Future meaning in Vietnamese and English: Similarities and Differences

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ABSTRACT

The paper describes in detail and employs one table and six discussions to compare expressions of future meaning in Vietnamese and English declaratives to find out their differences and similarities. The findings are the basis for giving some advice to learners of Vietnamese and English. Vietnamese neither distinguishes nor employs grammatical means to express various shades of future meaning. A lexical means like *sẽ*, *định*, *tính*, or *sắp*, or a combination of two or more like *định sẽ*, *tính sẽ*, or *dự tính sẽ*, does. The lexical means may be omitted when an adverbial of future time like *sáng mai*, meaning *tomorrow morning*, occurs. At first glance, Vietnamese learners face difficulty because one expression in their mother tongue separates into two or more in English, resulting in unnecessary differentiation; conversely, native speakers of English seem more enjoyable noticing that two or more expressions in their mother tongue merge into one in Vietnamese. However, to understand Vietnamese sentences, foreigners must depend more on contextual cues than when they process English sentences. This is uneasy for the native English speakers, who are accustomed to using a language in which all the modal meanings have signs, either lexical or grammatical or both, with an explicit indicator in the structure of the nuclear predication of the declaratives.

Introduction

Both Vietnamese and English have many ways of expressing the future meaning. In this article, we are interested in noting the ways in which the lexical means, which is the modal verb *sẽ*, and the words or word combinations that can substitute *sẽ*, express the future meaning in Vietnamese. And these expressions are translated into English on the basis of employing many sample translations from different authors, who are Vietnamese linguists as well as researchers in English linguistics. Then come comments made based on the results of comparing and contrasting *declarative sentences* (from now on called '*declaratives*' for short) written in Vietnamese and selected as illustrative examples, together with their English-translated versions.

Within the scope of this article, we only focus on presenting the notion of "nuclear predication" (Dik, 1978; To, 2011), a kind of *marked* modality expressed by either one of the Vietnamese modal verbs like *sẽ*, *định*, *tính* or *sắp*, or by a combination of two or more Vietnamese modals like *định sẽ*, *tính sẽ* or *dự tính sẽ*, and the expressions that are considered as their equivalents in English. Excluded from the description and analysis of this article is the *unmarked* modality of nuclear predication in declaratives. Cao (2017) describes this *unmarked* modality as 'the modality of the truth,' which "is expressed by *the indicative mood* of the verbs in inflected languages and by the absence a modal element in the well-formed sentence structure (i.e., linearized according to the rules of sentence formation) in non-infected languages" (p. 51). Also excluded from the article's description and analysis are such *adverbials* (To, 2019) of future time as *tuần tới* (next week), *hai ngày nữa* (in two days), etc.

This paper aims to find out how English and Vietnamese are different from and simultaneously similar to each other in their ways of expressing future meaning in order to give some advice to their learners, native or non-native, whenever they need to refer to an action that will happen in the future in the target language. To achieve such an aim, the paper first gives a full description of various ways to express future meaning in Vietnamese and English — the two natural languages in question. It then compares these ways, one by one, employing a summative table and its succession of six points of discussion, which attempts to summarize as well as highlight a number of key findings. The findings are the basis to give some advice to learners of Vietnamese and English as well as a number of topics for further research.

Vietnamese and English ways to express future meaning

Observing only ways to express future meaning, we simplify the subject of the Vietnamese declaratives by mainly using the personal pronoun *chị ấy*, meaning *she*, or the personal pronoun *tôi*, meaning *I*, which goes with *đến* — the Vietnamese equivalent of the English lexical verb *come*. Various expressions of future meaning are then examined by comparing and contrasting the Vietnamese declaratives selected as illustrations with their English equivalents.

2.1. Future meaning expressed by only one Vietnamese modal verb

When the future meaning of *the verb phrase* playing the role of *the predicate*[1] of the sentence is expressed by *only one Vietnamese modal verb*, which is *sẽ* in this case, we have the Vietnamese declarative numbered (1):

(1) Chị ấy **_sẽ_** đến.

2.1.1. Plain future: Sẽ vs. 'will or be going to + infinitive'

Thomson and Martinet (1986) believe that the simple future "normally conveys no idea of intention" (p. 181). In the same vein, Hayden et al. (1956) indicate that the simple future (or *be going to* + infinitive) expresses actions happening at a later time. "Modifiers indicating time often specify a definite time in the future (*He will leave in an hour*), but in some situations the

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[1] as contrast to *the noun phrase* playing the role of *the subject*

time is not specified (*He is going to go with me*)" (p. 84). This is also called the *plain future*. So, the first two English versions of (1) is:

(1a) She ***will*** come.

(1b) She ***is going to*** come.

2.1.2. Definite future arrangement

2.1.2.1. Sẽ vs. 'English lexical verb in the continuous present'

Thomson and Martinet (1986) give a subtly mixed case for further consideration. Being overweight and suffering from repeated fines for parking, Paul says:

(2) I'*ll* sell my car and buy a bike.

   Tôi *sẽ* bán cái ô tô của tôi và mua một chiếc xe đạp.

This is *intention at the moment of decision*, also known as *an immediate decision*, which can only be expressed by the simple future, with '*will* + infinitive.' This may be the idea that suddenly appears at the moment Paul gives an unexpected answer to the question: '*What are you doing with your car*, *Paul*?' (p. 182).

Will (abbreviated to *'ll*) must be used for unarranged actions, as in (2). It is not *will*, but either *be going to* or the continuous present is used to refer to the speaker's second mention of this unarranged action, after his sudden decision: "*be going to* is always possible; the present continuous has more restricted use" (p. 181).

Thus, at some point after making the decision, Paul again shows his decision to sell the car by saying:

(3) I'*m going to* sell my car.

   Tôi *sẽ* bán cái ô tô của tôi.

Unfortunately, it is not clear enough to distinguish the second mention of Paul's decision from the so-called *future with intention*, which is also expressed by '*be going to* ___.' (See section **2.**1.7.1.)

And when Paul finds a buyer, he can say:

(4) I'*m* sell*ing* my car.

   Tôi *sẽ* bán cái ô tô của tôi.

Since the continuous present also represent a *definite arrangement in the near future* (p. 182), we can safely choose (5a) as the first English version of the Vietnamese declarative (5), with the definite thought that her arrival has been well prepared and arranged:

(5) Sáng mai chị ấy ***sẽ*** đến.

(5a) She ***is*** com***ing*** tomorrow morning.

It should be noted that (5a) is also the English version of the following (5'):

(5') Sáng mai chị ấy đến.

Although it has been confirmed that the lexical means like *sáng mai*, meaning *tomorrow morning*, is beyond the scope of this paper, it is possible to use the three Vietnamese declaratives marked (5), (5') and (5") to record a quite interesting phenomenon in Vietnamese:

(5") Chị ấy đến.

- In (5'), it is not the modal verb *will*, but *sáng mai* — the adverbial, that expresses future meaning;

- In (5), the very future meaning is conveyed by both the adverbial *sáng mai* and the modal verb *sẽ*;

- It is hard to say that (5") expresses future meaning because this sentence includes neither the modal verb *sẽ* nor the adverbial *sáng mai.*

The same phenomenon occurs in English: because the continuous present is often used to express an action that is happening in the present, if you would like to use this tense to express future meaning, it is almost mandatory to have an explicit signal of future time, which is *tomorrow morning* as in the above-mentioned (5a).

2.1.2.2. Sẽ vs. 'English lexical verb in the simple present

Thomson and Martinet (1986) fully describe that the speaker does not necessarily make a definite future arrangement, but most likely by another person, or sometimes it is from such a completely objective regulation as a work schedule or airline timetable. Implying that she has decided to leave, the speaker says: *I'm leaving tomorrow morning*; *I leave tomorrow morning* means that the speaker herself may not plan this. Future meaning can be expressed by the simple present, provided that an adverbial of future time is attached (p. 180). This is also the meaning of (5b) — the second English version of both (5) and (5'):

(5b) She *comes* tomorrow morning.

2.1.3. future without intention

Thomson and Martinet (1986) argue that if we merely state that the action in question will happen, or if this action is only one step in *a normal course of events*, then the continuous future is used, resulting in (5c) — the third English version of both (5) and (5'). This future meaning is "less definite and more casual than" (p. 191) when it is conveyed by the present continuous:

(5c) She*'ll be* com*ing* tomorrow morning.

Phan (1990) asserts the same via his own examples, i.e., this author agrees that the continuous future can be used to express an action that will happen without any intention:

(6) Xe lửa số 7 *đến* lúc mấy giờ?

What time *will* the train number 7 *be arriving*?

(7) Xe lửa số 7 *đến* lúc 9 giờ 20 sáng.

   The train number 7 <u>*will be arriving*</u> at 9.20 am. (p. 41)

2.1.4. Assumptions, speculations or predictions about the future

Thomson and Martinet (1986) confirm that the simple future is used to guess, speculate, or predict about the future, (i) with or without an adverbial of time and (ii) with or without either an introducing clause like *I'm sure*, *I suppose*, etc., or an adverb like *perhaps*, *probably*, etc.:

   (*I'm sure*) he**<u>'ll</u>** come back.

   They**<u>'ll</u>** (*probably*) wait for us. (p.189)

To predict the return of the lady called *she* here, we then have (5d) and (5e) — the fourth and fifth English versions of both (5) and (5'), which express how one makes a guess about the future.

   ✓ ***Sẽ*** vs. 'English lexical verb in the simple future optionally accompanied by *an introducing clause*':

   (5d) (*I'm sure*) she**<u>'ll</u>** come tomorrow morning.

   ✓ ***Sẽ*** vs. 'English lexical verb in the simple future optionally accompanied by *an adverb*':

   (5e) She**<u>'ll</u>** (*surely*) come tomorrow morning.

It should be noted at this point that as soon as *tomorrow morning* is removed from both (5d) and (5e), they turn to be the English versions of the Vietnamese declarative numbered (1).

Predictions, especially those *based on present causes*, can also be expressed by *be going to*. On page 128, Lesson 3, Chapter 18 of Book 2 in the *New English 900* textbook series published by Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., its authors recommend using *be going to*, not the continuous present, to predict. Below is a typical example:

   (8) It's 7:00. The class starts at 7:15. We <u>*are going to*</u> be late.

   Bây giờ là 7 giờ. Lớp học bắt đầu lúc 7 giờ 15. Chúng ta <u>*sẽ*</u> trễ mất thôi.

Accordingly, (5) and (5') have their sixth English version, which is numbered (5f):

   (5f) She**<u>*'s going to*</u>** come tomorrow morning.

2.1.5. Promise: Sẽ vs. 'will + infinitive'

Changing *chị ấy* in (5) to the Vietnamese personal pronoun *tôi* results in (9). It is (9a) — the first English version of (9), that carries the meaning of *a promise* without the appearance of the lexical verb *promise* in the sentence:

   (9) Sáng mai tôi **<u>*sẽ*</u>** đến.

   (9a) I**<u>'ll</u>** come tomorrow morning.

Of course, one can make a promise in English in various ways:

(9b) I ***promise*** <u>to come</u> tomorrow morning.

(9c) I***'ll*** <u>come</u> tomorrow morning; I ***promise***.

But there is no sentence that is as natural and intimate as (9a). The following (9**'**) can also describe a promise without the modal verb *sẽ* on the condition that there exists the adverbial of future time *sáng mai* in this sentence:

(9**'**) Sáng mai tôi đến.

2.1.6. Near future:

    ➕ ***Sắp*** vs. '***be about to*** + infinitive'

The Vietnamese modal verb *sắp*, meaning 'sẽ sớm xảy ra' or 'sẽ xảy ra ngay bây giờ,' is equivalent to *about* + infinitive with *to* (Swan, 2016), which means 'going to very soon' or 'just going to':

(10) Chị ấy ***sắp*** đến.

(10a) She ***is about to*** come.

    ➕ ***Sắp*** vs. 'English lexical verb in the continuous present obligatorily accompanied by *soon*, *instantly* or *just now*'

Hayden et al. (1956) assert that "the present progressive expresses activities that will take place in future time. Adverbs indicating future time (*tomorrow*, *next June*, etc.) often modify the verb" (p. 76). The lexical verb conjugated in the continuous present and modified by *soon*, *instantly* or *just now* is definitely another equivalent of the Vietnamese modal verb *sắp*.

(10b) She ***is*** com***ing*** soon/instantly/just now.

2.1.7. future with intention

2.1.7.1. Định vs. 'will or be going to + infinitive'

Thomson and Martinet (1986) also confirm that the meaning of *future with intention*, also known as *intended future* in English, is conveyed by *will* or *be going to* + infinitive (p. 181), which refers to an act that one will do in his or her own desire. The same meaning is demonstrated by *định* in the Vietnamese declarative numbered (11):

(11) Chị ấy ***định*** đến.

with its two English versions:

(11a) She ***will*** come.

(11b) She ***is going to*** come.

Depending in my instinct as a native speaker of Vietnamese who has been learning and teaching English as a foreign language for my whole life, I feel no difference between *định*, *tính* or *sẽ* and their translated versions in English: like *định*, *sẽ* does convey *future with intention*; *tính* does convey *future with intention*, too, resulting in (11**'**):

(11') Chị ấy ***tính*** đến.

However, *tính* sounds more spoken and thus less formal than *định*; the modal verb *tính* is from a certain dialect in the South of Viet Nam, which is not considered "standard" to be included in common textbooks throughout the country. Among the three, *sẽ* is neutral and the most common. These modal verbs differ from each other in style or formality, but they share the same cognitive or conceptual meaning. They are synonyms as far as *future with intention* is concerned.

It should be noted up to this point that the two pairs marked (1a-b) and (11a-b) are exactly alike, in spite of the fact that their Vietnamese source sentences are different: (1) includes *sẽ* while (11) includes *định* (, and (11') includes *tính*). For easier comparison and contrast, the first trios are repeated right here:

(1) Chị ấy ***sẽ*** đến.

(1a) She ***will*** come.

(1b) She ***is going to*** come.

2.1.7.2. Định vs. 'plan to or intend to + infinitive'

Considering that "the verbal *định* + action verbal expression = *plan to* ___," Jorden et al. (1967, p. 125) translate the Vietnamese *định* into the English *plan to*, as in (12), which is their own example:

(12) Tôi ***định*** đi Sài Gòn.

     I *plan to* go to Saigon.

At this point, we have the third English version of the Vietnamese declarative (11):

(11c) She ***plans to*** come.

In addition, Vuong and Moore (1994) provide the fourth English version of (11):

(11d) She ***intends to*** come.

The two authors claim *định* to be synonymous with *intend to* ___, in their own example:

(13) Chúng tôi ***định*** thuê một chiếc ô tô để đi Đà Lạt.

     We *intend to* hire a car to go to Dalat. (pp. 62-63)

It should be noted up to this point that in order to be considered synonyms of the Vietnamese *định*, the English lexical verb *intend* or *plan* must be conjugated in the simple present.

2.1.7.3. Định vs. 'English lexical verb in the continuous present'

"*Định* is an auxiliary verb that precedes the main verb and is used to indicate a planned action" (Vu et al., 1996, p. 119):

(14) Tối nay tôi ***định*** đi xem phim.

I*'m going* to the movies tonight.

The above example given by Vu et al. (1996) shows their belief that the Vietnamese *định* is equivalent to an English lexical verb conjugated in the continuous present, with the support of an adverbial of future time in the sentence in question. Thus, these authors offer the fifth English version of (11):

(11e) She *is* com*ing*.

2.2. Future meaning expressed by two or more modal verbs

In this case, the future meaning of the verb phrase playing the role of the predicate of the sentence is expressed by two or more Vietnamese modal verbs.

2.2.1. Định, tính, or dự tính + sẽ

The combination of *định*, *tính*, or *dự tính + sẽ* clearly expresses the meaning of *future with intention*:

(15) Chị ấy *định sẽ / tính sẽ / dự tính sẽ* đến.

(15a) She *will* come.

(15b) She *is going to* come.

(15c) She *plans to* come.

(15d) She *intends to* come.

(15e) She *is* com*ing*.

The English declaratives numbered (11a), (11b), (11c), (11d) and (11e), which are listed again right below for convenient consideration, are identical to the above-mentioned (15a), (15b), (15c), (15d) and (15e). This indicates that the two declaratives numbered (11) and (15) can be used interchangeably to express the meaning of *future with intention* in the Vietnamese language, not to mention the Vietnamese declarative numbered (1) about which we have just talked in section **2.**1.7.1.

(11) Chị ấy *định* đến.

(11**'**) Chị ấy *tính* đến.

(11a) She *will* come.

(11b) She *is going to* come.

(11c) She *plans to* come.

(11d) She *intends to* come.

(11e) She *is* com*ing*.

2.2.2. Có thể sẽ, sẽ có thể or sẽ … được

Consider the Vietnamese declarative numbered (16):

(16) Chị ấy **_có thể_ _sẽ_** đến / **_sẽ_ _có thể_** đến / **_sẽ_** đến **_được_**.

It is noted that *có thể sẽ*, *sẽ có thể* and *sẽ … được* can be used interchangeably in Vietnamese. Below are the three English versions of (16), which all express *future possibiliti*es:

(16a) She **_can_** come.

(16b) She **_will be able to_** come.

(16c) She **_is going to be able to_** come.

These translations are based on the observations done by Hayden et al. (1956, p. 110): it is quite possible to replace *can* by either *will be able to* or *am/is/are going to be able to* without any change found in the basic meaning of the sentences (16a-c). In the same vein, Hofmann (1993) considers *can*, *can't* and *cannot* as "*the plain forms*" which describe "events at any time except in the past, i.e. present, future or always" (p. 99).

Disagreeing with the above-mentioned observations done by Hayden, et al. (1956), Eastwood (1994) argues that the two sentences (16a) and (16b) are not identical: (16a) shows "a possible future action" while (16b) shows "future ability or opportunity" (pp. 124-125). Like Eastwood (1994), Alexander (1990) emphasizes that only *will be able to*, not *can*, and even less *could*, can express "future ability" in his own example numbered (17) here:

(17) Baby <u>will be able to</u> stand up in two weeks.

Hai tuần nữa bé <u>sẽ</u> đứng chựng <u>được</u>. (p. 161)

Findings and Discussion

Table 1. Similarities and differences between Vietnamese and English expressions of future meaning

Vietnamese expressions of future mean	English expressions of future meaning
2.1. Future meaning expressed by **_only one modal verb_**	
2.1.1. *Plain future*: **_sẽ_** vs. '**_will_** or **_be going to_** + infinitive'	
(1) Chị ấy **_sẽ_** đến.	(1a) She **_will_** come. (1b) She **_is going to_** come.
2.1.2. *Definite future arrangement*	
(5) Sáng mai chị ấy **_sẽ_** đến. (5') Sáng mai chị ấy đến.	**2**.1.2.1. **_sẽ_** vs. 'English lexical verb in the continuous present: (5a) She **_is_** com**_ing_** tomorrow morning.
	2.1.2.2. **_sẽ_** vs. 'English lexical verb in the simple present:

	(5b) She *come**s*** tomorrow morning.
2.1.3. *future without intention*: *s**ẽ*** vs. 'English lexical verb in the continuous future'	
(5) Sáng mai chị ấy ***s**ẽ** đến. (5') Sáng mai chị ấy đến.	(5c) She***'ll be*** com***ing*** tomorrow morning.
2.1.4. *Assumptions*, *speculations* or *predictions about the future*	
(5) Sáng mai chị ấy ***s**ẽ** đến. (5') Sáng mai chị ấy đến.	*s**ẽ*** vs. 'English lexical verb in *the future simple optionally accompanied by an introducing clause*': (5d) (*I'm sure*) she***'ll*** come tomorrow morning.
	*s**ẽ*** vs. 'English lexical verb in *the future simple optionally accompanied by an adverb*': (5e) She***'ll*** (*probably*) come tomorrow morning.
	*s**ẽ*** vs. '***be going to*** + infinitive' (for *predictions* only): (5f) She***'s going to*** come tomorrow morning.
2.1.5. *Promise*: *s**ẽ*** vs. '***will*** + infinitive'	
(9) Sáng mai tôi ***s**ẽ** đến. (9') Sáng mai tôi đến.	(9a) I***'ll*** come tomorrow morning. (9b) I ***promise*** to come tomorrow morning. (9c) I***'ll*** come tomorrow morning; I ***promise***.
2.1.6. *Near future*	
(10) Chị ấy ***s**ắ**p** đến.	*s**ắ**p** vs. '***be about to*** + infinitive': (10a) She ***is about to*** come.
	*s**ắ**p** vs. 'English lexical verb in the continuous present obligatorily accompanied by *soon*, *instantly*, *just now*': (10b) She ***is*** com***ing*** *soon/instantly/just now*.
2.1.7. *Future with intention*	
(11) Chị ấy ***định*** đến. (1) Chị ấy ***s**ẽ** đến. (11') Chị ấy ***tính*** đến.	**2.**1.7.1. *định* vs. '***will*** or ***be going to*** + infinitive': (11a) She ***will*** come. (11b) She ***is going to*** come.
	2.1.7.2. *định* vs. '***plan to*** or ***intend to*** + infinitive': (11c) She ***plans to*** come. (11d) She ***intends to*** come.
	2.1.7.3. *định* vs. 'English lexical verb in the continuous present: (11e) She ***is*** com***ing***.
2.2. Future meaning expressed by ***two or more modal verbs***	

2.2.1. *Future with intention*: **_định sẽ_**, **_tính sẽ_**, or **_dự tính sẽ_**	
(15) Chị ấy **_định sẽ_** / **_tính sẽ_** / **_dự tính sẽ_** đến.	(15a) She **_will_** come. (15b) She **_is going to_** come. (15c) She **_plans to_** come. (15d) She **_intends to_** come. (15e) She **_is_** com**_ing_**.

2.2.2. *future possibility*: **_có thể sẽ_**, **_sẽ có thể_** or **_sẽ … được_**	
(16) Chị ấy **_có thể sẽ_** đến/ **_sẽ có thể_** đến/ **_sẽ_** đến **_được_**.	(16a) She **_can_** come. (16b) She **_will be able to_** come. (16c) She **_is going to be able to_** come.

3.1. Means to express future meaning

The Vietnamese language generally expresses future meaning by *a lexical means*: (i) either a single modal verb like *sẽ*, *định*, *tính*, or *sắp*; (ii) or a combination of two or more modal verbs like *định sẽ*, *tính sẽ*, *dự tính sẽ*, *có thể sẽ*, *sẽ có thể*, or *sẽ … được*.

Vietnamese generally conveys its modality via lexical means, mostly by modal verbs (Cao, 1998, p. 261). Vietnamese does not convey its modality via grammatical means because, as an isolating and non-infected language, it has no verb conjugation: a verb has only one and the same form. Jorden et al. (1967, p. 3), Vuong and Moore (1994, p. 23), and Cao (1998, p. 262) all approve of this remark.

The English language expresses future meaning by:

- ✓ A lexical means:

- A single modal verb used in the simple future: '*will*';

- A lexical verb which is conjugated in the simple present to be used temporarily as a modal verb: '*plan*' or '*intend*';

- A fixed expression which is used as an idiom: '*be going to__*' or '*be about to__*'.

- ✓ A grammatical means: The inflectional morpheme {–(*e*)*s*} in the third person singular verb form of the simple present: 'come**_s_**;

- ✓ A combination of the available means, either lexical or grammatical:

- A combination of the lexical verb '*plan*' or '*intend*' and the inflectional morpheme {–(*e*)*s*} in the third person singular verb form of the simple present: '*plan**s***' or '*intend**s***';

- A combination of an auxiliary verb that has almost no lexical meaning like '*am*', '*is*' or '*are*' and the inflectional morpheme {–*ing*}, resulting in the verb form of the continuous present: **_is_** com**_ing_**;

- A combination of the modal verb '*will*', the auxiliary verb '*be*' and the inflectional morpheme {–*ing*}, resulting in the verb form of the continuous future: **_'ll be_** com**_ing_**;

- A combination of the modal verb '*will*' and the idiom '*be able to__*': **_'ll be able to_** come;

- A combination of the two idioms '*am/is/are going to*' and '*be able to __*': **_is going to be able to_** come;

- An English lexical verb conjugated in the simple future optionally accompanied by *an introducing clause*: (*I'm sure*) she**_'ll_** come;

- An English lexical verb conjugated in the simple future optionally accompanied by *an adverb*, either of time, or of manner, or even both: She**_'ll_** (*probably*) come *tomorrow morning*;

- An English lexical verb conjugated in the continuous present obligatorily accompanied by *soon*, *instantly* or *just now*: She **_is_** com**_ing_** *soon/instantly/just now*.

The above-mentioned illustrates the "intra-lingual difficulties" (To, 2018, p. 67) that any learners of English, especially the ones whose mother tongue is Vietnamese, are supposed to overcome as quickly as possible to be fluent in English.

3.2. grammatical means vs. lexical means

In this paper, the term "grammatical means" refers to *the verb conjugation* in an inflected language like English, which involves:

- Inflectional morphemes like {–(*e*)*s*} or {–*ing*};

- Auxiliary verbs like '*be*' and its variants like '*am*', '*is*' or '*are*'.

Generally speaking, Vietnamese does not employ grammatical means to convey modality. As an isolating and non-infected language, Vietnamese has its own ways of repressing future meaning, which is a kind of modal meaning. The Vietnamese grammar system uses lexical items, which are called either "formal words" or "modal verbs" or whatever. In this paper, the term "lexical means" refers to such lexical items, whatever name they are called by.

Differences in the ways the two languages express future meaning lie basically in the fact that they belong to two different types of languages: either with or without the inflection, or the change, of their verb forms. The "without" any change of its verb forms expresses such a particular function named "future meaning" by lexical means, whereas the "with" employs both lexical and grammatical means, tending to appreciate grammatical means a bit more.

3.3. Present and non-past

As far as the two notions of *past* and *non-past* are concerned, the simple present is closely related to *non-past*, not to *present*, because the very tense can express future meaning, as illustrated by the above-mentioned (5b). Interestingly, the continuous present also belongs to *non-past*, not to *present*, despite the fact that it is a typical tense to express "activities that are in actual progress at the moment of speaking" (Hayden et al., 1956, p. 75).

3.4. Needs to distinguish various shades of future meaning

The Vietnamese language does not distinguish as many subtly different future meanings as the English language does; therefore, it is not necessary to employ any grammatical means for this

purpose. The coding by a lexical means like *sẽ*, *định*, *tính*, etc. indicates *the markedness* of the declaratives expressing future meaning, which, from the view of native speakers of Vietnamese, does not always need to make explicit, especially with the appearance of an adverbial of future time like *sáng mai* in (5') and (9'). The two Vietnamese declaratives, which recur right below for immediate consideration, clearly reflect this view:

(5') Sáng mai chị ấy đến.

(9') Sáng mai tôi đến.

It is the lack of exquisite delineation of different future meanings in their mother tongue that makes it really difficult for native speakers of Vietnamese to deal with these meanings expressed by grammatical and/or modal indicators in the English language. Vietnamese learners of English face difficulty at **Level 5** — **Split** in *the hierarchy of difficulty* initiated by Stockwell et al. (1965) and adopted by Brown (1994, p. 196). This is the highest difficulty level where one expression in their mother tongue separates into two or more in English, which are regarded as unnecessary to distinguish from the learners' viewpoint. This leads to many mistakes generally found in the learners' oral or written pieces of work (To, 2018).

At first glance, native speakers of English are quite pleased to find out that two or more expressions in their mother tongue merge into one in Vietnamese. This is **Level 1** — **Coalescence** in the same hierarchy of difficulty. For example, they just need to learn such lexical items as *sẽ*, *định*, *tính*, etc., then they can express future meaning in the Vietnamese language. However, the foreigners will encounter difficulty in perceiving Vietnamese modal meanings in different situations. When they deal with Vietnamese sentences, they have to depend more on contextual cues than when they process English sentences in which modality is revealed by signs — explicit indicators easily found in the structure of the nuclear predication of the English declarative in this paper.

3.5. 'Will' as an auxiliary verb or a modal verb

It is hard to deny *will* as an auxiliary verb easily found with the simple future. However, should we consider *will* and other meaningful expressions of future meaning in English as modal verbs — means of expressing modality (Palmer, 1979)? This perspective more or less draws the attention of Vietnamese learners of English to *the colored future*, which is much more difficult to identify than *the plain future*, which usually leads to a wrong assumption that the English grammar is quite easy!

3.6. Agreement in the interpretation of modal meanings, including a future meaning

There exists disagreement in the interpretation of future meaning in particular and the meaning conveyed by modal verbs in general, even by famous linguists as well as textbook writers, both native Vietnamese and English. Modal meanings in the English language are deeply influenced by its dialects, especially American English and British English. This phenomenon has not yet been highlighted in the Vietnamese language, but that does not mean it does not matter at all. That is why further research on modality and modal verbs is still a must, in the comparative and

contrasting approach, of course, for the sake of fast and accurate translation and interpreting nowadays.

Conclusion

To sum up, the researcher would like to give a personal feeling about the subject matter being studied and reported in this paper. Learning more about the relationship between *the signifier* and *the signified*, especially in the field of describing various future meanings of the nuclear predication in Vietnamese and English declaratives, the researcher is amazed by the two natural languages in question: not only do they successfully play the role of an effective means of communication but they also show how beautiful and complicated they are when dealing with their users' feelings and attitudes. Hopefully, this paper contributes something to teaching English to native speakers of Vietnamese and teaching Vietnamese to foreigners, especially those whose mother tongue is English, as far as ways to express future meaning are concerned.

For further research, the exquisite relationship between auxiliary verbs and modal verbs should be the focus, comparing and contrasting Vietnamese and English, of course. Various means of expressing other aspects of modality in the two natural languages should be the next concern, certainly in the comparative and contrasting approach as well. Qualitative and quantitative methods are expected to be used, resulting in a number of statistically meaningful numbers for both learners and teachers and for translators and interpreters. All efforts aim to bridge the gaps that may exist between a source text and its translated versions, especially from Vietnamese to English, which is usually considered as much more challenging than the opposite direction, i.e., from English to Vietnamese, by Vietnamese learners of English including the author of this paper.

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