

Introduction to Linguistics (CL1.102)

Summer 2021, IIIT Hyderabad

Assignment 3

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Summary

The article opens with an introduction and a generic description of the pronoun systems of European languages – English has only one pronoun, while French, German, Italian and Spanish all have two. A general overview of the article follows, and a summary of related works.

There are five sections, of which the first three talk about the correlation between the pronoun and the relationship between the speaker and addressee and the last two about the correlation between the pronoun and the speaker alone.

Section 1: The General Semantic Evolution of T and V

T refers to the generic “informal” or “intimate” pronoun, and V to the generic “formal” or “distant” pronoun. The authors make use of this terminology to avoid going into the phonetics of each language’s pronouns. In this section, the development of these two forms in Europe is traced.

In older forms of Latin, *tu* was the only singular 2nd-person pronoun, and *vos* was the plural form. The authors make two conjectures as to how the latter came to be a respectful singular pronoun:

- it was used to address the emperor, as there were actually two emperors who formed a single administrative entity.
- plurality is an “old and ubiquitous metaphor for power”.

It was later extended to other power figures, but the distinction in usage was not consistent for a long time.

1. The Power Semantic

This is the dimension of pronoun usage relating to the relative “power” (control over behaviour) of the speaker and the addressee. It is a non-reciprocal, asymmetric dimension – invariably, one of the two says T and receives V.

The use of V here entered Europe as a form of address for the principal power of the state, gradually moving “downwards”.

Several examples are given of an asymmetric superior/inferior relationship – nobility/peasantry, master of the house/servants, parents/children, etc. According to the authors, the extension from a head of state to the head of the microcosm of the state (the family) is a natural one, and a reversal of

this very process is exemplified in Freud's classification of rulers, generals and priests as "father figures".

2. The Solidarity Semantic

This is the dimension of "intimacy" that affects the use of pronouns. It is a symmetric dimension, dictated (say the authors) by like-mindedness (and not merely frequent contact). However, the authors conflict with this definition in their examples (which talk about family relationships). Using "the reciprocal V" became a mark of elegance.

While this dimension earlier only applied when there was no marked "superior" between the conversants, it later began to be a factor in *all* conversations. There then developed a conflict in situations when a "superior" was solidary and when an "inferior" was not – in such situations, the dimension of solidarity has begun to dominate more in recent times.

However, the right to initiate the reciprocal pronoun (the authors hypothesise) still belongs to the perceived "superior" (power-wise).

Section 2: Contemporary Differences among French, Italian and German

This section goes into some detail of the usage of pronouns in these three languages. The authors' informants were mostly male upper-middle-class students from abroad studying in America.

Here, a distinction is made between "ascribed" and "acquired" solidarity – the former referring to solidarity by ties of blood or upbringing, which in a sense one has no control over; and the latter to solidarity by ties of friendship or a common fate.

With respect to this distinction, the authors find that the German T (du) is more strongly associated with ascribed solidarity than the French T (tu) – it is more likely to be used among family members. The French T, on the other hand, is strongly associated with camaraderie and acquired solidarity: being fellow foreign students and so forth.

The Italian T (tu) is roughly similar to the German T in ascribed solidarity, but more frequently used than the French T in situations involving acquired solidarity.

In light of these observations, the authors conjecture that the probability of the usage of T is directly proportional to the number of "solidarity attributes" shared by the conversants.

Section 3: Semantics, Social Structure and Ideology

In this section, the authors describe the connection of pronouns to the social hierarchy.

Throughout the section, a spectrum of societies becomes visible, with static

societies on one extreme, and egalitarian or open societies on the other. Examples – both historical and contemporaneous – of both types of societies and their uses of pronouns show a marked correlation.

The non-reciprocal power semantic of pronouns is associated with a relatively static society – typically one following a feudal or manorial system. In the past, this was also linked to the Church’s teachings that a man ought not to wish to rise above his status in life. The reciprocal solidarity semantic came to prominence with social mobility and egalitarian ideologies.

- After the French revolution, a decree was passed banning the use of V among citizens – everyone having to use the same pronoun was a manifestation of *fraternité* or brotherhood, and it had to be T as V was considered an ugly relic of the same feudal system that the Revolution opposed. Eventually, however, the use of V regained popularity. The authors make special mention that a modern Frenchman would consider using T for a waiter outrageous – because (they guess) this is a reflection of a power differential that the “modern man’s ideology requires him to deny”.
- The example of the Quakers is brought up to no special effect – they follow an idiosyncratic tradition of continuing use of “thou” and “thee”, but they are a minority in society as a whole.
- The authors consider South African society as more static, consisting as it does of an added dimension – that of race. While the whites have their own usages of T and V, the coloureds and blacks address them as “Meneer” and “Baas” respectively. According to the authors, it is as if the social distances inspired by these differences transcend the expressive power of the existing pronouns.
- The fact that Gujarati- and Hindi-speaking societies use V for a husband, an elder brother and his wife reaffirms the authors’ belief that Indian society is more feudal and static than Western ones. They claim that a “young and progressive” Indian would use T for all these relationships.

Next, the authors make a guess regarding the shift in the dominant dimension dictating pronoun usage – from power to solidarity.

At one point, the dimension of solidarity came into play only between power equals, and the usage was solely dictated by the power semantic in case there was a perceived “superior”. This equilibrium did not last, the authors hypothesize, at least partially because of the human mind’s aversion to “contingencies” in such decisions, and partially because of the development of more “open” or egalitarian societies.

It is also connected, the authors say, to people’s distaste for a “face-to-face expression of differential power”. Other expressions of superiority (*i.e.*, non-reciprocal forms of address, or even body language) are more acceptable. The authors ascribe this to the “linguistic compulsion” associated with the former – it is not easy to avoid using a pronoun, and if using a pronoun is inextricably

tied to an expression of deference, then this is what becomes unavoidable. Other forms of address, on the other hand, are not grammatically enforced, either as pronouns or as verb forms.

The authors go on to give a reason why pronominal coding of a difference in status is less congenial to an open or fluid society – a neutral pronoun is a sort of “waiting room” for subordinates who are suddenly elevated to the status of equals, for them to address their former superiors until they can get used to treating them otherwise.

Section 4: Group Style with the Pronouns of Address

This section studies the correlation between pronoun usage and personal characteristics – or, more specifically, ideologies.

Eysenck’s Social Attitude Inventory was used to quantify the “radicalism” of a person’s ideology, and another metric was made use of to factor the tendency of a person to use the T pronoun. The latter was verified to be a fairly good scale using Guttman’s Scalogram Analysis.

A marked correspondence was noticed in the results – an increased tendency to use T was associated with a higher score of radicalism on the Inventory. The question of causation versus correlation now arises – the authors consider both possibilities:

- It could be that a person’s use (or the avoidance thereof) of T is dictated simply by their upbringing and their feeling in a particular situation. Their preference or distaste for it in various circumstances could be simply a “bundle of unrelated habits” – unrelated even to their ideology.
- It is possible, however, that the two phenomena are connected at a deeper level. Radicalism consists of the abolition of all barriers and advancement towards a more level, non-hierarchical society. It is strongly associated with solidarity with the human race as a whole – a solidarity transcending nationality, race and class. It is easy to see the association between an increased use of the pronoun of solidarity and intimacy with such tendencies.

Section 5: The Pronouns of Address as Expressions of Transient Attitudes

This section draws a contrast with the previous one, which considered the correlation between pronoun usage and fundamental – almost congenial – characteristics of people. We now consider the relation pronoun usage has with a fleeting, temporary mood of the speaker.

When a speaker breaks the usual pronoun pattern – uses T where they would usually use V, or vice versa – it is a form of expression for two kinds of meanings, corresponding to the two factors behind the normal use of the pronoun:

1. Breaking the dimension of power shows that the speaker temporarily considers the rank of the addressee as different. It is an elevation or a deprecation of the addressee in the esteem of the speaker.

The authors make special mention of Jean Racine, who made great use of the expressive power of such deviations along the power semantic – he “reserved the expressive pronoun as some composers save the cymbals”. His characters adhere strictly to one form of address, except in the climax scene of the play, where the practice is broken to great dramatic effect. The greater the social distance between the conversants, the more “shocking” or “outrageous” the sudden change is. It is a reflection of a greater passion and feeling.

The authors further claim that the “T of contempt” is more common in England than on the continent, borne out (according to them) by the fact that a dedicated verbal form is seen for just this act. “To thou someone” is to insultingly or deprecatingly use the T form for them.

2. Breaking the dimension of solidarity, by contrast, is a denial or an affirmation of intimacy – or, as the case may be, an expression of sympathy or estrangement.

An example is cited from Shakespeare’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, evidencing the latter use. Freud’s “striking” amoeba analogy is mentioned here – the use or avoidance of the T form expresses an “extension or retraction of libidinal pseudopodia”.

The T form once extended, however, is almost never retracted as “it would mean a complete withdrawal of esteem”.

Such deviations, although by nature transient and temporary, do carry information about the character of the speaker – that they would consider making such a change, even in highly emotional circumstances, is a part of their character.

The authors conclude the article by noticing that such expressive shifts in usage are on the decline, and they offer a tentative explanation – Europeans may have seen that excluded races or persons tend to become targets of aggression, and may wish to persuade themselves that “the solidarity ethic once extended will not be withdrawn, that there is security in the mutual T”.