

Result Cancellation in Vietnamese Causative Verbs: Experimental Evidence

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This study investigates the phenomenon of result cancellation in Vietnamese causative verbs—a linguistic feature attested in various languages such as Mandarin Chinese, Tamil, Japanese, and Korean. Although result cancellation, whereby the inherent result of a causative verb is negated, has been documented across multiple languages, its status in Vietnamese remains largely unexplored. This paper addresses two central questions: whether Vietnamese permits result cancellation with causative verbs, and if so, under what conditions it occurs. To explore these questions, an experimental approach was employed. The results indicate that Vietnamese tends to permit result cancellation, but only when at least one of two factors is present: the subject's intention regarding the verb's inherent result or the presence of a direct cause. These findings contrast with Korean, where each factor is individually required. By providing empirical evidence for both the existence and conditioning factors of result cancellation in Vietnamese, this study contributes to the broader cross-linguistic understanding of result cancellation phenomenon.

Key Words: result cancellation, causative verb, intention, direct cause, experiment, Vietnamese

1. Introduction

The primary goal of this paper is to investigate whether result cancellation is possible with Vietnamese causative verbs, using an experimental method. Result cancellation in causative verbs has been observed across various languages (see, e.g., Mandarin Chinese in

Demirdache and Sun 2014, Tamil in Pederson 2008, Herring 1988, Japanese in Tsujimura 2003, and Korean in Park 1993, Y.-S. Lee 2004, J. Lee 2012, 2014, 2015, Beavers and Lee 2020, among many others). To illustrate this phenomenon, consider the following examples from four different languages:

- (1) a. **Mandarin Chinese** (Demirdache and Sun 2014)
Yuēhàn shāole tā-de shu, dàn méi shāo-zháo.
 Yuēhàn burn pfv 3.sg-gen book but neg burn-touch
 (lit.) ‘Yuēhàn burned his book, but it didn’t get burnt at all.’
- b. **Tamil** (Pederson 2008: 331, (1), from Herring 1988: 282)
aiyar teengkaay-ai uTai-tt-aar.
 brahmin coconut-acc break(tr)-Ps-3sResp
aanaal teengkaay uTai-ya-villai.
 but coconut break(intr)-Inf-Neg
 (lit.) ‘The brahmin broke the coconut. But the coconut didn’t break.’
- c. **Japanese** (Tsujimura 2003: 393, (17))
Mado-o aketa-kedo (sabituuteite) akanakatta.
 window-Acc opened(TR)-but (rusty) didn’t.open(INTR)
 (lit.) ‘I opened the window, but it didn’t open (because it was rusty).’
- d. **Korean** (Beavers and Lee 2020: 1235, (3))
ku-ka changmwun-ul kkay-ss-ta.
 he-NOM window-ACC break-PST-DECL
haciman changmwun-i kkay-ci-ci anh-ass-ta.
 but window-NOM break-PASS-COMP NEG-PST-DECL
 (lit.) ‘He broke the window. But it was not broken.’

In (1), the inherent results of the causative verbs are asserted in the first clauses (or sentences) but they are negated in the second clauses (or sentences). Despite the apparent contradiction in their English translations, these sentences are nonetheless acceptable in the respective languages. Their meaning closely resembles that of the *try*-construction. For instance, the Korean sentence in (1d) can be approximately translated as ‘I tried to break the window, but it was not broken.’ (see Section 2 below for a discussion of the intention requirement in result cancellation).

While many languages in East, South, and Southeast Asia exhibit the result

cancellation phenomenon, the status of Vietnamese in this regard remains unclear. To date, there has been little formal discussion on whether result cancellation is possible in Vietnamese. The only mention of a sentence exhibiting result cancellation appears informally in Kato (2018: 189, (37)).

- (2) *Tôi đã giết nó. Nhưng nó chưa chết.*
 1sg PST kill 3sg but 3sg not.yet die
 ‘I killed him. But he hasn’t died.’

Despite the apparent grammaticality of sentences like (2) in Vietnamese, empirical validation of result cancellation with causative verbs—such as *giết* ‘kill’—has been lacking. This paper addresses two primary research questions: (i) does Vietnamese permit result cancellation with causative verbs? and (ii) if so, what conditions govern this phenomenon? To answer these questions, Section 3 presents an experiment designed to test the existence of result cancellation in Vietnamese. The findings indicate that result cancellation is relatively more acceptable, but it is contingent upon two key factors: the subject’s intention regarding the inherent result of the causative verb, and the presence of a direct cause that could produce the inherent result. Notably, when neither condition is met, the acceptability of result cancellation drops significantly. However, satisfying only one of the two conditions makes result cancellation only marginally preferred (see Section 3). In this respect, Vietnamese differs from Korean, where both factors are independently necessary for result cancellation to be licensed. By providing experimental evidence on result cancellation in Vietnamese causative verbs, this study contributes to a more nuanced cross-linguistic understanding of this phenomenon across natural languages.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews previous research on result cancellation, with particular attention to Korean data, and identifies two key factors underlying this phenomenon. Section 3 presents the experimental methodology and findings concerning result cancellation in Vietnamese causative verbs. Finally, Section 4 summarizes the main findings, discusses their theoretical implications, and outlines directions for future research.

2. Previous Study

This section outlines the established properties of result cancellation in Korean causative verbs, providing a foundation for examining analogous phenomena in Vietnamese. These properties serve as a comparative framework for cross-linguistic analysis.

2.1. Subject's Intention

Result cancellation in Korean is permitted, as shown in (1d). However, for this phenomenon to be felicitous, the subject must hold a clear intention with respect to the causative verb's inherent result. This requirement is illustrated in (3).

- (3) *ku-ka* (#*uytohacianhkey*/#*silswulo*/#*wuyenhi*) *changmwun-ul* *kkay-ss-ta*.
 he-Nom unintentionally/by_mistake/accidentally window-Acc break-Pst-Dec
kulena changmwun-i kkay-ci-ci anh-ass-ta.
 but window-Nom break-Pass-Comp Neg-Pst-Dec
 (lit.) 'He broke the window (unintentionally/by mistake/accidentally).
 But the window was not broken.'

(Beavers and Lee 2020: 1239, (8a))

In this example, the use of unintentional adverbs is incompatible with the second clause, which negates the occurrence of the result. This contrast suggests that result cancellation is only licensed when the subject's action is intentional. Without the implication of intent, the sentence cannot support a scenario where the causative event was initiated, yet the result did not occur. This phenomenon is related to *Agent Control Hypothesis* (ACH), which posits that "the availability of non-culminating construals for accomplishments correlates with the control of the agent over the described event" (Demirdache & Martin 2013).

Similarly, the absence of sentence—and consequently, intention—on the part of the subject precludes the denial of a causative verb's inherent result. This is illustrated in example (4).

- (4) *chentwung-i changmwun-ul kkay-ss-ta. #haciman,*
 thunder-Nom window-Acc break-Pst-Dec but
changmwun-i kkay-ci-ci anh-ass-ta.
 window-Nom break-Pass-Comp Neg-Pst-Dec
 (lit.) 'The thunder broke the window. But the window did not break.'
 (Beavers and Lee 2020: 1252, (26b))

In this example, the subject *chentwung* ('thunder') is non-sentient, and therefore incapable of holding intention. As a result, the sentence fails to support a reading in which the subject initiates the causative event without producing the intended result. This reinforces the conclusion that subject intention is a necessary condition for result cancellation in Korean causative constructions.

2.2. Direct Cause

In addition to subject intention, the presence of a direct cause is essential for licensing result cancellation in Korean causative verbs. Consider the following example, which is unacceptable in the absence of a direct causal link to the tearing event (see J. Lee 2015, Beavers and Lee 2020):

- (5) [Sally tried to open the book in order to tear a page from it,
 but the book was not opened. So she couldn't tear the page.]
#Sally-ka ku chayk-uy pheyci-ul ccis-ess-ciman,
 Sally-Nom the book-Gen page-Acc tear-Pst-but
ku pheyci-ka ccis-eci-ci anh-ass-ta.
 the page-Nom tear-become-Pass-Comp Neg-Pst-Dec
 (lit.) 'Sally tore the page of the book, but the page was not torn.'

In example (5), Sally's attempt to open the book does not satisfy the requirement of direct causation for the tearing event. While the attempt may constitute a necessary precondition, it does not qualify as a direct cause. In a modified scenario where Sally opens the book and then performs a volitional action—such as pulling the page—with the explicit goal of tearing it, the failure of the page to tear would render result cancellation felicitous.

This analysis underscores that result cancellation in Korean causative verbs is subject to two critical constraints: (i) the subject must possess a volitional intention to bring about the inherent result of the causative verb, and (ii) there must be a direct causal event capable of producing that result.

3. Experiment

This section presents an experiment designed to investigate whether Vietnamese permits result cancellation with causative verbs, and to evaluate the influence of the two previously discussed conditions: subject's intention and direct cause.

3.1. Design and Materials

This study used a 2×2 within-subjects factorial design to examine the interaction between INTENTIONALITY and DIRECTNESS in the interpretation of Vietnamese causative verbs. INTENTIONALITY, manipulated at two levels—'intention' and 'non-intention'—examined whether the subject of the causative predicate acted with deliberate intent to bring about the resultant state. In intention conditions, the subject explicitly aimed to achieve the outcome; in non-intention conditions, the outcome occurred without deliberate purpose. DIRECTNESS, also manipulated at two levels—'direct' and 'indirect'—explored the nature of the causal relationship. Direct conditions involved immediate and observable causation, whereas indirect conditions involved mediated or less immediate causation. By orthogonally manipulating these two variables, the design made it possible to isolate and quantify their main and interaction effects on participants' acceptability judgments. This approach enables a more precise understanding of the semantic constraints on result cancellation in Vietnamese causative constructions. A sample set of test items illustrating these manipulations is presented in (6).

(6) a. **Condition 1: intention | direct**

[Context: Liên pushed the door to open it. But the door did not budge because it was locked.]

Liên đã mở cửa, nhưng cửa đã không được mở.

Liên Pst open door but door Pst not Pass open

(lit.) 'Liên opened the door, but the door was not opened.'

b. **Condition 2: intention | indirect**

[Context: Liên was walking to the door to open it. But she couldn't open it because she slipped and fell on the slippery floor.]

Liên đã mở cửa, nhưng cửa đã không được mở.

Liên Pst open door but door Pst not Pass open
(lit.) 'Liên opened the door, but the door was not opened.'

c. **Condition 3: non-intention | direct**

[Context: Liên accidentally pushed the door. But it did not budge because it was locked.]

Liên đã mở cửa, nhưng cửa đã không được mở.

Liên Pst open door but door Pst not Pass open
(lit.) 'Liên opened the door, but the door was not opened.'

d. **Condition 4: non-intention | indirect**

[Context: Liên was walking to the door to paint it. But she couldn't paint it because she slipped and fell on the slippery floor.]

Liên đã mở cửa, nhưng cửa đã không được mở.

Liên Pst open door but door Pst not Pass open
(lit.) 'Liên opened the door, but the door was not opened.'

The experimental stimuli included 16 test items, derived from four sets of lexically distinct sentences ($4 \text{ sets} \times 2 \text{ levels of intentionality} \times 2 \text{ levels of directness}$). These 16 test items, along with 18 filler items, constitute the primary stimulus list. To control for potential order effects, two versions of the list were created: an original list and a reverse-ordered list. Each list commenced with 3 instructional items, subsequently presenting a pseudo-randomized sequence of 34 test and filler items, for a grand total of 37 items presented to each participant.

3.2. Participants and Procedure

A total of 20 adult native Vietnamese speakers were recruited using the Prolific platform. Participants accessed the experiment via a Google Form link and were then randomly assigned to one of two stimulus lists, with 10 participants allocated to each list. Participants were asked to complete the task in a quiet, distraction-free environment to ensure data quality. They were made aware that the study sought subjective judgments,

meaning there were no objectively right or wrong answers. Participants received instructions not to discuss the experiment with others, either during or after their involvement.

Participants rated the contextual appropriateness of sentences using a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated “definitely unsuitable” and 7 indicated “definitely suitable”. This scale was chosen to allow for greater sensitivity in measuring gradient acceptability judgments than a binary response format would afford. Upon completing the experiment, participants were compensated £1.50 (approximately \$1.90 USD) through the Prolific platform.

3.3. Results

Experiment results are presented in Table 1. To standardize the data, participant judgments were z-transformed.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Condition Ratings (z-transformed)

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Condition 1	80	0.64	0.882	0.444	0.837
Condition 2	80	0.107	0.792	-0.0687	0.284
Condition 3	80	0.155	0.807	-0.0245	0.334
Condition 4	80	-0.547	0.564	-0.672	-0.421

The mean ratings and their corresponding 95% confidence intervals for each of the four conditions are illustrated in Figure 1.

To assess the impact of INTENTIONALITY and DIRECTNESS on result cancellation acceptability, a 2×2 repeated-measures ANOVA (analysis of variance) was conducted. The analysis showed statistically significant main effects for both INTENTIONALITY, $F(1,79)=49.19$, $p < .001$, and DIRECTNESS, $F(1,79)=50.42$, $p < .001$. However, the interaction effect between INTENTIONALITY and DIRECTNESS was not statistically significant, $F(1,79)=1.08$, $p = .301$. These results suggest that both the subject’s intentionality and the directness of causation independently influence the acceptability of result cancellation in Vietnamese causative constructions.

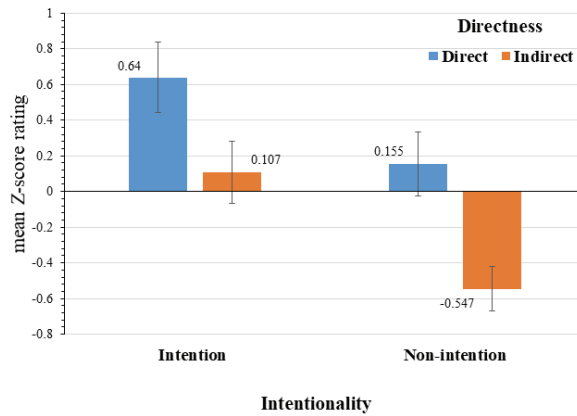


Figure 1. Average ratings by conditions with 95% confidence interval error bars (Vietnamese)

Pairwise differences among the four experimental conditions were examined using post hoc Tukey tests. These tests revealed statistically significant differences between all pairs ($p < .001$), except for the comparison between Condition 2 ($M = 0.107$) and Condition 3 ($M = 0.155$), which was not significant ($p = .978$).

The experiment utilized four causative verbs. Figure 2 displays the mean ratings for each verb in Condition 1 (intention | direct), along with 95% confidence intervals.

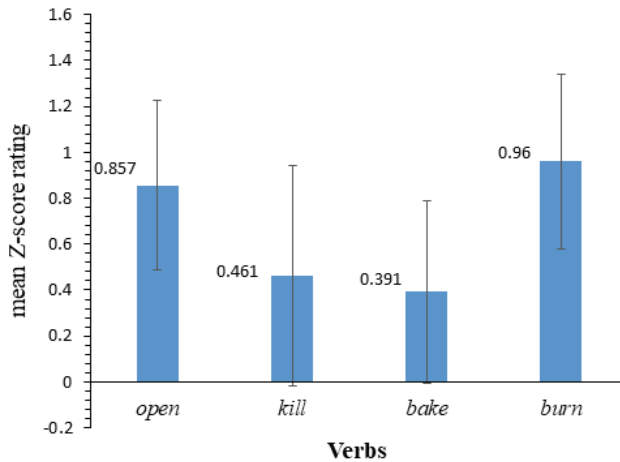


Figure 2. Average ratings by verb in Condition 1 with 95% confidence interval error bars (Vietnamese)

As depicted in Figure 2, the mean ratings for all four causative verbs were above zero. This indicates that participants generally perceived result cancellation as more permissible for these Vietnamese causative verbs.

3.4. Discussion

The results of this study provide nuanced insights into the acceptability of result cancellation with Vietnamese causative verbs. Condition 1, which involved both subject intention and direct cause, yielded a high mean acceptability rating ($M = 0.64$), indicating a strong tendency among participants to permit result cancellation in contexts where both elements are present. This finding supports the classification of Vietnamese as a language that permits result cancellation.

However, the fact that Conditions 2 ($M = 0.107$) and 3 ($M = 0.155$)—where either subject intention or direct cause was absent—still received mean acceptability ratings above zero challenges the notion that both factors are strictly required. This raises a key question: Are subject intention and direct cause truly indispensable for result cancellation in Vietnamese? In contrast, Condition 4 ($M = -0.547$), where both subject intention and direct cause were absent, elicited a strongly negative mean rating, indicating a clear resistance to result cancellation in such cases. These results suggest that while each of subject intention and direct cause significantly enhance the acceptability of result cancellation, they may not be absolute prerequisites. Rather, the presence of either factor appears sufficient to license result cancellation in Vietnamese. This pattern diverges from what has been reported for Korean, where both elements are necessary conditions for result cancellation. Such cross-linguistic differences highlight the need for further inquiry into the semantic constraints of causative verbs in Vietnamese.

In addition, more comprehensive empirical studies are needed to reinforce these initial findings. In particular, it is important to determine whether subject intention and direct cause are indeed non-essential, especially given that the mean acceptability ratings for Conditions 2 and 3 are close to zero. If subsequent research confirms this, it will be essential to define the precise semantic conditions that permit result cancellation in Vietnamese. Clarifying these conditions will contribute to a deeper understanding of cross-linguistic variation in the semantics of causative constructions and the acceptability of result cancellation.

4. Conclusion

This study presented experimental evidence that Vietnamese tends to allow result cancellation in the domain of causative verbs. The findings indicate that the acceptability of result cancellation in Vietnamese is influenced by two key factors: (i) the subject's intentionality regarding the inherent result of the causative verb, and (ii) the presence of a direct cause that would typically bring about that result in the actual world. When both elements are present, result cancellations receive higher acceptability ratings. In contrast, when both are absent, result cancellation receives lower acceptability ratings. However, when only one factor is present, acceptability ratings remain marginally above zero. This pattern suggests that either factor alone may suffice to license result cancellation in Vietnamese. However, it is important to underscore the preliminary nature of these findings. The limited scope of the experiment underscores the need for further empirical validation through larger-scale experimental studies or corpus-based analyses.

A key direction for future research involves investigating whether Vietnamese also permits action cancellation with activity verbs. Such cancellation has been reported in languages such as Korean and Burmese. This refers to the negation of the manner of motion expressed by an activity verb, while still preserving the overall acceptability of the sentence. Illustrative examples from Korean, as discussed in Lee (2015, 2016), are given in (7).

- (7) a. *ku-ka himkkes ttwi-ess-ciman,*
 he-Nom with all the strength jump-Pst-but
pal-i tti-e-ci-ci anh-ass-ta.
 foot-Nom detach-Comp-Pass-Comp Neg-Pst-Dec
 (lit.) 'He jumped with all his strength, but his feet were not detached from the ground.'
 = (approx.) 'He tried to jump with all his strength, but his feet were not detached from the ground.'
- b. *ku-ka himkkes kwul-less-ciman,*
 he-Nom with all the strength roll-Pst-but
kwu-lul swu-ka eps-ess-ta.
 roll-Rel way-Nom Neg-Pst-Dec
 (lit.) 'He rolled with all his strength, but he couldn't roll.'
 = (approx.) 'He tried to roll with all his strength, but he couldn't roll.'

The sentences in (7) appear to entail the subject's intention, similar to those involving result cancellation. For example, (7a) can be roughly paraphrased as 'He tried to jump with all his strength, but his feet did not leave the ground', with a similar interpretation applying to (7b). In addition to Korean, Burmese has also been documented as a language that permits action cancellation (Kato 2014: 9, (27), (28)). Burmese examples are presented in (8).

- (8) a. *thàiN=dê. dâ=bêmê thàiN=lô mǎ-yâ=bú*
 sit=REAL this=though sit=LO NEG-get=NEG
 '(I) sat down. But (I) couldn't sit down.'
 Situation: "Intending to sit in the chair, I tensed my muscles.
 However, on account of pain in my leg, I could not move my leg at all."
- b. *cau?=tê. dâ=bêmê cau?=lô mǎ-yâ=bú*
 walk=REAL this=though walk=LO NEG-get=NEG
 '(I) walked. But (I) couldn't walk.'
 Situation: "Intending to start walking, I tensed my muscles.
 However, on account of pain in my leg, I could not move my leg at all."

Similar to Korean, action cancellation in Burmese appears to presuppose the subject's intention to act. The speaker initiates an effort to perform the action, but the action ultimately fails due to internal or external constraints. Data such as (7) and (8) suggest that action cancellation is not language-specific, but rather a cross-linguistic phenomenon. It remains an open question whether Vietnamese, which appears to allow result cancellation with causative verbs, also permits action cancellation—a topic requiring further empirical investigation. Pursuing these research avenues will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the semantic constraints governing cancellation phenomena and their cross-linguistic variation.

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