

# Exploring Metaphors in Vietnamese Prepositions and Adverbial Particles

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**Abstract**—Every language has its own beauty, which is incrementally enhanced by the proliferation of metaphors. Numerous abstract concepts have been dissected through the lens of metaphorism. This paper sought to investigate metaphors in Vietnamese prepositions and adverbial particles denoting positions and movements in the space, for further understanding on how these prepositions and adverbial particles are mapped into other concepts such as status, value, and capability.

**Index Terms**—metaphors, Vietnamese prepositions, Vietnamese adverbial particles

## I. INTRODUCTION

Myriads of linguistic phenomena reflect human perceptions towards the surrounding world as pointed out by Nguyen (2005, p. 42): “The traces in human perceptions towards the world linger in language.” Behind the human perceptions towards the surrounding world is the exploration and explanation of the phenomena beyond human reach. Humans had not waited until they discovered the rotation of the earth around the sun and around its axis to portray the movement of the sun in daily language. Vietnamese folks observe and mind-map the analogy between the emergence and upwards motion of the sun and the growth of a plant and say:

(1) Mặt trời mọc ở hướng đông.

(The sun grows (= rises) in the east.)

Nonetheless, Vietnamese folks make the comparison between the downwards movement/ disappearance of the sun and the diving of a thing, say a diver or a fish, into the water, probably through their observation of the sun sinking into the sea from the beach or into the river from the river bank since Vietnam is the country of long coast and rivers.

(2) Mặt trời lặn ở hướng tây.

(The sun dives (= sets) in the west.)

Metaphors have been created in such a fashion by the ordinary folks, and are no longer considered as works of phenomenally competent writers (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The perception of Vietnamese people towards the movement of the sun culturally differs from that of English people, who employ the verbs “rise” and “set” to depict the upwards and downwards motion of the sun, as highlighted by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) that metaphors manifest themselves in everyday language, in every language, and are, to certain extent, culturally bound.

These views are reflected in Lakoff & Johnson’s theory of conceptual metaphor in which conceptual metaphors contribute to the understanding of non-physical concepts through the contrast with physical reality (Kövecses, 2002, p. 6). However, conceptual metaphors can help portray physical concepts beyond human scientific knowledge reach. Not in the know of the pathology of the appearance and disappearance of a red purpura on the skin, however, Vietnamese ordinary folks presumably find the appearance or disappearance of this red purpura and that of the sun analogous and describe as below:

(3) Hôm qua, ban mọc đầy người đứá bé, nhưng hôm nay ban lặn bớt rồi.

(Yesterday, the red purpura grew (= appeared) everywhere on the kid’s body, but today, a lot of them have dived (= have disappeared).)

Furthermore, not all conceptual metaphors are the mapping from physical reality into non-physical concepts. According to Lakoff & Johnson (1980) and Kövecses (2002), ANGER IS HEAT; however, is “anger” a non-physical concept? “Anger” can be regarded as a non-physical concept at a certain point of the history of scientific development, but is not a non-physical concept once it is medically known that “anger” is a physiological manifestation characterized by increased heart rate, blood pressure, and body temperature caused by the secretion of adrenaline from adrenal glands.

In conceptual metaphors, domain A and domain B can be both non-physical concepts as illustrated by the metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY, in which lovers are passengers on the journey; their relationship is the means of transport; they have the common goal as their marriage; and the difficulties in their relationship are the obstacles in the journey.

Conceptual metaphors not merely refer to the mapping from domain A into domain B – the analogous attributes between domain A and domain B, but also imply the existence of the inexplicable or scientifically unknown factors of domain B, which makes domain B resemble domain A through observation. The conceptual metaphor in the example (2) not only seeks to compare the downwards movement of the sun with the diving of a diver or fish, but also implies that the sun does not permanently vanish, but waits for the new opportunity to surface. Thus, the metaphor in the

example (2) is complementary to the metaphor in the example (1) in a way that the verb “lặn” (dive) (in the example (2)) synergize with the verb “mọc” (grow) (in the example (1)) to exhibit the concept of “cycle” in the movement of the sun as well as suggests permanent energy behind this cyclic movement of the sun, which was formerly scientifically unknown and under human curiosity (Such permanent energy is now known to result from the fusion and fission chain reactions among helium atoms in the sun). Therefore, metaphors imply human curiosity and desire to discover.

This paper seeks to explore metaphors in Vietnamese prepositions and adverbial particles denoting positions and movements in the space.

## II. METAPHORS IN VIETNAMESE PREPOSITIONS AND ADVERBIAL PARTICLES

### A. Metaphors in “trong-ngoài” and “ra-vào”

Generally, the preposition “trong” in the location relationship “x ở trong A” (x is in/inside A) denotes that the space of A embraces the space of x, and vice versa, the preposition “ngoài” in the location relationship “x ở ngoài A” (x is outside A) denotes that the space of A does not embrace the space of x. In these location relationships, “trong” and “ngoài” are equivalent to “in/inside” and “outside” respectively.

In English, the speaker’s location does not influence the use of “in/inside” and “outside”:

(4) He is playing in the school yard.

In (4), the preposition “in” is used whether the speaker is in the classroom or in the school yard. Nevertheless, in Vietnamese, the speaker’s location determines the usage of “trong” or “ngoài” in the sentence. If the speaker is in the location, which is farther than “he” in comparison to the center of the school, or if the speaker is in the space, which is more open than the space of “he”, for instance, the speaker is outside the school, then the preposition “trong” will appear in the Vietnamese sentence:

(4a) Vietnamese equivalent to (4): Anh ấy đang chơi trong sân trường.

However, if the speaker is in the location, which is closer than “he” in comparison to the center of the school, or if the speaker is in the space, which is more closed than the space of “he”, say, the speaker is in the classroom, then the preposition “ngoài” will appear in the Vietnamese sentence:

(4b) Vietnamese equivalent to (4): Anh ấy đang chơi ngoài sân trường.

If the speaker and “he” are in the same space, then “trong”, “ngoài”, or more neutral preposition “ở” can be used:

Bọn mình đang chơi trong/ ngoài/ ở sân trường.

Nonetheless, if the speaker X and “he” are in the same place, and the speaker X replies to the speaker Y as regards X and “he”’s location, then the speaker Y’s location will determine the usage of “trong” or “ngoài”. The previous rule will apply, i.e. if the speaker Y is in the location, which is farther than X and “he” in comparison to the center of the school, or if the speaker Y is in the space, which is more open than the space of X and “he”, for instance, the speaker Y is outside the school, then the preposition “trong” will appear in the Vietnamese sentence:

Speaker Y: Các bạn ở đâu thế?

(Where are you now?)

Speaker X: Tôi mình đang chơi trong sân trường.

(We are playing in the school yard.)

On the contrary, if the speaker Y is in the location, which is closer than X and “he” in comparison to the center of the school, or if the speaker Y is in the space, which is more closed than the space of X and “he”, say, the speaker Y is in the classroom, then the preposition “ngoài” will emerge in the Vietnamese sentence:

Speaker Y: Các bạn ở đâu thế?

(Where are you now?)

Speaker X: Tôi mình đang chơi ngoài sân trường.

(We are playing in the school yard.)

The above findings as regards the difference in the impact of the speaker’s position on the use of preposition between English and Vietnamese languages are consistent with Tran’s (2004, pp. 296-297) observation that oriental culture has built inwards and subjective cognitive process closely linked with the speaker in contrast with westerners’ outwards and objective cognitive process independent from the speaker.

Vietnamese culture tends to give something inside or centripetal more positive sense than something outside or centrifugal as in a Vietnamese saying “Cháu bà nội, tôi bà ngoại” (even though a grandson is looked after by his maternal grandmother, he is always considered the grandson of the paternal grandmother only.) Maternal grandmother is called “bà ngoại” (grandmother + outside “the family name”) and paternal grandmother is addressed as “bà nội” (grandmother + inside “the family name”) with more advantages and power. This cultural aspect is also found in certain statements implying that “trong” (inside, centripetal) shows more positiveness than “ngoài” (outside, centrifugal).

(5) Ngủ ngoài đường có hại cho sức khỏe.

(Sleeping outside in the street is harmful to your health. → Sleeping outdoors is harmful to your health.)

The entities in the space may display three dimensions, two dimensions, one dimension, or no dimensions (in case the entities are considered as points). Temporal expressions are conceptualized or metaphorized to take on dimensions, analogous to spatial expressions as illustrated by Nguyen (2007) in Table 1.

TABLE 1.  
DIMENSIONS OF SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL EXPRESSIONS

Dimensions	Spatial expressions	Temporal expressions
Three dimensions	<i>Trong hang</i> (in the cave)	<i>Trong năm 1999</i> (in 1999)
Two dimensions	<i>Trên bàn</i> (on the table)	<i>Vào chủ nhật</i> (on Sunday)
One dimension	<i>Dọc theo phố</i> (Along the street)	<i>Theo năm tháng</i> (Over time)
Zero dimension	<i>Gặp ở nhà ga</i> ((Meet) at the railway station)	<i>Lúc 7 giờ</i> (At 7 o'clock)

In English, except the dissimilarity in the use of one-dimensional prepositions between spatial expression and temporal expression, spatial prepositions denoting three, two, and zero dimensions are borrowed in temporal expressions. However, in Vietnamese language, only three-dimensional spatial preposition occurs in temporal expression implying TIME IS A CONTAINER. Even though “TIME IS A CONTAINER” is conceptualized in English language, merely the preposition “in” is used in time expressions. In contrast, Vietnamese folks use “trong” (in) to refer to the content of the CONTAINER OF TIME and “ngoài” (outside) to refer to a point outside this CONTAINER OF TIME such as “trong năm” (in the year) and “ngoài giêng”. The temporal expression “ngoài giêng” is comparable to spatial expression (4b) above:

Spatial expression	Temporal expression
Anh ấy đang chơi ngoài sân trường. The preposition “ngoài” will occur in the Vietnamese spatial expression in case the speaker is in the location, which is closer than “he” in comparison to the center of the school, or in case the speaker is in the space, which is more closed than the space of “he”, say, the speaker is in the classroom.	ngoài giêng In this case, the speaker stays at a point in this year of lunar calendar referring to a point in the first month of lunar calendar (giêng). “Ngoài” (outside) here implies outside the CONTAINER OF THIS YEAR OF LUNAR CALENDAR.

In Vietnamese language, “trong” (inside) also denotes a person’s true nature or feelings, and the depth of his or her feelings, contrasting with “ngoài” (outside), which refers to a person’s pretense or superficiality of feelings as illustrated in the following extracts from Tale of Kieu by the Vietnamese poet Nguyen Du:

(6) Tình trong như đã mặt ngoài e

(Her love is profound inside, but outside (i.e. through her expression and behavior) she remains shy.)

(7) Bên ngoài thơn thớt nói cười

Mà trong nham hiểm giết người không dao

(Outside (i.e. through her behavior) she talks and laughs, but inside her (i.e. her true nature) lies her cruelty.)

In Vietnamese language, corresponding to the static prepositions “trong” and “ngoài” are the prepositions of movement or direction “vào” (into) and “ra” (out of). In English language, static constructions tend to be used to transport dynamic contents (such as nominalisations); in contrast, dynamic forms tend to be used to carry static contents in Vietnamese language. Thus, unlike English language, one-, two-, and even three-dimensional temporal prepositions in Vietnamese language are dynamic, such as “vào/trong năm 1999”, “vào chủ nhật”, and “theo năm tháng (i.e. coming along with years and months = over time)” (see Table 1).

The preposition and adverbial particle “vào” refers to the movement or direction from more closed space to more open space, and “ra” refers to the opposite movement or direction as in the ensuing illustrations (see Nguyen, 2005, p. 45):

(8) Ngồi xêch vào.

(Move inwards, i.e. from more open end to more closed end of the bench, leaving some space for me to sit.)

(9) Ngồi xêch ra.

(Move outwards, i.e. from more closed end to more open end of the bench, leaving some space for me to sit.)

Metaphorizing TIME as a CONTAINER or a closed space, Vietnamese folks use “vào” and “ra” to depict the movement or direction into TIME. Compare the use of static and dynamic temporal prepositions:

	Spatial prepositions	Temporal prepositions
Static	Trong năm (in the year)	Ngoài giêng
Dynamic	Vào thu (in the autumn)	Ra giêng

A promise a boy gives to a girl appears to bring the girl more trust and the feeling that their wedding day is not too far away when the boy says “Ra giêng, anh cưới em.” (In the first month of lunar calendar, I will marry you.) than when he says “Ngoài giêng, anh cưới em.” (In the first month of lunar calendar, I will marry you.)

Since “trong” is static and “vào” is dynamic, “trong” tends to be used in the expressions of past time frame such as “trong những năm qua” (in the past years), but “vào” rather than “trong” is used in the expressions of future time frame, for instance, “vào thu” implying that the autumn is coming, and the autumn will arrive at a future point. It is the

dynamism of the preposition “vào” that the phrases “vào thu” and “thu sang” (when the autumn comes) are interchangeably used.

The preposition and adverbial particle “vào” can be metaphorically used to refer to the movement or direction from the explicit, known, public state (analogous to open space) to the implicit, unknown, secret state (analogous to closed space) such as “Anh ấy rút vào hoạt động bí mật” (He retreated into secret activity).

The preposition and adverbial particle “ra”, on the contrary, can be metaphorically used to refer to the movement or direction from the the implicit, unknown, secret state (analogous to closed space) to explicit, known, public state (analogous to open space). Consequently, “ra” carries the implication of “display” or “exhibit” as in this expression: “ăn nói ra môn ra khoai” (say in the way that taro and sweet potato are separately displayed, i.e. say clearly.) (based on Nguyen’s (2005) example).

The preposition and adverbial particle “vào” is also metaphorically used to denote the movement or direction into more concentrated state (analogous to the high density of the closed space) such as “Sắp xếp công việc đầu vào đây” (Arrange your work tidily, i.e. more concentrated than the messy state of your work) (Nguyen’s (2005) example). Contrarily, The preposition and adverbial particle “ra” can be metaphorically used to refer to the movement or direction towards loose, scattered, diluted state (analogous to the low density of the open space) such as “rã ra” (disassemble), “phát ra” (distribute, hand out), “phân ra” (divide, allocate), and “tách ra” (separate, split).

Like the static preposition “trong”, the corresponding dynamic preposition “vào” assumes the centripetal implication (analogous to the direction into more closed space). Moreover, “vào” is further metaphorised to portray the movement or direction into a person’s ego (centripetal) or selfishness such as “vun vào” and “vơ vào” (collect everything for themselves). The preposition and adverbial particle “ra”, on the contrary, displays the centrifugal implication and the deviation from a person’s ego such as “chia ra” (share) and “phát ra” (hand out).

The centripetal and centrifugal implications of “vào” and “ra” are also encountered in the expressions describing the movement into a topic under discussion such as “bàn vào” (focus on the topic) and its synonymous slang “bơi vào” (swim in, i.e. focus on the topic), or the movement off a topic under discussion such as “bàn ra” (go off the topic) and its synonymous slang “bơi ra” (swim out, i.e. go off the topic).

From its positive centrifugal implication involving the deviation from a person’s ego, “ra” is also found in such expressions denoting the change for the better as “xinh ra” (becoming prettier), “trẻ ra” (becoming younger), “tỉnh ra” (becoming more alert), “khỏe ra” (becoming healthier), “trắng ra” (becoming whiter), and “ăn nên làm ra” (becoming more successful) (based on Nguyen’s (2005) examples).

#### B. Metaphors in “trên-dưới” and “lên-xuống”

The prepositions “trên” (above/over/on) and “dưới” (below/under) in the location relationships “A ở trên B” (A is above/over/on B) and “B ở dưới A” (B is below/under A) denotes that the space of A is higher than the space of B, or the space of B is lower than the space of A. The disparities in this type of location relationship between English and Vietnamese are displayed in Table 2:

TABLE 2.  
ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE PREPOSITIONS IN TERMS OF VERTICAL LOCATION RELATIONSHIPS

Location relationships between space of A and space of B	The space of A is higher than the space of B			The space of B is lower than the space of A	
	The spaces of A and B are not on the same vertical axis	The spaces of A and B are on the same vertical axis	The space of A touches the space of B	The spaces of B and A are not on the same vertical axis	The spaces of B and A are on the same vertical axis
English prepositions	above	over	on	below	under
Vietnamese prepositions	trên			dưới	

In English, when the space of A embraces the space of x, the preposition “in” is used to portray this location relationship:

(10) Stars in the sky

(10a) Vietnamese equivalent to (10): Những ngôi sao trên trời

(11) The trembling carp in the water

(11a) Vietnamese equivalent to (11): Cá chép run rẩy dưới nước

(12) Viet is waiting in the living room.

Nonetheless, in Vietnamese language, the speaker’s location relative to the space of A determines the use of the preposition. Since the sky is above the speaker and the water is below the speaker, the prepositions “trên” and “dưới” are respectively used in the Vietnamese expressions (10a) and (11a). The example (12) has two Vietnamese equivalents:

(12a) Vietnamese equivalent to (12): Việt đang đợi dưới phòng khách. (in case the speaker is in the room, which is above Viet’s.)

(12b) Vietnamese equivalent to (12): Việt đang đợi trên phòng khách. (in case the speaker is in the room, which is below Viet’s.)

Since TIME is metaphorised to be A CONTAINER, TIME has the surface on which events are placed, for instance, “on Sunday” and “over time” in English. The Vietnamese corresponding preposition “trên” is not used to translate these phrases; however, the preposition “trên” can be used to denote the metaphor “TIME HAS THE SURFACE” in poetry:

## (13) Hay thu về đan sầu trên cỏ lá

Nỗi nhớ dãi trên những thớ ngầy qua

(Truong Dinh, <http://honque.com/ngothuymien/Unicode/kyniembuon.html>)

(Or the autumn returns and embroider sorrows on leaves and grass My missing you lingers on the past months and days, i.e. my missing you lingers over time)

TIME is also metaphorised to have spaces around it: spaces in front of and behind it (, which will be discussed in the section 2.3), and spaces above/over and below/under it. Observe the space under TIME in the subsequent example:

## (14) Mùa thu đến rồi, v àt ôi lại ngẩn ngơ và hân hoan ngắm những bàn tay giấu dưới những mùa thu.

(Nha Thuyen, <http://diendankienthuc.net/diendan/archive/index.php?t-5340.html>)

(The autumn had come, and I was astounded and thrillingly gazed the hands hiding themselves under the autumns.)

In Vietnamese language, corresponding to the static prepositions “trên” and “dưới” are the prepositions of movement or direction “lên” (upwards) and “xuống” (downwards). Upward movement denotes the growth or positive change and downward movement denotes the decay or negative change. These changes are summarized in Table 3.

TABLE 3.  
CHANGES IMPLIED IN PREPOSITIONS “LÊN” AND “XUỐNG”

The change in	Lên (upwards movement/positive change)	Xuống (downwards movement/negative change)
Status	Lên voi (move up on the elephant) (in the expression “lên voi xuống ngựa”)	Xuống ngựa (move down on the horse)
Capability	Lên chân (competence/ expertise improves) Học lên hẳn (improve in study)	Xuống sức (competence/ expertise diminishes) Học xuống hẳn (worsen in study)
Amount/value	Chia lên (give more share) (in the expression “chia lên chia xuống”) Trả lên (give higher bid) (in the expression “trả lên trả xuống”)	Chia xuống (give less share) Trả xuống (give lower bid)
Appearance	Đẹp lên (become prettier)	Xuống sắc (look less pretty)
Mentality	Lên tinh thần (become high-spirited)	Xuống tinh thần (become low-spirited)
Intensity/strength	Tức lên (get angry)	Nín giận xuống (restrain one’s anger)

Human emotions are metaphorised to reflect the directions such as “HAPPY IS UP” and “SAD IS DOWN” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Vi (2007, p. 56) also find these directions in metaphors of emotions in Chinese expressions. As such, besides the metaphors ANGER IS HEAT and ANGER IS FIRE (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Kovecses 2002), a Chinese expression “anger climbs three Chinese feet upwards” displays the metaphor ANGER IS UP. Lakoff & Johnson (1980) employs the image of FLUID to portray ANGER AND HAPPINESS: ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER and HAPPINESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER. However, Lakoff & Johnson do not use this image to refer to the emotion of SAD. The authors refer to the level of energy in the fluid in the metaphor of ANGER, but not in the metaphor of HAPPINESS. They, moreover, do not elaborate on the flexibility of the CONTAINER: Is this CONTAINER flexible or rigid? These limitations diminish the motivations of their metaphors of ANGER and HAPPINESS, and leave the feeling of SAD outside this interpretation of the metaphors. If ANGER is looked upon as a fluid, how should we interpret such a expression of anger as “tức khí” (the gas is energetic enough to burst out of the container) in Vietnamese language, or “blowing off steam”/“letting off steam” in English language (Lakoff’s (1987) examples).

Human emotions are exposed from the body. In Western medicine, the human body contains fluid (blood and lymph) and gas (in lungs, in thoracic and abdominal cavities, and in blood in the form of dissolved oxygen molecules), and in Oriental medicine, it contains gas and blood. Thus, human emotions should be metaphorised as FLUID and GAS in an ELASTIC CONTAINER like a body:

- ANGER/HAPPINESS IS THE FLUID AND GAS WITH HIGH MOTION ENERGY IN AN ELASTIC CONTAINER

- SADNESS IS THE FLUID AND GAS WITH LOW MOTION ENERGY IN AN ELASTIC CONTAINER

In case of ANGER/HAPPINESS, the high motion energy makes the molecules start hitting each other so hard and fast they “merge” with each other. This new combination of the two molecules is lighter than water and pushes it upwards the surface and produces bubbles. Hence, the elastic container will bulge further (due to more gas) and the direction of ANGER/HAPPINESS is considered to be upwards such as “giận điên lên” (anger) and “vui lên” (happiness). In contrast, in case of SADNESS, the elastic container becomes deflated and the direction of SAD is downwards such as “xiu xuống”, “buồn rũ” (as sad as the withering plant).

### C. Metaphors in “trước-sau” and “đi-lại”

The spatial prepositions “trước” (in front of) and “sau” (behind) are metaphorised in time expressions such as “trước Tết” (before Lunar New Year) and “sau Tết” (after Lunar New Year). The preposition “trước” also emerges in time metaphors with the implications of “facing” and “confronting”, for instance, “trước thềm năm mới” (facing the threshold of the new year) and “trước thời kỳ khủng hoảng kinh tế” (confronting the economic recession period).

Nguyen (2005, p. 49) views TIME drifting along an axis from behind to the front. However, TIME is metaphorised as a CONTAINER (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), so TIME is conceptualised to be three-dimensional (such as “trong năm” (in the year)), take up a space, and has spaces behind and in front of it. Thus, the movement of time away from the original point as expressed by the adverbial particle “đi” (such as “Thời gian qua đi” (time passed) and the movement of backwards to the original point as expressed by the adverbial particle “lại” (such as “thời gian quay lại” (time returned)) can be in diverse directions, not merely along an axis. The implications of the prepositions “đi” (away) and “lại” (back) are summarized in Table 4.

TABLE 4.  
THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE PREPOSITIONS “ĐI” (AWAY) AND “LẠI” (BACK)

The change in	Đi (the movement away from the origin or centrifugal motion)	Lại (movement back to the origin or centripetal motion)
Size		Nhỏ lại (become smaller) teo lại (shrink)
Sight	Khuất đi (out of sight)	
Status	Già đi (become older)	Trẻ lại (become younger)

### III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Every language has its own beauty, which is increasingly deepened by the proliferation of metaphors. A number of abstract concepts have been analyzed through the lens of metaphorism. Metaphors in Vietnamese prepositions and adverbial particles denoting positions and movements in the space have been examined in this paper, contributing to further understanding on how these prepositions and adverbial particles are mapped into other concepts such as status, value, and capability.

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