

# A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF SIMPLE NEGATIVE SENTENCES IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper represents the whole process of analyzing negative sentences in English and Vietnamese by comparing the negation in the two languages. Besides, it is an effort to contribute to the field of contrastive analysis of English-Vietnamese language. The scope of this study focuses on the simple negative sentences. The study is divided into three parts: showing simple negative sentences in English, showing simple negative sentences in Vietnamese and comparing some differences and similarities between simple negative sentences in English and simple negative sentences in Vietnamese.*

**Keywords:** *contrastive analysis, EFL students, simple negative sentences.*

## TÓM TẮT

### So sánh đối chiếu câu đơn phủ định trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt

*Bài báo này trình bày quá trình phân tích câu phủ định trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt qua việc so sánh sự phủ định trong hai ngôn ngữ. Bên cạnh đó, đây còn là một nỗ lực để đóng góp vào lĩnh vực so sánh đối chiếu hai ngôn ngữ tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt. Mục đích của bài nghiên cứu này tập trung vào câu đơn phủ định. Bài nghiên cứu này được chia ra làm ba phần: trình bày câu đơn phủ định trong tiếng Anh, trình bày câu đơn phủ định trong tiếng Việt và so sánh một số sự khác nhau và giống nhau giữa câu đơn phủ định trong tiếng Anh và câu đơn phủ định trong tiếng Việt.*

**Từ khóa:** *so sánh đối chiếu, sinh viên ngoại ngữ, câu đơn phủ định.*

## 1. Introduction

English is the powerful business language. It has become a necessity for people to speak English if they want to enter a global environment. Most of the information on the internet is in English. Knowing English will allow people to access to an enormous amount of

information. We can see that English is also a valuable language to learn and can create many opportunities. Most international events use English as their official language. Learning English is essential if the job or hobby is to get involved in such events. Not only it helps to understand the many activities in the

event, but also take advantage of opportunities to develop the career.

Grammar also syntax is an important aspect of written examinations. It is also necessary for someone who wants to become an interpreter, a translator or an English teacher. With these jobs, Vietnamese English - as - a - foreign - language (EFL) students need to be sure to master all grammar and have skills like listening, writing, speaking and reading. Besides, EFL students will always have to be sure with their English ability. Translating English words into English should require to grasp grammar, understand the use of each words, each sentence because this work needs high accuracy.

*“Grammar has always been playing a role in foreign language teaching and learning. This may probably be one of the reasons leading to the debates of teaching grammar. The debates result in fresh cognition of grammar: it is very important in that not only does it help improve learners writing, but also it helps learners do better in reading comprehension and listening alike; more significantly, the problem of how to teach grammar has been raised. The finding from the survey is that middle school students from China believe that grammar is very important and necessary. There are several reasons for its importance and necessity, one of which is that they have few opportunities and little time to get enough input inside and outside the class.”* (Shengmei Wang, 2010).

This paper plans to show some differences and similarities of simple negative sentences in English and

Vietnamese, improve Vietnamese English-as-foreign-language students' knowledge in English and Vietnamese negative forms and make a comparison between English and Vietnamese negative forms.

To achieve the aim of the paper, the objectives are set: describing the structure of negative forms in Vietnamese and English sentences, contrasting to find out the similarities and differences in the structure of negative forms in English and Vietnamese sentences and drawing practical applications and conclusions of the study.

The study concentrates on simple negative sentences in English and Vietnamese. However, this study just focuses on some conventional forms and constructions of the negative forms of the two languages because of the restricted scope. The study wishes to point out the language tools denoting negative in English and the corresponding language tools denoting negative in Vietnamese. Base on that, the study presents the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese in the simple sentences of negative forms.

## 2. Literature review

*“Câu phủ định là câu xác nhận sự vắng mặt của sự vật, hiện tượng hay sự kiện, xác nhận sự vắng mặt của đối tượng trong hiện thực hoặc trong tưởng tượng bằng những phương tiện hình thức xác định.”* (Diep, 2005). By this definition, the negative sentence is a sentence that verifies the absence of things, phenomena or events. In addition, Diep Quang Ban also divides negative sentences into two categories: explicit negations and implicit



negations.

Nguyen Thi Luong in “*Câu tiếng Việt*” (2006) expresses that a negative sentence is a sentence that uses negative words to confirm that there are no certain things, characteristics, properties and relationships or negate an opinion and a comment. This conception shows that negative sentences not only have the task of describing as definition of Diep Quang Ban but also have another function as negating an idea. “*The negative statements correct a mistaken idea, such as the idea that the monster was called Frankenstein. In general, we use negative statements to inform someone that what they might think or expect is “not” so.*” (Eastwood, 1994). Linguists around the world may have different ways of looking at negative sentences from a variety of angles but basically, they have the same view of the function of negative sentences as the way to express the content that is not true.

There are many articles and papers researching on negation in the sentence. However, there are five researches found considered relevant references: “*Contrastive Analysis of Negation in Language and Its Implications for Mwaghavul and English*” in Journal of language in India authored by Judith Makse Patrick, Nanbam Yuwana Ojo, Professor Mingcai Sui and Banenat Didam published in 2014. This paper compared the negation in the language of two languages at the syntactic and lexical verb levels. Besides, it was an effort to contribute to the field of contrastive analysis of the Mwaghavul-English language. The scope of this study focused on the six personal pronouns in the

sentence context presented in English and Mwaghavul in the present simple, simple past and future simple negative tenses.

“*An investigation into negative sentences in English and Vietnamese: A word grammar perspective*”, M.A. thesis in the English language at Da Nang University authored by Nguyen Vu Phong Van in 2012, under the guidance of Tran Quang Hai, analyzed the structures of sentences containing negative words extracting from Vietnamese and English works. In addition, this paper identified negative devices in English and Vietnamese, the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese when using negative sentences; determined the aims of using negative sentences and found out the functions of negative sentences in context. The aim of the study was to investigate the negative sentences in English and Vietnamese.

Based on the negative structure and the negative words in Chinese and Vietnamese, “*Câu phủ định tiếng Hán trong sự đối chiếu với tiếng Việt*”, M.A. thesis in the linguistics, written by Ly Bao My in 2015 at Ha Noi National University showed the comparison of the negative structure between the two languages to find out the differences between the two languages and to summarize the different elements about how to use negative in Chinese and Vietnamese sentences.

“*Câu phủ định tiếng Nga trong sự đối chiếu với tiếng Việt*”, M.A. thesis in the linguistics, Academy of social sciences, authored by Nguyen Thi Thanh Hien in 2016 presented the similarities and differences on negative sentences of two

languages. As a result, it helped to image to read the specified type of the language type over the negative sentence. This paper showed generalization of some research achievements on negative sentences in Russian and Vietnamese and the theoretical issues related to the thesis topic, performance the means of expressing negative in the negative sentences in Russian and Vietnamese, comparison of expressing negative meanings in Russian and Vietnamese to indicate the differences and similarities of negative sentences between the two languages. The description method and the comparison method were used to conduct this study.

“*Phân tích đối chiếu câu phủ định tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt trên bình diện cấu trúc – ngữ nghĩa*” (Tran, 2000). This study established the concept of the structure, the semantics of negative sentences, analyzed the description, classified of negative sentence models in English and similarities or differences in Vietnamese negative models, analyzed and contrasted the semantics structure expressed through grammar or vocabulary in two languages.

There are four main methods to make negative sentences in English and Vietnamese. The first method accounting for 88.35% in Vietnamese and 91.15% in English is position in which forming negation is based on the placement of nuclear negatives, implication or incomplete negation and uncertain contexts. The second method using interrogative pronoun like “*ai*”, “*nào*”, “*làm sao*”, etc., or yes/no or Wh-question is making negative forms by grammatical structure. This method accounts for 1.24% in English and 8.77% in Vietnamese. The

method called morphological modification is the third one accounting for 6.75% in English and 1.25% in Vietnamese. The third method forms a negative word by adding prefixes or suffixes such as “*vô*”, “*bất*” in Vietnamese and “*in-*”, “*un-*”, “*im-*”, “*-less*” in English. Words-negative markers is the last method using words that by themselves mean negative such as refuse (“*từ chối*”), lack (“*không có*”), deny (“*bác bỏ*”), swear words, slangs, etc. Statistics show 0.86% for English and 1.74% for Vietnamese on this method (Tran, 2000).

### 3. Research methodology

By the definition of Bui Manh Hung (2008), the author of “*Ngôn ngữ học đối chiếu*”, the comparative linguistics is a study linguistics subdivision that compares two or more than two languages to determine the similarities and differences between them without regarding to whether those languages compared are in the same origin or the same type. The choice of language to compare completely depends on the requirements of reasoning and practical research. Basically, comparative linguistics stands on a contradictory standpoint that is different from the historical view of comparative historical linguistics.

In the process of the comparative study of languages, there are basic principles which needed to be complied with, according to Bui Manh Hung. Firstly, the researcher must ensure that the mediums in the two linguistic languages are fully, accurately and deeply depicted before reconciling them to find out the similarities and differences between them.



This descriptive step is only a preparation but an important step in the process of collation as it provides inputs for reconciliation. Secondly, compilation cannot just focus on comparative aspects in a segregated way, but comparative aspects are focused on the system. Thirdly, comparative aspects should be considered not only in the linguistic system but also in communication. In addition, consistency in the use of concepts and theoretical models should be ensured to describe the languages being collated. Finally, the degree of closeness of the type between the languages contrasted must be taken into account because it allows the researcher to select the most appropriate approach to the reconciliation process.

Theoretically, based on the scope of comparison, the language is collated in two comparison ways of the system and comparison of parts. System comparison is a collation of two languages. The comparison of parts is a comparison of units, categories and phenomena of two languages. However, in fact, no study can fully compare languages in both ways. The most appropriate approach is to compare the means of the two languages in each category, specific aspects that are the scope of the comparison of parts. Le Quang Thiem (1989) distinguishes the scope of comparison by category, system structure, function and activity, style, history and development. According to Bui Manh Hung (2008), the distinction between areas should be determined on the basis of distinguishing linguistic analysis areas: phonetics, vocabulary, grammar and the meaning in the context of use.

There are two basic approaches in

linguistic comparison: two-dimensional comparison (or multiple-dimensional) and one-way comparison. Two-dimensional comparison (or multiple-dimensional) comparative studies examine the comparable phenomena of two or more languages in a reciprocal relationship on a comparative basis (TC – tertium comparationis). This method is carried out by selecting TC and identifying language denoting or belonging to the category in comparative languages. Two-dimensional confrontations are studies of the forms of TC representation in two languages, and then analyze these expressions with similar and different points, no language is the original language and the target language. An one-way comparison examines the meaning of a certain medium in this language and identifies means of expressing the corresponding meaning in another language. The one-way comparison starts from the description of the forms in the first language and then matching with equivalents in the second language. Conversely, it can also start with the description of the forms of the second language and then matching with equivalents in the first language. This method is called one-dimensional comparison because the researcher selects a language as the starting point and another language as the target. The choice of language as the starting language and the language of the target language depends on the task and the purpose of the comparative study rather than being characterized by the characteristics of the language structure.

This study uses the two-way comparison method. There are many

aspects related to the subject of research, but this study only focuses on how to form a simple negative sentence which is commonly used in Vietnamese and English. The study describes the ways of forming a negative sentence in English and Vietnamese, and then compares these ways in the two languages.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1. Negative sentences in Vietnamese

Vietnamese researchers have pointed out many ways to form a negative sentence, but because of the limitations, the study only covers cases commonly used in Vietnamese.

According to Diep Quang Ban (2005), negative sentences in Vietnamese generally contain negative words, such as “không”, “đâu”, “không...đâu”, “có...đâu”, etc. Among them, the four words (“không”, “chẳng”, “chưa”, “chả”) are commonly used. As in *Cô ta không thích bóng rổ* (She does not like basketball), the negative word “không” is used to negate an action “thích”. The word “chẳng” signifies the absolute negation. In another example *Cô ta chẳng muốn đi* (She does not want to go), the negative word “chẳng” is used to negate that “cô ta” want to go. The word “chưa” confirms the absence of things or negative phenomena until the time of speaking. *Anh ấy chưa đến công ty* (He has not come to the company) is an example for using the word “chưa” in the negative sentence with the word “chưa” being used to deny the presence of “anh ấy” in the company until the sentence was spoken. Finally, the word “chả” is commonly used in speaking. The word “chả” in the sentence *Ông ta chả*

*quan tâm lời tôi nói* (He does not care about what I say). In addition, there are also some words equivalent to the four words above considered impolite when used in spoken language such as “đếch”, “cóc”, etc. For example, in the sentence *Tôi cóc cần quà của cô ta* (I do not need her gift), the word “cóc” is used in the spoken language and negates the need for “quà của cô ta”. To give meaning “never” or “not at all”, a word “hề” is added after the words “không”, “chẳng”, “chưa”, “chả”, such as “không hề”, “chẳng hề”, “chưa hề”, “chả hề”. In the sentence *Bà ấy chưa hề nói lời nào về việc đã xảy ra* (She has never said a word about what happened), the phrase “chưa hề” means that “bà ấy” has not mention what happened even once. Combinations of “phải” and negative words (“không”, “chẳng”, “chưa”, etc.) are also used as “không phải”, “chẳng phải”, “chả phải”, “chưa phải”, etc. in negative sentences. For example, the phrase “không phải” in *Không phải anh ta làm việc đó mà là cô ta* (He does not do that, but she does) negates who do the action “làm”. Structures meaning negative are often used in Vietnamese as “có...đâu”, “nào có...đâu”, “làm gì có”, “đâu (có) phải”, etc. In the sentence *Tôi có mượn xe của cô đâu* (I did not borrow your car), the structure “có...đâu” used to negate that “tôi” borrowed “xe của cô ấy”. Nguyen Thi Thanh Hien (2016) mentioned, negative words and interrogative pronouns (“ai”, “gì”, “cái gì”, “ở đâu”, “người nào”, etc.) are two basic elements involved in the construction of structures that express absolute negativity. For example, “không ai”, “chẳng ai”, “không (cái) gì”, “chẳng



(cái) gì”, “không (ở) đâu”, “chẳng (ở) đâu”, “chưa bao giờ”, “không người nào”, “chưa lúc nào”, etc. In the example *Không ai biết lý do cô ấy thôi việc* (No one knows why she quit her job), the phrase “không ai” negative the idea that there is somebody knowing about the reason why she quit her job. In addition to using negative words and phrases mentioned above, there are other ways to form negative sentences mentioned by Tran Van Phuoc in his doctoral thesis in 2000, such as negative verbs (“khuớc từ”, “phủ nhận”, “từ chối”, etc.), slang words (“khỏi”, “thèm vào”, etc.), prefixes (“vô”, “vị”, “bất”, etc.) and negative nouns (“ma”, “trời”, etc.). As in *Cô ấy từ chối lời mời của tôi* (She refuses my invitation), the negative verb “từ chối” dismisses the acceptance of the invitation. The Sino-Vietnamese word used as prefixes in the phrase “bất thành” in *Nhiệm vụ bất thành* (Mission failed) negates the success of the mission. In the sentence *Làm gì có ma nào đến vào giờ này* (No one will come at this time), “ma” is a noun negating that there is someone will come.

#### 4.2. Negative sentences in English

In “*Oxford Guide to English Grammar*” (1994), John Eastwood mentioned many ways of making negative sentences in English, however, the study just shows some common ways because of the limitation.

To form a negative sentence, the word “not” (or “n't” short form of “not”) is associated with the verb with the condition of having an auxiliary verb preceding “not”. *He doesn't like me* is a simple example for forming a negative sentence

with “not” combined a verb. In addition, “not” can be placed in other positions in the sentence to create a negative sentence. When the speaker wants to correct something, the word “not” put before a word or a phrase. For example, in *I want a blue shirt, not a green one*, the speaker wants to correct the mistake that somebody gives him or her a blue shirt instead of a blue one. Noun phrases preceded “not” followed by many will reflect the quantitative negation as in *Not many vehicles in the parking today*. Phrases of distance or time followed by “not” will help the speaker express the negative meaning. This statement is clearly evident when you look at these examples *the train station is not far from here* and *I moved to the city not long ago*. Some other negative words, in addition to “not”, also help the speaker express the negative, such as “no”, “none”, “no one”, “nobody”, “nothing”, “nowhere”, “few”, “little”, “never”, “seldom”, “rarely”, “no longer”, “hardly”, “scarcely”, “neither”, “nor”, etc. Some simple examples use the words mentioned as *No one believes in me*, *Nothing happened that night*, *I never want to come back there*, *She rarely goes out after 10 p.m.*, etc. Some verbs carry negative meanings by themselves without needing “not” as “fail”, “avoid”, “stop”, “prevent”, “deny”, etc. For example, *I avoided her in a weak* means “I” did not want to see “her” in a weak. “Without” is also a simple way to form a negative sentence in English as *He accepts her invitation without hesitation* meaning that “he” did not hesitate upon accepting “her invitation”. To make the emphatic negative, the speaker can use “n't” the

short form of “not” (*He didn't know the reason*), “at all” (*She did not know about the new announcement at all*), a negative adverbial with the inversion of subject and auxiliary as “no”, “never”, “neither”, “nor”, “seldom”, “rarely”, “hardly”, “only”, etc. (*Never in my life have I been Paris*) and some another negative words and phrases like “not...by any means”, “far from”, “absolutely no (where/ thing/ etc.)”, etc. Tran Van Phuoc also mentioned creating negative sentences with prefixes like “un-”, “im-”, “in-”, and “-less” as in the sentence *Singing in that condition is impossible* having the prefix “im-” combined with adjective possible to make the negative meaning.

## 5. Conclusions

Generally, every language has specific features due to the difference in history, nature, culture, etc. Negative forms in sentences of both languages have some similarities and differences in some levels. Thus, there are some points of the similarities and differences of negative forms in English and Vietnamese sentences by contrasting two languages.

The way to express the negation in both of languages is to use negative words. Vietnamese has negative words like “không”, “chẳng”, “chưa”, “chả”, especially the word “chả” is commonly used in speaking (Diep, 2005). English also has negative word like “not” put before a word or a phrase (Eastwood, 1994). These words often are put after the subject and before the main verb in both of languages. There is a direct equivalent in Vietnamese with the same usage in negative sentences. The word “hề” is

added after the words “không”, “chẳng” such as “không hề”, “chẳng hề”, it has the same meaning with “never” or “not at all”. The word “phải” is put after “không”, “chẳng” such as “không phải”, “chẳng phải”. Besides, Vietnamese negative form has some structures like “có...đâu”, “nào có...đâu”. The negative word can be put before “ai”, “gì”, “cái gì”, “người nào” such as “không ai”, “không (cái) gì”, “không người nào” expressing the negation (Nguyen, 2016). English has a negative adverbial with the inversion of subject and auxiliary as “no”, “never”. Excepting the word “not”, English has negative words like “no one”, “nobody”, “nothing”. The negation is expressed by verbs like “avoid”, “stop”, “prevent”, “deny” in English and “khước từ”, “phủ nhận”, “từ chối” in Vietnamese (Tran, 2000). Prefixes “vô”, “vị”, “bất” in Vietnamese and prefixes “un-”, “im-”, “in-” in English have the same position with prefixes that putting before a word to make the negation. Besides, Vietnamese has negative nouns “ma”, “trời” to show the negation. In English, the negative slang words and the negative nouns seldom are used accounting for 0.86% (Tran, 2000).

In general, both English and Vietnamese in the expression of negation have many similarities, but there are also some differences. In Vietnamese, the most likely way is to make use of negative words or phrases, while English uses both words and grammatical structure. The adverbs carrying the negation like “hardly”, “scarcely”, “seldom”, “rarely” in English. Being different from Vietnamese, English uses the inversion to express the negation by placing the



negative adverb at the beginning of the sentence then putting the auxiliary before the subject. Furthermore, Vietnamese has the Sino-Vietnamese word used as prefixes to express the negation. The negative verb is influenced by the subject in English, but Vietnamese is not. It is different from English, Vietnamese has words expressing the negation like the slang words “*khỏi*”, “*thêm vào*”. Furthermore, the prefix “-less” is put at the end of the word indicating the negation. It shows differences in the negation between English and Vietnamese.

This study points out the similarities and differences in the formulation of negative sentences in English and Vietnamese based on the commonly used terms in these two languages. English and Vietnamese have the same negation usage through the words and phrases, the position of the negation word. Nevertheless, there also are some differences like the structure, effectiveness of the verb in the sentence. Although English and Vietnamese have many similarities, there are some differences. Therefore, for teachers, they should make learners clearly understand the grammatical structures and aspects related to negative forms in English and Vietnamese, remind and emphasize the

time and the fluctuations. Next, the teacher should notice especially the translation and instruct students to avoid word-by-word translation. For EFL students, they should pay attention to express negative meanings in both languages to avoid confusion in the structure and use of words.

Other issues are related to negative sentences such as the range of negative words influences the other components of the sentence, such as Diep Quang Ban mentioned in “*Ngữ pháp Việt Nam*” or comparison of the negative structure of negative sentences in different languages like the thesis written by Nguyen Thi Thanh Hien in 2016, etc. There are English and Vietnamese negative sentences. In addition, the negative form has negative questions, but because of the limited duration of the study, so this paper only compares the way in which simple negative sentences are formed. Since there are no conditions for in-depth analysis, this study deals only with common forms found in Vietnamese and English. However, the study also shows some basic similarities and differences in the way how to make negative sentences in Vietnamese and English. Hopefully, research will help in the process of teaching as well as learning languages in the future.

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