

The Vietnamese Language Learning Framework

Part Two: Pragmatics and Culture

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1. Pragmatics

What do we mean when we say that we are fluent in a certain language? If it's our mother tongue, very often it means that we know how to use the language to cope with a great variety of situations, ranging from everyday communication with family members, friends and colleagues, to more formal occasions where we have to deliver a speech or hold talks with government officials, etc. Unnoticeably, and even unconsciously, we change our register time and time again to suit the occasion, moving along a continuum that could start at a very informal or colloquial end to a highly formal one. Usually we are able to maneuver this continuum smoothly, unless the affective factor comes into play (when we feel greatly nervous or frightened or exhausted). This automatic language mechanism could be called pragmatics, since it helps us to display our mastery of our mother tongue.

The same thing could be said about the true mastery of a foreign language. Without a solid control of the pragmatics of a new tongue, we may commit many social blunders that may always be a part of the learning process and usually prove to be rather harmless, but an awareness of it will definitely contribute to the success of the whole linguistic endeavor on our part.

1.1 Terms of address

In Vietnamese each specific relationship determines its own forms of address, whereas in English we use 'you' and 'I' to describe any relationship. For example, for a male student, when talking to a female peer, one of the options he has is to call her *chị* 'older sister' while referring to himself as *tôi* 'I'; when a male elder joins the

conversation, he can call him *chú* 'junior uncle' and refer to himself as *cháu* 'nephew'; when talking to his female teacher he addresses her as *cô* 'female teacher' while calling himself *em* 'younger sibling'; and so forth.

In order to use terms of address properly, you may need to find out about other people's ages or you can ask them as to how they'd like to be addressed.

Learners should be aware that in many textbooks, only the formal "tôi" is taught as an equivalent to "I". In fact, "tôi" can be used when you are talking to a peer, but once a friendlier relationship has been established, "tôi" could be replaced by some other term that defines the relationship more clearly.

In a classroom setting, when addressing the teacher as *thầy* 'male teacher' or *cô* 'female teacher', learners have several choices of title for themselves: they may refer to themselves by their first names or as *em* 'younger sibling' or *con* 'child', depending on the age gap between teacher and student.

In other words, the three major factors that control the usage of terms of address are age, social status, and social relations (defined as family, acquaintances, or profession).

1.2 Listenership

To indicate listenership, we use such expressions as

1.2.1 *Thế à?* 'Is that so?'

1.2.2 *Vâng*. Literally it means 'yes', but when we use it to indicate listenership, it only fulfills this function and does not express agreement or approval.

1.2.3 *Rồi*. 'Yes,' informal, when conversing with a peer.

1.2.4. *Ừ*. 'Yes,' very casual, when conversing with a friend or a much younger person.

1.3 Politeness

Politeness is highly valued, and so needless to say, good manners will help build lasting relationships.

1.3.1 Some particles that we use to express politeness are *dạ* and *ạ*, with *dạ* occurring at the beginning of a sentence and *ạ* coming at the end. In some cases *dạ* may mean 'yes,' but normally it is used as a polite particle that may go with either a 'yes' or a 'no', for example, *Dạ có* 'Yes' or *Dạ không* 'No.'

1.3.2 Politeness is expressed in the use of appropriate terms of address, especially frozen expressions like *Cám ơn PN*. 'Thank you.' or *Xin chào PN*. 'Hello.' or 'Goodbye.' *

* PN = pronoun

1.3.3 It is considered more polite in many cases to answer in complete sentences. Short responses may sound curt or may be interpreted as an unwillingness to carry on a conversation.

Q: *Cháu ăn cơm chưa?* 'Have you eaten yet?'

A: *Dạ thưa chú, cháu ăn rồi ạ.* 'Yes, uncle. I have eaten already.'

1.3.4 Politeness can also be expressed by body language, such as listening attentively, a slight bow of the head, sitting upright, standing with hands clasped in front instead of at the back or stuck in pockets, and making eye-contact without giving the impression of staring.

1.4 Social conventions

There are, of course, numerous social conventions which students should be taught. The following are but a few examples.

1.4.1 Who may address whom first? Generally, social status and/or age are the deciding factors, i.e. younger people should greet older people first, but they should wait until they are asked by older people to join a conversation. However, if you need to initiate a conversation, you have no alternative but to address the other person first. Still, you should decide beforehand which term of address is the most appropriate under the circumstances.

1.4.2 Who pays for a meal? The person who invites someone out to dinner is supposed to pay for the meal for both. Usually this type of hospitality will be repaid in the future when you invite that person out.

1.4.3 Should you invite an unexpected guest (who interrupts your meal) to join you? It is considered impolite if you don't invite a friend to stay and share your meal (even though he/she interrupts it). If they decline, then you should offer them tea while you finish your meal, or if they intend to stay for only a few minutes, you should tend to their business first before going back to your meal.

1.4.4 Generally, you don't have to make a date to come see a friend. Dropping by unannounced is still the norm. This practice, however, is changing in places where the telephone has become a popular means of communication.

1.4.5 Do not ask *PN có khỏe không?* 'How are you?' of a person you meet every day. Asking after a person's health is permissible when you haven't seen each other for at least a few days. However, it is observed that among many young people, the informal expression "Khỏe chứ?" has become popular, and it is almost an equivalent to the English "How are you?" and could be used with a higher frequency than the more formal "PN có khỏe không?"

1.5 Conversational implicatures

It goes without saying that conversational implicatures (an implied invitation or request or suggestion) abound in Vietnamese culture. Some examples are:

1.5.1 When you want to suggest to a friend that the two of you should go eat, you can just ask *Đói chưa?* 'Hungry yet?'

1.5.2 When (at a party, a public function, etc.) you want to prepare the host for the fact that you are going to say goodbye, you may look at your watch and make such a remark as *Cũng khá khuya rồi.* 'Pretty late already.' or *Sáng mai tôi phải dậy sớm để đi làm.* 'Tomorrow morning I have to get up early to go to work.'

1.5.3 Such a remark about the weather as *Hôm nay trời đẹp quá!* 'How nice the weather is today!' could also be interpreted as 'Let's go for a walk.'

1.6 Formal vs. informal language

As a general rule, formal language should be employed when one talks to an older person or one of higher social status. Informal language indicates the reverse.

Some examples are:

1.6.1 *Vâng*. (Formal) 'Yes.' vs. *Ừ* (Informal) 'Yes.'

1.6.2 The use of *xin*, *mời*, or *làm ơn* (all roughly mean 'please') in formal requests. These polite markers are generally dropped in informal speech.

- . *Xin chị nói lớn hơn một chút*. 'Please speak a little louder.'
- . *Mời anh ngồi xuống đây*. 'Please sit down.'
- . *Làm ơn đóng cửa lại*. 'Please close the door.'

1.6.3 The choice of words:

Formal

Informal

mất or *qua đời* 'pass away'

chết 'die'

Tôi tên là Tuấn. 'My name is Tuan.'

Tôi tên Tuấn.

(*Là* 'be' is left out.)

Hà sống ở Huế. 'Ha lives in Hue.'

Hà ở Huế.

(*Sống* 'live' is left out.)

Bây giờ là mấy giờ rồi? 'What time is it now?'

Mấy giờ rồi?

(*Bây giờ là* 'Now 'is' is left out.)

1.6.4 The use of Sino-Vietnamese expressions such as *giới thiệu* 'introduce' and *hân hạnh* 'honored' always sets a formal tone for a conversation.

Many textbooks teach formal language, which is a good thing because the distinction between "formal" and "informal" can be very tricky, and if we err, it is always safer to err on the side of caution, or formality. Risking sounding formal in an informal situation is not half as bad as sounding informal in a formal setting.

1.7 Dialects/Regional differences

It could be said that each area, town or city in Vietnam has its own dialect, even though the differences are usually minor and have become less distinct, especially since people have for the past few decades moved around much more than before. In many people's speech we can now observe a blend of dialects in terms of both pronunciation and vocabulary. Also, it is somewhat arbitrary to make the claim that the Hanoi, Hue, and Saigon dialects are the major ones, or that the Hanoi dialect should be considered

standard Vietnamese. It is almost as unrealistic as the claim that California English should be taught across the country.

2. Culture

It is usually said that language and culture are inseparable. That is to say, when one learns a new language, one is also learning a new culture, or at the very least, one is also learning *about* that new culture. Learners of Vietnamese should be made aware of some of the interesting cultural points presented below, if they aren't already familiar with them.

2.1 Personal questions

In Vietnamese culture it is absolutely permissible to ask personal questions such as 'How old are you?', 'Are you married?' etc. Students should be prepared so that they won't be offended when people ask them those questions. In fact, to strengthen relationships, they themselves should ask those personal questions as well.

In Vietnam, there are many close-knit communities and neighborhoods where everyone knows everyone else. Thus, a sense of privacy doesn't really exist and people can converse easily and freely about most things.

Vietnamese people are also very fond of match-making. It is a very common social practice. Students should expect that suggestions may be made as to who they should meet and/or marry. If they feel uncomfortable, they may politely decline the invitation.

2.2 Offering tea

Offering tea to visitors is common practice. That is how most conversations begin. Some ritual language is necessary. For example, hosts and guests may exchange a few remarks about the quality of the tea before discussing the purpose of the visit. Some such comments are:

Trà này rất đặc biệt. 'This tea is very special.'

Chè thơm quá. 'The tea is so fragrant.'

2.3 Ritual language

2.3.1 At the dinner table

Mời PN xơi cơm. 'I invite you to start eating.'

Xin phép. 'Allow me to put some more food in your bowl.'

Xin phép PN. 'No more food for me, please. I'm full.'

Đừng khách sáo. 'Make yourself at home and enjoy the food.'

2.3.2 Seeing someone off

Chúc PN thượng lộ bình an. 'I wish you a safe trip.'

2.3.3 At a wedding

Chúc PN trăm năm hạnh phúc. 'I wish you a hundred years of happiness.'

2.3.4 Tet wishes

Chúc PN một năm mới an khang, thịnh vượng. 'I wish you a new year full of peace and prosperity.'

Chúc PN được vạn sự như ý trong năm mới. 'I wish you the fulfillment of all your wishes in the new year.'

Chúc PN một năm mới vui vẻ, mạnh khỏe và phát tài. 'I wish you happiness, good health and prosperity in the new year.'

2.4 Offering compliments

Use an intensifier such as *rất* 'very' or *lắm* 'very' or *quá* 'so/too' if you really mean what you are saying. For example, if you say *Món này ngon*. 'This dish is delicious.', the compliment will be interpreted as lukewarm or half-hearted. You should say *Món này ngon quá/lắm*. 'This dish is so/very delicious.'

Offering compliments on someone's appearance should be avoided while it is safe to praise that person's clothing or car or house, etc. Compliments on a child's appearance could also backfire if it turns out that the parents are superstitious and fear that praising their child may cause their child bad luck.

2.5 Accepting a gift

It is the norm to say a hearty thank-you (*Cám ơn anh/chị rất nhiều.* 'Thank you very much.') and then to put the present away, not opening it while you are still entertaining the guest. Some Vietnamese, upon being offered a gift, may politely decline it, saying *Đạ, thật tình tôi không dám nhận.* 'I really dare not accept it.', but the giver should always insist.

2.6 Greeting and leave-taking

Vietnamese do not hug when greeting or saying goodbye to someone. Maybe a handshake (if it is a male person) or a light touch on the shoulder or arm is adequate. Some Vietnamese women may not welcome a handshake, so a nod accompanying one of the following expressions will do:

Chào PN. can be used in both greeting and saying goodbye to people.

Tạm biệt PN. is very formal and used only when you are not going to see the other person again for quite a while, like a few weeks or longer.

2.7 Body language

2.7.1 Posture

Vietnamese pay a lot of attention to body language in conversation. Speaking to an older person, you have to stand or sit in a certain way. For instance, you shouldn't keep your hands in your pockets or clasp them behind your back, but you may clasp your hands in front or let them hang loose at your sides. When sitting, you shouldn't slouch or sit back with your arms on the back of the couch or cross your leg.

2.7.2 Eye-contact

Students also need to know how much eye-contact is socially acceptable, since constant eye-contact could be taken as a fixed stare, which is considered rude and is rather annoying. Normally, when talking to older people, you are supposed to look at them briefly and then cast your eyes down and look up again a little while later, both to show your attentiveness and deference.

2.7.3 Classroom etiquette

In class, students shouldn't put their feet up because that is a sign of great disrespect for the teacher. Wearing a hat or cap in class is also considered disrespectful. Students should also pay attention to the dress code: no shorts, no tank tops, etc.

Learners should be aware of the fact that students in Vietnam are taught to stand up when teachers come into class as well as when they leave.

Inside or outside of class, teachers should always be addressed as 'thầy' or 'cô', regardless of their ages. A student much older than a teacher still has to use those terms of address, but can refer to himself or herself as 'tôi'.

2.7.4 Gestures

In waving goodbye, put your hand up, palm open outward, and wave from side to side. When beckoning to someone, raise your hand to eye level, palm open downward, and slightly move your fingers toward yourself several times. To tell someone to go away, we use almost the same gesture as signaling, but with the fingers moving outward toward that person several times. Crossing your fingers to wish someone good luck takes on an entirely different meaning, highly taboo in Vietnamese culture. The okay sign and thumbs-up/thumbs-down and knocking on wood might be confusing to most Vietnamese, who generally do not use these signs.

2.7.5 Touching, patting and personal space

Some Vietnamese have the habit of touching you on the arm when talking to you. Maybe they think that's the best way of securing your undivided attention. Some stand very close to you while conversing with you. Usually there isn't a whole lot of personal space as seen in a country like America. Patting a friend on the back is acceptable.

2. 8 Deference

Degrees of deference increase with age. This is a very important aspect of Vietnamese culture. Learners are well-advised to show respect and reverence for older people in both their speech (using more polite particles) and their body language.

However, in reality, in many cases social position has precedence over age. One such example is where an older man works under a young female director. Because of their status gap, the employee is forced to use polite markers and diction while his boss doesn't have to.

Employee: *Thưa cô, tôi xin phép được về sớm hôm nay.*

'Please Miss, I ask your permission to go home early today.'

Boss: *Cũng được. Nhưng mai anh sẽ phải ở lại làm bù.*

'OK. But tomorrow you'll have to stay and work extra.'

2. 9 Beliefs

Many Vietnamese believe in fate (or blame fate for their misfortunes). Fate plays a big role in Nguyễn Du's "The Tale of Kiều," and is mentioned in a number of proverbs and folk poetry. Vietnamese people may utter these words:

Âu cũng là cái số. 'It's all because of fate.'

Số con rệp. 'A bedbug's fate.'

Mưu sự tại nhân, thành sự tại thiên. (Proverb) 'Man proposes, God disposes.'

... *Số cô có vợ có chồng* (Folk poetry, making fun of fortune-tellers.)

'... It's your fate to be married.'

Sinh con đầu lòng không gái thì trai. 'The first-born will be either a girl or a boy.'

2. 10 Superstitions

Some Vietnamese are very superstitious. They may tell you any of the following:

You don't give your Vietnamese friends a knife or a pair of scissors as a gift. You don't visit your friends in the morning of the first day of Tet. You don't shower your

friends' babies with compliments. You look up your future spouse's horoscope to see whether the two of you are compatible in marriage. You go to a fortune-teller to have him or her choose an *auspicious* date for your wedding. You follow the advice given on the calendar for every day of the week. You throw rice and salt out of the window after a bird flies into your house. You hang up a mirror or nail a horse shoe to your front door to chase away evil spirits.

3. Conclusion

Learning a new language is a multi-faceted task. Not only do learners have to try to master new linguistic features (such as tones and unfamiliar sounds and confusing speech patterns), they also need to become sensitive to a whole new culture that may have values that run counter to their own. But can we learn a new language without at least recognizing (if not accepting) the new value system? Even for diplomats and some other professions, it is still a resounding 'No!' Any way we look at it, intuitively we can say that any natural language is embedded in a certain culture and somehow reflects many cultural practices of the people who speak that language.

Even though making social blunders is almost unavoidable when we learn a new language, it only helps when early on we are made aware of some possible faux pas that could shake our self-confidence. This awareness is the first step toward a cultural sensitivity that will help us become truly successful learners, those who can both speak and live the new tongue.

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