



# Current Issues in Vietnamese Linguistics: An Introduction

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This Special Issue of *Languages*, part of the ISVL (International Symposium on Vietnamese Linguistics) series, presents revised papers from the 4th and 5th ISVL workshops, hosted by National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University in 2024 and Ca' Foscari University of Venice in 2025. Earlier workshops were held at the Harvard-Yenching Institute (2021), Konan University/Vietnam National University, Hanoi (2022), and Konan University (2023), with related volumes published in [Phan et al. \(2022\)](#), [Duffield and Phan \(2024\)](#), and [Phan and Duffield \(2025\)](#). The aim here is modest: to present focused case studies that shed light on specific aspects of Vietnamese grammar and its history. The contributions cover topics including inheritance and contact, reduplication, clause structure, reference and binding, and the semantics–pragmatics of particles. This is not intended as a comprehensive survey, but rather as a concise set of results that together point toward the next stage of ISVL research.

In assembling this issue, we also aim to demonstrate some ways in which Vietnamese evidence bears on active debates in typology, historical change, clause architecture, and the semantics–pragmatics interface, providing analyses that can be tested and compared beyond the Vietnamese domain. Vietnamese offers a compact testbed for questions central to current theory: how contact reshapes inherited structure; how a particle-rich, morphologically light system encodes scope, focus, and polarity; and how left-peripheral layering interacts with binding and reference in a language without inflectional reflexes. The papers in this Reprint contribute new data and analyses that speak directly to these issues, refining models of negation, question bias, movement vs. topicalization, and the division between anaphoric and pronominal null elements ([Rizzi, 1997](#); [Cinque, 1999](#); [Reinhart & Reuland, 1993](#); [von Stechow, 1996](#); [Cole et al., 2000](#); [Romero, 2024](#)).

Three main question threads run through the volume:

- (i) Inheritance under contact: How much of present-day Vietnamese grammar is Austroasiatic/Vietic in origin, how much is Sinitic or calqued through literacy, and how much reflects area-wide convergence?
- (ii) Architecture: Where does Vietnamese project structure in the middle and left periphery? How does information structure map to those positions, and how A/A' movement and locality should be modeled?
- (iii) Interpretation: How are repetitive, restitutive, incremental, and bias meanings compositionally derived in a particle-rich, morphologically light system?

Across these themes, the papers offer a tighter account of Vietic inheritance and contact pathways; clearer predictions for the distribution of negation and polar-question forms; and parameter settings that distinguish Vietnamese from close comparators such as Mandarin while capturing internal variation.



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Taken together, the contributions move from history to structure to interpretation. The diachronic studies in the Diachrony, Contact, and Inheritance subsection set the baseline for what is inherited vs. contact-driven; the semantics papers in the subsection Morphology–semantics interfaces and lexical pragmatics show how small positional changes yield distinct meanings; the structural papers in the subsection Argument structure, Movement, and the Clausal Spine locate the landing sites that make those meanings possible; the reference and polarity papers in the subsections Reference, Binding, and Null elements and Polar questions and Bias test these structures with binding and question bias diagnostics.

(i) *Diachrony, contact, and inheritance*

Mark Alves re-examines the Austroasiatic core of Vietnamese using enhanced Vietic reconstructions and a more precise view of Sinitic contact. He shows that native etyma and structural templates remain visible in the lexicon and in patterns of change that are not reducible to borrowing. This supports a cleaner partition between inherited structure and contact-driven remodeling, and it narrows what should count as “Sinitic” given the timing and channels of influence. This diachronic foundation constrains later analyses of negation, particles, and movement options.

Giorgio Francesco Arcodia and Trang Phan focus on the negative prefixes *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* and their interaction with clausal negators. Using a parallel set of *Analects* translations (17th, 19th, 21st centuries; *nôm* and *quốc ngữ*), they trace a non-linear trajectory: early prominence of native *chẳng*; 19th-century rise of *không* with selective prefixal use; and modern dominance of *không* alongside renewed use of *bất* and *vô* in literate and technical registers. The authors link this pattern to modern East Asian literacy and the spread of Chinese-based vocabulary, yielding a layered model of Vietnamese negation where register, position, and history matter. This model explains why derivational and sentential negation can co-exist and sets expectations for particle distribution elsewhere in the volume.

(ii) *Morphology–semantics interfaces and lexical pragmatics*

Tue Trinh analyzes similative reduplication with the rime *-iéc*. The construction is productive, produces “similar but not identical” readings, and tends to trigger ignorance-style inferences. Trinh models it with alternatives akin to disjunction, deriving the ignorance effect from how similarity is evaluated. The observed incompatibility with classifiers follows if *-iéc* relies on context-based similarity, while classifier constructions rely on grammatically fixed comparisons. These results show how Vietnamese encodes graded similarity without morphology, anticipating structural constraints discussed in the subsection Argument structure, movement, and the clausal spine.

Yi-Ling Irene Liao and Tzong-Hong Jonah Lin revisit *lại* and *nữa*. Preverbal *lại* can be repetitive or restitutive; postverbal *lại* is restitutive only; *nữa* supports both repetitive and incremental (“add more”) readings. They derive these contrasts by adjunction height and focus association (*vP* vs. *VP*) and by movement that yields the surface-final position of *nữa*. The account links word order to “again” semantics and provides diagnostics for attachment height in the verbal domain. This directly interfaces with the landing sites identified in Argument structure, movement, and the clausal spine and with bias-related contrasts in Polar questions and bias.

(iii) *Argument structure, movement, and the clausal spine*

Trần Phan and Chao-Ting Tim Chou separate two superficially similar patterns with clause-initial locatives. In the “locative” construction, the initial phrase is an argument of a locative predicate; in the “existential” construction, it is an adjunct that can be optionally topicalized. Only the existential type allows independent topicalization. They argue for a high, hybrid *A/A'* landing site in the *TP* domain, where a fronted locative competes with

an expletive for the same specifier. A composite featural probe captures the movement profile and supports a featural approach to the A/A' distinction. The identified high-TP position helps locate where focus-sensitive operators can take scope.

Nigel Duffield maps the embedded left periphery, addressing the position of all pre-subject elements: subordinators, embedded topics, fronted quantifiers and adverbials, as well as the Vietnamese counterpart of English “why.” Whilst the results of the study broadly align with the previous cartographic proposals, they also suggest revisions, especially with respect the “why-to” restriction, and the position of fronted quantifier expressions. The Vietnamese findings urge a reconsideration of earlier claims based on Italian data, especially concerning the motivation for fronting to the left periphery. This mapping provides the structural backdrop for the polarity and bias results in Polar questions and bias.

(iv) *Reference, binding, and null elements*

Andrew Simpson and Linh Pham test the behavior of the anaphoric element *mình*. Based on controlled judgments across regions and on diagnostics with ellipsis and quantificational subjects, they show that *mình* in object position can be locally bound without the reflexivizer *trở*. The pattern reflects genuine binding rather than accidental coreference. This challenges approaches that tie local reflexivization to morphological complexity and implies a recalibration of anaphor typology. The findings refine predictions about where reflexivizers are required in Vietnamese and related languages.

In a second paper, Simpson and Pham analyze bare kinship terms (KNs) and body-part nouns (BPNs). KNs behave as if they project a null possessor that is anaphoric and subject to locality, while BPNs pattern with a null pronominal (*pro*). This split differs from previous proposals for Mandarin and supports a parameter that distinguishes anaphoric from pronominal null elements in the nominal domain. This nominal-domain contrast complements the clausal distinctions drawn in Argument structure, movement, and the clausal spine.

(v) *Polar questions and bias*

Michael Yoshitaka Erlewine and Anne Nguyen examine Vietnamese polar-question constructions, with particular attention to the final particle *à*. They argue for a three-way distinction: original bias (speaker beliefs), contextual bias (evidence in discourse), and projected bias (constraints encoded by the form). Some bias effects are argued to follow from pragmatic competition among question types rather than from belief states alone. This analysis is related to the structural observations in the subsection Argument structure, movement, and the clausal spine and the focus-related patterns discussed in the subsection Morphology–semantics interfaces and lexical pragmatics, placing the Vietnamese data in dialogue with broader cross-linguistic studies of question bias.

A companion note by Tue Trinh proposes a bi-clausal architecture for polar questions. Together with Partition by Exhaustification and independently motivated constraints, this analysis explains contrasts involving definite vs. quantificational subjects, plain vs. *only*-focused subjects, and the placement of *chắc chắn* ‘certainly’ relative to verum focus. The proposal links form, focus, and discourse control in a way that predicts observed distributions and blocks unattested ones.

Together, these ten papers provide detailed descriptions and empirically testable analyses. They make a clear contribution to an agenda: to show that how findings from Vietnamese can drive theoretical development; that its empirical particularities (inheritance under contact, particle-rich compositionality, and flexible but rule-governed clausal architecture) force revisions to received views in historical linguistics, cartography, binding theory, and the semantics–pragmatics interface. We anticipate that the volume will serve as a reference point for future work, within Vietnamese linguistics and beyond.

In terms of limitations, the Special Issue does not aim to cover phonetics and phonology, prosody, dialectology, sociolinguistic variation, acquisition/processing, or computational modeling. Some conclusions rest on specialized historical corpora and controlled judgment tasks that merit replication on larger, regionally balanced samples and across genres.

Future research would benefit from (i) a balanced diachronic and synchronic corpora spanning regions and registers; (ii) integrated prosody–syntax studies to refine left-peripheral mapping; (iii) expanded experimental work on bias, focus, and anaphora; and (iv) comparative studies across East and Mainland Southeast Asia to separate areal from language-specific effects. We also encourage open diagnostics and datasets to support replication and comparison.

**Author Contributions:** For academic purposes, authorship of the Introduction is as follows: T.P. is responsible for the Introduction, Diachrony, contact, and inheritance, and Morphology–semantics interfaces and lexical pragmatics, N.D. for Argument structure, movement, and the clausal spine and Reference, binding, and null elements; and C.-T.T.C. for Polar questions and bias and Conclusions. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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