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## Politeness in the Malay Community

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### ABSTRACT

This concept paper focuses on the discussion pertaining to the status among the Malay community in Malaysia. Malaysia is a multiracial country with the Malays as the majority in the population. Therefore, the objective of the study is to discuss the politeness in the Malay community. The discussion focuses on the status among family members, friends, formal and awarded status. The study also implicates researcher, educators, individuals whom understand the status in the Malay community in Malaysia, and hence, understand the culture. It is hoped that future studies will focus on perceptions towards the status among the Malay communities.

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## INTRODUCTION

Every country has its own status when addressing others. This relates to being polite (Awang Sariyan, 2007) to another by addressing the right words. Some countries feel that the status is not important as long as the respect is still there. Hence, some other countries feel that the status is important especially among family members, and also when addressing someone with a higher status. As such, the status is considered as an important factor to ensure that everyone is respectful towards each other (Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin, Harishon Radzi, Maslida Yusof and Saadiah Mat Alip, 2005). Thus, most Asian countries have practiced the status among the community especially countries like, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Korea, China, Japan, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia and others. Hence, European and other countries in the west have practice the status only for parents and grandparents, while some countries added the status of uncles and aunts. Therefore, it shows that politeness and status has played a major role in uniting family members and being respectful towards one another.

Marlyna Maros, Aslinda John and Mohd Baharim Mydin (2010) study focuses on greetings among university students. The objective of this study is to present greeting patterns as well as greetings that include status among undergraduate students at a higher public learning institution in Malaysia. The study is composed of the researchers' random observations on inappropriateness of greeting behaviors among the students which involved the lecturers bringing about the questions of their sociopragmatic competences. The study observes the greeting patterns based on contexts, formality levels and the relationships between the interlocutors. The data will be analyzed according to gender differences and relating the gender factor to cultural and sociopragmatic aspects. The Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT) consists of 15 elicited settings, distributed to 264 respondents, giving a total of 3960 greeting outcomes. 30 respondents from the group of 264 contributed to the interview data. The ethnographic observations took place in three months. The findings revealed that interlocutors with close social distances preferred non-conventional greetings. Therefore, female students with close social relations would greet when hearing his/her first name, while male students would nod or say "hi". The analyses were based on Leech's (1993) sociopragmatics principles and Sherzer's (1987) features of male-female differences during interactions.

Leech (1983: 104) defines politeness as "social goals of establishing and maintaining comity" or mutual courtesy. Fraser (1975: 13) defines politeness as a property associated with an utterance in which, according to the hearer, the speaker has neither exceeded any rights nor failed to fulfill any obligations. Watts (2003: 17) defines politeness as face-constituting linguistic behaviours, a "mutually cooperative behaviour, consideration for others, and polished behaviour". Watts, Ide and Ehlich (2005: 2) added that politeness when manifested "helps us to achieve effective social living". Brown and Levinson (1987) and Duthler (2006) viewed politeness as a formal theoretical construct to analyze the language used in verbal interactions. Lakoff (1973) believes that

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politeness has been established in societies to save people from friction during personal interactions. Lakoff (1973) introduces one maxim of politeness as in, "Be polite" which includes strategies to soften the illocutionary force. Trosborg (1994: 24) agrees with Lakoff (1973) and states that the strategies of being polite depend on individuals.

Kuang Ching Hei, Maya Khemlani David and Lau Su Kia (2013) postulated that politeness is important in showing a person's character. Being polite is taught from when a child is born from upbringing parents and family members, a person will show politeness no matter where he/she goes (Lakoff, 1973). Here, politeness is taken to mean good manners such as greeting, acknowledging and thanking others (Awang Sariyan, 2007). Hence, politeness is an important social element in the Malaysian society in formal or informal situations. This study investigates the public transactions of front counter staff and patients in nine Malaysian private hospitals. The study was carried out for three months via close observations and focus was given to the use of openings and closings in 158 transactions. The data were analyzed by transcribing orthographically. The framework of the study used Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of politeness. Malaysian's concept of good manners such as greeting and thanking (Awang Sariyan, 2007) were applied as a framework. The results of the study revealed that the front counter staff employed in private hospitals had more impolite openings but at the end of the transactions, they used more polite closings. The results also revealed that the polite closings were often given in response to patients' initiations. The findings of the research benefited researchers of communication, curriculum designers and practitioners as these findings clearly indicate the awareness for politeness in people; there is a need for professional communication skills to be taught and implemented in service industries.

Studies on greetings of being polite showed that the aspects of behaviour (Hafreeza Burhanudeen, 1998; Kasih, 2002, 2004; Waldvogel, 2007; Ibrahim Youssouf *et al.*, 1976) play an important role in a society. Hence, greetings are an important aspect for communication. According to Abdul Sukor Shari, Nuraini Yusoff and Mohd Isa Awang, (2003), greetings are referred to the language used when a person starts talking to another person and uses the status appropriately according to their job, status and age. The style of greeting should follow the right rules and norms, and such factors are social status, social distance, context, interaction and gender of the speaker. If a person does not follow the rules, there may be barriers during interaction. As mentioned earlier, Malaysia is a multicultural society which holds certain traditional norms such as showing respect for the authority and senior people (Asma Abdullah and Pedersen, 2003), showing modesty for one's way of living (Awang Sariyan, 2007; Asmah Haji Omar, 1995), avoiding conflicts (Asrul Zamani, 2002), and being humble when praised (Shanmuganathan, 2003). In addition, foreigners who visited Malaysia have found that Malaysians are also known for their warmth and hospitality, and hence, the campaign "Budi Bahasa Budaya Kita" (Politeness is our Culture) plays a good evidence and gestures worldwide.

#### *Politeness and Status in the Malay Community Families:*

In the Malay community, status is an important factor in order to ensure that the younger generation will respect the elders. Status, as in giving specific names for each person in the family role, holds a great impact towards better and conducive conversation (Awang Sariyan, 2007; Norhashimah Jalaluddin *et al.*, 2005). Like any family of other races, the parents will be called with names *Emak* (mother) and *Ayah/Abah* (father). It can be seen that the names will be called only by the children and daughter- or son-in-laws towards the parents. Recently, there are also other names for mother and father due to the influence from television programs and dramas. For instance, the word *Emak* (mother) will be replaced with *Ummi/Mama* (mother) and *Ayah/Abah* (father) will be replaced with *Daddy/Bapak* (father). The word *Bapak* (father) was used by people in the 50s and 60s, and it is conventional. Currently, the word *Bapak* (father) is still being used by modern Malays in Malaysia. The word *Daddy* is influenced by the English word while the word *Ummi* is influenced by the Arabic word.

On the other hand, the siblings in the family have status ranging from the eldest to the youngest. The list of siblings with the status used by the Malays according to the first born and the last is as follows:

- 1-Along
- 2-Engah/Angah
- 3-Alang
- 4-Ateh
- 5-Anjang
- 6-Ucu/Acu

The list above showed that if the family consists of 6 children, the known names will be stated as above. Usually after the fifth child, there will be no statuses or names. This was due to fact that most Malaysians have less than six children. If there were more than six children, the child will be called with their own names. The reasons with the status names between siblings are because the younger person in the family will not be called with their names but instead with the status name, and will show more respect towards the elders. Hence, some families in Malaysia do not use the status due to several factors. Such factors include the little number of

siblings in a family, or the parents not wanting any status names in the family (Awang Sariyan, 2007; Norhashimah Jalaluddin *et al.*, 2005). Some of the families would call the siblings *kakak* (sister) or *abang* (brother), or include the word *kakak* (sister) or *abang* (brother) with their names. For instance, if the eldest brother's name is *Ahmad*, therefore the younger sister or brother will call him *Abang Ahmad* (Brother Ahmad). This shows that there is a value of respect between siblings.

Thus, if one of the siblings got married and have children, the children will call their parents siblings according to the status listed below;

- 1- *Along – Pak Long/Mak Long* (Uncle/ Auntie)
- 2- *Engah/Angah – Pak Ngah/Mak Ngah* (Uncle/Auntie)
- 3- *Alang – Pak Lang/ Mak Lang* (Uncle/Auntie)
- 4- *Ateh – Pak Teh/ Mak Teh* (Uncle/Auntie)
- 5- *Anjang – Pak Anjang / Mak Anjang* (Uncle/Auntie)
- 6- *Ucu/Acu – Pak Usu/ Mak Usu* (Uncle/Auntie)

The list above clearly states that uncles and aunties still maintain the original status when they were single as siblings, but were automatically changed after new members in the family. The new members could be children of the siblings. Hence, there are also modern families who do not use the status to this level (Awang Sariyan, 2007; Norhashimah Jalaluddin *et al.*, 2005). They would rather use the English words such as *Uncle* and *Auntie* and followed by the name of the person. For instance, if the eldest name is *Ahmad*, the niece or nephew will call him *Uncle Ahmad*. It can be seen that the influence of the television and the multiracial country (Norhashimah Jalaluddin *et al.*, 2005) has changed the statuses tremendously and some of the family members are not aware of the traditional status that were previously used since their ancestors.

Consequently, the same goes to the status for the grandparents. The names for grandparents are *Datok* (grandfather) and *Nenek* (grandmother). The names and status do not change for the old generation. The Malay community is still comfortable with the traditional names (Norhashimah Jalaluddin *et al.*, 2005). Nevertheless, according to different dialects in Malaysia, the names have changed. Certain states in Malaysia have different names for grandfather such as *Tok*, *Atok* and *Tok Wan* while for grandmother *Tok*, *Opah* and *Mek*. Some states use *Tok Wan* for both grandfather and grandmother. Hence, all the statuses were known according to the states and the family.

#### *Politeness and Status in the Malay Language:*

Thus, the status does not only limit the family members but also the community. If a younger person calls an elder person who is not a family member, he/she can either call him with the status *Encik* (Mr), *Puan* (Mrs) or *Cik* (Miss) followed by the name. For example, if the person name is *Ahmad*, he will be called *Mr Ahmad* by people around him who is not a family member. Here, the status is mostly for formal occasions such as in the office or meetings. A younger person who lives in the same area will call an elder person with *Pak cik* (Uncle) or *Mak cik* (Auntie) followed by the names. This shows respect from the younger person to the older person (Awang Sariyan, 2007; Asrul Zamani, 2002). Hence, among the Malay community, there is also status awarded. As compared to other countries, the status is not mentioned verbally but only on paper. For instance, the status of a person who achieved a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree will be called *Dr* followed by the name, or if he/she is awarded with a *Professor*, he/she will be called the word *Professor* followed by the name. It will be offensive if the status is not called as it is very sensitive. Even, when a person obtained a PhD or Professor, he/she will not be called with the status *Encik* (Mr) or *Puan/Cik* (Mrs/Miss). This will create a sensitive environment since status is important when addressing a person (Awang Sariyan, 2007). Moreover, in Malaysia, there are also lists of statuses awarded by the *Duli Yang Maha Mulia Seri Paduka Baginda Yang Di Pertuan Agong* (King of the Country) and *Duli Yang Maha Mulia Sultan* (Sultan) from each state. The status should also be mentioned in conversation and in writing, since this shows respect regardless for younger or older person. The statuses are *Datuk Seri*, *Puan Seri Datuk*, *Tan Sri*, *Puan Sri*, *Datin Paduka*, *Datuk Paduka* and *Datin*. A few statuses are automatically given to the spouse. For instance, if a male is given a status by the Sultan with the name *Tan Sri*, therefore, the wife will obtain the *Puan Sri* automatically. Unfortunately, if the status is given to the female, the husband will not get the status.

Based on the data above, it can be seen that status among the Malay community is important. Nevertheless, some statuses are given to the non-Malays due to their work and delivered by the King of the country or the Sultan of the states. Hence, the status is still mentioned within speeches and in writing as it is important to address a person with status (Awang Sariyan, 2007; Norhashimah Jalaluddin *et al.*, 2005; Asrul Zamani, 2002). It can also be seen that among the Malay community, status is important in a family (Norhashimah Jalaluddin *et al.*, 2005) and the status stays as long as the new parents decided to maintain such status. On the other hand, if new parents decides not to use the status in the family, they are allowed to do so. Therefore, it is a privilege for the Malay community to maintain the status which was carried down from their ancestors until today.

### Conclusion:

This study implicates researchers, individuals and educators from all over the world. They can compare the status among the Malay community with their own, and will discover that the status generates respect. Although, there is still respect without the status, it will not be same for other countries, as an older person can be called with the first name. This study also helps people around the world to be aware of the culture in the Malay community, and hence, gain knowledge about them. It is hoped that future studies will concentrate on the status by analyzing peoples' opinions toward the status known in the Malay community.

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