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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The Jeepney Culture of Politeness: A Structural Functionalist Perspective

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| ABSTRACT

The jeepney, tagged as 'king of the road' is an intriguing exhibit of Filipino culture. The study aims to explain the systems of action within the jeepney context. Through the lens of Parsons' systemic functionalist perspective, the study examines the driver-passenger interactions to understand how politeness (Lakoff, 1975) is negotiated inside the jeepney. Three specific research questions guided this investigation. First, it explored the linguistic choices Filipino jeepney riders employ to fulfill two main functions of their utterances: paying the fare and getting on/off the jeepney. Second, it examined the mechanisms riders use to negotiate politeness within the jeepney. Finally, it analyzed what these linguistic choices reveal about the cultural practices of the riders. Employing a qualitative-complete observation method, the study's findings reveal a distinct culture of politeness unique to the jeepney environment.

| KEYWORDS

Structural functionalism, politeness principle, collectivity, personality system, cultural system, social system

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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### 1. Introduction

On the Philippine roads, perhaps the most accessible and still the cheapest means of mobility among the average Filipino commuter is the jeepney. Long after its introduction at the end of World War 2, the Philippine jeepney is still thriving. Since the time that Nofuente tagged the jeepney as the King of the Road (1983; Pascua, 2009), it remains so (Ranis, Conquilla, Buncaras, & Tus, 2021). The metaphor may be attributed to the fact that the jeepney lords over the Philippine roads, particularly in its brazen style of stopping anywhere on the road to pick up and drop off commuters to their destinations. Studies have been conducted about the Philippine jeepney as a cultural expression of the Filipino spirit (Menez, 1988; Cerio, 2017) and culture (Hodder, 2000; Güss & Tuason, 2008; Ortega, 2002). This is the spirit where community or the *sakop* system is reflected in the way that associations of jeepney drivers, jeepney owners are formed. The same *sakop* system is represented in the way that passengers inside the jeepney reach out for the commuter's fare if the said commuter is seated at the far end of the driver.

In the domain of sociolinguistics, it is important to emphasize that analysis of the linguistic choices the speakers use is dependent on the context of use. Likewise, the way the speakers utter the message is equally important to analyze because the manner of rendering the utterance serves to establish the good relationship that the speakers want to establish with the receivers of the message. Brown and Ford (1964) posit that the use of polite expressions solicits a more positive response from the receivers of the utterance in the sense that the use of polite expressions shows the respect the speakers feel towards the receivers (also see Leech, 2014). In fact, definitive findings point out that of the three major patterns of address - the mutual exchange of FN (first name), the mutual exchange of TLN (title with the last name) and the non-mutual exchange where the speaker uses FN and the receiver TLN, it is typically more favorable if the superior is the one setting the tone of either formality or informality (Leech, 2014). It is further observed that when the speaker, who holds the position of authority, initiates the use of FN, the receiver, who is

positioned as the subordinate, is inclined to follow. In contrast, when the speaker, who is subordinate in position, initiates the FN exchange, the receiver, who has the authority, meets the FN with formality and reverts to the use of the TLN. In Gardner's (1984) study, women who are subjected to street remarks may view the remarks as positive and the experience favorable when they are unmistakably regarded as compliments and lacking in vulgarity. This finding suggests that, between unacquainted people on the street, the breach of silence may be perceived positively by the receiver if the content and quality by which street remarks are uttered seem pleasant enough. Another study (Bailey, 1997) highlights that the communication of respect and good will is a matter of intercultural differences. In his study of immigrant Korean retailers and their African American customers, he observes that the African American customers who were treated with restraint by the Korean retailers regard this lack of engagement or non-involvement as a sign of racism. Bailey furthered that restraint politeness includes actions which mark the interactor's unwillingness to impose on others (p. 330). This may be done by the interactor not simply demanding the other's attention to begin with. Such actions that characterize the Korean retailers' attitude towards their African American customers are expressions of cultural preference and a way to mirror the Buddhism philosophy of silence. To the Korean retailers, their dispassionate and unresponsive behavior is a form of politeness, since they give their customers the space to move and choose the items that they need without interfering with their purchasing decisions. Besides this, being EFL users, their silence also reflects the degree of English proficiency (p. 337). In this view, politeness may be regarded not as an inborn attribute but a product of socialization (Watts, 2003). This notion of politeness is significant because it considers the different contexts or occasions that interactants involve themselves in. For instance, in Greek weddings, as part of celebration and well wishes, it is customary for guests to break wine glasses. However, as a guest at a dinner party in a Filipino home, it is considered rude to intentionally break glasses. In the light of previous related studies, the present study intends to characterize the linguistic repertoire of the Filipino jeepney riders on two separate functionally directed utterances. These include the contexts of paying the jeepney fare and stopping the jeepney to get off. These contexts will determine the negotiation of politeness that both interactants - the Filipino passengers and the driver - execute within a limited setting. This investigation of the distinct Filipino culture within the jeepney context is important in understanding that politeness is determined by the context of situation (Malinowski, 1923; Hassan, 1995).

The present paper is guided by the following research questions:

- What linguistic choices do the Filipino jeepney riders use to fulfill two functions of their utterances - paying the fare and getting on/off board the jeepney?
- How do the riders negotiate politeness inside the jeepney?
- What do the linguistic choices say about the cultural practices of these riders?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The present study is based on the theory of structural functionalism initiated by Talcott Parsons in 1935, an American sociologist, who has influenced leading sociologists like Fishman (1970) in their quest for understanding the role of the cultural environment in the linguistic choices of the speaker and the receiver.

Structural functionalism is a strand of thought that views the action of the interactants as a point of reference in examining human behavior and quite naturally, the linguistic choice as a component of human behavior. According to Parsons (1971; Williams, 1992), an action covers the structure and processes by which human beings form meaningful intentions and implement them in concrete situations (p. 42). The term 'meaningful' here carries a symbolic or cultural level of representation and reference. Furthermore, the intended action is still subject to modification and is dependent on the situation or environment the interactor is presently in. For instance, a Social Security System (SSS) member employs reference of linguistic politeness when talking to an SSS staff as part of the process to be taken so that he can carry out his meaningful intention of requesting for a new SSS ID card or applying for a loan.

Turner (2001) provides a clear diagram below of the idea behind the structural functionalist perspective. The series of actions taken by the interactor is dependent on established systems of cultural values that the situation or organization has already formed. In such situations, the interactor is obliged to modify his intended actions to those actions forming the value system of the organization so that he may carry out his goal successfully. Figure 1 describes the hierarchical structures that govern interaction in a social space.

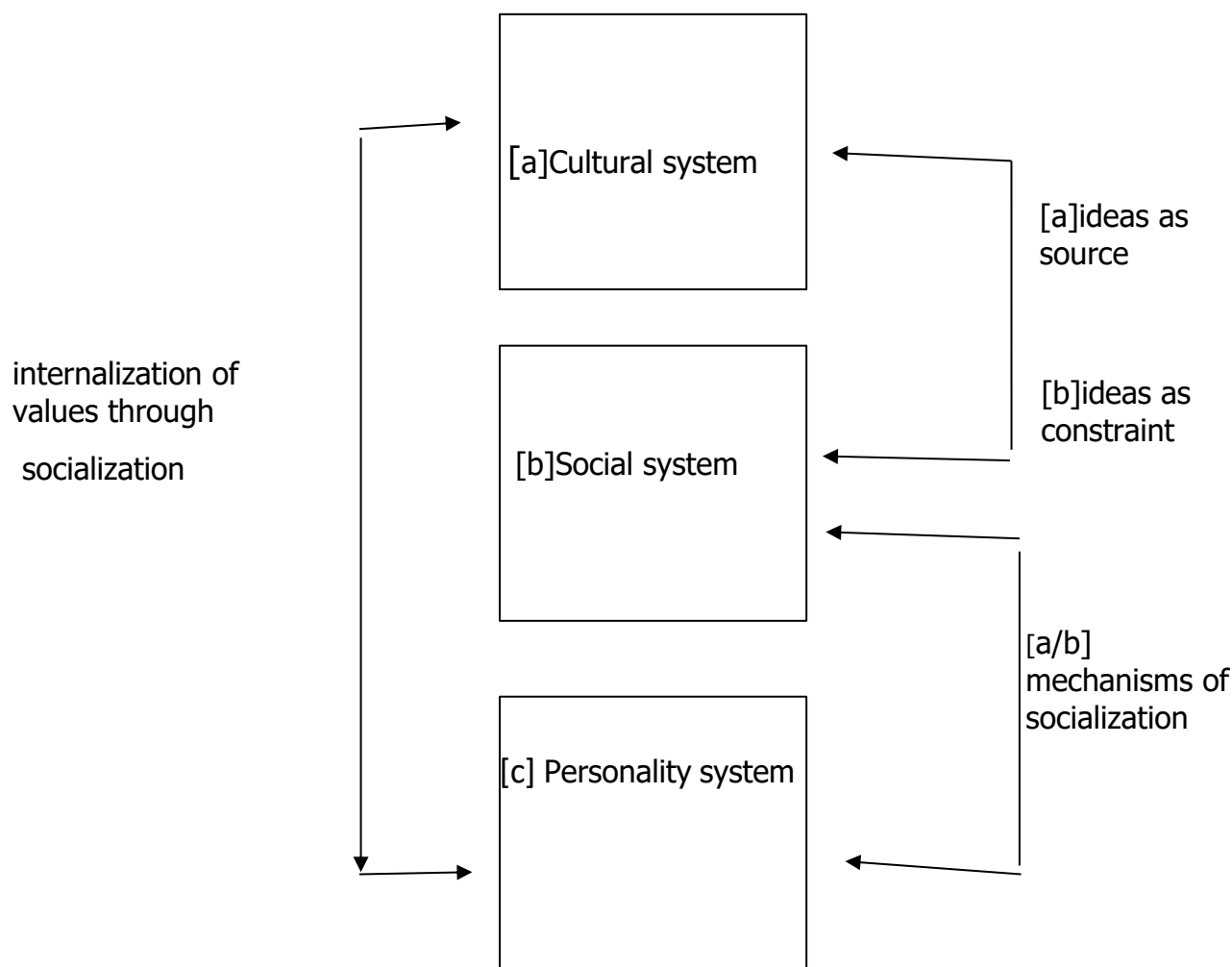


Figure 1. Integration among the systems of action (Turner, 2001)

### 3. Methodology

The data analyzed were derived from a complete qualitative observation (Jibril, 2018) of the actual interactions between Filipino riders and jeepney drivers inside the jeepney. Hence, the study employed observational study of public behavior. In observational studies where informed consent is not required, the study ensured that the conditions typically revolve around minimizing risk to participants and ensuring that the study falls within specific ethical guidelines. These conditions involve not identifying individuals, anonymity in data collection, ensuring that the observations do not disrupt the environment where the participants are located, ensuring that the study does not involve individuals in themselves but rather trends and patterns in public behavior.

The study began on the first day of July and ended on the 31st of the same month. Except for weekends, the researcher participated as the passenger of the jeepney, observed the utterances of the Filipino commuters on two different contexts - paying the fare and stopping the jeepney - on board the jeepney all weekdays of the month, and took notes of the linguistic repertoire the Filipino riders employ when making their payment and when requesting the jeepney to stop.

In this study, the passenger who initiates the payment of the fare is referred to as the speaker and the jeepney driver, the intended receiver. The researcher observed and took notes of the responses made by the jeepney driver to the utterances of the riders. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, at around 6 in the evening, one jeepney ride was taken from Vito Cruz to Heritage Hotel. From there, the researcher took another jeepney ride that would take her to Casimiro, Las Piñas. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the researcher took one jeepney ride from Casimiro, Las Piñas to Alabang at around six in the morning. From Alabang, she took another jeepney ride to Magallanes. Jeepney rides from Magallanes to Alabang, the Alabang to Las Piñas

totaled to two. This last set of trips took place at twelve in the afternoon. All in all, a total of fifty-six jeepney rides served as the basis for analysis. Except for the evening rides where the researcher had a choice to take the bus, all the other rides are standard rides. The term 'standard' is intended to mean that there is no other means of transport except for the jeepney.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Five until about six in the evening, when most employees return from work, this time is considered as rush hour. During this period, air-conditioned buses bound for the south are usually jam-packed. The other option for commuters is to take a longer route via the jeepney. From Vito Cruz to Heritage Hotel, there are many stops, sometimes done in the middle of the road, to take more passengers in. A regular jeepney seats nine people at each side totaling to eighteen passengers excluding two more passengers seated in front beside the jeepney driver. All eighteen passengers squeezed tightly with hardly enough room to move. A female passenger, wearing her night dress in her late fifties, her back slightly bent, puts the *bayong* on the jeepney floor by her side and stretches out her hand saying *Ma, bayad ho*, translated as 'Mister, my payment'. The next passenger seated to her right reaches for her fare and gives it to the next passenger until it reaches the hand of the driver seated in front. The elderly female passenger utters *salamat*, translated as 'thanks' to the passenger who is seated next to her. This scenario is observed usually when Filipino passengers pay their fare. Since the passengers seated at the farthest end of the jeepney will not be able to reach the hand of the driver to give their payment, other passengers seated nearer the driver will reach for the fare and extend their hands to help. For instance, in the first utterance of the female passenger when she signifies her desire to pay, there is no direct request being made to the next passenger to pass the fare to the jeepney driver. However, even if there were no requests made, that passenger will take the cue and volunteer to help by extending the hand since that passenger knows that the driver will not be able to reach the fare himself. This is known as the Filipinos' 'bayanihan' spirit in action. In essence though, the initial utterance signaling the desire to pay is as an indirect form of request. Also, since other passengers who hear the utterance are seated near the driver, they cannot just ignore the implicit request behind the utterance. They are somehow bound to respond to this indirect request. The female passenger will then thank the passenger who first reaches out his hand. This set of procedures to get the goal achieved, that is, of paying the fare, appears to go against Lakoff's theory of politeness. According to Lakoff (1975), the principle of politeness is rule-governed. He postulates that a speaker must conform to three considerations. First, the speaker must not impose. Second, he must give the receiver options. Finally, he must make the receiver feel good. In short, he must be friendly. Two things suggest a violation of Lakoff's politeness principle. One, the female passenger who stretched out her hand to pay the jeepney fare did not give the hearers the option to ignore her request. Two, even if many passengers extended their hands to reach out for the payment, the female passenger only thanked the passengers seated next to her. These are acts that seemed to violate the second and the third considerations maintained by Lakoff. However, these violations are explained in Parsons' structural functionalism (1971). From a structural functionalist reading, the jeepney is a symbolic representation of the social community. This is in the sense that the passenger, upon entering the transport, voluntarily becomes a member of the cultural systems and the values that the social community follow also become the values of this passenger by virtue of his temporary membership. The passengers voluntarily become members of the cultural systems and the values that the social community (Savage, 1977) follow also become the values of the passengers who ride the jeepney. Temporary here means if the passenger is inside the jeepney, he automatically conforms to the values shared by those who are also in it. Once he steps down, he frees himself from the constraints of these values. Hence, the female passenger knows that by sitting at the farthest end of the jeepney, it is her responsibility to rely on the other passengers to get her payment through to the intended receiver. This is why even though the female passenger is directly addressing the jeepney driver, she knows the other passengers who heard her will volunteer to assist in achieving her intended goal, which is paying her fare. In like manner, the other passengers who choose their seats inside the jeepney are also dictated by values that are already established inside the jeepney long before they were passengers themselves. Sometimes, though, the passenger does not have the opportunity to choose a seat when the jeepney is almost full. However, the passenger, who sits on the only available seat, is subject to the values shared by sitting where he is inside the jeepney. The jeepney driver, being the intended receiver, may not always hear the *Bayad daw ho*, translated as 'Mister, the payment' from the passenger. Even if this were the case, the message will be repeated by another passenger and the payment will get to him eventually. Also, even if the driver hears the message, he may not usually utter a response. From a structural functionalist perspective, this apparent lack of response is not taken as rudeness. Moreover, there is, inside the jeepney, an unspoken or unwritten norm that whoever is seated near the driver must extend the payment to the jeepney driver.

The second utterance made by the female passenger is directed towards the passenger for extending his hand and getting the payment from her. She only utters one acknowledgement of the help extended to her even if there are other passengers who shared in the task of getting her payment

to the driver. As earlier mentioned, the scenario appears to violate the third rule of Lakoff's politeness principle. However, based on Parsons' structural functionalism, the second utterance directed to the passenger seated next to the female is acceptable, since the passenger represents the collective consciousness of the passengers who extended their hands to get the fare to the driver. Collectivity, according to Parsons (1971; Williams, 1992) is "unity in the sense that society can be thought of as pursuing a single common end (or a system of ends) and not merely discrete individual ends" (p. 45). In other words, the female's gratitude to one passenger who extended his hand signifies her gratitude to all the other passengers who similarly extended their hands. Additionally, if their roles were reversed, the female passenger is expected to fulfill the same set of actions, since she is socially bound by the cultural system that is deemed acceptable in the jeepney.

Moreover, on the macro level, the driver's non-verbal response is unacceptable, and the passenger concerned would otherwise get offended. For instance, on the macro level, employees in larger institutions like government offices will get offended and will likely remember the offense thereby having negative feelings on the part of the speaker. Negative feelings may manifest as slower service the next time the speaker asks for a favor or a request. However, based on Parsons' structural functionalism, the passenger involved will adjust his personality system to conform to the cultural system while on board the jeepney. This means that he will withdraw from his personality expectation of getting affected or slighted if a favor he does is left unnoticed inside the jeepney, since his expectations are bound by the established values and roles of drivers and passengers. This passenger accepts the fact that the primary concern of the jeepney driver is getting his passengers safely to their destination and this concern takes precedence over the need for politeness. In fact, according to Parsons' structural functionalism, the actions, motives, and thought patterns of all the interactants involved in each interaction could only be understood in the context of the system of organization. In the diagram, the workings of this interaction are represented in the integration of the jeepney culture with the personality expectation of the passenger represented in Figure 2.

On another occasion, at around twelve noon, but still using the jeepney as the context for linguistic interaction, it is observed that another female passenger, in her early thirties, dressed in yellow t-shirt and faded jeans, boarded a jeepney. Moments later, she extended her right hand and uttered *Boss, bayad ko*, translated as 'Boss, my payment'. The male seated to her right ignored the outstretched hand. With the hand still outstretched, she rephrased the utterance by saying *Paki Abot po* translated to 'Please pass'. This time, another passenger, seated next to the male, reached out for the fare, and gave it to another passenger who, in turn, got the money and repeated the female's initial utterance by saying *Bayad daw ho*, translated as 'Mister, this is the female's fare', then put it on the driver's outstretched hand. This linguistic variation is another variation of the first interaction where the next passenger responded immediately to the implicit request of the elderly female passenger. Again, using Lakoff's rules on politeness, it may be observed that several violations have been made by the female passenger who initiates the intention to pay her fare. First, according to Lakoff, the speaker must not impose. The female passenger, however, put an imposition on the male passenger seated next to her, at least according to his perception, when she intruded into his thoughts by saying *Boss, bayad ko*, which translates to 'Boss, my payment'. Her utterance may have sounded aggressive causing him to ignore the implicit command behind the request. Second, not only is there an imposition in the form of an implicit command to give the fare to the driver, the female passenger also violated the third rule by not making the passenger feel good. Probably, because of the intrusion uttered with a hint of aggression in the implicit form of command, the male passenger seated next to the female chose to ignore her gesture. Lakoff (1975) posits that politeness is a social construct that seeks to reduce friction in personal interaction (p. 50). Thus, even in this jeepney context where passengers are seated at extreme ends, it is clear that the female passenger did not socialize positively. In short, there is no integration but only conflict between the cultural system (jeepney culture) and the social system (socialization perceived in the tone of aggression) in the given interaction. The breakdown of interaction is represented in Figure 2.

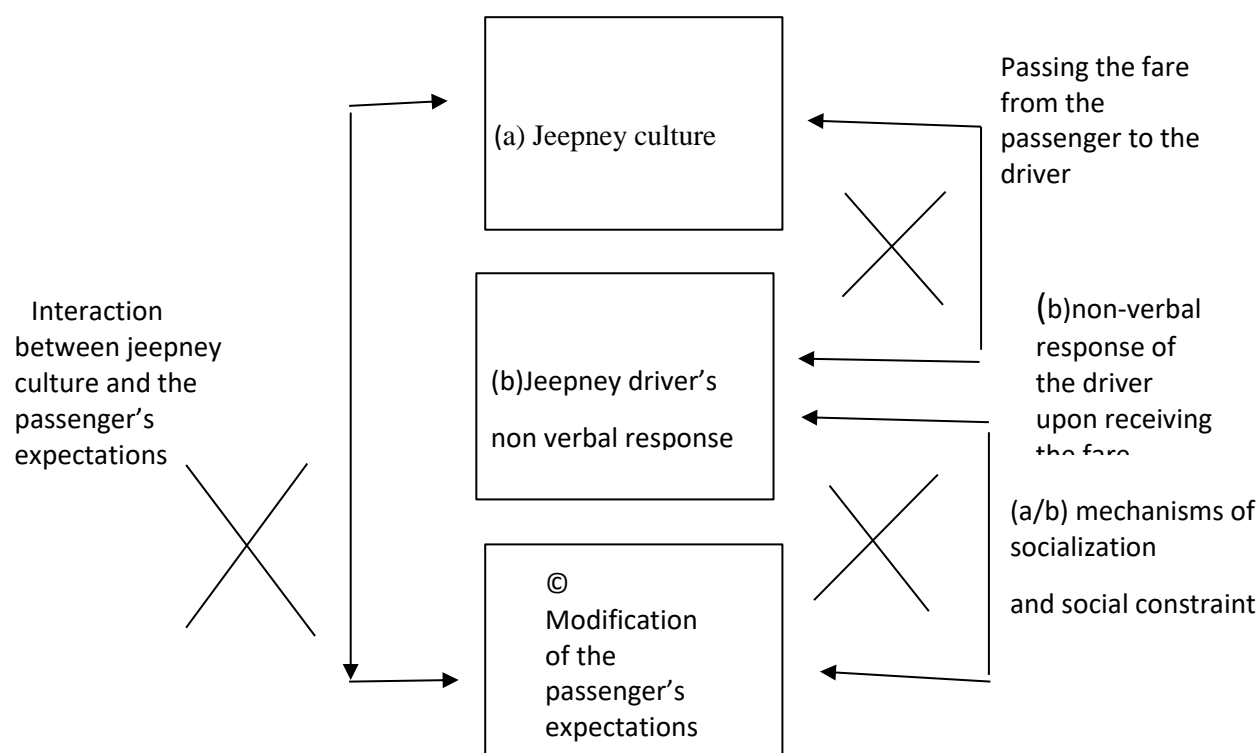


Figure 2. Integration among the systems of action within the jeepney context

Figure 2 displays the mechanism that takes place inside the jeepney. This mechanism involves the interaction between and among passengers as they reach out for the fare from other passengers to deliver to the driver. The breakdown, represented by an x mark, indicates the absence of politeness brought about by the non-execution of functionally directed utterances. The next passenger, hearing the utterances, may have perceived aggression due to the speaker's linguistic choice, as well as the tonal nuance.

In contrast, a change in the speaker's linguistic choice using a more polite linguistic expression *Pakiabot po*, 'Please pass', receives a more favorable response from the receivers (passengers hearing the request). It is observed that despite the more polite linguistic choice, the male passenger seated next to the speaker, still chooses to ignore the request. This non-involvement may be attributed to the psyche at work in the Filipino male who did not take lightly to the terms of address used by the female speaker when referring to the jeepney driver. In Filipino male discourse, it is usual to refer to another male interactor as "boss". Although the literal meaning of the word is someone superior, among Filipino males today, "boss" connotes a sense of belonging in the community composed solely of male members. Hence, it is not surprising in a country that still practices gender stereotypes and male domination, its male members will not be too keen on hearing the term "boss" uttered by a female. In fact, one study (Liwag, de la Cruz & Macapagal, 1998) corroborates findings confirming gender stereotypes in Filipino households belonging to the lower and middle economic status. The findings further elaborate that in poor households, the daughters' tasks are differentiated from the sons' chores. While the daughters are assigned tasks that are characterized as domesticated, indoor and nurturant, the sons are assigned those that are physical and belonging to the outdoors.

A male student in his teens utters *Kuya, sa tabi lang po*, translated to 'Brother, just on the side' as a way of making his request to get off the jeepney known to the driver. The jeepney driver, in response, executes the request and stops. Sometimes, if the jeepney driver is afraid of getting fined for a traffic violation, his response may not be immediately executed, but the driver might respond by saying *Sandali, bawal dyan*, 'Wait, it is prohibited to stop on that side'. There are times when the jeepney driver fails to respond to a verbal request to stop and will continue driving. In this case, other passengers will come to the aid of the speaker uttering the request by repeating what this passenger said. Linguistic expressions like *Ma, para daw ho*, 'Mister, the passenger on the right says stop' or simply *Para*, 'Stop' will then be uttered by the passenger. Other expressions hinting the two-functionally directed goals of the speaker may be categorized as non-verbal. Sometimes, the speaker may not need to express any verbal cues indicating his desire to pay the fare or requesting the driver to stop. The speaker may just catch the glance of the receiver and this brief exchange of eye contact usually conveys the message of the speaker to stop just as an outstretched hand holding his pay fare will indicate his intention to pay.

## 5. Insights

Because of the current economic state of the country, many Filipinos are now open and finding it practical to use the jeepney as their means of transportation. Thus, inside the jeepney is the symbiosis of the different strata of Philippine society. The poor, the lower middle class and the upper middle class may think nothing of the idea of riding a jeepney, but a matter of practicality as well as equalizing themselves with the poor majority. Along with this choice is the notion of conformity. Also, since the jeepney is a popular representation of Philippine society consisting mainly of the poor majority, it is a norm, a linguistic choice, and a cultural requirement that all those who chose to ride in the jeepney must adhere to the jeepney culture. One feature of the linguistic choice is the notion of politeness. In fact, Coulmas (2013) posits that the notion of politeness conventions is often said to reflect social structures. Although this position may be difficult to rationalize, this is indeed a reality inside the jeepney. Put simply, the language the jeepney riders use, as well as how they utter it, must be adjusted to the daily linguistic conventions established and accepted by the majority; otherwise, these jeepney riders will run the risk of losing their face.

## 6. Conclusion

In summary, the paper has shown how the Filipino riders negotiate the notion of politeness on two functionally directed goals, that is, paying the fare and stopping the jeepney. What is noted is that the passengers as speakers in the interaction and the driver as the intended receiver of the speaker's message are all subsumed in the culture and norms of the jeepney. These cultures and norms, in fact, are repeated processes that these interactants perform every time they choose to ride a jeepney. It is also observed that contrary to the politeness consideration set by Lakoff, there is a much more appropriate perspective that may be used to justify and therefore accommodate the linguistic expressions and occurrences inside the jeepney. While it is true that the speakers and the receivers of the message perceive politeness differently because of their cultural orientations, it is also important to know that in the given culture, the social structure that the speakers and the receivers belong to are also significant features contributing to the overall success or breakdown of a given interaction.

Studies of this nature will serve as a medium not only to understand that although speakers are given linguistic choices, they are still bound by societal features like the socioeconomic structures they belong to in ensuring that interaction is carried out with optimum benefit for all concerned. It is useful therefore, for future studies to look into another context or occasion like the interaction between a vendor and a buyer at a public market to determine what social linguistic perspective may be deemed appropriate to accommodate the linguistic adjustments that both speakers and receivers employ.

## 7. Study Limitations and Future Research

While the study presents invaluable insights into the politeness interactions between passengers and drivers within jeepneys, several limitations should be acknowledged. One, in terms of the sample size and generalizability, the sample size was relatively small and was based on the specific routes the researcher took. Second, the study focuses on a particular cultural and social context within the Philippines. The observed politeness interactions may vary significantly in other cultural settings, limiting the applicability of the findings to broader contexts. Finally, the study was conducted over a limited period, which may not account for variations in behavior over time, such as seasonal differences or changes in commuting patterns.

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several suggestions for future research may be kept in mind. One, future studies could include a larger and more diverse sample from multiple cities and regions to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Second, future research in different cultural settings may allow for comparisons and deeper insights into how cultural norms and values influence politeness interactions in public transportation. Finally, extending the period of study would help capture changes in behavior over time and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of politeness interactions within jeepneys.

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