

**VIETNAMESE MODAL SYSTEM OF
DYNAMIC POSSIBILITY:
A DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE***

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ABSTRACT

This preliminary work examines the Vietnamese diachronic data to first attempt a glimpse into the inventory of specialized dynamic modal elements in Vietnamese, and to adumbrate a rough chronology of this modal system. It further traces back the syntacto-semantic changes resulting in two distinct instances of the dynamic modal *được*. I argue that post-verbal *được* is immediately derived from a resultative marker, and there once existed a pre-verbal *được* with a pure opportunity reading, which was later reanalyzed as *được* with a benefactive interpretation. The paper thus provides an explanation to the long-held puzzle regarding the sole post-verbal position of dynamic modal *được* in Present-Day Vietnamese.

Keywords: dynamic possibility, modality, *được*, syntactic/semantic reanalysis, diachronic syntax, Vietnamese

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1. INTRODUCTION

Pre-verbal *có thể* and post-verbal *được* are standard means to express dynamic possibility, both jointly and individually, in Present-Day Vietnamese (PDV). See (1) for an example. A diachronic investigation into surviving texts going furthest back to the 12th century, or the late Archaic period in T.C. Nguyễn's (2001) periodization, however suggests that a distinct group of pre-verbal modal auxiliaries once dominated this role until the conclusion of the Ancient period.¹ Post-verbal *được* gained in importance towards the end of this stretch, and *có thể* became regularly used only quite recently.

- (1) *Tí có thể đi được.*
Tí can go DUOC²
'Tí can go/walk.'

Dynamic modality is understood in this paper as covering ability, opportunity, and dispositional readings. This term partially overlaps with Portner's (2009) category of dynamic (volitional) modality: I view dispositional modality as referring to inner dispositions/attributions of a non-volitional (inanimate) subject. It is different minimally from ability modality, which concerns the stable properties of a volitional subject. An opportunity reading is then associated with "accidental or stable properties of the utterance situation" (Hackl 1998:26). The modal elements exhibiting this set of readings are taken in Hackl (1998) to share a common constraint of having the predicate they select denote a change of state. This change is attributable to properties inherent to the subject and/or the utterance context they are in.

¹ T.C. Nguyễn (2001) divides the history of Vietnamese into six periods: Proto Viet (8th to 9th century), Archaic Vietnamese (10th to 12th century), Ancient Vietnamese (13th to 16th century), Middle Vietnamese (17th century to first half of 19th century), Modern Vietnamese (1881 to 1945), Contemporary Vietnamese (1946 to present).

² The abbreviations are glossed as follows: CL: classifier; COMP: complementizer; CONJ: conjunction; COP: copula; HON: honorific term; NEG: negative marker; PERF: perfect marker; PRT: particle; SG/PL: singular/plural. Due to its extreme polyfunctionality, all instances of *được* are glossed as DUOC for simplicity's sake.

Regarding the scholarship on the Vietnamese modal system, the literature up to this point, which are predominantly synchronic in nature, has laid disproportionate emphasis on the acquisitive modal *được*.³ This is mainly because this modal has multiple functions and curiously appears after the main verb, whereas other modal elements generally surface pre-verbally. (A substantial amount of attention is also given to related forms in other Southeast Asian languages and Chinese varieties for a similar reason.) The first aim of this work is to provide a coherent and diachrony-informed picture of the many grammatical means communicating dynamic possibility in the language, and call attention to an inventory of forgotten pre-verbal dynamic modal verbs. Among which is the pre-verbal *được*, which I will argue to have once existed with a standard opportunity reading. This modal use will be viewed as the missing link in the development of lexical verb *được* into pre-verbal benefactive circumstantial and deontic modal *được*. The second aim concerns the study of post-verbal modal *được* itself, a subject of intensive synchronic research for more than 25 years (see Simpson 1997; Duffield 1998 *et seq.*; Enfield 2003; Sybesma 2008 (to a lesser extent), and Thepkanjana and Ruangmanee 2015, among others). Specifically, I will offer a diachronic look that leads to an alternative proposal on the syntacto-semantic mechanism whereby this post-verbal modal evolved. The findings of this research are therefore expected to shed more light on how modality is configured syntactically in the language.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces the three classes of dynamic possibility-denoting means in Vietnamese and sketches out the rough historical development of this modal system. Section 3 focuses specifically on the two paths of syntactic/semantic reanalysis which result in the dynamic *được* in both post-verbal and pre-verbal positions. Section 4 concludes the paper.

³ The term “acquisitive modal” is adopted from van der Auwera *et al.* 2009. An acquisitive modal is understood as “an expression of modality that goes back to a predicate meaning ‘acquire, get’” (van der Auwera *et al.* 2009:271). Typical with these modal readings are ‘get’ etymons, of which an example is shown in (i).

(i) *I get to watch TV tonight/at night.* (van der Auwera *et al.* 2009:271)

2. MODALS OF DYNAMIC POSSIBILITY: A DIACHRONY

For the purpose of this paper, I propose that the development of Vietnamese modal expressions of dynamic possibility be divided into three stages. Stage I is characterized by a set of canonical pre-verbal modal verbs already dominant during the Archaic and remained so during the Ancient period. Stage II features the post-verbal modal *được*. This modal gradually rose in prominence starting in the late Ancient period and continuing into the early Middle Vietnamese period. Stage III began no later than the early 19th century (the start of the Modern Vietnamese), with the rise of *có thể*, first as a reinforcer but later as an alternative to *được*.

2.1 Stage I: pre-verbal modal verbs

The list of pre-verbal modal verbs of dynamic possibility should include at least *hay*, *khá/khả*, and *kham*.^{4,5} They are all obsolete in PDV, a fact which will become important in the later discussion. Note that many of the following examples display a co-existence of these modals and a post-verbal *được* (with most likely a resultative reading). This co-occurrence will be addressed in sec. 2.2.

Hay is first attested in the 12th-century *Phật thuyết đại báo phụ mẫu ân trọng kinh* (*Sutra on the Profundity of Filial Love*), the oldest surviving text written in the Nôm script, see (2). It continues to show up fairly often throughout the 16th century, as shown in examples (3-6). In contrast, *hay* is only attested sporadically during the later two centuries, and its modal reading is not listed in de Rhodes's (1651) dictionary. This might suggest that its dynamic use already started decreasing in popularity by the 17th century at the latest. From the 19th century onwards, the dynamic use of *hay* is mostly absent from the linguistic record.

⁴ The negative modal *khôn* 'cannot, hardly able to' is excluded to keep the discussion more focused.

⁵ For the reason that will be clear in sec. 3.2, this inventory should also include pre-verbal *được*.

- (2) *Hay tu bao nhiêu nét khổ*
can observe many ascetic.practice
'can observe various ascetic practices'⁶ (*Phật thuyết*, 12th c.)
- (3) *Ai hay cốt được, mới óc là đã.*
who can understand DUOC only say COP complete
'Only those who can successfully understand it are said to be complete.'
(*Cư trần*, 13th c.)
- (4) *Chí đàn bà nhòn chung mình tốt đẹp hay nghiêng*
will woman rely.on PRT self beautiful can overturn
được quốc thành.
DUOC state
'Women, aware of their own beauty, can cause the downfall of a state.'
(*Khóa hư*, 14th c.)
- (5) *Đất nào hay cãi ngược người ta?*
land which can argue against people
'What sort of land could argue against people?' (*Thập giới*, 15th c.)
- (6) *Người chín hay nói*
2SG essentially can speak
'You essentially can speak' (*Nam Xương*, 16th c.)

Although *hay* typically occurs with a volitional subject, it is sometimes found with non-volitional subjects, see (7).

- (7) a. *Tứ mùa nước chảy chẳng hay mòn*
four season water flow NEG can worn
'Water flows all four seasons but it cannot be worn' (*Hồng Đức*, 15th c.)

⁶ Glossing and translations of the diachronic data are mine.

- b. *Kim cương [...] lại hay hoại được muôn vật.*
diamond but can destroy DUOC all thing
'Diamond [...] however can destroy all things.' (*Giải Kim cương*,
17th c.)

The modal *khá/khả* has fewer textual attestations compared to *hay*, and is found irregularly in written texts between the 12th and the 17th century. In most cases, *khá/khả* is followed by non-passivized verbs and typically expresses ability, see (8-10). Instances where the verb directly after *khá/khả* is passivized, as in (11), are much less common. When this occurs, *khá/khả* expresses opportunity. These two uses are also attested for the Classical Chinese *kě* 可 'can' (cf. Pulleyblank 1995; Meisterernst 2008). This might suggest that *khá/khả* is a typical case of 'wholesale' borrowing from Chinese.

- (8) *Mẹ dẫu rằng sao khả báo được.*
mother dear say how can repay DUOC
'My dear mother, how could I repay [her favor]?' (*Phật thuyết*,
12th c.)
- (9) *Tham thiền kén bạn, nát thân mình mới*
practice Zen choose friend disintegrate body self only
khả hồi ân.
can return favor
'When practicing Zen, I choose friends, only until our physical body
disintegrates could I return the favor.' (*Cư trần*, 13th c.)
- (10) *Nghiệp Tiêu Hà làm khả kịp*
achievement Xiao.He do can reach
'The achievement of Xiao He, I can match it.' (*Quốc âm*, 15th c.)
- (11) *But ấy là lòng, But khả cầu.*
Buddha that COP heart Buddha can seek
'Buddha, that is but your heart, Buddha can be sought.' (*Quốc âm*,
15th c.)

Already in De Rhodes' (1651) dictionary the dynamic reading of *khá* is not included, although its deontic reading as 'should' is mentioned. If one subscribes to the path of semantic development by Bybee et al. (1994) and van der Auwera and Plungian (1998) in which dynamic ability develops into deontic possibility, it seems that after *khá* took on the deontic meaning, its earlier dynamic use started to fade away gradually.

Instances of *kham* as dynamic modals are exceedingly scarce, with a mere few examples evidenced in the written texts from between the 14th and the 16th century. *Kham* is assumed to be a cognate of the Chinese *kān* 堪 'can'.

- (13) *Quay đầu chấp bóng, ắt kham cười*
 turn head keep shadow necessarily can laugh
Diễn Nhã Đạt Đa.
 Yajiadatta
 'Turning the head to look at his own reflection, laughable was Yajiadatta.' (*Cư trần*, 14th c.)
- (14) *Quân tử kham khuôn được thừa danh*
 person.of.noble.character can follow DUOC its name
 'Persons of noble character can model themselves on my name.'
 (*Quốc âm*, 15th c.)
- (15) *chẳng kham lại lên non Vọng Phu vậy.*
 NEG can again go.up mountain await husband PRT
 '[I] can no longer return to the Husband-Awaiting Rock.'
 (*Nam Xương*, 16th c.)

Among the three modals, *hay* appears to be the most commonly employed. It also enjoyed the longest life span compared to the others. *Khá/khả* and *kham* were much less frequently attested and appeared mainly in literary works. *Hay* is also the only modal of this class which appears not to have a Sinitic origin. It is largely plausible that the remarkable continuation of *hay* is attributable to its native origin. Indeed, the Nôm character 𠵼 representing *hay* is generally taken to denote a native sound or concept,

although there is a disagreement on whether the character is borrowed (Wen 1933; Wang 1948) or a native invention (Hoàng 1999).

2.2 Stage II: post-verbal *được*

Vietnamese acquisitive *được* is cognate with the Sinitic *dé* 得 which is assumed to be borrowed from Chinese into the Common Viet-Muong vocabulary (Trần 2014). Note that post-verbal *được* single-handedly yielding a clear dynamic reading is an extremely rare sight in Ancient Vietnamese. First, *được* is more often found along with modal verbs (see sec. 2.1). With this configuration, the yielded modal reading is understandably attributable to the modal verbs (although it is unclear if or how much *được* also contributes to this construal). Second, in the absence of a pre-verbal modal, *được* is usually understood as a resultative marker meaning ‘be successful’ and only occasionally allows for a modal reading.

Some of the earliest cases of seeming ambiguity in fact lean towards the resultative reading under a closer look. For example, (16) does not bring about a modal reading for *được*. This is because *muốn* ‘want’ as a (desirative) control predicate only allows for a vP/VP complement (Grano 2015) and not a larger projection like Mod(al)P(hrase).

- (16) *Đệ tử nhược muốn trả được ơn ấy thời vì chung*
disciple if want repay DUOC favor that then for PRT
áng nà viết lục kinh này
parents write sutra this
(i) ‘If the followers want to repay successfully that favor, write this sutra for their parents’ sake.’
(ii) #‘If the followers want to be able to repay that favor, write this sutra for their parents’ sake.’ (*Phật thuyết*, 12th c.)

This syntactic constraint is manifested in the ungrammaticality of (17), where the pre-verbal modal *có thể* ‘can’ is explicitly realized. As will be made clear in sec. 3.1, I assume that *được* in a lower ModP enters an Agree relation with a ModP above VP to jointly express a dynamic modal reading. Since a higher ModP is impossible as the complement of *muốn*,

post-verbal *được* in (16) cannot be interpreted as a modal verb, but rather as a resultative marker.

- (17) **Tí muốn có thể bơi được.*
 Tí want can swim DUOC
 Int: Tí wants to have the ability to swim.’

One of the early attestations of *được* with a clear modal interpretation might be one from the 14th-century translated work *Thiền tông khóa hư ngữ lục* (*Zen Lessons on Emptiness*), see (18). *Được* in this case translates the Chinese modal *néng* 能 ‘can’ in the original work,⁷ and is intended to parallel *khá* of the following clause. These clear cases of modal interpretation are rarely attested prior to the 16th century.

- (18) *Cái chết đến ai ưa được, hạn lại đó*
 CL death come who love DUOC time come challenge
ai khá ngăn đấy.
 who can stop PRT
 ‘When death arrives no one could love it, when the time comes no one could stop it.’ (*Khóa hư*, 14th c.)

But how did the dynamic reading of post-verbal *được* come into existence? I venture to hypothesize that the decline in use of the original pre-verbal modals may highly correlate with the emergence of *được*. That is, through the frequent co-occurrence of pre-verbal modals and post-verbal resultative *được* in modalized environments, the latter gradually took on the dynamic reading. This way, *được* was over time reanalyzed as a modal element proper and started to function as an alternative way to express what canonical modals were originally responsible for, rendering them redundant. I will return to this process of reanalysis in sec. 3.1.

⁷ The original text is as follow:
 (i) 死 至 誰 能 戀 (quoted in Nguyễn 1972:154)
sǐ zhì shuí néng liàn
 death come who can love
 ‘When death arrives no one could love it.’

2.3 Stage III: pre-verbal modal expression *có thể*

Although *có thể* ‘can’ is the standard means to signal dynamic possibility in PDV, it seems to have gained popularity only from the 19th century onwards. One of the earliest attestations of *có thể* is in (19) whereby a dispositional construal is confirmed.

- (19) *Trên đầu ngó lên thấy thạch nhũ như là màn treo*
above head look up see stalactite like curtain
có thể bỏ xuống
can drop down
‘Looking up I saw above my head a stalactite looking like a curtain that can drop down.’ (*Chuyến đi*, 1875)

Note that *có thể* at the time still behaved more or less like (part of) a periphrastic construction instead of a fully lexicalized adverbial phrase it is assumed today. That is, the string appears to consist of *có* ‘have, exist’ and *thể* ‘potential, ability’. This view is reasonable as *có thể* is sometimes accompanied by *mà*, an overtly realized C-element, see (20).

- (20) *Đồ thắt bằng tre mây có thể*
object weave by bamboo rattan have potential
mà đựng bát chén
to hold bowl
‘bamboo- or rattan-weaved object which can (= has the potential to) hold bowls’ (Huỳnh-Tĩnh 1895:253)

More interestingly, *có thể* seems to have *có lẽ* (lit. ‘have reason/logic’) as its predecessor, see (21). Here, the string is also followed by *mà*, revealing its periphrastic nature. In PDV, *có lẽ* is however restricted to an epistemic reading of ‘might’ or ‘maybe’.

- (21) *việc này tôi phải cứ sự thật, chẳng có lẽ*
 issue this 1SG must depend truth NEG have reason
mà binh bên dòng được
 to defend side congregation DUOC
 ‘As for this issue, I must act in accordance with the truth, I cannot
 (= have no reason to) just take our congregation’s side’ (*Thư № 20*,
 1759)

All in all, I hypothesize in this section that *có thể* as a periphrastic construction first came to reinforce or emphasize the modal reading of post-verbal *được*. It was then reanalyzed as a modal element independent of the presence of *được*. Syntactically, *có thể* in PDV is most likely base-generated under ModP above VP, the same projection hosting the three archaic pre-verbal modals.

3. PATHS TO THE DYNAMIC ĐƯỢC

Được and its Southern alternative *đặng* are highly polyfunctional. I assume *được* started out as a transitive verb carrying the prototypical reading ‘acquire’ or ‘come to have/possess’ (cf. Enfield 2003) when it selects for an object DP, see (22-23).⁸ Aspectually, *được* is a typical achievement verb which describes a non-agentive punctual event leading to the beginning of a state. Modal extensions of *được* in both pre- and post-verbal positions are taken to derive from this lexical verb.

- (22) *Miền được lòng rồi, chẳng còn pháp khác.*
 as.long.as DUOC mind zen NEG have dharma other
 ‘As long as one acquires a Zen mind, there is no other dharma.’
 (*Cư trần*, 13th c.)

⁸ The claim that various modal readings go back to a verbal meaning of acquisitive verbs like *được* is also proposed for other languages where acquisitive modality is prominent (van der Auwera et al. 2009).

- (23) *Của ấy nào ai từng được chầy.*
wealth that which who used.to DUOC long
'That kind of wealth no one has ever had for long.' (*Quốc âm*,
15th c.)

3.1 Post-verbal *được*

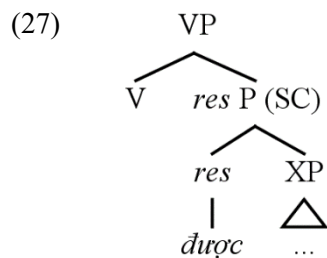
In a post-verbal position, *được* can function as a resultative marker meaning roughly 'be successful, with success' (Trần 2014; Hoàng 2006), see (24).

- (24) a. *Thầy Hoa Lâm tu đạo cảm được hai*
master Hoa Lam practice way influence DUOC two
hùm đến châu gần.
tiger come gather near
'Master Hoa Lam by practicing Zen successfully influenced two
tigers to attend his audience.' (*Khóa hư*, 14th c.)
b. *Cốc được tính ta nên Phật thực*
understand DUOC nature self become Buddha true
'Once one successfully understands one's own nature, one
becomes a true Buddha.' (*Vịnh Vân Yên*, 14th c.)

I hypothesize that this resultative marker is derived from transitive verb *được* as V2 of a V1-V2 configuration. In this position *được* still retains its lexical meaning, and must share with V1 the same argument structure. This transitive V2 then gradually takes on a more functional meaning when referring to the endpoint of the event denoted by the preceding verb. Adopting Cao's (1999) path of grammaticalization for Chinese V2 *dé*, I assume *được* first developed its intransitive use before turning into a fully functional category that is a resultative marker, a process closely tied to the loss of argument structure (Roberts and Roussou 2003). As a point of illustration, *được* in (25-26) can in principle be interpreted as either a transitive verb or a resultative marker.

- (25) *Nghề võ mạnh chung thu được công trăm trận đánh.*
 career military strong PRT claim DUOC credit hundred battle fight
 (i) ‘A strong military career is reflected in collecting and acquiring credit of hundreds of battles.’
 (ii) ‘A strong military career is reflected in collecting successfully credit of hundreds of battles.’ (*Khóa hư*, 14th c.)
- (26) *Năm hồ chiếm được chốn câu chày*
 five lake seize DUOC place fish net.cast
 (i) ‘In the Five Lakes appropriating and acquiring a place for fishing and net casting’
 (ii) ‘In the Five Lakes occupying successfully a place for fishing and net casting’ (*Hồng Đức*, 15th c.)

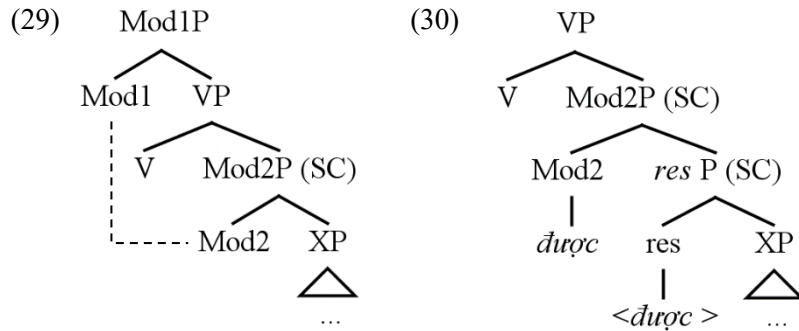
Syntactically, I propose that the resultative marker heads a small clause selected by V (cf. Meisterernst 2022). Inspired by Ramchand 2008, this projection is referred to as *resP*.



I further suggest that the dynamic reading of post-verbal *được* is derived directly from its resultative reading. This is unsurprising as a semantic extension from resultativity to ability/potentiality is observed cross-linguistically (Enfield 2003; Mari and Martin 2007; Lien 2011). In (28), *được* can no longer be interpreted as a transitive verb, but ambiguity remains as to whether it has a resultative or a dynamic reading.

- (28) *Nợ quân thân chưa báo đượ*
 debt king father not.yet repay DUOC
 (i) ‘The debt towards my king and my father I have yet to pay back successfully.’
 (ii) ‘The debt towards my king and my father I have yet to be able to pay back.’ (*Quốc âm*, 15th c.)

To account for the post-verbal dynamic *đượ* syntactically, I adopt Cheng and Sybesma’s (2003, 2004) analysis of Cantonese post-verbal *dak* 得 ‘can’ where not one but two structural positions for dynamic modality are postulated. Accordingly, the pre-verbal Mod1P and the post-verbal Mod2P wrap around VP, the former licensing the latter, see (29). I propose that resultative *đượ* is at first moved to Mod2P before it is finally reanalyzed as base-generated there, see (30). The pre-verbal modal position, once occupied by the archaic modal verbs, is then filled with *có thể*, and the two modals form a kind of *doubling* via Agree.⁹ This line of thinking is well-aligned with Duffield’s (1999) proposal to treat *có thể* as an abilitative/alethic modal and post-verbal *đượ* as being parasitic on the position it occupies. Syntactically, adopting the reanalysis of *đượ* from a (lower) resultative head to a (higher) secondary modal head is also a less costly solution than assuming the movement of the entire verb phrase over a pre-verbal modal head *đượ* to achieve the right surface order (as proposed in Simpson 1997 and Duffield 1998).



⁹ See Phan (2023) for more evidence in support of this configuration.

3.2 Pre-verbal *được*

Previously I have shown that dynamic modal verbs predominantly occupy a pre-verbal position throughout the development of the Vietnamese modal system. An immediate question that arises is: why does Vietnamese not have a pre-verbal dynamic *được*? The situation is even more peculiar given *được*, besides its post-verbal position, also appears pre-verbally as a benefactive circumstantial modal and a deontic modal, see (31).¹⁰

- (31) *Tí được đi bơi.*
Tí DUOC go swim
(i) ‘Tí gets to (= to have a chance to) go swimming.’ (*benefactive*)
(ii) ‘Tí is allowed to go swimming.’ (*permissive*)

A deeper look into the diachronic data however suggests that such a pre-verbal *được*, although already obsolete in PDV, was once in existence. (32-34), extracted from written texts dating from the 17th to the 19th centuries, clearly exemplify an evaluation-neutral dynamic modal use of *được*. That is, *được* in these examples is infelicitous with a permissive or a benefactive circumstantial reading. It is noteworthy that while both instances of dynamic *được* realize opportunity modals linking the actions denoted by its complement VP to the outside circumstance, only the benefactive *được* necessarily communicates that the said actions take place to the advantage of the subject. Such a notion of subject benefit is not warranted in these examples. I take the benefactive *được* to be distinct from a pure dynamic *được* essentially in this additional component of benefactivity. This point will be returned to shortly.

¹⁰ For the lack of better term, the label *benefactive* is chosen here to reflect the advantage generated by the external circumstances which is evaluated as beneficial to the subject. By invoking this label, I do not make reference to syntactic constructions featuring something like a verb of giving or a dative marker. I thank a synonymous reviewer for their comment on this terminological issue.

- (32) a. *Mà Đức Chúa Giê-su lấy hình ấy cho được*
 CONJ HON lord Jesus take image that for DUOC
vào lòng chúng tôi
 enter heart 1PL
 ‘Then Lord Jesus Christ assumed that form to be able to find a way into our heart’ (*Những điều ngấm*, 17th c.)
- b. *Bấy giờ người chẳng biết làm sao, xin đợi ba*
 that.time 2SG NEG know do what ask wait three
ngày cho được đem Phê-rô đến trước
 day for DUOC bring Peter to in.front.of
mặt vua làm chứng sự ấy.
 face king bear.witness affair that
 ‘At that time, he did not know what to do, so he asked the king to wait for three days so that he could bring Peter to the court to bear witness to that affair.’ (*Thiên Chúa*, 17th c.)
- c. *Đến ngày thứ năm, là ngày các Giu-dêu ăn thịt*
 to day order five be day PL Jew eat meat
thịt chiên [...], cho được nhớ nghĩa thuở xưa Đức
 meat sheep for DUOC remember grace time past HON
Chúa Trời cho khỏi làm tôi nước I-chi-tô
 lord sky make avoid be slave country Egypt
 ‘On the fifth day, the day the Jews eat lamb [...] so that they could remember how in the past the Lord saved them from becoming slaves in Egypt’ (*Đức Chúa*, 17th c.)
- (33) a. *song le đến sau cũng một năm ấy đức thầy cả Vitvò*
 but later also one year that HON priest Bishop
Berita sang nước chúng tôi cho được làm
 Berita come country 1PL for DUOC create
Concilium để mà sửa mọi sự về việc đạo
 council in.order PRT fix every thing about affair religion
 ‘but later that year Bishop Berita came over to our country so that he could create a council aiming at resolving all the faith-related affairs’ (*Thư Nê 6*, 1702)

- b. người nghe tin ấy liền sai bốn ông
 3SG hear news that immediately dispatch four CL
 chính đội trưởng và năm mươi quân cho được
 principle captain CONJ fifty soldier for DUOC
 tìm Phatêrê ấy trong xứ nhiều nơi
 search father that in region many place
 ‘upon hearing the news, he immediately dispatched four warrant
 officers and fifty soldiers in order to be able to search for that
 Father in many parts of the region’ (*Thư № 6, 1702*)
- c. cho nên chúng tôi phải làm tờ này cho được
 therefore 1PL have.to make sheet this for DUOC
 làm chứng sự thật cho danh cha cả sáng
 testify truth for name Father Glory
 ‘we therefore had to compose this letter so that we could testify
 the truth for the glory of our Father’s name’ (*Thư № 7, 1703*)
- d. thằng bé đi cùng tôi nó đã chạy đến kê
 CL little go with 1SG 3SG PERF run arrive place
 Hâu cho được bảo bốn đạo làng ấy cho biết
 Hâu for DUOC tell this religion village that for know
 những sự trái lẽ làm vậy
 PL NOM against moral do so
 ‘the boy travelling with me ran to Hâu village so that he could tell
 the Christians there about those immoral deeds’ (*Thư № 10, 1706*)
- e. những kẻ đã lên chức thầy cả cũng phải làm
 PL CL PERF rise rank priest also must do
 hết sức cho được nên muối đất và
 exhaust effort for DUOC become salt earth and
 sự sáng soi thiên hạ
 NOM light world
 ‘those who were ordained to the priesthood also must strive their
 best so that they could become the Salt of the Earth and the Light
 of the World’ (*Thư № 11, 1732*)

- (34) a. *Nói rồi thì thầy ấy nhắm mắt lại choặng*
 speak already then friar that shut eye back for DUOC
nhớ mọi sự trước sau cho đủ
 remember every affair before after so.that enough
 ‘After saying it, the friar closed his eyes so that he could recall everything’ (Lazaro Phiền, 1887)
- b. *Xin quan lớn cho tôi quân lính và*
 ask mandarin great give 1SG soldier CONJ
thuốc đạn cù túc cho được chống trả phi đảng
 ammunition enough for DUOC fight.against bandit
thì tôi dám đi.
 CONJ 1SG dare go
 ‘Sir, if you could provide me with enough soldiers and ammunition so that I could fight against the bandits then I will go.’ (Lazaro Phiền, 1887)
- c. *liệu phương thế choặng gạt người.*
 calculate method for DUOC deceive person
 ‘looking for ways to be able to deceive others’ (Taberd 1838:136)

Keen readers may notice that the examples in (32-34) all feature the purposive marker *cho* ‘for, in order’, which introduces an infinitival clause with a connotation of purpose. The possibility denoted by *được* is not inherently internal to the subject but is made available through a precursory conscious effort (primarily by the subject). The clause preceding the purposive marker denotes these enabling actions. Examples like (35) show that the sequence [*cho được*] cannot be a single lexical element, i.e. a lexical variant of *cho*. In the absence of an overt DP, I assume *pro* as the subject of the subordinate clause.

- (35) *song le tôi ra sức mà lên bờ cho người ta được*
 but 1SG exert CONJ go.up bank for people DUOC
xem thấy mà cứu lấy kẻ tôi chết đấy chăng
 see see CONJ save take lest 1SG die PRT PRT
 ‘but I exerted myself to climb up the bank so that others could see and save me lest I might have perished’ (Thư № 10, 1706)

Why are there many instances of pre-verbal *được* in this purposive configuration? The answer may lie in the typical association of purpose clauses with a modal interpretation cross-linguistically. See (36) for examples from English, Italian and Romanian: subordinate (purposive) infinitivals normally contain a covert possibility modal element (Bhatt 2006). That the dynamic modality is explicitly spelled out with *được* in (32-34) is thus unremarkable.

- (36) a. *Sue went to Torino to buy a violin.* (English)
 (≈ Sue went to Torino so that she could buy a violin.) (Bhatt 2006:2)
- b. *Gianni è andato a Torino per/a comprare*
 Gianni is gone to Turin for/to to.buy
un violin. (Italian)
 a violin
 ‘Gianni went to Turin to buy a violin.’ (Coniglio and Zegrean 2012:95)
 (≈ ‘Gianni went to Turin so that he could buy a violin.’)
- c. *Ion a sunat pentru a afla noutățile.* (Romania)
 Ion has called for to find.out news-the
 ‘Ion called so that he could find out the news.’ (Coniglio and Zegrean 2012:95)

It is important to note that pre-verbal *được* with a non-biased dynamic reading is also attested in the absence of *cho*, so its occurrence is in fact not restricted to the purposive configuration. See (37).

- (37) a. *lòng đầy đức mến, cho nên chẳng được phạm*
 heart full virtue love CONJ NEG DUOC commit
một tội gì trọng hèn
 one sin what serious trivial
 ‘[their] heart is full of love [for God], because of that they are unable to commit any sin, serious or trivial’ (*Thiên Chúa*, 17th c.)

- b. *đã hỏi Thầy giảng Jacobê Vĩnh có được phê tên*
 PERF ask catechist Jacob Vĩnh PRT DUOC write name
vào nhưng mà đã thưa rằng không được
 in but PERF say COMP NEG DUOC
bởi mù con mắt đã 6 năm nay
 because blind CL eye PERF 6 year this
 ‘[we] already asked if Mr. Jacob Vĩnh the catechist could sign his name but he answered that he could not because his eyes have been impaired for six years’ (*Thư № 8, 1703*)
- c. *tôi [...] thấy thầy Thiêm đọc một tờ lý đoán*
 1SG see catechist Thiêm read one CL judgment
phạt Đức Cự trong ấy nói nhiều lời tôi
 punish HON elderly in there say many word 1SG
chẳng được thuộc hết
 NEG DUOC memorize exhaust
 ‘I [...] saw Mr. Thiêm the catechist read a judgment specifying the punishment of the Honorable in which it mentioned many things I could not memorize in their entirety’ (*Thư № 18, 1759*)
- d. *may đâu lúc đó trăng lại tỏ hơn,*
 lucky where time that moon then bright more
nên tôi đừng xem thầy ấy rõ ràng
 CONJ 1SG DUOC see friar that clear
 ‘luckily the moonlight was brighter at the time, so I was able to see that friar clearly’ (*Lazaro Phiền, 1887*)
- e. *Sự tôi chịu cực mười năm nay thì đã*
 thing 1SG endure hardship ten year this then PERF
đủ mà đền tội tôi rồi. Bây giờ tôi
 enough CONJ redeem sin 1SG already now 1SG
đặng chết bằng an.
 DUOC die peace
 ‘My enduring hardship in the past ten years is already enough for me to redeem my sin. Now I can die peacefully.’ (*Lazaro Phiền, 1887*)

Further, the dynamic modality status of pre-verbal *được* is indisputable in cases where *được* alternates between a pre-verbal and a

post-verbal position without a change in its reading. (38a) and (38b) belong to two consecutive sentences; here *được* can precede or follow the main verb *giúp* ‘help’. In (39) *được* can appear on either side of *tra* ‘investigate, find’ in the same sentence.

(38) a. *Vì vậy kẻ ở xa mà ta chẳng biết mặt,*
 thus person at far REL 1PL NEG know face
thì người ấy nguyện làm lễ, cùng làm mọi
 CONJ person that wish do service CONJ do every
phúc khác, thì cũng được giúp ta
 good.deed other gain also DUOC help 1PL
 ‘Thus for someone living afar whom I do not know about, if that person wishes to celebrate Mass and do other good deeds, then he could also help us’ (*Thiên Chúa*, 17th c.)

b. *và kẻ ở trên thiên đàng cũng giúp được ta*
 CONJ person at on heaven also help gain 1PL
và kẻ đã sinh thì
 CONJ person PERF die
 ‘and those who are in Heaven could also help us and those who passed away’ (*Thiên Chúa*, 17th c.)

(39) *song le chưa tra được chứng nào cho thật,*
 but yet investigate DUOC evidence which PRT true
vậy con xin ở lại đây năm ba ngày nữa
 thus 1SG request stay at here five three day more
hoặc được tra chứng nào chẳng
 perhaps DUOC investigate evidence which PRT
 ‘but I have yet to be able to find any real evidence, thus I am asking to remain here for a few more days so that I perhaps will be able to find some evidence’ (*Thư № 22*, 1759)

The examples above strongly argue for the case of a forgotten pre-verbal *được* with an evaluation-neutral dynamic interpretation. I assume *được* here is derived from the lexical verb *được* and venture to hypothesize that *được* acquired a pre-verbal auxiliary status, and thus a modal reading, when it started to allow predicates to act as its complement. When *được* is

a lexical verb of acquisition, it selects for a nominal phrase. Contexts in which both a predicational interpretation and a nominal interpretation are plausible for the complement of *được* most likely pave the way for its reanalysis from a lexical verb into an auxiliary verb marking opportunity (see also Meisterernst 2019). Purely as a point of illustration, see (40). *Thanh nhàn* here can be understood as either a nominal meaning ‘leisure’ or a predicational adjective meaning ‘leisurely’; the former reading matches the lexical interpretation of *được*, while the latter reading facilitates its modal use. Conceptually, it is not unreasonable to think that the core meaning “come to have” (Enfield 2003) of the lexical *được* is largely preserved for the auxiliary *được*; the difference between the two fundamentally lies in what the subject of *được* is presented with: for lexical *được* what the subject comes to obtain is a physical or abstract entity, for auxiliary *được* it is an opportunity (enabled by some external circumstance) to realize the event denoted by its complement.^{11, 12}

- (40) *Ta được thanh nhàn ta sá yêu*
1SG DUOC leisure(ly) 1SG should love
‘If one gains leisure/ can be leisurely, one should appreciate it’ (*Quốc âm*, 15th c.)

The evaluation-neutral modal *được* is distinguishable from the contemporary benefactive *được*, which biases towards an opportunity the subject appreciates and considers fortunate to experience. For Vietnamese, I claim that this added benefactivity component is in nature not pragmatic but semantically encoded. This goes against Enfield’s (2003:301) claim that pre-verbal *được* does not carry any inherent positive evaluation, citing that it is “compatible with opposite and contrasting value judgments”, as shown in (41). Native speakers of Vietnamese have no problem confirming that while (41a) is unproblematic, *được* must be replaced by the malefactive *phải* ‘have to’ for (41b) to be grammatical. Predictively, having *phải* in lieu of *được* in (41a) also leads to ungrammaticality. As

¹¹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for reminding me to clarify the mechanism through which pre-verbal modal *được* is derived from lexical *được*.

¹² I disagree with Thepkanjana and Ruangmanee’s (2015:125) characterization of pre-verbal *được* as a lexical verb in a serial verb construction.

such, the sense of positivity for *được* (or that of negativity for *phải*) is not a mere implicature that is contextually determined.

- (41) a. *Tôi rất tiếc, ngày mai tôi không được hát*
 I very sorry tomorrow I neg rslt.prr.evnt sing
bài hát này.
 clf song that
 ‘What a shame, tomorrow I will not (get to) sing that song.’
 (Enfield 2003:301)
- b. *Tôi rất mừng, ngày mai tôi không được*
 I very cheerful tomorrow I Neg rslt.prr.evnt
hát bài hát này.
 sing clf song that
 ‘I’m glad, tomorrow I will not (have to) sing that song.’ (Enfield
 2003:301)

Enfield’s (2003) claim for Vietnamese appears to be carried over from Lao and some other mainland Southeast Asian languages whose respective equivalents to *được* (all derived from acquisitive verbs) simply entail a prior clause to the event predicated without specifying that the event is preferential to the subject. A similar scenario seems to be attested for some North Germanic languages. For example, Norwegian modal *få* selecting a VP means that the event denoted by predicate takes place to either the advantage or the disadvantage of the subject, although the latter might be more marked (Lødrup 1996; Askedal 2012; see also Viberg 2012 for Swedish *få*). In addition, the acquisitive modals in these languages allow both (participant-external) possibility and necessity readings. It appears that Vietnamese stands out as a language whose acquisitive modal can be unambiguously benefactive and has only an existential force.

It is postulated here that the contemporary benefactive *được* is derived from the obsolete ‘pure’ circumstantial *được* via a *semantic reanalysis* in the sense of Eckardt (2012). The process started out with the standard dynamic *được* which more often than not implies a positive nature of the happening in its VP complement. This benefactivity implication was at first strictly contextually conditioned, but is later reinterpreted as a proper component of the core semantics of *được*, that is

an inherent, context-independent meaning of the modal. Eckardt (2012:2688) attributes this kind of change to an “urge to *Avoid Pragmatic Overload*.” Pragmatic overload is understood to occur when certain presuppositions needed for the understanding of an element become unwarranted and therefore cannot be accommodated by the addressee without a proper context. Faced with this risk, the addressee might resort to reanalyzing the meaning of the said element so that its semantics becomes aligned with the prominent contexts in which it is found.

As a working hypothesis, I assume that this reclassification of information is facilitated by the tendency for *được* to increasingly associated with contexts of beneficial opportunity. This follows from the emergence of the malefactive *phải* ‘have to’ which is tied to contexts of disadvantage. The presence of *phải* as a modal allows for a neat division of labor between *phải* ([+malefactivity, +necessity]) and *được* ([+benefactivity, +possibility]), a display of stark contrast in both inherent evaluation and modal strength. This division carries over to the realm of deontic modality: while deontic *được* means ‘be allowed to’, deontic *phải* is interpreted as ‘must’.¹³ I further hypothesize that after *được* acquired its benefactivity component, pure opportunity modal *được* as its diachronic predecessor gradually ceased to exist. Much research is needed to substantiate the claims nevertheless.¹⁴

If the discussion so far is on the right track, then we have reasons to believe that this pure possibility use of pre-verbal *được* could be traced back to even the earliest surviving texts. For example, the sentences in (42)

¹³ Note further that *phải* as a lexical verb also has the core meaning of ‘come to have’, but the theme of *phải* is strictly evaluated as negative (leading to meanings like ‘contract’ or ‘suffer from’ (Nguyễn 1997)), while that of *được* is viewed as positive or neutral (i.e. usually, though not necessarily, desirable). Thus, there appears to be a deep-rooted contrast in semantics between these two elements. A further discussion on the matter is however beyond the scope of this work.

¹⁴ By arguing for the existence of pre-verbal *được* as an evaluation-neutral modal auxiliary, it becomes more straightforward as to how other instances of pre-verbal *được* could develop further modal readings. An account like, for example, that in Thepkanjana and Ruangmanee 2015, which proposes a direct reanalysis from the post-verbal dynamic *được* to the pre-verbal deontic *được*, has to answer the question of why the syntactic position of the modal relative to the verb changes when new interpretations develop.

are at least in principle ambiguous between a pure opportunity reading and a benefactive interpretation.

- (42) a. **Được** *mắng tám đáng tiếng*
DUOC hear eight kind sound
'Can/get to hear eight kinds of sounds' (*Phật thuyết*, 12th c.)
- b. *Trăm ngàn muôn kiếp ắt khôn là*
hundred thousand ten.thousand life CONJ hard CONJ
được *gặp*
DUOC meet
'It is hard to be able to/ get to meet in hundreds of thousands of incarnations' (*Phật thuyết*, 12th c.)
- c. *Thị phi tiếng lặng, được dầu nghe*
quarrel voice quite DUOC freely listen
yến thốt oanh ngâm.
swift sing robin sing
'Quarrelling voices quiet down, I can/ get to freely listen to birds singing.' (*Cư trần*, 13th c.)

Consequently, it seems not unreasonable to hypothesize that the opportunity reading of pre-verbal *được* might predate the ability reading of post-verbal *được*. Interestingly enough, Li (2004:228–229) also claims that the Chinese *dé* 得 is attested first with a participant-external (opportunity) reading (3rd century BC to 1st century) and much later with the participant-internal (ability) one. Incidentally, pre-verbal *dé* as a marker of possibility was also common in Middle Chinese but is lost in Present-Day Chinese. This striking parallelism in the development of these two cognates, though deserving further research, seems to reinforce the current hypothesis.

4. CONCLUSION

This work was first tasked with outlining a rough chronicalization for the modal means expressing dynamic possibility throughout the history of Vietnamese. These modal expressions can be divided into three groups

corresponding to three stages of development of the possibility system. Group I consists of at least *hay*, *khá/khả*, *kham* and *được*, which are all merged pre-verbally and no longer in use in PDV. Group II has post-verbal *được* as its sole member. Group III features modal phrases *có thể* and the now outdated *có lẽ*. Diachronic data indicate that pre-verbal modals long anteceded post-verbal *được*, while pre-verbal modal phrases only started to surface quite recently.

The second task of the paper concerned the sketching of the two distinct development paths for *được* as a dynamic modal element, both in a post-verbal and in a pre-verbal position. I started out by suggesting that post-verbal *được* as a modal is derived from a resultative marker, and its peculiar position can be accounted for if Cheng and Sybesma's (2003) "fork modality" is adopted. I subsequently made a case for the once existence of pre-verbal *được* as a dynamic modal proper, an important missing piece of the puzzle regarding the syntactic representation of modality in Vietnamese.

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Appendix: The list of cited texts with the corresponding abbreviation, English translation, and publication data.

Abbreviation	Title of text	English translation	Publication
Chuyên đi	Chuyên đi Bắc Kỳ năm Ất Hợi 1876	Voyage to Tonkin in 1876	Trương 1881
Cư trần	Cư trần lạc đạo phú	Dwelling in the World with the Joy of Practicing Dharma	H.C. Nguyễn 1988
Đức Chúa	Truyện Đức Chúa Giê-su	The Story of Lord Jesus	H. Nguyễn 2003c
Hồng Đức	Hồng Đức Quốc âm thi tập	Poetry Collection of the National Language from the Hong Duc Period	Bùi 2000
Giải Kim cương	Giải Kim cương kinh lý nghĩa	Understanding the Diamond Sutra	Lê 2000
Khóa hư	Thiền tông khóa hư ngữ lục	Zen Lessons on Emptiness	Trần 2009
Lazaro Phiền	Truyện thầy Lazaro Phiền	The Story of Lazaro Phien	T.Q. Nguyễn 1887
Nam Xương	Người con gái Nam Xương	The Married Woman of Nam Xuong	Q.H. Nguyễn 2001
Những điều ngắm	Những điều ngắm trong các ngày lễ trọng	Contemplations on Major Holidays	H. Nguyễn 2003a
Phật thuyết	Phật thuyết đại báo phụ mẫu ân trọng kinh	Sutra on the Profundity of Filial Love	Hoàng 1999
Quốc âm	Quốc âm thi tập	Poetry Collection in the National Language	Bùi 2000

Vietnamese Modal System of Dynamic Possibility

Thập giới	Thập giới cô hồn quốc ngữ văn	Ten Admonitions to Lonesome Spirits in the National Language	Bùi 2000
Thiên Chúa	Thiên Chúa thánh giáo khai mông	A Primer on Christianity	H. Nguyễn 2003b
Thư	Thư người Việt Công giáo thế kỷ 17-18 (collective name mine)	Letters from Vietnamese Catholics in the 17th-18th c.	Đoàn 2008
Vịnh Vân Yên	Vịnh Vân Yên tự phú	Fu on the Van Yen Temple	H.C. Nguyễn 1988

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從歷時角度探討越南語中表可能性的能願模態詞系統

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本文透過歷時語料探索越南語的能願模態詞 (dynamic modals) 系統，並大致勾勒出越南語模態詞分佈的時間順序。此外，我們進一步追溯在語料中發現的兩種能願模態詞 *được* 的句法-語意變化 (syntacto-semantic changes)。本文認為動後 (post-verbal) 模態詞 *được* 是由結果標記 (resultative marker) 發展而來的，而曾經存在的動前 (pre-verbal) 模態詞 *được* 經過重新分析 (reanalysis) 由單純的可能性語意 (opportunity reading) 轉變為受惠性 (benefactive) 語意。為何在現代越南語中能願模態詞 *được* 僅出現於動詞後是一個長期存在的難題，本文藉由歷時的角度為此提出了一個解釋。

關鍵字：表可能性的能願模態詞、模態詞、*được*、句法/語意重新分析、歷時句法、越南語