Conceptualising Social Categories in Vietnamese Interpersonal Relationships: A Folk Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of an in-progress study into the cultural logic of Vietnamese interaction. In particular, it elaborates a dichotomy between two social categories in Vietnamese interpersonal relationships. Drawing on two data sets, namely folk data and metapragmatic data, the findings indicate that in Vietnamese interpersonal relationships there is a clear-cut distinction between *người nhà* ('family people') and *người ngoài* ('outsiders'). Whereas the kinship-related category of *người nhà* ('family people') is confined with one's tie to shared experience in the same (extended) family, the category of *người ngoài* ('outsiders') is heterogeneous since it is broadly related to all non-kinship people. The interpersonal relationships in this category are affected by several socio-cultural variables, predominantly the mutual "knowledge" about each other and the frequency of contact, creating a dyad of subcategories: *người quen* ('acquaintances') vs. *người lạ* ('strangers'). Within the subcategory of *người quen* ('acquaintances'), there are associated groups, namely *người thân* ('close people'), formed on the basis of the degree of relationship intimacy, and groups of *bạn* ('friends'), including those who have similarities in age and/or social activities. The variety in interpersonal relationships, therefore, influences Vietnamese verbal behaviour in speech practice. From a discussion of the social categories, this paper takes into consideration the issue of intercultural communication aiming at minimising potential negative stereotypes, and makes recommendations for further research into Vietnamese language and culture.

Keywords: Vietnamese, metapragmatics, interpersonal relationships, social categories, ingroup/outgroup

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalisation, social interactions go beyond national boundaries. One of the keys to successful intercultural communication is the understanding of "otherness" (Crozet & Liddicoat, 2000). People, albeit mostly speaking in English, are culture-internally familiar with sets of cultural norms and assumptions in their own language. Thus, they tend to bring these norms and assumptions into their communication across cultures. It is not unusual that in certain intercultural encounters, especially between people whose cultural backgrounds have little in common, the interactional behaviour which is conceived of as "appropriate" by the speaker could be regarded as "unfriendly", "weird", or even "rude" by the addressee, resulting in the possibility of hostile, and/or offensive, national stereotypes (Thomas,

1983). This pinpoints a need for studies conducted from the cultural insider perspective for more insight into culture-specific properties of speech practices in languages other than English.

As far as the Vietnamese language is concerned, research into this language has had a tendency to follow the contrastive interlanguage pragmatics, whose focus is on the similarities and differences in communicative performance between English native speakers and Vietnamese as non-native speakers of English. These studies have taken the communicative strategies in English as parameters to describe the linguistic patterns in the target language that Vietnamese speakers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) should aim to acquire, or develop their pragmatic competence in intercultural communication in English (M. Nguyen, 2005; G. Tran, 2006). These studies have made a notable contribution to the literature of language education. However, several other socio-cultural variables of Vietnamese linguistic routines underpinning the cultural logic of interaction, including the patterns of interpersonal relationships, have not been touched. This results in a common misconception that Vietnamese cultural traits are identical with those of Chinese since Vietnam was historically influenced by Chinese for almost a century of occupation. In fact, Vietnam has established its own characteristics in both language and culture, synthesising Eastern and Western communicative styles and cultural values during its contact with other languages and cultures. This is evident in a sociolinguistic study of politeness in Vietnamese (Vu, 1997), which characterised Vietnamese politeness to be both strategic and normative. That said, it is not argued in this paper that Vietnamese speech practices do not share any areal features with other Asian cultures, but contended through the discussion of Vietnamese social categories that the conceptual and perceptual ways in which Vietnamese people interpret their cultural experiences are culture-specific. In addition, despite an increase in the number of contrastive interlanguage pragmatic studies, there is obviously a need for more studies of Vietnamese linguistic routines in its own right in order to speak to a wider audience beyond the boundary of the language education field.

This paper is, therefore, an attempt to partially contribute to the understanding about Vietnamese conceptualisation of interpersonal relationships. As part of an in-progress research into the cultural logic of Vietnamese interaction, the paper discusses the way in which Vietnamese people socially categorise the others, primarily based on their mutual understanding and frequency of contact, in order to make sensible decisions necessary for the appropriate behaviour. In particular, the paper elaborates the culturally-anchored dichotomy between two overarching social categories, namely *người nhà* ('family people') and *người ngoài* ('outsiders'), as well as their associate variables. Simultaneously, it considers the effects of these social categories on Vietnamese ways of reasoning for verbal behaviour.

THE CONCEPT OF 'SOCIAL CATEGORY' IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

A *social category* is defined in social science as a group of people who share similar identifiable social characteristics (Turner, 1982) such as women and elderly people. However, this term is used in the present paper to designate a group of people who possess some common interactional characteristics as a result of filtering their cultural conceptualisation. This conceptualisation is conventionally based on interactants' connections due to shared experience over time and their mutual commitment and understanding in interaction.

In the Vietnamese culture, the most important cultural concern of an interaction is the state of being in an interpersonal network, called *quan hệ* ('relationship') (Vo, 2014). Originating from the Chinese concept of *guanxi*, Vietnamese *quan hệ* ('relationship') through different stages of language change, has experienced a dramatic change in its meaning, and become polysemous in modern Vietnamese. However, the cultural meaning of *quan hệ* ('relationship') is still retained in the Vietnamese linguistic

repertoire, which is a system of cultural information about one's interactional experience with others. It encompasses one's thoughts and feelings towards others, based on which people can process and actively select behavioural patterns that are culturally appropriate for the on-going context. It is the cultural significance of *quan hệ* ('relationship') that influences Vietnamese cultural conceptualisation of social categories, since it forms the social basis for interaction between people (Vo, 2014). In a "family-oriented" culture like Vietnam (T. Tran, 1996), it is understandable that *quan hệ* ('relationship') is kinship-based, and thereby allowing a distinction between in-family and out-family interactions. It is this distinction that prepares the ground for the categorisation of two major Vietnamese social categories: *người nhà* ('family people') vs. *người ngoài* ('outsiders').

Social categories have been discussed in Western human communication literature under the terms of "ingroups" and "outgroups" (Gudykunst, Yoon, & Nishida, 1987; Triandis, 1988; Turner, 1982). In these studies, the concepts of ingroups and outgroups were defined based on various systems of information, including the demographic features of the people involved, the roles they play in social activities, and their membership of organisations. However, these concepts are somewhat different from the concepts of "insiders" and "outsiders" in non-Western cultures. These concepts not only refer to the social categories, but also function as the carriers of cultural meaning and social cognition. For example, Gladkova (2013) explained the distinction between *svoj* ('one's own') and *čužoj* ('alien/stranger/foreigner') in Russian. She argued that this Russian social cognition has influenced the choice of Russian communicative style. Although the prototype use of Russian *svoj* ('one's own') was to refer to a family member, the term is now extended as a reference to those people who "one shares life on a regular basis and who are treated similarly to family members" (Gladkova, 2013, p. 182). In Chinese interaction, likewise, the insider – outsider separation has been indicated in the principle of *nèi wài yǒu bié* ('inside – outside have difference') (Ye, 2004). This principle allows the dyadic social categories of *zìjǐrén* ('insider'/one of us'), which is the group of people who identify with each other including the place of origin, and *wàirén* ('outsider'), who do not share the common sense. Both Russian and Chinese cultures have a strong "insider vs. outsider" orientation, but they are not family-based as in Vietnamese culture. The divergence in Vietnamese social categories of "insider" and "outsider" is narrower in the range of the "insider". This "insider" range is bound up with only family members, leading to the "outsider' range being identified based on the non-family relatedness.

METHODOLOGY

Research questions

For an elaboration of the social categories in the Vietnamese interpersonal network, the present paper addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the social categories in Vietnamese interpersonal relationships?

2. How does this social categorisation influence verbal behaviour in Vietnamese interaction?

Data

Data used for the discussion in this paper was extracted from a larger project, which explores the cultural logic of Vietnamese interaction. The data has been divided into two sets. One set was the Metapragmatic Survey (MS) responses provided by 80 Vietnamese speakers. A metapragmatic study is generally defined as an exploration into speakers' awareness and evaluation of their language use. It explores the understanding that "members of a speech community gather in a course of time […] about conversation in general, their genres, patterns, styles and norms" (Hübler, 2011, p. 109). In the light of

Metapragmatics, the participants in this survey were required to complete a questionnaire, which consists of open-ended question items, by giving their opinions about cultural concerns and/or considerations in Vietnamese interaction. One of the advantages of using an open-ended questionnaire is that it permits the researcher to obtain candid opinions from respondents without interviewer bias. In addition, it is an effective method in the particular case of the present study since Vietnamese people are reticent to participate in face-to-face interviews or recorded conversations.

The other set was a self-compiled corpus of Vietnamese folk sayings and proverbs (henceforth, referred to as 'folk data' and abbreviated as [FD]). The rationale for using folk sayings and proverbs is that they have been well established as a rich documentary data source to tap into the native ways of thinking because "they can be reconfigured and reinterpreted to yield new insights into a particular social phenomenon" Mogalakwe (2009, p. 47). In the Vietnamese culture, folk sayings and proverbs are the ancestral wisdom and experiences passed on from generation to generation; they have, thereby, depicted the ethno ways of thinking and speaking in a way that "they recapitulate and reproduce established cultural values. They are communicative vehicles that both enact traditional authority and are partially constitutive of it. They are 'small forms' of authoritative discourse" (Goddard, 2009, p. 103). Folk data was used to support the analysis as well as triangulate with MS data.

VIETNAMESE SOCIAL CATEGORIES IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS: A DICHOTOMY

The Vietnamese culture, as cited in numerous studies (Huynh, 2012; Phan, 1998; T. Tran, 1996), is family-oriented. The boundary between family and non-family worlds is fixed in the Vietnamese mindset, and fundamentally influences Vietnamese interactional behaviour, for example:

[FD1]   *Khôn ngoan đối đáp người ngoài* ('Be wise to confront people outside the family')
          Gà cùng một mẹ chớ hoài đá nhau ('Don't fight with the siblings of the same mother')

This division is consolidated by 87% of the participants in the MS who stated that they would talk with family members and non-family people in entirely different ways. Therefore, it comes as no surprise to categorise the social groups on the premise of the family and non-family distinction, making a dichotomy between *người nhà* (family people') and *người ngoài* ('outsiders'). Figure 1 illustrates social categories and subcategories in Vietnamese interpersonal relationships.
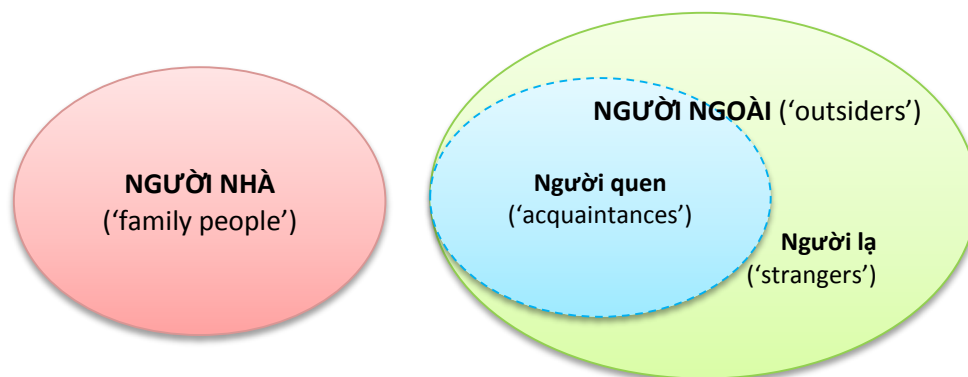

Figure 1: Vietnamese Social Categories.

Vietnamese *người nhà* ('family people')

The concept of *người nhà* ('family people') in Vietnamese has probably been comparable with the Chinese concept of *jiārén* ('extended family-person') in Ye (2004), who argued that *jiārén* was the prototype of *zìjǐrén* ('insider/one of us'), thus becoming a default *zìjǐrén*. The Vietnamese concept of *người nhà* ('family people'), however, is not as transparent as *jiārén* ('extended family-person') inasmuch as it does not always indicate an extended family member. This depends upon an interactant's contextualisation in a particular interaction. The element *nhà* in *người nhà* ('family people') literally means 'a house'. This implies that *người nhà* ('family people') are people who live in the same house. Furthermore, the concept of *quan hệ* ('relationship'), as pointed out in Vo (2014), is partly qualified by the duration of time people have spent together. For example, an aunt who has been living with you in the same house for a long time is regarded as one of your *người nhà* ('family people'). However, if this aunt lives away from you, she may not be considered in this way. This is ratified in the MS data. The following MS response is an illustration:

> When I take part in an interaction with someone, I'm most concerned about whether the person lives in the same house as me. I can feel relaxed to talk with this person because we've been together for a long time and developed mutual understanding, then it's easier to tolerate if there's a slip of the tongue. But if I talk with outsiders, I need to be careful. I mean, I can't always tell them about all (MS1).

This metapragmatic understanding also implies that the home is a distinctive interactional setting. The interaction within the family is, indeed, something sincere and sentimental that it is impossible to achieve in interactions with other people in the same way. For this reason, Vietnamese has a proverb reminding gossipy people of the unacceptable habit of revealing the privacy of family talks to outsiders:

[FD2]   *Trong nhà chưa tỏ, ngoài ngõ đã hay.*
          ('Family issues are very soon known to the outsiders.')

The interaction with *người nhà* ('family people'), in addition, are verbal experiences, or models, for one's social interaction with outsiders. In this setting, parents play an important role in teaching children the interpersonal and/or social skills (see H. Nguyen (2009) for an insight into family talk in terms of the negotiation of authority and "knowledge"):

[FD3]   *Mẹ dạy thì con khéo, bố dạy thì con khôn.*
          ('Children who are properly taught by parents behave well.')

Presumably, the consciousness about the distinction between family and non-family people in their interaction is due to Vietnamese mindfulness of possible impacts on family honour and reputation. The notion of "face" in Vietnamese interaction, like interaction among other collectivist Asian cultures, is not confined to the honour of an individual, but it reflects the established prestige and values of the family, and/or the community the individual is identified with:

[FD4]   *Hổ chết để da, người ta chết để tiếng.*
          ('When tigers die, they leave hides; when people die, they leave reputation.')

The above folk saying is evidence of the sensitivity to public "face" risk. It is also indicative of the influences of cultural values of collectivist spirit in Vietnamese culture, as well as an essential understanding about the boundary with the social category of *người ngoài* ('outsiders') in speech practices in order to minimise the risk of *mang tiếng* ('bearing [negative] reputation') or *mất mặt* ('losing face').

Vietnamese *người ngoài* ('outsiders')

A complementary category of *người nhà* (family people') notwithstanding, the social category of *người ngoài* ('outsiders') in Vietnamese interaction is much broader since it encompasses all non-family people. The interaction among people in this social category varies accordingly. An interaction with non-family people depends on several matters of concern. For example, a survey participant stated:

> When I communicate with someone, I think about whether this person is an acquaintance or a complete stranger. Of course, I will talk with him/her in different ways (MS2).

The comment (MS2) hints that there is a dyad in the broad category of *người ngoài* ('outsiders'). One is *người quen* ('acquaintances') –, and the other is *người lạ* ('stranger'). This division is depicted in the Vietnamese folk saying:

[FD5]   *Bà con khó xin đừng bỏ, kẻ lạ dầu sang cũng chớ đua.*
        ('Don't abandon poor relatives; don't follow strangers however rich they are.')

The folk saying reminds people of the unnecessary pursuit of wealth at the cost of blood-relatedness abandon. The implication is, nonetheless, the awareness of the boundary between *người nhà* (family people') and *người ngoài* ('outsiders'), and between *người lạ* ('strangers') and *người quen* ('acquaintances'). Arguably, *người lạ* ('strangers') and *người quen* ('acquaintances') are two subcategories of *người ngoài* ('outsiders'), based on the cultural concept of *quan hệ* ('relationship').

Người lạ ('strangers')

Vietnamese people in face-to-face interaction are contradictorily characterised as "talk preferring" and "timid" (Phan, 1998; T. Tran, 1996). The two features are, albeit oppositional, understandable considering the effect of Vietnamese cultural value on interaction. Vietnamese collective spirit sets a distinct separation between the "known" (or the acquaintances) and the "unknown" (or the strangers). People are expected to talk amiably to acquaintances as a way to establish and maintain their *quan hệ* ('relationship'). At least, a greeting is exchanged because it is normatively appropriate for a collective life in the Vietnamese culture:

[FD6]   *Lời chào cao hơn mâm cỗ.* ('A greeting is more valuable than a feast.')

Not only is warmth expected, but Vietnamese people are required to be appropriate in the verbal product, as implied in the saying:

[FD7]   *Lời nói chẳng mất tiền mua* ('Words do not cost')
        Lựa lời mà nói cho vừa lòng nhau ('Choose appropriate words to make each other pleasant')

To strangers, however, Vietnamese are naturally reserved, as captured in one of the folk principles of interaction among non-acquaintances:

[FD8]   *Im lặng là vàng* ('Silence is golden')

The question that arises is who will be assigned as strangers. From the Vietnamese perspective, *người lạ* ('strangers') are people that one has never talked with face-to-face, although these people could be described as *nhìn quen quen* ('look familiar').

Nonetheless, since human social interaction is a sophisticated nexus, there are circumstances in which complete strangers are expected to talk with each other. Therefore, the distinction between *người lạ* ('strangers') and *người quen* ('acquaintances') in the social category of *người ngoài* ('outsiders') is fairly borderline. According to Vo (2014), as human relationship is evolving, there is a consecutive

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transference in the state of *quan hệ* ('relationship'). In this regard, one of *người lạ* ('strangers') can become one of *người quen* ('acquaintances') after a certain amount of contact. In particular, as a result of the Vietnamese value of collective spirit, it is customary for people to establish and maintain relationship with the community. It is commonly held that:

[FD9]　　*Trước lạ, sau quen* ('strangers first, acquaintances later')

Talking is undoubtedly a pleasant way to become "known" to each other and establish *quan hệ* ('relationship'), because Vietnamese believe that

[FD10]　　*Dao năng liếc thì sắc; người năng chào thì quen.*
　　　　　　('If frequently sharpened, a knife becomes sharper;
　　　　　　if often greeting, people become acquaintances.')

In such circumstances, a "familiar look" could probably be a good reason for people to make acquaintances without timidity. Obviously, the subcategory of *người lạ* ('strangers') is a potential source of *người quen* ('acquaintances') in the development of interpersonal network. This is a culture specificity of Vietnamese interaction. In addition, the proverb [FD10] also implies that the shift in relationship from being a non-acquaintance to an acquaintance depends on the frequency of talk between people. Vo (2014) argued that the frequency of talk would enhance the mutual understanding, thereby influencing the quality of *quan hệ* ('relationship') in social interaction. This underpins the idea that the subcategory *người quen* ('acquaintances') is not a homogenous group, but it comprises variables, depending on the mutual understanding and the degree of intimacy between interactants, which have been developed through their establishment and maintenance of *quan hệ* ('relationship'). The following comment from an MS participant illustrates this:

> If we are acquaintances, I need to consider how much I know about that person, and how close we are. These are based on how long and how good our relationship has been (MS3).

Therefore, the subcategory of *người quen* ('acquaintances') is an interesting reflection of the complexity in Vietnamese interpersonal relationships, to the extent that it has several group variables.

Người quen ('acquaintances')

As mentioned above, *người quen* ('acquaintances') are family-unrelated people who have developed social connections. The state of connection in Vietnamese *quan hệ* ('relationship') can be qualified as good or bad, close or distant, harmonious or tense. The quality is affected by several social variables. Among these, 'personality' and 'interest' are most cited by the MS participants as important factors to determine the relationship. It should be noted that people's feelings towards each other in Vietnamese interaction are important in qualifying their relationship since Vietnamese culture is emotion-based, as depicted in the saying:

[FD11]　　*Một trăm cái lý không bằng một tí cái tình.*
　　　　　　('A hundred reasons are not as important as a sign of sentiment.')

Moreover, the shared interest between interactants contributes to either bringing them closer or driving them apart, making it possible to form smaller groups within *người quen* ('acquaintances'). The MS findings show that 88% of the survey participants mentioned *người quen* ('acquaintances') in their responses in a variety of specific terms, including *bạn* ('friends') and *người thân* ('close people').

Vo (2014) argued that along with *quan hệ* ('relationship'), Vietnamese interaction is greatly influenced by *thứ bậc* ('footing'), which is a system of standings or hierarchy based on age differences. In a Vietnamese interaction, one is situated in one of three levels of age-based footing, namely an older, a

younger, or a peer interactant in relation to the interactional partner. As far as peer interactants are concerned, they form a special circle of *người quen* ('acquaintances'), called *bạn* ('friends'). Vietnamese *bạn* ('friends') are loosely defined as people one knows with similar age and/or social status. In other words, *bạn* ('friends') are basically peer acquaintances.

With respect to other acquaintances, regardless of age similarity, there is generally a group of people who know each other well and like each other, or have the same interests. These people create a group, known as *người thân* ('close people'). This term is fairly slippery in definition. Generally, they are people whose long-term connection allows them to treat each other with trust and strong affection, more or less the same as the family sentiment. Interestingly, in everyday language, Vietnamese can refer to *người nhà* ('family people') as *người thân* ('close people'), considering the parameters of shared experiences and trust. However, one of the *người thân* ('close people') might not be one's *người nhà* ('family people'). The group of *người thân* ('close people') in this regard is fairly similar to the Chinese *zìjǐrén* ('insider'/'one of us'). The difference is that the Vietnamese concept of *người thân* ('close people') is developed based on the length of time and trust through contact. It is not confined to a shared place or a kind of sameness, which is referred to as *tóng* X ('X fellow'). Therefore, whereas a *tóngshì* ('colleague') in Chinese is a *zìjǐrén*, (Ye, 2004), Vietnamese *đồng nghiệp* ('colleagues') are certainly *người quen* ('acquaintances'), but might or might not be *người thân* ('close people'). In addition, some of the people in the friendship circle can also be categorised as *người thân* ('close people'), or particularly *bạn thân* ('close friends'), on the basis of common voice and shared interest.

The overlaps among different groups of people make the social subcategory of *người quen* ('acquaintances') fairly complicated, and even borderline. Figure 2 illustrates these overlapping variables.
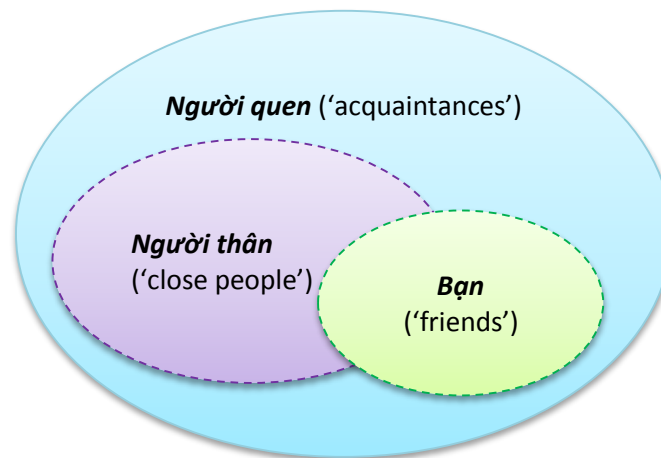

Figure 2: The overlapping variables of the social category người quen ('acquaintances').

It is worth noting that these variables tend to be psychological since they are affected by the emotional and attitudinal judgments interactants make of each other via talk. For this reason, *người thân* ('close people') and *bạn* ('friends') are argued to be psychological variables of *người quen* ('acquaintances').

FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the discussion of social categories in Vietnamese interpersonal relationships from the cultural insider perspective, the present paper partly explains the motives of Vietnamese interaction on the part

of participants, providing a cultural understanding of Vietnamese speech practices. Furthermore, it has implications for intercultural communication and cultural research.

As far as intercultural encounters are concerned, especially in first-time meetings, the social category conceptualisation allows Vietnamese to put all non-Vietnamese in the subcategory of *người lạ* ('strangers'). Therefore, it is understandable that people should be prudent in interaction with these people. This behaviour is consequently described as "timid", "reserved", or even "irrational" from an outsider perspective as prefaced earlier in this paper. This is a stereotype of Vietnamese. In reality, in order to establish and develop an interpersonal relationship with Vietnamese, one requires a certain length of time and/or shared assumptions or understanding. The explanation of social categories in this paper is expected to speak to, and help prepare for, the audience who will potentially have intercultural exchanges with Vietnamese, lest they should have culture shock or negative stereotypes of each other.

With respect to research, especially studies into Vietnamese language and culture, there are a number of considerations. Firstly, the dichotomy between *người nhà* ('family people') and *người ngoài* ('outsiders') triggers two distinct types of interaction, namely family talk and social exchange. It is recommended that these two types of interaction be separated in investigations into Vietnamese speech practices in the areas such as Pragmatics, Cultural Discourse Analysis, and Anthropological Linguistics, for more substantive findings. Secondly, since the category of *người ngoài* ('outsiders') is broad in its scope, there are several socio-cultural concerns such as the influence of levels of footing on interactants' choice of communicative strategies, and the implicature of social category conceptualisation through the choice of person references in Vietnamese. These issues, which remain untouched within the scope of the present paper, are worthy of further investigation for a more thorough understanding of Vietnamese language and culture.

CONCLUSION

The present paper has discussed the Vietnamese folk perspective on conceptualising different social categories in interpersonal relationships. In particular, it has analysed the dichotomy between *người nhà* ('family people') and *người ngoài* ('outsiders') as the two major social categories, verified with evidence from folk data, and from the native speakers' metapragmatic evaluation. Whereas the category of *người nhà* ('family people') is fairly homogenous, its complementary category of *người ngoài* ('outsiders') is heterogeneous. The interpersonal relationships within the category of *người ngoài* ('outsiders') are affected by several socio-cultural variables, predominantly the "knowledge" about each other developed through the frequency of talk, creating dyadic subcategories of *người quen* ('acquaintances') and *người lạ* ('strangers'). Within the subcategory of *người quen* ('acquaintances'), there are groups of people overlapping a number of categories, formed on the basis of long-term relationships and degree of intimacy. These groups are argued to be psychological variables of *người quen* ('acquaintances') since there is no parameter for categorising them, but interactants' judgments.

Although the present paper is a small part of an in-progress research project, it is hoped that the findings reported herein have provided an overview of an under-researched aspect of Vietnamese language and culture. The discussion is also suggestive of a more tolerant attitude towards Vietnamese in intercultural communication. The paper also recommends further exploration in some related issues, as well as some potential academic disciplines that can be involved.

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