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The Non-Issue of Dialect in Teaching Vietnamese

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Abstract

There is growing discussion concerning which dialect of Vietnamese should be taught in North American classrooms. This paper discusses certain phonological differences between the Hanoi and Saigon dialects to show that the two dialects are structurally equal and socially adequate, a claim that has important implications for planning language programs.

1. Introduction

Choosing which Vietnamese dialect to use in classrooms has been a constant concern, especially when the surrounding community is made up of speakers of different dialects. This paper is motivated by two incidents: first, a student's question: "Why are the majority of instructors of Vietnamese (in the United States) Northerners?"; second, a conversation with a colleague which revealed that the major, if not only, concern in hiring a Vietnamese instructor for a vacant position was which dialect the candidate spoke.

Dialect selection has become a burning issue for the North American Vietnamese classroom in particular, not only because of the problem of dialect stigmatization, which we can find in any language, i.e., 'standard' vs 'nonstandard', but also because the dialects bear political stigmatization. Assumptions are all too readily made about a teacher's political background on the basis of the person's choice of dialect to teach. Linguistically, the Northern dialects, represented here as the 'Hanoi' dialect, are often assumed to be 'better' for students to learn, because they are deemed 'standard', or 'more correct', or supposedly help students to avoid more spelling mistakes. The speech of Southerners, represented here as the 'Saigon' dialect, is meanwhile said to be 'less precise' in comparison, because Northern speakers pronounce almost all sounds distinguished in the orthography.¹ The 'Saigon' dialect is widely deemed inadequate and therefore less desirable

¹ The Vietnamese orthography is phonetic-based in that, with very few exceptions, one symbol represents one sound and one sound is represented by one symbol. Data in this paper is shown in italics in the

to learn. Decisions that flow from this ill-founded notion, although largely hidden, can have unfortunate impacts on classroom success, teacher hiring, program development and overseas studies planning. They can also affect collegial relationships.

Accordingly, the following questions will be addressed: Which dialect 'should' one teach? Does it have to be a 'standard' dialect? Which is the 'standard' dialect of Vietnamese? Is it true that any dialect that deviates from the 'standard' dialect is 'slovenly and bad'? How much can a dialect deviate and still be 'acceptable'? Is it true that students should learn the 'correct' or 'best' dialect rather than one containing 'improper', 'outdated', and 'backward' forms (as pointed out in Lam 2006)? Are some dialects 'stable', e.g., 'standard ones', and others not so, e.g., 'nonstandard ones'?

This paper will show that the two major dialects used in classrooms in North America - one spoken in Hanoi and surrounding areas and the other one spoken in Saigon and surrounding areas - are socially and structurally adequate to use for teaching and learning. It emphasizes that none of the Vietnamese dialects is 'wrong' or 'incomplete'. It also discusses some sound changes in progress in both major dialects, and stresses that change is normal, neither bad nor good. Change is a natural process in any and all languages and dialects. All this sounds natural and obvious to linguists, however, may not so to language teachers, administrators and members of the general public. This article is primarily designed to benefit teachers and administrators who are dedicated to teaching the language. The article should interest scholars of Vietnamese linguistics as well.

2. Socio-historical and language background

Unlike instructors in Vietnam those who teach the language to Vietnamese children and others in the United States or Canada often have to contend with bias: the possible political stigma associated with the dialect he or she speaks.

"Almost all instructors of Vietnamese in the States are immigrants" (Lam 2006).² Many of them – or their parents- fled North Vietnam for the South in 1954 and then overseas after the reunification of Vietnam in 1975. These immigrants speak Northern dialects Vietnamese with the pre-1975 Northern accent, which is somewhat different from the 'contemporary' post-1975 accent of those who lived in the North during the partition of Vietnam. For the most part the parents of "heritage students" arrived as those refugees after 1975. Instructors who speak the pre-1975 Northern dialects left the country for the same political reason as the parents of these students. However, instructors with northern accents, whether 'pre' or 'post'-1975, are often labeled 'communists', especially if they recently came to the United States directly from the North. The instructor is often treated with suspicion until he/she makes his/her political views clear.

According to Lam 2006, although most refugees speak the Southern dialects, Northern dialects historically dominate the classrooms of the University of California system. Because Northern dialects are pervasive, students who are speakers of Southern dialects are told they use 'improper', 'outdated', and 'backward' forms. Parents then

Vietnamese orthography with a phonetic transcription for linguistic readers. Tones are shown in only the orthography unless there is some discussion of an issue involving tone.

² The situation has gradually changed as younger instructors from Vietnam with some background in the American school system are appointed to teach the language in the United States.

complain about their child's experience with bias, and students are discouraged from taking Vietnamese at a higher level. Administrators are sometimes puzzled and surprised at this, not having appreciated the social and political forces at work in the classroom.

Because of the historical and socio-political context of Saigon and the increase of immigrants from many different areas, Cao & Lê 2005 suggest using the term 'Saigon dialect' only for the speech of educated speakers living in Saigon and cities around Saigon. In Cao & Lê's sense, the Saigon dialect is a social dialect rather than a geographical one, similar to the distinction between the speech of well-educated speakers of English in Britain no matter where they live, and the dialects of uneducated English speakers. The Saigon dialect that Huỳnh 1999 describes is the speech of those living in Saigon. Because of the natural and historical conditions of Saigon and the areas surrounding Saigon, which is called *Nam Bộ*, the Saigon dialect is regarded as part of a much larger unified dialect of Nam Bộ, spoken from *Đồng Nai* to *Cà Mau*. This dialect is also the variety described in this paper. The following sections will present the phonological differences between the two major dialects commonly used in classrooms, Northern dialects (i.e. 'Hanoi') and Southern dialects (i.e. 'Saigon'). It will focus on pronunciation in order to show that (i) although these dialects are structurally different they are both adequate for language learning; and (ii) language changes occur in all dialects and such changes are natural and to be expected.

First a brief remark on orthography is needed in order to understand the concept of 'standard dialect' in Vietnamese, as discussed later in the paper. The sound contrasts in a language or dialect are reflected in alphabetical writing systems. For example, in English *bat* and *fat* differ from each other only in the initial consonants written as *b* and *f* because [b] and [f] are different sounds in English. A perfect spelling system has a one-to-one correspondence between sounds and letters. Obviously English does not have a perfect system. The Vietnamese writing system tries to capture all the different sounds found in any dialect of the language in its spelling system. However, there are some dialects which do not have certain differences in sounds. If a particular dialect does not have such a sound difference in the orthography, it is wrong to say that in such a case, the dialect is not 'correct', or not 'complete'. For example, Northerners differentiate *lân* [la:n] 'long house' and *láng* [la:ŋ] 'be shiny, smooth' while Southerners have the same pronunciation for these words, *láng* [la:ŋ].³ Notice that because the two words are written differently to show the contrast between the two sounds *n* [n] and *ng* [ŋ], an educated Southern speaker may think that he/she should be making a *difference* between the two sounds because the spelling shows such a difference. This kind of awareness can lead to confusion between 'sound' and 'letter', i.e., between speech and writing, a confusion endemic in the minds of many professional teachers of foreign and native languages. It is not unusual to hear speakers from Central Vietnam or the South say that 'speakers of our dialect do not pronounce Vietnamese correctly', 'I know I say things wrong', etc. It is much rarer to hear a similar remark from a Northerner, because as we will see below, the Northern dialects 'lack'

³ In this paper the data are represented both in the Vietnamese orthography for non-linguists and in phonetic symbols for those who are interested. Tones are shown in the orthography only, unless it is a discussed issue (see Phạm 2006 for a phonological analysis of the Hanoi and Saigon dialects).

only three sounds that are represented in the Vietnamese spelling system. Spelling mistakes that originate from different regional pronunciations can be seen from time to time in newspapers, magazines, and creative writings. Such errors are mistakenly attributed to *wrong* pronunciation. People who make them are regarded as not well-educated or careless writers.

Tables 1 and 2 present the initial consonant inventories of the Hanoi and Saigon dialects, respectively. The description of the sound system of the Saigon dialect is based on Huỳnh 2005 and Pham 2006. The initial consonants in the Hanoi dialect are given in Table 1. This table uses standard orthography. In most cases the orthographic and phonetic symbols are identical, e.g., the sound [b] is written as *b* in the orthography. Where the orthographic symbol is different from the phonetic symbol, the phonetic symbol is put in parentheses beside the letter, e.g., the sound [c] is written as *ch*. In some cases more than one letter is used for a sound, depending on the following vowel, e.g. [ɣ] is written as *gh* before front vowels and *g* elsewhere. The glottal stop is unmarked in the orthography. Huỳnh 1999 and some other researchers do not include the glottal stop in the initial inventory of Vietnamese, which is presented in others such as Doan 1977, Nguyen 1997 and this paper.

labial	alveolar	palatal	velar	glottal
	<i>th</i> [t ^h]			
	<i>t</i>	<i>ch</i> [c]	<i>c, k, q</i> [k]	
<i>b</i>	<i>đ</i> [d]			[ʔ]
<i>m</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>nh</i> [ɲ]	<i>ng, ngh</i> [ŋ]	
<i>ph</i> [f]	<i>x</i> [s]		<i>kh</i> [x]	<i>h</i>
<i>v</i>	<i>d, gi</i> [z]		<i>g, gh</i> [ɣ]	
	<i>l</i>			

Table 1. The initial inventory in the Hanoi dialect

Table 2 shows initial consonants in the Saigon dialect. The Saigon dialect does not have *v* [v] but it does have three retroflexes *tr, s, and r* [t, ʃ, z] that are also represented in the orthography.

labial	alveolar	retroflex	palatal	velar	glottal
	<i>th</i> [t ^h]				
	<i>t</i>	<i>tr</i> [ʃ]	<i>ch</i> [c]	<i>c, k, q</i> [k]	
<i>b</i>	<i>đ</i> [d]				[ʔ]
<i>m</i>	<i>n</i>		<i>nh</i> [ɲ]	<i>ng, ngh</i> [ŋ]	
<i>ph</i> [f]	<i>x</i> [s]	<i>s</i> [ʃ]		<i>kh</i> [x]	<i>h</i>
<i>w</i>		<i>r</i> [z]	<i>v, d, gi</i> [j]	<i>g, gh</i> [ɣ]	
	<i>l</i>				

Table 2. The initial inventory in the Saigon dialect

While all sounds can occur in the initial position of a syllable, only a limited number of sounds can occur at the end. Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the final consonants in the Hanoi and Saigon dialects, respectively. The two sounds *ch* [c] and *nh* [ɲ] do not occur in the Saigon dialect.⁴ The two glides, [w] and [j] can also occur in the final position in both dialects. In the orthography, these glides are represented with either *u* or *o* for [w] and *i* or *y* for [j] to indicate the vowel length, e.g., *cao* [ka:w] ‘be tall’ and *cau* [kaw] ‘areca nut’.

<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>ch</i> [c]	<i>c</i> [k]
<i>m</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>nh</i> [ɲ]	<i>ng</i> [ŋ]
<i>o, u</i> [w]		<i>i, y</i> [j]	

Table 3. The final inventory in the Hanoi dialect

⁴ It is not important whether *ch* [c] and *nh* [ɲ] are other forms of *c* [k] and *ng* [ŋ], respectively. The distribution of *n* [n] and *t* [t] in the Saigon dialect still remains unchanged in both accounts. For the purpose of this paper, slashes // and brackets [] are used loosely, and some of the complex phonemic details are omitted (see Pham 2006 for full discussions).

<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>c</i> [k]
<i>m</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>ng</i> [ŋ]
<i>o, u</i> [w]	<i>i, y</i> [j]	

Table 4. The final inventory in the Saigon dialect

Table 5 shows the vowel system in the Hanoi and Saigon dialects. Only two vowels, *o* [ɤ] and *a* [a] contrast in length. Vowels are presented in groups (front, central, short) depending on the openness of the mouth and the tongue height. The Hanoi dialect has three diphthongs which are equivalent to long vowels in the Saigon dialect, i.e., long *i*, *u* and *u* [i:], [u:], [u:] (Thompson 1965, Cao 1998). Each diphthong has two spellings depending on its position in the syllable, e.g. *muoi* [muəj] ‘ten’ and *mua* [muə] ‘rain’.

<i>Front</i>	<i>Central</i>	<i>Back</i>
<i>i</i>	<i>u</i> [u]	<i>u</i>
<i>ê</i> [e]	<i>â</i> [ɤ] <i>ơ</i> [ɤ:]	<i>ô</i> [o]
<i>e</i> [ɛ]	<i>ă</i> [a] <i>a</i> [a:]	<i>o</i> [ɔ]
<i>iê, ia</i> [iə]	<i>ơơ, ua</i> [uə]	<i>uô, ua</i> [uə]

Table 5. The vowel inventory

The Saigon dialect has important social prestige since it is spoken in a city regarded as the largest economical and technological center of Vietnam. Similarly the Hanoi dialect spoken on the Red River delta has a distinguished reputation as it is associated with several thousand years of culture. Since 1975 many people from the North have relocated to the South in order to work and to build new lives, but only a very small number of people have gone to the North to work or live.

In Vietnam, writing without mistakes is regarded as a sign of being ‘well-educated’. As we saw above, however, neither dialect has all its sounds represented in the orthography. Many spelling mistakes in either dialect originate from this lack of a one-to-one correspondence between dialect and orthography.

3. The Saigon dialect- myths and facts

A common assumption is that, compared to the Hanoi dialect, which is regarded as ‘standard’, and, especially to the orthography, the Saigon dialect ‘lacks’ many sounds and has a number of sounds that are ‘mixed up or distorted’. For example, it is said that the Saigon dialect does not have *n* [n] or *t* [t] at the end of a syllable; that there are only 5 tones

instead of 6; that short vowels are pronounced as long vowels; and that many consonantal combinations are reduced to a single sound or are sometimes changed to a new sound. Consequently, the Saigon dialect is considered ‘incorrect’ or ‘improper’. This view is sometimes expressed by linguists or scholars. For example, Bui (1995:191) and Do 1994 state that Southerners “do not pronounce correctly sounds, rhymes and tones that are difficult”. It is my position that a lack of certain contrasts does not make one dialect ‘incorrect’ or ‘inferior’ to another, and that no dialect is structurally ‘better’ than another. Dialects are just different from one another. If teachers in particular and people in general understand this, the less likely they will be to make negative comments about the Southern dialects and speakers of even smaller and ‘stranger’ dialectal communities in Central Vietnam.

The following section will discuss each of these accusations to show that the above claims are false, and that where one Vietnamese dialect differs from another, such differences systematically reflect a total system rather than an ‘incomplete’ dialect.

3. 1. Do the two sounds [n] and [t] occur at the end of syllables?

It is often said that some segments in Table 3 do not occur in the final position in the Saigon dialect: i.e. *ch* [c], *nh* [ɲ], *n* [n] and *t* [t]. It is clear in any account that *nh* and *ch* never surface in the Saigon dialect, but it is not clear for *n* and *t*. The common assumption is that the Saigon dialect does not have the final [n] and [t] (e.g., Ngô 2007). This section will show that [n] and [t] do occur in the final position, as in the Hanoi dialect. The interesting thing is the environment where these consonants are distributed: they occur only after three front vowels.

Speakers of other dialects often notice cases such as (1) below in which the Hanoi dialect (and the orthography) distinguish the final *n* [n] from *ng* [ŋ] or *t* [t] from *c* [k]. However, where the Hanoi dialect has *n* or *t* the speakers of the Saigon dialect and other Southern dialects have *ng* [ŋ] or *c* [k] instead. In the examples below ‘HN’ stands for the Hanoi dialect and also for the orthography and ‘SG’ stands for the Saigon dialect. The bracket shows the pronunciation. Note that the quality of the diphthong in the Saigon dialect is different; diphthongs behave like long vowels.

(1)			
HN		SG	
<i>a. tiến</i> [tiə̃n]	‘advance’	<i>tiếng</i> [tiə̃ŋ]	‘advance’
<i>tiếng</i> [tiə̃ŋ]	‘language’	<i>tiếng</i> [tiə̃ŋ]	‘language’

n and *t* also occur in the Saigon dialect: (2) gives some examples.

(2)	
HN and orthography	SG
<i>in</i> [in] ‘print’	<i>un</i> [uŋ]
<i>ít</i> [it] ‘a little’	<i>út</i> [ut]

lên [len] ‘up’
hết [het] ‘finish’

lon [lɔ:n]
hót [hɔ:t]

Notice that in the Saigon dialect the vowels also change: *i* [i] and *ê* [e] are pronounced like *u* [u] and *o* [ɔ:], the two central vowels with the same tongue height (see Table 5) (Tô 2005, Huỳnh 1999, Phạm 2006). This pronunciation stands out as one strong marker of Saigon speech. It is the phenomenon known as ‘centralization’ in the Saigon dialect, i.e., in producing this front vowel the tongue moves further back to the central area.

Sounds are categorized into groups according to certain properties they share. Sounds in the same group normally behave like each other. The interesting question here is in the Saigon dialect whether *n* or *t* will occur after the third front vowel, *e* [ɛ], as they do after *i* [i] and *ê* [e]. In order to answer this question, we need to look at the vowel centralization in the Hanoi dialect. In this dialect, *nh* [ɲ] and *ng* [ŋ] are in complementary distribution when they occur at the end of a syllable, i.e., where *nh* [ɲ] occurs, *ng* [ŋ] does not, and vice versa. Specifically, *nh* [ɲ] occurs only after *i* [i] and *ê* [e], and *ng* [ŋ] occurs after other vowels. Because *nh* [ɲ] has a much narrower distribution than *ng* [ŋ], it is treated as another version of *ng* [ŋ] after *i* [i] and *ê* [e]. Some examples are given in (3).

- (3) *lính* [liɲ] ‘soldier’
bệnh [beɲ] ‘disease’
lùng [luŋ] ‘to search’
bông [boŋ] ‘cotton’
làng [la:ŋ] ‘village’

Because sounds within a group tend to behave in the same way, we would expect *nh* [ɲ] to occur after all three front vowels. However, *nh* [ɲ] does not follow the third front vowel *e* [ɛ], whereas after the short vowel *a* [a] we find both *nh* [ɲ] and *ng* [ŋ]. This creates asymmetry in the distribution of *nh* [ɲ] and *ng* [ŋ] after vowels: *nh* or *ng* does not follow *e* [ɛ], while both can follow the short *a* [a], as in (4).

- (4) *lạnh* [laɲ] ‘be cold’
lạng [laŋ] ‘a hundred grams’

In the literature, the vowel *a* [a] in *lạnh* ‘be cold’ is said to be *e* /ɛ/ underlyingly, and the final consonant *nh* [ɲ] is in fact *ng* /ŋ/ underlyingly (Cao 1988, Hoàng 1989, and Cao 1998 for an overview). Vowels often change slightly in quality as their context changes, but the change is extreme in the case of *e* /ɛ/: it sounds like *a* [a]. This analysis gives a symmetric

distribution of the final consonant *ng* /ŋ/: it appears as *nh* [ɲ] after three front vowels *i* [i], *ê* [e] and *e* [ɛ], and as *ng* [ŋ] after other vowels.

I said earlier that in the Saigon dialect, *n* [n] and *t* [t] can occur only after the two front vowels *i* [i] and *ê* [e]. If in the Hanoi dialect, the vowel *a* [a] in *lạnh* is indeed *e* [ɛ], does *e* [ɛ] behave like the other front vowels, *i* [i] and *ê* [e] in the Saigon dialect? Can it occur before *n* [n]? And if so, does the vowel change in quality, i.e., become centralized, as for *i* [i] and *ê* [e]? The answers are affirmative. For the Hanoi ‘*anh*’ [aŋ], the Saigon dialect has ‘*ăn*’ [an], and the front vowel *e* [ɛ] also changes to a central vowel *a* [a], *lạnh* [laŋ] ‘be cold’ ~ *lăn* [lan], shown in (5).

(5)

Hanoi (NORTH)		Saigon (SOUTH)
<i>lính</i> [linh] ‘soldier’	~	[luŋ] (pronounced as <i>lín</i> in Northern dialects)
<i>bệnh</i> [benh] ‘disease’	~	[bɤ:ŋ] (pronounced as <i>bôn</i> in Northern dialects)
<i>lạnh</i> [lanh] /ɛ/ (ɛ > a) ‘cold’	~	[lan] /ɛ/ (pronounced as <i>lăn</i> in Northern dialects)

Why are these *n* [n] and *t* [t] not noticed by speakers of other dialects, or even by speakers of the Saigon dialect? The appearance of *n* [n] and *t* [t] after front vowels is overlooked for possibly two reasons: (i) When *n* [n] and *t* [t] occur in the Hanoi dialect, they become *ng* [ŋ] and *c* [k], respectively, in the Saigon dialect, which gives the impression that *n* [n] and *t* [t] do not exist in this position; and (ii) the front vowel changes greatly in quality. The vowel sounds almost like a ‘different’ vowel, and this difference draws the attention of speakers of other dialects who proceed to ignore the consonants that follow those front vowels. In fact Cao & Lê 2005 remark that speakers of the Saigon dialect notice the difference between their dialect and others only in the initial consonants, e.g. *vân* [vɤŋ] in the Hanoi dialect is pronounced as [jɤŋ] in the Saigon dialect, where both the initial *v* [v] and final *n* [n] are pronounced differently. The Saigon speakers notice the difference with the initial *v* [v] but not the final consonant *n* [n], i.e., *n* [n] is pronounced as *ng* [ŋ].

In summary, while centralization happens only with *e* [ɛ] in the Hanoi dialect, it happens with all three front vowels *i*, *ê*, *e* [i, e, ɛ] in the Saigon dialect. The Saigon dialect, therefore, furthers our understanding of centralization of front vowels in Vietnamese.

3.2. The Saigon dialect has only 5 tones

While the Hanoi dialect has 6 tones that are clearly represented in the orthography, the Saigon dialect has only 5 tones, since tones 5 and 6 coalesce to tone 5. For example:

(6)			
HN		SG	
<i>mả</i> [ma5]	‘tomb’	<i>mả</i> [ma5]	‘tomb’

mã [ma6] ‘appearance’ *mả* [ma5] ‘appearance’

The collapse of tone 6 to tone 5 creates many homonyms and often leads to spelling mistakes. Mistakes with tones are found more often than mistakes with segments. However, only about one third of the total Vietnamese population has 6 tones in their speech (www.gso.vn). The rest have only 5 tones, sometimes fewer. This ‘lack of tones’ does not cause communication problem.

3.3. The Saigon dialect does not distinguish the short *ă* [a] and long *a* [a:].

This is another distinctive feature in the speech of Saigon speakers. A closer look reveals that the Saigon dialect does make the distinction but not exactly in the same places as in other dialects. Some examples, given below in (7), show that for long and short vowels in the Hanoi dialect (and also represented in the orthography), the Saigon dialect has only the long vowel.

(7)

Orthography	HN Pronunciation	SG pronunciation	Glosses
<i>tai</i>	[ta:j]	[ta:j]	‘ear’
<i>tay</i>	[taj]	[ta:j]	‘arm’
<i>cao</i>	[ka:w]	[ka:w]	‘tall’
<i>cau</i>	[kaw]	[ka:w]	‘areca nut’

The examples in (7) show there are no short vowels in the Saigon dialect; this statement, however, is only true before glides [w] and [j] and for the vowel equivalent to the Hanoi short [a] (Cao 2005). In the Saigon dialect, the short [a] does occur where it is equivalent to the short *â* [ɤ] in the Hanoi dialect (and in the orthography). There is no short *â* [ɤ] in the Saigon pronunciation. Without contexts the Saigon speakers have problems distinguishing the short *a* [a] and short *â* [ɤ], and often pronounce the two alike (8b and 8c).

(8)

Orthography	HN pronunciation	SG pronunciation	Glosses
a. <i>coi</i>	[kɤ:j]	[kɤ:j]	‘a little tray’
b. <i>cây</i>	[kɤ]	[kaj]	‘tree’
cf. <i>cay</i>	[kaj]	[kaj]	‘spicy’
c. <i>câu</i>	[kɤw]	[kaw]	‘to fish’
cf. <i>cau</i>	[kaw]	[kaw]	‘areca nut’

Although speakers of the Saigon dialect do not distinguish long *a* [a] from short *ă* [a] before final glides [j] and [w], they make this distinction before final consonants. These vowels still contrast in length before consonants, as (9) shows.

(9)			
Orthography	HN	SG	Glosses
<i>cam</i>	[ka:m]	[ka:m]	‘orange’
<i>căm</i>	[kam]	[kam]	‘to resent’

Just as in the Hanoi dialect, the Saigon dialect has the long σ [ɤ:] before final consonants, as in (10); however, the short \hat{a} [ɤ] is pronounced like the short a [a] before a consonant. The contrast between *căm* [kam] and *câm* [kɤm] is one of the hardest to learn. It is also where we may expect to see Southerners make spelling mistakes.

(10)			
<i>com</i>	[kɤ:m]	‘cooked rice’	<i>com</i> [kɤ:m]
<i>câm</i>	[kɤm]	‘mute’	<i>căm</i> [kam]

There is a vowel length distinction in the Saigon dialect, but it is made in different environments.

3.4. Reduction of consonant clusters

Another special feature of the dialect of Saigon and surrounding areas is that certain consonant clusters that contain [w], represented with the letter *u* or *o* in the orthography, are reduced to one consonant (Thompson 1965, Hoàng 1989). The remaining segment can be either [w], or the consonant that precedes [w]. This reduction can happen in two ways. In one pattern, a cluster is reduced to [w]. For example, in the first example in (11) the consonant *h* [h] in *hu* [hw] is lost. The syllable starts with lip rounding but there is no glottal stop as in *yên* [ʔiən] ‘peace’. The orthography does not use *w* [w], and this new sound is closest to *g* [ɣ] in the orthography.

(11)	NVN		SG
a.	<i>huyền</i>	[hwiən] ‘black’	<i>guyềng</i> [wiəŋ]
b.	<i>quyền</i>	[kwien] ‘right’	<i>guyềng</i> [wiəŋ]
c.	<i>uyển</i>	[ʔwiən] ‘deep, profound’	<i>guyềng</i> [wiəŋ]
d.	<i>nguy</i>	[ŋwi] ‘dangerous’	<i>guy</i> [wi]

In the other pattern the clusters are reduced, but [w] is lost, and the original consonant remains.

(12)	HN		SG
	<i>thuyền</i>	[t ^h wiən] ‘boat’	<i>thiềng</i> [t ^h iəŋ]
	<i>thuê</i>	[t ^h we] ‘to rent’	<i>thê</i> [t ^h e]

<i>xuyén</i> [swiən]	<i>siéng</i> [siəŋ]
<i>xoài</i> [swa:j] ‘mango’	<i>xài</i> [sa:j]
<i>duyên</i> [zwiən] ‘charm’	<i>diêng</i> [jiəŋ]
<i>luyên</i> [lwiən] ‘to train’	<i>liêng</i> [liəŋ]
<i>tuyén</i> [twiən] ‘select’	<i>tiêng</i> [tiəŋ]
<i>khuyên</i> [xwiən] ‘to advise’	<i>phiêng</i> [fiəŋ]

The cluster *khu* [xw-] undergoes a different process, i.e. [w] is lost but the surviving consonant changes: *khu* [xw-] becomes *ph* [f-]. This form does not occur in the speech of educated speakers.

A closer examination shows that the two patterns are not random. Which pattern is chosen in this simplification process depends on the nature of the consonant. In the first pattern where the consonant is lost, all the consonants share the same feature, i.e. [dorsal] or [back]. This feature is specified for consonants that are produced in the back of the mouth using the back of the tongue, e.g., *k* [k], *ng* [ŋ], *kh* [x], or made at the larynx, e.g., *h* [h] or [ʔ] (which has no symbol in the orthography but is found in syllables beginning with a vowel).

For the second pattern, where the consonant remains, all these consonants have one feature in common: [coronal]. This feature is specified for sounds that are made in the front area of the mouth using the tongue tip or blade, e.g., *th* [tʰ], *x* [s], *d* [z], *l* [l] or *t* [t]. This simplification of clusters occurs in a systematic way.

A lack of certain sounds does not make the Saigon dialect ‘deficient’ or less intelligible. Even the Hanoi dialect, regarded as ‘standard’, lacks 3 initial consonants: *tr*, *s*, *r* [t, ʃ, z]. For example, the southern dialects – and the orthography - differentiate *châu* [cɤw] ‘pearl, gem’ from *trâu* [tɤw] ‘water buffalo’, while the Northerners pronounce them the same: *châu* [cɤw]. The Hanoi dialect does not have certain rhymes, for example *uou* [uəw], as in ‘*rượu*’ [ruəw] ‘wine’, is pronounced as *diệu* [ziəw]; *uu* [uɤw] as in *cứu* [kɤw] ‘to rescue’ is pronounced as *kíu* [kiw].

In summary, the Saigon dialect does have *n* [n] and *t* [t] at the end of the syllable in different contexts; it also distinguishes vowel length but in different environments; and centralization of front vowels and the reduction of consonant clusters are systematic and rule-governed.

The Hanoi dialect distinguishes *hạc* [ha:k] ‘crane’ and *hạt* [ha:t] ‘seed’ but the Saigon dialect does not, with [ha:k] for both but that does not mean that the Saigon dialect is wrong. There is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’; that is the way the dialects are. We must deal with facts, not opinions when we teach languages.

4. Language variation or Dialect diversity: languages change over time

Languages have always changed and always will. This section discusses how the Hanoi and Saigon dialects have changed and how such changes have been judged by the Vietnamese.

In this section the terms ‘North Vietnam’ and ‘South Vietnam’ refer to the political boundary before 1975, not the dialects. ‘North Vietnam’ refers to the former Democratic Republic of Vietnam before 1975, and ‘South Vietnam’ refers to the Republic of Vietnam before 1975. People living in the same geographical area, having the same social identity, speaking the same dialect, share language “norms”. These have the same words, e.g., ‘umbrella’ is *cái dù* in the South and *cái ô* in the North, and the same pronunciation, e.g., ‘eat’ is pronounced as *ăn* [an] in the North and *ăng* [aŋ] in the South. Something that is a ‘norm’ in one area may be perceived as an unwelcome change in another.

In Vietnam after 1975 many words that were popular in North Vietnam, mostly of Sino-Vietnamese origin, sound ‘different’ to the ears of speakers living in South Vietnam, e.g., *triển khai* ‘to expand, start’, *công an* ‘police’, *khẩn trương* ‘urgent’, *chủ yếu* ‘mainly’, *khâu* ‘step, period in a process’ *đăng ký* ‘to register’, *đồng chí* ‘comrade’, etc. Such words were ‘imported’ to South Vietnam through the media and people who came to work there. These vocabulary items are associated with ‘communism’. Even the extensive use of certain words that are familiar in the South, e.g., *tốt* ‘well, be good’, *thoải mái* ‘be comfortable’, may be treated as a marker of the Northern identity of the speaker and lead to a label of ‘communist’.

The influences of the media and the school system have become more and more crucial in daily language use. The gap in vocabulary use between speakers in North and South Vietnam is now much narrower than before. There is little to distinguish between how the generations that were born and grew up in the South after 1975 now speak, compared to their peers in the North. This gap is almost non-existent in newspapers, on radio and television, and in websites. If one looks at major daily newspapers such as *Saigon Giải Phóng* (Liberated Saigon) or *Tuổi Trẻ* (Youth) published in Hồ Chí Minh City or *Nhân Dân* (People Daily) published in Hanoi, it is hard to notice anything to distinguish the use of vocabulary on any popular subject, e.g., politics, economics, films and literature. A survey of three major newspapers published in Saigon found that the number of Northern words used was almost equal to that of Southern words on any topic (Trần 2005).

Language change is a sensitive issue among many overseas Vietnamese, who seek to reject the ‘new words’ of contemporary Vietnam, as they associate them with ‘communism’. Those who left Vietnam in 1975 brought with them the language spoken at that time. Because they have little or no contact with the current Vietnamese spoken in Vietnam, their language has been ‘frozen’ in both vocabulary and pronunciation. Nonetheless, Vietnamese vocabulary in a global sense has changed very quickly as new words have been added and old words have died out, and others have taken on new meanings. Pronunciation has changed too, but more slowly.

Overseas Vietnamese are not alone in having to deal with this issue. For example, it is well known that Hungarians and Cubans who left their countries for somewhat similar reasons have been faced with ongoing changes in their languages. The home language changes in one direction; the overseas language changes in another direction. After as little as 30 or 40 years such differences can be quite noticeable, particularly in vocabulary, since both groups have independently introduced new words and subtly changed the meanings of

old ones. Each group may regard itself as speaking the 'true' language; however, there is no such thing. The language of 30 or 40 years ago no longer exists since a language lives in its speakers, i.e., its descendant users, and may now have different varieties. For example, French, Italian, and Spanish are descendants of Latin. Quebec French is unique. Today's British and American English are different; so too are the Northern and Southern varieties of Vietnamese.

Language use is inevitably linked to social identity, but in the Vietnamese case it has also been linked, often mistakenly, to political preferences. If the instructor speaks a northern dialect in North American classrooms, people tend to jump to conclusions about his/her political views. Such assumptions can lead to a student saying "Please do not teach us "communist" words because I do not want to talk to my parents using such words". At a job interview for a lecturer position in Vietnamese, an interview open to the public, a parent was allowed to ask: "Do you support the current government? We need to know so we can decide whether we want to send our children to your class". Instructors who belong to the first generation of immigrants, i.e., born in Vietnam and recently arrived in the United States, with a high degree of education, especially in the Humanities,⁵ or instructors in their 20s or 30s who speak a Northern dialect fluently, can be unnecessarily disadvantaged. However, at the same time along with this disadvantage, the Northern dialects are regarded as 'standard'. This certainly creates a complex situation for everyone concerned.

All languages change in pronunciation over time outside of anybody's control, and such change is neither for 'better' or 'worse'. For example, among three sounds [t, ʃ, z] written as *tr*, *s* and *r* that occur in the Southern dialects but not in Northern dialects, two are disappearing. First, *s* [ʃ] as in *sách* [ʃat] 'book', is reported to have disappeared completely in the urban Saigon, spoken by educated speakers in Saigon and surrounding cities (Nguyễn 2005, Cao 2005). When *s* [ʃ] disappears, it eliminates the distinction between *s* [ʃ] and *x* [s], as in the Hanoi dialect. The two sounds are now pronounced the same. Secondly, *tr* [t] as in *trường* [tʁuəŋ] 'school' is also gradually disappearing. *trung* [tʁuŋ] 'in the middle' in the Saigon dialect sounds like *chung* [tʃuŋ] /cuŋ/ 'to share', as in the Hanoi dialect. However, the new sound *ch* [c] is pronounced without the hissing sound of the Hanoi dialect, i.e., as a stop instead of an affricate in the Hanoi dialect. There are also changes that create more sound contrasts in the Saigon dialect. For example, as we saw above, the Saigon speakers do not pronounce the short vowel *a* before a glide, i.e., *tai* [ta:j] 'ear' and *tay* [ta:j] 'hand' are pronounced the with the same long vowel. However, there is a trend toward making the distinction in the urban Saigon dialect, represented by announcers on television, e.g., *tay* is pronounced with a short vowel. This change, towards adding more contrasts, happens only before [j] and is not seen yet before [w], where the short vowel is

⁵ Except those who worked as medical doctors, pharmacists or the like in Vietnam who could take courses and exams to be recertified to practice, this generation often had to go straight to the job market to support their families; therefore not many could go to graduate school for higher degrees.

still pronounced long, e.g., *sao* [sa:w] ‘star’ and *sau* [saw] ‘behind’ are pronounced the same, as observed in Cao (2005:175).

5. Which dialect should be taught?

We should be aware of very powerful social stereotyping: listeners often judge somebody’s intelligence, social background, education, personal and professional worth based on the dialect that person uses. A teacher’s knowledge of and attitude toward dialects has a huge effect on the classroom atmosphere and the success of the course. When every student feels secure about his/her native dialect, student competence increases. Those responsible for hiring teachers and for organizing overseas experiences for students should also have sound ideas about languages and dialects.

Therefore, which dialect should be taught in classrooms outside Vietnam? Is it acceptable to teach the native dialect of the teacher, or must it be so-called ‘standard’ dialect? Where in Vietnam should students be sent to study in a language program?

In Vietnam during the early 1980s the government’s policy was to require instructors from kindergarten to elementary school in the whole country to teach students the Northern dialect. This effort failed abysmally.

Since then there have been different opinions and approaches concerning which dialect should be taught to foreigners learning Vietnamese. The first approach has been to teach a Vietnamese variety that includes all contrasts. This variety takes the Hanoi dialect as a base and adds three sounds that this dialect lacks: *tr* [t], *s* [ʃ] and *r* [z]. The student is actually taught to pronounce exactly what the spelling suggests. This practice is used at a language school in Saigon. It is obviously controversial because the learner will speak a ‘dialect’ that does not exist anywhere.

If a ‘standard’ dialect is considered to be a variety of the language spoken by educated people, has high prestige, and is used in the media, then all three major varieties, those of Hanoi, Saigon and Hue, should satisfy the definition. The Hanoi dialect is associated with the capital and has strong historical and cultural associations. The Saigon dialect is also associated with a capital city, that of the former Republic of Vietnam, and so it still enjoys a certain prestige. Moreover, Saigon is now the biggest city with a very dynamic economy, culture, and technology (Cao 2005). The Hue dialect before 1975 was used in the media for the whole central area of Vietnam.

The term ‘standard’ dialect, however, is used confusingly in the literature (Nguyễn 2005), sometimes referring to the ‘urban dialect’ of Saigon and surrounding areas, and sometimes denoting the Hanoi or Northern dialects.

Vietnam itself is far from being in complete agreement as to what is or is not the ‘standard’ dialect. What is often considered ‘standard’ is a dialect based on the Hanoi dialect plus three retroflexes. Speakers of other dialects are ‘forced’ to imitate another dialect, but three ‘extra’ consonants exist in their own dialect. The resistance is even stronger when political attitudes and stereotyping are taken into account, since speaking a Northern dialect is to acknowledge their ‘victory’ as being legitimate.

Tô 2005 and others suggest that probably the most realistic and reasonable solution is to teach a pronunciation based on a ‘core’ dialect that the instructor wants to teach. Other skills such as listening, reading, and writing would be based on this pronunciation. After

establishing a good pronunciation, the instructor could then compare this dialect with other major dialects to help the learner communicate with speakers from other dialects, because learning the pronunciation of different dialects at the same time would only confuse the learner and lead to mixing up sound systems. The selected dialect should be the instructor's native dialect, for, as Tô comments, "It is equally good for foreigners to (learn to) speak either the Saigon, Hanoi, or Hue dialect; however, it is more important whether the learner can understand speakers of other dialects" (2005:276).

In summary, choosing to teach a dialect that has the most contrasts (Northern dialects) may send a message that other dialects are 'incomplete,' or 'improper', which implies that one dialect is linguistically 'superior' to others. It may also lead to hiring only speakers of that dialect, and attempts to 'improve' the speech of teachers who do not speak that dialect.

The analysis of dialects in this paper leads us to certain conclusions. First, for overseas language programs: students do not always have to go to North Vietnam to learn or improve their language skills, especially when there may be excellent private language schools in Saigon that can serve this purpose. Second, the common assumption that a language teacher should be a native speaker of the Northern dialect, the 'most correct' or 'standard' dialect, is false. Finally, a good understanding about the differences between major dialects and the nature of language change can help instructors to be more confident about the language they use in the classroom and give students an unbiased view of the dialects of others. This will enable students to use the language with comfort both in the classroom and at home if they happen to encounter the non-issue of dialects there.

6. Conclusions

An understanding of how languages are structured and of language change should be one of the first learning experiences in the professional development of Vietnamese language teachers, for as Lam remarks "...Heritage language students and often even instructors come to the Vietnamese language classroom with familiar characteristic stereotypes of the three regions of Vietnam...which are completely arbitrary in application" (Lam 2006). Teaching students about language variation, as Hazen 2001 suggests "... helps students understand that language has evolved and that it continues to be shaped by geographic, historical, social, and ethnic factors. In addition, learning about language variation allows them to examine their views about what constitutes correct English and to evaluate intolerance toward certain varieties of English". The same words apply to Vietnamese.

The instructor should teach the dialect that he or she speaks natively unless he/she comes from a small area with a very different pronunciation from either of the two major dialects, Hanoi and Saigon. Nonetheless, teachers are often very capable of adjusting certain sounds quickly in their pronunciation toward a 'standard'. Depending on the time available, teachers should encourage students to be aware of the differences among major dialects. Students then will be able to compare the dialect they learn with other 'norms' as they gain control of the language.

Problems may arise when students (both heritage and non-heritage) learn from different sources, and from teachers who have very different levels of knowledge about languages and how they can be described, how they function, and how they relate to the societies in which they are used. We should also mention that it is no longer a serious issue

in teaching English throughout the world, whether one teaches the American or the British variety -- either serves student interests.

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