Abstract: In Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1991, 2001, 2008, 2009), a constructionalist approach, grounding is the semantic function which relates an entity to the ground (the situation of speech, including its participants and the speech event). Cognitive Grammar holds that grounding is universal, albeit implemented differently in different languages. Nominal grounding may be done overtly by using grounding elements (e.g. demonstratives and articles), intrinsically, such as the case of a proper name, or covertly, through inference from the clause. Nung (spoken in Northern Vietnam) has a system of classifiers which are obligatory when a numeral or demonstrative is present.

Langacker (2008), drawing on Thai and Mandarin, holds that the classifier is first grounded by the demonstrative or quantifier, and this schematic nominal is then “elaborated” by the lexical noun (Langacker 2008, p.341). I argue as per Langacker (2008) that classifiers are not grounding elements per se. This paper presents primary fieldwork data from Nung focussing on the distribution of ‘bare classifiers’ -the use of classifiers with a noun, but without other nominal elements, such as túmá ‘dog’ in (1). A body of literature studies how “bare classifiers” relate to definiteness in various languages (Cheng and Sybesma 1999; Simpson, Soh & Nomoto 2011; Li & Bisang 2012). I argue that although bare classifiers signify the presence of a unique referent, it is the context which identifies the referent expressed by a bare classifier phrase.

Examples (1) and (2a) suggest that bare classifiers signify uniqueness. The classifier túis obligatory in (1) when the phrase refers to a unique dog, but it is un grammatical in (2a), where the instance of ‘chicken’ lacks uniqueness. But bare classifiers do not make referents identifiable. In (2b), the distal demonstrative tɛ́is obligatory in the phrase referring to a previously mentioned instance of ‘chicken’. I argue that the identifiability of ‘dog’ in (1) is due to the context, where only one instance of ‘dog’ is present.

(1) *(tú) má kʰʌ̀n dēm mā
CL.ANIM dog ascend shore come
'The dog went back up to the shore.'

(2a) nì ɬí (*tú) kʌ̄ɪ mí
2SG buy CL.ANIM chicken INT
'Did you buy a chicken?'

(2b) nì ɬí tú kʌ̄ɪ *(tɛ́) mí
2SG buy CL.ANIM chicken DIST INT
'Did you buy the chicken?'

In addition, I argue that the "virtual/actual" contrast (Langacker, 2008, p.271) is irrelevant. Example (3) shows an instance of 'dog' considered 'virtual' in Langacker (2008). The classifier túis obligatory in (3) as well as in (1), which contains an 'actual' instance.

(3) *(tú) má hʌ̄ʊ kʌ́ʊ-kʌ́ʊ
CL.ANIM dog bark woof-REDUP
'Dogs bark woof-woof.'