

Openings and Closings in Front Counter Transactions of Malaysian Government Hospitals

Kuang Ching Hei, Maya Khemlani David, Lau Su Kia and Ang Pei Soo
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on two aspects of social interactions: openings and closings. It examines the public transactions occurring between front counter Malay staff and clients/patients seeking services in Malaysian government hospitals. Openings and closings are important features of face-to-face interactions because both elements suggest that acknowledgement and recognition of another party have been fulfilled. They also indicate that respect and courteousness are present. Greetings are signs of a social encounter taking place. However, they will only occur under particular 'socio-historical' conditions. In this study, the use of openings and closings by front counter staff of various departments in six public (government) Malaysian hospitals were studied. From a total of 146 instances of transactions, only 68 of them contained openings made by staff while 46 contained closings contributed by staff. Analysis of data suggests that front counter staff of Malaysian hospitals used less openings and closings in their public transactions with patients/clients and due to that missing element, they could be described as being less polite than expected.

Keywords: Closings, front counters, Malay, openings, polite, public hospitals

1. INTRODUCTION

Politeness is an abstract concept but it is fundamentally linked to one's way of behaviour or speech which is supposed to display a particular aspect of social behaviour that is assessed by society as being polite or impolite. To be polite is to show good regard for other's feelings and when an individual demonstrates this quality in his/her speech or behaviour, that individual may be described by society as being polite, mannerly, courteous, respectful, civilised, refined, polished, well-bred and cultured (Collins Paperback Thesaurus, 2002). Such people are generally more socially attractive since human behaviour is often assessed through one's outward appearance like speech and mannerisms. Eliza Doolittle in 'My Fair Lady' was depicted as a lower class individual due to the way she talked, dressed and behaved but she was eventually 'upgraded' to be more socially acceptable and refined through the language she used. In Malaysia, refinement, finesse, courteousness and respect

Email: Kuang Ching Hei; kuangch@um.edu.my
Maya Khemlani David; mayadavid@yahoo.com
Lau Su Kia; lausk@um.edu.my
Ang Pei Soo; angps@um.edu.my

are all related to politeness. The higher the class, the more refined and cultured the person is expected to be. A refined and cultured person earns respect. However, this does not mean that others in the working class are not refined and cultured since both qualities are acquired through one's upbringing and cultural values.

In the Malaysian context, refinement of manners or in this case, politeness, is an important element for all human interactions. This can be traced to the current campaign on *Budi Bahasa Budaya Kita* which means 'Being Polite is Our Culture' which is being promoted in all government agencies or workplace. Of the three dominant groups living in this country, the Malay community is the majority. Malays are often described by literature as being more traditional and cultural. Their behaviour, it has been claimed, reflects their cultural values and upbringing. The Malay community is also depicted as a cohesive community that thrives on being collectivists and this is possibly due to a common binding religion, Islam. In addition, the Malay culture is also depicted as refined, constantly emphasising good breeding, proper mannerisms, and in Malay terms, being *bersopan-santun*, *berbudi bahasa* and *beradab* (Asmah Haji Omar, 1992; 1993) which means being polite and refined.

Good-breeding is not confined to external appearances only, much less to any particular dress or attitude of the body (Churchill, online). It is also the art of pleasing or contributing as much as possible to the ease and happiness of those with whom you converse (Churchill, online). In this sense, politeness is not just about behaviour but also about what one says. In the context of this study, politeness is confined to what the front counter staff say to their clients/patients in terms of openings and closings.

1.1 Aim

In giving focus to the use of openings and closings by front counter staff of Malaysian government hospitals in their public transactions with clients/patients, this paper aims to show that politeness can be gauged through these two features of conversations. Appropriate greetings in openings and closings can help illustrate politeness of the speakers involved. The research question this study hopes to answer is 'Are front counter staff of Malaysian government hospitals polite or impolite in their public interactions?'

1.2 Assumptions

In this paper, it is assumed that service counters need to project a polite image because they are providing services to clients and customers. It is further assumed that the first gateway to demonstrating politeness in service encounters is through openings which use appropriate greetings. These greetings show courteousness, respect and high regard for others as claimed by Searle and Vanderveken (1985) as well as Duranti (1997). Likewise, it is also assumed that service encounters need to use appropriate closings as these are social signs of appreciation and goodwill towards clients' patronage. In the context of this paper, usage of appropriate openings and closings are deemed as markers of politeness. Although cultural values are strongly embedded in the Malay community of Malaysia, it is also assumed that people change their behaviour to adapt to their environmental needs and more so in the workplace environment. It is also assumed that an overwhelming need to service clients in hospitals may also affect how front counter staff respond to clients.

1.3 Study Background

Six public hospitals in Peninsular Malaysia were studied. Focus was given to the use of openings and closings detected from the public transactions which occur between front counter staff and their patients/clients. The majority of the staff in these 6 hospitals were Malays but the patients may be of various ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese, Indians and others).

2. METHODOLOGY

Observations of the staff's public interactions with their clients/patients in various departments in six public/government hospitals were conducted. Oral public transactions involving the two parties were then manually recorded. The dominant language used by the staff was Malay but for the benefit of this paper, translations will be provided. Both verbal and non-verbal aspects of the transactions were focused. Pauses, hesitations, nodding of heads, shaking of hands and silence were indicated in the data. General information such as estimated age, gender, and ethnicity of both staff and patients were also indicated followed by time and place of the transactions.

2.1 Politeness and Face Threatening Acts

Politeness refers to the way a speaker expresses him/herself when interacting with others. It usually includes certain use of strategies which a speaker engages in his/her attempt to reduce any face threatening acts (FTA) to the hearer (Mills, 2003). To be polite therefore implies that the speaker focuses on giving high regard to the hearer and to accomplish this, a speaker speaks in ways that can 'save the face' of the hearer. Goffman (1967) was the pioneer to discuss 'face works' suggesting that people construct their identities and behave according to who their audiences are and in what social interactions. This notion was then taken up by Brown and Levinson (1987) who discuss the politeness theory in terms of strategies used to mitigate the threat of the hearer's face.

Face threatening acts (FTA) can be manifested verbally and non-verbally but depending on where one comes from, some acts may be seen as less threatening than others. In the Malaysian context which observes culture, values and hierarchy quite strictly (Hofstede, 1984), the concept of 'face' is an important feature to one's well being and communication as it also denotes one's dignity. Malaysians often resort to indirectness in face-to-face communication in order to mitigate threats to the hearer's face. Besides being less threatening, indirectness also comes across as being more cultured and refined while directness is perceived as upfront and straight forward thus, face threatening. David and Kuang (1999; 2005) have shown some evidence of the direct and indirectness of Malaysian professionals in giving directives and in writing memos and emails. Kuang and Jawakhir (2010) have also highlighted some aspects of Malay indirectness among professional Malay women while Morais (1995) and Manjit Kaur (1998) show how semi-professional working Malays were generally indirect in the way they communicate their needs to their bosses and among their peers.

Politeness is probably a waning value in this country and this is evidenced by the various campaigns organised by the government through the '*Budi Bahasa Budaya Kita*'

campaigns. The country is also experiencing higher levels of incidences involving school children fighting (*The Star*, 3 September 2010) and school principals making uncalled for remarks (*The Star*, 4 September 2010). Such social ills are also compounded by rude political leaders who call each other names in public forums and parliament debates (see Ngeow *et al.*, 2010).

Social transactions need to be polite for they work on goodwill and harmony, both of which promote peace and in that regard, it is important to be polite. Good mannerisms are polite for they show high regard for others as well as convince others that respect and courteousness are at work. In service encounters, such a value is even more required as polite public transactions ensure good relationships and maintain goodwill since decorum helps to smoothen human communications and minimise conflicts. It is more important for service providers who are there to serve their clients/consumers who require those services.

Politeness in the Malaysian context suggests that members of the community and society conform to certain rules of social interactions which include certain rituals. For instance, when one member meets another member in public, one of the common rituals of exchange is greeting each other. A person can acknowledge the presence of the other verbally by saying 'Hello', 'Hi', 'Good morning/afternoon/evening', or use various extended community terms like 'Ni hao', (Mandarin - How are you?), 'Assalamualaikum', (Arabic - Peace be with you), or 'Apa Khabar' (Malay - How are you) to display goodwill and to show high regard or respect for the other. Non-verbal but appropriate gestures like eye contact, smiles, nodding of head, or the waving of hands are equally important rituals which not only denote politeness but are also seen as giving recognition to others.

Hofstede (1984) mentions that Malaysia is a hierarchical society and its people tend to place high value on social distance and power. The use of titles or honorifics is thus an important aspect of interacting as titles and honorifics show the social positions of the respective individuals. In close relationships, titles and honorifics may be replaced by the use of appropriate kinship terms which are commonly used to show politeness (Gaudart, 1995; Radiah Yusoff, 2007). Asma Abdullah and Pedersen (2003), Asmah Haji Omar (1982) and Jamaliah Mohd. Ali (1995a) have also mentioned that Malaysians may also show their respect for others through indirectness which is a quality acquired from their upbringing. Searle (1975) describes indirectness as one of the common strategies used by interlocutors to reject proposals or to make requests. Nonetheless, it is not the contention of this paper to look at the use of indirectness as a marker of politeness. This paper only attempts to assess if the use of openings and closings are being practised by front counter Malay staff, as both are used as markers of politeness.

Politeness, as an abstract notion, cannot be measured nor graded but it can be assessed through some means. In the case of this paper, politeness is assessed through the use of openings and closings. In the context of this paper, greetings in openings are seen as important aspects of social or public interactions. Table 1 is provided as a model to illustrate how politeness is conveyed linguistically. The table is derived from the common practices of Malaysians in general when they meet each other. Thus, the contents are derived from daily routines of Malaysians based on observations.

Table 1. Model of polite openings in verbal transactions in the Malaysian context

Malay Student	<i>Apa khabar, cikgu?</i> (How are you, teacher?)
Malay Teacher	<i>Khabar baik.</i> (I am well.)
Malay Adult	<i>Assalamualaikum</i> (Arabic: I bring peace in my greeting.)
Malay Adult	<i>Mualaikum salam</i> (Arabic: I give you peace in mine.)
Malay shop assistant	<i>Good morning sir, can I help you?</i>
Customer	<i>No, thank you, I am just looking.</i>
Malay Child	Good morning, aunty/uncle/ <i>makcik/pakcik/dik/kak</i> etc.
Neighbor	Morning
Malay stall owner	<i>Ya kak, nak apa?</i> (Yes, sister, can I help you?).
Customer	Hmm, goreng pisang dua ringgit. (Hmm, banana fritters, two ringgit please.)

Source: Authors' experience

Greetings within interactions suggest the speaker's good intention; thus, it can be said that greetings are polite signs as they enhance a relationship even before it occurs. In multi-ethnic Malaysia, greetings may be said in Arabic, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and various other dialects common in the country. Apart from verbal greetings which are used as markers of politeness, certain aspects of non-verbal expressions such as making eye contact, smiling, nodding of heads, waving of hands when another person is in view are also considered as polite in this country and sometimes such people may even be described as friendly. While listening to another, silent attention is also a sign of politeness.

2.2 The Malay Community

Malaysia has been evolving over the years and despite the fact that its people have experienced more than 50 years of independence, literature about Malaysian Malays has not changed very much. "The Malay community still holds on strongly to our cultural values and one of these values that has been inculcated and nurtured in us since the day we were born is courtesy" (Kamisah Ariffin and Norazlan Annual, 2003: 190). In addition, the Malay community has also been described as a cultured community for its people are seldom confrontational (Asrul Zamani, 2003). Indirectness seems to be one of the unwritten rules of speaking among the Malays (Kamisah Ariffin and Norazlan Annual, 2003) and this has been confirmed by various studies done by Jamaliah Mohd. Ali (1995a; 1995b), Morais (1995), Manjit Kaur (1998), Suraiya (2002), David and Kuang (1999; 2005), Thilagavathi (2003), Kuang and Jawakhir (2010). These studies show that that Malays are indirect in their ways and such Malay participants ranged from students to professionals and semi-professionals and included both men and women in both formal and informal settings.

It also appears that most Malays are also traditionalists such that they abide by their customs and cultures quite strongly. In that sense, it would not be wrong to assume that the use of greetings like ‘*assalamualaikum*’, ‘*mualaikum salam*’ and other aspects of polite greetings and closings like ‘*inshallah*’ are commonly heard phrases between Malays. With other ethnicities, it is likely that Malay people would also maintain their traditional courteousness in other ways such as using common Malaysian terms like, ‘*Apa khabar cikgu?*’ (How are you?) among colleagues or ‘*Sudah makan?*’ (Have you eaten?) among neighbours.

The Malays are not just indirect and courteous in their ways, they are also tolerant, hospitable, humble and unassuming (Asrul Zamani, 2003). These qualities may contribute to the indirect ways of the Malays as well as their non-confrontational manners. Asrul Zamani (2003) explains that the Malays are peace-loving people who prefer to keep any dissatisfaction to themselves suggesting they have a high tolerance level and because of this they are often perceived to be polite. Such qualities of the Malays are difficult to come by says Asrul Zamani (2003) and because of that, he asserts that the Malays can be considered as different from other ethnic groups. These qualities have also been established by Abdul Razak Kamarudin and Kamarulzaman Kamaruddin (2009) whose study indicate that the decision-making styles in shopping behaviour of their Malay executives were affected by some of these traits including their religious beliefs.

Historically, the Malays were divided into Proto and Deutero Malays (see Asrul Zamani, 2003; Syed Husin Ali, 2008) but today, a Malay is one who professes Islam as a religion, speaks the Malay language habitually and conforms to Malay customs, as is defined by Article 160(2) of the Federal Constitution (2009). The Malay community and its behaviours have often been linked to the historical Malaccan kingdom in the fifteenth century. During that period of time, the Malay society was divided into the upper class (*bangsawan*) and the lower class (*rakyat*) (Syed Husin Ali, 2008). The former was smaller in comparison and was made up of the sultan, his family and chiefs. The latter was bigger comparatively and generally made up of the common people. It is possible that Malay loyalty and Malay indirectness are derived from the way the commoners interacted with the upper class during that period of time.

It is argued that the description of the Malay community should no longer be confined to one common set of characteristics as they have evolved over the years. This has been observed by Syed Husin Ali (2008) who mentions that while previously the Malay community used to be the upper and the lower class people, today, there are upper middle class Malays. Malays who are professionals, government servants and business executives can now be considered as upper middle class. As middle class groups, they not only have positions but also the economic means and power to do as they like. Unlike the early Malays who used to be paddy farmers and fishermen who struggled to make ends meet, the new Malays are now placed in the middle range. In comparison to those who are financially very successful, the new Malays are positioned midway, having income levels that are neither too high nor too low. As new Malays, it is possible that this group of upper middle class Malays are modern in their ways and that their values may have been influenced by the West through their education. However, the group is still collectivist in nature and in that regard, might also be

attracted to their traditional past (Syed Husin Ali, 2008). From this explanation, it would seem that the upper middle class Malays have both urban and rural values.

An advocate for Malays, Mahathir Mohammad (2001) once claimed that modern Malays 'forget easily'. He was imploring those who had acquired education from overseas and had become outspoken and bold to trace their roots and to "serve and fight for Malay struggles."

In recent years, changes have overcome the Malay community and Lailawati (2005) managed to show traces of this by indicating that Malaysian Malays have evolved from the high culture context to the low culture context, becoming more individualistic in nature. Lailawati's (2005) paper suggests that people are influenced by other values which could have been acquired from travelling or education. This is not surprising as psychologists like Bond and Hwang (1986) have mentioned how immigrant Chinese and their descendants' way of life had changed over the years due to their exposure to other cultures and other technological exposure which they experienced in host countries.

2.3 Framework for Analysis

Data was analysed from only one perspective that is politeness, and to gauge that both openings and closings are thus treated as markers of politeness. Our data will be categorised as polite, semi-polite or impolite. In the context of this paper, where the data provide clear-cut instances of openings which are initiated by greetings and use of appropriate titles, kinship terms or address forms, they will be classified as polite because they suggest giving recognition and showing a high regard for others. Closings which show signs of appreciating the other party are also treated as polite. Tone is not considered here as it was beyond our capacity to record the spoken data. Both verbal and non-verbal instances are then categorised in these three groups: polite, semi-polite and impolite. Where the openings or closings are not clear-cut polite but carry some inclination of care and concern which is shown through eye contact or appropriate body movements possibly followed by a direct question, they are categorised as semi-polite. Any instance of an opening or closing which carries no greetings, appropriate address forms, or which lacks any tendency to show high regard or respect for others is categorised as impolite.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Analysis of Data

From the observations of the transactions occurring between staff and patients, it appears that both verbal and non-verbal modes were employed in public transactions. Each verbal interaction recorded may have both openings and closings made by either the hospital staff or by patients or one of these may be absent. The verbal transaction may be as short as single words like 'yes?' and 'no' or it may consist of greetings subsequently followed by the conversation proper in which the purpose of the transaction is performed. The non-verbal transactions comprise silence and some level of body gestures.

Of the observations conducted, a total of 146 transactions were extracted for analysis. From the total, less than half or 68 (46.57%) of the transactions show that the openings had been initiated by the front counter staff while 78 (53.42%) of the transactions were initiated by patients. This phenomenon suggests that clients seem to initiate the openings, a public

transaction quite unlike normal public transactions offering services to the public as those in hotels, shops, restaurants and eateries.

From the 68 openings initiated by staff, a pattern also emerged. It was found that 19 (27.94%) of the openings could be described as polite, 12 (17.64%) could be labelled as semi-polite, and 37 (54.41%) were considered as impolite. This indicator thus implies that front counter public hospital staff were generally impolite. The outline of the data categorised are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 indicates that from the 68 openings detected, 9 were non-verbal instances with only 1 instance showcasing a polite handshake between two male participants. No non-verbal opening was detected in the female participants. A total of 59 of these transactions observed were verbal. From the statistics, it appears that words are an important aspect of front counter public transactions performed in hospitals. Data shown in Table 2 also suggest that 54.41% of the instances were impolite openings while only 27.94% could be considered polite and 17.64% were deemed as semi-polite. From the data, it could be said that the majority of the instances show that front counter Malay staff were less polite than expected.

Table 2. Statistics of openings by staff

Polite	Verbal	18	19 (27.94%)
	Non-verbal	1	
Semi-polite	Verbal	10	12 (17.64%)
	Non-verbal	2	
Impolite	Verbal	31	37 (54.41%)
	Non-verbal	6	
Total instances of openings recorded			68

It could not be ascertained with precision what could have caused this to occur but looking at the environment of a few of the public hospitals, it was apparent that serving many clients/patients may be a contributing factor. In one counter such as the '*Klinik Rawatan Kecemasan*' (Emergency Treatment Clinic) which was attended by three or four staff, it was observed that they had to serve hundreds of patients seeking treatment between midnight to morning. However, this is only based on observation. In that regard, it is possible that staff in public hospitals were overwhelmed by the number of clients/patients whom they need to serve. Inadvertently, their clients/patients were also from the lower income group. From that perspective, it is possible that the staff were overwhelmed by work demands and the pressure to serve many. Consequently, front counter staff had to resort to the quickest and shortest possible way to conduct their duties. It is deduced that such a situation may indirectly affect their social skills, and in this case, the inability to use polite openings. Nonetheless, this deduction is only based on observations. Table 3 illustrates the 6 categories of openings which will be used to classify our data.

Data in Table 4 will illustrate examples of polite openings. In the table, the column on the left indicates the numbering of the instances of public transaction occurrence. On the right

Table 3. Categories of openings

Categories	Examples
1. Polite (Verbal)	Greetings, offer help formally, uses appropriate address forms (e.g. Uncle/aunty/ <i>pakcik/makcik/dik/kak/</i>)
2. Polite (Non-verbal)	Smiles and handshake
3. Semi-polite (Verbal)	Offers help informally (<i>Ya, ada apa hal?</i>)
4. Semi-polite (Non-verbal)	Smiles, nods head then goes directly into the transaction like asking a question
5. Impolite (Verbal)	No greetings or offer of help. Goes directly into the transaction
6. Impolite (Non-verbal)	Action that avoids eye contact or gives any response to patients/clients

Table 4. Examples of polite verbal openings

Turns	Transactions
85	S: <i>Pagi, apa yang boleh saya bantu?</i> (Good morning, how can I help you?) P: <i>Tumpang tanya mana tandas?</i> (Excuse me, where is the toilet?)
87	S: <i>Assalamualaikum.</i> (Greetings.) (smiles) P: <i>Mualaikumsalam.</i> (Greetings.) (smiles)
88	S: <i>Ya, apa yang boleh saya bantu?</i> (Yes, how may I help?) (smiles) P: <i>Ya, cik, selamat pagi.</i> (Yes, miss, good morning,) (smiles)
91	S: <i>Ya, pagi.</i> (Yes morning.) P: <i>Kak, (sister) selamat pagi</i> (good morning). <i>Saya nak ambil report blood test.</i> (I want to take the report of my blood test.)
94	S: <i>Pagi.</i> (Morning) P: Good morning. <i>Saya nak buat blood test.</i> (I want to do a blood test.) <i>Sini ada buat tak?</i> (Do you do it here?)
95	S: <i>Assalamualaikum.</i> (Greeting) (smiles.) P: <i>Mualaikum salam.</i> (Greeting.) <i>Nak jumpa doktor ni.</i> (I want to see the doctor.) <i>Dah demam sehari, takut dapat denggi ni.</i> (I have been ill for a day, am afraid I get dengue.)
110	S: <i>Ya, pakcik ada apa hal?</i> (Yes, uncle, what is the problem?) P: <i>Pakcik nak tanya,</i> (I (addressing himself as uncle) would like to enquire) <i>parking sini dah penuh</i> (all the parking bays here are full) <i>jadi kereta boleh letak kat mane lagi?</i> (therefore, where else can the car be parked?)
123	S: Good morning. P: Good Morning. I would like to go to wad <i>bersalin</i> (maternity ward), so should I go this way?

column, S refers to the staff and P refers to the client/patient involved in the transaction. The brackets shown in the table illustrate the translations.

Note that Table 4 illustrates openings which make use of a number of elements:

- Greetings (Good morning, *assalamualaikum, pagi*)
- Offer to help (*Ya, apa yang boleh saya bantu?* / Yes, can I help you?)
- Enquiry (*Ya, ada apa hal?* / Yes, what is the problem?)
- Uses address forms (*Pakcik*)

Table 5 illustrates examples of openings which were classified as semi-polite.

Table 5. Examples of semi-polite verbal openings

Turns	Transactions
75	S: <i>Nak apa dik?</i> (Yes, brother, what do you want?) P: <i>Nak ambil resit.</i> (I want to collect my receipt.)
103	S: <i>Ya?</i> (Yes? What can I do for you?) P: <i>Nak ambil ubat.</i> (I want to collect my medication.)

The examples illustrated in Table 5 are minimal instances and these limited instances imply that semi-polite openings are less frequently used among front counter hospital staff. The data indicate that the hospital staff used openings which attempt to make an enquiry through the question form as instance 75 shows, ‘yes brother, what do you want?’ and ‘Yes, what can I do for you? The reason these two examples were seen as semi-polite was because both were preceded by an address form for example, ‘*dik*’ in Turn 75. It also offered a ‘yes’ as a form of acknowledging the presence of the patient and this is an indication of respect and courteousness. However, it was not deemed as polite because there were no greetings and it started with a direct question.

Table 6 illustrates openings which were classified as impolite. In the samples shown, elements of courtesy such as greetings, use of address forms, making enquiries or offering

Table 6. Examples of impolite verbal openings

Turns	Transactions
24	S: <i>Kenapa?</i> (What’s wrong?) P: <i>Demam panas tarik</i> (Have sunstroke.)
79	S: <i>Nak apa?</i> (What do you want?) P: <i>Saya nak ambil resit.</i> (I want receipt.)
81	S: <i>Kenapa?</i> (What’s wrong?) P: <i>Pening.</i> (Dizzy.)
92	S: Kamarul Hisham. P: (Patient walks to counter.)
105	S: <i>Ambil ubat ini tiga kali sehari, masa lepas waktu makan.</i> (Take this medicine three times daily after meal.) P: <i>Ubat ni lepas makan rasa mengantuk tak?</i> (Does the medicine make me drowsy?)
129	S: <i>Sudah bayar belum?</i> (Have you paid?) (Staff scrutinises form of patient.) P: <i>Sudah.</i> (Already)
140	S: <i>IC nombor?</i> (Identity card number?) P: <i>Nanti ya</i> (Just a minute) 590709-xx-xxxx

to help were absent. Further, the openings also seemed to commence abruptly and this indicates that the person initiating it is callous. Politeness and courtesy had been compromised through the use of directness which was performed by:

- calling a patient/client by name as in roll call
- giving instructions
- asking if transaction had been paid for
- making identification
- making a crude enquiry (what do you want, what’s wrong)

It appears that instances of impolite verbal openings were relatively high. In the context of this study, it may mean that at the workplace, social graces have been overwhelmed by the need to get work done.

Table 7 provides the only sample of a polite non-verbal opening.

Table 7. Examples of polite non-verbal openings

Turns	Transactions
49	S: (smiles) Very pack today. P: One zero six.

In this study, it was mentioned that only nine instances of non-verbal openings were detected and the example of turn 49 illustrates an example of a non-verbal opening that was classified as polite. This was shown in the gesture of a smile followed by a personal comment.

Table 8 illustrates examples of impolite non-verbal openings where no language or words were exchanged.

Table 8. Examples of impolite non-verbal openings

Turns	Transactions
9	P: (passes the form.) S: (talks a lot...)
20	P: (gives the form to the staff) S: (returns the form.)
35	P: (gives bill.) S: (takes bill and works on the computer.)
37	P: (gives bill and money.) S: (works on the computer and later gives change)
39	P: (gives a document) S: (accepts bill)
76	P: (gives money.) The staff takes the card from the lady patient but keeps on talking to the staff sitting beside her while she processes the card. She then returns the card to the patient without a word said. The patient then leaves after collecting the card without a word spoken.

The transactions shown in Table 8 illustrate information that had been communicated to the clients/patients without any use of words. In the high culture context, this is not a preferred mode of social or public transaction as people like to have some sense of being appreciated or respect which is often derived from the use of greetings, address forms or even an enquiry to show acknowledgement of the presence of the other. In this respect, the examples were all considered impolite. Besides openings, this paper will also discuss the use of closings which will be categorised as polite, semi-polite or impolite as shown in Table 9.

Table 9. Categories of closings by staff

Polite	Verbal	27	27 (58.69%)
	Non-verbal	0	
Semi-polite	Verbal	3	12 (26.08%)
	Non-verbal	9	
Impolite	Verbal	7	7 (15.21%)
	Non-verbal	0	
Total instances recorded			46

From Table 9, it is clear that of the 46 public transactions identified, 58.69% show the staff being polite because they had used closings. It is deduced that as a closure to a service transaction, closings provide clients/patients with a sense of being respected or appreciated and clearly, this is detected in the services offered by front counter staff of public hospitals. Of the 46 closings detected, 9 were non-verbal but were semi-polite, while 7 of these or 15.21% were verbal but were impolite. These statistics indicate that in general front counter hospital staff show appreciation to their clients/patients and in today's context, this is a good sign for it could be interpreted that social good values have not deteriorated. Tables 10 and 11 shed light on the practice of closings used by front counter hospital staff. Table 10 illustrates the verbal samples.

The above data show that in some instances, for example, instances 27 and 94, the patients did not say anything but the front counter staff were polite when they said '*terima kasih*' (thank you). Likewise, '*sama-sama*' (welcome) was used by the serving staff in instances 35, 36, 73, 88, 92, 97 and 118. However, as can be clearly seen, the closings were initiated by the patients first and so the staff had to reciprocate in the same way. Although it could not be ascertained, it is likely that the front counter staff had to respond appropriately due to what the patients had uttered. It has to be clarified here that when closings were articulated in the local language like Malay, they are also limited to two forms only such as '*terima kasih*' (thank you) or '*sama-sama*' (welcome). Thus, front counter staff had no choice but to use these formulaic expressions as reciprocal responses.

In this paper, it is stressed that the closings would show an appreciation of a service that has ended and in that regard, they are clear markers of politeness in service encounters. In the context of this paper, it could be said that closings, as polite markers, were not proactively created by the staff. The tables that follow will help to illustrate other examples of semi-polite and impolite closings.

Table 10. Examples of polite verbal closings

Turns	Transactions
27	P: (gives IC) [IC is Identity Card] S: <i>Terima kasih.</i> (Thank you.)
35	P: <i>Terima kasih noh.</i> (Thank you yes.) S: <i>Terima kasih.</i> Bye. (Thank you.)
36	P: <i>Terima kasih noh.</i> (Thank you yes.) S: <i>Sama.</i> (Welcome)
73	P: <i>Terima kasih.</i> (Thank you.) S: <i>Sama-sama.</i> (Welcome.)
88	P: <i>Macam tu?</i> (Like that?) <i>Saya datang sekejap lagi...</i> (I will come later on.) <i>Terima kasih.</i> (Thank you.) S: <i>Sama.</i> (smiles) (Welcome.)
92	P: Thank you. S: Welcome.
94	P: (Patient gives identity card to staff at the counter.) S: (Staff takes down particulars and then returns identity card to patient.) S: <i>Sila duduk dulu.</i> (Please take a seat first.) (smiles)
97	P: Ok. Thank you. S: Welcome.
118	P: Ok. Thank you. S: <i>Sama sama.</i> (Welcome.)

Table 11. Examples of semi-polite verbal closings

Turns	Transactions
84	P: (gives money) S: Ok.
98	P: Thanks. S: Ok.

Table 11 illustrates examples of semi-polite closings used by hospital staff. From the examples given, it appears that this category of closing is less frequently used in practice. It is possible that staff attending to the patients had limited things to say other than 'ok' which is considered an acknowledgement. Thus, even though it may not be seen as polite, the fact that the staff showed acknowledgement implies that it was an attempt to be polite; thus it was categorised as semi-polite.

Table 12. Semi-polite non-verbal closings

Turns	Transactions
7	P: Ok, thank you. (takes the balance) S: (nods)
34	P: <i>Terima kasih</i> S: (nods)
44	P: <i>Terima kasih.</i> S: (smiles)
74	P: <i>Oh, terima kasih ah.</i> (smiles) S: <i>Ah</i> (smiles)

Table 12 illustrates some examples of semi-polite non-verbal closings which do not rely on the use of words. As in the case of other non-verbal categories, the examples illustrated here were also limited. Data show the use of nods and smiles by staff to indicate that the transaction had come to an end.

Table 13. Impolite verbal closings

Turns	Transactions
81	P: Thank you. S: <i>Duduk dulu, nanti kita panggil.</i> (Sit first, we will call you afterwards.)
102	P: <i>Hari ni ada appointment dengan dia.</i> (Today, I have an appointment with him/her (doctor). S: <i>Duduk dulu, nanti kita panggil.</i> (Sit first, we will call you afterwards.)
115	P: <i>Sini.</i> (Here) (Patients gives paper to staff at counter.) S: <i>Duduk dulu, nanti saya panggil.</i> (Sit first, I will call you afterwards.)

In Table 13, some examples of impolite closings are given to illustrate how closings were performed. Clearly, staff were giving directives to the patients at the end of a public transaction and the three examples shown above suggest that front counter staff are used to giving instructions where the third person pronoun of 'we' or the first person pronoun of 'I' were used. These suggest positions of power. In this regard, the three examples were considered impolite because the directives were direct instead of indirect which, if applied, would have helped to mitigate the threat to the hearer's face. Clearly, the front counter Malay staff chose directness over indirectness to convey this message.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show how politeness was gauged through the use of openings and closings by front counter staff of Malaysian government hospitals. It has also outlined how data were categorised and what aspects of language were used to determine the three categories of politeness. The abstract notion of politeness was also defined and some examples of politeness shown through greetings used within the Malaysian community were also provided as illustrations. It was also mentioned that data in this study were elicited from close observations of public transactions of front counter staff and the general public in 6 public hospitals in Malaysia. Focus was given to the use of openings and closings only performed by front counter Malay staff serving clients/patients in various departments of Malaysian public hospitals. A total of 146 instances were identified with 68 consisting of openings initiated by staff and 46 containing closings initiated by staff. Clearly, there were more verbal openings and closings which had been identified in this study. This occurrence implies that language or words are an important feature of service encounters in hospitals. In addition, the languages used by the front counter Malay staff of government hospitals were Malay and English and this shows that even within multi-ethnic Malaysia, both languages served as the *lingua franca* between two parties.

However, as the focus of this paper is on the use of openings and closings as markers of politeness, it seems clear that some traditional aspects of politeness, as literature seems to claim exist within the Malay community, is less apparent when studied from the perspective of a third party observing the front counter services provided by Malaysian government hospital staff. Data suggest that front counter Malay staff in government hospitals in Malaysia seldom adhere to socially acceptable ways of behaviour. Not only were openings seldom performed with courtesy by front counter Malay staff of government hospitals, the use of closings too were limited in use.

Between the use of openings and closings which serve as markers of politeness in public transactions, data show that front counter Malay staff reverted to using more polite closings than openings. In answering the research question which asks, "Are front counter hospital staff in Malaysian government hospitals polite or impolite?", the analysis of the data provided by this study implies that they were more inclined to be described as less polite because their public interactions with clients/patients showed that both features of the conversation were used less frequently than desired. Nonetheless, this was probably due to their work demands.

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Kuang Ching Hei is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya.

Maya Khemlani David is Professor in the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics and Head of Section for Co-Curricular Activities, Elective Courses by Other Faculties and TITAS (SKET), University of Malaya.

Lau Su Kia is a language teacher attached to the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya.

Ang Pei Soo is a language teacher attached to the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya.