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PRO 102

15 October 2004

**“May I Take Your Order, Please?”**

“Welcome to McDonald’s...would you like fries with that today?” This phrase is heard countless times each day across the world. Communication plays a crucial role in a restaurant’s sales; however, in recent years, complaints of rude fast food employees have escalated. Customers flee the scene, claiming they do not like how they are spoken to by the fast food workers behind the counter and at the drive-through window. But who is ruder: unappreciative teenaged workers or senile middle-aged crew members? My study sets out to prove that younger employees are guilty of holding short, impolite conversations with customers.

Several sociolinguistic studies have been conducted comparing age and language. Stephen Levinson, director of the Language and Cognition Group at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, notes that “through friendliness and cooperativeness...the speaker will avoid finding himself/herself in an embarrassing situation” (Bayraktaroglu 76). Levinson and his partner, Penelope Brown, conducted a complex study proving that students in Turkey use a more redressed, softened language than their professors. Their study suggests that young adults prefer to give simple “yes” or “no” as an answer, rather than going into detail. Another investigation of Japanese subjects shows that the politeness differs between the sexes and among

different age groups (Hardman 134). All in all, the use of slang was found to culminate in the 17-19 age group (Andersen 105). Most teenagers seem to prefer the word “yeah” instead of “yes” and are also more likely than adults to use vague and small words. From age twenty onward, there seems to be a gradual decrease in the use of slang (Andersen 74). Previous research findings all indicate that teenagers prefer shorter words, are highly likely to use slang, and tend to hold shorter conversations than adults placed in similar situations.

My own study of language and age was conducted at a McDonald’s restaurant located in Hartland, Michigan. The store is strategically placed at the intersection of two major highways and receives a lot of business on a daily basis. I had previously worked at this location for nine months, so I was already pretty familiar with the employees and their interactions with the customers. After discussing my idea with the store manager, Chris, I decided that a Sunday lunch rush (10 A.M. – 2 P.M.) would be the optimum time to observe the employees of different ages in action. On Sunday, September 12, I grabbed my pen and notebook and headed over to my former place of employment.

The concept was simple and concise: I would observe the crew member working in the back drive-through window. This position involves many responsibilities, but the main duty is to take orders from the drive-through customers. There is no initial face-to-face contact; the employee merely speaks into a headset and the customer hears their voice through a speaker located outside the restaurant. By observing the conversations in this fashion, no other factors would have to be taken into account, such

as the age of the customer being spoken to. Since the worker cannot see the person whose order is being taken, there is no opportunity to speak differently based on the sight of the customer.

In order for my study to remain confidential, I sat in the crew room at the back of the restaurant and wore an extra drive-through headset. Using this method, I could listen in on the orders without the drive-through worker being aware that someone else was eavesdropping. Whenever anyone happened to peek into the back room and question what I was doing, I simply told them I was observing a day at McDonald's for my business class at Michigan State University.

During my four hours on the scene, 229 cars ventured through the McDonald's drive-through line. This steady stream of customers was expertly handled by seven different crew members of varying ages; however, the workers all came from relatively the same area of Michigan and roughly the same social class. The younger employees consisted of Heidi (eighteen years old), Scott (seventeen), and Stephanie (sixteen). On the other hand, Chris (mid 40s), Jodi (mid 30s), Cheryl (mid 40s), and Jim (twenty-five) made up the "older" group.

My original notes from my observations are recorded in **Table 1.1** below. The second table, **Table 1.2**, takes the information I observed and organizes it into categories to better help one distinguish differences between the younger and older crew members. Younger employees are indicated by the color **red** and older workers by **green**.

Table 1.1

<b>YOUNGER</b>	<b>OLDER</b>
<p><i>Heidi</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “What can I get for you?”</li> <li>▪ “Is that it? [Total] at the first window.”</li> <li>▪ Avoids greetings altogether</li> <li>▪ No “please” or “thank you”</li> <li>▪ NEVER suggestive sells</li> <li>▪ Asks about sauce about 1/3 times chicken is ordered</li> <li>▪ Does not apologize for waits</li> </ul> <p><i>Scott</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Welcome to McDonald’s; what can I get for you today?”</li> <li>▪ “Thank you, your total is [ ].”</li> <li>▪ Utilizes “thank you”</li> <li>▪ Suggestive sells occasionally</li> </ul> <p><i>Stephanie</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Blunt</li> <li>▪ “Can I help you?”</li> <li>▪ “[Total].”</li> <li>▪ No suggestive sell</li> <li>▪ No greeting</li> <li>▪ No “please” or “thank you”</li> </ul>	<p><i>Chris</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Good morning, may I take your order?” -OR- “Hi, may I take your order?”</li> <li>▪ ALWAYS utilizes “please” and “thank you”</li> <li>▪ Suggestive sells often</li> <li>▪ Apologizes to customers for their wait if applicable (i.e. “Thank you for waiting, how may I help you?”)</li> </ul> <p><i>Jodi</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Goooooooooooooooood morning may I help you!!”</li> <li>▪ “Thank you, your total is [ ] at the first window, please.”</li> <li>▪ Uses “please” and “thank you” frequently</li> <li>▪ Suggestive sells consistently</li> <li>▪ Always asks about cream/sugar/nugget sauces</li> </ul> <p><i>Cheryl</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Good morning, may I take your order please?”</li> <li>▪ “[Total] at the first window, please.”</li> <li>▪ Suggestive sells cinnamon rolls</li> </ul> <p><i>Jim</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Welcome to McDonald’s, how may I help you today?”</li> <li>▪ “Thank you Sir/Ma’am, your total comes to [ ] at the first window.”</li> <li>▪ ALWAYS suggestive sells</li> </ul>

Table 1.2

Employee	Greeting	Please	Thank You	Suggestive Selling?	Closing
Heidi	"What can I get for you?"	No	No	Never	"Is that it? [Total] at the first window."
Scott	"Welcome to McDonald's; what can I get for you today?"	No	Yes	Sometimes	"Thank you, your total is [ ]."
Stephanie	"Can I help you?"	No	No	Never	"[Total]."
Chris	"Hi, may I take your order?"	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	"Thank you, your total is [ ] at the first window."
Jodi	"Goooooooooooood morning may I help you!"	Yes	Yes	Always	"Thank you, your total is [ ] at the first window, please."
Cheryl	"Good morning, may I take your order please?"	Yes	No	Always	"[Total] at the first window, please."
Jim	"Welcome to McDonald's; how may I help you today?"	No	Yes	Always	"Thank you Sir/Ma'am, your total comes to [ ] at the first window."

Note that with the exception of Scott, the teenaged employees' greetings are significantly shorter than the adults' salutations, and the closings also follow a similar pattern. Stephanie, the youngest observed employee, is also the bluntest: she speaks to customers almost as if she is angry with them. Her greeting can hardly be called a greeting; she avoids saying "hi" or "hello" and instead skips right to "can I help you?" Not one time did she say "please" or "thank you", whereas the adults are much better about using these politeness words consistently. In fact, 75% of the adults use "please" or "thank you", and 50% of adults use both phrases for every order taken. In comparison, only 33% of the teenagers ever used "thank you", and 0% ever said "please"! There is no incidence of any teenager using both phrases.

Several explanations exist for the results of my study. The stereotypical teenager is often viewed as being rude and rebellious. As the times change, so do the generations of people, and distinct differences in language may gradually occur. In earlier times, people not possessing good manners were scorned by society and considered to be of a lower class. Perhaps the importance of proper etiquette is not stressed enough on today's generation.

Although there are instances when older employees are short or curt with customers, it is usually the younger workers who tend to socialize with the customers as little as possible. Politeness words and phrases, such as "please" and "thank you", are often forgotten. In addition, teenagers are much more likely to say, "yeah" than "yes" and so on. Older workers are much more personable and make an effort to go out of their way to make sure the customer is satisfied. Customers do not want to be dismissed with a mumbled "thanks" - they want to hear an enthusiastic "thank you, have a great day!"

### Works Cited

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