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Cross-Cultural Pragmatics of Criticism: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and American Working-Class Voices

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Abstract There have been numerous studies examining criticism from various perspectives. Yet, research has rarely focused on working-class speakers, whose communicative practices remain underrepresented. This study investigates criticism strategies used by Vietnamese and American working-class speakers to identify cross-cultural similarities and differences in using them, and explore how direct and indirect strategies are distributed. The collected data comprises 127 American English and 129 Vietnamese criticism acts, which were analyzed using Nguyen's (2005) framework through a mixed-methods approach combining discourse analysis and frequency counts. Results show that there are eleven shared strategies, with negative evaluation, sarcasm, and rhetorical questioning being dominant. Meanwhile, some strategies are culture-specifically used, such as swearing, directives, and reframing, which are frequently adopted by Americans, while proverbs and metaphorical comparisons are often adopted by the Vietnamese. These patterns reveal how class-based communication intersects with broader cultural values. American working-class criticism tends to be more confrontational and expressive, whereas Vietnamese speakers balance directness with culturally embedded indirectness. The study contributes to cross-cultural pragmatics and supports more informed intercultural communication and language education.

Keywords: *Criticism, Cross-cultural pragmatics, Working class, Speech act, Intercultural communication*

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1. Introduction

Criticism is more than identifying people's faults—it is a complicated social speech act that is capable of delivering and triggering emotions between interlocutors. In fact, it is shaped by cultural expectations of how people should interact (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Because it might be the addressee's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987), criticism carries the risk of negatively influencing relationships. How speakers handle this risk depends on how interlocutors manage to employ strategies of politeness, impoliteness, and facework (Culpeper, 2011; Goffman, 2017/1967). These linguistic choices,

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however, are shaped not only by cultural norms but also by social class, which influences expectations of directness, relationality, and solidarity (Bernstein, 1971; Mills, 2004).

Within the Vietnamese context, several studies have examined the speech act of criticism, typically comparing Vietnamese and American communicative tendencies. Hoang (2007), for instance, found that Vietnamese speakers adjusted their criticism based significantly on age and the purpose of the interaction. In the meantime, variables such as gender or setting showed less influence. Another study by Do (2012) used foundational politeness frameworks such as Lakoff (1973), Leech (1983), and Brown and Levinson (1987). The study found that Vietnamese speakers preferred indirectness over directness as a strategy to maintain harmony. In his study in 2015, Truong added further nuance by comparing politeness strategies between American and Vietnamese speakers. He concluded that Vietnamese criticisms tended toward reason-giving and rapport-building, while American criticisms were more direct and autonomy-oriented.

Despite the progress of Vietnamese pragmatics research, significant gaps remain. First, working-class speakers continue to be vastly underrepresented. While existing studies have drawn important comparisons between Vietnamese and American speakers, they have tended to privilege educated, middle-class participants whose communicative styles differ substantially from those of lower working-class communities. Their absence from the literature results in an incomplete picture of Vietnamese criticism practices. Second, limitations in methodology also influence the validity of earlier findings. The utilization of questionnaires, DCTs, and role-plays makes it difficult to capture the spontaneity, natural interactions, and contextual attributions of real criticisms. Third, the majority of Vietnamese-American comparative studies were conducted more than ten years ago. Previous research might not be able to represent the evolving sociocultural dynamics and recent shifts in communication, especially in working-class environments. Therefore, these gaps above highlight the need for updated, class-conscious, and contextually grounded research.

To address these limitations, the present study investigates criticism speech acts produced by Vietnamese and American working-class speakers as represented in contemporary web dramas. These dramas provide not only natural dialogues that showcase real-life conversational pragmatics but also clear contextual frames for interpreting speech acts (Do Nascimento, 2019; Rizki & Golubovic, 2020). By analyzing how criticism is constructed and negotiated within the interactions in dramas, the study seeks to provide a more current and socially grounded understanding of cross-cultural criticism practices. In particular, the research aims to (1) identify the similarities and (2) differences in criticism strategies employed by Vietnamese and American working-class characters, (3) examine how these strategies are distributed across the two sociocultural contexts. As a result, the study contributes not only to cross-cultural pragmatics and media linguistics but also to broader discussions on linguistic inclusivity, supporting UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals by amplifying the communicative practices of socially marginalized groups whose voices have long been overlooked. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the similarities in the employment of criticism speech acts by Vietnamese and American working-class speakers?
2. What are the differences in the employment of criticism speech acts by Vietnamese and American working-class speakers?
3. How are various criticism speech acts distributed by Vietnamese and American working-class speakers?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Speech Act Theory

The Speech Act Theory, first introduced by Austin (1962) in *How to Do Things with Words*, transformed how we think about language. Instead of seeing it only as a way to transfer information, Austin showed that speaking is also a way of doing things. Every utterance, in his view, carries an action—whether that means making a promise, apologizing, or criticizing. He broke this down into three layers: the locutionary act, or the literal meaning of the words; the perlocutionary act, which is the

effect those words have on the listener; and the illocutionary act, which reveals the speaker's intent, such as persuading, warning, or showing disapproval. Building on Austin's ideas, Searle (1969) outlined rules for how speech acts work and under what conditions they make sense. He proposed a widely-used classification of speech acts, in which criticism is categorized as an *expressive* act because it communicates the speaker's evaluation, often dissatisfaction or disapproval.

Still, criticism is not simply a negative speech act. It is a purposeful act that is shaped within cultural norms, social, and contextual elements. As Chaika and Tannen (1985) point out, criticism reflects broader social structures and cannot be understood in isolation. To grasp its meaning, we have to look not only at the words themselves but also at the social cues and cultural expectations that give them weight.

2.2. The Working-Class Communication Style

Working-class speakers in communication often focus on straightforwardness and direct emotional expression. This communication style includes the use of swearing, louder voice volumes, and "unsoftened" utterances, containing blunt commands, direct criticisms, and sometimes impassioned and argumentative (Engen, 2004). While this communication style might be interpreted as rude or confrontational by speakers of the middle- and high-classes, they carry important relational meaning within working-class communities. In fact, such directness often signals honesty, openness, and solidarity among working-class speakers. From this perspective, directness is less about causing offense, but more about fostering equality and immediacy in interactions. Conversely, the indirect and deferential styles, often using hedges ("kind of," "maybe") or polite softeners, can be considered by working-class speakers as unnecessarily formal or even emotionally distant (Mills, 2004). Indeed, lower working-class individuals often see freely communicating one's mind as honesty, a highly valued moral feature in their community, although this direct communication style is often perceived as tackless and disrespectful by middle-class colleagues in working environment (Lubrano, 2004).

The communication style described above aligns with Bernstein's (1971) concept of a "restricted code", which is often found in working-class settings. A restricted code is characterized by brief, context-dependent utterances that draw heavily on a foundation of shared knowledge and strong social ties. Rather than prioritizing elaborate sentence structures or explicit details, this code emphasizes relational meaning and group cohesion, making it highly effective for maintaining those community bonds (Bernstein, 1971; Mills, 2004).

Regarding politeness in communication, Mills (2004) also stated that working-class speakers tend to favor positive politeness strategies, which actively highlight solidarity and inclusion. This stands in contrast to negative politeness strategies, which emphasize distance and non-imposition. From a working-class perspective, expressions typical of negative politeness, such as "Could you possibly…?", might sound overly formal or even insincere. This is a central point in Mills's critique of mainstream politeness theories, particularly the foundational work of Brown and Levinson (1987). She argues that these theories are biased, centering the middle class, Western norms, and consequently mislabeling the working-class speech as "deficient" or inherently impolite. Instead, Mills insists that politeness cannot be universal. It is socially defined and must be understood within its specific cultural and class-based context.

2.3. American and Vietnamese Communication Styles

Communication styles often reflect cultural values, shaping how people interpret meaning and harmonize relationships. In America, interaction is usually marked by a low-context style, where clarity and explicitness are key elements. According to Hall (1976), in low-context cultures, meaning is carried mainly in the words themselves rather than in other contextual factors. As a result, Americans often emphasize directness, efficiency, and unambiguous expression. This is closely tied to its strong preference for individualism (Hofstede, 2001), which considers personal autonomy and self-expression as key virtues. Criticism, therefore, is often treated not as a threat to harmonious relationships but as honesty or constructive comments (Hosseinizadeh & Moqadam, 2018).

Vietnamese communication, by contrast, reflects the characteristics of high-context and collectivist cultures (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001). In high-context cultures, meaning is often carried beyond the literal words, drawing instead on shared understanding, social roles, and nonverbal cues (Nguyen,

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2020). For Vietnamese speakers, this means that indirectness and ambiguity are common strategies used to save interlocutors' faces and avoid unnecessary confrontation. What is more, collectivist values further reinforce this communication style by placing group harmony above individual expression. As a result, criticism is rarely delivered bluntly; it is often softened through rhetorical questions, pauses, or humor, with the expectation that the listener will recognize the implied meaning (Muir et al., 2018).

2.4. Previous Studies on the Speech Act of Criticism

According to Oxford Learner's Dictionary (2002), criticism is defined as expressing disapproval toward someone or something, pointing out that someone or something is wrong and inadequate. Similarly, the Vietnamese Dictionary, by Hoang (1996), described criticism as dissatisfaction with someone's action, quality, or behavior. In academic terms, Tracy et al. (1987) describe criticism as an act of finding fault and having a negative evaluation of one's action. Hyland (2000, p. 44), likewise, defines criticism as "the expression of dissatisfaction or negative comment." Nguyen (2005) develops this further by stating that criticism is an illocutionary act that aims to evaluate the hearer's actions, words, or choices. Drawing on Wierzbicka (1987), Nguyen also highlights its constructive dimension: criticism not only expresses a negative attitude but is also aware that the message could threaten the hearer's "face" (i.e., their social image), while still hoping to bring about positive change.

Additionally, it is worth noticing that criticism is often confused with similar acts, such as complaint and disapproval, since they often occur in similar contexts and share overlapping features (Meinl, 2013). However, some researchers (House & Kasper, 1981; Laforest, 2002; Meinl, 2013; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983) argue that drawing rigid boundaries among them is unnecessary. Following this perspective, the present study uses the definition of criticism by Tracy et al. (1987), while adopting a broad understanding of criticism that also encompasses shared features of the closely related acts above. This definition is chosen because it is sufficiently clear and covers attributes of most other similar definitions.

2.4.1. Studies in Various Cultures

Many studies about how people in different cultures criticize have been conducted. In her studies conducted in 2005 and 2013, Nguyen compared criticisms of native speakers of Australian and New Zealand with those of Vietnamese students. She found that native English speakers used a wide variety of strategies, including indirect suggestions. She also found that Vietnamese learners were noticeably more direct. The findings show not only the limits of pragmatic transfer but also the influence of collectivist norms on communication. In the Japanese context, Haristiani and Afiana (2022) conducted a study examining speech acts of criticism in Japanese manga and anime. The study highlighted the *Uchi–Soto* distinction: the insiders (*Uchi*) - people within a community- tend to give more direct and supportive criticisms; and the outsiders (*Soto*) – people outside a community- often receive softened forms of criticisms to maintain harmony. In Indonesian media discourse, Riani et al. (2024) examined the criticism strategies from the perspective of social justice. They used Nguyen's taxonomy (2005) as the major theoretical framework and found that direct and indirect criticisms were mostly equally utilized by Indonesians on Twitter. Differently, using a DCT approach to collect data, a study on criticism by Kurdish speakers shows that the Kurds would rather use indirect strategies than direct ones (Sulaiman, 2022). The research above indicates that the employment of criticism strategies is obviously culture-oriented.

Regarding contrastive studies across cultures, Hoang (2007) implemented a study in which she compared American and Vietnamese speech acts of criticism. She found that Americans typically delivered criticism directly, regardless of social status. Vietnamese speakers preferred indirect suggestion-based strategies, which reflect the cultural collectivist values. Another contrastive study between British and Jordanian criticizing acts (Al Kayed & Al-Ghoweri, 2019) claimed that British speakers often framed criticism as problem identification or questioning, and Jordanian speakers incorporated emotional and religious appeals, indicating their sociopolitical norms. These studies draw an important point: while criticism universally threatens face, the way it is performed is deeply influenced by cultural orientations toward directness, hierarchy, and solidarity.

2.4.2. Studies in Vietnam

Researchers have explored how criticism speech acts are performed within local Vietnamese contexts from various perspectives. Hoang (2007) compared Vietnamese and American speakers' speech acts of criticism. She found that Vietnamese participants adjusted their criticisms according to the addressee's age and the purpose of criticizing. In contrast, factors such as gender, interlocutors' familiarity, or the setting where the conversations take place were less influential. However, this study collected data primarily from middle-class speakers' dialogues, leaving the voices of working-class speakers underrepresented.

Do (2012) investigated both compliments and criticisms in the Vietnamese and English languages through observations of daily conversations and collections of questionnaires. Her findings showed a preference for indirectness in criticism by Vietnamese speakers. This serves as a strategy to maintain harmonious relationships. She used politeness theories developed by Lakoff (1973), Leech (1983), and Brown and Levinson (1987) as the theoretical framework for her study. However, while Do's work was relatively comprehensive, it was conducted many years ago, which makes it unable to reflect the contemporary pragmatic linguistic use, which is strongly influenced by digital communication, globalization, and modern societal changes.

A more recent contribution came from a study by Truong (2015). Truong examined politeness strategies in Vietnamese and American criticisms. His results showed that Vietnamese speakers have the tendency to give reasons for the criticizing act or soften their language, especially in informal contexts, whereas American speakers were more direct and impersonal. Truong (2015) also pointed out that when criticizing, Vietnamese speakers prefer "positive politeness" strategies to build rapport, while Americans favour "negative politeness", which emphasizes respect for individual autonomy. This study has contributed significantly to the Vietnamese context. However, the study had one limitation, that is, because its collected data relied on simulated scenarios rather than naturally occurring conversations, a number of communicative elements in conversations might have been overlooked.

Overall, although cross-cultural studies have compared criticism in American English and Vietnamese, they have not explicitly focused on lower working-class speakers, whose communicative practices may differ significantly from those of middle-class or educated groups (Hoang, 2007; Nguyen, 2008). Moreover, much of the existing work has adopted questionnaires and simulated scenarios to collect data (Do, 2012; Hoang, 2007; Truong, 2015). These methods, although being useful to a certain extent, are unable to explore the spontaneity and contextual richness of natural conversations. In contrast, films and web dramas provide authentic dialogues embedded in social contexts, offering a more suitable lens for investigating pragmatic behavior, including the performance of criticism (Do Nascimento, 2019; Rizki & Golubovic, 2020). Finally, most comparative studies on Vietnamese and American criticism were conducted over a decade ago, which means they do not fully capture contemporary linguistic trends or the ways in which speech practices have evolved in today's sociocultural landscape. Addressing these gaps by examining criticism in the speech of the Vietnamese lower working class, as represented in contemporary filmic discourse, can provide more current, socially grounded insights.

3. Methodology

3.1. Corpus

The general information about Vietnamese and American film data is presented in Table 1. Films were selected as the primary data source based on several criteria to ensure the comparability of the two datasets. First, all films portray the complex interpersonal dynamics within working-class families and their interactions with neighbors, thereby guaranteeing that the language under examination portrays working-class discourse. Second, the films chosen are web dramas—*Shameless Season 11* (aired on Netflix) and *Old Father* and *The Blind Alley* (aired on YouTube)—released within the past five years. This timeframe was selected to ensure that the data captures contemporary linguistic practices. Third, these films contain numerous scenes featuring a wide range of criticizing speech acts that serve different communicative functions. As Rizki and Golubovic (2020) argue, films provide rich sources of dynamic communicative interactions, life-like contexts, and complex interpersonal relationships. Finally, the films have attracted significant public attention, largely due to their realistic portrayals of working-class

communities, particularly in the context of social interactions before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1
The Duration of Films Used as the Data Source

Title	Year	Duration	Instances of Criticism
American film			
Shameless (Season 11), 12 episodes	2020	660 minutes	127
Vietnamese film			
Bố Già (Old Father), 5 episodes	2020	190 minutes	129
Hẻm cụt (The Blind Alley), 5 episodes	2022	212 minutes	
Total duration		1062 minutes	256

To address the criteria for "working-class" identification, this study moves beyond the films' genre. Following standard sociological definitions (e.g., Bernstein, 1971; Mills, 2004), characters were confirmed as working-class based on a combination of three explicit socio-economic criteria:

1. Occupation: Characters are primarily employed in manual labor, service industry, or "gig economy" roles (e.g., bar staff, ride-share drivers, gig workers) rather than salaried, managerial, or "knowledge-based" professions.
2. Economic factor: Characters are portrayed with significant economic precarity, such as a lack of assets, unstable income, and the constant stress of meeting basic needs (e.g., paying for utilities, rent, or food).
3. Educational factor: Characters generally do not pursue high education, which sociologically distinguishes their "market position" and access to middle-class professions.

The characters in Shameless (e.g., the Gallagher family's various service and gig-economy jobs), The Old Father, and The Alley (e.g., the "alley" community of drivers and small-scale vendors in The Old Father) explicitly meet these criteria.

It is well-noted that this study does not treat this data as a one-to-one reflection of reality. Instead, it analyzes these films as powerful cultural artifacts that construct and circulate social ideologies about class. Following a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework (Fairclough, 1995), the study analyzes *how* "working-class-ness" is linguistically performed and represented. The films' "realistic portrayals" are a social construction designed to be "authentic" to an audience, making them a perfect corpus for deconstructing the linguistic and pragmatic strategies (i.e., criticism) used to build that authenticity. Methodologically, this dataset provides a specialized corpus that is uniquely suited for pragmatic analysis for two reasons. First, as film is a dramatic medium, it provides a pragmatically dense collection of face-threatening acts (like criticism) that are often avoided in spontaneous conversation, thus helping to solve the 'Observer's Paradox.' Second, the audiovisual format provides the complete multimodal context (tone, gesture, setting) that is essential for accurately identifying the illocutionary force of speech acts—a key advantage over text-only corpora or the de-contextualized scenarios used in prior research.

3.2. Procedure

3.2.1. Data Collection

The procedure of collecting data includes steps such as data recording, data transcribing, data observing, and data coding. Data cards were used to document selected dialogues that contain speech acts of criticism. Next, the data was validated through careful and systematic observation by two experts in the field. For the American data, twelve episodes of the Netflix series *Shameless* were viewed and transcribed, focusing on characters who are native speakers of American English. For the Vietnamese data, ten episodes from two YouTube-based dramas (*Bố Già and Hẻm Cụt*) were similarly transcribed, featuring characters who are native speakers of Vietnamese.

3.2.2. Data Analysis

The data source produced a corpus of 127 instances of verbal criticism in American English and 129 in Vietnamese, which were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Criticism speech acts were selected based on Searle (1969), classifying criticism as an expressive act of showing the speaker's dissatisfaction with the hearer's quality, action, or behavior, and Tracy et al.'s (1987), defining criticism as the act of pointing out faults and delivering negative evaluations of a person or their actions. The qualitative approach was used to describe and analyze the verbal strategies of criticism in their conversational contexts. The quantitative approach was used to investigate the frequency of criticism strategies employed by Vietnamese and American characters.

The analytical framework for this study was adapted from Nguyen's (2005) taxonomy of criticism (Appendix). Nguyen's taxonomy was chosen as the theoretical framework for analysis due to its solid empirical foundation and its extensive application in research examining criticism across diverse intercultural, cross-cultural, and intracultural contexts (Al Kayed et al., 2019; Haristiani et al., 2022; Ho & Tran, 2022). Although non-verbal expressions could function as speech acts, the current study merely focused on the verbal perspective that contributes to the meaning of criticism performances. During the data coding process, several modifications were made to the adapted model to ensure it accurately reflected the unique conversational features observed within the web drama episodes. Strategies, such as "Explicit comparison", "Command/Directive", "Swear/Taboo words", "Reframing", "metaphorical comparison", "Idiom/Proverb", were added as they significantly reflected the unique features of data. On the other hand, some strategies, such as "Request for change", "Demand for change", "Advice for change", and "Expression of uncertainty", were excluded as they were not reflected in the data.

4. Results

4.1. The Similarities in the Employment of Criticizing Strategies by Vietnamese and American Working-Class Speakers

There are eleven criticism strategies found in both American and Vietnamese conversations:

Negative Evaluation: This strategy consists of utterances that express critical judgments of the hearer's behavior, appearance, attitude, or actions. These evaluations are commonly articulated through negative adjectives or other lexical items with unfavorable connotations (Nguyen, 2005).

1. *American: All due respect, Vernorica. Your brownies were awful.* (*Shameless/E2/21:32)*

Vietnamese: Mấy ngày nay không có nước tắm, nó chua ơi là chua. (Bố già/E2/32:00)
(No water to shower these days, you smell so damn sour!)

In the American example above, the speaker explicitly criticized his wife's cooking ability by using the negative adjective *"awful"* to describe the brownies she made. Similarly, the Vietnamese character gave a straightforward comment on his wife's unpleasant odor due to the lack of water to bathe, with the descriptive adjective *"sour"*. In both cases, the speakers did not use any mitigating device.

Expression of Disapproval: This strategy involves the speaker's expression of their personal unfavourable feelings toward the hearer's actions. With this type of strategy, speakers often utilize negation expressions such as "I hate", "I don't like," or "I can't stand."

2. *American:* (*Shameless/E6/30:03)*
Veronica: I <u>don't feel comfortable</u> subjecting my girls to this kind of trauma. They are Black girls in America. At least at school, they should be safe.
School principal: Well, I'm sorry, we used our PE money to give away hot lunches during the pandemic. Can't afford gym class, so pretending to run scared down the hallway from a crazed shooter's the only cardio these kids are gonna get all week.

Vietnamese: Cái chuyện không có đáng gì mà nói um sùm trời đất à! Tao <u>ghét</u> ai nhiều chuyện mà gặp toàn người nhiều chuyện không. (*Hẻm cụt/E2/05:31)*

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(That's nothing to shout about, so why all the noise? I hate gossipers, but keep bumping into them.)

Statement of the Problem: It concerns the speaker explicitly telling the hearer what he/she thinks is inappropriate or unfavourable in the other's action/behavior/choice.

3. *American*: *(Shameless/E10/31:11)*

A high-class man: Do you know who I am?
Carl: I don't care, sir.
A highclass man: I'm calling my alderman!
Carl: You think you can just come down here to the South Side, park wherever you want, kick out our neighbors, and arrest old men just because they have dementia.

Vietnamese: Gia đình đang vui, không khí đang vui, tự nhiên cứ chửi lên hè! (Bố Già/E4/21:20)
(We were all having a good time, everyone was happy, then out of nowhere, you started yelling!)

In the American example above, Carl (a young police officer) directly blamed the high-class man's actions by listing his unfavourable actions, one of which was parking in the wrong place. Likewise, the Vietnamese wife criticized her husband for destroying the joyful family vibe with his action.

Reference to Consequences: This strategy consists of emphasizing the unfavorable consequences that stem from the hearer's behavior. It is typically expressed through causal constructions introduced by connectors such as 'so,' 'therefore,' or similar equivalents.

4. *American: (Shameless/E4/14:15)*

Ian: Yeah, so weed might be legal, but carrying a gun as a convicted felon is about as illegal as it gets. What happens if you get arrested and get sent back to prison?
Mick: Look, I'm doin' security. Need a gun.

Vietnamese: Tao nói mày nghe, cục tự ái mày bự quá. Riết rồi mày tự ái như vậy ở nhà vợ với con mày đói. (Bố già/E2/36:25)
(Let me tell you, your damn ego is way too big. Keep being so full of yourself, and your wife and kids will end up starving at home.)

Explicit Comparison: This strategy is defined by the speaker's direct expression of a negative evaluation of the hearer's actions through comparison with a third party. It is typically realized through the use of comparative adjectives or equivalent constructions.

5. *American: You know, Frank, the Milkoviches might be awful, but living next to them can't be much worse than living next to you".* (*Shameless/E4/15:26*)

Vietnamese: Người ta đang nói chuyện mà bà cười bài hãi bài hãi như con điên à! (Bố già/E4/17:32)
(People are talking and you're laughing loudly like a crazy woman!)

In Example 5, the speaker openly states that the hearer made a mistake by forcing his son into a marriage without considering the son's wishes or emotions, thereby highlighting both the act and its moral implications.

Expression of Disagreement: This strategy is used when the speaker explicitly signals disagreement, often through direct or indirect negation. Phrases equivalent to saying "no" are employed to reject the hearer's position or statement.

6. *American:* (*Shameless/E6/30:30)*

School principal: Pretending to run scared down the hallway is the only cardio these kids get all week. It is like what Mrs.Obama said, right? Kids gotta move.
Veronica: Don't think that's what she meant.

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Vietnamese: Ngày hôm nay Nguyễn Ngọt Ngào tôi xin phép được lần đầu phản pháo con bé Như Quỳnh hỗn láo. (Hẻm cụt/E4/20:10)

(Today, I, Nguyễn Ngọt Ngào, would like to officially fire back at that rude little Như Quỳnh for the first time.)

In the American example, the school principal explained the purpose of having her students role-play as terrorists and victims in place of regular cardio exercises. To strengthen her argument, she cites Mrs. Obama. Veronica, however, directly challenges this reasoning by expressing her disagreement: "I don't think that's what she meant." Concerning the Vietnamese example, the middle-aged speaker used the verb *"phản pháo",* which literally means "*to fire back*", to convey a strong rebuttal, indicating that the speaker is prepared to counter the earlier statement made by another character, Nhu Quynh. He also gives the reason for his rebuttal by directly stating that Nhu Quynh is insolent and disrespectful.

Indicating Standard: According to Nguyen (2005), this strategy involves mentioning widely accepted community rules or social norms to indirectly criticize the hearer. Instead of addressing the hearer's fault directly, the speaker relies on shared cultural standards to frame the criticism.

7. American: (Shameless/E3/34:25)

Ian: You gave me a bigger order than everybody else.
Supervisor: Everyone takes their turn with the bigger orders. Hike up your skirt and be a team player.

Vietnamese: Nè, đàn ông con trai mà uống nước ngọt không. (Bố già/E1/07:54)

(Hey, you, drinking soda as a man!)

In the American example, the supervisor responds to Ian's complaint by mentioning that the workload in the factory is distributed equally. He implies that Ian's complaint is unreasonable, as everyone in the factory can take over the same workload. Similarly, in the Vietnamese example, the speaker assumes that the socially expected drink for a "real man" is not soda but alcohol. The speaker implicitly criticizes the hearer as failing to act following masculine expectations.

Asking /Presupposing: This strategy uses rhetorical questions not to find answers but to draw attention to the hearer's inappropriate behavior or attitudes (Nguyen, 2005). Questions are not intended to seek a response; rather, they serve to provoke reflection or induce a sense of guilt, thereby conveying criticism through implication rather than direct statement.

8. *American:* (*Shameless/ E10/17:25*)

Frank: Asians are always stealing opportunities away from African Americans.
Liam: Don't you think that's kind of racist? Wen just happens to be an Asian dude who's smart.

Vietnamese: Trời ơi, nó ca vậy rồi chừng nào nó nổi tiếng? (Bố già/E2/33:54)

(Oh God, singing like that, when's you ever gonna be famous?)

In the American example above, Liam criticizes Frank's utterance as an act of racism, but he does not state it directly. Instead, he poses a question not intended for Frank to answer, but rather to imply his disapproval. Similarly, in the Vietnamese example, the speaker asks: *'When will she ever be famous?'*- not because of the curiosity about the time of fame, but to imply that the hearer's singing voice is unattractive and thus unlikely to ever lead to fame.

Irony/Sarcasm: This strategy refers to the use of irony or overstated praise as a means of indirectly criticizing the hearer's behavior. It conveys a meaning contrary to its literal meaning, thereby underscoring the inappropriateness or absurdity of the hearer's actions. This expression is, therefore, implicit, not forceful.

9. *American: [Shameless/E7/5:50]*

Lip: Let's just vote and be done with it.
Franny: Sell!
Debbie: Shut up, Franny!
Sandy: Nice mothering, Debbie!

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Vietnamese: Nhìn nó hiền lành quá! Nào giờ coi trong phim không biết là ngoài đời có một đứa diễn hay như vậy! (Bố già/ E1/27:25)
(Looks all nice and innocent, huh? Who knew real-life acting could beat the movies!)

In the American example, the family is unable to reach a decision on whether to sell or keep the house due to conflicting opinions. When Lip, the eldest brother, suggests voting, Franny (Debbie's young daughter) gives the opposite opinion from her mother's. Sandy then offers a sarcastic remark — *"Nice mothering, Debbie!"* — which on the surface appears to be praise but in fact implies *bad parenting*, criticizing Debbie for failing to influence her daughter to support her. Similarly, in the Vietnamese example, a middle-aged man sarcastically praises a woman's "acting skills," suggesting that she is not genuinely innocent but is instead pretending to be a victim in real life. In both cases, the use of praise is insincere and functions as sarcasm, serving to highlight perceived faults or hypocrisy in the hearer's behavior.

Suggestion for a Change: This strategy concerns the speaker suggesting, requesting, or referring to a better alternative for the hearer to change. The structures of this type may include imperative or performative structures like "You need to…" "You should…" or equivalent constructions

10. *American: First of all, you need to clean up your language. B*tch, this is incredibly offensive to women.* (*Shameless/ E3/43:03*)

Vietnamese: Tao nói mày rồi. Làm ba mẹ cái gì cũng phải từ từ. (Bố già/E5/02:29)
(I've told you. As a parent, you should be patient.)

In Example 10, the speaker requests a more polite form of expression, thereby signaling an underlying criticism of the hearer's offensive language use. In the Vietnamese instance, following an intense quarrel between father and son, an elderly neighbor offers advice that implicitly criticizes the father for being overly impatient with his son.

Metaphorical Comparison: This strategy entails the speaker criticizing the hearer's actions or behavior by implicitly comparing them to a negative metaphorical figure, without relying on direct descriptive adjectives.

11. *American: You have a hairless body of a preteen girl.* (*Shameless/ E3/5:40*)

Vietnamese: Ba tụi bây là nhóm nhạc ba con kền kền. Chỗ nào có chuyện là có tụi bây. (*Hẻm cụt/E5/12:43*)
(You three are like a vulture band — wherever there's trouble, there you are.)

In the example above, the speaker compares his male friend's appearance to that of a prepubescent teenage girl—an image symbolizing innocence and femininity—in order to criticize his lack of masculinity and maturity, even though the utterance uses the adjective *"hairless"* rather than the explicit term "*unmanly*". In the following example, the hearers are likened to vultures—an image symbolizing wickedness and gossiping—implying a criticism that the hearer has the negative trait of spreading rumors and speaking ill of others. In this case, the speaker also refrains from directly using adjectives such as "*gossipy*" or "*nosy*".

4.2. The Difference in the Employment of Criticizing Strategies by Vietnamese and American Working-Class Speakers

4.2.1. Criticizing Strategies Used Exclusively by American Working-Class Speakers

Reframing: This strategy refers to the act of restating or redefining the hearer's behavior, words, or situation in a different light, usually by shifting the perspective to expose its negative implications. Instead of openly labeling the behavior as wrong, the speaker reinterprets it in a way that highlights its flaws, limitations, or undesirable consequences. This indirect strategy allows the criticism to be conveyed more subtly while still undermining the hearer's stance or action.

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12. *Kevin: Their tiny fingers are perfect. Look, this is why they used little kids to dig stuff out of machinery back in the old days. (Shameless/ E1/10:30)*
Veronica: They outlawed that, Kev. It's called child labor.

In this example, Kevin has his children help him roll tobacco papers. He attempts to do this task as if it were no different from what children were expected to do in the past. His wife, Veronica, however, reframes these tasks as 'illegal child labor,' thereby implying that her husband's actions are inappropriate.

Giving Commands: This strategy is marked by explicit directive utterances used to express the speaker's disapproval of the hearer's actions or behavior. Such utterances often employ a negative form of modal verbs like "You can't."

13. *Hey, you cannot just run away from people (Debbie to Sandy) (Shameless/E7/22:23).*

14. *Jesus, Frank! Where's your mask? You can't just walk into our house (Kevin to Frank) (Shameless/E4/15:05).*

In Example 13, Debbie criticizes Sandy for irresponsibly abandoning both herself and her son by uttering a command using "You can't". Similarly, in Example 14, Kevin shows his disapproval of Frank's inappropriate behavior of entering his house without wearing a mask—a requirement during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a directive statement, "You can't just…"

Swearing/Using Taboo Words: With this strategy, taboo words are not employed merely as exclamations but function as negative adjectives or noun phrases through which the speaker conveys critical evaluations of the hearer's actions or behavior.

15. *Site manager: No, I am sorry. But that is very cute. I have never had anyone ask me that before. (Shameless/E11/34:15)*
*Mick: It is not cute, lady. You should have told us that before we signed the stupid-a** lease. You and your weird-a** dog.*

16. *Mick: No? Want me to get some sh*tty-a** minimum-wage job like you, hauling boxes around a warehouse? No! (Shameless/E1)*

In these examples, taboo expressions function as negative descriptors. In Example 15, "stupid-a** lease" refers to the rental agreement, which Mick thinks is unfair to him. Plus, the expression "weird-a** dog" derogates the site manager's pet. In Example 16, "sh*tty-a** minimum-wage job" serves to denigrate the hearer's occupation, highlighting Mick's disdain and reinforcing the negative evaluation.

4.2.2. Criticizing Strategies Used Exclusively by Vietnamese Working-Class Speakers

Proverb: A proverb commonly involves a fixed concept, a moral lesson, or a traditional cultural belief that is shared in a certain community. When it is employed as a strategy of criticism, a proverb may function to offer advice, signal dissatisfaction with the hearer's behavior, deliver sarcastic commentary, or underscore the negative consequences of the hearer's actions. Although sharing certain features with sarcasm, proverbs are treated here as a distinct category, both because of their multifunctional role and their exclusive use among Vietnamese speakers.

17. *Cái thằng này nó có âm mưu gì đó, lù khù mà vác cái lu chạy đó (Bố già/E2/30:21)*
(This guy is definitely up to something — he may look slow and clumsy, but he's making off with the whole jar!)

18. *Thứ mà con nhà lính tính nhà quan không à (Bố già/E1/04:51)*
(You are just a soldier's son acting like a nobleman.)

The proverb in Example 17 literally means, *"he may appear clumsy, yet he can still run while carrying a large ceramic jar on his back."* In this context, the speaker implies that the hearer is not as simple or harmless as his outward appearance suggests. Similarly, in Example 18, the proverb literally means, *"he is the son of an ordinary soldier, yet he behaves like the son of a high-ranking commander."* Here, the

speaker criticizes the hearer's behavior/hobby as overly demanding and pretentious despite coming from a poor family background.

4.3. Distribution of Direct and Indirect Strategies among Vietnamese and American Working-Class Speakers

Figure 1 shows a preference for direct criticism among both American and Vietnamese speakers. American speakers employ direct strategies in 66.9% of the instances, whereas Vietnamese speakers use them in 58.9% of cases. Conversely, indirect strategies make up a higher proportion of Vietnamese criticisms (41.1%) compared to American (33.1%). The findings, on the one hand, suggest that both cultures are in favor of directness, which is consistent with the working-class communicative style described in the sociolinguistic research by Bernstein (1971) and Mills (2004). On the other hand, the finding suggests that Vietnamese speakers appear more willing to resort to indirectness than their American counterparts. This pattern reflects the cultural characteristics. On the one hand, American working-class speakers display a confrontational style where face threats are often tolerated or even expected as markers of authenticity and emotional honesty. On the other hand, Vietnamese working-class speakers combine direct evaluation with a certain degree of indirectness. This feature shows the significant influence of hierarchical, relational, and collectivist norms in Vietnamese society.

Figure 1

Frequency of Direct and Indirect Strategies by Vietnamese and American Working-Class Speakers

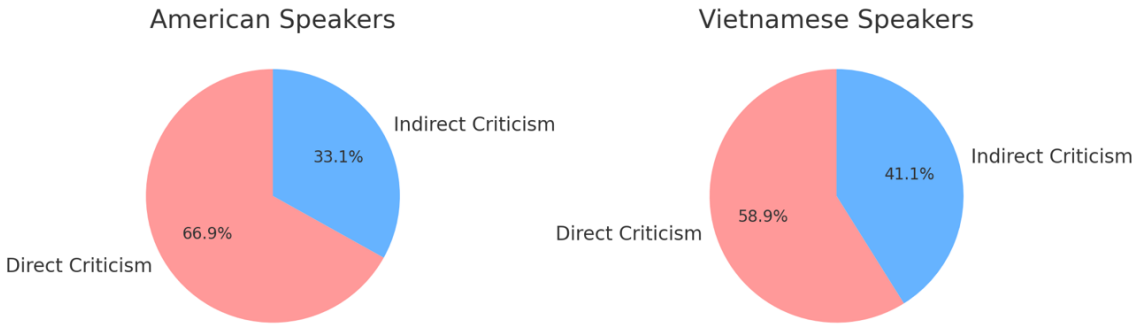
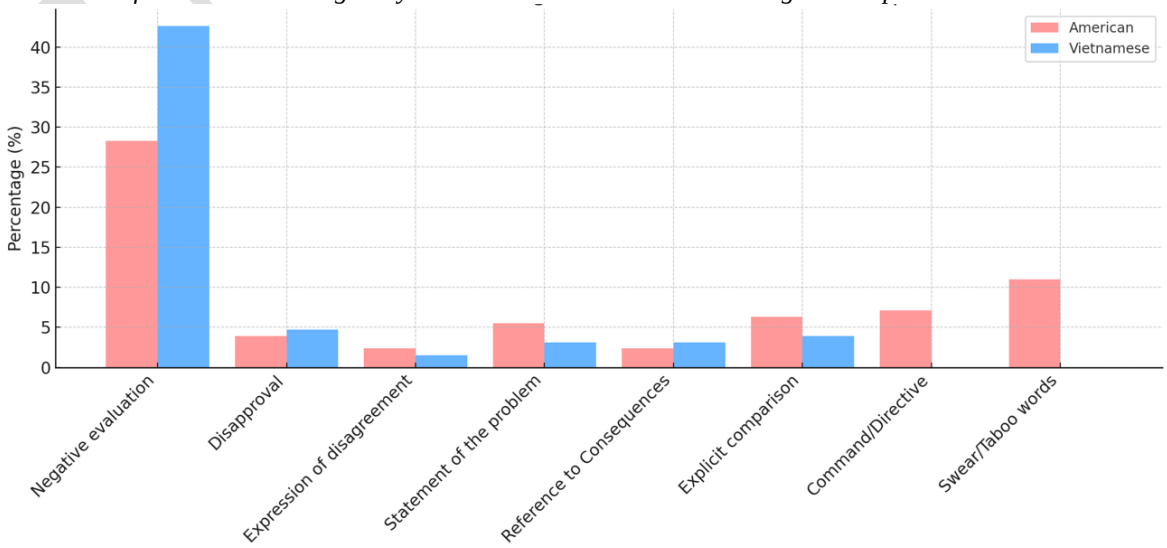


Figure 2 describes the distribution of direct criticism strategies. In both the American and Vietnamese datasets, Negative Evaluation is the most frequently used strategy. It accounts for 28.3% of American criticisms and a notably higher 42.6% among Vietnamese speakers.

Figure 2

Distribution of Direct Sub-Strategies by Vietnamese and American Working-Class Speakers

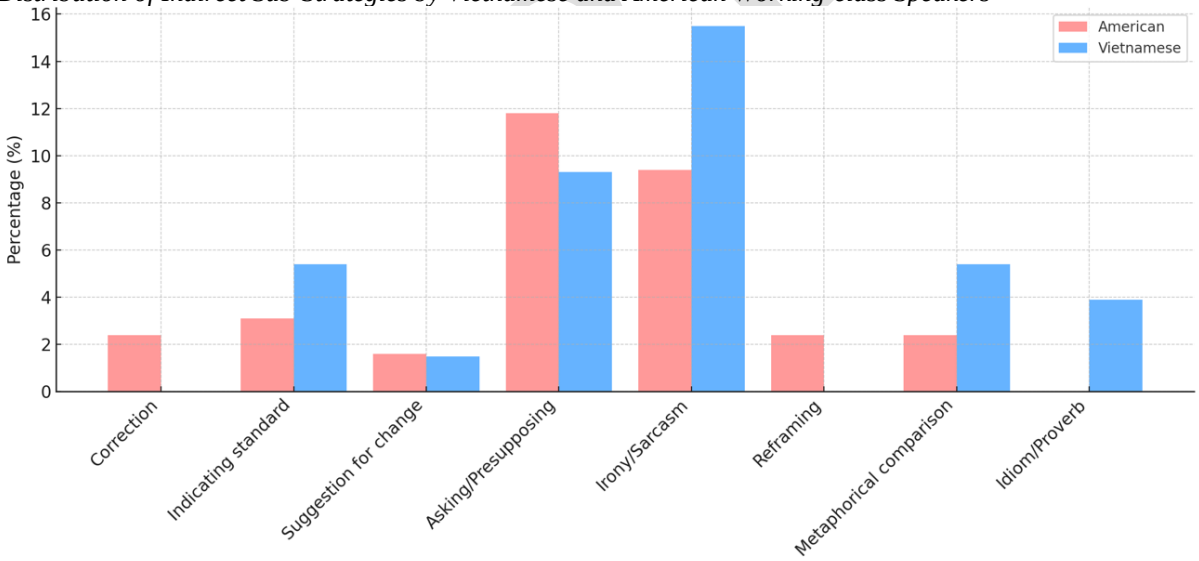


The high frequency of the Negative Evaluation strategy shows that straightforward evaluative judgments with the utilization of negative adjectives is the primary mode of direct criticism in both groups. This preference is particularly stronger in Vietnamese interactions. Other shared strategies, including Expression of Disapproval, Statement of the Problem, Reference to Consequences, and Explicit Comparison, appear less frequently in both datasets. Two strategies are found to appear exclusively in the American corpus, namely Command/Directive (7.1%) and Swearing/Taboo Words (11%). Meanwhile, no adoption of directives and swearing is found in the Vietnamese corpus, suggesting that Vietnamese cultural norms, although being within working-class discourse, discourage overt verbal aggression. Instead, Vietnamese criticism favors Negative Evaluation or figurative methods, reflecting a boundary around acceptable forms of directness.

As for indirect sub-strategies, Figure 3 reveals that both American and Vietnamese speakers employ Asking/Presupposing and Irony/Sarcasm frequently, though at different rates. American speakers use rhetorical questions in 11.8% of cases, while Vietnamese speakers use them at 9.3%, slightly less than those of the Americans. Similarly, Irony and Sarcasm occur in both corpora, but Vietnamese speakers favour them more (15.5%) than Americans (9.4%). Additionally, the figure shows that only Americans employed Correction (2.4%) and Reframing (2.4%) as strategies. Although they are relatively subtle, compared to Directives or Swearing, they display an assertive stance among American speakers. Furthermore, their absence in the Vietnamese counterparts indicates cultural differences. Meanwhile, Vietnamese speakers often employed forms of indirect criticism, such as metaphorical comparison (5.4%) and the use of Idioms/Proverbs (3.9%). These strategies were either absent or only minimally present in American speech.

Figure 3

Distribution of Indirect Sub-Strategies by Vietnamese and American Working-class Speakers



5. Discussion

This study explored how working-class speakers in Vietnam and America use criticism as a speech act. Drawing on a corpus of 127 American English and 129 Vietnamese instances of criticism taken from web dramas, the analysis examined both shared patterns and culture-specific strategies.

Firstly, there are eleven common strategies employed by both American and Vietnamese working-class speakers. Among them, *Negative Evaluation, Asking/Presupposing*, and *Irony/Sarcasm* are found to be the dominant strategies. The prevalent use of *Negative Evaluation* over other shared strategies is aligned with the core function of criticism as defined in foundational studies (Nguyen, 2005; Tracy & Eisenberg, 1990). What is more, the preference over *Negative Evaluation* (a highly direct strategy) and *Irony/Sarcasm* (an indirect strategy) also shows specific communicative norms of the working class, which values both sincerity through directness and solidarity through relational, humorous indirectness

(Bernstein, 1971; Mills, 2004). Furthermore, the findings reveal a significant culture-specific feature in the employment of certain strategies. That is, American speakers utilize some strategies, such as *Reframing, Commands, and Swearing*, which are not found in the Vietnamese data. This reflects a typical communication style where direct, unmitigated confrontation is not only tolerated but also functions as a marker of honesty and intimacy. This finding confirms how the distinct features of the lower working-class are portrayed in Western media, aligning with the cultural norms Mills (2004) describes. Also, it shows that the American working-class speakers have the tendency to employ negative impoliteness strategies (Culpeper, 2011) when giving criticism. Meanwhile, criticizing using *proverbs* by Vietnamese working-class speakers reflects a culture-specific feature, as proverbs allow speakers to deliver a potent criticism that is depersonalized and rooted in shared cultural concepts, thereby correcting behavior while preserving social harmony.

Regarding how various speech acts of criticism are distributed by Vietnamese and American working-class speakers, although both groups favored direct strategies (as discussed in the previous section), the distribution of these strategies differed significantly. In American English, direct strategies were used twice as often as indirect ones, whereas the ratio in Vietnamese was more balanced. This strong tendency among Americans confirms the findings of Hosseinizadeh and Moqadam (2018) and Al-Jdayeh (2023), who stated that American communication prioritizes clarity and assertiveness, the features that are stereotypical in low-context, individualistic settings. In contrast, the more balanced Vietnamese ratio, with its relatively higher use of indirectness, reflects the typical features of a high-context, collectivistic culture, in which preserving harmony and face remains a key concern (Nguyen, 2020). It can be found that while working-class norms may encourage directness, the primary Vietnamese cultural value of maintaining harmony in relationships (as described by Muir et al., 2018) still moderates this tendency. As a result, a more balanced distribution among Vietnamese speakers has compromised the monolithic view of working-class speech. This balance is supported by Truong (2015), whose findings indicate that national cultural norms emphasizing high-context communication and harmony remain highly influential, acting as a moderating force. Moreover, the way *Negative Evaluation* was expressed qualitatively also reflects cultural differences. In the American data, criticisms often contained taboo language and swearing, which acted as upgraders, intensifying the force of the criticism but, simultaneously, offering little descriptive detail. This pattern is consistent with Hosseinizadeh and Moqadam's (2018) observations about American assertiveness and suggests a lower concern for protecting the hearer's face. By contrast, Vietnamese speakers tended to make their negative evaluations more descriptive, providing specific details even when speaking directly. This approach may help reduce the face threat by framing the criticism as objective or impersonal rather than purely personal. This difference is one of the key contributions of the study: it highlights that "directness" is not a uniform phenomenon. For American speakers, directness often comes across as confrontational and forceful, while for Vietnamese speakers, it is more descriptive and evaluative, even when they are explicit. These findings suggest that cultural values shape not only the level of directness a criticism act is, but also how it is textured and delivered in class-based conversations. Lastly, cultural factors also determine how speakers employ indirect sub-strategies. For American speakers, rhetorical questions like "*What are you doing*?" are a common option. Despite being classified as an indirect strategy, these questions still carried a confrontational, challenging tone—very much in keeping with the directness and assertiveness associated with American communication. Vietnamese speakers, by contrast, relied more on sarcasm, rather than rhetorical questions. This reflects characteristics of Vietnamese high-context culture, in which shared background knowledge allows irony and critique to be understood without explicit statement (Nguyen, 2020). Differences were also evident in the use of direct strategies. Another finding is that Vietnamese speakers mostly relied on descriptive Negative Evaluation, indicating that when they chose to be direct, it was a more deliberate and marked choice within their communicative repertoire. By contrast, American speakers drew on a broader range of direct sub-strategies, including directives and swearing/using taboo words. These patterns support Al-Jdayeh's (2023) findings. He concluded that American speakers frequently use varied forms of directness.

The study still has certain limitations that need further exploration in the future. The scope of this study is deliberately focused on the cultural representation of criticism, not the spontaneous ethnography of everyday conversation. The reliance on films and web dramas was a methodological choice to analyze

a pragmatically dense and context-rich corpus. Because the dataset merely provides insights into the social ideologies of class-based communication, future ethnographic work could further compare these representations with real-world spontaneous speeches to explore the gaps between representation and reality. In addition, the focus of this study was limited to verbal expressions of criticism, rather than non-verbal cues, which often shape how criticism is delivered and received. A further exploration that offers a more balanced approach between verbal and non-verbal analysis is recommended.

Despite the limitations above, this study makes important contributions to cross-cultural pragmatics, intercultural communication, and language education. By portraying how Vietnamese and American working-class speakers criticize, it challenges the tendency of language teaching materials to privilege middle-class norms, which risks overlooking the communicative richness of ordinary speakers. In other words, the findings reflect the need for a more inclusive approach to language education, resonating with UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals on social equity, as all social-class languages should be equally examined and taught.

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Appendix

Taxonomy of Criticism Strategies (Nguyen, 2005)

Type	Characteristics	Examples
1. Direct criticism:	Explicitly pointing out the problem with H's choice/ actions/ work/ products, etc.	
a. Negative evaluation	Usually expressed via evaluative adjectives with negative meaning or evaluative adjective with positive meaning plus negation.	*"I think ah it's not a good way to support to one's idea* (L), *"Umm that's not really a good sentence"* (NS).
b. Disapproval	Describing S's attitude towards H's choice, etc.	*"I don't like the way you write that* (L).
c. Expression of disagreement	Usually realized by means of negation word "No" or performatives "I don't agree" or "I disagree" (with or without modal) or via arguments against H.	*"I don't quite agree with you with some points (.) about the conclusion"* (L), *"I don't really agree with you ⟨as strongly as⟩ you put it here"* (NS).
d. Statement of the problem	Stating errors or problems found with H's choice, etc.	*"And there are some incorrect words, for example "nowadays"* (L), *"You had a few spelling mistakes"* (NS).
e. Statement of difficulty	Usually expressed by means of such structures as "*I find it difficult to understand . . .*", "*It's difficult to understand . . .*"	*"I can't understand"* (L), *"I find it difficult to understand your idea"* (L).
f. Consequences	Warning about negative consequences or negative effects of H's choice, etc. for H himself or herself or for the public.	*"Someone who don't—doesn't agree with you (.) would straight away read that and turn off"* (NS).
2. Indirect criticism:	Implying the problems with H's choice/ actions/ work/ products, etc. by correcting H, indicating rules and standard, giving advice, suggesting or even requesting and demanding changes to H's work/ choice, and by means of different kinds of hints to raise H's awareness of the inappropriateness of H's choice.	

Type	Characteristics	Examples
a. Correction	Including all utterances which have the purpose of fixing errors by asserting specific alternatives to H's choice, etc.	*"safer" not "safe", comparison"* (L), *"And you put "their" I think t-h-e-r-e"* (NS).
b. Indicating standard	Usually stated as a collective obligation rather than an obligation for H personally or as a rule which S thinks is commonly agreed upon and applied to all.	*"Theoretically, a conclusion needs to be some sort of a summary"* (L).
c. Demand for change	Usually expressed via such structures as "you have to", "you must", "it is obligatory that" or "you are required" or "you need", "it is necessary".	*"You must pay attention to grammar"* (L), *"You have to talk about your opinion in your summary"* (L).
d. Request for change	Usually expressed via such structures as "will you . . . ?", "can you . . . ?", "would you . . . ?" or imperatives (with or without politeness markers), or want-statement.	*"I still want you to consider some points"* (L), *"What I would have liked to have seen is like a definite theme from the start like you're just TA:LKING about it"* (NS).
e. Advice about change	Usually expressed via the performative "I advise you . . .", or structures with "should" with or without modality	*"You should change it a little bit."* (L).
f. Suggestion for change	Usually expressed via the performative "I suggest that . . ." or such structures as "you can", "you could", "it would be better if" or "why don't you" etc.	*"I think if you make a full stop in here the ah (.) this sentence is clear is clear"* (L), *"It could have been better to put a comma (.) so ah ((laugh))"* (NS).
g. Expression of uncertainty	Utterances expressing S's uncertainty to raise H's awareness of the inappropriateness of H's choice, etc.	*"Are there several paragraphs ah not sure about the paragraphs"* (NS).
h. Asking/presupposing	Rhetorical questions to raise H's awareness of the inappropriateness of H's choice, etc.	*"Did you read your writing again after you finish it?"* (L).
i. Other hints	Including other kinds of hints that did not belong to (h) and (i). May include sarcasm.	*"I prefer a writing style which are not too personal"* (L).