

Contrastive Topic In Vietnamese

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Abstract

The main concern of the paper is to establish a hypothesis in which the form *thi* is treated as a particular Contrastive Topic marker in Vietnamese sentence structure. We have investigated that the form *thi* can be placed after a topical nominal or verbal to compose a Contrastive Topic phrase. Not only the subjects or objects but predicates in Vietnamese can have a CT interpretation with the marker *thi*. The *thi*-phrase not only refers to an entity or event the speaker wants to talk about, but also indicates that there exist contrastive alternatives the speaker wants to talk about. The nature of the contrastive topic decides the nature the alternative set and the choice of the topic of the implicated proposition. When the set of alternatives does not have the characteristic of scale, we have a descriptive opposite implicature. Again, if the contrastive set is a scalar set, we get a denial-of expectation implicature.

1. Introduction

The linear structure of Topic-Comment is most natural in information and discourse structure. Vietnamese data shows that Topic serves to ‘delimit the universe of discourse’ [Abraham et al. 1984], introducing what the rest of the sentence is about or setting up the frame of the sentence. The constituent category we are going to consider in this study is one kind of topics, i.e., contrastive topic in Vietnamese. We may ask how ‘topic’ and ‘contrastive topic’ should be distinguished conceptually so as to yield as fruitful a classification as possible. We will discuss how the two categories are distributed in the Vietnamese language and what grammatical properties tend to be correlated with the prominence of one as against the other. These two questions are interdependent, but distinct. The first one concerns the normative explication of universal terms; the second one concerns the testing of empirical hypotheses about universal tendencies and their explanations. In the process of elucidating those questions, we’ll go on to arbitrate and suggest a hypothesis in which the form *thi* is treated as a particular Contrastive Topic marker in Vietnamese sentence structure. The generalizations of facts about the Contrastive Topic marker *thi* correspond to those of facts on the Contrastive Topic marker *nun* in Korean, explored in Lee (, ,), suggesting that Contrastive Topic is a universal phenomenon. But we will concentrate on *thi* here.

2. ASPECTS OF CONTRASTIVE TOPIC

2.1. Topic-Comment structure

The syntactic structure of Vietnamese sentences reflects their logical structure and information structure. Every sentence expresses a proposition for truth conditions. It also shows the speaker’s topic and then says something about it. There is some difference between the ‘English-style’ topic, which is co-referential with some (overt or covert) element in the comment, and the ‘Vietnamese-style’ topic, which is related to the comment by aboutness. We can view an utterance from a Topic perspective and get a Topic-Comment structure, as follows (Topic here being a non-Contrastive Topic):

- (1) a. [Nam]Topic [di Ha Noi]Comment.
 Nam go Hanoi
 ‘Nam went to Hanoi’
 b. [Sinh vien nay]Topic [hoc rat gioi]Comment.
 Student this study very well
 ‘This student studies very well’
 c. [Hom qua]Topic [mua]Comment.
 Yesterday rain
 ‘It rained yesterday’.
 d. [Tren ban]Topic [at mot lo hoa]Comment.
 on table put one vase flower

- ‘There is a flower vase on the table’
 e. [Hut thuoc]Topic [khong tot cho suc khoe]Comment.
 Smoke tobacco not good for health
 ‘It’s not good for health to smoke’

In above sentences, the expressions of various categories such as *Nam*, *sinh vien nay* (NP), *hom qua*, *tren ban* (PP), *hut thuoc* (VP) can be said to be Topics. Although the most prevailing Topic category in Vietnamese is an NP (shown in 1a, 1e), Vietnamese also allows PP-Topics (1b, 1c) and VP-Tops (1d), as in Korean (Lee 1994, Choi 1997) and in Japanese (Saito 1985) as well. Typically, a non-contrastive Topic is given, presupposed, or anchored in the speech situation. It lacks contrastiveness and is located at the initial, prominent position of a sentence just like the Korean Topic.

In the *Vietnamese - the Outline of Functional Grammar* (1991), Cao started an analysis of Topic in Vietnamese by taking *thi* as a criterion for sentential division and considered *thi* as a Topic marker in Vietnamese. ‘The boundary between Topic and Comment of a sentence is the location of *thi* or where we can intervene *thi* in, without the breaking of syntactic structure or meaning’ (1991: 78). This study will demonstrate that the intervention of *thi* in the location between Topic and Comment of a sentence will trigger the changes in syntactic and semantic structure of that sentence. And we will argue that a *thi*-phrase should be determined to be a Contrastive Topic but not a Topic in Vietnamese.

2.2. ‘Thi’ phrase:

Suppose we put the form *thi* right after a Topic-marked phrase in the sentences of (1), then a *th*-marked phrase will appear in sentences as below:

- (2) a. *Nam thi i Ha Noi.*
 Nam THI go Hanoi
 ‘Nam went to Hanoi (but not others)’ ‘As for Nam, he went to Hanoi’
 b. *Sinh vien nay thi hoc rat gioi.*
 student this THI study very well
 ‘As for this student, he/she studies very well’
 c. *Sinh vien nay hoc thi rat gioi.*
 student this study TH very well
 ‘This student STUDIES very well’
 d. *Hom qua thi mua.*

- yesterday THI rain
 ‘As for yesterday, it was rain’.
 e. *Tren ban thi at mot lo hoa.*
 on table TH put one vase flower
 ‘As for the table, there is a flower vase on it (but not ---)’.

As the glosses indicate, the form *thi* (originally a noun with the meaning ‘time’) has a semantic effect on the sentence. *Thi* serves to emphasize the Topic as context-related in a particular way. It is not, however, simply a question of givenness.

In (2a), the topic, which is the original subject of the sentence on its argumental reading, refers to an entity the speaker wants to talk about: a person whose name is Nam. Moreover, due to the postpositional element *thi*, the topic in this sentence indicates that there also exist different alternatives the speaker wants to talk about. So that, Nam comes to be contrasted with other persons, and a further reading is that other persons did not go to Hanoi. Compared to the utterance without the attachment of the form *thi* to the topic in (1a), sentence (2a) not only asserts that Nam went to Hanoi but also implicates that other persons in the relevant context did not go to Hanoi (but went to other places).

The form *thi* has also triggered implicatures for sentences (2d) and (2e). In *saying hom qua thi mua* ‘as for yesterday, it rained’, the speaker evidently implicates that on other days in the context it did not rain. It might be *hom nay thi nang* ‘Today is sunny’. Because of *thi*, the sentence *trn ban thi at mot lo hoa* ‘On the table, there is a flower vase’ implicates that on other places, there is *no* flower vase (but other things possibly). Similarly, *tren tuong thi treo mot buc tranh* ‘On the wall, there is hung a picture’ implicates that there are no pictures at other places.

In the same vein, what is conveyed by sentence (2b) - with the presence of the form *thi* between Topic and Comment - is the speaker’s knowledge that *sinh vien nay* ‘this student’, as opposed to other possible candidates the addressee might have had in mind (eg. ‘that student’), is the right selection for characterization by *hoc rat gioi* ‘study very well’. A negative implicature is also necessarily conveyed, that is, ‘that student’ does not study well (s/he may work well).

It needs to distinguish (2c) from (2b): in (2b) ‘this student’ is contrasted with some entities in the context, but in (2c) the action of ‘studying’ is contrasted with other actions. In (2c), the

verb *hoc* 'study' - with *thi* following - presents an action ('studying') the speaker wants to talk about and becomes an un-typical Contrastive Topic of the sentence. The presence of the verb *hoc* with its Contrastive Topic marker *thi* triggers an implicature of denial of an alternative (typically scalarly stronger predicate). For instance it evokes an implicature of 'he/she did not work very well' or 'he/she cannot apply his knowledge to reality.' Here, the alternative predicates are pragmatically stronger than 'study well.'

An interesting point is that the verb *hoc* 'study' shows different syntactic behaviors in the above data. (Note that Vietnamese is an isolating language, that is, one in which words are invariable, in every case). In (1b) and (2b), it works as a typical verb. But in (2c), being marked by the Contrastive Topic marker *thi*, it temporally functions as an infinitive or noun¹⁾. Thus, it temporally lacks the ability of compounding with tense denoting morphemes,²⁾ as we can see below:

- (3) a. Sinh vien nay thi a /ang/se hoc rat gioi.
 student this CT PAST/PRES/FUT study very well
 'As for this student, he/she studied/studies/will study very well'
- b. Sinh vien nay *a /*ang/*se hoc thi rat gioi.
 student this PASS/PRES/FUT study CT very well
 'About this student, as for studying, he/she does very well'

As indicated above, the marker *thi* in Vietnamese gives a significant meaning effect and makes important changes in sentential structure when it appears after a Contrastive Topic phrase. With this marker *thi*, above topics are identified as a particular part in contrast with the rest of the parts and the speaker has the alternatives in contrast or contrast set in mind.

1) 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 [17, p.30]. Because the verb *hoc* in the study case is used non-prototypically so its distinction in term of syntactic behavior is not clearly shown.

2) In Vietnamese, nouns and verbs are different in the way they are compounded with other parts of speech. The list of "evidential words" which is used for recognizing verbs is confirmed in most books. That is following: such function words for tense, aspect, mood, negation as ', ang, s?, khng, ch?ng, cha, c?, cn' can be located before and such words as "xong, r'i" after a verb.

The thiphrases in (2) evokes (in addressee's mind) the contrast sets like {Nam, Mai}, {on the table, on the wall}, {studying, working} and evokes implicatures for the Contrastive Topic sentences. These support the assumption that *thi* may have deictic function of marking the Topic as contrastive in relation to some given entity or entities. It expresses, in other words, an 'indirect' kind of givenness.

2.3. Contrastive Topic:

Given the data in (1) and (2), one might reasonably assume that *thi* plays an important role in the compositional process of Contrastive Topic, and that it always induces implicature for sentence. So, from now on, the form *thi* will be called Contrastive Topic marker (CT-marker henceforth). In this section we will examine these claims in detail, analyzing how this status is established, maintained, and lost in sentence, and how *thi* triggers implicatures for sentences. In this way we hope to clarify the nature of the CT-marker use of *thi*.

First, let us discuss the notion of Contrastive Topic. CT is defined to be part of the (potential) topic that has appeared explicitly or implicitly in the previous discourse. In Lee 2000, CT is composed rest on the contrastive alternation. [does not make sense; correct the colored expression] A potential (non-contrastive) Topic in the discourse of previous question can be partitioned into parts and CT in current utterance is about one particular part in contrast with the rest of the parts of the potential Topic and the speaker has the alternatives in contrast or contrast set in mind. In various languages, CT is marked by various devices, such as by a morphological marker, by syntactic position, or by prosody features, as well as grammatical relation its original category takes and some combination thereof.

CT is as a universal linguistic phenomenon exists in every human language. Because of the distinctive feature of Vietnamese as a syllable and tone language, prosody in a sentence is less emphasized and there is a morphological marker which is a main device for marking CT in Vietnamese that is (we suggest) the *thi* marker.

Different from Korean, in which the contrastive topic particle *nun* can be used either as a Topic particle or as a CT particle, the form *thi* is exclusively designed for marking CT in Vietnamese. It can be placed behind a topic (or non-topic element as in 2c) to form a CT for a sentence. Being a contrastive topic marker, *thi* is less suitable if the topic is

referentially and relationally given. Consider (4):

- (4) a. Ho di dau?
they go where?
'Where did they go?'
- b. Nam thi i Ha Noi.
Nam CT go Ha Noi
As for Nam, he went to Hanoi
- c. Nam di du?
Nam go where?
'Where did Nam go?'
- d. Nam di Ha Noi.
Nam go Ha Noi
'Nam went to Hanoi'

The sentence (4d), without *thi*, is a suitable answer to (4c). But (4b), with *thi*, is more natural as an answer to (4a) than as an answer to (4c). Here *Nam* is not exclusively given but it is one particular part of the given *ho* 'they'. By saying *Nam tho di Ha Noi*, the speaker evidently assumes that there is someone a) who is other than Nam and b) he/she do not 'go to Hanoi' (for example, that *Mai thi di Nha Trang* 'Mai went to Nhatrang'). What *thi* expresses, then, is that the nominal or verbal is not only given but also it is contrasted with some thing(s) given in the context: in (4b), *Nam* is contrasted to the rest of the group referred to in (4a).

The CT-marked function of *thi* is obvious in (5), where *thi* is strongly preferred in the answer:

- (5) a. Anh co gap Nam va Mai khong?
You do meet Nam and Mai not?
'Did you meet Nam and Mai?'
- b. Toi co gap Nam. Mai *thi* toi khong gap.
I do meet Nam. Mai CT I not meet.
'I met Nam. As for Mai, I didn't meet her'
- c. Gap *thi* toi co gap. (Nhưng tôi không nói chuyện với họ).
meet CT I did meet but I not talk with them
'As for meeting, I did. (But I didn't talk to them)'

Similarly, consider (6)-(7):

- (6) a. Nam va Mai lam gi?

Nam and Mai do what

'What are Nam and Mai doing?'

- b. Toi khong biet Nam lam gi Mai thi ang nau com.
I not know Nam do what. Mai CT engaged-in cook rice
'I don't know what Nam is doing. As for Mai, she is cooking'

- (7) a. Ai dang nau com?
Who engaged-in cook rice?
'Who is cooking?'
- b. Mai dang nau com.
Mai engaged-in cook rice
'Mai is cooking'
- c.* Mai *thi* dang nau com.
'As for Mai, she is cooking'

Clearly, in the above data, the *thi*-phrase refers to an entity or an event the speaker wants to talk about - those are 'mai' in *Mai thi dang nau com* and *Mai thi toi khong gap*, 'gap' in *gap thi toi co gap*. In English something similar happens in: *as for Mai, as for meeting*. The *thi*-phrase, due to its contrastiveness, indicates that there also exist contrastive alternatives the speaker wants to talk about. Those may be *Nam thi* 'as for Nam' and *noi chuyen thi?* 'as for talking'. This intuition is, e.g., captured by the partial-answer account suggested in Krifka (1999): Assuming that a sentence is an answer to some question, the role of a Contrastive Topic consists in indicating that the answer is a partial one. Roughly, a sentence is a partial congruent answer to a question if it is entailed by some proposition *p* in the question meaning *Q*, but it is not a (complete) congruent answer entailing some *p* in *Q*.

In (5b) *Mai* is partial with respect to the question in (5a) since it is entailed by the entire answer (5b). The case is different but identical in principle to (5c). To be answered by (5c), (5a) can be understood via accommodation from context as a preliminary question to ask about the ultimate goal-directed question such as 'did you meet Nam and Mai and talk to them?'. So, the CT gap 'as for meeting' would be considered as a part with respect to such a super-question. (This case of CT is a so-called Contrastive Predicate Topic - Lee 1999, 2000, 2002).

In (6b) as an answer to (6a), *thi* is obligatory. As an answer to (7a), however, the *thi* version (7c) is not felicitous. Here (7b) is preferred. *Mai* is partial with respect to the question in (6a) but

it is not partial with respect to the question in (7a). This accounts for the inappropriateness of (7c). This supports the assumption that *thi* strictly marks Contrastive Topic in such cases.

We have observed CT expressions in Vietnamese. The CT marker *thi* can be placed after a topical nominal or verbal (in some cases, after non-topic elements) to compose a CT. Not only the subjects or objects but predicates in Vietnamese can get a CT interpretation, as shown above. Being a CT of a sentence, the *thi*-phrase not only refers to an entity or an event the speaker wants to talk about, but also indicates that there exist contrastive alternatives the speaker wants to talk about. While a topical non-contrastive topic always takes place at the initial position of a sentence, a CT can take an initial position or a mid-sentential in Vietnamese.

3. IMPLICATURE OF CONTRASTIVE TOPIC

An important property of the *thi*-phrase Contrastive Topic in Vietnamese - is that it always induces implicatures. In this section, we distinguish two kinds of implicatures triggered by *thi*: descriptive opposite implicature and denial-of-expectant implicature.

3.1. Descriptive Opposite Implicature (DOI).

From (8a), we can imagine some set of alternative elements such as: fruit {apple, grapes}, food {eat apple, eat noodle}, eat and drink activities {eat apple, drink coffee}, common activities {eat apple, watch TV} If we explicit the descriptive opposite implicature of (8a) in list CTs by a coordinating conjunction --- [not clear; correct it], we'll see that only the expressions which belong to the same semantic type can be conjoined. That is why (8b) is felicitous but (8c), (8d), (8e) are infelicitous

(8) a. Mai *thi* an tao.

Mai CT eat apple

'As for Mai, she ate apples'.

Imp: 'As for other person, he/she ate other thing'

b. Mai *thi* n tao

Mai CT eat apple

con Yumi *thi* an nho/ an pho/ uong ca phe/ xem ti-vi.

and Yumi CT eat grapes / eat noodle/ drink coffee/ watch TV

c. ?*Mai *thi* an tao con Nam *thi* an trai cy ?*

Mai CT eat apple and Nam CT eat fruit

d. ?*Mai *thi* an tao con Nam *thi* met.

Mai CT eat apple and Nam CT tired

e. ?*Nam *thi* met con Yumi *thi* dep.

Nam CT tired and Yumi CT beautiful

The unacceptability above comes from the distinction incomparableness - between hyponym and hyperonym in (8c), between action and state in (8d), and between stage-level and individual-level in (8e).

As we can notice, the contrastive set of nominal referents does not appear to form a scale clearly in these cases. Here, the marker *thi* may simply imply the existence of other comparable entities in the discourse, although we tend to seek a scale in all cases with *thi*.

3.2. Denial-of-Expectant Implicature (DEI).

Now we will examine *thi*-phrases that generate scalar propositions and induce a denial-of-expectant implicature. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, a CT comes into being when one of 'the partitives of the original topic denotation' is taken and it has a cancellative function whereby 'it gives rise to an implicature concerning the alternative in contrast in the polarity opposite to the given'[Lee 1999]. For example, when (9a) is uttered as an answer to a question did you take any alcohol?, then something like (9b) is implied in which *ruou manh* 'brandy' is a stronger expression than *ruou vang* 'wine' and the predicate is in the negative. Here the original topic, alcohol is divided into sub-cells, i.e. wine and brandy due to the presence of the CT.

(9) a. *Ruou vang thi co uong.*

Wine CT do drink.

'(I) drank WINE.'

Imp: b. *Ruou manh thi khong uong.*

Brandy CT not drink

'(I) did not drink BRANDY.'

As far as the contrastive topic is concerned, it seems that whether the set of the alternative has the nature of scale or not depends on the CT and the context. In this case, the contrastive set is a scalar set, consisting of {wine < brandy}. And an assertion of a weaker entity ('as for wine, I drank') implies denial of the stronger entity ('(but) as for brandy, I did not

drink'). That is why the so-call the denial-of-expectant implicature.

Therefore, the important principle of CT is that: 'An event CT is concessive admission of the expressed event and its unexpressed conveyed event meaning in contrast is based on a hierarchical scale of informational strength. It is topical, talked about in the previous question or discourse, and is focal, supplying choice information' [Lee 2000]. This principle is also well-applicable to Vietnamese, as we have seen.

As mentioned in section 2, not only the subjects or objects but predicates in Vietnamese can have a CT interpretation. For this, in Korean, the predicate is nominalized by *ki* (in an affirmative) or *ci* (in a negative) and the CT-marker is attached after that [Lee 1999]. In Vietnamese, a non-inflecting language, CT-marker *thi* is directly positioned behind a predicate to form CT as in the following:

- (10) Nam cao thi co cao.
 Nam tall CT exist tall
 'Nam is tall, but '

This is called 'event-contrastive' by Lee [1999, 2000]. Being marked by *th*, the above sentence not only asserts that Nam is tall, but also implies that something higher than the CT marked is implicitly negative, hence, denied, for instance, that 'but he is no good at basketball'. The proposition 'Nam is tall' is concessively admitted. The speaker wants to say something about Nam's negative sides, i.e. 'he is no good at basketball', and this is the real important news the speaker wants to convey.

In general, an utterance of a predicate in CT generates a polarity-reversed predicate meaning inversely. The assertion with a CT of a weaker entity/event implicates the denial of a stronger entity/event, and the negation of a stronger entity/event implicates the assertion of a weaker entity/event. This mechanism is implemented by means of the denial-of-expectant implicature.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have investigated the expression of CT in Vietnamese. The CT-marker *th* can be placed after a topical nominal or verbal to compose a CT phrase. Not only the subjects or objects but predicates in Vietnamese can have a CT interpretation with the marker *thi*. The *th*-phrase not only refers to an entity or

event the speaker wants to talk about, but also indicates that there exist contrastive alternatives the speaker wants to talk about. The nature of the contrastive topic decides the nature the alternative set and the choice of the topic of the implicated proposition. The set of alternatives in CT tends to form a scale.

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