MAJOR SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE SYMPATHY EXPRESSIONS

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ABTRACT

This study with a limited scope of research on English-Vietnamese similarities and differences in expressing sympathy is to help speakers of English reduce or avoid misunderstanding and inappropriateness in dealing with an essential part of everyday language- conducting sympathy, which leads to more successful cross-cultural communications. In addition, it is expected that Vietnamese learners of English would have a chance to get used to the natural way of expressing sympathy in English so as to be successful cross-cultural communicators.

Keywords: sympathy, cross- cultural communication, English, Vietnamese.

TÓM TẮT

Một số điểm tương đồng và khác biệt cơ bản giữa tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt
trong lời nói biểu đạt sự cảm thông chia sẻ

Mục đích của bài viết là tìm ra một số điểm tương đồng và khác biệt cơ bản trong lời nói biểu đạt sự cảm thông chia sẻ giữa tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt theo cách trực tiếp, gián tiếp và lịch sự, giúp người sử dụng tiếng Anh tránh hoặc giảm sự nhầm lẫn, thiếu chính xác trong việc diễn đạt sự cảm thông chia sẻ trong giao tiếp thường ngày, đồng thời giúp người Việt học tiếng Anh có thể hiểu rõ hơn và làm quen với cách diễn đạt ngôn ngữ tự nhiên, để từ đó, thành công hơn trong văn hóa giao tiếp giữa hai ngôn ngữ.

Từ khóa: sự cảm thông, giao thoa văn hóa trong giao tiếp, tiếng Anh, tiếng Việt.

1.   Introduction

English is considered the international language of many fields such as politics, business, science, technology, etc. The number of people learning English for various purposes has been on increase all over the world. In the process of learning a foreign language, learners of English, like those of any other language, have to get to know a new culture. Sooner or later, they realize the presence of cross-cultural differences between English and Vietnamese, which may be an impetus for them to study and explore the significance in the use of the language, but may also be an obstacle in their learning.

In cross-cultural communication, expressing sympathy is believed to be of vital importance as it helps communicators establish and maintain smooth conversations and

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a good relationship. An appropriate sympathy can heal a broken link between two people and provide a powerful incentive for the conversation to go ahead. Therefore, awareness of what, when, and how to express sympathy is dispensable in communication. Expressing sympathy, as a matter of course, cannot be separated from the culture of the target language.

Things considered, this study with a limited scope of research on English-Vietnamese similarities and differences in expressing sympathy is to help speakers of English reduce or avoid misunderstanding and inappropriateness in dealing with an essential part of everyday language- conducting sympathy, which leads to more successful cross-cultural communications. In addition, it is expected that Vietnamese learners of English would have a chance to get used to the natural way of expressing sympathy in English so as to be successful cross-cultural communicators.

2.   Theoretical background

2.1. *Cross-cultural pragmatics*

Born with the function of communicating, language is closely linked to the culture in which it exists and serves. Obviously, culture provides land for language to develop, and in its turn, language operates to serve the culture. They are really interrelated and interdependent. Through language, speakers expose their culture, and with a knowledge of the cultural background, hearers may realize their partner's culture in spite of the fact that individuals differ in the way they use.

It is the fact that there is no clear cut between cultures, which often causes difficulties for foreigners in communication with people from different cultures. Therefore, it is very necessary for cross-cultural communicators to be aware of what the pragmatics is and what the differences between their cultures are in order to avoid culture shock and to ensure successful communication.

According to Stephen C. Levinson (1983:21), "pragmatics is the study of the relationship between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding". Pragmatics, on the whole, investigates the way in which language is appropriate to the context in which it occurs. Therefore, pragmatics goes beyond the meanings implied in individual words and word order.

As for Richards (1992:284), pragmatics focuses on the three main aspects:

▪ How the interpretation and use of utterances depend on knowledge of the real world.

   ▪ How the speakers use and understand speech acts.

   ▪ How the structure of sentences is influenced by the relationship between the speakers and the hearers.

Yule (1986:87) defines cross-cultural pragmatics as the study of differences in expectations based on cultural schemata is part of a broad area of investigation generally.

2.2. *Issues of Politeness, Directness and Indirectness*

What is politeness?

According to Thomas (1995: 150), "politeness is a more general matter of expressing (or rather, of giving the appearance of expressing) consideration to others."

Also in terms of culture, politeness is regarded as *"the idea of polite social behaviors etiquette, within a culture"* (G. Yule - 1996: 60)

Each society has a great deal of rules or ideas towards etiquette, thus, politeness differs or greatly varies between cultures. For example, in the first meeting it is not customary for an Englishman to ask someone about their personal life. The following questions, therefore, are taboos:

"Is your job a well-paid one?"

or *"How old are you?"*

In the meantime, these questions are highly acceptable in the Vietnamese culture since the hearer may think that the speaker is considerate.

The degree of politeness, which is accompanied with directness and indirectness is still controversial among linguists. However, they all share the opinion that Directness, Indirectness and Politeness are closely interlinked and associated with different speech acts.

Blum-Lulka (1987:131) believes that "*Politeness is defined as the interactional balance achieved between two needs: the need to pragmatic clarity and the need to avoid coerciveness. This balance is achieved in the case of conventional indirectness, which indeed received the highest ratings for politeness*".

It might be the case that when giving a face-threatening act, indirectness degree is measured as an indicator of reducing or minimizing the threat, which is equal to politeness. Direct strategies, in the favor of pragmatics clarity or non - coerciveness, can be considered to be impolite because they indicate a lack of concern with face and non conventional indirect strategies can be considered as impolite because they indicate a lack of concern for pragmatic clarity.

Leech (1983: l08) suggests that given the same prepositional content, it is possible "*to increase the degree of politeness by using a more and more indirect kind of illocution* " because indirect illocution is regarded as more polite by increasing the degree of option.

If a teacher says to her student:

Could you say again your example, please?

She uses her utterance in a polite and indirect way. By doing so the teacher (1) encourages her/his student to be self- confident enough to say the example again, (2) does not use the power of teacher on the student, and (3) gives a soft and beautiful request but does not impose the reaction of the student by using words like " Could", "Please".

Leech (1983: l08) also intensifies that: *"Indirect illocutions tend to be more polite because of the degree of optimality and the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be* ".

There is a distinctive link between politeness and indirectness in terms of the two main types of indirectness: conventional and non-conventional.

Blum-Kulka (1987:132) assumes *"Politeness and directness are in the case of conventional indirectness, but not in the case of non-conventional indirectness".* The example:

*Chị ơi, hết mưa là nắng hửng lên thôi (*Luck emerges from loss and sorrow*)* can be understood in different ways :

(l) The speaker comforts the hearer

(2) The speaker hopes the better future is coming.

However, Blum-Kulka also thinks *"Indirectness does not necessarily imply politeness that is the reason why the most indirect strategies cannot obviously be regarded as the most polite ones* ". The hearer's face can be threatened by the utterance:

"Khiếp ở đâu ra mà bẩn như ma bùn thế ?"

(Few, you look as if you were covered in mud)

And of course it is not as polite as:*"Em hãy rửa mặt đi"*(Wash your face).

2.3. *Expressing sympathy*

Expressing sympathy is defined in Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2005) as "an act of feeling sorry for somebody, showing that you understanding and caring about somebody's problem. Expressing sympathy is regarded as an act of giving others some comfort through utterances in view of speech act.

Eg: *A: I've lost all my money and credit card.*

   B: Oh! Don't be so sad. Lost money saves life!

Pragmatically, B produces utterances containing an act of sharing unhappy feeling with A and comforts A by confirming the good side of the misfortune with a hope for a better future.

Sympathy exists when the feelings or emotions of one person are deeply understood and even appreciated by another person. In common usage, sympathy is usually making known one's understanding of another's sorrows or suffering, but it can also refer to being aware of other (positive) emotions as well.

3.   **Methodology and data**

The study consists of five parts. The first part is the introduction of the study. The second part will be the theoretical background of the definition of sympathy, directness, indirectness and politeness will be reviewed. Methodological issue will be discussed in the third part, describing the subjects, the instruments of the study, the data collection procedure and the data analysis procedure. The next part looks at the collected and analyzed data to get the findings. The last part of the study will present the conclusion.

As mentioned earlier, statistic analysis and comparative analysis are the main techniques used in the study. The data were analyzed by the following procedure: First, the data were gathered and organized in tables so that it is easier to be compared. Then the data from Vietnamese subjects were compared with the data from the English subjects to identify the differences between these two group's sympathy expressing. Finally, the identified differences were compared with the Vietnamese to determine if the differences were due to pragmatic transfer from Vietnamese, more attention is paid to the part 2 of the questionnaire which focuses on sympathy expressing in certain situations. Interviews are conducted with some English native speakers so that the researcher can understand more about the English sympathy expressing.

The data was collected from two groups of subjects: one group of Vietnamese subjects and one group of English subjects. The Vietnamese subjects are twenty in number: ten of them are students who are studying English at a Foreign Language Center (upper intermediate level) and the others are teachers of English from different parts of the country taking a master course at National University of Hanoi who have already had experiences in teaching English in Vietnamese. However, they have little chance to interact with native speakers of English. The English subjects are only five in number. Three of them are teachers at the Apollo centre, one is working for Bacninh water supplying and sewage company where the researcher is living, and a professor at Högskolan Dalarna University, Mrs. Christine Cox Eriksson.

The advantage is that they have just been working in Vietnam for a short time (not more than two years), or never been to Vietnam so they have not been affected by Vietnamese traditions and customs.

The next part deals with the way of expressing sympathy in English and Vietnamese, which bases on the questionnaire to collect data from a number of verified population of various different ages, gender, occupations...

4. Data analysis and findings

4.1. Data analysis

* **Situation 1:** How Vietnamese and English people often sympathize a person who is suffering from her/ his mother's sudden death.

Vietnamese	English
- Xin chân thành chia buồn (I'm very sorry to hear that). - Âu cũng là cái số (It's her/ his fate) - Xin chân thành chia buồn, đúng là trăm đường không tránh được số (Sorry to hear that, but noone can escape from fate).	- It's really a big loss. - May be it is his/her fate. - I'm very sorry to hear about your loss. - When her/his number is off. - Man propose, God dispose. Such a pity. - Death when it comes will have no denial. .- The die is cast

The above utterances reveal that both English and Vietnamese use directness and indirectness to express their sympathy. English is more various in indirectness than Vietnamese. Vietnamese people often ask some more personal questions after sympathizing such as: *how old he/ she is, or how it happened*. Proverbs and idioms are used to express sympathy in English. "Man propose, God dispose. Such a pity", "Death when it comes will have no denial", or "The die is cast" are instances.

* **Situation 2**: How Vietnamese and English people often sympathize a person who is suffering from a money loss.

Vietnamese	English
- Lac quan lên, trong cái rủi sẽ có cái may (Be pessimistic, you might find luck in the sorrow). - Đen bạc đỏ tình (Money loss brings you big luck in love). - Của đi thay người (Money loss may prevent you from danger and sorrow). - Thôi bỏ đi, lần sau cẩn thận hơn. (Take it easy, be careful next time).	- Take it easy for a good luck. - Nothing so bad as not to be good for something. - Oh! What rotten luck. - Oh! Don't be so sad. Lost money saves life! - Misfortune tell us what fortune is.

Both English and Vietnamese compare *money loss* with *luck*. They both apply indirectness to comfort the losers except Take *it easy, be careful next time* which is frequently used by parents to children or very close friends in Vietnamese.

* **Situation 3**: How Vietnamese and English people often sympathize a person who is suffering from being overweight.

Vietnamese	English
- Béo còn hơn gầy. (It's better than being thin) - Béo khoẻ, béo đẹp. (The fatter the more beautiful you are.) - Không sao, sức khoẻ là trên hết .(It is no problem. Health is the most important). - Tốt gỗ hơn tốt nước sơn (Personality is better than appearance) - Ở đời có ai được mọi điêu đâu (No one is perfect)	- No matter, beauty is only skin deep. - Every bean has its black

It seems that the number of overweight people in Vietnam is smaller than in the foreign country, they are therefore taken care more and they are comforted by both directness and indirectness. However, directness is often used by the same sex or very close relationship.

* **Situation 4:** How Vietnamese and English people sympathize a person who is suffering from an exam failure.

Vietnamese	English
- Học tài thi phận (You are an unlucky talented person) - Không sao, không thi lại không phải là sinh viên. (No matter/ problem. It's the norm of the learner) - Đừng buồn, thất bại là mẹ của thành công. (Don't be so said. Success emerges from failure)	- Better luck next time. - It is not the end of the world. - To have a whole life before on. - Adversity is a great school master.

These utterances tell us that pragmatically speakers produce utterances containing an act of sharing unhappy feeling with failures and comfort them by confirming the good side of failing with a hope for a better future. *No matter/ problem. It's the norm of the learner* is the most common utterance used by students to ease each other in Vietnam

* **Situation 5:** How Vietnamese and English people sympathize a person who is suffering from a job dismissal.

Vietnamese	English
- Đừng lo, có khi đây là cơ hội để thay đổi tốt hơn. (Don't worry, this may be a chance to get a better job). - Chắc gì đó đã là công việc tốt nhất đối với bạn. (That job is uncertain to be the best for you) . - Còn rất nhiều cơ hội đang đợi bạn ở phía trước. (Many opportunities are waiting for you ahead)	Don't be sad, There's still light at the end of the tunnel. - Don't worry, the end of something can be the beginning of something better. - It is not the end of the world. - Misfortune tell us what fortune is.

Job dismissals are frequently sympathized by indirectness and future hope in both Vietnamese and English. For Vietnamese, especially the young, the same sex and the close friends, it is not considered to be impolite if you ask the loser how much you got from the previous job afterward.

4.2. Findings: Major similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese sympathy expressions in terms of directness and indirectness.

4.2.1. Similarities

  - Both Vietnamese and English use directness and indirectness in expressing sympathy.

  - They both tend to use indirectness more.

  - People in both cultures never make jokes or exaggerate in sympathetic expressions.

  - Close friends and brothers or sisters receive the most direct and the least indirect responses.

  - Older people are often responded in a more indirect way in comparison with younger ones regardless of whether they are of the same blood or not.

  - When communicating with the opposite sex, people tend to be more indirect in their expressions.

4.2.2. Differences

    Despite the fact that both Vietnamese and English prefer to be more Indirectness than Directness, differences are shown quite obvious.

  - The Vietnamese tend to be much more indirect when talking to partners under investigations.

- There is a tendency that the Vietnamese treat their close friends more directly than their relatives, but in English culture, their relatives might receive more direct treatment than their close friends.

- Vietnamese people also employ with high frequency asking personal questions while it is seldom used by English people.

5.   Summary and conclusion

What have been discussed so far? The definitions of cross-culture pragmatics, issues of Politeness, Directness and Indirectness, and sympathy expressions are explicitly taken into account. The ways of English and Vietnamese express sympathy in some certain situations are collected and listed in tables by doing a small survey. Based on the result of the survey, a conclusion can be made that expressing sympathy requires communicators to be sensitive because it is the time their communicative partners were unhappy and even miserable conditions. In order to conduct successful communication, speaker has to share the same feelings or show his or her concern towards hearers. They also find suitable words or expressions to make the hearers comfortable. The data collection and the analysis in terms of Directness and Indirectness provide some interesting facts as people in both cultures never make jokes or exaggerate in sympathetic expressions. Interestingly, while the strategy of "asking personal questions" is widely used by Vietnamese, it is seldom used by the English. Both Vietnamese and English use indirectness more than directness in real communication. A lot of proverbs and sayings are used in English sympathy expressions. Directness and Indirectness vary across languages and cultures. The degrees of Directness and Indirectness in real communication are profoundly influenced by many socio-cultural factors. Therefore, learners of a foreign language have to be aware of restriction of its culture in order to reduce or avoid misunderstanding and inappropriateness in dealing with an essential part of everyday language- conducting sympathy, which leads to more successful cross-cultural communications.

However, the study will be more interesting and perfect if a broader and deeper survey is carried out.

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