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# Generic Sentences in Vietnamese and English: Similarities and Differences

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**To cite this article:**

To Minh Thanh. Generic Sentences in Vietnamese and English: Similarities and Differences. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*. Vol. 10, No. 2, 2022, pp. 166-175. doi: 10.11648/j.ijll.20221002.25

**Received:** March 8, 2022; **Accepted:** April 20, 2022; **Published:** April 28, 2022

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**Abstract:** Employing descriptive approach and qualitative analysis, this paper focuses on comparing Vietnamese generic sentences with English ones in order to look for similarities and differences in the ways each of the languages chooses to express the meaning of their generic sentences. The comparison indicates that there is no exact equivalence between their three types of generic sentences. Specifically, both Vietnamese and English have generic sentences beginning with a [+definite] article; but Vietnamese has no single article which can be considered as an exact equivalent of *the* — the sole [+definite] article which goes with a variety of English nouns: respectively preceding a [+singular count] noun, a [+singular group] noun, and a [+plural count] noun, *the* is equivalent to the *zero* article, *các* — the [+definite], [+plural count] article, and *những* — the [+indefinite], [+plural count] quantifier in Vietnamese. Both Vietnamese and English have generic sentences beginning with the *zero* article; but the *zero* article in Vietnamese is [+definite] while the *zero* article in English is always [+indefinite]. The *zero* article is also prominent because it witnesses the fact that universalism and uniqueness operate quite well in the two natural languages in question. The universal is shown by their generic sentences' identical internal structure, which is the topic/subject noun phrase always beginning with a certain kind of article plus the frequent [+stative] verb in the comment/predicate verb phrase. The unique asserts that each of the two languages is beautiful in its own way and deserves the patience and understanding of any language user, native and non-native. Except for the existence of the Vietnamese *classifier*, the first type of generic sentences including only those beginning with an [+indefinite], [+singular] article, which is *một* in Vietnamese or *a(n)* in English, exemplifies the similarities between the two languages; their differences lie in the other two types. Interchangeability among the three types of generic sentences is determined by the characteristics of their subject/topic noun phrase or the meaning of their predicate/comment verb phrase.

**Keywords:** Generic Sentences, Genericity, The Classifier, The *Zero* Article

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## 1. Introduction

Consider the two following declaratives:

(1) Hồ là loài ăn thịt.

'A tiger is a carnivore.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Conventions applied in this paper are:

Its translated version enclosed within single quotation marks is placed right under the original selected example;

Its equivalent translation enclosed within round brackets is placed next to the lexical item in question;

The lexical item in round brackets, like "(nào)" in (8), may or may not be verbalized;

The symbols "/", "\*", and "?" respectively stand for "or" and "unaccepted", and "hardly accepted."

(2) Một con hổ trước khi vồ mồi thì thể nào cũng thu mình lại.

'A tiger will definitely curl up before pouncing on its prey.'

Above are two examples of *generic sentences* — the ones that "express properties" of kinds and individuals, "seem to be ... important to scientific thought", "have ... been of concern to philosophers since Aristotle", and "have also attracted the attention of linguists" (p. 1403) [1].

A generic sentence usually manifests itself in the form of a sentence which frequently has an equative verb: *what is what* (pp. 122–4) [17]. It should be distinguished from *universal assertion/total assertion*, which is normally expressed by *cái gì cũng/ai cũng/đâu cũng...* in Vietnamese and their

equivalents *everything/everybody/everywhere...* in English, both being generalizations (pp. 1–8) [6].

Sentences can express facts about particular events and objects:

(3) Alexander the Great saw bananas on his expedition to India.

‘Alexander Đại đế nhìn thấy chuối trong chuyến thám hiểm của ông đến Ấn Độ.’

But sentences can also express more general facts that are not directly related to particulars:

(4) The banana was brought from the Canary Islands to the New World.

‘Chuối được đưa từ quần đảo Canary đến Tân thế giới.’

(5) Bananas are grown successfully under irrigation in such semiarid regions as the southern side of Jamaica.

‘Chuối được trồng thành công trong điều kiện tưới tiêu ở các vùng bán sơn địa như phía nam của Jamaica.’

(6) A banana contains vitamins A and C.

‘Chuối chứa vitamin A và C.’

(7) Woody eat bananas for breakfast.

‘Woody ăn chuối vào bữa sáng.’

Sentences like (3–6), and sometimes also (7), are called ‘generic,’ and sentences like (7) are often called ‘habitual.’ According to a unified theory of generic sentences within a formal semantic framework proposed by Carlson [10] and Carlson [11], as quoted in Asher and Simpson (p. 1402) [1], generic sentences express properties of individuals, which come in two flavors, namely ‘kinds,’ such as the kind *banana* (*Musa*), and ‘objects,’ like *Woody*, whereas non-generic sentences involve only stages of individuals, that is, individuals localized in time and space. Krifka, et al. [18] distinguish two types of genericity: ‘kind reference,’ as in (4), and ‘characterizing predications,’ as in (5–7).

Employing descriptive approach and qualitative analysis, this paper focuses on comparing Vietnamese generic sentences with English ones in order to look for similarities and differences in the ways each of the two languages chooses to express the meaning of their generic sentences.

## 2. Description of Generic Sentences in Vietnamese and English

### 2.1. Vietnamese Generic Sentences

#### 2.1.1. The First Type of Vietnamese Generic Sentences

The first type comprises the sentences that have as their topic/subject (p. 160) [8] a noun phrase (abbreviated to NP) beginning with *một*, which is the [+indefinite], [+singular] article in Vietnamese, followed by a *classifier*, called “*loại từ*,” and then a [–count] *noun*; the NP usually accompanied by a post-noun modifier (p. 48) [9]. This NP topic/subject indicates “a class the individual existing in front of the speaker and the hearer is its representative” (p. 11) [3]:

(8) *Một nhà lãnh đạo giỏi không thể (nào) hành động như thế.*

‘A good leader can never behave in such a way.’

(9) *Một bài viết hay không dài lê thê.*

‘A good piece of writing should be concise/should not be lengthy.’

An NP with constant reference, like *Europe* in (10), can sometimes be used as [+indefinite], [+abstract], and/or [+imaginary], and thus [+generic]:

(10) *Một Châu Âu thống nhất về chính trị sẽ không dễ gì đạt được.*

‘A politically unified Europe will not be easy to achieve.’

#### 2.1.2. The Second Type of Vietnamese Generic Sentences

The second type comprises the sentences that have as their topic/subject an NP beginning with either *các*, considered as the [+definite], [+plural] article in Vietnamese (Bui, 2000a, p. 13) [3], or a [+indefinite], [+plural] quantifier like *những* (more than one), *những* (many, several), *hầu hết* (most, almost all, nearly all), *mọi* (all), etc., in order to stick the label [+count] on the head noun of the topic/subject NP, which is usually ended by a post-noun modifier.

(11) *Các sản phẩm của Việt Nam đều có chất lượng tốt và có khả năng tiêu thụ ở Italia.*

‘Vietnamese products are of good/high quality and get commercialized/profitable in Italy.’

(12) *Những kẻ lười biếng thì không làm gì nên thân.*

‘Slothful persons fail at anything they do.’

‘A slothful person fails at anything he does.’

‘Those who are lazy will never succeed in life.’

Quite often are more than one post-noun modifiers:

(13) *Hầu hết cư dân đầu tiên vào vùng đồng bằng sông Cửu Long đều rơi vào hoàn cảnh bần cùng, khổ khó.*

‘Most of the first inhabitants in the Mekong Delta led a miserable life.’

(14) *Nhiều người nông dân ít học vùng đất mới Nam bộ, không kinh qua truyện thánh hiền, chỉ qua gia truyền, qua hát bội và truyện Tàu cũng thấm nhuần và hành xử theo những chuẩn mực tín, nghĩa, dũng của Nho giáo.*

‘Many little educated peasants in the new frontier of the South, who solely inherited Confucianism through family influence, classical drama, and old Chinese stories, conformed well to such Confucian values as trustworthiness, righteous, and bravery.’

#### 2.1.3. The Third Type of Vietnamese Generic Sentences

The third type comprises the sentences that have as their topic/subject an NP beginning with the *zero* article, “which is definite” in Vietnamese (p. 13) [3].

(i). *After the Zero Article Is a [–count] Noun, Also Called a Mass Noun [22]*

a) Without any post-noun modifier:

(15) *Chó là loài động vật trung thành với chủ.*

‘A dog is a loyal/faithful animal.’

‘The dog is a loyal/faithful animal.’

‘Dogs are loyal/faithful animals.’

(16) *Cá không ăn muối, cá ươn.*

‘A fish without salt gets rotten.’

‘Fish without salt get rotten.’

(17) *Nước quan trọng biết bao trong cuộc sống hàng ngày của người Khmer.*

'Fresh water is of great significance for the Khmer in their daily life.'

'These [-count] nouns can also occur in the structure 'x THÌ the verb phrase, y THÌ the verb phrase', which comprises the contrast between the two kinds" (p. 270) [5].

(18) Báo THÌ có đốm, hổ THÌ có vằn.

'Leopards have spots while tigers have stripes.'

(19) Trâu THÌ đen, bò THÌ vàng.

'The buffalo is black while the cow is beige/yellowish brown/golden.'

The topic/subject NP in (20–21) is not [+specific], like those in (18–19); it is [+abstract] instead:

(20) Phẩm hạnh là danh giá của con người ở đời.

'Dignity is one's fame in life.'

(21) Nhân là mục tiêu của chí và cứu cánh của học.

'Humanity is the goal of the will and the end of learning.'

b) With at least a post-noun modifier:

(22) Chim khôn hót tiếng rành rang

Người khôn nói tiếng dịu dàng dễ nghe (p. 296) [27].

'Wise birds sing with their clear voice; wise people speak in a pleasant tone.'

(23) Mưa Huế, giã vờ thật đấy. Nhìn ngoài trời cứ tưởng không mưa.

'The rain in Hue is really misleading: from the outside there seems to be no rain at all.'

'The rain in Hue is so misleading that we do not realize it is raining outside.'

(24) Người<sup>2</sup> Sài Gòn dễ dãi về tục lệ, đất Sài Gòn không có thiên tai, tương đối dễ tìm sinh kế nên ít ai lo xa.

'The people from Saigon are open-minded about their customs, and their land has not suffered natural disasters; since it is easy to earn their living, few people worry about it.'

'The Saigonese are open-minded about their customs because their land has not suffered natural disasters and they can earn their living without much toil.'

**(ii). After the Zero Article Is a [+Singular Count] Noun, with or Without a Post-noun Modifier**

(25) Thầy cũng như cha.

'A teacher is like a father.'

'Teachers are like fathers.'

(26) Nghề đánh cá đối với dân biển cũng quan trọng như nghề nông đối với dân ruộng.

'The fishery is as important to coastal folks as the agriculture to country folks.'

'Fishing is as important to coastal folks as farming to country folks.'

(27) Đội ngũ giáo viên trong hệ thống các trường công vừa thiếu lại vừa yếu.

'The teaching staff in the system of public schools is poor in quantity and weak in quality.'

(28) Người<sup>3</sup> quân tử trông cậy ở mình, kẻ tiểu nhân trông

cậy ở người.

'A magnanimous man relies on himself but a trivial man relies on others.'

'The gentleman relies on himself whereas the inferior relies on others.'

(29) Anh thi sĩ có thể tình cờ nhặt được vài tờ thơ vu vơ trời cho mà tạo được thành công bước đầu với vốn đầu tư cơ bản là những trang giấy viết không cần trắng lắm, cộng thêm sự may mắn. Còn anh họa sĩ có được thành công bước đầu, ngoài sự may mắn ra, phải lao động hội họa (cả học lẫn hành) cật lực bằng cơ bắp đích thực với những đồ nghề, vật liệu chẳng rẻ tiền chút nào, không thể trông cậy vào sự yểm trợ kỳ diệu của cái lưỡi (p. 29) [20].

'The poet may fortunately find some vague, groundless inspiration that is a godsend and make an initial success with only a basic investment of some writing papers that do not have to be very white. As to the artist, besides good luck, he has to do his best to make even an initial success that requires hard work (including both learning and practice); he has to use his own muscles, tools and materials which are not cheap at all; and he cannot depend on the wonderful support of his tongue.'

**(iii). After the Zero Article Is a Classifier Immediately Followed by a [-count] Noun**

Synecdoche is found in the NP topic/subject: "the individual stands for the whole class" (p. 11) [3]. The most frequent type of classifiers is *con*:

(30) Con ong làm mật yêu hoa

Con cá yêu nước, con chim ca yêu đời.

'A bee loves flowers, a fish loves water, and a bird sings to express their love for life.'

'Bees love flowers, fish love water, and birds sing to express their love for life.'

(31) Con khỉ chê chó lẩm lừng

Chó thì chê khỉ ăn đông nói dài.

'The monkey despises the dog's numerous hairs while the dog despises the monkey's lengthy ways of expression.'

'The pot calling the kettle black'

(32) Con người là loài sinh vật quý nhất được trời đất tạo ra và được trời ưu đãi phù hộ.

'A human is the most precious creature created and blessed by God.'

'Humans are the most precious creatures created and blessed by God.'

'Man/Mankind/Humankind is the noblest species created and favored by heaven and earth.'

The less frequent type of classifiers is *cái*:

(33) Cái khó ló cái khôn.

'Necessity is the mother of invention.'

'Want is the mother of industry.'

'Adversity brings wisdom.'

(34) Cái nét đánh chết cái đẹp.

'Beauty is only skindeep.'

'Beauty is not everything.'

<sup>2</sup> That *người* is [-count] in the sentence numbered (24) and [+singular count] in the sentence numbered (28) is because of semantic shift.

<sup>3</sup> The sentence numbered (28) is the Vietnamese translated version of a statement by Khổng Tử (Confucius), as quoted in Luận Ngữ (論語, Lunyu, the Analects of

Confucius): "Quân tử cầu chư kỷ, tiểu nhân cầu chư nhân." (君子求諸己, 小人求諸人)

'Handsome is as handsome does.'

(35) *Cái sậy này cái ung.*

'Little chips lights great fires.'

'Big oaks from little acorns grow.'

'Minor causes can bring about major results.'

#### (iv). After the Zero Article Is an Adjective or a Verb

"If nouns, adjectives and adverbs with no post-modifier plays the role of the topic/subject NP, it is definite and generic, or categorical" (p. 48) [9]:

(36) *Nghèo không phải là tội lỗi.*

'Being poor is not sinful.'

'It is not sinful to be poor.'

(37) *Yêu là chết ở trong lòng một ít.*

'Love means die a little bit in one's heart.'

(38) *Chạy làm cho khí huyết lưu thông.*

'Running makes blood circulate.'

## 2.2. English Generic Sentences

"Each of the articles can also be used when we wish to refer to a whole class of entities, usually with regard to their typical characteristics or habitual activities" (p. 378) [13].

### 2.2.1. The First Type of English Generic Sentences

The first type comprises the sentences that have as their topic/subject an NP beginning with *a(n)* plus a [+singular count] noun.

#### (i). Without any Post-noun Modifier

(39) *A child* needs love.

'Trẻ em cần được yêu thương.'

(40) *A car* must be insured.

'Xe hơi phải được bảo hiểm.'

(41) *An oar* is a thing you row a boat with.

'Mái chèo là vật bạn dùng để chèo thuyền.'

(42) *A computer* will do what it's told to do.

'Máy vi tính sẽ làm cái nó được lập trình để làm.'

#### (ii). With at Least a Post-noun Modifier

(43) *A woman without a man* is like a fish out of water.

'Đàn bà mà không có đàn ông thì như cá mắc cạn.'

(44) *A stockbroker who studies the market carefully* becomes an expert at buying and selling shares.

'Một nhà chứng khoán nghiên cứu kỹ thị trường có thể trở thành một chuyên gia trong việc buôn bán cổ phiếu.'

### 2.2.2. The Second Type of English Generic Sentences

The second type comprises the sentences that have as their topic/subject an NP beginning with the [+definite] article *the*.

#### (i). After "the" Is a [+singular count] Noun

(45) *The blackbird* has a lovely song.

'Chim hét (có giọng) hót hay.'

(46) *The giraffe* is the tallest of all animals.

'Hươu cao cổ thì cao nhất trong các loài động vật.'

(47) *The whale* is the largest mammals on earth.

'Cá voi là loài động vật hữu nhũ lớn nhất trên trái đất.'

(48) *The computer* will play an increasing large role in all of our lives.

'Máy vi tính có một vai trò ngày một lớn hơn trong toàn bộ cuộc sống của chúng ta.'

#### (ii). After "the" Is a [+singular] Group Noun

*The* + "a singular group noun" (p. 196) [16] sees a certain group as a whole, thus highlighting genericity:

(49) *The class* respects the teacher.

'Trò/Học sinh kính trọng thầy.'

(50) *The Government* wants to improve its image.

'Chính phủ muốn cải thiện hình ảnh của mình.'

It should be noted that "after a singular group noun, the verb can be either singular or plural... There is little difference in meaning. The choice depends on whether we see the crowd as a whole or as a number of individuals" (p. 196) [16].

(49') *The class* respect the teacher.

'Các trò/Các học sinh đều kính trọng thầy.'

(50') *The Government* want to improve its image.

'Các thành viên (trong) chính phủ/(của) nội các muốn cải thiện hình ảnh của mình.'

#### (iii). After "the" Is a [+Plural Count] Noun

(51) *The misers* seem always obsessed with the idea of saving (p. 230) [25].

'Người hà tiện dường như luôn bị ám ảnh bởi tư tưởng để dành.'

'Những người hà tiện dường như luôn bị ám ảnh bởi tư tưởng để dành.'

(52) *The spenders* cannot seem to hold on to their money (p. 230) [25].

'Người chi xài lớn không thể giữ được tiền.'

'Những người chi xài lớn không thể giữ được tiền.'

(53) *The economizers* are practical people who spend wisely (p. 231) [25].

'Nhà kinh tế là người thực tế, biết chi xài một cách khôn ngoan.'

'Những nhà kinh tế là người thực tế, biết chi xài một cách khôn ngoan.'

#### (iv). After "the" Is an Adjective or a Past Participle

(54) *The young* have the future in their hand.

'Thanh niên nắm tương lai trong tay họ.'

'Những người trẻ tuổi nắm tương lai trong tay họ.'

(55) *The dead* must be laid to rest.

'Người chết phải được chôn cất tử tế.'

(56) *The wounded* must be brought out of the front.

'Thương binh phải được đưa ra khỏi mặt trận.'

'Những người bị thương phải được đưa ra khỏi mặt trận.'

The combination of *the* plus *adjective/past participle* can be repeated, resulting in a structure of co-ordination in (57–58). Modified by the pre-determiner *all*, the very structure of co-ordination in (59) turns into a structure of modification encoding the topic/subject NP of this English generic sentence:

(57) *The old* and *the elderly* should be respected.

'Người già và người cao tuổi nên được kính trọng.'

(58) *The poor*, *the needy*, and *the homeless* need more help from the government.

‘Người nghèo, người gặp khó khăn và người vô gia cư cần được chính phủ giúp đỡ nhiều hơn.’

(59) *All the sick and the wounded* must be brought out of the front.

‘Tất cả thương bệnh binh phải được đưa ra khỏi mặt trận.’

Although not marked by the plural suffix, the topic/subject NP in this section, including the following (60–61) is always [+plural count]:

(60) *The British* drink a lot of tea.

‘Người Anh uống nhiều trà.’

(61) *The French* are noted for their fine cooking.

‘Người Pháp nổi tiếng về nghệ thuật nấu ăn tinh xảo của họ.’

### 2.2.3. The Third Type of English Generic Sentences

The third type comprises the sentences that have as their topic/subject an NP beginning with the *zero* article, which is [–definite].

#### (i). After the Zero Article Is a [–count] Noun

a) Without any post-noun modifier:

The meaning of the head noun of the topic/subject NP should be general (or inclusive) enough to talk about a certain class:

(62) *Silk* is made from silkworm cocoons.

‘Lụa được làm từ kén tằm.’

(63) *Paper* is scarce in some parts of the world.

‘Giấy thì khan hiếm ở một số vùng trên thế giới.’

(64) *Sugar* is bad for children’s teeth.

‘Đường có hại cho răng của trẻ.’

The topic/subject NP is not [+specific], like the one in the above (62–64); it is [+abstract] instead, like that of the following (65–67):

(65) *Life* is a dream.

‘Cuộc sống là một giấc mơ.’

(66) *Beauty* is in the eye of the beholder.

‘Vẻ đẹp nằm trong mắt của người nhìn.’

‘Khi yêu trái ầu cũng tròn, khi ghét quả bồ hòn cũng méo.’

(67) *Travel* broadens the mind.

‘Việc đi du lịch giúp mở rộng kiến thức.’

‘Đi một ngày đàng học một sàng khôn.’

“With mass nouns (e.g. *love*) the zero form is obligatory” (p. 379) [13].

b) With at least a modifier, either post-noun or pre-noun:

The meaning of the head noun of the topic/subject NP is general (or inclusive) enough to talk about a certain class, despite the influence of the modifier:

(68) *Silk from Japan* was used to make the wedding dress.

‘Lụa Nhật Bản được dùng để may áo cưới.’

(69) *Life in those days* wasn’t easy.

‘Cuộc sống lúc đó rất khó khăn.’

(70) *Coconut wine* is not as pupolar and common as *palm wine* in Ghana.

‘Ở Ghana<sup>4</sup> *ruợu dừa* không thông dụng và phổ biến bằng

*ruợu cọ*.’

#### (ii). After the Zero Article Is a [+plural count] Noun

“In the everyday use of English, the zero form with plural count nouns (e.g. *elephants*) is most applicable” (p. 379) [13].

a) Without any modifier:

(71) *Boats* can be hired by the day.

‘Thuyền thì cho thuê theo ngày.’

(72) *Carpets* are sold by the square meter.

‘Thảm thì bán theo mét vuông.’

(73) *Mice* are timid creatures.

‘Chuột là loài động vật nhút nhát.’

(74) *Norwegians* usually make good sailors.

‘Người Na Uy thường giỏi nghề sông nước/nghe đi biển.’

(75) *Americans*<sup>5</sup> like sports.

‘Người Mỹ thích thể thao.’

b) With at least a modifier, either post-noun or pre-noun:

(76) *Life’s rewards* are many.

‘Phần thưởng của cuộc sống thì có rất nhiều.’

(77) *Big hotels all over the world* are very much the same.

‘Những khách sạn lớn trên khắp thế giới thì đều giống nhau.’

## 3. Comparison Between Vietnamese and English Generic Sentences

Table 1. Similarities and differences between Vietnamese and English generic sentences

Vietnamese generic sentences	English generic sentences
the first type: the topic/subject NP beginning with the [+indefinite] article <i>a(n)</i> in English and <i>một</i> in Vietnamese	
<i>một</i> + a classifier + a [–count] noun (+ a modifier): <i>Một bài viết hay</i> không dài lê thê. ‘A good piece of writing should be concise.’	<i>a(n)</i> + a [+singular count] noun (+ a modifier): <i>A computer</i> will do what it’s told to do. ‘ <i>Máy vi tính</i> sẽ làm cái nó được lập trình để làm.’
the second type: the topic/subject NP beginning with the [+definite] article <i>the</i> in English and one of its equivalents in Vietnamese	
(There is no exact equivalent in Vietnamese.)	the [+definite] article <i>the</i> + a [+singular count] noun: <i>The computer</i> will play an increasing large role in all of our lives. ‘ <i>Máy vi tính</i> có vai trò ngày một lớn hơn trong toàn bộ cuộc sống của chúng ta.’
the [+definite], [+plural] article <i>các</i> + a [+count] noun (+ a modifier): <i>Các sản phẩm của Việt Nam</i> đều có chất lượng tốt.	the [+definite] article <i>the</i> + a [+singular group] noun: <i>The class</i> respects the teacher. ‘ <i>Trò/Học sinh</i> kính trọng thầy.’

Language and Linguistics, 2 (6), pp. 348–355.” Retrieved from <http://www.sciencepublishinggroup.com/journal/paperinfo.aspx?journalid=501&doi=10.11648/j.ijll.20140206.12>

<sup>5</sup> While the topic/subject NP of (74–75) refers to the whole ethnic group of people settling in a certain area, that of the following (75’) makes an ethnic group stand out from others known in the world:

(75’) *The Italians*, not *the Americans*, were fond of operas.

‘*Người Ý*, chứ không phải *người Mỹ*, đã rất yêu nhạc kịch.’

<sup>4</sup> For further information concerning the fronting of the adverbial “in Ghana” in the translated version of (70), please refer to “Thanh Minh To (2014). The English adverbial of time vs. the Vietnamese range topic of time, *International Journal of*

Vietnamese generic sentences	English generic sentences
'Vietnamese products are of good/high quality.'	<i>The class</i> respect the teacher. ' <i>Các trò/Các học sinh</i> đều kính trọng thầy.'
the [+indefinite], [+plural] quantifier <i>những, nhiều, hầu hết, mọi</i> , etc. + a [+count] noun (+ a modifier): <i>Những kẻ lười biếng</i> thì không làm gì nên thân. ' <i>A slothful person</i> fails at anything he does.' ' <i>Those who are lazy</i> will never succeed in life.' ' <i>The slothful/Slothful people</i> fail at anything they do.'	the [+definite] article <i>the</i> + a [+plural count] noun: <i>The Italians</i> , not <i>the Americans</i> , are fond of operas. ' <i>Người Ý</i> , chứ không phải <i>người Mỹ</i> , yêu nhạc kịch.'
(There is no exact equivalent in Vietnamese.)	the [+definite] article <i>the</i> + an adjective/a past participle: <i>The young</i> have the future in their hand. ' <i>Thanh niên/Những người trẻ tuổi</i> nắm tương lai trong tay họ.' <i>The wounded</i> must be brought out of the front. ' <i>Thương binh/Những người bị thương</i> phải được đưa ra khỏi mặt trận.'
the third type: the topic/subject NP beginning with the zero article	
the zero article + a [-count] noun (+ a modifier): <i>Chim khôn</i> hót tiếng rành rang <i>Người khôn</i> nói tiếng dịu dàng dễ nghe. ' <i>Wise birds</i> sing with their clear voice; <i>wise people</i> speak in a pleasant tone.'	the zero article + a [-count] noun (+ a modifier): <i>Silk (from Japan)</i> is used to make the wedding dress. ' <i>Lụa (Nhật Bản)</i> được dùng để may áo cưới.'
the zero article + a classifier + a [-count] noun: <i>Con khỉ</i> chê chó lắm lông <i>Chó</i> thì chê khỉ ăn đông nói dài. ' <i>The monkey</i> despises the dog's numerous hairs while <i>the dog</i> despises the monkey's lengthy ways of expression.' 'The pot calling the kettle black' <i>Cái nết</i> đánh chết <i>cái đẹp</i> . ' <i>Beauty</i> is only skindeep.' ' <i>Beauty</i> is not everything.' ' <i>Handsome</i> is as handsome does.'	(There is no exact equivalent in English.)
(There is no exact equivalent in Vietnamese.)	the zero article + a [+plural count] noun (+ a modifier): <i>Americans</i> like sports. ' <i>Người Mỹ</i> thích thể thao.'
the zero article + a [+singular count] noun + a modifier: <i>Nghề đánh cá</i> đối với dân biển cũng quan trọng như <i>nghề nông</i> đối với dân ruộng. ' <i>The fishery</i> is as important to coastal folks as <i>the agriculture</i> to country folks.' ' <i>Fishing</i> is as important to coastal folks as <i>farming</i> to country folks.'	(There is no exact equivalent in English.)
the zero article + an adjective/a verb <i>Nghèo</i> không phải là tội lỗi. ' <i>Being poor</i> is not sinful.' 'It is not sinful to <i>be poor</i> .' <i>Chạy</i> làm cho khí huyết lưu thông. ' <i>Running</i> makes blood circulate.'	(There is no exact equivalent in English.)

### 3.1. Articles as a Means to Convey Genericity

The first type of both Vietnamese and English generic sentences begins with a [+indefinite], [+singular] article, which is *một* in Vietnamese and *a(an)* in English, but this article precedes a [+singular count] noun in English (Section 2.2.1) and a sequence of a classifier plus a [-count] noun in Vietnamese (Section 2.1.1). This is because in English count nouns outnumber uncount ones [12]; on the contrary, Cao (p. 266) [5] asserts that in "the list of more than 3,000 Vietnamese mono-syllabic nouns" he has considered with great care there exist "more than 2,500 uncount nouns" and only "more than 300 count nouns." That is why the classifier must be employed to count what is considered as [-count] in Vietnamese.

Both Vietnamese and English have the generic sentences beginning with a [+definite] article; but Vietnamese has no single article which can be considered as an exact equivalent of *the* — the sole [+definite] article which goes with a variety of English nouns (Section 2.2.2), not to mention *the* + an adjective or a past participle collectively used as a group noun:

- Preceding a [+singular count] noun as in *the blackbird, the bicycle, the giraffe*, etc., *the* can be considered as equivalent to the zero article in Vietnamese;
- Preceding a [+singular group] noun as in *the class, the government*, etc., *the* can be considered as equivalent to *các* — the [+definite], [+plural count] article in Vietnamese;
- Preceding a [+plural count] noun as in *the misers, the spenders, the economizers*, etc., *the* can be considered as equivalent to *những* — the [+indefinite], [+plural count] quantifier in Vietnamese.

Hopefully, the attempt to identify various semantic components of *những* and *các* results in their appropriate use in translating and/or interpreting generic sentences. The Vietnamese *các* is equivalent to the English *the*, based on their "inclusiveness of reference" (p. 141) [14]. Its [+whole] meaning, however, makes *các* less natural when this Vietnamese article occurs in the NP the head noun of which is a [+form], [-material] unit noun like *con* (person, individual), *cái* (female, impersonal individual), *chiếc* (piece), *quả* (fruit), *hòn* (island), *viên* (pill, tablet), *tấm* (plate), *khoanh* (circle), *khi* (point of time), *miếng* (piece), *lần* (time), *mét* (meter), *kí* (kilogram), *lát* (slice), etc., resulting in the hardly accepted ?*các con trâu* (buffalos), ?*các cái bánh* (cakes), ?*các chiếc mũ* (hats), ?*các quả táo* (apples), ?*các hòn đất* (rocks), etc. To make the topic/subject NP sound more natural, place *tất cả* before *các*: *tất cả các con trâu* (all the buffalos); *tất cả các cuốn sách* (all the books)<sup>6</sup>, etc. (p. 6) [4]. Another way is to replace *các* by

6 If *đều*, which means *all*, stands right behind its topic/subject NP then the Vietnamese generic sentence sounds even more natural. Compare:  
Tất cả các cuốn sách *đều* hay.                      Các cuốn sách *đều* hay.  
'All the books are interesting.'                      'The books are *all* interesting.'

*những*, with at least one obligatory post-noun modifier: *những con trâu nhà ông Nam* (Mr. Nam's buffalos), *những cuốn sách (mà) anh đưa cho tôi* (the books (that) you gave me), *những cái bánh ấy* (the/those cakes), etc.

On the other hand, its [+whole] meaning makes *các* naturally combine with two-syllable Sino-Vietnamese unit nouns, especially those that refer to humans: *các sinh viên* (students), *các học sinh* (pupils), *các bác sĩ* (doctors), *các giáo viên* (teachers), *các thủy thủ* (sailors), *các tác giả* (authors), *các đại biểu* (delegates), *các nghệ sĩ* (artists), *các cầu thủ* (players), *các chuyên gia* (experts), etc. as well as mono-syllabic [+form], [+material] mass nouns: *các tỉnh* (provinces), *các huyện* (districts), *các làng* (villages), *các bài* (lessons), *các cách* (ways), *các khoản* (terms, rules), *các khoa* (departments), *các mẹo* (tricks), *các việc* (jobs, facts, matters, affairs), etc. (p. 12) [7].

The above analysis displays that *các* and *những* are mutually exclusive in the same position in the Vietnamese NP as *the* and *this/that/these/those* are in the English NP. “Despite their opposition, however, *những* and *các* can be used interchangeably in many circumstances” (p. 104) [15]. When the Vietnamese topic/subject NP is extended by a post-noun modifier, especially by the relative clause beginning with *mà*, meaning which, *who(m)* or *that*, both *các* and *những* are equally accepted: *các/những dòng/con sông (mà) không khô cạn* (the rivers that do not dry up), *các/những sinh viên của tôi* (my students), *các/những điều khoản đó* (the/those rules), etc. It seems that the post-noun modifier makes *những* as [+definite] as *các* is, supporting the fact that “*những* has a much wider operating range than *các*: *những* replaces *các* in most cases;” on other words, “only *những*, not *các*, occurs in a variety of sentence structures” (p. 11) [4].

Both Vietnamese and English have the generic sentences beginning with the *zero* article; but the *zero* article in Vietnamese (Section 2.1.3) is [+definite], according to Bui (p. 13) [3], while the *zero* article in English (Section 2.2.3) is always [+indefinite].

### 3.2. The [ $\pm$ count] Head Noun of the Topic/Subject NP

With the only two exceptions in which the head noun of the topic/subject NP is [ $-$ count] (Section 2.2.3. (i)) or replaced by an adjective or a past participle (Section 2.2.2. (iv)), the other types of English generic sentences use [+count] nouns. On the contrary, with the only two exceptions in which an article or a quantifier sticks the label [+plural count] (Section 2.1.2) or [+singular count] (Section 2.1.3. (ii)) on the head noun of the topic/subject NP, the other types of Vietnamese generic sentences use [ $-$ count] nouns. This means each of the two languages in question takes full advantage of their own available materials to create various types of generic sentences.

What marks the [ $\pm$ count] property of the topic/subject NP in Vietnamese as an isolating language is not the head noun itself, but its preceding article or quantifier; on the contrary, the same property is expressed mainly by the very head noun in English as an inflecting language. In other words, the [ $\pm$ count] property weighs more on either the [+indefinite], [+singular count]

article *một*, the [+definite], [+plural count] article *các*, or the [+indefinite], [+plural count] quantifier *những*, *nhều*, *hầu hết*, *mọi*, etc. than the head noun of the Vietnamese topic/subject NP whereas it is either a [+plural count] noun like *misers*, *spenders*, etc. or a [+singular count] noun like *blackbird*, *bicycle*, etc., or a [+singular group] noun like *class*, *government*, etc., that conveys its own [ $\pm$ count] property.

And it is certain that the English derivational class-changing noun-forming suffix *-er* is an English equivalent of *người* — a mysterious lexical item that requires further research to prove that it is not only a very common classifier in Vietnamese.

### 3.3. Modifiers of the Topic/Subject NP

Vietnamese and English deal with the modifiers in the topic/subject NP differently:

- The English NP beginning with *a(n)*, as exemplified by the above-mentioned (39–42), does not need any post-noun modifier; on the contrary, the Vietnamese NP beginning with *một*, which is in fact the equivalent of *a(n)*, is quite often followed by at least a post-noun modifier, as in (8–10), as if it somehow compensates for the [ $-$ definiteness] of its head noun.
- Except for the two cases of Part “a) Without any post-noun modifier” in Section 2.1.3. (i) and of the “*zero* + a classifier + a [ $-$ count] noun” in Section 2.1.3. (iii), the Vietnamese topic/subject NP usually has at least one post-noun modifier. There is no rule for English post-noun modifiers because modifiers are either pre-noun or post-noun and frequently optional in the English topic/subject NP.
- The post-noun modifier after *các* just adds a supplementary description, and thus usually being omitted: *trò* or *các trò* and *học sinh* or *các học sinh* in the translated versions of respectively (49) and (49') are all accepted; the post-noun modifier after *những* indicates the distinction between what “*những* + a noun” refers to and all the other individuals of the same class: “the omission of the post-noun modifier in the latter definitely leads to the failure to assert such a distinction” (p. 278) [23]: *thanh niên* is synonymous with *những người trẻ tuổi*, which both means *the young*, respectively found in the first and second translated versions of the sentence numbered (54); it is not synonymous with *những người*, which means *persons*.

### 3.4. Ways to Deal with Various Types of Generic Sentences

Vietnamese and English deal with their various types of generic sentences differently.

#### 3.4.1. As Far as Their Function as a Means of Expression Is Concerned

- Vietnamese generic sentences that include the *zero* article + *con ong*, *con cá*, *con chim*, *con khi*, *con kiến*, *con người*, *cái khó*, *cái khôn*, *cái nét*, *cái đẹp*, *cái say*, *cái ung*, etc. (Section 2.1.3. (iii)) “rarely occur in ordinary everyday language” (p. 11) [3];

- b) In English, the three articles express genericity from different points of view (p. 379) [13]: *a(n)* represents any individual member of a class of entity as typical of the whole class; *the* represents the referent of the noun as a single undifferentiated whole class of entities; *zero* implies that all or most of members of the class of entity possess the characteristic that is predicated of it.

### 3.4.2. As Far as Their Interchangeability Is Concerned

The following (78–79) a–c are illustrations of how the three types of English generic sentences with *a(n)*, *the* and *zero* are all accepted: “These statements are about all camels, camels in general, not a specific camel or group of camels” (p. 203) [16]:

(78) a. *A camel* can close its nose.

‘(Bất kỳ thành viên nào thuộc chủng loại) Lạc đà (đều) có thể đóng mũi của mình lại.’

(78) b. *The camel* can close its nose.

‘Lạc đà có thể đóng mũi của mình lại.’

(78) c. *Camels* can close their noses.

‘(Những chú) Lạc đà (đều) có thể đóng mũi của mình lại.’

(79) a. *A blackbird* has a lovely song.

‘(Bất kỳ thành viên nào thuộc chủng loại) Chim hét (đều) có giọng hót hay.’

(79) b. *The blackbird* has a lovely song.

‘Chim hét (có giọng) hót hay.’

(79) c. *Blackbirds* have a lovely song.

‘(Những chú) Chim hét (đều) có giọng hót hay.’

### 3.5. Lack of Free Interchangeability Among Various Types of Generic Sentences

The three types of English generic sentences are not freely interchangeable (p. 379) [13]:

*The generic use of “a(n)” is restricted, in that it can’t be used in attributing properties which belong to the class as a whole. For example, “the” but not “a” is acceptable in the following, since an individual kangaroo does not constitute a species, whether near extinction or not, whereas the class as a whole, represented by “the”, does:*

*The kangaroo is far from being extinct.*

*\*A kangaroo is far from being extinct.*

*Both “the” and “a(n)” are acceptable with a characterising predicate, as in our next example, since carrying its young in a pouch is characteristic of each and every female kangaroo:*

*The female kangaroo carries its young in its pouch.*

*A female kangaroo carries its young in its pouch.*

Thus, one of the two key factors determining interchangeability among various types of generic sentences is the meaning of the verb phrase (abbreviated to VP). That is why (80) a does, but (80) b–c do not, express genericity:

(80) a. *The underprivileged* need special support.

‘Những người chịu nhiều thiệt thòi cần sự hỗ trợ đặc biệt.’

‘Người nghèo cần được hỗ trợ đặc biệt.’

(80) b. *The undermentioned* is witness to this contract.

‘Người có tên dưới đây làm nhân chứng cho bản hợp đồng này.’

(80) c. *The undermentioned* are witness to this contract.

‘Những người có tên dưới đây làm nhân chứng cho bản hợp đồng này.’

The other key factor is *the characteristics of the topic/subject NP*, as clearly stated by Swan (entries 142.8 and 142.9) [24]:

*To talk about the seasons in general, we can say “spring or “the spring”, “summer” or “the summer”, etc. There is very little difference:*

*Spring/The spring is the most beautiful season of the year.*

*When we generalize with singular countable nouns, we normally use an article (the telephone, a whale). Unlike other singular countable nouns, “man” and “woman” can be used in a general sense without articles:*

*Man and woman were created for each other.*

*But we more often use “a woman” and “a man”, or “men and “women”:*

*A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle. (old feminist joke)*

*Men and women have similar abilities and needs.*

As far as “Generic *the*” is concerned, Azar and Hagen (p. 130) [2] highlights:

*Do not use “the” with a plural count noun (e.g., apples) or a noncount noun (e.g., gold) when you are making a generalization:*

*\*The apples are my favorite fruit.*

*Apples are my favorite fruit.*

*\*The gold is a metal.*

*Gold is a metal.*

Also, Swan (entry 141.1) [24] distinguishes English plural nouns with *the* from those without *the*:

*When we generalise about members of a group, we usually use no article. But if we talk about the group as a whole, as if it was a well-known unit, we are more likely to use “the”. Compare:*

*Nurses mostly work very hard, (nearly every individual).*

*The nurses have never gone on strike, (the well-known professional body).*

*This often happens when we talk about nationalities.*

*Compare:*

*New Zealanders don’t like to be mistaken for Australians.*

*The Australians suffered heavy losses in the First World War.*

Smalley and Ruetten (pp. 226–7) [25] support Swan’s “the group as a whole” by their below example:

*The positive teachers are by far the most agreeable teachers. A positive teacher seems interested in his subjects and his students...*

*The neutral teachers are not very agreeable... The neutral teacher allows for questions and some discussion, but...*

*The negative teachers are the least agreeable... A positive teacher seems more like a machine than a human being...*

“Article use is one of the most difficult points in English grammar” (Section 12 Determiners, INTRODUCTION) [24], particularly for learners whose languages do not always use articles in the same way as their English equivalents, especially when talking about things in general. This

definitely provides Vietnamese learners of English with a lot of trouble, within the scope of generic sentences only.

**3.6. Equivalence Between Vietnamese and English Various Types of Generic Sentences**

There is almost no exact equivalence between Vietnamese and English various types of generic sentences: the same propositional content might be expressed by one or more types. This is partly because of the fact that there is no consistency in the ways the two languages deal with [±count] nouns: a noun which is [+count] in English may be considered as [-count] in Vietnamese, and vice versa:

(81) Ở người Cotu, con gà không chỉ là một gia cầm mà còn hiện diện rất nhiều trong đời sống tinh thần của họ... Người Cotu dùng con gà để đoán định, cầu xin với Giàng, thần linh, ma quỷ... Con gà khi chết cũng có hồn ma, gọi là ma gà... Người Cotu tạc cả tượng con gà trống nhung phần thân và đuôi cũng được cách điệu hóa. (p. 26) [21].

‘For the Katu people, the chicken is not merely poultry to be raised and eaten, but also an image which appears repeatedly in their spiritual rites and traditions... The Katus use chickens to beg guidance from God, spirits, and devils... When a chicken dies, its spirit continues to exist and thus it is called a fowl spirit... The Katus make statues of the entire rooster with stylized bodies and tails.’

(82) As with other parts of this equivalents, an animal evolves this kind of nose it needs. The hippos has grown its ears and eyes on the top of its head, and its nostrils on top of its nose, for lying in water. Camels and seals can close their nose; they do it in the same way but for different reasons. The camel closes it nose against the blowing sand of the desert, and the seal against the water in which it spends most of its time. (p. 203) [16].

The two following pairs of sentences (83–84) a–b indicate that possibly Vietnamese sometimes does employ a specific form to mark a particular type of generic sentences while such markedness in English is not so clear. Thus, the receiver of the information has to depend a little bit more on a signal from the comment/predicate VP to identify which sentence is [+generic], as in (83) a–b, and which is not, as in (84) a–b:

- (83) a. A cat is a domestic animal.
- b. Mèo là một loài thú nuôi ở nhà.

(84) a. A cat was the victim of a cruel attack when he was shot in the neck by a pullet.

      b. Một con mèo là nạn nhân của một cuộc tấn công ác độc khi nó bị một viên đạn bắn vào cổ.

And sometimes in one and the same discourse there exist two or more types of generic sentences with various topic/subject NP structures. Translating at ease from and to English with pairs of equivalents proves that generic sentences are common in both Vietnamese and English:

(85) Sợi dây nhỏ, cây gỗ lớn, vậy mà dây cửa mãi gỗ cũng phải đứt.

‘A string is small while a tree is big; yet if the string continues its sawing, the tree will definitely be cut down.’

(86) Lễ là lễ nghi thể hiện các quy phạm đạo đức. Người có lòng nhân thì không làm điều trái lễ.

‘Rites are the etiquette that conforms to a moral code of behavior. A humanitarian/A person who follows humanitarianism does nothing against the rites.’

**3.7. Nominalization of the Topic/Subject Noun Phrase in Vietnamese and English**

Table 2. Nominalization of the topic/subject NP in Vietnamese and English

Vietnamese generic sentences	English generic sentences
(There is no exact equivalent in Vietnamese.)	the [+definite] article <i>the</i> + an adjective/a past participle: <i>The young</i> have the future in their hand. ‘ <i>Thanh niên/Những người trẻ</i> nắm tương lai trong tay họ.’ <i>The wounded</i> must be brought out of the front. ‘ <i>Thương binh/Những người bị thương</i> phải được đưa ra khỏi mặt trận.’
the zero article + an adjective/a verb: <i>Nghèo</i> không phải là tội lỗi. ‘ <i>Being poor</i> is not sinful.’ ‘It is not sinful <i>to be poor</i> .’ <i>Chạy</i> làm cho khí huyết lưu thông. ‘ <i>Running</i> makes blood circulate.’	(There is no exact equivalent in English.)

The re-consideration of the above sheds light to the fact that the nominalization of the topic/subject NP in English is a must; however, such a requirement is not so urgent and demanding in Vietnamese that the so-called “the topic/subject NP in Vietnamese” may be not precise. It should simply be “the Vietnamese topic”: anything, even an adjective, an adverb or a verb, can fill in the very beginning of Vietnamese declaratives, including Vietnamese generic sentences of course.

**4. Conclusion**

The preceding descriptions and analyses indicate that it is difficult to deny the similarities in the ways Vietnamese and English choose to express genericity. But in each of these similarities there exists something unique. In other words, universalism and uniqueness operate quite well in the two natural languages. *The universal* is shown by “the same way of perception of the states of affairs in the world, and thus the represented is identical” [6]; as quoted in (p. 1) [19], which is the frequent [+stative] verb in the comment/predicate VP as well as the fully described internal structure of the topic/subject NP of Vietnamese and English generic sentences. *The unique* asserts that each of the two language is beautiful in its own way and deserves the patience and understanding of any language user, native and non-native. I would not like to talk in a worn-out manner:

- East is East*
- West is West*
- Never the twain shall meet.* (p. 194) [25].

Inspired by the gratitude that I am too lucky to acquire the sophisticated cultures closely related to the two languages in question, I would like to say that:

West and East  
Someday the twain shall meet.

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