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# Functional Language in Vietnam and Australia

Some Differences in the Use of Functional Language  
Between Vietnamese and Australian Speakers

by Eleanor A Ensor



WESTERN AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE OF ADVANCED EDUCATION  
MOUNT LAWLEY CAMPUS LANGUAGE CENTRE

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FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE IN VIETNAM AND AUSTRALIA

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Language between Vietnamese and Australian  
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by Eleanor A Ensor.

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SOME DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE BETWEEN  
VIETNAMESE AND AUSTRALIAN SPEAKERS

The linguistic problems encountered in such areas as phonology and syntax by Vietnamese learning English are already dealt with in several publications. This paper however, explores a further avenue of common problems which are socio-linguistic in nature, relating to the settlement process of Vietnamese into Australian society.

Six areas will be discussed in relation to the use of functional language. These areas have been noted by Vietnamese and teachers of Vietnamese to be areas of difficulty for adjustment. They are :

- 1) Forms of address and greetings.
- 2) The Vietnamese kinship system - use of kinterms etc.
- 3) The structure of Vietnamese names.
- 4) Inviting/accepting/refusing.
- 5) The Vietnamese smile which is frequently substituted for language.
- 6) Yes and No, the use of which differs in Vietnamese and English.

1. Forms of address and greetings

The manner in which we greet someone in any situation performs a number of functions. Through the greeting, we do not just open a line of verbal communication, we express recognition, friendship or otherwise, intentions, expectations, reasons for speaking and so on. We greet people differently according to their social status, their age, their occupation and the respect which we are prepared to accord to them. We can use the greeting therefore, as a vehicle to set what we instinctively know in our culture to be the right tone for any social encounter.

In addition to this, each culture possesses intrinsic variations in the speaker/hearer's expectations of the various levels of discourse. The

speaker requires not only a good understanding of the specific language necessary but also an adequate knowledge of the social structure of that particular culture to be able to say what he wants to say in a manner acceptable to both him and the hearer.

In this context, the differences between the social structures and consequently the levels of discourse in the Vietnamese and Australian cultures, cause problems for Vietnamese newcomers to Australia. Because of their desire to settle into Australia as quickly as possible and their courtesy and wish to please, their lack of both linguistic skill in English and knowledge of social and cultural customs makes them fearful of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time and so giving offence.

According to Laurence C Thompson<sup>1</sup>, three major factors affect the style of speech which a Vietnamese speaker in his own culture will choose :

- 1) The formality of the situation in which he is speaking.
- 2) His status in relation to the hearer.
- 3) His attitude towards the person or persons being addressed.

The situations themselves tend to fall into three classes :

- a) Formal situations in which an individual is dealing with people he has either never met before or with whom he has only a limited acquaintance. These situations include public ceremonies or large ritualistic gatherings.
- b) Familiar situations in which the speaker is intimately related to the other persons involved.
- c) Informal situations involving people who are fairly well acquainted but not intimate.

There may well be a set of similar distinctions in Australian English in terms



of choice of style of address but the major difference is the wealth of address terms used in Vietnamese. The speaker of Vietnamese has numerous choices of address words to be used within these situations according to the age, social status, etc. of the person he is addressing.

Elders receive more consideration than younger persons and males enjoy more prestige than females. There is also a prestige hierarchy according to socio-political rank, intellectual achievement and wealth. Because of these factors, a formal situation is far more common in Vietnam than in Australia and carries into many areas which would not be considered formal by an Australian. The prestige hierarchy in Australia is far less clearly defined and some sections of the population do not acknowledge any prestige hierarchy at all.

In Vietnam, the distinction between speaker, hearer and referent is not emphasised in the actual conversation used in these formal situations nor to a certain extent in informal situations. Nevertheless, the social relationships which are involved are extremely important. In a conversation outside the family, a Vietnamese rarely uses names to address a person since this is considered impolite in Vietnam. The usual form of address is the use of an appropriate personal pronoun or kinterm preceded by the polite form 'thưa' with no mention of family or given names. Because this form is used when addressing or talking to someone superior to oneself in family or social rank, a common form of address from a Vietnamese student to his teacher would be :

Thưa Thầy (male) or Thưa Cô (female)<sup>2</sup>

The terms 'Thầy' (master/father) and 'Cô' (Miss/aunt) are used by Vietnamese students on all levels to address their teachers and have been in use in

in Vietnam for many centuries. Traditionally, the teacher has been considered the spiritual father or mother of the student and as such, commands the greatest respect.

An Australian student addressing an Australian teacher uses a much simpler format :

Mr Green (male) or Miss/Mrs Taylor (female).

In addressing a student, a Vietnamese teacher would use one of the following terms, showing the extensive use of kinship terms for address :

con (child)	)	
	)	Primary School
em (younger sibling)	)	
anh (elder brother)	)	
	)	
em (younger brother)	)	
	)	
chị (elder sister)	)	High School/University
	)	
cô (younger sister)	)	
	)	
given name with or without	)	
anh/chị preceding it	)	

3

The terms 'anh' and 'chị' are actually used by the teacher relative to the ages and sex of his or her own children.

In contrast, the Australian teacher simply uses the Christian name of the student from the time he or she enters Primary school through to High School /University.

Levels of discourse are most important in the use of these forms of address because the category of person is nearly always an optional one in Vietnamese. The surface structure of the language rarely forces the speaker to indicate specifically whether he is referring to himself, the listener or a third

person. However, the status of the various persons involved must nearly always be stated clearly. There is a great deal of talking in the third person, making use of the nouns and general categoricals denoting family relationships, professions, etc. when the speaker may actually refer to himself or his hearer. This speaking in the third person is an integral part of the normal system in Vietnamese.

A simulated conversation between a Vietnamese male teacher and student illustrates not only this use of the third person but also the terms of respect used between the two :

Teacher :	"CÔ học bài chưa?"
	"Younger sister/miss learn lesson yet?"
Young lady student :	"Thưa thầy chưa."
(spoken politely)	"Sir, not yet." <sup>4</sup>

A further example of the use of respectful terms is an idealized conversation between a female teacher and a young male student. The teacher would be addressed as 'cô'. If she is middle-aged or older or married, she would address the student as one of her own children.

Teacher :	"Nam, <u>con</u> làm bài xong chưa?"
	"Nam, have you finished your homework yet?"
Student :	"Thưa cô chưa."
	"Madam (Mrs.), not yet."

If the teacher is young, she may address the student as a younger brother or sister. e.g

Teacher :	"Nam, <u>em</u> làm bài xong chưa?"
	"Nam, have you finished your homework yet?"
Student :	"Thưa cô, chưa."
	"Honoured elder sister, not yet."

Teacher: "Tại sao?"

"Why?"

The teacher doesn't need to use a term of address here.

Student : "Thưa cô ....."

"Honoured elder sister, yesterday my mother was sick."<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, an Australian teacher-student conversation would be socio-linguistically less complex. The teacher would simply use the Christian name of the student with the second person pronoun regardless of age and the student would address the teacher as simply 'Mr Brown' or 'Mrs Green'. The student would possibly omit the teacher's name when replying or use it only once.

In Vietnam, because of the high esteem in which teachers are held, the students are taught to stand up in silence when the teacher enters the room and to sit down, again in silence, when the teacher either tells them to or indicates it by a wave of the hand.

There are no exactly equivalent greetings such as 'good morning', 'good afternoon' or 'goodbye' in Vietnamese because they do not differentiate between the times of the day in their greetings but the forms used are usually the personal pronouns 'Thầy' (male) or 'cô' (female) followed by a polite word at the end of the sentence e.g.

"Thầy ..... ạ"                      "cô ..... ạ"

'ạ' is a polite particle which is a term of extreme respect. It is used only in the north and can be used in any form of reply. 'Chào' can be used here with 'Thầy' and 'cô' as an optional additive.<sup>6</sup> 'Chào' means 'greetings' and can also be used as a salute in the army.

The Australian teacher almost invariably enters a room with a greeting like "Good morning, everyone", and expects the students in turn to reply with

"Good morning, Mrs Green", forms which are not only unfamiliar to the Vietnamese student but which are considered impolite. They quickly learn of course, that these are acceptable terms of address in this country but they are aware that this is totally different social behaviour from that which they are used to. They therefore feel very unsure in other unfamiliar situations because they have no instinctive knowledge which will help them to know the correct thing to say.

Vietnamese males normally greet each other with a handshake or a joining of each person's own hands, accompanied by a slight inclination of the head. Young Vietnamese, both male and female, also use a smile as a greeting but Vietnamese women never shake hands.

Greetings between fellow students of much the same age in Vietnam can be either fairly formal or more informal. This is in contrast to Australian students who tend to informality in almost all situations with contemporaries.

An idealized example of a fairly formal conversational exchange between two Vietnamese students who have a limited acquaintance would be :

- 1st student: "Chào anh Hai. Lâu quá không gặp. Anh mạnh giỏi không?"  
 Greetings Mr Hai. Long too not meet. You well not?  
 Greetings Mr Hai. I haven't seen you for a long time  
 Are you well?"
- 2nd student: "Cám ơn anh tôi vẫn mạnh. Năm nay anh thấy bài vở thế nào?"  
 Thank you. I still well year this you see lessons how?  
 "Thank you, I'm well. How are you finding study this year?"
- 1st student: "Khó hơn năm ngoái nhiều anh. Tôi tính lên thư viện  
 Difficult more year last much you I plan go up library để tham khảo thêm đây. Còn anh đi đâu hướng này vậy?"  
 to consult more here still you go where direction this in this case.
- "Much more difficult than last year. (Polite 'you' understood.) I plan to go to the library to look up more references. Where are you going, this way?"

- 2nd student: "Thưa tôi phải đi làm thực tập sinh hoá."  
(respectful) I must go do practical biology  
"I have to go to a Biology prac."
- 1st student: "Vậy để anh đi kéo trễ giờ. Khi nào rảnh rồi mời anh  
In that case let you go otherwise late hour. Whenever  
tới nhà tôi chơi".  
free invite you come house my visit.  
"In that case I'll let you go in case you're late.  
When you're free I'd like you to come to my place".
- 2nd student: "Cám ơn anh. Chúng ta sẽ có giờ nói chuyện nhiều hơn.  
Thank you We (inc) will have time talk much more  
Xin chào anh".  
Give greetings you  
  
"Thank you. We'll have time to talk a lot more. I bid  
you goodbye".
- 1st student: "Dạ, xin chào anh".  
(Polite particle) give greetings you.  
"(Yes) I bid you goodbye".

The terms 'anh' (elder brother) or 'ông' (Mr.) would be used on this formal level according to the age of the students.

Typical Vietnamese courtesy is shown throughout this exchange in expressions such as :

'Mr Hai'.  
'Thưa tôi', (respectful)  
'I bid you goodbye'.

Although this courtesy is not as marked in a more informal exchange, it would still be evident in one way or another.

As the difference between formality and informality is inherent in all forms of Vietnamese address, conversations unavoidably contain polite formulae.

For example, the use of 'cậu' means that the person being addressed may be younger but enjoys a higher social status. "Cậu" also means 'uncle' on the mother's side or 'the son of the boss' in the north. However, between two friends, one will often refer to the other as 'cậu' and himself as 'tôi'.

For other uses of 'cậu', (see Page 19) 'BỒ' is another address pronoun, meaning 'you' and is interchangeable with 'cậu' in a familiar, informal situation. An idealized informal conversation between two students of the same sex using these pronouns is:

- 1st student: "Đi đâu vậy bồ?"  
Go where like this you  
"Where are you going?"
- 2nd student: "Tớ đi thư viện, còn cậu?"  
I go library what about you?  
"I'm going to the library. What about you?"
- 1st student: "Mình phải 'cúp cua' giờ chót để đi thi lái xe".  
I must cut course hour last to go take exam drive car.  
"I have to miss my last lecture to take my driving test".
- 2nd student: "Rán dầu nhen".  
Try pass won't (you understood)  
"Try to pass won't you"?<sup>8</sup>

For a description of the use of the pronoun 'mình' see pp 16 and 19.

More informal and not very refined is the usage of the terms 'mày' or 'tao'. Such forms would probably be used by university students who are on very familiar terms or they can even be used by females who are close friends.

An example is in the following idealized conversation :

- 1st student: "Sao ngồi ứ rứ vậy mày? Nhớ bồ phải không?"  
Why sit sad like this you miss boy/girl friend yes/no.  
"Why are you sitting there, looking so sad? Are you missing your boy/girl friend?"
- 2nd student: "Đầu có, 'gạo' lâu nhức đầu chút đỉnh thôi".  
Not at all (I understood) swot long time headache a little only.  
"Not at all, I've been swotting so long I've got a slight headache".
- 1st student: "Vừa vừa thôi nghe. Học quá khủng đây mày".  
Moderate moderate just won't you. Study much crazy like that you  
"Take it easy won't you. Too much study drives you mad you know."<sup>9</sup>

An enormous difference between the conversational styles of the Vietnamese and the Australians can be seen when comparing the foregoing Vietnamese student discourse with one heard by myself on campus between two Australian students :

1st student: "G'day".

2nd student: "How're y' goin' Frank?"

1st student: "Good, mate".

End of conversation. It could also be the beginning of bewilderment for the Vietnamese who is trying to sort out the Australian linguistic expressions of politeness.

Even the differences in the length of the two conversations indicates the different ideas of courtesy. The Vietnamese conversation is longer as each would consider it impolite to cut the exchange short.

The fear of being considered impolite will cause the Vietnamese to err on the side of formality to be safe. This formality can be seen in the following exchange :

1st person: "Chào ông Thục".

"Hello (Mr) Thục".

(The word 'ông' here is typical of Vietnamese kinship or status terms which are a very significant feature of the language. "ông" signifies that the person addressing Thục regards him as superior or is on formal terms with him.)

2nd person: "Không dám chào ông Smith".

"Not flatter greetings Mr Smith".

The opening phrase here suggests that it is a great compliment to be greeted by the other person. It means 'please don't flatter me'.<sup>10</sup>

In commenting on social restraints on language choice Gumperz (1974) quotes Bernstein (1964) as saying: "Between language and speech, there is a social



structure".<sup>11</sup> Gumperz himself comments: "Social restraints on language choice are an important component of the relationship between signs and their meanings. Every message must conform to the grammatical restraints of the verbal repertoire but is always interpreted with social restraints".<sup>12</sup>

It is these social restraints which cause problems for the Vietnamese by virtue of the great disparity between their native culture and their adopted one. Language choice for them in social situations often becomes traumatic and frequently results in withdrawals into their own ethnic groups.

## 2 The Vietnamese Kinship system

To understand social attitudes towards human relationships within Vietnamese culture, it is wise first of all, to look at one of the fundamental components of Vietnamese life - the kinship system. Many words which are used for address and reference are kin terms within the Vietnamese family.

The Vietnamese have an extended family system, patriarchal in nature, which includes not only the members immediately related to ego (father, mother, brothers, sisters, children) but also those persons who are related to him through males (father's immediate relatives, father's father's immediate relatives, father's brothers' offspring, brothers' offspring, grandsons' offspring, sons' offspring, etc.). The term used for these persons is 'nôi' which means 'inside'.

The term given to other relatives is 'ngoài' which means 'outside' and this includes all relatives through females, mainly the members of the mother's extended family, but also the father's sisters' children, sisters' children and daughters' and granddaughters' offspring etc.

There are so many differentiating terms for members of the extended family that there are clear designations for generation and relative age within

generation and sex for individuals regarded as older than ego. This includes some persons who may actually be younger than ego but are related in such a way that the system treats them as older, e.g. father's elder brother's children.

An important difference here between Vietnamese and Australian kinship terms is that Vietnamese use the same kin terms for immediate relatives as they do for collateral relatives of the same generation.

For example, in Vietnam, the father's elder brother's children (ego's first cousins) are called 'anh' (elder brother) and 'chị' (elder sister) the same as ego's own elder siblings are. In the same way, his father's younger brother's children are called 'em' (younger siblings) - even though some of them may be chronologically older - in the same way that his own younger brothers and sisters are.

Usually 'anh' and 'chị' in these cases are used in conjunction with 'họ' and 'bà con' to show whether or not there is blood relationship. Even if these combinations are not used, they are certainly implied.

'Họ' and 'bà con' denote that that person is not in the blood line whereas the term 'ruột' denotes that person is in the blood line. Therefore, cousins' children can be 'anh họ' or 'chị bà con'.

The most important terms in average family relationships can be seen in the following table. See also Table 1, Page 13a<sup>13</sup>. Terms listed parenthetically are special terms for spouses of related persons, e.g. 'chị dâu' means wife of 'anh', 'anh rể'<sup>2</sup> means husband of 'chị'.

MaleFemale

SIBLINGS (included are parents' siblings' children and grandparents' siblings' grandchildren etc.)

Elder	anh (chị dâu)	chị (anh rê <sup>2</sup> )
Younger	em (trai) (em dâu)	em (gái) (em rê <sup>2</sup> )
PARENTS	cha, thày, bố, ba	mẹ, me, má

PARENTS' SIBLINGS (included are grandparents' siblings' children and great grandparents' siblings' grandchildren, etc.)

## FATHER'S SIDE

Elder	bác (bác gái)	bác (in some families) cô (đượng)
Younger	chú (thím)	cô (đượng)
MOTHER'S SIDE	cậu (mợ)	đì (đượng)

GRANDPARENTS (included are grandparents' siblings, great grandparents' siblings' children, etc.)

Father's side	ông (nội)	bà (nội)
Mother's side	ông (ngoại)	bà (ngoại)
GREAT GRANDPARENTS	cụ (ông), ông cố	cụ (bà), bà cố
CHILDREN	con (trai) (đâu)	con (gái) (rê <sup>2</sup> )

GRANDCHILDREN (included are siblings' children, parents' siblings' grandchildren etc.)

cháu (trai) (cháu dâu)	cháu (gái) (cháu rê <sup>2</sup> )
---------------------------	------------------------------------

It should be noted here that in the third ascending generation, the nuclear term 'cụ' (great grandparent) does not in itself distinguish sex.



Similarly, the nuclear terms for all relatives assessed as younger than ego are single terms for both sexes :

em (younger sibling)

con (child)

cháu (grandchild)

chắt (great grandchild)

chít (great great grandchild)

chút (great great great grandchild)

Because the descent pattern is patrilineal, nuclear terms distinguish father's elder brother (bác) from his younger brother (chú) while the same term is used for father's elder and younger sisters (cô), for mother's elder and younger brothers (cậu) and younger sisters (dì).

'Cha' and 'mẹ' are the most widespread terms of reference for parents, although the other four terms are common in direct address. Of these, 'ba' and 'má' seem to be the most commonly used.

The word 'thầy' (basically master) is used for 'father' in many dialect areas, especially in the north. However, 'tía' is an affectionate term for 'father' which is used in the south.

At the level of the child, although both 'dâu' (daughter-in-law) and 'rê'<sup>2</sup> (son-in-law) are used by themselves, they also commonly appear in referential use as complements to 'con' (child) 'con dâu' and 'con rê'<sup>2</sup> (same meanings as the simple terms).

'Trai' (male) and 'gái' (female) are used to distinguish the sex of relatives when the nuclear term leaves this unspecified. However, they are not used at the level of the grand parents' generation or above where they are replaced by 'ông' for males and 'bà'<sup>2</sup> for females.

Address and reference within the extended family therefore, utilize a large number of kinship courtesy designations while still operating in a 'familiar' situation.

Children and young people under twenty address their relatives by the appropriate nuclear term and call themselves by whatever kin term would be appropriate for the relative in question to use with them.

For example, a child addressing his father or mother calls himself 'con' which is 'child' and therefore third person and his father 'cha' (or one of the affectionate substitutes). When speaking to his father's brother, he calls himself 'cháu' (nephew/grandson) and his uncle 'bác' (uncle).

The adult members of the family reciprocate with the appropriate terms so that the father calls his son 'con' and himself 'cha' or a substitute. The elder brother of the father calls the boy 'cháu' and himself 'bác'.<sup>14</sup>

An example of speaking in the third person is shown in the following passage where a young lady around twenty talks with her mother :

Daughter: "Thưa má, truyện giầu-cau con nói có đúng và hay không, má?"

"Mother, is the story of betel (chewing) I've told (little daughter) told correct and well (told)?"

Mother : "Con nói đúng và hay lắm, nhưng tại sao con không nói các ích-lợi của giầu-cau?"

"You've (little daughter) told (it) correctly and well but why didn't (little daughter) you talk (about) the useful aspects of betel (chewing)?"

Daughter: "Vâng, con quên mất vì con không ăn giầu. Con xin má nói về ích lợi của giầu-cau cho hai ông nghe".

"Yes, I (little daughter) forgot all about that because (little daughter) don't chew betel. I (little daughter) ask you (honoured mother) (to) tell about the useful aspects of betel for the two gentlemen to hear".<sup>15</sup>

Although speaking in the third person is also done in English, it is usually so-called 'baby-talk', addressing small children and animals, e.g. "Mummy will smack Timmy/Spot if he keeps banging that drum/digging up the garden",

It can also be used to express sarcasm, definiteness or humour but it is never used in normal conversation as it is in Vietnam.

However, young people who consider themselves on an equal footing with each other, use the appropriate kin term for the hearer or referent but use the pronoun 'tôi' (I) to refer to themselves. Adults over twenty extend this use of 'tôi' for designating themselves to most situations, but use kin terms for addressing others or referring to them. Interestingly, if adults use the appropriate kin term to designate themselves when talking to other adults, it connotes special humility or obsequiousness (if it is a younger person addressing an elder) or great formality, severity or arrogance (if it is an older person addressing a younger one).

A husband adopts an attitude towards his wife which is roughly the position of her elder brother. He calls people in her family by the same terms that her elder brother uses. She not only calls him 'anh' but refers to herself as 'em' when talking to him.

They both use reciprocally the pronoun 'mình' when directly addressing each other. 'Mình' literally means 'body/oneself' but also means such an endearment as 'sweetheart'. 'Cũng' also means 'sweetheart', 'darling'. A husband calls his wife's elder brother 'anh' and is called 'em' by that person, regardless of their relative ages.

A common term used to a third person by a husband or wife about each other is 'nhà tôi', colloquially, 'my own'.

'Nhà' literally means 'house'. 'Tôi', as already mentioned, means 'I'. Husbands and wives also use such colloquial terms of endearment and affection as 'ông xã tôi' and 'bà xã tôi' when speaking about each other to a third person. Other terms used are 'ba cháu' and 'ba bày trẻ' which means 'father of my children' and 'má cháu' and 'má bày trẻ' which means 'mother of my children'.

After their first child is born, they shift to a teknonymous usage, ie. naming of the parent from the child, addressing each other as 'father of so and so' or 'mother of so and so'. For example, if the child is a male named Teò, the husband addresses his wife as 'má thấng Teò' and she addresses him as 'ba thấng Teò'. If the child is a female named Tám, the husband is called 'ba con Tám'<sup>16</sup>, and the wife is called 'má con Tám'.

Outside the extended family, 'tôi' is polite usage for the first person but certain kin terms are also used for addressing or referring to others.

These terms often exaggerate the relative age or status of the hearer or referent according to how well the people involved in the conversation know each other. The exaggeration would always be slanted towards complimenting the hearer.

The system is best reflected in a rather formal situation involving people who have just met each other or who have known each other formally for some time. In these cases, the forms of address for speakers over twenty would be:

'cụ' for persons of advanced age, roughly the age of one's own grandparents or older.

'ông' for all men twenty or older unless they merit 'cụ'

'bà' for all married women and for women the same age as the speaker or older, unless they merit 'cụ'.



'cô' for unmarried girls and women from about ten years old, unless they merit 'bà' or 'cụ'.

'anh' for boys roughly over twelve and under twenty.

'em' for younger children.<sup>17</sup>

If social class is clearly defined in any given situation, people who are considered of lower social class are generally addressed as 'anh' (for males) and 'chị' (for females). Traditionally, markings for social speech exist between the aristocracy, professional families, landowners and business executives as opposed to labourers and servants. But even here, age plays a determining role with elderly people of the labouring class often being politely addressed as 'ông' or 'bà'.

Even when people come to know each other better, age continues to be the most important factor when determining which form of address to use. In these cases, some reduction of age and status does take place but some exaggeration also remains. People older than the speaker often come to be called 'ông' or 'bà' rather than 'cụ'. But the movement from 'ông', 'bà' and 'cô' to 'anh' and 'chị' implies a lot closer acquaintance often amounting to intimacy. The only case of a reduction to 'em' is the case of a young man courting a young lady. He would probably start by addressing her as 'cô', then as he came to know her better he would change to 'chị' and finally when they were actually established sweethearts he would change to 'em'. This is also what he would call her if they eventually became married.

In addition to this wide selection of address terms in common usage, there are a few other kin terms used for special relationships.

The term 'cậu' is common in North Vietnam when addressing the male child of someone with higher social standing. 'Cậu' can also be used quite differently to address a very good male friend of the family. This compares to close male friends of the family in Australia being called 'uncle'.

The term 'bác' is sometimes used for both males and females in a special formal relationship to denote an influence outside the family but one which has a special concern or interest in that family.

The term 'chú' (for males) is also used to denote a less responsible but possibly a friendlier outsider.

In polite usage, the only personal pronouns which appear are 'tôi' (I), 'ta' and 'mình'. 'Ta' is a first person pronoun used by a person alone talking to himself or by speakers who assume a certain superiority over the persons to whom or about whom they are speaking. It also appears with the meaning 'you and I' e.g. 'chúng ta' (you and I inclusive). 'Mình' can appear as a descriptive complement referring reflexively to whatever actor is clear in the context, ie. myself, yourself, himself, herself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves, oneself. It is also used by married couples to address each other as 'you'. A further use is between two women who are on intimate terms to mean 'you and I' or occasionally 'you'.

The plural forms of the pronouns involved are formed with 'chúng' which literally means 'a group of animate things'. 'Chúng' is used with kin terms to designate the speaker.

For example:

'chúng con'	we children
'chúng cháu'	we grandchildren/nephews/nieces

'Chúng' is also used by itself as a collective word for reference to groups of people.

However, when the kin term refers to another person - either the person talked to or the person talked about - there is a regular plural marker used which is 'các', for the plural form, e.g.

'các con'	(you) children
'các Ông'	(you) gentlemen
'các bà'	(you) ladies <sup>18</sup>

Given names used with kin terms and titles within the family are quite common although more frequently with reference than address. If they are used in direct address it denotes more formality but at the same time a little more personal concern.

Amongst very close friends and family members, given names are used for address and reference. As mentioned before, this usage implies great intimacy. Sometimes, the given name is used by members of the same generation to address each other. It is often used by an older family member to address a younger.

An interesting difference between dialectal areas in the north and those in the south is shown in the practice which some families employ, calling their children by the number of their birth order. In the north, the eldest child is called 'Cả' (eldest). However, in the south, the first child is called 'Hai' (two), the second 'Ba' (three), the third 'Tứ' (four) etc. According to Thompson<sup>19</sup>, it has been suggested that this dialectal difference relates to superstition which designates 'cả' to the father and therefore cannot be used for any of the children.

These number names are sometimes the only given names the children have, although in some families they provide alternative names. Sometimes, servants are called by such number names also, together with 'anh' or 'chị'.

The Vietnamese feel so strongly about politeness that people who would

normally address and refer to one another in a familiar way, will consciously use much more formal terms to create an atmosphere of courtesy for people present who are not on the same familiar terms.

The use of the particles 'đạ' at the beginning of a sentence and 'ạ' at the end of a sentence convey great respect for the hearer or referent. On occasions, it is also considered more polite to refer to the potential or actual action by a hearer by a euphemism.

For example :

the verb 'xởi' replaces 'ăn' (eat) and 'uống' (drink), being the polite form for both these verbs.

Person A: "Mời ông xởi cơm".

"Have something to eat".

Person B: "Cám ơn ông. Tôi ăn cơm rồi".

"Thank you. I've already eaten". 20

### 3. Structure of Vietnamese Names

The differences between the structure of Vietnamese names and Australian names are a source of confusion for both groups.

Most Vietnamese have three names. For example :

Nguyễn văn Tám

Lê thị Anh

These names are actually in the reverse order to a typical Australian name such as John Robert Smith.

The first name of Nguyễn or Lê is the family name. Due to respect for the person addressed and for his ancestors, this family name is not used.

The middle Vietnamese name often indicates sex, e.g. 'văn' is a common form referring to men whereas 'thị' is often characteristic for women. However, there are many exceptions to this. Some Vietnamese have only a surname and then a double given name such as :

Nguyễn Anh-Thư

Tiêu Anh-Kiệt

Some middle names are common to both sexes and it is not always possible, unless one knows the meaning of the words, to tell the sex of the name bearer, e.g.

Nguyễn Hoàng Sang (rich prince)

Lê Hoàng Mai (yellow apricot blossom)

Some Vietnamese have more than three names, especially women, e.g.

Phan Thị Châu-Hải

Trần Thị Lê Hương

Some surnames and middle names are fixed and go together to indicate that such a name bearer formerly belonged to an aristocratic family or was of royal blood, e.g.

Bảo-Hân where Bảo indicates royalty for males since Bảo Đại was the last King of the Nguyễn dynasty at the end of the feudal system in Vietnam.

Often the middle name is separated from the other names by spaces or hyphens and written in small letters, e.g.

Dương văn Nam

The last name is the given name or Christian name as it is often referred to in Australia.

For example, a Vietnamese with the name Nguyễn Văn Sang would be addressed as Mr Sang which is equivalent to an Australian being addressed as Mr Smith. That is, the use of a family name in Australia is equivalent to the use of a given name in Vietnam. He can however, be addressed as just 'Sang' among friends. In correspondence the full names are used, although Nguyễn Văn Sang may sign his name as N.V.Sang.

Confusion between Australians and Vietnamese is common here with Australians addressing Nguyễn Văn Sang as Nguyễn, thinking this is a Christian or first name like Bill or John. On the other hand, Vietnamese find it incredibly difficult to address someone, particularly a teacher, by an unadorned Christian name, e.g. Margaret. They will nearly always address that person as Mrs/ Miss Margaret. They consider it impolite not to use a term of courtesy before the actual name.

A wife would either use the given name which is more intimate in addressing her husband, or she would use a relationship term, probably more so the latter. Parents would either use the given name to their child or would use a relationship word or a number denoting the order of birth among the children as already mentioned.

Buddhist monks put aside their family names and bear the Buddha's surname 'Thích'.

Titles such as :

Bác-sĩ<sup>2</sup> (medical doctor)

Kỹ-sũ<sup>3</sup> (engineer)

Thủ-Tướng<sup>2</sup> (Premier)

are used when addressing people of specialized occupation.

There has been a tendency among those who attend French schools in Vietnam to adopt a French name or alternatively an English name, to add to their

family names, e.g.

Juliette Lê-Hương

John Sang.

Vietnamese names are written in Roman letters just like Western names as the Vietnamese language was romanized in the seventeenth century.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. Inviting/Accepting/Refusing

A survey prepared for the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs in 1980 called *The Settlement Process of the Vietnamese, Lao, Kampuchean and Timorese in Sydney*, showed that just under a third of the Vietnamese lacked even the most basic command of English. Thirty-nine percent of them stated that they experienced fear or anxiety which resulted from their inability to speak English. These emotions made them reluctant to leave the house, feeling they could not cope with even simple situations.

Their inability to communicate with Australians and to make friends was listed as the most difficult aspect of life in Australia to adjust to. The Vietnamese, of all the other racial groups, particularly indicated a frustration at not being able to communicate the nuances of their own ideas or feelings to Australians and having to settle for very basic messages being communicated.

Because many Vietnamese have suffered severe disruption to their lives and have lost their families, they feel a sense of anger or loss over the fact that their social roles and status have been effectively wiped out - temporarily, or for some, permanently. They are used to emotional and practical support from the extended family situation so that the twin problems of loss of family as well as feeling cut off from Australian society through inability to speak English is quite overwhelming. They

badly need a supportive social environment which will include not only their fellow Vietnamese but also other members of the community.

Being very hospitable people, the Vietnamese love to entertain their friends with a high standard of food and drink in their homes to demonstrate how much they appreciate the friendship. However, there are linguistic differences between Vietnamese and English which do not always make the functions of inviting/accepting and refusing easy. Confusion arising from these differences can effectively dampen desire on both sides to issue invitations.

For example, Vietnamese use the polite form 'thank you' with great care. Their sparing use of this expression is because they feel that to say 'thank you' too frequently may be construed as insincerity.

However, the average Australian tends to expect others to verbally express gratitude, pleasure, etc. and when this verbal expression is not forthcoming, it can often be assumed that the other person is not grateful or pleased. It is more in the accepting/refusing function where this difference shows.

An Australian may say :

"Mười, would you like to come to my house for dinner  
on Saturday night?"

Acceptance from a Vietnamese with a limited range of English could range from a murmured bald 'Yes' which can be interpreted as nothing more than unenthusiastic to just a shy giggle or smile which can leave the inviter wondering if the answer is 'yes' or 'no'.

A standard refusal by an Australian to an invitation would probably be :

"Thanks very much but I'm already going out that night.  
I'd love to come another time".



However, a Vietnamese would possibly say hesitantly "No, I can't" without being able to explain further which leaves the inviter feeling singularly unappreciated.

The relative shyness of the Vietnamese in Australian society plays an important part in their social responses in these situations. It is perhaps better described as a reserved attitude towards strangers or towards a person one does not know very well. It is also a polite attitude used by Vietnamese to show respect to their elders or superiors. Their sparing use of 'thank you' also works in reverse in their attitude to people who thank them. Because modesty and humility have been deeply ingrained in them, they have been taught to refuse praise by saying they did not deserve it. Consequently, when a Vietnamese is thanked for something in his own society, he may reply with such expressions as 'Không dám' (I wouldn't dare expect your thanks) or 'Không có chi' (It's nothing really). If, in Australia, he has not yet learnt the corresponding English expressions, he may just smile and nod politely<sup>22</sup>.

A characteristic which also has an inhibiting effect on Vietnamese in new surroundings is the fear of 'losing face'. They are often afraid to volunteer information or ask too many questions for fear of making mistakes or looking foolish. It is also important to them in a social situation to maintain harmony between speakers or to 'save the face' of some one whose opinion might turn out to be wrong. They have been brought up to respect and accept the opinions of their elders and superiors or at least not to disagree openly. Disagreement would be put in a subtle form of alternative suggestions or the matter in question would be mentioned later.

This 'maintaining harmony' sometimes makes them embarrassed if they have

to refuse an invitation, particularly if it is from someone they consider to be superior, e.g. a teacher. They often fall back on laughing or smiling as an answer because they do not know what to say which will adequately cover them in this situation.

#### 5. The Vietnamese Smile

The enigmatic Vietnamese smile should be mentioned here because it is frequently used when they feel their linguistic skill is inadequate. The Vietnamese smile about almost everything and anything. It is used as a friendly welcome to strangers, to help someone through a difficult situation when a faux pas has been made, to show interest, to please their superiors or when a foreigner cannot pronounce their names properly. Conversely, it can also be used to politely hide confusion, ignorance, fear, contrition, shyness, bitterness, disappointment or anger. Smiling at all times and in all places is a common characteristic of all Vietnamese.

However, when this smile is substituted for language in a situation where another person does not understand what the smile means, it can be a source of irritation and confusion for the non-Vietnamese. They will often label the smiling Vietnamese as 'stupid'.

An example of confusion arising from the smile can be seen in a classroom situation. If a Vietnamese student does not understand a teacher's question, he will simply sit there smiling and saying absolutely nothing. This has been known to irritate teachers from other cultures greatly. Vietnamese will also smile if they are reprimanded at any time which will make the average Australian teacher convinced they are not only stupid but also insolent. However, the Vietnamese smile in this situation will probably be to show the teacher that, (a) they did not mind being reprimanded and (b) they realised they were indeed stupid for not understanding

the lesson or the question and deserved being reprimanded.

#### 6. Yes and No

Another area of misunderstanding can be caused through what appears to be misuse of 'yes' and 'no' by Vietnamese. Whether they agree or disagree with the speaker, responses will always start with the English word 'yes', a translation of the polite form 'đạ' used in Vietnamese. This indicates that the student is listening, not necessarily agreeing with the question asked.

For example, an exchange between a teacher and a Vietnamese student who is single could be like this :

Teacher: "You aren't married (are you)?"

Student: "Yes".

The response 'yes' means 'You were right in your assumption, I'm not married', yet it can give the impression that the student is married when he isn't.

Another example of the response 'yes' which is typical of the terms of respect which tend to begin sentences in Vietnamese is this dialogue :

1st person: "Ông mệt à?"

"You tired you?"

2nd person: "Vâng (tôi mệt)".

"Yes (obey. I tired)".

'Vâng' literally means 'obey' and would probably be translated as 'yes' in this particular case because it is an acknowledgement that the answerer has heard and agrees.

However, 'vâng' would also be used even if there is a negative expressed or implied, because the answerer is agreeing with the speaker, e.g.

- 1st person: "Ông không mệt à?"  
 "You not tired, eh?"
- 2nd person: "Vâng. (tôi không mệt)"  
 "No (Agreed) (I not tired)".

Here the word 'vâng' would have to be translated 'no' in English because of the negative involved but the Vietnamese would still be thinking in terms of 'yes' because he had agreed with the speaker.<sup>23</sup>

#### SUMMARY

As has been discussed, many difficulties with English which are encountered by Vietnamese are social/functional ones in day-to-day situations. Part of the solution obviously lies in intensive second language education. The functional development of language is taught through use of language and is consequently a unit of doing rather than simply knowing. For the Vietnamese student, learning the use of functional English means learning not only different grammatical rules of language use but also different cultural use of language.

They need to know 'why' as well as 'what'. It is not enough for them to learn what the functional language is in a given social situation but why it is used that way and on what levels.

The discussion of the functional differences between English and Vietnamese in this paper therefore, carries considerable educational implications for TESL teaching. The learning process for Vietnamese students of English may be a lengthier and more complex one than for students whose cultural and language background is more similar to the culture and language of Australian society.

Unfortunately, it becomes apparent through studying these differences in the use of functional language that language and culture are so entwined

that even when Vietnamese do achieve some command of English, there still remain certain problems regarding social adjustment into a new community. Knowledge of a common language is not necessarily equivalent to common understanding or mutual intelligibility.

The Australian community at large needs to accept that ethnic groups such as the Vietnamese have a great need to retain their cultural and spiritual values in a new country. If the Vietnamese are not forced by the stress of adaptation to Australian society to completely abandon their cultural identity or native language to achieve some sort of social acceptance, their integration will be gained at a far less traumatic and devastating loss to their personal identities. It is in Australia's interest to solve their settlement problems where possible.

FOOTNOTES

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