

Relevance Theory: A Pragmatic Account of the Sentence-Final Particle *Nhỉ* in Vietnamese

Ngoc Tai Huynh *

Tra Vinh University, Vietnam

Nhung Thi Tuyet Nguyen

Tra Vinh University, Vietnam

Abstract

Pragmatic particles play a significant role in interactions mediated by speech, as they are used as a means of conveying a speaker's attitude toward either the addressee, the situation, or their own assumptions and emotions. As Blass (2000) contended, besides the function of conveying a speaker's attitudes to an addressee, pragmatic particles can also indicate that the speaker has certain evidence for the truth of the proposition expressed, i.e., indicating that both the speaker and listener are aware of the evidence. In our study, we observed that, in Vietnamese, the sentence-final particle *nhỉ* might also have the properties of a pragmatic particle. This paper, therefore, aimed to analyze the Vietnamese sentence-final particle *nhỉ* within the framework of relevance theory to determine if this particle can be considered a relevant information marker in the Vietnamese language. By analyzing data extracted from a well-known literary text, *Picked Wife* (Kim Lan, 1962), the study found that *nhỉ* signals newly perceived information that is relevant to the speaker.

Keywords: Pragmatic particles; Vietnamese; Relevance theory; Relevant information marker

INTRODUCTION

Sentence-final particles play a significant role in linguistic meanings. In the Vietnamese language, much research has been conducted to explore the pragmatic functions of sentence-final particles. To date, however, very few studies have examined the role of the Vietnamese sentence-final particle *nhỉ* from the perspective of relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986;1995).

Le (2014) states that there are various sentence-final particles in Vietnamese, including the interrogative particles *không*, *chưa*, *à*, *ư*, *sao*, *đâu*, *đi*, and *thế*; the negative particle *đâu*; the imperative particle *đi*; the exclamative particles *thay*, *sao*, and *chưa*; and the Deictic particles *thế*, *vậy*, *cơ*, *nè*, *đấy*, *ấy*, and *lên*. The Vietnamese sentence-final particle *nhỉ* has received much attention in the literature on Vietnamese exclamatory and interrogative sentences. For instance, Bui (2010, p. 24) describes *nhỉ* as an interjection particle that is added at the end of a sentence to mark "different levels of the speaker's

attitude.” *Nhỉ* is also considered an important particle in interrogative sentences, as it is used to express politeness, respect, and friendliness (Đỗ, 2008). However, little research has been conducted to examine the functions of *nhỉ* from the viewpoint of relevance theory.

In this paper, we analyze *nhỉ* within the framework of relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986;1995) to determine if this sentence-final particle can be considered a marker of relevant information in some contexts. More precisely, our premise is that *nhỉ* signals newly perceived information that is relevant to the speaker.

As claimed by Noh (2003, p.2), according to relevance theory, “new information is relevant to an individual if it is based on a stronger source than a related existing assumption and yields a cognitive effect.” In Noh’s analysis, the Korean suffix *ney* is used with information that goes against the speaker’s expectations, and it is also a marker of relevant information. Therefore, based on Noh’s interpretation of relevance theory, this paper examines whether the Vietnamese sentence-final particle *nhỉ* is a marker of relevant information. In addition to examples from the Vietnamese language, the main data of this study consist of relevant sentences extracted from the short story *Vợ Nhặt* (*Picked Wife*). This story was written by a famous Vietnamese writer, Kim Lan (1962), and is taught in Vietnamese high schools.

Research question: This article sought the answer to the following question:

- To what extent can the Vietnamese sentence-final particle *nhỉ* be considered a marker of relevant information?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relevance theory and relevant information

Wearing (2015) defined relevance theory as a theory that “takes communication to exploit a more fundamental and more general feature of human cognition: its orientation toward what is relevant” (p. 88). Wearing (2015) further explained that effect and effort are the two interacting components of relevance theory. According to Noh (2003), in relevance theory, relevant information is defined as information that has a positive cognitive effect on the individual (while not requiring too much processing effort). In addition, a positive effect is a worthwhile difference to an individual’s representation of the world, i.e., a true conclusion (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). For the purpose of comprehension, we developed the simple diagram shown in Figure 1, which was created based on Noh’s (2003) interpretation of relevance theory to illustrate the general conditions for information to be relevant to an individual and the general way in which this relevant information is processed.

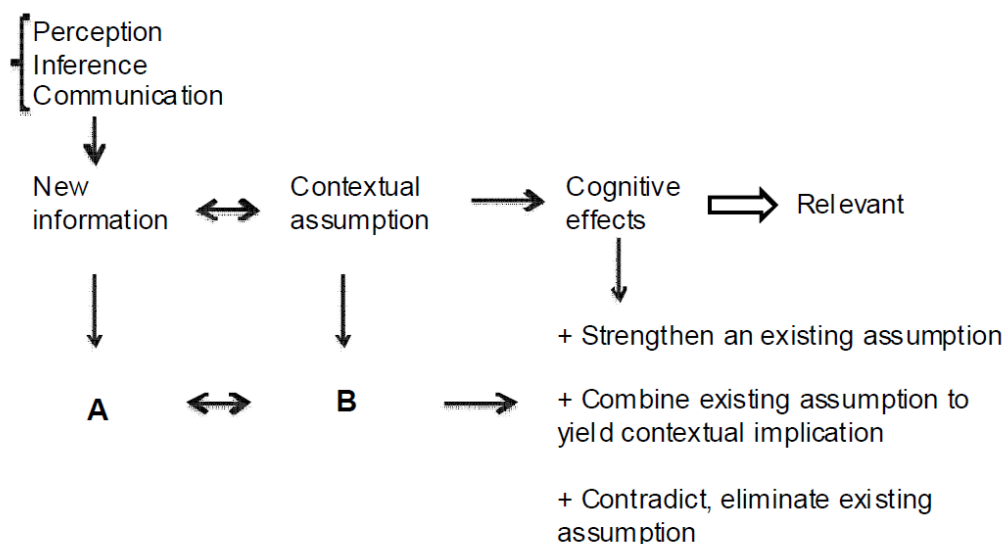


Figure 1. General conditions for information to be relevant and the processing sequence of relevant information

As can be seen in Figure 1, new information (**A**) received from sources of perception, inference, or communication interacts with the speaker's contextual assumption. The speaker's contextual assumption (**B**) can yield a positive cognitive effect if one of the following consequences occurs: **A** strengthens **B**; **A** combines with **B** to yield a contextual implication; **A** contradicts and eliminates **B**. It is important to note that the conditions for newly perceived information to be relevant are: (1) **A** relates to **B**, i.e., the speaker's existing assumption relates to the new information; (2) the source of **A** has to be stronger than the source of **B**.

More precisely, the newly perceived information should come from a more trustworthy means of perception, e.g., seeing something with one's own eyes can be deemed more trustworthy than hearing the same thing from a friend. For instance, it was midnight, and Mary's ordinary assumption was that there would be nobody coming to knock on her door (**B**). However, suddenly, Mary heard someone knocking on the door (source of **A**). This situation could surprise Mary and yield a cognitive effect because the source of **A** (hearing) is stronger than the source of **B** (a reasonable assumption). Consequently, the newly perceived information **A** contradicts and eliminates Mary's related prior assumption **B**. Thus, the new information, in this case, is relevant to Mary.

Previous claims *nhĩ* in Vietnamese

In the Vietnamese dictionary (Kim Than & Đúc Phuong, 2005), *nhĩ* is defined as a sentence-final particle that is put at the end of an utterance to confirm newly perceived information and to either confirm the speaker's agreement or to obtain the listener's agreement, as exemplified in (1).

(1) *Thằng bé thông minh nhĩ!*

CL¹ child intelligent *nhỉ!*

“The child is intelligent!”

Nhỉ is also used to express an ironic idea in an interrogative form that does not need an answer, as in (2).

(2) *Nói dễ nghe nhỉ?*

Speak easy listen *nhỉ?*

“You speak as if it is very easy.”

Other scholars have considered *nhỉ* to be a particle that is positioned at the end of interrogative and exclamatory sentences. Bui (2010), for instance, states that *nhỉ* belongs to the interjection group and plays a significant role in marking different levels of a speaker’s attitudes, as in (3) and (4).

(3) *Hôm nay trời đẹp nhỉ!*

Today weather beautiful *nhỉ!*

“The weather is beautiful today!”

In (3), the speaker added *nhỉ* as a way of expressing the surprised and excited feeling of experiencing beautiful weather. From our observations, this expression of feeling might disappear if *nhỉ* is not used. However, Bui (2010) did not discuss in detail the extent to which the speaker’s attitude may vary from a certain level to a more enhanced level with the inclusion of *nhỉ* in the sentence’s final position.

Another pragmatic way of using of the particle *nhỉ* in interrogative sentences was mentioned by Mai (2012, p.5). In Mai’s view, the presence of *nhỉ* might strengthen the closeness or friendship between speaker and listener, as illustrated in (4).

(4) *Sao chúng mình không cùng làm nốt việc này nhỉ?*

Why we not together finish job this *nhỉ?*

“Why don’t we get this job done together?”

The appearance of *nhỉ* in (4) creates a sense of “calling for agreement” from the listener, i.e., it changes (4) into a rhetorical question. Similarly, Việt (2008) emphasized that the use of *nhỉ* is considered crucial to making a question sound polite, as in (5).

(5) *Ai đi ấy nhỉ*

Who walk that *nhỉ*

“Who’s that walking there?”

According to Việt (2008), Vietnamese interrogative sentences often need to contain the particle *nhỉ* to achieve a feeling of politeness, respect, and closeness. This assumption was analyzed by Đỗ (2012), as mentioned above. It should be noted that an absence of *nhỉ* in examples (1)–(5) would not change the syntactic functions of those utterances, i.e., *nhỉ* is

¹ CL stands for *Classifier*

added at the end of the sentence to serve the speaker's communicative purposes. Generally, *nhỉ* might have the following properties:

- It conveys the speaker's attitude in exclamatory sentences.
- It is used to convey the speaker's respect, closeness, and politeness toward the listener in interrogative sentences.

However, it is worth noting that *nhỉ* is neither an exclamation marker nor a question marker. This is supported by the fact that exclamatory and interrogative sentences still reserve their syntactic function without *nhỉ*. As in (6) and (7), *nhỉ* is omitted, but the sentences seem to retain their syntactic functions, which are similar to those in sentences (4) and (5).

(6) *Hôm nay trời đẹp!*

Today weather beautiful!

"The weather is beautiful today!"

(7) *Ai đi đấy?*

Who walk that

"Who is that walking there?"

The above analysis allows us to suggest that Vietnamese interrogative sentences need the particle *nhỉ* when, in the context, there is a listener, an addressee. The presence of the addressee might affect the communicative goals of the speaker, e.g., politeness, respectfulness, and friendliness. These goals make the speaker try to add the particle *nhỉ* at the end of the sentence to satisfy their communicative purposes, as shown in examples (8) and (9), which were extracted from the text of a well-known Vietnamese story, *Vợ Nhặt* (Picked Wife) (Kim Lan, 1962, p.2).

(8) *Người khác khẽ thì thầm hỏi: Ai đấy nhỉ? Hay là người dưới quê bà cụ Tứ mới lên?*

Person another gently ask: Who that NHỈ? Or is someone from village lady Tứ just arrive?

"Another neighbor asked gently: Who is that? Is she someone who has just arrived from Mrs. Tứ's village?"

(9) *Chả phải, từ ngày còn mồ mã ông cụ Tứ có thấy họ mạc nào lên thăm đâu. Quái nhỉ?*

Not correct, from day still grave Mr. Tứ no see relative who visit NEG². Weird *nhỉ*?

"No, it is not correct, because there has been no relative from the village coming to visit them since Mr. Tứ's grave existed. Weird!"

Although there is no definite listener in (8), it is not difficult to interpret that there was a person among those standing in the crowd who was asked and gave the answer in (9). According to Việt (2008), the appearance of *nhỉ* is considered needed, particularly in short interrogative sentences, to decrease the feeling of being rude. Việt's analysis could account for the distinction between (8) and the question that immediately follows, "Or

² NEG stands for *Negation*

she is someone who has just arrived from Mrs. Tú's village?" As can be seen, *nhỉ* is not used in the long question. If the interpretation of sentences (8) and (9) is correct, there arises the question of whether a speaker would need to make the extra effort of adding *nhỉ* when there is no listener? If so, then what are the pragmatic functions of this particle in such a case? Let us examine the following sentences in the text of *Picked Wife* (Kim Lan, 1962, p.4), as exemplified in sentences (10) and (11).

(10) *Thị vẫn ngồi móm ở mép giường, hai tay ôm khư khư cái thúng, mặt bần thần.*

She still sit partially at edge bed, two hands hold tightly CL basket, face haggard.

"She kept sitting partially at the edge of the bed. Her face haggard, her hands held the basket tightly."

(11) *Hắn nghĩ bụng: "Quái sao nó lại buồn thế nhỉ?... Ồ sao nó lại buồn thế nhỉ?"*

He thinks belly: "Weird why she so sad that *nhỉ*? ... Oh why she so sad that *nhỉ*?"

He wondered: "Weird! Why is she so sad like that? ... Oh why is she sad like that?"

The example in (11) tells us two noticeable facts: (1) the particle *nhỉ* can appear in a long interrogative sentence, and (2), there is a case where no external listener exists in the context but the speaker (the man in the story) can still continuously use *nhỉ* at the end of a question, i.e., the speaker is asking themselves. Therefore, it seems to be insufficient to rely on the previous literature regarding the Vietnamese language to account for the pragmatic use of the Vietnamese sentence-final particle *nhỉ*, particularly in interrogative sentences. The following section attempts to explain the occurrence of this particle from the point of view of relevance theory by testing the hypothesis that "[n]ew information is relevant to an individual if it is based on a stronger source than a related existing assumption and yields a cognitive effect" (Noh, 2003, p. 2).

***Nhỉ* as a marker of relevant information**

From the above understanding of relevance theory and our observations, we propose that *nhỉ* is a marker of relevant information. Let us examine several text samples. First, though, we introduce the general contextual background (our translation): *The historical background of the story was that there was a terrible famine in Viet Nam in the 1945s. In a small village, there was a young man named Tràng, who, on his way home, met a group of women while pulling his ox cart. Though everyone seemed to be starved, they were still joking with each other. The man shouted, "For those who want to have rice to eat, just come and give me a hand." One woman was trusting and came to help him. They went back to the man's house together, and they were considered to be husband and wife from that day. The man was so happy because of this sudden event.*

The translation of the example in (11) is: "He wondered: Weird! Why is she so sad like that? ... oh why is she sad like that?". This sentence can be paraphrased as the man didn't expect that the woman to be sad like that and that the woman was so sad surprised him. In the given context, that day was assumed to be a very happy day for both the man and the woman because suddenly he had a wife and the woman had a place to live and a person to rely on amidst a time of famine. However, the unhappy expression on the

woman's face made the man confused and surprised. The continuous appearance of *nhĩ* in the man's utterances can account for what was happening in the man's mind: the newly perceived information **(A)**, i.e., *that the woman is so sad* contradicts the related existing assumption of the man **(B)**, i.e., *she should be happy indeed*. Thus, the new information is relevant to the man according to the relevance theory.

Suppose the woman had behaved in a happy manner that fitted what the man was expecting. In that case, it would sound odd for the man to utter, "*Why is she so happy like that nhĩ*". In our view, this question would be inappropriate even if *nhĩ* was not used, although it is the question, not the appearance of *nhĩ*, that sounds strange in this context. This might indicate that *nhĩ* is preferred when used together with sentences that are cases of **(A)** contradicting **(B)**, rather than **(A)** strengthening **(B)**. However, it is not possible to draw a conclusion from just one sample. We will now examine another sample from the text (Kim Lan, 1962, p.5).

(When the man said that to whom helped him, he would give rice, the women thought that he was joking. The woman asked him whether he was telling the truth. The man turned back and confirmed that he was.)

(12) (a) *Thật đấy, có đấy thì ra mau lên!*

True that, want push then come hurry

"It's true. If you want to push with me, then come out in hurry!"

(b) *Đã thật thì đẩy chứ sợ gì đằng ấy nhĩ!*

PAST³ true then push not afraid what there *nhĩ*!

"If so, I will push [the cart] with you. You are nothing to be scared of."

Since in Vietnamese, *đằng ấy* (*there*) is equivalent to the second personal pronoun *bạn/anh* (*you*) in the context of men and women talking to each other from a long distance, (12b) can also be translated into English as, "*If you are telling the truth, then I will push without being afraid you!*" Similar to (11), the particle *nhĩ* appears in (12b) within the context that the prior assumption of the woman **(B)**, i.e., *the man was telling a lie* contradicts her newly perceived information **(A)**, i.e., *he's telling the truth*. According to relevance theory, this type of interaction between **(A)** and **(B)** yields a cognitive effect on the speaker.

An interesting phenomenon in (12b) is that *nhĩ* follows the second personal pronoun *you*. This may be explained in the way that the new information in (12b) is relevant to not only the speaker but also the addressee. The man was surprised because he had not thought that the woman would trust him and come out to help him, and the woman coming out to help him contradicted his assumption. In our view, this is the reason for *nhĩ* appearing immediately after *you/the man*. The example from sentence (13) makes the above explanation clearer.

³ PAST: Stands for past-tense marker

The man's mother comes home from the market, and her son greets her with a happy smile. She asked him what is happening. He says, "just come in the house, and you will know." When his mother arrives at the center of the yard in front of the house, she is extremely surprised to see a strange woman in her house. She asks herself:

(13) *Quái sao lại có người đàn bà nào ở trong đây nhỉ?*

Weird why there CL woman who is inside there?

"Weird! Why is there a woman in the house?"

In this utterance, the appearance of a young woman in the house contradicts what the man's mother expected to see. The new information is, therefore, relevant to the mother. This interpretation is supported by the way the man replies to his mother, as exemplified in (14):

(14) *Thì u hãy cứ vào trong nhà đã nào.*

Then mother just come in house PAST now.

"Just come inside the house now, and mother will know."

There is another assumption that might exist in the mother's mind, "*My son already knew that there is a woman in the house.*" This could explain why the mother did not use an utterance such as "*Weird! Why is there a woman in the house, son?*" It could be simply because her newly perceived information is not considered to be relevant to her son. In our view, this sentence might have been used if the son had also been surprised by there being a woman in the house. If so, similar to (12b), sentences like (14) might suggest that the newly perceived information is relevant to both the speaker and the listener.

In the text, there were two other interrogative sentences, (15a) and (15b), which appeared immediately after the sentence in (13):

(15a) *Người đàn bà nào lại đứng ngay đầu giường thằng con mình thế kia?*

CL woman who stand right front bed CL son like that?

"Who is the woman that is standing in front of my son's bed like that?"

(15b) *Sao lại chào mình bằng u?*

Why greet me by mother?

"Why does she greet me by calling me mother?"

The question that arises here is, '*Why is *nhỉ* not used in (15a) and (15b)?*'. Although these questions would also be well formed with the appearance of *nhỉ* at the end of each question, they would sound unnatural due to the possibility that the follow-up information in (15a) and (15b) are not relevant to the mother. From sentence (16), it might be inferred that what is most relevant to the mother is the identity of the strange woman.

(16) *Ai thế nhỉ?*

*Who that *nhỉ*?*

"Who is that?"

In the text, four sentences (13), (15a), (15b), and (16) appear in order. The interpretation of (13) and (16) is that the mother wanted to know who the woman in the house was. Thus, it can be inferred from the above analysis that when the speaker considers new information as not especially relevant, *nhĩ* will not be used.

From our analysis, it can be concluded that, to a certain extent, the Vietnamese particle *nhĩ* can be used as a marker of relevant information by the relevance theory and Noh's analysis of the Korean suffix *ney* (2003). In particular, the use of *nhĩ* is preferred when the speaker perceives new information that turns out to be contrary to his/her prior assumption and yields a cognitive effect. Moreover, when the speaker considers the newly perceived information to be relevant to the listener, *nhĩ* can appear together with the second personal pronoun (addressing the listener).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We have reviewed the previous analyses of the Vietnamese sentence-final particle *nhĩ* and have examined the pragmatic use of this particle both within the framework of relevance theory and based on Noh's analysis of the Korean suffix *ney*. This study has revealed features of *nhĩ* that are different than those found in previous studies. More precisely, most Vietnamese linguists propose that one of the crucial functions of this sentence-final particle is to convey a speaker's attitude toward a listener. However, analysis of the data shows that there are cases in which *nhĩ* is used in a spoken context without a listener being present. This finding indicates that *nhĩ* might have further pragmatic functions. In particular, by having analyzed the sample sentences within the framework of relevance theory, *nhĩ* has been found in expressed propositions as a marker of relevant information to the speaker. Moreover, the findings in our paper are also different from previous analyses in that regardless of sentence type (e.g., interrogative or exclamatory sentences), *nhĩ* consistently appears to be a marker of relevant information.

As stated above, the researchers were inspired by Noh's analysis of the Korean particle '*ney*', and the analysis in this paper shows a similar result: *nhĩ* is also used to convey information that goes against the speaker's expectation, and, additionally, signals information that is relevant to the speaker. An interesting finding in this paper is the co-occurrence of *nhĩ* and the second personal pronoun, e.g., *you*. When the information is considered to be relevant to both the speaker and the addressee, the speaker tends to put the addressee before this particle. Concerning the relation to the effect of being polite to the addressee (as stated in the literature), there is one sample sentence in the text that might yield a noticeable finding relating to the addition of the second personal pronoun, as illustrated in (17):

(Hearing the sound of the drum coming from the communal house in the village, the woman asked the man's mother)

(17) *Trống gì đấy, u nhĩ?*

Drum what that, mother nhĩ?

"What type of drum is it, mother?"

Firstly, this sentence is similar to (12b) in that the second personal pronoun is used together with *nhi*. However, they are different in the social status of the addressee mentioned by the pronoun. In particular, *đấng ấy* (*you*) in (12b) stands for the man, who does not hold a higher social position than the speaker (the woman). In (17), *u* (*the mother*) is in a higher social position than the speaker (the woman). Secondly, the act of using the expressed proposition in (17) appears to be an asking action rather than behavior indicating surprise. Thus, in (17), the effect of being polite to the addressee is more obvious in the sense that the woman wants to be polite when asking the mother a question.

In our view, there might be a pragmatic restriction for using both the second personal pronoun and *nhi* at the same time. More precisely, when the speaker thinks the expressed proposition is relevant to the listener, the speaker will call for the listener's attention by adding a pronoun before the particle that signals the relevant information. However, the effect of being polite to the addressee would be more obvious when the pronoun refers to a person holding a higher social status. While further investigations into the above possibility are needed, it can now be concluded that, based on relevance theory, to a certain extent, *nhi* is a marker of relevant information.

REFERENCES

- Blass, R. (2000). Particles, propositional attitude and mutual manifestness. *Pragmatics and beyond new series*, 39-52.
- Bui, T. T. M. (2010). *Exclamations in English and Vietnamese—A Contrastive Analysis*. ULIS
- Đỗ, Q. V. (2008). So sánh đối chiếu câu hỏi về mặt hình thức trong tiếng Pháp và tiếng Việt [Comparing and contrasting interrogative forms in French and Vietnamese]. *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies*, 24(2), 92-104.
- Kim Lan (1962). *Con chó xấu xí - Vợ nhặt [Picked Wife]* NXB Giáo Dục [Vietnamese Education publisher]
- Le, G. H. (2014). *Vietnamese sentence final particles*. University of Southern California.
- Mai, Đ. T. (2012). Some differences in requesting strategies in English-Vietnamese.
- Nguyễn Kim Than, H. H. T., Nguyễn Duc Phuong(Ed.) (2005). *Từ Điển Tiếng Việt [Vietnamese Dictionary]*. Hồ Chí Minh Nhà Xuất bản Văn Hóa Sài Gòn [Sai Gon Cultural Publisher House]
- Noh, E. J. (2003). A Pragmatic Account of the Korean Sentence-Final Particle *ney*. *담화와 인지*, 10(2), 53-74.
- Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1986). *Relevance: Cognition and communication*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.
- Wearing, C. J. (2015). Relevance theory: pragmatics and cognition. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science*, 6(2), 87-95