

# Negation and polar questions in Vietnamese: Present and past

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## Abstract

Polar questions in Vietnamese consist of an affirmative sentence followed by a negation particle. Modern Vietnamese has three negation particles, but only two can occur in this function. This note proposes an account for this gap. The account is premised on the analysis of questions as sets of alternatives, and draws on facts of diachronic change gleaned from historical texts.

## 1 Questions as sets of alternatives

Asking a question, intuitively, involves requesting the addressee to make a choice between several propositions (Grice 1967, Searle 1969). This intuition underlies the "proposition set" analysis of question which we will be assuming in this discussion. Specifically, we will take a question to denote the set of propositions that count as its possible answers (Hamblin 1958, Karttunen 1977, Groenendijk and Stokhof 1984). The question in (1a), for example, denotes the set in (1b), assuming that John, Mary, Sue and Anne are the individuals in our universe of discourse.<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a. Ai thích John  
who like John  
'Who likes John'  
b.  $\llbracket(1a)\rrbracket = \{\text{Mary like John, Sue like John, Anne like John}\}$

We see that the elements of (1b) differ from each other in a systematic way: they vary on the subject position, which is underlined in (1b). This is the "focus" of the sentences, i.e. the position which is "targeted" by the question. We will call such sets of sentences as (1b) sets of "alternatives".

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<sup>1</sup> Following common practice, we write  $\llbracket\alpha\rrbracket$  to represent the semantic value of  $\alpha$ .

- (2) Definition of alternatives (Rooth 1992, Fox and Katzir 2011)  
 S' is an alternative of S iff S' is derivable from S by replacement of a constituent with an expression of the same type

The question in (1a), then, denotes a set of “subject alternatives”, as every element of the set is derivable from any other element by replacing the subject constituent. The subject constituent bears focus, so to speak. The question in (3a), on the other hand, denotes a set of “object alternatives”, i.e. sentences whose object constituent is focused.

- (3) a. John thích ai  
 John likes who  
 ‘Who does John like’  
 b.  $[(3a)] = \{\text{John likes } \underline{\text{Mary}}, \text{John likes } \underline{\text{Sue}}, \text{John likes } \underline{\text{Anne}}\}$

Subject and object are not the only constituents which can be targeted by a question. In fact, every position in the sentence can be targeted by a question. Wh-phrases are the usual means to target subjects, objects and adverbials, but for other grammatical functions other strategies are available. The simplest strategy, which can be employed to target any position in the sentence, is to list the alternatives using the connective *hay*.<sup>2</sup> Targeting subject and object using *hay* is exemplified in (4). Thus, (4a) and (4b) are equivalent to (1a) and (3a).

- (4) a. John thích Mary hay John thích Sue hay John thích Anne  
 b. Mary thích John hay Sue thích John hay Anne thích John

Targeting the verb using *hay* is exemplified in (5), and targetting the whole sentence is exemplified in (6).

- (5) a. John thích Mary hay John yêu Mary  
 John like Mary HAY John love Mary  
 ‘Does John like Mary or does he love her?’  
 b.  $[(5a)] = \{\text{John } \underline{\text{likes}} \text{ Mary}, \text{John } \underline{\text{loves}} \text{ Mary}\}$
- (6) a. John thích Mary hay tôi đang ngủ mơ  
 John like Mary HAY I am dreaming  
 ‘Does John like Mary or am I dreaming?’  
 b.  $[(6a)] = \{\text{John likes Mary}, \underline{\text{I am dreaming}}\}$

## 2 Vietnamese polar questions as sets of second position alternatives

Polar questions in Vietnamese consist of an affirmative sentence followed by a negation particle. There is dependency between the syntactic profile of the affirmative sentence and the choice of the negation particle. Specifically, if the second position of the affirmative is *có*, glossed as AFF, the particle will be *không*, glossed as NEG. If the second position of the affirmative is *đã*, glossed as PERF, the negation particle will be *chưa*, glossed as NEGPERF. The

<sup>2</sup> Vietnamese *hay* thus resembles English inquisitive *or*, as exemplified in *does John like Mary or does he like Sue*. Note that the sentences connected by inquisitive *or* exhibit subject auxiliary inversion. We will assume that this syntactic operation has no semantic effects.

reason for these glosses will be presented shortly. By “second position” we mean the head which immediately follows the subject.

- (7) a. John có đọc sách không  
John AFF read book NEG  
‘Does John read books?’
- b. John đã đọc sách chưa  
John PERF read book NEGPERF  
‘Has John read books?’

The general forms of Vietnamese polar questions are thus (8a) and (8b).

- (8) a. Subject AFF VP NEG  
b. Subject PERF VP NEGPERF

As the translations in (7) show, (8a) is in simple aspect and (8b) is in perfective aspect. Note, importantly, that (8a) and (8b) exhaust the possibilities of formulating a polar question in Vietnamese. In other words, there is no polar question in which the second position of the affirmative is not AFF or PERF, and there is no polar question in which the clause final negation particle is not NEG or NEGPERF.

We may now ask what the relationship is between AFF and NEG on the one hand and PERF and NEGPERF on the other. Specifically, we may ask whether this relationship is arbitrary, similar to that of, say, the verb *wait* and its subcategorizing preposition *for*, or whether it has some sort of semantic motivation. Can we say anything about the dependency between the second position of the affirmative and the clause final negation particle other than that the first “selects” the latter? It turns out that we can. Consider the sentence pairs in (9) and (10).

- (9) a. John có đọc sách  
John AFF read book  
‘John does read books’
- b. John không đọc sách  
John NEG read book  
‘John does not read books’
- (10) a. John đã đọc sách  
John PERF read book  
‘John has read books (already)’
- b. John chưa đọc sách  
John NEGPERF read book  
‘John has not read books (yet)’

As the translations show, (9b) is the logical negation of (9a) and (10b) is the logical negation of (10a). We can see that AFF occurs in the second position of a positive sentence and NEG occurs in the second position of its negative counterpart, and the same holds for PERF and NEGPERF.<sup>3</sup> This fact suggests the following syntax and semantics for Vietnamese polar questions.<sup>4</sup>

What about the phonology of Vietnamese polar questions? We propose the following syntax-phonology interface rule.

- (11) Polar questions in Vietnamese are sentences of the form  $[p [Q q]]$ , where
- (i)  $Q$  is silent
- (ii) Everything in  $q$  is silent except the focused constituent

Let us apply our analysis to a concrete example. Consider the question in (7a), repeated below in (12a). The Logical Form of the question would be (12b), and its denotation the set in (12c). We use strikethrough to represent phonological deletion.

<sup>3</sup> The reason for the glosses of these items is now clear: AFF is mnemonic for “affirmative”, NEG for “negation”, PERF for “perfective”, and NEGPERF for “negation of perfective”. Note that AFF is optional in (9a) and (9b), and indicates verum focus.

<sup>4</sup> We write “ $\neg p$ ” to represent the negation of  $p$ . The “lambda notation” used to represent functions is to be interpreted as specified in Heim and Kratzer (1998). Specifically,  $[\lambda\alpha : \gamma. \phi]$  is the function from  $\alpha$  such that  $\gamma$  to  $\phi$  or to 1 iff  $\phi$ .



- (16) a. John đã có đọc sách  
John PAST AFF read book  
'John read books'
- b. John đã không đọc sách  
John PAST NEG read book  
'John did not read books'
- (17) \*John đã có đọc sách *Q* John đã không đọc sách  
John PAST AFF read book *Q* John PAST NEG read book  
(‘Did John read books?’)

We also predict that no polar question can be formed from two propositions which are SPAs but which are not negation of each other. This prediction is borne out as well. The two sentences (18a) and (18b) are SPAs, as one can be derived from the other by replacement of the second position constituent. However, the question in (19) is ungrammatical.

- (18) a. John được đọc sách  
John may read book  
'John may read books'
- b. John phải đọc sách  
John must read book  
'John must read books'
- (19) \*John được đọc sách *Q* John phải đọc sách  
John may read book *Q* John must read book  
(‘Is it the case that John may read books or is it the case that he must?’)

The question arises, in this connection, as to whether there is any way to ameliorate the ungrammaticality of such sentences as (15), (17), and (19).<sup>7</sup> If we want to keep to polar questions, i.e. those which consist of an affirmative sentence followed by a negation particle, then the answer is no. This answer, of course, follows from what we said above about *Q*. However, if the question is understood as asking whether the intended meaning of (15), (17) and (19), or an approximation thereof, can be expressed by some sort of interrogatives, then the answer is yes. Specifically, we could connect the two sentences with *HAY*. What we end up with would of course be alternative questions, which is similar but not identical to polar questions.<sup>8</sup>

Another question which arises is why the second position is the focus of polar questions? Why is another position not chosen for this function? We have no satisfying answer to this question. However, we would note that the second position is actually the highest operator position. According to the standard view on sentence structure, the thematic core is the constituent containing the verb and its arguments. This is the smallest propositional constituent. This constituent then recursively merges with operators, i.e. heads that map a propositional object into another propositional object, for example heads expressing tense, aspect, and negation. After the last operator has merged, the subject moves from its base position, merging with the matrix node and becoming the “specifier” of the highest operator.<sup>9</sup>

- (20) [S Subject [S OP<sub>n</sub> ... [S OP<sub>1</sub> [VP *t*<sub>Subject</sub> Verb Object]]...]]

Thus, what we call “second position” is in fact the position of the main logical operator. Negating the sentence would then mean either merging a truth-value reversing operator on top of the sentence, or replacing the main operator with another operator. As only the latter option results in an “alternative” as defined in (2), it is natural that polar questions target the second

<sup>7</sup> We thank a reviewer of our paper for raising this question.

<sup>8</sup> We come back to this issue in section 6 below.

<sup>9</sup> This movement of the subject from its base position to the specifier position of the highest operator is required by the so-called Extended Projection Principle (EPP) which states, among other things, that the highest operator must have a specifier (Chomsky 1986).

position.<sup>10</sup> Again, we stress that this is just a hunch. We hope to be able to formulate a more concrete proposal in the future.

### 3 Explaining a gap in colloquial Saigonese

Colloquial Saigonese has two simple aspect negations: *hông* and *hổng*, glossed as [hong] and [hong?], respectively.<sup>11</sup> These items differ only in their tones, not in their segmental structure.

- (21) a. John *hông* đọc sách  
 John [hong] read book  
 ‘John does not read books’
- b. John *hổng* đọc sách  
 John [hong?] read book  
 ‘John does not read books’

As the translations in (21) show, [hong] and [hong?] are logically equivalent. There is, in fact, a pragmatic difference between (21a) and (21b). In particular, it seems that (21b) is more “emphatic” in some sense. We will, however, ignore this difference and note the following puzzle: [hong] can occur in polar questions but [hong?] can’t.

- (22) a. John *có* đọc sách *hông*  
 John AFF read book [hong]  
 ‘Does John read books?’
- b. \*John *có* đọc sách *hổng*  
 John AFF read book [hong?]  
 (‘Does John read books?’)

How do we resolve this puzzle? First, let us note that in Saigonese, there is another way to express negation which is syntactically complex, namely by [hong] or [hong?] followed by AFF, as exemplified in (23).

- (23) a. John *hông* *có* đọc sách  
 John [hong] AFF read book  
 ‘John does not read books’
- b. John *hổng* *có* đọc sách  
 John [hong?] AFF read book  
 ‘John does not read books’

Again, (23a) and (23b) are logically equivalent. It turns out that pragmatically, (23a) and (23b) have the same “emphatic” effect as (21b). In light of this fact, we propose that both [hong?] and [hong?] AFF are realizations of the same underlying complex negation NEG AFF. Here is the relevant morphophonemic rule.

- (24) Morphophonemic rule of Saigonese
- (i) NEG → [hong]
- (ii) NEG AFF →  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{[hong] AFF} \\ \text{[hong?] AFF} \\ \text{[hong?]} \end{array} \right.$

Thus, NEG has one phonological realization, while the complex NEG AFF has three, which are free variants. This means that (22a) and (22b) have the analyses in (25) and (26), respectively.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted here that our use of the term “second position” is not to be confused with how this term is used in the literature on the so-called “V2”<sup>4</sup> phenomenon in Germanic languages (Grewendorf 1988). The “second position” which hosts the finite verb in V2 languages (the “linker Satzklammer”) is the highest head in the C-Domain. What we call “second position” here is actually the highest head in the INFL domain. Assuming a simple C-T-V structure, the V2 position would be C, while what we call “second position” would be T. We assume, as is standard, that the C-domain relates to the information structure and not the logical content of the sentence (Chomsky 1995). We thank a reviewer for pointing out the need of making this distinction clear.

<sup>11</sup> Glosses in square brackets are intended to reflect the phonology, not the semantics, of the Vietnamese items. Note that [hong] has level tone while [hong?] has falling tone.

- (25) Analysis of (22a)
- a. John có đọc sách *Q* John hông đọc sách  
 John AFF read book *Q* John [hong] read book
- b. Logical Form: John AFF read book *Q* John NEG read book
- (26) Analysis of (22b)
- a. \*John có đọc sách *Q* John hông đọc sách  
 John AFF read book *Q* John [hong?] read book
- b. Logical Form: \*John AFF read book *Q* John NEG AFF read book

We can see the Logical Form in (25) fulfills all syntactic and semantic conditions on polar questions. The two arguments of *Q* are SPAs: one can be derived from the other by replacing just the second position. Furthermore, the two sentences are logical negation of each other. Consequently, (22a) is well-formed, as expected. Turning to (26), we can see that this Logical Form fails to fulfill the syntactic conditions on polar question, in that the two arguments of *Q* are not SPAs. Specifically, we cannot derive one from the other by replacing just the second position. Consequently, (22b) is unacceptable, as expected.

## 4 Explaining a gap in standard Vietnamese

It turns out that standard Vietnamese, i.e. the Hanoi dialect, also has two negations. Above we considered *không*. There is another head, *chẳng*, which is logically equivalent to *không*. In what follows we will gloss *không* and *chẳng* as [khong] and [chang?], respectively, to reflect the phonological realizations of these items rather than their syntax and semantics.<sup>12</sup>

- (27) a. John không đọc sách  
 John [khong] read book  
 ‘John does not read books’
- b. John chẳng đọc sách  
 John [chang?] read book  
 ‘John does not read books’

Although [khong] and [chang?] are logically equivalent, we can ask whether there are pragmatic differences between them. It turns out, interestingly, that [chang?] conveys the same sense of emphasis as [hong] AFF or [hong?] in Saigonese. Moreover, we observe that just like [hong?], [chang?] cannot occur as sentence-final particle in polar questions.

- (28) a. John có đọc sách không  
 John AFF read book [khong]  
 ‘Does John read books?’
- b. \*John có đọc sách chẳng  
 John AFF read book [chang?]  
 (‘Does John read books?’)

Given our discussion of colloquial Saigonese in the previous section, the following morphophonemics rule suggests itself for standard Vietnamese.

- (29) Morphophonemic rule of standard Vietnamese
- (i) NEG → [khong]
- (ii) NEG AFF → [chang?]

Thus, we claim that syntactically standard Vietnamese does have a complex negation NEG AFF which, however, is always mapped to the monosyllabic [chang?]. The rule in (29) makes it possible to derive the distribution of [khong] and [chang?] in standard Vietnamese polar questions

<sup>12</sup> Again, the “?” inside the phonological gloss of *chẳng* ([chang?]) indicates the falling tone of this item.

in the same way we derived the distribution of [hong] and [hong?] in colloquial Saigonese plural questions. Specifically, we can now say that (28b) is ill-formed because the two arguments of *Q* are not SPAs.

- (30) Analysis of (28b)
- a. \*John có đọc sách *Q* John chẳng đọc sách  
 John AFF read book *Q* John [chang?] read book
  - b. Logical Form: \*John AFF read book *Q* John NEG AFF read book

## 5 Historical consideration

Comparing (24) and (29), we can see that the former is plausible while the latter looks like a trick. There seems to be a possibility of motivating (24) in terms of familiar phonological processes: AFF changes the tone of the immediately preceding items and can optionally delete. For (29), however, it is hard to see by what phonological process AFF turns [khong] to [chang?]. This section attempts to defend (24) from charges of being ad hoc and arbitrary. The defense will appeal to facts of historical changes described in Vũ (1986), which examines Vietnamese texts spanning several centuries.<sup>13</sup> The titles are listed below in (31).

- (31) (A) *Quốc Âm Thi Tập* by Nguyễn Trãi (15th century)  
 (B) *Hồng Đức Quốc Âm Thi Tập* by Hội Tao Đàn (15th century)  
 (C) *Thơ Nôm* by Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (16th century)  
 (D) *Phép Giảng Tám Ngày* by Alexandre de Rhodes (17th century)  
 (E) *Truyện Kiều* by Nguyễn Du (18th century)  
 (F) *Thầy Lazaro Phiên* by Nguyễn Trọng Quản (19th century)  
 (G) *Đôi Mắt* by Nam Cao (20th century)

Examining these texts, we find that Vietnamese used to have not two but three negations: *không* ([khong]), *chẳng* ([chang]), and *chẳng* ([chang?]).<sup>14</sup> We counted the number of occurrences of each of these items in texts belonging to each of the six centuries. The frequencies are presented in (32).

(32) Frequency of [khong], [chang], [chang?] as negation

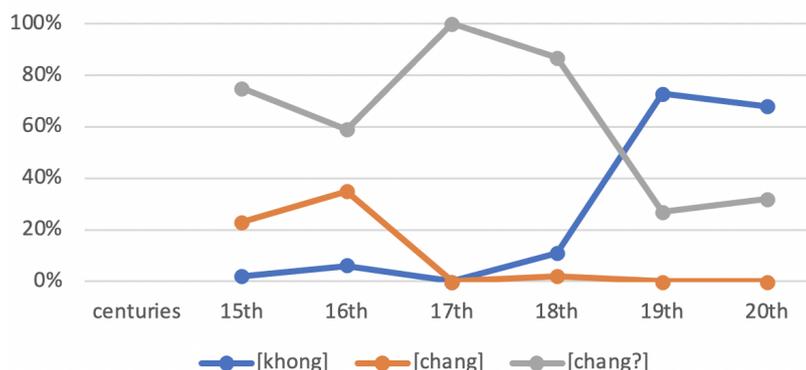
century	15th	16th	17th	18th	19th	20th
[khong]	7	7	0	14	87	59
[chang]	73	42	0	3	0	0
[chang?]	231	72	691	107	32	28

We can see that Vietnamese mainly used [chang] and [chang?] until the 19th century, after which [khong] became the item of choice to express negation. The historical development of the three particles is best presented visually in terms of not frequencies but probabilities, as below.

<sup>13</sup> To be exact, Vũ (1986) examines all the texts in (31) except (F) and (G). These two texts are examined by us for this paper.

<sup>14</sup> As suggested by the crosses, *chẳng* ([chang]) is different from *chẳng* ([chang?]) in that the first has level tone while the second has falling tone.

(33) Probabilities of [khong], [chang], [chang?] as negation



Here is how this graph is to be read. In the 15th century text samples, for example, 2% of negations are expressed by [khong], around 20% are expressed by [chang], and around 75% are expressed by [chang?]. Thus, [chang?] were the most popular negation, followed by [chang], and [khong] was rarely used. We then witness a big dive with [chang] in the 17th century text, with this item becoming as unpopular as [khong]. In the 18th century text, [khong] starts to occur more than [chang]. In the 19th and 20th century texts, [khong] becomes the most popular item to express negation, [chang?] being the distant second, and [chang] practically becoming obsolete and out of use.

Vũ (1986) proposes that [chang] used to be the default negation in Vietnamese, while [khong] comes into the language at a later time. We will take up this proposal, and add to it the claim that [chang?] is the realization of [chang] and AFF. Thus, the morphophonemics rule for, say, 15th century Vietnamese would be (34).

(34) Morphophonemic rule of old Vietnamese

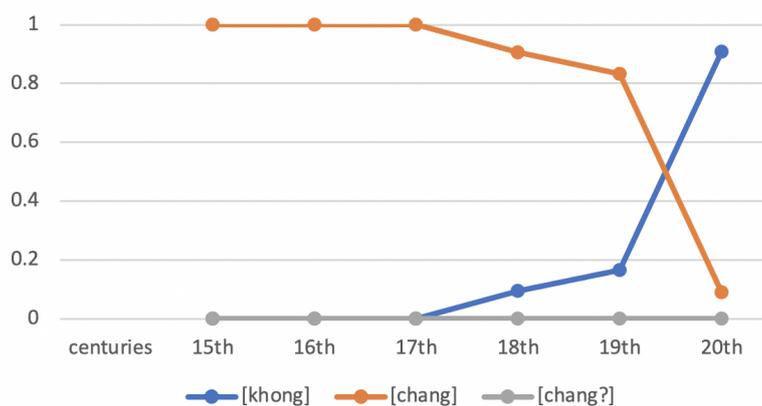
- (i) NEG → [chang]
- (ii) NEG AFF → [chang?]

Against the background of the rule in (34) for old Vietnamese, the rule in (29) for modern Vietnamese makes more sense: what changes is that [khong] replaces [chang] as the realization of NEG, nothing else. Note that this account makes an interesting prediction regarding the diachronic development of polar questions in Vietnamese. In sections 3 and 4, we argue that items which realize NEG AFF cannot occur as (clause final) polar question particles. Given our claim that [chang?] has always been the realization of NEG AFF throughout the history of Vietnamese, we expect that [chang?] has never been used as a polar question particle. And since NEG changes from [chang] to [khong], we expect that [chang] and [khong] switch places as the polar question particle in Vietnamese. Both of these expectations are borne out in the texts listed in (31). We counted the occurrences of [khong], [chang], and [chang?] in these texts, and got the following frequencies and probabilities.

(35) Frequency of [khong], [chang], [chang?] as polar question particle

century	15th	16th	17th	18th	19th	20th
[khong]	0	0	0	2	2	10
[chang]	7	3	32	19	10	1
[chang?]	0	0	0	0	0	0

(36) Probabilities of [khong], [chang], [chang?] as polar question particle



## 6 An open question about HAY

We now turn to a brief discussion of an open questions which, we believe, should be addressed in the context of our analysis. The question concerns the differences between  $Q$  and HAY regarding their usage. We have proposed a semantics for  $Q$  which is “akin” to that of HAY, in the sense that both of them map propositions to sets of propositions. What distinguishes  $Q$  from HAY is that  $Q$  requires each of its two arguments to be the logical negation of the other. This proposal does justice to our basic intuition about polar questions, namely that they present us with  $p$  and  $\neg p$  as possible answers. Similar proposals have been made for polar questions in English, where the English counterpart of HAY is the disjunctive particle *or* (Katz and Postal 1964, Langacker 1970, Romero and Han 2004, Guerzoni and Sharvit 2014). In fact, *or* would be an appropriate English translation of HAY, as the readers may have noted in the examples above.

Our proposal thus raises the question whether polar questions are the same as alternative questions, i.e. those constructed with HAY, in all respects. We submit that the answer is no, and we would also submit that our analysis is compatible with this answer. In other words, the semantic similarity between  $Q$  and HAY does not force us to say that these items have the exact same interpretation or the exact same use, as similarity is not identity. As it turns out, alternative and polar questions differ in Vietnamese in much the same way that they differ in English. As an example, take the observation, made by Bolinger (1978), that polar but not alternative questions are felicitous as invitations. This observation holds for Vietnamese also. Thus, suppose John sees Mary admiring the oranges in his garden and wants to invite her to try out one of them, he would ask the polar question in (37a), not the (elliptical) alternative question in (37b).

- (37) a. Em có muốn ăn cam không  
you AFF want eat orange NEG  
b. Em có muốn ăn cam hay không  
you AFF want eat orange HAY NEG

Given the stated empirical focus of this paper as well as its scope, we must remain agnostic about the semantic and pragmatic properties of HAY which distinguish its usage from that of  $Q$ .

To the best of our knowledge, this is also the current situation in the literature (cf. for example Romero and Han 2004: 643). We hope to pursue this interesting topic in the future.

## 7 Conclusion

We approach the grammar of polar questions in Vietnamese as many works have approached the grammar of questions in general, namely as a representation of a set of alternatives which is subject to semantic, syntactic and phonological conditions. Specifically, we propose that polar questions in Vietnamese denote sets containing a proposition  $p$  and its logical negation  $\neg p$ , where  $p$  and  $\neg p$  must be expressed by sentences that are second position alternatives. We apply our analysis to explain a gap in colloquial Saigonese, and extend that explanation to another gap in standard Vietnamese. Our account of the gap in standard Vietnamese involves a morphophonemic rule which looks implausible, but we argue that it has historical motivation, using texts spanning six centuries to corroborate our argument.

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