

[英] HELEN OATEY 著

THE CUSTOMS AND LANGUAGE
OF SOCIAL INTERACTION
IN ENGLISH

与英美人交往的习俗和语言



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of Social Interaction English*

by Helen Oatey

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CONTENTS

Preface	1
Chapter 1. Personal Names.....	5
1.1 Given Names	6
1.2 Surnames	8
1.3 Addressing People	10
1.4 Finding out Someone's Name	17
Exercises	
Chapter 2. Greetings.....	21
2.1 Some Common Ways of Greeting in English	22
2.2 Some Inappropriate Ways of Greeting in English	
Exercises	28
Chapter 3. Starting and Developing Conversations.....	33
3.1 Opening a Conversation	
3.2 Developing a Conversation	38
Exercises	43
Chapter 4. Conversation Topics	47
4.1 Jobs	47
4.2 Housing	48
4.3 Hobbies	48
4.4 Holidays and Outings	49
4.5 Films, Television Programmes & Other Forms of Entertainment	49
4.6 Local or National Events	50
4.7 Age	51

4.8 Money	53
4.9 Health	56
4.10 Family	58
Exercises	60
Chapter 5. Visiting a Foreigner.....	64
5.1 Arranging the Visit	64
5.2 Arriving	69
5.3 Refreshments	70
Exercises	77
Chapter 6. Dinner Invitations.....	80
6.1 Invitations	80
6.2 The Role of the Host	86
6.3 The Role of the Guest	89
6.4 Potential Problems & Misunderstandings	93
Exercises	95
Chapter 7. Leave-taking and Other Points	101
7.1 Leave-taking	101
7.2 The Use of 'Thank You'	109
7.3 Compliments	114
Exercises	116
Chapter 8. Conclusion	120
Exercises	125
Appendix 1. Common Male Given Names and Their Short Forms	127
Appendix 2. Common Female Given Names and Their Short Forms	134
Key to Exercises	142

PREFACE

This book is written for Chinese learners of English who wish to meet and talk with foreigners and who would like their English to be not only grammatically accurate but also socially acceptable. It is suitable for learners of intermediate level and above, and can be used either with a teacher or as self-study material.

The ideas for this book have developed over the five years that I have been teaching in China. During this time my students have frequently asked me to discuss the cultural differences between China and the West, and especially those differences that relate to language. Moreover, I have observed that misunderstandings often occur between Chinese and Westerners not simply because of grammatical inaccuracy or incorrect usage of vocabulary items, but also because of differences in customs and in the appropriacy of saying certain things in particular situations. I began teaching a course which dealt with such aspects, and the content of this book has grown out of this course.

There are seven main chapters in the book, and they deal in turn with the various functions and topics relating to social interaction, such as personal names and how to address people, greetings,

conversation topics and so on. Each chapter first provides background information on the issue concerned, and then discusses some of the common errors that Chinese speakers make and the problems that may arise when there are differences in customs between Chinese and English speakers. The eighth and final chapter in the book attempts to draw out some general principles underlying the information discussed in the preceding chapters. In this way it forms a conclusion to the book. At the end of each chapter there is a set of exercises. Many of these have a multiple choice format, but this does not mean that there is only one correct answer; in fact there are often two or more acceptable answers. Sometimes an option may be regarded as borderline; in other words, some native speakers may regard it as acceptable whereas others may not. All of this is indicated and explained in the key.

The term 'Westerner' has been used frequently throughout the book, and should be understood as referring to native speakers of English. In fact a Westerner is not necessarily a native speaker of English, but since there is no short and convenient term for such people, the long phrase 'native speaker of English' has been substituted with 'Westerner'.

Since native speakers of English are of many different nationalities, they inevitably differ in their customs and use of expressions. In fact, even within

one nationality there are often geographical and social differences. So there may be native speakers who disagree with some of the information or expressions given in this book. However, all of the chapters have been read by a wide variety of English speakers (particularly British, Americans, Canadians and Australians), and in this way every attempt has been made to make the book as wide in application as possible. Needless to say, it is beyond the scope of this book to describe and list all of the different customs and expressions used in different parts of the English speaking world; and since I am British, the book naturally has more of a British flavour. Nevertheless, the other nationalities who have read the script agree with almost all, if not all, of the content.

I should like to acknowledge my debt and gratitude to all those who have helped me in the writing of this book. Professor Hu Wenzhong's interest and research into intercultural communication acted as a stimulus to me, and his personal encouragement was a key factor in my decision to start the book. Many friends and colleagues spent considerable time reading each of the chapters and discussing their content with me, and their comments and advice were invaluable. In particular I should like to thank Frank Edmead and Yu Weiming for their careful reading of the drafts and for their

numerous valuable suggestions. Finally I should like to thank all the students I have taught over the past few years who have stimulated me by their questions and encouraged me by their enthusiasm and interest in the topics. Without the help of all of these people I should not have been able to write this book.

Helen Oatey

Foreign Languages Department
Shanghai Jiaotong University
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CHAPTER 1: PERSONAL NAMES

Personal names are people's names — the names that they inherit at birth and the other names that are given to them. In both English and Chinese these personal names can be divided into two main kinds — surnames and given names. But the way in which these names are used varies in the two languages.

A fundamental difference is the order in which the names occur. Look at the examples below:

Chen Li juan Linda Jane Chapman

In Chinese the surname comes first, with the given name placed after it. But in English the surname is at the end, and the given names are in front. So Chen and Chapman are surnames, and Li juan, Linda and Jane are given names. However, in English the order on forms and in alphabetical lists is usually reversed. In other words, the surname is normally written first, as follows:

Chapman, Linda Jane

This reversed order is usually indicated by placing a comma after the surname, as shown in the example above. The surname may also be written in capital letters or underlined (as shown below) to make the reversed order even clearer.

CHAPMAN, Linda Jane

1. 1 Given Names

Given names are usually chosen for people by their parents or other relatives, and in the West the most common factors which influence people's choice are as follows:

- a) The sound of the name — does it go well with the surname, both rhythmically and phonologically?
- b) The pleasantness of the name — do the parents subjectively like the name?
- c) The names of particular people — do they wish to name the child after a friend, relative or famous person?
- d) The meaning of the name.

The last factor has traditionally been of little importance, especially compared with Chinese; but recently it has been growing in significance. However, in English the meaning of a name is not obvious from the form; most people need to consult a dictionary of names to find out the meaning.

Most English people have two given names, but some only have one and others have three or even more. People who have two or more given names normally use just the first one on the majority of occasions; but if they prefer to use one of their other given names instead, they can do so if they wish. Usually, though, only one given name is used regularly, and it is only for

official purposes, such as on documents, that all the given names are used. There are perhaps two main reasons why people frequently have more than one name. Firstly, it helps to avoid confusion between people who might have the same full name, especially when their surname is a common one. And secondly, it enables parents to use a friend or relative's name and still to be able to choose another name that they particularly like.

When a person has two given names, the first is often called the first name, and the second the middle name, as shown below:

Linda Jane Chapman

Linda = First name

Jane = Middle name

Chapman = Surname

Given names are typically either girls' names or boys' names, and are not usually interchanged. However, unlike Chinese, where it is often possible to guess whether the name is a girl's or a boy's from the meaning, in English it is purely a question of knowledge and cannot be worked out from the form. People learn from experience which names are for boys and which are for girls. Occasionally, both male and female names have the same sound, but a slightly different spelling, such as Francis (m) and Frances (f). And in a few cases a name may be used for either sex, for example, Dale, Lindsay. In such cases, the name is usually a surname which has been taken over as a given name. This is more common

in the United States than elsewhere.

In Britain, given names are frequently referred to as Christian names. This does not necessarily mean, though, that the person is a Christian or that the name has been given by the church. Although the term 'Christian name' probably originated in that way, nowadays it is usually used as a synonym for 'given name'. Many people take their baby to church to be baptised, but the given names are chosen by the parents before this. And even if a person has never been baptised, their names can still be called Christian names. However, recently the terms 'given names' and 'forenames' have become more common, especially in official documents, to avoid causing any possible offence to people of different religions.

1.2 Surnames

Surnames are also known in English as 'family names' or 'last names'. Most Westerners have one surname which is the same as their father's. Nowadays surnames do not really have any meaning, although some of them used to. In the past many people obtained their surname in the following ways:

- a) From their occupation, e.g. Farmer, Butcher, Thatcher.
- b) From a nearby geographical feature, e.g. Moor, Wood, Hill.
- c) From a nearby town, village or county, e.g. York,

Kent.

- d) As a descriptive nickname, e.g. Small, Long, Wise.
- e) From their father's given name, e.g. Johnson (son of John), Richardson (son of Richard).

Some surnames have a prefix such as 'Mc' or 'O', for example, McGuire or O'Hara. These often indicate the person's geographical origin. 'Mc' is a common prefix in Scotland, and 'O' is common in Ireland.

A small number of people have a surname composed of two parts which are linked (in most cases) with a hyphen, for example, Lloyd-Jones, Bartlett-Smith. These are known as double-barrelled names and are formed by joining two ordinary surnames together. In Britain this has traditionally been done for the following reasons:

- a) When two people get married, they may feel that the man's surname is too common, and that there may be too many other people with the same name, so they make it double-barrelled by joining the woman's surname to the man's.

- b) In aristocratic circles, land and property is traditionally passed from one generation to the next through male descendants. If there is no male heir, a descendant through a female may inherit it, but in that case the male family name is usually added to the heir's surname, so that the association between name and property is not lost.

When a double-barrelled name has been formed in

either of these ways, subsequent generations normally continue to use both names. These double—barrelled names are more common amongst upper class people in Britain than elsewhere.

However, in recent years there has been an increase in another type of double—barrelled name. Some women, when they marry, hyphenate their surname to their husband's surname in order not to lose their identity at marriage; but in these cases the children only take the husband's surname. (See section 1.3 below for more details on women's names after marriage.)

1.3 Addressing People

When we talk directly to people. (i.e. *talk to* them, not *about* them) it is possible to address them in the following ways:

- by their given name
- by a title followed by their surname
- by a title on its own

When addressing people by their given names, we often use a shortened form of the name. For example, Timothy may be called Tim, or Jennifer may be called Jenny. Some common ways in which given names can be shortened are as follows:

- by using the first syllable of the name,
e.g. Christopher — Chris, Edward — Ed.
- by using the first syllable of the name + 'y'
e.g. Andrew — Andy, Jennifer — Jenny.

However, not all short forms can be worked out in this way. Sometimes another part of the name is used, as in Anthony — Tony, and in other cases there does not seem to be any logical origin to the short form, for example, Richard — Dick. Occasionally the 'short' form is even longer than the original name, as in James — Jimmie. So it is probably wiser not to try and work out a short form, but to keep to the form which a foreigner uses. A list of some common given names, together with their common equivalent short forms can be found in the Appendices.

Another way of addressing people, apart from using their given name, is to use a title + their surname. There are a number of different titles that can be used in English, but the most common are 'Mr, Mrs. and Miss.' In most cases 'Mr.' is used for men, 'Mrs.' for married women and Miss for unmarried women. They are used together with the surname and are placed in front of it, for example, Mr. Roland, Miss Webster.

When a woman marries, she usually takes her husband's surname and no longer uses her own, which is now referred to as her maiden name. So if a woman called Sheila Webster marries a man called Peter Roland, she will normally be called Mrs. Roland after her wedding. However, in recent years, the situation has begun to change because some women feel that by taking their husband's surname they lose their own identity. Some women solve this problem by simply

changing their middle name; after marriage they use their maiden name as their middle name. So Sheila Mary Webster might become Sheila Webster Roland, but she would still be addressed as Mrs. Roland. Other women (as explained in Section 1.2 above) join their surname to their husband's with a hyphen, and so in this case Sheila Webster would be called Mrs. Webster-Roland. Still other women object to taking their husband's name at all and prefer just to keep their own. Another title, Ms.' (pronounced as /məz/) is usually used for addressing them. So Sheila Webster could also be called Ms. Webster, if she did not want to use her husband's name.

Nowadays the title 'Ms' is used for any woman (single or married) who objects to the use of 'Miss' and 'Mrs.', and it can also be used for addressing any woman when it is uncertain whether she is married or not. This form of address is frequently used in writing, but in Britain it is not often heard in speech. However, in the United States its use is much more widespread.

Some professions can also function as titles, though not as many as in Chinese. Some common examples are Professor, Doctor, Nurse and ranks in the armed forces like Captain. If people have such positions they should normally be addressed with these titles, unless of course the situation is informal and the relationship is close. So such a person may be called Professor Lewis or Captain Simmonds, for example. These professional titles can also be used on their own, in other words without the