

When a Thai friend stops by, they may greet you by asking “*Gin khao reu yung?*” In other words, “Have you eaten rice yet?” The speaker isn’t really inquiring whether you’ve had lunch, but the phrase is used to mean “Hello” or “How are you?” In English, we similarly use phrases to greet one another that have other literal meanings, such as “What’s up?” A non-native speaker unfamiliar with the informal greeting might raise their eyes to the sky.

A number of languages use a similar inquiry when greeting others. For instance, in South India, Malayalam speakers ask “*Chorrunto?*” (“Have you eaten rice?”). In Mandarin, “*Chī le ma?*” translates literally to “Have you eaten?” It’s the same in Nepali with “*Khana khannu bhaiyo?*”

Why would so many languages ask whether someone has eaten as a greeting? The history of how greetings develop is different for every language and cultural context. For some, it’s because asking whether someone has eaten, and asking after their well-being, is essentially the same. For other languages, the practice may have developed during times of food scarcity, when

neighbors would inquire about how others were getting along by asking if they had a supply of a staple food. In every culture, there are norms of hospitality that make the exchange of food and drink customary when visiting.

The rituals of hospitality may be the biggest influence in the development of this greeting. Offering food and drink and a place to sit are very common, as are the culturally appropriate ways to accept them. In Western countries, accepting a glass of water when offered is seen as appropriate. In others, the norms of behavior require a respectful interchange of polite insistence and denial. For instance, in Iran, the custom called *taarof* requires a friendly negotiation between a host, who insists on providing food or drink, and a guest, who refuses. The number of times and level of insistence depends on the relationship between the host and guest.

Food is central to welcoming visitors into one’s home. A combination of cultural context and history along with norms of hospitality has brought the question “Have you eaten?” into so many languages as a way to greet others.