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INFORMATION STRUCTURE AND INVERSION IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE: A CONTRASTIVE STUDY

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Abstract:

Word order encodes information structure in discourse, not only grammatical relations. In this paper, inversion in English and Vietnamese is studied in the perspective of information structure, considering the inversion as a communicative strategy for the distribution of given and new information, the construction of discourse frames, and the highlighting of focal content. The study examines four types of inversion including locative, directional, negative and presentational in terms of the notions of topic, focus and stage topic. The results show that, in both languages, fronted constituents function as stage topics, offering a discourse frame before new referents are introduced, while sentence-final position always encodes focal, discourse-new information. The two languages, however, differ widely in the grammatical manifestation of inversion. English inversion is syntactically restricted: verb class restrictions, mandatory auxiliary-subject inversion in negative constructions, and deictic marking in presentational structures. Vietnamese, which has no morphological inflection and no auxiliary inversion, depends on a discourse-oriented system of flexible constituent ordering. The stage-topic function in this system spans a continuum of constructions, including existential and copular structures, that does not conform to the discrete categorial boundaries maintained in English. This asymmetry is more basic than a difference in formal means: inversion is a syntactically licensed operation in English but a discourse-motivated positional strategy in Vietnamese.

Keywords: *information structure, inversion, English, Vietnamese, contrastive analysis.*

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INTRODUCTION

In linguistic communication, speakers not only convey propositional content but must also organize information in accordance with the background knowledge, expectations, and attention of their listeners. According to Lambrecht [1], information structure concerns how speakers encode and distribute information in utterances to optimize communicative effectiveness. An utterance is, therefore, not merely a collection of syntactic elements but also a discourse unit organized according to certain information principles. In this organizational process, word order plays a particularly crucial role, as moving a

constituent to the front of a sentence, placing a phrase in a prominent position, or altering the positions of subject and predicate can change how listeners receive and interpret information [1, 2]. The phenomenon of inversion is a representative manifestation of the relationship between syntax and discourse. According to traditional grammatical approaches, inversion is primarily viewed as a change in the canonical syntactic order between subject and verb, or between auxiliary and subject, in order to create structural variants or rhetorical effects [3]. This approach predominantly emphasizes the formal dimension of the sentence rather than the discourse function and information organization of inversion. Therefore, remaining at the syntactic level alone makes it difficult to fully explain why speakers or writers choose an inverted structure over a neutral one. For example, in English, the sentence *On one long wall hung a row of Van Goghs* is not simply equivalent in meaning to *A row of Van Goghshung*

on one long wall, but also creates a different information organization[4]. The locative phrase *on one long wall* is moved to the front of the sentence to establish a spatial frame, while *a row of Van Goghs* appears at the end of the sentence as newly introduced information. According to Erteschik-Shir [5], such structures are typically associated with the establishment of a stage topic, a framing device that establishes the discourse background of the utterance. Similarly, in Vietnamese, the sentence *Trên sông gió nổi lên* (meaning *the river the wind blows*) is also not merely positional shifts of sentence constituents but serve to spatially anchor the discourse before introducing a new entity. This example, grounded in models of locative inversion in Vietnamese, demonstrates that word order plays an important role in organizing discourse information[6, 7].

From an information structure perspective, inversion can be viewed as an "information-information packaging strategy [1, 8], which is also regarded as a means of distributing given and new information, establishing topics and foci, and generating emphasis effects in discourse. Constituents fronted to the beginning of a sentence typically serve to establish a frame or provide discourse background, while constituents appearing at the end tend to carry new information or focal value. This is particularly evident in locative inversion, directional inversion, and presentational inversion structures. In the sentence, *Into the room came a stranger*, the directional phrase *into the room* establishes a movement frame, while *a stranger* is the new entity introduced into the discourse. In Vietnamese equivalence, the corresponding structure can be *Vào phòng bước một người lạ*, similarly shifting attention from the spatial setting to the newly appearing entity.

In English, inversion is typically identified through the reversal of subject - verb order or the appearance of an auxiliary verb before the subject, as in *Never have I seen such chaos; In the garden sat a little girl*. Such structures suggest more than express negation: they create emphatic focus across the entire utterance. Meanwhile, Vietnamese lacks verbal morphological inflection and has no auxiliary inversion mechanism like English; therefore, inversion in Vietnamese is primarily realized through positional shifts of adverbials, predicates, or spatial/temporal phrases as in *Chưa bao giờ người ta thấy hắn hiền như hôm nay* (meaning *Never have they found him as nice as he is today*); *Trên sông, những con thuyền im lìm trong sương sớm* (meaning *On river, boats silently sink in morning dew*). These structures show that Vietnamese organizes information primarily through

word order and discourse context rather than through morphosyntactic alternations [6].

Although inversion has received considerable attention in English linguistics, most previous studies have approached the phenomenon primarily from syntactic, grammatical, or stylistic perspectives[3, 4, 9]. Research has generally focused on structural constraints, inversion triggers, and sentence-level patterns, while relatively less attention has been devoted to the discourse-motivated functions of inversion as a mechanism for organizing information. From the perspective of information structure, inversion is not merely a marked word-order variation but a communicative strategy through which speakers manage the distribution of given and new information, establish discourse frames, and direct listener attention.

In Vietnamese linguistics, studies have similarly examined non-canonical word order, topicalization, and constituent fronting [6, 7]. However, these phenomena have often been discussed within functional grammar or discourse analysis without being systematically compared to English inversion structures. As a result, the extent to which English and Vietnamese employ inversion as a shared information-packaging strategy remains insufficiently explored. In particular, concepts central to contemporary information-structure theory, such as topic, focus, given/new information, and stage topic [1, 5], have not been fully integrated into contrastive analyses of inversion across the two languages.

This gap is theoretically significant because English and Vietnamese represent two typologically different linguistic systems. English relies heavily on syntactic marking and subject-verb ordering, whereas Vietnamese is an analytic language that depends more extensively on word order flexibility, discourse context, and pragmatic interpretation. Investigating inversion from an information-structural perspective therefore provides valuable insights into how different languages employ formal resources to achieve similar communicative goals.

Against this background, the present study investigates inversion in English and Vietnamese from an information-structural perspective. The study aims to examine how inversion contributes to the organization of topic, focus, stage topic, and given - new information, to identify major similarities and differences in the discourse functions of inversion between the two languages, and to explain how typological differences shape the realization of inversion as an information-packaging strategy. By

analyzing representative inversion patterns in English and Vietnamese, the study seeks to clarify the role of inversion at the interface of syntax, discourse, and communication.

The findings are expected to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between syntax and information structure in cross-linguistic perspective. They may also provide useful insights for contrastive linguistics, discourse analysis, translation studies, and the teaching of English and Vietnamese grammar.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Information Structure

Information structure, as defined by Lambrecht [1], concerns the relation between the form of the sentence and the cognitive status of the referents in the discourse, i.e., whether the entities and propositions expressed in an utterance are already part of the addressee's mental model of the discourse or are being introduced for the first time. The difference between given and new information partly determines the form of utterances: speakers usually place given information early and new information late, correlating structural position and informational weight.

This is illustrated by the difference between two examples of *A portrait hung on the wall* and *On the wall hung a portrait*. Both sentences are about the same state of affairs, but they differ in their instructional content. The first sentence starts from the portrait and adds the wall as further information, whereas the second sentence sets the wall as the discourse frame and presents the portrait as the new element. Halliday [2] discusses this dimension of sentence organization in terms of theme (what the clause is about) and rheme (what is said about it). He claims that the choice of theme has an interpersonal and textual meaning that goes beyond the propositional content of the utterance.

In this broader perspective, the notions of topic and focus have been particularly useful in explaining variation in word order. The topic of an utterance is the entity or proposition about which the utterance makes a predication, that is what Lambrecht [1] calls the matter of current interest in the discourse. The focus is the element that carries the main update of information: the part of the utterance that can't be presupposed from context. In many languages, including English, sentence-initial position is generally correlated with topic and sentence-final position with focus, but this correlation is not absolute and can be

overridden by the kinds of non-canonical constructions that are the subject of this paper.

The distinction given-new is a complementary distinction. Chafe [8] defines given information as that which the speaker believes to be already activated in the listener's consciousness and new information as that which the speaker believes is not. In inverted constructions, the fronted constituent will normally be given or inferrable information which provides some sort of contextual anchor. The post-verbal or sentence-final constituent will be the new or focal information. That distribution is the functional motivation for many types of inversion and will be an important analytical lens in the sections to come.

2.2. Topic, Focus and Stage Topic

The topic of an utterance does not have to be its grammatical subject. In a sentence like *In the garden sat a little girl*, the phrase in the garden is not the subject, but it is nevertheless the point of departure of the utterance - the situational frame in which the event is to be understood. This function is called stage topic by Erteschik-Shir [5], that is a constituent establishing a spatial, temporal or circumstantial background against which the focal content of the utterance is to be interpreted. The matter of the stage makes no affirmation in itself; it is there to find the affirmation that comes after it.

The idea of a stage topic is especially relevant for the study of locative and directional inversion, where a fronted spatial or directional phrase creates exactly this sort of discourse setting before the introduction of a new entity or event. Lambrecht [1] describes this process as a left to right movement from background to foreground. This is helpful to the listener in that it incrementally processes information, which anchors the new to a context that has already been set. The listener orients to a location or trajectory, and the new participant emerges in that orientated field.

Vietnamese offers clear evidence that this strategy is not specific to English. Sentences such as *Trong vườn có một cô bé đang ngồi* (meaning *In the garden, there is a little girl sitting down*), *Trên bàn đặt một quyển sách* (meaning *On the desk puts a book*), and *Ngoài sân đứng một người lạ* (meaning *Outside stands a stranger*) all open with a locative phrase that serves as stage topic before the focal noun phrase is introduced. The phrases *trong vườn* (in the garden), *trên bàn* (on the desk), and *ngoài sân* (outside) are not simply locative adverbials specifying where something occurs; they anchor the discourse frame within which the following information becomes interpretable [6]. This functional parallel between English and Vietnamese locative

fronting is one of the study's central points of comparison.

2.3. Inversion in English and Vietnamese

2.3.1. Inversion in English

In English, inversion is most broadly understood as the displacement of a constituent from its canonical position such that the standard subject-verb or auxiliary-subject sequence is altered [3, 9]. The literature identifies four principal types relevant to the present study.

Locative inversion follows the pattern *Adverbial phrase + verb + subject*. In *On the hill stood a castle*, the locative phrase *on the hill* is fronted, the verb *stood* follows, and the subject *a castle*, typically indefinite and discourse-new, occupies sentence-final position. This arrangement foregrounds the spatial setting and reserves the sentence-final slot for the newly introduced entity, producing a stronger presentational effect than the canonical *A castle stood on the hill* [10].

Directional inversion involves a fronted phrase encoding direction of movement. In *Into the room came a stranger*, the listener is first oriented along the trajectory before the moving entity is identified. The directional phrase establishes a movement frame; the subject, again typically indefinite, becomes the informational focus. This sequential arrangement creates visual immediacy and is particularly common in literary narrative.

Negative inversion is triggered when a negative or semi-negative expression is fronted: *Never have I seen such chaos; Rarely does he speak in public; Not only did she refuse the offer, but she also criticized it*. This construction carries obligatory syntactic consequences: English requires the auxiliary to precede the subject, a requirement that has no parallel in Vietnamese. The negative element in sentence-initial position creates emphatic or contrastive focus - what is sometimes described as polarity focus by foregrounding the exceptional or marked nature of the negated proposition.

Presentational inversion introduces an entity or event into the communicative field. Structures such as *Here comes the bus* and *There goes the train* use a deictic expression to direct the listener's attention toward a spatially or perceptually salient referent, which then appears post-verbally as the new element. The deictic word functions less as a locative argument than as an attentional cue.

2.3.2. Inversion in Vietnamese

The Vietnamese inversion is typologically different from the English inversion in structural aspects. Vietnamese is an analytic isolating language; it has no

verbal morphological inflection and no auxiliary system. Grammatical relations are shown by lexical means, particles, and linear order. Thus, what counts as inversion in Vietnamese is a matter of constituent position only - there is no morphosyntactic change to indicate that a deviation from default order has taken place [6, 7]. The most common form is fronted locative phrases. The first locative phrase in *Trên bàn là một cuốn sách* (meaning *On the desk puts a book*), *Ngoài sân đứng một người đàn ông* (meaning *Outside stands a stranger*) serve the stage-topic function in a way similar to locative inversion in English: it sets the stage for the discourse before a new referent is introduced. Vietnamese is much more flexible than English here. There is a wide variety of verbs (*đứng, nằm, treo, đặt, có, là*, meaning *stand, lie, hang, put, have, be* respectively) without any morphological adjustment.

Also, emphatic fronting of predicative elements is possible in Vietnamese such as *Đẹp vô cùng Tổ quốc ta ơi!* (meaning *How wonderful our country!*) [11] where the predicative adjective *đẹp* (its meaning in English: *wonderful*) is fronted to create an expressive, foregrounded quality predication. In negative contexts, the temporal-negative phrase *chưa bao giờ* (meaning *never*) can be fronted; for example, *Chưa bao giờ tôi thấy cảnh tượng ấy* (meaning *Never have I seen such a view*) to emphasise the scope of negation. But unlike English negative inversion, no auxiliary movement is involved; the subject-predicate order remains the same. Constituent position, discourse particles, and intonation do all the work of emphasis.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study is conducted in a qualitative design with the use of contrastive analysis and discourse analysis to examine inversion as a device for the organization of information in English and Vietnamese. The guiding idea is not to list inversion patterns as syntactic objects, but to explain the discourse work they perform: how they organise topic and focus, how they distribute given and new information, how they build the contextual frames in which utterances become interpretable.

3.1. Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The data for this study consist of inversion examples drawn from two principal source types: literary and narrative texts, and linguistic reference works and grammatical descriptions. For English, examples were taken from major reference grammars and theoretical studies, including Quirk et al. [3], Biber et al. [4], Erteschik-Shir [5], Huddleston and Pullum [9], and Birner [10], supplemented by attested examples from

some literary works. For Vietnamese, examples were drawn from functional grammar studies [6, 7] and from a selection of literary texts by southern Vietnamese authors including Trang Thế Hy and Tố Hữu, which provided naturally occurring instances of fronted locative, directional, and negative structures in narrative prose.

It should be noted that the data include both attested examples drawn from the sources above and constructed examples used for illustrative purposes, particularly in the theoretical framework sections. Constructed examples are employed where attested instances would not adequately distinguish the information-structural contrast under discussion, a practice that is standard in qualitative linguistic analysis [1]. Where an example is attributed to a specific text or author, it is attested; where it appears without attribution, it functions as a theoretical illustration. The study does not aim at quantitative representativeness, and no claim is made about the frequency of inversion types in either language.

The data are weighted toward literary and narrative discourse, which reflects the distribution of inversion in natural usage: non-canonical word order is considerably more frequent in written narrative than in conversation or expository prose [4]. This register bias is analytically appropriate given the study's focus on the discourse-organizational functions of inversion, which are most transparent in contexts where writers exercise deliberate control over information packaging. Readers should note that the findings pertain primarily to written, literary, and formal registers and should not be generalized to spoken or informal Vietnamese without further investigation. Examples were selected on the basis of two criteria. First, the example must exhibit a constituent order that departs from the pragmatically unmarked sequence in the language in question. Second, the departure must serve an identifiable information-structural function, establishing a discourse frame, introducing a new referent, or foregrounding a polarity contrast rather than being attributable to metrical, euphonic, or other non-communicative considerations. The boundary between these motivations is not always sharp, particularly in literary prose where aesthetic and informational purposes often converge; in such cases, examples were included when a clear information-structural reading was available, and the co-presence of stylistic motivation was noted where relevant.

3.2. Classification of Inversion Types

Following the categories established in the existing literature, the data were classified into four types: (i)

locative inversion, in which a locative phrase precedes the verb and subject; (ii) directional inversion, in which a directional expression precedes the moving entity; (iii) negative inversion, triggered by a fronted negative or semi-negative expression; and (iv) presentational inversion, used to introduce a new entity or event into the discourse. These categories were chosen because they represent the most consistently attested inversion patterns across the two languages and because each exhibits a distinct information-structural profile amenable to comparison.

3.3. Analytical Framework and Coding Procedure

Each example was analyzed with reference to the information-structural framework outlined in Section 2, drawing primarily on Lambrecht [1] and Erteschik-Shir [5]. The coding procedure addressed six analytical dimensions, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Coding Framework for Inversion Analysis

Analytical Category	Description
Type of inversion	Locative, directional, negative, presentational inversion
Topic	The discourse anchor or point of departure of the utterance
Focus	The element carrying the primary informational update
Information status	Given information vs. new information
Stage topic	Presence or absence of a spatial, temporal, or situational frame
Discourse function	Framing, presentation, emphasis, attentional shift, or polarity focus

For each example, the fronted constituent was first identified and its discourse role determined; the informational status of each constituent was then assessed in relation to the surrounding context; and the communicative function of the inverted structure as a whole was interpreted in terms of the categories in the rightmost column of Table 1.

3.4. Analytical Procedure and Reliability

The analysis proceeded in four stages: identification and extraction of inversion structures from the selected data; classification according to the four inversion types; analysis of each example in terms of topic-focus organization, given-new distribution, and stage-topic configuration; and comparison of the English and Vietnamese data to determine convergences and divergences. Because the study aims at theoretical explanation rather than statistical generalization, reliability was pursued through

consistency of application: the coding categories were defined with reference to established frameworks, and examples from different source types were cross-checked to ensure that discourse functions were identified on comparable grounds across the two languages.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Locative Inversion and the Function of Stage Topic

Most directly, locative inversion illustrates the relationship between non-canonical word order and information-structural organization. The difference between *A portrait hung on the wall* and *On the wall hung a portrait* is not simply a stylistic choice in English. In the presented wall context, it functions as a stage topic [5], which means it functions as a spatial anchor for the listener before the new entity (a portrait) comes in the discourse-final focal position.

Vietnamese works similarly. In *Trên sông gió nổi lên* (meaning *On the river the wind rises*), the fronted phrase *trên sông* establishes the locative frame, while *gió nổi lên*, appearing post-verbally, carries the informational update. The portrait is not, in this construction, what the sentence takes for granted; it is what the sentence presents. The parallel to English locative inversion is functional rather than formal: both constructions deploy a fronted spatial expression as stage topic and a post-verbal element as focus.

But there is one big formal difference. English locative inversion is sensitive to verb type (the type of verb matters: among the verbs that typically occur are stand, sit, lie, hang, and come) and requires that the subject be indefinite and discourse-new [10]. Vietnamese has no similar restriction on verb choice: *đứng, nằm, treo, đặt, có, là* (meaning *stand, lie, hang, put, have, be* respectively) and other verbs are all permitted in the fronted-locative pattern without morphological adjustment. The discourse function (stage topic + new referent) is common, but the grammatical conditions that license it are not.

4.2. Directional Inversion and Attentional Shift

English directional inversion involves a fronted phrase that does not just denote a location, but tracks a trajectory. *Into the room came a stranger* guides the listener along a path, and then reveals the entity at the end of that path. The directional phrase *into the room* constructs a vector of attention, and a stranger comes in is the point of payoff at the end of the clause. The effect is one of spatial and narrative momentum - what Biber et al. [4] call a presentational foregrounding, in

which the perspective of the reader is set from outside in, or from the trajectory inward.

Similar structure is found in Vietnamese: *Vào phòng bước một người lạ* (meaning *Into the room came a stranger*), with the directional phrase *vào phòng* (meaning *Into the room*) before both the verb and subject, creating a similar attentional sequence. But in practice, this construction belongs to another literary register. Vietnamese speakers typically prefer the canonical *Một người lạ bước vào phòng* (meaning *A stranger came into the room*). The same holds for English directional inversion, which is more frequent in fiction than in conversational or journalistic prose [4]. There is a fairly close alignment in the register sensitivity of the two languages.

Information structurally, directional inversion in both languages is an instance of the end-focus principle in that the focal entity is not introduced until the movement frame has been established. The listener or reader is placed somewhere on the trajectory before the participant who travels it is named. This is a more dynamic version of the stage-topic strategy identified in locative inversion. Rather than simply situating the discourse in a place, directional inversion situates it in a movement.

4.3. Negative Inversion and Polarity Focus

Negative inversion in English is the most formally constrained of the four inversion types. When a negative or semi-negative element such as *never, rarely, seldom, hardly, or not only* is fronted, the grammar of English requires auxiliary-subject inversion: *Never have I seen such chaos; Rarely does he speak in public*. This is not optional: a speaker who fronts *never* but retains canonical subject-auxiliary order produces an ungrammatical sentence. The syntactic requirement is itself a marker of the construction's pragmatic weight-negative inversion announces that what follows is being asserted against an implied contrary expectation, creating what Lambrecht [1] describes as a contrastive or polarity focus that spans the entire proposition.

Vietnamese achieves analogous emphasis without auxiliary movement. In *Chưa bao giờ tôi thấy cảnh tượng ấy* (meaning *Never have I seen such a view*), the temporal-negative phrase *chưa bao giờ* (meaning *Never*) occupies sentence-initial position to foreground the scope of negation, but the subject *tôi* continues to precede the main predicate in canonical order. The emphatic work is distributed across constituent position, the semantics of the negative particle, and intonational prominence- none of which requires a change in verb form. The discourse effect (polarity focus, assertion against expectation) is comparable to

English negative inversion, but the grammatical machinery is entirely different in kind.

This contrast is theoretically significant. English negative inversion is a syntactically obligatory response to a pragmatically motivated fronting operation. Vietnamese negative fronting is a pragmatically motivated positioning choice with no obligatory syntactic consequence. The question of whether these two patterns should be described under the same label - negative inversion - turns out to be less a terminological convenience than a theoretical decision with real analytical stakes, a point to which Section 4.6 returns.

4.4. Presentational Inversion and the Presentational Function

In English, presentational inversion introduces a new entity into the communicative field by means of a deictic marker and subject-verb inversion. *Here comes the bus* and *There goes the train*, here and there are attentional cues rather than genuine locative arguments: they direct the listener's gaze to a salient referent in the perceptual or communicative context, which then surfaces post-verbally as the new element being introduced into the discourse. Vietnamese does not have a structural equivalent to this construction. A set of overlapping devices perform the same presentational function: deictic expressions (*đây, kia, kia*, meaning *this, there, overthere*), aspectual particles (*rồi*, meaning *already*) and identificational copular structures. *Kia xe buýt đến* (its meaning in English: *There the bus comes!*) and *Xe buýt đến rồi* (meaning *The bus comes!*) both mention the bus arriving, but neither of them have *subject-verb* inversion as understood in English. In these structures the communicative goal is the same, but the formal realisation is different.

This distributional difference is one example of a general principle to which this analysis returns time and time again: functional equivalence between the two languages does not imply, and often conceals, formal non-equivalence. English concentrates the presentational function in one single, well-defined syntactic construction; Vietnamese spreads it over a bundle of pragmatically related, but formally different resources. The convergence on the communicative level is real but its consequences for grammar are quite different.

4.5. Inversion and Related Information-Structural Constructions in Vietnamese

One of the most analytically challenging features of the Vietnamese data is the difficulty of drawing a sharp boundary between inversion, topicalization, and

existential constructions. In English, these categories are broadly distinguishable: inversion involves subject displacement and, in some types, auxiliary movement; topicalization moves a constituent to the left periphery without affecting subject-verb order; existential constructions use the expletive *there* to introduce new referents. The categories overlap at their edges but are recognizably distinct at their cores. Vietnamese does not maintain these distinctions in the same way.

Consider the three sentences: *Trên bàn đặt một quyển sách* (meaning *On the desk puts a book.*); *Trên bàn có một quyển sách* (meaning *On the desk has a book.*); and *Trên bàn là một quyển sách* (meaning *On the desk is a book.*). The first might be analyzed as locative inversion because the locative phrase precedes the verb and the discourse-new noun phrase follows. The second can be read as an existential construction in which *có* signals the existence of a referent within the established frame. The third might be interpreted as a presentational or identificational structure in which the copula *là* introduces an entity into a discourse slot already opened by the locative. All three sentences share the same information-structural skeleton (locative stage topic + new referent) but their grammatical analyses diverge depending on which verb or copular element is present.

This blurring of categorical boundaries is not an analytical inconvenience to be resolved but a feature of the language to be described. Vietnamese, as an analytic language, encodes information-structural relations through a continuum of lexical and positional resources rather than through a set of formally distinct constructions. Verbs such as *có* and copular elements such as *là* carry both grammatical and discourse-organizational functions simultaneously: they signal existence or identity while also anchoring the transition from background frame to focal content [2, 6]. The result is a system in which inversion, topicalization, and existential presentation shade into one another, and where the identification of any one pattern as the primary vehicle of the stage-topic function is to some extent an interpretive rather than a descriptive act.

Register interacts with this flexibility in ways that are worth noting. Fronted locative and directional constructions are considerably more frequent in literary and descriptive prose than in spontaneous conversation. In narrative contexts, *Ngoài sân đứng một người lạ* (meaning *Outside stands a stranger*) and *Vào phòng bước một người lạ* (meaning *Into the room came a stranger*) exploit the sequencing of spatial frame before focal participant to create visual immediacy and

narrative pacing [7]. In conversational Vietnamese, the same situations are more naturally described by the canonical *Một người lạ đứng ngoài sân* (meaning *A stranger stands outside*) or *Một người lạ bước vào phòng* (meaning *A stranger came into the room*). The inverted forms are not ungrammatical in conversation, but they carry an unmarked literary quality that makes them pragmatically unusual outside of deliberate stylistic choice.

These observations suggest that in Vietnamese, inversion is not a grammatically defined category so much as a discourse-pragmatic tendency, a clustering of positional choices associated with particular communicative effects, distributed across a range of formally related but not formally identical constructions. Rather than treating Vietnamese inversion as a single phenomenon, the analysis here understands it as a region of the language's information-structural system in which constituent fronting, existential predication, and deictic presentation converge around the shared function of establishing a discourse frame before introducing focal content.

4.6. Contrastive Summary: Functional Convergence and Structural Asymmetry

Across the four inversion types examined in this study, English and Vietnamese converge at the level of communicative function while diverging substantially in the grammatical means through which that function is realized. In both languages, fronted constituents establish discourse frames, sentence-initial spatial or temporal phrases operate as stage topics, and sentence-final position attracts discourse-new referents. This parallel is not accidental; it follows from the general information-structural principle that listeners process utterances incrementally, and that speakers organize clauses accordingly, moving from context to content.

The formal picture, however, is considerably less symmetrical. English inversion operates under grammatical constraints with no Vietnamese counterpart. Locative inversion requires a particular verb class and an indefinite, discourse-new subject; negative inversion triggers obligatory auxiliary-subject reversal; presentational inversion demands deictic marking followed by inverted subject-verb order. These are not stylistic preferences but syntactic conditions: violating them produces infelicitous or ungrammatical results. Vietnamese achieves comparable discourse effects without any of this machinery. A locative phrase is fronted; nothing else in

the clause is required to change. The communicative work is distributed instead across word order, intonation, discourse particles, and contextual inference - resources that operate below the threshold of syntactic obligation.

This formal asymmetry points toward a deeper theoretical question. In English, inversion is defined against a stable canonical baseline (the Subject-Verb-Object sequence) and departure from it carries morphosyntactic consequences. The construction is, in a technical sense, *licensed*: conditions must be met before it can apply, and the grammar registers its application through changes in verb form and constituent order. What we call inversion in Vietnamese is structurally different in kind. Because the language lacks verbal inflection and auxiliary verbs, fronting a constituent sets no further grammatical machinery in motion. And unlike English, Vietnamese does not maintain a rigid syntactic default from which inversion would constitute a marked departure; its unmarked word order is itself discourse-sensitive and context-dependent [6]. English inversion violates a rule; Vietnamese fronting departs from a convention.

The theoretical consequence is worth stating plainly: the term *inversion* does not name the same phenomenon in both languages. In English it refers to a syntactic operation with discourse motivation; in Vietnamese it refers to a discourse strategy with positional effects. Treating them as parallel instances of a shared category obscures exactly the structural difference that a typologically informed contrastive analysis should be foregrounding. The boundary between inversion, topicalization, and existential constructions, relatively clear in English, considerably blurred in Vietnamese is itself a symptom of this deeper difference. Vietnamese, as an analytic language, produces a continuum of information-structural constructions rather than a set of formally discrete types, and no single label captures that continuum cleanly.

None of this diminishes the value of the comparison. It does, however, reframe what the comparison shows. The two languages do not share inversion as a strategy; they independently arrive at similar communicative outcomes through grammatically different routes. What they hold in common is the problem: how to distribute given and new information across the positions of an utterance in ways that serve the listener's incremental processing. The solutions, at the level of grammar, are their own.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined inversion in English and Vietnamese from the perspective of information structure, treating the phenomenon not as a syntactic irregularity but as a communicative strategy through which speakers distribute given and new information, anchor discourse in spatial or temporal frames, and direct listener attention toward focal content. The analysis of four inversion types including locative, directional, negative, and presentational has confirmed that functional convergence between the two languages coexists with a structural asymmetry that the preceding sections have examined in detail.

The theoretical contribution of the study lies in this insistence on the asymmetry. Information structure theory is most productive in contrastive linguistics not when applied as a *tertium comparationis* that subsumes both languages under a shared conceptual vocabulary, but when deployed to reveal how typologically different systems recruit different grammatical resources to solve the same communicative problem. The notions of topic, focus, stage topic, and given-new information are not neutral descriptive universals but analytical tools whose application must remain sensitive to the grammatical character of the system under investigation.

The findings carry practical implications for translation and language pedagogy. In translation, formal equivalence between English and Vietnamese inversion structures does not guarantee discourse equivalence: the register and pragmatic weight of an inverted Vietnamese construction may differ substantially from those of its English source, and a structurally faithful rendering is not always the most communicatively faithful one. In the classroom, English inversion should not be presented to Vietnamese-speaking learners as a simple word-order reordering but as a construction with grammatical licensing conditions that differ qualitatively from the Vietnamese patterns they may be inclined to treat as analogous.

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8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Not Declared

9. INFORMED CONSENT AND ETHICAL STATEMENT

Not applicable

10. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The contributions are equal among the authors.

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