Ingredients of excess: A study of Vietnamese *quá*

Anne Nguyen and Michael Yoshitaka Erlewine (mitcho)
nttn@u.nus.edu, mitcho@nus.edu.sg
National University of Singapore

1 Introduction

▶ Today we study the uses of the Vietnamese morpheme *quá*, which at first glance appears to be an **excessive** morpheme.

(1) Quả bóng này {**quá** to / to **quá**}.
   CL ball this QUÁ big big QUÁ
   ≈ 'This ball is too big.' [...I want a smaller one.]

Quá is unusual in allowing both pre- and post-adjectival positions. (Here we concentrate on *quá* with gradable adjectives.) Other degree modifiers appear in a fixed position:

'very'	'quite'	'extremely'	'more'	'as'	'enough'	'too' (?)
*A *rất*	*A *hơi*	*A *cực kì*	A *hơn*	A *bằng*	*A *đủ*	A ***quá***
rất A	*hơi* A	*cực kì* A	*hơn A	*bằng A	*đủ* A	***quá*** A

The meaning expressed in (1) — both with *quá to* and *to quá* — seems similar to excessive constructions such as the English *too... to* construction:

(2) Sarah is too tall [to ride the bus for free].   PURPOSE P = Sarah rides the bus for free

   a. <u>Purpose-oriented excessive:</u>   (see e.g. Meier 2003; Schwarzschild 2008)
   Sarah's height [$= \max(\lambda d$. Sarah is d-tall)] $> \max(\lambda d'$. if Sarah is d'-tall, CAN P)
   Meier 2003: 70: "the standard of comparison is... **an upper bound of admissibility**, and the value of the object lies above this value."

   b. <u>Malefactive inference:</u>
   Sarah's height negatively affects the speaker or Sarah.
   Nouwen 2018: "at some indeterminate level of analysis, **excess is bad** and sufficiency is good... Excessives are negative because they do not reach goals."

Pre- and post-adjectival *quá* in Vietnamese as in (1) each encode different components of the excessive meanings in (2):

- *"quá A"*: purpose-oriented excessive   (or something else...)
- *"A quá"*: comparative with not-at-issue malefactive inference

---

2 Background

Here we introduce some other Vietnamese degree constructions that we will make reference to.

2.1 Positive forms

The bare form of a gradable adjective is used as a positive form: "A (MEASURE PHRASE)"

(3) a. ? Cầu thủ này **cao**.
    player   this tall
    'This player is tall.'

    b. ? Con mèo kia **nặng**.
    CL cat that heavy
    'That cat is heavy.'

    c. ? Cái mũ này **đắt**.
    CL hat this expensive
    'This hat is expensive.'

(4) a. Cầu thủ này **cao** 1.8m.
    player   this tall 1.8m
    'This player is 1.8m tall.'

    b. Con mèo kia **nặng** 3kg.
    CL cat that heavy 3kg
    'This cat is 3kg.'

    c. * Cái mũ này **đắt** $20.
    CL hat this expensive $20
    Intended: 'This hat is $20.'

- Some gradable adjectives allow for a measure phrase: e.g. 'tall' and 'heavy,' but not 'expensive' in (4).

- The positive form without a measure phrase (3) is slightly marked when unembedded, but all improve if embedded:

(5) Nếu [tôi **cao**], tôi có thể tìm được một công việc tốt   hơn.
    if   I tall I can find able one job   good HƠN
    'If I was tall, I could find a better job.'

The use of *rất* 'very' makes these same forms perfect when unembedded, but cannot cooccur with a measure phrase: "*rất* A (*MEASURE PHRASE)"

(6) a. Cầu thủ này **rất** **cao** (*1.8m).
    player   this very tall   1.8m
    'This player is very tall.'

    b. Con mèo kia **rất** **nặng** (*3kg).
    CL cat that very heavy   3kg
    'That cat is very heavy.'

A comparison class can be explicitly specified for the bare positive form and 'very' using *so với*:

(7) **So** **với** các bạn cùng lớp, nó ?(rất) cao.
compare with all classmate he very tall
'Compared with all his classmates, he is (very) tall.'

(8) **So** **với** cái mũ kia, cái mũ này ?(rất) đắt.
compare with CL hat that CL hat this very expensive
'Compared with that hat, this hat is (very) expensive.'

The bare forms in (7–8) are slightly marked due to the general degradedness of unembedded bare positive forms, but are fine if embedded.

2.2 Comparative *hơn*

"A *hơn* (STANDARD (DIFFERENTIAL))"

(9) Cái mũ này (*rất) **đắt** **hơn** cái mũ kia ($3).
CL hat this very expensive HƠN CL hat that $3
'This hat is ($3) more expensive than that hat.'

(10) Cái mũ này **đắt** **hơn**.
CL hat this expensive HƠN
'This hat is more expensive [than that].'

2.3 Sufficiency *đủ*

"*đủ* A (*để* PURPOSE)"

The sufficiency construction expresses that the degree of A meets or exceeds ($\geq$) the minimum required for the purpose P to be true. See e.g. Meier 2003.

(11) Nó **đủ cao** (để chơi bóng rổ).
he ĐỦ tall ĐỂ play basketball
'He is tall enough (to play basketball).'

(12) Cái bàn này **đủ to** (để đặt ở phòng khách).
CL table this ĐỦ big ĐỂ put in living-room
'This table is big enough (to put in the living room).' [The other one was too small.]

2.4 Summary

Note again that each degree morpheme comes either before or after the gradable adjective:

	'very'	'more'	'enough'	'too' (?)	
	*A *rất*	A *hơn*	*A *đủ*	A ***quá***	(§3)
	rất A	*hơn* A	*đủ* A	***quá*** A	(§4)

3   Post-adjectival *quá*

(13)   Cái bàn   này **to   quá**.
      CL   table this big QUÁ
      ≈ 'The table is too big.' [...It cannot fit the room.]

We propose that post-adjectival *quá* is best thought of as **a (kind of) comparative encoding a not-at-issue malefactive inference**:

(14)   **Malefactive inference of post-adjectival *quá*:**
      Not-at-issue requirement: If the extent of A exceeds the (possibly implicit) standard, the speaker will be negatively affected.

We motivate this view from **four properties** of post-adjectival *quá*:

1. Post-adjectival *quá* **can take a measure phrase standard**, just like the comparative with *hơn*, but unlike pre-adjectival *quá* (§4).

   (15)   Sợi dây   này **dài** {**quá** / **hơn**} 2m.
         CL   string this long QUÁ / HƠN 2m
         'This string is longer than 2m.' (QUÁ ⇝ and that negatively affects me)

   When there is no measure phrase given as in (13), we naturally imagine a measure phrase such as 'the allowed degree' or 'the degree I imagined':

   (16)   Cái bàn   này **to   quá** {mức cho phép / mức tưởng tượng}.
         CL   table this big QUÁ level allow   / level imagine
         'This table is bigger than {the allowed degree / the degree I imagined}.'
         ⇝ and that negatively affects me

   But post-adjectival *quá cannot* take a phrasal (DP) standard, unlike *hơn*:

   (17)   Sợi dây   này **dài** {*__quá__ / ✓**hơn**} sợi dây   kia.
         CL   string this long   QUÁ /   HƠN CL string that
         'This string is longer than that string.'

2. Post-adjectival *quá* requires that **the speaker is negatively affected** *if* the extent of A exceeds the standard.

   (18)   <u>Context 1:</u> We need a string which is <u>less than 2.5m long</u>. We find a string in the drawer. You go to measure it and then know that it is <u>2.8m long</u>. You say:

       a.   ✓ Sợi dây   này **dài quá** 2.5m.   b.   ✓ Sợi dây   này **dài hơn** 2.5m.
           CL   string this long QUÁ 2.5m   CL   string this long HƠN 2.5m
           'This is longer[QUÁ] than 2.5m.'   'This is longer[HƠN] than 2.5m.'

(19) Context 2: We need a string which is <u>at least 2.5m long</u>. We find a string in the drawer. You go to measure it and then know that it is <u>2.8m long</u>. You say:

a. # Sợi dây này **dài quá** 2.5m.
   CL string this long QUÁ 2.5m
   'This is longer[QUÁ] than 2.5m.'

b. ✓ Sợi dây này **dài hơn** 2.5m.
   CL string this long HƠN 2.5m
   'This is longer[HƠN] than 2.5m.'

Post-adjectival *quá* is possible in Context 1 but not Context 2 because the string's length, greater than 2.5m, makes it a problem for the speaker. In contrast, *hơn* does not have such a requirement.

3. The malefactive inference requires that exceeding the standard *would* negatively affect the speaker, not that it actually does. **This inference projects through negation.**

(20) Context 3: We need a string which is <u>less than 2.5m long</u>. We find a string in the drawer. You go to measure it and then know that it is <u>2.3m long</u>. You say:

✓ Sợi dây này **không dài quá** 2.5m.
   CL string this not long QUÁ 2.5m
   'This string is not longer[QUÁ] than 2.5m.'
   ↝ being longer than 2.5m would be a problem   (true in context)

(21) Context 4: We need a string which is <u>at least 2.5m long</u>. We find a string in the drawer. You go to measure it and then know that it is <u>2.3m long</u>. You say:

Sợi dây này **không dài quá** 2.5m.
   CL string this not long QUÁ 2.5m
   'This string is not longer[QUÁ] than 2.5m.'
   ↝ being longer than 2.5m would be a problem   (false in context)

4. Post-adjectival *quá* is **not grammatically purpose-oriented**:

(22) Cái bàn này **to quá** *(,) [để đặt ở phòng khách].
   CL table this big QUÁ   để put in living-room
   'This table is bigger [than that] (↝ mal), to put in the living room.'

A purpose can be added to (22) only with a pause. To the extent that post-adjectival *quá* suggests that a particular purpose cannot be met, this inference must come about pragmatically.

Post-adjectival *quá* is a comparative morpheme, like *hơn*, but which conventionally encodes a not-at-issue requirement that, if the degree exceeds the standard, the speaker would be negatively affected.

4 Pre-adjectival *quá*

"*quá* A (*để* PURPOSE)" is an *excessive* meaning: 'too A to PURPOSE'

(23) Quả bóng này **quá to** để vừa cái hộp.
       CL   ball   this QUÁ big ĐỂ fit   CL box

     'This ball is too big to fit the box.'

     ⇒ the ball cannot fit in the box

(24) Nó **quá nhỏ**   để có thể hiểu   chuyện gì đang xảy ra.
       He QUÁ small ĐỂ able   understand what   PROG happen

     'He is too small to be able to understand what is happening.'

     ⇒ he is unable to understand what is happening

Here, *để* introduces a purpose "(can/should/must) P," just as with *đủ* sufficiency constructions in §2.3. **Excessives entail the negation of their purpose** ($\neg$ CAN/SHOULD/MUST P) (Meier, 2003; Schwarzschild, 2008; a.o.), as is reflected above.

   ► **But "*quá* A (*để* PURPOSE)" also has another, non-excessive function!**

Consider the minimal pair in (25):

(25) A: Should we go shopping tomorrow?

    B1: Dĩ nhiên. Thời tiết này **quá đẹp** để đi mua sắm.
        Of-course weather this QUÁ good ĐỂ go shopping

       'Of course. The weather is <u>very good</u> for going shopping.'

       $\overset{\approx}{\Rightarrow}$ we can/should go shopping tomorrow

    B2: Không. Thời tiết này **quá đẹp** để đi mua sắm. Đi dã ngoại sẽ   thích hơn.
        not   weather this QUÁ good ĐỂ go shopping go picnic   will great HƠN

       'No. The weather is <u>too good</u> to go shopping. Having a picnic will be better.'

       ⇒ we cannot/should not go shopping tomorrow

Clearly, the (B1) reading is not an excessive.

Pre-adjectival *quá* is ambiguous between two different constructions:

1. The excessive construction: the degree of A exceeds a threshold determined by the purpose P
2. A 'very'-like construction (B1): the degree of A exceeds a vague contextual standard[1]

---

[1]This is in contrast to a view like what we proposed in our abstract, that B1 expresses a 'more than enough to P' reading, which still refers to a clear threshold grammatically determined by the purpose P.

Here are **three reasons** to distinguish the constructions:

1. The 'very' reading of pre-adjectival *quá* is **evaluative**, but the excessive reading is not.[2]

   (26) Cái túi này **quá to**, để đựng máy tính, (#mặc dù   nó không to lắm).
        CL bag this QUÁ big ĐỂ carry laptop   even-though it not   big very
        'This bag is <u>very big</u> for carrying a laptop, (#even though it's not very big).'

   (27) Cái túi này **quá to** để đựng máy tính, mặc dù   nó không to lắm.
        CL bag this QUÁ big ĐỂ carry laptop   even-though it not   big very
        'This bag is <u>too big</u> for carrying a laptop, even though it's not very big.'

2. **The 'very' reading disprefers/disallows modals in its *để* purpose**, making their *để*-clauses more similar to non-excessive/sufficiency-related *để* purpose clauses.

   (28) Thời tiết này **quá đẹp**   [để đi mua sắm].
        weather this QUÁ beautiful ĐỂ go shopping

        a. 'The weather is <u>very good</u> for going shopping.'   ← preferred
             $\overset{\approx}{\Rightarrow}$ we can/should go shopping

        b. 'The weather is <u>too good</u> to go shopping.'
             ⇒ we cannot/should not go shopping

   (29) Thời tiết này **quá đẹp**   [để **có thể** đi mua sắm].
        weather this QUÁ beautiful ĐỂ able   go shopping

        a. ? 'The weather is <u>very good</u> for being able to go shopping.'
             $\overset{\approx}{\Rightarrow}$ we can go shopping

        b. 'The weather is <u>too good</u> to be able to go shopping.'   ← preferred
             ⇒ we cannot not go shopping

   (30) Quả bóng này **quá to**   [để **đặt vừa** cái hộp].
        CL ball   this QUÁ big ĐỂ put fit   CL box

        a. * 'This ball is <u>very big</u> for fitting in the box.'
             $\overset{\approx}{\Rightarrow}$ this ball {can fit/fits} the box

        b. 'This ball is <u>too big</u> to fit in the box.'
             ⇒ it {doesn't fit/can't fit} in the box

        The compound 'put-fit' in (30) is a modal construction.

   More general purpose adjuncts are also introduced by *để*, but do not allow modals:

   (31) Minh đi đến cửa hàng đó   [để (*có thể) mua một chiếc mũ].
        Minh go to   store   that ĐỂ able   buy one CL   hat
        'Minh went to that store to (be able to) buy a hat.'

---

[2]The pre-adjectival 'very' *rất* is incompatible with negation, but here we use the sentence-final 'very' *lắm* which scopes under negation.

3. **The 'very' reading can take a comparison class**, but the excessive cannot.

(32) **So với** hôm qua, thời tiết hôm nay **quá đẹp** [để đi mua sắm].
compare with yesterday weather today QUÁ good ĐỂ go shopping

    a.   'Compared to yesterday's weather, today's is <u>very good</u> for going shopping.'

    b. * 'Compared to yesterday's weather, today's is <u>too good</u> to go shopping.'

(33) **So với** Kim, nó **quá cao**.
compare with Kim he QUÁ tall

    a.   'Compared to Kim, he is <u>very tall</u>.'

    b. * 'Compared to Kim, he is <u>too tall</u> [for purpose P].'

(34) (***So với** quả bóng này,) quả bóng kia **quá to** [để đặt vừa cái hộp].
compare with CL ball this CL ball that QUÁ big ĐỂ put fit CL box

    a. * 'This ball is <u>very big</u> to fit in the box (compared to that ball).'
        This reading is ruled out due to the modal 'put-fit' in the purpose; see (30).

    b.   'This ball is <u>too big</u> to fit in the box (*compared to that ball).'

This suggests that 'very' pre-adjectival *quá* is a type of positive form construction, rather than a kind of comparative.

▶ The 'very' reading of "*quá* A *để* P" requires a correlation whereby **the higher the degree of A, the greater the likelihood of P**. This correlation leads to the perceived inference in the 'very' readings above.

| Puzzle | But this correlation seems to be reversed with negative adjectives.

(35) # Thời tiết này **quá xấu** [để ở nhà].
    weather this QUÁ bad ĐỂ stay home

    a. * 'The weather is <u>very bad</u>...'
        ⤳ the greater the degree of 'weather bad,' the more likely that we stay home
         ⇒ we can/should stay home

    b. # 'The weather is <u>very bad</u>...'
        ⤳ the greater the degree of 'weather bad,' the *less* likely that we can stay home
         ⇒ we cannot/should not stay home

    c. # 'The weather is <u>too bad</u> to stay home.'
        ⇒ we cannot/should not stay home

With the negative adjective 'bad' in (35), only the non-sensical readings are possible. The expected 'very' reading in (35a) (≈ 'the weather is so bad such that we can stay home') is unavailable. Compare to the ambiguous (28) above, with good weather.

Interim summary

We summarize the syntactic properties of the different degree constructions presented here:

		comparison class (*so với...*)	MP standard	DP standard	purpose (*để P*)
positive (bare)		○	○	×	×
'very / quite / ...'	*rất / hơi* A	○	×	×	$\triangle_1 (\rightsquigarrow P)$
'very'	***quá*** A	○	×	×	$\triangle_1 (\rightsquigarrow P)$
sufficiency	*đủ* A	×	×	×	○ $(\Rightarrow P)$
excessive	***quá*** A	×	×	×	○ $(\Rightarrow \neg P)$
comparative	A *hơn*	$\triangle_2$	○	○	$?\triangle_2$
equative	A *bằng*	×	×	○	×
comparative ($\rightsquigarrow$ neg)	A ***quá***	$\triangle_2$	○	×	$\triangle_2$

$\triangle_1$ Degraded with modals, like non-degree-related purpose clauses.

$\triangle_2$ Must be separated by a comma, or preposed.

Each of the three uses of *quá* can be related semantically to other degree morphemes in Vietnamese, partially explaining their word order and other syntactic properties.

1. **'Very'-like pre-adjectival *quá*** compares the extent of A to **a vague contextual standard**, allowing a *so với* comparison class, like 'very / quite' which are also pre-adjectival.

2. **Excessive pre-adjectival *quá*** compares the extent of A to **a threshold determined by a purpose** introduced by *để*, just like the sufficiency *đủ* which is also pre-adjectival.

3. **Post-adjectival *quá*** compares the extent of A to **a standard of comparison**, just like the comparative and equative morphemes, which are also post-adjectival.

---

5 Two other *quá*s

5.1 Mirative *quá*

Quá also appears in exclamative sentences such as (36):

(36) Cái bàn này **to quá**!
      CL   table this big QUÁ
      'Wow, this table is very big!' [...I love it!]

At first glance, this *quá* appears to simply be an instance of post-adjectival *quá*. But there are **three ways** to distinguish mirative *quá* from post-adjectival *quá*:

1. Mirative *quá* has **no malefactive inference**, unlike post-adjectival *quá* above. See (36).

2. Mirative *quá* has a **recency requirement**.

   (37)   Situation 1: I've been looking for a very big table. When I come home, I see a table which I think is extremely big. I say:

   Cái bàn   này **to**   **quá**!
   CL   table this big QUÁ

     a.   ✓ 'This table is so big!'   ✓ recent
     b.   # 'This table is bigger[QUÁ].'   ✕ malefactive

   (38)   Situation 2: I've been looking for a very big table. A day ago, I saw a table which I thought was extremely big. Now, I am telling you about that table.

   # Cái bàn   đấy **to**   **quá**!
   CL   table this big QUÁ

     a.   # 'This table is so big!'   ✕ recent
     b.   # 'This table is bigger[QUÁ].'   ✕ malefactive

   ▶ Rett and Murray 2013 document a similar recency requirement in mirative evidentials in a number of languages, and describe it as a general property of miratives:

   "These mirative interpretations are only available relatively recently after the speaker's learning that p."

3. Mirative *quá* is **incompatible with comparative standards**, unlike post-adjectival *quá*.

   (39)   * Cái bàn   này **to**   **quá** 2m^2!
   CL   table this big QUÁ 2m^2

   'Wow, this table is bigger than 2m^2!'   (ok as post-adjectival *quá*)

4. Mirative *quá* is **unavailable with attributive adjectives**.

   (40)   Minh tặng [$_{DP}$ cái nhẫn **to**   (***quá**)] cho Kim (***quá**)!
   Minh give   CL ring big QUÁ to Kim QUÁ
   Intended: 'Wow, Minh gave such a big ring to Kim!'

Only predicative adjectives can host mirative *quá*. More generally, mirative quá **cannot be embedded**.

   (41)   * Minh nói [$_{CP}$ rằng cái hộp này **to**   **quá**!
   Minh say   that CL box this big QUÁ
   Intended: 'Wow, Minh said this box is so big!'

Quá can be a mirative, modifying unembedded predicate adjectives, in post-adjectival / sentence-final position.

5.2 Sentence-final *quá* associating with 'many' and 'few'

(42) A: How many books did he buy for Kim?

    B: 20.

    A: i. She doesn't need that many.

           Nó mua [DP **nhiều** sách] cho Kim **quá**.
           he buy   many book for Kim QUÁ
           'He bought <u>too many</u> books for Kim.'

      ii. Thật à! Nó mua [DP **nhiều** sách] cho Kim **quá**.
           really he buy   many book for Kim QUÁ
           'Wow! He bought <u>very many</u> books for Kim.' [...She must be happy.]

Sentence-final *quá* in (42) seems to modify *nhiều* 'many' and express an excessive or 'very' reading, similar to pre-adjectival *quá* above. Here are **two properties** of sentence-final *quá*:

1. As the name suggests, **this *quá* must be sentence-final**.

   Notice in (42) that the benefactive *cho Kim* intervenes between the 'many'-headed DP and *quá*. *Quá* cannot be placed closer to *nhiều* 'many':

   (43)   * Nó mua [DP **nhiều** {**quá**} sách {**quá**}] cho Kim.
             he buy   many QUÁ book QUÁ for Kim
             Intended: 'He bought {too many / very many} books for Kim.'

   Vietnamese is known for having a rich inventory of sentence-final particles. See e.g. Thompson 1987; Nguyen 1997; Le 2015.

2. This sentence-final position is **incompatible with any other nominal modifier**, such as attributive adjectives.

   (44)   * Minh đưa [DP cái túi **to**] cho Kim **quá**.
             Minh give   CL bag big to Kim QUÁ
             Intended: 'Minh gave Kim a bag which is {too big / very big}.'

Among determiners, to our knowledge, this sentence-final *quá* is only compatible with *nhiều* 'many' and *ít* 'few.'

> *Quá* can be in sentence-final position, modifying a non-adjacent 'many' or 'few'-headed DP with excessive or 'very' interpretation.

6 Conclusion

Today: a preliminary investigation into the multiple functions of *quá* in Vietnamese.

- Excessive constructions such as the English *too...to* express (a) a ranking with respect to a **purpose-derived threshold** (Meier, 2003; Schwarzschild, 2008; a.o.) and (b) a **malefactive inference** (Nouwen, 2018).

- ▶ **These two types of meanings are encoded in two different "excessive" constructions in Vietnamese, both involving the morpheme *quá*.**

All in all, we have identified **five distinct uses of *quá***:

1. Pre-adjectival *quá*: a purpose-oriented excessive
2. Post-adjectival *quá*: a comparative with not-at-issue malefactive inference (14)
3. Pre-adjectival *quá*: 'very'
4. Mirative *quá*
5. Sentence-final *quá* with 'many/few'

It has been noted previously that Vietnamese has a number of extremely multifunctional functional morphemes; see e.g. Duffield 2017. A future goal will be to better understand **what constrains these different uses of *quá*** and **how they are related**:

- ▶ The relation of different *quá* to other degree morphemes with overlapping syntactic and semantic characteristics (in interim summary, page 9) offers a first step towards a better understanding.

References

Duffield, Nigel. 2017. On what projects in Vietnamese. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 26:351–387.

Le, Giang Ha. 2015. Vietnamese sentence-final particles. Master's thesis, University of Southern California.

Meier, Cécile. 2003. The meaning of *too*, *enough*, and *so...that*. *Natural Language Semantics* 11:68–107.

Nguyen, Dinh Hoa. 1997. *Tieng Viet Khong Son Phan*. London Oriental and African Language Library.

Nouwen, Rick. 2018. Notes on moderate excess. In *A coat of many colours*, volume 6.

Rett, Jessica, and Sarah Murray. 2013. A semantic account of mirative evidentials. *Proceedings of SALT 23* 453–472.

Schwarzschild, Roger. 2008. The semantics of comparatives and other degree constructions. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 2:308–331.

Thompson, Laurence C. 1987. *A Vietnamese reference grammar*. University of Hawaii Press.