



A STUDY OF THE NANG TONE IN VIETNAMESE

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1. The purpose. The purpose of this study¹ has been to assist the foreign student of Vietnamese by providing a description of the pronunciation of the nạng tone in the Northern dialect.

2. The procedure.

2.1. This study was carried out with several Northern informants who used, for the most part, a reading or slow, careful speech. After the initial elicitations of stories and conversations, it was necessary, for the purpose of a more complete study, to construct and in some cases revise sentences from various sources. To insure that these were as the natural constructions of a native speaker, the informants were requested to correct them as they read them to me for mimicry. Each informant appeared to make corrections very freely. To avoid an unnaturalness or an undue emphasis of these words, it was not disclosed to the informants that my main interest was in the nạng tone.

2.2. Steps of the procedure described.

2.2.1. To listen to elicited conversation and storytelling, some of which were tape recorded and listened to repeatedly. This was to assist me in beginning to listen for the tone, and to get a general impression which would help me know how to proceed.

2.2.2. To elicit sentences using the nặng tone with all combinations of adjacent tonal environments, including its occurrence as sentence initial or sentence final. Although this tone does not have a high percentage of occurrence in relation to the other tones,² it can occur in any of the above-mentioned environments. This is true regardless of whether the word final is a stop, nasal, vowel, or semivowel.

2.2.3. To compare nặng and huyền words in identical and similar contexts. This comparison was made after having noted that in context the level of the two tones is the same, as Ly notes in describing a musician-like impression of the tones.³

2.2.4. To listen to a series of two or more adjacent nặng tones within the wider context of a sentence. These included all possible combinations with reference to the word-final position: i.e., stop-final, nasal-final, vowel-final, and semivowel-final. For comparison, a word with the huyền tone was included in the sentences.

2.2.5. To observe nặng words in isolation in contrast with huyền words, which were otherwise identical. Stop-final nặng words were compared with similar words of both tones, since a stop-final never occurs on words with a huyền tone.

3. The results.

3.1. There is no variation in the pronunciation of words having the nặng tone to correspond with change in tonal context, in position in the sentence, or in the final of the word itself. (See 2.2.2, 2.2.4).

3.2. The level of nặng tone in context is identical with that of the huyền tone. In isolation, it is pronounced lower than huyền, except for nặng words with a stop-final, which were pronounced on the same level.

3.3. Laryngealization may occur on the vowels of words having the nặng tone. This is especially common in slow, precise speech. On tapes and in the first few readings by my informants, the vowels were very frequently laryngealized. Later, as the informants became more accustomed to the procedure, this almost disappeared.

3.4. A glottal stop occurs word-final on words written with a nasal, vowel, or semivowel final.⁴ On words having a nasal final, this effects a double closure. That is, the oral closure is made simultaneously with the glottal stop, the tongue reaching the point of articulation as the vocal cords interrupt the airstream. The nasal may continue after the glottal stop is released, especially in slow, careful speech.⁵ Even without the nasal being pronounced, the vowel preceding the glottal stop is nasalized, and being colored by the approach to the nasal, it enables one to distinguish a word ending with an alveolar closure from a velar (as, nən vs. nạng).

3.5. Orthographically, there are stop-final words having the nặng tone. Phonetically, however, these are to be classed with the huyền tone; because they occur without laryngealization or a glottal stop. (3.2 indicates a tendency toward this distinction between stop-final and other nặng words by the native speaker.)

Footnotes

¹This is an aural perceptive study in contrast to the spectograph study in Lê Văn Ly, Le Parler Vietnamiien, Huong Anh, Paris, 1948.

²From Emeneau's results on the frequency of occurrence of various tones in connected discourse, nẵng percentages average to only 11.7 percent. M. B. Emeneau, Studies in Vietnamese (Annamese) Grammar, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1951, p. 27.

³Ly, p. 108, sections 4 and 6.

⁴Ly, p. 116, section 6.

⁵See spectograph study, Ly, p. 117, numbers 33,34.