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## What was that you called me ?

### Forms of Address in Cross-Cultural Interactions

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#### Abstract

Forms of address have always been, and continue to be, markers of the perceived relationship between speaker and hearer. While English is the most frequently used language for international communication, there is no "one correct English system" for forms of address. This paper reports on a study done at the East-West Center with representatives of fifteen cultures who offered suggestions on what to use and what to expect as forms of address when speaking in English with people from their respective countries.

Anthropologists remind us that the way people address one another offers important information about the social structure of their society. Terms of address include legal names (Mayuri, Lawrence), names with titles (Acharn Somsak, Dr. Jones), pet names/nicknames (Dang, Old Blue Eyes), terms which indicate age, rank of speaker in relation to age of listener (Phi Ma), professional titles (General McArthur, Dr. Wong), and numerous others. Many people (including Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese) write and say their names with their family name first and the given name second. Americans and Britons often have middle names, which appear between the first and last (family) names. Some people, like the Thais and the Portuguese, usually use their given names with proper titles as address forms. Some people, like Koreans, very rarely use given names outside their immediate family. Some Spanish-speaking people have

a double surname (family name), from both the maternal and paternal family names, but are usually addressed by title plus the father's surname. People in many cultures use "pen names" and "stage names."

Americans, when addressing others, switch from title plus last name to first name very quickly. Sometimes Americans even begin addressing another by first name immediately after being introduced. The British prefer to use title plus last name for a much longer period of time. Although most Americans call one another by their first names, even if they have just met, there are many Americans who do not like this practice, especially if the person speaking is trying to sell them something. In Mexico, professionals may be addressed by profession and name, such as *Arquitecto*, *Ingeniero* or *Licenciado* (Lawyer) Perez. The same is true in Italy, Denmark, West Germany, and the Philippines. *Sheik* is a term applied

in the Arab world to anyone deserving respect: a teacher, elder, religious leader or member of the royal family.

There seems to be some deeply mystical power in the names we give things and in the process of naming. The Bible says that God's first act after saying, "let there be light" was to "call the light Day, and the darkness he called Night." One of his first acts after creating Adam was to bring every beast of the field so that Adam could give them names, "and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof." In most cultures, children are named by their parents. In the United States and the United Kingdom, most parents choose a name for their child before it is born. However in some places, babies are not named right away. In parts of Africa, parents wait until children survive their early years and then give them official names. In Scandinavia the child's name is kept a secret until after the baptism. In Laos, a Hmong boy gets a name when he is three days old. When he grows up, there is a naming ceremony to give him a new name. Cambodians say that a person's name lives forever, so parents are careful to choose names with good meanings for their children. A Cambodian girl may be named for a delicate flower and a boy's name may suggest strength or honesty. In Vietnam a person's name always means something good or beautiful. Children in the U.S. are often named for relatives, but some parents just pick a name because they like it. It is not so easy in France where it is illegal to give any child a name that is not already held by a saint or a well-known figure in history.

Anyone who has studied foreign languages knows that many cultures have

formal and intimate variations of "you". In Germany and France, white-collar workers, professionals, civil servants and the older generation in general use the formal form to one another and reserve the informal form for children, family, and intimate friends. People who see each other daily at work may continue to address each other with the formal term even after many years. This is not the case in Scandinavia where the polite "you" form is steadily disappearing from use, especially in provincial towns and outlying districts.

All of this is very interesting and almost never presents a problem for people learning another language. The rule is "Find out how the people of that culture prefer to be addressed in their language and follow that guideline." The problem occurs when people are using English as an international language. Someone might say, "If you are speaking in English, then use the English forms of address." Although this sounds like good advice, it really is no help at all since we know that native speakers of English (Americans, Britons, Australians, etc.) use very different forms of address and there is no "one correct way."

Today, with English being used as the principal language of cross-cultural communication, the question of how to address people in English when one or both parties in the conversation are non-native speakers of English is an important one. Recently Nittaya Campbell and I carried out a study at the East-West Center in Hawaii on forms of address used by people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds when communicating in English. In this study graduate students from fifteen different countries were paired up to discuss how

they would prefer to be addressed by foreigners and how foreigners should expect to be addressed when interacting with them or their fellow countrymen in English. The discussions were limited to forms of address used in everyday interactions among ordinary people. No attempt was made to include situations where special protocols or forms of address are needed such as in interaction with royalty, heads of governments, and high-ranking members of special interest (e.g. religious or military) groups.

Many people in the general public think that forms of address across cultures are not a serious problem if the interactors speak English well. There seems to be agreement that if people are familiar with the titles Mr., Miss/Ms, and Mrs. and if these titles are used with the family name, there will be no difficulties whatever the nationalities of the interactors. Very quickly our discussants pointed out that this was naive, since there are different cultures among the various English speaking countries and that there is much more to forms of address than these few words. The study revealed that though most people from such countries as Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom use English as their first language and share some common features of forms of address, they do differ in substantial ways. While the titles Mr., Mrs., Ms., and Miss are simple enough and people from these countries use them, they do not always use them in the same ways or with the same frequency. Other terms like "mate," "boss," "chief," and "sir" are used very differently, if at all, in different native English speaking countries. Nicknames are commonly given to foreigners in Australia as a sign of

friendliness but that is not true elsewhere. In our study it became evident that even among the broad spectrum of native speakers of English, forms of address can be vastly different and misunderstanding and embarrassment can occur when wrong or inappropriate forms are used.

From the study, it is clear that even when speaking English, the forms of address used by or preferred by the informants did not usually follow those used in America or Britain. As might be expected, the forms of address were influenced by the speaker's own native language system of address. It therefore cannot be assumed that the formula Mr., Mrs., Miss (and recently Ms.) followed by family name is the appropriate form of address when using English in international settings. One reason for this is that some cultures do not have family names. According to our Indonesian informant, although people from Sumatra have a given name and a family name, people from Java have only one name. It is not correct, nor is it beneficial, to categorize the name as either a given name or a surname. Likewise, the Burmese do not distinguish between given and family names. If a person wants to address another person in Burma orally, he or she can use the full name, such as Ngun Lan, or only part of the name, like Ngun or Lan, but it makes no sense to a Burmese to ask what the given names or the family names is. Burmese simply do not think of names in those terms. In writing, the full name of the person addressed is to be used along with the appropriate title. In Burma, according to our Burmese informant, a man is addressed as U (as in U Nu or U Than), while a woman is called Daw. In addressing a Burmese using the

title U or Daw, one should not use the English title Mr. or Mrs./Miss/Ms. as well (e.g., Mr. U Than) because U and Daw are the Burmese equivalents of the English titles. To continue with the example used earlier, a woman named Ngun Lan should therefore be called Daw Ngun Lan and not Miss/Mrs./Ms. Daw Ngun Lan or Miss/Mrs./Ms. Daw Ngun or Miss/Mrs./Ms. Daw Lan.

In a number of cultures, our informants told us, kinship terms are used to address one another. These sometimes are extended to foreigners as well. In Indonesia, for example, instead of the basic English titles, the terms people can use or may hear being used toward themselves are "Pak" and "Ibu" (father and mother) for men and women respectively. If the person being address is younger, "Bung" (brother) and "Nona" (Miss) are used. We were told something similar to this happens in Fiji if the foreigner stays in the community for a length of time and it is felt that he is accepted as a part of the village. He is then addressed as "Tavale" (brother-in-law) plus given name. If the foreigner is only a casual visitor or the interaction only lasts a short time, the English titles plus given name is most likely to be used.

In Thailand, although there are family names, they are rarely used and are reserved only for formal or official occasions, according to our Thai informant. Even then, family names are never used by themselves. They have to be accompanied by the given name plus title. It should not be surprising therefore that people who have known each other for a long time, or are even close friends, may not know each other's family name, something that some non-Thais find difficult to understand. Our Thai informant

also pointed out that although first names are used in Thailand, as in the United States, they are usually used with a title as a form of address, unlike the U.S., where they are usually used alone (e.g., Khun Mary in Thailand vs. Mary in the U.S.)

In China, Korea, Singapore, and a number of other countries, according to our informants, a woman does not change her family name when she marries. It is a common mistake for a native English speaker, following his/her own practice, to call a woman by her husband's family name or to refer to a man by his wife's family name thinking that she got it from him when they married. For example, our female Chinese informant from the People's Republic of China was named Shen Shu Hong (i.e. Shen is her family name, Shu Hong her given name) and was married to Wong Yit Fan (i.e. Wong is his family name, Yit Fan his given name). She said she preferred to be called Miss Shen rather than Mrs. Wong. While being called Mrs. plus the husband's family name is acceptable to some Chinese women, she said most prefer to be called Miss plus own family name regardless of their marital status.

From the data gathered, we discovered that there are all sorts of ways to address people, depending on such factors as where one comes from, one's relative age, status, position, and the degree of intimacy. Most of the informants preferred to apply or adapt their own system into English and to be addressed in that manner. One reason given for this preference was that when addressed in English by a foreigner using their own forms of address instead of a native English speaker (e.g. American or British) formula, they feel that the person is interested in and making an effort to

understand their culture. By using adapted local forms of address toward the foreigner in return, they are accepting him/her into their culture. One should therefore not be surprised to be called Mr. Bill (even Khun Bill) instead of Mr. Brown, in Thailand. Most Thais who know enough English to have an English conversation know the basic titles such as Mr., Mrs., and Miss and how to use them. But that does not guarantee that they will. "Khun" is a Thai word more or less equivalent to those English titles. While Thais may be able to use the English title when speaking, their choice of "Khun" signifies, according to our informant, a lesser social distance between the speaker and listener. There is a sense of acceptance and friendship that may be lacking (in the Thai's perspective) when the more formal Mr., Mrs., or Miss. is used. Our informant told us that one should therefore feel honored rather than disturbed when addressed as "Khun" plus first name by a Thai.

Our Korean informant told us that the use of title plus first name would present some difficulty to Koreans who prefer to use family name plus title. Koreans tend not to use given names, alone or with titles, no matter how long or how well they have known someone. This should not be interpreted as evidence that Koreans are stiff, formal, or unfriendly. Our informant said that this is an example of Koreans' understanding that the use of title is necessary to show politeness and that family names are more important and give greater identity than given names. According to our informant, a foreigner in Korea should not try and "get on a first name basis" with a Korean although the foreigner can expect to develop strong and lasting friendships.

From the study, it was reaffirmed that Japanese prefer to use family name plus title. "San" is the Japanese equivalent of the English Mr., Mrs., and Miss but is placed after the family name. Like the Koreans and unlike the Thais, the Japanese prefer to use the family name in addressing others, except in one's own family or with very intimate friends in which case the given name is sometimes used instead. Though it is true that once a certain degree of intimacy is reached, the given name may be used, the informant advised foreigners to stick to the family name plus "san" as it is considered more polite. He said that if a non-Japanese felt it was possible to use a given name to a Japanese, he should know that there is a difference here between the English title, Mr., and the Japanese "san." In America and other English speaking countries, the use of given names only as a form of address denotes familiarity and informality whereas the use of a title with a name represents formality and/or distance. With the use of the given name in America therefore the title is dropped. This is not so with the Japanese form of address. The title "san" does not mean formality or distance. Rather it is connected with politeness. Our informant felt that it is possible for a non-Japanese to be close enough to a Japanese to use his/her given name, but it should always be used with "san"; never without it.

All of our informants agreed with the Thai proverbial question, "What significance is there in a name?" Which means of course that the quality of a person is more important than what s/he is called. Still, no one denied that forms of address have a significant place in intercultural and international communication. In fact, they

emphasized the importance of the proper use of appropriate forms of address when people are using English across cultures. No one should assume that there is one "correct" English way. As English continues to be used more and more as an international language, the awareness of what

and how forms of address are used across cultures becomes increasingly more important. Every user of English, native and non-native alike, must increase their awareness of these conventions and begin to use and accept them in their international interactions.

#### **The Author**

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