

# A note on bias and polarity in Vietnamese

Tue Trinh<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Leibniz-Zentrum Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft

Vietnamese has two types of NPIs, simple and complex, and two types of polar questions, yes/no questions and agreement questions. Simple NPIs can occur in both types of polar questions while complex NPIs can occur in yes/no but not in agreement questions. I propose an account for this fact using familiar ingredients of semantic and syntactic analyses. I then discuss some ways in which Vietnamese and English differ with respect to how distinctions in meaning align with distinctions in form.

## 1 Observation

This section describes the differences with respect to distribution and interpretation between two types of NPIs across two types of polar questions in Vietnamese.

### 1.1 Two types of polar questions

I will use the term “polar questions” to describe questions which ask for the truth value of a single proposition. In other words, polar questions are those which are answered felicitously by assertion of a proposition or assertion of its negation. Vietnamese has two variants of polar questions. The first, which I will call “yes/no” questions, involves bracketing the predicate of the sentence with the words *có* and *không* (Trinh 2005, Duffield 2007). I will gloss *có* and *không* as AFF and NEG, for reasons which will be clear shortly.

- (1) a. John đọc Kant                      b. John có đọc Kant không?  
       John read Kant                      John AFF read Kant NEG  
       ‘John reads Kant.’                      ‘Does John read Kant?’

I will call (1-a) the “prejacent” of (1-b). More generally, the prejacent of a yes/no question will be (the proposition expressed by) the sentence derived from the question by removing AFF and NEG. Let us now briefly discuss AFF and NEG outside the context of a yes/no question. In declaratives, AFF and NEG are the affirmative and the negative auxiliary, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

- (2) a. John có đọc Kant                      b. John không đọc Kant  
       John AFF read Kant                      John NEG read Kant  
       ‘John does read Kant.’                      ‘John does not read Kant.’

These words are also used as the affirmative and the negative short answer to yes/no questions. The question in (1-b) can be answered with either *có* (AFF), which would mean John does read Kant, or *không* (NEG), which would mean John does not read Kant. We can analyze these short answers as (3-a) and (3-b), which are elliptical sentences with everything but the auxiliary elided (Holmberg 2016, Krifka 2013).

- (3) a. ~~Nam~~ AFF read ~~Kant~~  
       b. ~~Nam~~ NEG read ~~Kant~~

The other type of polar questions in Vietnamese is constructed by appending the discourse particle *à* to the end of a declarative sentence (Trinh 2010).

- (4) a. John đọc Kant à?                      b. John không đọc Kant à?  
       John reads Kant A                      John NEG read Kant A  
       ‘John reads Kant?’                      ‘John doesn’t read Kant?’

I will call this type of polar questions “agreement questions”, and the (proposition expressed by) the sentence preceding A the “prejacent” of the agreement question. The term “agreement questions” is due to the fact that these questions can be described, intuitively, as asking the hearer whether she agrees with the prejacent. Thus, (4-a) asks whether the hearer agrees that John reads Kant, and (4-b), whether she agrees that John does not read Kant.

There are two strategies of answering an agreement question. I will call them the “congruent” strategy and the “non-congruent” strategy. The non-congruent

<sup>1</sup>For arguments that AFF and NEG are verbal see Trinh 2005. Verbal negation is attested across languages. Finnish is an example (Bobaljik 1994). Note that similarly to English affirmative *do*, AFF appears only when the affirmative sentence bears verum focus. And similarly to English *not*, NEG is stressed when the negative sentence bears verum focus.

strategy consists in answering the agreement question as if it were a yes/no question, which means answering it with either AFF or with NEG. Note that AFF expresses an affirmative and NEG expresses a negative sentence independently of whether the prejacent of the agreement question is an affirmative or a negative sentence. Thus, no matter whether the question is (4-a) or (4-b), answering it with AFF means asserting that John reads Kant, and answering it with NEG means asserting that he does not.

Recall that an agreement question asks the hearer whether she agrees with the prejacent. The “congruent” answering strategy, therefore, should express agreement or disagreement with the prejacent. To express agreement with the prejacent, the response particle *vâng*, which I will gloss as ARG, is employed. The closest translation of ARG is ‘that’s right’, or ‘that’s correct’. Answering (4-a) with ARG means asserting that John reads Kant, and answering (4-b) with ARG means asserting that he does not, for example.

What if we want to express disagreement with the prejacent? In other words, what is the negative counterpart of ARG? It turns out that there is no such word: Vietnamese has a lexical gap. To convey disagreement with the prejacent of an agreement question, we would have to resort to the non-congruent strategy. Suppose the question is (4-a), the disagreeing answer would be *không* (NEG), which means John does not read Kant. If the question is (4-b), the disagreeing answer would be *có* (AFF), which means John does read Kant.

Thus, whereas yes/no questions have a positive and a negative short answer, agreement questions only have a positive short answer.

It turns out that there is a possible functional account of this asymmetry. The account will turn on another fact about agreement question, namely that it is biased towards the affirmative answer (Trinh 2010). Suppose the speaker sees John with a copy of *The Critique of Pure Reason* in his hand. In this context, the agreement question in (5-a) is felicitous but the yes/no question in (5-b) is not.

(5) Context: the speaker sees John with a copy of *The Critique of Pure Reason* in his hand

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| a. John đọc Kant à?<br>John read Kant A | b. #John có đọc Kant không?<br>John AFF read Kant NEG? |
|---|--|

In the very same context, the agreement question in (6-a) would be infelicitous, while the yes/no question in (6-b) would be felicitous.

- (6) Context: the speaker sees John with a copy of *The Critique of Pure Reason* in his hand

- a. #John đọc cả Hegel à?    b. John có đọc cả Hegel không?  
John read also Hegel A        John AFF read also Hegel NEG?

What (5) and (6) tell us is two things. First, if there is contextual evidence that  $\phi$ , a polar question with preajcent  $\phi$  is only felicitous when it is formulated as an agreement question. Second, if there is no contextual evidence that  $\phi$ , a polar question with preajcent  $\phi$  is only felicitous when it is formulated as a yes/no question. In other words, yes/no questions requires the context to be “preajcent neutral”, while agreement questions require it to be “preajcent biased”.

I conjecture that the preajcent bias of agreement questions might contribute to the functional pressure to have short answer expressing agreement with the preajcent but no short answer expressing disagreement with the preajcent.

## 1.2 Two types of NPIs

Vietnamese is one of the languages that build NPIs from *wh*-elements. For example, the word *ai*, as an interrogative pronoun, means ‘who’, but as an NPI, means ‘anyone’. Similarly, *gì* means either ‘what’ or ‘anything’ (Bruening & Tran 2006). A non-negated declarative sentence would disambiguate such expressions towards the interrogative reading, while a polar question would disambiguate them towards the NPI reading.

- (7) a. John đang đọc gì  
John PROG read what  
‘What is John reading?’  
b. ‘Is John reading anything?’  
(i) John có đang đọc gì            không  
John AFF PROG read anything NEG  
(ii) John đang đọc gì            à  
John PROG read anything A

This ambiguity extends to *which*-phrase. The Vietnamese word for *which* is *nào*, which combines with singular NPs. As Vietnamese is a classifier language of the East Asian variety, singular number is indicated by a classifier (Chierchia 1998, Trinh 2011).

- (8) a. John đang đọc quyển sách nào  
John PROG read CL    book which  
‘Which book is John reading?’

- b. ‘Is John reading any book?’
- (i) John có đang đọc quyển sách nào không  
 John AFF PROG read CL book any NEG
- (ii) John đang đọc quyển sách nào à  
 John PROG read CL book any A

In what follows, we will not be concerned with the interrogative reading of wh-phrases. For this reason, I will gloss CL+NP+NAO simply as “ANY NP”.

NPIs in Vietnamese come in two morphological variants, simple and complex. Those we just discussed are the simple ones. Complex NPIs are built out of simple NPIs by prefixing the latter with the word *bất kỳ* (Trinh 2020), which I will gloss as BK.

- (9) John có đang đọc bất kỳ quyển sách nào không  
 John AFF PROG read BK ANY book NEG  
 ‘Is John reading any book at all?’

As indicated by the translation in (9), adding *bất kỳ* to the NPI in Vietnamese has a similar interpretive effect as adding *at all* to the NPI in English: it gives rise to the inference that the speaker is biased towards the negative answer, in the sense that she has more reasons to think that the negative answer is correct than to think that the positive answer is. In the case of (9), the inference would be that the speaker strongly suspects that John is not reading any book. Simple NPIs, on the other hand, do not induce such negative bias. The question in (8-b-i), for example, does not give rise to any inference about which answer the speaker strongly suspects to be correct.

Another difference between simple and complex NPIs pertains to their distribution across the two types of polar questions: whereas simple NPIs are acceptable in both yes/no and agreement questions, complex NPIs are acceptable in yes/no questions but give rise to deviance when they occur in agreement questions.

- (10) a. John có đang đọc bất kỳ quyển sách nào không?  
 John AFF PROG read BK ANY book NEG
- b. #John đang đọc bất kỳ quyển sách nào à?  
 John PROG read BK ANY book A

## 2 Analysis

We have seen that Vietnamese polar questions come in two variants, yes/no questions and agreement questions. Yes/no questions are preacent neutral while agreement questions are preacent biased. We have also seen that NPIs in Vietnamese come in two variants, simple and complex. Simple NPIs are acceptable in both yes/no and agreement questions. Complex NPIs are acceptable in yes/no questions but cause deviance in agreement questions. In yes/no questions, complex NPIs give rise to negative bias while simple NPIs do not.

The present section will be devoted to an analysis of these facts.

### 2.1 Introducing WHETHER

For the purpose of this paper I will assume a simplified version of the analysis proposed in Hamblin 1973, Karttunen 1977. Let us define two functions. The first is YES, the identity function, and the second is NO, the negation function.

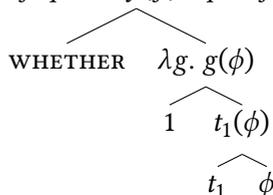
- (11) a. YES =<sub>def</sub>  $\lambda p \in D_{st}. p$   
 b. NO =<sub>def</sub>  $\lambda p \in D_{st}. \neg p$

We will say that a function  $f$  of type  $\langle st, st \rangle$  is a “polarity”, i.e. that  $pol(f)$ , if  $f$  is either YES or NO. For polar questions, I assume the presence of a (overt or) covert WHETHER (Bennett 1977, Higginbotham 1993, Krifka 2001, Guerzoni & Sharvit 2014).

- (12)  $\llbracket \text{WHETHER} \rrbracket = \lambda Q \in D_{\langle \langle st, st \rangle, t \rangle}. \lambda p \in D_{st}. \exists f \in D_{\langle st, st \rangle}. pol(f) \wedge p = Q(f)$

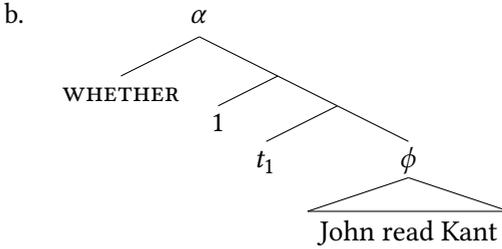
The base position of WHETHER is above TP. When it moves, it leaves a trace of type  $\langle st, st \rangle$ . Predicate abstraction proceeds in the familiar way.

- (13)  $\lambda p. \exists f. polarity(f) \wedge p = f(\phi)$



I will assume that at the relevant level of analysis, a yes/no question in Vietnamese whose preacent is  $\phi$  has the logical form  $\llbracket \text{WHETHER } \phi \rrbracket$ . Thus, the question in (1-b), reproduced below in (14-a), has the logical form in (14-b), which denotes the set in (14-c).

- (14) a. John có đọc Kant không?  
 John AFF read Kant NEG



- c.  $\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket = \{\text{YES}(\text{John reads Kant}), \text{NO}(\text{John reads Kant})\}$

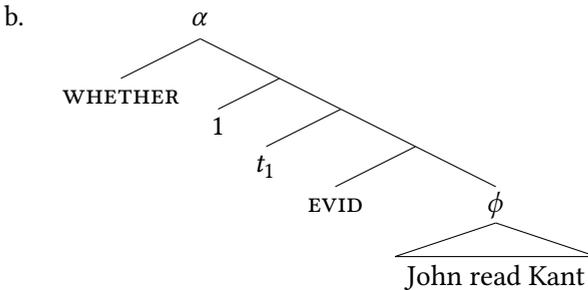
## 2.2 Introducing EVID

What about agreement questions? Recall that agreement questions are pre-jacent biased, in the sense that they require the context to contain evidence for the pre-jacent. I will adopt the analysis proposed in [Trinh 2014](#) and assume the existence of an evidential marker EVID, which is attached to TP and has the following interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

- (15)  $\llbracket \text{EVID } \phi \rrbracket = \begin{cases} \llbracket \phi \rrbracket & \text{if there is contextual evidence that } \phi \\ \# & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$

Thus,  $\llbracket \text{EVID } \phi \rrbracket$  presupposes that there is contextual evidence that  $\phi$ . I will assume that at the relevant level of analysis, the agreement question (16-a) has the LF in (16-b), and the denotation in (16-c).

- (16) a. John đọc Kant à?  
 John read Kant A



- c.  $\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket = \{\text{YES}(\text{EVID}(\text{John reads Kant})), \text{NO}(\text{EVID}(\text{John reads Kant}))\}$

<sup>2</sup>Thus, EVID is the presuppositional counterpart of [von Stechow & Gillies's 2010](#) epistemic *must*.

Both answers contain [EVID(John reads Kant)] as a subconstituent. Thus, both answers presuppose that there is contextual evidence that John reads Kant, which means the question presupposes that there is contextual evidence that John reads Kant. We thus account for the fact that agreement questions are evidentially biased toward the prejacent.

How do we account for the fact that yes/no questions are prejacent neutral, i.e. that a yes/no question with prejacent  $\phi$  is infelicitous in contexts where there is evidence that  $\phi$ ? I propose that this effect comes about as an anti-presupposition. I will assume the principle of Maximize Presupposition as a primitive of grammar (Heim 1991).

- (17) Maximize Presupposition (MP)  
Presuppose as much as possible!

Given MP, a yes/no question will be understood as indicating that there is no contextual evidence for the prejacent, since if there were such evidence, the speaker would have used an agreement question instead (Sauerland 2008).

### 2.3 Introducing EVEN

Let us now address the fact that NPIs, both simple and complex, are acceptable in yes/no questions. A well-known fact about WHETHER is that it licenses NPIs. Various attempts have been made to derive this observation (cf. Ladusaw 1979, Krifka 1991, 1995, Van Rooij 2003, Guerzoni & Sharvit 2007, 2014, Nicolae 2015, Roelofsen 2018, Roelofsen & Jeong 2022). For this paper, I will assume it as a primitive.

- (18) WHETHER licenses NPIs in its scope

Given (18), we predict, correctly, that NPIs of both types are acceptable in yes/no questions. However, we also predict, incorrectly, that NPIs of both types are acceptable in agreement questions as well, given our analysis of agreement questions as containing WHETHER. Our task, therefore, is to specify a distinctive grammatical property of complex NPIs which explains the deviance caused by their occurrence in agreement questions.

Recall a complex NPI consists of a simple NPI plus the element BK. I propose that BK, by itself, has no independent semantics. Rather, it is just the morphological reflex of a c-commanding operator, EVEN.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>For similar ideas see Heim 1984, Guerzoni 2004, Crnić 2014, Roelofsen & Jeong 2022.

(19) BK is the morphological reflex of a c-commanding EVEN in the structure

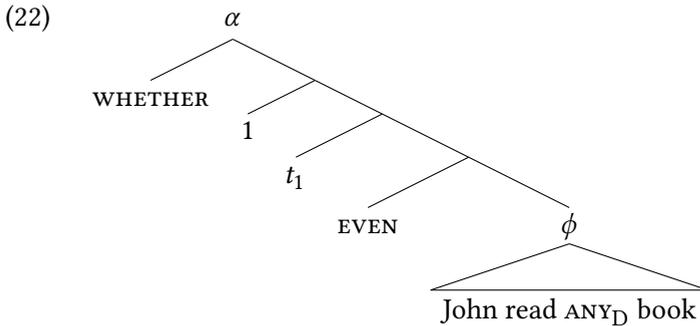
As its name suggests, EVEN has a meaning akin to that of English *even*. For the purpose of this discussion, we will give EVEN the interpretation in (20).

$$(20) \quad \llbracket \text{EVEN } \phi \rrbracket = \begin{cases} \llbracket \phi \rrbracket & \text{if } \forall \psi \in \text{ALT}(\phi). \llbracket \phi \rrbracket \leq_{\text{likely}} \llbracket \psi \rrbracket \\ \# & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Thus,  $\llbracket \text{EVEN } \phi \rrbracket$  asserts  $\phi$  and presupposes that  $\phi$  is the least likely among the alternatives of  $\phi$ . I will assume, following many works, that NPIs induce “subdomain” alternatives. Alternatives of sentences containing NPIs are generated by point-wise composition in the familiar way. In their basic meaning, NPIs are just existential quantifiers (Kadmon & Landman 1993, Krifka 1995, Chierchia 2013).

- (21) a.  $\llbracket \text{any}_D \text{ book} \rrbracket = \lambda P. \exists x. x \in D \cap \llbracket \text{book} \rrbracket \wedge P(x) = \text{‘a book in } D\text{’}$   
 b.  $\text{ALT}(\text{any}_D \text{ book}) = \{\text{any}_{D'} \text{ book} \mid D' \subseteq D\} = \{\text{a book in } D' \mid D' \subseteq D\}$   
 c.  $\text{ALT}(\text{John read any}_D \text{ book}) = \{\text{John reads any}_{D'} \text{ book} \mid D' \subseteq D\}$

Simple NPIs do not come with BK. I will take this to mean that they do not come with EVEN. In polar questions with EVEN, WHETHER can be base-generated either above or below EVEN. Consider the first possibility.



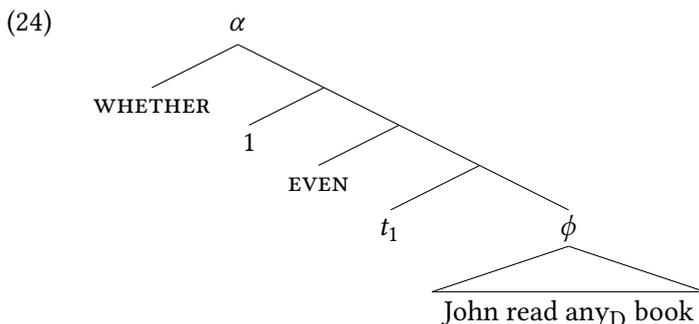
$$\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket = \{\text{YES}(\text{EVEN}(\text{John read ANY}_D \text{ book})), \text{NO}(\text{EVEN}(\text{John read ANY}_D \text{ book}))\}$$

This configuration results in a yes/no question for which both answers, the positive as well as the negative, have the same unsatisfiable presupposition, induced by the subconstituent in (23).

- (23)  $\# \text{EVEN}(\text{John read ANY}_D \text{ book})$   
 Presupposition: John reads a book in  $D \leq_{\text{likely}} \text{John reads a book in } D'$ , for any  $D' \subseteq D$

Given that likelihood respects logical entailments, i.e. that  $\phi \leq_{\text{likely}} \psi$  if  $\phi \Rightarrow \psi$ , and given the logical truth that for any D and D' such that  $D' \subseteq D$ , if John reads a book in D' then John reads a book in D but not vice versa, both answers in (22) presuppose that a weaker sentence is less likely than a stronger sentence, which is necessarily false. I will take this fact to mean that such a parse as (22) will be ruled out as deviant by the grammar.

Having EVEN scoping above the trace of WHETHER, however, results in a polar question with *one* felicitous answer, namely the negative.



$$\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket = \{ \text{EVEN}(\text{YES}(\text{John read any}_D \text{ book})), \\ \text{EVEN}(\text{NO}(\text{John read any}_D \text{ book})) \}$$

The positive answer in this case is equivalent to the positive answer in (22), and is deviant for the same reason, namely because it has a necessarily false presupposition. The negative answer, however, does not have such a presupposition. Let us consider it.

- (25) EVEN(NO(John read any<sub>D</sub> book))  
 Presupposition:  $\neg$ John reads a book in D  $\leq_{\text{likely}}$   $\neg$ John reads a book in D',  
 for any  $D' \subseteq D$

Negation is scale-reversing, so for any  $D' \subseteq D$ , if it is not the case that John reads a book in D then it is also not the case that John reads a book in D', but not vice versa. This means the negative answer in (24) has a trivially true presupposition.

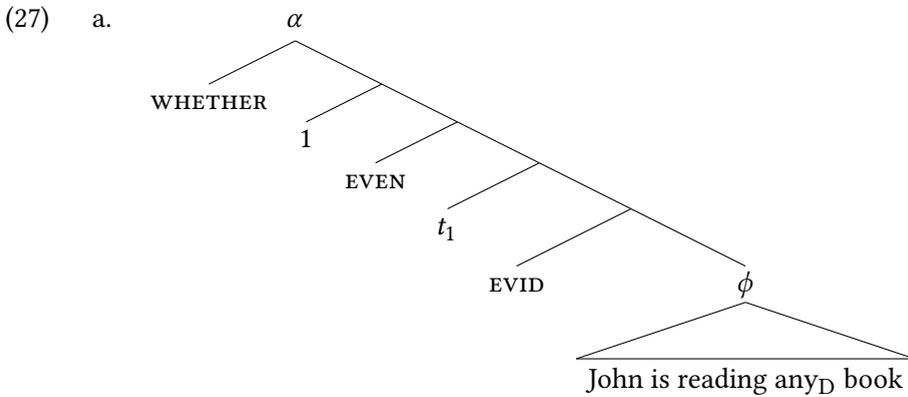
We thus see that if EVEN is present in a polar question, it has to be parsed above the base position of WHETHER, and within this parse, only the negative answer is acceptable. This means that polar questions with EVEN has only the negative answer as the one felicitous answer. And because complex NPIs require a c-commanding EVEN, we predict that for polar questions with complex NPIs, only the negative answer is felicitous. Asking a polar question with a complex NPIs, then, amounts to presenting the hearer with the negative answer as the

only choice. I propose that this is what brings about the inference that the speaker of such a question is biased towards the negative answer (cf. [Guerzoni 2004](#)). For concreteness, I will take this inference to be an conversational implicature of the question.

Let us now come (back) to the question why complex NPIs cause deviance in agreement questions, as evidenced by (10-b), reproduced below in (26).

- (26) #John đang đọc bất kỳ quyển sách nào à?  
 John PROG read BK ANY book A

Given what we have said, this question will have the parse in (27-a) and the denotation in (27-b).



- b.  $[[\alpha]] = \{\text{EVEN}(\text{YES}(\text{EVID}(\text{John is reading any}_D \text{ book}))),$   
 $\text{EVEN}(\text{NO}(\text{EVID}(\text{John is reading any}_D \text{ book})))\}$

Let us consider the inferences licensed by this question. Due to the presence of EVID, it has the presupposition in (28-a). And due to the presence of EVEN, it has the implicature in (28-b).

- (28) Inferences licensed by (27)
- There is contextual evidence that John is reading a book in D
  - The speaker strongly suspects that John is not reading a book in D

I submit that these two inferences are responsible for the question being perceived as deviant. It is an odd move, I claim, to ask a polar question which presupposes that there is contextual evidence that  $\phi$  and at the same time allows only  $\neg\phi$  as the one felicitous answer.

### **3 Interim summary**

Polar questions contain a covert *WHETHER*, which accounts for the intuition that they ask the hearer to confirm a proposition or to confirm its negation. Polar questions in Vietnamese come in two variants, yes/no questions and agreement questions. Agreement questions contain *EVID*, the evidential marker which introduces the presupposition that its prejacent is supported by contextual evidence. Yes/no questions, in contrast, do not contain *EVID*. Given Maximize Presupposition, yes/no questions anti-presuppose that there is contextual evidence for the prejacent. This accounts for the fact that in prejacent biased contexts, agreement questions are felicitous while yes/no questions are not, while in prejacent neutral contexts, the opposite is the case.

NPIs in Vietnamese also come in two variants, simple and complex. Complex NPIs come with a c-commanding *EVEN* in the structure, which introduces the presupposition that its prejacent is the least likely among the alternatives. Given that NPIs denote existential quantifiers and induce subdomain alternatives, the presence of *EVEN* brings it about that only the negative answer is felicitous. This accounts for the fact that polar questions containing complex NPIs give rise to the inference that the speaker strongly suspects that the negative answer is correct. Simple NPIs do not come with *EVEN* and hence do not give rise to such a bias.

An agreement question which contains a complex NPI would be parsed with both *EVID* and *EVEN*. Such a question would presuppose that there is contextual evidence for the prejacent, and at the same time, would license the inference that the speaker suspects that the prejacent is false. I hypothesize that such an expression represents an odd move in the language game, and hence, would be perceived as odd. This accounts for the fact that complex NPIs in agreement questions gives rise to deviance.

### **4 Comparison**

I will conclude this note by discussing some similarities and differences between Vietnamese and English with respect to polar questions and NPIs. I believe that addressing the questions they raise will contribute to the cross-linguistic research on the semantics-syntax interface, or more specifically, on how Universal Grammar constrains the way basic building blocks of semantic representation are combined and mapped onto syntactic objects by different languages.

Let us start with the distinction within the class of polar questions in Vietnamese, i.e. the distinction between yes/no and agreement questions. The reader

might have noticed that this distinction resembles the distinction in English between “inversion” and “declarative” questions. Inversion questions are polar questions which exhibit subject auxiliary inversion, such as (29-a), and declarative questions those which exhibit declarative word order and are often pronounced with rising intonation, such as (29-b).

- (29) a. Does John read Kant?  
 b. John reads Kant?

It has been pointed out that declarative questions give rise to the inference that there is contextual evidence supporting the prejacent (Gunlogson 2003, Trinh 2014). In a context where the speaker has no reason to think that John reads Kant or to think that he does not, (29-a) would sound appropriate and (29-b) would sound odd. On the other hand, if the speaker sees John with a copy of *The Critique of Pure Reason* in his hand, (29-b) would be ok.

Can we say that inversion and declarative questions are the English counterparts of Vietnamese yes/no and agreement questions? It turns out that we cannot. The distinctions do align, but not perfectly. Recall, from (5) and (6), that Vietnamese yes/no questions and agreement questions are in complementary distribution: yes/no questions are felicitous only in prejacent neutral contexts and agreement questions are felicitous only in prejacent biased contexts. The situation with English inversion and declarative questions is different. It turns out that the contexts in which inversion questions are felicitous are a superset of the contexts where declarative questions are felicitous. Specifically, inversion questions are felicitous in prejacent biased contexts as well.

- (30) Context: the speaker sees John with a copy of *The Critique of Pure Reason* in his hand  
 a. Does John read Kant?  
 b. John reads Kant?

(31)

		yes/no		agreement		inversion		declarative
prejacent neutral		✓		✗		✓		✗
prejacent biased		✗		✓		✓		✓
		Vietnamese			English			

I turn now to a discussion of the distinction between simple and complex NPIs in Vietnamese. Again, the reader might have noticed that this distinction resembles the distinction between NPIs and so-called “minimizers” in English, i.e. expressions such as *life a finger* or *have a red cent*. In fact, it is Guerzoni’s (2004) analysis

of minimizers that informs the analysis of complex NPIs proposed here. Guerzoni observes that minimizers induce negative bias in polar questions whereas NPIs do not. Thus, (32-a) can be read as not implying anything about how likely it is that John did something to help, while (32-b) clearly implies that it is unlikely that John did something to help.

- (32) a. Did John do anything to help?  
b. Did John lift a finger to help?

Guerzoni accounts for the difference between NPIs and minimizers with respect to negative bias by postulating that minimizers, but not NPIs, come with a c-commanding *EVEN* in the structure which has to scope above the base position of *WHETHER*. My account of the same difference between simple and complex NPIs in Vietnamese is just an adoption of her analysis. Can we, then, say that simple NPIs in Vietnamese correspond to NPIs in English while complex NPIs in Vietnamese correspond to minimizers in English.

Again, it turns out that we cannot. Recall that simple NPIs in Vietnamese are acceptable in preajacent biased polar questions. NPIs in English, however, are not. Suppose I am talking to John on the phone and hears chewing sounds, which I take to be evidence that he is eating while talking. In this context, it seems that I cannot ask him the questions in (33).

- (33) Contextual evidence: The hearer is eating  
a. #Are you eating anything?  
b. #You're eating anything?

Thus, NPIs in English are blocked by preajacent bias. Note that it has been observed that NPIs are deviant in declarative questions (Hirst 1983, Huddleston 1994, Gunlogson 2002). This is expected, given that declarative questions are necessarily preajacent biased.

Simple NPIs in Vietnamese, however, are not blocked by preajacent bias. Recall that only agreement questions can be preajacent biased. In the same context, i.e. one where there is evidence that the hearer is eating while talking on the phone, the question in (34) is completely fine, where *gi* is the word whose interrogative reading is 'what' and whose NPI reading is 'anything'.

- (34) Anh đang ăn gì à?  
you PROG eat anything A

How do complex NPIs in Vietnamese and minimizers in English compare with respect to preajacent biased questions. It turns out they behave similarly in this case:

both are unacceptable. The deviance of (10-b) evidences this for Vietnamese. For English, we can observe that a question such as (32-b) would be utterly inappropriate in contexts where there is evidence that John did do something to help.

Another way in which Vietnamese and English NPIs differ pertains to the so-called “free choice reading”, or FC reading for short. It has been observed that in English, NPIs embedded under existential modals such as *be allowed to* are, by default, read as wide-scope universal quantifiers (Carlson 1981, Dayal 1998, Menéndez-Benito 2010, Crnić 2019, Bar-Lev & Fox 2020). The FC reading, however, is impossible for minimizers.

- (35) a. John is allowed to do anything to help  
           ‘ $\forall x$ . John is allowed to do  $x$  to help’  
       b. #John is allowed to lift a finger to help  
           Intended reading: John is allowed to do anything to help

In Vietnamese, the situation is, in a sense, the reverse. It is the complex NPIs which can occur, and have the FC reading, under existential modals. Simple NPIs are excluded.

- (36) a. #John được phép đọc quyển sách nào  
           John is allowed to read ANY book  
           Intended reading: ‘John is allowed to read any book’  
       b. John được phép đọc bất kỳ quyển sách nào  
           John is allowed to read BK ANY book  
           ‘John is allowed to read any book’

(37)

	simple NPIs	complex NPIs	NPIs	minimizers
biased questions	✓	✗	✗	✗
FC reading	✗	✓	✓	✗
	Vietnamese		English	

I hope to account for the facts we just discussed in future research.

## Acknowledgements

This work is supported by the ERC Advanced Grant “Speech Acts in Grammar and Discourse” (SPAGAD), ERC-2007-ADG 787929.

## References

- Bar-Lev, Moshe & Danny Fox. 2020. Free choice, simplification, and innocent inclusion. *Natural Language Semantics* 28. 175–223.
- Bennett, Michael. 1977. A response to Karttunen. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 1. 279–300.
- Bobaljik, Jonathan. 1994. What does adjacency do? *MIT Working Papers in Linguistics* 22. 1–32.
- Bruening, Benjamin & Thuan Tran. 2006. Wh-questions in Vietnamese. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 15(4). 319–341.
- Carlson, Greg N. 1981. Distribution of free choice *any*. *Proceedings of CLS* 17. 8–23.
- Chierchia, Gennaro. 1998. Reference to kinds across languages. *Natural Language Semantics* 6. 339–405.
- Chierchia, Gennaro. 2013. *Logic in Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crnič, Luka. 2014. Against a dogma on NPI licensing. *MIT Working Papers in Linguistics* 71. 117–145.
- Crnič, Luka. 2019. *Any, alternatives, and pruning*. Manuscript, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
- Dayal, Veneeta. 1998. *Any* as inherently modal. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 21. 433–476.
- Duffield, Nigel. 2007. Aspects of Vietnamese clausal structure: separating tense from assertion. *Linguistics* 45. 765–814.
- Guerzoni, Elena. 2004. *Even*-NPIs in Yes/No Questions. *Natural Language Semantics* 12(4). 319–343.
- Guerzoni, Elena & Yael Sharvit. 2007. A question of strength: On NPIs in interrogative clauses. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30. 361–391.
- Guerzoni, Elena & Yael Sharvit. 2014. Whether or not anything but not Whether anything or not. In Luka Crnič & Uli Sauerland (eds.), *The Art and Craft of Semantics: A Festschrift for Irene Heim*, 199–224. Cambridge: MIT Working Papers in Linguistics.
- Gunlogson, Christine. 2002. Declarative questions. *Proceedings of SALT* 12. 144–163.
- Gunlogson, Christine. 2003. *True to Form: Rising and Falling Declaratives as Questions in English*. New York: Routledge.
- Hamblin, Charles Leonard. 1973. Questions in Montague English. *Foundations of Language* 10(1). 41–53.
- Heim, Irene. 1984. A note on negative polarity and downward entailingness. *Proceedings of NELS* 14. 98–107.

- Heim, Irene. 1991. Artikel und Definitheit. In Arnim von Stechow & Dieter Wunderlich (eds.), *Semantik: Ein internationales Handbuch der zeitgenössischen Forschung*, 487–535. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Higginbotham, James. 1993. Interrogatives. In Kenneth Hale & Samuel Jay Keyser (eds.), *The View from Building 20*, 195–228. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Hirst, Daniel. 1983. Interpreting intonation: A modular approach. *Journal of Semantics* 2. 171–182.
- Holmberg, Anders. 2016. *The Syntax of Yes and No*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Huddleston, Rodney. 1994. The contrast between interrogatives and questions. *Journal of Linguistics* 30. 411–439.
- Kadmon, Nirit & Fred Landman. 1993. *Any*. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 16(4). 353–422.
- Karttunen, Lauri. 1977. Syntax and semantics of questions. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 1. 3–44.
- Krifka, Manfred. 1991. *Some remarks on polarity items*. Manuscript, University at Texas Austin.
- Krifka, Manfred. 1995. The semantics and pragmatics of polarity items. *Linguistic Analysis* 25(3-4). 209–257.
- Krifka, Manfred. 2001. For a structured account of questions and answers. In Caroline Féry & Wolfgang Sternefeld (eds.), *Audiat Vox Sapientiae. A Festschrift for Arnim von Stechow*, 287–319. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
- Krifka, Manfred. 2013. Response particles as propositional anaphors. *Proceedings of SALT* 23. 1–18.
- Ladusaw, William. 1979. *Polarity Sensitivity as Inherent Scope Relations*. University of Texas Austin. (Doctoral dissertation).
- Menéndez-Benito, Paula. 2010. On universal free choice items. *Natural Language Semantics* 18(1). 33–64.
- Nicolae, Andreea. 2015. Questions with NPIs. *Natural Language Semantics* 23. 21–76.
- Roelofsen, Floris. 2018. *NPIs in questions*. Talk given at NYU Linguistics Colloquium.
- Roelofsen, Floris & Sunwoo Jeong. 2022. *Focused NPIs in statements and questions*. To appear in *Journal of Semantics*.
- Sauerland, Uli. 2008. Implicated presuppositions. In Anita Steube (ed.), *The Discourse Potential of Underspecified Structures*, 581–600. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Trinh, Tue. 2005. *Aspects of Clause Structure in Vietnamese*. Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. (MA thesis).

- Trinh, Tue. 2010. *Asking with assertions*. Talk given at SEALS 20, Zürich.
- Trinh, Tue. 2011. Nominal reference in two classifier languages. *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung* 15. 629–644.
- Trinh, Tue. 2014. How to ask the obvious - A presuppositional account of evidential bias in English yes/no questions. *MIT Working Papers in Linguistics* 71. 227–249.
- Trinh, Tue. 2020. Bipartite exhaustification: Evidence from Vietnamese. In Dun Deng, Fenrong Liu, Mingming Liu & Dag Westerståhl (eds.), *Monotonicity in Logic and Language*, 207–216. Berlin: Springer.
- Van Rooij, Robert. 2003. Negative polarity items in questions: Strength as relevance. *Journal of Semantics* 20. 239–273.
- von Stechow, Kai & Anthony S. Gillies. 2010. Must ... stay ... strong! *Natural Language Semantics* 18. 351–383.