

Expressions of Small Quantity in Vietnamese and Their Functional Equivalents: A Comparative Study with Mandarin 一点儿 And 一些

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Abstract: Rather than expressing quantity through precise numerical constructions, Vietnamese speakers often rely on subjective linguistic estimations when referring to small or indeterminate amounts. These expressions, shaped by individual cognition and contextual nuance, reflect the speaker's perception more than objective measurement. Typically, Vietnamese uses the structure "numeral + classifier + noun" to denote specific quantities of objects or events. However, when the quantity is vague or minimal, a range of lexical items such as *một ít*, *một chút*, *một vài*, and *một số* are employed—each carrying distinct semantic and pragmatic functions. In contrast, Mandarin Chinese offers fewer equivalents for expressing small quantities, with terms like: 些, 少许, or 几个 serving similar roles. This limited inventory poses challenges for learners attempting to draw parallels between Vietnamese and Chinese expressions of quantity, especially in translation and bilingual interpretation. This paper delves into the semantic and pragmatic characteristics of Vietnamese expressions denoting small amounts, analyzing their degrees of quantification and comparing them with their Mandarin counterparts. By highlighting the linguistic richness and stylistic diversity of Vietnamese, the study underscores key considerations in cross-linguistic translation and sheds light on the cognitive-linguistic strategies underlying quantity expression in both languages.

Keywords: Small quantity expressions, semantics and pragmatics, cross-linguistic comparison, translation and interpretation, cognitive linguistics.

1. INTRODUCTION

The linguistic expression of small or indeterminate quantities offers a unique window into the cognitive and cultural dimensions of human communication. In Vietnamese, a language known for its isolating structure and expressive richness, the concept of "smallness" is conveyed through a wide array of lexical items that span both standard and regional usage. Terms such as *một vài*, *một số*, *một chút*, *một ít*, *một tí*, *tí tí*, *tí mọ*, *nhỏ xíu*, and *tí xíu* are not merely quantifiers; they are nuanced linguistic tools that encode subtle variations in meaning, emotion, and speaker intent.

Each of these expressions functions beyond the grammatical level, serving pragmatic roles that adjust tone, politeness, and contextual appropriateness. They may indicate a small quantity, a brief duration, a low degree of intensity, or even a culturally embedded pause in conversation. Therefore, analyzing these terms requires a multidimensional approach that incorporates grammatical structure, semantic cognition, and intercultural pragmatics.

This study focuses on five representative expressions—*một chút*, *một tí*, *một ít*, *một vài*, and *một số*—to explore their grammatical behavior, semantic scope, and pragmatic functions in Vietnamese discourse. In parallel, the research draws comparisons with Mandarin Chinese indefinite quantifiers such as 一些, 少许, and 几个, aiming to uncover both convergences and divergences in how the two languages conceptualize and articulate small quantities.

By situating the analysis within a cross-linguistic framework, the paper not only highlights the stylistic and structural richness of Vietnamese but also offers practical insights for language teaching, bilingual translation, and intercultural communication in increasingly multilingual contexts.

2. Overview of Lexical Expressions for Small Quantities in Vietnamese

Vietnamese, as a language rich in nuance and expressive flexibility, offers a remarkably varied set of lexical items to convey the concept of small or indeterminate quantities. These expressions are not limited to formal or standardized vocabulary but extend into regional dialects and colloquial usage, reflecting the cultural and cognitive diversity of Vietnamese speakers across different communities. Commonly used terms such as "*một vài*," "*một số*," "*một chút*," "*một ít*," and "*một tí*" coexist with more localized or informal variants like "*tí tí*," "*tí mọ*," "*nhỏ xíu*," and "*tí xíu*." Each of these expressions carries its own semantic

shade, pragmatic function, and syntactic behavior, contributing to the richness of Vietnamese quantity expression.

What makes this lexical field particularly intriguing is the multifunctionality of many of these terms. For example, "một chút" and "một tí" are frequently used not only to indicate a small quantity but also to express brief durations, low degrees of intensity, or polite mitigation in interpersonal communication. Phrases such as "chờ một chút," "nghỉ ngơi một tí," or "dài hơn một chút" illustrate how these expressions operate beyond mere quantification, serving as tools for emotional modulation and social tact.

The classification of these expressions has been the subject of considerable debate among Vietnamese linguists. Some scholars have proposed that terms like "vài," "mấy," "một ít," and "một chút" belong to the category of indefinite numerals within the noun class. Others argue that they function as quantifiers or modifiers with distinct syntactic roles. Notably, Cao Xuân Hạo suggested that expressions such as "một ít," "một chút," "một số," and "vài ba" should be viewed as light quantifiers that precede noun phrases and indicate vague or non-specific quantities. This perspective emphasizes their role in shaping the semantic scope of noun phrases without committing to precise numerical values.

From a grammatical standpoint, Vietnamese typically employs the structure "numeral followed by classifier and noun" to express specific quantities. Examples like "một cái bàn," "hai con mèo," or "ba chiếc xe" demonstrate the clarity and precision of this construction. However, when speakers wish to convey an imprecise or minimal amount, they often rely on subjective estimation rather than objective measurement. This shift from quantifiable to intuitive expression reflects a deeper cognitive strategy in Vietnamese communication, where language adapts to uncertainty and interpersonal nuance.

In comparison, Mandarin Chinese presents a more constrained set of expressions for small quantities. Terms such as "一些," "少许," and "几个" serve similar functions but are generally more limited in their pragmatic range and syntactic flexibility. This asymmetry between Vietnamese and Chinese opens up a compelling space for cross-linguistic analysis, especially in the context of bilingual education, translation studies, and intercultural dialogue.

The present study focuses on five core Vietnamese expressions: "một chút," "một tí," "một ít," "một vài," and "một số." These are examined in terms of their grammatical structure, semantic depth, and pragmatic versatility. By comparing them with their Mandarin counterparts, the research aims to uncover how each language conceptualizes and communicates the idea of smallness. Through this comparative lens, the study not only highlights the expressive richness of Vietnamese but also provides practical insights for language learners, educators, and translators navigating the Vietnamese-Chinese linguistic interface.

3. Grammatical and Pragmatic Features of Common Vietnamese Expressions for Small Quantities

3.1. The Case of một chút and một tí

Among the various expressions used in Vietnamese to denote small quantities, một chút and một tí stand out for their frequency, versatility, and subtle grammatical behavior. Although both terms share the core semantic function of indicating a small amount, they exhibit distinct syntactic patterns and pragmatic nuances that merit close examination.

In Vietnamese syntax, một chút typically precedes a noun and serves to quantify it in a vague or minimal way. According to Bùi Mạnh Hùng (2011), the construction một chút + noun conveys the meaning of "a small, insignificant portion." Examples such as có một chút thành tích ("has a little achievement") or ăn thêm một chút cơm nữa đi ("eat a bit more rice") illustrate this usage. The reduced form chút, derived from một chút, retains the same core meaning but functions with greater syntactic flexibility. It appears in expressions like bớt chút thời gian ("spare a little time") or không chút tin tưởng ("no trust at all"), where it modifies abstract or uncountable nouns.

While một chút and chút are semantically equivalent in many contexts, their grammatical behavior diverges in specific constructions. For instance, chút can combine with quantifying modifiers such as từng or đôi, whereas một chút cannot. It is acceptable to say Cô ấy đút cho con từng chút cháo ("She fed the child spoonfuls of porridge"), but the phrase từng một chút cháo is ungrammatical. This suggests that chút possesses a degree of morphological adaptability that một chút lacks.

Another point of contrast lies in their ability to function independently. When not followed by a noun, một chút can stand alone and still convey a complete idea. For example, in the sentence Con cho nước vào nồi đi, cho một chút thôi ("Put water in the pot, just a little"), một chút acts as a direct object without requiring a noun complement. In contrast, chút is more restricted in such contexts and may sound incomplete or awkward if used without a noun. Consider the sentence Cà phê rất thơm, tôi phải uống

một chút (“The coffee smells great, I must drink a little”), which is acceptable, whereas tôi phải uống chút would be considered ungrammatical or unnatural.

From a grammatical perspective, một chút exhibits several notable constraints and patterns:

First, it can combine directly with a noun but cannot be followed by a unit noun or classifier. Phrases like một chút lít dầu, một chút cân thịt, or một chút chén cơm are incorrect. Instead, one must say một chút dầu, một chút thịt, or một chút cơm, where the noun is uncountable or mass-like in nature.

Second, một chút readily pairs with nouns denoting materials or natural phenomena. These nouns typically refer to substances or entities that lack discrete boundaries in space and cannot be easily individuated. Examples include một chút muối, một chút nước, một chút gió, and một chút bụi. Although some of these substances, such as salt or water, can be quantified using measurement units like grams or liters, others like wind or dust resist precise quantification unless specialized instruments are used. Nevertheless, speakers can intuitively perceive and express the relative amount or intensity of these phenomena.

Third, một chút can modify both countable and uncountable nouns, especially those with two syllables. When used with countable nouns such as vật dụng, thông tin, or tài liệu, it denotes a small portion of the referent. For example, một chút thông tin implies a fragment of information rather than a complete unit. Similarly, một chút vật dụng refers to a subset of items that cannot be precisely enumerated. When modifying abstract or uncountable nouns like tên tuổi, sức mạnh, or tình cảm, một chút conveys a low degree or minimal intensity. In these cases, it does not refer to a physical portion but rather to a qualitative measure. For instance, một chút tên tuổi suggests limited fame, while một chút sức mạnh implies a modest level of strength.

In both types of constructions, the nouns modified by một chút tend to represent entities that lack clear spatial boundaries or fixed shapes. As a result, they resist conventional methods of counting or measuring. The expression một chút thus serves as a linguistic strategy for navigating vagueness and expressing subtle gradations of quantity, intensity, or emotional tone.

The Expression “một chút” in Relation to Human Nouns

In Vietnamese, the phrase “một chút” is rarely used to directly modify nouns that denote people. Expressions such as “một chút người”, “một chút giáo viên”, or “một chút sinh viên” are generally considered ungrammatical or unnatural, as they fail to convey a coherent sense of quantity or identity. However, in certain nuanced contexts, “một chút” may appear alongside human-related nouns—not to indicate a fractional count or a low degree of presence, but rather to describe subtle traits or behavioral tendencies associated with the person.

Take, for instance, the sentence: “Tính cách cô ấy vẫn còn một chút trẻ con” (“Her personality still retains a touch of childishness”). Here, “một chút trẻ con” does not imply the presence of a small number of children, but rather evokes a lingering trace of childlike qualities—such as innocence, playfulness, or emotional vulnerability—that remain in her demeanor despite her maturity. The phrase thus functions as a qualitative marker, signaling a minimal yet perceptible degree of a personality trait.

“Một chút” and Concrete, Countable Nouns

Concrete nouns that refer to distinct, countable objects—such as chairs, tables, or bicycles—are typically quantified using classifiers like cái, chiếc, con, cuốn, or tấm. These nouns represent entities that occupy physical space, can be individually identified, and are often counted in discrete units. As such, the phrase “một chút” does not naturally combine with them. Phrases like “một chút ghế”, “một chút bàn”, or “một chút xe đạp” are grammatically awkward and semantically unclear.

Nonetheless, there are exceptions where “một chút” can be used with concrete nouns—particularly in contexts involving consumption, such as eating or drinking. In these cases, “một chút” does not refer to the whole object, but to a small portion of it. For example, “ăn một chút cá” (“eat a bit of fish”) or “ăn một chút xoài” (“eat a bit of mango”) implies consuming a fragment or slice of the item, rather than the entire fish or fruit. This usage is acceptable because the action pertains to partitive consumption.

However, when the verb implies acquisition or transfer—such as mua (“buy”) or biếu (“gift”)—the use of “một chút” becomes problematic. These verbs typically require reference to whole, countable units. Thus, instead of saying “mua một chút cá” or “biếu một chút xoài”, speakers would more naturally say “mua vài con cá” (“buy a few fish”) or “tặng vài trái xoài” (“gift a few mangoes”), using appropriate classifiers to denote quantity.

“Một chút” and Collective Nouns

Collective nouns—those that refer to groups or sets of items, such as gà vịt (poultry), quần áo (clothing), or sách vở (books and notebooks)—also resist direct modification by “một chút” when the intended meaning is quantitative. Phrases like “một chút gà vịt” or “một chút sách vở” are generally unacceptable if interpreted as referring to a small number of individual items.

However, “một chút” can be used with collective nouns to express a general or symbolic presence of related items, especially in culturally embedded or pragmatic contexts. Consider the sentence: “Khách đến nhà phải có một chút gà vịt chứ” (“When guests come over, there should be some poultry”). Here, “một chút gà vịt” does not specify a count of chickens or ducks, but rather refers to the customary practice of preparing food for guests. Similarly, “một chút son phấn” in “Là phụ nữ, đi ra ngoài phải có một chút son phấn chứ” (“As a woman, one should wear a bit of makeup when going out”) conveys the idea of grooming and self-presentation, not a literal quantity of cosmetic products.

In these cases, “một chút” functions as a pragmatic marker, signaling cultural expectations or social norms rather than numerical precision.

Comparing “một chút” and “một tí”

From a semantic and pragmatic standpoint, “một chút” and “một tí” are largely interchangeable, both serving to express small quantities or minimal degrees. In many everyday contexts, substituting one for the other does not alter the meaning. For example:

“ăn một tí/một chút cơm” (“eat a little rice”)

“ra ngoài có một tí/một chút việc” (“going out for a bit of work”)

The key distinction lies in register and regional usage. “Một tí” is more prevalent in spoken language and is commonly used by speakers in Northern Vietnam. In contrast, “một chút” appears in both spoken and written forms and is favored by speakers in Central and Southern regions. Due to its broader applicability and stylistic neutrality, this study adopts “một chút” as the representative form for analysis, without delving further into dialectal variation.

3.2. The Quantifier “một ít” in Vietnamese: Grammatical and Pragmatic Features

The Vietnamese quantifier “một ít” (literally “a little” or “a few”) is commonly used to indicate a small quantity of something. It can combine directly with nouns to express that the amount of an object or event is limited. For example, phrases like “mua một ít cá” (“buy a little fish”) or “đổi một ít tiền” (“exchange a bit of money”) illustrate its basic function.

In Mandarin Chinese, the meaning of “một ít” sometimes aligns with 一点儿 (a small amount) and at other times with 一些 (some). The reduced form of “một ít” is simply “ít”, and while both forms convey smallness, their usage can diverge depending on syntactic position and pragmatic intent. For instance, “mua ít rau” and “mua một ít rau” are nearly synonymous, but in other contexts, the difference becomes more pronounced. Consider the contrast between “Anh buổi tối ăn ít cơm thôi” (“You should eat little rice at night”) and “Chị mang ít cá về ăn đi” (“Bring home a bit of fish to eat”). In the first example, “ít” functions as an adverb akin to 少 in Chinese, modifying the verb to suggest a light or minimal action. In the second, “ít” acts as a quantifier equivalent to một ít, indicating a small quantity of the noun.

Key Pragmatic and Grammatical Characteristics of “một ít”

Expressing Small but Countable Quantities

The phrase “một ít” denotes a quantity greater than one, yet still relatively small. It can be used with both countable and uncountable nouns. For example:

“một ít sách” (“a few books”) implies several books, perhaps three to seven.

“một ít đồ dùng” (“a few items”) refers to a modest number of tools or objects.

It also applies to abstract nouns such as “một ít thông tin” (“a bit of information”) or “một ít thời gian” (“a little time”). Although these are abstract, they can be conceptualized as measurable entities—information can be itemized, and time can be quantified in minutes, hours, or days.

Differentiation from “một chút”

While both “một ít” and “một chút” can modify abstract nouns, their nuances differ.

“một chút thông tin” suggests a very small fragment or degree of information.

“một chút đồ dùng” implies a partial portion of an item, not a countable number.

“một chút thời gian” treats time as an amorphous substance, emphasizing its minimal presence.

In contrast, “một ít” implies a small but countable or measurable quantity. For abstract concepts like strength, emotion, or thought, both expressions may be used, but “một chút” tends to emphasize subtlety or partiality, while “một ít” leans toward quantification.

Incompatibility with Partitive Meaning

“Một ít” does not convey a partitive sense when referring to individual entities. To express a small portion of a single item, “một chút” is preferred. For example:

“Nếu yêu cô ấy, bạn nên thể hiện một chút tình cảm” (“If you love her, you should show a bit of affection”) Here, “một chút tình cảm” refers to a small degree of emotional expression, not multiple instances of affection. Using “một ít tình cảm” would be semantically inappropriate.

Direct Combination with Nouns (No Classifiers)

“Một ít” can combine directly with nouns without requiring classifiers. Acceptable phrases include:

“một ít bàn” (“a few tables”)

“một ít cá” (“a bit of fish”)

However, it is incorrect to say:

“một ít cái bàn”, “một ít cuốn sách”, or “một ít con cá” These constructions violate the syntactic rule that “một ít” does not precede unit classifiers.

Use with Uncountable Nouns and Natural Phenomena

“Một ít” is compatible with uncountable nouns and those denoting natural substances or phenomena:

“một ít gạo” (“a bit of rice”)

“một ít nước” (“a little water”)

“một ít bụi”, “một ít gió”, “một ít mây” (“a bit of dust/wind/clouds”)

When translating into Chinese, the choice between 一点儿 and 一些 depends on perceived quantity and context.

“Con đi chợ nhớ mua một ít gạo nhé” → 一些大米 (suggesting a measurable amount)

“Canh này phải cho thêm một ít nước nữa” → 一点儿水 (indicating a small addition)

Contextual Choice Between “một ít” and “một chút”

Both expressions can modify material nouns and natural phenomena, but the speaker’s perception and context determine which is more appropriate.

In shopping contexts, where quantities are measured (e.g., kilograms or bottles), “một ít” is preferred:

“Bạn mua giúp tôi một ít muối/một ít đường”

In cooking or tasting contexts, where only a pinch is needed, “một chút” is more natural: “Con cho thêm một chút muối vào canh đi”

Compatibility with Abstract and Concrete Nouns

“Một ít” can modify both countable and uncountable nouns, including abstract ones:

“một ít việc” (“a few tasks”)

“một ít sức lực” (“a bit of strength”)

“một ít thời gian” (“a little time”)

Depending on context, it may be translated as 一些 or 一点儿 in Chinese:

“Tôi có một ít việc cần nhờ anh giúp đỡ” → 一些事情

“Cho tôi một ít thời gian để suy nghĩ” → 一点儿时间

Use with Human Nouns

Unlike “một chút”, “một ít” can occasionally modify human nouns:

“8 giờ họp mà bây giờ mới có một ít người đến” (“It’s 8 a.m. and only a few people have arrived”) → 一些人

However, it is generally not used with specific human categories:

“một ít học sinh”, “một ít cán bộ” are less common and may sound unnatural in Vietnamese, though they are acceptable in Chinese (一些学生, 一些干部).

Use with Collective Nouns

“Một ít” can combine with collective nouns to express a small quantity:

“một ít quần áo” (“a few clothes”)

“một ít sách vở” (“a few school supplies”)

“một ít gà vịt” (“a few poultry items”)

Examples:

“Cô ấy phải mang một ít sách vở về nhà” → 一些书本

“Ông ấy phải bán một ít gà vịt để có tiền” → 一些鸡鸭

This usage is semantically equivalent to 一些 in Chinese, indicating a modest but not minimal quantity.

Ellipsis of the Noun After “một ít”

When the noun has already been mentioned earlier in the sentence, it can be omitted after “một ít”. For example:

“Chuối này bao nhiêu tiền một cân? Bán cho tôi một ít” (“How much is this banana per kilo? Sell me a bit”) → 一些

In such cases, “một ít” retains its function as a quantifier, with the referent understood from context.

3.3 The Quantifier Một vài in Vietnamese

In Vietnamese, the quantifier một vài functions as a lexical unit denoting a small, indefinite quantity and is semantically equivalent to the Mandarin expression 一些. Syntactically, một vài precedes a noun to form the construction một vài + noun, which conveys the notion of limited number without specifying exact count. This structure is commonly employed to refer to people, objects, or events in a non-exhaustive manner. For instance, expressions such as nói một vài câu (“say a few sentences”), đi một vài nơi (“go to a few places”), or gặp một vài học sinh (“meet a few students”) illustrate its typical usage.

The reduced form vài shares the same semantic function and is often used interchangeably with một vài, particularly in informal registers. Both forms express an estimated quantity that is greater than one but still considered small. Examples such as mua vài cái bàn, phát biểu vài câu, or đọc vài cuốn sách demonstrate the syntactic flexibility and pragmatic equivalence between the full and reduced forms.

Grammatically, một vài exhibits compatibility with a wide range of noun types. When modifying human nouns, it may appear with or without classifiers, such as vị, anh, or chị. The inclusion of classifiers tends to elevate the politeness or formality of the expression, though the core meaning remains unchanged. For example, both một vài vị bộ trưởng and một vài bộ trưởng are acceptable, with the former conveying a more respectful tone.

When used with countable or uncountable concrete nouns, một vài requires the presence of a unit noun or classifier to ensure grammaticality. Constructions such as một vài cuốn sách, một vài chai rượu, or một vài con cá are syntactically valid, whereas một vài sách, một vài rượu, and một vài cá are considered ill-formed due to the absence of classifiers.

In contrast, một vài may directly modify abstract nouns or locational expressions without necessitating classifiers. Phrases like một vài việc, một vài khó khăn, or một vài nơi exemplify this pattern, reflecting the quantifier’s ability to operate with semantically non-concrete referents.

Furthermore, một vài can be used with administrative or geographic entities, whether collective or individual, without requiring classifiers. Expressions such as một vài tỉnh thành, một vài quốc gia, một vài xã, and một vài thôn are syntactically acceptable and pragmatically neutral.

However, when the referent noun has already been introduced earlier in discourse, it may be omitted in subsequent clauses. In such cases, một vài cannot stand alone as a direct object unless followed by a classifier. For example, mua một vài or viết một vài are ungrammatical unless expanded to mua một vài cây or viết một vài trang. In these elliptical constructions, một vài may also be reduced to vài, yielding forms such as mua vài cây or viết vài trang, with or without the noun explicitly stated.

Notably, một vài is compatible with collective nouns referring to people or administrative units, such as một vài anh em, một vài thầy cô, or một vài đơn vị. However, it does not combine with collective nouns denoting objects or materials. Constructions like một vài quần áo, một vài sách vở, một vài bàn ghế, or một vài xe cộ are considered ungrammatical, indicating a semantic constraint in the quantifier’s distribution.

3.4 The Quantifier Một số in Vietnamese

The quantifier một số serves to indicate a limited but non-minimal quantity of people, objects, or events. It is frequently used in both spoken and written Vietnamese to refer to subsets of a larger group. Examples include gặp một số người (“meet some people”), đi một số nơi (“go to some places”), and làm một số việc (“do some tasks”). Unlike một vài, which emphasizes smallness and indefiniteness, một số suggests a slightly larger and more determinate quantity.

Although một số may be reduced to số, the latter does not function as a quantifier in this context. Expressions such as gặp số người or làm số việc are ungrammatical, as số alone lacks the semantic capacity to denote limited quantity.

When modifying human nouns, một số may appear with or without classifiers. Both một số vị bác sĩ and một số bác sĩ are acceptable, with the inclusion of classifiers contributing to a more formal or emotionally nuanced expression. Similarly, một số chị kế toán and một số kế toán convey the same referential meaning, differing only in stylistic tone.

In the case of uncountable nouns, *một số* must be followed by a classifier to ensure grammaticality. Valid constructions include *một số lon nước ngọt*, *một số bao gạo*, *một số con gà*, and *một số tờ giấy*. Conversely, forms such as *một số nước ngọt*, *một số gạo*, or *một số giấy* are syntactically unacceptable due to the absence of classifiers.

Một số also demonstrates compatibility with nouns denoting places, administrative units, and countable abstract concepts. It may directly modify such nouns without requiring classifiers, as seen in expressions like *một số cơ quan*, *một số nhà máy*, *một số tỉnh thành*, *một số quốc gia*, *một số thủ tục*, and *một số ý kiến*.

However, *một số* cannot be used with nouns referring to natural phenomena or inherently uncountable abstract concepts. Phrases such as *một số mưa*, *một số mây*, or *một số sức lực* are considered ungrammatical, reflecting a semantic boundary in the quantifier's applicability.

In elliptical constructions where the referent noun has been previously mentioned, *một số* may appear independently. For example, *Anh ấy đi du học mua rất nhiều sách, lần trước đã chuyển về nước một số rồi* ("He bought many books while studying abroad; last time he sent some back") and *Ông ấy quyết định bán một số để có tiền trang trải cuộc sống* ("He decided to sell some to cover living expenses") illustrate the quantifier's ability to function without an overt noun in contextually rich discourse.

Additionally, *một số* may modify collective nouns referring to small creatures, such as *một số tôm cá*, *một số ếch nhái*, or *một số ruồi muỗi*. It is also compatible with collective nouns denoting people or objects, including *một số sách vở*, *một số bàn ghế*, *một số xe cộ*, *một số anh em*, and *một số bạn bè*. The relatively broad scope of *một số* reflects its semantic flexibility and its capacity to denote subsets that are limited but not minimal.

4. Comparative Characteristics of Vietnamese Quantifiers Denoting Small Quantity

Vietnamese possesses a nuanced system of quantifiers used to express small or limited quantities, including *một chút*, *một tí*, *một ít*, *một vài*, and *một số*. While these expressions share a common semantic domain—namely, the notion of "smallness" or "limited quantity"—they differ significantly in terms of degree, syntactic behavior, pragmatic function, and regional usage. Understanding the subtle distinctions among these quantifiers is essential for both descriptive grammar and cross-linguistic comparison, particularly with Mandarin Chinese, which exhibits parallel structures through expressions such as *一点儿* and *一些*.

Among the Vietnamese quantifiers, *một chút* and *một tí* are the most semantically minimal. Both denote an extremely small amount, often approaching the threshold of imperceptibility. These expressions are frequently used to refer to substances, abstract qualities, or emotional states that cannot be easily quantified. For example, *một chút tình cảm* or *một tí hy vọng* implies a trace or hint of emotion, rather than a countable unit. Pragmatically, *một chút* and *một tí* are interchangeable in most contexts, though regional variation influences their distribution: *một tí* is more common in Northern Vietnamese dialects, while *một chút* is preferred in Central and Southern varieties and is more likely to appear in formal or written registers. For the purposes of comparative analysis, these two expressions are treated as a single unit due to their functional equivalence.

Moving up the scale, *một ít* occupies an intermediate position. It denotes a small quantity that is nonetheless measurable or countable. Unlike *một chút*/*một tí*, which often modify uncountable nouns or abstract concepts, *một ít* can be used with both countable and uncountable nouns, provided that appropriate classifiers are used. For instance, *một ít sách* may refer to three or four books, while *một ít nước* denotes a small volume of liquid. The quantity expressed by *một ít* is greater than that of *một chút*/*một tí*, but still falls within the semantic field of "limited amount."

The quantifier *một vài* introduces a further degree of quantity, typically referring to a small set of countable items. It is often used to denote an estimated number ranging from three to seven, depending on context and speaker perception. For example, *một vài sinh viên* suggests a handful of students, often fewer than ten. Syntactically, *một vài* requires the presence of classifiers when modifying countable nouns, but may directly combine with abstract or locational nouns without classifiers. Pragmatically, *một vài* conveys a sense of approximation and non-exhaustiveness, making it suitable for contexts where the speaker wishes to indicate partial inclusion or limited scope.

At the upper end of the scale, *một số* denotes a larger subset, though still within the bounds of "small quantity" from the speaker's perspective. The expression is inherently subjective: while one speaker may use *một số* to refer to ten items, another may apply it to thirty or more. This variability reflects the pragmatic elasticity of the term, which allows for broader application depending on discourse context.

For example, *một số* sinh viên không tuân thủ quy định may imply a significant minority of students, potentially affecting institutional policy or perception. Syntactically, *một số* behaves similarly to *một vài*, combining with both human and non-human nouns, and requiring classifiers when modifying countable entities.

Based on the semantic and pragmatic distinctions outlined above, the Vietnamese quantifiers can be arranged in a scalar hierarchy of increasing quantity:

một chút/một tí < *một ít* < *một vài* < *một số*

This hierarchy not only reflects native speaker intuition but also aligns with corresponding expressions in Mandarin Chinese. Specifically, *một chút/một tí* corresponds to 一点儿, *một ít* to 一点儿 or 一些 depending on context, and both *một vài* and *một số* to 一些. The following table summarizes these equivalences:

Vietnamese	Mandarin Equivalent
<i>một chút / một tí</i>	一点儿
<i>một ít</i>	一点儿 / 一些
<i>một vài</i>	一些
<i>một số</i>	一些

5. Cross-Linguistic Comparison: Vietnamese and Mandarin Quantifiers

The Vietnamese quantifiers *một chút/một tí*, *một ít*, *một vài*, and *một số* exhibit notable parallels with the Mandarin expressions 一点儿 and 一些, both of which serve to express small, indefinite quantities. Previous research (e.g., Vương Trúc Nhân et al., 2006) has proposed that 一点儿 may be translated into Vietnamese as *một ít*, *một chút*, or *một tí*, while 一些 corresponds to *một ít*, *một vài*, or *một số*. This translation framework underscores the semantic fluidity of these quantifiers and highlights the importance of context and speaker perception in determining equivalence.

One of the key distinctions between 一点儿 and 一些 in Mandarin lies in their compatibility with noun types. 一点儿 is typically used with uncountable nouns or abstract concepts, while 一些 modifies countable nouns or plural entities. Vietnamese mirrors this pattern: *một ít* used with uncountable nouns aligns with 一点儿, whereas *một ít* with countable nouns corresponds to 一些. For example, *một ít nước* (“a little water”) parallels 一点儿水, while *một ít sách* (“a few books”) aligns with 一些书. The choice of Mandarin equivalent thus depends not only on the quantity expressed but also on the grammatical nature of the noun.

Syntactically, both languages allow these quantifiers to appear post-verbally and to precede the noun they modify. Mandarin constructions such as 吃一点儿饭 (“eat a little rice”) correspond directly to Vietnamese expressions like ăn một chút/một tí/một ít cơm. In elliptical constructions, where the noun has already been mentioned, both languages permit the quantifier to stand alone. For instance, 你要多少汤? 一点儿 (“How much soup do you want? A little”) is equivalent to Anh muốn bao nhiêu canh? Một chút/một tí/một ít thôi.

Reduplication is another area of convergence. Mandarin allows forms such as 一点一点 or 一点点 to emphasize gradual accumulation or minimal quantity. Vietnamese equivalents include *một chút chút*, *một tí tí*, and less commonly *một ít ít*. These reduplicated forms are used for stylistic emphasis and are more common in spoken or expressive contexts.

In negative constructions, both 一点儿 in Mandarin and *một chút/một tí* in Vietnamese are acceptable, while *một ít* is not. This reflects a semantic threshold: *một chút/một tí* denote the smallest possible quantity, often approaching zero, making them suitable for negation. For example, 中午我一点儿饭也不吃 (“I didn’t eat even a little rice at noon”) corresponds to Buổi trưa tôi không ăn một chút/một tí cơm nào cả. In contrast, *một ít* implies a quantity that exceeds the threshold of “none,” and is thus incompatible with negative constructions.

Taken together, these observations reveal a high degree of structural and semantic alignment between Vietnamese and Mandarin quantifiers, while also highlighting language-specific constraints and pragmatic nuances. The comparative analysis not only deepens our understanding of quantity expressions in both languages but also contributes to broader typological studies of quantification and scalar semantics.

The Mandarin quantifier 一些 and the Vietnamese expressions một ít, một vài, and một số share a common semantic function: they all denote an indefinite, limited quantity. However, a closer examination reveals both structural parallels and nuanced differences in their syntactic behavior and pragmatic usage. First, all four expressions can directly modify nouns to indicate small quantity without requiring intervening classifiers. For example, Mandarin allows 买一些用品 (“buy some supplies”), which corresponds to Vietnamese constructions such as mua một ít/một vài/một số đồ dùng. Within this equivalence, the quantity implied by một vài is generally greater than một ít, but less than một số, reflecting a scalar gradation in perceived magnitude.

Second, while 一些 in Mandarin may undergo reduplication to form 一些些, Vietnamese quantifiers do not permit such morphological repetition. Forms like một ít ít, một vài vài, or một số số are considered ungrammatical and are not used in natural discourse. This distinction highlights a morphological constraint in Vietnamese that limits expressive intensification via reduplication in quantifiers.

Third, một vài and một số in Vietnamese, like 一些 in Mandarin, can modify human nouns and administrative units to express limited quantity. Examples include một vài học sinh, một số tỉnh thành, which correspond to 一些学生, 一些省市. In contrast, một ít is rarely used with such nouns, and expressions like một ít học sinh or một ít tỉnh thành are uncommon or pragmatically marked.

Fourth, all four expressions—một ít, một vài, một số, and 一些—can modify temporal nouns to indicate an imprecise duration. Mandarin phrases such as 一些日子 and 一些年 correspond to Vietnamese equivalents like một ít ngày, một vài năm, or một số ngày, depending on the speaker’s perception of quantity and context.

Fifth, none of these expressions are typically used in negative constructions. Mandarin does not allow 我家没有一些大米了 (“There isn’t some rice left at home”), nor does Vietnamese permit Trong nhà tôi không còn một ít/một vài/một số gạo rồi. This restriction suggests that these quantifiers presuppose the existence of a non-zero quantity and are thus incompatible with negation, which implies absence.

Additional distinctions emerge when these quantifiers are applied to abstract nouns and countable entities. For instance, 一些意见 (“some opinions”) may be translated into Vietnamese as một ít/một vài/một số ý kiến, depending on the intended degree of quantity. Similarly, 一些学生 (“some students”) corresponds to một ít/một vài/một số sinh viên, and 一些笔 (“some pens”) to một ít/một vài/một số cây bút. In the case of uncountable nouns, such as 一些大米 (“some rice”), Vietnamese allows một ít gạo directly, or một vài/một số bao gạo with classifiers. This illustrates that while 一些 in Mandarin can directly modify both countable and uncountable nouns, Vietnamese requires classifiers when một vài or một số are used with uncountable referents.

In summary, một ít can directly modify abstract nouns, countable human nouns, and both countable and uncountable material nouns. Một vài and một số share this flexibility but require classifiers when used with uncountable nouns. These syntactic constraints reflect deeper typological differences between Vietnamese and Mandarin, particularly in the treatment of noun classification and quantification.

6. CONCLUSION

Vietnamese expressions denoting small quantity—một chút, một tí, một ít, một vài, and một số—form a rich and nuanced system of quantification. Although these terms are often perceived as near-synonyms due to their shared semantic domain, they differ significantly in grammatical behavior, pragmatic function, and scalar magnitude. Native speakers rarely misuse these expressions, as their deployment is governed by deeply internalized linguistic intuition. However, a precise grammatical and pragmatic differentiation among them requires careful analysis, especially in contexts of bilingual translation and language instruction.

The quantity denoted by these expressions is inherently vague and subject to speaker interpretation. In many cases, the speaker does not quantify the referent precisely but instead relies on subjective judgment and contextual cues. This variability underscores the importance of linguistic perception and discourse context in shaping the use of quantifiers.

In cross-linguistic comparison, Vietnamese quantifiers align with Mandarin expressions 一点儿 and 一些, with một chút, một tí, and một ít corresponding to 一点儿, and một ít, một vài, and một số corresponding to 一些. Vietnamese exhibits greater lexical diversity and finer gradation in expressing small quantities than Mandarin, suggesting a more elaborate system of scalar quantification. These

differences may be attributed to cultural, cognitive, and environmental factors that influence how speakers of each language conceptualize and categorize quantity.

For Vietnamese learners of Mandarin and Chinese learners of Vietnamese, understanding the semantic range, syntactic constraints, and pragmatic nuances of these quantifiers is essential for accurate translation and effective communication. A contrastive approach that highlights both similarities and divergences can facilitate deeper linguistic awareness and improve bilingual competence in Vietnamese - Mandarin contexts.

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