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

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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)[1]

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 dʐots'o debo. ʂI 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 reponse 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)[2] 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) **tʂy ʂamban* 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 tʂa ʔa t'y?** '(Have you) drunk your breakfast tea? (Have you had your breakfast?)' He answered **tʂa 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 **ŋv(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, matinal 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)[3] 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)[4]

    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

sister!' who, in turn, responded with ?a 'yes' and a quick nod of her head. Possibly, the following meaning was conveyed:

• I see you have come (seeking confirmation);
• I want to let you know that I see you (suggesting interaction);
• I want to address you as I address my younger sister (by name);
• I cannot address you as I address my younger sister (interactional norm);
• I address you with the appropriate kinship term (implying familiarity).

The woman's affirmative response confirmed the implicit propositional content of the greeting and its corresponding illocutionary force as follows: Yes, I confirm I have come, etc.

This example further indicates the polysemic nature of kin terms (Scheffler, 1978:66) specifying, on the one hand, the type of relation of a dyad (see above), or, on the other, the nature of a biological kinship. In the above example the persons were acquaintances. The type of exchange makes sense only in an intercultural framework, like that of the rural Tibetans or Naxi, for whom (unlike Germans) the extended family forms the pivotal core of their society. Therefore, the rapport (closeness) among these peoples is often described in kinship terms. The concept of the family is expanded to include the community at large. The above address (5K) 'young sister' shows the willingness of the greeter to include the hearer into his community-wide family, a gesture of familiarity and solidarity.

Here is an example of two relatives meeting in the street one morning. This time a young woman greeted my guide, Mr. Wang, with (2K) **ak'e** 'Uncle'. (The younger, in principle, greets the elder first.) A quick glance toward her uncle was followed by eyes cast down and a slightly bowed head. This behavior indicated respect and was considered typically feminine. Her uncle returned her greeting nonverbally with an extensive look (a typically masculine response?), and a slight head nod. Notice the nonverbal display of the illocutionary force of confirmation.

It is interesting to note that the meaning of an address form shifts when followed by another address or a propositional greeting (if in the initial discourse position). Despite such semantic modifications, the addressee is still identified and the rapport between the speaker and the hearer remains specific. This leads us into the next part of this paper, dealing with explicit, propositional greetings.

Explicit propositions:
Most of the observed greetings fit into this category. They are acts with an explicit propositional content that may have overlapping functions of greeting and opening a conversation; an initial salutation, or greeting (31) could be followed by an invitation such as (23)[5], an indication of the speaker's

willingness to pursue the conversation. In this paper we will touch only on the first function of greeting.

Several illocutionary sub-classes have been isolated on the basis of the response content elicited by greetings and the context, as follows:
1) request for information
2) solicitation
3) confirmation

1) Request for information

Among the Naxi and the Tibetan, inquiries about the situation at hand were often heard, wherein the addresser was seeking information. One morning, on the trail back to Tacheng my guide was stopped by two women: (18N) **əko ze kə buɯ?** 'Brother, where are you going?' At once he answered: **le u buɯ**, '(We) are going back', followed by a few noncommittal comments, indicating we could continue our journey. Inquiries, as in example (16), were frequently observed in public places. In Lhasa my informant, a young woman, slowed down in the street, addressing her passing classmate as follows: (20L) **rãŋ k'a pa tʂ'o ka?** 'Where are you going?' **ŋa laptʂa la tʂ'o ki ji))** 'I am going to school' was his response.

In Tibetan regions, the form of such inquiries varied according to the age, the status and gender of the recipient. See (16K) addressed to two women: **ka su tɕje?** 'Where are (you) going?' **gusə* na wo tɕi ʂi** '(We are) going to the store.' If the greeted peson had been an elderly man, (17) would have been the appropriate form: **ka ʂy (h) su tɕje?** 'Where are (you) going?' Honorific (h) morphemes in Tibetan were used to show the appropriate deference, respect or distance. If a greeting started with an address form, it was judged to be more respectful, personal and intimate as in example (19K). This was true for Tibetans and Naxi (18N).

2) Solicitation

Often, a greeting took on the quality of a solicitation or a request. (24K) **tʂ'a t'õ rὒ(po)** 'Please, drink tea!' (to female guests) was addressed to us by construction workers who watched us pass their site in a small village. We responded with a smile to the "invitation", knowing that their gesture was not necessarily in the interest of their boss. In contrast, my host greeted the eldest woman of her village with (25K) **tʂ'a syi(h) rὒ(po)** 'Please, drink tea!'. This address form indicated a high degree of deference, offered generally to older people and high religious leaders.

What could have been resented as an order, in reality was an invitation: (27N) **ŋa ko ɕje buɯ!** 'Come to my home for rest!' shouted my guide across the fields. It was morning and the person was working on his land. He had no time to socialize with a foreigner. Thus the invitation was rejected with **mə buɯ se** '(I) cannot come.' As stated elsewhere, these invitations, if addressed to older persons, bore politeness markers, as for example in Naxi (21N) and

Kham (23K) and/or by honorifics in Kham (25K) and Lhasa Tibetan (25L). In general, these politeness markers were used more in town than in the countryside, by the older rather than the younger generation. (26N) **ama mɛ yɛ´lo ʂ u!** 'Mother, come get up!' To Western ears this greeting sounded direct and impolite. According to Kham norms, there were two politeness markers present: 1) the term of address, **ama**, 'mother' 2) the verb **ʂu** 'come' that reduced the directness of the request and turned it into a polite directive.

The solicitation patterns also varied according to regions. For example, in the most conservative Naxi enclave, in Baidi, men were greeted differently from women: (22N) **gə nɯ ledzɯ!** 'Sit on the platform' was addressed only to male visitors (excluding younger boys) since the platform with its altar was considered a sacred place reserved for men and older boys. (21N) **t'e ɕje(po)!** 'Rest (a while)!' and a gesture pointing to some humble seating space on the floor next to the platform, was an appropriate greeting to female visitors and young boys. The response was usually nonverbal, i.e. the guests would sit wherever they were directed.

Many of the greetings were not requests. They had a seemingly less forceful illocutionary purpose. They simply asked the addressee to confirm whatever content had been proposed by the greeter.

3) Confirmation

Early in the morning, at the Dongba Institute, I overheard my neighbour greet some visitor in a loud voice (28N) **le u tsI se la?** '(Have you) come back?' The voice of the guest responded reassuringly **le ts'I se** '(I have) come back.' Though the form of this greeting, as well as (31K) (32K) and (34L), misleadingly resembles that of a true information seeking question (see the first category), its illocutionary force, as indicated by the elicited response, is that of a confirmation. In (31K) the phatic situation occurred at 10 a.m. It was clear that breakfast time was already past and therefore confirmation rather than information was being sought. The above greeting (28N) as well as (30K)[6] and (33L) were often addressed to people arriving from a journey, or to relatives or friends not seen for some time. When I returned to Yunnan, Mr. Yang, whom I had not seen for a year, shook my hand while greeting me in English with 'Ah, you have come back!'

Social interaction

In German *Guten Morgen* wishes are routines that do not aim at true interaction on the part of the addressee. We define interaction as mutual influence (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1990:17), reciprocal action, or, in Goffman's terms, as co-presence (Goffman 1963:17). In other words, it is not enough to speak to a person. There has to be a certain mutual influence, an interdependency of action (Kendon 1988:22) achieved by the choice of the greeting forms, the vocal quality of the utterance and bodily staging such as the

41

orientation of the body, the type of eye contact, regulatory gestures, etc. These actions become an important source of information for the structuring of the interaction.

All through the paper we have pointed out that in Naxi and Tibetan greeting situations were socially more demanding than in the West. The addressee was expected to adapt his behavior and formulate his greeting in a personal and situation specific manner. For instance, a greeter had to show respect for his/her teacher by stopping in the street, getting off the bicycle, or by offering to the oldest guest with both hands the best chair or the one closest to the altar. A friend of the same age could be addressed by an exclamation while passing on a bicycle: (35L) **ja!** 'Oh (it's you!)' (Confirmation). The greeter was answered by a smile.

In certain situations these personalized greetings could be nonverbal: The driver of our car pointed with a forward movement of his arm ahead of us, at the greeted person in the street. With a nod and the repeated arm gesture, the addressed pedestrian returned the greeting. Incidentally, there is no slot in Tibeto-Burman for the greeting of foreigners. Nonverbally, though, a smile and a nod with your head, adequately communicates your good will to interact. On the whole it appears that greetings are more or less engaging interactions in Tibeto-Burman. They vary greatly according to culture and context specific criteria.

We conclude that the designation of greetings as desemanticized, polite discourse (Searle, 1969) needs reexamination. What holds true for the German *Guten Morgen*, or its English equivalent, does not hold true for matinal greetings in Naxi, Kham and Lhasa Tibetan, where the non-initiate *is* confronted with a multitude of situational greeting forms. An intercultural, pragmatic approach better fits the discursive realities of this multidimensional speech act. It allows us to capture Tibeto-Burman exchanges in initial encounters that are personal and situational rather than conventional and formal.

Notes

[1] The author documented similar reactions of Eastern European immigrants who complained, like my Naxi colleague, about the insincerity of conversational openings (i.e. How are you?) in Australia and America.

[2] Sincerity, as stated above, is a psychological state. Within the North American context it is related to authenticity, congruency between personal feelings and self-disclosure.

[3] Greetings and their responses are treated in this paper as inseparable, interactional sequences in a "minimal proper conversation."

[4] Free address forms could be defined semantically by a set of widely known features such as "power," "solidarity," "distance," etc. Though semantically and cross-culturally pertinent labels, they still do not instruct us on the use of these terms in actual phatic settings.

[5]In our data the invitation (23) had the function of a greeting.
[6]Kham greeting observed in a mountain village accessible by foot only.

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Appendix:

Data

(N= Naxi , K=Kham Tibetan, L=Lhasa Tibetan (U-Tsang),
*=loanword, G= greeting, R=response, po=politeness, h=honorific)

Terms of address

Kinship terms

1)	N əma	K ama	Lama laʔ (h)		'mother'
2)	N əta	K ak'e	Lak'u		'(paternal) uncle'
3)	N əko	K awu			'elder brother (addressed by younger sister)'
4)	N əbv	K ata			'elder brother (addressed by younger brother)'
5)	K G: shimo!				'Younger sister!'(addressed by elder brother)
	R: ʔã				'Yes'

Titles, names, nicknames

6)	K ŋiŋɛ	Lkuço?				'elder monk'
7)	K bẽdjə	Lentçu				'younger monk (novice)'
8)	K giru	Ltʂyku				'Living Buddha'
9)	N əsIma					'Tibetan monk'
10)	N əsIku					'Chinese monk'
11)	K gegã/laoʂə*	L kɛ̀laʔ (h)		N lasɯ*		'teacher'
12)	K mimba/isə*	L amtçilaʔ (h)	N jise*			'doctor'
13)	N mu jise*!					'Doctor Mu'
14)	L tashi laʔ (h)!					(female/male)
15)	K adzhu!					'Darling'

Propositional phrases

Request for information

16)	K G: ka su tçje?	'Where are (you pl.) going?'
	R: gusə* na wo tçi şi	'(We are) going to the store.'
	L G: k'a pa tʂo ka?	'Where are (you) going?'
	R: tʂ'om la tʂo ki jĩ	'(I am) going to the market.'

44

17) K G: ka ş y(h) su tɕje?   'Where are (you) going?
                                              (to elderly man)'
     L G: k'a pa t'ɛ(h) ka?   'Where are (you) going?
                                              (to elderly man)'
18) N G: əko ze gə bɯ?   'Brother, where (are you)
                                              going?'
      R: le wu bɯ   '(We are) going back'
19) K G: amã ne so ɲi kuraku dʑu ra?   'Grandma will (you)
                                              come with me tomorrow to
                                              turn the prayer wheel?'
      R: wõ k'õ nei wõ   '(I'm) not free to go (with you).'
20) L G: rãŋ k'a pa tş'o ka?   'Where are you going?'
     R: ŋa lop tşa la tş'o ki jĩ)   'I am going to school.'

Solicitation

21) N G: t'e ɕje (po)!   'Rest (a while)!'
22) N G: gə nɯ ledzɯ!   'Sit on (the platform)!'
23) K G: ye sa şu (po)!   'Come inside!'
          R: The visitors enter.
     L G: ya p'e(h)!   'Come inside!'
24) K G: tş'a t'õ rũ (po)!   'Please, drink tea! (to guests)'
     L G: tɕ'a t'õ rũ (po)!   'Please, drink tea! (to guests)'
25) K G: tş'a syi(h) rũ (po)!   'Please, drink tea! (to (m)
                                              and/or older guests)'
     L G: søtɕ'a(h) tɕ'ø(h)!   '(Please,) drink tea! (to
                                              high guests)'
26) N G: ama mɛ yɛ ıo şu (po)!   'Mother, come get up!'
27) N G: ŋako ɕje bɯ   '(Come to) my home for rest!'
      R: mə bɯ se   '(I) cannot come.'

Confirmation

28) N G: le u ts'I se la?   'Have (you) come back?'
      R: le ts'I se   '(I) have come back.'
29) N G: ŋv(po) ts'Isæ lv ne læ?   '(You're) herding
                                              animals, aren't you?'
      R: mm   'Mhm (yes)'
30) K G: ya pu wa!   '(You) have come up (here)!'
      R: ya ya   'Yes'
31) K G: t'o tşa ʔa t'y?   '(Have you) drunk your
                                              breakfast tea?'
      R: tşa t'y   '(Yes, I have) drunk tea.'

45

32) K G: tʂy ʂamban* jin wo ʔæ?   'You have come
                                         to work?'

    R: Embarrassed smile.
33) L G: palaʔ(h) loʔ lep tɕu!   'Daddy, (you) have
                                         come back!'

     R: õʔ   'Yes'

  34) L G: tɕ'iloʔ la p'ɛʔ(h) pɛ?   'Are (you going outside
                                         (of the campus)?'

     R: la jin   'Yes'
35) L G: jo!   'Oh (you are here)!'
     R: Smile.

Fixed forms

36) N G: gegæ yabu!   'Teacher, (you are) good!'
     R: lo dʑots'o debo. ʂI do!   'Good students sit down!'

46