Ellipsis of terms of address and reference in casual communication events in Vietnamese

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There is a general view that pro-drop only occurs in languages with either a 'rich' inflectional system (Taraldsen 1978; Chomsky 1981; Jaeggli 1982; Suñer 1982), or in languages whose pronouns are agglutinating for case, number, or other nominal feature (Huang 1989; Neeleman & Szendrői 2005). The Vietnamese language fits neither of these categories. The explanation of the phenomenon of ellipsis of terms of address and reference (TOA) in this paper is, therefore, not based on these morphological grounds. Rather, it is presented from a pragmatic perspective, which employs discourse analysis as its major methodology. The paper attempts to demonstrate the fact that although Vietnamese is not a pro-drop language in its traditional definition, ellipsis of TOA in casual communication events among Vietnamese speakers is very common, and highly situational. In other words, these elliptic items in this case are referred to as references "in a form of situational (exophoric) presupposition" (Halliday & Hasan 1976: 145).

Keywords: terms of address, ellipsis, grammatical person, Vietnamese

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of ellipsis of terms of address and reference (TOA) can be approached from at least two fundamentally different perspectives: from the perspective of theoretical generative grammar, and from a pragmatic perspective. From the perspective of theoretical generative grammar, ellipsis has been examined in numerous languages as a phenomenon variously known as Pro-Drop, Null-Subject Parameter, or Zero Pronominal. These theoretical permutations have been tested in comparative studies ranging from English and French to Italian and Spanish (Chomsky 1981), Chinese and German (Huang 1984; 1989), Japanese (Hasegawa 1984/1985; Hudson 1994); Korean (Clancy 1997; Sells 1998), and Denya, an Ekoid Bantu language (Abangma 1990). Although a detailed discussion of pro-drop/zero

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anaphora has not been found in the literature of Vietnamese studies, the phenomenon of ellipsis in Vietnamese is examined as a syntactic feature (Cao 1992; 2004) and in discursive practice (H. Nguyen 2009; 2015).

Other scholars have examined the phenomenon of ellipsis from other perspectives such as pragmatics, language processing, and language production. As Nariyama (2003: 27) states, "[…] unless the speaker can assume that there is sufficient context for the addressee to retrieve the referent, they are unlikely to select ellipsis as the referring form". In discussing language processing and production by examining Japanese, Yokokawa (1996: 287) says Japanese speakers' preference for ellipsis of referring forms when there is a context which provides the referential identity of the ellipted element. He also points out that elliptical sentences take less time to process and to produce. This explanation is in line with pragmatic theories that are used in explaining the mechanisms of conversation, one of which was developed by Grice (1975), and another from a different perspective (Sperber & Wilson 1986). In Grice's theory, the maxim of quantity is considered for the sake of language production with maximal efficiency, which discourages one from contributing more information than is required. From a language-processing perspective, Sperber & Wilson (1986) suggest the idea of 'optimal relevance', which presumes that the elliptical utterances must contain the minimum contextual detail to allow for processing. These theories can help explain the common phenomenon of TOA ellipsis in Vietnamese casual conversation. This paper seeks to extend and build on these scholarly ideas by looking at ellipsis from a pragmatic perspective. It discusses ellipsis of Vietnamese address terms on using the discourse analysis approach, which examines the phenomenon as a pragmatic aspect of a language that is rich in terms of address and reference. Also, ellipsis of TOA is largely connected to situations which allow for cognitive recovery of those elliptic elements.

2. Ellipsis of Vietnamese TOA

As it is widely acknowledged in the literature (for example, D. Nguyen 1957; Thompson 1965; Cooke 1968; Luong 1990; Buu 1994), speakers of Vietnamese have various choices among a wide range of terms of address and reference. These include, first of all, what are generally named as "true" personal pronouns by Vietnamese scholars (B. Le 1999; Cao 2003; T. Nguyen 2007, among others) or as "absolute" personal pronouns by Western scholars (Thompson 1965; Cooke 1968): ***tao, ta*** (first person), ***mày*** (second person), ***nó*** (third person), etc. Although there is no common agreement among Vietnamese scholars in terms of the number of pronouns listed as "true" ones due to a lack of a proper definition, it is generally

agreed that none of these "true" personal pronouns are absolutely neutral in their meaning. They are either used in casual conversations in intimate relationships, or as derogatory forms of address/ reference (Thompson 1965; Cooke 1968; K. Nguyen 1997; B. Le 1999; Do 2005). Because of the limits in number and meaning of these pronouns, there are other terms of address and reference that are used as substitutes for personal pronouns in Vietnamese conversations such as kinship terms, titles, and proper names. The use of these terms varies according to age, social status, relationship between the interlocutors, and especially, the context of the conversation. In addition, speakers of Vietnamese sometimes opt for a zero-form of address in situations where, for instance, an interlocutor is not fully aware or deliberately disregards the age difference between him/her and the other interlocutor, maybe to avoid using inappropriate TOA. Ellipsis such as this is rather common upon condition that the conversational situation is transparent enough for the phenomenon to occur without ambiguity regarding whether it is the addressor, addressee(s), or referent(s) that is/are referred to. Studies of Vietnamese language from pragmatic perspectives (Pham 1999; 2003; 2005) suggest that it is vital in conversations involving elliptic pronouns that the interlocutors share a mutual knowledge of:

- the relationship between the people involved
- the topic of the communicative event
- the time and place setting of the communicative event

As Pham (2005: 537) claims, "It is helpful if a speaker and hearer have similar knowledge backgrounds when they start a conversation. […]. Presuppositions are vital to recover the elliptical elements". He also agrees with Halliday & Hasan (1976) that it is the presuppositions that help create the coherence where ellipsis is in evidence.

In the sections that follow, this paper analyses data of Vietnamese elliptic TOA, how the data was collected and documented. The study aims to ascertain ellipsis of TOA as a common phenomenon in address practice in the Vietnamese language.

3. Theoretical concept: Content analysis and conversation analysis

As the focus of this paper is on addressing the frequency as well as the conversational contexts where ellipsis of TOA occurs, content analysis and conversation analysis are believed to be the most appropriate methodologies. As Krippendorff (2004: 21–22) puts it, "[r]ecognizing meanings is the reason that researchers engage in content analysis rather than in some other kind of investigative method".

Mayring (2000) illustrates how content analysis helps in integrating data in specific contexts. As a technique, content analysis is "an approach of empirical,

methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytic rules and step by step models, without rash quantification" (Mayring 2000: 5). Furthermore, as Krippendorff (1989: 404) remarks, "content analysis allows researchers to establish their own context for inquiry, thus opening the door to a rich repertoire of social-scientific constructs by which texts may become meaningful in ways that a culture may not be aware of".

Considered to be one approach to the study of talk in natural settings, conversation analysis has developed since the mid-twentieth century, and has been employed by many researchers, related to various aspects of social studies. In applied linguistics, conversation analysis is considered as a popular technique, as Krippendorff (2004: 68) remarks,

> […] inasmuch as conversations involve several participants whose utterances are made in response to previous utterances and in anticipation of future responses (thus the process is directed from within a conversation), researchers have the opportunity to understand conversations as cooperatively emerging structures that are, at each point in the process, responsive to past interactions and anticipatory of moves to come.

To conclude this section, I shall draw on Josephson & Josephson's (1994) observation of conversation analysis. They state, the understanding of speech is complemented with knowledge about the speakers, about the world, and of the language being used.

4. Data and analysis

The first set of data is from a semi-natural resource. The data was collected by randomly choosing conversations from the sixty-one 50-minute episodes of a Vietnamese television drama series released in 2008, which were transcribed into 198 utterances.[1] Even though it might be argued that this is not an authentic resource of data, the conversations in television dramas are relatively close to real-life situations because they reflect somewhat natural life-contexts that involve people in everyday interactions. In Berger's (2000: 151) words,

> In a sense, […], when we do research on dialogue in a film or other mass-media texts, we are dealing with a writer's perception of the world, but because writers create texts for large number of people, who presumably share their perceptions, we can assume that analysing dialogue in mediated texts is not that different from analysing dialogue in everyday situations.

1. By saying "utterances", I mean full utterances. Those short answers such as "Yes" and "No" were excluded because no grammatical subjects/ objects are needed.

In addition, an empirical data set of 64 utterances used by P. Le (2011) in his PhD dissertation on transnational variation in linguistic politeness in Vietnamese was employed as secondary data source. The utterances from P. Le's data were collected from: (1) conversations between sellers and buyers at a clothing shop in Can Tho (southern Vietnam); and (2), conversations between immigration officers and their customers at an immigration service office in Melbourne (Australia).

The process of data analysis was conducted as follows.

First, all those utterances with elliptic TOA were picked out from the transcriptions. These utterances were then grouped according to the generation gap between the interlocutors. Finally, the ellipted elements were examined in regard to the role of the interlocutors, for example, first-, second-, or third-person.

The most common codes used in the transcriptions and analysis include the following:

1PSN: first person
2PSN: second person
3PSN: third person
SGEN: same generation
OGEN: older generation
YGEN: younger generation

The symbol **Ø** used in the examples refers to the elliptic TOA and where it should have been located.

5. Results

It is important first of all to clarify how an utterance is considered as elliptical. Butler et al. (2011: 398) defines ellipsis as a grammatical phenomenon which is "the omission from a sentence of a word or words which would complete or clarify the construction". During the process of data analysis, what came to light is that many utterances could have been misjudged as elliptical while they were actually not. These include some imperatives and interrogatives which consist of a delayed second-person address term, normally uttered at the very end of the sentence. They are not considered as elliptical utterances because the term of address was actually exposed, though delayed, as in the examples below.

(1.1) a. *Mau đi kẻo người ta chờ,* ***con!*** (Hurry up, son! Don't let her wait.)
b. *Hổm rày có mua sắm gì chung chưa* ***con?*** (Have you bought anything together?)

Both utterances were spoken by addressors who were one generation older than the addressees. Therefore, the kinship term ***con*** 'child' is used to address the second person. In both cases, the delayed element is actually the grammatical subject to the main verb (underlined) of the sentence although it was not uttered until the end of the sentence, which means they are readily moveable to the position before the main verb. The alternative Vietnamese versions read as follows.

(1.1) a1. ***Con*** *mau đi kẻo người ta chờ.* (Hurry up, son! Don't let her wait.)
b1. *Hổm rày* ***con*** *có mua sắm gì chung chưa?* (Have you bought anything together?)

However, when the term ***con*** in the above utterances appears at the end of a sentence, it may also be treated as a(n) (optional) vocative word because the utterances make sense without that final element. In this case, if *con* is left out, which happens elsewhere more often than not, the utterance becomes elliptical.

Overall, 88 out of 198 utterances from the television drama episodes consist of one or more elliptic TOA, accounting for 44%. This percentage includes 94% by people of the same generation, 4.5% by people of an older generation talking to a younger generation, and only 1.5% by people of a younger generation speaking to those of an older generation. The secondary resource of data reveals a modest percentage of 29.7% of ellipsis of this kind, in which utterances performed by people of the same generation account for 78.9%, 5.3% by people of an older generation talking to a younger one, and 15.8% vice versa. The statistics are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

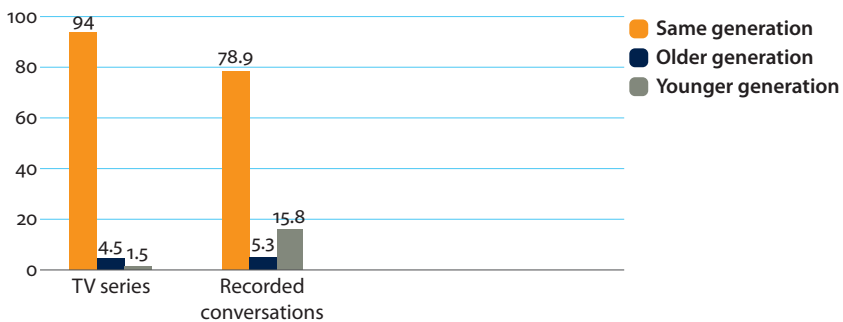

Figure 1. Ellipsis of Vietnamese TOA

Figure 1 presents the percentage of ellipsis of TOA in address practice among Vietnamese people. What can be seen is that ellipsis of this kind occurs with the highest frequency in utterances performed by people from the same generation. Among people in different generations, the percentages vary by between 3.00 and 10.5.

The significant findings will be discussed in the next section which reflects the distributions of ellipsis of TOA among first, second, and third persons.

First of all, it is observed that among the 217 utterances examined, 9 are not in an obvious position to be decided as to whether the ellipted TOA is the second or the third person. The ambiguity lies in the fact that the person to whom the utterance was implied in that circumstance was either sleeping/ unconscious, or was far away and (s)he could not hear the utterance. The target of the utterance, therefore, can be either/both an addressee and/or a referent. It is also notable that in all these cases, the addressor happened to be speaking to him-/herself. In the following example, Trúc (female, 20 years old) came home after work to find her housemate Nam (male, 22) sleeping. After giving him a shout and getting no response, she talked to herself about him. Trúc's monologue can be translated in two different versions as shown below Example (1.2). Because the focus is on the ellipted elements in the utterance and their frequency, a translation gloss would unnecessarily complicate rather than facilitate the example. For this reason, only a broad English translation is provided. All the ellipted grammatical subject(s) and object(s) are represented as **Ø**, and highlighted in bold form in the English versions.

(1.2) Vietnamese:
*Lại **Ø** ngủ nữa rồi! Không biết **Ø** lau nhà chưa ta? **Ø** Lau rồi. Trời! **Ø** Lau xong cũng không thèm xả cây lau nhà luôn!*
English translations:
He is sleeping again! I wonder if **he**'s cleaned the floor. Yes **he** did. Look! **He** finished the job without rinsing the mop.
You are sleeping again! I wonder if **you** cleaned the floor. Yes **you** did. Look! **You** finished the job without rinsing the mop.

Similar ambiguity is found in the example below, when Nam got up after a night of drinking. Again, Trúc's utterances were thrown into the air without Nam's interaction, thus suggesting that Nam was not engaging in the conversation. The translation Example (1.3a) expresses Trúc's thought process. Otherwise, the translation should read as Example (1.3b).

(1.3) Vietnamese:
Ø Mặt tỉnh bơ vậy trời! Ø Đừng nói là Ø không nhớ gì hết nhe.
English translations:
a. Oh my God! **He** is behaving as if nothing happened. I don't believe that **he** doesn't remember anything.
b. Look at **you**! **You** are behaving as if nothing happened. Don't **you** tell me that **you** don't remember anything.

It is noted that all the personal pronouns (in bold form) in the English versions of Example (1.3a) and Example (1.3b) were omitted from the Vietnamese original utterances.

Apart from those instances that are found ambiguous in regards to the engagement of the addressee/referent in the conversation, the rest of the data is quite transparent in terms of the grammatical person that represents the elliptic element. Figure 2 below shows the distributions of ellipted TOA drawn from the analysis of data from both resources.

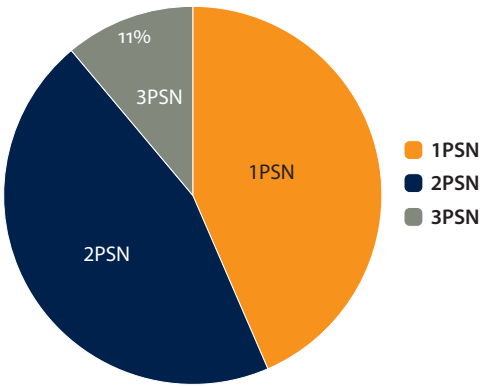

Figure 2. Distributions of ellipted TOA

There are four important discussing points.

1. Similar to English, first- and second-person terms of address in Vietnamese are omitted more often than third-person. Also, when it is the case of the second-person address terms, the utterances are very often in imperative or interrogative form, and sometimes in exclamations. This kind of ellipsis only occurs in casual conversations in English, for example, in casual chatting form. Let us compare the following examples.

(1.4)	IN VIETNAMESE	IN ENGLISH	SENTENCE TYPE
a.	*Đi đi!* '**You** go away!'	Out! (= **You** get out of here!)	Imperative
b.	*Bị gì vậy?* 'What's wrong with **you**?'	Wanna go? (= Do **you** want to go?)	Interrogative
c.	*Thấy ghê quá hà!* '**You** look awful!'	Clever! (= How clever **you** are!)	Exclamation

In Vietnamese, however, it is noted that ellipsis of the first- or second-person TOA may happen in more formal speech events such as in the case of an immigration officer and his/ her customer, provided that there is certain understanding intimacy between the two interlocutors. It is particularly acceptable when the addressor is much older than the addressee and so the way the speaker addresses the other interlocutor is similar to how they address their own children.

2. In the case of declaratives, which account for 28.1% of elliptic first- and second-person TOA, it is interesting to note that the majority (73.5%) of the utterances begin with a main verb. Examples (1.5) below demonstrate some elliptical declaratives, with the main verbs underlined.

(1.5) a. *Ø Năn nỉ mà. Ø Cho mượn ha.*
beg EMP lend END
'I beg you. Please, lend me some (money).'

b. *Tự dưng Ø thấy chóng mặt thôi.*
suddenly feel dizzy END
'I suddenly feel dizzy.'

c. *Thì bây giờ còn Ø có hai đứa con.*
PART now still have two chidren
'We still have two kids.'

As shown in the examples above, apart from additional words such as the adverbs "suddenly", "now", "still" and the particle *thì*, it is the main verbs that open the utterances. This observation is in line with Cao's (1992: 140) observation about thematic structures in Vietnamese, in particular, with the use of the particle *thì*. My data set reveals a percentage of 17.6 where this particle appeared in the elliptical delaratives with the first- and second-person engaged in.

3. In regards to elliptic third-person referent terms, which account for 11.1% of the distributions, it is important to note a contrast with the case of first- and second-persons. While 71.9% of elliptic first- and second-person TOA are in imperative or interrogative forms, only 16.7% of elliptic third-person referent terms are in these forms. Also, ellipsis of grammatical subjects accounts for the majority (99.1%) of all ellipsis of TOA related to third person. In addition, unlike elliptic first- and second-person TOA, which are identifiable in the conversations with the interlocutors involved, ellipsis of third-person referent terms heavily relies on the context(s) before and while the utterances were being performed. An example of this is a situation in which Nam (male, 22 years old) was asked by his parents to leave home after he lied to them. When he later found himself homeless, he became desperate with only one bag of clothes, and then he suddenly saw an unexpected sum of money. What was in his mind at that moment reads as follows.

(1.6) Vietnamese:
Ø Đuổi mình đi mà vẫn Ø tốt ghê. Nhất quyết Ø bố thí cho mình 20 triệu.
English translation:
(**They**) kicked me out of home but (**they**) were still so kind. (**They**) intentionally gave me this 20 million đong.

Again, the main verbs are underlined, and the symbol **Ø** represents the ellipted third-person referent terms, which are in bold form in the English translation.

Example (1.6) strongly suggests that in order for an outsider to figure out to whom the ellipted TOA applies, the contexts that are connected to the utterances play a significant role. This kind of context-dependent ellipsis also means that the elliptic TOA is highly exophoric, where the information of the personal reference is provided by the situation itself (Halliday & Hasan 1976).

4. As indicated in preceding sections of this paper, the phenomenon of ellipsis of Vietnamese TOA specifically deals with casual conversations, since the zero TOA is highly suggestive of a lack of formality in the discourse setting (Pham 2003; T. Nguyen 2007). This explains why the distributions of elliptical utterances performed by interlocutors of the same generation are much higher than the other distributions. Particularly, it is considered *vô lễ* 'impolite' or/and 'disrespectful' for people of a younger generation to speak to people of an older generation using elliptical TOA, which is *nói trỏng* in Vietnamese. Nevertheless, from a pragmatic perspective, the notion of "politeness" has to be defined according to the conversational situation itself. It does not only depend on obvious factors such as age gap and differences in social positions, and the relationship between the people involved in the conversation, but also the attitude of the speaker towards the person addressed or referred to. An interesting example I found from the data resource is related to conversations that occurred between Nam and his tutor, whose age gap is between 20 and 30. One can assume that it is a relatively formal situation, especially in a cultural context like Vietnamese, where teachers are generally highly respected. The age gap also suggests solidarity between the two people involved. However, the situation revealed an understood agreement between them, which was that Nam would pay the tutor a large amount of money after the tutor successfully put him into university by cheating on the entrance exam. Nam paid no respect to the tutor, and therefore, the zero form was employed most of the time either to address himself or the tutor. One of Nam's utterances is presented in Example (1.7) below.

(1.7) Vietnamese: *Có cái băng ghi âm mà **Ø**[1] cứ đem ra hù **Ø**[2] hoài!*
English: **You**[1] keep threatening **me**[2] with that same recording!

In the example above, the first ellipted element ***Ø***[1] represents a grammatical subject (you) and the second, a grammatical object (me). This example strongly indicates that the casualness or informality of a situation is not only about the setting and relationship between the interlocutors, but also about the specific attitudes of the people involved. The attitude as discussed here can be either positive, if people in distant relationships attempt to break the gap between them, or negative, as recently illustrated in the example of Nam and his tutor. A pragmatic approach is, therefore, useful in helping to explain linguistic phenomena related to conversational practice.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined ellipsis of TOA in Vietnamese by drawing upon the body of discourse-based research on terms of address and reference. It has argued that ellipsis of TOA is a common phenomenon in Vietnamese address practice, particularly in casual contexts and among people of the same generation. It also suggests that besides the contexts and the relationship between the people involved in a conversation, pragmatic features such as the speaker's attitude towards the addressee or referent should also be taken into account. More studies on ellipsis in a wider range of conversational circumstances would be helpful in explaining the strategies of the people who employ ellipted TOA in Vietnamese.

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Abbreviations

1PSN	first person
2PSN	second person
3PSN	third person
EMP	emphatic word
END	ending word
OGEN	older generation
PART	particle
SGEN	same generation
TOA	terms of address and reference
YGEN	younger generation

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