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On the syntax-semantics interface of the negative markers “đâu” and “nào” in Vietnamese*

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1. Introduction

Vietnamese uses a variety of words that contain a negative meaning. These negative markers differ in position, scope of negation, and how they interact with the nucleus and its core arguments. Vietnamese negative markers have been examined from various perspectives, from synchronic to diachronic studies, as well as from syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic viewpoints (Thompson 1965, Nguyễn 1996, Huỳnh 2017, Phan 2024); however, they have not been studied from the perspectives of Role and Reference Grammar (RRG). Specifically, the markers *đâu* and *nào*, which have high expressive nuances and frequently appear in special constructions, have not been systematically explored for their scope of negation and compatibility with core arguments – an exploration that the RRG framework can be effectively applied to.

According to RRG, negation is not merely considered a syntactic phenomenon; it is also linked to semantic roles and discourse information. This paper aims to analyze the syntax-semantics interface of Vietnamese negative markers in relation to the nucleus and core arguments from the perspective of RRG (Van Valin and Foley 1980; Van Valin 1993, 2005). The study explores how effectively this framework can explain the syntax-semantics interface of the negative markers *đâu* and *nào*. The main objectives in our research include: (1) the position of the negative markers *đâu*, *nào* in sentences and the scope of these markers; and (2) the compatibility of these markers with the core arguments. These are our research questions:

1. How do the positions and scopes of the negative markers *đâu*, *nào* vary across sentence structures?
2. How do the negative markers *đâu*, *nào* interact with the core arguments in the layered structure of the clause?

Our analysis also includes a comparison with the typical negative marker “không”.

<i>Vietnamese</i>	<i>English equivalent</i>
<i>không</i>	not
<i>đâu</i>	certainly not
<i>nào</i>	absolutely not

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2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Role and Reference Grammar

RRG is a grammatical theory developed by William A. Foley and Robert Van Valin, Jr. in the 1980s, combining multiple viewpoints from contemporary functional grammar theories. Van Valin and Foley (1980: 330) described RRG as “a FUNCTIONAL approach to syntax and grammatical description”. Building on this foundation, Van Valin (1993) characterizes RRG as a “structural functional grammar theory” that seeks a balance between two extremes: formal grammar and functional grammar.

In RRG, the description of a sentence in a specific language is constructed based on (a) its logical (semantic) structure and communicative function and (b) the grammatical procedures available in the language to express these meanings. As shown in Table 1, RRG describes the structure of a sentence in multiple layers as follows:

Table 1: *Semantic units underlying the syntactic units of the layered structure of the clause*

Semantic element(s)	Syntactic unit
Predicate	Nucleus
Argument in the semantic representation of predicate	Core argument
Non-arguments	Periphery
Predicate + Arguments	Core
Predicate + Arguments + Non-arguments	Clause (= Core + Periphery)

Source: Van Valin (2005: 5)

2.2. Negation and negative markers

2.2.1. Negation

Negation, a term that contrasts with affirmation, is associated with human communication and thinking activities and operates on “a truth value of the proposition” (Luraghi and Parodi 2008: 142). Negation in language has attracted the attention of many researchers. This interest arises from the unique characteristics of negation in each language, distinguishing it from others. Researchers particularly focus on how negation interacts with various grammatical elements such as tense, aspect, and quantifiers.

Negation functions as a type of operator. Van Valin and LaPolla (1997) show that negation is one of the 8 categories of operators, which includes 7 other categories: tense, aspect, status, modality, illocutionary force, directionals, and evidentials.

According to the perspective of RRG, an operator is not considered part of the core, nucleus, or periphery of a clause; instead, it functions as an additional element that contributes specific grammatical features such as tense, aspect, modality, and others. Table 2 categorizes the types of operators as outlined by Van Valin (2005: 9).

Table 2: *Operators in the layered structure of the clause*

Nuclear operators:

Aspect

Negation

Directionals (only those modifying orientation of action or event without reference to participants)

Core operators:

Directionals (only those expressing the orientation or motion of one participant with reference to another participant or to the speaker)

Event quantification

Modality (root modals, e.g. ability, permission, obligation)

Internal (narrow scope) negation

Clausal operators:

Status (epistemic modals, external negation)

Tense

Evidentials

Illocutionary force

Source: Van Valin (2005: 9)

Observing the above table, we can see that negation is the only operator that appears at all three levels: nuclear negation (the scope of negation is the nucleus), core negation (the scope of negation is one or more core arguments, and possibly the nucleus), and clausal negation (the scope of negation is the clause). The distinction between core negation (and potentially nuclear negation, although this is not explicitly shown in Table 2) and clausal negation is also referred to as internal (narrow scope) negation and external negation.

The Vietnamese data provide clear illustrations of these negation operators. In the Vietnamese language, nuclear negation can be expressed as a negation operator like *bất* (not) in the words *bất hạnh* (unhappy), *bất hợp pháp* (illegal), *bất động* (immobile), etc. Core negation can be encountered in the sentence *Không ai biết cô ấy* (No one knows her). In this construction, the scope of negation is one core argument *ai*. Finally, we can see clausal negation in Vietnamese sentences such as *Nào Nam biết cô ấy* (There is no way Nam knows her).

2.2.2. Negative markers

The discussion on negation can be extended by considering how various types of negative elements function in different languages. Zeijlstra (2004: 334) distinguishes three concepts related to negation: (1) Negative markers, which denote that a sentence or constituent is under the scope of negation (*ne* and *pas* in French, *non* in Italian, etc.); (2) N-words, which are under specific conditions equivalent to negative quantifiers; (3) Negative elements, the broader category encompassing negative markers, N-words, and negative quantifiers.

This classification of concepts can also be applied to Vietnamese to identify its negative markers. Vietnamese uses a variety of negative markers, such as *không* (not), *chưa* (not yet), *chẳng* (definitely not), *đâu* (certainly not), and *nào* (absolutely not). The negative markers in Vietnamese have similarities and differences regarding the scope of negation, their position in sentences, and how they interact with the nucleus and its arguments.

3. Research results and discussion

3.1. The scope of negation of the Vietnamese negative markers “đâu”, “nào”

The main characteristic of negation operators is that they have scope, meaning that their semantic effects extend over other elements in the text. The affected elements can be

within the same clause or across clauses. This point has been well established in linguistic studies, notably by Klima (1964) and Lasnik (1972). Klima (1964) points out that negation may encompass the entire clause or only a constituent. Lasnik (1972) proposed a diagnostic test to determine when an item is being negated and when it is within the scope of negation. He shows that the scope of negation is not symmetric; if a quantifier occurs to the left of *not*, it will be outside the scope of negation.

Like English and many other languages, Vietnamese negative markers allow for negation to be expressed at different levels of sentence structure, from the nuclear to the core and the entire clause.

3.1.1. Nuclear negation

The negative markers like *không*, *đâu*, and *nào* typically function with core or clausal scope. The possibility of a negative marker yielding nuclear scope, even if it typically operates at higher levels, often depends on specific structural or contextual conditions. This brings us to consider how scope is determined in potentially ambiguous sentences, especially in contexts that highlight a specific part of the clause.

As Van Valin (2023) discussed, the scope of negation is closely tied to the focus structure of the clause, and consequently, the interpretation of the sentence depends on the context in which it occurs. He illustrates the relationship between negation scope and discourse context with the following example.

Max didn't buy a new car.

- | | |
|---|-----------------------|
| a. <i>He leased one.</i> | Nuclear scope |
| b. <i>He just went window shopping</i> | Core scope |
| c. <i>He bought a new motorcycle.</i> | Core (argument) scope |
| d. <i>Bill did.</i> | Core (argument) scope |
| e. <i>It's not the case that Max bought anything.</i> | Clausal scope |

Source: Van Valin (2023: 42)

Vietnamese also provides examples where the scope of negation in sentences using markers like *không*, *đâu*, and *nào* appears to be influenced by context and focus, analogous to Van Valin's illustration. Consider the following sentences.

- | | | | | | | |
|--------|---|---------------------|------------|-------------|---------------|----------------------------|
| (1) a. | <i>Nam</i> | <i>không</i> | <i>mua</i> | <i>nhà,</i> | <i>anh ấy</i> | <i>thuê</i> ¹ . |
| | Nam | NEG | buy | house | 3SG | rent |
| | 'Nam didn't buy a house, he rented instead.' | | | | | |
| b. | <i>Nam</i> | <i>đâu</i> | <i>mua</i> | <i>nhà,</i> | <i>anh ấy</i> | <i>thuê</i> . |
| | Nam | NEG | buy | house | 3SG | rent |
| | 'Nam certainly didn't buy a house, he rented instead.' | | | | | |
| c. | <i>Nam</i> | <i>nào</i> | <i>mua</i> | <i>nhà,</i> | <i>anh ấy</i> | <i>thuê</i> . |
| | Nam | NEG | buy | house | 3SG | rent |
| | 'Nam absolutely didn't buy a house; he rented instead.' | | | | | |

¹ Abbreviations used in this paper: 3SG: third person singular, COM: comparative, COP: copula, DEM: demonstrative, INDF.PRO: indefinite pronoun, MP: modal particle, NEG: negation, PRT: particle, WH.PRO: Wh-pronoun.

In (1a-c), the negative markers *không*, *đâu*, and *nào* exhibit nuclear scope, targeting the predicate *mua* ‘buy’, as supported by the contextual clause *anh ấy thuê* (he rented). The data illustrate that, under suitable contextual conditions, these markers serve as indicators of nuclear negation, and their surface position aligns with this scope.

3.1.2. Core negation

The Vietnamese negative markers *không*, *đâu*, *nào* indicate that the scope of negation can extend to the core, which includes one or more core arguments and possibly the core itself. The core negation scope allows for a deeper interpretation of negation within a sentence, as it can affect not only the action or state expressed by the nuclear predicate but also the actor and the undergoer involved in that action or state.

- (2) a. ***Không*** *ai* *đến.*
 NEG INDF.PRO come
 ‘Nobody comes.’
- b. ***Đâu*** *ai* *đến.*
 NEG INDF.PRO come
 ‘Certainly, nobody comes.’
- c. ***Nào*** *ai* *đến.*
 NEG INDF.PRO come
 ‘Absolutely nobody comes.’

As illustrated in (2a), the negative marker *không* has a scope of negation that includes the core argument, the indefinite pronoun *ai* ‘anyone’. This shows that the scope of negation in Vietnamese can extend beyond the nucleus to include the entire core (including the core arguments and maybe the nucleus). In other words, negation may be related to the actor or the undergoer involved in the action or state expressed by the nuclear predicate.

However, despite having a similar structure to (2a-c), examples (2c) require a more detailed discussion regarding whether the scope of negation here is core or clausal. To answer the question: ‘*How many people came?*’, the shortest possible answers can be: *Không ai* / *Đâu ai* / **Nào ai*, each with different emphatic nuances. This illustrates that in sentence (2b), *đâu* should be grouped with *không* as a negative marker with core scope. The unnaturalness of *nào ai* as a standalone phrase (and the natural structure consisting of ‘*nào + ai + PRED*’) suggests that *nào* can be interpreted as a clausal negation marker in case (2c) *Nào ai đến* rather than a core negation marker.

The scope of negation also requires careful consideration when negative markers precede the nucleus in sentences with definite core arguments. Consider the following examples.

- (3) a. *Nam* ***không*** *biết* *cô ấy.*
 Nam NEG know 3SG
 ‘Nam doesn’t know her.’
- b. *Nam* ***đâu*** *biết* *cô ấy.*
 Nam NEG know 3SG
 ‘Nam certainly doesn’t know her.’
- c. *Nam* ***nào*** *biết* *cô ấy.*
 Nam NEG know 3SG

‘Nam absolutely doesn’t know her.’

The above data can have two interpretations regarding the scope of negation: (1) the scope of negation is limited to the core, which includes the core argument *cô ấy* ‘her’ (or possibly the nucleus *biết* ‘know’); or (2) the scope of negation extends to the entire clause. For instance, if we extend the sentence to *Nam không biết cô ấy, Nam biết em cô ấy* (Nam doesn’t know her, Nam doesn’t know her younger sister), the ambiguity regarding the scope of negation disappears; at this point, the scope of the negative marker *không* is over the core argument *cô ấy*. Therefore, the scope of negation is related to focus structure, as discussed by Van Valin and LaPolla (1997), Van Valin (2005, 2023). This opens a broader discussion, where the scope of negation may extend beyond the core to encompass the clause, as will be examined in the next section.

3.1.3. Clausal negation

Besides having scope over the core, Vietnamese negative markers can also extend their scope to the entire clause.

- (4) a. *Nào ai biết cô ấy*
 NEG anyone know 3SG
 ‘Absolutely nobody knows her.’
- b. *Nào Nam biết cô ấy*
 NEG Nam know 3SG
 ‘It is not the case that Nam knows her.’
- c. *Nào Nam có biết cô ấy*
 NEG Nam MP know 3SG
 ‘It is not the case that Nam knows her.’
- d. *Nào anh ấy biết nào anh ấy hay*
 NEG 3SG know NEG 3SG know
 ‘Absolutely, he doesn’t know, absolutely he doesn’t cognize.’

Example (4a) *Nào ai biết cô ấy* (Absolutely nobody knows her) raises the question of whether the negation introduced by the marker *nào* is limited to the indefinite pronoun *ai* or extends over the entire clause. In contrast, (4b) and (4c) demonstrate that *nào* may appear before a definite core argument *Nam* and the scope of negation spans the entire clause, although the negative meaning of (4c) is further emphasized due to the modal particle *có*. Finally, when the marker *nào* precedes a definite argument, it frequently appears in a parallel structure, as illustrated in (4d).

Under certain conditions (specifically, the presence of the particle *mà*), the word *đâu* may also function as a clause-initial negative marker directly preceding a core argument, as shown in (5).

- (5) a. *Đâu ai biết cô ấy.*
 NEG INDF.PRO know 3SG
 ‘Certainly nobody knows her.’
- b. **Đâu Nam biết cô ấy.*
 NEG Nam know 3SG
 Expected meaning: ‘Nam doesn’t know her.’

- c. **Đâu** **mà** *Nam* *biết* *cô ấy*.
 NEG PRT Nam know 3SG
 ‘It is not the case that Nam knows her.’

Based on (5a-c), we can see that the negative marker *đâu* can appear clause-initially when followed by an indefinite core argument such as *ai*, with core negation scope, as shown in (6a). If the core argument is not an indefinite pronoun, the sentence becomes acceptable only with the presence of the particle *mà*, as shown in (5c). While in (5a), the scope of the negative marker *đâu* is over the core argument *ai* (an indefinite pronoun), in contrast, in (5c), the scope of negation encompasses the entire clause.

Besides occurring pre-verbally, *đâu* can also appear clause-finally, where its scope of negation encompasses the entire clause.

- (6) *Anh biết cô ấy, phải không?*
 ‘You know her, don't you?’
- a. *Tôi biết.*
 1SG know
 ‘I know.’
- b. *Tôi biết đâu.*
 1SG know NEG
 ‘Certainly, I don't know.’
- c. *Tôi biết cô ấy đâu.*
 1SG know 3SG NEG
 ‘Certainly, I don't know her.’
- d. *Không có chuyện đó đâu.*
 1SG have thing DEM NEG
 ‘There's no such thing.’
- d'. *Có chuyện đó đâu.*
 have thing DEM NEG
 ‘There's no such thing.’

A comparison of (6a) and (6b), as well as (6d) and (6d'), reveals that *đâu* functions as the sole negative marker in (6b) and (6d') since no other negator appears. Meanwhile, (6b) and (6c) raise the question of whether *đâu*'s scope of negation is confined to the nucleus, the core, or extends to the clause; example 6d' conclusively demonstrates that *đâu*'s negation scope encompasses the entire clause.

The negative marker *không* cannot appear as clause-initial negative markers with scope over the entire clause in the way that *đâu* and *nào* can, but this marker can occur in existential constructions (*Không có chuyện Nam biết cô ấy* ‘There's no way Nam knows her’). Of course, *đâu* and *nào* can also appear in these structures.

Therefore, the scope of negation of the five Vietnamese negative markers is illustrated in Table 3. Specifically, all three markers – *không*, *đâu*, *nào* – can realize nuclear, core, and clausal negation; however, their realizations and specific uses at each level vary. For instance, although all can express clausal negation, only *đâu* functions as a clause-final negative marker with a scope that encompasses the entire clause, as shown above. Conversely, *nào* typically appears in clause-initial position, where it interacts strongly with various types of actor arguments, both indefinite and definite, to negate the entire clause.

Table 3: *The scope of negation of the Vietnamese negative markers “không”, “đâu”, and “nào”*

Negative marker	Nuclear negation	Core negation	Clausal negation
<i>không</i>	+ (under contextual conditions)	+	+ (pre-nucleus)
<i>đâu</i>	+ (under contextual conditions)	+	+ (clause-final)
<i>nào</i>	+ (under contextual conditions)	+	+ (clause-initial)

3.2. The compatibility of the Vietnamese negative markers “đâu”, “nào” with the core arguments

3.2.1. The negative markers preceding the nucleus

In (3a-c), we observe that the compatibility of negative markers is the same when the core argument (the actor) is a definite third-person singular. However, when the core argument (the actor) is an indefinite pronoun, the compatibility of these negative markers differs. While the negative markers *không* can quickly appear in a sentence with the indefinite pronoun *ai* as the core argument, see (7a); the negative markers *đâu*, and *nào* seem to lack this compatibility, see (7b) and (7c). It is essential to distinguish between negative sentences and interrogative sentences that contain negative markers between (7a) and (7a’), (7b) and (7b’), (7c) and (7c’).

- (7) a. *Ai không biết cô ấy.*
 INDF.PRO NEG know 3SG
 ‘Everyone knows her.’
- a’. *Ai không biết cô ấy?*
 WH.PRO NEG know 3SG
 ‘Who doesn’t know her?’
 ‘Who hasn’t known her yet?’
- b. **Ai đâu biết cô ấy.*
 INDF.PRO NEG know 3SG
Expected meaning: ‘Everyone knows her.’
- b’. **Ai đâu biết cô ấy?*
 WH.PRO NEG know 3SG
Expected meaning: ‘Who doesn’t know her?’
- c. **Ai nào biết cô ấy.*
 INDF.PRO NEG know 3SG
Expected meaning: ‘Everyone knows this’.
- c’. **Ai nào biết cô ấy?*
 WH.PRO NEG know 3SG
Expected meaning: ‘Who doesn’t know her?’

Bruening and Tran (2006) refer to words such as *ai* as wh-indefinite. Trinh (2025) also notes that Vietnamese is one of the languages that construct negative polarity Items (NPIs) from wh-elements. For example, the word *ai* functions as an interrogative pronoun

meaning ‘who’, but when used as an NPI, it means ‘anyone’. Similarly, words like *đâu*, *gì*, etc. function in the same way in this context.

In both (7a) and (7a’), *không* functions as a negative marker. However, in (7a’), the word *ai* acts as an interrogative pronoun (who), and the sentence is interpreted as a real question. In contrast, (7a) is interpreted as a rhetorical question, and in this sentence, the clause-level negation operator *không* exploits the polarity sensitivity of *ai*. In this rhetorical context, *ai* acquires an empty-set reading, leading to a universal affirmative meaning: *Ai không biết cô ấy* (Everyone knows her), which has a similar meaning to *Không ai không biết cô ấy* (Everyone knows her).

In (7b’) and (7c’), the markers *đâu* and *nào* carry an emphatic implicature and cannot be suitable for an interrogative sentence. In other words, the structure ‘*Ai + đâu/nào*’ is not allowed in direct interrogative sentences. Whereas in (7b) and (7c), *đâu* and *nào* either do not function as wide-scope clause-level polarity operators, or are restricted in this function in this specific construction. Therefore, they cannot trigger an empty-set reading for *ai*, leading to a universal affirmative meaning.

The data demonstrate that not all negative markers are equally compatible with indefinite core arguments. This interaction depends on both the nature of the marker and the information status of the core argument. From the RRG viewpoint, this is understood as an interface between the negation operator and the semantic and pragmatic functions of arguments.

3.2.2. The negative markers preceding the core arguments

In the previous sections, we found that only *nào* can combine with both types of core arguments serving as the actor: the indefinite core argument *ai* (as in (2c) *Nào ai đến* ‘Absolutely nobody comes’) and definite ones, as in (4b) *Nào Nam biết cô ấy* ‘It is not the case that Nam knows her’, while other negative markers can only combine with the indefinite core argument *ai*, but not with definite ones.

- (8) a. ***Không** *Nam* *biết* *cô ấy*.
 NEG Nam know 3SG
 Expected meaning: ‘Nam doesn’t know her.’
- b. ***Đâu** *Nam* *biết* *cô ấy*.
 NEG Nam know 3SG
 Expected meaning: ‘Certainly Nam doesn’t know her.’

In this section, we examine which indefinite arguments negative markers can combine with, in addition to *ai* ‘anyone’. The set of indefinite pronouns considered in this analysis includes *đâu* ‘anywhere’ and *gì* ‘anything’.

- (9) a. ***Không** *đâu* *đẹp* *bằng* *nơi* *này*.
 NEG INDF.PRO beautiful COMP place DEM
 ‘Nowhere beautiful as this place.’
- b. ***Đâu** *đâu* *đẹp* *bằng* *nơi* *này*.
 NEG INDF.PRO beautiful COMP place DEM
 Expected meaning: ‘Nowhere beautiful like this place.’
- c. ***Nào** *đâu* *đẹp* *bằng* *nơi* *này*.
 NEG INDF.PRO beautiful COMP place DEM
 Expected meaning: ‘Nowhere beautiful as this place.’

- (10) a. *Không* *gì* *là* *không thể.*
 NEG INDF.PRO COP impossible
 ‘Nothing is impossible.’
- b. *Đâu* *gì* *là* *không thể.*
 NEG INDF.PRO COP impossible
 ‘Nothing is impossible.’
- c. **Nào* *gì* *là* *không thể.*
 NEG INDF.PRO COP impossible
 Expected meaning: ‘Nothing is impossible.’

The data above show that the negative marker *không* combines freely with indefinite core arguments such as *đâu* ‘anywhere’ and *gì* ‘anything’, as indicated in (9a), (10a). Along with their interaction with the indefinite core arguments *ai*, the negative markers *không* demonstrate their extensive combinatorial possibilities with indefinite core arguments, despite the difference in emphatic nuance between these two negative markers.

Between the two markers *đâu* and *nào*, the marker *đâu* has a better compatibility with indefinite core arguments in negative constructions. *Đâu* cannot combine with *đâu* ‘anywhere’ as shown in (9b) *Đâu đâu đẹp bằng nơi này*, but it can combine with *gì*, as shown in (10b) *Đâu gì là không thể*. It would be more natural to include the word *có*, resulting in the sentence: *Đâu có gì là không thể* (Nothing is impossible).

Finally, *nào* does not demonstrate the capacity to be compatible with either *đâu* or *gì*. How can this be explained, given that in previous sections, we claimed that *nào* can appear before *ai* and even before definite core arguments, implying that *nào* can appear before a diverse range of core arguments? However, it should be noted that in all cases where *nào* appears before *ai* and various types of definite core arguments, *nào* consistently demonstrates clausal scope, rather than negating precisely the core argument functioning as the subject in the sentence. This explains why *nào* cannot occur before *đâu* ‘anywhere’ or *gì* ‘anything’ to form combinations like *nào đâu* ‘nowhere’ or *nào gì* ‘nothing’ that would serve to negate the core argument directly.

These findings suggest that Vietnamese negative markers are governed by both semantic and syntactic constraints when interacting with core arguments. In particular, their distribution reflects a sensitivity to the definiteness of the arguments: indefinite core arguments such as *ai* ‘anyone’, *gì* ‘anything’, *đâu* ‘anywhere’ show greater compatibility with negative markers, while definite core arguments restrict this combination.

4. Conclusion

This paper has provided an analysis of the negative markers “đâu”, “nào” in Vietnamese from the perspective of RRG. The investigation examined the scope of negation of these Vietnamese negative markers and their combinability with the core arguments.

The analysis of the scope of negation demonstrates that the negative markers *đâu*, *nào* operate across various layers of the clause, from the nuclear, the core, to the clause, demonstrating a layered structure typical of many languages analyzed within RRG. However, we also realize that both *đâu* and *nào* are most often found functioning at the clausal level. Among the investigated negative markers exhibiting clausal scope, *đâu* is unique in its clause-final placement, contrasting with *nào*, which occupies clause-initial position and strongly interacts with actor arguments (both definite and indefinite).

The study found that the combinability of these negative markers with the core arguments (actor) depends on: (1) the syntax-semantics characteristics of *đâu, nào*; (2) the position and characteristics of the core argument (indefinite or definite).

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