
THE EVOLUTION OF PERFECT ASPECT MARKERS IN VIETNAMESE: A DIACHRONIC STUDY FROM THE 13TH TO 20TH CENTURY*

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the diachronic evolution of perfect aspect markers in Vietnamese from the 13th to the 20th century, focusing on the development and interaction of *đã*, *rồi*, and the now-extinct *đoạn*. Utilizing a unique corpus that combines both primary texts in the traditional Nôm script and later texts in the modern Quốc Ngữ script, this study identifies seven distinct stages of development. In the earliest stage (up to the 13th century), *đã* was the sole perfect marker, primarily used preverbally and occasionally as a verb meaning ‘to finish’, with neither *rồi* nor *đoạn* present. By the 14th century, *rồi* emerged as a postverbal telic marker, and *đoạn* appeared mainly as a verb meaning ‘to finish’. Over the centuries, these markers coexisted and competed: *đã* expanded its functions to mark past tense, occasionally function as a conjunction (a usage that is no longer available), and sometimes serve as a sentence-final imperative marker ‘first’. Meanwhile, *rồi* was initially used as a verb and an immediately postverbal telic/completive marker. Over time, its usage expanded, with an increasing frequency as a perfect marker, while it also took on additional functions as a conjunction, marking temporal or logical transitions between events. On the other hand, *đoạn* transitioned from a verb into an immediately postverbal telic/completive marker and then into a perfect marker (and also a conjunction) before gradually dis-

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appearing by the late 19th century. The early 19th century marked the peak coexistence of all three markers as perfect markers. However, by the late 19th century, *đoạn* had vanished, leaving *đã* and *rồi* as the dominant markers, a pattern that persisted into the 20th century. Importantly, while *đã* has lost its conjunctive function in modern Vietnamese, *rồi* retains its conjunctive “and then” use – reflecting a broader Southeast Asian areal trend also attested in Lao *lèw* and Thai *lèw* (Enfield 2007: 183; Olsson 2013). This study sheds light on the historical evolution of Vietnamese grammar, highlighting the complex interaction and competition between these markers. The gradual disappearance of *đoạn* and the increasing specialization of *đã* and *rồi* as perfect markers reflect broader trends in grammaticalization, where lexical items undergo reanalysis, semantic narrowing, and functional shifts along the functional spine from lexical to grammatical and discourse functions. The research provides valuable insights into grammaticalization theory, particularly in the areas of aspect and tense marking, and deepens our understanding of the dynamic processes that have shaped Vietnamese grammar over centuries.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper traces the diachronic evolution of perfect aspect markers in Vietnamese from the 13th to the 20th century, centering on three key markers: *đã*, *rồi*, and the now-extinct *đoạn*. While the grammaticalization of certain functional categories in Vietnamese has been addressed in previous studies (Washizawa 2019, Vũ 2020, Trinh, Phan & Vũ 2024, Phan, Nguyen & Shimizu 2024, N. T. Phan 2024b), the diachronic interplay among the markers *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* has yet to be systematically explored. In particular, *đoạn* has never before been identified as a perfect marker, nor has the historical rivalry between preverbal *đã* and postverbal *rồi* been analyzed. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the historical dynamics of these markers, offering insights into the broader processes of grammatical change in Vietnamese. The evolution of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* reveals patterns of reanalysis, semantic narrowing, and syntactic shifts, which are hallmarks of grammaticalization.

The study is grounded in the observation that *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* not only marked aspect but also competed for similar syntactic and semantic spaces throughout history. In the earliest stages (up to the 13th century), *đã* was the sole perfect marker, used preverbally and occasionally as a verb meaning ‘to finish’, with no presence of *rồi* or *đoạn*. However, from the 14th century onward, *rồi* and *đoạn* began to appear, initially as immediately postverbal telic markers and verbs, before gradually taking on different grammatical functions. By the 16th century, both *rồi* and *đoạn* were used alongside *đã*, contributing to a complex system of aspect marking. Over time, *đã* evolved to

express past tense as well as perfect aspect, while *rồi* became a more dominant marker of perfectivity. The marker *đoạn*, which once had a significant role, gradually disappeared by the late 19th century, leaving *đã* and *rồi* as the primary perfect markers in Vietnamese.

This paper seeks to fill a gap in Vietnamese linguistic studies by providing a detailed analysis of the competition and evolution of these markers across seven key stages of development. By examining historical texts from both the *Nôm* and *Quốc ngữ* scripts, the findings have broader implications for the study of Vietnamese grammar and the theory of grammaticalization. The competition between *đã*, *rồi* and *đoạn* mirrors cross-linguistic trends where aspect markers transition to tense markers, conjunctions and discourse markers, and their disappearance or coexistence sheds light on the dynamic nature of language change. This study offers a more nuanced view of how grammatical categories develop, evolve, and sometimes disappear in the context of language history.

The structure of this paper is as follows. The *Theoretical background* section (2) provides a theoretical framework, discussing two types of perfect aspect (HAVE/BE perfect and FINISH/ALREADY perfect) (see Section 2.1 for terminology clarification) and the perfect cycle (FINISH/ALREADY > PERFECT > PAST), alongside a review of previous studies on Vietnamese perfect markers. The *Data sources* section (3) presents the historical texts used in this study, including both *Nôm* and *Quốc ngữ* script sources, and details the criteria for text selection and dating. The next sections, *The overall occurrence and usage of the three markers* (4) and *The competition of the three markers from the 13th to the 20th century* (5), analyze the development and competition of *đã*, *rồi* and *đoạn* across seven stages of Vietnamese history, drawing on specific texts from each period. Finally, the *Conclusion* (6) synthesizes the findings, outlining the diachronic evolution of these markers and their implications for the grammaticalization of perfectivity in Vietnamese.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Tense, grammatical aspect, and lexical aspect, and the functional spine in Vietnamese

To understand the Vietnamese perfect aspect system, it is essential to distinguish between tense, grammatical aspect, and lexical aspect. Each of these categories plays a unique role in marking temporal and aspectual relations within sentences, and they interact along the Vietnamese functional spine.

Tense encodes the timing of an event relative to the moment of speaking (Comrie 1985). In many languages, a past tense marker explicitly signals

that an event occurred before the time of speech, as in English ('I walked to the store'). However, Vietnamese does not have a true morphological past tense system. Instead, it uses aspectual markers like *đã* to indicate past events. Though *đã* is primarily a marker of perfect aspect, it can also convey past tense, illustrating how Vietnamese relies on aspect to signal temporal distinctions. Additionally, *sẽ* functions as a future marker (Trinh 2005, Duffield 2007, Phan 2013), though it also has modal implications (Bui 2019). Among the three syntactic positions for TAM markers in Vietnamese in Table 2, tense occupies the highest position (preverbal TAM₁). Among the three main markers (*đã*, *rồi*, and the now-extinct *đoạn*), only *đã* marks tense, specifically the past tense.

Grammatical Aspect pertains to how an event's internal temporal structure is perceived – whether it is viewed as completed or ongoing (Comrie 1976, Dahl 1985, 2000, Ritz 2012, Grønn & von Stechow 2021, a.o.). Within grammatical aspect, a distinction is often made between the perfect and perfective aspects. The perfect aspect highlights the relevance of a past event to the present ('I have finished the book'), while the perfective aspect simply indicates that an event is completed, without emphasizing its current relevance. In Vietnamese, *đã*, *rồi*, and historically *đoạn* function as markers of perfect aspect, indicating that an action (or the beginning of an action) is completed with ongoing relevance. Initially, *rồi* and *đoạn* served as telic/completive markers signaling completion, but over time, they evolved to express a broader sense of perfect aspect. Grammatical aspect in Vietnamese occupies two syntactic positions: the preverbal TAM₁ and the VP-final TAM₃. All three markers (*đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn*) can mark grammatical aspect, particularly the perfect aspect.

Lexical Aspect (or aktionsart) refers to the inherent temporal characteristics of a predicate, such as whether an action is telic (having a defined endpoint) or atelic (lacking a clear endpoint). In Vietnamese, telicity is marked by forms such as *được* 'get', *xong* 'finish', *ra* 'out' (Phan 2013, 2023) and, historically, *rồi* and *đoạn*, both of which signify that an action has reached its natural conclusion (Smith 1991). For example, *rồi* initially functioned as a telic/completive marker, but, over time, it transitioned into a perfect aspect marker, blurring the line between lexical and grammatical aspect. *Đoạn*, which indicated completion in earlier stages of Vietnamese, eventually disappeared as *rồi* and *đã* took over as the dominant markers. Lexical aspect in Vietnamese occupies only the immediately postverbal TAM₂ position. Among the three markers, only *rồi* and *đoạn* experienced a stage where they served as telic markers, indicating completion.

Negation is also an important component of the Vietnamese functional spine and serves as a useful diagnostic for the interpretation of perfect markers. Vietnamese sentential negators (e.g., *không*, *chẳng*) are standardly analyzed as occupying a dedicated NegP position between TP and AspectP/VP. When a marker such as *đã* occurs in a position that scopes above negation (e.g., *đã* + NEG + V), the configuration strongly favors a past-oriented interpretation, whereas affirmative contexts more readily allow a perfect/current-relevance reading (see [Trinh 2005](#), [Duffield 2013](#), [Phan 2013, 2023](#)). In the diachronic sections below, we therefore use the relative ordering of the marker and the negator as one criterion for distinguishing past vs. perfect uses in the historical texts.

Understanding these distinctions – tense, grammatical aspect, and lexical aspect – allows for a more nuanced analysis of the evolution of Vietnamese perfect markers and the shifting roles of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* within the language’s aspectual system.

These temporal and aspectual distinctions align with a broader functional spine in Vietnamese, structured into three zones: CP, TP, and VP ([Phan & Duffield 2022](#), following [Rizzi 1997](#), [Cinque 1999](#)).

- (1) CP > TP > NegP > Grammatical AspectP > VP₁ > Lexical AspectP > VP₂

The functional spine in (1) illustrates the grammaticalization trajectory of Vietnamese aspect markers, where elements transition from lower lexical layers to higher grammatical layers, following the syntax of grammaticalization proposed in [Roberts & Roussou \(2002, 2003\)](#), [van Gelderen \(2011, 2023\)](#), [Meisterernst \(2020\)](#), a. o. In particular, the relative word order of telic/completive versus perfect markers with respect to the verb is a key diagnostic in our diachronic analysis. This paper establishes a clear distinction between telic/completive markers, which immediately follow the verb and signify the completion of situations, and perfect markers, which emphasize current relevance rather than mere completion. Telic/completive markers belong to lexical aspect and are syntactically positioned within the VP domain ([Travis 2010](#)). In contrast, perfect markers are part of grammatical aspect and occupy higher syntactic positions, either preverbally or VP-finally, as outlined by [Phan \(2013, 2023\)](#). Recognizing this distinction is essential for understanding the nuanced interaction of these markers within the Vietnamese aspectual system. Over time, *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* each followed the general grammaticalization path in (1), though their specific paths varied. They evolved from verbs to lexical aspect markers, then to grammatical aspect markers, and, in some cases, extended to tense markers and even to C-domain markers (such as those for consecutive or imperative functions). This progression highlights the dynamic process of grammaticalization in

Vietnamese, as lexical items are reanalyzed and gradually take on more abstract, functional roles within the language's syntactic structure.

2.2 Cross-linguistic perspectives on the perfect aspect

The perfect aspect, which marks the relevance of a past event to the present, manifests differently across languages. According to [Dahl & Velupillai \(2013\)](#), perfect constructions vary significantly, including 'have'-type perfects derived from possessive structures, commonly found in Indo-European languages, and perfects derived from words for 'finish' or 'already,' prevalent in Southeast Asia and West Africa. While Vietnamese has traditionally been classified under 'Other perfect' in WALS, this study reclassifies it as a 'Finish/Already' perfect type, arguing for the central role of markers like *rôi* and *đã*. These markers parallel those in related Southeast Asian languages such as Thai *lɛ̌ɛw* and Khmer *ban* (WALS Map 68A).

Type of Perfect	Number of Languages
'Have'-type (derived from possessive construction)	7
Derived from 'finish' or 'already'	21
Other perfect	80
No perfect	114
Total	222

Table 1 Values of WALS Map 68A: The Perfect Aspect
([Dahl & Velupillai 2013](#))

The 'finish/already' perfect, also known as the iative aspect, is common in Southeast Asia and conveys that an event has achieved a state of relevance to the present. This form does not necessarily indicate total completion but emphasizes an event's significance at the current moment ([Olsson 2013](#), [Dahl 2022](#)). In languages with limited morphological tense marking, auxiliary or lexical markers fulfill this role. For instance, in Jakarta Indonesian:

- (2) *Bety, Bapak udah berangkat?*
 Bety Daddy PRF leave
 'Bety, has Daddy left?'

Here, *udah* functions as a perfect marker, similar to the use of *đã* and *rôi* in Vietnamese ([Dahl 2022](#)). Other languages in the region – such as Lao *laev* – also follow this pattern, using lexical forms to express perfectivity ([Olsson 2013](#)).

In Vietnamese, the perfect aspect primarily marks the current relevance of an event, focusing on its significance to the present rather than merely indicating its completion (Cao 2003, Phan 2013). This relevance may highlight different parts of the event, such as its initiation or intermediate state, without necessarily denoting completion (Thompson 1965, Phan 2023). For example:

- (3) Nó *đã* sơn tường rồi nhưng chưa xong
 3SG PRF paint wall PRF but not finish
 ‘He has painted the wall but he hasn’t finished it yet.’

In this example, unlike the Indonesian case discussed earlier, Vietnamese demonstrates the coexistence of two perfect markers within a single sentence: the preverbal *đã* and the VP-final *rồi*. Together, these markers signal that the action of painting holds present relevance, even though the task remains incomplete. This dual-marking system highlights the complexity of the Vietnamese perfect aspect, where *đã* and *rồi* interact to convey nuanced meanings of completion and ongoing relevance. Historically, Vietnamese also utilized *đoạn* as a marker of completion, though it fell out of use by the late 19th century. Both *đã* and *rồi* align with the iamitive perfect type, emphasizing actions with current significance, akin to the English use of “already” (Michaelis 1992).

This raises the question: when two perfect markers coexist in Vietnamese, what dynamics govern their competition? We propose that the interplay between *đã* and *rồi* cannot be fully understood without examining the historical role of *đoạn*. Remarkably, *đoạn*, despite its pivotal function in earlier stages of Vietnamese, has been largely overlooked in prior research. Understanding the relationship among these three markers offers a more comprehensive view of the evolution and specialization within the Vietnamese aspectual system.

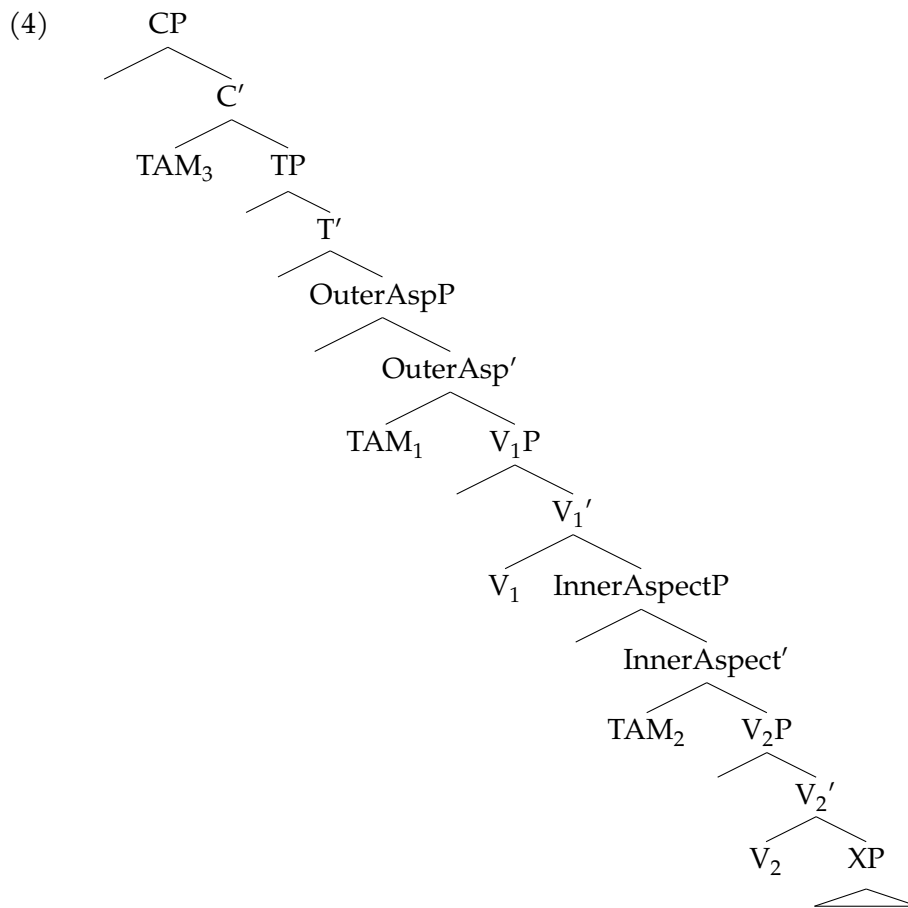
Furthermore, it is worth noting that, in Southeast Asian languages such as Vietnamese, Khmer, and Thai, the syntactic placement of Tense, Aspect, and Modality (TAM) markers within serial verb constructions exhibits a distinctive pattern. As Bisang (2006) notes, these languages position TAM markers at different points relative to the lexical verb (V), coverbs (COV), and directional verbs (Vd). Specifically, TAM markers can appear in three positions: preverbal (TAM₁), immediately postverbal (TAM₂), and VP-final (TAM₃). Vietnamese demonstrates this flexibility with *đã* and *rồi*, which can occupy both preverbal and VP final positions, allowing for nuanced aspect marking.

Phan (2013) expanded Bisang’s work by identifying an additional, immediately postverbal position (TAM₂) in Vietnamese, adding syntactic complexity to aspect marking. This study builds on Phan’s findings by demonstrating that all three TAM positions – preverbal, immediately postverbal,

Chinese	TAM ₁	COV	V-TAM ₂	COV	Vd	TAM ₃
Hmong	TAM ₁	COV	V-TAM ₂	Vd	COV	TAM ₃
Vietnamese	TAM ₁		V-TAM ₂	Vd	COV	TAM ₃
Thai	TAM ₁		V	Vd	COV	TAM ₃
Khmer	TAM ₁		V	Vd	COV	TAM ₃

Table 2 Position of TAM markers within the serial unit
(adapted from Bisang 2006: 593)

and VP-final – play significant roles in the grammaticalization process. To make the mapping from Bisang’s three positions to clause structure explicit, we schematize the relevant portion of the Vietnamese clausal spine as follows:



In this representation, TAM₁ corresponds to an “outer” aspect/tense-related layer above the main verbal domain, TAM₂ to an “inner” aspect layer inside the extended VP (strictly V-adjacent), and TAM₃ to a clause-edge/sentential-aspect layer associated with the CP edge. For broader syntactic discussion of Vietnamese tense/aspect/negation interactions and clause-edge phenomena that bear on these diagnostics, see [Phan \(2023\)](#) and [N. T. Phan \(2024a\)](#).

For readers less familiar with Vietnamese syntax, three points are key for the analysis in this paper. First, Vietnamese is predominantly VO and TAM markers are realized as free functional items rather than inflections. Second, TAM marking is distributed across three positions used throughout this study: preverbal TAM₁, immediately postverbal TAM₂, and VP-final TAM₃. Third, sentential negators (e.g., *không*, *chẳng*) occupy a dedicated NegP between TP and Aspect/VP, so the relative order of a marker and negation (e.g., *đã* + NEG + V) is a useful scope diagnostic, often favoring a past-oriented reading over a perfect/current-relevance reading. Building on these diagnostics, the main positional contrast relevant to the “clear path” in our findings is as follows: preverbal *đã* (TAM₁) anchors perfect/past and shows its strongest past drift under negation; *rồi* and *đoạn* first enter as VP-internal completion markers in TAM₂ (strictly V-adjacent), and later *rồi* – and briefly *đoạn* – appear in TAM₃ as VP-final perfect markers that scope over the whole VP (typically after V+O), with *rồi* also extending into clause-linking conjunction use.

Vietnamese, recategorized in WALS as one of only 21 languages with a ‘finish/already’ type of perfect aspect, offers a unique perspective on this grammaticalization pathway. Unlike the ‘have’-type perfect typical in European languages, Vietnamese follows a distinct trajectory, where aspect markers like *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* evolve with minimal reliance on complex morphology. The interaction and competition among these markers reveal the dynamics of grammaticalization in Vietnamese, illustrating how markers initially expressing telic and completive meanings shifted to more abstract functions within and beyond the perfect aspect. Tracking *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* across seven historical stages shows how completion and telicity meanings are redistributed into higher aspectual, tense-like, and discourse-linking functions, and how redundancy is later resolved through competition and specialization.

Although the preverbal marker *đã* has been extensively examined ([Cao 2003](#), [Trinh 2005](#), [Duffield 2007](#), [Phan 2013](#), [Phan & Duffield 2019](#), [Le 2022](#), [Phan 2023](#)), the postverbal marker *rồi* has attracted far less scrutiny, and the now-extinct *đoạn* remains almost entirely unexamined despite its historical significance. By combining quantitative distributions with close philological analysis, our study clarifies the syntactic division of labor between TAM₂

completion and TAM₃ perfect marking and documents how the system converges on the modern *đã-rồi* configuration, contributing to broader discussions of grammatical competition and resolution in language change.

2.3 *Historical perspectives on the Perfect Cycle*

The grammaticalization of perfect markers in Vietnamese reflects a broader linguistic phenomenon known as the Perfect Cycle. This cycle, observed in various languages, describes a grammaticalization trajectory in which lexical items with meanings related to completion (e.g., ‘finish’ or ‘already’) gradually transform into markers of perfect aspect, often extending to past tense and, eventually, discourse functions.

The Perfect Cycle, as outlined by [Heine & Kuteva \(2002\)](#), [Kuteva, Heine, Hong, Long, Narrog & Rhee \(2019\)](#) (see also [van Gelderen 2023](#)), progresses through a series of stages that reflect a shift from concrete lexical meanings to increasingly abstract grammatical functions:

- (i) Lexical Source (Finish): The marker originates with a specific lexical meaning, often indicating that an action has reached its endpoint. This initial stage provides the foundation for further semantic reanalysis.
- (ii) Telic/Completive Aspect: At this stage, the marker is reanalyzed to express completion more generally, marking that an action or event is fully accomplished.
- (iii) Perfect Aspect: The marker evolves to emphasize the relevance of a completed action to the present, signifying that the action has implications for the current state.
- (iv) Past: In some languages, the perfect marker undergoes further reanalysis, becoming a past tense marker that specifies that an event definitively occurred in the past.
- (v) Discourse Functions: In advanced stages, some markers evolve into discourse markers within the CP (Complementizer Phrase) domain, serving to indicate sequence, consequence, or even imperative functions.

In this study, we link the semantic stages of the Perfect Cycle to a syntax-of-grammaticalization approach ([Roberts & Roussou 2002, 2003](#)), treating grammaticalization as a shift from lexical items to functional markers that is visible in syntax. We diagnose this shift through (i) reduced lexical behavior –

forms no longer pattern as verbal heads with argument-structural selection – and (ii) overt reanalysis into higher, more fixed positions on the Vietnamese clausal spine. In practice, this means tracking a ‘clear path’ in position and scope: VP-internal completion is coded as TAM₂ when a marker is strictly V-adjacent immediately after the verb, while VP-final perfect is coded as TAM₃ when the marker follows the entire VP, typically after V+O. A further diagnostic comes from NegP: because sentential negators intervene between TP and Aspect/VP, the relative order of a marker and negation (e.g., *đã* + NEG + V) provides scope evidence that helps distinguish past-oriented readings from perfect/current-relevance readings, most notably for preverbal *đã*.

In Vietnamese, this cycle can be observed through the trajectories of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn*, each of which originated with telic or completive meanings before taking on more abstract grammatical roles. The analysis of their development provides insights into the unique grammaticalization path in Vietnamese and highlights common patterns across languages. In the earliest stages, *đã* was the primary marker of completion in Vietnamese, used preverbally to signal that an action had reached a natural endpoint. This marker initially served both as a perfect aspect marker and as a verb meaning ‘to finish’. By the 14th century, *rồi* emerged in immediately postverbal position, primarily indicating telicity, while *đoạn* appeared as a lexical verb denoting ‘to finish’. Over time, these markers coexisted and evolved within the Vietnamese aspectual system. Initially, *đã* functioned as a lexical verb meaning ‘to finish’ and a perfect aspect marker within the IP domain. Over time, it expanded its scope beyond perfectivity to include past tense readings, especially in negative constructions. By the 14th century, *đã* temporarily adopted conjunctive roles in the CP domain, linking clauses, but by the 17th century, this function was lost. Instead, *đã* developed clause-final imperative-like usage, signaling prioritization or event sequencing (meaning ‘first’). This dual role as a preverbal perfect and past marker solidified by the late 19th century and remains central in modern Vietnamese.

Emerging in the 14th century in the VP domain, *rồi* began as an immediately postverbal telic/completive marker, signaling that an action had reached its endpoint. Over the following centuries, as *đã* evolved into a dual-purpose marker, functioning as both a perfect and a past tense marker, *rồi* underwent grammaticalization, emerging as a VP-final perfect marker by the 17th century. Together, *đã* and *rồi* began to complement each other in marking perfect aspect, reflecting their specialized syntactic roles. *Rồi*’s increasing independence from *đã* in the late 19th century reflects its maturation as a distinct perfect marker. Concurrently, *rồi* also expanded into the CP domain, functioning as a conjunction to mark sequence or consequence between events. This mul-

tifunctionality illustrates the final stages of the Perfect Cycle, where markers take on broader discourse roles. By the 20th century, *rồi* had become a cornerstone of the Vietnamese TAM system, specializing in postverbal perfect marking and event sequencing.

Unlike *đã* and *rồi*, *đoạn* did not survive into modern Vietnamese. Initially emerging as a lexical verb meaning ‘to finish’, *đoạn* functioned in the VP domain as an immediately postverbal telic/completive marker. By the 17th century, it expanded into the CP domain, serving as a conjunction to link events. However, *đoạn*’s functional overlap with *rồi* – both markers serving as telic/completive and conjunctive elements – likely contributed to its decline. By the late 19th century, *đoạn* had completely disappeared from the Vietnamese aspectual system, reflecting the competitive dynamics of grammaticalization, where more versatile markers like *rồi* absorbed its functions. The interplay and competition among *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* reflect the natural evolution of perfect markers in Vietnamese, aligning with the stages of the Perfect Cycle. This interaction also reveals how languages manage redundancy by favoring certain markers over others, allowing some to evolve into specialized roles while others fall out of use. These developments vividly illustrate how word order and syntactic position provide key evidence for each stage of grammaticalization, with telic markers remaining within the VP domain and perfect markers rising to higher AspectP and TP positions before some extend into the CP domain as discourse devices.

The evolution of Vietnamese perfect markers fits a broader East and Southeast Asian pattern in which completion predicates ‘finish/already’ grammaticalize into aspectual and discourse devices. In Mandarin Chinese, for example, *le* is commonly traced back to completion/resultative sources and develops perfective, change-of-state, and discourse-marking functions, including signaling newly relevant information (Shi 1989, Sun 1996, van den Berg & Wu 2006); more generally, Chinese has well-attested pathways linking preverbal perfective/perfect adverbs such as *jì* 既 and *yǐ* 已 and Middle Chinese VP-*yǐ* termination/resultative constructions to later aspectual systems that culminate in modern *le* (Jiang 2001, 2007, Meisterernst 2016, 2023, Aldridge & Meisterernst 2018), and accounts of the perfective-to-past extension of *le* (Wu 2004) provide a useful comparison for the expansion of Vietnamese *đã* toward past readings, especially in negative environments. Vietnamese shows a closely comparable trajectory internally: *rồi* shifts from a telic/completive marker to a postverbal perfect and further to a conjunction encoding sequence or consequence, while our bilingual Nôm materials often align these Vietnamese markers with Chinese completion/transition cues, offering a philological baseline for distinguishing lexical, aspectual, and

connective uses. Beyond Chinese, parallel ‘finish/already’ developments are documented for Thai *lɛ̀ɛw* and Lao *lè̀w/laew* and for Khmer *ban*, where the same completion forms extend to perfect aspect and clause-linking (Bisang 2004, Enfield 2007, Olsson 2013, Hengeveld, Narrog & Olbertz 2017). Taken together, these convergences suggest that analytic languages with limited inflectional morphology repeatedly repurpose lexical completion verbs for grammatical distinctions in tense, aspect, and discourse, and the trajectories of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* situate Vietnamese squarely within this typological continuum.

The core research questions guiding this study are: How did *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* evolve and interact across different historical periods? What does their grammaticalization trajectory reveal about the Perfect Cycle and grammatical competition in Vietnamese, and how do these findings inform our understanding of universal patterns in grammaticalization?

Through addressing these questions, this study aims to illuminate the specific historical pathways of Vietnamese perfect markers, contributing to our understanding of how languages manage aspectual distinctions and the competition between markers with overlapping functions. By examining the Vietnamese case in relation to cross-linguistic patterns, this research enriches our understanding of the Perfect Cycle, demonstrating how languages across diverse typological backgrounds use similar strategies to express perfect aspect, past tense, and discourse functions. In sum, the diachronic development of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* highlights the dynamics of grammaticalization within Vietnamese and offers a broader perspective on the evolution of perfect markers. Vietnamese, as part of the ‘finish/already’ type of perfect aspect common in Southeast Asia, provides an informative case study for the Perfect Cycle. Through exploring these markers’ transitions from lexical meanings to more abstract roles, this study enhances our understanding of the processes underlying grammaticalization and aspect marking across languages, while situating Vietnamese within a universal framework of grammatical change. This pattern also aligns with broader theories of linguistic complexity and change, where grammaticalization leads to functional layering – adding new discourse and morphosyntactic roles to existing forms – and thereby increases overall functional complexity even as individual markers simplify (Hopper & Traugott 2003, Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994).

3 DATA SOURCES

This study examines the diachronic evolution of perfect markers in Vietnamese by analyzing texts written in two distinct scripts: the Chinese-based Nôm script (up to the 17th century), and the Latin-based Quốc ngữ script

(from the 17th century onward). These texts span seven centuries from the 13th to the 20th centuries, offering a unique lens through which to track linguistic shifts in Vietnamese, particularly the evolution of aspect markers like *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn*. The integration of primary Nôm texts provides an especially valuable resource for understanding early forms and functions of these markers, while Quốc ngữ texts illustrate their later stages of grammaticalization.

3.1 Nôm data

The analysis of Nôm texts is essential for capturing the historical stages of Vietnamese grammar. However, working with Nôm texts presents several challenges, particularly for texts predating the 15th century. Nôm materials from these early periods are scarce, and the precise dating of some texts is still a subject of scholarly debate. Additionally, the lack of modern punctuation in Nôm complicates clause boundary identification. Despite these limitations, Nôm texts offer invaluable insights into the historical usage of Vietnamese aspect markers.

3.1.1 Criteria and text selection

To construct a representative sample of historical Vietnamese, the study selected texts based on the following criteria:

- (i) Combination of prose and verse: Although prose is prioritized for its consistent grammatical structures, the selection also includes narrative-style long-form verse, which closely resembles prose in its structure.
- (ii) Combination of Monolingual Vietnamese and Literary Sinitic-Vietnamese Bilingual Texts: Early Nôm texts often feature bilingual translations with Literary Sinitic (in the terminology of [Mair 2004](#) and [King 2021](#)), offering a crucial baseline for the analysis and interpretation of Vietnamese grammatical structures. In cases of ambiguous readings, the Chinese original helps clarify the intended grammatical function in Vietnamese, especially for markers with multiple interpretations. Because the Vietnamese lines are translations within a Sinitic textual tradition, we do not assume one-to-one morpheme correspondence between source and target. Instead, we treat recurrent alignment patterns (e.g., how Vietnamese markers are deployed when the Chinese source uses completion verbs or

connective devices) as an interpretive aid alongside Vietnamese-internal diagnostics such as position relative to the verb, objects, and negation.

Based on these criteria, four Nôm texts were selected, each representing different historical periods and offering valuable insights into the development of Vietnamese grammar:

- (i) *Phật thuyết đại báo phụ mẫu ân trọng kinh* 佛說大報父母恩重經 (Sūtra of the Buddha's Teachings on Respectful Gratitude for the Great Karmic Retribution of Parents), a bilingual Vietnamese-Buddhist Chinese (a Literary Sinitic register) text, abbreviated as *Phật thuyết*.
- (ii) *Thiền tông Khoá hư ngữ lục* 禪宗課虛語錄 (Recorded Sayings of Zen Teachings), a bilingual Vietnamese-Buddhist Sinitic text, abbreviated as *Khoá hư lục*.
- (iii) *Tân biên Truyền kỳ mạn lục tăng bổ giải âm tập chú* 新編傳奇漫錄增補解音集註 (Interpretation of Legendary Tales: Newly Edited Collection with Supplementary Explanations and Pronunciation Annotations), a bilingual Vietnamese-Literary Sinitic text, abbreviated as *Truyền kỳ mạn lục*.
- (iv) *Thiên Nam ngữ lục* 天南語錄 (Records of Southern Language), Monolingual Vietnamese.

These texts, spanning from the 13th to the 17th centuries, provide a foundation for analyzing the functional vocabulary and evolving linguistic features in Vietnamese, with a particular focus on the use and grammaticalization of perfect markers.

3.1.2 Dating of historical texts

Determining the dates of these Nôm texts is crucial for understanding the historical stages of Vietnamese language development. However, exact dating is often uncertain.

Phật thuyết is generally considered the oldest, with estimates ranging from the late 11th to early 12th century to the 15th century. Scholars such as Hoàng (1999) and Shimizu (2002, 2020) propose a 15th-century origin, while others like Q. H. Nguyễn (2008) and Trần (2011) argue for an earlier date. For this study, we consider a broad range from the 13th to 15th century.

Khoá hư lục is typically dated to the 14th century, as supported by Trần (2012).

Truyền kỳ mạn lục has a debated timeline, with some scholars dating it to the mid-16th century and others suggesting the late 17th century. This study considers a range from the mid-16th to late 17th century.

Thiên Nam ngữ lục is firmly dated to the late 17th century, as noted by researchers such as T. L. Nguyễn (2001, 2006).

3.1.3 Nôm transcription methodology

This study employs both published transliterations from Nôm to Quốc ngữ and direct examination of original Nôm materials, including Literary Sinitic counterparts for bilingual texts, to ensure transcription accuracy. This approach is particularly valuable in addressing inconsistencies, such as the variable use of characters like 𣎵 and 𣎵 to represent *đà* and *đã*. In cases of scholarly disagreement, we adopt a consistent transcription method, interpreting 𣎵 as *đà* and 𣎵 as *đã*. This methodology improves upon prior studies, such as Vũ (2020), which relied exclusively on Quốc ngữ transliterations without consulting the primary Nôm texts. Notably, among the seven texts investigated, *Khóa hư lục* presents significant inconsistency in character usage, posing a unique challenge that we have carefully managed through our transcription approach. Therefore, a defining feature of this study is its direct engagement with primary Nôm sources, setting it apart from previous research. By cross-referencing original Nôm materials with existing transliterations, we address potential inaccuracies inherent in transliteration alone, capturing nuanced details that might otherwise be overlooked. This extra layer of verification enhances the precision of our analysis and contributes to a more reliable understanding of Vietnamese syntactic change.

3.2 Quốc ngữ data

In addition to Nôm texts, this study incorporates Quốc ngữ texts, written in the Latin-based script that was used from the 17th century onwards. Quốc ngữ texts provide insight into the more recent evolution of Vietnamese grammar and allow for comparison with Nôm data to identify continuity and change in the use of aspect markers. The following Quốc ngữ texts were selected:

- (i) *Sách sổ sang chép các việc* [The Book of Recorded Events], abbreviated as *Sách sổ sang*, by Philippe Bình (1822) – Reflects early 19th-century Vietnamese usage.
- (ii) *Thầy Lazaro Phiên* [Father Lazaro Phiên] by Nguyễn Trọng Quản

(1887) – One of the earliest novels written in Quốc ngữ, offering examples of perfect markers in literary prose.

(iii) *Sống mòn* [Living a corroded life] by Nam Cao (1944) – A 20th-century novel providing insights into modern uses of *đã* and *rồi*.

These Quốc ngữ texts bridge historical and modern uses of perfect markers, facilitating a comprehensive diachronic analysis of their evolution. By examining both Nôm and Quốc ngữ sources, this study contextualizes the grammaticalization of perfect markers and explores interactions among *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* over time.

3.3 Summary of data sources

The integration of texts from both Nôm and Quốc ngữ sources aligns with the study's aims to investigate the diachronic development of Vietnamese aspect markers. Nôm texts provide early evidence of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn*, highlighting how these markers functioned in the medieval period, while Quốc ngữ texts reveal their later stages, illustrating how these markers stabilized or evolved into modern Vietnamese.¹ The bilingual Nôm texts further enrich the analysis by offering a comparative perspective with Literary Sinitic, which aids in interpreting grammatical functions, particularly for markers with multiple possible readings.

Text	Script	Date Range	Syllables	Description
<i>Phật thuyết</i>	Sino-Nôm	13th-15th c.	5,423	Bilingual Vietnamese-Chinese Buddhist sutra, earliest Nôm text
<i>Khoá hư lục</i>	Sino-Nôm	14th c.	12,576	Bilingual Vietnamese-Chinese Zen teachings
<i>Truyện kỳ mạn lục</i>	Sino-Nôm	16th-17th c.	44,678	Comprehensive Vietnamese-Chinese bilingual text with narrative accounts
<i>Thiên Nam ngữ lục</i>	Nôm	Late 17th c.	28,205	Monolingual Vietnamese historical verse
<i>Sách số sang</i>	Quốc ngữ	Early 19th c.	62,940	Monolingual Vietnamese prose
<i>Thầy Lazaro Phiên</i>	Quốc ngữ	Late 19th c.	9,596	Earliest Vietnamese novel
<i>Sống mòn</i>	Quốc ngữ	Mid 20th c.	83,825	Modern Vietnamese novel

Table 3 Summary of Vietnamese texts analyzed for the diachronic study of aspect markers

¹ The corpus of *Sách số sang chép các việc* used in this study covers pp. 1–228 (ending partway through p. 228) and pp. 549–597, leaving approximately half of the full text unrepresented. We hope to extend our analysis to the complete text in future research.

The unique contribution of this study lies in its use of primary Nôm texts, a resource often underutilized in Vietnamese linguistics. This approach allows for a more precise historical analysis by examining the original characters and avoiding potential transliteration inconsistencies. The reliance on Nôm texts, along with Quốc ngữ sources, enables this study to address the research questions of how *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* interacted and evolved, providing insights into the broader Perfect Cycle and grammaticalization patterns in Vietnamese and across languages.

4 THE OVERALL OCCURRENCE AND USAGE OF THE THREE PERFECT MARKERS

In keeping with our linguistic-philological approach, Section 4 provides a bird’s-eye view of the quantitative trends of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn*, while Section 5 presents the detailed philological evidence that underpins these generalizations. By first looking at their total occurrences in a variety of texts spanning several centuries, we gain initial insights into the changing dynamics of their usage.

This study analyzes a total of 2762 occurrences of the markers *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* across seven Vietnamese texts from the 13th to the 20th century. Examining the frequency of these markers over time offers preliminary insights into their competition and shifting prominence, even before delving into their specific grammatical functions. For ease of comparison across texts of different lengths, Table 5 separately reports normalized rates (tokens per 1,000 words/characters).

Text	Century	<i>đã</i>	<i>rồi</i>	<i>đoạn</i>	Total	Syllables
<i>Phật thuyết</i>	13th-15th century	25	0	0	25	5,423
<i>Khoá hư lục</i>	14th century	80	27	16	123	12,576
<i>Truyền kỳ mạn lục</i>	16th-17th century	185	33	4	222	44,678
<i>Thiên Nam ngữ lục</i>	Late 17th century	294	31	4	329	28,205
<i>Sách số sang</i>	Early 19th century	547	52	78	677	62,940
<i>Thầy Lazaro Phiên</i>	Late 19th century	114	59	0	173	9,596
<i>Sống mòn</i>	20th century	647	566	0	1213	83,825
Total		1892	768	102	2762	247,243

Table 4 Total occurrences of *đã*, *rồi*, *đoạn* in selected texts

To complement Tables 4–5, Figure 1 visualizes the proportional distribution of the three markers within each text. This graphic view makes it easier to see shifts in relative prominence across periods.

Several notable patterns emerge from these frequencies. First, *đã* is consistently the dominant marker across the corpus. It occurs 1,892 times, ac-

Text	Century	<i>đã</i> /1k	<i>rồi</i> /1k	<i>đoạn</i> /1k	Total/1k
<i>Phật thuyết</i>	13th–15th	4.61	0.00	0.00	4.61
<i>Khoá hư lục</i>	14th	6.36	2.15	1.27	9.78
<i>Truyền kỳ mạn lục</i>	16–17th	4.14	0.74	0.09	4.97
<i>Thiên Nam ngữ lục</i>	Late 17th	10.42	1.10	0.14	11.66
<i>Sách số sang</i>	Early 19th	8.69	0.83	1.24	10.76
<i>Thầy Lazaro Phiên</i>	Late 19th	11.88	6.15	0.00	18.03
<i>Sống mòn</i>	20th	7.72	6.75	0.00	14.47
Corpus total		7.65	3.11	0.41	11.17

Table 5 Normalized rates of *đã*, *rồi*, *đoạn* (tokens per 1,000 words)

counting for 69% of all tokens of the three markers. The normalized figures corroborate this overall prominence (7.65 tokens per 1,000 syllables for the corpus as a whole), even though Figure 1 also makes clear that its relative share narrows in the 20th-century text as *rồi* becomes more frequent.

A second trend is the gradual rise of *rồi*. It is unattested in the earliest text, but becomes attested by the 14th century. However, its frequency remains relatively low and somewhat variable through the 16th–early 19th centuries, before showing a marked increase from the late 19th century onward. Normalized rates reflect this pattern: 2.15 tokens per 1,000 syllables in the 14th-century text, roughly 0.7–1.1 per 1,000 across the 16th–late 17th-century texts, 0.83 per 1,000 in the early 19th-century text, and then ~6–7 per 1,000 in the late 19th- and 20th-century texts. By the 20th century, *rồi* approaches *đã* in frequency, indicating a substantial shift in the distribution of perfect-related marking.

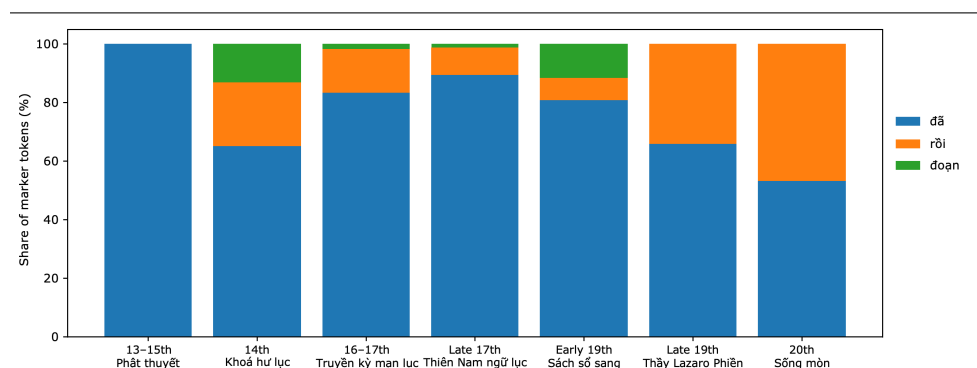


Figure 1 Proportion of *đã*/*rồi*/*đoạn* tokens by text (stacked percentages)

In contrast, *đoạn* remains marginal and ultimately disappears. It accounts for only 102 tokens (4% of the total) and is absent from the late 19th- and 20th-century texts. Even at its peak, its normalized rate is modest – about 1.24 tokens per 1,000 words/characters in the early 19th-century text – suggesting a limited functional foothold. Its rapid decline is consistent with a competitive scenario in which overlap with the expanding functions of *rồi* (and the entrenched *đã*) contributed to its obsolescence.

These initial frequency data provide a broad view of the dynamic relationships among the three markers across centuries. In the next section, we move from frequency patterns to functional distribution, examining how each marker’s grammatical roles and syntactic positions shift across periods.

5 THE COMPETITION OF THE THREE MARKERS FROM THE 13TH TO THE 20TH CENTURY

This section examines the diachronic evolution and competitive dynamics of the three Vietnamese markers *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* across seven texts representing distinct historical periods. This section is organized as a stage-by-stage analysis across seven texts (Stages 1–7), moving chronologically from the 13th century to the mid-20th century. For each stage, we first summarize the distribution of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* in a table (counts by function), and then illustrate the key functions with representative annotated examples from the text. This structure is designed to make the competitive dynamics transparent: [Stage 1](#) establishes *đã* as the sole marker; [Stage 2](#) introduces *rồi* and *đoạn*; [Stages 3–5](#) trace their functional differentiation and peak competition (including the emergence of VP-final perfect marking); and [Stages 6–7](#) document the disappearance of *đoạn* and the stabilization of the modern *đã*–*rồi* system.

5.1 Stage 1: *Phật thuyết* (13th-15th century)

The *Phật Thuyết* text, the earliest known Nôm document, provides a valuable perspective on the Vietnamese grammatical landscape from the 13th to 15th centuries. Structured in the *giải âm* format, it presents Buddhist Chinese sentences alongside their Vietnamese translations, enabling direct comparisons between the two languages. This parallel structure offers early evidence of Vietnamese syntactic structures and grammatical markers, shedding light on the specific functions of these markers – especially when compared with their counterparts in Buddhist Chinese.

To ensure a consistent analysis of the *Phật Thuyết* text, this study employs a character-based transcription approach that carefully addresses the complexities of Nôm character representation. The character 𠬞 is consistently

transcribed as *đã*, while 已 is consistently transcribed as *đã*. In a few instances, the character 訖 is also rendered as *đã*. In particular, when the two markers appear together in the form 訖訖, we transcribe this sequence as *đã đã*, thereby preserving the distinctions between them. Among the 25 occurrences of *đã*, 22 are represented by 已 and 3 by 訖; in 2 of the latter cases, the sequence 訖訖 appears, which we interpret as *đã đã*. This approach allows for a more precise analysis of marker usage, capturing subtle distinctions that might be missed in existing transliterations, such as those by [Hòang \(1999\)](#).

Among these instances, *đã* functions as a verb meaning ‘to finish’ in 5 cases and as a perfect marker in 20 cases. The absence of *rồi* and *đoạn* suggests that *đã* was the primary aspectual marker in this period, holding a unique role without competition from the other two markers. This early predominance of *đã* hints at its foundational place in the development of the Vietnamese aspectual system.

Marker	Verb (finish)	Perfect	Total
<i>đã</i>	5	20	25
<i>rồi</i>	0	0	0
<i>đoạn</i>	0	0	0

Table 6 Occurrences and functions of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* in *Phật Thuyết* (13th-15th century)

In five of the 25 identified cases, *đã* functions as a verb meaning ‘to finish’. This reflects its early lexical role, which predates its full grammaticalization as a perfect aspect marker. For example, in the following sentence, *đã* translates the Literary Sinitic verb 訖, meaning ‘to finish’, and thus retains its original lexical meaning.

(5)	22a1	嫁	事	已	訖	<i>Chinese original</i>
		marriage	matter	already	finish	
		役	舸	它	已	<i>Nôm translation</i>
		việc	gả	đã	đã	<i>Quốc ngữ</i>
		matter	marriage	already	finish	
		‘The marriage (arrangement) has already been finished.’				

The majority of occurrences – 20 out of 25 – illustrate *đã* in its role as a preverbal perfect marker. In these instances, *đã* signals that the situation or its initial stage has been completed, with implications for the present. Syntactically, *đã* appears in the default preverbal TAM₁ position, the canonical slot for Vietnamese higher aspectual particles, i.e., above the VP and before the lexical predicate. A prime example of this function is found in the sentence below.

- (6) 21a2-3 父 母 年 邁、形貌 衰羸 Chinese
 father mother age old appearance emaciated
 盎 那 歲 乜 茶、 Nôm translation
 áng nà tuổi đã già, Quốc ngữ
 father mother age PRF old
 膠 要 癢 癩
 da yếu gầy guộc
 skin weak thin RED
 ‘Father and mother got old and the appearance is weak and thin.’

Here, *đã* precedes *già* ‘to age’, indicating that the process of aging has begun and remains relevant in the present context. Crucially, the Literary Sinitic source is a bare predication (年邁 ‘age-old’) without an overt perfect marker; the Vietnamese translation’s insertion of *đã* therefore contributes an ‘already/has become’ (current-relevance) meaning rather than a simple descriptive state. *Tuổi đã già* foregrounds a change-of-state/result reading (‘has already grown old’), consistent with a perfect interpretation. This exemplifies *đã* fulfilling its primary grammatical role as a perfect aspect marker during this period.

To sum up, in the 13th-15th century, *đã* was the sole perfect marker, serving both as a lexical verb (‘to finish’) and as a pre-verbal perfect marker. This dual function reflects an early stage in its grammaticalization path, transitioning from a concrete lexical meaning to a more abstract grammatical role. The absence of *rồi* and *đoạn* indicates that *đã* faced no competition, establishing it as the foundational marker of perfect aspect in early Vietnamese. This period marks the initial phase of the grammaticalization process.

In the next sections, we will explore how *rồi* and *đoạn* gradually enter the aspectual system and how they interact with *đã* across different historical periods, shaping the evolution of Vietnamese aspect marking over time.

5.2 Stage 2: The evolution of perfectivity in the 14th century (*Khóa hư lục*)

The 14th century, as represented by the *Khóa hư lục* text, marks a crucial period in the evolution of Vietnamese perfect markers, with *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* appearing together for the first time. This subsection first introduces the corpus and transcription protocol and summarizes the functional distribution of the three markers (Table 7); detailed interpretations are then supported with textual examples in Sections 5.2.1–5.2.3, before being synthesized in Section 5.2.4.

This period highlights the early stages of their functional differentiation, as each marker begins to specialize in unique syntactic and aspectual func-

tions, setting the foundation for their separate developmental paths within the Vietnamese functional spine.

To ensure consistency in our analysis of the *Khóa hư lục* text, we utilize a character-based transcription method that thoroughly navigates the complexities of Nôm characters. Following the method used for *Phật thuyết*, we consistently transcribe 𣎵 as *đã* and 𣎵 as *đã*, with one additional instance of 𣎵 also rendered as *đã*. Across the text, we identify a total of 80 occurrences of *đã*, with 79 instances written as 𣎵 and one as 𣎵. While our approach aligns with certain transcription conventions, we intentionally depart from [Trần \(2012\)](#) in cases where 𣎵 is inconsistently transcribed as both *đã* and *đã*. By rendering 𣎵 consistently as *đã*, we aim to enhance clarity and coherence in the analysis, allowing for a more precise understanding of this marker’s grammatical role.

Marker	Verb (finish)	Immediately postverbal			Total
		telic/completive marker	Perfect	Conjunction	
<i>đã</i>	1	0	79	0	80
<i>rồi</i>	3	19	0	5	27
<i>đoạn</i>	14	2	0	0	16
Total	18	21	78	6	123

Table 7 Occurrences and functions of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* in *Khóa hư lục* (14th century)

In the following sections, we will explore the specific grammatical functions of each marker in greater detail to observe how their roles evolve and interact during this period.

5.2.1 The role of *đã*

In *Khóa hư lục*, it is found that in one instance, *đã* continues to function as a verb meaning ‘to finish’, consistent with its earlier role in *Phật thuyết*, where it signaled the completion of an action. In the following example, *đã* translates the Buddhist Chinese verb 已 (*yǐ*), preserving its function as a lexical verb:

(7)	37a	發願	已		Chinese original
		prayer	finish		
		發願	𣎵	未	Nôm translation
		Phát nguyện	<i>đã</i>	<i>rồi</i>	Quốc ngữ
		prayer	finish	COMPL	
		‘The prayer is finished.’			

Here, *đã* operates as a standalone verb, marking the completion of the prayer, while the addition of *rồi* as a postverbal telic marker reinforces the finality of

the action. At this point, readers may wonder why *rồi* in *đã rồi* is not treated as a verb meaning ‘to finish’, with *đã* serving as a preverbal perfect marker. Examining Table 7, we can see that *rồi* is predominantly used as a postverbal telic marker, reinforcing its function as a marker of action completion rather than as a primary verb. Notably, in the 14 instances of the Chinese verb 已 (*yǐ*) in the text, *đã* is used to translate *yǐ* in only one instance, while *đoạn* translates it in the remaining 13 cases, with *rồi* consistently following the main verb in each case. Furthermore, it can be seen later that *rồi* is used to translate other Chinese verbs such as 畢 (*bì*) and 尽 (*jìn*), both of which mean ‘to finish’, but not 已 (*yǐ*). This pattern suggests that *rồi* operates differently from *đã*, serving primarily as a telic marker to reinforce completion rather than as a direct equivalent of *đã* in translating 已 (*yǐ*). Our study offers a unique perspective on this question, distinguishing itself from Vū (2020), where a similar inquiry was raised but left unresolved. By employing a bilingual approach – cross-referencing the original Nôm text with its Buddhist Chinese counterpart – and a frequency-based analysis, we were able to address this issue comprehensively and clarify the nuanced roles of these markers.²

The dominant function of *đã* remains as a pre-verbal perfect marker (79/80 occurrences). In this role, *đã* signals that the action has been completed and has present relevance. This function is illustrated in the following example:

(8)	8b	貌	則	枯	年	則	高	Chinese original
		appearance	TOP	thin	age	TOP	high	
		麵	時	色	瘠			Nôm translation
		Mặt	mũi	thì	đã	gầy,		Quốc ngữ
		appearance	TOP	PRF	thin			
		轡	索	時	色	多		
		tuổi	tác	thì	đã	nhiều		
		age	TOP	PRF	numerous			
		‘The appearance became thin, and the age advanced.’						

In this example, *đã* is used twice in a pre-verbal position, marking the perfect aspect for both clauses. This confirms that *đã* retains its primary role as the marker of linking past process to the present.

² More broadly, we note that Chinese ‘finish/termination’ verbs such as 已, 訖, 畢, and 尽 have been treated in the diachronic literature as part of a wider set of termination/resultative resources that contribute to later aspectual developments in Chinese, including pathways associated with *le* (Jiang 2001, 2007, Wu 2004). We thank a reviewer for this point.

5.2.2 The role of *rồi*

By the 14th century, *rồi* appears 27 times in *Khóa hư lục*, reflecting its growing significance as an aspectual marker. During this period, *rồi* functions as a verb, conjunction, and an immediately post-verbal telic marker, with the post-verbal telic role being its most prominent function.

In 3 out of the 27 instances, *rồi* is used as a verb meaning ‘to finish’:

- (9) 56b 待 於 事 畢 Chinese original
wait at (until) matter finish
徐 俟 旦 六 役 未 Nôm translation
chờ chùng đến lúc việc rồi Quốc ngữ
wait at until when matter finish
‘wait until the time when the matter is finished.’

In this example, *rồi* acts as the main verb, marking the completion of an event. Its use in this position introduces direct competition with *đã* for the verb function, a trend that persists in later periods. While *đã* translates the Chinese verb 已 (*yǐ*), *rồi* is used to render other Chinese verbs such as 畢 (*bì*) and 尽 (*jǐn*), both of which convey the meaning ‘to finish’. This distinction in usage suggests a developing specialization between *đã* and *rồi*, with *rồi* becoming more associated with the completion of specific actions.

Similar to *đã*, *rồi* also serves as a conjunction, linking events in sequence; however, it appears more frequently in this role than *đã* (with *đã* appearing once as a conjunction compared to *rồi*’s five instances). This usage is illustrated in the following example:

- (10) 24a 李 長 者 解 經 而 天 厨 送 食
lý elder explain sutra then heaven kitchen send food
Chinese original
長 者 戶 李 訥 經 未 Nôm translation
trưởng giả họ Lý nói kinh rồi Quốc ngữ
elder family Ly talk sutra CONJ
麻 天 仙 迢 厨 食 旦
mà thiên tiên đưa trù thực đến.
and heavenly immortal bring kitchen food come
‘The elder from the Ly family explained the sutra, and then the Heavenly immortal brought the kitchen food.’

In this sentence, *rồi* functions as a conjunction equivalent to the Chinese conjunction 而 (*ér*), linking two actions and marking the transition

from one event to the next. This usage highlights *rồi*'s expanding role in narrative sequencing, signaling a shift from one completed action to the next in a sequence of events. Comparable reanalysis processes, where a bound/dependent element develops into an independent discourse/conjunctive device, have been discussed for Japanese (Nakayama & Horiuchi 2021).³

The most common function of *rồi* (19 out of 27 occurrences) in this period is as an immediately post-verbal telic marker, signaling that an action has reached its endpoint. This role becomes increasingly prominent for *rồi* in later periods, as illustrated in the following example:

- | | | | | | | |
|----------|---|------------|------|--------|-------|------------------|
| (11) 49b | 懺悔 | 已 | | | | Chinese original |
| | repentance | finish | | | | |
| | 羅懺悔 | 也 | 段 | 未 | | Nôm translation |
| | là sám hối | đã | đoạn | rồi | | Quốc ngữ |
| | COP | repentance | PRF | finish | COMPL | |
| | 'Repentance has been already finished.' | | | | | |

In this sentence, all three markers co-occur, each fulfilling a distinct function: *đã* serves as a preverbal perfect marker, *đoạn* acts as the main verb, and *rồi* immediately follows *đoạn* as a telic/completive marker, indicating that the action of repentance has reached full completion. Crucially, the TAM₂ classification here is based on syntax: *rồi* is strictly V-adjacent, attaching inside the VP as a completion marker. In Stage 2 this TAM₂ use is strongly concentrated in result-oriented expressions – above all the recurrent *đoạn rồi/đã đoạn rồi* pattern (e.g., (9) and multiple tokens in the corpus). This concentration suggests that, at this stage, *rồi*'s completive function is constructionally anchored in a small set of highly conventionalized completion/result expressions, rather than functioning as a freely productive postverbal marker across all VP types. Nevertheless, the use of *rồi* as a post-verbal telic marker highlights its role in marking the finality of actions, a function that becomes more pronounced in later stages of Vietnamese.

5.2.3 The role of *đoạn*

In the *Khoá hư lục*, *đoạn* appears 16 times, primarily functioning as a verb meaning 'to finish' and occasionally as an immediately post-verbal telic marker. Compared to *đã* and *rồi*, *đoạn* has a more restricted role, yet it still plays a significant part in the grammatical system of the 14th century.

³ We thank a reviewer for this discussion.

In 14 of these 16 instances, *đoạn* is used as the main verb meaning ‘to finish’, often translating the Chinese verb 已 (*yǐ*), as shown in the following example:

- (12) 42b 勸請 已 *Chinese original*
 transfer.of.a.deity finish
 羅 勸 請 已 段 未 *Nôm translation*
 là khuyển xin đã **đoạn** rồi *Quốc ngữ*
 COP transfer.of.a.deity PRF finish COMPL
 ‘The transfer of a deity has been already finished.’

Again, in this example, we observe *đã đoạn rồi* appearing together, with each marker serving a distinct function: *đã* acts as a preverbal perfect marker, *đoạn* serves as the main verb meaning ‘to finish’, and *rồi* functions as an immediately postverbal telic marker, emphasizing that the action has reached completion. This usage exemplifies the nuanced interplay between these markers in marking different aspects of completion.

In addition to its role as a verb, *đoạn* also functions as a post-verbal telic marker in some cases, directly competing with *rồi*. However, unlike *rồi* and *đã*, *đoạn* at this stage does not act as a conjunction. The following example demonstrates both *đoạn* and *rồi* in the same sentence, each fulfilling a different role:

- (13) 56b 喫 了 索 来 *Chinese original*
 eat PRT demand come
 喫 段 未 吏 隊 喫 女 *Nôm translation*
 ăn **đoạn** rồi lại đòi ăn nữa *Quốc ngữ*
 eat COMPL CONJ again demand eat more
 ‘Finished eating, and then demanded to eat more.’

In this example, *đoạn* marks the completion of the action ‘finished eating’, while *rồi* serves as a conjunction, linking it to the subsequent action. The concurrent use of *đoạn* and *rồi* underscores their overlapping yet distinct roles, illustrating the early stages of functional differentiation between the markers. Unlike *đã* and *rồi*, *đoạn* has not yet developed a conjunction function in this period. The competition among *đã*, *đoạn*, and *rồi* during this time reflects their evolving roles in marking aspect and sequencing within Vietnamese grammar.

5.2.4 The transition from Stage 1 to Stage 2

Stage 2 marks the first point in the corpus where *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* co-occur and begin to form a differentiated system. In Stage 1, *đã* alone carried the main burden of expressing perfectivity, while also retaining occasional lexical uses. In *Khóa hư lục*, the system becomes structurally richer: the three forms overlap in meaning ('completion') but begin to distribute across distinct syntactic positions and functions, creating the conditions for later competition and specialization.

The clearest continuity from Stage 1 is the persistence of *đã* as the default preverbal marker associated with perfect readings. With 79 instances used as a perfect marker (Table 7), *đã* remains the most stable exponent of perfectivity in this period, even while still showing residual lexical behavior.

By contrast, *rồi* enters the system with its center of gravity in the postverbal VP domain. Its most frequent role is as an immediately postverbal telic/completive marker (19 instances), and it also appears as a lexical verb and as a conjunction. Taken together, these distributions foreshadow a pathway in which a postverbal completion element becomes increasingly available for event sequencing, eventually supporting later developments toward VP-final perfect marking and independent conjunctive use.

Finally, *đoạn* remains primarily lexical at this stage, functioning overwhelmingly as a verb meaning 'finish' (14/16 instances) and only marginally as a postverbal telic marker. Unlike *đã* and *rồi*, it does not yet participate in clause-linking in this text, indicating a more restricted functional profile despite its high frequency as a verb (notably in translating 已 *yǐ*).

Overall, the transition from Stage 1 to Stage 2 can be characterized as a shift from a single dominant marker to an incipient division of labor: *đã* stabilizes as the preverbal perfect marker, while *rồi* and *đoạn* populate the verbal and postverbal completion domain with different emphases. This early differentiation sets up the later competitive dynamics observed in subsequent stages, where *rồi* expands its grammatical roles and *đoạn* will either diversify or recede under functional overlap.

5.3 Stage 3: *Truyện Kì Mạn Lục* (16th-17th century)

In the third stage of this diachronic analysis of Vietnamese perfect markers, *Truyện Kì Mạn Lục* (representing the 16th–17th centuries) provides valuable insights into the evolving functions of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn*. By consistently transcribing the Nôm characters 𠵿 as *đã* and 𠵿 as *đã*, we identify 185 occurrences of *đã*, 33 occurrences of *rồi*, and only 4 occurrences of *đoạn*, differing slightly from the findings of T. L. Nguyễn (2001).

Marker	Verb (finish)	Completive	Perfect/Past	Past only	Conjunction	Total
<i>đã</i>	3	0	168	6	8	185
<i>rồi</i>	16	12	0	0	5	33
<i>đoạn</i>	4	0	0	0	0	4
Total	23	12	168	6	13	222

Table 8 Occurrences and functions of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* in *Truyện Kì Mạn Lục* (16th-17th century)

In the following sections, we will explore the specific grammatical roles of each marker in greater depth to understand how their functions evolve and interact during this period.

5.3.1 The role of *đã*

Negation provides an important diagnostic for Vietnamese TAM: in many analyses, preverbal *đã* shows a stronger tendency toward past-tense readings in negative environments (e.g., when it scopes above sentential negators), whereas affirmative contexts more readily allow a perfect/current-relevance interpretation. This study adopts this diagnostic as one criterion for tracking the diachronic behavior of the markers (cf. [Trinh 2005](#), [Duffield 2013](#), [Phan 2013, 2023](#)).

This stage marks the first appearance of *đã* in negative sentences, where it precedes sentential negators. In 6 instances, *đã* occurs higher than the negation marker *chẳng*, marking past tense.

- (14) V3.18a 彷徨 欲 反 已 無 及 矣 Chinese
wander desire return already NEG in.time SFP
徘徊 悶 返 吏 Nôm translation
bồi hồi muốn trở lại, Quốc ngữ
wander desire return again
𢆏 拯 及 丕
đã chẳng kịp vậy
PST NEG in.time SFP
‘wander and desire to return back, but could not make it.’

In this example, *đã* marks the past tense of a negated event, indicating that the action occurred in the past but lacks current relevance.

By contrast, in affirmative environments – where *đã* is not forced to scope above negation – the same preverbal position more readily supports a perfect reading with present relevance, alongside a possible past interpretation depending on discourse context.

In affirmative sentences, *đã* continues to function primarily as a pre-verbal perfect marker, signaling the completion of an action, now with an additional past tense reading. In this context, *đã* can be interpreted either as a past marker (indicating that the action took place in the past without relevance to the present) or as a perfect marker (suggesting the action has past relevance that still holds).⁴

- (15) V1.3a 項 王 已 先 在 坐 *Chinese original*
 Hang king already before exist sit
 項 王 髒 乜 蚱 於 帶 *Nôm*
 Hạng Vương trước **đã** ngồi ở đây *Quốc ngữ*
 Hang king before PST/PRF sit at there
 ‘King Hang sat there before.’ (Past)
 ‘King Hang has sat there before.’ (Perfect)

In this period, *đã* appears in 3 instances as a main verb meaning ‘to finish’, preserving its role from earlier stages when it functioned as a standalone verb.

- (16) V1.22b 瑟 樽 不 療 貧 *Chinese original*
 zither barrel NEG treat poor
 丐 彈 丐 埕 拯 *Nôm translation*
 cái đàn cái nệm chẳng *Quốc ngữ*
 CLF zither CLF barrel NEG
 乜 事 苦
đã sự khó
 finish matter poor
 ‘Zithers and barrels do not end poverty.’

In 8 instances, *đã* functions as a conjunction, indicating the sequence of events or the passage of time.

⁴ For a more detailed analysis of the duality of *đã* between past and perfect readings, see [Trinh \(2005\)](#), [Duffield \(2013\)](#), and [Phan \(2013, 2023\)](#), although these studies focus on contemporary Vietnamese data.

- (17) V1.59a 已 而 風 晴 浪 帖 *Chinese*
 after that wind clear up wave calm down
 也 麻 飢 淨 滂 朗 *Nôm*
 đã mà gió tạnh sóng lặng *Quốc ngữ*
 after that wind clear up wave calm down
 ‘after that the wind settled and the waves calmed.’

In these examples, *đã* lacks independent verbal behavior in context and patterns distributionally with other temporal linking uses in the text. *Đã* links two clauses, marking the completion of one action before the onset of the next. These functions of *đã* as a verb and conjunction carry over from previous stages, showing continuity in its syntactic and semantic roles.

5.3.2 The role of *rồi*

During this period, *rồi* appears 33 times in the *Truyện Kì Mạn Lục* text, maintaining its functions as a verb meaning ‘to finish’, a post-verbal telic marker, and a conjunction. These roles illustrate the marker’s evolving prominence in marking completion and sequencing actions.

In 16 instances, *rồi* functions as a verb meaning ‘to finish’.

- (18) V1.72b 歌 竟 生 歔歔 泣 下, *Chinese original*
 song finish arise sob weep down
 分 手 而 歸
 part hand then return
 歌 皮 未 了 仁 者 *Nôm translation*
 ca vừa rồi người Nhân Giả *Quốc ngữ*
 song just finish guy Nhân Giả
 味 啜 哭 紗 涖 齟 分 搥 麻 衛
 sùi sụt khóc sa nước mắt phân tay mà về
 sob cry down tears part hand and return
 ‘No sooner had the song ended than the man named Nhân Giả sobbed, wept, and parted, then returned.’

Here, *rồi* functions as the main verb, translating the Chinese verb 竟 (*jìng*), emphasizing its role as ‘to finish’.

In 12 occurrences, *rồi* serves as an immediately post-verbal telic marker, denoting the natural conclusion of an action.

- (19) V1.65a 生 讀 訖 懊惱 移 時 *Chinese*
 student read finish depressed pass time
 皚 仁 者 讀 未 *Nôm translation*
 người Nhân Giả đọc rồi, *Quốc ngữ*
 person Nhân Giả read COMPL
 煩 惱 戈 蔑 除
 phiền não quá một giờ
 depressed over one hour
 ‘The man named Nhân Giả, having finished reading, was
 depressed for over an hour.’

Here, *rồi* follows the verb *đọc* ‘to read’, signaling the completion of the reading action. This usage highlights *rồi*’s role in marking the natural conclusion of events.

In 5 instances, *rồi* functions as a conjunction, linking sequential events and signaling transitions between actions.

- (20) V1.31a 藥 卿 曰 妾 歿 後 *Chinese original*
 Nhị Khanh tell I die after
 上帝 憫 其 非命
 Supreme.Being pity that die an unnatural death
 娘 藥 卿 浪 *Nôm translation*
 nàng Nhị Khanh rằng: *Quốc ngữ*
 madam Nhi Khanh tell
 妾 自 秩 未 衛 薶
 ‘thiếp từ mất rồi về sau
 I from die CONJ return later
 希 上 帝 傷 所 拯 沛 命
 vua thượng đế thương thừa chẳng phải mệnh,
 king Supreme.Being pity that NEG right destiny
 ‘Madam Nhi Khanh said, “Since I died, afterward, the Supreme
 Being pitied my unnatural destiny.”’

In this example, *rồi* connects the event of her death to the subsequent expression of pity, marking a temporal transition. It is used to translate the Chinese conjunction 後 (*hòu*), which denotes ‘after’ or ‘subsequently’, emphasizing the chronological link between the two actions. That is, in this period, *rồi* retains the same core functions as in the previous stage.

5.3.3 The role of *đoạn*

By the 16th–17th century, *đoạn* had significantly declined in frequency, appearing only 4 times in the *Truyện Kì Mạn Lục* text. In all instances, *đoạn* functions as a verb, retaining its earlier role of marking the completion of an action.

- (21) V1.49a 言 未 竟 見 Chinese original
 speak not.yet finish see
 一 人 衣 冠 甚 偉
 one person clothes cap quite good
 呐 睹 段 体 Nôm translation
 nói chứa **đoạn**, thấy Quốc ngữ
 speak not.yet finish see
 蔑 寻 襖 帽 極 宰
 một người áo mũ cực tốt,
 one person clothes cap extremely good
 ‘He had not yet finished speaking when he saw a person with extremely fine clothes and a cap.’

In this example, *đoạn* serves as the main verb and is used to translate the Chinese verb 竟 (*jìng*), which means ‘to finish’ or ‘to complete’. The phrase *chứa đoạn* ‘not yet finished’ conveys the interruption of the action, emphasizing that the speaking was incomplete.

This usage of *đoạn* highlights its continued function as a verb marking completion, though its frequency and scope remain limited compared to *đã* and *rồi*, which exhibit broader grammaticalization trajectories during this period.

5.3.4 Conclusion of Stage 3

Stage 3 consolidates a clearer division of labor among *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn*, while also sharpening the competitive asymmetries that will shape later stages. In *Truyện kì mạn lục*, *đã* overwhelmingly occupies the preverbal domain as the main exponent of perfect/past meanings (168 tokens), and it also begins to show a more transparent split between readings with present relevance and those that are purely past, particularly in environments involving negation. At the same time, the attested clause-linking uses indicate that *đã* is not confined to aspect alone but is already extending into discourse-related functions, even if such uses remain comparatively limited.

Rồi continues to profile as the completion-oriented member of the system. Its strongest foothold remains in the VP domain: it appears frequently both

as a lexical verb ‘finish’ and as an immediately postverbal telic/completive marker, with an additional set of tokens functioning as a conjunction for sequencing. Taken together, these patterns suggest that *rôi* is consolidating a pathway that keeps it closely tied to event structure and narrative progression, rather than competing directly with *đã* in the preverbal perfect/past slot.

By contrast, *đoạn* is now clearly receding. It survives only in a handful of tokens and remains restricted to the lexical verb function, without evidence in this text for the broader functional diversification visible for the other two markers. This sharp reduction in frequency, alongside the expansion of *rôi* in completion-related contexts, foreshadows *đoạn*’s later marginalization and eventual disappearance from the productive system.

Overall, Stage 3 represents a transitional configuration that anticipates the modern system: *đã* strengthens its association with preverbal perfect/past meanings and begins to participate more visibly in higher-clausal functions, while *rôi* consolidates its VP-based completion and sequencing profile. The growing functional distance between these two markers, combined with the weakening of *đoạn*, sets the stage for intensified competition and further specialization in subsequent periods.

5.4 Stage 4: *Thiên Nam ngữ lục* (late 17th century)

In the fourth stage of this analysis, *Thiên Nam ngữ lục* presents a linguistic environment marked by the consolidation and further evolution of the markers *đã*, *rôi*, and *đoạn*. By consistently transcribing the Nôm characters 𠬞 as *đã* and 𠬞 as *đã*, our approach differs slightly from that of T. L. Nguyễn (2006). We identify 294 occurrences of *đã*, 31 occurrences of *rôi*, and 4 occurrences of *đoạn*, reflecting the continued competition and shifting dynamics among these markers.

A remark regarding our transcription of *Thiên Nam ngữ lục* is warranted. The poetic nature of this text introduces unique transcription challenges, particularly regarding the character 𠬞, which we consistently transcribe as *đã*. In 23 instances, however, the character 𠬞 appears in grammatical contexts where it could plausibly correspond to *đã*. These ambiguities arise from the text’s adherence to traditional Vietnamese poetic metrics, known as *nhất tam ngũ bất luận, nhị tứ lục phân minh*. According to this pattern, the first, third, and fifth syllables allow tonal flexibility, while the second, fourth, and sixth syllables must exhibit contrasting tones (level versus oblique). In all 23 ambiguous cases, 𠬞 appears in even positions (second, fourth, or sixth syllables), where the tonal contrast would align with its transcription as *đã*. Despite this poetic constraint, the grammatical context in these instances suggests that these occurrences could function as *đã*. Nevertheless, to ensure methodological con-

sistency, we adhere to our transcription protocol and exclude these cases from the final count of *đã*. It is important to emphasize, however, that including these cases as *đã* would further solidify its already prominent role in this text.

The data from *Thiên Nam Ngữ Lục* reveals significant trends in the grammaticalization of these markers, as summarized in Table 9 below.

Marker	Verb (finish)	Immediately postverbal telic/ completive	VP-final Perfect	Past/ Perfect	Past	Conj	Clause- final 'First'	Total
<i>đã</i>	0	0	0	291	1	0	2	294
<i>rồi</i>	8	5	6	0	0	12	0	31
<i>đoạn</i>	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	4
Total	9	6	6	291	1	14	2	329

Table 9 Occurrences and functions of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* in *Thiên Nam Ngữ Lục* (late 17th century)

In the following sections, we will examine the specific grammatical functions of each marker in detail to trace their evolving roles during this stage.

5.4.1 The role of *đã*

In *Thiên Nam Ngữ Lục*, *đã* predominantly (291 out of 294 cases) functions as a pre-verbal dual marker of perfect aspect and past tense. The following example demonstrates its typical use:

- (22) 1108 天 地 已 証 鬼 神 見 知
 Trời đất **đã** chứng, quỷ thần kiến tri
 heaven earth PST/PRF witness devil god see know
 'The heavens and earth have borne witness; ghosts and spirits
 have seen and known.'
 OR: 'The heavens and earth bore witness; ghosts and spirits saw
 and knew.'

Here, *đã* precedes the verb *chứng* 'to witness', marking the action as completed, with interpretations possible in either the past tense or as a perfect aspect indicating present relevance.

As noted above, negation provides a useful diagnostic in Vietnamese TAM: when *đã* scopes above a sentential negator, the resulting configuration strongly favors a past-tense interpretation over a perfect/current-relevance reading. In one instance, *đã* appears before the negation marker *chẳng*, highlighting its shift toward functioning as a more general past tense marker.

- (23) 2374 干 尼 缶 拯 𠂇 牢 塊 命
 cơn này **đã** chẳng làm sao khỏi mình.
 pain this PST NEG do how out.of self
 ‘This pain did not leave me by any means.’

Here, *đã* marks a past event in a negative construction (*chẳng*), emphasizing that the action occurred in the past without current relevance.

Notably, *đã* does not appear as a conjunction in this text, which may indicate that this function had largely faded or become obsolete by the late 17th century. However, *đã* appears in 2 instances clause-finally, marking the sequence of events with a meaning akin to ‘first’.

- (24) 718 香 花 供 缶 官 軍 蓮 唐
 hương hoa cúng **đã**, quan quân lên đường.
 incense flower offer first govt.forces go.up road
 ‘Incense and flowers having been offered first, then the government forces departed.’

In this case, *đã* appears clause-finally, marking the action of offering incense and flowers as a prerequisite for the subsequent event (the government forces leaving). This usage reflects an evolving role for *đã* in denoting sequential actions.

5.4.2 The role of *rồi*

Rồi most frequently functions as a conjunction, appearing in 12 out of 31 instances, where it marks a transition between two events.

- (25) 2905 未 祐 相 地 山 川
rồi xem tướng địa sơn xuyên
 CONJ look appearance land mountain river
 ‘Then physiognomically judge the land and the landscapes.’

In this example, *rồi* is used to link events in a coherent narrative flow.

Rồi continues to act as a verb meaning ‘to finish’ in 8 instances, maintaining its function from earlier stages.

- (26) 4701 卅 辭 未 役 鬢 喪
 ba năm **rồi** việc tóc tang,
 three years finish CLF mourning
 ‘Three years have passed in mourning.’

Here, *rồi* functions as the main verb, signifying the completion of the mourning period.

In 5 instances, *rồi* acts as an immediately postverbal telic marker, directly following the verb to denote the completion of an action.

- (27) 3602 乱 未 乙 覓 治 歐 典 晷
 loạn rồi ắt thấy trị âu đến ngày
 disorder COMPL surely see govern maybe come day
 ‘After disorder surely comes a day of governance.’

In this sentence, *rồi* follows *loạn* ‘to disorder’, marking the completion of the disorder and setting the stage for the next event.

The most notable innovation in this period is the emergence of *rồi* as a VP-final perfect marker, appearing in 6 instances.

- (28) 1206 外 藩 屯 隊 上 邦 恩 未
 ngoài biên đã đội thượng bang ơn rồi
 out border PST/PRF put upper region favor PRF
 ‘At the border, they (have) placed the favor of the upper region already.’

In this example, *rồi* follows the verb phrase *đội thượng bang ơn*, reinforcing the completion and current relevance of the action. Notably, in 3 of these 6 instances (50%), *rồi* co-occurs with *đã*, where *đã* serves as a pre-verbal perfect marker (ambiguous between perfect and past), and *rồi* occupies the VP-final position, marking unambiguously perfect aspect.

This stage represents a significant development in the Vietnamese aspectual system, as it is the first time we observe a dual system of perfect marking: *đã* in the preverbal position and *rồi* in the VP-final position. This layered structure introduces a more nuanced approach to aspect marking, with *rồi* increasingly specializing in unambiguous perfect marking, while *đã* retains its dual role of perfect and past tense.

5.4.3 The role of *đoạn*

By the late 17th century, *đoạn* is in significant decline, appearing only 4 times in *Thiên Nam ngữ lục*. Interestingly, during this period, *đoạn* develops a new function as a conjunction, marking transitions between events. Of the 4 occurrences, *đoạn* functions as a conjunction in 2 cases.

- (29) 4595 段 連 催 買 時 森
 đoạn liền thôi mới ngày rằm
 CONJ next time just day 15th
 ‘Then comes just the right time of the 15th day of a lunar month.’

In one case, *đoạn* is part of the idiomatic expression *đoạn trường*, conveying emotional suffering rather than functioning as an aspectual marker.

- (30) 4514 惹 鬧 麻 極 慟 車 斷 腸
 lòng nào mà chẳng xót xa đoạn trường
 heart which CONJ NEG deplore painful
 ‘What heart wouldn’t deplore and feel such deep pain?’

Here, *đoạn* does not mark grammatical aspect but is embedded in the compound *đoạn trường*, meaning ‘heart-wrenching sorrow’, emphasizing intense emotional pain. This suggests an additional, non-aspectual trajectory for *đoạn*, which falls outside the focus of the present study.

In one instance, *đoạn* retains its older function as an immediately post-verbal telic marker, indicating the completion of an action.

- (31) 1097 說 段 江 使 金 龜
 thốt đoạn giang sứ kim quy
 speak COMPL river envoy gold turtle
 ‘Having finished speaking, a gold turtle – envoy of the river [...].’

In this example, *đoạn* follows *thốt* ‘to speak’, signaling that the action of speaking has been completed.

5.4.4 Conclusion of Stage 4

Stage 4 provides the first clear evidence for a structurally layered perfect system, while also sharpening the asymmetries among the three competing forms. The distribution in Table 9 shows that *đã* is now strongly entrenched as a preverbal marker with a dual perfect/past profile. In *Thiên Nam ngữ lục*, it overwhelmingly marks past/perfect readings and only marginally appears as pure past in negative environments. At the same time, the absence of conjunctive *đã* in this text suggests that the clause-linking use attested earlier is no longer productive here; instead, the innovation of clause-final *đã* ‘first’ indicates that its functional extension proceeds via a different route, namely into higher-clausal sequencing/prioritization.

In contrast, *rồi* is the locus of innovation within the VP domain. While it continues to appear as a lexical verb and as an immediately postverbal telic/completive marker, the most consequential development in this stage is the emergence of VP-final *rồi* as a perfect marker. This is the first stage in which Vietnamese offers two overt perfect-marking positions in the same system: preverbal *đã*, which remains compatible with both past and perfect readings, and VP-final *rồi*, which supplies an unambiguous perfect/result reading. The frequent use of *rồi* as a conjunction further reinforces its profile as an event-sequencing device, bridging aspectual completion and discourse linkage.

đoạn, by comparison, is already peripheral. Its very low frequency is consistent with an ongoing decline, yet it displays a limited attempt at functional diversification: alongside residual uses as a verb and a telic/completive marker, it appears as a conjunction in a small number of tokens. The coexistence of this conjunctive use with the idiomatic *đoạn trường* also suggests an incipient split between grammatical and lexicalized trajectories, with the latter becoming increasingly salient.

Taken together, Stage 4 marks a pivotal reconfiguration. The system begins to crystallize around a division in which preverbal *đã* anchors past/perfect readings, while VP-final *rồi* emerges as a specialized perfect marker and simultaneously strengthens its discourse-sequencing function. Against this backdrop, *đoạn* survives only at the margins, foreshadowing the later narrowing of competition to the *đã*–*rồi* pair.

5.5 Stage 5: *Sách sổ sang chép các việc* (early 19th century)

The early 19th century, represented by the text *Sách sổ sang chép các việc*, marks significant developments in the evolution of Vietnamese perfect markers. With 547 occurrences of *đã*, 52 occurrences of *rồi*, and 78 occurrences of *đoạn*, this stage showcases the full integration of all three markers, each playing specialized syntactic roles.

In the following sections, we will analyze each marker in detail to explore their functions and interactions during this pivotal period.

5.5.1 The role of *đã*

As expected, *đã* remains the dominant perfect marker in this stage, appearing 547 times. The vast majority of these occurrences reflect its consistent role as a pre-verbal marker of both perfect aspect and past tense. This is demonstrated in the following example:

Marker	Verb (finish)	Immediately postverbal telic/ completive	VP-final Perfect	Past/ Perfect	Conj	Clause- final 'First'	Total
<i>đã</i>	0	0	0	546	0	1	547
<i>rồi</i>	10	2	35	0	5	0	52
<i>đoạn</i>	8	2	9	0	59	0	78
Total	18	4	44	546	64	1	677

Table 10 Occurrences and functions of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* in *Sách sổ sang chép các việc* (early 19th century)

- (32) *đến năm 1774 thì các thầy ở annam mới biết tin*
 until year 1774 TOP PL priest in Annam PRT know news
rằng đã phá dòng ở thành roma.
 COMP PST/PRF destroy monastery in city roma
 'By the year 1774, the priests in Annam had just learned the news
 that the monastery in Rome had been/were destroyed.'

In this example, *đã* precedes the verb *phá* 'to destroy', signaling that the destruction of the monastery was completed in the past.

Interestingly, in one instance, *đã* functions as a sentence-final particle, taking on an imperative meaning that signals the need to 'first' complete an action before proceeding to another.

- (33) *bây giờ hãy còn nói sự dạy con trẻ cho xong đã*
 now let's PRT talk CLF teach children for finish first
 'Now let's first finish talking about teaching children.'

Here, *đã* follows the whole clause, creating an imperative sense of prioritization – emphasizing that one task must be completed before moving on to the next.

5.5.2 The role of *rồi*

Rồi is now firmly established as a VP-final perfect marker, with 35 out of 52 occurrences fulfilling this function.

- (34) *Khi đã tẩm hành hẹ mắm muối rồi, thì xếp vào các chậu đồng*
 When PST/PRF marinate onion chive fish sauce salt PRF, then
 place into PL pots copper
 ‘When it has been/was marinated with onion, chive, fish sauce, and salt, it is then placed into copper pots.’

In this example, *rồi* follows the whole verb phrase, indicating that the marination process is fully completed before proceeding to the next step (placing the mixture into pots). Notably, in 28 out of 35 cases (80%), we observe the sequence *đã ... rồi*, where *rồi* complements *đã* to reinforce the perfect aspect reading.

Rồi retains its function as a verb meaning ‘to finish’ in 10 instances:

- (35) *dẫn rằng khi rồi việc, thì lại phải đưa người lên*
 tell COMP when finish job TOP PRT must bring body up
 ‘It was told that when the job is finished, we must bring the people up.’

Here, *rồi* acts as the main verb, denoting the completion of the task.

In two cases, *rồi* functions as an immediately post-verbal telic/completive marker, signaling the completion of an action directly after the verb:

- (36) *khi nó xem rồi, thì bảo rằng khoá lại*
 when 3SG see COMPL TOP tell COMP close up
 ‘When he had finished viewing, he said, “Close it up.”’

In this example, *rồi* follows *xem* ‘to view’, emphasizing the action’s completion before the next step (giving instructions to close it up).

Finally, *rồi* appears as a conjunction in five instances, marking the sequence or transition between two events:

- (37) *xem đi xem lại các lá khai, cái nào chẳng rồi mới hạ tự*
 see forth see back PL promissory.note CLF which NEG
 CONJ PRT down holy.cross
 ‘Reviewing the promissory notes repeatedly, deciding what should be granted and what should not, and only then lowering the holy cross.’

In this case, *rồi* marks the temporal progression, linking the task of reviewing promissory notes with the subsequent action of lowering the holy cross.

These examples highlight the versatility of *rồi* during this stage, where it serves as a VP-final perfect marker, a verb, a telic marker, and a conjunction, reflecting its growing prominence in the Vietnamese aspectual system.

5.5.3 The role of *đoạn*

By the 19th century, *đoạn* appears 78 times in the text, reflecting its strongest presence in the corpus. This stage highlights *đoạn*'s versatility and evolving roles within the Vietnamese grammatical system. Its primary function in this period is as a conjunction, with 59 out of 78 instances marking transitions between events or actions.

- (38) *hãy để vậy mà ăn cưới 7 ngày cho xong tiệc này,*
 IMP let so and celebrate wed 7 day PRT finish feast this
đoạn sẽ hay.
 CONJ FUT know
 'Just let it be and enjoy the wedding feast for seven days; then, we'll see.'

Here, *đoạn* functions as a conjunction, signaling the conclusion of the wedding feast and marking the transition to the next phase.

Despite this shift, *đoạn* retains its older role as a verb meaning 'to finish' in 8 instances.

- (39) *cho nên tôi phải giữ lời, mà đoạn tết xuân*
 therefore 1sg must keep word and finish Lunar.New.Year
nam, thì tôi liền sang xứ đông.
 south then 1sg immediately go.to region east
 'Therefore, I must keep my promise, and after the Lunar New Year in the southern region, I will immediately journey to the eastern region.'

In this example, *đoạn* serves as the main verb, indicating the completion of the New Year festivities before transitioning to the next event.

In two instances, *đoạn* functions as an immediately post-verbal telic marker, highlighting the completion of an action directly following the verb.

- (40) *phán đoạn điều ấy, thì lại nghiêng mình xuống*
 speak COMPL word that then PRT bow self down
đất mà viết.
 ground and write
 ‘Having finished speaking those words, he bowed down to the
 ground and began writing.’

Here, *đoạn* follows the verb *phán* (‘to speak’), marking the action as completed before the subject transitions to a new activity.

A significant innovation in this period is the emergence of *đoạn* as a VP-final perfect marker, appearing in 9 instances. This marks a shift toward competition with *rồi* in marking perfect aspect.

- (41) *khi đã tang xác đoạn, thì vít vô lại đến mà*
 when PST/PRF bury body PRF then priest PRT come PRT
làm lễ mộ cho người.
 do rite funeral for person
 ‘When the burial has been/was completed, the priest returns to
 perform the funeral rites for the deceased.’

In this example, *đoạn* follows the verb phrase, emphasizing the completion of the burial process. Notably, in 5 out of 9 cases (56%), *đoạn* co-occurs with *đã* in the *đã ... đoạn* sequence, where *đã* serves as the preverbal perfect marker, and *đoạn* reinforces the VP-final perfect aspect.

This period marks a turning point for *đoạn*, as it flourishes in its role as a conjunction, retains its older functions as a verb and telic marker, and develops a new function as a VP-final perfect marker. Importantly, this is the first stage where all three markers (*đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn*) function as perfect markers: *đã* in the preverbal position and *rồi* and *đoạn* in the VP-final position. This development highlights a period of dynamic grammaticalization and specialization, signaling the flourishing period of the perfect aspect in Vietnamese.

5.5.4 Conclusion of Stage 5

Stage 5 represents the point at which the Vietnamese system exhibits its richest layering of completion-related forms, with all three markers simultaneously active but distributed across different functional niches. Table 10 shows that *đã* is by now highly stabilized in the preverbal position as a default exponent of past/perfect readings, with only a marginal continuation of the clause-final ‘first’ use. This strong positional fixation suggests that *đã* has largely

completed its reanalysis into a high functional marker, serving as the backbone of temporal anchoring in this text.

At the same time, the VP-final perfect domain becomes a site of intensified competition. *Rồi* is firmly established as a VP-final perfect marker and continues to be strongly associated with the *đã ... rồi* configuration, indicating that it still often functions as a reinforcing or disambiguating perfect element rather than as a fully autonomous marker. Yet its remaining uses as a verb, telic/completive marker, and conjunction show that it maintains connections to both event structure and discourse sequencing, keeping open multiple grammaticalization pathways.

What distinguishes this stage most sharply from earlier periods is the robust expansion of *đoạn*. Unlike its marginal status in Stage 4, *đoạn* appears frequently here, primarily as a conjunction, and it also develops a VP-final perfect use that brings it into direct rivalry with *rồi* in the same structural slot. This is the first stage in which Vietnamese clearly supports a three-way configuration for perfect marking: preverbal *đã* co-existing with two alternative VP-final perfect elements, *rồi* and *đoạn*. The resulting system is both competitive and functionally stratified: *đã* anchors past/perfect meanings preverbally, while VP-final perfect marking becomes a variable domain in which *rồi* and *đoạn* compete alongside their other discourse and completion-related functions.

In this sense, Stage 5 can be seen as a peak period of morphological and functional redundancy within the Perfect Cycle. The coexistence of multiple markers with overlapping completion semantics provides the preconditions for later resolution, where the system narrows and stabilizes around the more productive forms, ultimately leaving *đã* and *rồi* as the dominant elements in subsequent stages.

5.6 Stage 6: *Thầy Lazaro Phiên* (late 19th century)

This sixth stage of the diachronic analysis examines *Thầy Lazaro Phiên*, a text representative of the late 19th century. During this period, the Vietnamese aspectual system undergoes further refinement, with *đã* and *rồi* continuing to evolve while *đoạn* completely disappears from the textual evidence. In total, the text contains 114 instances of *đã* and 59 instances of *rồi*, but there are no occurrences of *đoạn*. This marks a significant shift in the system, where only two markers, *đã* and *rồi*, remain to fulfill the functions of marking perfect aspect and other roles along the Perfect Cycle.

Marker	Verb (finish)	VP-final Perfect	Past/ Perfect	Past only	Conjunction	Total
<i>đã</i>	0	0	113	1	0	114
<i>rồi</i>	1	31	0	0	27	59
Total	1	31	113	1	27	173

Table 11 Occurrences and functions of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* in *Thầy Lazaro Phiền* (late 19th century)

5.6.1 The role of *đã*

By the late 19th century, *đã* continues to dominate as a marker of both perfect aspect and past tense, appearing 114 times in *Thầy Lazaro Phiền*. Its primary role remains as a pre-verbal perfect/past marker in 113 of these instances as in (42), though one case demonstrates its usage as a simple past tense marker in negative sentences, as in (43).

- (42) ‘*Ôi thôi! Thầy đừng an ủi tôi làm chi? Tội tôi đã lớn lắm!*’
 oh no master don’t comfort me do what sin 1SG PST/PRF
 big very
 ‘Oh no! Master, why do you comfort me? My sins have been/were great.’

- (43) *mà bởi thầy kia đã không hỏi han cho rõ trước*
 but because 3SG that PST NEG ask for clear before
khi bắn lại cho nên chết thì phải chịu;
 when shoot PRT so die then must bear
 ‘But because he didn’t ask clearly before shooting, he had to bear responsibility for the death.’

5.6.2 The role of *rồi*

During this period, *rồi* appears 59 times, primarily functioning as a VP-final perfect marker (31 instances).

- (44) *Dẫu mà tội thầy nặng thế nào thì Chúa cũng*
 even though sin 2SG heavy however then Lord PRT
đã tha cho thầy rồi.
 PST/PRF forgive for 2SG PRF
 ‘Even though your sin is heavy, the Lord has forgiven/forgave you.’

In this example, *rồi* follows the perfect marker *đã*, adding emphasis to the completion of the action (forgiveness). Notably, in 25 out of the 31 instances (80%), *rồi* accompanies *đã* in the sequence *đã ... rồi*.

Rồi retains its roles as a conjunction (27 instances), as in (45) and, less frequently, as a verb meaning ‘to finish’ (1 instance), as in (46).

- (45) *Thầy ấy ngó tôi một chặp rồi mới nói rằng*
 3SG that glance 1SG one moment CONJ PRT say that
 ‘He glanced at me for a moment, then said.’
- (46) *Không ai đoái thương thì tôi quyết lên trên*
 no one show pity then 1SG determine up to
núi, liều mình cho thú dữ ăn đi cho rồi.
 mountain sacrifice myself to beast wild eat PRT for finish
 ‘If no one shows pity, then I am determined to climb the mountain
 and let the wild beasts devour me, just to get it over with.’

In this instance, *rồi* functions as the main verb, meaning ‘to finish’. The phrase *cho rồi* conveys the idea of completing an unpleasant action, emphasizing the finality of the decision.

5.6.3 The absence of *đoạn*

By the late 19th century, *đoạn* has completely disappeared from the textual data. In earlier stages, *đoạn* served as a verb meaning ‘to finish’, a telic marker, and, later, a conjunction. Its absence in *Thầy Lazaro Phiền* reflects its obsolescence and the growing dominance of *đã* and *rồi* as the primary markers of aspect and event sequencing in Vietnamese grammar.

5.6.4 Conclusion of Stage 6

Stage 6 marks a decisive narrowing of the competitive landscape. With *đoạn* no longer attested, the system reduces to a two-marker configuration in which *đã* and *rồi* occupy increasingly complementary domains. The distributions in Table 11 suggest that *đã* is now fully stabilized as a preverbal past/perfect marker, with only a marginal use as pure past in negated environments and no remaining evidence for the earlier conjunctive function. In this text, *đã* thus behaves as a highly grammaticalized element anchored in the clausal spine rather than as a multifunctional item spanning aspect and discourse.

At the same time, *rồi* consolidates two roles that had been developing across earlier stages: VP-final perfect marking and clause-linking sequencing. Its VP-final perfect use is frequent, and the high rate of co-occurrence in the *đã* ... *rồi* pattern indicates that *rồi* still often functions as a reinforcement or disambiguator of the perfect reading, rather than as an entirely independent perfect marker. Alongside this, the robust conjunction use shows that *rồi* remains a key resource for narratively organizing events, while the near-disappearance of its lexical-verb use and the absence of an immediately postverbal telic function point to a contraction of the earlier VP-internal completion profile.

Viewed in terms of the Perfect Cycle, Stage 6 is best characterized as consolidation through specialization. The disappearance of *đoạn* removes a major source of functional overlap, leaving *đã* to anchor past/perfect readings preverbally and *rồi* to supply VP-final perfect reinforcement and discourse sequencing. This streamlined division of labor anticipates the modern configuration observed in Stage 7, where the competition is no longer three-way but instead centers on how the remaining two markers balance reinforcement, independence, and functional range.

5.7 Stage 7: *Sống Mòn* (mid 20th century)

In this final stage of the diachronic analysis, *Sống Mòn*, a text representative of the mid-20th century, reflects a Vietnamese TAM system that has reached a stable configuration. By this point, the aspectual system is clearly dominated by two markers – *đã* and *rồi* – with *đoạn* having completely disappeared from usage. This stage highlights the consolidation of functions for *đã* and *rồi* and their complementary roles along the Perfect cycle.

The data from *Sống Mòn* reveals an overwhelming presence of both *đã* and *rồi*, with 647 instances of *đã* and 566 instances of *rồi*. There are no occurrences of *đoạn*, confirming its complete obsolescence in the Vietnamese aspectual system.

Marker	Verb (finish)	VP-final Perfect	Past/ Perfect	Past only	Conj	Clause-final 'first'	Total
<i>đã</i>	0	0	631	8	0	8	647
<i>rồi</i>	4	334	0	0	228	0	566
Total	4	334	631	8	228	8	1213

Table 12 Occurrences and functions of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* in *Sống mòn* (mid 20th century)

5.7.1 The role of *đã*

By the mid-20th century, *đã* had firmly established itself as the dominant pre-verbal marker of both perfect aspect and past tense. Out of 647 instances, *đã* appears as a dual marker of perfect and past tense in 631 cases.

- (47) *trong khi ấy, vợ y ở nhà quê lại đã*
 in time that wife 3SG stay countryside PRT PST/PRF
sinh một đứa con.
 give birth one CLF child
 'Meanwhile, his wife in the countryside had given/gave birth to a child.'

Here, *đã* precedes the verb *sinh* 'to give birth', marking the action as completed in the past with ongoing relevance to the present context.

In 8 additional cases, *đã* precedes negation markers, functioning as a pure past tense marker.

- (48) *y đã không cương quyết nổi đến cùng, để chống lại*
 3SG PST NEG resist to the end PREP go against
sự quyết định của gia đình.
 CLF decide of family
 'He didn't resist strongly enough against his family's decision.'

In this example, *đã* marks a past action, appearing before the negation marker *không* to signify the negation of a past event.

Additionally, *đã* retains its earlier clause-final use to indicate prioritization or sequencing, appearing in 8 instances with the meaning 'first'.

- (49) *thế thì để tôi còn phải vào xem đã.*
 then let me PRT must enter see first
 ‘Then let me enter and see first.’

In this context, *đã* follows the whole clause to emphasize the imperative sense of completing one task before moving on to the next.

5.7.2 The role of *rồi*

In this period, *rồi* plays a significant role, functioning as a VP-final perfect marker, a conjunction, and less frequently as a verb. Out of 566 occurrences, its primary function is as a VP-final perfect marker (334 instances), with additional uses as a conjunction (228 instances) and as a verb (4 instances).

- (50) *cứ vậy thì có lẽ bây giờ chúng mình đã yên thân rồi.*
 PRT so then perhaps now we PST/PRF settle PRF
 ‘If so then perhaps we have settled/settled by now.’

In this sentence, *rồi* follows *yên thân* (‘settle’) to indicate that the action has been completed and is relevant to the present.

Remarkably, 119 of these cases co-occur with *đã* in the sequence *đã ... rồi*, where *đã* marks the pre-verbal perfect, and *rồi* reinforces the perfective reading in the VP-final position.

A notable secondary function for *rồi* is its role as a conjunction, marking the temporal or logical progression between two events. 228/566 instances of *rồi* exhibit this function.

- (51) *cơm xong u em rửa bát đĩa rồi đi gánh nước.*
 meal finish mother 1SG wash dish CONJ go fetch water
 ‘After finishing the meal, my mother washed the dishes and then went to fetch water.’

Here, *rồi* functions as a conjunction, indicating the sequential relationship between two actions – washing dishes and fetching water.

Though rare, *rồi* also appears as a verb in 4/566 instances, retaining its older meaning of ‘to finish.’

- (52) *gian nhà ngoài cũng rồi, buồng cũng rồi.*
 part house out also finish room also finish
 ‘The outer part of the house was also finished, and so was the room.’

5.7.3 Conclusion of Stage 7

Stage 7 shows the Vietnamese TAM system in a largely stabilized, two-marker configuration. The distribution in Table 12 confirms that *đã* remains entrenched as the preverbal anchor for past/perfect meanings: most tokens occur in the preverbal position with the familiar dual interpretation, while the smaller set of negated contexts supports a more purely past reading. The continued presence of clause-final *đã* ‘first’ indicates that this discourse-oriented extension has been retained into the mid-20th century, though it remains quantitatively minor relative to the preverbal use.

rồi in this stage is best characterized as the dominant VP-final perfect marker and a highly productive sequencing conjunction. Its VP-final perfect function is frequent, and its conjunction use constitutes a substantial proportion of tokens, underscoring its centrality both to aspectual completion and to narrative progression. At the same time, the co-occurrence pattern provides an important diagnostic of system change: compared to earlier stages, VP-final *rồi* now appears much more often without preverbal *đã*, indicating that it is increasingly interpretable as a self-sufficient perfect marker rather than primarily as a reinforcing element within the *đã* ... *rồi* construction. The residual lexical-verb uses are rare and appear to be remnants of earlier stages rather than a productive subsystem.

Finally, the continued absence of *đạon* confirms that its former roles have been fully redistributed within the remaining system. Functions once associated with *đạon* – especially conjunctive linking and completion-related marking – are now handled by *rồi*, while *đã* maintains the preverbal past/perfect domain. Overall, Stage 7 thus illustrates the resolution of earlier competition: the system converges on a division of labor in which *đã* serves as the primary preverbal past/perfect marker and *rồi* specializes in VP-final perfect marking and event sequencing, with diminishing dependence between the two.

6 CONCLUSION

This study traces the diachronic competition and specialization of *đã*, *rồi*, and the now-extinct *đạon* from the 13th to the 20th century on the basis of seven texts spanning both Nôm and Quốc Ngữ traditions. The quantitative results (Table 13) and the philological analyses converge on a coherent picture: Vietnamese perfect marking develops through an interaction of (i) positional differentiation along the functional spine and (ii) competition-driven pruning, yielding the modern two-marker system dominated by *đã* (preverbal) and *rồi* (VP-final and conjunctive). Crucially, the system resolves into two complementary pathways: *rồi* shifts from VP-internal completion marking (TAM₂)

to VP-final perfect marking (TAM₃) and extends into clause-linking, whereas *đã* follows a different path centered on preverbal scope and a perfect-to-past expansion that is especially visible under negation; *đoạn* briefly enters the same VP-final perfect domain as *rồi* before disappearing.

6.1 Quantitative synopsis across periods

Table 13 provides a consolidated distribution of functions across the corpus (2,762 tokens total). In raw frequency, *đã* is the most frequent marker overall (1,892 tokens), followed by *rồi* (768) and *đoạn* (102). Importantly, frequency alone is not the main story: the decisive change concerns how these tokens redistribute across syntactic positions and functions across time, particularly the reallocation of postverbal completion functions (TAM₂) into VP-final perfect marking (TAM₃) and clause-linking functions for *rồi*, alongside the increasing tense-like behavior of preverbal *đã* in negative environments.

For *đã*, the corpus records an early lexical stage (9 verb tokens ‘finish’) and an early period in which it is a dedicated preverbal perfect marker (98 tokens of ‘preverbal perfect only,’ concentrated in the earliest texts). From the 16th–17th centuries onward, however, the dominant profile of *đã* becomes the dual past/perfect category (1,749 tokens), with additional evidence for “past-only” readings (16 tokens) that are especially diagnostic in negative environments. Beyond TAM, *đã* also shows limited excursions into clause-linking and clause-final discourse functions: 8 tokens of clause-initial conjunction and 11 tokens of clause-final ‘first/imperative’. Taken together, these distributions quantify a pathway in which *đã* stays anchored in the preverbal domain while expanding from perfect toward past readings (most clearly under negation), with only transient discourse extensions.

For *rồi*, the corpus reflects a different center of gravity. Its earliest functions are verbal (43 tokens ‘finish’), immediately postverbal telic/completive (37 tokens), and clause-linking conjunction (282 tokens), with the conjunctive function becoming particularly robust in later texts. The most consequential shift is the rise of *rồi* as a VP-final perfect marker (406 tokens), first attested in the late 17th-century text and becoming dominant by the 19th–20th centuries. In other words, *rồi* provides the clearest quantitative signature of “upward” reanalysis on the spine: from V-adjacent completion inside VP (TAM₂) to VP-edge scope as a perfect marker (TAM₃), while simultaneously expanding as a clause-linking device.

For *đoạn*, the quantitative record is strikingly time-bounded. It first appears as a verb and marginal postverbal telic marker (27 and 5 tokens respectively), later expands sharply as a conjunction (61 tokens) and even briefly enters the VP-final perfect slot (9 tokens) in the early 19th century, before

		Phật thuyết	Khóa hư lục	Truyền kỳ mạn lục	Thiên Nam ngữ lục	Sách sổ sang chép	Thầy Lazaro Phiên	Sống mòn	
Marker	Function	13th- 15th c.	14th c.	16th- 17th c.	late 17th c.	early 19th c.	late 19th c.	mid 20th c.	Total
đã	Total	25	80	185	294	547	114	647	1892
	Pre-verbal perfect only	20	79	0	0	0	0	0	99
	Pre-verbal past only	0	0	6	1	0	1	8	16
	Pre-verbal perfect/past	0	0	168	291	546	113	631	1749
	Clause-final 'first/ imperative'	0	0	0	2	1	0	8	11
	Clause-initial conjunction	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	8
rồi	Total	0	27	33	31	52	59	566	768
	Verb (<i>finish</i>)	0	3	16	8	10	1	4	43
	Clause-initial conjunction	0	5	5	12	5	27	228	282
	Immediately post-verbal completive	0	19	12	5	2	0	0	37
	VP-final perfect	0	0	0	6	35	31	334	406
đoạn	Total	0	16	4	4	78	0	0	102
	Verb (<i>finish</i>)	0	14	4	1	8	0	0	27
	Immediately post-verbal completive	0	2	0	1	2	0	0	5
	Clause-initial conjunction	0	0	0	2	59	0	0	61
	VP-final perfect	0	0	0	0	9	0	0	9
Total		25	123	222	329	677	173	1213	2762

Table 13 Functions of *đã*, *rồi*, *đoạn* across selected Vietnamese texts

disappearing entirely by the late 19th century. This is the clearest case of an innovation that rises, competes, and then is pruned from the system. Notably, its brief TAM₃ (VP-final perfect) use places it in direct competition with TAM₃ *rôi* in the early 19th century, but this competition resolves in favor of *rôi*, after which *đoạn* vanishes from the system.

6.2 A unified diachronic narrative: from emergence to resolution

The period-by-period trajectory can be summarized in Table 14 as a shift from a single-marker system to maximum competition and finally to stabilization.

In the earliest stage (13th–15th c.), Vietnamese perfect marking is effectively monopolized by preverbal *đã*, which also retains a residual lexical ‘finish’ use. Stage 2 (14th c.) initiates diversification: *rôi* and *đoạn* enter first in the VP domain as completion-related elements, while *đã* remains the only perfect marker. Stage 3 (16th–17th c.) is a turning point for *đã*: it becomes increasingly compatible with past readings, especially in negative environments – an effect consistent with the diagnostic role of negation introduced in Section 2.1 and exemplified in Section 5.3. This is also the stage where *đoạn* begins to recede sharply in frequency and functional range. At the same time, *rôi*’s role remains concentrated in VP-internal completion (TAM₂) and clause-linking, setting the stage for its later TAM₃ expansion.

Stage 4 (late 17th c.) marks a structural reconfiguration: *rôi* emerges as a VP-final perfect marker (first clear evidence of a two-position perfect system), while *đã* consolidates its preverbal past/perfect profile and develops the clause-final ‘first’ use. Stage 5 (early 19th c.) constitutes the peak of competition: all three markers can mark perfect, but crucially in different slots – preverbal *đã* versus VP-final *rôi* and (newly) VP-final *đoạn*. This is the maximal redundancy point in the system, where multiple forms with overlapping semantics coexist, setting the stage for later resolution. By Stage 6 (late 19th c.), *đoạn* disappears and the system narrows to the *đã*–*rôi* pair. Stage 7 (mid 20th c.) shows stabilization with a refined division of labor: *đã* anchors preverbal past/perfect meanings (and retains a minor clause-final ‘first’ use), while *rôi* dominates VP-final perfect marking and clause-linking sequencing, with increasing independence from preverbal *đã*. In short, the diachronic path resolves into a stable complementarity: *đã* specializes in preverbal scope (perfect/past, with past readings sharpened under negation), while *rôi* specializes in VP-edge perfect (TAM₃) and discourse sequencing, after first entering the system as a VP-internal completion marker (TAM₂).

Taken together, the findings support a Perfect-Cycle style pathway in which completion-related sources and telic markers can develop into perfect markers, expand to past-tense readings, and (for some items) extend

Period	<i>đã</i>	<i>rồi</i>	<i>đoạn</i>	System-level summary
13th c.	sole preverbal perfect; also lexical 'finish'	absent	absent	one perfect marker (<i>đã</i>)
14th c.	primary preverbal perfect; lexical 'finish' retained	emerges as postverbal telic; also verb 'finish'; conjunction	emerges mainly as verb 'finish'; marginal postverbal telic	differentiation begins; only <i>đã</i> marks perfect
16th–17th c.	expands to perfect/past; appears with negation for past; also conjunction	verb 'finish'; postverbal telic; conjunction	sharp decline; mostly verb 'finish'	<i>đã</i> remains sole perfect marker; <i>đoạn</i> marginalizes
late 17th c.	perfect/past; conjunction lost; clause-final 'first' emerges	conjunction prominent; postverbal telic; VP-final perfect emerges	very low frequency; conjunction begins	two perfect positions appear: preverbal <i>đã</i> vs VP-final <i>rồi</i>
early 19th c.	stable perfect/past; rare clause-final 'first'	VP-final perfect dominant; also verb/telic/conjunction	peak: conjunction dominant; also verb/telic; VP-final perfect appears	maximum competition: three perfect markers (preverbal <i>đã</i> , VP-final <i>rồi/đoạn</i>)
late 19th c.	stable perfect/past; no conjunction	VP-final perfect + conjunction; telic use lost; rare verb	absent	system narrows to <i>đã</i> + <i>rồi</i>
20th c.	stable preverbal perfect/past; clause-final 'first' retained	VP-final perfect + conjunction; increasing independence from <i>đã</i> ; rare verb	absent	stabilized two-marker system

Table 14 Timeline of developments of *đã*, *rồi*, and *đoạn* (13th–20th c.)

into discourse-linking functions. At the same time, the Vietnamese data underscore that grammaticalization is not simply additive. The history of *đã* illustrates non-monotonic expansion: the marker briefly develops a clause-linking role (Table 13: 8 conjunction tokens) but later loses it, while retaining and elaborating other functions (past/perfect and clause-final ‘first’). This pattern is compatible with competition-driven “pruning,” where intermediate functions can be transient as the system re-stabilizes. Conversely, *rồi* shows the most transparent “positional” trajectory – TAM₂ completion → TAM₃ perfect – while *đoạn* provides the clearest example of a marker that expands (including briefly into TAM₃) but is ultimately pruned away under competition.

The results also align with syntax-based accounts of grammaticalization and the cartographic view of the clausal spine (Rizzi 1997, Cinque 1999): the competition is largely resolved through positional differentiation. The diachronic record shows repeated movement from lower VP-internal completion marking (postverbal telic/completive uses of *rồi* and *đoạn*) to higher grammatical aspect positions (VP-final perfect, preverbal perfect/past), and in some cases to discourse-related positions (conjunctions; clause-final ‘first’). Word order and scope, including the diagnostic role of negation (NegP), thus provide concrete, text-based evidence for tracking upward re-analysis across periods. In particular, the TAM₂/TAM₃ contrast (V-adjacent vs. VP-final) offers a clear syntactic basis for distinguishing telicity from perfect meaning, independent of verb class alone.

A central contribution of this study lies in its linguistic-philological methodology. Where texts provide Literary Sinitic originals, the Chinese source lines serve as an interpretive anchor for identifying when a Vietnamese form functions lexically (e.g., translating ‘finish’ verbs), aspectually (telic/completive vs. perfect), or discourse-pragmatically (clause-linking). This bilingual baseline does not replace Vietnamese-internal analysis; rather, it strengthens it by offering an external control that helps diagnose functional shifts across centuries and across script traditions.

By the mid-20th century, the Vietnamese system has converged on an efficient two-marker configuration. *đã* dominates the preverbal domain as a past/perfect anchor, while *rồi* specializes in VP-final perfect marking and event sequencing through conjunction use. The disappearance of *đoạn* illustrates a common outcome of grammatical competition: when multiple forms overlap in function, the system can resolve redundancy by privileging the more frequent and versatile competitor(s). This end state follows directly from the two main diachronic pathways identified above: preverbal *đã* expands toward past (especially under negation), while postverbal *rồi* moves

upward from TAM₂ completion to TAM₃ perfect and consolidates as the primary sequencing conjunction. Beyond Vietnamese, these results contribute to broader historical-linguistic discussions of how aspectual systems reorganize through cycles of innovation, overlap, and specialization, and how syntactic position and scope diagnostics – especially with negation – can be leveraged in philologically-grounded diachronic analysis.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Trang Phan contributed to conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing the original draft, reviewing and editing the manuscript, and project administration, and is responsible for Sections 1, 2, 5.6, 5.7, and 6. Tuan-Cuong Nguyen contributed to data curation, validation, resources, and manuscript review and editing, and is responsible for Sections 3, 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5. Masaaki Shimizu contributed to data curation, validation, resources, and manuscript review and editing, and is responsible for Sections 4, 5.1, and 5.2. All correspondence should be addressed to the corresponding author Tuan-Cuong Nguyen at cuongnt@vnu.edu.vn.

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The evolution of perfect aspect markers in Vietnamese

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