

## The Functions and Use of Greetings

### LES FONCTIONS ET L'UTILISATION DES SALUTATIONS

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**Abstract:** In this paper, the studies of the most important functions of greetings in different social contents will be reviewed. First, greetings as illocutionary speech acts according to Austin's Speech Act Theory will be discussed. Then an analysis of greetings as linguistic routines of politeness will be reviewed. After that, the use of greetings in actual social interaction will be examined. Finally, social factors that affect the choice of greetings in terms of Laver's framework will be presented.

**Key words:** greeting; function; use

**Résumé:** Dans cet article, les études des fonctions les plus importantes des salutations en différentes matières sociales seront examinées. Tout d'abord, les salutations et des actes illocutoires de discours selon la théorie des actes de discours d'Austin seront discutées. Ensuite, une analyse des salutations en tant que des routines linguistiques de politesse sera examinée. Après cela, l'utilisation de salutations dans l'interaction sociale réelle sera examinée. Enfin, les facteurs sociaux qui influent sur le choix de salutation en termes de cadre Laver sera présenté.

**Mots-clé:** salutations; function; utilisation

Greetings are important as well as frequent in everyday social interactions all over the world. Appropriate greeting behavior is crucial for the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. As a significant aspect of politeness phenomenon, greetings have been studied in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, yet there has been no systematic investigation of their use across different languages from both pragmatic and sociolinguistic perspectives. Fortunately, Brown and Levinson (1978) have attempted to analyze the functional application of politeness to the performance of FTAs (Face Threatening Acts) in order to claim politeness phenomenon as universals in language use. Laver (quoted in Qian, 1996) has summarized social factors on the choice of greetings in his descriptive framework.

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## **1. THE PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF GREETINGS**

### **1.1 Greetings as Illocutionary Acts**

As Firth (1972:30) comments, greetings are 'a system of signs that convey other than overt messages.' But how do people take the covert messages (i.e. the intention or goodwill of the speaker) from this intricate sign system? Austin's Speech Act Theory is helpful for the explanation of this phenomenon.

The basic assumption of Austin's theory is 'to say something is to do something' (Austin, 1962:12). According to him, utterances are the production of words and sentences on particular occasions by particular speakers for particular purposes. They are not ends in themselves, but means to ends – means to affecting listeners in certain ways. They are speech acts for achieving certain communicative goals. He asserts (Austin, 1962:120) that speech acts consists of locutionary acts which have a meaning, illocutionary acts which have a certain force in saying something, and perlocutionary acts which achieve certain effects by saying something. Illocutionary acts are conventional acts and differ mainly in their immediate purpose or illocutionary force. There are thousands of possible illocutionary acts, such as requests, orders, complaints, promises, etc. According to Austin (1962), there are six types of illocutionary acts:

Assertives, used for expressing a belief, eg. 'John is in the library.'

Directives, used to get the addressee to do things, eg. 'Please close the door.'

Commissives, used to commit oneself to some future action, eg. 'I'll wash the dishes.' and 'Can I do anything for you?'

Expressives, used to express certain feelings toward the hearer, eg. thanking, apologizing, congratulating, greeting, etc.

Effectives, used to cause changes in institutional state of affairs, eg. 'You're dismissed.' and 'You are hereby sentenced to five years in prison.'

Verdictives, used to determine institutional state of affairs, eg. 'Strike' said by a baseball umpire.

According to the above classification of illocutionary acts, greetings fall into the category of 'expressives' and are therefore should not be taken literally. When an English speaker asks you 'How are you?' or 'How is your work?', he is not necessarily concerned much about your physical condition or work, but showing his politeness.

Another interesting example of the expressive aspect of such routines is the use of the Chinese expression 'Have you eaten?'. When a Chinese speaker makes such an inquiry, he is seldom really concerned about whether you are full or hungry, but intends to make you feel that he is being considerate to you .The conventional answer is 'yes', though often a white lie, for the negative answer would put the greeting person in an awkward situation. Actually such a greeting expression is not an invitation but a means to show the speaker's warm attitude and consideration towards the hearer.

The discussion above shows that from pragmatic perspective, greetings can be regarded as illocutionary acts. Illocutionary force can be conveyed through these illocutionary acts. However, the understanding of the covert meaning of greetings by the interlocutors in daily conversation lies in the routinization of such expressions.

### **1.2 Greetings as Linguistic Routines of Politeness**

Firth(1972:29-30) suggests that greetings should not be treated as spontaneous emotional reaction to the coming together of people. For the most part they are highly conventionalized and follow patterned routines.

Esponsing Firth's view, Laver (quoted in Qian, 1996) makes a further study of greetings in the linguistic patterns of conversation. He asserts that greetings as conversational routines are part of the linguistic repertoire of politeness. They are tools of polite behavior and their use is guided by a polite norm. Based upon his assumption, he employs Brown and Levinson's politeness theory to explain the function and use of greetings.

As Laver (quoted in Qian, 1996) comments, the central concept Brown and Levinson employ in their model is that of 'face' after Goffman (1967). As mentioned earlier, face refers to that emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize. They distinguish negative face (the want that one's action be unimpeded by others) and positive face (the want that one's wants be desirable to at least some others). If the strategic ends of speakers in conversational act are to be achieved, various politeness strategies must be used to maintain the participants' negative face or to enhance their positive face. In the process of greetings, such maintenance of enhancement of face has to be taken into consideration.

For instance, in English, greetings such as 'Hello!', 'How do you do?' and 'I am pleased to meet you.' have to be used to maintain or even enhance the hearer's positive face, depending on the status of the participants and the social setting.

In Chinese, some greetings are frequently used for the sake of politeness in social interaction as well. For example, 'Hello!' and 'Good morning!' as greeting expressions seem to be directed towards the hearer's positive face. Greetings such as 'What are you doing?' and 'Where are you going?' seem to maintain the speaker's positive face.

The examples above illustrate some routine expressions used in social greetings. Both participants normally take each other's positive or negative face into consideration.

In short, greetings are important conversational routines in the negotiation of social relationship and they are constrained by common social factors. In the following section, the use of greetings and some analytical frameworks accounting for the factors that affect the use of greetings will be discussed.

## **2. THE USE OF GREETINGS**

Having discussed the pragmatic functions of greetings, the use of greetings in different social contexts will be analyzed. In this section, the greeting strategies in terms of Brown and Levinson's model of politeness and the social factors that affect the choice of greeting strategies in terms of Laver's descriptive framework will be presented.

### **2.1 Greeting Strategies: Brown and Levinson's Model**

As discussed previously, greetings are linguistic routines concerned with politeness in social interaction. They can be discussed in terms of Brown and Levinson's model of politeness. Next the typology of politeness strategies provided in this model will be applied to the analysis of greeting strategies.

In Brown and Levinson's view, politeness strategies are concerned with interactant's face: they are used when doing FTAs (Face Threatening Acts) which can threaten the speaker's face as well as the hearer's. The rational actions people take to preserve both kinds of face for themselves and the people they interact with essentially add up to politeness. Brown and Levinson (1978) show us five strategies a person can deal with a face-threatening act to maintain the interactant's negative face or enhance their positive face to any degree in social interaction:

- (1) bald on record,
- (2) positive politeness,
- (3) negative politeness,
- (4) off-record, and
- (5) not doing the FTA.

However, Brown and Levinson have not discussed greetings in their framework in detail. Some linguistic researchers find it difficult or inappropriate to put greeting strategies into the above categories. Some of them try to analyze greeting strategies in other ways such as categorizing greetings into deference greetings and solidarity greetings. But Brown and Levinson's framework can be applied to the categorization of

greeting strategies with some modification as bald on record, negative greetings, neutral greetings, positive greetings and off-record greetings.

Bald on record strategy is starting a conversation without greetings, as in many short conversations with short intervals between family members, colleagues or friends. It is also used when the maxim of efficiency overrides the maxim of politeness, for example:

- (1) A: Hey, we're late.  
B: Let's hurry.
- (2) A: They are coming! Get away through the back door.  
B: Yeah.

Dialogue (1) may occur when A and B meet on their way to school or office in a hurry. Dialogue (2) may occur when B is being chased by others. In these situations, greetings are dispensed with due to the urgency.

Negative greetings are those usually with regressive action directed towards the hearer's negative face. This strategy is frequently used when addressing someone whom the speaker does not know or does not know well. For example;

- 'Excuse me, are you Professor Jones?'
- 'Excuse me, what is your noble name?'

The expression 'excuse me' can be considered to be a negative regressive greeting expression directed towards the hearer's negative face, i.e., the want to be free from intrusion.

Positive greetings are those directed towards the hearer's positive face. They are used to please the hearer to a certain degree. For example:

- I have heard a lot about you.  
You do look very well.  
You look very smart today!  
What a nice smell!  
We are so pleased that you attend our party.

The above expressions show the speakers' delight of meeting the hearer and his appreciation of the hearer's presence, appearance, food, etc. The speaker praises or flatters the hearer directly or indirectly and tries to enhance the latter's positive face.

Off-record greetings are those used between intimate friends to enhance solidarity or to create a humorous language environment. They are realized through teasing, irony or in seemingly impolite ways. For example:

- (1) A: Still alive?  
B: Alive and kicking.
- (2) What wind brings you here?

The first example is a joking greeting between persons of joking relationship, and the second example may express the speaker's heartfelt admiration toward the hearer.

Not doing the FTA may happen when people simply clear their throat loudly, or make some noise or gesture as greetings to attract the hearer's attention to start a conversation. This can be frequently seen in both English and Chinese.

In the context of mutual vulnerability of face, any rational agent will seek to avoid FTAs, or will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat. In other words, he will take into consideration the relative weight of (at least) three wants: (a) the want to communicate the content of the FTA, (b) the want to be efficient or urgent, and (c) the want to maintain H's (hearer's) face to any degree. Unless (b) is greater than (c), S (speaker) will want to minimize the threat of his FTA. In order to minimize the threat of his FTA, the speaker will choose from among a variety of politeness strategies to employ indicated by Brown and Levinson which have been mentioned earlier in this section. The more an act threatens S's or H's face, the more S will want to choose a higher-numbered politeness strategy to minimize the risk of FTAs.

However, it can be observed that although the consciousness of face and the strategies for maintaining or enhancing face are universal as Brown and Levinson (1978) claim, the realization of these strategies is language specific. A contrastive study of the repertoire of English and Chinese greetings will be provided in chapter 4. Prior to this work, we need to consider the social factors that affect the use of greetings.

## **2.2 Social Factors Constraining the Use of Greetings**

In this section, the influence of some social factors on the choice of greeting strategies will be examined in the light of Brown and Levinson's analysis and Laver's descriptive framework.

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), the choice of politeness strategies is for the most part determined by the weight of seriousness of FTAs, assessed with two social factors and one cultural factors:

$$W_x = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R_x$$

Where  $W_x$  represents the seriousness of FTAs,  $D(S, H)$  is the social distance between  $S$ (speaker) and  $H$ ( hearer),  $P(H, S)$  is the relative power of  $H$  over  $S$ , and  $R_x$  is the absolute ranking of imposition in the particular culture. All the three factors  $P$ ,  $D$  and  $R$  contribute to the seriousness of  $FTAx$  and determine the level of politeness with which  $FTAx$  will be communicated.

However, politeness strategies are not only used for doing FTAs. In the case of greeting, they are more often used to maintain or enhance social relationship between the interactants without definite communicative goals or specific purposes in terms of exchange of goods or services. Moreover, there are more factors which influence the choice of politeness strategies. At this stage of discussion, Brown and Levinson's formulation might be revised as follows for the choice of addressing strategies (Qian 1996:36):

$$X = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + \dots$$

Where  $X$  represents degree of politeness in greeting. The formulation is open-ended as other factors may influence the degree of politeness of greetings. It shows that both  $D$  and  $P$ (and some other social factors) contribute to  $X$ , i.e., if  $P$  is held constant,  $X$  varies with  $D$ . For example:

- (1) A: Hi, John!  
B: Hi, Jack! Glad to see you here!
- (2) A: How do you do, Mr. Smith?  
B: How do you do, Mr. Jones? I'm pleased to meet you.  
A: I'm pleased to meet you too.

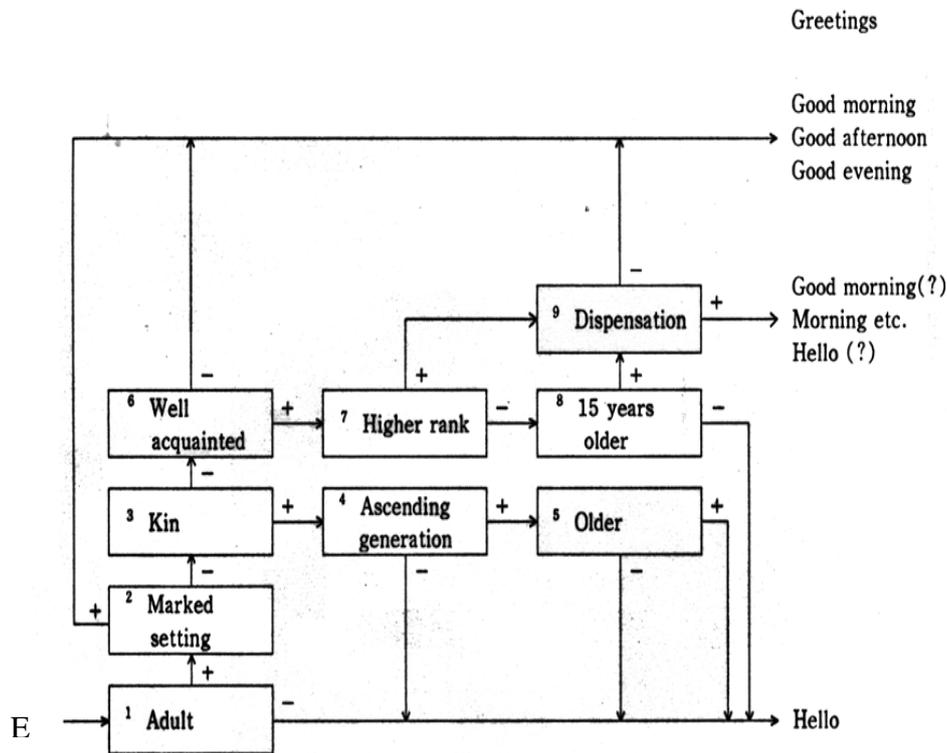
The social distance of interactants in example (1) is much shorter than that in example (2).

If  $D$  is held constant,  $X$  varies with  $P$ . For example:

- (3) A: Morning!  
B: Morning!
- (4) A: Good morning, Mr. Jones!  
B: Morning!

Example (3) may occur between interactants of equal social status whereas (4) may occur between a secretary and her boss!

Laver(quoted in Qian, 1996) has summarized social factors on the choice of greetings in the following figure:



**Laver's Diagram of the Factors that Constrain the Choice of Formulaic Greeting Phrases in British English (quoted in Qian, 1996: 37)**

In Laver's diagram, the greeting form system is presented as a series of choices, using the computer flow chart format. The square-shaped junctures are to be taken as decision points, or determiners of a set of specialized greeting expressions. The 'E' beside the juncture labeled 'adult' marks the entry point, the point where you begin the process. There are two exits from each decision point depending on whether the indicated condition is met (+) or not (-). The greeting expressions from the top to bottom on the right side of the diagram rank from the most polite to the least. To work out the correct greeting expression to use, you simply follow the appropriate path through the chart. For example, a faculty member (F) who wants to greet the dean (D) would recognize him or her as an adult, then check to see if it was a 'marked setting' (like a formal faculty meeting). If not, check whether or not D is a relative (presumably not). Next, F decides if D is an acquaintance, then if D is of higher rank (D is), then if F has a 'dispensation' to greet D. 'Dispensation' simply means that D has made it clear, explicitly or tacitly, that it is acceptable for F to greet him in an informal way; if not, F then has to decide to greet D in a formal way, like 'Morning!'.

It is instructive to notice that Laver calls for a decision about whether or not the other person is an adult or not. It should also be noticed that rank precedes age; if the other person is of higher rank, the age juncture will not enter into the decision, i.e., rank dominates age as a criterion of decision point.

Laver (quoted in Qian, 1996) takes such social factors as age, kinship, acquaintance, generation, rank as well as setting and dispensation into consideration. Through the presentation of Laver's framework, it is indicated that the choice of greetings is affected by various social factors, though different factors may carry different weight such as age in the choice of greeting strategies in English and Chinese. An interesting example is greeting expressions used among family members in different cultures. Actually, most Chinese film-goers used to be fascinated to hear such expressions as 'good morning' used among family members of foreign countries. They feel that speakers of English are extremely polite in their families. For Chinese speakers, similar expressions are usually highly marked if used among family members. If a father greets

his son with 'Good morning', for example, it might be ironic, since the boy is likely to have got up late. In fact, Chinese speakers also greet their family members, but in different ways. As some Chinese informants reported (Qian, 1996:84), they often use expressions as 'Got up?', 'When [did you] get up?', etc., or simply use terms of address such as 'dad' and 'mum' which seem more appropriate for family members in Chinese. Although things have been changed recently with China's reform and opening policy, many Chinese still feel that the specified greeting expressions are quite inappropriate for family members.

### 3. SUMMARY

To sum up the discussion of the pragmatic functions and use of greetings in English and Chinese, Austin's Speech Act Theory as well as Brown and Levinson's model of politeness has been proved helpful. However, the truth is that there is considerable variation in greeting expression usage, across languages, across social groups within the same country, from one individual to the next, and even in the behavior of the same person from one instance to another. Greeting as a politeness routine is a universal phenomenon but has culture specification. Brown and Levinson's face theory to some extent is validated, i.e. in Western culture or more specifically in Britain and America. It would be foolhardy to try to predict at any given time, even if you know what the relationship is between the speaker and the person he or she is talking to. If there is a small number of principles that govern greeting expressions, as there seems to be, there is much variation in their use. The essence lies in the cultural difference between these linguistic routines of politeness. Actually, Brown and Levinson have realized that the notion of face is subject to culture elaboration. In making sense of linguistic interactions, culture influence should be accounted such as age, power as well as setting and dispensation. It certainly seems worth exploring and needs to be supplemented by intercultural studies of these linguistic routines in English and Chinese culture. It is also sensible to combine Jane Austin's speech act theory and Brown & Levinson's Face Theory and not to separate one from another for they are complementary to each other.

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