

## Introduction to Vietnamese: “You” and “I” pronouns

In Vietnamese, there are no fixed “you” and “I.”

How you address someone else (“you” in English) and address yourself (“I”) differs in each situation, depending on the gender and the age of both people in the conversation. This often confuses new students \*, but with proper explanation and some practice, you won’t have much trouble navigating through the pronouns.

For example, Will and Harry are friends, but Will looks old enough to be Harry’s brother.

When talking to Harry, Will calls himself “**anh**” (older brother), and calls Harry “**em**” (younger brother/sister).

Harry calls himself “**em**”, and calls Will “**anh**.”

An example of a conversation between Will and Harry will go like this:

Will: Chào **em**, **em** có khỏe không? (*hello, how are you?*)

Harry: **Em** chào **anh**, dạ có ạ. Còn **anh**? (*hello, yes. How about you?*)

Will: **Anh** cũng khỏe. (*I’m also well*)

Suppose Kate is Will’s friend, and she seems to be older than Will (like an older sister), look up the table below and find out the appropriate pronouns for Kate and Will to use when they talk to each other.

Age (relative to you): that person looks...	Male	Female	What you call yourself
Old enough to be your grandparents	<b>Ông</b> (grandpa)	<b>Bà</b> (grandma)	<b>Con</b> (Southern) / <b>cháu</b> (Northern)
Older than your parents	<b>Bác</b> (older uncle)	<b>Bác</b> (older aunt)	<b>Con / cháu</b>
Younger than your parents	<b>Chú</b> (young uncle)	<b>Cô</b> (young aunt)	<b>Con / cháu</b>
Old enough to be your older siblings	<b>Anh</b> (older brother)	<b>Chị</b> (older sister)	<b>Em</b>
Young enough to be your younger siblings	<b>Em</b> (younger brother)	<b>Em</b> (younger sister)	Guys call themselves: <b>Anh</b> Girls call themselves: <b>Chị</b>
Young enough to be your niece, nephew, children, grandchildren	<b>Con / cháu</b>	<b>Con / cháu</b>	See above for appropriate pronouns

Some other common pronouns include:

1. Parents and children: **bố / ba** (dad), **mẹ / má** (mom), **con** (child)
2. Teachers and students: **thầy** (a male teacher), **cô** (a female teacher). Teachers are always called “**thầy**” or “**cô**” regardless of their age. The students call themselves “**con.**”
3. “**Tôi**”: generic “I”, most often used when speaking to a crowd or stranger)
4. “**Bạn**” : friends who are born within the same year (this is a strict rule: only people born between Jan 1 and Dec 31 of the same year are “**bạn**”). Native speakers rarely use this pronoun in conversation, even though textbooks will teach you this to get by during the first few lessons.
5. Pronouns between friends: “**cậu**” (you) - “**tớ**” (I) or “**mày**” (you) - “**tao**” (I). If someone calls you “**cậu,**” call yourself “**tớ.**” Do not mix “**cậu**” with “**tao**” and vice versa.

Northern Vietnamese is stricter than Southern Vietnamese with the pronouns.

Southern Vietnamese people may use “**chú**” and “**cô**” to address all the uncles and aunts, while Northern Vietnamese use “**bác**” to differentiate the older uncles and aunts.

With this, we conclude our brief introduction to Vietnamese pronouns.

\* Just in case there is a need to gripe about Vietnamese pronouns, Korean uses the same pronoun system, with clear distinction between people of different gender and age, while Japanese uses a similar but less complicated pronoun system (compared to the Korean and Vietnamese).

Vietnamese is rated as a Category 3 \* language in term of difficulty in learning by the Foreign Service Institute. Korean and Japanese are rated as Category 4.

Category 3 languages take about a year of full time, intensive study to master.

Category 4 languages take about 2 year.

For comparison, Spanish is rated as a Category 1 (half a year).