

# NONVERBAL STRATEGIES USED IN CLOSING A CONVERSATION AT OFFICES BY ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE STAFF AND MANAGERS

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**Abstract** - A conversation can be closed verbally or nonverbally. While people can learn to speak a language, they need to experience to behave appropriately. Furthermore, behaving well in the mother tongue is difficult but much more challenging in a foreign language. For this reason, the present study is to compare and contrast the ways English and Vietnamese staff and managers utilize nonverbal strategies to terminate their conversations at offices. From conversation analysis perspective, 60 English and 60 Vietnamese conversations with closing sections gathered in films are selected basing on strict criteria on contents, airtime and broadcast channels. Nonverbal closing strategies are noted down, generalized, compared and contrasted in both languages. As similarities, English and Vietnamese subjects often perform physical behaviors of standing up and moving towards the door due to the typical setting – working environment. Regarding differences, as opposed to English subjects, Vietnamese subjects tend to produce indirect closings by employing more numbers and types of nonverbal strategies in combination with roundabout leg movement. Especially, English subjects show their attentiveness by direct eye contact while Vietnamese ones display their respect and attention by smiling and head-nodding.

**Key words** - conversational closings; conversation closing strategies; nonverbal strategies; conversation analysis; conversations at offices; conversation between managers and staff

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Aims of the study

Human communication process can be carried out in various channels, among which nonverbal communication is regarded as the most basic. According to Knapp, Hall and Horgan [9], nearly 65% of all human communication is expressed via nonverbal cues, which indicates its crucial role in daily social interactions. Sharing the same point of view, Bruce [2] even claims that more than 85% of all human communication is nonverbal.

Moreover, behaving appropriately and effectively in face-to-face conversations with others is exceedingly challenging, especially the process of closing a conversation. A conversation can be closed verbally or nonverbally. Closing a conversation verbally seems to be less difficult thanks to the speakers' linguistics competence and knowledge; however, to produce proper nonverbal behaviors at the end of a conversation, participants need sufficient cultural background knowledge as well as experience.

Additionally, currently, there are lots of Vietnamese people working with those coming from English speaking countries. The need of communication among them is becoming more and more vital. At offices, Vietnamese parties have lots of obstacles in understanding as well as communicating nonverbally with foreigners. Particularly, they have difficulties in breaking contact with foreigners because "knowing how to close or say goodbye in one native language does not ensure success in another language" [1, p.6].

Consequently, this study is designed to equip English and Vietnamese staff and managers with adequate

nonverbal strategies to help them terminate their conversations at office courteously. This study is only limited to the description of nonverbal strategies taken by both English and Vietnamese staff and managers. From the description, some similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese subjects in the ways of terminating a conversation will be presented and discussed. It is hoped that the study will provide Vietnamese users of English with essential nonverbal strategies to help them to behave appropriately and politely with English speaking partners at offices in the process of closing a conversation. Precisely, this study is to answer two research questions: (1) what are nonverbal strategies employed by English and Vietnamese staff in closing conversations at offices? And (2) what are nonverbal strategies utilized by English and Vietnamese managers in closing conversations at offices?

## 1.2. Literature review

### 1.2.1. Conversational closing

Historically, conversational closing was first developed by Goffman [5]. Besides Goffman, Schegloff and Sacks [16] may also be considered other groundbreakers with an extension of their earlier work on conversational openings with the data collected from 500 telephone conversations. Following researchers have developed this area unsystematically from numerous perspectives.

As regards the data sources, due to the challenges in gathering naturally occurring conversations as the data for analysis, researchers have delved into this field in various ways. Lots of researchers have made use of conversations in written genre [1] while some others take advantage of telephone conversations [7] or rely on some channels of mediated communication like *online chats* [15] or *talk show interviews* [13]. Particularly, there have been some researchers who try to record naturally occurring conversations ([6], [10]) or create nearly natural data via role-plays with the help of volunteers [17]. In connection with perspectives, conversational closing can be approached in pragmatics or conversation analysis. For example, from pragmatic perspective, David et al. [3] focus upon politeness strategies used in closings of service encounters in Government agencies or from conversation analysis perspective, LeBaron and Stanley [10] specially analyze a single naturally occurring encounter between two clients in a beauty salon.

### 1.2.2. Nonverbal conversational closing strategies

Despite the essentiality and importance of nonverbal behaviors in closing a conversation, this field has been examined extremely limitedly worldwide and totally absent in Vietnamese due to the restricted accessibility of data sources. Factually, this area has only been inspected as a small part in

bigger studies. From its background, some significant results from previous investigations can be remarked. Regarding the level of intimacy among partners, Summerfield and Lake [17] assume that friends look at their partners more often than strangers. Likewise, Knapp, Hart, Friedrich and Shulman [8], with the data of formal interviews between acquaintances and strangers of equal and unequal status, introduce a number of nonverbal behaviors associated to leave-taking, for example, *breaking eye contact, smiling, nodding head, leg movement, leaning forward* and *movement in the direction of proposed exist*. In addition, by observing nonverbal behaviors of departure of an individual in an F-Formation, Kendon [6] realizes some remarkable movement behaviors including *stepping backwards, then stepping back into the group*, and *finally walking away*. Focusing on more diverse behaviors, Lockard, Allen, Schiele, and Wiemar [11] put forward some other nonverbal strategies indicating imminent departure like *unequal weight stances and weight shifts, breaking of eye contact* and *hand gestures*. Erickson [4] adds *postural shifts* as a signal of a change in topic or an intention to part. Finally, O'Leary and Gallois [14, p.8-24], with the attention to the relationship of parties, investigate the last ten turns of two-party conversations in comparison with the ten middlemost turns. They claim that unlike strangers, friends employ *more activities, behavior clusters* and *specific appointments with continuity statements*. However, both of them have a preference for *smiling, using hand gestures, looking away* along with *leverage/ lean forward* and *grooming* by the departing subject as well as *head nodding* by the staying subject. In conclusion, the background of this field points out that studies on nonverbal strategies in closing a conversation are deficient and unsystematic. Among researches in this field, the study by O'Leary and Gallois [14, p.8] seems to be the most sufficient. Being well aware of no existing previous framework on nonverbal behaviors, they analyze the data basing on their own framework including categories of looking, head movement, arm/hand movement, facial expressions, trunk movement and leg movement. In the same way, in this study, the writer takes note every nonverbal behavior of subjects and then summarizes from the most to the least popular ones. The categories of nonverbal behaviors are illustrated in the following Table:

Table 1. Categories of nonverbal behavior used in data analysis (Extracted from O'Leary and Gallois, [14, p.8])

|                   |                                                                                             |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Looking           | + At: eyes and nose pointed at partner's face                                               |
|                   | + Away: eyes and nose pointed away from partner's face                                      |
| Head Movement     | + Shaking: movement from side to side                                                       |
|                   | + Nodding: movement up and down                                                             |
| Arm/Hand Movement | + Gesture: movement accompanying own speech                                                 |
|                   | + Grooming: touching of own body (to stroke or groom)                                       |
|                   | + Leveraging: hands placed on arms of chair in a manner that would assist rising from chair |
| Facial Expression | + Smiling: raising or upturning of the corners of the mouth                                 |
| Trunk Movement    | + Leaning forward: movement of trunk forward 30° or more from previous position             |
|                   | + Leaning backward: movement of trunk back 30° or more from previous position               |

|              |                                                                                                   |
|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|              | + Standing: rising from a sitting to standing position.                                           |
| Leg Movement | + Orientation (while standing): any movement of legs resulting in a significant change in posture |
|              | + Door: trunk oriented in direction of door.                                                      |

### 1.3. Methodology

The results of this study base on the data of 120 conversations (60 English and 60 Vietnamese). Conversations selected must have the closing sections and be between two participants – a staff and a manager with the age from 20 to 60. To ensure equivalent contents and forms, English and Vietnamese films selected have to follow the same criteria such as broadcast channels, airtime and contexts. Exactly, Vietnamese movies must be aired in the golden hours on Vietnam Television (VTV) – the national broadcaster of Vietnam while English movies are selected from Vietnam Cable Television (VTVcab) channels such as HBO, Star movie, Star world. These movies must also be produced from 2000 up to date, discussing current issues in modern contexts of offices. From these criteria, one English film - “House of cards” and two Vietnamese films - “Đổi thủ kỳ phùng” and “Cảnh sát hình sự - Chạy án” are selected.

All nonverbal behaviors performed by English and Vietnamese subjects in closing sections of selected conversations are noted down then generalized from the most to the least popular ones. These strategies are analyzed and evaluated basing on their frequency of appearance in relation with 60 collected conversations. The conclusions display both similarities and differences in the ways the subjects in both languages terminate their conversations nonverbally at offices.

## 2. Results and Discussions

### 2.1. Nonverbal strategies by English and Vietnamese staff

Nonverbal strategies taken by English and Vietnamese staff are presented in the Figure 1 below:

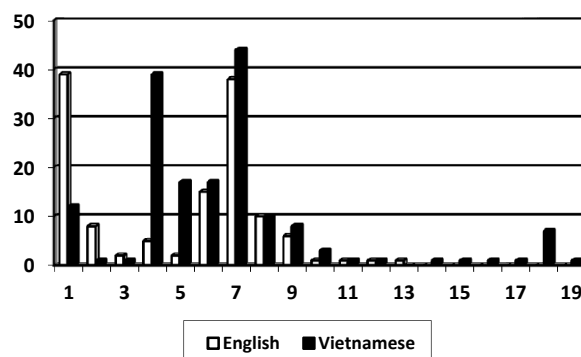


Figure 1: Nonverbal strategies by English and Vietnamese staff

#### Note:

- 1: Looking at partner's face, eyes
- 2: Breaking eye contact
- 3: Looking away from partner's face
- 4: Head Nodding
- 5: Smiling
- 6: Standing up
- 10: Arm/Hand gesture
- 11: Turning back
- 12: Touching shoulder
- 13: Looking at the watch
- 14: Wearing the coat
- 15: Leaning forward

- |                                                        |                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 7: Movements oriented in 16: Holding the other's hands |                                     |
| direction of door                                      | 17: Gazing at objects at a distance |
| 8: Packing things up                                   | 18: Moving closer                   |
| 9: Hand Shaking                                        | 19: Holding hands in front of       |

In overall, nonverbal behaviors of Vietnamese staff are more intricate than those of English ones because of more number and types of strategies employed. Vietnamese staff produce 166 nonverbal strategies categorized into 18 types whilst English staff only need 129 ones categorized into 13 types. Unlike the Vietnamese, the English belong to low-context culture; hence, they have low use of nonverbal elements in communication. Their communication is mainly expressed explicitly via words. Furthermore, the ways they restore each strategy are also different. To depict the similarities and differences, these nonverbal strategies will be analyzed from the most to the least frequency of occurrence.

With reference to the most frequently employed nonverbal strategies, it is notable that the strategies of *standing up* and *moving towards the door* are made use of most often with 25% and 63.3% by English staff and 28.3% and 73.3% by Vietnamese ones respectively. Their regular appearance is accounted by the typically official architecture and working environment. It can be inferred that in both cultures, staff-manager conversations often occur in the managers' rooms and the difference between these two strategies implies that staff may be sitting or standing while talking to their managers. Except for these two strategies, English staff prefer *looking at partner's eyes or faces* (65%) while Vietnamese staff enjoy *nodding heads* (65%) and *smiling* (28.3%) to end conversations with their managers at offices. Significantly, English individuals highly appreciate direct eye contact in interaction. In fact, direct eye contact is highly valued in the U.S culture and in communication, direct eye contact is to convey the attentiveness, respect, truthfulness, and self-confidence [12, p.56]. It can be inferred that the excessive employment of direct eye contact of English staff in examined conversations is to show the deference and attentiveness towards their managers. In contrast, in Vietnamese culture, it is especially inappropriate and even impolite for the less powerful partners like staff to look directly and constantly at the eyes or faces of the more powerful ones like their managers. This finding is in agreement with Martin and Chaney's point of view. They suppose that people in many Asian countries are uncomfortable with direct eye contact. They are inclined to look below the partners' chin during the conversation because looking into the partner's eyes would be quite rude [12, p.57]. The thorough observation of the collected data reveals that Vietnamese staff eye contact is inconstant and varying or they express the respect towards their managers by avoiding direct eye contact and most of the cases, they look at their managers' chin rather than their eyes. Instead, Vietnamese staff have a tendency to *nod their heads* or *smile* at their managers. According to Martin and Chaney [12, p.58], smiling accompanied by a slight nod-heading, in some cultures, is restored in conversation to acknowledge what the partner has said. Likewise, head nodding and smiling are a display of agreement, contentment and involvement in the conversation. The repeated occurrence of these strategies

exposes the staff's acknowledgement and involvement in the talk with their managers. Surprisingly, smiling and head-nodding appear in only two (3.3%) and five English conversations (8.3%). In English speaking countries, smiling associates with happiness [12, p.58]; hence, it seems to be inappropriate for them to smile in a formal conversation with their managers at offices.

With regard to the less frequently used nonverbal strategies, both English and Vietnamese staff can inform the conversational closings by *packing things up* and *handshaking*. The act of packing things up accounts for 16.7% in both languages. Generally, the staff will come into their managers' rooms and they may carry something with them like their handbag or a folder of document. By collecting or packing these things, the staff notice or inform their managers about the ending of their conversations and then their leaving. The act of *handshaking* makes up 10% in English and 13.3% in Vietnamese. Handshaking is an extremely popular behavior in Western countries, especially at the beginning of a meeting. However, due to the globalization of business, this behavior has become common in business around the world. It can be inferred that in English and Vietnamese official environment, it is proper for participants to shake their hands at the end of a conversation. Moreover, English staff also employ *breaking eye contact* while Vietnamese ones make use of *moving closer to the partner* to notify the closing. That the act of breaking eye contact is employed to terminate a conversation has been proved by earlier researchers [8, 10]. This reassures the importance of eye contact in interaction of English subjects. The act of moving closer to the partner to inform the closing of Vietnamese partners is an illustration of the Vietnamese's indirectness. Being an Asian country, Vietnamese culture is group-oriented; hence, working harmoniously within a group is highly valued whilst directness and forthrightness are considered rude or impolite [13, p 47].

Regarding rarely exploited strategies, nonverbal strategies including *looking away from the partner's face*, *looking at the watch, arm or hand gesture*, *turning back* and *touching the partner's shoulder* are used remarkably restrictedly in both languages. In fact, these strategies only occur in one or two conversations among 60 ones examined. The tremendous limitation of these strategies is explained by the partners' inequality of power. In both languages, it is inappropriate or even impolite for the less powerful partners to look away or turn back from the more powerful ones, except for some extraordinary or emergency situations. It is also worth noting that the touching behaviors are uncommon in English speaking countries [12, p.67] or they do not have a habit of touching. In addition, there also exist some other strategies which are only taken by Vietnamese staff such as *gazing at distant objects*, *leaning forward*, *wearing the coat*, *holding the other's hands* and *holding their own hands in front of*. Because of exceedingly rare appearance, it is not advisable for these strategies to be exploited in conversational closing sections.

In conclusion, English and Vietnamese staff are different in the way they make use of their looking, facial expressions, head movement and postural shifts to signal their

conversational closings. English staff prefer direct and instant eye contact as well as straight movement towards the exit while Vietnamese staff enjoy smiling, nodding their heads and moving towards their managers before moving towards the door. Nevertheless, they both rarely look way from their partner's eyes or faces, look at the watch, turn back, touch their managers' shoulders and so on.

## 2.2. Nonverbal strategies by English and Vietnamese managers

Nonverbal strategies taken by English and Vietnamese managers are presented in the Figure 2 below:

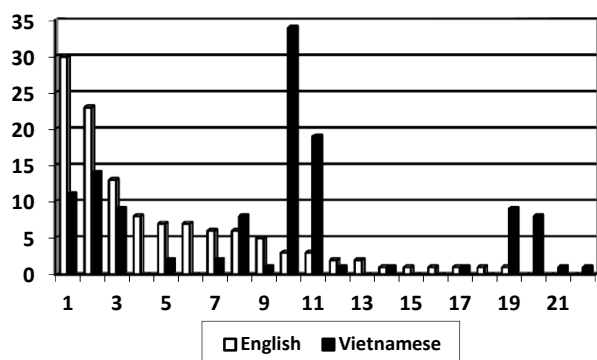


Figure 2: Nonverbal strategies by English and Vietnamese managers

### Note:

- |                                            |                                     |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1: Looking at partner's face, eyes         | 11: Smiling                         |
| 2: Movements oriented in direction of door | 12: Leaning forward                 |
| 3: Standing up                             | 13: Wearing the coat                |
| 4: Breaking eye contact                    | 14: Looking around                  |
| 5: Looking away from partner's face        | 15: Arm/Hand grooming               |
| 6: Working again                           | 16: Arm/Hand Leveraging             |
| 7: Turning back                            | 17: Packing things up               |
| 8: Shaking hands                           | 18: Looking at the watch            |
| 9: Leaning backward                        | 19: Touching shoulder               |
| 10: Nodding head                           | 20: Moving closer                   |
|                                            | 21: Gazing at objects at a distance |
|                                            | 22: Arm/Hand gesture                |

Although the total number of nonverbal strategies employed by English and Vietnamese managers is nearly the same, with 121 and 122, the frequency of occurrence of each strategy is exceedingly dissimilar. With regards to the most frequently used strategies, the behavior of *looking at the partner's faces/ eyes* accounts for the highest restoration by English managers with 50%. English managers prefer stable, straight and instant eye contact. Contradictorily, Vietnamese ones usually *nod their heads* and *smile* to indicate the closing with 56.7% and 31.7% respectively. As discussed above, English native speakers highly appreciate direct eye contact in interaction because it shows the attentiveness, respect, truthfulness, and self-confidence. With the exploitation of direct eye contact, English managers express their directness as well as their concentration on what the staff has said. Contrary to English managers, Vietnamese managers smile and nod their head to support what their staff has said. It can be inferred that Vietnamese managers are more pleasant and

affable to talk to than English ones due to their enormous utilization of smiling and head-nodding. Next, the behaviors of *standing up* and *moving towards the door* are performed fairly frequently with 21.7% and 38.3% by English managers and 15% and 23.3% by Vietnamese ones respectively. As discussed above, the high employment of these two strategies is due to the special architectural structures and working environment at offices.

In terms of the less frequently used nonverbal strategies, English managers tend to utilize behaviors which make them and their staff becomes more distant such as *breaking eye contact* (13.3%), *looking away from partner's face or eyes* (11.7%), *working again* (11.7%), *turning back* (10%) and *leaning backward* (8.3%). These behaviors are significant signals of closing because the managers show their incorporation in continuing the conversation. Especially, the behaviors of *working again* and *turning back* seem to threaten the staff's faces because the managers reveal that they are not eager or happy to continue talking with them. In normal conversations, these strategies may be considered inappropriate or even impolite in English culture. However, in conversations of unequal power, it is acceptable for the more powerful partners – the managers to make use of these strategies to close a conversation with the less powerful partners – the staff.

In contrast, Vietnamese ones rarely utilize these strategies, for instance, *turning back* (3.3%), *leaning backward* (1.7%) or *working again* (0%). Instead, they have a tendency to use behaviors creating the closeness like *looking at partner's eyes or faces* (18.3%), *touching partner's shoulder* (15%) and *moving closer to the partner* (13.3%). The Vietnamese culture is collectivism or group-oriented; hence, behaving and working harmoniously in a community is greatly appreciated whereas directness and straightforwardness are regarded as rude or impolite [13, p. 47]. For this reason, they try to behave closely and warmly even at the leave-taking of a conversation. Especially, in Vietnamese culture, the act of touching partner's shoulder is the privilege of the more powerful partners to show their sympathy and encouragement to the less powerful ones. Exceptionally, handshaking is a behavior performed quite similarly by the managers in both languages, with 13.3% and 10%.

Last but not least, despite the appearance of a variety of nonverbal strategies, most of them are employed in an extremely small percentage. The rarely used strategies by both English and Vietnamese managers are *wearing the coat*, *leaning forward*, *looking at the watch*, *looking around*, *packing up things*, *gazing objects from distance* and *arm/ hand gesture*. Factually, these strategies appear only in one or two conversations in both languages. Because of their unpopularity, it is advisable for the managers in both languages to avoid or limit the use of them to close a conversation with their staff.

In summary, in closing a conversation with their staff at offices, English and Vietnamese managers are similar in the regular exploitation of *standing up* and *moving towards the door*. As regards the differences, English managers tend to concentrate on the eye contact by *looking at the partner's eyes or faces*, *looking away* and *breaking eye*

contact and keep distant from their staff by *working again, turning back, and leaning backward*. Vietnamese managers, inversely, have a preference to make them closer to their staff by *nodding head, smiling, moving closer to the partner and touching partner's shoulder*. These differences can be accounted by the individualism of English culture and collectivism or group-oriented of Vietnamese culture.

### 3. Conclusions and suggestions for further studies

#### 3.1. Conclusions

To compare the employment of nonverbal strategies of the subjects in the two languages, there exist much more differences than similarities. As regards similarities, official working environment accounts for the massive employment of the strategies like *standing up* and *moving towards the door* by both subjects. Likewise, normal physical behaviors give an explanation for the occurrence of *packing things up* and *handshaking* of subjects in both languages.

In connection with differences, generally, nonverbal behaviors by Vietnamese subjects are much more complicated than English ones due to more numbers and types utilized. In addition, because of belonging a high-context culture, Vietnamese closings are rather roundabout or indirect with the preference of *moving closer to the partner and touching the partner's shoulder* before departing. These strategies are used to help Vietnamese subjects to avoid hasty or sudden closings which may threaten the interlocutor's face in Vietnamese culture. On the contrary, belonging to a low-context culture, English subjects tend to be goal-focused and straightforward. That is the reason why they move towards the door right after the conversation finishes and are uncomfortable with touching. Furthermore, English subjects show their involvement in the conversation by direct eye contact whilst Vietnamese display their attention and politeness by smiling and head-nodding. It can also be inferred from the exploitation of these strategies that the relation between Vietnamese staff and managers is rather warm and close whereas that of English ones is rather formal and distant. Finally, English managers appear more powerful than Vietnamese ones through the use of such strategies as *working again, turning back and leaning backward*. It can be concluded that English subjects tend to focus on the goal in interaction or produce work-based conversations whilst Vietnamese ones concentrate on both the effectiveness of the work and the establishment of rapport among interlocutors in interaction. The features of low-context culture of English and high-context culture of Vietnamese justify for these differences.

#### 3.2. Suggestions for further studies

The author is well aware of the limitation as well as the weakness of using the conversations in films as the data. The study will be much more valuable and meaningful if

naturally occurring conversations are collected as the data for analysis; hence, it is advisable for other researchers to examine conversational closing strategies with real life data. Moreover, because of being conducted in conversation analysis perspective, this study cannot expose the cultural origin of nonverbal behaviors of subjects in the two languages. A further study to examine English and Vietnamese nonverbal behaviors in closing a conversation under the cultural perspective is particularly meaningful and interesting. Finally, to produce a good closing, verbal strategies play an extremely essential role; consequently, it is better for other researchers to focus on verbal strategies in combination with nonverbal ones in closing a conversation.

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