

## Address in Some Western European Languages

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### 1. Introduction

This paper reports on an ARC Discovery Project in an early stage of development which examines changes in the address systems of three languages, French, German and Swedish, and the impact of sociopolitical changes and events on these systems in France, Germany, Austria, Sweden and Finland. The features we focus on are pronouns, and first names vs. titles / surnames / first and surnames. Table 1 gives details of the pronoun systems in the three languages, which all have more than one term of address (e.g. *tu* and *vous* in French), often referred to as T and V pronouns. We will also consider contexts where direct address forms are not used, which might be explained in terms of avoidance strategies.

**Table 1. Address pronoun systems in French, German and Swedish**

	French	German	Swedish
<i>Singular</i>			
Less formal (T)	tu	du	du
More formal (V)	vous	Sie	du
			ni
<i>Plural</i>			
Less formal (T)	vous	ihr	ni
More formal (V)	vous	Sie	ni

### 2. Background

Address is an important area of research for intercultural communication, as address rules are rarely adequately described in textbooks or grammars, and the existence of similar deictic dichotomies across languages, even closely related ones, offers no basis to assume a similar set of functions. A choice of address form usually has to occur very early in an encounter, especially since the selection of verb morphology is dependent on this in many languages. As Joseph (1989) points out, address usage encodes the relationship and attitudes of interlocutors perhaps to a greater extent than other aspects of language and is thus more open to cultural variation.

The seminal work on the study of address pronoun systems remains Brown and Gilman (1960) who examined the use of pronouns, primarily in French, German and Italian, in the late 1950s. They suggested a simple binary system involving the two competing semantic parameters of solidarity and power to account for pronoun use. They argued that solidarity is mostly expressed in reciprocal use of either the T or the V pronoun, whilst power is expressed in non-reciprocal use of pronouns between the more and less powerful in

communication. They found relatively stable systems for each of the European languages, but with signs of change in favour of reciprocal T, interpreted by them as a preparedness to extend the solidarity semantic to a growing circle of people.

Despite the deep insights of Brown and Gilman's analysis, its validity today is problematic. First, the type and extent of social and linguistic changes since that time, and their impact on patterns of pronoun use in Europe, could in no way have been predicted. The national cultures of Europe, reassuringly conservative after the shock of World War II, have been radically challenged since the 1960s. Second, Brown and Gilman's consistent attribution of a 'power semantic' to a non-reciprocal use of address pronouns and of a 'solidarity semantic' to a reciprocal use, particularly of the T pronoun, no longer seems to apply. Indeed, much of the subsequent research on address pronoun use in individual languages has pointed to unforeseen complexities involved in pronoun choice.

The thorough investigation of even a small number of languages, such as ours, can constitute a contribution to a pragmatic and/or sociolinguistic typology; particularly so if tested against traditional categories in the research on linguistic politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) elaborated a model of universals of linguistic politeness, inspired by Goffman's work on face (1971). When applied to address behaviour, negative politeness strategies typically involve avoidance and/or the use of formal terms of address, whereas positive politeness strategies are signalled through the use of informal address forms and first names.

However, Brown and Levinson's model has certain limitations. Of relevance to our study, their model of power can be considered rather simplistic. Politeness can be used to negotiate a position of power, and the person who is in the subservient position is not necessarily more polite. In addition, Brown and Levinson regard social distance, relative power, and ranking of interlocutors as the most important elements determining language usage, and they do not address fully the specific characteristics of the speaker, such as gender. Finally, their model is a static one, as it does not allow for interactional negotiations.

Of interest in developing a unified model of address usage are newly developed categories in the research on linguistic expressions of respect (such as Simon 2003). Based on a broader empirical base for each of the analysed languages, Simon's work might provide a clearer picture and possibly even a better theoretical foundation and practical model for the analysis of further languages than an approach that tries to gather data from as many languages as possible but ultimately has to rely on very few individual informants for each of those languages (e.g. Braun 1988).

In what follows, we set out the main working hypotheses of the project, which will run for three years, describe data collection instruments, and give a brief review of the current state of affairs for French, German and Swedish.

### **3. Hypotheses**

The main working hypotheses of the project can be summed up as follows:

- (a) The dichotomy T/V can no longer be understood simply in terms of solidarity vs power. In other words, the power dimension (i.e. asymmetry between interlocutors) is

no longer made salient in address. Rather, T/V can be understood through social distance relations within a theory of politeness. These relations are felt as marked or unmarked by a linguistic community or subcommunity within a given period in the social and linguistic development of that community. Markedness can be viewed as fluid or dynamic, and thus changeable over time.

- (b) Change is characterised by cyclical fluctuations—not linear developments as is claimed by Brown and Gilman (1960). These cyclical fluctuations are often asynchronous between speakers of regional, social and national varieties of a given language.
- (c) Worldwide email communication and the use of English as a lingua franca are leading to an increased use of first names and also of T, or to a growing insecurity about the place of V in the system, and an increase in strategies to avoid V or a decision between the use of either T or V.

#### **4. Research sites and instruments**

We have selected seven locations for data collection:

France: Paris, Montpellier  
Germany: Mannheim, Leipzig  
Austria: Vienna  
Sweden: Göteborg  
Finland: Vaasa.

This will enable us to explore the following areas:

- regional variation between Paris and non-metropolitan/southern France
- national variation between German German and Austrian German and between Swedish Swedish and Finnish Swedish
- the impact of group bilingualism in Finland Swedish, where the two languages in contact (Swedish and Finnish) have different address systems
- variation between Eastern and Western Germany reflecting long term division and membership of political and economic blocs with different communication systems.

Data will be collected using a variety of methods:

- (a) Participant observation carried out by each of the chief investigators on visits to the countries where the language is spoken.
- (b) Focus groups of about 16 people conducted by in-country research assistants—all postgraduate students—at each of the seven research sites. These groups are made up of people classified according to age (18-25, middle-aged, 60+), sex and occupation<sup>1</sup>. The groups meet twice for about two hours each time—at the start of the project to

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<sup>1</sup> Occupation includes several, if not all, of the following categories: professionals, tradespeople, service professions, secondary school teachers, caring professions, clergy, police, army, unemployed, management, artists, university students, representatives of political parties and unions, and so on.

gain input for the project, and at the end to involve the group in the interpretation of the results.

- (c) A questionnaire on address usage, attitudes and perceptions of changes, comprising closed and open-ended questions. The questionnaire will be largely administered as an interview by in-country research assistants who will select as participants 12 members of their social network, including fellow students; for each of the 12 base informants, 5 members of their specific social networks will be interviewed, including family members, fellow students, friends, and neighbours. This gives a total of 72 interviews in each site.
- (d) The establishment and utilisation of dedicated chat groups for each of the languages by the Australian research team to allow speakers to discuss the address issue and to give us both additional address data and further insights into the issue.
- (e) A mail survey conducted by the Australian research team of a sample of 40 public institutions and companies divided into 20 'multinationals', e.g. Nokia, FedEx, Greenpeace, Ikea, and 20 country-specific, e.g. national airlines, national banks, major political parties, national supermarket chains, with equivalents across all five countries, to investigate any policies on address usage.

## 5. French

Although language norms have long been rigorously monitored and regulated by successive French governments, address pronoun usage appears to be more liberal than prescribed norms would suggest, with evidence of substantial change since Brown and Gilman (1960). A study undertaken in 1969 by Maley (1974), for example, showed that the younger generation was newly and substantially more liberal in its use of the familiar/intimate form *tu* than the older generation, confirming the effects of more liberal social attitudes after 1968. However, once this social movement had died down as the 70s wore on, *vous* made a hesitant, and surprising, comeback (Coffen 2002: 235).

The current state of affairs for French can be summed up as follows:

- (a) Greater use of *tu* correlates with the younger age group with some decline over time as people grow older. Evolving choices of address pronoun from the younger to the older age groups can be explained through phrases in the life cycle, and not as a change in progress (cf. studies by Schoch (1978) in Switzerland and Gardner-Chloros (1991) in Alsace, as noted in Peeters 2004). The shift from adolescence and early twenties to so-called adult life, and entry into the workplace, is marked by a shift in the range of social relations that an individual maintains, and consequently a shift in pronoun use towards greater use of *vous*. In addition, the relative ages of interlocutors is an important factor in pronoun choice in French (eg Gardner-Chloros 1991 and Hughson 2001).
- (b) *Tu* is used reciprocally among members of close family and friends. In the late 60s, reciprocal *tu* was the norm among family members and close friends, regardless of age (see Maley 1974). In contemporary French society, this continues to be the case (see e.g. Coffen 2002 and Hughson 2001). In addition, *tu* is the norm for relations between people of equal status and who have known each other for a certain length of time, for

- example, work colleagues (Coffen 2002: 235). This points to the fact that social relations in France have become more informal (Peeters 2004).
- (c) *Vous* remains an important element of the address system. In particular, reciprocal *vous* has an important place, and is still the pronoun of choice in initial encounters between strangers and between people who want to avoid familiarity (Coffen 2002: 237). In addition, although *vous* is now used by people of different classes in all kinds of situations, it still retains vestiges of its association with bourgeois status (Morford 1997: 16-17), and in ideological terms can be considered as ‘conservative’, compared with a more ‘left-wing’ *tu*.
- (d) Rather than ‘an absolute preference for *tu*’, symmetrical use of *tu* or of *vous* is the preferred pattern, with stable asymmetrical use relatively rare (according Morford [1997:14] in her study of social indexicality in French pronominal address among standard French speakers in the Paris metropolitan area). Where asymmetry exists, it is mainly between different generations of a family—for example, bourgeois grandparents might receive *vous* from and use *tu* with their grandchildren—or during phases of uncertainty which can exist in the transitional phrase between *tu* and *vous* (Coffen 2002: 237).
- (e) Context is an important factor determining pronoun use, as Morford (1997: 16) points out. She frames her analysis in terms of social indexicality, that is, the pragmatic functions of address pronouns. She argues that *tu* and *vous* can ‘point’ not only to the relationship between interlocutors but also to the setting. She gives the example of the use of reciprocal *vous* between two lawyers who know each other well and would normally use reciprocal *tu*. However, when they find themselves in court, they acknowledge the official setting by addressing each other as *vous*. Morford’s framework also underlines the importance of speakers’ understanding of ‘who uses what kinds of forms in what particular ways’, in other words, speakers’ awareness of the social meaning of *tu* and *vous*.
- (f) French has a default set of nominal terms for addressing strangers (Monsieur, Madame, Mademoiselle), known as *termes de distance* (Dimachki & Hmed 2002: 10)—the equivalents of which German and Swedish do not possess (Glück & Koch 1998: 8).

## 6. German

Address in German has been characterized by instability and social insecurity. Among the linguistic communities we are studying, the German speakers devote most public discussion to the problem of appropriate address, particularly address pronouns. Their choice is clearly perceived as a socio-cultural phenomenon and has also been researched as such by cultural anthropologists (cf. Sproß 2001).

The reasons for this instability include:

- (a) A residual East German identity which has motivated a slightly different East German system of address.
- (b) The social effects of the student revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s in West Germany and to a lesser extent Austria.

- (c) The development of an autonomous Austrian identity.
- (d) The anxiety many people feel about their human relations and decisions on *du* and *Sie*, sometimes conditioned by anticipatory fears about what might happen if relationships change.
- (e) The specific situation of the German pronoun *Sie*, which is morphologically 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural, but which functions as the V form. From a functional pragmatics viewpoint, its deictic purpose is a re-focussing (para-deictic) towards the listener, even though it contains a "personal deictic residue" of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, distinguishing it from the communicative dyad of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> persons (cf. Rehbein 2001: 11-12; Simon 2003: 191-197).

Regular public opinion polls<sup>2</sup> since 1974 have shown:

- choice of *du* is increasing in most age groups in each survey
- greater choice of *du* correlates with the younger age group, with some decline over time as people grow older
- left-wing political views correlate with early adoption of *du*
- du* is used more freely by males and by those with university education or in apprenticeships
- du* is used more freely in Western than in Eastern Germany.

However, the questions in these polls have been too general to give more than overall tendencies and do not allow us to ascertain variation according to the interlocutor's background.

The student revolt of the late 60s and 70s initiated changes in the use of both *du* and *Sie* and titles. At university, it created a situation in which there were two alternative systems – the traditional one with *Sie* as the reciprocal unmarked pronoun of respect and *du* as the reciprocal marked pronoun of special relationships, still observed by older or more conservative professors, and the new (progressive) one with *du* as the reciprocal unmarked pronoun of solidarity and *Sie* as the reciprocal marked pronoun of social distance, observed by radical students and young staff members (Bayer 1979). There has, however, been a rollback of this development in the academic community since, and a tendency to re-mark the boundaries between teachers and students by reciprocal use of *Sie* (cf. Amendt 1995). This relaxation of the *du* tendency was due to the resentment by some young people of the top-down imposition by professors of a pseudo-egalitarian address rule that did not reflect a hierarchial structure. Overall, such developments have had only a moderate impact on the rest of society.

While the tendency to generalize *du* use has subsided somewhat over the years, the coexistence of a variety of address systems in German remains a cause of insecurity and instability. These alternative systems make the situation of German more complex than the other language systems under study. Except in very formal communication, the general titles such as *Herr* and *Frau* have replaced status-marked ones such as *Herr Professor*, *Frau Doktor*, except among older, status-conscious speakers.

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<sup>2</sup> Opinion polls conducted by the Institut für Demoskopie (Allensbach).

What are the conditions of the solidarity prompting marked *du* address in German today? Kallmeyer (2003) sums them up as a *gemeinsame Lebenswelt*. This ‘common world of experience’ includes working together, and also, we would suggest, having been to school together, being in the same queue at the employment office or in the waiting room of the counselling service or the tenant protection bureau, and so on. Even speaking dialect, dressing in a particular way, and living in a specific suburb can prompt spontaneous reciprocal *du*.

## 7. Swedish

The development of the post-war Swedish address system is characterised by a rapid shift during the 1960s and 1970s from a status conscious, formal and sometimes asymmetrical address usage, to an egalitarian system embracing a universal *du* (T). These changes have led to the least formal and simplest system of the languages investigated.

The reasons for the rapid shift to informal *du* include:

- (a) The lack of a polite, formal pronoun of address accepted by all. Swedish address prior to the general acceptance of *du* was characterised by a lack of a neutral, formal form of address in the singular, such as French *vous* or German *Sie*. The Swedish ‘equivalent’ *ni* has never been commonly accepted as a polite pronoun of address for reciprocal use, and has been perceived as condescending, at least by some speakers. This is explained by the fact that historically titles were used in Sweden, but if the interlocutor lacked a title or the title was not known, he/she would be addressed by *ni* and would have to use a title in return. This led to asymmetrical usage and subsequently *ni* became ‘contaminated’.
- (b) A ‘user-unfriendly’ address system as the only alternative. The lack of a neutral pronoun of address led to a very cumbersome system involving the use of titles and third person singular forms to avoid addressing an interlocutor directly, eg: *Önskas något till kaffet?* (‘Is something desired with the coffee?’); *Vill professor Andersson ha lite mer?* (‘Would Professor Andersson like some more?’). Out of fear of offending somebody by using *ni* and feeling that *du* would be too informal, the only option available was to avoid addressing somebody directly (see e.g. Ahlgren 1978, Wellander 1935, Widmark 1994).
- (c) Egalitarianism on the political agenda. A long standing social democracy pre-dating World War II, with a focus on eliminating class distinctions in social interaction and language use, has promoted a shift towards a less formal and a more egalitarian usage.
- (d) The ‘*du*-reform’. This social change was facilitated by the so-called ‘*du*-reform’ where authorities and large firms conducted language planning by enforcing *du* as the address pronoun among all employees. A recent example of this social engineering includes the Swedish furniture store Ikea which has also promoted universal *du* outside Sweden.

However, the 1980s saw the reappearance of *ni* (Mårtensson 1986) among young people as a formal and polite ‘distancing’ form of address—and in contradiction to Brown and Gilman’s (1960) prediction of permanent shift to informal use. The revival of *ni* may be explained in terms of a reanalysis of the functions of the formal pronoun, with younger

speakers unaware of the negative connotations of *ni* prevalent among middle-aged or older speakers (Norrby 1997). Thus the *ni* of the 1980s could be dubbed a ‘new *ni*’ used differently, and also restricted to or used predominantly in certain contexts such as service encounters. The ‘old’ *ni* came with negative connotations for many speakers, but it is also true that it was used in many more spheres (prior to the rapid changes in the 1960s and 1970s). It is probably fair to say that the reports of the reappearance of *ni* received unexpectedly keen interest in the Swedish media in the 80s and 90s and has spurred an ongoing public debate on address behaviour in Sweden (Ridell 2001).

The current state of affairs for Swedish can be summed up as follows:

- (a) The old system involving the use of titles and very formal address behaviour is completely extinct in contemporary Swedish.
- (b) Universal *du* is possibly not universal any longer, but the new *ni* seems to be very restricted in usage, in terms of the age of the speaker and the addressee as well as the speech situation.
- (c) The choice of address is still problematic in certain contexts, as evidenced by a high frequency of avoidance strategies.
- (d) The situation in Finland Swedish is still somewhat more formal, involving a higher frequency of titles as well as the V-form *ni*. Communication among Finland Swedes is more indirect and formal, reflecting more closely communicative patterns in Finnish than in Swedish Swedish (Saari 1995).

## 8. Conclusion

Though this project is at an early stage, it has enormous potential not only to show how recent sociopolitical events and developments have impacted on the ways in which people address each other in French, German, and Swedish, but also, in part through comparison with research on Italian, Dutch and Portuguese, to provide a new conceptual framework for the study of address. In addition, it will provide insights for inter-cultural communication and second language acquisition as well as the relation between language, cultural values, and sociopolitical change.

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