

Impact of Social Status on Participation in the Speaking Tradition at Washington and Lee  
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Washington and Lee University

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### Abstract

The study examines the relationship between the adherence to the Speaking Tradition at Washington and Lee University and the social status of the recipient. We focused on the whether or not an undergraduate student at Washington and Lee University participated in the Speaking Tradition when they were speaking to another student or to an adult. We collected data at three central locations on Washington and Lee University's campus, and participants included both male and female undergraduate students. All data was collected using observational procedures, and we did not engage with the participants. Observations concentrated on the types of individuals involved in a potential Speaking Tradition interaction, students or adults, and whether or not the student initiated the Speaking Tradition with a verbal greeting. In this way, age was used as a tool of gauging social status, as older individuals were presumed to have higher status. A total of 50 observations were recorded, 25 student-student interactions and 25 student-adult interactions. The results show that there are no significant differences in the adherence to the Speaking Tradition in student-student interactions versus in student-adult interactions ( $p > 0.05$ ). Overall, the present study provides important information regarding Speaking Tradition interactions at Washington and Lee University and found that there is no significant relationship between initiation of the Speaking Tradition and the social status of the recipient.

*Keywords:* social status, tradition, greetings, verbal interactions

## Impact of Social Status on Participation in the Speaking Tradition at Washington and Lee University

The Speaking Tradition at Washington and Lee University is a long-standing practice in which individuals on the university's campus regularly greet one another in passing. Dating back to Robert E. Lee's time as president, the tradition has served as a source of pride and a point of distinction for the students and faculty (Washington and Lee University, n.d.). The students represent the biggest group on campus, with a population of just under two thousand, and bear a majority of the weight to uphold the tradition (U.S. News & World Report, n.d.). Although the tradition is meaningful to the university, adherence to the Speaking Tradition may be affected by more than its historic value. Specifically, the way in which individuals interact with one another in Speaking Tradition interactions may be impacted by the current status and type of social relationship between the two individuals involved. Individuals tend to vary their greetings as a means of displaying their approval of the other individual and their satisfaction with the current relationship, or lack thereof (Pillet-Shore, 2012). Individuals also adjust their interactions and greetings in accordance with the social status of the recipient (Laporte & Zuberbühler, 2011). The present study aims to determine the relationship between student initiation of the Speaking Tradition and the status of the recipient and seeks to answer the following question: Are students at Washington and Lee University more likely to participate in the Speaking Tradition when passing adults or when passing a fellow student?

### **Social Greetings**

Individual's greetings are not identical in every social interaction. In face-to-face interactions, individuals target their greetings to display their current attitude toward the recipient and to confirm the present state of their relationship (Pillet-Shore, 2012). Likewise, the simple

presence of reciprocal greeting also depends on the two individuals' relationship; reciprocal communication has a higher frequency amongst individuals with a pre-established relationship than amongst individuals with no previous encounters (Luef & Pika, 2017). Seemingly, individuals tailor their greetings and responses to correspond to the relationship they have with the other individual involved in the interaction.

### **Generational Differences**

The tendency to use and feel comfortable in face-to-face greetings differs significantly amongst different generations. Specifically, the willingness to withstand uncomfortable in-person interactions varies greatly by generation (Van Volkom, Stapley, & Amaturio, 2014). Young adults, including individuals under age 20, report a significantly higher use of technology as a method to avoid face-to-face interactions than middle aged adults and older adults (Van Volkom et al., 2014). Generally speaking, teenagers report that internet communication is more comfortable than most face-to-face interactions, with most claiming that they have reduced the amount of face-to-face communication with both friends and family to engage in communication via electronic devices instead (Gapsiso & Wilson, 2015). Amongst high school students, there is a strong correlation between not feeling comfortable in face-to-face communication and feeling more comfortable talking online. These results suggest that young individuals will engage in face-to-face communication more infrequently, especially if there is a chance to redirect communication to an online platform (Pierce, 2009). Generally speaking, younger individuals tend to engage in direct, in-person conversation less frequently than older individuals (Van Volkom et. al., 2014; Gapsiso & Wilson, 2015).

### **Social Status**

Non-human primates, such as chimpanzees and squirrel monkeys, serve as an excellent model through which language development in the context of social status can be understood. Social status references an individual's place in the social hierarchy, and in many non-human primates and mammals, information relative to social status is clearly communicated through vocalizations (Laporte & Zuberbühler, 2011). Particularly, vocalized greetings are more common in squirrel monkeys when the individual who initiated the interaction had a higher social ranking in society (Masataka, Biben & Symmes, 1986). Generally speaking, the majority of interactions in communities of chimpanzees are those directed from an individual of a low social status to an individual of a higher social status, such as an alpha male, mother, or father. Furthermore, as individuals grow out of childhood and into early adulthood, interactions with the alpha male and other superiors increases dramatically (Laporte & Zuberbühler, 2011). Overall, greetings, callings, and other vocalizations from individuals of a higher social status to those of a lower social status are much more infrequent than those from an individual of a lower social status to an individual of a higher social status (Laporte & Zuberbühler, 2011; Luef & Pika, 2017). Similar findings appear in human populations as well. When asked about the types of behaviors considered appropriate for respectful treatment of elders, or individuals of higher social status, 17 percent of students claimed that greetings were important. In follow-up interviews, these students further explained that greetings are important in acknowledging the elder's social standing (Sung, Kim, & Torres-Gil, 2010).

As previous research illustrates, individuals in younger generations feel less comfortable engaging in face-to-face interactions than older generations and will avoid uncomfortable in-person interactions whenever possible (Van Volkom et. al., 2014; Gapsiso & Wilson, 2015).

Nevertheless, when younger individuals do engage in face-to-face interactions, social statuses and relationships impact both the type of greeting initiated and the likelihood of a response (Pillet-Shore, 2012). Specifically, individuals specialize and tailor their greetings to distinguish community members of differing social statuses; vocalized greetings are faster and more frequent when an inferior individual interacts with an individual of superior status, and the most common interactions between individuals of differing status are directed from the lower status individual to the higher status individual (Masataka et al., 1986; Luef & Pika, 2017). Moreover, students tend to consider greetings an important element in showing respect to individuals of higher status (Sung et al., 2010). Resultantly, we hypothesized for the present study that students at Washington and Lee would be more likely to use a vocal greeting and engage in the Speaking Tradition when passing adults, individuals of a higher social status, than when passing fellow students, individuals of a relatively equal social status. The hypothesis was observed in interactions between one student and either another student or an adult to see who students were more prone to engage in the Speaking Tradition with. It is important to note that a majority of the observational research on greetings and social status has been conducted with non-human subjects, and we are curious to see if similar patterns present in human populations.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The study included participants from the small liberal arts institution of Washington and Lee University. The sample consisted of individuals in the undergraduate student body with approximate ages from 18 to 22 ( $N = 50$ ). Participants were selected through non-random convenience sampling, as any student that walked by the researchers during times of data collection was included in the study. In order to qualify for participation in the study, the student

must pass another person while walking in the opposite direction; they must be no more than 10 feet from one another and no more than 15 feet from the researcher.

### **Design/Materials**

This study was conducted in three locations on Washington and Lee University's campus where students frequently pass one another: the walkway between Leyburn Library and Elrod Commons, outside of the Science Center, and outside the Marketplace. The predictor variable was the type of interaction that occurred. These interactions were grouped into two levels: student-student or student-adult. The outcome variable was participation in the Speaking Tradition: participation in the Speaking Tradition or no participation in the Speaking Tradition.

We defined a student-student interaction as an opportunity for the Speaking Tradition in which the two individuals passing one another were both students and a student-adult interaction as an opportunity for the Speaking Tradition in which one of the individuals passing was a student and the other was an adult. A student was defined as any singular individual carrying a backpack, wearing casual clothes, such as sweatpants, sweatshirts, or leggings, or wearing any clothing associated with a Greek life organization on campus. An adult was defined as any singular individual carrying a briefcase or purse, wearing a Washington and Lee staff uniform, or having wrinkles or gray hair. If any individual met criteria in both categories, we did not observe them in the study. In other words, we only included individuals in our study if they exclusively met characteristics of one category. We defined adherence to the Speaking Tradition as a verbal initiation of a greeting that was audible to the researcher.

### **Procedure**

We made observations while sitting on benches outside of the three observation sites. Observations were made on three separate days, each at different times throughout the day. In

order to avoid double counting in student-student interactions, we only observed the individual walking on the side of the pathway closest to the researcher, while the other individual only served to provoke a greeting. As there is only one student present in a student-adult interaction, all students in these interactions were observed. Additionally, we did not record students walking in a group of two or more individuals, as they did not meet the definition of a singular student or adult. We set a quota of 25 observations for both student-student and student-adult interactions. Once this quota was reached, we no longer recorded data for that type of interaction. When observing an interaction, we input the type of interaction as either student-student or student-adult and then whether or not the student participated in the Speaking Tradition. Data was recorded in a Google Sheet and was later transferred into a Microsoft Excel file.

### Results

Out of the 50 interactions observed, eight students participated in the Speaking Tradition, while 42 did not, as shown in Table 1. Of the eight students who participated in the Speaking Tradition, four of these students were engaging in a student-student interaction and four of the students were engaging in a student-adult interaction, as shown in Figure 1. We completed a chi-square test of independence to determine the significance of the relationship between the type of interaction and participation in the Speaking Tradition and determined that the relationship was insignificant,  $X^2(1, N = 50) = 1.000, p > 0.05$ . The number of students who participated in the Speaking Tradition did not significantly differ in student-student interactions when compared to student-adult interactions. Overall, the observed results illustrate that there is no significant relationship between the type of interaction and participation in the Speaking Tradition.

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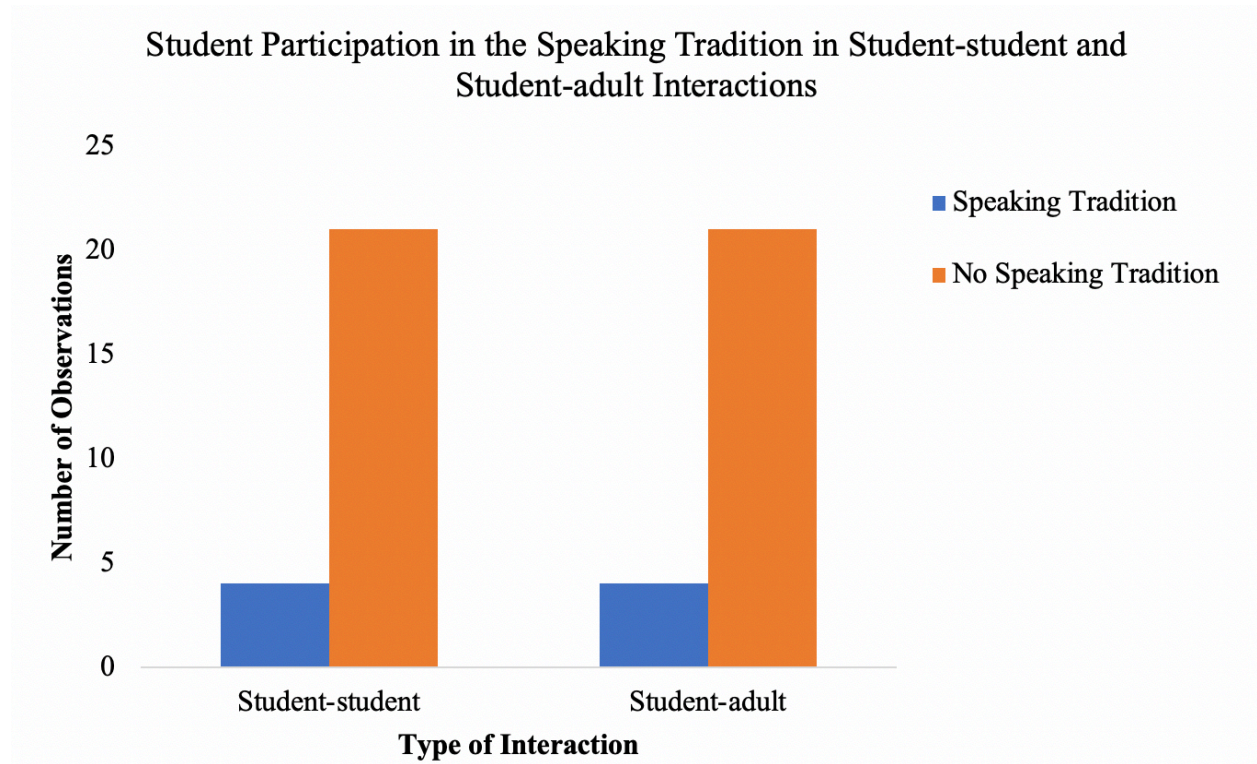
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Table 1

*The Frequency of Speaking Tradition Participation According to the Type of Interaction*

	Speaking Tradition Participation	No Speaking Tradition Participation	Total
Student-student	4	21	25
Student-adult	4	21	25
Total	8	42	50

Note. Student-student refers to interactions between two students, and student-adult refers to interactions between one student and one adult. Student-student,  $n = 25$ , student-adult,  $n = 25$ .



*Figure 1.* The number of Speaking Tradition observations by type of interaction and participation in the tradition.