Field Data on NCV

Linguistic data were collected through acoustic phonetic recordings using SIL's Wincecil.⁶ Speakers were given word lists (monosyllabic and bisyllabic words and short phrases and sentences). NCV showed 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 Tables 4 and 5. 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 and 5, the regional variants from Vinh downward are rural NCV variants. ‘NL’ refers to the regional subdistrict Nghi Lâm.

“lighter” bật lửa			
Location	QN	IPA	Tone Value
Hà Nội	bật lửa	bət liə	11-31g
Hue	bật lửa	bək liə	22-31g
Nha Trang	bật lửa	bək liə	11-35
Vinh	bật lửa	bət liə	22-31g
Thanh Chương	bật lò	bət lɔ	22-31g
Nam Đàn	mê lửa	me la	33-31
NL, Nghi Ân	bật lò	bət lɔ	22-24
NL, Nghi Hưng	mê lửa	me lɔ	35-31
NL, Nghi Khanh	bật lửa	bət liə	22-31
NL, Nghi Lâm	mậy lửa	məj liə	22-31

Table 4: NCV lexical variants for ‘lighter’

‘older sister’ chị			
Location	QN	IPA	Tone Value
Hà Nội	chị	ci	11
Hue	chị	ci	22
Nha Trang	chị	ci	12
Vinh	chị	ci	22
Thanh Chương	ò	ʔɔ	33
Nam Đàn	à	ʔa	33
NL, Nghi Ân	ò	ʔɔ	33
NL, Nghi Hưng	a	ʔa	33
NL, Nghi Khanh	à	ʔa	33
NL, Nghi Lâm	à	ʔa	33

Table 5: NCV lexical variants for ‘elder sister’

As another indication of the high degree of dialectal variation, Table 6 shows diphthongization and additional vocalic mutation.

QN	NV	Nghi Ân	Category
giản	zan	juən	Ga:ə
loạt	lwat	luət	
ngoại	ɲwaj	ɲuəj	
quáng	kwaŋ	kwəŋ	
bác	bak	bək	a:ɔ
vàng	vaŋ	vəŋ	
dàng	zaŋ	zəŋ	
ra	ra	rɔ	
phải	faj	fɔj	
trái	taj	tɔj	
ma	ma	mɔ	
hà	ha	hɔ	
quá	kwa	kɔ	

Table 6: Nghi Lộc, Nghi Ân Speech

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 7. Despite the small geographic region, the varieties of NCV show differences among all categories. Most tone variation is among the phonetically non-level trắc tones, though even the level bằng tones showed some variation.⁷ There is a phonetic distinction in some varieties between the sắc tone in open and syllables with final voiceless stops.

Table 7: Tone Contour in Varieties of Vietnamese

Area	City/Town	Ngang	Huyền	sắc (open)	sắc (closed)	nặng	hỏi	ngã
North	Hà Nội	33	21	24	45	22g	31	35g
South	Hồ Chí Minh	33	21	45		23	24	
Central	Huế	35	33	13g	45	22g	31	
	Vinh	35	33	11	11/55	22	31	13g
	Nam Đàn	35	33	13g	13g/45	22	31	
	Thanh Chương	35	33	11g/13g		22g	31	
	Nghi Khanh	35	33	55		53		44
	Nghi Hưng	44	33	45		22	31	31/13g
	Nghi Lâm	35	33	13g	45	22	31	31/13g

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 numerous local varieties 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 Cuu Chan 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 Muong 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.

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Notes

¹ See Thompson 1985 and Friberg 1973. The French colonial period saw the division of Vietnam roughly into the three regions recognized as dialectal boundaries, although, administrative boundaries have existed in North Vietnam since the Han dynasty two millenia ago (see Taylor 1983 for historical details and Ferlus 1999 for discussion of the relationship between those ancient divisions and modern dialectal differences).

² Two such works are Vương 1981 and Hoàng 1989.

³ The project was undertaken with the assistance of Nguyễn Duy Hương of the Institute of Linguistics in Hà Nội.

⁴ The work on Thanh Chương Vietnamese (Alves and Nguyễn) was presented at the Eighth SEALS conference held in Kuala Lumpur in 1998.

⁵ As acknowledged to me in personal communication with Vietnamese linguists.

⁶ The website www.sil.org contains numerous software programs related to linguistic research.

⁷ The bằng (meaning ‘level’) category refers to the mid-level/ngang and mid-falling tones/huyen tones, while the trắc (meaning ‘uneven’) category refers to all other Vietnamese tones, which have more distinctive contours and sometimes glottalization.

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¹ See Thompson 1985 and Friberg 1973. The French colonial period saw the division of Vietnam roughly into the three regions recognized as dialectal boundaries, although, administrative boundaries have existed in North Vietnam since the Han dynasty two millennia ago (see Taylor 1983 for historical details and Ferlus 1999 for discussion of the relationship between those ancient divisions and modern dialectal differences).

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