

LINGUISTICS AND VIETNAMESE LINGUISTICS

**DISCUSSION ON LINGUISTIC CONVENTIONS
AND THE TRUTH OF PROPOSITIONS****HO VAN HAN* - NGUYEN LAN PHUONG** -****PHAM THI DIEP*** - NGUYEN THANH LONG******

ABSTRACT: Every language possesses conventions, regulations of usage, and many linguists have been striving to study these rules to discover the pathways of a language. It is also understandable that it can help a specific language community to accept these ways of usage and understand each other in communication. Linguistic conventions consider their traditional connections to be stipulations of the truth of propositions, and do not need to consider metaphysical commitments to those truth values. So, whether the operation of a language is natural, independent or conventional? On the one hand, if the language operation is conventional and the speaker/hearer conform to those conventions, it leads to a common knowledge which is called a priori knowledge, not depending on observation, experience, real-world assessment, but relying on the logic, rules of a language. Furthermore, it can also be called a posteriori knowledge, depending on observation, direct experience with the world, empirical evidence. On the other hand, if the language action is natural, independent, there is no need to consider linguistic conventions, except considering knowledge by intuition of the speaker and the listener. It means not relying on common inferences (a priori knowledge and a posteriori knowledge) to determine the truth of propositions, but relying on epistemic status to commit metaphysical values to those truths. The paper evaluates and debates about linguistic conventions and the truth of propositions.

KEY WORDS: Linguistic conventions; the truth of propositions; epistemic status; a priori knowledge; a posteriori knowledge.

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1. Introduction

Every language is governed by conventions and usage rules, and many linguists have been striving to study these rules and the pathways of language evolution. It is understandable that such conventions help a specific linguistic community accept certain usages and facilitate mutual understanding in communication. Linguistic conventions treat traditional associations as guidelines for truth values without engaging in metaphysical commitments regarding those values.

This raises an essential question: Is the operation of language a natural and independent process shaped by an individual's idiolect, or is it determined by shared conventions? On the one hand, if a language operates through conventions and everyone adheres to them, it leads to a form of common knowledge - what is known as a priori knowledge. This type of knowledge is independent of observation, experience, and empirical evaluation, relying instead on logic and linguistic rules. Alternatively, it may be classified as a posteriori knowledge, which depends on direct observation, experience of the world, and empirical evidence. On the other hand, if a language evolves naturally and independently within individuals, then linguistic conventions become irrelevant. Instead, the focus shifts to knowledge by intuition, where the speaker's intuitive understanding influences the listener's interpretation. In this view, determining the truth value of a proposition does not require traditional inferential reasoning (priori or posteriori knowledge); rather, it depends on an individual's epistemic status, which serves as the basis for making metaphysical commitments to truth values.

There is a reality that the operation of language in society is not inherently governed by conventions, yet people often perceive certain cases as conventionally established. This paradox can be observed in the works of Lewis (1969), Grice (1971), Schiffer (1972), Chomsky (1980, 1986), *Nguyen Tat Thanh University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam:*

*Email: hvhan@ntt.edu.vn; **Email: nlphuong@ntt.edu.vn

Email: ptdiep@ntt.edu.vn; *Email: ntlong@ntt.edu.vn

Davis (2003), and Davidson (2005). The fundamental question arises: Do conventions create a shared linguistic meaning, or Is meaning inherently tied to the individual who generates it?

In communication, do individuals participate in linguistic conventions naturally, or intentionally? Is an individual's language entirely a product of their own making, independent of linguistic conventions? Or, conversely, are linguistic conventions the foundation upon which speakers construct meaning for what they express?

When studying the development or operation of a language, researchers often turn to dictionaries, newspapers, novels, and other sources, using diachronic and/or synchronic approaches to measure both fixed and evolving meanings at the lexical and grammatical levels. From this, they typically identify the syntax and semantics of individual words and syntactic structures. However, if we examine language use in real communication, meaning is shaped by the speaker's thought process and expression, while the listener interprets these expressions to identify patterns of speech, word choice strategies, and grammatical structures. Throughout this interaction, the speaker also analyzes the context to determine which communicative approach will be the most effective in achieving their communicative goals.

At times, a speaker may not directly express their intended meaning using a particular utterance (U), yet they still deliberately use U, even if they have no initial inclination to associate U with meaning (M). In such cases, the speaker may adjust certain linguistic conventions to achieve their communicative objective, leading to different interpretations of U between speaker and listener. This phenomenon can be seen as the speaker's personal linguistic system, which, at times, transcends conventional norms - what is often referred to as the speaker's linguistic competence in actual language use.

When studying conventions in a language, we should consider the truth of proposition based on the speaker's knowledge and belief because a proposition of U expresses the speaker's thought and can be considered either true or false. Therefore, the truth of a proposition refers to its correspondence with reality. There are different philosophical and linguistic conventions to defining truth such as:

- A proposition is true if it accurately describes the state of affairs in the world. (e.g., "*A bachelor is an unmarried man.*") This is an example of alethic necessity, where the proposition is necessarily true due to an undeniable referential meaning relationship between "*a bachelor*" and "*an unmarried man*").

- A proposition is true if it fits consistently within a system of beliefs or knowledge. (e.g., "*A contract is legally binding when both parties consent.*") This is true within a legal framework where a contract law operates based on precedent and legal principles. However, in many cases, although both parties have signed an agreement, it has no legal validity.

- A proposition is true when it depends on its usefulness or practical consequences. It works in a given context, helps solve a problem, or leads to real successful action. (e.g., "*The customer satisfaction leads to business success.*") It may not always be universally true (some businesses succeed despite poor customer service), but it is useful because applying this principle generally leads to positive outcomes in business.

- A proposition is true if and only if it is the case. (e.g., "*Snow is white.*" is true if and only if "*Snow is white.*").

The truth of a proposition can be reflected upon through the perspectives of Ayer (1965) and Gettier (1963). Ayer (1956) viewed a proposition as lying within the relationship between knowledge and belief. He argued that when something is considered a justified belief, it constitutes knowledge. He defined knowledge as the sufficient and necessary conditions for knowing that something is, first and foremost, true, then correctly identified as that thing, and finally, firmly recognized as such. To illustrate this, he proposed the convention "X knows that it is Y", which implies that "X believes that it is Y." In response, Gettier (1963) presented a counterexample as follows: Does the man X

mistakenly identify a dog as a sheep when looking at a field (considering that the dog has been disguised as a sheep by a farmer and assuming that X has not seen it before)? Consequently, X genuinely believes that there is a sheep in the field. This assertion is formally correct and reasonable, yet the true nature of the sheep must be reconsidered, as it was deliberately manipulated by the farmer beforehand.

In his convention theory, Ayer (1965) posits three primary conditions for knowledge: Belief - Truth - Justification as following conventions: 1/Belief: An individual can only be said to know something if he/she genuinely believe it; 2/Truth: The proposition believed must be true in reality; 3/Justification: The belief must have a rational basis or be justifiably supported.

As previously discussed, Gettier (1963) demonstrated that Ayer's Justified - True - Belief (JTB) model is insufficient for defining knowledge, as it fails to exclude cases of epistemic luck instances where his belief is both true and justified but attained through coincidence or mere chance. This challenge led both epistemology and linguistic convention theories to explore additional conditions beyond JTB to more precisely delineate the concept of knowledge. Linguistic convention, as the study of how language encodes meaning and truth in communication, has been particularly affected by these philosophical debates.

In response to Gettier's critique, several scholars proposed a fourth condition to safeguard the JTB model against cases of justified but accidentally true beliefs. Erasmus (2014) argues that for a belief to qualify as knowledge, it must track the truth meaning:

- (1) If proposition (*P*) is true, then speaker (*X*) believes *P*.
- (2) If *P* is false, then *X* does not believe *P*.

This formulation eliminates Gettier cases because, in the sheep case above, *X* would still believe a sheep was present, even when the actual object of perception was a disguised dog indicating that *X*'s belief fails to properly track the truth.

Goldman (2012) contended that knowledge must be produced by a reliable cognitive process, such as intuition, empirical observation, or scientific evidence. This ensures that true beliefs arise from dependable epistemic mechanisms rather than accidental or misleading reasoning. Lehrer (2018) proposed that knowledge requires not only justification but also infallibility meaning that if there is any possibility that a belief could be false, it should not be classified as knowledge.

In the natural language, these refinements to epistemology are reflected in linguistic intuitions regarding knowledge claims. When a person happens to be correct by mere chance, they are typically not said to "know" something. For instance, if a student blindly guesses the correct answer on a test, we do not say, "*He knew the answer,*" but rather, "*He guessed it right.*" This distinction highlights an inherent cognitive filter in human language that instinctively eliminates Gettier like scenarios.

From this analysis, it is evident that linguistic conventions must evolve to accommodate the increasing complexity of knowledge perception. This issue has become even more pressing with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), which influences how humans seek, process, and validate information. As people increasingly rely on AI-generated content, linguistic conventions shape how AI systems understand and categorize information in terms of truth, verification, and knowledge, thus reinforcing the profound interplay between epistemology, language, and emerging technologies.

2. Discussion

A review of the issue of linguistic conventions reveals both supporting and opposing perspectives on their existence. Lewis (1983) affirms the presence of linguistic conventions, stating, "*It is a platitude, something that only a philosopher would dream of denying, that there are conventions of language.*" Similarly, Fodor (1981) asserts the existence of linguistic conventions, arguing that "*Think of a natural language as a system of conventional vehicles for the expression of thoughts (a view to which I know of no serious objections).*"

In contrast, Chomsky (1996) challenges the idea that linguistic conventions are clearly identifiable within patterns of language use, claiming that "*The regularities in usage needed for linguistic*

conventions are few and scattered... Furthermore, such conventions as there do not have any interesting bearing on the theory of meaning or knowledge of language." Supporting Chomsky's skepticism, Collins (2008) also finds linguistic conventions to be ambiguous, stating that *"The relevant notion of convention remains wholly opaque and hence, by implication, unacceptable."*

Although linguistic conventions remain a subject of debate, this does not mean we should overlook their crucial role. Linguistic conventions enable a speech community to acquire language at various levels - from the most basic level of words, sounds, symbols, signals, and simple sentences to higher levels of meaning, pragmatics, complex sentences, and prosody - facilitating mutual agreement on meaning. This implies that within a linguistic community, individual language use is shared and generally accepted by its members. Without foundational linguistic conventions and rules, it would be difficult for individuals to progress to higher linguistic levels and achieve communicative goals.

The aim of this paper is to examine linguistic conventions as traditional associations that establish truth conditions and to explore the relationship between these truth conditions and abstract commitments such as knowledge, belief, and the speaker's intention behind an utterance. To achieve this, the paper will analyze whether language operation is a natural, independent process or convention-based. Finally, it will evaluate and discuss linguistic conventions and the truth value of propositions through the following three hypotheses:

- (1) The speaker's utterance U has meaning M according to linguistic conventions.
- (2) The meaning M of U results from the speaker's participation in linguistic conventions.
- (3) The meaning M of U does not result from the speaker's participation in linguistic conventions.

If this hypothesis holds, then the conventions of U cannot constitute meaning M.

Let us analyze some communication scenarios below to better understand linguistic conventions in some Vietnamese dialogues:

(1) A: "Còn gì ăn không?" (*Is there anything left to eat?*)

B: "Còn đây, nhưng chắc chỉ còn xương thôi!" (*Yeah, but probably just bones!*)

Utterance (1): A uses the expression 'Còn X không?' when wanting something to eat. B responds with 'Còn X' to indicate 'yes.' However, B adds 'nhưng còn Z,' where Z is different from X and Z has a lower value than X, aiming to negate 'Còn X' - essentially negating the affirmative meaning 'yes'.

(2) A: "Em muốn về." (*I want to go home.*)

B: "Đợi hết mưa đi em." (*Wait for the rain to stop.*)

Utterance (2): A uses the expression 'muốn X' to request B to perform X. B responds with 'đợi hết Z,' implying a delay or refuse in performing X but using an image unrelated to X ($Z \neq X$), employing Z to convey the response.

Illustrations (1) and (2) demonstrate that in Vietnamese, meaning and context enable mutual understanding among interlocutors, even when X and Z are independent and distinct values. In communication, the presence of X does not necessarily entail Z ($X \rightarrow Z$), and vice versa. Furthermore, Z is a natural component, chosen by the speaker based on his knowledge and interaction with the listener in the context. Therefore, although linguistic conventions in these cases can determine which proposition a given sentence expresses, they are powerless to make propositions true or false, so the very possibility of truth by convention is foreclosed. In these situations, we agree with Lewy's argument that linguistic conventions can only determine what a sentence means or what idea it expresses. However, whether that idea is actually true is a separate issue that conventions cannot decide. This means that while conventions can influence language, they cannot create truth. Some might still argue that we can declare a sentence to express a true statement by definition. But this explanation doesn't really prove that the statement is true by convention. Instead, it creates a circular reasoning problem unless the statement's truth exists independently of the convention itself.

From a pragmatic perspective, X and Z maintain a causal relationship, even though Z is an idiosyncratic linguistic element shaped by the speaker's intention regarding the proposition's truth

value. More specifically, Z is B's personal linguistic construct, independent of linguistic conventions, yet still connected to X. The meaning $M \in Z$ in B is not a result of participation in linguistic conventions if considered separately from A's context. Therefore, (1) and (2) align with all three hypotheses regarding linguistic conventions in Vietnamese discourse between speakers and listeners.

3. Conclusion

In a language, it is difficult to precisely determine which causal relationships are appropriate for the meaning M of utterance U to become conventional. However, the crucial point is that a speaker tends to use his language in a certain way, and other speakers in the same community also tend to use similar expressions frequently with the same meaning. Conversely, speakers recognize that certain expressions are commonly used in their community, indicating a certain interdependence between individual tendencies and community-wide linguistic conventions. If a speaker participates in a particular convention, his linguistic behavior aligns with the predominant tendencies of that community.

Linguistic conventions can be viewed as a standard measure for expressing both form and fundamental meaning, where a speaker in a linguistic community shares a common understanding of meaning. Consequently, the linguistic meaning of most expressions in a language is the conventional meaning assigned to those expressions within that community. However, we must consider two key characteristics of linguistic conventions:

Firstly, the challenge of determining whether a convention exists. How do we establish that a frequently used expression has become a convention? Consider the proverb: "Một cây làm chẳng nên non, ba cây chụm lại nên hòn núi cao" (*One tree alone does not make a forest, three trees together make a forest*). If the expression $1X \neq \text{'non/forest'}$, $3X = \text{'non/forest'}$ is conventional, then one could argue that "Một hạt cát chẳng làm nên đống cát, ba hạt cát tạo thành đống cát" (*One grain of sand does not make a pile; three grains of sand make a pile*) should also be accepted within the linguistic community. However, this example illustrates a paradox, highlighting that the concepts of 'nhiều = many/much' and 'ít = a few/little' lack a strict convention and are subjective of the speaker. This raises the question: when is a linguistic convention established? To address this, we should determine the meanings encoded in a given linguistic community - specifically, which meanings are systematically encoded in the shared language of the community or even between two interacting interlocutors. A convention is established when U is consistently used to express meaning M, making M the recognized meaning of U in that community or a small group. The best evidence for this is when speakers recognize the regularity and accept U as the conventional way to express M within their community.

Secondly, the nature of language offers valuable insights into linguistic conventions. The relationship between words and their meanings is not inherent but socially determined (Saussure, 2004). Language is an innate human ability, closely linked to cognition and creativity (Chomsky, 1975). Therefore, language is a human creation - it is not a naturally occurring entity but rather something that is continuously developed and maintained by speakers over time. This means that a language has an individual aspect, reflecting the distinctive speaking styles of its users. Additionally, a language has a relativity hypothesis, influencing how we think and perceive the world through acquiring a language (Whorf, 1956). For instance, in English, the word 'orange' refers to both a fruit and a color, whereas in Vietnamese, 'trái cam' (orange) is a fruit but linguistically associated with the color 'xanh' (green), demonstrating differences in conceptual categorization across languages.

Finally, when studying specific linguistic conventions such as morphological, phonological, syntactic, lexical, and semantic or pragmatic conventions, we need to view each of them as a part of a system of rules that govern how a language is structured and used. It is also important to remember that these conventions are not always fixed or natural but are shaped by social norms and historical developments. Through social and cultural rules, a language gradually becomes standardized in terms

of meaning and usage within specific contexts. It reflects the shared understanding, meaning, and usage among speakers within the language community.

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Bàn luận về Quy ước ngôn ngữ và giá trị đúng của mệnh đề

Tóm tắt: Mọi ngôn ngữ đều có tính quy ước, quy luật sử dụng, và nhiều nhà nghiên cứu ngôn ngữ đã và đang nỗ lực nghiên cứu những quy luật, con đường đi của ngôn ngữ. Cũng dễ hiểu là nó có thể giúp một cộng đồng ngôn ngữ cụ thể chấp nhận cách sử dụng và hiểu nhau trong giao tiếp. Quy ước ngôn ngữ coi các liên kết truyền thống như những quy định về giá trị đúng và không cần xem xét đến những cam kết siêu hình về giá trị đúng ấy. Vậy liệu rằng sự vận động của ngôn ngữ là có tính tự nhiên/độc lập hay quy ước? Một mặt, nếu sự vận động của ngôn ngữ có tính quy ước và mọi người tuân thủ theo những quy ước ấy thì dẫn đến một kiến thức chung và kiến thức chung này gọi là kiến thức suy luận diễn dịch (a priori knowledge), không phụ thuộc vào quan sát, trải nghiệm, đánh giá thực tế mà phụ thuộc vào tính logic, quy luật của ngôn ngữ. Ngoài ra, cũng có thể gọi là kiến thức suy luận quy nạp (a posteriori knowledge), phụ thuộc vào quan sát, trải nghiệm trực tiếp với thế giới, chứng cứ thực tế. Mặt khác, nếu sự vận động của ngôn ngữ có tính tự nhiên/độc lập thì không cần xem xét đến các quy ước ngôn ngữ, mà xem xét đến kiến thức qua trực giác (knowledge by intuition) của người nói và người nghe. Nghĩa là không cần thông qua những suy luận thông thường (suy luận diễn dịch và quy nạp) để nhận định giá trị đúng của mệnh đề, mà thông qua vị thế nhận thức (epistemic status) để cam kết siêu hình về giá trị đúng ấy. Điều này có nghĩa là không dựa vào các suy luận thông thường (suy luận diễn dịch và quy nạp) để xác định tính giá trị đúng của mệnh đề, mà dựa vào vị thế nhận thức (epistemic status) để cam kết các giá trị siêu hình cho những giá trị đúng ấy. Bài viết đánh giá và tranh luận về quy ước ngôn ngữ và giá trị đúng của mệnh đề.

Từ khóa: Quy ước ngôn ngữ; giá trị đúng của mệnh đề; vị thế nhận thức; suy luận diễn dịch; suy luận quy nạp.