



# **GENDER EQUALITY IN A GENDER-UNEQUAL SOCIETY: VIETNAMESE PRONOUNS**

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# Goals and hypotheses

- Investigates the endorsement of the usage of three Vietnamese pronouns: *tao-mày* ‘I-you’ and *nó* ‘he/she’ within the context of **intimate relationships** in order to test gender-inequality between couples.
- These three core pronouns are **gendered-neutral and hierarchical**, have a pragmatically restricted usage among siblings, close friends, or older people towards younger ones for superiority or **familiarity**, but **rarely among spouses** or couples in romantic relationships.
- The pronouns are also used to show **disapproval** and **disrespect**, regardless of ages or authority.

- Given the gender inequality in the Vietnamese society we aim to test the hypothesis

“Men are more likely to endorse the use of these three pronouns by husbands toward wives. Women are less likely to endorse the use of the pronouns among couples”

Beside **gender**, other independent variables include **education**, **career** (labor vs non-labor), **age** (younger couples vs older ones), **married vs unmarried** couples.

- **Inequality between men and women** have been shown to exist in multiple countries and across a number of dimensions (Sanchez & Rudman 2012; Blair & Lichter 1991; Joseph 1996; Gershuny & Robinson 1988; Rydstrøm, 2010).
- Vietnamese traditional family and society are not an exception.
- Influenced by **Confucian teachings**, traditional Vietnamese family is **patrilineal, male-oriented**. Women's role was suppressed with dogmas “**the three submissions**” and “**the four virtues**”.
- Asymmetrical views on gender roles in **proverbs** and **folk songs**.

- Research **on gender-related issues** in Vietnam are abundant (e.g., Drummond 2004; Marr 1976, 1981; Knodel et al 2004; Goodkind 1995).

- Policies to promote gender equality since 1940s, then in 2006 with Laws on Gender equality and on prevention and control of Domestic violence. Not much improvement (Dang 2017, Kwiatkowski 2011).
- The persuasion of the free market economy in 1980s after reunification compromised women gains. Gender inequality increases tremendously from marital opportunities to employment (Goodkind 1995).
- However, issues on gender and language are scarcely studied. The focus in general was on gender differences in politeness in speech acts and often compared with English (e.g., Le 2010, Tran 2008, Tran 2013 Le 2013).

# Vietnamese address terms

- Vietnamese address terms are dominantly **kin terms**, a complex and exhaustive system.
- For ‘**I**’ and ‘**you**’, “a wide range of quasi-familial were employed, almost all of them implying a vertical relationship based on age, social class, job function, sex, or moral judgement” Marr (1981:171)

- **Age** and **sex** are the two most important factors in this vertical, hierarchical relationship, overdriven only by the hierarchy in the genealogical grid.
- Address terms **derived from nouns**: *tôi* ‘I’ from ‘servant’, *họ* ‘they’ from ‘clan’.
- Vietnamese **does not have a system of personal pronouns** and *in a neutral tone*.



# Personal pronouns in Vietnamese

	Singular		Plural
1 <sup>st</sup> person	<u>tao</u>	1 <sup>st</sup> person	<b>chúng</b> tao
2 <sup>nd</sup> person	<u>mày</u>	2 <sup>nd</sup> person	<b>chúng</b> mày, bay
3 <sup>rd</sup> person	<u>nó</u>	3 <sup>rd</sup> person	<b>chúng</b> nó, chúng

- Those pronouns are highly sensitive to the speaker's intention and attitude, i.e., the speaker either assumes superiority toward the hearer, and they are “always brusque, undeferential, impolite in tones” (Emeneau 1951:133), or to show familiarity or solidarity toward the hearer.
- In the 1930s the Vietnamese pair *tao-mày* was used only among best friends, or as a slur. *Nó* ‘he/she’ is also regarded as derogatory (Marr 1981).

# Between spouses

- *Anh* ‘elder brother’ is used **by the husband** as self-reference or by his wife when talking to him.
- *Em* ‘younger sibling’ is used **by the wife** as self-reference, or by her husband to address her.
- Older couples: *mẹ nó* ‘its **mother**’, *bà nó* ‘its **grandmother**’ vs *ba nó* ‘its **father**’, *ông nó* ‘its **grandfather**’

- In the literature, stories tell how a husband calls his wife with “the derogatory *mày*, ordered her out of the house as if she were the merest servant” (Dang 1928), or some time just merely a way to address the wife (Nam Cao 1942, Thompson 1965).
- **Modern Vietnam: Women** still use the conventional pair *anh-em* ‘older brother-younger sibling’ when talking to their husband, even they are educated, and that **the wife might be older than the husband** (Pham 2002, Thompson 1965).

- Men can use the pronouns *tao-mày* and *nó* towards their wives, but not vice-versa.
- This paper is the first attempt to **statistically** test that assumption.
- Advantage: *tao-mày* and *nó* are gender neutral, but hierarchical.

# Hypotheses

- a) **Women** use the pronouns *tao-mày* and *nó* less than men,
- b) **Older couples** use *tao-mày* and *nó* less than younger couples,
- c) People with **advanced education** use *tao-mày* and *nó* less than couple without advanced education,
- d) People with **'white collar' jobs** use *tao-mày* and *nó* less than people with 'blue collar' jobs
- e) **Unmarried couples** use *tao-mày* and *nó* less than married couples.

# Methodology

- Questionnaires and interviews.
- Two categories: male / female.
- Two types of answers: a **scale of 7 values**, **Yes / No**
- 2 linguistic dependent variables: the pair *tao-mày* (I-thou), and 3<sup>rd</sup> person sing. *nó* (he/she).

# Questionnaires: 21 questions

- Qs 1-18 are **continuous**: based on a scale of 7 values, 1 indicates ‘completely acceptable’ and 7 ‘completely unacceptable’.
- Participants were asked *if they endorse the use of these three pronouns* in **several contexts**: among the couples, by the husband, by the wife, when talking to own parents, to the in-law parents, friends, during a quarrel and in a normal context.



# Examples

1. Normally husband and wife can use *mày-tao/ mi-tao* to address one another.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

2. In a quarrel husband and wife can use *mày-tao/ mi-tao* to address one another.

- Questions 19-21 ask the participant to report their experience **as an observer**

(a) If the participant has **ever heard** other couples using the pronouns

(b) If so, **only husbands** use the pronouns toward their wives

(c) If the participant has ever heard **couples 60 years old or older** using the pronouns.

19. Have you ever heard a couple in quarrel that uses *mày-tao/ mi-tao* towards one another? **Y/N**

**Findings not included in this report.**

- 42 native speakers, ages 20 and 59, from various locations in the cities and rural villages in central and south VN, were interviewed and requested to complete the questionnaire.
- Of 42, 7 subjects born and raised in north Vietnam live and work in south Vietnam during the time of the survey.

# Number of subjects according to independent variables

	numeric	%
labor	9	21%
non-labor	32	79%
elem & high school	10	29%
bachelor & postgrad	32	71%
married	21	50%
unmarried	21	50%
female	26	62%
male	16	38%
20-30	24	57%
31-59	18	43%
north VN	7	17%
south VN	35	83%

# Findings

- Findings are from the data **from the questionnaire**.
- **Interviews were not very useful** because participants either did not use any term when talking about their partner, or used “polite, proper” terms. Data were used as references.

# Findings

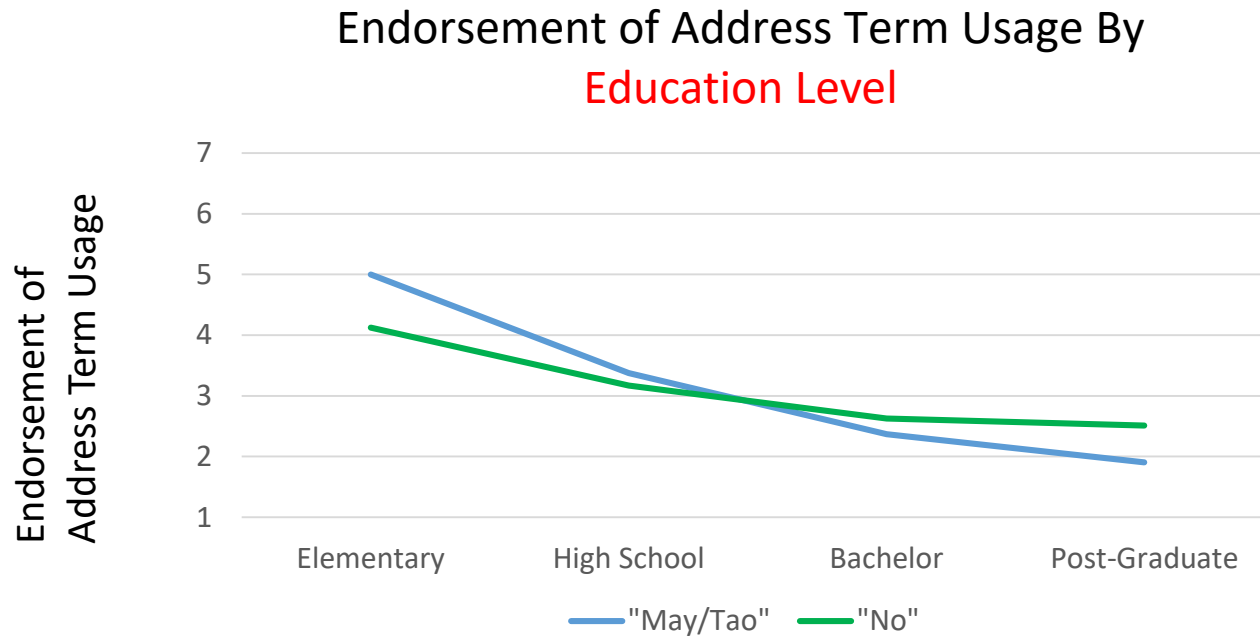
*Tao-Mày*

*Nó*

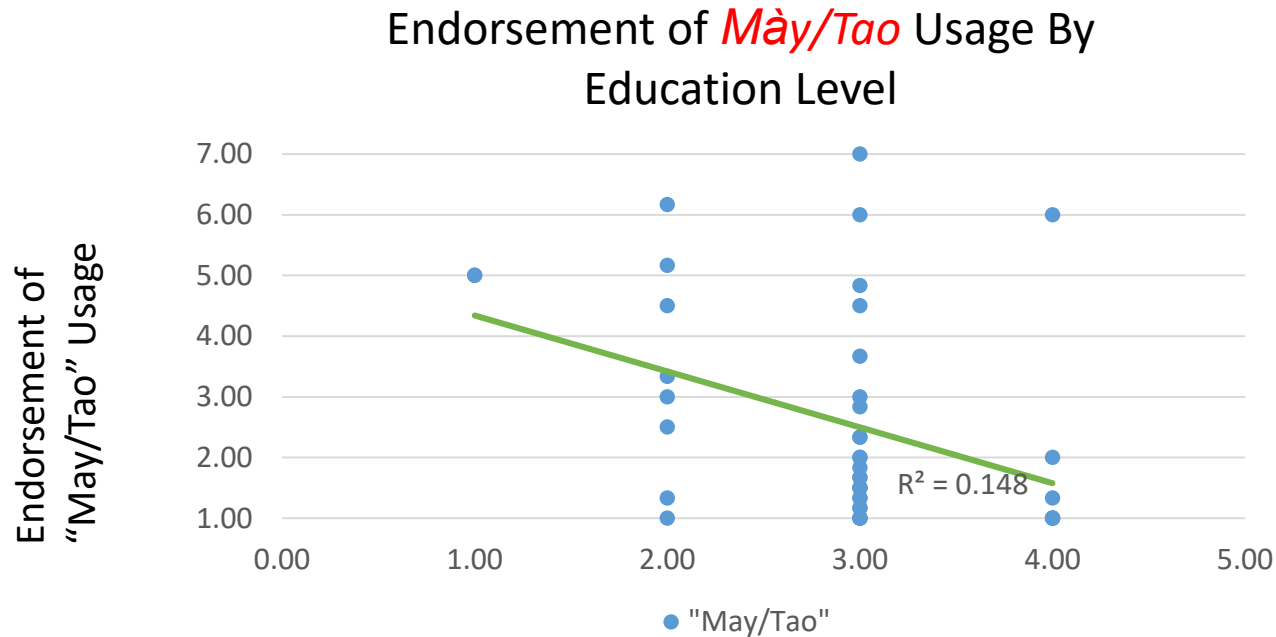


- Women use the pronouns *tao-mày* and *nó* less than men
- Older couples use *tao-mày* and *nó* less than younger couples
- People with advanced education use *tao-mày* and *nó* less than couple without advanced education
- People with 'white collar' jobs use *tao-mày* and *nó* less than people with 'blue collar' jobs
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# Endorsement of Address Term Usage: Analyses

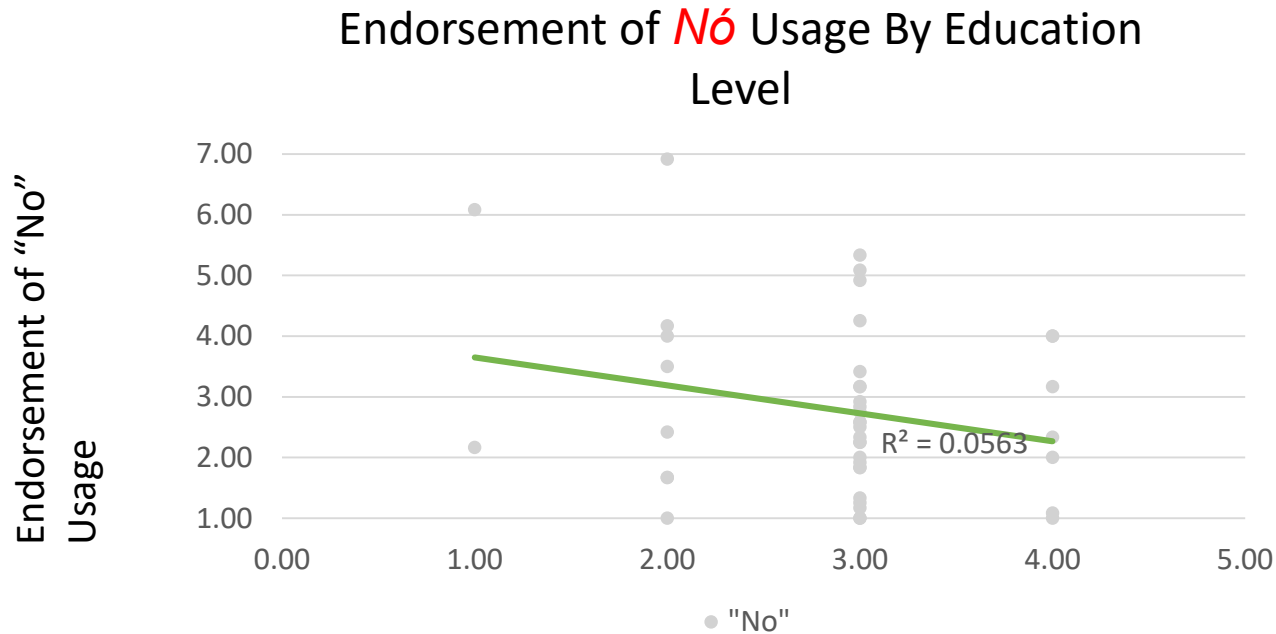


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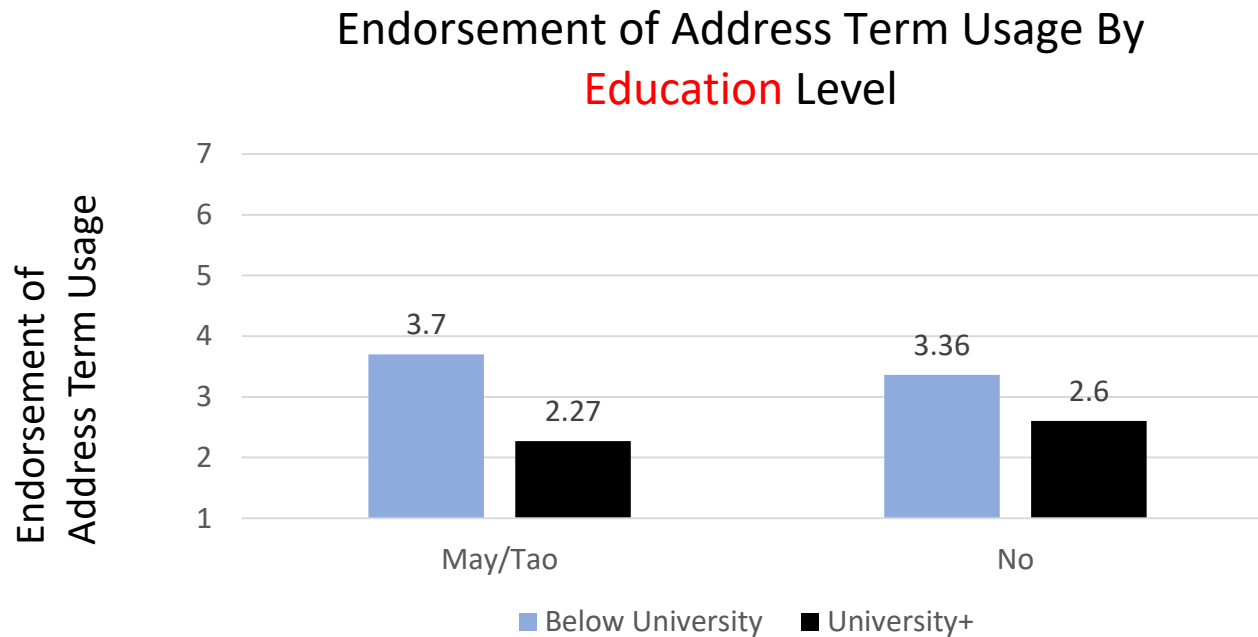




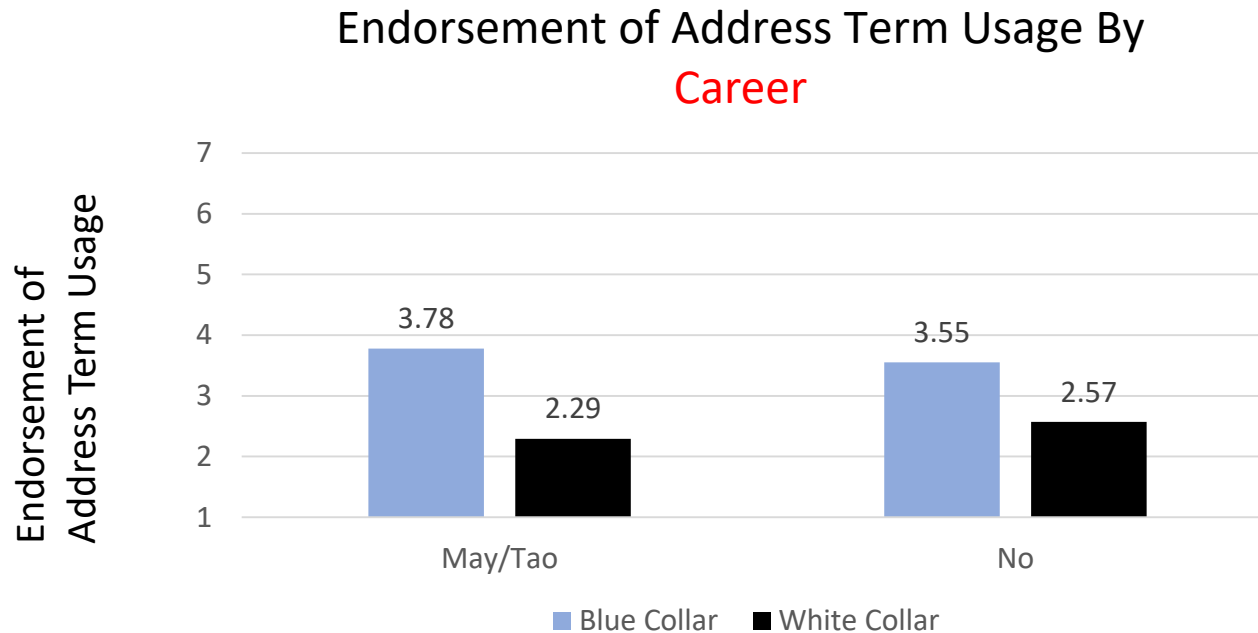
# Endorsement of Address Term Usage: Analyses



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# Endorsement of Address Term Usage: Analyses



# Education and career

- The findings confirm the hypotheses: Couples who hold a **bachelor degree or higher** are **significantly** less likely to endorse the use of three pronouns *tao-mày* and *nó* than those with lower education.
- Couples who **work desk-jobs** are **significantly** less likely to endorse the use of the three pronouns *tao-mày* and *nó* than those in laborer positions, such as drivers for a company or field workers in a factory.

- The finding that **gender variable is not significant** in using the three pronouns is **most unexpected**, given the **traditional Vietnamese values**.
- Women, especially **among the working class**, are **not** as tightly bound by Confucian texts **as the elite** class and at court (Duiker 1991).
- Before the Chinese rule and under the ruling of the Ly dynasty (11<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries). Vietnamese women **had many of the same rights as men**, more legal rights than Chinese women.

- Chinese influence in Vietnam is often **exaggerated**, “many of the components of Vietnamese culture have **roots indigenous to Southeast Asia**” (Duiker 1995:166).
- Another evidence for **Vietnamese gender equality** might be rooted from **indigenous traditions** is the fact that in some areas in southern Vietnam (originally was territories of the kingdoms of **Champa** and **Khmer**), these three pronouns are used among spouses even **in normal situations** (not during quarrel).

- In several languages in the **southeast Asian region**, the personal pronouns similar to the pair *tao-mày* are said to have **neutral attitude** (Nguyen 1988).
- **No studies have statistically analyzed this type of data before**, it is hard to say if the situation has changed.

- Although work conditions are **not improved** for women, and the traditional role of women in the family has **not significantly changed**, the survey in **this study shows that there is insufficient evidence to conclude that male partners “talk down” to their female partners**, by endorsing the use of *tao-mày* and *nó*, more than female partners talk to their male partners using the same pronouns.
- The finding about gender insignificance in using Vietnamese personal pronouns **challenges the stereotyped assumption about gender inequality in linguistic behaviors**, as often assumed in studies in the Vietnamese literature.



# Conclusions

- This study is the **first** that measures the endorsement for the use of Vietnamese pronouns *tao-mày* (I-you), and *nó* (he/she) in intimate relationships.
- There is a statistically **significant** difference between different levels of **Education** (low vs. high) on the endorsement of these pronouns.
- There is a statistically **significant** difference between different levels of **career** (laborer vs. non-laborer) on the endorsement of these pronouns.
- The evidence do **not statistically support the notion that men endorse the usage of these gender pronouns more so than women**, as is often assumed based on the values of the Vietnamese traditional family.

- The findings from this study support the **polarity** characteristics of Vietnam as a culture with a **Chinese influence** but also reflecting elements from **nearby civilizations or the local environment** (Duiker 1993, Taylor 2013).
- That gender equality in using the pronouns as address terms is **deeply rooted in the native cultures** with **influences from Chinese** doctrines is reflected in the statistical **significance of the education and career** variables.

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