

## Modality and multifunctionality in Vietnamese

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INTRODUCTION While the tense and aspect systems of Vietnamese have been analyzed in the formal literature (e.g. Phan 2013, Duffield 2017), the modal system has received less attention. The goal of this talk is to provide an initial classification of modals in the language, drawing on new data. We show that modals (like other grammatical morphemes in the language) are multifunctional: their meaning depends on where they are merged (Duffield 2017). This multifunctionality allows modals to stack and reinforce other modals.

BACKGROUND Vietnamese is a Mon-Khmer language spoken in Vietnam that has remained largely understudied by formal linguists (but see Cao 1992 and Duffield et al. 2019). The basic word order is SVO and it is an isolating language, with no inflection for tense or phi-features on the verb. We focus on the modal auxiliaries that typically appear in the pre-verbal domain. Deontic modals surface between tense/aspect and the verb (Phan and Duffield (2022:174)). Thus *được* follows the future tense marker *sẽ* but cannot precede it, as in (1).

- (1) Cô ấy                    thì        sẽ        được (\*sẽ)    gặp        anh ấy  
 FEM.SG.DEM    TOP        FUT        CAN FUT    meet        MASC.SG.DEM  
 ‘Speaking of her, she will be allowed to meet him.’

The modal *được* can also have an abilitative reading when it occurs clause-finally (Duffield 1999).

- (2) Cô ấy                    viết        bài        hát        được.  
 FEM.SG.DEM    write    CLF        song        CAN  
 ‘She is able to write the song.’

Unlike deontic modals, epistemics can occur high, preceding the subject and tense (4).

- (4) Có thể        anh                    đã        đi        lúc 10 giờ  
 EPIS.POS    MASC.SG    PST        go        at 10  
 ‘There is a possibility he left at 10/He could have left at 10.’

Based on the data in the literature and data we have elicited, we propose the following classification of Vietnamese modals:

(3)

	EPISTEMIC	DEONTIC	ABILITY
POSSIBILITY	<i>có thể/có lẽ</i>	<i>được/có thể (được)</i>	<i>được (post-verbal)</i>
NECESSITY	<i>chắc</i>	STRONG: <i>phải</i>   WEAK: <i>nên</i>	

ANALYSIS What has received less attention in the literature is the combination of different modals. For example, *được* can be used to reinforce the possibility modal *có thể* (5).

- (5) *Context: My mom says I will be able to play with my friends once I finish my chores.*  
 Con có thể        (được)    đi        sau        khi        quét        sàn        nhà        xong  
 you DEO.POS    (CAN)    go        after        when        sweep    floor    house    CMPL  
 ‘You can go after you sweep the floor.’

Similarly, the epistemic necessity modal *chắc* can be reinforced with the deontic modal *phải*.

- (6) *Context: My cat is hiding in only one of three boxes. Having checked the first two and not finding my cat, I conclude he must be in the third box.*  
 Con mèo        của        tôi        chắc        (phải)        trong        hộp        thứ        ba  
 CL cat        of        mine    EPIS.NEC    DEO.NEC    in        box        three  
 ‘My cat must be in the third box.’

We suggest that Vietnamese modals have limited semantic content (e.g. *có thể* is simply possibility). If merged high (e.g. as a matrix predicate in (4)), it receives an epistemic reading. When merged

low (below tense), it is deontic. When modals of the same force are combined, as in (5) and (6), the highest modal that determines the modal flavour (epistemic vs. deontic).

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