Ingredients of excess: A study of Vietnamese quá

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1 Introduction

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

(1) Quá bông 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘very’</th>
<th>‘quite’</th>
<th>‘extremely’</th>
<th>‘more’</th>
<th>‘as’</th>
<th>‘enough’</th>
<th>‘too’ (?)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*A rất</td>
<td>*A hơi</td>
<td>*A cực kì</td>
<td>A hơn</td>
<td>A bằng</td>
<td>*A đủ</td>
<td>A quá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rất A</td>
<td>hơi A</td>
<td>cực kì A</td>
<td>*hơn A</td>
<td>*bằng A</td>
<td>đủ A</td>
<td>quá A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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. Purpose-oriented excessive:
        (see e.g. Meier 2003; Schwarzschild 2008)
        Sarah’s height \[ = \max(\lambda d . \text{Sarah is } d\text{-tall}) \] \(>\) \( \max(\lambda d' . \text{if Sarah is } d'\text{-tall}, \text{CAN } P) \)
        Meier 2003: 70: “the standard of comparison is... an upper bound of admissibility, and the value of the object lies above this value.”
    b. Malefactive inference:
        Sarah’s height negatively affects the speaker or Sarah.
        Nouwen 2018: “at some indeterminate level of analysis, excessive 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... §4)
- “A quá”: comparative with not-at-issue malefactive inference
  (or something else... §5)

1 For helpful comments and discussion, we thank Elizabeth Bogal-Allbritten, Brian Buccola, Chris Davis, Hadas Kotek, Elin McCready, and the audience at the Degrees in Grammar Workshop at Nanjing University (March 2019), especially Chris Kennedy and Tom Grano.
2 Post-adjectival quá

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

(3) 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.

First, some properties of post-adjectival quá:

• Post-adjectival quá does not take a dé purpose clause\(^2\), unlike pre-adjectival qua (§3):

(4) Hội đây này dài quá (*[P dé buộc theo cách này]).
CL. string this long quá dé tie way this
≈ ‘This string is too long (*[P to tie this way]).’

• Post-adjectival quá can take a measure phrase standard, just like comparative họn:

(5) Hội đây này dài {quá / họn} 2m.
CL. string this long quá / họn 2m
‘This string is longer than 2m.’ (quá ~ and that negatively affects me)

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

(6) Hội đây này dài {*quá / *họn} Hội đây kia.
CL. string this long quá / họn CL. string that
‘This string is longer than that string.’

When there is no measure phrase given, we naturally imagine a measure phrase such as ‘the allowed degree’ or ‘the degree I imagined’:

(7) Cái bàn này to quá [mức cho phép / mức tương đương].
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

\(^2\)A purpose can be added but 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 requires that the speaker is negatively affected if the extent of A exceeds the standard:

Situation 1: We need a string less than 2m long.
Situation 2: We need a string at least 2m long.

(8) We find a string in the drawer and you measure it. It is 2.5m long.

a. Sợi dây này dài quá 2m.  
   cl. string this long quá 2m
   ‘This is longer[qua] than 2m.’  
   ‘S1 — # S2

b. Sợi dây này dài hơn 2m.  
   cl. string this long hơn 2m
   ‘This is longer[hon] than 2m.’  
   ‘S1 — ‘ S2

Post-adjectival quá is possible in S1 but not S2 because the string’s length, greater than 2m, is a problem for the speaker. In contrast, hon does not have such a requirement.

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

(9) We find a string in the drawer and you measure it. It is 1.5m long.

a. Sợi dây này không dài quá 2m.  
   cl. string this not long quá 2m
   ‘This s. is not longer[qua] than 2m.’  
   ‘S1 — # S2

b. Sợi dây này không dài hơn 2m.  
   cl. string this not long hơn 2m
   ‘This s. is not longer[hon] than 2m.’  
   ‘S1 — ‘ S2

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

3 Pre-adjectival quá

“qua A (để PURPOSE)” is an excessive meaning: ‘too A to PURPOSE’

(10) 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

(11) Nó quá nhỏ để có thể hiểu chuyện gì đang xảy ra.  
    He quá small để able understand what happen  
    ‘He is too small to be able to understand what is happening.’
    ⇒ he is unable to understand what is happening
4 Subjective ‘very’ quá

- But pre-adjectival quá also has another, non-excessive function!

We propose this non-excessive pre-adjectival quá is a ‘very,’ available in situations where a subjective (qualitative) judgment is made.³

(12) Câu trả lời quá / rất đúng.
   cl. answer quá very correct
   ‘The answer is very correct.’

   Situation 1: We are reading opinion articles.
   quá — rất
   Situation 2: We are reviewing students’ exam answers, which have been graded and have grades on them.
   # quá — rất

Two properties further distinguish subjective ‘very’ from the excessive pre-adjectival quá:

- The ‘very’ reading of pre-adjectival quá is evaluative, but the excessive reading is not.⁴

(13) Cái túi này quá to, dễ dùng máy tính, (mặc dù nó không to làm).
   cl. bag this quá big để carry laptop even-though it not big very
   ‘This bag is very big for carrying a laptop, (even though it’s not very big).’

(14) Cái túi này quá to, dễ dùng máy tính, mặc dù nó không to làm.
   cl. bag this quá big để carry laptop even-though it not big very
   ‘This bag is too big for carrying a laptop, even though it’s not very big.’

- The ‘very’ reading can take a comparison class, but the excessive cannot.

(15) So với Kim, nó quá cao.
    compare with Kim he quá tall
    a. ‘Compared to Kim, he is very tall.’
    b. *‘Compared to Kim, he is too tall [for purpose P].’

These facts suggest that ‘very’ pre-adjectival quá is a type of positive form construction, rather than a kind of comparative.

We propose that subjective ‘very’ quá is akin to English “integrated man” as in Man this coffee’s good (McCready, 2009), which functions as a kind of intensifier.

³This is in contrast to our description of this use in our abstract, as a ‘more than enough [to purpose]’ reading, which still refers to a clear threshold determined by a purpose.
⁴The pre-adjectival ‘very’ rất is incompatible with negation, so here we use the sentence-final ‘very’ làm which scopes under negation.
5 Mirative qua

Qua also appears in exclamative sentences such as (16):

(16) Cái bàn này to qua!
cl. table this big qua
‘Wow, this table is very big!’ [...] I love it!

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

1. Mirative qua has no malefactive inference, unlike post-adjectival qua above. See (16).

2. Mirative qua is incompatible with comparative standards, unlike post-adjectival qua.

(17) *Cái bàn này to qua 2m²!
c. table this big qua 2m²
‘Wow, this table is bigger than 2m²!’ (ok as post-adjectival qua)

3. Mirative qua has a recency restriction.

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. ✓ (16)

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. # (16)

- Rett and Murray 2013 document a similar recency requirement in mirative evidentials in a number of languages, and describe it as a general property: “These mirative interpretations are only available relatively recently after the speaker’s learning that p.”

Post-adjectival qua can be a mirative evidential with recency restriction (Rett and Murray, 2013).

6 Interim summary

We have seen four different uses of qua:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>pre-adjectival</th>
<th>post-adjectival</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>§3 purpose-oriented excessive</td>
<td>§2 comparative with malefactive inference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§4 subjective ‘very,’ ≈ integrated man</td>
<td>§5 mirative evidential</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7 Embedding and denial

- Subjective and mirative quá cannot be embedded or directly denied!

(18) Minh nghĩ [cái bàn này [quá to / to quá]].
Minh think  cl. table this quá big  big quá
‘Minh thinks this table is...’
quá to:  # ‘very big’ (subjective)  ‘too big’
to quá:  # ‘big!’ (mirative)  ‘bigger’ ~ maleactive

(19) Cái bàn này [quá to / to quá] không?
cl. table this quá big  big quá  y/n-q
‘Is this table...’
quá to:  # ‘very big?’ (subjective)  ‘too big?’
to quá:  # ‘big!?’ (mirative)  ‘bigger?’ ~ maleactive

(20) A: Cái bàn này [quá to / to quá]  B: Không.
cl. table this quá big  big quá  no
‘This table is...’  ‘No.’
quá to:  # ‘very big’ (subjective)  ‘too big’
to quá:  # ‘big!’ (mirative)  ‘bigger’ ~ maleactive

- Unembeddability and undeniability are both properties of mirative evidentials (Rett and Murray, 2013) and English “integrated man” (McCready, 2009).

- We propose that subjective ‘very’ quá is akin to English “integrated man” (§4) and mirative quá is a mirative evidential.

- As McCready 2009 and Rett and Murray 2013 argue for man and mirative evidentials, these constructions do not assert their content, but rather are are purely expressive (McCready) or illocutionary (Rett & Murray). Being purely expressive/illocutionary makes them unembeddable and not directly deniable.

References

Post-adjectival quà

(3) Cannot take a dé purpose clause:
Sdí dầy ngày dải quà [‘n dél buộc theo cách này’] CL string this long QUÁ Dé tie way this
= ’This string is too long ([Dé, to tie this way]’).

(4) Can take a measure phrase standard, like comparative hàm:
Sdí dầy ngày hàm [quá / hàm] 2m.
CL string this long QUÁ HÀM 2m
= ’This string is longer than 2m.’ (QUÁ ~ malefactive)
≠ ’This string is 2m too long.’

→ A comparative with a not-at-issue malefactive inference:
S1: We need a string LESS than 2m long.
S2: We need a string AT LEAST 2m long.

(5) Quà requires the speaker to be negatively affected:
Sdí dầy ngày dải quà 2m.  √ S1 - # S2 CL string this long QUÁ Dé tie 2m
= ’This string is longer than 2m.’ ≠ but that’s a problem
(6) Sdí dầy ngày hàm hơn 2m. √ S1 - √ S2 CL string this long HÀM 2m
= ’This string is longer than 2m.’ (simple comparative)

Subjective ‘very’ quà

→ But pre-adjectival quà can also mean ’very,’ in situations where a subjective (qualitative) judgment is made:

(9) Câu trả lời [quá / rätt] đúng.
CL answer QUÁ very correct
‘The answer is very correct.’
S1: We are reading opinion articles.
√ QUÁ - √ rätt
S2: We are reviewing students’ exam answers, which have been graded and have grades on them.
# QUÁ - # rätt

(10) Subjective quà can take a comparison class, but excessive pre-adjectival quà cannot:
So với Kim, Minh quà cao.
compare with Kim, Minh QUÁ tall
≠ ’Compared with Kim, Minh is very tall.’
≠ ’Compared with Kim, Minh is too tall [for some purpose].’

Pre-adjectival quà

(8) Purpose-oriented excessive:
Quá bỏng này quà to [‘n dép vửa cái hôp’].
CL ball: this QUÁ big, Dé fit, CL box
‘This ball is too big (Dé, to fit the box).’
max(λd · this ball is d-big) > max(λd · if the ball is d&big, can P)

Subjective ‘very’ quà

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(9) Câu trả lời [quá / rätt] đúng.
CL answer QUÁ very correct
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S1: We are reading opinion articles.
√ QUÁ - √ rätt
S2: We are reviewing students’ exam answers, which have been graded and have grades on them.
# QUÁ - # rätt

(10) Subjective quà can take a comparison class, but excessive pre-adjectival quà cannot:
So với Kim, Minh quà cao.
compare with Kim, Minh QUÁ tall
≠ ’Compared with Kim, Minh is very tall.’
≠ ’Compared with Kim, Minh is too tall [for some purpose].’

Unembeddability and undeniability are both properties of mirative evidentials (Rett & Murray 2013) and English “integrated man” (McCready 2009), which we propose that subjective quà is similar to.

→ These quà are purely expressive — not asserted — claims of high degree, with mirative quà adding mirativity. Being purely expressive/ illocutionary makes them unembeddable and not directly deniable.