

## Greeting and thanking in retail transactions in Sarawak, Malaysia

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**Abstract.** Vendor-customer interactions have a transactional purpose. Yet these interactions are infused with politeness elements of greetings and thanking in the Western setting. In the Eastern setting, the manifestation of these politeness rituals has not received adequate attention. The study examines greetings and thanking in the sales initiation and purchase closure stages of retail encounters, and how the performance of these stages is mediated by the language choice and ethnicity of the interactants. The corpus for the retail encounters comprises 435 vendor-customer interactions in a photograph developing shop, a grocery store, a cake shop, and a fruit stall in Sarawak. The interactions were between Chinese vendors and customers who are from different ethnic and language backgrounds. Results show that greetings and thanking are optional stages in the retail encounters. The study also found that more attention is given to these politeness strategies in vendor-customer interactions which cross ethnic boundaries and there is an inclination towards the use of thanking and greeting expressions in English and Mandarin Chinese although the main language of transaction is a dialect. The findings suggest that in high context communication styles, the vendor-customer social group orientation perpetuates a focus on the business at hand and dispense with politeness rituals which characterise interpersonal interactions.

**Keywords:** greeting, thanking, retail, transaction, Malaysia

### 1. Introduction

Culturally diverse social systems are emerging from increasing between- and within-society contacts. The cultural diversity that results from the cultural contact translates to pragmatic failures in communication as perceptions of appropriate linguistic behaviour differ with culture. The development of pragmatic competence, among others, is instrumental to the individual's achievement of social efficacy (Kim, 2001). One of the commonplace daily interactions constituting a site of pragmatic failure is retail encounters. Studies on retail transactions have found that the transaction is enacted in several stages, some of which are compulsory and others optional (Halliday & Hassan, 1985). The staging varies with type of transaction, for example, auction, market and shops (Mitchell, 1957). Ventola (1987) found that some stages are recursive and others are non-verbal. In these studies, greetings and thanking are elements in the transactional encounter although they are not hinged directly to the buying and selling.

Studies on interactional patterns involving Asian retailers show a frequent omission of greeting and farewell bidding sequences. Settings studied include a Korean store in the U.S. (Bailey, 2001), government offices and banks in China (Kong, 1998), and department stores, bookstores, speciality shops, convenient stores, food-stands and restaurants in Hong Kong and Guangzhou (Pan, 2000). Similar findings were obtained by Ting and Lau (2009) in their study of simulated business interactions conducted by university students in Malaysia. These Asian countries are in the category of countries with lower individualism indices and tend towards the collectivist end of the continuum as opposed to European and North American countries (Hofstede, 1983). In collectivist cultures, high-context communication culture predominates (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988, cited in Kim, 2002). In high context culture, meanings are less expressed in words but borrowed from the surroundings, resulting in the high probability of the occurrence of non-verbal communication during the interaction (Hall, 1976).