

## THE LEFT-PERIPHERAL NATURE OF THE RIGHT-EDGE PARTICLE *KHÔNG* IN VIETNAMESE\*

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### ABSTRACT

This work provides a syntactic account of VP-*không* questions in Vietnamese. We begin by pointing out potential problems in Duffield's (2013a) predicate-raising analysis to VP-*không* questions. First, it is unclear why raising the predicate to the left of the negator *không* could turn a declarative into a question. Second, Duffield's analysis cannot account for the occurrence of TP-level adverbs between the subject and the predicate. Third, contrary to a claim in Duffield's analysis, the topic marker *thì* is actually compatible with VP-*không* questions. To deal with these problems, we argue for an alternative analysis which involves Neg-to-C movement and the raising of a remnant TP.

Keywords: *không*, negator, negative particle questions, Vietnamese, Neg-to-C movement

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

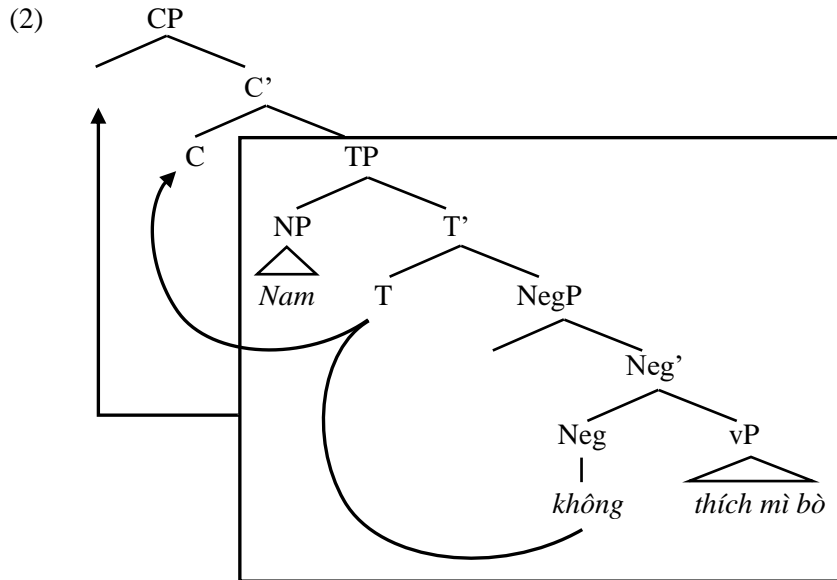
There is a special type of question sentences in at least some Southeast Asian languages and Sinitic languages, which is characterized by the occurrence of a sentence-final negative particle. It is called *negative particle question* in Cheng et al. 1997. Negative particle questions have drawn much attention from linguists, and different analyses have been argued for (Cheng et al 1997; Hsieh 2013; Duffield 2007, 2013a, among many others). In this work, we focus on the structure of VP-*không* questions in Vietnamese, which is a negative particle question. The pre-verbal element *không* in (1a) is a negator. However, it functions as a question particle when it occurs after the predicate of the sentence, as in (1b).<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a. Nam      **không**    thích      mì      bò.  
      Nam      NEG     like      noodles    beef  
      ‘Nam doesn’t like beef noodles.’
- b. Nam      thích      mì      bò      **không?**  
      Nam      like      noodles    beef      Q  
      ‘Does Nam like beef noodles?’

Duffield (2013a) proposes a predicate-raising analysis to VP-*không* questions, which he claims can account for some co-occurrence constraints in VP-*không* questions. However, we show that Duffield’s analysis leaves some problems unresolved. We instead argue for a different analysis to the VP-*không* questions, which involves Neg-to-C movement and the subsequent raising of TP, as shown in (2).

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used in the glosses are: NEG = negator, Q = question particle, CL = classifier, TOP = topic marker, FUT = future marker, POSS = possessive marker, PERF = perfective aspect marker, EXP = experiential aspect marker.



Following Nguyễn 1997 and Duffield 2013a, we assume that *không* is base-generated under the head of NegP. In addition, we propose that *không* moves to the head C.<sup>2</sup> The remnant TP subsequently raises to Spec, CP to derive the surface form.

Le (2015) also proposes a Neg-to-C analysis for the VP-*không* questions. Her evidence is the so-called identical distribution of the negator *không* and the question particle *không* when they occur with different types of verbs, aspectual markers, and modals. However, Le's work is not completely satisfactory in two aspects. First, Le only postulates the operation of Neg-to-C movement in VP-*không* questions, but why *không* ends up in the sentence-final position, she does not mention. Second, the so-called identical distribution of the two *không*'s in Le's argument does not seem to work. For example, the future marker *sẽ* actually can co-occur with the negator *không*, which is different from Le's

<sup>2</sup> We tentatively assume that Neg-to-C movement is driven by the valuation of the interrogative feature in C<sup>0</sup> (Chomsky 1995, 2001, 2002).

claim that both the negator *không* and the question particle *không* cannot co-occur with the future marker *sẽ*. See the examples in (3).

- (3) a. Nam      sẽ      không      đi      Mỹ.  
Nam      FUT      NEG      go      America  
'Nam will not go to America.'
- b. \*Nam      sẽ      đi      Mỹ      không?  
Nam      FUT      go      America      Q  
Intended reading: 'Will Nam go to America?'

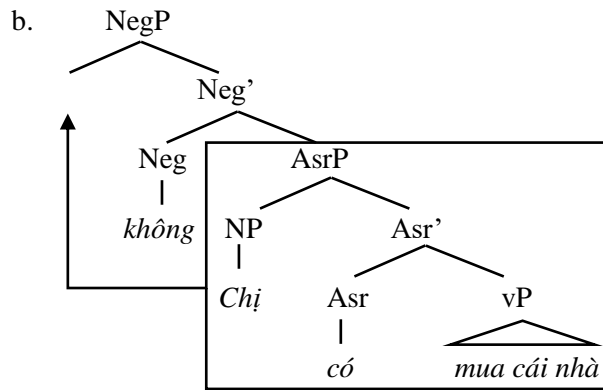
Therefore, though Le's analysis provides interesting insights, it is actually not as explanatory as one would expect. Although we also argue that there is a Neg-to-C movement in VP-*không* questions, we provide independent syntactic evidence to support it, which is free from the potential problems that previous analyses, such as Le's, would encounter. Furthermore, in addition to Neg-to-C movement, we also propose that the remnant TP moves to the Spec, CP. This resolves the question of the sentence-final status of the question particle *không*.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the analysis of Duffield 2013a and points out some potential problems in it. Section 3 presents the proposed analysis of this work. Section 4 introduces negative particle questions in other languages. Section 5 is the conclusion.

## 2. DUFFIELD 2013A

Duffield (2013a) proposes a syntactic analysis for VP-*không* questions, illustrated in (4). In that proposal, the negator *không* is in the head of the Negative Phrase (NegP). The Assertion Phrase (AsrP) is the complement of NegP, and it raises to Spec, NegP to derive the observed surface form.

- (4) a. Chị có      mua cái nhà      không?  
you exist      buy CL house      Q  
'Did you buy (the) house?' (Duffield 2013a:128)



(Duffield 2013a:147)

Duffield claims that this proposal would account for the following two phenomena: the impossibility of “negative” VP-*không* questions, and the incompatibility of VP-*không* questions with the topic marker *thì* and future marker *sẽ*. See the examples in (5) (cited from Duffield 2013a:128-129).

- (5) a. \*Anh ấy **không** đến không?  
 he NEG come Q  
 Intended reading: ‘Isn’t he coming?’
- b. \*Xã bên **thì** ruộng tốt không?  
 village side TOP rice.field good Q  
 Intended reading: ‘(As for) the neighboring village, are its rice-fields good (fertile)?’
- c. \*Vợ anh **sẽ** có làm việc ở Paris không?  
 wife you FUT exist work at Paris Q  
 Intended reading: ‘Will your wife work in Paris?’

In (5a), the VP-*không* question has an independent negator *không* in it, resulting in a “negative” VP-*không* question. It is ungrammatical, however. The sentence (5a) is ungrammatical, according to Duffield (2013a), because (in his own words) “a head (Neg) cannot trigger movement of a phrase containing itself around itself without violating some fundamental

derivational constraint (e.g., Structure Preservation, Chain Uniformity, Extension Condition, etc.)” (Duffield 2013a:145). In (5b), a topic occurs along with the VP-*không* question, marked by the topic marker *thì*. In (5c), the future marker *sẽ* occurs in a VP-*không* question. Both sentences (5b) and (5c) are ungrammatical. The reason for the ungrammaticality of these two types of sentences, according to Duffield’s analysis, is, in his own words, “Yes-No questions may only involve functional categories that are initially merged lower than the projection headed by *không*. Specifically, it predicts correctly that Yes-No questions cannot contain the future tense marker *sẽ* or the topic marker *thì*” (Duffield 2013a:145).

In addition, Duffield (2013a) explicitly rejects the view that the question particle *không* is in C, because *không* can co-occur with C-elements such as *liệu* ‘whether’, which is assumed to be a complementizer. See (6) (Duffield 2013a:135).

- (6) Cô gái hỏi [liệu cô có thể đi đến  
 girl ask LIEU she can go arrive  
 bữa tiệc được không].  
 party can Q  
 ‘The girl asked if she could go to the party.’

However, we believe that Duffield’s analysis leaves some problems unresolved. First, as Duffield (2013b) himself points out, it is unclear why raising the predicate to Spec, PolP (NegP in Duffield 2013a) would turn a negative statement into a question. Thus, the change in semantics triggered by *không* needs to be accounted for in some way. Second, we do not agree that the topic marker *thì* cannot occur with VP-*không* questions as in Duffield’s claim. It is actually possible for the topic marker *thì* to occur in a VP-*không* question, as those in (7).

- (7) a. Cái này **thì** Nam có mua không?  
 CL this TOP Nam exist buy Q  
 ‘As for this, did Nam buy it?’

- b. Pate nhum **thì** có ngon không?<sup>3</sup>  
 pâté sea.urchin TOP exist tasty Q  
 ‘As for sea urchin pâté, is it tasty?’
- c. Dây của hãng **thì**  
 cable POSS brand *cadi-MH* *cadi-MH* TOP  
 chất lượng có tốt không?<sup>4</sup>  
 quality exist good Q  
 ‘As for *cadi-MH* electrical cables, is their quality good?’

Third, the structure in (4b) predicts that no TP-level adverb may occur between the subject and predicate of a VP-*không* question, because the pre-*không* constituent is just an AsrP, and TP is still higher up. However, this prediction is not borne out. TP-level adverbs actually may occur between the subject and the predicate of a VP-*không* question sentence, as shown in (8).

- (8) Nam **ngày mai** có đi học không?  
 Nam tomorrow exist go study Q  
 ‘Will Nam go to school tomorrow?’

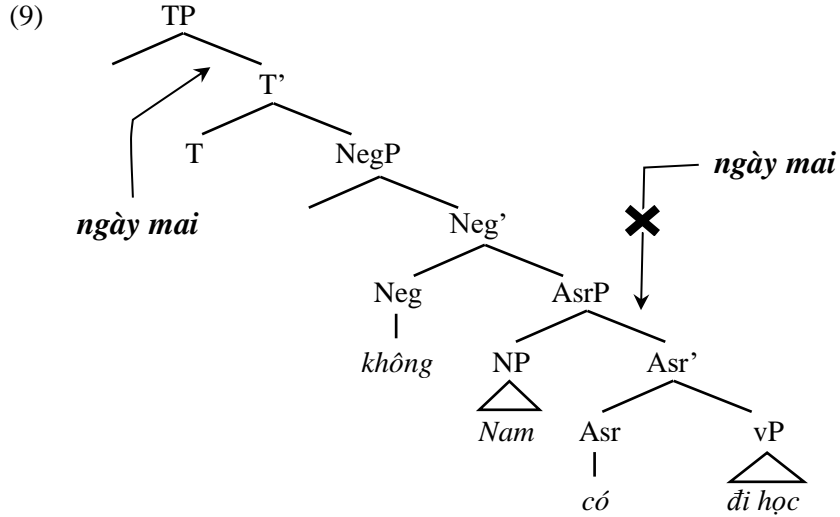
Duffield’s analysis does not permit a time adverb between the subject and the predicate of a *không* question sentence, because it must be adjoined to TP, and thus always is higher than (and therefore precedes) the subject, as shown in (9).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nhatrangreview.info/nha-trang/pate-nhum-nghi-vinh.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://webdien.com/d/showthread.php?t=100914>

<sup>5</sup> One may think that the time adverb may be adjoined to VP rather than TP. However, the adverb *ngày mai* ‘tomorrow’ can only adjoin to TP because it cannot occur after the future marker *sẽ*, which is typically assumed to be the head of TP (Thompson 1965; Trinh 2005; Duffield 2007, 2013; Phan 2013). See (i).

- (i) a. Nam **ngày mai** sẽ đi học.  
 Nam tomorrow FUT go study  
 ‘Nam will go to school tomorrow.’  
 b. \*Nam sẽ **ngày mai** đi học.  
 Nam FUT tomorrow go study



Moreover, Duffield (2013a) argues that the question particle *không* is not in C because it can co-occur with *liệu*, which he assumes is a complementizer. However, *liệu* in (6) is actually very likely an adverb which expresses the speaker's attitude of wondering, rather than a complementizer. If *liệu* is a complementizer, it can only take a TP complement. However, we observe that *liệu* may occur in a preverbal position, as shown in (10). This makes it more like an adverbial rather than a complementizer.

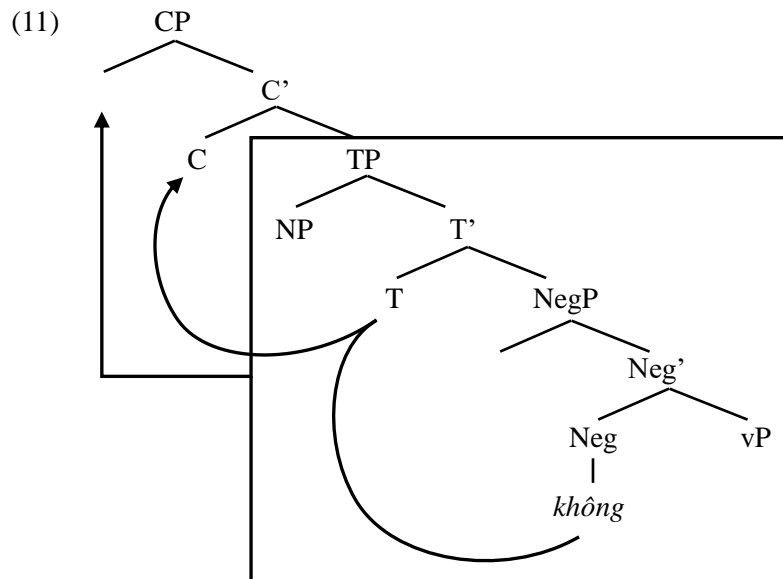
- (10) Nam      liệu      được      đi      Mỹ      không?  
 Nam      LIEU      can      go      America      Q  
 'I wonder whether Nam can go to America or not.'

To summarize, Duffield's analysis runs into problems as shown above. In the next section, we present an analysis which provides explanations for those problems.



### 3. PROPOSAL

We propose that VP-*không* questions involve Neg-to-C movement and raising of TP, as shown in (11). We assume that the question particle *không* is base-generated in the head of NegP (Nguyễn 1997; Duffield 2013a). The question particle *không* then moves from Neg<sup>0</sup> to C<sup>0</sup> and turns into a question particle. Furthermore, the remnant TP undergoes raising to Spec, CP. Holmberg and Nikanne 2002 propose that a [-focus] element must move out of the predicate for feature checking in the object shift construction in Finnish (also see Chomsky 1995). We follow this proposal, and assume that the remnant TP in the *không* questions is assigned a default [-focus] feature, and as a result it must move to the left of *không* so as to highlight the focus status of the particle *không* in the sentence-final position. This is why the question particle *không* ends up in the sentence-final position of the surface structure.



The proposed analysis can account for the properties of VP-*không* questions and those issues raised in the previous section. We summarize them as follows:

- A. There is a semantic change of *không* from a negator to a question particle.
- B. The topic marker *thì* actually may occur in a VP-*không* question sentence.
- C. The future marker *sẽ* is incompatible with VP-*không* questions.
- D. “Negative” VP-*không* question is not permitted.
- E. TP-level adverbs can occur between the subject and the predicate of a VP-*không* question.
- F. The element *liệu* can occur in a VP-*không* question.

First, the negator *không* receives the function of a question particle after it moves to C, which bears the question feature (Cheng 1997; Chomsky 1995). In addition, we assume that the question feature in Vietnamese, like other sentence-final particles in Vietnamese sentences, has the property of a proclitic and needs to get cliticized to an element that is leftward to it. This triggers the raising of the remnant TP to the Spec of CP. Thus, our analysis provides an explanation for the semantic change of *không*.

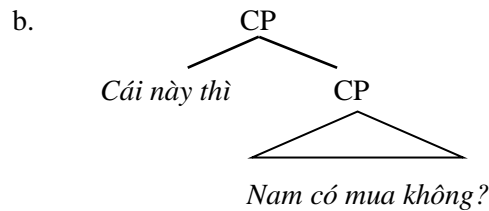
Second, the occurrence of the topic marker *thì* in a VP-*không* question now is expected because *thì* and the topic it introduces may adjoin to CP.<sup>6</sup> The topic element *cái này* ‘this’ and the topic marker *thì* in the example (7a), repeated in (12a), form a topical expression which is left-adjoined to the CP of the *không* question sentence, as shown in (12).

- (12) a.   Cái này thì           Nam       có           mua       không?  
          CL this TOP        Nam       exist       buy       Q  
          ‘As for this, did Nam buy it?’

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<sup>6</sup> A topic element can also adjoin to a wh-question, as shown in (i). Bruening and Tran (2006) propose that the wh-element in wh-question undergoes covert movement to the Spec, CP if it is in the matrix clause and without any question particle. So, this is another example to show that a topic can adjoin to a CP.

(i)   Cái này thì           ai       mua?  
      CL this TOP        who buy  
      ‘As for this, who bought it?’



Third, VP-*không* questions are not compatible with the future marker *sẽ* because such a sentence incurs violation of the Head Movement Constraint (Travis 1984; Rizzi 1990). A head cannot skip an intervening head. Assuming that *sẽ* is in T (Thompson 1965; Trinh 2005; Duffield 2007, 2013; Phan 2013), it intervenes the movement of *không* from Neg to C, resulting in ungrammaticality, as shown in (13).



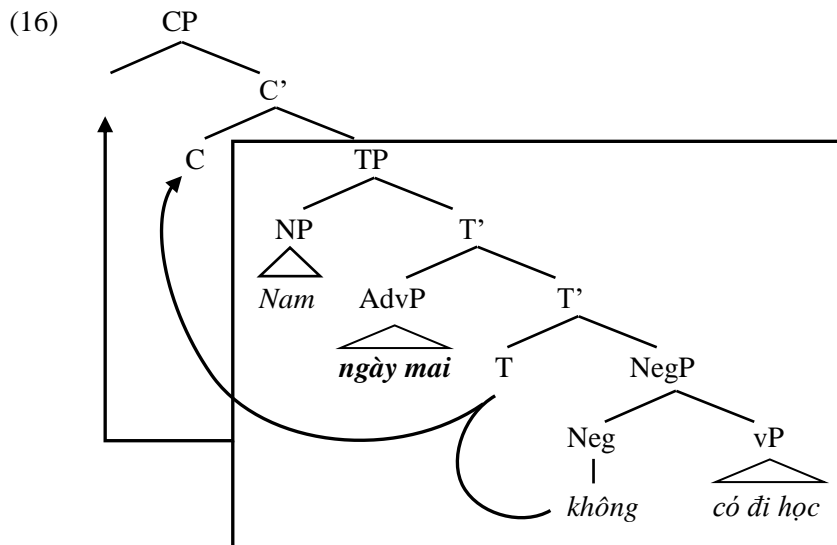
Fourth, “negative” VP-*không* questions are unacceptable because, to start with, projecting two NegPs in a sentence is impossible in principle. This is like the ungrammaticality of the English sentence (14), which contains two base-generated instances of the negator *not*.

(14) \*Mary does **not not** like John.

If negative VP-*không* questions were possible, this means that it were possible to have two instances of the negator *không* base-generated in the predicate of the sentence at the beginning of the derivation, with one of them moving to C and the other staying in situ. However, just like the case (14), this two-Neg configuration only results in ungrammaticality, as in (15).

(15) \*Hoa      **không**    **không**    thích    Nam.  
          Hoa      NEG      NEG      like      Nam

Fifth, a time adverb can occur between the subject and the predicate of a VP-*không* question, as shown in (8). The time adverb *ngày mai* ‘tomorrow’ adjoins to T’ between the subject and the predicate of the sentence. Since the whole TP raises to Spec of CP, the time adverb is moved along, remaining in the position between the subject and the predicate. See (16).<sup>7</sup>



Sixth, the occurrence of the element *liệu* in the VP-*không* questions does not pose any problem to our analysis. As indicated in Section 2, the element *liệu* is not like a complementizer because it can occur in a preverbal position as shown in (10). This makes it more like an adverbial.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> We assume, following proposals such as Lin 2015, that Vietnamese has the syntactic category T, which can be phonetically empty (i.e. an empty anaphoric pronominal). Sometimes it has an overt lexical form, for instance the future marker *sẽ* (and this is the basis for our minimality-violation account of (13)). We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this question to our attention.

<sup>8</sup> We leave aside questions about the syntactic and semantic properties of the element *liệu*.

<sup>9</sup> The question particle *không* and the element *liệu* do not compete for the same syntactic position. Thus, the presence of *liệu* does not pose any obvious problem to our proposal.

#### 4. NEGATIVE PARTICLE QUESTIONS IN OTHER LANGUAGES

Negative particle questions (NPQs) are also attested in other languages, in particular in the East Asian area, including Khmer, Thai, Mandarin, Taiwanese, Cantonese, and Hakka (Cheng et al. 1996; Cheng et al. 1997; Hsieh 2013; Tang 2022<sup>10</sup>). See the examples in (17).

- (17) a. Sowan məɬ1 səpɦin nul tee? [Khmer]  
 Sowan read book that not  
 ‘Didn’t John read the book?’ (Cheng et al. 1996:67)
- b. Thaan kaa-fɛɛ ɦig: mǎj? [Thai]  
 want coffee more Q/not<sup>11</sup>  
 ‘Will you have some more coffee?’ (Cheng et al. 1996:67)

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<sup>9</sup> The element *rằng* can also occur in a VP-*không* question. Questions may arise about whether it is a complementizer. If it is, it may pose a problem to the analysis that we propose in this work. See (i).

(i) Nam muốn biết **rằng** Hoa có đi Mỹ không?  
 Nam want know RANG Hoa exist go America Q  
 ‘Nam wants to know if Hoa went to America or not.’

We leave the questions about the grammatical status of *rằng* aside. However, even if it is a complementizer, we may very well adopt the Split CP hypothesis (Rizzi 1997) and assume that it merges to a CP higher than the CP where *không* and the raised TP reside. Thus, as far as we can see, the co-occurrence of *rằng* does not pose any difficulty to the proposal in this work. See (ii).

(ii) [CP *rằng* [... [CP [TP ...] *không* [... tTP ...]]]]

<sup>10</sup> A reviewer points out that Tang’s (2022) analysis of VP-*mei* questions in Cantonese is different from that of Cheng et al. 1997. Tang argues that the question particle *mei* in Cantonese is located in T, whereas Cheng et al. argue that *mei* in Cantonese is base-generated in C. We will not go into these issues in this work.

<sup>11</sup> The question particle *mǎj* in Thai is assumed to be derived from a preverbal negator (Diller et al. 2008).

- c. Ta chang qu **bu**? [Mandarin]  
 he often go not  
 ‘Does he go often?’ (Cheng et al. 1997:79)
- d. I u ki hak-hao **bo**? [Taiwanese]  
 he have go school not.have  
 ‘Did he go to school?’ (Cheng et al. 1997:76)
- e. Keoi lei-zo **mei**? [Cantonese]  
 he come-PERF not.have  
 ‘Has he come yet?’ (Cheng et al. 1997:69)
- f. Gi oi hi hoggao **mo**? [Hakka]  
 he want go school not.have  
 ‘Does he want to go to school?’ (Hsieh 2013:2)

Some scholars propose accounts based on Neg-to-C movement for NPQs. Cheng et al. (1997) argue that NPQs in Mandarin employ Neg-to-C movement. This is evidenced by the agreement between the negation and the modal/aspect in Mandarin NPQs. See (18)-(20). Since the distribution pattern of negator *bu* and question particle *bu* are the same, they propose that the question particle *bu* is derived through a reanalysis process, which transforms a negator into a question marker.

- (18) a. Hufei **bu** hui qu.  
 Hufei NEG will go  
 ‘Hufei will not go.’ (Cheng et al. 1997:67)
- b. Ta hui qu **bu**?  
 he will go Q  
 ‘Will he go?’ (Cheng et al. 1997:68)
- (19) a. \*Hufei **bu** qu-le xuexiao.  
 Hufei NEG go-PERF school  
 Intended reading: ‘Hufei did not go to school.’  
 (Cheng et al. 1997:67)
- b. \*Ta qu-le **bu**?  
 he go-PERF Q  
 Intended reading: ‘Did he go?’ (Cheng et al. 1997:73)



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analysis utilizing Neg-to-C movement and raising of TP. Our proposal can account for the occurrence of TP-level adverbs between the subject and the predicate, the impossibility of negative VP-*không* questions, the incompatibility of VP-*không* questions with the future marker *sẽ*, and the acceptability of the topic marker *thì* in the Vietnamese VP-*không* questions.



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越南語右緣助詞 *không* 的左緣本質

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本文探討越南語中否定詞 *không* 置於句尾作為疑問詞的問句 (VP-*không* questions)，並為其提出句法分析。我們指出了 Duffield (2013a) 針對此種問句提出的謂語提升 (predicate-raising) 分析可能會面臨的問題。一，Duffield (2013a) 的分析中並沒有說明謂語提升到否定詞 *không* 之前為何能將陳述句轉變為疑問句。二，Duffield (2013a) 的分析無法解釋時制詞組層級的副詞 (TP-level adverb) 為何能出現在主詞和謂語之間。三，Duffield (2013a) 認為主題標記 *thì* 無法出現在 VP-*không* 問句中，但是主題標記 *thì* 事實上是可以在 VP-*không* 問句中的。本文提出一套不同的句法分析，認為 VP-*không* 問句是透過 Neg-to-C 位移和餘留時制詞組 (remnant TP) 的提升而形成的。此分析可以解釋 VP-*không* 問句本身的句法限制，並且能為以上問題提出良好說明。

關鍵字：*không*、否定詞、否定助詞疑問句、越南語、Neg-to-C 位移