

# **GROUPS OF CONFUSING WORDS IN VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE AT ELEMENTARY LEVEL: DEFINITION - APPROACH - USAGE**

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## **Abstract**

In any language, there are groups of similar words, within which are hidden different layers of semantics. In other words, their distinction is so subtle that while native speakers may use them correctly, they can rarely explain the difference between them.

This paper outlines the meanings, approach to, and application of words with similar semantic forms (specifically *cả/tất cả*, *các/những*, and *còn/vẫn*) which can easily cause confusion for students when speaking or writing. The paper also delivers specific examples to help students access these words more easily and use them in a clear, meaningful, and natural way.

## **I. Introduction**

In the grammatical system of a language, vocabulary occupies the most important position: the richest resource, but also the most difficult part for language learners (when speaking and writing) to use correctly. Vocabulary is not a constant part of language; it is always fluctuating. And because vocabulary always has a direct connection with the reality of life and human perception, the use of words by each person is subjective, and there are different opinions in terms of meaning and usage. In order to give a word a specific meaning, it is necessary to put it in a certain context and position according to the grammatical arrangement of the sentence, while also determining what part of speech it is in that particular context. The traditional way

of teaching helps learners and users to perceive words in a simpler and more specific way. Based on identification and analysis of these groups of confusing words, we would like to offer some solutions for choosing the correct word from the following three pairs of confusing words: *cả/tất cả* to indicate the meaning “all, whole, including everyone, everything”; *các/những* to express the idea of plurality; and *còn/vẫn* to indicate an action or a state which is continuing.

These are groups of words with very close meanings. Theoretically, of course, these pairs cannot be considered exact synonyms, but native speakers are able to choose the best word for their intentions without having to consider the nuanced differences between them. Indeed, they may not even be able to explain that nuance.

In this paper, the meanings of these words are from (1) Hoàng Phê (Ed), Useful Vietnamese Language Dictionary, 2017, Vietnam Lexicography Center; (2) Nguyễn Văn Huệ (Ed), 2001, Dictionary of Basic Vietnamese Grammar, and (3) Long Điền Nguyễn Văn Minh, 1950, Purified Meaning Vietnamese Language Dictionary. Other meanings of the words “*cả/tất cả*”; “*các/những*” and “*còn/vẫn*” as given in other Vietnamese dictionaries are not mentioned in this article. The reason we do not include other meanings of these words here is because the scope of this article is for students at an elementary level to refer to and use (the end of the Vietnamese Textbook I & II, Tran Trong Giang (Ed)). The range of nuance of these words in their vocabulary comprises only their most basic meanings, or the main meanings of the words.

## **II. Confusing words - Definition - Approach - Usage**

**2.1. Group *các / những*:** Both express the idea of plurality.

2.1.1. *Các* - Definition - Approach - Usage

2.1.1.1. Definition and part of speech of *các*

a. According to Hoang Phe, 2017, Vietnamese Language Dictionary, *các* is a noun which is

used to indicate an identified plural noun, which refers to all the items we want to talk about. (Page 69).

Example: (1) *Các ngày trong tuần*  
- All the days in a week

(2) *Các nước trên thế giới.*  
- All the countries in the world

b. According to Nguyen Van Hue, 2001, Dictionary of Basic Vietnamese Grammar, *các* is an article which is used to indicate the whole defined group. (Page 24)

Example: (3) *Các bạn đang sống ở đâu?*  
- Where are you (plural) living now?  
(4) *Tất cả các ngôi nhà ở đây đều được xây từ trước năm 1930.*  
- All these houses here were built before 1930.

#### 2.1.1.2. Approach and usage of *các*

We would assert that *các* is a quantifier which is used before a noun or noun phrase to indicate plurality; or that all things being referred to are included<sup>1</sup>.

a. Used before pronoun *này/kia/đó*

Example: (5) *Các sinh viên này là người Nhật.*  
- These students are Japanese.

The pronouns *này* (this), *kia* (over there), and *đó* (that) identify the noun that goes before. In this situation, both the speaker and the listener know which students are referred to, and *các* refers to that specific group of students as a whole. In examples (1) and (2), the noun is identified by *trong tuần* - in a week (1) and *trên thế giới* - in the world (2), so we know which days or countries are talked about.

b. Used before identified noun

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<sup>1</sup> Vietnamese Textbook I - Kanda University of International Studies.

Example: (6) *Hiro đã đi đến các công ty ở khu công nghiệp này để tìm việc làm.*  
- Hiro has been to the companies in this industrial park to look for a job.

**Các** as used in (6) means that Hiro has been to all the companies in the industrial park, and he remembers which companies he has visited.

### 2.1.2 **Những** - Definition - Approach - Usage

#### 2.1.2.1. Definition and part of speech of **những**

a. According to Hoang Phe, 2017, Vietnamese Language Dictionary, **những** is part of a noun phrase which is used to express plurality of unidentified items. (Page 465)<sup>2</sup>

Example: (7) *những vì sao đêm*

- night stars

(8) *những ngày thơ ấu*

- childhood days

b. According to Nguyễn Văn Huệ, 2001, Dictionary of Basic Vietnamese Grammar, **những** is an indefinite quantifier, referring to a group, and used to distinguish this group from another group, or to compare it with another one. **Những** is also used to refer to an indefinite group. (Page 228)

Example: (9) *Tân thường kể cho con nghe những kỷ niệm thời trẻ của mình.*

- Tân often tells his son about his memories of youth.

In this situation, Tân has many memories of youth, and we do not know which ones exactly are referred to.

(10) *Anh đã đi du lịch những đâu, và những gì làm anh chú ý hơn cả?*

- Where did you travel, and what fascinated you more than anything else?

In this situation, the speaker knows that the listener has been to many places and been fascinated by many things, but does not know how many places or how many things, therefore **những** is

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<sup>2</sup> Vietnamese Textbook I- Kanda University of International Studies.

used.

#### 2.1.2.2. Approach and usage of **những**

We assert that **những** is a plural indefinite quantifier, and is used before a noun or noun phrase to indicate an indefinite but not all-inclusive quantity<sup>1</sup>.

a. **những** goes before a noun referring to a group which is different from another group, or is compared with another.

Example: (11) *Những năm tháng sinh viên là quãng thời gian đẹp nhất của chúng ta.*

- Our student years are the best time of our lives.

In this situation, the university years are just one of many time periods in our lives.

b. **những** goes before a noun referring to an indefinite group.

Example: (12) *Những ngành nghề nhân rồi nhưng lương cao rất khó tìm.*

- Easy jobs with high salaries are very hard to find.

In this situation, we do not know what an easy job with a high salary might be.

c. **những** can combine with the indefinite pronouns *gì* or *đâu*, *ai* to indicate an indefinite group

Example: (13) *Ở Việt Nam anh đã đi những đâu, gặp những ai, ăn những gì?*

- In Vietnam, where did you go, who did you meet, and what did you eat?

In this situation, the speaker knows the listener went to many places, met many people and ate many foods but does not know exactly how many.

#### 2.1.3. Comparison

**Các** is a definite article, and is always followed by a noun with or without a determinative phrase; and **những** is an indefinite article, always followed by a noun with a determinative phrase.

Example: (14) *Các sinh viên đều học tiếng Việt.*

- All students study Vietnamese.

(15) ~~*Những sinh viên đều học tiếng Việt.*~~

- All students study Vietnamese.

In (14), **các** refers to a definite group of students and both the listener and speaker know which students. In (15), **những** refers to an indefinite group of students. Therefore, a modifier must occur to narrow down the range of students, for example ở đây - here, or nước ngoài - foreign... As it stands, (15) is a wrong sentence, and it must be corrected to:

(15b) *Những sinh viên ở đây đều học tiếng Việt.*

- All students here study Vietnamese.

According to Long Điền Nguyễn Văn Minh, 1953, *Việt ngữ Tinh nghĩa Từ điển* (Purified Meaning Vietnamese Dictionary), **các** indicates plurality with a general meaning and includes the whole range. **Những** also indicates plurality but only for part of the range which **các** indicates.

Example: (16) *Tất cả các sinh viên ngồi ở đây, những sinh viên nào đã tham dự ngày hôm qua xin ngồi sang bên trái. Trong các sinh viên ngồi bên trái thì những sinh viên năm nhất ngồi ở trên.*

- All students sit here; students who participated yesterday please sit on the left side. Of the students who sit on the left side, first year students sit at the front.

In this situation, we can see **các** indicates all students here, and **những** indicates the group of students who are part of the “**các**” students.

It is difficult for Japanese learners to identify whether to use **các** or **những** because in Japanese these words might not occur. The above example can be translated as:

学生はここに座ってください。勉強し終わった学生は右側に座ってください。右側に座っている学生で一年生は前に。

When talking about designated people or places by their names, **những** should be used.

Example: (17) *Các vị anh hùng nước ta như ông Trần Hưng Đạo, ông Lý Thường Kiệt*

*là những người có công rất lớn đối với nhân dân.*

- Our country's heroes, such as Mr. Trần Hưng Đạo and Mr. Lý Thường Kiệt, are people who have made great contributions to the people.

(18) *Các ruộng lúa ở Việt Nam, những ruộng lúa ở miền Bắc thì tốt hơn những ruộng lúa ở miền Trung.*

- Of the rice fields in Vietnam, the rice fields in the North are better than the rice fields in the Centre.

## **2.2. Group *cả* / *tất cả***

### **2.2.1. *Cả* - Definition - Approach - Usage**

#### **2.2.1.1. Definition and part of speech of *cả***

a. According to Hoàng Phê, 2017, Vietnamese Language Dictionary, *cả* is a pronoun meaning all, whole, including everyone or everything without exception. (Page 67)

Example: (19) *Cả nhà đều đi vắng.*

-The whole family has gone out.

b. According to Nguyễn Văn Huệ, 2001, Dictionary of Basic Vietnamese Grammar, *cả* is an adjective which is placed before a classifier (such as *chiếc*, *quyển*, *nước*, *người*, etc.) to indicate the whole of the unit. (Page 17)

Example: (20) *Ngày mai cả trường đi Vũng Tàu.*

- Tomorrow, the whole school will go to Vũng Tàu.

#### **2.2.1.2. *Cả* - Approach - Usage**

We assert that *cả* is used to indicate the whole unit<sup>3</sup>. We can see *cả* occurring in these situations below:

a. Before a noun of time, such as day, night, week, month, year, decade, century, etc.

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<sup>3</sup> Vietnamese Textbook II- Kanda University of International Studies.

Example: (21) *Cô ấy ngủ cả ngày.*

- She sleeps all day.

(22) *Cả tháng tôi không gặp anh ấy rồi.*

- I have not seen him for a whole month.

b. Before a noun with a specific meaning, such as book, country, city, university, family, etc.

Example: (23) *Cả trường Kanda sẽ đi British Hill tuần sau.*

- The whole of Kanda University will go to British Hill next week.

(24) *Tôi đọc cả quyển sách này rồi.*

- I've read this whole book already.

c. Before an abstract noun, such as life, love, dream, etc.

Example: (25) *Cả cuộc đời ông ấy sống ở thành phố này.*

- He has lived in this city for his whole life.

(26) *Cả tình yêu này anh dành cho em.*

- All my love is for you.

d. Before a number to emphasize a high level or large amount, and often is used in speaking.

Example: (27) *Anh ấy ăn cả năm chén cơm.*

- He ate all five bowls of rice.

In this situation, the speaker implies that five bowls of rice is a lot, or too much.

## 2.2.2. **Tất cả** - Definition - Approach - Usage

### 2.2.2.1. Definition and part of speech of **tất cả**

a. According to Hoàng Phê, 2017, Vietnamese Language Dictionary, **tất cả** is a pronoun which is used to indicate all items with no exceptions. (Page 590)

Example: (28) *Tất cả đều tán thành.*

- They all agree.

(29) *Làm tất cả mọi việc.*



- Do everything.

b. According to Nguyễn Văn Huệ, 2001, Dictionary of Basic Vietnamese Grammar, **tất cả** is a pronoun, referring to all units of a group or class. Grammatically, **tất cả** can be used as the subject or the object of a sentence. (Page 272)

Example: (30) *Tôi mua tất cả.*

- I will buy it all.

(31) *Tất cả sẽ đi Tokyo.*

- We will all go to Tokyo.

#### 2.2.2.2. **Tất cả** - Approach - Usage

We assert that **tất cả** is a pronoun that can be a subject or an object in a sentence, or is used before a plural noun as a quantifier to indicate all members or parts of a group<sup>4</sup>.

a. Goes before *các, những*, or *mọi* when followed by a noun, and in such a combination, can be the subject or the object of a sentence.

Example: (32) *Tất cả mọi người đã đến.*

- Everybody has come.

(33) *Tôi thích tất cả các thành phố mà tôi đã đến.*

- I like all the cities that I have been to.

b. Goes before a personal pronoun (plural) to emphasize all the members of that group.

Example: (34) *Tất cả chúng ta phải học hành chăm chỉ.*

- All of us should study hard.

(35) *Tất cả các anh chị phải nộp bài tập đúng hạn.*

- All of you must submit your homework on time.

c. Is used as a subject or object when the meaning is a total.

Example: (36) *Tất cả 20 sinh viên.*

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<sup>4</sup> Vietnamese Textbook II- Kanda University of International Studies.

- There are 20 students in all.

(37) *Sách tiếng Việt I có tất cả 6 bài.*

-Vietnamese Book 1 has 6 lessons altogether.

We can see in (36) that no verb is required, but it can also be said with verb *có* - has or *là* - is.

(36a) *Tất cả là 20 sinh viên.*

Or

(36b) *Tất cả có 20 sinh viên.*

### 2.2.3. Comparison

According to Nguyễn Văn Huệ, 2001, Dictionary of Basic Vietnamese Grammar, *tất cả* refers to every unit of a group or class, whereas *cả* indicates the complete group considered as a unit, without regard to the elements which make up that unit. *Cả* cannot be used as a subject. (Page 272).

Example: (38a) - *Trong lớp này ai là sinh viên khoa tiếng Việt?*

- *Tất cả là sinh viên khoa tiếng Việt.*

- Who is a Vietnamese major in this class?

- Everyone is.

(38b) - *Trong lớp này ai là sinh viên khoa tiếng Việt?*

- ~~*Cả là sinh viên khoa tiếng Việt.*~~

- Who is a Vietnamese major in this class?

- Everyone is.

The answer of (38b) is wrong because *cả* cannot be used by itself, but it can be corrected to:

*Cả lớp này là sinh viên khoa tiếng Việt.*

Look at the situations below:

(39a) - *Bánh ngon lắm. Chị muốn mua mấy cái?*

- *Tôi mua tất cả.*

- This cake is delicious. How many do you want to buy?

- I will buy them all.

(39b) - *Bánh ngon lắm. Chị muốn mua mấy cái?*

-*Tôi mua cả.*

- This cake is delicious. How many do you want to buy?

- I will buy it all.

Both answers (39a) and (39b) mean that the speaker wants to buy all cakes the seller has. But in (39a) the unit that the speaker mentions is only the cakes, while in (39b) the unit the speaker includes perhaps the basket which contains all the cakes.

We can convert *cả* into *tất cả* as below:

Example (40) All my family like(s) traveling.

(40a) *Cả gia đình tôi thích đi du lịch.*

私の家族は旅行が好きです - All my family likes traveling.

As same as (40b) *Tất cả mọi người trong gia đình tôi thích đi du lịch.*

私の家族は全員旅行が好きです - All my family like traveling.

In (40a) *gia đình* – family is a complete unit, so *cả* is used here to indicate the whole group (several people - *những người*) but there is no word for this in Japanese. In English, this is indicated by 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular usage, “likes”. And in (40b) *mọi người trong gia đình* - all members of the family are a plurality, so *tất cả* is used here to indicate all the ones in a group, indicated in English by the 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural “like”.

2.3. **Group of *vẫn/còn*:** Both words are adverbs indicating an action or state which is continuously happening.

2.3.1. ***Còn*** - Definition - Approach - Usage

2.3.1.1. ***Còn*** - Definition and part of speech

***Còn*** has three different usages: as a verb, in a combination and as an adverb. In this paper, we

focus on distinguishing between **còn** as an adverb, and **vẫn/vẫn còn**.

a. According to Hoàng Phê, 2017, Vietnamese Language Dictionary, **còn** is an adverb that indicates an event, an action or a state which is continuously happening until some moment of time, or to express the affirmation of an event, an action or a quality which is totally different or opposite to before. (Page 120)

Example: (41) *Anh ta còn rất trẻ.*

- He is still very young.

(42) *Hôm qua còn nắng hơn hôm nay.*

- Yesterday was even sunnier than today.

b. According to Nguyễn Văn Huệ, 2001, Dictionary of Basic Vietnamese Grammar, **còn** is an adverb, placed before a verb or adjective to express the continuation of an action, a status or a quality that is not finished yet, or does not come up to standard, or does not meet a requirement. (Page 68)

Example: (43) *Anh ấy còn ngủ.*

- He is still sleeping.

(44) *Quán cà phê này còn vắng khách.*

- There are still few customers at this cafe.

### 2.3.1.2. **Còn** - Approach - Usage

We assert that **còn** is placed before a verb and used to express continuation of an action/status/quality of something or someone, but that it will stop/finish/end<sup>5</sup>.

Example: (45) *Tôi còn học đến 5 giờ.* – I will still be studying at 5 o'clock.

**Còn** can be used by itself as a response, as in:

(46) *- Anh còn làm việc hả?*

- *Còn.*

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<sup>5</sup> Vietnamese Textbook II- Kanda University of International Studies.

- Are you still at work?

- Yes. I am.

### 2.3.2. **Vẫn** - Definition - Approach - Usage

#### 2.3.2.1. **Vẫn** - Definition and part of speech

a. According to Hoang Phe, 2017, Vietnamese Language Dictionary, **vẫn** is an adverb indicating three different meanings: (a1) expressing the continuation of some action, status, or quality, continuously happening as before without changing at the time of speaking; (a2) expressing affirmation of what is happening, although the condition is unusual; (a3) expressing affirmation of a judgement that a state or action compares favourably with another, even though it may seem negative by itself. (Page 726)

Example: (47) *Trời vẫn tối.*

- It's still dark.

(a1: the darkness continues to exist at the time of speaking.)

(48) *Khó vẫn phải làm.*

- It's difficult but you still have to do it.

(a2: affirmation that even though it's difficult, it must be done.)

(49) *Có vẫn hơn không.*

- Better late than never.

(a3: affirmation that although being late is not good, it's better than not coming at all.)

b. According to Nguyễn Văn Huệ, 2001, Dictionary of Basic Vietnamese Grammar, **vẫn** is an adverb which is used to express continuation of an action, a state or a quality of something or someone which normally would change. (Page 304)

Example: (50) *Trông anh Tân vẫn thế!*

-You look the same (as before)!

In this situation, the speaker wants to say that Mr. Tân's appearance has not changed (although

it should have changed because he is older.) The *thế* in this sentence is a pronoun that refers to the state of Mr. Tân in the past.

#### 2.3.2.2. **vẫn** - Approach - Usage

We assert that **vẫn** is used to express continuation of an action/state/quality of something/someone which normally would change.

a. **Vẫn** is placed before a verb or adjective to indicate continuation of an unchanging quality.

Example: (51) *Thành phố này vẫn ồn ào, đông đúc như ngày nào.*

- This city is still as noisy and crowded as before.

In this situation, **vẫn** indicates the the state of the city's noise and crowds has not changed.

b. **Vẫn** is placed before a verb to indicate the continuing or prolonged state which is supposed to be replaced by another action.

Example: (52) *Muộn rồi mà anh ấy vẫn ngủ.*

- It's late but he is still sleeping.

In this situation, **vẫn** indicates the continuing or prolonged of the state *sleeping* which should be replaced by another action *wake up*.

c. **Vẫn** is placed before the comparative word *hơn* to indicate that something is certainly better than doing it another way.

Example: (53) *Đến sớm vẫn hơn bạn ạ!*

- You'd better arrive earlier!

In this situation, **vẫn** indicates that getting there earlier is better.

d. **Vẫn** is placed before a verb to indicate the continuation of a state or a quality of something or someone, which normally would change.

Example: (54) *Trông chị vẫn trẻ đẹp như xưa.*

- You still look as young and beautiful as before.

In this situation, **vẫn** indicates that the qualities of her youth and beauty continue the same as

before, despite her growing older.

### 2.3.3. Comparison

**Vẫn** and **còn** are adverbs, and they have the same function, indicating the continuation of an action, state, or quality, but they have different nuances, as in examples below:

(55). Nó còn ngủ. - He is still sleeping.

(56) Nó vẫn ngủ. - He is still sleeping.

(56) Nó vẫn còn ngủ. - He is still sleeping.

The implication of (55) is that sleeping is a state, and **còn** indicates that the state of sleeping is continuing, and it will be ended by another action, waking up. In (56), **vẫn** indicates the state of sleeping is continuing, and although it should normally change, it has not changed at the time of speaking. Example (57) implies that despite some kind of action (calling or yelling), the subject has not been affected and still has not changed; thus **vẫn còn** is used to indicate the stronger meaning. It is difficult for Japanese learners to identify the difference between them because (55), (56) and (57) are all said in Japanese as: 彼はまだ寝ています。

**Vẫn** is also indicates an action which would not happen under normal conditions and yet happens anyway, as in:

(58) (Trời mưa to) Anh ấy vẫn đi. – (It's raining heavily) He is still going.

(大雨です) 彼はまだ行っています。

## III. Conclusion

**Cả** is a pronoun of quantity, indicating a large unit; **tất cả** is also a pronoun but different from **cả**, in that **tất cả** includes many small units gathered in one large unit. **Cả** combined with a noun (**cả** + noun) can be the subject of a sentence; **tất cả** is a pronoun that can also take the role of a subject in a sentence.

**Các** is a quantifier which is used before a noun or noun phrase to indicate plurality; or that all

things being referred to are included; **những** is also a plural indefinite quantifier, used before a noun or noun phrase to indicate an indefinite but not all-inclusive quantity. **Các** is large defined unit which can include many **những** groups.

Both **còn** and **vẫn** are placed before a verb and used to express continuation of an action/status/quality of something or someone, but they have different meanings: while the continuation of an action/status/quality of **còn** will be replaced by another one, the existence of an action/status/quality indicated by **vẫn** will keep going or happen, in spite of something else. Determining the meaning and placement in sentences of words as we have shown above is a personal experience. We have applied it in the process of teaching foreign students Vietnamese as a foreign language at the elementary level (at the end of the Vietnamese Language Textbook I & II) and have achieved some positive results. We hope to contribute some useful ideas to help learners use vocabulary more accurately and effectively, and we also appreciate any feedback to further improve our teaching and our students' learning experience. Teaching Vietnamese as a second or foreign language is an open and unlimited topic. Experience helps us to achieve our goal of serving learners in the best way.



#### **IV. Reference**

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