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Address Forms

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Pronouns

When we speak, we constantly make choices that show how we see our relationship with others. One important choice is how we address people. This section looks at how some languages use different forms of "you," like tu and vous, and how names and titles are used. The way we choose to speak shows how we see our connection with the listener. In many cases, we cannot avoid making these choices because they are part of how we communicate. Different languages have different ways of doing this, and we will explore some of them.

Tu and vous: power and solidarity

Many languages have a distinction between a singular "you" (T) and a formal "you" (V), similar to the French tu and vous. The T form is often seen as informal or familiar, while the V form is considered polite. However, these forms have deeper social meanings. Many languages, including Latin, Russian, Italian, German, and Greek, have a similar system. English also had this distinction in the past with thou and you.

According to Brown and Gilman (1960), the T/V distinction originally reflected singular and plural differences. However, over time, it became a way to show power and respect. In ancient Latin, tu was the only singular form, while vos (plural) was first used to address emperors. This may have happened because, at one point, there were two emperors, one in Rome and one in Constantinople. Since they ruled together, addressing one meant addressing both. Also, an emperor was seen as representing the whole empire, so using vos showed respect. Similarly, emperors sometimes used nos ("we") instead of "I" when speaking, and the use of vos by others matched this pattern.

As time passed, powerful people (such as nobles) received V while using T with those of lower status, such as servants, children, and soldiers. This created a system where T showed dominance, while V showed respect. However, politeness led to symmetrical V usage, where people of the same social level used V with each other. This habit spread to some families, including between parents and children, husbands and wives, and lovers.

Over time, the idea of solidarity (a sense of belonging and shared identity) became more important than power. Mutual T use replaced mutual V in many cases, especially in close relationships. Meanwhile, the asymmetrical T/V use for power declined, with mutual V becoming more common even in formal settings, such as between officers and soldiers. Today, T is often used to show equality, while V remains in formal or hierarchical relationships.

This power and solidarity framework can still be seen in modern times. For example, in a Paris advertising agency, everyone uses tu except when speaking to the owner or the cleaning staff. This shows that T can indicate both closeness and a lower status. Ager (1990) noted that police officers in France use tu when checking the papers of young people or immigrant workers, but not to show friendliness—rather, to assert authority. In contrast, some upper-class people still prefer V even with family members. For instance, former French President Giscard d'Estaing used vous with everyone in his household, including his wife, children, and even dogs. Similarly, the wife of President Chirac addressed her husband as vous, while he used tu with most people.

The use of pronouns also varies by culture. In Bolivia, where many people have indigenous roots, Spanish is widely spoken, but many prefer to express their identity through traditional clothing.

Studies in Brazil show that pronoun use depends on institutional roles. Police officers mainly use pronouns to assert their authority, often showing little patience with crime victims. On the other hand, workers in a feminist crisis center switch pronouns to show solidarity with female victims rather than judging them.

Pronouns and positioning

Norrby and Warren (2012) reviewed studies on how personal pronouns have been used in Europe since the 1960s, focusing on French, German, and Swedish. They argue that two key ideas shape pronoun use: common ground and social distance.

Common ground means focusing on similarities between people.Social distance highlights differences and is influenced by three factors:

Affect (how much you like someone)

Solidarity (how much you feel connected to them)

Familiarity (how well you know them)

People do not simply follow fixed rules when choosing pronouns. Instead, they use them to shape their identity and relationships during conversations.

Keevallik (1999) studied how schoolchildren in Estonia learn to use the T/V distinction (sa/sina vs. te/teie). Many factors influence their choices, such as age, location (city or countryside), formality, and power differences. Sometimes, people avoid using pronouns, but this is not always possible. As a result, pronouns in Estonian are used creatively to define relationships and achieve different effects, such as insulting, criticizing, or nagging.

In colloquial Indonesian, the pronouns kamu and elu can both show either closeness or distance, depending on how they are used.

Naming and Titles

How people address each other varies based on social factors. You might call someone by their title (T), first name (FN), last name (LN), a nickname, or a mix of these. Sometimes, people do not use a name at all.

There are two main ways of addressing others:

Asymmetrical: One person uses a formal title (e.g., Mr. Jones), while the other uses a first name (e.g., John), showing a difference in status or power.

Symmetrical: Both people use the same level of formality, such as Mr. Jones and Mr. Smith or John and Fred.

English allows many variations, such as Dr. Smith, John Smith, Smith, John, Johnnie, Doc, Sir, or Mack. A person can also expect different names in different situations: a doctor might be called Doctor by patients, Dad by his son, John by his brother, Dear by his wife, and Sir by a police officer. Each name has a specific social meaning, and using the wrong one can be surprising.

To better understand naming practices, it helps to look at other cultures. A classic study by Evans-Pritchard (1948) on the Nuer people of Sudan found that every person had a personal (birth) name, which they kept for life. Sons might also be named after their fathers (e.g., "son of [father's name]"). These names could come from nature or important events, such as Reath (drought), Nhial (rain), or Mun (earth). Some children received a second personal name from their maternal grandparents, leading to different names being used by paternal and maternal relatives. Special names were also given to twins or children born after twins.

Among the Nuer, names changed with age and status. As boys grew up, they were addressed by their names, but later, older men were called Gwa (father) by younger men, while younger men were addressed as Gwa by boys. However, children called everyone by their personal names, including elders and parents.

Naming and addressing in English have been studied by Brown and Ford (1961). Their research, based on plays and observations in workplaces, found that:

Using title + last name (TLN) with one person and first name (FN) with another shows inequality in power.

Mutual TLN shows formality and distance.

Mutual FN shows equality and familiarity.

The switch from TLN to FN is usually made by the more powerful person.Other ways of addressing include:

Title alone (T): e.g., Professor or Doctor, which is the most formal and impersonal.

Last name alone (LN): e.g., Smith, which is less formal than a title.

Multiple naming: e.g., switching between Mr. Smith and Fred.

Some titles, like Sir or Madam, are generic and do not include a personal name. Similarly, casual terms like Mate, Buddy, Jack, or Mack function as informal first names in expressions like "Hey, Mack, don't do that."

In public settings, naming practices can show the speaker's attitude. Studies by Rendle-Short (2007) and Clayman (2010) found that in news interviews, how people are addressed reflects their relationship and stance toward each other, especially in political or heated discussions.

Fluidity and change in address terms

How Address Terms Change Based on Social Factors?

The way people address each other can change depending on social distance, gender, age, and relationships. A good example of this is found in the novels of Mehmet Murat Somer, a Turkish writer. His books feature a main character who is a male transvestite (referred to as "she"). The dialogue in these stories shows how people shift between different identities based on the situation.

In the English translations, both English and Turkish address terms are used to reflect different relationships. For example: The transvestites at her nightclub call her abla, which means “older sister” in Turkish. This term shows both respect and familiarity.The male bouncer, however, calls her boss, which highlights a power difference and sounds more masculine.Sometimes, she reacts negatively when someone addresses her using the informal sen instead of the respectful size. She and her friends dislike address terms that make them feel old, such as when she is called "uncle" by a young girl:

> ‘The door was opened by a young girl . . . “Come in, uncle” she said. I wasn’t about to let that one word spoil my mood. “Uncle” indeed!

Gender Identity and Address Terms

The character’s gender identity is also fluid, as people address her differently in different situations:

In her job as a hacker, some call her "my son" or abi ("big brother"), treating her as male.

Among her close friends and nightclub staff, she is always addressed with female terms.

Addressing Family Members and Step-Families

Naming and addressing can become complicated in families, especially in stepfamilies and in-laws. Many people struggle with what to call their mother- or father-in-law:

Calling them Mr. Smith may feel too formal.

Using first names may feel too casual.

Calling them Mom or Dad might seem forced or unnatural.

A study by Kellas et al. (2008) identified four ways people address and refer to stepfamily members:

1. Isolators – Use formal terms like “stepfather” to keep emotional distance.

2. Gatekeepers – Use familiar references (e.g., "father" instead of "stepfather") but maintain distance when addressing them (e.g., using first names).

3. Validators – Want to build close relationships, so they use family terms like "Mom" or "Dad".

4. Jugglers – Also use family terms, but feel guilty or confused, trying to balance relationships without hurting their biological parents.

Chinese comrades

A society undergoing social transformation often reflects such changes in its language, particularly if it has or had a complex system of address. Modern China serves as an example. Research conducted in the 1980s (Scotton and Wanjin 1983; Fang and Heng 1983) examined this phenomenon, and subsequent observations have noted further developments.

During the 1980s, the Communist Party of China encouraged the widespread use of tóngzhì (‘comrade’) as a replacement for terms that indicated ownership or social hierarchy, such as lǎobǎn (‘proprietor’) and honorifics like xiān·sheng (‘mister’). The goal was to foster equality by promoting an address form that eliminated distinctions based on social or economic status and emphasized political unity. However, titles did not completely disappear. Professional designations such as lǎoshī (‘teacher’) and dài-fu (‘doctor’) remained in use, while skilled workers preferred to be called shī-fu (‘master’).

tóngzhì was employed in various contexts, but its usage varied depending on the situation. A superior might address a subordinate with tóngzhì before issuing a reprimand, maintaining emotional and social distance. Conversely, a subordinate might use the term with a superior to reinforce shared interests. It was also used among equals to express solidarity.

Despite the Party's efforts, many Chinese still favored traditional titles such as zhǔrèn (‘director’) or zhǎng (‘chief’). Additionally, the use of lǎo (‘old’) and xiǎo (‘little’) combined with surnames persisted, serving as polite forms of address that could also indicate social distinctions. For example, an inferior could address a superior as Lǎo + Last Name or Last Name + Title, with regional preferences influencing which form was used. In large cities like Beijing and Shanghai, the former was more common, whereas smaller towns and less egalitarian environments preferred the latter. Another respectful form of address for elderly officials and scholars was Last Name + Lǎo, such as Wáng Lǎo.

These shifts in address terms were significant consequences of the Revolution. Researchers noted that China's address system had undergone profound and unique transformations, unlike those seen in most other countries. Later, Ju (1991) observed additional changes: shī-fu had become less prestigious due to its widespread use for individuals who were not originally entitled to the title, while xiānsheng had shed its former negative connotations, especially among younger generations. He concluded that as China's political and cultural landscape continued to evolve, further changes in address terms were inevitable.

References

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