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Special Issue: Classifying Nominalization in Cross-linguistic Perspective I

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Nominalization in Vietnamese: Roles of classifiers and the genitive marker *của*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of classifiers and the genitive marker *của* as devices for grammatical nominalization in Vietnamese, focusing on their distribution in both NP-use and modification-use contexts. The data on classifier marking largely supports Shibatani's (2021, 2023) proposed functional hierarchy, with one minor exception. In contrast, the genitive marker *của* shows partial similarity to Mandarin *de*, functioning as a nominalizer in both NP and modification uses. However, its use is semantically and contextually restricted. These findings contribute to our understanding of Vietnamese nominalization patterns and offer further insight into cross-linguistic typologies of nominalization.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study investigates two primary strategies of grammatical nominalization in Vietnamese: one involving the use of classifiers, and the other employing the genitive marker *của* as a nominalizing device. These elements are analyzed in terms of their distribution across NP-use and modification-use contexts. Examples (1) and (2) illustrate the roles of classifiers and *của* in nominal constructions:

- (1) Cái đang treo trong tủ là áo của tôi.
CLF PROG hang in closet COP clothes GEN 1SG
'What is hanging in the closet are my clothes.'
- (2) Quyển sách này là của thầy Nam soạn.
CLF book this COP GEN teacher Nam edit
'This book is the one Mr. Nam edited.'

Drawing on the typological framework proposed by Shibatani (2021: 524; 2023: 35), this study evaluates the extent to which Vietnamese adheres to the hierarchical pattern of classifier/gender marking. Vietnamese allows for classifier marking in all NP-use contexts outlined in the hierarchy—Numerals > Demonstratives > Genitives > Adjectives > Verb-based nominalizations—but restricts classifier marking in modification-use to numerals only. In contrast, the genitive marker *của* functions as a nominalizer in both NP and modification contexts for genitives and verb-based nominalizations, showing partial parallels with Mandarin

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de (Shibatani 2018: 390-391). However, its use is more limited in both semantic range and contextual flexibility. This study explores these patterns in detail, contributing to the cross-linguistic understanding of nominalization mechanisms.

As outlined by Nguyen (2004), Vietnamese noun phrases consist of both pre-nominal and post-nominal modifiers. The pre-nominal elements include classifiers (CLF), measure phrases (MP), articles, the focus particle *cái*, numerals (Num), and quantifiers (Q). In contrast, post-nominal modifiers comprise noun adjuncts, adjective phrases, prepositional phrases, relative clauses, demonstratives, and possessive constructions. While the sequence of pre-nominal elements is structurally fixed, as illustrated in (3), the arrangement of post-nominal elements is more variable and depends on the context (see Phan & Duffield 2022 for discussion).

(3) Q – Num/Article – Particle *cái* – CLF/MP – N

The following section provides a detailed examination of each component of the noun phrase, with the exception of articles and the particle *cái*, both of which are uniquely Vietnamese and warrant separate preliminary discussion due to their distinctive properties.

Although the existence of lexical articles in Vietnamese remains a topic of debate, Nguyen (1975) and Nguyen (2004) argue that elements such as the plural markers *những* and *các*, as well as the numeral *một* ('one'), functionally encode definiteness and number. For a more nuanced account of these elements, see Phan & Lam (2021) and Phan & Chierchia (2022). Illustrative examples are provided in (4).

- (4) a. **những** con trâu
 PL CLF buffalo
 ‘(the) buffaloes’
- b. **các** con trâu
 PL CLF buffalo
 ‘the buffalos’
- c. **một** con trâu
 one CLF buffalo
 ‘a buffalo’
- d. [zero] con trâu
 CLF buffalo
 ‘a/the buffalo’
- (NT³, p.104)

³ The abbreviations used to indicate data sources are as follows: NT = Nguyen. T. (2004)

Vietnamese features a function word homonymous with the classifier *cái*, which typically marks inanimate nouns, but distinct in its grammatical role. This particle *cái* appears between a numeral and a classifier and serves as a focus marker. An example is provided in (5):

- (5) Tôi muốn mượn hai **cái** cuốn sách kia kia.
 1SG want borrow two cái CLF book that there
 ‘I’d like to borrow those VERY two books OVER THERE’ (NT, p.48)

Importantly, the focus particle *cái* cannot precede the classifier *cái* itself, but it is obligatory when focus is applied to a noun that requires a classifier. The particle is always phonologically stressed, whereas classifiers are not. As Nguyen (2004: 52) notes, although focus in Vietnamese can be independently marked through prosody, *cái* functions as a formal syntactic device to indicate focus within the noun phrase. See also Simpson and Ngo (2018) for a more recent and detailed discussion of the particle *cái*.

In addition to the typical noun phrase structure described above, Vietnamese employs several nominalization strategies that derive noun phrases from other parts of speech. The most common among these are the nominalizers *sự*, *việc*, and *chuyện*, which originate from the Chinese nouns *shì* 事 ‘matter,’ *yì* 役 ‘work,’ and *zhuàn* 傳 ‘story,’ respectively. Unlike classifiers, these elements do not perform a classifying function. While *sự* functions strictly as a grammatical nominalizer and cannot serve as the head of a noun phrase, *việc* and *chuyện* retain more of their lexical meanings and may function as independent heads in NP constructions.

- (6) Sự phát triển của ngành công nghệ thông tin được đánh giá cao.
 NMLZR develop GEN sector IT PASS evaluate high
 ‘Development of the IT sector was highly praised.’
- (7) Việc học ngoại ngữ rất thú vị.
 NMLZR study foreign languages very interesting
 ‘To study foreign languages is very interesting.’
- (8) Chuyện nó không đến làm tôi vô cùng buồn.
 NMLZR he NEG come make 1SG extremely sad
 ‘That he did not come made me extremely sad.’

Another strategy involves zero-marked nominalization, where no explicit nominalizer is used. This commonly occurs in cleft constructions, which do not require nominalization markers (such as classifiers) when the referent is sufficiently identifiable from context. Illustrative examples are provided in (9)–(10).

- (9) Đang treo trong tủ đằng kia là áo của tôi.
 PROG hang in closet over there COP clothes GEN 1SG
 ‘What is hanging in the closet over there are my clothes.’

- (10) Tôi thích nhất là bún chả.
 1SG like most COP bun cha (vermicelli with grilled pork)
 ‘What I like most is bun cha.’

Another instance of zero-marked nominalization is found in complement clauses. Vietnamese complementizers such as *là* (derived from the copula) and *rằng* (originally a verb meaning ‘to say’) are frequently omitted, particularly in colloquial speech.

- (11) Tôi nghĩ (là/rằng) phương pháp này khả thi.
 1SG think COMP method this feasible
 ‘I think this method is feasible.’

In this study, data drawn from published sources are marked with standard abbreviations. Examples without explicit source attribution are original constructions based on the second author’s native-speaker intuition.

2. OVERVIEW OF CLASSIFIER MARKING AND GRAMMATICAL NOMINALIZATIONS IN VIETNAMESE

2.1 Classifier marking in Vietnamese

Nguyen D. H. (1957) compiled a list of approximately 200 classifiers used in Vietnamese. In a later dictionary (Nguyen D. H. 1971), we identified 1,005 lexical items categorized by these classifiers. However, as noted by Emeneau (1951), Nguyen D. H. (1957), Simpson & Ngo (2018), Phan (2019), Phan & Chierchia (2025), and others, not all Vietnamese nouns require or even permit classifier use when combined with numerals. Cao (1992), for instance, identified a set of 129 monosyllabic nouns that do not co-occur with classifiers. Additionally, Nguyen D. H. (1957: 132) observed that many compound nouns of Sino-Vietnamese origin (e.g., *kết quả* ‘result’, *ảnh hưởng* ‘influence’) and collective noun constructions denoting semantically related or synonymous pairs (e.g., *nhà cửa* ‘dwelling, house’; *giày dép* ‘footwear’; *chăn chiếu* ‘bedclothes’; *sách vở* ‘books and supplies’) also tend to appear without classifiers.

Classifier categories in Vietnamese are diverse; however, the most fundamental distinction is based on animacy and humanness. Nguyen (2004: 11) identifies a three-way animacy-based classification that serves as the core of the system.

- (12)
-
- ```

 graph LR
 ANIMACY --- Animate
 ANIMACY --- Inanimate["Inanimate: cái (CLF for things)"]
 Animate --- Human["Human: người 'person' (CLF for people)"]
 Animate --- Non-human["Non-human: con (CLF for animals)"]

```



- (15) a. một cuộc họp  
 one CLF meet  
 ‘a meeting’
- b. một kì thi  
 one CLF exam  
 ‘an exam’
- c. một giấc ngủ  
 one CLF sleep  
 ‘a sleep’
- d. niềm tự hào  
 CLF proud  
 ‘pride’
- e. một vụ ám sát  
 one CLF assassinate  
 ‘an assassination’

In contrast, the classifiers used for grammatical nominalization are drawn from a broader and more open set, extending beyond the restricted group of event-classifiers. In the sections that follow, we provide examples illustrating grammatical nominalization across different syntactic contexts.

### [1] Numerals

Vietnamese distinguishes between cardinal and ordinal numerals based on their syntactic position within the noun phrase. Cardinal numerals function as pre-nominal modifiers, appearing before the sequence {CLF + head noun}, whereas ordinal numerals are positioned post-nominally, following the same sequence.

#### [1a] Cardinal numerals

- (16) a. Tôi muốn mua bốn con chó?  
 1SG want buy four CLF dog  
 ‘I want to buy four dogs.’
- b. Anh muốn mấy con chó?  
 2SG want how.many CLF dog  
 ‘How many dogs do you want?’

- c. Bốn con.  
four CLF  
'Four.'

### [1b] Ordinal numerals

- (17) a. Anh thích bài thơ thứ mấy?  
2SG like CLF poem which order  
'Which poem do you like?'
- b. Tôi thích bài thứ hai.  
1SG like CLF second  
'I like the second one.'
- c. Bài thơ thứ hai.  
CLF poem second  
'The second poem.'

### [2] Demonstratives

Demonstratives function as post-nominal modifiers in Vietnamese noun phrases. They can be categorized into three types based on their syntactic behavior: free forms, bound forms, and forms that can function as both (see Table 1). The demonstratives illustrated in the following examples are either bound or free/bound forms.

- (18) a. Con chó này to nhi.  
CLF dog this big SFP  
'This dog is big, isn't it?'
- b. Con này to. Con kia nhỏ.  
CLF this big CLF that small  
'This one is big.' 'That one is small.'
- c. Chó này to.  
dog this big  
'This (kind of) dog(s) is(/are) big.'

Table 1. Demonstratives in Vietnamese

|                     | Indefinite            | Proximal             | Medial              | Distal               |
|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Free morpheme       | <i>đâu</i><br>'where' | <i>đây</i><br>'this' | <i>đó</i><br>'that' |                      |
| Free/Bound morpheme |                       |                      | <i>đó</i><br>'that' | <i>kia</i><br>'that' |
| Bound morpheme      | <i>nào</i><br>'which' | <i>này</i><br>'this' | <i>ấy</i><br>'that' | <i>ọ</i><br>'that'   |

### [3] Genitive noun phrases

The genitive marker *của* functions as a post-nominal modifier and is historically derived from a noun meaning 'property'. In contrast to other syntactic contexts, the use of classifiers in genitive noun phrases is generally optional.

- (19) a. (Cái) váy của em là cái nào?  
 CLF skirt GEN 2SG COP CLF which  
 'Which is your skirt?'
- b. Cái này là váy của em.  
 CLF this COP skirt GEN 1SG  
 'This is my skirt.'
- c. (Cái) của chị đâu?  
 CLF GEN 2SG where  
 'Where is yours?'

### [4] Adjectives

Adjectives of native Vietnamese origin typically appear as post-nominal modifiers, whereas those of Sino-Vietnamese origin frequently occur in pre-nominal position, as in *nam sinh viên* 'male student'.

- (20) a. Tôi muốn mua con chó bé.  
 1SG want buy CLF dog small  
 'I want to buy a small dog.'
- Anh muốn con chó nào?  
 2SG want CLF dog which  
 'Which dog do you want?'
- b. Tôi muốn con bé.  
 1SG want CLF small  
 'I want small one.'

## [5] Verb-based nominalizations

### [5a] Relative clauses

Vietnamese forms relative clauses using two primary strategies: the gapping strategy, as illustrated in examples (21b–c) and (22a–b), and pronominal retention, as shown in (23). These constructions may appear with or without the relativizer *mà*.

- (21) a. Anh có thể mang cho tôi cái váy mới không?  
2SG can bring for 1SG CLF skirt new NEG  
'Can you bring me the new skirt?'
- b. Cái đang treo trong tủ áo?  
CLF PROG hang in closet SFP  
'The one hanging in the closet?'
- c. Cái váy đang treo trong tủ áo.  
CLF skirt PROG hang in closet SFP  
'The skirt hanging in the closet.'
- (22) a. Cho tôi xem quyển (mà) anh mua hôm qua.  
let 1SG see CLF LNK 2SG buy yesterday  
'Let me see the one (book-like thing) you bought yesterday.'
- b. Quyển tiểu thuyết (mà) tôi mua hôm qua áo?  
CLF novel LNK 1SG buy yesterday SFP  
'The novel I bought yesterday?'

In example (23), the head noun phrase *cái đứa* 'the guy' is retained within the relative clause as the pronoun *nó* '(s)he/3rd person singular', illustrating the pronominal retention strategy.

- (23) Cái đứa mà tôi cao hơn nó là em trai của tôi.  
cái CLF LNK 1SG high more 3SG COP younger brother GEN 1SG  
'The guy whom I am taller than is my brother.' (Natchanan & Amara 2009)

### [5b] Complement clauses

Complement clauses in Vietnamese may be formed with or without an overt complementizer. As mentioned above, common complementizers include *là*, which historically derives from the copula, and *rằng*, which originally meant 'to say' in earlier stages of the language.

- (24) a. Nó gửi một bài thơ là/rằng Gió mưa là bệnh của trời...  
 3SG send one CLF poem COMP wind rain COP sick GEN sky  
 ‘She sent a poem saying Wind and rain is the sick of the sky...’
- b. Anh ấy gửi lại một bài là/rằng Anh về anh ốm tương tư...  
 3SG send back one CLF COMP 1SG return 1SG sick lovesick  
 ‘He sent back one saying I went home and got lovesick...’

### 3. DATA

#### 3.1 Classifiers

This section presents empirical data illustrating the distribution of classifier marking and grammatical nominalization in Vietnamese across a range of syntactic environments. The focus is on the distinction between NP-use and modification-use in contexts involving numerals, demonstratives, genitive phrases, adjectives, and verb-based nominalizations.

#### [1] Numerals

##### [1a] Cardinal numerals

NP use

- (25) Tôi muốn [bốn con].  
 1SG want 4 CLF  
 ‘I want four.’

Mod use

- (26) Tôi muốn [bốn con] chó.  
 1SG want 4 CLF dog  
 ‘I want four dogs.’

##### [1b] Ordinal numerals

NP use

- (27) Tôi thích [bài thứ hai].  
 1SG like CLF second  
 ‘I like the second one.’

Mod use

- (28) Tôi thích bài thơ [(\*)bài] thứ hai].  
 1SG like CLF poem CLF second  
 ‘I like the second poem.’

## [2] Demonstratives

NP use

- (29) [Con này] to.  
CLF this big  
'This one is big.'

Mod use

- (30) Con chó [(\*)con] này] to.  
CLF dog CLF this big.  
'This dog is big.'

## [3] Genitive noun phrases

NP use

- (31) [(Cái) của chị] đâu?  
CLF GEN 2SG where  
'Where is yours?'

Mod use

- (32) (Cái) váy [(\*)cái] của chị] đâu?  
CLF skirt CLF GEN 2SG where  
'Where is your skirt?'

## [4] Adjectives

NP use

- (33) Tôi muốn [con bé].  
1SG want CLF small  
'I want small one.'

Mod use

- (34) Tôi muốn con chó [(\*)con] bé].  
1SG want CLF dog CLF small  
'I want a small dog.'

## [5] Verb-based nominalizations

### [5a] Relative clauses

NP use

- (35) [Cái           đang       treo       trong       tủ]       á?  
      CLF        PROG       hang       in        closet       SFP  
      ‘The one hanging in the closet?’

Mod use

- (36) Cái        váy        [(\*cái)       đang       treo trong       tủ]       á?  
      CLF       skirt       CLF       PROG       hang in        closet       SFP  
      ‘The skirt hanging in the closet?’

### [5b] Complement clauses

NP use

- (37) Nó   gửi   một   bài   là/rằng    Gió   mưa   là   bệnh   của   trời...  
      3SG   send   one   CLF   COMP   wind   rain   COP   sick   GEN   sky  
      ‘He sent one (poem) saying Wind and rain is the sick of the sky...’

Mod use

- (38) Nó   gửi   một   bài   thơ       (\*bài)   là/rằng    Gió   mưa   là   bệnh   của  
      3SG   send   one   CLF   poem    CLF       COMP   wind   rain   COP   sick   GEN  
      trời   ...  
      sky  
      ‘He sent a poem saying Wind and rain is the sick of the sky...’

The patterns observed in the data are summarized in Figure 1, which outlines the distribution of classifier marking across NP-use and modification-use contexts. The figure captures both obligatory and restricted marking patterns, highlighting where classifier use is permitted, optional, or blocked.

Figure 1. Classifier marking pattern in Vietnamese

NP use:   CARD.NUM > DEM >   <sup>OPT</sup>GEN > ADJ >   V-based NMLZ  
          ORD.NUM

Mod use:   CARD.NUM > \*DEM >   \*GEN >   \*ADJ >   \*V-based NMLZ  
          \*ORD.NUM

(\* = no marking or impossible; OPT = optional marking; \*OPT = marking applies to a specific referent; unmarked = obligatory marking)

### 3.2 Genitive marker *của*

In contrast to classifiers, the genitive marker *của* plays a more limited role in grammatical nominalization. It functions as a nominalizer primarily in genitive noun phrases and relative clauses, and, to a lesser extent, as a marker of NP use in adjectival constructions, though the latter is largely confined to literary contexts. The nominalizing function of *của* is also semantically constrained. It typically requires a clear possessive or affiliative relationship between the head noun and the modifying element. In cases of verb-based nominalization, the head noun is generally interpreted as being controlled by or created by the subject expressed in the relative clause.

#### [3] Genitive noun phrases

NP use

- (39) Cái váy này là [của em].  
CLF skirt this COP GEN 1SG  
'This skirt is mine.'

Mod use

- (40) Cái này là [váy [của em]].  
CLF this COP skirt GEN 1SG  
'This is my skirt.'

#### [4] Adjectives

NP use

- (41) Của rẻ là của ôi.  
GEN cheap COP GEN spoiled  
'Cheap things are worthless.'

#### [5] Verb-based nominalizations

NP use

- (42) [Của tôi đào tạo] là thằng Nam, còn ...  
GEN 1SG train COP CLF Nam, and ...  
'The one I trained is Nam, and ...'

Mod use

- (43) [Thằng [của tôi đào tạo]] là thằng Nam, còn ...  
CLF GEN 1SG train COP CLF Nam and ...  
'The one I trained is Nam, and ...'

The distributional patterns of *cũa* as a nominalizer across different syntactic contexts are summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2. *Cũa* marking pattern in Vietnamese

|          |        |        |       |            |              |
|----------|--------|--------|-------|------------|--------------|
| NP use:  | *NUM > | *DEM > | GEN > | *OPT ADJ > | V-based NMLZ |
| Mod use: | *NUM > | *DEM > | GEN > | *ADJ >     | V-based NMLZ |

#### 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Vietnamese data on classifier marking align closely with the predictions of Shibatani’s (2023) functional-typological hierarchy, which posits that classifier/gender marking typically originates in NP-use and only later extends to modification-use. The pattern observed in Vietnamese largely supports this claim: classifier marking is consistently present in NP-use across structural categories (e.g., numerals, demonstratives, genitives, adjectives, and verb-based nominalizations), but its distribution in modification-use is strictly limited to cardinal numerals. A notable exception involves genitive noun phrases, where classifier marking is optional in NP-use. This deviates slightly from the hierarchy, which predicts either obligatory or no marking. This optionality may reflect a transitional stage or context-specific pragmatic influences within the Vietnamese system.

By contrast, the behavior of the genitive marker *cũa* provides an interesting complementary perspective. When functioning as a nominalizer, *cũa* appears in both NP-use and modification-use for genitive constructions and V-based nominalizations, mirroring the function of Mandarin Chinese *de* (Shibatani 2018: 390–391). This supports Shibatani’s broader claim that certain genitive or linker elements can evolve into non-classifying nominalizers. However, the use of *cũa* as a nominalizer is semantically constrained, typically requiring a possessive, affiliative, or control-based relationship between the head and modifier. Its productivity is also contextually limited, particularly in adjectival and numeral contexts, where its nominalizing function is not available.

Overall, the Vietnamese data contribute valuable cross-linguistic evidence in support of Shibatani’s theory, while also demonstrating some language-specifics and constraints that shape the distribution of nominalization strategies. The contrast between classifier-based and *cũa*-based nominalization in Vietnamese exemplifies the diversity of nominalization mechanisms and offers insight into the functional expansion and grammaticalization processes that operate across languages.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The Vietnamese classifier marking pattern, when viewed through the lens of Shibatani’s (2023) functional-typological framework, provides important support for the proposed hierarchy of nominalization, particularly the precedence of NP-use over modification-use in the development of classifier systems. However, a comparison with typologically similar languages, such as Northern Thai, reveals key syntactic divergences, most notably in word order. Whereas Northern Thai typically exhibits the [NUM–CLF–N] order, Vietnamese shows

a strong preference for the [NUM–CLF–N] structure in modern usage but may have historically followed a [N–NUM–CLF] pattern. Alves (2023) suggests that this shift reflects a broader syntactic change from early Vietic to modern Vietnamese. Evidence from 15th-century poetic texts, such as the following line from ‘Ba Tiêu’ in *Quốc Âm Thi Tập*, illustrates this earlier pattern:

- (44) tình thư    một            bức            phong        còn            kín  
 love letter one            CLF            seal            still            tight  
 ‘A love letter still sealed tight.’ (From the poem “Ba Tiêu” in “Quốc Âm Thi Tập,” Alves 2023: 11 of 23)

Although such examples are primarily found in poetic contexts, they offer diachronic insight into how classifier constructions in Vietnamese may have evolved structurally.

In parallel, the development of the genitive marker *của* also warrants historical investigation. While *của* functions today as a semantically restricted nominalizer in certain syntactic environments (e.g., genitive phrases and V-based nominalizations), its origin as a lexical noun meaning ‘property’ suggests a grammaticalization pathway worth tracing. Examining early texts may shed light on the semantic shifts underlying *của*’s evolution from denoting ownership or concrete possessions (e.g., ‘things’, ‘clothes’, ‘food’) to serving as a grammatical marker of nominal relations.

Taken together, the Vietnamese data appear broadly consistent with key aspects of Shibatani’s typological model and suggest the potential value of historical and comparative perspectives in exploring how nominalization systems develop across languages. Further diachronic and cross-linguistic investigation, particularly into classifier word order and the evolution of nominalizing markers, may offer deeper insights into the interaction between form, function, and structure in nominal syntax.

## ABBREVIATIONS

|          |                   |
|----------|-------------------|
| 1        | first person      |
| 2        | second person     |
| 3        | third person      |
| SG       | singular          |
| ADJ      | adjective         |
| CARD.NUM | cardinal numeral  |
| CLF      | classifier        |
| COMP     | complementizer    |
| COMP.CL  | complement clause |
| DEM      | demonstrative     |
| GEN      | genitive marker   |
| NMLZ     | nominalization    |
| NMLZR    | nominalizer       |
| NUM      | numeral           |
| ORD.NUM  | ordinal numeral   |

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