

# THE LINGUISTIC AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE OF GREETING AS A SPEECH EVENT

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## **Abstract**

*Language has always been an integral part of a people's culture. The act of greeting as a language component reflects the linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence of the participants in a social context. This study discovered that the communicative competence, proficiency in language use, a good understanding of the context and culture of interactants are needed for continual mutual interaction in any speech community and the act of greeting is seen as a speech event and as a cultural and linguistic phenomenon through J.L. Austin's Speech Act Theory used as a relevant tool for data analysis. This study then recommended that interactants in any speech events should try to be courteous in their selection of words in language use to ensure positive face management and cordiality in interactional and transactional language usage.*

**Keywords:** Greeting, Speech event, Linguistic/ Sociolinguistic competence

Human beings have been communicating and relating together in the way one would understand the other from the beginning of human existence. Grumperz, J. (2008) described language as a conventional, symbolic, arbitrary, social, structured, creative and meaningful phenomenon. Language is therefore primarily human and vocal. It is a means by which human beings interact and communicate with one another for one purpose or the other. Hence, this research shall examine the act of greeting as an aspect of language usage in a speech event from a particular social interaction and social context.

O' Neil (2006) acknowledged that greeting is an act of communication in which human beings as well as other members of the animal kingdom intentionally make their presence known to each other, to show attention and to suggest a type of relationship or social status between individuals or groups of people coming in contact with each other. Wardhaugh (2006) also affirmed that the act of greeting is a means by which human beings show a level of agreement and affection to one another. While greeting customs are highly culture/situation-specific and may change within a culture depending on social status and relationship, they exist in all known human cultures. In the light of this, it is right to say 'greeting' is an aspect of language usage in any social context.

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Throughout all cultures, people greet one another as a sign of recognition, affection, friendship and reverence. Seweje, (2002) asserted that greetings can be expressed both audibly and physically, and often involve a combination of the two. Sometimes, greetings could be a mark of identity to certain groups, like the secret societies have clandestine greeting rituals that allow members to recognize common membership. Some epochs and cultures have very elaborate greeting ritual, for example, greeting of a king.

The form of greeting one adopts is determined by social etiquette as well as by relationship of the people involved. Beyond the formal greeting which may involve a verbal acknowledgement, sometimes, a simple kiss or a peck on the cheek, eye contact, a hug, a wink of the eye can all signal what type of greeting is expected.

Gestures are the most obvious signal in greeting. For instance, greeting someone with an open arm is generally a sign that a hug is expected. However, crossing arms can be interpreted as a sign of hostility. Facial expression, body language and eye contact reflect emotions and interest level. While smiling and an exuberant attitude is a sign of welcome, a frown, slouching and lowered eye contact suggests disinterest.

Other relevant issues that could be raised in discussing the act of greeting as a sociolinguistic component are: Manners, inter-cultural competence, ethics, etiquette, morality and politeness. Westra, (1989) proposed that manners are connected to standards of conduct which demonstrate that a person is proper, polite and refined. They are a kind of norm that codify or set a standard for human behaviour. Inter-cultural competence is the ability of successful communication with people of other culture. Ethics also known as moral philosophy, is a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong behaviour. Etiquette is a code of behaviour that delineates expectations for social behaviour according to contemporary conventional norms within a society, social class, or group. Yule, G (2006) recommended that morality can be described as ‘manner, character, or proper behaviour.’ It is the differentiation between intention, decisions and actions between those that are good (right) and those that are bad (wrong). Politeness is simply the practical application of good manners or etiquette, although it is a culturally- defined phenomenon because what is considered polite in one culture, can sometimes be quite rude in another cultural context. Nevertheless, all these attributes clearly described above are necessary ingredients in discussing ‘greeting’ from the linguistics and sociolinguistics perspectives.

J. L. Austin’s Speech Act Theory is considered a very relevant tool for the linguistic analysis of the act of greeting as a speech event. Through the act of greeting, certain activities are carried out either verbally or non-verbally to denote an intention which could bring about either positive or negative reaction from the addressee. In other words, greeting as a speech event, can be said to be a means of communicating, interacting or conversing as human beings to establish or maintain interpersonal relationships.

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To achieve this, definite acts have to be carried out using words in diverse forms to attain the goals of the communicative events. J. L. Austin in his Speech Act Theory postulated that for any performative to have desired effect, it has to meet a given social and cultural criteria called *felicity conditions*. He believes that by making an utterance, language users perform one or more social acts which are called 'speech acts'. He then proposed a threefold distinction between different types of action. For instance, by speaking an utterance, one may perform a social act of making a promise, this is called '*locution*'; '*illocution*' is what the speaker does by making an utterance which in this instance, could be to douse someone's tension or raise his/her hope and there is always an effect of the action performed which is called '*perlocution*' that is what the speaker has eventually done having made the utterance.

'Actions speak louder than words, and speech is action'. When a speaker makes an utterance containing a referring expression, he carries out a linguistic act. The utterance could be declarative, interrogative or imperative. All perform acts of some kind or other and sentences of each type, when uttered tend to carry out typical linguistic acts. For instance, the linguistic act performed by making a declarative sentence type is 'asserting', that of interrogative sentence is 'asking', while the linguistic act of 'ordering' is carried out by making imperative sentences. All these acts are 'illocutions'. In other words, the illocutionary act carried out by a speaker making an utterance is the act viewed in terms of the utterance's significance within a conventional system of social interaction. Further examples of illocutions are acts such as: accusing, apologizing, challenging, complaining, congratulating, greeting, mocking, praising, thanking, and so on.

The perlocutionary act carried out by a speaker making an utterance is the act of causing a certain effect on the hearer and others. The perlocution of an utterance is the causing of a change to be brought about, perhaps unintentionally, through or by means of the utterance. In the light of this, the Speech Act Theory is believed to be a relevant tool to analyze the type of speech event highlighted in this paper - a dialogic and interactive mode of greeting.

### **Research Methodology**

An exchange of 'greeting', was recorded without the knowledge of the interactants and used to show how the act of 'greeting' as a speech event could be used as a sociolinguistic tool through which the norms, status, relationship, age, exposure and the beliefs of the interlocutors could be mirrored.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The linguistic analysis of greeting as a speech event was done using the Speech Act Theory of J. L. Austin, while the sociolinguistic analysis was done by adopting the four dimensions of sociolinguistic analysis which are: social distance/ solidarity, status and/ or power of the interactants, the level of cordiality or formality of the participants

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which determine the choice of vocabulary or register they use and the purpose or function of their interaction were also of crucial importance in this study.

### **Data (The Sample Speech Event)**

This exchange of greetings took place between two female students of the Federal College of Education, Abeokuta. The following dialogue was recorded by the researcher without the knowledge of the interactants. (The names given in this conversation are not real).

**Joke:** (*jumping at the other lady, shouts*) Atinga, ewo l'o see? Ore mi o (*touching her hair, then her nose*) O ti lo fine ju. Good morning, how are you?

**Meaning:** Atinga (a nickname for someone tall and slim) how do you do? "My friend o". You are too beautiful.

**Sola:** A very lovely morning to you, *ore mi t'o daa* that is, why I like you. You always appreciate good things. **Meaning:** Thank you, my good friend.

**Joke:** (*Touching Sola's cheeks again*) Hun uh, I am sure there is one rich, handsome, and reliable man somewhere taking a very good care of you, because you are getting chubby and rotund

**Sola:** Just tell me that I am pregnant, and I will tell you that 'pregnancy is contagious'. (Sarcastically)

**Joke:** Sorry o, 'Sister virgin Mary' don't be vexed o, *wetin concern 'agbero' with the shape of the luggage?*. (**Meaning:** you shall face the repercussion all alone, I was only being caring).

**Sola:** Baa wahala, 'agborandun' (**Meaning:** I have no problem, busy body). '*You think say I be like you? I beg , I dey kampe, na book I come read here o, no be for chasing men*' Off I go for my lecture, join me if you care. (A male student suddenly appears, hugs Joke and leaves with her.)

### **Data Analysis**

Doing a linguistic analysis of the greetings in the above speech event, one needs to consider the use of words and what the user intends by her choice. The very first word '*atinga*' though a nickname connotes insult, considering the meaning. It sounds abusive to a supposed friend and absurd followed by the complimentary greeting 'good morning'. To this, one can say that the initiator of the greeting does not really know the meaning of the word 'atinga' which contradicts the subsequent words '*ore mi*'- *my friend*, '*you are too beautiful*'. More so, saying someone is 'too beautiful', is an overstatement probably meant to flatter the latter who was indeed flattered, because of the response she gave- '*thank you my good friend, that is why I love you, because you appreciate good things*'.

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One can infer from this that the illocution is to flatter, deceive or brainwash and the perlocution was evident in the fact that the addressee was susceptible to flattery and deceit to which she even expressed a hearty and deep seated appreciation. The statement that followed the former-- '*I am sure one rich, handsome and reliable man is taking care of you....*,' is a declarative statement asserting that someone rich, probably a *man lover or sugar daddy* is dating her friend, was meant to elicit further information from her, because, she added that she was looking *plump*, to which the latter reacted almost annoyingly because 'her friend' seemed to be going too far, that 'pregnancy is contagious'. This locutionary act could be a statement of fact because Sola may be indeed pregnant but felt that it is strictly confidential and not meant for public discussion.

The illocutionary act of alleging that Sola was getting fat, by Joke touching her cheeks and feeling her nose and the likes, shows that Joke was being too inquisitive about her 'friend'. The perlocution was evident in the utterance '*Sorry o sister virgin Mary...I was only being caring,*' that Sola was not pleased with Joke's utterances towards her. The tone is now different from the initial one of a 'naïve friend' to a more mature one that can no longer be deceived with 'sweet' words. Even the utterance 'sister virgin Mary' from Joke sounds malicious, it implies that: does Sola want to prove that she is a virgin by sarcastically saying 'pregnancy is contagious'? Then the shifting of code to pidgin – '*wetin concern agbero (bus conductor) with the shape of the luggage*' though sounds proverbial or idiomatic, somewhat implies a sudden social distance between the two friends, more so with Joke telling Sola- '*don't be vexed o*'.

The use of Hausa language – '*baa wahala*' also have linguistic implication in the sense that it depicts the social setting of the speech event as multilingual where the influence of federal character was brought to bear, this together with the use of pidgin '*I dey kampe...*', reflect a conglomerate of codes by association and assimilation. The two friends had to part ways, having realized they just could not push the issue any further on a friendship level, more so when Sola felt that Joke was nothing but an 'agborandun'- a busy body, saying –"*you think say I be like you , na book I come read here , not to chase men*". From this statement, one can infer that Joke was promiscuous and thinks everyone else is like her, the fact that a boy appeared, hugged Joke and left the scene with her, was enough proof, even when the 'aggrieved' Sola still felt that they should go for their lecture together.

Having said this much on the linguistic analysis of greeting in the speech event being considered in this paper, the perlocutionary act of separation and strained relationship between the two friends was unintentional but must have been caused by Sola 's interpretations of Joke's illocutions as a way of poke-nosing.

Doing a sociolinguistic analysis of this same speech event, it will be needful to use the under-listed factors postulated by Meyerhoff, (2006) which constitute the dimensions of sociolinguistic analysis. They are:

1. Social distance or solidarity

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2. Status and / or power
3. Formality (whether cordial or formal)
4. Function of the language for communicative event;

One can start by first addressing the issue of type of participants in the speech event. It is obvious from the way the interlocutors addressed each other, using nickname '*atinga*', then '*ore mi o*', this shows that the interactants are intimate friends. They both were able to code-mix, code-switch and shift their code depending on the nature and gravity of the subject matter.

This is a true reflection of a multilingual speech community – the setting being a federal institution of higher learning constituting students from all the states across Nigeria, speaking different languages and different versions of English. To start with, addressing a stranger by the nickname "*Atinga*" can spell doom if the latter does not understand the meaning. Touching a person's nose and cheeks is also a paralanguage permissible from a familiar person. Considering the context of their greetings, they both used language of solidarity "*Ore mi*", *who is taking care of you?* (Implying who is dating you? which suggests "a sugar daddy" – man lover) . This shows a great level of solidarity between the interactants. Their choice of language depicts that they are in the middle class and are multilingual. They have the ability to code-switch as a result of exposure to people of other tribes. This is further shown in expressions like: "*O ti lo fine ju*", *o ya ni lecture hall*" "*baa wahala*" (*Hausa expression for "no problem"*)

There is an appreciable level of cordiality between the two friends due to the register and vocabulary they were using. The field of the greeting which is the subject matter according to Halliday (1978) is about how they look – beautiful, fat (implying whether the addressee is pregnant or well-fed). This shows familiarity in the tenor which makes the mode (manner of speaking) dialogic and intimate.

Moreover, gestures and gesticulations were richly used in the informal greetings. Friends jumping at each other, hugging and touching show closeness and intimacy. Talking about morality, politeness and etiquette; these are not pronounced in the informal greetings as the interactants belong to the same age group and status. 'Joke' seems careless in her choice of words, she switched to pidgin to relax the tension that had been mounted by her strong assertion which Sola rebuffed.

All the code choice depicts an informal interactive context. The choice of language is affective and interactive and the mode was quite effective. Interrogative grammatical/expressions were also used to elicit information. For instance "*who is taking care of you?* There is a level of sociolinguistic competence between the interactants as they used language within the conventions of the domain wherein they found themselves, complying with the norms.

## **Conclusions**

From the foregoing, this research work reveals that both linguistic competence that is, knowing what to say and how to say it, and the sociolinguistic competence which has to do with language use in a social context, that is, being well informed of what type of language to be used where and with whom a particular code is to be used in terms of the type of relationship that exists between or among language users are vital instruments in maintaining cordiality in greeting in a socio-cultural setting and in ensuring mutual understanding within a given communicative setting. Of paramount importance to a sociolinguist is also to know what register or vocabulary is to be used as well as what purpose or function do they want the language to carry out. All of these and more should be the utmost concern of whoever wants to ensure or maintain a meaningful interaction in any communicative event.

To a reasonable extent, this study has been able to show the act of greeting as a speech event that can either make or mar relationship if language is not properly selected and conventionally and carefully used. Hence, to ensure mutual intelligibility in any communicative or interactive discourse, both the knowledge of the linguistic system which includes lexical and grammatical choices that express appropriate experiential meaning, as well as the sociolinguistic tool which guides and shapes language use in a social context are indispensable

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