

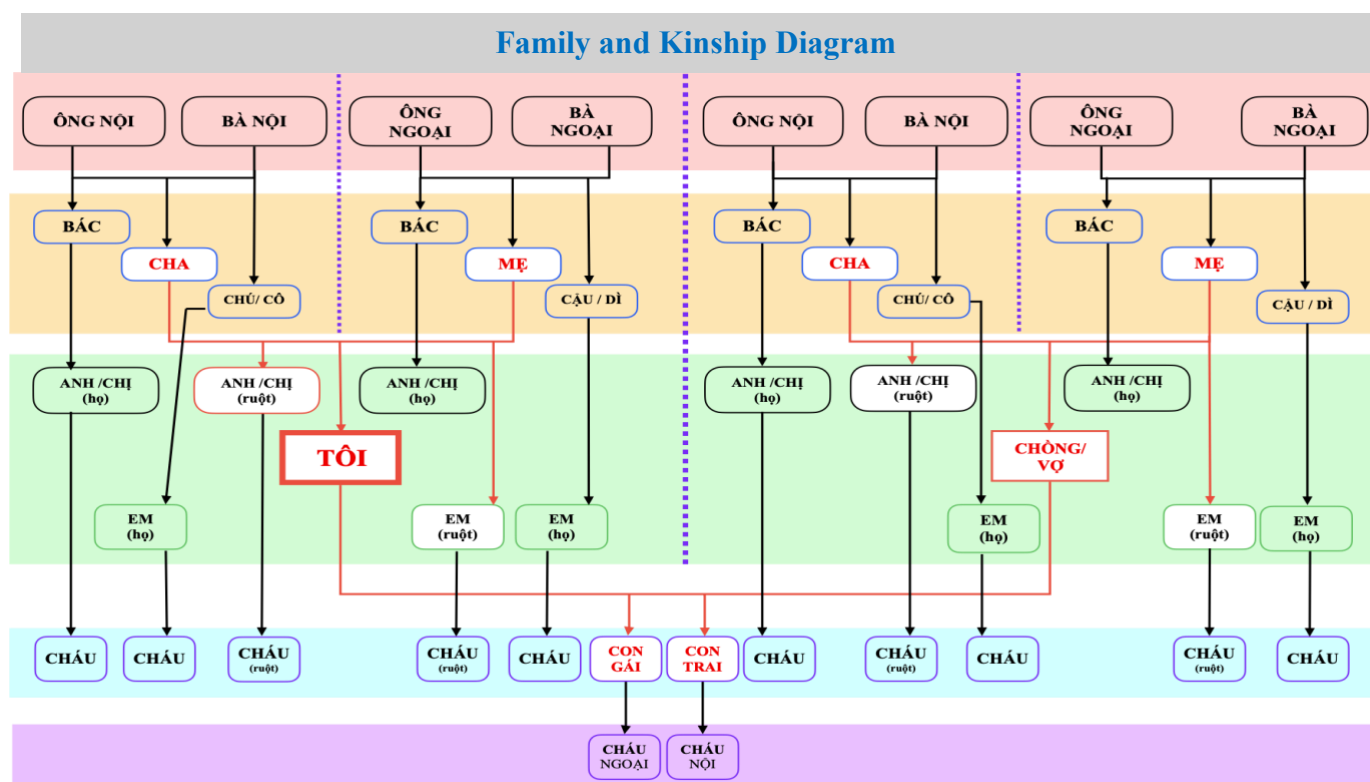
Vietnamese Rules of Address and Personal Pronouns

Written by Tam Thanh Nguyen

In Vietnamese society, forms of address are shaped by several priorities:

- Family rank, including paternal and maternal lines, blood relations, and marriage;
- Social status;
- Age;
- Gender; and
- Personal attitudes.

Vietnamese personal pronouns are highly complex - arguably among the most intricate in any language.



In ancient Vietnamese, forms of address centered on the sequence *tao/tau* (“I”), *mày/mi* (“you”), and *nó* (“he/she”), roughly comparable to English *I*, *you*, and *he/she*. These terms are still used today, though they are generally considered “colloquial”. Early Vietnamese kinship terminology was also relatively simple and direct, organised mainly around the relationships of *father/mother*, *child*, and *younger sibling*.

From the second century onward, after centuries of Chinese colonisation and the influence of Confucian hierarchy, Vietnamese developed a richer kinship vocabulary. Terms such as *chú* (father’s younger brother), *thím* (*chú*’s wife), *cô* (father’s younger sister), *bác* (older sibling of either parent), *cậu* (mother’s younger brother), *mợ* (*cậu*’s wife), *dì* (mother’s younger sister), and *dượng* (*cô/dì*’s husband) entered Vietnamese usage. These terms derive from

ancient Chinese vocabulary of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), adapted to Vietnamese pronunciation.



From the fifteenth century onward, family hierarchy was strictly reinforced by feudal law, including the Hong Duc Code of 1483, or National Penal Code (*Quốc triều hình luật*), under King Le Thanh Tong. Vietnamese forms of address therefore reflected not only blood relationships but also legal ties and social responsibilities.

For example, the single word *thím* conveys four pieces of information:

- *Thím* refers to a woman;
- She is a wife who is not a blood relative;
- She is married to the father's younger brother;
- She belongs to the paternal side of the family.

This personal pronoun system emerged from the blending of ancient Vietnamese culture with Confucian values and was later reinforced by feudal law. Over thousands of years, it

became deeply embedded in Vietnamese society. Yet rules imposed by ruling classes - whether foreign authorities or Vietnamese monarchs - were never applied absolutely. Instead, they merged with local customs, making even seemingly strict and complex rules flexible in practice.

Personal pronouns reflect the Vietnamese tendency to “familiarize social relationships”.

- Vietnamese speakers often draw strangers into an “imagined family” circle by addressing them with kinship terms such as “elder brother”, “younger sister”, “uncle”, “aunt”, “grandfather”, and “grandmother”. This differs markedly from the address systems of many other cultures.
- This tendency also extends to politics, where leaders and influential figures may be addressed with familial titles such as “Uncle” or “Great-Grandfather” (e.g., Uncle Ho, Great-Grandfather Marx).

Vietnamese personal pronouns also reflect a cultural tendency toward humility and self-effacement:

- The word *tôi* (“I”) is a native Vietnamese term that originally meant *tôi tớ* (“servant”). Speakers used it to humble themselves before superiors. Unlike kinship-based terms such as *anh* (“elder brother”), *chị* (“elder sister”), *em* (“younger sibling”), *chú/bác* (“uncle”), or *cháu* (“nephew,” “niece,” or “grandchild”), *tôi* creates a more distant relationship because it places the speaker outside the family circle.
- Some speakers also address others according to their child’s family rank, further lowering their own position within the relationship.

Subjective attitudes are built into Vietnamese forms of address and personal pronoun use.



In many languages, third-person pronouns are relatively neutral: English uses *he/she*, Danish uses *han/hun*, and French uses *il/elle*, roughly comparable to colloquial Vietnamese *nó*. In everyday Vietnamese, however, speakers often express attitude and emotion through forms of address. Respect may be conveyed through titles such as *Đức Phật* (“His Majesty Buddha”), *Đức Vua* (“His Majesty the King”), “Great-Grandfather,” “Grandfather,” “His Excellency,” or “Sir.” The same person may be addressed respectfully as “His Excellency” or “Sir,” but disrespectfully as *thằng* or *hấn*. Such disparaging pronouns are difficult to translate into English because they depend heavily on Vietnamese cultural context.

In short, Vietnamese personal pronouns and forms of address reveal a culture shaped by hierarchy but flexibility, and a long social history. In modern life, however, Vietnamese speakers increasingly simplify both their forms of address and their use of personal pronouns.