

LINGUISTICS AND VIETNAMESE LINGUISTICS

EXPLORING OPENING SEQUENCES AND ADDRESSING STRATEGIES IN VIETNAMESE TELEPHONE REQUESTS: A STUDY OF POLITENESS AND POWER DYNAMICS

NGUYEN TAT THANG* - PHAM HONG HAI** - TRAN TIN NGHI***

ABSTRACT: This research investigates the opening sequences and addressing strategies employed in Vietnamese telephone requests, specifically focusing on politeness and power dynamics. Three telephony query processing models serve as the conceptual framework for this study. Eighty college students with diverse majors participated, and discourse completion tests were utilized as survey instruments. The findings reveal that affirmative words are typically used by Vietnamese speakers in their queries (truy vấn), ranking them first or second in Ervin-Tripp's six-category classification. Moreover, speakers demonstrate respect on the phone by employing kinship terms like "anh" (older brother), "chị" (older sister), "chú" (uncle), and "bác" (aunt) when addressing strangers. Pronouns addressing the speaker's interlocutor are omitted when conversing with individuals of equal power. Overall, this study offers valuable insights into Vietnamese telephone etiquette and can serve as a resource for teaching Vietnamese to non-native speakers.

KEY WORDS: content analysis; conversation analysis; conversational opening; conversational opening section; opening sequences.

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1. Introduction

Addressing strangers and making requests on the telephone can be challenging for Vietnamese speakers due to the importance of using appropriate pronouns. While understanding how to address others is crucial in effective communication, personal address is a sociolinguistic variable that can be complex and variable (Philipsen & Carbaugh, 1986). This is particularly true in telephone conversations, where non-verbal behavior is lost, making it essential to rely on verbal communication alone (Gallois & Callan, 1997). For language learners, sociolinguistic or pragmatic transfer can occur when using the rules of their native speech community when interacting with members of the host speech community or speaking in a second language (Wolfson, 1989). This can lead to miscommunication or offense when inappropriate strategies or terms of address are used. Therefore, the aim of this research is twofold: first, to investigate how Vietnamese speakers address each other on the telephone, and second, to analyze request strategies when seeking to speak to a third party. The study focuses on the addressing systems and request strategies of Vietnamese students in two situations: talking to a person of higher power and to a person of equal power. The goal is to draw implications for the teaching and learning of Vietnamese and English, particularly with regards to telephone communication. Additionally, this study seeks to determine if power differentials affect request strategies when speaking to a person of higher power versus equal power.

2. Literature Review

The complexities of addressing systems and pragmatic transfer can pose difficulties for language learners. This literature review explores the relationship between addressing systems, pragmatic transfer, and speech acts in the context of requesting behavior. The review aims to provide an understanding of how different cultures and languages influence the ways people address each other and perform speech acts, specifically focusing on Vietnamese learners of English.

Regarding addressing systems, forms of address serve as signals of the relationship between individuals (Gallois & Callan, 1997). Naming systems can vary significantly across cultures (O'Sullivan, 1994). Vietnamese lacks a neutral pronoun like 'you' in English, and instead, people use

*Assoc.Prof.Dr; Da Lat University; Email: thangnt@dlu.edu.vn

**Dr; University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; Email: phamhonghai@hcmussh.edu.vn

***Dr; Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; Email: nghitt@huit.edu.vn

forms of address typically used for relatives (Pho Thanh Cat, 1999). Different forms of address are used based on age and social status, adding complexity to communication.

In terms of Pragmatic Transfer, Pragmatic transfer refers to the inappropriate transfer of speech act strategies from one language to another (Thomas, 1983). Language learners often struggle to accurately convey the intended pragmatic force in the target language (Kuhn et al., 1991). Pragmatic transfer occurs universally, including among Vietnamese learners of English, due to differences in language usage patterns (Wierzbicka, 1991). Moreover, Speech acts involve performing actions through language. They can be classified into various types, including representatives, declaratives, expressives, commissives, and directives (Searle, 1969). Finegan et al. (1992) added verdictives as a category, which includes assessments and judgments. Requests are a subcategory of directives. Understanding speech acts is crucial in analyzing requesting behavior.

Requests can be categorized based on their hearer-oriented or speaker-oriented perspectives (Kuhn et al., 1991). Vietnamese request utterances predominantly belong to the hearer-oriented perspective (Nguyen Xuan Vang, 1990). Different perspectives reflect cultural and linguistic influences on requesting behavior. Requesting behavior is complex and can be categorized into various types, including request, ask, command, invite, order, instruct, and beg (Fraser, 1975). Verbal and non-verbal actions are expected in response to a request (Churchill, 1978; Ellis, 2005; Hatch & Long, 1980; Kuhn et al., 1991; Trosborg, 1994). The nature of the relationship between interlocutors and the context affects requesting behavior. Request strategies vary in terms of directness and indirectness. Kuhn et al. (1991) classified request strategies on a nine-point scale, ranging from direct to indirect strategies. Other researchers, such as Searle and Fukushima and Iwata, proposed different perspectives on indirect speech acts and request formulas. The level of directness in requests influences the illocutionary intent apparent in the locution.

Politeness is an essential factor in requesting behavior and is often associated with indirect language use (Zhang, 1995). However, politeness and indirectness are not the sole factors at play in speech acts. Other factors, such as age, gender, social factors, and the nature of the request, also impact the degree of indirectness used.

Addressing systems, pragmatic transfer, and speech acts in requesting behavior are complex and influenced by cultural and linguistic factors. Understanding these aspects is vital for language learners, particularly Vietnamese learners of English. The literature review provides a comprehensive overview of the research in this area, shedding light on the intricacies of addressing systems, pragmatic transfer, and speech.

Vietnamese has a very complicated system of person reference. It comprises three grammatical subclasses which are (1) common nouns (kinship and “status” terms), (2) people’s names, and (3) personal pronouns. Thu Ngo - Len Unsworth (2011), in *Vietnamese person reference system as an Appraisal resource*, has drawn valuable conclusions about the system of personal pronouns in Vietnamese: “...although the system of personal pronouns in Vietnamese is not as frequently used in interactions as common nouns (kinship and status terms) and people’s name, it is actually a very intricate system. The choice of a person pronoun for self reference or for addressing other people expresses the speaker/writer’s concept of power, solidarity and formality through which the speaker/writer’s evaluative stance is implied”. In this work, the author has identified the issues of: outlining the appraisal system for English, explaining elements in the Vietnamese person reference system, and the way this system contributes to appraisal resources in Vietnamese. It will enable language teachers to provide Vietnamese learners of English with language resources to help them engage fully in the normal evaluative aspects of language use when the linguistic resources for doing so are substantially different in Vietnamese.

3. Methodology

- **Participants:** The study involved 80 university students from various academic disciplines, with an equal gender distribution of 40 males and 40 females. All participants fell within the age range of 18 to 22.

- **Instruments:** To assess the participants' communication patterns, a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was utilized. This test, following the guidelines proposed by Andrew D. Cohen (1996), comprised two scenarios. In the first scenario, the participants were asked to call a friend, but instead, the person who answered was their supposed roommate. The second scenario involved the participants seeking a day off and contacting their supervisor's associate for assistance. For each scenario, there were two variations: one where the participant heard a male voice, and another where they heard a female voice. This allowed for an examination of the addressing systems employed by the participants.

- **3. Data Analysis:** The pronouns used by the participants to address their interlocutors were categorized into different types, and the proportions of each type were calculated. Additionally, the content of the requests was analyzed based on existing literature on communication patterns.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Forms of Address

When the participants heard a male voice, a majority of fifty-nine percent (59%) (47/80) of the respondents made their requests without using pronouns to address their interlocutors. Similarly, in situations where the interlocutors were females, fifty-five percent (55%) (44/80) of the participants employed the same strategy. Overall, fifty-seven percent (57%) of the requests (91/160) omitted pronouns to address the hearers.

These findings indicate that Vietnamese telephone requests often take the form of imperatives, ranking as the most direct and straightforward mode of communication. This aligns with Kuhn et al.'s (1989, p.18) nine-point scale of indirectness, where imperatives fall under the category of "Mood derivable." Furthermore, these results correspond to Ervin-Tripp's (1976) six-type requesting classification, where imperatives constitute the second category.

However, as discussed in the previous literature, the syntactic forms alone do not fully capture the illocutionary force of Vietnamese phone requests. Instead, lexical and phrasal elements play a crucial role in conveying the true intention of the Head Act. This aspect will be further explored in the subsequent section.

4.2. Address Forms on the Telephone to a Person of Higher Power

Tables 1a and 1b present the percentages of pronouns used by phone callers to address their male and female higher-power interlocutors.

Table 1a. Percentages of Pronouns (x/40) Used by Phone Callers to Address Their Male, Higher-Power Interlocutors

Pronouns	Anh	Chú	Bác	No pronouns
Percentage	30%	20%	2.5%	47.5%

Table 1b. Percentages of Pronouns (x/40) Used by Phone Callers to Address Their Female, Higher-Power Interlocutors

Pronouns	Chị	Cô	Bác	No pronouns
Percentage	37.5%	15%	5%	42.5%

The pronouns 'Anh', 'Chị', 'Chú', and 'Bác' are used to address individuals belonging to the older generation, who are generally respected in Vietnamese culture. Phone callers employ these pronouns to demonstrate politeness and linguistic subtlety. Additionally, these pronouns serve to bridge the gap

of formality when communicating with strangers, fostering a sense of familiarity and strengthening the relationship between speakers and hearers.

When interacting with higher-power individuals, such as superiors or authority figures, phone callers employ these strategies with the same intention. However, the most frequently used pronouns are 'Anh' (to address a man) and 'Chị' (to address a woman). Thirty percent of the participants addressed their interlocutors as 'Anh', a pronoun that can be used in various situations when the speakers are unsure of the age of their interlocutors. 'Anh' (for a man) or 'Chị' (for a woman) can be used to address a younger person when they are not acquainted or are engaging in their first conversation. These pronouns are chosen to demonstrate politeness and linguistic subtlety when addressing individuals of higher power.

However, it is important to note that not all Vietnamese people express respect through their choice of pronouns, as forty-five percent (45%) of the requests exclude pronouns when addressing higher-power individuals, despite their position of authority.

4.3. Address Forms on the Telephone to People of Equal Power

The two following tables present the percentage of address forms collected for phone callers addressing their male and female interlocutors of equal power.

Table 2a. Percentages of Pronouns (x/40) Used by Phone Callers to Address Their Male, Equal-Power Interlocutors

Pronouns	Bạn	Anh	No pronouns
Percentage	20%	10%	70%

Table 2b. Percentages of Pronouns (x/40) Used by Phone Callers to Address Their Female, Equal-Power Interlocutors

Pronouns	Chị	Cô	Bạn	No pronouns
Percentage	12.5%	2.5%	17.2%	67.5%

The results indicate that sixty-nine percent (69%) (55/80) of the requests excluded pronouns when addressing interlocutors of equal power. This finding suggests that, in phone conversations, people tend to omit pronouns when addressing individuals who hold the same level of authority.

Nineteen percent (19%) of the requests included the pronoun 'Bạn', which signifies that the speakers perceive their interlocutors as friends. Only eleven percent (11%) of the requests utilized the pronouns 'Anh' or 'Chị', and only one out of 80 requests used the pronoun 'Cô' to address a female interlocutor of equal power.

These findings demonstrate that the majority of requests exclude pronouns when addressing interlocutors of equal power. Vietnamese students tend to omit pronouns more frequently when conversing with individuals of equal power compared to those in positions of higher power. Pronouns such as 'Anh' (for a man) and 'Chị' (for a woman) are primarily employed by phone callers when addressing interlocutors in higher positions, while the pronoun 'Bạn' is used for individuals of equal power.

4.4. Request Strategies

When discussing Request Strategies, Yong-Ju Rue and Grace Qiao Zhang (2008), in *Request Strategies - A comparative study in Mandarin Chinese and Korean*, discussed fully issues such as Head acts, Internal modifications, External modifications, Openers, Sequential management,...; These two authors drew remarkable conclusions: “In general, the data in this study shows that the Chinese are more indirect than the Koreans. They used more indirect strategies in head acts. In discourse, Chinese speakers made their requests sound more indirect as well. They employed about a 30% greater number of turns, along with more complex negotiation sequences than the Koreans. The Chinese group also presented more hedged outcomes”; “The high distribution of direct head acts and internal modifications occurring in Korean can be explained by its remarkably rich honorific

system. While direct requests may be considered impolite in other languages, this is not necessarily the case in Korean where the apparent impoliteness of a direct request is often mitigated by add-on honorifics". (p.293, 294). The similarities and differences in request patterns present in the given Chinese and Korean data, the intricate relation between request strategies and social factors (such as power and distance), the influence of methodology on data, the applicability of so-called universals to East Asian languages, and the problems of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic communication,...are convincingly discussed in this study. The results of the study above have suggestive significance in the study of communication strategies and forms of address of Vietnamese people. Vietnamese people tend to use indirect requests as shown by the percentage of Lexical and Phrasal Downgraders used in requests to a person of equal power (friend) and to a person of higher power (supervisor).

4.4.1. The most common syntactic form used for requesting, based on 160 responses provided by 40 participants, is as follows:

ALLO (greeting) → XIN LỖI (excusing) → CÓ THỂ (address term) → LÀM ƠN (do a favor) → CHO → (self-addressing) → 'GẶP X' (connect to X) → 'ĐƯỢC KHÔNG (A)' (Question word)?

Self-addressing will not be analyzed in this essay as it requires further study. If a request includes an appropriate pronoun to address the hearer, the politeness of the request is likely to increase. However, fifty-seven percent (57%) of the requests excluded pronouns. This does not imply that Vietnamese requests on the telephone are direct. Language learners of Vietnamese and Vietnamese learners of other languages should be aware of this, as starting from the most imperative form 'cho gặp X' (let (me) meet X), which is the most direct and least polite, phone callers incorporate one or more downgraders to soften the requests.

Table 3. Percentages (x/160) of Lexical and Phrasal Downgraders

Có thể	Xin lỗi	Làm ơn	Được không (a)
57=36%	139=86%	83=52%	102=64%

Table 3 illustrates that 139 out of 160 requests (86%) included the phrase 'Xin lỗi' (excuse me). By utilizing this phrase, callers seek to apologize for interrupting the interlocutor's peace. This approach allows

4.4.2. Power deferential in requests

As stated above, the politeness and indirectness of Vietnamese requests on telephone conversations cannot be seen through their syntactic forms. On the contrary, the downgraders play an important part.

Table 4. The percentage of downgraders used in requests to a person of equal power (friend) and to a person of higher power (supervisor)

Downgraders	Có thể		Xin lỗi		Làm ơn		Được không a	
The speaker's interlocutor	Friend	supervisor	Friend	Supervisor	Friend	Supervisor	Friend	supervisor
Percentage = x/80	15=19%	42=53%	39=49%	76=95%	25=31%	47=59%	28=35%	74=93%

Table 4 shows that ninety-three (93) percent of the requests to a person of higher power include 'Được không a', 95% 'xin lỗi', 59% 'làm ơn' and 53% 'có thể'. The results do indicate that the speakers are polite and indirect in making a request to their supervisor. In comparison with requests to a friend, the requests to a supervisor are more polite and more indirect.

The findings, to a certain extent, represent the fact that the power distance in Vietnam is high, and it goes in agreement with Hofstede (1980) who states that "people in cultures with a high power

distance [think that] more powerful people must be deferred to and not argued with, especially in public" (Galloir & Callan, 1997, p.28).

5. Conclusions

The results of the study go in agreement with researchers who state that Vietnamese people tend to use indirect requests. However, this understanding can be only acquired in cases when we have a look at both the syntactic forms and the semantic of the requests.

Vietnamese requests on the telephone have the syntactic forms of *Impositives*. The study discovered a bound and fix Head Act "CHO GẶP X" (Let (me) meet X) in most of the requests provided by the students.

Pragmatic transfer can occur if Vietnamese learners translate word for word. Foreign learners of Vietnamese should have a look at both the syntactic and semantic structure of the requests by considering the downgraders used by the speakers.

By using the downgrader(s), the speakers semantically soften the requests, thus unconsciously transfer the syntactically direct utterances into conventionally indirect ones.

Some downgraders can go freely into the requests whereas some others require certain rules of concurrence. The learners should be aware of the linear order as well as the concurrence principles of these downgraders, thus producing well-formed, meaningful and appropriate requests.

The study shows that Vietnamese people tend to be more indirect and more polite when making a request to a person of higher power than to a person of equal power. This is partly due to the cultural habit, and partly due to the perceptions of power distance of the Vietnamese.

Terms of address used by Vietnamese speakers vary according to the speakers' attitudes and culture habits. The majority of the speakers exclude the pronouns addressing their interlocutors. However, this phenomenon does not mean that the requests belong to the scale called *Impositives*.

Hopefully, this study may bring out some useful implications for the teaching of as well as learning of Vietnamese. Language learners should be aware of the syntax and the semantics of the utterances, thus avoiding to the least the pragmatic transfer in using the target language.

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Khám phá chuỗi mở đầu và chiến lược xưng hô trong các yêu cầu qua điện thoại bằng tiếng Việt: Nghiên cứu về phép lịch sự và động thái quyền lực

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này xác định các chuỗi mở đầu và các chiến lược xưng hô được sử dụng trong các yêu cầu qua điện thoại của người Việt, đặc biệt tập trung vào phép lịch sự và động thái quyền lực. Ba mô hình xử lý câu hỏi qua điện thoại được xem như khung khái niệm cho nghiên cứu này. Tám mươi sinh viên đại học ở nhiều chuyên ngành khác nhau đã tham gia nghiên cứu, và các bài kiểm tra hoàn thành diễn ngôn đã được sử dụng làm công cụ khảo sát. Các kết quả cho thấy những từ khẳng định thường được người nói tiếng Việt chú trọng sử dụng trong các câu hỏi, và xếp hạng chúng ở vị trí thứ nhất hoặc thứ hai trong phân loại phạm trù của Ervin-Tripp. Ngoài ra, người nói thể hiện sự tôn trọng trên điện thoại bằng cách sử dụng các từ ngữ chỉ quan hệ thân tộc như "anh" (older brother), "chị" (older sister), "chú" (uncle), and "bác" (aunt) khi xưng hô với người lạ. Các đại từ xưng hô với người đối thoại bị lược bỏ khi nói chuyện với những người có quyền lực ngang nhau. Tóm lại, nghiên cứu này cung cấp những hiểu biết có giá trị về phép xã giao qua điện thoại của người Việt và có thể được xem như nguồn tài liệu để dạy tiếng Việt cho những người không phải là người bản ngữ.

Từ khóa: phân tích nội dung; phân tích hội thoại; mở đầu hội thoại; chiến lược xưng hô; chuỗi mở đầu; lịch sự; quyền lực trong giao tiếp.