

MASCULINITY VIA TRANSITIVITY IN VIETNAMESE - ENGLISH TRANSLATION “ĐỂ MÈN PHIÊU LƯU KÝ” FROM PERSPECTIVE OF SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS

Nguyen Thi Hong Ha¹, Nguyen Thi Hop¹, Tran Thi Thanh Phuong²
Email: nhha@hou.edu.vn, ORCID: 0009-0003-3422-1477

Received: 08/08/2025. Revised: 05/02/2026. Accepted: 23/02/2026
DOI: 10.59266/houjs.2026.1135

Abstract: *Masculinity is understood as a set of behavioral, cultural, and social norms traditionally associated with boys and men, including traits such as strength, independence, competition, and emotional stoicism. This article examines masculinity expressed via verb phrases in the Vietnamese source text “Để mèn phiêu lưu ký” by To Hoai and how they are transferred to the English target text “Diary of a Cricket”. The study findings reveal that masculinity, with the biggest percentage, belongs to the material process, followed by the mental and behavioral process, describing an over-confident and over-proud nature, strong and fast movement, arrogant and aggressive behaviors, violent actions, and injured and bloody scenes. Also, masculinity is seen in high self-assessment of physical strength, superior ability, and looking down on weaker competitors. In the translation, some cases of verb phrases are not transferred, the shifts between processes occur, and the move to noun phrases also more or less makes the meaning of some verbs seemingly “weaker”, masculinity, thus, is partly “lighter” than that in the original.*

Keywords: *masculinity, transitivity, Vietnamese-English translation, verb phrase*

I. Introduction

According to Thompson and Pleck (1995), the measurement of masculinity ideologies has changed over time, and they summarized that there are two points of view on masculinity. One perspective regards masculinities as traits and dispositions, while the other features masculinities as culturally based ideologies that promise privileges for men. Thompson and Pleck

(1995, p. 130) argue that the trait approach to masculinity includes a set of attributes that society values. Meanwhile, the second perspective mentions the normative approach, focusing on the social norms related to men’s gender relations, attitudes, and beliefs. In other words, masculinity ideologies are considered the constructs that determine the cultural standards of manhood within social groups and institutions, or within an ethnic community, region, or

¹ Hanoi Open University, Hanoi, Vietnam

² University of Economics - Technology for Industries, Hanoi, Vietnam

society, while masculinity beliefs are regarded as a set of norms that individuals internalize and constitute a belief system of masculinity. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) put the local, regional, and societal-wide masculinity ideologies in both social practices and cultural traditions with specific times, places, and groups, not individuals. They affect the way people think, feel, and behave in gender-salient matters. In the Vietnamese source text “*Đế mèn phiêu liêu ký*” (To, 1942), the author To Hoai depicted the mature progress of a cricket named De Men with plenty of manly qualities and actions represented for masculinity. The English translation “*Diary of a cricket*” by Dang The Binh was released by Kim Dong Publisher in 2023. Both the source text and the target text are published in a bilingual book, in which the former is in Vietnamese, followed by the latter in English. The data in this study belong to the first two chapters, where macho characteristics of the main character De Men clearly emerged.

II. Literature review

2.1. Masculinity

In the online dictionary “Oxford Languages”, masculinity is defined as “*qualities or attributes regarded as characteristics of men or boys, for example, handsome, muscled, and driven*”. From the definition, the five key factors of masculinity are often seen as follows:

1. *Behavioral Norms*: The norms are closely associated with assertiveness, aggression, protection, and providing;

2. *Emotional Expression*: The emotions are usually described by stoicism, emotional control, and reduced expression of vulnerability.

3. *Performance*: The performance is frequently characterized as demonstrated or “performed” via actions, in career, sports, or daily conduct.

4. *Variability*: The concept “masculine” changes based on the context of history or culture, so it is a flexible concept rather than a fixed definition.

5. *Distinction from sex*: Distinct from the biological male sex, as anyone can exhibit traits and behaviors that are regarded as masculine.

Although masculinity was historically regarded as specific and rigid roles, its modern interpretations are increasingly inclusive and diverse, varying across time and space because contemporary societies usually put understanding on gendered social norms in constituting what it means to be a boy or a man. However, there are common perceptions that are taken as universal characteristics. Boys and men, as the main characters of masculinity, are commonly seen with the traits and dispositions of strength and power, independence, and action-oriented. In particular, strength is expressed through physical health, while power is demonstrated through mental toughness. Self-sufficiency and capability are expressions of independence, and an action-oriented nature focuses on solution-finding and problem-solving abilities directly related to their daily behaviors, as seen in their actions and activities. For example, boys or men typically undergo pressure to approach the norms of being tough, fearless, independent, invulnerable, stoic, self-reliant, and above all, non-feminine. In a study titled “*The perceptions of gender norms amongst sub-groups of men and boys in Canada and abroad*” by a group of researchers (Esina et al., 2018) who had reviewed 61 other studies published between 2005 and June 2018 on male gender, identified nine themes closely associated to masculinity, including: (i) *Emotional control and toughness*; (ii) *Violence or physical toughness*; (iii) *Dominance*; (iv) *Risk taking*;

(v) *Homophobia/heterosexism*; (vi) *Anti-femininity*; (vii) *Self-reliance*; (viii) *Status*; and (ix) *Sexuality*. In this study, the focus lies on the key factor of performance through verb phrases of actions and activities, which means it belongs to the theme of violence or physical toughness and self-reliance among the nine themes above.

2.2. Transitivity system or system of process types

Halliday (1994), with his systemic-functional grammar, identifies three

Table 1. Process types, and their meaning (Halliday, 1994, p. 143)

Process type	Content of type	Category of meaning
Material		Doing
	Action	Doing
	Event	Happening
Mental		Sensing
	Perception	Seeing
	Affection	Feeling
	Cognition	Thinking
	Desiderative	Wanting
Relational		Being
	Attribution	Attributing
	Identification	Identifying
Behavioral		Behaving
Verbal		Saying
Existential		Existing

Material process is understood as the process of doing a referring action/event, such as *running*, *working*, or *occurring*, while *mental* process refers to the process of sensing, such as *hearing*, *adoring*, *recognizing*, or *wishing*. Relational processes focus on *being*, *being at*, or *having*, while behavioral processes involve psychological and physiological behaviors, such as *crying* or *laughing*. While the verbal process consists of saying verbs like *talking*, *indicating*, or *showing*, the existential process indicates that something or some natural force exists. The transitivity of the system of process

functional elements of meaning in language: the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. Of the three linguistic meta-functions, the ideational meta-function is realized by the system of transitivity, specifically, different types of process. Three basic components consist of material, mental, and relational processes, and three other subtypes, including behavioral, verbal, and existential processes.

types serves as a theoretical framework for this study to identify the ideational meta-function. This article relies on Newmark's (1988) translation methods/strategies to clarify how the verb phrases are shifted into English.

III. Methods of the study

This study approaches finding the answers to the two research questions:

1. What process types in the transitivity system are applied to express the masculinity of male characters in the verb phrases of the Vietnamese source text "*Dế mèn phiêu lưu ký*" by To Hoai?

2. How are the process types shifted in the English target text to convey the ideational meta-function of masculinity?

3.1. Research method

The primary research approach is qualitative, with in-depth analysis of the data. In particular, analytical, comparative, contrastive, and synthetic methods are applied in this study, while the statistical method takes a secondary role.

3.2. Data collection procedure and data analysis

Verb phrases of actions and activities representing masculinity from the first two chapters (*Chapter 1. Tôi sống độc lập từ bé & Chapter 2. Cuộc phiêu lưu bất ngờ*) are collected, 155 verb phrases are counted, and arranged into the left-handed column in the statistical table. The next step is to put the translations of these verb phrases into the right-hand column, respectively, and in parallel. Classification of process types is conducted based on the above-mentioned transitivity system table; each category is arranged in a separate table, followed by comparisons and contrasts between Vietnamese source verb phrases and their English translations. As a result, the answers to the research questions are presented in the following section as the findings of this study.

IV. Findings and discussion

In the first two chapters of the source text, there are 155 verb phrases used to refer to the masculinity of the male characters, including the main cricket named De Men, another cricket called De Choat, and the two boys catching De Men: the older - Nhon and the younger - Be. The crickets and other animals in the source text are personified, so their actions and activities are naturally and excitingly described in the same way as humans’.

4.1. Masculinity via the process types of the transitivity system in the Vietnamese source text

Among the 155 verb phrases, when focusing on the main verbs, only five of six process types appear in the source text with 73 material processes (47.1%), 35 mental (22.6%), 24 behavioral (15.5%), 19 verbal (12.3%), and 4 relational (2.5%, See Table 2).

Table 2. Process types of the transitivity system in the Vietnamese source text

Process types	Quantity	Percentage
Material	73	47.1%
Mental	35	22.6%
Behavioral	24	15.5%
Verbal	19	12.3%
Relational	4	2.5%
Total	155	100%

Below are the details of each material process shown in the source text.

Material process

With the highest percentage of all, accounting for nearly half of the process types (47.1%), in the group of material process, masculinity is conveyed by the majority of verbs focusing on actions of the main character De Men when he builds his hole to live independently and experiences an adventurous trip with many exciting incidents on the way. The verbs of activities can be classified into many sub-groups, such as verbs of movement demonstrating manly ego with adverbs of strong and fast manner “đi đứng oai vệ”, “hếch răng lên”, “chui tọt”, “chui nhanh”, “vội nhảy lên”, “xộc ra”, “vùng vẫy”, “nhảy phắt đến”, “nhảy tót sang”, etc. In his building his hole, adverbs of reduplication are expressed like “hì hục đào”, “đạp phanh phách”, “sôi sùng sục”, “nảy lên bần bật”,

"*nghiến răng ken két*", "*ngổ ngáo vụt lên trước*", etc. In addition, verbs of violence and fighting are used to show his arrogance and warlike nature in front of his weaker competitors, such as "*chặn lối*", "*cắn một miếng*", "*bồi cho cái đập hậu*", "*xông sang lồng*", "*đánh nhau*", "*quần thảo vài hiệp*", "*bồi thêm chiếc đá nữa*", "*phóng vài cái đập hậu*", "*đá ngã kẻ địch*", "*đập hai càng*", "*đi đánh nhau*", "*thọc mạnh một cái đập càng*", "*xông vào chiến ngay*", etc. The verbs indicating injuries and blood as the terrible result of fighting are described as "*ngã bổ ngựa*", "*lăn quay*", "*chạy bán xác*", "*đá ngã*", "*lăn chiêng*", "*cắn cụt*", "*hộc máu mồm đen sì*", "*gãy một cẳng*", "*đánh gằn chết*", etc. Especially, everyday language is interestingly applied by the author, showing an informal style "*nằm chổng vó*", "*quăng ra ao*", "*xức một bữa*", "*giết ngoém ngay*", "*làm trò choảng nhau*", "*quay đơ*", "*đi chọi nhau*", etc. Besides, the masculinity of De Men is also expressed by verbs of leadership, looking down and underestimating other weaker components like "*chọi với tôi, không được mấy nả sức*", "*chẳng thêm đánh thêm*", "*đứng đầu thiên hạ*", etc., showing his really high appreciation of himself.

Mental process

In this group of mental process type, perceptive verbs are used to show the arrogant senses and feelings of De Men about himself and other weaker rivals, including "*nghe tiếng phành phạch giòn giã*", "*trịnh trọng và khoan thai*", "*sợ cái gì?*", "*nghe rộn gáy*", "*nóng gáy và ngứa hai cái càng*", "*ngạo mạn*", "*xác xược*", "*thấy đã lộn tiết*", "*chẳng coi ai ra gì*", "*cóc sợ*", "*lên mặt hão huyền*", "*phồng mũi*", etc. However, in front of

the stronger rival Xen Toc, De Men is depicted with a frightening and terrifying attitude: "*cứng cả khoeo*", "*chết thật chứ không chơi*", "*cảm thấy nhục nhã*". Another sub-group can be seen in the cognitive verbs describing De Men's thoughts and recognition of his life and behaviors as "*nghĩ về bài học đường đời đầu tiên*", "*đáng khếp tội gì*", "*không thêm giết tôi cho bản giuom*", "*nung nấu ý nghĩ trốn đi*", etc. In order to close the very aggressive adventurous journey, relating to many other fellows, both weaker and stronger than him, De Men is described with the affective verbs, like "*ăn năn hối lỗi*", "*ngao ngán đời mình*", showing the maturity of the main character from the warlike actions to the serious thoughts.

Behavioral process

In the third place of the statistical table, behavioral process can be witnessed via a series of verbs referring to eating, showing off habits and nature of De Men like "*nhai ngoàm ngoạp*", "*xì một hơi rõ dài*", "*không một chút bận tâm*", "*quắc mắt*", "*nhe răng ra*", "*làm bộ*", "*giương mắt*", "*cười ha hả*", "*vênh hai cái sừng dài*", "*hếch càng*", "*mím môi*", "*đi bắt nạt*", "*ngênh ngáo ngoài trời*". The author paints a lively image of a male cricket, showcasing its appearance and rebellious behavior. From the behaviors, masculinity demonstrates the arrogant, over-confident, and self-reliant personalities of De Men.

Verbal process

Unlike the common stereotype of assuming that being talkative is the nature of femininity only, the verbal process in the verb phrases of the source text seems to be very diverse. All of the 19 verbs in

the group of verbal processes vary from each other, from normal verbs of saying like “*bảo*” (x2), “*trêu*” (x2), “*cất giọng*”, “*ghẹo*”, “*ho he*”, sounding quite gentle. However, another sub-group of verbal process types with a louder volume belongs to the verbs like “*quát*”, “*mắng* x2”, “*hò hét*”, “*cà khịa*”, “*to tiếng*”, “*giậm đạp*”, “*gáy*”, “*rú lên*”, in which there are not only from De Men, but also from the two boys who caught the cricket.

Relational process

This final group accounts for a very slight proportion with only four cases (2.5%), where De Men self-evaluates himself when realizing his growing physical appearance through the verb “*có răng có càng to rồi*”, when underestimating a weaker rival “*liệu có mấy hơi sức*”, when appreciating himself “*là tôi giỏi*”, “*lấy làm hãnh diện*”. Despite this group’s very low rate, it also contributes to the recognition of masculinity through high self-assessment of physical appearance, strong ability, and underestimating and looking down on rivals.

In short, within the first two chapters of the Vietnamese source text, five process types of verbs appear in the 155 verb phrases, including material process with the biggest rate of 47.1%, followed by mental (22.6%) and behavioral process (15.5%). Masculinity of the main character and related ones are shown via verbs of fast and strong movement, fighting and violent actions, injured and bloody scenes with arrogant and rebellious behaviors, representing over-confident and over-proud manly qualities. The maturity and changes of thoughts and behaviors can be seen through mental

processes with the verbs of self-criticism and regret. Interestingly, verbal process (12.3%), which is commonly supposed to refer to femininity, is also used to support masculinity, besides relational process (2.5%), demonstrating high self-evaluation on physical appearance, powerful ability, and underrating weaker components.

4.2. Shifts of the process types in the English target text

In most cases in the English target text, verbs of one process type in the source text are usually transferred into the same type retaining the similar meaning in the translation. However, there are several differences in shifting the process types.

Ellipsis - no translation

This phenomenon scatters in the first two chapters of the translated text, particularly in material process, code 7, 29, 41, 47, 50, 55, 56, 57, 59, 62; mental process, code 3, 8, 15, 19, 25; behavioral process: code 4, 12, 13, 14, 15, 23; verbal process, code 4, 15 and relational process, code 3, 4. So, the total of 25 cases without translation contributes 16.1% - a relatively considerable proportion. Take some cases in the behavioral process for example. The code 12 - code 15 in the behavioral process “*vênh hai cái sừng dài*”, “*chõ xuống*”, “*hếch càng*”, “*có mím môi*” are not translated. In terms of meaning, the main verbs of these phrases do not seem too challenging for translators, but no translation here probably contains another intention, more or less decreasing the arrogance and aggressiveness in the behaviors of the main character.

Shifts between the process types

Some main verbs in the verb phrases are shifted from one process to another flexibly and diversely. They can be from *material process to verbal process*: *bắt đầu sống bình tĩnh* (vowed to pursue a calmer way of life), *quần thảo vài hiệp* (exchanging a few blows)....; from material to relational process: *chọi với tôi, không được mấy nả sức* (was far from equaling his insolence), *nằm chổng vó giữa giỏ* (was in the basket), *xông sang lông của nhau* (had no choice but to fight each other); from material to behavioral process: *lăn quay* (lying on the ground); or vice versa from behavioral to material process: *nhai ngoàm ngoạp* (were always moving crosswise); from verbal to material process: *dám cà khịa* (put on daring airs and was quick to pick quarrels). These smooth shifts between the process types made the translation not heavily rely on the original in terms of form, but the meaning remained to some extent. However, if a deeper consideration is taken, the nuances of meaning more or less are lost. For instance, have a look at some pairs, such as *quần thảo* - *exchanging*; *nằm chổng vó* - *was in*; *lăn quay* - *lying on*; *nhai ngoàm ngoạp* - *moving crosswise*; *cà khịa* - *pick quarrels*. The verbs in the source text seem to be more connotative and figurative in meaning than those of the translation. Therefore, the masculinity of the translation is partly less interesting and less “colorful” than that in the original.

Shift from one process to a noun phrase (none verb)

Most verb phrases are reserved with the main verb, though in some cases, they are moved into noun phrases. Let see some examples for this illustration: *cười*

ha hả - *great pleasure*, *kinh bỉ đến nỗi* - *cowardice so much that*, *chết thật* - *death was unavoidable*, *bồi thêm chiếc đá nữa* - *a few more kicks*, *đánh gần chết* - *more dead than alive*, *đánh nhau thuê* - *plaything*, *phóng vài cái đập hậu* - *a few blows*, *gậy khễ một cái* - *a few powerful kicks*, *cho mày bài học thuộc lòng* - *a good lesson for you*, etc. These changes of noun phrases, theoretically, have the same meaning as verb phrases, but in practice, verbs referring to actions and activities obviously convey more force, more movement than nouns, which only name objects and phenomena. Thus, the noun phrases in translation, to some extent, seem to be “lighter” in meaning, compared to the verb phrases in the original. As a result, the masculinity of the translated text is partly less powerful.

V. Conclusion

In the first two chapters of the source text, the main verbs in 155 verbal phrases referring to masculinity are expressed in five process types, with the largest percentage in material process (47.1%), followed by mental and behavioral processes (22.6% and 15.5%, respectively). Verbal and relational processes contribute slightly, accounting for 12.3% for the former and 2.5% for the latter. The masculinity of male characters is conveyed through verbs of strong, fast movement, violent and fighting actions, and injured and painful scenes, with arrogant and aggressive behavior, representing an overconfident, overproud nature. In addition, high self-assessment on physical strength, superior ability, and looking down on weaker rivals. In the target text, some cases of verb phrases are not transferred, resulting in a loss of meaning, partly reducing the

manly characteristics of arrogance and aggressiveness. Moreover, the shifts between processes occur, so some of the verbs seem to be less connotative and figurative in meaning, leading to less interesting and less “colorful” masculinity than in the original. Last but not least, the move to noun phrases also more or less makes the meaning of some verbs seemingly “weaker”, masculinity, thus, is partly “lighter” than that in the original.

References

- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society, 19*, 829-859. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>.
- Esina, E., Wells, L., Claussen, C., & Mallay, N. (2018). The perceptions of gender norms amongst sub-groups of men and boys in Canada and abroad. *Status of Women Canada*.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Hoang, V. V. (2006). *Translation: Theory and Practice. A Textbook for senior students of English*. Education Publishing House.
- Matthews, D. D., Hammond, W. P., Nuru-Jeter, A., Cole-Lewis, Y., & Melvin, T. (2013). Racial discrimination and depressive symptoms among African-American men: The mediating and moderating roles of masculine self reliance and John Henryism. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity, 14*(1), 35-46. doi: 10.1037/a0028436.
- Newmark, P. (1988). *A textbook of translation*. New York : Prentice-Hall International.
- Rimal, R. N., & Lapinski, M. K. (2015). A re-explication of social norms: Ten years later. *Communication Theory, 25*(4), 393-409.
- Thompson, E. H., Jr., & Pleck, J. H. (1986). The structure of male norms. *American Behavioral Scientist, 29*, 531-543. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/000276486029005003>.
- Thompson, E. H., Jr., & Pleck, J. H. (1995). Masculinity ideologies: A review of research instrumentation on men and masculinities. In R. F. Levant & W. S. Pollack (Eds.) *A new psychology of men* (pp. 129-163). New York: Basic Books.
- Thompson, E. H., Jr., Grisanti, C., & Pleck, J. H. (1985). Attitudes toward the male role and their correlates. *Sex Roles, 13*, 413-427. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00287952>.
- To, H. (1942, 2023). *Dé Mèn phiêu lưu ký (Diary of a cricket by Dang The Binh)*. Bilingual book. Kim Dong Publishing House.
- Uy, P. J., Massoth, N. A., & Gottdiener, W. H. (2014). Rethinking male drinking: Traditional masculine ideologies, gender-role conflict, and drinking motives. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity, 15*(2), 121-128. doi: 10.1037/a0032239.

TÍNH NAM TÍNH THỂ HIỆN QUA HỆ THỐNG CHUYỂN TÁC TRONG BẢN DỊCH VIỆT - ANH “ĐẾ MÈN PHIÊU LƯU KÝ” THEO NGÔN NGỮ CHỨC NĂNG HỆ THỐNG

Nguyễn Thị Hồng Hà¹, Nguyễn Thị Hợp¹, Trần Thị Thanh Phương²

Tóm tắt: Tính nam tính được coi là các chuẩn mực hành vi, văn hóa và xã hội truyền thống liên quan đến con trai và đàn ông, gồm các đặc điểm như sức mạnh, tính độc lập, tính cạnh tranh và sự kiểm chế cảm xúc. Bài viết này nghiên cứu tính nam tính thể hiện qua cụm động từ trong bản gốc tiếng Việt “Đế Mèn phiêu lưu ký” của Tô Hoài và cách chúng được dịch sang tiếng Anh “Diary of a cricket”. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy tỷ lệ lớn nhất thuộc về quá trình vật chất, theo sau là quá trình tinh thần và hành vi, mô tả bản chất tự tin thái quá và kiêu ngạo, chuyển động mạnh, nhanh, hành vi kiêu ngạo và hung hăng, hành động bạo lực, cảnh tượng bị thương và đâm máu. Ngoài ra, tính nam tính còn được thể hiện ở sự tự đánh giá cao về sức mạnh thể chất, khả năng vượt trội và coi thường đối thủ yếu hơn. Trong bản dịch, một số động ngữ không được dịch, có sự chuyển đổi giữa các quá trình, việc chuyển sang danh ngữ cũng ít nhiều làm cho ý nghĩa của một số động từ dường như “yếu hơn”, do đó, tính nam tính phần nào “nhẹ” hơn so với bản gốc.

Từ khóa: tính nam tính, chuyển tác, bản dịch Việt-Anh, cụm động từ

¹ Trường Đại học Mỏ Hà Nội, Hà Nội, Việt Nam

² Trường Đại học Kinh tế - Kỹ thuật Công nghiệp, Hà Nội, Việt Nam