

Conjunction as copula in Vietnamese

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1. Introduction

1.1 Identification and attribution

In his paper on 'to be' verbs in Khmer, Paus (in preparation) contrasts the use of two copula verbs, i.e. 'to be' verbs, and concludes that they are somewhat complementary, one primarily functioning as an identifying verb and the other as a characterizing, or attributive verb.

In Vietnamese there is a conjunction which appears to have a topicalizing role and which, in some cases, is interchangeable with the regular Vietnamese copula verb. In such cases, it functions rather like a copula verb, although even in these roles, it is actually not a verb. It is claimed here that the distinction between identification and attribution can hold in regard to the choice in Vietnamese between the regular copula and the emphatic conjunction, with the regular copula having an identificational role and the conjunction having an attributive role.¹ I will first set forth the facts in Khmer as expounded by Paus.

1.2 Two copula verbs in Khmer

Paus (in preparation:9) describes two copula verbs in Khmer as follows:

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| <i>kii</i> /kii/ | identifies one NP with another: '(the thing named by) A is equal to (the thing named by) B.' |
| <i>cia</i> /ciə/ | links a subject with a predication: '(the thing named by) A can be characterized as B.' or 'B is a characteristic of (the thing named by) A.' |

(*kii* *cia* and zero copula are stylistic variants, more formal and more colloquial, respectively.)

Sentences in which *kii* can occur but *cia* cannot "seem to be limited to constructions which have a purely equative or identificational sense, and which retain [the same sense] when the order of constituents is reversed" (Paus in prep.:16). Some examples are given in (1) (from p. 13), (2) (pp. 13–14), (3) (p. 14), and in (4) (p. 15) in which the heads of the subject and predicate NPs are formally identical, with the anaphoric 'one' being acceptable only in the predicate NP, as would be expected. (Romanization of Khmer orthography follows Paus.)

¹ For remarks on and confirmation of statements about Vietnamese examples in this paper, I am indebted to Mrs. Le Hong Phan of the University of California at San Diego School of International Relations and Pacific Studies and Mr. Hien Dai Tran.

- (1) *Muy dolar kii pii riəl. Pii riəl kii muy dolar.*
 one dollar COP two riel Two riel are one dollar.
 One dollar is two riels.
- (2) *Cəm.ləəy kii 'baat'. 'Baat' kii cəm.ləəy.*
 answer COP yes 'Yes' is the answer.
 The answer is 'yes'.
- (3) *Viə kii kñom. Kñom kii viə.*
 it COP I I am it.
 It's me.
- (4) *Siəwphəw pǎa khiew kii siəwphəw/ʔaa thom.ciən.kεε.*
 book color be.blue COP book/one be.biggest
 The blue book is the biggest book/one.
Siəwphəw thom.ciən.kεε kii siəwphəw/ʔaa pǎa khiew.
 The biggest book is the blue book/one.

In sentences with predicate NPs in which either *kii* or *cia* can occur, a preference for *kii* sometimes depends on the order of the constituents. In (5a) (from p. 17), *Tidaa* is both identified as being 'the' or 'a' teacher in the village and characterized as being a teacher in the village, and *kii* and *cia* are both acceptable. In (5b) (p. 18), however, which states that a/the teacher in the village is *Tidaa*, is a statement of identification only, and here *kii* is clearly preferred. The same goes for (6a and b) (p. 18) and (7a) (p.19) and (7b) (p. 6).

- (5)a *Tidaa kii / ciə nea?.kruu knuŋ phum nih.*
Tidaa COP COP teacher in village this
 Tidaa is the/a teacher in the village.
- b *Nea?.kruu knuŋ phum nih kii / ?ciə Tidaa.*
 teacher in village this COP COP Tidaa
 The/a teacher in the village is Tidaa.
- (6)a *Baay kii / ciə məhop kmer cɲaŋ.*
 rice COP COP food Cambodian be.delicious
 Rice is a delicious Cambodian food.
- b *Məhop kmer cɲaŋ kii / ?ciə baay.*
 food Cambodian be.delicious COP COP rice
 A delicious Cambodian food is rice.

(7)a Maon prampii **kii** / **ciə** peil prəcuŋ.
 hour seven COP COP time meeting

Seven o'clock is the time of the meeting.

b Peil prəcuŋ **kii** maon prampii.
?ciə
 (kii) nəw
 time meeting COP LOC hour seven

The time of the meeting is seven o'clock.

Demonstratives, being referential, have a clear preference for *kii* in either case, as shown in (8) (p. 21). However, with the phrase 'which person, who', *cia* is always preferred over *kii*, as shown in (9) (p. 23).

(8)a Nih **kii** / **?ciə** mdaay robah kmeyn.srəy.
 this COP COP mother of girl

This is the mother of the girl.

b Mdaay robah kmeyn.srəy **kii** / **?ciə** nih.
 mother of girl COP COP this

The mother of the girl is this one.

(9)a Nih **ciə** / **?kii** nea? naa?
 this COP COP person which

Who is this?

b Niəŋ/ Tidaa **ciə** / **?kii** nea? naa?
 she Tidaa COP COP person which

Who is she/Tidaa?

Such preferences for *cia* over *kii* occur seldom; in fact, Paus (in prep.: 24) states that "wherever *cia* is possible, *kii* is available, at least as a secondary option." Nonetheless, there is a distinction in which choice is made. In (10) (p. 24), this distinction is made clear with a slight change in meaning.

(10)a Viə **kii** / **?ciə** siəwphəw lʔaa.
 it COP COP book be.good

It is the good book. (To such a question as, "Which book is it?")

b Viə **ciə** / **?kii** siəwphəw lʔaa.
 it COP COP book be.good

It is a good book. (To such a question as, "What kind of book is it?")

At first glance, it appears that the distinction in (10) is between definiteness and indefiniteness, but such is not the case. See, for instance, that the two sentences in (5) above can be either definite or indefinite with either choice of copula. From the questions which determine the responses in (10), it can be seen that the “opposition of identification and attribution seems to play a more important role in the distinction between preference for *cia* and preference for *kii*” (Paus In prep.:25).

In fact, it is this opposition of identification and attribution that underlies Paus’ description given above for the two copulas, that *kii* is used for equation, identification, referentiality between two elements, while *cia* denotes one element, the predicate, as characterizing another element, the subject of *cia*. In regard to the fact that *kii* can occur in most attributive sentences but *cia* cannot occur in purely identificational sentences, he says (p.17), “Why should free variation [between *cia* and *kii*] be the norm in attributive sentences? In some sense, when you attribute a property to an NP, you are at the same time identifying it ... But the reverse is not true; you can identify something without attributing a property to it; in such sentences, there is a clear preference for *kii*.”

It appears that the same opposition of definition and attribution can be applied, although only generally, to a rather different copula situation in Vietnamese. This is discussed at length below.

2. Two copulas in Vietnamese

In Clark 1992, I have discussed the conjunction *thì* (and/so) then’ as having a topicalizing function in several different grammatical structures, such as NP *thì* Predicate, Subordinate Clause *thì* Sentence, Sentence *thì* Sentence, NP/Sentence *thì* Stative Verb, in all of which the segment preceding *thì* is the topicalized element.² In some of these structures, *thì* appears to function somewhat as an emphatic copula ‘(and so) it is (that ...)’. In some Sentence-*thì*-Sentence and Subordinate-Clause-*thì*-Sentence types, *thì* acts rather like a copula which sets off the first sentence as background to the resultative fact stated in the second sentence (Clark 1992:101). This is shown in (11) (in which the first sentence is not a subordinate clause, English translation to the contrary) and in (12) and (13) (from TCNN: 11), which do have preceding subordinate clauses.

- (11) Chì đi cuối đường Lê.Lợi thì tới đường Hùng.Vương.
 sis. go end street Le.Loì be.then reach street Hung.Vuong

When you get to the end of Le Loi Street, you reach Hung Vuong Street.
 (You go to the end ..., and so it is that you reach ...)

² Although conjunction *thì* is thought to be derived from a Sino-Vietnamese noun *thì* ‘time’, it is analogous to English ‘(and/so) then, in that case, therefore’ rather than to English ‘then, at that time, and next’. It is glossed here as ‘then’ or ‘be then’.

- (12) Nếu chị ăn Tết ở Huế thì tôi sẽ ra Huế!
if sister eat festival at Hue be.then subordinate will go.out Hue

If you celebrate the New Year in Hue, then (it is that) I will come up to Hue.

- (13) Chồng nói: “Thật có phải của trời cho,
husband say be.true have be.so belonging sky give
thì tự.nhiên đem về nhà này.”
be.then naturally take back.to house this

The husband said, “If it is true that it’s a gift from heaven, then (it is that) it naturally will be brought here.”

In sentences with time phrases as well, *thì* can be interpreted as having a copula meaning, as in (14) and (15) (both from Le 1986:15).

- (14) Nhưng sau năm 1637 khi chính.phủ Nhật thi.hành ...
but after year 1637 time.when government Japan execute
thì số người Nhật ở Hội.An giảm hẳn đi.
be.then number person Japan at Hoi.An decrease completely away

But after 1637, when the Japanese government executed ... [policy], so it was that the number of Japanese in Hoi An greatly decreased.

- (15) Trong khi đó thì người Trung.Hoa
inside time that be.then person China
không ngừng tăng lên.
not stop increase up

And during that time it was that the Chinese people did not cease to increase.

It is in sentences with stative predicates that *thì* seems particularly copula-like, with the stative describing the state of the object or event denoted by the phrase or clause preceding *thì* (Clark 1992:102) and *thì* at once setting apart and equating the topic and the predicate, as shown in (16) and (17).

- (16) Cái nón bài.thơ chị mua ở Huế thì rất đẹp.
thing conical.hat poem sister buy at Hue be.then very pretty

The hat of poetry you bought in Hue—it is very beautiful.

- (17) Gần bên chị thì cảm.thấy ấm.áp,
near side sister be.then feel warm
xa chị thì bơ.vợ, cô.độc ...
far sis. be.then friendless lonely

To be near you is to feel warm, to be far from you is to be friendless and lonely.

I have glossed *thì* in these sentences as ‘be then’, instead of ‘then’ as was done in the conjunction discussion, in order to stress its copular nature in these sentences. Nguyen K.T. (1975:153) says of *thì* that it means ‘be’ and denotes bilateral relations. The regular copula is *là* ‘to be’, and other authors as well group *thì* and *là* together,³ saying that, in many instances, one can replace the other, that both occur frequently in natural speech “serving as markers separating the comment from the topic” (Nguyen D.H. 1968:143). Huffman and Tran (1980:88) state that “*là* and *thì* both occur as conditional clause markers in complex sentences with very little difference in meaning. *Thì* is perhaps more common in this use, but when *là* occurs instead of *thì*, it implies ‘in general, habitually, as a usual thing’, while *thì* usually refers to a more specific context, situation, or occurrence.” They give the following example.

(18) Tan sở là tôi rảnh.
disperse office be subordinate be.free

I’m usually free after work.

Tan sở thì tôi rảnh.
disperse office be.then subordinate be.free

I’ll be free after work (this time).

It should be noted that, although *thì* can play a copular role, it is not the case that it is a copular verb, as is *cia* in Khmer. The regular copula verb cannot be directly negativized or questioned but it can be negativized or questioned indirectly, that is, through a stative verb meaning ‘be so, be correct’. *Thì* cannot be negativized or questioned at all. Neither can it be modified by an adverb, as shown in (19b), although *thì* can precede the adverb, as in (19c), where the adverb modifies the following stative verb and *thì* serves to put a heavier focus on the preceding subject. (19a) is from L. Nguyen (1981:24). Since stative verbs in Vietnamese are full verbs, the copula is unnecessary; it is inserted to make a stronger assertion.

(19)a Người vợ rất (là) thất.vọng bèn nói rằng ...
person wife very be be.disappointed instantly say that

The wife was very disappointed and right away said ...

b * Người vợ rất thì thất.vọng bèn nói rằng ...

c Người vợ thì rất thất.vọng bèn nói rằng ...

As for the wife, she was very disappointed and right away said ...

³ See, for example, Cao (1992:139), Huffman & Tran (1980:88), Khai (1972:244), and Nguyen D. H. (1968:143,152).

3. Identification and attribution in Vietnamese

I suggest that the subtle difference between *là* and *thì* in those cases where either can occur is the difference between identification and attribution as discussed by Paus, *là* being the equational/identificational copula and *thì* denoting attribution, that is, introducing a predicate which makes a statement about the nature or consequence of the topic/subject.

The types of sentences which are more clearly identificational, i.e., sentences in which *thì* does not usually replace *là*, tend to be NP-*là*-NP sentences. In sentences (20)–(23), all from Nguyen D.H. (1968:145), *là* is optional; that is, these identificational sentences can have NP predicates, as is usually the case in Vietnamese sentences with incremental predicates, as in (24).

- (20) Chú nó (là) cảnh.binh.
uncle 3PER INFERIOR be policeman

His uncle is a policeman.

- (21) Chồng cô Tám (là) con nhà nghèo.
husband aunt Tam be child house be.poor

Miss Tam's husband comes from a poor family.

- (22) Omega (là) đồng.hồ Thụy-sĩ.
Omega be clock Switzerland

Omega is a Swiss watch.

- (23) Cái ông beo.béo đó (là) người Ăng-lê.
thing grandfather be.fat.fat that be person be.English

The fat one over there is an Englishman.

- (24) Hiệu này 0 hai ngàn đồng một gói.
brand this two thousand piaster one package

This brand is 2,000 piasters a package.

For those sentences which allow easy choice of either *là* or *thì*, such as (18) above—repeated here, the difference in meaning appears to parallel identification versus attribution. In the first sentence in (18), *là* states the fact that the time of quitting work is equivalent to the speaker being free. When *thì* is used in this sentence, the time of quitting work is particularly characterized in this instance as a time when the speaker will be free. That is, *thì* signals that the predication is an attribute of the topic/subject preceding *thì*.

- (18) Tôi sở là tôi rảnh.
disperse office be subordinate be.free

I'm usually free after work.

Tan sớ thì tôi rảnh.
 disperse office be.then subordinate be.free

I'll be free after work (this time).

Nguyen D. H. (1968:152) states that, when *là* is substituted for *thì* in (26) below, the preceding word is emphasized, although he gives a single translation for both sentences (glosses mine, translation his). He also gives (27) (p. 153); it is unclear whether he includes this example in his statement regarding *là* since he gives *là* first in the example. He gives the same translation for both sentences. The sentence in (27b) does, in fact, have a different meaning from (27a). According to both LeHong Phan and Hien Tran, whereas (27a) is simply a descriptive statement of fact, (27b) indicates a particular emphasis, perhaps “some feeling about” the facts, as suggested in the translation given here.

(26)a Nó thì nó thèm.vào. b Nó là nó thèm.vào.
 3PER be.then 3PER not.care.for 3PER be 3PER not.care.for

Him? He'll never care for it.

(27)a Bên này là sông, bên kia là núi.
 side this be river side that be mountain

There is the river on one side, and a mountain on the other side.

b Bên này thì sông, bên kia thì núi.
 side this be.then river side that be.then mountain

(It's difficult because) there is a river on this side and a mountain on the other.

Nguyen D. H. himself (1968:148) states that *thì* functions for parallelism, comparison, or contrast, and is used as a topic marker, “whether this topic is a repetition of the subject or verb or object within the primary clause,” and (p. 149) that *là* has the value of ‘=’. Thompson also states (1984-85:135–6) that *là* is an identification marker. Furthermore, other analysts (for example, Liem 1969:161, Nguyen K. T. 1975:201, and Thompson 1984-85:255, 257) state or imply that *thì* is used for topicalization or contrast. Cao (1992:139) states that an NP can be marked as definite by the presence of *thì*, that “when a sentence is not used to convey global information (e.g. to answer such questions as ‘What ...?’),” it can contain *thì*. These remarks indicate that *thì* is not simply the identification or global referencing copula that *là* is; *thì* makes a stronger, more particularizing statement, an attributive statement, regarding the preceding NP or clause. Perhaps, then, it may be said of (26b) (which, according to Mrs. Phan and Mr. Tran, is Northern colloquial and a little unusual) that *là* serves to emphasize the preceding word, as Nguyen D. H. says, but because of the repetition of that word plus the presence of *là*, and that *thì* in this sentence gives an even stronger emphasis on the preceding word.

Many sentences, including those initiating with time phrases, can take either *là* or *thì*, again with *thì* indicating emphasis or contrast where *là* simply states the fact of identification of time, as shown in (28) and (29). As in sentences (20)–(24) above, *là* and *thì* can be omitted in (28) and (29), leaving only NP predicates. The copula can also be omitted in (30) and (31), with the possessive/source noun as predicate. If *thì* is omitted from these sentences, the meaning reverts to the meaning with *là*.

(28)a Bây.giờ (là) hai giờ rồi. b Bây.giờ thì hai.giờ rồi.
now be two hour already now be.then 2:00 already

It's two o'clock already.

And now, it's two o'clock already!

(29)a Ngày mai (là) thứ năm. b Ngày.mai thì thứ.năm.
day tomorrow be ORDINAL five tomorrow be.then fifth

Tomorrow is Thursday.

But tomorrow, it's Thursday!

(30)a Cái này (là) của cô ấy.
thing this be belonging aunt that

This belongs to her.

b Cái này thì của cô ấy.
thing this be.then belonging aunt that

As for this, it belongs to her.

(31)a Cái này là của trời cho.
thing this be belonging sky give

This is a gift from Heaven.

b Cái này thì của trời cho.
thing this be.then belonging sky give

This is indeed a gift from Heaven.

Omission of the copula from the sentence in (32) is not possible with the same meaning; it would mean 'My idea goes first', a little strange at the least. The same is true for (33) (from Nguyen D. H. 1968:145), which has the structure Clause-Copula-Verb (stative).

(32)a Ý.kiến tôi là đi trước.
idea subord. be go before

My idea is to go first.

b Ý.kiến tôi thì đi trước.

As for my idea, it's to go first.

(33)a Nó không đến là phúc lắm.
 3PER not arrive be be.fortunate very

That he is not coming is very fortunate.

b Nó không đến thì phúc lắm.

That he is not coming is indeed very fortunate.

Vietnamese sentences with stative verbs do not require a copula unless the topic/subject is a clause such that there would be ambiguity as to whether the stative applied to the entire clause or to one part of the clause, as shown in (33) above and (34) (from Nguyen K. T. 1975:158). When *thì* occurs following a verb and preceding a stative, as in (35), something else is implied; whether the clause with *thì* has the meaning of (34a) or (34b) depends on what follows or on the situation.

(34)a Anh làm là đúng. b Anh làm đúng.
 brother do be be.correct

It is right for you to do it.

You do it correctly.

(35) Anh làm thì đúng, ...
 brother do be.then be.correct

You do it correctly / It's right for you to do it, (but you don't need to do it).
 If it's you that does it, that's fine, (but if it's someone else ...)

When *là* occurs in a straight stative sentence, as in (36), it is used to make a more definitive statement or because the stative predicate is "too short" (Nguyen K.T. 1975:157), revealing a characteristic Vietnamese concern for auditory symmetry. (LeHong Phan was not happy with *là* in (36a), feeling that the predicate could be lengthened in other ways, for example, with an adverb such as 'very'.) As shown, with *thì* there is more concern with specific characterization.

(36)a Cô giám.đốc ấy (là) đẹp. b Cô giám.đốc ấy thì đẹp.
 aunt director that be pretty

That (young lady) director is beautiful. That director—she's beautiful, but...

In some cases, *thì* cannot be substituted for *là*. In (37a) (from Nguyen D. H. 1968:146), the predicate is the verb *là* plus an NP. The NP here cannot in itself be a predicate and since *thì* is not really a verb, this sentence with *thì*, (37b), is ungrammatical, although *thì* can occur preceding *là* for emphasis, as in (37c).

(37)a Chị ấy không lấy ông Thịnh là một điều hay.
 sister that not take gr'father Thinh be one affair be.good

It was a good thing she did not marry Mr. Thinh

b * Chị ấy không lấy ông Thịnh **thì** một điều hay.

c Chị ấy không lấy ông Thịnh **thì là** một điều hay.

It was certainly a good thing she did not marry Mr. Thinh.

The clearest examples of copula-type sentences which do not allow replacement of *là* by *thì* are those with hypothetical statements, as in (38) (from TCNN:13) in which *là* is optional; those with indefinite statements, as in (39); and sentences with negatives either as yes-no questions, as in (40) and (41), or as straight negative statements, as in (42).

(38)a **Có phải (là) của** **giời** **cho, ...**
have be.so be belonging sky give

If it is true that it's a gift from Heaven, ...

b ***Có phải thì** của **giời** **cho, ...**

(39)a **Phải có cô ấy làm hoặc là** **tôi** **làm.**
must have aunt that do or be subordinate do

Either she must do it or I must do it.

b * **Phải có cô ấy làm hoặc thì** **tôi** **làm.**

(40)a **Cô có phải là** **giám.đốc** **không?**
aunt have be.so be director not

Is it true that you are the director?

.....b * **Cô có phải thì** **giám.đốc** **không?**

(41)a **Cô là** **giám.đốc,** **phải** **không?**
aunt be director be.so not

You're the director, aren't you?

b * **Cô thì** **giám.đốc,** **phải** **không?**

(42)a **Anh ấy không phải là** **giám.đốc.**
brother that not be.so be director

He/That young man is not the director.

b * **Anh ấy không phải thì** **giám.đốc.**

Thì can occur with a negative only in a complex or compound sentence where *thì* is not an integral part of a negative clause, as in (43) (given by LeHong

Phan) and (44) (Nguyen K. T. 1975:209), or a negative predicate, as in (45) (Nguyen K. T. 1975:203). Compare (43) with (39).

(43) Phải có cô ấy làm hoặc không thì tôi làm.
must have aunt that do or not be.then subordinate do

Either she must do it, or if not, I will do it.

(44) Không phải anh muốn cái gì thì sẽ được cái đó.
not be.so bro. want thing what be.then will acquire thing that

It is not true that you can get everything you want.

(45) Tôi ăn còn nó thì không.
subordinate eat remaining 3PER be.then not

I eat and he doesn't. (I'll eat but [as for him] he won't.)

It appears from these facts that *thì* is not applicable in hypothetical or negative situations, that *thì* is an indicator of emphatic presence. This is consistent with an identification-versus-attribution distinction between *là* and *thì* in copular constructions. Identity can be questioned, negativized, or hypothesized, as well as asserted. On the other hand, a characterization is a positive assertion which can coincide with positive identification and is consistent with the role of *thì* as a topicalizer.

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