

**MICHAEL FARRIS**

## **Lexical and Grammatical Properties of Personal Pronouns in Vietnamese: Deicticity and Relationships**

### **Abstract**

Since all languages have ways of referring to the person speaking and the person being addressed, some have been misled into thinking that the category of person works in the same manner in all languages. Recognition that pronouns work differently in some East Asian languages is usually limited to observations about the number of different words used to refer to the speaker and addressee. This paper looks at the ways that Vietnamese speakers use words to refer to themselves and their addressees. The system that emerges is complex and dynamic. It makes use of both transreferential deictic words (that refer to participants in the speech act) as well as non-deictic words that only refer to individuals in terms of characteristics of the conversational participants such as age, sex and social role and the relationship between interlocutors.

**Keywords:** linguistics, Vietnamese, personal pronouns, grammar, deicticity

### **Introduction**

All human languages have ways of referring to the participants in conversational interactions. The system used for this is traditionally referred to as *person*. The primary indicators of person are personal pronouns, which in many languages are reinforced by agreement affixes on verbs, nouns or other parts of speech. Since all languages have ways of referring to the person speaking and the person being addressed some have been misled into thinking that the category of person works in the same manner in all languages. Close examination of a number of languages, however, indicates that this is not the case.

The goal of this paper is to look at some of the ways that Vietnamese speakers use words to refer to themselves and their addressees. The system that emerges from close examination is complex, in that it is made up of a number of subsystems, and dynamic in its application. In short, the system of self-reference and address in Vietnamese makes use of both deictic words (that refer to conversational interlocutors) as well as non-deictic words that refer to individuals not in terms of their participation in conversation but on the basis of personal characteristics such as age, sex, social role and the relationship between the interlocutors.

The traditional model of person posits three basic distinctions (Siewierska 2004: 1) which are found in Figure 1.

- first person** : speaker
- second person** : addressee
- third person** : specific entity which is neither speaker nor addressee

Figure 1.

Person is traditionally part of a larger system of deictic reference whose point of reference is linguistic interaction. Crucially, both first and second person identify participants in a conversation. First person refers to the speaker (or sender) of a linguistic message and second person refers to the intended recipient of the message. Typically within a conversation both interlocutors use both and the identity of a given first or second person referent depends upon who is speaking. This property (of referring equally to any interlocutor depending on who is speaking at a given moment) is referred to here as transreferentiality. Third person, on the other hand, is not transreferential in that it refers to a specific entity (human or not) but only refers to the speech situation negatively (as not being involved).

### Person in East Asian languages

It has long been noticed, for example, that personal reference in a number of the major languages of East Asia works very differently in a number of respects from that found in languages from Europe i.e. belonging to Indo-European language family.

In describing Japanese, a language whose system of self-reference and address shares some features with Vietnamese, Suzuki 1978 (p. 116) notes that in European languages, the words for speaker and address are a stable and mostly closed set, and cognates which date to prehistory appear across languages. Therefore the first person singular pronouns in different Indo-European languages such as Polish *ja*, Portuguese *eu*, Danish *jeg*, Lithuanian *aš*, English *I*, Greek *egó* and others are all modern reflexes of a single proto-Indo-European root, reconstructed by Sihler (1995: 369) as *\*eǵoH*. This kind of stability reaching across languages for thousands of years is unimaginable in Japanese

where the set of words used to refer to the speaker is much larger and unstable in that words enter and leave everyday usage much more rapidly than in European languages.

The situation in Vietnamese is similar. The set of words a speaker might use to refer to themselves at present includes but is not limited to *tôi, tớ, tao, mình, anh, em, cô, cháu* and others. Further, if a similar set for words used to refer to addressees is assembled it might include *mày, bạn, cậu, anh, em, cô, bác* and others. Interestingly, it will immediately be noticed that the two lists overlap, which is not likely or possible in European languages.

In the case of Vietnamese, Nguyễn 2004 describes Vietnamese pronouns as ‘substitutes’ and distinguishes between ‘Personal substitutes’ (p. 124) which indicate the age and social status of the interlocutor and ‘Status substitutes’ (p. 126) which use kinship terms fictively to indicate the relative age and status of referents.

Thompson 1991 distinguishes between ‘personal’ pronouns which can be pluralized with *chúng* and ‘absolute’ pronouns which cannot. He distinguishes four ‘courtesy levels’ for personal pronouns (p. 248). These are ‘respectful’, ‘superior’, ‘familiar’ and ‘abrupt’. He also claims that for the first two of these levels only first person forms exist and that general nouns are used for second and third person and that these may also be used as first person references to indicate humility (in the case of a younger person speaking with an older person) or formality or abruptness if an older person is speaking with a younger person (p. 299).

### Grammatical Person and Lexical Person

Before further analyzing the words used by speakers of Vietnamese to refer to speakers and addressees it is necessary to distinguish between two different aspects of person reference. These are here called grammatical person and lexical person respectively. The author first explored this issue in Farris 2003 where ‘lexical’ person was referred to as ‘logical’ person. Grammatical person refers to a formal category as determined by agreement markers or etymological factors. Lexical person on the other hand refers to the pragmatic meaning. Most of the time these two categories are identical. But over time, for a variety of reasons, mismatches may occur as semantic content changes while the grammatical form remains unchanged.

One important example of how grammatical and lexical person may diverge, is found in a number of European languages, including Polish, Spanish and Hungarian (with belongs to the Fino-Hungarian language family). It involves the use of forms which are grammatically third person for deferential or polite references to the addressee (lexical second person). The system as used in Polish will be briefly examined here. The lexical second person paradigm (most common forms) for the verb *mówić* (*to speak*) in Polish is found in Figure 2.

The familiar second person pronouns *ty* and *wy* are not required and are usually omitted. The formal second person pronouns (*Pan* et al.) are required and may not be

omitted. The forms given here are only the most common, least marked forms used with *Pan*, et al. Rarely second person verb forms can occur with the singular forms but these are highly marked and will not be discussed further here.

| second person singular      | second person plural             |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| (ty) mówisz                 | (wy) mówicie                     |
| <i>Pan</i> mówi (masculine) | <i>Panowie</i> mówią (masculine) |
| <i>Pani</i> mówi (feminine) | <i>Panie</i> mówią (feminine)    |
|                             | <i>Państwo</i> mówią (mixed)     |

Figure 2.

It should also be noted that *Pan/Pani* retain their meanings as common nouns. Depending on the context *Pan* may be translated as *gentleman*, *man*, or the title *Mr.* in English while *Pani* might be translated as *lady*, *woman* or the titles *Mrs.*, *Miss* and *Ms.*, again depending on context. A common noun used pronominally this way which does not lose its original meaning may be known as a pronominalized noun. In Polish, the pattern of a pronominalized noun and a third person verb form as a polite form of address is not limited to these examples. It is fairly productive, in that in specific situations other nouns can act in similar ways, the most common of these include *ksiądz* (*priest*), *siostra* (*nurse*, lit. *sister*) and sometimes within the family, kinship terms.

It should also be noted that the use of *Pan* et al. as a pronominalized noun differs in some ways from both unambiguously second person pronouns and from the homophonous common nouns. As noted previously, Polish is a null-subject or PRO-drop language in which first and second person subject pronouns may be omitted. But *Pan* and similar forms may not be omitted as illustrated in Figure 3.

|                         |                          |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Czy ty znasz ją?</i> | “Do you (Ty) know her?”  |
| <i>Czy znasz ją?</i>    | “Do you (Ty) know her?”  |
| <i>Czy Pan zna ją?</i>  | “Do you (Pan) know her?” |
| * <i>Czy zna ją?</i>    | “Do you (Pan) know her?” |

Figure 3.

*Pan* used as a pronominal noun also is different from *pan* as a common noun in that the latter may be substituted by third person pronouns anaphorically while the former cannot. This is illustrated in Figure 4.

|                                       |                                       |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>Widzę pana, ale nie znam go.</i>   | “I see the man but I don’t know him.” |
| <i>Widzę Pana, ale nie znam Pana.</i> | “I see you but I don’t know you.”     |

Figure 4.

## Pronoun Systems in Vietnamese

Mismatches between grammatical and lexical person are easy to spot in languages with person agreement forms. They can be harder to spot in languages with no agreement forms. Vietnamese lacks agreement forms but has an extensive and rich system of pronominal reference. An examination of their usage reveals three categories of pronoun forms, two rely to a greater or lesser degree on the traditional three person system, while the third is neutral as to person.

### Transreferential pronouns in Vietnamese

Vietnamese does appear to have a category of transreferential personal pronouns. These have stable meanings which refer to one of the three person categories. Although some of them have origins as common nouns, those meanings are now distinct from their use as pronouns. Some of the more common are found in Figure 5.

Of these, the most commonly used is *tôi*, which is always acceptable as a first person singular reference. The second person forms however are problematic. They are normally abrupt or arrogant. While some speakers accept *mày* as an intimate second person pronoun, others do not, finding it rude. Also the third person forms *nó*, and *hắn* are not always acceptable for human referents and often indicate disdain.

first person: *tôi, ta, tao, tớ*  
 second person: *mày, mi, bay*  
 third person: *nó, hắn, họ*

Figure 5.

### Pronominalized nouns

This is a large, productive category in Vietnamese and there is no way in this limited space to indicate the full richness of the system. The crucial point to remember in this system is that the choice of term does not depend on conversational roles. That is, the pronominalized noun does not refer to a person's momentary role in the conversation, but acts as a label for a specific person, irregardless of whether they are speaking, being addressed or or being referred to. Within the traditional framework of person these function not as first or second person but as third person.

The most important pronominalized nouns are kinship terms. Within the family, these are commonly used instead of pronouns, but they are also widely used with non-kin. In this case, the choice of term is determined by relative age of the interlocutors as well as the kind of relationship between them. Not all forms are equally likely to be used. The most common kin terms which are extended to non-kin are found in Figure 6. Here the Vietnamese form is followed by the literal kin definition and general indication of what kind of person they could be used of.

*ông* (grandfather) – adult male of greater age or status than interlocutor  
*bà* (grandmother) – adult female of greater age or status than interlocutor  
*anh* (older brother) – adult male of similar age and status as interlocutor  
*chị* (older sister) – adult female of similar age and status as interlocutor  
*cô* (aunt) – young adult woman  
*cậu* (uncle) – young adult man  
*em* (younger sibling) – child or adult younger than interlocutor  
*cháu* (grandchild, niece, nephew) – adult younger than interlocutor

Figure 6.

Other pronominalized nouns include but are not limited to occupational titles and personal names.

### **Pronominalized and other nouns used transreferentially**

There is also a small class of pronominalized nouns that can be used as true pronouns, identifying conversational roles, instead of a specific person independent of their conversational role. The most common are shown in Figure 7.

*mình* (body, self) – first person, second person  
*bạn* (friend) – second person  
*cậu* (uncle) – second person

Figure 7.

When used as a personal pronoun, *mình* is normally used for first person, but also finds limited use, as an intimate *you* between spouses. As a pronominalized noun it is a reflexive which can refer to all three persons.

In modern Vietnamese, *bạn* is the closest equivalent to a neutral second person pronoun (used, for example, in impersonal written documents). It may also be used as a pronominalized noun. Modern speech finds *cậu* used as a familiar second person sex-neutral pronoun, although as a pronominalized noun it is specifically male.

### **Use of different pronoun systems in Vietnamese**

Not only are there different classes of pronomial words in Vietnamese but they interact in multiple ways. There are three patterns of pronoun usage in Vietnamese. The first of these uses transreferential pronouns exclusively so that the words used refer to conversational roles. This is probably the rarest pattern, perhaps partly because of its inherent limitations in describing the relationships between interlocutors and in expressing honorific. A short example can be seen in Figure 8. The words used as personal pronouns

are in bold. Each line of the original dialogue is followed by a word by word literal translation and finally by a free translation. The conversation is taken from Halik, Hoàng 1997 (p. 8).

- A: Chào **bạn**, đi đâu vội thế?  
greeting **friend**(you), go where hurry so  
Hello, where are you in such a hurry to?
- B: A, xin chào, **mình** đi học. **Bạn** làm gì vậy?  
Ah, ask greeting, **self**(I) go learn **friend**(you) do what then  
Ah, hello. I'm going to school. What are you doing?
- A: **Mình** chờ mẹ. Mẹ **mình** mua bán trong chợ.  
**self**(I) wait mother. mother **self**(I) buy sell in market  
I'm waiting on my mother. She's gone shopping in the market.

Figure 8.

In this short conversation, both interlocutors, young males of close age and similar status, use *mình* as a transferential first person pronoun and *bạn* as a transreferential second person pronoun.

Unlike the first pattern which is not especially frequent, the second pattern is very common and uses pronominalized nouns exclusively. A short fragment can be seen in Figure 9. This is an excerpt from the 1934 novel *Nửa chừng xuân* (*Halfway through spring*) by Khái-Hung, cited in Nguyễn 1997 (p. 260.) The glosses and translations are from Nguyễn.

- Bà Án: Chắc **con** có điều gì phiền muộn mà **con** giấu mẹ.  
surely **child**(you) have matter whatever worry that **child**(you) hide **mother**(I)  
You must have something troubling you're trying to hide from me.
- Lộc: Vâng, có thể. Bẩm mẹ, **con** khổ lắm.  
yes emphatic so. respectfully report **mother**(you) **child**(I) unhappy very  
Yes, I have. Mother, I'm very unhappy.
- Bà Án: Chuyện gì thế **con**?  
story what so **child**(you)  
What is the matter son?
- Lộc: Mẹ cò tha tội cho **con** thì **con** mới dám thưa.  
**mother**(you) emphatic forgive sin to **child**(I) then **child**(I) only-then dare report  
Mother, I dare tell you only if you forgive me.

Figure 9.

Here, both the mother and her adult son refer to the mother as *mẹ* 'mother' and both the adult son and his mother refer to the adult son as *con* 'child'. In other words neither

is using transreferential pronouns but rather non-transreferential pronouns. Taken out of context, the conversation could just as easily be about other (third) persons as about the interlocutors themselves.

Here two points should be made. ‘Motherese’ (language interactions between mothers and very young children) in a number of languages (including Polish and English) at times uses this same kind of third person reference instead of normal first and second person. The difference between those languages and Vietnamese is that the same pattern can continue even when the child is an adult. The conversation quoted in Figure 9 is ultimately about the son’s desire to marry a young woman. It would be extremely strange for a young man and his mother to continue such a form of address into adulthood in English while it is not strange in Vietnamese. It should also be noted that the English translation does include some vocative expressions, but such vocative expressions cannot be used as arguments of verbs in English while they can in Vietnamese.

The third pattern depends on mixed usage of words belong to different pronominal classes. Most commonly in this type of usage, the speaker uses a true pronoun for first person and pronominalized nouns for second and third person references. A short example can be seen in Figure 10.

Tally: *Anh đã thạo đường ở phố cổ chưa?*

**older-brother**(you) already skilled road at city old yet  
Do you know your way around the old town yet?

Hiro: *Chịu! không hiểu sao tôi không thể nhớ nổi đường ở khu phố cổ.*

suffer! not understand why I not can remember road at area city old  
No way! I don’t understand why I can’t remember the streets in the old town.

*Tôi bị lạc luôn, không làm sao định hướng nổi.*

I suffer lost often, not do why plan direction plans.

I often get lost. I can’t find my orientation there.

*Chị chắc thạo rồi.*

**older-sister**(you) certain skill already

Surely you know your way around already.

Tally: *Tôi cũng vậy thôi.*

I also so just.

I’m just the same way.

Figure 10.

Functionally, this might be referred to as a two person system as the only consistent distinction made is between first and non-first person. It is difficult to consistently distinguish between second and third person. While some claim the difference between pronominalized nouns in the second and third person can be made with a demonstrative pronoun, this is not consistently used and the categories tend to merge. Thus, while first person remains a separate category from other person distinctions in this usage, second



and third person appear to merge as a non-first person category since shorn of context it is impossible to tell if any particular instance to *anh* or *chị* is referring to one of the interlocutors or some other person not involved in the conversation.

It should also be noted that these different arrangements of person categories are not segregated with each conversation using one or the other. Quite the opposite, the system is fluid and in a single conversation, usage may drift from one pattern to the other and back again. This can be seen in Figure 11. This conversation is taken from Halik, Hoàng 1997 (p. 41).

- Tuấn: **Lan** đi đâu đấy?  
**Lan**(you) go where emphatic  
 Lan, where are you going?
- Lan: Chào **Tuấn**, **mình** ra phố có chút việc.  
 greeting **Tuan**(you), **self**(I) out street have little work  
 Hello Tuấn, I'm going out to take care of something.
- Tuấn: **Mình** cũng ra phố, thế chúng ta cùng đi có được không?  
**self**(I) also out street, so we together go have can not  
 I'm also going out, so maybe we can go together?
- Lan: Tại sao lại không? **Tuấn** định mua gì? cho ai?  
 why again not? **Tuan**(you) decide buy what? for who?  
 Why not? What do you want to buy? Who's it for?
- Tuấn: Cho ai thì **mình** chưa thể nói được. (...) **Lan** giúp **Tuấn** nhé. (...)  
 for who then **self**(I) not-yet can say can. **Lan**(you) help **Tuấn**(I) right(...)  
 I can't say who it's for yet. You'll help me okay?
- Lan: **Mình** sẽ cố gắng giúp **Tuấn**.  
**self**(I) will do-best help **Tuấn**(you)  
 I'll do my best to help you.

Figure 11.

In this conversation both interlocutors use the transreferential pronoun *mình* to refer to themselves; they also use their personal names not only vocatively as terms of direct address but as verbal arguments to refer to each other and themselves. There is also a plural form here, the first person inclusive (including addressee) form *chúng ta*. Plural forms in Vietnamese carry their own complications however and for the sake of simplicity are not discussed here.

## Conclusion

Often in the description of non-Western languages, the uncritical usage of grammatical categories or terminology may obscure rather than enlighten. Much more research is

needed to adequately describe usage and to discover the factors that trigger one or the other kind of usage. The published grammars of Vietnamese do not entirely adequately describe either the categories of Vietnamese pronouns nor their usage. It is probable that the concepts of grammatical person and lexical person as well as that of transreferentiality may shed new light on the structure of Vietnamese as well as those of other languages such as Japanese and Thai with ambiguous or still poorly understood pronoun systems.

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