

Ingredients of excess: A study of Vietnamese *quá*¹

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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) 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 <i>rất</i>	*A <i>hơi</i>	*A <i>cực kì</i>	A <i>hơn</i>	A <i>bằng</i>	*A <i>đủ</i>	A <i>quá</i>
<i>rất</i> A	<i>hơi</i> A	<i>cực kì</i> A	* <i>hơn</i> A	* <i>bằng</i> A	<i>đủ</i> A	<i>quá</i> 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. Purpose-oriented excessive: (see e.g. Meier 2003; Schwarzschild 2008)
Sarah’s height [= $\max(\lambda d . \text{Sarah is } d\text{-tall})$] > $\max(\lambda d' . \text{if Sarah is } d'\text{-tall, CAN } P)$
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, **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... §4)
- “A *quá*”: comparative with not-at-issue malefactive inference (or something else... §5)

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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 *để* purpose clause²**, unlike pre-adjectival *qua* (§3):

(4) Sợi dây này dài quá (*[*P* để buộc theo cách này]).
CL string this long QUÁ để 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 *hơn*:

(5) 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)

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

(6) 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.’

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 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

²A 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.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>a. Sợi dây này dài quá 2m.
 CL string this long QUÁ 2m
 ‘This is longer[QUÁ] than 2m.’
 ✓ S1 — # S2</p> | <p>b. Sợi dây này dài hơn 2m.
 CL string this long HƠN 2m
 ‘This is longer[HƠN] than 2m.’
 ✓ S1 — ✓ S2</p> |
|---|---|

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, *hơn* 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.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>a. Sợi dây này không dài quá 2m.
 CL string this not long QUÁ 2m
 ‘This s. is not longer[QUÁ] than 2m.’
 ✓ S1 — # S2</p> | <p>b. Sợi dây này không dài hơn 2m.
 CL string this not long HƠN 2m
 ‘This s. is not longer[HƠN] than 2m.’
 ✓ S1 — ✓ S2</p> |
|--|--|

Post-adjectival *quá* is a **comparative**, like *hơn*, 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*

“*quá* 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 PROG 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**, 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 very big for carrying a laptop, (#even though it’s not very big).’

- (14) 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 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’ *lắm* which scopes under negation.

5 Mirative *quá*

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

- (16) 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 (16).
2. Mirative *quá* is **incompatible with comparative standards**, unlike post-adjectival *quá*.

- (17) *Cái bàn này to quá 2m²!
CL table this big QUÁ 2m²
'Wow, this table is bigger than 2m²!' (ok as post-adjectival *quá*)

3. Mirative *quá* 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 *quá* can be a **mirative evidential** with recency restriction (Rett and Murray, 2013).

6 Interim summary

We have seen four different uses of *quá*:

pre-adjectival	post-adjectival
§3 purpose-oriented excessive	§2 comparative with malefactive inference
§4 subjective 'very,' ≈ integrated <i>man</i>	§5 mirative evidential

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' ~ malefactive
- (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?' ~ malefactive
- (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' ~ malefactive

- **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 **purely expressive** (McCready) or **illocutionary** (Rett & Murray). Being purely expressive/illocutionary makes them unembeddable and not directly deniable.

References

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Introducing *quá* and the semantics of excess

(1) Two word orders for Vietnamese excessive *quá*:

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:

‘very’	‘quite’	‘more’	‘as’	‘enough’	‘too’
*A rất	*A hơi	A hơn	A bằng	*A đủ	A quá
rất A	hơi A	*hơn A	*bằng A	đủ A	quá A

(2) Two components of excessive meaning:

Sarah is too tall [_{purpose P} to ride the bus for free].

a. Purpose-oriented excessive truth conditions:

$\max(\lambda d . \text{Sarah is } d\text{-tall}) > \max(\lambda d' . \text{if Sarah is } d'\text{-tall, can } P)$

Meier 2003: 70: “the standard of comparison is... **an upper bound of admissibility**, and the value of the object lies above this value.”

b. Malefactive inference:

Sarah’s height negatively affects the speaker or Sarah.

Nouwen 2018: “at some indeterminate level of analysis, **excess is bad** and sufficiency is good...”

These two uses of *quá* reflect different grammatical strategies for the expression of excess:

Post-adjectival *quá* is a comparative with not-at-issue malefactive inference (2b); pre-adjectival *quá* has excessive truth conditions (2a)

Post-adjectival *quá*

(3) Cannot take a *để* purpose clause:

Sợi dây này **dài quá** (*_P để buộc theo cách này]).
CL string this long QUÁ ĐỂ tie way this
≈ ‘This string is too long (*_P to tie this way)].’

(4) Can take a measure phrase standard, like comparative *hơn*:

Sợi dây này **dài {quá / hơn} 2m**.
CL string this long QUÁ HƠN 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) *Quá* requires the speaker to be negatively affected:

Sợi dây này **dài quá** 2m. √ S1 - # S2
CL string this long QUÁ 2m
≈ ‘This string is longer than 2m.’ ~ and that’s a problem

(6) Sợi dây này **dài hơn** 2m. √ S1 - √ S2

CL string this long HƠN 2m
‘This string is longer than 2m.’ (simple comparative)

(7) The malefactive inference projects through negation:

Sợi dây này **không dài quá** 2m. √ S1 - # S2
CL string this not long QUÁ 2m
≈ ‘This string is not longer than 2m.’ ~ but that *would* be a problem

Pre-adjectival *quá*

(8) Purpose-oriented excessive:

Quả bóng này **quá to** (_P để vừa cái hộp]).
CL ball this QUÁ big ĐỂ fit CL box
‘This ball is too big (_P to fit the box)].’
 $\max(\lambda d . \text{this ball is } d\text{-big}) > \max(\lambda d' . \text{if the ball is } d'\text{-big, can } P)$

Subjective ‘very’ *quá*

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

(9) Câu trả lời {quá / rất} đúng.

CL answer QUÁ very correct
‘The answer is very correct.’

S1: We are reading opinion articles. √ quá - √ rất
S2: We are reviewing students’ exam answers, which have been graded and have grades on them. # quá - √ rất

(10) Subjective *quá* can take a comparison class, but excessive pre-adjectival *quá* cannot:

So với Kim, Minh **quá cao**.
compare with Kim Minh QUÁ tall
= ‘Compared with Kim, Minh is very tall.’
≠ ‘Compared with Kim, Minh is too tall [for some purpose].’

Mirative *quá*

At first glance, looks like post-adjectival *quá*, but...

(11) Has no malefactive inference:

Cái bàn này **to quá!** (Tở rất thích.)
CL table this big QUÁ I very like
‘Wow, this table is very big! (I like it.)’

(12) Incompatible with comparative standards:

Cái bàn này **to quá** (*2m²)!
CL table this big QUÁ 2m²
‘Wow, this table is {very big / *bigger than 2m²}!’

(13) Subject to a recency restriction:

Context: I’ve been looking for a very big table.

- a. When I come home, I see a table which is extremely big. √ (11)
b. A day ago, I saw a table which I thought was extremely big.
Now I am telling you about it. # (11)

Mirative evidentials in many languages have such a recency restriction (Rett & Murray 2013).

Mirative and subjective *quá* cannot be embedded or denied

(14) Minh nghĩ [cái bàn này {quá to / to quá}].

Minh think CL table this QUÁ big big QUÁ
‘Minh thinks this table is...’

- a. **quá to**: # ‘very big’ (subjective) √ ‘too big’
b. **to quá**: # ‘big!’ (mirative) √ ‘bigger’ ~ malefactive

(15) Cái bàn này {quá to / to quá} không?

CL table this QUÁ big big QUÁ Y/N-Q
‘Is this table...’

- a. **quá to**: # ‘very big?’ (subjective) √ ‘too big?’
b. **to quá**: # ‘big!?’ (mirative) √ ‘bigger?’ ~ malefactive

(16) A: Cái bàn này {quá to / to quá} B: Không.

CL table this QUÁ big big QUÁ no
‘This table is...’ ‘No.’

- a. **quá to**: # ‘very big’ (subjective) √ ‘too big’
b. **to quá**: # ‘big!’ (mirative) √ ‘bigger’ ~ malefactive

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

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