

# NEGATIVE POLITENESS STRATEGIES USED BY MCS IN “THE LATE SHOW WITH DAVID LETTERMAN” AND “THE GUESTS OF VTV3”

## CHIẾN LƯỢC LỊCH SỰ ÂM TÍNH TRONG NGÔN NGỮ NGƯỜI DẪN CHƯƠNG TRÌNH “CHƯƠNG TRÌNH KHUYA VỚI DAVID LETTERMAN” VÀ “KHÁCH CỦA VTV3”

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**Abstract-** This paper aims to examine negative politeness strategies (NePoSs) used by the master of ceremony (MC) in “The Late Show with David Letterman” on American Television and “The Guests of VTV3” on Vietnam Television and to find out the similarities and differences in the language used by MCs between the two shows in terms of NePoSs. The results show that seven NePoSs were utilized by two MCs in talk shows, namely *being conventionally indirect*; *using question and hedge*; *minimizing the imposition (Rx)*; *giving deference*; *apologizing*; *impersonalizing S and H*; *going on record as incurring a debt or as not indebting H*. Both MCs used these strategies with the guests who had relatively high relative power and social distance to minimize imposition, give deference, avoid nuisance or make their utterances get more formal. Moreover, in some cases, both MCs were similar in concerning the use of strategies and directive or indirective utterances. The findings of this research also reveal that NePoSs occurred with higher frequencies in “The Late Show with David Letterman” than “The Guests of VTV3”.

**Key words** - negative politeness; strategy; imposition; utterance; directness.

### 1. Introduction

It has been agreed that politeness is a kind of pragmatic phenomenon. In fact, deeply understanding and applying politeness in communication is necessary for Television MCs in establishing, maintaining, and improving the interpersonal relationship between communication parties. For example, in the episode of “The Late Show with David Letterman” between MC David Letterman and his guest, actor Micheal Weatherly, the MC minimized the imposition by saying: “*I want you to tell us a little bit about your relationship, your friendship, your professional relationship to Robert Wanger because you were in a ... you know... in a movie...*” (excerpt: Micheal Weatherly on “The Late Show with David Letterman”, February 2012). The MC has used the understatement “*a little bit*” to show his high deference to his guest and satisfied his guest’s positive face. By doing this, the MC has used a negative politeness strategy (NePoSs) to make the communication smooth.

However, the PoSs used by MCs of TV shows convey specific cultural features which are different from country to country. In different social situations, we “as members of groups” are obliged to adjust the words which we use and the ways in which we behave to be polite “in more and less predictable ways in order to achieve social coordination and sustain communication” (Janney & Arndt, 1992). On the other hand, what is considered polite in one society may be different from what is considered

**Tóm tắt** - Bài viết khảo sát các chiến lược lịch sự âm tính (CLLSAT) dùng trong ngôn ngữ người dẫn chương trình “Chương trình khuya với David Letterman” trên truyền hình Mỹ và “Khách mời của VTV3” trên truyền hình Việt Nam đồng thời tìm ra giống và khác nhau trong CLLSAT do người dẫn dùng. Kết quả cho thấy bảy CLLSAT được dùng trong cả hai chương trình, cụ thể là *sử dụng gián tiếp ước lệ*; *đặt câu hỏi*; *sử dụng cách nói rào đón*; *giảm thiểu sự áp đặt*; *tỏ ra tôn trọng*; *nhận lỗi*; *tránh đề cập đến người nói và người nghe*, *nói công khai như thể người nói chịu ơn người nghe hoặc ngược lại*. Người dẫn chương trình dùng các chiến lược này với khách có quyền lực quan hệ cao tương đối, khoảng cách xã hội để giảm thiểu áp đặt, tỏ ra tôn trọng, tránh làm phiền hoặc tạo cho phát ngôn thêm trang trọng. Hai người dẫn chương trình giống nhau trong việc dùng các chiến lược, phát ngôn trực tiếp hoặc gián tiếp. CLLSAT xuất hiện trong “Chương trình khuya với David Letterman” với tần suất cao hơn “Khách mời của VTV3”.

**Từ khóa** - lịch sự âm tính; chiến lược; áp đặt; phát ngôn sự trực tiếp.

polite in another one, and people have different ways to express politeness. For instance, when responding to a speech act like: “You are really a lucky dog.”, Vietnamese people often give negative responses such as “Anh nói cái kiểu gì đấy?” (What do you mean?), “Anh bảo ai là chó hả?” (Who is a dog, do you mean?), while the American people may make positive ones like “Could be”, “I think I am.” (Nguyen Quang, 2004). All these interesting cultural differences actually capture my attention.

Because of the complex and interesting aspects of using PoSs in communication, especially in TV talk shows, this paper examines the NePoSs used in communication and finds out the similarities and differences in the language used by MCs of the two shows in terms of NePoSs.

### 2. Research Aims

This study aims at:

- Examining NePoSs used by the MCs in two TV reality shows “The Late Show with David Letterman” on American Television and “The Guests of VTV3” on Vietnam Television from June 2011 to December 2012.

- Finding out the similarities and differences in NePoSs used by the MCs in “The Late Show with David Letterman” in comparison with “The Guests of VTV3”.

- Providing some implications for teaching and learning English conversations.

### 3. Research Questions and Research Methods

#### 3.1. Research questions

1. What are NePoSs used by the MC in TV Reality Shows “The Late Show with David Letterman” on American Television?
2. What are NePoSs used by the MC in TV Reality Shows “The Guests of VTV3” on Vietnam Television?
3. What are the similarities and differences in NePoSs used by the MCs in two TV Reality Shows?

#### 3.2. Research methods

The source of data is both MCs’ utterances in transcripts of two talk shows containing NePoSs chosen as samples to be analyzed. The samples were collected from 68 episodes (four episodes per month) from June 2011 to December 2012, on the website: <https://www.youtube.com/khachcuavtv3>; <https://www.youtube.com/lateshowwithDavidLetteman>.

The researcher watched, numbered, transcribed a number of NePoSs that occurred in conversations of two talk shows. Therefore, the descriptive, qualitative and quantitative methods are used in this paper to describe and analyze how the NePoSs are used in two talk shows.

### 4. Literature Review

#### 4.1. Previous studies related to the research

So far, there have been many researches related to politeness and PoSs in communication. Lackoff (1972, 1973) considers politeness as a pragmatic rule in communication in the form of dos and don’ts. Leech (1983) sets a politeness principle with several maxims operating on a number of scales. Brown and Levinson (1987) claims politeness has a universal status. The choices of PoSs influence the face-threat to involve three fundamental sociocultural variables. Morizumi (1997) puts forward some skills and techniques to make a TV talk show. Nguyen Quang (2004) gives out some tactics to hold a conversation in communication and cross-cultural communication. Sekar (2009) reveals that most of the PoSs used were intended to minimize the distance between the MC and the guest. The host tried to perform the most communicative, directive and procedural strategy during the talk show. Nguyen Ho Phuong Chi (2012) shows that age, religion, occupation, gender and the social situation clearly influence individual’s linguistic uses as well as non-verbal behaviors and language is used to create social standards of express cultural norms.

#### 4.2. Some theoretical concepts

*Politeness* which is considered as a universal phenomenon in every cultural linguistic community has attracted a lot of attention from linguists and sociologists. While Leech (2012) writes politeness is “*strategic conflict avoidance*” which “*can be measured in terms of the degree of effort put into the avoidance of a conflict situation*”. Ide (1989:22) defined politeness as “*language associated with smooth communication*”. Brown and Levinson (1987) see politeness “*as a complex system for softening face threats*”.

Brown and Levinson (1987) state that *Face* is the public self-image of each person in society, and every individual

has two types of faces: *positive face and negative face*. In communication, people can potentially threaten other people’s face. Acts that threaten someone’s face are called face threatening acts (FTAs).

*Politeness strategies* are declared by Goffman (1971) as speech acts that express concern for others and minimize threats to self-esteem in particular social contexts.

“*Negative politeness* is a redressing action addressed to the addressee’s negative face: his want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded” (Brown and Levinson (1987:129)). Nguyen Thien Giap (2016) claims that NePoSs are strategies of communication that aim to avoid threatening negative face by face saving acts.

#### 4.3. Talk show interviews

Talk show interview, as defined by (Tolson, 1991:178), “*frequently transgresses those protocols and presumes an increasing sophistication on the part of the television audience. The result is a certain ambivalence between forms of talk which are designed both to inform and to entertain*”. Talk Show interviews are performed by journalists (or MC) and guests. High competitiveness and importance of audience ratings force broadcasters to experiment with new formats (Clayman and Heritage, 2002:2). Lauerbach (2007) lists self-help, issue shows, counseling and therapy shows, political and celebrity shows, confrontation and reconciliation and so on.

“The Late Show with David Letterman” was a sixty-minute weeknight comedy and hosted by David LetterMan, an American television host, comedian, writer, and producer, on the CBS in the United States. It was ranked The Top Ten List and nominated as Outstanding Variety, Music and Comedy six times.

“The Guests of VTV3” is a forty five-minute celebrated comedy and hosted by Lai Van Sam, a journalist, television host, and producer, on Vietnam national TV program broadcast every Sunday morning, including three parts: (i) the story of the program; (ii) the story of the guests and (iii) the story of reality.

During their existence, two talk shows became the most favorite ones with varieties of guests including artists, journalists, politicians or economists who enthusiastically discussed all areas and current events such as politics, finance, business, arts, media and shared their personal lives or chatted with the audience.

### 5. Result and Discussion

#### 5.1. Negative politeness strategies used by the MCs in “The Late Show with David Letterman” and “The Guests of VTV3”

NePo contains ten strategies, namely (i) *being conventionally indirect*; (ii) *using question and hedge*; (iii) *being pessimistic*; (iv) *minimizing the imposition (Rx)*; (v) *giving deference*; (vi) *apologizing*; (vii) *impersonalizing S and H*; (viii) *stating the FTA as a general rule*; (ix) *nominalizing*; (x) *going on record as incurring a debt or as not indebted* (Brown & Levinson, 1987), but some of them were not found in the interviews of two MCs, the examples of the analysis of each strategy are as follows.

**Strategy 1. Being conventionally indirect:** Speaker (S) does not say what really means to soften the utterance. Indirect speech acts can be included in this strategy. For instance:

(1) **Michael Weatherly:** ... it's gorgeous in the Robert Wagner story, you know?

**David Letterman:** Robert Wagner, *for God's sake 200 episodes*, Is that possible 200 episodes NCIS. You can see it every Tuesday at 8.00 p.m.

("The Late Show with David Letterman", February 2012)

In this utterance "*for God's sake 200 episodes...*", Letterman indirectly showed his admiration with the TV series NCIS which Michael participated in. The insertion of exclamatory expression pushed the challenge over to on-recordness. In this way, the utterance goes on record and the S indicated his desire to have gone off record.

(2) **Hoang Che:** Bài hát "Trên đỉnh Trường Sơn", tôi hát thường xuyên vào những năm tháng ấy. (The song "Trên đỉnh Trường Sơn", I often sang it at that time).

**Lai Van Sam:** *Anh có thể giúp* khán giả nhớ lại bài hát đấy được không có ạ? (*Could you please help* the audience recall that song?)

("The Guests of VTV3", May 2012)

The MC's utterance: "*Could you please help ...?*" could be considered as "be conventionally indirect". He made a conventional indirect request to be polite and satisfy the H's wants. The utterance went on record, and the S indicated his desire to have gone off record (to have conveyed the singer to sing the song indirectly).

**Strategy 2. Question, hedge:** A 'hedge' is a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or noun phrase in a set (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

(3) **David Letterman:** It looks fantastic. *By the way, you know* there are a few people in the world that I find remarkable that I like. I am very fond of I'm very fond of you. I wish we were closer but beyond that I would like to be a member of your family.

("The Late Show with David Letterman", June 2011)

MC's utterance above used the hedge: "*by the way, you know...*", "*I would like to be ...*" to modify his suggestion "to be a member of the guest's family". His aim was to satisfy his guest's negative face.

(4) **Lai Van Sam:** Một số người không thích nhiều tiền. một số người thì lại coi đồng tiền là nguồn gốc của tội lỗi. *Tôi cho rằng* đó là một quan điểm không đúng. (Some people don't want to get a lot of money, others consider the money as an origin of sin. *I suppose* that is an incorrect view).

("The Guests of VTV3", November 2012)

MC Lai Van Sam and his guest discussed the value of money. He applied the hedge in his utterance above "*I suppose...*" to modify the force of a speech act, gave an implied question about the value of the money for his guest and satisfy the guest's negative face as well.

**Strategy 4. Minimizing the imposition:** This strategy is used to minimize one's own action or avoid confrontation with taboo topics. Range of expressions is

often used to minimize the imposition, like: *a little, a bit, a sip, a taste, just, simply*, etc.

(5) **Micheal Weatherly:** I get nervous what happened

**David Letterman:** I want you to tell us *a little bit* about your relationship your friendship, your professional relationship to Robert Wanger because you're in a movie.

("The Late Show with David Letterman", February 2012).

David Letterman used the understate "*a little bit*" in his utterance above to minimize the imposition when he asked his guest to talk about Micheal's relationship.

(6) **Lai Van Sam:** Ý tưởng của chị là một hành trình chạy đua với thời gian. *Em chỉ dám nghĩ* thế này chị có nhiều cảm xúc khác nhau lắm, nhiều kỷ niệm lắm. Bây giờ mà hỏi là kỷ niệm nào là sâu sắc nhất thì chắc là cũng khó đối với chị. (Your idea is a journey following the time. *I only dare to think* that you kept a lot of different emotions and memories. Now it is difficult for you to tell which piece of memories you remember most).

("The Guests of VTV3", April 2012)

In this utterance "*I only dare to think...*" MC Lai Van Sam minimized the imposition and delimited the extent of the FTA by saying this utterance.

**Strategy 5. Giving deference:** Talking about giving deference, there are two sides to the coin in the realization of deference: first, S humbles and abases himself and second, S raises H's positive face of a particular kind and satisfies H's wants to be treated as a superior. As in:

(7) **David Letterman:** He is the best selling author, he's got a new book here. It's entitled "Life code". it's currently available exclusive at the Lea, at the book. Ladies and gentlemen, here's American's favorite TV mental professional *Dr. Phil*. Good to see you, *Dr. Phil*.

("The Late Show with David Letterman", November 2012)

MC David Letterman regarded his guest to be in a higher position. He gave deference to Mr. Phil by mentioning his job, his best book and using "*Dr. Phil*". He gave deference by raising Mr. Phil's face of a particular kind, namely that which satisfied his guest's wants to be treated as a superior, to be acknowledged and to be respected.

(8) **Lai Van Sam:** Khách của chúng tôi mời tới chương trình hôm nay là một người đặc biệt. Xin trân trọng giới thiệu họa sĩ Đặng Ai Việt, một người rất nổi tiếng, *phu nhân*, vợ nghệ sĩ nhân dân đạo diễn Phạm Khắc. (The guest we invited to the program today is a very special person, who has devoted her own time and raced with the time to hold back the timeline of other lives. We would like to introduce painter Dang Ai Viet, a very famous one, *a lady*, wife of the late people's artist, director Pham Khac).

("The Guests of VTV3", April 2012)

It was a good way to reduce the effect of FTA by giving deference to his guest, artist Dang Ai Viet, saying the content of the show or mentioning her work. He used an address term "*Lady*" to indicate that the H had higher relative power. This satisfied the H's face and her wants to be appreciated and respected.

**Strategy 6. Apologizing:** Apologizing is one way to

partially satisfy H's negative face demand by indicating that S is aware of them and taking them into account in his decision to communicate the FTA (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example:

(9) **Anderson Looper:** You know on the gay issue I do think you know Gingrich is clearly trying to get as many conservative votes and evangelical voters as possible, so it's certainly not an issue or you know a population that he isn't necessarily going to be addressed.

**David Letterman:** What was the... and *forgive my ignorance or sloppiness* with a decision or viewpoints of judges, elected judges.

(“The Late Show with David Letterman”, December 2011)

By begging the H's forgiveness for his mistake in the utterance “*forgive my ignorance or sloppiness...*” MC Letterman could indicate his reluctance to impinge on his guest's negative face and minimize the imposition.

(10) **Lai Van Sam:** Tôi thì từ bé đến giờ chưa bao giờ được gần cây đàn tỳ bà như thế này. *Xin lỗi* là có thể được xem cái đàn Tỳ Bà không ạ? (I've never been close Ty Ba like this. *I'm sorry*, could you please let me see Ty Ba?)

**Mai Phuong:** Vâng (Oh, yeah.)

(“The Guests of VTV3”, August 2012)

MC Lai Van Sam admitted his impingement by saying “*I'm sorry*”. With the small strategy, the S meant respect and minimized the imposition with the H as well.

**Strategy7. Impersonalizing S and H:** This strategy aims to avoid the use of the “I” and “you” pronouns and make generalization of S and H. It is stressed by the use of performative verb, imperative, impersonal verb, passive voice, etc. (Brown & Levinson, 1987) As in:

(11) **David Letterman:** *It is reported that* 10 million people lost power, the hurricane will make landfall in New Jersey and Delaware during high tide...

(“The Late Show with David Letterman”, October 2012)

Both the S and H discussed the damage which the hurricane had caused, The MC used the passive and circumstantial voice “*It is reported that...*” to avoid reference to person involved in FTAs. The host didn't want to impinge on the H so he speaks as if the agent were other than the S or at least possibly not the S.

(12) **Lai Van Sam:** *Mọi người nói với tôi rằng* gặp Ngô Thanh Vân thì cẩn thận vì nhiều lẽ đây là một người mà nhiều con người trong một con người. (*It is said that* I should be careful when meeting Ngo Thanh Van because of many reasons, you are a person who can represent different people's characters).

(“The Guests of VTV3”, June 2011)

By using the passive and circumstantial voice “*it is said that...*”, the MC could avoid threatening the H's negative face and reference to the S. The H involved in FTAs when giving comment about his guest's characters.

**Strategy 10. Going on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebteding H:** S can redress an FTA by explicitly claiming his indebtedness to H, or by disclaiming any indebtedness of H. This strategy is used to express the S's

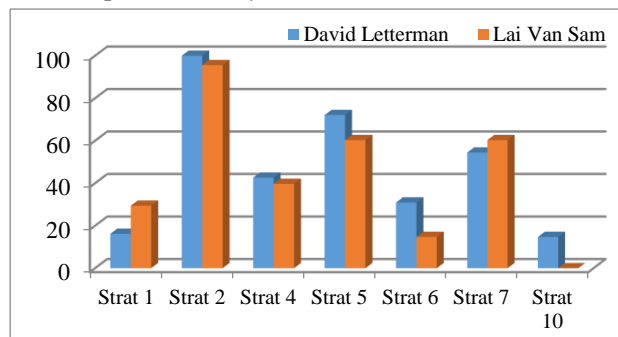
gratefulness or indicate the S's debt and modesty to the H.

(13) **David Letterman:** I worry about my abilities as a parent especially since I'm elderly. You tell me if I'm right about this or if I'm wrong either, but *it's a thank you*. It's a fine line between discipline and patience, a very fine line or razor's edge.

(“The Late Show with David Letterman”, August 2012)

The MC Letterman and Michelle Obama (The United States president's wife - Barack Obama) talked about giving care of children and holding a kid State dinner. By using the expression “*It's a thank you*”, he implicitly put himself in debt to Michelle for giving him how to take care of his children.

## 5.2. Comparative analysis



**Figure 1.** Statistic Comparison of NePoSs Used by Two MCs

### 5.2.1. Similarities

The statistics in the Figure 1 above show that the seven NePoSs are utilized in the interviews of two MCs with 429 utterances. The statistical data, as illustrated in the figure above, also show the similarities between two MCs in the use of NePoSs in their talk shows. It can be seen that NePoSs 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7 were used by two MCs to minimize the imposition and conflict in interviewing their guests. In addition, two MCs utilized NePoSs with the guests who had higher relative power and social distance to give deference and also used hedge to modify their utterances. Moreover, in some cases, both MCs were similar in the use of the NePoSs to satisfy the guests' negative face or avoid reference to their guests involved in the FTAs in giving comments or indirect request.

### 5.2.2. Differences

From the results of descriptive, qualitative, quantitative methods, it can be seen that there are differences in the way the two MCs expressed utterances. The American MC is more personal, straightforward and direct in showing his ideas and preference, while the Vietnamese MC appears to be more tentative, careful, and reserved in expressing his opinions and predilection. The statistical data, as illustrated in the figure above, reveals that there are differences in the occurrences of the NePoSs in two talk shows. It can be seen that American MC used more NePoSs than Vietnamese MC did, accounting for 225 times at 52.45% compared with 204 times at 47.55%. There are small differences in the categories of NePoSs used by two MCs. Strategy 2 is of nearly equal frequencies with 68 times (100%) by MC Letterman and 65 times (95.6%) by MC Lai Van Sam.

Similarly, strategy 4 was used 29 times (42.6%) by MC Letterman and 27 times (39.7%) by MC Lai Van Sam. However, big differences are found in the frequencies of NePoSs in specific categories. Strategy 2 had the biggest frequency with 133 times (31.0%) while strategy 3, 8 and 9 were used the least with zero times in both programs. A bit lower than those of strategy 2 was the rate of the strategy 5 with 90 times (20.98%). Strategy 7 was a bit lower with 78 times (18.18%) and strategy 10 could be only used by MC David Letterman with 10 times (2.33%).

## 6. Conclusion

In brief, it can be summarized that NePoSs are used by two MCs to avoid further imposition of obscurity or prolixity, to satisfy H's negative face and to minimize the threat. The analysis of categories of NePoSs reveals that the American and Vietnamese MC are extremely different in frequency of using NePoSs in their utterances. The American MC tends to be more direct in giving the maximum efficiency and to be freer in minimizing imposition, using hedge and giving deference than his partner, the Vietnamese MC in their conversations. Therefore, it should be necessary to design situational exercises or exercises of recognizing NePoSs in teaching, learning daily dialogues in English and Vietnamese and training communicative skills for people who want to be TV MCs.

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