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“Eating alone is painful”: An interdisciplinary and ethnographically inspired sociolinguistic investigation into Vietnamese mealtime ritual invitations

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Thi Mai Duyen Dang

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Abstract

Invitations are a commonplace part of language ritual at meals in Vietnamese culture. They are verbal and non-verbal signals extended around everyday meals and interpreted as offers or invitations for food and/or company at meals. These invitations form communal and familial bonds and serve as a means to maintain hierarchical order. However, the commonly-held misperceptions of these invitations include them being explicitly verbalised, occurring only at meal-starts, and being specific to regions and people groups. Previous studies discussed the language of invitations from a narrow linguistic perspective which led to limited understandings of their nature and of how contextual and social factors govern their usage. My research examines linguistic and cultural perceptions and usage of Vietnamese mealtime ritual invitations (VMRIs) by about 350 native speakers of Vietnamese in New Zealand and Vietnam. My study draws on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork data, including participant observations, informal talks, diaries, video-recordings, and interviews. This is an interdisciplinary study drawing upon theoretical ideas from Sociolinguistics and Cultural Anthropology to analyse and interpret the data.

The main findings are from two perspectives. From a linguistic perspective, VMRIs exhibit several features. Firstly, their linguistic variants are diverse. Secondly, particular linguistic features can express formality, politeness, hierarchical respect, and communicative conventions. Thirdly, key sociocultural variables (age, gender, familiarity, perception, and socio-family status) appear to influence usage. From an anthropological perspective, VMRIs are daily-life ritual practices manifesting the value of food in Vietnamese socio-cultural and historical context of food insecurity, the significance of family meals and meal manners, and the role of women.

This study on Vietnamese mealtime ritual invitations expands the conceptual boundaries of invitations as multiplex discourses by showing how context (food and family meals) and other factors (status, familiarity, age, gender, and perception) generate and constrain language use. It also highlights the interrelationship between language and behaviour, the ritual practice of familial bonding during mealtimes, and the role of women in Vietnamese society. The findings emphasise the importance not only of taking account of speakers and hearers’ identities and discursive contexts when interpreting contextual language use but also of identifying those contexts.
Acknowledgments

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## List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colloq.</td>
<td>Colloquialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Diary-writer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FM</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMG</td>
<td>Female guest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FNNZ</td>
<td>Field-notes in New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FNVN</td>
<td>Field-notes in Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INZ</td>
<td>Interviewee in New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IVN</td>
<td>Interviewee in Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honor.</td>
<td>Honorifics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MG</td>
<td>Male guest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NZ</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTs</td>
<td>Reference terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT</td>
<td>Speech Act Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VMRI</td>
<td>Vietnamese mealtime ritual invitations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VN</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>The inviter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Z Something offered/invited

Y The recipient

# The order of diary entries
Notes in citing the data in Vietnamese and Vietnamese authors’ names

Vietnamese (tiếng Việt) is the national, official language of Vietnam, spoken as a native language with quite a few dialectical differences by around 90 million Vietnamese people (Kinh) inside Vietnam and as the first or second language by about three million Vietnamese ethnic minorities in Vietnam and Vietnamese people residing elsewhere. It is a tonal language of Southeast Asia, belonging to the Austroasiatic language family, but not related to Chinese although it contains loan words from Chinese (and other languages) and its old writing system even used Chinese-like characters. The Vietnamese alphabet in use today since the 19th Century is a Latin alphabet with additional diacritics for tones and certain letters (Cao, 1998; Nguyễn, 1988).

Given my primary focus on spoken Vietnamese, I will keep all diacritics in the original form when presenting data in Vietnamese. I will also keep these diacritics when citing Vietnamese authors’ names, like Nguyễn Đình Hòa for example, except for those names published with their works in simplified forms (without diacritics), like Nguyen Dinh Hoa for instance.

I apply the APA 6th style, in which surnames rather than first names are used, to cite all authors’ names, including Vietnamese names although they are in different orders, i.e., surnames come first and first names come last. Therefore, the citation will be Nguyễn (1956) instead of Hòa (1956) for the author’s full name Nguyễn Đình Hòa, for example. However, there are some exceptions, for instance, citing the authors’ names in full when they are recognised as pen-names or aliases, like Nam Cao (2014).
Notes in translation

Like English, Vietnamese syntax conforms to the subject–verb–object order; however, in spoken style, word order is not fixed and some arguments (e.g., subject, objects) may be omitted (ellipses); Vietnamese lexic a do not have morphological inflection of grammatical features such as gender, number, mood, person, voice, or tense (Nguyễ n, 1988). The meanings can be made clearer with the use of modifier and classifier systems, ‘small’ or ‘empty’ words (hư từ), but they are also highly dependent on specific contexts and shared knowledge among interactants (Luong, 1987).

Therefore, in this research of language ritual at mealtimes, to translate spoken Vietnamese data into English to capture the nuances of meanings, not just the literal meanings of the words, and to meet the requirements of the topic, I adopt the sociosemiotic approach, which is based on Halliday's (1978) social semiotic in language. This translation approach, according to researchers in translation including Nida, Morris, and Hu, “helps one understand better not only the meanings of words, sentences and discourse structures, but also the symbolic nature of distinguishing between designative and associative meanings” (as cited in Dang, 2006, p. 14). Moreover, the sociosemiotic approach focuses on not only what people say and do and how they do it but also when (in what context) and why, i.e. the large-scale social consequences of the talk (according to Hu as cited in Dang, 2006).

In translating invitational utterances in particular, I also flexibly apply three-way translation: transliteration in the source language (Vietnamese), literal translation word-for-word in the target language (English), and accessible paraphrase (or pragmatic translation) in the target language (Lembrouck, 2007) using double quotation marks and brackets. I keep the transliteration in double quotation marks “…”, literal translation in square brackets […], and pragmatic translation with equivalent meanings or interpretations of the utterances in round brackets (...). Take an example of a conversation between two friends named H and Đ:

H: “Đ vào ăn cơm với H cho vui!”
[Đ come in eat rice with H for joy!] (Please come and join me for lunch, Đ!)

D: “H ăn đi. Đ ăn rồi!”
[H eat imperative. D eat already!] (Thanks, H. Please continue your meal. I have already eaten) (IVN13, 11:20)
Sometimes, round brackets are used within square brackets to add further information or explanations to certain literal translation in particular contextual use. There are reasons for double-bracketing translation and adding explanations. Firstly, not all lexical items in Vietnamese have close equivalents in English. Secondly, some lexical equivalents in English carry different connotations or referential meanings from those in Vietnamese in certain contextual use. Additionally, there is great difference between ways of communication in Vietnamese (which is more general and implicit) and in English (which is more specific and explicit) (see further in Chapter 1) that requires further explanation added to translation. For example, this pragmatic translation (Mother, please have meal!) can be the English equivalent for both examples “Mẹ mời cơm đi ạ!” and “Mẹ ăn cơm đi ạ!” However, the verbs ‘mời’ and ‘ăn’ used in them have different connotations although they both mean ‘Eat’. Therefore, the information about their connotations are added in round brackets (…) placed within the square brackets of literal translations, [Mother eat (polite) rice imperative honorific!] and [Mother eat (neutral) rice imperative honorific!] respectively, to retain nuances of the source language (Vietnamese), for true presentation of language users.

**Notes in using some terms**

Throughout the study, I have used the terms *extenders* and *recipients* more often than *speakers* and *hearers* or *inviters* and *invitees*. This is firstly because I would like to emphasise that since Vietnamese mealtime ritual invitations encompass all verbal and nonverbal respectful signals, they are extended, but not only uttered; and they can be received by other senses, not just hearing. Another reason is that *extenders* and *recipients* cover more cases than the other two pairs. For instance, *extender* is more precise than *inviter* in describing the one who extends the invitation “Mẹ con cháu mời bà vào xơi cơm!” [Mother child niece/grandchild invite granny come in eat rice] (Granny, please come to join us for meal!) since in this invitation, the extender mentioned not only herself but also her child as the inviters. The latter pairs are used only when I would like to emphasise the particular aspects of speaking or inviting.

I have also used the term *superior* more often than *senior*, in both family and society contexts to emphasise the reflection of Vietnamese family hierarchy in the use of mealtime invitations. In Vietnamese family hierarchy, a person who is at a higher rank of linage order is considered superior to his/her relatives regardless if s/he is younger
than them or at a lower social position than theirs. This is not always aligned with the society hierarchy, in which an older person is always regarded as one’s senior. However, familial relations are more weighted than social relations in Vietnamese society - and particular in meal context. Therefore, in this study, the term *superior* has been selected in relation to the use of other terms *inferior* and *equal*. The classification of these relationships is discussed further in relevant chapters.