

A REVIEW OF INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON VIETNAMESE LINGUISTICS

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Vietnamese is one of the less studied languages from a formal perspective, despite Vietnam being a country with close to a hundred million people. The publication of this book is especially welcome, for the empirical facts under investigation contribute to our understanding of linguistic theory. The papers in this volume cover several aspects of the Vietnamese language: phonetics, phonology, syntax, semantics, acquisition and language use. Some of them consider dialects other than the standard (Ha Noi) dialect. The method of research undertaken here is for the most part based on controlled experiments.

The southern dialect of Vietnamese seems to differ from many other well-studied languages, such as those in the Indo-European languages, in that questions do not have a rising intonation, according to Phạm Thị Thu Hà and Marc Brunell (*Intonation in southern Vietnamese interrogative sentences*). They show that it differs from the northern dialects and other languages such as English in that intonation in questions is not particularly distinctive. A commonly observed feature of this dialect is that a raised f₀ height and rising contour are only optional. They are present in questions

only occasionally and are hardly distinguishable from declaratives. The speech rate in interrogatives, however, is faster than that in the declaratives. Nevertheless, the different types of questions do show some differences in overall f0 height and global slope. Their findings are based on the study of experimental data from a four-hour recording. The examples they consider are morphosyntactically questions, with question words, disjunction or clause-final particles. With these distinctive features in the utterance, it is perhaps no surprising that intonation is not necessary for questions.

However, it would have been good to look at an area that has direct relevance to the issue, namely, cases where the morphosyntax is the same, but may be understood as declaratives or interrogatives, depending on the intonation. The examples of the sort in (i) bear on this point:

- (i) a. cô ấy đến rồi (?)
 woman that arrive already
 ‘That woman/girl already arrived (?)’
- b. Anh uống cà phê (?)
 you drink coffee
 ‘You drink coffee (?)’

A systematic investigation of these cases would either buttress their claim or lead to a more precise characterization of the intonation in questions.

Dialectal differences are most commonly observed in phonology, with some of them possibly arising from language contact. Vietnamese is no exception. In a very detailed study of the phonological systems of three dialects in Thanh Hóa, Hà Tĩnh and Quảng Nam provinces in the north-central and southern regions of Vietnam, Andrea Hoa Pham (*Vietnamese dialects: A case of sound change through contact*) shows that the three share some phonological features in an intriguing way. On the one hand, they all have lengthening [a] in CVC and strong phonetic diphthongization, but lack three phonemic diphthongs. Quảng Nam and Thanh Hóa dialects have final palatals, tonal contours in a large tonal space and distinctive creaky phonation, but the Kẻ Chay dialect in the intervening Hà Tĩnh province lacks them. She attributes the common features of these dialects

to migration from Thanh Hóa to Quảng Nam. Added to the intrigue is the absence of [a] and the [aw] ~ [o] correspondence in Thanh Hóa, and the presence of them in Hà Tĩnh and Quảng Nam. The same can be said of the presence of merged tones in Kẻ Chay, but not in Thanh Hóa and Quảng Nam. Hopefully, future work would shed light on whether the shared features are related to something else, and why only certain features of the donor dialect but not others, were accepted in the recipient dialect.

Displacement is one of the most intensively studied grammatical properties. It is thus of special interest to consider languages like Vietnamese where *wh*-phrases remain in place. Cases where a *wh*-phrase apparently lies in a syntactic island and yet has scope outside the island in the presence of a clause-final particle *thế* raise interesting analytical issues. Nigel Duffield (*Illusory islands: On wh-questions in Vietnamese*) argues that these are illusory islands. He runs experiments showing that grammaticality judgments reported in previous work can only be partially replicated. He goes on to give alternative analyses without islands. Specifically, he re-analyzes an apparent sentential subject in (iia) as either a *wh*-phrase followed by a relative clause (preferred reading), as in (iib), or as the main clause (less preferred reading), as in (iic):

- (ii) a. [Ai vừa bỏ đi] làm mọi người bối rối (thế)?
 who ADV leave make everyone embarrassed PRT
 ‘That who left made everyone embarrassed?’
 b. ai [_{RC} mà (vừa) bỏ đi], làm mọi người bối rối (thế)?
 ‘?Who that just left made everyone embarrassed?’
 c. ai [(vừa) bỏ đi], [làm mọi người bối rối] ??(?thế)?
 ‘Who just left, and embarrassed everyone (by doing so)?’

For unclear reasons, he gives a syntactic analysis for the less preferred reading in (iic) where the *wh*-phrase *ai* ‘who’ is taken to be in SpecTopP binding the null subject of the first and the second predicate. But this analysis does not account for (iia) possibly having the reading that it is the event of leaving that made everyone embarrassed.

Similarly, he takes the apparent causal adjunct in (iia) as the second conjunct of a coordinate structure:

- (iii) a. Tân thua cuộc vì ai làm hư xe của anh ta
Tan lose event because who damage car POSS 3SG
(thế)?
PRT
‘Tan lost the race because who damaged his car?’
- b. [Tân thua cuộc] vì [ai làm hư xe của anh ta] (thế)?
‘Tan lost the race (because) [who damaged his car?]
- c. Tân [vì ai làm hư xe của anh ta] thua cuộc (thế)?
‘Tan lost the race because who damaged his car?’

But this analysis does not extend to the variant in (iiic) where the adjunct containing the *wh*-phrase *ai* ‘who’ is in the middle of the main clause.

It thus seems that some, but not all, apparent islands can be alternatively analyzed without islands. The issue of how a *wh*-phrase lying inside an island may have scope outside the island is yet to be resolved.

Temporal interpretation in languages without overt marking for time raises the issue of how it can be derived. Thuy Bui (*Temporal reference in Vietnamese*) argues that Vietnamese is only superficially tenseless and that every finite clause contains a phonologically empty non-future tense morpheme from which the event time is determined. She specifically claims that the preverbal particle *đã* is not a past tense morpheme, but is an aspect marker, for it allows for a present perfect reading, a pluperfect reading and most relevantly a future perfect reading. The preverbal particle *sẽ* is not a future tense morpheme, either; rather, *sẽ* combines with the null tense morpheme to yield a future tense reading. The formal semantics of the past or present readings derives the time that the null tense morpheme restricts, and that of *sẽ* derives the future reading. The analysis here is couched in terms of a null tense morpheme and may seem reasonable, for it gives an account for where the time intervals to which temporal interpretation is related come from. But, as far as I can tell, it has not been shown that an alternative semantics for tense without such null tense morpheme is impossible. After all, the event argument given in the formal semantics of TP does not come from any (null or overt) morpheme. Why can the non-future tense not be treated in the same way? Such a null morpheme would be justified, if it is shown to alternate with an overt morpheme exhibiting some syntactic properties.

The view that *đã* is not a past tense marker is echoed by Nguyễn Hoàng Trung (*Semantics of Vietnamese đã*), who argues further that it is not a purely aspectual marker either. The arguments are made, strangely, on the basis that some uses of *đã* are not related to the past tense and that examples with *đã* co-occurring with negation *không* or with the progressive marking *đang* are, in his judgment, dubious or unacceptable. He suggests that *đã* is a modal operator indicating realis marking factuality. Given other readings of *đã*, for instance, the future perfect discussed by Bui, this view is at best incomplete. Nguyễn also raises some methodology issues. He argues that some of the data are not acceptable, not only according to his judgment, but also by his not being able to find them in text search in translation work of English novels like Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the wind* or in newspaper articles in Vietnamese. He also rejects data that are not in accord with the judgments of the speakers he communicates with. The objection can hardly be taken too seriously, for there is no reason to rely on translation work. Moreover, the failure to find those examples in text search clearly does not warrant the conclusion that they are impossible. The best way to go about data is to solicit judgment from speakers, with control of dialectal variation, to see to what extent the judgment can be replicated.

The complexity of the various temporal readings of *đã* seems to me to be related to the role of reference time, a point worth pondering further about. For instance, the three readings of *đã* may well be due to where reference time is anchored to. If it is in the past, then the pluperfect reading obtains. If it is in the present, then we get the present perfect reading, and if it is in the future, then we get the future perfect. Details need to be worked out, but this seems to be the direction that is worth pursuing.

The complexity of the semantics of *đã* is further complicated by the interpretation of the sequence *đã không*, modulo Nguyễn's quibbles regarding its grammaticality, exclusively as past, even though without negation it can be understood to be present perfect. Phan Trang and Nigel Duffield (*A more perfect unification: Exploring a Nano-syntactic solution*) give a Nano-syntactic account for it according to which words are lexically represented as L-trees, and may correspond to more than one syntactic head. According to them, the L-trees of *đã* and *không* are as in (iv):

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- (iv) a. [_{PastP} Past [PERFECTP Perfect \emptyset]] \Rightarrow ĐÃ
b. [_{InterrogativeP} Interrogative [_{NegP} Neg \emptyset]] \Rightarrow KHÔNG

Abstract tense and aspectual heads, too, have L-trees, such as those in (v):

- (v) a. Past: [_{PastP} Past \emptyset]
b. Perfect: [_{PerfectP} Perfect \emptyset]

Negative Past would be derived by lexicalizing PastP, by building PastP on top of NegP, as in (vi):

- (vi) Negative Past: [_{PastP} Past [_{NegP} Neg \emptyset]] \Rightarrow *đã không*

As no PerfectP is present in the L-tree in (iv), the lack of the perfect reading in the sequence *đã không* follows.

There remain some outstanding issues, however. First, there is no reason why the L-tree for *không* should have InterrogativeP on top of NegP as an inherent property, for it need not be part of a question. Second, it is unclear how *đã* is lexicalized in (iva), as the head of Past or the head of Perfect. Third, if the lexicalization of *đã* in (vi) is possible without PerfectP, then why should the L-tree of *đã* in (iia) have PerfectP as complement to Past? Fourth, if PerfectP of the L-tree for *đã* can be discarded, then there seems to be no reason why the same cannot be true of PastP so that Negative Perfect can be built from the L-tree in (iva) disregarding PastP on top, resulting in a non-existing Negative Perfect reading for *đã không*. Significantly, it remains to be seen how L-trees can be derived for cases where *đã* is followed by the progressive marker *đang* as discussed by Bui, given that the L-tree for *đã* in (iva) has PerfectP as complement to Past.

In a number of languages, e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean and German, *wh*-phrases may sometimes be interpreted as indefinites, in addition to their interrogative interpretations. Vietnamese is no exception. Cheng-Yu Edwin Tsai and Kim Ngọc Quang (*Scalar implicatures and the semantics of wh-indefinites in Vietnamese*) point out some cases in Vietnamese that appear to fall outside the purview of accounts relying on some notion of

non-entailment or factivity. The existential construction where existence is asserted as well as the presence of classifier *cái* are two cases where indefinite *wh*-phrases are sanctioned. They argue for an analysis in terms of scalar implicatures and exhaustification as well as a speaker-oriented epistemic modal. Much like previous work on compositional semantics, their account employs some null operators that have no overt morphosyntax. While these notions may lead to the desired results, independent evidence for them is hard to come by.

Moreover, the role of some sentence-final particles must be brought to bear on the indefinite readings of *wh*-phrases. For example, without the otherwise demonstrative *đấy* ‘that’, the *wh*- phrase *đâu* in (vii) can only be interpreted as a location question word meaning ‘where’:

- (vii) Anh đó đang trốn đâu đấy.
 he that PRESENT hide where that
 ‘He is hiding somewhere.’

The same can be said of the clause-final particle *rồi* ‘already’. In fact, this is not much different from Chinese, cf. *tā chī cuò-le shěnmē le* ‘He ate something wrong’. The issue that still needs to be addressed is how a demonstrative may give rise to an indefinite reading.

Languages like English employ a definite determiner, such as *the*, to indicate definiteness. Questions arise as to how the definite reading is possible in languages without determiners. As Quý Ngọc Thị Đoàn, Martin Everaert and Eric Reuland (*(In)definite of Vietnamese noun phrases*) point out, bare nouns and Num-CL-N phrases in Vietnamese can be understood as definite or indefinite in subject and object positions, whereas classifier plus NP can only be understood as definite in either position. The distributions of definite and indefinite NPs are even more intriguing from a comparative point of view. For instance, bare nouns, but not CL + N, in subject position must be understood as definite in Mandarin, while CL + N, but not bare nouns, in that position can only be understood as definite in Cantonese. Bare nouns in object position in Mandarin behave like those in Vietnamese in having both definite and indefinite readings, but those in Cantonese only have an indefinite reading. They propose an account for the facts in terms of an unvalued D feature in T in the two

Chinese dialects, but not in Vietnamese. If the unvalued D features on T must be valued by a DP in a local c-command domain, essentially SpecTP, it then follows that subjects in the former must be definite, but that in the latter need not be. Apart from the issue of how some finer distinctions between bare nouns and CL + N in the Chinese dialects can be made and brought to bear on their interpretations in subject position, it is yet to be seen whether the difference in the D feature on T can be justified by relating it to something else.

In light of the feature-based analysis of definiteness, it is an interesting issue as to how Vietnamese children understand definiteness, given that they are not told of the D feature. Ni-La Lê, Hannah Forsythe and Cristina Schmitt (*Vietnamese children's interpretation of definite noun phrases*) run two experiments testing Vietnamese children's knowledge of definiteness and number. They find that they have little trouble with definiteness, but struggle with number. These results are just the opposite of those acquiring English and Spanish, languages that have definite determiners and explicit marking of plurality. Vietnamese differs from English and Spanish in that it mostly needs a classifier between a numeral and a noun. It has no determiners apart from the demonstratives and expression of plurality is optional. The puzzle here is why Vietnamese children have no trouble interpreting the sequence classifier followed by a noun as being definite, despite the lack of explicit marking for it. It is also of interest as to how the morphosyntactic differences between English and Spanish on the one hand, and Vietnamese on the other, account for the acquisition facts.

However, there is an alternative way to understand the results. In their experiments, the children are shown pictures in which some animals are standing in a straight line in front of a tree. They are asked to select an animal standing near the tree. The children select the animal that is nearest to the tree, apparently understanding 'an animal near the tree' as 'the animal nearest to the tree'. It may well be that children understand 'near' to be 'nearest', and there is only one in the line that is nearest to the tree, hence giving the impression that they pick a definite animal. Whether this alternative view is correct is an open question, but one may wonder whether it would be clearer to have some animals standing around the tree,

each at the same distance from it, and some others farther from it. This would exclude the possible interpretation of ‘near’ as being ‘nearest’.

Vagueness and ambiguity is very common in natural language. For instance, a bare numeral like *three* in English has the strong (*exactly*) reading and the weak (*at least*) reading. A question that arises is whether the two readings are from the same lexical item, and if yes, which reading is basic and which reading is derived. Andreas Haida, Tue Trinh and Chi Mai Luong (*Interpretation of numerals under memory load by Vietnamese speakers*) report the results of three experiments for the interpretation of bare numerals in Vietnamese. They are designed to be very similar to previous work on French. However, the results do not support the Fregean view of numerals according to which the strong reading is basic and the weak reading is derived from it. In fact, one of the experiments shows just the opposite. These results are not surprising, however, as the experiments have several confounds. First, French and Vietnamese have different morphosyntax. Second, the test sentences are not entirely the same. One of the test sentences has the item *ít hơn* ‘fewer/less than’, whose French counterpart is not present in the experiment for French. One can nevertheless take the results of the experiments in Vietnamese on their own merit, and use the work on French as reference for the experimental design. The interesting issue is how the morphosyntactic differences between the two languages bear on the different interpretive properties of bare numerals.

Vietnamese is a language in which arguments mostly need not be overt. It differs from other null argument languages like Chinese, Japanese and Korean in that some pronouns have the same forms as kinship terms. The distribution of argument, null or overt in the form of a pronoun or full NP, is of special interest. Binh Ngo, Elsi Kaiser and Andrew Simpson (*Effects of grammatical roles and parallelism on referential form production in Vietnamese spoken and written narratives*) take a novel approach bringing the grammatical roles of both the argument and its antecedent to bear on their distribution. They find that the distribution of arguments shows subject parallelism. Null pronouns are most often used when it is the subject and the antecedent it is related to is also the subject. For other pairings, subject-object, object-subject and object-object, full NPs are most often used. In all cases, overt pronouns are the second preferred

choice. They also find that the modality of the expression, i.e., oral vs written, has no significant bearing on their distributions.

As the basic structure of a sentence is subject-predicate, it is perhaps unsurprising that the language shows subject parallelism. In a series of sentences describing a certain event, once the predication relation is established, the subsequent sentences naturally have the same predication relation with the same subject.

The authors give just four pairs of sentences illustrating the four combinations of grammatical relations. It would have been appropriate to append the whole data set so that the reader can judge how the way the pear story is recounted shows the patterns of distribution of arguments.

As a means of communication, language can be used to express attitudes and opinions. Dung Hoang and Tran Phan (*Gender in Vietnamese*) enumerate a variety of ways in which Vietnamese shows gender bias against women. Much like any language spoken in a culture favoring men over women, there are in Vietnamese more terms for males than females and male-denoting terms have finer-distinctions than female-denoting ones (cf. two different lexical items for paternal male siblings *chú* ‘father’s younger brother’ and *bác* ‘father’s older brother’, but only one for paternal female siblings *cô* regardless of age in relation to the father). *Cậu* and *dì* are also the only terms for maternal male and female siblings respectively. This is much like Chinese, hardly surprising given the influence of the Chinese culture in ancient times. For the same reason, many gender-bias (literary-sounding) terms are in fact borrowed from Chinese, e.g., *quả phụ* ‘widow’ (apparently no word for ‘widower’), and *đoan trinh* ‘chaste decent’ (only for females), cf. Chinese *guǎ fù* 寡婦, *duàn zhèng* 端正.

Cultural attitudes toward gender also manifest themselves by grammatical means. In N-N coordination, a male-denoting N comes before a female-denoting one, e.g., *cha mẹ* ‘father mother, i.e., parents’, *thầy cô* ‘male teacher and female teacher’, with few exceptions, e.g., *vợ chồng* ‘wife and husband, i.e., married couple’. It may be argued that the order reflects the bias that women are subordinate to men, much like expressions of N-N coordination indicating social hierarchy, e.g., *cha con* ‘father son’, *chủ thợ* ‘master worker’.

As can be seen from the above discussion, the papers in this volume present a variety of empirical facts that bear on a range of theoretical issues

in major areas of linguistic theory, many of which still need a further look. Insofar as linguistic theory is required to have a wide coverage of facts, especially those in a less well-studied language like Vietnamese, the papers collected here deepen our understanding of the complexity of natural language.

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Paul Law is a research fellow at the T.T. Ng Chinese Language Research Center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research interests include syntactic theory and the syntax-semantics-morphology interface. He has worked on Romance and Germanic languages, Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese, Malagasy, Tagalog, Naxi and Vietnamese.