Cohesive Meaning of Linking Word "Nhưng" in Vietnamese Language

Lê Thu Lan[*]

Abstract: In linguistics, adversative conjunctions are linking words that connect different parts of language to produce a cohesive message. They are studied for their formation, functions, and relation to content words. "Nhưng" is an example of an adversative conjunction in Vietnamese, which functions as a syntactic and textual cohesive marker. This article explores the patterns of "nhưng" usage in terms of sentence and utterance cohesion, highlighting structural differences that affect meaning and reflect the speaker's communicative intent. The authors investigate the structural differences that affect meaning and reflect the speaker's communicative intent. Through analysis, the author highlights the ways that "nhưng" can be used to connect contrasting ideas or expressing opposition. The author also examines the role of context and intonation in shaping the meaning of this conjunction. The findings of this study have implications for understanding of language use and communication. By shedding light on the patterns of adversative conjunctions in Vietnamese, this research contributes to the broader field of linguistics and provides insights for language learners and teachers.

1. Introduction

Cohesion is a crucial feature of text, as it ensures that linguistic units, like utterances, are joined in a way that produces a coherent whole. There are several cohesive devices that can be used, including iteration, substitution, ellipsis, antithesis, and association, but conjunction is one of the most common. In Vietnamese, conjunctions are a typical form of cohesive device, and they can be single words, pairs of words, or groups of words that link text together. Through statistical research, around 100 types of conjunctive words or

[*] Hanoi University.

Email: thulanle111@gmail.com

groups have been identified in Vietnamese, with differences across categories such as selection, cause-effect, time-space, generalisation, specification, adversative, and concession.

Several studies have identified and classified groups of linking words in the adversative category in Vietnamese. However, more in-depth research is needed to examine how these word groups function, how frequently they occur, and the specific meaning values they contribute to a text.

Researchers have classified different linking words in Vietnamese based on criteria such as form, position, number, and meaning. Adversative linking words in Vietnamese, denoting contrary or opposite meanings, are commonly referred to as the "adverse" group. Words belonging to this group include *nhưng (but), song (but, however), mà (but), còn (but), tuy vậy ((al)though, even though), tuy nhiên (however), dẫu cho ((al)though, even though), dẫu rằng ((al)though, even though), thế nhưng (but), trái lại (in contrast), ngược lại (in contrast), thật ra (là) (indeed, in fact), thế nhưng mà (but), cho dù ((al)though, even though)*.

Among the group of adversative conjunctions, there are differences in the degree of contrary. However, statistical analysis shows that "nhưng" and "song" are the two most common words in this group. While both words are widely used, "nhưng" is used more frequently and in more diverse grammatical structures than "song". Thus, this article focuses on examining "nhưng" as a representative example of the adversative conjunctions in Vietnamese.

2. Literature review

The first English conjunction work was "Cohesion in English" by Halliday and Hasan (1976). This study laid the groundwork for researching text in general and conjunctions, particularly their logical relation to meaning. The researchers divided conjunctive cohesion into four types based on logical meaning relation: additive, adversative, causal, and temporal. "An Introduction to Functional Grammar", which Hoàng Văn Vân translated into Vietnamese in 1998, followed this work. Halliday's research is the basis for studying conjunctive cohesion in various languages.

David Nunan (1997) also reinforced the importance of conjunctions, including them in the concept of cohesion, in "Introduction to Discourse Analysis", which Hồ Mỹ Huyền and Trúc Thanh translated into Vietnamese. The author agreed with Halliday's four primary types of semantic relations in conjunctions. This theory is applicable to research on the semantics and pragmatics of conjunctive cohesion in Vietnamese.

Several Vietnamese linguistics researchers have studied the syntactic meaning of the word "nhưng", including Hoàng Trọng Phiến (1980), Nguyễn Đức Dân (1987), Nguyễn Anh Quế (1987), and Hoàng Phê (2003). According to Nguyễn Đức Dân,

"nhưng" is a linking word that plays an essential role in sentence structure (Nguyễn Đức Dân, 1987, p.156). Most authors analyse "nhưng" as a conjunction that connects two clauses in a sentence.

Trần Ngọc Thêm is considered the pioneering author in the advancement of text grammar and cohesive devices, including conjunctions. In his work, "*Hệ thống liên kết trong văn bản tiếng Việt*" (The cohesive system in Vietnamese text) (1985), he provided valuable insights into the different aspects of conjunctions in texts, such as their grammar, semantics, and pragmatics.

Two other linguists who have made significant contributions to the research on conjunctions in text are Đỗ Hữu Châu (1994) and Nguyễn Thị Việt Thanh (1999). Their research has explored the functional and pragmatic aspects of Vietnamese conjunctions, drawing from both traditional language theories and modern textual theories. These studies represent a new focus on the meanings of conjunctions.

Other Vietnamese linguists have focused on the linking roles of functional words, including linking words, from a pragmatic perspective. They have explored how these words link to content and functional words to create various message patterns. Their research covers a broad range of topics, including text, discourse, structural organisation, meaning, force, and effectiveness of different types of language units. They have also conducted narrower research on functional words and linking words, examining their scattered references and deixis in speech acts, interactive conversation cohesion in the function of implicit meaning expression, and the role of cohesive operators and arguments.

This article aims to survey the usage of the word "nhưng" in Vietnamese compound sentences (A *nhưng* B/A but B), where it serves as a syntactic agent (conjunction). It can also appear at the beginning of a sentence, functioning as a linking word in intersentence cohesion (textual cohesion: A. *Nhưng* B/ A. But B). The primary focus of the article is to examine the role of "nhưng" in text relations, with particular emphasis on sentences where "nhưng" appears at the beginning. The examples are drawn from a variety of sources, including artistic works, political and scientific texts, and natural conversational utterances.

The article also seeks to investigate the structural and semantic connections between utterances containing the word "nhưng", as intended by the communicator. In other words, the article aims to decode the message that contains "nhưng".

3. Research methods

To identify the conjunctive relationship and semantic values of the linking word "nhưng" (as an adversative conjunction), the article employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, focusing on discourse analysis and semantic analysis. The research objects include utterances, sentences, and paragraphs that contain linking words, as well as research works, books, scientific articles, and literary works from various

sources, such as artistic, administrative, scientific, political, and media texts. By analysing the structural, semantic, and pragmatic features of adversative conjunctions through description, review, and evaluation, the study identifies the positions, number, and occurrences of linking words (groups) in relation to the word "nhưng" in Vietnamese. Specifically, the article provides a detailed analysis of two utterances with different conjunctive functions (main utterance and linking utterance), highlighting the structural and semantic links of the word "nhưng" in Vietnamese.

For our study, we have selected literature works that include the word "nhưng" in textbooks and major newspapers in Vietnam, both past and present. This selection makes it easy for readers to identify and locate the relevant resources, and provides the author with the necessary tools to analyse the data. These publications are also easy to cite or analyse.

In the data selection process, we have also included a text by Hồ Chí Minh that calls for unity against the US. We are not analysing the political, historical, or propaganda aspects of the Vietnam-US relationship. Rather, we are focusing solely on the semantic meaning of the word "nhưng" in the text used by the President at that time. Although this text may not be as visible in the current press, it was well known in the past, and its rhetorical utterance makes it easy for readers to see the contrasting sides of reality or two phrases in a sentence.

4. Research results

4.1. Main meaning of "nhưng" (but)

In general, linguistic explanatory dictionaries provide a consistent explanation of the functional meaning and linguistic role of "nhưng" (but). It indicates a contrast or opposition to the idea that has been previously mentioned in an utterance. Specifically, the Vietnamese dictionary (Hoàng Phê, 2020) defines **"nhưng" as a linking word** that signifies a contrary meaning to what has been stated before in the utterance. For example, "*Việc nhỏ nhưng ý nghĩa lớn*" (A small but significant thing), "*Nói nhỏ nhưng vẫn nghe thấy*" (It sounds small but it can be heard), and "*Hứa nhưng không thực hiện được*" (It is a promise but it isn't done). Therefore, the main meaning of "nhưng" is to express what is about to be said in contrast to what has been said before.

Example:

Anh ấy nghèo *nhưng* lại đối xử rộng rãi với bạn bè.

(He's poor *but* he's generous to his friends).

Cô ấy đẹp *nhưng* tính tình không tốt.

(She's pretty *but* doesn't have a good personality).

Trời mưa to *nhưng* đường không bị ngập.

(It heavily rained *but* the roads were not flooded).

4.2. Pattern of word "nhưng" (but)

With the symbols A and B representing the content before and/or after the contrary linking word, the adversative relation of "nhưng" can be structured in the following cohesive pattern:

"A nhưng B" (i) (A but B)

This is the most common pattern of adversative relation, with the linking word "nhưng" (but). The content word units in the pattern are usually simple and concise. The events have a natural relation, but it is not too contrasting or "sharp". Therefore, they are often described continuously in a coherent, clear manner without being separated.

Example:

(1) "Chúng cháu không dám chắc lép *nhưng* quả là ít vốn". (Nam Cao, 2020, p.48).

(We want to avoid being skeptical *but* we really have very little money).

(2) "Thân xác là kẻ khác *nhưng* hồn vẫn là mình". (Lưu Quang Vũ, 2013, p.44).

(The body belongs to another *but* the soul still is ours).

Accordingly, the word "nhưng" has two common positions associated with two different types of grammatical units: the initial and middle positions. Its linking function at these different positions is quite distinct. In the adversative relation, "nhưng" always appears at the beginning of clause A, serving as a marker for *tuy, dẫu, dầu, dù, dù cho*, etc. (however, (al)though), which signals the contrasting clause B.

The second most common position for "nhưng" is at the beginning of the sentence as an utterance, indicating the adversative relation between at least two sentences. In other words, we have an intersentential relation or a link between paragraphs in a broader sense of text.

As discussed above, the most common position of "nhưng" is within a sentence, where the variant pattern is marked formally through a comma to separate the clauses in the adversative relation, specifically "A, nhưng B" (A, but B).

Another common pattern for "nhưng" is when it appears in the initial position of a sentence, indicating an adversative relation between sentences. This creates a cohesive relationship at the text level: "A. Nhưng B" (A. But B).

Example:

(3) "Đế quốc Mỹ dã man, gây ra chiến tranh xâm lược hòng ăn cướp nước ta, *nhưng* chúng đang thua to." (Lời kêu gọi của Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh "Không có gì quý hơn độc lập, tự do", ngày 17 tháng 7 năm 1966).

(The American empire is ruthless, causing a war of aggression in an attempt to steal our country, but they are currently losing). (The call by President Hồ Chí Minh "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom", 17 July 1966).

(4) "Giặc Mỹ trắng trợn dùng không quân bắn phá miền Bắc nước ta, hòng gỡ thế thất bại của chúng ở miền Nam và hòng ép chúng ta "đàm phán" theo ý muốn của chúng.

Nhưng miền Bắc không hề nao núng.'' (Lời kêu gọi của Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh "Không có gì quý hơn độc lập, tự do", ngày 17 tháng 7 năm 1966).

(The American enemy is blatantly using their air force to bomb and destroy the North of our country, in an attempt to overcome their failure in the South and to pressure us to "negotiate" on their terms. However, the North remains unshaken). (The call by President Hồ Chí Minh "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom", 17 July 1966).

Through observation, we find that in the sentences mentioned earlier, the word "nhưng" joins the two main clauses of an adversative compound sentence, and the two clauses have a close relation. For example, in the sentence "Đế quốc Mỹ dã man, gây ra chiến tranh… nhưng chúng thua to" (The American empire is ruthless, causing a war of aggression in an attempt to steal our country, but they are currently losing).

However, in a text with similar content, the events in the following sentence are separated into two distinct sentences. In this case, the word "nhưng" appears at the beginning of sentence B, creating a strong and definitive affirmation. This is because there are two sharply adversative facts: A refers to "giặc Mỹ" (the American enemy), while B refers to "miền Bắc" (the North).

The difference in the use of punctuation marks between a comma and a period is not only related to the aspect of grammatical meaning, but also to the degree of contrast in the content of the facts. A comma represents a closer and tighter semantic content structure relation, while a period represents a looser semantic relation. In other words, the choice between a comma or a period reflects the degree of tightness or looseness of the adversative meaning.

Trần Ngọc Thêm (1985), Diệp Quang Ban (1998), and Phạm Văn Tình (2002) were the pioneering authors who identified loose and tight textual conjunction. Loose conjunction is based on linking the adversative meaning within at least two clauses, while tight conjunction is based on the adversative meaning of a coming utterance (sentence) as/belonging to a new paragraph after a period.

In the context of adversative conjunction, we focus on the relation between main clause A and linking clause B, taking place in both semantic and pragmatic aspects. The degree of looseness and tightness in the relation between the two clauses is presented according to the choice of the corresponding punctuation mark in the text.

4.3. Linking level of word "nhưng" (but)

4.3.1. Syntactic level

The structure of a word or phrase can also exhibit the phenomenon of adversative conjunction. It serves as the lowest unit that can provide context for the occurrence of words.
Example:

(5) "Tìm mãi *nhưng* không thấy".

(I've been looking *but* failed to find it).

The contrary relationship can occur between the main and subordinate elements of a phrase, such as in verb and adjective phrases. This is a common occurrence, as seen in examples like: "*Chém nhưng không chết*" (It was cut *but* it didn't die), "*chặt nhưng không đứt*" (It was cut *but* it wasn't broken), "*đi nhưng không đến nơi*" (He has gone *but* he failed to come), "*học dốt nhưng vẫn lên lớp*" (He was a bad student *but* he always passes exams to enter upper class), "*tàn nhưng không phế*" (disabled *but* unbreakable).

Whereas, there are very few noun phrases with adversative structures because the pattern "A nhưng B" (A nhưng B) itself carries the function of proving, explaining, describing the characteristics of things so they are likely to be the role of modification of the sentence.

Example: Thị trấn xa nhưng vẫn nhộn nhịp (The town is remote *but* busy) or *Nhà nghèo nhưng vẫn luôn vui vẻ* (It's a poor *but* happy family).

The word "nhưng" connects two adversative parts within the scope of modification.

Example:

(6) "Bác cứ sống với thân bác, hồn bác, rồi bác sẽ tìm được cách sống trong cõi đời ghê gớm *nhưng* lý thú này…" (Lưu Quang Vũ, 2013, p.85).

(Just live with your body, your soul, and you'll find a way to exist in this terrible *but* exciting world...).

The word "nhưng" joins two adverbials in a contrary relation.

Example:

(7) Ngày đêm trên đầu khe, gió hú, gió gào bên ngoài *nhưng* trong vẫn ấm áp và êm đềm như thường (Tô Hoài, 1998, p.38).

(Day and night on the top of the ravine, the wind howls, the wind shrieks outside, *but* it is still warm and calm as usual inside).

The word "nhưng" connects two clauses of a compound sentence.

Example:

(8) "Thân xác là kẻ khác, *nhưng* hồn vẫn là mình" (Lưu Quang Vũ, 2013, p.44).

(The body belongs to another *but* the spirit belongs to us).

The pattern denotes a contrary content between two clauses of a compound sentence in which "nhưng" occur at the beginning of linking clause B and after a comma.

4.3.2. Intersentence level

The contrary relation is shown at the text level when linking sentences, also often called "intersentence" or "interparagraph", as the following pattern:

97

"A. Nhưng B" (ii)

The pattern "A. Nhưng B" indicates a context with a grammatical relation above the sentence level. Additionally, it reflects the degree and boundary of adversative meaning through its structural scale. This pattern can be seen as an extension of the structural scale of constituent parts, from extended sentence components to entire sentences. It is marked by a period to separate the sentences, instead of using a comma to separate sentence clauses.

Example:

(9) "Thân này tiện nhân đã cầm chắc là không được toàn. Nhưng trước khi chết tiện nhân cũng cố hết sức biện bạch mong Hoàng thượng đừng coi rẻ anh em tiện nhân, ngõ hầu con em theo gót sau này được mở mày mở mặt." (Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, 2015, tr.15).

(I know myself, a humble man, is about to die. But before I die, I'd try to make excuses to ask the Majesty not to look down on my brothers and sisters so that our children will be able to be proud in the future.")

It has been observed that some grammarians do not accept sentences that begin with a conjunction and argue that they are not grammatically dependent on any other clause (Trần Ngọc Thêm, 2013, p.205). However, statistics compiled by Trần Ngọc Thêm (2013, pp.205-206) indicate that of the 1,590 texts analysed, conjunctions clearly occur at the beginning of a sentence as follows: "nhưng/song" (but) 367 times, "và" (and) 84 times, "về" (about) 72 times, "rồi" (already) 66 times, "bởi vì/vì" (because) 45 times, and "nên/cho nên" (therefore) 36 times. This clearly shows the role and function of linking words in the cohesion of inter-sentences, including "nhưng". Therefore, it is necessary to study and indicate their textual connection.

4.3.3. Conversational level

At a conversational level, the level of intimacy in an interaction can be inferred by observing the response of speaker 2 to the "opening" act. In particular, if speaker 2 responds in a way that contradicts the previous statement made by speaker 1, this suggests a close and familiar relationship between the speakers.

Example:

(10) Người nói 1 - Vợ người hàng thịt: Tôi đây mà, ông đang ở nhà ta chứ ở đâu!

Người nói 2 - Hồn Trương Ba: *Nhưng* bà là ai kia chứ? (Lưu Quang Vũ, 2013).

(Speaker 1 - Butcher's wife: It's me, you're in our home!

Speaker 2 - Trương Ba's soul: But who are you?)

In conversational language, the word "nhưng" is typically used at the beginning of the respondent's utterance, or utterance B. As a result, the word "nhưng" serves the function of a conjunction, marking the interaction and turn-taking in the conversation (i.e., the speaker's utterance in an adjacency pair). In addition, "nhưng" signals a contrast or contradiction

between the content of the speaker's utterances. Thus, "nhưng" serves both to indicate interaction and to show a contrary relation between the utterances of the speakers.

4.4. Linking function of word "nhưng" (but)

4.4.1. Function in terms of sentence elements

When a contrary pattern is used in a sentence, the clauses that make up that pattern (the main clause and the linking clause) share the same grammatical function, meaning that the pattern has sentence elements with the same function and a specific sentence clause. Specifically, the linking clause matches the structure of the main clause, but they have opposite meanings.

Example:

(11) "Thấy ông đảm việc, tôi mừng cũng có, *nhưng* lo cũng nhiều." (Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, 2015, tr.17).

(Seeing that you're doing good housework, I'm happy, *but* also worried.)

In traditional grammar, the sentence "Thấy ông đảm việc" (Seeing you're doing good housework) can be classified as a modal adverbial or as a subordinate predicate that is initially inverted. The other clause in the sentence is a subject-predicate structure with two predicates, which are joined by an adversative relation. The sentence can be modelled as follows: Adv - S-Pred (Pred1, nhưng Pred2).

4.4.2. Linking function in utterances

As mentioned before, groups of linking words are classified separately because each group has its own functional meaning. However, in specific contexts, linking words from one group can be used to express the functional meaning of another group, and can be replaced by each other in some cases. The use of the word "nhưng" as a discourse marker within utterances depends on the speaker's communicative intention. Trần Ngọc Thêm (1999, pp. 305) argues that "the use of linking words to connect utterances is a common and acceptable phenomenon (rather than a 'mistake in punctuation')". This is because the phenomenon can be observed in the works of any author, in any genre.

Example:

(12) "Tôi mời lão hút trước. *Nhưng* lão không nghe" (Nam Cao, 2020, p.297).

(I invited him to smoke first. *But* he didn't do that)

In example (12), the word "nhưng" indicates a contrary relation between events. Without the meaning of "nhưng", there would only be a list of ongoing events. In other

words, the speaker uses "nhưng" to draw attention to the adversative relation, making the meaning of description and listing implicit and subordinate. The purpose of using "nhưng" is to emphasize the contrast between the events and to highlight the adversative relation between them.

(13) "Tôi đã biếu ông ta. *Nhưng* việc này e phạm phép giời." (Lưu Quang Vũ, 2013, tr.25) (I gave it to him. *But* I'm afraid it's against the God's law) → *"nhưng"* shows a cause and effect relation according to the speaker's subjectivity that can be replaced by "do đó/vì vậy" (therefore/so).

(14*)* "Tóc đen lay láy nhưng quăn quăn" (Vũ Trọng Phụng, 2020, tr.10) (The hair is so black *but* a little curly) → *"nhưng"* provides the meaning of addition, or continuation; it can be replaced by "và" (and).

(15) "Hãy đập bàn đập ghế để đòi cho được năm đồng, *nhưng* được rồi thì vất trả lại năm hào "vì thương anh túng quá" (Smash the table and the chair to get five *đồng*, *but* if when you get it, then throw five *hào* back "because I sympathize with you!" → *"nhưng"* provides conditional meaning that can be replaced with the conjunction "nếu" (if).

To fully understand the meaning of linking words in specific contexts, it is important to thoroughly study their usage. Only then can the potential ambiguity in meaning and the interchangeability of linking words be identified.

Regarding the word "nhưng", it is primarily used to express adversative meanings that still exist in discourse and are realised in text. However, additional meanings corresponding to the replaceable meanings of the words are hidden. If the speaker wants these additional meanings to be explicit, the implicit function of "nhưng" can be replaced with the corresponding matching words. This changes the communicative purpose of the utterance.

The ambiguity of the word "but" is also expressed implicitly in the text. The structure "A. Nhưng B" represents two utterances, or core units, in the textual link. However, from utterance A, it can be inferred that there are not only one possible utterance B (according to formal logic) but also many variants of utterance B.

Example:

(16a) Cô Hến xấu người. *Nhưng* lại có tư chất thông minh.

(Hến is ugly in form. *But* she is smart in personality).

If we join the utterance describing a state (Cô Hến xấu người/ Hến is ugly in form) with another utterance using "nhưng", the adjective "xấu" (ugly) with its negative meaning tends to have an "antithesis" content with a positive meaning. For example, "She is ugly in form, but she is smart in personality" implies that people should not be judged by their appearance, but rather by their essence, personality, or soul. But if we join the utterance with another one:

(16b) Cô Hến xấu người. *Nhưng* lại sang chảnh.

(Hến is ugly in form. But she behaves in a snobbish way).

It can lead the hearer/reader to another inference that Hến has an inappropriate personality, making her seem even worse. This implies a negative meaning, emphasising the importance of understanding oneself and others in order to behave appropriately. Or if the speaker uses another variant of B:

(16c) Cô Hến xấu người. *Nhưng* lại có chồng con đàng hoàng (hơn ối cô xinh đẹp).

(Hến is ugly in form, but she has a good family).

Then the speaker intends for the hearer to infer that in life, it is not always true that girls who are not physically attractive are unlucky in marriage. It is possible for a girl who is not conventionally pretty to be happy in other aspects of life, such as her family. This suggests that "God favours the unlucky".

Indeed, the meaning of "A. But B" can vary depending on the speaker's communicative intention, and the second utterance (B) can have multiple inference variants, leading to different interpretations. This highlights the productive value of the word "nhưng" in language use, as it allows speakers to mark a contrast or transition between two utterances and convey different shades of meaning, depending on the context and intention.

5. Conclusion

In summary, "nhưng" is a linking word that serves both a syntactic and a textual linking function. It is used to connect clauses within a sentence and to link sentences within a paragraph. In both cases, "nhưng" serves to join two contrasting sides. However, there is a difference in conjunctive level between the two structures. The syntactic structure is **"A nhưng B"** (A but B), while the textual structure is **"A. Nhưng B"** (A. But B).

Semantically, "nhưng" expresses a meaning of contrast or opposition, providing an adversative or antithetical meaning depending on the speaker's intention. As a linking word, "nhưng" (or "song") is used to create conjunctive cohesion between utterances, and its use is guided by the speaker's pragmatic intention. The adversative nature of this type of discourse creates a variety of ways to communicate, making the meaning of text and talk different and more vivid.

The function of "nhưng" is to express a contrary or adversative meaning within an utterance, which is achieved by using a compound sentence consisting of two clauses: **"Clause A nhưng clause B"**. However, when used in writing, the writer often divides the sentence into two separate utterances in the text: **"A. Nhưng B"**. In this case, the linking word "nhưng" serves a function of textual cohesion, and there can be many variants of utterance B that are modified according to the writer's purpose. Despite expressing an adversative meaning, any changes to the utterance B lead to a different semantic content, and this difference is important in terms of pragmatics.

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