Criticizing behaviors by the Vietnamese and the American: topics, social factors and frequency

Hoang Thi Xuan Hoa*

*Department of English - American Language and Culture,
College of Foreign Languages, Vietnam National University, Hanoi,
Pham Van Dong Street, Cau Giay, Hanoi, Vietnam*

Received 05 December 2007

Abstract. Speech acts as minimal unit of discourse analysis have been the focus of a large body of research as they do not only represent language form but also reflect cultural values of the people who perform them. Like most other speech acts, the realization of the speech act of criticizing is influenced by a number of social and situational factors, the perception of which might vary greatly across cultures. In addition, cultures may also differ in their common topics and frequency of criticism their people make in everyday life. This paper report a cross-cultural study on criticizing behaviors by the Vietnamese and American people focusing on three aspects: the topics of critics, factors affecting criticizing behavior, and the frequency of criticism. Responses to questionnaire items by 102 Vietnamese and 102 Americans reveal both similarities and differences between the two groups of people in all the three investigated aspects. Although the results of the study are inconclusive, it is hoped that they could be used as reference for further investigation into criticism performance by the Vietnamese and Americans.

1. Introduction

The action view of language introduced in the speech act theory [1-3] has started a new era in language research. Speech acts as minimal units of discourse Austin [1] have become the focus of investigation of many language researchers as the concept of speech act embraces both "linguistic form and social norms" [4]. The results of a large body of research in speech acts reveal that although many speech acts seem to exist in different cultures and societies, their natures, their conditions of realization and the means by which they are rendered are not global in nature, but rather socially and culturally defined [5]. For example, research into cross-cultural pragmatics also confirms that speech acts such as apologizing, requesting, refusing, etc. often evoke different communicative styles across cultures [6,7]. These stylistic differences may be due to the speakers' differences in perception of factors such as relative power, social distance, and the degree of imposition operating on both macro and micro levels of interaction. These are the factors that influence the speaker's decisions about "when to speak and when not to speak, and what to talk about with whom, when,

_____
* Tel.: 84-4-8510304
E-mail: hxhoa18@yahoo.com

where, and in what manner." [4], and cultures may vary in the perceptions of and hierarchies for these factors. Some cultures put certain relative values ahead of others, as Linton (1938: 426) contends: "All cultures exhibit patternings, a tendency to organize large areas of their content with reference to certain dominant attitudes or values".

Like other speech acts, the speech act of criticizing is culture specific and reflects fundamental values of a given society. Weightings given to the social and situational factors that influence criticism performance may vary with different cultures. Thus, criticizing behaviors in Vietnamese culture, which encourages collectivism and has been traditionally influenced by confucian ideology, and those in Anglo-American culture, which has been identified as a culture high in individualistic value tendencies [8], may differ in many aspects. This study was designed to examine some of those aspects, namely the most common topics that these two people often criticize on, a number of the social and situational variables (relative power and social distance between interactants, severity of offence, the setting, the gender of the hearer, etc.) hypothesized to influence the choice of criticizing strategies by Vietnamese and American people, and the frequency they criticize people having different relations with them. Hopefully, the results of this study could help establish the foundation for further investigating the nature of the speech act of criticizing, and for comparing criticizing behaviors by Vietnamese and American peoples.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Factors affecting speech act performance

Successful performance of any speech act should be based on two judgments:

sociopragmatic "whether to perform" and pragmalinguistic "how to perform" [9, 10].. Sociopragmatic judgments involving contextual factors such as social power, distance, rights and obligations, purpose of the speech act, etc., are the basis for the speaker to decide whether it is appropriate to perform a given speech act, whereas pragmalinguistic decisions, which are language-specific, concern linguistic choices related to encoding speaker's illocutionary force in an appropriate way (Bonikowska, ibid).

Studies show that social relations such as degree of social power and distance between interlocutors and the ranking of imposition of the speech acts are among the most important variables in determining the pragmatic decisions involved in the performance of speech acts. Social distance is defined by Spencer-Oatey [11] as having several components: 1) social familiarity; 2) frequency of contact; 3) length of acquaintance; 4) familiarity, or how well people know each other; 5) sense of like-mindedness; and 6) positive/negative affect. However, social distance is most commonly understood as the degree of familiarity and solidarity between the speaker and the hearer. It is one of the foremost factors that determine the way in which interlocutors converse because it is an important determinant of the degree of comfort or politeness in a verbal exchange [12]. Studies of social distance as a variable in speech act behavior by Nessa Wolfson [13], D'Amico-Reisner (1985), Holmes (1990) cited by Boxer (1993) reveal that distributions of different speech acts across social distance vary. The difference may be due to the extent to which they are construed as face-threatening acts. For instance, the bugle shape [13] of compliments and invitations, which are considered as solidarity-establishing and rapport-inspiring speech acts, is skewed for

apologies and indirect complaints, the two more face-threatening acts.

The second factor that often has great impact on speech act performance is relative power, which Spencer-Oatey (ibid) also breaks down into 5 components such as 1) reward power; 2) coercive power; 3) expert power; 4) legitimate power; and 5) referent power. In this study, the term relative power is used to generally refer to the power of the speaker with respect to the hearer, which reflects the degree to which the speaker can impose his/her will onto the hearer. The degree of effect that social power has on speech act strategies varies across cultures. The differences are especially obvious between "small power distance" and "large power distance" cultures [8]. Hofstede (1991) cited in Ting-Toomey found out that "small power distance" cultures (e.g. Austria, Denmark, Israel, Germany, Canada, United States, etc.) emphasize equal distance, individual credibility, and symmetrical interaction, whereas "large power distance" cultures (Malaysia, Indian, Philippines, Singapore, etc.) emphasize power distance, seniority, age, rank, title, and asymmetrical interaction.

The third factor affecting speech act performance is absolute ranking of imposition, which refers to the potential expenditure of goods and/or services by the hearer according to macro-level socio-cultural norms operating within a given culture. According to Brown and Levinson[14], absolute ranking of imposition demonstrates the degree to which this imposition interferes with an individual's wants of self-determination or approval (negative and positive face-wants). It includes reference to the right of the speaker to perform the act and the degree to which the hearer welcomes the imposition [5].

Beside those three major factors, a number of other factors are also likely to influence speech act behavior, such as the speaker's perception of the degree of the offence, the age of the two interlocutors, the topic, the setting of the speech event, etc [15].

Although, in general, all the above mentioned factors have been found to influence speech act performance, different cultures may give different weightings to each of the factors. For example, comparing refusal strategies by Americans and Germans, Beckers [16] finds out that Americans tend to vary their refusal strategies according to status rather than social distance while Germans vary their refusal strategies according social distance rather than status. However, the investigation of the speech acts of refusal and apology by Japanese and American people by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) reveals that Japanese refuse differently according to the status of the interlocutors, while Americans are more affected by the degree of familiarity or social distance between interlocutors. Similarly, in Japanese society, social status is a more important factor influencing apology realization whilst Americans give more weight to social distance. This fact reflects a basic difference between Japanese and American societies: The two cultures have markedly different ways of viewing and expressing power relations. Japanese society has a strongly vertical structure, in contrast to the more horizontal American society. In Japan, even people of equivalent status and qualifications are always conscious of their relative rank based on age, year of joining the company, length of service, and so forth. These factors strongly influence their selection of communication style [17].

In sum, a number of social and contextual factors have been found to affect speech act performance. The weighting of the factors varies across cultures. The same speech act may exist in various cultures but its nature

and the conditions for its realization are cultural specific. Therefore, a cross-cultural study on a certain speech act should investigate not only its patterns of linguistic realization and socio-pragmatic strategies but also how each of the factors influences on the speech act in different cultures.

2.2. The speech act of criticizing

Criticizing as the act of "finding fault" (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language) [18], or "saying that you disapprove of something or somebody, or what you do not like/think is wrong about something" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary) [19], or "expressing disapproval of something or somebody" (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary) [20] is highly face-threatening. Besides its two major functions: to point out a negatively perceived behaviour or problem to the offender and to request some repair, criticizing is sometimes performed to vent the speaker's negative feeling or attitude to the hearer or the hearer's work, choice, behaviour, etc. Consequently, criticism may impair the hearer's face, which leads to the unfavourable reaction and judgments of the hearer toward the speaker, resulting in conflicts and damage to the relationship [21]. However, criticism has a number of advantages. They can help clear up a problem, lessen irritation, and as Wajnryb [22] points out, criticism may provide a "rich, timely potentially fruitful opportunity for learning".

When the speaker finds that an action performed or a choice made by the hearer is inappropriate or unsatisfactory, he/she has to make a very careful decision: Should he/she perform the act of criticism, or should he/she not? And if yes, how should he/she do it so that the realization of the speech act would most effectively bring about the desired

results? In order to come to such decisions, the speaker has to judge whether the situation and the relationship between himself/herself with the hearer are suitable for him/her to make the criticism. In other words, the speaker has to decide whether the necessary conditions for the appropriateness of the speech act are actually satisfied. Nguyen Thi Thuy Minh [23] in her interlanguage study of criticisms made by Vietnamese learners, has identified four conditions for the speech act of criticism relating to the speaker's perception of the hearer's offence and the speaker's attitude toward the offence and his/her desire for a change in the action or attitude of the hearer. Tracy *et al.* [21] in distinguishing the speech acts of complaining and criticising also point out an important condition for criticism that it is performed by people of higher social status to those of lower social status. However, Nguyen Thi Thuy Minh argues that the role relationship is not a necessary condition for criticism performance as it is not uncommon for people in lower social position to be invited to make criticism to their superiors. She also adds that speech acts are context dependent, and contexts can sometimes be a more influential factor in determining the illocutionary force of a speech act. As has been discussed in the previous part, the impact of contextual factors on speech act performance can vary with cultures, and the role relationship can be perceived differently in different cultures resulting in the variation in the conditions for speech act realisation across cultures, as Green [24] has suggested: speech acts are not necessarily carried out by reference to the same pragmatic preconditions in all languages.

Although the existence of the speech act of criticism is universal across languages, its frequency, the situational contexts in which it is found, and the types of linguistic forms

available and used are culture-specific. Criticizing, like other speech acts, reflect fundamental values of the society, so the study of criticisms in one culture can provide important insights into social norms and values that are embedded in that culture. Therefore, a comparison between criticizing performance by the Vietnamese and the American is necessary not only because of its implications for language teaching and learning but also for cross-cultural understanding which constitutes an important condition for successful cross-cultural communication between peoples of the two cultures. To create a basis for cross-cultural research on criticizing behaviors by American and Vietnamese people, this preliminary study investigates some issues concerning the speech act of criticizing such as the factors that affect the pragmalinguistic decisions in performing the speech act of criticizing, the common criticism topics, and the frequency of the speech act by the Vietnamese and the American.

3. The stydy

3.1. Research questions

The study was designed to get the answers to the following research questions:

To what extent do Americans and Vietnamese differ in:

(a) the factors affecting criticizing performance?

(b) the topics of criticism?

(c) the frequency of criticizing?

3.2. Research design

3.2.1. Participants and sampling techniques

Participants for the study are 102 Vietnamese (n=102) living in Hanoi and 102

Americans (n=102) living in New Hampshire, USA. New Hampshire is chosen as the location for the study because of the following reasons. First, being one of the six New England states and one of the thirteen original colonies of the U.S., and with 96% of the population are white, New Hampshire has Anglo-American as its mainstream and dominant culture. Second, fifty nine per percent of the state's inhabitants are classified as urban, one of the lowest rates among the states, so its population composition can be considered as more similar to that of Vietnam than any other states (Encarta, 2006). In Vietnam, Hanoi is chosen because it is the city where people from various parts of the country come to live, so its population can have most of the characteristics of the people in Northern Vietnam.

Efforts were made so that the two groups did not differ in terms of age, place of residence, education and gender. In order to have the respondents in the two groups with similar parameters, the survey was conducted first in New Hampshire. Then, based on the features of the American informants, a group of Vietnamese informants of similar features were chosen. Informants in New Hampshire were selected via a networking approach to quota sampling. This approach involved using friends to establish contacts with other members in the target speech community. Participants were first chosen on the grounds of availability to the researcher, their willingness to participate in the study, and their Anglo-Saxon origin. Then, quota sampling technique was employed to select official informants from those participants. The demographic characteristics upon which the quota were set were age (four age groups: 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, and 50-60), gender, education (secondary, tertiary), and place of residence (urban, rural). The quota

percentages were as follows: (a) age - 25% for each age group, gender - 60% female, 40% male, (b) education - 20% secondary, 60% college graduates, and 20% postgraduates, (c) – 40% rural, 60% urban. The rationale behind the quota percentage was not that they absolutely match the population percentages on these characteristics. Rather, the goal was to insure that the various groups would have sufficient representation to allow statistical analyses for them. And a more important reason was to ensure the similarities between the two cultural groups.

3.2.2. Instrument

Two questionnaires, one in Vietnamese and the other in English, were administered to the Vietnamese and Americans groups respectively. Two bilingual Vietnamese nationals were invited to check the language of the two versions of the questionnaires to make sure that they were identical in meaning, and only different in the language. Each questionnaire consisted of four main parts: Part 1 was aimed to get demographic data from the informants such as age, education, gender and place of permanent residence. Names were not asked for. Part 2 was intended to find out the factors that people take into consideration when they decide to criticize somebody to their face. Factors such as age, gender, social distance, social status, the effect of the criticism, the severity of offence (offence in the study is defined as an act with unfavorable consequences which is contrary to social code of behavioral norms [25], the goal of criticizing, the setting, etc. were listed with a five-point rating scale indicating the degrees of consideration people take for each factor when they have to criticize somebody to their face. Informants were asked to check the

appropriate column beside each factor and give their reasons for their choices in the next column if they wished to. There was also an open option for the informants to add their own factor(s). Part 3 of the questionnaire investigated the topics that people often criticize on. The 12 topics investigated are (a) appearance, (b) choices in everyday life, (c) important choices in life, (d) choice of life partner, (e) behavior at home, (f) behavior in public places, (g) behavior at the workplace, (h) results of work, (i) results of housework, (k) attitude to life, (l) political viewpoints and (m) religious beliefs. These topics were chosen based on the criticism areas identified by Tracy et al. [21] in their study of the "good and bad criticisms", and by the definition of criticism given by Nguyen Thi Thuy Minh in her interlanguage pragmatic study of criticism by Vietnamese learners of English. A scale of five points indicating the degree of comfort when criticizing (from very comfortable to very uncomfortable) was also used. The last part, part 4, of the questionnaire was to find out the frequency the Vietnamese and American informants criticize their friends, relatives, superiors or subordinates, etc. on the 12 topics mentioned in part 3. Participants were asked to check the columns indicating the frequency. A six-point scale was used, ranging from 1 as *never* to 5 as *very often*, and 6 as *not applicable* (the informants did not have such relationship).

3.2.3. Mode of data analysis

The responses obtained from the questionnaires were collated and then analyzed by the statistical tool SPSS. Means of the elements were compared within groups to identify the most common topics of criticizing, the rank of the factors that affect the criticizing behaviors and the frequency of criticizing by

the people in each group. Also, two-tailed t-test (a test that asks whether two sample means differ enough to lead one to believe that there are statistically significant differences between the two populations) was run to find out the areas of significant difference between the two groups. Statistical significance is measured by the alpha level. The value of alpha was set 0.005 or lower ($p \geq 0.005$) for the difference between the two samples' means to be considered as statistically significant.

3.2.4. Procedures

Before officially administered to the respondents, the questionnaires were piloted on a group of three Vietnamese and a group of three Americans to check the clarity of the questions, the naturalness of the language employed and the questionnaire format. While the format was regarded as satisfactory by all the informants, some changes in various lexical items were suggested in order to achieve more clarity for the questions.

The English version of the questionnaire was first administered to American samples. Most of the respondents were from Southern New Hampshire University and some worked in other institutions in various parts of the state of New Hampshire. The researcher invited the informants to join the study via her friend who was working at the university as a visiting scholar at the time. First, the researcher's friend was introduced to different departments, schools, centers and offices of the University by an international relation officer where she talked to the people working there about the aim of the study, the purpose of the questionnaire and gave a brief instruction of how to complete it. She also answered questions by the staff concerning the questionnaire. Then she left the

questionnaires - the number of which corresponded to the number of the staff - in each office/department/school and asked the head of the department/office/school to collect the completed questionnaires and returned them to the international students' office for her. The researcher's friend did not collect the questionnaires herself because she wanted to give the staff the freedom to choose to do it or not. The staff was also encouraged to invite their friends and relatives to join the survey if they were interested. Thus, in addition to the informants from the university, the researcher could get a number of informants working outside the university via the university's staff. Finally, 116 completed questionnaires were returned. Approximately 29% of the people contacted refused to fill out the questionnaire. Only 102 questionnaires that matched the desired percentages were chosen to be analyzed by the researcher.

The Vietnamese group was selected according to the features of the American group to make sure that the two groups had similar parameters except their cultures. This time the researcher invited the informants to participate in her study in person. However, of the 132 questionnaires sent out only 110 were returned, and 102 were chosen. Although the total number of the informants was not big, it was assumed that, with the quota sampling and the similarities between the two groups being secured, the results obtained would reach a reasonable degree of validity and reliability.

3.3. Findings and discussion

3.3.1. Factors affecting criticizing behaviors

The means of the factors by the two groups were calculated. Then the means of different factors were compared within

groups to identify the order of importance of these factors for each group. After that, the means were compared across groups to find out the significant differences between the two groups in terms of factors the two peoples take into consideration when criticizing.

A comparison of the means within groups shows that the orders of importance of these factors perceived by the two groups are different. For the Vietnamese, the purpose of criticizing is the most important factor that influences their decision to criticize. Some respondents explained that they would not hesitate to criticize if that helped H to correct his/her mistake or change the situation for the better. Age is the factor that comes as the second most important consideration for the Vietnamese. Like in other Asian countries, age is usually treated with deference in Vietnam. Therefore, the age difference between S and H will certainly affect S's criticizing strategies. The third factor in the ranking order is severity of offence. The explanation given by some of the respondents was that how they criticized would depend on the seriousness of the offence, for the trivial mistakes they would even choose to opt out. The setting of criticizing is the fourth most important factor. The Vietnamese do not seem to pay much attention to where the criticism takes place. The social power of the H, and the social distance between S and H rank as the fifth and sixth most important factors respectively. According to the responses, the effect of criticism was given less consideration than most other factors. It comes seventh in the rank order. The explanation provided by some informants is that they believed that the purpose of criticizing was to make things change for the better, so they did not care about the bad effect on the relationship between themselves and the H that might come as the consequence of the criticism. Both

Vietnamese and American informants rated gender as the least important thing they had to take into consideration when criticizing. The gender of H does not affect their decision concerning their criticizing behavior.

The order of importance of the factors provided by the American informants is different from that by the Vietnamese. To the Americans, the most important factor is the setting of the criticism. Privacy is believed to be an important American value. Thus, when they have to criticize, they prefer doing it in private. Most of the informants claimed that they would not criticize anyone in public, because, according to them, that would damage the H's face seriously, which might have counter effect to them as the H may react negatively and talk back to them making them lose their own face. Distance is ranked as the second most important factor. This is consonant with the results of the research by Beebe et al. [7] that American's refusals – also a highly face-threatening act – are greatly influenced by the degree of familiarity or social distance between interlocutors. Two factors - effect and severity of offence - come third in the order. Compared with the Vietnamese that ranked age as the second most important factor, the American informants considered the age of the person they criticize much less important. It comes fifth in the scale. The purpose of the criticism and the status of the H come sixth and seventh respectively and, like with the Vietnamese, gender of the H considered as the least important factor is at the bottom of the scale.

If we believe that a speech act acts as "a mirror of cultural values" [26], then the factors that affect the decisions involved in performing the speech act also reflect the values. The differences between the orders of importance of the factors as seen by the two groups are obvious. While to the Vietnamese,

goal, age, and severity of offence are the most important, to the Americans the setting, distance and effect are.

However, the results of the two-tailed t-test reveal only four factors that are of significant difference between the Vietnamese and Americans. As stated above, with the *p* value set at 0.005, the factors where significant differences are found are only age, gender, status and purpose. According to Vietnamese traditional belief, age itself is a value as it is attached with experience, wisdom and knowledge, hence should be treated with a certain degree of deference, whereas according to American values, age is not something that one can be proud of. Old age means to many Americans as "uselessness" [27], so they avoid talking about it whenever possible. The second significant difference is gender, and the third is status. Although status does not come high in the ranking of importance of all the factors both by the Vietnamese and Americans, the difference in the means between the Vietnamese and American groups is significant at the *p* value of 0.000. This can be accounted by common belief that Vietnamese people, like most Asian peoples, are a rather "socially sensitive, status conscious and hierarchically oriented" [28], while Americans, who are brought up with the belief that their society is an egalitarian one, where people are respected more for their real ability and performance than the status they hold. The fourth difference is the factor of the purpose of criticizing. To the Vietnamese, this is one of the most important factors leading them to the decision to criticize or not, while to the Americans, the purpose of criticizing is overridden by most of other factors.

3.3.2. Topics of criticism

The second part of the questionnaire aims at discovering the topics that Vietnamese and Americans often criticize on. The result of a statistical analysis shows that the means for the two groups are generally low, especially for the American group. The highest of the means are just 3.23 and 3.12 for the Vietnamese and Americans respectively. With the means as low as 2.5, there are 10 topics often criticized on by the Vietnamese: Behavior at Home, Behavior in Public Places, Behavior at Workplace, Results of Housework, Appearance, Choices in everyday Life, Results of Work, Important Choices in Life, Attitude to Life and Political Viewpoint; whereas there are only 7 topics chosen by the Americans: Behavior in Public Places, Choices in Everyday Life, Attitude to Life, Appearance, Behavior at the Work Place, Results of Housework and Results of Work.

The means of the Vietnamese group are generally higher than those of the American one (the mean of all the topics is 2.83 by the Vietnamese compared to 2.51 by the Americans), showing that the Vietnamese probably feel more comfortable criticizing on the various topics, which may lead to the conclusion that Vietnamese tend to criticize more than Americans do. Although the two groups did not differ significantly in their ranking of the degree of comfort in criticizing most of the topics, the Vietnamese informants did rank Important Choices in Life, Choice of Life Partner, Behavior at Home and Religious Belief significantly higher than did the American ones. (Although *p* value of variable (d) - choice of life partner - is slightly above the significant level, the difference is worth paying attention to). The difference reflects the fact the Americans treasure privacy [29], so they do not feel comfortable criticizing other people about their private life. With their principle of "non-interference", unless the offence committed by H leads to bad consequences for themselves or breaks the

social norms, Americans avoid criticizing. The two groups are similar in that Religious Beliefs is the topic that people find most uncomfortable criticizing.

3.3.3. Frequency of criticizing

The third part of the questionnaire is to find out the frequency the Vietnamese and Americans criticize people having different relationships with them on the topics listed in part 2 of the questionnaire. The relationships include those between status equals (friends, colleagues), status unequals (subordinates – boss), between people as socially distant as strangers or as familiar as family members. Again, in this part, the means by the Vietnamese group are generally a lot higher than those of the Americans, and informants' answers on part 3 quite match their answers on part 2, which demonstrates the reliability of the questionnaires.

Comparison of the means of the two groups reveals some similarities as well as some differences. The first similarity is that the means by both groups for all the topics are highest with close friends and family members. Both Vietnamese and Americans criticize their friends and relatives more often than they do to other people. This can be easily explained by the fact that people tend to do face-threatening speech acts in relationships they think they are safe. In relationships that are still uncertain such as acquaintances or colleagues or boss and subordinates, people are generally more careful with their speech act behavior. Moreover, in the case of criticism, the greater the power difference or the distance between S and H, the more threatening criticism appears.

The second similarity between the two group is that for both groups the means for the bosses (older and younger) are quite low showing that both the Vietnamese and

American informants seldom criticize people in higher positions. In addition, although most of the informants in both groups responded to question 1 that gender was not an important factor they took into consideration when criticizing, the means of the frequencies show that they do pay attention to their friends' gender when criticizing them (close friend of the same gender: 3.29, of different gender: 2.87).

The most notable difference between the two groups is that means for all cases by the American informants are significantly lower than those of the Vietnamese ones with the p value is often smaller than 0.01 (p < 0.01). Americans evidently criticize much less often than the Vietnamese. This conforms to the results obtained by question 2, according to which the degree of comfort Americans feel when having to make direct criticism is much lower than that by the Vietnamese. Also, the means of different relationships are distinctively different for the Vietnamese group, whereas for the American informants, the means are low but not different significantly. This demonstrates the fact that relationship has more effect on the Vietnamese sample when deciding to criticize than on the American one.

The second difference between the groups is that while the Vietnamese criticize their spouses most frequently and the spouse relationship has the highest means on most topics (except for the Choice of life partner), the people most frequently criticized by Americans are their siblings. This is interesting as it shows the fact that in Vietnamese culture, the wife and husband seem to have closer and more intimate relationship than in American one so that Vietnamese people are more comfortable criticizing their spouses.

Of the family members, grandparents is ranked the lowest by the Vietnamese

respondents in the frequency of being criticized by the Vietnamese but higher than other groups such as colleagues, subordinates or bosses, whereas they are ranked by the Americans as even lower than all other relationships except for older bosses. This is probably because of the fact that, as nuclear family is more popular in the American society, it is very unusual for American people to live or have everyday contact with their grandparents, and hence they seldom criticize them.

In summary, the investigation in the frequency of criticizing by the Vietnamese and the American reveals the fact that Americans criticize considerably less than the Vietnamese on all topics, to people of all types of relationships to them. In addition, the frequency Americans criticize does not vary much with people of different relationships with them, whereas for the Vietnamese groups the difference is significant. Although both groups tend to criticize close friends and family members more often, the rank order of frequency by the two groups differ. Relatively, the Vietnamese tend to criticize their spouse more often, while the Americans do so more to their siblings. Also, Americans criticize their grandparents (ranked 11th by the Americans and 7th by the Vietnamese) much less than the Vietnamese.

4. Conclusion

Although criticism may exist in all languages, like other speech acts, it is culture-specific. The pragmatic rules that govern its occurrence and forms of expression are culture dependent. The topics of criticism, frequency of criticizing and factors that affect people's decision to criticize and their criticizing behaviors may also vary across cultures, influenced by specific cultural values. As part of a larger cross-cultural study

or criticizing behaviors by the Vietnamese and the American, this piece of research aimed at investigating three aspects related to criticism including the common topics that the Vietnamese and Americans often criticize on, the weightings the two peoples give to contextual and other factors in criticizing and the frequency they criticize.

The results of the survey reveal certain differences between the two cultures in criticizing behavior. First, the Vietnamese and the American differ in the ranking of factors affecting their criticizing behaviors. To the Vietnamese, the goal of criticizing, the age of the H, and the severity of offence are the most important factors, whereas to the Americans the setting of the criticism, the distance between themselves and the H, and effect of criticism on the relationship between themselves and the H rank above all other factors. In terms of the degree of consideration taken for the factors when criticizing, the three statistically significant differences found between Vietnamese and Americans are the age of the H, the relative social status of H, and the purpose of criticizing. The differences may stem from the influence of the Confucian ideology on the traditional Vietnamese society which emphasizes "hierarchical respect, seniority, age, rank and title" [8].

The investigation into the criticism areas also reveals some similarities and differences between the Vietnamese and American informants. Although there is a slight difference in the order, the list of seven most frequently criticized topics by the Vietnamese almost match with that of the Americans. However, statistically significant differences are found with four topics: Important Choices in Life, Choice of Life Partner, Behavior at Home and Religious Beliefs. The significantly lower means of these topics by the American informants might be interpreted as their

preference to avoid too deep interference with other people's lives, and the sensitivity of religious matters to them. It is probably because, to the Vietnamese, to criticize is to help make things change for the better [30], so they do not mind criticizing on even some very personal issues.

In terms of frequency of criticizing, perhaps, the most striking difference is that, generally, Americans criticize considerably less than their Vietnamese counterparts, on all topics, to people of all relationships. At first sight, this might seem to contradict the common belief about Anglo-American values such as sincerity and directness. However, a more insightful look at the reasons why the Americans opt out of criticizing consolidates the fact that Americans highly value individualism, the central characteristics of which being "non-interference", "privacy" [31], and "self-face concern" [8]. Americans would want to have a wall around them, at least part of the time, so that no one can violate their privacy. They avoid interfering with other people's business so that they can be left alone to do their own business. They seldom criticize probably not only because they care about H's face but probably also because they care about their own face, for one of the possible consequences of criticizing is that the criticized will react negatively to the criticizer which makes the criticizer lose his/her own face. Living in a society having the characteristics of a collectivistic oriented one such as poor, rural, agrarian and traditional [32], the Vietnamese are also highly face conscious. However, the type of face they are concerned to maintain is not "self-face" like Americans but "collective face" (Ting-Toomey, ibid). When criticizing, the Vietnamese believe that their criticism would do something good to the criticized, saving them from the bad consequences of the

offence they committed, and in that way they show their care for the H's face. The results of the study also show that although Americans criticize much less frequently than the Vietnamese, when they do criticize, they are not affected by the social factors as much as the Vietnamese are.

In sum, the study has found a number of similarities and differences between the Vietnamese and Americans in terms of areas of criticism, factors affecting criticizing behavior, and the frequency of criticizing. However, these findings should be treated as those of an exploratory study only, for speech act performance is a highly complex human behavior affected by the interaction of a numerous socio-psychological and cultural factors. In order to cross-culturally compare criticizing behaviors by the two peoples, further studies should be carried out to investigate how these two peoples perceive the severity of offence, the speaker's right to criticize, and the advisability to criticize in concrete situations, as these factors will have great influence on the decisions leading to people's criticizing performance.

Moreover, there is always a big gap between how people think they behave and how they actually behave. Sociolinguistic studies have repeatedly demonstrated the inadequacy of native speaker intuitions. Also, native speakers have been shown to be unaware that there is a difference between their perceived speech behavior and their actual speech production (Wolfson, D'Amico-Reisner and Huber cited in Wolfson, Marmor and Jones). Thus, the actual criticisms by the Vietnamese and the American in various realistic situations should be collected and analyzed to find out the similarities and differences between the two languages in terms of strategies and semantic formulas. Only then could there be sufficient and

reliable information for a thorough cross-cultural comparison between how the speech act is performed in the two cultures.

References

[1] J. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1962.

[2] J. Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1969.

[3] J. Searle, *The Philosophy of language*, Oxford University Press, 1971.

[4] D. Hymes, "Models of inetraction of language and social life" in J. Gumpertz and D. Hymes (eds.): *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1972.

[5] L.C. Wagner, *Towards Sociopragmatic Characterization of Apologies in Mexican Spanish*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1999.

[6] S. Blum-Kulka, Learning to Say What You Mean in a Second Language: A Study of the Speech Act Performance of Learners of Hebrew as a Second Language, *Applied Linguistics* 3 (1982) 29.

[7] L.M. Beebe, T. Takahashi, R. Uliss-Weltz, Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals, In E. Andersen and S. Krashen (Eds.), *Developing Communicative Competence in a Second Language*, Newbury House, New York, 1990.

[8] S. Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures*, The Guilford Press, 1999.

[9] J. Thomas, Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure, *Applied Linguistics* 4 (1983) 91.

[10] Bonikowska, The choice of opting out. *Applied Linguistics* 9 (1988) 169.

[11] H. Spencer-Oatey, Rapport management: A framework for analysis, In Helen Spencer-Oatey (ed.) *Culturally Speaking: Managing Rapport through Talk across Cultures*, London: Continuum, 2000.

[12] D. Boxer, Complaints as positive strategies: what the learner needs to know, *TESOL Quarterly* 27 (1993) 277.

[13] N. Wolfson, T. Marmor, S. Jones, Prblems in the comparison of speech acts across cultures, In *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*, eds. Blum-Kulka, S., House, J., Kasper, G., Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1989.

[14] P. Brown, S. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, Cambridge: CUP, 1987.

[15] E. Olshtain, A. Cohen, Speech act behaviour across languages, In H. W. Dechert and M. Raupach (Eds.), *Transfer in Language Production*, Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Pub., Corp, 1989.

[16] A.M. Beckers, *How to say "No" without saying "No" – A Study of the Refusal Strategies of Americans and Germans*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Mississippi, 1999.

[17] H.K. Shea, *Japanese Complaining in English: A Study of Interlanguage Pragmatics*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2003.

[18] *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 1992.

[19] *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, 2002.

[20] *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2003.

[21] K. Tracy, D.V. Dusen, S. Robinson, "Good" and "Bad" Criticism: A Descriptive Analysis in, *Journal of Communication* 37 (1987) 46.

[22] R. Wajnryb, The perception of criticism: one trainee's experience, *EA Journal* 13 (1995) 54.

[23] Nguyen Thi Thuy Minh, *Criticizing and responding to criticism in a foreign language: A study of Vietnamese learners of English*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Auckland, 2005.

[24] G. Green, G, How to get people to do things with words, In: P. Cole, J. Morgan, (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics, Speech acts*, Academic Press, New York, 1975.

[25] E. Olshtain, L. Weinbach, Interlanguage features of the speech act of complaining, In: Kasper, G., Blum-Kulka, S. (Eds.), *Interlanguage Pragmatics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993.

[26] J. Manes, Compliments: A mirror of cultural values, In: J.N. Wolfson and E. Judd eds., *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*, Rowley, MA: Newbury House, (1983).

[27] D.R. Levine, M.B. Adelmen, Beyond Language - Cross-Cultural Communication. Regents/Prentice Hall, 1993.

[28] N.L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, University of California Press, 1993.

[29] Nguyễn Quang, *Một số khác biệt giao tiếp lời nói Việt-Mỹ trong cách thức khen và tiếp nhận lời khen* (Differences in Vietnamese and American compliments and responses to compliments) Unpublished doctoral dissertation, National University, Vietnam, 1999.

[30] Vu Van Tuan, Napier, K. Nancy, Paradoxes in Vietnam and America: *"Lessons earned"* - paradox 1, Human Resource Planning 23, 1, AB/INFORM Global, 2000.

[31] A. Wierzbicka, Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: The Semantics of Human Interaction, Mouton De Gruyter, 1991.

[32] H.C. Triandis, *Individualism and collectivism*, CO: Westview Press, Boulder, 1995.

So sánh hành động lời nói phê phán của người Việt và người Mỹ: chủ đề, các yếu tố ảnh hưởng và tần suất

Hoàng Thị Xuân Hoa

Khoa Ngôn ngữ và Văn hóa Anh - Mỹ,
Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội,
Đường Phạm Văn Đồng, Cầu Giấy, Hà Nội, Việt Nam

Hành động lời nói, với tư cách là đơn vị phân tích nhỏ nhất của ngôn bản, vừa mang tính phổ biến lại vừa có tính đặc thù văn hóa. Việc thực hiện lời nói phê phán, giống như với hầu hết các hành động lời nói khác, chịu ảnh hưởng của các yếu tố xã hội và tình huống khác nhau. Mức độ và phạm vi ảnh hưởng của các yếu tố này đối với hành động lời nói phê phán có thể thay đổi ở những nền văn hóa khác nhau. Thêm vào đó, chủ đề phê phán, tần suất thực hiện việc phê phán cũng rất khác nhau giữa các nền văn hóa. Bài viết này báo cáo lại một nghiên cứu giao văn hóa về hành vi lời nói phê phán của người Việt và người Mỹ ở ba khía cạnh: chủ đề thường hay phê phán, các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến việc thực hiện lời phê bình trực diện, và tần suất thực hiện việc phê bình trực diện trong đời sống hàng ngày của người Việt và người Mỹ. Số liệu thu được từ các bảng câu hỏi của 102 nghiệm thể Mỹ và 102 nghiệm thể Việt cho thấy có nhiều điểm tương đồng và khác biệt giữa ở cả ba khía cạnh nghiên cứu. Mặc dù kết quả nghiên cứu chưa mang tính kết luận, hy vọng rằng nghiên cứu này có thể là nguồn tham khảo hữu ích cho các nghiên cứu so sánh lời phê bình của người Việt và người Mỹ tiếp theo.