

A Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Speech Act of Congratulation in Vietnamese and American Contexts

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Abstract—This study investigates the cross-cultural pragmatics of congratulatory speech acts by comparing Vietnamese and American speakers. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates both quantitative and qualitative analyses to examine strategy usage and formulation. Data were collected through a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) administered to 78 Vietnamese and 78 American participants. The DCT presented three situational scenarios reflecting varying power dynamics. Findings indicate that while both groups primarily employ Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices, cultural variations shape secondary strategies. Vietnamese speakers favor Offering good wishes and Suggestion to Celebrate, reflecting their collectivist cultural values, while American speakers frequently use Expression of Positive emotions and Expression of Personal happiness, in line with individualistic communication norms. Power dynamics influence strategy selection, with lower-power individuals favoring direct strategies to enhance social rapport. Vietnamese participants uniquely suggest that the congratulated individual host a celebration, while Americans maintain consistent emotional expressiveness across hierarchical contexts. Data coding followed Elwood's (2004) taxonomy, with adaptations to reflect context-specific findings. This study contributes to the field of intercultural pragmatics by demonstrating how sociocultural factors and power dynamics shape congratulatory expressions. The results have implications for cross-cultural communication, language education, and professional intercultural interactions.

Index Terms—cross-cultural pragmatics, congratulatory speech act, Discourse completion task, power in language use

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of speech acts plays a crucial role in cross-cultural pragmatics, offering insights into how language is used not only to convey information but also to maintain social relationships (Le Do et al., 2025). Speech acts, as defined by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969), encompass various communicative functions such as requests, apologies, and compliments, each shaped by cultural norms and social expectations. Understanding these acts in cross-cultural settings is essential for fostering effective intercultural communication and mitigating misunderstandings, particularly in an increasingly globalized world (Thomas, 1983). Among these speech acts, congratulation holds a unique position as a social lubricant that strengthens interpersonal bonds by acknowledging and validating others' achievements (Elwood, 2004). Scholars in pragmatics have identified two key dimensions of variation in the production and interpretation of speech acts: pragmatolinguistic and sociopragmatic differences (Culpeper & Haugh, 2014). The linguistic strategies employed by speakers to perform speech acts provide valuable insights into sociolinguistic and sociocultural differences in language use. This research examines the pragmatolinguistic realizations of the speech act of congratulation in Vietnamese and American English. It also explores the sociopragmatic implications that arise from these realizations.

The speech act of congratulation denotes an expression of praise and goodwill, reflecting a speaker's positive evaluation of a joyful event or situation (Culpeper & Haugh, 2014). In its simplest form, congratulation may be seen as a customary or traditional behavior unique to each culture. However, with the development of linguistic theories and

politeness research, congratulation has increasingly been recognized as a vital speech act closely tied to rituals and politeness in everyday communication (Brown & Levinson, 1987). According to Searle's (1969) classification, congratulations fall under the category of expressive speech acts, which serve to maintain and strengthen relationships between the speaker and the recipient. In cross-cultural settings, the way congratulations are expressed and responded to can reveal underlying societal structures, including power relations, social distance and imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This study aims to compare the realization of the speech act of congratulation in Vietnamese and American contexts and to analyze how power dynamics influence the choice of congratulatory strategies in both cultures. Power relations play a crucial role in influencing communication approaches across different cultures (Le Do et al., 2025). In high-context societies like Vietnam, where social hierarchy and respect are ingrained in everyday exchanges, the speech act of congratulation often demonstrates politeness and deference, especially when addressing those in higher status (Nguyễn, 2019). Conversely, in low-context cultures like the United States, where egalitarianism is more pronounced, congratulatory expressions tend to be more direct and informal, regardless of the interlocutors' relative social positions (Kasper, 2006).

The rationale for comparing Vietnamese and American speech acts lies in their contrasting cultural frameworks, particularly concerning power relations. Vietnam's collectivist orientation emphasizes group harmony and respect for authority, influencing how individuals communicate in hierarchical relationships (Hofstede, 2001). In contrast, the United States' individualistic culture promotes equality and personal achievement, often reflected in more straightforward and expressive communicative styles (Ting-Toomey, 1999). This study aims to examine the cultural subtleties of congratulation, highlighting both the similarities and differences between the strategies used in Vietnam and the United States, while also exploring how the power of the addressee shapes these strategies in each cultural setting. The research questions are as follows:

1. To what extent do Vietnamese and American speakers use the realization strategies of the speech act of congratulation differently?

2. What are the effects of the addressee's power on the choice of congratulatory strategies in each culture?

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the growing field of variational pragmatics, which seeks to examine how factors such as region, power, gender, age, and ethnicity influence communicative language use (Schneider & Barron, 2008). Analyzing the speech act of congratulation in Vietnamese and American English provides valuable insights into cross-cultural communication. Furthermore, although speech acts have been widely studied, the speech act of congratulation remains relatively underexplored, especially in non-Western contexts (Alghazo et al., 2021). This study enhances existing literature by presenting findings from a cross-cultural comparison of congratulatory practices in two linguistically and culturally distinct contexts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is grounded in the two pragmatic theories of Speech Acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979) and Politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1979), providing a theoretical basis for analyzing language use in communication.

A. *Speech Act Theory*

In communication, speakers perform various actions through language, which are collectively referred to as speech acts, despite being expressed in different forms. The concept of speech acts was initially introduced by Austin (1962) and subsequently developed by scholars such as Searle (1979) and Yule (1996). Austin proposed that producing an utterance inherently involves performing an action. He identified three distinct layers of action within an utterance: the locutionary act (the act of producing meaningful linguistic expressions), the illocutionary act (the communicative intent behind the utterance), and the perlocutionary act (the intended effect of the utterance on the listener) (Yule, 1996).

According to Yule (1996), the locutionary act involves the production of a meaningful sentence, the illocutionary act conveys the speaker's intended meaning, and the perlocutionary act reflects the impact of the utterance on the listener. Searle (1979) emphasized that speech acts are the fundamental components of linguistic communication.

Austin (1962) categorized speech acts based on their communicative functions into five types: verdictives (e.g., appraising); exercitives (e.g., appointing, ordering, advising, warning); commissives (e.g., promising, proposing); behabitives (e.g., apologizing, congratulating, commending, condoling); and expositives (e.g., conceding, assuming).

However, Searle (1979) presented an alternative classification that has become more widely accepted, focusing on how listeners interpret utterances rather than how speakers express their intentions. Searle's taxonomy includes five categories: commissives (commit the speaker to future actions, such as promises or threats), declarations (change the existing state of affairs, such as legal pronouncements), directives (aim to get the listener to perform an action, such as requests or suggestions), expressives (convey the speaker's emotions or attitudes, such as apologies or compliments), and representatives (describe states or events, such as assertions or reports).

Within these classifications, the speech act of congratulation is categorized as a behabitive according to Austin's framework and as an expressive in Searle's taxonomy. The term is defined in multiple ways in Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2003, p. 262). The first definition describes it as "to express pleasure to (a person) on the occasion of success or good fortune". The second definition extends this notion to "expressing sympathetic pleasure at (an event)". The third definition characterizes congratulation as "to express a salute or greeting".

Building on the foundational theories of speech acts by Austin (1962) and Searle (1979), which categorize and explain the functions of speech acts, the assumption that these acts are governed by universal structures has been a topic of debate. While Austin and Searle proposed that speech acts are universal, with their realization rooted in shared linguistic frameworks, subsequent cross-cultural studies have challenged this view. Rosaldo (1982) noted that Searle, influenced by Austin's work, relied on English performative verbs as a framework for what he considered universal linguistic principles. However, research in cross-cultural pragmatics (e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1987; Wierzbicka, 2003) has demonstrated significant variations in how speech acts are realized across languages and cultures, particularly in terms of pragmalinguistic forms and sociopragmatic norms. Additionally, studies in interlanguage pragmatics have shown that communication breakdowns often result from pragmatic failures speech act execution (Guo, 2012). Therefore, thorough investigations of the two key dimensions of variation- pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic differences- in speech act production and interpretation are crucial for understanding effective communication across cultures.

B. Politeness Theories

The second theory directly relevant to this study is Politeness Theory (Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Politeness may be defined as a factor that shapes the way members of a cultural community think and behave appropriately. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory is grounded in the concept of face, initially introduced by Goffman (1967). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), face refers to an individual's public self-image that they aim to maintain during social interactions. They distinguish between two types of face: negative face and positive face. Negative face reflects an individual's desire to act freely without interference from others, whereas positive face represents the need to be accepted and appreciated by others. Building on this concept, Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed two types of politeness strategies: positive politeness, which attends to the hearer's positive face by showing closeness and solidarity, and negative politeness, which respects the hearer's negative face by minimizing imposition. When a speaker disregards either the positive or negative face of the hearer, they commit a face-threatening act (FTA), which Brown and Levinson (1987) define as actions that inherently challenge the face needs of the hearer or speaker. They further classify FTAs into two categories: those that threaten negative face-by indicating that the speaker imposes on the hearer's autonomy-and those that threaten positive face-by suggesting that the speaker is indifferent to the hearer's desires or feelings.

According to Leech (1983), certain speech acts are intrinsically polite, such as congratulation, because they provide material or emotional benefits to the hearer and serve the function of expressing politeness. Congratulation fulfills several maxims of politeness, including modesty, agreement, and sympathy. Leech also posits that congratulation is a face-enhancing act, which can elevate the face of either the speaker or the hearer. Therefore, congratulation can be viewed as a positive politeness strategy. Positive politeness strategies aim to foster intimacy and expand social relationships by expressing the speaker's intent to connect with others (Brown & Levinson, 1987). As such, congratulatory acts need not be mitigated but rather expressed with intensified structures to enhance politeness. However, in certain cultures and contexts, congratulation can also be perceived as a face-threatening act to the hearer's negative face, as it may impose on their freedom of action and compel them to respond or reciprocate appropriately (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Additionally, the hearer's positive face may be compromised if they feel embarrassed or undeserving of the congratulation, particularly in public settings. Moreover, congratulation can threaten the speaker's positive face, as the act of offering congratulations may implicitly position the speaker as less successful than the hearer or expose potential envy, especially if the speaker feels compelled to offer congratulations despite personal reluctance (Holtgraves, 2013). Therefore, congratulation must satisfy two conditions: it should not threaten the hearer's face, and it should not undermine the speaker's face. Consequently, politeness and face are fundamental pragmatic aspects that the act of congratulation consistently aims to uphold.

C. Related Studies

Speech acts have become a significant area of research in linguistics and communication studies. However, existing studies on the similarities and differences in congratulatory speech act (CSA) across British English, American English, and other languages remain relatively limited (Lê et al., 2025). Significant contributions in this field include the works of Saleem et al. (2022), Avazpour (2020), Alameen (2017), Dastjerdi and Nasri (2012), and Elwood (2004).

Elwood (2004) conducted one of the first cross-cultural studies on CSA, analyzing American and Japanese university students using the Discourse Completion Task (DCT). Both groups frequently used *Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)*, such as *Congratulations*, but cultural differences emerged. Americans asked more questions, while Japanese speakers compared themselves to the recipient. Although Elwood's study provided a foundational CSA classification, overlapping strategies and limited situational contexts reduced its generalizability.

Dastjerdi and Nasri (2012) explored the influence of power and social distance on congratulatory selection in American, Persian, and Syrian Arabic speakers. While all groups were sensitive to status, cultural norms influenced strategy choices. Americans used more inquiries with lower-status individuals but reduced them with higher-status recipients, reflecting an individualistic culture. Syrians offered more well-wishes to lower-status individuals, emphasizing collectivist values, while Persians increased their use of congratulations for higher-status recipients to show respect. Social distance also influenced CSA, with closer relationships favoring emotional expressions and

acquaintances preferring neutral strategies such as *IFID*. Both Persian and Arabic speakers incorporated culturally specific elements, such as requesting sweets in celebratory contexts.

Alameen's (2017) study compared the congratulatory strategies of Sudanese and British speakers, focusing on event type and the influence of age. The study involved 38 Sudanese and 19 British participants, and revealed that Sudanese speakers used congratulatory expressions more frequently and warmly, often incorporating direct *IFID* along with religious and emotional elements. In contrast, British speakers tended to be more concise and direct in their congratulatory expressions. Although age significantly influenced strategy selection, the imbalance and limited age diversity within the British sample weakened the generalizability of this conclusion.

Avazpour (2020) examined CSAs among American, Indian, and Spanish English speakers. *IFID* was the most commonly used strategy across all groups. However, Americans preferred direct congratulatory remarks such as *I'm so happy for you!*, reflecting a low-context communication style. Indian English speakers favored well-wishes and honorifics, characteristic of a high-context culture where respect and hierarchy are emphasized. Spanish speakers balanced formality and emotional engagement, often incorporating additional remarks to express enthusiasm. Power and social distance influenced CSA selection. Americans maintained directness but increased politeness when addressing higher-status individuals. Indian English speakers integrated honorifics and religious references, demonstrating hierarchical sensitivity. Spanish speakers combined formality with warmth, frequently adding evaluative comments.

Saleem et al. (2022) analyzed CSAs among Pakistani ESL learners and native English speakers. While *IFID* was the most commonly used strategy overall, strategy selection varied by social class. Upper-class Pakistani speakers exhibited patterns similar to those of native English speakers, whereas middle- and lower-class speakers relied more on *IFID* and combination strategies, influenced by their native language. Social distance also played a role: emotional expressions preferred for close acquaintances, while formal strategies were used for strangers. Pakistani speakers often incorporated religious elements, reflecting collectivist cultural values, while native English speakers tended to emphasize personal achievements.

In the Vietnamese contexts, CSA in Vietnamese remain underexplored. Existing studies focus on their linguistic and cultural characteristics, cross-linguistic comparisons, and wedding contexts. Phạm (2003) analyzed Vietnamese CSA as expressions of shared joy and goodwill, reinforcing social bonds. Linguistically, they are highly expressive and follow structured direct and indirect patterns, often accompanied by nonverbal gestures. While responses typically involve simple acknowledgments, the study provided limited discussion on response strategies. Vo (2008) compared CSA in Vietnamese and English, highlighting differences in directness and politeness. English speakers used more direct strategies, while Vietnamese speakers favored indirectness, reflecting politeness norms. However, the study lacked in-depth cultural analysis and omitted response strategies, limiting its applicability. Nguyễn (2015) examined CSA in Southern Vietnamese weddings, noting their formality and structured phrasing. However, the study focused solely on wedding contexts without exploring broader social applications or response strategies.

In summary, previous studies suggest that the realization of CSAs varies across contexts, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and is influenced by factors such as power, social distance and age. However, there remains a lack of cross-cultural comparative research examining CSAs in Vietnamese and American English, particularly regarding the impact of power on strategy selection for enhancing communicative effectiveness. Given the frequent use of congratulations in daily interactions, investigating how Vietnamese and American speakers perform this speech act and how power dynamics shape their strategic choices is particularly valuable.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a descriptive design, employing a mixed-methods approach that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative techniques for data collection and analysis. The quantitative analysis identifies the frequency of strategy use among participants, while the qualitative analysis provides illustrated examples of how participants constructed the speech act of congratulation. The study employed a Discourse Completion Task as the primary research instrument.

A. Participants

The participants in this study consisted of Vietnamese and American individuals, aged between 18 and 54, with most participants falling in the 18-34 age range. However, age was not a variable of in this study as it did not significantly impact the analysis, given the predominantly young adults sample. All participants had completed at least an undergraduate degree. A total of 78 Vietnamese participants (33 males and 45 females) completed the DCT in Vietnamese, while an equivalent number of 78 American participants (22 males and 56 females) completed the DCT in English. The Vietnamese participants were recruited from both undergraduate and graduate students at Can Tho University, Vietnam. The American participants were selected from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, participants in the Coach for College program, former Princeton in Asia volunteers at Can Tho University, and their relatives.

Note: This study forms part of a broader research project that examines both congratulatory speech acts and responses to congratulation across cultures. While this article focuses on the analysis of congratulatory behavior, a separate paper has discussed the responses to congratulation (Le Do et al., 2025). The same participant group (comprising 78 Vietnamese and 78 American individuals), experts for validation process and data collection procedure

were used in both studies. The data collected for these two aspects of speech acts were analyzed independently, and each paper represents a distinct exploration of the research topic.

B. Research Instrument

A written DCT was employed to gather data for the contrastive analysis of congratulatory performance for the following reasons. According to Ogiermann (2018), the DCT is one of the most widely used tools in cross-cultural pragmatics research, particularly for examining speech act production. Secondly, elicited data is considered equally valid as naturally occurring data in cross-cultural pragmatics, as noted by House and Kádár (2021). Thirdly, DCTs allow researchers to control social variables, efficiently gather data across various contexts, and build comparable corpora—an aspect that is often challenging when relying on naturally occurring data, particularly in comparative studies (Qiu et al., 2023). Lastly, its flexibility allows researchers to use it in different languages, making it easier to compare speech act strategies in various communities under similar situations (Nelson et al., 2002).

In this study, a DCT comprising 3 scenarios was developed based on situations from previous studies on Vietnamese and American congratulatory speech acts (Le Do et al., 2025; Avazpour, 2020; Dastjerdi & Nasri, 2012; Vo, 2008). These prior studies have established the validity of the DCT as an effective tool for collecting data on congratulatory speech acts. Accordingly, the adoption of a DCT grounded in these studies ensures the validity and reliability of the data collected in the present research. Furthermore, the findings of this study can be readily compared with those from both national and international research. The DCT was developed in two versions: one in Vietnamese and one in English. The English version was reviewed by two American colleagues to ensure accuracy in wording and grammar.

The DCT consists of two sections:

Section A gathers demographic information about the participants, including nationality, native language, occupation, gender, and age.

Section B collects participants' congratulatory expressions and responses based on the three selected scenarios. The situations were categorized based on different levels of power as follows: Situation 1 represents a low-to-high power, Situation 2 reflects an equal power level, and Situation 3 illustrates a high-to-low power.

Situation 1: *You are working as a junior lecturer at the English department in a university. Recently, a new Head of the English department has been appointed. At your first meeting with him/her, what will you say to congratulate him/her on his/her appointment as the Head of the English department?*

Situation 2: *You work in a company. While working in your office, Mr. X, with whom you are not close, comes and wants to speak with your colleague in the same office. Your colleague informs you that Mr. X's child was born a week ago. What will you say to congratulate him?*

Situation 3: *You are the boss of a company. You run into your employee in the parking lot and (s)he tells you that (s)he has bought a new car. What will you say to congratulate your employee?*

C. Data Collection Procedure

For the Vietnamese participants, the survey was conducted in Vietnam, targeting undergraduate and graduate students at Can Tho University. Participants were informed about the study's purpose at the beginning, and their consent to participate was obtained. Detailed guidelines were provided to clarify the expected length of responses and the contextual factors influencing the selection of congratulatory speech acts in the DCT scenarios. Participants were instructed to provide written answers to the DCT situations. Most participants completed the survey in about 15 to 20 minutes, as no time limit was set.

The English version of the survey was distributed to American participants through two methods. The first involved distributing the survey to American students in the Coach for College program in Vietnam. The second method was conducted using an online Google Form. The survey link was shared through email and Facebook with American participants who had previously participated in the Princeton in Asia program at Can Tho University and those who were acquaintances. Furthermore, a colleague teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Madison was asked to forward the survey link to American students at that institution. Data collection occurred from December 2023 to March 2024, with a total of 468 responses, including 234 from American participants and 234 from Vietnamese participants. All data were entered, coded, categorized, and analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

D. Data Coding and Analysis

Each response was coded based on the chosen strategy to express congratulations. The coding scheme was developed by identifying patterns within the collected data, with reference to prior studies, particularly Elwood (2004), whose taxonomy of congratulatory strategies has been widely applied in prior research (e.g., Avazpour, 2023; Alghazo et al., 2021; Saleem et al., 2022). Commonly used strategies in Elwood's taxonomy include the following (Elwood, 2004):

1. IFID
2. Expression of happiness
 - a. Expression of personal happiness
 - b. Statements assessing the situation positively
3. Request for information
 - a. Specific questions

- b. General requests for information
- 4. Expression of validation
 - a. Statements indicating the situation was warranted
 - b. Praise
 - c. Statements of prior certainty
- 5. Self-related comment
 - a. Expression of envy, longing, or chagrin
 - b. Comment of one’s future effort
 - c. Prediction of one’s own future success
- 6. Exclamation/ expression of surprise

Adaptations were made to ensure the coding framework aligned with the current data, including retaining strategies found in both datasets, reclassifying overlapping categories, and simplifying lengthy category labels while generalizing context-specific strategies (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
TAXONOMY OF CONGRATULATIONS ADOPTED IN THIS STUDY

1	Illocutionary force indicating device (IFID) a. Full-form IFID b. Abbreviated IFID c. Mentioning occasion	7	Expression of Positive emotions a. Expression of Expectation b. Expression of Affection c. Expression of Surprise/ Exclamation d. Assessing situation positively
2	Expression of Personal happiness	8	Delivery of compliment
3	Suggestion to celebrate	9	Joking/ Statement assessing the situation negatively
4	Request for information a. Specific questions b. Affirmative questions	10	Expression of Validation a. Indicating situation was warranted b. Statements of prior certainty
5	Offering good wishes	11	Expression of Encouragement
6	Prediction regarding the promoted person’s future	12	Silence

After identifying the congratulatory strategies and completing the initial analysis, we conducted a validation process to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the classification system. Two colleagues- one a linguistics expert and the other a doctoral candidate in the field - were asked to help with the data coding. Both individuals coded the data independently, and any discrepancies were addressed through discussions, supported by our guidance.

The coding of congratulatory expressions enabled a more systematic classification. Below is an illustrative example of the coding process applied to a congratulatory expression from DCT:

“Congratulations on the new position. Well deserved!”

The above expression consists of two congratulatory strategies:

1. IFID: *“Congratulations on the new position.”*
2. Expression of Validation: *“Well deserved!”*

IV. FINDINGS

A. Congratulatory Strategies

(a). Frequency of Usage of Congratulatory Strategies

As previously mentioned, Elwood’s (2004) modified framework was employed to classify the congratulatory strategies. Regarding the frequency of strategy usage, the analysis reveals differences in the numbers. Table 2 provides a statistical comparison of the congratulatory strategies and sub-strategies employed by Vietnamese and American respondents.

TABLE 2
FREQUENCY OF USAGE OF CONGRATULATORY STRATEGIES BY THE PARTICIPANTS

Strategies	Vietnamese		American	
	N	%	N	%
IFID	189	49.9	189	46.7
a. Full-form IFID	96	25.4	75	18.5
b. Abbreviated IFID	2	0.5	19	4.7
c. Mentioning occasion	91	24	95	23.5
Expression of Personal happiness	11	2.9	24	5.9
Suggestion to celebrate	29	7.7	0	0
Request for information	16	4.2	8	2
a. Specific questions	5	1.3	7	1.7
b. Affirmative questions	11	2.9	1	0.2
Offering good wishes	40	10.6	29	7.2
Prediction regarding the promoted person's future	4	1.1	7	1.7
Expression of Positive emotions	35	9.3	108	26.7
a. Expression of Expectation	16	4.2	25	6.2
b. Expression of Affection	3	0.8	3	0.7
c. Expression of Surprise/ Exclamation	12	3.2	31	7.7
d. Assessing situation positively	4	1.1	49	12.1
Delivery of compliment	38	10	25	6.2
Joking/ Statement assessing the situation negatively	3	0.8	2	0.5
Expression of Validation	3	0.8	11	2.7
Expression of Encouragement	10	2.6	0	0
Silence	1	0.3	2	0.5
Total	379	100	405	100

While both groups exhibited a similar preference for *IFID* as the most frequently employed strategy, notable differences emerged in their secondary choices. Vietnamese speakers demonstrated a stronger tendency toward *Offering good wishes* strategy, whereas American speakers more frequently utilized *Expression of Positive emotions* compared to other strategy categories.

Notably, *IFID* remained the predominant strategy in both groups, accounting for 49.9% of the responses among Vietnamese speakers and 46.7% among American speakers. The second most frequently used strategy among Vietnamese participants was *Offering good wishes* (10.6%), whereas American speakers ranked this strategy as their third most preferred, with a usage rate of 7.2%. Conversely, *Expression of Positive emotions* was the second most frequently employed strategy among American respondents, with a significant 26.7% usage rate, compared to only 9.3% among Vietnamese participants. In terms of the third most commonly used strategies, *Delivery of Compliment* ranked third for Vietnamese speakers at 10%, while for American speakers, it accounted for 6.2% of responses. Moderately used strategies included *Expression of Personal happiness*, which was employed by 2.9% of Vietnamese participants and nearly double that (5.9%) among American speakers. Similarly, *Request for Information* appeared in 2% of American responses but was twice as frequent among Vietnamese respondents (4.2%). The least frequently employed strategies in both groups included *Prediction regarding the promoted person's future*, *Joke*, *Expression of Validation*, *Expression of Encouragement*, and *Silence*. A significant finding is that two strategies were employed by Vietnamese speakers but were not observed among American participants: *Suggestion to Celebrate* (7.7%) and *Expression of Encouragement* (2.6%).

(b). Construction of the Speech Act of Congratulation

The preceding section presented a statistical examination of the congratulatory strategies employed by the two participant groups. This section focuses on a qualitative analysis of how the act of congratulation is structured in both languages.

As indicated in the previous analysis, *IFID* was the most frequently used strategy by both groups. Vietnamese speakers commonly used the full-form *IFID*, such as (1) “*Em chúc mừng thầy*” (I congratulate you), or the abbreviated form, as in (2) “*Mừng cậu đã mua chiếc xe*” (Congrats on buying the car). Notably, in example (2), the occasion for the congratulation is explicitly mentioned.

In contrast, English speakers employed a variety of expressions, three of which are illustrated below:

(3) “*Congratulations!*”

(4) “*Congrats!*”

(5) “*Congratulations on your newborn.*”

In addition to using the noun *congratulations* or *congrats* to explicitly convey their congratulatory messages, American speakers also frequently referenced the occasion for the congratulation.

Offering good wishes emerged as the second most preferred strategy among Vietnamese speakers and the third most frequently used among American speakers. In Vietnamese, typical expressions of this strategy include:

(6) “*Chúc thầy công việc thuận lợi.*” (Wishing you success in your work.)

(7) “*Tôi hi vọng những điều tốt đẹp sẽ đến với thiên thần nhỏ của gia đình anh.*” (I hope all the best things will come to your little angel).

Among American speakers, the following expressions were commonly used:

(8) “*May God bless you and your precious baby!*”

(9) “*Best wishes for mother and baby's health.*”

(10) “*Wishing you all the happiness and blessings as you embark on this incredible journey of parenthood!*”

Expression of Positive emotions, by contrast, was the second most frequently used strategy among American speakers, occurring 108 times out of 405 in three different situations. The dominant sub-strategy within this category was *Assessing Situation Positively*, through which speakers expressed positive evaluations of the situation. Common expressions included terms such as (11) “*exciting, great, wonderful, fantastic, amazing, awesome, and cool*”. The typical expressions for *Exclamation* included (12) “*Wow, Oh, Ah, Ooo*”. Additionally, the predominant linguistic realization of *Expression of Expectation* was (13) “*I look forward to working with you*”.

Notably, American participants employed *Expression of Positive emotions* more frequently than Vietnamese participants, with 108 occurrences compared to 35 out of 379 responses. Among Vietnamese speakers, *Expression of Expectation* emerged as the dominant sub-strategy within this category, reflecting an emphasis on mutual support following the new appointment. The dominant response in this context was (14) “*Rất mong được cộng tác cùng anh.*” (I look forward to collaborating with you).

One of the most commonly used strategies in the data was *Delivery of Compliment*, which appeared more often among Vietnamese speakers than American speakers. This strategy was particularly prevalent in contexts such as the birth of a child and the purchase of a new car. A representative example from the Vietnamese data included:

(15) “*Chiếc xe đẹp đấy!*” (Your car is nice!)

Similarly, in the responses of American speakers, common expressions included:

(16) “*Nice car!*”

(17) “*What a nice-looking car!*”

Another frequently employed strategy was *Expression of Personal happiness*, which explicitly conveys the speaker's joy and positive emotions in response to the listener's success. An example of this strategy in Vietnamese is illustrated in the following expression:

(18) “*Em rất vui khi được làm việc với thầy.*” (I am happy to work with you.)

In American English, similar expressions were used to communicate happiness, as demonstrated in the following examples:

(19) “*I'm so happy for you.*”

(20) “*We're glad to have you aboard.*”

Two strategies found in the responses of Vietnamese speakers, but not in those of American speakers, were *Suggestion to Celebrate* and *Expression of Encouragement*. *Suggestion to Celebrate* was employed 29 times by Vietnamese participants, particularly in scenarios involving the purchase of a new car. An interesting pattern observed in the data was the reversed nature of this strategy. Rather than the congratulatory extending an invitation to celebrate the recipient's new car, the congratulator instead suggested that the recipient hosted a celebration. This unexpected shift in social dynamics is exemplified in the following responses:

(21) “*Ăn mừng đi.*” (Let's celebrate.)

(22) “*Vậy tối nay dẫn anh em đi rửa xe.*” (So tonight, let's take the guys out to celebrate.)

Expression of Encouragement appeared ten times in the responses of Vietnamese speakers. This strategy was often employed to complement a congratulatory message, reinforcing motivation and support for the recipient. For instance, in a scenario where an employer congratulated an employee on purchasing a new car, the congratulation was accompanied by an encouragement to achieve further success, as illustrated in the following examples:

(23) “*Cố gắng thêm một chiếc nữa nhé.*” (Try to get one more.)

(24) “*Ràng phần đầu hơn nữa nhé.*” (Keep striving harder.)

Request for Information was used twice as often by Vietnamese speakers as American speakers. It occurred 16 times in the responses from Vietnamese participants, while American speakers used it only 8 times. This strategy was mainly observed in Situation 2 (newborn) and Situation 3 (buying a new car). Vietnamese speakers frequently utilized this strategy to inquire about specific details related to the congratulatory event, as demonstrated in the following examples:

(25) “*Con trai hay con gái?*” (A boy or a girl?)

(26) “*Con anh chào đời rồi hả?*” (Has your baby been born?)

Expression of Validation was employed to acknowledge, affirm, or emphasize the recipient's merit and to recognize that their achievements were a result of their efforts. This strategy served to validate the recipient's accomplishments by reinforcing the idea that their success was well-earned. American speakers used this strategy 11 times out of 405 responses, whereas Vietnamese speakers employed it 3 times out of 379 responses. For instance, an American participant highlighted the deserving nature of a newly appointed department head when offering congratulations, as illustrated in the following expressions:

(27) “*It's a well-deserved recognition of your expertise and leadership.*”

(28) “*I know you've work hard to buy that.*”

Among Vietnamese speakers, a similar validation was observed in the following example:

(29) “*Mọi cố gắng của em đã được đền đáp rồi đó.*” (All your efforts have been rewarded.)

Joking was employed infrequently, appearing only 3 times in the responses of Vietnamese speakers. This strategy was used to add humor to the congratulatory exchange, often in a lighthearted or playful manner. For example, a Vietnamese manager, upon learning that a subordinate had purchased a new car, responded with the following remark:

(30) “*Hôm nào cho anh mượn dạo phố nhé.*” (Let me borrow you for a stroll around the city sometime.)

Similarly, the use of humor was also observed in the responses of American speakers. One participant incorporated a joke after congratulating a colleague on the birth of his child, as illustrated in the following example:

(31) “*Terrible twos on their way!*”

Prediction regarding the promoted person's future was utilized by both groups, allowing speakers to express confidence in the recipient's future success or anticipate positive outcomes following their promotion. In Vietnamese, this strategy was realized through expressions such as:

(32) “*Em tin thầy sẽ làm tốt ở vai trò mới này.*” (I believe you will do well in this new role.)

Similarly, among American participants, the following expression exemplifies this strategy:

(33) “*I know the English Department will thrive under your leadership.*”

The final strategy observed in the data was *Silence*. One Vietnamese and two American participants opted for silence as their responses, believing that acknowledging Mr. X's newborn might make him uncomfortable, as it pertained to his private life. Instead of verbalizing congratulations, they chose to remain silent while offering a polite smile. This is a new strategy that was not previously mentioned in Elwood's taxonomy.

B. Effects of Power in the Usage of Congratulatory Strategies

Regarding the impact of power on the use of the congratulatory speech act, the analysis revealed certain effects. Table 3 displays frequencies of usage based on power dynamics.

TABLE 3
EFFECTS OF POWER ON STRATEGY CHOICE

Strategies	P+ (low-high)		P= (equal)		P- (high-low)	
	V	A	V	A	V	A
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
IFID	66 (84.6)	73 (93.6)	74 (94.9)	73 (93.6)	49 (62.8)	43 (55.2)
d. Full-form IFID	34 (43.6)	15 (19.2)	35 (44.9)	42 (53.9)	27 (34.6)	18 (23.1)
e. Abbreviated IFID	0 (0)	1 (1.3)	1 (1.3)	10 (12.8)	1 (1.3)	8 (10.3)
f. Mentioning occasion	32 (41.0)	57 (73.1)	38 (48.7)	21 (26.9)	21 (26.9)	17 (21.8)
Expression of Personal happiness	9 (11.5)	14 (17.9)	1 (1.3)	4 (5.1)	1 (1.3)	6 (7.7)
Suggestion to celebrate	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (1.3)	0 (0)	28 (35.9)	0 (0)
Request for Information	0 (0)	0 (0)	7 (9.0)	4 (5.1)	9 (11.5)	4 (5.1)
c. Specific questions	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (2.6)	4 (5.1)	3 (3.8)	3 (3.8)
d. Affirmative questions	0 (0)	0 (0)	5 (6.4)	0 (0)	6 (7.7)	1 (1.3)
Offering good wishes	21 (26.9)	0 (0)	16 (20.5)	17 (21.8)	3 (3.8)	10 (12.8)
Prediction regarding the promoted person's future	3 (3.8)	7 (9.0)	1 (1.3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Expression of Positive emotion	18 (23.1)	26 (33.3)	8 (10.3)	25 (32.1)	9 (11.5)	57 (73.1)
e. Expression of Expectation	16 (20.5)	25 (32.1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
f. Expression of Affection	2 (2.6)	0 (0)	1 (1.3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (3.8)
g. Expressions of Surprise/ Exclamation	0 (0)	0 (0)	6 (7.7)	8 (10.3)	6 (7.7)	23 (29.5)
h. Assessing situation positively	0 (0)	1 (1.3)	1 (1.3)	17 (21.8)	3 (3.8)	31 (39.8)
Delivery of compliment	1 (1.3)	0 (0)	7 (9.0)	0 (0)	30 (38.5)	25 (32.1)
Joke/ Statement assessing the situation negatively	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (1.3)	3 (3.8)	1 (1.3)
Expression of Validation	1 (1.3)	5 (6.4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (2.6)	6 (7.7)
Expression of Encouragement	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (3.8)	0 (0)	7 (9.0)	0 (0)
Silence	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (1.3)	2 (2.6)	0 (0)	0 (0)

ABBREVIATIONS: P = Power; V = Vietnamese; A = American

Table 3 presents variation in the distribution of congratulatory strategies based on power. In Situation 1, the congratulator is a faculty member, and the recipient is the newly appointed Head of the English Department, an individual in a higher position of authority. This context is characterized by a formal communicative setting where the two interlocutors are relatively unfamiliar with each other. Both Vietnamese and American participants predominantly employed direct congratulatory expressions through *IFID*, with respective frequencies of 84.6% and 93.6%. In Vietnamese, the second and third most commonly used strategies were *Offering good wishes* (17.6%) and *Expressing of Positive emotions* (15.1%), respectively. In contrast, in English, the strategies *Expressing of Personal happiness* (32.1%) and *Expressing of Positive emotions* (32.1%) were equally prevalent as the second most frequently employed strategies, with their usage rates being nearly double those observed in Vietnamese. Notably, *Offering good wishes* was infrequently used in English, accounting for only 1.3% of responses.

In Situation 2, the congratulation recipient is Mr. X, a distant colleague who has recently welcomed his first child. The workplace setting is moderately formal, with both the congratulator and the recipient holding equal power and lacking prior acquaintance. In this scenario, *IFID* remained the most commonly employed by both groups, with 94.9% of Vietnamese speakers and 93.6% of American speakers utilizing it. This high frequency suggests that direct congratulatory expressions are the default strategy when congratulating an unfamiliar colleague of equal status in a

professional environment. *Offering good wishes* ranked as the second most frequent in Vietnamese and the third most frequent in English, with its usage being almost identical in both groups (20.5% and 21.8%, respectively). However, a notable cultural difference emerged in the use of *Expressing of Positive emotions*, which Americans employed at more than twice the rate of their Vietnamese counterparts (25.7% vs. 10.3%), reflecting a variation in emotional expressiveness across cultures. Additionally, *Silence* appeared in this scenario, albeit infrequently.

In Situation 3, a manager congratulates a subordinate upon learning that he has purchased a new car. The interaction occurs informally in a parking lot, where the power difference is still apparent, even though the individuals share a collegial relationship within the same organization. While *IFID* continued to be the most frequently employed strategy (62.8% among Vietnamese and 55.2% among Americans), its usage was significantly lower than in the previous scenarios. Instead, Americans prioritized *Expressing of Positive emotions*, which emerged as the most commonly used strategy at 73.1%. In contrast, Vietnamese speakers frequently adopted *Suggesting to Celebrate* (35.9%), a strategy entirely absent among Americans (0%). Additionally, *Delivery of Compliment* was relatively prevalent in both groups, with a slightly higher frequency among Vietnamese (38.5%) compared to Americans (32.1%). The use of compliments in this context highlighted a recognition of the subordinate's personal achievement while fostering motivation and workplace rapport.

Based on the preceding analysis, it is evident that the selection of a congratulatory strategy is influenced by the recipient of the congratulation. Furthermore, this choice is shaped by the relationship between the interlocutors, as well as the cultural background and affiliations of the respondents.

V. DISCUSSION

This study examines the speech act of congratulation from a cross-cultural perspective by comparing its use in two distinct languages: Vietnamese and American English. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks and literature review presented earlier, the findings reveal certain similarities with those observed in previous research. Notably, the study identifies *IFID* as the most frequently employed strategy across all DCT scenarios. This result aligns with prior studies, including those conducted by Avazpour (2020), Alameen (2017), Dastjerdi and Nasri (2012), and Elwood (2004). Psychologically, this tendency can be attributed to the inherent nature of human communication- when offering congratulations, the immediate and instinctive response is to express the illocutionary force of the speech act explicitly. However, this result contradicts Vo (2008), who concluded that Vietnamese speakers preferred indirectness when expressing congratulation.

Additionally, *Offering good wishes* is frequently employed by Vietnamese speakers. In Vietnam's collectivist society, offering good wishes serves as an expression of hope for prosperity and good fortune for others. This practice extends beyond a mere social convention; it is a deeply rooted tradition that signifies genuine care and reinforces social bonds (Nguyễn, 2014). In her study, Nguyễn (2015) concluded that offering good wishes plays a crucial role in narrowing both power distance and social distance between interlocutors. For American speakers, in addition to the direct congratulatory strategy *IFID*, the strategies of *Expression of Positive emotions* and *Expressing of Personal happiness* are also highly preferred. In American culture, expressing personal emotions toward others is considered a common and positive form of communication, allowing individuals to acknowledge and appreciate personal achievements, even when addressing someone of higher status. This finding aligns with the results of studies by Avazpour (2020) and Dastjerdi and Nasri (2012), which suggest that this congratulatory strategy is consistent with the individualistic nature of American culture. In this context, openly expressing emotions- such as sharing joy and personal happiness in response to another's success- is regarded as an essential aspect of interpersonal communication.

When examining the influence of power dynamics on the selection of congratulatory strategies, it becomes evident that individuals with lower or equal power tend to express congratulations more directly through *IFID*. This reflects their intent to enhance the positive face of the interlocutor, reinforcing social rapport. According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, congratulatory acts serve to strengthen social connections and increase intimacy by signaling the speaker's intention to establish a bond with others, which aligns with this finding.

When congratulating someone of lower status, strategy selection varies between the two cultural groups. Among Vietnamese speakers, an intriguing cultural phenomenon emerges, particularly in Scenario 3, where they frequently employ *Suggestion to Celebrate*. Rather than simply offering congratulations followed by an invitation for a meal or coffee, the congratulator often suggests the recipient to host a gathering in recognition of their joyous occasion. This practice exemplifies a distinctive social dynamic where acts of goodwill are closely linked to communal celebrations and mutual exchanges. This once again affirms and reflects a distinctive feature of Vietnamese culture, which places great emphasis on collective connections and the sharing of joy with others through communal gatherings and celebratory feasts (Quách, 2008). Furthermore, this finding supports Đỗ's (2012) observation that a large power distance does not necessarily create emotional detachment- in Vietnamese workplace culture, a close and familial relationship can still exist between supervisors and their subordinates. However, the act of suggesting a celebratory gathering also reflects the hierarchical nature of Vietnamese society, where status and rank remain influential in social interactions. This observation aligns with Hofstede's (2001) six-dimensional cultural model, which highlights power distance as a key characteristic of Vietnamese cultural norms.

Among American participants, the recipient's power status also influences the choice of congratulatory strategies, albeit to a lesser extent. Americans tend to express positive emotions more frequently when congratulating someone of lower status, rather than focusing solely on direct congratulatory expressions. However, the influence of power on the selection of strategies remains minimal. This finding aligns with the results of Le Do et al. (2025), which suggest that Americans tend to express positive emotions more frequently when responding to congratulations, regardless of the other person's power status. It further reinforces the general tendency in American culture to value open and explicit expressions of personal emotions. Even when addressing individuals in higher positions of authority, American speakers still prioritize expressing positive emotions, viewing it as a way to foster social connection and offer acknowledgment.

An intriguing aspect of this study's findings is that in formal situations involving a low-to-high power dynamic, American participants continue to use informal address forms. This suggests that Americans place less emphasis on social hierarchy and interpersonal power relations in communication. Similar results were observed in Saleem et al.'s (2022) study, which examined formal congratulatory exchanges between individuals who were neither close nor of equal status. In contrast, Vietnamese respondents demonstrated a distinct formal register in such contexts. For instance, in Situation 1, they employed honorifics such as "*thầy/cô*" (teacher), "*trưởng Khoa*" (department head), "*tân trưởng Khoa*" (newly appointed department head), or "*thầy trưởng Khoa*" (professor department head), which serve to convey respect and deference toward the addressee. When contextualizing these findings within previous research on politeness and face theory, it is evident that high-context cultures such as Vietnam are typically associated with a greater emphasis on power distance (Nguyễn, 2019). The use of formal expressions and honorifics by Vietnamese speakers in the analyzed scenarios likely reflects this cultural trait, as it serves to acknowledge and reinforce hierarchical distinctions within social interactions, similar to the findings of Le Do et al. (2025).

VI. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the cultural and linguistic differences in the use of congratulatory speech acts between Vietnamese and American speakers. Twelve categories of strategies and a new strategy were identified to be used by both groups in performing congratulation. Both groups primarily employ *IFID* as their dominant strategy, reflecting a universal tendency to express congratulations directly. However, cultural variations emerge in secondary strategies. Vietnamese speakers favor *Offering good wishes*, *Suggestion to Celebrate*, and *Expression of Encouragement*, reflecting their collectivist cultural values and emphasis on social bonding. In contrast, American speakers more frequently employ the *Expression of Positive emotion* and *Expression of Personal happiness*, aligning with their individualistic culture, which values personal acknowledgment and emotional expressiveness.

Power dynamics also play a role in strategy selection, with lower-power and equal-power individuals favoring direct strategies to reinforce social harmony. Vietnamese speakers exhibit a unique social pattern by suggesting that the congratulated individual hosts a celebration, reinforcing hierarchical yet communal values. American speakers, in contrast, maintain a consistent emotional expressiveness regardless of hierarchical differences.

The findings contribute to the understanding of intercultural pragmatics by providing empirical evidence of the influence of cultural values on speech acts. They underscore the importance of sociocultural awareness in cross-cultural communication. Future research could expand on these findings by examining other cultural groups or considering additional social contexts, such as online communication and corporate environments.

While this study offers valuable contributions, certain limitations remain. Firstly, the findings are constrained to the languages and language variations analyzed, as well as the three specific contexts examined. The second limitation of the study is the lack of representativeness among participants, as a random sampling method was not employed, and variables such as age and gender were not considered. Consequently, the results cannot be generalized to a broader population.

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