LANGUAGE INVESTIGATIONS IN SPOKEN ENGLISH

"Have a good day!" Is the world growing more or less polite?

Walk down the main streets of London, Paris, New York or Tokyo and you will see many of the same brand names –MacDonalds and Starbucks immediately spring to mind. This process of 'globalisation' refers to the way in which the world is becoming more uniform or 'homogenised'. This has been attributed to the influence of American culture. One aspect which is of interest to linguists is the expression of politeness. Maria Sifianou* and her research team have explored this in some service industries in Britain where typically American expressions like *Hi, how are you?*, *Have a nice day!* and customers' first names are being more widely used.   *You're welcome* as a reply to *thank you* is also thought to be American in origin. Such innovations are often disliked as they seem counter to our traditional British reserve and are often thought to be impolite.

You could investigate politeness in service contexts in your home town, using the same methods as Professor Sifianou and her team.

Where to investigate politeness
Here are some suitable contexts for investigating what salespeople say:

Face-to-face encounters: - a local shop
                                  - a chain supermarket
                                  - the ticket office at the railway station
                                  - the post office

Telephone encounters: - asking a large store if they have a
                                  particular item in stock
                                - asking a store or a restaurant about
                                  their opening hours

How to investigate politeness

To keep things simple, you could focus on what salespeople say at the **beginning** of the service encounter, the **end**, and how they respond to **thanks**.

Record as many encounters as you can, using your phone or quickly jotting down what people say in a notebook. Even 1 encounter will give you useful data, though 5 (or more) would be better, as you can try to generalize.

If you have time, it would be interesting to compare politeness behaviour in a local shop and a chain supermarket, or in a face-to-face context and a telephone context. You can be the customer yourself, or you can just try to be unobtrusive, and listen and observe (in this case you should not record the encounter!)

Prepare an observation sheet for each of the contexts that you analyse. Something like this would be suitable:

shop	location	customer's age	customer's gender	salesperson's age	salesperson's gender	How well do they know each other?
Newstop (my local newsagent)	Hunter Road (edge of town)	15	female	30	male	quite well

Greeting
Hi how are you today
Thanks
Customer: thank you
Salesperson: [no reply]
Closing
Bye. Take care. See you soon

TIP: you'll have to guess the age of the salesperson and any customers that you observe (as they might not be too happy if you ask them!). It's usually easiest to estimate to the nearest round figure.

How to analyse your data

These are some of the questions you can consider. Focus on what the salesperson says, to keep things simple.

Greetings

Who speaks first: customer or salesperson?

What do they say at the beginning of the encounter? Examples might include:
- *hello*
- *hi*
- *can I help you?*
- *how are you today?*
- silence
- a smile

Thanking routines

If the customer says *thank you*, does the salesperson
- say nothing
- say *you're welcome*
- say something else(what?)

Closings

What does the salesperson say as the customer is ready to leave?

     Bye

 Cheers

Have a nice day

Something else (what/)

Nothing

Social chat

Is there any kind of chat that is not relevant to the service? If so, what is the chat about? For example, the salesperson and customer might talk about the weather, or why they are making the purchase.

Scripts

Does it seem as though the salesperson is working to a script that they have been trained to use?

Depending on where you did your investigation, you're now ready to decide:

are salespeople in your home town using expressions that are typically American?
Are there differences in the politeness expressions used in local stores and chain supermarkets/men and women/older and younger salespeople/ out of town shopping centres and small local shops/salespeople who know their customers and salespeople who don't/ face-to-face contexts and telephone contexts?

Sifianou suggests that in Britain there has been a cultural shift towards emotional expression and openness. Do your results suggest that British salespeople are being informal, open and friendly, or formal, serious and respectful?

TIP The starting point for your investigation can be a hypothesis, such as "salespeople in chain supermarkets are more likely to use politeness routines that are typically American". Then you can see whether your analysis confirms or disconfirms the hypothesis.

Or you can present your investigation as a research question that you will explore, such as ' what politeness routines do salespeople in the post office/railway ticket office/ use' or ' are there any differences in the politeness routines used by salespeople in Tesco and the shop at the end of my road?"

Finally, a note on ethics
Sifinaou decided not to ask salespeople for permission to make recordings because this would have annoyed other customers waiting to be served. She thinks this is acceptable because the interactions were brief and not at all private – they were in a public place where anyone could have overheard them. However she was careful not to note down the names of the salespeople. You should do the same in your report. You might also write "a chain supermarket" instead of, say, "Tesco", and "a local shop" instead of giving its name, so that your participants are anonymous.

Reading

* Sifianou, Maria (2013) The impact of globalisation on politeness and impoliteness. *Journal of Pragmatics* 55: 86—102. You can read a summary of this paper here