

Expressing Satisfaction in American English and Vietnamese (as Seen from the Categorical Dimension of Directness-Indirectness)

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Abstract: Based on the theories of cross-cultural communication, this study aims at investigating the similarities and differences in expressing satisfaction towards different co-interactants in the Vietnamese and American languages and cultures. It focuses primarily on the popularity of strategies of expressing satisfaction employed. The author takes into consideration such informants' social parameters as age, gender, marital status, living area, and knowledge of foreign language(s).

Keywords: Cross-cultural communication, expressing satisfaction, directness and indirectness.

1. Introduction

As a matter of fact, to attain a good command of communication, culture learning apparently turns out to be indispensable. Brembeck [1 : 37] notes that, “*to know another’s language and not his culture is a very good way to make a fluent fool of oneself*”. The same holds true of the teaching and learning of English. In order to help learners achieve communicative competence, we have to pay close attention to culture awareness and acquisition. That dialectical connection has always been a concern of researchers and it has received more and more agreement. With this in

view, Nguyen Quang [2 : 2] remarks that, “*one cannot master a language without profound awareness of its cultural background; in both verbal and non-verbal communication, culture makes itself strongly felt*.” A learner can truly master English only when he is able to have a good understanding of the inter-relationship between culture and language.

For this reason, the researcher has carried out a small-scale study on **expressing satisfaction** viewed from the categorical dimension of Directness-Indirectness.

1.1. Cross-cultural communication

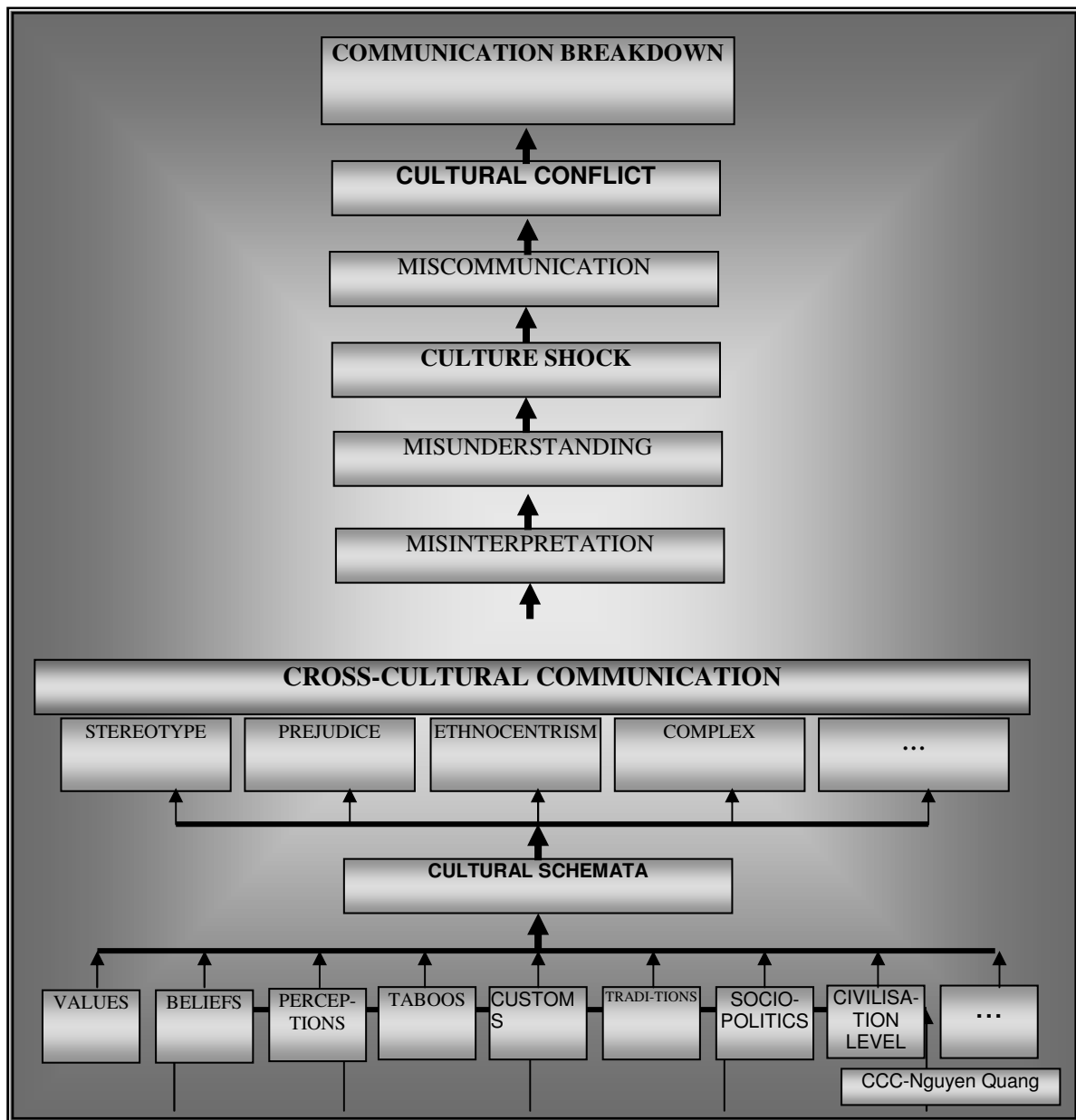
Culture shapes communication and ways of interpreting communication. Therefore, there is high likelihood that problems arise when people

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from different cultures communicate. That is the reason why studies of “cross-cultural communication” come to life.

Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied linguistics [3] gives the definition of cross-cultural communication simply as “an exchange of ideas, information, etc. between people from different backgrounds”

In a broader sense, cross-cultural communication is “communication (verbal and non-verbal) between people from different cultures; communication that is influenced by cultural values, attitudes and behavior; the influence of culture on people’s reactions and responses to each other”. [4]



It is understandable that when cross-cultural communication occurs, difficulties, misunderstandings or communication failures may happen because people from different cultural backgrounds have different values, beliefs, perceptions and communication styles. They often interpret others' interactive behaviour according to their own cultural conventions and they tend to use their own culture to value others. If the cultural values of the speakers are widely different, misinterpretations and misunderstandings can arise and even result in a total breakdown of communication. This can also lead to confusion, anger, disappointment and culture shock as an inevitable consequence. Nguyen Quang's bottom-up flowchart [2] of culture shock and communication breakdown can well serve as a good illustration.

Undoubtedly, cultural differences are the source of difficulties and failures in cross-cultural communication. Only with awareness of cultural differences can people keep their communication smooth and easy. In other words, knowledge and skills of the field are the key to effective cross-cultural communication.

1.2. Expressing satisfaction in cross-cultural communication

1.2.1. What is 'expressing satisfaction'?

According to the classification of speech acts by Searle [5], **expressing satisfaction** belongs to the type of expressives, i.e. "*those kinds of speech act that state what the speaker feels. ... And in using an expressive, the speaker makes words fit the world (of feelings)*" [6]. To be more precise, they are based on psychological states and relate to the expression of feelings or emotions to the receiver.

In another way, expressing "*satisfaction*" found in Oxford English Dictionary Online [7] is "*the good feeling that you have when you achieved something or when something you wanted to happen does happen*". It is often mistaken among those good feelings as happiness, joy, contentment or fulfillment. However, when taking a closer look, there are some slight distinctions among them.

- Happiness is a state of mind or feeling characterized by contentment, love, satisfaction, pleasure, joy, etc. It often depicts the good feelings of a person in general, therefore, "satisfaction" is meant beyond the shade of "happiness".

- Contentment (rather formal) is a feeling of happiness or satisfaction with what you have

- Fulfillment is a feeling of happiness or satisfaction with what you do or have done.

Satisfaction, in this article, should be identified as "*the gratification you feel after you have fulfilled a need, wish or expectation.*" [8]

On this basis, expressing satisfaction is meant to be an act of showing how happy and content somebody is when he/she has attained something longing. It is such an amorphous feeling; therefore the expression of it may vary from person to person. In terms of channels, there are supposed to be two main types of strategies when expressing satisfaction. They are:

- Non-verbal strategies:

- + Body action

- + Smiling

- + Silence

- + Crying

- + Others

- Verbal strategies:

- + Thanking

- + Understating
- + Seeking agreement
- + Using joke
- + Being optimistic
- + Giving gift
- + Asking questions
- + Raising

However, as stated from the beginning, the purpose of this study is to investigate expressing satisfaction as a speech act. Therefore, it is to take the focal point on verbal strategies and explore the differences between the two cultures (Vietnamese and American).

1.2.2. Directness- Indirectness strategies in expressing satisfaction

According to Nguyen Quang [9], there are 4 direct strategies and 8 indirect strategies in a communicative act:

▪ **Directness strategies:**

1. Single directness (SD)
2. Compound directness (CD)
3. Directness + conventional indirectness (D-CID)
4. Directness + non-conventional indirectness (D-NID)

▪ **Indirectness strategies:**

1. Conventional indirectness (CID)
2. Non-conventional indirectness (NID)
3. Conventional indirectness + conventional indirectness (CID- CID)
4. Conventional indirectness + non-conventional indirectness (CID- NID)
5. Non-conventional indirectness + conventional indirectness (NID- CID)
6. Non-conventional indirectness + non-conventional indirectness (NID-NID)

7. Conventional indirectness + directness (CID- D)

8. Non-conventional indirectness + directness (NID- D)

In expressing satisfaction as a communicative act, the Vietnamese respondents in this research resort to 8 strategies while the American ones take 10 out of the 12 strategies suggested by Nguyen Quang [9].

Eight strategies used by the Vietnamese respondents in the three situations (at home, at work and in public) under investigation include:

- SD: Cảm ơn nhiều nhé!
- CD: Cảm ơn nhé! Thật may biết mà sửa sớm như thế này tốt biết bao!
- D-CID: Cảm ơn ấy! Gia đình ấy cũng tuyệt vời thế mà!
- D-NID: Cảm ơn! Bí quyết là ở chỗ phải biết bằng lòng với cuộc sống!
- CID: Thỉnh thoảng nhà em cũng có mấy chuyện linh tinh nhưng nhìn chung thế là ổn rồi!
- NID: Số em vẫn may mà!
- CID- D: Thế mà mình không nghĩ ra! Cảm ơn nhé!
- NID- D: Vai u thịt bắp có khác! Cảm ơn ông nhé!

Meanwhile, the American informants resort to the following 10 strategies:

- SD: Thanks!
- CD: That's so kind of you to say so! You know that I do feel blessed by my family.
- CID: My arms were about to pull out of their sockets!
- NID: You really are a blessing!
- D- CID: I am very grateful but of course no family is perfect.

- D- NID: Thanks a bunch! Nobody's perfect, by the way!
- CID- D: You understand these things so thoroughly. Thanks for walking me through it!
- NID- D: I messed up. But thanks!
- NID- NID: You know me too well. I should be clever as you.
- CID- NID: It's good to hear another perspective on this. Those are good ideas, honey!

2. Access

2.1. Research questions

For the discovery of major similarities and differences between the Vietnamese and American in expressing satisfaction, this study is aimed to be largely a qualitative one. Two main research questions are raised:

1. How do American and Vietnamese informants express their satisfaction in given situations?
2. What are major similarities and differences between Vietnamese and American informants in expressing satisfaction in the situations under investigation?

2.2. The questionnaire

The study is conducted to examine how the Vietnamese and American express their satisfaction. In order to get data for the contrastive analysis, two versions of questionnaire (English and Vietnamese) were designed and delivered to two groups of

informants: one - American and the other-Vietnamese.

The informants were requested to give verbal responses to the following specific situations:

Situation 1 (family setting): How would you verbally express your satisfaction to the following person (best friend, nodding acquaintance, brother/sister, colleague, boss, subordinate) when someone (another person) says you are lucky to have a happy family?

Situation 2 (office setting): How would you verbally express your satisfaction to the following person (best friend, nodding acquaintance, brother/sister, colleague, boss, subordinate) when someone (another person) shows your mistakes in your work and suggests the solutions?

Situation 3 (public setting): How would you verbally express your satisfaction to the following person (best friend, nodding acquaintance, brother/sister, colleague, boss, subordinate) when someone (another person) enthusiastically helps you with your heavy shopping bags?

2.3. The informants

The survey questionnaires are administered to two groups of informants. The Vietnamese group consists of 30 informants living in Northern Vietnam. The second group was 30 Native American speakers who are now living in the United States.

Details of the informants' parameters are illustrated in the following table:

Table 1. Number of informants with their status parameters

STATUS PARAMETERS		INFORMANTS	
		American	Vietnamese
AGE	Below 40	22	13
	Above 40	8	17
GENDER	Male	22	8
	Female	8	22
MARITAL STATUS	Single	14	20
	Married	16	10
AREA WHERE INFORMANTS SPEND MOST OF THEIR TIME	Rural	12	4
	Urban	18	26
OCCUPATION	Social- service	13	10
	Tech- scientific	17	20
ACQUISITION OF LANGUAGE	With FL(s)	28	26
	Without FL(s)	2	4

2.4. Data collection and analysis procedure

Data collection procedure was carried out during the first two stages of the research. Based on hypotheses and anticipations, the author designed two types of survey questionnaires: one in English and the other in Vietnamese. These questionnaires were carefully piloted by the researcher and some pre- informants chosen at random.

After that, the questionnaires were converted to a google document stored online so that it was easier to spread and keep the data. In addition, the questionnaires were also delivered directly to some American and Vietnamese respondents in person. The researcher, though fully aware of the necessity to certify the validity of the study through other methods such as interviewing or recording, failed to conduct these to all of the informants due to the limited time and the scope of the study. What can be strongly emphasized in the method is that the researcher managed to have penpal interviews via Skype with many American informants, which contributed greatly to the major findings of the study itself.

The next stage is called data analysis in which all the collected materials were critically analyzed in the light of cross cultural communication. In brief, the data may be viewed and collated from the perspectives of directness- indirectness and politeness strategies.

It should be noted that this is largely a qualitative study and data was collected from the informant. The context may somehow made change to the responses from informants. Hence, no overgeneralization is firmly made.

3. Findings and discussion

Following is the summary of the research findings and discussion:

3.1. Use of D-ID as seen from communicating partners' parameters

3.1.1. Vietnamese findings

As can be seen from the table, most Vietnamese informants are in favor of directness when it comes to expressing their satisfaction in 3 given situations. Indirectness,

on the other hand is less preferred by the majority and yet, informants are inclined to

choose indirect strategies when they communicate with those who have equal status.

Table 2. D- ID in the situations under study (Vietnamese)

Situation 1		Situation 2		Situation 3	
Directness	Indirectness	Directness	Indirectness	Directness	Indirectness
65%	35%	81.12%	18.88%	72.23%	27.77%

Table 3. Use of D-ID as seen from Vietnamese communicating partners' parameters

Communicating partner	Strategy	Directness (%)	Indirectness (%)
Best friend		40%	60%
Nodding acquaintance		70%	30%
Brother/ sister		56.66%	43.34%
Colleague		63.34%	36.66%
Boss		86.67%	13.33%
Subordinate		83.34%	16.66%

The majority of respondents chose to be straightforward when communicating to people with different social distances. However, there

3.1.2. American findings

is still some exception, that is, when the communicating partner is the best friend.

Table 4. D-ID in the situations under study (in American)

Situation 1		Situation 2		Situation 3	
Directness	Indirectness	Directness	Indirectness	Directness	Indirectness
68.34%	31.66%	58.34%	41.66%	82.78%	17.22%

Table 5. Use of D-ID as seen from American communicating partners' parameters

Communicating partner	Strategy	Directness (%)	Indirectness (%)
Best friend		36.67%	63.33%
Nodding acquaintance		73.34%	26.66%
Brother/ sister		63.33%	36.67%
Colleague		36.67%	63.33%
Boss		83.34%	16.66%
Subordinate		80%	20%

First and foremost, the greatest number of the sampling (82.78%) express their emotion directly when the scenario is in public. It seems

that people tend to make use of simple and quick strategy of directness rather than resort to other various types of strategies. Meanwhile,

within the office settings, the choice between direct or indirect strategies is comparatively equal.

In comparison with Vietnamese responses, American informants seem to make use of more direct and indirect strategies. The degree of Directness fluctuates from 36.67% to 83.34%, whereas indirectness is employed at quite unstable rates, ranging from 16.66% to 63.33%. In terms of indirectness, it is remarkably preferred when communicating with best friend and colleague.

3.1.3. Similarities and differences

- Similarities:

- Both Vietnamese and American informants are more in favour of directness when expressing satisfaction.

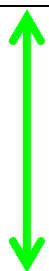
- When the informants interact with their family members or best friend, the strategies are more varied.
- Bosses in Vietnam and America seem to receive the most direct expressions.

- Differences:

- The American informants use more strategies than the Vietnamese ones (10 against 8).
- A special finding is within the office background. If Vietnamese people are bound to choose just some certain strategies of expressing satisfaction, American ones are quite different.

Differences in the choice of direct and indirect strategies can be clearly seen in the following features:

	In Vietnamese		In American
Highest percentage of D	86.67%	>	83.34%
Lowest percentage of D	40%	>	36.67%
Highest percentage of ID	60%	<	63.33%
Lowest percentage of ID	13.33%	<	16.66%

Vietnamese		More direct	American	
<u>Communicating partner</u>	<u>Percentage</u>		<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Communicating partner</u>
Boss	86.67%		83.34	Boss
Subordinate	83.34%		80%	Subordinate
Nodding acquaintance	70%		73.34%	Nodding acquaintance
Collegague	63.34%		63.33%	Brother/sister
Brother/sister	56.66%		36.67%	Colleague
Best friend	40%		36.67%	Best friend
		Less direct		

3.2. Use of D-ID as seen from informants' parameters

3.2.1. Vietnamese findings

It is observable that directness is utilized at a comparatively higher rate than indirectness, especially by informants aged under 40. Male participants tend to be more direct in expressing satisfaction with 87.5%. With regard to

residence, far beyond the researcher's expectation, rural people are likely to take more directness than indirectness into consideration with 76.92% versus 23.08%. Meanwhile only 25% of urban population express their feelings directly.

It can be inferred from the data that there is a disparity in the degree of directness between individuals who work in the fields of social sciences and service (SS & S) (50%) and those majoring in natural sciences and technology (NS & T) (70%).

Table 6. Use of D-ID as seen from Vietnamese informants' parameters

Informants' para	Strategy	Directness (%)	Indirectness (%)
Age	Under 40	76.92%	23.08%
	Over 40	61.53%	38.47%
Gender	Male	87.5%	12.5%
	Female	72.72%	27.28%
Marital status	Single	80%	20%
	Married	60%	40%
Residence	Rural	76.92%	23.08%
	Urban	25%	75%
Occupation	Social- service	50%	50%
	Tech- scientific	70%	30%
Acquisition of FL (s)	Yes	61.54%	38.46%
	No	75%	25%

3.2.2. American findings

Table 7. Use of D-ID as seen from American informants' parameters

Informants' para	Strategy	Directness (%)	Indirectness (%)
Age	Under 40	75%	25%
	Over 40	63.64%	35.36%
Gender	Male	62.5%	37.5%
	Female	72.72%	27.28%
Marital status	Single	71.43%	28.57%
	Married	56.25%	43.75%
Residence	Rural	55.55%	44.45%
	Urban	75%	25%
Occupation	SS & S	64.71%	35.29%
	NS & T	61.54%	38.46%
Acquisition of FL (s)	Yes	71.43%	28.57%
	No	50%	50%

It is worthy of note that more indirect strategies are chosen by American informants. Similar to most cases for Vietnamese

informants, all of the groups employ more directness than indirectness.

3.2.3. Similarities and differences

- Similarities:

A major similarity which can be realized in the data analysis is that both Vietnamese and American informants employ more direct strategies. The evidence is in almost any cases, directness outnumbers indirectness. In addition, indirectness is favoured mostly by those who are over 40 and get married already.

- Differences:

+ The most striking difference is that the rate of using indirectness by American

informants is significantly higher than that by Vietnamese ones.

+ Vietnamese male participants rarely employ directness to express their satisfaction while opposite is the case of American informants.

+ With regards to residence, Vietnamese urban respondents are less direct than Vietnamese ones, while with the American, it is the opposite.

	In Vietnamese		In American
Highest percentage of D	87.5%	>	75%
Lowest percentage of D	25%	>	50%
Highest percentage of ID	75%	<	50%
Lowest percentage of ID	12.5%	<	25%

The informants' parameters presenting their impact on directness and indirectness in the two cultures also differ:

Vietnamese	More direct	American
<u>Informants</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Male	87.5%	75%
Single	80%	75%
Under 40	76.92%	72.72%
Rural	76.92%	71.43%
Without FL(s)	75%	71.43%
Female	72.72%	64.71%
Tech-sci	70%	63.64%
With FL(s)	61.54%	62.5%
Over 40	61.53%	61.54%
Married	60%	56.25%
Social-service	50%	55.55%
Urban	25%	50%
	Less direct	

3.3. Discussion

In terms of direct- indirect strategies

Contrary to Kaplan's cultural thought patterns [10] which suggest that the Orient appear to be more roundabout than the Anglo-Saxons, this research has come out with the

finding that the American informants actually opt for more indirectness than the Vietnamese ones. This study proves that, the majority of the Vietnamese informants resort to directness whilst the American choose from a variety of indirect and direct strategies to express their satisfaction.

Regarding the effects of social distance in measuring levels of indirectness, the research findings reveal that the closer the social distance between the interlocutors is, the more varied indirect strategies are used. This is similar in both groups of informants.

In terms of informants' status parameters

The results of data analysis show that all investigated status parameters, namely age, gender, marital status, occupation, residence and acquisition of foreign language(s) have different impacts upon both Vietnamese and American informants in their verbal politeness behavior. Generally speaking, it has been shown that, both of the Vietnamese and American informants at older age, of weaker sex, of social science working groups appear to be more open and freer than those of the opposite groups. There are some certain differences between the two groups of informants; however, it is not really significant.

4. Conclusion

As an important speech act, expressing satisfaction includes many strategies which the speaker makes use of during their daily interaction. This study has found out some noteworthy points. Firstly, both American and Vietnamese informants tend to be in favor of short and direct responses. They mostly choose thanking as a safe communicative strategy when expressing their satisfaction. By contrast, the American informants prefer to exploit

indirect communicative strategies, not to mention the greater variety of strategies they make use. Besides, the study also reveals that the Vietnamese informants are inclined to be more straightforward and simpler in expressing satisfaction.

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Nghiên cứu giao thoa văn hóa về cách thức diễn đạt sự hài lòng giữa người Mỹ và người Việt Nam

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Tóm tắt: Dựa trên tiền đề lý luận của giao thoa văn hóa, nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích xem xét sự giống và khác nhau trong việc diễn đạt sự hài lòng đối với những đối tượng khác nhau trong ngôn ngữ và văn hóa Mỹ, Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu tập trung chủ yếu vào các chiến lược ngôn ngữ được sử dụng để diễn đạt sự hài lòng. Ngoài ra, tác giả còn nghiên cứu dựa trên các tham số của đối tượng nghiên cứu như tuổi tác, giới tính, tình trạng hôn nhân, nơi sinh sống, trình độ ngoại ngữ thứ hai.

Từ khóa: Năng lực giao tiếp văn hóa, diễn đạt sự hài lòng, trực tiếp và gián tiếp.