Bah, Humbug! Some extemporaneous thoughts on the past, present and future of T(ense) and C in Vietnamese

Nigel Duffield, Konan University

Ex tempore 16th century < *ex tempore* (out of time)

Abstract

In this lecture, I use Charles Dickens' novella, *A Christmas Carol*, as the frame through which to explore the expression of tense, aspect and modality both in Vietnamese, and in formal generative analyses. Perhaps unexpectedly, it will be suggested that traditional claims concerning Vietnamese grammar, *viz*., that Vietnamese does not express tense grammatically, are probably correct. However, though this conclusion necessitates revisions to many current generative analyses of Vietnamese phrase-structure, it does not undermine the leading idea that Vietnamese grammar is constrained by the same principles of grammatical organization that apply to English or German or Japanese syntax: in every natural language, structural well-formedness depends on the interaction between thematic arguments and the grammatical features contained in at least two functional categories beyond the predicate phrase. Yet the terms T and C are probably misnomers (the title of this conference notwithstanding). Given the Vietnamese facts, I speculate on what the correct labels might be, leaving the empirical work for future research.

Introduction
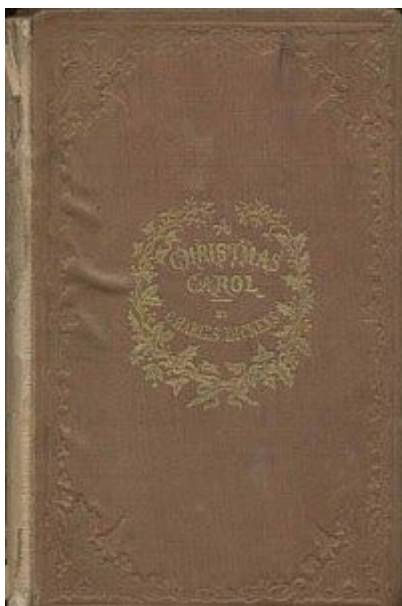
Charles Dickens' story *A Christmas Carol* concerns a certain Ebenezer Scrooge, a misanthrope and miser, a man whose name has become synonymous with mean-spirited avarice. It is Christmas Eve, and Scrooge is begrudging the time off he must give to his employees, in particular, to his modest clerk Bob Cratchitt, whose crippled child, Tiny Tim, is gravely ill for want of medicine and decent food. That evening, Scrooge has a vision, in which he is haunted by the ghost of his former business partner, Joseph Marley. Marley sends Scrooge three other spirits — the *Ghosts of Christmas Past*, *Christmas Present*, and *Christmas Yet-to-Come* — to show him the life he has lived, the lives of those around him, and the unhappy future and cursed after-life that awaits him, if he does not change his ways. The terrifying experience causes Scrooge to repent, and to begin to redeem himself through acts of generosity and public spiritedness.

In this presentation, I will use Dickens' story to reflect on how tense and speech act information is expressed in Vietnamese, as well as on how these facts have been – *are*, and *could be* – characterized in generative descriptions of Vietnamese grammar. As far as is

possible, my aim here is to sketch an approach in which these two concerns – language description and formal theory – are considered separately from one another; where they connect, the goal is to make their interaction mutually beneficial and transformative.

I understand that some audience members are sceptical of generativist approaches to Vietnamese grammar, which they may regard as at best simplistic and derivative; in the worst case, they may consider advocates of generative grammar arrogant or even imperialistic (imposing a foreign hierarchical model antithetical to the spirit of the language, and careless with the data). I share much of that scepticism and concern, especially after the experience of co-editing the recent Benjamins volume *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vietnamese Linguistics*, which really *is* interdisciplinary, unlike many other volumes with this term in the title. Nevertheless, my intention is to try to persuade the sceptics that the principles of generative syntax – when used as a set of heuristics, rather than as articles of faith – can allow for insights that enrich scholarly inquiry into Vietnamese, instead of replacing it. Like Ebenezer Scrooge, generative grammar can be redeemed. At least, I hope so.

Before meeting our ghosts, it is useful to have some operational definition of tense. In what follows, I'll use the term <u>tense</u> to refer strictly to the grammatical representation of time infomation;[1] specifically, following Klein (1994), tense is understood in terms of a set of relationships between *two temporal arguments,* TU (Time of Utterance) and TT (Topic Time), and *one of three* abstract spatio-temporal predicates {INCL, AFTER, BEFORE}. On this construal tense does *not* refer to the grammatical representation of event structure – usually subsumed under the term Aspect (grammatical and lexical aspect both) – nor to temporal relations in non-indicative, modal contexts.

Klein's construal of past, present and future tenses is schematized in Table 1.

	Schema	Tense	Example
1.	TU AFTER TT	past tense	John *was* in the garden.
2.	TU INCL TT	present tense	There *is* a book on the table; She *has* been waiting for hours.
3.	TU BEFORE TT	future tense	I will see John tomorrow.

Table 1. Klein's construal of Tense (1994, 1998); cf. *Wikipedia.org*

Notice that this formalism is basically conceptual or semantic, rather than being syntactic in nature: while it characterizes how utterances are grammatically *interpreted*, it makes no claims at all concerning how – or indeed *whether* – these interpretations are syntactically encoded.

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[1] English has the virtue of distinguishing the term 'tense' (a grammatical concept) from time itself. This helps to avoid some of the confusion surrounding the topic, in contrast to French, for example (*les temps du passé*; see below.) But not all confusion is avoided: in English, for instance, the (simple) present tense is amost never used by native speakers when speaking of current events or situations; also, as will be claimed later, English does not have a future tense at all.

On Syntactic Tense

For the last 20 years at least, the conventional generative analysis of a sentence such as *John was in the garden* has been as in Fig. 1, which explicitly assigns to the node occupied by auxiliary *was* the label T (for Tense):
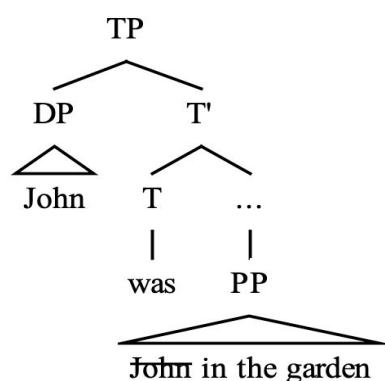
(1)   John was in the garden.

Fig. 1. Tense in current generative descriptions (default)

There are three points to observe immediately about this phrase-marker. The first is that the position occupied by the tensed copula *was* has not always been identified with tense: in *Syntactic Structures* (Chomsky 1957: 38 *et seq.*), for example, tense morphology (an expansion of C) was only one of several possible expansions of the heterogenous category AUX – the sole `functional category' in early phrase-structure analyses (see Fig. 2a below); in *Lectures on Government & Binding* (Chomsky 1981), AUX/C is relabelled 'INFL', reflecting the morphosyntactic concerns of GB derivations; meanwhile, S' (CP) has assumed some of the modality features previously located in (or near) C/INFL; see Fig 2b. Subsequent developments have seen the further fractionation of INFL, so that in some analyses a multiplicity of functional heads are now competing for the title 'head of S'; tense is only one candidate, arguably less promising than some others. See, for instance Fig 2c., from Duffield (2007, 2013).

Fig 2a. Tense in *Syntactic Structures* (Chomsky 1957:38)

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Figure 2b. Tense in *Lectures on Government and Binding* (Chomsky 1981)
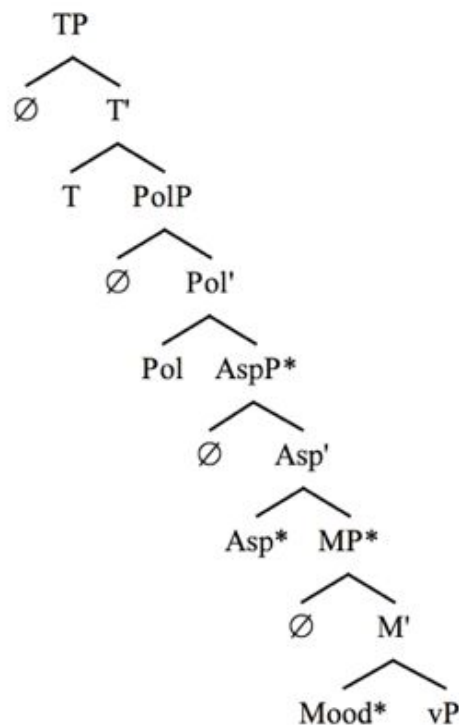
Fig. 2c. Tense in Cartographic Minimalism (*cf.* Duffield 2013a)

A second point to observe is that the position occupied by auxiliary *was* is a derived position (in most current analyses): the copular verb is analyzed as having been raised from some lower position; by hypothesis, this is the same position occupied by its non-finite allomorph *be*. This can be seen by comparing Fig. 1 with Fig 3a below. Ironically perhaps, the only elements that are regularly assumed to be base-generated in this higher position – namely, the non-finite 'auxiliary' *to* in (3a) and the untensed modal auxiliaries (*can, may, might, could*, etc) in (3b) – are those that never inflect for tense (or agreement).

And, for reasons I'll come to presently, it seems likely that modal auxiliaries have also moved from a lower position, but the point should still be clear: for much of the time in English, the 'T' node is occupied by inherently tenseless elements.

4

(3a)

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                        C'
                   ┌─────┴─────┐
                   C           TP
                   │      ┌─────┴─────┐
                  for    NP           T'
                        ╱──╲     ┌─────┴─────┐
                       John     T           …
                                │           │
                          [-TNS/-AGR]       VP
                                │           │
                               to           V'
                                       ┌────┴────┐
                                       V         PP
                                       │       ╱───╲
                                       be   in the garden
```

(3b)

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                     TP
                ┌─────┴─────┐
               NP           T''
              ╱──╲     ┌─────┴─────┐
             John     T           …
                      │           │
                [-TNS/-AGR]       VP
                      │           │
                    might         V'
                              ┌────┴────┐
                              V         PP
                              │       ╱───╲
                              be   in the garden
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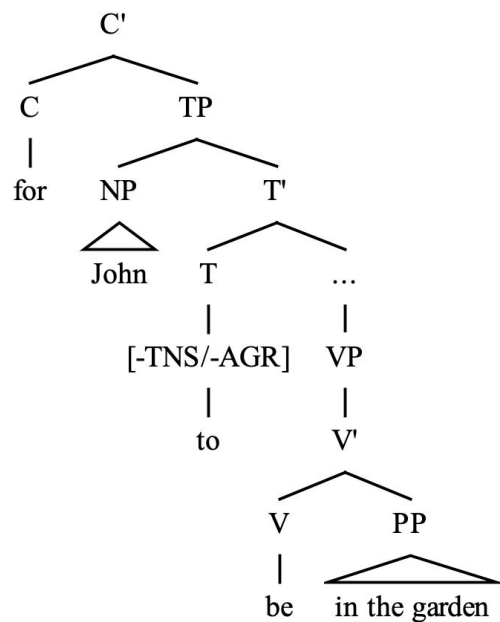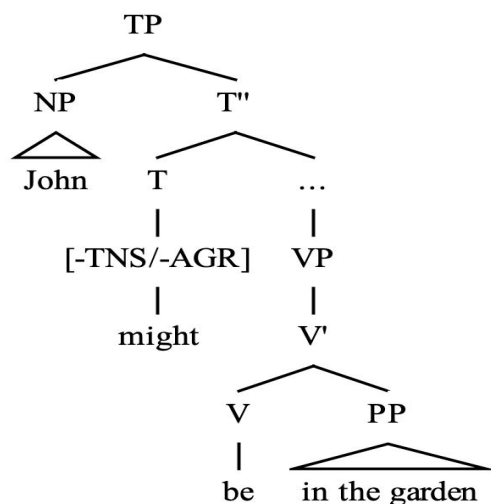
Some evidence that English clauses headed by modal auxiliaries are indeed tenseless (though still finite) is offered by the *wh*-island extraction data in (4) below. As is well known, extraction from embedded questions is sensitive to whether the clause is tensed or untensed (*cf*. Chomsky 1973: 'Tensed-S Condition'). Kanno & Nomura (2012)'s paradigm, reproduced in (4), shows that clauses containing modal auxiliaries can be extracted from just as readily as non-finite clauses, implying that they are indeed untensed.

(4)   a.   *What do you wonder [how he cooked ~~what~~] ?
              b.   ?What do you wonder [how to cook ~~what~~] ?
              c.   ?What do you wonder [how you should cook ~~what~~]?[2]

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[2] Adapted from Matsumoto (2009:117).

A final point to consider before turning to Vietnamese is that there exist several constructions in English in which T appears not to be projected – or at least is radically empty - but where there is nevertheless clear distributional evidence of higher functional projections within the clause. These contexts include the subjunctive clauses in (5), and, most tellingly perhaps, the imperative clauses in (6): here, the Early Modern English and contemporary Belfast English examples – varieties in which the addressee subject may be overt – show that the imperative raises to the left of this subject noun-phrase; so that even if one assumes that the subject remains *in situ*, the imperative (stem) must occupy a position outside of the thematic verb-phrase:

(5)   a.   The boss insisted [that the strike leaders not be at the meeting].
          b.   She insisted [that *they* not be present.]
          c.   They recommended [that *he* not return to work until fully fit.]

(6)   a.   And thou, Solomon my son, know *thou* the God of thy father, (KJB 1Chr. 28 9)
          b.   Look *thou* but sweet/And I am proof against their enmity (Shakespeare, R&J II, 2)
          c.   Do *you(s)* your homework! (Belfast English; *cf.* Henry 1995).

All of the above considerations tend toward the conclusion that T is not the most suitable label for the 'head of S' projection. Therefore, pending further investigation, let's re-label T as α (on the further understanding that α – like Chomsky's C node in Syntactic Structures – may be a cover term for an extended set of possible expansions $\{ \alpha: \alpha_1... \alpha_2... \alpha_n \}$). What this means for syntactic analyses is that a commitment to α^* entails no commitment to the idea that tense is structurally represented in Vietnamese clauses – or in all English ones, come to that.

Tense in Vietnamese

Let's turn now now to the question of whether or not preverbal auxiliaries in Vietnamese express tense, keeping in mind that this is now independent of the question is whether *the-category-formerly-known-as-T(P)* is structurally represented.

I'll begin with examination of a short article by Lo-Cicero (2001), whose chief merit, *si l'on peut dire ainsi*, is to demonstrate how *not* to do comparative syntax: instead of using the contrasts between Vietnamese and her "theoretical donor language" – French, in this case – to eludicate or revise theoretical concepts, Lo-Cicero proceeds to jam Vietnamese morphemes into a French categorial template; furthermore, a template that is based on traditional grammatical categories, rather than on the dynamics of Modern French grammar. Nevertheless, Lo-Cicero's attempt to fit a 'square peg into a round hole' is useful in framing the problem, and in providing an empirical starting point.[3]

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[3] In fairness to the author, Lo-Cicero's main concern seems to be to address the problem of translation between French and Vietnamese: in that context, her claims make more sense. (So, for instance her assertion thjat '"đã" exprime les temps du passé…' could reasonably be taken to mean that "đã" expresses [in Vietnamese translations] what is usually conveyed using *'les temps du passé'*

Lo-Cicero writes (2001: 7): *"La correspondance des temps verbaux du vietnamien aux Français [sic], si l'on peut dire ainsi, est simple d'une manière générale: "đã" exprime les temps du passé, "đang" — ou sans "đang" — le présent, et "sẽ" le futur, ces termes précédent les verbes vietnamiens. Pour mettre en valeur le moment de l'action, la langue vietnamienne se sert donc de termes ou marqueurs comme "đang, đã, sẽ."*

As evidence for her claims, Lo-Cicero uses Vietnamese examples based on translations of French literary texts, including those in (7)-(9) below. Here, the examples and French equivalents are Lo-Cicero's; the glosses and English translations are mine: NGD.[4]

(7)   a.   Hôm nay, tôi viết tiếp   lá thư tôi *đã* viết cách đây hai ngày. [Lo-C: 5]
                 today   I   write continue letter I ant write from here two days
                 'Today I resumed writing the letter that I was writing two days ago.'

                 ('Il y a deux jours, j'en étais resté là de ma lettre. Je la reprends.')

       b.   Tôi *đã* sống nhiều ở nhà   những người lớn. Tôi *đã* nhìn thấy họ rất gần.
                 I   ant live much be house sev. person big. I ant see   prn very near
                 'I have lived a lot in the houses of important people. I have seen them up close.'

                 ('J'ai beaucoup vécu chez les grandes personnes. Je les ai vu de très près.')

(8)   a.   Bức   trang vẽ hình một con rắn   *đang* nuốt   một con thú dữ. [Lo-C: 6]
                 picture draw appear   one cls snake PROG swallow one cls animal wild
                 'The picture showed a snake swallowing a wild animal.'

                 ('Ça représentait un serpent qui avalait un fauve.')

       b.   Nó vẽ   một con trăn *đang* tiêu   hóa một con voi.
                 prn draw one cls boa prog digest one cls elephant
                 'He was drawing a boa constrictor digesting an elephant.'

                 ('Il représentait un serpent boa qui digérait un éléphant.')

(9)   a.   Chúng tôi *sẽ* không trở về Ruăng làm gì, và nếu quân Phổ đến gần Lơ Havre thì chúng tôi *sẽ* sang Anh. {Lo-C: 6]
                 pl. I fut not return Rouen make what, and if army Prussia come near Le Havre top pl.I fut cross.over England
                 'We shall not return to Rouen whatever happens, and if the Prussian army approaches Le Havre, we'll cross over to England.'

                 ('Nous ne reviendrons pas à Rouen, et si les Prussiens approchent du Havre, nous gagnerons l'Angleterre.')

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in French texts. This would be approximately accurate, though uninformative from the point of view of theoretical linguistics.

  [4] This strategy, a form of contrastive analysis (Lado 1957), still appears to be popular in translation studies, even though it has largely been discredited in second language acquisition research, and in more theoretical work – at least at the level of analysis. (Pre-theoretically, of course, it is often used to get the lie of the land).

      b.   Nhưng không buộc, nó *sẽ* đi lung tung,   đị lạc ... [Lo-C: 6]
                  but   NEG   tie,   PRN FUT   go round & round, go astray
                  'But if you don't tie it up, it will go off, and get lost ...'

                  (Mais si tu ne l'attaches pas, il ira n'importe où, et il se perdra.)

It is notable that many of the examples that Lo-Cicero (2001) cites in support of *đã* as past or *sẽ* as future do not in fact signal past or future with respect to utterance time, in Kleinian terms (TT AFTER/BEFORE TU): as I'll discuss directly, *đã* and *sẽ* both signal a different type of temporal relation from that of future or past tense forms in, for example, French or English.

As for *đang*, the two examples that Lo-Cicero cites are translations of French *imperfait* (past imperfect) constructions: that is to say, they involve past time contexts. In other words, just these examples provide reasonable *prima facie* evidence that *đang* marks aspect, not tense – arguably what Travis (2000, 2010) refers to as Outer Aspect, see Duffield (in prep.)

In short, none of the examples provide clear evidence that pre-verbs in Vietnamese express tense: instead, they are all consistent with the claim of Nguyễn Đ. D. *'[T]rong tiếng Việt không có phạm trù thì.'* So, if not tense, what is it that these morphemes express?

Let us now bring on our ghosts, beginning with Christmas past.

The Ghost of Christmas Past (*đã*)

> *The cellar-door flew open with a booming sound, and then he heard the noise much louder, on the floors below; then coming up the stairs; then coming straight towards his door.*
> *"It's humbug still!" said Scrooge. "I won't believe it."*
>
> *"I am the Ghost of Christmas Past."*
> *"Long Past?" inquired Scrooge: observant of its dwarfish stature.*
> *"No. Your past."*

Does *đã* express past tense? Excluding a small number of articles – including, it should be said, my own (2007) paper, whose main purpose was to address a different property of finiteness – there is fairly broad consensus across the formal~functional divide, that *đã* is not primarily a tense morpheme in regular affirmative declarative sentences: see Nguyễn K. T. (1977); Panfilov (2002); Nguyễn M. T. 1995; Nguyễn V. T. (2003); *cf.* Cao X. H. (2003), Nguyễn H. T. (2006). Rather, its core meaning is *anteriority* – a term originally due to Nguyễn, Đ. H. (1997).

Anteriority is a notion similar to 'perfect', except that what is indicated is that some event, state-of-affairs or process has started at some *t* (prior to the Topic Time, and also that this {event, state-of-affairs, process…} did not obtain prior to *t*. See Phan (2013: 65ff), for discussion. Notice that this notion of *anterior* is distinct from the English *perfective*, which focusses on the completion/endpoint of the {event, state-of-affairs, process…} in question.

The near minimal contrasts between the Vietnamese and English setences in (10) and (11) below bear this out:

(10) a. 'When we *were* young, we had few responsibilities.'
Hồi chúng ta (*đã) còn trẻ, chúng ta có ít trách nhiệm.

b. 'By the time we *were* in our thirties, life had become more difficult.'
Hồi chúng ta (??đã) ở tuổi ba mươi, cuộc sống trở nên khó khăn hơn.

c. 'Now that we *are* old(er), things are getting better.'
Bây giờ thì chúng ta đã già (hơn), mọi thứ đang trở nên tốt đẹp hơn.

First, the fact that *đã* is excluded from (10a) and (10b) indicates, as Nguyễn H. T. (2019) also claims, that it is not a marker of past time; conversely, the availability of *đã* in (10c), a present time context, confirms the idea that *đã* implies a prior change of state – *đã* is impossible in the absence of a state transition.

Second, as we saw in (7a) above, *đã* can be used to mark the inception point of an activity here, letter writing that is taken up once again: this clearly contrasts with the use of either the preterite or present perfect 'tenses' in English or French, all of which entail completion of the activity in question. Compare the translations of (7a), in (11):

(11) Hôm nay, tôi viết tiếp   lá thư [tôi *đã* viết cách đây hai ngày].
#Today, I continue writing   the letter [(that) I wrote/have written two days ago].
#Aujourd'hui j'ai repris   la lettre [(que) j'écrivis/j'ai écrite il ya a deux jours].

Although anteriority differs from perfectivity, it shares with this the property of being inherently *aspectual*, rather than temporal. Wiithin the hierarchical analysis articulated above this means that *đã* is base-generated below α (T), and only inherits any temporal interpretation through raising to α, as diagrammed in Fig. 12:
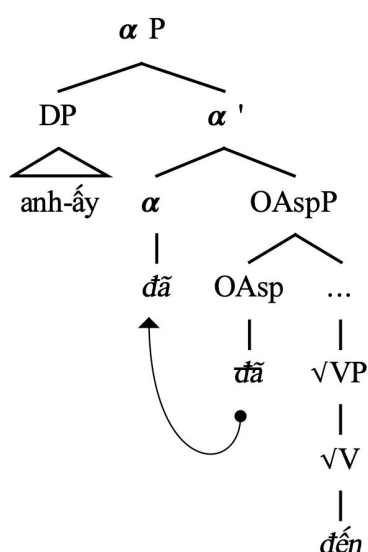

Fig. 12: *đã* movement in affirmative clauses (movement creates ambiguity)

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And yet, there *is* a context in which *đã* appears to have no aspectual interpretation, where – if translation can be relied on – *đã* seems to express exactly what is formalized in Klein's schema as past tense (TT BEFORE TU). This context is, of course, where *đã* precedes the clausal negation morpheme *không*: compare (14b) and (14c) below:

(13)   a.   Anh-ấy   đến.
                3S.M   come
                'He comes/came.'   [No specified time]

        b.   Anh-ấy đã đến.
                3S.M   da come
                either: 'He came.'   [past time interpretation]
                or: 'He has come.'   [perfect interpretation]

(14)   a.   Anh-ấy không đến.
                3S.M   NEG come
                'He doesn't come/didn't come.'

        b.   Anh-ấy đã   không đến.
                3S.M   DA NEG come
                'He didn't come.'   [exclusive past time interpretation]
                NOT   'He hasn't come.'

        c.   Hôm qua anh ấy đã không có   đến nhà chị.
                yesterday PRN   DA NEG ASR go house PRN
                'He didn't go to your house yesterday.'   [exclusive past time interpretation][5]

(15)   a.   Anh-ấy chưa   đến.
                3S.M   NEG$_{PRF}$ come
                'He hasn't come yet.'   [exclusive perfect interpretation]

        b.   Anh-ấy *đã* chưa   đến.
                3S.M   DA NEG$_{PRF}$ come
                'He hadn't come yet.'   [past perfect interpretation]

Since the constraint was first pointed out by Trinh (2005), it has been given a number of analyses. One possible treatment, proposed in my own work with Trang Phan, is that negation blocks the movement of aspectual *đã* to T/α: since it is just this double positioning that allows the ambiguity in (13b), whenever *đã* is inserted directly into T/α, as schematized in Fig. 16, the aspectual intepretation is lost:

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[5] Nguyễn H. T. (2019) disputes the grammatical acceptability of examples (16a) and (16b, on the grounds that this sequence cannot be found in literary translations. It is a separate empirical question, however, whether lay native speakers consider them acceptable: a Google string search suggests that they are unproblematic.
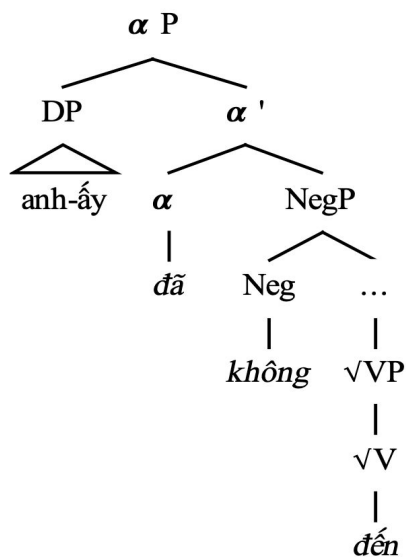
Fig. 16. Direct insertion of *đã* in *α* (no ambiguity)

The blocking by *không* of any aspectual reading for *đã* is demonstrated most clearly by the contrasting translations of the sentences in (17), involving the predicate *chết ('die, be dead')*: whereas the affirmative sentence in (17a) favors a present perfect intepretation, its negative counterpart in (10b) only allows the preterite interpretation — namely, at some relevant time, Harry Potter didn't (in fact) die; the unspecified sentence in (16c) disallows a past time construal:

(17) a. Harry Potter *đã* chết!
          'Harry Potter is dead.'

      b. Harry Potter *đã không* chết!
          Harry Potter didn't die [then].
              Not 'Harry Potter isn't dead.'

      c. Harry Potter *không* chết!
          Harry Potter isn't   dead.
              Not 'Harry Potter didn't die.'

Now, from a functionalist perspective, there may well be ways of accounting for this loss of ambiguity that do not involve appeal to structural hierarchies and a contrast between syntactic movement/direct insertion. However, when we observe what appears to be the same asymmetry in the distribution and interpretation of modal auxiliaries – that is, where 'lower interpretations' are blocked in the presence of other functional categories – this suggests that a common underlying explanation is involved in both cases. I will present these cases in a few moments. Before that, however, let's dispense with our two other ghosts: the *Present* and the *Yet-to-come*.

The Ghost of Christmas Present

After Scrooge's encounter with the first ghost, he is somewhat less certain of himself and more open to persuasion...

> *"Come in!" exclaimed the Ghost. "Come in! and know me better, man!"*
> *Scrooge entered timidly, and hung his head before this Spirit. He was not the dogged*
> *Scrooge he had been; and though the Spirit's eyes were clear and kind, he did not like to*
> *meet them. "I am the Ghost of Christmas Present," said the Spirit. "Look upon me!"*

Our encounter with the Ghost of Christmas Present will be brief. This is partly because we still have much ground to cover, but mostly because with regard to present tense, there is *literally nothing to talk about*: as far as I can determine, there are no grammatical exponents of present tense in Vietnamese (in Kleinian terms). Of course, this does not mean that it is impossible to specify present time – adverbials such as *bay gio, hôm nay* perform this job adequately – but among preverbal auxiliaries there are no serious contenders. As we have seen, Lo-Cicero's claim concerning *dang* is obviously incorrect: not only is *dang* interpretively compatible with past time situations, it also appears to be structurally compatible with either anterior *đã* or 'future' *sẽ,* as shown by the examples in (18a) and (18b), respectively: *cf.* also Bui (2019)

(18)   a.   Lúc   tôi đến,   nó *đã*   đang ngủ rồi.
                 time I come   PRN ASP   ASP   sleep already
                 'When I came, he had been sleeping. (Duffield 2017: 357)'

          b.   Vào giờ   này tuần tới tôi *sẽ* đang nghỉ mát ở Hawaii rồi.
                 come hour DEM week next I   FUT ASP holiday BE Hawaii already
                 'By this time next week I will have been holidaying in Hawaii. (Duffield, *ibid.*)'

For Klein *et al*, 'aspect' is construed as a set of relationships, similar to that of tense, except that T-SIT ('Situation Time') replaces TU as the argument contrasted with TT. This is illustrated in Table 19, which shows one of several alternative combinatorial possibilities that Klein entertains. If this is correct, then *đang* would seem to be an ideal exponent of imperfective aspect.

	Schema	Aspect
1.	TT AFTER T-SIT	perfect
2.	TT INCL T-SIT	Imperfective
3.	T-SIT INCL TT	perfective

Table 19. Klein's construal of Aspect (1994, 1998)

The fact that this schema doesn't work as well for *đã* is not necessarily a problem – for Klein at least, who allows for more variability in crosslinguistic semantics than generativists would

typically be comfortable with. As he notes, *'...There are still other possible ways to cluster temporal relations (including to have one form for everything), but it should be clear that 'perfective aspect' in one language is not necessarily the same as 'perfective aspect' in another language (see Klein 1995, for details)...(Klein, Li & Hendriks 2000: 744)'.*

Bui's formal semantic analysis of *đang*, reproduced in (20) below, is consistent with Klein's more schematic approach:

(20) $[[DANG]]^{w,t,g,c} = [\lambda P_{\langle \varepsilon,t \rangle} : [\lambda t'_i : \exists e \, . \, t' \subseteq \tau(e) \, \& \, P(e) = T]]$
          'The time t' is properly contained within the 'temporal trace' of an event of P'
          (Bui 2019: 130)

The main conclusion of this section, then, is that Vietnamese has no overt exponents of *present* tense. And we have seen that *đã* is not inherently a past tense marker, even if – like English modals – it indicates a kind of finiteness when raised to α. So what about future tense?

The Ghost of Christmas *Yet-to-Come* (*sẽ*)

> *"I am in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come?" said Scrooge.*
> *The Spirit answered not, but pointed onward with its hand.*
>
> *…*
> *"Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point," said Scrooge, "answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only?"*
>
> *Still the Ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood.*

Two observations are due about the future and future *sẽ*. First*, pace* Klein, I suspect that the future tense should not be construed as occupying the same time line as present [non-past] or past: by nature, the future is more epistemic than temporal. To rehearse the title, 'future tense' is *ex tempore* ('out of time').[6] If this is true, it is probably for metaphysical reasons: outside of quantum mechanics, the future has a different epistemic (and truth-conditional) status from the past/non-past. Evidence for this is given by the fact that the same verbal expression appears in the *apodosis* (main clause) of present conditionals in English, French and Vietnamese, as appears in regular future contexts. This was already illustrated in Lo-Cicero's example in (9a) above, repeated here in Table 21.

Notice, in direct contrast, that past-tense forms are anomalous in the main clauses of past conditionals, unless the protasis creates a special epistemic context, as in (23a): compare the sentences in (21) with those in (22) and (23):

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[6] See also Abusch (1985), Kratzer (1998), referenced in Bui (*ibid.*)

	IF-CLAUSE	MAIN CLAUSE	MORPHEME
9a.i 9a.ii	(-) ..và nếu quân Phỗ đến gần Lơ Havre	chúng tôi *sẽ* không trở về Ruăng làm gì, (thì) chúng tôi *sẽ* sang Anh.	*sẽ* *sẽ*
	(-) ..if the Prussian army approaches Le Havre,	We *shall* not return to Rouen whatever happens, (then) *we'll* cross over to England	*shall* *shall*

Table 21. Present Conditionals in Vietnamese and English (insensitivity to presence of *if*-clause)

(22) a. She came to the conference last January.
      b.i If she liked linguistics ... #she came to the conference last January.
      b.ii. If she had known him, ... #she came to the conference last January.

(23) a. If he is to be believed, she came to the conference last January.
      b. #If people believe him, she came to the conference last January.

Even in regular main clause contexts, English *will* remains true to its etymological origins, as a modal verb (*cf.* German *wollen*). As the contrast in (24) suggests, *will* marks a less certain, more optative, future than the equivalent 'present tense'; whereas (24a) is an assertion of 'future fact', example (24b) feels more like a prediction:

(24) a. The last boat off the island (#probably) departs at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon: you'd better be on it!
      b. The last boat off the island (probably) will depart at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon: you'd better be on it!

These facts are consistent with the idea that English 'future tense' does not in fact mark future time: it is really *irrealis*, a modal relation.

This is fairly close to what Bui (2019) argues, for Vietnamese. Specifically, she claims that *"future tense in Vietnamese realized as a combination both the obligatory null tense morpheme and an overt spell-out of sẽ, which is the Vietnamese counterpart of the English WOLL operator (Abusch 1985). This means that* sẽ *itself is neither a purely a tense or solely an epistemic modal* (Bui 2019:115)."

The interested reader is referred to Bui's article for arguments and supporting data, but if her conceptual point is correct, then *sẽ* cannot be a future tense marker, any more than *đang* and *đã* are present and past tense markers, respectively.

Superficially then, the sceptics would seem to be correct: in terms of *exponence* – overt morphological expression – there is no tense in Vietnamese. It was all "Humbug!" Yet, as I noted earlier, this negative conclusion does not seriously undermine the generativist approach to phrase-structure: except for the label T – which was already in doubt on the basis of the English data discussed at the outset – there are still good reasons for supposing that both English and Vietnamese clauses contain at least one underspecified functional projection or projections (α: α_1, α_2, α_3,..α_n), to which different auxilary elements raise in the course of a syntactic derivation, and which is associated with some kind of finiteness property.

Before speculating on what that property might be, it is worth drawing attention to some important constraints on the co-occurence of *sẽ* with other pre-verbal auxiliaries. These can each be shown to follow from a structural/raising analysis, but they go unexplained – or have to be handled on a piecemeal basis – in a theory that eschews abstract formal structure:

(i) *sẽ*, though compatible with aspectual *đang*, is incompatible with anterior *đã*, even though the intended future perfect interpretation is otherwise available:

(25) a. Han (*sẽ) đã làm bánh mì.
          Han SE   DA make sandwich
          (intended: 'Han will have made a sandwich.')

      b. Đến cuối năm nay, tôi   (*sẽ) đã ra.trường.
          arrive end year DEM[1] PRN FUT ANT go.out.school
          'I shall have graduated by the end of the year.'

(ii) *sẽ* is incompatible with *có,* either as an emphatic assertion marker (26a), or as an interrogative marker (26b):

(26) a. Năm sau vợ anh sẽ   (*có) làm việc ở   Paris.
          year next wife PRN FUT ASR   work   be.LOC Paris
          'Your wife *will* work in Paris next year!'

      b. Năm sau vợ   anh (*sẽ) (có) làm việc ở   Paris không?
          year next wife PRN   FUT   INT   work be.LOC Paris NEG
          'Will your wife work in Paris next year?'

(iii) *sẽ* is compatible with deontic modal auxiliaries, such as *phải* ($\approx$ must) and *nên* ($\approx$ should); in contrast to these, which appear in various low positions within the clause, *sẽ* – like *đã*, and like English modal auxiliaries – is always the left-most element in the series (examples adapted from Duffield 2013a: 267):

(27) a. Tôi (*nên) sẽ (nên) làm gì   nếu bị   sa thải ?
          PRN should FUT should do what if   PASS fire
          'What should I do if I get fired?'

b.   Lẽ ra   lúc này họ (*nên) đã (nên) đi rôi.
    right out when DEM PRN should ANT should go already
    'He (should) have left already.'

c.   Lẽ ra lúc này mình (?nên) đang (nên) làm một thứ gì dó.
    right out time DEM PRN should DUR should do 1   thing what DEM
    'I should have been doing something at the moment/by now.'

d.   Những ai yêu bóng.!á   thì (*nên) không (nên) bỏ lỡ clip này.
    several who love football TM should NEG should miss clip DEM
    'Those who love football, (they) should not miss this clip.'

I end this section with an interim conclusion, and a closing reflection. The conclusion is given in (28):

(28)   a.   In terms of morphological exponence, *there is no tense in Vietnamese;*
      b.   In terms of syntactic analysis, there is clear evidence that *Vietnamese and English dispose of many of the same functional categories, including the-category-formerly-known-as-T.*

Hopefully, it is clear by this point that there is no inherent contradiction between these two conclusions. Nor should there be any friction between the two modes of inquiry: just as we can only gain a clear understanding of the mapping between the lexicon and syntax, as well as of the limits of crosslinguistic variation – through careful study of the lexical inventory of particular languages, so it is only by utilizing formal, structural principles that we can make sense of – and sometimes predict – the collocational and interpretive constraints that apply to that inventory. A problem arises only when we fail to pay proper attention to each other's results, by ignoring theoretical research, alternatively, by glossing over important differences to make the data fit.

In ending this section, it is worth considering Scrooge's hopeful interpretation of the *Ghost of Christmas Yet-to-Come*'s visit:

"Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead," said Scrooge. "But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!"

In the story, the Ghost softens his stance, and Scrooge redeems himself through good work and benevolence, and so gains a better future. Note that in the present context I have been careful not to say whom Scrooge represents: the generativist or the anti-generativist? That's a matter for the reader/listener to decide. But either way, I am confident that given some good will and good work, we can all change, for the better.

In the final main section, I leave the Christmas Carol analogy behind, and briefly speculate on what Vietnamese can tell us about α and the other projections beyond the predicate phrase: if not tense, what is T; and if not Comp, what is C?

16

Alternatives to T and C

Once liberated from the idea that Tense is always the head of S, syntax is full of new possibilities. In this section, drawing on work by Wolfgang Klein and Mamoru Saito respectively,[7] I briefly sketch some ideas about the nature of distinguished functional categories to the left of negation: α and beyond.

A value for α?: Splitting Finiteness

In their discussion of the Mandarin particle *le*, which bears many similarities to Vietnamese *đã*, Klein, Li & Hendriks (2000) note:

> *'What these observations demonstrate is the fact that the addition of the particle le somehow indicates that the situation, or part of the situation, is, was, or will be 'real': the particle affects the 'assertion status' of what is expressed by the utterance. A satisfactory account of the function of le must explain this fact.'*

This comment echoes Klein's original proposal (1998, 1999) concerning finiteness, which partitions that conceptual category into two distinct components: (i) **Tense**, and (ii) **Assertion validity**.[8] For Klein, this split is illustrated by the ambiguity of the example in (29) below:

(29)　　a. 'The book *was* on the table.'
　　　　b. 'The book is on the table.' – 'No, the book *was* on the table.'
　　　　c. 'The book was not on the table.' 'No, that's wrong, the book *was* on the table.'

As Klein expresses it: *'the finite element was carries at least two distinct meaning components: 1. the tense component: it marks past, in contrast to present or future; 2. [the assertion component:] it marks the claim — the fact that the situation described by the utterance indeed obtains, in contrast to the opposite claim.'*

Finiteness, therefore, is more than tense. In fact, we already saw evidence, in (4) above that English modals are 'finite' without being tensed. Should α be equated with this latter property: (α = Fin)? Although such a proposal would be consistent with other analyses of clause-structure, notably Rizzi (1997), *cf*. Laka 1990, 1994 – see Fig. 30a, for example – I think there is good evidence that 'assertion' itself, realized as *có* in Vietnamese, is initially projected lower in the structure, as is diagrammed in Fig. 30b. See also Duffield (2013a), for discussion. Here, I leave it as an open question, however.

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[7] See also Kayne (2019).

[8] Klein's proposal was the guiding insight behind my (2007) analysis of the Vietnamese mutifunctional particle có: this analysis was modified in my (2013a) paper, in which 'assertion' was integrated with polarity, and where the lower position was identified with Mood. Both papers maintain the view that assertion validity is distinct from Tense; in both papers, assertion initially occupies a lower position than that of the former T node.

(30a) Force < Topic < Focus < Finiteness < IP
       (from Rizzi 1997; see also Laka 1990, 1994)

```
                    XP
                   /  \
                 DP    ...
                / \     |
           anh-ấy  FinP
                    |
                   Fin'
                  /    \
                Fin    NegP
                 |     /  \
                 _   Neg   Asp₁P
                     |     /   \
                  không  Asp₁   Asp₂P
                          |     /   \
                         đã   Asp₂   AsrP
                               |     /  \
                             đang  Asr   ...
                                    |     |
                                   có    √VP
                                          |
                                         √V
                                          |
                                        đến
```
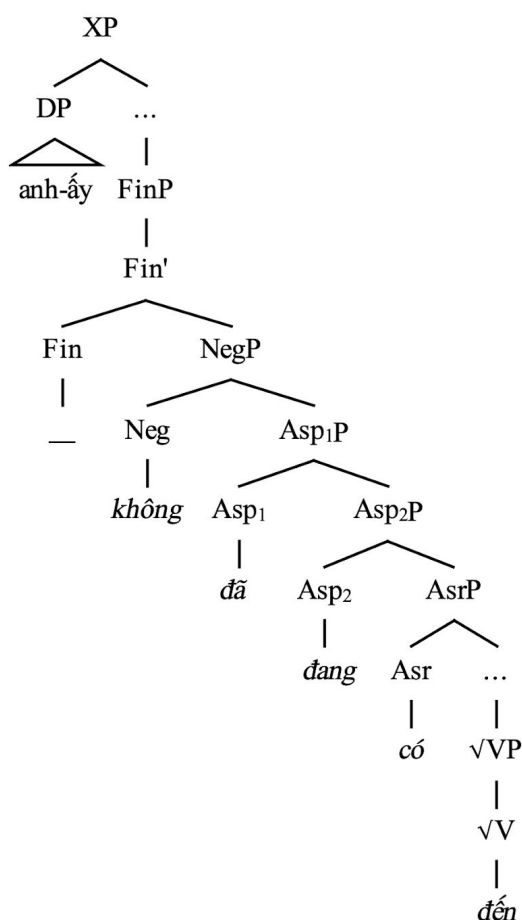
Figure 30b. Underlying positions of pre-verbal functional morphemes below Negation (from Duffield 2013)

Modals, high and low

Next, a number of remarks are in order concerning modal auxiliaries. All of these tend towards the idea that at least some modal auxiliaries – especially those expressing deontic force – are generated below negation and aspectual projections, whereas others, those expressing *epistemic* and *utterance* level meanings (in the terminology of Ueda (2007)), are generated higher. If this idea is correct, α could be identified with epistemic force.[9]

Recall first – as was shown in (27) above – that deontic modals in Vietnamese appear low in phrase-structure, to the right of negation and/or anterior *đã*: The fact that these do not raise

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[9] Alternatively, epistemic modals may simply be projected higher than deontic modals, closer to α. For Saito (adopting Ueda's proposal) *epistemic* modals include { *daroo* (surmise), *desyoo* (formal surmise), *mai* (negative surmise)}, utterance modals comprise { *ro/e* imperative, *(i)nasai* (formal imperative), yoo (invitation), (i)masyoo (formal invitation), yoo (volition), mai (negative volition)}. Saito (2015) is an attempt to integrate the cartography of these elements with that of the sentence-final particles (*wa-ya-no-ne*); see Endo (2010).

might explain why they are compatible in imperatives, as illustrated in (31), in contrast to what is found in English:

(31) a.   Hãy/cứ nên   nghe.lời nó.
               IMP/ IMP should listen   PRN
               '(You) should listen to him!'

       b.   Đừng/chớ nên   nghe.lời nó.
               NEG.IMP should listen PRN
               '*(You) shouldn't listen to him!'

Second, in languages where modals uniformly appear in the same high position, regardless of modal force, we observe collocational or interpretive restrictions where these interact with other modals, or with other intervening functional categories. For example, modals in English and Japanese both exhibit Uniqueness Effects: *viz*., only one modal morpheme can appear per clause; this is shown in (32) and (33), respectively. Notice this is not the case in German, for example, where modals have all the inflectional and complementational privileges of main verbs; *cf*. the examples in (34).

(32) a.   *He should can do that.
       b.   *She may should go to the conference.

(33) a.   Kimi-wa soko-e ik-u   daroo (*na).
               you-TOP there-to go-pres will   don't
               'Don't go there! [Don't be going there].'

       b.   Taroo-wa soko-e ik-u   mai (*daroo)
               Taroo-TOP there-to go-pres won't   will
               'Taroo won't go there. [I guess Taroo won't go there]

(34) a.   Er soll   das machen können, was ihn glücklich macht.
               prn should that make   can-inf   what him happy   makes
               'He should be able to do what he likes.'

       b.   Sie hätte   das machen sollen.
               she would.have that make   should-inf
               'She should have done that.'

These uniqueness effects are consistent with the idea that modals 'compete' for a unique functional slot (α). Saito also points out that Japanese *affixal* modals – such as the imperative suffixes *-ro/-e* and the optative *-(i)masyoo* – are incompatible with tense morphology: compare the examples in (35) and (36.:

(35) a.   Taroo-wa sore-o   tabe-ru.
               Taroo-TOP that-ACC eat-PRES
               'Taroo eats that.'

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b. *Taroo sore-o tabe-ru-ro!
Taroo that-ACC eat-PRES-IMP
'Taroo eat that!'

c. Taroo-wa sore-o tabe-ru daroo.
Taroo-TOP that-ACC eat-PRES surmise
'I guess Taroo eats that.'

(36) a. Sore-o tabe-(*ru)-masy-oo!
that-ACC eat-PRES-POL-let's
'Let's eat that.'

b. Soko-e ik-(*u)-imasyoo!
there-to go-PRES-POL-let's
'Let's go there.'

Saito (2015: 258ff) explains this constraint in terms of morphological selection – *-ro/e* selects for a bare verb stem, and so can only take a *v*P complement (projection of TP would block merger, as in (37a); *daroo*, on the other hand, selects for a TP complement, which allows for a tensed proposition). An alternative analysis would be that imperative verbs in both languages can only raise to a tenseless α (37b). Either way, the conclusion must be that in Japanese and English tense features are not projected in imperatives; in both languages, however, there is evidence of verb-raising.
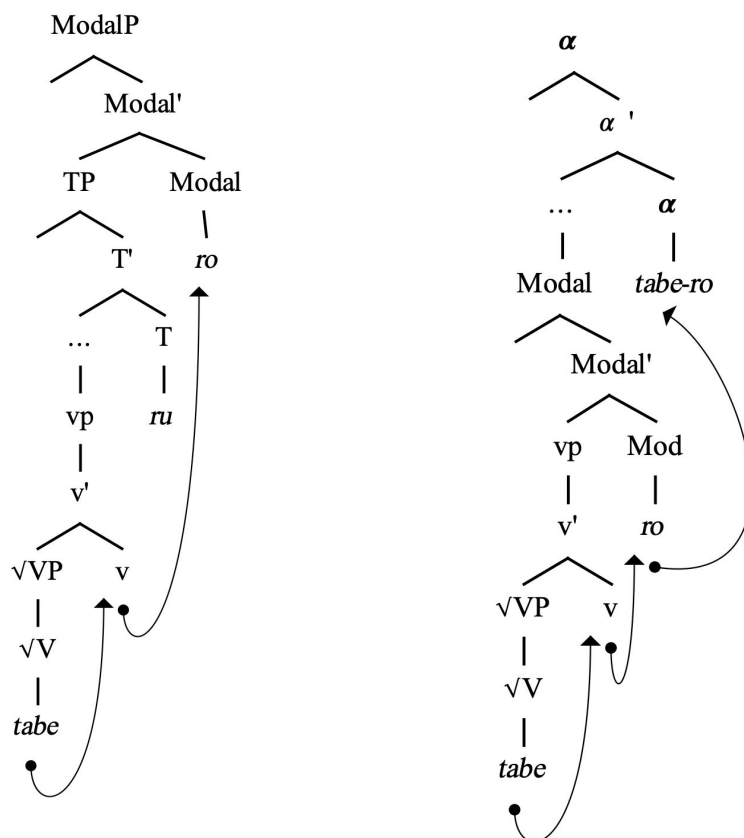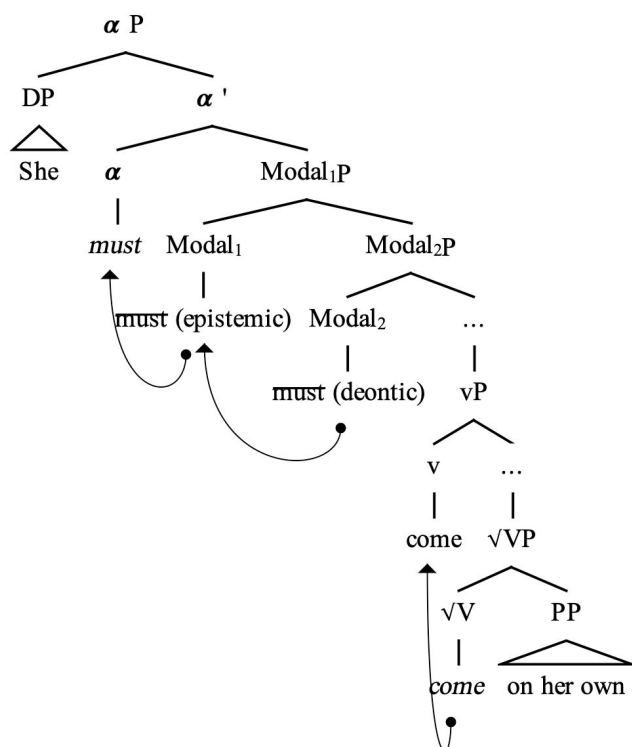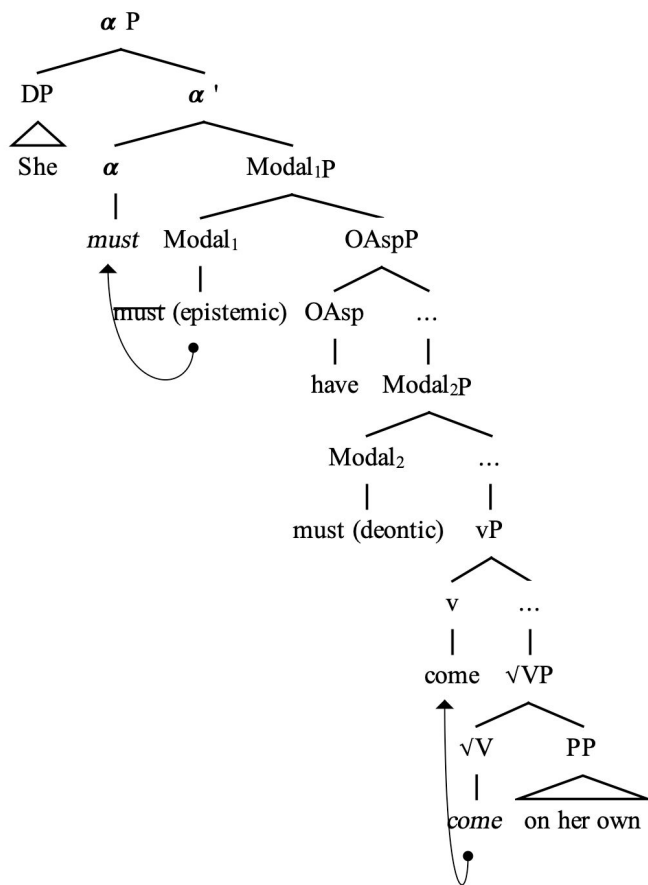
Fig. 37. Imperative raising in Japanese (blocked by T). a-from Saito, p 258; b-an alternative analysis.

If it is true that some modal elements are inserted low in phrase-structure and are raised in the course of the syntactic derivation, then we might expect to find other intervention effects – aside from their complementary distribution with tense morphology. In particular, we might expect that projection of Aspect nodes would block Modal raising. This prediction seems to be (partially) borne out in English: modals such as *must, may, might, can, could,* which are all normally ambiguous among several force readings, appear to lose all except their epistemic readings in perfect contexts. Compare the examples in (38) below:

(38) a. You *may/must* behave better, when you visit your grandmother. (deontic/epistemic-surmise)
      b. You *may/must* have behaved better, when you visited your grandmother. (epistemic-surmise only)
      c. Alice *can/could* come here on her own. (deontic/abilitative/epistemic)
      d. Alice *can/could* have come here on her own. (epistemic-surmise only)

(The generalization does not seem to apply to *should*, for unknown reasons.) It is possible to account for this interpretive constraint in the same way as we accounted for the Negative Constraint on Vietnamese *đã* earlier in this presentation: the presence of intervening functional categories – here, perfect aspect – blocks raising, so only that direct insertion is possible, resulting in a loss of ambiguity:

αP
- DP
  - She
- α'
  - α
    - *must*
    - Modal₁ ... (rendered below)

α P

DP — She

α '

α — *must*

Modal₁P

Modal₁ — *must* (epistemic)

OAspP

OAsp — have

Modal₂P

Modal₂ — must (deontic)

vP

v — come

√VP

√V — *come*

PP — on her own

The Status of Comp(lementizers)

Finally, let us briefly consider complementizers: if there is no T node, might there be no C node, either? It seems probable that this is the case, that C should instead be re-interpreted as β, or rather as a set of $\{\beta: \beta_1, \beta_2 ... \beta_3\}$, each hosting distinct functional features. Indeed, the idea that Comp is a cover term for a heterogenous set of features has become quite well-established in generativist thinking, at least since Rizzi (1997). See also Krifka (this conference).

Saito (2009, *ibid.*) takes up the issue in respect of Japanese, proposing a split between a higher 'Report' node and a lower 'Force' node (above FinP), the latter signalling the illocutionary force of the embedded clause (as declarative, interrogative or imperative). In Japanese, these two functional heads are expressed as *to* and *ka,* respectively. As Saito shows, both positions can be realized simultaneously, in sentences such as that in (40):

(40)   Taroo-wa [CP ...[CP ... [CP kare-no imooto-ga soko-ni i-ta (no) C:FIN] ka C:Force] (to) C:Report]
minna-ni tazuneta
Taroo-TOP   he-GEN sister-NOM there-at be-past no   if   to
all-DAT inquired
'Taroo asked everyone if his sister was (had been) there.'

According to Saito, '*to* embeds a paraphrase or report of direct discourse... s-selected by verbs of saying or thinking that are compatible with direct quotation'; such verbs include *i-u* ('say'), *omo-u* ('think'), *kitaisu-ru* ('expect'), *sake-bu* ('scream'), etc.[10] Observe that in contrast to English *that*, Japanese *to* is compatible with various kinds of embedded clause, including questions (41a), imperatives (41b-c), and invitations (41d) [Saito, *ibid*. Ex (26)].

(41)   Taroo-wa Ziroo-ni ...
    a.   [$_{CP}$ [$_{CP}$ kanozyo-ga kare-no ie-ni   ku-ru]   ka] *to*] tazune-ta.
                she-nom   his-gen house-to come-pres   ka to   inquired
                '...asked Ziroo (that) if she is coming to his house.'

    b.   [$_{CP}$ [$_{CP}$ [$_{CP}$ kare-no ie-ni   i] -ro]   *to*] meizi-ta.
                his-gen house-to be -imp   to ordered
                '...ordered Ziroo to be to his house.'

    c.   [$_{CP}$ [$_{CP}$ [$_{CP}$ [$_{CP}$ kare-no ie-ni   ik-u]   -na]   *to*] meizi-ta.
                his-gen house-to come-pres-neg.imp   to ordered
                '...ordered Ziroo not to go to his house.'

    d.   Taroo-wa Ziroo-o...[$_{CP}$ [$_{CP}$ kare-no ie-ni   ik] -oo] *to*] sasot-ta.
                            his-gen house-to go-   let's   to   invited
                            '...invited Ziroo to go to his house.'

These Japanese examples provide clear evidence that C/Comp may be fractionated in interesting ways; also, that complementizers exhibit distinct behaviors in different languages. Moreover, they imply that the behavior of English *that* may not offer the best guide to understanding the (left or right) periphery of clausal phrase-structure. However, the point of presenting these data here is not to suggest that Japanese is necessarily any more reliable a model for analyzing Vietnamese structure than was English, but merely that consideration of cross-linguistic differences can help us to discern universal patterns.

Still, it happens that Vietnamese *does* look more like Japanese than English (if one abstracts away from head-complement order): as I discussed some years ago, Vietnamese complementizers generally appear in the same hierarchical order as Japanese ones (Report above Force); also like Japanese C-elements, they can co-occur in the same sentence (Duffield 2013b):

(40)   a.   Phải nói *rằng là*   thế hệ   trẻ   của chúng ta rất tài năng.
                modal say COMP COMP generation young of   plural prn very talented
                '(I) have to say that our young generation is very talented.'

    b.   Hy vọng rằng *là*   giới trí thức sẽ   không làm thinh trước sự việc đó.
                hope   COMP COMP intelligentsia FUT NEG   do quiet prep   event   DEM
                '(I) hope that the intelligentsia will not keep a still tongue in their heads (in the face of this event).'

---

[10] In contrast to English, the distinction between direct and indirect speech in Japanese is much less clear-cut: the same C elements and verb-forms appear in both cases.

    c.   *Phải nói *là rằng* thế hệ trẻ của chúng ta rất tài năng. (*cf.* 40a)

    d.   *Hy vọng *là rằng* giới trí thức sẽ không làm thinh trước sự việc đó. (*cf.* 40b)

Yet there is at least one complementizer-like element that does not behave as expected. As the examples in (41) show, the peripheral interrogative morpheme *liệu* seems to express to express illocutionary force [+Q], and is compatible with the report complementizer *rằng*. The possibility of co-occurrence of these two elements is consistent with the Japanese data: the problem is the order, which is just the opposite of what we should expect: as shown in (42), Force precedes Report:

(41)   a.   Người đàn ông   tự hỏi [*liệu* cô bồ có ở lại   với ông ấy hay không].
                person gentleman self ask   lieu PRN friend be stay with PRN DEM or NEG
                'The man wondered whether his girlfriend would stay with him.'

        b.   Cô   gái hỏi [*liệu* cô có   thể   đi đến   bữa tiệc được không].
                PRN girl ask lieu PRN ASR possibility go arrive party   can   neg
                'The girl asked if she could go to the party.'

(42)   a.   Tôi đã sa thải họ. *Liệu* tôi làm thế có đúng không?
                I   ant dismiss prn. lieu I   do that asr right neg
                'I have dismissed them. Did I do the right thing

        b.   Tôi đã sa thải họ. *Liệu rằng* tôi làm thế có đúng không?

The availability of (42b) presents a *prima facie* challenge to our theory. In principle, there are two kinds of solution available (assuming that the judgments here are accurate): we could modify the theory to accommodate the Vietnamese data, or re-analyze the data to reconcile the conflict. Or both. My goal here, once again, is not to resolve this issue, but instead to demonstrate how the generativist approach, when it worksl, can offer a 'two-way' street between theory and description, and can encourage us to tackle empirical questions that we would not otherwise have even considered.

Summary

In this paper, I have tried to bridge the gap between generativist theory and traditional scholarship in the analysis of Vietnamese grammar. I understand that for many readers or listeners, generative grammar seem quite abstruse, abstract and alien, with ill-fitting concepts and foreign formalisms: talk of Tense and Comp, and head-movement in a language with no tense morphemes or (obvious) subordinators, and very limited displacement, appears irrelevant at best. I have accepted the conclusion that there is no tense in Vietnamese, at one level of analysis at least; at the same time, I have tried to make the argument that generativist models (labels such as T and C aside) can still make a significant contribution to uncovering the fine structure of Vietnamese sentences.

If we wish to make progress in understanding the underlying structure of Vietnamese, we really need to listen to one another: theory is not Humbug!, but neither are serious scholarly objections to cavalier treatments of the data.

I'll end on a personal note. In the time since I started working on Vietnamese, and especially in the last few years, I have significantly changed my stance — on many things beyond generative grammar: hopefully, like Ebenezer Scrooge, this is for the better. It is fitting, therefore, if I close this lecture with the closing lines from *A Christmas Carol:*

> *"Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms."* Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (Conclusion).

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