

## Article

# The Sino-Vietnamese Negative Prefixes *bất*, *vô*, *phi* and Their Coexistence with Sentential Negators: A Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a comprehensive synchronic and diachronic analysis of the Sino-Vietnamese negative prefixes *bất* (Chinese 不 *bù*), *vô* (無 *wú*), and *phi* (非 *fēi*), examining their historical development and modern usage in Vietnamese, with a comparative perspective on their Chinese equivalents. By investigating the interaction between these prefixes and Vietnamese sentential negators—such as the native *chẳng* and the Chinese-derived *không*—the study explores the evolution of negation in Vietnamese over several centuries. The research draws on a corpus of three bilingual Classical Chinese–Vietnamese translations of Confucius’s *Analects* from the 17th, 19th, and 21st centuries, two written in traditional *Nôm* script and one in the modern *Quốc ngữ* alphabet. This corpus provides valuable insights into linguistic shifts driven by language contact in Vietnam. The findings reveal that in the 17th century, the Sino-Vietnamese prefixes *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* were largely absent, with native *chẳng* dominating. By the 19th century, *chẳng* persisted, but *không* emerged as a sentential negator, and *bất* appeared, both reflecting Chinese forms and demonstrating innovative uses. In the 21st century, *không* became the dominant negator, with *bất* and *vô* seeing increased usage, reflecting broader trends of linguistic modernization. This study situates these changes within the broader context of 20th-century East Asian literacy expansion, where Japan played a pivotal role in disseminating modernized Chinese-based vocabulary. By examining the selective adaptation and integration of Sino-Vietnamese elements, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of language contact, syntactic influence, and lexical innovation in the evolving Vietnamese lexicon.



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## 1. Introduction

This paper investigates the Sino-Vietnamese negative prefixes *bất*, *vô*, and *phi*, tracing their historical development and modern usage in Vietnamese, while comparing them with their Chinese counterparts 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi*. Although significant work exists on Sino-Vietnamese linguistic interaction (Haudricourt, 2010; Hashimoto, 1978; T. C. Nguyễn, 1979; Alves, 2007a, 2007b, 2017; Shimizu, 2017, a.o.), less attention has been paid to the specific evolution of these negative prefixes and their interaction with native Vietnamese sentential negators like *chẳng* and the Chinese-derived *không*. This study seeks to address this gap by focusing on both the synchronic and diachronic changes in the Vietnamese negation system.

### 1.1. The Vietnamese Negation System

Vietnamese negation operates on two levels: sentential and lexical. At the sentential level, contemporary Vietnamese primarily uses *không* as the standard negator<sup>1</sup>, which originates from the Chinese word 空 *kōng* ‘empty, void’ (P. P. Nguyễn, 1994; Trinh, 2005; Phan, 2023). However, *không* only became a sentential negator in the late 17th century (Phan et al., 2024), whereas *chẳng*, a native negator, was dominant before the mid-19th century. By the 19th and 20th centuries, *không* overtook *chẳng* as the primary negator in Vietnamese (Trinh et al., 2024).

At the lexical level, Sino-Vietnamese prefixes like *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* have been productive in forming negative adjectives, nouns, and verbs (Alves, 2007a, 2007b). However, little research has explored when these prefixes became productive in Vietnamese or how they interact with sentential negators such as *không* and *chẳng*. This paper provides a detailed analysis of how these negative prefixes evolved and how they coexist and compete with native negators in the Vietnamese language.

### 1.2. Why Focus on Vietnamese Translations of the *Analects*?

A key contribution of this study is its analysis of three bilingual Classical Chinese–Vietnamese translations of Confucius’s *Analects* from the 17th, 19th, and 21st centuries. The *Analects* (論語 *Lúnyǔ*), a cornerstone of Confucian philosophy, had a profound cultural and linguistic influence in both China and Vietnam (Lau, 1979; Ames & Rosemont, 1998; Gardner, 2003). These translations, two written in the traditional character-based *Nôm* script and one in the modern *Quốc ngữ* alphabet, offer a unique opportunity to observe how Sino-Vietnamese prefixes (*bất*, *vô*, *phi*) were integrated into Vietnamese alongside native negators like *chẳng* and *không*. By analyzing this corpus, we can observe patterns of linguistic coexistence, competition, and innovation, revealing shifts in negation usage over time.

### 1.3. Chinese Negators and Their Vietnamese Adaptations

In the history of Chinese, 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi* have been used as core negators at both the sentential and lexical levels (Pulleyblank, 1995; Li & Thompson, 1981). When these elements were borrowed into Vietnamese, they were restricted to word formation, functioning only as prefixes to form negative adjectives, nouns, and verbs. In contrast, Vietnamese relied on native negators such as *chẳng*, with *không* later incorporated from Chinese. As a result, in Vietnamese translations of Chinese texts, translators utilized both Sino-Vietnamese prefixes and sentential negators to accurately maintain the original meaning.

### 1.4. Classical Chinese and the Evolution of Literary Sinitic in East Asia

‘Classical Chinese’ is used to refer to the form of written Chinese used in classical texts from the late Spring and Autumn period to the Han Dynasty (roughly corresponding to Peyraube’s (1996) ‘Late Archaic Chinese’), including Confucius’s *Analects*. These texts, particularly the Confucian classics, shaped the intellectual history of East Asia. In English-language Sinology, the terms ‘Classical Chinese’ and ‘Literary Chinese’ have been traditionally used to describe this variety and the written variety modeled on the classics which was used in later epochs (i.e., since the first century CE, known in Chinese as 文言 *wényán*), respectively. Mair (2004) introduced the term ‘Literary Sinitic’ to replace ‘Classical Chinese’ or ‘Literary Chinese’. In a recently published work, King (2021) proposed using the new term ‘Literary Sinitic’ to both refer to the term of *wényán* used in modern Chinese, and also to refer to the concept of 漢文 *hànwén* in other East Asian countries (kanbun in Japan, hammun in Korea, and Hán văn in Vietnam) because Literary Sinitic is the most important linguistic feature of classical texts in East Asian countries.

In Vietnam, Chinese characters were introduced during the Nam Việt 南越 kingdom period (203–111 BCE) and became entrenched during the Chinese domination of 交州 *Jiāozhōu*/Giao Châu (modern-day northern Vietnam) from 179 BCE to 938 CE (T. C. Nguyễn & Bui, 2020). By the 8th and 9th centuries, under the influence of the Chinese language in Tang dynasty, the Hán-Việt (Sino-Vietnamese) reading system emerged, a system that remains in use today (T. C. Nguyễn, 1979; Phan, 2013, 2025)<sup>2</sup>. After Vietnam's independence, Chinese characters (*chữ Hán*) remained the official script for administrative documents. The Confucian civil service examination system (1075–1919) ensured the continued mastery of Literary Sinitic, allowing scholars to compose official documents and literary works in this written variety. Surveys show that the nine most important Confucian classics, including the *Analects*, were all translated into Vietnamese and recorded in *chữ Nôm* during the monarchal period (T. C. Nguyễn, 2016). These translations, along with later versions in *Quốc ngữ*, cemented *wényán*'s long-standing impact on Vietnamese linguistic and intellectual history.

Choosing the *Analects* for this study offers several advantages. First, its mix of dialogue, narrative, and didactic passages provides a rich array of syntactic environments in which negation appears. Second, the availability of translations of the *Analects* from the 17th, 19th, and 21st centuries provides a well-spaced corpus for examining linguistic change over time. Third, its broad dissemination—first via woodblock printing and later through modern editions—means these versions were read by diverse audiences, helping us gauge both scholarly and popular language use.

### 1.5. Aims and Main Findings

The primary objective of this study is to offer a synchronic and diachronic analysis of the Sino-Vietnamese negative prefixes *bất*, *vô*, and *phi*, comparing their usage with their Chinese equivalents. It also explores the interaction between these prefixes and sentential negators, revealing patterns of linguistic coexistence and innovation.

Our key findings are as follows:

- (i) 17th-Century Native Dominance: In the 17th-century translation, *chẳng* dominates the negation system, with no occurrences of the prefixes *bất*, *vô*, or *phi*, reflecting the dominance of indigenous negators during this period.
- (ii) 19th-Century Transition: By the 19th century, while *chẳng* remains prevalent, *không* emerges as a sentential negator. This period also sees the appearance of *bất*, which corresponds directly to Chinese forms (e.g., *bất nhân* 不仁) or appears in innovative formations (e.g., *bất tài* 不才), signaling the increasing influence of Chinese on Vietnamese negation patterns.
- (iii) 21st-Century 'Modernization': In the 21st-century translation, *không* becomes the dominant negator, and there is a notable increase in the use of *bất*, *vô*, and *phi*, reflecting broader innovative trends in Vietnamese. This shift is part of the broader linguistic and cultural 'modernization' of East Asia, influenced by Japan's role in transmitting modernized Chinese characters through reformist writings (Sinh, 1993).

#### Structure of the Paper

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the Chinese negative prefixes 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi* in Classical Chinese and their development in (Modern Standard) Mandarin. Section 3 focuses on the modern usage of *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* in Vietnamese, particularly on their interaction with native negators like *chẳng* and *không*. Section 4 introduces the historical corpus, and Section 5 presents a diachronic analysis of the three bilingual *Analects* translations. Section 6 discusses the broader implications of these findings and suggests future research directions.

## 2. 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi* in Chinese

Chinese negation involves a nuanced system of items that have undergone significant changes throughout the history of the language. Among the most central negators are 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi*, which have played key roles at both the sentential and lexical levels. This section focuses on their use and evolution from Classical Chinese to Modern Standard Mandarin, providing crucial context for understanding their adaptation into Vietnamese.

### 2.1. Classical Chinese

Given that the translations of the *Analects* chosen for this study are bilingual—featuring both Vietnamese and Classical Chinese—understanding the role of these negators in Classical Chinese is essential.

#### 2.1.1. Verbless Nominal Predication: 非 *fēi*

In *Classical Chinese*, 非 *fēi* was commonly used to negate nominal predicates in verbless sentences. Unlike copular verbs in other languages, *fēi* is not considered a verb but rather a particle that negates the predicate directly (see [Vogelsang, 2021](#)). This structure, which was well established in the Classical period, became a defining feature of nominal negation throughout Premodern Chinese.

An example of *fēi* in a nominal predication may be found in the *Mencius*:

- |     |            |           |             |             |           |
|-----|------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|-----------|
| (1) | 非          | 我         | 也,          | 兵           | 也         |
|     | <i>fēi</i> | <i>wǒ</i> | <i>yě</i> , | <i>bīng</i> | <i>yě</i> |
|     | NEG        | 1SG       | PTC,        | weapon      | PTC       |
- ‘It was not I, it was the weapon’. (*Mencius*; [Pulleyblank, 1995](#), p. 16)

In this example, *fēi* negates the subject 我 *wǒ* (‘I’), contrasting it with 兵 *bīng* (‘weapon’). The particle 也 *yě* is often omitted in negative clauses, in the Classical language.

In another example from the *Zhuangzi*, the nominal negation is simpler, and *fēi* serves again as the main negator:

- |     |           |            |           |
|-----|-----------|------------|-----------|
| (2) | 子         | 非          | 魚         |
|     | <i>zǐ</i> | <i>fēi</i> | <i>yú</i> |
|     | 2SG       | NEG        | fish      |
- ‘You are not a fish’. ([Vogelsang, 2021](#), p. 34)

Here, *fēi* negates the subject–predicate relationship directly, contrasting 子 *zǐ* (‘you’) with 魚 *yú* (‘fish’). The use of *fēi* in this manner highlights its role in creating binary contrasts in Classical Chinese.

Historically, 非 *fēi* evolved from the phrase 不唯 *bù wéi*, where *bù* functioned as a negator and 唯 *wéi* acted as an emphatic particle. Over time, 不唯 *bù wéi* ceased to be used, and 非 *fēi* became the standard form of nominal negation ([Vogelsang, 2021](#), p. 32). Grammarians differ in their classification of 非 *fēi*: some treat it as a particle rather than an adverb (e.g., [Guo et al., 1999](#)), which makes it unique among negators in Chinese ([Vogelsang, 2021](#)).

#### 2.1.2. Verbal Predication: 不 *bù*

Unlike 非 *fēi*, which negates nominal predicates, 不 *bù* is primarily used to negate verbal predicates. In Classical Chinese, and up until the stage of Modern Chinese, *bù* played a central role in negating actions and states. It could negate verbs and adjectives.

Consider the following example from the *Mencius*, where 不 *bù* negates the verb 見 *jiàn* (‘see’):

- (3) 就 之 而 不 見 所 畏 焉  
 jiù zhī ér bù jiàn suǒ wèi yān  
 approach 3SG and NEG see NMLZ fear PTC  
 ‘Going up to him, I did not see anything to fear in him’.  
 (Mencius; Pulleyblank, 1995, p. 29)

Here, *bù* directly negates the act of seeing, marking the absence of the action. This example illustrates the broad applicability of *bù* to verbal negation in Chinese.

Additionally, *不 bù* is used to negate adjectives, which are sometimes classified as stative/property verbs in Chinese. The following example shows the negation of an adjective:

- (4) 日 月 不 高  
 rì yuè bù gāo  
 sun moon NEG high  
 ‘The sun and moon are not high’. (Vogelsang, 2021, p. 45)

In this example, *不 bù* negates the adjective *gāo* (高, ‘high’), treating it as a stative verb. This reflects the flexibility of *不 bù* in Classical Chinese, as it can negate both actions and states.

### 2.1.3. Possessive and Existential Negation: 無 wú

The third negator we considered in the present study is 無 *wú*, which negates possession or existence. In Classical Chinese, 無 *wú* was used to negate existential or possessive predicates, distinguishing it from *不 bù*, which negates actions or states.

For example, in the following sentence, *wú* negates the existence of ‘gentlemen’:

- (5) 無 君子, 莫 治 野人  
 wú jūnzǐ, mò zhì yě rén  
 NEG gentleman, no one rule rustic-person  
 person

‘If there were no gentlemen, there would be no one to rule the rustics’.  
 (Mencius; Pulleyblank, 1995, p. 29)

Here, *wú* negates the existence of 君子 *jūnzǐ* ‘gentleman’, building a conditional clause about governance.

## 2.2. Modern Standard Mandarin

In Modern Standard Mandarin, the negators *不 bù*, *沒 méi*, and 無 *wú* have developed distinct syntactic functions, each associated with specific contexts of negation. This section explores how these negators operate in the modern language and compares their roles to their counterparts in Classical Chinese. This comparison is essential for understanding the Sino-Vietnamese prefixes *bât*, *vô*, and *phi* and their integration into Vietnamese linguistic structures.

### 2.2.1. Irrealis Negation: 不 bù

In Modern Standard Mandarin, *不 bù* functions as the general negator for irrealis predicates, negating both verbs and adjectives. This is similar to its role in Classical Chinese, where *bù* negates verbs and adjectives directly, without the need for additional auxiliaries. Just as in Classical Chinese, predicative adjectives are sometimes conflated with verbs in the literature (see, e.g., Li & Thompson, 1981), but the criteria for distinguishing them from verbs are somewhat clearer in the modern language (see, e.g., Arcodia, 2012).

Example (6) illustrates the negation of an adjectival predicate:

(6)	張三	不	高
	Zhāngsān	bù	gāo
	Zhangsan	NEG	tall
	'Zhangsan isn't tall'.		

*bù* is also used to negate the copula 是 *shì*, as in example (7):

(7)	張三	不	是	日本人
	Zhāngsān	bù	shì	Rìběn-rén
	Zhangsan	NEG	COP	Japan-person
	'Zhangsan is not Japanese'.			

Here, *bù* negates the copula 是 *shì*, used in nominal predication. In Classical Chinese, *fēi* would have been used in such cases, without a copula (see Exx. 1–2). In Modern Standard Mandarin, 非 *fēi* is used only in lexical items and conventionalized constructions, while *bù* serves as the general negator for the copula.

*bù* is also the general irrealis negator for verbs, as may be seen in example (8):

(8)	我	不	去
	wǒ	bù	qù
	1SG	NEG	go
	'I'm not going'.		

In this sentence, the verb 去 *qù* ('go') is negated by *bù*. The pattern is similar to that found in Classical Chinese verbal negation, such as in example (3) from the *Mencius*.

### 2.2.2. Realis Negation: 没(有) *méi(yǒu)*

In contrast to 不 *bù*, 没(有) *méi(yǒu)* is used to negate realis predicates: while *bù* covers irrealis contexts, 没 *méi* is mostly used to negate the occurrence of past episodic events.

For example, in (9):

(9)	我	没	去
	wǒ	méi	qù
	1SG	NEG	go
	'I didn't go'.		

Here, 没 *méi* negates the occurrence of the action of going. This differs from 不 *bù*, which negates a habitual or future event (compare Ex. 8).

*Méi* is also used as the existential negator: in (10), it negates the existential predicate 空 *kòng* ('free time'):

(10)	今天	我	没	空
	jīntiān	wǒ	méi	kòng
	today	1SG	NEG	free time
	'I don't have time today'.			

In this case, 没 *méi* negates the existence of free time, much like 無 *wú* in Classical Chinese negates existence or possession, as example (5) above. However, in Modern Standard Mandarin, 没 *méi* is also the primary negator for realis situations, especially when discussing past episodic events (9).

### 2.2.3. Word Formation

In contemporary standard Mandarin Chinese, the negators 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi* play crucial roles not only in sentence-level negation but also in word formation, particularly in creating derived adjectives and nouns.

For instance, 不 *bù* is frequently used to form adjectives by negating the base adjective or noun. In example (11), 不 *bù* combines with 安 *ān* ('peace') to form 不安 *bù'ān* ('uneasy'), a predicative adjective that describes an emotional state:

(11)	他	很	不安
	<i>tā</i>	<i>hěn</i>	<i>bù'ān</i>
	3SG.M	very	uneasy
	'He's feeling (very) uneasy'.		

This pattern, where 不 *bù* is prefixed to an adjective or noun, demonstrates how 不 *bù* functions as a productive prefix in forming descriptive adjectives. However, 不 *bù* very often creates non-predicative adjectives, e.g., 不敗 *bùbài* ('invincible'); as shown in (12), such a non-predicative item cannot be used in the same predicative construction seen just above (11).

(12)	*他	很	不敗
	<i>tā</i>	<i>hěn</i>	<i>bùbài</i>
	3SG.M	very	invincible
	(Meaning:) 'He's (very) invincible'.		

Similarly, 無 *wú* serves as a negator in morphologically complex words, typically indicating the absence of possession or attributes. In (13), for example, *wú* combines with 糖 *táng* ('sugar') to form 無糖 *wútáng* ('sugar-free'), a non-predicative adjective designating a food product lacking sugar:

(13)	無糖
	<i>wútáng</i>
	NEG sugar
	'sugar-free'

In this case, 無 *wú* negates the noun 糖 *táng*, creating morphologically complex words that describe what something lacks, which is common in terms that describe attributes or states. Similarly to 不 *bù*, it can be sometimes used also to form predicative adjectives (e.g., 無力 *wúlì* 'powerless'), and we can find it also in nouns, again describing something lacking a property (e.g., 無產者 *wúchǎnzhě* 'proletarian', lit. 'one who lacks properties').

非 *fēi*, on the other hand, is used to form words that imply negation of a property, such as 非會員 *fēihuìyuán* ('non-member'). This prefix can form nouns, as 非會員 *fēihuìyuán*, but also non-predicative adjectives, both by combining with nouns (e.g., 非貿易 *fēimàoyì* 'non-commercial') and with adjectives (非官方 *fēiguānfāng* 'unofficial'; see Arcodia, 2012).

These examples of word formation highlight how negators in Mandarin Chinese are used not only to negate verbal or adjectival predicates but also to create new lexical items. In both Classical and Modern Chinese, 不 *bù*, 非 *fēi*, and 無 *wú* serve distinct but related functions in negating actions, states, and existence. While 不 *bù* continues to dominate verbal and adjectival negation in modern Mandarin, and is also used in word formation, *wú* and *méi* have evolved specific functions, with 無 *wú* primarily used in lexical negation and *méi* in syntactic negation; 非 *fēi* is generally confined to word formation, in the modern language. These negators provide a foundation for understanding how Sino-Vietnamese prefixes like *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* were integrated into the Vietnamese lexicon.

In the following section, we examine how these elements, after being introduced into Vietnamese, interact with sentential negators like *chẳng* and *không*. By analyzing the Vietnamese translations of Confucius's *Analects*, we explore how Sino-Vietnamese negative prefixes coexist with sentential negative markers, setting the stage for the development of Vietnamese negation systems.

### 3. *Bất*, *vô*, and *phi* in Present-Day Vietnamese

A crucial distinction between the Chinese negators 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi* and their Vietnamese counterparts *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* lies in their syntactic scope. In Chinese, 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi* function at both the sentential and lexical levels, whereas in contemporary

Vietnamese, *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* are restricted to word formation (i.e., to the lexical level) and co-exist with independent sentential negators. This distinction is central to understanding how negation operates in Vietnamese, and how it diverges from its Chinese origins.

In present-day Vietnamese, negation is expressed through both sentential negators and negative prefixes. There are two primary sentential negators: *không*, which is derived from Chinese 空 *kōng* and functions as the standard negator, and *chẳng*, a native negator that is considered non-standard and often adds an emphatic or non-neutral tone.

(16)	a.	Nó 3SG 'He didn't go to the library'.	<b>không</b> NEG	đi go	thư viện library
	b.	Nó 3SG 'He didn't go to the library'.	<b>chẳng</b> NEG	đi go	thư viện library

Both (16a) and (16b) convey the meaning 'He didn't go to the library,' but the latter carries a stronger, more emphatic connotation due to the use of *chẳng*. While the use of sentential negators like *không* and *chẳng* has been widely investigated (P. P. Nguyễn, 1994; Phan, 2023; Trinh et al., 2024), there has been significantly less attention paid to the negative prefixes *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* in modern Vietnamese. These Sino-Vietnamese prefixes, which originate from their Chinese counterparts, are primarily used in the formation of negative adjectives, nouns, and verbs. This section, therefore, is devoted to examining the role and usage of *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* in present-day Vietnamese, shedding light on how they function within the broader system of Vietnamese negation.

Drawing on data from the *Great Dictionary of Vietnamese* (N. Y. Nguyễn, 1999), we compiled a list of 125 frequently used words containing either *bất*, *vô*, or *phi* in the prefixal position. From this list, 51 occurrences of *bất*, 67 occurrences of *vô*, and 7 occurrences of *phi* were identified, excluding archaic or idiomatic usages, as summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The number of words containing *bất*, *vô*, *phi* in the *Great Dictionary of Vietnamese*.

<i>Great Dictionary of Vietnamese</i> (1999)	
number of words containing <i>bất</i>	51
number of words containing <i>vô</i>	67
number of words containing <i>phi</i>	7

While these prefixes retain core semantic functions related to negation, their usage patterns in Vietnamese show significant divergence from Chinese, particularly in terms of allowable combinations and lexical productivity.

### 3.1. *Bất* in Present-Day Vietnamese

The prefix *bất* is used to create negative adjectives, verbs, and nouns in Vietnamese, often expressing negative qualities or states. In our data, we identified 51 frequently used words with *bất* such as:

(17)	<i>bất</i>	<i>an</i>	'insecure'
	<i>bất</i>	<i>biến</i>	'invariant'
	<i>bất</i>	<i>cẩn</i>	'careless'
	<i>bất</i>	<i>chính</i>	'unrighteous'
	<i>bất</i>	<i>công</i>	'unjust'

These examples illustrate how *bất* functions to negate qualities and states, forming compound words that convey negative meanings. This pattern aligns with its use in Modern Standard Chinese, where, as shown earlier (§2.2.3), 不 *bù* similarly negates adjectives

and nouns to express states of negation or absence, as in 不安 *bù'ān* ('uneasy') or 不正 *bùzhèng* ('unrighteous'). However, Vietnamese demonstrates selective adaptation, as some combinations commonly used in Chinese are not productive or acceptable in Vietnamese. For instance, while *bất tài* ('incompetent') is a viable term in Vietnamese, neither *vô tài* nor *phi tài* are considered acceptable combinations. This contrasts with Chinese, where both 不才 *bùcái* ('incompetent') and 無才 *wúcai* ('talentless') are permissible. This divergence highlights how Vietnamese has selectively integrated *bất* while maintaining constraints on its combinations. In this sense, *bất* has retained its core semantic function of negating qualities but has been limited in terms of lexical flexibility when compared to Chinese.

### 3.2. *Vô* in Present-Day Vietnamese

The prefix *vô* is more frequently used in Vietnamese than *bất*, with 67 occurrences identified in the data. *vô* generally negates qualities and states, often conveying the absence or lack of something. Common examples include:

(18)	<i>vô</i>	<i>tâm</i>	'unthoughtful'
	<i>vô</i>	<i>tận</i>	'endless'
	<i>vô</i>	<i>thần</i>	'atheist'
	<i>vô</i>	<i>tội</i>	'innocent/guilt-free'
	<i>vô</i>	<i>trách nhiệm</i>	'irresponsible'

These compounds highlight how *vô* in Vietnamese is used to negate the existence or presence of a quality, much like 無 *wú* in Chinese. However, Vietnamese demonstrates unique constraints on how *vô* can be used.

### 3.3. *Phi* in Present-Day Vietnamese

The prefix *phi* is the least frequently used of the three, with only seven occurrences identified in the data. However, *phi* plays an important role in forming compound words related to non-standard or non-normative categories. Some examples include:

(19)	<i>phi đạo đức</i>	'unethical'
	<i>phi lý</i>	'irrational'
	<i>phi pháp</i>	'illegal'
	<i>phi quân sự</i>	'non-military'
	<i>phi thường</i>	'extraordinary'
	<i>phi nghĩa</i>	'unrighteous'
	<i>phi phạm</i>	'extraordinary'

The prefix *phi* typically negates normative categories, indicating something that deviates from social or legal standards. This usage parallels that of 非 *fēi* in Mandarin, where it negates similar concepts, such as in 非貿易 *fēimàoyì* ('non-commercial') or 非會員 *fēihuìyuán* ('non-member'). However, as seen with *bất*, Vietnamese imposes restrictions on how *phi* can combine with certain base words. While *phi phạm* ('extraordinary') is commonly used, *bất phạm* is not, even though the equivalent forms in Chinese are both acceptable.

Across all three prefixes—*bất*, *vô*, and *phi*—Vietnamese demonstrates a strong parallel with Chinese. For example, combinations like *bất an* (insecure) in Vietnamese closely align with the Chinese 不安 *bù'ān*, and *vô biên* (boundless) mirrors 無邊 *wúbiān* in Chinese. This alignment suggests that Vietnamese has maintained much of the original form and function of these prefixes as they were borrowed from Chinese. Particularly in formal and philosophical domains, the overlap between the two languages is significant, as seen in terms like *bất khả thi* (impossible), which directly corresponds to 不可能 *bù kěnéng* in Chinese. This reflects the deep and enduring influence of Chinese on the Vietnamese lexicon.

However, a crucial difference emerges in how these prefixes function within each language. In the history of Chinese, 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi* have operated flexibly at the sentential and lexical levels, although only 不 *bù* is productively used as a syntactic negator in the modern language. In contrast, their Vietnamese counterparts—*bất*, *vô*, and *phi*—are strictly confined to lexical negation, forming negative compounds such as adjectives, nouns, and verbs. This aligns with typological studies showing that core grammatical elements like negation are more resistant to borrowing than lexical items (Heine & Kuteva, 2005; Sakel, 2007). Sentential negation in Vietnamese is handled separately by the native negators *không* and *chẳng*, which coexist alongside the Sino-Vietnamese prefixes. This compartmentalization of negation in Vietnamese, where sentential and lexical negators are separated, marks a significant structural divergence from Chinese. It illustrates how Vietnamese, while adopting Chinese lexical elements, has tailored its negation system to its own syntactic norms. Vietnamese also demonstrates a degree of innovation with these borrowed prefixes. In some cases, Vietnamese has created terms that do not have exact counterparts in Chinese, reflecting creative linguistic adaptations. This dynamic process of borrowing and adaptation exemplifies how languages can integrate foreign elements while still evolving in unique ways.

In the next section, we explore how these prefixes function in translations of Confucius's *Analects*, examining their appearance across the 17th, 19th, and 21st centuries. This analysis provides further insights into the interaction between Sino-Vietnamese prefixes and sentential negators, and how these elements have coexisted and evolved in Vietnamese over time. Specifically, we focus on the timing of their appearance and their frequency in translated texts, shedding light on broader patterns of language contact and adaptation.

#### 4. Data Collection

To trace the evolution of Sino-Vietnamese negators from Classical Chinese to modern Vietnamese, this study examines three key bilingual texts spanning the 17th to 21st centuries: *Luận ngữ ước giải* (17th century), *Luận ngữ thích nghĩa ca* (19th century), and *Khổng phu tử và Luận ngữ* (21st century). These texts, blending Classical Chinese with Vietnamese translations, offer a unique corpus for analyzing the integration of the prefixes *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* alongside sentential negators such as *chẳng* and *không*.<sup>3</sup>

##### 4.1. *Luận ngữ ước giải* (Concise Interpretation to the Analects) (17th Century)

*Luận ngữ ước giải* 論語約解, known as the *Concise Interpretation to the Analects*, is the earliest extant Vietnamese translation of Confucius's *Analects*, composed in the 17th century. Its full title is 'Tứ thư ước giải Luận ngữ giải quốc âm nghĩa tăng bổ Đại toàn bị chỉ' 四書約解論語解國音義增補大全備旨 (Explanation of the *Analects* using national pronunciation and meaning, supplemented with important annotations from the *Daquan* 大全, part of the *Concise Interpretation to the Four Books*). In this paper, it is referred to as *Luận ngữ ước giải*. It forms part of the *Tứ thư ước giải* 四書約解 (*Concise Interpretation to the Four Books*), which translates and annotates the *Four Books of Confucianism* into Vietnamese using the Nôm script, accompanied by Literary Sinitic annotations. The translator remains anonymous, and the text is housed at the Institute of Sino-Nom Studies (Hanoi, Vietnam), with call number AB.270/1–5.

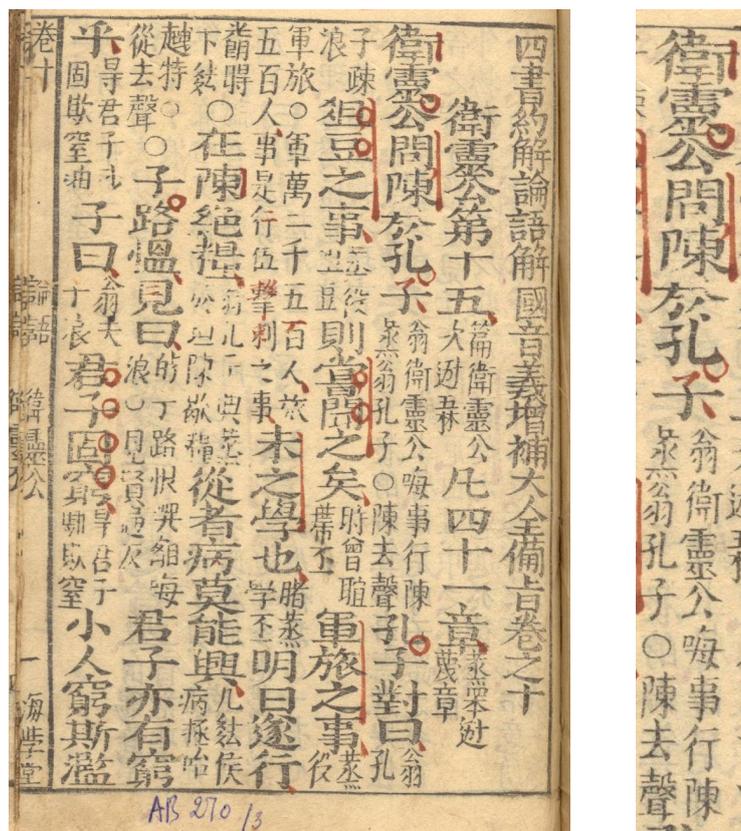
Although the book cover dates the text to the 20th year of Emperor Minh Mạng's reign (1839), subsequent research by T. C. Nguyễn (2009), T. C. Nguyễn (2014) revealed that the composition was completed in the 17th century. The wood blocks used for printing were re-carved multiple times from the 17th to the late 19th century. Despite the cover date of 1839, the text itself, written in Nôm script and Vietnamese language, retains the characteristics of 17th-century language and script.

The *Luận ngữ ước giải* originally consisted of 19 volumes, but only 12 volumes remain, with volumes 3–9 missing. The remaining portion includes the last six chapters of the *Analects*, from chapter 15 ‘Weiling Gong’ 衛靈公 to chapter 20 ‘Yao yue’ 堯曰, spanning 98 pages. To maintain a strict comparative framework, our study focuses exclusively on these final six chapters, comparing them across the 17th, 19th, and 21st-century Vietnamese translations alongside the original text in Literary Sinitic.

The format of *Luận ngữ ước giải* is bilingual, with large traditional Sinographs used for the original Literary Sinitic text and smaller Nôm characters for the Vietnamese translation. The structure of each paragraph in the *Luận ngữ ước giải* is divided into three parts, as illustrated in Table 2:

- (i) Original Text in Literary Sinitic: The main text is written in large traditional Sinographs at the beginning of each paragraph.
- (ii) Nôm Translation: Below the original text, small-sized Nôm characters provide the Vietnamese translation.
- (iii) Annotation Section: Small Sinographs give additional annotations, typically sourced from the *Great Complete Works of the Four Books* (四書大全), compiled during the Ming dynasty by a group led by Hu Guang (胡廣, 1369–1418). A circular bullet point separates the Nôm translation from the annotation, where present as they both use small font sizes.

**Table 2.** The first page of the remaining portion of the *Luận ngữ ước giải*, within the *Tứ thư ước giải*, call number AB.270/3, page 1a.



1. Large traditional Sinographs, original text: 衛靈公問陳於孔子 *Vệ Linh công vấn trần ư Khổng tử* (Sino-Vietnamese reading). Weiling Gong inquired of Confucius regarding the matter of warfare.
2. Small-sized Nôm characters, Vietnamese translation: 翁衛靈公 事行陣蒸翁孔子 ông *Vệ Linh công hỏi sự hành trận chưng ông Khổng tử* (Vietnamese phonetic transcription). The elder Weiling Gong asked about the conduct of warfare to Master Confucius.
3. Circular bullet point and small-sized Sinographs annotation: 陳去聲 *Trần, khứ thanh*. (Sino-Vietnamese reading). The word ‘Trần’ has a departing tone.<sup>4</sup>

The first page of the remaining portion of the *Luận ngữ ước giải*, within the *Tứ thư ước giải*, call number AB.270/3, page 1a

Exposition of the translation of the opening passage of chapter 15 ‘Weiling Gong.’

This format, with its bilingual structure and detailed annotations, allows for in-depth analysis of how negators in Literary Sinitic were translated into Vietnamese, particularly the use of 不 *bất*, 無 *vô*, and 非 *phi*.

#### 4.2. *Luận ngữ thích nghĩa ca* (Song of Interpreting the Meaning of the Analects) (19th Century)

*Luận ngữ thích nghĩa ca* 論語釋義歌, or *Song of Interpreting the Meaning of the Analects*, is a 19th-century Vietnamese translation of the *Analects* with 2970 lines of verse. Its full title is *Tự Đức thánh chế Luận ngữ thích nghĩa ca* 嗣德聖制論語釋義歌 (The Song of Interpreting the Meaning of the Analects Composed by Emperor Tự Đức), hereafter referred to as the *Luận ngữ thích nghĩa ca*. This translation was compiled by Emperor **Tự Đức (1828–1883)**, a monarch of the Nguyễn dynasty renowned for his poetic compositions, during his reign from 1848 to 1883. It was authorized for engraving and printing by the court around the years 1896–1907 after the author's death. The text exhibits the linguistic and script characteristics (Vietnamese language and Nôm script) of the second half of the 19th century, reflecting the time of the author's completion of the work. The composition incorporates many expressions from the Huế dialect, the capital of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945), such as the words *mãn rãng* 凌 (how), *mãn ri* 夷 (like this), *chừ* 除 (now), and *ni* 尼 (this).

At the Institute of Sino-Nom Studies (Hanoi, Vietnam), there are currently two sets of books with call numbers A.186/1-2 and HVv.709/3-6, with the latter being incomplete. Therefore, this article references the first set. Call number A.186/1-2 comprises seven volumes, divided into two booklets, totaling 1,104 pages. Corresponding to the last six chapters of the remaining portion of the *Luận ngữ ước giải* presented above, from chapter 'Weiling Gong' to chapter 'Yao yue,' the *Luận ngữ thích nghĩa ca* cover from the latter part of volume 5 to the end of volume 7, totaling 760 lines of verse (26% of the total length of 2970 lines).

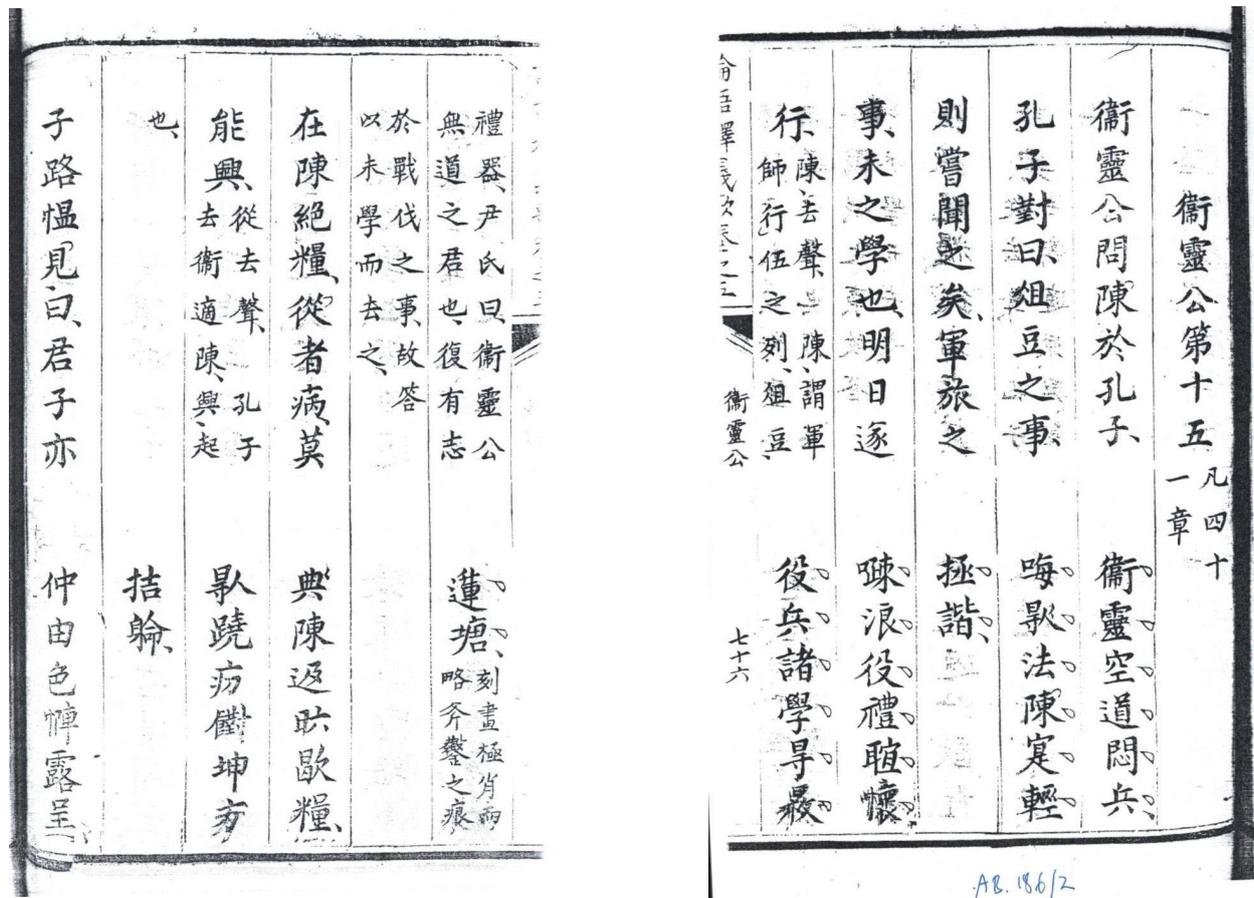
*Luận ngữ thích nghĩa ca* is written in the poetic *lục bát* (six-eight, i.e., the number of syllables in every two lines) verse form and uses Nôm script, a reflection of the linguistic and cultural environment of the Nguyễn dynasty. The text demonstrates the highly formalized nature of Vietnamese poetic composition in this era.

The presentation format of *Luận ngữ thích nghĩa ca* is structured into two tiers, as shown in Table 3:

- (i) Top Tier: This contains (i) the original text of the *Analects* in large traditional Sinographs, accompanied by (ii) small Sinographs for annotations. These annotations are mainly drawn from Zhu Xi's (朱熹, 1130–1200) *Collected Annotations on the Analects* 論語集注.
- (ii) Bottom Tier: (iii) The large Nôm characters in the bottom tier provide the Vietnamese translation in *lục bát* verse, followed by (iv) commentary in small Sinographs written by Nguyễn Phúc Miên Trinh 阮福綿貞 (1820–1897), an uncle of Emperor Tự Đức.

This text exemplifies how Vietnamese translators engaged with Classical Chinese texts using the *lục bát* form, while still incorporating complex philosophical concepts. The use of *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* in this poetic context provides insight into how Classical Chinese negators were translated into vernacular Vietnamese during the 19th century, when both Chinese influence and native linguistic forms coexisted.

**Table 3.** The *Luận ngữ thích nghĩa ca* (Song of Interpreting the Meaning of the Analects), call number AB.186/2, volume 5, pages 76a (right side) and 76b (left side).



The *Luận ngữ thích nghĩa ca* (Song of Interpreting the Meaning of the Analects), call number AB.186/2, volume 5, pages 76a (right side) and 76b (left side).

4.3. *Khổng phu tử và Luận ngữ* (Confucius and the Analects) (21st Century)

*Khổng phu tử và Luận ngữ* (Confucius and the Analects) by Phạm (2004) is a modern translation of the *Analects* into Vietnamese using the Latin-based *Quốc ngữ* script. This work reflects the modernization of the Vietnamese writing system, marking the transition from *Nôm* script to *Quốc ngữ*, which became the dominant script from the 20th century. The text was first published by the National Political Publisher in Hanoi in 2004. The translated portion from chapter 15 ‘Weiling Gong’ to chapter 20 ‘Yao yue’ spans from page 337 to page 391.

This translation adheres closely to the segmentation of the *Analects* as outlined in Zhu Xi’s *Collected Annotations on the Analects*, using a systematic approach to label each section. For example, XV.1 refers to the 15th chapter and the 1st section. The text is organized into four main components, as seen in Figure 1:

- (i) Original Text in Literary Sinitic: The source material is presented in traditional Sinographs.
- (ii) Sino-Vietnamese Phonetic Transcription: This provides a phonetic transcription using Sino-Vietnamese readings.
- (iii) Vietnamese Translation: The translation is rendered in modern Vietnamese prose using *Quốc ngữ*.

- (iv) Footnote-Style Annotations: These provide additional commentary, although they are less extensive than the annotations found in the earlier Nôm-script texts.

## 衛靈公第十五 VỆ LINH CÔNG ĐỆ THẬP NGŨ

(Thiên mười lăm: Vệ Linh công)

XV.1. 衛靈公問陳於孔子。孔子對曰：“俎豆之事則嘗聞之矣。軍旅之事未之學也”。明日遂行。在陳絕糧。從者病莫能興。子路慍，見曰：“君子亦有窮乎？”子曰：“君子固窮，小人窮斯濫矣”。

*Vệ Linh công vấn trận ư Khổng tử. Khổng tử đối viết: “Trò dậu chi sự tắc thường văn chi hĩ. Quân lữ chi sự vị chi học dã”. Minh nhật toại hành. Tại Trần tuyệt lương. Tòng giả bệnh, mạc năng hưng. Tử Lộ oán, hiện viết: “Quân tử diệc hữu cùng hồ?”. Tử viết: “Quân tử cố cùng, tiểu nhân cùng tư lạm hĩ”.*

**Dịch:** Vệ Linh công hỏi Khổng tử về chiến trận. Khổng tử đáp rằng: “Việc cúng tế thì tôi từng nghe rồi. Việc quân lữ thì tôi chưa từng học đến”. Ngày hôm sau Khổng tử rời nước Vệ ra đi. Ở nước Trần hết lương ăn. Người đi theo đều ốm, chẳng ai đứng dậy được. Tử Lộ dỗi uất hận, ra mắng mà nói rằng: “Quân tử cũng lâm vào cảnh cùng khốn ư?”. Khổng tử nói: “Quân tử vững bền trong cảnh khốn cùng. Bọn tiểu nhân trong cảnh khốn cùng thì chúng làm bừa, làm bãi”.

337

**Figure 1.** Khổng phu tử và Luận ngữ, page 337.

The modern prose translation allows for a clear understanding of how Sino-Vietnamese negators *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* have been fully integrated into contemporary Vietnamese. The text reflects the culmination of centuries of linguistic adaptation and demonstrates how these prefixes have been normalized within modern Vietnamese vocabulary.

#### 4.4. Comparison of the Three Bilingual Texts (the Last Six Chapters)

The three texts—*Luận ngữ ước giải*, *Luận ngữ thích nghĩa ca*, and *Khổng phu tử và Luận ngữ*—offer a unique corpus that spans over 400 years of Vietnamese linguistic history, as summarized in Table 4. Together, they allow us to trace how Sino-Vietnamese negators have evolved across different periods, genres, and writing systems.

In terms of script and language, the first two texts are written in Nôm script, while the 21st-century text is written in Quốc ngữ. This transition from Nôm to Quốc ngữ reflects broader cultural and educational reforms in Vietnam.

In terms of translation style, the 17th-century *Luận ngữ ước giải* uses prose for translation, while the 19th-century *Luận ngữ thích nghĩa ca* uses the poetic *lục bát* form. We acknowledge that the *lục bát* form’s fixed syllable count and tonal pattern may preferentially accommodate shorter negators (e.g., *chẳng*, *không*) and limit the inclusion of longer, multi-morphemic prefixes such as *bất*- and *vô*—potentially influencing their observed frequencies. The 21st-century translation returns to prose, offering a more straightforward ap-

proach. These shifts in genre and style reflect changes in how the Vietnamese approached the translation of Classical Chinese texts.

**Table 4.** Comparison of the 3 bilingual texts.

Book Title	<i>Luận ngữ ước giải</i>	<i>Luận ngữ thích nghĩa ca</i>	<i>Không phụ tử và Luận ngữ</i>
Date of Completion	17th century	Late 19th century	Early 21st century
Language of Translation	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Vietnamese
Script of Translation	Nôm script	Nôm script	Latin-based Quốc ngữ script
Genre of Translation	Prose	Lục bát (six-eight) verse	Prose
Segmentation Method of Each Translation	The segmentation is much smaller compared to Zhu Xi’s segmentation, with most segments not forming complete sentences but rather individual phrases; when concatenated, they form complete chapters and sections.	Segmentation is smaller or equal to Zhu Xi’s chapters, but each segment is either a complete sentence or a concise paragraph.	Follow Zhu Xi’s <i>Collected Annotations on the Analects</i> , each chapter is divided into sections.
	When concatenating the Nôm translation segments of the 2 Nôm translations together according to Zhu Xi’s chapter units, it will form the corresponding Vietnamese translated text for each chapter, following the segmentation structure of the Quốc ngữ script translation.		
Literary Sinitic Annotations.	Available, based on the <i>Great Complete Works of the Analects</i> 論語大全 Hu Guang group	Available, based on Zhu Xi’s <i>Collected Annotations on the Analects</i>	Not available

In terms of annotation and commentary, the 17th- and 19th-century texts include extensive annotations, often explaining the translation choices and providing additional context for the use of Sino-Vietnamese negators. The 21st-century text includes fewer annotations, relying instead on a direct translation of the *Analects* into modern prose. These annotations are crucial for understanding the nuanced use of negation in earlier translations and how they were understood in different periods.

By analyzing these texts, we can observe the gradual integration of Sino-Vietnamese negators into the Vietnamese lexicon, from the early stages in the 17th century, through their poetic adaptation in the 19th century, to their full incorporation into modern prose in the 21st century. These shifts reflect broader cultural and linguistic changes in Vietnam, offering a comprehensive view of the evolution of Sino-Vietnamese negation.

### 5. *Bất, vô, phi* and Their Coexistence with Sentential Negators in the Three Translated Texts

This section examines the use of the Sino-Vietnamese prefixes *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* in the three translations analyzed in this study. By analyzing these texts, we can trace the integration of these Sino-Vietnamese prefixes into the Vietnamese language and their interaction with native negators like *chẳng* and *không*. In particular, we explore when these prefixes first appear, how frequently they are used, and how they function alongside sentential negators in each translation.

In the original text of the last six chapters of the *Analects*, 153 instances of 不 *bù*, 38 of 無 *wú*, and 4 of 非 *fēi* were identified, totaling 195 sentences containing these negators,

as seen in Table 5. Our bilingual corpus includes all these Chinese sentences along with their equivalents in the three Vietnamese translations, resulting in 585 sentences across the 17th-, 19th-, and 21st-century translations. This brings the total number of sentences in the corpus to 780, providing a robust foundation for comparative analysis of the usage and adaptation of negation in both languages. In particular, the 153 instances of 不 *bù* make it the most frequent negator, reflecting its prominence in both sentential and lexical negation. The 38 instances of 無 *wú* and the 4 instances of 非 *fēi* show that these negators, though less frequent, are still essential for marking lexical negation, particularly in abstract or moral contexts. These frequency patterns in Literary Sinitic offer a point of comparison when analyzing how the corresponding Vietnamese prefixes (*bất*, *vô*, and *phi*) were adapted across the three translations.

**Table 5.** The number of 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi* in the last 6 chapters of the *Analects*.

The <i>Analects</i> (Last 6 Chapters)	
不 <i>bù</i>	153
無 <i>wú</i>	38
非 <i>fēi</i>	4

5.1. Distribution of Negators in the 17th-Century Translation

Our analysis shows that in the 17th-century Vietnamese translation of the *Analects*, most instances of 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi* were translated using *chẳng*, the native Vietnamese negator. Specifically, *chẳng* was used in 152 out of 153 cases of *bù*, 32 out of 38 cases of *wú*, and all 4 instances of *fēi*, as seen in Table 6. This overwhelming reliance on *chẳng* reflects a clear preference for native sentential negation over the adoption of Sino-Vietnamese lexical prefixes like *bất*, *vô*, or *phi*, which do not appear in the translation at all.

**Table 6.** 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi* and their equivalents in the 17th-century Vietnamese translation of the *Analects*.

Literary Sinitic	Vietnamese Translation (17th Century)
不 <i>bù</i> (153)	<i>chẳng</i> (152), others (1)
無 <i>wú</i> (38)	<i>chẳng</i> (32, in which <i>chẳng có</i> (12)), others (6)
非 <i>fēi</i> (4)	<i>chẳng</i> (4, in which <i>chẳng phải</i> (3))

In the original Literary Sinitic text, 不 *bù* is used 153 times; 152 of these instances were translated using the native Vietnamese negator *chẳng*.

(20)	<i>bù</i> (不)	=>	<i>chẳng</i>		
a.	Literary Sinitic (Chapter 15.21)				
	君子	矜	而	不	爭、
	Quân tử	cãnh	nhi	<b>bất</b>	tranh.
	gentleman	proud	but	NEG	contentious
	群	而	不	黨、	
	Quần	nhi	<b>bất</b>	đảng”.	
	join	but	NEG	cliquish	

‘The gentleman is proud but not contentious. He joins with others but is not cliquish.’

- b. Vietnamese translation (17th century)
- |       |           |         |     |               |             |  |  |  |  |
|-------|-----------|---------|-----|---------------|-------------|--|--|--|--|
| 導     | 君子        | 嚴       | 麻   | 拯             | 爭           |  |  |  |  |
| Người | quân tử   | ngghiêm | mà  | <b>chặ̉ng</b> | tranh       |  |  |  |  |
| CLF   | gentleman | proud   | but | NEG           | contentious |  |  |  |  |
- ‘The gentleman is proud but not contentious’.
- |     |       |     |               |         |      |      |      |  |  |
|-----|-------|-----|---------------|---------|------|------|------|--|--|
| 固   | 排     | 麻   | 拯             | 覓       | 夕    |      | 丕    |  |  |
| Có  | bầy   | mà  | <b>chặ̉ng</b> | mệ́ch   | làm  | bè   | vậ̣y |  |  |
| has | group | but | NEG           | wrongly | make | ally | PRT  |  |  |
- ‘He joins with others but is not cliquish’.

無 *wú* is used 38 times in the original Chinese text, and it is typically translated as *chặ̉ng* or *chặ̉ng có* ‘not have’ in the Vietnamese translation.

- (21) 無 *wú* => *chặ̉ng có* ‘not have’
- a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 17.23)
- |           |         |         |     |           |           |
|-----------|---------|---------|-----|-----------|-----------|
| 君子        | 有       | 勇       | 而   | 無         | 義         |
| Quân tử   | hữu     | dụ̃ng   | nhi | <b>vô</b> | ngھی̣a    |
| gentleman | possess | courage | but | lack      | rightness |

‘A gentleman who possesses courage but lacks rightness’.

- b. Vietnamese translation (17th century)
- |           |      |         |      |     |               |           |        |
|-----------|------|---------|------|-----|---------------|-----------|--------|
| 導         | 君子   | 固       | 孟    | 麻   | 拯             | 固         | 義      |
| Người     | quân | có      | mạnh | mà  | <b>chặ̉ng</b> | <b>có</b> | ngھی̣a |
|           | tử   |         |      |     |               |           |        |
| gentleman | have | courage | but  | not | have          | rightness |        |

‘A gentleman who possesses courage but lacks rightness’.

Here, 無 *vô* is rendered as *chặ̉ng có*, indicating the absence of a quality (rightness). This structure mirrors the negation pattern found in Chinese but uses the native Vietnamese negator *chặ̉ng có* instead of *vô*.

非 *fēi*, which appears four times in the original Chinese text, is mostly translated as *chặ̉ng phải* ‘not right’ in the Vietnamese translation, a construction that aligns with (verbless) nominal negation in Vietnamese.

- (22) 非 *fēi* => *chặ̉ng phải* ‘not right’
- a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 15.28)
- |        |       |         |       |     |      |         |        |
|--------|-------|---------|-------|-----|------|---------|--------|
| 人      | 能     | 弘       | 道、    | 非   | 道    | 弘       | 人、     |
| Nhân   | nặ̀ng | hoặ̀ng  | đạ̣o, | phi | đạ̣o | hoặ̀ng  | nhân   |
| Person | can   | enlarge | Way,  | NEG | Way  | enlarge | person |

‘A person can enlarge the Way; it is not the case that the Way can enlarge a person’.

- b. Vietnamese translation (17th century)
- |        |     |     |       |       |               |              |      |     |     |
|--------|-----|-----|-------|-------|---------------|--------------|------|-----|-----|
| 馱      | 哈   | 夕   | 穰     | 道、    | 拯             | 沛            | 道    | 哈   | 夕   |
| Người  | hay | làm | rộ̣ng | đạ̣o, | <b>chặ̉ng</b> | <b>phạ̉i</b> | đạ̣o | hay | làm |
| person | can | do  | large | Way   | not           | right        | Way  | can | do  |
- 穰 導  
rộ̣ng người  
large person

‘A person can enlarge the Way; it is not the case that the Way can enlarge a person’.

The 17th-century Vietnamese translation of the *Analec̣ts* preserved the semantic distinctions of the Literary Sinitic negators through native syntactic mean; we do not see examples of prefixation (lexical negation) yet in the Vietnamese text. For example, the complex form *chặ̉ng có* ‘not have’ (a negator and an existential verb) was used for existential

negation and *chẳng phải* ‘not right’ (a negator and a predicate) was used for (verbless) nominal negation. Chinese syntactic negators, therefore, are consistently rendered using native Vietnamese syntactic negators—a significant observation, as later translations show the gradual emergence of Sino-Vietnamese negators.

This dominance of native Vietnamese negators during the 17th century points to a period where Vietnamese largely retained its own negation system, even as it borrowed Chinese vocabulary in other lexical domains. The findings illustrate the selective nature of linguistic adaptation, where core grammatical elements like negation were slower to absorb Sino-Vietnamese influences. In the following section, we turn to the 19th-century translation of the *Analects*, examining how the prefixes *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* began to be integrated into the Vietnamese language while continuing to coexist with native negators such as *chẳng*.

### 5.2. Distribution of Negators in the 19th-Century Translation

The data for the 19th-century translation reveal a mix of native and borrowed negators, as illustrated in Table 7:

**Table 7.** 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi* and their equivalents in the 19th-century Vietnamese translation of the *Analects*.

Literary Sinitic	Vietnamese Translation (19th Century)
不 <i>bù</i> (153)	<i>chẳng</i> (90), <i>không</i> (35), <i>bất</i> (2), <i>others</i> (26)
無 <i>wú</i> (38)	<i>chẳng</i> (11), <i>không</i> (14), <i>others</i> (13)
非 <i>fēi</i> (4)	<i>chưa</i> (1), <i>lắm</i> (1), <i>nào có</i> (1), no translation (1)

In the 19th-century Vietnamese translation of the *Analects*, we observe a more diverse distribution of negators compared to the 17th-century text. Native negators like *chẳng* continue to be dominant, appearing 90 times to translate 不 *bù* and 11 times to translate 無 *wú*, but we also see the increasing use of *không*, which appears 35 times to translate 不 *bù* and 14 times to translate 無 *wú*. This shift aligns with the historical trend of *không*, which is derived from Chinese 空 *kōng*, becoming more integrated into the Vietnamese language, particularly as a sentential negator. Recent studies have noted that *không* began to grammaticalize into a general negator in the late 17th century (Phan et al., 2024), and by the late 19th century, it started to rival or even replace *chẳng* as the dominant negator (Trinh et al., 2024).

Additionally, we observe that, among the three prefixes, *bất* is the first to appear in the Vietnamese translation, albeit in just two instances. Its early inclusion marks the initial stage of the integration of Sino-Vietnamese prefixes into Vietnamese negation. This reflects a gradual linguistic shift, where native negators like *chẳng* still dominated but were slowly accompanied by borrowed Sino-Vietnamese elements. The appearance of *bất* signals the beginning of increased lexical borrowing from Chinese, which would become more prominent in subsequent periods.

In the 19th-century translation, 不 *bù* is predominantly translated as sentential negators *chẳng* or *không*.

(23) 不 *bù* => *chẳng/không*

a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 15.21)

君子	矜	而	不	爭、
Quân tử	cãnh	nhi	<b>bất</b>	tranh.
gentleman	proud	but	NEG	contentious
群	而	不	黨、	
Quần	nhi	<b>bất</b>	đảng”.	
join	but	NEG	cliquish	

‘The gentleman is proud but not contentious. He joins with others but is not cliquish’.

b. Vietnamese translation (19th century)

馱	賢	嚴	吏	空	爭、
Người	hiền	ng nghiêm	lại	<b>không</b>	tranh,
person	gentle	proud	but	NEG	contentious
和			眾	拯	說
Hoà	nên	ưa	chúng	<b>chẳng</b>	bênh
join	then	like	group	NEG	incline to
					dua
					đòi,
					cliquish

‘The gentleman is proud but not contentious. He joins with others but is not cliquish’.

Having compared example (20) and example (23), we see that in the same Literary Sinitic sentence, 不 *bù* appeared twice and was translated as *chẳng* in both instances in the 17th-century translation, whereas in the 19th-century translation, one instance was rendered as *chẳng* and the other as *không*. The shift from the native sentential negator *chẳng* to the Chinese-derived sentential negator *không* suggests an increased adoption of Sino-Vietnamese lexical elements during the 19th century, although the chosen item does not match Chinese usage.

Another distinctive feature of the 19th-century translation, among the three bilingual texts under investigation, is the first appearance of one of the three Sino-Vietnamese prefixes. This is the earliest text where 不 *bù* is translated as *bất*, marking the initial stage of integrating these items into Vietnamese negation.

(24) 不 *bù* => *bất*

a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 19.3)

嘉	善	而	矜	不	能
gia	thiện	nhi	cãnh	<b>bất</b>	<b>năng</b>
applaud	good	but	sympathize	NEG	ability

‘He applauds good men and sympathizes with those who lack ability’.

b. Vietnamese translation (19th century)

嗜	馱	唯	卒	傷	台	不	才
Khen	người	giỏi	tốt	thương	thay	<b>bất</b>	<b>tài</b>
applaud	person	good	nice	sympathize	PRT	unable	

‘He applauds good men and sympathizes with those who lack ability’.

(25) 不 *bù* => *bất*

a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 17.21)

子	曰、	予	之	不	仁	也
Tử	viết:	“Dư	chi	<b>bất</b>	<b>nhân</b>	dã
Confucius	say	Yu	PRT	no	human	PRT

‘The Master said, Yu (Zai Wo) has no humaneness!’

b. Vietnamese translation (19th century)

咈	浪	予	意	罕	時	不	仁
Dạy	rằng	Dư	ấy	hãn	thì	<b>bất</b>	<b>nhân</b>
teach	that	Dư	that	clearly	TOP	unhuman	

‘The Master said, Yu (Zai Wo) has no humaneness!’

Interestingly, these two examples where 不 *bù* is translated as *bất* reveal distinct translation strategies: one slightly more innovative, and the other more conservative. In the first example (24), 不能 *bù néng*, which means ‘lacking ability’ in Literary Sinitic, is translated as *bất tài* in Vietnamese. While *bất tài* can still be understood as ‘lacking ability,’ it typically carries a stronger connotation of ‘incompetence’ or ‘lack of talent.’ This translation reflects a minor shift toward a more specific interpretation. In the second example (25), 不仁 *bù rén*, meaning ‘inhumane’ or ‘lacking benevolence,’ is translated as *bất nhân*, which is a direct and faithful reflection of the original. Here, the translator adheres closely to the source text, preserving the core meaning of the Confucian concept of 仁 *rén*, or ‘benevolence’ (Ivanhoe, 2000). Unlike the slight shift seen in the previous example, this translation remains conservative, ensuring that key philosophical terms retain their original sense and integrity. These two examples illustrate the early stages of the integration of *bất* into Vietnamese negation. In one case, as with *bất tài*, the translator makes subtle adjustments to fit Vietnamese usage, while in another, such as *bất nhân*, the original term is maintained. Together, these cases suggest that the appearance of *bất* in the 19th-century translation marks a gradual yet careful adoption of Sino-Vietnamese prefixes into the Vietnamese lexicon.

Similar to 不 *bù*, the negator 無 *wú* continues to be predominantly translated as *chẳng* (11 times) or *không* (14 times). However, we observe a more frequent use of *không* as the preferred translation for *vô*, reinforcing the trend of increased Sino-Vietnamese lexical borrowing in this period. This is consistent with recent studies on the grammaticalization path of *không* (Phan et al., 2024), which suggest that, before *không* assumed the role of a general negator in Vietnamese, it initially functioned as an existential negator meaning ‘not have’. In the following example from Chapter 17.23 of the *Analects*, 無 *wú* is translated as *không*, reinforcing this trend:

(26) 無 *wú* => *không*

a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 17.23)

君子	有	勇	而	無	義	爲亂
quân	hữu	dũng	nhi	<b>vô</b>	ngĩa.	vi loạn
tử						
gentleman	have	courage	but	NEG	rightness do	rebellious

‘A gentleman who possesses courage but lacks rightness will become rebellious’.

b. Vietnamese translation (19th century)

勇	麻	空	義	亂		苦	而	之
Dũng	mà	<b>không</b>	ngĩa	loàn	gây	khó		gì
courage	but	NEG	rightness	rebellious	cause	trouble		thing

‘A gentleman who possesses courage but lacks rightness will become rebellious’.

In the case of 非 *fēi*, the 19th-century translation shows a variety of renderings, including *chưa* ‘not yet’, *lầm* ‘wrong’, and *không có* ‘not have’, depending on the context.

(27) 非 *fēi* => *không có* ‘not have’

a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 15.28)

人	能	弘	道、	非	道	弘	人、
Nhân	năng	hoàng	đạo,	phi	đạo	hoàng	nhân
Person	can	enlarge	Way,	NEG	Way	enlarge	person

‘A person can enlarge the Way; it is not the case that the Way can enlarge a person’.

b.	Vietnamese translation (19th century)							
	馱	哈	駙	穰	道	常、		
	Người	hay	mở	rộng	đạo	thường,		
	person	can	open	large	Way	often		
	道	箕	芾	固	駙	芒	鄧	馱、
	Đạo	kia	<b>nào</b>	<b>có</b>	mở	mang	đặng	người,
	Way	DEM	not	have	open	PRT	can	person

‘A person can enlarge the Way; but the Way cannot enlarge a person’.

This variability may be influenced by the poetic nature of the text, which often allows for broader interpretation. The translator’s approach to 非 *fēi* seems more flexible, moving away from a strict adherence to uniform translation norms. This flexibility may reflect their efforts to convey the nuances of meaning and context, using different forms of negation depending on the specific situation.

Compared to the 17th-century translation, where the native sentential negator *chẳng* was overwhelmingly dominant and there was no sign of *bất*, *vô*, or *phi*, the 19th-century translation marks a transitional phase. A notable difference is the increased use of the Chinese-derived sentential negator *không*, especially in translating both 不 *bù* and 無 *wú*. This shift aligns with recent research on the development of *không*, which transitioned from an existential negator to a general negator (Phan et al., 2024). Additionally, the 19th-century translation introduces *bất* for the first time, signaling the early stages of integrating Sino-Vietnamese prefixes into the negation system.

Overall, the 19th-century translation reflects a period of transition in Vietnamese negation. Native negators like *chẳng* remained prominent, but the increasing use of *không* and the introduction of *bất* are indicative of a gradual integration of Sino-Vietnamese elements. In the following section, we explore the 21st-century translation of the *Analects* and how *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* have become more integrated into modern Vietnamese.

### 5.3. Distribution of Negators in the 21st-Century Translation

In contrast to earlier translations, the 21st-century version reflects a linguistic shift toward the frequent use of the Chinese derived *không* as the standard negator over the native Vietnamese *chẳng*.

As seen in Table 8, *không* has become the overwhelmingly preferred negator, translating 127 out of 153 instances of 不 *bù*, 27 out of 38 instances of 無 *wú*, and all 4 instances of 非 *fēi*. In comparison, *chẳng* plays a more limited role in this period, appearing in only 12 instances for 不 *bù* and 2 for 無 *wú*, a stark contrast with its prominence in earlier translations. This decline reflects a shift in usage patterns where *không* takes precedence, pushing *chẳng* into a more emphatic or non-standard role. This supports previous research on the grammaticalization of *không*, which became a standard negator by the late 19th century (Trinh et al., 2024). Below are examples in which 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi* are all translated as *không*.

(28)	不 <i>bù</i> => <i>không</i>				
a.	Literary Sinitic (Chapter 15.21)				
	君子	矜	而	不	爭、
	Quân tử	cãnh	nhi	<b>bất</b>	tranh.
	gentleman	proud	but	NEG	contentious
	群	而	不	黨、	
	Quần	nhi	<b>bất</b>	đảng”.	
	join	but	NEG	cliquish	

**Table 8.** 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi* and their equivalents in the 21st-century Vietnamese translation of the *Analects*.

Literary Sinitic	Vietnamese Translation (21st Century)
不 <i>bù</i> (153)	<i>không</i> (127), <i>chẳng</i> (12), <i>bất</i> (5), others (9)
無 <i>wú</i> (38)	<i>không</i> (27) (in which <i>không có</i> (9)), <i>chẳng</i> (2), <i>vô</i> (5), others (4)
非 <i>fēi</i> (4)	<i>không</i> (4) (in which <i>không phải</i> (3))

‘The gentleman is proud but not contentious. He joins with others but is not cliquish’.

b. Vietnamese translation (21th century)

Người quân tử	tự chủ bản thân,	giữ	quan điểm	nhưng		
CLF	control	hold	opinion	but		
gentleman	self					
<b>không</b>	tranh giành,	cãi cọ.				
not	fight	argue				
Hợp quần	với mọi người	nhưng	<b>không</b>	bè	phái	
join with	people	but	not	ally		

‘The gentleman is proud but not contentious. He joins with others but is not cliquish’.

(29) 無 *wú* => *không* or *không có* ‘not have’:

a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 17.23)

君子	有	勇	而	無	義	爲	亂
quân tử	hữu	dũng	nhì	<b>vô</b>	nghĩa	vi	loạn
gentleman	have	courage	but	NEG	rightness	do	rebellious

‘A gentleman who possesses courage but lacks rightness will become rebellious’.

b. Vietnamese translation (21th century)

Quân tử	có	dũng	mà	<b>không</b>	<b>có</b>	nghĩa
Gentleman	has	courage	but	NEG	have	rightness
thì	làm	loạn				
TOP	make	rebel				

‘A gentleman who possesses courage but lacks rightness will become rebellious’.

(30) 非 *fēi* => *không phải* ‘not right’:

a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 15.28)

人	能	弘	道、	非	道	弘	人、
Nhân	năng	hoàng	đạo,	phi	đạo	hoàng	nhân
Person	can	enlarge	Way,	NEG	Way	enlarge	person

‘A person can enlarge the Way; it is not the case that the Way can enlarge a person’.

b. Vietnamese translation (21th century)

Con	người	có thể	hoàng dương	đạo	chứ	<b>không</b>
CLF	person	CAN	enlarge	Way	but	<b>NOT</b>
<b>phải</b>	đạo lý	hoàng dương	cho	con	người	
<b>right</b>	Way	enlarge	for	CLF	person	

‘A person can enlarge the Way; it is not the case that the Way can enlarge a person’.

The 21st-century translation of the *Analects* exhibits a similar pattern to that of the 17th century, where Vietnamese mostly employed syntactic strategies rather than relying on lexical prefixation for negation. The key distinction, however, lies in the choice of the standard negator: while the 17th-century translation predominantly used *chẳng* to maintain the semantic distinctions of the Literary Sinitic negators, the 21st-century text continues this syntactic approach with *không* as the main negator. For example, in both periods, existential negation is expressed through the combination of a negator and an existential verb. In the 17th-century translation, this was typically rendered as *chẳng có* (‘not have’), as seen in example (21b), whereas in the 21st-century version, the same structure is realized as *không có*, as seen in example (29b). Similarly, for (verbless) nominal negation, the earlier translation used *chẳng phải* (‘not right’), as in (22b), which in the 21st-century translation becomes *không phải*, as in (30b). This suggests that, despite increased lexical borrowing from Chinese, Vietnamese uses the core grammatical strategies with compound structures like *không có* and *không phải*, allowing for precise differentiation between types of negation.

The increased appearance of Sino-Vietnamese prefixes, such as *bất* and *vô*, is also notable in this period. *bất* appears in five instances, and *vô* in five instances as well, marking their integration into the Vietnamese lexical negation system. Just as in the 19th-century translation, *bất* continues to appear, showcasing its role as a formal and fixed negator. However, while two of these instances were already present in the 19th-century translation, the 21st-century version introduces three more cases of *bất*. Two of these three retain the original lexical form of Literary Sinitic, such as *bất thiện* and *bất đồng*, while the third offers a more innovative translation: the Literary Sinitic *bất hiền* is rendered as *bất tiếu* in Vietnamese. For instance, in Chapter 16.11 of the Literary Sinitic text, 不善 *bù shàn* is translated as *bất thiện*:

(31) 不 *bù* => *bất*

a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 16.11)

見	不	善	如	探	湯	
kiến	<b>bất</b>	<b>thiện</b>	như	thám	thang	
see	NEG	good	as	explore	scalding	water

‘sees what is not good and acts as though he had put his hand in scalding water’.

b. Vietnamese translation (21th century)

thấy	điều	<b>bất</b>	<b>thiện</b>	chạy	như	tránh	nước	sôi
see	thing	NEG	good	run	as	avoid	water	boiling

‘sees what is not good and acts as though he had put his hand in scalding water’.

Similarly, in Chapter 15.39, 不 *bù* is translated as *bất đồng*:

(32) 不 *bù* => *bất*

a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 15.39)

道	不	同
Đạo	<b>bất</b>	<b>đồng</b>
way	NEG	same

‘your Way is not the same’.

b. Vietnamese translation (21th century)

Đạo lý	đã	<b>bất</b>	<b>đồng</b>
way	PST	NEG	same

‘your Way is not the same’

However, the translation becomes more innovative in Chapter 19.22. Instead of directly translating 不賢 *bù xián* ‘unworthy’ as *bất hiên*, the 21st-century translation uses *bất tiếu* (not worthy):

(33) 不 *bù* => *bất*

a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 19.22)							
賢	者	識	其	大	者、		
Hiên	giả	chí	kì	đại	giả,		
worthy	man	remember	PRT	essential	thing		
不	賢	者	識	其	小	者	
<b>bất</b>	<b>hiên</b>	giả,	chí	kì	tiểu	giả,	
NEG	worthy	man	remember	PRT	minor	thing	

‘worthy men remember the essentials and those of little worth remember the minor points’.

b. Vietnamese translation (21th century)

Bật	hiên	giả	nhớ	được	cái	lớn,	kẻ	<b>bất</b>
CLF	worthy	man	remember	CAN	CLF	big	man	NEG
<b>tiếu</b>	nhớ	được	cái	nhỏ.				
worthy	remember	CAN	CLF	small				

‘worthy men remember the essentials and those of little worth remember the minor points’.

This innovation highlights the growing flexibility of *bất* in the modern Vietnamese lexicon, reflecting both the preservation of classical forms and the creative use of new ones to adapt to contemporary linguistic norms.

In addition to the prefix *bất*, *vô* makes its debut in the 21st-century translation, appearing in five instances that underscore its role in formalizing lexical negation. Notably, *vô* did not appear in the 17th- and 19th-century translations, marking its emergence solely in the 21st-century version. Unlike *bất*, which shows some innovative usages in Vietnamese, *vô* remains closely aligned with its original Literary Sinitic form, without deviations from the classical meanings.

In the following examples, *vô* consistently retains its original sense of existential negation without creative reinterpretation or novel usage:

(34) 無 *wú* => *vô*

a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 15.4)								
無	爲	而	治	者	其	舜	也	與
<b>vô</b>	<b>vi</b>	nhì	trị	giả	kỳ	Thuấn	dã	du?
NEG	action	but	rule	person	that	Shun	PRT	PRT

‘Of those who ruled through inaction, surely Shun was one?’

b. Vietnamese translation (21th century)

Người	thực hiện	nền	chính trị	<b>vô vi</b>	mà
person	carry out	CLF	politics	inaction	but
đất nước	thịnh trị	có lẽ	là	Thuấn	chẳng
country	peaceful	perhaps	is	Shun	PRT

‘Of those who ruled through inaction but the country was peaceful, was Shun the one?’

In this instance, *vô vi* is directly retained in the Vietnamese translation, preserving the original term from Literary Sinitic.

- (35) 無 *wú* => *vô*  
 a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 15.6)  

邦	無	道	如	矢
Bang	<b>vô</b>	<b>đạo</b>	như	thì.
state	NEG	way	as	arrow

‘The state was without the Way, he was straight as an arrow’.

b. Vietnamese translation (21th century)  

Nước	<b>vô</b>	<b>đạo</b>	ông	cũng	thẳng	như	tên
state	lack	way	PRN	still	straight	as	arrow

‘The state was without the Way, he was straight as an arrow’.  
 Again, the phrase *vô đạo* is preserved directly from the classical text.

(36) 無 *wú* => *vô*  
 a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 15.3)  

終	夜	不	寢	以	思
chung	dạ	bất	tâm	đĩ	tư
all	night	NEG	sleep	in order to	think
無	益				
<b>vô</b>	<b>ích</b>				
no	use				

‘and all night without sleeping in order to think. It was no use’.

b. Vietnamese translation (21th century)  

Trọn	đêm	không	ngủ	để	nghĩ
all	night	NEG	sleep	in order to	think
nhưng	đều	<b>vô ích</b>			
but	all	no use			

‘and all night without sleeping in order to think. It was no use’  
 In this case, *vô ích* maintains its classical meaning of ‘no use’.

(37) 無 *wú* => *vô*  
 a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 16.2)  

天下	無	道
Thiên hạ	<b>vô</b>	<b>đạo</b>
world	NEG	way

‘When the Way no longer prevails in the world’.

b. Vietnamese translation (21th century)  

Thiên hạ	<b>vô đạo</b>
world	lack way

‘When the Way no longer prevails in the world’.  
 Here, *vô đạo* once again aligns perfectly with its Literary Sinitic form.

(38) 無 *wú* => *vô*  
 a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 17.24)  

惡	勇	而	無	禮	者
ố	dũng	nhi	<b>vô</b>	<b>lễ</b>	giả
hate	courage	but	no	ritual	person

‘He hates courage that ignores ritual decorum’.

b. Vietnamese translation (21st century)

Ghét	kẻ	có	dũng	mà	<b>vô lễ</b>
hate	person	have	courage	but	no ritual

‘He hates courage that forgets ritual decorum’.

In this final example, *vô lễ* is faithfully translated as ‘no ritual’ in Vietnamese, closely following the classical meaning. The consistent appearance of *vô* in these examples demonstrates its seamless integration into the Vietnamese lexicon, with no notable departures from its original Literary Sinitic usage. Unlike *bất*, which sometimes exhibits innovative translation choices, *vô* adheres closely to its classical roots, highlighting its stability as a negation prefix in modern Vietnamese.

Unlike *bất* and *vô*, *phi* does not appear in any of the three Vietnamese translations analyzed in this study. In the 21st-century translation, 非 *fēi* is consistently translated as *không*, with *không phải*, a common construction in modern Vietnamese that negates the truth of a statement or identity being the most commonly used form. This indicates a clear preference in Vietnamese for syntactic negation over lexical negation when considering (verbless) nominal negation constructions. Rather than employing a Sino-Vietnamese prefix equivalent to 非 *fēi*, such as *phi*, Vietnamese translators favor the use of *không phải*, a syntactic structure that aligns with the native patterns of negation, particularly in (verbless) nominal negative contexts. This aligns with a trend in Vietnamese to adapt and integrate negation strategies through syntactic combinations rather than adopting all lexical prefixes from Literary Sinitic.

(39) 非 *fēi* => *không phải* ‘not right’:

a. Literary Sinitic (Chapter 15.1)

對	曰	然、	非	與、
Đối	viết:	“Nhiên.	<b>Phi</b>	đư?” <sup>5</sup>
reply	say	yes	NEG	Q

‘Zigong replied, Yes, isn’t that so?’

b. Vietnamese translation (21st century)

Đáp	rằng:	“Vâng,	chẳng lẽ	<b>không</b>	<b>phải</b>	ư?”
reply	COMP	Yes	perhaps	NEG	right	Q

‘Zigong replied, Yes, isn’t that so?’

The 21st-century translation of the *Analects* marks a significant shift in the Vietnamese negation system, with *không* firmly establishing itself as the dominant negator. Additionally, there is a notable increase in the use of *bất* and *vô* reflecting broader ‘linguistic modernization’ trends in Vietnam. This shift aligns with the larger cultural and linguistic modernization of East Asia, heavily influenced by Japan’s transmission of neologisms made of Chinese morphemes through reformist writings during the 20th century (Sinh, 1993).

In this context, the integration of *bất* and *vô* into formal expressions, alongside the creative flexibility seen in the translation of *bất tiếu* ‘not worthy’, highlights the evolving role of Sino-Vietnamese prefixes in modern Vietnamese.

This 21st-century shift contrasts with earlier periods, such as the 17th-century translation, where *chẳng* overwhelmingly dominated, and the 19th century, where *không* and *chẳng* coexisted more equally. The gradual rise of *không* as the standard negator underscores the ongoing influence of Sino-Vietnamese elements in the language. The increased presence of *bất* and *vô* in the 21st century demonstrates the culmination of these linguistic trends, showing how Vietnamese has balanced the integration of Chinese lexical features with its own syntactic structures.

In summary, the 21st-century translation exemplifies the historical evolution of Vietnamese negation, with *không* taking precedence while *bất* and *vô* gain prominence in specific contexts. This evolution is part of a broader cultural shift in East Asia, driven by modernization and the transmission of modernized Chinese linguistic features (Sinh, 1993; Alves, 2017).

#### 5.4. Evidence from Earlier Texts

As highlighted earlier, the 17th-century Vietnamese translations of the *Analects* relied almost exclusively on native Vietnamese negators like *chẳng*, with no evidence of *bất*, *vô*, or *phi*. This pattern is consistent across earlier bilingual texts, suggesting a strong reliance on native Vietnamese negators in formal translations. For instance, in the *Tân biên Truyền kỳ mạn lục tăng bổ giải âm tập chú* 新編傳奇漫錄增補解音集註 (*Interpretation of Legendary Tales: Newly Edited Collection with Supplementary Explanations and Pronunciation Annotations*), (late 16th to 17th century), the translation of 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi* similarly utilized native negators such as *chẳng*, *chăng*, and *chớ*.

As shown in Table 9, the 16th- to 17th-century Vietnamese translations predominantly employed native sentential negators without integrating Sino-Vietnamese lexical prefixes. This reliance on native structures, especially for negation, persisted in earlier texts, indicating a gradual and selective integration of Sino-Vietnamese elements into the language. The transition to using prefixes such as *bất* and *vô* would not occur until the 19th and 20th centuries, suggesting that Vietnamese language and translation practices initially remained insulated from external lexical influences in the domain of negation.

**Table 9.** 不 *bù*, 無 *wú*, and 非 *fēi* and their equivalents in the late 16th-century–17th-century Vietnamese.

Literary Sinitic	Vietnamese Translation (Late 16th–17th Century)
不 <i>bù</i> (563)	<i>chẳng</i> (558), <i>chớ</i> (5)
無 <i>wú</i> (95)	<i>chẳng</i> (92), <i>chăng</i> (3)
非 <i>fēi</i> (69)	<i>chẳng</i> (44), <i>chớ</i> (25)

(Washizawa, 2019a, pp. 151–157)

By the 20th century, the rise of the sentential negator *không* and the emergence of the negative prefixes *bất* and *vô* reflect broader shifts in the intellectual and linguistic landscape of Vietnam. These shifts align with the country’s ‘modernization’ efforts, which were significantly influenced by Chinese and Japanese intellectual movements, as well as by European colonialism. As noted by Sinh (1993), the reforms in Japan during the Meiji period played a crucial role in disseminating modernized Chinese-character-based vocabulary across East Asia, facilitating the eventual integration of Sino-Vietnamese elements, including *bất* and *vô*, into the Vietnamese lexicon. The literacy reforms and educational movements of the 20th century, particularly the promotion of the *Quốc ngữ* script, further accelerated the standardization of the Vietnamese language. This standardization allowed for greater integration of Sino-Vietnamese prefixes into formal, academic, and philosophical texts. These reforms not only improved access to education but also reinforced the use of prefixes like *bất* and *vô* in domains where precision and formality were required.

By the 21st century, *bất* and *vô* had become firmly established in formal Vietnamese, particularly in academic and philosophical discourse. This is evident in modern translations of the *Analects*, where these prefixes appear alongside *không*, which had by then become the dominant negator for sentential negation. The growing prominence of *bất* and *vô*

underscores the increasing formalization and modernization of Vietnamese in intellectual contexts, influenced by East Asian linguistic reforms in the early 20th century (Hashimoto, 1978; Alves, 2017; Takahashi, 2022). The integration of Sino-Vietnamese prefixes into the modern lexicon reflects both Vietnam's efforts to 'modernize' its language and educational system and the external influences from Chinese and Japanese reformists. Despite the increasing presence of *bất* and *vô*, however, *không* remains the dominant negator, highlighting a balance between retaining native linguistic structures and incorporating new Sino-Vietnamese elements, and a division of labor between syntactic negation and lexical negation. This gradual yet dynamic evolution demonstrates the adaptability of the Vietnamese language in response to both internal and external changes.

## 6. Discussion

This study has examined the development and integration of the Sino-Vietnamese prefixes *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* within the Vietnamese language, using a unique corpus of bilingual translations of the *Analects* from the 17th, 19th, and 21st centuries. By analyzing these texts, we have traced how these prefixes entered the Vietnamese language and interacted with sentential negators like *chẳng* and *không*. The shifts observed over these three centuries highlight both the resilience of native Vietnamese syntactic structures and the gradual incorporation of Sino-Vietnamese lexical elements.

### 6.1. Comparison of Negation Across Three Periods

A comparative analysis of the three translations spanning over three centuries reveals a dynamic evolution in how negation has been handled in Vietnamese. Each period represents a distinct phase in the adaptation and integration of Sino-Vietnamese elements into the negation system of the language.

#### 6.1.1. The 17th Century: Dominance of Native Negators

In the 17th century, the Vietnamese translation of the *Analects* overwhelmingly relied on native negators, particularly *chẳng*. The absence of the Sino-Vietnamese prefixes *bất*, *vô*, or *phi* during this period indicates that Vietnamese was largely resistant to lexical borrowing in the domain of negation. Native constructions like *chẳng có* 'not have' for existential negation and *chẳng phải* 'not right' for (verbless) nominal negation maintained the semantic distinctions of Literary Sinitic negators through syntactic, rather than lexical, means. The reliance on these native forms suggests a period where the Vietnamese language favored its own grammatical structures over borrowed ones, even though other areas of the lexicon had already incorporated Chinese vocabulary.

#### 6.1.2. The 19th Century: Transitional Phase

The 19th-century translation of the *Analects* marks a clear transition in the Vietnamese negation system. While native negators such as *chẳng* continued to dominate, *không*—a Chinese-derived sentential negator—began to appear more frequently, particularly for translating 不 *bù* and 無 *wú*. This shift aligns with historical linguistic studies that identify the grammaticalization of *không* as a general negator (Washizawa, 2019b; Phan et al., 2024; Trinh et al., 2024). The 19th century also saw the first instances of the Sino-Vietnamese prefix *bất*, signaling the early stages of its integration into the Vietnamese negation system. However, *bất* only appeared in two instances, one of which maintained a conservative translation (e.g., *bất nhân*), while the other reflected a more innovative use (e.g., *bất tài*). The usage of *bất* remained limited to formal or philosophical contexts, reflecting a cautious and gradual borrowing process. This transitional phase marked a shift in Vietnamese negation, where native structures were slowly complemented by borrowed Sino-Vietnamese elements, leading to a more hybrid system that combined both native and borrowed forms.

### 6.1.3. The 21st Century: Modernization and Integration

The 21st century marks a significant shift in the Vietnamese negation system, with *không* emerging as the dominant sentential negator across most contexts. Unlike the 17th century, where *chẳng* dominated, and the 19th century, where *không* and *chẳng* coexisted, the modern translation of the *Analects* shows a clear preference for *không*. In this period, *bất* and *vô* also appear more frequently, reflecting their growing role in formal and academic discourse. While the innovation seen in the earlier usage of *bất* continued, *vô* maintained a more conservative usage, remaining closely aligned with its original Literary Sinitic meaning. Interestingly, *phi* is still absent in the 21st-century translation. Instead, 非 *fēi* is consistently translated as *không phải* ('not right'), reflecting Vietnamese's continued preference for syntactic negation over the adoption of a lexical negator such as *phi*. This suggests that despite increased borrowing of Sino-Vietnamese prefixes in other areas, Vietnamese retains a syntactic strategy for negation in copular constructions, demonstrating the resilience of native grammatical patterns.

### 6.2. Linguistic Modernization and Broader Cultural Context

The increasing integration of Sino-Vietnamese prefixes like *bất* and *vô* in the 21st century reflects broader cultural and linguistic modernization in East Asia. As Sinh (1993) noted, Japan's Meiji-era reforms played a pivotal role in transmitting modernized Chinese vocabulary across East Asia, influencing countries like Vietnam. The rise of Sino-Vietnamese prefixes in Vietnamese texts, particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries, mirrors these larger regional shifts toward linguistic and intellectual modernization.

The promotion of the *Quốc ngữ* script during the 20th century also played a critical role in the standardization of the Vietnamese language. This increased literacy and educational reform not only made the language more accessible but also facilitated the integration of Sino-Vietnamese elements like *bất* and *vô* into formal contexts. As Vietnam engaged more deeply with modern Chinese and Japanese intellectual traditions, these prefixes became more embedded in the lexicon, particularly in legal, academic, and philosophical discourse.

Despite this growing presence, the dominance of *không* as the general sentential negator suggests that the Vietnamese language has balanced external influences with a preservation of native structures. While prefixes like *bất* and *vô* have found their place in formal contexts, *không* remains the most versatile and widely used negator, illustrating the selective nature of Vietnamese in the adoption of Chinese items.

### 6.3. The Role of our Unique Corpus and Future Research Directions

The unique bilingual corpus of the *Analects* translations, spanning three centuries, offers invaluable insights into the evolution of negation in Vietnamese. It provides a rare opportunity to trace how Vietnamese has integrated Sino-Vietnamese prefixes into its language, alongside native syntactic strategies. This corpus allows for a deeper understanding of the interplay between borrowed lexical elements and native grammatical structures, shedding light on the complexities of linguistic adaptation in Vietnam.

However, more research is needed to address key questions that this study has raised:

- (i) When did the first compounds involving *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* appear in Vietnamese? While we have identified their early usage in the 19th century, understanding the precise origins of these compounds and their spread across different text types could further illuminate the process of Sino-Vietnamese lexical integration.
- (ii) What are the possible word classes for these compounds, and do they behave syntactically like their counterparts in Chinese? Further research should explore how these

compounds function across various syntactic contexts in Vietnamese and whether they mirror Chinese structures or diverge in significant ways.

Expanding the corpus to include non-philosophical genres from the same periods would provide a broader picture of how Sino-Vietnamese prefixes were adopted across different domains. Additionally, further exploration of literacy movements and educational reforms, particularly the influence of Japan and China in transmitting modernized vocabulary, could offer deeper insights into the cultural factors driving these linguistic shifts.

## 7. Conclusions

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of negation in Vietnamese across three centuries, tracing the gradual integration of Sino-Vietnamese lexical prefixes *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* alongside sentential syntactic negators such as *chẳng* and *không*. The findings highlight a slow but steady shift toward incorporating Sino-Vietnamese elements into the language, particularly in formal and academic contexts. However, the preservation of native syntactic structures underscores the balance Vietnam has struck between borrowing external linguistic elements in the lexicon, while maintaining its own native constructions in syntax.

The unique corpus of the *Analects* translations has offered a rare glimpse into this linguistic evolution, providing a valuable resource for future research. By examining how negation has shifted over time in Vietnamese, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex processes of language contact, adaptation, and modernization in Sinospheric East Asia. The selective integration of Sino-Vietnamese elements like *bất*, *vô*, and *phi* into the modern Vietnamese lexicon underscores the dynamic nature of language contact and the complex processes through which languages evolve over time.

Documents investigated in the paper

Luận ngữ ước giải 論語約解 [*Concise Interpretation to the Analects*], 17th century, anonymous, written in Nôm, archived of Institute of Sino-Nom Studies, call number AB.270/3, Romanized transliterated by T. C. Nguyễn (2009, manuscript).

Tự Đức thánh chế Luận ngữ thích nghĩa ca 嗣德聖制論語釋義歌 [*Tự Đức imperial explanation of the Analects*], 19th century, by Emperor Tự Đức (1828–1883), written in Nôm, archived at the Institute of Sino-Nom Studies, call number A.186/1-2.

Khổng phu tử và Luận ngữ [*Confucius and the Analects*], 21st century, by Phạm (2004), written in Romanized Quốc ngữ, Hanoi: National Political Publisher.

Tân biên Truyền kỳ mạn lục tăng bổ giải âm tập chú 新編傳奇漫錄增補解音集註 (*Interpretation of Legendary Tales: Newly Edited Collection with Supplementary Explanations and Pronunciation Annotations*), 16th–17th century, anonymous, written in Nôm, archived of Institute of Sino-Nom Studies, call number HN.257 and HN.258, Romanized transliterated by Q. H. Nguyễn (2001), *Truyền kỳ mạn lục giải âm*, Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing house.

Đại từ điển tiếng Việt [*Great Dictionary of Vietnamese*], compiled by N. Y. Nguyễn (1999). Ho Chi Minh City: Culture and Information Publisher.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In perfect contexts, *chua* serves as the negator. See Trinh (2005) and Phan (2023) for the distinction between *không* and *chua*.
- <sup>2</sup> T. C. Nguyễn (1979) posits that during the 8th and 9th centuries, the Chang’an dialect of Chinese was taught in Jiaozhou/Giao Châu (modern northern Vietnam) as a foreign language. Phan (2013) further suggests that during this period, in addition to the local language spoken by the indigenous population (Vietnamese), there existed a contact language referred to as *Annamese Middle Chinese*. Rather than a mere contact variety, *Annamese Middle Chinese* was the home dialect of urban Sinitic communities in the Red River Delta, linked to other Chinese dialect islands in Guangxi and Hunan. After Vietnam’s independence, these Sinitic settlers gradually shifted to speaking Annamese natively—imbuing it with heavy Sinicisms (Phan & de Sousa, 2022; Phan, 2025). This linguistic variety was part of a broader Chinese dialectal continuum, stretching from Chang’an to Giao Châu. Despite differences in their hypotheses, both scholars agree on the influence of the phonological system of the Chang’an dialect of the Tang dynasty in shaping the Sino-Vietnamese reading system (*Hán-Việt*) in Vietnam.
- <sup>3</sup> Translated texts such as our *Analects* versions offer a valuable, diachronic parallel between source and target, enabling us to observe negator choices in uniform contexts and tie shifts to specific periods. Yet we recognize that translators’ aims—balancing literal fidelity against target-language fluency—may influence negator distribution. To separate translation conventions from genuine linguistic change, future work should draw on non-translated materials (official edicts, literary prose, folk tales, modern journalism) as well as both Sino-Vietnamese and purely native texts. A broad, multi-genre diachronic investigation will provide a fuller understanding of how *bất-*, *vô-*, and *phi-* have developed in Vietnamese. We leave this extension to future research. We are grateful to a reviewer for drawing attention to this important consideration.
- <sup>4</sup> The Chinese character 陳 has two pronunciations: *trận/zhèn* (departing tone 去), meaning battle, and *trần/chén* (level tone 平), meaning the Trần/Chén family.
- <sup>5</sup> In (39a), 非 behaves as a sentential negator—essentially a verb meaning ‘not’—able to stand alone and take the interrogative particle 與. Unlike the prefixal use of 非 in compounds such as *phi-pháp* (<非法), where 非 is bound to the noun 法, this verbal use was never adopted into Vietnamese. We thank a reviewer for discussing this point.

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