DECOMPOSING DEFINITENESS IN VIETNAMESE

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Abstract
This paper provides a detailed description of how Vietnamese encodes definiteness in the nominal phrase in the context of the crosslinguistic debate about the existence of lexical articles in classifier languages. We first show that so-called lexical determiners in Vietnamese are not genuine articles in the technical sense. We then scrutinize six different referring expressions in Vietnamese including bare nouns, classifier – nouns, numeral – classifier – nouns, plural – classifier – nouns, focus cái – classifier – nouns while pointing out how Vietnamese differs from other better-studied classifier languages. Based on this thorough investigation, we posit that Vietnamese systematically differentiates six levels of the givenness hierarchy in the sense of Gundel et al. (1993); therefore, Vietnamese contributes to a better understanding of the nature of definiteness and the structure of the nominal phrase.

Keywords: definiteness, plural, classifier, numeral, bare noun, Vietnamese

ISO 639-3 codes: vie

1. Introduction
The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the on-going controversial issue of whether Vietnamese as a numeral classifier language has lexical articles. On the one hand, there are those researchers who deny the existence of lexical articles in Vietnamese, such as Emeneau (1951), Thompson (1965), Nguyen D. H. (1997), Doan et al. (2019), just to name a few. On the other hand, Nguyen T. C. (1975) and Nguyen H. T. (2004) claim that Vietnamese indeed possesses genuine lexical articles, which form an independent paradigm as in (1).

(1) Candidates for lexical articles in Vietnamese
    a. một (‘one’)        [−Plural, −Definite]
    b. những (‘plural’)   [+Plural, −Definite]
    c. các (‘plural’)     [+Plural, +Definite]

Our contributions to the existing literature are the following. First, based on a re-examination of the members of the paradigm listed in (1), carefully distinguishing them from one another, we argue that there are no genuine lexical articles in Vietnamese despite some researchers’ effort to formally apply this functional category notion in the analysis of Vietnamese nominal structure. Second, we further notice a well reported fact that comes out of this debate but is hardly discussed at any depth, namely, various constructions can be interpreted as definite in Vietnamese including bare nouns, classifier – nouns, numeral – classifier – nouns, plural – classifier – nouns, cái – classifier – nouns (Nguyen T. C. 1975, Nguyen P. P. 2002, Nguyen H. T. 2004, Trinh 2011, Tran J. 2011, Le & Schmitt 2016, Phan & Lander 2015, Tran N. N. 2017, Simpson & Ngo 2018, Doan et al. 2019).
(2) a. **Sách rách rồi**
   Book torn already
   ‘The book(s) was/were torn.’

b. **Cuốn sách rách rồi**
   CLF book torn already\(^1\)
   ‘The book was torn.’

c. **Hai cuốn sách rách rồi**
   two CLF book torn already
   ‘(The) two books were torn.’

d. **Các cuốn sách rách rồi**
   PL CLF book torn already
   ‘The books were torn.’

e. **Những cuốn sách (này) rách rồi**
   PL CLF book this torn already
   ‘These books were torn.’

f. **Cái cuốn sách (này) rách rồi**
   FOC CLF book this torn already
   ‘This very book was torn.’

The issue worth further investigating, therefore, is whether there are any differences in terms of definiteness interpretation among these constructions.

(3) Types of definite nominal constructions under investigation:

a. bare nouns
b. classifier – noun phrases
c. numeral – classifier – noun phrases
d. **các** – classifier – noun phrases
e. **Những** – classifier – noun phrases
f. **Cái** – classifiers – noun phrases

In a nutshell, our study centers on two research questions:

(4) Research questions:

a. Are **Những, các, một** genuine lexical articles?
b. What are the interpretational differences across different definite constructions?

In order to address the first question, we compare the distribution and interpretation of **Những, các, một** with that of grammaticalized articles like English *the*, and we provide those arguments which go against Nguyen H. T. (2004), and Nguyen T. C. (1975)’s proposal in which these markers are considered as articles in Vietnamese.

In order to tackle the second question, we adopt the givenness hierarchy proposed by Gundel *et al.* (1993) shown in (5) since this hierarchy distinguishes up to six levels of givenness, which is fine-grained enough to account for six different definite nominal constructions in Vietnamese listed in (3).

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1 Abbreviations used in this paper include the following: 1SG: first person singular, 2SG: second person singular, ANT: anterior, AP: adjective phrase, CLF: classifier, DEM: demonstrative, FOC: focus, Mod: modifier, NUM: numeral, PL: plural, PossP: possessive phrase, RC: relative clause.

2 Different from the previous examples in (2a-d), noun phrases with **Những** and **Cái** in (2e-f) prefer to be accompanied by an additional post-nominal modifier **này** (meaning ‘this’). The presence of such a modifier is optional since it can be omitted if the contextual information is clear enough. This point will be explained in sections 4.4 and 4.5.
(5) The givenness hierarchy, adopted from Gundel et al. (1993:275):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In focus</th>
<th>Activated</th>
<th>Familiar</th>
<th>Uniquely identifiable</th>
<th>Referential</th>
<th>Type identifiable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>{it}</td>
<td>{that}</td>
<td>{that N}</td>
<td>{the N} {indefinite this N}</td>
<td>{a N}</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Gundel et al. (1993), referring expressions in natural languages differentiate six cognitive statuses, which can be stated informally as in (6).

(6) Six levels of givenness:

- **type identifiable**: I can identify the type of things that the noun describes
- **referential**: I refer to a particular thing that I have in mind
- **unique identifiable**: I can identify the unique thing that the noun describes
- **familiar**: I am familiar with the thing that the noun describes
- **activated**: I can refer to the thing that the noun describes by retrieving activation from immediate linguistic or extralinguistic context.
- **in focus**: The thing that the noun describes is the center of attention.

The givenness hierarchy is a continuum from indefinite, referential specificity, unique definiteness, familiar definiteness, activated givenness to focus. One crucial property of the givenness hierarchy is that those six statuses are implicationally related. For instance, if a referring expression is ‘familiar’, it is also ‘unique identifiable’ since if one is familiar with the thing described by the noun, (s)he is also able to identify that thing. In this paper, we will show how the givenness hierarchy sheds light on various aspects of definiteness encoded by different Vietnamese nominal expressions.

In this beginning section, we have first introduced the problems that we find worth further investigating, then we narrowed down to two research questions, as well as sketched out how we handle these questions. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The second section outlines the panorama of Vietnamese nominal phrases. Section 3 addresses the first research question; in particular, we show that the paradigm listed in (1) fails to capture several crucial facts of Vietnamese nominal phrases, thus strictly speaking, Vietnamese has no genuine lexical articles, similar to many other classifier languages. However, Vietnamese does distinguish different subtle shades of definiteness, which are investigated thoroughly in Section 4 by addressing the second research question. Section 5 discusses some intra-linguistic and cross-linguistic implications of the study before ending the paper.

2. Panorama of Vietnamese nominal phrase

An extended nominal phrase in Vietnamese consists of both pre-nominal and post-nominal elements, which are arranged in the template in (7) and (8).


(8) Tất-cả cả/cả ba cái cuốn sách AP[ců] PossP[của tôi]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RC</th>
<th>mà</th>
<th>anh</th>
<th>mượn</th>
<th>hôm qua</th>
<th>dò</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2SG</td>
<td>just borrow yesterday that</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘All those (three) old books of mine that you just borrowed yesterday’

The pre-nominal elements serve to categorize the noun, and importantly, they must obey a fixed order in which universal quantifiers must be followed by plural markers or numerals, which in turn are followed by the pre-classifier cái and classifiers, as in (9a), illustrated in (9b). For instance, the raising of the classifier across the pre-classifier cái as in (9c), or across the numeral/the plural as in (9d) or across the universal quantifier as in (9e), as well as the displacement of the numeral/the plural across the universal quantifier as in (9f) all result in ungrammaticality.
(9)  

(a) $Q_{\text{universal}} < \text{PL/Num} < \text{Cái} < \text{CLF} < \text{Noun}$  

(b) Tất cả ba/các cái cuốn sách  
All three/ PL FOC CLF book  

(c) *Tất cả ba/các cuốn cái sách  
All three/ PL CLF FOC book  

(d) *Tất cả cuốn ba/các cái sách  
All CLF three/ PL FOC book  

(e) *Cuốn tất cả ba/các cái sách  
CLF all three/ PL FOC book  

(f) *Ba/các cuốn tất cả cái sách  
Three/ PL all CLF FOC book  

Intended meaning: ‘All the (three) books’

The post-nominal elements, on the other hand, serve to modify the noun, and notably, they exhibit a less strict ordering effect, as shown in (10).

(10)  

\[ \text{Noun} < \text{AP} < \text{PossP} / \text{RC} / \text{Dem} \]

The only restriction is that adjectives must be the closest modifier attached to the noun as in (11a). The intervention of other modifiers between the adjective and the noun as in (11b), (11c), (11d) are all unacceptable:

(11)  

(a) Cuốn sách [cũ] của tôi [mà anh mới mượn hôm qua] đó  
CLF book old of 1SG RC 2SG just borrow yesterday that  

(b) *Cuốn sách [cũ] của tôi [mà anh mới mượn hôm qua] đó  
CLF book old of 1SG RC 2SG just borrow yesterday that  

(c) *Cuốn sách [cũ] của tôi [mà anh mới mượn hôm qua] đó  
CLF book old of 1SG RC 2SG just borrow yesterday old that  

(d) *Cuốn sách [cũ] của tôi [mà anh mới mượn hôm qua] đó  
CLF book old of 1SG RC 2SG just borrow yesterday that old  

Intended meaning: ‘That old book of mine that you just borrowed yesterday’

The order of adjectives, possessive phrases, relative clauses, and demonstratives\(^3\), however, is quite flexible, as shown in (12).

(12)  

(a) Cuốn sách [cũ] của tôi [mà anh mới mượn hôm qua] đó  
CLF book old of 1SG RC 2SG just borrow yesterday that  

(b) Cuốn sách [cũ] của tôi [mà anh mới mượn hôm qua] đó  
CLF book old of 1SG RC 2SG just borrow yesterday of 1SG that  

(c) Cuốn sách [cũ] đó [mà anh mới mượn hôm qua] của tôi  
CLF book old that of 1SG RC 2SG just borrow yesterday  

(d) Cuốn sách [cũ] đó [mà anh mới mượn hôm qua] của tôi  
CLF book old that RC 2SG just borrow yesterday of 1SG  

Intended meaning: ‘That old book of mine that you just borrowed yesterday’

In this paper, we only take into account those pre-nominal elements which are significant for the definite interpretation of the noun phrases, in particular, on the six types of nominal constructions as listed in (3). The rationale for this choice will become clear at the end of the next section.

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\(^3\) Unlike what is commonly assumed in the literature, Hoang & Nguyen (2004), Phan & Tsai (2018) argue that demonstratives are not the final boundary of Vietnamese nominal phrase. Interested readers are referred to Phan & Tsai (2018) for further details.
3. Are the definiteness markers genuine lexical articles in Vietnamese?

This section deals with the first research question of whether `những, các, một` truly form a paradigm of genuine lexical articles as proposed by Nguyen T. C. (1975), and Nguyen H. T. (2004) in (1).

In this section, we propose three objections to the paradigm in (1). First, we argue that `những/các` are different from the English definite article `the` in terms of their optionality and their incompatibility with numerals. Second, in the line with Phan & Lander (2015) and Le & Schmitt (2016), we show that the distinction between `những` and `các` as indefinite and definite articles respectively in the paradigm in (1) fails to capture the fact that similar to `các`, `những` can also appear in strongly definite contexts. Then we provide the third argument to challenge the paradigm, namely, the categorization of `những` and `một` under the same label of ‘indefinite articles’ fails to capture the crucial distributional differences between `những` and `một`. On a final note, we make some comments with respect to Nguyen H. T. (2004: 42)’s claim that ‘there is no way to use a determiner to unambiguously mark [+singular; +definite] in Vietnamese.’ Based on these considerations, we conclude that Vietnamese has no genuine lexical definite articles.

First of all, the distributional properties of `những` and `các` clearly set them apart from genuine definite articles. In particular, unlike English `the`, Vietnamese plural markers are not obligatory for definiteness interpretation of the nominal phrase. Examples in (13) below indicate that the nominals in both sentences can be interpreted as definite either with `các` as in (13a) or without `các` as in (13b). That is to say, the presence of `các` crucially contributes to the sentence the plural reading, not the definite reading.

(13) a. **Huốn sách rất cũ**  
   CLF book very old  
   ‘The book is very old.’

b. **Các cuốn sách rất cũ**  
   PL CLF book very old  
   ‘The books are very old.’

In fact, the element which is necessarily present for the definiteness as well as the well-formedness of the sentence is the classifier `cuốn` instead.

(14) a. **Các cuốn sách rất cũ**  
   PL CLF book very old  
   Intended meaning: ‘The books are very old’

b. **Các sách rất cũ**  
   PL CLF book very old  
   Intended meaning: ‘The three books’

The minimal contrast between (14a) and (14b) suggests that the counterpart of the definite article in Vietnamese is the classifier `cuốn` instead.

In addition to the non-optionality property, `những` and `các` are also differentiated from English `the` with respect to their co-occurrence restriction with numerals. In English, there is no such incompatibility between the article `the` and the numerals as shown in (15a) whereas in Vietnamese plural `những` and `các` cannot precede the numerals as in (15b).

(15) a. **The three books**  
   Intended meaning: ‘The three books’

b. **Các ba cuốn sách**  
   PL three CLF book  
   Intended meaning: ‘The three books’

`Những` and `các` not only compete with numerals distributionally, but also interpretationally. Let us consider a context in which the hearer is supposed to meet the speaker in order to return the three books that (s)he borrowed from the speaker. When they meet each other, the speaker can either use `các` or `three` in the question as in (16a) and (16b) respectively, but not both.
(16) a. **Các cuốn sách đâu?**
   PL  CLF book where
   ‘Where are the books?’

b. **Ba cuốn sách đâu?**
   Three  CLF book where
   ‘Where are the three books?’

c. **Các ba cuốn sách đâu?**
   PL  three  CLF book where
   Intended: ‘Where are the three books?’

It is obvious from (16b) that the presence of the numeral is compatible with a definiteness interpretation. Alternatively, the pre-classifier cái can be inserted right after the numeral with the companion of a post-nominal modifier.

(16) d. **Ba cái cuốn sách đó đâu?**
   Three  FOC CLF book that where
   ‘Where are those three books?’

In other words, without the plural markers, the nominal phrase can still be interpreted as definite. Other elements including the numeral and the pre-classifier cái can also serve the same function. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the distribution of những and cả is truly different from that of genuine definite articles.

Second, in contrast to Nguyen’s (2004) description, we posit that there is no inherent contrast between những as [−Definite] and cả as [+Definite]. In fact, similar to cả, những is perfectly fine in those contexts which require strong definite readings including noun phrases with demonstratives and superlatives as in (17a-b).

(17) a. **Những/Các cuốn sách ấy**
   PL / PL  CLF book that
   ‘Those books’

b. **Những/Các cuốn sách cũ nhất**
   PL / PL  CLF book old most
   ‘The oldest books’

Third, những is sharply distinguished from the indefinite một for một is totally excluded from those strong definite contexts as in (18a-b).

(18) a. ***Một cuốn sách ấy**
   One  CLF book that
   ‘One book’

b. ***Một cuốn sách cũ nhất**
   One  CLF book old most
   ‘The oldest book’

These examples suggest that the grouping of những and một as indefinite articles on the one hand and cả as a definite article on the other hand as proposed by Nguyen H. T. (2004) is misleading. Instead, những and cả are both compatible with a definiteness interpretation, and only một can be characterized as an indefinite marker.

Finally, the paradigm in (1) is indeed not a complete one, since it misses out the element which is characterized as [+Singular +Definite] in Vietnamese. Although it is understandable for Nguyen H. T. (2004) to deny the existence of such an article, nevertheless, the presence of a classifier in Vietnamese nominal phrase clearly forces such a reading.

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4 The fact that (16c) is an ill-formed translation of the English sentence ‘Where are the three books?’ clearly highlights the difference between Vietnamese cả and English the: the former is a quantity word whereas the latter is not. We thank Mark Alves for pointing this out.
From the above discussion, two points can be drawn. First, although Vietnamese possesses certain lexical items which express the definiteness of the nominal phrases, they are not articles in a strictly technical sense. To this extent, Vietnamese is no different from other classifier languages.

However, it does not mean that Vietnamese is unable to mark fine-grained distinctions with respect to different facets of definiteness. As briefly seen above, not only các, but also những, numerals, the pre-classifier cái and classifiers can also independently contribute to the definite interpretation of Vietnamese nominal phrases. Therefore, in the next section we will scrutinize those definite constructions which involve these elements, as listed in (3) in order to point out which aspect of definiteness each of the constructions highlight as well as to what extent Vietnamese is different from other classifier languages.

4. What are the interpretational differences across different definite constructions?

This section addresses the second research question, namely, what the interpretational differences among a bare noun, a CLF – N phrase, a Numerical – CLF – N phrase and a PL – CLF – N phrase, a cái – CLF – N phrase are when it comes to expressing definiteness. Let us look at each of the constructions in turn.

4.1. Bare nouns

The definite reading of Vietnamese bare nouns obtains in both subject and object positions, as in (20) and (21) respectively.

(20) a. Sách rách rồi
    book torn already
    ‘The book(s) was/were torn.’
  b. Sách là bạn tri-kỳ của tôi
    Book COP friend soul of 1SG
    ‘Books are my soul-mate’.

(21) a. Tôi làm rách sách rồi
    1SG make torn book already
    ‘I made the book(s) torn.’
  b. Tôi muốn mua sách
    1SG want buy book
    ‘I want to buy a book/ books.’

In terms of interpretation, Vietnamese bare nouns can be interpreted as definite (as in 20a, 21a) or generic (as in 20b) or indefinite (as in 21b), with either singular or plural readings. The wide range of interpretations and distribution of bare nouns in Vietnamese is shared by other classifier languages such as Thai and different varieties of Chinese (see Cheng & Sybesma 1999, 2005, Simpson 2005, among others). What is crucial here is that the definiteness interpretation of the noun seems to be conditioned by the aspectuality of the predicate, not by the position of the noun in the sentence. Specifically, the predicate in (21a) is resultative, the bare noun obtains a definite reading, whereas the predicate in (21b) is episodic, the bare noun is interpreted as indefinite. Again, a similar correlation is also observed in different dialects of Chinese (Cheng & Sybesma 2005). That is to say, with respect to the ability to license a definite bare noun, Vietnamese is not an exception. However, Vietnamese does exhibit certain language-specific characteristics.

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5 It is well-documented that cross-linguistically definiteness can be expressed by a variety of means including articles, structural position, verbal aspect, Case, etc. (Cheng & Sybesma 2005, Simpson 2005, among others). In this paper, we are mainly concerned with the first factor.
when other elements including classifiers, numerals, plural markers, and the pre-classifier cái are brought into the picture.

4.2. Classifier-Noun
Definite reading of a nominal phrase containing a classifier and a noun can be obtained regardless of the position of the noun phrases as the subjects or the objects of the sentences, as in (22) and (23).

(22) a. Cuốn sách rạch rồi
CLF book torn already
‘The book was torn.’

b. Cuốn sách là người bạn tri-kỳ của tôi6
CLF book COP CLF friend soul of 1SG
‘The book is my soul-mate’.

(23) a. Tôi làm rạch cuốn sách rồi
1SG make torn CLF book already
‘I made the book torn.’

b. Tôi muốn mua cuốn sách
1SG want buy CLF book
‘I want to buy the/a book.’

The presence of the classifier cuốn forces a singular definite reading unless the default definite reading is overridden by the context. This property puts Vietnamese closer to Cantonese than to Mandarin Chinese, since CLF-N tends to be definite in Cantonese, not in Mandarin (Cheng & Sybesma 1999, Simpson, Soh & Nomoto 2011, Jenks 2018).

Since a bare noun can be also possibly interpreted with a definite singular reading, as shown in (20a) and (21a), a question arises whether there are any differences in terms of definiteness interpretation between a definite bare noun and a definite classified noun.

Interestingly, it is found that there are contexts that are compatible with both a bare noun and a classified noun as in (24), but there are also other contexts which only tolerate classified nouns as in (25).

(24) a. Context A: The hearer is supposed to meet the speaker today in order to return the book that (s)he borrowed from the speaker. When they meet each other, the speaker asks:
(Cuốn) sách đâu?
CLF book where
‘Where is the book?’

Note that there are those contexts in which the combination between a classifier and a bare noun can be interpreted as generic:

- Con chó thích ăn thịt. Con mèo thích ăn cá
CLF dog like eat meat CLF cat like eat fish
‘Dogs love to eat meat. Cats love to eat fish.’

- Con trâu là bạn của nhà nông bao đời nay
CLF buffalo COP friend of CLF farmer many generation now
‘(The) buffaloes have been (the) farmers’ friends for many generations.’

Here we witness a difference between Cantonese and Vietnamese: CL-NPs in Cantonese cannot have a generic interpretation (Cheng & Sybesma 1999:533). What factors license such a generic reading is clearly worth further investigation. However, in this paper, we only focus on the definite interpretation of the relevant construction, so the generic interpretation is left for future research.

According to Sudo & Trinh (2009), Vietnamese CLF-N can only be indefinite in object positions, i.e., under the scope of Existential closure at the VP level, as in (23b).

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CLF dog like eat meat CLF cat like eat fish

‘Dogs love to eat meat. Cats love to eat fish.’

Con trâu là bạn của nhà nông bao đời nay
CLF buffalo COP friend of CLF farmer many generation now

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7 According to Sudo & Trinh (2009), Vietnamese CLF-N can only be indefinite in object positions, i.e., under the scope of Existential closure at the VP level, as in (23b).
b. Context B:

*Mẹ mới mua một cuốn sách cho tôi.*

‘Mum has just bought a book for me.’

*Sách vẫn còn thơm mùi giấy mới.*

‘The book still has the good smell of freshly-printed paper.’

(25) Context: The speaker borrowed a book from the hearer. When they meet each other, the speaker says:

*Tớ rất thích *(cuốn)sách mà cậu cho tôi mượn*

‘I really like the book that you lent me.’

From (24a), it can be seen that both a bare noun and a classified noun can refer to situationally unique referents. From (24b) and (24c), it is suggested that both a bare noun and a classified noun can also refer to discourse-familiar referents (note that bare nouns are interpreted contrastively in (24c)).

Crucially, the subtle difference between (24a) and (25) lies in the optionality of the classifier cuốn in (24a) versus the obligatoriness of the classifier cuốn in (25). (25) tells us that the presence of the classifier is required when we add a post-nominal modifier (in the form of a relative clause in this case). In other words, CLF-N is needed in the activation of immediate linguistic context.

This seems to suggest that in Vietnamese, both bare and CLF-N phrases can express unique definiteness and familiar definiteness, whereas CLF-N phrases can additionally encode activated givenness. That is to say, Vietnamese data provide additional empirical support for recent research findings on definiteness that languages differentiate different levels of definiteness (Heim 1982, 2011, Li 1999, Jiang 2012, Simpson and Biswas 2016, Jenks 2018, among others).

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8 Note that there is a certain kind of nouns which does not require classifiers even in anaphoric contexts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sĩnh-viên</th>
<th>và</th>
<th>giáo-viên</th>
<th>đều</th>
<th>đến</th>
<th>dự</th>
<th>tiệc.</th>
<th>Sĩnh-viên</th>
<th>thì</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>teacher</td>
<td>both come</td>
<td>attend</td>
<td>party</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>TOP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Students and teachers both came to the party. The students were very drunk, the teachers were still awake.’

See Simpson & Ngo (2018), Phan (2019) for detailed discussion. In these cases, we assume that those seemingly bare nouns in fact are not so bare, structurally they contain within themselves a classifying element which enables them to stand alone in anaphoric contexts as well as to combine directly with numerals and the plural markers, as seen in footnote (10) and footnote (13).

9 We are grateful to Michal Starke for pointing out this crucial contrast to us and for helping us to sharpen the empirical data in (24) and (25).
4.3. Numeral – Classifier – Noun
Similar to other numeral classifier languages, Vietnamese requires the presence of the classifier between the numeral and the bare noun in counting contexts, as in (26).\(^{10}\)

(26) a. \(\text{Ba} \ cuôn \ sách\)
    Three CLF book
b. \(\ast \text{Ba} \ sách\)
    Three book
   ‘(The) three books.’

A numeral – CLF – N phrase can naturally be interpreted as definite in both subject or object positions, as in (27) and (28) respectively.

(27) a. \(\text{Hai} \ cuôn \ sách \ rách \ rồi\)
    two CLF book torn already
   ‘(The) two books were torn.’

b. \(\text{Hai} \ cuôn \ sách \ là \ những \ người \ bạn \ trì-ký \ của \ tôi\)
    Book CLF book COP PL CLF friend soul of 1SG
   ‘The two books are my soul-mates.’

(28) a. \(\text{Tôi} \ làm \ rách \ hai \ cuôn \ sách \ rồi\)
    1SG make torn two CLF book already
   ‘I made (the) two books torn.’

b. \(\text{Tôi} \ muốn \ mua \ hai \ cuôn \ sách\)
    1SG want buy two CLF book
   ‘I want to buy two books.’

The fact that Vietnamese Numeral – CLF – N phrases can have definite reading\(^{11}\) and can naturally occur in the subject position clearly differentiates them from Mandarin and Cantonese counterparts which are indefinite and can only be the sentence’s subjects in limited contexts (Li 1999, Cheng & Sybesma 1999, 2005, Sio & Song 2015, Jiang 2012, among others). In particular, in Mandarin Chinese, a numeral – CLF – N phrase can only be the sentence’s subject if we add you (‘have’) to the left of the numeral – CLF – N phrase or dou (‘all’) to the right of the numeral – CLF – N phrase, as in (29).

(29) a. \(\ast [\text{San ge xuesheng}] \ zai \ xuexiao shoushang \ le\)
    three CLF student at school hurt LE
   ‘Three students were hurt at school.’

b. \(\text{You} \ [\text{san ge xuesheng}] \ zai \ xuexiao shoushang \ le\)
    have three CLF student at school hurt LE
   ‘There are three students hurt at school.’

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\(^{10}\) As noted in footnote (8), those nouns which do not need classifiers in anaphoric contexts also do not need classifiers in numeral contexts: hai sinh viên (two students), hai giáo trình (two textbooks), một trăm nhà (one hundred houses), một trăm vận động viên (one hundred athletes), etc. See Phan (2019), Simpson & Ngo (2018) for detailed discussion.

\(^{11}\) This generalization does not apply to the numeral \(\text{một}\) (‘one’), which is uncontroversially indefinite in both subject and object positions:

(i) a. \(\text{Một} \ cuốn \ sách \ rách \ rồi\)
    One CLF book torn already
   ‘A book was torn.’

b. \(\text{Tôi} \ làm \ rách \ một \ cuốn \ sách \ rồi\)
    1SG make torn one CLF book already
   ‘I made a book torn.’
c. $\text{San ge xeusheng\textunderscore dou}$ lai zhe li le
Tai CLF student all come this place LE
‘Three students all came here. (Examples cited from Sio & Song 2015:180-181)

Since the CLF-N construction is also definite as shown in the previous section, we can ask a further question of whether there exist any differences in terms of definiteness interpretation between a CLF-N phrase and a Numeral-CLF-N phrase.

Similar to a CLF-N construction, a Numeral-CLF-N construction can designate both unique definiteness as in (30), and familiar definiteness as in (31).

(30) Context: The hearer is supposed to meet the speaker today in order to return the ten books that (s)he borrowed from the speaker. When they meet each other, the speaker asks:

$\text{Mười cuốn sách đâu?}$
Ten CLF book where
‘Where are the ten books?’

$\text{Tôi mới mua hai cuốn sách và mười cây bút.}$
1SG just buy two CLF book and ten CLF pen
‘I have just bought two books and ten pens.’

$\text{Hai cuốn sách và mười cây bút vẫn còn thơm mùi gõ mới.}$
two CLF book and ten CLF pen still have good smell
wood fresh
‘The two books and the ten pens still have the good smell of freshly-cut wood.’

However, there are contexts in which CLF-N is not sufficient, and a numeral must be added, as in (32).

(32) $\text{Tôi đã mua *(hai) cuốn sách rất hay}$
1SG ANT buy two CLF book very good
‘I have bought those two books which are very good.’

It is shown from (32) that only Numeral-CLF-N, but not CLF-N phrases, can serve as the object controller of a secondary predicate,\(^\text{12}\) which is assumed to be referential specific (i.e., known by the speaker, not by the hearer). In other words, in addition to being unique definite and familiar definite, Numeral-CLF-N phrases can be referential specific. That is to say, compared to bare nouns and CLF-N constructions, Numeral-CLF-N constructions cover a wider range of the givenness hierarchy (Gundel \textit{et al.} 1993).

4.4. \textit{Các/những-Classifier-Noun}
Apart from numerals, there are two plural markers which can be added to the left of the CLF-N sequence resulting in a definite PL-CLF-N phrase. Similar to numerals, the presence of a classifier is also obligatory for the plurals, as in (33).\(^\text{13}\)

(33) a. $\text{Những/Các cuốn sách}$
PL/PL CLF book
‘The books.’

\(^{12}\) A similar phenomenon is also observed in Chinese (Cheng \& Sybesma 1999, Li \& Bisang 2012).

\(^{13}\) As noted in footnote (8) above, those nouns which do not need classifiers in numeral contexts also do not need classifiers in plural contexts: \textit{những/các sinh viên} (the students), \textit{những/các vận động viên} (the athletes), etc.
Furthermore, as already shown above, *những and *các are in complementary distribution with numerals.

(34)  *Những / *Các ba cuốn sách
PL/PL three CLF book
Intended meaning: ‘The three books’

PL-CLF-N phrases can be definite either in the subjects or the objects positions, as in (35) to (36).

(35)  a. Các cuốn sách rách rồi
PL CLF book torn already
‘The books were torn.’
b. Các cuốn sách là những người bạn tri-kỷ của tôi
PL CLF book COP PL CLF friend soul of 1SG
‘The books are my soul-mates’.

(36)  a. Tôi làm rách các cuốn sách rồi
1SG make torn PL CLF book already
‘I made the books torn.’
b. Tôi muốn mua các cuốn sách
1SG want buy PL CLF book
‘I want to buy the books.’

PL-CLF-N phrases can be interpreted as either definite (as in 35a, 36a) or generic (as in 35b), but cannot be indefinite as in (36b).

Two comments are in order. First, the behavior of *các in the contexts in (35) to (36) parallels that of classifiers in as much as their presence both renders a definite reading. The only distinction is that *các forces a plural interpretation, whereas the classifier results in a singular interpretation. Second, the fact that *các-CLF-N phrases are unambiguously definite even in indefinite-oriented contexts such as (36b) makes them apparently different from Numeral-CLF-N phrases which are naturally interpreted as indefinite in such contexts as shown in (28b).

It is easily seen that the examples in (35) to (36) above only concentrate on *các, therefore the next question arises as to what distinguishes between the two plural markers *các and *những.

Both *các and *những must be added in order to refer to plural previously mentioned referents, as in (37).

(37) Tôi mới mua hai cuốn sách và mười cây bút
1SG just buy two CLF book and ten CLF pen
‘I have just bought two books and ten pens.’
*Các cuốn sách và những cây bút vẫn còn thơm mùi gỗ mới
PL CLF book and PL CLF pen still have good smell wood fresh
‘The books and the pens still have the good smell of freshly-cut wood.’

In the above discourse-anaphoric context, *những and *các seem to behave in the same manner. However, there are other contexts which tease apart the two plural markers. Specifically, only *những-CLF-N but not *các-CLF-N can appear as the object controller of a secondary predicate suggesting that though both can be familiar definite (as in 37), only *những can be referential specific (as in 38b).

(38)  a. *Tôi đã mua các cuốn sách rất hay
1SG ANT buy PL CLF book very good
‘?I have bought the books which are very good.’
b. Tôi đã mua những cuốn sách rất hay
1SG ANT buy PL CLF book very good
‘I have bought those books which are very good.’

14 Những ba cuốn sách is only acceptable under the abundance reading of *những, meaning ‘as many as three books’, which is outside the scope of this paper.
Furthermore, *các* is more preferable in unique-based definite.

(39) Context: The hearer is supposed to meet the speaker today in order to return the ten books that (s)he borrowed from the speaker. When they meet each other, the speaker asks:
   a. Cực cuốn sách đâu?\(^{15}\)
      PL  CLF  book  where
      ‘Where are the books?’
   b. Những cuốn sách đâu?
      PL  CLF  book  where
      ‘Where are the books?’

The felicitousness of *những* in this context is greatly improved if a post-nominal modifier such as a demonstrative or a relative clause is added.

(40) Context: The hearer is supposed to meet the speaker today in order to return the ten books that (s)he borrowed from the speaker. When they meet each other, the speaker asks:
   a. Những cuốn sách đó đâu?
      PL  CLF  book  that  where
      ‘Where are those books?’
   b. Những cuốn sách mà anh muốn tôi đâu?
      PL  CLF  book  RC  2SG  borrow 1SG  where
      ‘Where are the books that you borrowed from me?’

This observation is shared by many other researchers including Bui, M. H. (2000), Le & Schmitt (2016). See Le & Schmitt (2016) for an account of why *những* but not *các* requires post-nominal modification. To this, we add a further note that the post-nominal modifiers can also be added to *các*-CLF-N phrases, therefore the subtle difference is that *những* requires their presence in this context, whereas *các* can but does not need to co-occur with them.

(41) Cực cuốn sách (đó/ mà ănh muốn tôi) đâu?
    PL  CLF  book  that/ RC  2SG  borrow 1SG  where
    ‘Where are those books? / Where are the books that you borrowed from me?’

To recap, *các* can encode unique definiteness and familiar definiteness, whereas *những* not only encodes unique definiteness and familiar definiteness but also referential specificity. To this extent, *các*-CL-NP patterns with bare nouns, whereas *những*-CL-NP patterns with numeral-CL-NP.

At this point, we must ask ourselves the question what really distinguishes *những*-CL-NP from numeral-CL-NP since both constructions can express unique definiteness, familiar definiteness, and referential specificity. As seen above, the fact that *những* requires post-nominal modification not only sets *những* apart from *các*, but also from numerals. That is to say, *những* is able to express a wider range of givenness distinction than numerals, namely only *những* requires activation from immediate linguistic contexts including demonstratives, relative clauses, as well as other kinds of post-nominal modifiers. To put it differently, only *những* can encode activated givenness of the givenness hierarchy (Gundel *et al.* 1993).

4.5. Cái – Classifier – Noun
Apart from classifiers, numerals, plural markers, there is an additional pre-nominal position, which hosts the so-called the extra *cái* as in Nguyen P. P. (2002), Simpson & Ngo (2018).

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\(^{15}\) Note that in this unique-based definite context, the presence of the plural *các* and the classifier *cuốn* is optional, the bare form of the noun is the preferred option.
Tất cả ba/những cái cuốn sách này
‘All these three books.’

This pre-classifier usage of cái must be distinguished from the general classifier usage of cái. Whereas in the classifier position, cái requires the accompanying noun to be non-animate, in the pre-classifier position, cái has no such restriction.

(43) a. Con chó
   CLF +ANIMATE dog
   ‘the dog’
b. *Cái chó
   CLF -ANIMATE dog
c. Cái con chó
   FOC CLF +ANIMATE dog
   ‘this one particular dog’

Only in the pre-classifier position, can cái can co-occur with other classifiers.

(44) a. Cái con chó
   FOC CLF dog
   ‘this one particular dog’
b. Cái cuốn sách
   FOC CLF book
   ‘this one particular book’
c. Cái cây bút
   FOC CLF pen
   ‘this one particular pen’

Furthermore, the two usages of cái also differ with regard to stress patterns. As previously mentioned (see Nguyen T. C. 1975, Nguyen H. T. 2004), in the pre-classifier position, cái is always stressed while in the classifier position, cái is by default unstressed (the stress is indicated by capital letters).

(45) CÁI cuốn sách này
    FOC CLF book this
    ‘This one particular book’ / ‘This very book’

(46) a. cái bàn
    CLF table
    ‘The table’
b. *CÁI bàn
    CLF table

Having acknowledged the special status of cái in the pre-classifier position, Vietnamese linguists seem to reach a consensus regarding its function. It has been claimed in the literature that the presence of cái in the pre-classifier position serves to single out a particular individual and therefore cái is reasonably identified as a focus marker in the nominal domain (Nguyen T. C. 1975, Nguyen P. P. 2002, Nguyen H. T. 2004, Simpson & Ngo 2018, among others). This is the reason why throughout this paper, we gloss cái as FOC. At this point, we leave the question of how the two usages of cái (the focus cái and the classifier cái) are related to each other for future research.

Another distributional restriction of the focus cái, which is well noted in the literature, is that it prefers to be accompanied by a post-nominal modifier (Nguyen T. C. 1975, Nguyen P. P. 2002, Doan et al. 2019). As shown above, this property is also shared by những.
Having set out the interpretation and distribution of the focus cái, let us now look at how this element fits into the givenness hierarchy. As a nominal focus marker, cái expresses the highest level of givenness: signaling in-focus referents. The question arises as to whether cái also designates other lower levels in the hierarchy. Cái is infelicitous in referential specific context as shown below.

(48) *Tôi đã mua cái cuốn sách rất hay
1SG ANT buy FOC CLF book very good
Intended: ‘I’ve bought this one particular book which is very good’.

Cái is appropriate in unique definite and familiar definite contexts as long as it is accompanied by a post-nominal modifier.

(49) a. Cái cuốn sách đó/ mà anh mượn tôi đâu
FOC CLF book that/ RC 2SG borrow 1SG where
‘Where is that particular book? / Where is this particular book that you borrowed from me?’

b. Tôi mới mua một cuốn sách cũ do Lê Lựu viết. Cái cuốn sách đó làm tôi đọc mê mẩn
1SG just buy one CLF book old by Le Luu write FOC CLF book that make 1SG read passionate
cả ngày
all day
‘I’ve just bought an old book written by Le Luu. That particular book made me read passionately all day’.

That is to say, cái can refer to unique, familiar, activated given, and in focus referents but cannot refer to referential specific referents.

5. Discussion
We have now addressed both of the research questions raised in the introduction. The answer to the first research question is that so-called determiners in Vietnamese including những, các and một are not strictly lexical articles. Distributionally, they are optional and are incompatible with numerals. Interpretationally, in addition to definiteness, they contain other features including plurality, specificity, discourse activation. This answer not only addresses the question of whether Vietnamese has definite articles, but also sheds light on the issue of whether Vietnamese has obligatory number. As seen elsewhere, the presence of những and các is not necessarily required for the definiteness as well as for the plurality reading of the sentence. Indeed, Vietnamese nouns can be interpreted as plural without the plural markers.

(50) Sinh viên ngôn ngữ rất chăm chỉ
student linguistics very hardworking
‘Linguistics students are hard working.’

Bošković’s (2009) proposes that there is a structural connection between the lack of definite articles and the non-obligatory of number morphology in a given language. Vietnamese therefore provides an empirical support for a connection between definiteness and number. To this extent, Vietnamese patterns with other NP languages including Serbo-Croatian, Warlpiri, Chinese, and Japanese, among others.

In answering the second question, we have come to the remark that although there are no inherent definite articles in Vietnamese, a number of constructions including bare nouns, CLF-N phrases, Numeral-CLF-N phrases and những/các-CLF-N phrases, cái-CLF-N phrases correspond to different spans of the givenness hierarchy in the sense of Gundel et al. (1993).
The givenness hierarchy in Vietnamese nominal phrase:16

in focus > activated > familiar > uniquely identifiable > referential

\[ \begin{align*}
\{ \text{in focus} > \text{activated} > \text{familiar} > \text{uniquely identifiable} \} & = \text{CÁI-CLF-N} \\
\{ \text{activated} > \text{familiar} > \text{uniquely identifiable} > \text{referential} \} & = \text{NHỮNG-CLF-N} \\
\{ \text{familiar} > \text{uniquely identifiable} \} & = \text{CÁC-CLF-N} \\
\{ \text{familiar} > \text{uniquely identifiable} > \text{referential} \} & = \text{NUMERAL-CLF-N} \\
\{ \text{activated} > \text{familiar} > \text{uniquely identifiable} \} & = \text{CLF-N for singular} \\
\{ \text{familiar} > \text{uniquely identifiable} \} & = \text{BARE NOUN}
\end{align*} \]

Those spans suggest that these different levels of givenness are implicationally related in Vietnamese, just as in many other languages. In particular, bare nouns tend to mark unique definiteness and familiar definiteness in Vietnamese as in (51f). Compared to bare nouns, CLF-N phrases can mark both unique definiteness, familiar definiteness, and activated givenness as in (51e). Compared to CLF-N phrases, Numeral-CLF-N phrases can refer to referential specificity in addition to unique definiteness and familiar definiteness, as in (51d). Among the two plural markers, các-CLF-N phrases can only encode unique definiteness and familiar definiteness, (as in 51c), whereas những-CLF-N expression can additionally encode activated givenness and referential specificity, as in (51b). Compared to những-CLF-N phrases, cái-CLF-N phrases can additionally refer to in-focus referents, but cái-CLF-N phrases cannot refer to referential specific referents, as in (51a).

Gundel et al. (1993) have looked at the representations of the givenness hierarchy in Mandarin Chinese, English, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish. Vietnamese therefore provides an additional empirical support for such a hierarchy.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that there are no elements which qualify as genuine grammaticalized definite articles in Vietnamese, but as a highly analytic language, Vietnamese possesses a number of article-like elements which express various facets of definiteness. We have provided a systematic way of looking at different Vietnamese nominal constructions which contain these elements in light of the givenness hierarchy proposed by Gundel et al. (1993). For each construction, we have pointed out where Vietnamese patterns with as well as differs from other better-studied classifier languages including Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese. We have also shown that Vietnamese nominal phrases underlyingly reflect the universal ‘givenness hierarchy’. That is to say, Vietnamese nominals, though subtly different from other classifier languages, still behave as expected universally.

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