

Young people's language today from the perspective of some modern linguistic theories

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Abstract: *Young people's language today is a social phenomenon which causes many contradictory reactions: most are criticisms, but there is also agreement or sympathy saying this is a linguistic phenomenon associated with the development of modern society. In this article, instead of giving opinions by feeling, based on feelings of love and hate or expressing aggressively as often seen in the media today, the author presents different views on young people's language today from the perspective of some modern linguistic theories. In our opinion, feeling cannot replace reason of scientific arguments.*

Key words: Young people's language, Modern linguistics, Systemic functional grammar, Generative grammar

1. Mixed opinions on young people's "non-standard" Vietnamese today

In the context of ongoing renovation and international integration in Vietnam, together with the rapid economic and social changes, the development and preservation of the purity of Vietnamese language are

urgent issues, including very new issues.

In principle, similarly to other languages, Vietnamese language has to develop to meet the needs to express general perception of developing society, needs to express Vietnamese people's increasingly complicated and sophisticated affection. Especially, with scientific and technological development, the

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introduction of a variety of new communication forms such as e-mail, online chat, social network etc. has created types of communication language which have not been seen before.

However, such strong development also leads to numerous consequences, including those related to the preservation and development of Vietnamese language which are represented through young people's or generation @'s "non-standard" expressions today. Generally, it can be seen that, the society is insecure about language. Evidently, there has been a series of articles on the media alarming the current situation of Vietnamese language such as: "Vietnamese language is distorted", "Spelling worries", "The purity of Vietnamese language has to be preserved", "Vietnamese language today: to laugh or to cry", "Thought on Vietnamese language on social networks", "Messy Vietnamese language in period of cultural exchange", "Laugh out loud with tears, Vietnamese language today",...

According to criticisms of authors of abovementioned articles, the cause of this situation is due to the influence from the flip side of the market economy, the degradation of social morality, the frivolity of young generations born in the 80s, 90s and

also the deregulation of language usage on mass media...

However, there are also some comments saying that we should not be too worried, those "ridiculous", "exaggerated", "weird" expressions of young people today will quickly pass and Vietnamese language has strong internal strength to protect itself, to endure with the nation. Moreover, young people's expressions today also show interesting innovations. For example, at the dialogue "Language of young people in era @ through pictures of artist Thành Phong" held in Hanoi in March 2012, when assessing the expressions such as "Chán như con gián" ("Bored as a cockroach"), "Chảnh như con cá cảnh" ("Arrogant as an aquarium fish"), "Dở hơi biết bơi" ("Silly person knows how to swim"), "Ăn chơi sợ gì mưa rơi" ("Party without fear of rain") etc., teacher Văn Như Cương expressed his delight with young people's linguistic creativity today. He said, these expressions have truly brought interesting and unexpected meanings which traditional expressions cannot describe. Moreover, he thought that, these expressions have represented a shift from the old to the new, reflected very interesting historical issues. Giving examples, he said, our forefathers once said "Cái khó bó cái

khôn” (“Difficulty prevents invention”) to indicate the hunger prevented us from succeeding in life. However, during the resistance against the French, the whole nation faced “the difficulty” (“cái khó”) so it “showed the invention” (“lò cái khôn”), representing efforts to overcome all difficulties to fight and win. However, if the hunger, the difficulty continues, then “difficulty shows stupidity”. Clearly, three expressions - “Cái khó bó cái khôn” (“Difficulty prevents invention”)/ “Cái khó lò cái khôn” (“Difficulty shows invention” or “Necessity is the mother of invention” / “Cái khó lò cái ngu” (“Difficulty shows stupidity”) - reflect three different historical periods and are not completely arbitrary linguistic changes. On the beauty of these three expressions, teacher Văn Như Cương concluded: “How can I not love?”.

In this article, we do not rush to criticize or advocate young people’s language usage today. Instead, we believe that, young people’s usage of “non-standard” Vietnamese language today needs to be examined in different dimensions and linguists must seek modern linguistic arguments to answer the pressing question of the entire society: Is such usage of Vietnamese language serious or not? What should we do to develop

and preserve the purity of Vietnamese language as well as Vietnamese cultural identity?

2. Outlining the situation of young people’s “non-standard” Vietnamese language today

We believe that, the new issues posed for the preservation and development of Vietnamese language is the phenomenon of young people using unusual combinations, using Vietnamese phonetic variants in speaking and writing, using English mixed with Vietnamese. These phenomena can be described broadly as follows:

- Using unusual, illogical language

Young people like to use expressions which seem nonsense, weird like: “Cướp trên giàn mướp” (“Rob on loofah trellis”), “Buồn như con chuồn chuồn” (“Sad like dragonfly”), “Chảnh như con cá cảnh” (“Arrogant as an aquarium fish”), “Chán như con gián” (“Bored as a cockroach”),... or use unusual combination such as “Hơi bị đẹp” (“Freaking nice”).

Young people like to use pun (mostly homophonic puns), for example: “Yêu nhau trong sáng, phang nhau trong tối” (“Love in light, make love in dark”), “Campuchia tiền ăn trưa” (“Share lunch bill”),...

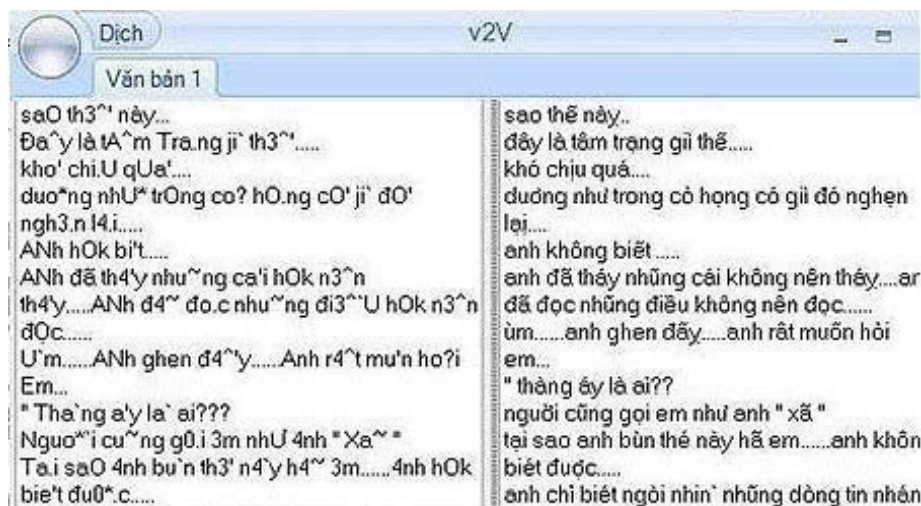
- Using Vietnamese phonetic variants in speaking and writing

This situation has shocked many people, especially parents. They are shocked because of young people's expressions which they think are "distorting" Vietnamese language, because they cannot understand what young people are saying.

In mobile phone messages, online chat etc., words such as: "rồi" ("already") is written as "roài", "không" ("no") becomes "hông"/"hem", "biết" ("know") becomes "bít", are very

is written as 3, i becomes j, g becomes 9, o becomes 0, c becomes k, b becomes p etc. The mentioned sentence "Thế là cậu không biết rồi, hi hi" ("So you don't know, hee hee") will be written as: "Th3 l4 k4u h3m pj t r04j, hyhy".

Such expression is too cryptic that a female student in Ho Chi Minh city has put her effort to write translation software for language @, named as V2V (Vietnamese to Vietnamese). The picture below is an illustration of this software application.



popular. The result is that, there are sentences like: "The la cau hem bit roai, hihi" ("translated" into normal language as "It means you don't know, hee hee"). Moreover, generation @ even "creates" weird writing styles, such as letter "a" becomes 4, letter e

However, software V2V cannot keep pace with the distortion speed of language @. As time goes on, language @ has more and more variations, making first version of software V2V to become out-of-date and cannot translate correctly.

Consequently, the author has to continuously study and upgrade to version 1.3, and now version... 1.4. (Cited: Nguyễn Văn Toàn, “Vietnamese language is... dusty”, <http://www.vietnamnet.vn/vn/chinh-tri/tuanvietnam/71742/tieng-viet-dang-bi---bui-bam-.html>).

- Using English mixed with Vietnamese

Generation @ is generally good at foreign languages. In their language, it is quite common to use English mixed with Vietnamese. For example, this is the introduction of a teenager: “Hi mọi người! Mình là..., mình rất vui được làm quen với everybody. Mình đang study ở ... High School. Mình rất confident trong các extracurricular activities. Hiện nay mình đang cope up with chương trình học rất killer của trường... Nhưng mình tin với capacity của mình, mình sẽ hoàn thành completely cái syllabus đó” (“Hi everybody! I am..., very nice to meet everybody. I'm studying at High School. I'm very confident in extracurricular activities. Currently, I'm coping up with killing the curriculum of my school. However, I'm very confident with my capacity. I will completely finish that syllabus”) (<http://www.bacgiangonline.net/diendan/showthread.php?t=10709&page=1>).

The using of English mixed with Vietnamese is not only seen in

generation @, but also in older people who studied abroad or have chance to frequently contact with foreigners in their daily work. For example, a customer of Vietnam Airlines can say to a ticket staff: “Vé này có cần con phom (confirm) lại không chị?” (“Does this ticket need to be confirmed again?”). The risk of this way of speaking is the forming of a pidgin language like French pidgin before 1945.

3. Assessing current young people's language from the perspective of some modern linguistic theories

The problems of Vietnamese language such as speaking like foreign language, using Vietnamese language mixed with foreign language, young people's unusual expressions etc. have received attention from linguists from different perspectives with different questionings.

Firstly, the phenomenon of using foreign language mixed with Vietnamese language is related to code-switching, code-mixing and borrowings, which have been discussed a lot in social linguistic studies (Nguyễn Thúy Nga, 2013). According to social linguists, this phenomenon is related to member's status in specific social groups in multilingual societies. There is a relationship between these phenomena

with class status, ethnic status and social status. It is also seen as a way to structure the exchange of verbal interactions. In particular, some discourse analysts believe that code-switching and code-mixing not only reflect social states but also are tools to establish social state. After all, these are the simplest, less expensive ways to mark social groups, thus are particularly preferred by young people.

Secondly, social linguists also consider young people's unusual expressions as a way of marking groups and expressing identity. Young people's distinctive language usage is an expression of their identity. In short, it is an expression of personal and interpersonal meanings, under so-called "social style". With such language expressions, social linguistics raise the issues of personal variations within individuals (Crystal David, 2006; Coupland, 2007; Biber and Conrad, 2009). Young people create unusual expressions to help them to distinguish from previous generations which they call Mr. Khot, granpa Khot for fun (Khottabych, the main character in Lazar Lagin's work).

Besides the approach of social linguistics, it is also possible to approach and assess the phenomenon of "non-standard" Vietnamese

language from the perspectives of two current well-known linguistic theories called *systemic functional grammar* of Halliday and *generative grammar* of Chomsky, with conflicting results.

Halliday's *systemic functional grammar* views language as a resource to make meaning and believes that language has evolved to obtain different structures as the basis for our choices in expressing experiential meanings, interpersonal meanings and textual meanings. In Halliday's system of systemic functional grammar, "non-standard" languages can be put into dialects or registers. Dialect is language organized in relation to who the speaker is in a regional or social sense (in which we have regional and social dialects). And register is language organized in relation to "what use is being made of language". Halliday treats register, or "language according to use", as a plane of semantic organization which can be specified through the concept of field (the organization of ideational and experiential meanings, mode (the organization of textual meanings) and tenor (the organization of interpersonal meanings) (Halliday, 1985).

It can be seen that, according to Halliday, registers are the results of choice which young people use to

express meanings. Hence, at the end, the unusual, “standard-deviated” expressions are how speakers use to express meanings.

Young people’s language has both positive and negative aspects. Whether positive or negative, according to the perspective of systemic functional grammar, such “non-standard” expressions exist objectively and are the basis for the next choices. In other words, systemic functional grammar believes that “non-standard” language is also a part of selection system, and in principle, “non-standard” concepts can produce and be multiplied in many different social situations. From the view of development, if positive “non-standard” phenomena can have a good contribution to language, negative “non-standard” phenomena will gradually degenerate, change the language system in adverse direction. Consequently, from the approach of systemic functional grammar, the current situation of negative “non-standard” language of young people is alarming. It is necessary to take measures to prevent and educate young people to return to the pure, standard and community-accepted way of speaking.

However, for current “non-standard” Vietnamese language phenomena, people who follow Chomsky’s theory

of *generative grammar* assess differently. Based on the assumption that language ability is innate, inherited and syntax includes rules that are autonomous, independent of meaning and usage, Chomsky’s generative grammar believes that imperfect, degenerated language phenomena generally, or young people’s usage of “non-standard” language specifically, will not be able to distort or change the language system (Chomsky, 1965; Cook and Newson, 2007).

With the view that, in English, a sentence like “Colourless green ideas sleep furiously” is absolutely grammatically correct (despite of weird semantics and pragmatics), according to Chomsky’s theory, young people’s current “non-standard” combinations such as “Cướp trên giàn mướp” (“Rob on loofah trellis”), “Buồn như con chuồn chuồn” (“Sad like dragonfly”), “Nhí nhảnh con cá cảnh” (“playful like aquarium fish”) are also absolutely grammatically correct because such combinations comply with principles previously established through combinations that are considered grammatically correct, such as “Cướp trên tàu” (“Rob on the ship”), “Buồn như đêm tang” (“As sad as night”), “Nhí nhảnh con nít” (“Playful like kid”). Therefore, such combinations

do not change the grammar system of Vietnamese language.

According to Chomsky's theories, the usage of Vietnamese phonetic variant, change of spelling, mix of English and Vietnamese (borrowing, code-switching or code-mixing) etc. are just errors of expression and performance, absolutely have no impact on changing the rules of universal grammar in general and Vietnamese grammar in particular which have been established in the deep.

If the hypothesis of human brain has built-in principles of universal grammar like designs, helping children to acquire grammar of mother tongue easily, is correct, then the consequence that once the child establishes the grammar structure of their mother tongue (when the child is about 7 years old), the deviations in performance later cannot be intervened and change previously established grammar system.

Therefore, for Chomsky's followers, the worries that current "non-standard" phenomena amongst young people can ruin Vietnamese language are excessive and do not have justifiable basis. Obviously, we should still have good language education policies to help young people to understand the good and beauty of

Vietnamese language, of Vietnamese culture ingrained in the language passed on from our forefathers. However, if considering from the view of generative grammar, we will not be pessimistic or afraid that Vietnamese language may be degenerated.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the volatility of young people's language should be understood as an inevitable movement in the internal of language. However, the extent of acceptance or replication also depends partially on social awareness. The general rule is that, the good will be disseminated, socially-accepted; the bad will be eliminated, used infrequently and eventually disappear. Language will have its own screening and regulation mechanisms.

Despite of being pessimistic or optimistic when viewing the issue from different theories, when facing young people's current movement or phenomenon of "non-standard" language, it is important to maintain and develop a good language education, especially through schools and media, preserving the purity as well as facilitate the development of Vietnamese language. However, education of language awareness should always take into account of psychology of age. This should be

specifically noted when establishing any rule or policy interfering young people's language usage.

In terms of *forecasting*, it can be predicted that some of young people's current humorous, interesting, non-offensive expressions will be accepted socially and can be put into Vietnamese language system as new idioms, proverbs, patterns of expression. However, the majority of generation @'s speaking and writing will gradually become old, out-of-date. According to such logic, the mysterious, confusing writing will gradually be eliminated, and expressions such as "Chán như con gián" ("Bored as a cockroach"), "Buồn như con chuồn chuồn" ("Sad as dragonfly") etc. will gradually lose their originality and be forgotten. However, the problem is that, other unusual expressions and combinations will appear in young people's language because the reason and motivation for such writing and speaking – being comfortable, prefer novelties, like asserting themselves – still exist amongst young people with different variations, in parallel with social development. And we should be prepared to face this situation.

Particularly for English words appearing due to code-switching or code-mixing, we agree with the

suggestions that words used with high frequency can become borrowings and put into Vietnamese vocabulary system (Nguyễn Văn Khang, 2010). In the next step, we may see changes in form or content of words in order for them to exist as a sustainable lexical unit in Vietnamese language as what we have seen from borrowings from Chinese and French in historical development of Vietnamese language □

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