

## **Greetings and Interpersonal Closeness: The Case of Bengalis on Orkut**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates to what extent greetings on a social network site popular with South Asians are associated with the degree of interpersonal closeness of the users, educated middle class Bengalis in the United States. Computer-mediated discourse analysis, face-to-face interviews, and participant observation were employed to analyze the textual comments exchanged in 79 Bengali dyads. The analyses reveal a relationship between degree of social distance and frequencies of Bangla greetings when type of greeting (regular vs. ritualistic) and manner of expression (unmarked vs. intensified) are taken into account. However, some aspects of the interplay between interpersonal closeness and greetings can only be understood if cultural nuances and medium factors are considered.

*Key words:* Bangla, greeting, Orkut, politeness, social distance, social network site

### **1. Introduction**

Politeness, as it is commonly understood, is the pragmatic application of good manners or etiquette. Its primary goal is to make one's conversation partner (or occasionally a third party) feel relaxed and comfortable, so that a cooperative common ground emerges for the smooth functioning of activities and pleasant co-existence (Brown and Levinson, 1987[1978]; Leech, 1983). Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]) remains the most thought-provoking and influential starting point for studying linguistic politeness across cultures and societies. Yet critics (e.g. Eelen, 2001; Ide, 1989; Matsumoto, 1988, 1989; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003) have pointed out various shortcomings of the work, charging that it suffers from Western bias. Meanwhile, more recent politeness studies (Chen et al., 2013; Leech, 2007) have argued that there is no East-West divide in politeness, although they acknowledge that there are qualitative and quantitative parametric variations in observations of linguistic politeness across different societies and cultures.

Even if there are only parametric variations in politeness behaviors across societies and cultures, it is important that people be aware of these possible variations and their appropriate uses in different socio-pragmatic contexts, so that they can avoid misunderstanding, which is a potential cause of damage to interpersonal relationships. Misunderstandings are especially likely to arise in text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC), which lacks the audio-visual cues that in face-to-face communication help to clarify speakers' intentions. Furthermore, the technical and social contexts of CMC influence language use (Herring, 2007). However, the relationship between interpersonal closeness and politeness practices in virtual space has not been addressed, as such, and linguistic studies of politeness in CMC have focused mostly on Western languages such as English (e.g. Duthler, 2006; Waldvogel, 2007; but cf. the papers

in Locher, 2010). Research is needed to investigate how degree of interpersonal closeness influences online politeness practices, especially in lesser-studied languages.

Bangla is the mother tongue of about 220 million speakers, most of whom live in the Indian state of West Bengal and Bangladesh; it is spoken by about 300 million people worldwide (Wikipedia, 2015). Many Bangla speakers in the diaspora communicate via CMC as a way to maintain contact with other Bengalis. It was learned that a group of middle class young urban Bengalis from West Bengal who moved to the US between 2002 and 2004 used the social network site Orkut to socialize and stay connected with fellow Bengalis both in the US and in India. This group provided the impetus for the present study.

Orkut, which was owned and operated by Google, was the most popular social network platform among Indians until it, like many other SNSs that were popular in different regions of the world, was eclipsed in popularity by Facebook.<sup>1</sup> Orkut is like Facebook in terms of its forms and functions. It is a convergence of various applications, for instance, profiles, 'friending' via links, 'communities', email, chat, photo uploads, videos, and 'scrapbooks'. Users personalize their profiles to express their interests and tastes. The friend network lets users link to their friends and traverse the resulting network of profiles. The 'scrapbook' is the most widely used text-based asynchronous mode of communication on Orkut, similar to the Facebook 'timeline' (known as the 'wall' at the time of data collection for this study). Figure 1 shows a screenshot of an Orkut scrapbook.

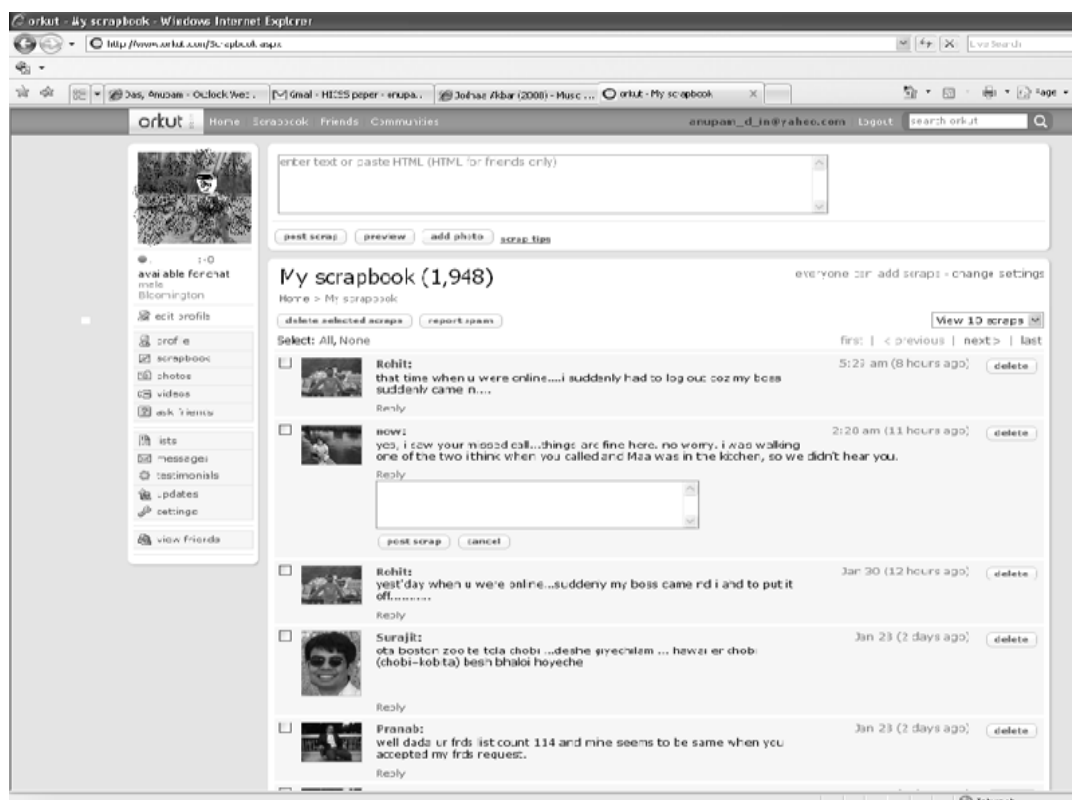


Figure 1. Screenshot of an Orkut *scrapbook*

Although Orkut has lost its popularity to Facebook, it was widely used, primarily by Brazilians and Indians, between 2004 and 2009. Unfortunately, there is dearth of scholarly

<sup>1</sup> The website <http://vincos.it/world-map-of-social-networks/> indicates that Orkut was overtaken by Facebook in popularity in India by December 2009. Google closed Orkut down in late 2014.

research on languages and SNSs that are perceived not to be sufficiently prominent either economically or politically. Although the use of Orkut by Portuguese speakers has been described in a number of studies (e.g. Recuero, 2005; Soares and Bezerra de Sá Peixoto, 2010; Lisbôa and Coutinho, 2011), there has been little research on Orkut use by speakers of Indian languages; moreover, no studies of Orkut have focused on politeness, to our knowledge. However, research on lesser-studied languages and SNSs would strengthen understanding of how politeness practices vary parametrically across cultures, societies, and virtual spaces.

The focus of this study is on two aspects of politeness practices. First, we investigate whether, and if so, how, the degree of interpersonal closeness of Bengali Orkut users relates to the frequency of occurrence of Bangla greetings (i.e. regular vs. ritualistic) in their scraps. Further, we examine whether there are quantitative differences in the manner of expression of the greetings (i.e. unmarked vs. intensified) with respect to the users' degree of interpersonal closeness.

## 2. Theoretical background

Greetings play important roles in interpersonal relationships and are a common politeness ritual in opening moves. Eelen (2001) identified two broad categories of politeness, which he termed first-order politeness (Politeness 1) and second-order politeness (Politeness 2). Politeness 2 refers to linguists' conceptualizations, the theoretical and scientific aspects of politeness. The present study is concerned with Politeness 1, which refers to the way politeness manifests in communicative interaction: politeness-as-practice in everyday interaction. Politeness 1 comprises three types of politeness. Judgments of linguistic politeness behavior made either by outsiders to the interaction or by the participants themselves are termed *classificatory* politeness. *Expressive* politeness refers to participants' explicit polite language, e.g. "beg your pardon". *Metapragmatic* politeness refers to how people talk about politeness as a concept in everyday interaction, and what people perceive politeness to be in different interactional practices.

In general, Politeness 1 has an evaluative character, involves social norms, and covers different aspects of the lay notion of politeness and how politeness is intentionally encoded in language by the speaker in various communicative practices, as well as how politeness is perceived or evaluated by the hearer. Since linguistic politeness represents one aspect of social interaction, it is recognized as first-order politeness, and has been the focus of empirical work mainly carried out in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics (Eelen 2001; Ide 1989).

In studying American greeting rituals, Krivonos and Knapp (1975) observed that, despite being cliché-ridden, interaction rituals perform highly important functions in human relationships. The researchers claimed (pp. 17-18) that in American society greetings perform three functions: (1) "to mark a transition between a period of absence and a period of increased access" (for interlocutors who have already developed at least an acquaintanceship with each other); (2) "to reveal important information about the state of the relationship between the participants;" and (3) "to serve a maintenance function for interpersonal relationships" (especially greetings between acquaintances who meet in passing). Fisher and Adams (1994) explained that by exchanging greetings, the participants affirm that they are connected to each other through a relational bond – even if that bond only means that the participants are co-members of a particular culture. They further argue that when two people greet each other, both expect that an interaction will follow, at least for some time.

According to stage theories of close relationship development (Guerrero and Anderson, 2000), the process of staying in touch with online and offline contacts can be classified in terms of three main stages of relationships, i.e. beginning, maturation and development, and deterioration. Previous studies have claimed that during the initial stages of a relationship, people's behavior is by and large driven by unmarked rules of social politeness (Sommers, 1984). Additionally, in the early stages, typically little is involved beyond pleasant interactions, and enjoyable interactions make the participants feel that they are happier together than apart (Planalp et al., 2006).

The strength of a bond/tie is thought to be a linear combination of the frequency of contact, duration of association, intimacy of the tie, and the provision for reciprocal services (for a discussion of measures of tie strength, see Granovetter, 1973; Marsden and Campbell, 1984; Wasserman and Faust, 1994). Studies report that weaker, more casual friendships or work relationships (*weak ties*, e.g. acquaintance or coworker relationships) engage in fewer, less intimate conversations and share fewer types of information and support than stronger relationships (*strong ties*) (Granovetter, 1973; Marsden and Campbell, 1984; Wellman et al., 1988; Wellman and Gulia, 1999). In contrast to weak and strong ties, *latent ties* are connections between two individuals that are available technically but have not yet been fully activated by social interaction (Haythornthwaite, 2001).

Despite differences in the way politeness is studied, politeness researchers have acknowledged that the forms and manner of politeness expressions are influenced by the degree of closeness of interpersonal bonding, or social distance (Brown and Levinson, 1987[1978]; Eelen, 2001; Leech, 1983, 2007; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003). Drawing on the dramaturgical theories of Erving Goffman (1967) and his concept of *face*, Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]) view 'facework' as the process through which people try to balance multiple persons' face needs in social encounters. They posited that facework is realized as a result of interactional effects involving several factors: the social *distance* between the speaker and the hearer, the *power* of the hearer in relation to the speaker, and the degree to which a Face Threatening Act is rated as an imposition in that culture. Brown and Levinson's (1987[1978]) framework predicts that these factors combine to determine how people engage in facework, including through politeness behavior.

Norms of politeness behavior in South Asia are both similar to and different from those in other regions of the world. Among the differences are the fact that in South Asian languages kinship terms (such as 'Uncle') are used with non-kin conversational participants (Vatuk, 1969). Jain (1973) noted that South Asians generally avoid addressing each other by their given name alone, especially when the addressee appears to be senior and/or to have greater social status, as it is considered disrespectful. Moreover, linguistic expression of gratitude is generally avoided in close relationships, since it indexes interpersonal distance (D'souza, 1998). D'souza (1998) argues that in addition to verbal forms, one needs to take rule-governed social relationships into consideration in order to arrive at an appropriate understanding of strategies of politeness used in South Asia. These observations suggest that social distance is important to an understanding of politeness behavior in South Asian languages.

In one of the very few studies that investigated politeness in CMC in an Indian context, Kaul and Kulkarni (2005) observed that men used flattery more than their female counterparts in work-related emails written in English. They did so in order to praise and approve of the recipient's actions – a strategy more commonly associated with women in English CMC (Herring, 1994). Kaul and Kulkarni suggest that this behavior is attributable to the cultural context in which the emails were written. They claim that Indian men take on

a patronizing role and compliment frequently in order to motivate their colleagues and subordinates in organizations.

While qualitative analyses of politeness practices can shed light on what socio-psychological factors in a given culture determine individuals' politeness patterns, quantitative analyses can reveal patterns of interdependence between strength of interpersonal ties and the frequency of specific politeness practices (Wolfson, 1988, 1989; Wolfson et al., 1985). Yet only a handful of studies have investigated how strength of interpersonal ties influences linguistic politeness quantitatively.

It was observed that the politeness behaviors of *intimates*, *status unequals*, and *strangers* are quantitatively different from those of *nonintimates*, *status-equal friends*, *co-workers*, and *acquaintances* (Wolfson, 1988, 1989; Wolfson et al., 1985). This research repeatedly found that relationships at the two extremes of social distance – intimates and strangers – appeared to observe similar politeness norms, while relationships more toward the center in terms of social distance show marked differences from the extremes. This pattern is represented graphically in Figure 2.

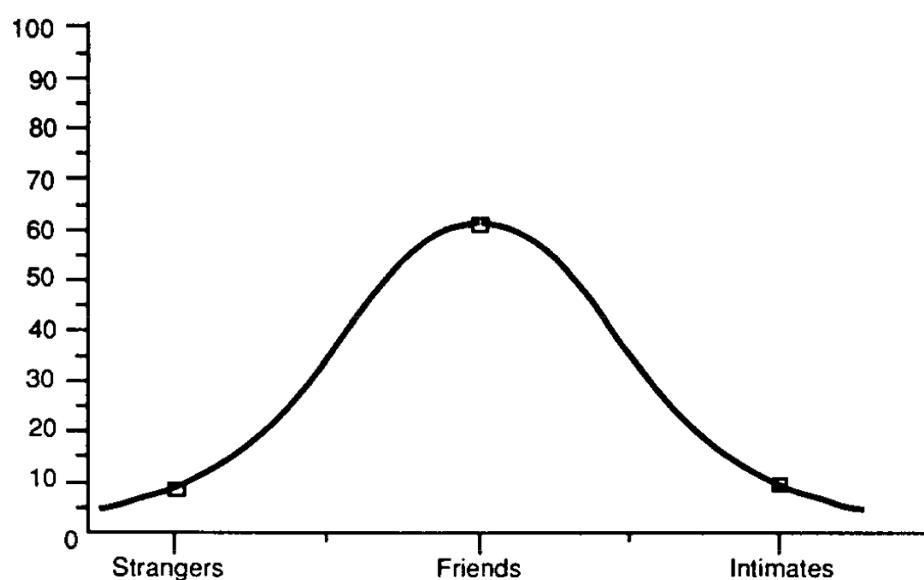


Figure 2. Wolfson's bulge, based on evidence from compliments and invitations (Source: Boxer, 1993)

The graph resembles a characteristic bulge. Wolfson's observation was later validated in studies by other researchers (e.g. Herbert, 1986; Holmes, 1986; Meier, 1998). However, Wolfson's own research, as well as most other studies that have validated Wolfson's *bulge theory*, are based on data collected through discourse completion tests (DCT)<sup>2</sup> in controlled environments. It is possible that politeness data collected in a controlled environment differ from their actual realization in natural contexts (Nurani, 2009). Thus, it is important that Wolfson's claim be examined based on linguistic data produced in natural environments, as is the case in the present study.

As further support for the existence of a connection between interlocutors' social relationships and their politeness behavior, empirical evidence confirms a connection

<sup>2</sup> A DCT is a written questionnaire containing short descriptions of a particular situation intended to reveal the patterns of use of a speech act (or other linguistic behavior) being studied (Kasper and Dahl, 1991).

between social distance and interpersonal ties (Marsden and Campbell, 1984). Marsden and Campbell argue that the degree of closeness or intensity of a relationship is the best indicator of interpersonal tie strength, which, in turn, is the structural glue of a social network. Thus, an understanding of the interplay of politeness behaviors and degree of closeness of interpersonal relationships may help shed light on the structure of social networks and other issues that are best understood in relation to social networks, like socio-emotional support (Das, 2010).

In his *Social Information Processing* (SIP) theory, Walther (1992) argues that all things being equal and given sufficient time, participants in CMC will interact as they would do face-to-face. However, there could be parametric variation in communication style between CMC and face-to-face communication, as the technical and social contexts of CMC differ from those of face-to-face communication. Herring (2007) explains that forms and structures of discourse in text-based CMC are governed by situational factors (e.g. participant characteristics, social distance, degree of anonymity, topic) and medium factors (e.g. synchronicity, channels of communication, interface design). Although many CMC researchers have studied online politeness behavior (e.g. Duthler, 2006; Herring, 1994; Hongladarom and Hongladarom, 2005; Kaul and Kulkarni, 2005; Waldvogel, 2007), none of the studies has investigated whether there is a connection between the interlocutors' politeness behavior and the closeness of their relationships. Furthermore, there have been very few studies of politeness in CMC in Indian languages. Thus, ample scope remains for research in this area.

### 3. Method

This study specifically focuses on the classificatory and expressive polite language use of 14 Bengalis and their contacts (a total of 79 dyads) in Orkut scrapbooks. At the time of data collection (between November 1, 2007 and February 29, 2008), the scrapbook was a semi-public interface, meaning that any person who was in the contact list of a particular Orkut user had access to scrapbook conversations between that user and any of his/her listed contacts. The first author, a native speaker of Bangla, was added to the contact list of all the participants on Orkut and therefore had access to their entire scrapbook conversations.

#### 3.1. Data and sampling

The participants were identified from the Orkut community *Midtown bangalibrindo*<sup>3</sup> (Bengalis in Midtown) created by and for the Bengali population residing in a Midwestern university town in the United States. Linguistic data were collected from the participants' scrapbook conversations with their Orkut contacts, and non-linguistic data were gathered through participant observation in offline and online environments. The study did not assume a priori that any particular factors would influence participants' politeness behaviors; instead, their politeness behaviors were observed in a bottom-up manner. The coding scheme to identify different forms of greetings was developed after carefully observing the data in context (for further details, see tables 1-3). The data were analyzed quantitatively by identifying regularities of co-occurrence between linguistic forms of politeness and the degree of participants' interpersonal closeness.

Consistent with the nature of the CMC mode through which the participants primarily exchanged textual messages and photos (i.e. asynchronous text-based scrapbook communication), greetings were usually expressed in a topical unit – a chunk of language

<sup>3</sup> The actual name of the community has been masked for privacy reasons.

that conveys a single main idea – which was often a scrap. Typically a scrap is larger than a single utterance but shorter than a paragraph, similar in length to a Facebook status update. A few scraps contained more than one topic; in such cases, the number of topics determined the quantity of units identified for the purpose of analysis. A total of 675 topical units were identified and analyzed.

At the time of data collection, the *Midtown bangalibrindo* community had 16 members. The participants were middle-class graduate students and their significant others in their late 20s and early 30s. To get acquainted with the members of the community and to identify other Bengalis who were not members of this Orkut community but were active Orkut users, a snowball sampling procedure was followed. To begin with, the moderator of *Midtown bangalibrindo* was contacted, who eventually introduced the first author to a few other members of the community, who then introduced him to the rest. With the help of these 16 members, the first author was able to identify and contact another five Bengali Orkut users in the same town who were also graduate students. He took part in the activities that this group of people organized, and in the process, came to be accepted as a member of the group.

In total, 19 out of the total 21 Bengali Orkut users expressed interest in participating in the study. However, only 14 out of the 19 were eligible to participate, because five members appeared to have deleted their scrapbook posts between 11/01/2007 and 02/29/2008 and thus had to be excluded from the study. Scraps posted by the remaining 14 participants to their contacts during this period were collected for politeness analysis. These four months of scraps were selected for three reasons: (i) the scraps exchanged between the participants and their contacts during this period can be considered natural communication, since neither the participants nor their contacts were aware of the study before or during this period; (ii) four months, i.e. one-third of a year, should provide enough data to be representative of all the participants' politeness behaviors; and (iii) during these four months, many of the 14 participants appeared to have been actively engaged in scrapbook conversations with their contacts, especially during the three major festivals that took place during that period: Diwali/Kali pujo (a Hindu festival), Christmas, and the English New Year.<sup>4</sup> A few days before and after these events, the rate of exchange of greetings appeared higher than on days when there were no events. Thus, while the sample may contain a somewhat higher concentration of greetings than at other times of the year, it includes enough non-festival time for normal scrapbook posting activity to be well represented, too.

Having identified the initial participants whose scraps posted to their contacts were the object of analysis of the study, the researchers made a list of those participants' contacts who had posted scraps during this period. Later, in one-to-one, face-to-face interviews, the first author asked each of the 14 participants to estimate their social distance in relation to all the Bengali contacts who had posted scraps to them during the above-mentioned period on a three-point scale: *intimate friend*, *friend*, or *acquaintance*. Next, during the interview, the tokens (user names of the participants' contacts with their profile photos) for each of their contacts were placed in three small boxes labeled *intimate friend*, *friend*, and *acquaintance*. Later in the interview, each of the 14 participants was asked to pick two tokens randomly from each of the three boxes, for a total of six contacts. This sampling process yielded 79<sup>5</sup> dyads for analysis. Other relevant information, such as type of addressee

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<sup>4</sup> Both Christmas and the English New Year are widely celebrated by urban Bengalis.

<sup>5</sup> The sampling process ideally should have yielded 84 dyads (14 x 6); however, some participants did not have enough intimate friends in their list of contacts.

for each scrap (i.e. individual vs. generic<sup>6</sup>) and frequency of scrap exchange, were gathered from participants' scrapbooks, where this information was for the most part readily available. Whenever there were doubts about any aspect of the data, the participants were contacted personally and asked to provide further information.

### 3.2. Variables and code values

Two sets of variables were identified: non-linguistic (independent) and linguistic (dependent). The non-linguistic variables pertain to the degree of social distance between the participants and their contacts, whereas the linguistic variables were manifestations of participants' greetings in the text-based interactions.

Although *intimate friends* and *strangers* occupy the edges of Wolfson's social distance scale, this study excludes the *stranger* category. Adding this category to the one-dimensional social distance scale would raise a conceptual problem, in that it seems particularly problematic to compare the behavior of one anonymous category with other non-anonymous categories in CMC, given the considerable evidence that the dynamics of anonymous CMC differ from the dynamics of non-anonymous CMC (e.g. Herring and Stoerger, 2014; Morand and Ocker, 2003; Walther, 1992). Thus, this study included only the non-anonymous categories, i.e. intimate friend, friend, and acquaintance. These categories represent three degrees of social distance corresponding to the leftmost half of Wolfson's 'bulge' in Figure 2. In social network terms, intimate friends can be considered to correspond roughly to strong ties, friends to weak ties, and acquaintances to latent ties. The concept of latent tie was operationalized as a relationship between the participants and other Orkut users who were either known to them only through their contacts or whom they had met briefly at random gatherings.

At the initial stage of data collection, the social distance scale was conceptualized as a continuous scale. However, after a few initial interviews, it became apparent that many participants were confused in ranking their contacts, so much so that when they were asked to rank the same contacts after a gap of a couple of days, their ranking was notably different. In order to avoid such internal inconsistency, the study re-conceptualized social distance as a discrete scale (i.e. *intimate friend*, *friend*, and *acquaintance*) and found no inconsistency, even when the participants were asked to rank their contacts a few days later.

It was observed that greetings were exchanged between the participants and their contacts primarily in two types of contexts. In one, participants greet each other to mark a special occasion, such as celebration of a birthday, *durga puja*, or *diwali/kali puja* (e.g. M to P: *Janmodiner anek shubhechha roilo*. 'Happy birthday.'). These greetings are here termed *ritualistic*, since they are exchanged as part of socially-agreed-upon rituals in the community under observation. During community festivals participants often compose a single, generalized greeting and send it to everyone on their list of contacts. The second context in which greetings are used is in everyday interactions, to acknowledge other people's presence on Orkut, re-establish contact after an absence from meeting, or signal a desire to meet a contact in physical space. These greetings are here termed *regular* greetings (e.g. Anbr @ Srth: *kemon acho?* 'How are you doing?').

The independent variables and their code values are listed in Table 1, and the dependent variables and their code values are listed in Table 2.

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<sup>6</sup> Generic scraps usually come with a notice that states: "To post scraps to all your friends please click here".



Table 1. Nonlinguistic (independent) variables and code values

<i>Nonlinguistic variables</i>	<i>Values</i>
Interpersonal closeness between a participant and his/her contact	intimate friend; friend; acquaintance
Type of addressee of the scrap	individualized; general scrap sent to entire group of contacts
Frequency of scrap exchange	total number of scraps posted by a participant/ number of scraps posted to his/her contact

Table 2. Linguistic (dependent) variables and code values

<i>Linguistic variables</i>	<i>Values</i>
Frequency of greetings posted by a participant to his or her contacts	(Number of topical units containing greetings posted by each participant to each of his or her contacts/total number of topical units posted by that participant to his or her contacts) x 100%
Presence of greeting	absent; present
Form of greeting	ritualistic; regular
Manner of greeting	unmarked; intensified; other

In identifying greetings, the coders – and in some cases, the participants – were provided a coding scheme (see Table 3). The coding was first done by three coders who were Orkut users with similar socio-cultural backgrounds to those of the participants, but who were not part of the study. The coders agreed in their identification of greetings in 74% of the cases. In case of disagreements among the coders, the participants' own judgments were considered. Finally, to verify that the coders' evaluation of greetings matched with a participant's own evaluation, some tokens from the data were picked randomly, and the participants were asked to give their opinions on the selected tokens.

Table 3 illustrates with examples how manner of greeting, i.e. *unmarked*, *intensified*, and *other* types of greetings, was coded. We identified these manners based on a close review of the entire data set. *Unmarked* greetings consist of two types: formulaic and abbreviated. *Intensified* greetings include linguistic and/or non-linguistic intensifiers. Four indicators of intensification were identified in the data: semantic modification, syntactic elaboration, representations of smiling and laughter, and repetition of characters and punctuation marks. When a greeting in a topical unit is accompanied by a lexical modifier, typically a preceding adjective, it is considered to be a token of intensified greeting through semantic modification. In syntactic elaboration users add one or more phrases/sentences to a greeting; if a topical unit contains one or more of these indicators then it is considered an intensified greeting. Through representations of smiling and laughter, senders try to make up for the lack of audio-visual cues in textual conversations. Similarly, typical standard textual communications lack suprasegmental features (e.g. length, pitch etc.) that add affective information to utterances. Some senders try to create the effect of suprasegmental features in textual conversations by repeating characters and punctuation marks. The *other* category was included to account for elaborated forms of greetings (e.g. friendly teasing) whose impact on their intended recipients was not clear from context, nor was any background information about such scraps provided by the participants who posted them. However, the

*other* category was dropped when the analysis was done of the distribution of intensity of greetings at each of the three interpersonal categories. Although the *other* category was a potential linguistic politeness indicator and thus was included in the calculation of overall distribution of greetings, it was not clear to the researchers whether this category actually intensified greetings.

Table 3. Manner of greeting coding scheme

Types	Examples
<i>Unmarked</i>	
Formulaic	<i>Shubho janmodin</i> ‘Happy birthday’ (ritualistic) <i>Kemon achish</i> ‘How are you?’ (regular)
Abbreviated	<i>hb</i> ‘happy birthday’ (ritualistic)
<i>Intensified</i>	
Semantic modification	<i>ekbuk bhalobasa roilo.</i> ‘with <b>lots</b> of love’ (regular)
Syntactic elaboration	<i>Wish you a happy and prosperous new year...may all your dreams come true this year...keep smiling...</i> (ritualistic)
Representations of smiling and laughter	<i>Sharod subhecha niyo ☺</i> ‘Wish you happy durga puja ☺’ (ritualistic) <i>Hi Hi ha ha ha ha ha.....good morning</i> (regular)
Repetition of characters and punctuation marks	<i>Gud morning!!!!</i> ‘Good morning!!!!’ (regular)
<i>Other</i>	
Friendly teasing	<i>Ki khuro kamon achho?</i> ‘ <b>Uncle</b> , how are you doing?’ (addressing a non-kin status equal)

### 3.3. Statistical methods

The study used both descriptive and inferential statistics. Using descriptive statistics, it measured the frequency of greetings. Descriptive statistics were also used to calculate the frequency and distribution of unmarked and intensified greetings. Chi-square tests and Fisher’s exact test were employed to determine whether the findings were statistically significant.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Quantitative results

The descriptive statistical analysis revealed that 26.8%, or slightly more than one-quarter, of the 675 topical units contained greetings. Table 4 displays the pattern of overall use of greetings by the participants at each of the three interpersonal distance categories.

Table 4. Distribution of greetings at three interpersonal distances

	<i>Intimate friend</i>	<i>Friend</i>	<i>Acquaintance</i>
Overall greetings	30.4% (67 units)	22.7% (71 units)	29.9% (44 units)
Topical units other than greetings	69.6% (153 units)	77.3% (237 units)	70.1% (103 units)
Total	100% (220 units)	100% (308 units)	100% (147 units)

It can be observed from Table 4 that the participants give almost equal priority to their *intimate friends* and *acquaintances* in greeting. In contrast, *friends* are paid relatively less attention in this respect. However, the picture changes entirely when unmarked greetings are analyzed separately from intensified greetings.

Of the greetings, 44.4% were unmarked and 55.6% were intensified. Figure 3 displays the interplay between the interpersonal closeness of the participants and the two degrees of greeting intensification.

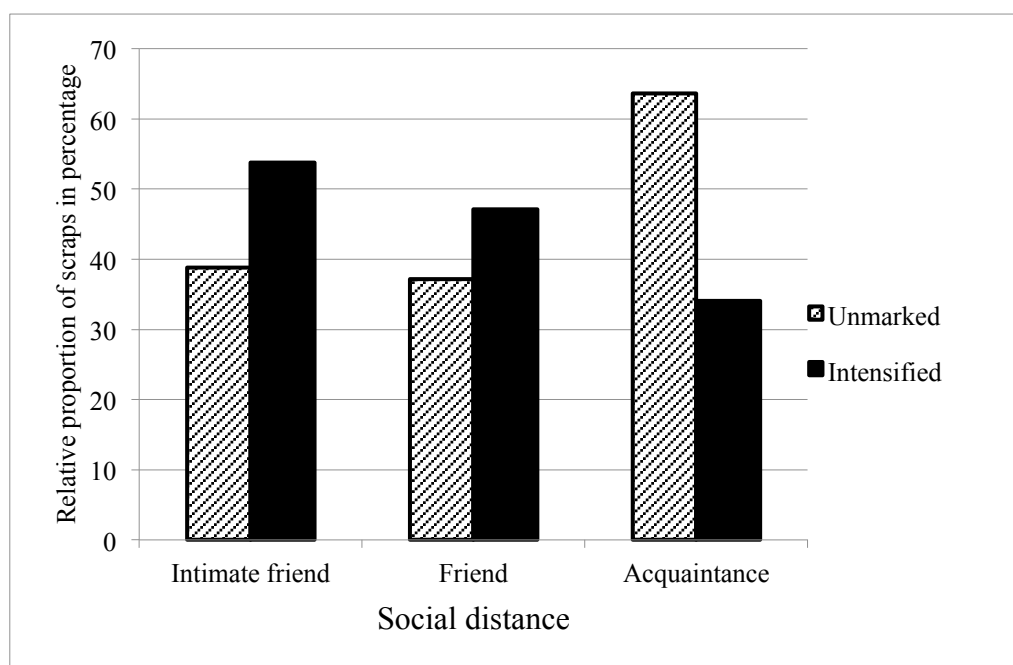


Figure 3. Interpersonal closeness and manner of expression of greetings

As Figure 3 shows, as interpersonal closeness decreases, the frequency of use of *intensified* greetings also decreases. Conversely, *unmarked* greetings are most frequently used when interacting with acquaintances, where interpersonal distance is greatest, and less with friends and intimate acquaintances. Overall, intensified greetings are preferred with intimate friends, and unmarked greetings are preferred with acquaintances; with friends, the two greeting types are used roughly equally.

The same pattern emerges when *regular* greetings alone are considered. Figure 4 shows interpersonal closeness and two degrees of *regular greeting* intensification. The intensified variants are used more to greet contacts at a close social distance, whereas the unmarked variants are strongly preferred in greeting acquaintances.

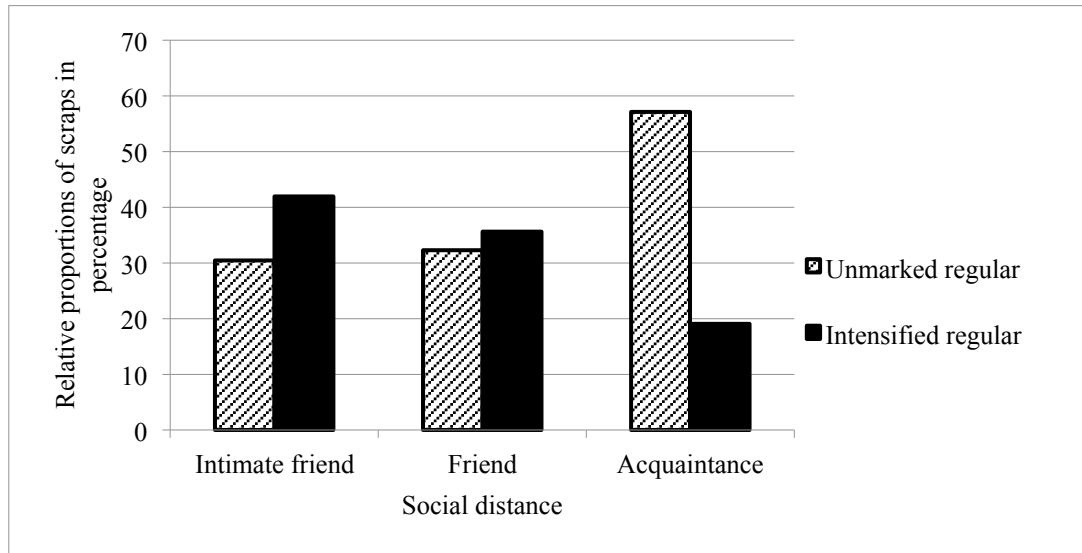


Figure 4. Interpersonal closeness and manner of expression of *regular greetings*

These findings show that there is a relationship between social distance and frequency of greetings among Bengali Orkut users. Moreover, the form of the greeting and its manner of expression are important: Intensified greetings and unmarked greetings are both associated with degree of interpersonal closeness, but in opposite directions.

The pattern of use of *ritualistic* greetings with the three categories of interpersonal closeness differs from the pattern for regular greetings. The results for *ritualistic* greetings are shown in Figure 5.

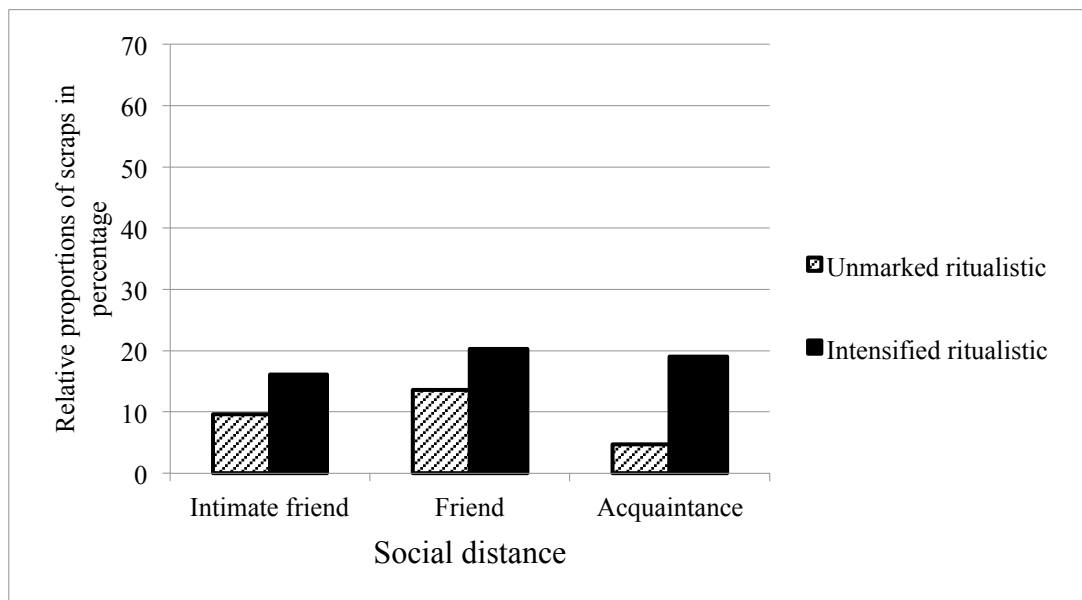


Figure 5. Interpersonal closeness and manner of expression of *ritualistic greetings*

The distribution of ritualistic greetings does not clearly relate to social distance – there is no linear increase or decrease in either the unmarked or the intensified type from ‘intimate friend’ to ‘acquaintance’ in Figure 5, as there is with regular greetings in Figure 4. Whereas the association between interpersonal closeness and frequency of use of regular greetings is statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), the analyses indicate no significance in the association between interpersonal closeness and frequency of use of ritualistic greetings. Moreover, in

contrast to the patterns in Figures 3 and 4, the intensified variant of ritualistic greetings is preferred over the unmarked variant when greeting acquaintances, as shown in the rightmost columns in Figure 5. In the following section we examine greeting behavior qualitatively and propose some explanations for the quantitative patterns described in this section.

#### 4.2. Functions of greetings in Midtown bangalibrindo

Greetings play important roles in interpersonal relationships and are a common ritual in opening moves. In the scraps posted in the *Midtown bangalibrindo* Orkut community, greetings perform the same three general functions that Krivonos and Knapp (1975) observed in American society: (1) marking a transition between a period of absence and a period of increased access (for interlocutors who have already developed at least an acquaintanceship with each other); (2) revealing important information about the state of the relationship between the participants; and (3) serving a maintenance function for interpersonal relationships (especially greetings between casual acquaintances). The following Orkut examples illustrate these functions:

- (1) Somlan @ Ani: *ki re kemon achis? Anek din katha hai ni tor sathe.* ‘Hey! How are you? It’s been long since we spoke to each other last.’  
(Somlan explicitly marks a transition between a period of absence and the time of contact in stating ‘It’s been long since we spoke to each other last.’)
- (2) Shikirji @ Dhrub: *Sunlam tui naki biye korchis! Congratulations.* ‘I heard that you were getting married! Is it true? Congratulations.’  
(After hearing the news of Dhrub’s plan for marriage from someone other than Dhrub himself, Shikirji congratulates him. The scrap indicates that Dhrub did not take Shikirji into his confidence about his marriage plans and thus that they are unlikely to be intimate friends.)
- (3) Irin @ Prabal: *ki re sab thik thak? Jar theke puropuri shere uthechis?* ‘Is everything all right with you? Have you completely recovered from fever?’  
(By asking ‘have you completely recovered from fever?’, Irin indicates that she is familiar with Prabal’s past state of health. The greeting, in this case, is used to learn the present state of his health; in the process, Irin maintains her relationship with Prabal.)

Greetings are realized in two basic ways by Bengalis on Orkut. *Ritualistic* greetings are exchanged between dyads during special occasions, such as Durga puja, diwali, and on birthdays. *Regular* greetings are generally used either to acknowledge other people’s presence in Orkut or simply to signal one’s desire to meet their contacts in a physical space – especially, after a prolonged absence. Additionally, regular greetings are used to initiate a conversation, and/or to stay in touch with other members in the network. *Intensification* of a greeting is common with intimate friends, especially with regular greetings. Consider the following greeting that one of the participants posted to one of his intimate friends.

- (4) Anobhun @ fun gal: *Hi Hi ha ha ha ha.....good morning.....*

The techniques used to intensify the unmarked greeting ‘good morning’ in this example include laughter, which is represented as ‘Hi Hi ha ha ha ha’, and repeated punctuation. Intensified regular greetings appear to index interpersonal intimacy more generally, in that their use increases with an increase in interpersonal intimacy.

A corollary of this tendency is that a person using intensified greetings with someone they do not know well could be interpreted as insincere, and their motives could come under suspicion. Yet some participants intensify ritualistic greetings even when the recipients are acquaintances (see Figure 5) and send them across their network to commemorate social and religious events that are typically celebrated collectively by members of the Bengali diasporic community. Since the recipients of these generic greetings include, in addition to acquaintances, intimate friends and friends, the participants feel that intensification of such greetings is appropriate, and acquaintances are less likely to think that behind such intensification of greetings there are any ulterior motives. Moreover, intensified generic ritualistic greetings provide positive socioemotional support to members of the diasporic community. International immigrants often feel nostalgic during religious festivals, especially if those festivals are not observed in their new homeland (Helland, 2007). Many immigrants turn to the Internet to bond with those who experience similar feelings. This type of greeting thus serves to satisfy members' sentimental/emotional needs.

However, on individualistic special events such as birthdays, anniversaries, and examinations, the ritualistic greetings need to be customized, since these events are by nature personal. Past research has found that people who share a close relationship communicate more often and use more media to communicate and maintain the relationship than those who share weak ties (Haythornthwaite, 2001). In most cases, the Orkut scrapbook is the only medium used for social communication with *friends*. However, the participants use other modes of communication such as telephone and face-to-face conversation with their *intimate friends*,<sup>7</sup> especially for special personal occasions (e.g. birthdays), along with occasional use of the scrapbook for this purpose. For this reason, the participants post fewer customized ritualistic greetings on the scrapbooks of their intimate friends than of their friends, as shown in Figure 5. The participants' connection to their *acquaintances* is via latent ties, and they do not feel it necessary to greet or congratulate them on their personal events. It appears that to send and receive such greetings, there needs to be a level of closeness in the relationship that is absent in latent ties. In fact, the participants claimed that in most cases they were unaware<sup>8</sup> of such personal events involving their acquaintances.

More generally, the use of greetings on Orkut appears to be associated with relationship development, facilitating a gradual move from impersonal to interpersonal communication (Walther, 1992). When the relationship between two interlocutors is distant (e.g. because the two share little background), the default form of regular greetings is unmarked. With unmarked regular greetings, the participants pay face to their acquaintances (build rapport), which is the first step towards building a stronger relationship. One needs to remember that most relationships are not static. An acquaintance at time A is a potential friend at time B. Similarly, a friend at time A may become an intimate friend at time B.<sup>9</sup> When the distance between the participants and their contacts narrows down as they continue to develop rapport, the frequency of use of unmarked greetings also decreases (Figures 3 and 4).

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<sup>7</sup> However, most of the intimate friends of the participants were located in India (with a time difference of more than nine hours), and it was not convenient for the participants to telephone them frequently. As a result, the participants did sometimes use the scrapbook to greet their intimate friends.

<sup>8</sup> Orkut did not have an option to notify users of special personal events at the time when the interaction between the participants and their contacts took place. This option was implemented later.

<sup>9</sup> The reverse process is also possible, i.e. an intimate friend at time A may turn into just a friend at time B.

To investigate how friendships are developed in virtual worlds, Utz (2000) adapted Walther's (1992) SIP theory and found that the users in her study employed "knowledge-generation strategies such as interrogation, self-disclosure, deception detection, environmental structuring, and deviation testing to gather psychological knowledge-level information about other persons" (Walther, 1992, p. 71). In the present study, the participants generate knowledge about their friends and acquaintances primarily through interrogation and self-disclosure. Before doing so, they typically greet their contacts, as in the following conversation between Priyam and his friend Sontu:

- (5)
- Priyam @ Sanatan: *happy diwali bhaipo..!! :) 'Happy diwali buddy..!! :)'*
- Sontu @ Priyam: *thank u n same to u. kemon acho? 'Thank you and same to you. How are you?'*
- Priyam @ Sontu: *ekdom ghach ghach kore kete jacche..!! tomar ki khabor?? 12th Dec bari jacchi.....tomar mumbai hoye..!! :) 'I am doing very well. How are you doing? By the way, I am going home on December 12<sup>th</sup> via your Mumbai.'*
- Sontu @ Priyam: *hathat ei samay? 'Why at this period?'*
- Priyam @ Sontu: *oi samai to ekta sem end er chhuti thake re....bari kobe asbi next?? 'There is a semester break during this period and that is why I am going home. When are you going home?'*

The conversation begins with an intensified ritualistic greeting ('Happy diwali ..!! :)'), after which Priyam discloses his travel plans to his friend Sontu and eventually inquires of Sontu when he plans to go home.

Intensification of greetings helps participants maintain close relationships. In contrast, unmarked greetings are used to develop a relationship that is at a nascent stage. Acquaintances are, by definition, persons about whom one has little prior knowledge. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of first impressions in a developing relationship. Duck (1991) explains that getting started "on the right foot" is crucial to any relationship if one expects it to develop into anything more than a casual meeting. Thus, it could be argued that explanations related to relationship development and maintenance help account for the association between interpersonal closeness and the manner of expression of ritualistic and regular greetings, i.e. whether they are unmarked or intensified.

## 5. Discussion

We set out to investigate whether, and if so, how, the degree of interpersonal closeness of Bengali Orkut users relates to the frequency of occurrence of types of greetings (i.e. regular vs. ritualistic). We also looked for quantitative differences in the manner of expression of the greetings (i.e. unmarked vs. intensified) with respect to the users' degree of interpersonal closeness. The associations we found between degree of interpersonal closeness and frequency of exchange of Bangla Orkut greetings do not exactly parallel Wolfson's (1988, 1989) findings for English, even when only the left-most half of the bulge pattern is considered. When the data are considered globally, before segregating tokens of greetings into types and manner of expressions, acquaintances (a social distance in the middle of Wolfson's bulge) and intimate friends (the social distance on the left side of the bulge) received nearly equal numbers of greetings. This pattern of association is not what

the bulge theory would predict. However, when the tokens of greetings are broken down based on type and manner of expressions, the distribution of unmarked greetings in general and unmarked regular greetings in particular resembles the left half of Wolfson's bulge. Conversely, intensified greetings in general and intensified regular greetings in particular exhibit the inverse pattern, with intimate friends using more such greetings. Both patterns show an association between greetings and social distance or tie strength.

Stages of relationship development can be invoked to explain why individualized intensified regular greetings are used least frequently with acquaintances and most frequently with intimate friends. In the initial stage of a relationship, due to a lack of relational history, acquaintances resort to pragmatic norms that are governed by the society and the group. Among intimate friends, conversely, individualized greetings are used most frequently due to the friends' rich relational history, which requires that relational pragmatic norms be customized by and for the conversational partners involved. Planalp, Fitness, and Fehr (2006) explain that feeling is more central than behavior in close relationships. Indeed, acting close without feeling close seems more of a travesty of intimacy than feeling close without acting close. Interdependence is another well-established hallmark of close relationships; Planalp et al. argue that being connected is less important than feeling connected. Given that the kinds of intensifiers identified in our greeting data (repetition of characters and expressive punctuation, expressions of smiling and laughter, etc.) tend to generate positive feelings and induce positive emotions in message recipients, according to the participants in this study, intensified greetings – especially intensified regular greetings – seem to be a type of politeness that is more appropriate for close relationships than distant relationships. Thus regular greetings accompanied by intensifiers serve to indicate social closeness. However, intensified ritualistic greetings may or may not serve this function.

In general, our qualitative analysis reveals that the overall functions of Bangla greetings closely parallel the functions of greetings in American English, and thus they corroborate the claims of some previous studies of politeness that there is no East-West divide (e.g. Brown and Levinson, 1987[1978]); Chen and Hu, 2013; Leech, 2007). However, what types of greetings are chosen for whom and in what manner they are expressed can only be fully understood if we consider issues of cultural specificity, relationship management, and medium effects. This is especially the case for the distribution of ritualistic greetings, which does not clearly relate to social distance, but rather must be explained in terms of cultural and medium factors, as described in the previous section. But it is also part of the reason why unmarked regular greetings are used most frequently with acquaintances and least frequently with intimate friends. In South Asia formal (i.e. unmarked) expressions of politeness indicate interpersonal distance, which may be undesirable and thus socially avoided between friends (D'souza, 1998). Kinship terms, conversely, are used to address non-kin conversational partners (Vatuk, 1969) precisely to indicate social closeness. For example, in a ritualistic intensified greeting one friend addressed another as *bhaiipo* 'nephew' (which we translated as 'buddy' in example 5) to indicate interpersonal closeness.

The technological medium also influences the type and manner of expression of greetings used by Bengalis on Orkut, consistent with Herring's (2007) claims. Orkut makes available an affordance that permits users to distribute generic ritualistic greetings to all their contacts, creating and reinforcing networks of connections among diasporic Bengalis. Further, it influences the textual form of greetings. One of the strategies followed by the participants in the *Midtown bangalibrindo* community is to intensify their greetings by combining formulaic greetings with emoticons, repetition of characters and/or expressive punctuation, as in the opening greeting in example (5) above. The participants adopt these



strategies to compensate for the lack of audio-visual cues that are usually available for purposes of intensifying a message in face-to-face interaction, such as facial expression, volume, and pitch variation. Finally, the norm of informality that characterizes many genres of CMC, including social network site communication, is exploited by Bengalis on Orkut to index social closeness, for example through the use of abbreviation and non-standard orthography, as in part of example (5) above (Sontu @ Priyam: *thank u n same to u*. ‘Thank you and same to you.’).

## 6. Conclusion

Investigating a lesser-studied language provides a needed counterbalance to the dominance of English and other European languages in the available literature on CMC (cf. Danet and Herring, 2007) and politeness. It was observed that the fundamental functions of Bangla greetings in interpersonal relationships on Orkut are similar to English greetings in American society (Krivonos and Knapp, 1975), and that there is a clear relationship between degree of social distance and the forms and frequencies of greetings, as has also been reported in politeness research involving Western participants (e.g. Wolfson, 1988, 1989; Wolfson et al., 1985), provided that type of greeting (regular vs. ritualistic) and manner of expression (unmarked vs. intensified) are taken into account. At the same time, some aspects of the interplay of interpersonal closeness of the participants and greetings can only be appropriately understood if cultural nuances and medium factors are considered. One may thus conclude that alongside basic similarities to English greetings, there are parametric variations in the use of Bangla greetings to indicate interpersonal intimacy. In this respect, the study makes a contribution to research on Internet multilingualism and cultural plurality.

The study also provides insights into the pragmatics of contemporary virtual modes of communication, an emergent domain (Herring et al., 2013). The structure and functions of social network sites help users connect easily with latent ties through ritualistic greetings. This was especially important for the members of the diasporic community studied here, since in their new country there was not yet a strong social support system in place. Their latent ties might eventually grow into weak and later strong ties; thus bonding through the exchange of ritualistic greetings could prove useful later. Moreover, periodic use of ritualistic and regular greetings helps users strengthen their weak ties. Orkut provided a feature that allowed users to contact everyone on their contact list via a single scrap. During community festivals, such as *durga puja*, some participants would send festive wishes to a large group of contacts by sharing one intensified generic ritualistic scrap. Upon receiving a generic scrap, participants would occasionally respond to the sender with an individualized ritualistic greeting that would lead to a longer exchange of scraps. The participants explained that such an exchange often acted as an icebreaker with acquaintances and that, if and when they met one another in a social gathering later, they would feel less social distance than if the scrap exchange had not taken place.

Last but not least, the study contributes methodologically in terms of framework testing, as well as in the use of computer-mediated discourse analysis methods to extract inferences from the data set. Most studies that use computer-mediated discourse analysis to investigate users’ communicative behavior have depended solely on online data and did not take users’ perspectives into account. The present study, by combining computer-mediated discourse analysis with online and offline participant observation methods and face-to-face interviews, demonstrated that a systematic and meaningful network analysis can be done if the findings of discourse analysis are connected to participants’ perceived social distance.

Although Orkut has lost its popularity to Facebook, similar methods could be used to study language use in other social network sites, such as Facebook and Twitter.

At the same time, several methodological limitations remain. Although the findings of our study are representative of the use of greetings by the Bengali Orkut participants, they may not be broadly generalizable beyond this particular network, since the sample size was relatively small and based in a particular diasporic community. Moreover, although our focus on greetings is theoretically grounded and supported by previous research, it restricts the linguistic data to highly formulaic bits of discourse, leaving more implicit expressions of greeting, concomitant pragmatic phenomena such as *friendly teasing*, and other expressions of politeness (including code mixing and code switching) out of consideration. Future studies investigating politeness practices of communities on social network sites could benefit by taking these phenomena into consideration.

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