

Hi vs. *Ciao*: NSM as a tool for cross-linguistic pragmatics

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of the semantic analysis of two salutations, *Hi* (English) and *Ciao* (Italian), made adopting the methodology of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage. The analysis is aimed at making two points: first, that “greetings” have a proper semantic content consisting of expressed attitudes and feelings which can be described in simple, cross-translatable words; second, that salutations are not only performed differently, but also conceived differently across languages and this can create potential cases of miscommunication in cross-cultural interactions. To show this, the interactional meaning of *Hi* is compared with that of *Ciao*; two different semantic explications are proposed in order to capture various aspects of their meaning emerging from linguistic evidence. The implications for cross-linguistic pragmatics are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Although discussions on salutations abound in various branches of linguistics, so far virtually no analysis has been made from a strictly semantic point of view. Most linguists seem to have simply accepted the idea that “greetings” have no propositional content and that they merely function as “a courteous indication of recognition of the hearer” (Searle, 1969:64–65). Similarly, when looking up a given salutation in a dictionary the reader can find information on how it is used, but there will rarely be any attempt at pinpointing its meaning.

Even though it is obvious that salutations are “formulaic” in nature, this paper questions the assumption that they are devoid of semantic content. This study is aimed at showing that forms of address and “greetings” convey a paraphrasable *interactional meaning* (Wierzbicka, 1992) consisting of expressed attitudes and feelings. My hypothesis is a given “greeting” is carefully chosen by speakers of different languages because they are aware that it conveys a particular meaning and decide, accordingly, whether or not to express such a meaning is appropriate to the situation. To test this hypothesis, the interactional meanings of *Hi* in English and *Ciao* in Italian are analysed and compared adopting the methodology of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage.

The study situates itself into the broader fields of intercultural pragmatics (Kesckes, 2014; Scollon et al., 2012; Specer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009) and cross-cultural semantics (Wierzbicka, 2003), drawing in particular upon previous comparative studies on salutations (Grieve and Seebus, 2008) and cultural keywords (Goddard and Ye, 2014; Stefanowitsch, 2004; Wierzbicka, 1992, 1997, 1999) in different languages. However, the present analysis adds to the

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previous literature by proposing a different and, in some respects, complementary approach to the analysis of salutations in cross-linguistic perspective, as the paper will show.

In the first part of the paper I provide a succinct review of two previous studies on “greetings” and forms of address in cross-linguistic pragmatics, discussing methodological issues and highlighting the differences with the analytic approach taken in this study. Successively, I analyse the meaning of *Hi* and that of *Ciao* in separate sections. In the final part of the paper I discuss the implications that a semantic analysis of salutations can have for the development of intercultural pragmatic competence.

2. Previous studies on “greetings” and forms of address in cross-linguistic pragmatics: methodological issues

Different approaches have been taken to analyse “greetings” and forms of address in cross-linguistic pragmatics. In this section I focus on two previous analyses which are particularly relevant to the present one and I highlight the aspects which I see as most problematic.

One is [Grieve and Seebus’ study \(2008\)](#), which is also on two salutations in two different languages. Using a discourse analysis approach, they compare how *G’day* in Australian English and *Guten Tag* in German are used in telephone conversations. The problem with their analysis is the terminology used for describing these two salutations: throughout the paper the authors use the pragmatic labels “formal” and “informal” to describe and compare *G’day* and *Guten Tag* without clearly specifying what they mean by these terms and in what ways *G’day* is “more informal” than *Guten Tag*. If these labels were to be used to analyse *Hi* and *Ciao* both would probably be described as “informal”, but then it would be impossible to distinguish them.

Similarly, *Hi* is often described as a “friendly” salutation. But again, what does “friendly” mean? Also, are *Ciao* and *Hi* equally “friendly” or is one of the two “more friendly” than the other one? As I will show, the differences between *Hi* and *Ciao* reflect the fact that Italian speakers do not think in terms of “friendliness” and that Anglo and Italian speakers have different views of the “friendliness” of a salutation.

Similar terminological issues emerge in [Spencer-Oatey & Franklin’s analysis of forms of address \(2009\)](#). Emphasising the importance of forms of address for rapport management the authors write:

“This is because they indicate both the *power* and the *distance-closeness* of the participants, and if these *relational indicators* are not in accordance with the assumed or desired relationship rapport is to be affected.”

(2009:123, emphasis added)

While the authors do have a point in identifying the relationship between the interlocutors as an important aspect of the use of forms of address, they do not define the labels “power”, “distance” and “closeness” and do not specify in what ways any violation of these “relational indicators” affects the relationship between the interlocutors (either positively or negatively). Again, these labels could not be used to describe and compare *Hi* and *Ciao* because Anglo and Italian speakers have different views of “closeness” and “power”, given that they think according to different conceptual frameworks.

The point is that very often in cross-linguistic pragmatics a given linguistic feature in different languages is described using an English label with the assumption that this word is clearly intelligible by the speakers of these languages.

This criticism has been expressed by [Duranti](#) in pointing out that although there is no generalisable definition of “greetings” which could be valid for more than one language “researchers have felt at ease identifying ‘greetings’ in different languages and providing hypotheses about what greetings ‘do’ for or to people” (1997:63). [Duranti](#) is critical of the fact that very often researchers have imposed an English-specific label on the description of salutations of other languages, regardless of the fact that these are conceived and performed very differently from the English “greetings”. In relation to this, [Wierzbicka](#) points out that

“We cannot identify conceptual categories without using language. If we want to identify them through English, then we need to recognize that most English words are not cross-translatable into other languages and carry with them a particular culturally shaped perspective. To reach a neutral, language-independent perspective, we need [...] cross-translatable words.”

(2014:50)

3. Using NSM as a culturally neutral tool for research in cross-linguistic pragmatics

3.1. How this analysis differs from previous ones

The approach taken in this study differs from previous ones in two main respects.

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