

VIETNAMESE NORMS OF COMMUNICATION IN A TV TALK SHOW

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Abstract

In an age of globalization, learning another language must be closely accompanied by the acquisition of its culture. The learning of the Vietnamese language is no exception. Situated at the very heart of the Southeast Asia, Vietnam has attracted foreigners from all corners of the world to the nation for reasons related to business, tourism, education and other cultural activities. This article highlights some distinctive features of the Vietnamese language in terms of its sociolinguistics associations as observed in a popular national television program broadcast nationwide. The analysis of verbal and non-verbal usage in the show reveals that age, religion, occupation, gender and the social situation dramatically shape the way Vietnamese people communicate. Common characteristics specific to a collectivistic culture such as politeness, solidarity and smile are also identified. The paper offers a better insight into Vietnamese norms of communication and it particularly helps foreigners who are learning Vietnamese to have a sense of how Vietnamese language use is influenced by the social context.

Keywords: intercultural communication, language and gender, politeness, Vietnamese norms of communication, women's language

1. Introduction

The talk show “The Contemporaries,” broadcast every Sunday night on Vietnam Television VTV1, is an increasingly popular program honoring famous individuals who have made significant contributions to the country’s socio-economic growth and commending those whose actions set good examples to the public. In fact, the program has run since 2001. In this article, the show on 27 January 2009, which features a panel of guests to greet the Lunar New Year of Buffalo, will be analyzed in terms of its sociolinguistics. The purpose is to offer a better insight into Vietnamese norms of communication.

The talk show, also the final piece of the Lunar Year 2008, took place in the film studio of Vietnam Television and was broadcast on VTV1 Channel just a few days before the spring break of 2009. Unlike the other shows during the year, which usually center around only one guest, this special show marks the simultaneous appearance of five invited guests. They are highly welcomed as “people of the year”. The guests presented in the order of their appearance are: Ms. Thảo, a young female who is the chief representative of Vietnam Veterans of American Foundation; Mr. Tuệ and Ms. Yến, a middle-aged couple whose child suffers from autism; Mr. Liên, a middle-aged businesswoman who is a general director of 3A Insurance Company and Mr. Calisto, a 60 year-old Portuguese citizen who is the coach of the Vietnam national football team. There is also a brief participation of an unnamed potter and a nun. All of these guests are involved in a discussion initiated and led by the presenter, Ms. Tạ Bích Loan. Apart from Mr. Calisto who speaks English, others mainly use Vietnamese throughout their conversations. The talk show aims to encourage the guests to exchange their opinions as well as to share their own experiences in life failure and success with the audience. These visitors are also persuaded to predict the near future at the time when they are about to greet the biggest and most important festival in Vietnamese culture – the Tết holiday.¹

2. Politeness

To begin with, the first major sociolinguistic concept that obviously manifests in the talk show is politeness. According to Brown & Levinson, politeness strategies are developed in order to save the hearer’s “face”, the respect that an individual has for him or herself and to

¹ Tết, also known as Spring Festival or Lunar New Year, is the Vietnamese New Year. The main celebration lasts around 7 days, usually sometime between mid-January and mid- February.

maintain social relationships (1987: 61). In other words, politeness involves taking others' feelings into account, making the addressee feel good, being kind and friendly to minimize conflicts. Politeness is a key to build up and maintain social relationships. As the chat show is broadcast nationwide and its atmosphere is semi-formal, communicators primarily seek to keep their own faces and that of the others. The fact that people of different social backgrounds, ages, genders and occupations join the conversation diversifies linguistic and non-linguistic expressions of politeness. However, based on power difference and on the distance between the participants involved, two politeness systems can be worked out: hierarchy and solidarity.

Firstly, the hierarchical politeness system in which “the participants recognize and respect the social differences that place one in a superordinate position and the other in a subordinate position” (Scollon & Scollon, 1995: 45) is evident in this group interaction. Differences in age and religion separate the guests into two groups marked as “superordinate” and “subordinate”. The “subordinate” group always shows its respect to its “superordinate” counterpart. Expression of respect is conveyed by the use of special terms of address and certain stylistic devices. For instance, being the youngest member, Thảo always draws on appropriate terms of address when speaking to others. She calls Mr. Calisto “ông” and Mr. Tuệ “anh”. Both “ông” and “anh” are equivalent to “you” in English but they carry a respectful meaning in Vietnamese. “Ông” is suitable for Mr. Calisto because he is much older than Mr. Tuệ. Similarly, Thảo makes use of “chị” in her talk to other older females like Ms. Loan, Ms. Liên and Ms. Yến. Thảo also adds “thưa” (“please”) in front of the terms of address to show her respect. She refers to herself as “em” (“I”), noticing the age gap between her and other participants. “Em” puts her in a lower position and shows the intimacy she wants to build up with the other guests. Courtesy is also conveyed by function words that Thảo, Loan and Liên use to older hearers such as “dạ”, “thưa”, “vâng”, “ạ”, which are often translated as “yes” but are actually indicators of respect rather than agreement. It is very common for Vietnamese people to resort to these function words before embarking on their responses, especially when they talk to a senior person. Furthermore, respect is reflected when participants often encourage others to share their ideas by using indirect questions in the form of statements instead of interrogatives. For instance, the presenter elicits involvement by wondering “Tôi tự hỏi là ông có tin vào tương lai không” (“I wonder whether you believe in future prediction or not”), “Mọi người có thể cho biết có thấy thích thú không ạ?” (“Please can you tell me if you feel happy”). It has been observed that higher levels of indirectness result in higher levels of politeness. As Brown & Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983) claim, direct requests appear to be inherently impolite and face-threatening because they impose on the addressee's territory. Thus, the

preference for polite behavior is indirectness. Another sign of respect is demonstrated clearly when the nun appears on stage. The presenter welcomes her with the respectful title “Thích Đàm Lan” and uses a greeting phrase, also a prayer of Buddhists, “Nam Mô A Di Đà Phật” (“Buddha Amitabha”), with a bowing head. Other guests do not address the nun as “chị”, an appropriate term for older females, but call her “su thầy” (“an elder nun”), and then bow to her. Bowing is definitely a sign of respect. In this situation, power and distance in exchanges come mainly with old age and religion. It is understandable because in Vietnamese society, the prime sentiment in the relationships between older members of a social group is respect. Respect is key factor in the Vietnamese value system. Old people enjoy high respect, irrespective of wealth, education or social position. Moreover, since Buddhism is widely recognized in Vietnam as the national religion, the social prestige of Buddhist followers is no doubt acknowledged throughout the country. It could be said that negative politeness is adopted because people pay respect and avoid intruding on each other (Holmes, 1992: 297). Secondly, the idea of politeness is visible in the solidarity spirit where participants express closeness to each other, minimizing feeling the of power and distance between them. High involvement in conversation is particularly highlighted when guests express their beliefs about future and comment on others’ pottery product. When the presenter posed the question “Chúng ta có ai tin vào tương lai không ạ?” (“Would it be possible for you to believe in future prediction?”) the other guests, apart from Mr Calisto who is still thinking for a while, hastily share very similar ideas. Thảo, together with words, enthusiastically raises her hand to signal agreement whereas Tuệ, Liên and Yến chorally say “Có ạ” (“Yes, please”). Then they look and smile at each other upon their shared opinion. It is worth mentioning that the use of particles expressing politeness such as “ạ” (“yes”), “dạ” (“yes”), “vâng” (“yes”) adds a sense of respect and sociability in the speakers' discourse. Here, more intimate terms of address, which include older people’s name such as “chị Liên”, “chị Yến”, “anh Tuệ” are employed by the younger attendant, Thảo. Thảo even switches code from Vietnamese to English “I want to raise my hand”, “You have to play gamble here” to establish the rapport with Mr. Calisto, the only person who speaks English on the talk show. In this situation, code-switching, the use of two languages in a single discourse, shows that Thảo wants to include Calisto in the group discussion. She wants to have something in common with the only foreigner who does not speak Vietnamese. The use of English in Thảo's discourse functions as solidarity marker (Bradby, 2002). Other guests, Tuệ, Yến, Thảo and Liên, give compliments on ceramic objects without hesitation, compliments such as “Khá đấy” (“Pretty good”), “Tuyệt vời” (“Wonderful”), “Đẹp quá” (“Nice looking”). Generally, all the participants tend to intensify their interest and approval to each other not only through

words but also through nods and smiles. Politeness, in this case, is very much concerned with solidarity and can be referred to as positive politeness (Holmes, 1992: 297).

3. Intercultural communication

Besides politeness, the second major sociolinguistic concept that evidently emerges in the talk show is the notion of intercultural communication. The presence of Mr. Calisto, who is of Portuguese origin, characterizes a striking contrast between the Vietnamese way of speaking and that of Westerners. The norms of communication can be interpreted as collectivism for Vietnamese guests and individualism for Mr. Calisto. In their interaction, all Vietnamese attendants place great emphasis on group harmony and try to avoid group conflict. In-group identity markers such as “chúng ta” (“we”), “chúng tôi” (“we”), “tất cả chúng ta” (“all of us”), are frequently used. The individual is seen as secondary to the group. As a result, any expression of disagreement is minimized at all costs. For example, when being asked about her opinion on Thảo’s pottery, Ms Yên gives a smile first then remains silent for a while before starting with hedges in her response, which is also a compliment “...Um, tôi nghĩ, ah...cũng đẹp đấy” (“...Um, I think, ah... it’s ok”). Loan, Liên and Thảo all listen attentively as a way to express their deep sympathy on hearing the unfortunate experience of Mr. Tuệ and Ms. Yên’s child. Presenter Loan engages the audience as well as the guests in her compassionate expression in response to the couple’s story “tôi nghĩ rằng tất cả khán giả xem truyền hình cũng như tất cả chúng ta đều xúc động và chia sẻ với những khó khăn của anh chị” (“I think all the TV viewers and our guests as well as our audience here today are deeply moved by your story and we all sympathize with those sufferings you have to endure”). Another aspect of the collectivistic culture easily identified in the conversation of Vietnamese participants is that Vietnamese people smile very often, which is not necessarily considered normal pleasure or agreement. There are moments when Liên smiles to hide her embarrassment over Loan’s question and Loan smiles back to encourage Liên’s participation. For them, the smile is a proper response in most situations in which verbal expression is not needed or not appropriate. It is used as a substitute for “I’m sorry”, “Thank you” or “How about you?”. Smiles can then be taken as a means to express rapport and solidarity. Such apparent closeness and intimacy are among the fundamental spirit typical of collectivism. As Scollon & Scollon (1995:133) put it, from a collectivistic point of view, one’s face really represents the faces of one group. This “group first” attitude may be further regarded as positive politeness, which is defined by Brown

& Levinson (1987) as sharing common ground and having camaraderie. For Vietnamese guests, working with others and cooperating is the norm. On the contrary, Mr. Calisto's speech and behavior puts himself on the individualistic scale. He regularly emphasizes independence and autonomy in his words. What he is concerned with is the expression of his own opinion rather than seeking common connections with others. He is the only person who does not believe in future prediction. He says "I must see it first," unlike what the other guests claim. He uses the personal pronoun "I" rather than "we". His expressions tend to be very short and explicit in meaning such as "No", "I think five". In a way, Mr. Calisto minimizes involvement with others since he hardly ever joins group discussion, unless being invited by the presenter. His face does not show specific emotion over others' talk. His detachment can be explained by his inadequate understanding of the Vietnamese language and Vietnamese culture. He needs to wait for the translator and so he is slow in response and reaction. His English use is a certain barrier preventing him from establishing a close relationship with other members. This is also probably due to intercultural differences. Mr. Calisto belongs to the Western world where the concept of the self is focused more on an individual (Scollon, 1995: 133). Another possible explanation for Mr. Calisto's reluctance in joining the group discussion is his personality. He is often described in the popular Vietnamese media as a "quiet", "reserved" and "distant" coach. Although Vietnamese people love him and are grateful for his contribution to the nation's football, Mr. Calisto has never been characterized as a "friendly" and "approachable" person. He has been living in Vietnam for quite a long time but he does not even use a single Vietnamese word for making social contact in the talk show such as "xin chào" ("hello"), "cảm ơn" ("thank you"), unlike many other foreigners appearing on Vietnamese TV programs who often try to make themselves more open to Vietnamese people by pronouncing such common Vietnamese words and phrases.

4. Language and gender

In addition, the connection between language and gender is clearly revealed in the talk show. There is a remarkable difference between the discourse of the four women and that of the two men featured in the show. Female guests often rely on words showing politeness such as "xin" ("please"), "dạ", and "vâng" ("yes"). This coincides with Holmes's affirmation that women are more polite than men (1995: 1). As Tannen (1990: 77) insists, "for most women, the language of conversation is primarily a language of rapport a way of establishing

connections and negotiating relationships”. Chinese-loan words or Sino-Vietnamese expressions, which are supposed to convey politeness and suitable for formal context, are also employed by most women in the discussion. The use of “xin”, “mời”, “làm ơn” (all roughly mean “please”) are used in formal requests by female participants. In addition, Ms Loan greets the whole audience as “quý vị khán giả” (“ladies and gentlemen”), “hân hạnh” (“honored”); Ms Liên uses “Tết nguyên đán” (“Lunar New Year”) or “Kỷ Sửu” (“Year of Buffalo”). Chinese-root words undoubtedly set a formal and polite tone for their conversation. Women in the show also repeat hedging devices and tag questions to signal their uncertainty like “theo tôi thì” (“I think”), “tôi cho là” (“I guess”), “như là” (“sort of”), “phải vậy không?” (“isn’t it?”). Loan, Liên and Thảo tend to produce very long sentences in their speech. They talk more and provide more information than being asked. It is possible that they speak for a long time because they need more time to think over their reply. As Lakoff (1975, cited in Holmes 1995: 317) argues, these linguistic features reflect women’s lack of confidence. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet further claim that women are inclined to speak tentatively, side-stepping from commitment and strong opinions (2003: 158-159). Another feature, which is associated with the female’s discourse in the show, is the use of high rising tone at the end of an utterance, especially when making statements, which makes it sound as if a question is being asked. This is noticeable in Thảo’s and Yến’s intonation. Romaine (1994: 100) refers to this phenomenon as an indicator of women’s tentativeness and lack of confidence in putting forward their views. Moreover, the female guests employ back-channeling and pausing more frequently than men. Backchannels are an indicator of turn-taking and function as signs of attention (Gumperz, 1982: 163). They are realized in Thảo, Loan, Liên and Yến’s speeches by items such as “um”, “yeah”, “oh”, “tôi biết” (“I see”), “thế à” (“really”), “O.K.”, “vâng” (“right”), “aha”. These are also signs marking their understanding and approval. Female members of the show also resort to compliments more regularly than men. This is not only the evidence of their politeness but also a common distinction between male and female language, as is observed by Holmes, “women compliment others more than men do” (1995: 2). Behavior separates female and male discourse in this talk show as well. There often seem to be long pauses before the female members express their thoughts. Non-verbal language such as nodding, clasping hands and smiles is commonly noticed more among the female participants. On the contrary, both Mr. Calisto and Mr. Tuệ, regardless of their different language use, are very brief in their speech. They are direct and prompt in reply. They hardly use hedges and draw on backchannels. Neither do they resort much to nodding and smiles as a way of showing agreement. Mr. Tuệ also frequently interrupts other speakers to voice his opinions and disagreement. In other words, he tries to dominate the

discussion. Although researchers have not given a clear answer to the question of who is more likely to interrupt in a conversation with mixed-sex attendants (Aries, 1996: 95), the analysis of Mr. Tuệ's discourse in this context shows that he tries to establish his own identity by making constant interruptions during his chat with other female guests. What is more, the two male guests here tend to argue to make their points. Mr. Calisto downright disagrees with future beliefs, whereas Mr. Tuệ does not concur immediately with others' viewpoint on future. According to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, "argument can mark the strength of participants' connections to one another" (2003: 103). It is clear that gender really matters in communication. Power in communication here does not stem from age or religion but from gender. The show language, to a certain extent, is a reflection of Vietnamese society where women still have subordinate positions to men. Gender inequality is explicable in Vietnamese discourse because due to the strong influence of Confucianism for over a thousand years, Vietnamese women are stereotyped as a weaker sex both domestically and socially.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the talk show sheds light on the inextricably interwoven relationship between language and society. Age, religion, occupation, gender and the social situation of the show clearly influence an individual's linguistic uses as well as non-verbal behaviors. Aspects of Vietnamese culture and norms of interaction are reflected in the discussion. Indeed, social factors and attitudes play a vital role in shaping language because it is the social system within which we live that determines the linguistic choices we have available to us in ways that reflect our society's main concerns. Undoubtedly, sociolinguistics enables us to explain certain language phenomena so that we can avoid deep-rooted prejudices against our listeners and achieve successful communication. The analysis of the popular TV program also reveals that language is used not simply to communicate ideas, but also to create social standards and express cultural norms. Therefore, learning a language is not only a matter of mastering the linguistic features; language acquisition is also closely embedded in the understanding of the social conventions practiced by native speakers within a wide range of social contexts.

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APPENDIX: SHORTENED ENGLISH TRANSCRIPTION OF THE TALK SHOW

Scene 1

▪ **Presenter:** Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to our talk show today, a special program of the Year 2008. It is my honor to introduce our guests: Ms. Nguyen Thu Thao, chief representative of Vietnam Veterans of American Foundation; Ms. Nguyen Thi Yen and Mr. Mai Van Tue, members of a club including parents with autistic child; Ms. Nguyen Thi Kim Lien, general director of 3A Insurance Company and Mr. Calisto, coach of Vietnam national football team.

[...] Well, I wonder whether all of you believe in future prediction.

- **Ms. Thao:** Yes, I want to raise my hand. (raising her hand)
 - **Ms. Lien, Ms. Yen and Mr. Tue:** Yes, we think so. (chorally)
 - **Presenter:** Well, I guess you all agree. How about Mr. Calisto I wonder whether you believe in future prediction or not.
 - **Mr. Calisto:** I must see it first.
 - **Ms. Thao (to Mr. Calisto):** You have to play gamble here.
 - **Presenter (to Mr. Calisto):** Well, what a clever coach you are. You mean you do not really believe in future? But the other guests, you all believe, don't you?
 - **Ms. Thao, Ms. Lien, Ms. Yen and Mr. Tue:** (nodding head, smiling)
- [...]

Scene 2 (After the guests have participated in the game of making pottery)

[...]

- **Presenter:** You have joined an exciting game. Now, please can you tell me if you feel happy.
 - **Ms. Thao, Ms. Lien, Ms. Yen and Mr. Tue:** (nodding head, smiling)
 - **Presenter:** I am wondering how do you evaluate your product, Thao?
 - **Ms. Thao:** Well, how shall I put it? Uh, probably ... maybe... above average
 - **Presenter:** You agree with Thao, don't you?
 - **Ms. Yen:** ...(smiling) Um, I think, ah... it's ok
 - **Mr. Tue:** I think my product deserves 7 or 8.
 - **Ms. Lien:** Would it be possible if I give mine 10? (smiling)
 - **Presenter:** (smiling). Yes, thank you. And Mr. Calisto, can you tell us something about your product? How many marks will you give?
 - **Mr. Calisto:** I think 5.
 - **Presenter, Ms. Thao, Ms. Lien, Ms. Yen and Mr. Tue:** (smiling)
- [...]

Scene 3

[...]

- **Presenter (to Mr. Tue and Ms. Yen):** Could it be possible if you share with us your feelings when things don't live up to your expectation?
 - **Mr. Tue:** Of course we feel disappointed.
 - **Presenter:** Um... Yes... And when you realize that your child suffers from autism...
 - **Mr. Tue:** Hopeless. Everyone wishes to have a healthy child.
 - **Presenter:** We are wondering how you can overcome the difficulty.
 - **Ms. Yen:** Um, well, we guess it is like an instinct. It's sort of when you are drowning, you are forced to swim. We did try our best to save our child... Um... then we reconsider the notion of happiness in life..., which helps us to change our attitudes toward life. In other words, we begin to think more positively.
 - **Presenter:** Yes, you...
 - **Mr. Tue:** For example, just looking at our child makes us happy.
 - **Presenter:** Yes...
 - **Mr. Tue:** Positive thinking takes us out of deep depression.
 - **Presenter:** At this moment, I think all the TV viewers and our guests today are moved by your story and we all sympathize with those sufferings you have to endure.
- [...]

Scene 4

[...]

- **Presenter:** We are going to have a talk with Ms. Lien, the general director of 3A Insurance Company. Good Morning Ms. Lien. I wonder if you could share with us the moment when you are most disappointed.

- **Ms. Lien:** Yes, I guess it was a long story... a story that I still wonder why this could happen to me. (smiling)
- **Presenter:** (smiling)
- **Ms. Lien:** Well, aha... it was a long time ago... When I first had the intention of establishing a private insurance company, everyone, I mean my friends and family supported me. We were extremely happy... then ... at the last process, I was left alone. People discouraged me from the project. It seemed that I could not continue. But... luckily, I determined to pursue my dream to the end. I have been successful... (smiling)
- **Presenter:** Yes. It is a great experience, isn't it?
- [...]
- **Presenter (to Ms. Thao):** Can you tell us how long it normally takes you to recover after a failure?
- **Ms. Thao:** Um, I guess it depends... but the biggest failure took me about 6 months to get over. In 1999, I was working in a United Nations Organization when I decided to apply for AusAID Scholarship. I confidently thought I would win... then I was disappointed.
- **Presenter:** Yes...
- **Ms. Thao:** Um... Then I applied for Ford Foundation's Scholarship. I was living in a mountainous area, which was an advantage... My job, my experience and qualifications fitted in well with the requirement... yet, I failed again. My friend encouraged me to seek opportunity with Fulbright. Well, I was not confident enough... I wondered if I could... sort of ... try one more time. Well, and I finally was...
- **Presenter:** Yes, you did retry, didn't you?
- **Ms. Thao:** (smiling) Yes, I did...
- [...]
- **Presenter:** And now can we please shift the turn of talking to Mr. Calisto? Well, as a coach, it would be a great disappointment for you to be a loser in a match. Would you mind telling what do you often expect before a game?
- **Mr. Calisto:** Before a game, there are always pressures. Expectations are very high. When we fight with 100% strength, we can expect to win.
- [...]

Scene 5

- [...]
- **Presenter:** Today, it is our great honor to welcome the High Venerable Buddhist Nun Thich Dam Lan, abbess of Bo De Pagoda. Buddha Amitabha. Please can you tell us what Buddhists usually pray for a coming New Year?
- **The nun:** Buddha Amitabha. They wish Buddha to bless them with happiness, health, luck and success. I think we should neither look back on the past nor look forward to the future. We should live in present to find happiness.
- **Presenter:** Yes, ... but future is always our main concern, isn't it? Do you think the coming Year, Ky Suu, is supposed to be a good year?
- **The nun:** Well, from the Buddhist view, it is a prosperous year for us.
- [...]
- **Mr. Tue:** We wish all of us and the audience to have a happy new year.
- **Presenter:** Yes, thank you. And let's listen to Ms. Lien.
- **Ms. Lien:** I wish we all have luck and health.
- **Ms. Thao:** Wishing everyone prosperity.
- **Mr. Calisto:** I wish everyone good health.
- **The nun:** On the occasion of New Year, I wish all the Buddhists many blessings.
- **Presenter:** I wish everyone a hopeful New Year.

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