



On polarity emphasis, assertion and mood in Vietnamese and English[☆]

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Received 28 January 2012; received in revised form 10 September 2013; accepted 13 September 2013

Available online 14 November 2013

Abstract

The paper presents data from several languages—chiefly, Vietnamese and English—in support of two empirical claims concerning the syntax of polarity elements, assertion and mood (illocutionary force). The proposal draws on and develops Klein's (1998) arguments for a decomposition of Finiteness: whereas Klein originally proposed that finiteness should be understood as involving at least two independent components—tense and assertion (validity)—this is elaborated to three in the present analysis, with polarity added as a distinct projection intermediate between the other two projections, to the left of Outer Aspect. Contrastive intonation—polarity emphasis—is argued to be able to target either polarity or assertion, by default the former; cf. Battlori and Hernanz (2011). With regard to assertion itself, it is shown that these features are projected rather low in Vietnamese phrase-structure, immediately to the left of the predicate-phrase. It is further claimed on the basis of evidence from imperative, interrogative and modal constructions that this low structural position hosts many other illocutionary features in Vietnamese (notwithstanding the evidence of Romance and Germanic languages, which seem to support a much higher position for such features on the left periphery of the clause). The paper considers the theoretical implications of this apparently parametric contrast in the context of current Minimalist theorizing.

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Keywords: Vietnamese clause structure; Mood and modality; Representation of illocutionary force; Finiteness; (Correlates of do-support)

1. Introduction

Recent work on polarity emphasis raises a number of issues concerning the relationship between polarity, assertion, and illocutionary force; in particular, questions about the representation in clausal syntax of what are, in the first instance, prosodic and/or semantic notions. In this paper, I address two more specific questions about the syntax of polarity emphasis: first, what—syntactically—is being emphasized? (or, why is emphasis where it is?); second, what is polarity? (Are negative and affirmative clauses really in direct opposition to one another, as this term implies; if so, is affirmation distinct from “assertion”?).

An overarching question relating these two is why negation, assertion and (other instances of) illocutionary force are expressed clause-*medially* in English—and, as it turns out, in Vietnamese—when, intuitively, all three notions might be

[☆] Note: The initial draft of this article was written during a year spent as Megumi Visiting Professor at Kobe College, Nishinomiya, Japan. Kobe College also generously supported my travel to the Workshop on Polarity Emphasis (held at the University of Ghent, September 2011). I am extremely grateful to the organizers of that workshop—Liliane Haegeman, Anne Breitbarth, and Karen de Clercq—for their invitation. The present paper developed out of the presentation delivered in Ghent: it has benefited significantly from the comments of other workshop participants, as well as from those of several anonymous reviewers. I should also like to acknowledge Trang Phan and Tue Trinh, not only for their invaluable data judgments but also for their theoretical insights. All remaining weaknesses are, of course, my own. The paper was extensively revised in 2013, after I took up a position at Konan University.

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expected to surface instead as operator-like elements on the left periphery, where they would more readily take scope over the whole clause. This mismatch between what may be termed ‘low Mood’ and the demands of compositional semantics has been a perennial thorn in the side of generative research (or spur to analysis, perhaps), probably since the inception of transformational grammar (Chomsky, 1957), certainly since Klima (1964)’s seminal work. Though this paper provides no definitive solutions to any of these problems, it does offer a detailed cartography of pre-verbal projections that allows us to arbitrate better among the analytic options currently available.

The focus of this investigation is on the phrase-structure of Vietnamese, a radically isolating language that simultaneously happens to have a fairly rich inventory of free grammatical morphemes: other isolating languages such as Chinese varieties, for example, tend to lack any significant functional vocabulary, while languages with richer inflectional morphology tend toward greater morphological fusion or synthesis, properties that serve to obscure underlying structural relationships. Vietnamese thus affords an unusually transparent, ‘skeletal view’ of functional phrase-structure.

More narrowly construed, the focus here is on the set of pre-verbal functional categories in Vietnamese that express assertion, negation and mood (illocutionary force), most specifically, on the varying interactions between the ‘assertion marker’ *có* and *không*, the chief exponent of sentential negation, across a variety of clause-types. An initial paradigm is presented in (1) below: from these examples, the functional and distributional parallels between Vietnamese *có* and English ‘auxiliary *do*’¹ should be immediately apparent. (Here, and the following examples, italics indicate contrastive emphasis).

- (1) a. Anh *có* mua sách!
 PRN ASR buy book
 ‘He *DID* buy the book!’
- b. Anh *không* (*có*) mua sách!
 PRN NEG ASR buy book
 ‘He did *NOT* buy the book!’
- c. Anh (*có*) mua sách *không*?
 PRN Q buy book NEG
 ‘Did he buy the book?’
- d. *Có* (*chứ*)!
 ASR (exclamative marker)
 ‘(He) *did* (indeed)!’
- e. *Không* (*có*)!
 NEG (ASR)
 ‘No, he *didn’t*!’

Note in passing that in Yes-No questions (1c), *không* follows *có*, whereas in all other contexts where the two morphemes co-occur—negation invariably precedes *có*. I return to this alternation presently.

The paper is organized as follows. First, I set out the theoretical background to the study, and provide some empirical motivation for the current proposal from English and Romance. Next, extending previous work (Duffield, 2007), I present data from Vietnamese, outlining some of the ways in which assertion marking is structurally dissociated from tense and (outer) aspect. Assertion is shown to be projected low in the functional phrase-structure in Vietnamese, in a position distinct from that of sentential negation, which has scope over this position. (It is the projection occupied by negation—polarity phrase—that will be claimed to be the usual target of contrastive intonation, rather than the assertion phrase itself). Having dissociated polarity from assertion, I consider the properties of the assertion phrase in more detail: it is claimed that that assertion is but one feature specification of a more general Mood Phrase, and that many—possibly all—illocutionary features are initially associated with this lower projection, at least in Vietnamese.²

Throughout the discussion, explicit comparisons are drawn between Vietnamese *có* and English auxiliary *do* in Present-Day English (PDE), as well as in Early Modern English (EmodE) and in English Child Grammar (CG): it is proposed that the treatment of the Vietnamese data presented here carries over to English, forcing some revision of standard analyses of *do*-support as well.

¹ Auxiliary *do* in Present Day English (PDE) is often referred to as ‘expletive’, ‘pleonastic’ or ‘dummy’ *do*: these terms, all of which imply semantic vacuity, are misnomers if the claims of the present paper prove correct.

² In Duffield (2011, 2013a), it is claimed that assertion *có* is preferentially associated with eventive contexts: this is taken to imply that *có* may be the realization of a (temporally-unbounded) event argument. It remains open whether this implies an additional projection (EP; see Travis, 2010), or whether Mood hosts this event argument also. Space constraints preclude any discussion of these data here.

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