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Author(s)	Nguyen, Van Hiep
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The History of Approaches in Describing Vietnamese Syntax

NGUYEN Van Hiep

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1. *Phase one: Vietnamese syntax was primarily influenced by Eurocentrism*

The very first presentations of Vietnamese syntax were perhaps just the simple notes of different parts of speech, the role of word order, etc. in the bilingual dictionaries developed by western scholars. From their perspectives, the Vietnamese language was characterized by several factors: (i) Vietnamese words do not change their forms when used in sentences, There is no morphological basis to determine the different parts of speech, and, therefore, Vietnamese can be regarded as a language with no parts of speech; (ii) the order of words in the sentence plays a very significant role in understanding the meaning of the sentence. In “*Dictionarium Anamitico-Latinum*” edited by J.L Taberd (published in 1838), there are notes about functional words (form words) in Vietnamese (with descriptions of their general meanings and their positions in the sentence illustrated by examples). For instance, the author made notes on such words as *chớ, cũng, dẫu, đặng, hầy, hẳng, kẻo, mà, rất, sê, con, cái, and thì*. Several idiomatic expressions were also noted with their uses and usages, for example, “*thì thôi*”, “*thì chớ*”. Clearly, these were disconnected, scattered, unsystematic, and non-representational notes.

By the 1940s, most of the materials related to Vietnamese syntax had mainly been written by foreign scholars. Thus, it comes as no surprise that such materials were imbedded with a European view of Vietnamese syntax, in particular, and of the Vietnamese grammar, in general. Even such Vietnamese scholars as Pham Duy Khiem, Bui Ky, and Tran Trong Kim had a similar view, since they studied linguistics through French, perceiving the concepts and descriptions of syntax in the way of the French language. Consequently, the Vietnamese syntax described by them can be seen as some sort of French syntax illustrated in Vietnamese¹. This period clearly showed the idea of “Eurocentrism,” and, in the specific area of syntax, clearly showed the so-called “word-based

1 However, saying so does not mean that there were no interesting observations as well as appropriate findings, based on native perception. For instance, Trương Vinh Ky in “*Sách mẹo Annam*” (Abrégé de Grammaire Annamite) (in French) classified such words as *con, cái, cục, chiếc, hòn...* general nouns (appellatifs), functioning in completely the same way as other general nouns, namely: *bàn, bện, bộ, bó, bốt, bùm, buồng, cây, cặp, cuốn, đám, đoạn, đồng, gói, khúc, miếng, miếng, múi, mỏ, nắm, nhúm, nùi, pho, tấm, trái, viên, vốc, xấp*. [Truong Vinh Ky 1924 : 16 – 20].

approach.” This approach, while quite appropriate for the process of analyzing European-language syntax, resulted in the following consequences:

First, only content words can function as functional elements of a sentence (such as subject, predicate, object, and so on), since only content words have morphology.

Second, each of the content words in a sentence can have some functional job in the sentence, for content words always have a certain type of morphology.

Third, each sentence element is normally attached to certain parts of speech, since words of the same part of speech share the same kind of morphology [see Nguyen Minh Thuyet 1994: 57-67].

According to this analysis, the then authors of the Vietnamese language all considered attribute as a supplementary element of a sentence, i.e. attribute also functions as a sentence functional element, in the same way as subject, predicate, adverb, object, etc. Such sentences as:

-Người tôi gặp hôm qua là nhà văn (The person I met yesterday is a writer.)

could be considered as a compound sentence, in the light of European linguistics because, in European languages, an equivalent of this sentence would consist of two verbs in finite form. In the English example “The person I met yesterday is a writer,” the two verbs in the finite form are *met* (to meet) and *is* (to be).

What should be noted here is that even though the above-mentioned syntax analysis procedure is not applied when analyzing the Vietnamese language (because Vietnamese does not change its morphology), the consequences of applying such a procedure have purportedly been used for the Vietnamese language for quite a long time. Vietnamese syntax is thus in the shape of an unaccomplished duplicate of European syntax.

As can be seen in the following section, this idea was severely criticized in the 1960s and 1970s, and is virtually dismissed nowadays. Generally speaking, during the period before 1945, the authors tended to mould Vietnamese sentence structure in the form of French sentence structure, with the terms given to Vietnamese sentence elements copied from French sentence elements, such as subject (*sujet*), verb (*verbe*), complement (*complément*), etc. A few of those authors are Vallot P.G, Bulteau R, Tra Ngan, Tran Trong Kim, Bui Ky, Pham Duy Khiêm, Pham Tat Dac.

Nonetheless, that period did record efforts to escape from the idea of the old framework, expressed in the works by Phan Khoi and Le Van Ly.

In 1955, Phan Khoi published “Việt ngữ nghiên cứu” (Vietnamese Language Studies), in which the author criticized the trend of “word-based approach,” asserting over it the “sentence-based approach,” that is, “considering the sentence structure the root, the core in teaching grammar; moving from short to long sentences, from simple to compound sentences. We can classify words into different parts of speech and determine their uses in relation to their positions and functions in the sentence” [1955: 16].

Le Van Ly was regarded as the first author to apply some methods of structural linguistics to describing the syntax of the Vietnamese language. He used some function words, called “words of

witness” (mots de témoin), in combination with other Vietnamese words in order to classify Vietnamese words into such categories as A, B, B' and C (more or less in correspondence with noun, verb, adjective, function word). Later, he mentioned the possible combinations of these words, for example [cited by Emeneau M.B 1951: 228-232]:

AAAAAA	:Sáng cháo gà, tối cháo vịt.
CCCCCCCC	: Dù sao chẳng nữa cũng tại chúng mày cả.
AB	: Nước chảy.
AB'	: Nhà cao.
AC	: Xe tôi.
ABA	: Mẹ về chợ.
ABB	: Chó muốn chạy.

2. *Phase two: Vietnamese syntax was extensively and intensively taught and studied*

In the 1960s and 1970s, when Vietnamese was extensively and intensively taught in schools in both the North and the South of Vietnam, researchers intentionally analyzed Vietnamese sentences in a way that is different from the formula of the French sentence. In this new light, some characteristics of the Vietnamese language were discerned, particularly some functional elements of sentence which had never been seen in French grammar books, namely, the *topic* (by Truong Van Chinh, Nguyen Hien Le), the *theme* of the sentence (by Nguyen Kim Than) or the *word-theme* (by Nguyen Tai Can, I.X Buxtrov, N.V Xtankevich, and so on). The function and the essence of such sentence elements are still controversial today.

In terms of methodology, this phase is characterized by the trend to use the theory of phrase, a very prevalent theory in the former USSR for analyzing Vietnamese syntax. A typical author of this trend was Nguyen Kim Than who claimed that it was necessary to distinguish between the secondary elements of the sentence and the secondary elements of the phrase. In his opinion, the so-called attribute and complement are actually not sentence functional elements. They are just the elements of the noun phrase and the verb phrase when such phrases are parts of the sentence. Nguyen Kim Than accepted only adverbials and theme as genuine secondary elements of the Vietnamese sentence, since these elements are not restricted to phrase functioning as the subject and predicate in a sentence.

Also in this trend, the issue of simple and compound (complex) sentences was revisited. The sentence “Người tôi gặp hôm qua là nhà văn” (The person I met yesterday is a writer) was considered a simple sentence because the phrase “tôi gặp hôm qua” (I met yesterday) is only a secondary element of the noun phrase “Người tôi gặp hôm qua” (The person I met yesterday). Later, this issue was again revisited in the distinction between complex and compound sentences: a complex sentence is a kind of simple sentence of which the elements can be expanded into a S-V structure

(for instance, the previously mentioned sentence “Người tôi gặp hôm qua là nhà văn”), and a compound sentence is a sentence with two or more S-V groups, none of which embedded in another (for example, “Ông nói gà, bà nói vịt”).

It can be observed that the distinction between the sentence’s functional elements and the phrase’s elements was one of the most exciting issues of Vietnamese syntax in the 1960s and 1970s, leading to the non-traditional views of several sentence elements as mentioned above. However, some authors held a more neutral position. For example, the authors of “Ngữ pháp tiếng Việt” (Vietnamese grammar) (1975) - Buxtrov, Nguyen Tai Can and Xtankêvich – accepted the dual characteristic of these sentence elements, “Each major or minor element of a sentence can be expressed by phrase. The components of a phrase are dual: on the one hand, they are part of the phrase because their presence is determined by the lexical-grammar attributes of the phrase’s core; on the other hand, as phrases are part of the sentence, they are dependent elements, typically attribute [1975: 134].

In addition to the new characteristics addressed above, it is important to note other efforts to apply other linguistic theories to studying Vietnamese syntax, especially those studies conducted by foreign scholars, notably Yu.K Lekomtsev và L.C Thompson, for the new ways they brought into analyzing and describing Vietnamese syntax. Both of these authors applied the Immediate Constituents (IC), a very famous method at the time, to studying Vietnamese sentences.

Yu.K Lekomtsev stated his views on Glossematics, being in favor of the abstract mathematical diagram in describing the language, and displayed a complete outline of the structure of Vietnamese simple sentences on the following IC hierarchy:

$$E1 - (E2 - (E3 ((E5 - (E6 - (E7 - (E9 - E8)) - E6)) - E4))))$$

$$7 \quad 6 \quad 5 \quad 4 \quad 3 \quad 2 \quad 1 \quad 1 \quad 2 \quad 3 \quad 4 \quad 5 \quad 6 \quad 7$$

Comparing this schema with the labels of traditional grammar, Lekomtsev identified that E1 is a modal particle, which may locate either at the beginning or at the end of the sentence; E2 is a time adverbial; E3 is a locative adverbial, E4 is locative adverbial, too, but sometimes it is a time adverbial; E5 is a subject, and so on [Lekomtsev 1964; 54-63].

Similar to Yu. K Lekomtsev, L.C. Thompson has used the IC’s method of parsing to study the structure of Vietnamese sentences. L.C. Thompson believed that the IC’s method of parsing was “extremely helpful in understanding the structure of utterance,” and “For a native speaker of a language or for a linguist who knows the language well, division into immediate constituents seems relatively simple and straightforward in a majority of cases [...]. This intuition really represents a deep sense of the structure of the language.” [1965: 109 – 110] The IC analyzing method shows that the structure of Vietnamese sentences is actually the Focal Construction: “The Focal Construction forms restrictive phrases with predicates as head or center. Various kinds of substantives, substantival phrases and even predicates occur as focal complements” [Thompson 1965: 239]. Thompson gave the following illustrations:

Nhà cháy rồi (The house has burned already)

Bạn đã làm cho tôi (A friend did it for me)

Cơm đưa lên (Rice was brought up)

Con chó bị chết (The dog died)

Hai ông ấy học tiếng Việt Nam (Those two gentlemen are studying Vietnamese)

Trên bàn có nhiều cây bút chì (On the table there are a lot of pencils)

Hôm qua mưa to quá (Yesterday it rained hard)

Thế gian có nhiều kẻ hiếu lợi hơn ta (In the world there are still many people greedier than I)

Hai bên cũng chưa có vợ có chồng (Neither of them was married)

Ở bên nam nóng lắm (In the south it's very hot)

Also, single words sometimes appear as focal complements but not as substantives or as predicates: They are some kinds of focals recognized by their positions in the sentence. For example:

Sao ông không đến nhà chơi (Why don't you come to [my] house for a visit?)

Đấy ông thấy làng Phát Diệm (Over there you see the village of Phat Diem)

[Thompson 1965: 239 – 240]

Always, the focal complements are located at the beginning of the sentence and are classified into various types as seen in the following general diagram:

Focal Complexes				Predicate
manner	time	place	topic	
Như thế	hôm qua	tại chợ	tôi	mua nhiều đồ
	Hôm nay		tôi	quên làm
Vậy	hôm nay			nóng quá
	Ngày xưa	ở Việt Nam	việc hôn nhân	là do bố mẹ kén chọn cho con cái

Thompson may be the first who recognized the role of the focal head particle “**thì**” in the focal construction of Vietnamese sentences; he then argued that it is not necessary to differentiate between the hierarchy of subject and object (under traditional terms) in describing the structure of Vietnamese sentences. He wrote: “That Vietnamese grammar groups focal complements into one large class (with little to distinguish subject-like entities from temporal, locational and manner complements) is emphasized by the fact that the local head particle **thì** appears as often setting off a topic focal complement as it does with other types.” [1965: 257]

Thompson's description of the Vietnamese sentence structure proved that he was really sharp in terms of typology. Most of what he called topic complements and other types of complements are later defined as the Topic in the Topic-Comment structure, which is considered the basic form of a Vietnamese sentence by Cao Xuân Hao and his followers.

It is essential to mention the research conducted by Tran Ngoc Ninh in the “The structure of Vietnamese language.” [Lua Thieng Publisher, 1973]. What was new was that in his work on Vietnamese syntax, the author used some of the arguments and methods of Generative Grammar originated and developed by N. Chomsky. However, the outcome was not as good as expected, and a few researchers continued to develop it².

Similarly, Duong Thanh Binh (1971) in her effort to use modern theory of linguistics to define Vietnamese syntax, applied the set of concepts and methods of Tagmemics. In her “A Tagmemic comparison of the structure of English and Vietnamese sentences,” the author demonstrated a comparison method from sentence level to word level, and she said that there were four levels and four respective sectors of hierarchy structure from high to low [Duong Thanh Binh 1971: 66 – 69].

Nguyen Dang Liem (1972) combined Tagmemic and Case Grammar in parsing Vietnamese sentences, i.e, he acknowledged the above analysis of level and the role relations among different noun phrases and predicative verb(s). Applying the role relations developed by Fillmore (1868), Nguyen Dang Liem argued that there may be 12 role relations in the Vietnamese language. They are *agentive case, objective case, dative case, benefactive case, comitative case, instrumental case, locative case, directional case, time case, source case, goal case, and extent case*. Of these twelve cases, he said, “Only the agentive and objective cases are nuclear in the clause; the dative, benefactive, and instrumental cases are semi-nuclear in the sense that they can be hosted only by certain verb classes; and the rest of the cases, the comitative, locative, directional, time, source, goal, and extent are satellite in that they occur with most verbs except those otherwise marked.” [Nguyen Dang Liem 1972: 775]

Nguyen Phu Phong [1975, 1976] did not directly point to issues of how to describe the structure of Vietnamese sentences. He, however, applied quantitative and qualitative criteria carefully in his work on such word types as determiner and classifier, as well as the issue of negation, all of which made a great contribution in terms of methodology to the study of Vietnamese grammar.

In the 70s and 80s the Formalism in Vietnamese syntax research tended to be affirmed, and is clearly reflected in some research on Vietnamese sentence constituents by Panfilov, a Russian expert on Vietnamese grammar. Panfilov might be influenced by Jakhontov’s previous research on Chinese sentence constituents, which ultimately aims to build strict methods for parsing and identifying sentence structural constituents. Panfilov built “starting concepts” to help analyze and describe the Vietnamese sentence, systematically and uncontradictorily.

As Jakhontov did with Chinese, Panfilov attempted to do with Vietnamese, formalizing” the

2 Recently Nigel Duffield from Sheffield University has created a Vietnamese Online Grammar Project at <http://www.vietnamese-grammar.group.shef.ac.uk/index.php>

This project is set within the general framework of Generative Grammar.

concept of “completion,” considering it as the foundation for identifying the sentence nucleus. Such concept of the complete sentence is the theoretical foundation for formal methods (for example, the method of ellipsis, combined with other methods such as substitution, complementation) which Nguyen Minh Thuyet and Nguyen Van Hiep used to identify the Vietnamese sentence nucleus [Nguyen Minh Thuyet, Nguyen Van Hiep 1998, reprinted in 2004].

It is necessary to add that Panfilov (1980), and also previously Nguyen Tai Can, N. Xtankevich, and Buxtrov (1975) mentioned what is called “the information structure of the sentence” when analyzing the Vietnamese sentence. This concept originally given by The Functional Linguistics of Praha in the 1930s (accordingly, a sentence is divided into two parts, or two different informative segments: Theme and Rheme, or the Given and the New) is still one of the grammarians’ focuses. In Vietnamese materials, Ly Toan Thang also mentioned this in his writing (1981). That article is now quoted for reference in various graduate and post-graduate theses.

The trend of formalization in Vietnamese syntax research, with respect to the Subject of sentence, has been done thoroughly by Nguyen Minh Thuyet. The author claimed that the criteria for word order and functional words are unreliable for distinguishing formal labels in the sentence structure, so that in an overall solution, the author built a set of formal methods, including ellipsis, substitution, complementation, transformation, and causalisation to expose formal differences of the sentence structural elements. In his PhD thesis “Subject in Vietnamese” (1981), the author provided formal criteria for distinguishing the sentence subject from other constituents, especially distinguishing subject from object, a matter previously paid little attention to in Vietnamese linguistics. The criteria for distinguishing subject from object is the different syntactic attitudes of these two sentence constituents when the nucleus is put into the causal construction model (causalised method), with the central predicate of such causal verbs as “bắt, buộc, sai, nhờ...” (make, force, cause, order, ask...) or such perception and evaluation verbs as “cho (là), coi (là)” (suppose (that), consider (that)...). Such consistent application of formal criteria has brought out interesting results. For instance, the author admits that the subject status of phrases indicating position or location in such sentences as “*Trên đôn* im như tờ”, “*Trong nhà* ra mở cửa”, and also the sentence type “*Tôi còn tiền*” have two kinds of subject: topic subject (“*tôi*”) and grammatical subject (“*tiền*”)...

In addition to the formal tendency, in this period some authors also want to find another approach to Vietnamese grammar. For instance, Phan Ngoc brought out a kind of grammar based on semantic compatibility or semantic grammar. He illustrated this kind of grammar by analyzing the two sentences below:

a) Con cò mổ con cá;

(The stork pecked the fish)

and b) Chị tôi mổ con cá.

(My sister disembowel the fish)

In sentence a), through the context it can be imagined that a living creature (a stork) is eating

another living one (a fish) by using its beak pecking at the fish. This is because ‘mổ’ meaning ‘using the beak to touch something harshly’ shares the same shade of meaning with ‘using beak to touch’ when referring to a stork. On the other hand, the predicate ‘mổ’ (peck) and the object ‘con cá’ (a fish) are related to one another. Mổ (peck) is the act of trying to eat the fish, ‘ăn’ (eating), and the fish is ‘thức ăn’ (the food) of the stork [Phan Ngọc 1983: 211]. Whereas in sentence b), if the subject is replaced then Vietnamese people will comprehend it differently. According to Phan Ngọc, it is the semantic relation among the words that leads to different ways of comprehension: “‘mổ’ in the context now no longer means ‘touching harshly with the beak’ as in the first sentence but ‘open something using a knife.’ Why? Because the meaning ‘touching harshly with the beak’ does not go along with the subject. The subject is a person, ‘chị tôi’ (my sister) does not have a beak, so she can not peck like a stork” [Phan Ngọc 1983: 212]. Phan Ngọc said that a sentence in Vietnamese ‘includes words combined and linked with each other by syntactic meaning outside the one prescribed by the words’ positions,’ therefore the sentences may ‘look the same in appearance’ but are quite different syntactically, because their semantic relations are different. ‘Tôi ăn bát’ (literal translation: I eat bowl) and ‘Người làm xiếc ăn bát’ (acrobat eat bowl) look the same, but in the first sentence, the ‘bowl’ functions as an adverbial while in the second one it is an object. The reason is that in the first sentence it is semantically impossible to combine the act of eating with the ‘bowl’ as something to eat and the sentence can be understood as ‘I eat (something) using a bowl’. In contrast, in the example with the acrobat, there is an implication that he can do what normal people cannot, so he is able to eat the bowl the same way as he eats food. Similarly, in the sentence ‘Tôi ăn bàn’ (literal translation: I eat table), ‘table’ is also an adverbial pointing to the place where I sit to eat, and in the sentence ‘Con mọt ăn bàn’ (termite eat table), ‘table’ is an object [Phan Ngọc 1983: 214].

During the 70s and 80s, there were notable discoveries of Vietnamese sentence structures and their corresponding functional-semantic features. Diep Quang Ban (1981) and Tran Ngoc Them (1985) realized the indispensable role of a constituent called adverbial in the existential sentence. This remains an important way to acknowledge that the adverbial in the existential sentence is, in essence, a kind of mandatory object of the sentence, the second actant of the existential predicate (the first actant is the phrase located after existential predicate).

Whereas the main concept duos used to describe the basic grammatical structures of Vietnamese sentences used to be Subject- Predicative, now it is the new Theme-Rheme duos. It is likely that under the influence of “Theory of sentence actual division” and studies on sentence’s functional perspective”, Luu Van Lang and Tran Ngoc Them (1985) both use the Theme-Rheme concepts to describe the core of the Vietnamese sentence. From the 70s, Luu Van Lang tends to analyse sentences on the basis of hierarchic phrase with the Theme-Rheme core.

Meanwhile, despite the Theme-Rheme concepts, Tran Ngoc Them maintains a close link with traditional grammar by using such familiar concepts as subject, verb, adverbial and complement. He asserts that a Vietnamese sentence has the following four types of nuclei:

Nucleus of characteristics: C → V

Nucleus of relation: C → V-B

Existential Nucleus: Tr → V-B

Mutual Nucleus: xA → yB

So the Theme-Rheme concept that Tran Ngoc Them uses to identify the sentence nucleus is not the same as the concepts of Subject-Verb, nor the *Given-News*, which are often cited in actual division analysis of the sentence. The author states that: 'A sentence often has two parts: one is the syntactic centre (organizing centre) of the sentence, called the Theme; the other is the semantic centre of the sentence, called the Rheme. It always stands after Theme' [1985: 50].

Achievement in Vietnamese syntactic studies, together with the coming into existence of grammar research has led to the debut of a cooperative project, 'Vietnamese Grammar' by the Vietnam Social Sciences Committee in 1983. This project can be evaluated in different ways. On the one hand, the project is considered profound but simple, understandable and applicable. On the other, there's also a sense of compromise and tolerance among different viewpoints, though expressed not very tactfully in the project. For example, the exclusion of complement from sentence constituents, viewing it as a constituent of verb phrase, is a trace of theory of phrase structure in syntactic analysis. The use of Theme-Rheme duos to describe sentence nucleus is an influence of the theory of parsing in terms of hierarchic phrase with the Theme-Rheme core, initiated by Luu Van Lang. The demonstration of phrase structure with pre-head and post-head dependents and the head reflected achievements in the studies of Vietnamese phrase structure.

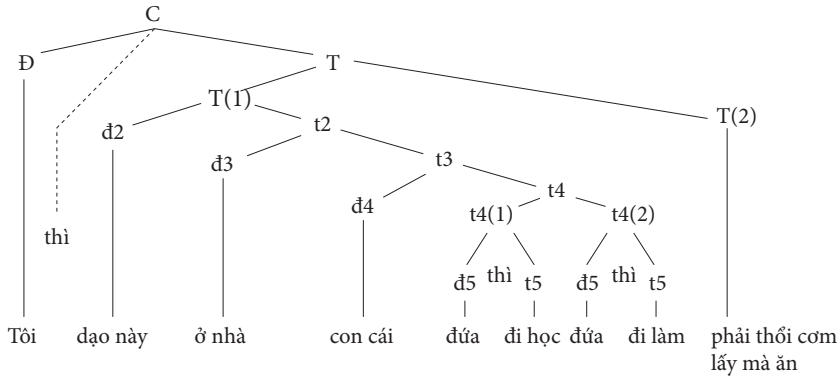
3. Phase 3: Vietnamese syntax changing into functional grammar and grammar based on meaning.

In the early 1990s, research in Vietnamese syntax was activated with the launching of the book 'Tiếng Việt- Sơ thảo ngữ pháp chức năng, tập 1' [Vietnamese language – preliminary of functional grammar, Volume 1] by Cao Xuan Hao. Many discussions were held on the topic of Functional Grammar and Vietnamese after the publication. It must be confessed that Cao Xuan Hao's book blows a new life into national linguistics. Issues raised by the book still remain.

The new idea that the book put forward is a spirit of moving against Eurocentrism in studies of Vietnamese sentences. The author claims that most grammar descriptions in schools are a rigid imitation of the grammar of European languages, especially the idea that the subject-verb structure is the basic structure of Vietnamese sentences. According to the author, the subject-verb structure, as usually comprehended, is only suitable to describe European languages. For such a language as Vietnamese, the basic grammar structure must be Topic-Comment structure.

The two constituents of this structure correspond to the two components of an *act of statement*. In the Vietnamese language, the linear between Topic and Comment is marked by the possibility of inserting words such as *thì, là, mà*. The structure of a declarative sentence can be divided into two

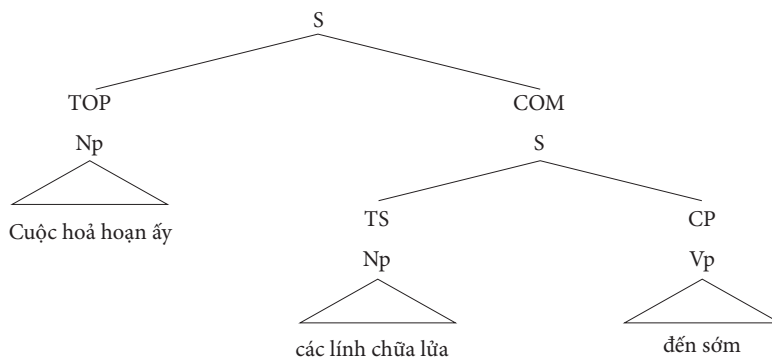
constituents, namely, Topic and Comment. A sentence can have one or more than one level of Topic and Comment. For example, the sentence “*Tôi dạo này ở nhà con cái đứa thì đi học đứa thì đi làm, phải thổi cơm lấy mà ăn*” has five levels of Topic-Comment as follows:



Cao Xuan Hao claims that the functional approach is most appropriate to describe Vietnamese grammar. This approach gives a sense of integration of three aspects of sentence study: structural study, semantic study, and pragmatic study. Yet, it requires that the researcher determine the three aspects unmistakably. According to the author, the misuse of the aspects is a common shortcoming of precursor authors, who usually use semantic features to label sentence constituents, instead of formal features.

Cao Xuan Hao’s book also addresses or re-addresses a host of basic issues in syntactic study, e.g., what is sentence, the status of sentence in the hierarchy of units of language, subject-verb and Topic-Comment structures in contemporary linguistics, semantic structure of sentence, issues in pragmatics, etc. As for specific problem solutions, readers can agree or disagree with the author. Yet, in modern syntax research, researchers cannot help addressing the issues that Cao Xuan Hao mentioned in the book and in his later articles. The balance and simplicity in his Topic-Comment solution for describing Vietnamese sentences is one of his advantages.

Cao Xuan Hao’s viewpoint is supported by several studies in international linguistics. For example, applying findings by Li and Thompson about subject-prominent or topic-prominent languages to Vietnamese, Dyvik (1984) found the role of *particle “thì”* as a distinguishing mark for Topic and Comment structure. Dyvik analyses a sentence such as “*Cuộc hoả hoạn ấy thì các lính chừa lửa đến sớm*” as follows:



Divik claims that « the Vietnamese language could be viewed as a topic-prominent language » [1984 : 63]. However, this analysis is not persuasive enough as the language still has passive voice structure. Thus, another possibility of analysing this language could be subject-verb parallel structure, which is different from the Topic-Comment Structure [1984 : 63].

Under the circumstance of such new tendency, Cao Xuan Hao's explanation and proposal for the Vietnamese sentence structure is both unique and understandable. While some more discussion and adjustment would be necessary, at this time, it can be asserted that the book written by Cao Xuan Hao has greatly contributed to urging the study and development of Vietnamese syntax onto a new development stage. Thus, it could be said that Cao Xuan Hao is the first person to take the initiative in studying Vietnamese syntax in terms of functional grammar.

From different perspectives, Nguyen Minh Thuyet and Nguyen Van Hiep, who combined both modern linguistic theory and international Eastern study without boycotting the linguistic concepts of describing the Vietnamese language used previously, have made every effort to introduce a coherent and unified solution about "The Vietnamese sentence elements" [First edition 1998, second edition 2004]. According to these authors' solution, the elements of Vietnamese sentences are classified and recognized by their content and linguistic appearance. The solution also presents multi-dimensions of the sentence and distinguishes between the nucleus of a sentence and the secondary elements. Apart from analyzing traditional elements such as complement, word-topic, these authors claim that the sentence modification as a secondary element tells the attitude and opinion of the speaker's utterance; and the final modal particle's phrase shows typical illocutionary force. In essence, the research carried out by Nguyen Minh Thuyet and Nguyen Van Hiep has shown the spirit of modern functional grammar.

While Nguyen Minh Thuyet and Nguyen Van Hiep classify and recognize sentence elements based on their content and appearance, Dao Thanh Lan uses 5 criteria to form a framework for the Vietnamese simple sentence structure, namely the criteria of an utterance's meaning, of representation meaning, of syntactic relation, of location of elements, and of appearance. As a result, the list of sentence elements in Vietnamese would include: periphric phrase, explaining phrase,

topic, attribute, comment, complement, and adverbial phrase [Dao Thanh Lan 2002: 253]

In our opinion, using many criteria gives an urgent solution to a researcher when facing some difficulties in respect to classifying, especially in the case when applying one or two criteria in such circumstances is not possible due to the complexity of the matter. However, while applying many criteria, a researcher should ensure that those criteria are supplementary to each other, not in conflict. The combination of those criteria (for instance, lexical and grammatical criteria) in the classification of parts of speech can be a lesson for any researcher in such a way that one criterion is in conflict with another criterion. Frawley (1992) says that the idea of considering the combination of lexical meaning (even though general lexical meaning) with grammatical features to be a criterion of classifying parts of speech is actually illusive. In this situation, the grammatical features themselves are truly the key factors in classifying the parts of speech. Le Hoang (2005) claims that “English words such as (to) *water*, (to) *lawn* have their roots ‘water, lawn,’ indicating things, but that they have a paradigm like other verbs indicating action (or state), so they are called verbs” [Lê Hoàng 2005]. Moreover, sometimes, one object can only satisfy some criteria, not all the criteria (for instance, 2 or 3 out of 5 criteria...) in that case what should the object be called? The development of Prototype theory, firstly in research on lexicology, then on grammar, is the criticism for the application of essential features (or clear-cut discrete features) in labelling the object. It is increasingly important to affirm the existence of non-prototype cases in addition to prototypes.

When criticizing formal trends and also the skepticism about the generality of the concepts used to describe Vietnamese grammar as well as other isolating languages, Le Hoang (2002b) attempted to build a kind of semantic grammar, which the author supposed suitable for describing Vietnamese. Calling *W* word, of which *L* is the lexical constituent and *G* the grammatical constituent, the author claimed that in Vietnamese identifying lexical words is very hard, and if possible they only have the model $W=L$, thus “syntactic rules can be built based on the attribute of (*L*) (combination ability for instance), but cannot be based on the inherent element (*G*). Instead of the element (*G*) only word order and functional words can be used. However, if word order primarily reflects the ability to combine the meanings of words, not rules independent from their meanings and functional words have a low degree of grammaticalization, syntax can be considered as rules of combining the meanings (*L*) of words. In other words, we have $\text{syntax}=\text{semantics}$ ” [Lê Hoàng 2002b]. Specifically, the author supposed that it is possible to describe Vietnamese syntax by “analyzing and describing attributes of (*G*), then detailing by investigating their inter-relations with categorical qualities of (*L*)”. And for a language like Vietnamese, it is necessary to build a theoretical frame of $\text{grammar}=\text{semantics}$, i.e. analyzing and describing main syntactic rules based on kinds of categorical meanings of words, i.e. the meanings with grammatical value, reflecting through of observable syntactic restraints [Lê Hoàng 2002b]. For such an isolating and uninflected language as Vietnamese, the author’s approach seems to be prospective. What matters is how many kinds of categorical meanings will be identified, and then, how many syntactic rules will be generalized from

the restraints of those categorical meanings. This is really interesting but not easy.

In a recent experiment, Diep Quang Ban (2004) applied the model of the systemic functional grammar of Halliday (1985) to analyze Vietnamese sentences according to its 3 metafunctions (including representative metafunction, interpersonal metafunction and textual metafunctions). This approach reveals the multi-dimensional structure of a sentence. As it is previously proved by Hoang Van Van (2002) in his descriptive work on Vietnamese sentences in terms of representative metafunction, we have seen the effort of experimental outlines: Vietnamese is used as data to test a new theoretical approach of systemic functional grammar. However, whether or not such a theory meets the specifications of the Vietnamese language remains an open question and awaits further study.

It is difficult to review all the available studies of Vietnamese syntax (whether in form of books, monographs, or articles). Above is only a very small number of illustrative authors and their work directly relating to the issue of the description of the syntax structure of Vietnamese sentences. In addition, there are other authors and major studies that we cannot analyze in detail, namely, Le A, Le Can, Mai Ngoc Chu, Nguyen Cao Dam, Dinh Van Duc, Nguyen Lai, Ho Le, Vu Duc Nghieu, Dai Xuan Ninh, Hoang Trong Phien, Nguyen Anh Que, Nguyen Thi Quy, Huu Quynh, Le Xuan Thai, Phan Thieu, Hoang Van Thung, Bui Minh Toan³...

4. *A new approach to studying Vietnamese syntax*

From the perspective of the history of the study of Vietnamese syntax, it is obvious that most major theories of syntax in the world have an impact on the study of Vietnamese grammar to some extent, and linguists of Vietnamese studies, with different characters, have made their own contributions to the study of Vietnamese grammar as a whole. In general, given the current actual state of the Vietnamese language, more and more linguists tend to describe the Vietnamese language by its functions and meanings, which means they are not formal in developing their own solutions.

There are several recommendations, in our view:

- To follow the way of describing the rules of syntax on the basis of various categorical meanings of words, which means grammatical meanings can restrict syntax combinations seen in a sentence. This is also called “Grammar based on grammatical meanings of words”, or grammar based on meaning interactions between sentence components [Phan Ngoc 1983, Le Hoang 2002b...]. From the worldwide linguistic perspective, there are many authors following this trend, which is also addressed as word-grammar, of which Hudson (2007) is a typical author.

- To develop a systemic functional grammar, based on metafunctions of a sentence including experimental (i.e. sentence is a representation), inter-personal (i.e. sentence is an exchange), and

3 Despite of all the greatest effort, this list cannot be exclusive. Reviewing all the contributions of Vietnamese linguists must be a long term work of a collective in the future.

textual (i.e. sentence is a message), to reflect various aspects of sentences [Halliday 1985, Downing & Locke 1995, Diệp Quang Ban 2004...]

- To establish various meanings that can be expressed in a sentence to fix appropriate format categories. This is a radical function-to-form approach, which is simplified by Jan Nuyts (2001) as follows “taking the semantic category as its starting point, it looks into the range of its linguistic manifestation” [Nuyts 2001: xvi]. This is a trend that was previously seen in Dixon (1992) with his work “A New Approach to English Grammar on Semantic Principles” (Oxford, Clarendon Press). In one of his recent works, Nguyen Van Hiep (2008) strongly supported for this approach.

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