



Manipuri greetings: significance, role and meaning

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Abstract

Greetings are an important part of everyday interaction. Greetings convey one's desire as well as one's nature of being friendly with his/her environment; it also helps in establishing a relationship between the speaker and his surroundings. The paper aims to analyze the pragmatic functions of Manipuri greetings, their significance and role, thus studying the appropriate usage of some of the common forms of greetings, and the knowledge these expressions provide on the culture.

Keywords: Greetings, expressions, culture, politeness, society, function.

Introduction

Manipuri or Meiteilon is a Tibeto-Burman (TB) language, spoken in the northeastern state of Manipur in India¹. It comes under the Kuki-chin-Naga language sub-group of the Sino-Tibetan languages in the TB family². However the position of the Manipuri under the Kuki-chin-Naga language group remains controversial³. Some experts are of the opinion that Manipuri should be put under a distinct sub-branch of the Mikir-Meiteilon languages⁴. Manipuri is the official language of the state and it also serves as the lingua franca to the different ethnic communities inhabiting the state⁵. As per Census of India 2011, the native Manipuri speaker comprises of about 58.2% people of the total population of the state⁶. Manipuri is also spoken in the neighboring area of; parts of Assam, Tripura, Nagaland, Myanmar, Bangladesh and West Bengal as well⁷.

Appropriate greetings competence is crucial for the establishment of inter-personal relationship⁸ while acquiring the skill of any language. Although greeting expressions are taken for granted as they come naturally, the roles of greetings are undeniably important as they form the foundation on which human relationships are shaped. According to Firth, greeting expressions can not be contemplated as spontaneous impulsive reaction while people come together as they are earmarked with highly accustomed norms and comprises of a structure of its own⁸. As per Searle and Vanderveken 'greetings' have no propositional elements and are mere articulated acts, thus defining 'greeting' as a "courteous indication of recognition, with the presupposition that the speaker has just encountered the hearer"⁹. Austin states that illocutionary acts are medium to influence listeners in certain ways¹⁰.

Manipuri Greetings and its cultural notion

In Manipuri society, one of the most essential components of everyday interaction consists of greetings. The culture of

greetings in Manipuri society serves as a fine example in supporting Laver's argument that the practice of greeting, being an obligatory form of daily interaction, is a part of the "linguistic repertoire of politeness"⁸, as in Manipuri society, one is often considered rude, unsociable and aggressive if one does not have the 'decency' of greeting people. On the other hand, a person who has a habit of greeting people is often considered as a good and cultured person. Supporting this claim, there is a common phrase in Manipuri "*mi-ok mican fəbə*" roughly interpreted as having the personality trait of greeting people often and thus being a highly sociable person. This attribute constitutes one of the finest aspects of personality one could possibly possess. Younger generations, who do not greet older people in Manipur, are considered to be indecent, impolite, ill-mannered and untaught, as the "custom of greeting" is ingrained in the culture, thereby it is considered the yardstick to measure the quality of one's upbringing.

Some formal Manipuri greetings that are often used to express courtesy and politeness in social gatherings are as follows:
lakpirum-e (you have come) more like (Ah! you are here)
youbirək-le (you have arrived/reached)
leŋ-sin-bi-rək-u (welcome/ please come in)
luk-ha-bi-ra-bra/cak-ca-bi-rə-bra? (have you eaten/ have you taken your meal)

Of all the Manipuri greetings, *cak carəbra / cak cabirabra* (have you taken your meal) is the most commonly used form of greeting. One uses this greeting to greet people of daily encounters. This form of greeting is used in the evening as well as in the morning almost throughout the day. Although this greeting expression seems like a time-free form of greeting, based on the frequency of its uses throughout the day, however it is indeed time bound. It would be inappropriate to use *cak carəbra* to greet people from 3pm to 5pm. This particular greeting expression has a lot to convey about the society in context. First, using the expression conveys the fact that the

interlocutors are people of frequent encounters. This greeting behavior also speaks about the significance of rice, which is the staple food like many southeast Asian culture, as *cak*, means rice and literally translated *cak carəbra* means have you eaten rice. It is also a mood reader, as in the olden days the manipuri people were highly dependent on rice, the culture of fast foods and processed, packets food have only set its trends in the recent times, the Manipur society up until the early 90's depended mostly on rice. Rice was consumed 3-4 times a day; *cak caba* (to eat food/rice) in the morning meant something like brunch. The time of the first *cak caba* (to eat food/rice) happens somewhere between 7am up till noon, there would be another *cəra-wanbə* (to eat the leftover from the previous meal) somewhere between 1pm to 2pm, here the left over rice from the morning is eaten as cooking was a long and tedious task, as people depended on hearth made from firewood and husk of the rice which required systematic preparation and couldn't be rushed, and rice is served again for dinner. So the term *cak carəbra* is used to predict the state of mind of the other person assuming (the popular saying, a hungry man in an angry man) that if the person were filled in the stomach he/she would be in good humor. Also the completion of *cak caba* marks a completion of a certain phase of work for the day especially for grown-ups, since brunch or food is taken only after the completion of morning phase of work e.g. household chores or fieldwork. However asking someone *cak carəbra* is not an invitation for food, one is expected to answer yes or no, even if it is not the accurate answer as these greeting, like the other forms of Manipuri greetings, is only a way of expressing one's politeness, in casually acknowledging the interlocutors' presence⁹.

Greeting expressions such as *kədom-də-gi-no* (where from) / *kərai-cət-lui-no* (where did you go) are used to express an element of surprise to see the hearer at the said time and space. They are sometimes use to seek information, other times it is a time-free form of greeting or a sign of willingness to engage in conversation.

Based on Brown and Levison's politeness strategies relating to interactional behavior, greetings expressions could be arranged into 5 categories, i.e. bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and not doing the FTA¹¹, in terms of Face Threatening Acts with due consideration on the linguistic routine concerned with politeness in social interaction¹².

Manipuri Greetings could be placed under most of these greetings strategies according to the FTA theory,

Bald on records e.g.- i. *loi-rə-bra* (done), ii. *cət-lə-se* (let's go), iii. *hourəsi* (lets start), *kəydəw-ri-no* (what are you doing).

Negative greetings e.g.- i. *kəna kəna leibəge* (who is there)? ii. *mi-leibro* (Is there anyone)? iii. *Keinomtə* (equivalent to excuse me).

Positive greetings also expressed as complimentary greetings or expressing that the speaker is delighted to meet the listener e.g. i. *yam fəjərume* (you look prettier/handsome), ii. *nəsək yam hojəme* (you looks have changed).

Off record greetings that are used among intimate friends, they are highly informal, to create a comfortable or humorous language environment e.g. i. *hiyli* (still alive)? ii. *Kədomdəgino toubirək-e-sibu?* (where from), iii. *Cak ca-ré* (have you eaten)? iv. *cak cabiré* (have you eaten)

or certain humorous greetings expression, with a tone of sarcasm indicating the nature of relationship between the interlocutors.

Some of the formal Manipuri greetings, which are seldom used in day-to-day lives, are as follows:

K^hurum-jə-ri (folded hands) an act of welcoming
təramnə ok-cə-ri (welcome)

These form of formal greetings are used only in social gatherings, perhaps while addressing a large number of audience, however they hardly find application in everyday life.

Other greeting expression

jai jai/radheradhe, illustrating the influence of the Hinduism and thus the emergence of *rasthila*, these greetings expressions are mostly used among the Manipuri dance and culture oriented people. These forms of greetings speaks volumes about the interlocutors, since age, culture and religious aspects are not just the only social factor taken in account but, it also encompasses the profession, history and upbringing of the interlocutors.

kai-cət-lu-ge (Where did you go), although it seems little intuitive, it is another form of greeting that is commonly used among people of frequent encounters. *kai-cət-lu-ge* is one of the most commonly used expression among family members, however unlike the normal use of this form of greeting outside ones home, where one is not expected to give an accurate answer, the use of this expression within family is more inclined towards seeking information and hence it functions more as a question rather than greetings when used within closed family units. This expression therefore takes the role of greetings as well as interrogative function depending on the parameters of the relationship.

Some other greetings expression that are generally used in Manipuri language are as follows:

*kəmdouri,-/ bi-ri-ge*⁷, (how are you) informal, formal
*nunjai-ri-bra*⁷, (how are you) informal
kəmai-tou-ri-ge (how are you) informal
udəkuire-da/ko (its been long since I saw you last)
kei-keihotnə-ri-ge (what are you up to these days)

Also use of kinship terms like, *ipən/k^hura* / *kəka* (uncle), *ene* (aunty), *indon* (aunty), *tadə/tamo* (use to address an older male)

and *ice* (use to address an older female) without further greeting phrase is also common form of politely acknowledging the presence of the interlocutor. The age of a person is one of the determining factors in greeting another person. Second and third person pronouns are avoided while greeting or referring to an older person¹³. To shows respect and politeness.

Another form of greeting is the acknowledgment of the action performed by the listener e.g.

School *cətlabɾa* (off to School)?

*cak caribra*⁷ (you eating)?

thabək/office cətlabɾa (off to work/office)?

These forms of greetings are more like a rhetoric question. The speaker sees that the listener is performing an action, yet he asks if he/she is performing the said action, in polite acknowledgment of the presence of the other person. In such greetings the conventional answer is a smile or a yes, *um* or a nod.

Conclusion

In studying the different forms of Manipuri greetings, cultural parameters must be accounted for since social variables¹⁴, such as age group, relationship of the interlocutors, time and occasion etc. are the aspects which determine the suitability and appropriateness of the greetings used. Overlooking these variables would lead to perhaps incorrect use of greetings expression thus violating the social and age hierarchical code of conduct. In Manipuri greetings suffixes after the root word determines the relationship of the interlocutors as well, e.g. *kəmdou-ri* (informal) *kəmdou-bi-ri-ba-ge* (formal). The suffixes used, can also provide an insight on the precedence of age difference, for example an older interlocutor would normally not address a younger listener formally unless the occasion or the hierarchical position of one's profession demands so, however a younger speaker would always greet an older listener formally out of respect despite the rank or position of work. The significance of Manipuri culture is thus imbedded in its greetings expression, consequently reflecting the type of culture and practices. Manipuri greetings consist of both time free and time bound forms. Manipuri greetings are an important part of everyday interaction however they do not fundamentally represent substantial communication process, meaning they are used for the purpose of cordiality more often than to successfully convey meaning, however one always has an option of using greetings in Manipurias a conversation starter as well. Therefore, greetings play an indispensable role in establishing an impression in speech discourse in Manipuri Culture.

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