

# Cultural and Language Features in Vietnamese: General and Special Cases of Classifiers: “con” and “cái”

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## *Abstract:*

*As far as cultural and language features in Vietnamese are concerned, I would like to touch upon the “règles d’exception” [rules of exceptions] “des sous-règles” [sub-rules] which account for a number of special cases that form a coherent and regular set. These rules of exceptions, limited in number, will be presented and classified by degrees of “exception” [degrés d’exceptionnalité].*

*There are exceptions according to different degrees which are determined by a system more or less adapted to the language, in this case, the Vietnamese language. Vietnamese is a language with a system of classifiers. The complexity of the choice of classifiers is determined essentially by the form of the object and by the distinction between two worlds: animate and inanimate. I pay particular attention to the multifaceted usage of the two classifiers: “con” which generally represents the animate world, and “cái”, the inanimate one.*

*Key Words: cultural, language features - Vietnamese - classifiers - con (animate world) - cái (inanimate world) - exceptions*

## **1 Reflections on exceptions in Vietnamese**

Reflecting on the exceptions suggests that they exist. As Vietnamese is my second language, I know the language intuitively and speak it fluently and without asking myself whether its grammar has rules for exceptions. By contrast, French, my first language, has many exceptions to rules, which are usually explicitly written in grammar textbooks and must be memorized.

Dealing with exceptions is an opportunity for me to propose some reflection in this problem of the Vietnamese grammar. I have found no case of exceptions in the different Vietnamese grammar books that I have read. Certain grammar manuals and textbooks on the Vietnamese language, published in French put forth some exceptions but not many, according to my observation. I shall go back to this point later.

In Vietnamese grammar textbooks, there is no mention on the rules of exceptions themselves except for specific notes, comments and annotations.

These are precisely the specific linguistic elements which I will study and, through which, I will try to explain the specific grammatical, morpho-syntactic or lexical phenomena which might affect these rules of exceptions.

I touch upon the “rules of exceptions” [règles d’exception] “sub-rules” [des sous-règles] which account for a number of special cases that form a coherent and regular set. These rules of exceptions, limited in number, will be presented and classified by degrees of “exception” [degrés d’exceptionnalité].

There are exceptions according to different degrees which are determined by a system more or less adapted to the language, in this case, the Vietnamese language. Vietnamese is a language with a system of classifiers. The complexity of the choice of classifiers is determined essentially by the form of the object and by the distinction between two worlds: animate and inanimate. I pay particular attention to the multifaceted usage of the two classifiers: “con” and “cái”.

The choice of one or the other depends on the context. Nevertheless, other semantic elements will disrupt the system and come into play to determine some other particular cases that I will try to clarify in this article.

## 2 Vietnamese and its classifiers: the semantic feature

### 2.1 The choice of classifiers according to the form of objects

In addition to the invariable morphology of all words in Vietnamese, one of the other specific characteristics is its classifier system.

The usage of classifiers is complex, as Phu Phong Nguyen pointed out in his article “Le problème des classificateurs en vietnamien” [Problems of classifiers in Vietnamese] (1975: 65-82). I shall discuss classifiers according to their characteristics of semantic prominence instead of their syntactic nature. For instance, many different classifiers are combined with a noun that features the shape of the object.

- (1) *Điếu thuốc lá* ‘cigarette’ - roll  
*Tấm gương* ‘mirror’ - flat  
*Cục đường* ‘lump of sugar’ - lump  
*Chuỗi hạt ngọc* ‘a string of pearls’ - string  
*Trái bưởi* ‘pomelo’ - roundish

However, this is not always the case. Let us take the example of flat objects. The classifier “tấm” thus applies to flat and large objects. We say *tấm gỗ / bằng / lụa / hình* ‘a piece of wood, diploma, picture’. However, we can also say *tấm chồng* ‘husband’; *tấm lòng vàng* ‘heart of gold’; *tấm lều tranh* ‘straw hut’; *tấm thân* ‘body’. These examples show that this is obviously not a problem of “shape”. Indeed, as defined in the Dictionary Vietnamese Language (1994), Tự Điển Tiếng Việt: “tấm: Meaning 1: word used to indicate a unit (or class) of objects having a flat and large shape; Meaning 2: (literary): word used to indicate a unit (or class) of objects, despite their small or

insignificant value, they are nevertheless very valuable. Example: *Mẹ già ở tấm lều tranh*. ‘An old mother lives in a straw hut’.

“Tấm chồng” cannot be translated or does not have an equivalent term (popular song).

We say also *tấm chữ* as for “writing”. Tự Điển Tiếng Việt, [the Dictionary Vietnamese – French] (1994) defines “tấm” as follows:

“1/ piece; 2/word in front of some nouns, designating a unit, a person, a feeling ... not translated on its own. This applies for *tấm chồng* ‘husband’ which indicates a person, *tấm lòng vàng* ‘heart of gold’ for a feeling, *tấm chữ* ‘writing’ and *tấm lều tranh* ‘straw hut’, for a unit of set”. In this regard, Phu Phong Nguyen added that he was curious to see in the case of “writing” that “tấm” can be combined with “chữ”, an object without stand (1975: 67).

## 2.2 The classifiers “cái” and “con”

In general, the Vietnamese language establishes a sharp contrast between two categories of class: the category of living beings (human, animals), also known as “animate”, and that of “inanimate” nature (things). Therefore, to support these classes of words, we have two terms “cái” and “con”.

“Cái” determines nouns of things (inanimate), and “con” determines nouns of animate creatures, especially animals.

(2) *cái bàn, cái ghế* ‘table, chair’

(3) *con người, con chó, con mèo, con khỉ* ‘man, dog, cat, monkey’

However, certain inanimate objects are sometimes accompanied by classifier “con”. In this regard, “La Méthode Assimil, le Vietnamien Sans Peine (Do and Lê, 1994: 500, 501) wrote in the section entitled “Les classificateurs généraux: Il existe cependant quelques exceptions”. [The general classifiers: however, there are some exceptions.]

“Con” is also put before some nouns of things that are considered “animated/moving”: *con đường* (street), *con tàu* (train or boat), *con tem* (stamp), *con mắt* (eye), *con dao* (knife). Kim Than Nguyen defines this rule “comme n’étant pas absolue” [as not being absolute], in his book “Études de la Grammaire Vietnamienne” (1997: 168) [Vietnamese Grammar Studies].

(4) *con dao, con quay, con cờ, con tàu* ‘knife, spinning top, pawn (chess), boat’

(5) *con mắt, con người, con tim* ‘eye, pupil (med), heart’

(6) *con trăng, con sông, lunar* ‘month, river’

As one can see, this classification is not always appropriate. The examples (4, 5, 6) are special cases. The “objects” in these cases are characterized by “movements”,

similar to those of living beings. (TRUONG VAN CHINH AND NGUYEN HIÊN LÊ 1963: 185; quoted by PHU PHONG NGUYEN 1995: 32).

The above examples are classified into sub-categories. First, the examples (4, 5, 6) belong to objects that human beings use or manipulate to do things and to make them “move”, such as a knife (to cut), a spinning (to spin) or a pawn (to play chess).

I have also found “cái tim” in “Mẫu thêu Cross Stitch chữ cái tim [Model of embroidery in a heart shape] ([www.Google.com.vn](http://www.Google.com.vn)). In this example, “cái” simply denotes the meaning of a model of embroidery in a heart shape with a photo illustration.

We can say “cái tim của con bò” [the heart of a cow] in everyday conversation to mean the heart of a cow or other animals. Although “cái” is appropriately used in this case, we can always say “tim bò” with no classifier.

The following example (7) in French and its translation in Vietnamese illustrate precisely the movement of the eyes:

(7) (...) tandis que, derrière les volets fermés, “des yeux guettaient” ces hommes victorieux, (...). (Boule de suif, Guy de Maupassant)

“(...) whereas “the eyes were watching these victorious men, behind the closed shutters on the windows (...).” (Suet Dumpling Butterball or Ball of Fat, Guy de Maupassant)” (Word-for- word translation).

‘(...) while behind the fast-closed shutters eager eyes peered forth at the victors-masters (...)’ ([www.gutenberg.net](http://www.gutenberg.net))

‘(...) trong khi, ở sau cửa chớp đóng kín, “những con mắt đang rình ngó” những người chiến thắng, (...)’. (Viên Mỡ Bò [Boule de suif], Guy de Maupassant, translated by Huang Minh)

The continuous aspect of the verb “guettaient” (watching) in French expresses very well the eye movements which were progressive and continuous as in example (7). I observe that in the English version, in order to respect the idea of the eyes’ movement, the translator uses the adjective “eager” in “eager eyes”.

The Vietnamese translation, for its lack of verbal inflection, expresses this idea through the use of classifier “con” that indicates the lively movement of the eyes as if they were “animate objects”. Moreover, this classifier is preceded by marker “đang” that expresses precisely the progressive aspect of the verb “guettaient” (l’imparfait de l’indicatif – preterit simple tense).

Finally, the category of nouns in the examples (6) reflects the phenomena of nature (lunar month, river).

Those three categories of nouns, uses with classifier “con”, represent particular cases which can be well justified by the notion of objects with independent movements.

### 2.3 About the neutralization of the semantic feature of homonyms

The use of “con” and “cái” depends on the semantic opposition of the same lexical word”: the “homonym”.

- (8) *cái trăng / con trăng* ‘moon / lunar month’
- (9) *cái số / con số* ‘fate / number’
- (10) *cái nước / con nước* ‘country or water / tide’

It is the context which indicates the distinction between animate and inanimate objects deriving from the homonym as illustrated in (8, 9, 10): *trăng, số, nước*. However, example (10) distinguishes the semantic meanings of these two terms by using “con” and “cái”: *cái nước* ‘country – water’, *con nước* ‘tide’.

As a result, the choice of “con” or “cái” neutralizes the ambiguity of the semantic feature caused by the same lexical word – homonym - as illustrated in the above examples. However, some names of things can be combined with both “con” and “cái” indiscriminately without much meaning to change.

- (11) *cái tàu, con tàu* ‘train or boat’

To conclude, the choice of “con” or “cái” in these specific and situational cases determines the semantic value of words (homonyms) as they are transformed from inanimate objects to animate creatures. This helps neutralize and avoid the ambiguity of homonyms in specific usage.

### 2.4 “Cái”: the use as a determiner

“Cái”, apart from its word class nature as a classifier accompanying the nouns of things (inanimate objects), can also mean “female”. For example, we use “cái” before proper names.

- (12) *Cái/con Minh Hà có ở nhà không?*

Cl. *cái /con Minh Hà* - have - preposition - house - interrogative marker “không”  
‘Is Minh Hà at home?’

“Cái” (or “con”) before a proper name seems to be a classifier indicating that the person is female. It is not quite so. In fact, it is a determiner which determines precisely the proper name to which it relates (Minh Hà). However, these determiners are only used by seniors and parents (or grandparents) over their juniors or children (or great children) in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular. In terms of hierarchy, this constitutes a form of address that seniors use to speak with or refer to their juniors.

We can also hear/say “con Minh Hà” (12) in Vietnamese. It is quite difficult to understand this use of “con”. Nevertheless, this phenomenon can be explained as follows: this example is unrelated to the perception of animate or inanimate beings. Thus, this case could be classified as a particular grammatical phenomenon. Lê Văn Lý (1948: 53) considers this particular point as a remark rather than an exception in his book “Esquisse de la grammaire vietnamienne” [The outline of the Vietnamese Grammar /*Sơ Thảo Ngữ Pháp Tiếng Việt*].

We observe that the use of either “cái” or “con” before proper names differs between the North and the South. In the South, people use “con”. My father would ask: *Con Minh Hà đi đâu rồi?* [Where is Minh Ha?] whereas, in the North, people use “cái” by saying *Cái Minh Hà đi đâu rồi?*

To check whether “cái” or “con” positioned before a proper name indicates a female person, one can replace it with “thằng” (as opposed to “cái”) to refer to a male person. In this case, “cái” and “thằng” are used in an informal way or in a family context where parents or seniors address their juniors.

There is another special case which could be understood in the same meaning as the case described in example (12). The use of “cái” implies the process of “personification”. One can perfectly understand this process with reference to the idea of “cái Lan” (12).

(13) *Rúc mãi vòm hang đáng chán này*  
*“Cái” rùa nhẹ dạ ước đêm ngày*  
*Đi xem xừ lạ người mach bảo*  
 ‘A light-brained tortoise, anciently,  
 Tired of her hole, the world would see.’

The first step of personification is to replace “con” – a classifier denoting an animal with “cái” denoting the female gender (not a classifier denoting an object): cái rùa / the tortoise (13). The context clearly indicates this semantic feature. However, in order to make the anthropomorphism more true to life, the Vietnamese translator added pronominal substitutes/personal pronouns: *Chị rùa* ‘Sister tortoise’ (13bis) (Les substituts pronominaux, cf. LO-CICERO 2000) [The pronominal substitutes]

(13bis) *Rúc mãi vòm hang đáng chán này*  
*“Chị” rùa nhẹ dạ ước đêm ngày*  
*Đi xem xừ lạ người mách bảo*  
 ‘A light-brained “Sister” Tortoise, anciently,  
 Tired of her hole, the world would see’<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <http://oaks.nvg.org/fonta10.html#tototodu>: The Tortoise And Two Ducks, La Fontaine.

Linguist Phu Phong Nguyen added that with “cái” being put before a noun of an animal, “cò” (heron), the meaning of heron passed from the animal category to the human one. This is a process of personification in a particular context in which the author wishes to personify animals, as in the case of the heron in some poems.

Indeed, herons and storks occupy an important place in many popular poems. They are considered as human beings as poets describe the activities of those birds in paddy fields (PHU PHONG NGUYEN 1975). Thus, one can find “cái cò” (the heron, personified) instead of “con cò” (the heron, the animal).

(14) *Cái cò, cái diệc, cái nông*  
*Sao mà dẫm lúa nhà ông hỡi cò!*  
‘Hello! Egret, heron and pelican  
Why do you stamp your feet in my paddy field!’

- *Không, không, tôi đứng trên bờ,*  
*Mẹ con cái diệc đổ ngờ cho tôi.*  
‘- No, no, not at all, I am standing by the edge of the river  
The egret family gave suspicion on me!’

(15) ... *họ coi mình như cái kiến cái bọ*<sup>2</sup>  
‘They considered us as ants, as insects’<sup>3</sup>.

Example (15) illustrates another interpretation of the semantic feature of “cái”. Let’s not forget that the primary function of “cái” is to determine the noun of things. This seems to be an inconsistency at first. However, “cái” before the noun of an animal denotes either a very small animal or “something insignificant or even worthless”. Thus, “cái” accompanying “kiến, bọ” expresses the devaluation of the noun it determines. This phenomenon is known as “renversement de valeur” [the reversal of values].

## 2.5 The personification / the “dé-personification” (devaluation procedure)

The last case concerns the process of personification / “dé-personification” [devaluation procedure].

(16a) *Con kiến* ‘ant’

(16b) *Cái kiến* / ‘ant’ (devaluation “dé-personification”, a tiny animal)

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<sup>2</sup> NGUYEN CONG HOAN 1958, quoted by NGUYEN KIM THAN 1997.

<sup>3</sup> I propose the translation.

This transfer of classifier from “con” to “cái” reduces the value of the ant to a lower rank. From being animated, it switches to the state of an object or something inanimate.

## 2.6 The “static” character of the perception of things when using “cái” or the emphatic use

Remember that both human beings and animals belong to living beings. Therefore the classifier “con” must be used.

(17) *This wolf another brings to mind,  
Who found dame Fortune more unkind,  
In that greedy, pirate sinner,  
Was balked of life as well as dinner.  
As says our tale, a villager  
Dwelt in a by, unguarded place;*<sup>4</sup> (The Wolf, the Mother and Her Child)  
'Con sói kia làm tôi nhớ lại  
Đời bạn y tệt hại hơn nhiều  
Trong chuyện sau đời hẳn bị tiêu'

(18) *“My lord, do you not find  
The prince of knaves and fools  
To be this man, who boasts of mind  
Instructed in his schools”*<sup>5</sup> (The Lion, the Monkey and the Two Asses)  
'Thưa Đức Ông, ngài có thấy không  
Con người, loài vật vô song  
Mà sao ngu ngốc bắt công rành rành (...)'

However, one can find some particularly interesting cases such as:

(19) *Cái người chúng ta gặp hôm qua là một cán bộ.*  
'The man we met yesterday is a civil servant'.

The classifier “con”, as we can see, has been replaced with “cái”. This is not because we wanted to humiliate the man by lowering him to the state of an object, but because we wanted to reinforce the static position of the man. The idea was to keep the man “still” in order to describe him. That is called the process of emphasis. The same is true for other examples.

(20) *Cái con người làm sao mà tệt bạc quá!*  
'What an ungrateful man!'

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<sup>4</sup> <http://oaks.nvg.org/fonta4.html>: The Wolf, the Mother and Her Child, La Fontaine.



*La Fontaine se plaît à faire de ces coups!*

[La Fontaine enjoys making up these strange stories!]<sup>5</sup>

‘Cái ông La Fontaine tôi thích bày ra những câu chuyện oái oăm thế đó’.<sup>6</sup>

cái - monsieur - La Fontaine

*Cái cuốn sách in thật đẹp.*

cái - cuốn (classifier “roll”) – book – print – very - beautiful

‘This book is well printed.’

As we can see, the presence of two classifiers on the same level serves to reinforce the emphatic process. In Vietnamese, the rule is as follows (PHAN KHÔI 1997): “cái” placed before another classifier that denotes the shape of the object (c.f. examples 1) – makes the object (static by nature) even more static<sup>7</sup>; it seems that the same rule applies also to human beings.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.7 Summary

The choice of “cái” or “con” according to the categorisation of animate creatures as opposed to the inanimate world applies to the majority of nouns.

Nevertheless, the choice implies many syntactical restraints which depend on the semantic feature or on the word classes/parts of speech according to the context.

Thus, according to this study, “cái” and “con” present many particular features caused by their nature and their function in the sentence. This is the problem of classifiers and determiners that relate to the nouns they accompany.

As emphasized strongly by Phu Phong Nguyen (1975: 58) in his book “Le problème des classificateurs” [The Problem of Classifiers]:

*The property of being animate or inanimate, depends on the vision, the conception, the angle of perception, temporary or permanent, about the circumstances generated by a short artistic inspiration for the need of harmony or a stylistic or poetic contrast, or secured by force of circumstance.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I propose the translation.

<sup>6</sup> Fables de La Fontaine, traduites, annotées et commentées par Huu Dan Hoang, Édition “Tre” (Jeunesse, Ho Chi Minh Ville, 1996, page 269).

<sup>7</sup> Phan Khôi (1997: 97): Ba câu lệ đặt chữ “cái” lên ba chữ “cây, cuốn, tờ” cốt làm những vật đã tĩnh càng tĩnh hơn, hầu cho cung thu được cái công hiệu như đã tu được ở hai câu lệ trên (cái người, cái con người...). Word for word translation.

<sup>8</sup> Word for word translation.

<sup>9</sup> I propose the translation in English. (“La propriété d’être (± animé) d’un être dépend de la vision, de la conception, de l’angle de perception, momentanés ou permanents, sur le coup engendrés par une

### 3 Distinction between ordinary and exceptional features: problems of restraints and linguistic rules in “con” and “cái”

*Everyone knows intuitively his own language and practices it spontaneously without being able to produce a reasonable description. However, it is precisely this familiarity/knowledge which, thanks to the ambiguity of the expression “connaître une langue / to know a language”]<sup>10</sup> often hides from us problematic data and prevents us from asking the right questions (RIEGEL, RIOUL and PERRAT 1974: 1).*

Dealing with the ordinary and exceptional features of the Vietnamese language sets many problems because we know and speak the language very well without necessarily knowing its exact rules, as Riegel, Rioul and Perrat pointed out. However, we could not find out an immediate and logical explanation for the existing rules of exceptions. Therefore, I chose to address certain classifiers, including “cái” and “con”, which seem to me the most complex and interesting from the point of view of semantic features.

The few examples mentioned above show that studying exceptions is no easy task especially as they are essential for the smooth functioning of languages.

As Maillard stresses in his article about different categories of exceptions in Portuguese, the exceptions in Vietnamese can be classified into different types. As I specified in the beginning of the article, Vietnamese grammar books rarely introduce exception cases. Those observations, remarks and annotations inserted in the main rules of grammar are in fact exceptions.

In my analysis, I have found that the exceptions concern mainly two classifiers: “cái” and “con”. The key is how to classify particular cases according to their degree of exception in comparison to the language system. Following the proposed classification of Maillard about the Portuguese language, I feel that his proposal confirms the actual classification.

a. For instance, we can say that there exist, first of all, “les exceptions régulières qui sont gérées par des sous-règles très générales et qui sont applicables sans exception” [the regular exceptions that are “managed” or “set” by very general sub-rules and that are applicable for all cases without exception]. This is the first type of exceptions. It concerns the use of classifiers according to the form of the object and in two opposite worlds: animate and inanimate.

b. Then there are “les exceptions particulières, générales aussi, mais néanmoins des exceptions au second degré” [specific exceptions belonging to the second degree]. This

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inspiration artistique passagère pour le besoin d’une harmonie ou d’un contraste stylistique ou poétique, ou ancrés par la force des choses”).

<sup>10</sup>Chacun connaît intuitivement sa langue et la pratique spontanément sans pour autant être capable d’en produire une description raisonnée. Or c’est précisément cette familiarité qui, à la faveur de l’ambiguïté de l’expression “connaître une langue”, nous le cache souvent des données problématiques et nous empêche de poser les vraies questions. (RIEGEL, RIOUL and PERRAT, 1974: 1).

is the case of inanimate objects which are considered as living creatures according to the specific perception of objects as they are linked to motion: *knife, eyes, street* ‘con dao, con mắt, con đường’. Classifier “con”, associated with the words of inanimate living beings expresses the real power of movement.

c. And then come the “exceptions ‘exceptionnelles’” [exceptional exceptions] that deal specifically with particular linguistic points required by some semantic and syntactic parameters. This is also the case of the personification of objects or animals and the process of emphasis on living beings when the two classifiers “con” and “cái” are used at the same level. As Maillard defines in his article, these categories which call for a case-by-case procedure/solution are named “des exceptions singulières” [singular cases].

d. The marginal exceptions: “Non seulement les exceptions les plus marginales ne sont pas extérieures au système, mais elles sont bel et bien engendrées par le système lui-même quand il y a un conflit de paramètres. (MAILLARD: 2002)

[Not only the most marginal exceptions are not outside the system, but they are generated by the system itself when there is a conflict of parameter].

That is the case of some uses of “con, cái” – living beings: animate/inanimate which are used to neutralize the ambiguity of words such as homonyms.

As well defined by Benveniste (1966: 19), quoted by Riegel, Rioul and Pellat (1994: 1):

*Mais [...] les problèmes infiniment divers des langues ont ceci de commun qu'à un certain degré de généralité ils mettent toujours en question le langage.*

*[But [...] the non-finite and various problems of languages have one thing in common, that is, at a certain degree of generality, people always question the language].*

Riegel, Rioul and Pellat add: “Ces conditionnements faits de possibilités, de choix et de contraintes spécifiques confèrent à chaque langue son originalité, en un mot, son génie (9)” [These conditionings, which are made of specific possibilities, choices and constraints, confer to each language its originality, in a word “genius”].

Consequently, these specific constraints, called “exceptions”, are the features of language and culture that are essential of enrichment and originality<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank Pr. Michel Maillard for his support and advice concerning the complexity of exceptions in languages in general and in their classification cases in Portuguese in particular. I will also not forget the late linguist, Pr. Phu Phong Nguyen, whose enlightenments concerning the classifiers in Vietnamese have immensely contributed to the success of this article. And finally, I would like to thank Mr. Manh Ha Tran (Liaison Officer Sector for External Relations and Public Information, UNESCO) for reviewing my English text version.

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