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Overview of Vietnamese

Vietnamese is spoken by over sixty million people in Vietnam.   There are over a million additional speakers of Vietnamese scattered across the globe including 500,000 in the United States.

Vietnamese is a member of the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family. Other Mon-Khmer languages include Mon, which is spoken in Burma, Khmer, which is spoken in Cambodia, and Muong, which is also spoken in Vietnam. Because the Chinese ruled Vietnam for hundreds of years, the Vietnamese language is full of Chinese words.

In 1910, a romanized script devised by Catholic missionaries in the 17th Century was adopted for Vietnamese.   The Vietnamese alphabet consists of 17 consonants and 12 vowels. Vietnamese is a tonal language: the tone or pitch used when a word is pronounced helps determine its meaning.   There are six distinct tones in Vietnamese.

Many nouns and verbs in Vietnamese are made up of individual segments of one of two syllables that work together.   These individual segments may have no meaning, or an entirely different meaning when taken out of context.   Sometimes two words with the same meaning are combined for emphasis.   In Vietnamese, the flow and rhyme of the language are very important.   All of the elements in a sentence work together to make a language which is often said to resemble poetry.

Alphabet and Tones

The Vietnamese alphabet consists of the following vowels and consonants:

Consonants
b
c
ch
d
đ
g
gh
gi
h
k
kh
l
m
n
ng/ngh
nh
ph
qu
r
s
t
th
tr
v
x

Vowels
a
ă
â
e
ê
i
o
ô
ơ
u
ư
y

Tones

Vietnamese is a tonal language and the tone or pitch used when a vowel is pronounced helps determine the meaning of a word.

There are six distinct tones in Vietnamese:

Level, (which is unmarked)   a
The level tone begins at the mid-point of normal speaking range and remains level.

High rising   á
The high rising tone begins on a high pitch and rises sharply.

Low falling   à
The low falling tone begins lower than the level tone and falls off slightly.

Low rising   ả
The low rising tone also begins lower than the level tone, falls slightly and then rises to the starting point.

High rising broken   ã
The high rising broken tone begins very slightly lower than the level tone, falls slightly and then rises above the starting point.

Low broken   ạ
The low broken tone begins lower than the level tone and falls off sharply.

Nouns

Nouns are the words used to name a person, place, thing or idea.

A **proper noun** names a specific person, place, thing or idea and is written with capital letters.

Hà Nội   Hanoi

In Vietnamese, nouns do not change form, they do not have case, gender or number.   There are no articles (such as a, an, or the) in Vietnamese.

See also:
Number and Agreement
Noun Classifiers

Number and Agreement

There are two numbers in Vietnamese, singular and plural.   The plural form of a noun is generally expressed with a plural marker and the noun does not change at all.   The plural markers are not always translatable.

Another way to express plurality in Vietnamese is with the use of cardinal numbers.   If a number precedes a noun, it does not require a plural marker.

Noun Classifiers

Classifiers are used when a noun is referred to specifically, or when a noun is counted.
The classifier quantifies or classifies the noun.
A classifier cannot stand alone.

Here are some of the most common classifiers:

Cái	Used with inanimate objects
Cái bàn	(the) table
Cái va li	(the) suitcase

Con	Used with animals and some inanimate objects
Con mèo	(a) cat
Con chó	(a) dog
Con sò	(a) clam

Cây	used with trees, plants and some long, thin objects.
Cày chanh	(a) lemon tree

Trái and **quä**	used with fruits
Trái chanh	(a) lemon
Quä lê	(a) pear

See also:
Nouns

Adverbs

Adverbs are the words which modify a verb, an adjective, another adverb or a phrase.

Verbs and Time Markers

Verbs express action, existence or occurrence.   In English, verbs change according to person or tense.   (I go, I went, I will go)   In Vietnamese, verbs generally do not change.   Often, the person or tense of a verb can be determined by the context.   Sometimes, the verb is modified by an adverb of time or a time marker.

Here are some Vietnamese verbs:

Sáng tác	To create, to be creative
Khin khích	To giggle
Tan hoà	To dissolve

Time Markers

Time markers are used to specify the time an action has taken or will take place.

Dang indicates and action which is ongoing or continuing.

sẽ indicates an action that will take place in the future.

Dã indicates an action in the past.

If a sentence contains an adverb of time which clearly denotes when the action takes place, there is no need for a time marker.

Modal Verbs

Vietnamese has several **modal verbs** that occur frequently.   These are sometimes called helping verbs and they are used to state the wish, need or desire of the speaker.

Có thế is equivalent to can or may in English:

muốn is equivalent to want in English:

cần **phai** and

cần express need or necessity and can often be translated as to have to or must.

Là and Ở

Là in Vietnamese is often translated as the English verb to be.   It is only used with nouns or noun phrases and it is not used to express location.   The verb Ở is used to express location.

Adjective-like verbs

Many verbs in Vietnamese act the way adjectives do in English, and **là** is not used.

Adjectives

Adjectives are the words that are used to describe nouns.

In Vietnamese, adjective-like verbs are most often used to describe a noun.

See also:
Verbs

Pronouns

A **pronoun** is a word that stands for a previously mentioned or understood noun.

The use of personal pronouns in Vietnamese is determined by the age of the person you are speaking to, their marital status, their gender, their social standing and your own relationship with them.

Singular Pronouns

Pronoun:	Translation:	Formality:	Usage:
tôi	I		
ông	you	formal	used when speaking to an older man or a man of higher status
bà	you	formal	used when speaking to an older woman or a woman of higher status
anh	you	familiar	used when speaking to a younger man or a man your own age
chi	you	familiar	used when speaking to a younger woman or woman your own age
cô	you	formal	used by a man when speaking to a woman he does not know well
em	you	familiar	used when speaking to a child or person much younger than you
ông	he	formal	used when referring to an older man or a man of higher status
bà	she	formal	used when referring to an older woman or a woman of higher status
anh	he	familiar	used when referring to a younger man or a man your own age
chi	she	familiar	used when referring to a younger woman or woman your own age

Plural Pronouns

Pronoun:	Translation:	Formality:	Usage:
chúng tôi	we		meaning only the person speaking
chúng ta	we		meaning the person speaking and the listener
các ông	you	formal	used when speaking to older men or a man of higher status
các bà	you	formal	used when speaking to older women or a women of higher status
các anh	you	familiar	used when speaking to younger men or a man your own age
các chi	you	familiar	used when speaking to younger women or women your own age
các cô	you	formal	used by a man when speaking to women he does not know well
các em	you	familiar	used when speaking to a child or person much younger than you
các ông	they	formal	used when referring to older men or men of higher status
các bà	they	formal	used when referring to older women or a women of higher status
các anh	they	familiar	used when referring to younger men or men your own age
các chi	they	familiar	used when referring to younger women or women your own age

Possessive Pronouns

In order to indicate possession in Vietnamese, the element của is used with the personal pronouns.

Forms of Address

The **forms of address** used in Vietnamese are determined by the age of the person you are speaking to, their marital status, their gender, their social standing and your own relationship with them.   In Vietnamese, these forms of address are often used where we would omit them in English.

See also:
Pronouns

Prepositions

Prepositions are the connecting words that show the relationships between words in the sentence. In, at, on, by and for are all prepositions in English.

Demonstratives

Demonstratives point out a specific item and distinguish it from other similar items.

A demonstrative adjective points out the noun specifically referred to and distinguishes it from others of the same class. In English the demonstrative adjectives are this/these and that/those. For example:
I would like **this** banana.
I want to go to **that** restaurant.

In Vietnamese, demonstrative adjectives follow modified nouns.

In English, the demonstrative pronouns are this/that and these/those. For example:
I like **that**!
These bags are heavy, **those** are light.

In Vietnamese, đó is the demonstrative that is used most often as a pronoun:

Conjunctions

Conjunctions are the elements that join phrases, words and clauses together.

The most common conjunction in Vietnamese is probably **và** (and).

Particles

Particles are short words in Vietnamese which cannot readily be translated into English. They perform many different functions.

Polite Particles are used to show respect for the person to whom you are speaking. They are often used in short sentences or responses.

Other particles may express surprise.

Particles are also used in interrogative expressions.

Interrogatives and Negatives

Interrogatives

In Vietnamese, questions are formed using specific interrogative elements.

Negatives

Negative statements are usually formed with the word **không** which means no or not.