

## POLITENESS FORMULAS IN TIBETO-BURMAN LANGUAGES: A CLOSER LOOK AT INITIAL ENCOUNTERS

Hanny Feurer  
Université du Québec à Montréal

I arrived in Lijiang, Naxi territory, in southwestern China, intending on becoming familiar with local politeness formulas such as greetings. My interpreter, Mr. Yang, a Naxi scholar from the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, informed me, "We have no such greeting clichés." He illustrated this with a counter example of greetings used in Germany, where he had spent several years. He hated the cliché *Guten Morgen*, delivered on a routine daily basis in what he perceived to be an insincere manner, without personal engagement. Unwittingly, my interpreter had suggested a first contrastive analysis by using an intercultural approach. Let us briefly review the components of Mr. Yang's analysis:

- Greeting clichés do not exist in Naxi.  
*Implications:* Greeting forms in Naxi are not fixed, but diverse in form and content.
- The cliché *Guten Morgen* was rendered in an insincere manner.  
*Implications:* Naxi greetings are uttered in a sincere manner.
- German greeters do not interact; their greeting is mechanical.  
*Implications:* Naxi greeters engage themselves in situation specific interaction.

Such analysis merits comment. We are all familiar with Searle's speech act theory of the late sixties, which includes sincerity conditions as part of its semantic framework. Greetings (in English), he claimed, are not subject to sincerity conditions (Searle 1969:64-65). They seek to convey politeness rather than a psychological state, (sincerity or insincerity). What might hold true for English (Ferguson 1976:141-142) and German greeting formulas certainly does not hold true across the planet. (See Wierzbicka (1991:116)<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Yang's continuing description of the lack of interaction (or engagement) included images of Germans smiling mechanically and nodding their heads while muttering their greeting-in-passing (Kendon 1990:175). Thus, if met in the street, greeters usually would not stop, since no true response, except the returned echo of the cliché, was expected. This rather lengthy explanation aroused my curiosity and I questioned Mr. Yang about the appropriate way of greeting in Naxi. His answer was short but definite. Greetings in his language were too varied and impossible to explain. We decided to test his claims.

From 1991-96, we collected sociolinguistic data on greetings in three Tibeto-Burman varieties, the Naxi, Kham and Lhasa Tibetan (SOV) varieties. Naxi and Kham Tibetan are spoken by two neighbouring groups in

northwestern Yunnan, whereas Lhasa Tibetan (U-Tsang) is spoken in Central Tibet.

The findings will be presented and analyzed in terms of a cross-cultural speech act theory, as suggested in part by our Naxi interpreter. An introductory note on the data, clichés and address forms, will be followed by the main part of our paper, an analysis of the semantic content and, finally, by some comments on social interaction.

### **Data Collection, clichés and addresses.**

The data (semi-formal interviews and participant observation) were collected in seven different settings (family, public places, government, hospital, nationality clothes factory, religious institution and bilingual school) and in three different localities (town, remote countryside and rural enclave). In this paper we will limit ourselves to Kham, Lhasa and Naxi initial greeting encounters in the morning, where a German *Guten Morgen* would have been appropriate.

Greeting clichés—which we define as fixed (stereotyped, Knuf 1990:114) forms, marked by their frequent usage—were the exception rather than the norm in the Tibeto-Burman communities visited. They were observed in educational and religious settings. In the Kham classroom a daily greeting routine was practiced between teacher and students, at the beginning of the morning Tibetan lessons. The students, standing up, would greet their teacher as follows: (36K) **gegæ yabu!** ‘Teacher, (you) are good!’ **lo dzots’o debo. şİ do!** ‘Good students, sit down!’ would be the teacher’s reply. The identical greeting routine (+address +declarative phrase) was used in the Naxi classroom, where Naxi was taught—only this time the greeting was in Chinese. In the Lhasa classroom greeting routines were either in Tibetan or Chinese. (We were informed that this routine was practiced all across China.) Greeting within the classroom was an artificial act for the Kham and the Naxi. Formal teaching, viewed from a historical perspective, was foreign to both of the groups until not too long ago, when it was introduced by the Chinese and modeled on the Chinese concept of education.

A few general comments about address forms:

First, when terms of address are used as greetings, a verbal or nonverbal response is equally appropriate, especially if its author is older or of higher status.

Second, religious titles are somewhat different from the other terms of address. As greetings, they have a high occurrence among Tibetans and a very low one among the Naxi. Here are some of the reasons. Tibetans, who are Buddhists, have a complex religious hierarchy reflected by their multiple titles, some of which (i.e. (6), (7)) were used as greetings in encounters. Tibetans, in addition, had elaborate religious greeting rituals (i.e. prostration) that had overlapping religious functions. Naxi, who were traditionally believers of the

Dongba religion, used no religious titles—except for Tibetan and Chinese monks ((9N) **əsIma** ‘Tibetan monk’ (10N)) **asIku** ‘Chinese monk’—and greetings generally were not ritualized. Today the practice of the Dongba religion has nearly disappeared. Unfortunately, this subject matter is beyond the scope of the present paper.

## Semantic content

### Sincerity

How does one determine the presence or absence of sincerity (Wierzbicka 1991:115-121)<sup>2</sup> in a greeting exchange? For my Naxi colleague, unlike Searle, sincerity seemed to be a central issue in phatic exchanges (Jakobson 1960). He suggested para- and extra-linguistic criteria that disclose the presence or absence of sincerity, such as vocal quality and nonverbal behavior. The mechanical (flat intonation) and quick delivery of a greeting, lacking real eye contact, not slowing down in the street while greeting, constant reiterations of the same greeting—all of these vocal and nonverbal clues were, for the Naxi, signs of insincerity.

After six summers of observing the frequency of phatic exchanges, we came to the conclusion that among the Naxi and the Tibetans, greetings on the whole played a less important role than in the West. For example, at the factories, homes and hospitals we visited, greetings were seldom uttered. At the factories onlookers or workmates did not bother with words unless there was a salient reason, such as joking about a late arriver: (32K) **tšy šamban\* jin wo ʔæ?** ‘You have come to work?’

In homes, every family member was busy doing their thing in the morning. No importance was attributed to phatic exchanges. There were occasional circumstances in which greetings were appropriate, such as the visit of a neighbour (31K). The host asked him **t’o tša ʔa t’y?** ‘(Have you) drunk your breakfast tea? (Have you had your breakfast?)’ He answered **tša t’y** ‘(Yes, I have) drunk tea.’ Notice the culture-specific element of this greeting.

Even in the hospital setting, phatic situations were not necessarily marked by verbal greetings. If they were, the patient usually addressed the doctor by his title (12N) **jise** (Chinese loan word), or his title and name, as in (13N) **mu jise**, ‘Doctor Mu’—a simple form of acknowledgement.

In the street, or on the trail, the norm was to greet acquaintances but not strangers. If one greeted strangers, the person had to be of the same sex or much older or younger. As a sign of respect, corresponding morphological appropriate markers had to occur in the greeting (29N) addressed by a young boy to an older farmer **ɲv(po) ts’Isæ lv ne læ?** ‘You (are) herding animals, aren’t you?’ The answer was affirmative **mm** ‘mhm (yes)’.

I am linking sincerity not only with frequency of usage but also with politeness. Let me elaborate by contrasting German greetings with their

Tibeto-Burman equivalents. Germans tend to stress the importance of politeness formulas in public encounters. When *Guten Morgen* for example, is addressed to workmates, it is best described as a polite, yet mass produced act, and therefore deprived of sincerity (according to Yang or, according to Searle, without sincerity condition—a mechanical routine).

In contrast, Naxi and Tibetan do not experience the pressure with which Germans are familiar, to greet and express politeness in initial encounters. Greetings, when uttered, were expected to be sincere in order to be meaningful. Politeness, though important, was subordinated to sincerity. Consequently, maternal greetings were performed when they were sufficiently appropriate to mark a unique initial interaction, as for instance acknowledging a close relation or a high religious status, extending an invitation, passing on information or seeking confirmation. Though these acts were expected to be sincere, the degree of sincerity varied from one situation to another. According to Searle sincerity can only be expressed through utterances that have a propositional content

Tibeto-Burman greetings, as demonstrated by our Naxi native speaker, fall into the category of illocutionary acts that are, as a rule, characterized by their propositional content and sincerity condition. In contrast, German greetings, if explained in terms of Searle, are simpler acts without sincerity condition (expressing no psychological state) and propositional content. We now propose a closer investigation of the propositional content, to further our understanding of Tibeto-Burman greeting patterns.

## Propositions

Based on the criterion of *propositional content*, we propose a binary classification of the Naxi/Tibetan act of greeting, the former representing implicit, and the latter, explicit propositions. Both classes divide further into sub-classes according to their *illocutionary force*. The greetings explained below further exemplify initial morning encounters.

### *Implicit propositions:*

Class one consists of different address forms (and symbolic gestures described later) such as kinship terms, titles, names and nicknames (See (1)-(15)). Our interest is in the usage of these free address forms in greeting situations where there was an actual response (Sacks 1975:66)<sup>3</sup> that inevitably suggested the underlying propositional content and illocutionary force of the greetings in question. Consequently we will describe our samples by text rather than by a paradigm of features (Brown & Gilman 1960; Brown & Levinson 1978; Wierzbicka 1992)<sup>4</sup>

Terms of address that function as greetings will now be illustrated briefly by kinship terms. We experienced many situations in which greetings in the form of kinship terms elicited confirmative responses. For example, one morning Mr. Wang greeted a lady in the street with (5N) **shimo!** 'Younger