

AN INVESTIGATION ABOUT FORMS OF ADDRESS IN VIETNAMESE THROUGH THE REPORT OF A MARRIED COUPLE

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Received: 28/8/2024	Vietnamese is a member of the Austroasiatic language family spoken by approximately 100 million people, predominantly in Vietnam, a country located in Southeast Asia. The language features a distinctive system of address terms that is deeply intertwined with both cultural and linguistic norms. Understanding these address codes is crucial for cultural immersion and for preventing potential misunderstandings in cross-cultural interactions. This study delves into the application of Vietnamese address terms across various familial and social contexts, examining how these terms are used to navigate relationships and communication settings. Through personal observations and in-depth interviews with a couple, the study explores the nuanced ways in which they addressed each other throughout their marriage. It was found that the choice of address terms is influenced not only by relational and situational factors but also by the individuals' sentiments, attitudes, and emotional states toward one another. This reveals that address terms in Vietnamese are not static but dynamically reflect the evolving nature of personal relationships and emotions. By analyzing these patterns, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of address terms in interpersonal communication and highlights the intricate ways in which language and culture intersect.
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KHÁM PHÁ CÁCH XUNG HỒ TRONG TIẾNG VIỆT QUA LỜI KỂ CỦA MỘT CẶP VỢ CHỒNG

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 28/8/2024	Tiếng Việt là một ngôn ngữ thuộc ngữ hệ Nam Á với hơn 100 triệu người sử dụng, chủ yếu ở Việt Nam, một quốc gia nằm ở Đông Nam Á. Ngôn ngữ này có hệ thống các từ ngữ xưng hô đặc biệt, đan xen sâu sắc với cả chuẩn mực văn hóa và ngôn ngữ. Việc thông thạo các từ ngữ xưng hô này rất quan trọng để hòa nhập văn hóa và tránh những hiểu lầm tiềm ẩn trong giao tiếp. Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu việc sử dụng cách xưng hô tiếng Việt trong nhiều bối cảnh gia đình và xã hội khác nhau, xem xét cách các từ ngữ này được sử dụng để điều hướng các mối quan hệ và bối cảnh giao tiếp. Thông qua quan sát và phỏng vấn sâu với một cặp đôi, nghiên cứu khám phá những cách tinh tế mà họ xưng hô với nhau trong suốt cuộc hôn nhân của họ. Nghiên cứu cho thấy việc lựa chọn các từ ngữ xưng hô không chỉ bị ảnh hưởng bởi các yếu tố quan hệ và tình huống mà còn bởi tình cảm, thái độ và trạng thái cảm xúc của mỗi cá nhân đối với nhau. Điều này cho thấy các từ ngữ xưng hô trong tiếng Việt không phải là tính mà phản ánh động bản chất phát triển của các mối quan hệ và cảm xúc cá nhân. Thông qua phân tích này, nghiên cứu góp phần vào việc hiểu sâu hơn về vai trò của các từ ngữ xưng hô trong giao tiếp giữa các cá nhân và làm nổi bật những cách phức tạp mà ngôn ngữ và văn hóa giao thoa.
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1. Introduction

Vietnamese is classified as an Austroasiatic language, forming part of a language family that includes Khmer and Mon as its most prominent members. This paper aims to explore how Vietnamese address terms are employed in familial relational dynamics and communication scenarios. By examining how these terms are employed in different settings, the study aims to reveal the underlying social and cultural mechanisms that influence their usage. It explores how address terms reflect and reinforce the intricate structure of Vietnamese society, including aspects such as age, gender, familial rank, and social status as well as how they might vary depending on the nature of the relationship between the interlocutors. Even though much research has delved into the complex usage of Vietnamese terms of address in social communication scenarios, not much has investigated aspects such as the dynamic use in specific situations. The study also analyzes how changes in a person's life circumstances, such as becoming a parent or grandparent, affect the terms of address used in communication. This includes analyzing how address terms adapt to reflect evolving relationships and social roles over time. By incorporating observations and in-depth interviews, the research provides insights into how individuals consciously or unconsciously navigate these linguistic conventions to manage social interactions and express their attitudes and emotions.

The system of addressing terms in Vietnamese is not merely a linguistic feature but also a rich reflection of cultural and social values, presenting a fascinating convergence of both linguistic and cultural dimensions. In Vietnamese, terms of address are intricately linked to social hierarchies, relational dynamics, and cultural norms, making them a crucial element for effective communication. The complexity of this system extends beyond their grammatical function; they embody social structures and cultural values. An application of certain terms of address can indicate not only the relative age and status of the interlocutors but also their emotional closeness and the level of formality in the interaction. This layered system of address underscores the importance of context in Vietnamese communication, where the choice of a pronoun can reflect and influence social dynamics.

For Vietnamese, before one enters any conversation with another, they must decide how to address that person. In some cases, a name or a general pronoun can be enough for one to get by in a quick conversation. However, in some other cases, one can put themselves in trouble if they fail to address their conversation partner correctly. Therefore, one does need to learn more so as to address people appropriately for better communication results. Factors such as social status, sex, age, family relationship, occupational title, official rank, or the nature of the relationship between the interlocutors could decide how they address each other in their conversations [1].

Addressing terms are socially driven [2], and titles and forms of address are important, sensitive indicators of social status [3], or emotions and social distance [4]. Studies in languages have pointed out that the usage of terms of address is usually subject to social and ideological matters. The system of address in a language provides clues to the social class hierarchy and also social values of the community using that language. Brown and Gilman [5] conducted a study on pronouns in some European languages (German, French, and Italian) and found that there was a connection between social structure, group ideology, and the semantics of the pronouns. They also showed that a person's consistent pronoun style implied his or her class status and political views. A person could also express transient moods and attitudes by varying his or her pronoun style from time to time [5]. Other research has also pointed out that the rules of address can be symmetric or asymmetric dependent on status-marked situations, social rank, or personal identity (age, sex, status...) [6].

In the Vietnamese language, the choice of personal pronouns pragmatically reflects either intimacy or familiarity among close friends of the same age, or a lack of deference and high degree of arrogance towards the addressee and/or third-party pronominal referent of superior age

[7]. In other words, the selection of personal pronouns in informal situations takes into consideration the age factor as priority. Thus, it's not unusual for strangers to ask each other about age when they first meet, in order to establish the proper terms of address to use. The second factor will be sex. This means that a person's use of pronouns can tell if that person is a 'he' or a 'she' (e.g.: male/female: *anh/chị, chú /cô...*). It should be noted that not all personal pronouns reflect sex. Those such as *em, cháu...* reflect inferiority rather than the sex of the speaker.

A personal pronoun that can be used in formal situations is *tôi* [7]. *Tôi* is the most neutral term to be used in social situations. However, Luong [8] found the use of "*tôi*" among family members as a negation of solidarity and an indication of the lack of deference towards the referent. A sudden shift to "*tôi*" during a conversation among interlocutors could indicate a mood change include dissatisfaction or even anger arisen [9]. The "true" pronouns, such as "*tôi*", are used quite limitedly in familial communication scenarios. For most situations, kinship terminology is used when referring to oneself, the audience, or a third party [8]. These terms might vary in different dialects of the Vietnamese language.

In non-kinship communication context, a Vietnamese will consider several factors before they address someone. It is not uncommon for them to ask a person on the first meeting questions about age, social position, their relations with someone they know, or other factors relevant to the cause of their encounters. Given this cultural aspect, various terms could be used to refer to or address the first, second, and third person (singular and plural). Terms that are used in informal situations might not be used, or are not considered appropriate in more formal situations. There are also terms that are no longer used as a result of social changes (i.e. terms used by or to indicate kings/queens).

As far as kinship addressing, Vietnamese has a saying that "*Một giọt máu đào hơn ao nước lã*" (literally translated as a drop of blood is better than a pond of water, or "blood is thicker than water"). Kinship is unquestionably very important and must be recognized. One shall acknowledge and address their relatives correctly (immediate family members or extended family members).

2. Methodology

Data for this paper was gathered through a series of in-depth interviews conducted with a married couple. The primary aim of these interviews was to explore the kinds of address terms used by the couple throughout the course of their relationship, tracing the changes from their initial meeting up to their 52nd wedding anniversary. Semi-structured interview questions were developed focusing on eliciting detailed responses about the various factors influencing their choice of address terms at different stages of their relationship. The interviews sought to uncover how specific terms of address were used in relation to significant life events, shifts in the nature of their relationship, and other contextual variables. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The interviews were conducted from June to August, 2015 with two face to face interviews and three phone interviews in a total of 85 minutes.

3. Findings and discussions

In the eyes of Westerners, Vietnamese people might be perceived as reserved or shy, yet this characterization overlooks their deep-seated value of interpersonal relationships and communication. Contrary to the image of reticence, Vietnamese culture places a high value on engaging with others through conversation. The ability to communicate effectively is a fundamental aspect of social interaction and is emphasized from an early age. This is captured in the traditional saying "*Học ăn, học nói, học gói, học mở,*" which could be literally translated as "learn to eat, learn to talk, learn to wrap, learn to open," highlighting the importance of mastering verbal communication alongside other skills.

Indeed, in Vietnamese society, individuals with strong verbal skills are often more readily received and well-regarded. However, the concept of "good verbal skills" encompasses a wide

range of abilities beyond mere eloquence. The practice of choosing the appropriate address term is not just a matter of politeness but serves as a reflection of Vietnam's rich cultural heritage and intricate social structure. It was fascinating to find that the couple could use various terms of address, and these kept changing from the moment they got to know each other and during their marriage (Table 1). When they were not married yet, the use of terms showed the level of intimacy with social distance marked as positive. However, after they got married the terms reflected their relationship, moods, and even important events of their life (having children, having grand-children, or reaching certain ages...). The man had used at least four terms (*tao*, *his first name*, *tôi*, *anh*) to refer to himself and 13 terms to address his wife (*mày*, *her first name*, *áy*, *em*, *mình*, *bà xã*, *mẹ nó*, *mẹ thằng cu*, *mẹ đĩ*, *mẹ cô út*, *cô*, *bà*, *cụ*). The woman had also used at least four different terms to refer to herself (*tao*, *her first name*, *tôi*, *anh*) and 11 distinguished terms (*mày*, *his first name*, *áy*, *anh*, *mình*, *ông xã*, *bố nó*, *bố thằng cu*, *bố cô út*, *ông*, *cụ*) to refer to her husband in conversations. Most of the terms are compatible for both sexes.

However, the reason why the woman used 11 terms to address her husband and that the man had 13 terms to address the wife is because the man had used an obsolete term “*mẹ đĩ*” to address the woman when they had children; and the term “*cô*” which is usually used to address an aunt in kinship relation and an elder woman (who is roughly the same age with one's mother) in non-kinship relation. The term “*mẹ đĩ*” was unpopular nowadays (but might appear in literature occasionally). The man used the term “*cô*” to address his wife when he was displeased with her (but still wanted to maintain a certain level of politeness). As for the woman, she used “*anh*” even though she was unhappy with the husband. In fact, the style of verbal interactions might vary between men and women across different languages. Women are generally considered inferior, hence are more polite in their speech behavior [10] and more careful in choosing appropriate terms to use [11]. In the case of this couple, the women chose the option to maintain respect even though she could go for “*mày*” to express her anger with the man.

Although age is considered to be an important factor to decide on address terms in social situations, it is disregarded in familial contexts. Generally, without taking into consideration family hierarchical rank, the first person term “*anh*” can be used only by a male person who is older in age, and the first person term “*em*” can be used only by a younger person (either male or female). This suggests that, rather than age, gender and the level of intimacy were the primary factors influencing the choice of terms. Consequently, the man used the superior term “*anh*,” while the woman used the subordinate term “*em*.” This shift highlights how address terms can reflect changes in their relationship dynamics.

The couple also reported intriguing variations in the application of terms of address in confrontational situations. Specifically, the man might employ terms such as “*tao/mày*,” which are deemed offensive in intimate relationships, while the woman would typically refrain from using them. This discrepancy can be attributed to cultural norms that position the woman as subordinate to the man within a marital relationship. The use of such terms by the woman would be perceived as highly disrespectful and could significantly damage the relationship. Initially, “*tao/mày*” were terms used during their friendship (since they were roughly the same age) before their relationship became more intimate. Once they were married, the use of these terms became no longer acceptable. In less tense situations, they opted for more formal address terms (“*tôi/cô*,” “*tôi/anh*”), which are used in formal contexts, such as among colleagues, to convey a specific stance toward the partner.

In contrast to “*tao/mày*,” the terms “*anh/mình*” and “*em/mình*” signify the highest level of intimacy and often reflect love and respect between partners. The term “*mình*” is frequently found in folk songs and poetry about love, underscoring its cultural significance. However, preferences for address terms can vary individually. In contemporary usage, especially among younger people, these terms are less commonly heard. Today, “*anh/em*” has become more universally prevalent.

It is also noteworthy that the use of address terms within a relationship can evolve with the addition of significant life events, such as the birth of a child or a grandchild. For instance, couples may begin addressing each other with terms reflecting their new parental roles, such as “mẹ nó” (meaning "mother of the child") or “bố nó” (meaning "father of the child") when the first child came; or “mẹ chúng nó” (meaning “mother of the children”) or “bố chúng nó” (meaning “father of the children”) as they had more children. Similarly, upon becoming grandparents, they might use terms like “bà nó” (meaning "grandmother of the child") or “ông nó” (meaning "grandfather of the child"). These shifts in address terminologies illustrate how relational dynamics and familial roles can influence language use within married relationships.

Table 1. *Terms used by the couple*

Frequency/timeline	frequent (1 st / 2 nd person)	sometimes (1 st / 2 nd person)	rarely (1 st / 2 nd person)
<i>small/going to village school</i>	tao/mày		
<i>around 17</i>	- First name/ <i>ấy</i> - First name/ <i>ấy</i>		- <i>tôi</i> <i>đồng chí</i> (used during time of the Vietnam War)
<i>starting to date each other</i>	- First name/ First name - First name/ First name		- First name [*] / <i>ấy</i> - First name [*] / <i>ấy</i>
<i>just before the marriage</i>	- anh/em - em/anh		
<i>after the marriage</i>	- anh/mình - em/mình	- anh/bà <i>xã</i> - em/ông <i>xã</i>	
<i>having the first child (a boy)</i>	- anh/mẹ nó - em/bố nó	- anh/mẹ <i>thằng cu</i> ; anh/mẹ <i>đĩ</i> - em/bố <i>thằng cu</i>	- <i>tôi/cô</i> (<i>less offended</i> ; <i>tao/mày</i> [*] (<i>very offended</i>) - <i>tôi/anh</i> [*] (<i>less offended</i>)
<i>having the last child (a girl)</i>	- anh/mẹ nó - em/bố nó	- anh/mẹ <i>cô út</i> (mother of the youngest child) - em/bố <i>cô út</i> (father of the youngest child)	
<i>having the first grand-child</i>	- <i>tôi/bà</i> - <i>tôi/ông</i>		- anh/mẹ nó - em/bố nó
<i>having other grand-children</i>	- <i>tôi/bà</i> - <i>tôi/ông</i>		
<i>now (at 69 years old)</i>	- <i>tôi/bà</i> - <i>tôi/ông</i>		
<i>to be used when great-grandchildren are born (future)</i>	<i>tôi/cụ</i>		

Note: * N.B: the first line in each box indicates the man's use. The second line is the woman's.

All in all, through the case of the couple examined, it is apparent mastering address forms extends beyond mere linguistic proficiency; it involves a deep understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which language is used. In languages like English, and several others, the act of addressing someone is relatively straightforward: "I" speak to "You" without needing to adjust the form of address based on specific social contexts. English speakers typically use the same pronoun, "you," regardless of the other person's age, gender, social status, or relationship to the speaker. In contrast, languages with complex address systems, such as Vietnamese, require speakers to consider a multitude of factors when choosing how to address someone. These factors include the relative age of the interlocutor and the addressee, gender, social hierarchy, and familial or legal relationships. Address terms can also be influenced by the context or mood of the conversation. It should be noted that naturally, most people do not judge or be hard on nonnative speakers of their language, yet every language learner wants to navigate social interactions with grace and cultural sensitivity. Understanding and using the appropriate address terms effectively can convey respect, reinforce social bonds, and handle complex social

relationships. Therefore, addressing someone correctly in languages with elaborate address systems is a sophisticated skill that involves much more than simply knowing the right words; it entails a comprehensive grasp of cultural norms and social interactions.

4. Conclusion

As discussed, Vietnamese address forms are notably intricate due to the numerous factors that must be encapsulated within a single term. The choice of an address term involves meticulous considerations of various sociolinguistic factors. Although age commonly dictates address terms in general social interactions, it is less relevant in kinship contexts. In these situations, address terms are primarily determined by familial hierarchical status and gender, rather than age.

The address terms used by couples, as observed in this study, reflect not only their relational dynamics and gender roles but also their attitudes and emotional states. Analyzing these terms can provide insights into whether a couple is newly married or has been together for an extended period, whether they have children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, and the current state of their relationship. Additionally, such terms may even hint at political preferences. This variability underscores the fascinating nature of address terms as they evolve with changing circumstances, illustrating that the appropriateness of an address term can shift with new factors affecting communication.

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