

# Entries and exits: An analysis of greetings and leave taking in Meitei speech community

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe and explain the linguistic and social behavior of the Meiteis, when they greet and take leave from each other in various situations. The paper will attempt to check the hypothesis that modes of greeting and leave taking tend to become progressively simpler and shorter as societies become more and more complex. The Meitei are the dominant community living in the valley of Manipur, a state which is situated in the northeastern region of India. Their language, known as Meiteilon<sup>1</sup> or Manipuri, is the official language of the state. It is a Tibeto-Burman language of the Kuki-Chin sub-family (Grierson, 1904 Vol. III, part III). However, according to the classification made by Burling, Manipuri is not a subfamily of Naga-Kuki group, rather it is best to leave Manipuri separately by itself (Burling, 2003, 188). As Manipur is also the home of many other hill tribes such as Naga and Kuki, Meiteilon serves as a lingua franca among the speakers of 29 dialects of the state.

## Introduction

For the Meiteis, greeting is one of the important areas of study particularly because it occurs in every interaction. Every social relationship is at least partially statable in terms of the role structure of the greeting.

The present study attempts to describe and explain the linguistic and social behavior of the Meiteis, when they greet and take leave from each other in various situations. The data used in the study were collected by observing actual speech, keeping in consideration social parameters such as age, achieved status, degree of intimacy etc. Secondary sources such as plays, stories and other relevant literary texts were also used to collect data. The information thus obtained is supplemented by the author's own perspective as a native speaker of Meileilon.

An important question that will be examined in the course of the present study is that of what kind of information is displayed or signaled by a speaker using certain greeting or leave taking forms, or what kind of information may be hidden behind certain forms. The shared knowledge of

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<sup>1</sup>Meiteilon literally means the language of the Meiteis (Meiteis 'plain people' and lon 'language').

appropriate language and social use unifies Meiteilon speakers as members of a single speech community and serves to maintain a distinct identity among the other ethnic communities<sup>2</sup> in Manipur.

Looked at from the sociolinguistics perspective, modes of greeting fall within the general purview of what Goffman calls the “ethnography of encounter” (Goffman, 1963:91) with “social occasion” as its structural unit. Every greeting situation involves a “protocol of encounter” which is characterized by an opening move in the form of a statement, a gesture and some paralinguistic features (Mehrotra 1986:81).

The reasonable assumption that every language has a range of forms for use as greetings and farewells is based on the social importance of ‘entries’ (into pieces of interaction) and ‘exits’ (Hudson 1980:132). In the words of Erving Goffman, a greeting is needed to show that the relationship which existed at the end of the last encounter is still unchanged, in spite of the separation, and that a farewell is needed in order to “sum up the effect of encounter upon the relationship and show what the participants may expect of one another when they next meet” (Goffman 1967:41)

### **Meitei greeting**

Among the Meiteis, a greeting is a necessary opening to every encounter. It is an essential introduction to any interaction in the Meitei society. No well-formed interpersonal interactions can take place without an opening greeting. Gestures and eye contact are also necessary to the greeting but are never sufficient because no accurate information can be obtained about both the parties. Among the Meiteis, a greeting is a conversation opener that makes no imposition on the addressee to respond or engage in conversation. The addressee may ignore, acknowledge with a nod of the head, start a conversation, or do whatever she/he may choose, but generally the addressee is expected to respond; otherwise the addressee would be considered an uncultured person.

In principle, a greeting must occur between any two persons who are visible to each other. Out on the road, in the office, in the market or if someone is entering a compound yard, a greeting must occur even if one party must make a wide detour to accomplish it. Depending on the situation in which they are uttered, greetings in Meitei society generally function as confirmation, solicitation or information-seeking acts that are characterized by their sincerity. They are initial encounters, wherein two individuals recognize and acknowledge each other’s presence verbally and/or non-verbally.

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<sup>2</sup>The inhabitants of Manipur include other ethnic communities like Nagas, Kukis, Meitei Muslims etc.

The form of a greeting is at least in part determined by other properties of the utterance such as i) the form of address, ii) the form of the pronouns, and iii) the use of certain lexical elements expressing politeness.

Examples:

1. Form of address:  
 pabuŋ kəromdə leŋbidoyno?  
 Father where going  
 ‘Father, where are you going?’

When someone is greeting a person who is of the addressor’s father’s age, this type of greeting form is used. Age is one of the major criteria that needs to be taken into account when choosing an appropriate type of greeting form in Meitei speech community. Age is an important social parameter in determining social distance between the speaker and the addressee and it plays a significant role in reflecting the power relationship between them. Respect is prescribed for older ones, and, as Meitei society is a kin-based society, kin terms are used with both kin and non-kin.

2. Use of pronouns:  
 nəŋ kəday cəttoyno?  
 IInd PP where going  
 ‘Where are you going?’

This type of greeting form is used in informal situations where there is strong solidarity between the interlocutors. It can also be used to social inferiors and to younger people. Social factors such as degree of intimacy, social status and age come into play in such greeting forms.

3. Polite expression:  
 kəromdə leŋbidoyno?  
 Where going  
 ‘Where are you going?’ (+Hon.)

In formal situations, this type of greeting form is used with persons who are superior to us whether in terms of age or in social status.

There is no common greeting which can go with all kinds of address forms. According to Goody, “the form of address accompanying a greeting varies with the status of the person spoken to” (Goody, 1972:51). But in the present analysis, status is one among several factors like age, sex and occupation which bring about the variance in the greeting forms.

A greeting phrase generally includes or occurs with a form of address as in example 4:

4. oja kəromdə leŋdoyno?  
 teacher where going?  
 ‘Teacher, where are you going?’

However, an address form need not necessarily be overtly expressed in a greeting phrase as in example 5:

5. *kərom leŋdoyno?*  
Where going?  
'Where are you going?'

In such a case, the addressee is implicit, for the addressor sees that the addressee is going somewhere.

Acquaintances who do not have a solidarity relationship greet one another without any form of address, as shown in examples 6 and 7:

6. *nuŋŋaybiribrə, kəram təwbirige*  
'How are you?'
7. *kəromdə cətpirubəno*  
'Where did you go?'

Sometimes a mere form of address without any of the formal features of a greeting is made to perform the function of greeting as well. For example, elderly persons directing greetings to younger folks who do not need to show any deference can freely use addresses without any address term or personal name. This can also be done by status superiors to their younger subordinates because of the existing solidarity relationship. The same pattern is also reported in Greek (Dickey E. 1997). This form is also used by close friends.

Examples include *kəmdəwri* 'How are you?', *kədaydəno* 'Where are you going?', and *kəromdə cətlubəno* 'Where did you go?' The deemed answers respectively would be *nuŋŋayjəri*, 'I am fine' *somdə cətcərubəni*<sup>3</sup> 'I went there' by younger folks or by subordinates, but for intimate friends, it would be - *nuŋŋayri*, and *somdə cətlubəni* (without the politeness marker *cə-jə*).

More important than age, however is the norm which provides for omitting people on the grounds of social status. There are many situations in which it is the elder who greets the younger in age by virtue of the latter's wealth, education etc. For example, a boss would always be greeted by his subordinate even if the subordinate is his senior in age. Greetings among equals are brief and simple, while those addressed to persons of higher status are wordy, pompous and ceremonious. There are situations in which, if a person ranks relatively lower than oneself or than some other person present, one may delay greeting him until more important persons are greeted, perhaps omitting him altogether if there are many high-ranking persons nearby. The principal criteria for high ranking people in the Meitei speech community are

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<sup>3</sup>Suffix -ru is an imperative marker in Meiteilon but in the present study it is not functioning as command marker. It has an allomorph -lu. It denotes event away from the speaker performing the event at some other place.

age, sex, and achieved prestige (which may consist of wealth, status etc.). Because of the rank difference based on age, one greets adults before greeting children. Relative rank, based on these considerations, also determines which of the two persons approaches the other and initiates a greeting. Who greets first and who greets second is to some extent also determined by the various parameters of the stratified system in situations in which two persons meet (for example, young men would greet old men first, inferiors would greet superiors first, etc.). However, there are times when an opening greeting is not conditioned by relative status. Independent of social status, the person who arrives or departs would be the first to greet someone already present.

### **Types of greeting Expressions**

In the Meitei speech community, greeting expressions can be divided into three types.

#### *A) Interactive greeting expression*

The first type of greeting expression includes inquiries like *cakcārəbrə?* ‘have you had lunch?’, *kəday cətoyno?* ‘where are you going?’ or *kəday cətlurino?* ‘where have you been?’ etc. They are not real inquiries but are used as friendly salutes. The addressee can either answer the inquiry and start a conversation or take it as a mere salute and respond with similar inquiries. This greeting expression carries a sense of informality and intimacy.

#### *B) Regards greeting expression*

The second type of greeting expression assumes the form of giving regards to others, a typical examples of which is *nuŋŋayribrə?* ‘how are you?’ People believe that this new type of greeting expression has begun to prevail during recent decades. It has a shade of elegance and formality.

#### *C) Paralinguistic greeting expressions*

This type of greeting expression uses expressions of paralinguage such as facial expressions, gestures or some prosodic sounds. The usual form of this type of greeting used among the Meiteis is nodding and smiling. Implications of such greeting vary according to the social status of the speaker, as well as the relationship between the two. Generally women prefer this type of greeting expression for the sake of dignity and staidness, whereas men use it to display an air of reserve. It shows distance and indifference between acquaintances. It is also used with strangers.

As early Meitei society was a close-knit society, people had more contacts with other members of the same community than with people outside it. One effect of belonging to such a closed network is that people are constrained by its behavioral norms and there is consequently little variation between members in their behavior (at least in the norms which they accept).

This being so, we might expect to find a relatively high degree of conformity in speech, which is one type of behavior governed by norms. When people met in the village or in the lane, it was natural for them to spend sometime greeting each other. Moreover, since transport and communication was in bad shape, relatives visited each other less often. So, interactive greeting expressions or type A greeting expressions became the traditional, usual way of greeting.

During recent decades, Meitei society underwent tremendous changes. The opening of educational institutions along western lines, shops, cooperatives and various other organizations has made life more complex and led to the expansion of people's experience. Corresponding expansion and diversification of verbal communication with the development of western education has led speakers to use greeting expressions such as 'good morning' and 'good evening' to their status equals. Such types of greeting expressions were developed under the influence of modernization. Such forms of greeting are prevalent among the educated people but have so far failed to touch the common people.

Another point to be noted here is the gradual shift from interactive greeting expressions to regards greeting expression. The new generation feels that using interactive greeting expressions is like interfering in other people's personal lives. Therefore regards greeting expressions are preferred by the younger group. In rural areas, however, the interactive greeting form is still the most widespread form.

Paralinguistic greeting expressions or type C greeting expressions are used mostly with new acquaintances and in exceptional cases with familiar friends and relatives when people run into each other on their way to work. There are also situations in which type C greetings are used with friends and relatives. Such situation are usually marked either by excessive noise as in a metal factory or by excessive silence as in a funeral where there is no possibility of verbal exchange. In such a situation a mere nod or smile replaces the verbal greeting forms. Yet another factor which discourages verbal greetings is the intensity of emotion which prompts one to take recourse to a gestural greeting.

Regards greeting expressions or Type B expressions are natural and poised, more polite than a nod or a smile and above all, they can be applied in a large variety of situations. Elderly people tend to be conservative in their language use and stick to type A greeting expressions. But as the younger generation grows older, the scope and frequency of use of type B forms will also grow. We can expect that in keeping pace with the progress of our social life, the use of type B greeting expressions will gradually extend from younger people to the elderly and from towns to rural areas. Hence it may become the most common type of greeting form.

Greetings therefore cannot remain unaffected by social change. In earlier times, prostration was the humblest mode of salutation among the Meiteis. In the course of time, this long fatiguing exercise gave way to bowing at the feet of the superior. Subsequently, at a later stage it was replaced by a

low bow or a slight inclination of the body which has finally been reduced to a scarcely perceptible nod, the greeter thus placing himself symbolically or by implication at the feet of the person saluted. As Meitei society becomes more complex, modes of greetings are becoming progressively simpler.

## **Leave-taking**

### **Introduction**

Leave-takings are a crucial part of etiquette in every society. It has long been established that bringing an ordinary conversation to an end constitutes a ritualistic event (e.g. Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Davidson, 1978; Levinson, 1983; Button, 1987). As Schegloff and Sacks (1973) report, a participant wishing to bring a conversation to an end has to proceed in such a way that his/her completion is recognizable as a closing and not interpretable as silence. Following turn-taking provisions for ordinary conversations (Sacks et al., 1974), silence would indicate that the speaker is opting not to take a further turn, but would not signal the intention to bring the conversation to an end. As a solution to this problem, termination is customarily accomplished by an exchange of ‘good-byes’, which indicates the participants’ orientation to the completion of the speech encounter.

Leave-takings or farewells, like greetings, are what Goffman (1971:79) has called “access rituals”: “Greetings mark the transition to a condition of increased access and farewells to a state of decreased access.” These rituals generally require specialized linguistic forms that Ferguson (1976) has called “politeness formulae.” The choice of formula depends on such factors as intimacy between the two participants, relative status, and length of contact or expected time apart.

### **Meitei leave-taking**

People from different cultures have different ways of breaking contact with each other. In western societies, people generally need to reassure each other that the break in social contact is only temporary—that they are still acquainted and will resume contact at some time in the future (Goffman 1971). As a consequence, in taking leave they will often: (i) summarize the content of the contact they have had; (ii) justify ending their contact at this time; (iii) express pleasure about each other; (iv) indicate continuity in their relationship by planning, specifically or vaguely, for future contact; and (v) wish each other well (Albert & Kessler 1976, 1978; Knapp, Hart, Friedrich, & Shulman 1973).

However, in small close-knit societies like that of Meiteis, in which continuing relations among individuals are taken for granted, people do not need an elaborate form of leave-taking. In such societies people usually take leave abruptly. Such was the case of early Meitei society, but as the society became more complex people started following an elaborate form of leave-taking.

Following the concept of the closing section of Schegloff and Sacks (1973), Meitei farewells are here subdivided into two functionally distinct subsections.

1. Topic termination: This function is served by the pre-closing statement and its response.

2. Leave-taking: This function is served by the material following the pre-closing statement and its response and includes the final word for taking leave.

*i) Topic termination*

The pre-closing statement is initiated by the participant wishing to close the conversation. The pre-closing section secures the addressor's position from infringing the addressee's rights to initiate further talk. It shows from the position that the co-interactant does not intend to continue talking about the current topic or raise a different one. The participants of a conversation cannot simply end the conversation when they have nothing more to say. They must first agree that they have no more topics to raise. There are certain verbal cues in Meiteilon that one uses to indicate that she/he would like to terminate the conversation. These include words such as *ədudi* 'well/so', followed by a pause or phrases such as *kona əmuk u-nərsi* 'let us meet again'.

Pre-closing leaves open the option for the other party to introduce a new topic of conversation. There may be several pre-closing gambits before both speakers decide that they no longer have any new topics to discuss.

Leave-takings are a delicate matter both technically, in the sense that they must be placed such that no party is forced to exit while still having compelling things to say, and socially, in the sense that both over-hasty and over-slow terminations can carry unwelcome inferences about the social relationships between the participants. The devices that organize leave-takings are closely attuned to these problems. We typically find that conversations close in the following manner. The person who is leaving initiates the pre-closing sequence as in example 8:

8. *ədu-di əykhoy ani əmuk u-nə-si*  
Well, we will meet again.

Such type of pre-closing statement always indicates that the interlocutors are friends and they will meet again in life.

The other participant of the conversation will reply in the following manner:

9. *phəni*  
Okay.



In a situation where a group of people are gathered, if a person wants to take leave, leave-taking usually takes place in the following manner:

10. ədu-di məyam ley-bi-həw-kho, khərə han-jə-rəm-mə-ge  
 ‘Well, I am leaving a little earlier, please (you) carry on’.

ii) *Leave-taking*

This function is served by the material following the pre-closing statement and its response and includes the goodbye exchange. The basic function of the leave-taking subsection is a social process which is called “reaffirmation of acquaintance,” or simply “reaffirmation”. Clark and French (1981) investigate the use of ‘goodbye’ and ‘thank you’ and ‘thank you very much’ in the closing sections of telephone conversations between operators at a university switchboard and callers in the United States. They argue that the basic function of leave-taking in the closing section of telephone conversations is a ‘reaffirmation of acquaintance’. Likewise, in any social encounter, the closing section of any conversation requires reaffirmation of acquaintance (Clark and French 1981). Reaffirmation of acquaintance is necessary in order to compensate for possible negative effects on human relations, which may be caused by breaking contact.

The following expressions are used by Meiteis for reaffirmation of acquaintance:

11. ədu oy-rə-di  
 ‘Well then’
12. yam-nə nuṇay-jə-re  
 ‘I am very happy’ (thanking formula)

After reaffirmation of acquaintance, one of the participants closes the conversation and takes leave from the co-participant by saying *youkhrəge* /*cətkhrəge*/*cətləge* ‘(I) will leave’ in informal settings and *youjəkhəge* /*cətcəkhəge* in formal settings. In Meiteilon there is no exact word for goodbye. Words such as *cətle*, *cətkhrəge*, *youkhrəge* etc. are used instead of goodbye. The other co-participant responds by saying *phəni* ‘okay’ which indicates the co-participant’s agreement on the completion of the speech encounter.

*cətləge* ‘I will leave’, although used conventionally as a concluding utterance in informal settings for taking leave can mean other things too. The expression *cətləge* ‘I will go’ is not particularly used when one is setting out for a long distance journey. This expression is almost like a taboo in this particular context probably because it is often used by dying persons on their death beds when the pain is almost too excruciating for them to bear. As nobody wants to risk his/her life instead of using the expression *cətləge*, another expression, *cətlukhige*, which means ‘I will go and come back’ is used as a final word for taking leave. This very expression is used so as to render the wording more acceptable in such contexts (Pramodini, 1989).

It is the leave-taking section where farewells are accomplished. This section is specifically designed for the two parties to reaffirm their acquaintance, and so it is optional. If the two parties need no such reaffirmation, the section can be omitted. If the two parties need only a minimum or pro forma reaffirmation, the section will be minimal too, consisting only of the utterance *cətləge* 'I will go.' If the two parties are well acquainted, and if the break is to last long, the section will consist of more elaborate preparations before ending with a goodbye exchange.

In earlier times, no elaborate forms of parting ritual were used by the people because the society used to be a close knit society and people used to take leave abruptly. But along with the changes in the composition of Meitei society, elaborate forms of parting rituals have come into practice and leave-taking varies depending on the type of relationship between the interlocutors.

## Conclusion

Like many other daily routines, greeting and leave-taking in Meitei society is highly conventionalized, follows prefabricated routines and has an adaptive value in facilitating social relations. By looking at the usage of a particular type of greeting or leave taking form, information can be obtained about the types of social relationship between the dyads. For example, one type of greeting form is used to greet superiors (superior in age, social status, etc.) and another type to inferiors. Depending upon the situations, greeting and leave taking differs. Meiteis do not have a greeting phrase consisting of a word referring to morning, evening, etc. so greeting form such as *cakcəɾəbra* 'have you taken your meals?' is used when a person greets somebody before lunch (during daytime) and before dinner (during night time). And as regards leave-taking no elaborate form of parting ritual is required if the dyads are going to meet again soon. Hence the choice of greeting and leave taking forms varies with the status of the speaker and that language usage always drifts under the influence of ever-changing interpersonal relations, ways of life, and social psychology which in turn depend on particular levels of social productive forces. As Meitei society becomes more complex, modes of greeting are becoming progressively simpler. Along with the development of Meitei society, greeting and leave-taking expressions have been undergoing changes in the relative frequency of occurrence of the different types, as well as the situations in which each type can be appropriately used.

## Symbols

(Unmarked)	Falling tone
ˊ	Level tone

## Abbreviations

Hon – Honorific  
PP - Personal Pronoun

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