A Comparative Analysis of the Semantic and Grammatical Properties of the Vietnamese Predicate "Còn" And Its Functional Equivalents in Khmer

Thach Thi Thanh Loan

Tra Vinh University, Viet Nam

ABSTRACT

The Vietnamese word *"còn"* is a polysemous lexical item and can perform a variety of grammatical functions. It may function as a predicate, adverb, connective or adverbial. This raises the question of whether the words equivalent to *"còn"* in Khmer exhibit similarities or differences in comparison with *"còn"* in Vietnamese. This study provides a semantic and grammatical comparison of the Vietnamese word "còn" when functioning as a predicate and its corresponding expressions in Khmer.

With regard to research data, the Vietnamese corpus is selected from Vietnamese folk verses, the song lyrics *Anh còn nợ em* and *Năm 2000*. Khmer language data are collected from sealang.net, as well as from a number of utterances recorded by the author through communication, observation and the reading of reference materials. In terms of research methodology, the study employs data collection methods, analytical methods, statistical classification techniques, contrastive–comparative methods and translation methods.

Keywords: functions of the word *"còn"*; semantics of *"còn"*; grammar of *"còn"*; predicate of *"còn"* *"នៅតែ"*; *"នៅសល់តែ"*.

INTRODUCTION

Vietnamese and Khmer belong to the isolating (analytic) language type and are non-inflectional languages. This characteristic is fundamentally different from most Indo-European languages such as English, French and Russian. These languages are typically polysyllabic and inflectional. They undergo morphological changes. Therefore, from a semantic–grammatical perspective, the examination of the semantics and grammar of Vietnamese and Khmer words requires identifying the "semantic–grammatical" characteristics of lexical items through grammatical devices specific to Vietnamese and Khmer. Among these devices are word order and the inherent "multi-categorical" nature of word classes and subclasses in Vietnamese and Khmer. These characteristics are manifested in the "contextual environment" of utterances, also referred to as discourse context. Based on the analysis of the collected data, this study also conducts a contrastive analysis in order to identify the similarities and differences between the Vietnamese word *"còn"* and several words with equivalent meanings in Khmer.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The word *"còn"* has been discussed by many scholars such as Tran Trong Kim, Bui Duc Tinh, Dai Xuan Ninh, Nguyen Anh Que, Hoang Phe, Do Thanh and Nguyen Van Pho with the following viewpoints.

Do, T. (2007). *Dictionary of functional words* [4], argues that *"còn"* is used to express the continuation of an action or a state.

Example:

- *"Bố tôi còn làm việc, chưa nghỉ hưu."* (Provisional translation: My father is still working; he has not yet retired.) (Do Thanh, 2007, p. 40)

In *The Functioning of Vietnamese Words*, Dai, X. N. (1978) [2] argues that *"còn"* expresses temporal modality, indicating that the action of a verb continues up to the time of speaking or up to a certain point in the past or future.

Examples:

- *"Năm ấy anh ta còn học ở Đại học sư phạm."* (Provisional translation: That year, he was still studying at the University of Education.)

- *"Ngày mai chúng ta còn gặp nhau ở đây."* (Provisional translation: Tomorrow we will still meet here.)

The adverb *"đang"* may be added to emphasize the sense of continuity:

- *"Nó đang còn học."* (Provisional translation: *He is still studying.)*

- *"Nó còn đang học (*Provisional translation*: He still studies.)* (Dai, X. N, 1978, p. 126)

Accordingly, *"còn"* is used to express "continuation up to the time of speaking."

Nguyen, A. Q. (1988) [6] states that *"còn"* is mainly used to indicate that an action has not yet ended (p. 88).

According to Tran, T. K., Bui, K., & Pham, D. K [9], *"còn"* conveys the meaning of an unfinished action, an unchanged state or a relationship related to another event. In such cases, speakers use the adverb *còn* or *hãy còn*.

Bui, D. T. (1966) in *Vietnamese Grammar* [1] classifies *"còn"* into the group of "adverbs expressing tense of verbs and stative verbs" and considers it a special type of adverb (including *đang, còn, vẫn, hãy còn, đã, rồi, vừa, sắp, sẽ*) without specifying its semantic features (Bui Duc Tinh, 1966, p. 106).

According to the Hoang, P. (Ed.). (2003). *Vietnamese Dictionary* [5] (p. 200), *"còn"* has the following meanings:

* **As a verb**, *"còn"* means to continue to exist (meaning 1) or to continue to have, not having completely disappeared or been lost (meaning 2).

Examples:

☐ *"Kẻ còn, người mất."* (meaning 1) → Provisional translation*: Some are still alive, while others have passed away.* ("còn" = continue to exist / still alive)

☐ *"Còn một tuần lễ nữa là đến Tết."* (meaning 1) → Provisional translation*: There is only one week left until the Lunar New Year.* ("còn" = continue to exist in terms of remaining time)

☐ *"Nó còn tiền."* (meaning 2) → Provisional translation: *He/She still has money.* ("còn" = continue to have / possess)

☐ *"Anh ta còn mẹ già."* (meaning 2) → Provisional translation: *He still has his elderly mother.* ("còn" = possessive existence)

* **As an adverb**, *"còn"* expresses the continuation of an action or state up to a certain point (meaning 3) or affirms an action or quality, especially in cases where it is added for comparison or contrast (meaning 4).

Examples:

☐ *"Khuya rồi mà vẫn còn thức."* (meaning 3) → Provisional translation: *It is already late, yet he/she is still awake.* ("còn" = continuation of a state up to the reference time)

☐ *"Anh ta còn rất trẻ."* (meaning 3) → Provisional translation: *He is still very young.* ("còn" = persistence of a property/state)

☐ *"Hôm qua còn nắng to hơn hôm nay nhiều." (*meaning *4)*→ Provisional translation: *Yesterday, it was much sunnier than it is today.* ("còn" = comparative/contrastive emphasis)

☐ *"Thà như thế còn hơn." (*meaning *4) →* Provisional translation: *That would be preferable.* or (more explicit contrast): → Provisional translation: *That would be better than the alternative.* ("còn" = evaluative comparison)

* **As a connective**, *"còn"* introduces another case or a contrasting case in comparison with what has just been mentioned (meaning 5).

Examples:

- *"Nó ở nhà, còn anh?"* Provisional translation: He is at home; what about you?" *(meaning 5)* → contrastive topic.

- "Nắng thì đi, còn mưa thì nghỉ". Provisional translation: If it is sunny, we go; if it rains, we stay at home. *(meaning 5)*

In addition, *"còn"* is also commonly used in colloquial speech.

According to Diep, Q. B., & Nguyen, H. T. (1996) [3], *"còn"* expresses a contrastive or oppositional relationship (p. 142).

Examples:

1. *"Em xem ra anh ấy cũng là người thành thật, còn con anh ấy thì mình quý nó, tất nó phải quý mình."* Provisional translation: *It appears that he is also an honest person; as for his child, if we care for the child, the child will surely care for us in return.* → ("còn" functions as a contrastive/partitioning connective, introducing a parallel but distinct topic for comparison.)

2. **"***Trong nhà này người ta đã sống quen như thế: vợ con chỉ được quyền nghe, còn ông có quyền nói."* Provisional translation: *In this household, people have long been accustomed to living in this way: the wife and children are only entitled to listen, whereas the man of the house has the right to speak* → ("còn" functions as a contrastive connective, marking opposition and asymmetry in roles and rights.)

Nguyen, V. P. (2018) [7] in particular argues that when functioning as a conjunction, *"còn"* is used to link two opposing situations within the same semantic domain with the contrast typically located in the predicate (Nguyen Van Pho, 2018, p. 495).

In summary, a review of previous studies on the word *"còn"* shows that its grammatical category varies depending on communicative context and intended meaning. The word *"còn"* may function as a verb, an adverb, a connective, a conjunction, a predicate or in some cases it is an adverbial. Semantically, *"còn"* conveys multiple meanings. It expresses the continuation of an action or state; temporal modality indicating that an action continues up to the time of speaking or to a certain point in the past or future; adverbial meanings expressing tense of verbs and stative verbs; continued existence or possession, not having completely disappeared or been lost; affirmation of an action or quality, especially when used for comparison or contrast; and the introduction of another or opposing case in relation to what has just been stated. As a conjunction, it expresses contrastive or oppositional relations and links two opposing situations within the same semantic domain, with the contrast typically located in the predicate.

Thus, the viewpoint of Nguyen Van Pho is consistent with those of Diep Quang Ban, Nguyen Hoang Thung, and Hoang Phe in recognizing that *"còn"* functions as a conjunction linking two opposing situations within the same semantic domain, or as a word affirming an action or quality, especially when used for comparison or contrast. In contrast, Hoàng Phê classifies *"còn"* as an adverb, a verb, and a connective. Scholars such as Do Thanh, Dai Xuan Ninh, and Hoang Phe share the view that *"còn"* expresses the continuation or persistence of an action or state up to a certain point.

The grammatical and semantic roles of the word *"còn"* will be analyzed in next section Findings and Discussion. With regard to words equivalent in meaning to *"còn"* in Khmer, there have so far been no specific documents or studies focusing on their semantics and functions in concrete contexts. This gap has opened up a new and feasible research direction for the present study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- **Data collection method:** Data were collected from Vietnamese folk verses, the song lyrics *Anh còn nợ em* and *Năm 2000*. Khmer linguistic data were obtained from the sealang.net database from Khmer-language teaching materials used at Tra Vinh University, as well as from a number of utterances recorded by the author through direct communication, observation and fieldwork conducted in the locality where the author resides.

- **Analytical method:** After the data were collected, we were analyzed, selected, and processed in order to be presented in the Findings and Discussion section of this study.

- **Statistical classification technique:** The collected data were statistically classified. Instances of the word *"còn"* in Vietnamese and several equivalent words in Khmer were categorized based on their grammatical functions in actual utterances.

- **Contrastive–comparative method:** Based on the collected data, a contrastive–comparative analysis was conducted to compare the semantics and grammatical functions of the word *"còn"* in Vietnamese with those of several semantically equivalent words in Khmer.

- **Translation method:** This method was employed to translate certain Khmer utterances and Vietnamese in to English in order to facilitate the contrastive comparison between the two languages Vietnamese and Khmer.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, we aim to clarify the roles of the word *"còn"* in sentences when it functions as a predicate through a number of specific analyses. After that, we compare and analyze of the grammatical and semantic functions of the word *"còn"* with its equivalent expressions in Khmer.

1. Semantic–grammatical features of the word *"CÒN"* in Vietnamese in term of predicate function

Let us examine several Vietnamese utterances containing the word *"còn"*:

☐ *"Một số dân tộc miền núi phía Bắc, nam nữ vẫn còn giữ tập tục trò chơi ném còn gieo"*[1] (1). → Provisional translation: *Among certain ethnic groups in the northern mountainous regions, both men and women still preserve the traditional "ném còn" courtship game.*

☐ *"Còn trời, còn nước, còn non."* (2) → Provisional translation: *As long as there are sky, water and mountains.*

☐ *"Còn cô bán rượu, anh còn say sưa (3)."*[2] → Provisional translation: *As long as there is the wine seller, he remains intoxicated.*

☐ *"Còn duyên kẻ đón, người đưa. Hết duyên đi sớm, về trưa một mình."* (4)[3] → Provisional translation: *While affection remains, there are those who welcome and those who see one off; once affection is gone, one departs early and returns alone at noon.*

☐ *"Anh còn nợ em. Con tim bối rối. Con tim bối rối."* (5)→ Provisional translation: *I still owe you; my heart is unsettled, my heart is deeply troubled.*

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[1] Based on Hoang Phe (Ed.) (2003). *Vietnamese Dictionary*. Lexicography Center & Da Nang Publishing House, p. 210.
[2] Excerpted from Vietnamese folk verses.
[3] Excerpted from Vietnamese folk verses.

☐"*Anh còn nợ em* (6)[4] "→ Provisional translation: *I still owe you.*

☐"*Và còn nợ em. Cuộc tình đã lỡ. Cuộc tình đã lỡ."* (7) → Provisional translation: *And I still owe you, for a love that was missed, a love that was lost.*

☐ *"Năm hai ngàn năm anh còn gì?"* → Provisional translation: *In the year two thousand, what do you still have left? (8)*

☐"*Tôi còn lại gì?"* (9) → Provisional translation: *What remains of me?*

☐"*Em còn gì?"* (10)→ Provisional translation: *What do you still have left?*

• **"*Ta còn lại gì?"* (11)→ Provisional translation: *What remains of us?*

☐*"Còn chăng đó là bóng hư không* (13)*"* → Provisional translation: *If anything remains, it is but a shadow of emptiness.*

☐"*Còn chăng đó tuổi đã mênh mông* (14)*."* → Provisional translation: *If anything remains, it is age stretching endlessly.*

☐*"Còn chăng có tóc xanh phai màu…"* (15) → Provisional translation: *If anything remains, it may be youthful hair faded in color…*

Below are several analyses of the word *"còn"* in the cited utterances.

In utterance (1), when examining the two occurrences of *"còn"*, it can be observed that they have completely different meanings and, accordingly, belong to two distinct grammatical categories. In the phrase *"vẫn còn giữ"* ("still continue to keep"), *"vẫn"* and *"còn"* function merely as modifiers of the predicate *"giữ"* ("to keep"). The meaning conveyed is that "something from the past has been preserved up to the present (*còn*), without undergoing change (*vẫn*)."

By contrast, the word *"còn"* in the phrase *"ném còn"* ("throwing *còn*") in the same utterance functions as a complement to the verb *"ném"* ("to throw"), corresponding to similar constructions such as *"ném đất"* (throw soil), *"ném đá"* (throw stones), *"ném còn"*. In this case, *"còn"* belongs to the nominal category and carries the following concrete meaning: "a cloth ball with multiple colored tassels has used as an object for throwing and catching in a traditional game."

In utterance (2), *"Còn trời, còn nước, còn non,"* the structure can be represented as $V_1 + S_1, V_2 + S_2, V_3 + S_3$. When compared with the utterance *"Trời còn, nước còn, non còn,"* which has the structure $S_1 + V_1, S_2 + V_2, S_3 + V_3$, it can be seen that although the two utterances differ in surface structure. They are nearly identical in terms of the semantic–grammatical value of the predicate *"còn"*, which functions as an existential predicate (denoted as Vt). In this case, *"còn"* carries the meaning of "existence," closely associated with the implication of "permanence" or "endurance."

In utterance (3), *"Còn cô bán rượu, anh còn say sưa,"* both instances of *"còn"* function as predicates in the phrases *"còn cô bán rượu"* with the structure *V + Complement (N–V)* and *"còn say sưa"* with the structure *V + Complement (V)*. Here, *"còn"* still conveys the meaning of "existence," equivalent to the predicate *"có"* ("to have/to exist") but this existence is not immutable. It may either occur or not occur. Consequently, utterance (3) can also be interpreted as: "If there is a wine seller, he becomes intoxicated," which further implies: "If there is no wine seller, he does not become intoxicated."

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[4] Utterances cited from the song *Anh còn nợ em*, composed by Anh Bằng, with lyrics by Phan Thành Tài, available at: **https://hopampro.com/sheet-nhac/anh-con-no-em/**

This interpretation becomes clearer when considered in relation to utterance (4): *"Còn duyên kẻ đón, người đưa. Hết duyên đi sớm, về trưa một mình."* Here, *"còn"* is placed in opposition to *"hết"* ("to be gone"), forming an antonymic pair *"còn/hết"* (+/−), similar to *"có/không"* (+/−).

In utterances (5), (6), (7) and (8), where *"còn"* functions as a modifier of the predicate in the phrase *"còn nợ"* ("still owe"), it clearly retains the semantic feature of "something from the past persisting into the present." Accordingly, the predicate *"còn nợ"* conveys the meaning that "a debt incurred in the past has not yet been fully repaid."

In utterances (9) through (15), there are three recurring predicates: *"còn gì"*, *"còn lại gì"*, and *"còn chăng"*. These predicates recur in the remaining utterances with two instances of *"còn gì"*, two of *"còn lại gì"*, and three of *"còn chăng"*. All three predicates have *"còn"* as their core predicate and inherently presuppose that "something existed or was possessed in the past."

When asking *"còn gì?"*, the speaker implies: "Is there anything left or not?" When asking *"còn lại gì?"*, the implication is: "Among the things that once existed, which continue to exist (*còn*) and which no longer exist (*không còn*)?" When asking *"còn chăng?"*, the implication is that "among what once existed, almost everything has been lost over time and only what is inevitable remains." If one dies, only "emptiness" (*bóng hư không*) remains; if one is still alive, aging is inevitable and thus what remains is "advanced age" (*tuổi đã mênh mông*) and graying hair (*tóc xanh phai màu*).

In summary, *"còn"* may function as a noun in certain cases, but in most instances it primarily functions as a predicate. This predicate may serve as the core of the predicate phrase or in some cases as a secondary predicate modifying another main predicate. As a predicate, *"còn"* can be identified as either an **existential predicate** or a **possessive predicate**.

When functioning as an existential predicate, *"còn"* may denote immutable existence due to the inherent nature of the subject or due to accompanying complements that are inherently immutable, such as *"trời"* (sky), *"đất"* (earth), *"non"* (mountains), *"nước"* (water), or due to logical regularities, as in: *"Còn tiền, còn bạc, còn đệ tử. Hết cơm, hết gạo, hết ông tôi."*

When functioning as a possessive predicate, *"còn"* denotes existence that may either be present or absent (+/−), depending on the inherent nature of the subject.

2. A comparison of the Vietnamese word *"còn"* with its equivalent expressions in Khmer in terms of predicate function

The words "នៅតែ" / "នៅសល់តែ" are equivalent expressions in Khmer in terms of predicate function with "còn" in Vietnamese. The word *"នៅតែ"* can also be used with the meaning of "remaining" or "being left over." Consider the following examples[5].

- *គាត់នៅតែ/នៅសល់តែកូនពីរនាក់។* (16) (Provisional translation: *He/she has only two children left*.)

- *ក្នុងថ្នាក់រៀននៅតែ/នៅសល់តែអ្នកគ្រូ និង សិស្សម្នាក់ប៉ុណ្ណោះ។* (17) (Provisional translation: *In the classroom, only the teacher and one student remain*.)

- *ក្រោយពេលព្យុះ ភូមិនេះនៅសល់តែផ្ទះពីរខ្នងប៉ុណ្ណោះ។* (18) (Provisional translation: *After the storm, only two houses remain in the village*.)

- *គ្រួសារខ្ញុំនៅសល់តែ/នៅតែអង្ករ២គីឡូសម្រាប់ថ្ងៃស្អែក។* (19) (Provisional translation: *My family has only two kilograms of rice left for tomorrow*.)

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[5] Note: These examples (16) – (19) are extracted from the website: http://sealang.net/khmer/dictionary.htm

"នៅសល់តែ" or *"នៅតែ"* in these examples functions as the main verb (predicate) of the sentence, rather than as a modifier of another verb. In other words, in utterances (16) through (19), *"នៅសល់តែ"* or *"នៅតែ"* serves as the predicate. Specifically, in utterance (16), *"នៅសល់តែ"* or *"នៅតែ"* denotes the number of children remaining. If *"នៅសល់តែ"* or *"នៅតែ"* were omitted, the sentence would completely lose its meaning and could not function as a complete utterance. Similarly, in utterances (17), (18) and (19), *"នៅសល់តែ"* or *"នៅតែ"* also functions as a predicate in the same manner as in utterance (16).

Thus, *"នៅតែ"* can function as a predicate, as in utterances (16) through (19). However, when functioning as a predicate to express the remaining quantity of objects, entities or events, Khmer additionally employs the word *"នៅសល់តែ"* as an alternative to *"នៅតែ"*. In contrast, when functioning as an adverb, *"នៅតែ"* cannot be replaced by *"នៅសល់តែ"* with the meaning "only remaining." It would be unacceptable to say:

- *គាត់នៅសល់តែរងចាំអ្នក។* (Provisional translation: *He/she only remains waiting for you*.) (20)

- *ខ្ញុំនៅសល់តែធ្វើការងារនេះ។* (Provisional translation: *I only remain doing this job*.) (21)

- *គាត់នៅសល់តែជួបគ្នារាល់ថ្ងៃ។* (Provisional translation: *They only remain meeting frequently*) (22)

- *ម្ដាយខ្ញុំនៅសល់តែស្នាក់នៅទីនោះ។* (Provisional translation: *My mother only remains staying there*.) (23)

- *ខ្ញុំនៅសល់តែចាំការឆ្លើយតបពីអ្នក។* (Provisional translation: *I only remain waiting for your response*.) (24)[6]

It is evident that when *"នៅតែ"* is replaced by *"នៅសល់តែ"* in utterances (20) through (24), the resulting expressions are highly unacceptable in Khmer, even though the Vietnamese translations may sound relatively natural. Therefore, when functioning as a predicate, the structure can be generalized as follows:

[S – នៅតែ / នៅសល់តែ – O]

When compared with Vietnamese, we observe a similarity in grammatical function with the word *"còn"* when *"នៅសល់តែ/នៅតែ"* functions as a predicate expressing the meaning of "remaining." However, there are slight semantic differences between the two languages. These differences can be summarized in the following table:

Vietnamese	Khmer
Semantic features: As an *existential predicate*, *"còn"* may denote existence that is invariant due to the inherent nature of the subject or due to invariant accompanying complements, or due to logical regularities. As a *possessive predicate*, *"còn"* may denote existence or non-existence (+/−) depending on the inherent nature of the subject.	**Semantic features:** Remaining entities, events, or quantities.
Function: Predicate	**Function:** Predicate
Grammatical structure: [S – CÒN – O] or [S – CÒN – P], while *P = [V + O]*	**Grammatical structure:** [S – នៅតែ / នៅសល់តែ – O]

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the analysis of specific utterances, this paper has examined the grammatical functions and semantic features of the word *"còn."* This is a lexical item with multiple grammatical functions and diverse semantic

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[6] Note: These examples (20) – (24) are extracted from Data collected from real-life communicative situations of Thach Thi Thanh Loan

nuances. The study has analyzed *"còn"* in its roles as a predicate. In addition, *"còn"* can function as a noun; however, in most cases, *"còn"* primarily functions as a predicate. This predicate may serve as the core of the predicate phrase, or in some cases as a secondary predicate modifying another main predicate. *"Còn"* can be classified as either an existential predicate or a possessive predicate.

With regard to the comparison between *"còn"* in Vietnamese and its Khmer equivalents—specifically *"នៅតែ /នៅសល់តែ"*—the study identifies several similarities in grammatical function and sentence structure. In particular, the two languages show parallels in the roles of predicates. When functioning as predicates, *"còn"* in Vietnamese may serve as either an existential or a possessive predicate, whereas its Khmer equivalents primarily express the remaining entities, events, or quantities.

This paper is limited to an analysis of the semantic and grammatical properties of the word *"còn"* when it functions as a predicate. We propose that future research should extend this line of inquiry by further analyzing and comparing the semantic and grammatical characteristics of *"còn"* in its functions as an adverb, connective and conjunction in relation to Khmer and other languages. From there, these studies can find both similarities and differences in some languages. This indeed constitutes a promising and intellectually engaging direction for future research.

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