FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

SYNTACTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF COUNTERFACTUAL CONDITIONALS IN CHINESE AND VIETNAMESE

NGUYEN THI MINH KHOA*

ABSTRACT: Counterfactual conditionals express hypothetical situations that contradict reality and are constructed through the combination of syntactic components and linguistic devices marking hypothetical relationships. Although Chinese and Vietnamese are both isolating languages, the syntactic structures of counterfactual conditionals in the two languages exhibit similarities and differences that warrant further investigation. This study examines and contrasts their syntactic characteristics, focusing on antecedent–consequent structural patterns, hypothetical connectives, the positions and functions of linking elements, negative elements, temporal and modal markers, and ellipsis. Based on the analysis of representative linguistic examples and previous research, the study finds that counterfactual conditionals in both languages generally consist of an antecedent and a consequent, linked by corresponding hypothetical devices. However, the two languages differ in their syntactic patterns, the selection and distribution of connectives, the combination of negative, temporal, and modal elements, and the omission of sentence components. Vietnamese is characterized by constructions such as *"giá mà……thì……"* and *"phải chi……thì……",* whereas Chinese commonly employs patterns such as "如果……（就）……" and "要是……（就）……". These findings provide a clearer account of the syntactic characteristics of counterfactual conditionals in Chinese and Vietnamese and offer a foundation for further contrastive research into their semantic and pragmatic features.

KEY WORDS: Counterfactual conditionals; Chinese; Vietnamese; syntactic structure; antecedent; consequent; hypothetical connectives.

RECEIVED: October, 18th, 2026. EDITED: November, 22nd, 2026

1. Introduction

Conditional sentences play an important role in the grammatical systems of languages worldwide. Counterfactual conditional sentences are particularly complex, as they involve not only grammatical rules but also concepts closely related to logic and cognitive psychology. Their study helps reveal the relationship between language and counterfactual thinking.

Chinese and Vietnamese are both isolating languages. Unlike inflectional languages, they lack morphological inflections and cannot directly indicate counterfactuality through verbal tense. Instead, they primarily rely on function words, word order, and contextual cues to express counterfactual meanings. This characteristic has given rise to a rich variety of linguistic expressions in both languages while also presenting certain challenges for contrastive analysis.

Although substantial progress has been made in the study of Chinese conditional sentences, existing research has mainly focused on the description of general conditional sentences or contrastive studies between Chinese and English or Chinese and Japanese. Systematic contrastive research specifically addressing counterfactual conditional sentences in Chinese and Vietnamese remains scarce. To date, only the doctoral dissertation by Chen Lingxiangjiang has been identified as providing a brief comparison of the corresponding forms of Chinese and Vietnamese counterfactual conditional sentences. A comprehensive and in-depth investigation of this subject is still lacking. Furthermore, the study of counterfactual conditional sentences has significant practical implications.

**International Academy; Email: science2711@gmail.com*

In language teaching, learners often encounter difficulties when converting between Chinese and Vietnamese non-factual hypothetical constructions. In translation practice, misinterpretation of counterfactual meanings may also lead to distortions in information transfer. In view of these issues, this study aims to conduct a systematic contrastive analysis of Chinese and Vietnamese counterfactual conditional sentences from the syntactic perspective, with a view to providing a reference for relevant language teaching and translation practice.

2. Overview of previous research

Counterfactual conditionals are constructions that express assumptions contrary to reality. In these constructions, speakers posit a situation that does not or did not occur in the actual world and reason about its corresponding consequences. Closely related to hypothetical thinking, modality, and human reasoning, counterfactual conditionals have been studied from various perspectives, including logic, philosophy of language, semantics, pragmatics, and cognitive linguistics.

Historically, Chisholm (1946) was among the early scholars to address counterfactuality. Goodman (1947) further developed the concept of counterfactual conditionals, while Lewis (1973) proposed a semantic model based on possible-worlds theory. Subsequent studies by Stalnaker, von Fintel, and Williamson further explored the relationships among hypothetical assumptions, reality, and counterfactual reasoning. In Chinese and Vietnamese, both analytic languages, counterfactual meaning is not primarily expressed through morphological inflection but is generally constructed through lexical devices, syntactic structures, modal expressions, and communicative context. Therefore, a contrastive study of counterfactual conditionals in these two languages can help clarify their distinctive means of expression and the mechanisms through which counterfactual meaning is constructed.

Research on Chinese counterfactual conditionals: Because Chinese lacks a dedicated morphological inflectional system for marking the counterfactual mood, its capacity to express counterfactuality has long been debated in academic circles. Bloom (1981) argued that Chinese speakers experience greater difficulty in counterfactual reasoning due to the absence of subjunctive mood morphology. However, this view was challenged by Au (1983) and subsequent studies, which demonstrated that Chinese speakers can recognize and process counterfactuality through linguistic devices and contextual information. Since the late twentieth century, research on Chinese counterfactual conditionals has developed along several lines. From a psycholinguistic perspective, Feng (2006) and Zhou Simin (2018) investigated the recognition and processing of counterfactuality, emphasizing the influence of propositional content and context alongside formal linguistic markers. From syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic perspectives, Chen Guohua (1988)focused on the roles of particles, temporal adverbs, hypothetical conjunctions, negation, and intonation in triggering counterfactual inferences.

In addition, cognitive linguistic approaches have drawn on Fauconnier's Mental Spaces Theory to explain the contrast between actual and hypothetical spaces. Cao Liming (2013) regarded counterfactual meaning as the outcome of constructing and comparing cognitive spaces. From a typological perspective, Wang Chunhui (2012) and Yong Qian (2014) highlighted the role of devices that strengthen hypotheticality, arguing that Chinese expresses counterfactuality through the combination of conjunctions, negation, modality, temporal elements, and contextual information.

*Research on Vietnamese counterfactual conditionals:*emerged relatively late. Early studies by Trần Trọng Kim (1945)], Hoàng Tuệ (1962), Diệp Quang Ban (1989), and Nguyễn Kim Thản (1997) mainly examined conditional sentences in terms of syntactic structures, the relationship between hypothesis and consequence, and the system of conjunctions. Counterfactual meaning, however, had not yet been treated as an independent research subject. Since the late twentieth century, with the development of semantics and pragmatics, researchers have paid increasing attention to the roles of modality, context, and inference in the construction of counterfactual meaning. Nguyễn Đức Dân (1987)] and Hoàng Phê (1989) contributed to clarifying the distinction between conditional relations

in natural language and implication in formal logic. Approaching conditional sentences from the perspective of natural logic, Ngô Thị Minh (2001) also emphasized counterfactual nuances and subjective attitudes expressed through constructions such as "giá mà" and "phải chi". Notably, Lê Thị Minh Hằng's (2005) doctoral dissertation, classified Vietnamese conditional sentences into several types, including counterfactual conditionals. The author identified the discrepancy between the condition and its corresponding consequence as the defining feature of this type, while highlighting the roles of modal expressions, temporal elements, function words, and context in conveying counterfactual meaning.

Overall, previous studies have made important contributions to understanding the semantic features and linguistic devices of Vietnamese counterfactual conditionals. Nevertheless, the criteria for identifying counterfactuality have not yet been fully standardized. Building on these findings and addressing the remaining research gaps, this article examines the structural characteristics of Chinese and Vietnamese counterfactual conditionals, thereby identifying similarities and differences in how these constructions are organized and expressed in the two languages.

3. Theoretical basis

Definition of counterfactual conditionals:

Counterfactual conditionals are a special subtype of conditional sentences in which the antecedent expresses an assumption contrary to past events or objective reality, while the consequent presents a hypothetical outcome inferred from that unreal condition. This type of construction involves complex semantic features, logical reasoning, and significant pragmatic implications. In Chinese, counterfactual conditionals commonly occur in patterns such as "如果……就……了", "要是……就……了", and "要不是……". Their counterfactual meaning is generally conveyed through hypothetical conjunctions, temporal markers, modal particles, and communicative context.

Relevant theoretical foundations:

Research on counterfactual conditionals has evolved from traditional logic to modern semantics. Various theories have been proposed to explain the truth conditions of these constructions. Four influential approaches are the theory of co-possibility, strict implication theory, material implication theory, and Stalnaker–Lewis possible-worlds semantics.

Theory of co-possibility:

In the 1960s, Goodman, Sellars, Rescher, and other scholars developed the theory of co-possibility, also known as the metalinguistic theory, to explain the reasoning mechanisms underlying counterfactual conditionals. According to this theory, the antecedent alone cannot entail the consequent. Rather, the inference depends on its combination with background rules and true propositions implicitly assumed by the speaker or hearer in a given context. For example:

(1) *If a candidate has already been admitted to a higher-priority choice, their lower-priority choices will no longer be considered* [Manh Xuan, 2024].

In example (1), inferring the consequent requires the reader to draw on implicit admission regulations, including the priority order of choices, the principle that only one choice can be accepted, and the exclusion of subsequent choices. Thus, the relationship between the antecedent and the consequent depends not only on the content of the two propositions but also on the background rules assumed to hold alongside them. Their interaction provides the basis for inference and the construction of counterfactual meaning.

Strict implication theory:

Strict implication is a form of implication associated with modal concepts such as necessity, possibility, and impossibility, first proposed by the American philosopher and logician Lewis. Unlike material implication, this theory requires a necessary relationship between the antecedent ((p)) and the consequent ((q)), meaning that (p) cannot be true while (q) is false. Strict implication was developed to overcome a limitation of material implication, which does not account for the semantic relationship between the antecedent and the consequent. However, the relationship between the two

clauses in counterfactual conditionals is often based on experience, natural laws, and empirical causal relations rather than logical necessity. Therefore, a valid counterfactual conditional does not necessarily satisfy the requirements of strict implication. For example:

(2) If greenhouse gas emissions remained at their current level, global warming would continue at the same rate [Thanh Hai, 2024].

In example (2), the relationship between the antecedent, "greenhouse gas emissions remaining at their current level," and the consequent, "global warming continuing at the same rate," is based on physical and climatic laws. Nevertheless, it is logically conceivable that the antecedent could be true while the consequent fails to occur, for instance, if the Earth suddenly cooled due to a massive volcanic eruption or the deployment of advanced carbon-capture technology. Thus, although the statement is reasonable in light of current scientific knowledge, it does not express an absolutely necessary relationship in formal logic.

Therefore, strict implication cannot account for all counterfactual conditionals, since the relationship between their antecedents and consequents is not necessarily one of logical necessity. Moreover, this theory does not fully resolve paradoxes that conflict with ordinary intuition. These limitations have encouraged researchers to seek alternative approaches to provide a more comprehensive explanation of counterfactual conditionals.

Material implication theory:

Material implication originated in the ancient Greek Stoic school of philosophy. According to this theory, the truth value of a conditional depends solely on the truth values of its antecedent P and consequent Q, regardless of the semantic relationship between them. A conditional is considered true in three cases: when both P and Q are true, when P is false and Q is true, or when both are false. However, this approach can produce counterintuitive conclusions and does not adequately reflect the use of conditionals in natural language. In particular, whenever the antecedent is false, the conditional is automatically considered true, regardless of the truth value of the consequent. As a result, all counterfactual conditionals are regarded as true under the truth-functional account. For example:

(3) Russia could not exist without sovereignty [Tuong Anh, 2023].

According to ordinary intuition, sentence (3) is considered true, whereas the sentence "Russia could exist without sovereignty" is considered false. However, material implication treats both sentences as true because their antecedents are false. Furthermore, this theory invalidates several rules of inference, including transitivity, strengthening of the antecedent, and contraposition. Thus, although material implication plays a foundational role in formal logic, it has significant limitations in explaining counterfactual conditionals, whose interpretation depends substantially on semantic relations and contextual factors.

Stalnaker–Lewis possible-worlds semantics:

Although strict implication theory fails to provide an adequate account of counterfactual conditionals, the possible-worlds semantics developed by Stalnaker and Lewis offers a more effective approach. According to this theory, the truth value of a counterfactual conditional is determined by whether its consequent holds in the possible worlds closest to the actual world in which its antecedent is true. The main difference between Stalnaker's and Lewis's approaches lies in how they determine the degree of similarity between possible worlds. Nevertheless, their approaches are often discussed collectively as Stalnaker–Lewis possible-worlds semantics. This theory not only accounts for counterfactual conditionals but also explains why certain inference rules, including transitivity, strengthening of the antecedent, and contraposition, may fail in some cases.

Despite its explanatory advantages, the theory has several limitations concerning three issues: the ontology of possible worlds, the determination of similarity between worlds, and the validity of inferential models. For example, it does not adequately explain certain counterfactual conditionals with disjunctive antecedents, indicating the need for further refinement and extension. Furthermore,

developments in dynamic semantics have highlighted the limitations of the static approach adopted in traditional logical semantics. Analyzing sentence meaning in isolation, without considering contextual changes or the relationships between successive utterances, makes this approach inadequate for explaining sequences of utterances in natural communication.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Structural characteristics of chinese counterfactual conditional sentences

4.1.1. Structural patterns

Structurally, Chinese counterfactual conditional sentences generally consist of an antecedent and a consequent. Their basic pattern is "如果/要是 + P，（就）Q" (if P, then Q). For example:

(4) 如果我是猫，就快活到头了。[Yu Hua, 2010]

If I were a cat, my happiness would come to an end.

In this example, "我是猫" (I were a cat) expresses a hypothetical condition that contradicts reality, while "快活到头了" (my happiness would come to an end) expresses the corresponding hypothetical result.

(5) 要不是来了爆炸大队，咱这一家子，早就饿死了。[Mo Yan,1995]

If the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit had not arrived, our whole family would have starved to death long ago.

In addition, Chinese has several variant patterns, such as "要不是 P，Q", "若不是 P，Q", and "P，否则 Q" (if it were not for P, Q; were it not for P, Q; P, otherwise Q).

Counterfactual meaning is not entirely encoded by syntactic forms. Its interpretation also depends on contextual information, real-world knowledge, and temporal relationships. Therefore, Chinese counterfactual conditional sentences constitute complex constructions shaped by the interaction of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

4.1.2. The system of hypothetical connectives

Hypothetical connectives are among the most important syntactic devices used to construct Chinese counterfactual conditional sentences. Their primary function is to introduce a hypothetical antecedent and establish a logical relationship between the condition and its consequent.

Common hypothetical connectives include 如果, 要是, 要不是, 若不是, and 否则, among others. Among these, "如果" is the most frequently used conditional connective. However, not all sentences containing "如果" express counterfactual meaning. For example:

(6) 如果还有其他用途，请在横线上补充。[Jiang Liping, 2018]

If there are any other uses, please add them on the line.

This sentence expresses a general hypothetical condition rather than a counterfactual one.

Compared with "如果", connectives such as "要不是" and "若不是" exhibit a stronger tendency to convey counterfactual meaning. For example:

(7) 要不是那天晚上在文典耽搁，你可能早就不在人世了。[Bao Ninh,1991]

If you had not been delayed at Văn Điển that night, you might have been dead long ago.

In this example, "要不是……" introduces a negative hypothetical condition that contradicts reality, while "你可能早就不在人世了" expresses the corresponding hypothetical result. The adverb "早就" emphasizes that the hypothetical outcome would have already occurred, thereby further reinforcing the counterfactual interpretation. The implicit meaning of the sentence is that it was precisely because of the delay that the person escaped death.

4.1.3. Negative elements

In addition to hypothetical connectives, negative elements constitute another important syntactic device in Chinese counterfactual conditional sentences. Common negative forms include "不", "没", "没有", and "不是". For example:

(8) 如果没有母亲与她的大姑姑这次密谈，我不可能在七个月时便能行走，母亲也不可能有兴致带我们去大街上观灯。[Mo Yan,1995]

If it had not been for this private conversation between my mother and her eldest paternal aunt, I would not have been able to walk at the age of seven months, nor would my mother have been in the mood to take us out to the streets to watch the lantern displays.

In this example, "如果没有……" introduces a negative hypothetical condition that contradicts reality, while the consequent expresses outcomes that did not actually occur under the assumed circumstances. This illustrates how counterfactual meaning in Chinese can be constructed through the combined use of hypothetical connectives and negative elements.

Overall, hypothetical connectives and negative elements are important linguistic devices for expressing counterfactual meaning in Chinese conditional sentences.

4.1.4. Temporal and modal markers

Unlike English, which expresses counterfactuality through verbal inflections, Chinese primarily relies on temporal adverbs and modal elements to convey counterfactual meaning. Common temporal adverbs include "早" (long ago/early), "当初" (at that time/originally), "那时候" (at that time), "昨天" (yesterday), and "以前" (previously), among others. For example:

(9) 当初问问他的地址、电话什么的就好了。[Yang Xuemei, 2020]

It would have been better if I had asked for his address and telephone number at the time.

In this sentence, counterfactual meaning is not expressed through verbal inflections but is primarily conveyed through the temporal adverb "当初", the modal expression "就好了", and the retrospective context. Specifically, "当初" highlights a past time frame, while "就好了" expresses regret and a wish concerning an unrealized situation.

In addition, aspectual particles such as "了" and "过" frequently occur in counterfactual conditional sentences, emphasizing the completion or experiential nature of hypothetical events. For example:

(10) 如果草食动物灭绝了，肉食动物也会灭绝。[Jiang Liping, 2018]

If herbivores became extinct, carnivores would also become extinct.

(11) 如果黑客偷取并使用某人上次使用过的数据，机器会认定其无效。[Jiang Liping, 2018]

If a hacker stole and used data that someone had previously used, the machine would identify it as invalid.

Furthermore, modal verbs and modal adverbs also contribute to the expression of meanings such as conjecture, regret, and exclamation in counterfactual conditional sentences. Common expressions include "会" (would), "能" (be able to), "可以" (could/may), "一定" (certainly), "肯定" (definitely), "早就" (long ago/already), and "也许" (perhaps).

4.1.5. Elliptical constructions

In addition to forms containing explicit markers, Chinese also has a large number of counterfactual conditional sentences in which overt conditional markers are absent. In such cases, counterfactual meaning is mainly inferred from the context, real-world knowledge, and the logical relationship between the antecedent and the consequent. For example:

(12) 跟着俺她就饿死了。[Mo Yan, 1995]

If she had followed me, she would have starved to death.

Although the hypothetical connective "如果" or "要是" is omitted, "跟着俺" (following me) functions as the hypothetical condition, while "她就饿死了" (she would have starved to death) expresses the hypothetical result. Its counterfactual meaning is primarily inferred from the context and discourse logic. The complete form can be reconstructed as "如果跟着俺，她就饿死了". The adverb "就" further reinforces the logical relationship between the condition and the result. For example:

(13) 早知如此，何必吞金？[Mo Yan, 1995]

Had I known this would happen, why would I have swallowed gold?

This sentence can be regarded as an elliptical form of "如果早知道如此，何必吞金呢" (If I had known this earlier, why would I have swallowed gold?). Although "如果" is omitted, the condition–result relationship can still be inferred from the context. The sentence conveys counterfactual meanings associated with regret and remorse.

Furthermore, other types of elliptical constructions can also be found in spoken Chinese, such as:

(14) 再和家珍说下去我就稳不住自己了。[Yu Hua, 2010]

If I continued talking to Jiazhen, I would no longer be able to control myself.

The complete form of this sentence can be reconstructed as "如果再和家珍说下去，我就稳不住自己了" (If I continued talking to Jiazhen, I would no longer be able to control myself).

4.2. Structural characteristics of Vietnamese counterfactual conditional sentences

4.2.1. Structural patterns

Structurally, Vietnamese counterfactual conditional sentences generally consist of an antecedent and a consequent, forming a non-factual "condition–result" relationship. They can express various meanings, including regret, reproach, and conjecture. Their basic pattern is:

Nếu/Giá mà/Phải chi/Giả sử + P, thì Q

In this pattern, P represents the counterfactual condition, while Q expresses the counterfactual result. For example:

(15) Giá mà anh được đưa vào bệnh viện sớm hơn thì tình trạng đã không trầm trọng đến vậy. [Ngo Hai, 2024]

If only he had been taken to the hospital earlier, his condition would not have become so serious.

In this sentence, *"anh được đưa vào bệnh viện sớm hơn*" (he had been taken to the hospital earlier) represents a hypothetical condition that contradicts reality, while *"tình trạng đã không trầm trọng đến vậy"* (his condition would not have become so serious) expresses a hypothetical outcome that did not actually occur. The implied real-world meaning is that the patient was not taken to the hospital in time, which consequently led to the worsening of his condition.

The counterfactual meaning of this sentence is not expressed through verbal inflections but is primarily conveyed through the hypothetical construction *"giá mà… thì…",* the aspectual adverb *"đã",* the negative element *"không",* and the retrospective context.

4.2.2. Constituent elements of Vietnamese counterfactual conditional sentences

(i) The bipartite structure of condition and result

Vietnamese counterfactual conditional sentences generally consist of a conditional clause and a result clause, forming a non-factual hypothetical relationship. The conditional clause usually occurs at the beginning of the sentence and provides the inferential premise for the result clause. For example:

(16) Nếu không bị tụt lại tối ấy ở Văn Điển, không chừng cậu chết rồi cũng nên.

If you had not fallen behind that night in Văn Điển, you might well have died.

In this sentence, *"không bị tụt lại"* (not having fallen behind) represents the hypothetical condition, while *"cậu chết rồi"* (you would have died) expresses the hypothetical result. In reality, he did fall behind that night and thus escaped death.

This example demonstrates that the condition–result relationship in Vietnamese does not necessarily depend entirely on the connective "thì". Even when "thì" is omitted, the logical relationship between the two clauses remains clear. For example:

(17) Nếu được ăn học, tất cũng nên người như ai. [Vu Trong Phung,1936]

If he had received an education, he would certainly have become a respectable person like anyone else.

(18) Nếu không vì đã gần chết lịm do đau đớn hẳn anh ta đã giết tươi Kiên. [Ky Quang Muu, 2024]

If it had not been for the fact that he was nearly unconscious from the pain, he would certainly have killed Kiên on the spot.

The two examples above are broadly similar in meaning. This indicates that Vietnamese exhibits considerable flexibility in the structural organization of counterfactual conditional sentences.

(ii) The system of hypothetical connectives

Hypothetical connectives are important syntactic devices in the formation of Vietnamese counterfactual conditional sentences. They are used to introduce conditions and establish hypothetical–inferential relationships between antecedents and consequents. Common forms include nếu, giá mà, phải chi, giả sử, ví thử, lẽ ra, and không có… thì, among others.

Among these, "nếu" is the most widely used; however, not all sentences containing "nếu" express counterfactual meaning. For example:

(19) Nếu đánh ta thì ta đánh liền. [Vu Trong Phung, 1936]

If they hit me, I will hit them back immediately.

This sentence expresses a general hypothetical condition rather than a counterfactual one, because the event in question has not yet occurred and remains a possibility.

By contrast, counterfactual meaning is more clearly expressed in the following constructions.

As illustrated in Example (18), combinations such as *"giá mà"* and *"phải chi"* typically convey a strong sense of regret and have a stronger tendency to express counterfactuality than "nếu". This represents a notable characteristic of Vietnamese in comparison with Chinese: hypothetical connectives in Vietnamese often carry modal meanings in addition to their conditional functions.

Furthermore, certain negative constructions also contribute to the expression of counterfactual meaning, such as *"không có… thì", "nếu không… thì"*, and *"giá như không…"*. For example:

(20) Cơ mà… nếu không có cậu thì tớ đã gây án mạng biến mình thành sát nhân. [Ky Quang Muu, 2024]

But… if you hadn't been there, I would have committed murder and turned myself into a murderer.

The implicit real-world meaning of this sentence is that the person was actually there, and it was precisely their presence that prevented the speaker from committing murder. This demonstrates that negative elements in conditional clauses often establish a contrast between reality and the hypothetical situation, thereby contributing to the formation of counterfactual meaning.

(iii) Temporal markers

One important characteristic of Vietnamese counterfactual conditional sentences is the frequent occurrence of past-time markers. These elements help establish that the events in question did not actually occur in reality. Common temporal adverbs include hôm qua (yesterday), lúc đó (at that time), ngày ấy (that day), trước đây (previously), hồi đó (back then), khi ấy (at that time), and giá như ngày trước (if only in the past), among others. For example:

(21) Giá kể hồi đó người ta hẵng gườm gượm, báo tử lần lượt thưa ra thì có khi mẹ em vẫn còn sống được tới giờ. [Ky Quang Muu, 2024]

If only people had been more cautious back then and the death notices had gradually become less frequent, perhaps my mother would still be alive today.

In this sentence, "hồi đó" establishes the past-time reference, while *"tới giờ"* indicates that the present outcome contrasts with the hypothetical condition.

In addition to temporal adverbs, Vietnamese also employs aspectual markers such as "*đã", "rồi",* and "từng" to express the completion or experiential aspect of hypothetical events. For example:

(22) Bản thân anh nếu không nhờ được sự che chở đùm bọc… thì ắt rằng đã chết từ lâu. [Nguyen Khac Phuc,1989]

If it had not been for the protection and support he received, he himself would certainly have been dead long ago.

The combination of "đã" and "từ lâu" establishes the hypothetical outcome as belonging to an unrealized past situation.

Unlike English, which uses verbal inflections to mark counterfactuality (e.g., "had gone" and "would have met"), Vietnamese primarily relies on temporal adverbs and contextual cues to convey counterfactual meaning. This is a characteristic feature of an isolating language.

(iv) Modal elements

In addition to connectives and temporal markers, modal elements play a particularly important role in constructing the counterfactual semantic nuances of sentences. Common modal expressions include *"đã"* (already), *"chắc"* (probably/presumably), *"có lẽ"* (perhaps/maybe), *"lẽ ra"* (should have/ought to have), *"hẳn"* (certainly/presumably), *"mất rồi"* (ended up having/with the result that), *"đâu đến nỗi"* (there would have been no need for things to go so far), *"biết bao"* (how much/how greatly), and *"thôi"* (just/that is all), among others. For example:

(23) Nếu bạn giỏi thật sự như vậy thì tôi nghĩ sẽ không thiếu công việc, cơ hội cho bạn lựa chọn. [Pham Chien, 2026]

If you are really that competent, I think there will be no shortage of jobs or opportunities for you to choose from.

(24) Giá kể mà quanh đây có nước, thì có lẽ em nên tắm đi cái đã, đúng không? [Ky Quang Muu, 2024]

If only there were some water around here, perhaps you should take a bath first, don't you think?

These examples demonstrate that the expression of counterfactual meaning in Vietnamese relies to a considerable extent on pragmatic inference. The interpretation of counterfactuality is therefore not determined solely by syntactic structures or individual linguistic markers but also depends on modal meanings and contextual information.

(v) Elliptical constructions

Vietnamese tends to employ ellipsis extensively in communication, particularly in sentences carrying strong emotional connotations. Consequently, many counterfactual conditional sentences do not contain both the conditional and result clauses in their entirety, yet listeners can still infer the condition–result relationship. For example:

(25) Tôi mà nói đùa thì cả họ nhà tôi bị trời tru đất diệt. [Vu Trong Phung,1936]

If I were joking, may my entire family be struck down by heaven and earth.

(26) Giá mà chúng mình mãi mãi chỉ là bạn. [Nguyen Khac Phuc,1989]

If only we could remain friends forever.

Although the latter sentence does not contain an explicit result clause, listeners can still understand its implicit meaning, such as *"thì mọi chuyện đã khác"* (then everything would have been different) or *"thì đã không xảy ra chuyện này"* (then this would not have happened).

Ellipsis reflects the flexibility of Vietnamese counterfactual expressions. Their interpretation depends not only on syntactic structures but also on contextual information and pragmatic inference.

Overall, Vietnamese primarily employs hypothetical connectives, negative elements, temporal markers, modal expressions, and contextual cues to convey counterfactual meaning. These resources endow Vietnamese counterfactual conditional sentences with considerable structural flexibility and pragmatic richness.

4.3. Similarities and differences in structural characteristics

4.3.1. Structural similarities

(i) Both languages exhibit a bipartite condition–result structure

Chinese and Vietnamese counterfactual conditional sentences are both built around two fundamental components: the conditional clause (hypothetical premise) and the result clause (hypothetical conclusion). Together, these two components establish a non-factual hypothetical–

inferential relationship, in which the proposed condition does not hold in reality and the corresponding result has not actually occurred.

The general structural patterns in the two languages can be summarized as follows:

- Vietnamese: Nếu/Giá mà + P, (thì) Q
- Chinese: 如果/要是 + P, （就）Q

In these patterns, P represents the counterfactual condition, while Q represents the counterfactual result. Examples (15) and (5) illustrate these structures.

In both languages, the conditional clause typically occurs at the beginning of the sentence, providing the premise from which the result clause is inferred. This constitutes the most fundamental and frequently occurring structural characteristic of counterfactual conditional sentences in both Chinese and Vietnamese.

(ii) Neither language uses verbal inflections to express counterfactuality

Both Chinese and Vietnamese belong to the isolating language type. Therefore, unlike English or French, neither language expresses counterfactual meaning through morphological changes in verb forms. Instead, both primarily rely on syntactic and semantic devices, such as hypothetical connectives, negative elements, temporal adverbs, modal elements, and communicative context.

Vietnamese example:

(27) Nếu không có bếp lửa sưởi kia thì Mỵ cũng đến chết héo. [Ky Quang Muu, 2024]

If it had not been for that warming fire, Mỵ would also have slowly withered away and died.

Chinese example:

(28) 如果不是她的奶，我已经死了，烂了，已经被蛆虫吃光了。[Mo Yan, 1995]

If it had not been for her milk, I would have died, decomposed, and already been consumed by maggots.

In the above examples, counterfactual meaning is not conveyed through verbal inflections but is identified through linguistic elements such as *"nếu không", "đến",* "如果不是", and "已经", together with the hypothetical contexts that contradict reality.

In the Vietnamese example, *"không có bếp lửa sưởi kia"* (if that warming fire had not been there) introduces a counterfactual condition, while "Mỵ cũng đến chết héo" (Mỵ would also have withered away and died) expresses an unrealized hypothetical result. The implied meaning is that the fire was actually present, and therefore Mỵ did not die.

Similarly, the Chinese expression "如果不是她的奶" (if it had not been for her milk) introduces a negative hypothetical condition, while the consequent describes the corresponding hypothetical outcome.

These examples demonstrate that both Chinese and Vietnamese primarily employ analytic linguistic devices rather than morphological inflections to express counterfactual meaning.

(ii) Both languages rely heavily on context and pragmatic inference

In both Chinese and Vietnamese, counterfactual meaning is not entirely encoded by syntactic forms but relies considerably on contextual information and pragmatic inference. Even when hypothetical connectives or entire clauses are omitted, listeners can still understand the condition–result relationship on the basis of context.

Vietnamese example: Example (28) does not contain an explicit result clause. Nevertheless, listeners can infer its implicit sense of regret, namely that an undesirable outcome has already occurred.

Chinese example: In Example (13), the connective "如果" is omitted, but listeners can still recognize the sentence as expressing a hypothetical situation that contradicts reality, together with semantic nuances of regret and remorse.

These examples demonstrate that counterfactual conditional sentences in both Chinese and Vietnamese exhibit considerable structural flexibility. Their counterfactual meanings depend not only

on grammatical forms but also on the interaction of real-world knowledge, contextual information, and pragmatic inference.

4.3.2. Differences in the structural characteristics of Vietnamese counterfactual conditional sentences

(i) Differences in hypothetical connective systems and modal nuances

Vietnamese counterfactual conditional sentences generally exhibit more pronounced modal nuances than their Chinese counterparts. This is reflected in the fact that many Vietnamese hypothetical connectives not only establish condition–result relationships but also directly convey the speaker's subjective emotions and attitudes, such as regret, remorse, and wishes that contradict reality.

For example, in Example (24), the combination "giá kể" expresses not only a counterfactual hypothesis but also a profound sense of regret. This indicates that emotional meaning is directly incorporated into the hypothetical construction itself.

By contrast, Chinese generally employs relatively neutral connectives, such as "如果", "要是", and "假如". Their primary function is to establish the logical relationship between the antecedent and the consequent, while emotional nuances are often conveyed through subsequent modal elements. For example:

(29) 当初问问他的地址、电话什么的就好了。[Yang Xuemei, 2020]

It would have been better if I had asked for his address and telephone number at the time.

In this example, the sense of regret is primarily conveyed by the expression "就好了", rather than by the hypothetical construction itself.

This suggests that Vietnamese tends to integrate syntactic and expressive functions within conditional constructions, whereas Chinese tends to establish the logical relationship first and subsequently convey modal and emotional nuances through additional linguistic elements.

(ii) Differences in the expression of tense and aspect

Counterfactual meaning in Vietnamese is generally conveyed through relatively explicit linguistic markers, such as *"giá mà", "phải chi", "nếu không", "lẽ ra",* and *"đã"*. For example, in Example (16), the elements *"nếu không", "đã*", and *"hẳn"* help listeners readily identify the sentence as expressing a hypothetical situation that contradicts reality.

By contrast, many Chinese counterfactual conditional sentences do not explicitly mark counterfactuality at the surface level. Their interpretation often requires contextual information and logical inference. For example:

(33) 跟着俺她就饿死了。

If she had followed me, she would have starved to death.

Without sufficient context, learners may find it difficult to determine whether this sentence expresses a counterfactual conditional or a general prediction. Its counterfactual meaning is primarily inferred from the context and real-world knowledge.

Overall, Vietnamese tends to employ more explicit linguistic markers to convey counterfactual meaning, whereas Chinese relies more heavily on contextual information and pragmatic inference.

(iii) Differences in contextual dependence and ellipsis

Both Chinese and Vietnamese exhibit ellipsis in counterfactual conditional sentences; however, the purposes and characteristics of ellipsis differ between the two languages.

In Vietnamese, ellipsis is often used to enhance expressive effects and emotional intensity. In many cases, only the hypothetical clause is explicitly present, while listeners can independently infer the implied result clause. For example, in Example (23), the result clause is omitted, yet the sentence still evokes a sense of regret over an undesirable situation that has already occurred in reality. Such ellipsis serves to intensify the emotional depth of the utterance.

By contrast, although ellipsis also occurs in Chinese, elements that help preserve the logical relationships between sentence components are generally retained. For example, in Example (13), although the hypothetical connective "如果" is omitted, expressions such as "早知" and "何必" remain, maintaining the logical relationship and guiding listeners in making the necessary inferences.

This indicates that ellipsis in Vietnamese tends to enhance emotional expressiveness, whereas ellipsis in Chinese places greater emphasis on preserving discourse logic and syntactic relationships.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the syntactic characteristics of Chinese and Vietnamese counterfactual conditionals, focusing on structural patterns, the organization of the antecedent–consequent relationship, the position and functions of hypothetical connectives, negative elements, temporal and modal markers, and ellipsis. The findings reveal both substantial similarities in sentence structure and notable differences in the syntactic devices used to express counterfactual meaning in the two languages.

In terms of similarities, counterfactual conditionals in both Chinese and Vietnamese share a basic bipartite structure consisting of an antecedent and a consequent. These two components form a hypothetical condition–result relationship: the antecedent presents a situation contrary to reality, while the consequent expresses the corresponding outcome under that hypothetical situation. Both languages employ hypothetical connectives to link the two components, with common patterns such as "如果/要是……（就）……" in Chinese and *"nếu……(thì)……"* in Vietnamese. In addition to these full constructions, both languages exhibit structural variations involving negative elements, temporal markers, and modal expressions, which further specify or clarify the relationship between the antecedent and the consequent. Ellipsis is also found in both languages, allowing certain sentence components to be omitted while remaining recoverable through contextual interpretation.

Nevertheless, Chinese and Vietnamese differ in the ways they organize and realize syntactic structures. In Vietnamese, constructions such as *"giá mà……thì……"* and *"phải chi……thì……"* not only connect the antecedent with the consequent but also directly convey the speaker's wishes and feelings of regret. By contrast, Chinese connectives such as "如果" and "要是" primarily introduce hypothetical antecedents; counterfactual meaning is often established through their combination with negative elements, temporal markers, modal expressions, or contextual information. Regarding the organization of sentence components, Vietnamese tends to use markers such as "đã", "rồi", and "từng" to indicate more explicitly the temporal and aspectual properties of hypothetical situations. Chinese, in contrast, commonly combines temporal adverbs, particles, and modal verbs to construct counterfactual patterns. Differences are also evident in ellipsis: Vietnamese may omit the consequent to enhance expressive force, whereas Chinese tends to retain the linguistic elements necessary to maintain the cohesive relationship between the antecedent and the consequent.

Overall, counterfactual conditionals in Chinese and Vietnamese share a basic bipartite structure but differ in the selection, combination, and distribution of syntactic devices. These differences are particularly evident in the systems of hypothetical connectives, the use of negative, temporal, and modal elements, and the omission of sentence components. This study contributes to a clearer understanding of the syntactic characteristics of counterfactual conditionals in the two languages and provides a basis for further contrastive research into their semantic and pragmatic features.

REFERENCES

1. Kai von Fintel (2012), "Subjunctive Conditionals," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Language*, Routledge.
2. Robert Stalnaker (1968), "A Theory of Conditionals," in N. Rescher (Ed.), *Studies in Logical Theory*, Blackwell.
3. Kai von Fintel (2012), "Subjunctive Conditionals," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Language*, Routledge.
4. Timothy Williamson (2020), *Suppose and Tell: The Semantics and Heuristics of*

5. *Conditionals*, Oxford University Press.
6. 8. Alfred H. Bloom (1981), *The Linguistic Shaping of Thought: A Study in the*
7. *Impact of Language on Thinking in China and the West*, Lawrence Erlbaum
8. Associates, Hillsdale.
9. Chen Guohua (1988), "A Comparison of English and Chinese Hypothetical
10. Conditional Sentences," *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, no. 73.
11. Tran Trong Kim and Bui Ky (1945), *Vietnamese Grammar*, Hanoi.
12. Hoang Tue (1962), *A Course in Vietnamese*, vol. 1, Vietnam Education Publishing House, Hanoi.
13. Diep Quang Ban (1989), *Standard Vietnamese Grammar*, University and Professional Education Publishing House, Hanoi.
14. Nguyen Kim Than (1997), *Studies in Vietnamese Grammar*, Vietnam Education Publishing House, Hanoi.
15. Nguyen Duc Dan (1987), *Logic, Grammar, and Syntax*, University and Professional Education Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City.
16. Hoang Phe (1989), *The Logic of Linguistics*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi.
17. Ngo Thi Minh (2001), *Means of Expressing Modality in Vietnamese Complex Sentences*, doctoral dissertation in Philology, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.
18. Le Thi Minh Hang (2005), *Conditional Sentences in Vietnamese: A Comparison with Japanese*, Doctoral dissertation in Philology, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

SURVEY MATERIALS

1. Pham Chien, "No Need to Worry about Unemployment If You Are Proficient in English," *VnExpress*, available at: https://vnexpress.net/khong-lo-that-nghiep-neu-gioi-tieng-anh-4698248.html, accessed May 18, 2026.
2. Ngo Hai (2024), "Health Consequences of Avoiding Hospital Visits During the Lunar New Year," *Nhan Dan*, available at: https://nhandan.vn/he-luy-cho-suc-khoe-vi-kieng-den-vien-ngay-tet-post796150.html, accessed May 18, 2026.
3. Thanh Hai (2024), "As the Earth's Temperature Reaches Record Highs," *Nhan Dan*, available at: https://nhandan.vn/khi-trai-dat-tang-nhiet-ky-luc-post815765.html, accessed May 17, 2025.
4. Ky Quang Muu (2024), *Lectures on Vietnamese Literature*, Vietnam Education Publishing House, Hanoi.
5. Mo Yan (2003), *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, translated by Tran Dinh Hien, Writers' Association Publishing House, Hanoi.
6. Bao Ninh (1991), *The Sorrow of War*, Writers' Association Publishing House, Hanoi.
7. Nguyen Khac Phuc (1989), *The City Standing at the Head of the Wind*, Da Nang Publishing House, Da Nang.
8. Vu Trong Phung (1936), *Dumb Luck*, Literature Publishing House, Hanoi.
9. Yu Hua (2010), *To Live*.
10. Jiang Liping (2018), *HSK Standard Course 6A: Workbook – Audio Scripts and Answer Key*, Beijing Language and Culture University Press, Beijing.
11. Yang Xuemei (2020), *A Reference Guide to Chinese Listening Course, Volume 3*.
12. Mo Yan (1995), *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, Yunnan People's Publishing House, Yunnan.
13. Manh Xuan (2024), "Strict Implementation of Regulations on University Admissions," *Nhan Dan*, available at: https://nhandan.vn/thuc-hien-nghiem-cac-quy-dinh-trong-tuyen-sinh-dai-hoc-post804626.html, accessed May 16, 2026.

14. Thanh Hai (2024), "As the Earth's Temperature Reaches Record Highs," *Nhan Dan*, available at: https://nhandan.vn/khi-trai-dat-tang-nhiet-ky-luc-post815765.html, accessed May 17, 2025.
15. Tuong Anh (2023), "Russia in 2023 and Putin's Early Election Campaign," *Tuoi Tre Cuoi Tuan*, available at: https://cuoituan.tuoitre.vn/nuoc-nga-2023-va-chien-dich-tranh-cu-som-cua-ong-putin-20231221084358436.htm, accessed May 15, 2026.

Đặc điểm cú pháp của các câu điều kiện phản thực trong tiếng Trung Quốc và tiếng Việt

Tóm tắt: Các câu điều kiện phản thực diễn tả những tình huống giả định trái ngược với thực tế, được hình thành thông qua sự kết hợp giữa các thành phần cú pháp và các phương tiện ngôn ngữ biểu thị quan hệ giả định. Mặc dù cả tiếng Trung và tiếng Việt đều là ngôn ngữ đơn lập, nhưng, cấu trúc cú pháp của các câu điều kiện phản thực trong hai ngôn ngữ này vẫn tồn tại những điểm tương đồng và khác biệt đáng để nghiên cứu sâu hơn. Nghiên cứu này xem xét và đối chiếu các đặc điểm cú pháp của chúng, tập trung vào các mô hình cấu trúc tiền đề - hệ quả, các từ nối giả định, vị trí và chức năng của các yếu tố liên kết, các yếu tố phủ định, các dấu hiệu chỉ thời gian và phương thái, cũng như hiện tượng lược bỏ thành phần câu. Dựa trên việc phân tích các ví dụ tiêu biểu và các nghiên cứu trước đây, bài viết chỉ ra rằng, câu điều kiện phản thực trong cả hai ngôn ngữ nhìn chung đều bao gồm một tiền đề và một hệ quả, được kết nối với nhau bằng các phương tiện giả định tương ứng. Tuy nhiên, hai ngôn ngữ này khác biệt ở các mô hình cú pháp, cách lựa chọn và phân bố từ nối, sự kết hợp giữa các yếu tố phủ định, thời gian, phương thái, cũng như việc lược bỏ các thành phần trong câu. Tiếng Việt đặc trưng với các cấu trúc như "giá mà……thì……" và "phải chi……thì……", trong khi tiếng Trung thường sử dụng các mô hình như "如果……（就）……" và "要是……（就）……". Những kết quả này cung cấp cái nhìn rõ nét hơn về đặc điểm cú pháp của câu điều kiện phản thực tế trong tiếng Trung và tiếng Việt, đồng thời tạo nền tảng cho các nghiên cứu đối chiếu sâu hơn về các khía cạnh ngữ nghĩa và ngữ dụng của chúng.

Từ khóa: Câu điều kiện phản thực; tiếng Trung Quốc/Trung; tiếng Việt; cấu trúc cú pháp; tiền đề; hệ quả; từ nối giả định.