

## Teaching Final Particles in Vietnamese

journal or publication title	The Journal of Kanda University of International Studies
number	30
page range	455-470
year	2018-03
URL	<a href="http://id.nii.ac.jp/1092/00001491/">http://id.nii.ac.jp/1092/00001491/</a>

# CÁCH GIẢNG DẠY TRỢ TỪ CUỐI CÂU TRONG TIẾNG VIỆT TEACHING FINAL PARTICLES IN VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE

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## Abstract

In the Vietnamese language, final particles (that is, particles placed at the end of the sentence) exist in considerable numbers, and are used in various fields, from daily conversation to poems, folk songs, idioms, sayings, literature and even in political speeches. These particles express to the listener not only the purpose of the utterance, but also the feeling of the speaker. Obviously Vietnamese people can use them easily when they want to convey certain information or emotions, and when we can use the final particles correctly, our utterance will sound more native.

This paper is limited to some common final particles in sentences, that is, *à, cho, chứ, đã, đây, đấy, luôn, mà, mất, ngay, nhé, nhỉ, thế, thôi, vậy*; and each entry is demonstrated as follows:

- Illustrative situations: the number of situations given increases according to its level of difficulty, in order to explain the grammar and the meaning. From them, we will summarize how to use them in the correct way.
- Related expressions: These points out the similarities and differences between the word being considered and other expressions that may be related semantically or grammatically.
- Combinations: Frequent combinations of the word being considered are presented with other expressions.

## TEACHING FINAL PARTICLES IN VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE

### I. INTRODUCTION:

Typologically, Vietnamese language belongs to the group of analytic, isolating languages along with other languages like Chinese, Thai, etc. The basic characteristic of these languages is that words do not change their form in the sentence, and their relationship is expressed by word order. When the order changes, the syntactic relationship between words also changes, making the meaning of the sentence change also.

As in many languages around the world, Vietnamese has a number of particles able to be placed at the end of sentence, and these express the purpose of the utterance. Together with this, the final particles express the attitude and feelings of the speaker about the matter at hand. What sets them apart from other lexical and functional words in a sentence is that they do not contribute to the propositional content of an utterance; and yet the final particle is significant in the computation of a sentence's truth condition. According to Giang Ha Le (Vietnamese Sentences Final Particles, University of Southern California, 2015), although final particles do not feature in more formal discourse such as newspaper reports, debates, or public announcements, since the language of the media calls for objective reporting of truth devoid of added emotive or subjective content, they are however heavily employed in colloquial speech and are an important component of a competent Vietnamese speaker's lexicon. Comparing Vietnamese to the Japanese language, Japanese particles – comprising a total of 188 particles<sup>1</sup> – are small words that indicate the relationships of words within a sentence, and they follow other words such as verbs, nouns and adjectives, and are a part of the sentence. Similarly to Vietnamese,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fluentu.com/japanese/blog/japanese-sentence-particles/>

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many of them come at the end of sentence, such as *ne* (ね) in Japanese for seeking agreement or confirmation and *chứ* in Vietnamese; *yo* (よ) for the Japanese version of exclamation mark, to emphasize, as *quá* does in Vietnamese. The difference is that in Japanese, some final particles are used only by female particular gender: for example, *no* (の) for making a question or adding stress to a statement is often used by women or children, while *sa* (さ) for adding emphasis to a statement or *zo* (ぞ) for ending a sentence with emphasis and determination, are often used by men; but there is no gender-specificity in final particles in the Vietnamese language.

While following specific grammar rules, final particles in Vietnamese also reflect many different nuances of meaning. Obviously Vietnamese people can use them easily when we want to convey certain information or emotions, and even children can understand them from the poems, folk songs and fairy tales which are sung to them by their mother. Although for a foreigner, understanding them is a big effort, if we know how to use them well our utterances will sound more natural. Therefore, in this paper I would like to introduce a limited number of final particles in Vietnamese, being: *à, cho, chứ, đã, đây, đấy, mà, mất, nhé, nhỉ, thôi*, and *vậy*, and show how they can be used naturally in everyday situations to convey one's attitude and feelings.

## II . FINAL PARTICLES IN VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE

These particles express the purpose of the utterance, and the attitude and feelings of the speaker about the topic. They indicate whether a certain utterance is negative, interrogative (Wh question or yes/no question), explanative or imperative. The meaning of these final particles is extracted from “Dictionary of Basic Vietnamese Grammar (Nguyen Van Hue, 2001)”.

**2.1. Final particle à:** is placed at the end of a question to ask for more information about something that the speaker is observing (based on certain evidence). We also see **à** used in spoken language to express concern to the listener, or express the speaker's surprise about something.

(1) Nam and Hai have been swimming for a long time. Hai looks tired. Nam says:

Anh Hai mệt à?

Mr Hai tired à? → Mr Hai, you are tired, aren't you?

In this case, Nam wants to verify his observation (Hai looks tired) so he uses **à** as final particle in the question.

(2) Every morning, seeing Mai goes to work, the neighbor always asks:

Cô Mai đi làm à?

Ms Mai go to work à? → Ms Mai, you are going to work?

In this case, the neighbor does not care whether Ms.Mai answers, as this is meant as a greeting.

(3) Normally a daughter goes to school at this time, but today she is at home. The father says:

Con không đi học à?

You no go study à? → Oh, you are not going to school!

In this case, the father's surprise as to the truthfulness of the proposition is because the daughter should be at school at this time.

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(4) *à* can transform a Wh question into yes/no question

Em đang học gì?

You (be-)ing study what ? → What are you studying?

Em đang học gì *à*?

You (be-)ing study what *à*? → Are you studying (something)?

**2.2. Final particle *cho*:** is placed at the end of sentence to offer a suggestion, look for sympathy, or warn of a bad thing that may happen to the listener.

(5) Seeing Nam is tired but has to finish his work on time, Hai offers to help Nam to give him time to rest. Hai says:

Anh Nam nghỉ một chút đi, để tôi làm cho.

Mr Nam rest a little *go*<sup>2</sup> let me do *cho* → Mr Nam please take time to rest for a while, let me do that for you.

In this case, Hai uses *cho* to suggest that he will help Nam to do his work and hopes Nam will agree with him.

(6) Seeking sympathy

Em không cố ý làm việc đó, xin cô tha lỗi cho *ạ*<sup>3</sup>.

I no purposely do that please teacher forgive *cho*

I have not purposely done that, teacher forgive me please.

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<sup>2</sup> Final particle expressing persuasion

<sup>3</sup> Final particle expressing politeness, respectfulness

In this case, the student uses *cho* in the hope that teacher will sympathize with him.

(7): Warning of an unfavorable consequence which is caused by the listener themselves

(7a) Lan thinks Hoa's dress is very odd, and says:

Chị mặc áo này người ta cười cho.

you wear dress this people laugh *cho*. → If you wear that dress, people will laugh at you.

(7b) Nam drives very fast, and Hai tells Nam:

Chậm lại đi không cảnh sát phạt cho.

Slow again *đi*<sup>4</sup> no police fine *cho*. → Slow down otherwise you will be fined.

In these cases, the speakers use *cho* in order to warn the listeners something bad could happen to them.

**2.3. Final particle *chứ*:** is used when the speaker is seeking the confirmation from the listener, reminding the listener about something, emphasizing what has just been affirmed, or affirming what the speaker says while rejecting what listener has just said.

(8) Nam meets Binh after they have not seen each other for a long time. Nam asks Binh:

Anh vẫn sống ở Quận 10 chứ?

You still live at/in District 10 *chứ*? → You are still living in District 10, aren't you?

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<sup>4</sup> Final particle expressing persuasion

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In this situation, Nam thinks Binh is still living in District 10 and he wants Binh to confirm his idea, so **chứ** is used to seek confirmation.

Compare: Anh vẫn sống ở Quận 10? This is a checking question: the speaker wants to check if they are right.

(9) Compare the 2 sentences below:

(9a) Anh làm việc này cho tôi! → You do this for me!

(9b) Anh làm việc này cho tôi **chứ**? → Could you do this for me?

(9a) this is an order from an older to a younger person, or from a boss to an employee.

(9b) this is a request from an older to a younger person, or from a boss to an employee, and in this case, **chứ** is used by the speaker in order to seek the listener's agreement.

(10) In the store, Lan tells Mai:

Máy lạnh Toshiba của Mỹ, tốt lắm!

air conditioner Toshiba of America, good very! → Toshiba air-conditioner from America is very good!

Ms Mai says:

Máy lạnh Toshiba là của Nhật chứ!

air conditioner Toshiba is of Japan **chứ**! → Toshiba air-conditioner is from Japan!

In this situation, **chứ** is used because Mai wants to assert that what she said is right at the same time as asserting that what Lan said is wrong.

**2.4. Final particle *đã*:** *đã* often is used right before the verb as a marker indicating the simple past tense. *đã* as a final particle is used to indicate that the action just mentioned will be completed before doing another action.

(11) Seeing her son come home from a football match, a mother says:

Con phải làm bài tập chứ. → You must do your homework.

Son replies:

Con đi tắm *đã*.

I go bath *đã* → I'll have a bath first.

In this situation, the son wants to tell his mother that having had a bath first, he will then do his homework.

**2.5. Final particle *đây*:** is used to emphasize the idea of anxiety or worry about something; to emphasize the reality and certainty of what just has been mentioned; or to indicate immediacy. *đây* is often used in spoken language.

(12) Lost at midnight, Nam is very worried and he asks Hai:

Mình đi đường nào *đây*?

we go street which *đây*? → Which way should we take?

In this situation, *đây* is used to express the speaker's anxiety about what is happening.

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(13)

(13a) Ms Hoa wants everyone listen to her: Em nói **đây**.

I speak **đây** → I speak now.

(13b) Ms Hoa want to let Ms Mai knows that time is up soon:

Làm nhanh lên, sắp hết giờ **đây này**.

do fast up, soon time out of **đây này** → Hurry up, the time is up soon.

In this situation, **đây** is often combined with **này** to remind (13a) or to warn (13b) the listener of something that is about to happen.

**2.6. Final particle *đây***: is used to ask about something that is happening at the moment of speaking; to warn or remind of something will happen; or to evaluate or assess something.

(14) Hai is reading, and Nam asks:

Anh đọc gì **đấy**?

you read what **đấy**? → What are you reading?

In this situation, **đấy** is used in order to ask about the thing (reading) which is happening at the moment of speaking.

(15) Hai sees a new woman at the office, so he asks Nam: “Who is this?” Nam answers:

Cô ấy là thư ký mới **đấy**.

she is secretary new **đấy** → She is a new secretary.

In this situation, **đấy** is used to emphasize the reality of what is mentioned.

(16) Nam afraid that Hai will be late tomorrow. He says:

Ngày mai anh đến đúng giờ **đấy**\*, nếu không ông giám đốc sẽ giận **đấy**\*\*.  
tomorrow you come right time **đấy**, if no Mr. Director will angry **đấy**  
→ You should be on time tomorrow, otherwise the director will be angry.

In this situation, **đấy** is used to remind (\*) or to warn (\*\*) of something that will happen.

(17) After examining the report, the director says:

Anh làm tốt **đấy**!  
you do good **đấy** → You do very good job!

In this situation **đấy** is used to express the reality of the thing which has just mentioned, and often it is used in terms of an evaluation or assessment.

**2.7. Final particle mà:** is used in spoken language in order to emphasize an explanation, persuasive argument, affirmation or reproach.

(18) Nam tells Hai that his mother cooks very well. Hai says:

Mẹ tôi là đầu bếp **mà**.  
mother I is chef **mà** → My mother is a chef.

In this situation, **mà** is used in order to explain that what has been said is natural and only to be expected (His mother cooks well because she is a chef.)

(19) Hai thinks Nam will not go to his party, so he asks: “You’re sure you will come to my party?” Nam answers:

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Tôi đến *mà*.

I come *mà* → Sure, I will come.

In this situation, *mà* is used in order to affirm the fact (Nam will certainly come) that speaker has just mentioned so as to reassure the listener.

(20) Nam has warned Hai many times that he should not come to work late. Now Hai has been sacked because of this problem. Nam says:

Tôi đã nói anh nhiều lần rồi *mà*.

I (past) speak you many times already *mà*. → I have told you many times.

In this situation, *mà* is used in order to reproach the listener with the fact that Hai (listener) did not follow Nam (speaker)'s advice.

**2.8. Final particle *mất*:** is used when the speaker wants to express their anxiety about some bad thing might happen, or their regret for something unwanted that has happened.

(21) Taking his father to hospital, a man is very worried for his father, so he says to the doctor:

Làm ơn cứu ba tôi, nếu không ông ấy chết *mất*.

please save father I, if not he die *mất* → Please help my dad, if not he might die.

In this situation, the speaker uses *mất* because he is worried about his father's health.

(22) A woman returns to a shop to buy the bag she likes, but someone has bought it already. She says:

Mẹ ơi, cái giỏ người ta mua **mất** rồi.

mother, the bag people buy **mất** already → Mom, the bag has already been sold.

In this situation, speaker uses **mất** to indicate her disappointment because what has happened is contrary to her wish.

**2.9. Final particle *nhé*:** is used to draw the listener's attention in an informal way, to imply that the listener should agree with the speaker, regarding to the speaker's advice, request, or suggestion.

(23) *nhé* can be used in goodbyes or congratulations in order to draw the listener's attention to the friendly manner of speaking.

(23a) Hẹn gặp lại **nhé!**

appointment meet again **nhé** → See you again!

(23b) Chúc mừng sinh nhật anh **nhé!**

Congratulation birthday you **nhé!** → Happy birthday to you!

(24) A teacher gives students advice:

Các em phải cố gắng học **nhé!**

(plural) you should try study **nhé** → You should try your best to study!

**nhé** in this situation is used in order to give some friendly advice to the listener.

(25) Nam asks Hai go to coffee, Hai nods his head; Nam says:

Bạn gật đầu là đồng ý rồi **nhé!**

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you nod head is agree already *nhé!* → You nodded your head; it means you agree, right?

*nhé* in this situation is used in order to confirm a commitment or suggestion.

**2.10. Final particle *nhỉ*:** is used in interrogative or exclamatory sentences.

(26) Nam looks at Hai and thinks Hai is tired; Nam says:

Trông anh có vẻ mệt *nhỉ!*

look you tired *nhỉ?* → You look tired, aren't you?

*nhỉ* in this situation is used in order to show the speaker's belief, while expecting the listener to agree with it.

(27) Nam knows Hai is not a rich man. Therefore, when Hai had told Nam he has just bought a Mercedes, Nam says:

Ô, anh giàu *nhỉ!*

Oh, you rich *nhỉ!* → Oh, you are rich!

*nhỉ* in this situation is used to emphasize the nuance of irony of the utterance.

(28) Look at these examples:

Anh nói gì *nhỉ?*

You say what *nhỉ?* → What do you say?

*nhĩ* is used in this question with the purpose of showing the speaker's amicability toward the listener.

(29) Feeling he is doing something wrong, Nam says to himself:

Minh đang làm gì *nhĩ*?

I (progressive) do what *nhĩ*? → What am I doing?

*nhĩ* is used in this situation to form a narrative question, and the speaker does not require an answer from the listener.

**2.11. Final particle *thôi*:** is used to express the limit of the scope or level; or to show that is a unique thing or action.

(30) Look at these examples:

(30 a) Tôi gặp anh ấy vài lần *thôi*.

I meet him couple time *thôi* → I have met him only a couple times.

*thôi* is used in order to express the limit of times that the speaker met him: just a few, not many.

(30 b) Người ích kỷ là người nghĩ đến mình *thôi*.

person selfish is person think of themselves *thôi* → Selfish people only think of themselves.

*thôi* is used in order to express the meaning of uniqueness: selfish people think of nothing but themselves.

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**2.12. Final particle *vậy*:** is used in a question to ask about a fact which is happening at the moment of speaking; to ask for more details about something that has happened; or to ask about things relative to the discussion or observed in that situation.

(31) Anh làm gì *vậy*?

you do what *vậy*? → What are you doing?

*vậy* in this question is used to ask about what is happening of the moment of speaking.

(32) Nam saw Hai talking with someone he does not know. He asks Hai:

Anh đã nói chuyện với ai *vậy*?

you (past) talk with who *vậy*? → who did you talk with?

*vậy* in this situation is used to ask for getting a clear understanding about an event which has happened already. *vậy* in this meaning is always used after indefinite pronouns *ai* (*who*), *gì* (*what*), *sao* (*why*), *nào* (*which*), *đâu* (*where*) ...

(33) After discussion with Nam for a while, Hai does not agree with what Nam has said, so he says:

Anh nói gì lạ *vậy*?

you say what strange *vậy*? → What are you talking about?

*vậy* is used to ask for more details about something after discussing, observing, or comparing; and it is given out like a conclusion. In this situation, Hai wants to show his conclusion that he does not agree with what they has discussed.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

This paper addresses several issues relating to Vietnamese sentence final particles. We provided a description of function and meaning with illustrative examples for 12 final particles that are common in the language. The illustrations are shown via some authentic texts such as daily conversations and some business conversations.

Unlike in English, where normally rhythm, intonation and stress are used when the speaker wants to express his/her exact meaning for the listener, in Vietnamese (and many other languages such as Japanese, Chinese, and Korean), sentence final particles are used every day in both formal and colloquial speech. However, finding the right words in English to translate the sentences ending in final particles in these languages can be difficult.

In this paper, I would like to introduce some suggestions of ways to teach final particles words to learners who speak English as their first language which are believed to be easy and not very time-consuming for the teachers to do yet still supposedly interesting for the learners to learn.

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