

Third Personal Pronouns in Vietnamese Language: An Interesting Complexity

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: July 14, 2022 Accepted: August 14, 2022 Volume: 3 Issue: 4	In everyday speech, personal pronouns are significant. Each language has its own system of pronouns, each with a specific usage. For those learning a language from a different culture, this paper presents several challenges. The author of this essay intends to raise awareness among language learners, particularly those working in translation, of the issues that arise when using the third person singular pronoun in Vietnamese as opposed to English.
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1. Introduction

Learners of any language are taught how to utilize personal pronouns from the very first classes. It's only that addressing is inevitable in any act of communication. However, that form of pronoun is not always easy for English and Vietnamese language learners to use and comprehend correctly. Personal pronouns can actually be a lot more ambiguous than they appear. For instance, in English, it can be challenging for beginners to figure out to which noun the pronoun corresponds. Different personal pronouns might be used in different contexts to refer to the same individual in Vietnamese. These issues are not uncommon, and we can all occasionally run against them. In the past, linguists have conducted a great deal of research and thought about personal pronouns and usage issues. This article will highlight certain issues experienced by students of both cultures by analyzing some typical contexts in which the third person personal pronouns "He/She" are employed.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Third person personal pronouns in English and its usage problems

When referring to specific people or things, third person personal pronouns are used in their stead. It can be divided into categories in English based on case, gender, and number. We'll use the table below as an example. Pronouns are viewed by Eka (2008) as grammatical components of the closed system that can be used in place of nouns and noun phrases.

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2018), the Latin word *pronomen*, which is a loan translation of the Greek *antonymia*, is where the pronoun first appeared as a part of speech in the middle of the 15th century. *Pronomen* means "in place of something"

and nomen means "name, noun." According to Abia (2013), pronouns are words that are substituted for nouns to minimize pointless repetition. In other words, a Pronoun is a grammatical item used in substitute for a noun or noun group.

2.1.1 Case

three cases are nominative, possessive, and objective.

Case in the context of pronominals refers to the modifications a word goes through depending on how it interacts syntactically with other words in the phrase. In a word, case also conveys ownership. The relationship a noun or pronoun exhibits with other words (especially verbs) within a phrase is referred to as the case, according to Akinbode (2006). In pronouns, there are a variety of noteworthy case types. As follows:

The nominative case is used when the pronoun acts as the sentence's subject. In the nominative form, the pronouns I, you, he/she, it, and we/they are used.

She is the topic or object being named by the use of a pronoun in this sentence, hence the nominative case pronoun is used.

A pronoun in the possessive case is used to denote ownership or possession of something. My, My, Ours, His/Hers, Theirs, It, and Yours are the pronouns in the possessive form.

My car wouldn't start because *I* left the headlights on.

In this sentence, "My" is showing whose car is being discussed, and the "I," being the subject of the sentence, is there in the nominative pronoun.

A pronoun that is in the objective case is used as the direct object, indirect object, or the object of the preposition. The objective form pronouns are: me, you, him, her, it, and them.

I was so thrilled that *I* gave *her* a big hug.

Her, a pronoun in the objective case, serves as the object receiving the action in this sentence. As the sentence's goal is to illustrate something about "I," the sentence's subject, "I" would be in the nominative case.

The grammatical construction of a noun or pronoun that demonstrates how the noun or pronoun is related to the other words in the sentence is known as a case, according to Kumar (2022). In other words, the case of a noun or pronoun is a trait that depends on the function it performs in a sentence. The accusative (or objective) case and the nominative (or subjective) case are the two different case forms for personal pronouns.

For the third person (as mentioned on Table 1): He, she, it, they are used as nominative case.

Number	Gender	Case	
		Nominative/ Subjective	Accusative/ Objective
Singular	Masculine	He	Him
	Feminine	She	Her
	Neuter	It	It
Plural	Both genders	They	Them

Table 1. *Third person personal pronouns in English*

He, she, it, and they all represent the accusative case.

The nominative case is necessary when a personal pronoun serves as both the subject of a finite verb and a predicative nominative (subject complement). The objective case is used when the personal pronoun is either the direct or indirect object of the verb or the object of a preposition. The difference between personal pronouns in the accusative and nominative cases should be noted.

Subject of finite verb = nominative case

Incorrect: *Him and her* went to the party. (Correct: *He and she* went to the party.)

Object of verb= accusative

Incorrect: Tom wants to meet you and *they*. (Correct: Tom wants to meet you and *them*.)

Object of preposition= objective case:

Incorrect: Is there any relationship between you and *she*? (Correct: Is there any relationship between you and *her*?)

In standard written English, the personal pronouns in the predicative nominative are the same as they would be in the subject. Most native speakers do not speak in this way, but it is grammatically correct. This nominative case follows a linking verb to rename the subject:

The winner was *her*. (Socially accepted)

The winner was *she*. (Grammatically accepted)

Sometimes, we also use nominative case for pronouns that follow forms of the verb *be* and describe the same person or thing as the subject.

It's *her*, not *him*. (Socially accepted)

It's *she*, not *he*. (Grammatically accepted)

2.1.2 Gender

Wikipedia (2022) states that the third plural pronoun *they/them* does not distinguish between genders. However, the third person singular pronouns make a distinction between genders, using the *he/him*, *she/her*, and neuter pronouns (*it*).

He/she refers to an animal's gender in some specific contexts when the animal's sex is known and of interest, as in *she-bear*, *she-goat*, *she-ass*, and *he-cat*, *he-dog*.

What a little sweet dog! It is a *he* or a *she*?

He/she is sometimes used to emphasise gender of people in some cases:

The accusative case is represented by *him*, *her*, *it*, and *them*.

He-man: an exceptionally powerful, skilful, or virulent man; *She-male*: a male transvestite or gay.

The child is it a female or a he? (New-born child's gender is unknown)

He and *she* are pronouns that are used in English to replace names of special places, things, or objects in addition to names of individuals. Typically, the pronoun *he* is used to refer to powerful things, dreadful concepts, rivers, mountains, etc. The pronoun *She* also stands for lovely ideas, such as ships, cities, towns, and nations (Wikipedia, 2022).

In addition, the pronoun *he* is occasionally used to refer to people in general.

He who laughs best, laughs last.

Although the rule of using “*he/she*” in English is quite simple and sounds like “no matter”, it sometimes causes headache to learners.

2.1. 3. Gender- problem

Gender is one of the contentious issues when using personal pronouns, and learners occasionally found it challenging to select the correct gender for an indeterminate antecedent that called for a singular pronoun.

He/him is a generic pronoun that English speakers have historically used when the antecedent's grammatical form calls for a singular pronoun.

A novelist should write about what *he* knows best.

Although this form of construction is grammatically sound, it will have issues with sexism and illogic. In this instance, the novelist might be either a male or a woman. Some analysts contend that the pronoun *he* is used in this statement generically and can refer to both *he* and *she*. Language-wise, this examination of the general use of the pronoun “*he*” seems dubious. In reality, the English masculine form is an odd choice; if *he* were truly a gender-neutral form, we would anticipate that it could be used to refer to the members of any organization that included both men and women. Traditional usage such as the one described here has come under fire for exhibiting gender discrimination (Khang, 2012; Diep, 2005). As more people become sensitive to sexist language this use is less convincing. In this case, many learners sidestep the problem by using *they/them* in the place of *he/him* like:

If *anyone* calls, tell *them* my message.

Others prefer to replace *her* or *him* with *him* or *her* in their place.

Write on what you know best, as a novelist. The first approach can deviate from the grammar rule that says everyone should be handled as a singular form. And by using the plural pronoun *they* in this instance, students violate the pronoun-antecedent agreement criterion. Despite growing in popularity, this approach is still inadmissible for the majority of formal writing.

Using both pronouns in the latter case might result in clumsy or awkward sentences, especially in texts that use a lot of the same indefinite pronouns and nouns. The fact that this solution still prioritizes the male form, even when the alternative “*she or he*,” is not preferable, can also be questioned. Some individuals suggest coming up with a new term that may be used to refer to both *he* and *she*, like “*they*,” which is derived from *they* or *s/he*. But this approach is a long way from being accepted by society. Better ways to get rid of a misplaced gender-specific pronoun include:

- *Rephrasing the sentence to eject the problem*

For example, instead of saying “If anyone calls tonight, give him my message”, we rephrase: “Please tell my message to anyone who calls tonight”.

- *Using a plural noun and pronoun*

Novelists should write about what *they* know best.

- *Substituting the gender- specific pronoun with gender neutral noun.*

If *anyone* calls tonight, give *the caller* my message.

2.1.4 Unclear pronouns

In addition to the gender issue with pronoun usage, English language learners also struggle with another issue. Finding the precise noun to which the pronoun refers is a challenge. A pronoun typically refers to the word that comes before it. This is not always obvious, particularly if the pronoun comes a little after the word it relates to.

Mai had invited Linh to the party, Linh informed *her* mother.

Which Linh or her mother does the pronoun "*her*" refer to in this instance?

Even with the third person singular pronoun indicated above, the pronoun usage conundrum never quite resolves itself. In fact, even native speakers could be embarrassed with personal pronoun usage. So far, the use of personal pronouns is not simple as what they seem. This also reveals that English is a kind of generalized language system.

2.2 Vietnamese third person singular pronouns

2.2.1 Some principles in use

The grammar of the Vietnamese language is reputed to be one of the most intricate in existence. Even for Vietnamese people, understanding and utilizing it properly is not so simple.

Pronouns are significant in Vietnamese, with personal pronouns holding a prominent position. Vietnamese personal pronouns are complicated, thus instead of being determined by case, number, or gender as they are in English, they are determined by the circumstances and external factors. The primary distinction between the two languages' personal pronouns is this. In English, pronouns only alter their forms to reflect their roles in the sentence. For instance, the pronoun "he" in the nominative case changes to "him" when it replaces an object (Giap, 2004). (Quang, 2004).

Vietnamese pronouns can typically be used as noun phrases. A pronoun typically denotes a level of kinship or family relationship in Vietnamese. When addressing oneself, the audience, or a third party, the feature of kinship terminology is used. In other regions, these terms could be a little different. Many of them are loanwords from Chinese, but over time they have also developed the extra grammatical role of being pronouns.

Vietnamese terms of reference can indicate the speaker's social status in regard to the person being mentioned, their age disparities, and even the speaker's attitude toward them. A speaker must therefore carefully consider these variables before selecting the right phrase. When two strangers first meet, it's common for them to inquire about one another's age to determine the appropriate words of address to employ. There is a specific pronoun that a stranger can use to address the speaker if they don't know them in order to sound respectful (Wikipedia, Vietnamese Pronouns, 2022).

Vietnamese speakers prefer to employ flexible pronouns rather than stable ones when referring to outside subjects or objects. Accordingly, Vietnamese third person personal pronouns differ based on factors such as age, sex, social standing, degree of intimacy, etc. For Vietnamese language learners, this intricacy causes certain usage issues.

The author of this essay just touches upon a few widely accepted rules for expressing "he/she" in Vietnamese with third person singular pronouns. Pronoun connection with other objective elements cannot be seen in the classification presented above. Vietnamese third person personal pronouns can also be categorized according to the following:

- *Age-related factors*
- *Attitude - related factors*
- *Region – related factors (Dialect)*

Age-related factors

Vietnamese has a distinct age-ranking system that separates children, teenagers, adolescents, middle-aged individuals, and old people. So, while using personal pronouns in Vietnamese, the age component is crucial. Finding the right pronouns to use to refer to their audience during interactions is made easier.

When someone is significantly older than the speaker (about the same age as the speaker's parents, grandparents, etc.), the following pronouns should be used:

He/him: ông ấy, ông ta

She/her: bà ấy, bà ta

Ông Nguyễn đã về hưu được 5 năm. *Ông ấy* có một ngôi nhà ở miền quê

(*Mr. Nguyen* has retired for 5 years. *He* has a house in the countryside)

The pronoun with the tail "ấy" is employed at a little greater level of intimacy than the one with the tail "ta," it should be emphasized.

Vietnamese speakers occasionally use nouns like "ông," "lão," and "bà," "mụ," which refer to the antecedent nouns, as personal pronouns.

Ông Minh năm nay 85 tuổi, nhưng *lão* vẫn tập thể dục đều đặn vào buổi sáng.

(*Mr. Minh* is 85 years old, but *he* does exercise regularly in the morning)

If the person is a bit older than the speaker (approximately at the same age of the speaker's sister, brother, or aunt, or even the speakers themselves), the pronouns are:

He/him: anh ấy, anh ta

She/her: chị ấy, chị ta, cô ấy, cô ta

Linh là một sinh viên giỏi. Chúng tôi rất quý mến *cô ấy*

(*Ms. Linh* is a good student. We love *her*)

Also, sometimes the nouns "*anh*" (for male) and "*chị*"/"*cô*" (for female) are used temporarily as pronouns.

Thương âu yếm nhìn *Hùng* và *anh* cũng nhìn *cô* cười tủm tỉm

(*Ms. Thương* warmly takes a glance at *Hung* and *he* looks at *her* and smiles lovely)

If the third person is younger than the speaker, people use "*nó*" for both singular male and female.

Thắng là đứa nào? Sao *nó* đánh con tôi nông nổi này?

(Who is *Thang*? Why did *he* hit you so hard?)

Attitude - related factors

He/she is used in English when referring to the singular third person without regard for the speaker's attitude. But in Vietnamese, it's really different. Due to the nuanced nature of the speaker's attitude toward the subject of the speech, this element is extremely complex. According to Quang (2004), the use of *he/she* in Vietnamese depends on the speaker's mindset.

Person	Positive	Neutral	Negative
He	Anh/Ông/Cụ/Chàng/Ngài/ Người/...	Anh ấy/ Cụ ấy/ông ấy/Anh ta/ Cụ ta/ Ông ta/...	Gã/ Hủn/ Y/Lão/ Thằng cha ấy/ thằng đó....
She	Chị/ Cô/Bà.... Nàng/ Người	Chị ấy/Cô ấy/ bà ấy/ông ấy/bà ta/chị ta....	Mụ/à/thị/con mụ ấy/con ả ấy...

Table 2. *The use of the 3rd singular personal pronoun in Vietnamese in terms of speakers' attitudes*

The speaker's attitude is taken into account in three main ways, as seen in the table above: positively, neutrally, and negatively. However, there is still some variation in the personal pronouns used to describe each element.

With this classification, we can see the speaker's many levels of attitude and sentiment toward the third person... This is another distinguishing feature of Vietnamese personal pronouns that is uncommon in other languages. Compare the subsequent illustrations:

- (a) *Anh* lặng yên ko nói gì, chăm chăm nhìn vào kết quả xét nghiệm.
 - (b) *Anh ấy* lặng yên ko nói gì, chăm chăm nhìn vào kết quả xét nghiệm.
 - (c) *Anh ta* lặng yên ko nói gì, chăm chăm nhìn vào kết quả xét nghiệm.
- (*He* was silent and didn't say anything, staring at the test results)

It is clear from the three sentences that the speaker's sympathy and closeness levels vary. The speaker displays the most empathy in the first scenario (a), while displaying the least in the third.

Another interesting difference between Vietnamese and English is that in Vietnamese, we can interpret the speaker's attitude toward the third person within a single sentence unit thanks to the variety of word choices, whereas in English, we must take the entire context (a paragraph, a chapter, or even a story) into account.

Without having to read the entire story in Vietnamese, viewers can comprehend the author's disregarding yet compassionate attitude toward the character.

Người đàn bà đi sau lưng hắn ba buồn bước. *Thị* có vẻ rón rén e thẹn
(The woman walks after him...*She* looks so shy and reserved)

In comparison, it is difficult to determine how the speaker feels about the third person in English's "The woman walks after him...She appears so shy and restrained." without taking the sentence into account in a larger context. It is difficult to understand how the speaker feels about the third person in this instance if we merely read the English equivalent of the line, "The woman goes after him...She appears so bashful and restrained," for example.

In general, this phenomenon contributes to the explanation of why English people perceive reasons differently than Vietnamese people do. At this stage, language demonstrates how it functions as a cultural mirror.

Region – related factors (Dialect)

As one of the elements of language, dialect must also be taken into account. When traveling across the nation, both foreigners and Vietnamese people may become aware of the variety of languages spoken in various parts of the nation. They could find it difficult to understand what the locals say.

Personal pronouns are employed consistently since the language is regarded as standard in the northern region of Vietnam. However, there are some variances in how the third person singular pronouns are used in the central and southern regions.

When speaking about a third-person female, people in Nghe An, a province in central Vietnam, use the pronoun "o ấy" rather than "cô ấy," "cô ta," or "chị ta."

Hôm qua tau gặp o Lan. O trông khá ốm yếu

(Yesterday I met Ms. Lan. She looks pretty sick)

In Nghe An, and particularly, the pronoun “hắn”, which stands for singular masculine, is sometimes used to refer to both sexes, male and female in spoken language.

Thằng Trung đi du lịch Nam Phi về. Hắn có vẻ cháy nắng

Trung returned from a trip to South Africa. He looks sunburned.

Huệ vừa nhận được kết quả thi đại học. Hắn rất vui

Hue has just received the results of the university entrance exam. She is very happy

In the southern regions, local people often turn the pronoun “anh ấy” to “anh”; “ông ấy” to “ông”; and “bà ấy” to “bà”

Ông xã em đang đi công tác ở Hà Nội. Em nhớ anh rất nhiều

(My husband is away on business in Ha Noi. I miss **him** so much)

Conclusion

The necessary guidelines for utilizing the third-person personal pronouns he/she in English and Vietnamese, as well as some common issues, have been offered to researchers and learners from both cultures in this article. Beyond its obvious goal, the article's focus has been on emphasizing the cross-cultural perspective on language through one of its features, third-person pronouns. Language is supposed to be a mirror of culture, reflecting the cultural characteristics of each nation (Giap, 2004: 203). Vietnamese people frequently consider all connections between local elements and external factors when deciding on the best address for communication. Meanwhile, English is used as “prefabricated units” with stable words and phrases for personal pronouns. They only change their forms due to functions in the sentence with ignorance of other factors like age, relationship, attitude of people in conversation as being considered in Vietnamese.

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