A study of the Vietnamese marker *Là*

Danh Thành DO-HURINVILLE

MoDyCo, Université Paris Ouest (Nanterre), UMR 7114,
Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales
dhdthanh@gmail.com

The authors who work on Southeast Asian and African isolating languages (cf. Robert *et al.*, 2003) emphasize that the categorial change of words is one of the primary characteristics of those languages. In Vietnamese, which is an isolating language, there are several polyfunctional markers (or transcategorial markers) such as *là*, *thì*, *mà*, etc.

> [...] As we have seen, languages tend to make optimal use of their lexical resources. Instead of coining distinct items for every combination of concept and function, languages tend to recycle items in several functions [...] (Anward, 2000: 38)

There are two approaches relative to the Vietnamese marker *là*. According to the syntactic approach, Vietnamese is a subject-predicate language, *là* being a verb-copula. For his part, Cao (2004), who resorts to the classification of languages by Li Charles and Thompson (1976), argues that Vietnamese is a Topic-Prominent language, *là* separating the topic from the comment.

In my proposal I will combine the pragmatic and syntactic approaches to study *là*. From the pragmatic viewpoint, this marker is a rhematizer connecting two constituents X and Y as follows: **X + là + Y** ; the constituent Y is more informative than the constituent X, according to the notion of communicative dynamism (cf. Firbas, 1971). From the syntactic viewpoint, *là* can be used at the phrase level or at the clause level.

1.   *Là* inside a clause (phrase level)

The marker *là* is used to separate the immediate constituents of a clause.

1.1.   Rhematization of the predicate

(1)	*Anh ấy*	*là*	*giáo sư.*	(2)	*Hà Nội*	*là*	*thủ đô*	*của*	*Việt Nam.*
	3SG	COP/RHEM	professor		Ha Nôi	COP/RHEM	capital	POSS	Vietnam
	« He is a professor »				« Hà Nôi is the capital of Vietnam »				

In (1, 2), the copula *là* separates the subjects from the nominal predicates. From the pragmatic viewpoint, this type of clauses sets up the theme-plus-rheme structure in the form of an equation where theme equals rheme (thematic equative).

1.2.   Rhematization of the temporal adverb

(3)	*Ngày mai*	*là*	*anh ấy*	*phải*	*lên đường.*
	tomorrow	RHEM	3SG	must	set off
	"Tomorrow, he must set off"				

In (3), the temporal adverb *ngày mai* (tomorrow) is rhematized by *là*. In other words, *ngày mai* (not at another moment) is the moment to set off.

1.3.   Reduplication of the subject with *Là*

(4)	*Tôi₁*	*là*	*tôi₂*	*chỉ*	*thích*	*đọc*	*Balzac.*
	1SG	RHEM	1SG	only	like	read	Balzac
	"As for me, I like to read Balzac only"						

In (4), *tôi* is reduplicated and made salient by *là*. *Tôi₁* is the disjunctive (tonic) pronoun (it is the topic) and *tôi₂* is the subject.

1.4. Reduplication of the predicate with *Là*

> (5) *Cô ấy* <u>*đẹp*</u> *ơi* **là** <u>*đẹp*</u>*!*
>   3SG be beautiful EXCLA RHEM be beautiful
>   "How beautiful she is !"

In (5), the verb phrase *đẹp* (be beautiful) is reduplicated and made salient by **là**.

2.   *Là* connecting two clauses (clause level)

The marker **là** is used to link two clauses X and Y.

2.1. *Là* separating the temporal clause from the main clause

> (6) *Trời sáng* **là** *anh ấy phải lên đường*.
>   sky be light RHEM 3SG must set off
>   "When the daylight comes, he must set off"

2.2. *Là* separating the subordinate clause from the main clause

> (7) *Hễ* *trời lạnh* **là** *tôi ho*.
>   whenever sky be cold RHEM 1SG cough
>   "Whenever the weather is cold, (then) I start coughing"

2.3. *Là* as a complementizer

> (8) *Tôi nghĩ* **là** *anh ấy có lý*.
>   1SG think COMPLE 3SG be right
>   "I think (that) he is right"

> (9) *Tôi nghĩ* **là** *anh ấy*.
>   1SG think COMPLE 3SG
>   "I think (that) it's him"

> (10) *Tôi nghĩ* **rằng** *anh ấy có lý*.
>   1SG think COMPLE 3SG be right
>   "I think (that) he is right"

> (11) *Tôi nghĩ* **rằng** *anh ấy…*
>   1SG think COMPLE 3SG
>   "I think (that) he…"

In (8), **là** functions as a complementizer linking the main clause (topic) to the subordinate clause (comment). *Là* can also be used when Y is a pronoun as in (9). When Y is a clause, this marker can permute with the complementizer *rằng*[1] as in (10). When Y is a pronoun and preceded by *rằng*, the sentence is not complete as in (11).

Abbreviations : 1SG (first person); 3SG (third person); COMPLE (complementizer); COP (copula); EXCLA (exclamative particle); POSS (possessive marker); RHEM (rhematizer).

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[1]   The complementizer *rằng* is originally a verbe meaning « to say ».