

Lone Contrastive Topic Constructions: A Puzzle from Vietnamese

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I. Introduction

It has been long agreed by formal and functional researchers (primarily based on English data) that contrastive topic marking, namely marking a constituent as a contrastive topic via the B-accent/the rising intonation contour) requires the co-occurrence of focus marking via the A-accent/the falling intonation contour (see Sturgeon 2006, and references therein). However, this consensus has recently been disputed by new findings indicating the occurrence of utterances with only B-accent, dubbed as lone contrastive topic (Büring 2003, Constant 2014). In this paper, I argue, based on the data in Vietnamese, that the presence of lone contrastive topic is just apparent, and that the focus that co-occurs with the seemingly lone contrastive topic is a verum focus. The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 is a brief description of how information structural categories are canonically realized in Vietnamese. The non-canonical construction in question is discussed in section 3. An analysis of this non-canonical construction is given in section 4. Section 5 is a concluding remark.

II. Information structure in Vietnamese

II.I Topic

Vietnamese displays a SVO word order in a pragmatically neutral context, and is a topic prominent language in the spirit of Li and Thompson (1976) in that the subject tends to be the topic, and is preferably referentially given. The following examples are illustrative.

- (1) a. *Một nhóm người làm giàu rất nhanh.
one group person make rich very fast
'A group of people become rich very fast.'
- a'. Nam nói chuyện với một nhóm người.
Nam say story with one group person
'Nam talked to a group of people.'

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The ill-formedness of (1a) results from the occurrence of the indefinite NP ‘a group of people’ in the subject position, as opposed to the well-formedness of (1a’) where the indefinite NP ‘a group of people’ is in the object position. The contrast in grammaticality of these two sentences indicates that indefinite NPs are not qualified as topics. To express the proposition intended by (1a) an existential sentence is used.

- (1) b. Có một nhóm người làm giàu rất nhanh.
 exist one group person make rich very fast
 ‘(There is) A group of people (who) become rich very fast.’

A non-subject topic generally undergoes topicalization, that is, to be dislocated to the left periphery. As expected, topicalization of indefinite NPs is not allowed as evidenced by the contrast between (2a) and (2c).

- (2) a. *Một cái ghế, Nam mới mua.
 one CL chair Nam just buy
 ‘Nam just bought a chair.’
 b. Nam mới mua một cái ghế.
 Nam just buy one CL chair
 ‘Nam just bought a chair.’
 c. Cái ghế này, Nam mới mua.
 CL chair this Nam just buy
 ‘This chair, Nam just bought.’

To account for the fact that a topical constituent is generally located in the left periphery, researchers working within the Cartography approach (Duffield 2007, Tran 2009) assume that a full-fledged sentence in Vietnamese is a Topic Phrase (TopP), and the topic is located in the Spec, TopP.

II.II Is *thì* a topic head?

It is common in Vietnamese that a topic phrase is linearly followed by a particle, characterized in the literature as a topic marker, hence the gloss TOP. For instance, the subject-topic ‘he’ is followed by the topic marker *thì* in (3a). Another particle interchangeable with *thì* is *là*, as shown in (3c). In the absence of the overt particle, a null particle realized by a pause is used (3b).

- (3) a. Nó **thì** thích kẹo chanh nhất.
 he TOP like candy lemon best
 ‘He likes lemon candy best.’ (Cao 1991)
 b. Mãng cụt, ai cũng thích.
 mangosteen, TOP_{Null} who also like
 ‘Everybody likes mangosteens.’ (Michaud & Brunelle 2015)

- c. Mãng cụt **thì/ là** ai cũng thích.
 mangosteen TOP who also like
 ‘Everybody likes mangosteens.’ (Michaud & Brunelle 2015)

Since the non-canonical construction under investigation exclusively involves the particle *thì*, and allows for neither particle *là* nor the covert particle, a deeper look at this particle is necessary. As mentioned earlier, researchers working within the framework of the Cartography approach analyze a full-fledged sentence in Vietnamese as a Topic Phrase. The topic marker *thì* on this analysis is the topic head of the Topic Phrase (Duffield 2007, Tran 2009).² This analysis leads to the assumption that the element located in the Spec of the Topic Phrase must be topical. There is however evidence indicating that the so-assumed topic head *thì* is not always associated with the topic. Consider the examples below.

- (4) a. Ai **thì** anh giúp?
 who PRT you help
 ‘Who will you help?’
 b. Nam **thì** tôi giúp.
 Nam PRT I help
 ‘I will help Nam.’

Note that Vietnamese is a *wh*-in-situ language: the word order of a canonical *wh*-question remains the same as that of its non-interrogative counterpart. As such, (4a) represents a non-canonical *wh*-question in that the argument object *wh*-phrase ‘who’ is dislocated from the base position, namely the post-verbal position. It is not plausible to assume that the particle in question is a topic head given that the *wh*-phrase is not qualified as a topic. Additionally, the fronted object ‘Nam’ in (4b) is construed as being focused either as a reply to the question in (4a) or as a continuation of a mini-discourse such as ‘it is not my nature to help anyone, yet ...’ I therefore reject the assumption that the particle in question is a topic head, and assume, following Neeleman and van de Koot (2008), that the particle in question is at best a marker that partitions the utterance into topic-comment or background-focus, and does not mark the moved elements as topics or foci, but instead marks the constituents formed by their movements as comments and backgrounds. For ease of presentation, the gloss for the particle *thì* is simply PRT ‘particle’.

II.III Givenness

Vietnamese realizes givenness by ellipsis (deletion). Ellipsis applies not only to nominal, but to non-nominal constituents as well. The size of the elided material varies, depending on the focus structure of the utterance.

²Trinh (2005) provides an alternative analysis, according to which a full-fledged sentence in Vietnamese is a CP, and analyzes the particle in question as the head C of the CP.

- | | | |
|-----|---|---|
| (5) | a. Anh gặp ai?
you meet who
'Who did you meet?' | b. Nam.
Nam
'Nam.' |
| | c. Gặp Nam.
meet Nam
'(I) met Nam.' | d. Tôi gặp Nam.
I meet Nam
'I met Nam.' |

Of the three felicitous answers (5b, c, d), (5b) is the most frequent utterance in informal conversations where all but the focused constituent is deleted. In polarity focus contexts, it is common that the given propositional content is left unpronounced. For instance, all but the aspectual particles is deleted in (6b).

- | | | |
|-----|---|---|
| (6) | a. Anh gặp Nam chưa?
you meet Nam not.yet
'Have you met Nam?' | b. Rồi / Chưa.
already not.yet
'Already./ Not yet.' |
|-----|---|---|

It is possible to provide a tense-aspect marker or a 'yes-particle' as the answer to a polarity question even though such an answer is considered to be impolite.³

- | | | |
|-----|---|--|
| (7) | a. Anh có đi không?
you Q go Q
'Did you go?' / 'Will you go?' | b. Sẽ/Có.
FUT/do
'I will/I did.' |
|-----|---|--|

II.IV Focus

Focus in Vietnamese is generally realized in situ and is prosodically marked, namely by placing the stress on the focus element (Jannedy 2007, and references therein). Vietnamese also marks focus by adjoining a particle, homophonic to the existential/possessive verb and the yes-no particle, to the focused element (Tran 2012). The relevant role of this particle to the issue under investigation will be discussed in section 4.

III. The non-canonical structure

III.I The structure and the licensing context

We have seen above that a canonical sentence in Vietnamese displays a SVO word order, and that the topic is linearly followed by the assumed topic particle *thì*. In what follows we will look at a non-canonical construction. Briefly, the non-canonical construction involves a clause followed by the particle *thì* (the particle *là* and the covert one are ungrammatical in this construction), and what looks like a verb, or the existential/possessive verb to be precise. This construction cannot be used out of the blue, but requires contextual licensing: The context given in (8A, B) facilitates the non-canonical construction (8a), not the canonical one (8b).

³It is controversial with respect to the category of the preverbal particle *sẽ* that somehow encodes temporal reference. I gloss it as FUT just for ease of exposition.

- (12) Nam là giám đốc.
 Nam be director
 ‘Nam is a director.’

We have seen that *có* in the examples above is not an instance of the lexical verb ‘exist/have’. If it is a functional element, what is its role in the sentence structure? Consider the examples in (13) and (14) where it occurs in the pre-verbal position. The gloss in these examples is mine, but the translation is by the authors.

- (13) Hôm qua tôi có đi săn.
 yesterday I CO go hunting
 ‘Yesterday I did go hunting. (Thompson 1965:216)

Thompson (1965:216) assumes that *có* “[...] is in many ways similar to the English auxiliary verb *do*“, and “[...] denotes a kind of emphasis of the verb it precedes.” Other authors hold a somewhat similar view. For instance, Nguyen (1997:152) proposes that ‘[*có*] is used to emphasize a confirmation’.

- (14) X có ăn hối lộ.
 X CO eat bribe
 ‘X did take bribe.’ Nguyen (1997:152)

The only formal analysis of this element to date is Duffield (2007) who analyzes the pre-verbal *có* as the lexical realization of the head of the Assertion Phrase (AsrP), selected by the head T (Tense) of the Tense Phrase (TP). In the following I show that the pre-verbal *có* is a verum focus marker.

First, the functional *có* needs contextual licensing. As shown by the examples given below, the functional *có* is felicitously used in uncertainty contexts (15), and denial contexts (16).

- (15) I wonder whether Nam goes to church or not.
 Nam #(có) đi nhà thờ.
 Nam VR go to church
 ‘Nam does go to church.’

- (16) Tan didn't help Mai.
 Không. Tân #(có) giúp Mai.
 not Tan VR help Mai.
 ‘No, (that's not true). Tan did help Mai.’

The contexts that license the functional *có*, namely the indirect yes-no question in (15) and the denial context in (16), are known in the literature as the verum focus contexts. It is therefore reasonable to assume that *có* is a verum focus marker; henceforth, it is glossed as VR. In these contexts, the propositions are given, and the focus is on the polarity, that is, on whether the proposition is true or not.

We have observed previously that the non-canonical construction in question cannot be used out of the blue, and needs contextual licensing. It is interesting that its

licensing context is parallel to one of those of the preverbal *có* as verum focus marker in canonical constructions, that is, the denial context.

- (17) Tan helped Mai.
 Không. Lan giúp Mai **thì có**.
 not Lan help Mai PRT VR
 ‘No, (that’s not true). (The truth is) Lan did help Mai.’

The obvious difference between (16) and (17) is the obligatory occurrence of *có* (17): Its absence renders (16) as infelicitous, but (17) as ungrammatical. At a first approximation it seems safe to assume that the functional *có* in (17), the non-canonical construction, is a verum focus marker. Syntactically, it adjoins to the TP (18a). Its semantic contribution to the propositional content of the TP is null: It is an identity function with the lexical entry given in (18c), the ordinary value semantics, and the focus value semantics is as in (18b).

- (18) a. $[_{TP} [_{TP} \text{ có } [_{TP}]]]$
 b. $[[\text{có} (p)]]^f = \{\lambda p[\lambda w[p(w)]], \lambda p[\lambda w[\neg p(w)]]\}$
 c. $[[\text{có}]]^o = \lambda p. \lambda w p(w)$

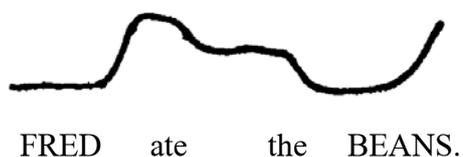
The focus value indicates that the proposition is given, and only the polarity is focused. We have observed that givenness material generally undergoes ellipsis as evidenced by the yes-no questions in (6) and (7). It is unclear why the non-canonical construction does not apply it. What prevents it? To answer this question, let us first examine the information structural status of the TP.

IV. Contrastive topic and lone contrastive topic

IV.I Contrastive topic (CT) realization

Before discussing the information structural status of the TP that the verum focus adjoins to, it is necessary to have a brief review of the current analyses of an information structural category that we have not discussed: contrastive topic (CT). Formal semantics, based mainly on European languages, provides an intonation based analysis of CT: a constituent marked by the A-accent (rise-fall intonation) is referred to as the focus of the sentence, and a constituent marked by B-accent (fall-rise intonation) the contrastive topic (Jackendoff 1972, Roberts 1996, Krifka 1999, Büring 2003, among others), as illustrated below.

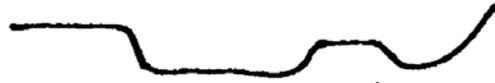
- (19) a. What about FRED? What did HE eat?



[FRED]_{B-accent} [the BEANS]_{A-accent} Büring (2003:511-512)

In (19a), the B-accent on the subject NP ‘Fred’ indicates that it is a contrastive topic, as opposed to the object NP ‘the beans’ that bears an A-accent, and is construed as a focus. By contrast, in (19b), the subject NP ‘Fred’ as an instance of focus receives an A-accent, while the object NP ‘the beans’ is an instance of contrastive topic bearing a B-accent.

b. Well, and what about the BEANS? Who ate THEM?



FRED ate the BEANS.

[FRED]_{A-accent} [the BEANS]_{B-accent} Büring (2003:511-512)

As far as I am informed, Vietnamese does not exhibit the use of B-accent for contrastive topic. It is more likely that the language makes use of other means, for instance, syntactic means. If a contrastive topic is as Krifka (2006) explicates, that is, as an aboutness topic that contains a focus, then a contrastive topic is expected to undergo topicalization in Vietnamese. In fact, English also employs syntactic means to mark CT: Functional researchers regard preposing constructions as a means of contrastive topic marking (Chafe 1976, Prince, 1981, Lambrecht 1994, among others). For instance, contrastive topics appear at the left edge of the clause.

(20) What about the apples? Who ate them?

[Apples]_{CT} [Mary]_F ate.

Now let us turn to the question whether lone CT is possible across languages. Büring (2003) seems to indicate that lone CT is language specific: “In Büring (1997b) I pointed out that a contrastive topic in German must be followed by at least one focus. Accordingly, CT+CT doesn’t exist, just as little as F+CT or sole CT. In English the situation is different in that we do find sole B-accent, which should be indicative of a sole contrastive topic” (Büring 2003: 532). Recently, Constant (2014) specifies cases where an utterance surfaces with only the B-accent, and refers to this type of utterances as a lone-CT construction. The example in (21) from Constant (2014), where only *Persephone* bears the rising contour/the B-accent, is illustrative.

(21) **Lone CT**

A: Did Persephone and Antonio bring vegetarian dishes?
 B: [Persephone]_{CT} brought one...
 L+H* L-H% (Constant 2014:23)

Furthermore, there are cases where the contrastive topic is the entire clause; namely, it is the clause that bears the rising intonation or the B-accent. Constant (2014) refers to

such cases as Sentential CT constructions, and proposes that Sentential CT is a subtype of Lone CT.

(22) **Sentential CT**

- A: Why are you so happy? Did Fred come over?
 B: [Fred came over]_{CT} ... but that's not why I'm so happy...
 L+H* L-H% (Constant 2014:46)

Interestingly, the Lone CT example in (22) can be rendered into Vietnamese using the non-canonical construction as in (23): the contrastive topic is marked by the particle *thì* and the verum focus is marked by *có*.

(23) Did Nam and Hoa bring cookies to the class?

- a. [Hoa]_{CT} **thì** [có]_F ...
 Hoa PRT VR
 'Hoa did.'
- b. [Hoa]_{CT} **thì** [có]_F mang bánh đến...
 Hoa PRT VR bring cake arrive.
 'Hoa did bring cookies.'
- c. còn [Nam]_{CT} **thì** [không]_F.
 but Nam PRT not
 'but Nam didn't.'

Even though either (23a) or (23b) is felicitous as an answer to the context question, the short form in (23a) is more natural where the given material is deleted. The expected continuation (23a) or (23b) is the contrastive clause (23c): 'but Nam didn't'.

Back to the question in section 3. If the non-canonical construction involves a verum focus, and since the focus value indicates that the polarity is in focus, while the proposition is given, the given material is expected to undergo ellipsis as evidenced by the yes-no questions in (6) and (7). But it does not. Why? The answer is now obvious. The verum focus does not operate on the polarity of the given proposition, but on the polarity of the alternative propositions triggered by the CT. The contrastive topic value of a non-canonical sentence such as (17) repeated below is given in (24).

- (17) Lan giúp Mai **thì có**.
 Lan help Mai PRT VR
 (The truth is) 'Lan did help Mai.'

$$(24) \quad [[(p) \text{ thì có}]]^{\text{ct}} = \{ \{ \lambda p[\lambda w[p(w)]], \lambda p[\lambda w[\neg p(w)]] \}, \{ \lambda p'[\lambda w[p'(w)]], \lambda p'[\lambda w[\neg p'(w)]] \}, \{ \lambda p''[\lambda w[p''(w)]], \lambda p''[\lambda w[\neg p''(w)]] \} \} \dots \}$$

The contrastive topic value, in the spirit of Büring (2003), is a set of yes-no questions, namely a set of sets of the propositions of the form $\{ \{ p', \text{ not } p' \}, \{ p'', \text{ not } p'' \} \dots \}$, where p', p'' are the propositions in which the contrastive topic marked

element is replaced with alternatives to it: {{Nam helped Mai, Nam did not help Mai}, {Lan helped Mai, Lan did not help Mai}...}.

IV.II Particle *thì* as a discourse template marker

We have observed that the particle *thì* partitions the sentence into either topic-comment or background-focus, and therefore should not be analyzed as a topic head or topic marker. Following Neeleman and van de Koot (2007), I assume that the movement of the topic is to mark the comment, and that of the focus is to mark the background. Simply put, as a result of the movement of the topic (contrastive topic), the constituent resulted from the movement is construed as comment, and similarly, the movement of the focus gives rise to the construal of the remaining constituent as background. The movement of the CT witnessed in Vietnamese is to obey the mapping rules proposed by Neeleman, and van de Koot (2007) in (25), where the information structure in (25b) is ruled out. The topic is followed by a Kleene star in (25a) to indicate that there may be more topics.

- (25) a. topic* [COMMENT FOCUS [BACKGROUND]]
 b. *FOCUS [BACKGROUND topic [COMMENT]]

For illustration, consider the non-canonical examples in (23). I assume that (23a) is base generated as in (26a): The information structure formed by the verum focus *có* and the TP is ruled out by the mapping rule given in (25b), where the background following the focus consists of the topic, *Hoa*, and the comment, *bring the cookies arrive*. To comply with the mapping rule (25a), left dislocation of the contrastive topic is required, yielding (26b), where the comment following the topic includes only the focus (the verum focus), and the optional background: The deletion of ‘bring the cookies arrive’ is not obligatory.

- (26) a. [**thì** [TP **có** [TP [Hoa]_{CT} mang bánh đến]]]
 PRT VR Hoa bring cookies arrive
 b. [[Hoa] **thì** [TP **có** [TP [~~Hoa~~]_{CT} ~~mang bánh đến~~]]]
 Hoa PRT VR Hoa bring cookies arrive

The example in (23) is parallel to the following English example in Constant (2014), where on Constant’s analysis, the first utterance of (27B) ‘Our first kid does’ is a case of Lone CT.

- (27) A: Do your kids have Swiss citizenship?
 B: [Our first]_{CT} kid does...
 L+H* L-H%
 ?? [our second kid]_{CT} does...
 L+H* L-H%

But [our third kid]_{CT} [doesn't]_{Exh.}
 L+H* L-H% H*L-L% (Constant 2014:143)

However, if this is the case, it would be difficult to explain why the third utterance 'But our third kid doesn't' is not a Lone CT given that they both contribute to the resolution of the same question.⁴ It is more plausible that the auxiliary 'do' in the first sentence functions as a verum focus, the same as the verum focus *có* in Vietnamese, but for unknown reason, the expected accent is not realized.

Continuing with the verum focus analysis, I argue that the example in (28), which according to Büring (2003) is an instance of Lone CT, also displays a CT+VF pattern, and the verum focus of (28) is realized by the strong form [kæn], not the weak form [kən] of the modal verb 'can'.

(28) Can Jack and Bill come to tea? – BILL_{CT} can. (Büring 2003:532)

The non-canonical construction in Vietnamese uses a modal verb instead of a verum focus to express the short answer in (28), as illustrated in (29). This is not unexpected given that the use of a modal verb as a short answer to a yes-no question in Vietnamese is quite common.

(29) Can Nam and Trung come to tea?
 Nam thì được.
 Nam PRT can
 'Nam can.'

The non-canonical construction can also realize sentential CT constructions, namely constructions where the entire clause functions as a contrastive topic. As shown in (30), the first clause 'the workers work' (30a) contrasts with the second clause 'the boss does not pay them their salary' (30b).

(30) What caused the strike yesterday?
 a. Vì [công nhân làm]_{CT} thì [có]_F
 because worker work PRT VR
 'Because the workers work...'
 b. mà [chủ trả lương]_{CT} thì [không]_F.
 but boss pay salary PRT not
 'but the boss does not pay them their salary.'

V. Conclusion

The findings in Vietnamese indicate that contrastive topic marking requires the co-occurrence of focus marking. Constructions that can be specified as Lone CT in Vietnamese in fact involve verum focus marking. It is likely that Lone CT across

⁴ The subscripted *Exh* phrase according to Constant (2014) is an exhaustive focus that provides the complete answer to the question.

languages is accompanied by verum focus marking, and languages differ as to how this verum focus is realized: syntax, phonology, or both.

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