

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).

Thus far, studies on the retail interactions have not considered the mediating effect of language choice on the inclusion of greeting and thanking sequences as these could take place in languages which differ from the main language of transactions. This is an area which needs investigation particularly in a setting where vendors and customers are from different language backgrounds as languages have social meanings derived from the sociocultural and historic background that imbues the languages with certain connotative

associations on the prestige and status of the languages or the speakers of the languages. In this context, studying the language of vendor-customer interactions for greetings and thanking offers insights into the socio-psychological considerations of a transactional encounter.

2. Purpose of Study

The study examines greetings and thanking in the sales initiation and purchase closure stages of retail encounters, and analyses how the performance of these stages is mediated by the language of transaction. The specific objectives of the study are:

- To identify the frequency and language of greetings used in transactions;
- To identify the frequency and language of thanking used in transactions; and
- To analyse the mediating effect of language of transaction on greeting and thanking expressions.

3. Method

3.1. Corpus

The corpus of vendor-customer interactions comprised the interactions between vendors and customers in a retailing business involving products and services. The study did not include wholesale businesses. The interactions between vendors and customers involved enquiry about products, orders for products and transactions resulting in purchase of products. In other words, these were transaction-oriented and did not include interpersonal-oriented conversations between vendors and regular customers not related to the purchase of the products. The vendors in the study were Chinese so that the ethnic variable in the customer-vendor interactions is controlled but the customers were from various ethnic and language backgrounds. The older vendors spoke a colloquial variety of Malay, commonly referred to as Bazaar Malay whereas the younger Chinese spoke Bahasa Malaysia, the standard variety of Bahasa Malaysia left through formal education in school.

The study was conducted in four research sites located in the central business district of the main cities of Sarawak, a Malaysian state on Borneo Island. The clientele of the four retail outlets was predominantly Chinese although the customer base included Malays, Sarawak indigenous and sometimes foreigners. The characteristics of the research sites are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Ethnic and language backgrounds of vendors at the four research sites

Research site	Vendors	Languages spoken
Photograph developing shop, Sibü	A Chinese Foochow couple in their fifties and their two college-age children.	Mandarin, Foochow, Hokkien, Malay, English.
Grocery store, Miri	Chinese Hakka couple in their fifties and four children	Mandarin, Fujian, Cantonese, Hakka, Foochow, Malay, English
Cake shop, Sibü	A Chinese Foochow couple in their fifties, son and daughter-in-law in their twenties and a Chinese Foochow employee	Mandarin, Foochow, Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay, English and some Iban
Fruit stall in Satok Sunday market, Kuching	Chinese Hakka couple in their fifties and their college-age son	Mandarin, Hakka, Hokkien, Malay, English.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The vendors were told that the general purpose was to study the language of transactions. The data collection took place for about three weeks during the regular opening hours of the retail businesses. A sign “Recording in Progress” was put up to inform customers of the research that was taking place. The vendor-customer interactions were audio-taped using with the tape recorder or digital MP3 recorder. Observations were conducted so that relevant non-verbal cues could be recorded to provide a context for the interactions. For example, non-verbal cues such as smiles, nodding, handing over of money and other actions such as pressing of buttons on the mobile phone, picking up of fruits, and pointing to type of egg cakes were noted.

The audio-taped vendor-customer interactions were transcribed using conventions given by Eggins and Slade (1997). Then the transcripts were read to identify the stages of Greetings, Sale Initiation and the presence or absence of thanking in the Purchase Closure. The language of transaction used was noted.

4. Results and Discussion

Out of 435 vendor-customer interactions recorded in the four research sites, 13 were non-verbal: one in the cake shop, two in the photograph developing shop; and 10 in the grocery store. Hence, the analysis of the results on the initial and closure stages of the retail encounter are based on 422 interactions.

4.1. Greetings and Sales Initiation in retail encounters

The results show that greeting is not a common feature of vendor-customer interactions conducted in the four retail settings under study. Out of 422 transactions, 255 or 60.43% did not include greetings of any form (Table 2). Only 13 (or 4.27%) of the transactions began with a “Hello” uttered by the vendors serving the customers and 146 (or 34.60%) with some form of sales initiation. Compared to findings from studies conducted on retail encounters in the Western setting, the lack of greetings in transactions present a stark contrast. While greetings seem to be a compulsory stage in a retail encounter, in the Eastern setting, it is an optional feature. The transactions mostly began with the customers stating their request.

Table 2. Frequency of greetings and sales initiation in retail encounters across languages

Type of retail setting	Main language of transaction	None	Greetings	Sales Initiation		Personal conversation
			Hello	Yes? What?	Mention of product	
Photograph shop (N=148)	Foochow (n=34)	27	1	1	5	0
	Mandarin (n=13)	12	0	0	1	0
	Hokkien (n=1)	1	0	0	0	0
	Malay (n=99)	79	2	8	10	0
	English (n=1)	1	0	0	0	0
Grocery store (N=102)	Mandarin (n=33)	1	3	2	25	2
	Malay (n=65)	9	4	5	47	0
	English (n=4)	0	1	1	2	0
Cake shop (N=99)	Foochow (n=51)	48	1	0	1	1
	Mandarin (n=29)	28	0	0	1	0
	Hokkien (n=3)	3	0	0	0	0
	Malay (n=16)	10	6	0	0	0
Fruit stall (N=73)	Hakka (n=9)	3	0	0	6	0
	Mandarin (n=15)	8	0	0	7	0
	Hokkien (n=3)	0	0	0	3	0
	Malay (n=44)	25	0	0	19	0
	English (n=2)	0	0	0	2	0
TOTAL		255	18	17	129	3

For sales initiation, guesswork on the customer’s intended purchase was more frequent than a general expression to show willingness to serve the customer. Guesswork on the part of the vendor as to the possible intention of the customers involved a specific mention of the product or service. For example, “Take photo?”, “Want to print how big?” and “just baked one [cake].” By so doing, the vendors pre-empted the customers to make a sale request. The same purpose was achieved through a question “Yes?” or “Yes? What?” with the meaning of “How can I help you?” which is more common in Western contexts. An exception was a personal conversation with a regular customer on the health of a family member. In general, it can be concluded that in the settings under study, it is the customer who take the first turn in the retail encounter rather than the vendors who greet the customer and show their willingness to serve the customers. In other words, the retail encounter usually begins with the customer’s enquiry on the availability or characteristics of the products.

Further analysis based on the language of the transaction showed that the vendors are more likely to greet non-Chinese customers rather than the Chinese customers. In the data set, greeting was found in 12 (or 5.36%) out of 224 transactions conducted in Malay but only in 5 (or 2.62%) out of 191 interactions in one of the Chinese languages. The inclusion of politeness rituals seems to be mediated by language of interaction which is a proxy of ethnic similarity or dissimilarity, suggesting that the Chinese vendors are more polite when interacting with non-Chinese customers.

4.2. Thanking in purchase closure stage of retail encounters

Table 3 shows that 302 (or 71.56%) out of 422 vendor-customer interactions concluded without any form of thanking. This shows that thanking is not a compulsory element in the retail encounters observed in the setting. For instance, payment during transactions in Hong Kong and China was performed by the handing over and the receiving of money by the seller and buyer, without the need of a verbal acknowledgement (Pan, 2000). This is a vast difference from practices in retail encounters in the Western setting (e.g. Halliday & Hassan, 1985; Ventola, 1987).

Table 3. Frequency of thanking in retail encounters across languages

Type of retail setting	Main language of transaction	None	Xia lia (Foochow)	Gam Siar (Hokkien)	Xie Xie (Mandarin)	Terima Kasih (Malay)	Thank you
Photograph developing shop (N=148)	Foochow (n=34)	29	3	0	1	0	1
	Mandarin (n=13)	11	0	0	1	0	1
	Hokkien (n=1)	1	0	0	0	0	0
	Malay (n=99)	66	0	0	0	15	18
	English (n=1)	0	0	0	0	0	1
Grocery store (N=102)	Mandarin (n=33)	17	0	0	11	0	5
	Malay (n=65)	44	0	0	0	3	18
	English (n=4)	2	0	0	0	0	2
Cake shop (N=99)	Foochow (n=51)	42	4	0	5	0	0
	Mandarin (n=29)	18	0	1	9	0	1
	Hokkien (n=3)	1	0	1	1	0	0
	Malay (n=16)	14	0	0	0	0	2
Fruit stall (N=73)	Hakka (n=9)	6	0	2	1	0	0
	Mandarin (n=15)	10	0	0	4	0	1
	Hokkien (n=3)	3	0	0	0	0	0
	Malay (n=44)	36	0	0	0	5	3
	English (n=2)	2	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL		302	7	4	33	23	53

On how the language of transaction mediates the form of thanking expressions, the analysis revealed that there is an inclination to thank in standard languages. With Chinese customers, the vendors tended to thank in Mandarin although the transaction was conducted in one of the Chinese dialects. Out of 34 transactions conducted in Mandarin with a thanking expression, there was only one instance of Hokkien usage (*gam siar*) and 24 (or 70.59%) were in Mandarin (*xie xie*). On the contrary, out of 19 transactions conducted in Foochow, Hakka or Hokkien in which the vendor thanked the customers, there were only 10 (or 52.63%) in these Chinese dialects. In interacting with non-Chinese customers, the Chinese vendors were more likely to thank their customers and the inclination was to thank in English (53 times) rather than Malay (23 times). The general patterns suggest that thanking is not a natural practice in the dialects of the Chinese vendors and the politeness strategy is acquired from formal learning of the language.

4.3. Discussion

The results are discussed in the light of the transactional nature of retail encounters and the high context communication style. As the explicit purpose of retail encounters is for the vendor to make a sale and the customer to make a purchase, greetings and thanking can be considered conversational frills not central to the transaction. However, these are politeness strategies are essential to the retail encounter in the Western setting.

In the Malaysian retail setting, the element of non-verbal communication in vendor-customer interactions shows the influence of the high-context communication culture that predominates in collectivistic cultures (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988, cited in Kim, 2002). The display of verbal communications is of a lower level as verbal greetings can be replaced by a smile or a nod to acknowledge the presence of the customer in the shop. Thus, if the interaction is studied only based on verbal data, it seems that the encounter is impolite if generalisations are made based on the schematic structure of retail encounters found in the Western setting.

5. Conclusion

The study shows that greeting and thanking by vendors are optional features of retail encounters in the Malaysian setting. Most transactions begin with customer's sale enquiry and end with the handing over of goods and payment, often conducted non-verbally. However, these conversational routines are more likely to be present in interethnic vendor-customer interactions, suggesting more pronounced positive face want (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The findings show that vendor-customer interactions are culture-bound and findings from studies conducted in low-context communication contexts are not generalisable because "culture shapes human communication behaviour" (Kim, 2002, p. 33). The intersection of politeness norms and cultural similarity in retail encounters in high-context communication contexts is an area for further investigation.

6. References

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