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**Bridging the Gap between Cross-Cultural Communication Differences: Politeness and Greetings**

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**Abstract**

Greetings are important for the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships, as they are embedded in politeness. In Africa, greetings are regarded as a personal responsibility to establish and sustain interpersonal relations. In China, people express their ideas implicitly, while Westerners are explicit in expressing their ideas. The analysis shows that greeting through politeness expresses concern for one another as well as respect towards each other. This suggests that people should be aware that greeting a person has the pragmatic value of a given culture to enable successful intercultural communication underpinned by the politeness principle. Thus, politeness through greetings could help people make appropriate adjustments to their communicative language and habits. The study recommends developing cultural awareness and sensitivity, observing and adapting to local customs using neutral, universal strategies (smiling, respectful body language), and showing openness to learning and emphasising empathy and flexibility in communication across cultures.

Keywords: Greetings; indirectness; sociality; cultural differences; cultural conflicts; linguistic features

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**INTRODUCTION**

Globalisation has increased interaction among people from diverse cultural backgrounds, making cross-cultural communication an important area of study. According to Niu and Liu (2022), cross-cultural communication links cultural anthropology and communication studies by examining how people from different societies negotiate meaning, identity, and relationships. Greetings and politeness are central to this process because they regulate social interaction and reduce misunderstandings. Holtgraves and McNamara (2010) argue that culturally appropriate speech helps people communicate respectfully without offending. Thus, greetings are not only linguistic expressions but also reflections of cultural values, norms, and worldviews. Greeting practices differ across cultures. In many African societies, greetings are elaborate and emphasize communal solidarity, respect, and social harmony. They may involve inquiries about health, family, and daily activities, while gestures such as bowing or kneeling show respect for elders. In contrast, Western cultures often use shorter and more direct greetings such as “hello” or “good morning,” reflecting individualism and efficiency. Asian cultures, especially in Japan and Korea, use honorific language and bowing to express hierarchy and respect, while Arabic greetings often carry religious and cultural significance. These examples show that greetings are shaped by culture, religion, and social organisation.

Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory explains how people maintain each other’s social identity

or “face” during interaction. Positive politeness promotes closeness and solidarity, whereas negative politeness emphasises privacy and autonomy (Behzadpoor, 2023). Collectivist cultures generally favour positive politeness through extended greetings, while individualistic cultures prefer more direct and less intrusive forms. Greetings also serve important pragmatic functions: they open conversations, establish relationships, reduce tension, express respect, and create a sense of belonging. Greeting behaviour further varies according to context, age, gender, social status, familiarity, and setting. Formal environments often require more respectful forms of greeting than informal situations. Language choices such as titles, honorifics, and kinship terms also communicate cultural attitudes toward authority and relationships. Therefore, studying greetings provides insight into how language reflects cultural values and social identity. This study examines the theory of politeness, greetings, their pragmatic functions, situations of use, language forms, and teaching strategies for greetings and politeness. Understanding these differences is essential in a globalised world because effective communication depends on both linguistic competence and cultural sensitivity. Thus, this study will answer questions such as 1) what is the theory of politeness, 2) what are greetings, 3), what are pragmatic functions of greetings, 4) what are the specific situations for greetings, 5) what is the language of greetings 6) what are teaching strategies for greetings and politeness? Furthermore, theoretical relevance of this paper could help people from other cultures to understand and appreciate greeting systems of different cultures.”

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

The purpose of this study is to explore how people from different cultural backgrounds understand and use politeness strategies and greeting practices, and to identify ways to reduce misunderstandings in intercultural communication. This study adopted a qualitative review research design to examine cross-cultural communication differences focusing on politeness and greetings across different cultural contexts. This research approach was appropriate for this study because it synthesised findings from previous studies, theories, and scholarly discussions related to intercultural communication, politeness strategies, and greeting practices.

### ***Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques***

Secondary data were collected from academic sources including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, conference papers, and online scholarly databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, ResearchGate and SpringerLink. The sources focused on topics related to cross-cultural communication, politeness theory, greeting behaviour, language use and intercultural interaction. Relevant literature was identified using keywords and phrases such as cross-cultural communication, politeness strategies, greetings in different cultures, intercultural communication differences, Brown and Levinson politeness theory, verbal and nonverbal greetings and communication etiquette across cultures. The researcher selected publications written in English and published within a relevant timeframe to ensure the inclusion of recent and credible studies.

### ***Data analysis technique***

The collected literature was analysed using thematic analysis. Key themes and patterns related to politeness norms, greeting styles, communication barriers, and cultural misunderstandings were identified and compared across different societies. The review also applied concepts from politeness theories, especially the theory developed by Brown and Levinson, to explain how cultural values influence communication behaviours. To ensure reliability and validity, the study relied on credible academic sources and compared findings from multiple researchers. Cross-checking different perspectives helped minimise bias and improve the accuracy of interpretations.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Cross-cultural communication is influenced by social norms, values, and language conventions that shape how people show politeness and exchange greetings. Because these practices differ across

cultures, they can lead to misunderstandings or unintended offense in multicultural settings. The following discussion highlights politeness strategies and greeting behaviors as essential parts of communicative competence and shows how their variation can create communication gaps.

### ***Politeness Theory***

Politeness theory is based on the idea that individuals possess a social self-image or “face” that they seek to maintain during interaction (Saragih, Rahayu, Azizah, Zulida & Makhroji, 2019). According to Saragih, Rahayu, Azizah, Zulida and Makhroji (2019), speakers employ different politeness strategies to protect both their own face and that of others. The choice of strategy often depends on the social relationship between the speaker and the hearer, particularly in situations involving face-threatening acts (FTAs) (Huang, 2023; Márquez & Schneider, 2019). Thus, politeness is closely linked to consideration for others’ feelings and the need to maintain comfort and harmony in communication. The theory draws heavily on the work of Erving Goffman (1967), who argued that individuals in face-to-face interaction continuously engage in “face-work” to manage public identity. Building on this foundation, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987) proposed that face consists of two universal dimensions: negative face, which refers to the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition, and positive face, which refers to the desire for approval and social connection. Politeness theory therefore encompasses both linguistic and non-linguistic behaviours that help individuals maintain interpersonal relationships and express shared social values. The study of politeness further provides insight into the broader cultural and social norms that shape interactional behaviour within communities (Félix-Brasdefer, 2021). Consequently, linguistic and non-linguistic elements reveal the social practices that influence individual language use and communication.

### ***Greetings as Illocutionary Acts***

Greetings are pragmatic routines that reflect cultural competence because they convey information about the speaker and the speaker’s perception of the interlocutor (Nilsson, Norrby, Bohman, Marian, Wide & Lindström, 2020). Therefore, illocutionary acts should not always be interpreted literally when examining the relationship between macro-social factors and language use (Barron, 2017; Adukpó, Kumi & Wumbei, 2019). For instance, when English speakers ask questions such as “How are you?” or “How is your work?”, they are often expressing politeness rather than genuine concern about one’s health or work situation. Such expressions function to maintain politeness and enhance the hearer’s positive face. Similarly, the Chinese greeting “Have you eaten?” is rarely intended as a literal inquiry about hunger. Instead, it reflects consideration and warmth toward the hearer (Wei, 2010). The expected response is usually “yes,” even if untrue, because a negative answer could create social discomfort. Thus, the expression serves more as a gesture of friendliness than an actual invitation.

Nilsson, Norrby, Bohman, Marian, Wide and Lindström (2020) further observed differences in greeting practices between Sweden-Swedish and Finland-Swedish speakers. Sweden-Swedish speakers typically used reciprocal verbal greetings, whereas Finland-Swedish speakers often initiated interactions without verbal greetings. The two groups also differed in their use of mutual gaze, with Finland-Swedish speakers maintaining longer eye contact during service encounters, while Sweden-Swedish speakers coordinated gaze more closely with verbal greetings. These findings suggest that Finland-Swedish interactions may be perceived as more formal than Sweden-Swedish ones. Cultural differences in greetings are also evident between Chinese and Western societies. Although both groups use greetings to express concern and maintain social relationships, the forms and content of these greetings differ considerably. In China, expressions such as “Have you eaten yet?”, “Where are you going?”, and “What are you doing?” are common greetings in everyday interactions. However, many Westerners find such questions confusing because they interpret them literally, particularly the frequent references to eating (Zhu & Liu, 2020).

### ***Greetings as Linguistic Routines of Politeness***

Greetings function as linguistic routines shaped by norms of politeness and social interaction (Wei, 2010). In English, expressions such as “Hello,” “How do you do?” and “I am pleased to meet you” are commonly used to maintain or enhance the hearer’s positive face, depending on the relationship between

speakers and the context. Similarly, Chinese greetings such as “Hello” and “Good morning” promote positive social relations, while questions like “What are you doing?” or “Where are you going?” reflect interpersonal involvement and social closeness. In many African societies, greetings extend beyond simple phatic communication. They are central to social interaction and communicate concern, solidarity, and respect (Wójtowicz, 2021). Conversations often begin with greetings regardless of how brief the interaction may be. Among the Yoruba, for example, the greeting *báwo ni?* (“How are you?”) may invite a genuine discussion of personal difficulties. Similar practices have been observed among the Ewe and Hausa, where greetings can lead to expressions of sympathy and emotional support (Adukpo, Kumi & Wumbei, 2019; Wójtowicz, 2021). Unlike Western cultures, where greetings are often limited to maintaining social contact, African greetings frequently communicate deeper interpersonal meaning.

Greeting practices also reflect broader cultural expectations of politeness and community. In many African communities, individuals greet one another regardless of familiarity. Studies on the Tanzanian Ngoni, Akan of Ghana, Baatombu of Benin, and Ewe show that greeting strangers is considered a sign of respect and social harmony (Adukpo, Kumi & Wumbei, 2019). Among the Setswana, younger people were traditionally expected to greet every adult they encountered, whether known to them or not (Mompoloki, 2012). Such practices highlight the communal orientation of African societies, where greetings reinforce social bonds and mutual recognition. The form of greetings often varies according to context, age, status, time of day, and social occasion. Formal interactions may require honorific forms, while greetings may differ during activities such as eating, travelling, visiting the sick, weddings, funerals, or childbirth celebrations. In South Africa, for instance, greetings such as “Howzit,” “Hello,” and “How are you?” are widely used, although practices differ across ethnic groups. These variations demonstrate that greetings are culturally embedded communicative acts shaped by social norms and values.

### ***Greetings According to Situations***

Greetings are shaped by social variables such as power, status, age, gender, and context. According to Agyekum (2008), greetings reflect not only interpersonal relations but also the broader social activities surrounding speakers. For example, the Akan people of Ghana and Ivory Coast use different greetings depending on the activity in which the addressee is engaged. Similarly, Wójtowicz (2021) notes that the Yoruba possess greetings for virtually every social circumstance, including sitting down, working, meeting others, displaying intelligence, or remaining at home while loved ones travel. Such examples demonstrate that greetings in many African societies function as highly contextualised expressions of social awareness and solidarity.

Traditional Ngoni greetings in Tanzania further illustrate the multifunctional nature of greetings. According to Mapunda and Sommer (2017), greetings may express concern for another person’s wellbeing, mark respect and recognition, request support, or reinforce community ties. Greeting practices are also closely linked to social hierarchy and physical setting. For instance, senior participants may sit on chairs while juniors crouch or sit on the floor when greeting them. In communal settings, social expectations may overlap or conflict: a newcomer is expected to greet the group, while guests are also expected to greet hosts.

Age and gender frequently determine greeting order, although the relative importance of each differs across cultures. In many African communities, younger people are expected to greet elders first. However, some societies prioritise gender over age. Among the Sukuma, for example, male status may override seniority, requiring an older sister to greet her younger brother respectfully. By contrast, among the Swahili, age takes precedence over gender, so younger males are expected to show deference to older females. Similar patterns occur among the Hausa and Yoruba, where greeting order depends on both age and gender relations. Nevertheless, situational factors may also influence greeting behaviour. Among the Yoruba, whoever notices the other person first may initiate the greeting, regardless of age or gender, although younger individuals are still expected to greet first when recognition is simultaneous. Variations also exist within the same cultural group. Among the Setswana communities, for example, greeting conventions differ between the Bangwaketse and the Bangwato. The Bangwaketse require younger people to greet elders first mainly when meeting away from home, whereas the Bangwato expect younger individuals to initiate greetings in all situations, including when elders arrive as visitors. These differences

highlight the complexity and cultural specificity of greeting practices, showing that greetings are not merely routine expressions but important markers of hierarchy, identity, and social relationships.

## CONCLUSION

Greetings are a fundamental part of social interaction across cultures, as they help establish and maintain relationships while reflecting key social factors such as age, gender, status, power, kinship, and occupation. Although greeting practices are universal, their forms and meanings vary widely across cultures and are often culturally specific and highly structured. In many African societies, greetings go beyond initiating conversation; they function as social obligations that promote solidarity, reinforce respect, and support community harmony. Age and social hierarchy significantly influence greeting behaviour, often determining who initiates and how greetings are expressed, with respect for seniority being particularly important. The study highlights the need for cultural awareness in intercultural communication. It recommends observing local customs, using appropriate verbal and non-verbal cues, asking questions when uncertain, and remaining open and empathetic. Overall, understanding greeting norms is essential for effective cross-cultural communication, as greetings carry deeper social and cultural meanings beyond their surface form.

This study contributes to the field of pragmatics and intercultural communication by providing a detailed account of how greeting practices function as socially meaningful acts beyond simple conversational openings. The study also contributes to sociolinguistic theory by reinforcing the idea that linguistic behavior is socially conditioned, showing how hierarchical relationships and cultural expectations shape interactional patterns. Furthermore, the research adds value to intercultural communication studies by emphasizing the functional importance of greetings in African societies, where they extend beyond phatic communication to serve as mechanisms for maintaining social cohesion, expressing solidarity, and reinforcing communal values. Finally, the study offers practical implications by recommending culturally sensitive communication strategies, thereby linking theoretical insights to real-world intercultural competence development. The originality of this study lies in its integrated examination of greetings as both linguistic and socio-cultural phenomena within African contexts. Additionally, the study contributes originality by linking descriptive findings with practical intercultural communication recommendations, offering strategies such as adaptive politeness, observational learning, and empathetic engagement to improve cross-cultural interactions. Future research could examine how politeness and greetings are adapted in online spaces such as WhatsApp, email, and social media. Future studies might compare how younger and older generations within the same culture perceive politeness and greetings, especially as globalisation and social media influence communication norms.

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