

Chú giải ngữ pháp EASSY VIETNAMESE: GRAMMAR NOTE

1. In the case, chào means “Hello”, and chị means “older sister”. People in Vietnam normally address each other using kinship terms, even if they are not related. When talking about another person, we add the word ấy (áy) “that” to the kinship term or pronoun used for that person. For example, we use the kinship term anh (aing) when talking with a man our age, and anh ấy (aing áy) to talk about him. The Vietnamese also use kinship terms to refer to themselves in conversation, so they will pick a proper pronoun for themselves depending on whom they are conversing with. Vietnamese speakers will use the pronoun tôi (toh-ee) “I” when talking with people of the same age, but em (em) “younger sibling” if the other person is a little older. If the person is a lot older, they will refer to themselves as cháu (cháh-oo) “niece/nephew” or even con (kawn) “daughter/son”. Learners should observe these social norms, even though they can always use the formal pronoun tôi if it is easier to remember.

GRAMMAR NOTE Conversations Among Friends

In Vietnam, close friends do not use titles in front of given names when addressing one another. For example, in the dialogue above, Hoa no longer referred to Jane as chị Jane, and simply called her by her first name, Jane. Among close friends many young people nowadays tend to refer to themselves in the third person, using their own name. For example, Hoa no longer referred to herself using the formal pronoun tôi, and used her own name Hoa instead. Older speakers still tend to be more formal. They continue using titles when addressing others, and referring to themselves as tôi.

2. Vietnamese Word Order

Like many other languages, Vietnamese is an SVO (Subject + Verb + Object) language, although its word order is more flexible in poetry. Most Vietnamese question words occur at the end of a sentence. Verbs are not conjugated, and word forms never change regardless of a word’s function in a sentence. In Vietnamese, subjective and objective pronouns share the same forms, and there are no possessive pronouns. When someone says Tôi tên là Jane (Toh-ee tayn làh Jane) or “My name is Jane”, the literal translation is “I name be Jane.” Alternately, one can say Tên tôi là Jane, a shortened and more informal form of Tên của tôi là Jane.

3. Omitting Words

In traditional Vietnamese grammar, là (läh) means “to be”. However, in many cases it is just used as a marker identifying the subject of the sentence. In other cases, it effectively functions as an equal sign. The verb là can be omitted in such a question as “What’s your name?” and in the response, although its omission may make the question sound less polite and even curt. In Vietnamese the verb là (läh) is always omitted from the sentence pattern Subject + Adjective. With some sentences in Vietnamese, the verb is implied, but not used. Một (moh̄t) “a/one” is another word that is usually optional, but shouldn’t be omitted in a formal setting.

4. CULTURAL NOTE Asking Personal Questions

In Vietnam, many people love asking personal questions out of curiosity, about your private life, such as your age, marital status or if you have children.

5. The Question Word Nào = “Which”

The question word nào (nòw) “which” must be put at the end of a sentence. The phrase người nước nào (ngùh-a-ee núh-ak nòw) “person which country” is the shortened, completely acceptable version of người của nước nào (ngùh-a-ee kóo-a núh-ak nòw) “person of which country”. In Vietnamese grammar, the possession marker của (kóo-a) “of” is usually left out, as long as the intended meaning is understood. In this type of question, của is always omitted.

6. Footnote: In the northern dialects gi is pronounced “zee” with the falling tone in the question word gì, and pronounced “z” in other words that begin with gi. In the southern dialects, “gi” is pronounced “yee” with the falling tone in the question word gì, and pronounced “y” in other words that begin with gi.

7. GRAMMAR NOTE The Word Muốn = “Want”

The Vietnamese verb muốn (moo-óhn) “want” in restaurants is a polite equivalent to “would like.” Other alternatives would include: Tôi thích ... (Toh-ee théek) “I’d like ...”, Cho tôi ... (Chaw toh-ee) “Give me/Let me have ...”, or simply mention the name of the dish or beverage we want to enjoy.

8. GRAMMAR NOTE The Intensifier Quá = “So”

Unlike in English, in Vietnamese adjectives always come after the nouns that they modify, and the intensifier quá (kwáh) “so” usually occurs after that.

9. NUMBERS (21-1,000,000)

Number 11 is mười một (muh-a-ee móht), which uses the same tone for một (móht), or number one: the lowest tone represented by the dot placed under the vowel ô. However, in the numbers 21, 31, 41, etc., number on carries the highest tone, represented by an acute accent placed above the vowel ô: mót.

10. GRAMMAR NOTE Classifiers

In Vietnamese, classifiers are used to introduce count nouns. For example, cái can encompass numerous inanimate objects such as pieces of furniture and clothing articles, con for all types of animals, trái for all fruits, and củ for vegetables that grow under the ground such as carrots and potatoes. Vietnamese classifiers also indicate the shapes of objects and occasionally the materials of the objects. Cây is used for objects that are stick-like in shape; tờ for objects that are flat and made of paper, such as a newspaper; and cuốn for objects that are thick and made of paper, such as a book or a magazine.

Note that classifiers are only needed when we use a specific number or a determiner such as “this/these” or “that/those”. Once the people in the conversation know what they are referring to, then the classifier for that object can function as a pronoun in place of its word for the object. In Vietnamese, cái quần (kái kwùn) “pants” is singular, as it is thought of as a single object.

11. GRAMMAR NOTE The Words Hay or Hoặc = “Or”

When two choices are offered in a question, they are linked by the word hay (hah-ee) “or”. However, in statements the word hoặc (hwák) “or” will be used instead of hay.

12. GRAMMAR NOTE The Word “Very” in Vietnamese

Rất (rút) “very” and lắm (lám) “very” are synonyms, but rất always occurs before the word that it modifies, whereas lắm always occurs after that word. Also, lắm is more colloquial, and is therefore heard more in everyday conversation.

13. GRAMMAR NOTE Forming Plurals: To form the plural in Vietnamese, we add những (nyúhng) “plural” in front of the classifier.

14. GRAMMAR NOTE Giving Directions

The grammar for giving directions in Vietnamese is much the same as it is in English. Speakers usually use the imperative of a verb, followed by a preposition or adverb of the location. A verb is made into an imperative by merely putting it at the very beginning of a sentence. As in English, imperative sentences in Vietnamese do not use a subject. For example, “Go to that intersection over there”, is said in Vietnamese, Đến ngã tư đường kia (Dee dáy় ngäh tuh dà়়ng kee-a).

15. GRAMMAR NOTE Verb Tenses

From a grammatical perspective, Vietnamese does not really have tenses, since there are no verb conjugations. Instead, the past, the present, and the future are mostly expressed through the use of time expressions, and the optional use of three tense markers placed before the main verb: đã to indicate the past, đang for things that are happening in the present; and sẽ for future activities or events.

18. GRAMMAR NOTE The Word Bị = “Suffer From”

Bị (bẹ), “suffer from”, indicates that something negative has happened to you, such as an unpleasant incident or experience, and at the same time conveys a sense of passivity to the listener/reader. Some common situations in which native speakers will use bị include sickness, accidents, getting stuck in traffic, and getting lost. In addition, it can be used as a passive voice marker for unpleasant experiences.

19. GRAMMAR NOTE “We” in Vietnamese

In Vietnamese, there are two words for “we”. The first is *chúng tôi* (chóong toh-ee), the exclusive “we”, which excludes the listener. The second is *chúng ta* (chóong tah), the inclusive “we”, which includes the listener. Thus, when telling a passerby that they are lost, Jane and Ben refer to themselves as *chúng tôi*, but when stating this fact to each other they use *chúng ta*.

20. GRAMMAR NOTE Auxiliary Verbs

Similar to English, Vietnamese has a set of auxiliary verbs that serve as modals. These include, *phải* (fái) “must”, *nên* (nayn) “should”, and *có thể* (káw théh) “can”. As in English, they come before the main verb in a sentence.

21. GRAMMAR NOTE The Word *Chu'a* = “Yet”

When *chưa* (chuh-a) “yet” occurs at the end of a sentence, it becomes a question word, changing the sentence from a statement to a question. When *chưa* occurs before a verb in a sentence, it turns the sentence into a negative statement, and means “not yet”. *Chưa* can also be used alone as a short response to mean “not yet”.

22. GRAMMAR NOTE The Phrase *Bao Lâu Rồi* = “How Long Have You Been...?”

When *rồi* (ròh-ee) “already” accompanies *bao lâu* (bow loh-oo) “how long”, it gives the question a meaning that is the same as the present perfect tense or present perfect continuous in English (for example, “How long have you been...?” and “How long have you done ...?”). On the other hand, if *bao lâu* is used without *rồi*, the question now will have a meaning that is the same as the simple past tense or future tense in English, depending on the context.

23. GRAMMAR NOTE Time Expressions

In Vietnamese, time expressions can be placed at the beginning or at the end of a sentence. However, they sound a little more informal when used at the beginning of a sentence.

24. GRAMMAR NOTE Telling Time

In Vietnamese, the easiest way to tell time is simply to say the hour *giờ* (yùh) and then the number of minutes *phút* (fóot). However, there are other ways of telling time that many native speakers use. For example, they usually say *ruồi* (rüh-a-ee) “half” instead of 30 minutes. And, to indicate the time before a certain hour, they often use *giờ* followed by *kém* (kém) “minus” or *thiếu* (thyéw) “minus”, and then the number of minutes. For multiples of five minutes, the word *phút* is optional.

25. Footnote

In Vietnamese, the day is divided into four parts, namely, morning, noon, afternoon/ evening, and night. For example, “in the morning,” is “vào buổi sáng.”

26. CULTURAL NOTE Measurements

Vietnamese people mainly use the metric system, but some speakers are aware of American units too. There are also two terms for a “kilometer”: a Vietnamese one, *cây số* (kay sóh), and a word borrowed from French, *ki lô mét* (kee loh mét).

GRAMMAR NOTE The Word *Bằng* = “By”

The word *bằng* (bàng) “by” must be used in questions asking about the means of transport needed to get to a certain place. However, in responses it is optional.

27. CULTURAL NOTE French and English Loanwords

Apart from Chinese, we also find some French and English loanwords in Vietnamese. Words such as *a lô* (ah loh) “hello”, *bơ* (buh) “butter”, *cà phê* (kàh feh) “coffee”, *áo sơ mi* (ów suh mee) “shirt”, *cà vạt* (kàh vah) “necktie”, *xe buýt* (se bwéet) “bus” were borrowed from French, while words such as *buyn đinh* (bween deeng) “building”, *Intònét* (Eentùhnét) “Internet”, *ti vi* (tee vee) “TV”, *nhạc rốc* (nyáhk róhk) “rock music” and *quần sọc* (kwùn sòok) “shorts” were borrowed from English.

28. GRAMMAR NOTE The Vietnamese Past Tense

Look for time expressions or tense markers used in the sentence to tell if the sentence is in the present or past tense, or rely on the context. In the sentence pattern above, cách đây (káik day) “ago” and cách đây một tiếng (káik day moh̄t tyéng) “an hour ago” both express a past activity or action.

29. GRAMMAR NOTE “When”

In Vietnamese, we begin a sentence with bao giờ (bow yùh) “when” or khi nào (khee nòw) “when” to ask when some future event or activity will occur. However, we end a sentence with hồi nào (hòh-ee nòw) “when” to ask a question about when a past event or activity happened.

30. GRAMMAR NOTE The Word Bị = “Things Happening to Us”

In Chapter 5, we learned that bị (bēe) “suffer from” is used to talk about negative things that have happened to us, such as getting lost, having an accident, or getting stuck in traffic. In this chapter, we see that bị can also be used to talk about health symptoms and illnesses.

31. GRAMMAR NOTE The Word Vậy = Used to Soften Questions

Usually, Vietnamese speakers use vậy (vay) as a mitigator, to soften questions so that they do not sound like an interrogation. Vậy as a mitigator is always placed at the end of a question.

32. GRAMMAR NOTE The Word Mό’i = “Just” or “Then”

Mό’i (múh-ee), or “just (a short time ago)” when between a subject and verb of a sentence, can also link clauses and phrases, and means “then” or “consequently”.

33. GRAMMAR NOTE The Question Word Ai = “Who?”

The question word ai (ai) “who/whom” can occur both at the beginning of the question and at the end of it. When it occurs at the beginning of a question, it is equivalent to the English subject form “who”. For example, Ai gặp Jane? (Ai gặp Jane?) means “Who met Jane?” However, when it occurs at the end of a question, it is equivalent to the English object form “whom”. For example, Jane gặp ai? (Jane gặp ai?) means “Whom did Jane meet?”

34. CULTURAL NOTE Texting Lingo

Young adults in Vietnam add new words to their chat/text language every day, so it isn’t easy to keep up with it all. Here is just an example of how creative they might be. In this text message, the author cuts out letters to reflect his/her own pronunciation of many words but still uses some conventional ones such as N for “anh”, E for “em”, the English word h(our) for giờ, and ko for “không”.

35. GRAMMAR NOTE The Question Word À = Confirming

Information The question word à? (áh?) “true?” is usually used to confirm information that we already know, and not to elicit new information.

36. GRAMMAR NOTE The Word Đã = Past Tense Marker or Emphasis Marker

The word đã (dāh) has two different uses depending on the context. When used with an active verb, it serves as a past tense marker. For instance, in the sentence Tôi đã mua cuốn sách này (Toh-ee dāh moo-a koo-óhn sáik nàh-ee) “I bought this book”, đã functions as a past tense marker. However, when used with a stative verb, it is merely used to give emphasis. For example, in the sentence Tôi đã có cuốn sách này (Toh-ee dāh káw koo-óhn sáik nàh-ee) “I already have this book”, đã or “already” makes the sentence more emphatic. Đã differs from rồi (ròh-ee) “already” in that it comes before a stative verb, while rồi comes at the end of the sentence. Both of these words can be used in the same sentence for greater emphasis.

37. CULTURAL NOTE Common Expressions in Vietnam

Many older people frown upon slang in general. They particularly dislike the following expressions, which they find completely nonsensical because the comparisons are based solely on the rhyming of the words. Still, saying these funny expressions may help break the ice or even win instant friendship.

38. GRAMMAR NOTE Tag Questions

A tag question is a short word or phrase added to the end of a statement to turn the statement into a question (e.g., “It’s hot outside, isn’t it?”). In Vietnamese, there are several different ways of asking a tag question, depending on what the question is used for. For example, when we want to turn a statement into a suggestion, we use nhe (nye); when we want confirmation that what we said is true, we use chű (chûh); and, when we want to see if a suggested activity is possible, we use đưốc khõng (dṳ-ak khohng).

39. GRAMMAR NOTE The Word Hả = “Huh?”

The Vietnamese word hả (hâh) is a perfect equivalent of the English interjection “huh” when it occurs at the end of a sentence. Normally it is used to ask for agreement.

40. CULTURAL NOTE How Are You?

In Vietnamese this is the equivalent of “Are you doing well?” This should only be asked when one has not seen an acquaintance for at least a week or two.

41. CULTURAL NOTE Formal Introductions

Address a person by title then given name to avoid confusion as thousands of families share the same family name. Younger people can omit titles when introducing peers to one another. Older people sometimes use bà (bâh) “grandmother” and ông (ohng) “grandfather” as an equivalent of Mrs. and Mr. respectively. Vietnamese names follow this order: family name + middle name + given name. When meeting older people, it is more polite to use hân hạnh (hun hâng) “honored” than vui (voo-ee) “happy”, which can be paired with an intensifier such as rất (rút) “very/really”.

42. CULTURAL NOTE Noodles in Vietnam

There are several different types of noodles. Phở (fuh) noodles are long and flat, whereas bún (bóon) noodles are round and white. Both are rice/cellophane noodles. Mì (mèe) noodles are yellow egg noodles. All these taste different and are used in different dishes.

43. CULTURAL NOTE Bargaining

In Vietnam, bargaining is expected as sellers usually mark their items up considerably. Ask for a discount (about 10 to 20 per cent off the price), with a smile on your face, and be prepared to walk away if the prices are too high.

44. CULTURAL NOTE Asking about Age

For people in their mid-teens and above, you should use the question bao nhiêu tuổi to inquire about their ages. This is considered more polite than mấy tuổi, which is used mostly with children. When in doubt, use bao nhiêu tuổi, as it is always safer to risk sounding too formal than too informal or rude.

45. CULTURAL NOTE Matchmaking

Matchmaking is a very common practice in Vietnamese culture. People will ask you your age and marital status, and if they find out that you are still single, very soon they will try to be your matchmakers. If you feel embarrassed by questions about your marital status, just tell them you are already married.

46. CULTURAL NOTE Parts of the Day

In Vietnam, generally speaking it is thought that sáng (sâhng) “morning” begins at 1 am and ends at 10 am, trưa (juh-a) “noon” starts at 11 am and ends at 2 pm, chiều (chyèw) “evening” begins at 3 pm and ends at 7 pm, and tối (tôh-ee) “night” starts at 8 pm and ends at 10 pm. One other common time expression is đêm (daym) “late at night”, which goes from 11 pm until 12 am.

47. Reduplicative compound words

A reduplicative compound word is formed by a reduplication of the entire stem, or by a part of it affixed to itself, or by a meaningful single word plus a meaningless structural element.

48. Conjunctive compound words

A conjunctive compound word is formed by two different single words.

49. Free compound words

A free compound words is formed by two or three single words, which do not follow the above formation. There are not many free compound words in Vietnamese.

50. Important notes

- a) Vietnamese words may be classified as follows: noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, adverb, conjunction, preposition, numeral, exclamation, adverbial particle.
- b) Vietnamese words never change in number, gender, person or tense. Plurality is expressed by a limited number of words called plural markers which always precede the invariable nouns.
- c) More than half of Vietnamese words are derived from Chinese. Therefore, there are often two words to designate the same thing, one coming from Chinese and the other being pure Vietnamese.
- d) Idioms are phrases with a fixed structure. They have a special formation with rhythms.

51. The basic sentence structure

A sentence is made up of one or more phrases. It provides a complete expression of meaning. It expresses a statement, a question, a command, or an exclamation. In the written form it begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop, a question mark or an exclamation mark. Sometimes a sentence may not have a subject or a verb.

52. Phrases

A phrase is a compound of two or more words which together make up a particular element of a sentence (e.g. the subject or the predicate). There are four types of phrases: noun phrases, verb phrases, adjectival phrases and adverbial phrases.

53. Simple sentences

A simple sentence normally consists of two parts, a subject and a predicate. The subject and the predicate can be single words or phrases.

In a simple sentence, there may be more than one subject or predicate.

54. Optional parts of a sentence

Many sentences have an optional part which is dependent on the main part; it modifies the whole sentence and cannot, therefore, stand independently as a sentence. It is an adverb or an adverbial phrase of time, place, manner, purpose, etc. The optional part of a sentence may be put at the beginning of a sentence or at the end, but in Vietnamese, 80% of them have to be put at the beginning of the sentence.

55. Compound sentences

A compound sentence is made up of two simple sentences linked by a conjunctive particle.

56. Terms of address

In place of a pronoun equivalent to English “you,” Vietnamese uses a range of kinship terms and honorifics as terms of address. The use of these is explained at the beginning of Chapter 2. The Vietnamese phrases listed often require a choice to be made according to whether the addressee is male or female.

57. The Vietnamese usually use a system of kinship terms instead of names as a method of address, e.g.: bá̄c (father's elder brother)—used for people obviously older than the speaker; anh (older brother)—used for a man the same age or older than the speaker; chí (older sister)—used for a woman the same age or older than the speaker. These terms can be used alone or with the given name (never with the surname), e.g.: Bác Minh, Chí Mai. More respectful terms are used in formal situations: Ông (Mr), Bà (Mrs), Cô (Miss). These titles are used with the given name. Women are called bà and cô according to their age, rather than their marital status. Foreign women are usually called bà regardless of age.

In formal situations the title of the position held by a person is usually used as a term of address, e.g.: Kỹ sư Minh (Engineer Minh), Giáo sư Hoa (Professor Hoa). The terms ông and bà can be added to professional titles to make them more respectful, e.g.: Bà giám đốc (Mrs Director), Ông bác sĩ (Mr Doctor). In this case

the given name is not used. Female teachers are called cô and male teachers are called thầy. These terms are extremely respectful.

The professional title held by a husband or wife can be transferred to the other spouse, e.g. the husband of Cô Mai (Teacher Mai) could be called Thầy Minh (Teacher Minh) because his wife is a teacher, even if he is not.

58. In Vietnam people usually have three meals. Bữa sáng (breakfast) is eaten sometime between 6 and 8 am. It usually consists of Vietnamese soup and tea. Bữa trưa (lunch), traditionally eaten at home between 11.30 am and 1.30 pm, includes steamed rice, soup, and a hot dish. Offices are often closed but shops are still open. School children generally return home at lunchtime. Bữa tối (dinner), at around 6 or 7 pm, is the important meal, often including fish or meat and steamed rice.

The life of an average Vietnamese family is simple in every way. An ordinary meal consists of steamed rice and three other dishes, one salted, one fried or roasted, and a vegetable soup. The soup takes the place of a beverage, since no drink is served. The salted dish is usually a local fish.

Meat is served once or twice a week. The second dish is a vegetable stir-fried or cooked with fish or bits of meat. The vegetables most commonly used are bean sprouts, eggplant, squash, sweet potato, manioc, soybean, lettuce, cabbage, and corn. Pork is the favorite meat. Beef is often served, but lamb is disliked by some. Duck and chicken are served on special occasions. Fish sauce, nước mắm, is an inevitable accompaniment of all meals and is served in a little dish beside each plate. Since it is quite salty, it is usually the only seasoning provided; some red pepper may be crushed into it. Most restaurants have a cover charge which includes a service charge.

59. Local motor taxi — xe ôm

A local motor taxi—xe ôm—is popular in most urban cities and could be a fun, convenient and economical way to get around town or to travel short distances under 30 miles. Safety can be a concern, though. Ask around for “references” when sourcing for a safe xe ôm driver, and make sure to use a helmet when riding—most of the xe ôm drivers carry extra helmets for their passengers.

60. Syntax—the order of words, will be different than your own language. Human thought usually occurs in complete ideas. Every society has developed a way to express those ideas linearly by first saying what happened (the verb), or by first saying who did it (the agent), etc. Paying attention to this will accustom us to the way others speak.

61. Vocabulary—the meanings of words, never have just one meaning, and their usage is always different. You always have to learn words in context and which words they’re paired with. These are called collocations. To “commit a crime” and to “commit to a relationship” use two different verbs in most other languages. Never assume that learning “commit” by itself will give you the answer. After a lifetime in lexicography, Patrick Hanks “reached the alarming conclusion that words don’t have meaning,” but rather that “definitions listed in dictionaries can be regarded as presenting meaning potentials rather than meanings as such.” This is why collocations are so important.

62. Grammar—the changes or morphology in words are always in flux. Memorizing rules will not help you achieve fluency. You have to experience them as a native speaker says them, repeat them as a native speaker would, and through mass amount of practice come to an innate understanding of the inner workings of a language’s morphology. Most native speakers can’t explain their own grammar. It just happens.

63.