

IS VIETNAMESE A HARD LANGUAGE?

Tiếng Việt có phải là một ngôn ngữ khó không?

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1. MYTH OR REALITY?

1.1 *Học tiếng Việt có khó không?*

Is learning Vietnamese difficult? Conventional wisdom has it that Vietnamese is "a very difficult language." Many Vietnamese believe that it's pretty much impossible for foreigners to master their language. A quick search in Google for phrases like *tiếng Việt khó* ('Vietnamese is difficult') yields tens of thousands of hits. According to [George Milo](#):

The supposed difficulty of Vietnam's official language is a point of national pride amongst its 90 million inhabitants, and locals are happy to tell you "*tiếng Việt khó!*" (Vietnamese is hard) at every possible opportunity.

There is a saying in Vietnam:

Phong ba bão táp không bằng ngữ pháp Việt Nam.

which can be translated as "The hardships of struggling with a violent storm don't compare to the hardships of mastering Vietnamese grammar."

1.2 Debunking the myths

In this article, we will debunk some of the myths surrounding the so-called difficulty of Vietnamese. The analysis will be based on my own experience in learning 15 languages. I can speak ten of these quite fluently, am a high beginner in spoken Vietnamese, and can read but not speak another four languages (see [Jack's language Chart](#)).

A good answer to the question "*Học tiếng Việt có khó không?*" would be

Học tiếng Việt không khó cũng không dễ.

Learning Vietnamese is neither hard nor easy.

As we will see, many more aspects of Vietnamese grammar are *dễ* rather than *khó*. Realistically, it is more accurate to say that Vietnamese is mostly "an easy language" rather than "a hard language." However, one aspect of Vietnamese, the pronunciation, is quite difficult. To give a balanced picture, in the second half of this article we will describe the difficult aspects of learning Vietnamese.

2. WHY VIETNAMESE IS EASY

2.1 Short words

An important factor that makes Vietnamese easy to learn is that most words are short, some very short. Studies have shown that on the whole the average word length in Vietnamese is among the shortest in the world. There are thousands of monosyllabic words used in daily life, like *có*, *đi*, *ăn*, *ngủ*, and *cá*. But even the disyllabic words (which exceed by far the monosyllabic ones), like *thú vị* 'interesting' and *ngoại ngữ* 'foreign language', are fairly short.

Compare *đẹp* to the English *beautiful* and the Japanese *utsukushii*, or compare *mai* to the English *tomorrow* and the Japanese *ashita*, which are much longer. Think of the great benefits this brings to learners. Shorter words are (1) easier to memorize, (2) easier to recall, and (3) easier to write. Unfortunately, this does *not* mean that they are also easier to pronounce!

2.2 Tones are stable

A major difficulty in learning Vietnamese is the tone system (see §3.4 below). But there is good news too. For practical purposes it can be said that Vietnamese tones *do not change* according to the context.

Technically, such changes are called *tone sandhi*, which refers to a tone changing to another tone depending on the tone of the adjacent syllables. This is a well known phenomenon to speakers of Mandarin. For example, the first syllable in a sequence of two third tones changes to the second tone, as in 你好 *nǐ hǎo*, which is actually pronounced as *ní hǎo*. In other tonal languages, especially in some Chinese dialects such as Taiwanese, tone sandhi rules can be very complex and impose a major burden on the learner.

In Vietnamese, once you learn the tone of a syllable, you need not worry about it changing according to the context. For practical purposes the Vietnamese tones are stable, making it easier to learn than languages that have tone sandhi.

2.3 No gender

2.3.1 Gender is challenging

The grammatical category *gender* **does not exist in Vietnamese**. For those who have studied languages like Spanish, German and Arabic, this is good news, since gender can be highly irregular and highly illogical. Why, for example, is 'sun' masculine in Arabic (شمس *shams*) and feminine in Hebrew (שמש *shemesh*)? And why is *Mädchen* 'girl' *neutral* in German (which has *three* genders) and not feminine? Thus in German the learner has no choice but to memorize the genders of thousands of nouns.

In some languages, adjectives, nouns, and articles have gender. In Spanish *la muchacha bonita* is 'the beautiful girl' and *el muchacho bonito* is 'beautiful boy', but the adjective *grande* 'big' is the same for both masculine and feminine nouns. In some languages, even verbs are inflected for gender. In Arabic and Hebrew, there are dozens of such forms for each verb. For example, 'you eat' in Arabic is *تأكل* *ta'kulu* when speaking to a male but *تأكلين* *ta'kuliina* when speaking to a female.

2.3.2 Freedom from gender

Gender is nothing but historical baggage that places a burden on language learners and serves no useful purpose in communication. Learners spend years studying languages

like German and Arabic without fully mastering this difficult aspect of grammar. Fortunately, Vietnamese, and other gender-neutral languages like Japanese and Chinese, have no grammatical gender, which is yet another reason why Vietnamese is an easy language to learn.

2.3.3 Gender neutrality

Think about how convenient it is to use a gender-neutral language like Vietnamese, English, and Chinese. For example:

Bạn tôi là một bác sĩ.

My friend is a doctor.

我的朋友是医生. (*Wǒ de péngyou shì yīshēng*)

This sentence is neutral as to the gender of both the friend and the doctor. This is not the case in such languages as Spanish, German, Arabic, and many others. In Spanish, you are *forced* to choose between *Mi amigo es un doctor* for a male friend and *Mi amiga es una doctora* for a female friend. Unlike Vietnamese, you don't have the option of not specifying the gender of both the doctor and the friend.

Of course, specifying the gender is sometimes necessary, as when one needs to emphasize the gender of a person or animal. In Vietnamese, you have the choice of talking about *chó* 'dog' and *bác sĩ* 'doctor' in a gender-neutral way, or you can specify the gender explicitly by *chó đực* 'male dog' or *bác sĩ nam* 'male doctor'. How convenient!

2.4 No plural

The grammatical category *plural* **does not exist in Vietnamese** (except for a few pronouns, see §3.6).

2.4.1 Nouns and adjectives

Learning the plural form of nouns and adjectives is even more challenging than learning their gender. For those who have studied languages like German and Arabic, this is excellent news, since the plural forms are often highly irregular. Moreover, the plural can have a feminine form, and in Arabic there is a third kind of number, *the dual*, used only for pairs, as can be seen below:

Table 1. Arabic plurals

مُدَرِّسُونَ	<i>mudarrisūna</i>	male teachers
مُدَرِّسَانِ	<i>mudarrisāni</i>	two male teachers
مُدَرِّسَاتٌ	<i>mudarrisātun</i>	female teachers
مُدَرِّسَاتَيْنِ	<i>mudarrisatāni</i>	two female teachers

To complicate matters, it is said that as many as 90% of Arabic plurals are irregular and thus unpredictable. That is, there is no rule for predicting them. In addition, many nouns have two, three or even more plurals. In German the situation is better, but there are still many plural patterns to memorize, only a few of which are shown below:

Table 2. German plurals

Singular	Plural	English
Mann	Männer	man/men
Tisch	Tische	table/tables
Student	Studenten	student/students
Lehrer	Lehrer	teacher/teachers

2.4.2 Verb plurals

In addition, the verb forms of some languages (and to some extent even English) are inflected for number. In the case of Arabic and Hebrew, there are dozens of plural forms. For example, in Hebrew:

Table 3. Plural verbs in Hebrew

I (male) eat	אני אוכל	<i>ani 'oxel</i>
I (female) eat	אני אוכלת	<i>ani 'oxelet</i>
we (male) eat	אנחנו אוכלים	<i>anaxnu 'oxlim</i>
we (female) eat	אנחנו אוכלות	<i>anaxnu 'oxlot</i>

2.4.3 Plural is optional

The plurals in some languages can be very time-consuming to master. Fortunately for the learner of Vietnamese, this is a non-issue since Vietnamese nouns, adjectives and verbs are not inflected for number. A Vietnamese noun is simply "number neutral," so that *chó* or *con chó* could mean 'a dog' or '(many) dogs' depending on the context.

Of course, it is possible to express the plural of nouns when necessary. This can be done by (1) specifying a number + classifier before the noun (see §3.7 below), as in *năm con chó* 'five dogs', and (2) by adding the plural marker *những*, as in *những con chó* 'dogs'. The point is that the *form* of the word itself, in this case *chó*, never changes. This is yet another reason why Vietnamese grammar is easy to learn.

2.5 No articles

The grammatical category *article* **does not exist in Vietnamese**. Those who have studied European languages like German and Portuguese know how troublesome it can be (1) to learn the system of articles, whose form can depend on gender, number, and case, and (2) to know when to use the definite article, the indefinite article, or no article at all. Since gender and case are often irregular and illogical, mastering the use of the article is no easy feat. The table below show how the definite article varies in German. There are similar tables to describe the indefinite article and article-like words like pronouns.

Table 4. The definite article in German

Case	Masculine	Neuter	Feminine	Plural
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Nominative	der	das	die	die
Accusative	den	das	die	die
Dative	dem	dem	der	den
Genitive	des	des	der	der

2.6 No conjugation

2.6.1 The nightmare and the paradise

For many languages, the learner must spend countless hours to master countless verb forms inflected for tense, person, number, gender, aspect and level of politeness, resulting in hundreds of forms (Arabic and Spanish), or even thousands of forms (Japanese), which are organized into dozens of tables called "conjugation paradigms." Arabic verbs are the language learner's worst nightmares come true. Have a look at a small subset of a typical verb paradigm.

Table 5. Part of past tense of اشْتَرَى @'ishtara@ 'to buy'

No	Pron	Arabic	Roman	English
01	أَنَا	اِشْتَرَيْتُ	<i>'ishtaráytu</i>	I bought
02	أَنْتَ	اِشْتَرَيْتَ	<i>'ishtaráyta</i>	you (m) bought
03	أَنْتِ	اِشْتَرَيْتِ	<i>'ishtaráyti</i>	you (f) bought
04	هُوَ	اِشْتَرَى	<i>'ishtara</i>	he bought
05	هِيَ	اِشْتَرَتْ	<i>'ishtarat</i>	she bought

Arabic has 13 persons, only five of which are shown above. This just one of 20 similar tables for just one verb اشْتَرَى 'ishtara' 'to buy'! A staggering 42,000 forms for 14 conjugation patterns subdivided into 182 subtypes, 13 grammatical persons, and 240 inflected forms (see [our CAVE website](#)) governed by an intricate network of rules, sub-rules, exceptions and sub-exceptions enough to drive mad even the bravest of souls. Other languages, such as Spanish, Russian and Hebrew, also have many paradigm tables with numerous exceptions that require much effort to learn.

In stark contrast, Vietnamese is "the conjugator's paradise." Simply put, **Vietnamese has no verb conjugations.** This is one of the most important features of Vietnamese that makes it easy to learn. Vietnamese verbs are easy for two reasons: (1) they are often short (monosyllabic), like *đi* 'to go' and *ăn* 'to eat' and, more importantly, (2) they have only **one invariable form**, like a solid block of gold, eternally immutable. By learning that *ăn* means 'to eat', you instantly, fully, and irrevocably master the entire "conjugation paradigm" – which consists of exactly *one* form. This relieves you of one of the biggest hurdle faced by language learners.

2.6.2 Tenses are easy

Tense, aspect and the passive voice in Vietnamese are expressed by a small number of particles, called *tense markers*, placed before the verb, as shown below:

tôi đã ăn I ate

<i>tôi ăn rồi</i>	I already ate
<i>tôi sẽ ăn</i>	I will eat
<i>tôi đang ăn</i>	I am eating
<i>tôi sắp ăn</i>	I am about to eat
<i>tôi mới/vừa ăn</i>	I just ate
<i>được khen</i>	is praised (desirable)
<i>bị chỉ trích</i>	is criticized (undesirable)

Although some tense markers can be combined to form more complex constructions, you can nevertheless master the basics of the Vietnamese tense system in literally a few minutes. This is unthinkable in the vast majority of the world's languages.

2.6.3 Tenses are optional

Unlike in many other languages, in Vietnamese tenses are *optional*. There are two ways to convey tense information without using tense markers. The first is to use time words, like *yesterday* and *this week*. For example, in *Tôi ăn trưa hôm qua* 'I had lunch yesterday', the time word *hôm qua* makes it clear that the action took place in the past. The second is purely from the context, such as in:

Tuần trước tôi đi đến Tokyo. Sau đó tôi đi đến Boston.
Last week I went to Tokyo. I then went to Boston.

In the second sentence, it is perfectly clear from the context that *đi* indicates the past tense, though no tense marker and no time word is used in that sentence.

2.7 No case endings

The grammatical category *grammatical case* **does not exist in Vietnamese**. In such languages as Arabic and German, nouns, adjectives and pronouns change their form depending on whether they are the subject (nominative), the direct object (accusative), the indirect object (dative case), or the possessive (genitive), as shown in the table below for the German word *Tisch* 'table':

Table 6. German case endings

Case	Singular	Plural
Nominative	der Tisch	die Tische
Genitive	des Tisch(e)s	der Tische
Dative	dem Tisch(e)	den Tischen
Accusative	den Tisch	die Tische

Mastering the case system of some languages, which is often irregular and illogical, is a tedious process that puts a great burden on the learner. Fortunately for the learner, Vietnamese has no case endings. The function of a word is indicated by word order (subject before the verb and object after the verb), or by prepositions, as in:

Lan đã gửi thư cho mẹ.
Lan sent a letter to his mother.

It is clear that the subject is *Lan*, the direct object is *thur* because of the word order, and *mẹ* is the indirect object because of the preposition *cho*.

2.8 No agreement

Grammatical agreement does not exist in Vietnamese. This refers to changes to the form of a word depending on the tense, number, or gender of other nearby words. For example, in the English phrase *these men* the plural *these* must agree with the plural *men*, while in Arabic and Hebrew there is gender agreement for verbs, as in אוכל *'oxel* for 'he eats' but אוכלת *'oxelet* for 'she eats'. Mastering agreement in some languages, like German and Arabic, can get very complicated, requiring a detailed knowledge of verb conjugations, number and gender – an effort that can take many years.

2.9 Easy to read

For about 1000 years Vietnamese was written in a Chinese-based script called *chữ Nôm*, which was abolished in the early 20th century. This was replaced by the Vietnamese alphabet (*chữ Quốc ngữ*), which is based on the Latin script and is modified by various diacritics, especially to represent the tones. The essentials of the Vietnamese alphabet are explained at:

https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Vietnamese_alphabet

Unlike the scripts of other Asian languages like Chinese, Thai, Japanese, Korean, and Burmese, since the alphabet is similar to that of the European languages it is easy to master in a short time. Though the many diacritics may look intimidating at first, they are used logically and are easy to memorize. This means that, compared to many other Asian languages, the Vietnamese script is easy to learn and easy to read. But this does *not* mean that it is easy to pronounce! In fact, pronunciation is by far the most difficult aspect of learning Vietnamese, as explained in §3 below.

2.10 Easy to write

Since the Vietnamese alphabet is based on the Latin alphabet, it is easy to write. The good news for the learner is that, unlike such languages as French and English, the Vietnamese orthography is fairly regular. In standard Hanoi pronunciation, each letter or digraph (two letters combination) is pronounced the same (except for in some loanwords). Though the pronunciation of some consonants can be different when they are in the final position, on the whole the Vietnamese orthography is relatively easy to learn.

Though Vietnamese has fairly good letter-to-sound (*grapheme-to-phoneme*) correspondence, unfortunately the opposite is not always true. That is, in some cases the same sound can be written in different ways, depending on etymology. In standard Hanoi speech, this is restricted to the following cases.

Table 7. One sound, several spellings

Sound	Spelling	Description
[tɛ̃]	<i>ch, tr</i>	like English /sh/ but unaspirated
[s]	<i>s, x</i>	like English /s/
[z]	<i>d, gi, r</i>	almost like English /z/

[k]	c, k	like English /k/ but unaspirated as in <i>sky</i>
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2.11 Easy words

Most Vietnamese words are derived from Chinese or based on the Chinese model of word formation. Each syllable used to be written with one Chinese character, usually denoting a clear meaning. Compound words are formed by combining syllables in a manner that the meaning of the whole is usually easily derived from the components. For example:

ngoại (外) 'foreign' + *ngữ* (語) 'language' → *ngoại ngữ* (外語) 'foreign language'
thực (食) 'eat' + *phẩm* (品) 'item' → *thực phẩm* (食品) 'food product'

In Chinese and Japanese, this word formation mechanism is very clear because if one knows the meanings of the components it is easy to understand the meanings of compound words. But even though the Chinese characters are no longer used, knowing the meaning of such components makes it easier to learn new words.

2.12 Easy grammar

Although Vietnamese grammar has some difficult aspects, on the whole it is much easier than most other languages. One reason is that it has various optional features: optional tenses, optional gender, optional plurals, and the subject is often optional. It almost seems as if optionality is built into the fabric of the language, which is logical and convenient since it does not force the user to convey unnecessary information, such as gender and plurality. As we have seen, one can say

Vietnamese *Bạn tôi là một bác sĩ.*
English My friend is a doctor.
Spanish Mi amigo es un doctor

without revealing if the doctor is male or female, which is obligatory in Spanish. At the same time, we have seen that several grammatical features, such as verb conjugation, grammatical agreement, and case endings, are entirely missing in Vietnamese. This means that the learner can spend less time in learning since he/she need not pay much attention to the optional features, and pay no attention at all to the missing features.

2.13 Information density

Here is an amazing fact about Vietnamese. According to [a study at the Université de Lyon](#), Vietnamese has the highest "information density" among the world's major languages, as shown below:

Table 8. Information Density

Language	Information density	Syllabic rate	Information rate
English	0.91	6.19	1.08
French	0.74	7.18	0.99
German	0.79	5.97	0.90

Italian	0.72	6.99	0.96
Japanese	0.49	7.84	0.74
Mandarin	0.94	5.18	0.94
Spanish	0.63	7.82	0.98
Vietnamese	1.00	5.22	1.00

This means that Vietnamese packs more than twice as much information into the same number of syllables as Japanese does. On the other hand, Japanese is spoken 50% faster to make up for the low density, but Vietnamese is still more efficient since it has a 25% higher "information rate" (1.0 vs 0.74).

What does this mean for the learner? That though Vietnamese is spoken more slowly, the listener has to concentrate more because information is compressed into each unit of time. Nevertheless, the higher density probably contributes to ease of learning because of the significantly shorter words and efficient representation of meaning. Let's look at an example.

English	17 syllables	Yesterday I went to the aquarium and saw many beautiful fish.
Vietnamese	12 syllables	Hôm qua tôi đi thủy cung và thấy rất nhiều cá đẹp.
Japanese	31 syllables (36 mora)	昨日、私は水族館に行って、美しい魚をたくさん見ました <i>Sakujitsu, watashi wa suizokukan ni itte, utsukushī sakana o takusan mimashita</i>

As expected, Japanese has almost 2.6 times more syllables than Vietnamese, and even English is 1.4 times more verbose, which demonstrates that **Vietnamese is concise**, that is, that it has short words (see §2.1). This means that it takes the learner less time to read or listen to Vietnamese compared to other languages.

3. WHY VIETNAMESE IS HARD

The greatest difficulty in learning Vietnamese is the pronunciation, especially the tone system. (The comments below refer to standard Hanoi speech, unless stated otherwise.)

3.1 Vietnamese consonants

Vietnamese has 19 (or 20) consonants, which are listed with their precise Hanoi and Saigon pronunciation (in IPA) at [my Vietnamese page](#). Most of these are similar to English and Spanish and are easy to pronounce. Only one consonant can be said to be difficult for learners : [ŋ], written as *ng* or *ngh*, in such words as *ngủ* 'sleep', which is pronounced more or less like *ng* in *singing*. [ŋ] is especially difficult in the beginning of a word, as in *ngôn ngữ* 'language'. There is an outstanding video on Youtube by [Stuart Jay Raj](#) that shows how to pronounce [ŋ] precisely.

The other somewhat difficult sound is [x], spelled as *kh* in such words as *khó* 'difficult'. This is common in such languages as Spanish (*ajo* 'garlic') and Chinese (你好 *nǐhǎo* 'hello'). Technically [x] is a "voiceless velar fricative" but don't let that scare you away. It is a kind scraping sound produced with the back of the tongue touching the soft palate. You will quickly get used to it. If you really can't master it, use the Saigon variety, which is an aspirated [k^h] as in the English *car*.

The other consonants are not particularly difficult but some require special attention, as described below.

Table 9. Vietnamese consonants

Sound	Spelling	Description
[d̥], [b̥]	<i>đ, b</i>	Similar to English [d] and [b] but preceded by a <i>glottal stop</i> , so it sounds constricted at the beginning.
[k]	<i>c, k, qu</i>	An <i>unaspirated</i> [k], like in English <i>sky</i> or the Chinese <i>ga</i> , without a puff of air.
[t̚]	<i>ch, tr</i>	Similar to English <i>ch</i> , but <i>unaspirated</i> , or like Chinese /j/.
[ɣ]	<i>g, gh</i>	A fricative (lightly scraping) sound, sometimes pronounced like a normal [g].
[t ^h]	<i>th</i>	An aspirated [t], pronounced with a strong puff of breath.
[t]	<i>t</i>	An <i>unaspirated</i> [t], like /d/ the Chinese <i>dàxúe</i> . It sounds close to <i>đ</i> so should not be confused with it.
[s]	<i>s, x</i>	Both are pronounced almost like [s] in English.
[z]	<i>d, gi, r</i>	All three are pronounced almost like English /z/.

Many native Hanoians will swear that /s/ should "correctly" be pronounced as [ʃ], like in Saigon (close to the English /sh/). This is a myth based on "hypercorrection." Though Hanoians sometimes pronounce it as [ʃ], in standard Vietnamese [s] is perfectly correct. Some even argue that pronouncing /r/ as [z] is "incorrect," which is nonsense. If it were true, then millions of Northerners are speaking their own native language incorrectly! It is the native speakers that determine what is "correct" – not some historical or theoretical criterion.

3.2 Vietnamese vowels

Vietnamese has 11 vowels, 8 long vowels and 3 short vowels, many diphthongs and triphthongs, and 8 final consonants. You should refer to a good grammar book to get a full description of how to pronounce the different combinations of consonants, vowels, finals and other elements, which could be quite challenging. The chart below briefly describes the basic vowels. Note that the vowel descriptions below are based on standard American English, which are an approximation, while the precise pronunciation is given in the second column in IPA ([International Phonetic Alphabet](#).)

Table 10. Vietnamese vowels

Spelling	Sound (IPA)	Description
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a	[a:]	a long /a/ as in <i>father</i>
ă	/a/	a short /a/ – be sure to distinguish it from long /a/
i (y)	[i:]	a long /i/ but pronounced short in some contexts
â	[ɤ] (/ə/)	a short closed vowel, similar to <i>o</i> in English <i>other</i> .
e	[ɛ:]	a long open /e/ similar to the vowel in <i>bat</i> in English
ê	[e:]	a long closed /e/ similar to the vowel in English <i>day</i> but without the <i>y</i>
o	/ɔ:/	a long open sound similar to the vowel <i>aw</i> in English <i>flaw</i>
ô	[o:]	a long closed /o/ sound like in <i>boy</i> but without the <i>y</i>
ơ	[ɤ:] ([ə:])	a long vowel somewhat similar to the <i>o</i> in English <i>other</i>
u	[u:]	a long /u/ sound like the vowel in <i>boot</i>
ư	[i:]	a long vowel somewhat similar to the vowel in English <i>fur</i>

For the learner, the most difficult sounds vowels are probably /â/, /ơ/ and /ư/.

3.3 Vietnamese syllables

Vietnamese syllables have a complex structure that can consist of up to five components, such as initials, finals, and tones. These components be combined to form thousands of syllables, many of which contain difficult-to-pronounce diphthongs and triphthongs. In our institute (CJKI) we have compiled possibly the largest database of Vietnamese syllables, with over 6785 entries, summarized in [Summary of syllables](#). Below are a few syllables from that database with their precise pronunciations in IPA for standard Hanoi speech (Hanoi 2 is more precise) and the Saigon dialect.

Table 11. Some Vietnamese syllables in IPA

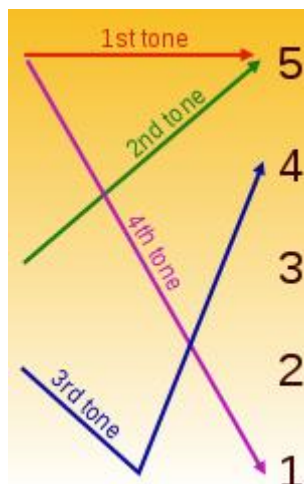
Spelling	Hanoi 1	Hanoi 2	Saigon	Tone
đư ^o õn	ɗiə̃n	ʔɗi ^o ɿn	ɗiə̃ŋ	2
binh	βi ^h ŋ	ʔβi ^h ŋk	βi ^h n	1
bóc	βaw ^o k ^h p̄	ʔβaw ^o k ^h p̄		5B
bông	βow ^o ŋm̄	ʔβow ^o ŋm̄		1
bót	βo:t̄	ʔβo:t̄	βo:k̄	5B

The five components interact in complex ways that cause changes in pronunciation, especially in vowel quality and length. For example, /ô/, normally pronounced [o], becomes [ow] in *bông*, while /ơ/, normally [ɔ:], becomes [aw] in *bóc*, and the *a* is neutralized in the diphthong *ia* [iə]. There are many other changes like this, which are governed by a complex set of rules that are difficult to master. One of the greatest difficulties in mastering Vietnamese is to learn how the vowels and consonants change when they are combined into different types of syllable.

3.4 Vietnamese tones

3.4.1 Tones are difficult

Vietnamese is commonly described as having six tones. There is no question that tone languages are generally difficult to learn, especially for those who do not speak a tone language like Chinese or Thai. To discuss Vietnamese tones, we will use "tone contour numbers."



The above diagram shows the four tones for Mandarin, with 5 representing the highest level and 1 the lowest. The third tone, for example, can be represented by 214, which means that it starts at level 2, dips to level 1, then rises to level 4. Now let us look at the Vietnamese tones. The symbol [ʔ] represents the *glottal stop*, produced by suddenly closing the vocal cords.

Table 12. Vietnamese tones

No.	Name	Description	Hanoi	Saigon	Example
1	ngang	mid-high level	44	44?	ba
2	huyền	low-falling	21 (31)	21	bà
3	hỏi	low-falling (-rising)	31 (313)	313 (31)	bả
4	ngã	mid-rising (high-rising)	3 [?] 5 (4 [?] 5)	313	bã
5A	sắc	mid-rising	24 (35)	24 (35)	bá, tám, ái, báng
5B	sắc	high-rising	35 (45)	35	sắc, bót, báp
6A	nặng	low-falling	32 [?] (31 [?])	23	bạ, bạ, bậ
6B	nặng	low-falling	32 (31)	23	mạ, đẹp, bệ

Based on extensive investigation and consultation with experts, I believe that the above table accurately represents the tones in standard Hanoi speech and the Saigon dialect (not Northern Vietnamese and Southern Vietnamese in general).

3.4.2 Dispelling myths

Yes, the tones are difficult, but not as difficult as they may seem. The notes below should dispel some myths about Vietnamese tones.

1. Grammar books describe the first tone *ngang* as "mid-level" (33). This is simply not true, as shown by researchers and as you can easily verify by listening to a native speaker pronouncing *rất vui*. *vui* is definitely higher than mid-level. It is a *mid-high* level tone, roughly 44, and sometimes even close to 55.
2. It may come as a shock to most native speakers that linguists have concluded as a result of in-depth studies (such as the [dissertation by Hoa T. Pham](#)) that Vietnamese has eight tones, not six. As you can see in the chart, *sắc* and *nặng* have two variants. For example, the tone 5A in *bá* is different from the tone 5B in *sắc*. The latter starts from a higher point and rises quick and sharply. For the learner, it is useful to learn the eight tone system, since it represents the actual pronunciation more accurately.
3. Contrary to the claims of Vietnamese learning materials, in Hanoi *hỏi* is generally not pronounced as 313 but as 31. This is especially true before other syllables, but it may be pronounced as 313 in careful speech at sentence end. 313 is also used in the Northern dialects outside Hanoi and in Saigon. For foreigners, 313 is probably easier to distinguish since in fast speech 31 may sound like *huyền*, which is normally 21 but can also be 31.
4. *Nặng*, especially the 6A variety, is quite difficult for foreigners. It drops very low very quickly, the throat is constricted in a glottal stop, and, most important of all the final consonant disappears or almost disappears, so that *bạn* sound more like *bạ* without the final /n/.
5. Note that *sắc* 5B is very high, and in quick speech may even sound like a flat high tone close to 55, whereas *nặng* 6B may sound low as 21 or possibly close to 11.
6. The tones in Saigon and in other Southern dialects are different from Hanoi. Especially noteworthy is that both *hỏi* and *ngã* are both pronounced the same, as 313.

3.5 Listening comprehension

Learners often say that it is easier for them to use a language passively (reading and listening), called "reception," than to use it actively (speaking and writing), called "production." For myself I find this to be true in most languages I have studied, especially those whose grammar is difficult, such as German and Arabic. However, I find that the opposite is true for two languages, Chinese and Vietnamese, which share various features such as tones and a lack of conjugation, plurals and gender.

For Vietnamese, I find it considerably easier to speak than to understand. My biggest problem is listening comprehension, and I am surprised by the fact that I can speak Vietnamese better than I can understand it. I thought about this a lot and tried to figure out the reasons. Below are the reasons I came up with it, though I am not fully convinced that these are the correct explanations.

3.5.1 Difficult sounds. First and foremost, Vietnamese is a phonologically rich and complex language: 11 vowels, 19 (or 20) initial consonants, 8 final consonants and 8 tones

combine to form nearly 7000 syllables, as compared to about 1200 in Chinese and only 108 in Japanese. This means that it is not only difficult to pronounce certain sounds, but is also difficult to distinguish between many sounds that are quite similar to each other, such as:

<i>bang</i> [bɑ:ŋ]	<i>banh</i> [bɛ̃ŋ]	<i>bênh</i> [bɛ̃ŋ]
<i>nhinh</i> [ɲĩŋ]	<i>nghinh</i> [ŋĩŋ]	<i>nghiêng</i> [ŋiəŋ]

I suspect that even native speakers have difficulty in distinguishing between these sounds, which are quite close. Other syllables, such as *nghiệm* [ŋiəm], *nghịch* [ŋĩk] and *ngoạc* [ŋwɛ̃k] are both difficult to pronounce and difficult to discern.

3.5.2 **Difficult tones.** The difference between tones may sometimes be difficult to discern, especially in rapid or casual speech. For example, the difference between *huyền*, *nặng* and *hỏi* in the following is rather subtle.

<i>ngoài</i>	[ŋwa:j-2]
<i>ngoại</i>	[ŋwa:j-6A]
<i>ngoải</i>	[ŋwa:j-4]

There is little doubt that it can be difficult for the learner to distinguish between tones. Nevertheless, it is probably true to say that distinguishing between similar sounds (such as *banh* and *bênh*) is more difficult than distinguishing between similar tones.

3.5.3 **Fast/unclear speech.** There is no question speed can be a major obstacle in understanding a foreign language. But as we have seen in §2.13, Vietnamese is spoken more slowly than any other world language investigated in [a study on information density](#). So speed is probably not a major factor contributing to poor comprehension. Another issue is that the learner often finds himself/herself in a noisy environment, and the other party speaks unclearly or in a low voice.

3.5.4 **Unknown vocabulary.** Obviously a major obstacle to listening comprehension is the presence of unknown words, colloquialisms, and difficult phrases. Nevertheless, I find that it is often difficult to follow a conversation even if I already know many or even most of the words, so that knowledge of words alone cannot account for failure to understand.

3.5.5 **Expectation.** An important factor that contributes to misunderstanding, even in your native language, is hearing unexpected words or phrases. When studying a foreign language, if someone suddenly asks you a question that you are not expecting, such as "Are there many schools in your city?" when you are talking about sports or cuisine, you are likely to misunderstand even if you know every word in the question.

3.5.6 **Auditory memory.** If you have learned a word by reading it but have never or rarely heard it, you may not recognize it when you hear it. What you need is an "aural image," not just a visual image, of the word. So poor listening comprehension can be due to insufficient exposure to the spoken word.

3.5.7 **Losing control.** When you are speaking you are in control: in control of the topic, in control of the vocabulary, in control of the speed. When you are listening, the other party is in control. When you are in control, you limit yourself to the vocabulary you know and to the topic of your choice, but when you lose control you are likely to lose your train of thought. And if the other party speaks too fast, changes the topic, or uses

many unknown words, you can soon get completely lost in a sea of unknown sounds that make little sense.

3.6 Many pronouns

According to the [Wikipedia article on Vietnamese pronouns](#), there are about 50 pronouns in Vietnamese, including plurals and archaic ones. (This is much less than the numerous pronouns in Japanese, but it is still a significant number.) To fully master the Vietnamese pronoun system can be difficult because of (1) their large number, and (2) to use pronouns correctly requires an understanding of cultural and social factors. There are different types of pronouns in Vietnamese, a small subset of which is shown below:

Table 13. Principal Vietnamese pronouns

Person	Singular	Plural
First	tôi	chúng tôi
	mình	chúng mình
Second	mày	chúng mày
	mi	bay
Third	nó	chúng nó
	hắn	bọn chúng, chúng
		người ta
		họ

Below are some the most common kinship terms used in place of pronouns. These are not restricted to a specific grammatical person, so it can be confusing. For example, *chị* can mean both 'you' and 'I'. When used as pronouns, these terms feel more like pronouns than real kinship terms, so that *Khi nào bác đến?* translates as "When are you coming?" rather than as "When is Uncle coming?".

Table 14. Common kinship terms used as pronouns

Term	Meaning	Term	Meaning
<i>cha</i>	father	<i>mẹ</i>	mother
<i>anh</i>	older brother	<i>chị</i>	older sister
<i>em</i>	younger sibling	<i>con</i>	child or grandchild
<i>cháu</i>	grandchild	<i>ông</i>	grandfather
<i>bà</i>	grandmother	<i>bác</i>	uncle, aunt
<i>cô</i>	father's sister	<i>bạn</i>	friend

The good news for the learner is that in practical conversation pronouns are "an issue," but not "a major problem." Though the pronoun system may look overwhelming, with a little effort it is manageable for practical communication. For example, for *I* you can always safely use *tôi*, though you will sound somewhat formal, or the pronoun appropriate to your age, such as *cháu* if you are say less than 40 or so and the other

party is considerably older than you. For *you* you can use the informal *bạn* 'friend', but ideally you should use the kinship term based on age, such as *anh* for someone who could be your older brother and *ông* for an elderly gentleman.

3.7 Many classifiers

A distinguishing feature of some languages, like Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese, is the use of *classifiers*. These are words used for classifying or counting nouns. For example:

Tôi có bốn con chó.
I have four dogs.

This is similar to the English *head* in 'four heads of cattle'. The problem is that Vietnamese has a rich set of classifiers, their use is obligatory, and it may be difficult to remember which classifiers are appropriate for which nouns. Some common classifiers include:

<i>cái</i>	generic classifier for inanimate objects
<i>con</i>	generic classifier for animate objects, especially animals
<i>ly</i>	glasses or cups
<i>cây</i>	trees and tree-shaped objects

It takes time to get used to using Vietnamese classifiers correctly. But even if you don't use them, or just use the generic *cái* and *con*, it is sufficient for communication. So although classifiers are a somewhat difficult aspect of learning Vietnamese, there is no need to despair.

3.8 Information density

In §2.13 we explained how high information density may contribute to making Vietnamese easier to learn. But this may be a double-edged sword. That is, the high information density may make listening comprehension more difficult because it takes more time and more effort to analyze and absorb the condensed information packets. For example, in Japanese *ustukushii* 'beautiful' extends over five syllables as opposed to the one syllable *đẹp* in Vietnamese. I suspect that while the five-syllable *ustukushii* is being pronounced the listener makes less effort to absorb the meaning because the five syllables take more time to pronounce than the fleeting single-syllable *đẹp*.

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Why Vietnamese is easy

Below is a summary of **fifteen reasons** that Vietnamese is easy to learn, much easier than many other languages.

1. **Short words.** Words are short and easy to learn. Many common words like *ngủ* and *đi* have only one syllable and even polysyllabic words like *thú vị* are often short.
2. **Stable tones.** The tones do not change according to the context; that is, the tone of any syllable is always the same.

3. **No gender.** Vietnamese has no grammatical gender. Gender is a major challenge for learners of many languages like Arabic and German, since the form is often irregular and illogical.
4. **No plural.** Vietnamese has no plural forms, neither for nouns and adjectives nor for verbs. Plural forms can be highly irregular (as in German and Arabic) and thus difficult to learn.
5. **No articles.** Vietnamese has no articles. In many languages, such as German and Portuguese, mastering the articles is difficult because their form can depend on gender, number, and case.
6. **No conjugation.** Vietnamese verbs are never conjugated; that is, they have only **one form**. Some languages have hundreds of verb forms, which could take years to learn.
7. **Tenses are easy.** Vietnamese tenses are formed by a small number of particles placed before the verb, such *đã* for past and *sẽ* for future. You can thus master the Vietnamese tenses in a few minutes.
8. **Tenses are optional.** The tense particles can be omitted if the tense is clear from the context, or by using a time word, as in *Tôi ăn trưa hôm qua* 'I had lunch yesterday'.
9. **No cases.** Vietnamese words are not inflected for grammatical case (such as nominative and dative), which makes it much easier to learn than languages with complicated case systems like German.
10. **No agreement.** Since Vietnamese words are not inflected nor conjugated, they never change according to the tense, number and gender of other words in the sentence, as is the case in many languages.
11. **Easy to read.** Vietnamese is written in the Latin alphabet, modified by diacritics. It is much easier to read compared to other Asian languages like Chinese and Japanese that are written in non-Latin scripts.
12. **Easy to write.** Vietnamese is easy to write because it uses the Latin alphabet and because the orthography is fairly regular, unlike such languages as French and English.
13. **Easy words.** Vietnamese words are based on the Chinese model. Since each syllable has a clear meaning (often derived from a Chinese character), compound words can be easily understood if one knows the meanings of each component.
14. **Easy grammar.** Vietnamese grammar is much easier than that of many other languages because of such features as verb conjugation and case endings don't exist, while others, such as plural forms and tenses, are easy to form and are optional.

15. **Information density.** Vietnamese packs more information into the same number of syllables than other major world language, contributing to ease of learning because the shorter words represent meaning more efficiently.

4.2 Why Vietnamese is hard

Below is a summary of the reasons why Vietnamese is hard to learn. (All comments refer to the standard Hanoi speech.)

4.2.1 Pronunciation is difficult

1. **Consonants.** The 19 consonants are mostly similar to English and easy pronounce but *kh* and initial *ng* , as in *ngôn ngữ*, could be difficult.
2. **Vowels.** Vietnamese has 11 vowel and many diphthongs and triphthongs. For learners, the most difficult ones are probably /ɯ/, /ɔ/, /â/ and /ua/.
3. **Syllables.** There are nearly 7000 syllables, some of complex structure and many are difficult to pronounce, like *đuồn*, *nghiêng*, *duọt* and *buru*.
4. **Tones.** Vietnamese actually has eight, not six, tones. Some tones, like *nặng* and *ngã*, are difficult to pronounce.

4.2.2 Listening comprehension

It is often said that it is easier to learn to use a language passively (reading and listening) than actively (speaking and writing). For Vietnamese. it seems that speaking could be easier than listening, for the reasons explained below.

1. **Difficult sounds.** Vietnamese is phonologically rich and complex: 11 vowels, 19 (or 20) consonants, 8 final consonants and 8 tones combine to form nearly 7000 syllables, some of which are quite similar and difficult to distinguish, like *nhinh* [ɲĩŋ], *nginh* [ɲĩŋ], and *nghiêng* [ŋiəŋ]
2. **Difficult tones.** The difference between some tones in rapid speech may be difficult to discern, as for example, in rapid speech the difference between *ngoài*, *ngoại*, and *ngoải*.
3. **Fast speech.** Vietnamese is normally spoken relatively slowly, but if spoken fast, unclearly or in a low voice it becomes difficult to understand.
4. **Vocabulary.** A major obstacle in learning any language is the presence of unknown words and phrases. But Vietnamese can be difficult to follow even if most of the words are known.
5. **Expectation.** If someone asks you a question you are not expecting, you are likely to misunderstand even if you know every word in the question.
6. **Auditory memory.** If you have learned a word by reading but have rarely heard it you may not recognize it. You need an "aural image," not just a visual image, to understand the spoken word.

7. **Losing control.** When speaking you are in control of the topic, the vocabulary, and the speed, but when listening, the other party gains control and you may get lost. Therefore, speaking can be easier than listening.
8. **Information density.** Though high information density makes Vietnamese easier to learn in general, it may actually make listening more difficult because it may take more time to absorb the denser information.

4.2.3 Pronouns and Classifiers

1. **Pronouns.** There are dozens of pronouns, and their correct use requires an understanding of cultural and social factors. Confusingly, the same word, like *anh* and *cháu*, can refer to both the first and second persons.
2. **Classifiers.** Vietnamese has a rich set of classifiers, whose use is obligatory, and it is difficult to remember which classifiers are appropriate for which nouns.

4.3 Conclusions

In conclusion, despite of the challenges faced by learners of Vietnamese, especially in pronouncing and discerning the tones and the many difficult sounds, it can be said that Vietnamese is a relatively easy language to learn: short words, a stable orthography, no genders, no plurals, no conjugation, no cases, no articles, and more.

Don't let the false prophets shouting "*tiếng Việt khó*" mislead you :-). Screw up your courage and plunge into the exciting and joyous world of *tiếng Việt*.

5. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

5.1 Jack Halpern



Jack Halpern, CEO of The CJK Dictionary Institute, is a lexicographer by profession, has compiled many dictionaries and apps for language learning, especially the world-renowned [Kodansha Kanji Learner's Dictionary](#). Jack Halpern, who has lived in Japan over 40 years, was born in Germany and has lived in six countries. An avid polyglot, he has studied 15 languages (speaks ten fluently) and has devoted several decades to the study of lexicography. Jack Halpern loves the sport of unicycling. Founder of the International Unicycling Federation, he has promoted the sport worldwide. Currently, his passions are playing the quena, improving his Vietnamese and Arabic, and overseas travel.

5.2 The CJK Dictionary Institute

The CJK Dictionary Institute, Inc. (CJKI) specializes in CJK (Chinese, Japanese, Korean) and Arabic computational lexicography. The institute creates and maintains CJK large-scale dictionary databases currently covering approximately 24 million entries. Located in Saitama, Japan, CJKI is headed by Jack Halpern, who is the editor of many dictionaries and applications for studying languages, especially Japanese and Chinese. Based on Jack Halpern's experience in learning foreign languages, CJKI has developed [Libera](#), a revolutionary tool that provides a whole new way of making language learning more effective and enjoyable than ever before.