Information structure and syntax interaction: A view from Vietnamese

Thuan Tran
University of Potsdam
thutran@uni-potsdam.de

Against the Cartographic view that Vietnamese thì is a topic marker, and that Vietnamese projects a Topic Phrase (Cao 1998; Duffield 2007; Tran 2009; Michaud & Brunelle 2015), the paper argues that the particle is a contrast particle in the spirit of Neeleman and Vermeulen (2012). The exchange in (1) indicates that the particle is appropriate in non-topical contexts, giving rise to the dislocation of the wh-phrase and the focus.

(1) a. *Ai_i thì Ba giúp t_i?*   b. *Nam_i thì Ba giúp t_i*
       who   PRT Ba help   Nam   PRT Ba help
       'Who will Ba help?'   'Ba will help Nam.'

Dislocation is also observed in contrastive topic context.

(2) a. *Tôi không biết   ai   mua   trà$_{CT}$, nhưng*
       I   not   know   who   buy   tea,   but…
       'I don't know who bought the tea, but …

  b. *Cà phê$_{iCT}$ thì Nam   mua t_i*
      coffee   PRT Nam   buy
      'Nam bought the coffee.'

Semantically, the contrast particle yields a contrast component in addition to the ordinary meaning. Specifically, the contrast component of (1a) suggests that there exists a set denoted by the D-linked wh-phrase alternative to the expressed non-D-linked one such that the speaker cannot or does not want to make an enquiry about. The contrast component of the contrastive focus (1b) conveys that there is at least one alternative y to the focus Nam such that it is not the case that the speaker will help y. Likewise, that of the contrastive topic (2b) states that there is at least one alternative such that the speaker cannot make or finds it difficult to make an assertion about.

References: • Duffield, N.. 2007. Aspects of Vietnamese clausal structure separating tense from assertion. *Linguistics* 45(4). 765–814. • Neeleman, A. & R. Vermeulen. 2012. The syntactic expression of information structure. In H. van Riemsdijk et al. (eds.), *The syntax of topic, focus, and contrast*,1–38. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton. • Tran, T. 2009. Wh-quantification in Vietnamese. PhD dissertation. University of Delaware.