



# The two b's in the Vietnamese dictionary of Alexandre de Rhodes

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## ► To cite this version:

André-Georges Haudricourt. The two b's in the Vietnamese dictionary of Alexandre de Rhodes. 2018.  
halshs-01631486v2

**HAL Id: halshs-01631486**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01631486v2>**

Preprint submitted on 16 May 2018

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*Non-final version (May 16th, 2018). In preparation for: Haudricourt, André-Georges. Evolution of languages and techniques. (Ed.) Martine Mazaudon, Alexis Michaud & Boyd Michailovsky. (Trends in Linguistics. Studies and Monographs [TiLSM] 270). Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.*

## **The two *b*'s in the Vietnamese dictionary of Alexandre de Rhodes (1974)**

Originally published in Vietnamese translation as: Hai Chữ B, trong cuốn từ điển của A-lêch-xan đơ Rốt. *Ngôn Ngữ* [Linguistics] 4 (1974). Haudricourt's original French typescript was prepared by Nguyen Phu Phong and published in 2005 as: Les deux b du *Dictionarium* d'A. de Rhodes, *Cahiers d'Etudes Vietnamiennes* 18, 65–68. It is the basis of the present translation.

*translated by Alexis Michaud*

### **Abstract**

[This article, intended for non-specialist Vietnamese readers, begins with a typographical curiosity in the romanized spelling of the famous *Dictionarium* of Alexandre de Rhodes (1651): the modified *ϕ*, indicating the bilabial spirant transcribed [β] by linguists. In the 17th century, this phoneme was distinct from both *b* [b] and *v* [v], but neither the modified *ϕ* nor its pronunciation survives in modern standard Vietnamese: words written with *ϕ* in the *Dictionarium* are currently written and pronounced with *v*.

The spelling of vernacular plant-names in post-*Dictionarium* botanical works is examined for clues to the date of the merger between β and v. Although examples of the erroneous use of *ϕ* for v in de Loureiro 1790 may be an indication of merger, the replacement of *ϕ* by *b* in later works by French botanists is a strictly typographical error with no basis in phonology, because the phoneme β merged only with v, never with b [b].]

The initial phoneme *v* [v] of Vietnamese has two distinct diachronic origins: on the one hand a bilabial stop, which is preserved in Mường and in the other minor languages of the Viet-Mường [Vietic] group, and on the other hand the labiovelar semivowel [w].

H. Maspero also mentions a third origin for Modern Vietnamese *v*, namely a labiodental consonant [v] borrowed from Thai. However, it appears that the latter is a relatively recent innovation in Thai, and that it originates, like the labiovelar consonant of Modern Chinese, in a bilabial. Be that as it may, Maspero (1912: 74) shows that in the 15th century the

*Hoa-di dịch-ngữ* [a collection of local pronunciations transcribed in Chinese characters<sup>1</sup>] distinguishes [words corresponding to present-day] *vàng, vi, vãn, vườn, voi*, transcribed by characters pronounced with initial **w**, from *vua, viết, vãi, vú*, transcribed by characters pronounced with initial **p**. Thanks to the publication of the Vietnamese section of the *Hoa-di dịch-ngữ* by É. Gaspardone (1953), we can now add *vá (áo), vách, vãn, vãn, vò, vô tay* and *vút* to the list of **p**-initial words. [See the Appendix for glosses and additional information.]

Maspero states that it is difficult to ascertain whether the two initials were still distinct in the 17th century: “De Rhodes states that *v* has two values, one vocalic and the other consonantal, but he does not describe the latter; he also mentions the existence of a sound which may have been intermediate between *b* and *v*, and which has now disappeared, turning into *b* in some words, and into *v* in others” [Maspero 1912: 74].

It seems to me that Maspero did not read de Rhodes’s text with sufficient attention. The text reads:

[Latin (Rhodes 1651b:2–3)]	[translation]
B est etiam duplex	There are two varieties of <i>b</i> .
unum commune ut ‘ba’ tria	One of them is as in <i>ba</i> ‘three’;
et istud quidem, non est	this one is not exactly like ours,
omnino simile nostro	
sed pronuntiatur non emittendo	it is pronounced, not by emitting
sed potius attrahendo spiritum	the breath, but rather by drawing it
in ipso oris... <sup>2</sup>	into the mouth.
alterum <i>ɸ</i> pronuntiatur	The other, <i>ɸ</i> , is pronounced
fere ut β graecum	like the Greek β,
ut <i>ɸếao</i> ‘ingredi’	as in <i>ɸếao</i> ‘to enter’; <sup>3</sup>
non est tamen omnino simile	it is not, however, exactly like

1. [Chinese: 華夷譯語; Pinyin romanization: *huá yí yì yǔ*; Sino-Vietnamese: *Hoa-di dịch-ngữ*. An annotated edition of the Annamese (Vietnamese) section was published by Vương Lộc (1995).]
2. [Haudricourt has omitted several words here, no doubt intentionally, both from the Latin and from the translation, but in the process eliminated *hiatu* ‘opening’, the object of *in*. The missing words (following *oris*): *seu labiorum hiatu ac si quis vellet proferre ‘m’ et postea proferat ‘b’* “through the same opening of the mouth or of the lips, as if one wished to produce *m* and afterwards produced *b*”.]
3. [Present-day Vietnamese spelling: *vào*.]

nostro 'V' consonanti	our consonant V:
sed paulo asperius,	it is slightly aspirated, <sup>4</sup>
et in ipsa labiorum apertione	and is pronounced opening the lips,
pronunciatur	
ita ut sit vere litera labialis	like a true labial,
ut Hebræi loquuntur,	as in speaking Hebrew,
non autem dentalis.	and not as a labiodental. <sup>5</sup>

The description of *b* is clearly of an injective pronunciation of preglottalized *b* [β̚]. While it is not quite as clear as that provided by Dubois (1909)<sup>6</sup>, there can be no doubt as to its interpretation.

The barred *b* [β̚] stands for a bilabial voiced spirant, which phoneticians transcribe with the Greek letter *beta* [β]. It is distinct from consonantal *V*, which must have been labiodental since there is no indication that this sound was pronounced differently than in European Romance languages. At the time, *V* and *U* were variants of the same sign, and were used to transcribe the vowel *u* as well as the labiodental consonant *v*. At the onset of a Vietnamese word,<sup>7</sup> where it is necessary to distinguish the vowel from the consonant, de Rhodes uses a diaeresis for the vowel: *ũống*, *ũêi*, *ũế*, *ũang* (he also uses the same device for the semivowel: *xũít qua*, *xũót*, *thũê*, *ũi*).<sup>8</sup>

However, at that time there was some hesitation between *β̚* and *v* in a few words: I have found the pairs *β̚ai/vai*, *β̚ấn/vấn*, *β̚ạt/bảnh/vạt vảnh*, *β̚iết/viết*, *β̚ồ/bồ/uồ uồ*, *β̚ờ/ờ*, *β̚ót/uót*, *β̚ũa/uũa*, *β̚uót/uuót* – i.e. ten words for which there is a fluctuation between the two spellings, versus sixty that consistently have a *v* and over eighty that consistently have a *β̚*.

Etymology reveals that in the case of *vai*, *vấn* and *viết* the *β̚* is older, and thus that the change went from bilabial to labiodental.

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4. [*paulo asperius* 'slightly more roughly', cf. *asper* 'rough'; the translation 'aspirated' is based on the usage *spiritus asper* for the consonant *h*.]
  5. [More literally, and precisely confirming the place of articulation: "pronounced in the same aperture of [between] the lips as a truly labial letter, as the Hebrews speak, and not as a dental."]
  6. [See Haudricourt 1950 "Preglottalized..." in this volume.]
  7. [More accurately: at the onset of a Vietnamese syllable.]
  8. [A facsimile edition of the *Dictionarium* was published in Vietnam in 1991, with a Modern Vietnamese translation. Most of the diaereses were erased from the facsimile, but the distinctions of the original are preserved in the reprinted text that accompanies the translation.]

In 1965, de Rhodes's text was finally read with great care by a student of Laurence Thompson, whose Ph. D. on the phonology of "Middle Vietnamese" was published in Saigon in 1969 with an English translation of de Rhodes's Latin text as an appendix (Gregerson 1969).

At this point, another issue must be taken into account. In 16th-century Spain, a merger of **b** and **v** was under way: it began in Castilian (Spain's official language), then spread to the other languages of the peninsula, viz. Catalan to the East and Portuguese to the West (Haudricourt and Juilland 1970: 69–81). At present, the only areas where **b** and **v** remain as distinct phonemes are the southern part of the Catalan-speaking area (the region of Valencia) and the southern part of the Portuguese-speaking area (the region of Algarve).

This is relevant because after de Rhodes, the main witness [of Vietnamese pronunciation] is a Portuguese from Lisbon, João de Loureiro (1710-1796), who stayed in the city of Huê from 1742 to 1777. De Loureiro's *Flora Cochinchinensis* is a book of great importance for Vietnamese botany and ethnobotany. It contains hundreds of carefully transcribed plant names; the "hooks" and "bars" [de Rhodes's special diacritics] are indicated by means of an interruption in the shape of the letter<sup>9</sup>, so that barred *b* is distinct from plain *b* and barred *d* from plain *d*. But there is an error in two frequently used words, *voi* ['elephant'] and *vòi* [(elephant's) trunk], which are written with the barred *b* [*boi*, *bòi*] in the plant names *cỏ vòi voi*, *đeei vòi voi*, and *nâm củt voi* (see *Appendix*). Both de Rhodes's dictionary on the one hand and etymology on the other indicate without ambiguity that their initial was actually **v**, originally a **\*w**.

It is thus likely that by the middle of the 18th century, the present-day merger was already completed, and that the use of *b* by J. de Loureiro in his transcriptions was no more than an orthographic tradition.<sup>10</sup>

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9. [In Loureiro 1790, de Rhodes's barred letters were rendered, not by adding hooks or bars, but by a small gap, either in the lower half of the vertical stem of *b*, or in the vertical part of the round belly of *d*. The gaps were produced by making a small horizontal cut in the moulded metal letter-forms. Gaps in the letters *u* and *o* indicated 'bearded' *u'* and *o'*. De Loureiro remarks that these modifications (and the tone-marks) were an annoyance to typographers, who tended to leave them out (Loureiro 1790:xv).]
  10. [Haudricourt does not mention de Loureiro's phonetic remark (which he may not have seen) in the introduction to the *Flora*: "The horizontally cut *b* indicates a sound intermediate between ordinary *b* and consonantal *v*." (Loureiro 1790:xv).]

Finally, we may note that when later botanists like Lanessan (1885) and Pételot (1952-1954) reproduced the words transcribed by J. de Loureiro, they replaced *ɸ* not by *ɱ*, but by an ordinary *b*.<sup>11</sup>

### Comments

Haudricourt's analysis of a modified *b* character in de Rhodes's epoch-making Vietnamese dictionary (1651) adduces facts from Romance philology and Ming-dynasty Chinese lexicography. Vernacular names in an 18th-century book on Vietnamese plants is a logical place to find out about the pronunciation of Vietnamese at that time; and a fine-grained understanding of its author's language background contributes to evaluating its testimony.

Some twenty years earlier, Haudricourt had written an article that traced the peculiarities of the Vietnamese spelling system back to the spelling habits (graphophonemics) of the Romance languages that were familiar to the 17th-century European authors of this system (Haudricourt 1949, translated 2010).

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11. [The mistake which Haudricourt points out, namely the replacement of *ɸ* by *b*, leads to an erroneous modern pronunciation, since these two phonemes (unlike *ɸ* and *ɱ*) have not merged in the modern language. In conversation, Haudricourt suggested that Lanessan had either not noticed or not understood de Loureiro's modified *b*, and had substituted plain *b*, perhaps without realizing it (Ferlus, p.c. 2015).]

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### Appendix: Lists of cited examples

Haudricourt's typed manuscript contained small handwritten tables of the examples cited from the 15th century Chinese phonetic wordlist with glosses, which were not needed in the Vietnamese version. These are presented in (1)–(3) below: modern Vietnamese spelling, gloss, 15th century Chinese phonetic rendering as cited by Maspero, modern Mandarin pronunciation of the character.

(1) [Vietnamese words with Chinese phonetic renderings, from the *Hoa-di dịch-ngữ*: Characters pronounced w- (Maspero 1912:74)]

<i>vàng</i>	'yellow'	[岡]	wǎng]
<i>vị</i>	'未, 8th cyclic character'	[威]	wēi]
<i>văn</i>	'writing'	[聞]	wén]
<i>vườn</i>	'garden'	[文]	wén]
<i>(ông) voi</i>	'elephant'	[(翁) 威]	wēi]

(2) [Vietnamese words with Chinese phonetic renderings from the *Hoa-di dịch-ngữ*: Characters pronounced p- (Maspero 1912:74)]

<i>vua</i>	'emperor'	[波]	bō]
<i>viết</i>	'to write'	[別]	bié]
<i>vải</i>	'fabric'	[帛]	bó]
<i>vú</i>	'breast'	[布]	bù]

(3) [More Vietnamese words phonetically rendered by characters pronounced with initial p- in the *Hoa-di dịch-ngữ* (*Gaspardone 1953*)]

<i>vá áo</i>	to mend (clothes)
<i>vách</i>	partition wall
<i>ván</i>	plank, board
<i>vắn</i>	short, brief
<i>vò</i>	jar
<i>vỗ tay</i>	to clap one's hands
<i>vút</i>	to wash (rice before cooking)

(4) [Words with initial or medial *ũ* in Rhodes 1651a, with current spelling, gloss, and page no.]

<i>ũống</i>	<i>uống</i>	to drink	873
<i>ũêi</i>	<i>vây</i>	to besiege, to encircle	864
<i>ũế ường</i>	<i>(uế -)</i>	unclean	864
<i>xũt qua</i>	<i>xít/xut qua</i>	to brush past sth.	
<i>xũt</i>	<i>xuất</i>	(to come) out	900
<i>thũê</i>	<i>thuê</i>	to hire, to employ so.	782
<i>ũi</i>	<i>ui</i>	to push away, to push back	867

(5) Words spelled with both barred *b* [*ḃ*] and *v* in Rhodes (1651a). Viet.=present-day Vietnamese orthography.]

Rhodes 1651	Viet.	meaning	details from Rhodes 1651
<i>ḃai / vai</i>	<i>vai</i>	‘shoulder’	
<i>ḃán / vắn</i>	<i>vắn</i>	‘short’	<i>vắn</i> ‘curto, brevis’, also <i>ḃán</i> ‘ditto’ (p. 859)
<i>ḃạt ḃanh / vạt vãnh</i>	<i>vạt vãnh</i>	‘slight, insignificant’	<i>ḃanh ḃạt / ḃãnh ḃạt / ḃạt ḃanh</i> ‘miudezas, minutia’ (p. 67)
<i>ḃiết / viết</i>	<i>viết</i>	‘to write’	
<i>ḃí / úi</i>	<i>vây cá</i>	‘(fish’s) fin’	<i>uí cá</i> ‘barbatana, pinna’, also <i>ḃí cá</i> ‘ditto’ (p. 866)
<i>ḃồ ḃồ / uồ uồ</i>	<i>vò vò</i>	‘wasp’	
<i>ḃờ / uờ</i>	<i>vật vờ</i>	‘to float (in the air), precarious, unstable’	<i>ḃạt ḃờ</i> ‘fazer cambetas, titubo’ (p. 70)
<i>ḃót / uót</i>	<i>vót</i>	‘to sharpen; to whittle’	
<i>ḃữa / uữa</i>	<i>vữa</i>	‘rotten (egg)’	<i>uữa, thũng uữa</i> ‘ouo podre, goro, ouú vrinum’ [also <i>thũng ḃữa, ũ</i> ‘ditto’ (p. 875)]
<i>ḃuốt / uuót</i>	<i>vuốt</i>	‘to stroke’	

[(6) Incorrect spellings of plant names in the *Flora Cochinchinensis* (Loureiro 1790): *h* instead of *v*. Current spellings from Nguyễn Tích and Trần Hợp 1971).]

Loureiro 1790 (page)	current	literal meaning	Botanical name
<i>cây hòi hoi</i> (103)	<i>cỏ vòi voi</i>	elephant-trunk	<i>Heliotropium</i>
<i>cây hòi hoi</i> (116)		herb	<i>indicum</i>
			<i>Nerium scandens</i>
<i>deei hòi hoi</i>	<i>dây vòi voi</i>	elephant-trunk	
		liana	
<i>nấm cứt hoi</i> (696)	<i>nấm cứt voi</i>	elephant-dung mushroom	<i>Clavaria pistillaris</i>