

Abstract for the Popular Culture Association Conference, March 2013

“Next! Next!”: Ethnic and Pragmatic Variation in Communicative Styles within the Diverse
Speech Community

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From the language that blares through busy city streets to the rich and diverse argot that echoes in markets and stores around the country, language patterns notably differ in this equally diverse American culture. Deborah Tannen, for instance, examined this trend, noting differences in the communicative styles between women and men. Communicative difference, however, is not just restricted across gender lines. Ethnic variations in greeting styles prove just as significant to the linguistic framework that makes America so unique, individuals varying their communicative styles, according to Charles A. Ferguson, based upon the cultural and social politeness formulas that they embrace.

This trend is particularly prevalent at Lexington Market in downtown Baltimore, where vendors of seafood, chicken wings, and sugary desserts each attempt to grab the attention of the masses who stroll through each day. Walking among the stands, one might notice, for instance, that the rows upon rows of Chinese vendors are more likely to use non-verbal or truncated greeting styles while many Hispanic and African-American vendors often engage potential customers, using a fuller, more extended greeting approach. Preliminary findings suggest that the model of language thus varies across ethnic lines, at least in spoken discourse. This paper will examine how vendors at Lexington Market therefore employ differing degrees of the phatic and conative functions of language, as Jakobson defines them, moving along a clear dialect continuum across ethnic lines. The result is a noticeable and informative difference between the more simplistic, “Next! Next!,” and the more engaged, “Hello, Sir. How may I help you today?”