

## Means of Performing the Speech Acts of Complaining in Vietnamese

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of complaining language in literary works by Anh N.N. The author examines the forms of using complaining speech acts based on the theory of pragmatics. Based on data collection, there are 408 utterances containing complaining speech acts expressed by means such as modal particles at the end of sentences, colloquial words, and a number of rhetorical devices. Complaining speech acts are most commonly expressed through the use of modal particles at the end of sentences, followed by colloquial words, and finally through the use of rhetorical devices.

**Keywords:** speech act, complaining speech act, Vietnamese

### INTRODUCTION

Speech act is a special type of action in which language is used to influence the recipient in speech. It is an indispensable social activity in daily communication and is associated with human speech activities. The founder of the theory of speech acts was the English philosopher J.L. Austin, with his research work "How to Do Things with Words".

Based on the theory of speech act by J.L. Austin, more and more researchers around the world are becoming interested in and researching speech act. In Vietnam, there are many in-depth research works in the field of pragmatics, such as those by Chau, D.H., Dan, N.D., Giap, N.T., and Hao, C.X...

Speech act in Vietnamese has been developed by researchers such as Dan,

N. D. (1998), Lien, D. T. K. (1999), Chau, D. H. (2003), and Giap, N. T. (2005). In Vietnamese, research on complaining speech acts has been studied from many different aspects. For example, An, V. M. (2003) analyzed the structure and function of modal factors in complaints, Duc, L. T. M. (2001) studied complaining behavior in Vietnamese, and Hong, D. T. M. (2001) surveyed and studied reproachful behavior in Quang Binh folk songs...

From the treatise on domestic and foreign studies, in the article, we define complaining linguistic behavior as follows: Complaining behavior is a linguistic act that speakers use to express their sorrow, sadness, dissatisfaction, or discontent with the impact of a certain thing or event that was, is, or is about to happen.

Complaining is a behavior that can potentially threaten the face of the other party. However, in everyday life, this behavior is quite common among different communication objects in diverse environments. In this research, we focus on the means used to express complaints in Vietnamese language, based on the materials of Vietnamese literary works, such as "Mắt biếc" (Blue Eyes), "Ngồi khóc trên cây" (Sitting in the Tree, Crying), and "Những cô em gái" (Little Sisters). We believe that studying this content is important not only in the field of pragmatics in general, but also useful for the study and teaching of Vietnamese in particular.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To analyze the methods of performing speech acts of complaining in the literary works of Nguyen Nhat Anh.

## SCOPE OF STUDY

In this research, the author collected information from three works of Nguyen Nhat Anh: "Blue Eyes", "Sitting in the Tree, Crying", and "The Little Sisters".

## ASSUMPTION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

The methods of performing speech acts of complaining in Vietnamese, as they appear in the literary works of Nguyen Nhat Anh, include the use of the final modal particle at the end of sentences, colloquialisms, and rhetorical devices.

## RESEARCH METHODS

1. Collecting information. Data on complaining behavior was collected from three Vietnamese literary works by the author Anh, N.N.:

- 1) Mắt biếc (Blue Eyes) (2019)
- 2) Ngồi khóc trên cây (Sitting in the Tree, crying) (2013)
- 3) Những cô em gái (Little girls) (2011)

2. Content Analysis

## THE SPEECH ACTS OF COMPLAINING

### Speech acts

In Vietnam, there are many in-depth researches works in the field of pragmatics such as Chau, D. H., Dan, N. D., Giap, N. T. ...

Dan, N. D. (1998) argues that when making an utterance in a specific communication situation, the speaker performs certain speech acts, and the listener perceives them through their utterance and structure. This phenomenon occurs because speech acts are of a social nature and are constrained by society (p. 3). Additionally, Lien, D. T. K. (1999) refers to speech acts as actions in language and states that "when describing, telling, commenting, advising... we are acting - acting in language. The term speech act can be used to refer to the partial acts of human language" (p. 14). Therefore, it can be said that speech acts are an indispensable activity in daily communication and are associated with human speech activities. They are a special type of action that uses language to influence the listener or partner to convey a message. Furthermore, speech acts are also social in nature because they affect the relationship between speakers and listeners.

### Complaint Speech Act

According to the Vietnamese dictionary, complaining is the act of using words to express sadness or dissatisfaction in order to hope for sympathy and agreement.

Chau, D. H. (2003) stated that even behaviors that do not require a response, such as exclamation or testing, still need to be answered (p. 5). For example, when the speaker complains, if they only receive indifference and not the sharing of the listener, they may feel embarrassed or ashamed. Although complaining is a spontaneous

expression of feelings that are occurring and seem to be for the self rather than the interlocutor, the speaker still expects the listener to share that feeling with them. Besides, if the listener has no words of comfort after listening to the speaker complain, they will also feel guilty, as if something is not right.

Although the need to express human emotions and feelings is great and often occurs at all times, complaining is a behavior that is not always utilized. However, at a spontaneous level that cannot be undone, this behavior is used to express feelings and emotions of an immediate nature.

#### MEANS FOR PERFORMING THE SPEECH ACTS OF COMPLAINING IN VIETNAMESE

To classify and identify utterances that belong to complaining speech acts, researchers rely on the criteria that Searle provided, specifically:

- Propositional content condition: This condition indicates the nature of the content of the behavior. When complaining, the speaker (Sp1) must express their frustrations and dissatisfaction with something. Even though this emotional state is not a proposition, it still serves a propositional function.
- Preparatory condition: It is presupposed that in addition to knowing how to use complaining language, Sp1 is under strong stimulus.
- Sincerity condition: Sp1 is genuinely sad, but may or may not intend to express how they feel about what happened or is happening.
- Essential condition: Sp1 can express their feelings and emotions of sadness and depression.

After synthesizing utterances containing complaining speech acts, the researcher selects and classifies the means of expressing complaining behavior. Accordingly, the researcher has compiled a total of 408 utterances containing complaining behavior. Of these, 72 means are used to express complaining behavior, including modal particles at the end of sentences, colloquialisms, and rhetorical devices. The results of the means of complaining can be summarized in the chart below:

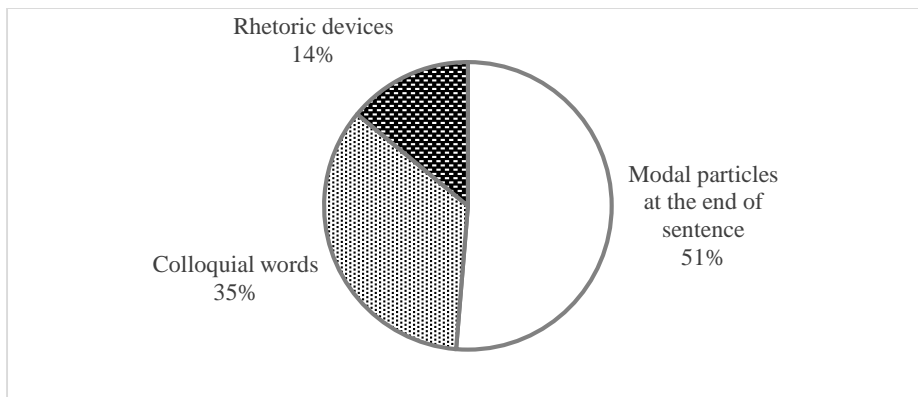


Chart 1. Means of expressing complaints in Vietnamese

Looking at the statistics, we find that out of 72 instances, the modal particle at the end of the sentence is the most commonly used means to express complaining behavior (37 times, accounting for 51%). This is followed by colloquial words (25 times, accounting for 35%) and rhetoric (10 times, accounting for 14%).

#### Means of performing the speech act of complaining

Use of modal particles at the end of sentences

In Vietnamese, the use of modal particles at the end of a sentence increases the level of the content of the preceding clause. The modal particles at the end of sentences such as "lắm" (very), "quá" (too), "đâu" (where) are very diverse in Vietnamese, not only expressing the speaker's meaning but also having an impact on the listener's emotions due to their vividness and expressiveness.

- EX1: Grandma: Cháu hư **lắm**! Lần sau không được như vậy nữa! Ai lại đi dòm con gái đang tắm!  
(You're **very** naughty! Next time it won't be like that! Who would look at a girl taking a bath!)
- Ngan: Dòm thì sao hả bà? Cháu dòm hoài!  
(What's wrong, ma'am? I'm always watching!)

[Blue Eyes, Anh, N.N., p. 39]

The situation in example 1 is about childhood. Grandma is scolding Ngan for peeking at Ha Lan while she was bathing. The modal particle "very" used in the

above statement helped to increase the degree of her scolding directed at Ngan, thereby expressing the speaker's clear and unequivocal attitude towards the incident.

EX2: Dong: Chú là người lớn mà sao lại ăn nói hồ đồ **thế**!

(You are an adult, why are you talking **so** vaguely!)

Uncle Ngai: Mày nói ai ăn nói hồ đồ?

(Who are you talking about?)

[Sitting on the tree crying, Anh, N.N., p.158]

In example 2, Dong expresses his complaint to Uncle Ngai about the scene where Uncle Ngai scolds Rua using heavy sarcasm. Dong uses the modal word "so" at the end of a sentence to convey his complaint. Thus, the use of modal particles in this utterance not only helps the speaker convey the complaint, but also expresses sarcasm and ridicule about the listener's behavior.

Use of colloquial words

Considered as a "non-standard" linguistic unit, colloquial words in Vietnamese appear frequently in daily communication, and there are almost no specific principles governing their use. These words are pragmatically and semantically diverse, highly expressive, and carry many different levels of meaning, from sarcasm and contempt to rudeness and profanity. Therefore, they are considered rhetorical devices that help speakers express different nuances, especially when using them to perform complaining speech acts. Examples of such words include "đồ điên" (crazy), "xạo" (liar), "nói láo" (liar), and "bá láp" (nonsensical)...

EX3: Hai San: **Sự thật cái con khỉ**. Mày bịa chuyện tao đập mày nghe Ngai!

(Oh hell! You made up the story and I beat you, Ngai!)

Ngai: Ông đập tôi đi! Mấy ông biết thừa là tôi không bịa mà!

You hit me! You guys know that I'm not making up!

[Sitting on the tree crying, Anh, N.N., p.159]

In example 3, Mr. Hai San used the colloquial word above to express his anger when Ngai told the truth about Rua's father's passing in front of her. He used the word to complain to the listener and also to refute and negate the content of Ngai's previous utterance.

EX4: Dung: Tao có làm khổ Hà Lan hồi nào đâu!

(I never hurt Ha Lan!)

Ngan: **Nói láo!** Anh đang gây ra đau khổ cho Hà Lan!

(**Liar!** You are causing suffering to Ha Lan!)

[Blue Eyes. Anh, N.N., p.173]

The context of the situation in example 4 is a conversation between Dung and Ngan, where they are both referring to the third character, Ha Lan. When Dung denied ever hurting Ha Lan, Ngan expressed disapproval and dissatisfaction with Dung's statement by calling him a "liar!" Although both words convey the same meaning of complaint, in this situation, Ngan's family position is lower than Dung's. Therefore, colloquial words were used as a means of expressing Ngan's displeasure, and they were also considered in terms of politeness compared to the character Hai San in example 4.

Along with the richness, diversity, and particularly complex nature of colloquial words, the act of complaining is expressed in many different forms with diverse levels of expression. Therefore, it also reflects the cultural elements of each region in particular and the culture of Vietnamese people in general in a skillful and interesting way.

Use of rhetorical devices

Complaining is a direct threat to the other party's face. Therefore, when making a complaint, the speaker often uses other speech acts to indirectly perform the complaining speech act. According to Chau, D. H. (2003), acts in indirect speech are rules-based creations that fall under the realm of rhetorical devices (tropes) by "illocutionary act" (p. 153). Therefore, the author has compiled a list of rhetorical devices that are often used in complaining utterances:

(1) Means of Exaggeration

In addition, in Vietnamese, there is another means that can be used to perform the speech act of complaining, which is exaggeration (also known as overstatement). With this medium, the things and events mentioned in the utterance will be exaggerated by the speaker in terms of extent and scope. Therefore, this is considered one of the most impressive tactics when writing and speaking, as it can grab the attention of the listener. Especially in utterances containing complaints,

exaggerated speech will help increase the level of complaint and the speaker's dissatisfaction with the mentioned thing. Hyperbole to express complaints often appears in everyday communication, especially in close relationships.

EX5: Ms. Thinh: Ba Ngan đánh Ngan có đau không?

(Did Ngan's dad hit Ngan painfully?)

Ngan: Đau gần chết

(The pain was so bad that I feel that I am too close to death)

[Blue Eyes. Anh, N.N., p.15]

In example 5, in order to convey the attitude of sulking and blaming her father for beating her, the character Ngan used exaggerated means as shown in the above statement. The purpose of using this expression was to amplify the pain of being beaten by her father, expressing her angry but also sulky mood when asked by Ms. Thinh. This not only helps the listener realize the complaining implication in Ngan's sentence but also leaves a strong impression on the listener.

#### (2) Means of Comparison/Simile

Moreover, the comparative method is also utilized when expressing complaints in Vietnamese. This is a rhetorical device used to contrast and compare an object or phenomenon with other objects or phenomena with similar characteristics or properties to increase the suggestiveness and sensuality of expression. Within the scope of the survey, the most commonly used form is the "like" comparison.

EX6: Ha Lan's mother: Nó chẳng giống ông ấy! Nó rời làng như cây bật rễ, biết bám vào đâu! Rồi nó sẽ khổ suốt đời! (It doesn't look like him! She leaves the village like a tree uprooted, knowing where to cling! Then she will suffer for life!)

[Blue Eyes. Anh, N.N., p.202]

The context of the above example is that after learning that Ha Lan had become pregnant and dropped out of school at the age of seventeen, her mother was very sad and confided in Ngan upon his return to the village. As a means of comparison or simile, she expressed her complaint about her daughter leaving their village to go to a lavish city, likening it to a tree being uprooted and not knowing where to take root. This comparison or simile helps listeners easily visualize the



incident mentioned in a specific and vivid way, while also capturing the mother's complaint and displeasure towards Ha Lan.

### (3) Use of Idioms and Proverbs

On the other hand, with a rich treasure trove of idioms and proverbs, there is no reason for Vietnamese people not to apply them in everyday communication to express the intended meaning. Among them are proverbs and idioms used to express complaints, which often have negative connotations and are used to express the speaker's dissatisfaction and disagreement with the thing mentioned.

EX7: Dong Anh: Tao chịu thôi! (I can't stand it!)

Minh Khoi: **Yếu mà ra gió!**

**(If you are not in good health, don't get out of the house!)**

[Little sisters. Anh, N.N., p.81]

The above statement was made by the character Minh Khoi in a situation where the whole group of friends in the class were challenging each other to drink alcohol to see who could handle the most. However, when Minh Khoi just touched the glass with his lips, Dong Anh quickly put the glass down and refused to participate in the challenge. Realizing Dong Anh's cautious attitude and wanting to give up, Minh Khoi used the expression "Yếu mà ra gió!" (If you're not feeling well, don't leave the house!) to disparage those who don't know their limits but still try to do things beyond their abilities. With just this idiom, the speaker was able to achieve the desired effect in their words, expressing both irony and complaint about the listener's behavior.

EX8: Thuc: Ê ê, người lớn không được ăn hiếp con nít à nha!

(Hey, adults can't bully children!)

Uncle Ngai: Nó là con nít nhưng là con nít hoang! Hừm, hèn gì người ta nói **"con không cha như nhà không nóc"**.

(It's a child, but it's a illegitimate child! Hmm, no wonder people say **"a child without a father is like a house without a roof"**).

[Sitting on the tree crying. Anh, N.N., p.158]

The above situation occurred when Thuc witnessed Uncle Ngai scolding Rua for breaking his series of hunting traps. Angered by his friend's scolding, Thuc made

a somewhat sarcastic comment to Uncle Ngai. In response, Uncle Ngai expressed his anger and complained about Rua's character using the proverb "a child without a father is like a house without a roof". In the above comment, the idiom is not only used to show the meaning of complaint but also to be sarcastic about the situation of Rua's orphaned parents at a young age, which implies that because there is no one to teach the girl, she behaves erratically. Utterances using idioms and proverbs like the one above help speakers express the content they want to convey without having to say it directly, which is a typical cultural feature of Vietnamese communication.

#### (4) Means of Metonymy

Metonymy is a rhetorical device used to name things or phenomena by the name of other things or phenomena that are similar or closely related to them. This technique is used to create evocative and effective expressions. It is an artistic measure that helps readers and listeners easily associate the things and phenomena that the speaker wants to mention. It allows the writer or speaker to express their intentions skillfully and profoundly. Metonymy is also a useful means of indirectly expressing complaints. It helps the speaker convey their attitude of dissatisfaction with the listener's expression.

EX9: Quyen: Thế nào hử Khoa? Có phải Khoa định làm **thầy bói**

**mù sờ voi** không?

(How's it going? Is Khoa going to be a **blind fortune teller who touches elephants**?)

Khoa: Ủ, đúng là không phải nét chữ của Quyen thật.

(Yeah, it's not really Quyen's handwriting)

[Little sisters. Anh, N.N., p.153]

The context of the situation is that Khoa saw his poem in Quyen's notebook and thought that Quyen had copied it from someone else. However, Quyen insisted that the handwriting was not hers and that someone else had written the poem for her. After arguing for a while and showing Khoa the handwriting in his notebook again, Quyen expressed her intention to blame her friend for not believing her and insisting that his judgment was correct. Quyen used the image of "the blind fortuneteller touching the elephant" from the Vietnamese folk tale "The Fortune-Teller Sees the

Elephant" to convey the meaning of blame and irony to Khoa. The folk tale is a satirical allegory that criticizes those who uphold personal opinions and affirm absolute truth based on little knowledge and experience. Through this metonymy, Quyen's utterance helped the listeners become aware of the implication of reproach and the sarcastic and critical attitude.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the survey data, this article has divided the research materials into three main groups: modal particles at the end of the sentence, colloquial words, and other devices. Modal particles, such as *lắm* (very), *quá* (too), *chứ* (so), and *thế* (so), when placed at the end of a sentence in Vietnamese, form an exclamation expressing the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of the speaker. Thus, when used to express complaining behavior, these modal particles help increase the level of the preceding clause's content and easily express the meaning of complaint, displeasure, and disagreement with the other party.

In addition, the colloquial words used to express complaints in Vietnamese are rich and diverse in expressive nuances. For example, "*đồ điên*" (crazy), "*xạo*" (liar), "*nói láo*" (liar), "*bá láp*" (nonsensical)... Especially depending on the distance, age difference, or role, the speaker will choose colloquial words with an appropriate negative level for the conversation, but still ensure that the effect of their own words is achieved.

Finally, there is a group of rhetorical devices, including exaggeration (overstatement), comparison, idioms, proverbs, and metonymy. Exaggeration is a device that helps the speaker emphasize the extent of the content they want to mention in order to give an impression of anger or dissatisfaction when used to express complaining behavior. Comparison or metonymy helps speakers easily visualize the mentioned thing or phenomenon. These devices are not only helpful in increasing evocative and effective expression, but are also very useful for conveying the intention of complaining and the displeasure and disapproval of the speaker when making a complaint. On the other hand, idioms and proverbs are also often used in everyday speech to express complaints. These measures not only help the utterance become

vivid and easy to imagine, but also possess a unique beauty that reflects the skillful and typical communication culture of the Vietnamese people.

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