

Structural Characteristics of Swearing Speech Acts in Nguyen Huy Thiep's Short Stories

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Abstract— Cursing is one of the characteristic linguistic behaviors of spoken language and is often regarded as a "non-normative" phenomenon. In this article, we focus on exploring the structural characteristics of cursing language behavior in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories, with the aim of understanding and explaining the use of this linguistic behavior in the characters' language. Through this, we can see the diverse manifestations as well as the role of this behavior in reflecting the unique artistic style of the author.

Keywords- Swearing speech Acts, short stories, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, structural characteristics.

I. INTRODUCTION

Swearing is one of the distinctive speech acts in spoken discourse and is often considered a "non-standard" phenomenon. Although it has a taboo nature, this act is still commonly used. In the field of literary arts, writers also employ this act in constructing their characters' language.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is one of the prominent writers of Vietnam's literature during the Renovation period. He experimented with multiple genres, but his most notable success came through short stories. His short stories vividly reflect life with a remarkably diverse range of topics. The language in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's works is both cold and indifferent, yet also provocatively unsettling. Swearing speech acts are represented in various and nuanced ways throughout his short stories. This element contributes not only to the expression of the works' themes and ideas but also to the author's unique artistic style.

In this article, we focus on exploring the structural characteristics of swearing speech acts with the aim of understanding and analyzing the use of this speech act in the characters' dialogue. Through this, we can observe the diverse manifestations and the role of this act in highlighting the author's distinctive artistic style.

II. RESEARCH CONTENT

Surveying the collection *Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's Short Stories* (Saigon Cultural Publishing House, 2007), which includes 42 short stories, we obtained the results shown in the following table:

TABLE 1: Structure of Swearing Speech Acts in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's Short Stories

| Structure Type | Structure of Swearing Acts | | | | Total |
|----------------|----------------------------|--------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| | Word | Phrase | Sentences | Paragraph | |
| Quantity | 24 | 80 | 48 | 25 | 177 |
| Percentage (%) | 13,56% | 45,2% | 27,12% | 14,12% | 100% |

Based on the statistical results and classification above, we observe that swearing acts in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories appear in relatively high numbers and exhibit a wide variety of structures. Specifically, we identify several prominent structures that constitute swearing acts in his short stories, such as:

- Single-word swearing acts
- Phrase-structured swearing acts
- Sentence-structured swearing acts (S-V structure)
- Paragraph-structured swearing acts

As shown in Table 2.1, phrase-structured swearing acts are the most frequent, accounting for 45.2%, followed by sentence-structured (S-V) swearing acts at 27.12%. The remaining two types, single-word and paragraph-structured swearing acts, have nearly equal proportions at 13.56% and 14.12%, respectively.

2.1. Single-word Swearing Acts

Single-word swearing acts are speech acts with a concise structure yet capable of fully expressing the speaker's intent, thoughts, or emotions. This structure is used by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp in 24 out of 177 swearing acts, accounting for 13.56%.

In this structure, swearing acts in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories often appear in terms expressed by certain words such as:

- Use of colloquial expressions: "mẹ khi" (damn), "khốn" (wretched), "khốn nạn" (scoundrel), "khốn kiếp" (cursed), "mẹ kiếp" (damn it), etc.

In single-word swearing acts that use colloquial expressions, we find that the author predominantly uses "khốn nạn" (10 out of 24 instances). "Khốn nạn" expresses the character's emotions, thoughts, and attitudes in an intense, forceful, and fierce manner.

Examples:

"Khốn nạn! A coward like that, offering himself to it." (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *A Drop of Blood*)

"– Just live on, child, and you'll understand life. Damn it! Damn it so much! You must know that even your mother is a damned woman!" (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Legend of the Street*)

Aside from "khốn nạn," the expression "mẹ khi" is also common in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories.

Examples:

"Damn it, life is miserable..."

(Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *The Lumbermen*)

"Damn it, this vile guy is the worst omen of my fate." (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *General Retires*)

“Damn it! Having a husband makes reckless behavior easier...” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Singing the Sparrow Across the River*)

- Use of words indicating intellectual or cognitive limitations: "điên" (crazy), "rồ" (mad), "khùng" (insane), "ngu" (stupid), "láo" (insolent), etc.

Examples:

“– Even you understand – E said solemnly.” “Madness! – The village chief roared. He looked to the elders for support. He knew the old always found simple solutions to every life complication.” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *The Winds of Hua Tat*)

“Vi asked: ‘The way to the battle is beautiful this season, isn’t it, Grandpa?’ My father cursed: ‘Damn you! Insolent!’” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *General Retires*)

- Use of vulgar, blunt, and crude words: "cứt" (shit), "dương vật" (penis), "hạ bộ" (genitals), etc. This type of swearing, using crude language, creates a disturbing effect for the reader. Swearing acts structured this way hold a strong capacity for disdain, contempt, and humiliation, inflicting serious offense on the dignity and pride of the recipient.

Examples:

“The king was enraged: ‘You blue-faced wretch! Lusting at the edge of the grave? I’ll cut off your d... and feed you shit!’” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Virtue*)

“Trương Chi caught a fish and threw it onto the boat. He struck two stones together to light a fire and roasted the fish. He ate it, but every bite he spat out, saying: ‘Shit!’” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Trương Chi*)

Thus, in single-word swearing acts, the speaker spontaneously and concisely expresses emotions (anger, contempt, shame, etc.) that cannot be restrained, suiting each character and context. These single-word swearing acts generally lack explicit pronouns, yet readers can still discern the purpose, target, and attitude of the character within each specific context. This structure, with words like “mẹ kiếp,” “mẹ khi,” “khón,” “khón nan,” “khón kiếp,” is commonly found in literature. Readers encounter this type of swearing not only in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s short stories but also in the works of other realist writers like Nam Cao, Vũ Trọng Phụng, and Nguyễn Công Hoan. This shows that writers often favor single-word swearing structures because of their brevity and powerful expressive effect.

2.2. Phrase-Structured Swearing Acts

Phrase-structured swearing acts are a common form of swearing in literature. Researcher Nguyễn Thị Tuyết Ngân once noted in her study of swearing language that “in Vietnamese, single-word swearing is rare; phrases are primarily used to perform this function.” This aligns well with the characteristics of the Vietnamese language, where words tend to combine into phrases that offer richer expressive power.

Phrase-structured swearing acts are the most frequently encountered in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories. Among the 177 instances of swearing across his 42 short stories, 80 are phrase-structured, comprising 45.2%—almost half of all instances.

This structure type is both the most prevalent and the most complex. Words combine into various phrases to convey a wide range of shades, emotions, and expressions. Through surveying, categorizing, and classifying, we identified several prominent models of phrase-structured swearing acts, such as: *Model 1:*

“Đồ/ Con/ Thằng + x”

In this model, “x” is a noun/adjective/verb that describes qualities or limitations, often negative, of the target of the swearing act. This model is highly generalizable and represents over 50% of phrase-structured swearing acts (46 out of 80 instances).

| | |
|-------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Đồ | Wretched scoundrel / Whore Dog / Dog-faced |
| Con | Little brat / Whore Damn her |
| Thằng | Mad / Dog / Damn monkey |

Examples:

“Uncle Hào said:

- Just my luck! You whore! Dog-faced scum!” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Life, What Fun!*)

“Smile, you dog!” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Vietnamese Lesson*)

“A large man with a shaved head and blazing red eyes was spinning a pole over his head.

- Incredible! Crazy Bot! Mad Bot! Crazy Bot! Mad Bot! Is there anyone in Niệm Market who doesn’t know Crazy Bot?” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Singing the Sparrow Across the River*)

“This wicked creature killed my mother, did you know?” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *A Drop of Blood*)

This structure appears frequently in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories. Combining “Đồ/Thằng/Con” (like “scum/you bastard/you wench”) with verbs, nouns, and adjectives can have a strong and direct impact on the listener. It captures the speaker’s heightened emotional state, where anger reaches its peak, compelling them to use swearing language. Through this swearing, the speaker expresses a highly negative, contemptuous evaluation of the target, aiming to satisfy their own anger and, above all, to insult, humiliate, and degrade the target's character and dignity.

Model 2:

Kinship noun + Second or third-person pronoun

Swearing in Model 2 represents 15 out of 80 phrase-structured swearing acts and typically conveys the speaker’s contempt or disdain when angry.

| | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| • Damn it, parents! | • You / You all |
| • Damn it, damn your parents! | • You whore / that |

Examples:

“Damn you! Hold onto your nose! I’ll make you bleed.” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *The Water God's Daughter*)

Mrs. Hai Thuan laughed:

- “Damn you! You little brat! This is a gift for refined and romantic guests, kid... You wouldn’t understand.” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Singing the Sparrow Across the River*)

Mrs. Lam said: “Damn you, you whore; just wait till she gets here, I’ll deal with her.” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Lessons from the Countryside*)

This type of swearing, which combines a kinship noun with a second-person pronoun, not only impacts the listener directly but can also indirectly affect those closely related to the target. This model brings the highest impact, sharpest sting, and deepest insult by using kinship terms associated with ancestors and lineage.

Model 3:

Derogatory term (like “scum,” “lot,” “clan,” etc.) + Noun (person, profession)

This model appears less frequently in phrase-structured swearing, but the swearing acts that do use it convey a high level of contempt.

| | |
|------|---------------------|
| Scum | Intellectuals Thief |
| Gang | Ordinary people |
| Mob | Wretched men Dog |

Examples:

“Ms. Phụng jumped, looked up, saw me, and angrily said:

- “Get lost, you damn men!” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *The Water God’s Daughter*)

“Mrs. Hai Thuan exclaimed angrily:

- “Brutal scum! You’re a bunch of murderers! How can there be such barbaric goods...” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Singing the Sparrow Across the River*)

In addition to the typical models mentioned, the swearing behavior in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s short stories with phrase structures also includes other combinations, such as:

- Noun referring to a person/profession + Adjective (describing that person)

Examples:

“Slut! Dog-faced scum!” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Life Is Like That*)

“Even a general can be stupid.” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Integrity*)

- The phenomenon of interspersing words into compound phrases to insult or ridicule, aiming to humiliate the target.

Example:

“Like a man and an animal, looks like a bandit.” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Crossing the River*)

- Using proverbs, folk songs, or rhymes that contain deep insults.

Examples:

“Peeking, peeking, if you don’t worry, you’ll die.” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Not Crying in California*)

“Laughing loudly sometimes just for show, Laughing uproariously sometimes makes you ache.” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Not Crying in California*)

From the analysis above, we observe that most of the swearing behaviors with phrase structures are typically noun phrases. These noun phrases consist of a central noun combined with other nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. Among these, the model “Thing/Child/Boy + x” occupies the largest proportion.

Additionally, in some cases, adjectives participate in forming adjective phrases. In these cases, the adjective acts as

the center and combines with other words. However, most of these adjective phrases have been nominalized: “How vile!”, “This is vile,” “So wretched,” “Is it not wretched?” “Clearly fake,” etc.

Thus, the swearing behavior with phrase structures in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s short stories not only represents the largest quantity but also showcases a wide variety and complexity in the forms of word combinations. Regardless of how they are combined, the resulting phrases can powerfully express the speaker’s mental state and emotions. They achieve maximum effectiveness in swearing, seriously offending and degrading the dignity, ethics, honor, and self-respect of the target.

2.3. Insulting Behavior with a Sentence Structure (S-V Structure)

Insulting behavior in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s short stories also appears in the subject-verb (S-V) structure. Sometimes, the words used are not enough for the speaker to fully express their mental state, prompting them to create longer statements to satisfy their emotions. In these cases, the speaker produces insults structured in an S-V format. Moreover, the characters’ language reflects everyday speech through the eyes of the author, meaning that this S-V structured insult also aims to express the author’s artistic intentions.

Through our survey and analysis, we found that the number of insults with an S-V structure accounts for 27.12% of all insults. This structure is the second most prevalent after the phrase structure. This structure typically includes all the main components of a sentence: subject and predicate. The subject often consists of vocatives or terms referring to the object being insulted. Most of the words acting as the subject carry connotations of disdain, contempt, or mockery towards the recipient, such as “quân” (scum), “thằng” (bastard), “chúng mày” (you all), and “bọn chúng mày” (those of you). Sometimes, the subject may be the first-person pronoun to refer to the speaker themselves, such as “tôi” (I) or “tao” (I, informal). Meanwhile, the predicate clarifies the object being insulted through noun phrases, verbs, or adjectives that indicate negative or undesirable qualities.

For example: “Mẹ cha mày, thế mày nâng bát cơm lên miệng hằng ngày mày có nghĩ không?”

(“Mother f*** your father, do you even think when you raise that bowl of rice to your mouth every day?”)

(Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, “Không có vua”)

In this example, the character Lão Kiền feels humiliated when criticized by someone in his own household, Đòai, for charging exorbitant prices for vehicle repairs (patching tires). In his rage and shame, Lão Kiền responds with an insult. His insulting behavior aims to alleviate his internal anger while simultaneously justifying his unethical actions. Moreover, this insult inflicts harm upon the recipient, humiliating them and viewing them as a parasite who lives off the ill-gotten gains earned by Lão Kiền. The deeper cause of this situation stems from their difficult life circumstances, leading individuals to commit acts against moral norms. Lão Kiền’s insult partially exposes the harsh reality of poverty.

Another example: “Anh Tân sầm mặt lại, bảo: Bọn thành phố toàn quân mất dạy.”

(“Tân frowned and said: The city folks are all a bunch of scoundrels.”) (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, “Bài học nông thôn”)

In this instance, Tân’s insult arises upon hearing his wife recount an incident where a man from the city flirted with her. What begins as a description of a single man transforms through Tân’s words into “bọn thành phố” (the city folks)—representatives of a morally degraded portion of urban society. This behavior encapsulates a broader criticism. Readers gain insight into the darker sides and limitations of urban prosperity, serving as a lesson for rural individuals stepping into the glitzy city life.

Other examples include: “Đàn ông chúng tôi đều đốn mạt hết!” (“All of us men are worthless!”)

(Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, “Chút thoáng Xuân Hương”)

“Anh đều cáng và độc ác lắm.”

(“You are truly deceitful and cruel.”)

(Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, “Những người thợ xẻ”)

“Bà Hân lặng đi, bùi ngùi: Hồi nó ba tuổi, ông còn nhớ đận đi Thảo bị trâu húc chột mắt không, nó lên sởi, chỉ bị tí nước té vào mà người đỏ rực như than hồng, nó sốt đến bốn năm ngày... Cũng chỉ tại bà để cái gáo nước theo đánh mới ra cơ sự thế chứ? Vâng! Tôi vụng, tôi ngu, tôi dại!”

(“Ms. Hân fell silent, feeling nostalgic: Do you remember when it was three years old, and Aunt Thảo got gored in the eye by a buffalo, it got measles, and just a little water splashed on it turned it red as a cherry? It had a fever for four or five days... It’s all because I left that bowl of water on the counter that things ended up like this, right? Yes! I’m clumsy, I’m stupid, I’m foolish!”) (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, “Cánh buồm nâu thuở ấy”)

Here, Ms. Hân’s insulting behavior towards herself arises from her carelessness that led to her daughter’s worsening illness. This act of self-insult is decisive and is constructed through three concise S-V structures that express her high emotional state. She curses her own behavior while expressing remorse, as well as self-blame and dissatisfaction with her actions. Through this, Ms. Hân insults her own dignity with her evaluations of being “clumsy,” “stupid,” and “foolish.” The harsh realities of life force their daughter to marry far away in search of a better life, but for poor farmers, life is a continuous struggle. They push their beloved daughter away, only to feel regret and self-reproach when they recall the past. The significance of Ms. Hân’s insults is heightened when placed in the broader context of their situation.

Some instances of S-V structured insults involve repetitive components to emphasize the targeted object and demonstrate the author’s artistic intent.

For example: “Sứ mệnh đế vương thật là sứ mệnh khốn nạn, chỉ được quyền cao cả, không được quyền đê tiện.”

(“The royal mission is indeed a wretched mission, it grants you lofty rights, but not the right to be vile.”)

(Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, “Phẩm tiết”)

“Cô đáng xấu hổ... chính cô cũng thích... cô đã không tự bảo vệ danh tiết cho cô...”

(“You are disgraceful... you even enjoy it... you have not defended your own honor...”)

(Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, “Bài học tiếng Việt”)

There are numerous instances of insults in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s short stories, characterized by both variety and richness. Analyzing these insults, we observe that they are often short and sharp. Unlike the somewhat milder insults in Nam Cao’s short stories or the more coherent ones in Nguyễn Công Hoan’s, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp crafts his insults with a terse, cold tone and coarse, casual language. As a result, the insulting behavior in his short stories creates an unsettling feeling, allowing readers to perceive the almost absolute level of offense inflicted by the speaker upon the listener. This effectiveness is maximized through this approach.

2.4. The Cursing Behavior Structured as a Paragraph

The cursing behavior structured as a paragraph represents a speech act of substantial volume. It is a combination of various cursing acts, both long and short, structured as sentences (C-V). Formally, cursing structured as a paragraph is a long curse with rhythm, creating a high speech effectiveness.

According to statistical results, the number of cursing behaviors structured as paragraphs is not very high, ranking third among the total types of cursing structures, with 25 out of 177 acts, accounting for 14.12%. Overall, cursing behaviors structured as a paragraph account for a percentage nearly equivalent to cursing behaviors structured as a word (13.56%). Compared to other writers such as Nam Cao or Nguyễn Công Hoan, the ratio of using cursing structured as a paragraph is the highest (almost twice as much).

Thus, it can be seen that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp emphasizes constructing long curses in the form of a paragraph to fully and decisively express the speaker’s intensity. Some paragraphs consist of short curses, combined from shorter sentences.

For example: “Those disgraceful intellectuals! Disgraceful to the working people! I respect your father, or else I’d slam the door shut!” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, “Tướng về hưu”)

“Is that you? What kind of civil servant are you? Lazy as a dog, you don’t know how to write, just good at gouging” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, “Không có vua”)

The concise cursing paragraph by the character Lão Kiến in the short story “Không có vua” reveals the true nature of a portion of educated intellectuals like Đoàn. Through this cursing, the character Đoàn allows readers to imagine a civil servant who appears respectable but is essentially empty inside. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp makes this clear when describing the family’s background, habits, and lifestyles. Not only Đoàn but also other family members—educators, workers, and students—live indulgently: “eating rice without inviting anyone, six men shirtless, wearing shorts, ... slurping and gulping like a dragon winding,”... which does not reflect the demeanor of an educated person.

There are also longer cursing passages, with long sentences and complex structures, as the person cursing is in a complex, intertwined emotional state. Therefore, when constructing the curse, the writer chooses, arranges, and combines it in a way that fits the speaker, the target of the curse, and the context.

For example: “You’re despicable. You know very well that even if you are alone... because your father knows well. You’re despicable just like your father, like Mr. Hùng. Then Mr. Hùng is just as despicable as Mr. Gấu, Mr. Sói, Mr. Dê, Mr. Lợn, his ancestors... You are despicable just like thirty million men of your time.”

(Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, “Con gái thủy thần”)

Ms. Phụng, a wealthy woman, always feels that life in the city is rife with violence, deception, and depravity. She seems to endure all the pain and suffering of life and the men around her. Unable to contain herself, when meeting the character “I,” Ms. Phụng unleashes all her pent-up thoughts and emotions through long curses that release her frustrations. The sentences in the paragraph are interconnected, reflecting the emotional state of a woman who bears all feelings from suffering to humiliation. Ms. Phụng’s circumstances and fate represent the common plight of many in the harsh urban life filled with deceit and darkness. Through this lengthy cursing paragraph, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp exposes the nature of these despicable men and the darkness of urban life at that time.

In Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s short stories, readers encounter many long and short cursing passages using vulgar, raw language, and objectifying terms to humiliate and insult others or themselves:

“You have the build of a male prostitute. Women are obsessed with you. There’s a scene in the movie where Chiêu Hồ squeezes the breasts of village girls, and you play that role perfectly.” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, “Chút thoáng Xuân Hương”)

“And as for me, my whole life, I only know one thing... while pretending to be virtuous, I don’t know how to cherish anyone, just know that in old age, I suffer and make my children suffer.” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, “Những bài học nông thôn”)

“You’re despicable. You know very well that even if you are alone... because your father knows well. You’re despicable just like your father, like Mr. Hùng. Then Mr. Hùng is just as despicable as Mr. Gấu, Mr. Sói, Mr. Dê, Mr. Lợn, his ancestors... You are despicable just like thirty million men of your time.” (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, “Con gái thủy thần”)

The character’s curses not only expose the reality of life but also aim to humiliate the opponent; they also contain self-reproach, regret, and even awakening. The person awakens to harsh realities, unable to suppress the curses from the depths of their hearts, which must be released as a form of self-liberation. Cursing in extreme circumstances of anger, pain, and self-reproach is always accompanied by coarse, vulgar, and impolite language. Therefore, the linguistic act of cursing is considered by many researchers as “non-standard behavior.” However, this is not entirely accurate and must place the curse in the specific context and circumstances of the character to understand and empathize with their fate.

The structure of cursing behavior in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s short stories is quite diverse and rich. The majority consists of phrase structures (45.2%), followed by sentence structures (C-V structure) at 27.12%, and the two structures of paragraph and word at 14.12% and 13.56%, respectively. Overall, the cursing behaviors in his short stories are generally concise, with a cold, sharp tone, and show no leniency. The

effectiveness of the words is always maximized, reflecting the emotional state as well as the speaker’s purpose.

III. CONCLUSION

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is a short story writer known for his sharp cursing behavior, which leaves a particularly strong impression. This behavior has the potential to seriously offend the honor and dignity of the recipient. Through cursing, emotional states are expressed clearly and richly, showcasing various nuances. In a survey of 42 short stories by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, we identified 177 instances of cursing. From this data, it is evident that the writer uses a substantial number of these acts to construct dialogues for his characters. This is also a prominent characteristic of his writing style.

The structure of cursing behavior in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s short stories is quite diverse and rich. Cursing can be structured as a single word, a phrase, one or more C-V constructions, or even a paragraph. Among these structures, the phrase structure (group of words) accounts for the largest quantity, typically represented by the structure “Đồ/ Thằng/ Con + x” (where x is a noun, adjective, verb, etc., describing the negative qualities of the target). This aligns with the requirement to reflect the reality in a true and concise manner in his works, fitting the writer’s style: brief, sharp, and somewhat harsh.

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