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From *truth* to discourse marker: The case of *thật* in Vietnamese

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Abstract

Vietnamese *thật* (truth)-based expressions are prevalent in a 17th-century text and contemporary data, however there has been a lack of in-depth studies of such Sino-Vietnamese expressions in terms of their grammaticalization into discourse markers (DMs). The aim of this study is to identify whether linguistic elements from the same source develop into DMs in a similar manner. To achieve this, I compared diachronic data in the 17th century to contemporary Vietnamese. The historical data includes the first Romanized Vietnamese prose written in 1651, while the contemporary data consists of written and spoken materials collected from a language consultant, internet quotes, and naturally occurring conversations. The main findings of this research are as follows: (1) *Thật*-related expressions appear to follow the well-attested grammatical path from “TRUE” to “INTENSIVE” and further into DMs. (2) The subjective and intersubjective uses of *thật* forms are distributed complementarily: subjective usage tends to occur in the utterance-final position, while intersubjective usage typically appears in the utterance-initial position. (3) *Thật* has also combined with other elements to form multiword-unit DMs, indicating that DMs do not always undergo formal reduction. (4) Regarding the borrowing of DMs through language contact, examples from Vietnamese and other languages suggest that lexical elements are initially borrowed as in their original forms and then grammaticalized as DMs in ways that are language-specific yet comparable. These findings provide theoretical contributions to our understanding of the emergence and development of DMs in Vietnamese.

Keywords: *language contact, discourse marker, grammaticalization, intersubjectification, Sino-Vietnamese thật*

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От «ИСТИНЫ» к дискурсивному маркеру: *thật* во вьетнамском языке

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Аннотация

Выражения, основанные на китайско-вьетнамской лексеме *thật* «истина» (кит. 實), широко употребляются во вьетнамском языке с XVII в. до наших дней, однако наблюдается отсутствие глубоких исследований с точки зрения их грамматикализации в дискурсивные маркеры (ДМ). Цель данного исследования – определить, переходят ли языковые единицы, происходящие из одного и того же источника, в ДМ схожим образом. Для этого мы сравнили диахронические данные XVII в. с современным вьетнамским языком. Источником исторического материала послужила первая романизированная вьетнамская проза, относящаяся к 1651 г.; современный письменный и устный материал был собран из интернет-источников и естественной коммуникации, а также с помощью интервью. Основные выводы исследования следующие: (1) Выражения с *thật* развиваются по уже засвидетельствованному грамматическому пути: от «ИСТИНА» до «УСИЛИТЕЛЬ» и далее – в ДМ. (2) Субъективное и интерсубъективное использование форм с *thật* распределяется следующим образом: субъективное использование, как правило, встречается в конечной позиции высказывания, в то время как интерсубъективное использование обычно наблюдается в начальной позиции. (3) *Thật* также объединяется с другими элементами, образуя многословные ДМ, что указывает на то, что ДМ не всегда подвергаются формальной редукции. (4) Что касается заимствований ДМ, происходящих в результате языкового контакта, то примеры из вьетнамского языка, как и других языков, показывают, что лексические элементы изначально заимствуются в исходных формах, а затем грамматикализуются в культурно-специфичные, но сопоставимые ДМ. Данные выводы вносят теоретический вклад в понимание возникновения и развития ДМ во вьетнамском языке.

Ключевые слова: языковой контакт, дискурсивный маркер, грамматикализация, интерсубъективация, китайско-вьетнамский *thật*

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1. Introduction

Vietnamese *thật* and *thật*-derived discourse markers (DMs), collectively termed as “*thật*-based expressions” (mostly DMs), were prevalent in a 17th century text (introduced in Section 3) and in contemporary data, spoken and written. *Thật* originated from a Sino-Vietnamese lexeme 實 meaning ‘full, rich, true’ as an adjective and ‘fruit’ as a noun (Thiều Chửu 2009: 178–179); it is a cognate with corresponding expressions in Chinese, Japanese and Korean. Diachronic change of 實-based expressions has attracted much attention in studies of those languages (for further discussion, see Section 2.2). However, there have been no in-depth studies

of the grammaticalization of such Sino-Vietnamese expressions into DMs. To make theoretical contributions, this study determines whether linguistic elements derived from the same source develop into DMs in similar manners to DMs, that is, through cyclicity (Hansen 2018a, b). To achieve this, I compared *thật*-based expressions in diachronic data in the 17th century and contemporary Vietnamese. The historical data includes *Cathechismvs in octo dies diuisus* (Catechisms in eight days), the first Romanized Vietnamese prose written by Alexandre de Rhodes, a French missionary, in 1651 (for details, see Section 3), while the contemporary data consists of written and spoken materials collected from a language consultant, internet quotes, and naturally occurring conversations.

This study is organized as follows. In Section 2, I present history of Vietnamese and give an overview of relevant research. In Section 3, I present an account of the data used in this study. In Section 4, I present results of the study which are discussed in Section 5 in terms of grammaticalization. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Research background

2.1. A short history of Vietnamese and its writing system

Vietnamese is classified as an Austro-Asiatic language. It is an isolating language with a verb-medial and head-initial structure, featuring six tonal distinctions. The dialects of Vietnamese are generally categorized into three main groups: the northern dialect, primarily spoken in Hanoi; the central dialect, spoken in Hue; and the southern dialect, spoken in Ho Chi Minh City (Tomita 2000: 17–20). In this study, I examine the northern dialect. Detailed information on the dialect will be provided in Section 3.

The history of writing in Vietnam is influenced by the country's long cultural connection with China. Accordingly, Vietnamese leaders and scholars borrowed a large number of Chinese words from Chinese written forms (Alves 2007a: 357), which are now known as Sino-Vietnamese words. Regarding Sino-Vietnamese words, Nguyễn (1961) states that they account for 60–70% of modern written Vietnamese texts (see also Alves 2001, 2009, Murakami & Imai 2010), while Miyajima (2019: 809) argues that approximately 70% of Vietnamese words are Sino-Vietnamese (see Shibasaki & Higashiizumi (forthcoming), Note 6 for more details).

Edmondson (2006: 432) summarizes the history of writing in Vietnam as follows: Chinese scripts may have been adopted as a learned script in Vietnamese before the Common Era¹. Subsequently, a demotic script, *Chữ nôm*, to write purely Vietnamese words, may have been in use as early as the 10th century. Ultimately,

¹ Tomita (1988: 761) indicates that the direct control of Vietnam by China from 111 B.C. to 938 A.D. led to the spread of Chinese culture and language in Vietnam. Furthermore, according to Kawamoto (2011: 1901), by the 11th century, the phonetic system of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary had individualized from Chinese.

these two scripts were replaced by *Quốc ngữ* in the 20th century, a Romanized script developed by Jesuit missionaries in the 17th century. *Chữ nôm* characters are based on Chinese ideograms, while the modern Vietnamese writing system (*Quốc ngữ*) is a phonetic script written using Roman characters (Vũ 2005: 7).

In line with Maspero (1912)², Nguyễn (1997: 5) categorizes Vietnamese in the 17th century as Middle Vietnamese, as “reflected in the Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin dictionary by Alexandre de Rhodes,” a French missionary. Missionary literature such as dictionaries and catechisms have been examined as materials for missionary linguistics (Kishimoto & Sirai 2022), which are “modeled according to the traditional Greco-Latin framework” (Zwartjes 2018).

2.2. A brief overview of the relevant studies

Hopper & Traugott (1993: xv) define grammaticalization as “the process whereby lexical items and constructions come in certain linguistic contexts to serve grammatical functions, and, once grammaticalized, continue to develop new grammatical functions.” According to Kuteva et al. (2019: 443), there is a typological tendency for words meaning ‘true’ to be grammaticalized as intensive markers. With regard to this point, Rhee et al. (2021) highlighted the Chinese etymon 實-based expressions that denoted ‘real(ity), true, full, rich, fruit’ and examined how they have been grammaticalized into DMs in languages in the Chinese cultural sphere, including Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Rhee et al. (2021) point out that the developmental paths of DMs containing the Chinese etymon 實 / 实 / 実 in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean such as 事實上/事实上/事实上 and 其實/其实, shows similarities semantic, syntactic, and discursive changes. Additionally, several articles in this special issue explore words including 真 ‘true’ in different languages, including Khammee (2024)’s work on *cing* in Thai, Higashiizumi et al. (2024)’s discussion of 真に (*shinni*) in Japanese, and Rhee & Zhang (2024)’s analysis of *cincca* in Korean and 真是 (*zhenshi*) and 真的 (*zhende*) in Chinese.³

Bui (2012, 2015) lists examples of DMs in Vietnamese that have text connective functions as in (1).

² Maspero, Henri. 1912. Études sur la phonétique historique de la langue annamite. Les initiales. *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 12. 1–124.

³ Interestingly, the Sino-Vietnamese lexeme *chân* meaning ‘true,’ which is derived from 真, is not used as a DM in Vietnamese. One reason may be that, as noted in Section 2.1, Sino-Vietnamese words have been largely used in written and formal discourse. This fact offers a possible account for the rarity of spoken and colloquial-oriented elements common to Chinese and Vietnamese (Alves 2007a: 357).

(1) Vietnamese DMs

- a. *tuy nhiên* (雖 ‘though’ + 然 ‘so’) ⁴
/ *tuy thế* (雖 ‘though’ + ‘so’)
/ *tuy vậy* (雖 ‘though’ + ‘so’) ‘however’ (Bui 2012: 4, Bui 2015: 23–90)
- b. *và lại* (‘moreover’ + ‘again’)
/ *và chẳng* (‘moreover’ + ‘surely’) ‘moreover’ (Bui 2012: 4, Bui 2015: 246–302)
- c. *dù sao* (‘however’ + ‘how’) ‘anyway’ (Bui 2012: 91–176)
- d. *thế* (‘so’) / *vậy* (‘so’) ‘so’ (Bui 2012: 3)

According to the language consultant, in addition to Bui’s (2012, 2015) list, other DMs that consist of ‘truth’-related elements, as in (2) exist. Note that *thực* is a variant⁵ of *thật*.⁶

(2) Some other Vietnamese DMs

- a. *thật ra* (實 ‘real’ + ‘out’) ‘in fact, actually’
- b. *thực ra* (寔 ‘real’ + out) ‘in fact, actually’
- c. *thật sự* (實 ‘real’ + 事 ‘matter’) ‘in fact, actually’
- d. *thực sự* (寔 ‘real’ + 事 ‘matter’) ‘in fact, actually’
- e. *trên thực tế* (on + 實 ‘real’ + 際 ‘occasion’) ‘in fact, actually’
- f. *thật tình* (實 ‘real’ + 情 ‘situation’) ‘in fact, actually’
- g. *thực tình* (寔 ‘real’ + 情 ‘situation’) ‘in fact, actually’
- h. *quả tình* (果 ‘fruit’ + 情 ‘situation’) ‘in fact, actually’
- i. *quả thế* (果 ‘fruit’ + ‘so’) ‘in fact, actually’
- j. *quả thực* (果 ‘fruit’ + 寔 ‘real’) ‘in fact, actually’
- k. *quả thật* (果 ‘fruit’ + 實 ‘reality’) ‘in fact, actually’
- l. *quả nhiên* (果 ‘fruit’ + 然 ‘so’) ‘in fact, actually’
- m. *quả vậy* (果 ‘fruit’ + ‘so’) ‘in fact, actually’
- n. *kỳ thật* (其 ‘its/that’ + 實 ‘real’) ‘in fact, actually’
- o. *kỳ thực* (其 ‘its/that’ + 寔 ‘real’) ‘in fact, actually’

Contrarily, the counterpart expressions in Vietnamese to such cognate-like forms in Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Thai, that is, *thật*, have not yet come under close scrutiny, especially from the perspective of grammaticalization. Broadly speaking, ‘truth’-related expressions with 真/真 ‘truth’ in Chinese, Korean, and Thai have developed in a convergent way to DMs, although the Japanese counterpart *shinni* ‘truly, genuinely’ has not (yet) reached the DM stage. Therefore, this study uncovers pathways of change from ‘truth’ to a DM in Vietnamese and

⁴ The author added glossing with Chinese characters and English.

⁵ There is another dialectal variant *thiệt* often used in the southern dialect (Phạm et al. 2009: 388).

⁶ In the Nguyễn dynasty (19th century), 實 *thật* was changed to 寔, and its pronunciation was changed to *thực*, because 實 violated the naming taboo of Empress *Tá Thiên*, Emperor *Thiệu Trị*’s mother (Chèn 1982: 570–571). Therefore, it is not expected that *thực* would be observed in the documents of the 17th century.

contributes to a better understanding of the ways DMs develop in this particular cultural region.

Before proceeding, let us examine one of common views of DMs. Brinton (2010: 285–286) clarifies the following formal features of DMs:

(3) DMs

They are phonologically “short” items that preferentially occur in sentence-initial position. They are syntactically independent elements that are loosely attached to (parenthetical to) their host clause and often constitute a separate intonation unit and as such have scope over global units of discourse (beyond the level of the clause). They occur with high frequency, especially in oral discourse, and may be stylistically stigmatized. (Brinton 2010: 285–286)⁷

Notably, DMs also have text-connective and interpersonal functions, including subjective and intersubjective functions. The concept of speaker stance encompasses both subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Subjectivity refers to the speaker’s expression of their own attitudes and beliefs (Lyons 1982: 102), whereas intersubjectivity pertains to the speaker’s awareness of the addressee’s attitudes and beliefs (Traugott 2003: 126, 2010: 33).

3. Data and methodology

The data used for this study are twofold. For diachronic data, I use *Phép giảng tám ngày* (PGTN; *Catechismvs in octo dies diuisus*; Catechisms in eight days), which is the first Romanized Vietnamese prose written in 1651 by Alexandre de Rhodes. According to Kishimoto (2018: 58), PGTN is a Latin/Vietnamese bilingual translation. In addition, Schreiter (2015: 8) evaluates PGTN as follows: “The Catechismus he wrote to evangelize the Vietnamese people was the first Vietnamese-language book to be published in the West. And the Roman alphabet with a diacritical marking system he devised became the basis for the alphabet used to this day in the Vietnamese language.”⁸ Maspero (1912: 9, Note 1) reports that PGTN relates to the Tonkinese dialect, that is the northern dialect. In the *Từ điển Việt–Bồ–La* (TĐVBL; *Dictionarium Annamiticum Lusitanum et Latinum*; The dictionary of Annamese, Lusitanian and Latin) compiled by Rhodes in 1651 (See 2.1 for its significance in the history of the language) along with PGTN, *thật* is spelled as *thăt*, and it is defined as *verdade* (truth) and *certo* (right) in Lusitanian, that is, Portuguese, as well as *veritas* (truth), *atis* (truly), and *verus* (true) in Latin.⁹

⁷ See Brinton (2017: 2–8) and Heine et al. (2021: 6) for more recent and comprehensive definitions of DMs as well as pragmatic markers (PMs). For a functional differentiation of DMs and PMs see Shibasaki and Higashiizumi (forthcoming).

⁸ Shimizu (2024) is known as a linguistic study based on PGTN, which probes into the historical development of the Vietnamese durative/continuous/progressive marker *đang*, which originated from the Sino-Vietnamese word 當.

⁹ The original texts regarding *thật* in TĐVBL are as follows. The author added English translations in the brackets to them.

The data of PGTN and TĐVBL is sourced from Wikisource, a free-content digital library maintained by the Wikimedia Foundation. For contemporary Vietnamese, I use data from the northern dialect, which comprise written and spoken data obtained from a language consultant,¹⁰ quotes from the Internet, and family conversations.¹¹

For the methodology, I will compare examples from the 17th century with contemporary ones to see how *thật*-based DMs develop over time, with a particular focus on their pragmatic functions. This approach will help to reveal part of the grammatical pathways that lead from ‘truth’ to a DM in Vietnamese, along with the characteristics of this change.

As Vietnamese lacks inflectional morphology, it is necessary to differentiate word classes based on their functions and distribution for diachronic and typological comparison. The following are brief definitions of terms related to word class in Vietnamese grammar. Nominals can be used as the subject, object of a verb, or object of a preposition. Classifiers are sometimes used before or instead of nominals to indicate specificity and definiteness. Adjectivals can modify noun phrases and act as a predicate. Adverbials modify adjectivals and clauses. Notably, utterance-final particles (UFPs) are used to convey pragmatic information, such as the speaker’s emotions and epistemic state, and to indicate the connection and relationship between preceding discourse. Some UFPs can be compounds.

4. Results

In this section, I present the following five types of usages of *thật*, namely, (A) nominal, (B) adjectival, (C) adverbial, (D) utterance-final, and (E) DM, with examples from the 17th century and contemporary Vietnamese. Results indicate that *thật* was not used as (D) utterance-final particles or (E) DM in the historical context. Instead, it primarily appeared in prose as (B) adjectival meaning ‘true’ and (C) adverbial meaning ‘truly’ or ‘really,’ particularly in the context of conveying

thật *verdade* [truth], *certo* [right] *veritas* [truth], *atis* [truly], *verus* [true], a, vm, *nói thật* *fallar verdade* [tell the truth]: *verum loqui* [to speak the truth]. *cho thật: certamente* [certainly]: *certè* [sure], *profectò* [surely], *fanè* [really]. *thề thật: iurar verdade* ([to swear the truth]: *verum iurate* [to swear the truth]. *thề ngay, idem* [the same]. *thật thà fiel* [faithful], *fincero* [sincerely]: *veridicus* [truthful], a, vm, *fincerus* [sincere], a. vm.

¹⁰ The language consultant is a female native Vietnamese speaker who was born in Hanoi, Vietnam. She is in her 50s as of 2024.

¹¹ Data for the present study comprised an 8-hour audio recording of a collection of family dinner conversations. These conversations were recorded in Hanoi by the author in 2014. Glossed excerpts with Japanese translations were included in Adachi (2021) as an appendix. Table 0 provides background information about the family members, all of whom are native speakers of Vietnamese who were born and raised in Hanoi.

Table 0. Background information of discourse participants in the Vietnamese family conversation database

Name		Occupation
Father	(F)	Wholesaler
Mother	(M)	Language teacher
Daughter	(D)	Junior high school student

“religious truth” to the Vietnamese at that time. In contrast, today *thật* exhibits a range of uses, including (B) adjectival meaning ‘real’; (C) adverbial (sometimes followed by a linker *là*) ‘really’; (D) as an utterance-final particle meaning ‘indeed’; and (E) DM in utterance-initial position, such as *thật ra* (*thật* + out) meaning ‘in fact’.

4.1. Vietnamese in the 17th century¹²

4.1.1. Nominal usage

In the texts from the 17th century, the word *thật* does not exist as a noun. It is preceded by the classifier *sự*, which originated from the Sino-Vietnamese word 事 (meaning ‘matter’), to form the noun *sự thật* (*sự thật* with contemporary spelling), rendered in English as ‘truth,’ as shown in (4). Note that in traditional Vietnamese linguistics, classifiers are functionally treated as nouns.

(4)	<i>e</i>	<i>thì</i> ¹³	<i>phải</i>	<i>giữ</i>	<i>ba</i>	<i>sự</i>	<i>một</i>	<i>là</i> ¹⁴	<i>sự</i>	<i>thật</i> ,
	LNK	have.to	keep	three	CLF	one	LNK	CLF	THẬT	
	<i>hai</i>	<i>là</i>	<i>sự</i>	<i>cou</i>	<i>bàng</i> ,	<i>ba</i>	<i>là</i>	<i>sự</i>	<i>cần</i> :	
	two	LNK	CLF	fair		three	LNK	CLF	need	

‘(The second commandment prescribes us not to offend God with our tongue by swearing by God’s name in vain. For an oath in the name of God or of divine things not to be a sin), there are three conditions: **truth**, justice, and necessity. (Lit. then, (we) have to keep three matters, one is real one, two is fair one, three is necessary one.)’

4.1.2. Adjectival usage

As an attributive adjective meaning ‘true’, *thật* follows a noun as shown in (5).

(5)	<i>m</i>	<i>huáng</i>	<i>lộ</i>	<i>người</i>	<i>ở</i>	<i>thế</i>	<i>này</i>	<i>thì</i>	<i>phải</i>	<i>tìm</i>
	much	less	people	in	world	this	LNK	have.to	find	
	<i>biết</i>	<i>được</i>	<i>ai</i> ,	<i>làm</i>	<i>Chúa</i>	<i>thật</i>	<i>đã</i>	<i>sinh</i>		
	know	POSSIB	who	do	lord	THẬT	PFT	give.birth		
	<i>cho</i>	<i>nên</i>	<i>blời</i> ,	<i>đất</i> ,	<i>muôn</i>	<i>vật</i> ,	<i>mà</i>	<i>thờ</i>	<i>đấy</i> .	
	let	should	sky	earth	all.things	LNK	worship	DEM.MED		

‘How much more should all in this world find who **the true lord** is and the creator of heaven and the earth and all things in order to adore him.’

¹² Regarding examples in 4.1, I provide original texts of PGTN cited from Wikisource in the first line, followed by glossing in the second line. The English translation is quoted from Phan (2015). And if necessary, a literal translation is added by the author.

¹³ According to Do-Hurinville & Dao (2019: 58, Note 1), *thì* “functions as a temporal anaphoric conjunction or a topic marker.” In this paper, I consider *thì* a polyfunctional linker and gloss it as LNK.

¹⁴ The word *là* “is a copular verb” and also “functions as a consecutive conjunction, a focus marker or a complementizer. (Do-Hurinville & Dao 2019: 58, Note 1).” In this paper, I consider *là* as a polyfunctional linker and gloss it as LNK, similar to *thì* (refer to Note 13 in this paper).

In addition, the following is an example of *thật* as a predicative adjective. In (6), *thật* follows an intensifier *rất* meaning ‘very sincere’.

- (6) ^f *Mà đức Chúa Iesu rất khiêm nhường,*
 LNK saint lord Jesus INT modest
 và **rất thật** thưa rằng :
 and INT THẬT answer COMP

‘(But the exceedingly good Lord, bearing this injury with great gentleness, did not want to keep silent lest he appeared to have lacked respect for the high priest.) He answered with greatest humility (Lit. And the Lord answered very modestly and **very sincerely** that...): (“If I have spoken wrongly, show me what I have said wrongly; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?”’

4.1.3. Adverbial usage

As an adverb, *thật* can express that the following proposition is true (‘without doubt’), modify the preceding verb (‘really die’), and intensify the following adjective (‘very foolish’), as shown in (7), (8) and (9), respectively.

- (7) ^y **thật là** ma qui ở tào địa ngục là nhà nó.
 THẬT LNK devil be inside hell LNK home they
 ‘**Without doubt** the demon is in hell which is his home.’

- (8) ^h *fau hết đàn bà có tội lắm, vì mlời thật*
 finally woman have sin INT because sky THẬT
đức Chúa blời răn, mà chẳng giữ thì
 saint lord sky admonish LNK NEG keep LNK
đe chết thật,
 threaten die THẬT

‘Moreover, the woman sinned most grievously by doubting the order and the death threat that God had formally announced (Lit. Finally, the woman had much sin, because the true lord in the sky had admonished that (if she would) not follow (the order) then (she would be) threatened to **really die**)).’

- (9) ^e *ví bàng có ai già nhà, má chẳng*
 if have someone farewell house LNK NEG
giã Chúa nhà, thật là¹⁵ dại mà chớ.
 farewell master house THẬT LNK foolish LNK UFP

¹⁵ When the adverbial *thật* modifies a predicate adjective as an intensifier, inserting the marker *là* after *thật* is grammatically optional. Lien (2009: 748) analyzes the copula-derived *si⁷* 是 as a focus marker that follows *si⁸* 實 ‘really’ based on the following example of early Southern Min. Similarly, in Vietnamese, copula-derived marker *là* that follows *thật* and precedes an adjective can also be considered a focus marker, as demonstrated in (9). For a more in-depth discussion on the multifunctionality of the marker *là*, refer to Note 14 in this paper.

b. *si⁸ si⁷ chhing¹-khi³* (07.000, WL)
 實 是 清氣
 really FM clean
 ‘It is really clean.’ (Lien 2009: 748)

‘(Suppose you enter a house and see that things to eat and drink have been prepared and laid out. After you have eaten and drunk and rested, to whom do you give thanks, to the house or to the master of the house, even though you do not see him?) Would it not **be foolish** (Lit. **very foolish**) to give thanks to the house and not to its master?’

4.2. Contemporary usages

4.2.1. Nominal usage

Similar to the Vietnamese language of the 17th-century, *sự thật* (classifier + true) is used to mean denote ‘truth, fact’ as shown in (10).

- (10) *Đó là sự thật đấy*¹⁶.
 DEM.MED LNK CLF true UFP [sharing information]
 (That’s true, for your information [(Lit.) ‘That’s a **type of truth**’].) (Elicitation¹⁷)

4.2.2. Adjectival usage

As an attributive adjective meaning ‘true’, *thật* follows a noun as shown in (11).

- (11)¹⁸ *Có nên sử dụng tên thật trên Facebook của mình hay không?*
 Q should use name real on PN of I or NEG
 ‘Should I use my **real name** on Facebook or not?’ (A quote from the Internet)

Especially in a spoken context, *thật* is used as a type of backchanneling¹⁹ with some UFPs such as *thật không?* ‘really?’ as in (12) or *thật à?* ‘really?’ as in (13). In both instances, the speakers express surprise at new information or information that contradicts their prior expectations, and demonstrate interest through these *thật*-based backchannelings. In (12), the daughter is astonished because the mother reveals unexpected information about desserts that the daughter was unaware of. In (13), the mother is surprised when the father informs her that the price of the candles they are discussing is cheaper than she had assumed.

¹⁶ UFP *đấy* functions as an assertive marker when the speaker thinks that the information is new to the addressee with the meaning ‘which you may not know about’ or ‘for your information’ (Adachi 2021: 81–84).

¹⁷ The elicited examples (10), (18), (26), and (28) were provided by the language consultant. Refer to Note 10 of this paper for the original source.

¹⁸ Công ty TNHH Phương Nam VINA. 2014. *Có nên sử dụng tên thật của mình trên facebook hay không?* [Should I use my real name on Facebook or not?] <https://websitechuyenngiep.vn/co-that-su-dung-ten-that-tren-facebook.html> (published on 5 August, 2014; accessed on 9 September 2024)

¹⁹ Mereu (2024: 2) defines backchannelings as “the short productions uttered by one participant in the conversation when the other participant occupies the floor.”

- (12) M: *có lẽ tráng miệng là những xoài đấy*
 perhaps dessert LNK PL mango UFP [sharing information]
 ‘Perhaps the dessert was mangos, for your information.’
 D: ***thật không?***
 true UFP [question]
 ‘Really?’ (Family conversation)
- (13) F: *hôm nay mình xem cái cây nến kia*
 today I [self]²⁰ see CLF [thing] CLF [tree-like object] candle DEM.DIST
 ‘I saw that candle (in the store) today.’
một cây kia là hai trăm nghìn
 one CLF DEM.DIST LNK two hundred thousand
 ‘That candle cost 200,000 Vietnamese dollars (= about 10 US dollars).’
 M: *bao nhiêu?*
 how much
 ‘How much?’
 F: *hai trăm nghìn*
 two hundred thousand
 ‘200,000 Vietnamese dollars.’
 M: ***thật à?***
 real UFP [question with mild surprise]
 ‘Really?’ (Family conversation)

4.2.3. Adverbial usage

(14) is an example of *thật* as an intensifier modifying an attributive adjective *ngon* ‘delicious’.

- (14)²¹ *Làm món nướng thật ngon*
 make food grill THẬT delicious
 ‘Make **really delicious** grilled dishes.’ (A quote from the Internet)

In sentences (15), (16), and (17), *thật* intensifies the negation of stative verbs of emotion that follow it such as *nỡ* ‘bear’, *chịu* ‘bear’, and *hiểu* ‘understand’, meaning ‘really unbearable’ or ‘really incomprehensible’.

- (15)²² *Giờ phải chia xa, tôi thật không nỡ chút nào.*
 time have.to separate far I [servant] THẬT NEG bear little any
 ‘When I have to be far away (from my wife), I cannot bear (it) at all.’
 (A quote from the Internet)

²⁰ Supplemental information may be added within brackets.

²¹ Khánh Hòa. 2013. Làm món nướng thật ngon [Make really delicious grilled dishes.], *Vnexpress* <https://vnexpress.net/lam-mon-nuong-that-ngon-2755290.html> (published on 16 May, 2013 accessed on 9 September 2024).

²² VOI2. Tôi không nỡ bán vườn, xa quê [I can’t bring myself to sell the garden and be far away from home]. <https://vov2.vov.vn/toi-khong-no-ban-vuon-xa-que-12575.vov> (published on 3 February, 2015; accessed on 9 September 2024).

- (16)²³ *Thật không chịu nổi!*
 THẬT NEG bear able
 ‘**Really unbearable!**’ (A quote from the Internet)
- (17)²⁴ “*Tôi thật không hiểu nổi*”
 I [servant] THẬT NEG understand able
 ‘**Really incomprehensible (for me)!**’ (A quote from the Internet)

The adverbial *thật* can also modify a predicate adjective such as *lãng mạn* ‘romantic’ as shown in (18).

- (18) *Phim này thật là lãng mạn.*
 Movie DEM.PROX THẬT LNK romantic
 ‘This movie is **really romantic.**’ (Elicitation)

In addition, the adverbial *thật* can modify preceding verbs *tưởng* ‘think’ in (19), *nói* ‘say’ in (20) and (21), and *sống* ‘live’ in (21), meaning ‘truly’, ‘candidly’ or ‘honestly’, respectively. Note that, as shown in (19)–(21), *thật* is not formally treated as an object noun like its English translation, ‘truth,’ but rather as an adverbial modifying the predicate.

- (19)²⁶ *nói đùa mà cứ tưởng thật*
 say lie but continue think THẬT
 ‘(I) lied, but (you) **believed it to be true.**’ (A quote from the Internet)
- (20)²⁷ *Không phải lúc nào cũng nên nói thật*
 NEG right whenever should say THẬT
 ‘**Talking candidly** isn’t always the best choice.’ (A quote from the Internet)
- (21)²⁸ A quote from the Internet
Nhà văn phải là người nói thật, sống thật
 writer have.to LNK person say THẬT live THẬT
 ‘A writer must be someone who **tells the truth and lives honestly.**’
 (A quote from the Internet)

²³ Đăng Huỳnh. *Thật không chịu nổi!* [Really unbearable!]. *Cần Thơ online*. <https://baocantho.com.vn/that-khong-chiu-noi--a69162.html> (published on 15 July, 2012; accessed on 9 September 2024).

²⁴ Huỳnh Trung Phong. 2024. Declan Rice: “Tôi thật không hiểu nổi” [Declan Rice: “Really incomprehensible!”]. *Tin thể thao* [Sports news]. <https://www.tinthethao.com.vn/declan-rice-toi-that-khong-hieu-noi-d766912.html> (published on 24 June, 2024; accessed on 9 September 2024).

²⁵ See Note 15 in this paper for a focus marker *là*.

²⁶ Soha tratu. 2024. *Thật [true]*. http://tratu.soha.vn/dict/vn_vn/Th%E1%BA%ADt (accessed on 9 September 2024).

²⁷ Hoài Nam. 2024. *Không phải lúc nào cũng nên nói thật* [Talking candidly isn’t always the best choice.] *Dân Trí* [People’s Intellectual] <https://dantri.com.vn/nhip-song-tre/khong-phai-luc-nao-cung-nen-noi-that-1206978735.htm> (published on 1 April, 2008; retrieved on 9 September 2024)

²⁸ Lam Điền. 2022. *Nhà văn nói về nghề: Nhà văn phải là người nói thật, sống thật* [A writer must be someone who tells the truth and lives honestly.]. *Tuổi trẻ* [Youth]. <https://vanchuongthanhphohochiminh.vn/nha-van-noi-ve-nghe-nha-van-phai-la-nguoi-noi-that-song-that> (published on 8 June, 2022; retrieved on 9 September 2024)

4.2.4. Utterance-final particle usage

Sometimes, *thật* appears as an UFP with other UFPs, which as a whole plays an intensifier role. For example, *thật đấy* and *ấy thật* are used utterance-finally in (22)–(26) respectively. In other words, *thật* is not fixed but formulaic (or loosely conventionalized). While *thật* as an adverbial to intensify the objective criterion, such as ‘better/worse/more/less than normal’, it serves as a UFP to express the speaker’s subjective evaluation based on direct experience, such as the speaker’s fatigue in (22).

- (22) M: *mệt thật đấy*
 tired THẬT UFP [sharing information]
 ‘(I’m) tired, **indeed**, (for your information).’ (Family conversation)

In (23) and (24), the speaker (M) discusses the plot of the theatrical play she attended the day before. She evaluates the playwright’s and actor’s styles based on her actual experience.

- (23) M: *kiểu kịch Lưu Quang Vũ ấy²⁹ thật*
 style play PN UFP [shared information] THẬT
 ‘(That was) exactly the playwright Luu Quang Vu’s dramatic style, **indeed**.
 (Family conversation)

- (24) M: *thằng Xuân Bắc, nó đóng buồn cười thật đấy*
 CLF [young man] PN he play humorous THẬT UFP [sharing information]
 ‘Mr. Xuan Bac played a very humorous role (in the drama yesterday, **indeed**).
 (Family conversation)

(25) is an interjectional use of *thật*. When the speaker says *chết³⁰ thật* (Lit. ‘really dying’) to express his or her annoyance or disappointment, however, he or she is not dying in reality (cf. (4)).

- (25) *Chết thật!*
 die THẬT
 ‘**Oh no!**’ (Elicitation)

4.2.5. Discourse marker usage

Notably, DM usage shows a more subjective view of the situation in an utterance-initial position as shown below. This discourse characteristic is in contrast to the UFP usage used in the utterance-final position, as in Section 4.2.4. (see Section 5.2 for relevant discussions). Furthermore, *thật* has developed in diverse ways as DMs, some of which are shown below (see also Section 2.2). In examples (26)–(29), *thật không may* ‘unfortunately’ and *thật là may* ‘fortunately’

²⁹ Utterance-final particle *ấy* is used to remind the addressee of something the addressee already knew (‘remember?’) (Adachi 2021: 90–99).

³⁰ *Chết* ‘die’ alone and *chết rồi* ‘(die + PFT) Lit. ‘have been dead’ also have interjectional use meaning ‘Oh no!’.

indicate the speaker’s subjective attitude toward the situation described, rather than presenting objective facts. These terms help to draw the addressee’s attention to the speaker’s perspective.

(26)³¹

Thật không may, dịch vụ Google Play đã ngừng
 THẬT NEG fortunate service PN PFT stop
 ‘Unfortunately, Google Play services has stopped’. (A quote from the Internet)

(27)³²

Thật không may, tựa phần mềm này không còn trong kho.
 THẬT NEG fortunate title part soft DEM.PROX NEG remain
 within store
 ‘Unfortunately, this title is permanently out of inventory.’ (A quote from the Internet)

(28)³³

Thật không may lại có vấn đề.
 THẬT NEG fortunate again have problem
 ‘Unfortunately, there is a problem again.’ (A quote from the Internet)

(29)³⁴

Thật là may, một người bạn đã cho cậu mượn một chiếc máy bay, ...[snip]
 THẬT LNK fortunate one person friend PFT let him [uncle, young man]
 borrow one CLF [vehicle] airplane
 ‘Fortunately, a friend lent him an airplane, ...[snip]’ (A quote from the Internet)

In examples (30)–(33), the phrase (*phải nói*) *thật là*, which translates to ‘I had to choose, to be honest’ (literally ‘I have to tell the truth that’), indicates that the speaker feels the situation being described is challenging to communicate to the addressee. This concern arises from the speaker’s worries about how the addressee might react. It is worth noting that the words *phải* ‘have to’ and *nói* ‘say, tell’) can be omitted without losing the meaning.

³¹ Công ty SONY Electronics Việt Nam. 2024. Thông báo sau xuất hiện thường xuyên: Thật không may, dịch vụ Google Play đã ngừng. [The following message appears frequently: Unfortunately, Google Play services has stopped]. <https://www.sony.com.vn/electronics/support/articles/00141861> (published on 1 October, 2016; accessed on 9 September 2024).

³² Intel Software Advantage Program Support Center. 2024. Thật không may, tựa phần mềm này không còn trong kho [Unfortunately, this title is permanently out of inventory]. <https://tgahelp.zendesk.com/hc/vi/articles/13531897639693-Th%E1%BA%ADt-kh%C3%B4ng-may-t%E1%BB%B1a-ph%E1%BA%A7n-m%E1%BB%81m-n%C3%A0y-kh%C3%B4ng-c%C3%B2n-trong-kho> (published on 8 March, 2024; accessed on 9 September 2024).

³³ Glosb. 2024. Thật không may [Unfortunately]. <https://vi.glosbe.com/vi/en/th%E1%BA%ADt%20kh%C3%B4ng%20may> (Accessed on 9 September 2024).

³⁴ Remy Charlip 2014. Thật Là May – Fortunately. Fahasa.com. https://www.fahasa.com/that-la-may-fortunately.html?srsltid=AfmBOoqbqUesqUr_U7MGVeEN-Y8heeft6TITv6eyUDu-Lq5PfuXTwvDP (Accessed on 9 September 2024).

- (30)³⁵ *Phải nói thật là chất lượng xây dựng các tòa nhà tại Việt Nam quá kém.*
 have.to say THẬT LNK quality construction PL building in
 Vietnam too low.
 ‘To be honest, the quality of the building construction in Vietnam is too low.’
 (A quote from the Internet)
- (31)³⁶ *“Nói thật là rất khó”*
 say THẬT LNK INT difficult
 ‘To be honest, (it’s) very difficult.’ (A quote from the Internet)
- (32)³⁷ A quote from the Internet
Nói thật là không dám ra khỏi nhà luôn, [snip]
 say THẬT LNK NEG dare go.out escape house immediately
 ‘To be honest, (I) dared to leave (my) house right away.’
 (A quote from the Internet)
- (33) *Thật là anh³⁸ nhớ em nhưng anh không dám nói ra.*
 THẬT LNK I [brother] miss you [sister] but I [brother]
 NEG dare say outwards
 ‘To be honest, I miss you but I cannot tell you.’ (Elicitation)

In (34) and (35), *thật ra* (thật + ra) means ‘actually’ and indicates that the speaker presents a situation as a fact that contradicts the addressee’s expectations.

³⁵ Nhất Nam. 2017. Chuyên gia Nhật: “Phải nói thật là chất lượng xây dựng các tòa nhà tại Việt Nam quá kém.” [A Japanese expert: “To be honest, the quality of the building construction in Vietnam is too low.”] *Đầu tư Bất động sản* [Real Estate Investment]. <https://baodautu.vn/batdongsan/chuyen-gia-nhat-phai-noi-that-la-chat-luong-xay-dung-cac-toa-nha-tai-viet-nam-qua-kem-d59560.html> (published on 1 March, 2017; Retrieved on 9 September 2024)

³⁶ Hà Vũ 2024. Liên kết phát triển miền Trung: “Nói thật là rất khó” [Central region development linkage: “To be honest, it is very difficult”] *VnEconomy*. <https://vneconomy.vn/lien-ket-phat-trien-mien-trung-noi-that-la-rat-kho.htm> (Accessed on 9 September 2024)

³⁷ Đại sứ quán Cộng hòa xã hội chủ nghĩa Việt Nam tại Matxcova - Liên bang Nga [The embassy of Socialist Republic of Viet Nam in the Russian Federation]. 2022. Nỗi niềm người Việt sơ tán từ Ucraina [Concerns of Vietnamese evacuees from Ukraine] <https://vnembassy-moscow.mofa.gov.vn/vi-vn/News/EmbassyNews/Trang/N%E1%BB%97i-ni%E1%BB%81m-ng%C6%B0%E1%BB%9Di-Vi%E1%BB%87t-s%C6%A1-t%C3%A1n-t%E1%BB%AB-Ucraina.aspx> (published on 14 March, 2022; Accessed on 9 September 2024)

³⁸ In Vietnamese, kinship terms often function as personal pronouns, both among family members and in broader social contexts. These terms vary according to gender, age, familiarity, and social relationships. For example, terms like *anh* ‘elder brother’, *chị* ‘elder sister’ and *em* ‘younger sibling’ indicate the power dynamics, intimacy and solidarity between participants in a conversation. Nguyễn (1997: 129) explains that couples, referred to in Vietnamese as *vợ chồng* ‘wife and husband’, use the terms *anh* ‘elder brother’ and *em* ‘younger sister’ to signify their relationship. In this context, *anh* implies ‘I’ (when the boy or husband is speaking) and *em* implies ‘you’ (when the girl or wife is speaking), or vice versa.

(34)³⁹ *Thật ra, không phải lúc nào cố gắng cũng là tốt*
 THẬT RA NEG right whenever exert.effort also LNK good
 ‘**Actually**, it’s not always good to exert effort.’ (A quote from the Internet)

(35)⁴⁰ *Thật ra rất đơn giản.*
 THẬT RA INT simple
 ‘**Actually**, it’s really simple.’ (A quote from the Internet)

In (36), *quả thật* (fruit + *thật*) meaning ‘in fact’ appears in the utterance-initial position, indicating that the speaker perceives the situation as a fact, similar to *thật ra* ‘actually’ in (34) and (35).

(36)⁴¹ *Quả thật, tôi không biết nên giải quyết vấn đề này như thế nào và bắt đầu từ đâu?*
 QUẢ THẬT I [servant] NEG know should solve
 problem DEM.PROX like how and begin from where
 ‘**In fact**, I don’t know how (I) should solve this problem and where (should I) start?’
 (A quote from the Internet)

What I have shown above can be summarized as in Table 1. First, the nominal usage of *thật* was obsolete, if not possible, in the 17th century. Second, while adjectival and adverbial usages are attested in the 17th century, the DM usage is found only in contemporary Vietnamese. Lastly, the newly derived DM usage is realized in a variety of ways, which I indicates that *thật* has been well grammaticalized in the language.

Table 1. *Thật*-based expressions in the 17th and 20th centuries

	17th century	20th century
(A) Nominal usage	obsolete	obsolete
(B) Adjectival usage	<i>Chúa thật</i> ‘the true lord’ Ex. (5) <i>rất thật</i> ‘very sincerely’ Ex. (6)	<i>tên thật</i> ‘real name’ Ex. (11) <i>thật không?</i> ‘really’ Ex. (12)
(C) Adverbial usage	<i>thật là</i> ‘without doubt’ Ex. (7) <i>chết thật</i> ‘really die’ Ex. (8) <i>thật là dại</i> ‘very foolish’ Ex. (9)	<i>món nướng thật ngon</i> ‘really delicious grilled dishes’ Ex. (14) <i>thật là lãng mạn</i> ‘really romantic’ Ex. (18) <i>nói thật</i> ‘tell the truth’ Ex. (20), (21)
(D) UFP usage	n.a.	<i>mệt thật</i> ‘tired indeed’ Ex. (23)

³⁹ Chùa Hạnh Đức. 2023. *Thật ra, không phải lúc nào cố gắng cũng là tốt* [Actually, it’s not always good to exert effort] <https://chuaanhduc.com/bai-viet/5-nep-song-dao/18550-that-ra-khong-phai-luc-nao-co-gang-cung-la-tot> (Published on 4 December, 2023; Retrieved on 9 September 2024).

⁴⁰ Glosb. 2024. *Thật ra* [Actually]. <https://vi.glosbe.com/vi/en/th%E1%BA%ADt%20ra> (accessed on 9 September 2024).

⁴¹ VietJack khoa hoc. 2024. ‘*Câu hỏi* [Question]’ <https://khoaoc.vietjack.com/question/464607/qua-that-toi-khong-biet-nen-giai-quyet-van-de-bay-nhu-the-nao-va> (published on 14 July, 2024; accessed on 9 September 2024).

	17th century	20th century
(E) DM usage	n.a.	<p><i>thật không may</i> ‘unfortunately’ Ex. (26), (27), (28)</p> <p><i>nói thật là</i> ‘to be honest’ Ex. (31), (32)</p> <p><i>thật là</i> ‘to be honest’ Ex. (33)</p> <p><i>thật ra</i> ‘actually’ Ex. (34) (35)</p> <p><i>quả thật</i> ‘in fact’ Ex. (36)</p>

5. Discussion

5.1 From “TRUE” to “INTENSIVE” in Sino-Vietnamese

The above observations suggest the following. First, the historical pathway of Sino-Vietnamese 實 *thật* seems to be in line with the well-attested grammaticalization path from “TRUE” to “INTENSIVE” (Kuteva et al. 2019: 443); from the adjectival usage ‘real’ to the adverbial usage ‘really, indeed’, subsequently giving rise to DMs in contemporary Vietnamese. In a broad sense, Hansen’s (2018a, b) cyclicity hypothesis holds true for Sino-Vietnamese cases. Interestingly, adjectival and adverbial usages can be attested in the 17th-century text PGTN. When the Chinese character 實 for *thật* was borrowed into Vietnamese (presumably as a noun), its adjectival usage appeared first, followed by its adverbial usage, because the reverse is not plausible from the standpoint of language change. However, of course, this is mostly a matter of speculation owing to the lack of any reliable number of historical resources in the language,⁴² although it is based on some cross-linguistic evidence (Kuteva et al. 2019: 443).

5.2. Toward (inter)subjectification

Second, the newly attested DMs of *thật* origin in contemporary Vietnamese are likely to convey the speaker’s view of the content of the immediate proposition, that is, subjectification. Moreover, and some of them seem to play an interpersonal role of prompting a reaction from the interlocutors, that is, intersubjectification. Consider the following examples. Note that *ấy* implies shared knowledge.

(23)'

M: *kiểu* *kịch* *Luu Quang Vũ* *ấy* *thật*
 style play PN UFP THẬT

‘(That was) exactly the playwright Luu Quang Vu’s dramatic style, indeed.’

(Family conversation).

⁴² Alves (2007b: 219) contends that most Vietnamese intensifiers of Chinese origin were not originally grammatical forms in Chinese, but rather became grammatical after being incorporated into Vietnamese. This supports the argument presented in this paper.

- (31) A quote from the Internet
 “*Nói thật là rất khó*”
 say THẬT LNK INT difficult
 ‘**To be honest**, (it’s) very difficult.’

When *thật* is used as an adverbial intensifier, it appears typically in the utterance-final position as in (26).⁴³ The usage shows that what is being said exceeds a certain standard according to the speaker’s judgment: This usage of *thật* can be regarded as a case of subjectification.⁴⁴ Contrastingly, when *thật* is used as a DM, it always appears in the utterance-initial position as in (36).⁴⁵ These DM usages serve to introduce the speaker’s attitude toward the following content, which is however only partly true. Interestingly, such utterance-initial DMs appear to play a vital role in attracting the attention of potential interlocutors, thus constituting leading to a case of intersubjectification.⁴⁶ The fact that some ‘truth’-related expressions in Vietnamese have taken on an intersubjective role in discourse leads us to a greater understanding of the way borrowed words of Chinese origin develop into DMs in each language (see Khammee 2024, *inter alia*).

Further, the functional differentiation of subjective and intersubjective *thật*-based DMs in terms of discourse-syntactic positions deserves attention. Arguably, Beeching and Detges (2014: 11) propose the following hypothesis: linguistic items such as adverbs and DMs occurring before the proposition serve to express something subjective, whereas those occurring after the proposition serve to express something intersubjective. It is true that certain items in some languages provide evidence in favor of Beeching and Detges’s (2014) hypothesis (see papers therein). However, Vietnamese DMs, at least those presented in this study, provide evidence against the hypothesis (see also papers in Rhee et al. 2021).

5.3. Morphosyntactic expansion in grammaticalization

Third, the formal feature of this grammaticalization is worth reconsideration. When it comes to DMs and relevant expressions such as general extenders (GEs) in the history of English, Overstreet and Yule (2021: 103) suggest that “there is a pattern of change from a longer form to a shorter form, retaining only the first two constituents of the longer expression. As we discovered, this is a typical direction of change throughout the history of English.” While Overstreet and Yule (2021:

⁴³ Of course, it is possible to take this usage as a DM instead of as an adverbial intensifier. However, differentiating from DMs and adverbial intensifiers is a matter I intend to pursue in future research.

⁴⁴ See Rhee (2021: 342) for discussion of mirativity based on 事實上 (*sasilsang*).

⁴⁵ As presented in Section 2.2, *thật* is not just used as a single component but often as a part of formulaic sequences such as *nói thật là* ‘to be honest’. Note that this particular formulaic expression may have been conventionalized enough to be reduced to *thật là* ‘to be honest’. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean the prevalence of ‘erosion’ among Vietnamese DMs (see Section 5.3 for this issue).

⁴⁶ This attention-getting function of (*nói*) *thật là* ‘to be honest’ may be termed ‘projector’. See Hopper & Thompson (2008) and Shibasaki (2014) on projectors.

175–176) summarize some of the structural differences of GEs in several languages,⁴⁷ the above-mentioned pathway of change seems generally plausible.⁴⁸ In grammaticalization studies, it is called ‘erosion,’ that is, “loss of phonetic features that a linguistic expression experiences in the course of grammaticalization” (Narrog & Heine 2021: 334, see Givón 1979: 208–209 for a typical reduction scale).

Contrarily, the Vietnamese DMs summarized in (2) show formal expansion instead of formal reduction, i.e., *thật* 實 ‘real’ + *ra* ‘out’ in (2a), *thực* 寔 ‘real’ + *ra* ‘out’ in (2b), *quả* 果 ‘fruit’ + *thực* 寔 ‘real’ in (2j), *kì* 其 ‘its/that’ + *thật* 實 ‘real’ in (2n) as well as *thật* 實 ‘real’ + *là* (linker), discussed in this study. Considering the fact that *thật* 實 and its cognates in Japanese, Korean, and Thai are all monosyllabic-like unless particles are attached (e.g., *shinni* [*shin* ‘truth’ + *-ni* (adverbializer)] ‘truly’), it would be natural for a short form to recruit other elements to make different types of DMs over time. In fact, we can see similar patterns of change in Thai (Khammee 2024) and in Japanese (Higashiizumi et al. 2024). Therefore, this study raises the possibility that some languages go through morphosyntactic expansion or modification instead of erosion to produce a cluster of related DMs.

5.4. Borrowed as a lexeme and grammaticalized as a DM⁴⁹

Last, it would be useful to suggest how DMs are derived in Asian languages, an issue especially addressed in this special issue. The borrowability of DMs through language contact has been pursued mostly from a synchronic perspective, notably in the field of bilingualism (e.g., Maschler 2000, Goss & Salmons 2000). Some studies regard DMs (or prefabricated multiword units) as among the most frequently borrowed items (e.g., Muysken 1981, Grant 2012). Suppose that DMs are easily borrowed from one language to another; ‘truth’-related DMs of Chinese origin in Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese might have been borrowed through either intensive or extensive contact with Chinese at various points in history. Contrary to expectations, however, this is quite unlikely as reported in this special issue (see also Rhee et al. 2021, Higashiizumi & Shibasaki (forthcoming), inter alia). In these languages, certain lexical items were borrowed from Chinese as is, and then, they developed in language-specific (but similar) ways into DMs.⁵⁰

How, then, can we explain the unborrowable nature of DMs in Asian languages spoken in the region of Chinese characters? It is well known that DMs are typically developed and used in spoken discourse. Therefore, one can easily find studies of

⁴⁷ The languages examined therein are English Creoles (Trinidad and Hawai‘i), Brazilian Portuguese and Spanish, Lithuanian, Russian, German, French, Swedish, and Persian. Note that Overstreet and Yule (2021) make no in-depth survey of any of the Asian languages addressed in the special issue.

⁴⁸ In addition to Overstreet and Yule (2021), the *it/there is no X* construction with a variety of nouns such as *doubt*, *question*, *way*, *wonder*, etc. in the slot X underwent clausal reduction to *no X* as DMs (e.g., Davidse & de Wolf 2012, Gentens et al. 2016, Nykiel & Shibasaki, forthcoming).

⁴⁹ This subsection is developed from Shibasaki and Higashiizumi (forthcoming).

⁵⁰ Matras (2007: 57) states that there is no clear evidence of borrowing of DMs in Vietnamese.

borrowing through spoken contact (e.g., Clyne 2003: 225–232 on the use of *well* and *you know* in bilingual and trilingual contexts, that is, English, German, Dutch; see also García Vizcaíno and Martínez-Cabeza (2005) for *well* in English and *bueno* in Spanish). However, such heavy lexical borrowing of Chinese words into Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese became possible only through written contact (see Note 1). Even contemporary DMs, if they can be traced to certain borrowed lexemes from Chinese, are likely to have developed after borrowing in their own ways. Moreover, such written contact-based lexemes are now used in spoken contexts in Vietnamese, as shown in Section 4. As this is a research area to be exploited, I plan to do follow-up research on it, based on both information and inputs from Rhee et al. (2021), Higashiizumi and Shibasaki (forthcoming), and this special issue.

6. Conclusion remarks

In this study, I presented a variety of Vietnamese *thật*-based DMs, by analyzing data from the 17th-century and contemporary Vietnam. The following points were derived from the analysis. *Thật*-related expressions seem to have followed the well-attested path from “TRUE” to “INTENSIVE” (Kuteva et al. 2019: 443) and further into DMs (Section 5.1). The subjective and intersubjective usages of *thật* forms are distributed in a complementary manner: The subjective usage appears in utterance-final position, while the intersubjective usage appears at utterance-initial position. Theoretically as well as descriptively, this finding suggests that researchers to reconsider Beeching & Detges’s (2014) hypothesis (Section 5.2). *Thật* has also recruited other elements to create multiword-unit DMs, which implies that DMs do not always undergo formal reduction (Section 5.3). As to whether DMs are borrowed through language contact, examples from Vietnamese and from Japanese (Higashiizumi & Shibasaki forthcoming) and Thai (Khammee 2024) suggest that lexical elements are first borrowed as they are and then grammaticalized as DMs in language-specific but similar ways (Section 5.4).

These findings are theoretical contributions to gain a better understanding of the way DMs emerged and developed in Vietnamese, through a descriptive analysis of historical and contemporary data. However, a comparison of data from the 17th century and from present-day Vietnamese is neither balanced nor sufficient: there is a need to examine the 18th- to 19th-century texts⁵¹ written in Chinese scripts, *Chữ nôm* and *Quốc ngữ* (See 2.1) as well. Languages do not change in a uniform way at a uniform rate. Therefore, I will conduct a follow-up review and research in to further test the results of the study.

⁵¹ According to Alves (2005: 320), based on data from *Truyện Kiều*, a poem written in *chữ nôm* characters in the 19th century, the adverb *thật* primarily functions before main verbs rather than adjectives. This observation suggests that DM usage such as *thật ra* ‘actually’ may occur in the late 19th century or possibly after.

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Abbreviations

CLF	classifier
COMP	complementizer
DEM.DIST	distal demonstrative
DEM.MED	medial demonstrative
DEM.PROX	proximal demonstrative
INT	intensifier
LNK	linker
NEG	negation
PFT	perfect
PL	plural
PN	proper noun
POSSIB	possibility
Q	question
UFP	utterance-final particle

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