

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE PRAGMATIC USES OF BOTH ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE INDEFINITE PRONOUNS IN COMMUNICATION

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***Abstract:** This article aims to identify the pragmatic features of both English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns in communication. Quantitative and qualitative methods are combined for the comparison and contrast research. Research activities include observation, collection, synthesis, and analysis. The data for the research consist of phrases, utterances, and sentences from approximately 10 online books, 10 articles, and websites in both English and Vietnamese, in the areas of literary material and linguistic research. Some similarities and differences are found based on criteria such as emotional nuances, grammar, politeness, context, formality, clarity/vagueness, culture, and communication purpose. The factors influencing the pragmatic uses of indefinite pronouns include grammatical structures, pragmatic intent, social relations, context dependence, definiteness, register, formality, communication purposes (precision or ambiguity), and styles of cultural communication. The article may provide students and other researchers with a useful, though somewhat intensive, look at the pragmatic uses of both English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns.*

***Keywords:** features, pragmatic uses, English and Vietnamese, indefinite pronouns, communication*

I. Introduction

Nowadays, the use of indefinite pronouns among learners and language users still causes vagueness and even ambiguity. Both the learners and language users often get confused about indefinite pronouns in sentences. What is more, they are not confident and active in using indefinite pronouns. There is a comparative research gap in the pragmatic aspects of English and Vietnamese

indefinite pronouns. It is seen that the pragmatic matters of both English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns have not been thoroughly and intensively explored in communication. Haspelmath (1997) maps the range of variation in indefinite pronouns with respect to formative and functional roles. Diversity arises through a set of unrestricted universals and a number of implicational universals. The research covers the functional and

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formal types of indefinite pronouns. The aspects of the negative indefinite pronouns and the grammaticalization of indefinite pronouns are systematized. Đinh (2011) studies the uses of the indefinite pronouns in both English and Vietnamese affirmative sentences. The research scope is limited to translation. Not many linguistic features are indicated. There are many necessary examples of pragmatic usage of indefinite pronouns given, but with no intensive analysis. Nguyễn (2015) does research on the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic structures of Vietnamese indefinite pronouns. He refers to the necessity of contexts attached to the use of indefinite pronouns and successfully makes some strong points stand out. Relying on a few pragmatic features in the above studies, the writer aims to conduct a comparative study of English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns, a research gap that the writer wishes to fill. It is hoped that research on the gap will provide a clearer picture of the characteristic features of both English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns. Misunderstandings will be reduced. The research questions are: 1, What are the most common pragmatical uses of both English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns in communication? 2, What communicative factors influence the pragmatical uses of both English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns? The survey might help language users and learners be aware of the meaningful values of using indefinite pronouns in utterances or sentences, across various styles for different purposes or implications in communication. It might also be a useful source of reference for other research or studies.

II. Literature review

2.1. Concepts of English indefinite pronouns

In doing scientific and linguistic research, Haspelmath (1997) successfully makes clear various semantic and formal properties of English indefinite pronouns. The most common ones are: *some, every, any, each, no, all, ...* They are combined with *thing, one, where, body, people, time, ...* to convey generality. Đinh (2017) analyzes some types of indefinites, such as *neither, no, none, both, either, each, much, few, every, less, little, many, several, all, enough, ...* in the aspects of semantic and syntactic structures and functions. Besides their role as pronouns, indefinites are used in various cases as subjects, objects, and complements, with vivid details for full explanations and references.

2.2. Concepts of Vietnamese indefinite pronouns

According to Diệp (1998), Vietnamese indefinite pronouns mostly belong to a group of quantifiers. Those take place within a noun phrase, and they always come before a head noun. They are referred to as a type of lexical words that express some quantity and distribution. The quantity relies on estimation: “*Độ, dăm, mấy, hơn, khoảng, mười, vài, gần, bất cứ, chưa đến, bất kỳ, lắm, vô luận, bất luận, ...*” and the distribution includes: “*mỗi, mọi, những, từng, các, toàn bộ, tất cả, ...*” There are still some more words, and they are often used in direct combination with any nouns, such as “*tất cả, toàn bộ, vô kể, tổng thể, nhiều, ít, cơ man, ...*” Of the same view, Nguyễn (2013) considers indefinite pronouns to be a kind of basic but optional determiner for Vietnamese noun phrases. They are: “*mấy, cả, tất cả, tất cả, vài, một số,*

hết cả, nhiều, toàn bộ, ít, ba, hết thấy, dăm, mười,...”. He says that the above indefinites always convey the universal linguistic properties.

2.3. Concepts of pragmatic communication

As far as pragmatic communication is concerned, Barron and Steen (2017) introduce the nature of pragmatics. It is related to the understanding of the message in communication. Pragmatic language relies on a series of speech acts, context, implicature, the speaker’s intention, presupposition, conversational maxims, social distance, and politeness. The message can be understood via implicit assumptions or social relationships. LoCastro (2011) concludes that pragmatics is always related to social language use in real-life interaction and may lead to effects on communication. Socio-cultural variables and everyday conversation can help shape the language choices made by participants in their interactions. Ciccia (2011) helps readers better understand the pragmatic features. They are social hierarchy, negative sentence behavior, emotional nuances, classifier requirement, specific vs non-specific distinction, generic or impersonal reference, avoiding blame or responsibility, politeness aspects, and word omission in purpose.

III. Methodology

3.1. Context of the study

Indefinite pronouns play an important part in the linguistic system. In both English and Vietnamese, they not only have grammatical functions but also pragmatic roles in communication. In intercultural communication, the differences in the use of indefinite pronouns between Vietnamese and

English may lead to misunderstandings. Due to the big differences in linguistic structures and cultural features, there is no corresponding language match. Language users and learners find it hard to communicate well with indefinite pronouns. The research is necessary for improving effective communication. The communicative features of indefinite pronouns remain a mystery in real-life contexts such as narratives, instructions, or casual conversations.

3.2. Scope of the study and data collection

The study was conducted solely to compare and contrast the pragmatic uses of indefinite pronouns in English and Vietnamese. The study focuses on the indefinite pronouns used in sentences or utterances of daily communication. They are short sentences and utterances collected from around 10 online books, 10 articles, and websites in both English and Vietnamese, focusing on literary trends and linguistic research.

3.3. Research methods and data analysis

The study needs a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods for comparison and contrast. Statistics of characteristic features and uses of indefinite pronouns are needed. Comparison and contrast research activities were conducted to identify the differences and similarities in the pragmatic uses of Vietnamese and English sentences and utterances. The criteria for data collection and analysis are emotional nuances, grammatical structures, levels of politeness, types of context, degrees of formality, cultural aspects, and communicative purposes of indefinite pronouns in English and Vietnamese in everyday communication.

IV. Major findings and discussions

4.1. *The pragmatic uses of English indefinite pronouns in communication*

In English, indefinite pronouns, such as “anything,” “something,” “anybody,” “some where,” “nothing,” or “noone,” refer to unspecified things, persons, or concepts. They are considered necessary tools for certain types of communication without specific details. There are about 7 pragmatic features that help convey the intended meaning through lexical words in general. The first pragmatic property is that indefinite pronouns rely on context. For instance, “All are welcome.” (Grammarly, 2023). Those indefinite pronouns need a specific context to refer to a group of people, which helps make sense. “All” and “everybody” might be different in another case. Another pragmatic property is that indefinite pronouns may function as negative polarity items. It means that they are often utilized in negative contexts and interrogative contexts: “Is there anything I can do?” (Caulfield, 2023). They can be seen in direct negation: “I haven’t seen anybody.” (British Council, n.d.), or indirect negation: “I don’t think that anybody will like this.” (Glottopedia, 2014). They can also be seen in some other semantically related contexts. It belongs to a non-affirmative predicate. In general, they exclude any people, events, or occurrences from being present. Thirdly, it is true that indefinite pronouns bring about interactions with other words. They can be used with other words or phrases to add more complicated meanings. For example, “There isn’t much else to say about it.” (Easy English Path, n.d.), “at least somebody’s enjoying themselves.” (Ludwig.guru, n.d.). They always suggest a near-universal possibility. Fourthly,

indefinite pronouns sometimes convey stances or attitudes towards a circumstance. Instead of a specific name, “somebody” can be used to convey a dismissive attitude or to imply a lack of importance. For example, “Somebody/ someone wants to speak to you.” (ThoughtCo, 2020). It is known that “somebody” might imply an existential quantity, whereas “anyone” may introduce a broader possibility. Fifthly, indefinite pronouns are suitable for indicating generalities. “Nothing” or “everything” can be utilized to mention the absence or totality of something without identifying individual items. “Everybody” and “everyone” refer to all members of a group. The next feature is that indefinite pronouns might be used to describe the specific effects, but mostly to avoid specificity or directness, which may be suitable in some social contexts that contain varying degrees of requirement. As a matter of fact, the use of indefinite pronouns may bring about a bit of ambiguity or mystery. It is a matter of uncertainty and specificity. Lastly, indefinite pronouns can be used to refer to free-choice items. For most cases, “any” is a free-choice item. The meanings are understandable in a number of contexts. All in all, indefinite pronouns are often just the placeholders for non-specific nouns. Their pragmatic aspects help language users to express the subtle meanings, mild attitudes, and possible specific effects in communication.

4.2. *The pragmatic uses of Vietnamese indefinite pronouns in communication*

Vietnamese indefinite pronouns are utilized to indicate the unidentified facts or the vagueness of things, events, and people. They are used to avoid unwanted

confrontations or mundane repetition, and to indicate generality, unknown concepts, people, and things. Some of the main Vietnamese indefinite pronouns are of “ai, gì, đâu, nào, đó, chỗ, họ, bạn, ta, mình, cái, tất cả,.... They are used in combination with some determiners (định từ) such as “mỗi, mọi, một, từng, mấy, những, các, này, kia, ấy...”. The followings are the main pragmatic properties: Firstly, indefinite pronouns are used to refer to unspecified things, events, matters and people in general. For example, “Ailàm cũng được. Minh điđâu cũng được.” (FPT Shop, 2025), “Ai oi bung bát com đây.” (Phạm, 2025). Secondly, Vietnamese indefinite pronouns are necessary for language users to avoid referring to the things, events, and people mentioned previously. For example, “Nhà nghèo sinh con thảo. Người ta vẫn nói vậy.” (Loigiai hay.com, n.d.). Sometimes, Vietnamese indefinite pronouns reveal uncertainty or ambiguity when the speaker is not sure about the objects or entities they are going to mention. The listeners and the readers have to make a prediction. For example, “Người ta lấy sẵn dao thót và dây để trói.” (Nam Cao, 2002, p. 21). Another reason is that they may not want to provide specific details or unnecessary clarity. In such cases, the indefinite pronouns are suitable and reasonable. For instance, “Mà lúc bấy giờ, chí nguyện của Tân cũng chỉ có thế.” (Thạch Lam, 2004, p. 101). Indefinite pronouns can act as representatives of groups of people, things, and events. Occasionally, Vietnamese indefinite pronouns are used with some adverbs like “lại,” “cũng,” “chẳng,” “không...” to enhance the meanings. Indefinite pronouns are often used in narrative sentences to express the start or progress of actions and states. From time to time, indefinite pronouns are employed

to reveal strong or positive attitudes, feelings, and emotions. For instance, “Ai oi, giữ chí cho bền. Dù ai xoay hướng đổi nền mặc ai.” (Vũ, 1977, p. 109). All in all, the most outstanding property of Vietnamese indefinite pronouns is to indicate generality, and those pronouns can help create flexible utterances or sentences in different communicative situations.

4.3. The pragmatic similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns in communication.

There are some common things between English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns in communication. The first thing is that they are used to express universal truths. They can be helpful for concealing the agent in situations involving sensitive issues, conflicts, or errors. That is the best way to avoid responsibility or blame. They reduce the imposition on the listener. In recounting events or storytelling, indefinites are used to create emotional effect, suspense, or mystery. They mainly add narrative or emotional nuance. To keep face and maintain politeness, indefinites can reduce the level of criticism, reminders, or disagreement. In this case, the criticism does not target any specific person. In fact, indefinite pronouns can strengthen harmony in interpersonal relations by avoiding directness, which can cause discomfort. In some cases, indefinite pronouns are used when speakers do not want to show precise details, or they may lack sufficient information or avoid uncertainty. Lastly, people use indefinite pronouns to suggest activities with respect to autonomy, making them feel more optional, or to soften various types of advice.

Table 4.3. The differences between English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns in communication

No	Vietnamese	English	Pragmatic Features
1	Essential; may replace indefinites	Not encoded	Social hierarchy
2	Bare forms + negative marker	Any-series	Negative sentence behavior
3	Common; high-context	Rare	Ellipsis / omission in purpose
4	Weak; context-dependent	Strong	Specific vs non-specific distinction
5	Very rich; classifiers add attitude	Minimal	Emotional nuances
6	Required, with pragmatic nuance	None	Classifier requirement
7	Ai đó, người ta	Passive voice	Avoiding blame or responsibility
8	Strongly encoded via pronoun choice	Minimal	Politeness/ indirectness
9	Người ta, ai, mọi người	“people”, “you”	Generic/ impersonal reference

The table above shows nine main differences between English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns in communication. The biggest difference lies in emotional nuances. In most aspects, the pragmatic uses of Vietnamese indefinite pronouns rely on contexts of community, whereas English indefinite pronouns depend on contexts for individuality. The least clear one is the impersonal reference. The gap of difference is not really big or easy to spot.

4.4. The communicative factors that influence the uses of both English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns

Through collections, observations, synthesis, and analysis, some of the communicative factors have been identified. Based on Barron and Steen (2017), the main features of pragmatic uses are a series of speech acts, types of contexts, degrees of implicature, the speaker's intention, presupposition, conversational maxims, social distance, and levels of politeness. Both English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns are often used in fixed lexical units, and many of them rely on polarity. Via modal verbs and tone, the implicature can be subtly expressed. The implicature can be expectation, uncertainty, or urgency. The

cultural matters can help listeners realize the levels or the adjustment of politeness or social hierarchy. Depending on the form, indefinite pronouns can express non-existence, existence, or possibility. The outstanding point is that various contexts can help determine the hypothetical, inclusive, or exclusive trends. They shape the meanings in variation. Purposes in communication can determine the flexible vagueness or specificity. In Vietnamese, the trends of using indefinite pronouns tend to imply more modesty, indirectness, or reveal face-saving strategies.

4.5. Discussions

Vietnamese and English indefinite pronouns play important pragmatic roles in communication. Beyond their grammatical functions, they express non-specific things or people. In Vietnamese, the pronouns like *ai*, *gì đó*, *ai đó*, *cái gì*, *mọi người*, etc., are used to imply the ways to control levels of social harmony, ambiguity, and politeness. For example, “*Ai đó*” can show vagueness to keep away from confrontation, whereas “*mọi người*” conveys the inclusiveness to bring about solidarity. The indefinite pronouns can appear in rhetorical structures or questions. They reflect a cultural preference for the style of indirect communication. In

English, pronouns such as *everyone*, *someone*, *nothing*, and *anyone* are always used to signal degrees of certainty, speaker attitude, and politeness. For instance, “*someone*” often reflects an unnamed but definite person, whereas “*anyone*” maintains openness, neutrality, or even doubt. Strategically, many English speakers need indefinite pronouns to avoid directness, such as “*Someone should clean the room.*” This way can soften the blame or responsibility.

Pragmatically, the indefinite pronouns in both languages are affected by some major factors. One of them is *cultural norms*, specifically regarding directness and politeness. In reality, English in many Western countries values sentence clarity, but indefinite pronouns are used to soften certain kinds of assertions. Culturally, the Vietnamese place greater emphasis on face-saving strategies and indirectness, which may lead to greater nuance and a more frequent use of indefinite forms to sustain harmony in social relations. *Context* is also an important factor for formal settings. The speaker always needs more impersonal or cautious pronoun choices. In informal cases, more flexibility is needed. One more thing is that the speaker’s *intention* can affect the ways of expressing generalization, uncertainty, or avoidance of responsibility, which leads to the careful selection of pronouns in both languages. As a matter of fact, *syntactic constraints* limit the usage. Non-assertive and negative indefinite pronouns such as *anything*, *anyone*, *anybody*, or *anywhere* are suitable in certain grammatical structures, whereas Vietnamese depends more heavily on the word order and the particles to express the same meanings. Last but not least, interpersonal relationships, including

familiarity, status, and age, influence the manner in which speakers use indefinite pronouns. Specifically, the Vietnamese need careful linguistic choice for social hierarchy.

Compared to previous studies, this article focuses solely on the field of pragmatics. Intensively, it is a comparison-and-contrast research project conducted between English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns for communicative purposes. Regarding the same matter, previous studies examine other aspects of indefinite pronouns one-sidedly and adopt different approaches. Haspelmath (1997) covers different aspects of indefinite pronouns, both internally and externally, but there are no comparison-and-contrast activities between English and Vietnamese. Đinh (2011) studies the use of indefinite pronouns in both English and Vietnamese affirmative sentences, but the scope of the research is limited to translation. Nguyễn (2015) also studies the pragmatic uses of indefinite pronouns, but one-sidedly in Vietnamese. The research is conducted in a pragmatic environment, but it is related to syntactic and semantic aspects. Various studies have provided a panorama of indefinite pronouns in both languages from a communicative perspective.

V. Conclusion

It can be concluded that it is necessary to investigate the pragmatic uses of both English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns in communication. They are the indispensable items in communication for non-specific entities with clarity and precision. Mastering the pragmatic uses of both English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns can help students, researchers, and language users feel confident and communicate effectively. It will reduce

the chances of losing face, shyness, exclusiveness, directness, or vulgarity. Knowing more about pragmatic uses of both English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns can help language users strengthen their skills and competence in utilizing words and phrases in studies or research. It is hoped that, based on the results of this article, other researchers will conduct further studies on the cultural features of both English and Vietnamese indefinite pronouns.

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NGHIÊN CỨU CÁC ĐẶC ĐIỂM NGỮ DỤNG CỦA CÁC ĐẠI TỪ PHIÊM CHỈ TIẾNG ANH VÀ TIẾNG VIỆT TRONG GIAO TIẾP

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Tóm tắt: Bài viết này nhằm mục đích xác định các đặc điểm ngữ dụng của đại từ phiếm chỉ tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt trong giao tiếp. Nghiên cứu kết hợp phương pháp định lượng và định tính cho việc so sánh và đối chiếu. Các hoạt động nghiên cứu bao gồm quan sát, thu thập, tổng hợp và phân tích. Dữ liệu nghiên cứu là một số cụm từ, phát ngôn và câu từ khoảng 10 cuốn sách trực tuyến, 10 bài báo và trang web bằng cả tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt về lĩnh vực văn học và nghiên cứu ngôn ngữ. Một số điểm tương đồng và khác biệt được tìm thấy dựa trên các tiêu chí như sắc thái cảm xúc, ngữ pháp, phép lịch sự, ngữ cảnh, tính trang trọng, sự rõ ràng/mơ hồ, văn hóa và mục đích giao tiếp. Các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến việc sử dụng ngữ dụng của đại từ bất định là cấu trúc ngữ pháp, chủ đích ngữ dụng, quan hệ xã hội, sự phụ thuộc vào ngữ cảnh, tính hạn định, phong cách ngôn ngữ, tính trang trọng, mục đích giao tiếp (chính xác hay mơ hồ) và phong cách giao tiếp văn hóa. Bài viết này có thể cung cấp cho sinh viên và các nhà nghiên cứu khác một cái nhìn hữu ích và chuyên sâu về việc sử dụng đại từ phiếm chỉ trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt theo đặc điểm ngữ dụng.

Từ khóa: đặc trưng, ngữ dụng, tiếng Anh, tiếng Việt, các đại từ phiếm chỉ, giao tiếp

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