

# Conjunction as Topicalizer in Vietnamese

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Conjunctions such as English *then* appear to introduce predicative clauses by setting off the units of speech immediately preceding them. Such a conjunction in Vietnamese is the conjunction *thì* 'then, so then'. It occurs interclausally and also between a subject noun phrase and its predicate, between an initial outer (peripheral) time phrase or clause and the sentence, or between a noun phrase or proposition and a stative predicate. These structures are widely used in many styles of speech, both oral and written. The claim is made here that *thì* has a general discourse-related topicalizing function, explicitly marking background for the main proposition which the speaker wishes to communicate, and that it is this explicit marking allowing for 'immediate' communication that makes this conjunction so popular. A subsidiary claim is that such a function is an inchoative one, that conjunctions such as *thì* introduce inchoative predications: Given X *then* predicate Y as coming about.<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction

Ideas in Mainland Southeast Asia tend to be expressed in seemingly coordinate or sequential units, in a linear fashion rather than in clause-within-clause constructions. These units are frequently unmarked by conjunctions. Therefore, when conjunctions are used, they signal the likelihood that the speaker wishes to make some point about the relationship between the clauses involved with that conjunction. Some conjunctions do not have meanings that are restricted enough to be quite clear about the relationship being expressed. It is that sort of conjunction that I will examine here, principally one conjunction in Vietnamese but with a brief description of a similar conjunction in Hmong, in an attempt to clarify the function of the Vietnamese conjunction.

I will not touch on the issue of topic prominence versus subject prominence as discussed in Li & Thompson 1976 and Dyvik 1984. I will discuss merely the specific cluster of structures involving one particular conjunction. In this respect, I will assume subjects, not topics, in ordinary Vietnamese sentences.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper owes much to earlier work done on the Hmong conjunction discussed in Sec. 1.1 and to persons who were helpful to me in writing that paper. For helpful consultation on this paper I am particularly indebted to Phuong Tonthat, as well as to his wife, Lo-Giang Tran, Long Nguyen, and to Anthony Diller.

### 1.1 A Hmong conjunction

In an earlier paper (Clark 1988) I discussed a sentence-linking word in the White Hmong language of Laos which I claimed was a conjunction with inchoative properties (becoming, happening, 'and so', '(and) then'), which occurs mainly in the environment  $S_1 \text{ --- } S_2$ . Sometimes  $S_1$  is a conditional sentence, sometimes it is an independent sentence. I suggested that this conjunction functioned to 'topicalize', to background or state as given, the first sentence, with  $S_2$  being the *main foregrounded proposition, which is often new information*. The same conjunction may intervene between a subject NP and its verb and serves to topicalize the subject in a discourse context. This Hmong conjunction appears to be derived from an intransitive goal verb meaning 'come (back), return'. The following Hmong sentences illustrate these types.<sup>2</sup> In (1)  $S_1$  is, by the presence of *los*, explicitly stated as given for the proposition in  $S_2$ . In the complex sentence in (2)  $S_1$  is a conditional clause. (For discussion of conditionals as topicalized clauses see below and Haiman 1978.) (3) has the form (X implied); NP \_\_\_ Pred, where *los* topicalizes or backgrounds the subject NP, and either the NP or the Pred have reference to X.

(1) *Peb los txog tim no*  
 we come reaching place across this  
*los tsis muaj cov Hmoob nyob ntawm no.*  
 then not have group Hmong stay place at this  
 'We've come over here and there aren't any Hmong living here.'

(2) (*Yog*) *koj tsis pom qab sau no*  
 be that you not know write this  
*los tsis ua li cas.*  
 then not make as how  
 'If you don't know how to write this, (then) it doesn't matter.'

(3) ... *Peb los tseem noj qab nyob zoo li qub thiab*  
 we then still be happy and well as old also  
 ... 'As for us, we're still fine as usual.'

### 1.2 The Vietnamese language

The Vietnamese language, the primary language spoken in Vietnam, is a member of the Austroasiatic language family. It is spoken along the coastal and delta regions of eastern Mainland Southeast Asia by approximately sixty million people and by some tens of thousands of refugees and residents in the United States, Canada, Australia, France, many other countries, and in refugee camps in HongKong, Thailand, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Like Vietnamese, Hmong (Hmong-Mien/Miao-Yao language family) is a tonal, uninflected primarily SVO language. The romanization used here is that used by the Hmong in Laos prior to 1975 (see Smalley 1976:87-88 and Bertrais 1979) and by the White Hmong in the U.S. and elsewhere. Double vowel symbols indicate Vng and orthographic final consonants indicate tone:

-b high, -j high falling, -v mid rising, 0 mid, -g low falling breathy,  
 -s low, -m low with final glottal, -d low rising.

Vietnamese examples are in standard Vietnamese orthography.

Vietnamese fits well into the areal linguistic patterns of Mainland Southeast Asia. Whether the type of conjoined structures discussed here is one of these areal patterns, a typological feature, or a general language pattern is still a question. I would hypothesize at this point that it is the latter but perhaps with particular areal characteristics related to the overall configurations of speech in the area, especially the running linear pattern of sentences mentioned above.

## 2. A Vietnamese conjunction

I will discuss here a Vietnamese word which appears to be a conjunction with a discourse function similar to that of the Hmong conjunction. The word is *thì* then, so then'. Nguyen D.H. (1968:143) states that 'grade-school teachers admonish children for overusing the particle *thì* ... but actually [it] occurs very frequently in natural speech, serving as [a] marker separating the comment from the topic.' In fact, usage is quite common, as illustrated in this section. The sentences in (4) and (5) are two of his examples (1968:144 and 148, respectively). More examples of natural conversation follow, (6) and (7) from Huffman & Tran 1980:204. In all cases, *thì* implies some degree of contrast or comparison, usually with an actual or implied antecedent.

- (4) Anh Lâm (thì) ở nhà  
older bro. Lam then stay home  
'(Elder brother) Lam stayed home.'
- (5) Mà thì gầy, nó thì béo  
youFam then thin 3sg then fat  
'You are skinny, and he is fat.'
- (6) Nhạc Việt Nam hay tây phương thì tùy anh chọn  
music Vietnam or the West then up to brother choose  
'Vietnamese music or Western music, it's up to you to choose.'
- (7) Anh lo ...; còn tôi thì lo việc dọn dẹp và ...  
bro. worry and I then worry work arrange and  
'You take care of ... and I'll take care of straightening up and ...'
- (8) Hôm nay tôi bận nhưng mai thì đi được  
today I busy but tomorrow then go able  
'I'm busy today but tomorrow I can go.'
- (9) Nếu chị thích thì chúng ta sẽ đi viếng Seattle  
if sister like then weIncl will go visit Seattle  
'If you like, we'll go visit Seattle.'

This conjunction is not uncommon in letters (10); modern fiction, as in (11) from Tran 1988:20, and (12) and (13) from Nguyen N.N. 1986:93 & 96; and in written discussion, as in (14) from TCNN:1 and (15) from Le 1986:15.

- (10) *Có chị Kim sang đây thì vui lắm.*  
 have sister Kim cross here then happy very  
 'Kim, if you come over here (to visit), that will be great.'
- Bây giờ thì Thu sẽ... mong đến ngày ấy*  
 now then Thu will expect to day that  
 'So now, I (Thu) will wait and hope for that day.'
- (11) ... *nhưng người thì già quá người trẻ quá*  
 but person then old too much person young too much  
 '... but then they're too old or too young.'
- (12) *Vịt xào măng thì nhất.*  
 duck cook with bamboo shoots then first  
 'Duck cooked with bamboo shoots is the best.'
- (13) *Đang lúc toan quay về, thì thấy một đám...*  
 in midst moment about to turn return then see one group  
 'He was about to turn to go back when he saw a group of ...'
- (14) *Về phần chúng tôi thì chúng tôi xin thú rằng...*  
 about part weExcl then weExcl request admit that  
 'For our part, we readily acknowledge that ...'
- (15) *Nhưng sau năm 1637 khi chính phủ Nhật...*  
 but after year 1637 time when government Japan  
*thì số người Nhật ở Hội An giảm hẳn đi*  
 then nu. person Japan at Hoi An decrease completely away  
 'But after 1637, when the Japanese government,  
 the number of Japanese in Hoi An greatly decreased.'

Furthermore, this conjunction is common in proverbs, as in (16) and (17) from TNLG: 5&7, and can be found in plenty in retold folktales, as in (18) from TCNN: 11 (1932) and (19) from CTTD (1989).

- (16) *Ăn mắm thì ngắm về sau*  
 eat fish sauce then aim,view regarding after  
 'When one is poor (eats fish sauce), one has to look ahead.'
- (17) *Biết thì thưa thốt, không biết thì dựa cột mà nghe*  
 know then speak-out not know then lean pillar yet listen  
 'If one knows then one should speak out (but politely); if one doesn't know then one should lean against the pillar and listen to others.'
- (18) *Đến lúc mở ra, ... định chia nhau,*  
 arrive moment open out intend divide each other  
*thì vàng chẳng thấy đâu*  
 then gold not see at all  
 'When the time came to open it, intending to divide the gold, they saw no gold at all.'

- (19) *Cô dâu, hay đúng hơn là vợ anh*  
 bride or exact more be wife he  
*thì ngồi ở một bàn lớn*  
 then sit at one table big  
 ‘The bride, or more precisely his own fiancée (!), sat at a big table.’

It occurs as well in classical literature. The classic poem *Chinh Phụ Ngâm* (The Song of a Soldier’s Wife) was first written in classical Chinese in the 18th century by a Vietnamese poet; the most well-known Vietnamese version was written, from the original Chinese, later in the same century by another poet. (See Huynh 1986:vii-viii.) The word *thì* occurs both in the Sino-Vietnamese transcription of the Chinese version and in the Vietnamese version, an example of the latter shown in (20) (Huynh 1986:64-65, lines 363-4).

- (20) *Thiếp xin chàng chớ bạc đầu,*  
 I(to husb.) request you(husb.) don’t silver head  
*thiếp thì giữ mãi lấy màu trẻ trung*  
 I then keep forever take color youthful  
 ‘To silver may age never turn your hair! And may I ever keep the looks of youth!’

*Thì* also occurs in popular contemporary songs, such as in Pham Duy’s 1960 *ai vô xứ Huế thì vô* (‘Whoever wants to go down to Hue can go’), popularized by Duy-Khanh’s 1964 *Ai ra xứ Huế* (Whoever goes up to Hue), and in the following extract from Song Ngọc’s 1964 *Giã từ kỷ niệm* (‘Farewell to memories’).

- (21) *Có yêu thì xin “đừng... phụ lòng em”*  
 have to love then request don’t reject young sib.  
 ‘If you love me, I beg you: don’t let me down.’

It is clear from all these examples that *thì* is used in many ways, both formal and informal, spoken and written, as well as in both early and modern times. The following sections will elaborate on the different types of grammatical structures in which *thì* occurs.

### Types of sentences with *thì*

Unlike the conjunction *los* in Hmong, which occurs most intersententially, (1)-(2) above, the Vietnamese conjunction *thì* occurs more often following subject P’s, as in (4-7), (11-12) and (19-20) above, or between a conditional clause and the following main proposition, as in (9-10), (17) and (21) above. However, it may occur following other types of phrases and clauses with, I believe, a similar function. In this section, I will comment on the various types of environments occurring with *thì*. To facilitate the discussion I will refer to the environment of *thì* as  $X_1\_X_2$ , where  $X_1$  may be a noun phrase (NP), a marked or unmarked subordinate clause ([S]), or an independent clause ( $S_1$ ), and  $X_2$  is a predicate (V) or an independent clause ( $S/S_2$ ).

## 3.1 NP topics: NP \_\_ V/S

In the NP–marked sentences mentioned above and in (22) from Huffman & Tran 1980:203 and (23) from Le 1986:13, the NP is the subject of the sentence (NP \_\_ V). The subjects set off by the conjunction are clearly topicalized in a discourse context. The marked sentence has an external referent with which the topic NP is typically in contrast; i.e., it occurs in a context something like ‘(and/but) as for \_\_’. The issue of old versus new information, etc., will be taken up following the illustrations of sentence types. (Note that the verb in (23) is a stative verb meaning ‘get, have the opportunity of, be able to’ and requires an embedded transitive sentence whose logical object is the subject of the stative verb, i.e. the NP topicalized by *thì*.)

(22) *Rượu mạnh thì chắc mắc tiền lắm*  
 whiskey then surely expensive money very  
 ‘Whiskey (as opposed to something else) is surely very expensive.’

(23) ... *ảnh hưởng của đô thị cổ này ...*  
 influence belonging city old this  
*thì ít được các tác giả đề cập tới*  
 then little get Plural writer mention to  
 ‘The influence of this ancient town on ... (nevertheless) has been little touched on by writers.’

Additional topicality can be given to a noun phrase by preposing it to its sentence, setting it off by *thì*, and then allowing the same NP or anaphoric reference to it repeated in its proper place within the sentence, as shown in (24) and (25), both from Nguyen K.T. 1975: 201-202, and in (26). *Thì* can be replaced by a pause in these sentences. In (24) and (26) it is the subject which is topicalized; in (25) the object is topicalized.

(24) *Tôi thì tôi đồng ý*  
 I then I agree  
 ‘As for me, I agree.’

(25) *Thằng bé này thì tôi biết nó lắm*  
 boy this then I know he very  
 ‘This boy, I know him well.’

(26) *Bà An thì bà ấy không đi được*  
 Mrs. An then she not go able  
 ‘(As for) Mrs. An, she can’t go.’

In (27), from Dyvik 1984:32, the inalienable possessor of the subject is made a topic in the same manner but without explicit reference within the sentence. The sentences in (28) are untopicalized versions of (27), the second being the most usual.

(27) *Tôi (thì) răng đau*  
 I then tooth ache  
 ‘As for me, I have a toothache.’ (‘Me, my tooth aches.’)

- (28) *Răng tôi đau*                      *Tôi đau răng*  
tooth I hurt                      I hurt tooth  
'My tooth aches.'                      'I hurt/ache in the tooth.'

Sometimes the topic NP is more specifically marked by being introduced by a preposition, as the abstract locative preposition 'about, with respect to, (returning to)' in (14) above. In Hmong this introductory marking is also done with a locative word, the noun meaning 'the place of/at/where', as in (29). In Thai as well, the same type of locative noun is used for this purpose (Tony Diller, personal communication). Vietnamese seems to prefer verb-like prepositions and conjunctions.

- (29) *Ntawm kuv thiab kuv niam los noj qab nyob zoo*  
place of I and I mother then happy and well  
'As for me and my mother, we're fine.'

Frequently such NP's (or PP's) with implied contrast are time phrases, giving NP(time)\_\_\_S, as in the second sentences in (8) and (10) above and the examples here. In (30) the subject 'I' can be repeated following *thì*, but without it is more natural. Note that the contrasting antecedent presupposed by *thì* (and by 'but') is given here; the presence of *thì* implies particular emphasis on the time period 'noon'. (31) is from Le 1986:15 and (32) from Thompson 1984-5:244. For those who would analyze 'inside' and 'after' as prepositions, the time phrases in (31) and (32) would be PP's rather than NP's; I agree with Thompson's (1984-5: 200-202) analysis as nouns in Vietnamese.

- (30) *Sáng nay tôi bận nhưng trưa thì gặp anh được*  
morning this I busy but noon then meet bro. able  
'I'm busy this morning but at lunchtime I can meet you.'

- (31) *Trong khi đó*  
inside time that  
*thì người Trung Hoa không ngừng tăng lên*  
then person China not stop increase up  
'During that time the Chinese people did not cease to increase.'

- (32) *Sau khi cụ Đàm ăn sáng xong ...*  
the time after old Mr. Dam eat morning finish  
*thì gặp hai ông Vỹ và Dong*  
then meet two man Vy and Dong  
'After Mr. Dam ate breakfast, he ran into the two fellows Vy and Dong.'

The discourse context of these topicalized NP's can be specifically marked by another conjunction roughly meaning 'and as for (and it remains that)' which occurs sentence initially, as in (7) above and (33) from CTTD and (34). Earlier in this section it was suggested that Vietnamese uses 'verb-like' conjunctions. The conjunction *còn* is synchronically derived from a homophonous verb meaning 'remain, be remaining, still be'.

(33) *Còn Luc thì tối vẫn về ngủ trong kho lúa*  
 and Luc then night still return sleep inside storehouse paddy  
 'As for Luc, he still slept in the barn at night.'

(34) ... *còn chị tôi thì học lịch sử Đông Nam Á*  
 and sister I then study history Southeast Asia  
 '(My brother studies ...) and my sister studies SE Asian history.'

### 3.2 Conditionals and other subordinate clauses: [S]\_\_S<sub>2</sub>

The sentences in (9-10), (17), and (21) above are introduced by conditional clauses, although only (9) is lexically marked as such, by the subordinating hypothetical conjunction 'if'. Following are more examples of conditional clauses marked by subordinating conjunctions and set off from the main clause by *thì*. Note that the conjunction *thì* is optional with such conditional clauses as in (35), but that *thì* is preferred when there is no subordinating conjunction, as in (36), which has the same meaning. (37) is from TCNN:11 and (38) from Nguyen K.T. 1975:185 (with his gloss 'if'; the gloss 'yet' in (39) is my own).

(35) *Nếu anh không thấy ai ở bên đó*  
 if brother not perceive who at side that  
*(thì) anh không cần ở lại một mình.*  
 then brother not need stay back one self  
 'If you don't see anyone over there, you don't have to stay there by yourself.'

(36) *Anh không thấy ai ở bên đó*  
 brother not see who at side that  
*thì anh không cần ở lại một mình*  
 then brother not need stay back one self  
 (Same meaning as (35).)

(37) *Ngộ đem nay có đứa nào lấy mất*  
 if by chance night this have person which take lose  
*thì làm thế nào?*  
 then do so which  
 'And if tonight somebody steals it, then what do we do?'

(38) *Anh mà đến thì chị ấy rất vui lòng.*  
 you if come then she very glad  
 'She will be very glad if you come.'

(39) *Thu mà trở qua lần này*  
 Thu yet return across occasion this  
*thì Thu đâu có ở Sài Gòn nữa.*  
 then Thu not at all have stay Saigon more  
 'If you come back over now (however), you won't be staying in Saigon any more.'



Some conditionals are expressed by means of question words, which imply indenfiniteness, as in (40) from TCNN:11, and many are introduced by the existential 'to exist, have', as in (10) and (21) above and (41) from TCNN:13.

(40) ... *đứa nào nó lấy thì lấy, tao không tiếc*  
 person which he take then take I Fam not regret  
 'Whoever(if somebody) takes it then they take it; I have no regrets.'

(41) *Có phải của trời cho,*  
 have correct belonging heaven give  
*thì tự khắc nó phải bò về nhà*  
 then naturally it must crawl back to house  
 'If it's true that it's a gift of heaven then naturally it must come home to us.'

As stated above with respect to (10), (17), and (21), conditionals with *thì* are frequently otherwise unmarked as conditionals. More examples are in (42) from TCNN:12, (43) from Thompson 1984-5:256, (44) from Dyvik 1984:29, and (45) from Nguyen D.H.1968:144. Dyvik (1984:30-31) states that (44) is ambiguous, as shown, as to whether it should have a conditional or temporal interpretation but may be disambiguated by a subordinating conditional conjunction or a nominalizing time noun. Without *thì*, (45) is a complex causative sentence; it is the presence of *thì* which marks the first clause as conditional and subordinate and implies a preceding warning 'don't laugh!' (Phuong Tonthat and Lo-Giang Tran, personal communication).

(42) *Bỏ ở giữa trời*  
 leave at middle sky  
*thì tất có đứa nó phải khiêng đi*  
 then surely have person he must carry away  
 'If you leave it out in the open, of course someone is going to take it.'

(43) *Sau này nhiều nhà không có cành đào*  
 after this many house not have branch peach  
*thì họ vẽ cành đào vào tờ giấy bùa*  
 then they draw branch peach onto paper amulet  
 'After this many families, if they didn't have peach branches, they drew peach branches on amulets.'

(44) *Anh đi Sài Gòn, thì tôi đi với anh*  
 you go Saigon then I go join [with] you  
 'If you go to Saigon, then I will go with you.'  
 'When you go to Saigon, then I will go with you.'

(45) *Anh cười (thì) làm em thẹn*  
 brother laugh then make young.sib. be ashamed  
 without *thì* : 'Your laughing made me bashful.'  
 with *thì* : 'If you laugh, it will make me bashful.' (LGT)

For some of the time elements which occur as subordinates with *thì* and a following sentence, it is difficult to say whether they are time phrases (NP\_\_S) or clauses ([S]\_\_S<sub>2</sub>). Such is the case with (13) above and (46) here from TCNN:11.

- (46) *Đang lúc hai vợ chồng trò chuyện nhau*  
 during moment two wife husband talk each other  
*thì có hai thằng kẻ trộm rình ở ngoài nhà*  
 then have two thief spy at outside house  
 'While the couple were talking together there were two thieves outside listening.'

The word *đang* is ordinarily a preverbal auxiliary with the approximate meaning 'to be in the process of, be in the midst of'. When it occurs preceding a noun instead of a verb, as in (13) and (46), its status comes into question. One could hypothesize that it is a synchronically derived preposition which occurs with certain time nouns, introducing time phrases. Alternatively, one might claim that it is a verb which, because of its [+durative] semantic property, may occur with a time noun, in which case it introduces a time clause. (Thompson (1984-5:270) considers *đang* in this use to be a noun but does not clarify his analysis.) That the time phrase/clause introduced by *đang* is subordinate to the sentence introduced by *thì* there is no question (i.e. [X]\_\_S<sub>2</sub>). The time clause in (18) above and repeated here is clearly a subordinate clause. Note that the proposition introduced by *thì* has a topicalized object, giving the sentence an ergative-like construction.

- ((18)) *Đến lúc mở ra, ... định chia nhau,*  
 arrive moment open out intend divide each other  
*thì vàng chẳng thấy đâu*  
 then gold not see at all  
 'When the time came to open it, intending to divide the gold, they saw no gold at all.'

### 3.3 'Interdependent' non-subordinate clauses: S<sub>1</sub>\_\_S<sub>2</sub>

When two grammatically independent sentences are related by *thì*, as in (47) from CTTD, (48) from TCNN:12, and (49), the status of both sentences is in doubt with respect to whether or not subordination is involved. It appears that although such sentences frequently translate into English with subordinate clauses, in their Vietnamese structure they are grammatically independent (although the presence of 'just' in (47) may mark its clause as a temporal subordinate).

- (47) *Anh vừa định nhặt dao ...*  
 brother just decide pick up knife  
*thì bỗng thấy một lão trượng ... đứng trước mặt*  
 then sudden see one old man stand before face  
 'He just decided to pick up his machete ..., when suddenly he saw an old man standing in front of him.'

- (48) *Người ấy đem mở ra xem*  
 person that take open out see  
*thì thấy vàng vẫn còn nguyên như trước*  
 then see gold still intact as before  
 'He opened it up to see and saw that the gold was still there as before.'

- (49) *Một ngày sau tôi đến đó*  
 one day after I reach there  
*thì cô đã bỏ đi rồi*  
 then Miss already leave go already  
 'The day after, I came there and she had left already.'

However, for proper interpretation, such sentences are semantically interdependent. In most cases, the first clause provides backgrounding for information in the second clause. Foley & Van Valin (1984:256ff) and Olson (1981) have given the term 'cosubordination' to clause linkages that do not involve embedding but are not altogether independent. This is a useful term if it is understood that cosubordination is a cover term for several types of interdependencies. Even just with the use of the conjunction *thì* there are different semantic relationships, such as backgrounding for new information, new information for contrast foregrounding, predication (see discussion on stative verbs below), consequential, sequential, etc.

#### 3.4 Sequential events: $S_1, \_ S_2$

Truly independent sentences expressing logical sequence can be conjoined by *hì*. Compare (50), whose sentences do not express sequence, with (51) and (52), which have sequential events. In (50) *thì* acts rather like a copula which sets off the first sentence as background to the resultative fact stated in the second sentence. Whether the first clauses of such sequential constructions as in (51)ff can be considered to be topicalization is open to question, although they are certainly, at least in the examples here, some form of backgrounding, and not just sequential event reporting.

- (50) *Chị đi cuối đường Lê Lợi*  
 sister go end street Le Loi  
*thì tới đường Hai Bà Trưng*  
 then reach street Hai Ba Trung  
 'When you get to the end of Le Loi Street, you'll have reached Hai Ba Trung Street.'  
 ('You go to the end of LL Street and you reach HBT Street.')

- (51) *Chị đi cuối đường Lê Lợi*  
 sister go end street Le Loi  
*thì đi bộ tới chợ*  
 then walk reaching market  
 'When you get to the end of Le Loi Street (then) walk to the market.'

- (52) (Chị) tới đường Hai Bà Trưng thì quẹo tay trái  
 sister reach street Hai Ba Trung then turn hand left  
 'When you reach Hai Ba Trung Street, (then) turn left.'

Huffman & Tran (1980:46) consider a clause such as the first clause in (52) to be a conditional clause. It is true that in a sense the first action is 'a prior condition to the second', but grammatically I do not believe this to be a subordinate conditional clause in Vietnamese. Nevertheless, even in these seemingly independent clauses, *thì* realizes a definite relationship in which the first clause does provide a prior condition for the event of the second clause. In true sequential sentences, *thì* is interchangeable with *rồi* 'and then (having finished, then...)' or may be preceded by *rồi* as shown in the following sentences:

- (53) Em đọc chuyện đó (rồi) thì làm bài  
 young.sib. read story that & then then do lesson  
 'Read that story then do the lesson.'

- (54) Tối hôm qua tôi xem TV (rồi) thì đi ngủ  
 night yesterday I watch TV & then then go sleep  
 'Last night I watched TV and then went to bed.'

### 3.5 Phrases and clauses with statives: NP/S \_\_ V(sttv)

The copula-like function of *thì* is most pronounced in sentences in which X<sub>2</sub> is a stative predicate. There are many such *thì* sentences as this, as can be seen in (5), (11-12), and (22) above, where, as in (55), X<sub>1</sub> is a noun phrase. X<sub>1</sub> may as frequently be a full clause, as in (10) above and (56) here.

- (55) Cái nón bài thơ chị mua ở Huế thì rất đẹp  
 thing conical hat poem sister buy at Hue then very pretty  
 'The hat of poetry you bought in Hue is very beautiful.'

- (56) Gần bên chị thì ..., xa chị thì bơ vơ, cô độc ...  
 be near side sister then be far sister then friendless lonely  
 'To be near you is (to feel happy), to be far from you is to be friendless and lonely.'

In these cases *thì* states an identity between X<sub>1</sub> and X<sub>2</sub>, with X<sub>2</sub> describing the state of the object or event of X<sub>1</sub>. Although a simple predicate may be a grammatical sentence in Vietnamese, here the stative predicate may not be a full sentence, it does not take a subject NP following *thì*. In fact, it is X<sub>1</sub> that becomes the logical subject or topic described by stative X<sub>2</sub>.

These and the following sentences appear to be true topic-comment sentences. From this it could be said that *thì* nominalizes the preceding clause. However, in Vietnamese, nominalization tends to occur only lexically, except in the case of time clauses (as can be seen in some examples in Sec.3.1). Furthermore, since conditionals and other clauses, as well as NP's, can be set off by *thì*, it is not necessary to postulate nominalization for these clauses, especially in a language which is so

highly 'verbal'. The sentence in (57) is from Khai 1972:200 and in (58) and (59) from Huffman & Tran 1980:42, 127.

- (57) Anh chia công tác cho tôi thì được  
brother divide work to I then be possible  
'It will be alright if you apportion the work to me.'
- (58) Đi xe lam thì mắc hơn... nhưng tiện hơn  
go taxi-bus then expensive more but handy more  
'To go by taxi-bus is more expensive but more convenient.'
- (59) Ông nói làm ruộng thì tự-do nhất.  
he say work rice field then free first  
'He says that farming provides the most freedom.'

### 3.6 Interesting miscellany

Dyvik, in discussing NP topics in Vietnamese (1984), gives some constructions which are not included in the sections above. The NP topic in (60) (from p.60) is the object from both the conditional clause preceding *thì* and the main clause following *thì*. It is grammatically possible (though awkward) for the object to be repeated in the subordinate (first) clause but not possible in the main (second) clause.

- (60) Chiếc xe này, nếu anh thích lắm, thì tôi sẽ mua  
Clsfr car this if you like very then I shall buy  
'As for this car, if you like it very much then I'll buy it.'

The sentence in (61) poses a grammatical problem, although not startlingly exceptional in Vietnamese. *Thì* sets off a locational phrase and introduces a kind of stative predicate having a postposed Patient, a structure I will not attempt to go into here. Regarding (61) Dyvik states (pp. 37-38) that 'some monovalent verbs are able to assign to a nominal complement the same semantic role which they otherwise assign to the topic/subject', as 'die' assigns to 'many people' here, and that the nominal complement cannot be 'markedly definite'.

- (61) Trong cuộc hỏa-hoạn ấy, thì chết nhiều người  
inside Clsfr fire that then die many person  
'During that fire many people died.'

(62) (from p.34) has a structure similar to the sentences (24) – (26) above having topicalized NP's which are repeated in the sentence. The topicalized element here, however, is the verb.

- (62) Nói thì bà Ba nói rất nhiều.  
speak then Mrs. Ba speak very much  
'As for talking, Mrs. Ba talks a lot.'

An interesting multiple embedding allows the object NP from the innermost (sentence-final) embedded clause to be topicalized to the front of the sentence. The topicality of 'this car' is enhanced by the presence of *thì*, although here *thì* does

not imply contrast with another NP. Clauses are enclosed in brackets. (63) is from p.59.

- (63) *Chiếc xe này, thì [tôi biết [ông Hai đã hỏi cô Ba, Clsfr car this then I know Mr. Hai already ask Miss Ba [ai nói với cô ấy rằng [tôi muốn mua]]]].*  
 who speak with Miss that that I want buy  
 'As for this car, I know that Mr. Hai already asked Miss Ba who had said to her that I wanted to buy it.'

In these examples the function of *thì* is essentially the same as in the examples cited earlier. It is this function which I will address in the following sections.

#### 4. The function of conjunction *thì*

Despite the quite varied types of sentences in which *thì* occurs, I believe that these types share some common attribute. I further believe that that attribute can be stated in terms of some form of topicalization of  $X_1$ , usually in a discourse context.

##### 4.1 Some analyses

Larry Thompson (Thompson 1984-5) labels *thì* 'then, in that case' as a focal head particle (257) and as an 'isolating particle', i.e., its clause ( $X_2$ ) is a head and the partner ( $X_1$ ) of its clause is not necessarily a head (261), and he implies (244) that *thì* gives some special marking to  $X_1$ . However, *thì* seems to play no role in what he calls 'emphatic topics' (245) and it is not clear that he would consider *thì* to be involved in a topicalization process.

Nguyen Dinh Hoa in his 1968 discussion of *thì* and *là* 'to be, be equal to' gives (148-9) the uses of *thì* as being for parallelism or contrast (see the sentence in (5) above), emphasis of the predicate or adverbials (time phrases), and as a topic marker. When sentence-initial in conversation (examples not given in this paper), *thì* shows transition or expresses reluctance. Later (Nguyen D.H. 1974:103) he states specifically that *thì* is a conjunction meaning 'then, in that case' and acts as a topic marker for noun phrases, occurring between 'the topic or theme' and the predicate.

Jones & Thong (1979:119) also label it a conjunction or connecting particle 'which is used to introduce phrases which define situations occurring at the same time, relatively, as the situation stated in the immediately preceding phrase, and may be the result of that situation', 'then, at that time'. They include examples of  $X_1$  as NP, subordinate clause, and independent clause.

Liem (1969) states that *thì* 'then, as far as it concerns, consequently' contrasts one clause with another or one tagmeme with a similar tagmeme in another clause (161), and operates as a clause level coordinator (175). Khai (1972:244) says that a main clause after a subordinate clause is marked by *thì*, but also (200) that *thì* is a verb which 'changes a kernel structure into its subject', referring to the  $X_1$  in the

$X_1$ —V(sttv) structure. Nguyen K.T. (1975) defines *thì* ‘be’ as denoting bilateral grammatical relations (153), a relation of condition (185), and a relation of interdependence ‘not subordination’ (186). He also discusses (201) the use of emphasis as in (24) and (26) above:  $NP_1$ — $NP_1$  V.

Huffman & Tran (1980:133) state that *thì* marks topics and conditional clauses, but in fact has ‘the same grammatical function wherever it occurs,...“given A, then B”.’

Dyvik (1984:63), characterizes topics as expressing givenness and wide scope (referential or ‘scene–setting’ function in relation to other constituents of the sentence ((10)), as not being assigned a semantic role by any co–occurring predicate, and, in Vietnamese, the possibility of being marked by *thì*. However, the non–assignment of semantic role surely applies only to some cases of NP’s with *thì*. One would question that, where *thì* intervenes between a ‘subject’ NP and its predicate, that NP is not assigned a role by the verb; i.e., is ‘Miss Ba’ in (64) (from p.16) a non–argument with respect to the verb ‘prepare’?

- (64) Tôi không biết ông Hai làm gì  
 I not know Mr. Hai do what  
 Cô Ba *thì* sửa-soạn tết.  
 Miss Ba then prepare festival  
 ‘I don’t know what Mr. Hai is doing.  
 As for Miss Ba, she is preparing the festival.’

There are obviously degrees of topicality and it appears that phrases and clauses marked by *thì* ver a range of degrees. In general, I am in agreement with Huffman & Tran’s statement and will discuss the function of *thì* as a topicalizer of givens in the next section.

#### 4.2 Topicalization, backgrounding, and givens

Most analysts of conjunction *thì* recognize it as ‘setting off’ whatever precedes it ( $X_1$ ) and stating some sort of relationship ‘connecting’  $X_1$  with the clause introduced by *thì*,  $X_2$ . Some recognize the function of *thì* as a topic marker, at least of noun phrases.

Most definitions of topic in linguistic literature are concerned with NP topics only, not clauses. However, Dyvik (1984) discusses clauses as topics and Haiman (1978) discusses at length the question of subordinate conditional clauses as topics. His definition of topic (585) is as follows:

The topic represents an entity whose existence is agreed upon by the speaker and his audience. As such, it constitutes the framework which has been selected for the following discourse.

His argument for conditionals as topics is based strongly on identity of marking: the assumption that ‘superficial similarities of form are reflections of underlying similarities of meaning’ (586, also discussion on p.565), i.e. identity of NP topic markers with markers for conditionals. Considering that *thì* marks both sub-

ordinate and non-subordinate clauses as well as NP's, and considering the fact of similar judgments of meaning, the argument for identity of marking is very sound for Vietnamese *thì*.

I prefer the term 'given' to 'topic' but see the explicit marking of givens as a form of topicalization, that is, one technique for background-foreground processing (see Hopper 1979). Regarding old versus new information, the facts favor instead the concept of given and new information. (See Prideaux 1987:310 and papers cited in Prideaux.) In some structures with *thì*, particularly the NP\_\_V structures, the givens are Dyvik's (1984:9) referential givenness (presupposition of unique reference), while with other structures they are his content-givenness (without presupposed reference). He states (19) that 'the less highly referential a [topic] is, the stronger is the suggestion of induced content-givenness,' which applies of course to  $X_1$  as clause.

With respect to those 'interdependent' structures  $S_1$ \_\_ $S_2$ , discussion by Givon (1989) seems relevant. He discusses degrees of semantic and grammatical integration for complementation, and, for inter-clausal relations, degrees of pragmatic and grammatical integration:

The more cohesive (predictable) the inter-clausal transition is pragmatically, i.e. the more integrated a clause is into a single thematic unit, the more integrated the discourse will be grammatically, i.e. the less finite the clause is.

Interdependent clauses presume this loss of finiteness in both clauses, and in the  $S_1$ \_\_ $S_2$  structures *thì* serves to signal greater pragmatic cohesion in terms of explicitly designating  $S_1$  as a given for  $S_2$ .

My own definition of topic, at least applicable for this case, is a little more qualified than Haiman's:

A topic is what is assumed by the speaker to be given background information. Since this information may not necessarily be old information, agreement regarding givenness may occur at the time of utterance; that is, the topic is assumed to be received by the audience as given background to what follows. Thus, a topic may be any grammatical structure which is marked for this property.

In the case of *thì*, the marking of both background and foreground is so explicit as to leave no doubt of immediate reception. It seems apparent that it is for this reason that *thì* is used so often and in so many different styles of speech. This aspect of immediate reception of backgrounding, then, could be said to be the central function of *thì*. It should be added that the foregrounded discourse following a topic set off by *thì* is usually a single comment.

### 4.3 Inchoative conjunctions

I will make the same claim here that was made for several conjunctions in Hmong (Clark 1988), that is that *thì* is an inchoative conjunction, that it marks its following clause with a semantic value of inchoation, i.e., it evokes commencement of actual or perceptual change, realization, consequence (sometimes contrary to expectation), discovery, etc. I claim that it is this semantic feature of [+inchoative]



that allows such conjunctions to be used in topicalizing functions, to background phrases or clauses as givens for foreground comment. Finer distinctive features of inchoative conjunctions determine the selection of conjunction for any particular background–foreground processing.

Finally, I tentatively claim that it is a universal tendency to use inchoative conjunctions or markers to set off or topicalize particular portions of speech. It is interesting to note the various uses of the English conjunction *then*. One use is as a coordinating temporal conjunction marking sequential events, as in (65). There are two inchoative *then*'s, one which sets off NP's (66), and one which introduces main clauses following conditional clauses (67). A subordinate clause is the only kind of clause preceding inchoative English *then*. The quote from Dyvik (1984:10) in (68) uses both inchoative *then*'s.

(65) *We chopped the veggies then cut up the meat.*

(66) *This menu, then, is the one we will use.*

(67) *If he's going to do the cooking, then I'll do the shopping.*

(68) *'The generalization, then, is that when topics have . . . , then the scope of their sentence operators . . .'*

It is interesting to note that if the English conjunction *then* is derived from the deictic time noun *then*, 'at that time', there is a parallel with Vietnamese *thì*. *Thì* is generally considered to be derived from the Sino–Vietnamese noun *thì* 'time'. (Chinese *shí* has roughly the meaning '(fixed) time'.)

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