



## THE DIVERSITY OF SEMANTIC AND SYNTACTIC PROPERTIES OF THE MORPHEME CÓ IN VIETNAMESE



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### ABSTRACT

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The present study is concerned with the diversity of the semantic and syntactic properties of the morpheme *có* in Vietnamese. The morpheme *có* possesses a variety of meanings and syntactic structures. Morpheme *có* may mean HAVE or THERE BE in English, and may also serve as a modal/auxiliary. The paper presents a thorough analysis of the semantic and syntactic roles of this morpheme. Data collected from 40 Vietnamese English learners of different levels were examined to determine to what extent they perceived or recognized the meanings and syntactic structures of the morpheme *có* while translating a number of Vietnamese sentences into English. The material consisted of 14 Vietnamese statements involving the morpheme *có* in different syntactic forms and semantic properties. The findings showed that more than 81% of students have no difficulties translating similar constructions such as THERE BE + NP and HAVE Possession in comparison with other constructions in which morpheme *có* signaled conditionality, acted as an auxiliary or was followed by an NP. Additionally, students of different proficiency levels displayed different accuracy levels in performing the translations with the morpheme *có*. This study provides Vietnamese language teachers, learners, and translators with an in-depth understanding of morpheme *có* in using different typologies of existential and possessive constructions.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study is one of very few studies which have systematically investigated the morpheme *có*, one of Vietnamese typologies of existential and possessive constructions in comparing with those existing in English language.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Language learners need various kinds of strategies to interpret what they hear or read. They need strategies for interpreting contextual clues, which can provide them with information about the likely intent of the language to which they are being exposed. It is possible that several utterances can be said to have the same propositional meaning, but not the same communicative significance. It is this possibility that poses problems for learners.

One of the most persistent and complex problems facing language learners is the ability to recognize the semantic and syntactic structures of the morphemes that may play different roles in the language. The problems may be worse for Vietnamese-speakers whose language does not possess a system of different morphemes that

signal different categories of semantic or syntactic structures. Instead, one morpheme may have several functions and contain different meanings in different contexts. In English, for example, THERE + BE is used to present the 'Existential' and HAVE the 'Possessive'. In Vietnamese, however, only one morpheme *có* can fulfil both roles. In addition, beyond the meaning of THERE BE and HAVE, morpheme *có* may act as a modal and sometimes as a function word, depending on the context in which it is employed. This will be further explored in the next section.

Syntactically speaking, whether morpheme *có* requires the use of the Existential THERE BE, HAVE, a modal, or something else (another kind of structure) when translating it into English, it depends on the underlying or deep structure and the meaning of the sentence. Recognition of the 'underlying' structure and meaning of the morpheme *có* is not an easy task though it is believed that people have the 'linguistic competence' which is said to be universal, and it is this 'linguistic competence' that helps people intuitively recognize a deep sense of the structure of the language, or the structure of the utterance(s) in particular.

Why is it so complex and varied in syntactic and semantic properties? Unlike English, in which the syntactic structures and meanings can be partly perceived through the derivational or inflectional morphemes and/or function words, such as modality and mood, Vietnamese is a monosyllabic language in which the words or the lexical themselves shoulder the meaning and the syntactic structure. The overwhelming majority of Vietnamese morphemes are composed allomorphs precisely one syllable long. As a result, the fact that one morpheme bears a wide range of meanings (i.e., semantics) and syntactic functions poses problems for language learners (Nguyen, Nguyen, Romary, & Vu, 2004).

It is thus the intent of this paper to present a deeper investigation into the semantic and syntactic structures of the morpheme *có*, along with a collection of data from learners themselves regarding their ability to recognize this diversity, hoping to uncover some implications for the practice of language learning and teaching as well. Accordingly, the paper seeks to find the answers to the following two questions. First, we would like to see how students perceive the meaning of the morpheme *có* and its structure in different situations. Second, we would like to see whether there are differences in the ability to perceive the meanings and structures of the morpheme *có* between first year and fourth year English major students when translating Vietnamese sentences into English.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. An Overview

Typologies of existential and possessive constructions are one of the issues that have attached many modern linguists (Abdoulaye, 2006; Benu, 2019; Huumo, 2003; Myler, 2016; Stolz, 2001; Tsujioka, 2013; Wang & Xu, 2013). The group of constructions is known as '*locational*' in a number of languages. Clark (1970) argues that the '*locational*' is traditionally called 'Existential', 'Locative' and 'Possessive' are all examples of a type called Locational. An example of 'existential' used is in the form:

1. a. There is a pen on the floor.
- b. *Có một cái bút ở dưới sàn nhà.*

Examples of the 'locative' construction include:

2. a. The book is on the table.
- b. *Cuốn sách (nó) ở trên bàn.*

And the 'possessive' constructions are:

3. a. John has a red pen.
- b. *Jean **có** một cây bút màu đỏ.*

And

4. a. The pen is John's.
- b. *Cây bút (này) (là) của Jean.*

The reason for identifying these constructions as 'Locational' is that they all contain a locative phrase (Loc) and a nominal (Nom). Clark (1970) also argues that the configuration of locational constructions is universal with regard to word order, verbs used and locative characteristics.

Each of the examples above contains a [+ DEFINITE] locative phrase and a [± DEFINITE] nominal. Sentences in (1) and (3) signify that a book or a pen exists, whereas sentences in (2) and (4) signify where the pen is found (e.g., in John's possession, with John) (Clark, 1978; Duff, 1993). Regarding the P/E (Possessive/Existential) constructions, Duff (1993) states that they 'seem to have' common semantic and formal characteristics in many languages; however, language learners often face an issue of whether ambiguous P/E utterances, in which a logical subject may not be expressed, are to be interpreted as P or as E.

Vietnamese learners of English are very likely to face this problem due to the fact that one morpheme *có*, is employed for P and E, and morpheme *có* can also serve as an auxiliary. Take, for example, the following sentences:

5. a. Anh *có* một vết dơ trên áo.  
 You *có* a stain on [your] shirt.  
 You've got a stain on your shirt.
- b. Áo anh *có* (một) vết dơ  
 Your shirt *có* a stain [on it].  
 Your shirt has a stain on it.

Both contain the same semantic property that there exists a stain on the shirt, and the shirt is yours. Their syntactic configuration is, however, different though both sentences contain morpheme *có*. The possessor nominal Anh (you, male) in 5a, accompanied by a [+Locative] nominal *trên áo* (on shirt), poses no problems to the learners who would then find it hard to recognize that *áo anh* (your shirt) in 5b is simply a [+Locative] nominal though it serves as a subject, and it should be added a locative case ending (or preposition) 'on it' to make the sentence more 'native-like'.

Regarding the conception of Theme and Rheme, as well as the distribution of the constituents we may see that 5a and 5b are different in the speakers' choice of their 'point of departure' (Downing & Locke, 2006). In example 5a, the initial element acting as signal to the hearer, directing their expectations regarding the structure, is *Anh – you*; the speaker focuses on the hearer who would then be informed of something that is going to be described in the Rheme. It's quite different in 5b where the focus or the 'point of departure' is *áo anh – your shirt*. The Theme in this sentence is 'your shirt' whereas in 5a it is 'Anh' - you. The choice of Theme is important because it 'represents the angle' from which the speakers project the message and partially condition how the message develops (Downing & Locke, 2006).

In this study the participants translated a number of Vietnamese sentences into English; the major task of the test was to investigate the perception of the students when translating the morpheme *có* in different contexts. The diversity of the semantic and syntactic properties of morpheme *có* will be further discussed below.

## 2.2. Possessive or Existential

Slobin (1985) discusses the conflation of possession and location as a "broadly conceived, possession is an animate being and the Figure-Ground relation is of an enduring or socially-sanctioned nature". Like the Vietnamese morpheme *có*, the overlapping P/E functions of the Chinese 'you' poses problems for learners, which is distinguished by Langacker (2015) in terms of constructs *participant* and *setting*. From this perspective, when the subject 'you', as well as its object, is a participant, then the relationship between subject and object is possessive, and when the subject functions as a setting (the object is still a participant), the relationship is existential (cited in Duff (1993)). However, it is not always an easy task to recognize the functions each constituent fulfills in an utterance, especially with "multi-meaning" words like in Vietnamese (Cao, 1998).

Duff (1993) states that the difference between E and P and interpretations concerning the relationship between subject and object 'may simply be due to' the perspective of the speaker regarding the relative degree of foregrounding of the locational sense of the P/E morpheme, that is, the extent to which the possessor nominal is viewed as background (setting, ground) or foreground (participant, figure).

### 2.3. A Deeper Investigation

#### 2.3.1. Showing Possession

There have been no corpus findings about the usage of morpheme *có* in terms of register, e.g., conversation, newspaper; or function, e.g., main verb, auxiliary, or in locative or possessive constructions. However, when *có* is heard of, its most 'popular' meaning and connotation could be related to "possession". Serving the semantic properties of possession, *có* requires a succeeding NP and an antecedent NP acting as a participant.

The pattern for this structure is:

S/NP<sub>1</sub> (participant) + *có* + NP<sub>2</sub>

Within this category, HAVE [GOT] would be most suitable translation, as in the following examples:

6. Tôi *có* một cái áo mới

I have [got] a new shirt

7. Họ *có* nhiều sách

They have [got] many books.

Another structure in which *có* serves as a morpheme showing possession would be as follows:

NP<sub>1</sub> + *có* + NP<sub>2</sub> + VP

The NP<sub>2</sub> + VP in this pattern plays the role of a non-finite clause, and the NP<sub>2</sub> serves as an antecedent of a relative clause which in turn modifies this NP<sub>2</sub>.

8. Tôi *có* một người anh làm ở công ty đó

\* I HAVE (GOT) a brother - works in that company

I have got a brother working / who works in that company

9. Cô ấy *có* hai em trai ở Úc và một em gái ở Canada

She - HAVE/HAVE GOT - a brother - a sister - younger - live in Canada

She has [got] two younger brothers living in Australia and a younger sister [living] in Canada.

Most of the time, the NP<sub>2</sub> in this structure is a participant which means [+Animate]. However, the NP<sub>2</sub> can be [-Animate] and when this occurs, the verb in the relative clause is mostly in the passive form:

10. Bà ấy *có* một cái bàn làm bằng đá.

She has [got] a table made of stone.

#### 2.3.2. Showing Existential

Another common meaning of *có* is when it serves the semantic purpose of 'existential'; the pattern for this category is as THERE BE + NP. This pattern is usually applied in answer to the questions of whether there is anything on/in somewhere or what there are/is in/on somewhere. This is going to be discussed further below.

One pattern used by Vietnamese speakers, though not very common, is when the participant serving as the subject of the sentence is not animate [-Animate] with a pattern as NP + *có* + NP. Take the following example:

11. Bàn thường *có* 4 chân

Table[s] usually *có* 4 legs

Tables usually have four legs.

Or A table usually has four legs.

This is not a case showing possession; rather, it presents a general fact or a description.

In contrast, when preceded by a preposition, NP1 no longer plays the roles of the subject and possessor; rather, it functions as a setting, or a background in which another NP exists. The PP can be moved to the end of the sentence and the sentence begins with *có*. The pattern found in this type is **PP + *có* + NP / *có* + NP + PP**. This pattern is more common than any others within this category.

- 12 a. Trên bàn *có* nhiều sách  
 On table *có* many books  
 There are many books on the table  
 On the table, there are many books.

In (12a), 'trên bàn' – 'on table' serves the function of 'locative case ending', carrying the meaning of 'at a place' or 'to a place' (Clark, 1978). In (12a), 'trên bàn' – 'on table' can be shifted to the end without changing the meaning of the sentences:

- 12 b. *Có* nhiều sách trên bàn  
*Có* many books on table  
 There are many books on the table.

Analyzing 12a and 12b in the light of Theme and Rheme perspective, we can see that these two usages are different though the prepositional meaning of the two does not show any difference. In 12a, the speaker focuses on the location, and 12a would be most appropriate in answering the question "what's there on the table?" On the other hand, the 'point of the departure' in 12b shows the fact that the speaker understands that the hearer knows that there are books, but the hearer does not know where the books are located. Then 'on the table' would be the new information that the speaker is going to provide. However, from speaker's angle, the most appropriate form for *có* in this context would be THERE BE.

This interpretation is also suitable when the PP is replaced with a group of words showing time. Consider the following examples:

- 12 c. Năm ngày nữa sẽ *có* một buổi hòa nhạc ở đây  
 Five days more will *có* a concert here  
 In five days, there will be a concert here  
 There will be a concert here in five days.  
 12 d. *Có* một vụ tai nạn ở đó cách đây hai tuần  
*Có* an accident there 2 weeks ago  
There was an accident there 2 weeks ago.

In short, *có* + NP with a preceding or succeeding PP, or a group of words showing a period of time relating to past, present, or future, should be interpreted as Existential, requiring the syntactic structure of THERE BE.

The pattern *có* + NP + PP can be expanded to include situations in which the N in the NP is preceded by a possessive adjective, e.g., tên tôi [my name]. When this occurs, another form of the translation into English is required. Take for example the following instances:

- a. *Có* tên tôi trong danh sách.  
*Có* my name on the list.  
 My name is on the list.  
 b. *Có* mẹ tôi ở dưới bếp.  
*Có* my mother in the kitchen.  
 My mother is in the kitchen.

In short, the corresponding morpheme for *có* can be employed successfully if the learners are able to perceive the propositional meaning as well as the surface structure of the sentence in context, of *có*, and whether it is Locative, Existential or Possessive.

We shall now explore the pattern that is very likely to pose problems for learners in recognizing the deep structure of the sentences. In the following example:

13. *Có* năm sinh viên chưa nộp bài

\* There are five students - have not submitted assignments

There are five students who have not submitted their assignments yet

Five students have not submitted their assignments yet.

Learners should be able to realize these two deep implicit aspects, that there are five students left, and that these students have not yet completed and submitted their compositions. Noteworthy here, is that the pattern *có* + NP + VP is different from that displayed in section 1.3.3 (sentence 12a and 12 b). The VP succeeding the NP cannot be moved to the beginning of the sentence whereas the PP in the sentences in 1.3.3 can be put initially or 'finally'. The VP in this pattern can be a non-finite clause or a relative clause with the NP serving as its antecedent. The structure used for translations using this pattern would be THERE BE + NP + VP, or NP + VP with the omission of THERE BE.

Thompson (1965) states that the auxiliary *có* is "especially important". It is in many ways similar to the English auxiliary verb *do*; it is less frequent in ordinary affirmative sentences, and in those cases it denotes a kind of emphasis of the verb it precedes; however, it is almost 'indispensable' in interrogative sentences, just as *do* is in English (Thompson, 1965).

The most common pattern with *có* as an auxiliary in the affirmative is NP + *có* + VP. Since Vietnamese is a 'tenseless' language, which means there is not a grammaticalized process/phenomenon, *có* may be interpreted using several semantic and syntactic categories depending on the context. However, the interpretation of *có* may be based on time reference (e.g., past, future), or implicit meanings (e.g., condition, causation, etc.)

Within affirmative utterances, the semantic attribution most commonly attributed to *có* is that it acts as an 'emphasizer', highlighting a fact or a truth. i.e. factive, that the action was/was not, or will/will not be carried out, i.e. factive or non-factive. Take the following instances:

14. Cô ấy *có* nói điều đó.

She *có* say that.

She did say that.

15. Mẹ tôi *có* đi đấy.

My mother *có* go.

My mother did go [there]

or My mother will surely go

Semantically speaking, and when we examine the time reference, we can perceive that utterance (14) itself tells us of an action, which is a woman said something and the said action, was completed, then we use the aspect of 'simple' with a tense of 'past'.

On the contrary, "Mẹ tôi *có* đi đấy" in (15), can be the reply discussed to one of two questions: 'Did your mother go there?' or 'And won't your mother go?' In this case it is only the context of the utterance that can tell us what tense or aspect should be used for *có*.

Noteworthy, are the following sentences:

a. Cô ấy *có* nói điều đó.

She *có* say that.

She did say that.

and

b. Cô ấy nói điều đó.

She said that.

These sentences show no difference in the propositional meaning that there is a woman and she said something, and the truth of her saying that is assured by the speaker. However, the morpheme *có* in sentence (a) displays the

speaker's attitude that the fact that she said something is true and the speaker wants to emphasize that fact. It thus requires students to be alert to the role that morpheme *có* plays in these kinds of utterances so they may have a thorough understanding of the author's intention in the sentences to be translated.

Preceding the predicate and being accompanied with *không* at the end of the sentence, the *có ... không* formula is "much the most common way of asking a simple choice question" (Thompson, 1965); this formula serves as a Yes/No signal.

16. Anh *có* đi Hà Nội không?  
Did / will you go to Hà Nội?

Or Are you going to Hà Nội?

The variance in the translations given above, is due to the contexts in which the utterances are made.

Another pattern with *có* used in question takes the form of:

*Có phải* + Clause + *Không?*

The clause in this pattern is mostly substantival or identifying.

17. *Có phải* anh là người Hà Nội không?  
*Có phải* you are from Hà Nội không?  
Are you 'Hanoian'?  
Are you from Hanoi?

18. *Có phải* anh đã gọi tôi không?  
*Có phải* you called me không?  
Was it you who called me?  
Did you call me?

With this kind of question, the questioner usually expects a confirmation from the hearer, making the questions a little like assurance seeking.

### 2.3.3. Other Functions of *có*

#### 2.3.3.1. Quantifying Modifier

The morpheme *có* may serve as a device to emphasize the limit of the quantity. In this sense, *có* always precedes quantifiers:

19. Tôi mua *có* hai kilogam gạo (à).  
I bought *có* two kilograms of rice  
I just bought only two kilograms of rice  
20. Tôi mới học được *có* hai môn trong kỳ thi này à.  
I just go through *có* two subjects in this final exam  
I have been able to go through only two subjects for the final exams.

It should be noted here that the difference between the two sentences is that of the speaker's attitude towards the fact in the utterance:

a. Tôi mua hai kilogram gạo.  
I bought two kilograms of rice  
and b. Tôi mua *có* hai kilogram gạo (à)  
I bought *có* two kilograms of rice  
I bought only two kilograms of rice

The propositional meaning of the two sentences is the same, that 'it was me who bought rice' and 'the quantity was two kilograms.' However, sentence (a) shows no attitude from the speaker, whereas sentence (b) displays the speaker's opinion that two kilograms is not too much or possibly not even enough.

### 2.3.3.2. *Có in Conditional Sentences*

The morpheme *có* is commonly found in expressions showing a condition, which means if one thing serving as a condition is fulfilled, then something else can be achieved. The following examples will illustrate the case.

21. *Có làm, thì mới có ăn.*

*Có* work, then *có* eat

If one works, one has food to eat.

22. *Có tiền thì có tất cả*

*Có* money, *có* everything

If one has money, one has everything

If we had money, we would have everything.

23. *Anh có đi thì tôi chờ*

If you want to come, I'll wait for you

As can be seen, the morpheme *có* may be understood differently when used in different context. There are still other meanings of this morpheme along with other syntactic structures; however, due to time and word limit constraints, we have only presented the main structures in which *có* may be used, semantically as well as syntactically.

The next section will present the study of the 'usage' of the morpheme *có* by Vietnamese learners of English, with the aim of determining their ability to translate this 'multi-function' morpheme, as well as the problems they may face when doing so.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Introduction

With its diverse usage as well as the intersection of its syntactic and semantic properties, the morpheme *có* may cause confusion among Vietnamese-speaking learners of English as well as English-speaking learners of Vietnamese when they interpret or translate Vietnamese into the target language. This study is, therefore, an attempt to determine the most common mistakes made by Vietnamese learners of English when they interpret sentences containing the morpheme *có*, with the hope of providing some useful information to both language teachers and learners.

### 3.2. Subjects

The participants were 40 students learning English as a major, of which 10 were freshmen, 10 sophomores, 10 juniors and 10 seniors. From the beginning of their University education, these students learnt subjects such as EPP (English Pronunciation Practice), Grammar, and Sentence writing. Moreover, a compulsory subject included in their curriculum namely 'Applied Vietnamese' introduces them to a wide range of aspects of language such as phonetics, phonology, and syntax as well as semantics. This subject provides basic knowledge of the Vietnamese language for University-level students.

### 3.3. The Test

The students were asked to translate a number of sentences into English (see Appendix). The test consisted of 14 sentences containing the morpheme *có* with varying syntactic structures and semantic properties. The test is designed to investigate the students' perception of the morpheme *có* when translating these Vietnamese sentences into English.

Five major categories of sentences were included in the test as follows: The first category involved two sentences in which the morpheme *có* had an Existential semantic property, and the form or structure expected to be used was THERE BE as in sentences 1 and 4 in the paper.



The second type allowed the omission of the THERE BE even though the 'nature' of the utterance was still about the existence of an NP performing an action. The structure expected was THERE BE + NP + V-ing, or NP + VP as in sentences 7 and 12 in the paper.

The third category concerned possession, and the morpheme anticipated was HAVE [GOT] as in sentences 10 and 13 above.

The fourth type presented the morpheme *có* as an Auxiliary emphasizing the action or state the speaker or writer is referring to as in sentences 2 and 9 above, and items 6 and 8 serve which are confirmatory questions using *có* ...[clause]... *không?*

The last category included sentences containing the morpheme *có* but the core structure and semantic reference expressed a limited quantity (Sentences 5 and 11 in the questionnaire), or a condition (Sentences 3 and 14 in the questionnaire).

Sentences from each category were randomized in the paper, thus avoiding *có* being recognized to serve the same function. This was done to increase the reliability and the validity of the measurement of examining the students' perception of the syntactic and semantic diversity of the morpheme *có*.

### 3.4. Collecting and Analysing Data

The test consisted of 14 sentences and was distributed to all 40 students who were then asked to translate those sentences into English within 20 minutes. The time limit was set so as to attain a result from the participants themselves; since the main concern of the study was about the learners' ability to perceive the syntactic and semantic properties of the morpheme *có*, grammar errors were not considered as wrong translations. A good translation would contain the right form of a morpheme fitting the contextual situation.

The errors found in each category were compared to see which function of *có* had been 'mastered' by the students and which was not. The achievements of the students from four different levels, first year, second year, third year and fourth year were also examined to find out whether more advanced learners fared better in employing the right form of the target language for the morpheme being investigated. Each of the sentences translated with an appropriate form for *có* was awarded one (1) point. Therefore, for each category, e.g., THERE BE + NP, each student could earn 2 points at the most.

The means of the scores of students in each year, e.g., first year, or second year, were then compared using SPSS software. Also, an Independent Sample T-test was run to see which groups of students displayed statistically significant differences in perceiving the diverse possible translations of *có* and being able to apply the appropriate form.

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis attempted to see whether there was a statistically significant difference between the students in terms of proficiency; whether first year students had different scores from fourth year students and so on. Moreover, the study expected to find out which functions of the morpheme *có* proved problematic for the learners, e.g., whether *có* as an auxiliary or as a constituent showing Existential semantics caused trouble for the learners, and so on.

### 4.1. The Perception of the Morpheme *Có* in Different Circumstances

Data gained from the test indicated that for the possessive structure of HAVE, questions with *có*, and constructions with THERE BE + NP, a large number of participants displayed an ability to apply appropriate forms of the morpheme *có*. It should be noted here that we had 40 students performing the translation task. Each category consisted of 2 sentences. This meant that we would have 80 answers for each category.

Ninety-three (93) percent of the correct answers (75/80) involved the structures of the possessive HAVE and Questions with *có*; Ninety (90) percent of the correct answers (72/80) involved the type of structure that required the translation of THERE BE + NP for *có*. Eighty-one (81) percent (65/80) of the sentences were translated with the appropriate form for *có* when *có* served as a quantity modifier. The participants displayed high scores on this category thanks to the fact that *có* was perceived as a quantity modifier when it preceded a number showing quantity.

The results also indicated that for those constructions which used similar word order in both languages, e.g., THERE BE + NP, and HAVE Possession, students had no difficulties in discerning and then providing corresponding appropriate forms for the morpheme. With constructions like THERE BE + NP or HAVE Possession, the pattern of English and Vietnamese is similar. Clark (1978) provides evidence that the pattern is universal. These results confirm Clark's and other researchers' findings on the universality of the Existential and Possessive constructions.

On the other hand, the data showed different results when other categories were examined. In the categories of *có* serving as an Auxiliary, *có* being followed by NP + VP, and *có* serving as a signal of conditionality, students displayed a low ability to perceive the meaning, or rather the communicative purpose of the morpheme. Much lower scores were found in the categories of Auxiliary, Conditional constructions and THERE BE + NP + VP. Only 52% (42/80) of sentences were translated using appropriate forms for *có* when it was used in conditional constructions. 65 % (51/80) of the sentences requiring THERE BE + NP + VP, and 61 % (49/80) of the sentences requiring Auxiliary insertion were translated with correct forms for *có*.

For the construction of THERE BE + NP + VP, Vietnamese students often made mistakes in failing to conjugate the VP. They did not perceive the core structure of the VP that served as a non-finite clause with the NP as its subject. In Vietnamese, the VP is not conjugated, which may have resulted in L1 transfer when they translated it into English.

Statistically, the data obtained showed that there was an increase in the scores as the language proficiency of the students increased, indicating a clear difference between the scores earned by different groups of students at different levels of proficiency. Of the seven categories in which *có* was investigated, six were accompanied by a raise of mean score from first to fourth year.

For constructions involving THERE BE + NP, HAVE Possession, and Questions with *có*, the mean scores were dramatically higher among third years than first years but showed no difference between third and fourth years. This indicates that the students improved their ability to perceive the meaning of the morpheme *có* as time went by, achieving a clear understanding and accurate usage of the morpheme in their third year of study. The fact that there was no difference between the third and fourth years shows that these constructions may be learned or acquired in the third year.

For the construction of THERE BE + NP + VP and Condition, the mean scores were dramatically higher among the second years than the first years and higher still among third year students. The scores were only slightly higher for fourth year students in comparison to third year students. This indicates that students needed more time and practice to learn and/or acquire the semantic and syntactic properties of *có* in these constructions.

For construction of *có* as an auxiliary, there was no difference between the mean scores of the first and second years, but the mean scores were significantly higher for third years compared to second years, while fourth years scored slightly higher at 1.5 (out of 2). This may indicate that students could only apply an appropriate form for *có* just when they had learned and understood other fundamental rules, principles, and parameters of the language being learned.

A somewhat inexplicable and interesting phenomenon occurred with constructions using *có* as a quantity modifier, in that the mean scores were proportionally higher among second and third years relative to first years with third years achieving an accuracy rate of 1.8 (out of 2) but were slightly lower at 1.7 among fourth years. Since

this construction requires a high understanding of the properties of *có*, highly proficient students were likely to overthink which forms best fitted and thus be indecisive in the situations given for translation.

#### 4.2. A Comparison of Scores between Students of Different Years

This study attempted to detect any statistical difference between the scores of students of different proficiency levels. An Independent Sample T-test was utilized to compare pairs of groups, namely First year – Second year, First year – Third year, First year – Fourth year, Second year – Third year, Second year – Fourth year, and Third year – Fourth year students.

In this section, however, not all the outputs are presented due to the word constraints for this essay. This section will only include those outputs that show statistically significant differences between the scores of each pair of the groups mentioned.

The output of the Independent Sample Test comparing the scores of first- and third-year students, and first- and fourth-year students respectively showed that for constructions involving *có* as a signal of condition, students of two groups, namely first year versus fourth year, performed a statistically significantly differently when translating the Vietnamese sentences into English. The T-test output showed that the mean scores of first and third-year students, and the mean scores of first- and fourth-year students were significantly different, with  $t = -3.130$  and  $p = .006 < .05$  and  $t = -3.464$  and  $p = .003 < .05$  respectively. For constructions using *có* as a signal of condition, the output also displayed a difference in mean scores between second and fourth-year students of  $t = -2.060$  and  $p = .049 < .05$ .

The results indicated that proficiency did have an effect on the outcome of the students' performance on sentences using this construction. First year students had a much lower score (mean = .6000) than that of third year students (mean = 1.3000), and fourth year students (mean = 1.4000). From this we can infer that proficiency does have effect on the perception of the learners in translating from one language to other languages and in particular, the perception of *có* when it serves as a signal showing condition.

There was also a statistically relevant difference in the mean scores of first year and fourth year students in the construction of THERE BE + NP + VP. The output showed that the two groups performed differently in the test, with  $F = 1.100$ ,  $t = -2.449$  and  $p = .025 < .05$ . Note: for this construction, the VP in Vietnamese language is not conjugated, which may cause L1 transference on outcome of the translation.

As can be seen, first year students had a much lower score for this category, mean = .9000, in comparison with that of fourth year students with mean = 1.500. Again, the higher proficiency resulted in the better outcome among the senior students in translating the language, or rather perception of the morpheme. It is obvious that with morphemes possessing a variety of semantic as well as syntactic properties, students with low proficiency levels show a lower ability to use them in comparison to more proficient students.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The paper presents an in-depth investigation into the diversity of the semantic and syntactic properties of the morpheme *có*, presenting a clear overview of the structures in which *có* is used. The essay lays out seven main structures containing *có* in which it performs different functions. This study also aimed to determine the differences between students of different proficiency levels in terms of their perception of the varied uses of the morpheme *có* when performing its seven different functions. The findings confirm other researchers' view on the universality of the construction of THERE BE + NP and the possessive Have. In these constructions, students obtained much higher scores in comparison to those in which *có* signaled conditionality, acted as an auxiliary, or was followed by an NP.

The mean scores of each group of students of different proficiency levels were also presented and were used in a T-test which attempted to compare each pair of groups of students. The results showed that there was a statistically

significant difference between the mean scores of different groups of students of different proficiency levels, namely first and third/fourth year students, meaning that there existed a discrepancy in perception of the structures and meanings of the morpheme being investigated.

In general, the students showed a high degree of accuracy in translating constructions that are said to be universal; with morphemes like *có* possessing diverse semantic and syntactic properties in Vietnamese, students of different proficiency levels displayed different accuracy level in performing the translations. Accuracy required more experience in using the language before users would be able to distinguish the different functions of the morpheme and apply the appropriate structures and words in each particular situation.

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## APPENDIX

The sentences students were asked to translate into English.

1. Đấng kia có cái bông hoa màu đẹp thật.

There's a flower over-there with beautiful colors.

2. Nó nói là nó có đi cắm trại.

She said that she did go camping / She said she would surely go camping.

3. Anh có làm việc chăm chỉ thì anh mới thành công được.  
Only if you work hard, then you could be successful.
4. Có cái gì trong mắt của em nè.  
There's something in my eyes.
5. Em mua chỉ có 2 cuốn vở thôi.  
I just bought 2 notebooks.
6. Anh có biết khi nào thi học kỳ không?  
Do you know when the final exams will take place?
7. Có một vài bạn sinh viên đi làm thêm vào cuối tuần.  
There are some students working part time at weekends / Some students work part time at weekends.
8. Có bạn nào biết số điện thoại của cô Mary không?  
Does anyone know Ms. Mary's phone number?
9. Tôi có mua cuốn tiểu thuyết đó mà.  
I did buy that novel.
10. Anh có cây bút nào màu đỏ không?  
Do you have a red pen? / Have you got a red pen?
11. Nhà em chỉ còn có một ít đường thôi.  
We have just a little sugar only.
12. Có một số người làm việc 16 giờ mỗi ngày.  
There are some people working 16 hours a day / Some people work 17 hours a day.
13. Cô ấy có nhiều giày đắt tiền lắm.  
She has (got) many expensive (pairs of) shoes.
14. Có suy nghĩ kỹ càng về một việc thì sẽ có ý tưởng tốt.  
If you think of an issue carefully, then you could have a good idea about it.

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