

A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF CLASSIFIERS IN VIETNAMESE

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Key words: corpus-based study, Vietnamese, classifiers, pragmatic functions, discourse structure.

Vietnamese is a language which has a very complex classifier system with three general classifiers *cái* (inanimate), *con* (animate non-human), and *người* (human) as in (1-3) (Nguyen 1957; Nguyen 2002). This paper examines classifiers in Vietnamese narrative discourse in terms of pragmatics and discourse structure on a corpus-study basis.

- (1) *cái* *bếp*
CL(inanimate) kitchen
'the kitchen'
- (2) *một con* *mèo*
a/one CL(animate) cat
'a cat'
- (3) *hai mươi người* *con trai*
twenty CL(human) child male
'twenty sons'.

The data used for this study come from the corpus consisting of one hundred and seventeen Vietnamese folktales randomly selected from two books published in 2013 and 2016 in Vietnam. These are 'real life stories' which are told by Vietnamese native speakers from generation to generation, the language is thus natural and belongs to the Vietnamese people in general. There are 2340 tokens altogether in the data.

The results of the study show that 60% of all the classifier tokens in the data have the classifier construction Classifier - Noun, which suggests that this classifier construction is a better candidate considered as the prototypical classifier construction in Vietnamese. The fact that only 23% of all the classifier tokens in the data conform to the pattern Numeral - Classifier - Noun dispels the belief that the prototypical syntactic classifier construction in Vietnamese is Numeral - Classifier - Noun that Aikhenvald (2000) and other researchers claim.

The research also has found evidence in Vietnamese to support Aikhenvald (2000)'s claim that "different types of numeral classifiers may co-occur and display different properties" (Aikhenvald 2000:112). Two classifiers co-occurred 72 times in two different classifier constructions in the data as shown in (4-5).

- (4) *một đứa con* *gái trong làng*
one CL(human) CL(animate) girl in village
'a girl in the village' (1.29).
- (5) *cô con* *gái đẹp*
CL(human) CL(animate) girl beautiful
'the beautiful girl' (1.141).

This paper discusses the phenomenon of classifier co-occurrence in Vietnamese which is restricted to a limited number of classifiers, and whether one of the two co-occurred classifiers can be omitted without changing the meaning of the noun phrase or losing some properties depends on the classifier(s). I argue that the use of classifiers in Vietnamese is flexible and thus complex.

References

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