The Vietnamese Passive Construction 'Bị' from the Perspective of Cognitive Construction Grammar

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Abstract: In modern Vietnamese, the frequency of occurrence of 'bị' is quite high in the events with passive meaning. Vietnamese linguistic have had many researches on the categories and grammatical functions of 'bị', but up to now, there is still no consensus on these issues. 'Bị' is ultimately notional verb (the verb has the full lexical meaning) or plays as a modal verb (the modal verb denote state in a sentence, including desire, allowed or required) or auxiliary verbs (denote the passive meaning)? Through the application of Conceptual Integration Theory and Compression Theory (including Energy Transfer Theory) of Cognitive Construction Grammar to the analysis of the 'bị' constructions 'bị + VP', 'bị + NP' and 'bị + AdjP', this paper explains how the underlying forces make these constructions possible or impossible to indicate the passive meaning, while refuting the idea that in the 'bị + NP' construction, 'bị' is always the notional verb that means 'to suffer (from)'. In addition, the analysis also shows that, in certain cases, the 'bị + AdjP' construction can still denote the passive meaning, thereby, disproving the idea that in the 'bị + AdjP' construction, 'bị' plays as a modal verb.

1. Introduction

The usage of 'bị' in Vietnamese is derived from the Chinese passive marker bei [1-2]. The word bei is deeply rooted in Vietnamese and has long been widely used as a Sino-Vietnamese word. It is defined in the "Chinese-Vietnamese Dictionary" (2013, p. 69), compiled by the Institute of Linguistics affiliated to the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, as follows (this paper only quotes the parts relevant to the research object, and omits the rest) [3].

bei₂ Bị 1) bị/ mắc/ phải/ gặp phải (i.e., equivalent to 'to suffer (from)')

bei₃ Bị 1) bị/ được (dùng trong câu bị động) (i.e., used in the passive sentences)

bei₃ Bị 2) (đặt trước động từ tạo thành cụm bị động) bị (i.e., used in front of a verb to form a passive phrase)

Although 'bị' is derived from *bei*, 'bị' and the 'bị' construction formed by it, and *bei* and its *bei* construction, present a semantically similar and differences under the control of the development laws of Vietnamese and Chinese. There are also many researches discussing the grammatical function of 'bị', and these ones have also not reached a consistent point of view. One of the notable studies on the grammatical function of 'bị' is the research on 'passive sentences' conducted by the Vietnamese linguist Diệp Quang Ban. Concerning the passive construction involving 'bị' and its lexical

categorization, this paper draws upon Diệp Quang Ban's (2004) work, as presented in his book Vietnamese Grammar – The Sentence, and organizes his viewpoints into two tables (see Tables 1 and 2 below)[4]. The specific perspectives are outlined as follows.

Table 1: Typical syntactic structure of the Vietnamese passive sentence with 'bị'.

Subject$_1$ (Patient)	The auxiliary verb that indicates passive meaning 'bị'	Subject$_2$ (Agent)	Predicate$_2$	Complement
	The operator that forms the passive sentence	Predicate$_1$		

Table 2: Summary of the lexical category, syntactic function and syntactic representation of 'bị'.

Lexical category	Syntactic function and syntactic representation	Example			
Notional verb	As the predicate (Type A)	Con thỏ	bị	đạn.	
	Conditions: the complement that follows it is filled by a noun or noun phrase.	rabbit	BI	bullet	
		'The rabbit is hit by a bullet.'			
	As the predicate (Type B)	Em này	bị	bố mẹ	mất sớm.
	Conditions: formally possessing the components of the passive sentence shown in table 1, and must meet the followings. 1) Subject 1 is semantically unrelated to what is described by the Predicate 2. 2) Subject 1 is not the same as Subject 2.	the kid	BI	parents	die early
		'The kid's parents died when he was young.'			
Modal verb	As a modal verb (i.e., the operator that denote the state in a sentence, including desire, allowance or force), and is not the component of the predicate. Conditions:	Bạn ấy	bị	học lại	một năm.
	1) The predicate is filled by a verb, adjective or linking verb. 2) The subject of the predicate is the same as the subject of the whole sentence.	he	BI	learn	one year
		'He learns one more year.'			
Auxiliary verb	As an operator of the passive construction, and is not the component of the predicate. Conditions: formally possessing the components of the passive sentence shown in table 1, and meet the following conditions.	Xe	bị	(kẻ xấu)	ném đá.
	1) Subject 2 is optional. 2) Subject 1 is semantically related to what is described by Predicate 2. 3) Subject 1 is not the same as Subject 2.	car	BI	(bad people)	stone
		'The car is stoned by bad people.'			

It can be said that Diep Quang Ban has analyzed quite in the lexical category and syntactic functions of 'bị'. However, regarding Diệp Quang Ban's view that bị functions as a lexical verb meaning 'to suffer from' when taking nominal complements, this study holds reservations. The reason is that, through the application of Conceptual Integration Theory and Compression Theory (including Energy Transfer Theory) of Cognitive Construction Grammar to the analysis, the 'bị + NP' construction is considered to be the construction representing the passive meaning. Similar to the 'bị + NP' construction, when verbs such as 'to die' and 'to fall' are used in the 'bị + VP' construction, it has been argued that 'bị' functions as an auxiliary verb expressing passive meaning, and the entire 'bị + VP' construction conveys a passive sense [5–6]. The specific analysis is as follows.

2. Analysis of the 'bị + VP' construction

According to Diệp Quang Ban's analysis, bị should be classified as a modal verb rather than a

passive auxiliary. This is evidenced by the predicate head being occupied by the lexical verb chết 'to die', with its subject coreferential to the clausal subject Pang Tong.

Bàng Thống	đã	bị	chết	trong	chiến dịch đó.
Pang Tong	already	BI	die	in	that battle

Pang Tong died in that battle.

However, from the perspective of Cognitive Grammar, we should argue that 'bị' can be treated as an auxiliary verb that expresses a passive meaning and form a passive construction 'bị + VP'. There are two reasons for this, which can be analyzed from the following two aspects.

a) In Vietnamese, the verbs such as 'chết' (to die), 'trôi' (to float), 'ngã, đổ' (to fall) and so forth, are almost simultaneously used in two ways, either with 'bị' or alone, a pattern that is also observed in Chinese [7–8]. At first glance, it seems that there is no difference between these two expressions, but in fact there is not. When these verbs are used together with 'bị', i.e., when they enter the 'bị' construction 'bị + VP', in addition to indicating the state described by the verb itself, the construction also implies that the patient subject is in a state of 'involuntary willingness', and that is caught in the state described by the verb under the action of one or some factor. Example (1) can be interpreted as: in that battle, Pang Tong was attacked by the enemy and fell into a state of death. According to the Conceptual Integration theory, the integrated network representation of Example (1) is shown as follows (Figure 1).
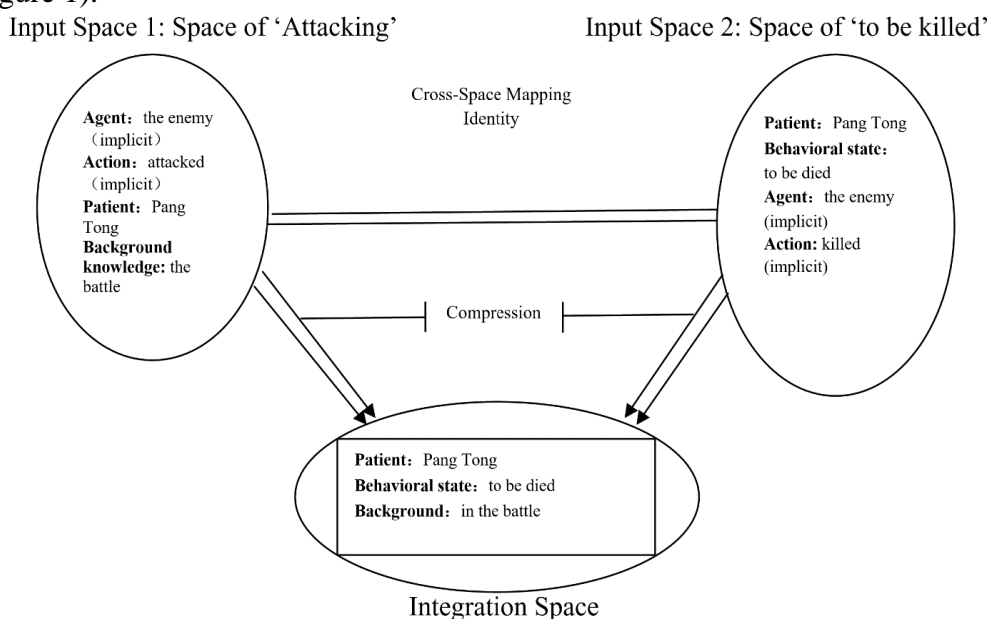

Figure 1: The integrated network representation that is activated by Example (1).

In Figure 1, the cause event (semantically equivalent to kẻ địch công kích 'hostile assault') remains latent in Input Space 1 but recoverable through contextual framing (chiến dịch đó 'military engagement'). This aligns with documented historical accounts of Pang Tong's combat fatality at Luo County (cf. Sanguozhi, Vol. 37: Biographies of Pang Tong and Fa Zheng).The result event, encoded as bị giết chết 'lethal termination', surfaces in Input Space 2 with concomitant agentive obscuration. Participant alignment across spaces is achieved via compressed isomorphic mapping, yielding conceptual integration through: Patient entity projection; Resultant state incorporation. The blended space thus emerges through selective fusion of: Causal event structure (Input Space 1); Constructional template (Input Space 2).

b) According to Zhang's (2012) Cognitive Grammar analysis, the bei passive construction exhibits differential argument prominence: while the patient achieves full syntactic realization, agent representation remains attenuated or implicit [9]. This argument demotion concomitantly reduces

agentive autonomy under the patient's trajectory prominence. The constructional semantics foregrounds the patient's end-state transformation resulting from energy transfer via agent-initiated action. Crucially, energetic transmission constitutes the defining feature licensing bei construction formation.

Same as the *bei* construction, in the Vietnamese passive construction 'bị', the energy transfer still exists, the patient and its changes being prominent as the energy receiver, while the agent being weak as the energy transmitter[10]. Accordingly, Example (1) can be interpreted as follows: In that battle, Pang Tong could not let himself die. He was an energy receiver, and by receiving the energy transmitted by the implicit energy transmitter (i.e., the enemy), his life has changed, i.e., he has fallen into a state of death.

In summary, Example (1) is able to satisfy the formation conditions of the construction, indicating the passive meaning in Table 2:

1) Subject 2 is optional: the implicit subject here is most likely the enemy.

2) Subject 1 is semantically related to what is described by the statement in Predicate 2: the one who died is 'Pang Tong', and the 'death' was the state or result caused by the implicit 'enemy'. One of the sub-domains of the cognitive domain of the 'enemy' is its dynamic feature, and one of the dynamic feature of the 'enemy' is 'killing', which are accompanied by the implicit agent 'enemy' enter the construction. Then, it is activated to have a dominant effect on the Subject 1 'Pang Tong', which finally leads the Subject 1 'Pang Tong' to the state of 'death' described by the Predicate 2.

3) Subject 1 is not the same as Subject 2: 'Pang Tong' and the implicit 'enemy' are completely different.

In addition, in Vietnamese, Example (1) can be reduced to the corresponding active construction, as shown in Example (1').

Example (1'):
Kẻ địch   đã   giết chết   Bàng Thống   trong   chiến dịch đó.
Enemy   already   killed   Pang Tong   in   that battle
The enemy killed Pang Tong in that battle.

Therefore, in Example (1), 'bị' is an auxiliary verb that expresses passive meaning, and the 'bị + VP' construction can be treated as a construction that expresses the passive meaning. Notably, Vietnamese permits verbs encoding spontaneous change—such as trôi 'to float', ngã/đổ 'to fall', and chết 'to die'—to occur in the bị-construction, whereas their Chinese semantic counterparts resist licensing in the bei-passive. Using bei float, bei fall, and bei die as search strings, comprehensive queries employing exact-match and fuzzy-match protocols were conducted via the Chinese National Corpus (CLC) administered by the State Language Commission of China. No validated instances of these constructions were retrieved within the corpus scope relevant to this study.From the perspective of Cognitive Grammar, the reason for the above-mentioned differences is that the interpretation of the construction is based on the general cognitive ability and basic experience of human beings, and there are many differences in the cognitive ability and experience of the two nations. Even in the same situation, when we observe things, we may choose different domains and perspectives, highlight different aspects, and have different levels of detail in our narratives, all of which will lead to differences in syntactic representation. (Nan Shifeng, 2009, p. 106) When the Vietnamese said that 'Bàng Thống đã bị chết trong chiến dịch đó.' (Pang Tong was killed in that battle.), they conceptually focus on the event that the subject was killed, while the Chinese conceptually focus on the fact that the subject died.

3. Analysis of the 'bị + NP' construction

According to Diep Quang Ban, when 'bị' is followed by a noun or a noun phrase, it is a notional

verb that is 'to suffer (from), to encounter', and the 'bị + NP' construction is not a construction with passive meaning. In this paper, we analyze and re-conceptualize the issue from the perspective of Cognitive Grammar based on the example of type A in Table 2. As shown in Example (2).

Example (2):

Con thỏ   bị   đạn.
rabbit   BI   bullet
'The rabbit is hit by a bullet.'

In her article "The Analysis of *bei* Constructions under the view of Cognitive Grammar and Construction Grammar", Zhang Yuan points out that from the perspective of Cognitive Grammar, the '*bei* + NP' construction can be formed because it is permitted by two factors: the first is the suppression of the 'bei' construction; the second is the actuation of grammatical metonymy that allows the transformation of nouns into verbs. (Zhang Yuan, 2012, p. 53-54) Accordingly, (2) can be interpreted as follows: when 'đạn' (bullet) enters the 'bị + NP' construction and is used in the description of the event, the dynamic feature of 'đạn' (bullet) (i.e., to shoot, to fire) is activated under the suppression of the 'bị' construction, and it gets the function of a verb, and then functions as 'to shoot, to fire'. The dynamic feature of 'đạn' (bullet) is the subdomain of the cognitive domain of 'đạn', and the transfer of 'energy' is the subdomain of the cognitive domain of 'energy'. The conceptualization of Example (2) is shown as follows (Figure 2). These two subdomains overlap, so that the metaphorical chain is realized, and the linguistic representation of the overlapping domain is 'to shoot, to fire'. The conceptualization of this 'bị + NP' construction is shown in the following.
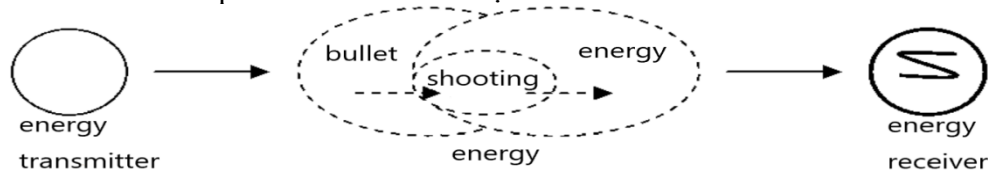

Figure 2: The conceptualization of Example (2).

Instead of treating 'bị' as a notional verb and arguing that the 'bị + NP' construction has not passive meaning, this paper prefers to treat the 'bị + NP' construction as a passive expression. However, a diachronic consideration emerges: the 'bei + NP' syntactic pattern has existed in Chinese since antiquity, as evidenced in classical texts such as Wang Chong's Discourses Weighed (Eastern Han Dynasty): 'Human lifespans vary; epochs witness prosperity and decline. In decline come sickness and mortality—manifestations of calamity endurance.' Here both bei and meng function as conjoined verbs meaning 'to suffer from', demonstrating the construction's historical semantic consistency.

Then, under what contexts does the bei in the 'bei + NP' construction exist as a notional verb meaning 'to suffer (from)'? Under what contexts does it acquire the function of expressing passive meaning? Similarly, the same issue exists in Vietnamese. 'Nạn lụt' (flood) enters the 'bị + NP' construction, 'bị' means 'to suffer (from)', as shown in Example (3).

Example (3) :

Khi   dân   bị   nạn lụt, người làm vua   phải   cứu giúp tai ương.
When   the people   BI   flood,   the Emperor   must   relief   disaster
'When the people suffered from the flood, the Emperor must rescue them from the disaster.'

According to Liu Zhenqian (2011), from the perspective of Cognitive Grammar, bounded domain of conceptual representation of the noun has both static and dynamic features. The former refers to the features of the domain itself, such as size, shape and so forth, while the latter refers to the features of the events embodied in the domain when it interacts with the world or humans. Accordingly, the static features of 'đạn' (bullet) in Example (2) can be interpreted as: pointed arch, round head, man-made objects, equipment , and so forth. It can be said that in addition to its 'inward factors' (i.e., shape, manufacturing materials and so forth), there are also 'outward factors' (i.e., to be used by

humans, usage, purpose of use and so forth). In Example (3), the static features of 'nạn lụt' (flood) include 'inward factors' such as natural disaster, negative effect , and so forth, but not 'outward factors'.

Vietnamese 'bị + AdjP/NP'constructions trigger cognitive recategorization: Qualitative adjectives (e.g., đẹp 'beautiful') shift to nouns 'beauty' under bị's influence, implying an evaluator's judgment that heightens pragmatic salience. For dynamic nouns like đạn (bullet), bị activates verb semantics 'shoot' while static features imply an external causer (user), forming passive meaning through metonymy – consistent with Zhang Yuan's (2012) observation of bei+NP requiring external causation in Chinese. Conversely, autonomous-event nouns like nạn lụt (flood) inherently self-activate dynamics (flood/submerge). Their entry into bị+NP creates dual conflicts: (a) bị's forced 'secondary activation'contradicts their natural autonomy, and (b) bị cannot simultaneously function as a light verb 'suffer' and passive auxiliary without logical contradiction, unlike Chinese which blocks such adjective incorporation entirely.

a) The nouns can result in the event's occurrence by themselves, and their dynamic features are self-activating (e.g., the dynamic features of 'flood' are 'to flood', 'to submerge' and so forth). When they enter the 'bị + NP' construction, the active ones are 'secondarily activated', which creates a conflict.

b) In the 'bị + NP' construction, the 'outward factors' are also involved in the activation process, but such nouns do not have the 'outward factors', which creates a contradiction.

To sum up, in Vietnamese, when nouns such as 'nạn lụt' (flood) and 'bão' (typhoon) are used together with 'bị', 'bị' is a notional verb that means 'to suffer (from)', and the 'bị + NP' construction is semantically expressed as 'experiencing an event'. The rest of the nouns enter the 'bị + NP' construction, 'bị' is used as a passive auxiliary verb, and the 'bị + NP' construction is a construction with passive meaning.

It should be noted here that, similar to Chinese, not all nouns other than 'nạn lụt' (flood), 'bão' (typhoon) can enter the 'bị + NP' construction, the 'productive power' of this construction is still limited.

4. The analysis of the 'bị + AdjP' construction

Like the '*bei* + AdjP' construction, the Vietnamese 'bị + AdjP' construction can also express the passive meaning. Based on Zhang Yuan's view, there is an analysis of the rationale for this kind of construction, which is shown in Example (4).

Example (4):

Có từng	bị	đau khổ	thì mới	hiểu được	hạnh phúc	là	gì
Used to	BI	pain	so just	understand	happiness	to be	what

'Only once in pain do you know what happiness is.'

It is well known that the semantic representation of an adjective is a feature of something, and some of which can be reduced to a dynamic process if viewed from another perspective. 'Đau khổ' (pain) in Example (4) is actually a feeling of 'pain' caused by some external factors, i.e., the result of interaction with the external world. When the metonymic mechanism 'result→action' occurs, 'đau khổ' (pain) can be transferred to the action that creates the pain, and at the same time, the word class is changed, and the adjective is transformed into a verb.

It is worth mentioning that in spoken Vietnamese, adjectives such as 'đẹp' (beautiful), 'mắc, đắt' (expensive), and 'xa' (far) can all be used in the 'bị + Adj' construction. It is shown in Example (5).

Example (5):

Cái này	bị	đẹp	đấy.
The thing	BI	beautiful	modular particle-oh

'This thing so beautiful.'

The comprehensive network representation of Example (5) is shown as follows (Figure 3).

Vietnamese "bị + AdjP" (e.g., bị đẹp) cognitively transforms qualitative adjectives: 'đẹp' (beautiful) shifts from description to reference 'beauty', inducing lexical recategorization (Adj → N). An implicit evaluator 'consider' is presupposed, creating a construction where the subject (cái này) is judged to possess a trait. This contrasts with neutral descriptive '(Adv.) + AdjP', making features more salient pragmatically through perceived 'mismatch', yielding vividness. Chinese lacks parallel 'bei + AdjP', precluding this emphasis strategy.
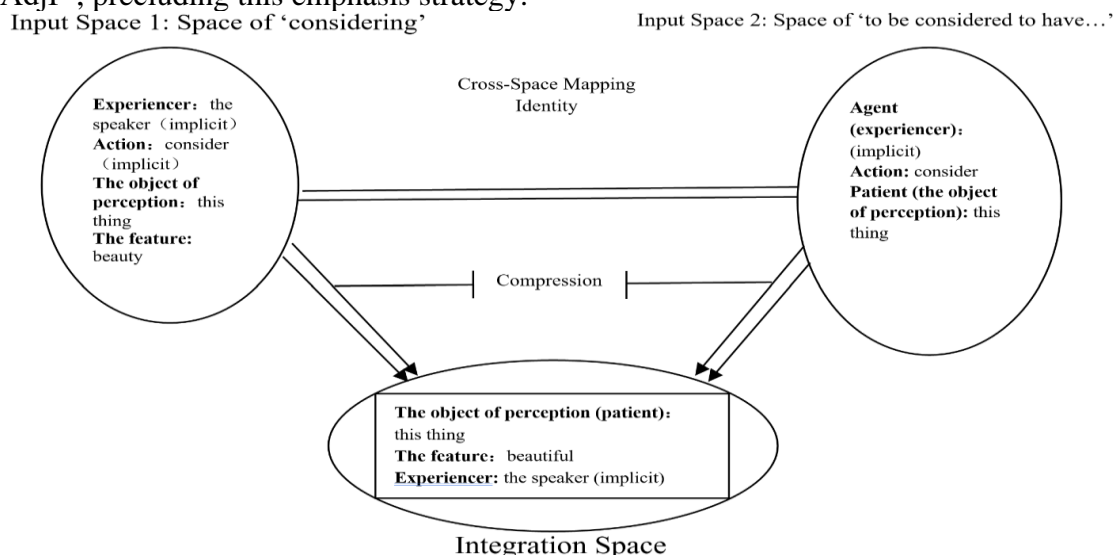

Figure 3: The integrated network representation that is activated by Example (5).

5. Conclusion

Several kinds of the 'bị' construction in Vietnamese have been discussed and analyzed from the perspective of Cognitive Grammar. It can be seen that there are several constructions that cannot be explained as passive constructions, but a reasonable explanation for their creation can be found from a different perspective. This is also in line with the viewpoint of cognitive grammarians that any language phenomenon should have its own cognitive argument. In addition, although the word 'bị' is derived from the Chinese word *bei*, due to the evolution of the Vietnamese language, there are similarities and differences between the 'bị' construction and the *bei* construction in terms of semantic and syntactic functions.

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