

Some issues in using third person singular pronouns *He/She* in English and Vietnamese languages

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Abstract. Personal pronouns play an important role in any act of communication. Each language possesses a system of personal pronouns with its own rules and cultural aspects, which sometimes causes difficulties for learners of different cultures. This article will attempt to look at some issues in using third person singular pronouns *He/She* in English and Vietnamese through some certain situations so as to help learners and translators understand and use them correctly.

1. Introduction

From the very first lessons of any language, learners are taught how to use personal pronouns. It is simply because in any act of communication, addressing is unavoidable. However, that kind of pronoun is not always clear for learners of English and Vietnamese to use and understand properly. In fact, personal pronouns can be a lot more confusing than they seem. For example, in English, it is sometimes difficult for learners to identify what noun the pronoun refers to. In Vietnamese, different personal pronouns can be used to denote the same person in different contexts. Such problems are not unique and anyone of us may sometimes encounter. Previously, time has seen so many ideas and researches about personal pronouns and their usage problems that were carried out by many linguists. This article with the analysis at some usual situations in which third person personal pronouns "*He/She*" are used will reveal some problems faced by learners of both cultures.

2. Third person personal pronouns in English and its usage problems

We use third person personal pronouns to substitute people or things being spoken about. In English, it can be characterized by case, gender, and number (Quirk, 1987) [1]. The following table will illustrate the point:

2.1. Case

Grammatically, case is the form of the noun or pronoun built up by means of inflexion, which indicates the relations of the noun or pronoun to the other words in the sentence. In other words, case is a characteristic of a noun or pronoun determined by the function it performs in a sentence.

Personal pronouns have two sets of case-forms: nominative (or subjective) case and accusative (or objective) case.

For the third person (as mentioned on Table 1):

He, she, it, they are used as nominative case.

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Table 1. Third person personal pronouns in English (Source: www.WeblearnEng.com)⁽¹⁾

Number	Gender	Case	
		Nominative/ Subjective	Accusative/ Objective
Singular	Masculine	He	Him
	Feminine	She	Her
	Neuter	It	It
Plural	For both sexes	They	Them

Him, her, it, them stand for accusative case.

The nominative case is needed when a personal pronoun is used as subject of finite verb and as a predicative nominative (subject complement). Meanwhile, the objective case is used when the personal pronoun is direct or indirect object of the verb and object of preposition.

We should be careful not to confuse personal pronouns in the nominative and accusative case.

+ subject of finite verb = nominative case

Incorrect: *Him* and *her* went to the party.

Correct: *He* and *she* went to the party.

+ object of verb = accusative

Incorrect: Tom wants to meet you and *they*.

Correct: Tom wants to meet you and *them*.

+ object of preposition = objective case:

Incorrect: Is there any relationship between you and *she*?

Correct: Is there any relationship between you and *her*?

In standard written English, the personal pronouns in the predicative nominative are the same as they would be in the subject. Most native speakers do not speak in this way, but it is grammatically correct. This nonnominative case follows a linking verb to rename the subject:

e.g. The winner was *her*. (*socially accepted*)

The winner was *she*. (*grammatically accepted*)

Sometimes, we also use nominative case for pronouns that follow forms of the verb *be* and describe the same person or thing as the subject.

e.g. It's *her*, not *him*. (*socially accepted*)

It's *she*, not *he*. (*grammatically accepted*)

2.2. Gender

The third plural pronoun *they/them* do not set apart by gender. However, the third person singular pronouns distinguish in gender between masculine (*he/him*), feminine (*she/her*) and neuter (*it*).

In some special use, *he/she* refers to the gender of animals when the animal's sex is known and is of interest such as *she*-bear, *she*-goat, *she*-ass...*he*-cat, *he*-dog...⁽²⁾

e.g. What a little sweet dog! It is a *he* or a *she*?

He/she is sometimes used to emphasise gender of people in some cases:

e.g. *He*-man: a particularly strong, masterful, or virile man

She-male: male homosexual or transvestite.

Is the child a *he* or a *she*? (unknown gender of newborn child)

The pronouns *he* and *she* in English are not only used to replace names of people but also the names of some special places, things or objects. Normally, *he* is used to denote strong objects, terrible ideas, rivers, mountains, etc. And *she* represents beautiful and nice concepts, ships, towns, and cities, countries, etc [2].

e.g. The name Roma is used to refer to the ancient Roman Empire. *She* was founded by Romulus in 753BC on Palatine Hill.

In addition to that, pronoun *he* is sometimes used to refer to human being in general.

⁽¹⁾ <http://www.weblearneng.com/the-personal-pronouns>

⁽²⁾ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English-personal-pronouns>

e.g. *He* who laughs best, laughs last.

Although the rule of using “*he/she*” in English is quite simple and sounds like “no matter”, it sometimes causes headache to learners.

2.3. Gender- problem

One of the controversial problems while using personal pronouns is gender which learners sometimes find it difficult to choose from for the indefinite antecedent that required a singular pronoun.

Traditionally, English speakers have used the pronoun *he/him* generically in contexts in which grammatical form of the antecedent requires a singular pronoun.

e.g. *A novelist* should write about what *he* knows best.

Despite grammatically correct, this type of construction will face problems of both sexist and illogical. The novelist, in this case, could be a man as well as a woman. Some experts would argue that *he* in this sentence is used generically that the pronoun is understood to both *he* and *she*. This analysis of the generic use of *he* is linguistically doubtful. If *he* was truly a gender-neutral form, we would expect that it could be used to refer to the members of any group containing both men and women; but in fact, the English masculine form is an odd choice. The traditional usage like above has gone under criticism for reflecting gender discrimination (Nguyen, V.K [2], Tran, X.D.[3]). As more people become sensitive to sexist language this use is less convincing.

In this case, many learners sidestep the problem by using *they/them* in the place of *he/him* like:

e.g. If *anyone* calls, tell *them* my message.

Other people choose the way of replacing *he* or *she*, *him* or *her* instead.

e.g. *A novelist* should write about what *he* or *she* knows best.

The first solution may ignore grammatical standard that anyone should be treated as a

singular form. And in this situation, learners break the rule of pronoun-antecedent agreement by using the plural pronoun *they*. Although this method is gaining popularity, it is still not acceptable for most formal writing.

The latter using both pronouns can create an unwieldy or cumbersome sentence, especially in the texts with much of the same indefinite pronouns and nouns. Moreover, this solution can be criticized for still putting the male form first although the alternative “*she or he*” is not better.

Some people raise the solution of creating a new word for neutral gender like “*hey*” which is derived from *they* or *s/he* to refer to both *he* and *she*. This solution, however, is far from social recognition.

Better methods of eliminating an inappropriate gender-specific pronoun may include:

+ Rephrasing the sentence to eject the problem

e.g. Instead of saying “If anyone calls tonight, give him my message”, we rephrase: “Please tell my message to anyone who calls tonight”.

+ Using a plural noun and pronoun

e.g. *Novelists* should write about what *they* know best.

+ Substituting the gender- specific pronoun with gender neutral noun.

e.g. If *anyone* calls tonight, give *the caller* my message.

2.4. Unclear pronouns

Apart from the problem of gender in using pronouns, there is another problem faced by learners of English. The problem is how to identify exactly what noun the pronoun refers to. Usually, a pronoun refers to the word that immediately precedes it. However, this is not always clear, especially if the pronoun comes a bit after the noun to which it refers.

e.g. Linh told her mother that Mai invited her to the party.

In this example, pronoun *her* stands for whom - *Linh* or *her mother*?

The puzzle while using pronoun never ends with only the third person singular pronoun mentioned above. In fact, even native speakers could be embarrassed with personal pronoun usage.

Professor Karen Weekes from Georgia University once raised his problems online:

"I'm teaching a multi-cultural Women's Studies class this semester, and my class of 100 is very diverse. Last week, I was talking about the concept of white privilege, and I found myself tangled in pronouns. Do I say it's something "we" experience, since I'm white? If I do, I feel like my inclusive "we" means I'm talking only to a certain portion of the classroom, but if I say "they" then I felt like I'm setting myself off outside my race, as if to say that "they" all have a problem but "I" have enlightened myself beyond that. This may sound ridiculous, but I caught a funny look on a couple of black students..." (From KarenWeekes@Arches.uga.edu, Subject Pronoun?, Fri, 17 Sep, 1999).

So far, the use of personal pronouns are not simple as what they seem. This also reveals that English is a kind of generalized language system.

3. Vietnamese third person singular pronouns and some principles in use

It is said that Vietnamese grammar is one of the most complicated systems among languages in the world. Understanding and using it appropriately is not so easy, even for Vietnamese people.

In Vietnamese, pronouns play an important role [4,5], of which personal pronouns rank at special position. Because of their complexity, Vietnamese personal pronouns are not considered according to case, number, gender as they are in English but the contexts and outside factors. This is the main difference of personal pronouns of the two languages. In English, the pronouns only change their forms due to their functions in the sentence, for example, "*he*" of nominative case turns into "*him*" when it takes a place of an object. Vietnamese ones, in contrast, stay the same in the sentence no matter of their grammatical function, but change forms in different situations.

When talking about third people or things, Vietnamese people do not use stable pronouns but flexible ones. That is to say, Vietnamese third person personal pronouns vary depending on age, sex, social position, level of intimacy, etc. This complexity leads to some usage problems for learners of Vietnamese.

In this article, I only mention some popular principles in using third person singular pronouns to denote "*he/she*" in Vietnamese.

First, they can be classified by formal and informal contexts as follows:

However, the classification above cannot display the correlation of pronouns with other objective factors. Thus, another way to classify Vietnamese third person personal pronouns is due to following factors:

- Age of third persons in comparison with the speaker
- Attitude of the speaker
- Dialect

Table2. Vietnamese third person personal pronouns

	<i>He</i>	<i>She</i>
<i>Formal</i>	ông ấy/anh ấy...	bà ấy/ cô ấy/chị ấy...
<i>Informal</i>	ông ta/ anh ta/hắn/ y...	bà ta/ cô ta/chị ta/ ả/ thị

3.1. Influence of age

In Vietnamese, there is a clear age-ranking system that distinguishes children, teenagers,

adolescents, middle-aged people, old people in addressing. Therefore, age factor is very important in Vietnamese personal pronoun

usage. It helps the speakers in conversations find appropriate pronouns to refer to the people they are talking to.

+ If the person is much older than the speaker (approximately at the same age of the speaker's parents or grandparents, etc.) the pronouns should be used as:

He/him: ông ấy, ông ta

She/her: bà ấy, bà ta

e.g. Ông Năm có tất cả năm người con. Ông ấy đã nghỉ hưu.

(Mr. Nam has five children. He's retired.)

It is noted that the pronoun with the tail "ấy" is used at a bit higher level of intimacy than the one with "ta".

Sometimes nouns like "ông", "lão" (for male) and "bà", "mụ" (for female) are used as personal pronouns that refer to the antecedent nouns.

e.g. - Ông Tám đã ngoài bảy mươi nhưng ông vẫn tập thể dục đều đặn.

(Although Mr. Tam is over seventy, he still does morning exercises regularly).

- Bà Lê-Brăng bày tỏ niềm vui được thăm lại Việt Nam. Bà khẳng định Chính phủ Pháp luôn coi trọng quan hệ hữu nghị với Việt Nam.

(Ms. Le Brance shows her delight for coming back to Vietnam. She confirmed the special concern to the friendship between France and Vietnam.)

+ If the person is a bit older than the speaker (approximately at the same age of the speaker's sister, brother, or aunt, or even the speakers themselves), the pronouns are:

He/him: anh ấy, anh ta

She/her: chị ấy, chị ta, cô ấy, cô ta

e.g. Tôi học cùng với Linh từ nhỏ nên tôi rất hiểu cô ấy.

(I have studied with Linh since we were children so I know her very well.)

Also, sometimes the nouns "anh" (for male) and "chị"/"cô" (for female) are used temporarily as pronouns.

e.g. Anh Nam đưa mắt nhìn Đào, chị cũng nhìn anh cười tủm tỉm.

(Nam takes a glance at Dao, she looks at him and smiles.)

+ If the third person is younger than the speaker, people use "nó" for both singular male and female.

e.g. - Lan là ai vậy? Nó là con cô Mỹ.

(Who is Lan? She is My's daughter.)

- Thằng bé này thông minh quá. Nó học lớp mấy rồi?

(This little boy is very intelligent. Which grade is he in?)

3.2. Influence of the speaker's attitude

In English, people use "he/she" when talking about singular third person with ignorance of the speaker's attitude. But it is quite different in Vietnamese. This factor is very complicated due to the complexity of the speaker's attitude to the person spoken about.

Nguyen, Q. [4] illustrates the use of *he/she* in Vietnamese in terms of the speaker's attitude as follows:

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
HE	Anh/Ông/ Cụ/ Chàng/ Ngài/ Người/...	Anh ấy/ Cậu ấy/ Ông ấy/ Anh ta/ Cậu ta/ Ông ta/...	Gã/ Hăn/ Y/ Lão/ Thằng cha ấy/ Thằng khi ấy/ Thằng chó ấy...
SHE	Chị/ Cô/ Bà.... Nàng/ Người....	Chị ấy/ Cô ấy/ Bà ấy/ Chị ta/ Cô ta/ Bà ta...	Mụ/ Á/ Thị/ Con mụ ấy/ Cái mụ ấy...

From the table above, we can see the speaker's attitude is considered in three main aspects: positive, neutral and negative. However, in fact, we still see a little difference among the choice of personal pronouns within each aspect. Therefore, in my point of view, the factor of the speaker's attitude should be illustrated clearer as follows:

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
HE	Người>	Ông ấy-Anh	Thằng cha
	Ngài>	ấy-Cậu ấy>	ấy-Thằng
	Cụ>	ông ta-anh	khí ấy> Y >
	Ông-Anh...	ta-cậu ta...	Gã> Lão> Hắn...
SHE	Người>	Bà ấy- Cô	Con mụ
	Bà-Chị-	ấy-Chị ấy >	ấy> Cái mụ
	Cô ...	Bà ta-Cô ta-	ấy> Mụ>
		Chị ta.....	Á> Thị....

Note: “>” means “more”

With this classification, we can see different levels of feeling and attitude of the speaker to the third person.. This is also a typical characteristic of Vietnamese personal pronouns, which is hard to be found in any other languages. Compare the following examples:

(a) *Chị* lặng yên không nói, chỉ chăm chăm nhìn lũ trẻ.

(b) *Chị ấy* lặng yên không nói, chỉ chăm chăm nhìn lũ trẻ.

(c) *Chị ta* lặng yên không nói, chỉ chăm chăm nhìn lũ trẻ.

Obviously, the speaker's attitude in the three sentences are at three levels of intimacy and sympathy.

One more interesting thing is that the variety of word choice enables us to interpret the speaker's attitude to the third person in Vietnamese within only *one sentence unit*, while in order to do so in English, we need to take the whole situation (a paragraph, a chapter or even a story) into consideration.

For example, in the story “Vợ nhặt”, Kim Lan wrote: “Người đàn bà đi sau lưng hắn chừng ba bốn bước...*Thị* có vẻ rón rén, e thẹn”. Needless to read the whole story, the readers can understand the attitude of the writer to the character, that is disregardful but sympathetic.

In contrast, if we only read the similar sentence in English : “The woman walks after him...*She* looks so shy and reserved.”, it is hard to know how the speaker feels about the third person in this case without considering the sentence in a broader situation.

Broadly speaking, this phenomenon partly explains for the perception of feeling of Vietnamese people, which is different from the perception of reason of English people. At this point, language expresses its role as a mirror of culture.

4. Influence of dialect

It is also necessary to consider dialect as one of language aspects. Foreigners even Vietnamese people when travelling throughout the country may realize the diversity of language in different regions. It may cause them some puzzle in understanding what the local people said.

In the northern region of Vietnam, language is considered as standard, so the personal pronouns are used as usual. However, in the middle and southern areas, the third person singular pronouns have some differences in use.

+ In Nghe An - a province in the middle region of Vietnam, when talking about the third person of female, they use the pronoun “*o ấy*” instead of “*cô ấy*”, “*cô ta*”, “*chị ta*”...

e.g. Mi có thấy *o Nhân* đi đâu không? Tao muốn gặp *o ấy*.

(Do you see where Nhan is? I want to see her now.)

In Nghe An, and Hue particularly, the pronoun “*hắn*”, which stands for singular masculine, is sometimes used to refer to both sexes, male and female in spoken language.

e.g. Hôm qua *o Linh* có ghé qua nhà tôi, *hắn* có nói chi mô.

In this case, “*o Linh*” is clearly female, but is replaced by pronoun “*hắn*” that normally refers to male.

+ In southern region, local people often turn “*anh ấy*” to “*ảnh*”, “*cô ấy*” to “*cố*”, “*ông ấy*” to “*ổng*”, “*bà ấy*” to “*bả*”.

e.g. *Anh Quyền* là chồng em. Em rất tự hào về *ảnh*.

(Quyen is my husband. I'm very proud of him.)

5. Conclusion

This article has provided researchers and learners with both cultures with required rules while using third person personal pronouns *he/she* in English and Vietnamese as well as some usual problems involved. And beyond the surface purpose, the article has been concerned with highlighting the cross-cultural look on language through one of its aspects - pronouns of third person.

It is said that language is a mirror of culture and cultural characters of each country has been shown through language (Nguyen, T.G. 2004: 203). Vietnamese people often regard all relationships among community and outside factors in order to choose appropriate address in communication. Meanwhile, English is used as “prefabricated units” with stable words and phrases for personal pronouns. They only change their forms due to functions in the sentence with ignorance of other factors like age, relationship, attitude of people in conversation as being considered in Vietnamese.

Through the rules of using the third person singular pronouns in two languages, we can partly see that Vietnamese system of personal pronouns is more complicated but clearer because its usage depends on specific factors while in English, the rule sounds very simple but still vague in some cases because of its generalization. Understanding the rules will help learners of Vietnamese and English as well as translators overcome the speech impediment and use them in correct situations.

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Một số vấn đề khi sử dụng đại từ nhân xưng ngôi thứ ba số ít He/She trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt

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Đại từ nhân xưng đóng một vai trò quan trọng trong hoạt động giao tiếp nói chung. Mỗi ngôn ngữ lại có một hệ thống đại từ nhân xưng khác nhau với các cách thức sử dụng riêng. Điều này gây không ít trở ngại cho người học ngoại ngữ thuộc các văn hoá khác nhau. Bài viết này đề cập đến một số vấn đề khi sử dụng đại từ nhân xưng ngôi thứ ba số ít *He/She* trong đối chiếu tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt qua các tình huống cụ thể; qua đó giúp người học và người làm công tác dịch thuật hiểu và sử dụng chúng một cách phù hợp.