

Vietnamese

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History of the Writing System

Vietnamese is the 7th most spoken language in the United States with over one million speakers. Throughout the world, Vietnamese is spoken by 82 million people ([Agar, 2008](#)).

Vietnamese is a tone language or, more specifically, it utilizes "lexical tone." This means that the same syllable can have different meanings depending upon the tone with which it is produced. For example, the syllable *ma* has six different meanings depending upon which of six tones it is produced with:

Vietnamese has been influenced by Chinese, French, and even English (i.e. loan-words). In fact, the language originated from the Chinese language. From 207 B.C. to 939 A.D., Vietnam was under the control of China, so their language and writing system was essentially Chinese

| Vietnamese | Tone | Definition |
|------------|--------------|---------------|
| <i>ma</i> | <i>ngang</i> | ghost |
| <i>má</i> | <i>sắc</i> | cheek, mother |
| <i>mả</i> | <i>hỏi</i> | tomb, grave |
| <i>mà</i> | <i>huyền</i> | but |
| <i>mạ</i> | <i>nặng</i> | rice seedling |
| <i>mã</i> | <i>ngã</i> | horse, code |

(Thompson, 1987). Starting in the 10th century, the pronunciation of Chinese spoken in Vietnam began to change, along with the writing system. The writing system for this variation of Chinese was called *Chữ-nôm*, and was used until about the 20th century (Thompson, 1987). The *Chữ-nôm* writing system made use of Chinese characters but in combinations not found in Chinese (Thompson, 1987).

Chữ-nôm

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In the 17th century, Christian missionaries introduced a Romanized writing system called *Quốc Ngữ* (national language) ([Agar, 2008](#)).

The alphabet used Latin-based letters, and diacritics to mark tones and vowels. This writing system was used in conjunction with *Chữ-nôm* until the 20th century, at which point *Quốc Ngữ* became the primary writing system. Presently, *Quốc Ngữ* remains the primary writing system of Vietnamese ([Agar, 2008](#)).

Images courtesy of http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnamese_language

Alphabet courtesy of (Thompson, 1987)


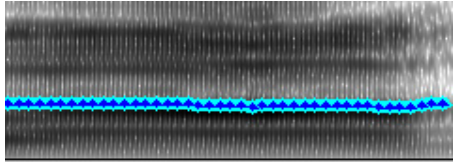
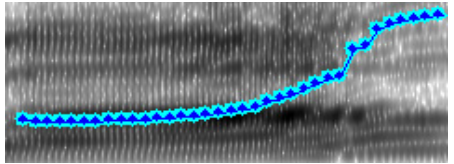
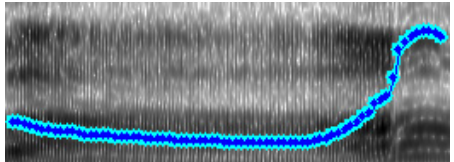
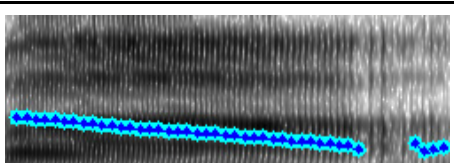
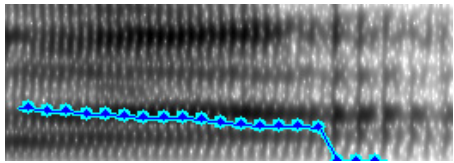
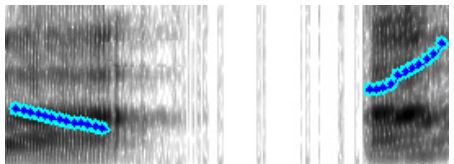
Vietnamese

Click & Play

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Click on  below to hear a native Northern Vietnamese speaker say *ba* in each tone.

Each spectrogram image provides a visual representation of the vowel "a" plus a particular tone. The blue line represents the pitch of the voice (the rate at which the vocal folds in the throat are vibrating). Notice that the tone description matches the shape of the pitch contour.

| ba + diacritic | Tone | Description | Spectrogram Image |
|---|--------------|------------------------------|--|
| <i>ba</i>  | <i>ngang</i> | mid level |  |
| <i>bá</i> | <i>sắc</i> | high rising |  |
| <i>bả</i> | <i>hỏi</i> | mid dipping-rising |  |
| <i>bà</i> | <i>huyền</i> | low falling |  |
| <i>bạ</i> | <i>nặng</i> | low falling (short duration) |  |
| <i>bã</i> | <i>ngã</i> | high (glottal stop) rising |  |

Sound files courtesy of (Hastings, 2000)

Tone descriptions courtesy of (Thompson, 1987)



Vietnamese

References

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