

# Comparison of greetings in the Vietnamese dialects of Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City

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## 1. Introduction

Politeness should be seen as a set of strategies or verbal habits which someone sets as a norm for themselves or which others judge as the norm for them, as well as being a socially constructed norm within particular communities of practice (Mills 2000:6). Ide (1999:1) states that honorifics are key linguistic features for linguistic politeness in the languages which use them....She also mentions about the relationship between the speaker and the hearer and the speaker's attributes vis-à-vis the society as a whole. By choosing the proper formal honorific forms while speaking, the context is indexed appropriately. This is analogous to the proper use of such greeting rituals as "Good morning." Or "How do you do?" in appropriate contexts and can be seen as politeness according to etiquette and protocol.

There is no research work on greeting in any Southeast Asian languages distinctively except being a part of any particular language teaching materials. Therefore, this paper, which is a part of the research projects<sup>1</sup>, would like to contribute the findings by comparing the various politeness patterns of greeting used by speakers from Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City to find the similarities and differences. The output will be useful and more colorful for the teachers who teach Vietnamese to the native speakers as well as to foreigners who are studying Vietnamese. The varieties of greeting patterns give more language choices to the speakers. Moreover, comparison with other Southeast Asian languages on this issue is highly suggested.

### 1.1 Theoretical framework and Methodology

This study will use the theories of Pragmatics, Sociolinguistics and Ethnolinguistics for data collection and analysis by using questionnaires<sup>2</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup>This paper was presented in the 14 Southeast Asian Linguistics Conference organised by Thammasat University at Siam City Hotel, 19-21 May 2004. This topic is extracted from the studies of a research entitled "Politeness strategies in Vietnamese language: Ha Noi" granted by AFP 2001 and a research entitled "Identities and Dynamics in Transition of Politeness strategies in Vietnamese language: Ho Chi Minh City" granted by SEASREP 2002.

<sup>2</sup>The questionnaire was the self-report in which the respondents were requested to write down how they greeted senior, equal and junior people (See appendix).

observation, participation and interviews. The questionnaires will be designed to cover various speech acts: greetings, introduction, leave-taking, thanking, request, refusal, complaint, compliment, apology and disagreement,. The target respondents will be sampled from different ages (20-35 years, 36-50 years, and 50+), gender (male, female) and occupation (government officials, state and private enterprises and students). The questions were designed for investigating how the respondents use politeness to the senior, equal and junior addressees. According to the data, occupation is the significant factor which can distinguish the politeness clearer than age and gender. Different education does not affect linguistic politeness, therefore, it is not a significant factor and is not analysed in this work. Each age group has 35 respondents. Total respondents are expected to be approximately 210 people from Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City.

### 1.2 Definitions of greeting

Stolyarov II (2004:1) states that *“An expression of greeting indicates the willingness to undertake a transaction of some sort, a universal signal (with plenty of rich stylistic variations) that directs the other party’s attention toward the agent and at the same time demonstrates the friendly, appreciative conduct that befits a peaceful trader.”*

Joddy Murray (1996) states that *“A greeting is the verbal equivalent of catching someone’s eye. It catches the attention of the one being greeted, and it does so in several ways...”*

According to these definitions, they correlate with the concepts of Sociolinguistics and Pragmatics that greeting is a part of politeness which is used primarily when people meet each other in order to make the addressee feel good, be friendly and minimize conflicts. Proper greeting pattern should be chosen by the interlocutors appropriately according to Sociolinguistics factors.

## 2. Findings

There are 16 polite greeting patterns, as follows:

### 2.1 V. *Chào* ‘greet’ + NP (kinship term/ name) + (polite particle *ạ*)

- |     |                      |       |      |
|-----|----------------------|-------|------|
| (1) | Chào                 | bác   | ạ.   |
|     | greet                | uncle | part |
|     | V                    | NP    | part |
|     | “Hello, uncle, sir.” |       |      |

This pattern is used by all groups when addressing senior people both in the Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City speech varieties. Without the polite

particle, it is used to greet people who are equal and junior by appropriately changing the NP.

## 2.2 NP subj. + V. *chào* ‘greet’ + NP obj. + (polite part *ạ*)

- (2) Em            chào    anh        ạ.  
 young. sib    greet    eld. bro.   part  
 NP            V        NP        part  
 “I greet the elder brother, sir.”

- (3) Anh            chào    em.  
 eld. bro.        greet    young. sib.  
 NP            V        NP  
 “Hello.” (=I greet you.)

This pattern is used by all groups when addressing people who are senior, junior and equal, both in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City. It is noteworthy that in Hanoi speech, people use more titles than in Ho Chi Minh City, as in the following examples:

- (4) Em            chào    **thủ trưởng**    ạ.  
 young. sib    greet    boss            part  
 NP            V        NP            part  
 “I greet boss, sir.”

In (5), the word **sếp** is an English loanword “chief” which also means “boss”.

- (5) Em            chào    **sếp**        ạ.  
 young. sib    greet    boss        part  
 NP            V        NP        part  
 “I greet boss, sir.”

## 2.3 NP subj. + V. *xin* ‘beg’/ V. *kính* ‘respect’ + V. *chào* ‘greet’ + NP obj. + (polite part *ạ*)

Sentence (6) would be used by the tradespeople to address people who are senior or equal in social rank in Ho Chi Minh City speech. The verb **xin** ‘beg’ is a polite verb

- (6) Cháu    xin    chào    bác.  
 niece    beg    greet    uncle  
 NP        V        V        NP  
 “I greet my uncle.”

Sentence (7) is a pattern typically used by the tradepeople. When addressing people of equal social rank in Ho Chi Minh City speech, the familiar form **mình** “I” is used among friends.

- (7)    *Mình*      *xin*      *chào*      *bạn.*  
       I            beg        greet      friend  
       NP          V          V          NP  
       “Hello.”

Sentence (8) is used by a young student to address a person who is his/her senior in Ho Chi Minh City speech. The junior people in Ho Chi Minh City often address themselves by using the kinship term **con** “child” to the senior to show their inferiority and respect which is not found in Ha Noi speech. In (8), there is another polite verb **kính** “to respect”. This pattern is a very polite form.

- (8)    *Con*      *kính*      *chào*      *ông*      *ạ.*  
       child    respect    greet      grand fa.    part  
       NP        V          V          NP          part  
       “I greet the grandfather respectfully.”

#### 2.4 Polite word *Dạ* ‘Yes’ + NP subj. + (V. *xin* ‘beg’) + V. *chào* ‘greet’ + NP obj. + (polite part *ạ*)

This pattern is used by all groups when addressing seniors in Ho Chi Minh City speech. In Ha Noi, officials use this pattern when addressing seniors as well.

- (9)    *Dạ*      *cháu*      *xin*      *chào*      *bác.*  
       yes      niece      beg      greet      uncle  
       AdvP    NP        V        V        NP  
       “I greet my uncle, sir.”

- (10) *Dạ*      *chào*      *bác*      *ạ.*  
       yes      greet      uncle    part  
       AdvP    V        NP      part  
       “I greet the uncle, sir.”

#### 2.5 (Polite word *Dạ* ‘Yes’) + (Polite word *Thưa* ‘Dear sir’) + NP (kin term) + (V. *xin* ‘beg’) + V. *chào* ‘greet’ + NP obj. + (polite part *ạ*)

Sentence (11) is used by the tradespeople when addressing seniors in Ho Chi Minh City speech, not in Ha Noi.

- (11) *Dạ*      *thưa*      *ông.*  
       yes      dear sir    grand fa.  
       AdvP    A          NP  
       “Dear grandfather, sir.”

Sentence (12) is used by government officials and tradespeoples when addressing seniors in Ho Chi Minh City speech, not in Ha Noi.

- (12) Thưa      bác      ạ.  
 dear sir    uncle    part  
 A            NP        part  
 “Dear uncle, sir.”

Sentences (13) and (14) are used by tradespeople and students when addressing senior people in Ho Chi Minh City speech. In Ha Noi speech, students use a greeting pattern as in (14) to the senior people as well. Actually, the polite word *Đạ* is the Southern typical word, therefore, the Southern Vietnamese people use this pattern more than the Northern Vietnamese people.

- (13) Dạ            cháu      xin      chào      bác .  
 yes            niece    beg      greet    uncle  
 AdvP        NP        V        V        P  
 “I greet my uncle, sir.”

- (14) Dạ            chào      bác      ạ.  
 yes            greet    uncle    part  
 AdvP        V        NP        part  
 “Hello, sir.”

## 2.6 V. *Xin* ‘beg’ + V. *chào* ‘greet’ + (NP obj.) + (polite part *ạ*)

This pattern was used by all groups in addressing seniors both in Ho Chi Minh and Ha Noi speeches.

- (15) Xin            chào      bác      ạ.  
 beg            greet    uncle    part  
 V              V        NP        part  
 “Hello uncle, sir.”

- (16) Xin            chào.  
 beg            greet  
 V              V  
 “Hello.”

## 2.7 Greeting expression + health question

Sentence (17), the health question can be used to ask the senior, junior and equal people both in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City speeches by all groups. Moreover, there is another question type which is used to ask junior and equal people as well. But only health questions, not activities, are used to ask seniors in both speeches.

- (17) Chào      ông,            ông      có      khoẻ      không?  
 greet      grand fa.    grand fa    Q      strong    Q  
 V            NP            NP        Q      V        Q  
 “Hello, how are you?”

## 2.8 Greeting expression + activity question

Sentence (18), the question reflects one of the Vietnamese characteristics. The Vietnamese prefer to stay collectively in one form of community or another. There are both historical and environmental reasons for this. In particular, in times of wars and floods, the people were forced to stay together to protect their land either from the intruders or the natural hazards. They thus attach considerable importance to friendship and other communal ties. The Vietnamese people prefer to perform social activities with friends; they thus have a saying about inviting someone to join such activities seriously, for example: **Ăn cho vui**: “Eat for fun.” **Đi cho vui**: “Go for fun.” **Nói cho vui**: “Speak for fun.” and **Làm cho vui**: “Do it for fun.” It means that if you join with us, we will feel more joyful. (Sophana 2003:236) That’s why this type of question is used in both Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City speeches by government officials for both junior and equal people.

(18)	Chào	em.	Có	gì	vui	không?
	greet	young. sib.	have	what	fun	Q
	V	NP	V	Q	V	Q
	“Hello. Is anything fun?”					

The activity question is used to ask junior people in both speeches by tradespeople and students.

(19)	Chào	em!	Công việc	hôm nay	thế nào?
	greet	young. sib.	work	today	how
	V	NP	NP	NP	Q
	“Hello. How is your work today?”				

Sentence (20) is another way of seniors greeting when addressing junior and equal people. The question was initiated from the seen activity. The tradespeople in Ho Chi Minh City and the students in Ha Noi use this pattern.

(20)	Chào	cháu	nhỏ.	Cháu	đi	học	mới	về,	phải	không?
	greet	niece	small	niece	go	study	just	return	isn't	correct
	V	NP	AP	NP	V	V	AdvP	V	V	Q
	“Hello, my small niece. You just came back from school, didn't you?”									

In (21), after greeting juniors, tradespeople and students also asked about junior's activity. This is similar to the Thai greeting pattern as well. It does not mean that the speaker wants to be curious about the listener's response. It is just only a pattern of greeting. The listener may or may not answer. This pattern is used both in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City speeches.

- (21) Chào em, đi đâu vậy?  
 greet young. sib go where part  
 V NP V Q part  
 “Hello. Where have you been?”

## 2.9 Greeting expression + health question + activity question

In (22), it is composed of a greeting expression, a health question followed by an activity question, used by a tradespeople addressing equal people in Ha Noi speech. It is noticeable that the long greeting patterns convey familiarity between the interlocutors.

- (22) Chào bạn. Bạn có khỏe  
 greet friend friend Q strong  
 V NP NP Q V  
 không? Công việc vẫn tốt chứ.  
 Q work still good Emp. Part  
 Q NP AdvP V Emp. Part  
 “Hello. How are you? Your work still going well, right?”

## 2.10 Greeting expression + comments

In (23), after greeting the senior, the tradespeople in Ho Chi Minh City comments about the listener’s good health.

- (23) Con xin chào bác ạ. Hôm nay trông bác khoẻ.  
 child beg greet uncle part today look uncle healthy  
 NP V V NP part NP V NP V  
 “I greet my uncle, sir. Today, you look healthy.”

In (24), after greeting equal people, the students in Ha Noi comments about the good weather. The comments in (23) and (24) initiate dialogue.

- (24) Chào bạn! Hôm nay đẹp trời đấy chứ!  
 greet friend today beautiful sky part Emp. Part  
 V NP NP V NP part Emp. Part  
 “Hello. Today, the weather is nice, isn’t it!”

## 2.11 Question about activity

This pattern does not have the initial greeting expression, just the activity question as follows:

In (25), it is one of the common questions used as a greeting in Vietnamese. All three groups use this pattern in Ha Noi speech when addressing senior, equal and junior people. In Ho Chi Minh City speech, government officials use this pattern to junior and equal people. The students use it when addressing seniors. Tradespeople use this pattern when addressing equal people.

- (25) **Bác đi đâu?**  
 uncle go where  
 NP V Q  
 “Where are you going?”

In (26), it is used by students in Ho Chi Minh City speech when addressing senior and equal people.

- (26) **Bác làm gì vậy?**  
 uncle do what so  
 NP V Q A  
 “What are you doing?”

In (27), in Ha Noi speech, all three groups use this pattern when addressing senior, junior and equal people, whereas in Ho Chi Minh City speech, only worker groups use the pattern in (27) addressing juniors. The speaker asks a direct question to the listener in order to know what the specific purpose of the listener is in coming to the speaker's place.

- (27) **Em đi đâu, đến đây có việc gì?**  
 young. sib. go where come here have work what  
 NP V Q V NP V NP Q  
 “Do you have any reason for coming here?”

## 2.12 V. *Chào* ‘greet’ + NP: temporal *buổi sáng* ‘morning’/ other NPs

In (28), it is a mixed style between Vietnamese and English as “Good morning.” actually, only the greeting word **Chào** can be used politely, but the speaker adds in addition the NP temporal **buổi sáng** ‘morning’ as the English form. It is a new style, which is found only in Ho Chi Minh City, not in Hanoi. This pattern is used by the tradespeople to juniors as well as by government officials group in addressing equal people.

- (28) **Chào buổi sáng.**  
 greet morning  
 V NP  
 “Good morning.”

In (29), it is used by all three groups in addressing senior people only in Ha Noi speech. Ho Chi Minh City speech does not use these words, particularly the word **đồng chí** means ‘comrade’, which reflects the stronger Communist influence in the North. This word means “the same purpose.” It is used commonly in the government sector and army. It is also used during discussion or debate by participants in a formal meeting and conveys equality, no senior nor junior. However, many Hanoians use it as a common word, but the Ho Chi Minh City people are not interested in using it in their daily life.



- (29) Chào    đồng chí/    bác    đồng nghiệp.  
          greet    comrade    uncle    colleague  
          V        NP            NP        NP  
          “Hello comrade/ uncle colleague.”

### 2.13 V. *Chào* ‘greet’

In (30), it is used by government officials in addressing junior people in Ho Chi Minh City, whereas all three groups in Ha Noi use it in addressing equal and junior people. This pattern is accepted as polite if the senior speaker greets the junior one, not vice versa.

- (30) Chào.  
       greet  
       V  
       “Hello.”

### 2.14 NP kinship term /name + (polite part *a*)

Only an NP can be used as a politeness greeting. In (31), all three groups use this pattern in addressing senior, junior and equal people in Ha Noi speech, whereas government officials and students in Ho Chi Minh City use it in addressing junior people.

- (31) Anh        a/        Em.  
       eld. bro.    part    Young. sib.  
       NP        part    NP  
       “Elder brother/ Younger sibling.”

In (32), government officials in Ha Noi speech and tradespeople in Ho Chi Minh City speech use this pattern to equal people.

- (32) Hải.  
       Hai  
       NP  
       “Hai.” (name)

### 2.15 English greeting: *Hi!*, *Hello!* / *Exclamation Ê!* + (Question)

In (33), *Hi!* is an English greeting loanword used by the tradespeople and students in addressing equal and junior people in Ho Chi Minh City speech, whereas government officials in Ha Noi speech use the English loanword ‘Hello’ as in (34) to address people of equal social rank.

- (33) Hi!  
       Hi  
       NP

(34) Hello!  
Hello  
NP

Sentence (35) is used by government officials and students when addressing people in Ho Chi Minh City speech.

(35) **Hi!**      Hôm nay      thế nào?  
Hi          today          how  
Interj.   NP                  Q  
“Hi! how are you?”

Sentence (36) is an informal greeting pattern which is used by government officials and students in addressing equal people in Ha Noi speech, whereas in Ho Chi Minh City speech, only students use it in addressing equal people.

(36) **Ê!**    Đi    đâu    đấy?  
E    go    where    part  
Ex   V    Q            part  
“Hey! Where have you been?”

## 2.16 Gestures: smile or bow the head + (question/ greeting expression)

Only a gesture can be used as a greeting pattern and/or followed by greeting expressions or a question. In (37), to smile with a greeting expression to be used by a tradespeople when addressing both junior and equal people in Ho Chi Minh City speech. But only smiling is used by government officials when addressing equal and junior people, tradespeople and students use it in addressing juniors in Ha Noi speech.

(37) Smile + (Chào).  
greet  
V  
“Hello.”

In (38), it is used by government officials in addressing junior people, whereas it is used in addressing seniors in (39) in Ho Chi Minh City speech.

(38) Smile + bow the head + Em                  đang    học    gì?  
young. sib    Prog    study    what  
NP                  AUX    V                  Q  
“What are you studying?”

- (39) Smile + bow the head + Cháu      chào      bác      ạ.  
    niece      greet      uncle      part  
    NP          V          NP          part  
    “I greet uncle, sir.”

Moreover, to round the arms and bow the head express a junior’s respectful greeting of seniors in Ho Chi Minh City speech and is used by all three groups. In Ha Noi speech government officials and students only bow the head when greeting senior people.

Age and sex, however, are found not to be the most significant factors in politeness use. There are some interesting points which show some differences among the different age-groups and the two sexes as follows:

(1) In Ha Noi speech, both males and females in the age group 20-35 years often use the polite particle *ạ* in addressing seniors than the other two age-groups 36-50 and 51+. When greeting a friend, both males and females use the words “Hi!” or “Hello!”. More females than males use more body language, such as smiling or nodding the head instead of greeting by words.

In Ho Chi Minh City speech, more females than males use the more polite particle *ạ* when addressing seniors. Only females use the English greeting word “Hi!”. Females use more body language than males. More males than females use the more polite word *Đạ* at the start of greeting.

(2) In Ha Noi speech, more females in the age group 36-50 years use the polite particle *ạ* when addressing senior than males. The style of male greetings varies from the above pattern such as when using the English greeting word “Hello,” or asking about health, such as the greeting pattern i.e. *khoẻ không?* “Are you doing well?” Females use more mild particles such as *à*, *nhé* when speaking to friends or juniors, while males do not use these particles in this pattern.

In Ho Chi Minh City speech, more females than males use the polite particle *ạ* when addressing seniors. Males use particles such as *nhé*, *hả* when addressing juniors, whereas females do not use them.

In comparison to males, females in the 51+ age group, in both Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City use the more polite particle *ạ* when addressing seniors.

These results corroborate the study of Hương’s work (1999) that more females than males have a tendency to use polite words.

### 3. Summary and conclusion

There are 16 polite greeting patterns found in both Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City. According to Table 1, the summary is presented as follows:

- 4 patterns (See Table 1 no. 1, 6, 7 and 16) are the same and used in both dialects.
- Pattern number 2 is used in both Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City but in Ha Noi, the speakers used more as a title as an NP object than in HCMC.
- Pattern number 3 was not found in Ha Noi but found in Ho Chi Minh City which used as an NP Subj. (kin term) **con** 'child' for addressing oneself instead of using the word **cháu** 'niece, nephew, grandchild'.
- Pattern number 4, in Ha Noi, only the government group uses it to address seniors, whereas in Ho Chi Minh City, all groups use it.
- Pattern number 5 is found in both dialects but Ho Chi Minh City people used more as an initial polite word **Đạ** more than in Ha Noi speech.
- Pattern number 8 is found in both dialects but only the government group used it.
- Pattern numbers 9 and 10 were found only in Ha Noi.
- Pattern number 11 was found in both dialects but in Ho Chi Minh City, the government officials use it to address juniors and equals. Students use it to address seniors. Tradespeople use it to address equals.
- Pattern number 12 was not found in Ha Noi but found in Ho Chi Minh City which tradespeople use it to address juniors, government officials use it to address equal people.
- Pattern number 13 was found in both dialects. In Ha Noi, three groups use it to address equal and junior people. In Ho Chi Minh City, the government officials use it to address junior people.
- Pattern number 14 was found in both dialects. In Ho Chi Minh City, the government officials and students use it to address junior people.
- Pattern number 15 was found in both dialects. In Ha Noi, government officials use it to address junior people. In Ho Chi Minh City, tradespeople and students use it to address equal and junior people.

Each dialect has its own identity for expressing politeness with unique greeting patterns, as well as sharing some common patterns. There is a little change in Vietnamese polite greeting patterns by using some English greeting words. Most Vietnamese people still express their respect to each other via their language. The polite greetings in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City speeches are quite similar, but there are some differences as well, and these are shown in the summarized Table given below:

Table 1. Summarised greeting patterns in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City speeches.

Greeting patterns	Ha Noi speech	Ho Chi Minh City speech
1. V. <i>Chào</i> 'greet' + NP (kinship term/ name) + (polite particle part <i>a</i> )	✓	✓
2. NP subj. + V. <i>chào</i> 'greet' + NP obj. + (polite part <i>a</i> )	✓ Used more as a title as an NP object than in HCMC	✓
3. NP subj. + V. <i>xin</i> 'beg'/ V. <i>kính</i> 'respect' + V. <i>chào</i> 'greet' + NP obj. + (polite part <i>a</i> )	—	✓ Used as a kin term <i>con</i> 'child' for addressing oneself instead of using the word <i>cháu</i> 'niece, nephew, grandchild'
4. Polite word <i>Đạ</i> 'Yes' + NP subj. + (V. <i>xin</i> 'beg') + V. <i>chào</i> 'greet' + NP obj. + (polite part <i>a</i> )	✓ Only government officials use it to address seniors	✓ All groups
5. (Polite word <i>Đạ</i> 'Yes') + (Polite word <i>Thưa</i> 'Dear sir') + NP (kin term) + (V. <i>xin</i> 'beg') + V. <i>chào</i> 'greet' + NP obj. + (polite part <i>a</i> )	✓	✓ Used more as an initial polite word <i>Đạ</i> more than in Ha Noi speech.
6. V. <i>Xin</i> 'beg' + V. <i>chào</i> 'greet' + (NP obj.) + (polite part <i>a</i> )	✓	✓
7. Greeting expression + health question	✓	✓
8. Greeting expression + activity question	✓ The government officials.	✓ The government officials
9. Greeting expression + health question + activity question	✓	—
10. Greeting sentence + comments	✓	—

Greeting patterns	Ha Noi speech	Ho Chi Minh City speech
11. Question about activity	✓	✓ The government officials use it to address juniors and equals. Students use it to address seniors. The tradespeople use it to address equals .
12. V. <i>Chào</i> 'greet' + NP: temporal <i>buổi sáng</i> 'morning'/ other NPs	—	✓ Tradespeople use it to address juniors, whereas government officials use it to address equal people.
13. V. <i>Chào</i> 'greet'	✓ Three groups use it to address equal and junior people.	✓ Government officials use it to address junior people.
14. NP kinship term /name + (polite part <i>a</i> )	✓	✓ Government officials and students use it to address junior people.
15. English greeting: Hi!, Hello!/Exclamation <i>Ê!</i> + (Question)	✓ Government officials use it to address junior people.	✓ Tradespeople and students use it to address equal and junior people.
16. Gestures: smile/ bow the head + (question/ greeting expression)	✓	✓

**Symbols:**

- ✓ means occurrence  
— means non-occurrence

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**APPENDIX**

**Greeting question, a part of questionnaire (English translation)**

1. How do you greet these people when you often meet them?

Senior \_\_\_\_\_

Equal \_\_\_\_\_

Junior \_\_\_\_\_