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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

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Linguistics

at Massey University, Auckland

New Zealand

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2016

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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

Writing this thesis has been my own solitary experience, but its completion has been greatly supported by many individuals and institutions. I would like to thank them profoundly, beyond my words and beyond these few pages of acknowledgments.

Firstly, I would like to thank my research collaborators for their time, their energy, their enthusiasm, their intellectual and personal sharing, and their voluntary engagement with my study. They invited me to their kindness, openness, friendliness, hospitality, and generosity and freely offered me their consent, their trust, and their confidentiality. Many of them also enthusiastically referred me to their colleagues, friends, and relatives so that I could obtain rich and robust research data. I can never fully repay this enormous debt, yet I value their attribution to this study so dearly.

I am deeply grateful to my incredible supervision team, Dr David Ishii, Dr Graeme McRae, and Dr Mary Salisbury, for their mentorship, their feedback, their guidance, and their encouragement. Each supervisor has helped me with their own expertise, their perspectives, and their unique supervision styles, but they altogether have also enhanced me to pursue my own path into an interdisciplinary research, which integrates linguistics and cultural anthropology and sources of knowledge such as education, psychology, history, and sociology. I profoundly appreciate their patience, their care, their empathy, and their emotional sustenance when I most needed them. I moved myself to tears when they shared the expense to buy me a free lunch in the farewell gathering before my fieldwork or when Mary dressed-up and took me to an auspicious gathering (with lunch) to congratulate me after hearing the ‘miracle’ of my examination result. My respect is surely extended to these great mentors and I feel so close to them, especially to special, dear, and devoted Mary. They have been a great supervisory team that I have ever had.

My appreciation further extends to the examination board, at both the confirmation and the final viva. Their encouraging and insightful comments have made my research more comprehensive.

This work could not have been completed without the contribution and support of many other individuals. My sincere thanks go to Sasya Wreksono and Ruth Gibbons for freely giving me their precious time and professional filmmaking skills to help with my videos. My appreciation further extends to my dedicated former teachers, colleagues, friends, and

associates, who proofread my writings or my research instruments (questionnaires and diaries) in English or Vietnamese, helped me understand articles in other languages, and/or sent me necessary reading materials from overseas. Their help is far too much for me to squeeze all their names in few pages of acknowledgments. My gratitude towards them goes beyond words. I owe them an enormous debt of gratitude. Their compassion and good will have sustained my faith in humanity.

To the institutions, I would like to thank Vietnamese Government for encouraging me with their high-status Overseas Project scholarship and Massey University for acknowledging my research with their prestigious Vice Chancellor's Doctoral Scholarship. I am also grateful to the School of Humanities (Massey University) for their support in many ways, especially their considerate care in arranging accommodation and transportation for my conference attending. My deep thanks are also extended to Massey University library, the Graduate Research School, and Centres for Teaching and Learning on Albany Campus, particularly Mr Martin McMorrow, for the excellent services they have offered me throughout my doctoral candidature. I am grateful to many associations and groups such as MUHEC for approving my project; ASA for supporting my parental-student issues; New Zealand Linguistics Society, CEAD, and others for organising conferences where I have received insightful comments on my papers.

I express my appreciation to many Massey University dedicated staff and helpful peers, including those in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics postgraduate group (School of Humanities) and in the Emerging Anthropologist Postgraduate group (School of People, Environment and Planning) for inviting me to their monthly academic discussions and giving me a sense of belongings. I also extend tremendous thanks and gratitude to the wonderful peers sharing the PhD office with me. They exchanged with me experience of being a student, a researcher, and a parent; they looked after my child while I was at a conference; they brought me produces from their gardens; they accompanied me to hospital and drove me home when I was sick; they shared every up and down moments with me during my PhD long journey. I am also grateful to any other Massey University staff and students and many New Zealanders who have helped or encouraged me in various ways during our coffee-chats, tea breaks, lunchtime conversations, or other social gatherings. These people have made New Zealand as my 'sweet home away from home'.

I express my deepest appreciation to all the holy spirits, my ancestors, my family-of-origin, and my small family for loving me, protecting me, encouraging me to pursuit my dreams,

and being my great source of inspiration for this research (and previous achievements). Particularly, my indebtedness is to my parents, whose teachings are treasures of my world-view and my siblings, who keep sending me their care. I thank my daughter Jenny Linh for accompanying me to everywhere during this hash but glorious journey, for “*always being your [my] Number 1 great fan*”, and for giving me reasons to persist with this study. I also thank my husband for his sacrifice and support when allowing my daughter and me to leave him home alone for my oversea study and for his assistance in my data collection.

Thank you!

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List of Abbreviations

Colloq.	Colloquialism
D	Diary-writer
FM	Female
FMG	Female guest
FNNZ	Field-notes in New Zealand
FNVN	Field-notes in Vietnam
G	Girl
INZ	Interviewee in New Zealand
IVN	Interviewee in Vietnam
Honor.	Honorifics
M	Male
MG	Male guest
NZ	New Zealand
RTs	Reference terms
SAT	Speech Act Theory
VMRIs	Vietnamese mealtime ritual invitations
VN	Vietnam
X	The inviter

Z Something offered/invited

Y The recipient

The order of diary entries

Notes

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 lexica do not have morphological inflection of grammatical features such as gender, number, mood, person, voice, or tense (Nguyễn, 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!)

Đ: “*H ăn đi. Đ ăn rồi!*”

[H eat imperative. Đ 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 lineage 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.