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## EXPRESSING GRATITUDE IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE: A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SPEECH ACT OF THANKING

Do Thi Phuong Thuy \*

Posts and Telecommunications Institute of Technology, Hanoi, Vietnam.

\* Corresponding Author

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### ABSTRACT

This study offers a contrastive analysis of the speech act of thanking in English and Vietnamese, examining it on three planes: semantic content, pragmatic strategy, and cultural motivation. Thanking is treated as an expressive speech act in the sense of Austin (1962) and Searle (1975), through which the speaker conveys a positive psychological state towards a benefit conferred by the hearer. Drawing on examples from everyday conversation, literary works, and film dialogue in the two languages, the study finds four substantive similarities: the core propositional content of gratitude, the dominance of direct conventionalised strategies, the use of address terms as politeness devices, and the use of intensifiers to upgrade the force of the act. It further identifies five systematic differences: the semantic scope and frequency with which thanks are verbalised, the preference for concise versus expanded strategies, the degree of structural fixedness, the range of intensifying and affective devices, and the way thanks are used in response to compliments. These differences are explained with reference to positive versus norm-based politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987), individualist versus collectivist orientations (Hofstede, 2001), and the interpersonal richness of Vietnamese grammar (Halliday, 1994). The paper closes with pedagogical implications for developing intercultural pragmatic competence in Vietnamese learners of English and in learners of Vietnamese.

**Keywords:** Speech act of thanking; Gratitude; Contrastive pragmatics; Politeness; Address terms; Intensifiers; English and Vietnamese; Intercultural communication

### 1 INTRODUCTION

In everyday interaction, the speech act of thanking plays a central role in maintaining social relationships and in signalling politeness between interlocutors. A word of thanks is not merely a ritual verbal reflex; it also encodes the speaker's attitude, emotion, and assessment of the social relationship holding between the participants.

The realisation of thanking, however, is governed not only by the linguistic system but also by culture and context of situation. English and Vietnamese, representing two different language families and two different cultural traditions, display both shared tendencies and notable divergences in the way gratitude is expressed. Where such divergences go unrecognised, they readily give rise to misunderstanding or to pragmatically inappropriate usage in intercultural encounters — a learner who transfers Vietnamese norms into English may sound either curiously effusive or, in the opposite direction, ungrateful.

Previous research has established the theoretical apparatus for describing such behaviour: speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975), politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983), cross-cultural pragmatics (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989; Wierzbicka, 1991), and empirical work on gratitude expressions (Cheng, 2005) and compliment responses (Chen, 1993). Relatively few studies, however, have brought English and Vietnamese thanking together in a single systematic contrast that covers content, strategy, form, and intensification at once. This study seeks to fill that gap.

The research aims to:

- Identify the similarities in how thanks are performed in English and Vietnamese.
- Describe and explain the differences in semantics, pragmatic strategy, and grammatical form.
- Account for these differences in terms of politeness norms and cultural orientation.
- Offer practical suggestions for foreign language teaching and intercultural communication.

By combining a contrastive with a pragmatic perspective, the study hopes to clarify the specific difficulties faced by learners and to propose solutions that can improve both teaching methodology and learner competence.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Design

The study employs a qualitative, descriptive-contrastive design. Contrastive analysis is used to juxtapose the semantic, pragmatic, and structural features of thanking in the two languages and thereby to predict points of transfer. Pragmatic analysis, framed by speech act and politeness theory, is then used to interpret why particular realisations are preferred in each speech community. The unit of analysis is the thanking utterance together with its immediate co-text, since the illocutionary force of thanking is frequently distributed across an utterance sequence rather than carried by a single formula.

### 2.2 Data Collection

The data consist of three complementary sources:

- Naturally occurring conversational exchanges in English and Vietnamese, observed in service encounters, classroom interaction, and family talk.
- Dialogue extracted from literary works and films in both languages, which supplies richer, more elaborated tokens than everyday routine talk.
- Constructed contrastive pairs, translated between the two languages, used to demonstrate transfer-induced infelicities.

Vietnamese examples are given in the original and, where the structure is not transparent, glossed in English. The analysis is organised into two blocks: similarities (Sections 3.1.1–3.1.4) and differences (Sections 3.2.1–3.2.5), each illustrated with examples that show the convergence or divergence of the two languages.

## 3 FINDINGS

### 3.1 Similarities in the Realisation of Thanking

#### 3.1.1 The propositional content of gratitude

In both languages the core content of a thanking utterance is the expression of the speaker's positive psychological state towards a beneficial act performed by the hearer. In the taxonomies of Austin (1962) and Searle (1975), thanking belongs to the expressives: the speaker does not attempt to change the world but to make an attitude public. In both languages the act is characteristically tied to its cause, which makes the utterance specific and therefore more convincing:

*Thank you for helping me with my assignment. / Thank you for your support during the project.*

*Cảm ơn anh đã giúp em làm bài tập. / Cảm ơn chị đã hỗ trợ em trong công việc.*

The following clause (for helping me... / đã giúp em...) specifies what is being acknowledged. As Leech (1983) observes, stating the reason for gratitude maximises positive politeness, since it shows that the speaker genuinely registers the hearer's contribution.

### 3.1.2 Thanking strategies

Both languages show a clear preference for the direct strategy — the use of a conventionalised expression that names the act being performed (Thank you / Thanks a lot; Cảm ơn / Em cảm ơn ạ). Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) treat this as a near-universal option, favoured for its transparency and communicative economy.

Beyond the direct strategy, both languages routinely combine thanking with other speech acts — refusal, explanation, or apology — in order to soften an unwelcome move:

*Thank you, but I'm afraid I can't accept your offer.*

*Cảm ơn anh, nhưng em không thể nhận lời được.*

Following Brown and Levinson (1987), pairing thanks with a refusal mitigates the face-threatening act. In both languages, then, thanking is not only an expression of gratitude but also a strategic resource for maintaining social harmony.

### 3.1.3 Address terms

The use of address terms within the thanking utterance is a further point of convergence, reflecting the weight of social factors in both speech communities. For Holmes (1995), address is the linguistic means by which speakers negotiate social distance, power, and intimacy:

*Thank you, sir. / Thank you, professor.*

*Cảm ơn bác ạ. / Em cảm ơn thầy.*

In both cases the address term marks respect and recognition of the hearer's standing. The Vietnamese system is far more elaborate, but the shared principle is that address functions as a pragmatic dial by which the politeness value of the thanks is adjusted to context.

### 3.1.4 Intensifying devices

Both languages allow the force of the act to be upgraded so as to signal the intensity of the speaker's feeling:

*Thank you very much for your help. / Thank you so much!*

*Em cảm ơn anh rất nhiều ạ. / Cảm ơn cô nhiều lắm.*

As Cheng (2005) notes, intensification lifts the utterance out of the merely ritual minimum and into the expression of sincere feeling. The devices available in each language differ in range — a matter taken up in Section 3.2.4 — but the functional motivation is shared.

**Pedagogical implication:** because these four features are shared, they can be taught as transferable ground and used as a secure starting point from which the contrasts below are introduced.

## 3.2 Differences in the Realisation of Thanking

Although thanking discharges the same communicative function in both languages, the data reveal substantial differences in semantic scope, pragmatic strategy, formal structure, and intensification. These differences reflect the strong influence of divergent cultural values and politeness norms.

### 3.2.1 Semantic scope and frequency of verbalisation

English speakers verbalise thanks frequently and across a very wide range of situations, including trivial everyday services. Wierzbicka (1991) describes this as a tendency to verbalise politeness through explicit formulae:

*Thank you. (as someone holds a door open) / Thanks. (on being handed an item by a server)*

Vietnamese does not always require thanks to be stated. In familiar or family settings, gratitude may be conveyed by action, by an acknowledging particle, or simply by the situation itself:

*(taking a bowl of rice from one's mother, without saying cảm ơn) — Vàng ạ. "Yes (respectfully)."*

Thanking in Vietnamese is therefore not invariably a verbal obligation; it may be discharged non-verbally or behaviourally. This is characteristic of East Asian interactional norms, where intimacy reduces the need for explicit verbal expression of feeling (Nguyễn Quang, 2002). Learners moving in either direction misread this: Vietnamese learners of English under-thank, while English speakers in Vietnamese may sound oddly formal with close kin.

### 3.2.2 Pragmatic strategy: concise versus expanded

English favours a direct, brief, highly formulaic strategy; Vietnamese tends towards an expanded strategy in which the thanks are supported by several additional elements:

*Thank you for your help.*

*Em cảm ơn anh đã giúp em nhiều như thế này, em thật sự rất quý ạ.*

In Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms, English politeness leans on positive politeness, emphasising autonomy and equality, whereas Vietnamese is strongly shaped by norm-based politeness, in which the speaker expands the utterance to display humility and to acknowledge relative status. Vietnamese thanks are also commonly accompanied by an apology or by self-deprecation:

*Em cảm ơn anh, phiền anh quá rồi. "Thank you — I have troubled you too much."*

This combination is rare in English, where apologising for having been helped can read as insincere or as an unwanted imposition of obligation. The contrast points to two different ways of managing face.

### 3.2.3 Grammatical structure and form

English uses a relatively fixed set of patterns, with thank as the central verb and a small number of licensed complement types:

*Thank you. / Thank you for + noun / gerund. / I really appreciate it.*

Vietnamese permits a considerably more flexible structure in which several elements may be stacked in a single utterance: an address term, a modal particle, a degree adverb, and an explanatory clause:

*Em cảm ơn cô nhiều lắm ạ, nhờ cô mà em mới làm được bài này.*

In Halliday's (1994) terms, this reflects the interpersonal richness of Vietnamese grammar, in which emotion and social relationship are encoded directly in clause structure rather than left to intonation or context. Vietnamese thanking is consequently harder to detach from its situation of use than its English counterpart.

### 3.2.4 Intensification and affective shading

English intensification of thanks is largely quantitative and drawn from a restricted inventory (very much, so much, a lot). Vietnamese draws on a wider system comprising degree adverbs (rất, nhiều lắm), modal particles (ạ, nhé, nhỉ), and expressive formulae:

*Em cảm ơn anh rất nhiều ạ. / Cảm ơn cô nhiều lắm, em không biết nói gì hơn.*

Critically, the Vietnamese devices do more than scale emotion: the particle ạ and the choice of address term simultaneously encode deference and hierarchical position, a function for which English has no direct grammatical equivalent. Following Hofstede (2001), Vietnamese culture is comparatively collectivist, valuing cohesion and the display of feeling, whereas Anglo-American culture is comparatively individualist, favouring restraint and economy. This helps explain why Vietnamese thanks tend to be longer, more affective, and more relational.

### 3.2.5 Thanking as a response to compliments

A final clear difference concerns compliment responses. In English, answering a compliment with thanks is the expected, confident, and appropriate move:

— *You did a great job!* — *Thank you!*

Vietnamese speakers characteristically combine thanks with modesty or a mild denial:

— *Em làm tốt đấy!* — *Dạ, em cảm ơn cô, em vẫn còn thiếu sót nhiều ạ.*

As Chen (1993) argues, this reflects different conceptions of the self and different norms of modesty: acceptance signals appropriate self-regard in one culture, while partial rejection signals appropriate humility in the other. A bare Thank you may strike a Vietnamese interlocutor as immodest; a self-deprecating response may strike an English interlocutor as fishing for reassurance.

**Pedagogical implication:** these five contrasts are the points at which transfer produces pragmatic failure rather than grammatical error, and they therefore deserve explicit treatment in the syllabus rather than incidental correction.

## 4 CONCLUSION

This study has surveyed and contrasted the speech act of thanking in English and Vietnamese on semantic, pragmatic, and cultural planes, using data from natural conversation, literature, and film. Thanking emerges as a universal phenomenon, present in both languages with the same basic function: to express gratitude and to sustain social relationships.

On the side of similarity, both languages treat thanking as an expressive act directed at a benefit received; speakers in both tend to specify the reason for their gratitude, to intensify the act in order to mark its sincerity, to deploy address terms as politeness devices, and to use thanks strategically in delicate situations such as refusals and evaluations. These convergences indicate that thanking is governed by general principles of politeness in human interaction.

On the side of difference, English favours direct, brief, highly conventionalised thanks, while Vietnamese exhibits greater flexibility, frequently combining thanks with address terms, modal particles, explanations, or apologies. English thanks are largely explicit, direct, and mono-functional; Vietnamese thanks are more often multifunctional and implicit, simultaneously signalling friendliness, relational maintenance, and relative status. These differences reflect two conceptions of politeness, face, and communicative orientation: the English-speaking world tends towards the individual and the direct, Vietnamese culture towards social relationship, harmony, and hierarchy.

Pedagogical implications include:

- Explicit teaching of when thanks are conventionally required in English but optional in Vietnamese, and vice versa.
- Practice in the concise English formula thank you for + noun / gerund, alongside awareness that expansion is not required.
- Contrastive work on compliment responses, so that learners can accept praise in English without loss of face.
- Attention to Vietnamese address terms and modal particles as untranslatable politeness resources rather than optional decoration.
- Role play and film-based tasks that expose learners to the full expanded and reduced forms of thanking in both languages.

Theoretically, the study contributes further English–Vietnamese evidence to speech act and politeness research. Practically, its findings can be applied in the teaching of both English and Vietnamese, and in particular in developing intercultural communicative competence, so that learners use thanks appropriately and effectively and avoid the misunderstandings that pragmatic transfer would otherwise produce.

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