HIGH, LOW OR IN-BETWEEN? CULTURAL CONTEXT AND GREETINGS. A STUDY ON JAPANESE AND ROMANIAN

Magdalena Ciubăncan, Assist. Prof., PhD, "Dimitrie Cantemir" University of Bucharest

Abstract: Starting from Edward Hall's distinction between high-context cultures and low-context cultures and from the corresponding characteristics of each type of culture (Hall, 1976), I analyse the role that context plays in various types of greetings in Japanese and Romanian. While Japan is given as a typical example of a high-context culture, the case of Romania still needs to be investigated. My paper is an attempt to demonstrate that, when one takes into account the role of context in communication, the distinction high/low should not be regarded as a clear-cut dichotomy, defining opposing spaces, but more as referring to the extremes of a continuum on which certain segments are activated at certain times. Romanian culture and the way in which cultural characteristics are reflected in greeting expressions in the Romanian language are somewhere between these two extremes, reflecting a blend of high-context substance and low-context forms of expression.

Keywords: high-context culture, low-context culture, greeting expressions, cultural continuum.

1. Introduction

An important part of our everyday interaction with others, greeting expressions are often taken for granted and used automatically, while their semantic content is almost forgotten or ignored. The importance of the role that greetings play in human societies is, however, undeniable. Were it not for greetings, human relations would not develop smoothly, as one of the main roles that greeting expressions play is that of eliminating possible tensions from the communication between people. An illustrative example comes from a news report published in The Japan Times on February 24, 2014. The report covers an incident which occurred in Nagoya (Japan), where a man rented a car and later intentionally ran over 13 people. The man admits to being guilty and confesses that he wanted to kill people with the car, but what is relevant to our paper are the comments of his neighbours, who declared: "He was not the kind of person who would cause such an incident. […] He would always greet people.[1]" (our emphasis). The act of greeting, as can be seen from this statement, is associated with not having the intention – or the ability – to do harm. Greeting people means that one is not violent or aggressive and that he wants to establish a certain kind of relationship with his interlocutor, and through the act of greeting he establishes the ground for such a relationship.

2. Towards a definition of greetings

Greetings are some of the most common expressions that we use every day, and yet, a definition of greetings is still a matter of debate among specialists. If we take into account

[1] http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/02/23/national/crime-legal/driver-held-after-running-over-13-pedestrians-in-nagoya/#.U8fIp5R_t9V (accessed on July 10th, 10:48 hours)

BDD-A22297 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:59:12 UTC)

various dictionary definitions, a greeting is "a polite word or sign of welcome or recognition"[2] or "something that is said or done to show people that you are happy to meet or see them […] a message that expresses good wishes to someone"[3]. Thus, among the characteristics that greeting expressions have, we find: politeness, good wishes and welcoming, recognition of somebody, feelings of happiness. The semantic and functional areas covered by greeting expressions appear to be rather large, hence the difficulty of coming up with a unitary definition.

2.1. Previous studies

The act of greeting has been studied form various perspectives, such as the ethological one, the ethnological one or the linguistic – pragmatic one, but the common idea that surface the great majority of all types of research is that greeting expressions are used in order to signal that one has no aggressive intentions, thus creating a comfortable environment for the relationship between interlocutors. Following Duranti (Duranti, 2009), we will take a brief look at the main theoretical approaches to greetings and greeting expressions.

Researchers studying animal behavior have claimed that greetings exist not only in the human world, but also among other species, the common ground being that both humans and animals live in a permanent state of potential aggression and greetings have developed as "rituals of appeasing and bonding that counteract potentially aggressive behavior in face-to-face encounters" (Duranti, 2009: 64). Body language is the type of non-verbal communication that best illustrates the statement above. One of the most common forms of non-verbal greeting is, in western cultures, handshaking. Although the origins of handshaking have not yet been agreed upon[4], the meaning behind the gesture seems to have been similar, regardless of the culture where it occurred: handing over goodness, showing that one is unarmed and has no evil intentions or showing equality and respect. Handshake is, above all, a sign of goodwill and mutual respect, showing that the two participants in the interaction have no hidden evil thoughts. Handshaking is often associated, in Western cultures, with eye contact. Although eye contact does not get the same interpretation in all cultures, its presence – or absence – is equally important. Thus, while in Western cultures the presence of eye-contact suggests honesty, confidence or respect, in Asian cultures it is often perceived as a sign of aggression and confrontation. Regardless of the type of non-verbal greeting employed – smile, bow, pat, hug, nose-rub, kiss, etc. – the message which is transmitted is the same: lack of aggressive behavior, leading to the development of a smooth relationship.

Although non-verbal communication is not the main focus of our paper, it cannot be overlooked when analyzing human interaction. However, we will not go into further details regarding gestures used in greeting exchanges, but move forward and briefly refer to the view of the speech act theorists. Malinowski (1923:315) defines an expression of greeting such as 'How do you do' as a special kind of speech that is called 'phatic communication', "a type of speech in which union is created by a mere exchange of words". These words do not have any semantic content; instead, they fulfill a social function. For Searle and Vanderveken (1985:215), 'greetings' are marginally illocutionary acts since they have no propositional

[2] http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/greeting?q=greeting
[3] http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/greeting
[4] Some theories go back to 3000 B.C. Egypt, where power was supposed to be transferred from a god to an earthly ruler by the touch of his hand. The idea of transmitting life force through a single touch of hands is beautifully illustrated by Michelangelo in his Sistine Chapel painting "The Creation of Adam". Greeks and Romans apparently also used this type of non-verbal greeting to show compromise and agreement. 6th century Islamic teachings refer to handshaking as a method of determining good or evil. Later on, in Medieval Europe, knights extended their arms in order to show that they were unarmed. (for further reference, see http://history.stackexchange.com/questions/10186/does-the-forearm-grip-handshake-have-a-historical-basis or http://www.ehow.com/info_8598985_history-handshaking.html)

BDD-A22297 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:59:12 UTC)

contents. For example, in saying 'Hello', one indicates recognition in a courteous fashion. Therefore, 'greeting' is defined as a "courteous indication of recognition, with the presupposition that the speaker has just encountered the hearer".

From an ethnographic perspective on the study of greeting expressions, greetings are studied in relation to the specificity of the culture that the participants to the interaction belong to. Needless to say, greeting expressions vary from culture to culture, both in terms of form and in terms of content. For example, while in some languages greetings will mainly take the form of imperatives, in other languages they will be mainly statements, while in other they will be wishes and so on. Other cultural parameters are also to be taken into account when analyzing the ethnographic aspect of greeting expressions. In an attempt to examine cultural variation in discourse, Clyne (1994) claims that formulaic routines are instances of in inter-cultural tendencies in pragmatic usage and rules for the performance of particular speech acts in a given culture or region. Greetings, as typical examples of formulaic routines, are culture-bound. Discourse patterns are determined by universal principles as long as the latter do not contravene the specific cultural values (such as harmony, respect or restraint). Duranti (2009) states that the universal dimensions of greeting exchanges are their sequential property and the importance of status definition, the other aspects being culture-specific.

2.2. A working definition of greetings

As it can be seen from the above-discussed views, greetings are rather difficult to be given a unitary definition, since they encompass a great number of aspects of a diverse nature. In the present paper, we will use the term greeting to refer to those linguistic expressions used in borderline situations, such as meeting and leave-taking. Unless otherwise specified, we do not include in our analysis ceremonial greetings or other functional expressions such as thanking, apologizing etc. and which are sometimes analysed under the wider umbrella of greeting expressions.

3. Greetings and the context of culture

The way individuals relate to each other is determined by very complex rules of culture and behavior. These are learned – not acquired - at an early age and it is the speaker's ability to match routine expressions with particular cultural and socio-historical circumstances. At first sight, the great degree of heterogeneity of notions such as “culture or “language” may lead to the assumption that they are too vague to be actually operational, the influence that the context of culture has on the language that a certain population uses is undeniable.

Culture is generally defined as a system of shared beliefs, values, customs or behaviors that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning. Thus, cultural values are not inherited genetically, but are learned through the process of enculturation. In the same manner, language[5] is acquired as a system of signification, in a specific cultural context and from individuals who belong to the same cultural context and who share the same cultural values. While we do not necessarily share the belief that a certain cultural background influences every single aspect of language as a system, we consider that the context of culture exerts a great influence on the way in which certain aspects of the enculturated world are expressed into language as well as on the particular way in which said aspects are communicated. The differences in the communication styles of people belonging to various societies can be easily explained if regarded from the perspective proposed by Edward Hall in his theory on high-context cultures and low-context cultures (Hall, 1976).

3.1. High context culture and low-context culture

[5] The term “language” in this paper refers to the mother tongue.

BDD-A22297 © 2014 “Petru Maior” University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:59:12 UTC)

Although we often think of cultures in terms of the geographical position of the corresponding countries and nations, geography alone cannot account for the differences (or similarities) between cultures. Edward Hall (Hall, 1976) proposes a perspective based on the role that the broader cultural context plays in determining the way in which a particular society functions. His well-known distinction between high-context cultures and low-context cultures will serve as our theoretical background for the analysis of several characteristics of greeting expressions in Japanese and Romanian.

In Hall's view, culture provides a highly selective screen between man and the outside world, making it possible for the individuals living in a society not to become overloaded with information. The culture that we belong to functions as a filter that selects those aspects which we pay attention to and those aspects which we ignore. This process is possible due to the preprogramming of the individuals who share the same culture or, in other words, to the contexting of the individual. People who have shared the same cultural context over a long period of time do not need to spell out every single aspect that must be taken into account in the course of interaction or communication. On the other hand, there are cultural spaces where even the minutest details are explicitly stated, since not by doing so successful communication cannot be attained.

Hall proposes a distinction between high-context cultures and low-context cultures, with Japan as a typical representative of the high-context end and German-speaking countries as representatives of the low-context end of the scale. What is important to remember is that Hall's distinction is not a clear-cut dichotomy and that high-context cultures and low-context cultures are not opposites, but rather extreme points on a continuum which includes areas where the two perspectives are actually intertwined. Hall himself gives the example of the Japanese high-context society, where actually there can be distinguished two different frameworks which coexist in the life of Japanese individuals: a high-context one – which begins at home in childhood and which emphasizes the need to be close[6] – and a low-context one – which is activated in public and during ceremonial occasions and which emphasizes self-control, distance and hiding inner feelings.

In high-context cultures, the group is favoured over the individual. It takes time to build trust relations and to be accepted as part of the group, but once that happens, the relations change very little or do not change at all. Change is very slow and difficult in high-context cultures, because every little aspect of life is deeply rooted in tradition. In order for change to occur, the whole tradition must be investigated and questioned and it is often the case that in the end nothing changes. In high-context cultures, authority and the social power are centralized, as opposed to low-context cultures, where responsibility goes down to the individual. Hierarchy is thus accepted as natural and inevitable and is not subject to change or to negotiation. Space and time are also conceptualized differently in the two types of cultures. In low-context cultures, space is compartmentalized and individualized, while in high-context cultures space is often communal. The existence, even to this day, of public baths used by ordinary people in Japan is a typical example of communal space. Time, on the other hand, is linear and monochronic in low-context cultures, based on the philosophy of things being done one at a time. In high-context cultures, time is spiral and polychronic, where every single

[6] See also the Takeo Doi's concept of *amae* - a uniquely Japanese need to be in good favour with and, consequently, be able to depend on the people around oneself. Although the feeling of being emotionally close to other human beings exists in all cultures and societies, in Japan it is especially visible not only in personal relationships but also in the behaviour of the individuals as adult members of the society. (Doi, 1973).

BDD-A22297 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:59:12 UTC)

thing has its own time and will be done when its time comes, regardless of the duration that it will take.

Communication is one of the areas where the differences between high-context cultures and low-context cultures are very obvious. In low-context cultures, the verbal message is often direct and explicit, with little non-verbal elements employed in communication. On the other hand, in high-context cultures the verbal message is indirect and implicit, since it is the context which becomes important in deciphering the message. Communication in low-context cultures is regarded as a way of exchanging information and ideas between individuals, while in high-context cultures communication is often based on involving the other in the process, creating a situation where harmony must be maintained at all costs.

Regardless of the type of culture, if we consider the unfolding of a typical situation of communication, greetings mark specific moments of the process, such as the beginning or the end. They are part of the communication process, but do not necessarily represent (linguistic) communication strategies, in the sense that they are not used in order to successfully convey meaning, as paraphrasing, substitution, avoidance, asking for clarification or other genuine communication strategies do. Greetings mark borderline situations and they may or may not be followed by a communicative situation, hence the possibility of regarding the use of greetings as setting the context for the next step, which is communication proper. Greetings thus appear as expressions in which one can find a reflection of the type of cultural context of a particular society.

4. Greetings in Japanese and Romanian

When it comes to meeting and leave-taking, both Romanian and Japanese display a rather large number of greeting expressions, if compared to, for example, English, where the tendency is to cover several types of situations with the same greeting expression. If we take the simple example of “Hello”, we see that it is used in a very large number of occasions, which may differ substantially in terms of formality, the social status of the interlocutors, the relation between the interlocutors etc. The same set of situations and participants would be covered by different greeting expressions in Japanese or in Romanian. In both languages, we can find greetings in the form of declarative sentences, interrogative sentences or imperative sentences which focus either on the state of things or on features of the interlocutors - either the speaker or the addressee. The examples below are not a comprehensive list of the greetings used in meeting and leave-taking in Japanese and Romanian, but illustrate very well the cultural characteristics that we will further refer to:

Romanian - Meeting	**English equivalent**
1. Salut/Salutare/Te (vă) salut	Salute/Salutation/I salute you
2. Toată stima	All (my) consideration
3. Tot respectul	All (my) respect
4. Sărut mâna	I kiss your hand
5. Servus	(servus humilimus = your humble servant)
6. Ciao/Ceau/Ceao	(sclavus > sclavo > sciavo > sciao = slave)
7. Lăudăm pe Isus	We praise Jesus
8. Hristos în mijlocul nostru	Christ (is) among us
9. Ce (vânt) te-aduce pe-aici?	What (wind) brings you here?
10. Cum merge?	How’s it going?
11. Care-i treaba?	What’s the deal?
12. Cum (mai) ești?	How are you?
13. Ce mai faci?	What are you doing?

BDD-A22297 © 2014 “Petru Maior” University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:59:12 UTC)

14. Bună dimineața/ziua/seara	Good morning/afternoon/evening
15. Bună să-ți fie inima	[May your heart be good]
16. Să trăiți	[May you live]
17. (Hai) noroc	Good luck
18. Doamne-ajută	God help
19. Binecuvintează (părinte)	(Father) bless
20. Dumnezeu să te (îm)bucure	[May God give you joy]

Romanian – Leave taking	**English equivalent**
21. Te-am salutat	[I saluted you]
22. Te-am pupat/Te sărut	[I kiss(ed) you]
23. Ne vedem mai târziu	See you later
24. Mai vorbim	[We'll talk]
25. Vă conduc	I'll see you off
26. Mă retrag/Plec (și eu)	[I'll retreat]/I'll be going
27. Îmi iau zborul	[I'll fly]
28. La revedere	[To seeing each other again]
29. Noapte bună	Good night
30. Rămâi/Du-te sănătos/cu bine	[Stay/Go in health/well]
31. S-auzim numai de bine	[Let's hear only of good]
32. Sănătate	[Health]
33. Drum bun	[Good way] Have a good trip
34. Spor la treabă	[Results in your work]
35. Te-am salutat	[I saluted you]
36. Adio	Farewell

Japanese - Meeting	**English equivalent**
37. Shitsurei shimasu	[commit an offence/an act of impoliteness] Sorry
38. Ojama shimasu	[make impediment] Sorry
39. Tadaima (kaerimashita)	[just now (I returned)] I'm back
40. Youkoso irasshaimashita	[well come] Welcome
41. Ohayougozaimasu	[it's early] Good morning
42. Ohisashiburi desu	[it's been a long time] It's been a long time
43. Konnichi wa (gokigen ikaga desuka)	[this day (how is your honorable condition?)] Good afternoon
44. Konban wa (gokigen ikaga desuka)	[this evening (how is your honorable condition?)] Good evening
45. Ogenki desuka	[(are you) well?] How are you?
46. Ikaga osugoshi deshouka	[how have you spent (your time)?] How have you been?
47. Odekake desuka	[going out?] Going out?
48. Dochira he	[where to?] Where to?
49. Okaeri nasai	[come back home] Welcome (back) home!
50. Oyasumi nasai	[rest] Good night
51. Irasshaimase	[honorably come] Welcome
52. Itterasshai	[honorably go and come back]

Japanese – Leave-taking	**English equivalent**

BDD-A22297 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:59:12 UTC)

53. Otanoshimi ni shiteimasu	[making to look forward to] Can't wait/Look forward to
54. Shitsurei shimasu	[commit an offence/an act of impoliteness] Sorry
55. Otsukaresama deshita	[was/were looking tired]
56. Sayounara	[if the situation is as such] Good bye
57. Dewa (ja)	[so] Well
58. Gokigenyou	[honorable mood well] Please take care
59. Karada ni ki wo tsuketekudasai	[take care of your body] Take care
60. Ganbatte kudasai	[make efforts] Do your best
61. Odaiji ni	[honorable important] Take care (of your health)
62. Ogenki de	[honorable wellness] Take care/Stay well
63. Mata aimashou	[again let's meet] Let's meet again

If we consider the above-mentioned examples in terms of semantic reference, we can easily identify at least four semantic markers: human reference, time reference, religious reference, context reference. In terms of human reference, while in Japanese it is only suggested by the meaning or other grammatical category of the verb (such as in example 37/534 or 63)), in Romanian greetings with human reference are more numerous, the human presence being suggested through reference to body parts (4) or to human conditions (5, 6). Human reference can also be traced in greeting expressions referring to health (32, 59, 61, 62). If we consider time reference, both in Romanian and in Japanese we find greetings referring either to the moments of the day (morning, evening) or to a future time, often in relation to the interlocutors meeting again. The context reference includes, for example, references to the state of things (55).

A very interesting aspect is the religious reference, which seem to be absent in the Japanese greetings, but which is still used in contemporary Romanian, although not so frequently (7, 8, 18, 19, 20, 36). The lack of religious reference in Japanese greetings can be accounted for if we look at them from the high-context/low-context culture perspective. Cultures toward the low-context end of the scale tend to see objects – both natural and supernatural – in isolation. Humans, gods, objects of the world – they are all seen as separate from one another, in their discreet nature. Therefore, it is easy to conceptualize a divinity, one god to whom to refer in everyday actions. On the other hand, many Eastern cultures, situated at the high-context end of the scale, have a more holistic view on the world and it is difficult to individualize the concept of a god. The Japanese word kami is often translated as "god" or "deity" in English, but kami is more of a spirit pervading everything. Everything has a kami, but only those things which show their kami-like nature will be called a kami. Kami are not divine or omnipotent, they are no perfect and they do not live in a supernatural world, but are diffused in all the aspects of our world. The lack of religious reference in Japanese greetings shows this impossibility of conceptualizing divinity as a deity, distinct from other deities. On the other hand, in Romanian we can still find greetings with religious reference, which places the Romanian culture closer to the low-context end of the scale, as compared to the Japanese culture.

Placing the Romanian culture towards the low-context end is not, however, fully satisfactory. We claimed elsewhere (Ciubancan, 2013) that while the Romanian society shares the cultural and social values of the Eastern world (hierarchy as opposed to democracy, fatalism as opposed to self determinism, male dominance as opposed to gender equality etc.), it also displays a communication style which is closer to the Western world (extrovert, forceful, lively, overt body language etc.). Romanian greetings illustrate this ambivalence as well.

BDD-A22297 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:59:12 UTC)

Many greeting expressions are similar to Japanese greetings both in terms of linguistic form and in terms of semantic content.

5. Concluding remarks

The large number of greeting expressions – adapted to various types of situations, to the interlocutors' status, to the context of the situation etc. - is a reflection of the self altering or adapting, according to the context. In a culture such as the American one, for example, these differences tend to be annihilated. A striking example is the military response "Yes, Sir", addressed not only to men but also to women superiors. The complexity of greetings in Romanian and in Japanese shows a very high sensitivity to context nuances. The concern about the well being of the other and about affirming the links that bind the other to the community is a constant of Romanian and Japanese greetings. Furthermore, if we look closer into the act of greeting, we can see that actually it usually consists of several phases. For example, greetings used when meeting consist of a first phase, which includes a ritualized formula such as those enumerated in the examples above, followed by at least another phase – usually including an interrogative about the interlocutor. Leave-taking is even more complex. Generally, leave-taking starts, in both cultures, with a phase that includes non-verbal elements (silence, body language), followed by a second phase, which consists of verbal elements suggesting closure; the third phase usually announces the leave-taking and it can be followed by other phases, depending on the situation (persuading the leave-taker to stay longer, refusing the offer and giving reasons, acknowledging the desire of the interlocutor to leave, inviting to a future reunion, expressing thanks and appreciation etc.). This kind of prolonged greeting ritual is often absent in low-context cultures and, aside from illustrating the numerous shades of context, it actually serves to set the context for the subsequent communication act.

Although geographically situated thousands of kilometers away, the Japanese and the Romanian cultures share certain views on the world, demonstrating that the high-context and the low-context perspectives are not distinct and opposing aspects, but that there is a continuum which unites them.

Bibliography

Bernstein, B. 1964. "Elaborated and Restricted Codes: Their Social Origins and Some Consequences." American Anthropologist, 66: 55–69. doi: 10.1525/aa.1964.66.suppl_3.02a00030

Ciubancan, M. 2013. "Culture and Business Communication", Romanian Economic and Business Review, Special Issue 2/2013, pp. 52 – 61.

Clyne, M. 1994. Inter-cultural communication at work: cultural values in discourse. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Doi, T. 1973. The Anatomy of Dependence

Duranti. A. 1997. "Universal and Culture-Specific Properties of Greetings", in Journal of Linguistic Anthropology 7: 63-97.

Ebata, Y. 2001. "A geolinguistic study on the greeting expressions and behavior in Japan", in The Japanese Journal of Language in Society, Vol . 3, No .2 , March 2001, pp. 27−38

Hall, E. T. 1976. Beyond Culture. New York: Anchor Press.

BDD-A22297 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:59:12 UTC)

Kai, M.1985. “Nihongo no aisatsu kotoba no junjosei (The sequentiality of Japanese greeting expressions)”, in Nihongogaku Vol.4, No.8, p 23-30.
Kuramochi, M. 2013. „Aisatsu no kotoba no henka (Transformations of greeting expressions)”, in Meikai nihongo Vo. 18, p. 259-284.
Li, W. 2010. „The functions and use of greetings”, in Canadian Social Science Vol. 6, No. 4, 2010, pp. 56-62
Malinowski, B. 1923. "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages”, in Charles K. Ogden / Ian A. Richards (eds.), The Meaning of Meaning, London: Routledge, pp. 146-152.
Nisbett, R. 2003. The Geography of Thought. How Asians and Westerners Think Differently…and Why. New York: The Free Press.
Nishie, M. 2004. „Aisatsu to sono kata (Greetings and their form)”, in Gengo, April 2004, p.60-67.
Searle, J. and D. Vanderveken. 1985. Foundations of illocutionary logic. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

BDD-A22297 © 2014 “Petru Maior” University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:59:12 UTC)