
Classifiers and definiteness/indefiniteness in Vietnamese

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Some linguists claim that Vietnamese classifiers (CL) exclusively mark definiteness (T. C. Nguyen 1975, Le 2008, among others), others provide evidence that they express definiteness as well as indefiniteness (T. H. Nguyen 2004, Trinh 2011, Hanske 2013). The present paper is formed on the corpus of 30 written texts (15.838 words) and 30 oral texts (9.261 words) to show that Vietnamese classifiers are not obligatory and can have both definite and indefinite functions. Both types of texts are reports on a movie with various protagonists and objects involved. The texts were produced by 46 Vietnamese native speakers (25 female and 21 male, aged 20 to 40), 14 of them participated in both text-production experiments. It reports the analysis of the experiment test will be based on two questions: (i) what determines the presence and absence of a classifier and (ii) what determines its interpretation?

In our corpus, the presence of a classifier is significantly higher with [+protagonist, +animate] features and in the context of contrastive topics. As for interpretation, there is a general preference of using classifiers with definite nouns. If one combines the criterion of word order (preverbal/subject vs. postverbal/object) with animacy, it turns out that the CL prototypically occurs with definite animate nouns in the subject position. These findings reflect the universal tendency of certain preverbal positions in SVO languages to be associated with definiteness (Keenan & Comrie 1977 and others). Rare functions like CL with indefinite subjects are due to specific contexts likethetic statements. More generally, it will be shown that the definiteness expressed by Vietnamese classifiers is based on identifiability for establishing common ground rather than on uniqueness. This is in line with the prominence-based criteria that determine classifier use and with the definite interpretation of preverbal [CL N] constructions if these positions are associated with topichood and the function of identifiability that goes with it (Lambrecht 1994).