

## NEGATION AND POLAR QUESTIONS IN VIETNAMESE: PRESENT AND PAST <sup>1</sup>

Tue Trinh

*Leibniz-Zentrum Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft*

Trang Phan

*Ca' Foscari University of Venice*

Vu Duc Nghieu

*Vietnam National University Hanoi*

### ABSTRACT

Polar questions in Vietnamese consist of an affirmative sentence followed by a negation particle. Modern Vietnamese has three negation particles, but only two can occur in this function. This note proposes an account for this gap. The account is premised on the analysis of questions as sets of alternatives, and draws on facts of diachronic change gleaned from historical texts.

Keywords: polar questions, negation, Vietnamese

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: Trang Phan [thihuyentrang.phan@unive.it]. This research was funded by the ERC Advanced Grant #787929 ‘Speech Acts in Grammar and Discourse’ (SPAGAD) [to the first author, Tue Trinh]. We thank the audience of ISVL 2 (Konan University) and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and constructive criticism. For academic purposes, Tue Trinh is responsible for sections 1, 3, 4, 7; Trang Phan is responsible for sections 2, 6 and Vu Duc Nghieu is responsible for section 5.

## 1. QUESTIONS AS SETS OF ALTERNATIVES

Asking a question, intuitively, involves requesting the addressee to make a choice between several propositions (cf. Grice 1967, Searle 1969). This intuition underlies the ‘proposition set’ analysis of question which we will be assuming in this discussion. Specifically, we will take a question to denote the set of propositions that count as its possible answers (Hamblin 1958; also Karttunen 1977; Groenendijk & Stokhof 1984). The question in (1a), for example, denotes the set in (1b), assuming that John, Mary, Sue and Anne are the individuals in our universe of discourse.<sup>2</sup>

- (1) a. Ai thích John  
      who like John  
      ‘Who likes John’  
      b.  $[[ (1a) ]]$  = {Mary like John, Sue like John, Anne like John}

We see that the elements of (1b) differ from each other in a systematic way: they vary on the subject position, which is underlined in (1b). This is the ‘focus’ of the sentences, i.e. the position which is ‘targeted’ by the question. We will call such sets of sentences as (1b) sets of ‘alternatives’.

- (2) Definition of alternatives (Rooth 1992, Fox and Katzir 2011)  
      S' is an alternative of S iff S' is derivable from S by replacement of a constituent with an expression of the same type

The question in (1a), then, denotes a set of ‘subject alternatives’, as every element of the set is derivable from any other element by replacing the subject constituent. The subject constituent bears focus, so to speak. The question in (3a), on the other hand, denotes a set of ‘object alternatives’, i.e. sentences whose object constituent is focused.

---

<sup>2</sup> Following common practice, we write  $[[\alpha]]$  to represent the semantic value of  $\alpha$ .

- (3) a. John thích ai  
 John likes who  
 ‘Who does John like’  
 b. [[(3a)]] = {John like Mary, John like Sue, John like Anne}

Subject and object are not the only constituents which can be targeted by a question. In fact, every position in the sentence can be targeted by a question. Wh-phrases are the usual means to target subjects, objects and adverbials, but for other grammatical functions other strategies are available. The simplest strategy, which can be employed to target any position in the sentence, is to list the alternatives using the connective *hay*.<sup>3</sup> Targeting subject and object using *hay* is exemplified in (4). Thus, (4a) and (4b) are equivalent to (1a) and (3a).

- (4) a. John thích Mary hay John thích Sue hay John thích Anne  
 John like Mary HAY John like Sue HAY John like Anne  
 b. Mary thích John hay Sue thích John hay Anne thích John  
 Mary like John HAY Sue like John HAY Anne like John

Targeting the verb using *hay* is exemplified in (5), and targeting the whole sentence is exemplified in (6).

- (5) a. John thích Mary hay John yêu Mary  
 John like Mary HAY John love Mary  
 ‘Does John like Mary or does he love her?’  
 b. [[(5a)]] = {John likes Mary, John loves Mary}  
 (6) a. John thích Mary hay tôi đang ngủ mơ  
 John like Mary HAY I am dreaming  
 ‘Does John like Mary or am I dreaming?’  
 b. [[(6a)]] = {John likes Mary, I am dreaming}

---

<sup>3</sup> Vietnamese *hay* thus resembles English inquisitive *or*, as exemplified in *does John like Mary or does he like Sue*. Note that the sentences connected by inquisitive *or* exhibit subject auxiliary inversion. We will assume that this syntactic operation has no semantic effects.

## 2. VIETNAMESE POLAR QUESTIONS AS SETS OF SECOND POSITION ALTERNATIVES

Polar questions in Vietnamese consist of an affirmative sentence followed by a negation particle. There is dependency between the syntactic profile of the affirmative sentence and the choice of the negation particle. Specifically, if the second position of the affirmative is *có*, glossed as AFF, the particle will be *không*, glossed as NEG. If the second position of the affirmative is *đã*, glossed as PERF, the negation particle will be *chưa*, glossed as NEGPERF. The reason for these glosses will be presented shortly. By ‘second position’ we mean the head which immediately follows the subject.

- (7) a. John *có* đọc sách *không*  
John AFF read book NEG  
‘Does John read books?’  
b. John *đã* đọc sách *chưa*  
John PERF read book NEGPERF  
‘Has John read books?’

The general forms of Vietnamese polar questions are thus (8a) and (8b).

- (8) a. Subject AFF VP NEG  
b. Subject PERF VP NEGPERF

As the translations in (7) show, (8a) is in simple aspect and (8b) is in perfective aspect. Note, importantly, that (8a) and (8b) exhaust the possibilities of formulating a polar question in Vietnamese. In other words, there is no polar question in which the second position of the affirmative is not AFF or PERF, and there is no polar question in which the clause final negation particle is not NEG or NEGPERF.

We may now ask what the relationship is between AFF and NEG on the one hand and PERF and NEGPERF on the other. Specifically, we may ask whether this relationship is arbitrary, similar to that of, say, the verb *wait* and its subcategorizing preposition *for*, or whether it has some sort of semantic motivation. Can we say anything about the dependency between

the second position of the affirmative and the clause final negation particle other than that the first ‘selects’ the latter? It turns out that we can. Consider the sentence pairs in (9) and (10).

- (9) a. John có     đọc   sách  
        John AFF read book  
        ‘John does read books.’  
       b. John không     đọc   sách  
        John NEG        read book  
        ‘John does not read books.’
- (10) a. John đã         đọc   sách  
        John PERF read book  
        ‘John has read books (already)’  
       b. John chưa       đọc   sách  
        Johnh NEGPERF read book  
        ‘John has not read books (yet).’

As the translations show, (9b) is the negation of (9a) and (10b) is the negation of (10a). We can see that AFF occurs in the second position of a positive sentence and NEG occurs in the second position of its negative counterpart, and the same holds for PERF and NEGPERF.<sup>4</sup> This fact suggests the following syntax and semantics for Vietnamese polar questions.<sup>5</sup>

What about the phonology of Vietnamese polar questions? We propose the following syntax-phonology interface rule.

---

<sup>4</sup> The reason for the glosses of these items is now clear: AFF is mnemonic for “affirmative”, NEG for “negation”, PERF for “perfective”, and NEGPERF for “negation of perfective”. Note that AFF is optional in (9a) and (9b), and indicates verum focus.

<sup>5</sup> We write “ $\neg p$ ” to represent the negation of  $p$ . The “lambda notation” used to represent functions is to be interpreted as specified in Heim and Kratzer (1998). Thus,  $[\lambda\alpha : \gamma. \phi]$  is the function from  $\alpha$  such that  $\gamma$  to  $\phi$  or to 1 iff  $\phi$ .

- (11) Polar questions in Vietnamese are sentences of the form  $[p [Q q]]$ , where
- (i)  $Q$  is silent
  - (ii) Everything in  $q$  is silent except the focused constituent

Let us apply our analysis to a concrete example. Consider the question in (7a), repeated below in (12a). The Logical Form of the question would be (12b), and its denotation the set in (12c). We use strikethrough to represent phonological deletion.

- (12) a. John có đọc sách không  
           John AFF read book NEG  
           ‘Does John read books?’  
       b.  $[[\text{John AFF read book}] [Q [\text{John NEG read book}]]]$   
       c.  $[[ (12b) ] ] = \{ \text{John AFF read book}, \text{John NEG read book} \}$

The two arguments of  $Q$  are second position alternatives (henceforth SPAs), as one can be derived from the other by replacing the second position constituent. The analysis delivers the correct meaning: the set denoted by the question contains the proposition that John does read books and the proposition that he does not. These are, intuitively, the two possible answers to the question. Also, we get the right pronunciation, as NEG, even though syntactically it is the second position of the second sentence, ends up being pronounced like a clause final particle. Perfective questions are illustrated in (13).

- (13) a. John đã đọc sách chưa  
           John PERF read book NEGPERF  
           ‘Has John read books (yet)?’  
       b.  $[[\text{John PERF read book}] [Q [\text{John NEGPERF read book}]]]$   
       c.  $[[ (12b) ] ] = \{ \text{John PERF read book}, \text{John NEGPERF read book} \}$

Again, the two arguments of  $Q$  are SPAs. The meaning is correct, as the question denotes the set containing the proposition that John has read books and the proposition that he has not. Intuitively, these are the two possible answers to (13a). Last but not least, the analysis yields the right

pronunciation. Let us now discuss some predictions made by our analysis. First, we predict that no polar question can be derived by merging *Q* with two propositions which are negation of each other but which are not SPAs. This prediction is borne out. Consider (14a) and (14b).<sup>6</sup>

- (14) a. John sẽ có đọc sách  
           John FUT AFF read book  
           ‘John will read books.’  
       b. John sẽ không đọc sách  
           John FUT NEG read book  
           ‘John will not read books.’

These sentences are negation of each other. However, they are third position alternatives, not second position alternatives. Consequently, future tense polar questions are ineffable in Vietnamese, as has been observed (cf. Trinh 2005; Duffield 2007, 2013; Phan and Duffield 2019; Phan 2023).

- (15) \*John sẽ có đọc sách *Q*    ~~John sẽ~~ không ~~đọc sách~~  
       John FUT AFF read book *Q*    John FUT NEG read book  
       (‘Will John read books?’)

Similarly, preterite polar questions are ineffable, as a preterite sentence and its negated counterpart differ with respect to the third position, not the second position.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Note that AFF is optional in future and preterite sentences. In fact, AFF would not appear in normal pronunciation of these sentences. The occurrence of AFF would indicate “verum focus”, similar to stress on auxiliaries in English. We will abstract from this fact for the present discussion.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Note that the morpheme *đã* which is glossed as PAST is assumed to be different from the homophonous morpheme *đã* which is glossed as PERF. The first expresses past tense, while the second expresses perfective aspect. These came apart when the sentence is negated. Negated past tense is *đã không* (PAST NEG), while negated perfective aspect is *chưa* (NEGPREF). The homophony most probably has historical ground (Trinh 2005).

- (16) a. John đã có đọc sách  
 John PAST AFF read book  
 ‘John read books.’  
 b. John đã không đọc sách  
 John PAST NEG read book  
 ‘John did not read books.’

- (17) \*John đã có đọc sách *Q* ~~John đã không đọc sách~~  
 John PAST AFF read book *Q* John PAST NEG read book  
 (‘Did John read books?’)

We also predict that no polar question can be formed from two propositions which are SPAs but which are not negation of each other. This prediction is borne out as well. The two sentences (18a) and (18b) are SPAs, as one can be derived from the other by replacement of the second position constituent. However, the question in (19) is ungrammatical.

- (18) a. John được đọc sách  
 John may read book  
 ‘John may read books.’  
 b. John phải đọc sách  
 John must read book  
 ‘John must read books.’

- (19) \*John được đọc sách *Q* John phải đọc sách  
 John may read book *Q* John must read book  
 (‘Is it the case that John may read books or is it the case that he must?’)

The question arises, in this connection, as to whether there is any way to ameliorate the ungrammaticality of such sentences as (15), (17), and (19).<sup>8</sup> If we want to keep to polar questions, i.e. those which consist of an affirmative sentence followed by a negation particle, then the answer is no. This answer, of course, follows from what we said above about *Q*.

---

<sup>8</sup> We thank a reviewer of our paper for raising this question.



However, if the question is understood as asking whether the intended meaning of (15), (17) and (19), or an approximation thereof, can be expressed by some sort of interrogatives, then the answer is yes. Specifically, we could connect the two sentences with HAY. What we end up with would of course be alternative questions, which is similar but not identical to polar questions.<sup>9</sup> The alternative questions in (20a), (20b), and (20c) express the intended meaning of (15), (17), and (19), respectively.

- (20) a. John sẽ đọc sách hay John sẽ không đọc sách?  
           John FUT read books HAY John FUT NEG read books  
       b. John đã đọc sách hay John đã không đọc sách?  
           John PAST read books HAY John PAST NEG read books  
       c. John được đọc sách hay John phải đọc sách  
           John may read books HAY John must read books

Another question which arises is why the second position is the focus of polar questions? Why is another position not chosen for this function? We have no satisfying answer to this question. However, we would note that the second position is actually the highest operator position. According to the standard view on sentence structure, the thematic core is the constituent containing the verb and its arguments. This is the smallest propositional constituent. This constituent then recursively merges with operators, i.e. heads that map a propositional object into another propositional object, for example heads expressing tense, aspect, and negation. After the last operator has merged, the subject moves from its base position, merging with the matrix node and becoming the ‘specifier’ of the highest operator.<sup>10</sup>

- (21) [s Subject [s OP<sub>n</sub> ... [S OP<sub>1</sub> [VP *t*<sub>Subject</sub> Verb Object]]...]]

Thus, what we call ‘second position’ is in fact the position of the main operator. Negating the sentence would then mean either merging a truth-

---

<sup>9</sup> We come back to this issue in section 6 below.

<sup>10</sup> This movement of the subject from its base position to the specifier position of the highest operator is required by the so-called Extended Projection Principle (EPP) which states, among other things, that the highest operator must have a specifier (Chomsky 1986).

value reversing operator on top of the sentence, or replacing the main operator with another operator. As only the latter option results in an ‘alternative’ as defined in (2), it is natural that polar questions target the second position.<sup>11</sup> Again, we stress that this is just a hunch. We hope to be able to formulate a more concrete proposal in the future.<sup>12</sup>

We will also note that there are some similarities between Vietnamese and Mandarin and some other Chinese dialects with respect to polar questions. Specifically, the latter also formulate these questions with a negative particle. The analysis proposed by Cheng et al. (1997), for example, is different from the analysis proposed here in that they do not assume a deletion based account. The comparison between these two languages are worth pursuing but would have to be left for future.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. EXPLAINING A GAP IN COLLOQUIAL SAIGONESE

Colloquial Saigonese has two simple aspect negations: *hông* and *hông̣*, glossed as [hong] and [hong?], respectively.<sup>14</sup> These items differ only in their tones, not in their segmental structure.

---

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted here that our use of the term “second position” is not to be confused with how this term is used in the literature on the so-called “V2” phenomenon in Germanic languages (Grewendorf 1988). The “second position” which hosts the finite verb in V2 languages (the “linker Satzklammer”) is the highest head in the C domain. What we call “second position” here is actually the highest head in the INFL domain. Assuming a simple C-T-V structure, the V2 position would be C, while what we call “second position” would be T. We assume, as is standard, that the C domain relates to the information structure and not the logical content of the sentence (Chomsky 1995). We thank a reviewer for pointing out the need of making this distinction clear.

<sup>12</sup> Note that we use “operator” in the sense of a function from things to things of the same kind, in this case from propositions to propositions. Thus, the “question operator” Q, which maps propositions to sets of propositions, would not be an “operator” in this sense. We thank an anonymous reviewer for making us aware of the need to make this clear.

<sup>13</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to Cheng et al. (1997).

<sup>14</sup> Glosses in square brackets are intended to reflect the phonology, not the semantics, of the Vietnamese items. Note that [hong] has level tone while [hong?] has falling tone.

- (22) a. John hông      đọc sách  
           John [hong]    read book  
           ‘John does not read books.’  
       b. John hông      đọc sách  
           John [hong?]   read book  
           ‘John does not read books.’

As the translations in (22) show, [hong] and [hong?] are semantically equivalent. There is, in fact, a pragmatic difference between (22a) and (22b). In particular, it seems that (22b) is more ‘emphatic’ in some sense. We will, however, ignore this difference and note the following puzzle: [hong] can occur in polar questions but [hong?] can't.

- (23) a. John có      đọc sách hông  
           John AFF read book [hong]  
           ‘Does John read books?’  
       b. \*John có      đọc sách hông  
           John AFF read book [hong?]  
           (‘Does John read books?’)

How do we resolve this puzzle? First, let us note that in Saigonese, there is another way to express negation which is syntactically complex, namely by [hong] or [hong?] followed by AFF, as exemplified in (24).

- (24) a. John hông      có      đọc sách  
           John [hong]    AFF read book  
           ‘John does not read books’  
       b. John hông      có      đọc sách  
           John [hong?]   AFF read books  
           ‘John does not read books’

Again, (24a) and (24b) are logically equivalent. It turns out that pragmatically, (24a) and (24b) have the same ‘emphatic’ effect as (22b). In light of this fact, we propose that both [hong?] and [hong?] AFF are realizations of the same underlying complex negation NEG AFF. Here is the relevant morphophonemic rule.

(25) Morphophonemic rule of Saigonese

- (i) NEG  $\Rightarrow$  [hong]  
[hong] AFF
- (ii) NEG AFF  $\Rightarrow$  [hong?] AFF  
[hong?]

Thus, NEG has one phonological realization, while the complex NEG AFF has three, which are free variants. This means that (23a) and (23b) have the analyses in (26) and (27), respectively.

(26) Analysis of (23a)

- a. John có đọc sách *Q* John hông ~~đọc sách~~  
John AFF read book *Q* John [hong] read book
- b. Logical Form: John AFF read book *Q* John NEG read book

(27) Analysis of (23a)

- a. \*John có đọc sách *Q* John hông ~~đọc sách~~  
John AFF read book *Q* John [hong?] read book
- b. Logical Form: \*John AFF read book *Q* John NEG AFF read book

We can see the Logical Form in (26) fulfills all syntactic and semantic conditions on polar questions. The two arguments of *Q* are SPAs: one can be derived from the other by replacing just the second position. Furthermore, the two sentences are logical negation of each other. Consequently, (23a) is well-formed, as expected. Turning to (27), we can see that this Logical Form fails to fulfill the syntactic conditions on polar question, in that the two arguments of *Q* are not SPAs. Specifically, we cannot derive one from the other by replacing just the second position. Consequently, (23b) is unacceptable, as expected.

#### 4. EXPLAINING A GAP IN STANDARD VIETNAMESE

It turns out that standard Vietnamese, i.e. the Hanoi dialect, also has two negations. Above we considered *không*. There is another head, *chẳng*,

which is logically equivalent to *không*. In what follows we will gloss *không* and *chẳng* as [khong] and [chang?], respectively, to reflect the phonological realizations of these items rather than their syntax and semantics.<sup>15</sup>

- (28) a. John không đọc sách  
           John [khong] read book  
           ‘John does not read books.’  
       b. John chẳng đọc sách  
           John [chang?] read book  
           ‘John does not read books.’

Although [khong] and [chang?] are semantically equivalent, we can ask whether there are pragmatic differences between them. It turns out, interestingly, that [chang?] conveys the same sense of emphasis as [hong] AFF or [hong?] in Saigonese. Moreover, we observe that just like [hong?], [chang?] cannot occur as sentence-final particle in polar questions.

- (29) a. John có đọc sách không  
           John AFF read book [khong]  
           ‘Does John read books?’  
       b. \*John có đọc sách chẳng  
           John AFF read book [chang?]  
           (‘Does John read books?’)

Given our discussion of colloquial Saigonese in the previous section, the following morphophonemics rule suggests itself for standard Vietnamese.

- (30) Morphophonemic rule of standard Vietnamese  
       (i) NEG => [khong]  
       (ii) NEG AFF => [chang?]

Thus, we claim that syntactically standard Vietnamese does have a complex negation NEG AFF which, however, is always mapped to the

---

<sup>15</sup> Again, the “?” inside the phonological gloss of chẳng ([chang?]) indicates the falling tone of this item.

monosyllabic [chang?]. The rule in (30) makes it possible to derive the distribution of [khong] and [chang?] in standard Vietnamese polar questions in the same way we derived the distribution of [hong] and [hong?] in colloquial Saigonese polar questions. Specifically, we can now say that (29b) is ill-formed because the two arguments of *Q* are not SPAs.

(31) Analysis of (29b)

- a. \*John có đọc sách *Q* John chẳng ~~đọc sách~~  
       John AFF read book *Q* John [chang?] read book
- b. Logical Form: \*JohnAFF read book *Q* John NEG AFF read book

## 5. HISTORICAL CONSIDERATION

Comparing (25) and (30), we can see that the former is plausible while the latter looks like a trick. There seems to be a possibility of motivating (25) in terms of familiar phonological processes: AFF changes the tone of the immediately preceding items and can optionally delete. For (30), however, it is hard to see by what phonological process AFF turns [khong] to [chang?]. This section attempts to defend (25) from charges of being ad hoc and arbitrary. The defense will appeal to facts of historical changes described in Vu (1986), which examines Vietnamese texts spanning several centuries.<sup>16</sup> The titles are listed below in (32).

- (32) (A) *Quốc Âm Thi Tập* (*Poem Collection in the National Language*) by Nguyễn Trãi (15th century)
- (B) *Hồng Đức Quốc Âm Thi Tập* (*Hong Duc Poem Collection in the National Language*) by Hội Tao Đàn (15th century)
- (C) *Thơ Nôm* (*Poems in Nôm*) by Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm (16th century)
- (D) *Phép Giảng Tám Ngày* (*Cathecismys in octo dies diuisus*) by Alexandre de Rhodes (17th century)
- (E) *Truyện Kiều* (*Tale of Kiều*) by Nguyễn Du (18th century)

---

<sup>16</sup> To be exact, Vũ (1986) examines all the texts in (32) except (F) and (G). These two texts are examined by us for this paper.

- (F) *Thầy Lazaro Phiên* (*Father Lazaro Phiên*) by Nguyễn Trọng  
Quản (19th century)  
(G) *Đôi Mắt* (*The Eyes*) by Nam Cao (20th century)

Examining these texts, we find that Vietnamese used to have not two but three negations: *không* ([khong]), *chẳng* ([chang]), and *chẳng* ([chang?]).<sup>17</sup> We counted the number of occurrences of each of these items in texts belonging to each of the six centuries. The frequencies are presented in (33).

(33) Frequency of [khong], [chang] and [chang?] as negation

century	15th	16th	17th	18th	19th	20th
[khong]	7	7	0	14	87	59
[chang]	73	42	0	3	0	0
[chang?]	231	72	691	107	32	28

We can see that Vietnamese mainly used [chang] and [chang?] until the 19th century, after which [khong] became the item of choice to express negation. The historical development of the three particles is best presented visually in terms of not frequencies but probabilities, as below.

---

<sup>17</sup> As suggested by the glosses, *chẳng* ([chang]) is different from *chẳng* ([chang?]) in that the first has level tone while the second has falling tone.

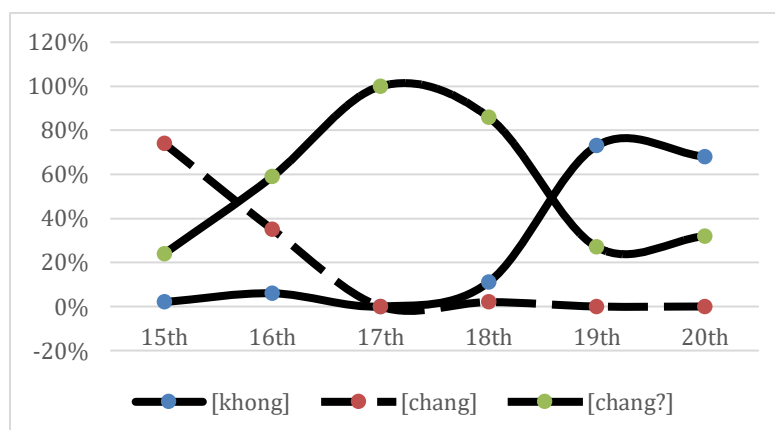


Figure 1. Probabilities of [khong], [chang] and [chang?] as negation

Here is how this graph is to be read. In the 15th century text samples, for example, 2% of negations are expressed by [khong], around 20% are expressed by [chang], and around 75% are expressed by [chang?]. Thus, [chang?] were the most popular negation, followed by [chang], and [khong] was rarely used. We then witness a big dive with [chang] in the 17th century text, with this item becoming as unpopular as [khong]. In the 18th century text, [khong] starts to occur more than [chang]. In the 19th and 20th century texts, [khong] becomes the most popular item to express negation, [chang?] being the distant second, and [chang] practically becoming obsolete and out of use.

Vu (1986) proposes that [chang] used to be the default negation in Vietnamese, while [khong] comes into the language at a later time. We will take up this proposal, and add to it the claim that [chang?] is the realization of [chang] and AFF. Thus, the morphophonemics rule for, say, 15th century Vietnamese would be (34).

(34) Morphophonemic rule of old Vietnamese

- (i) NEG  $\Rightarrow$  [chang]
- (ii) NEG AFF  $\Rightarrow$  [chang?]

Against the background of the rule in (34) for old Vietnamese, the rule in (30) for modern Vietnamese makes more sense: what changes is that



[khong] replaces [chang] as the realization of NEG, nothing else. Note that this account makes an interesting prediction regarding the diachronic development of polar questions in Vietnamese. In sections 3 and 4, we argue that items which realize NEG AFF cannot occur as (clause final) polar question particles. Given our claim that [chang?] has always been the realization of NEG AFF throughout the history of Vietnamese, we expect that [chang?] has never been used as a polar question particle. And since NEG changes from [chang] to [khong], we expect that [chang] and [khong] switch places as the polar question particle in Vietnamese. Both of these expectations are borne out in the texts listed in (32). We counted the occurrences of [khong], [chang], and [chang?] in these texts, and got the following frequencies and probabilities.

(35) Frequency of [khong], [chang], [chang?] as polar question particles

century	15th	16th	17th	18th	19th	20th
[khong]	0	0	0	2	2	10
[chang]	7	3	32	19	10	1
[chang?]	0	0	0	0	0	0

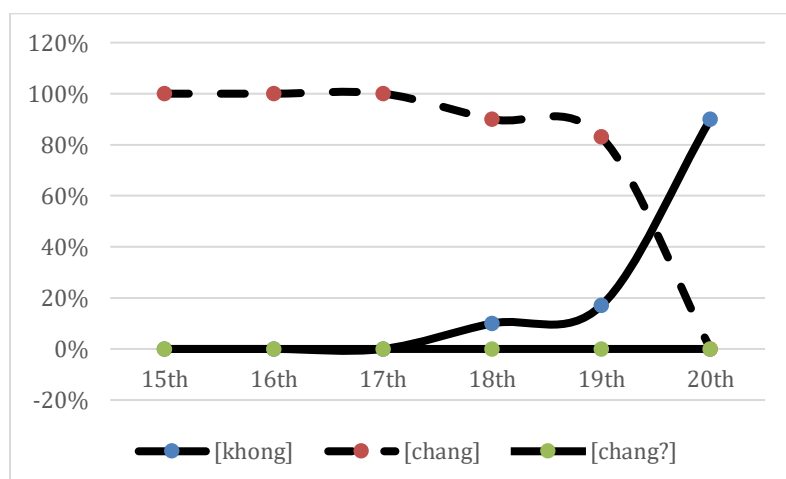


Figure 2. Probabilities of [khong], [chang], [chang?] as polar question particles

## 6. AN OPEN QUESTION ABOUT *HAY*

We now turn to a brief discussion of an open questions which, we believe, should be addressed in the context of our analysis. The question concerns the differences between *Q* and *HAY* regarding their usage. We have proposed a semantics for *Q* which is ‘akin’ to that of *HAY*, in the sense that both of them map propositions to sets of propositions. What distinguishes *Q* from *HAY* is that *Q* requires each of its two arguments to be the logical negation of the other. This proposal does justice to our basic intuition about polar questions, namely that they present us with *p* and  $\sim p$  as possible answers. Similar proposals have been made for polar questions in English, where the English counterpart of *HAY* is the disjunctive particle ‘or’ (cf. Katz and Postal 1964; Langacker 1970; Romero and Han 2004; Guerzoni and Sharvit 2014). In fact, *or* would be an appropriate English translation of *HAY*, as the readers may have noted in the examples above.

Our proposal thus raises the question whether polar questions are the same as alternative questions, i.e. those constructed with *HAY*, in all respects. We submit that the answer is no, and we would also submit that our analysis is compatible with this answer. In other words, the semantic similarity between *Q* and *HAY* does not force us to say that these items have the exact same interpretation or the exact same use, as similarity is not identity. As it turns out, alternative and polar questions differ in Vietnamese in much the same way that they differ in English. As an example, take the observation, made by Bollinger (1978), that polar but not alternative questions are felicitous as invitations. This observation holds for Vietnamese also. Thus, suppose John sees Mary admiring the oranges in his garden and wants to invite her to try out one of them, he would ask the polar question in (36a), not the (elliptical) alternative question in (36b).

- (36) a. Em có muốn ăn cam không  
           you AFF want eat orange NEG  
       b. Em có muốn ăn cam hay không  
           you AFF want eat orange HAY NEG

Given the stated empirical focus of this paper as well as its scope, we must remain agnostic about the semantic and pragmatic properties of HAY which distinguish its usage from that of *Q*. To the best of our knowledge, this is also the current situation in the literature (cf. for example Romero and Han 2004:643). We hope to pursue this interesting topic in the future.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

We approach the grammar of polar questions in Vietnamese as many works have approached the grammar of questions in general, namely as a representation of a set of alternatives which is subject to semantic, syntactic and phonological conditions. Specifically, we propose that polar questions in Vietnamese denote sets containing a proposition *p* and its negation  $\sim p$ , where *p* and  $\sim p$  must be expressed by sentences that are second position alternatives. We apply our analysis to explain a gap in colloquial Saigonese, and extend that explanation to another gap in standard Vietnamese. Our account of the gap in standard Vietnamese involves a morphophonemic rule which looks implausible, but we argue that it has historical motivation, using texts spanning six centuries to corroborate our argument.

## REFERENCES

- Bolinger, Dwight. 1978. Yes-No Questions are not Alternative Questions. In *Questions*, ed. Henry Hiz, pp.87-105. Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Company.
- Cheng, Lisa, C.-T. James Huang, and C.-C. Jane Tang. 1997. Negative particle questions: A dialectical perspective. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics Monograph Series* 10:65-112.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1986. *Barriers*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1995. *The Minimalist Program*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Duffield, Nigel. 2007. Aspects of Vietnamese clausal structure: separating tense from assertion. *Linguistics* 45:765-814.
- Duffield, Nigel. 2013. On the head-initiality of Vietnamese clauses. In *Linguistics of Vietnamese: An International Survey*, eds. Daniel Hole, pp.127-155. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Fox, Danny, and Roni Katzir. 2011. On the characterization of alternatives. *Natural Language Semantics* 19:87-107.
- Grewendorf, Günther. *Aspekte der deutschen Syntax: Eine Rektions und Bindungsanalyse*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Grice, Paul. 1967. Logic of conversation. In *Studies in the Ways of Words*, pp.41-58. Harvard University Press.
- Groenendijk, Jeroen, and Martin Stokhof. 1984. *Studies on the Semantics of Questions and the Pragmatics of Answers*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Doctoral Dissertation, Netherlands.
- Guerzoni, Elena & Yael Sharvit. 2014. Whether or not anything but not whether anything or not. In *The Art and Craft of Semantics: A Festschrift for Irene Heim*, eds. Luka Crnić and Uli Sauerland, pp.199-224. Cambridge: MTWIPPL Publisher.
- Hamblin, Charles Leonard. 1958. Questions. *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 36:159-168.
- Heim, Irene, and Angelika Kratzer. 1998. *Semantics in Generative Grammar*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Karttunen, Lauri. 1977. Syntax and semantics of questions. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 1:3-44.
- Katz, Jerrold, and Paul Postal. 1964. *An Integrated Theory of Linguistic Descriptions*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Langacker, Ronald. 1970. English question intonation. In *Studies Presented to Robert B. Lee by his Students*, eds. Jerrold Saddock and Anthony Vanek, pp.139-161. Edmonton: Linguistic Research.
- Phan, Trang. 2023. *The Syntax of Vietnamese Tense, Aspect, and Negation*. London: Routledge.
- Phan, Trang, and Nigel Duffield. 2019. The Vietnamese perfect: a compositional analysis. In *Cross-linguistic Perspectives on the Semantics of Grammatical Aspect*, eds. Adeline Patard, Rea Peltola, and Emmanuelle Rossel, pp.38-63. Leiden: E Brill.
- Romero, Maribel and Chung-Hye Han. 2004. On negative yes/no questions. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 27:609-658.

- Rooth, Mats. 1992. A theory of focus interpretation. *Natural Language Semantics* 1:75-116.
- Searle, John. 1969. *Speech acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Trinh, Tue. 2005. *Aspects of Clause Structure in Vietnamese*. Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin MA Thesis, Germany.
- Vu, Duc Nghieu. 1986. Diễn biến trong ý nghĩa, chức năng của nhóm hư từ *không, chẳng, chẳng* từ thế kỷ 15 đến nay [The changes in meaning and function of *không, chẳng, chẳng* from the 15th century to the present day.] *Khoa học* 2:55-61.

[Received 24 June 2022; revised 30 Nov 2022; accepted 25 Feb 2023]

*Tue Trinh*  
*Leibniz-Zentrum Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft*  
*Pariser Str. 1, 10719 Berlin*  
*tuetrinh@alum.mit.edu*

*Trang Phan*  
*Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University of Venice*  
*Dorsoduro 3246, 30123 Venezia, Italy*  
*thihuyentrang.phan@unive.it*

*Vu Duc Nghieu*  
*Department of Social Sciences & Humanities, Vietnam National University Hanoi*  
*336 Nguyen Trai Str., Thanh Xuan Dist., Hanoi*  
*nghieuvd@vnu.edu.vn*

*Tue Trinh, Trang Phan, Vu Duc Nghieu*

否定和疑問在越南語中的現在和過去

Tue Trinh<sup>1</sup>, Trang Phan<sup>2</sup> & Vu Duc Nghieu<sup>3</sup>

萊布尼茲通用語言學研究中心<sup>1</sup>

威尼斯卡福斯卡里大學<sup>2</sup>

社會科學和人文學院大學, 越南河內國立大學<sup>3</sup>

越南語的極性問句是將一個否定助詞加在肯定句之後而形成的。現代越南語中有三種否定助詞，但卻只有其中兩種可以置於肯定句後使之形成問句。本文為此現象提出了一個分析。此分析是基於將極性問句分析為備選集，並利用從歷史文本中發現的歷時變化事實進行推理。

關鍵字：否定、極性問句、越南語