Access Rituals in West African Communities

An Ethnopragmatic Perspective

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Semantic analysis must be integrated with ethnographic information if we want to provide an adequate pragmatic analysis of speech activities within and across speech communities.

—Alessandro Duranti, "Universal and Culture-Specific Properties of Greetings"

One can think of access rituals as verbal and nonverbal communicative acts that mark boundaries at the beginning and closing phases of social interaction. Goffman (1967, 1971) classified greetings and farewells as access rituals because "greetings mark the transition to a condition of increased access and farewells to a state of decreased access" (Goffman 1971: 79). Levinson (2006a, 2006b) suggested that access ritual activities were among the ethologically grounded behavioral proclivities driven by cognitive predispositions for human interaction "that are at source independent of variations in language and culture" (Levinson 2006b: 40). Even though access rituals have generally been subsumed under greetings and farewells, and the former have been privileged in many cases over the latter (e.g., Duranti 1997; Firth 1972), I argue that greetings and farewells stricto sensu are components of opening and closing access rituals and are not coextensive with them. These access rituals are forums in which members of various communities of practice "enact through linguistic practices cultural ideologies of … [e.g.] inequality in West Africa" (Foley 1997: 359).

Ethnographic and sociolinguistic accounts of "greetings" in some West African societies have pointed to the enactment of an ideology of inequality in which participants with inferior status assume the role of initiator of greetings, with its possible manipulations and attendant responsibilities (see, e.g., Goody 1972 on Gonja and Lodagaa; Irvine 1974 on Wolof; Schottman 1995 on Baatombu; Youssouf, Grimshaw, and Bird 1976 on Touareg). However, in some other West African communities that are also status conscious but not as stratified, the ideology of inequality seems not to be acted out in greetings or, more generally, access rituals. Even in these celebrated cases, interactional asymmetry is just one among many other values. Thus Perrino (2002) found that in Wolof ethnomedical greetings, inequality was enacted but was "tempered" by a projection of intimacy. I demonstrate later in this chapter that in several communities of practice along the West African coast, other cultural values are played out in the performance of access rituals. These include hospitality, interdependence, harmony, and inclusiveness. For reasons of space, I use Ewe-speaking communities as the prototype and draw parallels with practices in other communities, such as Akan and Ga. My discussion is based on participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and recorded texts from different communities of practice. With respect to Ewe, I also draw on my native knowledge of these communicative practices.

The aims of this chapter, then, are manifold. First, I want to show that greetings and farewells are parts of, rather than being, the conventional openings and closings of social interactions. Openings and closings are phases in interaction in which mutual access is negotiated, and they are made up of several act sequences (see Schegloff 1968). Second, I want to demonstrate that even though the boundaries of social encounters are marked through ritual communicative acts, these ritual acts do not have just social (e.g., acknowledgment) and phatic functions. They have rich illocutionary meanings that can be analyzed and represented in a rigorous fashion using, for example, the methods and modes of representation of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage framework (see, e.g., Ameka 1999; Goddard 1998; Wierzbicka 2003). A third aim is to characterize expectations, norms of interaction, cultural ideologies, and values with respect to access rituals and modes of interpreting them in cultural or ethnopragmatic scripts (see, e.g., Goddard 2006; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2004).

A fourth goal is to address a specific issue concerning routinized greeting questions and their answers. Much theorizing about the ritualistic nature of greetings, and especially about greeting questions, has

concentrated on an Anglo and Western attitude toward such questions. In English, it has been argued that "How are you?" is not a question but a greeting (Leech 1983). Some writers, including Sacks (1975), have demonstrated that such questions are preferentially answered by lying. Wirerzbicka (2003) argued that "How are you?" is a Pollyanna question that has to be answered positively. I show that in some cultural linguistic groups in West Africa, greeting questions are genuine questions that have to be faithfully and felicitously answered.

The complexity of openings and closings everywhere depends on several factors, including the period of absence, the status and age of participants, and, importantly, the type of encounter and associated sociocultural conventions. Therefore, in the following section I outline different types of encounters that may occur between interlocutors in West Africa. Next, I describe a particular type of encounter—a social visit—drawing out its constitutive factors and elucidating the linguistic routines that may be used in such situations. I then focus on a variety of conventional opening acts for negotiating interaction, arguing that "greetings" are but a subcomponent of openings. I claim that the enactment of well-being inquiries is an avenue for displaying cultural values such as inclusiveness and harmony in West African communities, and I show that expectations about the questions vary cross-culturally. Finally, I consider changes due to cultural contact and the norms associated with greeting behavior in West Africa and conclude by reflecting on the relationship between access routines and ritual communication.

Toward a Typology of Encounters

Interactions between people who do not live in the same place may occur as chance meetings or as planned encounters. Chance meetings occur just because the interlocutors happen to be in the same place at the same time. Their paths cross as they go about their individual activities. This implies that chance meetings take place between interactants, either as individuals or as groups, none of whom could be said to be at their place of abode or work. In West Africa, encounters of this kind occur between people who meet in the street, in the neighborhood, at the riverside, on the way to the market, to the farm, to school, and so forth. Such meetings are usually brief and involve, minimally, the exchange of greeting routines. They can be accompanied by brief general conversations. They could also develop into a sort of "purposeful" encounter in which the interlocutors retire to a spot with some shade and exchange news, ideas, or gossip.

Planned meetings, on the other hand, have a defined social or trans-actional purpose. In this case one can identify two or more participants or groups of participants: a host, who is construed to be at "home" either in reality or at least functionally (Naden 1980, 1986), and a visitor or visitors, who are not at home or do not function as such. Thus a trader in the market, a teacher at school, and a farmer on the farm are all functionally at home. A customer in the market and a visitor to the school or farm are not at home. Such encounters may vary in their level of formality (Irvine 1979), their length and content, and, above all, their purpose.

In the West African context, one person can visit another for the purpose of paying respect to neighbors and relatives or to exchange greetings and just check on the well-being of others. Thus the Ewe utterance in (1) can be used either as a parting expression or as an answer to the question, "Where are you going?"[1]

(1) *me-yi   má-dó   gbe   ná   asímasí   má-vá*
    1SG-go 1SG: POT-put voice to   so-and-so 1SG: SUBJV-come
    I am going to greet So-and-So, and I'll be back.

Similarly, one can visit another to express one's best wishes to a new parent or a sick person, offer condolences to a bereaved person, or give thanks to a benefactor. The cultural importance of visits as an interactional habit of members of West African communities is enshrined in traditional sayings such as the following ones in Ewe:

(2a) *nɔví-kpɔ́-kpɔ́-é*   *nyé*   *nɔví-wɔ-wɔ*
     Sibling-RED-see-FOC   COP   sibling-RED-do
     Seeing (visiting) friends is making friends.

(2b) *Afɔ*   *mé-gblĕ-á*   *ame*   *dome*   *o*
     foot   NEG-spoil-HAB   person   between   NEG
     Lit.: foot/leg does not spoil relations between people
     Going by foot to visit people does not destroy friendships/relationships.

These social visits can be of varying lengths. They might be "flying" visits, in the sense that the visitor comes around to say hello and soon departs, or they might be "sitting" visits, in which the visitor accepts a seat from the host and spends some time with him or her. Sitting visits may be for the exchange of news or for some economic transaction, such as the visitor's wanting to negotiate a loan from the host.

Each of the interactions is defined by or has cultural-situational frames. To provide a frame for looking at access rituals, I next concentrate on social "sitting" visits, characterizing the act sequences that make up the opening, central, and closing phases. An "exchange of news" event in which a visitor goes to a host with the specific purpose of giving him or her a piece of news is taken as an example.

A Frame for a Social Visit

I adopt the SPEAKING model proposed by Hymes (e.g., 1968, 1972; see also Duranti 1985; Saville-Troike 2003) in the description of a speech event of news exchange. We can assume that the setting of this event is a compound house with seats in the courtyard (and children playing around). The participants are a host and a visitor. Each of them may assume the role of speaker or addressee in the act sequences that constitute the event. In addition, there may be a spokesperson for each of the host and visitor or just one person acting as spokesperson for both parties. The spokesperson serves as an intermediary (or channel) through whom messages are sent from one party to the other. The addressor may whisper the content of his thought to the spokesperson, who frames it in good language and verbalizes it to the addressee (or through the addressee's spokesperson). Alternatively, the addressor-speaker invites the spokesperson to pass on the information while he says the message for the hearing of the addressee (and his spokesperson). During social visits of this kind, the second option is usually adopted (on triadic communication in West Africa, see Ameka 2004; Ameka and Breedveld 2004; Yankah 1995; and references therein). I now turn to the sequences of acts that make up the speech event of news exchange, focusing on the boundary acts that are used to ask for and grant access and to terminate access. The enactment of these involves adjacency pairs and, in most cases, standardized expressions.

Opening Sequences

The opening sequences in the speech event include attention-calling, the welcome, the offer of a seat, the offer of water, the host's identification of the visitor, and an exchange of greetings. Some of these are required, and others are optional.

Attention-Calling   The visitor initiates the action by attracting the host's attention outside the house. The visitor uses vocative and hailing routines such as *agoo* 'I want you to know I am about to do something'

(Ameka 1994); *kɔ́kɔ́kɔ́kɔ́* 'ideophone copying the sound of knocking on the door'; and a phrase such as *mi-le é-me-a?* 'Are you (pl) inside?" Nonverbal signs such as physically knocking or clapping at the gate may also be used. The effect of this act is to draw the host's attention to the visitor. It also helps the addressee ascertain whether the host is available or not.

If the host (or someone in the host's home) is available, he or she gives an appropriate response to the hailing routine—for instance, *amee!* 'I want you to do what you say you want to do', the standard response to *agoo;* the answer particle *ehĕ* 'yes'; or any expression that signals "come in," such as the Ewe *gé ɖé é –me* (lit. 'drop toward its inside'), "come in."

Welcome   This is an optional move, and its execution depends on where the visitor is coming from. If the visitor is from the same village or neighborhood, then there is no need for this act. If the visitor has come from another village or is perhaps returning from work or the farm, then the host welcomes him or her. The routines used include the interjectional expressions *a..túúù* 'We embrace each other'; *dzáà* 'I am very happy to see you'; *wò / mìawó-é zɔ* 'YOU (sg/pl) walked!'; *wò / mìawó-é de* 'YOU (sg/pl) have been and back'; and *ɖó afé* 'reach home' (see Ameka 1992, 1994 for their semantics).

Seat Offer   Immediately after the visitor enters the compound, he or she is offered a seat. In this respect Ewe practice differs from that of the Ga. In Ga practice, according to Kropp Dakubu (1981, 1987), the visitor is seated and offered water only after the initiation of greetings. The verbal routines used in Ewe to offer the seat are usually variations on the idea that there is a seat for the visitor. These routines are usually accompanied by a pointing gesture: *zi le mia té* [chair be.at 2PL under] 'There is a seat/chair under you'; *zikpui / nɔfé li* [chair/ seat be.at: 3SG] 'There is a chair/seat'. The visitor can decline the seat if this is a passing visit, and then the offer of water will also be omitted. If a host does not offer the visitor a seat, the visitor may interpret it as a sign of being unwelcome. Thus, even though this may be an automatic ritual, its non-occurrence when it is expected is loaded.

Offer of Water   This act depends on whether the visitor is a traveler or not—whether she or he has come from some other village or is just visiting from the same village. When the visitor is offered water, she or he pours a little bit on the ground and then drinks the rest. The

pouring of water on the ground is done as an offering to ancestors and to ask for peace in the transactions that follow. Traditional prayer in West African communities is always accompanied by the pouring of some liquid, whether alcoholic or simply water, on the ground as an offering to God and the ancestors. Hence one could argue that when the visitor pours some water on the ground, it is a kind of prayer. Even if the visitor is not thirsty, she or he must take a sip of the water before giving it back. It is considered bad manners to reject the offer of water without performing these rituals.

Identification   There is a phase in the opening in which the host identifies the visitor by the use of special address terms that place the visitor in the lineage, generation, or social category to which she or he belongs. For instance, in several Ewe communities of practice, this identification makes reference to the day of the week on which the person was born. These identification terms in the context of access rituals are a recognized category in Ewe called *dzedzeŋkɔ* 'salutation name'. This is similar to a category of names used in greetings in some Central and East African communities, such as among the Luo, who label it *empaako* (Byakutaaga 1991; Ndoleriire 2000: 278–280). Typically, in Akan communities the address term for identification relates to the origin or lineage of the interlocutors, especially clan affiliation. In the context of a social visit this move may also include a real question about the visitor's identity. The position of this move in the sequence is relative. It may occur immediately before the exchange of greetings, or it may occur earlier.

Exchange of Greetings   After the preliminary acts of attention-calling, welcome, and offers of a seat and water, the interlocutors are ready to exchange greetings. The Ewe folk label for this is *gbe-lɔ-lɔ* 'voice-intertwining'. This label is instructive, for it suggests that the turn-taking among greeting participants is viewed as the interweaving of their voices, as is evident in the sample greeting exchange that follows. Perrino (2002: 239) reported a similar image for Wolof greetings, which were said to be "like a braid."

The greeting itself may be preceded by a pre-greeting sequence. If it is performed, it may be initiated by either the host or the visitor. When the visitor initiates it, its purpose is to alert the host and seek permission, as it were, to greet him. An adjacency pair for a pre-greeting initiated by a visitor is the following:

(3) Visitor: *má-dó*   *gbe*   *ná*   *mi*   *ló!*
             1SG: SBJV put   voice   to   2PL   UFP
             May I greet you!
    Host: *yoo,*   *gbe-a*   *né-vá*
             Okay,   voice-DEF   JUSS-come
             Okay, let the greeting come!

In essence, the host's response acknowledges his or her preparedness to receive the greeting. When the host initiates the move, the same utterance without the assent-giving signal *yoo* is used. Another routine expression used to invite greeting exchange is *mí-lɔ̃ gbe* [1PL-weave voice] 'let's greet'. Either the host or the visitor can proffer this when the two are ready for this phase of the interaction. The other participant simply acknowledges it.

After the pre-greeting sequence, the visitor initiates a series of greeting acts. In this case, Ewe practice is similar to that of the Ga, among whom greetings are initiated by the visitor (Kropp Dakubu 1987: 508). However, Ewe practice may be different from what obtains in other West African societies, such as the Gonja (Goody 1972: 40), the Bisa (Naden 1980), and the Baatombu (Schottman 1995), among whom it appears that hierarchical status in terms of age or office determines who initiates the greeting exchange.

Greeting exchanges in Ewe are made up of a series of speech act sequences. These may be broadly divided into greeting, "how-are-you," and thanking sequences. The greeting sequence is made up of routines referring to the time of day, such as *ŋdí* 'morning' or the adapted word *mɔ́ni* 'morning' and *ŋdɔ* 'afternoon'. The how-are-you sequence consists of several question-and-answer pairs during which the interlocutors in turn ask about the well-being of each other, their relatives, parents, children and the people in the household they belong to, or the people at the place they have been associated with just before the interaction, such as fellow travelers (see Agblemagnon 1969: 57ff.). The thanking or "gratitude" segment of the greetings exchange is present in other West African communities as well. The expressions used in enacting it are based on "thanks for yesterday" and "thanks for the other day" formulas that have become routinized as parts of daily greeting rituals (Ameka 2006). They are used to acknowledge the services that people render to each other daily by virtue of being part of the same community. The Ewe expressions are:

(4) *Etsɔ/nyitsɔ/gbaɖégbe*   *fé*   *dɔ́*
    Yesterday/day.before.yesterday/the.other.day   POSS   work
    Thanks for yesterday/the other day.

As part of the routinization, the expressions may be reduced in syntactic complexity or in lexical or phonological form. In Ewe, for instance, in the greeting context, the full forms of the expressions in (4) may be reduced to just the temporal nouns. Furthermore, the nominals in the expression *etsɔ fé dɔ́* 'yesterday's work' may be compounded to form *dɔ́–tsɔ* 'work-yesterday' and used in the greeting context.

A further indication of the ritualization of these expressions in the greeting context is that they do not elicit any of the standard responses to gratitude expressions (Ameka 2006). Rather, they are responded to by echoing the expression. The echo response shows that the speaker wants to say the same kind of thing back to the addressee as a return greeting.

Another set of expressions used in the gratitude segment of greetings emphasizes the continued support that members of the community give to each other. These expressions incidentally use the second person plural pronoun as the subject, namely, *mia-wó-é le dɔ dzí / wɔ-ḿ* lit. 'YOU (PL) are working' and *mia-wó-é le ame ta/dzí kpɔ́-ḿ* lit. ' YOU (PL) are looking after people'. Such expressions are responded to with *yoo, mia-wó hã* [Okay 2PL-PL also] 'Okay, you too' or simply with *Máwú-é* 'it is God'. The former response acknowledges the participants' mutual involvement in the good things that are supposed to have been done. The latter shifts the responsibility for the things to an external divine being, reinforcing a communal cultural belief that things that happen to people are brought about by supernatural beings such as God (Ameka 1987, 1994). Thus, even though it is ritualistic, this enactment and its choice of expressions reinforce not only ideologies of gratitude, communality or inclusiveness, and interdependence but also religious belief in God and a view of the causality of things that happen in the world.

There are two modes of interweaving the greeting exchange in Ewe. In one, the initiator posits a proposal, and the interlocutor responds in one move and then follows it with a second move in the same turn by positing a question or proposition. The next turn consists of similar moves by the other interlocutor. Thus, the pattern in terms of moves is A BB AA BB AA BB, and so forth. This is the mode employed in the

inland Ewe dialects. An example of this pattern in greeting during a chance meeting on the street is the following:

(5a) Inland Ewe greeting exchange pattern:
A: *ŋdí*   *loo!*
      Morning   UFP
      Good morning.
B: *ŋdí*
      Morning.
      afé-á   *me*   *ɖê?*
      house-DEF   containing.region   Q
      Morning, how is the house/how are the people at home?
A: *Wó-dɔ̆*
      3PL-spend.time
      Mì-le   *agbe-a?*
      1PL-be.at: PRES   life-Q
      They are fine. Are you well? (lit: They have spent the night. Are you alive?)
B: *Ee!*   *Na-vá*   *kábá*
      Yes   23G: SUBJV-come   quickly
      Yes, come back early.
A: *Yoo*
      Okay.

Apart from the first and final turns in the preceding excerpt, all turns consist of two moves, one in response to the immediately adjacent pair and the other a proposition or a question.

By contrast, in the southern dialects, the pattern is that the initiator remains the initiator through many turns, but at the end of the how-are-you enquiries, the roles are reversed, and the interlocutor becomes the questioner. The pattern is A B A B A B. Consider the following exchange, which follows this pattern (Ameka and Essegbey n.d.):

(5b) Southern Ewe greeting exchange pattern:
Titsa Kɔdzó: *Yoo,*   *xɔ*   *ŋdɔ*   [GREETING SEQUENCE]
                  Okay   get   afternoon
                  Okay, good afternoon to you.
Aƒétɔ́ Gemegá: *Ŋdɔ*   *goo,*
                  Afternoon   UFP
                  mɔ́-dzí-tɔ́-wó?   [HEALTH INQUIRIES]
                  way-top-PERS-PL
                  Good afternoon! How are the people on the road?

Titsa Kɔdzó:	*Wó-dɔ́*				
	3PL-spend.time				
	They are fine.				

[INTERRUPTION]

Afétɔ́ Gemegá:	*Aléké-é,*	*afí*	*ka*	*ne-tsó*	*fífíá?*
	How-FOC	place	CQ	2SG-come.from	now
	How is it? Where are you coming from now?				

Titsa Kɔdzó:	*Me-tsó*	*Ho*
	1SG-come.from	Ho
	I come from Ho.	

[HEALTH INQUIRIES RESUMED]

Afétɔ́ Gemegá:	*ã,*	*Ho-tɔ́-wó?*
	INTERJ	Ho-PERS-PL
	How are the people at Ho?	

Titsa Kɔdzó:	*Wó-dɔ́*
	3PL-spend.time
	They are fine.

Afétɔ́ Gemegá:	*Wó*	*ame-wó?*
	3PL	person-PL
	How are the people?	

Titsa Kɔdzó:	*Wó-li*
	3PL-exist
	They are fine.

Afétɔ́ Gemegá:	*Dziwòláwó?*
	bear-2SG-ER-PL
	Your parents?

Titsa Kɔdzó:	*Wó-dɔ́*
	3PL-spend.time
	They are fine.

Afétɔ́ Gemegá:	*Nɔví-wò-wó?*
	sibling-2SG-PL
	Your brothers and sisters?

Titsa Kɔdzó:	*Wó-li*
	3PL-exist
	They are fine.

Afétɔ́ Gemegá:	*Mie-dɔ́*	*nyúíé-a?*	
	2PL-spend.time	well-Q	
	Are you well?		[SIGNALING ROLE SWITCH]

Titsa Kɔdzó:	*Ee*	
	Yes.	
	Aféme-tɔ́-wó?	[CHANGE TO QUESTIONER]

	home-PERS-PL		
	The people at home?		
Aʄétɔ Gemegá:	*Wó-dɔ*		
	3PL-spend.time		
	They are fine.		
Titsa Kɔdzó:	*Ɖeví-wó?*		
	child-PL		
	The children?		
Aʄétɔ Gemegá:	*Wó-li*		
	3PL-exist		
	They are fine.		
Titsa Kɔdzó:	*Miedɔ*	*nyúíéa?*	
	2PL-spend.time	well-Q	
	Are you well?		
Aʄétɔ Gemegá:	*Ee*		
	Yes.		
	Wo-é	*zɔ*	*kékéké*
	2SG-FOC	walk	very.much
	Yes, (we are fine). Welcome, welcome.		

[SIGNAL TO END GREETING PHASE]

Titsa Kɔdzó:	*Yoo*
	Okay.

Propositional questions, as opposed to topic-only questions, are used to signal that a speaker is giving up the role of questioner. Once both have had their turn in the role of questioner, the whole greeting phase is rounded off by the host's welcoming the visitor once more. The greeting exchange could be accompanied by a handshake, especially if the interlocutors are both male.

The Central Sequence

The middle part of a speech event involving news exchange consists of an inquiry about the purpose of the visit. The folk Ewe label for it is *amanié bɔbɔ* lit. 'recounting of news' (*bɔ amanié* 'recount news' is a phrase that has diffused from Akan into Ewe as well as Ga). This segment of the interaction is initiated by the host.

Various combinations of formulas are used. These are illustrated in the following excerpt from Nyaku 1985: 3 involving the use of the spokespersons Ameteʄé and Tsiami. The host is named Bokɔ, using the title for his role as a diviner.

(6a) Bokɔ́:   *Ametefé*   *se-e*   *né*   *wò-a-tu*
                NAME   hear-3SG   COMP   3SG-SBJJV-reach
                va-vá-lá wó
                RED-come-ER-PL

(6b)   **wó-nyá-ná**   **hã**   **wó-biá-ná**   **amanié-**   **a?**
                3PL-know-HAB   too   3PL-ask-HAB   news   Q
                Ametefe, hear it and pass it on to the visitors. (It is said that)
                even though one may be aware of it one can still ask. What's
                the news/mission?

(6c) Ametefé: *tɔ--nye-tɔ́-wó*   *mie-se*
                POSSPRO-1SG-PERS-PL   2PL-hear
                gbe-a   *ɖá-a?*
                voice-DEF   VS-Q

(6d)   **bokɔ́**   **bé**   **ye**   **gbɔ́**   **fá**
                diviner   QUOT   LOG   place   become.cool
                My friends, have you heard the message? The diviner says
                everything is peaceful here.

(6e) Tsiami: *míé-se-e*   . . .   **míá-wó**   **hã**
                1PL hear 3SG   1PL   PL   too

(6f)   **míé-le**   **afɔ**   **vɔ̃**   **áɖéké dzí**   **o**
                1PL: NEG-be.at: PRES   foot   bad   any   top   NEG
                We have heard it … we have also not come with any bad
                mission.

A number of routines in this excerpt shed further light on aspects of
the "inquiry of purpose" component in Ewe social encounters. These
expressions are shown in boldface in the excerpt (lines b, d, and f).

   One stereotyped phrase used as a pre-question or disclaimer in the
inquiry turn is *wó-nyá-ná hâ wó-biá-ná* 'even if one knows one (still) asks'
(line 6b). This phrase is used as a preface to other inquiring expressions
in situations in which the visitor's mission seems predictable because
of its context. For instance, in the preceding example, the host is a
diviner, so when people come to his place, it can be assumed that they
are coming to ask for his services in that role, as is the case with these
visitors. Hence it is appropriate that the diviner prefaces his inquiry
with this phrase. The phrase is also appropriate in contexts in which
meetings are prearranged. In such cases, the host may have had some
prior notice of the purpose of the encounter. The force of the expression
seems to be, "I am asking the obvious question." Thus this pre-question
gives an indication of the scheduled nature of such interactions and
is used to establish a common ground for the interaction. In the
foregoing example, the pre-question routine is followed by a question:

amaniɛ́-a? 'the news?' The significance of the routine *amaniɛ́-a?* could be paraphrased as follows:

I think you are in this place because you want us to do something together.
I don't know what you want us to do.
I want to know it.
I say: I want you to say what you want us to do (here).
I say it because I want you to say something that would cause me to know it.

The next turn after the host's inquiry is the response, in which the visitor spells out the broad outline of his mission or topic. A final part of the inquiry about the purpose of the visit is that in which the visitor may enquire about any news or business that the host may have at his place. This can be done only after the visitor's mission and purpose have been established. This turn is usually included when the visitor comes from another village. In such situations, the host may recount some of the things that have happened or are in the planning at his village, such as recent deaths and festivities.

The Closing

It appears that in cultures in which the terminal boundaries of encounters are recognized, closings tend to have a tripartite structure: a preclosing phase in which one of the participants signals his or her intention to bring the encounter to a close; a leave-taking phase enacted through various social rituals such as thanking; and the final departure (see, e.g., Aijmer 1996: 59ff; Schegloff and Sacks 1973: 317). In West Africa, too, closings take place in three stages: a permission-to-leave phase; a leave-taking phase that might comprise a formal gesture of leave-taking; and a final departure phase.

The Preclosing   When an interlocutor wants to terminate an encounter, she or he cannot do so without first asking permission to leave (Ameka 1999). The request for permission to leave is a genuine one and can be answered positively or negatively. A positive response may be accompanied by other supportive acts such as thanking the visitor for coming and expressing displeasure at having to let him go. If the response is negative, the host signals that he or she would like the visitor to participate in other activities. The visitor can accede to the request

and delay departure or may decline and repeat the request, adding a justification for being unable to stay longer. If the visitor agrees to stay, he or she will have to act out the permission-seeking again at the end of the activities that have been introduced into the agenda. This phase is omitted if the meeting is a chance one, and it is minimally realized if the encounter is purposeful but informal. It is obligatory and fairly elaborate if the situation is a formal one, such as a traditional ceremony of name-giving or one of certain types of funerals, marriages, arbitrations at the chief's court, and other events. The following cultural script, presented according to Natural Semantic Metalanguage principles, is proposed to represent the communicative practice of requesting permission before leaving a host (for justification, see Ameka and Breedveld 2004: 172):

[A] Cultural script for permission to leave
[people think like this:]
when I am with someone in this person's place because I wanted to do some things with this person
if I think like this: "I don't want to be here in this person's place anymore"
I have to say something like this to this person:
"I think that there is nothing more you want us to do now
I think that there is nothing more you want to say to me now
if it is like this, I want to be somewhere else a short time after this
I want to do something because of this
I know that I can't do it if you don't say to me 'You can do it'
I want you to say it"

The salience of this preclosing phase of leave-taking in West Africa is reflected in the folk linguistic action labels used to talk about it in different languages—for instance, *srɛ kwan* 'beg way' (Akan), *bí gbɛ* 'ask way' (Ga), *tɔkusú* 'ask road' (Sɛkpɛlé), and *biá mɔ́* 'ask way, ask permission' (Ewe). It is also reflected in the transfer of this communicative practice to the varieties of English and French used in that part of the world. The phrase *on va demander la route* has become a routine expression in West African French. In Anglophone West African countries such as Ghana, similar standardized phrases are emerging, such as the adjacency pair "Permission to fall out" and the response, "Permission granted." The following fragment is the permission-to-leave phase of the encounter between the visitors and the diviner cited in (6):

(7) Tsiami: …*fífíá,*   *míá-biá*   *mɔ̌*
             …now   1PL-ask   way
             …Now, we will ask permission to leave.

Bokɔ:	mɔ	li	faa;	mià-de	afé.me	nyúíe
	way	exist	freely	2PL-reach	home	well

You may go. Have a safe journey home.

Tsiami: yoo

Okay.   (Nyaku 1985: 9)

The Leave-taking   In some encounters, especially those involving elders and more formal occasions, all present perform a physical gesture to show that the encounter has been completed. The spokesperson is asked to lead them in this. This act occurs after permission has been granted to the visitor to leave. The ritual has at least two stages: a preparatory stage and the performance. The core of the ritual is that all present rise from their seats a little and then sit down again. This act is accompanied by a linguistic gesture said by all at once as they return to their seats. The linguistic noise made is [hɛ̃], depicting the noise associated with sitting down. This action is described in Ewe folk terms as either *así-ɖeɖé zikpui tó* [hand-RED-put chair edge] 'putting hands on the edge of chairs' or *zikpui-lé-lé* [chair-RED-catch] 'holding chairs'.

This leave-taking act is performed in the following manner: First, the spokesperson warns everyone present that the elder is going to pick up his chair. He then states that the elder has gotten up. On hearing this, everyone gets up a little and sits down again. This leave-taking ritual is not part of every encounter, but every "sitting" encounter has the preclosing and departure phase. Thus, for every such encounter there is a formal closure. In this respect, Ewe practice seems to be different from that of the Mampruli of northern Ghana, among whom, according to Naden (1986: 195), "at the end of business, interactants drift apart without any formal closure."

The Departure   After the visitor has been granted permission to leave—and if necessary, after the closing ritual has been performed—the host proffers good wishes to the visitor, and the visitor responds. At this point, the visitor and host may shake hands and part. The host may see the visitor off or appoint someone to do this on his or her behalf. The choice of routine expressions at this stage depends on what the host-speaker perceives the visitor-addressee to be doing after the present encounter (see Ameka 1999 for a description of some parting expressions). For instance, is the interlocutor going to his or her home in the same village, home to a different village, or to the farm or the market? Is it nighttime, and is the interlocutor going to bed? The encounter finally terminates when the host and the visitor part.

A Variety of Conventional Openers

It is usually asserted of African cultural linguistic groups that they have "a salutation for every conceivable occasion and situation" (Akindele 1990: 3). This comment was made with respect to the Yoruba, but Agblemagnon (1969) made a similar observation with respect to Ewe and compared it with French: "Each occasion in social life has a specific corresponding form of greeting. Instead of the impersonal and non-circumstantial 'bonjour' and 'bonsoir,' Ewe uses specialized formulas" (Agblemagnon 1969: 59, my translation).[2]

   Although it is true that there is a special salutation for every event in many African communities, it is an exaggeration to consider all such expressions greetings. They are better seen as expressions used at the entry points of interactions. For instance, *agoo,* mentioned earlier, and its equivalents in other languages, such as *hodi* in Swahili, are openers rather than greetings, although some writers have characterized them as such. There are language-internal arguments for this view. The enactment of *agoo* is not reported in these languages as "X has greeted." In Ewe, for instance, it is not reported as *é-dó gbe* [3SG-put voice] 'He greeted'. Rather, it is delocutivized, and the expression is the content of the locution, as *é-dó agoo* [3SG-put *agoo*] 'He has said *agoo*'. Such an expression is not classified in Ewe together with expressions such as *ŋdí* 'morning' and *è-le agbea?* lit. 'Are you alive?' the enactment of which is reported with *é-dó gbe ná X* 'He greeted X'.

   Furthermore, the semantics of *agoo* lacks some of the crucial components of greetings. The expression *agoo* has at least three uses in the West African littoral: to request permission to enter someone's premises, to request silence before a speech or an event,; and to ask for right-of-way. The common denominator of all these is attention-getting. The illocutionary semantics of the expression *agoo* can be paraphrased as follows:

I say: I want to do something.
I want you to know it.
I think I cannot do it if you don't want me to.
I say it because I want you to do something that would cause me to know I can do it.

This paraphrase does not contain some of the elements that I would say are criteria for a greeting; it has nothing to do with expressing good feelings to the addressee (see Wierzbicka 1987 for an explication of the English verb "greet").

Similarly, welcoming expressions such the Ewe *woé de* lit. 'you have reached' and *woé zɔ* lit. 'you have walked' are not greetings, although they may occur as initial openers or as parts of greeting litanies, as in the long greeting sample quoted earlier (see 5b). Other salutations addressed to people at work, such as *ayikoo!* (Ameka 1994), or dining, such as *así le agba me loo* lit. 'hand in bowl', are interaction openers rather than greetings because it is after such expressions that proper greetings are exchanged. Thus there may be specialized salutations for "almost any conceivable situation," but these salutations do not constitute greetings. Well-being inquiries, however, constitute greetings, and I turn to these now.

Well-being Inquiries

"How-are-you" sequences and well-being inquiries are those turns during any greeting exchange in which the well-being of the interlocutors and their relatives are asked about. These questions may constitute the only opening or greeting turn. Formally, three types of interrogative structures are used in these sequences: propositional questions, signaled in Ewe by the question particle-clitic *=à;* "topic-only" questions, marked by the particle *é,* which may be used to inquire about the well-being of people and places associated with the addressee but not of the well-being of the addressee him- or herself; and a manner content question introduced by *álékéé* 'How is it?' as used in the earlier greeting sample. This last type seems to have gained greater currency among youths, because it feels like a translation of the colloquial English greeting as well as a popular greeting in Pidgin English, "How now?"

These questions may occur in two positions in the greeting exchange: at the beginning, functioning as conversation openers, or in the how-are-you sequence slot after the initial time-of-day greetings or welcoming routines. The propositional how-are-you questions such as *è-le agbe-a?* lit. 'Are you alive?' and *mìe-fɔ́-a?* lit. 'Have you (pl) risen?' tend to be used between equals and people who are familiar with each other. It is rude for a younger person to inquire about the well-being of an elder using these questions. This is a case in which the status of the interlocutors may determine the choice of the linguistic form used in the interaction.

These questions, unlike the English "How are you?" and "How do you do?" are genuine questions. Leech (1983: 132) quoted Arthur Guilterman to show that the English expressions are not true questions:

Don't tell your friends about your indigestion:
"How are you" is a greeting, not a question.

The English questions do not have to be answered faithfully; one is expected to answer them positively. Note that the response to "How do you do?" is its echo, "How do you do!" These are Pollyanna questions (Leech 1983: 147; and see Wierzbicka 2003 on the meaning of "How are you?" in English). The Ewe how-are-you questions have meanings, and because they can be faithfully answered either positively or negatively, they are real questions. For instance, if a parent greeted a child with the following question,

(8) *è-le*   *nyuie-a?*
     2SG-be-at: PRES   well-Q
     Are you well?

a felicitous response could be,

(9) *ao,*   *ta*   *le*   *vé-ye-ḿ*
     no   head   be.at: PRES   pain-1SG-PROG
     No, I have a headache.

Similarly, if the father of the addressee were sick, and the interlocutor asked about the father's well-being:

(10) *È-tɔ́*   *dɔ́*   *a?*
     2SG-father   spend.night.time   Q
     Is your father well? (lit. 'Did your father sleep/ spend the night (well)?')

a faithful response could be,

(11) *oo,*   *é-fé*   *lãme*   *gblé*
     no   3SG-POSS   body   spoil
     No, he is unwell. (lit. 'His body is spoiled')

Contrast these responses with the situation in English, in which such negative responses are unexpected. Although it is possible to respond to "How are you?" in English with a negative answer, this tends to occur in contexts where the speaker indicates that she or he is aware that the

negative response is not what is expected. For instance, although one can reply with something like "Lousy" or "I feel terrible," it is usually said in jocular manner to show that the norm is being violated.

One can conclude from all this that the Ewe questions are not only for courtesy but are genuine inquiries about the well-being of others. Their genuineness is also a reflection of the communality and of inclusiveness themes that are enacted during social interactions. Language users can reflect on the genuineness of these questions. Van Jaarsveld (1988) reported on an experiment conducted in South Africa to test perceptions among Afrikaans-speaking students, on the one hand, and black African students, on the other, of responses to how-are-you questions. The students were asked what they would think if someone answered a how-are-you inquiry with "I have a headache and have no medicine." Among the 74 Afrikaans speakers, 37 thought the responder was looking for sympathy, and 13 believed he was being honest. The 59 black African students were split more sharply in the opposite direction: only 8 thought the response was a plea for sympathy, and 51 considered this an honest answer. For the great majority of the black Africans, then, the question and its answer were genuine and were to be viewed seriously. If this experiment were replicated, similar results would be obtained across various communities in Africa. Van Jaarsveld (1988: 100) quoted a Sesotho informant's reaction to the purpose of these questions: "It gives people the opportunity to indicate their true feelings and circumstances, for example, illness, wanting help, etc." This represents the folk logic that underlies the faithful answers given to how-are-you questions in various African societies. The problems that can ensue when speakers of African languages transfer these understandings of well-being inquiries into English, for example, in intercultural contexts should be self-evident. Saville-Troike (2003: 36) commented: "Non-native speakers of English … complain that native speakers do not really care about the state of their health when they ask *how are you*? The non-natives are not recognising that this question is part of a greeting routine, which by nature has no meaning apart from its phatic function in communication." The claim that "How are you?" has no meaning apart from phatic function can be challenged, but what is at stake is whether the question should be answered faithfully or not.

Kecskes (2003: 112) distinguished between "situation-bound routines" and "situation-bound rituals." The former do not sound sincere, whereas the latter, which occur more often in tradition-oriented societies, are not considered insincere, "because these cultures seem to have agreed to accept the surrogate evidence for the true feeling." He further suggested

that situation-bound routines relate directly to situations, participants, and actions, whereas situation-bound rituals relate the situation to other situations or agents. This distinction can be applied to the strategies for answering how-are-you questions. In English-speaking and other societies, the answers are routines that sound insincere, whereas in African societies they are rituals and are not considered insincere. Indeed, in Akan the situation of a positive answer to the question is related to another agent, God. The answer to *wo hõ te sen?* lit. 'Your body is how?'—*me hõ yε* 'I am fine'—is invariably prefaced by *Nyame adɔm* 'By God's grace'. Incidentally, such a formula has been adapted into English; sometimes only the preface is used as a response, adapted as "By his grace."

Topic-only greeting questions are asked about a place or a group of people with whom the addressee is associated. Typically, these questions are made up of a noun phrase that optionally ends in the particle *ɖé* in Ewe. An example is the following:

(12) *Mɔ́-dzí-tɔ́-wó*   *(ɖé)?*
       way-top-PERS-PL   Q
       How are the people on the road?

When such questions occur initially, they may substitute for either time-of-day greetings or welcome routines or attention getters. However, questions in which only the well-being of people is asked about, and no associated place is explicitly mentioned, cannot occur initially; they must occur after some other greeting expression. It is odd to start a greeting sequence with the question *ɖeví-á-wó (ɖé)?* 'How are the children?' Such a question can occur in the second turn in the greeting exchange, but not as an opener.

Responses to these questions are varied. The common responses are *wó-li* 'They exist' and *wó-dɔ́* lit. 'They have spent the night'. These questions perhaps reflect the questioner's seeking to know something about the topic, and it need not be the addressee's well-being. The well-being interpretation is imposed by the greeting context in which they are used.

I propose the following semantics for *X (ɖé)* greeting questions, where X is an noun phrase headed by a human or a locative nominal:

I am thinking about X.
I want you to know I feel something good toward X.
I don't know some things about X.

I think you might know some things about X (because you have been in the same place).
I say: I want to know something about X.
I say it because I want to cause you to say something that would cause me to know it.

When the question is about people, it is possible to elide the particle, *ɖé*. This happens especially when different groups of people are asked about during the greeting exchange. However, when the question is only about a place, *ɖé* ellipsis is not possible. Thus, in (5a), given earlier, when the questioner asks about the house—a place—the particle is used, whereas in (5b) all the questions are about people, and neither interactant uses the particle.

Using these well-being questions to ask about the addressee and other people and places associated with them is an enactment of an ideology of inclusiveness. Indeed, in many cases, inclusive plural pronouns or collective plural terms are used. Dzameshie (2002) related this to a cultural injunction that people should have care and concern for their fellow human beings (see also Egblewogbe 1990).

Sociocultural and Historical Dimensions

The sociocultural norm among the Ewe is that one should say something acknowledging another when the two come to be in the same place, whether they know each other or not. This explains why there are formulas for almost every conceivable situation, from having a meal to having a bath. In Ewe there is no restriction on who should initiate interactions determined by status in regard to age or office. All things being equal, a young person may greet an elder first or vice versa, and a chief may greet a commoner first or vice versa. In this respect Ewe are different from other groups among whom the status of interlocutors determines who initiates greetings, such as the Gonja (Goody 1972). However, the "visitor" in general should initiate the interaction. This cultural norm can be spelled out in a cultural script as follows:

[B] Cultural script for interaction
[people think like this:]
if two people come to be in the same place
it is good if they say something of the kind one should say to the other at such a time
if they do this
they cause people to think/know that they are part of the same thing

One general constraint is that someone who is about to do something considered unclean or who is in an unclean condition, even if he or she is construed to have the visitor's role, should not open interactions. It is considered rude and insulting to the interlocutor. Some things considered unclean are going to the toilet or the rubbish dump or having a bath. People handling a corpse or carrying remains of a person should also not initiate interaction. This norm of interaction can be captured in the following cultural script:

[C] Cultural script for constraint on initiating interaction
[people think like this:]
if you come to be in the same place as someone else
if you are about to do something unclean
it is good if you do not say something first to the other person
people think it is very bad to do this

Apart from such contexts, the absence of the exchange of interactional formulas is viewed as a bad situation. The one who considers himself host may ask the other person whether the two of them "got up from the same bed." The reasoning is that if the two people had woken up in the same place, they would have greeted each other already, and so when they come to be in the same place later, they will not need to greet each other again. He might also ask, "Aren't you going to say anything to me?" (see Yahya-Ohtman 1995 on a similar question in Swahili). People who are not on speaking terms are investigated by the community's elders and leaders, and good relations between them are restored after arbitration.

Although these underlying cultural norms of interaction are resilient, the forms and modes of interaction have been affected by communities' contact with other groups. The Ewe, for example, have borrowed the English word "morning," adapted as *mɔ́ni,* and use it as a time-of-day greeting expression. They have also appropriated from English *kuɖími* 'good evening' and *gúdee* 'good day'. All these can be followed by an Ewe addressee phrase such as *ná wò* 'to you'. These English borrowings are used more in chance meetings. They invariably trigger a short form of the greeting. One is less likely to hear them in the context of planned encounters.

A related change is the emergence of a greeting exchange that could possibly be attributed to influence from other sources. In some southern Ewe communities, chance meeting greetings are enacted with the adjacency pair *me-dó gbe* [1SG-put voice] 'I greet' and *me-xɔ gbe*

[1SG-receive voice] 'I receive the greetings'. This could be a calque based on an Akan standard greeting, literally "I greet you." Considering that it has developed in communities close to the Togo border, where speakers might come into contact with French, it could also be a calque of the French *salut.* Whatever the source, the use of borrowed words and this new chance greeting are not looked upon favorably by the older generation.

Another observable change is in bodily gestures, especially those of females. Women show respect in greeting by lowering their bodies, as if about to genuflect and bow slightly. These days women seldom, if ever, lower their bodies in greetings. Both men and women still sometimes practice bowing slightly.

The use of salutation and identification address terms in opening routines has disappeared, especially in urban contexts, and not just among Ewe but also in other communities such as the Akan. The mode of inquiring about such identification terms has been replaced by questions asking for other forms of identification, such as "Who are you?" "Where are you coming from?" and Who is your father?" Some aspects of access rituals are stable, but others are changing in the West African communities.

Concluding Remarks

As people go about their daily activities in various communities of practice, they carry out several communicative rituals. In the foregoing I have looked at rituals for entry into and exit from interactions, especially among the Ewe of West Africa. In their performance, various ideologies are enacted, such as inclusiveness, hospitality, harmony, and communality. Furthermore, there are sociocultural constraints on communicative interaction, some of which I have tried to spell out in cultural scripts. The illocutionary meanings of some of the situation-bound utterances used in these interactions have been explored. For a holistic understanding of interactional ritual, we need to take into account the semantics of the formulas, the cultural constraints on their enactment, and the ideologies and values they embody.

In closing, I want to note some questions that the material discussed raises for our thinking about ritual communication. First, what is *ritual* about the linguistic forms and strategies described? As Richard Bauman asked in his commentary during the Wenner-Gren symposium, is there any reason other than the fact that Erving Goffman (e.g., 1967, 1971) referred to these as access rituals that we want to consider them rituals?

To the extent that they are enacted in culturally defined, predetermined situations, they possess an aspect of ritual. But this raises the question of the relationship between ritual and routine. Furthermore, access routines are ritualistic because of their interdiscursivity. In their enactment, speakers draw on standardized syntactic patterns and formulaic phrases, applying them in conventionalized frames for opening and closing interactions. Moreover, their patterning has metapragmatic function in the sense that they help "interactants inhabit culturally recognizable roles and perform culturally recognizable acts" (Perrino 2002: 229).

Notes

1. In the explication of Ewe utterances, I use the following abbreviations and conventions: COP, copula; DEF, definiteness marker; FOC, focus marker; HAB, habitual aspect marker; INTERJ, interjection; JUSS, jussive; LOG, logophoric pronoun; NEG, negation marker; PERS, personalizing suffix; PL, plural; POSS, possessive; POT, potential; PRES, present; PRO, pronominal; PROG, progressive; Q, question particle; QUOT, quotative; RED, reduplicative; SG, singular; SUBJV, subjunctive; VS, verb satellite; 1, first person; 2, second person; 3, third person. Tones are marked where relevant as follows: low tone by a grave accent, *à;* high tone by an acute accent, á*;* falling tone by a circumflex, *â;* and rising tone by a hacek, *ǎ.*

2. "A chaque circonstance de la vie sociale, correspond une forme déterminée de salutation. Au lieu du 'bonjour' et du 'bonsoir' impersonnels et non circonstanciels, l'Eve emploie des formules spécialisées."