

# Vietnamese and the structure of NP

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## 1 Introduction

Cheng & Sybesma (1999) develop an analysis of the interpretational possibilities of NPs in two dialects of Chinese shown in Table 1. The analysis takes as its point of departure the idea that only DPs may function as arguments (Stowell 1989, Szabolsci 1994, Longobardi 1994 among others). Postverbally, the two languages differ only in the structures which license definite readings, as shown in Table 1.

	<i>Mandarin</i>		<i>Cantonese</i>	
	Indef	Def	Indef	Def
Bare N	+	+	+	-
Cl + N	+	-	+	+
Num + Cl + N	+	-	+	-

Table 1. Postverbal interpretational possibilities in Chinese..

The distribution is largely similar preverbally, with one important difference: preverbally, bare nouns may not receive an indefinite interpretation in either language. This fact is crucial to the Cheng & Sybesma analysis, because it relies on the notion of **lexical government** (Longobardi 1994, Chierchia 1998), in that empty categories are prohibited in non-lexically governed positions. From this perspective, all arguments must be DPs, or at least DP-like. According to Cheng & Sybesma, bare nominals actually have a more complex syntactic structure, containing empty Cl and/or Num heads. The presence of these empty heads, in conjunction with the principle of lexical government, allows them to correctly predict the distribution of NPs and their associated definite, indefinite, and generic readings in the dialects of Chinese which they examine.

In this short squib, I present data from Vietnamese that suggests this approach is untenable, at least for some languages, but that a principled account of type shifting as a ‘last resort’ strategy may be possible in order to rescue the proposed relation between argument type and structure.

## 2 Vietnamese

Vietnamese nouns have no overt number morphology, so bare NPs can be singular or plural. For example, (1) may be interpreted as singular or plural, definite, indefinite, or generic (data in (1-2) from Nguyễn 2004).

- (1) Tôi mua sách  
1sg buy book  
'I buy/bought (a/the) book(s).'

This holds for preverbal bare NPs as well:

- (2) Bò đang ăn lúa kia!  
cow PROG eat paddy over-there  
'(A/the) cow(s) is/are eating (your/the) paddy (over there)!'

This contrasts with [Cl+N] phrases, which force a singular reading:

- (3) a. Con chim bay  
CL bird fly  
'The bird flies.' Not 'The birds fly.'  
b. Tôi thích con chó  
1sg like CL dog  
'I like the dog.' Not 'I like dogs.'  
c. Con bò đang ăn lúa kia!  
CL cow PROG eat paddy over-there  
'(A/the) cow is eating (your/the) paddy (over there)!'

Note that an indefinite preverbal reading is allowed for the [Cl+N] phrase in (3c)<sup>1</sup>. Postverbally, singular indefinite readings are allowed for [Cl+N] phrases as well, although these readings are all specific. Generic readings are disallowed:

- (4) Anh ấy đọc cuốn sách (của thư viện).  
brother DEM read CL book POS library  
'He is reading a/the library book/\*books.' Not 'He reads library books.'

When not used in conjunction with a determiner, addition of any numeral to a [Cl+N] phrase results in an indefinite interpretation.

- (5) a. Một con chim bay  
one CL bird fly  
'A bird flies.' (non-generic interpretation)

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<sup>1</sup>The pluralizers *các* and *những*, when used in conjunction with a [Cl+N] phrase, force [+definite] and [-definite] readings respectively. Since these data do not bear on the discussion at hand, I have omitted them here.

- b. Tôi có ba con chó  
 1sg like CL dog  
 ‘I have three dogs.’

To confirm the (in)definiteness effect, consider the sentences in (6a-b)<sup>2</sup>.

- (6) a. Tôi tìm kiếm một cuốn sách và tôi tìm thấy một cuốn  
 1sg look search one CLS book and 1sg search find one CLS  
 ‘I looked for a book and I found one.’ (Specific indefinite reading)
- b. Tôi tìm kiếm một cuốn sách và tôi tìm thấy cuốn đó  
 1sg look search one CLS book and 1sg search find CLS DEM  
 ‘I looked for a book and I found it.’ (Specific definite reading)

Table 2 summarizes the interpretational possibilities in Vietnamese.

	Bare NP	[Cl+N]	[Num+Cl+N]
Definiteness	I/D/G	I/D	I
Number	S/P	S	-

Table 2. Interpretational possibilities in Vietnamese..

Notice that no mention is made of whether the NP structure occurs preverbally or postverbally. This is because there is no apparent positional (syntactic) effect on interpretation in Vietnamese. This is problematic, if not fatal, for the Cheng & Sybesma account, because indefinite readings are allowed in exactly the position where they should not be allowed. In order to salvage the Cheng & Sybesma/Longobardi style of analysis, then, we would need to explain why bare NPs are not restricted to lexically governed positions<sup>3</sup>.

One possible approach to accounting for the Vietnamese data within the general Cheng & Sybesma/Longobardi program would be to extend the range of conditions under which N-to-Cl movement is licensed. Recall that, in Mandarin, definite bare nouns cannot occur with overt classifiers, but are posited to have a structure containing an empty Cl<sup>0</sup> head, which performs the necessary deictic function (which, in turn, leads to a definite interpretation).



Figure 1. Chinese indefinite bare NP.

<sup>2</sup>Note that although the N itself has been elided in the complement clauses, this has no effect on the in/definite interpretation.

<sup>3</sup>Alternatively, one might attempt to explain how a preverbal position in Vietnamese may be seen as lexically governed; this is not a direction I shall pursue here.

However, since definite readings are licensed preverbally for bare nouns in Mandarin, this  $Cl^0$  head must not be empty. Cheng & Sybesma suggest that this indicates N-to-Cl movement has taken place - and that this movement licenses application of a type-shifting  $\iota$  operation (Partee 1987). In order to explain why not all languages make use of this operator, Chierchia (1998) appeals to a principle that may be summarized as “don’t do covertly what you can do overtly”. That is to say, in English, the use of  $\iota$  is blocked by the existence of the definite article and in Cantonese by the existence of classifiers (which are required for a definite reading).

While the N-to-Cl movement analysis looks promising for Vietnamese, it is perhaps difficult to see why the strategy should be available, given that [Cl+N] phrases may receive definite interpretations as well. But perhaps all is not lost: recall that [Cl+N] phrases may also receive *indefinite* interpretations (see example 3c and 4 above). One might be able to argue that, since Vietnamese does not provide a single, *unambiguous* strategy by which NPs may receive definite readings - since bare NPs may also receive definite and indefinite readings - the  $\iota$  operation is licensed in this language, in spite of the presence of alternative means of specifying definiteness (namely, overt classifiers).

Another approach would be to try and expand on ideas presented in Chierchia (1998) and simply allows NPs to bear different types -  $\langle e \rangle$  in some cases,  $\langle e, t \rangle$  in others. Chierchia develops a correspondence between properties and ‘kinds’ that, for all intents and purposes, equates to this difference between predicates and arguments. Since there exists a correspondence between properties and kinds, Chierchia reasons, there must also be a (functional) means of getting from one to the other. These functions, UP  $\cup$  and DOWN  $\cap$ , correspond to the type-shifting functions *ident* and *iota* ( $\iota$ ), respectively.

To explore the ways in which languages refer to kinds, Chierchia sets up a typology of NP denotations defined by the features  $[\pm arg]$ ,  $[\pm pred]$  and considers the various languages such a system predicts to exist (and not exist).

The first type of language examined by Chierchia is the type defined by  $[+arg, -pred]$ . Its characteristics are summarized in (8):

- (8) *NP [+arg, -pred] languages*
- a. Generalized bare arguments
  - b. The extension of all nouns is mass
  - c. No PL
  - d. Generalized classifier system

Chierchia puts forth Chinese to be such a language, but the properties in (8) seem to apply equally, if not moreso, to Vietnamese. While this system (correctly, to my view) predicts that Vietnamese and Chinese pattern together as opposed to, say, languages like French and Italian or English and German, it fails to capture the subtleties in interpretation that Cheng & Sybesma’s proposal does. Chierchia himself notes explicitly that such interpretations may well be possible:

“...Hence grammatical occurrences of bare arguments across the board [in [+arg, –pred] languages] is expected. Notice that this does by no means entail that bare arguments will have the same range of interpretations throughout. And if there are different readings in different positions...it is an interesting empirical issue how to derive them. Their derivation might involve null structure...” (Chierchia 1998:358)

Besides being open to the possibility of different interpretations, however, Chierchia’s system does not appear to possess the requisite technology to deal with this eventuality, except to note - as Cheng & Sybesma do as well - that null structure must be lexically governed. In the limit, then, Cheng & Sybesma’s proposal almost seems to be the logical next step after Chierchia’s - theirs is, after all, a method of relating predicates (properties) to arguments (heads), just mediated via (possibly empty) structure, the constraints on the distribution of which also seems to account for the range of interpretations with respect to bare nominals.

At least until we get to Vietnamese. It may be that Cheng & Sybesma are right, but that lexical government is the wrong licensing condition on null structure, or it may be that null structure is not actually needed after all...

## References

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