

A Sociolinguistic Study of Greetings Among Iraqi University Students

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This study is a qualitative descriptive study. Its aim is to know the most commonly used greetings among students. It aims to identify the students' language level and its effect on their use of greetings. The participants are students from Al-Muthanna University, Department of English. They are 100 students from the first, second, third, and fourth stages. The data were collected using a questionnaire, and the data were analyzed using Politeness Theory. The results of this study show that Iraqi society has its own culture, customs, and traditions in greetings, and students' greetings at the university are affected by these factors.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Greetings, Linguistic Functions, Customs and Traditions, Politeness Theory.

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1. Introduction

Greetings are social behaviors that exist in all societies. They are used to communicate and start interactions with others. Greetings are an essential part of conversations because they show respect and appreciation for the other person. The type and form of greetings are influenced by factors such as culture, society, traditions, and religious beliefs. Because of these factors, each society has its own greeting practices that reflect its cultural values and social norms. Greetings can be divided into two main types: verbal and non-verbal. Non-verbal greetings may include physical actions such as handshakes or other gestures, depending on the cultural context. Greetings are both language and social behavior, which is why sociolinguistics studies them. This field is important because it helps us understand how differences in societies and cultures affect the language people use, especially in their greetings. This study focuses on greetings among Iraqi university students, specifically at Al-

Muthanna University. It also studies how social factors, environment, culture, and language level affect the way students greet each other. This study is important because it helps us understand how greetings reflect social and cultural beliefs among students. This study is limited to Iraqi university students, specifically students at Al-Muthanna University. It focuses on social, cultural, religious, and environmental factors, and students' language level, and how these factors affect their greeting.

2. Sociolinguistics

The relationship between society and language is studied by sociolinguistics. This field examines the different ways people use language in various contexts and focuses on social relationships and how individuals express their social identity through language. Another aspect that this science deals with is the functions of language and how these functions are used to convey meaning from a social

perspective. It also seeks to explain the reasons behind the differences in the way we speak in different social situations. Furthermore, sociolinguistics studies the relationship between language and context, and how the social context in which people communicate influences their way of speaking (Holmes, 1992).

3. Language Functions

Linguistic schools that influenced language functions:

3.1. Prague school

This school presented basic ideas in the field of linguistics, including ideas about sentence structure and its relation to the functions of language. The most famous and influential scholar in this school is Roman Jakobson, who has many studies related to linguistics, starting with the first studies he conducted on children's language acquisition (Ibrahim, 2022).

According to Roman Jakobson, there are six characteristics or features through which to study functions of the language, which are: Referential function, Emotive function, Phatic function, Conative function, and Metalinguistic function.

The two functions related to this research are Emotive and Phatic Functions.

1. Emotive means keeping social communication.
2. Phatic means expression of feelings.

3.2 The London School

It is one of the linguistic schools that influenced the study of language functions. It focuses on the expressive aspects and the social characteristics of language. The beginnings of this school can be traced back to the ideas of Daniel Jones and Henry Sweet regarding phonetics. One of the founding figures of this school is Halliday (Ibrahim, 2022).

3.3 Halliday's Approach in Linguistics

In the field of linguistics, Halliday adopted a functional approach. His approach focused on the functionality of language. He stated that, according to his approach, linguistic structures have purpose and these purposes indicate that everything is acquired through communication. Language is considered essential and fundamental in life. Moreover, his approach studies the meaning of language rather than merely words and structures (Ibrahim, 2022).

According to Halliday, there are three functions of language:

1. Ideational function – In language, the ideational function is an important part of meaning. This function includes the semantic meaning, which reflects what is in our minds and thoughts. That is, the decisive use of language in each function is the ideational factor (Halliday, 1973, as cited in Ibrahim, 2022).

2. The textual function – This function requires language to establish cohesion, for example, actual connections between sentences. This function is located between parts of language, and the different types of text that can be linked to the broader context indicate this function (Halliday, 1973, as cited in Ibrahim, 2022).

3. The interpersonal function – This concerns social relationships and also focuses on people's motives for doing things and acting upon them (Halliday, 1973, as cited in Ibrahim, 2022).

4. Related Studies

(Hassan, 2019) discusses the different patterns of greetings, this study specifically focuses on the differences in greetings in the Southern Iraqi dialect compared to other regions. The aim of this study is to examine the pattern of repetition in greetings in this dialect, meaning the study of the sociolinguistic behavior of synonymic repetition in greetings in this dialect. The method or data collection in this study was through observing people in conversations and collecting information by recording dialogues in both private and public gatherings in the homes of

influential people. This study discussed the types of greetings in Southern Iraq, for example, verbal greetings like “Shlonak” and The second type of greetings is non-verbal, like handshakes, cheek kissing. One of the results of this study is that the purpose of repetition is to show strong and deep relationships among people in these regions.

(Abdul Kareem & Kareem, 2024) conducted the difficulty of translating Iraqi informal greetings into English. The aim of the study is to find suitable solutions for this problem. The researchers collected data from the Iraqi community and took four informal greetings. These greetings were given to five MA students in the College of Arts, Translation Department, to translate them. The study also mentioned that the researchers used two strategies to control the cultural difficulty in translation. The results showed that the main problem in translating these greetings is the difficulty of understanding the cultural context in which these expressions are used. It also showed that these greetings are culture-specific expressions and have no direct equivalent in English.

(Riyahi, 2024) conducted the phonetic patterns that appear in Iraqi greetings. This study was done in Basra city. The aim of the study is to show the differences between men and women in using these phonetic patterns. Another aim is to find out if the same educational level affects the use of similar tones for both genders. The sample of the study was 48 people, men and women, educated and uneducated. The data were collected through voice recording, and later the recordings were listened to and analyzed. The results showed that men have lower tones than women in both formal and informal greetings. The tones also change between genders depending on the situation, the speaker, and the listener.

(Muhammed, 2025) discusses pragmatic study of speech acts. It explained pragmatics and its role in how speech acts work. In this study, the data were 40 examples to show the most common speech acts in Iraqi Arabic, including greetings in Iraqi society. The study also showed the ways people express feelings, requests, apologies, and greetings. The aim of the study is to find out how speech acts

are formed and to understand how people use them in Iraq and how they change according to context. This study used theories as a framework. The results showed that speech acts have ambiguity and politeness strategies that are culturally embedded when compared to English.

5. Roles of Greetings

Greetings have interactions and build strong relationships. They show respect and appreciation to the other person. Greetings are used to show acknowledgment of the other side in conversations or other situations. Of course, depending on the context and culture, greetings may differ, but their main purpose is to show respect, appreciation, and to create relationships with others. They reflect social norms and traditions, so they have an important role in culture. Each culture has its own greetings that reflect its values, norms, and traditions (Toshmatov & Niyozmatova, 2024).

Greeting exists in all languages and is considered a linguistic routine used to start conversations politely and build social relationships. The fields that study greetings include sociology, sociolinguistics, anthropology, and discourse analysis. Greetings are an important part of communication and have cultural and social significance (Liu, 2016). They are considered a social ritual through which social relationships are formed, and through greetings these relationships are maintained. Greetings have symbolic meanings in every culture and reflect customs, traditions, and social norms. They occur in different contexts, for example, among friends, family, neighbors, and parents.

Greetings vary depending on the time of day, the relationships between people, and the social situation. In the Oxford English Dictionary, a greeting is defined as something you say or do to welcome someone. One important aspect of greetings is respect, which is common, as people pay great attention to respectful greetings (Adebayo et al., 2025). styles or ways differ according to cultural background. a group of people may not share the same cultural background, but they have a common

greeting. For example, Muslims differ in countries, culture, and linguistic backgrounds, but they have a common greeting which is As-salamu ‘alaykum (Risdadi et al., 2023).

Greetings can be divided into two types. The first type is formal and traditional greetings, which are defined as communication through writing. This type is used in formal communication, for example in diplomatic letters. The second type is informal and non-traditional greetings, which are considered persuasive and are used to attract attention (Bibiri et al., 2016, as cited in Risdadi et al., 2023).

There is an older study on greeting behavior by Kendon and Ferber (1973). They found that a greeting is a unit of social interaction. For example, in gatherings, each person greets the other either with words or gestures, signaling that they have seen the other person (Kendon, 1990, as cited in Nilsson et al., 2020). These scholars, and those who followed them, stated that the words we use for greetings are often accompanied by body movements, such as waving or nodding. Most of our conversations and interactions begin with a verbal greeting, along with eye contact and a smile (Kendon, 1990; Duranti,

1997; Pillet-Shore, 2008, as cited in Nilsson et al., 2020).

6. Cultural norms

Greetings are strongly connected to the culture of the country or society, their values, and their traditions. The differences in cultures affect the form and type of greetings. Therefore, in this part of the research, greetings in Eastern countries such as China and India, in the Middle East such as the Gulf region and Iraq, and in Western countries will be discussed. This part will explain how the culture of each country influences the types and forms of greetings.

6.1 Eastern Countries

1. China

One of the most common greetings in China is "ni hao", which means hello. People often use it with a nod of the head or a small bow, and this is a sign of respect (Toshmatov, 2020).



Figure 1: Chinese greeting Nihao (iStock, 2013)

In China, one form of greeting is asking about personal details, such as “Where are you going?”, “Have you eaten today?”, or “What are you doing now?”. These questions are used to show care and

closeness. Another form of greeting in China is using kinship term this is very common in Chinese culture. The choice of kinship term depends on age, identity, and how suitable the title is. These are used to show

respect and to recognize the social position of people. This reflects a culture of respect and politeness in Chinese society. Also, farewell greetings in China are different. When they say goodbye, they often give the reason related to the other person, for example: “You are very busy, I should not disturb you, so I will leave.” This type of farewell shows politeness and the respect that is common in their society (Zhang, 2022).

One of the factors that influence the forms of greetings in China is the ideas and values they have. In Eastern countries, traditional moral thinking is very important, so in China, morals come first. Values also affect greetings. The Confucian idea of benevolence means love and caring for others, and old values related to Confucianism encourage

connection in the community. This shows that Chinese culture is a collective culture. Another factor that influences their greetings is the collective environment. The relationships between people play a role in the form of greeting, and also family closeness has an effect. For example, greetings for older people are more respectful (zhang, 2022).

2. India

The most common greeting in India is Namaste. It is done by bringing the palms of the hands together in front of the chest and making a small bow. The word Namaste means “I bow to you.” This greeting represents philosophical ideas and religious practices.



Figure 2: Namaste greeting in India (iStock, n.d)

This greeting has religious symbolism and ancient origins, and it has continued until today. Its continuation for many years shows its ability to adapt and fit different social contexts, even when these contexts change over time. However, the greeting has kept its symbolic elements and religious importance in Indian society. It is also considered a linguistic practice. This greeting has its social and situational context. For example, in the morning in India, people greet each other by saying Namaste. The spread of

yoga practice has also helped this greeting become global, and Namaste is now used around the world. According to Durkheim, the greeting Namaste is a social fact that helps maintain social behavior by reinforcing social values. Collins argues that this greeting, through its physical movement and mutual recognition between individuals, creates emotional energy, which helps to strengthen social bonds between people

(Pallathadka & Roy, 2025).

6.2 Western Countries

Western people in greeting use the first name of the person, and this in their culture shows the close relationship between the speaker and the listener. They also in their greetings do not use words that show age because in their culture they do not want others to see themselves as old, and they do not use words that show closeness for people who are not close, because in their culture and society this greeting is not polite. The expressions they use in greeting are without questions or personal information of the other person (Zhang,2022) .

1. Britain and America

According to Grice (1991), the British in their greetings are more formal and they use formal greetings such as “Hello” or “How are you,” and they are more polite in performing their greetings. Piper et al. (1999) mentioned that when the British greet a person, they use the family name. While in American society there is a difference. According to Halliday (1979), the American society is known for informal greetings because they ignore the social status. According to Piper et al. (1999), Americans use the first name of the person when greeting. According to Atwood (2015), in America and Britain, they use different strategies in greeting because of the differences in culture and the country. But in British and American society, they avoid repetition in their greetings (Abbas ,2022). Here it shows how culture has a big role and affects the greeting, even though America and Britain are Western countries, each country and society has its own culture in greetings.

6.3 Countries of the Middle East

1. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, the most famous greeting is the Islamic greeting, which is “As-salaam-alaykum”. It is used to get people’s attention that someone has arrived at a place. For them, it is considered a sufficient greeting and it is used in many occasions like official greetings, social events, religious celebrations, and public gatherings. The Bedouin areas in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have different

greetings. They are known for welcome greetings. In Bedouin culture, these greetings show that the guest is welcome. The greeting is in formal Arabic and also includes a prayer for the guest (Tag Eldin, 2023). Greetings are different between women and men in Saudi Arabia depending on the person, social situation, and social distance. They use verbal and non-verbal greetings, which are different for men and women. Non-verbal greetings are more common among women. For example, they use expressions like “Hala”, “Wala”, “Shlonk”, and “Sh Halak”. The formal greeting is “As-salaam-alaykum”. Women, when greeting friends, use both verbal and non-verbal greetings like hugging and kissing. Men use more masculine expressions and shake hands strongly (Almushayqin , 2020)

2. Iraq

In Iraq, and especially in the southern areas, greetings are verbal and non-verbal. One form of formal greeting is handshaking with the right hand, and this greeting is common between people of the same gender. Because of their Islamic culture, there is no physical contact between different genders. In their culture, pulling the hand quickly is considered not good and impolite, while pressing the hand means deep relationship and friendship. Also, greeting from a distance by using the right hand depends on the closeness, relationship, or friendship between them. The third type of greeting is kissing the shoulder, and this is very common in the southern areas of Iraq, and kissing the hand is used rarely to show respect for righteous people and elderly people. Also, their greetings are known for repetition, and this is known in the southern Iraqi culture to confirm the greeting (Hassan,2019).

7. Methodology

This study used a qualitative descriptive method in order to know the most common greetings among students in universities are males and females from Al-Muthanna University, Department of English, from the first, second, third, and fourth stages, 25 students from each stage, making a total of 100

students. Data Collection the data were collected through a questionnaire that contains 15 questions.

8. Analytical Procedure

The analytical procedure in this study involved dividing the questionnaire, which contains 15 questions, into five groups. Each group includes related questions. The data were analyzed based on the number of participants' answers and the actual responses. Also, Politeness Theory was used in the analysis.

8. Analysis

1. Greetings Forms at Iraqi universities

The most common types of greetings are verbal and non-verbal. More than 50% of the students use both types, verbal and non-verbal, such as smiling, raising the hand, and handshaking. Friends also use special greetings like raising the eyebrow with each other. The most common verbal greeting used is "As-salamu alaykum". According to the theory used in this study, these results are considered positive students, especially friends, and their use of special greetings among themselves.

Table 1: Greetings Forms at Iraqi universities

Type of greetings	Percentage
Verbal	%15
Non verbal	%15
Both	%60

2. Greetings Forms between Genders

The study showed that the students avoid greeting the opposite gender because of social and religious reasons, and also shyness. Some of them avoid greetings to avoid interaction or long

conversations at the university. Also, more than 50% greet the opposite gender, but the greeting is short and formal. According to the theory used in this study, this is considered negative politeness because of the limits between genders and their avoidance of long interaction.

Table 2: Greetings Forms between Genders

Greetings	Percentage	Reasons
Short and Formal	%61	Shyness , religious Social customs.
Avoid greeting	%35	Shyness, to avoid long conversation.

Table 2 shows that the reasons behind using short and formal greetings and also avoid greeting.

3. Greetings form between Teacher and Student

Greetings between students and teachers are usually more formal than greetings between friends. The most common type of greeting is verbal and polite. Also, the place inside the university does not change the way students greet their teachers, as the greeting stays formal. This is because of several reasons, such as the teacher’s social position and respect, which require a polite and formal greeting. This is negative politeness because of the formal relationship and limits between student and teacher.

4. Greetings form Among Friends

The most common greetings between friends are friendly greetings. Many students have their own special greetings that they use with close friends, such as “salam alaykum molay,” “shlonak haji,” “how are you my sweet,” They may also use informal greetings like holding a friend’s hand or giving a hug. According to politeness theory, this is considered positive politeness because it shows closeness and a strong relationship between friends.

Table 3: Greetings form Among Friends

Gender	Greeting form	Percentage	Greeting
Male	Verbal and non-verbal	%44	Hi bro ,use raising hand and hug ,handshake
Female	Verbal and non-verbal	%50	Smile, hi hug, called her my baby.

Tab3 shows greeting forms among friends.

9. Discussion

According to the results of this study, the most common greetings are verbal and non-verbal, and they are mostly used between the same genders. The most common greetings are raising the hand, handshaking, and “As-salamu alaykum”. These are common greetings in Iraqi society, and “As-salamu alaykum” is an Islamic greeting and is used a lot. Greetings with the opposite gender are very different. They are more formal and short because of religious and social reasons, and to avoid long talking with the opposite gender. This shows that Iraqi society follows traditions and Islamic limits.

Greetings between students and teachers are more polite, respectful, and formal because of the teacher’s social status. Most of them are verbal greetings. Different places in the university do not change the

type of greeting, and it stays respectful with the teacher. But greetings between friends are friendly, less formal, and more interactive because they are close to each other. Some students use special greetings with their friends. Language level also affects the type of greeting and interaction. The study showed that weak language ability leads to short greetings and short interaction. This shows that language is connected to society and affects

10 Conclusion

This study focused on greetings among students in Iraqi universities, especially Al-Muthanna University. The results of this study showed that greetings in Iraqi society are connected to its culture, customs, and traditions, and its commitment to Islamic limits. For example, the most common

greetings are the Islamic greeting “As-salamu alaykum”. Also because of Islamic culture and shyness, greetings between males and females are short and formal. However, greetings between the same gender or friends are very different. They are friendly, less formal, and more interactive because of closeness and friendship. Greetings with the teacher are formal because of respect and the different social status of the teacher. Another result of this study is language and its effect on greetings, and how language is connected to society. The study showed that the higher the language level, the more students use English verbal greetings. For example, third and fourth stage students at Al-Muthanna University use English greetings more than first and second stage students.

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