GREETINGS AMONG NAXI AND KHAM TIBETANS ON YUNNAN'S HIGH PLATEAU

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INTRODUCTION

The act of greeting, both verbal and nonverbal, is a universal phenomenon of human communicative behavior. Every speech community devises such interactive behavioral patterns, the "common formula for social intercourse" (Bloomfield 1933). Turner (1973), however, claims that this act of greeting is semantically "empty, to accommodate and acknowledge a hearer [rather] than to carry a message" (p. 212). In the same line of thought, Searle (1969) states that salutations are insincere and have no propositional content. Consequently, greetings or salutations, in spite of their universal occurrence, have received very little attention by Western linguists and students of social behavior. By contrast, greetings in Tibeto-Burman are meaningful, context-sensitive, sincere, highly personal, even region-specific.

The lofty Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau in northwestern Yunnan has long been the home of two neighboring ethnic groups, the Kham Tibetans bordering on Tibet, and south of them the Naxi. This paper describes the intricate interdependencies of contemporary greeting patterns among these two neighboring ethnic groups, both of Tibeto-Burman stock.

The sociolinguistic research reported here consists of greeting patterns in Naxi and Kham Tibetan, collected in urban, rural and enclave settings of northwestern Yunnan between 1991 and 1996, totalling 7 1/2 months of fieldwork (about 670 initial encounters). Our sample represents the western Naxi and southeastern Kham Tibetan dialects spoken in the autonomous Naxi

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county of Lijiang and the autonomous Tibetan Prefecture of Deqing, especially in Zhongdian County.

Our method comprised two approaches: (1) informal interviews and (2) participant-observation, based on which we will describe the use and distribution of greetings in a variety of everyday situations (home, bilingual school, Nationality Clothes factory, monastery, medical institution and on the street/trails). Across sociolinguistic boundaries, urban greeting patterns will then be compared to rural and enclave greetings. Variations will be explained in demographic terms (Giles et al. 1987:71-72), such as population size and geographic/dialectal distinctions; and in psycho-sociological terms (such as age, kinship, status and gender differences, and institutional affiliations/support). We formulate the first sociolinguistic generalizations on greeting behavior in Tibeto-Burman.²

THE NAXI

Dialects

Naxi speakers live mainly in northwestern Yunnan, in the Naxi autonomous county of Lijiang. The Naxi language belongs to the Yi branch of the Tibeto-Burman family. Naxi scholars (i.e., Yang 1991 [pers. comm.], Jiang 1993) divide the Naxi varieties into two major dialect groups, the Western varieties spoken in an area expanding north and west from Lijiang, and the Eastern varieties spoken northeast of Lijiang³. The Western dialect is further divided into three dialectal zones (Li 1988): Dayanzhen, Lijiang Plain and Baoshanzhou. Our paper reports only on the western dialects as spoken in: (i) Lijiang town and surrounding villages (Dayanzhen dialect), (ii) Tacheng township (Lijiang Plain dialect) and (iii) Baidi administrative villages (Lijiang Plain dialect), an enclave that is probably one of the most traditional Western Naxi settlements. (We opted for the Tacheng township (Yilong), because of its traditional language usage often labeled by Lijiang speakers as the ‘good spoken Naxi’ variety. Dialectal differences did not affect its general intelligibility.)⁴

² Sociolinguistic papers on Kham Tibetan of Zhongdian (Rgyalthang dialect) are only recent (Bartee, 1994, Feurer 1997) as are linguistic papers, e.g., Hongladarom (1996), Wang (1996).
³ The Western dialect is predominantly spoken in Lijiang county, parts of Weixi, Zhongdian and Yongsheng counties and the Eastern dialect particularly in Ninlang, Yanyuan, Yanbian and Muli counties. The variety spoken by the Mosuo people belongs to the eastern dialect and is often regarded as the most conservative variety of Naxi (Yang, pers. comm.,1991). Rock (1963), however, suggests that the two main dialects, once distinct, became confused under the common name ‘Moso’, given earlier in this century to both dialect varieties, the Western and the Eastern ones.
⁴ In contrast, the Baozhong dialect was apparently not understood by Dayanzhen speakers.
Greetings among Naxi and Kham Tibetans

Research locations

(1) Town of Lijiang: In the shade of the snow-capped Jade Dragon mountain lies one of the most beautiful ancient towns of China, Lijiang, situated at 2400 m. altitude, 600 km. northwest of the provincial capital of Kunming. In the past, Lijiang was an important trading post for caravans from neighboring Tibet, and still today remains an important center in northwestern Yunnan, the soul of the Naxi world. Most Naxi, numbering approx. 240,000 distributed across northwestern Yunnan, consider Lijiang their sociolinguistic keystone.

(2) Tacheng township (Yilong administrative district), with its homogeneous agricultural Naxi population, is situated in a mountainous area about 200 km. northwest of Lijiang at the border of the Deqing Tibetan Prefecture. It is known for its well preserved, traditional Naxi culture (i.e. several Dongba priests and traditional dance groups). We collected our data mainly in two villages, with a total population of 543.

(3) Baidi, an enclave with 1575 Naxi inhabitants, 72% of the total population (1990 census), is a cluster of administrative villages under the township of Samba (Naxi nationality township) located within Zhongdian County. Situated northeast of Lijiang County, this enclave is separated by a river from its neighboring Naxi autonomous county and by mountains from Zhongdian to the northwest. Due to its isolation it is one of the most traditional Naxi strongholds, with practicing Dongba priests, dances, and oral Naxi literature, and is a sacred place for the Dongba religion. Our data was taken from three homogeneous Naxi villages with a total population of 963.

Dongba culture and religion

The ancient Dongba religion is Bon-related, with religious rites (nature worship, worship of heaven, etc.), divination practices, medical activities, and astrology. Traces of a once fierce yet culturally distinct Naxi kingdom are still evident today in the elite group of aging Dongba priests, numbering close to 70, who are the last transmitters of a body of cultural and religious knowledge. Dongba priests are independent farmers, herdsmen or craftsmen in their communities.

KHAM TIBET

The Kham Tibetans of Diqing Prefecture number over 100,000 (32% of the total population), and form the largest ethnic group in a multiethnic region that

5 Dongba priests, we need to clarify, are not professional priests. They are neither affiliated with nor members of monasteries or religious organizations (He and Yang, 1993).
also includes Lisu, Han, Naxi, Bai, Pumi and Yi. They are distributed in three counties (Zhongdian, Deqin and Weixi), although we shall limit ourselves to the first.

**Kham Dialects**

Whereas Naxi dialects have been for some time the focus of research, the Kham dialects of Yunnan have yet to be investigated. When this study started in 1991, the most accessible urban dialect was Rgyalthang, spoken in the town of Zhongdian. We then collected rural data in the Deqin dialect, spoken in a remote area 200 km. north of Zhongdian, in order to match the Naxi urban/rural dialectal distinctions. Yet our sample made certain Rgyalthang informants uncomfortable, in that they felt the Deqin dialect to be closer to that of Lhasa. My Deqin informant even told me that certain Zhongdian persons claimed not to understand her dialect. According to local consensus, the best traditional Kham (Rgyalthang) speakers were the inhabitants of the two townships Xiao Zhongdian and Nixi Thangdui (abbreviated to Thangdui henceforth). Therefore, discarding dialectal boundaries and distance as the primary criteria, we collected data in 1996 from these two rural townships, in order to match our Naxi sample where the rural variety was also considered to be the most traditional. While it is clear that Xiao Zhongdian is a sub-dialect of Rgyalthang, Thangdui has linguistic features characteristic of the Deqin dialect. The Kham variety spoken in the enclave (Tacheng township), seems to be a sub-variety of the Weixi dialect.

**Research locations**

(1) **Zongdian (Rgyalthang)** is the largest town and government seat of the Diqing Autonomous Tibetan Prefecture. It is located about 709 km. north of Kunming, capital of Yunnan, or seven hours by bus (on a scenic mountain road) north of the nearest town, Lijiang, at 3200 m. altitude. Formerly, this town was an important trading center on the Tibet-Yunnan caravan route. Caravans of importance have disappeared, and trucks have taken over their function. This autonomous Tibetan region has witnessed a slower development than the autonomous Naxi region, mainly because of poor transportation facilities.

(2) **Rural region: Xiao Zhongdian** (Small Zhongdian) township is located about 25 km. south of the town of Zhongdian, where women wear a typical local Tibetan costume. There we collected our sample in two homogeneous

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6 Yet Kham speakers claim that a dialectal shift occurs only north of Thangdui after crossing the Yangtze River. Further research will be needed to establish Kham dialectal boundaries.