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From form to function: Mobile language resources in the Vietnamese customs setting

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Abstract

English language for Customs is considered crucial for working in an international airport; however, few if any empirical studies have investigated the language repertoires of customs officers in such a multilingual and multicultural, but security-sensitive, context. This paper reports on a study that drew on Blommaert's (2010) sociolinguistics of globalization and Hymes's (1974) *Ethnography of Communication* to examine naturally-occurring interactions in English between Vietnamese customs officers and foreign travelers. We use EC and text analysis of data from observations, customs materials, and interviews to explore typical communicative practices in customs and the factors influencing the interactants participating in these practices. We argue that examining the interactions in detail provides insights into the communicative resources that customs officers utilize to accomplish order and security in the airport, currently experiencing escalating numbers of international travelers. The findings highlight the functional deployment of English as the airport lingua franca and non-verbal resources to accomplish meaning, notably around the smooth and efficient security processing of travelers. The paper concludes with implications for English for Specific Purposes curriculum design and materials development in the important but previously neglected area of customs communication.

Keywords: Customs; English for customs communication; Ethnography of Communication; intercultural communication; lookalike English

Introduction

Workplaces undergo rapid change as they engage with today's globalized economy. If we are to understand globalization as the escalation of transnational economic interactions and the increased movement of people, goods, services, finances, technologies and ideologies (Appadurai, 1996; Urry, 2000), then associated with these interactions are the intercultural interfaces that demand new forms of communication. For employees working in places that are at the intersection of globalized activity, processes of adaptation are crucial. In multinational situations where overseas companies establish businesses in new sites, the locally-embedded employees with relevant language skills play a central role in mediating linguistic and cultural differences (Born & Peltokorpi, 2010). In this sense, workplace communication involving multinational corporations as well as small enterprises servicing international clients can no longer operate monoculturally and monolingually. Rather, workplaces increasingly demand that employees have the capability to function with a multilingual consciousness and across more than one language (Lam, Cheng, & Kong, 2014). This paper is interested in a workplace that is particularly exposed to intercultural encounters, that is, the customs area of an international airport in Vietnam. Vietnam is undertaking major initiatives related to national development, regional integration, and global participation (Tran, Kettle, May, & Klenowski, 2016). Central to these initiatives is the nationally mandated program of English language proficiency improvement called the National Foreign Languages Project 2020 (Ministry of Education and Training, 2014; The Vietnamese Government, 2008). Tourism, trade, education, and diplomacy are some of the activities driving the increase in traveler numbers passing through Vietnam's airports (Khanh, 2017). For customs officers tasked with enforcing security and quarantine laws as well as presenting a welcoming face to travelers, the workplace is one of fluidity, spontaneity, and intercultural interactions, mostly in English. We report on an ethnographic study of customs officer

communication at one of Vietnam's busiest international airports, with around 70,000 travelers arriving and departing in a day (Ministry of Transport, 2018). We argue that much of the communication by the customs officers at this airport is characterized by an emphasis on function rather than form, that is, in the acute moments of interaction, the officers prioritize communication and communicative function over linguistic form and language that complies with grammatical rules. Our aim in this paper is to highlight how effective communication is accomplished, that is, the communicative practices that characterize customs work in this intercultural space dominated by English as the *lingua franca* of communication.

The paper proceeds in five stages. First, the context of Vietnamese airports and air travel is described. Second, the theoretical lens is provided using sociolinguistic literature on the linguistic conditions of a globalized world, their impact on English and on intercultural communication more broadly. Third, the empirical study of the communicative practices in the customs hall of an international airport in Vietnam is presented. Next, the analysis section reports on ethnographic observations, public materials, and interviews with customs officers to draw out the nature of the communicative demands and the intercultural practices of the workplace. The analysis highlights the efficacy of theoretical concepts such as 'lookalike' English (Blommaert, 2012) to capture the focus on function and the priority of achieving shared meaning between custom officers and travelers. Finally, the discussion addresses the implications for customs officer training and ESP curriculum that has been historically preoccupied with grammar and correctness of form, rather than communication and the efficacy of communicative resources.

The study presented here sought to address the following questions:

1. What kinds of communicative practices characterize customs interactions in a Vietnamese international airport?

2. What are the features of the communicative resources including English utilized by Vietnamese customs officers in an airport setting? What are the implications for customs officer training and the design of English for customs communication courses?

Vietnam, Globalization, and Language

Since 1986, Vietnam has embarked on a program of economic reform called *Đổi Mới*, or Renovation, which has facilitated massive expansion of economic and political ties with foreign countries. In the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, Vietnam has established bilateral cooperation with over 170 countries, widened international trade affairs, and exported goods to more than 230 nations in the world. Membership of the WTO saw exports increase of 14% annually in the period from 2007 - 2010 (Press and Information Department - Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014). In 2017, Vietnamese exports were valued at USD 19.99 billion with the top five exports being, in order: mobile phones, computers and electrical products, footwear, machinery and tools, and fishery products (General Department of Vietnam Customs, 2005 - 2013a). Central to the monitoring of all traffic in and out of Vietnam is the Vietnam Customs Office which operates at receiving and dispatching points such as international seaports, airports, and road border gates and oversees the traffic of all goods, machinery and people. The Customs Office is a crucial facility in Vietnam's process of global engagement and the country's goals of development and integration.

Vietnam Customs is located in the General Department of Vietnam Customs (2005-2013b) with local offices throughout the country. It names as one its main objectives:

To build a professional and specialized customs force with modern equipment and techniques and effective and efficient operations, contributing to facilitating lawful

trade, developing tourism, attracting foreign investment, assuring national security and social safety, protecting the interests of the State and the rights and legitimate interests of organizations and individuals. (para. 2)

The Customs office where the observations were conducted for this study is situated in a large international airport. According to the Civil Aviation Authority of Vietnam, the airport had 22,140,348 travelers in 2014, an increase of 10% on the previous year (Ha, 2015). Most international travelers are from Asia (Korea, Singapore, Japan, Thailand) and Europe (Finland, Spain, Germany, Italy, Denmark) (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2015). To accommodate the variety of first languages among the traveler population, English has been adopted as the lingua franca for verbal communication between airport authorities and passengers arriving and departing through the airport.

Foreign language education in Vietnam has undergone considerable change over time. Prior to English, French was used as the lingua franca during the French colonial period from 1861 to 1945 (Manh, 2017). Afterwards, English was considered as the mandated foreign language taught during the American-Vietnamese War from 1955 to 1975. However, after the Communist victory in 1975, it was banished from the education system (Wright, 2002). Since economic reforms in 1986 and the normalization of relations between America and Vietnam in 1995, English has become the dominant language for foreign cooperation and integration.

The prominence of English as the language mediating globalization has contributed to its elevated status in Vietnam (Do, 2006; Ministry of Education and Training, 2012). English as a foreign language has become a compulsory subject in both schooling and higher education. To address the role of languages in the new economic, political, and cultural conditions, the Vietnamese Government announced the National Foreign Languages Project 2020 in 2008 (The Vietnamese Government, 2008). The general objective of the project – Project 2020 for short – is to invest heavily in reforming the teaching and learning of foreign languages (in

particular English) in the national educational system with the aim of achieving rapid improvement in the proficiency of the population². For the Government, English is an international passport to modernization and prosperity, and Vietnamese students need to be equipped to work in this changed environment (Ha Noi University, 2011).

English as a Workplace Lingua Franca: Customs

Customs as an area of communication research, especially in terms of English language use, has attracted little attention. Studies of international business settings with people from different national, cultural and linguistic backgrounds have highlighted the role of English as the language of contact and interaction, or a lingua franca (ELF)³ with importance attached to intercultural communication skills for collaborative work (e.g. Briguglio, 2005; Crosling & Ward, 2002). The findings from business studies have highlighted the usefulness of communication knowledge and text level, or genre, knowledge over grammatical rules and idiom correctness (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010; Roshid, 2014); there is a view that native speaker models of English are not necessarily the most effective in ensuring ELF intelligibility and comprehensibility.

The research that is aligned with the security focus of customs is that involving the defence forces and policing. Another similarity is the invested legal authority of the officers in the three contexts, with the overt signifiers of authority including uniforms and particular ways of communicating, especially with interactants who are the subjects of their authority and less powerful. In research with the Australian Defence Force, De Silva and Thomson (2015) found that the contextual conditions for communicating as an officer required a repertoire of genres oriented to politeness and the amelioration of power, as well as language for directives and the declaration of facts. In work with the Indonesian National Police Force, Gishbaugher (2015) found that the primary English language demands of officers were the functions of giving directions and clarifying questions.

As with the business communication studies presented above, the defence force and police studies highlight the importance of genres and language functions in the accomplishment of workplace communication. In the case of the Indonesian study, the communicative functions are in English. These two latter studies foreground talk types that communicate officers' authority and their roles in the society. The study presented here addressed similar issues: its focus was the communicative practices of customs officers in a Vietnamese international airport – a context with its own linguistic and intercultural demands.

Ethnography of Customs Communication

To examine the communicative practices comprising customs work in a Vietnamese international airport, we turn to Hymes's (1974) *Ethnography of Communication* (EC). This view of talk in everyday practices is complemented by Blommaert's (2010) broader sociolinguistics of globalization and his argument that English in particular, has been decoupled from its original localized norms and conventions, and now operates translocally across multiple different contexts. Our rationale for conjoining these perspectives is that they provide a means of understanding the production and reception of meaning through 'denativized' English in a globalized contact point – the customs area of an international airport.

Ethnography of Communication

Ethnography of Communication enables a focus on language use that is situated and naturally-occurring. Hymes (1972; 1974) made a major contribution in this area through his development of the mnemonic SPEAKING as a way of understanding the constituent parts of spoken communication. The eight components that can be used in analysis are: *Setting and Scene* (S) which includes time and place, and physical aspects of the scene such as furniture layout; *Participants* (P) identity including personal characteristics such as age, sex, and

social relationships to each other; *Ends* (E) include the purpose of the event as well as the goals of the participants; *Act* (A) or the sequence of speech acts within the speech event or practices; *Key* (K) or tone in which something is said; *Instrumentalities* (I) meaning the codes or modes that are used, for example, spoken or written and the language variety; *Norms* (N) include the sociocultural rules and conventions of the interaction; and *Genre* (G) which is the type of event such as a phone call or an email. The eight components are interrelated although some may be more salient and of interest than others in particular speech events. Research provides a means of discerning those that are most relevant in particular interactions.

The Linguistic and Intercultural Demands of Globalization

Blommaert's (2010) sociolinguistics of globalization extends the concept of globalization beyond transnational economic activities to the linguistic and intercultural demands inherent in such globally-expansive activities. He distinguishes two paradigms: the *established* and the *emerging*. The *established* paradigm considers the movement of language resources in a horizontal and stable space and in chronological time. On the other hand, the *emerging* paradigm focuses not on language-in-place but on language-in-motion, recognizing that mobile language resources are in fact moving across spaces that already have norms and conventions on what constitutes acceptable language use. Using a language in any one of these spaces creates the potential for communicative trouble and a demand for greater communicative agility.

While the notion of an emergent paradigm foregrounds the dynamic and mobility of languages within globalization, especially English, Blommaert (2010) also recognizes the impact on language norms through his concepts of *territorialization* and *detrterritorialization*. *Territorialization* involves "the attribution of values to language as a local phenomenon" (pp. 45-46); people's mother tongue can be seen as a 'territorialized language' which is tied to their local communities and spaces. In contrast, *detrterritorialization* refers to language that is

seen as not belonging to one locality; this language operates translocally and in “wider spaces” (Blommaert, 2010, p. 46). A second language, foreign language, or lingua franca can be considered deterritorialized. In this way, the English used as the default in globalized settings such as international airports is recognized as deterritorialized and disembedded from locally-contextualized orthodoxies about what constitutes acceptable and appropriate forms of English.

When a language repertoire becomes mobile, it generates meanings pertinent to the norms and expectations of new situations and spaces. On this point, Blommaert (2010) maintains that a language repertoire that is good enough to perform in this place is not necessarily good enough to perform in another place. His explanation of ‘good enough’ refers to a shift from a focus on language form to a focus on language function. To account for the dissolution of the emphasis on form, he introduces the concept of *lookalike English*; this is a variety of English that is created by people with limited English competence but whose social knowledge helps them guess at and produce meanings in the social context (Blommaert, 2012).

Meaning Making as Cooperative, Function-Oriented Interaction

While *lookalike English* refers to the features and functions of language use in dynamic, intercultural settings and EC provides useful items for consideration in analysis of talk, meaning-making in face-to-face settings is achieved through interaction. Indeed, in face-to-face social life, interactions through talk are at the heart of establishing and maintaining order in social and cultural life (Goodwin, 1990). For interactants, the language of the interaction will be that which is most readily available functionally and linguistically; it might be *lookalike* verbal forms for second language users and/or non-verbal forms such as gesture, gaze and body positioning (e.g. Sunaoshi, 2005). Together the interactants use their available resources to negotiate meaning across the interaction. In goal-driven settings such as the customs area of an international airport, maintaining the smooth processing of travelers while

also ensuring security compliance is a major goal for officers. Interaction will be directed in ensuring positive outcomes.

Shotter (2009) makes the point that the surroundings of our utterances are influential in the sense that they exert 'calls' on speakers to respond to them in ways that are fitting.

Developing shared understandings about how to fit into the contextual conditions is achieved over time, largely through talk. People respond to each other's utterances in order to link their activities; in these attempts to coordinate their activities, particular social relationships are constructed (Shotter, 2009). For experienced international travelers, a shared understanding will exist with customs officers about the behaviors including language required in the processing area. In instances of non-compliance or unexpected speech events, both parties need to negotiate satisfactory outcomes using their available communicative resources (Sunaoshi, 2005). The ascendancy of English within the hierarchy of global languages means that for all parties in the airport setting, English is the official language, irrespective of their proficiency level. Nonetheless, the goals of the respective participants mean that English language limitations will be superseded by other communicative resources in the co-construction of mutually beneficial outcomes (Sunaoshi, 2005). For the customs officers following national policy, this means maintenance of security as well as concerns for the safety and rights of travelers. For the travelers, it is the smooth and trouble-free progression through customs and onto the next stage of their journey.

Methodology

The customs office where the study was conducted is situated in a large metropolitan international airport in Vietnam. The management structure of the customs office comprised one Head and four Deputy Heads. They supervise teams such as the Tax Management team, the Supervisory team, the Exit Baggage team, and the Entry Baggage team. The Supervisory team inspects and supervises customs procedures for exported, imported or transiting goods

and their transportation. The Exit Baggage team controls customs checks of travelers' luggage, goods, and money being taken out of the country, while the Entry Baggage team controls customs checks of travelers' luggage, goods, and money on entering the country. Researcher access was granted to the Entry and Exit customs areas to collect observation data. There were 18 customs officers working in the Entry Baggage area, and 20 officers working in the Exit Baggage area. Permission to observe more complex interactions such as investigations of customs fraud in the inspection room was not granted due to the sensitivity and confidentiality of these interactions⁴.

The study involved two weeks of non-participant observations in the Entry and Exit Baggage areas plus interviews with two customs officers, each of approximately 30 minutes. Both officers had at least three years' experience working in the airport. Permission to interview these officers was granted by the team Head. Customs Officer A (CO(A)) chose to use English in the interview while Customs Officer B (CO(B)) used Vietnamese. An observational protocol was developed for descriptive field notes using the eight features of the SPEAKING mnemonic as prompts (Hymes, 1972; 1974). The interviews were designed to explore the participants' perspectives on their English language choices in the customs workplace. The interview protocol featured different types of questions – introductory, probing, and interpreting – to elicit information for the study and to assist the interviewees with their responses.

Additional data consisted of documents such as the Customs guidelines for travelers visiting the airport and the in-house training materials for customs officers. The SPEAKING mnemonic provided a framework for discerning the features of the speech events and was augmented by Saville-Troike's (2003) EC that referenced Hymes's work. The overall objective of the study, following Hymes (1972), was to "explicate the competence that enables members of a community to conduct and interpret speech' (p. 52). To this end, the

observed actions of the customs officers, the accounts of their actions, and the written documents were brought together in a rich, comprehensive explanation of the communicative practices of officers in the high security customs area of a large international airport in Vietnam.

Findings

Observed Communicative Actions

The observed communicative practices of the customs officers are described in their constituent parts using the SPEAKING heuristic. As noted above, the parts are integrated and interrelated but some are more salient than others in particular practices.

The relevant *Settings* were the restricted customs areas in the international airport. The Entry and Exit areas were air-conditioned halls equipped with baggage X-ray machines on both left and right hand sides of the checkpoints. There were typically two to five customs officers in their uniforms standing in front of a baggage X-ray machine to direct travelers through the customs procedures. Behind these customs officers was the baggage X-ray machine with one officer sitting at the screen to control and check the luggage being scanned on the screen. The travelers went through the customs checks at the Exit Baggage area after completing check-in at the airline counter. At the Entry Baggage area, customs procedures occurred after passing through the Passport and Visa check. At the customs checkpoints, if there was any sign or suspicion of illegal behavior, the traveler would be searched by the customs officers; otherwise, there was only the occasional check. The travelers' processes before boarding the plane and after landing are illustrated in Table 1.

<<insert Table 1 here >>

In terms of the *Scene*, the customs halls were relatively quiet despite the large number of travelers, interrupted only by loudspeaker messages. The travelers were watchful, constantly

monitoring the customs officers who were themselves attentive to the queue of people. The atmosphere seemed tense and markedly different to the noisy, relaxed ambience of the waiting lounges and shopping mall.

The *participants* in the setting, were organized into specific roles, one of authority for the customs officers and one of compliance for the travelers. The customs officers' distinctive khaki uniforms of trousers and jackets, black boots, with khaki caps like those worn by police officers marked their distinctive role and authority. This included the two female customs officers observed more closely – CO (A) and CO(B). In contrast, the travelers were typically informally dressed in jeans and t-shirts with small carry-on backpacks.

The *Ends* refer to both goals and outcomes. The goals that both customs officers and travelers sought to accomplish were legal arrivals into, and departures from, Vietnam. The outcome customs officers and travelers actually achieved was the efficient completion of traveler and luggage scans at the customs checkpoints, including the detection of illegal goods or fraud. It must be noted that there were no cases of illegal activity detected during the two-week observation period. The following interaction between CO(B) and a traveler demonstrates the outcomes sought at the customs area and the compliance by a traveler:

CO(B): Please put your jacket on here, please.

Traveler 2: Yes, sorry.

Like her colleague, CO(B) used a directive in the form of an imperative, accompanied by *please*. With her experience in customs, CO(B) was aware that illegal items could be hidden in a traveler's jacket. The directive worked to ensure an acceptable outcome for the officer in her role of detection and security. The response of the traveler was compliance and an apology – *sorry* – indicating a less powerful social position in the interaction.

The *Act sequence* refers to the sequential organization of speech acts including turn-taking and overlap phenomena. Interactions at the customs checkpoints occurred very quickly between officers and travelers because they were observed to be highly routinized. When the traveler approached the customs area, the Customs Officer typically greeted the traveler in either a verbal form such as “*Good morning*” or a non-verbal gesture such as a nod before the customs checks were conducted. These checks usually involved traveler’s belongings. In some instances, identity and body checks were also conducted. The speech act sequence typically involved a greeting and then an imperative operating as a demand:

CO(B): Good morning. Put all your bags here, please.

The speech act was typically a directive delivered as an imperative, accompanied by *please*. Saville-Troike (2003) makes the point that directives⁵ include demands and requests; *please* has a phatic function designed to promote empathy and solidarity, and indicate politeness. Social ‘softening’ was achieved through *please*, mostly located at the end of the directive. For example, CO(A) directed a group of travelers after the travelers had collected their luggage:

CO(A): Stand in line, please.

At the time, an influx of travelers in the Entry area had created a large crowd, putting considerable pressure on the officers. The directive from CO(A) was a demand aimed at speeding up the processing through the security scanners. The social-relational work was done through the politeness marker *please*. Nevertheless, the travelers understood the directive as such because in response, they formed a line.

The *Key* includes tone and manner of a particular speech act. As noted above, the tone of the whole customs area was one of hushed observance of the rules to queue, to place bags on the conveyor belt, and to respond to custom officers’ demands. In the example above, “*Good*

morning. Put all your bags here, please.”, it was observed that there were no smiles from CO(B). The officer’s authority was evident in the use of the imperative and the compliant responses of the travelers.

However, in other instances such as giving directions or responding to an information request from a traveler, the Customs Officer’s tone was observed to change. In one case when a traveler initiated a request for directions, the Customs Officer responded with helpful information about the location of the toilet. Both request and response are in simplified, non-standard English but effective in communicating directions nonetheless:

Traveler 1: The toilet, please.

CO(A): On the back, turn left, please.

The customs officers’ tones were keyed as polite and serious which both sought to create harmonious relations with travelers, yet insist on their cooperation. The social relationship thus appeared to be one of considerable power and authority with the customs officers. They did not smile and often pointed or nodded rather than spoke.

Instrumentalities refer to the language codes and modes of transmission. Spoken English was overwhelmingly the mode of communication even if the traveler was potentially Vietnamese. As can be seen in the examples above, the use of language was sparse and when it occurred, it was typically an imperative functioning as a directive. In addition to these linguistic resources, the customs officers utilized non-verbal forms such as hand gestures and nods to enhance meaning making to travelers. This mode of communication occurred often at the Entry/Exit customs site and seemed intended to accomplish two functions: first, it provided an efficient means of communicating to people who appeared confused; and second, it acknowledged that customs procedures are highly routinized and predictable activities for experienced travelers, thus making detailed explanations unnecessary. As observed at the

Entry customs area, after collecting their luggage, travelers approached the customs checks. The Customs Officer's hand gestures, such as opening her palm and pointing towards the queue, indicated that travelers should stand in line. Similarly, the opening of the Customs Officer's palm pointing towards the tray indicated that travelers should place their luggage on the tray. These two hand gestures effectively constructed two orders: [*Stand in line*] and [*Put your luggage on this tray*].

Another common example of non-verbal communication can be seen in the photograph in an online document published by Customs Newspaper (2015). In the photograph, the customs officer can be seen with his palm upwards, pointing in a particular direction, meaning *Proceed this way*. (see Figure 1)

<<insert Figure 1 here>>

In addition to hand gestures, a nod was often used to indicate a greeting. The greeting was commonly performed at the beginning of the interaction between the customs officer and traveler. Instead of saying “*Good morning*” or “*Good afternoon*”, a nod was used to indicate a greeting. This type of interaction occurred frequently across the observations. Therefore, while English was the common means of verbal communication in this context, non-verbal communication was also observed.

The *Norms of interaction* refer to the expected sociocultural rules and conventions of interaction. In the customs areas, travelers were observed to understand the norms and expectations, and follow the rules. Most travelers were cooperative when directed to do something by a customs officer. In the following incident, one traveler failed to follow the norms of behavior related to his jacket. The Customs Officer re-asserted procedure by demanding the traveler place his jacket in the required spot; the Officer used three imperative forms to ensure the desired outcome:

CO(A): Excuse me, put here please. Wait! Wait!

In this instance, an interactional mediator (Sunaoshi, 2005) in the form of another customs officer stepped in to reinforce the message and to avert a problematic situation.

Genre refers to types of interaction. In this customs workplace, two typical genres were identified: customs security checks and traveler information requests. Hymes (1964) makes the point that linguistic means are always in the service of communicative ends. Within the genre of security checks, the linguistic forms were overwhelmingly imperatives, moderated by the solidarity-oriented phatic device of *please*, as noted in the following Exit baggage area example:

CO(B): Good morning. Put all your bags here, please.

In response to the directive, the traveler positioned his bags so that they could be scanned by the X-ray machine.

A variation in linguistic form is evident in another situation with CO(B) in the Exit baggage area:

CO(B): Good morning. May I see your passport?

Traveler 3: Yes.

CO(B): Can you open the suitcase?

Traveler 3: (Opens the suitcase)

CO(B): Ok, let's go.

This interactive sequence functions as a directive but is worded as a request with the use of modal forms *may* and *can*. The context of the communication meant that CO(B) chose this more modalized directive, but nonetheless, with a similar outcome: the traveler opened his

suitcase. The closing move was accomplished by “*Ok, let’s go.*” which gave the traveler permission to move on.

The second observed genre was information requests initiated by travelers, often seeking directions as outlined here:

Traveler 4: Excuse me, where is the currency exchange?

CO(A): Yes, just go straight to the end, then turn right, you will see it. It
 is very near here, very near.

Traveler 4: Thanks.

The exchange is characterized by numerous phatic devices on the part of the traveler designed to build solidarity and empathy, for example, *Excuse me* and *thanks*. These devices indicate a different genre in the customs area, that is, one initiated by the traveler who in this context occupies a position of lesser power to the customs officers.

Key Written Texts Including Policy Regulations and Training Materials

In the customs halls, a pamphlet with the customs regulations and guidelines in English was available for the traveling public. This document was written to provide travelers with important information before they went through the custom checks. Many of the guidelines related to customs violations and legal consequences, as evident in lexis such as *violate* and *law*, as well as strong modality e.g. *must*. Occasional errors in English spelling and grammar were evident in the pamphlet, as evidenced in Figure 2.

<<insert Figure 2 here >>

Spelling, or written form errors included “guidlines” (guideline), “social organiz” (social organization), “oficer” (officer), and “vice verse” (vice versa). Despite the errors, the words were ‘lookalike’ enough to the correct forms that meaning remains intact. In terms of

grammar, forms such as morphology and syntax (in bold and italic) were occasionally non-standard such as in Examples 1 and 2:

Example 1:

People on exit and entry **violated** the guidelines above will be handled in accordance with law.

Example 2:

The content of customs declaration must be performed before **person on entry carries out procedures for baggage** and *must be declared border gate customs* as well as *taken responsibility* before law on the content of declaration.

As with the lexical items, the meaning is largely intact and travelers could no doubt discern the general gist of the points.

The in-house training materials collected as data included a set of 12 interactive dialogues developed as scenarios and models of typical interactions for customs officers. The first script is reproduced below and analyzed following Hymes's (1964) distinction between language and communication, where the latter refers to language use that functions appropriately to get things done in a particular context.

Checking a suspicious woman

1. <Customs Officer (CO)> Hello ma'am. Which flight were you on?
2. <Foreigner (F)> I was on JL flight 356.
3. <CO> May I have a look at your passport?
4. <F> Here it is.
5. <CO> Thanks. Have you filled out a declaration form for customs?
6. <F> I glanced over the form, but I didn't make a declaration.

7. <CO> So, you mean you have nothing to declare.
8. <F> Yes. That's right.
9. <CO> Do you have a cold or feel cold, by the way?
10. <F> Well ... Yes, I feel cold somehow ...
11. <CO> Could you take everything out of your pockets, please?
12. <F> They are just odds and ends. Nothing to show you.
13. <CO> I don't care about it. Will you, please?
14. <F> ... OK, if you insist. (The woman shows him her things in six paper packs)
15. <CO> What about this jewellery? What are you going to do with these earrings and necklaces? There are roughly 60 pieces.
16. <F> I was just asked by my sister, who runs a jewellery shop in Nagoya. Is there anything wrong with that? They are mere samples, officer.
17. <CO> I'm afraid I have to clarify your claim at our inspection room.
Another inspector is coming here to take you.
18. <F> Do I have to go there?
19. <CO> Right, ma'am.
20. <F> (Resigning herself) All right ...

Source: Customs Office (2015)

The training dialogue features directives functioning more as requests. The use of modal forms such as *may* and *could* as well as *I'm afraid* and the term of address *ma'am* contribute

to a tone that is less authoritarian than was actually observed in practice during the study. The dialogue is also much longer than any observed, although as noted, there were no violations or suspicious cases during the two weeks of observation. The question in line 9 “*Do you have a cold or feel cold, by the way?*” seems unrelated to the business of customs checks but might be intended to probe the woman’s suspicious behavior. It is not immediately clear what the officer’s intent is with the question, as is evident in the traveler’s response. The topic of cold appears to alert the trainees to visible signs of discomfort or anxiety and has its value as a model for customs officers.

Participants’ Accounts of Their Actions

This section presents the Customs Officers’ accounts of their actions and language choices during the course of their work. In the interviews, both CO(A) and CO(B) described the common communicative functions of issuing directives such as “*the way they go out and come in*”. Custom Officer B explained how she deliberately switched from a soft tone to a more forceful one if necessary to demand a traveler’s compliance:

CO(B) (translated): The request is often used. If travelers do not cooperate, my tone will shift to an order. The politeness principle is always for greeting at the beginning using the structure “May I ...?”. If travelers cooperate, we would say “thank you”. If some travelers react against the customs checks, I become more serious. I explain for them that this is my job and ask them to cooperate in order not to waste time. If travelers still do not cooperate, I will be much more serious.

Customs areas are workplaces foreign travelers must pass through before they exit or enter the country. Given the variety of mother tongues among travelers, both Customs Officers subscribed fully to the view that English was the best language to act as the medium for communication. For CO(A), there was an awareness that different varieties of English were possible:

CO(A) (verbatim): As you know English is the live [moving and changing] language, some people come from very many countries. They use English but not at the same way like Asian because they use English very difficult to hear, because the voice, it is very difficult. Some people like in England, Australia, America, New Zealand it is very easy because you learn the way they sound in English in university.

According to this account, she found it easier to ‘hear’ the accents of Anglophone English speakers because they were introduced in materials at university but she had difficulties with other accents especially among people from Asian countries. The Customs Officers indicated that through years of practice and experience in security processing, they had formed views about various national groups and their linguistic practices at Vietnamese customs.

In her interview, CO(B) listed examples of her views on the culturally-based practices of different traveler groups:

For Chinese travelers: They accept short phrases in simple words and even curt answers. They really do not understand if I make complete sentences. To other travelers, it is impossible; however, Chinese travelers prefer this type of communication. They find it easy to understand and never complain of this.

For Japanese travelers: They are highly cooperative in customs checks, very polite and diplomatic as well.

For Korean travelers: Sometimes they are little abrupt, so I have to be firm and serious when doing any customs checks with them.

For Western travelers: Some are extremely polite and highly cooperative and some prove to be uncomfortable when being checked at customs. When they are disagreeable, I do not become aggressive. I tend to be more formal instead and they will change their attitudes and become cooperative. Being formal here means that I follow the customs procedures carefully when checking travelers’ luggage such as not putting my hands in their luggage.

By this description, CO(B) indicated that she adjusted the key of her utterances depending on the nationality of the group. In her view, Chinese travelers prefer simplified language; using complete sentence structures gets in the way of understanding. With Japanese travelers, politeness is essential. With regard to Korean travelers, in her view, she has to be firm and serious about exerting her authority. With travelers from Western countries, particularly those who are difficult, a formal demeanour is the best. Through these differentiated language responses, she believes she is able to accomplish the communicative goals associated with her role.

CO(A) observed that although the customs profession had protocols to conduct custom inspections (as modelled in the training materials), at times, the two sets of participants (customs officer and traveler) did not achieve their communicative purpose. She attributed this to cultural factors, in particular, the mismatch between dissimilar cultures. In contrast to CO(B)'s account of adjusting her language choices to what she described as the cultural and linguistic characteristics of particular national groups, CO(A) suggested that customs staff should equip themselves with what she called an *international principles of communication* when dealing with travelers:

CO(A): With my own experience, each staff has to equip herself with international principles of communication which do not influence travelers' unique cultures and still keeps the Vietnamese identity.

By this, she was referring to a dilemma for customs officers of accommodating the cultural and linguistic preferences of travelers while also staying true to one's own cultural sensibilities and national priorities.

Discussion and Implications

The goal of this paper was to build a comprehensive description of customs officers' communicative practices in a Vietnamese international airport. The objective was to identify the competences (Hymes, 1972) characterizing customs work in the English-medium, high-stakes intercultural space that is now international airports. The three data sets coalesce to form a multi-dimensional view of customs work: the ethnography based on observations details the constituent parts of customs communication; the text analyses of a customs pamphlet highlight the *lookalike* English while the training materials reveal a high level of modality which is not matched in practice; and finally, the interviews with the Customs Officers present their accounts of practice and the views formed in experience. In this section, we bring the three sets of analyses together to address the research questions and to present possible implications for training and practice.

First, in terms of the research questions about the communicative practices in the customs area of an international airport, the linguistic features are predominantly imperatives, with *please*, fulfilling the function of a directive. The directives constitute an order or a demand with the *please* operating in a phatic sense of solidarity-building and politeness-marking. It might be seen as an attempt to soften the power relations in the interaction while fulfilling the communicative function. After all, customs officers have a duty to implement the security and quarantine requirements of the Vietnamese Government as outlined in its customs vision statement and objectives.

Second, it is clear that customs officers' directives are intended for those travelers who are not conversant with and/or not following the conventional behaviors of entering or exiting customs checkpoints. The directives are about making the travelers comply. Overall, however, most travelers appear familiar with the expectations and cooperate with customs officers in the joint action (Shotter, 2009) of getting the customs checks done efficiently and effectively. Part of the cooperative outcome might also be attributed to the customs officers'

nuanced responses to what they perceived as particular traveler groups' cultural preferences and linguistic behavior (Blommaert & Verschueren, 2002). For example, CO(B) suggested that knowledge of travelers' cultural identities helped make the customs checks efficient by being primed to know what to expect and how to respond.

Third, the very brief interactions between customs officers and travelers in the halls hardly qualify as a community in that they will never see each other again. However, the routines for customs checks are well established across the globe and travelers are habituated in these kinds of checks and will come with some sense of how the customs interactions should be done. Therefore, drawing from Hymes's definition, customs officers and the foreign travelers they interacted with in the customs areas formed the speech community of interest for this study. In these contextual conditions, the norms of interaction (Hymes, 1974) are privileged to the customs officers who usually initiate and control interactions when doing any customs inspections. Although the customs officers' speech acts are non-conventionalized (Flowerdew, 2012) in this contact point, travelers might find themselves understandable when the customs procedures look similar across countries. In this regard, as members of the customs community and due to the distinctive characteristic of the customs profession, the tenor of customs officers' interactions is usually keyed as polite and serious, though there is also a delicate shift of tones depending on the purposes of communication (Duranti, 2009).

Fourth, English as instrumentality in customs interactions is significant because it reflects the political, economic, and social priorities currently driving Vietnam's program of development and international integration (Tran et al., 2016). The analysis of the publicly available pamphlet in the customs area showed non-standard linguistic forms of English in terms of written form (spelling) and syntax (word order). Despite these errors, meaning was unimpeded pointing to what Blommaert (2012) calls 'lookalike' English: for example, 'Guidlines' looks like the English word 'guidelines' and within the genre of a pamphlet with

particular pictures and text organization, the meaning is clearly ‘guidelines’. Despite the non-standard spelling, the meaning is uninterrupted and the communicative function of providing information is fulfilled. In a globalized world, English is now used overwhelmingly by second language speakers with no native speakers present (Jenkins, 2007). Lookalike English is evident in many texts in diverse contexts, and while it is not welcomed by English language learners pedagogically (Prodromou, 2006), it does highlight how non-standard forms can function meaningfully to achieve communicative ends.

Finally, power and authority were in play throughout the customs processes, manifested in symbols such as officer uniforms, directives as the dominant language choice, and paralinguistics such as pointing without smiles. On this point, for Foucault (1984), power (as in customs officers’ uniforms, tones, and expressions) and knowledge (as in customs investigation practices) are inextricably intertwined. Furthermore, Saville-Troike (2003) notes that people in asymmetrical relations of power do not beg; they give orders. The highly ritualized use of particular language forms by the customs officers, in this case, directives + *please*, is in the service of customs-related communicative ends. They help accomplish the officers’ goals of maintaining system and order (Saville-Troike, 2003). Like other organizations involved in law and order such as the military and police, the processes of customs need to be orderly and surveillable. The language choices of the officers are a crucial part of ensuring that this authority is communicated to travelers and that the latter comply with the security expectations as efficiently and calmly as possible. The norms of acceptable behavior at customs as intercultural contact points are realized to a large extent through the cooperative interactions between the customs officers and the travelers. There is a co-construction which draws on multiple communicative resources to ensure effective and efficient customs processing in accordance with Vietnam’s national security priorities (e.g. Goodwin, 1990; Sunaoshi, 2005).

Implications

The mobility of language activates a set of potentials for communication in different localities. For instance, mobile language will reflect the local environment through which it flows and the contextualized purpose to which it is put. In other ways, it carries traces of where it has come from. In addition to context-related meanings, English language interactions between the customs officers and foreign travelers index cultural identities and perform role-specific authority.

The communicative features of the interactions provide useful input for the development of English language teaching materials for students studying specifically in the customs field. As one of the leading materials and course developers for Project 2020 notes, English for Specific Purposes curricula need to prioritize relevance to local industry settings (Hoang, 2013). The use of authentic, contemporary English materials sourced directly from local Vietnamese workplaces can exemplify topics, tasks, strategies, speech acts, and wordings which are current and relevant to the students' future workplace practices.

Equally training materials such as those presented above could benefit from the ethnographic data recorded during the observations. While this study was denied access to sensitive situations involving evasions and fraud, and indeed, none occurred during the time of the study, future research could endeavour to gain access to these events. Ethnographic data could be highly beneficial in ensuring that officers are equipped with the English needed to handle these situations appropriately.

From this study, it can be seen that customs is a dynamic intercultural context in which officers are tasked with the maintenance of security and control. An understanding of the relationship between language and globalization foregrounds the mobile language resources and repertoires of people as they partake in speech events across the world that are

characterized by contingency and interculturality. What is evident in customs practices, and indeed in many workplaces affected by globalization forces, is the shift in focus from linguistic forms in isolation to a focus on communicative functions and meanings in contextualized practices and interactions. The study presented here contributes a detailed understanding of customs communicative practices and the benefits of such work for teaching and training.

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² The Vietnamese Government recently reviewed the Project 2020. The updated version is now referred to as the National Foreign Languages Project and has been extended to 2025 (References).

³ For more on the field of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), see Jenkins (2007) and Seidlhofer (2011).

⁴ The only people permitted in these interviews were customs officers or relevant investigators.

⁵ Directives can be demands, requests, suggestions, and hints but within this list, there is declining pragmatic force and positions of decreasing power (Saville-Troike, 2003).

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Table 1

Processing Travelers on Exit and Entry

Processing travelers on exit	Processing travelers on entry
1. Security check before entering the terminal	1. Medical check (required for travelers from epidemic areas)
2. Check-in for flight at the airline counter	2. Passport and visa check
3. Customs check: registered luggage and carry-on baggage	3. Baggage collection
4. Passport and visa check	4. Customs check: registered luggage and carry-on baggage
5. Security check before boarding	5. Security check at the terminal gate
6. Waiting in the lounge area	
7. Boarding the plane	



Figure 1. Non-Verbal Interactions at the Customs Checkpoint

Source: <http://www.baohaiquan.vn/Pages/Cac-buoc-thu-tuc-doi-voi-hanh-khach-XNC.aspx>



Figure 2. Examples of *Lookalike* English from the Printed Customs Guidelines

Source: Customs Office (2015)

Appendices

Appendix A. Observational protocol at the Customs office

Observational Fieldnotes

- Research site: Customs office
- Participants: Customs Officer A and Customs Officer B
- Role of the researcher: Nonparticipant observer
- Aims: Studying authentic types of English language use in both written and spoken genres
- Time and date: 8:00 a.m. – 16:30 p.m., 4 May 2015
- Length of observations: Two weeks

Descriptive fieldnotes

1. Studying written genres:

- Customs guidelines, in-house training materials

2. Studying spoken genres:

Talk between customs officers and travelers:

- What kinds of English used
- What types of communicative practices
- What registers
- What tones, nuances

3. Studying non-verbal mode such as hand gestures, smiles, nods

Reflective fieldnotes

This is personal thoughts the researcher records during observations for later analysis to have more informed conclusion of the study.

RESEARCH SITE: _____

DATE: _____

PARTICIPANT: _____

OBSERVATION NUMBER: _____

Time	What's happening? (mode, topic, genre, setting, outcomes...)	What/who is participating? (forms, texts, people, roles, tenor/key...)	Other interesting stuff

REFLECTIONS: (what kinds of English am I seeing? What are the features of English in this workplace and for this work role? What about intercultural communication? What does that look like?)

Observation session	Reflection notes
Setting and Scene	

Participant	
Ends (Expected outcomes)	
Act sequence (actual form, content, lexis)	
Key (tone, manner, behavior, posture, gesture)	
Instrumentalities (choice of channel)	
Norms of interaction and interpretation	
Genre (types of utterance)	

Appendix B. Interview protocol for Customs Officers

OPENING

Tell me about your work history?

How much English did each job require?

BODY

In this current job, what do you use English for?

What types of English do you usually use?

What do you find hard to do in English?

What do you find easy to do in English?

Tell me about how you learnt English

At school?

At college?

On the job?

What has been the best way for you to learn English for your job?

Did you have to take the entrance exam in English for this job?

What were you prepared for?

What weren't you prepared for?

What do you think is the best way to learn English for your job?

What do you think about cultural understandings when communicating with foreign travelers?

RECALL

I noticed that you ... Can you tell more about that?

CLOSING

For someone coming into your workplace, what advice would you give them about the English required?

Thank you ... closing ... checking transcriptions and translations