

Does Vietnamese Have Lexical Articles? A Reexamination of *một*, *các* and *những*

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1. Introduction

Many expressions that require a determiner in English do not seem to require a determiner in Vietnamese. Consider (1)-(3):

(1) Nam mua một cái bút.

Nam buy one CL pen.

“Nam buys a/one pen.”

(2) Nam mua cái bút ấy.

Nam buy CL pen DEM.

“Nam buys the pen.”

(3) Nam mua bút.

Nam buy pen

“Nam buys a pen/pens.”

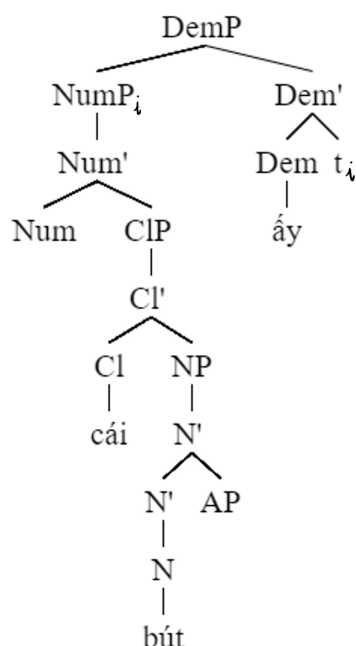
Such examples call into question whether the Vietnamese have a DP projection or not.

While languages without overt determiners can be analyzed to have a DP projection, this hypothesis remains to be tested out in Vietnamese<sup>1</sup>. This paper analyzes and rejects previously proposed candidates for the D-head in Vietnamese—*một*, *các*, and *những*—thereby supporting the hypothesis that Vietnamese does not have a DP. Instead, I argue that *một*, *các*, and *những* should be considered numerals in the Num-head. I also propose a

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Rutkowski (2002).

structure for the Vietnamese NP, a modified structure from Nguyen's proposal<sup>2</sup>. Below is a tree for *cái bút ấy* in example (2), shown as headed by a Demonstrative Phrase.



## 2. Proposed D-heads in Vietnamese:

Nguyen proposes a set of lexical articles in Vietnamese as candidates for the D-head<sup>3</sup>. The lexical articles are contrasted by [±plural] and [±definite]. The proposed articles are *một*, *những* and *các*; they are organized in a paradigm as follows<sup>4</sup>:

(4) Một	[−definite; −plural]
Những	[−definite; +plural]
Các	[+definite; +plural]

Nguyen argues that *một* and *những* can occur in indefinite environments: existential sentences, initial mentions of referents, a complement of *là* “be” and *trở thành* “become” and they do not bear phonological stress. Consider examples from:

<sup>2</sup> Nguyen, Tuong Hung. “The Vietnamese Noun Phrase.” *Linguistics of Vietnamese: An international survey*, 2013, 57–86. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110289411.57>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 71.

(5) Existential sentences<sup>5</sup>:

a. Hôm qua có **một** con chó chạy lạc vào nhà tôi.

Day past have one/a CL dog run lost enter house I

“A dog strayed into my house yesterday.”

b. Có **những** bản nhạc nghe mãi không biết chán.

Have CL music listen forever not know bored

“There are musical pieces you can listen to forever without feeling bored.”

(6) Initial mentions of referents<sup>6</sup>:

a. Bà tôi cho tôi **một** con mèo.

Grandmother I give I one/a CL cat

“My grandma gave me a cat.”

b. Bà tôi nuôi nhiều mèo. **Những** con mèo đen bắt chuột rất giỏi.

grandma I raise a lot cat CL cat black catch mouse very good

“My grandma has a lot of cats. Some of the black cats are very good at catching mice.”

(7) Complement of *là* “be”<sup>7</sup>:

a. Đó là **một** con chó.

That be one/a CL dog

“It’s a dog.”

b. Huế, Sài Gòn, Hà Nội là **những** thành phố lớn của Việt Nam.

be city big of Vietnam

“Hue, Saigon and Hanoi are (some of the) big cities in Vietnam.”

<sup>5</sup> Nguyen, Tuong Hung. “The Structure of the Vietnamese Noun Phrase.” PhD Diss. Boston University, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 31, 37.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 32, 38.

Nguyen further argues that *một* and *những* cannot be used in definite environments: unique reference (superlatives, *đầu tiên* “the first,” *duy nhất* “the only”) and second and subsequent mentions of the referent. Consider examples given by Nguyen:

(8) Superlatives<sup>8</sup>:

a. (\***Một**) em học sinh giỏi nhất lớp tôi cũng phải chịu thua câu hỏi này.

One/a CL pupil good best class I also must suffer lose question this

“The best pupil in my class was stumped by this question.”

b. **Những** em học sinh giỏi nhất lớp tôi cũng phải chịu thua câu hỏi này.

CL pupil good best class I also must suffer lose question this

“Some of the best pupils in my class were stumped by this question.”

(Not “The best pupils...”)

Contrary to *những*, Nguyen argues that in contexts such as (8b), *các* would refer exclusively to the entire group mentioned.

(9) **Các** em học sinh giỏi nhất lớp tôi cũng phải chịu thua câu hỏi này.

CL pupil good best class I also must suffer lose question this

“The best pupils in my class were stumped by this question.”

*Các* is also shown to not exist in indefinite contexts, contrary to (5b)<sup>9</sup>:

(10) ?\***Có các** bản nhạc nghe mãi không biết chán.

Have CL music listen forever not know bored

Nguyen’s proposal can be generalized in the following table. In addition to this table, Nguyen argues that a noun without a classifier and these proposed determiners can be either singular or plural, definite or indefinite.

	-plural	+plural
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<sup>8</sup> Ibid 34, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 41.

-definite	∅ or <i>một</i>	<i>những</i>
+definite	∅	<i>các</i>

Table 1: Summary of Nguyen's proposal.

### 3. Reexamination of *một*, *các*, and *những*

#### a. Nguyen's paradigm of lexical articles<sup>10</sup>

Phan and Lander challenge the paradigm proposed by Nguyen in (4), and one of their reasons for doing so is that none of these proposed "articles" are obligatory<sup>11</sup>. Revisit (3) where the bare noun *bút* can be understood as either plural or singular:

#### (3) Nam mua bút.

Nam buy pen

"Nam buys a pen/pens."

Phan and Lander offer an example where *các* ensures the plural reading, but not the definite reading. Phan and Lander argue that while con in (11b) must be plural, it can either be definite or indefinite<sup>12</sup>:

#### (11)

##### a. Con rất ngoan.

Child very well-behaved

"The child is/The children are very well-behaved."

##### b. Các con rất ngoan.

child very well-behaved

"The children/Children are very well-behaved."

<sup>10</sup> Nguyen, "The Vietnamese Noun Phrase."

<sup>11</sup> Trang Phan and Eric T. Lander, "Vietnamese and the NP/DP Parameter," *Canadian Journal of Linguistics/Revue Canadienne De Linguistique* 60, no. 3 (2015): pp. 391-415, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0008413100026268>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 393.

While Nguyen proposes that *một* is [–definite; –plural], *những* is [–definite; +plural] and *các* is [+definite; +plural], he did not propose any words for [+definite; –plural]. Nguyen proposes that the [+definite; –plural] reading can be obtained when the classifier and noun are not preceded by one of his proposed articles. This necessarily suggests that a null morpheme fills the position of [+definite; –plural] in the paradigm. However, as can be seen in Table 1, Nguyen argues that a null morpheme can also lend itself to the reading [–definite; –plural]. Consider (12), where a classifier without any plural marker forces the singular reading, but it can be understood as either definite or indefinite.

- (12) Nam mua cái bút.  
 Nam buy CL bút  
 “Nam buy a/the pen.”

The paradigm that Nguyen offers is messy. The proposed null morpheme is [±definite; –plural]. While a noun preceded by a classifier and the null morpheme must be singular, it can be either definite or indefinite. This is also the case for *các* in (11b), where *các* forces the plural reading but not the definite reading. I argue that *một*, *các*, and *những* are better analyzed as a numeral, occupying the Num head since the only thing that contrasts them is [±plural]. Moreover, *một*, *các* and *những* can never co-occur with another numeral in Vietnamese, which suggests that they occupy the same position in the syntax tree. Consider (13) where adding either *những* or *các* would make the sentence ungrammatical, while *mèo* “cat” is plural.

- (13) (\***Những**/\***Các**) ba con mèo này rất đẹp.  
 three CL cat DEM very beautiful

These three cats are very beautiful.

By contrast, determiners in English have no difficulty co-occurring with numerals:

- (14) The three cats are beautiful.

In this paper, I argue that the proposed articles in Vietnamese are better analyzed as numerals. In the following sections, I argue that *một* functions just like a normal numeral and that there is no inherent [ $\pm$ definite] difference between *các* and *những*, contrary to what Nguyen proposes.

b. *Một* as a numeral

*Một* is number one in Vietnamese, so Nguyen's proposal necessarily means that there are two different *một*'s in Vietnamese: one is an article, and one is a numeral. Nguyen did not offer an explanation for how the form *một* can have two meanings: whether it is out of pure coincidence or one developed into another. Reconsider (6a) where Nguyen argues that it is best translated as "My grandmother gave me a cat" and not "My grandmother gave me one cat." Nguyen argues that while the numerical reading is possible ("My grandmother gave me one cat") is possible, it is less likely.<sup>13</sup>

(15) Bà                    tôi cho tôi **một** con mèo.

Grandmother I give I one/a CL cat

"My grandmother gave me a cat."

However, analyzing *một* sometimes as an article and sometimes as a numeral is not efficient. In this section, I show that *một* is a numeral like any other, such as *hai* "two" and *ba* "three." First, *một* can both have the article reading (*a/an*) or a numeral reading (*one*) in an English sentence. It does not exhibit the same contrast that *a/an* and *one* exhibit in English in (15). While (15a) can be understood as a general descriptive sentence about all spiders, (15b) suggests that there is this one particular spider that has eight legs (while other spiders do not).

(16)

a. A spider has eight legs.

b. One spider has eight legs.

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<sup>13</sup> Nguyen, "The structure of the Vietnamese noun phrase."

The same contrast does not exist in Vietnamese, where *một* can be used for the general descriptive reading. While Nguyen argues that the numerical reading in (6b) is unlikely, I argue that both readings are possible with *một*.

- (17) **Một** con nhện có tám cái chân.  
 a/one CL spider have eight CL leg  
 “A/One spider has eight legs.”

Second, *một* can be used like other numerals in compound adjectives.

- (18) *Một* in compound adjectives

- a. Con chó **một** mắt  
 CL dog one eye  
 “One-eyed dog”
- b. Con chó ba mắt  
 CL dog three eye  
 “Three-eyed dog”

Third, *một* forces a singular reading, while *a/an* in English could allow a non-singular understanding in cases such as (18).

- (19)
- a. Who ate apples yesterday?  
 b. Nam ate an apple yesterday!

If (18b) is said as a response to (18a), this response is still acceptable even if Nam ate more than one apple. However, the same does not apply in Vietnamese, where (19b) necessarily means that “Nam ate one and only one apple yesterday”:

- (20)
- a. Hôm qua ai ăn táo?  
 Yesterday who eat apple



“Who ate apples yesterday?”

b. Hôm qua Nam ăn **một** quả táo!

Yesterday Nam eat one CL apple

“Nam ate an/one apple yesterday.”

In conclusion, *một* in Vietnamese functions like other numerals, and does not always function like the indefinite articles *a/an* in English.

c. No inherent [ $\pm$ definite] difference between *các* and *những*

One key point of Nguyen’s proposal is that *những* is [ $-$ definite;  $+$ plural] and *các* is [ $+$ definite;  $+$ plural]. Nguyen says that while they are both plurals, there is an inherent [ $\pm$ definite] distinction between them. Examples to show the contrary are not rare; Phan and Lander offer the following<sup>14</sup>:

(21)

a. **Những** sinh viên của tôi rất chăm chỉ.

student of me very hard-working

“My students are very hard-working.”

b. **Các** sinh viên của tôi rất chăm chỉ.

student of me very hard-working

“My students are very hard-working.”

While Nguyen says that *những* cannot be used in definite environments such as superlatives and with *đầu tiên* “the first,” (21-22) show that this is perfectly grammatical in Vietnamese:

(22) **Các/Những** sinh viên giỏi nhất lớp sẽ được thưởng.

student good best class FUT PASS reward

<sup>14</sup> Manh Hung Bui, “Về Một Số Đặc Trưng Ngữ Nghĩa—Ngữ Pháp Của *Những* Và *Các* [Some Semantico-Syntactic Characteristics of *Những* and *Các*],” *Ngôn Ngữ [Language]* 3 (2000): pp. 16-26.

“The best students in the class will be rewarded.”

(23) **Các/Những** học sinh đầu tiên làm xong bài sẽ được thưởng.

student first do finish exercise FUT PASS reward

“The first students to finish the exercise will be rewarded.”

Nguyen points out that *các* refers to the entire group mentioned and *những* can be only a subset of this group. However, this distinction is not relevant to whether these two words are definite or not. As in (21), either *các* and *những* can be used, but the definiteness of the noun *sinh viên* “students” is already established in the superlative context. Indeed, *những* and *các* only have an indefinite reading when the definiteness is not otherwise stated in the sentence<sup>15</sup>.

In conclusion, while there are differences in meaning between *các* and *những*, there is no inherent [ $\pm$ definite] difference between them to contrast them as plural articles. *Những* has been shown in definite contexts, ruling out the possibility that it has a [ $-$ definite] feature. Both *các* and *những* are better analyzed as plural markers and they occupy the Num head in the syntax.

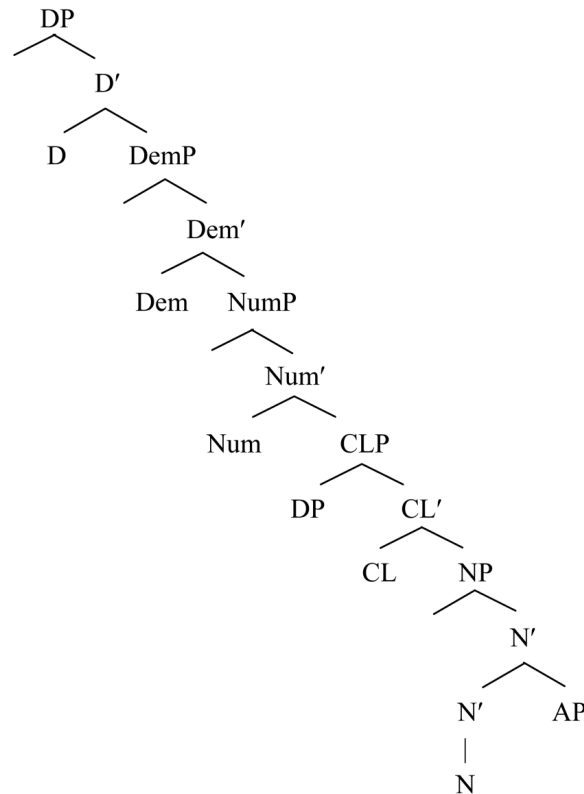
#### 4. Implications

I have shown that *một*, *các*, and *những*—candidates for D-head in Vietnamese proposed by Nguyen are not determiners but numerals. I will now propose a syntactic structure for the Vietnamese NP, which I have adapted from Nguyen’s proposal below<sup>16</sup>:

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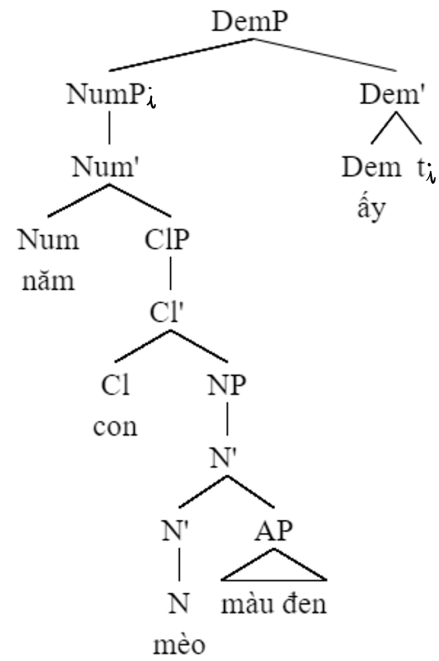
<sup>15</sup> Phan and Lander, “Vietnamese and the NP/DP Parameter.”

<sup>16</sup> Nguyen, “The Vietnamese Noun Phrase.”



The possible word order of a Vietnamese NP is as follows: (Num) (Cl) N (AP) (Dem). The only required element is the noun, but if other elements appear, they must appear in the order specified. My proposal is shown in the tree below, with the NP headed by a DemP; this is because it is impossible to join the DemP below AP, an adjunct. In comparison to Nguyen's proposal, I have deleted the DP projection above the DemP, and I have removed the DP that occupies Spec, CLP. To account for the word order—that the demonstrative appears at the end of an NP in Vietnamese—Nguyen proposes, and I agree that a phrasal movement happened: the entire NumP, which occupies the position of complement to Dem-head in the Deep Structure, moves to Spec, DemP in the Surface Structure. A tree for *năm con mèo màu đen ấy* would look like the below:

- (24) Năm con mèo màu đen ấy  
 Five CL cat color black DEM  
 “Those five black cats.”



My analysis shows that Vietnamese does have a way of expression plurality and (in)definiteness, but this is not lexicalized or grammaticalized in the language. This lends support to the argument that Vietnamese is a non-DP language, and I propose a structure for the Vietnamese NP without a DP projection.

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