

The Influence of Social Distance on Expressions of Gratitude In Vietnamese

Toan Anh Pham

University of South Australia

Abstract

This study investigates the effects of social distance on the act of expressing gratitude in Vietnamese. The data of the study were collected through a DCT and from Vietnamese undergraduate students. Results show that social distance has a great influence on how gratitude is expressed in different interpersonal relationships. In general, Vietnamese native speakers (VNSs) thank more distant interlocutors more frequently than closer interlocutors. Results also show that VNSs appear to do more interactional work in their thanking expressions to friends than to intimates and strangers. In this aspect, our finding, to a certain extent, supports Wolfson's (1988) Bulge theory of linguistic behaviour.

Key words: pragmatics; social distance; expressions of gratitude; Vietnamese

Introduction

Expressing gratitude is a speech act that is commonly performed among people with different interpersonal relationships: intimates, friends, strangers, etc. Appropriate expressions of gratitude can help enhance the rapport of the speaker and the hearer. On the contrary, the lack of an expression of gratitude or the use of an inappropriate expression may make the hearer displeased, thus sometimes resulting in worsening the speaker-hearer relationship (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986).

To help maintain the social harmony, it is important to make an expression of gratitude in a thanking situation. It is also important to appropriately express gratitude to a favour giver in relation to a speaker in terms of their interpersonal relationship. The choice of an appropriate expression of gratitude in a given situation in a particular language, as Coulmas (1981: 75) put it, is based not only on "the nature of the object of gratitude" but also on the "social relation of the participants". Social distance, together with relative power, is a major factor determining the social relation of the speaker and hearer. The effects of social distance on the performance of a wide range of speech acts in different languages have been found in many studies (e.g. Brown & Levinson, 1987; Grimshaw, 1980; Holmes, 1995; Leech, 1983; Wolfson, 1988).

The aim of this paper is to investigate the influence of social distance on expressions of gratitude in Vietnamese. To do this, we examine how Vietnamese native speakers (VNSs) use different strategies to express gratitude to different types of social-distanced interlocutors.

Expressing gratitude as a speech act

Research on the act of expressing gratitude has attempted to define what this speech act is. Searle (1969) identified it as an expressive illocutionary act. In his description (1969), thanking is described as a reactive act realized by a speaker on the basis of a prior action accomplished by a hearer. The past act is beneficial to the speaker, and the speaker believes that he/she has received a certain benefit from it. On feeling grateful or appreciative for what the hearer has done, the speaker makes an utterance which serves as an expression of gratitude or appreciation. Coulmas (1981, 74), viewing expressing gratitude as an reactive speech act, states that every sincere verbal expression of gratitude is addressed to "the object of gratitude" which is actually "some action (actions) of a benefactor"

I am grateful to Prof. Tony Liddicoat and Dr Tim Curnow for their suggestions and comments on this paper.

or “a result of this action”. In other words, it is the hearer’s past or anticipated future action which has benefited or will benefit the speaker that causes an expression of gratitude.

Expressing gratitude is a frequently used speech act in Vietnamese and an important part of speech etiquette in Vietnamese culture (Huu, 2009). This speech act, as stated by Luong (2010) and L.T. Nguyen (2010), can be performed directly or indirectly. A direct expression of gratitude contains either *cảm ơn* (thank) or another more formal thanking verb such as *cảm tạ*, *đá tạ*, *đội ơn*, or *bái tạ* (Nguyen, 2010). Indirect expressions are those which have the illocutionary force of thanking, but are realized in the form of other speech acts such as complimenting, evaluating, expressing luckiness, etc. Vietnamese people sometimes respond to thanking situations using speech acts which are more or less related to gratitude, such as *Thật không? Cậu cho mình mượn thật à?* “Really? Are you sure [to lend me the money]?”, spoken in a situation in which the hearer offered to lend the speaker some money. In other cases, they use speech acts which are not apparently related to gratitude at all, such as a leave-taking expression equivalent to “See you soon”, which was spoken when the speaker left his /her close friend’s house after having dinner². In certain circumstances, especially in interactions between intimate interlocutors (family members and close friends), they sometimes do not use verbal expressions at all, choosing instead to remain silent and perhaps use non-verbal cues (e.g., a smile, eye contact) to show gratitude (Nguyen, 1990; Pham, 2005, 2007). The choice of an appropriate expression for a given situation among such a wide range of strategies involves the consideration of the relationship between the speaker and the hearer.

Social distance and its influence on linguistic politeness

Social distance is one of the most important factors which affect the production and interpretation of linguistic behaviours including thanking behaviours. Leech (1983) identifies it as a crucial dimension in determining politeness behaviour or linguistic tact; Wolfson (1988) recognizes the weight of social distance in accounting for differences in politeness behaviour; and Holmes (1995: 11) identifies this factor as “one of the most basic factors determining appropriate levels of politeness behaviour in most, if not all, societies”.

Social distance can be understood as “a measure of the degree of friendship/ intimacy (or absence thereof) between interlocutors” (Boxer, 1993: 103). It is, however, important here to concretize components that help measure the degree of distance/intimacy. A frequently used way for determining distance/intimacy is to employ role relationships such as *spouse*, *close friends*, *neighbours*, *colleagues*, *acquaintances*, *strangers*, etc. In fact, a social distance continuum with three levels, ‘strangers’, ‘friends’, and ‘intimates’, has been used in many studies investigating the association between language use and social distance (e.g. Boxer, 1993; Holmes, 1990; Wolfson, 1988). Based on R Brown’s (1965: 57) idea that “if status is the vertical of social relationship, solidarity is horizontal”, this 3-level scale of social distance can be graphically represented in Figure 1.



Figure 1: A three-scale social distance continuum

On this continuum, the category *strangers* is found at one extreme, *intimates* at the other end, and *friends* towards the middle. These categories are not distinct categories, but are points along a continuum. In terms of role relationships, the category of intimates comprises very close friends and intimates (e.g. spouse, partners, nuclear family members, etc.); the category of friends consists of casual friends, classmates, schoolmates, relatives, colleagues, acquaintances, etc.; and complete strangers belong to the last category. This three-level social continuum will serve as the background for this present study to examine the effect of social distance on the performance of the act of expressing gratitude.

Of the studies on speech behaviour in relation to social distance dimension, Wolfson (1988) is the most extensive. She found that middle-class Americans’ speech behaviour given to intimates and strangers differed from that given to casual friends, coworkers, and acquaintances. More specifically, she found that speech act behaviour appears to be much less frequent and elaborated between those

² This example is taken from T. B. T. Nguyen (1990: 90)

who are intimates or strangers than between casual friends and acquaintances. Based on her findings, Wolfson put forward a theory of social interaction which she called the 'Bulge'. Wolfson's Bulge of linguistic behaviour is graphically demonstrated by Holmes (1995) with the social distance continuum being the X axis, and linguistic politeness being the Y axis as in Figure 2 below.

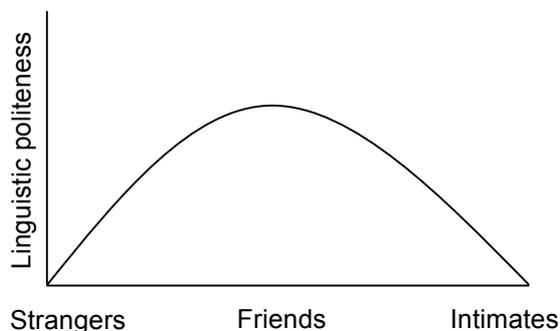


Figure 2: Wolfson's 'bulge' model. (Holmes, 1995: 14)

According to Wolfson, those at the two extremes of the social distance continuum do not bother to employ a great deal of explicit linguistic politeness to each other because of the relative certainty of their relationships: they know what to expect of one another. On the contrary, those in between the two extremes are often more "dynamic and open to negotiation" to close the gap of distance to develop or enhance a friendship (Wolfson, 1988: 33).

Methodology

Data collection instruments

A twelve-situation DCT (Discourse Completion Task) was employed to provide production data for this research. The DCT is often criticized as giving data which is shorter in length, simpler in wording and less negotiatory than natural data (Yuan, 2001). However, when this instrument was used in studies to elicit expressions of gratitude, it has proved to yield valid data due to the formulaic nature of this speech act. For example, Bodman and Eisenstein (1988), on comparing three types of data gathered by the DCT, the open-ended role play, and the natural data, affirmed that "the oral language used in role-plays and natural situations incorporated the same words and expressions that were elicited by the written questionnaire. In other words, our written data were indeed representative of natural use" (1988: 3). In addition, Schauer & Adolphs (2006), in their comparative study of the DCT and natural corpus data on expressions of gratitude, confirmed that "one strength of data elicited via a DCT is the wide range of interactional formulaic sequences that it provides" (2006: 130). Given this, the DCT can be expected to give an accurate picture of expressions of gratitude in Vietnamese.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the three social variables, relative power, ranking of imposition, and social distance, can operate as independent variables. That is, two of them can be kept constant, allowing the rest to vary. Based on this view, in all the DCT situations, the two social variables relative power and ranking of imposition are deliberately kept neutral so as to let social distance be in focus. More specifically, interlocutors in each situation are status equal and have same sex and more or less the same age. Of the 12 DCT situations, there are four situations in which interlocutors are intimates (close friends or family members), four in which interlocutors are friends (classmates, neighbours), and four in which interlocutors are strangers (see Appendix A).

The Vietnamese subjects who completed the DCT questionnaires were given the choice of opting out; that is, they were instructed to make a cross (X) in the slot given after each of the situations if they decided that they would say nothing in this situation.

Subjects and data collected

Altogether, 30 subjects (14 males and 16 females) responded to the DCT. They were all Vietnamese undergraduate students at universities in Vietnam. They came from different parts of the country and spoke Vietnamese as their mother tongue. They had never travelled to or lived in any foreign country. Their ages varied between 18 and 27.

Thirty subjects completed the twelve-situation questionnaire, giving 360 responses in total. Of these 360 responses, 120 were given by intimate interlocutors, 120 by friend interlocutors and the rest by stranger interlocutors.

Results

Before presenting the focal point of the paper, a brief description of head act types and strategies of expressing gratitude in Vietnamese will be given.

Direct and indirect thanking head acts

Our data show that VNSs express gratitude using not only direct thanking heads act but also indirect thanking head acts.

A direct thanking head act identified in the corpus of this study is a semantic unit in which the verb *cảm ơn* “thank” is embedded. Apart from the thanking verb *cảm ơn*, which is the obligatory element, a direct head act may also contain some optional elements. In the direct head act *Cảm ơn bạn nhiều* (Thank you very much), for example, *Cảm ơn* is the core of the head act. *Bạn* “you” is the second person pronoun, indicating a thankee who has the same age or equal status as the thanker. *Nhiều* “much” is an intensifier, which is used to increase the strength of the gratitude. *Bạn* and *nhiều* in this head act are optional elements. A direct thanking head act, with or without optional elements, expresses gratitude directly from the thanker to the thankee.

In some studies of the act of expressing gratitude in Vietnamese, (e.g. Huu, 2009; Luong, 2010; Nguyen, 2010), the indirect performance of this act has been recognized. In general, indirect expressions of gratitude, in Luong’s (2010: 38) view, are expressions having the illocutionary force of thanking, but being realized in the form of other speech acts.

In particular in this study, an indirect thanking head act, which is the nucleus of an indirect expression of gratitude, is a semantic unit without the thanking verb *cảm ơn*, but it has the illocutionary force of thanking. It is not used to thank the thankee directly, but to emphasize a certain aspect of the favour given, thereby thanking the thankee indirectly. Below are some examples of indirect head acts found in our study.

- (1) *Nhờ có bạn, mình đã hiểu bài.* (Owing to you, I understand the lesson now)
- (2) *Bạn thật tốt bụng.* (You are so kind-hearted)

The indirect head act (1) explicitly indicates the hearer’s role, and the result of the hearer’s action is shown in *mình đã hiểu bài* “I understand the lesson now”. On recognizing the hearer’s contribution and feeling appreciative for it, the speaker makes a positive appraisal towards the role of the hearer.

The indirect head act (2) is actually the speaker’s expression of praise to the hearer: the speaker explicitly compliments the hearer for his/her personality by using the descriptive adjective *tốt bụng* “kind-hearted”. An expression of praise in general can work as a compensation for any cost of an action which was done or will be done by the benefactor. In this way, it is very close to Haverkate’s (1988: 391) definition of an expression of gratitude, which says that the speech act is “a verbal act that symbolically compensates the cost invested by the hearer for the benefit of the speaker”.

Strategies of expressing gratitude in Vietnamese

The responses to the DCT by VNSs used a range of strategies: those with head act(s), those without head acts, and also cases in which subjects decided to say nothing. On this basis, their responses are grouped into three super-strategies, namely Head Act, No Head Act and the Opt Out strategies.

Head Act strategies comprise the largest proportion of all: 267 over the total of 360 responses, amounting to 74.2%. No Head Act strategies rank second, accounting for 23.9% or 86/360. The VNSs’ choice of the Opt Out strategy makes up 1.9% or 7/360 (see



Table **1** below).

Table 1 : Proportion of Super-strategies

	n	%
Head Act strategies	267	74.2
No Head Act strategies	86	23.9
Opt Out strategy	7	1.9
<i>Total number of DCT responses</i>	<i>360</i>	

There are three sub-types of Head Act strategies: Single Direct Head Act strategies, Single Indirect Head Act strategies, and Multiple Head Act strategies. Single Direct Head Act strategies are responses containing a direct head act; Single Indirect Head Act strategies are those containing an indirect head act; and Multiple Head Act strategies comprising a direct head act and an indirect head act. A response of two direct head acts is not found in our data.

Table 2 : Proportion of Head Act sub-strategies

	n	%
Single Direct Head Act strategies	151	41.9
Single Indirect Head Act strategies	43	11.9
Multiple Head Act strategies	73	20.3
<i>Total number of DCT responses</i>	<i>360</i>	

As seen from Table 2, responses using Single Direct Head Act strategies make up the largest proportion: 151 out of 360 responses (41.9%). Multiple Head Act strategies are the second frequent in use, accounting for 20.3%. Single Indirect Head Act strategies are found in 43 responses (11.9%).

No Head Act strategies do not contain any single direct or indirect head act, and they often appear to resemble supportive moves to a head act. Of the No Head Act responses, some are speech acts more or less related to the gratitude that could be expressed in the investigated situations; the others are not related to thanking at all. Below are some examples of No Head Act strategies.

- (1) *Mai tao qua chở mà đi học ghen!* (I will drop in and take you to school tomorrow)
- (2) Dạ, chị giúp em một tay. (Yes, please give me a hand)

Response (1) is an example of a gratitude-related speech act. It was made in the situation in which the speaker was offered a lift home after school by a close friend. It is actually an undertaking to reciprocate or repay a favour that has been done, and can somewhat compensate what the hearer has done for the speaker.

Response (2) is an example of a gratitude-unrelated speech act. It was spoken in the situation 'Carrying a bag', in which the speaker's brother/sister offered to carry one of the heavy bags for him/her. It appears in the form of a request; however, it is not a *real* request. A real request is made in order to fulfil a speaker's need: he/she needs help from the hearer, and therefore makes the request to get the hearer to act. This response, however, does not originally come from the speaker's need because the original offer has already addressed this. It is a redoing of an offer in the form of a request.

Of the 360 DCT responses, 86 responses use No Head Act strategies, making up 23.9%. This may suggest that responding to a thanking situation without using a thanking head act expression is quite common in Vietnamese.

The Opt Out strategy is found in two out of the twelve DCT situations investigated, in which the interlocutors are intimates: family members (brother-brother or sister-sister) and close friends. In Vietnamese culture, close friends are often considered as blood relatives (Nguyen, 2002: 2), thus their interaction can be viewed in some ways as that of family members. Some intimate interlocutors in our study used Opt Out strategy probably because they may be influenced by the thanking behaviours in the traditional Vietnamese family. In these families, "between children and parents and among brothers, love and assistance were given mutually without any thought of reciprocity" (Tran, 1991: 43). This may be because mutual assistance in the family is considered to be the responsibility of every member and it may require no verbal expressions of gratitude from the assistance receiver. There thus seems to be an implicit norm that the members of a traditional Vietnamese family do not *explicitly*

thank each other. If, for example, parents thanked their child, the child would feel uneasy or think that something was wrong. He/she would also suddenly feel as if these people were strangers rather than his/her parents (Do, 2004).

The influence of social distance on expressing gratitude in Vietnamese

To examine the influence of social distance on expressions of gratitude in Vietnamese, we first look at how each type of interlocutors (intimates, friends, and strangers) used different strategies and then compare the use of the strategies by these types of interlocutors.

Choice of strategies by each type of interlocutors

As seen from Table 3 below, intimate interlocutors used Opt Out Strategy with seven cases. It is also the number of all Opt Out strategy found in our study. This means that Opt Out strategy was used with intimates only.

Table 3: Choice of strategies of expressing gratitude by intimates

	Head Act			No Head Act	Opt Out	Total
	S. Direct	S. Indirect	Multiple			
n	38	12	13	50	7	120
%	31.7	10.0	10.8	41.7	5.8	100%
N: 63 (52.5%)						

The number of responses with No Head Act strategies and those with the Opt Out strategy altogether is approximately the same as the responses for Head Act strategies: 57/120 (47.5%) compared with 63 (52.5%). This indicates that Vietnamese people may not use thanking expressions frequently with intimates who do them a favour or a good deed. Instead, their responses may be unrelated or only partly related to the gratitude that would be expressed. They may not even say anything at all in these situations.

Different from intimates, none of the friend interlocutors used the Opt Out strategy. They all responded to the thanking situations investigated by saying something (see Table 4).

Table 4: Choice of strategies of expressing gratitude by friends

	Head Act			No Head Act	Opt Out	Total
	S. Direct	S. Indirect	Multiple			
n	27	25	40	28	-	120
%	22.5	20.8	33.3	23.3	-	100.0%
N: 92 (76.7%)						

A large number of friend interlocutors' responses used Head Act strategies, making up 76.7% of all their responses (92/120). The rest of their responses, 28, accounting for 23.3%, used No Head Act strategies. It can be suggested that expressions of gratitude having thanking head act(s) are much more favoured among friends than those without a thanking head act.

Of the Head Act strategies, the Multiple Head Acts are the most frequent, making up a percentage of 33.3% (40/120). With regard to Indirect Head Act strategies, 25 responses of this type were used, as almost frequently as Direct Head Act strategies: 25 (20.8%) compared with 27 (22.5%).

Table 5: Choice of strategies of expressing gratitude by strangers

	Head Act			No Head Act	Opt Out	Total
	S. Direct	S. Indirect	Multiple			
n	86	6	20	8	-	120
%	71.7	5.0	16.7	6.7	-	100.0%
N: 112 (93.3%)						

As seen from Table 5, no responses given by stranger interlocutors used the Opt Out strategy. This means that when strangers are helped or given an offer, they never keep silent but always respond with verbal expressions. Of the 120 verbal utterances by stranger interlocutors, a dominant number of responses used Head Act strategies, making up 93.3% (112/120); only 8 responses used No Head Act strategies, accounting for 6.7%.

Choice of strategies by interlocutors with different social distances: A comparison

We now compare the use of super-strategies for expressing gratitude with three groups of interlocutors: intimates, friends, and strangers. A discussion of the use of Head Act strategies will come first; next will be that of No Head Act strategies; and last Opt Out strategy.

Table 6: The use of Head Act strategies by different types of interlocutors

	No of Head Act strategies	No of total responses	%
Intimates	63	120	52.5
Friends	92	120	76.7
Strangers	112	120	93.3

As seen from Table 6, the number of responses using Head Act strategies with stranger interlocutors is larger than with friend interlocutors: 112 vs 92 (or 93.3% vs 76.7%). Intimate interlocutors used Head Act strategies the least frequently, at 52.5% (or 63/120). This shows a tendency that interlocutors with a close relationship use Head Act strategies less often than those with a more distant relationship. In other words, the closer the social distance between the speaker and the hearer is, the less frequently verbal expressions of gratitude (direct and/or indirect) are used among them.

Table 7: The use of No Head Act strategies by different types of interlocutors

	No of No Head Act strategies	No of total responses	%
Intimates	50	120	41.7
Friends	28	120	23.3
Strangers	8	120	6.7

It can be seen from Table 7 that strangers rarely used No Head Act strategies. In effect, they used these strategies the least frequently in comparison with the other two groups. Only eight out of their 120 responses have these strategies, accounting for 6.7%. Friends used No Head Act strategies more often than strangers, with a proportion of 23.3% of their total responses (28/120). Intimates, on the other hand, used No Head act strategies with a much larger proportion than friends and strangers: 50 vs 28 for friends and eight for strangers.

Our data suggest a tendency that the closer the relationship between the speaker (the receiver of favour or a good deed) and the hearer (the giver) was, the less frequently verbal expressions related to gratitude were used.

Table 8 below shows that there were only seven responses using the Opt Out strategy, and they were all used with intimate interlocutors. Neither stranger interlocutors nor friend interlocutors employed the Opt Out strategy.

Table 8: The use of No Head Act strategies by different types of interlocutors

	No of Opt Out strategy	No of total responses	%
Intimates	7	120	5.8
Friends	-	120	-
Strangers	-	120	-

Our finding shows that Vietnamese people may sometimes not say anything to intimates in contexts in which gratitude would be expressed. However, this way of behaviour is not frequent. This finding is in accordance with the findings of TBT Nguyen (1990), who indicated that keeping silent may be found as a strategy for expressing gratitude in Vietnamese among intimates.

Discussion

Our description of the VNS data shows that the influence of social distance on the way Vietnamese people express gratitude is significant. In other words, VNSs differ in their choice of how to express gratitude to people at different social distances (intimates, friends, and strangers).

Cảm ơn, the direct thanking device, is found in Single Direct Head Acts and in Multiple Head Acts. When the total use of *cảm ơn* in these two situations is considered, it can be seen that the subjects in our study used it most frequently with strangers in a large proportion: 106 out of 120 total responses or 88.3%. This shows that using an expression involved with *cảm ơn* is a very common way to express gratitude among strangers in Vietnamese. On the other hand, this way of expressing gratitude is the least frequent with intimates, with 67 out of the 120 total responses involving *cảm ơn*, accounting for 42.5%. That intimates used this strategy with low frequency may be because saying *cảm ơn* to intimates may increase the social distance between the speaker and the hearer, thus may sound insincere. Friends used expressions involved with *cảm ơn* in a proportion of 67 out of 120 responses or 55.8%, more frequently than intimates but less often than strangers. With this type of interlocutors, *cảm ơn* is usually found in combination with an indirect head act to create a multiple head act (40/67 responses).

Instead of thanking directly and/or indirectly, Vietnamese people, in some situations, frequently use responses without a thanking head act to intimates. They may even say nothing to these interlocutors although this way of behaviour in these situations occurs with low frequency. Responding to a favour or a good deed using gratitude-unrelated responses, however, is not frequent at all with friends and very rare with strangers.

It appears that speakers put more interactional work and 'effort' into thanking friends than intimates and strangers. This is reflected in the way they select thanking expressions among Single Direct Head Act strategies, Single Indirect Head strategies, or Multiple Head Act strategies. Specifically, speakers use indirect expressions of gratitude with friends more frequently than with intimates and strangers and use direct expressions of gratitude less often than that with the other two types of interlocutors. This is possibly due to their desire to close the social distance between them. As pointed out by Wolfson (1988), friends are different from intimates and strangers in that their relationship is unstable while the relationships of the other two categories are of relative certainty. They may construct their speech behaviours in such a way that they could develop their relationship: becoming closer as friends. A direct thanking expression in Vietnamese among intimates in certain circumstances may give the hearer a feeling that the speaker is distant and insincere. Since friends attempt to make a relationship closer, the use of direct thanking among them might be a threat to this relationship because it could bring a distancing action. Therefore, friend interlocutors in our study used indirect thanking strategies to express gratitude. At this point, it can be seen that thanking friends needs more consideration or more 'effort' than thanking intimates or strangers.

As shown above, friends use Multiple Head Act strategies far more frequently than strangers and intimates. The reason for this may be as follows. The speech act of thanking, as pointed out by many researchers (e.g. Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986; Hickey, 2005; Leech, 1983), has a convivial function which helps settle the harmony between speakers and hearers and makes them closer to each other. Multiple Head Act strategies, which consist of a direct and an indirect thanking head act, are in general lengthier in form and deeper in gratitude than the Single Direct Head Act and the Single Indirect Head Act alone. The realization of these strategies also involves more interactional work, thus being more likely to make the speaker and hearer's relationship closer by emphasizing the convivial function of thanking. Friend interlocutors, whose relationship is less stable, may want to reinforce that relationship, so they use these lengthier, deeper and more interactional expressions of gratitude more frequently than the other two groups of interlocutors at two ends of the social distance continuum. In other words, friends tend to elaborate their thanking expressions more often and put more 'effort' in their thanking behaviours than intimates and strangers.

Our discussion of the reasons for more frequent use of multiple and indirect thanking head acts with friends indicates that thanking this type of interlocutors requires more 'effort' and more interactional work than thanking the other types of interlocutors at the two ends of the social continuum. This finding, to some extent, is in agreement with Wolfson's (1988) Bulge theory of linguistic behaviour, one aspect of which states that the language use of interlocutors between the two extremes of the social distance continuum (i.e. friends) are often more "dynamic and open to negotiation" to reinforce a friendship (Wolfson, 1988, 33).

In general, VNSs tend to use thanking Head Act strategies less frequently with intimates than with friends and with strangers. In other words, they tend to thank (directly and/or indirectly) those with a close relationship less frequently than those toward the other end of the social distance continuum. This can be graphically described as in Figure 3.

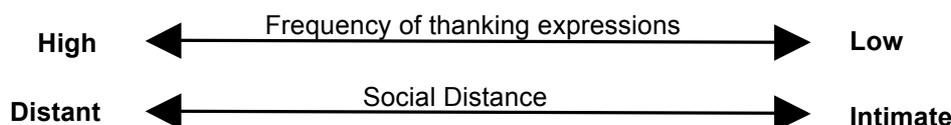


Figure 3: Relationship between thanking expressions and social distance

Note here that the diagram above only indicates a general tendency of the influence of social distance on the use of thanking expressions among VNSs. There are still cases in which their thanking behaviour may be different from what the pattern represents.

Conclusion

Although it is not the focus of this paper, our brief description of strategies of expressing gratitude in Vietnamese shows that VNSs use a wide range of strategies. Apart from using direct thanking expressions with the thanking device *cảm ơn*, Vietnamese native speakers may express gratitude by using indirect thanking expressions. They may also express gratitude by combining a direct thanking expression with an indirect one. Our finding about different ways of expressing gratitude in Vietnamese are in accordance with NT Tran's (2000) observation that Vietnamese people may use different ways to express gratitude in different situations.

Besides thanking head act expressions, VNSs may also use non-thanking expressions when responding to help or favour. They may even say nothing in a thanking situation, which is possibly influenced by thanking behaviours in the traditional Vietnamese family.

Social distance is found to have great effect on thanking behaviours in Vietnamese. In general, the greater the social distance between the speaker and the hearer, the more frequently thanking expressions (direct and/or indirect) are employed. More specifically, people almost always thank (directly and/or indirectly) when strangers do them a favour or a good deed, and very often, they use *cảm ơn* in their expressions. With friends, thanking (directly and/or indirectly) is also very frequent but less than with strangers; No Thanking expressions are used in some scenarios but these appear to be situation-specific. With intimates, No Thanking expressions are found in all 'intimate interlocutor' situations investigated, and the number of responses with these non-thanking strategies is nearly equal to

that of the responses with thanking strategies. Intimates are also the only type of interlocutors with whom Keeping Silent strategy is found.

Interlocutors who are friends seem to have more interactional work when thanking than intimates and strangers. They also seem to put more consideration or 'effort' in their thanking expressions. This may be due to their desire to reinforce their unstable relationship so that they would be able to develop their relationship to become closer. These findings about friends' thanking behaviours, to some extent, support Wolfson's (1988) Bulge theory, one aspect of which says that the linguistic behaviours of friends are often more "dynamic and open to negotiation" than intimates and strangers – interlocutors at the two ends of the social continuum (Wolfson, 1988, 33).

References

- Bodman, J., & Eisenstein, M. (1988). May God increase your bounty: the expression of gratitude in English native and non-native speakers. *Cross Currents*, 15(1), 1-21.
- Boxer, D. (1993). Social distance and speech behavior: The case of indirect complaints. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 19(2), 103-125.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, R. (1965). *Social psychology*. London: Collier-Macmillan.
- Coulmas, F. (1981). 'Poison to your soul': thanks and apologies contrastively viewed. In F. Coulmas (Ed.), *Conversational Routine* (pp. 69-91). Mouton: The Hague.
- Do, T. (2004). Response to Forum Discussion: Grace Chew's Query on 'Thank You' Retrieved 18th, March, 2011
- Eisenstein, M., & Bodman, J. (1986). 'I very appreciate': expressions of gratitude by native and non-native speakers of American English. *Applied Linguistics*, 7(2), 167-185. doi: 10.1093/applin/7.2.167
- Grimshaw, A. D. (1980). Social interactional and sociolinguistic rules. *Social Forces*, 58(3), 789-810.
- Haverkate, H. (1988). Toward a typology of politeness strategies in communicative interaction. *Multilingua - Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication*, 7(4), 385-410. doi: 10.1515/mult.1988.7.4.385
- Hickey, L. (2005). Politeness in Spain: Thanks but No 'Thanks'. In L. Hickey & M. Stewart (Eds.), *Politeness in Europe* (pp. 317-331). Clevedon ; Buffalo: Multilingual Matters.
- Holmes, J. (1990). Apologies in New Zealand English. *Language in Society*, 19(2), 155-199.
- Holmes, J. (1995). *Women, men and politeness*. London: Longman.
- Huu, D. (2009). *Đặt trung ngôn ngữ và văn hóa giao tiếp tiếng Việt*. Việt Nam: Nhà xuất bản Giáo dục.
- Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London ; New York: Longman.
- Luong, H. (2010). Các hình thức cảm ơn gián tiếp của người Việt. (5(252)), 38-45.
- Nguyen, L. T. (2010). Các hình thức cảm ơn trực tiếp của người Việt. *Ngôn Ngữ*(3(250)), 14-24.
- Nguyen, T. B. T. (Ed.). (1990). *Politeness Formulae: Thanking*: Centre for teaching English to speakers of other languages, University of Canberra.
- Nguyen, T. H. (2002). Vietnam: Cultural Background for ESL/EFL Teachers Retrieved 25, March, 2011
- Pham, T. A. (2005). *A Vietnamese-American Cross-cultural study on expressing gratitude to people with different social distances*. MA MA, Vietnam National University - College of Foreign Languages, Hà Nội.
- Pham, T. A. (2007). Từ câu nói "Lựa lời mà nói cho vừa lòng nhau" đến tính phù hợp trong ngôn ngữ. *Ngôn ngữ và Đời sống*(6-2007), 42-44.
- Schauer, G. A., & Adolphs, S. (2006). Expressions of gratitude in corpus and DCT data: Vocabulary, formulaic sequences, and pedagogy. *System*, 34(1), 119-134.
- Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: an essay in the philosophy of language*. London: Cambridge University Press.



Tran, D. H. (1991). Traditional families in Vietnam and the influence of Confucianism. In R. Liljestrom & T. Lai (Eds.), *Sociological studies on the Vietnamese family* (pp. 25-48): Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi.

Tran, N. T. (2000). *Cơ sở văn hóa Việt Nam (The foundation of Vietnamese culture)*. Việt Nam: Nhà xuất bản Giáo dục.

Wolfson, N. (1988). The bulge: A theory of speech behaviour and social distance. In J. Fine (Ed.), *Second language discourse: A textbook of current research* (pp. 21-38). Norwood N.J.: Ablex.

Yuan, Y. (2001). An inquiry into empirical pragmatics data-gathering methods: Written DCTs, oral DCTs, field notes, and natural conversations. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 33(2), 271-292.

Appendix A: DCT Situations (Translated version)

1. You are walking along the pavement holding some books in your hand. Unfortunately, you stumble and fall, and the books spill everywhere. A stranger who is the same sex and age as you helps you stand up and collects the book for you.
You:
2. You get onto the bus and are moving to an empty seat when the bus starts moving and you drop your bus ticket. A stranger who is the same sex and age as you picks it up and gives it to you.
Stranger: Excuse me! Your ticket.
You:
3. You were not able to attend the last lesson and have difficulties understanding one of the central points of this lesson. After class, you meet a classmate who is the same sex and age as you. You tell your classmate that you did not understand one of the central points and ask him/her to explain it to you. Your classmate explains the point in detail and even draws a diagram.
Classmate: Well, I hope that it's clear now.
You:
4. You are trying to get the table you have just bought from the shop off your trailer. Your neighbour who is the same sex and age as you and who is watering the plants in his/her front yard, sees this. He/she stops his/her work and comes to help you. He/she also helps carry the table into your living room.
You:
5. You enter a bookshop to look for a book. You spend a few minutes looking but can't find it. The shop assistant who is the same sex and age as you asks if you need any help. He/she finds the book and hands it to you.
Shop assistant: Is this the book you need?
You:
6. You have just gotten your hair cut in a new style, but you liked it better the old way. A friend who is the same sex and age as you sees you when you are walking in the street.
Friend: Hey, you've got a new haircut. It's great!
You:
7. You have just got off the train and are moving to the exit of the station with two heavy bags. Your brother/sister (same sex as you), who is meeting you, sees you and helps you carry one of the bags.
Brother/sister: Let me carry this one.
You:
8. You are a visitor to a city. You want to walk to a souvenir shop but don't know the way. You ask a passer-by (same sex and age as you) and he/she tells you to follow him/her because he/she is going in that direction too. You have just got to the place where he/she will turn into another road.
Passer-by: Can you see the tall building over there? The souvenir shop is next to that building.
You:
9. You borrow a mobile phone from a close friend who is the same sex and age as you to make a phone call because your phone has run out of money. You finish the call and give the phone to your friend.
You:
10. After class, a classmate who is the same sex and age as you and who is also your close friend offers to give you a lift home. He/she drops you in front of your house.
You:
11. You find yourself in sudden need of money - \$200.00. You mention this to a close friend who is the same sex and age as you. Your close friend immediately offers to lend it to you. You are surprised and very grateful.
You:



12. You have to read a chapter in a book for one of your assignments which is due in one week. All the copies of the book in the library are on loan and it would take too long to get it from a bookshop. You meet a classmate who is the same sex and age as you and tell him/her about it.

You: It's really awful! I just can't get hold of this book and I have to read it for my assignment!

Classmate: You need Chapter 8, don't you?

You: Yes, that's right! Do you have it?

Classmate: Yes, I have read it already. I'll bring it in for you tomorrow.

You: