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**A STUDY OF OPENING
CONVERSATION ON THE PHONE
IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE**

**Field: THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
Code: 60.22.15**

**M.A. THESIS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
(A SUMMARY)**

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 RATIONALE

For everyone to live and work in a society, making a phone call takes up the most part of his or her time. Telephone is an important and useful tool for us. Using the telephone is an essential part of our every lives.

In this modern time with the ever-increasing living standards and needs, telephone conversation between human beings has been made much more and more complex. Telephone communication has its own laws we cannot predict. We are often sure that everyone can speak on the phone.

Related to linguistic and sociolinguistic, opening conversation on telephone has been given much interest and attention. The analysis of phonology, syntax and morphology. To ensure a successful telephone conversation, one must be aware of problems such as telephoning language, structure, participants and social status and other cultural aspects.

What is the secret of telephone conversation? When you speak over the phone you do not see the other person, you cannot structure your conversation based on a facial reaction.

The difficulty that one often faces to when starting a telephone conversation lies in the use of language in real situation. It is a fact that “Every thing is difficult as it starts”. As for conversation making, this is true to every aspect. “Once actual talk is initiated, it

follows its own rules, but starting and stopping are not always easy, and, of the two, getting started appears to be the more difficult” (Ward Haugh).

The telephone conversations we have in our course books or textbooks are rather ideal. Out of the classroom, language learners would face up to many difficulties in making telephone conversation.

One more reason is that some people, especially Vietnamese, may develop a hesitation or even a fear of talking to someone and I am bashful and scared when I face to face to communicate someone. Thus, I carry out “*a study of opening conversation on the phone in English and Vietnamese*”. It is hoped that the findings of this study would contribute to supporting those of many previous studies. This study on cognitive semantic, structure and pragmatic. The study can field more useful information for language learners and help them improve their language skill to achieve the purpose of social communication.

1.2 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

1.2.1 Aims

This paper is aimed to: Study the utterances and nature of opening conversation in English and Vietnamese in order to help language learners start conversation successfully on the phone.

1.2.2 Objectives

This paper is designed to aim at the following objectives:

Identify, describe and discuss the syntactic, and pragmatic features of the openings of telephone conversation in English and

Vietnamese, social condition under which different types of opening on the phone occur.

Compare and contrast opening conversation in terms of syntactic, and pragmatic features.

Suggest some implications for the teaching and learning English as a foreign language in Vietnam.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to achieve the aims and objectives of the study, the research questions below will be addressed.

1. What are the syntactic and pragmatic features of telephone conversation openings in English and Vietnamese?

2. What are the similarities and the differences between English and Vietnamese in this field in term of syntactic, and pragmatic features?

1.4 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

In this study, I would like to investigate the syntactic, pragmatic aspects of telephone conversation openings on the basis of contrastive analysis of the data collected from dialogues in textbooks, recorded telephone conversations daily life, questionnaire as well as information searched from the Internet.

1.5 DEFINITION OF TERMS

Syntactic features: special characteristics involving the rules governing the structure of a language such as the structure of words, phrases, clauses, sentences and transforming of word order, verb patterns.

Pragmatic features: special characteristics relate to the context in linguistics.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study is just an attempt to consider problematical aspects of conversational openings on telephone in terms of syntactic and pragmatic features. Opening and closing conversation are used widely in every situation for everyone. It is a chance for us to explore some semantic, syntactic and phonetic features of opening conversation by telephone in English and Vietnamese and to find out similarities and differences of the two languages in terms of this problem. The results of the study are intended to affect so much language users and learners. The finding can help language users improve their language skill to achieve the purpose of social communication. Accordingly, the research on opening conversation on telephone will be useful for those who are going to investigate closing conversation on telephone.

1.7 ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

The thesis consists of 5 main chapters

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Chapter 3: Method and Procedure

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussions

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL
BACKGROUND

2.1 A REVIEW OF PREVIOUS STUDIES RELATED TO THE TOPIC

Opening a phone call is one of the important phrase in the organization of a telephone conversation. In order to carry out my paper on “Opening conversation on telephone”. Up to now, a lot of researchers have been done this field. Each of these has been employed for different purposes in acquiring the target language.

According to Shegloff [25] there are four types of American English telephone conversation openings: (1) **summons – answer**, (2) **identification – recognition**, (3) **greeting**, (4) **how are you?**

According to Solomon, P. [28], In his analysis of conversation in Information Seeking Context, also emphasizes the importance of opening phase. He reviews the idea of Eichman stating that opening speech act can have 3 kinds of impact: expressive for communicating an enquirer’s attitudes and feelings, phatic for establishing a channel of communication, and informational for transmitting a question or a request for information. These 3 impacts correspond to interpersonal, textual and ideational classification of conversation goals.

Nguyen Cung Tram (2002) [17] in her study, “Conversational openings in English and Vietnamese” deal with opening conversation. In her work, she laid the foundation for

conversational openings in English and Vietnamese. However, Mrs. Tram only discussed the topic in face - to -face conversation, didn’t have variables in pragmatics.

Bui Thi Thu Hien [2005], [3] focused on discussing the Strategies for Telephone Opening Conversation. In her study, she showed that telephone conversation includes four sequences: Summon-answer sequence, identification sequence, greeting exchanges, and “how are you“ exchanges.

In Vietnamese, the problem of conversational openings is mentioned scatteredly within the scope of a large work.

Nguyen Anh Que – Ha Thi Que Huong(2000) [39] in their book on “Tiếng Việt trong giao tiếp thương mại”, only focused on using the two words “Đạ” and “ạ”. These two words are used at the beginning and ending of the sentence to express respect by an inferior to a superior or by the younger to the older.

Chu Thi Thanh Tam (1995) [36], in her study, She mentions the opening phrase in comparison with the body of the conversation. She aims to point out the difference between speech subject and discourse subject which is the central discussion of her Ph. D. thesis.

2.2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.2.1 Concept of Discourse

In this part, I review some aspects related to discourse theory so that I will have a clearer understanding about the features of telephone opening conversation at the level of discourse both in English and Vietnamese.

2.2.2 Speech Act : Yule's theory

In this part, I review some aspects related to speech act theory so that I will have a clearer understanding about the structure of utterances as a speech act both in English and Vietnamese.

2.2.3 Conversational Theory

In this part, Many researchers have been done in the field of Conversation and there have been many definitions about conversation and opening conversation both in English [7], [16], [6], [50], [44], [4], [47] and Vietnamese [38], [40], [37], [42]. Besides, I review some features of conversation [3], [1], [16], [17], [28], Organization of Conversation [23], [25], [34], [32], [1] and according to Grice Maxim's and Brown & Levinson's theory ,there are Cooperative Principles and Politeness Principles [11], [2].

2.2.4 Telephone Conversation

In this part, I give telephone structure and the structure of openings in telephone conversations.

Schegloff (1972, 1979) introduced four parts in the opening section:

- 1) a summon-answer sequence
- 2) an identification-recognition sequence
- 3) a greeting sequence
- 4) the "how are you" sequence.

Structure of telephone openings are suggested by Edmondson and House [9, p.208]

- (1) Conventional in content

- (2) Summons-answer format

+ Caller summons (ringing telephone)

+ Other party answers

- (3) Sociability (chit-chat)

(4) Caller (not answerer) usually raises the first main topic, ending the opening phase.

2.2.5 The Influence of Social-Cultural Factors on The Use of Telephone Conversation Openings

Gender, Age and Interlocutor's Relationship factors affect on the use of telephone conversation openings [31], [24], [10], [21].

Tannen [29, p.25] claimed that there are gender differences in ways of speaking. He stated that the most important point to consider in studying and learning about gender specific speech styles is that gender distinctions are built into language

In the book "Communication between Cultures", Samovar & Porter (1995) contend that a pattern of speech will be also influenced by "age, status, cooperation and the like". Samovar and Porter [24, p.71] also support that social hierarchy, which is an outstanding feature of Vietnamese community, is prevalent and institutionalizes inequality. That is to say, the interlocutors' age is very significant in Vietnamese conversation.

According to Hatch [10, p.52], "People of a close relationship such as close friends or family members often regard overlap or a very natural style of speaking, with no intention of hurting their negative face".

2.2.6 Terms of Address

Addressing words consist of words, group of words, which are used in communication.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The main methods are the descriptive and contrastive analysis in which both qualitative and quantitative methods is chosen as the first language and Vietnamese serves as the second language.

The theoretical background is set up with references to both Vietnamese and foreigner. Furthermore, the thesis includes both **quantitative** and **qualitative methods** in which qualitative one takes priority so as to analyze data and make them more reliable. Data are collected and analyzed for the purpose of comparing and contrasting opening conversation on the phone in English and Vietnamese to find out the similarities and differences between the two languages in the study.

3.2 RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The central hypothesis of this study is that there are similarities and differences in the ways English and Vietnamese people open a telephone conversation.

3.3 SAMPLING

The samples were taken from telephone conversations in textbooks such as: face-to-face textbook, đàm thoại tiếng anh qua hội thoại, thực hành giao tiếp tiếng anh qua hội thoại, and questionnaire.

The samples were also taken from over 100 telephone conversations in English and about 80 Vietnamese for conversation practice. Native speakers of English and Vietnamese conduct them.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION

The analysis and discussion of this paper is based on different sources of data. The data in English and Vietnamese was collected from textbooks, tapes, recorded telephone in English and Vietnamese daily life for practicing conversation and the questionnaire. These questions are concerned about factors such as: gender, age, social position to get information for the discussion about social cultural factors affecting telephone conversation openings.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

The utterances with the aim of telephone conversation openings are chosen. They are then analyzed and classified to find out syntactic, pragmatic features. The following are procedures for data analysis.

- Collecting telephone conversation samples from various sources, “face-to-face” textbook, recorded from daily life conversations, textbooks, ...
- Doing literature work.

- Sorting out telephone conversations
- Developing questionnaire and delivering to native speakers of both language.
- Analyzing the telephone conversation openings.
- Working on the questionnaire
- Analyzing to compare telephone conversation openings in English and Vietnamese.
- Analyzing and discussing the results.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 THE SYNTACTIC FEATURES OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION OPENINGS IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE

Telephone Conversation Openings in both languages were analyzed in the following elements:

Greetings: Greeting and Identification & Introduction

Interrogatives: Wh-questions, Yes- No questions, Declarative questions and Tag questions

Declaratives: Affirmative and Negative statements

Imperatives

Expressives: Complaining, Apologising and Complimenting

4.1.1 The Syntactic Features of Telephone Conversation Openings in English

4.1.1.1 Greetings

In Greeting, there is also a process of identifying someone. The nature of identification is also to recognize the presence of a speaker and to create a friendly, familiar atmosphere for the talk. Usually after the identification, there comes a self-naming as an introduction

4.1.1.2 Interrogatives

From 162 opening telephone conversation samples, we can realize 102 cases in interrogative structures occupying 66.2%. The typical English subtypes consist of Wh-questions with 36 cases accounting for 22%; Yes-No questions with 54 cases accounting for 33%; Declarative questions with 10 cases accounting for 6.2%; Tag questions with 2 cases (1.2 %)

4.1.1.3 Declaratives

From 162 opening telephone conversation samples, we can identify 7 cases in declarative structures occupying 4.9%. Among 7 opening telephone conversation samples in declarative structures, there are 6 cases in affirmative statement (3.7%); 2 cases in negative statement (1.2 %).

4.1.1.4 Imperatives

From 162 opening telephone conversation samples, there are 14 cases in imperative structures occupying 8.6%.

4.1.1.5 Expressive

From 162 opening telephone conversation samples, there are 10 cases expressive structures occupying 6.2 %.

4.1.2 The Syntactic Features of Telephone Conversation Openings in Vietnamese

Like English, from 70 telephone conversations in Vietnamese and 40 questionnaires in Vietnamese, we can identify a variety of structures such as **greetings, interrogatives, declaratives, imperatives and expressives**. Among these structures, we can find that greetings with 85 cases occupying 77.2% ; interrogatives with 59 cases accounting for 55.5%; declarative with 4 cases (3.6%); imperatives with 6 cases (5.5%) ; expressives with 15 cases (13.5%)

4.1.2.1 Greetings

4.1.2.2 Interrogative

4.1.2.3 Declaratives

4.1.2.4 Imperatives

4.1.2.5 Expressives

4.1.3 Similarities and Differences of the Syntactic Features of Telephone Conversation Openings in English and Vietnamese

Now let us make a brief comparison of syntactic representation between each syntactic form of Telephone Conversation Openings in English and Vietnamese.

Table 4.3. Frequency of Syntactic Representation of Telephone Conversation Openings in English and Vietnamese

Structures	English		Vietnamese	
	Number	Frequency %	Number	Frequency %
Greetings	134	82.8	85	77.2
Interrogatives	102	66.2	61	55.5
Declaratives	7	4.3	4	3.6
Imperatives	14	8.6	6	5.5
Expressives	10	6.1	15	13.5
Total	162		110	

Note: the total percentage of the table above reaches more 100% because one telephone conversation contains more than one structure

4.2 THE PRAGMATIC FEATURES OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION OPENINGS IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE

Pragmatics is a systematic way of explaining language use in context. Telephone conversation openings are largely influenced by social relationship and mogul relationship.

4.2.1 Social Relationship for Conversation Openings on Telephone

4.2.1.1 In Terms of Non-familiar People and Familiar People

Telephone conversation openings are largely influenced by the level of strangers and familiarity between participants.

4.2.1.2 In Terms of Gender

Gender also plays a very important role in telephone conversation openings. The data in English and Vietnamese do not actually show a significant difference between the two cultures in this aspect. There seems to be a commonality for all people to choose the partner for their telephone conversation.

4.2.2 Mogul Relationship for Conversation Openings on Telephone

4.2.2.1 In Terms of Age

The age of communicators is one of the elements that highly affect their language use. Nevertheless, how this element exerts an impact on the speaker's interacting style really differs across cultures. We can see that age does not count much in American society, which depicts "you and I", but it does a great deal in Vietnamese culture.

4.2.2.2 In Terms of social status

Social status of communicators is one of the elements that highly affect their language use. Nevertheless, how this element exerts an impact on the speaker's interacting style really differs across cultures and contexts. We can see that social status does not count much in American society, but Vietnamese speakers pay much attention to the status of their partner in telephone conversation initiation.

4.2.3 Similarities and Differences of the Pragmatic Features of Telephone Conversation Openings in English and Vietnamese

4.2.3.1 Similarities

Firstly, The level of strangeness –familiarity, age, gender and social status affect clearly on the telephone conversation openings.

Secondly, Both English and Vietnamese prefer to talk to people they have know before or acquaintances. The reason is for easy topics and avoiding misunderstanding or embarrassment.

Thirdly, The functions of telephone conversation openings and the sentence structures for the representation of the functions are almost the same in English and Vietnamese. All use greeting structure with the most highest rate to start a telephone conversation. Next, interrogative, declarative, expressive and imperative structures

Fourthly, Higher status speaker in Vietnamese and English often use requesting, inquiring and asking to start a telephone conversation with high intonation. Lower status or younger speakers in Vietnamese and English were very concerned about the degree of politeness in telephone conversation with higher status ones by "ạ, dạ, vâng,..” and “sir, madam”.

Fifthly, In both languages, high level of formality can be expressed by the use of conversational expressions, formal vocabulary, completeness of sentence constituent,... Politeness can be achieved by reducing or avoiding imposition on the hearer or increasing the hearer's interest or option.

Finally, In specific context, both languages speakers used greetings structures with funtions such as: greeting, indentification

and introduction, question or requirement. It is pronounced with interrogative intonation both answering to “Alo, Hello” and making question “Who is calling? What?”. Interrogative structure with functions: asking on situations, asking for information, asking for permission, request and offering help....

Both languages used Declarative structure with function: informing information, Imperative structures with functions: advising, order, request...., Expressive structure with functions: complaining, apologising, complimenting and thanking,....

4.2.3.2 Differences

Firstly, in the representation of telephone conversation opening in both languages, the grammar and vocabulary of the language are motivated to the utmost. However, the linguistic strategies are not the same. English principally employs grammar such as *modality, voice, mood,..* and phonology such as *intonation,..* Vietnamese relies much on the system of lexical item such as address terms, particles, mitigating word, which comes in wide range for each group and which inherently bears many pragmatic components such as situations, speaker’s attitudes, interpersonal relationship,...

Secondly, the age factor shows a remarkable difference between English and Vietnamese cultures in the choice of telephone conversation openings. While age is not a big problem for English speakers, the Vietnamese show high consideration to age.

Thirdly, as for status factor, there is also a very significant difference between two groups. For English speakers, everyone is

regarded the same, and opportunity for telephone conversation opening is larger. The higher status people are not often favoured. In contrast, Vietnamese speakers pay much attention to the status of the one they will start telephone conversation with.

Fourthly, for younger speakers also use greeting and interrogative structure with high rate. Older speakers often use requesting, inquiring and asking to start a telephone conversation.

Finally, whatever difference or similarity there is, telephone conversation opening is always a problem of interest and closely related to the life of not just English and Vietnamese Speakers, but to everyone who uses and speaks a language.

4.3 CONCLUSION

First of all, the pragmatic meaning of these forms is not exactly the same. English *hello* performs all these functions too, but it can also be used in other ways, most notably as a greeting, both in face to face interactions and on the phone.

Secondly, answering the phone with a simple *hello* or *hi* is not at all infrequent in English, but is strictly confined to the domestic space of personal interactions (Schegloff 1986).

Thirdly, Receivers often identify themselves upon answering the phone at the workplace. Another move that can be found in receivers’ first turns are offers of availability such as *(how) can I help you?*

Fourthly, expressions like *(how) can I help you?* seem to be not just stereotyped routines, frozen politeness formulas, but rather a

way of actually expressing the receiver's orientation towards the caller's needs. This can be seen quite clearly in the following example, where the bookshop assistant uses the rather uncommon and creative *can I do something* before falling back on the more usual *how can I help*.

As we said, another common move in the English corpus is the offer of availability, which is found even in relatively small businesses, such as a fishing shop (*boat rod and parrot can I help you?*) or a florist (*hello melany can I help you?*). In one case, a car accessories shop, the offer of availability was the only move in the first turn.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS – IMPLICATIONS - LIMITATIONS - RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 CONCLUSIONS

5.1.1 A Summary of the Development of the Study

As it was stated in the previous chapter, the thesis involves the qualitative and quantitative study of the syntactic and pragmatic features of telephone conversation openings in English and Vietnamese.

In order to carry out the study effectively, we have read a lot of theoretical material relating to conversation and other issues concerning the research. After that, we designed an outline to specify the steps of the study.

As for the data collection is concerned, we relied mostly on the data collected from dialogue in textbooks, “face-to-face” textbooks, recorded telephone conversations daily life, questionnaire as well as information searched from the Internet

After selecting and classifying the data, we classified them into categories suitable to each part that I have designed in the outline and then we described, analyzed and made a constrastive analysis to clarify the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese in the way performing structures and level of strangerness – familiarity, age, gender, social status used in telephone conversation openings. The problems under investigation have resulted in the findings which are summarized in the following section.

5.1.2 A Summary on Telephone Conversation Openings

5.1.2.1 Similarities

Firstly, structures in both English and Vietnamese can exist in many different structures such as greeting, interrogative, declarative,imperative and expressive structures.

Secondly, for structural forms, the frequency of occurrences in English is almost similar to that in Vietnamese

Finally, the level of strangerness–familiarity, age, gender and social status affect clearly on the telephone conversation openings.

5.1.2.2 Differences

Syntatically, In English, tag questions have a clear syntax which has the construction of an auxiliary a predicator followed by a

personal pronoun as a subject. Meanwhile, in Vietnamese, to recognize a tag question, we often base on some phrases or words at the end of the sentence such as (**có phải không, có đúng không, hả,...**). In other words, tag question in Vietnamese does not have a clear syntax like in English

In English they can be realized by a modal verb or a finite operator by the verb **be** or **have** before the subject of the sentence. However, in Vietnamese they can be recognized by the final particle “**không, chưa**”

Wh-questions begin with an interrogative Wh-word except for *how* such as: **Who, whom, what, which, where, when...** However, in Vietnamese they typically have the form of a declarative with indefinite words in their positions where the required information goes in declarative sentences

Pragmatically, frequencies of opening strategies used in English and Vietnamese telephone conversation about strangeness-familiarity, age, gender, social status have differences

5.2 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

As far as we know, language plays a very important role in our life. We use language as a tool to communicate everyday and the communicative competence is estimated through speech acts and the understanding of languages of nations we interact

Telephone conversation opening is an interesting problem not only of social communication but of teaching and learning a foreign language as well. Through telephone conversation practice,

learners can develop their speaking skill or communicative ability on telephone. What appeals to language teachers is how to help their learners feel at ease to get their telephone well started and then establish some social relation.

Telephone interaction is perhaps not taught enough in classrooms. However, textbook treatment of telephone conversation is by and large inadequate from an interactional perspective (Wong 2000) [34]. This may be a serious problem for learner. So for language learners, the result can be beneficial. The contrastive analysis will offer them good insight to get involved in communication. It also helps them a lot in enhancing their pragmatic and syntactic awareness of telephone conversation openings. Then, telephone conversation openings will no longer be too hard for their social interaction. When communicating with others on the phone, these learners can manage better and get more success for furthering relationship.

For language teaching, teachers should get the students' attention to how to start a telephone conversation politely. Moreover, the teachers need to point out and distinguish the differences of the ways that people in the two languages perform their self-identification and greetings...

For language learners, people should try to capture the good things on how to talk on the phone.

5.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

In spite of the fact that we have tried our best in finding materials and investing our efforts, due to the lack of time for research and the limited knowledge of the writer, this is not without limitations

Telephone conversation opening is not only a big but also complicated problem in communication. It is not easy to make recordings of telephone conversation. With the limited data for analysis, there are certainly many other problems that the research has not covered.

In addition, the number of English speaking informants is restricted. With a large subject conducting the questionnaire, there may be better panoramic idea about the problem of socio- cultural concern. If there were more recorded telephone conversations, the analysis and result would be better and reliable.

Finally, many of the Vietnamese people are not familiar with doing the questionnaire. Some of the questionnaires in the return are not suitable with the intended questions or some of them are without answers.

With those difficulties and limitations of personal ability, of source of references and outside factors are inevitable. I would be grateful to those who are interested. Any comment, advice and adjustment is valuable to make this work more fulfilled and perfect.

5.4 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

If the future research is conducted in this direction, the following aspects will be taken more consideration and investigation:

- Closing in telephone conversation in English and Vietnamese.
- Cultural features of English and Vietnamese used in telephone conversation openings in English and Vietnamese.