PROGRESSION MARKERS IN VIETNAMESE NARRATIVE

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Abstract

This article aims to study the progression markers in six Vietnamese folktales. Progression markers refer to the grammatical devices that characterize any happenings that push the story forward. These markers highlight the temporal sequence of succeeding events, which form the backbone, or storyline of the Vietnamese folktales. They are rõi ‘already’, xoan ‘finish’, doan ‘end, terminate’, thi ‘then’, bèn ‘then, consequence’, and đa ‘have experienced’. The paper begins with the structural description of these progression markers and proceeds to their discourse functions both on the narrative timeline and out of the line. As the default timeframe of the narrative is past time or accomplished time, when these markers occur in past time, they indicate temporal succession and a cause-effect relationship of foregrounded events. In projected time as in quotations, the progression markers rõi, xoan, doan, thi, bèn, and đa are compared with the progression markers lẫw, sêt, còp, k₃; cuη, đaη in Thai respectively to show that despite the morphological difference, at the level of discourse syntax, their discourse structures are quite common.

Introduction

Certain events in a narrative discourse are given special prominence within that discourse. They are more important to the development of the plot or theme of the narrative than are others. These events are sequenced and chronologically ordered, i.e., the first point mentioned precedes the second in the narrative timeline. Longacre (1996:9) posits the temporal succession or temporal sequence as “a framework of temporal succession in which some of the events or doings are contingent on previous events or doings.” The framework of temporal succession characterizes the narrative. The events or situations on the narrative timeline are represented as having already taken place and usually narrated in the simple past or historical present tense.

Dry (1983) mentions that the more important happenings are reported in foreground clauses—clauses in which the action of the narrative takes up and time begins to move forward. The foreground clauses make reference to sequenced temporal points, rather than spans of time, and these points are usually the endpoints of situations. These clauses are on a narrative timeline and constitute the foreground of a narrative.

This paper focuses on the progression

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markers which accompany foreground clauses. The progression markers refer to the grammatical devices that characterize any happenings that push the story forward. These markers highlight succeeding events which form the backbone or storyline of the Vietnamese narrative. They are temporal connectives and the aspectual value of clauses. The paper begins with a structural description of the progression markers and proceeds to their discourse functions both on the narrative timeline and out of the line. The discussion part gives a summary of the findings in comparison with Thai.

The data consist of six Vietnamese folktales drawn from the work “Cohesive devices in Vietnamese folktales” (Suksiri, 2000). These folktales were transcribed into phonetic symbols and translated into English from the original work Kho Tàng Truyện Cổ Tích Việt Nam (A Collection of Vietnamese Folktales) (Nguyễn Văn Ngo, Vũ Ngô Phan, and Trà Thanh Mai, 1996).

Structural Description

The progression markers which identify sequenced points on the narrative timeline include the words ròi, xong, đogn, dâ, bê̄n and thî. Of all progression markers ròi occurs with most frequency whereas đoxan has the least occurrence, as shown below:

| Progression markers | Number of occurrences |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| ròi                 | 35                    |
| thî                 | 25                    |
| dâ                  | 19                    |
| bê̄n                | 14                    |
| xong                | 13                    |
| đoxan               | 6                     |

The meanings of these words which are relevant to this study are given in the Vietnamese-English Dictionary (Việt Ngôn ng học, 1987) as listed below. The examples are drawn both from the dictionary and Sophana (p.c.).

ròi 1. ‘Already, done, over, finished’
e.g., Tôi ăn sáng ròi.
I have breakfast already
‘I’ve already had breakfast.’
2. ‘Then’
e.g., Tập thể dục ròi.
Exercise already
mói ăn just have
lốt da.
breakfast
‘To do one’s morning exercises then have breakfast.’

xong ‘Be complete, be finished, be done’
e.g., Em làm luận án xong chua?
young sibling do thesis finish yet
‘Have you finished your thesis yet?’
doạn 1. (rare)
   a. ‘Finish, just finish’
      e.g.,  Chúng ta gặt hái
              We harvest
           via doạn.
           just finish
           ‘We’ve just finished the harvest.’
   b. ‘Cut off, break off, terminate’
      e.g.,  Tôi doạn tình với
              I break off love with
              Lan rồi.
              Lan already
              ‘I’ve already broken off the love
              affair with Lan.’
   2. ‘Then’
      e.g.,  Chúng tôi nói chuyện
              We speak story
              đến khuya, doạn
              until late at night then
              chia tay nhau
              say good-bye each other
              ‘We talked until midnight and
              then separated.’

đã  ‘Already’
   e.g.,  Anh ban đã
           elder sibling friend already
           đến rồi.
           arrive already
           ‘Our friend has arrived.’
   e.g.,  Tháng này sang năm
           month this next year
           cuốn từ điển đã
           CLF. dictionary already
           soạn xong.
           compile finish
           ‘This month next year, the
           dictionary will have been
           finished.’

Bên  ‘Then’
   e.g.,  Thấy không khí
           see atmosphere
           nắng nẻ quá anh ta
           strained too he
           bên nói dàa một câu.
           then joke I sentence
           ‘As he noticed that the
           atmosphere was quite strained, he
           then cracked a joke.’

Thì 1. ‘Then’
   e.g.,  Khát nước thì uống
           thirsty then drink
           nước nguồn.
           water source
           ‘If one is thirsty, then one can
           drink water from the source.’
   2. ‘As for’
      e.g.,  Como thì hâm,
           rice as for mouldy
           cả thì móc
           egg-plant as for mouldy
           ‘As for the rice, it is rotted, as for
           the egg-plant, it is mouldy.’

Based on their occurrences in the above
examples and the folktales, the syntactic
structure of the words rồi, xong, doạn is
postverbal; đã, bèn are preverbal⁴; and thì
is a sentence conjunctive and topic
marker. The progression markers rồi, xong, doạn, thì and bèn usually occur in a
series of clauses whereas đã usually

⁴ Sophana (p.c.) notes that ńao also occurs
after a clause as an adverb meaning ‘first of
all’ as in the following example:
Nghi một cái đã.
rest a while first of all
‘Let’s take a rest first.’
occurs in a single clause as illustrated by the examples below:  

\[ \text{rõi} \quad [\text{NP}+\text{VP}+\text{rõi}]_{\text{CL1}} \quad [(\text{NP})+\text{VP}]_{\text{CL2}} \]

\begin{enumerate}
\item \[\text{Lac Long Quan d\text{"o}ng m\text{"o}t} \quad \text{Lac Long Quan build one} \]
\item \[\text{ch\text{"i}c th\text{"u}y\text{"e}n th\text{"a}t} \quad \text{CLF boat real} \]
\item \[\text{ch\text{"a}c v\text{\`a} th\text{"a}t l\text{o}n,} \quad \text{strong and real big} \]
\item \[\text{r\text{`e}n m\text{"o}t kh\text{"o}i s\text{"a}t c\text{`o}} \quad \text{forge one CLF iron have} \]
\item \[\text{ni\text{\`e}u c\text{'a}nh s\text{`a}c nung} \quad \text{many sharp edge burn} \]
\item \[\text{cho th\text{"a}t d\text{`o} r\text{õ}i} \quad \text{to real red COMP.MK} \]
\item \[\text{dem kh\text{`o}i s\text{\`a}t} \quad \text{carry CLF iron} \]
\item \[\text{xu\text{`o}ng th\text{"u}y\text{"e}n ch\text{\`e}o} \quad \text{down boat row} \]
\item \[\text{th\text{"o}ng d\text{'e}n \text{Ng\text{"u}u Tinh.}} \quad \text{straight to Ng\text{"u}u Tinh} \]
\end{enumerate}

\begin{quote}
‘Lac Long Quan built a big and strong boat, forged a block of iron that was full of the sharp points, heated it until it was red and brought it along to the evil fish’s cave.’
\end{quote}

\[ \text{xong} \quad [\text{NP}+\text{VP}+\text{xong}]_{\text{CL1}} [(\text{NP})+\text{VP}]_{\text{CL2}} \]

\begin{enumerate}
\item \[\text{Ly Th\text{"o}ng ng\text{`e}e xong.} \quad \text{Ly Thong COMP.MK listen} \]
\item \[\text{n\text{`a}y r\text{`a}m\text{`o}t m\text{`at}u} \quad \text{bounce out one trick} \]
\item \[\text{Th\text{"a}m d\text{`o}c} \quad \text{wicked} \]
\item \[\text{‘After Ly Thong had listened, he tried a trick to intimidate Thach Sanh.’} \]
\end{enumerate}

\[ \text{doan} \quad [(\text{NP})+\text{VP}+\text{doan}]_{\text{CL1}} [(\text{NP})+\text{VP}]_{\text{CL2}} \]

\begin{enumerate}
\item \[\text{N\text{"o}i doan, hai m\text{`e} speak} \quad \text{COMP.MK two mother} \]
\item \[\text{con qu\text{"a}n \text{\`a}o x\text{`ung x\text{`inh}}} \quad \text{child clothes beautiful} \]
\item \[\text{l\text{`e}n d\text{`o}ng} \quad \text{up way} \]
\item \[\text{‘After that was said, Cam and her mother went to the festival in their new dresses.’} \]
\end{enumerate}

\[ \text{th\text{`i}} \quad [(\text{NP})+\text{VP}]_{\text{CL1}} \text{th\text{`i}} \quad [(\text{NP})+\text{VP}]_{\text{CL2}} \]

\begin{enumerate}
\item \[\text{Sanh b\text{\`i}nh t\text{\`i}nh, h\text{\`o}a p\text{\`e}p} \quad \text{Sanh calm, use magic} \]
\item \[\text{D\text{\`a}nh nh\text{`a}u v\text{`i} fight together with} \]
\item \[\text{tr\text{"a}n t\text{\`i}nh, h\text{\`o}i l\text{\`au th\text{`i}}} \quad \text{python, long while then} \]
\item \[\text{y\text{`e}u qu\text{"a}i} \quad \text{evil spirits PASS.MK} \]
\item \[\text{gi\text{`e}t ch\text{`e}t, h\text{\`o}a ra m\text{`o}t} \quad \text{kill die, change out one} \]
\item \[\text{con tr\text{"a}n l\text{\`a}n.} \quad \text{COMP.MK python big} \]
\item \[\text{‘Thach Sanh stayed calm and fought it with his magical powers, then the evil spirit was killed and changed into a big snake.’} \]
\end{enumerate}
Thay có quán nước
see have shop water
bên đường sạch sẽ, beside way clean
bên ghé vào.
then drop in
‘He saw a clean teashop at the side of the path, so he stopped at that shop.’

Chỉ trong chớp mắt,
only in a wink
Lạc Long Quân dâ
Lac long Quan COMP.MK
về
return
‘In an instant, Lac Long Quan appeared.’

The progression markers may co-occur. Rôi occurs with all other progression markers. Thi also co-occurs with most of the progression markers except xong. And dâ can occur with xong. The following examples illustrate some of the co-occurrences:

dâ + roi

(7) Tám vừa bước ra
Tam just step out
dâ cảm lấy chổi
COMP.MK hold take broom
quét dọn nhà cửa sạch sẽ, clean up house clean
roi đi voz ga
COMP.MK go wash the rice

thôi com, hai rau
cook a meal pluck vegetable
đi vụn nau canh
at garden cook soup
giúp bà hàng
help old woman shop
nước đoan Tâm
water COMP.MK Tam
lại thu hình
again get back body
bé nhỏ như cừ roi
little as old COMP.MK
chuối vào voz quả
creep into peel CLF
thi.
persimmon tree
‘As soon as Tam stepped out, she held a broom cleaning the house and cooking for the old woman. And then she returned into the fruit.’

(8) Vua Thùy Tế mừng lâm,
king king of ocean glad very,
tăng Thạch Sanh võ sỏ
present Thach Sanh countless
vàng bạc châu báu,
gold silver jewel valuable
nhưng chẳng đều từ chời
but the lad all refuse
không nhận, chỉ lấy
not receive only take
một cây dâm.
one CLF string instrument
Xỏng roi từ già
COMP.MK COMP.MK say
goodbye
vua và Thái tử,
king and Crown Prince,
 lên trần gian voz
up earth return

6 The non-co-occurrence of thi and xong may be due to the limitation of data.
such events, when taken together as a group, represent a high-level abstraction of the folktales, in which only the most important events are mentioned.

The general function of the progression markers is therefore to highlight and mark thematic events which are temporally sequenced. The meanings of progression markers drawn from the Vietnamese-English Dictionary (1987) above either indicate perfective (completive) aspect\(^7\) or temporal succession.

The postverbal \(roi\), \(xong\), and \(doan\) make reference to the endpoint of a situation. That is, they imply the completion of an action or event. When they tag clauses, they signal the completion of happenings in the clauses which will be built upon by the next happening in subsequent clauses as seen in examples (1-3) above. These three words are used in a similar manner and it is difficult to figure out when to use each word. However, it is more likely that \(xong\) is used with an accomplishment verb\(^8\) and \(doan\) is used to terminate a happening whereas \(roi\) has a wider usage with various kinds of verbs indicating the completion of a happening.

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\(^7\) Perfective or completive aspect denotes a complete situation, with beginning, middle, and end. The semantic element of perfective is the termination of the situation; that is, the situation is viewed as a single complete whole (Comrie, 1981).

\(^8\) Dry (1983) defines accomplishment as a situation of some duration, having a natural endpoint, outcome, or result state, e.g., building a house, running a mile, singing a song.
The sentence conjunctive thì and the preverbal bèn introduce a succeeding event which builds upon the preceding event usually encoded by an adverbial clause. It can be seen that these two words have the same function. The difference is their syntactic structure: thì occurs between clauses and bèn before a verb as seen in example (9). Besides the structural difference, bèn has a slightly different use than thì in that bèn implies a consequence of the previous event. It should be noted also that bèn is no longer used in everyday conversation. It appears only in old texts. The sentence conjunctive thì seems to play a more important role in the discourse.

The following example presents a chain of events marked by bèn and rồi, each one of which in turn is built upon.

(10) a. Tin là thật, Tám believe be real Tam ‘Tam believed her sister’s words.’
b. bèn xuống ao lội then down pond swim ra chỗ sâu tám rửa out place deep wash ‘Then she went down to the pond and washed her hair.’
c. Cảm thụa dip Cam take the opportunity trút hết tép của pour finish tiny shrimp of Tám vào giò cua Tam into basket of Minh rồi oneself already ‘Cam transferred the tiny shrimp from Tam’s basket to hers.’

d. ba-chan bôn càng về run at full speed return trước before ‘She ran home hurriedly.’
e. Lúc Tám bước lên time Tam step up chỉ còn gió không only still basket not ‘When Tam came back and saw her empty basket,’
f. bèn ngồi xuống bung mắt then sit down blind eyes khóc hu hu weep noisily ‘then she sat down and wept noisily.’

In this example, the first event (a)—believing her sister’s words—is built upon by the second—(b) going down to the pond and washing her hair—which is introduced by the preverbal bèn. This in turn is built on by event (c)—transferring the tiny shrimp from Tam’s basket to Cam’s basket—which is marked by the postverbal rồi. The postverbal rồi signals the completion of event (c) and introduces event (d) which builds upon event (c). Event (e) expressed in the adverbial clause is a background event which is followed by the foreground event (f) marked by bèn.

It can be seen that rồi, xong, and doạn have a perfective or completable aspect whereas thì and bèn mark the beginning of a successive event. Besides rồi, xong, and doạn, đã also has aspectual value. It has a perfective aspect since it refers to the action or event in its entirety. A clause on the narrative timeline which has the preverbal đã makes reference to its beginning and ending points so it has
perfective aspect. The preverbal dă is not a past tense marker since Vietnamese has no grammatical forms marking tenses. The timeframe of the narrative is usually in the past; therefore, the narrative is represented as having already taken place. So the clause having dă has the perfective aspect in the past timeframe. The example in the previous section — Thăng năm sang năm cuốn tư điện dă soan xong ‘This month next year, the dictionary will have been finished’ serves as a good example to support the fact that dă is not a tense marker since it also occurs in future time. Consider the following example from the folktales having dă with perfective aspect.

(11) Ngọa phúng mốt chac dă
horse run an instant COMP.MK
dến kinh dă.
arrive capital
‘Soon she arrived at the capital.’

This sentence refers to an action which has been completed on the past timeframe of the narrative. It is viewed as a whole and makes reference to its beginning and ending points.

**Functions of Progression Markers out of Narrative Timeline**

The progression markers which occur on the narrative timeframe function to introduce a new happening which occurs after the completion of the previous one. However it has also been found that these markers may occur out of the narrative timeline such as in quotations and flashback.

Grimes (1975) notes that a quotation gives collateral information which is defined as possible events with reference to projected time. An act of speaking is an event itself but what is said usually is not. Quotations in the Vietnamese folktales have the form of prediction. They have an event sequence which is displaced forward in time as exemplified in example (12).

(12) Tắm chỉ vào
Tam only come in
cái thằng thu;
CLF basket speak
‘Tam only put her head in the basket and said:
Dĩ con bắt phải
stepmother child force must
nhất thóc ra
pick up unhusked rice out
thóc, gao ra gao,
unhusked rice out rice
rői mới được
COMP.MK so get
dị xem hỏi
go watch festival
“My stepmother forced me to sort the rice. If I finish this work, I can go and join the festival.
Lúc nhất xong thi
time pick up COMP.MK TOP.MK
hội dă tan
festival COMP.MK be over
rői còn gì
COMP.MK still what
nụa mả xem.
further in order to watch
By that time, the festival will be finished.’’

In the above example, the progression markers rői, xong, and dă mark a se-

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9 Projected time refers to the time when a situation or action is contemplated, enjoined or anticipated but not realized.
sequence of events that might result later from the main action. This sequence of events is foreshadowing, which is said before the events are actually asserted to have taken place. These markers in a quotation do not function to propel or develop narrative time so they do not mark the storyline.

Flashback is events or activities which are displaced backward in time. Flashback information is usually marked by the progression marker đã as in example (13).

(13)  Chàng hồi nhớ lại những 3rd PER recall again some ngày xưa năm, cái ngày day very far CLF day chẳng lỡ tay ném 3rd PER miss hand throw đã vao đâu em, stone in head YO.SIS tưởng em chết think YO.SIS die nên đã đi so COMP.MK go lang thang không dám trở về roam not dare return nhà, rồi được house COMP.MK get một người buôn one person sell thuốc bắc Chinese tradition medicine đem về nhà nuôi carry return house bring up ở Trung Khánh, thuốc at Trung Khanh belong to tỉnh Cao Bằng. province Cao Bang

that she had died so he had run away. One day, he had met a herbal seller who brought him up at Trung Khanh, Cao Bang province.'

In this example the event—running away—has taken place in a previous part of the story. The preverbal đã indicates that the event was completed in the distant past as seen in example (14). The postverbal rồi is also used to mark a sequence of events which is displaced backward in time.

(14)  Tô Văn thấy thế To Van see like this sợ quá, chạy thẳng afraid very run straight in một mạch ra đường one breath out way không còn dám no more dare ngoài có lại. Turn one’s head around again ‘To Van was very frightened. He immediately ran away from home without turning back even one time.’

The occurrences of progression markers out of the narrative timeline reveal that they bear a notion of completion which is neutral, i.e., not limited to any specific time, and can be displayed in present, past, and future. The context and pragmatic knowledge enable the reader to know the time which those markers display.

Besides indicating the temporal sequence of events, the sentence conjunctive thì is also used to mark a topic, as in example
(12) above and to indicate a condition in a quotation as in example (14) below.

(15) Ṣọ̀́ cá́ t̀à́i b̀iè́n ǵì
    if have disaster what
thì cú́ gò́i
then keep on call
    ta, ta sè
1ªPER 1ªPER FUT.MK
vè́ ngày!
return immediately
‘If any problem occurs, call me. I will be back immediately.’

Discussion

The progression markers rṑi, xōng, dōan, thi, bèn, and dā play a very important role in the folktales. An abstract of the folktales can be extracted by listing all the clauses having these markers. As progression markers, these words mark temporal sequences of events either in the narrative timeline or in projected time.

As the default timeframe of the narrative is past time or accomplished time, when these markers occur in past time, they indicate temporal succession and a cause-effect relationship of foregrounded events. The postverbal rṑi, xōng, and dōan signal the completion of the previous events and introduce a new event which is chronologically tied to the previous one. The sentence connective thi and the preverbal bèn introduce the sentences which move the story forward and thus propel time. These two words have a similar function but different syntactic structure. The word bèn is always preverbal whereas thi occurs between two clauses. The preverbal bèn is rare and occurs only in texts whereas thi is normally used in everyday conversation. The preverbal dā which occurs with non-stative verbs indicates the thematic status of the following verb. Besides signaling foregrounded happenings, the preverbal dā may also occur in flashback, which is information displaced backward in time. It indicates that an event has taken place in the previous part of the story.

In projected time as in a quotation, the progression markers mark the temporal sequence and a cause-effect relationship of events which have not occurred. Besides a progression marker, the temporal connector thi is also used as a topic marker and a conditional connector.

Based on their occurrences both in past time and projected time, it can be concluded that the progression markers rṑi, xōng, dōan, and dā have a perfective or completive aspect which is neutral in reference to time. That is, they may be displayed in present, past, and future. The word dā is thus not a past tense marker but it implies past tense because of its perfective aspect value. Therefore, on the narrative timeline, dā will be equivalent to past tense in English and to past perfect when it is off the narrative timeline such as in flashback. The progression markers thi and bèn mark temporal succession which is also not limited to any specific time. The time settings in the narrative, such as temporal words, phrases and clauses or the context, will give a clue as to specific time.

Comparing the progression markers in Vietnamese to Thai, it has been found that these markers have a similar function to the progression markers in Thai.10

10 See further discussion of the progression markers in Thai in Somsonge (1991, 1992)
Progression Markers in Vietnamese Narrative

The preverbal kō: and cuvj have a similar function to thi and bèn respectively. The preverbal cuvj behaves in a similar way to kō:, but it also implies a consequence of the previous event in the same way as bèn. The preverbal kō: is used very frequently in narrative in the same manner as thi and it is regarded as equivalent to kō: in Thai. However, their syntactic structure is different in that kō: is always preverbal as seen in example (15) whereas thi occurs between two clauses. If the second clause has the same subject as the first one, it is usually omitted and the structure becomes the same as kō: as illustrated below.

Thai

\[ [\text{NP} + \text{VP}]_{\text{CL1}} \]
\[ [\text{omitted NP}] + \]
\[ kō:+\text{VP}]_{\text{CL2}} \]

Vietnamese

\[ [\text{NP} + \text{VP}]_{\text{CL1}} + \text{thi} + \]
\[ [(\text{omitted NP}) +\text{VP}]_{\text{CL2}} \]

Besides signaling the temporal sequence, kō: also functions as a conditional connector just as thi as illustrated below.

(17) \( \text{thā: dēdēk tham} \)
if children do
\( \text{ka:nhā:n sēt} \)
homework finish
\( kō: cā dā:j \)
then will have a chance
\( du: \text{tho:rathāt} \)
watch television

‘If the children finish their homework, they can watch television.’

In the same way as dā, the preverbal dā:j is not a tense marker but implies past tense because it has perfective aspect value. It conveys a meaning that someone has experienced something either in the past or future time. It also has the same function as dā in flashback. Compare example (18) in Thai with examples (13-14) in Vietnamese.

\( \text{(16) lāyːcā:k khā: suša tua} \)
after kill tiger CLS
\( \text{nà:n taa lēw na:jphraː:n} \)
that die already hunter
\( kō: klāp bā:n lēw kō: \)
then return house and then
\( \text{paj̱-fław phraː:chā: goes} \)
meet king

‘After (the hunter) had (already) killed the tiger, the hunter then returned home, and went to see the king.’

(Somsonge, 1991: 108)

11 Compare the use of thi and kō: in examples (4) and (16).
12 See detailed discussion of multi-functions of the word kō: in Yajaj (1985).
The comparison of progression markers in Vietnamese and Thai shows that despite the morphological difference, at the level of discourse syntax, their discourse structures are quite common. It is therefore worth studying discourse structures of other Southeast Asian languages to explore the universal characteristics of discourse features.

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