Semantics of Vietnamese directional verbs

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In Vietnamese there are some verbs indicating direction of movement. The five verbs whose semantics are discussed in this paper are: (1) ra /za\textsuperscript{1}/ “go out, come out”, (2) vào /va\textsuperscript{2}/ “come in, go in, move in”, (3) lên /le\textsuperscript{1}/ “go up, get up, climb up”, (4) xuống /su\textsuperscript{2}/ “go down, climb down”, and (5) sang /sa\textsuperscript{1}/ “go over, come over, cross”.

The semantics of the five directional verbs are as follows:

\textbf{Ra} /za\textsuperscript{1}/ “go out, come out” goes from a narrow point and moves to a wider point. It only refers to direction, not to personal relations. The schema of this verb may be diagrammed as follows:

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
\node at (0,0) {ra};
\node at (0,-1) {narrow};
\node at (0,1) {wide};
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

\textbf{Vào} /va\textsuperscript{2}/ “come in, go in, move in” goes from a wide point and moves to a narrow point. It only refers to direction. The schema of this verb may be diagrammed as follows:

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
\node at (0,0) {vào};
\node at (0,-1) {wide};
\node at (0,1) {narrow};
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

\textbf{Lên} /le\textsuperscript{1}/ “go up, get up, climb up” goes from a low point and moves to a higher point. It can be used with both a direction or a personal relation

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
\node at (0,0) {lên};
\node at (0,-1) {low};
\node at (0,1) {high};
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

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 Xuống /səŋ⁵/ “go down, climb down” goes from a high point and moves to a lower point. It can be used with a direction or a personal relation.

\[
\text{xuống} \quad \downarrow \quad \text{high} \quad \downarrow \quad \text{low}
\]

Sang /səŋ¹/ “go over, come over, cross” is used with movement in a horizontal direction.

\[
\text{sang} \quad \leftarrow A \rightarrow B
\]

These five verbs can refer to only a specific place, not just a general direction, as in the following examples:

(1) Chúng ta hãy ra phòng khách.
/коŋ⁵ ta¹ haʔaj⁴ za¹ fɔŋ² ɣəc⁵/
we Imp mk go out living room
“Let’s go out to the living room.”

In (1), the speaker perhaps is in the bedroom (narrow place) and invites the other to go to the living room (wide place).

(2) Tôi vào nhà vì trời mưa.
/toj¹ vaʔou² na² vi² caŋ² muŋ¹/
I come in house because sky rain
“I walked into the house because of the rain.”

In (2), perhaps the speaker was in the yard (wide place) and moved into the house (narrow place).

These verbs have wider usages as when there is an implication of geographic direction of the movement. The starting point and the destination are in a geographic relation with each other: east-west, north-south. The shape of Vietnam is like the letter ‘S’ that has the widest part in the North and the narrowest part in the South. Vietnam is divided into three regions: the North, Central and the South. So the direction from a ‘northern province’ to a ‘southern province’ is vào ‘come in, go in, move in’; movement in the opposite direction with the verb ra ‘go out, come out’, as represented in the following schema:
North (wide)
↓
vào ra
Central
↓
South (narrow)

(3) Từ thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, anh ra
/tuʔ² thanh² pho² ho² ci⁵ min¹ an¹ za¹
from city Ho Chi Minh you go out
Hà Nội bằng gì?
ha² noj⁶ banj² zi²/
Ha Noi by what
"From Ho Chi Minh City, how do you go to Hanoi?"

(4) Tôi sẽ vào thành phố Hồ Chí Minh mấy ngày.
/toj¹ seʔe⁴ vaω² thanh² pho² ho² ci⁵ min¹ maa⁵ naŋ²/
I will go in city Ho Chi Minh several day
"I will go to Ho Chi Minh City for several days."

In (3), from Ho Chi Minh City in the South to Hanoi in the North, the verb ra "go out" is used. In (4), the speaker perhaps is in the Central or on the North and wants to go to Ho Chi Minh City in the South. Therefore, the verb vào 'go in' is used. The same as in (5), from Hanoi to Nghe An in the Central, the verb the verb vào 'go in' is used. In (6), from Hue in the Central up to Hanoi in the North, ra 'go out' is used.

(5) Tôi từ Hà Nội vào Nghe An nghỉ mắt.
/toj¹ tuʔ² haʔ² noj⁶ vaω² ȵe⁶ an¹ ni³ maat⁵/
I from Hanoi go in Nghe An go on holiday
"I am from Hanoi to Nghe An for holiday."

(6) Ông tôi vừa từ Huế ra
/onj¹ toj¹ vaω² tu² hwe⁵ za¹
grandfather I just from Hue go out
Hà Nội an Têt.
haʔ² noj⁶ an¹ tet⁵/
Hanoi celebrate New Year's Day
"My grandmother just came from Hue to Hanoi for New Year's Day celebration"
Within a region, the vertical direction for relationship between any two provinces, the verb lên ‘go up, get up, climb up’ is used for south-to-north movement and xuống ‘go down, climb down’ for north-to-south movement, as in the following examples:

(7) Tôi lên Hà Giang.
/toj /len / ha^2 zan^1/ 
I go up Ha Giang “I go up to Ha Giang.” (the northmost province near the border of China/ The speaker is in Hanoi.)

(8) Tôi xuống Hà Nội.
/toj / suan^5 / ha^2 noj^6/ 
I go down Ha Noi “I go down to Ha Noi.” (The speaker is in Ha Giang.)

For the horizontal direction between two provinces (east ---> west or west ---> east), the verb sang “go over, come over, cross” is used, as in:

(9) Tôi vừa sang Lai Châu về.
/toj /vua^2 /san^1 / laj^1 ca^1 ve^2/ 
I just go over Lai Chau return “I just returned from Lai Chau.”

Moreover, the verbs xuống ‘go down’ and lên ‘go up’ can convey a personal relationship. The verb xuống conveys the direction from a high-ranking person to a low-ranking person or from a central to a peripheral area, whereas the verb lên conveys the direction from a low-ranking person to a high-ranking person, or from a peripheral to a central area, such as:

(10) Chủ tịch tỉnh đi xuống huyện.
/cu^3 tic^6 tin^3 / di^1 suan^5 hwian^2/ 
governor do down district “The governor goes to the district.”

(11) Tôi báo cáo lên viện trưởng.
/toj /baw^5 kaw^5 / len^1 vian^6 cuan^3/ 
I report up director “I reported to the director.”

Some people have the idea that an office is an important place, or that the location of a house should be south of an office, therefore the verb lên often used, as
(12) Bố cháu lên cỗ quán.
/bo⁵ cau⁵ len¹ kɔ¹ kwan¹/
father niece go up office
"My father goes to the office."

The starting point of the direction is the most important which indicates the narrow point or wide point. If from the narrow point to the wider, the directional verb ra "exit" is used with an action verb. Whereas from the wider point to the narrow, the verb vào 'go in, come in' is used with an action verb. Many action verbs occur frequently with directional verbs, such as: đi ra 'go out', mở ra 'open out' and nói ra 'speak out', as follows:

(13) Tôi đi ra phố.
/toj¹ di¹ za¹ fo⁵/
I go exit street
"I go out to the street."

(14) Tôi mở cửa ra.
/toj¹ mɔ³ kuɔ³ za¹/
I open door exit
"I opened the door."

In (13), the speaker is in the house, which is a narrow point, and is going to the street, which is a wider point, as is the case in (14), too.

(15) Mẹ dòng cửa vào.
/me⁶ dɔŋ⁵ kuɔ³ va:w²/
mother close door into
"Mother closes the door."

There are sets of verbs that are fixed with certain directional verbs, as in the following examples:

- verb + ra
bếu ra /bew¹ za¹/ "display to"
bộc lọ ra /bok⁶ lo⁶ za¹/ "expose"
cởi ra /kɔj³ za¹/ "take off"
nông ra /nɔŋ¹ za¹/ "stretch out"

- verb + vào
dày vào /daŋ⁶ va:w²/ "cover"
khép vào /kʰep⁵ va:w²/ "shut (without locking)"
cuốn vào /kuɔn⁶ va:w²/ "roll up"
dong vào /dɔŋ⁵ va:w²/ "close"
- verb + lèn
nàng lèn /nʌŋ⁶ len¹/  “lift up”
dun lèn /dunⁱ len¹/  “boil”
tóc lèn /tok⁵ len¹/  “blow up”
hét lèn /hɛt⁵ len¹/  “shout”

- verb + xuống
hạ xuống /ha⁶ sʊŋ⁵/  “lower”
cuí xuống /kʊŋ⁵ sʊŋ⁵/  “bow”
quỳ xuống /kwɪ² sʊŋ⁵/  “kneel”

(Nguyễn Kim Thán 1997: 208)

Due to the fact that the shape of Vietnam is long and narrow, the meanings of some verbs are related to the location of the starting point and the destination in terms of the north-south, east-west directions. When directional verbs are used to refer to personal relationships, they also convey authority. However, if the speakers, especially foreigners, understand the directional of the components verbs clearly, they can communicate with the Vietnamese people accurately and can use directional verbs appropriately.

REFERENCES