

Saying “Good Night” in Bhutan: Community Constructed Messages on WeChat

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Bhutan is a small, landlocked country of approximately 750,000 people, who live in valleys separated by the high mountain ranges of the Himalayas (Phuntsho, 2015). Until recently, communication was predominantly face-to-face, as people lived in small villages where bonds and relationships were deep. The structure of communities has changed, however, in recent years: many people have moved from small villages to cities and urban regions both within and outside of Bhutan. Yet people have found ways to maintain daily contact, facilitated by the use of mobile phones and Bhutan’s most popular social media platform, WeChat. We have observed that in group chats people may close the day by sending each other ‘good night’ wishes, an expression that did not formerly exist in traditional, spoken Bhutanese languages. From an analysis of messages shared on WeChat, we unpack the form and structure of closings and ‘good night’ messages, and explain how these closing messages diverge from those analyzed by Schegloff and Sacks (1973). Data include textual forms, audio messages, and images shared on the platform.

Keywords: Bhutan, affordances, online community, greetings

Analysis

Conversation: online reflects offline world

In a group conversation in Bhutan, it usually is considered impolite to make comments or say anything unless it is of great importance or if one is an important or respected member of the group. So, for example, children and young people cannot talk in the presence of elders. This has led the Bhutanese society to be quite suppressed where spiral of silence occurs as a matter of fact.

This offline world reflects in the online world. Here, in the Dungkar Community chat group, although there are 29 members, only a few speak out. Others just “listen.” Also, responses are not posted as audio voice messages, but through emojis and stickers saying, Thank you, or Good luck. Only the lama and few elder members speak out. This is also observed in other online chat forums and WeChat groups.

Good night as a blessing

There is only one commonly used phrase to greet someone – *kuzuzangpo*, which translates to something like, I am happy to see you in good health. However, with modernization, modern technology and mass media, there are new words and phrases being coined. One such word is good night. However, from the brief analysis of its use in this WeChat group page, good night is used more a blessing than wishing someone ‘good night’ as per the western tradition. So instead of replying with a “good night” to a “good night”, the respondent says “thank you” like how one would express a sense of gratitude when one is

blessed. It is western equivalent of replying with a “thank you” to someone wishing you a “safe journey.”

This argument is also evidenced by the fact that the two greetings, the local “*Kuzuzangpo*” and the imported “good night” are used together. The lady opens her message with *kuzuzangpo* and says she wants to ‘offer’ good night to all the members. Here the “offer” is like how one would offer blessings instead of a simple wish.

It is interesting to note how simple phrases like “good night” mutates into new concepts when they meet a different culture. This seems to have happened in Bhutan.

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