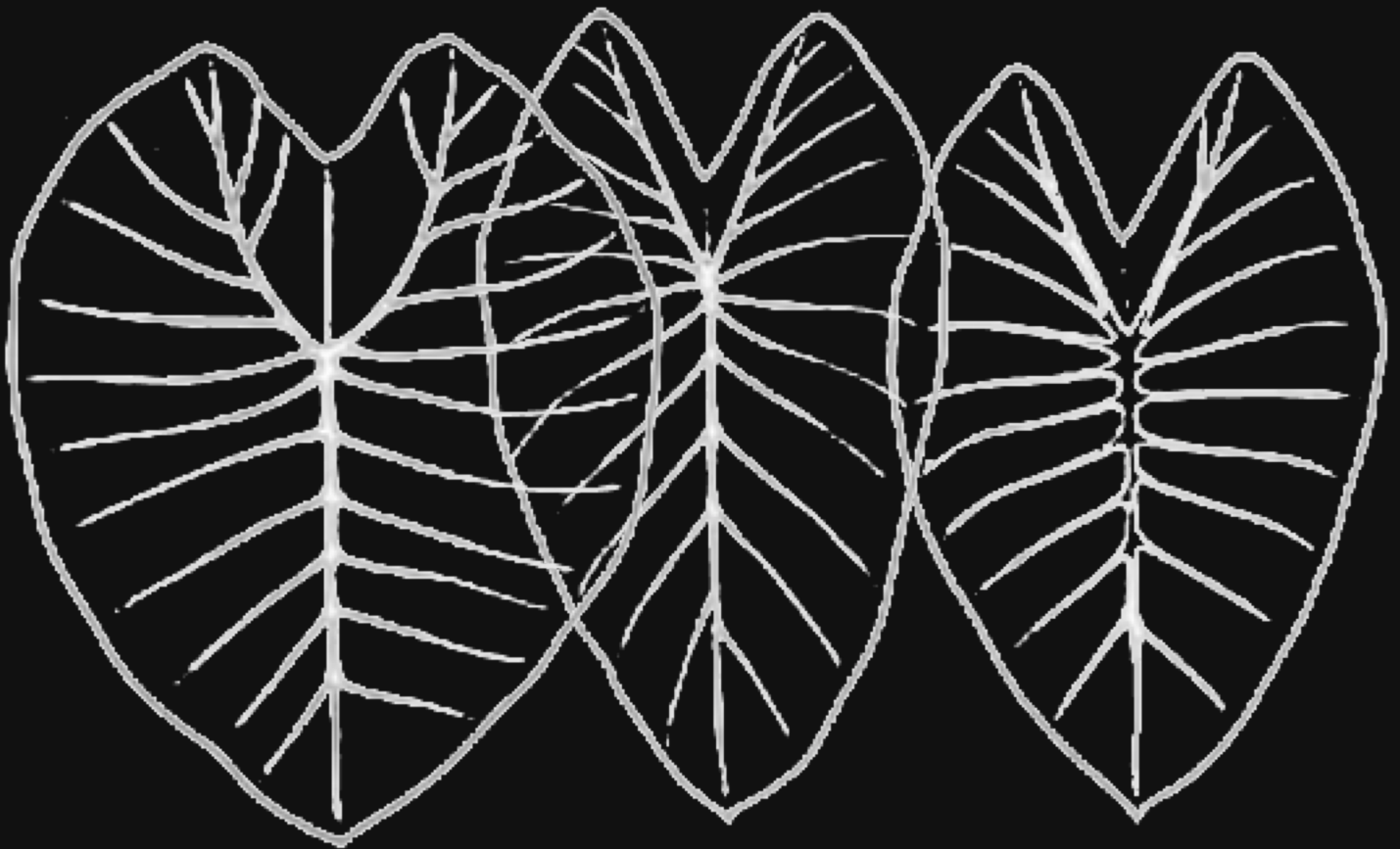


Proceedings of TripleA 3

Fieldwork Perspectives on the
Semantics of African, Asian and Austronesian Languages



Ed. by Vera Hohaus & Wanda Rothe

*Proceedings of TripleA 3:
Fieldwork Perspectives on the Semantics of African, Asian and Austronesian Languages*

Edited by Vera Hohaus & Wanda Rothe
2017 Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen, Publikationssystem

<https://publikationen.uni-tuebingen.de/xmlui/handle/10900/73437>

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<https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/handle/10125/4327>

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Syntactic and Semantic Aspects of Discontinuous Noun Phrases in Vietnamese¹

Sarah Duong Phu – Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main

Abstract. In this paper, I analyse two aspects of the syntax and semantics of discontinuous noun phrases in Vietnamese. The first aspect deals with the syntax of discontinuous noun phrases. It is discussed whether split constructions in Vietnamese involve movement as proposed by Trinh (2011) or base generation as put forward by Fanselow & Féry (2006). It turns out that both analyses have their weaknesses and that most likely a mixture of them (as adopted by Fanselow 1988 and Ott 2012 and is necessary in order to account for the facts. The second aspect deals with classifiers and discontinuous noun phrases. It is helpful to distinguish between three types of nouns: 1) nouns that need a classifier to be countable, 2) nouns that take an optional classifier, and 3) nouns that do not take any classifier at all.² Discontinuous noun phrases are not so well accepted by native speakers when involving nouns that take no classifier. Nouns with optional classifier in sentences containing discontinuous noun phrases are better when they occur with a classifier.

1 Introduction

Discontinuous noun phrases constitute a special kind of non-canonical word order. Whereas in word order changes like extraction (see example from German in (1)) whole constituents move to another position in the course of the derivation, in discontinuous NPs parts of the very same constituent are separated from another. Example (2) shows the unmarked constituent order and (1) an extraction.

Continuous noun phrases such as the children, two boys or some red apples may be discontinuous in some languages and in certain contexts. This means the head of a noun phrase is separated from its determiner, adjective or quantifier, for example (cf. Fanselow & Féry 2006). In (4), the German NP *einige Rehe* ‘some deer’ appears in its discontinuous form ((3) contains the continuous version for illustration).

- (1) **Aus Holland** kam der Mann.
from Holland came the (M³) man
‘The man came from Holland.’
- (2) Der Mann kam **aus Holland**.
the (M) man came from Holland
‘The man came from Holland.’

¹ Thank you for the help of all my informants. Special thanks to Caroline Féry for advice and expertise, as well as to Peter Smith for comments and discussion. I am also grateful for financial support from the DFG.

² See Tran (2011) for a comparable view.

³ The following abbreviations are used in this paper: M=masculine, PL=plural, CLF=classifier, TOP=topic, ART=article, INFL=inflection and ACC=accusative.

- (3) Sie hat **einige Rehe** im Wald gesehen.
 she has some deer in forest seen
 ‘She saw some deer in the forest.’
- (4) **Rehe** hat sie **einige** im Wald gesehen.
 deer (PL) has she some in forest seen.
 ‘She saw some deer in the forest.’

In Vietnamese, the noun phrase *hai trái cam* ‘two classifier orange’ as in (5) may be discontinuous, separating the noun from the numeral/classifier complex:

- (5) Tôi mua **hai trái cam**.
 I buy two CLF orange
 ‘I buy two oranges.’
- (6) **Cam** tôi mua **hai trái**.
 orange I buy two CLF
 ‘I buy two oranges.’

2 The Syntax of Discontinuous Noun Phrases in Vietnamese

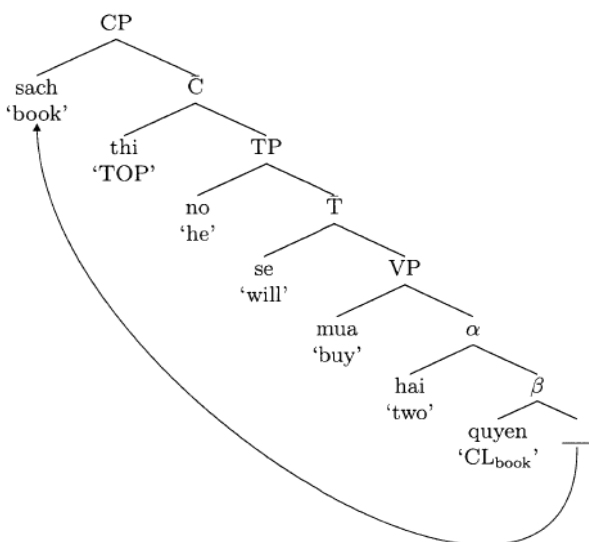
In this section, two main analyses of split constructions are compared. The first analysis considers the two parts of an NP split construction as discontinuous in a strict sense, namely as originating in one and the same noun phrase. This first analysis is problematic because usually only maximal projections can move. Moving only parts of a noun phrase violates this constraint (cf. Chomsky 1986). The second analysis considers split constructions as consisting of two independent noun phrases. This view also presents some problems since it does not account for the fact that the two phrases are semantically connected to another and often show morphological agreement.

The only worked out syntactic approach on NP split in Vietnamese is that of Trinh (2011), for whom split constructions in Vietnamese involve movement. However, Fanselow & Féry (2006) propose that split constructions in Vietnamese contain ‘free topics’. The authors do not give a detailed analysis of Vietnamese, but rather group the behaviour of Vietnamese with other Asian languages.

Trinh (2011) assumes A-bar movement of N to [Spec, C] for split constructions.

- (7) **Sách** thì nó sẽ mua hai **quyển**.
 book TOP he/she will buy two TOP
 ‘He/she will buy two books.’

Example (7) is thus analysed in the following way:



(Trinh 2011, p. 78)

Trinh (2011) explains the fact that *sách* ‘book’ only occurs in the beginning of the discontinuous noun phrase and not at the end of it (after the classifier) while assuming the so-called Edge Condition on Copy Deletion (ECCD) as in (8)

(8) Edge Condition on Copy Deletion (ECCD)

For a chain (α, β) where α is the higher and β is the lower copy, deletion of β requires that β ends any XP (Trinh 2011, p. 18).

He assumes A-bar movement since the relationship between fronted noun and stranded classifier spans finite clause boundaries, but is island sensitive. In (9) we see that it is possible to separate the noun from the numeral/classifier-complex despite embedding. Note that *là* ‘that’ is rather a ‘connection word’ than a relative pronoun since it may also be used to connect two nouns as in (11). In (10) the noun cannot move out of the complex noun phrase island “a person who has two”.

- (9) **Sách/mèo** thì tôi nghĩ [_{CP} là nó⁴ sẽ mua hai **quyển/con**].
 book/cat TOP I think that he will buy two CLF/CLF
 ‘When it comes to books/cats, I think that he will buy two of them.’ (Trinh 2011, p. 76)
- (10) ***Sách/mèo** thì nó sẽ gặp [_{island} một người có hai **quyển/con**].
 book/cat TOP he will meet one person have two CLF/CLF
 ‘He will meet one person who has two books/cats.’ (Trinh 2011, p. 77)
- (11) Cô là thư ký.
 aunt⁵ be secretary
 ‘She is a secretary.’

⁴ Actually ‘nó’ can either be feminine or masculine. However, while citing Trinh (2011) I will keep with his gloss and translation.

⁵ Younger sister of one’s father.

Other types of island NP split constructions are also not possible. (12) shows an adjunct island constraint, (13) a subject island constraint, and (14) a non-bridge-verb constraint.

- (12) ***Sách/mèo** thì nó đi về [_{island} sáu khi mua **hai quyển/con**].
 book/cat TOP he go home after moment buy two CLF/CLF
 ‘He went home after he bought two books/cats.’
- (13) ***Sách/mèo** [_{island} thì nó mua hai **quyển/con**] là tốt.
 book/cat TOP he buy two CLF/CLF be good
 ‘That he buys two books/cats is good.’ (Trinh 2011, p. 77)
- (14) ***Sách/mèo** thì nó thì thào [_{island} rằng nó sẽ mua **hai quyển/con**].
 book/cat TOP he whisper that he will buy two CLF/CLF
 ‘He whispered that he would buy two books/cats.’ (Trinh 2011, p. 77)

According to my own investigations with native speakers, the constraints that Trinh (2011) mentions do not seem to hold for all contexts. The contexts of (15) and (16) elicit contrastive topic and focus. The sentences are grammatical although the complex noun phrases constraint should disallow them:

- (15) Context: In this village there are a lot of cats and dogs.
Mèo tôi đã gặp một người có **năm con**,
 cat I past meet one person have five CLF
 còn **chó** thì tôi gặp một người có **sáu con**.
 and dog TOP I meet one person have six CLF
 ‘As for cats, I met a person who has five, and as for dogs, I met a person who has six.’
- (16) Context: There are many ducks and chickens sold at the market.
Vịt tôi thấy một người bán **năm con**
 duck I see one person sell five CLF
 còn **gà** thì thấy một người bán **bốn con**.
 and chicken TOP see one person sell four CLF
 ‘As for ducks, I see/saw a person selling five and as for chicken, I saw a person selling four.’⁶

The discrepancy between my data and Trinh’s constraints may be due to the fact that in Vietnamese there is no clear distinction between discontinuous noun phrases and free topics. We do not find any phrase, comparable to the “as for”-phrases in English as in the following example:

- (17) **As for shoes**, I like **red ones**.
- (18) **Giày** (thì) tôi thích **màu đỏ**.
 shoe(s) (TOP) I like colour red
 ‘As for shoes, I like red ones.’

⁶ Note that the sentences in (15) and (16) would also be grammatical if they ended before *còn* ‘and’ and did not contain the second part of the sentence. However, the second part of the sentence makes the contrastive topic structure clearer.

In Vietnamese, the topic marker *thì* may be used to indicate a free topic, but it is not obligatory. As a result, an ambiguity is unavoidable between discontinuous noun phrases and free topics. German, by contrast can make a clear distinction between both types: (19) contains a free topic and (20) a discontinuous noun phrase.

(19) **Was Bücher angeht**, habe ich nur **rote**.
 what books is about have I only red
 ‘Concerning books, I only have red ones.’

(20) **Bücher** habe ich nur **rote**.
 books have I only red
 ‘I have only red books.’

The similarity between free topics and split constructions has been noted before:

While such constructions [free topics] do not involve any syntactic displacement, they are virtually equivalent to STCs [split topics] in their pragmatic force (as also observed in Haider 1985: 237, Oppenrieder 1991: 72, Pittner 1995: 33, and Shaer et al. 2009: 4) (Ott 2012, p. 83).

In other words, Ott (2012) observes that split constructions may occur in the same pragmatic context as free topics. The only difference is that split constructions involve syntactic movement, whereas free topics do not.

There are further arguments against a movement analysis of Vietnamese split constructions. The first one is that in numeral-classifier-complexes the classifier may also function as a pronoun, even outside the context of split constructions as in (21).

(21) Context: There is a special offer for baskets this week, so everybody wants to buy them.
 Thảo mua **bốn cái**, Lý **ba cái** còn Mai thì **sáu cái**.
 Thao buy four CLF Ly three CLF and Mai TOP six CLF
 ‘Thao buys four ones, Ly buys three ones and Mai buys six ones.’

Also in German we find comparably effects: Fanselow (1988) shows that German NPs may occur without an overt noun as in (22) and (23). This is an argument against the movement analysis of NP splits.

(22) Ich habe **den** noch nicht gefunden.
 I have the (M ACC) yet not found
 ‘I haven’t found him/it yet.’

(23) Ich kenne **keinen** in Uppsala.
 I know no (ART) in Uppsala
 ‘I know no-one in Uppsala.’ (Fanselow 1988, p. 89)

Secondly, there are gapless splits in Vietnamese which are also difficult for the movement analysis since they contain two full NPs instead of two parts of the same NP (for gapless splits see Fanselow 1993, Ott 2012). (24) is an example for a gapless split in German, (25) and (26) show gapless splits

in Vietnamese.

- (24) **Reptilien** mag sie nur **Eidechsen**.
 reptiles like she only lizards
 ‘As for reptiles, she only likes lizards.’
- (25) Context: A: What kind of foreign cars do you like?
 B: **Xe hơi nhật** thì anh thích **Toyota** còn **xe hơi Đức**
 car Japanese TOP here: I like Toyota and car German
 thì thích **Volkswagen**.
 TOP like Volkswagen.
 ‘As for Japanese cars, I like Toyota and as for German cars I like Volkswagen.’
- (26) Context: A: What kind of fruits and sweets do you like?
 B: **Trái cây** thì thích ăn **chuối** còn **kẹo** thì thích **sô-cô-lâ**.
 fruit TOP like eat banana and sweets TOP like chocolate
 ‘As for fruits, I like to eat banana, and as for sweets, I like chocolate.’

However, that NP split constructions are difficult to account for in a movement analysis has already been noted by Fanselow (1988) who mentions that there are split constructions, which do not have an “unsplit” equivalent. The inflection of the discontinuous noun phrase in (27), for example, is different from the inflection of a continuous noun phrase we find in (28). Simply splitting the continuous NP *keine polnischen Gänse* ‘no Polish geese’ apart results in ungrammaticality, as in (29).

- (27) **Polnische Gänse** gekauft hat sie **keine**.
 Polish (strong INFL) geese bought has she no
 ‘She didn’t buy Polish geese.’
- (28) Sie hat **keine polnischen** Gänse gekauft.
 she has no Polish (weak INFL) geese bought
 ‘She didn’t buy Polish geese.’
- (29) ***Polnischen** Gänse gekauft hat sie **keine**.
 Polish (weak INFL) geese bought has she none
 ‘She didn’t buy Polish geese.’ (Fanselow 1988, p. 99)

In addition, there are cases of preposition doubling in discontinuous noun phrases as in (30), whereas preposition doubling is not possible in its continuous variant, as in (31).

- (30) **In** Schlössern habe ich noch **in** keinen gewohnt.
 in castles have I so far in no lived
 ‘As for castles, so far I have not lived in any.’ (Fanselow and Cavar 2002, p. 5)
- (31) *Ich habe noch **in in** keinen Schlössern gewohnt.
 I have so far in in no castles lived
 ‘As for castles, so far I have not lived in any.’

Fanselow & Féry (2006) assume that in Vietnamese, as well as in other Asian languages, there are no discontinuous noun phrases derived by movement analysis. Since these languages are known to have free topics anyway, free topics may also occur in split constructions. Furthermore, these languages contain gapless splits as shown in the Japanese example in (32) (cf. Fanselow & Féry 2006, p. 64-65).

- (32) **Tori**-wa kare-wa **kanaria**-dake (-o) sitteru.
 bird- TOP he - TOP canary -only-ACC know
 ‘As for birds, he only knows canaries.’ (Fanselow & Féry 2006, p. 64)

However, there is also a counter-argument against this view: In Vietnamese there is agreement between the different parts of a discontinuous NP, as expressed by the choice of classifier. The classifier *quyển* ‘CLF (bound objects)’ as in (33), for example, is the correct classifier for ‘book’ whereas *con* ‘CLF (+animated)’ in (34) is not correct.

- (33) **Sách** tôi mua hai **quyển**.
 book I buy two CLF (bound objects)
 ‘I buy two books.’
- (34) ***Sách** tôi mua hai **con**.
 book I buy two CLF (+animated)
 ‘I buy two books.’

To sum up so far, my analysis shows that neither the movement nor the base generation approach convincingly accounts for the Vietnamese data. Therefore, a mixture of both approaches, a so-called ‘hybrid theories’ (as adopted by Fanselow 1988 and Ott 2012 for German) seems to be more appropriate for the analysis of split constructions in Vietnamese. I will leave details of such an approach to further research.

3 Classifiers and Discontinuous Noun Phrases

The presence or absence of classifiers plays an important role for the analysis of discontinuous noun phrases in Vietnamese, since classifiers are often part of a split construction. This is illustrated in (35).

- (35) **Sách** thì mua hai **quyển**, còn **viết** thì mua ba **cây**.
 book TOP buy two CLF and write TOP buy three CLF
 ‘He/she buys/bought two two books and three pens.’

In (35), the classifier *quyển* (classifier for bound objects) combined with the numeral *hai* ‘two’ is separated from its head noun *sách* ‘book’. In this case, the numeral cannot occur without a classifier since words like *sách* need a classifier in order to be countable, as can be seen in (36). This observation has led some researchers to assume that Vietnamese is a numeral classifier language (cf. for example Aikhenvald 2000, Grinevald 2002). However, not all Vietnamese nouns need a classifier in order to be countable. Some nouns may be directly connected with a numeral, as shown in (38)-(40).

- (36) *bốn sách
four book
'four books'
- (37) bốn quyển sách
four CLF book
'four books'
- (38) một ngày
one day
'one day'
- (39) hai sinh viên
two student
'two students'
- (40) ba câu
three sentence
'three sentences'

The observation that in a numeral classifier language not all nouns are necessarily associated with a classifier, has been made earlier by Dixon (1986) and Aikhenvald (2000). Still, not all authors consider the possibility that in such a language a noun may be directly connected to a numeral. For Chierchia (2010, p. 7), it is impossible for a numeral of a classifier language to directly combine with a noun. However, the Vietnamese data seems to speak against this view.

Discontinuous noun phrases involving nouns that do not need a classifier to be countable may be assumed to behave in the same way as other discontinuous noun phrases. They just leave the classifier out. However, this is not tenable in light of examples such as (41).

- (41) ?*Ngày, tôi ở lại năm.
day I stay five
'Days, I stayed for five.' (Nguyen 2004, p. 102)

In (41), the numeral *năm* 'five' cannot appear on its own, separated from its head noun. My own investigations show that sentences like (41) are on the verge of grammaticality. Example (42) was accepted by one informant, but another informant evaluated it as not being entirely unacceptable, but still not being natural either.

The degraded status of (42) might also be due to the tendency of numerals in Vietnamese to not usually occur on their own as in (43) uttered for example in a market setting, where somebody wants to buy two fruits.

- (42) Context: Huong has a lot of uncles and aunts.
?Chú thì có bốn và cô thì có năm.
uncle⁷ TOP have four and aunt TOP have five
'She has four uncles and five aunts.'

⁷ Younger brother of one's father.

- (43) Bán cho tôi **hai trái**.
 sell for I two CLF (fruits)
 ‘Sell me two (of them).’

However, some Vietnamese nouns which are countable without a classifier may take a classifier when they are counted as can be seen in (44) to (45):

- (44) hai (người) cô
 two (CLF) aunt
 ‘two aunts’
- (45) ba (người) chú
 three (CLF) uncle
 ‘three uncles’

When it comes to discontinuous noun phrases, sentences containing the class of nouns just described, seem to be better when they occur with a classifier as in (46).

- (46) Context: Huong has a lot of uncle and aunts⁸.
Chú thì có bốn người và cô thì có năm người.
 uncle TOP have four CLF and aunt TOP have five CLF
 ‘Huong has a lot of uncles and aunts: Four uncles and five aunts.’

In short, discontinuous NPs seem to be grammatical, when a classifier is separated from its noun, but not when an unclassified noun is separated from other parts of the NP (for example numeral). However, sentences with discontinuous NPs seem to be better when nouns taking an optional classifier occur with a classifier.

Trinh (2011) proposes a general distinction between relational and non-relational nouns in order to correctly analyse discontinuous noun phrases. As for non-relational nouns, no doubling of head nouns is possible when they appear without complement:

- (47) **Sách** thì nó sẽ mua **hai quyển** (*sách).
 book TOP he will buy two CLF (*book)
 ‘He will buy two books.’ (Trinh 2011, p. 79)

Concerning relational nouns without complement as second part of a discontinuous noun phrase, doubling of fronted noun is optional:

- (48) **Bạn** thì nó sẽ gặp **hai người** (bạn).
 friend TOP he will meet two CLF friend
 ‘As for friends, he will meet two friends.’ (Trinh 2011, p. 20)

According to my own research, the distinction between relational and non-relational nouns is not necessary to analyse discontinuous NP in Vietnamese. It is more important to consider whether a noun takes a classifier or not and whether this classifier is optional or not. And this property is independent from the property of being relational or not.

⁸ Younger siblings of her father.

The different behaviour of (47) and (48) may be explained by the fact that *sách* ‘book’ needs a classifier to be counted, whereas *bạn* ‘friend’ takes an optional classifier. Obviously noun doubling is either possible with nouns taking an optional classifier or with nouns that do not take a classifier as in (49).

In (49), the nouns *ngày* ‘day’, *giờ* ‘hour’, *phút* ‘minute’ and *giây* ‘second’ are all non-relational and do not take a classifier. Still, doubling is possible and even necessary (cf. example (41) above). It seems that these nouns may function as “their own classifier”. Note that nouns like *ngày* ‘day’ may also be analysed as a ‘measure classifier’ in Grinevald’s (2002) terminology. Therefore, depending on the theory it may also be a classifier.

Context: Hoa’s boyfriend went far away because of his work, therefore Hoa is very lonely and misses him. So Hoa counts every second, every hour and every day until her boyfriend returns:

- (49) **Ngày** thì đếm được **7 ngày**, **giờ** thì đếm được **168 giờ**,
 day TOP count can 7 day hour TOP count can 168 hour
phút thì đếm được **10080 phút** còn **giây** thì đếm được **604800 giây**.
 minute TOP count can 10080 minute and second TOP count can 604800 second
 ‘She counts 7 days, 168 hours, 10,080 minutes and 604,800 seconds.’

An anonymous reviewer⁹ proposed that words like *ngày* ‘day’ might be analysed as being a fusion of classifier and noun. However, this does not seem plausible since it is not possible to have “CLF+noun” at the beginning of a sentence containing a discontinuous NP:

- (50) Context: A (small) child likes animals a lot and wants to breed some different of them.
 ***Con chó** thì ba con còn **con thỏ** thì hai con.
 CLF dog TOP three CLF and CLF rabbit TOP two CLF
 ‘He/she wants to breed three dogs and two rabbits.’

To sum up, it is necessary to consider whether a noun takes a classifier or not and in case there is a classifier whether this classifier is optional or not, in order to analyse discontinuous noun phrases in Vietnamese. There is thus no need to consider whether a noun is relational or not. This paper almost exclusively discussed discontinuous noun phrases involving numerals. However, discontinuous NP without numerals may behave differently since in these cases classifiers are not used so frequently. This may be a topic for further research.

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⁹ Abstract for the Semantics of African, Asian and Austronesian Languages (TripleA 3) workshop.

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