


GREETING OTHERS: HERMENEUTICS OF THE GREETING RITUAL IN THE ESAN AND ÀLAGO COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA

Moufoutaou Adjeran¹ 

University of Abomey-Calavi (Benin)

moufoutaou.adjeran@uac.bj

Adignondé Blandine Alice Wetohossou² 

University of Abomey-Calavi (Benin)

enbette@gmail.com

Aidegue Akhideno³ 

Sr Elizabeth Njoku

Doctoral student, University of Abomey-Calavi (Benin)

aidecharles@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study analyses the ritual of greetings in two Nigerian linguistic communities: the Esan and the Alágo. Based on in situ observation of greeting rituals and their contexts of application, we have come to the conclusion that the functioning of this social practice stems from politeness and social organisation marked by precise choices and appropriate gestures. The analysis shows that an act of language such as greeting, through discursive and communicative movements, reveals the social relationships existing between the different people involved in this interaction. Thus, we can see that through the use of greetings in these linguistic communities, men and women demonstrate a particular linguistic behaviour with the use of distinct lexical forms. On one hand, each greeting is closely correlated with the gender of the person using it and, on the other hand, it is also indicative of their marital status. Formulas that facilitate expression: *aيسان* and *doejie* among the Esan on one hand, and *onogha* and *ajiga* on the other, are used respectively by men and women respectively regardless of their age but in connection with the marital status of the person being greeted. Among the Alágo, on the other hand, we have identified a single generic greeting - *nmaje* exclusively used by young single men and women. Marital status is a significant factor in the use and choice of the two categories of greeting in this language community. An analysis of the choices made in line with the different categories of greeting reveals their correlation with gestures that are just as differentiated between men and women.

Keywords: Greeting, diagenetic variation, Esan, Àlágó, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Social and cultural practices vary from one society to another and give rise to verbal rituals and gestures that differ according to some specific variables. Among these social practices are greeting rituals. Greetings are used in specific social situations such as commemorating a birth, a death, celebrating a success, congratulating newlyweds, greeting someone returning from a trip, etc. In Africa, greeting is an expression of politeness towards the person being greeted. The expression of this politeness involves combining appropriate verbal formulas, which are adapted to the person being addressed, with appropriate and highly

¹ Corresponding author: Moufoutaou Adjeran. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3500-5090>

codified gestures, hence the term "greeting ritual". For example, to greet someone in the Yorùbá community, prostration must be followed by a formula that is often fixed, *káàrò*, while other communities simply shake hands or embrace. It is clear, then, that no human relationship is either singularly verbal or exclusively non-verbal. The greeting rituals analysed are between a person greeting and a person being greeted, whose social position and, above all, gender and marital status - in the case of the linguistic communities involved - influence the choice of formula and the gestures (marital gesture for men and genuflection for women) that accompany it.

Furthermore, what is interesting among the Esan of Ekpoma, who speak the Esan language, and Alágo - who speak the Alágo language - both patriarchal linguistic communities in Edo and Nasarawa States respectively in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, far from the use of a fixed formula for men and women, the choice of the greeting formula is essentially determined by two variables: the gender and the marital status of the greeters and those being greeted. The correlation or interconnexion of the two, instructs more than a simple socio-cultural act and requires social scientists to dig out from insightful investigation, the very meanings of such a societal identification.

The following question holds in its own interest, the main purpose which instigates our mind to pose this specific problem of greeting: How are the variables of gender and marital status articulated in the greeting ritual in the two linguistic communities: esan and àlágo? The aim of this article is to analyse how gender and marital status are anchored in the greeting rituals of the two communities in question. In order to provide an appropriate account of the subject, the study is structured in accordance with a tripartite outline: the first part presents the methodology and the constitution of the corpus. The second part looks at the gestures used in the greeting ritual. The third one analyses the anchoring of gender and marital status in the greeting ritual.

2. Methodological Approach and Theoretical Guidelines

This section elucidates the methodological approach adopted and the theoretical indications that underpin the conceptual choice made.

2.1 Methodological approach and constitution of the corpus

This study was prompted by a meeting with two Nigerian Master degree students who were in Benin in 2020, Ms Aidegue and Sr Elizabeth. They respectively belong to the Esan and Àlágo communities. Additional information was gathered through in situ observation by Béal (2000: 17) and through semi-directive surveys and guidelines by Blanchet (2012: 51).

The methodology adopted, which does not escape the framework defined by the 'theory of speech acts', should help us to understand the social functioning of the 'communicative profiles' of Esan and Àlágo, since it is obvious, as Traverso (1996, p. 41) that in many recurrent situations (e.g. greetings, introductions, wishes, requests, requests for information...), we use "ready-made" formulas that are both adapted to the situation, shared by all the members of the society or group, and accepted as such.

The methodological achievements, relating to the articulation between the immediate contexts and the circumstances of practice of the concerned greeting ritual, question the notion of authenticity and at the same time imply confronting the interviews with the observations. These considerations allow us to situate our reflections on the relationships between the contexts and variables called upon here and to define the field of reflection in which they mostly fit. The methodology accordingly developed facilitates a holistic approach to the greeting ritual in the two communities, the corpus of which is presented below.

The corpus used for this analysis is made up of a set of photos and linguistic units collected in various contexts and circumstances. The data selection criterion is qualitative. Of all the gestures and formulas selected, only those with features that meet the criteria of the greeting ritual are selected for analysis. Where data appear in different circumstances, they have been retained to give a complete picture of the contexts and circumstances in which the greeting ritual is practised. The following examples summarise the data relating to the corpus constituted.

Glossonyms and ethnonyms	Greetings and other designations	Glose
Esan	<i>aisan</i>	Greeting used by men to say good morning to a man or a woman (singular use by men)
	<i>doeje</i>	Greeting used by women to say good morning to a man or a woman (singular use by women)
	<i>khara</i>	A greeting used by men to say say hello, good evening and thank you (afternoon until nightfall) to a man or a woman (singular use by men).
	<i>aijesan</i>	A greeting used by women to say hello, good evening and thank you (afternoon until nightfall) to a man or a woman (singular use by women).
Àlágo	<i>onogha</i>	Greeting used by men to greet married women (used singularly by men regardless of their marital status).
	<i>ajiga</i>	Greeting used by married women to greet a man and to respond to greetings (singular use by married women)
	<i>nmaje</i>	Generic formula used by men and women who are not yet married

2.2 Theoretical guidelines

Our approach to the variable 'gender', identified as one of the sources of variation in the choice of greeting formulas, is inspired by the Sapirian conception of 'gender' but is nevertheless different from it. It is detached from it insofar as the languages used in the study do not display the same linguistic properties in terms of gender, a grammatical category which could thus refer as much to the symbolic as to the linguistic, and thus maintain a rhetoric of confusion. We focused mainly the opposition between men and women, and therefore to the social category of the variable sex. The scientific debates surrounding the concept of 'gender' could lead us down a cul-de-sac from both the symbolic and linguistic points of view.

The observation of specific modes of language used according to linguistic communities leads to the identification of several variables, sources of variation, including geographical origin, age, gender, social origin and contexts of language use, to name but a few. In the context of this work, gender and marital status are variables that determine the choice of greeting to be used when the person greeting is either a man or a woman. From this point of view, greeting becomes an act of socialisation that creates and maintains contact between two or more people. So, from a relational point of view, this act can be situated on a scale of proximity and social constraint, where the formula chosen corresponds to a specific use in relation to the person being greeted, and the gestures that accompany the formula are the social constraint that imposes it on the greeters and the greeted. The greeting thus becomes a resolutely social attitude, marked by an interest in social cohesion.

Greeting is seen as an act of socialisation of the existence of human beings living in a community governed by rules of life. Initiating an interaction presupposes prior preparation on the part of the interlocutor as to whether or not to accept this act. This seems to be corroborated by Mebiame-Akono (2013, p. 152) when he says:

Greetings are behavioural norms governing the opening and closing of a conversation. If we look at the overall organisation of greeting exchanges, we can see that they make it possible to initiate contact with an addressee, to show the other person a cognitive readiness to initiate a communicative exchange with them, and also to reiterate to their conversational partner [...].

Greeting someone is part of the justification for human beings being different from instinctive animals and defines an ontological relationship that is part of a social and existentialist perspective. Greeting is therefore not an optional act, but an essential one. It is this reflection that I am attempting to endorse on the basis of the hermeneutics of greeting rituals in two linguistic communities in Nigeria.

Several scientific works have proposed well-thought analyses of the greeting ritual in different linguistic communities in the world (Pradelles, 1980; Stojic, 2002; Mebiame-Akono, 2013; Adjeran, 2018 and others). With the exception of Adjeran (2018), who established a relationship between the greeting ritual and social variables, in this case gender and age as factors underlying the choice of greeting formulas and subsequent gestures, previous work has focused essentially on the ritual as an index of politeness, a social construct, and a cultural expression. Adjeran (2018) argues that the politeness index is correlated with age and social construction, and that gender is linked to cultural expression, but these studies have not identified these variables as sources of choice of greeting formulas. Over and above these characteristics linked to greeting rituals, the differentiated choice of greeting formulas according to the gender of the greeter, marital status and gestures underpin this practice in the linguistic communities surveyed. These variables highlight the diversity of the greeting ritual, with its specific formulas and gestures.

3. Gestures in the Greeting Rituals

In most communities around the world, the greeting combines verbal and non-verbal gestures. The non-verbal part is gesture, which varies depending on whether the person greeting is male or female. In the Esan community, genuflecting is characteristic of the gestures that accompany the greeting ritual for women, while men hammer their right foot and stamp it against the ground as in the form of standing at attention. In short, a martial gesture by the men always accompanies their greeting rituals.

However, the symbolism of these gestures appears different. Genuflection is a cultural sign of deference to male human beings. In this community, women devote absolute deference to men, whatever their age. This is a patriarchal community where the man has the social responsibility of protecting children and women, and plays a dominant role within the family. Women are therefore subject to his authority in one way or the other.

Still on the subject of genuflection in the ritual of greeting, we note quite a differentiated practice. The youngest (the girl child) genuflects to the ground in reverence - without exaggeration - to the male protector, a little god on earth; the youngest (young ones) are still at the stage of learning social norms. The transmission of cultural and cultic values by society, from early childhood onwards, is an age-old practice in communities in general and African communities in particular. Society thus becomes a book in which children learn their daily life lessons and discover their cultural and cult references. For women, i.e., adults,

genuflection is not done all the way to the ground. In any case, genuflection is a sign of respect for the man. Unlike women, the martial gesture denotes a certain authority, marking territory and imposing that authority. As a result, men take the full measure of their social responsibility, and through this gesture, they are reminded of it on a daily basis. By analogy, this gesture becomes anaphoric in the sense that it is repeated each time the greeting ritual is performed, reinforcing the man's authority.

While genuflection is practised differently by girls and women, there is no distinction between men and women. Responsibility is passed on to men from an early age and they grow up in this mould until adulthood; a sign that responsibility cannot be improvised but is gradually acquired throughout life. Society gradually passes on to them the social responsibilities they will have to fulfil in the future, and for which they will be held accountable if they fail to meet their obligations to this social authority.



We can therefore understand that genuflection is a noble act that crosses time, societies, human races and religious beliefs. It is an act as old as the world, whose scope varies from one society to another, from one belief to another, from one community to another, with one epicentre: deference. Genuflecting is part of everyday life, and you may reflexively genuflect when talking to a senior on the phone without really paying attention. It's a mark of respect in the presence or absence of the caller. It's proof that showing respect for others is a permanent gesture, not a hypocritical act. This is a perfect illustration of the importance of this gesture, synchronised with the choice of greeting, as can be seen in the image opposite.

4. Esan and Alágo Greeting Rituals

According to Bulot and Blanchet (2013, p. 48), external variation is organised around five main dimensions: diachronic, diatopic, diastratic, diaphasic and diagenic. The dimension that seems to be constitutive of the data analysed in this work is the diagenetic dimension, which concerns the differences in speech noted between men and women. It makes it possible to account, for example, for the fact that men and women do not have the same linguistic practices (a formula may be used by men, but not by women) and therefore that they do not necessarily use the same forms of address in similar social contexts. In the contexts under study, two factors determine the choice of a greeting: gender and marital status.

In fact, the choice of a greeting used between people of the same generation is not subject to any constraints. Furthermore, when two people of different generations and genders have to greet each other, gender factors and the marital status of the person being greeted determine the choice of greeting. From this point of view, it is crystal clear to understand that the primary objective is, in this case, to ensure that the gender factor makes it possible to recognise the gender of the person greeting: a man or a woman.

Diagenetic variation takes a variety of forms in Esan and Alágo. The linguistic marking of the feminine and masculine is far from being reduced to the presence or absence of a morpheme such as -e in French or -a in Spanish, for example. Linguistically, it requires us to take into account the formulas that mark diagenetic variation. The language offers formulas that facilitate expression: *aisan* and *doejie* in Esan, *onogha* and *ajiga*, used respectively by men and women without distinction as to age, but which take account of the

marital status of those being greeted. The uses and recipients remain distinct surely according to the cultural background in question.

Both communities use generic diagenetic formulas to carry out the act of greeting. These formulas can be addressed to both men and women. The difference lies at the diagenetic level among the Esan: *khara* (for the exclusive use of men) and *aijesan* (for the exclusive use of women) are formulas used respectively by men and women to say good evening to a man or a woman at a specific time of day.

Among the Alágo as the case in under study in this research work, we have identified a single generic greeting - *nmaje* - used exclusively by young single men and women. Marital status is the predominant factor in the use and choice of the two categories of greeting in this language community. The analysis of the choices and different categories of greetings is part of the perception of the lifestyles and social organisation of the two communities.

4.1 The Esan greeting ritual

The greeting formulas are dealt with separately because they pose specific problems, on the one hand, in terms of the times at which they are used and, on the other, in terms of the conjugal situation of the speaker greeting. In addition to the times at which they are used and the marital situation, these formulas play a demarcating role between men and women.

4.1.1 Aijesan and doejie, two Esan greetings used exclusively by women

Aijesan and *doejie* are greetings reserved exclusively for women. They are used to greet both men and women. The choice of one or the other is determined by the time of day. When a woman or man is greeted in the morning, the choice is *doejie*. On the other hand, when a woman greets another woman or a man in the afternoon, she uses another form of address, *aijesan*. In this case, gender is not a discriminating factor in the choice of a particular formula. The variation in the choice of formula is based on the weather during the day. So, what's really interesting here is not the variation according to gender, but the use is exclusively female and the choice is made according to the weather and goes beyond the common framework.

Apart from these temporal considerations, this formula has many interesting sociolinguistic aspects. The social convention in both formulas is to recognise the gender of the person greeting (exclusively a woman), who sends her greetings to either a man or a woman at specific times of the day; the person sending the greeting can only be female. When a woman of a younger age (a young girl, for example) sends her greetings to another woman of a higher age (her mother, for example), the formulas remain the same. The birthright does not apply through the choice of formula, but rather through the gestures that accompany the greeting ritual: the complete genuflection in this case. The same principle applies when a woman of a younger age (a daughter, for example) addresses her greetings to a man who is not of the same generation as her (her father, for example).

In addition to its representative function of conveying meaning - greeting the speaker - language has an expressive aspect in that certain variables indicate the personal characteristics of the speaker, namely gender.

4.1.2 Aisan and khara, two greetings used exclusively by Esan men

Men make a different choice of greeting when it comes to greeting a man or a woman at a given time of day. Two formulas are used: *aisan* and *khara*. Greeting a woman is a matter of protocol in certain linguistic communities or religions. In the Western tradition, for

example, in relations between men and women, it is always the woman who decides, unless the man is performing public and official duties or is experienced in the delicate gesture of kissing. But even in this case, there is a subtle initiation of the woman. When there are people of the same sex, it is the older person who takes precedence, and when there is a coincidence of sex and age, it is social position that is the discriminating criterion.

According to some Islamologists, the greeting that men address to women and that women address to men are permitted if there is no risk of seduction. This is why some people distinguish between young and old women, to avoid any pretext which could in one way or the other jeopardize social connection among people of the same communities. Others add conditions relating to age and beauty: if the young woman is beautiful and one fears being seduced by her, then the greeting is no longer obligatory. The relevant argument used by those opposed to greeting women is "fear of seduction". The practice of greeting seems to vary according to community and religion (Adjeran, 2018).

Among the Esan, gender is a relevant factor in the practice of greetings between men and women unlike some communities with other kinds of religion. Within such communities, the greeting between a woman and a man is highly influenced by the questions of age and gender which in their turn determine the rhythm of the greeting ritual. Consequently, total genuflection for young girls, partial genuflection for women and the martial gesture for men of all ages - only the time of day help as guidelines to the choice of formula to be used by the person who is greeting.

Basically, Esan men show no deference to women. This is reflected in their gestures, which are characterised by a martial gesture rather than prostration, as might be the case in other linguistic communities. The linguistic code that men use to greet women is never, or never should be, accompanied by the bending of the knee as is customary among the Yorùbá, for example, where the opposite is interpreted as a sign of lack of respect or consideration for the woman. Esan men consider women to be submissive to men, who protect them and to whom they owe respect and consideration.

4.2 The Àlágó greeting ritual

The greeting formulas are dealt with separately because they pose problems specific to the conjugal situation of the woman who uses them. As well as being closely linked to marital status, these formulas play a demarcating role between married and unmarried women on the one hand, and between men and married women on the other. A generic formula is reserved for single men and women.

4.2.1 Ajiga, a greeting for the exclusive use of married women

Ajiga is a greeting exclusively reserved for married women. It is used to greet both men and women, regardless of sex, age or marital status. Its use is determined by the gender and marital status of the speaker. When she responds to greetings addressed to her, or when she sends greetings to either a woman or a man at any time of the day, the traditional greeting is *ajiga*. Next, when an unmarried woman greets another unmarried woman or an unmarried man, she uses another generic greeting, *nmaje*. The variation in the choice of formula is, in this case, based on the marital status of the greeter. What is really interesting here is not the variation over time - common to almost all human communities - but the choice based on gender and marital status, which goes beyond the common framework.

Aside from these marital considerations, this formula has many interesting sociolinguistic aspects. Social convention uses this formula to recognize the gender and marital status of the person responding to a greeting or sending a greeting (a married woman only) as either male or female; the person responding or sending a greeting can therefore only

be female. When a woman of a younger age (a young girl, for example) responds or sends greetings to another woman of a higher age (her mother, for example), the formula remains the same, *ajiga*. The right of birth does not apply to the choice of formula, but rather to the gestures that accompany the greeting ritual: the complete genuflection in this case. The same principle applies when a woman of a younger age (a young girl, for example) responds or sends her greetings to a man who is not of the same generation as her (her father, for example).

This formula has a triple role; in addition to its representative function of conveying meaning - greeting the interlocutor - it has expressive aspects insofar as certain variables indicate the personal characteristics of the speaker, namely his or her gender and marital status (married or single).

4.2.2 *Onogha, a greeting used exclusively by men*

Men make a different choice of greeting when it comes to greeting a man or a woman at a given time of the day. The traditional greeting in this case is *onogha*. In the *Álago* community, gender and marital status are relevant factors in the greeting ritual between men and women. Unlike the Esan community and others, in the ritual greeting between a man and a woman, the woman's gender and marital status determine the rhythm of the ritual. To respond to the greeting or to greet a married woman, a special formula is used: *onogha*. Yet, to respond to or greet a single woman or man, another generic formula facilitates the ritual in this case: *nmaje*.

Onogha is therefore an exclusively masculine greeting reserved for the ritual greeting between a man, regardless of marital status, and a married woman. This is reflected in the use of this greeting, which is not used for women but is addressed to them when they are married. It has a triple role; in addition to its representative function of conveying meaning - greeting or responding to a married interlocutor - it has expressive aspects insofar as certain variables indicate the personal characteristics of the person being greeted or responded to, namely their gender and marital status (married or single).

5. Conclusion

This study analyses the ritual of greetings in two Nigerian linguistic communities: the Esan and the *Álago*. Essentially based on in situ observation of the rituals and their contexts of application, we could assume that the functioning of this social practice stems from 'politeness', to use Kerbrat-Orecchioni's term (1997), and from social organisation marked by precise choices and appropriate gestures. The analysis shows that, from an act of language like greeting, through discursive and communicative movements, we discover the social relationships existing between the different people involved in this interaction. Thus, we can see that through the use of greetings in these linguistic communities, men and women show a particular linguistic behaviour, in that they use distinct lexical forms. Besides, each greeting is closely correlated with the gender of the person using it and, on the other, it is also indicative of their marital situation.

Formulas that facilitate expression: *aisan* and *doejie* among the *Esan* on the one hand, and *onogha* and *ajiga* on the other hand, are respectively used by men and women without distinction of age but in relation to the marital status of the people being greeted. Both communities use generic diagenetic formulas in their greeting rituals. These formulas can be addressed to both men and women. The difference lies in the diagenetic level among the *Esan*: *khara* (for use by men only) and *aijesan* (for use by women only) are formulas used to respond to or say goodnight to a man or a woman. Among the *Álago*, we can identify a single generic formula - *nmaje* - used exclusively by young single men and women. Marital status is

a significant factor in the use and choice of the two categories of greeting in this language community. An analysis of the choices made and the different categories of greeting reveals their correlation with gestures that are just as differentiated between men and women.

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