

ARTICLES

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Greeting and saying farewell in two Bantu languages: Swahili and Zulu*

Abstract

The article discusses greetings and farewells of a typical conversation in two Bantu languages: Swahili and Zulu. The conversation usually comprises the greeting followed by the enquiry about each other's well-being, the actual conversation, and then the parting farewell. The article outlines the importance of nonverbal, sociolinguistic, and situational factors of the salutation. The objectives of the paper are to explore the feasibility of considering the salutation in Bantu languages as being uniform, to determine some common trends in the salutation, and to discuss the aspects that may have an impact on the form of the salutation, in languages in general and in Swahili and Zulu in particular.

Keywords: greetings, farewells, salutations, Swahili, Zulu, Bantu languages, African languages

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1. Introduction

Greetings and farewells (salutations) are speech acts often considered to be highly formulaic. The act of greeting (and saying farewell) is used globally (Brown and Levinson 1978) as a politeness device and plays an important role in everyday social interactions in speech communities all over the world. While some scholars have noted that greetings are used to serve as a communication device to avoid confrontation, nowadays greetings are used to start a conversation in an appropriate manner or to establish and maintain social relationships (Goffman 1967). While Baratta (2009: 21) states that many greetings are relatively straightforward and formulaic, Jucker (2017: 2) asserts more cautiously that at first sight greetings and farewells appear to be fairly simple and well-defined speech acts that mark the boundaries of conversations and are often ritualistic. They have been claimed to be devoid of propositional content (Searle 1969: 67), however, a more critical consideration reveals that the situation is much more complex. Greetings and farewells are often embedded in longer exchanges and within such exchanges individual expressions may or may not have propositional content.

Learning the language of fellow citizens in a multilingual country is important for building trust and unity between different speech communities. Moreover, with rapidly growing globalisation, particularly with young people entering the world of work in foreign countries, comes a dire need to communicate with people who speak different languages and, in turn, the necessity to learn foreign languages. Foreigners often learn just a few words, phrases, and some expressions, including how to greet in the language of the host country or that of new co-workers and friends. Greeting someone in her/his own language becomes a gesture of goodwill that makes the indigenous communities more hospitable and well-disposed towards newcomers and may be the starting point for building social relationships.

2. The aim of the article

The paper aims at investigating linguistic, sociolinguistic, and nonverbal conventions employed in greetings and farewells in two Bantu languages: Swahili and Zulu. For that purpose, the selected parts of a typical conversation will be discussed. The typical conversation usually comprises the greeting, followed by the enquiry about each other's well-being, after which the actual conversation ensues and then the parting farewell is bidden. Similarities and differences between the linguistic, nonverbal, sociolinguistic, and situational characteristics of the salutation in these two languages will be investigated.

3. The salutation as a speech act

Knowing and using a few words and expressions of a local language may put a smile on faces of the locals, however, that is not enough to engage in a proper conversation. Moreover, successful communication includes both verbal and nonverbal components, nonverbal aspect of communication being crucial. Cohen (1996) remarks that the successful use of a speech act is dependent on the proper definition of its goals, as well as on the semantic and performative prerequisites for its realisation. Performing a speech act is thus a complex task which requires understanding its purpose along with possessing linguistic, cultural, and communicative and pragmatic competence. Even if a second language (L2) speaker performs a linguistically correct speech act, but fails in terms of nonverbal communication, the good intent of the act may be totally annulled. In the process of a speech act production a (L2) target language learner does not only rely on the linguistic rules – the phonetics, phonology, morphology, semantics, and syntax of the language – but also on the appropriate use of these rules and interactional norms according to a specific context. (L2) speakers often inappropriately transfer linguistic rules and sociocultural and contextual conventions of their native language (L1) to the target language (Thomas 1983). Such pragmatic transfer often leads to communicative breakdowns, misunderstandings, and pragmatic failure. Pragmatic errors or “errors of appropriacy” (Grandall & Bas-turkmen 2004: 38) are perceived as serious by native speakers and, compared to grammatical or vocabulary errors, are “less easily forgiven” (Yates 2010: 288). They might be seen as offensive, disrespectful or even rude.

The Bantu languages are no exception to the underlying principles governing greetings. The non-Bantu speakers, therefore, have to learn to use the forms of salutation correctly and appropriately if they want to communicate with the Bantu speakers. The paper focuses on the usage patterns that are connected with greetings and farewells. Thus, greetings and farewells are not seen as speech acts that can be studied in isolation, these expressions must be investigated within the context in which they occur.

The ultimate goal of language teaching and learning is developing the ability to communicate in the target language. Communication is not, however, just a question of grammar and vocabulary, it is also a question of culture (Crozet 1996). Every message a human being communicates through language is communicated in a cultural context. However, there are of course also similarities, particular behaviours, norms and beliefs that are shared among different linguistic communities.

This study focuses on greeting practices among different Bantu communities. It investigates greeting practices of Swahili and Zulu speakers, in particular. While both communities speak a Bantu language, one may assume that there are certain similarities between their greeting routines. In fact, the research shows significant differences between speaker roles in terms of age, position, and family/social relations of the interlocutors.

4. The salutation in Swahili

Swahili is a language of wider communication in East Africa, therefore it is used as a second or third language by the majority of its users. This is important, since every user has her/his own cultural background that comes with linguistic behaviour absorbed within her/his native language and that heavily influences discourse patterns when she/he speaks Swahili. Batibo (2009, 2015) investigated the effects of the differences of cultural norms and values when minority language speakers shift to dominant languages or use them as second or primary language. The research shows that even speakers who abandoned their native language in favour of a dominant language (in this case Swahili) still value and often transfer the cultural norms of their native language into the dominant language. It is thus difficult nowadays to draw a distinction between what “pure” Swahili is and what adopted cultural norms are. The diversity of Swahili speakers does not allow for strictly defined norms and values to be shared by all its speakers across East Africa. In fact, Swahili native speakers do not belong to any defined ethnic group (Batibo 2009). The language itself is not bound to any particular culture but open to all cultural dimensions of its users, easily adopting different variations of cultural norms and values across areas where it is spoken.

Swahili as a widely spread *lingua franca* is a very tolerant and modern language that incorporates norms of the Western culture, so its conventions pertaining to the salutation are not as traditional as those of the other Bantu languages of East Africa. For example, kneeling used to be a popular greeting act among many African communities, but it does not feature in Swahili, however, it is still practiced among other traditional communities, like the Ngoni and Sukuma, who also use Swahili on a daily basis.

The typical Swahili conversation, similar to Zulu, comprises four distinct parts. The greeting is followed by the enquiry about each other’s well-being, after which the actual conversation takes place and thereafter, at the end of the conversation, follows the parting farewell.

4.1. Linguistic forms of greeting in Swahili

Among the Swahili speakers it is age rather than any other characteristic that has the greatest significance for the salutation, especially in terms of turn taking. The younger person always initiates the greeting and it is very important that she/he uses the right expression. If not, the older, offended interlocutor, may react by demanding the right form of address/greeting (Omar 1991).

When an older and a younger person meet, there is a standardised expression *Shikamoo* 'My respects' that the younger person initiates the greeting with. It should be followed by an answer *Marahaba* 'I accept your greeting' – the dependency of the expressions requires the younger person to speak first. The term "younger" may also be equivalent to a lower status of the interlocutor who should pay respect not only to an older person but also to someone of higher status. The form also has a plural variant *Shikamooni* that should be used when greeting several older/of a higher status people at the same time.

The usual greeting routine among interlocutors of equal age and/or status starts with the following saying which can be used regardless of the time of day:

- A: Hujambo?¹
'How are you? (*lit.* There is no matter with you?)'
- B: Sijambo.
'I am well.'

In fact, the words *hujambo* and *sijambo* have significant verbal characteristics. The initial morphemes *hu-* and *si-* are negations. *Hu-* is the negative for the second person singular, while *si-* is the negative for the first person singular. *Jambo* means 'matter', and the literal meaning of the whole phrase *Hujambo* is 'There is nothing wrong with you, I hope'. Similarly, the response can be translated as 'No, there is nothing wrong with me'. Person A does not ask only for information, but he/she puts forward a hypothesis. There is also a plural version that can be used when one addresses a group of people *Hamjambo* 'Are you-all well?' and the response is *Hatujambo* 'We are well'. *Hawajambo* with the same answer *Hawajambo*, is a query meaning 'Nothing wrong with them?' which is used when asking about the other party's (plural) well-being. There is no distinction between the masculine and the feminine, so the forms can be used for both men and women.

¹ All linguistic examples, if not indicated otherwise, are provided by the authors.