

Politeness Strategies and Address Forms Used by Filipino Domestic Helpers in Addressing Their Malaysian Employers

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Abstract

Politeness is important in any interaction and is considered sensitive in interactions between interlocutors who have different role relationships. In interactions between employers and employees, role and power relations come into play. In most conversations, it can be observed that both interlocutors particularly between employee and employers maintain their face. However, employees may struggle to maintain politeness in order to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTA). In this research, politeness strategies used by Filipino domestic helpers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia are examined. More specifically this research focuses on politeness as seen in the use of address forms. Twenty (20) Filipino domestic helpers participated in an interview. The findings show that Filipino domestic helpers use certain patterns when communicating with their Malaysian employers. It shows that the use of Title (T), Title and First Name (TFN), Title and Last Name (TLN), and First Name (FN) are used as politeness strategies. It reveals that role relationship, social distance and age influence to such use of address forms. Moreover, the findings also reveal that the address forms used by the Filipino domestic helpers are influenced by the Filipino, Malaysian and Western cultures.

Keywords: Politeness, politeness strategies and address forms.

1. Introduction

Politeness is viewed differently in various cultures although Brown and Levinson (1978) claim it to be universal. It can be seen in social interactions across cultures and manifests itself in the language used. Politeness can be seen as a social phenomenon and

understood to be culturally bound where people from different cultures may perceive an action or statement as polite or impolite. Consequently, sometimes an act or statement can be considered polite in one culture but impolite in another. Watts (2003:8) explains a discursive dispute of what is polite or impolite is predominantly dependent on how behavior is interpreted and perceived in the entire social interaction and not merely at the level of language usage. This means that politeness is observed in the linguistics, pragmatic and non-linguistic features such as gestures and other movements of the body. As a result, politeness can be considered discursive. The discursive feature refers to the varying interpretations in evaluating behavior as polite or impolite.

Brown and Levinson (1978:68) describe politeness as a strategic behavior especially in structuring an utterance. They explain how individual speakers take part in a conversation and take into account the possible threats it may cause the hearer. Politeness holds that everyone has both negative and positive face, both of which are threatened by or the other at times, and that individuals will use the politeness strategies before performing a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987:62). Politeness strategies are also held not only to mitigate face threatening acts (FTA) but also to fulfill the speaker's or listener's positive and negative face (Kitamura, 2000). To explain the concept of politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987:69) classify politeness into four main types such as bald on record, negative politeness, positive politeness and off-record or indirect strategy.

Bald on record strategy does not aim to minimize face threatening acts (Brown and Levinson, 1978:94). For instance, a discourse between close friends can be direct as they have developed closeness and familiarity. In this context, the role relationship between the speaker and listener is important, the closer the participants the higher the possibility of being direct in their discourse. On the other hand, negative politeness is a strategy that considers the context and the situation of a hearer (Brown and Levinson, 1978:129). For instance, when speakers presume to impose or demand something from the hearers they consider the actual capability of the listeners, thus knowing the negative face of the listener could be used as a strategy to impose (Brown & Levinson, 1978). In this case, the hearer's autonomy is preserved by considering his or her inability to act in a given context or situation.

Positive politeness is a strategy that seeks to minimize the listener's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). It considers the capability of the listener in a situation where he or she is being imposed on. It is used to avoid conflict especially when dealing with those who are fairly close to the speaker. Positive face is evident through the use of hedging which is an effective strategy of minimizing the impact of any face threatening acts. Lastly, off-record or indirect politeness is a strategy that separates speakers from being compelled in any given situation (Brown and Levinson, 1978:211). For instance, if a wife is hungry, instead of telling her husband that she wants to eat she might ask the husband if he is hungry. In such context, the wife is indirectly asking the husband to eat as it is understood and expected that she will also be asked in return.

Numerous empirical studies (Lakoff, 1975; Leech, 1980; Fraser and Nolan, 1981; Arndt and Janney, 1985; Brown and Levinson, 1978; Hill *et al* 1986; Ide, 1989; Kasper, 1990; Holmes, 1995) have been conducted to address politeness in social interactions. One model that has influenced the study of social interaction is Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. However, due to criticisms that emerged in the 1980's, several researchers have come up with a wider outlook to study linguistic politeness.

According to Watts (2003), politeness is not natural for humans as social beings but it has to be acquired and learned through social interactions and cultural practices. People characterize politeness according to their own perceptions. Some characterize politeness as a behavior that shows respect to others, or evaluate someone as polite by looking at the language used (Watt, 2003:1). Considering all levels of interpretations in understanding politeness, people perceive and evaluate politeness differently. Watts (2003) explains that the varying interpretations of politeness are caused by people's linguistic and socio-cultural practices and their language. For instance, in Japanese culture, power dimension in relation to politeness is relatively important as compared to the individualistic culture of the Americans where social distance is associated with politeness (Koyama, 2001). It must be noted that Watts' (2003) notion of politeness does not focus on the overt politeness of the interlocutors' language use or the linguistic choice, but he provides a broader description by including the society as a whole. Therefore, when interpreting politeness as a way of behavior it includes

the language use in expressing politeness and how behavior is interpreted in socially and culturally bound interactions.

Politeness is categorized into two major distinctions, such as first-order politeness and second-order politeness (Watts, 2003; Ide and Ehlich, 1992). First-order politeness refers to the lay interpretations of politeness which include on how people evaluate and interpret a particular behavior as polite (Watts, 2003:9). On the other hand, second-order politeness refers to the linguistic politeness based on the theoretical perceptions on the study of social interaction (Watts, 2003:4). In studying politeness, it is necessary to consider both lay people's interpretation and the linguistic interpretation. This will give a clear explanation in identifying the process on how politeness is evaluated and manifested in an interaction. Undoubtedly, Watts (2003) aims to provide sufficient basis in analyzing politeness which largely includes language, culture and society that results in the discursive nature of politeness in social interpretation.

To explore politeness strategy, there are features that must be taken into consideration particularly the address forms which vary in different cultures. The use of address forms signal respect or disrespect to the addressee depending on how it is uttered and perceived. It also varies depending on the level of formality of interaction and the role relationship between the two interlocutors. Holmes (2008) explains that forms of address are derived from identity in a specific context (e.g., your honor, Prime Minister, madam and sir).

It is important to note how politeness influences the interaction of people particularly those who come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, specifically the occurrence of politeness in relation to address forms. One of the less studied phenomena is the interaction between a domestic helper and employer. In employer-employee interactions, the address terms might be used frequently. This study analyzes how politeness strategies are manifested in address forms used by Filipino domestic helpers when they interact with their Malaysian employers. Due to different linguistic and cultural backgrounds of employers and employees, miscommunication is most likely expected. However, the occurrence of miscommunication can be minimized through the use of politeness strategies such as the use of appropriate forms of address. The analysis of the politeness strategies, particularly the

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forms of address used by Filipino domestic helpers will help to uncover how politeness strategies influence the interaction between Filipino domestic helpers and Malaysian employers.

1.1 Politeness Strategies

In everyday conversation, interactants have their own ways of fulfilling their wants. Regardless of the people and situation that speakers are in, they still manage to formulate an utterance that would suit a given communicative event. This is similar to Aristotle's (1969) 'practical reasoning' that emphasizes how rational beings achieve ends through means. In spite of this, people tend to act differently according to the context and participants. For example, when surrounded by a group of people in a formal context, an utterance may be formal and reserved in which speakers may use certain modalities and hedging devices such as "could, shall, is it okay, if it's ok, I'm sorry to disturb etc." to show respect or politeness towards others. The participants, context, and the social situation as a whole may influence the use of certain strategies, and modify the utterance by choosing appropriate words in a particular communicative instance. Watts (1989) 'politic behavior' explains how people position themselves in a particular social interaction and stress on the pre-structured behavior of interactants before entering in an interaction which encompasses both linguistic and non-linguistic behavior. 'Politic behavior defined as:

"Socioculturally determined behavior directed towards the goal of establishing and/or maintaining in a state of equilibrium the personal relationship between the individuals of social group" (Watts, 2003:20)

In studying politeness, it is difficult not to include the concept of face which refers to the respect that an individual has for him or herself, and maintaining that "self-esteem" in public or in private situations (Goffman, 1955). Usually, you try to avoid embarrassing the other person, or making them feel uncomfortable. Face Threatening Acts (FTA's) are acts that infringe on the hearers' need to maintain his/her self-esteem, and be respected. Politeness strategies are developed for the main purpose of dealing with these FTA's.

In addition politeness has been principally approached from the face-saving perspective (Brown and Levinson 1987). Differences in the cultures have received attention both at the linguistic (language used) and corporate (type of business environment) level, and Bargiela-Chiappinis, 2009 study shows that differences in the cultures among interlocutors suggests that clarity motivated by efficiency supersedes politeness.

Longcope (1995) has identified how people act in a particular communicative event that individual has its own way of constructing his utterance with respect to communicating with others. It is then necessary to employ a specific way or manner when communicating with others. Any occurrence of verbal interaction between interlocutors ought to have specific communicative intent. This would entail that the intention of both interlocutors are employed with specific strategies in mitigating face threatening acts (FTA's). The use of strategies are largely dependent on three factors, such as 'the social distance or the symmetric relation of the speaker (S) and hearer (H) ', 'the power relation or the asymmetric relation of the speaker (S) and hearer (H), and the ranking of imposition' of the speaker (S) and hearer (H) (Brown and Levinson 1978:79).

Apart from power relations, politeness can be influenced by speakers' socio-cultural background. Considering the fact that interlocutors come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, varying interpretations among interlocutors becomes inevitable. Thus, an utterance with the same intent might be perceived and interpreted differently by both interlocutors who come from linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, thorough understanding why people use politeness strategies does not only include social stratification of interlocutors, it is also vital to consider the interlocutors' language and socio-cultural upbringing. This explains why people employ some politeness strategies.

It must be noted that communication itself is not an easy task because both interlocutors are constantly engaged in alteration of their utterance either to employ or show politeness or to avoid face threatening acts of a certain utterance. To show politeness, speakers tend to use certain politeness strategies such as the use of address forms by using titles and honorific titles. Moreover, the use of request forms is also considered as a type of

politeness strategy as it seeks to mitigate any utterance that threatens the speaker's negative face.

1.1.1 Address Forms

The use of address forms in communication plays a crucial role especially in a socially stratified society. In many languages, the use of address forms is one of the strategies that are commonly used. For example in Malaysia where politeness is highly observed, the use of titles or honorifics is an important aspect in an interaction as it shows the social positions of the respective individuals (Kuang, David, Lau and Ang, 2011). Its usage has its own purpose especially in labeling and classifying individuals in communicative contact (Hayakawa, 1978). The use of address forms in a particular communicative event, would classify interlocutors in a "definable category" (Hayakawa 1978:16). For instance, Brown and Gilman (1960) examine the French pronouns "*tu* and *vous*" and argue that the use of non-honorific pronoun would build solidarity between interactants, whereas the use of honorifics would create distance between interactants. Hence, address forms can serve different functions whether to claim intimacy or to create distance (Brown and Ford, 1964).

The use of address forms is also evident in Holmes' (1995:15) diagram of social distance, particularly in her study about Women, Men and Politeness which illustrates how address forms affect solidarity or intimacy and vice versa (see figure 2.2). The diagram illustrates the constant alteration of a particular communicative event with regard to address forms as politeness strategy.



Figure 2.2 Holmes' social distance diagram

The use of address forms is salient when expressing politeness in an interaction among interlocutors and is evident in many forms of communication in relation to

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participants and context. However, the use of address forms varies from one culture to the other. For example, in English speaking-countries, the use of first name and title such as Mr. Mrs. and Miss appears to be common while in Asian countries like Malaysia and the Philippines, the use of title and kinship terms is also common to express politeness and show respect in communication (Gaudart, 2009). Undeniably, the address forms have been widely used where role-relationships are situated. Brown and Ford (2003) suggest that people speak according to the relation that governs the speaker and addressee. They utilize the selection of linguistic form which is vital for the success to engage in certain interactions or even in the entire duration of interaction. Brown and Ford (2003) show a significant explanation and descriptions on the patterns of address forms used in American English. It reveals that the use of first name (FN) and title with the last name (TLN) which has a reciprocal exchange and the use of non-reciprocal exchange of first name (FN) and title with last name (TLN), are evident. The use of address forms in American English includes: the use of titles (T) (e.g. sir, ma'am, madam) which serve as a substitute to (TLN) and is commonly used to address a newly acquainted person that possesses a higher status. The use of last name (LN) (e.g. Richardson, Lewis) acts as a substitute to (FN), which occurs when interactants develop a much closer relationship with one another and is used to replace (FN) when it consists a polysyllabic form. Multiple names (MN) is used in various ways (e.g. using first name (FN) or title with the last name (TLN) to the same addressee), to foster closeness between interlocutors (Brown and Ford, 2003:235).

These address forms are differentiated in terms of intimacy factor between interactants. The use of first name (FN) in the level of reciprocal pattern shows a greater intimacy compared to the use of title with the last name (TLN). In addition, in an event of non-reciprocity, interaction is differentiated when a person of a higher status initiates an interaction using the first name (FN) towards an addressee of a lower status and in return the latter uses the title with the last name address form (TLN) when addressing the former (Brown and Ford, 2003).

The use of address forms is influenced by the person's higher status, considering the fact that the speaker sets the pace of an interaction. In an event where a person of a lower status initiates a conversation by using the first name, he has the risk of being rejected. On the

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other hand, if a person of a higher status initiates an interaction using different address forms from both dyadic patterns, a slight chance of refutation from the person of a lower status is expected (Brown and Ford, 2003:243).

In Asian context, people use kinship terms as address forms to express politeness although speakers have no blood relationship (Baron, 2007). Kinship terms such as “aunty and uncle” are used to address older people as a sign of respect (Kuang, 2008). In fact, such use of kinship terms is evident among Chinese speakers. Gaudart (1999) identified address forms used by the Chinese in Hong Kong and discovered that Chinese names usually consist of three parts. The first part of the name is the surname and the next two parts are the first names. Chinese people do not have a middle name in their given names although most of their names are made up of three parts. The study shows that honorifics with the first part of the name are commonly used to address an interlocutor with a higher position (Gaudart, 1999:59). It is only with close friends that the given name can be used to address an interlocutor in a conversation (Gaudart, 1999).

The use of address forms in interactions can be useful in mitigating a face threatening act particularly in making request. Since making requests is a directive act, using the address forms help to show politeness. In fact, the use of politeness strategies is also evident in making requests.

2. Methodology

This study examines the politeness strategies and address forms used by Filipino domestic helpers when communicating with their Malaysian employers. This study uses two theoretical frameworks to explain the occurrence of politeness when using the address forms in interactions between Filipino domestic helpers and Malaysian employers. The concept of politeness by Richard Watts (2003) helps to explain the cultural aspects of politeness while the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987) explains the occurrence of positive and negative politeness in interactions.

The participants of the study were all Filipino domestic helpers who worked in Kuala Lumpur with Malay, Chinese, or Indian employers. Filipino domestic helpers who studied at

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the Filipino Workers' Resource Center (FWRC) – the Philippine Embassy's livelihood/training courses in August 2010 and other domestic helpers referred by other Filipinos were used as participants in this research.

The data were collected through interviews which were conducted individually in the Philippine Embassy every Sunday where Filipino domestic helpers gathered together to attend various livelihood classes. There were 20 Filipino domestic helpers who took part in the study. The use of qualitative approach is believed to be useful in gathering comprehensive information as to how Filipino domestic helpers used forms of address and forms of request when communicating with their Malaysian employers. In order to triangulate and validate the data, a set of questionnaire was distributed after the interviews to provide written examples when making requests. In addition to the interviews, all audio recorded information was transcribed and analyzed.

3. Results

The analysis was based on the transcribed interviews. The emphasis was on the politeness strategy in addressing the employers. The analysis is presented by discussing the patterns of address forms, the relationship between the address forms and politeness, and the role of culture when using certain address forms.

3.1 Patterns of Address Forms

The findings show that in interactions between Filipino domestic helpers and Malaysian employers, common patterns of address forms are used. The use of the Title (T), Title and First Name (TFN), Title and Last Name (TLN) and First Name (FN) are some of the common patterns of address forms that emerged in the data collected (see Table 3.1). However, addressing the employers using the Title (T), Title and First Name (TFN), Title and Last Name (TLN) or First Name (FN) depends on the relationship between the employer and employee.

Table 3.1 Common address forms used by Filipino domestic helpers

Title (T)	Title and First Name (TFN)	Title and Last Name (TLN)	First Name (FN)
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Ma'am, Sir, Datu, Datin	Datin Ana, Mr. John, Sir John, Ma'am Christine	Mr. Lim, Ms. Lim	Christine, John
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Table 3.1 shows the different titles used when addressing the employers. The address forms vary in various cultures and contexts. Consequently, different address forms are used with different people. For instance, the use of title “Datu and Datin” may apply only to Malaysians who possess such titles. However, it is evident from the data that domestic helpers pronounce “Datu” in a number of different ways such as “Dato and Datuk”. The use of “Title and Title with First Name such as, ma'am, sir, Mr. Lim, Ms. Lim” appears to be common. However, using the first name basis like “Christine, John” is seldom used.

Malaysian employers did not tell or remind the Filipino domestic helpers of the kind of address forms they prefer. In fact, the address forms used by Filipino domestic helpers were determined by them. Perhaps, the use of address forms can be considered inherent in Philippine and Malaysian cultures where respect and politeness play an important role in most interactions, more specifically between people of different social status. Hofstede (1984), as cited in Kuang, David, Lau and Ang (2011), mentions that Malaysia is a hierarchical society and its people tend to place high value on social distance and power. This is even reflective in Filipino language in which “po” or “ho” are used when talking to the elders and other people of higher status (Dumanig, 2006).

Addressing the employers varies most of the time and this is revealed in the interviews conducted. The participants of the study commented:-

“I usually call him sir and that’s what he prefers”
“I call her madam because for me, it’s a sign of respect”
*“I call them “Datu * or Datin”(Titles used in Malaysia)*
“My employer, I think prefers to be called Mr. John”
“I call my male employer as Mr. Lim”
“I’m close to my employer and I call her Christine”

The term Datu was pronounced Dato and Datuk

The findings of the study show that the Title (T), Title and First Name (TFN) and First Name (FN) are the address forms used. For instance, saying “*I usually call him **sir** and that’s what he prefers, I call them **Datu or Datin**, I think my employer prefers to be called **Mr. John** and “I’m close to my employer and I call her **Christine**” reflect how the Filipino domestic helpers use different forms when addressing their employers. Different employers are addressed differently depending on their status. The number of occurrence of these address forms is tabulated below to show which of the three address forms are commonly used.*

Table 3.2 Forms of address used by Filipino domestic helpers when addressing their Malaysian employers

Title (T)	Title and First Name (TFN)	Title and Last Name (TLN)	First Name (FN)
10 (50%)	6 (30%)	3 (15%)	1 (5%)

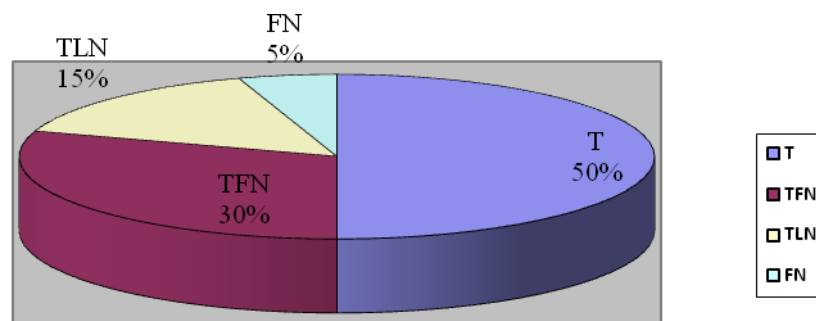


Chart 3.1 Address forms used by Filipino domestic helpers

Table 3.2 and chart 3.1 show that (5%) of Filipino domestic helpers use the First Name (FN), (15%) use Title and Last Name (TLN) like “Mr. Lim, Ms. Lim”, (30%) use Title and First Name (TFN) like “Sir John, Maam Christine”, and (50%) use Title like “Sir, Ma’am, Dato and Datin” when addressing their Malaysian employers. The findings show that 50% of Filipino domestic helpers prefer to address their employers using the Title (T) like

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“Sir, Ma’am, Madam, Dato, Datin.” These forms of address are used to show politeness and respect to their employers which also reflect the cultural backgrounds of Filipino domestic helpers. For Filipinos, respect and politeness are essential in order not to lose one’s face. The Filipino culture emphasizes the importance of respect specially when communicating with people who hold higher roles. Since the employers are of higher status than that of the employees, respect using the address forms is always expected. Failure to use the appropriate form of address can be deemed impolite and disrespectful.

In the interviews conducted, the participants explained that they can use their own way of addressing their employers. However, in other cases, the address forms used may sometimes depend on employers’ wishes. They explicitly ask their employees how they would like to be addressed.

*“Sometimes I will ask if I can call them by their name or I call them **ma’am or sir** or I will call them **Mr. or Ms.**”*

“I call my employer as Mr. Lim.”

*“If they say oh no, just call us by **name** then I will do it.”*

“Sometimes they tell me how to address them”

The interviews show that 10 of 20 Filipino domestic helpers asked their employers if the address forms that they use would be appropriate. This is evident when the participants said; *“Sometimes I will also ask if I can call them by their name or I call them **ma’am or sir** or I will call them **Mr. or Ms.**,”* *“If they say oh no, just call us by **name** then I will do it.”* and *“Sometimes they tell me how to address them”*. From the interviews conducted, it would mean that the address forms used by Filipino domestic helpers sometimes depend on how the employers perceive the address given. If the address is favorable to the employers, they easily give an approval. However, if employers do not show any approval, they usually tell their employees how they should be addressed. This is evident when participants said *“If they say oh no, just call us by **name** then I will do it”* and *“you can address me by my name.”* This is expected because there are people who prefer to be addressed by first name basis particularly those who were exposed to western culture. This is possible since some employers were educated in the United Kingdom.

The cultural differences in using the address forms are important particularly in interactions between two people of different social status: superior and subordinate. In the Philippines for instance, using the First Name or Title such as “John, Mr. or Miss” when addressing an employer is not commonly practiced. The use of Title like “ma’am and sir” seems to be common among Filipinos especially when both interlocutors come from different social status. In fact, the Philippine kinship terms such as “*ate* or *kuya*” (*elder sister or elder brother*) are commonly used by house helpers when they address their employers. The address terms, “*ate* or *kuya*” can be literally translated as “sister or brother” but it has a deeper meaning because it signals the relationship between the house helper and the employer. In this context, the Filipino address forms like “ate and kuya” would resemble the English forms of address “ma’am or sir”

In Malaysian context, the use of “ma’am and sir” are not common address terms because for Malays they use the Malay forms of address like “*abang*” (*elder brother*), “*kaka*” (*elder sister*) or “*adik*” (*little brother or little sister*)” which are sometimes also used when addressing Malays, Indians and Chinese. Despite these address forms which are common in Malaysia, some Filipino domestic helpers still bring their own culture by addressing their employers as “sir or ma’am” which is related to “ate or kuya” in Filipino language. Although, it must be noted that the use of “ate or kuya” has deeper cultural meaning. Such use of address terms reflects the way Filipino treat their house helpers as part of their family.

3.1.1 The Use of the Title (T)

The use of the title (T) like “ma’am and sir” is prevalent among Filipino domestic helpers when addressing their Malaysian employers. In the interviews conducted, the participants said:

“If I talk to my employer I call her ma’am.”

“Sir or ma’am is what I always use every time I talk to them and they call me by my name”

“Of course, ma’am and sir. If I call them by their names they might slap me (laugh)”

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The use of the Title (T) has been commonly used by Filipino domestic helpers when they address their Malaysian employers. From the use of Title when addressing the employer, it can be assumed that these Filipino domestic helpers have brought the Philippine culture in their workplace because Titles like “ma’am or sir” appear to be commonly used in the Philippines. From the interviews conducted, the use of Title (T) when communicating with the employer follows a pattern of interaction between a Filipino domestic helper and a Malaysian employer which is shown in Figure 3.1.

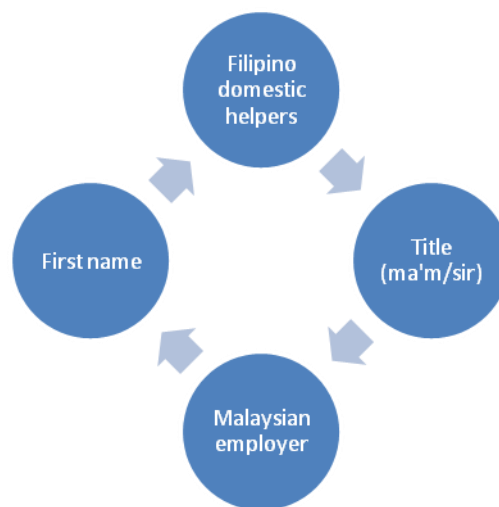


Figure 3.1 Patterns of address forms between Filipino domestic helpers and Malaysian employers

Figure 3.1 shows the address forms used by Filipino domestic helpers when addressing their Malaysian employers and the address forms used by the Malaysian employers when addressing their domestic helpers. Since some Malays and Tamils do not have surnames, the pattern reveals that Filipinos use the Title “ma’am or sir” when addressing their Malaysian employers. Addressing the employers with their title indicates high respect from the employers. However, the employers use the first name to address their helpers. Using the Title “ma’am or sir” in this context is a form of showing respect to the employers who are superior. On the other hand, employers use the First Name (FN) when addressing their helpers. Using such address forms reveals that both speakers, the employer

and the employee, are aware of their social role and status which is reflected in the way they address each other.

The use of the Title (T) when addressing an employer can be interpreted as politeness strategy which specifically emphasizes respect and formality in interactions. Addressing a superior using the Title “ma’am or sir” is one way of mitigating a face-threatening act. Having been aware of the speakers’ role and status, the use of a specific address form is expected of those who are in subordinate status. In addition, since people would always want to appear pleasing to others and fear the loss to face, the use of address form becomes essential. In the interviews conducted, the Filipino domestic helpers said:-

“Addressing my employers using ma’am or sir is a polite way of calling them.”
“Ma’am or sir is more polite than calling their names”
“In Philippine culture using ma’am or sir is more polite”

The participants clearly state that *“Addressing my employers using ma’am or sir is a polite way of calling them.”* Addressing the employers using the Title can be considered as a polite strategy of Filipino domestic helpers. They believe that using *“ma’am or sir”* is more polite than calling their names. Such a view is perhaps a transfer from the Filipino culture where the use of *“ma’am and sir”* is considered a polite way of addressing people, particularly those who are superior.

In the home domain, the employer is always considered to be of superior status. In addition, such a use of address forms is perhaps influenced by the educational training of most Filipinos who were trained to use “ma’am or sir” when dealing with older people or people who are of higher social status.

3.1.2 The Use of the Title and First Name (TFN)

Apart from using the Title when the addressing the employers, it is also found that 6 domestic helpers address their Malaysian employers using both the Title and First name

(TFN). They address their employers like “Ma’am Cathy or Sir Joseph.” In the interviews conducted, they said:-

“When I first met my employer I called him Sir John because I heard a lot of Malaysians say that”

“I call my employer as Ma’am Claire because it sounds formal. If I call her just Claire it’s not right and it sounds rude to me”

Filipino domestic helpers address their employers using the Title and First Name which shows respect and formality. This is evident when they say: *“When I first met my employer I called him Sir John because I heard a lot of Malaysians say that”*, *“I call my employer as Ma’am Claire because it sounds formal. If I call her just Claire it’s not right and it sounds rude to me”*. The TFN is used because Filipino domestic helpers might have heard other Malaysian employees use this form when addressing their employers. Filipino domestic helpers perhaps learn to use the appropriate address forms and in a way accommodate to the Malaysian norm of name calling. Such use of address forms can be used similarly in giving the Title which is to show respect. However, this address form can perhaps be traced in the Malaysian culture where the use of First Name is common, particularly among the Malays and Tamils. In addition, using this type of address form maintains formality between the two speakers. The pattern of using TFN when addressing the employers is shown in Figure 3.2.

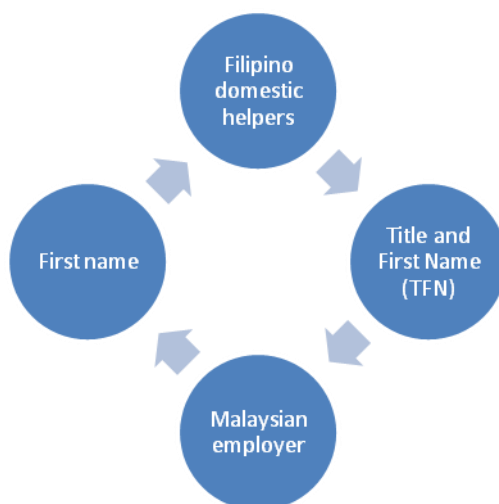


Figure 3.2 Patterns of using the Title and First Name (TFN) when addressing the employers

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The pattern of address forms shown in Figure 3.2 reveals that 5 Filipino domestic helpers use the Title and First Name (TFN) when communicating with their employers. However, the employer calls the domestic helpers by their first name. This pattern is similar to the situation where the employee addresses the employer using Titles but the employer addresses their employees using their first name which can be classified as non-reciprocal address form (see Figure 3.2).

The use of the Title and First Name (TFN) is also a politeness strategy used by Filipino domestic helpers when addressing their employers. The term of address used sounds polite due to the presence of the Title “ma’am or sir”. The use of Title and First Name (TFN) is common in Malaysia since the Malays and some Indians do not have their surnames. Consequently, the use of their First Name which is preceded by the Title, “ma’am or sir,” makes the interactions less face-threatening.

It is evident that using TFN can be an influence of the Malaysian way of addressing others using the First Name since Malays and some Tamils do not have surnames. Foreigner, who observes such terms of address, may think this is an acceptable norm in the society and he or she might use it. This is clear when one participant said, *“When I first met my employer I called him Sir John because I heard a lot of Malaysians say that.”*

In interactions between Filipino domestic helpers and Malaysian employers, the address form like the Title and First Name reveals politeness to other interlocutors. Such use of address forms defines the speakers’ role relationship and their level of social distance scale.

3.1.3 The Use of the Title and Last Name (TLN)

The use of the Title and last Name (TLN) is not commonly used as compared to the Title (T) and Title and First Name (TFN) (see Table 3.1). However, TFN is used by 3 Filipino domestic helpers when addressing their Chinese employers. The Chinese always

emphasize their surnames because when they write the surname comes first and this is then followed by their first name, for example “Chan Hock Tian”.

In Malaysia, the use of TLN may not be common for the Malays and Indians but this is prevalent among the Chinese. The use of TLN can be heard mostly in the Chinese communities where some of them are identified and labeled by their surnames. In the interviews conducted, the Filipino domestic helpers narrated how they interact with their employers using the Title and Last Name (TLN). The pattern of interaction is shown in Figure 3.3.

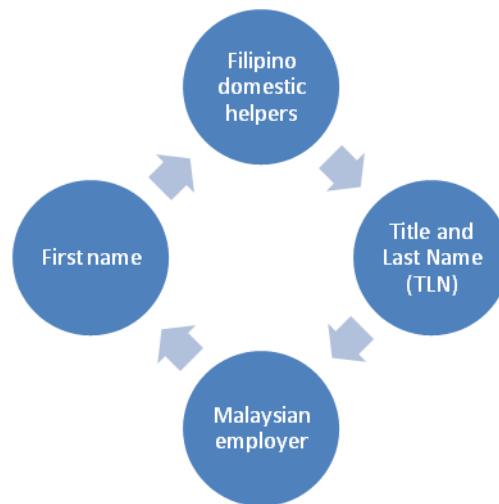


Figure 3.3 Patterns of using the first and last name when addressing the employers

Figure 3.3 shows that Filipino domestic helpers address their Malaysian employers using the Title and Last Name (TLN). This form of address is used mostly with the Chinese employers. However, the employers address the Filipino domestic helpers by their First Name (FN) which is also common to all Malaysian employers regardless of ethnicity.

In the interviews conducted, three Filipino domestic helpers said:

“My employer is Miss Cheng and I call her Miss Cheng and most people call her like that”
“When I talk to my boss I always say Miss Tan because it is formal and polite”
“Calling my employer as Mr. Chong is formal”

The use of the Title and Last Name (TLN) is formal in nature. This is evident when they said, “*When I talk to my boss I always say Miss Tan because it is formal and polite*” and “*Calling my employer as Mr. Chong is formal.*” However, this is not surprising because using such address form shows social distance between the employer and the employee. This is possible because sometimes speakers would set a distance particularly in the Asian context where hierarchy is common.

The use of TLN when addressing the husband as “Mr. Chong” shows formality and social distance between the domestic helper and the employer.

The use of the Title and Last Name as a form of address normally occurs only in formal setting. It is a polite address form used in formal context like in the work place, school and other formal domains of communication. For Filipino domestic helpers, the use of TLN is focused more towards politeness, formality and respect. Even if the interactions occur in the home domain which is an informal domain but for domestic helpers it is a different context because it is considered as their workplace. The home domain is the workplace domain of domestic helpers and is sometimes perceived as a formal domain. Consequently, the use of formal address term is used.

On the other hand, the use of TFN can be cultural. In the Philippines, TLN is common when addressing a lecturer or a teacher using the Title and Last Name to show respect, politeness and authority. Similarly, in this research the use of TLN is used as a form of showing politeness. Filipino domestic helpers would like to show politeness but at the same time would like to establish social distance with their employers. It can be said that the address forms define the speakers’ role relationship and their level of social distance scale. This means that using TLN also indicates the subordinate status of a domestic helper and the higher status of the employer.

3.1.4 The Use of the First Name (FN)

The use of the First Name (FN) as an address form is common in many Western countries because it creates solidarity between the two speakers. In other cultures, particularly the Western culture, using the First Name (FN) is a form of showing their respect and

politeness to others by addressing them by their first name regardless of the role and status of the speakers (Holmes, 2008). However, in the Asian context the use of First Name when addressing the employer is seldom used. Culturally, it is impolite to address older people or a superior with their first name due to the existence of social hierarchy in the society which influences the type of address forms to be used. This means that the role of the speakers is highly emphasized by using different address forms that is appropriate with the status of the speakers. Despite this Asian hierarchical mindset, the findings of the study reveal that the use of First Name (FN) when addressing the employer is used by Filipino domestic helpers. In the interviews conducted it shows that 5 % of Filipino domestic helpers use the First Name (FN) when addressing their Malaysian employers.

They said:

“I call my employer by their First Name because that’s how they wanted me to call them. At first it was awkward for me but later on I get used to it.”

“I called them by their First Name when I talked to them like for example I just say, Peter and that is how I show my respect”

The use of First Name when addressing an employer is not common with Filipino domestic helpers. However, the domestic helpers who were interviewed mentioned that they address their employers by their names. The preference of such address forms could have been influenced by the Western culture since these two Malaysian employers were educated in the United Kingdom as narrated by the participants. Consequently, they might have adopted the Western culture.

Using such address forms has also contributed in establishing better relationship between the employer and the employee. This is evident because using the First Name (FN) when addressing another person is made only when both interlocutors are already familiar with one another. On the other hand, the use of First Name when addressing the employers can perhaps be related to the age of the speakers. Since the some domestic helpers are older than their employers they feel more comfortable when addressing them by their names. Such

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address forms may not be interpreted negatively by the employer. Based on the narratives of the domestic helpers, it is observed that they follow a certain pattern when addressing each other. The pattern of using the First Name (FN) when addressing the employers and employees is shown in Figure 3.4.

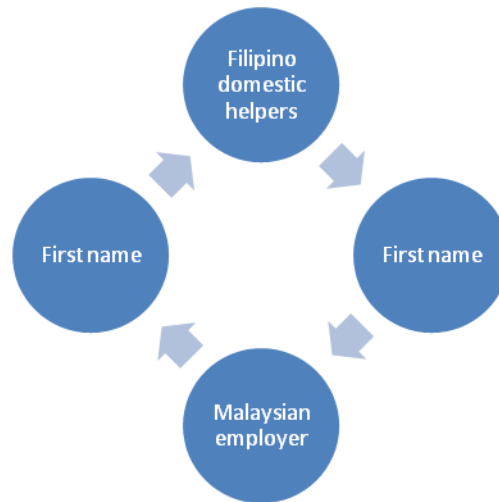


Figure 3.4 Patterns of using the first name when addressing the employers

Figure 3.4 shows how employers and Filipino domestic helpers interact and how they use the First Name (FN) when addressing their employers. Similarly, the employers also address their house helpers by their First Name (FN). Using the First Name can be interpreted as a way of establishing closer relationship and showing solidarity. It minimizes the formality of interactions, thus making the conversation more casual and informal.

Section 3.1.4 reveals that using the First Name (FN) to address the employer can be interpreted as politeness strategy because according to the participants that is how they show respect. However, their close relationship and solidarity that they establish are somehow influenced by their years of work. The longer they work they became more familiar with their employers. Because better relationship has been established, the use of First Name (FN) has become natural. In fact, addressing the speaker using the First Name has been used as an address form. Therefore, it can be said that using the First Name when addressing the employer in Malaysian context is influenced by the number of years and close relationship of the speakers. This means that using the First Name does not occur immediately. It takes time until the employer and employee become very familiar with one another and their

relationship has been strengthened due to the number of years they have worked for the employer.

3.1.5 Title (T) and Title and First Name (TFN) Continuum

It is evident that Filipino domestic helpers usually address their employers using the Title (T) and Title and First Name (TFN). However, it is also evident that using the Title and Last Name (TLN) and First Name (FN) are also used to address the employers.

In the data analysis, a continuum of using the Title and First Name emerges. Such occurrence can perhaps be attributed to the cultural backgrounds and years of stay of both interlocutors. The continuum is shown in Figure 3.5.

Address forms

Title (T)

Title and First Name (TFN)

Domestic helper's years of stay with the employer

Figure 3.5 Title (T) and Title and First Name (TFN) continuum

Figure 3.5 shows that using the Title (T) when addressing the employers may move as time go by and may result in the use of Title and First Name. The moment both interlocutors establish a closer relationship, the address forms also change. This is evident that the address form has become an indicator of solidarity in interactions. From the interviews conducted, it is clear that Filipino domestic helpers address their employers as “sir, ma’am, or madam” during their few years of stay, however with time, they become more familiar with the employer and the use of First Name is added and it results in Title and First Name (TFN). In the interviews conducted, 6 out of 20 Filipino domestic helpers said:-

“When I came here I called them “ma’am or sir” but later it was just changed and I started adding their names”

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"I stayed with my employer for many years then we become close and now I am calling them as "Ma'am Carol and Sir Nick".

The continuum of the address forms Title and Title and First Name can perhaps be considered as cultural products of Philippine and Malaysian cultures. The use of "sir or ma'am" is inherent in Filipino culture and the use of First Name is common among Malaysians because some Malays and Tamils do not have surnames. The convergence of two cultures may have contributed in the continuum which starts from using the Title to the use of Title and First Name.

3.1.6 Hierarchy in Address forms: Filipino and Malaysian Cultures

The Philippines and Malaysia are countries that have hierarchical orientations (Dumanig, 2010). This means that people highly value the importance of hierarchy in identifying the role and status of every speaker in the society. This cultural practice is reflected on the address forms that they use which is essential when showing politeness in interactions. It is always expected that in hierarchical society, speakers of lower status must always show politeness to their superiors. In the interviews conducted with the Filipino domestic helpers, it is evident that power relation and status is observed in most interactions.

They commented:

"I always call them "ma'am and sir" because they are my boss and I'm just working for them, so I have to respect them."

"Calling them as "sir or ma'am" and their names is a form of recognizing that they are my employers, no matter what, they are always superior than me"

"Even if I'm a college graduate, I would still say that my employer is higher than me because they are my employers. (laugh)"

The hierarchical nature of the society is reflected in how the speakers address the employers. The interviews show that Filipino domestic helpers address their employers to show respect. They acknowledge their employers with high regard which is reflected when they said, *"Calling them as "sir or ma'am" and their names is a form of recognizing that*

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they are my employers, no matter what they are always superior than me” and “”because I work for them”, I would say that my employer is higher than me because they are my employers (laugh).”

4. Conclusion

The findings reveal how the Filipino domestic helpers address their Malaysian employers. Filipino domestic helpers employ various address forms when communicating with their Malaysian employers. When addressing their Malaysian employers, they follow certain patterns like using the Title (T), Title and First Name (TFN), Title and Last Name (TLN) and First Name (FN) as politeness strategies. The use of such address forms also indicates the role relationship, social distance scale and age of the speakers. In addition, the address forms used by the Filipino domestic helpers is not only dependent on the role relationship, but is also influenced by the Filipino, Malaysian and Western cultures. In both Filipino and Malaysian cultures, the importance of politeness is reflected in the use of address forms. Such appropriate address forms does not only reflect politeness but it enhances the relationship between the employer and employee. Developing better communication is seen to be essential between the employers and domestic helpers to minimize problems and misunderstanding in the home domain.

The findings of the study are clear that the use of address forms in interactions between Filipino domestic helpers and Malaysian employers are influenced by the speakers’ role relationship (see Brown and Levinson, 1987). Moreover, the Filipino and Malaysian cultures are seen to be as important factors that influence the address and request forms (see Watts, 2003).

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