Language in Use: Greetings in a Social Discourse

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Introduction

Most of the service stations in the United Kingdom, apart from petrol filling have mini markets selling a variety of goods including convenience foods, snacks, drinks, confectionery, top up cards, scratch cards, lottery tickets and tobacco products, etc. Some of them offer round-the-clock services, such they are well-known places for the inhabitants of that area of the country. Therefore, these places become very common for people where distinctive forms of social discourse take place in various genre modes. Being a part-time employ of a service station provided me an opportunity to collect an authentic data from valid discourse which has many functions such as performing social interaction to make social bonds and relationship (Bax 2009:80), while services are rendered.

At its first glance, a deep analysis of the social discourse patterns that took place in the service station and looking at them in a different dimensions supplied me with insightful understanding of the social and linguistic aspects used by the different communicators made me to draw on to reach to purposeful conclusions. In this article, the focus is in analyzing the customers' utterances which they used while communicating. Furthermore, it explains the underlying meaning of linguistic patterns related to discourse, pragmatics and sociolinguistic. In addition, a description of some of the contextual factors such as signs and artifacts which contribute to give a complete depiction of the discourse setting is explained.

Observation & Preliminary Findings

The preliminary findings of observation led me to classify the customers' utterances into two main categories as, 1) Greetings and 2) Leaving Comments. Greetings is a way for human beings to intentionally communicate awareness of each other's presence, to show attention to, and to suggest a type of relationship or social status between individuals or groups of people coming in contact with each other. On the other hand, leaving comments more or less involve greetings, but sometimes use different words which are not related to greetings. However, the leaving comment does have a social purpose. My curiosity in this study arose when customers used various linguistic patterns while uttering greetings and leaving comments. Consequently, I adopted the idea of ethnography where we study people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means that capture their social meanings and ordinary activities (Brewer 2000:56). My concentration was on speech acts, which are actions performed via utterances (Yule 1996: 48) is my focus of analyzing greetings and leaving comments expressed by the customers.

The social discourse patters were observed for a month (Appendix – 1), the more I observed the more curious I was in finding remarkable patterns. Initially, I gathered almost all the greetings and leaving comments that people spoke, but however, later on the customers' using some extraordinary patterns attracted my attention and are my focus in the analysis. Though, collecting spoken communication data was a bit challenging as, I was working night shifts and there was a barrier between the customer and me, *the glass window,* I was serving through a hatch, could gather a considerable data from the utterances which were audible to me.

In addition, there were some other issues in utterances, may be my miscomprehension, for example 78 (Appendix – 3) in which customer's intention of using speech acts 'praise' with 'chocking' (really chocked me!). The customer's intention behind using this word was to praise my service. At first instance, I got confused and started thinking about it how to fit it in my context, I thought, I might not have heard the word properly (after scratched my head, for an hour!). I gave up the idea of finding more about the word thinking that I do not want include this utterance in the article, but later on when searched for this word I found there is an adjective which goes with the word as '*safe and sound*' might be the intention of the customer!

On the other hand, in this multicultural society, there were some customers from different nationalities used *unconsciously* their mother tongue in greetings that I could not comprehend. Furthermore, customers used their cultural salutations like '*As-Salam Aleykum*' and '*Namaste*' etc. are ways of greeting people in their nations have not been taken into my observation as I was looking for target language patterns. Through my observation I found that the customers use various patterns of speech acts for greetings that include politeness and adjacency pairs, etc. The utterances that I collected have the following functions: statements, greeting, request, praise, invitation, questions, wish, concern, apology, and promise as they were shown in the table (Appendices)

Formal and Informal Greetings and Leaving Comments (Spoken Language)

Firstly, I would like to discuss the customers' use of combination of Formal and Informal greetings and leaving comments (Appendix – 2). In examples, 1-3 customers used mirrored greetings *'Hi'* which was an exact duplicate of the first parse. Though these speech acts are informal, they include politeness of 'greeting' for 'friendly' approach. The adjacency pairs of likely responses were received in these examples (Cook 1989:53). There are more examples in the observation where customers used mirrored greetings such as '*Hiya' 'Hello'* and '*Cheers*' etc. use of these speech acts though informal show close relationship. In examples 4-43 the customers used different kinds of sentences, for instance, declarative sentences in examples 38, 40, 42 & 43 , '*thank you very much indeed…*' which are formulaic expressions of specific speech acts and they also used ritualized expressions '*Bye*' in examples 11, 13 & 35 (Watts J. 2003: 169) which are standard and ritual in a social context. Ritual is a conventionalized act through an individual portrays his respect and regard for some object of ultimate value (Goffman 1971:62). The expression in Example 25 '*It's Ok'* is a common response to '*thanks*' in many parts of the world which mean showing 'gratitude', however it is seldom heard in my observation.

In examples 44 & 62, the declarative phrases '*I appreciate that'* is used to show that the customers were grateful for the service rendered. This particular phrase is often heard in business English such I assumed that they are businessmen or from a business background, which may tell us the social status of the people. The

customers used interrogatives followed by 'please' to function as a 'request' as in examples 45, 54, 55 & 57 'Can I have…?' and 'Could you…?

A unique response uttered by a customer which was heard only once during my observation i.e., example 47 is 'OK' which can be considered as preferred response, however it may indicate the emotional state of the customer. In other words a customer may be in a mood of not preferring to talk much. In expression 45 & 48 the customers' statements saying '*you are alright'* which has a falling intonation of a question. Some declaratives like in examples 45, 49, 50, 58 though the customers used preferred responses they tentatively used two greeting phrases simultaneously as 'Thanks/Cheers' and 'Thanks a lot/Cheers' etc. this shows socialization in their utterances. The typical response in example 61 'Take it easy' for thanks was also never heard, whether it has positive or negative connotation in greeting as it mean settle into a comfortable sitting position! In Example 62 customer responded with 'apology' for greeting by adding 'please' through which his use of politeness in his speech acts for his delayed payment and also which could be taken as new social meaning in this context.

Informal Greetings and Leaving Comments (Spoken Language)

While observing patterns (Appendix – 3), I noticed the customers tend to ignore traditional words, replacing new words which are added recently in English such as 'Hiya' and 'cheers'. According to Oxford Dictionary 'Hiya' is a 'word of greeting' included in the dictionary in 1946 and started its use since the mid of the 20th century (Cited in Oxford Online Dictionary). Whereas, 'cheers' a colloquial synonym for

'thanks' added to British English by transition (*ibid*) has become more common, in these days. In examples 64 – 77, the customers use of 'hello', 'hi', 'bye', and 'see you later', the notion of these speech events sequencing and serial moves are central to adjacency pairs and are used to explain the dynamic characteristics of verbal interaction. Moreover, some customers used 'praises' with greetings, in examples 78-81, such as adjectives like 'chocking', 'awesome', 'splendid', and 'smashing' etc. are 'praises' for quick service. In particular, examples 82 & 83 customers showed social relation by using phrases like 'you take care' and 'take care' in their leaving comments.

Formal Greetings and Leaving Comments (Spoken Language)

During observation I found that the elderly people use formal greetings (Appendix – 4) often than the present generation. These greetings followed an appropriate sequence. In example 84, the preferred response was the same as I uttered showing 'respect' in its utterances. In example 85, a pleased customer, greeted with 'wish' as leaving a comment stating 'have a good day.' In example 86, the customer's greeting was defined as having a question following the greeting, his intention of using this was to ensure my wellbeing, which again reflects social and close relation. In examples 87-91 the customers' use of formal greetings conveys politeness. In examples 92, 95 & 97 customers use of speech acts 'praise' with the words 'smashing', 'fantastic' and 'great' were to show their satisfaction to service delivered. Whereas, in example 93, a regular customer to the station always shows a deeper relation by saying 'son' and 'God bless you my son.' The emphasis on formulaic expressions is common in formal greetings such as in examples 94 & 96.

Greetings through Gestures

Firth (1973) refers to greeting phenomena as a ritual with verbal and nonverbal forms and according to him non verbal forms are composed of body language (Williams J.). Customers used body language and gestures for greetings, such as 'thumb up', 'waving hands', 'shake hands,' 'eye contact' 'nodding head' 'smile' and 'Victory symbol' etc. Sometimes, body language serves the purpose better than the verbal communication. In Example 63 a customer used a gesture of 'victory symbol,' which is very informal in some countries, but solidarity was shown through this gesture. In most of the English speaking countries, it is an obscene insulting gesture of defiance; I wondered whether to take the customer's gesture as positive or negative greeting! In example 98, customer's gesture of showing 'thumb up' reflects the approval of acceptance of greeting, it has connotation of different meanings in various countries for example, in the United Kingdom it means 'OK or good' whereas in America 'great or awesome' (cited in articlebase.com). In example 99, 'shaking hands' is done in order to 'greet' which is also done in several other occasions such as meeting and parting etc. Shaking hands also has several positive and negative connotations in different parts of the world. In examples 98 & 100, the gesture 'waving hand' implies several meanings such as a greeting or a sign of departure, in example 98 the customer used it as a sign of departure whereas in example 100 it signifies 'praise' and 'greeting'.

Greetings in Written Language

Many business companies convey greetings through notices in 'captions' 'symbols' and 'signs' to attract, suggest and warn the customers. In the service station the

notice on the forecourt 'please call again' in example 101 (Appendix – 5), 'request' the customers to 'visit the place again' that acts as a greeting. In example 102, the notice at the entrance to the shop 'welcome to your local shop', the use of 'your' in the notice shows close relation. The written signs are used in different font sizes, colors (red, yellow and blue) and illustrations to emphasize their messages and the messages use direct speech acts that anyone reads the message is the receiver of the message.

Conclusion

To conclude, I found some interesting findings in expressing greetings and leaving comments in spoken, written and body language. The findings of the observation show that there are some new words can be considered in greetings. People are fascinated to use new words in English for greetings and to create positive social context. For instance, in India it is a common use 'you are welcome' as a response to someone's greeting 'thanks' whereas, (Appendices) I started using the patterns suitable for this social context.

However, this is a short study; I cannot conclude comprehensive deductions because it requires more data and deeper analysis. If I were to do a full study in this area, I would analyze each utterance with its social context and its analysis, in detail. I will gather more information on greetings through questionnaires, interviews, use voice recorder to record the utterances, video recording of some of the practical greeting exchanges, pictures, diagrams, and spending more time observing these utterances in different places.

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