

## Selected means of expressing modality in Vietnamese compound sentences (A survey of Nam Cao's works)

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on investigating, identifying, and systematizing the lexical-grammatical means used to express modality through the structure of compound sentences in the works of writer Nam Cao. By analyzing a representative corpus of data from Nam Cao's literary works, the paper demonstrates the diversity of modality-bearing compound sentence types, including conditional-consequential relations (*nếu... thì, hễ... thì, giá... thì*), causal-consequential relations (*vì/bởi vì... nên, sở dĩ... là vì*), additive-progressive relations (*càng... càng, đã... lại còn*), as well as supplementary, comparative, contrastive, and sequential relations. The results indicate that modal means in compound sentences not only serve grammatical linking functions but also act as sharp artistic tools, enabling Nam Cao to deeply portray the inner world of his characters and express a lucid, philosophical realistic perspective, alongside profound compassion for the destitute lives in the old society.

**Keywords:** Vietnamese compound sentences, modality, modal means, Nam Cao, Vietnamese grammar

### Introduction

Modality is a universal and critically important category in semantics and pragmatics. It reflects the speaker's attitude, evaluation, sentiment, or degree of certainty regarding the objective reality described in an utterance, as well as their relationship with the listener.

While simple sentences are the basic units for conveying complete informational content, compound sentences possess more complex structures, consisting of clauses with reciprocal relationships that express thoughts, moods, and argumentative depth. The integration of compound sentence structures with modal means creates special expressive nuances, playing a pivotal role in delineating the characters' inner worlds and the author's artistic intentions.

Nam Cao was a major writer known for his sharp, subtle, and profoundly philosophical prose. His works (ranging from short stories to novels) do not merely reflect the suffocating reality of society; they delve into the inner conflicts and spiritual tragedies of impoverished intellectuals and miserable peasants. To achieve this haunting depth, Nam Cao utilized a system of artistic language rich in dialogue, introspection, and philosophy. In this context, modality-bearing compound sentences appear with high frequency, becoming powerful tools for the writer to convey attitudes of irony, pity, skepticism, or despair.

Given this reality, investigating the means of expressing modality in compound sentences through the lens of Nam Cao's works holds practical significance in both theory and application. This study aims to identify, describe, and systematize the formal means of expressing modality in Vietnamese compound sentences, while indicating their usage characteristics within the writer's literary texts.

### Content

#### 1. The Concept of Modality

Modality is a complex semantic category with various perspectives throughout the history of linguistic research. Globally, prominent linguists such as Vinogradov viewed "Modality as a grammatical category expressing the various

relationships of an utterance to reality" [2; p.17]. Meanwhile, O.B. Sirotinina argued that "Modality lies within the predicativity of the sentence, without which there can be no utterance" [2, p.43]. According to Bally, it is the "soul" of the sentence and communication, indicating the speaker's degree of commitment or subjective evaluation. Lyons defined modality as "the speaker's attitude towards the propositional content of the sentence or the situation described by the proposition" [3; p. 425].

In Vietnam, researchers have reached a fundamental consensus on the nature of this category. Diep Quang Ban stated, "Modality is the component indicating (volition, desire), attitude, and sentiment of the speaker toward what is being said, and the speaker's relationship with the listener" [1, p.181]. Le Quang Thiem asserted that "Modality participates in the realization process, transforming potential situation content into real speech with defined semantic content" [6, p.182].

From these perspectives, modality can be broadly understood as a component of sentence meaning that helps actualize propositional content in communication. It encompasses the entirety of the speaker's perceptions, evaluations, emotions, and attitudes toward the objective reality described in the utterance.

#### 2. Means of Expressing Modality in Vietnamese

##### 2.1 Words and Phrases Expressing Modality:

- **Modal Verbs:** Combining with other verbs to act as the predicate core, expressing the speaker's attitude or expectations (e.g., *cần, nên, phải, muốn, ước...*).
- **Particles:** Emphasizing words or phrases to draw the listener's attention, expressing attitude or evaluation without syntactic function (e.g., *những, mãi, chỉ, tận, đến nỗi...*).
- **Interjections:** Directly expressing emotions or sentiments (e.g., *vâng, dạ, chào ời, ơ ôi, trời ời...*).
- **Sentence-Final Modal Particles:** Positioned at the end of an utterance to express nuance between speaker and listener (e.g., *à, nhi, nhé, quá, lắm, đấy...*).

- **Auxiliary Words:** Accompanying lexical words to indicate temporal aspects, degree, or continuity (e.g., *đã, đang, sẽ, cũng, vẫn...*).

## 2.2 Types of Sentences Expressing Modality:

- **Performative Sentences:** Containing performative verbs (e.g., *cắm, đề nghị, cho phép, van xin...*) to directly execute a speech act.
- **Compound Sentences:** Serving not only as structural links but also as means to express inferential processes and the speaker's subjective assessment.

## 3. Modality in Compound Sentences (Selected Examples)

### 3.1 Compound sentences expressing conditional-consequential relations

Compound sentences expressing conditional-consequential relations establish a connection between the conditional clause (hypothesis) and the consequential clause. Typically, the conditional clause is a subordinate clause preceding the main clause; however, the main clause can be inverted. In such cases, the connective is usually retained in the conditional clause and omitted in the consequential clause. Common connective pairs in this sentence type include: *nếu... thì, hễ... thì, hễ như... thì*, and *giá... thì*.

#### 3.1.1 The "Nếu A thì B" (If A, then B) structure

In "Nếu A thì B" compound sentences, the reciprocal relationship between condition and result is clearly defined, allowing the speaker to posit hypotheses accompanied by predictions regarding objective reality. This relationship can be linked to various social, ethical, or life issues, thereby directly or indirectly influencing the recipient. The essence of this structure is a tight connection in which A acts as the hypothesis and B as the result; in other words, B is likely to occur given condition A. Semantically, this conditional-consequential sentence type is divided into two main categories:

- **Real conditions:** These reflect events or situations that are true in reality. If condition A occurs, result B will certainly follow. (1) "*Nếu phải rạch mặt mấy phát nữa thì cũng đau.*" (If [I] had to cut [my] face a few more times, it would hurt.)
- **Hypothetical conditions:** These are conditions that do not exist in reality but are posited according to the speaker's perspective or reasoning to provide an alternative viewpoint or line of deduction. (4) "*Nếu tôi không nhất định chờ chồng, làm lụng nuôi con, thì tôi lấy người phụ quét chợ ngày xưa rồi.*" (If I hadn't been determined to wait for my husband and work to raise our children, I would have married the market sweeper back then.)

#### 3.1.2 The "Hễ A thì/là B" (Whenever A, then B) structure

In Vietnamese, the operators "Hễ - thì/là" express the inevitability of an event. This structure describes a relationship where, whenever event A occurs, event B necessarily follows according to a stable pattern. Unlike the *nếu... thì* structure (which can be hypothetical or contrary to fact), *hễ... thì* is associated with events that occur regularly and repetitively by rule.

### 3.1.3 The "Giá A thì B" (If only A, then B / Had A, then B) structure

The operator pair "Giá A thì B" is specifically used to express counterfactual modality. The speaker uses this structure to posit a hypothesis completely contrary to objective reality to express regret, speculate on an alternative outcome, or reveal a negative attitude toward reality. (10) "*Giá có tôi ở nhà thì đâu đến nỗi.*" (If I had been home, it wouldn't have turned out like this.)

### 3.2 Compound sentences expressing causal-consequential relations

Each clause in a causal-consequential compound sentence presents an event with a logical relationship, where the event in the causal clause serves as the argument leading to the conclusion in the consequential clause. Common connectives include *vì, bởi vì, tại vì, do, bởi, tại, nhờ, sở dĩ...* for the cause, and *nên, cho nên, mà...* for the result.

### 3.3 Compound sentences with progressive relations

Compound sentences with progressive relations express meanings where the subsequent clause supplements, affirms, or elevates the meaning of the preceding clause to a higher degree.

- **The "Càng A thì càng B" (The more A, the more B) structure:** Indicates mutual change between two events.
- **The "Đã A lại còn B" (Not only A, but also B) structure:** Indicates the speaker's subjective evaluation regarding an unusual characteristic or the cumulative escalation of events in the same direction.

### 3.4 Compound sentences with supplementary relations: "Trong khi A thì B" (While A, [meanwhile] B)

This structure describes two events occurring simultaneously in the same timeframe but with contrasting content or unrelated themes, highlighting the difference in states between characters.

### 3.5 Compound sentences with comparative relations: "A như / giống như B" (A as/like B)

This structure establishes a similarity between two objects or actions to enhance figurativeness and vividness, helping the reader easily visualize the nature of the event.

### 3.6 Compound sentences with contrastive relations: "Tuy A nhưng B" (Although A, [but] B)

This structure contains two clauses with opposing meanings. The first clause sets forth a hypothesis or fact as a basis for comparison, while the second clause provides an unexpected result or a reversal of common expectations.

### 3.7 Compound sentences with sequential relations: "Vừa A đã B" (No sooner A than B) and "Chưa A đã B" (Hardly A when B)

These structures describe a strict temporal relationship where the event in the subsequent clause appears immediately (often earlier than expected or as soon as the first clause initiates), reflecting the speaker's subjective evaluation of the event's pace.

## Conclusion

1. Modality is a universal and critically important category in Vietnamese semantics and pragmatics. It

not only reflects the relationship between the propositional content and objective reality but also directly reveals the speaker's attitude, evaluation, sentiment, and subjective stance. When structured within compound sentences, modal meaning becomes increasingly enriched, multi-dimensional, and highly argumentative.

2. The survey of Nam Cao's works reveals an extremely diverse system of compound sentences expressing modality, which are flexibly employed through various syntactic structures and specialized connective pairs. From types expressing conditional-consequential relations (nếu... thì, hễ... thì, giá... thì), causal-consequential relations (vì... nên, sở dĩ... là vì), progressive relations (càng... càng, đã... lại còn), and contrastive relations (tuy... nhưng), to supplementary, comparative, and sequential relations—all are thoroughly utilized by the writer to recreate a vivid and complex picture of life.
3. Modal means in compound sentences do not merely fulfill grammatical linking functions; they also serve as sharp artistic tools that enable Nam Cao to portray the characters' inner worlds, expressing a lucid and deeply philosophical realistic perspective, alongside profound compassion and empathy for the destitute people in the old society. Through his pen, every compound sentence structure carries the heavy, rhythmic pulse of the reflections and anxieties of his era.

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