



PHÓ TỪ Modals

Phó từ ‘modal’ in Vietnamese serve two functions: helping the verb and helping the sentence in enhancing the idea to an extent that makes it clear to the reader or listener. Many of these modals appear like English adverbs.

By the end of this chapter, learners will be able to recognize, and apply aurally or orally Vietnamese modal. Common modals in Vietnamese are:

ắt, ắt là ‘probably’
biết đâu ‘might’
cần phải ‘have to’
chắc ‘may’
chắc có lẽ ‘maybe’
chịu ‘bear to accept’
có thể ‘can/could’
dám ‘dare’
dám ... lắm ‘be possible’
đĩ nhiên ‘of course’
định ‘be going to’
hẳn, hẳn là ‘somehow surely’
hình như ‘seem’

không chừng ‘might be possible’
liệu ‘had better’
nên ‘should’
phải, bị buộc phải ‘must’
quả nhiên ‘apparently’
quyết ‘be determined’
rất nên, rất đáng ‘ought to’
tất, tất nhiên ‘certainly’
tất nhiên, tất phải ‘definitely’
thà ‘would rather’
thà ... còn hơn ‘rather ... than’
vừa định ‘be about to’

*Ta thà làm con cá
goá không chồng
còn hơn ưng người!*

*Ta cũng vậy. Thế
gian hết cá bà rồi ta
mới nghĩ đến người!*

Fish A: I’d better stay single than marry you!
Fish B: Me too. You are the last woman
I would marry!



I. Tổng Quát – General

Phó từ ‘modals’ are terms comprised of adverbs and adjectives, adverbs with auxiliaries or verbs with proforms. As with other parts of speech, Vietnamese has several types of modals: voluntary modals, inferring modals, and modals for manner. Don’t be confused with adverbs when encountering similar terms that have been introduced in the chapter for adverbs.

Let’s take *hình như*, for instance, as an adverb to begin a sentence:

- a) *Hình như // có người đến*. ‘Probably there is person coming.’ (Probably someone is coming.) vs *hình như*, a modal:
- b) *Anh ấy hình như có chuyện buồn*. ‘He seems have something sad.’ Or ‘Looks like he is sad.’

In a) *Có người* ‘there is someone’ *đến* ‘coming’; *hình như*, therefore, is an adverb to modify the whole sentence.

In b) *hình như* modifies *có* ‘have’ > ‘seem (to) have’; therefore, it is a modal.

In general, a modal can function as an adverb but an adverb cannot function as a modal.

II. Hình Thức Phó Từ – Forms of Modals

Unlike other parts of speech, modals in Vietnamese are categorized into conceptual orientation. This part of speech not only represents the viewpoint of the Vietnamese but it also reflects how flexibly an idea can be expressed in more than one way while maintaining the same meaning.

A. Cấu Tạo của Phó Từ – Formation of Modals

Lexicologically, Vietnamese modals are mostly functional. This means there are no exact modals like *will/would*, *shall/should*, *can/could* of English. Except for certain real modals most of them are compounded from other parts of speech to be modals:

1. Phó Từ Đơn – Single Modals

Phó từ đơn ‘single modals’ are derived from terms that function as modals: *chịu* ‘accept, endure’ *dám* ‘dare’ *hãy* ‘let’ *liệu* ‘had better’ *chắc* ‘certainly’ *nên* ‘should, succeed, better’ *thà* ‘would sooner’

2. Phó Từ Ghép – Compound Modals

Compound modals consist of other parts of speech combined to derive a third meaning:

✳ **Biết đâu** = ‘know + where’ > unable to know exactly > **might**. Review hidden negative form (Chapter 10–K2). *biết đâu đi rồi* ‘might have gone’ *biết đâu xong rồi* ‘might have finished’ *Việc ấy biết đâu đã bị phanh phui*. ‘It might have been discovered.’

✳ **Dám ... lắm** = ‘dare + very’ > highly possible > **very likely, might have**: *dám hết lắm* ‘might have run out’

✳ **Hình như** = ‘image’ + ‘like’ > look like > **seem**: *hình như có điều gì* ‘seems to have something’ *hình như thích cái ấy* ‘seem to like that one’

✳ **Kính xin** = ‘respect’ + ‘beg’ > **may we**: *kính xin mời* ‘may we invite’ *kính xin thưa* ‘may we have the honor to request that’ *kính xin tặng* ‘may we have the honor to give’ *kính xin cáo* ‘may we be excused’ *kính xin dâng* ‘may we have the honor to offer’. Sometimes people can also say: *xin kính*: *xin kính mời, xin kính thưa, xin kính tặng xin kính cáo, xin kính dâng*.

✳ **Rất đáng** = ‘very’ + ‘worth’ doing something > : *rất đáng mừng* ‘worth rejoicing’, *rất đáng khen* ‘worth praising’, *rất đáng trách* ‘worth complaining’ *rất đáng thưởng* ‘worth rewarding’ ... This modal denotes a hidden passive form.

✳ **Rất nên** = ‘very’ + ‘should’ > **ought to** as in ‘ought to do something’: *rất nên dạy con đúng cách* ‘ought to teach the children correctly’ *rất nên đối xử tốt với nhau* ‘ought to treat each other well’, ...

✳ **Vừa định** = ‘just’ + ‘intend’ > **be about to** as in ‘be about to leave the house’ *vừa định gọi chị* ‘be about to call you (woman)’ *vừa định nói* ‘be about to speak up’ ...

III. Các Loại Phó Từ – Types of Modals

Again, modals are categorized into four types: voluntary modals, modal denoting reasons, modals for inference, and modals of manner. Each has its own specifications in terms of usage and tense.

A. Phó Từ Ý Chí – Voluntary Modals

Phó từ ý chí ‘voluntary modals’ precede the verb to indicate the voluntary idea or the will of the subject: *chịu, dám, hãy, nhận, thà*. **Phó từ ý chí** reflects the voice of the will. These modals only stand before the verbs to assist them. Of these modals, **thà** can’t be formed in an imperative, since it is a main verb.

✳ **Chịu** ‘bear to accept, agree to, concede’ describes the condition where the subject somehow accepts to do something.

*Anh An **chịu** giúp chúng ta.* ‘An bears to help us.’ (An simply agrees to help.)

*Chủ nhà **chịu** trả tiền nước.* ‘The landlord agrees to pay for the water bill.’

*Ít người **chịu** làm không công.* ‘Few people bear to work without labor.’
(Few people are ready to work without pay.)

For negation, just add *không* before *chịu*:

*Chị Ba **không** chịu kết hôn với anh Hải.* ‘Ms Ba is not ready to marry to Hải.’

*Người ta **không** chịu bán chịu.* ‘They don’t agree to sell on credit.’ (*Bán chịu* ‘to sell on credit’; *mua chịu* ‘to buy on credit’)

***Chịu** đi cho người ta nhờ!* ‘Just say yes for goodness sake!’

✧ ***Dám*** ‘dare, not willing’ not having enough courage to do something: *dám làm* ‘dare do’ *dám chịu* ‘dare endure’ *dám nói* ‘daresay’ *dám thử* ‘dare try’

*Những người ấy **dám** chết cho nhau.* ‘Those people dare sacrifice their lives for one another.’

***Dám** làm thì **dám** chịu, chớ có than van!* ‘Dare do then dare admit it; don’t blame anyone!’ (If you dared do it then you should admit doing it. Don’t blame anyone.)

✧ ***Hãy*** ‘please, let’ making a suggestion to others: *hãy nghe đây* ‘listen please’ *hãy làm theo lời tôi nói* ‘please do what I say’

*Chúng ta **hãy** cố giúp nhau mà sống.* ‘Let’s help each other to survive.’

*Đừng nghe những gì họ nói mà **hãy** nhìn kỹ những gì họ làm.* ‘Let’s not listen to what they say but watch what they do.’

***Hãy** đoàn kết lại, hỡi dân Việt ơi!* ‘Unite, Vietnamese people!’

✧ ***Nhận*** ‘be willing to, ready to’ connoting the idea of being ready to do something voluntarily: *nhận giúp* ‘willing to help’ *nhận làm thay* ‘willing to substitute’. *Nhận* can also be used with *chịu* > *chịu nhận* ‘admit doing’, and *nhận chịu* ‘ready to endure (harship, punishment, etc.)’

*Chị tôi **nhận** làm thêm ngày thứ bảy.* ‘My sister is ready to work on Saturday.’

*Hãng này **nhận** giao hàng tận nhà.* ‘This company accepts to deliver parcels to the door.’

***Nhận** đi chớ còn chờ chi/gì nữa!* ‘Take it! What are you waiting for?’

✧ ***Thà*** ‘would rather’ denotes preference, usually negative: *thà chịu thiệt* ‘would rather suffer loss’ *thà chết* ‘would rather die’ *thà ở vậy* ‘rather stay’...

*Tôi **thà** ở vậy nuôi con chứ không thèm ửng anh.* ‘I would rather stay widowed to raise my children than marry you.’

Ta **thà** làm quỷ nước Nam còn hơn làm vương đất Bắc⁴⁰. ‘I’d rather be a ghost in the South country than be a king in the North region.’

Thà chết còn hơn chịu nhục! ‘Sooner death than humiliation!’ (I sooner die than live in humiliation!)

B. Phó Từ Suy Luận – Modals Denoting Reasons

More frank and logical, *phó từ duy lý* denotes reasons based mainly on the voice of the mind: *bắt phải*, *buộc phải*.

✳ **Bắt phải** ‘to be compelled to’ is for a strong obligation one has to meet: *bắt phải đi* ‘be compelled to leave’ *bắt phải nói khác* ‘be compelled to say differently’ ... Literally, *bắt* ‘to arrest’ and *phải* ‘must’, *liệu*.

If this modal is split to sandwich the object: *bắt* (the object) *phải* (main verb), it becomes transitive. This is known as *bị động khiếm thị* ‘hidden passive’. Review item A.2, part III – Passive Form of Verbs, Chapter 9.

Người ta **bắt phải** làm như vậy. ‘They forced us to do that.’ (We) were compelled to do that.)

Compare:

Người ta **bắt** chúng tôi **phải** làm như vậy. ‘They forced us to do that.’

✳ **Buộc phải** ‘be forced to’ similar to *bắt phải*, *buộc phải* denotes a stronger sense of obligation one must obey. Literally, *buộc* means ‘to tie’. Sometimes *bắt buộc* are combined to express an extreme situation where one has no choice but one. This modal does not apply to any hidden passive form.

*Bị đàn áp quá mức, người dân **buộc phải** chống lại.* ‘Being severely oppressed, the masses are forced to resist.’

✳ **Liệu** ‘had better’ a way to mildly threaten someone and simultaneously encourage one to accomplish what he/she is supposed to do.

Người mẹ khuyên cô con gái: “Mày **liệu** trả lại cái xe đạp cho nó đi.”. ‘The mother reminded her daughter, ‘You’d better return to him the bike you have borrowed.’

C. Phó Từ Suy Diễn – Modals for Inference

Subjective and irrational, *phó từ suy diễn* tends to express one’s feeling and affection towards people or objects around oneself: *chắc*, *có thể*, *dám* ... *lắm*, *hình như*, *rất đáng*, ...

⁴⁰ by Trần Bình Trọng (1256–1285), a general caught by Chinese invaders. At his execution, he shouted these words at the moment he was beheaded.

✧ **Chắc** ‘must, for sure’; one of the uses of *chắc* is equivalent to ‘must’ in a sense of uncertainty. To modify a sentence, *chắc* becomes an adverb, meaning ‘perhaps’. For past, progressive or future idea, add *đã* after *chắc*:

Bây giờ chắc khuya lắm rồi, tôi buồn ngủ quá. ‘It must be midnight; I feel very sleepy.’

Anh có chắc đến không? ‘Are you coming for sure?’ (Are you sure to come?)

Chị ấy chắc đã tốt nghiệp đại học rồi. ‘She must have graduated from college.’

Anh ấy chắc đến đòi nợ. ‘Perhaps he comes for the debt.’

Chắc gì ‘not certain’ has a negative connotation. *Chắc gì* functions as an adverb as well:

Nó chắc gì biết chuyện của chúng ta. ‘It is doubtful that he knows about our story.’ (It is not very certain that he knows about our story.)

Chị ấy chắc gì được nhận vào làm việc. ‘It’s not certain that she will be hired.’

✧ **Có thể** ‘could, possibly’ refers to something possibly happen. Be aware that *có thể* is also an auxiliary, in which case that may, it can be modified by *rất* ‘very’. See item B-7, II Modes of Verbs, chapter 9. For negation, use *không thể* ‘can’t’.

Chị hay cả tin, người ta có thể lừa chị bất cứ lúc nào. ‘You are very credulous; they can lead you down the garden path any moment.’

Tiền có thể mua được nhiều thứ nhưng không thể mua tất cả. ‘Money can buy many things but it can’t buy everything.’

✧ **Dám ... lắm** ‘very likely that, might have’ is another modal for guessing based mainly on some clues that are not highly reliable:

Bà ấy dám đến nhà anh lắm. ‘She is very likely to have gone to your place.’ (It is very likely that she has gone to your place.)

Người ấy dám đã bỏ về Việt Nam rồi lắm. ‘He might have gone back to Vietnam already.’

For negative statement, add *không* before *dám* and use *đâu* in place of *lắm*:

Bà ấy không dám đến nhà chị đâu. ‘She wouldn’t dare come to yours.’

✧ **Hình như** ‘seem’; this modal suggests one’s own judgment by viewing the appearance of an object, emotionally or sentimentally. For negation, add *không* after the modal. Variant: *dường như*, but this term has a big difference with *hình như*. *Dường* ‘false, falsely’ *như* ‘like’ despite the fact that many have mistakenly use it interchangeably as *hình như*.

Chính quyền hình như muốn mọi người dân phải nghèo. ‘The government seems to want every citizen to be poor.’ (It seems that the government wants the masses to be poor.)

Chị ta hình như rất thích anh. ‘She seems to like you very much.’

Dường như anh ấy có điều muốn giấu tôi. ‘He is seemingly hiding something that he doesn’t want me to know.’

✽ **Rất đáng** ‘be very worth (doing), ought to’ subjectively recommending one to do something: *rất đáng đọc* ‘worth reading’ *rất đáng xem* ‘worth seeing’ ... This is one of the hidden passive forms. For negation, replace *rất* with *không*: *không đáng* ‘not worth’

Người ấy rất đáng trách. ‘That person is very worth being blamed.’ (That person ought to be blamed.)

Tội ác của họ thật rất đáng nguyên rủa. ‘Their crimes are worth being condemned.’ (They ought to be condemned for their crimes.)

Tội trốn thuế không đáng bị tù. ‘Tax evasion is not a crime for imprisonment.’

D. Phó Từ Thái Độ – Modals for Manner

Phó từ thái độ ‘modals for manner’ bring to bear the speaker’s viewpoint upon an object, an event or human personality: These modals are used when one wishes to show respect to the listener: *kính, làm ơn, thưa, xin, ...*

✽ **Kính** ‘respectfully’ is used, in formal occasions, for polite requests to an audience of one or of many: *kính mời, kính thưa, kính vâng*. It may be used directly or indirectly.

Kính mời quý vị an tọa ‘May (I) request the honor of your being seated.’ (Please be seated)

Kính thưa quý vị khán giả. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, our beloved audience.’

Kính thưa quý vị độc giả. ‘Dear readers,’

Kính thưa toàn thể đồng bào. ‘Dear fellow countrymen,’ (As the chief of state addressing the nation.)

Kính vâng ‘respectfully obey’ is a very polite affirmative reply when being asked by a revered or important figure. For less formality, *xin* is used in place of *kính*.

– *Chúng con kính vâng lời ngài.* ‘We (as children) respectfully obey your words.’ (reply of religious attendees to a revered priest or monk)

✽ **Xin** ‘may I beg’ is used in informal occasions, for polite requests to an audience of one or many: *xin mời, xin hỏi, xin, xin vâng, ... Xin* can also be used for negative effect.

Xin mời quý vị an tọa. ‘May (I) beg your honor of being seated.’ (Please be seated.)

Xin hỏi ở đây ai là Nguyễn Văn A? ‘May I ask who Nguyễn Văn A is?’

Xin mời ra khỏi đây ngay. ‘May I ask you to leave here instantly?’

✱ **Kính xin** ‘respectfully request’ for more formality, this modal is occasionally used: *kính xin mời, kính xin thưa, kính xin hỏi, ...*

Kính xin mời chú vị an tọa. ‘We respectfully request the honor of your being seated.’ (Please be seated.)

Kính xin thỉnh chú vị dùng trai chay. ‘We respectfully request the honor of your attending our vegetarian meal.’

✱ **Làm ơn** ‘do favor’; actually this modal is for a request for a favor from someone ‘if you please’. In daily conversation this is very commonly used:

Làm ơn cho tôi quá giang đến chợ. ‘Please give me a ride to the market.’

Làm ơn giúp tôi một tay đưa cái này lên xe. ‘Please give me a hand to load this onto the truck.’

Idiomatic expression: *Làm ơn mắc oán* ‘One’s getting requited with resentment for his good turn.’

Làm ơn thì chớ kể công. ‘When you do someone a favor, don’t mention it.’

Làm ơn phải làm ơn cho trót. ‘Once (you) offer to help someone, (you) should help him/her with your best.’

IV. Thì của Phó Từ – Tenses of Modals

Although Vietnamese verbs do not conjugate, they do have tenses, especially modals. Placing a time marker incorrectly creates an undesired meaning. Except for modals of manner, which never need a time marker, other types do need time markers for tenses.

A. Tiếng Chỉ Thì Trước Phó Từ – Time Marker before the Modals

Time markers come before modals and give a different meaning than their postposition after modals to denote a solid of assumed tense.

✱ **Bắt phải** ‘to be compelled to’; add *đã* or *sẽ* before *không*. Add *định* ‘going to’ after *không*.

Người ta không bắt phải làm như vậy. ‘They don’t force us to do that.’
(We aren’t compelled to do that.) (assumed present)

> *Người ta không bắt chúng tôi phải làm như vậy.* ‘They do not force us to do that.’ (solid past)

Người ta đã không bắt chúng tôi phải làm như vậy. ‘They do not force us to do that.’ (solid past)

Người ta sẽ không bắt chúng tôi phải làm như vậy. ‘They will not force us to do that.’ (solid future)

Người ta sẽ không định bắt chúng tôi phải làm như vậy. They are not going to force us to do that.’ (assumed future)

✳ **Buộc phải** ‘be forced to’; add *đã* or *sẽ* before *không*.

Nếu được tự do, người dân đã không buộc phải chống lại. ‘Living in a free society, the masses weren’t forced to resist (the authorities).’

✳ **Chắc** ‘must, for sure’ add *không* or *chưa* before the modal and replace *rồi* for *đâu* (if any).

Anh không chắc đến đâu. ‘He is not sure to come after all.’ (assumed future)

Chị ấy chưa/không chắc đã tốt nghiệp đại học đâu. ‘She might not have graduated from college.’ (assumed past)

Anh ấy chưa/không chắc đến đòi nợ. ‘Perhaps he doesn’t come for the debt.’ (assumed present)

Chắc gì ‘not sure’ has a negative connotation. It functions as an adverb as well:

Nó chưa/không chắc gì biết chuyện của chúng ta. ‘It is not sure he might know about our story.’ (Whether he knows about our story is certainly unknown.) (assumed present)

Chị ấy chưa/không chắc gì được nhận vào làm việc. ‘It’s not certain that she is hired.’ (Whether she is hired or not is not certain.) (assumed present)

For future assumption, only *không* is used:

Nó sẽ không chắc gì biết chuyện của chúng ta. ‘It will not be sure he might be able to know about our story.’ (Whether he will know about our story is certainly unknown.)

Chị ấy sẽ không chắc gì được nhận vào làm việc. ‘It will not be certain that she will be hired.’ (Whether she will be hired or not is not certain.)

✳ **Có thể** ‘could, possibly’; add *không* or *khó* ‘hardly’ before *có thể* and add *được* (if any) after the main verb:

Chị ta là người hay đa nghi, người ta khó có thể lừa được chị ấy. ‘She is a very skeptical person; they can not/hardly lead her down the garden path.’

✳ **Dám ... lắm** ‘very likely that, might have’ add *không* before the modal and replace *lắm* for *đâu*.

Bà ấy không dám đến nhà anh đâu. ‘She is not very likely to have gone to your place.’ (It is not very likely that she has gone to your place.) (present)

Người ấy không dám bỏ về Việt Nam đâu. ‘He might not have gone back to Vietnam already.’ (present)

✳ **Rất đáng** ‘be very worth (doing), ought to’ subjectively recommending one to do something: *rất đáng đọc* ‘worth reading’ *rất đáng xem* ‘worth seeing’ ... This is one of hidden passive forms. For negation, replace *rất* with *không*: *không đáng* ‘not worth’

Người ấy không đáng trách. ‘That person isn’t very worth being blamed.’
(That person oughtn’t to be blamed.) (past)

Việc làm đó của bà ấy không đáng nguyên rủa. ‘Her crime is not worth being condemned.’ (She oughtn’t to be condemned for what she has done.)
(past)

B. Tiếng Chỉ Thì Sau Phó Từ – Time Marker after the Modals

To express high degree of assumption or uncertainty, time markers are placed after the modals. Adverbs *không*, *đang*, and *sẽ* are the most common time markers.

✧ **Có thể** ‘could, possibly’; This modal is applied for probability:

Chị ấy có thể sẽ đòi được tiền. ‘She will probably be able to get her money back.’

Người ta có thể đã thủ tiêu anh ấy rồi. ‘They might have purged him by killing him.’

Đám người ấy có thể sẽ bị thay thế trong nay mai. ‘That gang of people will possibly be replaced presently.’

✧ **Hình như** ‘seem’; for negation, add *không* after the modal. In some cases, *hình như* can be replaced with *dường như*.

Chính quyền hình như không muốn mọi người dân được giàu có.
‘The government doesn’t seem to want every citizen to become rich.’ (It seems that the government doesn’t want the masses to be rich.) (present)

Bà ta hình như không thích tôi. ‘She doesn’t seem to like me.’ (past)

Anh ấy dường như không thành thật với tôi. ‘He is seemingly not honest to me.’ (He does not seem honest to me.) (past)

Em hình như đã quen với lối sống mới. ‘You (to a woman) seem to be used to the new way of life.’ (assumed past)

Họ hình như sẽ tiến hành điều tra về cái chết của anh ta. ‘They seem to begin an investigation the cause of his death.’ (assumed future)

✧ **Hình như** ‘seem’ can also be used in unreal subjunctive:

Anh có cảm giác em hình như không thương anh. ‘I have a sense that you don’t seem to be in love with me.’ (assumed present)

Mọi người đều thấy hình như sẽ xảy ra một chuyện gì ghê gớm.
‘Everybody senses that something will terribly happen.’ (assumed future)



Tóm Tắt – Summary

Phó từ ‘modal’ is a part of speech that adds meaning to the verb in a way that an adverb fails to do in terms of semantic differentiability. Though they look very much like adverbs, modals can replace adverbs whereas adverbs can’t replace modals.

- Modals are basically categorized in two forms: single modals and compound modals. Single modals are *chịu, dám, hãy, liệu, chắc, nên, thà*. Many of these can take negative and interrogative forms.
- There are four main types of modals: *phó từ ý chí, phó từ suy luận, phó từ suy diễn, phó từ thái độ*.
- *Phó từ ý chí* ‘voluntary modals’ are *chịu, dám, hãy, thà*.
- *Phó từ suy diễn* ‘modals for inference’ are *chắc, có thể, dám ... lắm, hình như, rất đáng*.
- *Phó từ suy luận* ‘modals denoting reasons’ *bắt phải, buộc phải, liệu*.
- *Phó từ thái độ* ‘modals for manner’ are *kính xin, kính xin, làm ơn*.
- Modals do take tense markers. For negation, add *không* before the modals, and/or *đâu* at the end of the same sentence if needed.
- Only with *hình như*, the negative marker *không* is added before the main verb.



*Xưa nay những bạn má hồng,
Thà hầu quân tử hơn chồng tiểu nhân.*

‘Oh my dear fellow girl;
Better be a concubine to a noble
than the wife of a lowborn man.’