

Abstract: Tone-melody correspondence between the Vietnamese language and music

Quang Hung Duong¹

¹Monash University, Pharmacy, Parkville, Australia

'Say as if you sing' is a colloquialism often used to describe the Vietnamese language. The diversity of tonal characteristics of Vietnamese somewhat resemble musical melodies, particularly those from Vietnam. Although the correspondence between melodies and linguistic tone has previously been established at the note-pair level, this tone-tune relationship implicates potential pragmatic applications that currently remain unexplored. Adopting terminologies from music theory, I aimed to construct a simple model of the Vietnamese language using a case examination of one popular Vietnamese song. I then evaluated the validity of the model with other musical genres of Vietnam. Preliminary results showed great similarities between the language and tonal music. I identified the use of the tone Ngang [level] was synonymous with the tonic note, being the referential point for other tones. Lower-pitched tones Huyen [falling] and Nang [heavy] generally appeared below the tonic, whereas higher-pitched tone Sac [rising] and Nga [rising, glottalization] localized above the tonic (referring to the tone Ngang). The final tone Hoi [falling then rising], with its complicated tonal structure, was indeed found to have complex pitch registers and contours. Surprisingly, many songs and verses ended with the note of Ngang and Huyen, but significantly infrequent with the other tones. This may demonstrate that the relationship between these two tones is comparable to that between the tonic and dominant in music. This model can bridge the gap between Vietnamese music and language, and be a viable tool to learn Vietnamese for musicians, and for Vietnamese-speaker to learn music theory.