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## **Vietnamese**

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### **Introduction to Vietnamese**

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Vietnamese is the official language of Vietnam. It is spoken by 70 million people in Vietnam and approximately 2 million Vietnamese overseas. Vietnam is also home to approximately 60 smaller ethnic groups who speak indigenous languages. Of these, the largest group is the ethnic Chinese, speaking both Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese. Many Vietnamese also speak Russian and / or English, and some older Vietnamese speak French. However, the majority of social, political, and cultural communication in Vietnam is conducted in the Vietnamese language.

Vietnamese belongs to the subfamily of Mon-Khmer languages in the Austroasiatic language family. The Austroasiatic family has approximately 150 languages and 80 million speakers in two important subfamilies, Munda and Mon-Khmer. The ten Munda languages are spoken by six million people in northeastern India, and the Mon-Khmer languages, of which Vietnamese is one, are spoken throughout much of Southeast Asia. There are roughly 140 Mon-Khmer languages, but only Vietnamese and Khmer, or Cambodian (7 million), are well known.

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**Introduction to Vietnamese** (continued)

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The Vietnamese language has three main dialects: northern, central, and southern. The southern dialect is spoken in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), the largest city in Vietnam and the most important South Vietnamese political, economic, and cultural center. The differences between the dialects lie in both the vocabulary and the phonetic system. However, Vietnamese everywhere understand each other despite these differences and despite the lack of a “standard” Vietnamese pronunciation.

This Vietnamese course introduces the contemporary Hanoi (“northern”) dialect. Used in the capital and considered the most cultured in Vietnam, the Hanoi dialect represents the phonetic system of the language more fully than do the other dialects. The Hanoi dialect is the one most often used in news broadcasts on national Vietnamese radio and television and in Vietnamese books, newspapers, and magazines.

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## Vietnamese

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### Written Vietnamese

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From approximately the 1st century until the late 19th century, Vietnamese used the Chinese writing system for official documents of all sorts as well as for literature and poetry. In Vietnamese, this system is called *chữ Hán* or *chữ Nho*.

A writing system known as *chữ nôm*, based on Han Chinese writing, was developed by Vietnamese Buddhist scholar-priests around the 13th century. This system used composite graphs borrowed from Chinese, in which one component signaled the pronunciation, while another indicated the meaning of a word. However, the new writing system was unpopular because it was often thought to be too complicated to learn, and for several centuries the *chữ nôm* system existed alongside the standard written Chinese.

The Roman script was introduced by Catholic missionaries at the beginning of the 17th century as a part of their efforts to Christianize Vietnam. The writing system based on the Roman script is called *quốc ngữ*. Unlike the *chữ Nho* and *chữ nôm* systems,

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**Written Vietnamese** (continued)

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*quốc ngữ* is structured around the alphabetic principle, with almost every symbol representing a structurally significant phonetic entity, or “phoneme.” Since the beginning of the 20th century, *quốc ngữ* has been the official Vietnamese alphabet.

The Vietnamese alphabet contains twenty-two Roman characters: a, b, c, d, e, g, h, i, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r, s, t, u, v, x, y. Diacritic marks are added to indicate specific sounds, e.g., *ă, â, ê, ô, u, o, đ*. Diacritic marks are also used to indicate important tonal differences.

Vietnamese is a tonal language, where changes in the pitch level of a word signal a change in meaning. Vietnamese has six different tones: mid-level (a), low-falling (*à*), high-rising (*á*), low-falling-rising (*â*), high-rising broken (*ã*), and low-falling broken (*a*). Except for the mid-level tone, all of the tones are denoted by diacritic marks, shown here with the letter “a.”

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**Vietnamese**

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**Linguistic Notes**

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Vietnamese belongs to the group of isolating languages, where there are no inflectional endings and all the words are invariable. Grammatical relationships are expressed by the use of auxiliary words and word order, not by changing the internal structure of the words (the use of inflectional endings).

In the Vietnamese language, the syllable is the minimal meaningful unit that cannot be divided into smaller meaningful parts. Each syllable consists of two mandatory components: a tone and a nuclei vowel. Three additional optional components may be present: an initial consonant, a sound indicating the labialization (rounding of the lips) of the syllable, and a final consonant or semivowel. The structure of the Vietnamese syllable can be presented as follows:

<b>T O N E</b>			
INITIAL CONSONANT	LABIALIZATION	NUCLEI VOWEL	FINAL CONSONANT / SEMIVOWEL

### Linguistic Notes (continued)

Most words in Vietnamese are monosyllabic (consisting of one syllable) or disyllabic. The number of polysyllabic words is rather small. In addition to the words of Mon-Khmer origin, the Vietnamese vocabulary contains a large number of words and parts of words borrowed from Chinese. It makes use, as well, of words of French and English origin.

The Vietnamese phonetic system contains twenty-three "initial consonant" sounds. These are *b*, *ph* [f], *v*, *m*, *t*, *đ* [d], *th*, *x* [s], *d* [z], *n*, *l*, *tr* [tʃ], *s* [ʃ], [ʒ], *ch*, *nh*, [k], *g*, *kh*, *ng*, *h*, *p*, and *r*. However, in the Hanoi dialect, the three consonants [tʃ], [ʃ], and [ʒ] do not exist. The consonants "p" and "r" occur only in words borrowed from European languages.

The Vietnamese language has eleven "nuclei monophthong vowels": *i*, *ê*, *e*, *u*, *ơ*, *â*, *a*, *ã*, *u*, *ô*, *o*, and three "nuclei diphthongs": *iê* / *ia*; *uơ* / *ua*; and *uô* / *ua*.

There are six "final consonants": *p*, *t*, *c* / *ch*, *m*, *n*, *ng* / *nh*, and two "final semivowels": *i* / *y* and *o* / *u*.

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## VIETNAMESE

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