

Manifestation of Relationship Between Language and Culture Through the Use of Address Expressions in Vietnamese

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Abstract

Every certain language always has a close relationship with its own cultural-social context. Within the scope of Vietnamese, address expressions, as a particular linguistic trait, reflects the bond between language and culture. By analyzing the socio-cultural features of language that affected the way Vietnamese people address each other as well as making some comparison between Vietnamese language and some European languages, this paper explores the characteristics of the address terms and investigates the manifestation of relationship between language and culture through the use of address expressions in Vietnamese.

Keywords: Language, culture, relationship, address expressions, Vietnamese.

Introduction:

Language stores the essence of a nation and reflects the features of a nation's culture. In other words, language is inseparably connected to culture, in which culture values are exposed and supported by language. Hence, it is necessary to thoroughly understand what language is and what culture is in order to clarify their relationship.

The definition of the two terms language and culture is diversified. This paper pursues the following definitions about culture and language: "Culture is the kind of knowledge which we learn from other people, either by direct instruction or by watching their behaviour" (Hudson, 1990); "Culture is the system of spiritual and material values that human being has created throughout history" (Phung, 1975:7). Language is "the systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs or written symbols in a human society for communication and self-expression" Crystal (1971, 1992); "Language is an anonymous, collective and unconscious art; the result of the creativity of thousands of generations" (Sapir, 1921).

Language has various functions, such as describing the reality, expressing ideas, communicating, recording, helping thinking, sensationalizing. Besides, it also has psychological, artistic and religious functions, which are more or less overlap with the function of culture. Hantrais (1989) proposed that “culture is the beliefs and practices governing the life of a society for which a particular language is the vehicle of expression”. As a result, culture influenced everyone’s views and people described their idea by using the language sculptured by that culture. However, Emmitt and Pollock (1997) argued against the difference in how people see the world depending on the different languages they speak though they might share similarities in behavioral backgrounds or cultural situations. In short, culture influences language and takes an importance role in their relationship. In other words, language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality.

In Vietnamese, the relationship between language and culture is revealed at every linguistic levels, range from phoneme to text level. This paper is mainly focused on analyzing the relationship between language and culture through the use of address expressions. Besides, the socio-cultural factors: prestige, relationships and attitudes of Vietnamese in their using address expressions are analyzed. Moreover, some comparison between Vietnamese and some European languages are also discussed.

Characteristics of Address Expressions in Vietnamese

Most languages have different ways to denote the speaker and the listener. In comparison with English or other European languages, the Vietnamese system of referential address is much more complex and diversified. For example, the counterparts of English address terms *I* and *you* in the Vietnamese system have “dozens of linguistic forms of various grammatical subclasses” (Luong 1990: 2). The referential address of the interlocutor in Vietnamese can be done with address terms such as personal pronouns, proper nouns, title (status terms, occupational titles; i.e. *giáo sư* [professor], *bác sĩ* [doctor], *kỹ sư* [engineer]) and kinship terms (Luong 1990; Cooke 1968; Nguyen 1999; Cu 2001). All can be “alternatively used to refer to the addressor, the addressee(s), as well as third parties in social interactions” (Luong 1990: 4).

For instance, according to Ngo (2006), in the domain of personal pronouns, Vietnamese can be divided as the following table:

| Type | Persons | Addressor | Addressee | Third referent | person |
|----------|------------------|-----------|-----------------------|---------------------|--------|
| Singular | Tôi | | / | | |
| | Tao | | Mày, mi | | |
| | Ta | | / | | |
| | Tớ | | / | Nó, hắ, y | |
| | Mình | | / | | |
| | / | | Mình | | |
| Plural | Chúng tôi | | / | | |
| | Chúng tao | | Chúng mày, bây, chúng | | |
| | Ta/ chúng ta | | bây | Chúng, chúng nó, họ | |
| | Chúng tớ | | / | | |
| | Mình, chúng mình | | / | | |

As shown from the table above, in Vietnamese, the usage of personal pronouns basically indicates intimacy among people which have close relationships such as friends or coevals), or implies disrespect and arrogance towards the other party (addressee or third person pronominal referent). The most neutral personal pronoun to be used in social situations is *tôi* (I). However, the term *tôi* also “presupposes and implies not only the negation of solidarity but also the lack of deference towards the referent” (Luong 1990: 129).

Another important part of Vietnamese address system is kinship terms. As defined by Cooke, kinship terms “are nouns, most of which have a primary meaning denoting blood kin” (1968: 125). Nguyen (1970) claims that there are various kinship terms which appear so frequently, so that it is not only hard for foreign learners of Vietnamese but even problematical for Vietnamese natives to use them properly. According to Luong (1990: 37), when addressing kinfolk or non-relatives, “Vietnamese kinship terms are used not only for third-party reference, but pervasively also in address and self-reference” to deliver the degree of intimacy or familiarity (disrespectful or respectful, intimate or distant).

Most of kinship terms in English or other European languages have their equivalents in Vietnamese but not vice versa. For example, such terms which are translated as ‘older uncle’ (*bác trai*), ‘younger uncle’ (*chú*), ‘older aunt’ (*bác gái*), ‘younger aunt’ (*đì*), ‘maternal grandmother’ (*bà ngoại*), ‘paternal grandfather’ (*ông nội*), and ‘male/female cousin’ (*anh/chị họ*) have no equivalents in English.

All in all, compared to European languages, the features of address expressions in Vietnamese show its unique cultural character. While pronouns in European language have important role (center factor) among address expressions and have high neutral expressivity of word, the case in

Vietnamese is reversed. Additionally, in European language, kinship terms are rarely being shifted to address expressions whereas in Vietnamese this situation is common which leads to the fact that kinship terms tend to familialize social relations (especially in office communication, e.g. the words such as *chú* [uncle], *bác* [uncle], *anh* [older/big brother], *em* [younger/little brother/sister], *cháu* [nephew/niece] are used frequently instead of pronouns; or occupational expressions, e.g. director, manager).

In brief, there are five features of the Vietnamese address expression. The first one is to *have large quantity*. Second, the address expressions are *not homogeneous in use*. To be more specific, the same address word can participate in different communication roles, e.g. The address word “*mình*” (I, you) can be either first person pronoun or second person pronoun. The address word “*ta*” (I, we) can be used as either single or plural forms.). The third feature is that the address expressions in Vietnamese *have high rate of homonym and synonym phenomena*. Because many address words proceed from kinship words, the overlap between address words and kinship words is the fourth feature of Vietnamese address expressions. Lastly, Vietnamese address expressions *have high affective meaning and low neutral expressivity of word*.

Socio-cultural Features of the Use of Address Expressions in Vietnam

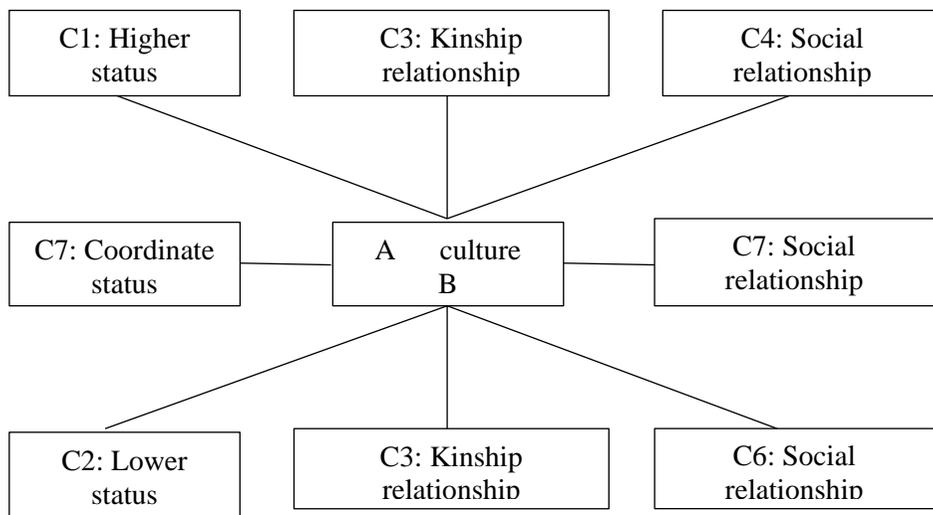
Socioculturally, Vietnamese people value modesty and harmonious relations with each other because Vietnamese culture connects deeply with social factors such as *prestige* which obtained with social status/role, age, educational level and occupation, *relationships* which involved blood kin and acquaintanceship (intimate or distant) and *attitudes* which illustrated the degree of respect towards others. In actual communication, the use of Vietnamese address expressions is very complicated. Both the usage and the meanings of them are inseparably “linked to the power, solidarity, and formality dimensions in the relations” among all parties (the addressor, addressee and the referred parties) (Luong 1990: 5). As a result, in order to choose the appropriate terms in communication, users need to consider not only the socio-cultural factors, such as social status, relationship, attitudes and feelings of the speaker and the listener, but also the formality of the context (Luong 1990; Nguyen 1999).

Besides, the attitudes and feelings of the speaker and the listener cannot be ignored when choosing address expressions. The election or alteration of address term is decided by ones’ attitude or feelings towards their interlocutor. Take an excerpt in the representative realistic novel of the early 20th century “*Tắt đèn*” [When the light is out] written by the well-known Vietnamese author Ngô Tất Tố (1937) as an example. In chapter 18, in the conversation between the heroine Dậu and the gaolers, at first, because

of concern and anxiety for her husband, Dậu was begging the gaolers and called them *ông* and appointed herself as *cháu*, i.e. “Hai *ông* làm phúc nói với *ông* lí hãy cho *cháu* khất” [Please, Mister, I am begging you to let me delay the debt until next time]. In this case, the address term *ông* is used to address the person with higher/superior social status while *cháu* is to demonstrate a person with much lower social position. Then when Dậu’s husband facing a death threaten, Dậu changed her address expressions towards the gaoler from *ông-cháu* to *ông-tôi*, which made her equal to them, i.e. “Chồng *tôi* đang ốm, *ông* không được phép hành hạ” [My husband is sick, you have no right to maltreat him]. However, the gaolers did not take Dậu seriously and continued to ill-treat Dậu and her husband, then Dậu attitude became more and more drastic with a fierce resistance. At this point, Dậu totally shifted her attitude towards the gaolers from apprehension to defiance. She called them *mày* and appointed herself *bà*; this addressing pair *mày-bà* is the extremely disregarded/despise expressions to address interlocutors, i.e. “*Mày* trói chồng *bà* đi, *bà* cho *mày* xem” [Dare you to tie my husband, I will show you hell]. Through the example, it can be seen that the use of address terms in Vietnamese helps to clearly show the personalities and relationships between the characters and indicate the changes in their relationships and attitudes towards each other. Thus, attitudes and feelings of the writer towards his/her characters are conveyed.

Manifestation of Relationship between Language and Culture through the Use of Address Expressions in Vietnamese

According to the theory of communication, a conversation is effective if participants perform their role properly. In Vietnamese, the use of address expressions clearly shows the culture in behavior of communication. The process of communication in relationships is governed by many different factors:



A, B: Participants

C: Factor governs the use of address expressions

→ Culture is shown by using suitable address expressions following the relationships in the model above

In reality, in communication, Vietnamese people are under the governance of kinship and social relationships. This governance is strengthened in terms of history and formation of customs, communication habits. If one person wants to communicate with another person, s/he usually refers to that person’s age with her/his family members or relatives in order to set up the suitable address expressions to suit the cultural habits or the regional culture. E.g. if the other partner is a male who is at the same age as your older brother, so he is addressed as “anh”, and you call yourself “em”; if the other partner is a female who is about the same age as your mother, so you call her “cô” (North dialect) or “đi” (South dialect) or even “bác” (more respectful way of addressing) and call yourself “cháu”.

Considered address expressions system, it can be said that the relationship between language and culture in Vietnamese is more plentiful than European languages. The following table illustrates the difference between Vietnamese and some European languages (English, Russian, and French):

| Language | First person | Second person |
|------------|--------------|---|
| English | I | You |
| Russian | Ja | tu/vư |
| French | Je | tu/ vous |
| Vietnamese | tôi/ta | cụ; ông/bà; bác; bố/mẹ; chú/cậu; cô/dì; anh/chị; nàng; mình; bạn; em; cậu; bạn; con; người; người; cháu |

In Vietnamese, the address expression “tôi” takes the center place. It can be used between all relationships (difference in age and social status). Its neutrality is higher than other first person address expressions, however, it cannot be compared to the address expressions in English, Russian or French. For example, “I” (English), Ja (Russian) or Je (French) could not create address expressions pairs in which the attitude of participants in a conversation contains affective meaning. In contrary, “tôi” in Vietnamese can perform affective meaning well.

E.g.

1. *Tôi và ông không thù oán gì sao ông lại gây sự với tôi?*

(*I and you have no hard feelings, why do you want to pick a quarrel with me?*)

→ Show unpleasant, upset or furious attitude

2. *Tôi và ông vào quán uống nước đi.*

(*Let I and you (us) have a drink together.*)

→ Show the close and equal relationship (may be between friends or colleague)

3. *Tôi đã gửi thư cho em, em có nhận được không?*

(*I sent you a letter, did you receive?*)

→ Show an intimate relationship (possibly between lovers)

4. *Tôi nói với anh mấy lần rồi?*

(*How many times did I tell you?*)

→ Show angry attitude

The examples above show that the relationship between “tôi” and other address expressions is not accurately decided by the high-low social status or old-young in age, but always have the flexible shift which depends on communication position and the attitude of speakers at different contexts.

Conclusion

It is a fact that language is important closely attached to culture. Culture encompasses and influences language presentation. Language and the use of language are inseparable from culture; it has the role to reflect, maintain and exchange culture.

Since the Vietnamese language concerns with the achievement of interpersonal relations between the self and the non-self, it influences people in the way they communicate with each other, especially through how they address their interlocutors. To address another person, the speaker needs to choose a proper linguistic form. Then, the intention of the speaker is both to establish communication and to initiate and maintain some kinds of relation with his/her interlocutor. By investigating the use of address expressions in Vietnamese, the relationship between language and culture is exposed.

The complexity of the relationship among address expressions in Vietnamese between the first person and the second person is just being presented partially. In reality, it depends on specific context, socio-cultural factors (prestige, relationship and attitudes) one's own experience. In other words, address expressions in Vietnamese is an open system, which reflects the characteristics of Vietnamese culture: flexibility and activeness.

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