Classifiers and discontinuous noun phrases in Vietnamese

Sarah Duong Phu
Graduate School 'Nominal Modification'
Goethe University of Frankfurt

The presence or absence of classifiers seems to play an important role for the analysis of discontinuous noun phrases in Vietnamese, since classifiers are often part of a split construction. As can be seen from the following example:

Context: A (small) child likes animals a lot and wants to breed some different of them:

(1) Chó muốn nuôi ba con, còn thỏ   thì hai con.
   dog want breed three CLF and rabbit TOP two CLF
   'He/she wants to breed three dogs and two rabbits.'

In (1) the classifier con (classifier for animals) combined with the numeral *ba* 'three' is separated from its heads noun *chó* 'dog'. In this case the numeral cannot occur without a classifier since words like *chó* need a classifier in order to be countable. This observation has led some researchers to assume that Vietnamese is a numeral classifiers language (cf. for example Aikhenvald 2000, Grinevald 2002). However, not all Vietnamese nouns need a classifier in order to be countable. Some nouns may be directly connected with a numeral or have an optional classifier.[1]

One might assume that discontinuous noun phrases which involve nouns that do not take a classifier, behave similar compared to other discontinuous noun phrases, just leaving the classifier out. However, this does not seem to be the case as shown in the following example:

(2) ?*Ngày, tôi ở lại năm.
   day   I stay five
   'Days, I stayed for five.' (Nguyen 2004, 102)

In (2) it seems not to be possible for the numeral *năm* 'five' to appear on its own being separated from its head noun. When it comes to discontinuous noun phrases, sentences containing optional classifiers, seem to be better when they occur with a classifier as in (3)

(3) Chị   Hương có nhiều cô chú: Chú thì có   bốn người và cô
   older sister Huong have a lot aunt[2] uncle[3] uncle TOP have four CLF and aunt
   thì   có   năm người
   TOP have five CLF
   'Huong has a lot of uncle and aunts: Four uncles and five aunts.'

In short, discontinuous NPs seem to be grammatical, when a classifier is separated from its noun, but not when an unclassified noun is separated from other parts of the NP (for example numeral). However, sentences with discontinuous NPs seem to be better when nouns taking an optional classifier occur with a classifier.

Trinh (2011) proposes a general distinction between relational and non-relational noun, while analysing discontinuous noun phrases. As for non-relational nouns, no doubling of head nouns is possible when they appear without complement. Concerning relational nouns without complement as second part of a discontinuous noun phrase, doubling of the fronted noun is optional:

---

1 As noted earlier by Dixon (1986) and Aikhenvald (2000), in a numeral classifier language not all nouns are necessarily associate with a classifier.

2 Younger sister of one's father.

3 Younger brother of one's father.

(4) Bạn   thì nó sẽ   gặp   hai người (bạn)
    friend TOP he will meet two CLF friend
    'As for friends , he will meet two friends'   (p. 20)

According to my own research, the distinction between relational and non-relation nouns is not so relevant, but rather whether a noun takes a classifier or not and whether this classifier is optional or not. In (4), doubling of *bạn* is possible since *bạn* takes an optional classifier. This would not be possible with nouns taking an obligatory classifier as in (1). Obviously noun doubling is either possible with nouns taking an optional classifier or with nouns that do not take a classifier as in (5).

In (5) the nouns *ngày* 'day', *giờ* 'hour', *phút* 'minute' and *giây* 'second' are all non-relational and do not take a classifier. Still, doubling is possible. It seems that these nouns may function as "their own classifier".

Context: Hoa's boyfriend went far away because of his work, therefore Hoa is very lonely and misses him. So Hoa counts every second, every hour and every day until her boyfriend returns:

(5) Ngày thì đếm   được 7 ngày, giờ   thì   đếm được   168 giờ,
    day   TOP count can   7 day hour TOP   count can   168 hour
    phút   thì đếm được 10080 phút   và giây   thì   đếm
    minute TOP count can   10080 minute and second   TOP count
    được 604800 giây.
     can 604800 second

'She counts 7 days, 168 hours, 10080 minutes and 604800 seconds. '

Therefore, the properties of a noun with regard to classifiers are decisive in order to predict its behaviour within discontinuous noun phrases.

References

Aikhenvald, A. Y. (2000). *Classifiers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dixon, R.M. W. (1986). Noun classes and classification. *In C. Craig (ed.). Noun classes and categorization: Proceedings of a symposium on categorization and noun classification*, 345–375.

Grinevald, C. (2002). Making sense of nominal classification systems: noun classifiers and the grammaticalization variable. *In Ilse Wischer and G. Diewald (eds.), New reflections on Grammaticalization* (p. 259–275). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Nguyễn, T. H. (2004). *The structure of the Vietnamese noun phrase*. Boston University.

Trinh, T. H. (2011). *Edges and Linearization* (dissertation). MIT.