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## RESEARCH

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### THEME IN THE VIETNAMESE CLAUSE SIMPLEX: A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL DESCRIPTION

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Received 29 November 2021

Revised 9 January 2022; Accepted 02 March 2022

**Abstract:** This article is a functional description of an aspect of textual grammar of Vietnamese. The theoretical framework adopted for the description is Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) as developed by Halliday and other systemicists. The focus is on the description of Theme in the clause simplex. Two main questions which form the basis of this article are: (1) “what is Theme in the Vietnamese clause simplex and how is it recognised?”; and (2) “what are the delicate options available in the environment of **THEME** and how are they distinguished?” The study shows that Theme in Vietnamese is a system of the clause as a message; it can be defined as “the point of departure of the message” (Halliday (1967b, p. 212; 1970, p. 161; 1985b, p. 38), and can be recognized by first position in the clause; and the environment of **THEME** opens for a number of delicate options, and these options can be distinguished along the three metafunctions of language: the experiential, the interpersonal, and the textual. The study contributes to the application of SFG theory to the description of textual grammar of the Vietnamese clause, opening up potentials for a new approach to the description of a comprehensive SFG of Vietnamese for language teaching, learning, and research.

*Keywords:* Theme, Rheme, clause simplex, Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), Vietnamese

#### 1. Introduction

Vietnamese graduate students of English applied linguistics often experience difficulties understanding Theme and, in particular, analysing for thematic structure in Vietnamese when they do research on comparing textual meanings of Vietnamese and English texts. The main reason for this is that Theme is not a univalent concept; it is understood and described differently in different languages by different grammarians of different linguistic traditions. A consequence of this is that students lack a common theoretical framework for their comparison. To make matters worse, what they often have to do is to

follow either of the following ways: (1) they compare textual meanings of two texts in the two languages, using the categories defined in one theoretical framework which are employed to describe the base language with those falsely-felt comparable categories defined in another theoretical framework which are employed to describe the comparative language; or (2) they use what is commonly referred to as ‘transfer comparison’ (Halliday et al., 1964, p. 120), adopting uncritically the categories defined in the theoretical framework which are employed to describe the base language, and comparing them with those undescribed but falsely-felt comparable categories in the comparative language. Such unscientific approaches to

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comparative/contrastive discourse analysis often produce unreliable findings. They constitute the gap which this study attempts to fill. As a first step toward a full understanding of textual meanings of texts for comparative studies, in this article an attempt is made to explore Theme in the Vietnamese clause simplex, using Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) as the theoretical framework. There are two main reasons for our choice. First, SFG is a ‘metatheory’ – a theory of theories, many of whose general categories can be used to describe any language (Halliday, 1992; Matthiessen, 1995, p. 60; Fries, 1995b, p. 47; Hoang, 2012, p. 107). Secondly, SFG has been extensively used to describe Theme in English (e.g. Halliday, 1967b, 1970, 1985b, 1998; Fries, 1981, 1995a, 1995b, 1997; Egging, 1994; Matthiessen, 1995; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; G. Thompson, 2014, and many others) and other languages, while in reviewing the literature, it is evident that almost no comparable research has yet been conducted to describe Theme in Vietnamese. Our research is organized around five main parts. Following Part one which introduces the topic of the research, Part two is concerned with a review of the literature on how Theme is conceptualized in the world as well as in Vietnamese linguistics. Part three presents the design and methodology of the research. Part four – the focus of the research – describes in some detail the notion of Theme, thematic structure, and different options available in the environment of **THEME** in the Vietnamese clause. And Part five provides a résumé of what has been explored and makes suggestions for further research.

## 2. Literature Review

For the purposes of this study, the review of the literature on the study of Theme is organised around three sections: section one (2.1) provides a brief overview of the origin of the concept of Theme; section two (2.2) presents two alternative approaches to the definition of Theme; and section three (2.3) is concerned specially with the review of some studies of Theme in Vietnamese.

### 2.1. The Origin of the Concept of Theme

Theme as a grammatical category can be said to have a long but chequered history. What

we know about Theme in linguistics today is that it is a complex notion which can be traced back to ancient times (see Robins, 1997, 2012; Halliday, 1977). Halliday (1977) points out that the concept of Theme has its origin from ancient Greek linguistic scholarship. It was derived from the two different approaches to linguistic study: the rhetoric and the logic whose representatives were the sophists and Aristotle respectively.

The sophists were concerned with teaching many subjects such as philosophy, music, athletics, mathematics, and language. In language teaching, they were concerned with rhetoric, with the nature of argumentation, and hence with the structure of discourse. Our knowledge about the sophists today is very indirect and piecemeal. They left no writing themselves, but based on what is reported in the writings and quotations of other ancient Greek scholars (e.g. Plato and Aristotle) we can know that in their time the sophists were already familiar with elementary grammatical categories of Indo-European languages like gender, number, and case. We can also know that in their analytical approach, the sophists treated a sentence as a piece of discourse which consists of two parts referred to respectively as *ὄνομα* (noun) and *ῥήμα* (verb). Halliday (1977) aptly shows that this is the analysis of a unit of discourse considered as something that is arguable, something that can be confirmed, denied, contradicted, etc., something which is not concerned with truth value as conceptualized in logic. Answering the question, “What is the meaning of *ὄνομα* and *ῥήμα* as seen from the point of view of the sophists?”, Halliday (1977, p. 35) quotes Plato, a well-known ancient Greek philosopher: “There are two modes of the expression of existing things in sound... That which is the expression for actions we call *ῥήμα*. The vocal sign for those who do the things is *ὄνομα*. And later, if we combine *ῥήματα* with *ὄνοματα*, we are not only naming, we are doing something.” Halliday (1977) shows that this latter meaning – ‘we are doing something’ – is precisely concerned with what is referred to in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as the interpersonal metafunction of language, one of whose key concepts is **Subject** (see Halliday, 1977, 1985b, 1998; see also Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Also from the writings and quotations of

the other ancient Greek scholars, we can know that the sophists performed the next two analytical steps to formulate their views about language. In the first step, the sophists identified two grammatical classes based on categorical meanings: a verb expresses an action or event, and a noun expresses a doer of the action; a verb and a noun are the names of the classes (categories), but when they are combined, they are defined through their transitivity functions as actor, action, acted upon. This conceptualization of meaning yields what is referred to in SFL as the experiential metafunction of language, one of whose key concepts is (taking the material process as representative) **Actor** (see Halliday, 1977, 1985b, 1998, Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014 in relation to English; and Hoang, 2012 in relation to Vietnamese). In the second step, the sophists were concerned with discourse. In their view, discourse must be about something; so the noun must also function as what the discourse is about. And according to Halliday (1977), because Plato did not label this function, it was mistranslated into English by a translator named Jowett as “Subject”, but, as Halliday aptly points out, it is not the subject in the traditional subject-predicate analysis; it is concerned with what is referred to in SFL as the textual metafunction of language, one of whose key concepts is **Theme** (Halliday, 1985b, 1998, Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Fries, 1981, 1995a, 1995b, 1997; see also Mathesius, 1939; Daneš, 1964, 1974; Firbas, 1982, 1987, 1992, see also Hoang, 2007).

## 2.2. Two Approaches to the Definition of Theme

Since ancient Greece, the concept of Theme has not been seamlessly studied. It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that the study of Theme was taken up in mainstream linguistics (Davies, 2004, p. 54). The two scholars who are credited with reviving the study of Theme are the Czech linguist of the Prague linguistic school Vilém Mathesius (1939) and the eminent British-born Australian linguist Michael Halliday (1967a, 1967b, 1968, and elsewhere).

Inspired by the French grammarian Weil's (1844) book on word-order, Vilém Mathesius – the main architect of the Prague school of linguistics – outlined a new approach to the functional analysis of the sentence-utterance analysis commonly known in English

as “functional sentence perspective”. His own terminology in Czech “aktuální členění větné” (actual division of the sentence) suggests a clear distinction between the sentence as formal pattern – *langue* in de Saussure's (1983) formulation, and sentence as a means through which the speaker communicates information to the listener in a given situation – *parole* in de Saussure's (1983) formulation. Viewed in this light, the sentence should be analysed into two functional components called “Theme” and “Rheme”. These terms are defined by Mathesius as follows:

The Theme – *východiště výpovědi* (point of departure within the clause) is “that which is known or at least obvious in the given situation and from which the speaker proceeds”; and the Rheme – “*jádro výpovědi*” (the core of the utterance) is “that which the speaker is communicating about or what relates to the starting point of the utterance”. (Mathesius, 1939, p. 171, as cited in Firbas, 1987, pp. 143-44)

Daneš (1964) points out that in Mathesius's discussion of Theme, he used three terms “*východiště*” (point of departure), “*téma*” (Theme), and “*základ*” (foundation). But he stated that the point of departure was not necessarily always identical with the Theme. And later, according to Firbas (1987), Mathesius dropped the term “*východiště*” and used the terms “*téma*” and “*základ*” interchangeably. Fries (1981, p. 1), on the other hand, is more explicit in pointing out Mathesius's (1939) conceptualization of Theme. He aptly observes that Mathesius approached the notion of Theme from two perspectives. The first perspective is precisely concerned with given information – information which is ‘known or at least obvious in the given situation’; and the second one, with thematic information – information ‘from which the speaker proceeds’. Fries (1981) shows that Mathesius's definition has been adopted by several European linguists, particularly those of the Prague school of linguistics (e.g., Daneš, 1964; Firbas, 1982, 1987; van Dijk, 1972; Dik, 1978; and many others). Those linguists believe that the two senses “that which is known or at least obvious in the given situation” and “[that] from which the speaker proceeds” together constitute the notion of Theme. As a result of this conceptualization, there is only one structural

layer referring to both senses of Theme in the sentence. Fries (1981, p. 2) and Hasan and Fries (1995, p. xxvi) call Mathesius's approach to Theme the 'combining approach'.

In contrast to Mathesius's combining approach, Halliday (1985b, 1998, 2012, and elsewhere) abstracts out Mathesius's second function for Theme, separating it from the first. He argues that the second function "that from which the speaker proceeds" brings about the thematic structure of the sentence (the 'clause' in his terminology) which consists of two functional components: 'Theme' and 'Rheme'; and the first function "that which is known or at least obvious in the given situation" brings about the information structure which consists of two functional components: 'Given' and 'New'. Halliday draws attention to the fact that thematic structure is a structure of the clause, while information structure may be not. He claims that in English and probably in all languages too, thematic status is signaled by initial position. Theme is "the point of departure of the message; it is that which the clause is concerned" (Halliday, 1985b, p. 38; 1998, p. 37). In contrast, information structure is not directly a structure of the clause, but of the information unit. Halliday, in relation to English, suggests that information units are signaled in the spoken language by the tone group ('sense unit' in the older terminology). Each tone group has some section which expresses information presented as New information. The tonic foot (the location of the so-called sentence accent) defines 'the culmination of what is New: it marks where the new element ends.' (Halliday, 1985b, p. 275; 1998, p. 296). In addition to information which is presented as New, information units may contain information which is presented as Given. Halliday's view of Theme has been widely adopted by systemic functional linguists (e.g. Matthiessen, 1992, 1995; Fries, 1981, 1995a, 1995b, 1997; Hasan & Fries, 1995; Eggins, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; G. Thompson, 2014; and many others). Those linguists believe that each of the two functions "that which is known or at least obvious in the given situation" and "[that] from which the speaker proceeds" defines a different aspect of the textual meaning of the clause. As a result of this conceptualization, there are two structural layers each realizing one function of

Theme in the clause as message: the thematic structure – the focus of our study – and the information structure. Fries (1981, p. 2) and Hasan and Fries (1995, p. xxvii) refer to Halliday's approach to Theme as the 'separating approach'.

In his application of SFG theory to the description of Theme in English, Halliday makes three important premises. First, he assumes that "in all languages the clause has the character of a message: it has some form of organization giving it the status of a communicative event. But there are different ways in which this may be achieved. In English, as in many other languages, the clause is organized as a message by having a distinct status assigned to one part of it. One part of the clause is enunciated as the Theme; this then combines with the remainder [the Rheme] so that the two parts together constitute a message" (Halliday, 1985b, p. 38, 1998, p. 37). Secondly, he distinguishes the notion of Theme in the Theme-Rheme structure from the notion of Topic in the Topic-Comment structure as used by other non-systemic functional linguists such as Chafe (1976), Li and Thompson (1976) and Dik (1978). He argues convincingly that some grammarians have used the terms Topic and Comment instead of Theme and Rheme, but the Topic-Comment terminology carries different connotations: Topic usually refers to only one particular kind of theme; and in SFG it tends to be used as a cover term for the two concepts that are functionally distinct, one being that of Theme in the thematic structure, and the other being that of Given in information structure (Halliday, 1985b, p. 39, 1998, p. 38). And thirdly, he provides a general guiding principle for identifying Theme in the clause which reads as follows:

In some languages, which has a pattern of this kind, the Theme is announced by means of a particle: in Japanese, for example, there is a special postposition -wa, which signifies that whatever immediately precedes it is thematic. In other languages, of which English is one, the Theme is indicated by position in the clause. In speaking or writing English we signal that an item has thematic status by putting it first. No other signal is necessary, although it is not unusual in spoken English for Theme

to be marked off also by intonation (Halliday, 1985b, p. 38; 1998, p. 37).

Proceeding from these premises, Halliday (1985b, 1998, and elsewhere) and then Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) come to explore various aspects of Theme and the thematic structure of the clause, usually using English as the language of illustration. Although there are some minor changes in the wording of the headings of Halliday's (1985, 1998) and Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) descriptions of Theme, the following general categories seem to remain unchanged: Theme and Rheme, simple Themes, Theme and mood, multiple Themes, and clauses as Themes, unmarked Theme, and marked Theme.

### 2.3. Studies of Theme in Vietnamese

Studies of Theme in Vietnamese vary in both nature and scope of research. They range from book chapters or parts of book chapters (e.g. Lý, 2002; Diệp, 2004, 2013; Cao, 1991/2004; Thai, 2004) to research journal articles (e.g. Hoàng, 2007, 2008), and to unpublished doctoral dissertations (e.g. T. H. Nguyễn, 1994; T. M. Đỗ, 2007; T. H. V. Nguyễn, 2015). In those studies, however, the concept of Theme has been approached quite differently by different researchers. Lý (2002), for example, introduces in passing the notion of Theme as conceptualized in the Prague school linguists' theory known as 'functional sentence perspective'. Diệp (2004, 2013), on the other hand, being sympathetic with SFG theory, describes briefly Theme and its exponents in the Vietnamese sentence. Hoàng (2007, 2008) draws on insights from SFG theory to interpret the notion of Theme in the Vietnamese clause simplex and clause complex, but within the scope of two short research articles, the issue of Theme in Vietnamese in those grammatical units is not sufficiently addressed. In a book chapter entitled *Metafunctional profile of the grammar of Vietnamese*, Thai (2004) explores Theme in Vietnamese clause, using SFG as the theoretical framework. But, due to the fact that his study is concerned with a number of other aspects, the issue of Theme is not adequately treated. In a more recent doctoral research, T. H. V. Nguyễn (2015) makes an attempt to look at Theme in the Vietnamese

clause (she calls 'câu đơn' [the 'simple sentence']), using SFG theory as the descriptive framework. Her research has yielded some significant results. However, due to the fact that she is strongly influenced by Vietnamese traditional grammars, an exhaustive application of SFG theory to the description of Theme in Vietnamese seems to be impossible.

Among the studies of Theme in Vietnamese, *Tiếng Việt: Sơ thảo ngữ pháp chức năng* (Vietnamese: An Outline of Functional Grammar) by Cao Xuân Hạo is perhaps the most notable monograph which deserves some detailed examination. Cao's monograph was first published in 1991 under the title *Tiếng Việt: Sơ thảo ngữ pháp chức năng, quyển 1* (Vietnamese: An Outline of Functional Grammar, Book 1). In 2004, the book was reprinted under the title *Tiếng Việt: Sơ thảo ngữ pháp chức năng* (Vietnamese: An Outline of Functional Grammar). It is organized into two parts. The first part discusses general theoretical issues of different formal and functional approaches to language study such as the notion of functional grammar, three-level approaches to syntax, the definition of sentence, the subject-predicate structure in the formal grammar paradigm, the Theme-Rheme structure in modern linguistics, the semantic structure of the sentence, and some issues about pragmatics. The second part presents an application of Cao's functional framework to the description of the Vietnamese sentence. It consists of three chapters: chapter one explores the basic syntactic structure of Vietnamese, focusing in particular on Theme, its grammatical properties, and the markers used to isolate Theme from Rheme in the sentence; chapter two looks at different types of sentence structure in text/discourse; and chapter three is concerned with the classification of the sentence based on illocutionary force and representational meaning. Of these chapters, Chapter one is of immediate interest and will be taken for review.

Functional grammar, for Cao, is "a theory and a system of methods which are built upon the view that sees language as a means for exercising communication between human beings" (Cao, 2004, p. 11)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> This passage appears in the Vietnamese original (page 3) as follows:

một lý thuyết và một hệ thống phương pháp được xây dựng trên quan điểm coi ngôn ngữ như một phương tiện thực hiện sự giao tiếp giữa người và người.

In evaluating the formal approach to grammar, Cao suggests that it would be unfair to say that grammarians of the formal paradigm do not pay attention to meaning in language study. He claims that they really do. However, meaning in this approach is relegated to a secondary status. It is considered only when it is found necessary; that is, to serve the purpose of studying the formal aspects of language. This drawback of the formal approach, according to Cao (2004), is inevitable considering that their main goal is to investigate the structures of the linguistic signs in their static forms or *état de langue* (to use de Saussure's 1983 terminology). Contrasting his own view with the formal approach, Cao states:

Functional grammar sets for itself the task of investigating, describing, and explaining the rules that govern the operations of language on both the formal and the content level in their functional relationship (i.e., in the relationship between means and ends) through observing and using language in real communicative situations not only for establishing and identifying systems and sub-systems of linguistic units but also for observing how language operates through its vivid manifestations when it is used (Cao, 2004, 15)<sup>2</sup>.

And to clarify his functional view of language, Cao further states:

The structure-constructing rules of the basic discourse unit – the sentence – are represented and explained in functional grammar on the basis of the close relationship between language and

thought in structuring and linearizing the states of affairs which are reflected and reported in the interactive environment between different situational and contextual factors with the participation of conscious and subconscious objectives of the speaker under the control of the co-operative contracts between the participants (Cao, 2004, p. 16)<sup>3</sup>.

As the above quotes show, the task which Cao sets for his functional grammar is rather ambitious. It encompasses not only linguistics in the sense of the Saussurean *état de langue* but also several other disciplines such as pragmatics, discourse analysis, and psycholinguistics. Apart from these, his grammar has to take account of a number of fundamental issues such as the relations between form and meaning in language; *langue* and *parole* in the Saussurean sense; language, reality and thought in the Whorfian sense; and language and social context in the Firthian and Hallidayan sense.

Discussing the different three-level approaches to syntax, Cao claims that most of the three-level models of syntax are derived from the semiotic theory introduced by Charles Morris (1938) who assumes that in every semiotic system, there are three levels: (i) syntactic, (ii) semantic, and (iii) pragmatic. Cao points out that the level that seems to cause the most disagreement among scholars is the third. Here one may find that different functionalists use different terms with different connotations to refer to the nature of this level: 'textual function' (Halliday 1967b, 1968, 1970, 1975, 1978, 1985b, 1998, and many other

<sup>2</sup> This passage appears in the Vietnamese original (page 15) as follows:

Ngữ pháp chức năng tự đặt cho mình cái nhiệm vụ nghiên cứu, miêu tả và giải thích các quy tắc chi phối hoạt động của ngôn ngữ trên các bình diện của mặt hình thức và mặt nội dung trong mỗi liên hệ có tính chức năng (trong mỗi liên hệ giữa những phương tiện và những mục đích) thông qua việc quan sát cách sử dụng ngôn ngữ trong những tình huống giao tế hiện thực không phải chỉ để lập những danh sách đơn vị và xác định những hệ thống và tiểu hệ thống đơn vị ngôn ngữ, mà còn để theo dõi cách hành chức của ngôn ngữ qua những biểu hiện sinh động của nó trong khi được sử dụng.

<sup>3</sup> This passage appears in the Vietnamese original (page 16) as follows:

Những quy tắc xây dựng cấu trúc của đơn vị ngôn từ cơ bản – câu – được ngữ pháp chức năng trình bày và giải thích trên cơ sở những mối quan hệ khăng khít giữa ngôn ngữ và tư duy trong việc cấu trúc hoá và tuyến tính hoá những sự tình được phản ánh và trần thuật, trong môi trường tác động của những nhân tố đa dạng của những tình huống và văn cảnh, với sự tham gia của những mục tiêu hữu thức hay vô thức của người nói dưới sự chi phối của những công ước cộng tác giữa những người tham dự hội thoại.

places), ‘pragmatic’ (Dik, 1978), ‘the organization of utterance’ (Daněš, 1964, 1974), and ‘logico-informative’ (Gak, 1981).

With regard to the basic structure of Vietnamese, Cao rejects the idea popularly adopted amongst most Vietnamese grammarians of the formal paradigm that Vietnamese is a subject-predicate language. He explicitly states that Theme-Rheme/Topic-Comment is the basic structure of Vietnamese. He provides evidence to support his claim. The first evidence is based on an analysis of some examples in French and their Russian counterparts. These examples are reproduced below as (1) - (6):

(1) *J'ai lu ce livre.* (I read this book.)

(2) (*Quant à*) *Ce livre, je l'ai lu.* (This book, I read [it].)

(3) ?? *Ce livre a été lu par moi.* (This book was read by me.)

(4) *Я читал эту книгу.* (I read this book.)

(5) *Эту книгу я читал.* (This book, I read [it].)

(6) *Что касается этой книги, я его читал.* (As for this book, I read it.)

(Cao, 2004, pp. 58-9)

By providing these examples in French and Russian and analysing the thematic structure of sentence (2) in French and of sentence (5) in Russian, Cao wishes to demonstrate that French, which is a language of fixed word order, prefers what he calls ‘external Theme’ while Russian, which is a language of free word order, prefers ‘internal Theme’. The conclusion he actually arrives at is that in (2) the Theme *Ce livre* (This book), which is not the subject of the sentence, is placed outside the syntactic structure of the sentence. The following part *je l'ai lu*, which is marked off from *Ce livre* by a clear pause when spoken, is a complete sentence in which *Ce livre* is replaced by the pronoun *je*. In contrast, in the Russian counterpart (5), the Theme *Эту книгу* (this book), which is not the subject of the sentence either, is placed inside the syntactic structure of the sentence. However, what proves that *Эту книгу* (this book) is inside the syntactic structure of the sentence is not apparent from Cao’s analysis. Cao claims that this feature (that Theme is placed inside the syntactic structure of the sentence) of inflectional languages such as

Russian is similar to that of isolating or non-inflectional languages such as Chinese and Vietnamese.

The second evidence Cao provides in support of his claim that the basic structure of Vietnamese is Theme-Rheme/Topic-Comment is derived from Chafe (1976) and, in particular, Li and Thompson (1976). In their study on language typology, Li and Thompson (1976, pp. 457-89) group all languages of the world into four main types: (i) languages that are subject-prominent (e.g., Indo-European, Niger-Congo, Fino-Ugric, etc.), (ii) languages that are topic-prominent (e.g., Chinese, Lahu, Lisu, etc.), (iii) languages that are both subject-prominent and topic-prominent (e.g., Japanese, Korean, etc.), and (iv) languages that are neither subject-prominent nor topic-prominent (e.g., Tagalog, Ilocano, etc.). Cao (2004, p. 60) claims without giving any further evidence that Vietnamese is a topic-prominent language.

Thematic structure has been one of the foci which is extensively explored in different functional approaches to language. Drawing on Halliday (1985b), Cao discusses the issue by first pointing out the confusion of the formal paradigm between grammatical subject, logical subject, and psychological subject. He suggests that the dichotomy between Theme and Rheme should not be seen as a static picture of reality, but rather, it should be regarded as an oriented manipulation of thought. When re-organising reflected reality, thought divides it into two parts by choosing a point of departure for establishing the relationship between these two. Cao claims that the part that is chosen as the point of departure functions as Theme (subjectum, thema) and the part that realizes the manipulation functions as Rheme (praedictatum, rhema). In his opinion, the Theme-Rheme structure in the sentence is a phenomenon which belongs to what he refers to as ‘the logico-discursive domain’. It is ‘logico’ in the sense that it is linearized in discourse, and it is ‘discursive’ in the sense that it reflects the judgement impact of thought (for more detail, see Cao, 2004, pp. 66-67).

With regard to the order of Theme and Rheme in the sentence, Cao observes that like most languages, the usual or unmarked Theme-Rheme order in the Vietnamese sentence is that the Theme precedes the Rheme. However, there

are instances where this order is inverted. He provides a number of examples to prove the point. One of his examples on page 173 is (7) [CXH, p. 193]

<i>Đẹp</i>	<i>biết</i>	<i>bao</i>	<i>những</i>	<i>lời</i>	<i>chân thực</i>	<i>ấy!</i>
beautiful	how	much	plural marker	word	sincere	those
<b>Rheme</b>			<b>Theme</b>			

How beautiful those sincere words are!

According to Cao, the Theme-Rheme order in the above sentence is inverted. He explains that this inversion usually occurs in exclamatory sentences. He even goes further to suggest that in similar situations this inversion of Theme-Rheme order may be universal across languages. Unfortunately, his analysis does not seem to conform to the principle he has established for identifying the Theme-Rheme order:

When uttering out a sentence, the speaker produces a Theme and says (8) [CXH, p. 152]

<i>Anh</i>	<i>Nam</i>	<i>ấy</i>	<i>à?</i>	<i>Tôi</i>	<i>vừa</i>	<i>gặp</i>	<i>anh</i>	<i>ấy</i>	<i>ở</i>	<i>trường</i>	<i>xong</i>
brother	Nam	that	inter. particle	I	just	meet	brother	that	at	school	finish
<b>Topic/Theme?</b>				<b>Comment/Rheme?</b>							

(Did you mention) Nam? I've just met him at school.

(9) [CXH, p. 152]

<i>Chị</i>	<i>ấy</i>	<i>mà,</i>	<i>chị</i>	<i>cần</i>	<i>nghĩ</i>	<i>kĩ</i>	<i>về</i>	<i>việc</i>	<i>vừa qua.</i>
sister	that	particle	sister	need	think	careful	about	work	past
<b>Topic/Theme?</b>			<b>Comment/Rheme?</b>						

As for you [sister], you should think carefully about what you have done.

By contrast, an internal Theme is one that falls inside the syntactic structure of the sentence. It is divided into frame Theme and topic Theme. A frame Theme is “the sentence component that specifies the conditions that make up a frame of situation such as time and

(10) [CXH, p. 154]

<i>Trong</i>	<i>cái</i>	<i>bình</i>	<i>này</i>	<i>nhật độ</i>	<i>lên</i>	<i>đến</i>	<i>39<sup>0</sup></i>
in	generic classifier	container	this	temperature	rise	up	39 <sup>0</sup>
<b>Topic/Theme?</b>				<b>Comment/Rheme?</b>			

In this container, the temperature rises up to 39<sup>0</sup>.

reproduced as (7) below (the analysis of the sentence into Theme and Rheme is my own).

something about that Theme or within the range of that Theme (Cao, 2004, p. 151).<sup>4</sup>

Cao classifies Themes into (i) external Theme and (ii) internal Theme. An external Theme is one that “falls outside of the syntactic structure of the sentence, having no normal syntactic function in the sentence” (p. 152), it [external Theme] is “a peripheral and uncommon grammatical phenomenon, occurring only in some untypical situations” (p. 154). For example:

space in which the thing said in the Rheme is valid. By contrast, a topic Theme is the sentence component that indicates the object mentioned in the Rheme, the topic of the judgment.”<sup>5</sup> (Cao, 2004, p. 156). Below are some examples of frame Theme and topic Theme in Cao’s formulation:

<sup>4</sup> This passage appears in the Vietnamese original (page 151) as follows:

Khi nói một câu người ta đưa ra một cái đề, rồi nói một điều gì về cái đề đó hoặc trong khuôn khổ của cái đề đó.

<sup>5</sup> This passage appears in the Vietnamese original (page 156) as follows:

1. Khung đề, là thành phần câu nêu rõ những điều kiện làm thành cái khung về cảnh huống, thời gian, không gian trong đó điều được nói ở phần thuyết có hiệu lực, còn
2. Chủ đề, là phần câu chỉ đối tượng được nói đến trong phần thuyết, cái chủ thể của sự nhận định.

(11) [CXH, p. 154]

<i>Cái</i>	<i>bình</i>	<i>này</i>	<i>nhiệt độ</i>	<i>lên</i>	<i>đến</i>	<i>39<sup>0</sup></i>
generic classifier	container	this	temperature	rise	up	39 <sup>0</sup>
<b>Topic/Theme?</b>			<b>Comment/Rheme?</b>			

In this container, the temperature rises up to 39<sup>0</sup>.

(12) [CXH, p. 154]

<i>Chân thành</i>	<i>thì</i>	<i>ai</i>	<i>cũng</i>	<i>quý</i>
sincere	isolating particle	who/everyone	also	like
<b>Topic/Theme?</b>		<b>Comment/Rheme?</b>		

Sincerity is what everyone likes.

(13) [CXH, p. 154]

<i>Anh</i>	<i>Nam</i>	<i>thì</i>	<i>ai</i>	<i>cũng</i>	<i>quý</i>
brother	Nam	isolating particle	who/everyone	also	like
<b>Topic/Theme?</b>		<b>Comment/Rheme?</b>			

Everyone likes Nam/As for Nam, everyone likes him.

According to Cao, in sentences (10) and (11) both *Trong cái bình này* (in this container) and *Cái bình này* (this container) express the range within which the statement *nhiệt độ lên đến 39<sup>0</sup>* (the temperature rises up to 39<sup>0</sup>) is applicable. Similarly, in sentences (12) and (13), *Chân thành* (sincerity) and *Anh Nam* (Nam) also express the range within which the statement *ai cũng quý* (what/who everyone likes) is applicable. Thus despite other more delicate differences, each of these functions as internal Theme (for more detail, see Cao, 2004, pp. 155-6).

One of the most interesting but highly debatable points concerns Cao's principle for identifying Theme and Rheme in the sentence. Cao claims that to identify the boundary between these component parts, we can use two test words or 'isolating particles' (to use L. C. Thompson's (1985, p. 261) terminology): *thì* and *là*. It thus follows from Cao that the boundary between Theme and Rheme in a sentence can be recognised by the presence of either of these two markers or by inserting either of them without changing the basic structure and the meaning of the sentence. According to Cao, *thì* is a special word that is used to mark the boundary between Theme and Rheme in the sentence and *là* is a multifunctional word but its main function is to mark the Theme-Rheme boundary. However, *là* differs from *thì* in that while *thì* is used to mark

the thematic component, *là* is used to mark the rhematic one. He points out that the most important function of *là* is to signal the rhematicity of the syntagms which are not rhematically typical such as noun phrases, prepositional phrases, proper nouns, personal pronouns. Cao establishes a testing principle which reads as follows:

The boundary between Theme and Rheme in a sentence is or may be marked by the presence of *thì* or *là* (p. 234).<sup>6</sup>

Cao's principle for determining the boundary of Theme and Rheme in the Vietnamese sentence sounds a good one, but surely it cannot be applied to all cases. This explains why it is precisely this principle for which Cao is subjected to criticisms by a number of Vietnamese scholars. H. C. Đỗ (1992), for example, argues that the particles *thì* and *là* have a variety of uses; it is, therefore, unjustified to say that their function is to mark the boundary of Theme and Rheme in the sentence. In fact, H. C. Đỗ (1992, pp. 10-11) goes so far as to suggest that Cao's testing principle does not reflect the reality of Vietnamese language and is thus not a valid criterion for sentencehood. The main reason, as H. C. Đỗ explains, is that most of the examples Cao provides for establishing the principle are context-free. When they are considered in

<sup>6</sup> This passage appears in the Vietnamese original (page 234) as follows:

Biên giới đề thuyết của câu đặt ở chỗ nào có hoặc có thể có THÌ hay LÀ.

context (or when they are context-bound), *thì* and *là* cannot work as test words, i.e., they cannot be filled without either changing the meaning of the sentence or making it sound odd or unnatural (p. 11). Agreeing with H. C. Đỗ's position, Luu (1993, p. 25) also claims that: "... chẳng phải ranh giới đề-thuyết nào cũng có thể đặt chúng vào được. ("... not all Theme-Rheme boundaries can be filled in by *thì* and *là*.")". He claims that the Theme-Rheme boundary is determined by a particular context. Cao's functional views and his Theme-Rheme principle are also criticised by Hồ (1993) who points out that Cao's approach to Theme-Rheme distinction is inconsistent; his distinction between internal and external Themes is not clear; and the distinction between frame Theme and adverbial phrases is not clear either. Hồ (1993) concludes that because of these weaknesses, some of Cao's analyses appear to be too complex and in many places they are inappropriate (for more detail of this critique, see Hồ, 1993, pp. 52-3).

It can be said in summary that *Tiếng Việt: Sơ thảo ngữ pháp chức năng* by Cao is the first descriptive study to address the issues of Vietnamese grammar from a functional perspective. It is one of the very few functional grammars of Vietnamese which is of both theoretical and practical significance (Đình, 1993). The merits of Cao's grammar, in my view, rest on at least four counts. First, his grammar can be considered a ground-breaking study of Vietnamese grammar from a functional perspective. Secondly, it introduces in a relatively systematic way some major functional views of language currently existing in world linguistic scholarship. Thirdly, it attempts to use insights from various functional approaches to describe and interpret the Vietnamese sentence. Fourthly, and perhaps more importantly, it generates ideas for debates and discussions among Vietnamese linguistic scholars.

Despite the merits, limitations still pertain. First, as Cao claims that Vietnamese is a topic-prominent language and the syntactic structure of the Vietnamese is Đề + Thuyết, his grammar represents a mono-functional approach to language. Secondly, through his description and interpretation of the thematic structure of Vietnamese, Cao seems to follow the

'combining approach' to Theme; thus resulting in some confusion between Theme-Rheme and Given-New analysis. Thirdly, the unit of Cao's thematic analysis is not always clear: in a number of cases, one cannot tell which of the three units subsumed under the term sentence is the unit of Cao's thematic analysis: the simple sentence, the complex sentence, or the compound sentence (see, for example, (87b), p. 202; (88a), p. 202; 173b, p. 259). Fourthly, whether Cao's basic structure of Vietnamese is Topic-Comment as conceptualized by some North-American linguists (e.g. Chafe, 1976; Li & Thompson, 1976) or Theme-Rheme as conceptualized by SFL and the Prague school scholars is not explicated in his study; this is evident in his use of different pairs of terms which, as Halliday (1985b, 1998) has pointed out, carry quite different connotations: Đề-Thuyết (Theme-Rheme), Sở đề-Sở thuyết or Sở đề-Thuật đề (Topic-Comment). (That explains why in my analysis of Cao's examples, I put a question mark after every Topic/Theme and Comment/Rheme to indicate that I am not sure whether Cao wants to refer to the structure of Vietnamese as Topic-Comment or Rheme-Rheme). And finally, except the introduction of *thì* and *là* as the test words for identifying the boundary of Topic and Comment in sentences, no further statements are made about the boundary between these constituents. These remarks bring us to the next section where we will present research design and methodology – the focus of our study.

### 3. Research Design and Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Questions

This study is intended to address the following questions:

1. What is Theme in the Vietnamese clause simplex and how is it recognised?
2. What are the delicate options available in the environment of **THEME** and how are they distinguished?

#### 3.2. Data Collection

Two points should be made here before we deal with the collection of data for our research. First, because the description of Theme in Vietnamese presented in this study is written

in English and, more importantly, is based on the SFG framework, reference is made, in particular, to the works of Halliday. Apart from this, the writings of other SF grammarians such as Matthiessen (1992, 1995), Martin (1992), Eggins (1994), Lock (1996), Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), and others are also taken as points of reference. And secondly, since all these studies are written in English and about the grammar of the English language, and I am myself writing this research in English, an inevitable corollary is that in describing the grammar of Vietnamese, instead of coining new terms, I will be employing the terminologies or labels which Halliday and his colleagues have used to describe the grammar of English. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the grammatical categories which English systemicists set up for describing the grammar of English are identical in all respects to those employed for the description of Vietnamese in this study. This is because “each language has its own semantic code” (Halliday, 1998, p. xxx); and “any grammatical category that is established for the systemic functional description of a language is, of necessity, language-specific, since it is an abstraction based on the interrelations and oppositions found in the grammatical organisation of the language being described” (Shore, 1992, p. 209). And, in a strict sense, one would be justified in arguing that the grammatical categories of no two languages can be regarded as identical since the grammatical distinctions and oppositions that are made in any language are unique to that language (see Hasan & Fries, 1995). It follows that when borrowing a term or a label from one language to name a grammatical category of another language, one has to be very careful. However, it should be remembered that the category which is assigned the same label in the “borrower language” (Vietnamese in this case) is not necessarily equivalent to that in the “lender language” (English in this case) (for detail of these points, see Hoang, 2012).

The illustrating materials collected for this study are text-based, with the examples taken from natural texts (both written and spoken). Ideally, every example should be the whole text; but in practice, this ideal is unattainable. So, in order to exemplify, I often

scour short extracts or passages from complete texts, which are understandable even apart from their contexts and contain one or a number of examples in point. To ensure authenticity and variety, the illustrating materials are collected from a wide variety of sources which cover a large number of text types: novels, short stories, journals, grammar books, folk tales, poems, Vietnamese riddles, and field notes of spontaneous conversations. Details of these sources of data are provided in the Appendix.

Some of the examples are my own. This was made necessary for the reason that grammar is concerned not just with the actual but with the possible as well (see Chomsky, 1957, 1965). When a number of related examples need to be provided together with the original one, often it is extremely difficult to find all these variants or agnates in a given collection of texts, no matter how large it may be. This does not mean that they cannot occur, but simply because of ‘the vast complexity of language’ (Palmer, 1980, p. 8), it would take a grammarian a lifetime to scour the texts for the desired agnate examples – a kind of work which seems to take the use of authentic examples to unnecessary extremes. However, to ensure the validity of the made-up examples, I often have them cross-checked with my colleagues who are Vietnamese linguists.

As most of the examples are authentic, they sometimes contain elements which are irrelevant to the point under discussion and sometimes are elliptical; i.e., certain elements have to be retrieved with the help of context. In some instances, in order to avoid overload of information not needed immediately, what I have done is (i) to ‘tidy up’ the original example by removing the irrelevant elements such as false starts, stutters and so on or by reducing a highly complex nominal group to a single noun or proper name, and (ii) to expand the elements of an elliptical example, so as to remove ellipsis. It is hoped that these ‘editing’ steps, taken minimally, in no way invalidate the suitability of the examples, especially where the grammar of Theme in the clause is concerned.

### ***3.3. Scope of Description***

This study is confined to the description of Theme in the clause simplex. Clause simplex is not a univalent concept even in Systemic

Functional Linguistics. It can refer to an independent clause, a dependent clause, a major clause, a minor clause, a full clause, an elliptical clause, a clause simplex, a clause complex, and so on. This study takes major independent clauses defined by Halliday (1985a, 1985b, 1998), Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), and Hoang (2012) as the units to describe Theme: those clauses that can stand by themselves and can be analysed for Transitivity, Mood, and Theme. Thus major independent clauses such as *Bà thẩm phán đặt tay lên một góc tờ giấy* (The judge lady put her hands on a corner of the paper.) [PDT, p. 20], *Hãy làm cho nó được nổi tiếng!* (Make him become famous!) [NĐC, p. 112], and *Bố muốn đi chơi đâu bây giờ?* (Where do you want to go now, dad?) [NĐC, p. 72] are within the scope of this study. Major dependent clauses such as *Khi chúng tôi ra tới nơi* (When we arrived there), in *Khi chúng tôi ra tới nơi, thành phố đang ngất trời bom đạn* (When we arrived there, the city was towering with smoke from bombs and bullets.) [BN, 1944, p. 175], and *Nếu chú chẳng chịu giúp* (If you cannot help) in *Nếu chú chẳng chịu giúp, thì họ ta vẫn phải mời luật sư* (If you cannot help, our clan will still have to hire a lawyer) [LNM, p. 125]; and minor clauses such as *Tuan ơi!* (Tuan!), *Này!* (Hey!), *Tất nhiên!* (Of course), *Được.* (OK), *Tội nghiệp!* (Poor you!), etc. will be left out of account.

This study adopts Halliday's definition of Theme because "it fits within a general model of the nature of language" (cf. Fries, 1995b, p. 47). In Halliday's SFL model, language is conceptualized as having three metafunctions: experiential metafunction, interpersonal metafunction, and textual metafunction. Each of these metafunctions activates the choice of a set of structural system on language. Thus, the experiential metafunction activates the choice of the **TRANSITIVITY** system concerning process types such as material, behavioural, mental, verbal, relational, and existential, their associated participants, and their incumbent or attendant circumstances. The interpersonal metafunction activates the choice of the **MOOD** system realized by mood functions such as Subject, Predicator, Complement, and Adjunct. And the textual metafunction activates the choice of two related types of system which concern the organization of information in text:

The **THEME** system and the **INFORMATION** system. The **THEME** system divides the information being conveyed in the clause into Theme and Rheme, while the **INFORMATION** system divides the information being conveyed into Given and New information. As our study is concerned with the **THEME** system, the **INFORMATION** system will be out of consideration.

Some systemic functional studies by such scholars as Matthiessen (1995), Eggins (1994), Thai (1998, 2004), G. Thompson (2014), and the seminal work *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* and its repeated editions by Halliday (1985b, 1998) and then by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) foreground either the 'systemic' or the 'functional' aspect of grammar. This study attempts to keep a balance between these two: both system networks representing systemic choices and structures realizing these systemic choices are explored and provided.

Finally, it should be noted that Halliday's and other systemic functional scholars' descriptions of Theme are based on English. Some of their descriptive categories presented in their IFGs are specific to English and thus are not relevant to Vietnamese. This suggests that in our description of Theme in Vietnamese, we should be selective, describing only those categories which are applicable and specific to Vietnamese.

### 3.4. Presentation of Illustrative Examples

Two notes of caution should be taken before we introduce how an illustrative example is presented. First, as mentioned, in the SFL model the clause is recognized as a simultaneous representation of three strands of meaning: experiential, interpersonal and textual, realized at once in the systems of transitivity (experiential), mood (interpersonal), and theme (textual). This suggests that in describing the system of **THEME** in Vietnamese, we have to presuppose the existence of the systems of **MOOD** and **TRANSITIVITY** so that at some point when there is a need to bring out more clearly a feature concerning the category of Theme, some reference will be made to them. To date, only the system of **TRANSITIVITY** in

Vietnamese has been explored (see Hoang, 2012), so while recognizing the shortcoming of taking the system of **MOOD** for granted, we have generally assumed that functions such as Subject, Predicator, Complement, Adjunct at least at the primary level of delicacy resemble those in English. And secondly, because the description of Theme in this study is written in English, it should be presented in a way so that not only Vietnamese but also readers of English can understand it. To fulfil this goal, glosses and symbols used in the study are presented as follows:

- In the descriptive and explanatory text, the initial letter of the names of functions is capitalized, e.g., Theme, Rheme, Subject, Predicator.
- When these functions are introduced for the first time, they appear in boldface type, e.g. **Theme, Rheme, Subject, Predicator**; and when there is not enough space, they are abbreviated, e.g. **Th, Rh, Subj, Pred**.
- Names of systems are capitalised throughout: **THEME** for the system of **THEME**, **TRANSITIVITY** for the system of **TRANSITIVITY**, and **MOOD** for the system of **MOOD**.

(14) [NĐC, p. 114]

<i>Ngày</i>	<i>xưa</i>	<i>có</i>	<i>một</i>	<i>người</i>	<i>thợ săn</i>	<i>trẻ</i>
day	old	have	one	person	hunter	young
<b>Theme</b>			<b>Rheme</b>			

Once upon a time, there was a young hunter.

### 3.5. Aspects of Description

Drawing on insights from SFG framework, the description of Theme in the Vietnamese clause simplex will focus on the following aspects:

- The notion of Theme and thematic structure in the clause,
- The boundary between Theme and Rheme in the clause,
- Simple Theme v. multiple Theme,
- Unmarked Theme v. marked Theme,
- Theme interpreted from the point of

### Figure 1

*An Analysis of Transitivity, Mood and Theme of (15a), (15b) and (15c)*

The presentation of an illustrative example is organised as follows:

- Each individual example is numbered in Arabic numeral which is enclosed in round brackets (...). This is followed by the source of data or the origin of the example including an abbreviation of the author’s name and the page from which the example is taken; these are enclosed in square brackets [...] (see the Appendix).
- The first line, which is italicised, provides the Vietnamese wording.
- The second line gives English inter-glosses.
- The third (sometimes the fourth or the fifth) line provides the configuration of functions of the elements in the clause and appear in boldface type.
- The final line gives an idiomatic translation into English. For non-Vietnamese speakers so far as the grammar is concerned, it is the inter-glosses that are more relevant as the idiomatic translation is an attempt to convey the meaning and not the grammatical relations within the clause.

Below is an instance of how an illustrative example is presented:

view of Mood.

## 4. Theme in the Vietnamese Clause Simplex

### 4.1. The Notion of Theme and Thematic Structure in the Clause

Let us start with three material clauses below: (15a) is the original clause, and (15b) and (15c) are agnates. To facilitate discussion, these clauses are analyzed in terms of Transitivity, Mood and Theme; and the elements that function as Theme are in boldface type.

(15a) [THL, p. 161]

	<i>Ông Xê</i>	<i>trở về</i>	<i>quê hương</i>	<i>sau</i>	<i>gần</i>	<i>năm mươi</i>	<i>năm</i>	<i>lưu lạc</i>
	Mr Xe	return	home country	after	near	fifty	year	wander
Trans.	<b>Actor</b>	<b>Process: material</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Circumstance</b>				
Mood	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>	<b>Complement</b>	<b>Adjunct</b>				
Theme	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Rheme</b>						

Mr. Xe came back to his home country after nearly fifty years' wandering abroad.

(15b)

	<i>Sau</i>	<i>gần</i>	<i>năm mươi</i>	<i>năm</i>	<i>lưu lạc</i>	<i>ông Xê</i>	<i>trở về</i>	<i>quê hương</i>
	after	near	fifty	year	wander	Mr Xe	return	home village
Trans.	<b>Circumstance</b>					<b>Actor</b>	<b>Process: material</b>	<b>Range</b>
Mood	<b>Adjunct</b>					<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>	<b>Complement</b>
Theme	<b>Theme</b>					<b>Rheme</b>		

After nearly fifty years' wandering abroad, Mr. Xe came back to his home country.

(15c)

	<i>Quê hương,</i>	<i>ông Xê</i>	<i>trở về</i>	<i>sau</i>	<i>gần</i>	<i>năm mươi</i>	<i>năm</i>	<i>lưu lạc</i>
	home village	Mr Xe	return	after	near	fifty	year	wander
Trans.	<b>Range</b>	<b>Actor</b>	<b>Process: material</b>	<b>Circumstance</b>				
Mood	<b>Complement</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>	<b>Adjunct</b>				
Theme	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Rheme</b>						

His home country, Mr. Xe came back [to it] after nearly fifty years' wandering abroad.

We will consider Theme in relation to Transitivity first because it is the aspect “where the most highly structured configurations are found” (Halliday, 1998, p. 337). Our Transitivity analysis of (15a), (15b), and (15c) brings out two points. First, each of the three clauses is composed of four constituents: the nominal group *Ông Xê* (Mr Xe), the verbal group *trở về* (returned), the nominal group *quê hương* (home country), and the prepositional phrase *sau gần năm mươi năm lưu lạc* (after nearly fifty years' wandering abroad). Secondly, in whatever order these constituents are positioned in these clauses, *ông Xê* still functions as **Actor**, *trở về* as **Process: material**, *quê hương* as **Range**, and *sau gần mười năm lưu lạc* as **Circumstance**. It can be said, as a result, that the experiential world being described or represented in these clauses is the same. What seems to be different lies in the way the world is organized and presented in them – the textual world. Our Theme analysis shows that *Ông Xê* which functions as Actor in transitivity receives focal attention in (15a), while *Sau gần năm mươi năm lưu lạc* which functions as Circumstance receives focal attention in (15b), and *Quê hương* which functions as Range receives focal

attention in (15c). When they are put in initial position of these clauses, they receive special status: they set up ‘the local context in which each clause is to be interpreted’ (Matthiessen, 1995, p. 531; see also Hasan & Fries, 1995, p. xxvii; Fries, 1997, p. 231; Bell, 1991, p. 127). Following the SFG terminology, we shall use the term **Theme** as the label for this function, and the term **Rheme** as the label for the function of the remainder of the message or the part in which the Theme is developed. Thus, a Vietnamese clause as a message consists of a **Theme** combined with a **Rheme**, and the configuration Theme + Rheme constitutes the **thematic structure** of the clause (see Halliday, 1985b, 1998; see also T. H. Nguyễn, 1994; T. M. Đỗ, 2007; T. H. V. Nguyễn, 2015).

#### 4.2. The Boundary Between Theme and Rheme in the Clause

Defining what theme is is one thing; identifying the boundary between Theme and Rheme in a clause is quite another. In fact, identifying the boundary between Theme and Rheme often causes problems for students of language. In our analysis of the thematic structure of (15a), (15b), and (15c), we have

selected rather arbitrarily the transitivity element that occupies the first position in these clauses as Theme. The question of where the Theme ends and the Rheme starts in a clause needs some further clarification. Halliday (1985b, 1998), Matthiessen (1992, 1995), and Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) made an important observation about the nature of the experiential, the interpersonal, and the textual aspects of the clause. They found that the mode of expression of the experiential metafunction is particulate, its experiential selections are realized by constituency configurations of a process, participants and/or circumstances; the mode of expression of the interpersonal metafunction is prosodic, its interpersonal selections are typically realized by pitch contours (phonological prosody), modal prosodies, and so on, giving value to the relative sequence of the Mood functions of Subject, Predicator, Complement, and Adjunct; and the textual mode of expression is periodic or wave-like, realized by sequence of prominence, giving value to the initial position (in the case of Theme-Rheme information) and the final position (in the case of Given-New information). Modelling Theme-Rheme information as wave suggests that a prominence (the peak of the wave) is at the beginning of the clause and a non-prominence (the trough of the wave) is at the end of the clause. But it also suggests that the differentiation between Theme and Rheme is not discrete. For purposes of textual analysis, however, “we have to create experiential-like discreteness by drawing constituency boundaries between Theme and Rheme” (Matthiessen, 1992, p. 50). But even when we accept this analytical strategy, we still have to answer the question, “Where does the Theme end in a clause?” In this regard, recourse has to be had to the experiential metafunction which tells us that the boundary between the Theme and the Rheme can be drawn after the first experiential element in the Transitivity structure (cf. Halliday, 1985b, 1998; Matthiessen, 1992, 1995; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Thus, *Ông Xê* – Actor in *Ông Xê trở về quê hương sau gần năm mươi năm lưu lạc*, *Sau gần năm mươi năm lưu lạc* – Circumstance in *Sau gần năm mươi năm lưu lạc ông Xê trở về quê hương*, and *Quê hương* – Range in *Quê hương, ông Xê trở về sau gần năm*

*mươi năm lưu lạc* are Themes. This observation allows us to establish a general guide for identifying the boundary between Theme and Rheme that can capture the variation in the choice of Theme in the Vietnamese clause simplex with respect to the different Transitivity functions in the clause as follows:

#### General guide 1

The Theme of a clause is the first constituent from the experiential metafunction: if in a clause, a participant, say Actor, occurs in initial position, then that participant is Theme; if in a clause, a Circumstance occurs in initial position, then that Circumstance is Theme; and if in a clause, a Range occurs in initial position, then that Range is Theme; everything else, i.e. all that follows this initial constituent in such clauses, will automatically fall into Rheme.

#### 4.3. Simple Theme v. Multiple Theme

Functional scholars of the combining approach to Theme (e.g. Mathesius, 1939; Daneš, 1964, 1974; Firbas, 1982, 1987, 1992; van Dijk, 1972; and Dik, 1978) do not seem to discuss the internal structure of Theme. The prominent Vietnamese functionalist Cao (1991/2004), who follows the combining approach to Theme, does not seem to discuss the internal structure of Theme either. Apart from the concepts he proposes to discuss the two types of Theme which he calls “external theme” and “internal Theme”, what Theme looks like or how Theme is structured in the sentence is not explicated in his description.

A functional scholar of the separating approach who makes the most significant contribution to the study of Theme in general and of the internal structure of Theme in particular, is perhaps Michael Halliday. Through his various studies of the textual meaning of the clause, many interesting features about the internal structure of Theme are revealed. According to Halliday (1985b, 1998, and elsewhere), **THEME** as a system is the entry point of two systemic choices which he refers to respectively as ‘simple Theme v. multiple Theme’ and ‘unmarked Theme v. marked Theme’. These systemic choices can be applicable to the description of the internal structure of Theme in Vietnamese.

### 4.3.1. Simple Theme

Simple Theme in Vietnamese falls into three choices (subcategories): (1) group or phrase simplexes as simple Theme, (2) group or phrase complexes as simple Theme, and (3) rank-shifted clauses as simple Theme.

#### 4.3.1.1. Group or Phrase Simplexes as Simple Theme

We can distinguish a group from a phrase. A group, according to Halliday (1985b, 1998, p. 180) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, p. 362), is a ‘WORD COMPLEX’ (*capitals in original*) or a ‘group of words’ such as *Cây gạo* (silk-cotton tree or *bombax ceiba*), *cột mốc* (landmark), *làng Kiều* (Kieu village) and *những làng xung quanh* (surrounding villages) in *Cây gạo như là cột mốc để phân biệt làng Kiều với những làng xung quanh* (The silk-cotton tree serves as a landmark to distinguish Kieu village from the surrounding ones) [THL, p. 162]. In contrast, a phrase consists of a preposition plus a nominal group such as *Từ trên Đèo Ngang* (From Deo Ngang Pass) in *Từ trên Đèo Ngang, Liễu Hạnh đã biết có hoàng tử đến tìm mình* (From Deo Ngang Pass, Lieu Hanh already knew that the prince came to find her) [NĐC, p. 106]. In other words, the difference between a group and a phrase is that while a group is an expansion of words, a phrase is a contraction of a clause.

Following is a short extract taken from a short story to illustrate how the choice of simple Themes functions to organize the thematic structure of the messages. The boundary between Theme and Rheme is shown by the sign +, the clause boundary is shown by the sign ||, the Themes are italicized, the Themes realized by prepositional phrases are underlined; and the English translation is provided immediately below the original extract.

#### Extract 1

(16) *Thằng Cọt* + ngồi trên chiếc ghế gỗ,  
 || (17) *đôi mắt* + chùng ngó ra ngoài vườn. || (18)  
 (21) [NĐC, p. 100]

	<i>Hoàng hậu</i>	và	<i>phi tần</i>	<i>hết sức</i>	<i>lo sợ</i>
	queen	and	concubine	very	afraid
Transitivity	<b>Carrier</b>	<b>Carrier</b>		<b>Attribute</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme?</b>			<b>Rheme</b>	

The Queen and the concubines were very afraid.

*Trên đầu nó*, + mái hiên chùa im mát rợp bóng.  
 || ... || (19) *Tất cả* + sạch sẽ, tinh tươm, thanh  
 tĩnh. || (20) *Trên cái nền ấy*, + thằng Cọt nổi bật  
 nên như một vật kỳ dị, lạc lõng. <sic> [TTM, p. 347]

Cot sat on a wooden chair, his eyes peered out into the garden. On top of his head, the shady silent porch of the pagoda was shading... All was clean, pure, tidy, and silent. Against that background, Cot stood out as a strange and out-of-place figure.

As can be seen, all the Themes in the above extract are simple ones. Whether they are realized by a nominal group or a prepositional phrase, they serve to set local contexts for the clauses themselves. Here we can see *Thằng Cọt* (Cot) – a nominal group – functioning as Theme in (16), *đôi mắt* (his eyes) – a nominal group – functioning as Theme in (17), *Trên đầu nó* (On top of his head) – a prepositional phrase – functioning as Theme in (18), *Tất cả* (All) – a nominal group – functioning as Theme in (19), and *Trên cái nền ấy* (Against that background) – a prepositional phrase – functioning as Theme in (20).

#### 4.3.1.2. Group or Phrase Complexes as Simple Theme

The criterion we set for identifying Theme in Principle 1 appears simple: Theme equals clause initial constituent. Based on this criterion, all the Themes in Extract 1 are simple Themes in the sense that each consists of one constituent from the experiential metafunction. However, in naturally occurring texts, a clause may consist of two or more elements occurring concurrently in initial position, forming a single complex, and having the same experiential function. Consider clauses (21), (22), (23), and (24) which are extracted from different texts. To facilitate discussion, these clauses are analysed in terms of Transitivity and Theme. To save space only the onsets of the Rhemes are shown in (22), (23) and (24).

(22) [NQT, p. 31]

	<i>Các</i>	<i>khác biệt</i>	<i>và</i>	<i>trương đồng</i>	<i>trong</i>	<i>lòng tin</i>	<i>được</i>	<i>trình bày</i>	...
	plural marker	difference	and	similarity	in	trust	particle	present	
Transitivity	<b>Goal</b>		<b>Goal</b>			<b>Process: material</b>			
Theme	<b>Theme?</b>					<b>Rheme</b>			

The differences and similarities in social trust of men and women are presented in Table 2.

(23) [T.T.Kh.]

	<i>Một</i>	<i>mùa thu</i>	<i>trước</i>	<i>mỗi</i>	<i>hoàng hôn</i>	<i>nhặt ...</i>
	one	autumn	past	each	twilight	pick
Transitivity	<b>Circumstance</b>			<b>Circumstance</b>		
Theme	<b>Theme?</b>					<b>Rheme</b>

At each twilight in a last Autumn, [when I] picked up ...

(24) NĐC, p. 66]

	<i>Ngày</i>	<i>xưa</i>	<i>ở</i>	<i>một</i>	<i>vùng</i>	<i>nọ</i>	<i>có...</i>
	day	old	in	one	area	that	have
Transitivity	<b>Circumstance</b>		<b>Circumstance</b>			<b>Process: existential</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme?</b>					<b>Rheme</b>	

Long long ago, in an area, there was...

I put a question mark after the Theme in each of the above clauses to indicate that the recognition for Theme according to the above examples poses some analytical problems. Clauses (21) and (22) each has two successive participant elements of equal status; each is realized by a nominal group, and they are connected by the conjunction *và* (and): *Hoàng hậu* (The Queen) and *phi tần* (concubines) in (21), and *Các khác biệt* (The differences) and *trương đồng* (similarities) in (22). Clause (23) has two successive temporal circumstantial elements, each is realized by a nominal group: *Một mùa thu trước* (In a last Autumn) and *mỗi hoàng hôn* (at each twilight). And Clause (24) also has two successive circumstantial elements, but one is a temporal element realized by a nominal group: *Ngày xưa* (Long long ago), and the other is a spatial element realized by a prepositional phrase: *ở một vùng nọ* (in an area). How should these group and phrase complexes be treated in these clauses? Should they be treated as constituting a simple or a complex Theme in each? There may be two solutions to this problem: one is to treat the first element as Theme, and the other is to treat both elements as Theme. In our analysis, we adopt the second position, treating them as simple Themes. The reason is that although each of the elements in these complexes may be realized differently,

they have the same transitivity function: Carrier in (21), Goal in (22), and Circumstance in (23), and (24), and thus forming what Halliday (1985b, p. 41; 1998, p. 40) refers to as “a single complex element”. Now, we can establish a general guide for identifying the Theme which is realized by group or phrase complexes as follows:

**General guide 2**

The Theme of a clause consists of everything up to the first constituent from the experiential metafunction: if in a clause, two or more participant elements related to each other by means of paratactic relation occur in initial position, then those participants serve as simple Theme; and if in a clause, two or more circumstantial elements occur in initial position, then those circumstantial elements serve as simple Theme.

**4.3.1.3. Rank-Shifted Clauses as Simple Theme**

All the Theme elements in the preceding discussion, either consisting of one or more than one element, are realized by a group or phrase rank constituent. A clause simplex may contain Theme which is realized by a rank-shifted clause – one which is downgraded to function as a constituent of a clause. (25), (26), (27) and (28) are the examples in point.

(25) [NK, p. 30]

	<i>Nó</i>	<i>đi</i>	<i>xa</i>	<i>là</i>	<i>nhà</i>	<i>vắng</i>	<i>hẳn</i>
	he	go	far away	be	house	deserted	complete
Transitivity	<b>Carrier</b>			<b>Process: relational</b>	<b>Attribute</b>		
Theme	<b>Theme</b>			<b>Rheme</b>			

The house was deserted whenever he went away.

(26) [NDC, p. 107]

	<i>Các</i>	<i>vi</i>	<i>đến</i>	<i>đó</i>	<i>sẽ</i>	<i>có ...</i>
	plural marker	gentleman	arrive	there	aspectual marker	have ...
Transitivity	<b>Circumstance</b>				<b>Process: existential</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme</b>				<b>Rheme</b>	

When you gentlemen arrive there, there will be lodgings available and people ready to serve.

(27) [THL, p. 161]

	<i>Ông</i>	<i>về</i>	<i>người</i>	<i>làng</i>	<i>Kiều</i>	<i>có</i>	<i>kẻ</i>	<i>biết người không.</i>
	Mr	return	people	village	Kieu	have	someone	know...
Transitivity	<b>Circumstance</b>		<b>Senser</b>				<b>Process: mental</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme</b>		<b>Rheme</b>					

When he [Mr Xe] came back, some of Kieu villagers knew it; others didn't.

(28) [HVV, 2012, p. 56]

	<i>Cách mạng</i>	<i>tháng tám</i>	<i>thành công</i>	<i>đem lại</i>	<i>độc lập</i>	<i>tự do ...</i>
	revolution	august	succeed	bring back	independence	freedom...
Transitivity	<b>Actor</b>			<b>Process: material</b>	<b>Goal</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme</b>			<b>Rheme</b>		

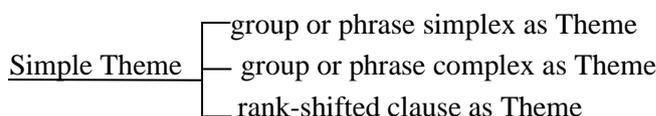
The victory of the August Revolution brought independence and freedom to the nation.

As can be seen, all the Themes in (25), (26), (27), and (28) are realized by a clause: *Nó đi xa* (literally, ‘he went far away’) in (25), *Các vi đến đó* (literally, ‘you gentlemen arrived there’) in (26), *Ông về* (literally, ‘he returned’) in (27), and *Cách mạng tháng tám thành công* (literally ‘the August Revolution succeeded’). When entering into a syntactic relation with

other constituents, these elements still retain their clause structure, but they are down-ranked (rank-shifted) to function as a constituent in the clause: Actor in (25), Carrier in (26), Circumstance in (27), and Actor in (28). Simple Theme in Vietnamese and its more delicate options can be represented in the following system network.

**Figure 1**

*Simple Theme in the Vietnamese Clause Simplex*



**4.3.2. Multiple Theme**

So far, we have introduced different instances of simple Themes and considered them mainly in relation to their respective transitivity functions: participant/Theme or circumstance/Theme, occurring either in one or more than one group/phrase. Following Halliday (1985b, 1998, and elsewhere), we can refer to them as **topical**

**Theme.** In naturally occurring texts, however, we may come across clauses which do not contain simple topical Themes as such. Instead, we may find a number of elements preceding the topical Theme which are obligatorily thematic.

The distinction between simple Theme and multiple Theme as systemic choices is related to the internal structure of Theme.

Halliday (1985b, 1998, and elsewhere) and Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) claim that any element occurring in the thematic portion contributes to the creation of text: if it does not contribute directly to the textual meaning-building of the clause, it contributes to the construction of text in the wider textual environment. A Theme is simple when the thematic element is represented by just one constituent: a nominal group, an adverbial group, a prepositional phrase, or a clause rank-shifted to function as a constituent of the clause; or when the thematic element consists of two or more participant elements occurring concurrently in initial position and having the same experiential function. In contrast, a Theme is multiple when it has a further internal structure of its own: it not only contains the constituent from experiential metafunction but can be extended to contain elements having interpersonal and textual metafunctions as well (for more detail, see Hoang, 2018, pp. 9-10).

The recognition of multiple Theme in the clause is derived from the multifunctional nature of language: the ideational function, the interpersonal function, and the textual function. Since all these functions operate simultaneously in one and the same clause, this opens for the possibility of more than one element of Theme

(29) [NN, p. 22]

<i>Có lẽ</i>	<i>cũng</i>	<i>vì</i>	<i>vậy</i>	<i>mà</i>	<i>ông “vua quý”</i>	<i>này</i>	<i>đã ...</i>
perhaps	also	because	this	which	Mr king	monster	this
modal	adverbial	conjunctive	conjunctive	Thing	Classifier	Deictic	...
<b>interpersonal Theme</b>	<b>textual Theme</b>				<b>topical Theme</b>		
<b>multiple Theme</b>							<b>Rheme</b>

Perhaps because of this reason that that “monster king” could not lord over the country for no more than five years.

The analysis of (29) shows that the elements constituting the Theme in this clause is fairly complex. From the remotest item on the left *Có lẽ* (perhaps) to the head nominal group *ông “vua quý” này* (literally, ‘this monster king’), we come across six elements, five of which (*Có lẽ*, *cũng*, *vì*, *vậy*, and *mà*) are themselves not parts of the proposition. Drawing on insights from Halliday’s metafunctional theory, we can interpret them in some more detail as follows (although it is not always possible to translate all our concerns of them into the metalanguage):

to occur in it (Halliday, 1985b, 1998; Hasan & Fries, 1995; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Extracts (29) and (30) taken from two different text types will suffice for the present purpose. The clauses in point are italicized; and the elements of Theme are in boldface type.

(29) Khi vua Uy Mục lên ngôi thì hành bạo chính, đảo lộn cương thường, người trong nước hết thấy đều oán giận. ...*Có lẽ cũng vì vậy mà ông “vua quý” này đã không tác oai tác quái được quá 5 năm.* [NN, p. 22]

When King Uy Mục ascended to the throne, he exercised violent policies and reversed the common rules; the people in the country were all resentful. ...*Perhaps because of this reason that that “demon king” could not lord over the country for no more than five years.*

(30) Lan: Hân ơi, Anh Nam gọi điện đến bảo là đang có khách. [HVV, 2008, p. 21]

Hân: *Ừ, nhưng thế thì Lan ạ nhất định anh Nam sẽ không đến.*

Lan: Han, (brother) Nam called, saying that he’s having a guest.

Han: *Yeah, but if so Lan, it’s certain that he (brother Nam) will not come.*

Let us look at (29) first. The thematic analysis of this clause is something as follows:

*Có lẽ* is a modal element indicating that something may be true, but the speaker/writer is not sure.

*Cũng* is an adverbial element used to affirm the similarity of a phenomenon, a state, or an activity, or a characteristic already mentioned in the previous text (Khi vua Uy Mục lên ngôi thì hành bạo chính, đảo lộn cương thường, người trong nước hết thấy đều oán giận... [When King Uy Mục ascended to the throne, he exercised violent policies and reversed the common rules; the people in the country were all resentful...]).

*Vì* is a conjunction used to give a reason for something; *vậy* is a demonstrative determiner indicating something as given, because it was mentioned in the previous text. When *vì* and *vậy* are collocated, the conjunctive *vì vậy* indicates what is going to be said has a reason from what has already been said.

*Mà* is a conjunction used to indicate what is going to happen as a result of what has been already said.

*Ông “vua quý” này* is a nominal group (which consists of the generic classifier *ông* and the noun *vua*) functioning as Thing, *quý* – a noun (30) [HVV, 2008, p. 21]

<i>Ừ</i>	<i>nhưng</i>	<i>thế thì</i>	<i>Lan ạ</i>	<i>nhất định</i>	<i>anh Nam</i>	<i>sẽ không đến.</i>
yeah	but	so then	Lan	certain	brother Nam	will not come
continuative	structural	structural	vocative	modal	nominal	
<b>textual Theme</b>			<b>interpersonal Theme</b>		<b>topical Theme</b>	
<b>multiple Theme</b>						<b>Rheme</b>

Yeah, but if so Lan, it’s certain that he (brother Nam) will not come.

The analysis of (30) shows that like (29), the organization of the thematic sequence of this clause is equally fairly complex: from the remotest item on the left *Ừ* (Yeah) to the nominal group *anh Nam* (brother Nam), we also come across six elements, five of which (*Ừ, nhưng, thế thì, Lan ạ, nhất định*) do not contribute directly to the textual meaning-building of the clause. A closer inspection of these six elements will reveal that.

*Ừ* is an adverbial particle used as a response to say that something which the first speaker (Lan) has said (*Anh Nam gọi điện đến bảo là đang có khách* [Nam called, saying that he’s having a guest]) is true, or that the second speaker (Hân) agrees with what the first speaker has said. Another feature of *Ừ* here is that its occurrence in the clause signals a move in the discourse. In this context, it is a continuative element.

*nhưng* is a conjunction used to indicate what the speaker is going say will be contrary to the expectation set up before (*Anh Nam sẽ đến*). In this context, it is a structural element.

*thế* is a pronominal used to indicate something which has just been mentioned. When collocated with the conjunctive particle *thì*, the combination becomes a conjunctive Adjunct, and constitutes a structural element.

*Lan* is a proper name used as a vocative;

functioning as Classifier, and *này* – a demonstrative pronoun functioning as Deictic.

Considering the textual functions of these six elements, we can see from the analysis that *Có lẽ* functions as **interpersonal Theme**, the combination *cũng vì vậy mà* functions as **textual Theme**, and the nominal group *ông “vua quý” này* functions as **topical Theme**. Taken together, these elements constitute what can be referred to as **multiple Theme**.

In the same way, the Theme of (30) can be analysed as follows:

*ạ* is a particle used to call someone’s attention. When *Lan* is collocated with *ạ*, the combination is a vocative element.

*nhất định* is a modal element indicating that the degree of probability of Nam’s not coming is high.

*anh Nam* is a proper noun or personal name. In this context it is a nominal element.

Considering the textual functions of these elements, we can see from the analysis that the three elements *Ừ, nhưng* and *thế thì* constitute textual Theme, *Lan ạ* and *nhất định* constitute interpersonal Theme, and *anh Nam* is topical Theme. Taken together, these elements constitute **multiple Theme**.

The analysis of (29) and (30) reveals five noticeable features of multiple Theme.

First, no matter how many elements occur in the thematic part, there is always a topical or experiential element occurring in the final position, and its occurrence is obligatory.

Secondly, the position of the topical Theme is fixed, but the position of the elements in the interpersonal and textual Theme may vary: (29) begins with a modal Adjunct *Có lẽ* functioning as interpersonal Theme, while (30) begins with a continuative element *Ừ* functioning as part of textual Theme.

Thirdly, among the elements constituting the interpersonal and textual Themes, the order of the vocative and modal element is more flexible: In (30) the vocative element *Lan ạ* can follow the elements *Ừ nhưng thế thì* as in *Ừ nhưng thế thì Lan ạ nhất định*, and the continuative element *Ừ* as in *Ừ Lan ạ nhưng thế thì nhất định*; it can occur at the beginning of the clause before *Ừ* as in *Lan ạ, ừ nhưng thế thì nhất định*, and it can occur even at the end of the clause as in *Ừ nhưng thế thì nhất định anh Nam sẽ không đến, Lan ạ*. And the modal element *nhất định* can occur within the Theme part immediately after the vocative element *Lan ạ* as in *Ừ nhưng thế thì Lan ạ nhất định anh Nam sẽ không đến*; but it can also occur inside the experiential structure of the clause immediately after the topical Theme *anh Nam* as in *Ừ nhưng thế thì Lan ạ anh Nam nhất định sẽ không đến*.

Fourthly, of the five non-topical Theme elements in (30), the continuative *Ừ*, the conjunction *nhưng* and the conjunctive Adjunct *thế thì* are inherently thematic in the sense that if they are present in the clause at all, they usually come at the beginning before the topical Theme. It is not possible to say *nhưng thế thì Lan ạ nhất*

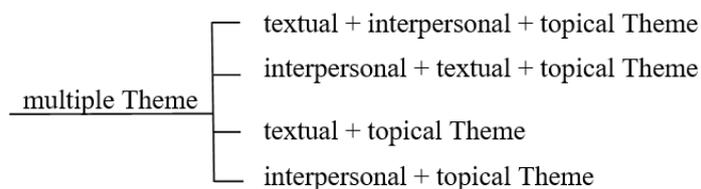
*định anh Nam ừ sẽ không đến\** or *Ừ thế thì Lan ạ nhất định anh Nam nhưng sẽ không đến\** or *Ừ nhưng Lan ạ nhất định anh Nam thế thì sẽ không đến\**. Apart from what has been discussed, the constraints on the specific order of these non-topical Theme elements in the clause seem to be too complex to be gone into here.

And finally, the relatively flexible order of interpersonal and textual Themes allows for four possible choices/combinations of multiple Theme: (1) textual Theme + interpersonal Theme + topical Theme as in (29) and (30); (2) interpersonal Theme + textual Theme + topical Theme as *Thế thì Lan ạ anh Nam* in *Thế thì Lan ạ anh Nam nhất định sẽ không đến* (So then Lan [brother] Nam will certainly not come); (3) textual Theme + topical Theme as *Dạ, em* in *Dạ, em không có điều gì bận khoăn ạ*. (No, I don't have anything to worry about.) [PDT, 1994, p. 19]; and (4) interpersonal Theme + topical Theme as *Anh Bắc ơi, lần này* in *Anh Bắc ơi, lần này anh phải ở nhà chờ chị ấy*. (Bac, this time you should stay at home to wait for her.) [NQTh, 1994, p. 125].

Figure 2 represents the system network of multiple Theme in Vietnamese.

**Figure 2**

*Multiple Theme in the Vietnamese Clause Simplex*



**4.4. Unmarked Theme v. Marked Theme**

The second systemic choice involves the distinction between unmarked Theme v. marked Theme. It should be noted here that the contrast “unmarked” v. “marked” is interpreted quite differently by different scholars. Richards et al. (1999, p. 220), for example, talk about “unmarked” v. “marked” in terms of ‘more basic, natural, and frequent’ [unmarked] v. ‘less basic, natural, and frequent’ [marked]. Crystal (2008, pp. 295-6), on the other hand, in discussing different theories of markedness, talks about “unmarked” v. “marked” in terms of ‘presence’ [unmarked] v. ‘absence’ [marked]; ‘more specific’ [unmarked] v. ‘less specific’ [marked]; ‘unrestricted’ [unmarked] v.

‘restricted’ [marked]; ‘more general tendency’ [unmarked] v. ‘less general tendency’ [marked].

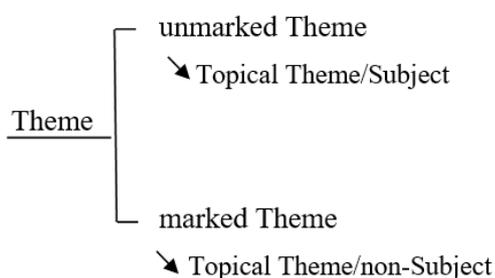
The terms “unmarked Theme” and “marked Theme” were first introduced in SFG by Halliday (1985b, 1998, and elsewhere). But unlike the criteria proposed by the above scholars, Halliday seems to distinguish “unmarked Theme” from “marked Theme” on interpersonal metafunction ground. He argues that the main criterion for distinguishing an unmarked Theme from a marked one lies in the possibility of Theme being conflated with Subject in the Mood structure: in a declarative clause, when topical Theme maps on to or is conflated with Subject, it is an unmarked Theme; in contrast, when topical Theme does not map on

to or is not conflated with Subject, it is a marked Theme (see Halliday, 1985b, 1998; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Thus in **Ông Xê** trở về quê hương sau gần năm mươi năm lưu lạc (Mr. Xe came back to his home country after nearly fifty years' wandering abroad) in (15a), **Ông Xê** is an unmarked Theme because it is conflated with Subject: Theme/Subject; in contrast, in **Sau gần năm mươi năm lưu lạc** ông Xê trở về quê hương (After nearly fifty years' wandering abroad, Mr. Xe came back to his home country) in (15b), **Sau gần năm mươi năm lưu lạc** is a marked Theme because it is conflated with Adjunct: Adjunct/Theme; and in **Quê hương**, ông Xê trở về sau gần năm mươi năm lưu lạc (His home country, Mr. Xe came back [to it] after nearly fifty years' wandering abroad) in (15c), **Quê Hương** is a marked Theme because it is conflated with Complement: Complement/Theme.

The unmarked Theme v. marked Theme contrast can be represented in the following system network:

**Figure 3**

*Unmarked Theme v. Marked Theme in Vietnamese*



In several text types, particularly in narrative, the elements most likely functioning as unmarked Theme in a declarative clause are personal pronouns *tôi* (I), *chúng tôi* (we), *bạn* (you), *ông ấy/anh ấy* (he)/*chị ấy* (she), *nó* (it), *họ* (they). The following extract taken from a short story will serve to prove the point. (The Themes are in boldface type; the ellipses of the personal pronouns are retrieved with the help of context and are put in square brackets. For reasons of space, only the translations of the personal pronouns are given in round brackets).

**Extract 2**

|| (31) **Tôi** (I) + quen ông Quài không do ai giới thiệu cả, || (32) tình cờ [**tôi**] (I) + gặp ông chăn một cặp bò phối giống có bộ lông màu cánh gián tuyệt đẹp ở vạt cỏ cạnh đường || (33) [**tôi**]

(I) + liền đứng ngắm || (34) rồi [**tôi**] (I) + bắt chuyện với người chăn. || (35) **Ông ta** (He) + hay chuyện || (36) mà **tôi** (I) + lại đang thèm chuyện, || (37) [**chúng tôi**] (we) + đứng với nhau một lúc lâu chưa hả || (38) [**chúng tôi**] (we) + lại hẹn gặp nhau tại nhà để nói cho hết chuyện. || [NK, p. 20]

I knew Mr. Quai quite by chance. Seeing him raising a pair of inseminated cows with beautiful brown hair near the road side, I immediately stopped to behold the cows, and talked with him (the raiser). He was fond of talking and I was also craving for talk. We chatted for a while; but feeling that our story would be unfinished, we decided to meet at his home to finish it.

As can be seen from the above extract, in all eight clauses, the unmarked Themes are personal pronouns: *tôi* (I) in (31), [*tôi*] (I) in (32), [*tôi*] in (33), [*tôi*] (I) in (34), *Ông ta* (He) in (35), *tôi* (I) in (36), [*chúng tôi*] (we) in (37), and [*chúng tôi*] (we) in (38). They represent the author of the story and his interlocutor. Their alternate presence in the passage helps to push the text forward.

**4.5. Theme Interpreted From the Point of View of Mood**

Another way to explore Theme in the clause is to consider it in terms of Mood. Mood is the grammaticalization of the semantic system of speech function in communication, assigning interactive roles into pairs such as speaker/writer or listener/reader. In these pairs of speech roles, the speaker/writer may confirm ('có [yes]' or 'không [no]') with the listener/reader in a statement called declarative mood; the speaker/writer may require the listener/reader to do something referred to as imperative mood; or the speaker/writer may ask the listener/reader to provide information known as interrogative mood (for detail, see Halliday, 1985b, 1998, 2012; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Kress, 1981; Matthiessen, 1995; Matthiessen et al., 2010). What we have presented in 4.1 to 4.4 are all concerned with Theme in declarative clauses. In what follows, we will look at Theme in imperative and interrogative clauses.

**4.5.1. Theme in Imperative Clauses**

In an imperative clause, the speaker or writer indicates that he or she wants some action

or situation to result from his or her words. The semantic content of an imperative clause thus comprises a notional component – the verb – and an indication of the role of the speaker who issues the command or the appeal to the listener to execute the command. In Vietnamese, imperative clauses occur in a variety of forms to achieve different communicative purposes. An imperative clause can be a command, an instruction, a request, or a suggestion. A detailed account of these imperative forms and their meanings would be useful, but would go beyond the scope of a journal article as such. For the purposes of the present study, the discussion of

Theme in imperative clauses will centre around examples (39) to (48). Note that (40) to (44) are agnates of (39). To facilitate discussion, these clauses are analysed in terms of Transitivity, Mood, and Theme.

(39) [ĐB, p. 62]

	<i>Vào!</i>
	Come
Transitivity	<b>Process: material</b>
Mood	<b>Predicator</b>
Theme	<b>Theme: unmarked</b>

Come in!

(40)

	<i>Cứ</i>	<i>vào</i>	<i>đi!</i>
	imperative particle	come	imperative particle
Transitivity		<b>Process: material</b>	
Mood		<b>Predicator</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme: unmarked</b>		

Do come in!

(41)

	<i>Xin</i>	<i>hãy</i>	<i>vào</i>	<i>đi!</i>
	beg	imperative particle	come	imperative particle
Transitivity			<b>Process: material</b>	
Mood			<b>Predicator</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme: unmarked</b>			

Come in please!

(42)

	<i>Xin</i>	<i>mời</i>	<i>vào</i>	<i>đi!</i>
	beg	invite	come	imperative particle
Transitivity			<b>Process: material</b>	
Mood			<b>Predicator</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme: unmarked</b>			

Come in please!

(44)

	<i>Tuân,</i>	<i>vào</i>	<i>đi!</i>
	vocative	come	imperative particle
Transitivity		<b>Process: material</b>	
Mood		<b>Predicator</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme: unmarked</b>		

Tuan, come in!

(45)

	<i>Tuân</i>	<i>oi,</i>	<i>cứ</i>	<i>vào</i>	<i>đi!</i>
	vocative	call	imperative particle	come	imperative particle
Transitivity				<b>Process: material</b>	
Mood				<b>Predicator</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme: unmarked</b>				

Tuan, do come in!

(46) [NĐC, 1993, p. 30]

	<i>Con</i>	<i>đừng</i>	<i>khóc</i>	<i>nữa.</i>
	son	not	cry	more
Transitivity	<b>Behaver</b>	<b>Process: behavioural</b>		<b>Circumstance</b>
Mood	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>		<b>Adjunct</b>
Theme	<b>Theme: marked</b>	<b>Rheme</b>		

Don't cry any more, my son!

(47) [THL, p. 16]

	<i>Chú</i>	<i>cứ</i>	<i>về!</i>
	junior uncle	imperative particle	come back
Transitivity	<b>Actor</b>		<b>Process: material</b>
Mood	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme: marked</b>	<b>Rheme</b>	

Come back home, my younger brother!

(48) [NĐT, p. 16]

	<i>Chiều</i>	<i>nay</i>	<i>lên</i>	<i>Trung đội</i>	<i>chỉ huy!</i>
	afternoon	this	up	platoon	command
Transitivity	<b>Circumstance</b>		<b>Process: material</b>	<b>Goal/Range</b>	
Mood	<b>Adjunct</b>		<b>Predicator</b>	<b>Complement</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme: marked</b>		<b>Rheme</b>		

This afternoon, come to the Commanding Platoon!

Examples (39) – (48) are intended to bring out the following characteristics of imperative clauses in Vietnamese:

(1) An imperative clause can contain only the Predicator: *Vào* (39).

(2) An imperative clause can contain imperative elements of various delicate functions preceding the Predicator: *Cứ* (40), *Xin hãy* (41), *Xin mời* (42), *Xin mời cứ* (43), *Tuân* (44), and *Tuân ơi* (45).

(3) An imperative clause can contain a Subject: *Con* (46) and *Chú* (47), or an Adjunct preceding the Predicator: *Chiều nay* (48).

(4) An imperative clause can contain an imperative particle following the Predicator: *đi* in (40) to (45).

(5) In an imperative clause, the presence of the Predicator is obligatory.

The question that arises here is “How can Theme be identified in these imperative clauses?” Based on the characteristics pointed out above, we can make the following statements for identifying Theme in imperative clauses in Vietnamese as follows:

(1) When the Predicator occurs alone in an imperative clause, the Theme is the

Predicator, and it is an unmarked choice of Theme (unmarked Theme). It is not difficult to explain here, because the basic message of an imperative clause is ‘I want you to do something’ (Halliday, 1998, p. 47); and the imperative is the only type of clause in which the Predicator is regularly found to occur in the first position (Halliday, 1998, p. 47; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 103).

(2) When elements such as imperative particles, vocatives, or calls precede the Predicator, the Theme is these elements plus the Predicator, and it is still an unmarked choice of Theme. The reason is that these elements do not have a function in Transitivity.

(3) When an imperative particle occurs following the Predicator, this element automatically falls within the Theme as *đi* in *Cứ vào đi* (40).

(4) When an element having a Transitivity function precedes the Predicator such as *Chú* (Actor) in *Chú cứ về* in (47), or *Chiều nay* (Circumstance) in *Chiều nay lên Trung đội chỉ huy* in (48), the Theme is this element; but it is a marked choice of Theme (marked Theme).

### 4.5.2. Theme in Interrogative Clauses

Halliday states:

The typical function of an interrogative clause is to ask a question; and from the speaker's point of view asking a question is an indication that he wants to be told something. The fact that, in real life, people ask questions for all kinds of reasons does not call into dispute the observation that the basic meaning of question is a request for an answer. (Halliday, 1998, p. 45)

Halliday distinguishes two basic choices of interrogative clause which are also applicable to Vietnamese: polar interrogative v. non-polar interrogative, illustrated in the following examples:

(53) [LNM, 1994, p. 126]

	<b>Có</b>	<b>phải</b>	<b>ông ấy</b>	<b>là</b>	<b>đại biểu</b>	<b>Quốc hội</b>	<b>không?</b>
	yes	correct	Mr that	be	member	parliament	no
Trans			<b>Carrier</b>	<b>Process: relational</b>	<b>Attribute</b>		
Mood			<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>	<b>Complement</b>		
Theme	<b>Theme</b>			<b>Rheme</b>			

Is he a member of the National Assembly?

(54)

	<b>Ông ấy</b>	<b>có</b>	<b>phải</b>	<b>là</b>	<b>đại biểu</b>	<b>Quốc hội</b>	<b>không?</b>
	Mr that	yes	correct	be	member	parliament	no
Trans	<b>Carrier</b>			<b>Process: relational</b>	<b>Attribute</b>		
Mood	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>			<b>Complement</b>		
Theme	<b>Theme</b>			<b>Rheme</b>			

Is he a member of the National Assembly?

(55)

	<b>Ông ấy</b>	<b>là</b>	<b>đại biểu</b>	<b>Quốc hội,</b>	<b>có</b>	<b>phải</b>	<b>không?</b>
	Mr that	be	member	parliament	yes	correct	no
Trans	<b>Carrier</b>	<b>Process: relational</b>	<b>Attribute</b>				
Mood	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>	<b>Complement</b>				
Theme	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Rheme</b>					

He's a member of the National Assembly, isn't he?

A cursory look at clauses (53) - (55) and comparing them with any major independent declarative clause in Vietnamese will show that the structural pattern of a polar interrogative clause in Vietnamese is similar to that of a declarative one: both are realized by the configuration of +**Subject** ^ +**Predicator** (where the sign + indicates the presence of the element is obligatory and the sign ^ indicates the sequence of the elements). What makes them differ from each other is that apart from having

(51) *Có phải sự thở có ý nghĩa với hô hấp không?* [HVV, 2017, p. 44]

Does breathing have significance to respiration?

(52) *Sự thở có ý nghĩa gì với hô hấp?* [NQV, 2016, p. 65]

What significance does breathing have to respiration?

Each of these choices of interrogative clauses are examined in some detail below.

#### 4.5.2.1. Theme in Polar Interrogative Clauses

Polar interrogative clauses can be instanced by examples (53) to (55); (53) is the original, and (54) and (55) are agnates.

the Subject + Predicator structure, a polar interrogative clause is realized by what has been commonly referred to in Vietnamese linguistic scholarship as interrogative particles, among which three are most commonly found: *có* (yes), *phải* (correct), and *không* (no). These particles are used to ask for information about the whole clause and require the answer '*có* (yes)/*có phải* (yes correct)' or '*không* (no)/*không phải* (not correct)' (see Hoang, 2020, p. 132).

A closer inspection of these examples reveals that the place of these interrogative particles in the clause is indeterminate: they can float around in the clause rather freely depending on the speaker's communicative or pragmatic purpose. In (53) *Có phải ông ấy là đại biểu Quốc hội không?*, the positive particles *Có* (yes) and *phải* (correct) occur in initial position before the Subject *ông ấy*, and the negative particle *không* (no) occurs in final position of the clause. In (54) *Ông ấy có phải là đại biểu Quốc hội không?*, the positive particles *có* and *phải* occur in the position after the Subject *Ông ấy*, and the negative particle *không* occurs in the final position. And in (55) *Bác là đại biểu Quốc hội, có phải không?*, all the three particles *có phải không* occur in the final position of the clause. The fact that interrogative particles can occur in different positions in a polar interrogative clause raises a question: "What is Theme in polar interrogatives in Vietnamese and how can it be recognized?" General Guide 1 'the Theme of a clause consists of everything up to the first constituent from the experiential metafunction' still works here. Thus the Theme of clause (53) is *Có phải ông ấy*: interrogative particles + Carrier/Subject, and the Themes of (54) and (55) are *Ông ấy*: Carrier/Subject.

#### 4.5.2.2. Theme in Non-Polar Interrogative Clauses

Non-polar interrogative clauses in Vietnamese cover a very rich but fairly complex textual domain. This is due to the fact that in daily communication, people ask their interlocutors not only to confirm or deny a proposition but also to provide any piece of missing information they want: they might want to know the missing piece about **who** a person is, **what** a thing is; **what**, **when** and **where** a person or a thing does; and **how** and **why** an action or an event happens, and so on and so forth. Now the question is "How can Themes be recognized in non-polar interrogatives in Vietnamese?" Before answering this question, it would be useful to look at how Themes are recognized in non-polar interrogatives in English.

Non-polar interrogatives are commonly referred to in English as WH-questions. With regard to Themes in WH-questions in English, Halliday and Halliday and Matthiessen have this to say:

In a WH-question, which is a search for a missing piece of information, the element that functions as Theme is the element that requests this information, namely the WH-element. It is the WH-element that expresses the nature of the missing piece: *who*, *what*, *when*, *how*, etc. So in a WH-interrogative, the WH-element is put first, no matter what other function it has in the mood structure of the clause, whether Subject, Adjunct or Complement. The meaning is 'I want you to tell me the person, thing, time, manner, etc.' (Halliday, 1998, pp. 45-6; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, pp. 101-2)

Halliday and Halliday & Matthiessen go on to explain why the WH-elements usually function as Themes in non-polar interrogatives in English as follows:

Interrogative clauses, therefore, embody the thematic principle in their structural make-up. It is the characteristic of an interrogative clause in English that one particular element comes first; and the reason for this is that that element, owing to the very nature of a question, has the status of a Theme. The speaker does not choose each time this element first; its occurrence in first position is the regular pattern by which the interrogative is expressed. It has become part of the system of the language, and the explanation for this lies in the thematic significance that is attached to first position in the English clause; the natural theme of a question is 'I want to be told something; the answer required is either a piece of information or an indication of polarity. So the realization of interrogative mood involves selecting an element that indicates the kind of answer required, and putting it at the beginning of the clause. (Halliday, 1998, p. 46; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, pp. 101-2)

As can be seen from the above quotes, the principle for recognising Themes in non-polar interrogative clauses in English is rather simple: Theme equals WH-element. But when it comes to Vietnamese, the problem seems to be very complex. Let us consider examples (56) to (67) which are analysed in terms of Mood and Theme.

(56) [NDC, p. 222]

	<i>Ai</i>	<i>têm</i>	<i>trầu</i>	<i>này?</i>
	who	prepare	betel	this
Mood	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>	<b>Complement</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Rheme</b>		

Who prepared this betel?

(57) [CD]

	<i>Cái gì</i>	<i>cao lớn</i>	<i>lênh khênh</i>
	what	tall	lanky
Mood	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Complement</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Rheme</b>	

What is the thing that is high and lanky; [it falls right away when it stands without leaning]?).

(58) (NDC, p. 111)

	<i>Người</i>	<i>là</i>	<i>ai?</i>
	you	be	who
Mood	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>	<b>Complement</b>
Theme	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Rheme</b>	

Who are you?

(59) [PDT, p. 20]

	<i>Bà ta</i>	<i>làm</i>	<i>gì</i>	<i>thế nhỉ?</i>
	she	do	what	interrogative particle
Mood	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>	<b>Complement</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Rheme</b>		

What is she doing?

(60)

	<i>Bác</i>	<i>đi</i>	<i>được</i>	<i>bao nhiêu</i>	<i>cây [số]</i>	<i>rồi?</i>
	uncle	go	gain	how many	kilometre	already
Mood	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>	<b>Complement</b>			
Theme	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Rheme</b>				

How many kilometres have you covered/walked?

(61)

	<i>Chị</i>	<i>cần</i>	<i>bao nhiêu</i>	<i>tiền?</i>
	sister	need	how much	money
Mood	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>	<b>Complement</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Rheme</b>		

How much money do you want?

(62)

	<i>Họ</i>	<i>đã</i>	<i>đi</i>	<i>được</i>	<i>bao lâu</i>	<i>rồi?</i>
	they	aspectual marker	go	gain	how long	already
Mood	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>			<b>Adjunct</b>	
Theme	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Rheme</b>				

How long ago did they leave?

(63) [ĐB, 1994, p. 63]

	<i>[Vây thì] anh</i>	<i>đi</i>	<i>đâu?</i>
	[so] brother	go	where
Mood	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>	<b>Adjunct</b>
Theme	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Rheme</b>	

[So], where do you go?

(64) [HP, p. 33]

	<i>Nhà</i>	<i>chị</i>	<i>ở</i>	<i>đường</i>	<i>nào?</i>
	house	sister	at	road	what
Mood	<b>Subject</b>		<b>Complement</b>		
Theme	<b>Theme</b>		<b>Rheme</b>		

In what street is your house located? / What street is your house in?

(65) [LCT, p. 241]

	<i>Bao giờ</i>	<i>chị</i>	<i>đi</i>	<i>chợ?</i>
	when	sister	go	market
Mood	<b>Adjunct</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicator</b>	<b>Adjunct</b>
Theme	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Rheme</b>		

When are you going to market?

(66) [NĐC, p. 7]

	<i>[Thế] thầy</i>	<i>anh</i>	<i>giao</i>	<i>hàng</i>	<i>thế nào?</i>
	[so] father	brother	deliver	goods	how
Mood	<b>Subject</b>		<b>Predicator</b>	<b>Complement</b>	<b>Adjunct</b>
Theme	<b>Theme</b>		<b>Rheme</b>		

How does your father deliver goods?

(67) [YB, p. 190]

	<i>Sao</i>	<i>mẹ</i>	<i>lại</i>	<i>khóc?</i>
	why	mother	particle	cry
Mood	<b>Adjunct</b>	<b>Subject</b>		<b>Predicator</b>
Theme	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Rheme</b>		

Why are you crying, mum?

The analysis of (56) to (67) reveals a number of interesting observations. First, non-polar interrogatives in Vietnamese represent various pieces of missing information that need to be supplied; and the information needed to be supplied can be conflated with Subject as *Ai* in (56) and *Cái gì* in (57); Complement as *ai* in (58) and *gì* in (59); spatial extent Adjunct as *bao nhiêu [cây số]* in (60) and *bao nhiêu [tiền]* in (61), temporal extent Adjunct as *bao lâu* in (62); spatial location Adjunct as *đâu* in (63) and *[ở đường] nào* in (64), temporal location Adjunct as *Bao giờ* in (65), manner Adjunct as *thế nào* in (66), and cause Adjunct as *Sao* in (67). Secondly, the question words/phrases are put exactly in the place where the missing information is required to be supplied. Thirdly, of the eleven non-polar interrogative clauses, four have question words/phrases put in initial position and have the status of Theme: (56) and (57) where the question words *Ai* and *Cái gì* function as Subject, and (65) and (67) where the questions words *Bao giờ* and *Sao* function as temporal Adjunct and cause Adjunct respectively; all the remaining seven

other clauses have the question words/phrases put in the place where the missing information is required, giving the Subjects the status of Theme: (58), (59), (60), (61), (62), (64), and (66). And fourthly, of the eleven non-polar interrogative clauses, nine have Subject put in initial position (accounting for 82%). This allows us to say that unlike English in non-polar interrogative clauses, Vietnamese prefers to thematise the Subject.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

### 5.1. Summary

In this article, we have made an attempt to explore the notion of Theme in the Vietnamese clause simplex. We began by tracing the history of the study of Theme in world linguistics, and showed that the study of Theme had its origin from ancient Greek linguistic scholarship. After more than twenty thousand years' disappearing from the scene, it was taken up in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century first by the Czech scholar Vilém Mathesius and other

scholars of the Prague school linguists, and then by the world-renowned British functional scholar Michael Halliday and other SF linguists. The review of their research has shown that Mathesius and Halliday are similar in seeing Theme as a fundamental discursive concept, but they differ in how they approach it. While Mathesius assigns two distinct functions of Theme by defining it as (i) “that which is known or at least obvious in the given situation” which yields the information structure of Given + New and (ii) that “from which the speaker proceeds” which yields the thematic structure of Theme + Rheme, Halliday abstracts out Mathesius’ second function for Theme, separating it from the first, and thus making it easier to describe and analyse two layers of Theme in discourse. Then we turned to look at how Theme was studied in Vietnam, reviewing in particular the work *Tiếng Việt: Sơ thảo ngữ pháp chức năng* by the Vietnamese prominent linguist Cao Xuan Hao (1991/2004). The review of Cao’s work has shown that Cao seems to characterize the basic structure of the Vietnamese sentence as Topic + Comment as conceptualized by some North-American scholars such as Chafe (1976) and Li and S. Thompson (1976) rather than that of Theme + Rheme as conceptualized by Mathesius and Halliday. The review of other related research on Theme in Vietnamese, either descriptive or comparative, clearly indicated that the term “Theme” has been employed in various senses, making an exhaustive application of the SFG framework to the description of Theme in Vietnamese impossible.

Having examined the history and development of the study of Theme in world linguistic scholarship, and the related literature in the study of Theme in Vietnam, I turned to explore Theme in Vietnamese. Drawing on the SFG framework, and based on the specificities of Vietnamese language, I described Theme in the Vietnamese clause simplex and its delicate options in the environment of **THEME**. I began by examining Theme and the thematic structure of the Vietnamese clause simplex, identifying the boundary between Theme and Rheme, distinguishing between simple and multiple Theme, and unmarked and marked Theme. Then I looked in some detail at Theme as seen from the point of view of Mood, describing Theme in

imperative clauses, and Theme in interrogative clauses. At this point, our research can be summarised in the following points:

1. Theme in the Vietnamese clause simplex can be defined as ‘the point of departure of a message’; and can be distinguished as that element which comes in first position in the clause.

2. The Theme of a clause consists of everything up to the first constituent from the experiential metafunction; everything else that follows this initial constituent will automatically fall into the Rheme.

3. In declarative clauses, Theme can be conflated with one or another of the three transitivity functions Participant, Circumstance, or Process.

4. In imperative clauses, Theme is typically conflated with Predicator.

5. In polar and non-polar interrogative clauses, Theme is typically conflated with Subject.

6. A Theme can be simple or multiple:

6.1. A Theme is simple when the thematic element is represented by just one constituent: a nominal group, an adverbial group, a prepositional phrase, or a rank-shifted clause; a Theme can also be treated as simple when the thematic element is represented by two or more elements occurring concurrently in initial position, forming a single complex element, and having the same experiential function.

6.2. A Theme is multiple when it has a further internal structure of its own. Here we can distinguish between topical Theme, interpersonal Theme and textual Theme. A topical Theme is one that is conflated with an experiential element of the clause: it can be, taking material clause as representative, Actor, Goal, or Circumstance. An interpersonal Theme may contain (i) a modal element (e.g. *có lẽ* [perhaps]), (ii) the definite element in the case of *có/không* (yes/no), and (iii) a vocative (e.g. *Hân ơi*). And a textual Theme represents the meaning that is relevant to context, both co-text (of text) and context (of situation). It may have any combination of three textual elements: (i) a continuative element (e.g. *ừ* [yes]), (ii) a structural element (e.g. *nhưng* [but]), and (iii) a conjunctive element (e.g. *vì* [because]).

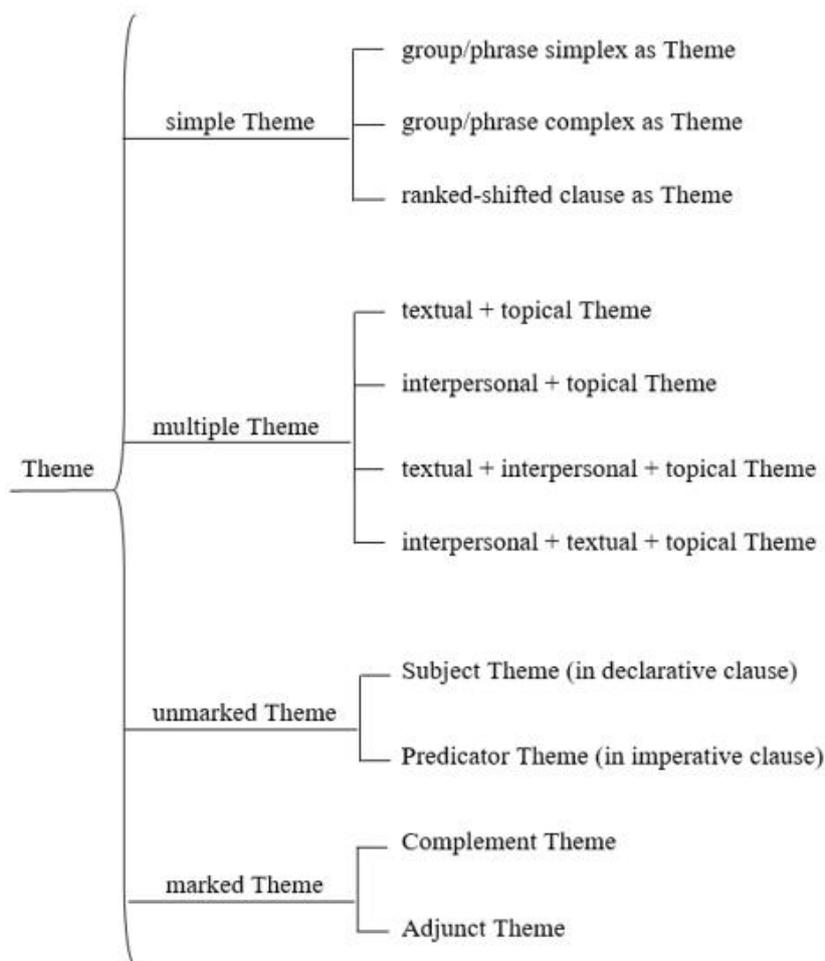
7. A Theme can be unmarked or marked.

An unmarked Theme is one that is conflated with Subject, whereas a marked Theme is a constituent functioning as some element of the rest of the Mood clause including Predicator, Complement, or Adjunct.

Below is a tentative system network showing thematic potential of the Vietnamese clause simplex as far as we have taken in this research.

**Figure 3**

*Theme in the Vietnamese Clause Simplex: A Tentative Network*



**5.2. Suggestions for Future Research**

This study is confined to only one aspect of Theme, examining it from the aspect of “that from which the speaker proceeds” realized in Theme + Rheme structure. This suggests that to have a full picture of the textual grammar of the clause, the other aspect of Theme “that which is known or at least obvious in the given situation” realized in Given + New structure in the Vietnamese clause simplex should be a topic for the next study.

This study is confined only to the study of Theme and thematic structure in the clause

simplex. This suggests that future research should focus on studying Theme and thematic structure in clause complexes, and in texts/discourses.

**Acknowledgements**

The author would like to express his sincere thanks to Professor Nguyễn Thiện Giáp of VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Dr Nguyễn Thị Minh Tâm of VNU University of Languages and International Studies, and Dr. Nguyễn Thị Hồng Vân of Hanoi Metropolitan University for helping cross-check the made-up agnate examples to ensure their validity in this research.

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## Appendix

### Sources of data for illustration

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## ĐỀ NGŨ TRONG CÚ ĐƠN TIẾNG VIỆT: MÔ TẢ THEO QUAN ĐIỂM CHỨC NĂNG HỆ THỐNG

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*Trung tâm nghiên cứu giáo dục ngoại ngữ, ngôn ngữ và quốc tế học,  
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**Tóm tắt:** Bài viết này mô tả một khía cạnh của ngữ pháp văn bản tiếng Việt theo quan điểm chức năng. Khung lí thuyết sử dụng để mô tả là Ngữ pháp chức năng hệ thống do Halliday và các nhà ngữ pháp chức năng hệ thống khác phát triển. Trọng tâm của bài viết được đặt vào việc mô tả Đề ngữ trong cú đơn. Hai câu hỏi chính làm nền tảng cho bài viết là: (1) Đề ngữ là gì trong cú đơn tiếng Việt và Đề ngữ được nhận diện như thế nào?; và (2) những lựa chọn tinh tế nào có sẵn trong môi trường **ĐỀ NGŨ** và chúng được phân biệt như thế nào? Nghiên cứu cho thấy **ĐỀ NGŨ** trong tiếng Việt là một hệ thống của cú với tư cách là một thông điệp; nó có thể được định nghĩa như là “xuất phát điểm của thông điệp” (Halliday (1967b, tr. 212; 1970, tr.161; 1985b, tr. 38), và có thể được nhận diện bởi vị trí đầu tiên trong cú; môi trường **ĐỀ NGŨ** mở ra một số lựa chọn tinh tế và những lựa chọn này có thể được phân biệt theo ba siêu chức năng ngôn ngữ: siêu chức năng trải nghiệm, siêu chức năng liên nhân, và siêu chức năng văn bản. Nghiên cứu góp phần vào việc vận dụng lí thuyết Ngữ pháp chức năng hệ thống vào việc mô tả ngữ pháp văn bản của cú tiếng Việt, mở ra những tiềm năng cho một cách tiếp cận mới trong việc mô tả toàn diện ngữ pháp chức năng hệ thống tiếng Việt phục vụ cho giảng dạy, học tập và nghiên cứu ngôn ngữ.

*Từ khoá:* Đề ngữ, Thuyết ngữ, cú đơn, Ngữ pháp chức năng hệ thống, tiếng Việt