Working-Class Voices on Screen: Pragmatic Realization of Criticism in Vietnamese Cinema

Pham Huong Ngoc Uyen [1,2,3*]

[1] University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
[2] Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
[3] Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
[*]Corresponding author's email: uyenphn@uef.edu.vn
https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3659-4656
https://doi.org/10.54855/ijli.25443

Received: 24/09/2025 Revision: 19/11/2025 Accepted: 22/11/2025 Online: 24/11/2025

ABSTRACT

Criticism, as a pivotal speech act, often threatens the addressee's face and engages complex politeness norms. While previous research has extensively examined criticism, few studies have focused on how working-class speakers navigate these interactions, particularly within authentic, everyday contexts. This study examines the criticism strategies employed by Vietnamese working-class individuals as depicted in contemporary cinema, aiming to bridge a significant research gap and bring implications to how language is educated. From conversations in popular Vietnamese web dramas, this study employs discourse analysis and quantitative methods to uncover how criticism speech acts are performed by the working class. Findings reveal that direct criticism, predominantly in the form of negative evaluation, is the most frequent strategy among working-class characters. However, indirect strategies such as sarcasm and rhetorical questioning are also commonly utilized, adding emotional nuance and providing face-saving mechanisms. Importantly, both age and social distance are shown to influence criticism: peer interactions favor directness, whereas mixed-age exchanges balance direct and indirect approaches; moreover, as familiarity increases, speakers employ less direct criticism. These findings not only illuminate class-based communication in Vietnamese culture but also have practical implications for developing culturally relevant language teaching materials and fostering cross-cultural understanding.

Keywords: Criticism, Working-class, social equality, Inclusivity

Introduction

People engage in daily conversations for various purposes and goals (Ngo, 2022). Like other speech acts, criticism goes beyond simply expressing disagreement—it is a powerful,

CITATION | Pham, H. N. U. (2025). Working-Class Voices on Screen: Pragmatic Realization of Criticism in Vietnamese Cinema. *International Journal of Language Instruction*, *4*(4), 41-60. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54855/ijli.25443

emotionally charged act of communication that shapes how people relate to one another and how cultural norms are reinforced (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Because it is a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987), criticism requires delicate handling. Speakers must navigate politeness, impoliteness, and the careful management of face to express their intent without damaging relationships (Goffman, 1967; Culpeper, 2011). In Vietnam, this process is especially challenging for working-class speakers, who constantly negotiate long-standing social hierarchies and unequal power dynamics in their daily interactions. Although such encounters are part of everyday life for the majority, they have received little scholarly attention. Much of the existing work has centered on middle-class or elite communication, leaving the voices and strategies of working-class communities largely absent from the academic conversation (Hoang, 2007; Nguyen, 2015; Al Kayed et al., 2019; Ho & Tran, 2022).

The growth of Vietnamese cinema and web dramas offers unprecedented access to naturalistic depictions of working-class life, often set in street markets, close-knit neighborhoods, and multi-generational homes. These portrayals provide valuable insight into criticism as a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987), revealing how politeness, impoliteness, and facework are negotiated in real social contexts (Goffman, 1967; Culpeper, 2011). Understanding such pragmatic strategies is vital for linguistics, language teaching, and cross-cultural communication. When curricula privilege standardized, middle-class norms, they risk marginalizing working-class voices and communicative strengths. Documenting authentic discourse thus contributes to inclusive, culturally relevant education.

Aligned with UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals on equity and inclusivity, this study highlights how class, age, and social distance shape criticism, challenging deficit views of working-class language and promoting pedagogies that embrace linguistic diversity. Through a sociolinguistic analysis of cinematic dialogues, it reveals the distinctive performance of criticism by Vietnamese working-class speakers. The findings have broad implications for language learning, intercultural understanding, and advancing linguistic and educational equity.

Literature review

Speech Act theory

Speech Act Theory, by Austin (1962), changed how we think about language—not just as a way to share information, but as a way to perform an act, such as making promises, offering apologies, or giving criticism. He divided these acts into three dimensions: the locutionary act (what is said), the perlocutionary act (how it affects the listener), and the illocutionary act, which reveals what the speaker is trying to achieve—such as persuading, warning, or expressing disapproval.

Searle (1969) built on this by introducing rules that explain how speech acts work and when they are appropriate. He also developed a classification that remains influential: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. Criticism fits into the "expressives" category because it reveals how the speaker feels—typically dissatisfaction or disapproval (Searle, 1969; Yule, 1996).

But criticism is not just about saying something negative—it is a purposeful act shaped by culture, relationships, and the situation. As Chaika and Tannen (1985) pointed out, these acts reflect the underlying social structure and cannot be fully understood without considering the wider context. To truly grasp the meaning and effect of criticism, we need to look beyond the words and pay attention to the social cues and norms that give them weight.

Working-class communication: directness and politeness

Working-class communication is often direct and emotionally expressive, featuring swearing, elevated volume, and unhedged acts such as blunt commands or criticisms. What might look impolite or even confrontational from a middle-class perspective often carries very different meanings in working-class communities. Here, traits like bluntness or directness signal authenticity, emotional honesty, and solidarity rather than rudeness. Speaking plainly is less about giving offense and more about creating a sense of equality and immediacy in conversation. By contrast, middle-class preferences for hedging or softening requests can come across to working-class speakers as unnecessarily formal or even emotionally distant (Mills, 2004).

This communicative style resonates with Bernstein's (1971) notion of *restricted code*—a context-bound linguistic system typically found in working-class settings. Restricted code relies heavily on shared knowledge and close relationships, privileging relational meaning and group cohesion over syntactic elaboration or explicitness (Bernstein, 1971; Mills, 2004).

Politeness norms also differ. Working-class speakers tend to favor positive politeness, which prioritizes camaraderie and inclusion, rather than negative politeness, which emphasizes distance and non-imposition. Phrases like "Could you possibly…?" may be interpreted as insincere. Mills (2004) critiques dominant politeness theories, such as Brown and Levinson's, for reflecting middle-class, white, Western norms that marginalize working-class speech as deficient or impolite, arguing that politeness is socially constructed and class-specific. Mill's research further shows that working-class speakers often perform speech acts directly, especially requests and criticisms. Minimal mitigation of face-threatening acts is pragmatically appropriate within their cultural logic, reflecting Bernstein's notion of horizontal discourse, where communication is grounded in local, relational knowledge rather than abstract or hierarchical forms.

Previous studies on the speech act of criticism

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2003) defines "criticism" as the act of expressing disapproval or dislike toward someone or something, or suggesting that something is incorrect or inadequate. In academic terms, Tracy, Van Dusen, and Robinson (1987, p. 87) describe it as "finding fault" and giving a "negative evaluation of a person or an act for which he or she is deemed responsible." Nguyen (2005, p. 7) adds more detail, calling it an "illocutionary act" aimed at judging the hearer's actions, words, or choices—especially when the hearer is seen as responsible for them. Drawing on Wierzbicka (1987), Nguyen also points out that criticism often aims to improve the hearer's future behavior, suggesting it can be beneficial to both parties.

Criticism across settings

Criticism is a powerful communicative act that allows individuals to express disapproval, offer constructive feedback, or make a change. Therefore, many studies have examined it in different settings. In academic contexts, Nguyen (2005) found that hierarchical classroom norms and a general emphasis on politeness shaped criticism. More proficient learners were inclined to soften their critiques with praise or suggestions. In the digital political setting, Alshakhanbeh and Alghazo (2022) explored criticism in social media posts directed at the Jordanian government. They observed that users frequently used emotionally charged strategies, such as sarcasm, indirect complaints, or appeals to religious sentiment, to express political resistance. In the media domain, Ho and Tran (2022) examined judges' feedback on *The Voice of America* and found that their critiques balanced honesty with entertainment. Judges used a range of strategies—from direct comments (with the highest frequency of using "identification of the problem" sub-strategy) to more indirect ones (with change-related sub-strategies). This reflects the low-context nature of American culture. As for data collected from movies, Haristiani et al. (2023) analyzed the criticism used by characters in some Japanese and Minangkabau films, finding a tendency to use indirect strategies such as asking/presupposing and offering advice for change. She also used Brown and Levinson's model (1987) to examine the politeness strategies when characters criticized.

Criticism from culture to culture

Culture plays a central role in shaping how criticism is conveyed and received. Nguyen (2005, 2013), in comparative studies of native (L1) and non-native (L2) English speakers in Australia and New Zealand, found that L1 native speakers employed a broader range of strategies, including indirectness and suggestion. In contrast, L2 speakers from collectivist cultures tended to be more direct, potentially due to limited pragmatic fluency in English or differing cultural expectations. Haristiani and Afiana (2022) investigated Japanese discourse from manga and anime dialogues and highlighted the influence of the cultural concept of *Uchi–Soto* (insiders vs. outsiders). Among insiders, criticism was more direct and supportive with "request for change" strategies, whereas in interactions with outsiders, speakers favored indirectness and mitigated language to preserve harmony. The concepts of "Uchi-Soto" are similar to the levels of familiarity in other studies, which are proven to be influential factors in Japanese criticism.

Hoang (2007) compared American and Vietnamese styles of criticism. Americans generally offered direct feedback regardless of status, while Vietnamese speakers used more subtle, suggestion-based strategies, reflecting the country's hierarchical and collectivist values.

Cultural variation was also evident in social media use. British users often framed criticism as problem identification or questioning, while Jordanian users employed more emotional and religiously infused expressions—revealing the intersection of language, culture, and sociopolitical norms. (Al Kayed et al., 2019).

Criticism in the Vietnamese context

Vietnamese communication style aligns closely with the concept of a high-context culture, as described by Hall (1976). Muir (2018) highlights that the language and interactional norms in Vietnam emphasize social hierarchy and the maintenance of interpersonal harmony. In such

contexts, communication tends to be indirect and nuanced, particularly to avoid causing "face loss." As a result, face-threatening acts like criticism are often delivered with strategies that preserve politeness and mitigate offense. While some research focuses on the correlation between gender and politeness strategies in Vietnamese context (Hoang, 2023), Nguyen (2020) pays attention to how frequently Vietnamese speakers use positive politeness techniques—such as indirectness and relationship-building language—to create social cohesion and avoid direct confrontation when performing criticizing acts.

Vietnamese communication tends to be highly context-sensitive, placing strong value on shared social understanding. Hoang (2007) describes Vietnamese society as both hierarchical and socially attuned, with deep roots in Confucian traditions that emphasize respect for age, seniority, and social position. This means that age and social distance strongly influence how criticism is expressed. For instance, younger people or those in subordinate roles are expected to use careful, formal language when speaking to superiors, particularly when criticism is involved. Le (2021) expands on this by highlighting the role of family and social structures, noting that Vietnamese communication follows a strict age-based hierarchy. When interacting with elders or authority figures, speakers typically adopt deferential, restrained speech to show respect. As a result, Vietnamese communication is often characterized by low assertiveness and a tendency to avoid direct personal criticism. At the same time, individuals with higher social status are granted greater flexibility in how they voice criticism. They may shift between "authoritative," "neutral," or even "friendly" tones, depending on the situation (Le, 2021). This uneven distribution of communicative freedom reflects broader cultural values that place harmony and structured interpersonal roles above direct confrontation.

As for the criticism of speech acts, Vietnamese scholars have also contributed important insights into how criticism functions culturally. Hoang (2007) compared Vietnamese and American English speakers and found that Vietnamese participants modulated their tone based on the listener's age or the purpose of the criticism, while familiarity, gender, and setting had less influence. However, the study's focus on middle-class professionals left out working-class perspectives. Do (2012) conducted a detailed comparison of compliments and criticisms in Vietnamese and English using both real conversations and survey data. Her work highlighted the common use of indirectness in Vietnamese to maintain social harmony, drawing on politeness frameworks by Lakoff, Leech, Brown, and Levinson. While comprehensive, the study is now dated and does not fully address the impact of digital communication or global cultural shifts. A more recent study by Truong (2015) examined politeness in Vietnamese and American criticism. His findings revealed that Vietnamese speakers leaned toward "positive politeness" (building rapport), while Americans used "negative politeness" (respecting individual autonomy). However, his study relied on simulated scenarios rather than natural daily conversations, limiting its real-world applicability.

In short, criticism—as a type of speech act—is influenced by a range of social and cultural factors, including age, familiarity, gender, social status, and broader cultural norms (Hoang, 2007; Nguyen Quang,2019). Many researchers have explored how these elements shape both the delivery and reception of criticism. However, most of these studies tend to focus on middle-class or highly educated speakers (Al-Jdayeh, 2023; El-Dakhs et al., 2019; Mulac et al., 2000;

Nguyen, 2008; Ho and Tran, 2022; Yang, 2013), leaving the communication styles of working-class groups largely unexplored. This gap is important because language use often varies by class, and these differences can have a big impact on how people interact and understand one another. Moreover, although films have been acknowledged as valuable sources of pragmatic data—providing access to socially embedded, naturally occurring dialogue (Do Nascimento, 2019; Moura & Bispo, 2020; Rizki & Golubovic, 2020)—Vietnamese research has yet to fully utilize this medium. Existing studies predominantly rely on written texts or formal interviews, often missing the rich, contextually grounded conversations found in contemporary cinema and web dramas. This study addresses both gaps by analyzing working-class speech in Vietnamese filmic discourse. It seeks to illuminate how criticism is performed among working-class characters, with particular attention to the roles of age hierarchy and familiarity—factors that have produced varied findings in previous literature. In doing so, the research aims to offer fresh insights into class-based communication and the nuanced performance of criticism across different social relationships.

Research Questions

The central research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How does Vietnamese working-class interlocutors' age influence the way they deliver criticism?
2. How does Vietnamese working-class interlocutors' social distance influence the way they deliver criticism?
3. What strategies do Vietnamese working class frequently employ when performing acts of criticism?

Methods

Study Setting

In this study, the data were drawn from ten episodes of two Vietnamese web dramas, namely *Bố Già* (*Old Father*) and *Hẻm Cụt* (*The Blind Alley*). The movies were released in 2020 and 2022 on YouTube. They both portray the intricate interpersonal dynamics within a lower-class family and their relationships with neighbors. The residents in the movies were of the lower working class. All characters communicated in Vietnamese. These two web dramas were selected based on two criteria. Firstly, both garnered significant public attention for their realistic portrayals of working-class communities. At the time of their release, both movies were welcomed by audiences for their authentic use of everyday language and sincere portrayal of the natural conversations of the southern Vietnamese working class. Secondly, the movies included many scenes with various speech acts of criticism. Movie' scripts were selected as the data for analysis because movies are considered to be a rich source of pragmatic data where contexts, situations, life-like conversations, interlocutors, and their relationships are available to be interpreted (Do Nascimento, 2019; Moura & Bispo, 2020; Rizki & Golubovic, 2020). Characters' age ranges from late adolescence and young adults (17-35 years old), middle-aged (36-59 years old), and old-aged (60 or above). The data sources are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

The Duration of Movies Used as Data Source.

Episodes	Duration	Episodes	Duration
Bố già (Old Father) - 2020		**Hẻm Cụt (The Blind Alley) - 2022**	
1	46 minutes	1	44 minutes
2	47 minutes	2	42 minutes
3	36 minutes	3	40 minutes
4	32 minutes	4	40 minutes
5	25 minutes	5	43 minutes
Total duration		**395 minutes (approx. 6.5 hours)**	

Data collection & analysis

Ten episodes of two web dramas were observed and transcribed in Vietnamese. A corpus of 131 verbal criticisms was chosen and analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The speech acts of criticism were selected based on the notion of criticism by Wierzbicka (1987) and Nguyen (2005). A quantitative approach was used to investigate the frequency of criticism strategies by age and social distance. The qualitative approach was used to describe and analyze the verbal strategies of criticism in their specific contexts.

The analytical framework for this study is grounded in Nguyen's (2005) model of criticism, which was originally adapted from Hiraga and Turner's (1996) framework. Nguyen's model was chosen as the theoretical framework for analysis due to its robust empirical foundation and its extensive application in research examining criticism across a diverse range of cultural contexts, including intercultural, cross-cultural, and intracultural settings (Al-Kayed et al., 2019; Haristiani et al., 2021,2022; Ho & Tran,2022). Although non-verbal expressions can function as speech acts, the current study focuses solely on the verbal perspective that contributes to the meaning of criticism performances. During data coding, minor modifications were made to the adapted model to ensure it accurately reflected the features observed in the web drama episodes. Due to its frequent occurrence, "Sarcasm" was mentioned as a distinct strategy instead of being a part of "Other hints" in the original framework.

The analysis procedure included various steps, such as recording data, transcribing data, and observing dialogues with note-taking. Tokens of criticism were selected and coded by age group and social distance. Based on descriptions of the web dramas and character relationships, speakers of criticism were classified into Young (below 35), Middle-aged (35-55), and Old (above 55). Speakers were also categorized according to social distance, namely familiar relationship (family members, nearby neighbours), unfamiliar relationship (strangers, first-time communicators), and acquaintance (relationships that are not close). The data classification was validated through an expert judgement process.

Results/Findings

Quantitative findings

The use of criticizing strategies across age groups

In terms of age, there are five types of interactions found in the movies: Middle-aged to Middle-aged (Mid-Mid), Middle-aged to Young-aged (Mid-Y), Young-aged to Middle-aged (Y-Mid),

Young-aged to Young-aged (Y-Y), and Old-aged to Middle-aged (O-Mid).

Table 2 shows that in same-age dyads (Mid-Mid, Y-Y), direct criticism dominates. Mid-Mid pairs use it in 67.7% of cases, with negative evaluation (57.4%) as the most frequent sub-strategy. Y-Y pairs favor direct criticism even more (80%), almost exclusively through negative evaluation (80%), reflecting a direct yet narrowly focused approach. Indirect strategies appear minimally, 32.4% in Mid-Mid and 20% in Y-Y interactions.

In mixed-age dyads (Mid-Y, Y-Mid), the distribution is more balanced. Mid-Y interactions show 45.4% direct versus 54.5% indirect criticism, while Y-Mid shows 55.5% direct versus 44.4% indirect. Compared to same-age interactions, these groups employ more indirect strategies, likely as politeness or deference. Sarcasm and asking/presupposing are more frequent in mixed-age talk—Mid-Y uses sarcasm (18.2%) and asking (20.5%), while Y-Mid uses sarcasm (22.2%) and asking (22.2%). This suggests heightened sensitivity to social distance or power differences. In contrast, old-to-middle-aged (O-Mid) interactions resemble same-age patterns, with 80% direct criticism, solely negative evaluation, and only one instance (20%) of indirect criticism ("indicating standard").

Strategy diversity also varies. Middle-aged-related interactions display the broadest range, using nearly all sub-types in both direct and indirect categories—from negative evaluation and consequence statements to sarcasm and asking/presupposing. By contrast, Y-Y and O-Mid groups rely almost entirely on negative evaluation under direct criticism, with minimal to no indirect forms. This indicates middle-aged characters adopt a wider repertoire of criticism strategies, while young and old characters tend to favor a straightforward negative evaluation approach, rarely employing sarcasm or other indirect forms.

The use of criticizing strategies according to social distance

The data from Table 3 provide clear evidence that speakers adjust their critical strategies according to the degree of social distance between themselves and their interlocutors. When analyzed across the three relational categories — unfamiliar, acquaintance, and familiar — the findings highlight meaningful patterns in the use of directness, sub-strategy preferences, and strategic diversity.

In interactions marked by greater social distance, such as those among unfamiliar and acquaintance groups, speakers predominantly employ direct-criticism strategies. Unfamiliar pairs use direct criticism in 65.6% of cases, while acquaintances do so even more frequently at 71.4%. In both groups, the sub-strategy of negative evaluation dominates—65.6% in unfamiliar and 53.5% in acquaintance interactions—while other sub-strategies are either absent or occur only marginally. This strong reliance on blunt, evaluative criticism suggests that speakers in socially distant relationships are less concerned with preserving the hearer's face. In Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms, such behavior reflects minimal use of negative politeness strategies in contexts where relational risk is perceived as low. The scarcity of indirect forms also indicates limited strategic variation, consistent with the transactional or impersonal nature of distant communication.

Table 2

The Percentages of Criticizing Strategies according to Age Groups

Strategy	Mid-Mid		Mid-Y		Y-Mid		Y-Y		O-Mid	
	Freq.	Per	Freq.	Per	Freq.	Per	Freq.	Per	Freq.	Per
Direct criticism	**46**	**67.7**	**20**	**45.4**	**5**	**55.5**	**4**	**80**	**4**	**80**
Negative evaluation	39	57.4	13	29.5	4	44.4	4	80	3	60
Disapproval	3	4.4	1	2.3	1	11.1	0	0	0	0
Expression of disagreement	0	0	2	4.5	0	0	0	0	0	0
Statement of the problem	1	1.5	3	6.8	0	0	0	0	0	0
Statement of difficulty	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Consequences	3	4.4	1	2.3	0	0	0	0	1	20
Indirect criticism	**22**	**32.4**	**24**	**54.5**	**4**	**44.4**	**1**	**20**	**1**	**20**
Correction	0	0	1	2.3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Indicating standard	4	5.9	2	4.5	0	0	0	0	1	20
Demand for change	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Request for change	0	0	2	4.5	0	0	0	0	0	0
Advice about change	0	0	2	4.5	0	0	0	0	0	0
Suggestion for change	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Expression of uncertainty	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Asking/presupposing	4	5.9	9	20.5	2	22.2	1	20	0	0
Sacarism	14	20.6	8	18.2	2	22.2	0	0	0	0
Total	**68**	**100**	**44**	**100**	**9**	**100**	**5**	**100**	**5**	**100**

By contrast, speakers in familiar relationships take a more balanced approach: 52.8% direct versus 47.3% indirect criticism. While negative evaluation remains the most frequent sub-strategy (37.8%), this group employs a broader range of tactics, including sarcasm (21.6%), asking/presupposing (13.5%), indicating standard (5.4%), and consequence statements (6.8%). This diversity suggests greater attention to relational maintenance, using linguistic strategies to temper criticism and manage interpersonal rapport. The higher proportion of indirect strategies signals greater pragmatic competence and alignment with Leech's (1983) Maxims of Politeness, particularly Tact and Agreement, as criticism is mitigated to preserve solidarity and reduce face threat.

Across all groups, negative evaluation, sarcasm, and asking/presupposing are the most common sub-strategies. Other forms—such as demand for change, suggestion for change, and advice about change—are rare or absent, pointing to a cultural preference for either clear, evaluative feedback or more oblique expressions of dissatisfaction rather than overtly corrective or prescriptive criticism.

A clear correlation emerges between social distance and the use of negative evaluation: 37.8% in familiar, 53.5% in acquaintance, and 65.6% in unfamiliar interactions. This progression

indicates a greater likelihood of blunt, evaluative criticism when emotional or social ties are weaker.

Table 3

The Percentages of Criticizing Strategies according to social distance

Strategy	Unfamiliar		Acquaintance		Familiar	
	Freq.	Per	Freq.	Per	Freq.	Per
Direct criticism	**19**	**65.6**	**20**	**71.4**	**39**	**52.8**
Negative evaluation	19	65.6	15	53.5	28	37.8
Disapproval	0	0	4	14.3	1	1.4
Expression of disagreement	0	0	0	0	2	2.7
Statement of the problem	0	0	1	3.6	3	4.1
Statement of difficulty	0	0	0	0	0	0
Consequences	0	0	0	0	5	6.8
Indirect criticism	**10**	**34.4**	**8**	**28.6**	**35**	**47.3**
Correction	0	0	1	3.6	0	0
Indicating standard	1	3.5	1	3.6	4	5.4
Demand for change	0	0	0	0	1	1.4
Request for change	0	0	0	0	2	2.7
Advice about change	0	0	0	0	2	2.7
Suggestion for change	0	0	0	0	0	0
Expression of uncertainty	1	3.5	0	0	0	0
Asking/presupposing	3	10.2	3	10.7	10	13.5
Sarcasm	5	17.2	3	10.7	16	21.6
Total	**29**	**100**	**28**	**100**	**74**	**100**

Qualitative analysis of strategies

Direct speech acts of criticism

Negative Evaluation: This strategy involves utterances that convey critical judgments about the hearer's behavior, appearance, attitude, or actions. Such evaluations are typically expressed through the use of negative adjectives or words carrying unfavorable connotations (Nguyen, 2005). In many situations, negative adjectives often go with modifiers describing levels of intensity.

- *Example 1*: Chú cũng có hơi kỳ với quá khích một chút. (Bố già/E1) (Young-Mid; Unfamiliar relationship)

  Translation 1: You are a bit odd and somewhat overreactive too.

- *Example 2*: Nhưng mà cái tay hơi gân nha. Trời gân xanh quá luôn đó, nhỏ. (Hèm cụt/E3) (Mid-Young; Accquaintance)

  Translation 2: But your arm's kinda veiny, you know. Gosh, those veins stand out so much,

girl!

- *Exampe 3*: Xời, mày thiệt cà khịa quá mày ơi! (Bố già/E2) (O-Mid; Familiar)

  Translation 3: "Pff, you're so annoying, seriously!"

- *Example 4*: Xài điện thoại cùi bắp mà bày đặt! (Bố già/E2) (Mid-Mid; Familiar)

  Translation 4: "Look at you, using that crappy phone and still acting all fancy!"

- *Example 5:* Nhìn cái mặt mày tao mới thấy lo đó. Mặt mày nhìn thấy gian lắm (Mid-Y; Familiar) (Bố Già/E2)

  Translation 5: "Just looking at your face makes me worried. You look so shady."

In Example 1, the situation occurs in a police station where the younger speaker critiques a middle-aged, unfamiliar man after a fight between the middle-aged man and the young speaker's mother on the street. The young speaker used the adjectives *"kỳ"* (odd) and *"quá khích"*(overreactive), both of which signal disapproval. However, this utterance has been softened by modifiers "*hơi"* (a bit) and *"một chút"* (somewhat), implying the speaker's acknowledgement of the social distance and hierarchical age gap. It can be seen that the speaker employed direct negative evaluation, yet used softeners to lower the intensity of the speech act. In the second example, the middle-aged speaker (the landlord) negatively evaluates the younger acquaintance (the tenant)'s physical appearance, describing their arms as *"gân"* (veiny) and emphasizing the unattractiveness with the vivid expression *"xanh quá luôn"* ("veins stand out so much"). Interestingly, the speaker used both softening modifier "hơi" (kinda), and amplifying modifier "quá" (so much) to directly evaluate the hearer's appearance in a way that is not overtly rude. In examples 3,4, and 5, the relationships are all familiar (neighbours), and the utilizing of strongly negative adjectives in combination with amplifying modifiers, such as "quá" (so much), "thiệt" (seriously) (in example 3), "cùi bắp" (crappy) (in example 4), "lắm" (so) (in example 5). Despite this, the neighboring hearers show no sign of being offended.

Disapproval: Disapproval refers to the personal expression of unfavorable opinions or feelings of aversion toward the hearer's actions. This type of criticism is commonly realized through negation phrases such as "I don't like," "I hate," or "I can't stand."

- *Example 6*: Tôi bực mình mấy người lắm rồi đó nha! Gì chị thấy thì chị hãy nói. Còn chị không thấy thì chị đừng nói. (Hẻm cụt/E4) (Mid-Mid; Accquaintance)

  Translation 6: I'm really fed up with you! Say only what you actually saw. If you didn't see it, then don't say anything.

- *Example 7*: Anh là một thằng đàn ông không ra gì à. Tôi không nể anh. Đó là lời thật lòng. (Hẻm cụt/E3) (Mid-Mid; Familiar)

  Translation 7: You're a poor excuse for a man. I have no respect for you. That's the honest truth.

- *Example 8*: Cái chuyện tao không có đáng cái gì mà mày nói um sùm trời đất à. Tao ghét ai nhiều chuyện mà gặp có toàn người nhiều chuyện không. (Hẻm cụt/E4) (Mid-Y; Familiar)

Translation 8: It is not a big deal, but you told everybody about it! I hate talkative people, but keep pumping into them.

In Example 6, the middle-aged speaker directly conveys emotional discomfort through the phrase *"bực mình"* ("fed up with"), clearly signaling dissatisfaction with the hearer's behavior. Similarly, in Example 7, the speaker explicitly criticizes the hearer's character by stating *"tôi không nể"* ("I have no respect"), which expresses strong personal disapproval. In Example 8, the use of *"Tao ghét"* ("I hate") also signals direct disapproval. These examples demonstrate that the speakers express their attitudes bluntly, regardless of age hierarchy or the degree of familiarity in the relationship. However, the choice of personal pronouns reflects underlying social dynamics: pronouns such as *"tôi"* (I), *"chị"* (you), and *"anh"* (you) indicate politeness and equality in age, signaling relative social distance, while *"tao"* (I) and *"mày"* (you) mark a hierarchical, unequal relationship, typically signaling greater familiarity or superiority.

Reference to Consequences: This strategy involves highlighting the negative outcomes or effects resulting from the hearer's behavior. It is often realized through causal structures such as "so," "therefore," or their equivalents.

- *Example 9*: Bà làm cái gì hả? Bà làm cái gì? Bà hỏi người ta trong bao thư có nhiêu tiền làm chi cho người ta quánh giá bà vậy? (Bố già/E3) (Mid-Mid; Familiar)

  Translation 9: What the hell are you doing? You really asked how much was in the envelope, just so they could have something to judge your wit.

- *Example 10*: Tao nói mày cứng đầu Làm cha mẹ, cái gì cũng từ từ. Nói mày không được. Cái nào mày cứ ào ào à. Rủi ra nó có cái chuyện gì thì tính sao. (Bố già/E3) (O-Mid; Familiar)

  Translation 10: You're so stubborn. Being a parent means thinking things through, not just charging ahead like you always do. What if something goes wrong to him as a result?

In one example, a husband criticizes his wife's actions by pointing out the negative consequence, using the structure *"làm làm chi cho..."* (roughly, *"just so…"*), which implies an unfavoured action. Example 6 illustrates a layered structure: the speaker (a hearer's senior neighbour) begins with a direct negative evaluation, offers unsolicited advice, and concludes with a warning about potential consequences if the criticized behavior continues — particularly directed toward the hearer's son.

Indirect speech acts of criticism

After data has been analyzed, the following sub-strategies were the most commonly found:

Sarcasm: Sarcasm refers to the use of ironic or exaggerated praise to indirectly criticize the hearer's actions or behavior. It typically conveys a meaning opposite to the literal interpretation, thereby highlighting the inappropriateness or absurdity of the hearer's conduct in a subtle yet potent manner.

- *Example 13*: Nhìn nó hiền lành quá! Nào giờ coi trong phim không biết là ngoài đời có một đứa diễn hay như vậy! (Mid-Mid, unfamiliar) (Bố già/ E2)

  Translation 13: Looks all nice and innocent, huh? Who knew real-life acting could beat

the movies!

- *Example 14*: Thông minh quá, giờ này mà cũng còn nghe lời người ta! (Mid-Mid, Familiar) (Bố già/E3)

  Translation 14: Wow, so smart — still taking people's words for it at this age!

- *Example 15:* Còn con này, đi học thay đồ nhanh quá ha! (Mid-Young, familiar) (Bố già/ E1)

  Translation 15: Look at you, girl—changing your clothes for school so fast, huh!

- *Example 16:* Khi mà em kết hợp trong cái bộ đồ áo dài của chị đó. Chị mặc bước vô cái bữa tiệc. Chị lộng lẫy như một con lân! (Young-Mid, Accquaintance) (Hẻm cụt/E3)

  Translation 16: When you wear it (a big tie) with the áo dài outfit I made for you and step into the party, you look as stunning as a lion dancer!

In Example 13, a middle-aged man sarcastically praises a woman for her "acting skills," implying she is pretending to be an innocent victim — not in a performance, but in real life. The use of praise here is not genuine but serves to call out perceived hypocrisy. Similarly, in Example 14, the husband uses the phrase "*so smart*" to imply the opposite — that his wife is naive or gullible for trusting someone too easily. In both scenarios, sarcasm operates as an indirect but pointed form of criticism, carrying emotional weight. In Example 15, the father appears to commend his daughter for how quickly she changes clothes and goes to school with her male classmate. However, the underlying message is one of disapproval, as he actually objects to her eagerness to leave with the boy. Likewise, in example 16, the young tailor's use of the word "stunning" ("lộng lẫy") to describe a middle-aged woman's appearance is undercut by the comparison to a "lion dancer." Since lion dancers are known for their flamboyant and colorful costumes—elements seen as unsuitable for both the occasion and the woman's age—the intended effect is subtly critical rather than flattering. In each of these instances, sarcasm is constructed through positive adjectives or praise that, within the context, are clearly meant to convey a negative assessment of the hearer's actions or choices.

Asking/Presupposing*:* This strategy involves the use of rhetorical questions not to elicit information but to subtly draw attention to the hearer's inappropriate behavior or attitudes (Nguyen, 2005). Rather than expecting a reply, such questions are used to provoke reflection or guilt, often implying criticism through what is left unsaid.

- *Example 17*: Nè mày coi mày ăn bận nè. Nút trước nút sau vậy đó hả? (Mid-Young, familiar) (Bố già/E1)

  Translation 17: Hey, look at what you're wearing. Did you really button your shirt like that—front and back all mixed up?

- *Example 18:* Thiệt tình. Kiếp trước bà lái xe tải hả? Ở đâu đâm ngang vậy? (Mid-Mid, Unfamiliar) (Hẻm cụt/E2)

  Translation 18: Honestly, were you a truck driver in your past life or something? Where did you even come from, cutting in line?

- *Example 19*: Đính hôn hay giật dây chuyền mà gấp dữ vậy chị? (Young-Mid, Accquaintance) (Hẻm cụt/E3)

  Translation 19: Are you getting engaged or just snatching a necklace, with such a rush, sis?

- *Example 20:* Chú Ngọt! Có bằng lái chưa mà chạy như vậy? (Young-Mid, Familiar) (Hẻm cụt/E4)

  Translation 20: Uncle Ngọt! Do you have a driver's license, driving that way?

In Examples 17–20, rhetorical questions are systematically utilized as indirect strategies to express disapproval. Example 17 features a yes/no interrogative within a father-son interaction, functioning as a negative evaluation of the son's attire in a context marked by familiarity and close relational ties. In Example 18, the exchange occurs between strangers, and a rhetorical question is used to criticize the inappropriate act of cutting in line. Here, the apparent irrelevance of the question underscores its pragmatic function as a criticism, rather than an information-seeking act.

Example 29 involves a familiar relationship, where the speaker uses a rhetorical question during an engagement ceremony to draw a humorous parallel between the urgency of the preparations and the act of snatching a necklace. This analogy implicitly critiques the woman's haste as excessive and socially inappropriate. Finally, in Example 20, the rhetorical question is directed at a familiar interlocutor, functioning as a mitigated criticism of the hearer's driving skills. By framing the criticism as a question rather than a direct statement, the speaker softens the potential face threat, thus maintaining interpersonal harmony.

Indicating standard: As described by Nguyen (2005), this strategy involves referencing commonly accepted rules, proverbs, or societal expectations to indirectly criticize the hearer for violating these norms. The speaker does not confront the hearer directly but invokes a shared cultural standard to frame the criticism.

- *Example 21*: Hông ai bận cái đầm này mà thắt dây nịt hết trơn. (Bố già/E2)

  Translation 21: No one wears this kind of dress with a belt at all.

- *Example 22*: Nè đàn ông con trai mà uống nước ngọt không! (Bố già/ E4)

  Translation 22: Look at you—supposed to be a man, yet you're drinking soda.

In Example 21, the speaker draws on a conventional fashion guideline — that one should not wear certain clothing items without a belt — to subtly highlight the hearer's poor sense of style. Likewise, in Example 22, the speaker invokes a stereotypical image of masculinity, suggesting that a "real man" would not drink soft drinks but alcohol. By referencing this social expectation, the speaker criticizes the hearer for failing to conform to traditional gender norms, thus questioning his masculinity in a socially coded way.

Discussion

Criticism strategies in terms of age

In peer interactions among members of the same age group (Mid-Mid, Young-Young), working-class speakers tend to employ direct criticism strategies with minimal mitigation. Among these, the negative evaluation sub-strategy is the most frequently utilized. This pattern aligns with the communication characteristics of the British and American working classes described by Mills (2004), who notes that individuals from these backgrounds often favor direct, blunt, and unambiguous language to express solidarity and honesty. In the Vietnamese context, the findings of this study diverge from those of Do (2012), underscoring that the working class exhibits a distinctive communication style compared to the general population and other social classes. This highlights the significant influence of social class on the realization of critical speech acts.

When looking at cross-generational communication among working-class speakers (Mid–Young, Young–Mid), we see a more negotiated mix of direct and indirect strategies. This pattern reflects the continuing influence of traditional Vietnamese norms, which tend to value indirectness to reduce face threats. At the same time, the strong presence of the Negative Evaluation sub-strategy—so characteristic of working-class discourse—shows that speakers are not simply following convention but adapting it in nuanced ways.

Interestingly, younger speakers appear less invested in broadening their repertoire of criticism strategies, leaning more heavily on direct approaches. By contrast, middle-aged adults—even within the same social class—draw from a wider range of strategies, showing greater flexibility and heightened awareness of the hearer's face needs, including when interacting with younger interlocutors. This generational difference signals a meaningful shift in Vietnamese communicative practices. Younger speakers are becoming noticeably more blunt and less likely to soften their criticisms, even when addressing older adults. Such a trend diverges from earlier observations by Hoang (2007), Do (2012), and Le (2021), who documented stronger norms of deference and mitigation across generations.

Criticism strategies in terms of social distance

Notably, conversations between interlocutors who share an unfamiliar or only slightly acquainted relationship predominantly employ direct criticism strategies, characterized by straightforwardness and a primary reliance on the negative evaluation sub-strategy. In contrast, interactions among those with closer relationships (such as family members or close neighbors) display a more balanced use of both direct and indirect criticism strategies. This suggests that the closer the relationship, the more likely working-class speakers are to employ indirect strategies to maintain harmony, compared with more distant relationships. Such tendencies reflect an intersection between traditional Vietnamese communicative norms—which value emotional connections, respect for the interlocutor's face, and harmonious relationships across both distant and close ties—and the general working-class tendency to favor blunt, straightforward expressions with little mitigation, particularly in less familiar relationships. (Do, 2012; Hoang, 2007; Le, 2021; Mills, 2004)

This pattern stands in contrast to the Japanese concepts of Uchi (in-group) and Soto (out-group).

According to Haristiani and Afiana (2022), Japanese speakers tend to use more direct criticism and prioritize positive politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987) with close in-group members as a marker of inclusion, whereas in interactions with out-group or unfamiliar individuals, they prefer indirect strategies and negative politeness, consistent with Brown and Levinson's theory.

A second noteworthy feature is that the Vietnamese lower class relies primarily on negative evaluation sub-strategies when engaging in direct criticism, and on asking/presupposition and sarcasm when opting for indirect criticism. Notably, there is an absence or rarity of sub-strategies that involve suggestions for change, and the greater the social distance, the less diverse the strategies used. This highlights distinctive class-based features in Vietnamese working-class communication, as described by Shi and Lei (2021), who observe that this group tends to explicitly express unpleasant attitudes and emotions using negative adjectives in daily interaction, especially in acts of criticism. As Shi and Lei (2021) further note, there is relatively little lexical and structural diversity in their utterances compared to those of other social classes, resulting in a narrower, less varied set of communicative strategies when performing criticism.

Direct and indirect criticizing strategies among Vietnamese working-class people

The qualitative descriptive data yielded particularly nuanced insights. When employing direct criticism strategies, individuals from this social class frequently use strong adjectives, often intensified by adverbial modifiers, to emphasize their point. Notably, both upward and downward polarity modifiers serve to reinforce the force of the adjective, often converging on the same level of intensity—for instance, "hơi" (kinda) and "quá" (so much) can both convey the sense of "rất" (very). As a result, exaggeration is a common feature, manifested through the use of emphatic adjectives and high-intensity modifiers.

As previously discussed, working-class speakers primarily use rhetorical questions and sarcasm to express indirect criticism. In these cases, they tend to opt for positive adjectives and amplifying modifiers. Additionally, comparison plays a significant role, typically realized through similes and metaphors that draw on familiar, everyday references without introducing complex layers of meaning. For example, expressions such as "rạng rỡ như một con lân" ("as dazzling as a lion dancer") and "đính hôn hay giật dây chuyền" ("getting engaged or snatching a necklace") are rooted in relatable imagery. Consequently, even when indirect strategies are employed, the intended critical meaning is easily accessible and rarely leads to misinterpretation among listeners.

Conclusion

This study shows that Vietnamese working-class speakers predominantly employ direct criticism strategies—especially "negative evaluation"—in everyday exchanges, reflecting both class-based and cultural influences on communication style (Nguyen, 2005; Mills, 2004). While previous research has characterized Vietnamese communication as largely indirect and face-saving, shaped by Confucian hierarchies and high-context norms (Hoang, 2007; Hall, 1976), the findings here reveal a distinctive working-class pragmatics: blunt, expressive, and marked by strong adjectives, yet adapted through softeners or intensifiers when context demands.

Strategy use broadens in familiar relationships or mixed-age interactions, where indirect forms such as sarcasm and rhetorical questioning become more common to maintain harmony (Nguyen, 2020; Do, 2012). Middle-aged speakers display the greatest strategy diversity, demonstrating sensitivity to age and social distance, while younger and older speakers tend to favor a narrower, more direct style.

Social distance emerges as a key factor: less intimate relationships prompt more direct, negative, and unmitigated criticism, whereas close relationships produce a balanced mix of direct and indirect strategies—consistent with cross-cultural politeness theory and Vietnamese sociolinguistic norms (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Le, 2021). Notably, working-class criticism in Vietnamese cinema rarely takes constructive forms (e.g., advice or suggestions) but excels in emotional authenticity and relational signaling, often drawing on sarcasm and culturally grounded rhetorical devices (Shi & Lei, 2021).

By analyzing naturalistic film dialogue, this study addresses a gap in prior research, which has largely overlooked the lower class in favor of educated or institutional contexts. The findings underscore the communicative competence of marginalized groups, challenging standardized norms and supporting calls for more inclusive language pedagogy and policy (Do Nascimento, 2019; Moura & Bispo, 2020). Theoretically, the study contributed to the landscape of pragmatic speech acts of criticism, in which little attention is paid to the working class. Practically, the study also aimed to raise awareness for language educators in the design of language materials, which currently focuses on standardized language mode. It is particularly meaningful to support language learners with communicative, especially pragmatic, competence.

Finally, despite its valuable insights, this study has some limitations to be acknowledged. The dataset comprises 131 instances of criticism drawn from only two popular web dramas. Although selected for their authenticity and cultural relevance, the modest sample size and limited cinematic scope may not capture the full range of working-class criticism strategies in real-life contexts. Future research should incorporate a wider variety of films and episodes to expand the analysis and enhance generalizability. The analysis of age-related dynamics was also constrained by the available characters and storylines. As a result, certain interactions—such as those between elderly and young individuals, or among the elderly—were absent. Additionally, both films are set in Ho Chi Minh City, reflecting southern Vietnamese working-class speech. Broader geographic representation would provide a more comprehensive perspective. Ultimately, this research lays important groundwork for future comparative studies, including cross-cultural analyses with English working-class pragmatics, to offer learners exposure to authentic, context-rich conversational strategies.

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Biodata

Pham Huong Ngoc Uyen is currently a lecturer at the Faculty of English, Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance. She teaches English Linguistics and General English courses in different international undergraduate joint programs. Ms. Uyen holds a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics from Curtin University, Australia. Her main interests are the application of innovative methods in ELT, pragmatics, and intercultural communication. Currently, as a Ph.D. candidate in Social Sciences and Humanities at Ho Chi Minh City, her research interests have expanded to include varied aspects of linguistics and how languages can change and impact all aspects of life.