

On the modern Vietnamese script

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1 Introduction

- Spoken and written language
- Linguistic units
- Types of scripts

2 Basic features of the modern Vietnamese script

- Alphabet
- Pronunciation
- Spacing, capitalization, punctuation

3 History of the script

- “Chữ nho” & “chữ nôm”
- Romanization
- Popularization

4 Acknowledgement & references

Some truisms

- Spoken language exists before written language
- Spoken language is an acoustic phenomenon, written language is a visual phenomenon
- Written language helps spread and preserve spoken language
- Written language reflects spoken language

What is “spoken language”?

- It is the externalization of mental entities called “linguistic expressions”
- A linguistic expression is a structured object analyzable in terms of several sorts of abstract units

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Units of sounds

- Phonemes
 - **cat** has three speech sounds
 - **cat** has two speech sounds in common with **hat**
- Syllables
 - **easy** has two syllables
 - **easier** has one more syllable than **easy**

Units of meaning

- Morphemes
 - **cats** has two morphemes while **cat** has one
 - **cats** and **children** have one morpheme in common
- Words and sentences
 - **dogs barked** and **dogs barked yesterday** are sentences
 - The first have two, the second has three words

“infinite use of finite means”

- The number of morphemes, syllables and phonemes is finite
- The number of words is arguably infinite
 - **missile, anti-missile, anti-anti-missile,...**
- The number of sentences is definitely infinite
 - **he saw the cat, he saw the cat that caught the mouse, he saw the cat that caught the mouse that ate the cheese,...**

Usable scripts

- It follows that a usable script cannot have one symbol for each word or sentence
- But it can have one symbol for each morpheme, syllable, or phoneme
- By a “symbol” we mean a written sign whose shape cannot be predicted by general rules

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Three main types

- “morphemic scripts”: one morpheme, one symbol!
 - example: Chinese
 - 日 (ri) ‘sun’, 月 (yue) ‘moon’, 明 (ming) ‘light’
- “syllabic scripts”: one syllable, one symbol!
 - example: Japanese
 - ほ = [ho], て = [te], る = [ru], ほてる = [hoteru] ‘hotel’
- “phonemic scripts”: one phoneme, one symbol!
 - example: Latin
 - **principia** = [prɪŋkɪpiə] ‘principles’

Hybrid nature

- Most scripts are hybrid, showing properties of all three types
- one morpheme, one symbol: **tough** vs. **tuff**
- one syllable, one symbol: **k9**, **b4**
- one phoneme, one symbol: **cat**, **hat**

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Letters and diacritics

- The modern Vietnamese script is a phonemic script
- Its alphabet is based on the latin alphabet
 - consonants
 - original: **b, c, d, g, h, k, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, t, v, x**
 - derived: **ch, đ, gi, kh, ng, ngh, nh, ph, th, tr**
 - vowels
 - original: **a, e, i, o, u, y**
 - derived: **ă, â, ê, ô, ơ, ư**
- Tones are indicated by diacritics: **à, á, ả, ã, ạ**

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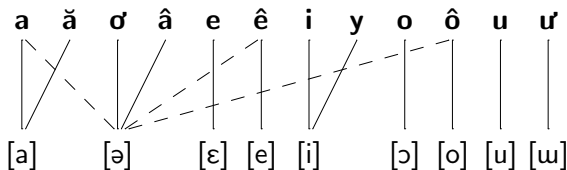
Consonants

b	h	l	m	n	p	q	t	v
[b]	[h]	[l]	[m]	[n]	[p]	[q]	[t]	[v]

c	k	d	gi	r	s	x	ch	tr	đ	kh	ng	ngh	nh	ph	th
[k]		[z]			[s]		[c]		[d]	[x]	[ŋ]		[ɲ]	[f]	[tʰ]

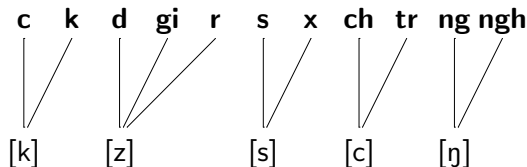
- letters absent from the vietnamese alphabet: **f**, **j**, **w**, **z**

Vowels



- Dashed lines represent “non-default” mappings
- ă is short [a]: **san** ‘divide’ / **săn** ‘hunt’
- â is short [ə]: **sơn** ‘paint’ / **sân** ‘courtyard’

Alternations



- morphemically motivated
 - **da** 'skin', **gia** 'family', **ra** 'exit'
 - **sa** 'fall', **xa** 'far'
 - **cha** 'father', **tra** 'interrogate'
- phonemically motivated
 - **k/ng** before front and non-open vowels, **c/ng** otherwise
 - **ki**, **kê**, **ke**, **cơ**, **ca**, **co**, **cô**, **cu**, **cư**
 - **ng****hi**, **ng****hê**, **ng****he**, **ng****ơ**, **ng****a**, **ng****o**, **ng****ô**, **ng****u**, **ngư**

We won't have time to discuss vowel alternations!

Tones

- **ma** ‘ghost’ = flat contour, medium pitch
- **mà** ‘but’ = flat contour, low pitch
- **má** ‘mother’ = rising contour
- **mả** ‘grave’ = falling contour with breathy ending
- **mã** ‘appearance’ = broken contour
- **mạ** ‘rice’ = creaky voice

There are two other tones – the so-called “checked tones” – but they are not represented by new diacritics: **mát**, **mật**

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Spacing

- In English, empty space is put between words
all men are created equal
- In Vietnamese, empty space is put between morphemes
tất cả mọi người sinh ra đều bình đẳng
- What do English words and Vietnamese morphemes have in common?
- They are the smallest meaningful units that can be spoken as a sequence of syllables
 - In English, every word, but not every morpheme, is a sequence of syllables: **construct-ed, cat-s**
 - In Vietnamese, every morpheme is a syllable: it is a “monosyllabic language”

Capitalization & punctuation

- pretty much like English!

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“Chữ nho”

- Written language was exclusively Chinese until about the 13th century
- The script was called “chữ nho” (“confucianist script”)
- Linguistic materials in the native language had to be transmitted orally
- Bureaucratic problems solved by using Chinese words with similar pronunciation
 - Some regions in Vietnam have two names: a “vulgar name” (“tên tục”) and a “written name” (“tên chữ”)

vulgar name	written name
Kẻ Noi	Cổ Nhuế
Chèm (← Tlèm)	từ liêm

“Chữ nôm”

- In the 13th century, during the Trần Dynasty, scholars began using a script called “chữ nôm” (“southern script”)
- The script is based on the Chinese script but could represent native vietnamese words
- Vietnamese became official written language and “chữ nôm” official script during two dynasties
 - Hồ Dynasty (1400–1407)
 - Tây Sơn Dynasty (1778–1802)
- However, succeeding rulers always reverted to literary Chinese as the official language
- The most famous Vietnamese literary work, “Truyện Kiều” (“The Tale of Kiều”) by Nguyễn Du (1766–1820), was written in “chữ nôm”

Examples of how “chữ nôm” works

- writing Chinese loan words as they are written in Chinese
史 = **sử** ‘history’ (pronounced [shi] in Chinese)
- combining two Chinese symbols, one relating to the meaning, the other indicating the sound
火吹 = **sôi** ‘boil’ = 火 [huo] ‘fire’ + 吹 [chui] ‘perish’
- representing a Vietnamese word using a similar sounding Chinese word
沒 = **một** ‘one’ (pronounced [mei] and means ‘not’ in Chinese)
- representing a Vietnamese word by simplifying a Chinese word with the same meaning
𠬞 = **làm** ‘do’, from Chinese 為 [wei] ‘do’
- and so on...

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The missionaries

- European missionaries came to vietnam as early as the end of the 16th century
- But only after 1615 did they come more regularly and stayed for longer
- The majority of them were Portuguese, but there are other nationalities as well: Italians, French, Japanese
- They learned Vietnamese with the help of indigenous people, using the Latin alphabet to transcribe what they heard
- Their transcriptions were highly individual, being based on (i) the local dialect, and (ii) the native language of the transcriber

Transcriptions

- Gaspar Luís, report sent from Macao in 1621

1621	2015	
noüocman	nước mặn	'salty water' ('sea water')
ontrum	ông trùm	'the boss'

- Cristoforo Borri, memoir published in 1631

1621	2015	meaning
nuoecman	nước mặn	'salty water' ('sea water')
bũa	vua	'king'
chiuua	chúa	'lord'
scin mocaij	xin một cái	'ask for one thing'

Alexandre de Rhodes

- The French missionary Alexandre de Rhodes (1591 – 1660) is recognized as the person who contributed the most to the systematization of the Romanized script
 - born in Avignon, France, to a family of Jewish ancestry
 - studied math and theology in Rome
 - did missionary work in South Vietnam 1624 – 1626, in North Vietnam 1627 – 1630, and again in South Vietnam 1640 – 1645
 - was able to give sermons in Vietnamese after only six months of studying the language
 - Vietnamese name: A-Lịch-Sơn Đắc-Lộ

Dictionarium & Catechismus

- two books by Alexandre de Rhodes published in Rome in 1651
 - Dictionarium anamiticum lusitanum et latinum
 - Vietnamese = “Tự điển Việt Bồ La”
 - English = “Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin Dictionary”
 - Catechismus pro iis qui volunt suscipere baptismus, in octo dies divisus
 - Vietnamese = “Phép giảng tám ngày cho kẻ muốn chịu phép rửa tội, ma bẻ đạo thánh đức Chúa bời”
 - English = “Catechism for those who want to be baptized, divided into eight days”
- They are considered the first publications containing Vietnamese written in the romanized script
- These books constitute the basis on which today’s script was developed

Language change

- de Rhodes' phonemic script gives clues to 17th century pronunciation

de Rhodes	today	meaning
chúa blời	chúa trời	'god'
con tlâu	con trâu	'the buffalo'
mlâm mlữ	lầm lữ	'to err'
mnhớn	nhớn	'big'

- This is evidence that Vietnamese used to have [bl], [tl], [ml], [mɲ] as syllable onsets

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Gia Định Báo (Gia Định Newspaper)

- The Romanized script remained inside the church for more than 200 years
- After they obtained control over south vietnam in 1862, the French began teaching and propagating the script
- The first newspaper using this script was founded: Gia Định Báo (1865 – 1897)
- In 1882, official use of the Romanized script was imposed in South Vietnam
- It was called “chữ quốc ngữ” (“national script”)
- The French eventually took control of North Vietnam also, but allowed both “chữ quốc ngữ” and “chữ nho” in this region

Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục (Tonkin Free School)

- Anti-French Vietnamese nationalists opened a school in 1907 whose goal was to educate their countrymen and modernize their thinking
- They looked to the West and Japan for inspiration
- They offered free courses on the Romanized script
- Realizing the danger, the French closed down the school after only a few months of operation

Bình Dân Học Vụ (People's Education)

- When the communists seized control of Vietnam from the French in 1945, 90% of the population were illiterate
- Bình Dân Học Vụ was a social movement initiated by the new government in order to “fight ignorance”
- It was declared “the first task of the first government”
- There was no tuition, and teachers were mostly volunteers

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