Vietnamese Sign Language - Unresolved Issues

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ABSTRACT

Appearing in Vietnam around 1886, today, Vietnamese Sign Language (VSL) has been a major means of communication in the deaf community in Vietnam. However, VSL has not been unified across regions, has not been officially taught in educational institutions and has not been interested by researchers. The article mainly uses the descriptive method to analyze the linguistic features of VSL in terms of phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar. Besides, the author also uses activities such as collecting documents, analyzing, synthesizing, comparing to make the necessary judgments and conclusions. The article will introduce VSL from the perspective of linguistics with phonological, lexical, and grammatical aspects - through which readers can see the unique characteristics of VSL. It also analyzes the outstanding issues, what needs to be done to move towards a unified VSL, to become the object of research in Linguistics and to be taught officially in the School. Besides, the research directions or the development of sign languages of some countries such as the US, UK... are also mentioned in the article as experiences that Vietnam can learn and absorb.

Keywords: Vietnam, sign language, deaf community, linguistics, phonology

1   Introduction

Sign language (also known as sign language) is "a type of language that uses hands instead of the sound of voices, created by deaf people during the development of the community to purpose communicate with each other and absorb knowledge of society" (Hoa Nguyen, 2016). In the world, sign language has undergone a long development process. Today, it has become an official tool in communication of the deaf community and is a sub-discipline of Linguistics. Sign language is also officially taught in major universities in many countries such as the US, UK, France, Australia...

From the last years of the nineteenth century, Vietnamese Sign Language (VSL) was started to be taught at Lai Thieu School for the Deaf (Binh Duong), but at that time, VSL was not interested by researchers. From the 2000s onwards, VSL began to attract the attention of scientists as well as domestic and foreign organizations to gradually be systematized. Sign language centers, clubs, groups, teaching and activities began to form and develop, attracting the participation of many members inside and outside the deaf community.

Previously, "Vietnamese sign language" was the common name for all three sign languages developed by the deaf communities in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, and Hai Phong. According to Nguyen Thi Bich Trang, the sign languages of Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi share about 58% of basic vocabulary, while this figure is 54% for sign languages in Ho Chi Minh City and Hai Phong (Nguyen Thi Bich Trang, 2016).

From the date of September 1, 2020, VSL has unified and standardized, marked by the introduction of Circular 17/2020/TT-BGDDT on "Promulgating national standard regulations on sign languages for people with disabilities" dated June 29, 2020 issued by the Ministry of Education and Training, accompanied by the National Standard Regulation on Sign Languages for People with Disabilities. Article 2 of the Circular clearly states: "This Circular takes effect from September 1, 2020. National standards on sign language for people with disabilities specified in this Circular apply to institutions educational

institutions of the national education system; organizations and individuals conducting educational activities related to people with disabilities". The Vietnamese language symbol system in this Regulation includes the arrow convention table, the alphabetic symbol table and tone signs, the alphanumeric symbol table and the list of words and symbols.

Thus, officially from September 1, 2020, VSL has been unified according to "national standards". And Ho Chi Minh City Sign Language, Hanoi Sign Language, Hai Phong Sign Language,... will still exist but as "dialects" of VSL. It can be said that this is an important event, marking the standardization for VSL, creating a premise for the research, compilation of tool books as well as the unified teaching and learning activities of VSL.

In our article, we only mention VSL that has been standardized according to Circular 17/2020/TT-BGDDT.

2   Literature review

Although appearing a long time ago, it was not until 1996 that VSL was interested by scientists. James C. Woodward is considered the first scientist to come to Vietnam to study VSL. He discovered that there are at least three sign languages used by the deaf community here and gave it a place name: Hanoi sign language, Hai Phong sign language and Ho Chi Minh City sign language (Compilation Board of the Project of Secondary Education - University for the Deaf Vietnam, 2007). In 1997, the Learning Center of the Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences also collected and surveyed the language of the deaf community and called it the Vietnamese sign of the Although appearing a long time ago, it was not until 1996 that VSL was interested by scientists. James C. Woodward is considered the first scientist to come to Vietnam to study VSL. He discovered that there are at least three sign languages used by the deaf community here and gave it a place name: Hanoi sign language, Hai Phong sign language and Ho Chi Minh City sign language (Compilation Board of the Project of Secondary Education - University for the Deaf Vietnam, 2007). In 1997, the Learning Center of the Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences also collected and surveyed the language of the deaf community and called it the sign of the Vietnam's deaf.

In 1998, when the Project "Inclusive Education for Deaf Children" was implemented by the Pearl S. Buck Foundation, Int. in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Training, the term "Sign Language" has just begun to be used in education for the deaf in Vietnam. In 2000, James C. Woodward and Nguyen Thi Hoa implemented a project to provide higher education for the deaf in Vietnam by bilingual method (HCMC sign language and Vietnamese) in Dong Nai. Not only being taught about sign language, the deaf community in Vietnam is also acquainted with the "deaf culture", helping them understand and integrate into the community. From this time, VSL has much more opportunities for development and attracts the interest of many peoples and researchers.

Some projects can be named such as "Supporting teachers to teach inclusion in Sign Language" by Rainbow Asia organization (2010), "Intergenerational Education of the Deaf (IDEO)" by the World Bank funded through World Concern (2011), "Improving the quality of primary school deaf students' education through sign language." (QIPEDC) (2019) supported by World Bank through Ministry of Education and Training ... These projects have contributed to promoting development as well as affirming VSL's important role and position in the deaf community in Vietnam.

Along with these projects, VSL research also attracts a number of scientists. There are a few documents and tool books such as the 3 sets of Symbols for the Deaf in Vietnam, Dictionary of Vietnamese Sign Language, etc.

There are a number of research articles on the characteristics of VSL such as those of Nguyen Hoa (2016), Nguyen Thi Bich Trang (2019)… However, these works only provide an overview of VSL, not from the perspective of linguistics for analysis.

Therefore, in our article, we will analyze VSL specifically and in detail under many linguistic aspects such as: Phonetics, vocabulary, grammar. Thereby, readers will get an overview of VSL. At the same time, the article also points out the issues that we need to continue to research in order for VSL to be more complete; existences that need to be resolved in order for VSL to become an official language taught in schools for the deaf community in Vietnam.

3   Methodology

The article mainly uses the descriptive method to analyze the linguistic features of VSL in terms of phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar. Besides, the author also uses activities such as collecting documents, anasynthesizing, comparing to make the necessary judgments and conclusions.

4   Results and Dicussion

4.1   4.1. Characteristics of VSL
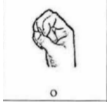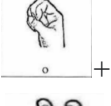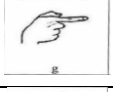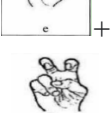
Vietnamese sign language has the following characteristics:
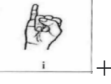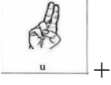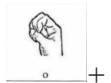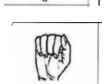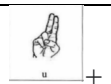
4.1.1   Phonetics

VSL is used to convey the mother tongue (Vietnamese) of the deaf community in Vietnam, so the phonetic system of VSL fully represents the phonemes of Vietnamese. In communication, each phoneme in the VSL is represented by one or more symbols.

Table 1: *Phonetic and writing system in VSL*

No	Phonemes	VSL	Writing	No	Phonemes	VSL	Writing	No	Phonemes	VSL	Writing
1	/i/		i	15	/b/		b	27	/k/		c
			y	16	/m/		m				k
2	/ɛ/		e	17	/p/		p				q
3	/e/	+	ê	18	/v/		v	28	/h/		h
4	/u/		u	19	/d/		đ	29	/ ɣ /		g
5	/ɯ/	+	ư	20	/t/		t			+	gh

6	/ ɔ /		o	21	/s/		x	30	/c/		ch
7	/ɤ/		ơ	22	/z/		d	31	/ ɲ /		nh
8	/o/		ô	23	/n/		n	32	/t'/		th
9	/a/		a	24	/l/		l	33	/ χ/		kh
10	/ă/		ă	25	/ʂ/		s	34	/ ŋ /		ng
11	/ɤ̆/		â	26	/ʐ/		r				ngh
12	/ie/		iê					35	/ʈ/		tr

|										
			ia					36	/f/	ph
13	/uo/		uô					37	Thanh 2	Thanh huyền
			ua					38	Thanh 3	Thanh sắc
14	/ɯɤ/		ươ					39	Thanh 4	Thanh hỏi
			ưa					40	Thanh 5	Thanh ngã
								41	Thanh 6	Thanh nặng

From the table above, we can make the following observations.

Phonetically, VSL is based on the Vietnamese script to create symbols or in other words, the symbols in VSL are used to represent Vietnamese characters. Because it comes from the writing , the VSL system still retains the phonological irrationalities of the Vietnamese language. For example, a phoneme can have more than one symbol, as is the case with phonemes /k/, /ŋ/, /uo/... However, this representation creates unity with the writing should be completely acceptable.
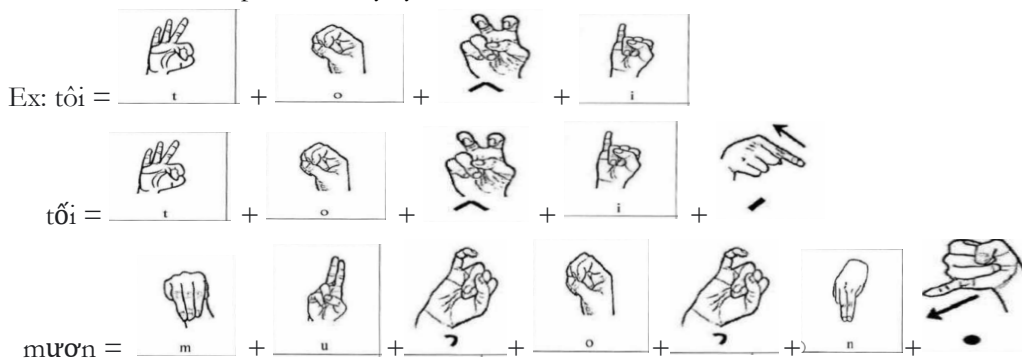
The principle of VSL is: each letter, diacritic and tone is represented by a symbol. Letters with a combination of diacritics (such as: ă, o, u...) will combine the symbol representing the letter and then the symbol representing the diacritic.

Ex: ă = [image] + [image]
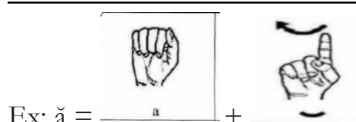
As for the letters combined by more than one letter (such as tr, ch, ng...) the symbols will be combined in turn from left to right.

Ex: tr = [image] + [image]
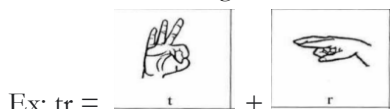
When phonemes combine to form syllables, the symbols are combined from left to right, the tone is shown last. Tone 1 is not represented by symbols.

Ex: tôi = [image] + [image] + [image] + [image]

tối = [image] + [image] + [image] + [image] + [image]

mượn = [image] + [image] + [image] + [image] + [image] + [image]

In addition to the description by sign language, the communication process is also supported by "mouth reading" – the only form of speech perception for the hearing impaired – and facial or body expressions.

4.1.2 Vocabulary

It can be seen that sign language is rooted in life. It describes the movements and attitudes that take place in daily life to name things, phenomena, concepts. This once again confirms the "social nature" of language. But it is this feature that becomes one of the limitations of sign language, because it is difficult to describe complex psychological states of people, abstract concepts... VSL is no exception to this rule.

The numbering system in VSL from 0 to 9 is represented by separate symbols. Contrary to the symbols of the phonetic system, the symbols representing numbers are quite recognizable and easy to implement. For numbers with 2 or 3 digits, the symbols are concatenated in turn.

Ex: 19 = [image] + [image]

Ex: 215 = [image] + [image] + [image]
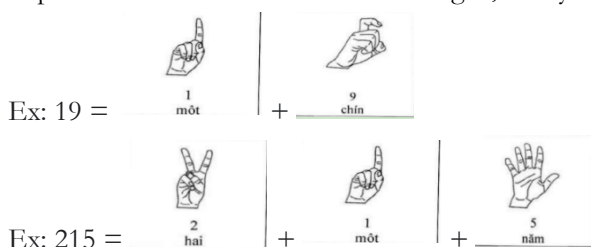
Starting from the smallest 4-digit number (1000) is represented by its own symbol, the following numbers follow the 3-digit number representation.

Ex: 1034 = [image] + [image] + [image] + [image]
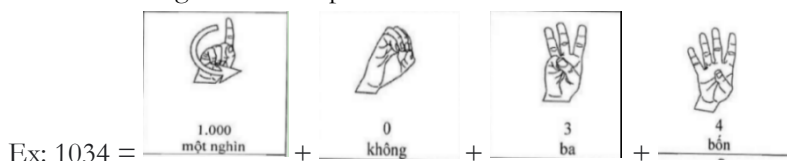
In turn, numbers with 5, 6, 7... digits are all represented by their own symbols as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2*: Number system in VSL*

Beside numbering system, there is a "List of Sign Words" including 408 units in the National Standard Regulation on Sign Language for People with Disabilities. According to our survey, 408 sign word units appeared with the following topics:

- Words for body parts
- Words indicating personal pronouns and close relationships
- Words indicating things and phenomena
- Words indicate properties
- Words indicating feelings
- Words for natural phenomena
- Words for jobs
- Word indicating place
- Words indicating activity
- Words for animals
- Words for plant
- Professional words (names of subjects, mathematical terms...)

However, the number of words in each topic is still small and not rich. Specifically:

- Words indicating time have: "buổi sáng, buổi chiều" but no words such as "buổi trưa, buổi tối, đêm..."
- Words for things: there is the word "áo, áo khoác" but no "áo sơ mi, áo len, áo phông, áo dài tay, áo cộc tay,...; "bút" without "bút chì, bút ..."
- Words for objects in the family, there is "cái bát, cái chăn, cái quạt cây, cái gối, cái chuông, cái võng" without "cái thìa, cái dao, cái cốc, cái chén,..."
- Words for jobs, only have "bác sĩ, công nhân, ca sĩ, hoạ sĩ, y tá" without familiar words such as "học sinh, sinh viên, giáo viên, công an, bộ đội, cảnh sát, nông dân..."
.

Thus, with the standardized number of words in this Regulation, it is difficult for users to fully express their thoughts because the number of basic words is still much lacking, words for emotions, levels, comparisons, etc... is not rich.

4.1.3   Word formation

Unlike Vietnamese - which mainly uses compound and reduplication methods to form words - VSL takes the meaning or function, properties and characteristics of words as the content of the symbols, not simply combining the symbols together. Ex:

bạn: (friend)		Hands clenched, palms facing each other, left hand on right hand, in front of chest.
bạn thân: (close friend)		Hands clenched, thumbs spread, palms facing each other, placed close together in front of the chest. Simultaneously move both hands from inside to outside (3 times).
bút: (pen)		The thumb and index finger of the right hand should touch each other, the other fingers are clenched, palm facing down, placed in front of the chest. Move the hand to the right in a wavy line.
bút mực: (ink - pen)		Thumb and index finger of right hand extended, other fingers clenched, palm facing left, placed in front of chest. Move index finger and thumb touching each other (2 times).

The way to create symbols is to use movements that simulate the shape, salient feature or recognizable nature of the named concept, and with the support of facial expressions. Ex:

cái bát: (bowl)		Right hand cupped, palm facing up, placed in front of chest.
buồn: (sad)		Right hand clenched, palm facing inward, close to chest. Move the hand in a clockwise circle, sad face.
cảm ơn: (thank you)		Right hand together, palm facing in, placed in front of mouth. Move the hand forward, palms facing up, with fingers spread out.
cá sấu: (crocodile)		Hands cupped, palms facing each other, right hand on left hand, in front of chest. Move fingers touching each other (2 times).
chèo thuyền: (rowing)		1. Hands cupped, closed, palms facing up, fingers facing out, placed close together in front of the chest. Move both hands out at the same time. 2. Two hands clasped, palms facing each other, staggered to the right. Move both hands back at the same time (2 times).

This feature makes it easy for learners to relate the concept to its essence, which is intuitive and easy to remember. It also has the advantage of making users better distinguish homonyms with different meanings, because what is shown here is the meaning of the word, not the sound shell. However, this advantage is also a limitation for learners because "learn which word to know that word" without following the rule of "matching" single words as in Vietnamese. And it can be said that the feature of word composition of sign language in general and VSL in particular is a clear feature of deaf culture - "hearing with eyes" in communication, the most important thing is "the perceived"

4.1.4 Word - order in sentence

Regulations issued together with Circular 17/2020/TT-BGDDT do not mention the wording of sentences in the VSL. However, for the purpose of giving an overview of the VSL situation, we would like to use the corpus of the Ho Chi Minh City Sign Language (in the Sign Language Dictionary - Vietnamese Sign Language Dictionary - built by the Vietnamese Sign Language Dictionary). developed by Be Ready Education Australia in 2011) for the survey.

Table 3*: Examples of sentence expressions in VSL*

Sentences in Vietnamese	Sentences in VSL
Tôi tên là Hiếu.	Tôi tên Hiếu.
Tôi 19 tuổi.	Tôi tuổi 19.
Tôi thích mèo.	Tôi mèo thích.
Toà nhà cao.	Toà nhà cao .
1 tuần có 7 ngày.	1 tuần ngày 7.
Bây giờ là 7 giờ.	Bây giờ 7 giờ.
Tôi thích môn Hoá.	Tôi môn Hoá thích.
Ba của tôi tốt bụng.	Ba của tôi bụng tốt.
Tôi không thích rắn.	Tôi rắn không thích.
Tôi không có bút chì.	Tôi bút chì không.
Gia đình tôi có 3 người.	Gia đình tôi người 3.
Ở sông có cá, tôm, cua.	Cá, tôm, cua sông có.
Bà nội của tôi già rồi.	Bà nội của tôi già rồi.
Anh của bạn có cao không?	Anh của bạn cao?
Ai là lớp trưởng?	Lớp trưởng ai?
Nho có chua không?	Nho chua (biểu cảm)?
Cái này có mấy màu?	Cái này màu mấy?
Nhà bạn có mấy người?	Gia đình của bạn người mấy?
Bạn thích nhất mùa gì?	Bạn mùa thích nhất gì?
Ai biết bơi?	Bơi biết ai?
Ai mặc áo đỏ?	Áo đỏ ai?
Một năm có mấy mùa?	Một năm mùa mấy?
Việt Nam có lũ lụt không?	Việt Nam lũ lụt có?
Trường của tôi có 3 tầng.	Trường của tôi tầng 3.
Ông ngoại của bạn có khoẻ không?	Ông ngoại bạn khoẻ?

- With declarative sentences, the word order in the sentence is usually:

Subject + Complement + Verb

(Ex: Tôi mèo thích; Tôi bút chì không (có); Ba của tôi bụng tốt...)

- Declarative sentences with adjectives as predicates, the word order is the same as sentences in Vietnamese: Subject + Predicate (adjective)

(Ex: Bà nội của tôi già rồi; Toà nhà cao;...)

- With questions, the question word is usually put at the end of the sentence

(Ex: Bơi biết ai? Một năm mùa mấy? Lớp trưởng ai? Gia đình của bạn người mấy?...

For interrogative questions (có...không), VSL does not use the word "không" but instead uses facial expressions to ask.

(Ex: Anh của bạn cao? Ông ngoại bạn khoẻ?...)

- If there is a number in a sentence, it is placed after the noun

(Ex: Tôi tuổi 19; Gia đình tôi người 3;...)

The features of the word order in the sentences of VSL are different from the word order in Vietnamese sentences, which may cause Vietnamese people to learn VSL to be a bit confused by the influence of their mother tongue.

In general, the sentences in VSL are presented in a concise and easy to understand manner. This can be explained by the limitations encountered when using sign language instead of spoken language, the most basic thing here is to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the information you want to convey.

4.2   Discussion

Since Circular 17/2020/TT-BGDDT has only taken effect from September 1, 2020, all previous documents have been compiled with corpus languages of regions such as Hanoi, Hai Phong or Ho Chi Minh City. Ho Chi Minh. For example, in the Vietnamese Sign Language Dictionary built by Be Ready Education Australia in 2011, the words that appear are divided by regions such as Hanoi sign language, signs of Ho Chi Minh City, or there are words that are Lam Dong sign language. This diversity will cause difficulties for VSL learners and researchers. Faced with such a situation, many problems arise.

Firstly, it is necessary to have all kinds of tool books to support the deaf in the process of teaching and learning VSL: VSL textbooks (all levels), VSL dictionary, VSL grammar books... The problem is this toolbook must be developed with standard sign language in accordance with Circular 17/2020/TT-BGDDT without using the corpus of any region. The promulgated standard glossary of symbols currently lacks many basic words used in daily life. Therefore, the addition and enrichment of this word list is essential to support the deaf community to communicate more easily. We can rely on the sign language of a certain region, adjust it to conform to the regulations on the national standard of sign language, and then recognize it to enrich the "vocabulary" for this sign word list in a "standardized" manner.

After standardizing in terms of documents and tools, the training of VSL teachers also plays a very important role. Currently, scientists, especially linguists who are interested in VSL, is still very small. Vietnam also does not have an official training institution specializing in sign language. This is a problem posed to the authorities of the Ministry of Education and Training. Teachers of sign language not only know how to use VSL, but also have a certain level of education, knowledge of the "deaf culture", and have a pedagogical approach. Currently, there are many VSL teaching centers for the deaf community in Vietnam, but these activities are supported by domestic and foreign organizations or spontaneously due to the learning needs of the deaf community but there is no professional orientation of the educational departments. That is why VSL teaching and learning has become informal despite the great demand for teaching and learning. Vietnam has 7.3 million people with disabilities, including 2.5 million deaf and hard of hearing (According to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, Bureau of Population and Housing Census 2019). They have the right to an equal education as we do. If we can solve the human resource problem and have all kinds of tools and tools in accordance with national standards on VSL, we can think of opening VSL training majors at mainstream educational institutions in Vietnam.

People with disabilities in general and the deaf community in particular are inherently disadvantaged in society: rarely participate in social activities not enjoy a formal education, psychological inferiority, lack of attention from society... Therefore, in addition to equipping them with sign language, an effective information transmission channel, deaf people need to have access to deaf culture. Deaf culture

is simply understood as a way of life, opinions, experiences, knowledge, and standards that have been experienced and spread along with sign language, they become common problems in the deaf community. This proves one of the important functions of language - language is a means of transmitting and expressing culture. Therefore, VSL education means simultaneously educating the deaf culture.

Finally, in developed countries such as the US, UK, France, Australia..., sign language is recognized as a sub-discipline of Linguistics, which is officially taught in universities as well as in other educational institutions. Learners are awarded Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees in Sign Language and become an important human resource in teaching and interpreting sign language. As a specific field of study, the Governments of many countries have many incentive policies such as granting scholarships to learners; funding researchers; organize many activities to create a communication environment and practice sign language in the deaf community; high remuneration for those working in sign language... All of these have contributed to promoting the research and training of sign languages in these countries. These are also experiences that Vietnam we can refer to and learn in this field.

5   Conclusion

It can be seen that sign language is an effective communication tool and a cultural feature of the deaf community. However, even deaf people who want to express themselves well in sign language must learn to use this type of language.

VSL has its own characteristics in terms of phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar as we briefly described above. Understanding the general picture of VSL helps researchers as well as those who have been, are and will learn VSL to have an overview of this type of language.

Vietnam has begun to pay attention to sign language, marked by the introduction of Circular 17/2020/TT-BGDDT; cooperation and allows domestic and foreign organizations to jointly research and organize VSL teaching activities...However, for VSL to become a major of Linguistics and be taught officially at school, we need to prepare a lot in terms of policies, human resources, materials...This requires the participation of a team of scientists, educational departments... This is also "social responsibility" society" that we need to do to contribute to helping the disabled community in general and the deaf in Vietnam in particular to better integrate into society through enjoying a formal, equal education.

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