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Signs of Deference, Signs of Demeanour: Interlocutor Reference and Self-Other Relations across Southeast Asian Speech Communities

DWI NOVERINI DJENAR and JACK SIDNELL, eds.

Singapore: NUS Press, 2023.

The edited collection *Signs of Deference, Signs of Demeanour* is an important milestone in bringing the insights of linguistic ethnography into conversation with the field of Southeast Asian studies. The book also signifies the expansion of the field outside the traditional centers of Europe and North America, stemming from a collaboration between Australian and North American scholars and published in Singapore, which makes it more readily available for an Asian readership.

The topic of the volume may sound a bit obscure at first glance, but for anybody who is even slightly familiar with the languages of Southeast Asia the subject matter will be immediately relatable. The book is ultimately about how we refer to ourselves and to others in everyday conversation, and how that affects social and intersubjective relations and intersubjective relations on both micro scales—for instance, power asymmetries between kin—and more macro contexts, such as political speech. In each case, the choices we make in how we refer to ourselves and others are crucial to understanding how we as speakers are perceived and how our speech acts are interpreted by our interlocutors.

The book's motivation draws from the domination in sociolinguistics over the years of the Brown and Gilman model of interlocutor reference. Roger Brown and Albert Gilman wrote an influential article in which they generalized the European pronoun division between T (from the French *tu*) and V (from the French *vous*) to pronoun usage universally across languages, arguing that T forms signal “intimacy” and V forms are used in asymmetrical “power” relations (Brown and Gilman 1968). This argument has been criticized in later sociolinguistic and linguistic ethnographic study, but the “common sense” underlying the argument still holds sway in much of the discussion about person reference cross-linguistically.

However, as the editors of this volume argue in the introduction, and as the case studies elucidate quite nicely, even a surface examination of language use in Southeast Asia presents a highly complex picture of interlocutor reference that cannot be encapsulated by Brown and Gilman's broad formulation. Most Southeast Asian languages are classified as open class in terms of interlocutor reference (Fleming and Sidnell 2020), which means that there are a variety of noun forms such as kinship terms, usages such as "master-slave" and "teacher-child," as well as proper names and nicknames that can be used as speakers refer to one another. In addition, the pronoun systems are much more complicated than the binaries of T and V—for instance, the alternations one can use in Javanese, Malay, or Indonesian, providing different "shades" of social and pragmatic meaning. The editors argue that the Brown and Gilman model placed an undue emphasis on "deference," or the elevation of the addressee by the speaker; this led to what was to be called "politeness studies," which also has a large tradition in Japanese sociolinguistics (Ide 2012). Instead of focusing on deference alone, they argue that for Southeast Asia, one has to look at the complex interplay between deference and "demeanour," which is how the speaker seeks to comport themselves in relation to the addressee, and how they wish to be perceived by the interlocutor. Consequently, Southeast Asia presents a classic case of how speakers do not simply elevate their addressees but also manipulate how the addressees view them; the performance of "self" is as important as the respect given to the "other."

The book is divided into four parts. The first part, called "Systems," includes a comprehensive examination of person reference in Kri, a Vietic language of upland Laos (N. J. Enfield), as well as Javanese (Joseph Errington). Enfield and Errington are well-known scholars in the field of linguistic ethnography and have worked for decades in their field sites. Their chapters provide a comprehensive summation of the dynamics and changes of linguistic systems over time, touching on issues of how complexities of kinship, social class, and perceptions of modernity influence the ways in which speakers refer to one another.

Part 2 of the book is titled "Practices" and also contains two chapters. The first is on vocatives in the Cirebon variety of Javanese (Michael Ewing). This is important as vocatives are not considered in discussions of person reference, even though in languages such as Javanese they are quite common and play a role distinct from pronominal forms. The second chapter, by Sarah Lee, is on the use of the English "I/you" in Kuala Lumpur Malay. This is the only chapter in the volume that looks at language contact between English and Southeast Asian languages and also brings in ethnic diversity, discussing how the choice of person reference terms in English and Malay influences perception of ethnic difference in the diverse urban space.

Part 3 of the book is titled "Intimacies" and has three chapters, including two by the editors and one by Charles Zuckerman. This section perhaps sheds the most light on the complex relations between deference and demeanour that form the title and major theme of the book. Jack Sidnell's chapter is based on an extended Vietnamese conversation between two couples and their use of

kinship terms. He takes the idea of “respect those above, yield to those below” to show how asymmetry in person reference is not simply about power and solidarity but also elucidates the delicate ways in which senior-ranking interlocutors include and “yield” to lower-ranking interlocutors to create a smooth, collaborative interaction that maintains the norms of respect. Dwi Noverini Djenar’s chapter is useful because it extends the study beyond the interpersonal domain to show how something seemingly minute like first person pronoun alternation in Indonesian has large-scale effects. The chapter deals with the case of media interviews with political candidates during the 2019 national election campaign. Finally, Zuckerman’s chapter is notable because while many of the chapters discuss hierarchy, Zuckerman looks at the egalitarian relation implied by the Lao term *siaw1*, which is used by friends who are roughly the same age. He makes the astute observation that while the use of such terms entails a highly intimate relationship where interlocutors are more free and open in their interactions than with “elder” brothers or sisters, it also means that the social obligations to maintain these relations are less stringent, leading to quicker dissolution. The constraints that govern asymmetrical reference therefore lead to a tighter social bond than the looser, more dynamic relations implied by egalitarian social reference.

Part 4 of the book is titled “Theories,” and here Luke Fleming draws on several cases to look at how Southeast Asian (and also East Asian) person reference can provide a different starting point for understanding interlocutor reference more broadly. He first suggests that with the exception of Taba, no Southeast Asian language follows the model prevalent in European address systems, where the pronoun is directed exclusively from speaker to addressee (T/V). In fact, languages of Southeast and East Asia have honorific registers targeting not only the addressee but also the speaker (self-humbling), and they also have discourse referents outside the interaction. Therefore, analysts need to pay particular attention to “pragmatic salience”—what aspects of the social context the interlocutors are bringing in at what time, and how their choices are motivated not only by the context in situ but also by prevailing language ideologies, kinship structures, and sociohistorical conditions. The “open class” structure of interlocutor reference in these languages makes it all the more important to look at how speakers are focusing their points of reference to determine the social uptake of their utterances.

While the book covers an important topic that has not received as much attention as it should in the study of Southeast Asian languages, it is more a representative sample of theoretical and empirical developments in the field and should not be seen as an introduction to linguistic ethnography per se. It includes several complex formulations that can be understood only by those with some exposure to linguistic ethnography. However, for those interested in Southeast Asian languages, if they are willing to make a little extra effort in order to grasp the theoretical architecture of the book, the case studies provide an excellent resource and entry point for examining in greater depth this crucial though understudied aspect of Southeast Asian languages. As of now, the field of linguistic ethnography is mostly established in the centers of the Global North, such as North

America, and now Australia, as is attested by the affiliations of the contributors to this volume. My hope is that with more volumes like this, the field can expand and be taken up by those located at institutions in Southeast Asia who can bring a native-speaker and context-specific sensibility to the subject matter, expanding and deepening the discussions even further.

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