

AN EXPERIMENT OF INVESTIGATING SYNTACTIC BEHAVIOR OF NOUNS AND VERBS IN VIETNAMESE IN TERMS OF ICONICITY

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Abstract

This paper deals with syntactic behavior of nouns and verbs in Vietnamese. Generally, in our language nouns differ from verbs in that they are different in compound with such other words as *những, các, này, no...* (as for nouns) or *đã, đang, sẽ, xong, rồi...* (as for verbs). However, in some cases, a noun or a verb may lack these abilities.

According to the hypothesis of iconicity in syntax, the syntactic behavior of nouns and verbs in Vietnamese are determined by the way they are used either prototypically or non-prototypically. The categories of nouns and verbs actually manifest themselves only when the discourse requires them to: the less a linguistic element is required by the discourse either to report an discrete discourse event or to introduce a discrete entity participating in the state of affairs, the less saliently it will be marked as verbs or nouns

1. The iconic features in syntax

The study of linguistic universals in the 60s made many linguists surprised when they realized that natural languages in the world resemble each other in some aspects. This fact led them to suspect the so-called arbitrariness of language. Some observations showed that "linguistic forms are frequently the way they

are because, like diagrams, they resemble the conceptual structures they are used to convey; or, that linguistic structures resemble each other because the different conceptual domains they represent are thought in the same way" [12, p.1]. Armed with a special concern, some functional linguists have been conducting research on the Iconicity in language. The result of this research can be resumed as following:

- Many linguistic universals are tendencies rather than absolute restrictions;

- The universals can be explained.

In details, two types of iconicity in language are advanced as hypotheses:

- + Isomorphism: the tendency for there to be a one-to-one correspondence between form and meaning.

- + Motivation: the reflection in linguistic structure of some aspect of the structure of reality.

In the summer of 1983, a conference about iconicity in syntax took place in Stanford, gathering many famous linguists. Among them, Tai discussed the temporal sequence of compound sentences in Chinese as one linearity manifest of iconicity, recalling Caesar's "veni, vidi, vici". Dealing with some reduced

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expressions, Givón argued that in principle reduced expressions of more predictable information is an icon of the lesser attention paid to such information. Bybee made the point that the closeness between a verb stem and inflectional categories tends to reflect the relevance of conceptual closeness that these inflectional categories carry to such verb stem. She confirmed that the proximity of elements in a clause follows some iconic principle whose result is that elements going together semantically tend to occur close together in the clause. A. Wierzbicka showed that seemingly arbitrary distinctions in terms of singular/plural between *oats* and *wheat* are in fact motivated by a set of cognitive principles... [12]. In France, many research papers with the same spirit were collected and published in "Faits de Langues" No 1/1993.

In Vietnamese grammar, Phan Ngoc has shown some iconic phenomena that are considered as arguments for a new approach to grammar of Vietnamese on semantic principles. For example, in serial verbs the one takes preceding position will be the one describing the earlier event (*Mời ông đi lên gặp ông giám đốc*) or the order of attribute modifiers in Vietnamese is determined by degree of abstractness (*Quyển sách lịch sử Việt Nam bìa vàng in chữ đỏ*). He made the point that ignoring that rule would create long and cumbersome sentences [6, p.271-301]. While strongly criticizing the plausibility of model Subject-Predicate for describing Vietnamese sentences, Cao Xuan Hao mentioned one iconic aspect of Vietnamese syntax by confirming that the only appropriate way to

describe sentence of such an isolating language as Vietnamese is to use model Theme-Rheme. Sporadically some iconic aspects of Vietnamese syntax were mentioned such as the symmetry of proverbs, the role of order of words... However, in Vietnamese no one officially pays attention to iconicity in syntax.

2. The iconicity in syntactic behavior of noun and verb in Vietnamese

In this paper, in term of iconicity we deal with syntactic behavior of nouns and verbs, two most important parts of speech in Vietnamese. Therefore, we would like to provide data from an isolating language to confirm the iconic aspect of the two parts of speech, which has been studied a lot by functional grammarians in inflectional languages [14].

Nouns and verbs in Vietnamese as well as in other languages are two major classes that have semantic correlation with the two most important concepts [11, p.320-321]. As for nouns the entity it presents is something prototypically like "thing" or "object" and is considered as "time-stability". Verbs, on the other hand, are considered to report something prototypically like "actions" or "events"; they are used to symbolize concepts that lack time-stability. The distinction between nouns and verbs is a linguistic universal phenomenon prevailing all over the world. That is why in Vietnamese as well as in other languages, the "general meaning" criterium is often used for distinguishing nouns and verbs: nouns have general meaning about things or objects, verbs have general meaning about actions or events.

This content distinction has been supported from the formal distinction: If in inflectional languages nouns differ from verbs in trappings on gender, number, tense, aspect, mood, voice...then in such isolating languages as Vietnamese that nouns and verbs are different in the way they are compounded with another parts of speech have until now been agreed by most linguists. Initiated by Le Van Ly, the list of "evidential words" used for distinguishing nouns and verbs is confirmed in almost books about parts of speech as following:

a) Such words for plural marker as "những, các" can be put before and such determiners as "này, ấy, nọ, kia" after a noun. For example,

- "Các bạn ấy nói chuyện với nhau suốt ngày"(These students are always talking in class).

b) Such function words for tense, aspect, mood, negation as "đã, đang, sẽ, không, chẳng, chưa, cứ, còn..." can be located before and such words as "xong, rồi" after a verb. For example:

- "Em tôi *chưa* làm xong bài tập" (My brother hasn't done his homework yet).

The distinction has been supported by many studies on noun phrases and verb phrases in Vietnamese. The fact that generally in comparing with another parts of speech nouns sharply differ from verbs in term of syntactic behavior (for an such isolating language as Vietnamese it means the ability to compound with another word) meets the following hypothesis about the iconicity of lexical categories principle:

"The more a form refers to a discrete discourse entity or reports a discrete discourse event, the more distinct will be its linguistic form from neighboring forms, both paradigmatically and syntagmatically" [14.p.151]. Following from what mentioned above, the hypothesis seems to be unchallenged.

However, from all of what mentioned above it is also easy to realize that there is an extreme tendency by focusing inherent semantic features of nouns and verbs, regarding these features as decisive factors which determine syntactic behavior of nouns and verbs. So researchers must be confused when they confront the cases in that nouns and verbs lack the own characteristic ability of compounding. Some instances can be cited as following:

-As for nouns:

-Lack of ability of compounding as mentioned in (a), e.g. ability to go along with "những", "các" (put before) and "này", "ấy", "nọ", "kia" (put after) and existence of tendency semantically to incorporate in the prior verb. For example: "Người Việt Nam ăn *dũa*",

(The Vietnamese eat with chopsticks)
"Anh ta làm *ruộng*" He does the farming). We can not say:

- Người Việt Nam ăn *những/*các *dũa* *này.

- Anh ta làm *những/*các *ruộng* *đó.

-Lack of ability of compounding as mentioned in (a) while either playing attributive role in copula sentences (Bố tôi là giáo viên) (My father is a teacher) or playing the role of object in such sentences in which

transitive verbs are used in a special way as "Chị làm y tá đã mấy năm nay" (She has been a nurse for several years). We can not say:

- Bố tôi là *giáo viên* *đó.
- Chị làm y tá *ấy đã mấy năm nay.

- Noun referring to an "attached" body part lack ability of compounding as mentioned in (a) while going along with its owner, as in sentence "Tôi đau *dầu*" (I have a headache), "Tai nạn làm gãy *tay* nó" (He broke his arm in the accident). We can not say:

- Tôi đau *dầu* *này.
- Tai nạn làm gãy *những/*các *tay* (của) nó.

As for verbs:

- Lack of ability of compounding as mentioned in (b) while playing the role of subject in sentence, for example : "Yêu là chết ở trong lòng một ít" (Love is blue), "Thi đua là yêu nước" (Emulation is patriotism). We can not say:

- *Đã/*đang/*sẽ yêu là chết ở trong lòng một ít.
- *Đã/*đang/*sẽ thi đua là yêu nước.

- Lack of ability of compounding as mentioned in (b) in the so-called existential sentences, for example : "Đầu làng *trông* một cây đa to" (There is a tall tree at the edge of the village), "Trên tường *treo* một bức tranh" (There is a picture on the wall). We can not say:

- "Đầu làng *đã/*đang/*sẽ *trông* một cây đa to.
- Trên tường *đã/*đang/*sẽ *treo* một bức tranh.

- Lack of ability of compounding as mentioned in (b) while playing the role of modifier to **predicate** in such type of sentence as "Chiếc **đồng hồ** này **trông** rất đẹp" (This watch looks very nice), "Chuối này **ăn** không ngon" (This kind of bananas don't taste delicious) . We can not say:

- Chiếc đồng hồ này *đã/?đang/*sẽ *trông* rất đẹp.
- Chuối này *đã/*đang/*sẽ *ăn* không ngon.

Shortly speaking, in the foregoing study cases nouns and verbs in Vietnamese lacked the characteristic ability of compounding, which would be used as criteria to their differentiation.

How would these seemingly odd phenomena be explained by linguists?

We think that these phenomena show an aspect of the iconicity in syntax in Vietnamese, spectacularly performed by nouns and verbs. Its nature consists in the distinction between central/peripheral or prototypical/non-prototypical in respect of the syntactic behavior of nouns and verbs. Consequently, only a prototypical noun would be maximally distinct from a prototypical verb [15, p.30]. Because those nouns and verbs in the study case are used non-prototypically so their distinction in term of syntactic behavior is not clearly shown.

Then the question is: in what situation will a noun or a verb be considered being used prototypically?

A functional point of view can shed light on that issue and give a reasonable explanation: it is the role of an element in

discourse that determines its nature, and by that determines its form. So the subjectivity and communicative intention plays a crucial role and if saying in term of functionalism we can confirm that Pragmatics determines Semantics and in its turn, Semantics determines Syntax [10, p.13].

In other words, in respect of prototypically, intrinsic semantic features are relevant, but not enough to assign a form to noun or verb category. We have to resort to the ultimate reason: the prototypicality in nouns and verbs is ultimately derivative of their respective functions in sentence. And *the intrinsic semantic features of nouns and verbs are ultimately derived from their functions in sentence*. By using this statement we will explain the syntactic behavior of nouns and verbs in Vietnamese in turn.

As for noun, the prototypical use is to denote a discrete entity involving in discourse as a participant [14, p.156]. Due to that, the categorical status of nouns will display in a scale reflecting the iconic degree how they are used to that aim. In other words, the more a form is to be used to denote a discrete entity, the more a form has categorical status of noun with all of its own characteristic formal features.

In such sentences as "Người Việt Nam ăn dưa", "Anh ta làm ruộng" the objects are non-referring nouns, that means by using them the speaker/writer has no intention to associate with any discrete, separate entity at all. Thus, from the functional viewpoint, these nouns do not denote participants in any state of affairs.

They are not nouns playing prototypical function in sentence. That is why they lose characteristic and potential ability of noun compounding.

This explanation is also applied for nouns that play either attributive role in copula sentence ("Bố tôi là giáo viên") or object role in sentence whose verb-predicate is used in a special way ("Chị tôi làm y tá đã mấy năm nay").

As for such sentences as "Tôi đau đầu", "Tai nạn làm gãy tay nó" the situation became more complicated. Theoretically, it is not difficult to realize that body-part noun is used as referring expressions. However, its referent is not autonomous but is treated as dependent, unindividuated entity in relation with its owner. So, in describing frame of predicate-participants construction it is noun referring the "possessor" that is discourse salient entity. In fact, something which happens to a body part is normally done by the body-part possessor, so the body-part nouns in question really are not used prototypically and consequently they will lose characteristic features of nouns in respect of potential compounding ability.

As for verbs, the prototypical use is to report an actual action or event. Due to that, the categorical status of verbs will display in a scale reflecting the iconic degree how they are used to that aim. In other words, the more a form is to be used to report an actual action or event, the more a form has categorical status of a verb with all of its own characteristic formal features.

In such sentence as "*Yêu là chết trong lòng một ít*", "*Thi đua là yêu nước*", the verbs "yêu", "thi đua" (in the role of subject) are not used to report either action or event. So they do not function as prototypical verbs; and consequently they lose compounding potential mentioned in (b). This explanation is also suitable to the verbs that function as manner complement to predicates in such sentences as "*Chiếc đồng hồ này trông rất đẹp*", "*Chuối này ăn không ngon*".

Such sentences as "*Đầu làng trông một cây đa to*", "*Trên tường treo một bức tranh*"... may generally be called existential sentences. They are considered to be used to confirm the existence of identity of some entity, so the verb-predicate in them (*trông*, *treo*) is not used in prototypical way. In Vietnamese, one mentioned some constraints to verb-predicate in existential sentences: the verb-predicate lose the ability of compounding with such function words for tense, aspect, result... [1]. These constraints, in our view, are consequences of the fact that the verbs in question were not prototypically used.

However, as we have just said, prototypically is a degree concept. Thus, there are some cases where nouns or verbs just partly lose their own ability of compounding. For instance, stative verbs loses the ability to go along with some function words for aspect or result, but maintain the ability to go along with function words for tense. Compare:

+ Anh ta yêu *xong/*được cả ba cô.

+ Anh ta đã/đang yêu cả ba cô.

Another distinction on compounding ability is also observed between verbs used to present a foregrounded action or event and the same used to present a backgrounded action or event. Look at how the state of affairs "*Cô ấy li dị chồng*" (She has divorced) is used differently in following sentences:

+*Cô ấy đã li dị chồng* (foregrounded)

+*Cô ấy *đã li dị chồng* khiến mọi người kinh ngạc (backgrounded)

+*Việc cô ấy *đã li dị chồng* khiến mọi người kinh ngạc (backgrounded)

The distinction between prototypical and non-prototypical usage help us to understand some cases when a form, which is not a noun, temporally has syntactic behavior of a noun. For example, adjectives "*rắc rối*", "*khó khăn*" function as noun in following sentences:

- *Những rắc rối ấy* khiến ông phát khùng. (The troubles made him mad.)

- *Những khó khăn này* không dễ khắc phục trong thời gian ngắn. (It is not easy to solve these difficulties in short time.)

Some researchers argued that there was a change in status of word classes: "*rắc rối*", "*khó khăn*" were no longer adjectives, they became nouns. According to our view such interpretation is too mechanical. We incline to another interpretation: in that foregoing cases, the adjectives temporally function in the way an prototypical noun functions, e.g to present discrete entities participating in frame predicate-participants of sentence. Thus, they temporally gain ability of compounding of a prototypical noun.

3. Concluding

From some foregoing rough experiments, we have reason to confirm that syntactic behavior of nouns and verbs in Vietnamese is not beyond the general iconic principle of nouns and verbs in natural languages. The distinction on syntactic behavior of prototypical nouns and verbs reflects the distinction in communicative intention: a prototypical noun inclines to be used to present a discrete entity in discourse, a prototypical verb inclines to be used to report an actual action or event in discourse. Otherwise, both

nouns and verbs lose, at different degree, their own ability of compounding. We think that the foregoing iconic principle on syntactic behavior of nouns and verbs would criticize any atomic view in circle of Vietnamese grammarians, which led to many misunderstanding for a long time and meanwhile would confirm principles and interpreting capacity of Functional Grammar that professor Cao Xuan Hao firstly represent in monograph "Tiếng Việt- Sơ thảo Ngữ pháp chức năng, quyển I" (Vietnamese- a sketch of Functional Grammar, volume 1) [4]

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