An Evaluation of Greeting Exchanges in Textbooks and Real Life Settings

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Introduction

This report is an attempt to evaluate greeting exchanges as speech acts in both ESL materials and real life interactions, then arrive at tentative conclusions concerning the authenticity of greetings presented in ESL materials.

Three Perspectives of Greetings

The review on greeting exchanges covers three broad disciplines: linguistics, sociology, and anthropology. These three disciplines view greetings across a spectrum of proximity from micro to macro. Linguists represent the micro view, focusing on linguistic behavior. Sociologists take a step back by looking more at social interaction. Lastly, anthropologists have taken a larger view, interpreting the linguistic behavior of greetings coupled with interaction as representing culture.

The Linguistic Perspective

Conversational analysis also known as discourse analysis, describes speech phenomena in two basic manners, in terms of speech units, such as adjacency pairs, utterances, and turns, and of pragmatic meaning. Schegloff (1972), Schegloff and Sacks (1973) introduced adjacency pairs as part of conversational analysis. They defined adjacency pairs as:

(1) two utterance length.

(2) adjacent positioning of component utterances.

(3) different speakers producing each utterance.

(4) relative ordering of parts.

(1973: 295‑296).

The notion of sequencing and serial moves is central to adjacency pairs and is used to explain the dynamic characteristics of verbal interaction. Schegloff and Sacks see greetings as a speech event composed of two parts side by side, serial, and sequential, such as Greeting‑Greeting:

A: Hello.

B: Hi.

or

A: Good morning.

B: Hello.

There may also be optional second pair parts where the second function is replaced by another function: Greeting‑Request for In‑formation

A: Hello.

B: Did you just get home?

Richards and Schmidt define Greeting‑Greeting adjacency pairs as "closed sets, formulaic, and easily learned." (1983: 131). They also acknowledge greeting‑other function combinations as

another possibility, and also point out that these other forms are not normally found in second language instruction.

Using adjacency pairs to describe greetings has limitations. Some difficulties include:

(1) The definition of adjacency pairs does not adequately fit real life examples, Piazza (1987), Price (1988).

(2) Use of adjacency pairs fails to make predictions about interaction. First pair parts may not indicate the presence of second pair parts.

(3) Adjacency pairs have a static dimension. They can only describe the observable behavior and fail to fully address the pragmatic interactional aspects of greeting exchanges.

Given the above questions, the use of adjacency pairs as a linguistic form of greetings presents some difficulties. Conversational analysis, in order to be more representative of real life communication, needs to establish a strong relationship between form and pragmatic context.

The Sociolinguistic Perspective

Goffman (1971) prefers to characterize greeting exchanges as "access rituals" consisting of two types, passing greetings and engaging greetings (1971: 79). Ritual is defined as a "conventionalized act through which an individual portrays his respect and regard for some object of ultimate value" (1971: 62). Passing greetings and engaging greetings function are similar to a switch that

opens or closes relations. Greetings also have other observable physical behavior. "A selection from a set of behavioral displays is involved." In addition, "a verbal salutation is likely provided along with a term of address" (1971: 74). In short, greetings are composed of several interlinking behaviors:

(1) "salutation" or the verbal linguistic form.
(2) term of address.
(3) body language.
(4) social context.

Goffman makes three generalizations in interpreting greeting behavior. First, exchanges serve to reestablish social relations, second, acknowledgement of a "differential allocation of status," and third, when greetings are performed between strangers, "there is an element of guarantee for safe passage" (1971: 74).

Firth (1973) also refers to greeting phenomena as ritual with verbal and non-verbal forms. Verbal forms may be one of three linguistic units: question ("How do you do?"), interjection ("Hello") or affirmation ("Good morning") and non-verbal forms are composed of body language.

Laver (1981) views greeting exchanges as having three components: formulaic phrases, address forms, and phatic communion or small talk ("Nice day for this time of year"). Laver applies the notion of routine to all three categories, thus proposing that greeting exchanges as a whole are routine rituals.

Firth claims greeting exchanges are an "affirmation" of social status. Laver recognizes the social control element through status in society, but also adds that greetings may be negotiated between

participants. Laver also proposes that routine rituals serve to pre-serve face. Using Brown and Levinson's (1990) notions of face in politeness behavior, Laver argues that greeting exchanges consti-tute routine and thus politeness behavior. Because social interaction causes risk to face, the use of politeness, i.e., greeting exchanges, helps mediate the potential for loss of face. Moreover, Laver puts forth a maxim of face and routine:

"Maximum risk leads to maximum routine, and conversely, maximum routine reflect highest risk" (1981: 290).

Anthropological Linguistics Perspective

Fieg and Mortlock (1989) operating from a cross-cultural viewpoint, offer another interpretation of greetings. They are de-scribed in terms of cultural and linguistic differences between Americans and Thais in three situations: work, passing on the street, and personal encounters. Greeting forms are defined as "ritu-alistic expressions" that carry some type of pragmatic meaning. What the meaning is, according to the authors, depends on the speech events as they present them. No explicit linguistic form is given other than examples from personal observation.

Their means of analysis focuses on cross cultural pragmatics. In an example of greeting while passing on the street Americans are reported to say "what's happening?" or "what's new?" According to Fieg and Mortlock, these American greetings should have an effect on the listener, causing a non-formulaic response about events "impinging on the hearer or what new events have somehow af-fected the hearer's life" (1989: 4).

They go on to interpret the intended pragmatic effects as

having a larger cultural basis in American cosmology. The cosmological view is dynamic, open, and engaging; thus Americans are said to welcome new experiences and offer them up as conversation topics. Thais, however, influenced by Buddhism, view the universe as transitory; consequently, events that impinge upon the hearer are too ephemeral to discuss in a casual greeting.

Fieg and Mortlock attempt to generalize the utility of greetings initially as influences of social factors, and then point out cross-cultural differences, such as how each culture's cosmological views influence the meaning of their speech act. The theoretical concerns then revolve around notions of culture and provide underlying explanations of purpose. Greetings, in short, are a speech event with pragmatic meaning and the meaning, in turn, is affected by cultural perspectives.

Interim Summary

In general greetings represent an acknowledgement of the relationship between two individuals, according to Aymer (1996). Also, the act sets up the possibility for further relationships. The kind and number of other parameters involved in greeting exchanges as a speech event, according to academics across the three disciplines discussed, are expectedly mixed.

Definitions are found on several levels, ranging from arbitrary categories of linguistic form to non-verbal communication. Indeed, it is difficult to determine where greetings as a speech phenomena end. Researchers suggest several components of greetings, which further complicate the search for definitive forms.

Method

<u>Subjects</u>

The greeting exchanges used by adults was chosen. For the purpose of this study, "adult" was defined as anyone who appeared to the author to be 18 years of age or older.

<u>Setting</u>

There are two possible settings that could be looked at. One of these is an open casual environment. An open setting would be one that is available to nearly anyone. Casual was defined as a place without an institutionalized hierarchy in place. Specific settings chosen for this study were the open areas (the grounds) of university and college campuses, television talk shows, small coffee shops, restaurants, and areas of large shopping centers where people gather.

On television talk shows one may see boxers, entertainers, and working class people with unique talents mixing with others who are thrust into the limelight for a brief time and then return to their normal life.

The coffee shops and restaurants proved to be interesting and problematic situations. People who work with the public often engage in scripted and routine language behaviors, thus calling into question whether data collection from this source occurred spontaneously and naturally. Small coffee shops, however, were considered different due to size and previously established relationships of the participants. Selected coffee shops had a form of intimacy where people interacted at what may be considered a personal level. There

was a greater chance that these people would interact again in the future in contrast to a fast food chain where the pressure is to get customers in and out as quickly as possible. An example of one coffee shop that met the criteria was the Sacred Grounds Coffee Shop, located in a industrialized section of Arcata, California. Its customers returned on a regular basis. It was felt that in the establishments chosen, the feeling of intimacy appeared to level things out and there was no apparent institutionalized structure in place.

The counterpart of an open and casual setting is one that is closed and structured. Closed was defined as a work place that set some restrictions on who can be there. Structured was defined as a stratified system based on a written document or where a de facto ranking system existed. An example of a closed and structured environment would be the military service, the construction industry or hotel service sector.

Status

Status was another factor that could be looked at. Given the lack of access to any situation with a distinct and previously established status, I could not use this variable as part of my data collection in the open casual environment without making personal judgements. Thus, any analysis offered here may be subject to bias.

Passing and Engaging Greetings

Greetings were also classified according to passing and engaging. A passing exchange is defined as the use of an utterance by at least one of the two people involved without any other conversation at that moment. An engaging greeting leads to some form of conversation after the initial exchange.

Procedure

Greeting exchanges in what appeared to be open situations were collected from a total of twenty-seven ESL conversation textbooks selected at random. Public exchanges were gathered from the following settings: coffee shops, small restaurants, the grounds of college campuses, television talk shows and the open areas of shopping malls. Greetings were classified according to four linguistic forms, 'Hi,' 'Good X' (morning, evening, etc.), 'Hello,' and 'Other.' Additional characteristics noted were the type of greeting, (mirrored or greeting-response) passing/engaging, status, and structure.

Mirrored greetings are defined as one of the following linguistic forms where the response is an exact duplicate of the first pair part. An example of a mirrored greeting would be:

A: Hi.
B: Hi.

A greeting-response is defined as having a question following the first pair part. An example would be:

A: Good morning.
B: How are you?

Status was divided into same and unequal. These two groups were further divided into mirrored and greeting-response.

Analysis

<u>Texts</u>

A total of twenty seven greeting exchanges were recorded from what appeared to be open casual situations and fourteen were found to be of the mirrored 'Hello' type. The other thirteen greetings were closely divided between 'Good X,' seven, and 'Hi,' six. All of the 'Good X' were mirrored. The smallest linguistic category, 'Hi' was evenly divided between mirrored and greeting-response.

In the status category there were seventeen greetings in the same group and ten in the unequal category. The 'Hi' category was equally divided in the mirrored and greeting-response sections for both same and unequal. There were more unequal than same status in the 'Good X' category. In the 'Hi' category, there were about three times more in the same than in the unequal group.

In the structure section, the open group had nineteen greetings and the closed had eight. The 'Hi' category was all in the open section and the 'Hello' category had five times more in the open group than the closed. The 'Good X' category was the only one that had less in the open section than the closed, two to six.

There were fifteen engaging greetings and twelve passing greetings in the books. The 'Hi' category had more engaging than passing, one to five. 'Good X' was about evenly distributed, three passing and five engaging. There were eight passing and five engaging in the 'Hello' category.

<u>Real Life Situations</u>

Observed greeting exchanges numbered twenty-two. An interesting factor was that talk show hosts overwhelmingly avoided

greeting exchanges and began their discourse by moving straight to a topic. For example, they would say something like, "You have a new movie or CD out."

The dominant linguistic form, fourteen, from the field was 'Hi,' while the second highest number of greetings, seven, was found in the 'other' category, specifically greetings involving only first names. Subjects would often just start with the first name of the person they wanted to greet and then move directly into the topic they wished to discuss. In this other category, three were mirrored and one was greeting-response. The 'Hello' category was one behind the other with three greetings. Of these, two were mirrored and one was greeting-response. There was only one greeting in the 'Good X' category, and it was mirrored.

The status category broke down into same, eighteen, and unequal, three. In the same status group, ten were mirrored and eight were greeting-response. The unequal group had all of its three greetings in the Greeting-Response. The largest linguistic form category had thirteen in the same status group. These were about evenly divided between mirrored, six, and greeting-response, seven. There was one in the unequal status group and it was in the Greeting- Response section. In the 'Other' category, I recorded two in the mirrored, same status group and two in the unequal status Greeting- Response group. The 'Hello' category was all in the same status group. Two were in the mirrored and one in the Greeting-Response section. The lone 'Good X' was the same and mirrored.

There were far more passing, sixteen, than engaging, five, greetings. This was also the case in the "Hi" category, which had eleven passing and only three engaging. The 'Other' was evenly divided two and two between passing and engaging. All of the

'Hello' category was passing. The one 'Good X' was a passing.

Discussion

More than a few issues must be noted in this study. First, the lack of access to a closed and structured situation was a difficulty that was unfortunate, but real. On the other hand, textbooks presented open situations more than twice as many times as they did closed. However, it would be good for someone to look at closed situations to see what form of greetings are used. A potential setting to be examined is a hotel room cleaning service.

Second, the number of greetings recorded in the field did not yield as much as expected. There could be several reasons for this. One possible explanation is that people may not greet as much as we think they do. This project was approached with the assumption that greetings were everywhere and data would be plentiful. Yet this did not seem to be the case. Obviously a longer study consisting of more observers then one would yield larger numbers. Also nonverbal communication was not looked at as it is seldom if ever presented in ESL textbooks. Therefore, if people only nodded or waved to each other, it was not recorded.

Despite the low frequency of greeting exchanges per se, the data collected does offer some interim conclusions about the nature of authentic exchanges:

(1) The frequency of 'Hi' as a greeting exchange did not correspond between authentic situations and ESL texts. In real life, 'Hi' was the most frequent linguistic form used; in texts, it was the least frequent.

(2) Real life greetings rarely involved 'Good X,' yet these forms were the second most prevalent exchange in texts. A possible

explanation is that books present what may be considered by many to be a formal greeting setting, which has a beginning, middle, and end.

(3) Books use twice as many mirrored as greeting-response. In contrast, data indicate these two types were used about equally in real life situations, suggesting textbook writers present stilted, formulaic exchanges. Consequently, students learn routines through tightly controlled exchanges, but lack flexibility when open ended interactions occur.

(4) ESL materials present nearly even numbers of passing and engaging greetings. However, in real life, passing exchanges outnumbered engaging by three to one, which is further evidence that texts tend to present formulas. One possible explanation could be found in the nature of textbook writing. Textbooks, as a written medium, make it difficult to present passing greetings.

(5) Analysis of status indicated a difference between real life and textbooks. Materials provided equal numbers of same and unequal status greetings, but, in real life, same status greetings were presented overwhelmingly. Stratification of participants in texts does not appear to be the case. Students are exposed to equal status situations and do not receive information on hierarchical relationships.

(6) Data from real life greetings indicated the use of first names as a common greeting exchange. Yet, no ESL text used names as a possible greeting form. I believe this is significant evidence that texts omit viable and commonly used greeting exchanges, thus failing to provide students with authentic situations.

Conclusion

This study found that there is a substantial difference between greetings taught in ESL texts and those used in real life. The authenticity of greetings in textbooks is questionable on several grounds: lack of variety, inappropriate representation of status, etc. Textbook writers have frequently been using 'safe' polite forms of greetings in their books. It can only be hoped that more people will look into this issue in the future. It is also important that teachers be fexible in their approach and not rely only on textbooks. The use of hand gestures, body language, and auditory sounds which may play a larger role in greetings should also be considered, according to Schleicher (1997). Also, teachers may want to incorporate the use of videos and present alternative ways of greeting people (along with other forms of English) within the classroom setting, according to Samovar and Porter (1995).

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