

# Exclamatives and Exclamatory Acts in English and Vietnamese

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## Abstract

*This paper investigates some typical exclamative structures in English and Vietnamese as well as analyzes the uses of these sentences in performing the illocutionary acts known as exclamatory acts according to speech act theory. (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979; Yule, 1987). The study follows a descriptive and contrastive design, choosing English as the source language and Vietnamese as the target one. To begin with, exclamative sentences in the both languages will be described and categorized in terms of syntactic features. Then, a group of exclamatory acts will be identified and classified according to their discourse functions. Finally, some similarities and differences of exclamative structures and exclamatory acts in the two languages will be identified in order to help learners of English and those of Vietnamese be aware of different ways of expressing affective meaning.*

**Key words:** *English and Vietnamese exclamatives, exclamatory acts, similarities and differences, contrastive analysis*

## Introduction

English exclamatives are sentences that have an initial phrase introduced by *what* or *how*, normally with subject-verb order (Greenbaum & Quirk, 2003, p.231; Downing & Locke, 1992, p.200; Swan, 2005, p.195).

(1) **What** a wild country! I yelled. (Jack Kerouac, 1957, p.260)

Exclamatives in Vietnamese are used to express speakers' strong feeling or attitude, using : *ôi, quá, thay, sao, ôi, chao ôi, ôi chao ơi, ôi trời ơi, biết bao nhiêu, biết bao, vô cùng, làm sao, etc.* (Do, 1999, p.140)

(2) *Cô này ghê gớm làm sao!*  
(She this horrible **how**!)  
(**How** horrible she is!)

As indicated in the examples above, learners may have difficulty translating from a Vietnamese exclamative sentence into an English one and vice versa due to the fact that exclamative word *What/How* precedes the Subject and Finite whereas in Vietnamese it is at the end of an exclamative. In addition to syntactic features, learners may encounter problems in using exclamative sentences in communication because they are in fact somewhat different in kind from statements, questions or directives in that they involve an emotive element (Huddleston, 1984, p.351). This is the most important factor in performing an exclamatory act. Furthermore, other factors such as subject, object, context and culture should be taken into consideration.

Research on exclamatives and exclamatory acts in English and Vietnamese will provide interesting and useful insights into interlanguage of speakers of both languages and there are pedagogical implications for second language education.

## Literature Review

Exclamative sentences as well as declaratives, interrogatives and imperatives are sentence types classified according to discourse functions. Although the morphological, syntactic and semantic aspects of exclamation have been discussed, little attention has been paid to the pragmatic perspective. For instance, several English grammarians have mentioned about exclamatory sentence

(Swan, 2005; Greenbaum & Quirk, 2003; Downing & Locke, 1992; Alexander, 1992; Azar, 1998; Cobuild, 1990).

In Vietnamese, grammarians and linguists have investigated exclamation from different perspectives but mainly focus on traditional, syntactic or semantic perspectives (Hoang Trong Phien, 1989; Mai Ngoc Chu, Vo Duc Nghieu, Hoang Trong Phien, 1990; Diep Quang Ban, 2004; Do Thi Kim Lien, 1999; Nguyen Thi Hong Ngoc, 2004).

On the pragmatic functions of sentences in utterances, known as theory of speech acts, there have been well-known authors as Austin (1962), Leech (1983), Searle (1979), Yule (1987).

There has not been a study of exclamative and exclamatory acts in English and Vietnamese in terms of contrastive analysis.

## Exclamative structures in English and Vietnamese

### Exclamative structures in English

According to the statistic from 200 English exclamatives taken from short stories, novel and conversations, the general model for exclamatory sentences in English should be as follows

#### Model E1: Exclamative structure in English

$$\text{EXCS} = \text{Inter} + \text{EXCE}$$

Abbreviations: EXCS : Exclamative sentence  
 EXCE: Exclamative expression  
 Inter: interjection

- Interjection in English is usually one-syllable word like: *Oh, Ah, Wow, Whee, whoo, Hoo, Yeah, etc.*
  - Interjection can appear either before or after an exclamative expression
- (1) **Ah!** *Here they are!* (Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, p.48)  
 (2) *What a crazy cat that was,* **whoo!** (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.155)

Model E1 has two sub-models

#### Sub-model E1.1: Word exclamative in English

$$\text{EXCS} = \text{Inter!}$$

This is a special exclamatory sentence when there is just one interjection in the sentence to express exclamation

- (3) **Hee! Whee! Hoo!** *yelled Dean.* (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.265)

#### Sub-model E1.2: Sentence exclamative in English

$$\text{EXCS} = \text{EXCE!}$$

EXC expression can be a What/How clause, a nominal clause or an inversion

#### E1.2.1. Exclamative structures with WHAT

$$\text{WHAT} + (\text{A/AN}) + (\text{ADJ}) + \text{N} + (\text{S} + \text{V}) !$$

- (4) **"What a mission!"** (Max Allan Collins, *Saving Private Ryan*, p.32)  
 (5) **What a fool I've been!** (Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*, p.174)  
 (6) **What a weird town!** (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.224)  
 (7) **What lovely flowers!** (Michael Swan, p.174)

#### E1.2.2. Exclamative structures with HOW

$$\text{HOW} + \text{ADJ} / \text{ADV} + (\text{S} + \text{V}) !$$

- (8) **Oh, dear! How sad!** (Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*, p.174)  
 (9) **How ugly I was and what filth I was discovering in the depths of my own impure psychologies!** (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.201)

- (10) *How different they must be in their private concerns and evaluations and wishes!*  
 (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.280)

**HOW + S + V!**

- (11) *How I died!* (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p. 171)

### E1.2.3. Exclamative structures with nominal clause

**Pro/ N + S + V**

- (12) *"Whooee, this I never thought existed!"* (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*:279)

### E1.2.4. Exclamative structures with inversion

**AUX (NOT) + S + V!**

- (13) *Did I did him!* (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p. 155)  
 (14) *Boy, am I going to dig all this later!* (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.58)  
 (15) *Hasn't she grown!* (Michael Swan, p. 175)

### Exception

An emphatic intonation contour (high fall-rise or high rise-fall) on any type of clause, whether major or minor, or even group structures and words, also produces an exclamation. (Downing & Locke, 1999, p.2201)

### Intonation on single words

- (16) *"Truck! Truck!"* (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p. 198)  
 (17) *"Fire!" Sarge shouted, and the soldiers took cover.*  
 (Max Allan Collins, *Saving Private Ryan*, p. 8)

### Intonation on phrases

- (18) *Oh, the sadness of the lights that night!* (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p. 170)  
 (19) *"Nice sweet jacket for all that bad whisky!" he yelled.*  
 (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p. 191)

### Intonation on declaratives

- (20) *Ah, this breaks my heart! Cried Dean, punching his chest.*  
 (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.281)  
 (21) *This is traffic I've always dreamed of! Everybody goes! – yelled and jumped with joy!*  
 (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.283)

### Intonation on questions

- (22) *Wow! What'll Dewer be like!* (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.38)

### Intonation on imperatives

- (23) *"Oh, smell the people!" yelled Dean with his face out of the window, sniffing.*  
 (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p. 133)

## Exclamative structures in Vietnamese

The general model for Vietnamese exclamatory sentences should be as follows

### Model V1: Exclamative structure in Vietnamese

**CCT = TCT/YCT + NCC (C+V)**  
**(EXCS = Inter/EXCE + S+P)**

## Abbreviations:

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| CCT   | : câu cảm thán (Exclamative sentence)      |
| NCC   | : nòng cốt câu (Sentence)                  |
| C     | : chủ ngữ (Subject)                        |
| V     | : vị ngữ (Predicate)                       |
| TCT   | : từ cảm thán (Interjection)               |
| YCT   | : yếu tố cảm thán (Exclamative expression) |
| Sent  | : sentence                                 |
| EXCS  | : Exclamative sentence                     |
| EXCE  | : Exclamative expression                   |
| S     | : subject                                  |
| P     | : predicate                                |
| Inter | : Interjection                             |

- Interjection in Vietnamese may be either one-syllable words as *a, à, ôi, ối, ời, eo, chà, chao* or two and more than two-syllable words as *ô kia, chao ôi, ôi chao ôi, ối eo ời*

**(24)** *Eo ôi! Tên khổng lồ! Cháu sợ lắm!*

*Giant! I scared much*

*Giant! I am scared very much!*

(Nguyễn Nhật Ánh, *Điều không tính trước*, p.109)

- Interjection can appear either before, after or in the middle of a sentence.

**(25)** *Chà! Có vào đó chú mới biết.*

*Have come there uncle know*

*You will know when you come there*

(Vũ Hữu Ái, *Cát Trắng*, p.30)

**(26)** *Ôi, cái ngày mẹ nó xuống ổ, chao ôi, vui thiệt là vui!*

*Oh, the day mother came net, wow, happy really happy!*

*Oh, the day the hen came into the net, wow, how happy its chickens were!*

(Nguyễn Quang Sáng, *con gà trống*, p.74)

**(27)** *Sợ quá, eo ôi!*

*Frightened!*

(Nguyễn Nhật Ánh, *Điều không tính trước*, p.107)

- Exclamative expression can be one or more than one-syllable words as *quá, lắm, thay, cho, nhỉ, chết, chết cha, biết sao, làm sao, biết nhường nào*, etc. Like interjection, it can stand at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of the sentence.

**(28)** *Mẹ tôi không vui nhưng biết sao!*

*Mother I not happy but know how!*

*My mother wasn't happy but how I know!*

(Phan Thị Vàng Anh, *Khi người ta trẻ*, p. 49)

**(29)** *Chết cha! Vậy là nó chuẩn bị rồi!*

*Die father! So it prepare already!*

*Damned it! He has already been ready!*

(Nguyễn Nhật Ánh, *Điều không tính trước*, p.112)

**(30)** *Trời ơi! Sao mà nhục nhẽ!*

God! Why shame!  
 My god! What a shame!

(Hồ Thị Hải Âu, Những phiên bản của đời, p. 123)

Sub-model V1.1: Word exclamative in Vietnamese

CCT = TCT/YCT  
 (EXCS = Interj/EXCE)

(31) **Ái chà!**

Oh!

(Tạ Duy Anh, Bước qua lời nguyên, p. 77)

(32) **Mẹ kiếp!...**

Mother destiny!

Damned!...

(Nguyễn Thị Âm, Giấc ngủ nơi trần thế, p. 120)

- Vietnamese exclamatives also use intonation on any type of a clause to express an exclamation

(33) **Phim có hay không mà?**

- **Tuyệt!** Có hoàng đế Ama và tên trộm Abu, hay lắm.

Was the film interesting?

- Wonderful! There were Ama King and Abu thief, great.

(Nguyễn Nhật Ánh, Điều không tính trước, p. 114)

(34) **Mặc tiếng gọi! Mình đang đau khổ đây!**

Neglect the call! I am miserable!

(Hồ Thị Hải Âu, Những phiên bản của cuộc đời, p. 122)

### The similarities and differences of English and Vietnamese exclamatives in terms of syntactic features

- Interjections in English and Vietnamese are used to express an exclamation and can stand alone to form a special sentence. However, English interjections are normally one syllable while Vietnamese ones may have one, two or three syllables.
- There are a wide variety of exclamative expressions employed in the both language systems but Vietnamese exclamatives seem to be more plentiful.
- In English, an exclamative expression conveys a proposition and speaker's feeling or attitude. However, in Vietnamese speaker's feeling can be expressed by an exclamative expression whereas the information or proposition of the utterance lies on the main sentence.
- English and Vietnamese speaker can use intonation on any type of sentence to express an exclamation

### Exclamatory acts in English and Vietnamese

According to Yule (1987, p.4), pragmatics is "the study of the relationships between linguistic forms and the users of those forms". It involves speaker or writer's meaning. In other words, it is also considered as the study that deals with the analysis of what people mean by utterances rather than what the words and phrases might mean by themselves. One of the central concepts of pragmatics is the observation that utterances perform actions, which are known as speech acts. Therefore it is necessary to consider exclamatives in the view of pragmatics especially under the theory of speech acts.

As Yule (1987) stated when making an utterance, the speaker performs an action that consists of three acts: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts.

A locutionary act is the basic act of utterance, or producing a meaningful linguistic expression". It is the act of using language units like phonetic, grammatical, lexical unit to form an utterance. If you have difficulty with actually forming the sounds and words to create a meaningful utterance in a language, then you might fail to produce a locutionary act.

However, mostly we do not just produce well-formed utterances with no purpose. We form an utterance with some kind of function in mind. This is the illocutionary act. For example, "*I've just made some coffee*" (\*) can be used to make a statement, an offer, an explanation, or for some other communicative purposes. This is also known as the illocutionary force of the utterance. We do not, of course, simply create an utterance with a function without intending it to have an effect. This is the perlocutionary act. For example, you might utter (\*) to account for a wonderful smell, or to get the hearer to drink some coffee. This is also known as the perlocutionary effect.  
 (Yule, 1987, p. 48)

These three acts must have a close relation to achieve high efficiency in communication. A particular locution has a particular illocutionary force if it meets the appropriate conditions for that act. On the contrary, the same locutionary act can be understood in different ways. i.e having different illocutionary force in different contexts. The utterance "*I will talk to you later*" (A father says to his son) can count as a promise if the father is in a good mood and wants to have a talk with his son about a problem they both are interested in. On the contrary, it may be understood as a threat when the father is angry with his son and dissatisfied with his action or words.

Yule (1987, p.57) listed five types of general functions performed by speech acts : declarations, representatives, expressives, directives and commissives. Searl's classification of illocutionary acts are defined as assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations. It is clear that an exclamatory act is a type of expressives since it has the function of expressing speaker's feeling or psychological attitude towards a state of affair.

## Exclamatory acts in English

- Exclamatory sentences are used to show the following illocutionary acts

### Surprise

(35) "*What a wild country!*" I yelled. (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.260)

This utterance conveys a proposition that the country is wild and expresses speaker's surprise.

Another illustration is

(36) "*What's a strange animal this is!*" (Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*, p. 8)

### Excitement

(37) "*Ah! God! Life! He swung around a trolley.*" (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p. 133)

(38) "*We bounced in our seats. "And dig her!" yelled Dean, pointing at another woman, "Oh, I love, love, love women! I think women are wonderful! I love women!" He spat out the window; he groaned; he clutched his head. Great beads of sweat fell from his forehead from pure excitement and exhaustion.*"

(Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.134)

### Compliment

(39) "*This one is a beaut!*" he whispered in my ear.

(Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.208)

### Painfulness

(40) "*I'm shot!*" Caparzo screamed, bleeding. "*Oh, God, I'm shot!*"

(Max Allan Collins, *Saving Private Ryan*, p.32)

### Promise

(41) "*The next time you're wounded, you'd better hope I feel like helping you!*"

(Max Allan Collins, *Saving Private Ryan*, p.59)

### Comfort

(42) "*I ... can't move,*" Wade said, speaking very quietly.

"*You're not dead, Wade!*" Mellish insisted.

(Max Allan Collins, *Saving Private Ryan*, p.66)

- Depending on the subject, the object and the speaker's feeling, exclamatory acts can be identified as

#### Internal

Internal exclamatory acts mean that the speaker expresses feeling towards himself or herself.

- (43) *How I died!* (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.171)  
 (44) *How ugly I was!* (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.201)  
 (45) *I was in another bid high cab, all set to go hundreds of miles across the night, and was I happy!* (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.19)

#### External

External exclamatory acts mean that the speaker expresses feeling towards a state of affair

- (46) *Ah, man, What a dreamboat!* (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.216)  
 (47) *"What a wild country!" I yelped.* (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.260)  
 (48) *What greedy beggars you are!* (Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*, p.20)

#### Unconscious

Unconscious exclamatory acts mean that the speaker suddenly expresses feeling towards a state of affair without being aware of its effect to the listener.

- (49) *Hee! Whee! Hoo! yelled Dean.* (Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, p.265)

#### Conscious

Conscious exclamatory acts mean that the speaker expresses feeling towards a state of affair that she/he is aware of its effect to the listener with the aim of showing his/her sympathy or comfort with the listener's feeling.

- (50) *"I ... can't move," Wade said, speaking very quietly.*  
*"You're not dead, Wade!" Mellish insisted.*  
 (Max Allan Collins, *Saving Private Ryan*, p.66)

### Exclamatory acts in Vietnamese

- Vietnamese exclamatives are also used to perform these illocutionary acts

#### Surprise

- (51) *Sướng quá! Lại được ăn chè kia chứ, có ngọt không u?*  
*How happy! We had sugar soup, was it sweet Mom?*  
 (Nam Cao, *Nghèo*, p. 34)

#### Excitement

- (52) *Phim có hay không mà?*  
 - **Tuyệt!** *Có hoàng đế Ama và tên trộm Abu, hay lắm.*  
*Was the film interesting?*  
 - *Wonderful! There were Ama King and Abu thief, great.*  
 (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh, *Điều không tính trước*, p.114)

#### Disappointment

- (53) *Trời ơi! Sao mà nhục nhẽ!*  
*My God! What a shame!*  
 (Hồ Thị Hải Âu, *Những phiên bản của cuộc đời*, p.123)

#### Painfulness

- (54) *Ồi, ối đau quá, chết mất!*  
*Oh, oh, how painful, am I going to die!*  
 (Y Ban, *Bức thư gửi mẹ Âu Cơ*, p.170)

- Vietnamese exclamatory acts can also be distinguished as

#### Internal

- (55) *Sao cái thân tôi lại khổ thế này!*  
*Why myself I miserable!*  
*How miserable I am!*  
 (Ngô Tất Tố, *Tắt đèn*, p. 25)

#### External

- (56) *Trời ơi, làm sao em tàn ác thế!*  
*My God! Why you cruel such!*  
*My God! How cruel you are!*

(Tạ Duy Anh, *Xưa kia chị đẹp nhất làng*, p.94)

### Unconscious & conscious

(57)- Thế anh còn bố mẹ không?

- Bẩm, tôi mồ côi cả bố lẫn mẹ từ sớm.
- **Tội nghiệp!** Thế anh đã có vợ con gì chưa?
- Bẩm chưa...
- **Tội nghiệp!**

(Vũ Trọng Phụng, *Số Đỏ*, p.65)

- Are you parents still alive?
- Madame, my parents died since I was a child.
- **What a pity!** Are you married?
- No...
- **What a pity!**

“Tội nghiệp!” (*What a pity!*) in the first sentence is an unconscious exclamatory act while “Tội nghiệp!” (*What a pity!*) used the second time with speaker’s awareness of showing her sympathy with the listener, so it is a conscious exclamatory act.

### The similarities and differences of English and Vietnamese exclamatory acts

There are a wide variety of exclamatory acts both in English and Vietnamese and they can be defined into opposite pairs as internal-external exclamatory acts, unconscious-conscious one. However, in Vietnamese it seems that the interjections and exclamative expressions are more plentiful, and they are often used together to express speaker’s feeling or attitude, so the effect of the exclamatory act is stronger.

### Conclusion

Syntactically, there are several models with English and Vietnamese exclamative sentences as well as their similarities and differences. Both languages systems use interjection as a special sentence to express such feeling as surprise, excitement, disappointment, etc. In addition, other structures with What, How or inversion are often employed to show exclamation. Vietnamese use a variety of exclamative expressions. Pragmatically, we have covered the instances of exclamatory acts in different purposes in communication and they can be classified into opposite pairs.

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