



HUE UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES



MANY AUTHORS

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 4th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH IN LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE EDUCATION



HUE UNIVERSITY PUBLISHING HOUSE



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Sách không bán



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VIETNAMESE COMPLAINT STRATEGIES AND SOCIAL DISTANCE

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Abstract: The speech act of complaint has been well studied in a large body of research. Concerning the complaint strategies in Vietnamese, Nguyen's (2016, 2017a, 2017b) studies have indicated that the speech act set of Vietnamese complaints consists of eleven strategies presented according to the increasing level of severity, and that these strategies are closely associated with the social status and gender of the complainers and complainees to varying extents. The current study aims to investigate whether social distance also has any association with Vietnamese complaints. Seventy-two Vietnamese native speakers were involved as participants who were asked to role-play as either complainers or complainees in nine situations of daily-life communication. Information about social distance was provided in each of the nine situations. After each role-play, the complainers evaluated their complaint performance. Both the participants' role-plays and their evaluation were recorded. The collected data was then transcribed, coded, analysed and interpreted. The research findings revealed that the Vietnamese tend to use a similar amount of complaints whatever dimension of social distance they belong to. Nonetheless, Vietnamese complaining remains a complex speech act, especially when it is performed by Vietnamese acquaintances, who have tension between their wish to maintain harmonious relationships and their inclination to affirm their own position with the interlocutors.

Key words: Vietnamese, complaint strategies, social distance, face threatening act.

1. Introduction

The complaint speech act has been investigated in a large body of interlanguage pragmatic research where Brown and Levinson's (1987) face-saving model was employed. In these studies, a complaint is defined as a face-threatening act (FTA), the act that runs against the face want of either the speaker or the hearer. Specifically, a complaint is a communicatively demanding speech act, in which individual A expresses negative attitudes to individual B as a reaction to B's past or ongoing unsatisfactory behaviour, which affects A unfavourably (Kraft & Geluykens, 2002; Laforest, 2002; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987, 1993). Moreover, Trosborg (1995) presents the following definition which can be considered a full description of the required factors contributing to the

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complaint speech act, for example, the participants, the propositional content and the interpersonal relation between the participants in the complaint performance:

A complaint is an illocutionary act in which the speaker (the complainer) expresses his/her disapproval, negative feelings etc. towards the state of affairs described in the proposition (the complainable) and for which he/she holds the hearer (the complaine) responsible, either directly or indirectly (pp. 311-312).

As Nguyen (2017b) reviews, Trosborg's (1995) definition implies the non-polite nature of the complaint, which threatens the hearer's face (Kraft & Geluykens, 2002; Laforest, 2002; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993; Trosborg, 1995), and is very likely to create subsequent opposition among the participants who wish to maintain their social standing (Dersley & Wootton, 2001; Edmonson & House, 1981).

Nguyen (2016, 2017a, 2017b) also states that the language investigated most frequently in the available studies about the complaint speech act was English whereas French, Hebrew, Russian and Vietnamese were examined with much less frequency. Moreover, although many of these studies have explored how certain variables affect people's complaints, they described the influences of these factors, thus failing to explain why there were the impacts. For instance, social distance does not have any significant influence on the complainers' performance in Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) study while its impacts are considerable in Trenchs' (1995), Trosborg's (1995), and Arent's (1996) findings. Concerning the gender factor, Kraft and Geluykens (2002) indicate that the complainer's gender also places certain influence on the complaint performance.

2. Research on Vietnamese complaint strategies

Thorough reviews on Vietnamese complaint strategies have been conducted by Nguyen (2016, 2017a, 2017b). Specifically, Nguyen (1998) explored complaints in Vietnamese and English in a cross-linguistic study. The findings indicate that the linguistic forms of Vietnamese complaints are a statement followed by a question, an exclamatory sentence or an imperative sentence with the modal particles. The complainers in Nguyen's (1998) study would expect the complainees to show sympathy or to make changes regarding the offensive situations.

Concerning the complaint strategies in Vietnamese, Nguyen's (2016) study reveals a set of eleven Vietnamese complaint strategies presented according to the increasing level of severity, that is, how the strategies threaten the complaine's face. The data in Nguyen's (2016) study was coded mainly based on Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) and Trosborg's (1995) frameworks. Moreover, semantic formulae were employed to present the Vietnamese complaint speech act performance as a whole sequence: the complaint strategy consists not only of the complaint itself, but also other utterances and strategies which are

developed to redress the offensive actions or to express increasing severity (Kraft & Geluykens, 2002). For example, request for repair, threat, and request for a change in complainees' future behaviour are treated as complaint strategies in Nguyen's (2016) study although they are considered as directive acts in some other studies (e.g., Trosborg, 1995; Kraft & Geluykens, 2002).

Following is the inventory of eleven strategies presented according to the increasing level of severity (Nguyen, 2016, pp. 243-245). It is complicated to determine the face-threatening level within each complaint strategy; therefore, the ranking as shown in Table 1 needs to be verified in more extensive research.

Table 1. The strategies used by Vietnamese to make complaints

Order	Strategies	Sub-strategies	Examples
1	Below level of reproach	Hints to show sympathy with the complainees	(1) <i>Đạo này anh sao vậy?</i> (What's the matter with you recently?) Complainees is usually late for work.
		Hints to attract the complainees's sympathy	(2) <i>Mẹ còn phải lo cho em út nữa.</i> (I am also busy looking after your younger brothers and sisters). Complainees comes home quite late at night without asking for his mother's permission.
		Hints to show sympathy with the complainees and to attract the complainees's sympathy simultaneously	(3) <i>Tôi hiểu hoàn cảnh của anh nhưng quy chế công ty vẫn phải đảm bảo.</i> (I understand your situation but the regulations of the company must be followed). Complainees is usually late for work.
2	Expression of annoyance or disapproval	Expression of annoyance	(4) <i>Cái máy sao mà trầy hết vậy?</i> (Why are there so many scratches on the mobile phone?) Complainees inadvertently damages his close friend's new and expensive mobile phone.
		Expression of ill consequences for the complainer	(5) <i>Tiền bạc không có nên em mệt mỏi quá.</i> (Being short of money makes me feel so tired). Complainees has not returned the money to the complainer.

		Expression of ill consequences for the complainee	(6) <i>Đi kiểu đó nhớ có chuyện gì thì sao?</i> (What if you have any trouble when you come home that late?) Complainee comes home quite late at night without asking for his father's permission.
		Expression of ill consequences for both the complainer and the complainee	(7) <i>Tôi e là sự cộng tác của chúng ta khó mà thành công được.</i> (I am afraid that our cooperation is unlikely to be successful). Complainee is the boss of a company and neither shows respect nor attempts to cooperate with the complainer, who is the representative of another company.
3	Accusation	Indirect accusation in which a third party related to the complainee is a potential agent of the offence	(8) <i>Có cho ai mượn xài không?</i> (Have you lent my mobile phone to someone else?) Complainee inadvertently damages his close friend's new and expensive mobile phone.
		Indirect accusation in which the complainee is a potential agent of the offence	(9) <i>Chuyện này tôi nhắc nhở anh nhiều lần rồi phải không?</i> (I have reminded you of this problem many times, haven't I?) Complainee is usually late for work.
		Direct accusation without evidence provided	(10) <i>Hôm nay cô lại trễ nữa.</i> (You are late again today). Complainee is usually late for work.
		Direct accusation with evidence provided	(11) <i>Tôi gọi cá mà sao cô mang gà ra?</i> (I ordered fish, but why did you bring chicken?) Complainee brings the wrong dish for the customer (complainer).
4	Request for complainee's explanation for his/her behaviour		(12) <i>Có giải thích cho tôi tại sao lại như vậy!</i> (Explain to me why it happened like that!) Complainee is usually late for work.

5	Reaction to complainee's explanation for his/her behaviour	Reluctant acceptance of complainee's explanation	(13) <i>Bây giờ thì anh em cũng phải thông cảm thôi.</i> (Anyway, I have to be tolerant with you because we are co-workers). Complainee has not returned the money to the complainer.
		Indirect refusal of complainee's explanation	(14) <i>Lần nào cô cũng có lý do cả.</i> (You always have a reason for your being late). Complainee is usually late for work.
		Direct refusal of complainee's explanation	(15) <i>Không thể được, không có chuyện thông cảm.</i> (No, I can't be tolerant with you at all). Complainee is usually late for work.
6	Mockery		(16) <i>Cô xem đồng hồ giúp tôi bây giờ mấy giờ rồi?</i> (Could you tell me what time it is now?) Complainee is usually late for work.
7	Blame	Modified blame	(17) <i>Máy mượn thì phải giữ gìn chứ.</i> (You should have taken more care of my mobile phone (because you borrowed it). Complainee inadvertently damages his close friend's new and expensive mobile phone.
		Explicit blame of the complainee's behaviour	(18) <i>Anh thấy chuyện trễ như vậy là không tốt.</i> (I think that being late in returning the money is not good). Complainee has not returned the money to the complainer.
		Explicit blame of the complainee as a person	(19) <i>Tôi không nói với anh nữa, anh bất lịch sự lắm.</i> (I'm not talking to you any more, you're so impolite). Complainee keeps pushing past the complainer and tries to get a ticket before the complainer.
8	Request for repair	Indirect request for repair	(20) <i>Thế thì bao giờ em có thể giúp anh?</i> (So when can you help me?) Complainee has not returned the money to the complainer.

		Direct request for repair	(21) <i>Đạ, có gì thầy giảm bớt cho bọn em chứ nhiều quá.</i> (Could you cut down the amount of the assignment for us because it is too much?) Complainer is given too many assignments to do during a short holiday.
9	Reaction to complainee's offer to repair	Indirect refusal of complainee's offer to repair	(22) <i>Bạn bè ai lại làm thế?</i> (How can I do that if you are my friend?) Complainee suggests paying for the damage she made to her friend's phone cover.
		Direct refusal of complainee's offer to repair	(23) <i>Đời nào tao để mày làm vậy, khó chịu quá!</i> (I can never accept your offer. It makes me feel so uncomfortable). Complainee suggests paying for the damage she made to her friend's phone cover.
10	Threat	Threat with deferred consequences	(24) <i>Còn một lần nữa là tao đem hết quần áo ra đường nghe chưa.</i> (I will throw all your clothes out to the street if you come home late next time). Complainee comes home quite late at night without asking for his mother's permission.
		Threat with immediate consequences	(25) <i>Anh mà không tôn trọng tôi chắc là tôi cũng xin về.</i> (If you don't respect me, perhaps I will leave now). Complainee is the boss of a company and neither shows respect nor attempts to cooperate with the complainer, who is the representative of another company.
11	Request for a change in complainee's future behaviour		(26) <i>Lần sau nhớ sửa chữa, không được tái phạm nữa.</i> (You should correct your mistake, and should not repeat the mistake). Complainer wants the complainee to stop being late for work.

In addition to the inventory of Vietnamese complaint strategies above, Nguyen (2016) found that the Vietnamese have the greatest preference for the least face-threatening strategies (e.g., strategies 1, 2 and 3); they also show greater preference for combining non-open face-threatening strategies with open face-threatening in order to soften the complaints than combining two open face-threatening strategies in order to intensify the complaints.

The complaint strategies as reported in Nguyen (2016) have been confirmed to be associated with the social status and gender of the complainers and complainees to varying extents. As claimed by Nguyen (2017a), people with a higher position make a dramatically larger number of complaint strategies than those with an equal or lower position, and people with lower status utilise non-open face-threatening strategies much more frequently and employ open face-threatening strategies much less frequently than those with higher or equal status. Moreover, Nguyen (2017b) stated that while the complainer's gender does not closely interact with the complaint performance, the complainees' gender shows an opposite result. Specifically, the Vietnamese are likely to make more complaints to people of the same sex than to people of the opposite sex. When complaining, both Vietnamese male and female complainers utilise more politeness strategies with female complainees than with male complainees.

The literature shows that research concentrating on investigating complaints in one's own native language is limited. Moreover, studies on Vietnamese complaints have been conducted with an emphasis on the pragmatic aspects such as social status and gender. The current paper, therefore, aims to present how social distance is associated with the Vietnamese complaint strategies which were established by Nguyen (2016).

3. Research methodology

3.1. Participants

The study involved seventy-two Vietnamese native speakers (36 males and 36 females) as research participants. They worked in different professions and were in the age range from 21 to 55. Their participation in the research was voluntary.

3.2. Data collection

The current study employed two data collection methods, including open role-plays and verbal report interviews.

Nine situations of daily-life communication were designed and translated into Vietnamese for participants to role-play. To control the variable of social distance, the relationship between the complainer and the complainees, that is, an intimate, acquaintance, or stranger relationship, was presented to the participants in each situation. One participant

would play two roles in two different situations, being the complainer in one situation and the complaineer in another situation. Right after each role-play, the complainer-participant would listen to the conversation and then comment on or explain his/her complaint strategies. Both the participants' role-plays and interpretations were audio-recorded with the participants' permission. A total of 72 conversations were obtained, with a corpus of 532 complaints and 72 samples of interpretation.

3.3. Data analysis methods

The present study employed descriptive and interpretive methods in the analysis of the data. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the distribution of Vietnamese complaint strategies (Nguyen, 2016) by social distance. Specifically, the researcher counted the total number of strategies and the frequency of each strategy used by all the participants or by each group of participants. Interpretive methods were employed to analyse the contents of the complaints as well as the complainer's comments.

It was notable that there were eleven complaint strategies in Vietnamese; hence, the data scattered, making several cells of the contingency table (e.g., Table 3) contain less than five cases. A Chi-square test, in this case, cannot provide reliable results (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2000). Accordingly, Chi-square for two-way designs was deliberately not used in the current study.

4. Findings and discussion

In the present study, the relationship between the complainer and the complaineer in terms of social distance was classified into three groups: intimates, acquaintances, and strangers. The seventy-two participants, in three groups of twenty-four, played the role of a complainer who had (a) an intimate relationship, (b) an acquaintance relationship, and (c) a stranger relationship with the complaineer. The number of complaint strategies employed by each group is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Distribution of Vietnamese Complaint Strategies by Social Distance (1)

	Intimate (N=24)	Acquaintance (N=24)	Stranger (N=24)	Total
Number of complaints	170	196	166	532
Percentage	32.0	36.8	31.2	100

Table 2 reveals that the distribution of Vietnamese complaint strategies by social distance shows very small differences. Those who have an intimate or a stranger relationship with the complaineer employed almost the same number of complaints (32.0% and 31.2%, respectively). Those who have an acquaintance relationship with the complaineer utilised a slightly higher number of complaints (36.8%) than the other two groups.

Table 3, which describes the association of social distance with the distribution of eleven single complaint strategies, however, reveals some obvious differences:

Table 3. Distribution of Vietnamese Complaint Strategies by Social Distance (2)

Strategies ¹	Intimate (N=24)		Acquaintance (N=24)		Stranger (N=24)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Strategy 1	23	13.5	39	19.9	13	7.9
Strategy 2	35	20.6	29	14.8	30	18.1
Strategy 3	35	20.6	35	17.9	37	22.3
Strategy 4	11	6.5	7	3.6	12	7.2
Strategy 5	3	1.8	13	6.6	11	6.6
Strategy 6	9	5.3	6	3.1	16	9.6
Strategy 7	17	10.0	6	3.1	16	9.6
Strategy 8	11	6.5	42	21.4	19	11.5
Strategy 9	7	4.1	1	0.5	0	0.0
Strategy 10	6	3.5	13	6.6	12	7.2
Strategy 11	13	7.6	5	2.5	0	0.0
Total	170	100	196	100	166	100

As shown in Table 3, strategy 2 (expression of annoyance or disapproval) and strategy 3 (accusation) are the two most preferred strategies among the intimates. Specifically, both strategy 2 and strategy 3 take 20.6% of the complaints used by the intimate group. Similarly, in the stranger group, the most frequently employed strategy is strategy 3 (22.3%), followed by strategy 2 (18.1%). In the acquaintance group, the two most preferred strategies, however, are strategy 8 (request for repair) and strategy 1 (below level of reproach) (21.4% and 19.9%, respectively). Those who are in the acquaintance relationship also displayed a preference for strategy 2 and strategy 3, but with somewhat lower percentages (14.8% and 17.9%, respectively). For strategies 4, 6, and 7, the acquaintance group used relatively fewer strategies than the intimate group and the stranger group (3.6%, 3.1%, and 3.1% compared to 6.5%, 5.3%, and 10.0%; and 7.2%, 9.6%, and 9.6%, respectively). Nonetheless, for strategies 5 and 10, it is the intimate group that utilised slightly fewer strategies than the other two groups (1.8% and 3.5% compared

¹ The order of strategies 1 to 11 corresponds to the increasing order presented in Table 1.

to 6.6% and 6.6%; and 6.6% and 7.2%, respectively). Moreover, strategies 9 and 11 were employed by only intimates and acquaintances (4.1% and 7.6% compared to 0.5% and 2.5%, respectively).

A closer look at Table 3 reveals that the most distinctive differences in the distribution of Vietnamese complaint strategies by social distance lie in strategy 1 (below level of reproach) and strategy 8 (request for repair).

Strategy 1 (below level of reproach) is a non-open face-threatening strategy with 19.9% of the complaint strategies employed in the acquaintance group's performance. In contrast, the percentages for strategy 1 are much lower in the stranger group and the intimate group (7.9% and 13.5%, respectively). In this case, acquaintances use more solidarity-establishing behaviour than intimates and strangers, which corresponds to the Bulge, the theory of social distance and speech behaviour proposed by Wolfson (1988). Indeed, the participants claimed that they usually feel free to be straightforward to intimate and strange interlocutors. Particularly, those in the intimate group admitted that the complainees would find it easy to sympathise with their explicit complaints because being open and straightforward is one important feature of the intimate relationship in the Vietnamese culture. Participants in the intimate and stranger groups are, therefore, not prone to using the tactful strategy 1 very frequently. By contrast, those in the acquaintance group wish to maintain relationships with their acquaintances. For instance, a female complainer, whose colleague was late in returning the money to her, admitted that "I do not want to be so straightforward because this will potentially threaten our relationship at work, while we, in fact, still have to work together". This is one of the reasons why the acquaintances are more motivated to use non-open face-threatening strategies such as strategy 1.

Strategy 8 (request for repair), an open face-threatening strategy, was also utilised with a considerably higher percentage by the acquaintances than by the intimates and the strangers (21.4% compared to 6.5% and 11.5%, respectively). The acquaintance group showed a tendency to perform more face-threatening behaviour than the other two groups. This phenomenon cannot be explained by Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which holds that politeness increases with social distance. Wolfson's (1988) theory of the social distance and speech behaviour cannot be used to account for this either. Instead, the participants' interpretations of their complaint performance have provided us with a possible explanation. In the Vietnamese cultural tradition, people usually find it easier to sympathize with their relatives or close friends (Tran, 1999). Therefore, even though they can be very open to express their feelings, they are not very likely to request compensation from their intimates. Moreover, since complainers do not have the tendency to expect much

from strangers, they may not find it necessary to request a stranger for compensation when he/she conducts an offensive act. On the other hand, those who are in the middle of the extremes - in the acquaintance relationship - tend to use this form of request because their relationship with the interlocutor is neither close enough to show much sympathy, nor distant enough to ignore the offence. Nonetheless, in order to minimise the severity of the request with these acquaintances, the complainer may choose to employ an indirect request.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the Vietnamese tend to use a similar amount of complaints whatever dimension of social distance they belong to. That social distance did not seem to have a major impact corresponds to Olshtain and Weinbach's (1987) findings on the employment of complaint strategies in Hebrew. Nonetheless, the Vietnamese data show that there are obvious differences among three groups of intimates, acquaintances, and strangers in their frequency of using strategy 1 (below level of reproach), a non-open face-threatening strategy; and strategy 8 (request for repair), an open face-threatening strategy. The acquaintance group makes more use of these two strategies than the other two groups. The differences reflect the complexity of the speech behaviour performed by Vietnamese acquaintances, who have tension between their wish to maintain harmonious relationships and their inclination to affirm the relationships with their interlocutors. The differences also reveal that, in Vietnamese, it is very complicated to determine whether politeness increases with social distance, as Brown and Levinson (1987) claim, and whether politeness behaviour is performed more frequently among acquaintances than intimates and strangers, as Wolfson (1988) holds.

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CHIẾN LƯỢC THAN PHIỀN CỦA NGƯỜI VIỆT VÀ KHOẢNG CÁCH XÃ HỘI

Tóm tắt: Hành động lời nói than phiền đã được trình bày trong khá nhiều nghiên cứu. Riêng về chiến lược than phiền trong tiếng Việt, những nghiên cứu của Nguyễn (2016, 2017a, 2017b) đã cho thấy rằng, lời nói than phiền trong tiếng Việt bao gồm 11 chiến lược được sắp xếp theo mức độ tăng dần về độ nghiêm trọng, và những chiến lược này có mối liên quan mật thiết với vị trí xã hội cũng như với giới tính của người than phiền và người bị than phiền theo nhiều cấp độ khác nhau. Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu xem các chiến lược than phiền trong tiếng Việt có mối liên hệ với khoảng cách xã hội hay không. Có 72 người Việt tham gia nghiên cứu; những người này được yêu cầu đóng vai là người than phiền hoặc người bị than phiền trong 9 tình huống giao tiếp thường nhật. Khi mỗi hoạt động đóng vai kết thúc, người than phiền đánh giá và giải thích về chiến lược mà mình đã sử dụng. Toàn bộ số liệu được thu âm. Số liệu nghiên cứu sau đó được phiên âm, mã hoá, phân tích và diễn giải. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy, người Việt có khuynh hướng sử dụng số lượng chiến lược than phiền tương đương nhau cho dù khoảng cách xã hội giữa người than phiền và người bị than phiền có khác nhau như thế nào. Tuy nhiên, kết quả nghiên cứu vẫn phản ánh được sự phức tạp của hành động lời nói than phiền trong tiếng Việt, đặc biệt là khi lời than phiền được thực hiện bởi những người có mối quan hệ quen biết nhau; họ thể hiện sự giằng co giữa việc muốn duy trì một mối quan hệ hòa hảo và việc muốn khẳng định cũng như bảo vệ vị thế của mình với đối phương.

Từ khóa: Tiếng Việt, chiến lược than phiền, khoảng cách xã hội, hành động đe dọa thể diện.