A cross-linguistic comparison of address pronoun use in four European languages: Intralingual and interlingual dimensions

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Abstract

As part of a major ongoing project, we consider and compare contemporary patterns of address pronoun use in four major European languages – French, German, Italian and Swedish. We are specifically interested in two major aspects: intralingual behaviour, that is, within the same language community, and interlingual dimensions of address pronoun use. With respect to the former, we summarize our key findings to date. We then give consideration in a more preliminary fashion to issues and evidence relevant to the latter.

Keywords: address pronouns, European integration, French, German, intralingual, interlingual, Italian, Swedish

1. Introduction

While the use of address pronouns in languages around the world has been of interest to linguists for some time, relatively little attention has been paid to direct cross-linguistic comparisons. In recent times there has been a burgeoning interest in patterns of address in European languages (e.g. Hickey & Stewart 2005 includes examples from 14 languages including those discussed here). Research has tended to focus on individual languages, often with a very specific interest (e.g. Brunet 2003-4 who considered the historical rise of *Lei* as a pronoun of address in Italian). At the same time there is relatively little evidence of research on address pronoun use in Europe specifically of a comparative nature. Exceptions include Anokhina (2003-4), comparing Russian and Romance languages; Gardner-Chloros (2003-4), comparing French and English; and a major cross-linguistic study of French, Italian and Spanish based at the University of Helsinki (see e.g. Havu 2005, 2006 on the French part of the project).

In this article we consider and compare contemporary patterns of address pronoun use in four major European languages – French, German, Italian and Swedish. These languages have traditionally differed in the nature of their address pronoun systems. As such they provide a useful point of comparison of how different systems in a relatively small geographical area may interact, change or vary over time – in this case since the beginning of European integration in the 1950s. We focus in this study on two issues:

- General patterns of address that we have observed in our data for each of these four languages with respect to *intralingual* communication, i.e. within the same language community. Amongst other things, we are also interested in the extent to which speakers of these languages have shifted to more reciprocal and more informal pronoun use, as predicted by Brown & Gilman (1960);

- Address pronoun use in these languages in *interlingual* communication in a European context of increasing social and economic integration, based on preliminary observations.

2. Overview of the address pronoun systems of the four languages

Table 1 shows the pronouns available to speakers of each of the four languages considered. They are listed in terms of number (singular vs. plural) and formality (less formal vs. more formal forms; also referred to as T- and V-forms since Brown & Gilman's 1960 study).

Table 1 Address pronoun systems in French, German, Italian and Swedish

	French	**German**	**Italian**	**Swedish**
Singular				
Less formal (T)	*tu*	*du*	*tu*	*du*
More formal (V)	*vous*	*Sie*	*Lei*	*du*
			voi	*ni*
Plural				
Less formal (T)	*vous*	*ihr*	*voi*	*ni*
More formal (V)	*vous*	*Sie*	*loro*	*ni*
			voi	

Each language has a more or less different system available: in French the same pronoun (*vous*) is used as V-form in the singular and in all plural forms. In German, on the other hand, the V-forms in singular and plural are identical (*Sie*), whereas the T-forms are different: *Du* for singular and *Ihr* for plural. In Swedish one pronoun (*ni*) is used in all plural forms and another (*du*) as T-form singular but both pronouns can be used as V-form singular. Italian, finally, is the most complex of the languages considered here: while the T-forms singular (*du*) and plural (*voi*) are clearly separated and straightforward, there are two options for each of the V-forms (*Lei* or more rarely *voi* in singular, *loro* or *voi* in plural). The four languages, then, have different pronouns serving as T- and V-forms, but the main focus of our interest is in the distinct patterns of *usage* of these pronouns, as well as certain cross-linguistic similarities.

3.   Context, data and methodology

This article reports and builds on data and results from a larger study conducted at the University of Melbourne and largely funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC).[1] The principal aim of the ARC-funded part of the project was to explore variation and change in the address systems of French, German and Swedish, that is, to establish the current situation with respect to national and/or regional and social variation in address usage for each language (see also Clyne, Kretzenbacher, Norrby & Warren 2004). Italian was included as a separate but related unfunded sub-project. Our overall focus for all four languages was on address within an intralingual context, that is, within the same language community.
Data for the larger study were collected in seven locations: Paris and Toulouse in France, Leipzig and Mannheim in Germany (East and West), Vienna in Austria, Gothenburg in Sweden and Vaasa in Finland, to account for regional and national variation. A variety of data collection methods were used which complemented each other, including focus groups, interviews, questionnaires, online discussion and participant observation (see Clyne, Kretzenbacher, Norrby & Schüpbach 2006 for a more detailed account of the methodology). Data for Italian were collected amongst native speaker adults in Siena, Milan and Melbourne, all of whom were raised and educated in Italy, using detailed questionnaires as well as oral and written feedback (see Parkinson & Hajek 2004 for some results).

4.   Patterns of address pronoun usage in the four languages

In the following, we summarize our findings with regard to the contemporary use, patterns of change and internal variation from an intralingual perspective for each of the four languages.

4.1.   French

It is clear from our data that in French there are situations in which *tu* (T) is the default form of address – with family and close friends – and situations in which *vous* is the default form – with strangers and in particular hierarchical work relationships (see Warren 2006). Overall, our results suggest that use of *vous* and *tu* can be characterized as follows:

- *tu* is equated with notions of proximity, connection, affect, and perceived commonalities, marking a low degree of social distance;

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[1]   'Address in some Western European Countries: A study of language and social change', ARC Discovery Project 2003-2005/6.

- *vous* is equated with notions of maintaining barriers, hierarchy, respect, and neutrality, marking a certain degree of social distance.

Within this general frame, individual preferences and negotiation can inform choice of address pronoun in different ways, with individual variation more common outside the work domain. At work, the use of *tu* and *vous* is largely conditioned by workplace hierarchies. A general distinction is made between work colleagues on the one hand, with whom one usually uses reciprocal *tu*, and superiors on the other: depending on the workplace environment, reciprocal *tu* or *vous* can be used between employees and their superiors, but in general, reciprocal *vous* is used with the head of an institution or others in important hierarchical positions. *Vous* is also the pronoun of choice between employees and their customers and clients. Outside the workplace, address pronoun choice is more complex. Although there seem to be relatively few cases where people have difficulty in choosing an address pronoun, a Paris participant explained that in fact the dilemma is in deciding when to shift from *vous* to *tu*:

(1)   *[L]e 'tu' est plus compliqué que le 'vous'. Le 'vous' c'est d'emblée. Tu connais pas, tu rencontres quelqu'un, c'est automatiquement, c'est le 'vous'. C'est après, savoir quand le 'vous' devient le 'tu'. C'est là.*
      '[T]u is more complicated than *vous*. *Vous* is from the outset. You don't know someone, you meet them, it's automatically *vous*. It's afterwards, knowing when *vous* becomes *tu*. That's where [it's difficult].'

As far as recent developments in the address pronoun system are concerned, changes in social attitudes after the student revolt of 1968, for example, were reflected in the younger generation's greater use of the familiar form *tu* (see e.g. Maley 1974). However, *vous* made a re-appearance during the 1970s (Coffen 2002: 235), as social hierarchies reasserted themselves. More recently, *tu* has become more widespread with growing informality of social relationships in France (Peeters 2004), but *vous* remains a key element of the address system.

Age is also an important factor in choice of address, both absolute age and relative age of speakers (see e.g. Gardner-Chloros 1991). The continuing importance of both *vous* and *tu* is confirmed to a certain extent by one of the younger participants in the Paris focus group who stated that it is wrong to assume that young people do not use *vous* any more. She maintained that while *tu* is used more often among young people, *vous* is always preferred as soon as hierarchy and respect are involved. Other participants, however, stated that *tu* is becoming more frequent. A Toulouse participant mentioned that *tu* and *vous* are less codified today and that *tu* is encroaching on the public sphere. The question of whether greater use of *tu* is limited to the younger generation, an instance of simple age grading with young people using less *tu* and more *vous* as they move into the workplace and adult life (see e.g. Peeters 2004, Havu 2005), or, conversely, whether this is evidence of a change in progress, will require further investigation as new data become available for analysis.

4.2. German

Our data show that there are two distinct situations in German where either of the address pronouns is the default form: with family and close friends *du* is the default form of address; and with strangers and authorities, in hierarchical relationships in general and in formal contexts *Sie* is the default form.

A third situation exists where the two systems coexist or overlap in an ambiguous way (Clyne, Kretzenbacher, Norrby & Schüpbach 2006, Kretzenbacher, Clyne & Schüpbach 2006). In this situation, the choice between the two conflicting systems can be made according to the preference of the individual, the preference of a network and, most importantly, the perceptions of 'social distance', based on factors such as relative age, emotional closeness and perceived commonalities between interlocutors (Kallmeyer 2003). We note the pertinent observation of one of our interviewees:

(2)   *Du zeigt, dass man gleich alt ist, oder dass man sich gut kennt, oder dass man auf einer persönlichen Ebene ist.*
        '*Du* shows that you are the same age or you know each other well or you have close relations with each other.' (Leipzig, female university administrator, 28)

In the third situation of system coexistence and overlap, various sets of conflicting rules may be applied. Insecurity as to which rule is the overriding one in any given situation produces a high embarrassment potential which is tolerated because the distinction between *du* and *Sie* is overwhelmingly seen as useful and worth maintaining.

Overall, while the systems in German and in French are similar, there seems to be a higher degree of variation and of insecurity in German. This is also apparent in an ongoing public discussion about address in German-speaking countries. In fact this public interest, even public anxiety regarding address is very characteristic of German (see e.g. front-page story "*Wollen wir uns alle duzen?*" ['Do we all want to call one another *du*?'], *Bild-Zeitung* 17 July 2006).

Recent changes in the German address system are somewhat similar to French, which is not surprising given the parallel developments associated with the student revolt of 1968 in France and Germany. The student movement initiated a radical change to *du* at universities immediately post-1968 (Bayer 1979). This reciprocal *du* was maintained among students but rolled back between students and academics during the 1970s.

Nevertheless, this aspect of the student movement had a lasting influence on address among younger people in general. Our data show an increasing use of reciprocal *du* and, as several participants observed, the age limit for 'automatic' *du* is steadily moving upwards. This slow shift is corroborated by regular opinion polls in Germany which show increasing *du*-use in most age groups in each survey. Except for the latest survey (Allensbach 2003), the greatest preference for *du* correlates with the youngest age group, with some decline over time as people grow older. However, this decline seems to be much slower than for French.

In terms of intralingual variation, our data draw attention to two dimensions. Firstly, within Germany, there is variation between the East (former German Democratic Republic [GDR]) and the West (Federal Republic of Germany) as a 'left over' from the two German states, and our data indicate a slightly more conservative address usage in the workplace in Leipzig (East) than in Mannheim (West). This may have to do with the fact that there was no 1968 student movement in the former GDR. It may also be attributed to the longstanding distaste for the imposition of *du,* common within the then Communist Party of the GDR.

The other dimension concerns variation between Germany and Austria. Interestingly, we found that the T-form as well as titles are more prevalent in Austria (particularly in the workplace). While this seems paradoxical, we view this as a carryover from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The high frequency of reciprocal *du*-use in both the military officers' corps and state bureaucracy has been a characteristic of Austrian German since that time (Besch 1998: 98-100) and seems to have spread from there into the wider community. Similarly, the frequent use of titles has continued since then as a way of identifying people's place in society without necessarily imposing social distance.

4.3. Italian

As already observed for French and German, in Italian there are relatively clearcut T- and V-situations. *Tu* prevails with close family and friends and the V-forms in more formal situations. As previously mentioned, Italian has a more complex address system than the other languages (see table 1). While *Lei* (singular) and *loro* (plural) are today considered the prescriptive V-forms, *voi* (singular) is declining but use of *voi* (plural) as formal address pronoun is clearly increasing. The second point that distinguishes Italian from the other languages is the relatively higher incidence of non-reciprocal T/V-use (see below).

There is also regional variation in the use of address pronouns within Italy. While the north tends towards a binary singular system of *tu / Lei*, in some parts of Southern Italy singular *voi* (alongside or to the exclusion of *Lei*) is quite common. Yet elsewhere in Southern Italy there is traditional use of *tu* in all domains which leads to utterances such as *Signora, cosa vuoi?* ('Madam, what do you [T] want?'), unacceptable in other parts of Italy.

In terms of recent changes, overall there is a general homogenisation towards a binary system, of *tu* and *Lei* in the singular, even though *voi*, as we have noted, still persists. In addition, there is some shift to increased use of reciprocal *tu*, similar to that reported for French and German. Yet a surprisingly high degree of non-reciprocal use persists, conditioned primarily by age: younger adults in a dyad often send V but receive T in return (Parkinson & Hajek 2004). The strength of this phenomenon in contemporary Italian contradicts Brown & Gilman's (1960) claims made almost 50 years ago that "for French, German, and Italian […] [t]he rule is that usage is reciprocal" and "the reciprocal solidarity semantic has grown with social mobility and equalitarian ideology" (1960: 264), as well as their prediction that address was moving very fast in the direction of reciprocal use (1960: 276). Although it is true that reciprocal address (whether informal *tu - tu* or formal *Lei – Lei*) is most common, the shift to *tu* has occurred relatively slowly and has not so far eliminated the noticeable amount of non-reciprocal address. Why the latter seems to have persisted to the extent that it has in Italian as opposed to other languages in our sample remains unclear.

4.4. Swedish

Of the four languages, Swedish has the most egalitarian use of address pronouns. *Du*, the T-form, is the default form of address and *ni*, the V-form, is used in very limited circumstances (Norrby 2006). Of the 31 situations presented in our questionnaire, only four yielded significant V responses (among them writing an email to a stranger and addressing a considerably older stranger in the street). Age seems to favour *ni* to some extent but the age limit is very high (between 60 and 75) and associated in particular with perceived frailty: a young waiter in Gothenburg said that he might use *ni* for 'an old man with a walking stick'.

Given that *du* is the default pronoun in most encounters, it can no longer be used to express any specific intimacy or closeness between interlocutors – therefore perceived intimacy is today signalled by the use of first names. As a consequence, the increased use of first names is frequently discussed:

(3)   *Det är fruktansvärt obehagligt med förnamnstilltal… förnamnet är privat. Vem är du? Vad har du för rätt att känna till eller använda mitt förnamn? Så reagerar jag när vilt främmande människor använder mitt förnamn.*
        'It is terribly unpleasant this address with first names ... your first name is private. Who are you? What right do you have to know or use my first name? That is the way I react

when complete strangers use my first name' (Gothenburg, female cashier at McDonald's, 20).

The formal pronoun *ni* has never been commonly accepted as a neutral, polite pronoun of address for reciprocal use, simply signalling social distance, and has often been perceived as condescending. Historically, this is related to a complicated use of titles and corresponding avoidance of address pronouns. In the 1960s and 1970s informal *du* began to spread rapidly in Sweden. This can be attributed partly to this lack of a formal pronoun accepted by all, and partly to the social democratic hegemony in post-war Sweden and its promotion of the cradle-to-grave welfare state. This social change was facilitated by the so-called '*du*-reform' where authorities and large companies conducted language planning by enforcing *du* as the address pronoun among all employees. A democratic, no-nonsense form of address based on solidarity resonated with the egalitarian ideals of the late 1960s in Sweden.

Since the 1980s *ni* has appeared again among young people as a formal and polite form of address. It is mainly used in service encounters to older customers, its users obviously unaware of the negative connotations *ni* has for the older age groups who still recall its pre-1960s use.

The situation in Finland-Swedish is somewhat different. Negative attitudes towards *ni* are not as strong as in Sweden and since the 1950s *ni* has been perceived as a distancing but polite and neutral form of address in Finland-Swedish within a formal hierarchal situation. *Ni* is used more frequently than in Sweden, among other things the age limit for its use is lower, but overall *du* is increasing. In Sweden on the other hand, *du* is used almost universally – one participant termed Sweden 'a one address pronoun society'.

4.5. *Summary*

The current address systems in the four languages can be summarized as follows: In French, individual preferences can influence address pronoun choice in distinct ways within and outside the workplace, with individual variation more common outside the work domain; German shows a degree of variation leading to greater insecurity and conflicting norms; the system for Italian is more complex and continues to display a surprising amount of age-conditioned non-reciprocal pronoun use; and Swedish is the most egalitarian of the four languages considered.

While the four languages show over time similar patterns of increasing reciprocal T-use, the rate and degree of change has been very different. Swedish has shown the most radical change, with a large-scale shift to generalized T-use, albeit with evident national variation between Sweden-Swedish and more conservative Finland-Swedish. The other three languages have proven more resistant. Moreover, change across the four languages has not always been linear. There is evidence of much variation and of a counter-cyclical return to more formal pronoun use, e.g. as French speakers become older, the return in the 1970s to wider V-use in French and German universities, and the rise since the 1980s of age-conditioned use of *ni* in service encounters in Sweden-Swedish.

5. The interlingual dimension of address pronoun use in Western Europe today

During the course of data collection for our research on *intralingual* address, we were also able to gather some information about *interlingual* address, i.e. what happens when speakers use their language (L1) or the language of their interlocutor (L2) to communicate across the four languages in our sample, and also in English. Analysis of patterns of interlingual address has not been an objective of our project to this point. However, in the contexts of (1) variation between and within the four languages; (2) the potential effect of social and economic integration and contact with Europe on language use, and the increasing use of English as a *lingua franca*; and (3) the lack of any wide-ranging research to date, it is clearly an important topic worthy of investigation as the next stage of our project. At this early point, we can only make preliminary observations, as well as report some of the data currently available to us that highlight the need for further study.

The extent of difference across and within the four languages is perhaps surprising given the strong process of local, regional and national socioeconomic integration that has been under way in Europe for at least 50 years. Each of the countries that served as fieldsites is a member of the European Union. While European integration might be expected to favour language contact and convergence of patterns of address, we note that it also has the potential to create communication conflict and misunderstanding when different systems meet.

In the following a number of examples of interlingual misunderstandings are discussed, mostly drawn from our data.

(4)   A male teacher from Leipzig (40) recalls being thrown out of a café in Cannes along the French Riviera some years ago when addressing a young waitress with *tu* (T), *da für mich das du eigentlich selbstverständlich ist* ('because that's normal for me').

This example demonstrates how the transfer of norms from one language to another (in this case from German to French) can lead to conflict. For this particular participant, *reciprocal* T would have been 'his norm' in German, as it was a *young* waitress he was addressing. In French and in this particular situation, the waitress and her boss perceived it as intentionally non-reciprocal and therefore condescending, as in a T-form used with servants.

(5)   In a preface to the German edition of the novel *Brandvägg* by Swedish author Henning Mankell, the translator, Wolfgang Butt, comments explicitly on his decision to translate the Swedish *du* (T) as German *Sie* (V) unless it is a *du* of friendship or collegiality, *auch wenn damit ein Stück schwedischer Authentizität des Textes verlorengeht* ('even though the text loses some of its Swedish authenticity').

This example illustrates the obvious fact that the use of address pronouns needs to be considered in translation. In this case the translator actually makes his choices explicit and notes the problem that it creates for cultural accuracy. Some participants also mentioned potential difficulties in translations, particularly in films (subtitled or dubbed), e.g. a female student from Vienna (23) said:

(6)   *ich wundere mich immer, wie das bei Synchronisierungen von Filmen ist, wie man das macht.*
       'I always wonder how dubbing works, how it's done.'

European integration has resulted in a massive expansion of cross-border commerce and opportunities for address issues to arise in the multinational business sector. The following two examples illustrate the impact of the imposition of Swedish address norms by Swedish companies on other languages in other European countries.

(7)   IKEA, the international furniture retailer, founded in Sweden, requires that their employees use the T-form in their stores worldwide, i.e. the current Swedish norms are transferred to other contexts in which the corresponding distribution of T and V can be significantly different.

(8)   A German textile retailer was recently taken over by H&M, a Swedish multinational, that instituted the informal address form *du* among the German staff. After a couple of years a long-time employee, insisting on the formal *Sie,* sued the company. He lost his case on appeal, with the court ruling that it was not a violation of personal freedom to be addressed by *du* because he had accepted the practice for some time before suing. (Sakowski, n.d.)

Our participants were asked their thoughts regarding a policy of enforced use of T. In France, the majority considered such an imposition as partially or wholly negative. One Paris interviewee explained that enforcing *tu* was as if

(9)   *l'on utilisait la langue pour essayer d'effacer les inégalités sociales, des inégalités qui sont par ailleurs réelles.*
       'language was being used to erase social inequalities, inequalities which are in other respects real.'

In Germany and Austria this view was shared to some extent (although some were in favour of generalized T), but the major objection was to the *imposition* of the T-form rather than to the address form itself, e.g.:

(10) *Ich finde, das kann man nicht von oben vorgeben, ... das muss jeder für sich selbst entscheiden, ... das finde ich nicht in Ordnung.*
       'I don't think that can be prescribed from above ... everyone has to decide that for themselves […] I don't think that's OK.' (Mannheim, male journalist, 32)

Contact with English (as a one address pronoun language) and Anglo-American business culture was mentioned repeatedly by our informants as a major influence for increased T-use, particularly in the workplace, as seen in this example taken from an information technology worker in Paris:

(11) *On tutoie tout le monde quoi, nos supérieurs. Tout le monde se tutoie. C'est un peu à l'américaine quoi.*
'We use *tu* with everyone, our superiors. Everyone uses *tu*. It's a bit like the American way of doing things.'

Finally, we report on a recent incident, widely publicized in Great Britain, since it highlights the extent to which English-speakers are sensitive, rightly or wrongly, to address norms in other European languages. During an official visit to Paris in 2004, British Prime Minister Tony Blair addressed the French President Jacques Chirac with the intimate French address pronoun *tu,* instead of the more formal *vous.* This perceived faux-pas caused a sensation in the British press, with the punning headlines "Et tu, Jacques" (*The Daily Telegraph* 10 May 2004) and "Tony and Jacques' chatshow is just *tu* good to be true" (*The Times* 10 May 2004). *The Daily Telegraph* (10 May 2004) described Blair's use of *tu* as "particularly cringe-making", with Blair "trying to be matey and getting it wrong". What the British media failed to notice, however, was that Jacques Chirac, unlike many of his predecessors, is known to be in favour of *tu* and that Blair and Chirac had previously negotiated the use of the T-form through the process of birthday gift-giving Through all of this, the French press remained silent, since they did not see a problem. As such, this episode is an excellent example of interlingual misunderstanding where the supposed victim of offence suffers none at all.

6. Conclusion

Our cross-linguistic comparative approach to the use of address pronouns in Europe today has focussed on four languages (French, German, Italian and Swedish). We have reported in the first part on general patterns for each of these in *intralingual* communication. The generalized shift to reciprocal *du* so evident in Sweden-Swedish (and to a lesser extent in Finland-Swedish) is consistent with predictions made decades ago by Brown and Gilman (1960). While in the other three languages there is some evidence of a gradual spread of reciprocal T-use, shift has not occurred to the degree nor necessarily in the linear order foreseen by Brown and Gilman. Change should be seen as more cyclical or non-linear, as has even occurred in Sweden with the limited (re-)appearance of age-conditioned *ni* In French, German and Italian the T-V distinction remains strong. At the same time, while similarities across French, German and Italian can be found, differences across them but also within them persist and need to be properly understood.

The differences across the four systems are also interesting with respect to interlingual communication: what happens when these systems meet? Although European integration might favour linguistic convergence alongside social and economic convergence, it also has the potential to create communication misunderstanding and conflict, especially in an area as basic as the address, as many of our examples have shown. How is the spread of English as the increasingly preferred European *lingua franca* impacting on interlingual patterns of address and introductions? All of these are important questions worthy of detailed investigation.

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