

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Prototype Theory and Its Applications to Studying Existential Sentence Types in Vietnamese Language

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Abstract:

In the field of cognitive semantics, prototype theory started in mid-1970s together with studies by Eleanor Rosch, a psycholinguist, on the internal structure of categories. The advent of these studies marked a new era of doing research on lexical semantics and led to reviewing the classical approach of classification from the Aristotelian period on. The application of the prototype approach to determining various levels of categorization, in which the basic level is the center from which other cognitive activities are analyzed, has achieved certain success. In recent years, prototype theory is considered a new direction in conducting research on linguistics in general and the Vietnamese language in particular at the time when traditional viewpoints have not been able to satisfactorily explain various linguistic issues whose analyses are not agreed upon. The effectiveness of prototype theory is shown by the fact that those members that are more prototypical within a category are recognized and understood faster, more frequently used, and that in turn helps to accelerate the speed of solving any tasks which are related to the task of identifying, and especially those of explaining the 'fuzziness' phenomenon. This paper mainly focuses on introducing the basic and important content of prototype theory. Then, the paper proposes certain applications of the theory to conducting research on the Vietnamese phonology, lexicon, grammar with an emphasis on studying in depth Vietnamese existential sentences.

Keywords: Prototype theory, category, grammar, existential sentences, Vietnamese language

1. Introduction

Categorization is a cognitive ability, within which humans realize, distinguish and divide everything following certain procedures while interacting with the surrounding environment. Without categorization our thinking is just a collection of individual, chaotic, irregular, unrelated elements. The cognitive process first begins with the categorization; subsequently moves to categories; forms various concepts, and organizes the main category-based conceptual system. Believing categorization is the heart of languages, many linguists strongly believe that it is the very central issue of linguistic theories¹. Questions such as 'Do categories have their root in the real world or do they purely the result of imagination in the mind of humans?', 'What is their internal structure?', 'How are categories conceptualized?', 'What is the existential relationship among categories?' (Taylor 1995). are of major concerns of linguists. Until now, under the influence of new developments in the field of cognitive science, there are two new approaches to categories and categorization which are (a) the classical approach, and (b) the cognitive approach which explains the categorizing process based on a prototype (including identifying typical members or affirming the effect of prototypes when they are viewed as the earliest or the 'original' members).

The issue of prototype categorization and its origin has attracted great attention of many cognitive researchers. Following the same trend, attempting to understand and apply prototype theory to practical aspects of the Vietnamese language is a new way of research that promises possible results.

One of the applications of this theory to practical aspects of the Vietnamese language is to undertake research into the the sentence system and the structure of Vietnamese sentences such as subject, verbs, types of sentences. Currently, to affirm whether or not existential sentences exist in Vietnamese is an essential issue in linguistics. Analyzing existential sentences from the perspective of prototype theory will help discover key features of Vietnamese existential sentences; identify the prototypical members and non-prototypical members in the category of existential sentences in Vietnamese; and recognize this type of sentence more easily.

¹1. The point has been made by Labov, W. (1973: 342): "If linguistics can be said to be any one thing it is the study of categories: that is, the study of how language translates meaning into sound through the categorization of reality into discrete units and sets of units" and "categorization is such a fundamental and obvious part of linguistics activity that the properties of categories are normally assumed rather than studied".

2. See more: Ellis, J.M. (1993). *Language, Thought, and Logic*. Northwestern: University Press.

2. The Prototype Theory – History and Achievements

2.1. From the Aristotelian² Theory to Those before Rosch

2.1.1. The Classical Approach to Categorization

In speaking of the classical approach to categories, the term “classical” is used in two senses. “The approach is classical in that it goes back ultimately to Greek antiquity; it is classical also in that it has dominated psychology, philosophy, and linguistics throughout much of the twentieth century” (Wittgenstein 1978:22). The traditional classification model has existed since ancient Greece when Aristotle assumed that everything in the world was determined by the essential characteristics.

Aristotle believed that everything in this world is affirmed by key features. He distinguished between the essence of a thing and its accidents. The essence is that which makes a thing what it is: essence is “all parts immanent in things which define and indicate their individually, and whose destruction causes the destruction of the whole” (Metaphysics 5.8.3). The basic assumption of the classical approach, then, is as follows:

Categories are considered vehicles that carry entities which share certain common features called ‘necessary and sufficient’. The existence of each feature is necessary, but it requires the existence of a collection of certain features to sufficiently affirm a category. The law of contradiction states that a thing cannot both be and not be, it cannot both possess a feature and not possess it, it cannot both belong to a category and not belong to it. Hence: features are binary, categories have clear boundaries, and all members of a category have equal status. There are no degrees of membership in a category, i.e. there are no entities which are better members of the category than others. For example, to qualify for the category of “bird” one must meet the following conditions: having a beak, feathers, and the ability to fly. In semantic theories, these necessary and sufficient conditions take the form of expressions. The division of categories is therefore considered to be semantic and unrelated to the notion.

The traditional approach considers categorization as a linguistic function and believes names of categories are decided by humans.

We can see that the role that the Aristotelian model of categorization has played in mainstream twentieth-century linguistics. The highly sophisticated formalism associated with much post-war work in phonology, syntax, and semantics rests ultimately on assumptions of the Aristotelian model. Famous authors such as Chomsky and Halle (1968), Ladefoged (1975), Lass (1984), Katz and Fodor (1963), Biervcisch (1967), Nida (1975) ... have elaborated the Aristotelian model by making a number of further assumptions, especially concerning the nature of the features which define the categories. However, from Cruse’s monograph (1986), there are various angles from which the classical theory of categorization, and its elaborations, may be queried³.

2.1.2. Some Approaches before Rosch

Many of the above inadequacies of the classical theory of categorization were anticipated by Ludwig Wittgenstein in a highly significant passage in the Philosophical Investigations. Wittgenstein’s observations on the diversity of languages or ‘language-game’ have questioned the traditional approach of categorization. He set out to search for common key features among all members of the ‘game’ category such as card-games, ball-games or Olympics-games.

He realized that these members of this ‘game’ category did not share the same features: some games were for amusement, others for competition, some others for chances, still others for intellectual challenge. According to Wittgenstein, members of the same category are related in many ways which are similar to those in a family, called ‘family resemblance’. This observation of his has later become a key characteristic of ‘prototypicality’.

And we can go through many, many other groups of games in the same way; we see how similarities crop up and disappear. And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.

I can think of no better expression to characterise these similarities than ‘family resemblances’; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family.

How is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? No. You can draw one; for none has so far been drawn. (But that never troubled you before when you used the word ‘game’.) (Wittgenstein 1978: 31-3)

Besides, many researchers of different fields such as J. L. Austin (1961), Brent Berlin and Paul Kay (1969) also have contributed to the forming and developing a new approach to categorization because they realized that categorization reflects humans’ thinking, cognition and action. This new approach asserts that the affirmation of a category should be based not only on the ‘necessary and sufficient’ conditions but also on the ‘family resemblance’ relationships.

²The term “Aristotelian” is being used here as a cover label for a particular model of categorization.

³Cruse’s approach is especially worthy of attention, since it is possible to detect in this work symptoms of the disintegration of the classical theory. The highly significant modification of the classical theory lies in the fact that for Cruse components of word meanings do not have to have the status of necessary and sufficient conditions.

2.2. Prototype Theory According to Rosch and Her Colleagues

Wittgenstein's insight that the classical theory fails to predict the referential range of at least some words in everyday use received empirical confirmation in a series of experiments reported in Labov⁴ (1973). Perhaps the most extensive and systematic empirical exploration of prototypes, however, has been pursued by the psychologist, Eleanor Rosch. From the 1970s, Eleanor Rosch through her own works and other collaborative works with her colleagues has developed a new theory named prototype theory with its basic-level categories. Rosch was the first person who coined the term 'prototype' and defined it as 'the central member of a category which systematically shows the most prominent or typical characteristics compared with other members within the category'.

According to Rosch, affirming a category only through common features as it was done in the traditional approach will result in the fact that all members of the category will be of equal value and there will not be any better or more fitting members within the category. In addition, Rosch observes that humans' ability and other human-related aspects play a certain role in categorization.

One of the most prominent achievements of Rosch and her colleagues is the empirical approach, which is based on various criteria, for example:

- Direct ranking: placing members on a 'good-bad' scale of 1 to 7
- speed of reaction: how quick or slow the participant reacts to an utterance about the membership of a category
- member listing: selecting typical members of the category
- similarity ranking: placing members in pairs to find how similar they are
- incompatibility: between a typical and a non-typical member
- family-resemblance' feature: finding similarities between typical and non-typical members.

From these criteria, Rosch concludes that the structure of categorization consists of three levels: super ordinate level, basic level, and subordinate level. She observes that a prototype is a relatively abstract entity that contains several common features with the majority of other members within the category and shares some common features or does not share them with members of neighboring categories. Compared with other members of the category, the prototype is the most fitting member, therefore, it acts as the model member or as a focal point of cognition for the entire category. From her empirical findings, Rosch proposes two basic principles which dictate the process of categorization in humans' thinking, that is: (a) the principle of economy cognition, and (b) the principle of the structure of the perceptual world.

Rosch and her colleagues have contributed to the development of a new research approach which can verify the theory of categorization happening in humans' minds in daily life. However, by the end of the 1970s, Rosch herself has abandoned her analyzing approach of empirical evidence as a way to explain the cognitive theory about categories. Then arrived G. Lakoff's theory of model cognition which aimed to overcome the weaknesses in Rosch's approach.

2.3. Lakoff's Theory of Model Cognition

In order to plausibly explain the effective forming of the root proto type, in both physical and abstract sense, Lakoff has developed a theory of cognitive categorization – the theory of model cognition – as shown in *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*. According to Lakoff:

- Certain categories can be classified as members and fuzziness exists between members
- Ranking of categories are gradable
- Different categories can be systemized with opposite elements
- Incompatible elements can exist in the structure of a category depending on how its members are ranked as 'good' or 'bad' (fitting or unfitting) in terms of similarity with the root proto type.
- Categorization is not objective. Certain categories are classified according to the subject's bodily experience with the outside world, the subject's way of thinking and the subject's culture.

From these theoretical grounds, we draw the conclusion that:

- Prototypical theory is the theory of different levels of typicality of members in the category. Based on the level of satisfying these characteristics, the members have different levels of prototypicality. The most exemplary member, the center of the category, is the most representative member of the category that satisfies all the typical characteristics of the category. A prototypical member of a category possesses the highest number of the common properties of the category that it represents and has the lowest number of the properties that exists in other categories.
- Bad examples (or members of the peripheral category) share only one or two attributes with other members of the same category, but they have some attributes that are also found in other categories, that is, the boundary between categories is a fuzzy one.
- The patterns of cognitive categories are not invariable. They can change. The overall internal structure of a category is also variable, depending on the actual context of the specific cognate, cognitive models and culture.

The research on the categorization has gone through a long distance from the ancient Greek until today. We can apply what has been achieved by prototype theory to solving series of issues in various aspects of life, among which essential topics in linguistics such as phonology, semantics and grammar. Within the scope of this paper, the writer aims to

⁴Labov studied the linguistic categorization of household receptacles like cups, mugs, bowls, and vases, whereby subjects are asked to name line drawings of artefacts. Labov's results show that associated with each of the categories cups, bowls, vase, etc., there is a certain optimum value, or range of values, for the width-depth ratio.

explore the existential sentence in Vietnamese from the perspective of prototype theory as a proof of applying effectively this theory in today's linguistic research.

3. Applying Prototype Theory to Studies on Existential Sentences in Vietnamese

3.1. Issues in Question

Using prototype theory to analyze existential sentences in Vietnamese will help identify characteristics of prototypical members, which are the typical representatives of the category of the existential sentence in Vietnamese. It also helps to decide whether or not an entity belongs to the category of the existential sentence, and if it is a member of the category, what level of representation it has. Combining all research findings will help answer the questions "What is the prototype of the Vietnamese existential sentence?", "Where are non-prototypical members placed?". To achieve the set objectives, this article aims to find answers to the following issues:

Establishing a set of grammatical criteria for the existential sentence

- Based on this set of grammatical criteria, we will survey, analyze, describe the constructions of concrete examples of existential sentences in Vietnamese. Those constructions that meet all criteria will be affirmed as the prototypes, the typical representatives carrying all features of the category. Those constructions that fail to meet all criteria will be considered as non-prototypical members of the category. These non-prototypical members will further be graded from high to low according to the number of criteria they are able to meet.
- The research results and a schematic diagram will be used to establish models of the prototypical existential sentence in Vietnamese. The prototypical members will be placed in the center of the diagram. The more criteria a member can meet, the closer to the center it will be placed.

The findings will give the reader a better and more systematic view of the Vietnamese existential sentence.

3.2. Research Methodology

This article is written following the methods and procedures of describing, analyzing, classifying and systemizing concrete linguistic data in order to be able to categorize members of the existential sentence in Vietnamese. In line with prototype theory's fuzziness principle, categorical members of the existential sentence will be illustrated by a schematic diagram.

3.3. Surveying Scope

To obtain the most objective results on the grammatical and semantic features of the Vietnamese predicate, 100 samples were extracted from the survey data system, including: <a> 30 short stories and modern Vietnamese poetry by 25 representative authors with a length of 221 pages, 3,456 sentences. In addition, only short stories of less than 3,000 words and poems of less than 250 words were selected; 40 face-to-face conversations (each has 3-5 pairs of interlocutors) were collected through observation and recording.

3.4. Results and Discussion

According to Diep Quang Ban, the existential sentence includes the types of sentence that show the existence, appearance or symbols of things.

In Vietnamese, the common structure of the existential sentence is as follows:

Sentence> = <Preposition + Noun> + <Predicate> + <Noun/Noun phrase>

Nguyen Minh Thuyet and Nguyen Van Hiep believe that the existential sentence informs us of a well-defined space which exists or does not exist from a certain subject's view and propose a 'frame verb' in the existential sentence which is as follows:

Specialized words describing existence such as: có, còn, hết...

Words describing quantity such as: nhiều, ít, đông, đầy...

Words describing visual imagery (or onomatopoeia) such as: lấp lánh, chồm chồm, lù lù...

Some action verbs have the characteristic of actionness must meet the following conditions:

- They must be those verbs that intrinsically contain the meaning related to a defined space.
- They must be those verbs that bring results because that is the necessary basis to create the meaning of 'state of being'.

For example:

- Trên bàn có một cuốn sách.
- Đứng xa tiến lại hai người đàn bà.
- Sau vườn trồng hai cây na.
- Có tiền.

In summary, we have found the following basic features in the Vietnamese existential sentences:

- It contains the prototypical verb of existence "có". "Có" is a verb that carries the prototypical meaning of existence, and the verb in itself means the existence of things, phenomena purely and objectively.
- It affirms the existence of an entity in a well-defined space and place.
- It shows whether an entity's category is affirmative or negative, existent or non-existent.
- Its sole semantic purpose is to affirm the fact that an entity exists or not.

By contrasting various prototypical features in the category of Vietnamese existential sentences, we are able to identify the most prototypical structure of the existential sentence in Vietnamese. It is a sentence with “có” as its central verb and has the following construction:

<Sentence> = <Preposition + Noun> + < “có” > + <Noun/Noun phrase>

For example:

- Trên bàn có cuốn sách.
- Trong phòng có người.
- Dưới hồ có cá.

This type of sentence which has its central verb “có” confirms the existence of an object in a clearly defined space (“trên bàn”, “trong phòng”, “dưới hồ”). In the absence of the negative element “không”, the above examples clearly affirm the existence of the objects, and display their affirmative category. In sentences of the negative category which negate the existence of things, the negative element “không” combines with the verb “có” to form the negative phrase “không có” (e.g. Trên bàn không có cuốn sách; Trong phòng không có người; Dưới hồ không có cá). The verb “có” is the center of the sentence; thus, the central meaning of the sentence is the existence of the object, and not the spatial location. In order to identify the main element of the sentence, we need to ask the question “Có cái gì ở trên bàn?” or “Trên bàn có cái gì?” and the answer is “Trên bàn có cuốn sách”. If the central meaning is the spatial location, then the question would be “Cuốn sách ở đâu?” => “Cuốn sách ở trên bàn” and not “Trên bàn có cuốn sách”. Hence the prototypical member of the category of existential sentences is the sentential structure “<Preposition + Noun> + < “có” > + <Noun/Noun phrase>”.

The core meaning of prototype theory is the grad ability of members in a category. In addition to its prototypical member, the Vietnamese existential sentence also has non-prototypical members.

a. The existential sentence has the construction “<Preposition + Noun> + <Position verb or static verb> + <Noun/Noun phrase>”

For example:

- Trên ghế để hai tờ báo mới.
- Giữa phòng đặt một bộ bàn ghế uống nước.

In this structure, the spatial location is confirmed. Within this well-defined space the mentioned object reflects state of being, quality or position. Similar to the prototypical sentence, the space here is established clearly and concretely. It is worth mentioning that the spatial location in this case has a close relationship with the speaker’s position or perspective. The central role of the verb in the sentence is no longer the one that carries the meaning of existence. Semantically and indirectly speaking, however, this type of sentence still conveys the meaning of the object’s existence in a concrete spatial position. The central verb is of position, state of being, quality; consequently, the core of the situation is the object’s existence in a position, state of being, a concrete manner of existence. For instance, “để” (“hai tờ báo”); “đặt” (“bộ bàn ghế uống nước”). The situations in these sentences are determined as of affirmative or negative category (e.g. Trên ghế để hai tờ báo mới is a sentence of affirmative meaning). The verb element in this type of sentence is often developed, followed by a noun/noun phrase with modifying attributes (“mới”, “uống nước”...). This sentential structure “<Preposition + Noun> + <Position verb or static verb> + <Noun/Noun phrase>” meets three out of four key features of the prototypically existential sentence, as a result, it is classified as a non-prototypical member of the category.

b. The existential sentence has the construction “<Preposition + Noun> + <process verb or action verb> + <Noun/Noun phrase>”

For example:

- Đẳng xa tiến lại hai người đàn bà.
- Ngoài đình bỗng dội lên một hồi trống dồn dập, vội vã.
- Đẳng xa vắng vắng tiếng còi đêm.

In this structure, the central verb of the existential sentence is a verb that expresses a process, an action, especially a verb of active state accompanied by a directional activity. For instance, in “Đẳng xa tiến lại hai người đàn bà” the central verb “tiến lại” describes a purposeful act and a spatial direction from afar towards the speaker. This central verb does not carry the meaning of existence, but a process, an action which indirectly reflects the object’s existence in a defined space. Another example, “Đẳng xa vắng vắng tiếng còi đêm” conveys the meaning of existence “đẳng xa và ở đây có tiếng còi đêm”. This type of sentence is formed by an “adverbial of place” which establishes a space, a location. Thanks to the directional verb, the spatial location is expanded. The key features of the verb in this type of sentence are that the verb describes a process, a purposeful act, or an onomatopoeic sound, a phenomenon together with a spatial direction. The existential sentence is able to confirm the existence or non-existence of the object. For example: “Ngoài đình bỗng dội lên một hồi trống dồn dập, vội vã” firmly establishes the existence of “hồi trống”. This sentential structure meets three out of four key features of the prototypically existential sentence.

- The existential sentence has the construction “< “Có” > + <Noun/Noun phrase/C-V structure>”

For example:

- (Có tiền.
- Có khách.
- Có tiếng trở mình khe khẽ.

This type of sentence does not meet criterion 2 which is “affirming the existence of an entity in a well-defined space and place”. It does not include the participation of an adverbial of place, as a result, a spatial location can not be affirmed. However, it meets the remaining criteria: having the central verb “có”, showing the object’s existence (“tiền, khách”), and displaying affirmation or negativity of the sentence.

- The existential sentence has the construction “<verb> + <Noun/Noun phrase>”

For example:

(o). Còn nước.

(ô). Nhiều sao.

In this structure, the “adverbial of place” is omitted, and the central verb is not “có”. It fails to meet criteria 1 and 2 of the prototypical existential sentence. It only meets criteria that shows the object’s existence or non-existence, and the meaning of the sentence is the object’s existence.

To sum up, an existential sentence has different members, each of which meets certain requirements for key features, prototypicality of various levels. The levels of prototypicality of the sentential members are summarized in the table below:

The Existential Sentence Has the Construction	Number of Criteria Met	Gradability
<Sentence> = <Preposition + Noun> + < “có” > + <Noun/Noun phrase>	4/4	Prototypical membership
<Preposition + Noun> + <Position verb or static verb> + <Noun/Noun phrase>	3/4	Non-prototypical level 1
<Preposition + Noun> + <process verb or action verb> + <Noun/Noun phrase>	3/4	Non-prototypical level 1
<“Có”> + <Noun/Noun phrase/C-V structure>	3/4	Non-prototypical level 1
<Verb> + <Noun/Noun phrase>	2/4	Non-prototypical level 2

Table 1: Prototypically Graded Classification of Members of the Existential Sentence⁵

The table of classification shows various levels of prototypicality of members of the Vietnamese existential sentence.

Based on the extent to which we meet the criteria of the prototypical existential sentence, we have identified its very model which is structured as follows: <Sentence> =<Preposition + Noun> + <“có”> + <Noun / Noun phrase>. In another study of the prototypical predicate in Vietnamese, we also found that this type of existential sentence completely meets the whole set of eleven criteria of the prototypical predicate. The predicate in the existential together with the predicate, which is structured by the verb, adjective / verbal phrases, adjectival phrases, are the prototypical members of the Vietnamese predicate category; and is located in the center of the schematic diagram of the prototypical predicate.

On the basis of the analysis, in comparison with the set of prototypical characteristic features, the remaining structures of the existential sentences from 2 to 4 are considered as non-prototypical sentences near the center, which satisfies 3 out of 4 criteria of the prototypical existential sentence. Those members that meet fewer than two criteria in the set of prototypical criteria are not considered members of the Vietnamese existential sentence category.

From these findings we are able to establish a schematic diagram in which the center of the diagram is the prototypical member and non-prototypical members are placed further away from the center and towards the periphery.

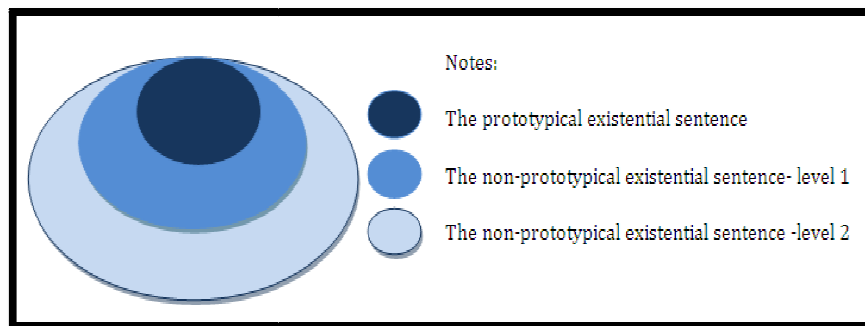


Figure 1: Schematic Diagram of the Prototypical Existential Sentences in Vietnamese

4. Conclusion

Prototype theory is an important theory in cognitive linguistics. It has shed light on several linguistic issues, especially that of grammar in which the existential sentence serves as evidence. By applying prototype theory in cognitive linguistics, the article has been able to identify the structure of the prototypical member of the Vietnamese existential sentence, that is: “<Preposition + Noun> + < “có” > + <Noun / Noun phrase>”. Other non-prototypical members have different fitting levels and are prototypically graded accordingly. It is hoped that the findings of this article may become a

⁵ The Summary Table Will Present A Set Of Four Prototypical Criteria Which Are Based On The Four Characteristic Features Of The Existential Sentence.

useful reference for learners and teachers of Vietnamese.

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