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Dear Peter,

How would you say "computer" in Vietnamese? "*Com pu tơ*" or "*máy diên toán*" (literally: machine electricity mathematics)? Well, it depends. Xuân Vu, a teacher from Huế who fled the communist regime in 1975 and now lives near Seattle, Washington, says "*com pu tơ*". And "*máy diên toán*" is nothing more to her than another of those "weird words the communists created".

But for Bình Ngô, a North-Vietnamese who supports Boris Yeltsin, loves his culture and has been teaching Vietnamese in Moscow for 11 years, a computer is a "*máy diên toán*". "Vietnamese have always borrowed words from foreign languages", says Bình, a tall and broad-shouldered man who teaches at the University of Washington for the summer. "We have borrowed mainly from Chinese, but also from French and Thai, and from English. But Vietnamese has a word for computer and it is more easily understood by the 80% of the population not living in cities."(1)

(1). The biggest contribution was in fact of classical Chinese, Han, which was used during the millenium of Chinese imperial rule. Hence, a high proportion of Han words and the adoption of certain Han syntactic rules. But through the centuries, Han has become vietnamized and thoroughly integrated into the country's language. The process is well documented in Glimpses of Vietnamese classical literature, Foreign language publishing house, Hanoi 1972.

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

The disagreement between Xuân and Bình is not a new one. From Nguyễn Trãi, the 14th century poet who rejected Chinese classical script and wrote instead in *nôm* (a mixture of phonetics and Chinese characters), to the 20th century's patriots who spread their nationalist message by using the romanized alphabet devised by European missionaries to preach Catholicism, indeed the Vietnamese have fought for a true national language.(2) Was the "computer" case simply another chapter in the battle?

I wondered about that last week as I sat in a small office at the University of Washington, chatting with two Vietnamese language teachers. It was very hot in Seattle, 92 degrees Fahrenheit, a record. We were all sweating, yet I was fascinated. Bình, a teacher at the advanced level of the Southeast Asian Summer program (SEASSI), was patiently answering some of the questions I had been puzzled by since the start of our classes June 15.

It all began the morning our usual teacher, Xuân, went to teach for an hour in a different class. There are three beginner's classes in our program; one advanced and one intermediate, each with their assigned teacher (there are roughly eight to ten students in each class). Every morning, for the first of the four hours of beginner's class, the teachers rotate. The idea is to expose the students to different accents, voices and teaching techniques.

Already the first morning, some of us began to sense more than the usual variations in accents between regions. The major difference was very much personnalized by Bích Ng, one of the two "true Hanoians" teaching in SEASSI (the other one teaches at the intermediate level).

Bích is a young woman with long shining black hair and a communicative laugh. The first morning she came into our class we were all puzzled. Not because she giggled so much. Actually it was truly refreshing to watch her break into an irrepressible laugh. What else was she supposed to do, when instead of saying "I have studied (*học*) Vietnamese", I said "I have Vietnamese stuck (*hóc*) in my throat". Now, those two *hoc* may look the same to you but beware. The dot under the first one and the accent on top of the second one make them sound very different when they are pronounced well. Unfortunately, I had not done so.

Anyway we liked it when Bích laughed. However, we didn't like it as much when she started to tell us that our textbook was wrong. Or that what we had learned the day before, on Xuân's advice, was actually "not good", or "too old", or "too polite, too formal" and not used anymore".

We patiently inquired: Was that only a matter of region? Was it OK to say that in the South? "*Không, không*", she kept answering, (which means "No, no.") Nobody said that anymore, she insisted. It was old. Just like the two dictionaries I had bought in Montreal.

(2) Nguyễn Trãi et son recueil de poèmes en langue nationale, Editions du CNRS, 1987.

According to Bích, most English-Vietnamese or French-Vietnamese dictionaries published in America are "passé". They have been written by scholars who have not been in Vietnam for years. For example, they still list post office as "*nhà dây thép*" when in fact the word is now "*bưu điện*".

But was Bích right? Had the Vietnamese language changed so much in the past 15 years that Xuân was outdated? Was Bích not simply pushing "*giọng Hà Nội*", her Hanoi dialect? On the other hand, maybe Xuân was influenced by her past when she said "the communists created weird words" or when she insisted we use the very formal and polite expressions instead of Bích's shorter ones?

Dr. Kim Nguyễn, director of the Vietnamese program at the University of Washington, couldn't quite answer those questions. A southerner herself, she came to the United States as a student 25 years ago and never returned to Vietnam. According to her, the only change in the language is in the terminology. "The communists, she says, created new words, mainly in military, technology, politics, and literary criticism."

But there are other differences. And Dr. Nguyễn is aware of them. "When I sat down with Dr. Nguyễn to form the teaching team for the summer, she insisted on having teachers with northern accents", recalls Harold Schiffman, language coordinator for the SEASSI program at the University of Washington. "She also insisted on not having all of the teachers come from Hanoi. She said the local Vietnamese community would never accept it. So we had to look for northerners who didn't look like northerners!"

So then came Xuân, a Vietnamese-American from Huế, who has been teaching Vietnamese to Seattle children for years and has "good credentials" in the community. The program also hired Kinh, respected teacher from Idaho who fled the communist regime and knows the northern accent even though he was born in the South. Bích, a Hanoi teacher, was listed as coming from Georgetown University (she had been studying English there for six months before coming to Seattle)!

All teachers agreed to teach "northern Vietnamese". So the letter "g" is pronounced "z" while in the South it would be pronounced "y". And that is just one of the variations! "Out of Hanoi, I was lost," recalls John, a student who just spent four months studying in Vietnam. "People understood me but I could not understand them. There are many dialects."(3)

Binh says books could be written about the evolution of his mother tongue. Fluent in five languages, he spent 11 years pondering about the phenomenon while he taught Vietnamese to Russian students.

"Take the words Ông and Bà, (Mr and Mrs), the communists saw them

(3). Between 80% and 90% of Vietnamese, or Kinh, speak Vietnamese. The rest of the population is composed of about 54 ethnic groups speaking as many different languages. Among the Kinh, there is at least three major dialects and numerous regional variations. Vietnamese is understood everywhere in the country.

as expressions of respect to the bourgeoisie and tried to eliminate them, to replace them by comrade. Just like in Russia. But the words never disappeared. Even in the North, they were always used, mainly in the villages but also in cities. Now, they are less heard, not because of the communists but because of a world tendency to democratize the language, Even here in the States they are not used as much anymore."

Among Asian languages, Vietnamese might be the easiest one for westerners to learn if only for its alphabet. Vietnamese isn't written in ideograms, like Chinese or Japanese. It uses a romanized alphabet created in the 17th century by missionaries trying to spread Catholicism. The result of their effort was called *Quốc ngữ*, the national language (the oldest document in *Quốc ngữ* is a catechism written by Alexandre de Rhodes).(4) At first, the Vietnamese elite rejected *quốc ngữ* as another sign of foreign aggression. But the advantages of alphabetic script over ideographic script soon became evident: learning to read required only a few months instead of several years. "From the start of the 20th century, patriots anxious to propage new ideas had realized that Quoc ngu, could be a convenient tool."(5) In 1945, with the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, *quốc ngữ* became the official national language in the administration and in the school system.

It wasn't the first time language was linked with a patriotic upsurge. As early as the 14th century, while they were still part of the Chinese empire, the Vietnamese had devised a special script to transcribe their popular language. It was called *nôm* and used a mixture of phonetics and Chinese characters. "The history of the vietnamese language is tied to the history of the patriotic sentiment", writes Bùi Xuân Bào.(6)

To what language group do Vietnamese belong to? Among linguists, the question remains undecided. It is "either an Austroasiatic language that has adopted tones" or a "Tai language with a puzzling number of Austroasiatic vowels in its everyday vocabulary", writes E.J.A. Henderson.(7)

(4). Bùi Xuân Bào, Le roman vietnamien contemporain, Editions Tu Sach Nhân Vau Xa-Hôi, 1972, p.17.

(5). Glimpses of Vietnamese Literature, op.cit. p.9.

(6). Bui Xuân Bào, op.cit. p.18.

(7). Quoted in Robert Parkin, A guide to Austroasiatic speakers and their languages, Oceanic linguistic special publications, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, p.89.

Other scholars like H.L.Shorto say that Vietnamese "is a Mon-Khmer language showing the effects of a long contact with Chinese both in its vocabulary and in its phonological progress to monosyllabism."(8)

But whatever the classification, there are six tones in Vietnamese and they *diên cái đầu*, which means "they are driving me nuts". Say *chua* on a high pitch tone instead of a low one, and you will have said - like I did last week - not the "yet" I wanted to say but rather that I was pregnant! So better learn singing fast.

Overall, learning Vietnamese involves more joy than pain. Each new word seems like a window on an ancient and sophisticated culture.

For example, "I" - yes, the "I" identifying me for what I am, my "Je" in French - well, it keeps changing in Vietnamese. Sometimes "I" is *tôi* (meaning "servant" ), some other times it is *cháu*, or *chị*, or *em*, or *bà*, or *con*. It all depends on the person I am talking to. I am *tôi* with strangers and not with friends. And "I" should be *cháu* (niece) with an older person or one to whom I owe respect. But how does one know when to use *cháu* and not *chị* (older sister)? Will someone about my age be insulted if I use *cháu* instead of *chị*? How should one know that one is close enough to an older person to use *con* (child) instead of *cháu*?

I don't know. Sometimes even the Vietnamese themselves don't know! "It is difficult when Vietnamese speak on the phone, admits Dr. Kim Nguyen. We have to decide if the other person is a superior or an equal, a younger or an older person. It is very difficult."

In spite of the difficulties, I marvel at what the language reveals about the importance of family and relationships in Vietnamese society. Others might say the importance of hierarchy in Vietnamese society!

But what about the new "weird words the communists created"? "All languages create new words, says Bình. The real question is what rules to use to create them. In French you use Latin. In Vietnamese, some still use Chinese rules. Others prefer to use Vietnamese rules."

For example, a helicopter is either a *máy bay trực thăng* or a *máy bay đi thẳng*. The first word comes from sino-vietnamese roots. The second is "more Vietnamese" according to Bình, "more communist" according to Xuân. As historian Alexander Woodside wrote, the linguistic battle is not a new one. "Some nationalists clung to the extreme position that the Vietnamese people should not steal vocabulary (...) but should carefully invent their own words", writes Woodside in his 1976 book Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam. "To these patriots, the Vietnamese people suffered from a hereditary sickness which was the disease of scorning their own mother tongue."

(8).H.L.Shorto, The Linguistic protohistory of mainland South-East Asia, 1979, p. 276, quoted in Robert Parkin, op.cit., p.89.

So one has to be careful answering questions in a Vietnamese class. If Bích asks me what my profession is, I must answer *phóng viên*, a journalist. But if Kinh asks, the answer is *ký giả*. Sometimes I am also a *nhà báo*. I guess it is nice to know one can be all of those at the same time.

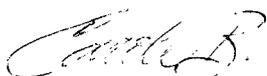
Strangely enough, it is the southerners more than the northerners who cling to Chinese words. I expected the opposite, simply because the northerners were so much closer to China geographically. "The Chinese came later to the South, explains Binh. And there were Chinese schools in the South until 1975. In the North there were no Chinese schools, only Vietnamese."

Most of the time, those differences are mentioned to us in a smooth, matter of fact way. But, sometimes, their sole existence seems to violently shake the apparent unity of our teachers' team. Last Friday, *Thầy* (teacher) Kinh, a sophisticated southerner who speaks fluently five languages, treasures his mother-tongue and can hardly hide his despise for the Hanoi regime, got suddenly angry at the textbook we are using. He said the word in the book for police, actually meant secret police not your average on the beat cop! An hour later, Bích, fuming, said the book was right and Kinh was wrong. I haven't had time yet to sort this one out! If I do, I will let you know.

For now, the last word will go to Lt-colonel Edouard Diguët who wrote in 1904 "*Eléments de grammaire annamite*".(9) For weeks, since I began studying Vietnamese, I had been looking for a way to spell two vowels of the Vietnamese alphabet: *ư* and *ơ*. My fellow students said "u hook". Lt-Colonel Diguët gave me a better word. He called them "barbu", the "bearded u", the "bearded a". Everytime I see one now I have a smile in memory of Lt-Colonel Diguët who loved the language so much he wrote its grammar and chided Europeans for "believing the tones were only graphic ornaments." (10)

I don't beleive the tones are graphic ornaments, Lt Diguët. I certainly don't. But I often wish I was a better singer.

More soon,



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(9). Edouard Diguët, *Eléments de grammaire annamite*, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1904, foreword.

(10). Diguët, op.cit., foreword.