

A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE VERB PHRASES IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE

Nguyen Thi Tan¹, Vo Thi Bach Mai², Nguyen Thi Bich My³, Phan Hong Phuc⁴

^{1 2 3 4} Văn Hiến University

¹tannt@vhu.edu.vn

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ABSTRACT

Learning verb phrases plays an integral part in foreign language learning effectively in general or in English learning practically. Thus, it is absolutely necessary for those learning English as a foreign language to analyze and contrast similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese verb phrases. Referring to the collected books, we (three senior students under the supervisor in Van Hien University) examine this statement for our further understanding purpose. In this paper, some common features of the verb phrases in English and Vietnamese are pointed out, concepts about the verb phrases are noted together with the distinction between two languages are also in the light. It is recommended that EFL learners should acknowledge the variations of verb phrases to apply into language use in suitable contexts precisely.

Keywords: verb, verb phrases, similarity, difference

TÓM TẮT

Phân tích sự tương phản của việc sử dụng cụm động từ trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt

Tìm hiểu cụm động từ giữ một vai trò cốt lõi giúp ích cho việc học ngoại ngữ hiệu quả đối với người học. Vì lý do này, sẽ là cần thiết để người học tìm ra sự khác biệt cũng như sự tương đồng của cụm động từ trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt. Căn cứ vào nguồn tài liệu tham khảo về chủ đề này, nhóm tác giả gồm sinh viên hiện đang học năm thứ tư dưới sự hướng dẫn của giảng viên tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ Trường Đại học Văn Hiến đã tìm về chủ đề này nhằm có được sự hiểu biết sâu rộng hơn trong lĩnh vực này. Trong bài viết này những yếu tố nổi bật nhất về cụm động từ trong tiếng Anh, tiếng Việt sẽ được làm sáng tỏ, các khái niệm cũng như cụm động từ được đánh dấu cùng với sự khác biệt khi sử dụng những cụm động từ giữa hai ngôn ngữ được kiểm chứng. Sinh viên học ngoại ngữ nên tiếp thu, tham khảo những kiến thức được nêu ra ở đây và vận dụng chúng linh hoạt sao cho phù hợp với ngữ cảnh của người học một cách chính xác.

Từ khóa: động từ, cụm động từ, sự tương đồng, sự khác biệt

1. Introduction

Language plays a unique role in the maintenance of human existence and social development. It is a special social phenomenon, and sophisticated signal system that closely links to thinking, with the most basic function to be a communication tool among human being. The importance of language in general or English in practical is undeniable and overlooked as it is widely used everywhere in the world. Especially, for a developing country like Vietnam, English is taught in variety environments and commonly learnt by various different back-

ground people. That is why English are used as a means to instruct many subjects in universities (Vietnam national university, Ha Noi and Universities of Social sciences and Humanities) recently. Because of this, every singular component in English usages (words, phrases, clauses and sentences) need to be clarified. And here, a group of students in business English majors in Van Hien University only conduct verb phrases in English only instead of looking into all aspects of English grammar functions only due to our short period of time. Then, based on the syntax theory, the distinctions between English and

Vietnamese verb phrases are on display in order to assist students like us to apply our understanding about this fact to improve our English speaking and writing skills.

2. Literature review

The verb phrases in English

According to Kies (2009), an English verb phrase is divided into two parts: major part (nucleus) and the other parts such as: auxiliaries, complements, and also modifiers. Generally, two functional parts of verb phrase are the main verbs and the auxiliary verbs. Sometimes, it can be called by the name as the main verb + the auxiliary system.

The main verb of a verb phrases itself is not too complicated to recognize by a verb because of its base form (play, run, think, etc.) lexically. The function of the main verb is to be the bearer of the semantic content of the verb phrase which can form the different relations with all the other elements in the sentence. It, therefore, displays the core meaning implied by the whole verb phrase (Kies, 1995). In the other way, it is able to express a state (Kies, 1995) as in *This table weighs 20 kilos*. In this sentence, the verb phrase *weighs* express the state of the noun phrase *this table* that is 20 kilos. Also, it can represent an action (Kies, 1995) as in *He drives this car*. Here, the verb phrase *drives* express an action of pronoun *He* that is implementing an action on the noun phrase *this car*. As in *He jumped the wall* and *She reads this book* are also the same. Moreover, It can illustrate a process (Kies, 1995) as in *The weather is changing for the better*. In this sentence, the verb phrase *is changing* express a process of the noun phrase *the weather* that is occurring and changing for better.

The auxiliary system itself - the bound element of the verb phrase is slightly more complicated, since it can be seen from dissimilar point of views (Kies, 2009) by a zero element without realization at all (\emptyset + Head) (Kies, 2009) as in *They play football every day* and *We write the new lyric of this song*. In two sentences, the verb phrases *play* and *write* are the head nouns without realization. By an inflectional morpheme (-ed1 + Head) as in *They played football yester-*

day. The verb phrase *played* is a verb in the past form and is added inflectional morphem *-ed*. By an auxiliary verb (modal verb + Head) as in *They may play football every day*. In this sentence, the verb phrase *may play* include a modal verb *may* combine with a head verb *play*. By a combination of auxiliary verbs and inflectional morphemes [(-ed1 + may + have -ed2 + be -ing) + Head] as in *They might have been playing football every day*.

The function of the auxiliary system in English is to modify the main verb. It helps to specify, in a certain way, the general meaning of the main verb, introducing a variety of semantic ances which are related to the verbal categories of tense, mood, polarity, phase, aspect and voice (Beare, 2009).

The auxiliary system is then a complex element established by the combination of at least six basic binaries and non-recursive modifications, which are tense, mood, polarity, phase, aspect and voice. They are binary in the sense that they are all realized by two terms, a marked and an unmarked one (i.e., modal and non-modal, progressive and non-progressive, etc.), and they are non-recursive because there is no polarity of a verb phrase's being marked twice with respect to each modification. These modifications, which have been analyzed as constituents of the auxiliary system, allow English speakers multiple possibilities of modifying the general meaning of the main verb grammatically. This can easily be seen if we consider that tensed verb phrases in English are remote or non-remote, modal or non-modal, negative or non-negative, phased or non-phased, progressive or non-progressive, and passive or non-passive (Kies, 2009; Odlin, 1989). But, what is the grammatical relation between these elements? We have to accept that in the existing literature this relation has not been clearly defined. In an example such as *The police must have been questioning*.

The suspect *questioning* has normally been considered the head, but the relation between *must*, *have* and *been*, between themselves, and also as regards the head *questioning* has never been very clear.

Some analyses, which follow quite traditional

approaches, take the ‘geographical’ approach – i.e., position – to establish that must depend on “have”, “have” depend on “been”, and “been” depends on “questioning” (Beare, 2009). We are definitely against this analysis because in our opinion the English verb phrase is formed by the combination of the six modifications that form part of the auxiliary system, and a verb, usually lexical, which functions as the main verb (Kies, 1995).

Even in most linguists considering tense as an obligatory modification, and mood, polarity, phase, aspect, and voice as optional, all the modifications included in the Auxiliary System are equal at level. Tense is like other obligatory, optional, mood, phase or aspect. Tense, like any other modification, may or may not be explicitly realized in the verb phrase. Thus, in the verb phrase of the following example: The police have rights to suspect, none of the modifications is marked: There is no mark for tense, mood, polarity, phase, aspect or voice (Beare, 2009). But, although this verb form is clearly unmarked, all the modifications are somehow present in the verb phrase both semantically and functionally. This can easily be proved since this verb phrase means what it means and functions in the context it functions because it is an unmarked form. Although tense is not morphologically marked, it is not difficult to relate the context of this verb phrase to a present habitual situation. Although there is no mark for mood, this sentence is easily recognized as a simple statement (Beare, 2009).

It can be understood that it is impossible to express that the statement is affirmative (Oldin, 1989). If this verb phrase is compared with that of the suspects could not have been being questioned by the police, it can be seen that now the lexical verb question is morphologically marked by the six modifications.

It is marked by the remote -ed1 morpheme, the modal verb can, the negative particle not, the phase form have -ed2, the progressive form be -ing, and the passive be -ed2 (Kies, 2009). But, the fact that this verb phrase has some auxiliary words and inflections that the other does not have does not make it more meaningful. It

expresses different nuances of time reference, modality, and aspect, but that is all. In any verb phrase, there may or there may not be marks for the different modifications. This does not mean, however, that unmarked the verb phrases have a different structure from marked ones. The structure is always auxiliary system + main Verb. The auxiliary system may have a zero realization, or may be realized by inflections and/or auxiliary words. But the absence of a modification is as meaningful as its presence. English has a binary system of marked and unmarked forms that combine among them to express different shades of meaning. Thus, the difference between the verb phrases such as question and could not have been being questioned is not that the latter and not the former has tense, mood, polarity, phase, aspect or voice modifications, but that the former is non-remote, non-modal, non-negative, non-phased, non-progressive and non-passive, whereas the latter is remote, modal, negative, phased, progressive and passive (Kies, 1995).

In a nutshell, the morphological structure of the English full tensed verb phrases should, therefore, be formulated as: [(Ø,-s/ -ed1) (Ø/ modal verb) (Ø/ not) (Ø/ have -ed2) (Ø/ be -ing) (Ø/ be -ed2)] + lexical verb (Kies, 1995)

All the modifications are equally important. None of them plays a more outstanding role than the others. All the modifications modify the head of the verb phrase at the same level (Kies, 1995). So they are in a coordination relation: The head is the main verb, and the head is modified by the marked or unmarked form of these modifications. The order in which these modifications occur is always fixed (Kies, 2009)

Tense is closely attached to the first element and polarity to the first auxiliary, with operator do. The present of inflectional morphemes in the phase, aspect and voice modifications are always connected to the following verbal form, and the main verb is normally the last element in the verb phrase (Oldin, 1989).

The verb phrases in Vietnamese

Independent Verbs

An independent verb (a meaningful verb) that is able to perform grammatical functions it-

self in phrases or sentences such as: *đi* (go), *làm* (work), *chạy* (run), *nhảy* (dance). (Pham, 2009). Individual verbs can be categorized into smaller groups such as action/ action verbs, state verbs, positional verbs, process verbs, etc. (Nguyen, 2001).

Variation of verb groups is often based on two categories: semantic and grammatical categorization (Nguyen, 2001). For example, in terms of expressing grammatical meaning, we first need to analyze two important verb groups: verbs indicate actions/ physical activities such as *ăn* (eat), *uống* (drink), *đánh* (hit), *đẩy* (push), *cắt* (cut), *chạy* (run), *leo* (climb). (Pham, 2009) and verbs indicate activity or mental state such as *thích thú* (like), *biết* (know), *cảm thấy* (feel), *lo lắng* (worry), *sợ* (scare), *tôn trọng* (respect), *hi vọng* (hope), *mơ ước* (wish) (Pham, 2009).

The different types of verbs are related to their ability to combine. Verbs that express physical activity can be grouped with words that display the results of an action, such as: *xong rồi* but most verbs indicate activity or mental state are often impossible. Going together with those words, or can only be very limited in combination with another meaning. In speaking you can say *Tôi ăn xong rồi*, but cannot say *Tôi tôn trọng xong rồi*. And when you say *Tôi sợ anh rồi* then there is another meaning *bắt đầu* (start) (Pham, 2009).

In both types of verbs, we can distinguish between the intransitive verbs and the transitive verbs. The intransitive verbs express action, activity or state cannot directly affect another object such as *ngủ* (sleep), *nằm* (lie), *đi* (go), *đứng* (stand), *suy nghĩ* (think) (Bui, 2008). The transitive verbs that denote an action, activity, or state that can directly affect another object or create another object, for example: *đào, tìm, bắt, xây, viết, mua, sản xuất*. When creating a passive voice, we can only use the verb as in *Họ đang đào đường* transfer to *Đường đang bị họ đào* (Nguyen, 2001).

However, in Vietnamese some verbs can be both intransitive and transitive. For example, the verbs *đi, chạy* in principle are not the transitive verbs but the Vietnamese still used as the

transitive verbs (e.g, “*Nó đi quân mã để ra xe cho nhanh.*” Or “*Hai vợ chồng đang bận chạy trường tốt cho con.*” (Nguyen, 2001).

Non-independent verbs

Non-independent verbs are verbs that do not express a full meaning (meaning of action, activity or state), so in principle, these cannot stand alone to perform a grammatical function. Thus, they require another following word (eg, noun, verb, etc.) to add the meaning (Bui, 2008). The following non-independent verbs may be stated as Mood verbs, which express the subjective relationship (attitudes, appreciations, wishes, spirits etc.) of the speakers towards the content of the sentence or objective reality, it is possible to distinguish the following verb groups such as the verbs denote appreciation of the necessary level *nên, cần, phải, cần phải*; the verb expresses appreciation of possibility *có thể, không thể/ chưa thể*; the verb denotes appreciation of luck: *bị (tai nạn), được (nhà), mắc, phải* (e.g: *mắc căn bệnh nhà giàu, phải một trận đòn*); the verb expressions of expectations: *trông, mong, chúc, ước, cầu, muốn*; the verb expresses the level of will, spirit: *dám, định, nỡ, buồn* (more often used with the negative meaning), *thôi, đành* (Pham, 2009).

The verbs indicate existences are the verbs represent the actual fact of things or phenomena. This group includes three verbs such as the verbs denote the complementary existence or continuity of things, phenomena: *còn*, as in *Trong nhà còn hai người nữa* and *Trong túi tôi còn tiền*; the verb denotes existence: *có* as in *Trên đỉnh núi có một ngôi chùa* and *Trong nhà có tiếng khóc*; the verb denotes the end of the existence of things, phenomena: *hết* as in *Trong nhà hết sạch tiền rồi* (Pham, 2009).

The relationship verbs usages are to express the relationship between things and the nature or function of things: *là, làm* to do as in *Im lặng là vàng* and *Hồi làm giám đốc, ông ấy đã từng mắc tội tham nhũng*. (Pham, 2009). It should be said that the above distinction is sometimes only relative, since in reality, some Vietnamese verbs can be both independent verbs and non-independent verbs such as verbs *có* or verb *làm*. (Pham, 2009).

3. Research Methods

Our purpose to carry out this assignment is to assist our selves as students in Vietnam have full images of implementing English and Vietnamese verb phrases precisely. Thus, we have decided to apply qualitative method (discussion and, description) based on the collected books above to understand more deeply about this statement. It takes a half month from mid-March to the end of March, 2017 to collect and analyzed collected data from the above books. Then, it takes the other half month of April focusing on comparing and contrasting verb phrases in Vietnamese and English.

4. Results and Discussion

Learners can easily recognize that both English and Vietnamese verb phrases have three parts: the central element (nucleus), the pre-additive element, and the post-additive element. Among them, the central element must be a verb and it is obligatory while two parts of additive elements can be optional to go with the head verb (Pham, 2009).

However, English has the notion of tense such as present tense, past tense and future tense but Vietnamese do not. In addition, English verb phrases change their form to mark different tenses (Ha, 1999) as in *I am sitting beside Mary* (The present continuous tense), *I can sit beside Mary in my evening class* (The simple present tense), *I sat beside Mary in my evening class last week* (The simple past tense), *I will sit beside Mary in my evening class tomorrow*. (The simple future tense)

In contrast, Vietnamese verb phrases always keep the same form in every situation; instead Vietnamese uses subordinate words such as “*đã, vừa, mới, đang, sẽ*” to denote the time as in *Tôi đang làm bài tập*. (I’m doing my homework.), *Tối nay tôi sẽ làm bài tập*. (This evening, I will do my homework.), *Tôi đã làm bài tập xong*. (I have already done my homework.) (Nguyen, 2001).

Similarly, form of the English verb phrase changes in interrogative and negative sentences while Vietnamese also keeps the same form and adds subordinate words as in I didn’t see them

(*Tôi không nhìn thấy họ*), *Can you speak French? (Bạn nói được tiếng Pháp không?)* (Bui, 2008). When the verb phrase functions as the subject of a sentence, its form must change to “V-ing” in English but keep the same in Vietnamese. For example, in English we say “Reading is one of my hobbies” but in Vietnamese it is “*Đọc sách là một trong những thói quen của tôi*”. Moreover, some English verbs must be followed by a preposition, whereas Vietnamese do not need, for example: listen to, believe in, approve of, respond to, compare to, introduce to... (Nguyen, 2001).

In addition, there is necessary to point out similarities and differences in form of each part between two languages. In these two languages, the central part must contain major verbs, some of those must be followed by objects and some others may not. If one English verb phrase contains only one head verb instead of a series of verbs like in Vietnamese. In other words, unlike English, Vietnamese have the form of one verb goes directly after another verb as a range as in *Chủ nhật tuần sau tụi nó đi coi phim* (They will go to the movie next Sunday), *Tôi làm mất chìa khóa* (I have lost my key), *Nó đi ngủ* (He goes to sleep). (Ha, 1999).

The pre-element of the verb phrase can not be an adjective in English but it can be in Vietnamese, for example: *nhanh khỏi, lâu mòn, khế kêu, nhẹ nhàng khuyên bảo*. Another aspect to consider about English-Vietnamese verb phrases is the similarities and differences in their meaning. In general, the verb phrase provides information about the subject of the sentence. The pre-additive element usually functions the grammar while the post-additive element functions the meaning. However, sometimes the same English verb can go with different prepositions to show different meanings, such as *make up, make from, make of, make for, and make off*. All of them have different meanings. Moreover, the meaning of English auxiliaries is much more diversified. Although some auxiliaries such as “must, might, need, ought to, should” have the same meaning of obligation to do something, their usage depends on the level of obligation,

for example, the meaning of “must” shows the strongest obligation among them. In contrast, Vietnamese doesn’t have this term but they use subordinate words such as “*nên, phải, cần...*” to express those meanings (Oldin, 1989). Besides, according to Du (2005), some verbs have different meanings like the verb “*có*” in Vietnamese have both meanings of possession “have” and existence “is/ are” in English.

It is not too complex to recognize that most students tend to transfer their mother tongue into the target language. Although the components which form both Vietnamese and English verb phrases are almost the same, the structure is a little bit dissimilar. Therefore, this can lead to misunderstanding due to differences in many aspects between the two languages. As a result, the students should ask the teacher to explain these differences. For example, in English questions, auxiliary verbs or interrogative pronouns are used before subject; meanwhile, in Vietnamese, they are often at the end of the sentence such as “*phải không, đúng không, chưa, hả...*” and so on. The awareness of Vietnamese and English verb phrases also helps students develop linguistic skills in both languages. Contrastive knowledge in students’ mother tongue and the target language somehow also gives them a clear distinction in order to help them avoid mistakes frequently. Then learners are able to apply and transfer languages more naturally and effectively. One of the key point in studying the verb phrase is that, learners are capable to identify transitive and intransitive verbs going together with their suitable sub-elements; when some English verbs are both transitive and intransitive (Esldesk, 2009); for example, “study” is a transitive verb in “John studies Vietnamese”, but intransitive verb in “John studies hard”. Further more, it is advised that teachers can also assist them to clarify the meanings of different verb phrases that go with different prepositions. In general, there are two types of verb phrases: phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs and (Ha, 1999). These forms have a main verb and a preposition with different meaning (laugh at, listen to, and wait for and so on). Whereas, each phrasal verb has

specific meaning, for example: “put off” means “postpone”, “turn down” means “refuse”, “pass away” means “die” and many examples like that (Bui, 2008).

5. Conclusion

According to the finding above, the verb phrase is a vital role to form sentences for language learning purpose as well as language communication; it is like the root part of a tree. Fully understanding verb phrases benefits language learners in language learning effectively. For Vietnamese foreign language learners, to understand the structure, the formation, the origin, especially the characteristics of language may not simple at all because of the fact that English and Vietnamese are different languages. In the other words, because of this reason, it is obvious that each of them has its own characteristic. Thus, making a comparison between these two languages seems complicated for students like us. The important thing is not only to recognize how to use these two languages confidently, but also to distinguish the differences as well as the similarities between these ones. This assignment figured out some useful ideas about verb phrases for language students learning purposes. However, it still requires some more research about this topic before it is applied widely.

Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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