

# T/V Reform in Europe: a Corpus Study

Emma Rafkin  
Georgetown University  
epr41@georgetown.edu

December 2024

## 1 Introduction

Many European languages have honorific pronominal systems. While this used to exist in English with the forms of *thou/thee* and *ye/you* (thou being informal, ye being formal), a shift towards a more egalitarian form of address narrowed the second person pronoun to just the formal *you* [1]. Other European languages—including the German and French from which English so heavily derives—maintain an pronominal honorific system. This paper examines European languages with 2<sup>nd</sup> person honorific systems, often denoted as “T/V” systems after the French *tu* (informal) and *vous* (formal). The use of honorific pronouns can carry different semantic meanings that are culture-specific. Some languages have strict boundaries of when the formal or informal pronouns should be used, while others are more flexible. The social connotations of pronominal use are so ingrained in the language that some languages have a word to describe the act of officially switching to use the informal pronoun—for example *Duzbrüderschaft* (the reciprocal *du*-brotherhood) in German or *tutear* (to address someone informally using “tú”) in Spanish. Sometimes the speakers of a language do not ascribe the same meanings to the honorific system. When there is more than one system at play in a language, this can lead to confusion for speakers, as they do not always know the polite or proper term to use for a given situation [2]. Due to this confusion, it has been shown that the use of these honorific systems can undergo a shift over time, with one system overtaking another [2, 3].

There is a widely accepted claim that a general shift in European languages leading to reciprocal informal pronominal uses (one expects to receive the same informal pronoun that they used to refer to their interlocutor) mirrors a societal shift towards valuing equality [4, 5]. This paper explores this politically motivated shift in pronominal honorific systems using a corpus study, comparing German, Swedish, and Spanish usage of T/V forms.

## 2 Background

In this paper, I compare 3 languages with T/V forms: German, Swedish, and Spanish. Table 1 displays the 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns for each of these languages.

|         | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Sg. Informal | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Sg. Formal | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Pl. Informal | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Pl. Formal |
|---------|------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| German  | Du                           | Sie                        | Ihr                          | Sie                        |
| Swedish | Du                           | Ni                         | Ni                           | Ni                         |
| Spanish | Tú                           | Usted                      | Vosotros                     | Ustedes                    |

Table 1: 2<sup>nd</sup> person formal and informal pronouns for the languages being evaluated in this paper.

The choice of when to use the formal and informal versions vary depending on the socio-pragmatics of the language. Additionally, the meaning of breaking an expected usage differ across languages and situations. For example, using the informal pronoun can either be seen as building a solidarity bond or it can be seen as being rude or diminishing to the interlocutor [2, 5].

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a radical shift in Swedish where *du* became the default term of address, even when addressing elderly populations [3]. Before this shift, it was seen as polite to address strangers or people of a lower social status using the formal *ni*. A “Social-Democratic ideology” in Swedish culture saw a shift to the opposite, defaulting to “du” for everyone to signal a widespread social comradery [5]. In German, there were two pronominal honorific systems described by Delisle, one in which *sie* is the default pronoun and *du* is only used for children and people close to the speaker for which they have already agreed to use the informal pronoun. The other system uses *du* to also include people that are in an in-group with the speaker. Delisle observes and predicts that the use of the second pronominal system was becoming increasingly popular starting with the “left-liberal and progressive attitudes of the student movement during the late sixties” [2]. She concluded that the use of *du* as an in-group signifier would become more normalized, but it would not overtake the use of *sie* as had happened in Sweden.

In contrast to these two languages, Spanish has a very complex method of choosing which pronoun to use in a given situation, taking into account concepts such as age, social status, and even physical surroundings. The manner by which people switch back and forth between using the different pronouns “scarcely comparable with other European patterns” [6]. However, in Spain, the informal pronoun is more widely used, likely due to many social movements throughout the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century which favored “brotherly informality” [6].

This concept of political pressures changing the default pronoun to the informal form is interesting as it contrasts what happened in English [1]. This paper uses a corpus study to explore change in T/V usage in these languages. The first experiment compares German to Swedish to detect whether Delisle’s prediction that the German “du” followed the pattern of the Swedish “du”. In the discussion, I compare German and Swedish T/V pronouns to Spanish T/V pronouns to assess whether the similar sociopolitical factors drove normalizing the use of the informal pronoun.

### 3 Corpus Study Methods and Results

This paper compares “du” and “ni” counts in Swedish over time to “du/ihr” and “sie” counts in German over time. To test the prevalence of the acceptability of the informal form, the corpora used are political speech and parliamentary corpora. Should the informal pronoun be a widely acceptable form to use as a default, it should increase even in this extremely formal environment. The German corpus is a set of 2,048 speeches from 1987-2017 made by the President (*Bundespräsident*), President of the Bundestag (*Bundestagspräsident*), Chancellor (*Bundeskanzler*) and

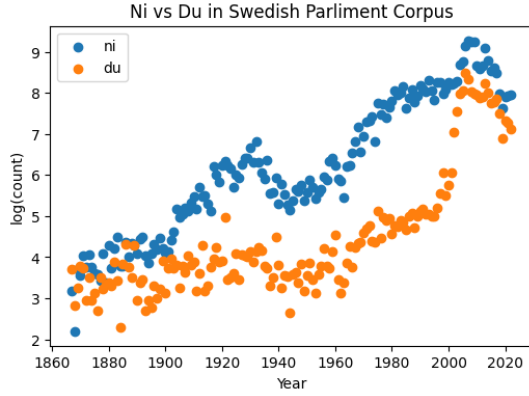


Figure 1: Swedish corpus log of the counts.

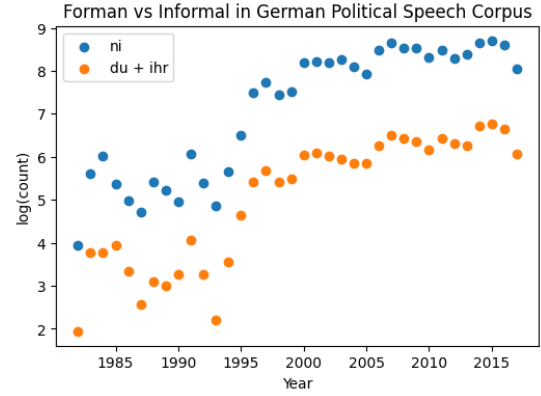


Figure 2: German corpus log of the counts.

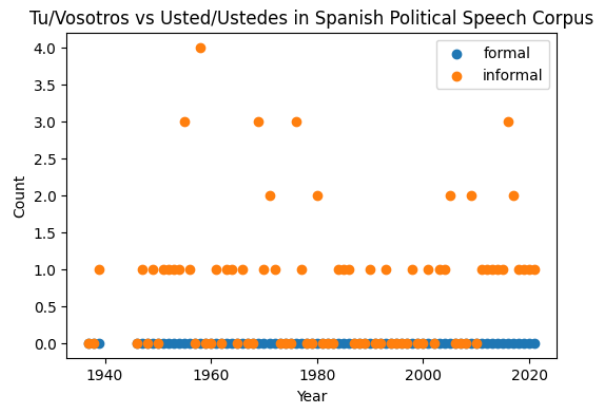


Figure 3: Spanish corpus raw counts

corresponding state ministers/secretaries, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs (*Bundesminister des Auswärtigen*) [7, 8]. The Swedish corpus contains 17,935 parliamentary speeches from 1870-2023 [9]. These corpora are then compared to a corpus of 77 political Spanish Christmas speeches from 1937-2019 [10]. For Spanish, the formal and informal pronoun counts were aggregated together. Each of the texts were tokenized and cleaned before analysis, taking into account diacritics when necessary.

Results for the Swedish and German corpora can be found in Figures 1 and 2. It should be noted that because *ni* is also the informal 2<sup>nd</sup> plural pronoun, the *ni* counts might be falsely inflated. The formal and informal counts in both German and Swedish clearly display logarithmic behavior, therefore the logarithmic graphs more clearly demonstrate where spikes occurred. One interesting result from this corpus study is that the growth in informal pronominal usage happened a bit later than described in the literature (late 1990's and early 2000's for both Swedish and German). This late spike proves the earlier assumption that the *du*-reform will only appear in this formal environment once it was widely accepted in society. These two graphs confirm Delisle's predictions that *du*-reform happened in Germany too.

These graphs stand in contrast to the Spanish results in Figure 3, in which only the *vosotros* form had any hits in this corpus. No clear pattern can be seen in the Spanish data, unlike the logarithmic behavior of the other two corpora. Based on Hickey's analysis, this is likely because the corpus does not extend far enough into the past to observe a shift in pronominal systems, however the result is clear that the polite Spanish default is the informal pronoun due prevalence of the *vosotros* form over all others.

## 4 Discussion

The results of the corpus study demonstrate that German and Swedish did go through a similar T/V-reform and that all languages have developed to accept a default use of the informal pronoun. While all display a growing (or steady) usage of the informal 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun, these counts do not explain the reason behind this reform. In this section, I aim to show that it is due to a societal emphasis on social-democratic ideals of equality. For the German and Swedish corpora I look at examples pre- and post- *du* reform<sup>1</sup>.

If it is the case that *du*-reform is liberally motivated, it would have first appeared in the most liberal communities. We can see that this is the case from this 1941 speech in the Swedish corpus. This excerpt was spoken by a member of the Communist party while discussing growing antisemitic and anti-communist behavior in Sweden and accusing parliamentary members not in his political party of inaction:

“ark försett med en organisationsstämpel, »antijudiska förbundet» [...] slutar med orden: »martin luther har sagt: var *du* ser en äkta jude kan *du* med gott samvete och tillförsikt säga. [...] *ni* socialdemokrater, som skola förbjuda fascisterna, vilka partier ämna *ni* förbjuda?”

“sheet bearing an organizational stamp, ‘Anti-Jewish League’ [...] ends with the words: “Martin Luther said: Where you see a true Jew, you can say with a clear conscience and confidence. [...] you social democrats, who are going to ban the fascists, which parties do you intend to ban?”

While reading a quote—a neutral action as there is no recipient of the pronoun but rather a hypothetical—the speaker defaults to the *du* form. However, while addressing his fellow parliamentarian, but notably not someone in his social group, he uses the polite out-group term of *ni*. This is a clear example of how the *du*-reform was happening in liberal communities before it became mainstream. The informal pronoun denotes camaraderie between himself and the people of the parliament to whom the speaker is appealing. In 2006, well after the Swedish *du*-reform, even people who are arguing and are not in the same group use *du* with each other:

“*Herr Talman!* berit högman, det var intressant att höra hur snabbt *du* gick från kvinnors arbetsmarknad till byggnadsarbetares.”

“Mr. Speaker! Berit Högman, it was interesting to hear how quickly you went from the women’s labor market to the construction workers’ market.”

In this quote, there is still an argument, and the speaker is still using formality (as seen with the use of the title *herr*), but *du* is the pronoun that is used. This shows that it is no longer acceptable or polite use *ni* because it would imply that the interlocutor is not a part of the in-group in the parliament.

Similarly, in 1982, before the German *du*-reform, when there was an argument the formal pronoun is used:

“Vor acht Wochen, in der Debatte über die Regierungserklärung, haben *Sie* bestritten, daß wir zu irgendeiner Übereinkunft in diesem Punkt fähig seien.”

“Eight weeks ago, in the debate on the government statement, you denied that we were capable of any agreement on this point”

---

<sup>1</sup>For German and Swedish analyses I used Google Translate to obtain the English translations. For Spanish I used my L2 understanding of the language.

After the German *du*-reform, in 2001, we can see default *du* being used and particularly in a liberal setting:

“Sondern handeln im Sinne des John F. Kennedy Leitspruchs ‘Frage nicht, was dein Land für dich tun kann. Sondern was *du* für dein Land tun kannst’”

“Instead, act in the spirit of John F. Kennedy’s motto: ‘Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.’”

Again, in a quote with no present entity that the pronoun is referring to, *du* is the default. The use of *du* with this particular J.F.K. quote clearly denotes a casual liberal brotherhood as the speaker is asking everyone to shoulder the burdens of their country equally. Therefore not only is *du* the default, but as is in-group signaling. For both the German and Swedish corpora, this in/out group signaling is part-and-parcel with the reason behind the *du*-reform. By using *du* to signal comradery and given a social leaning towards equality, it is only polite to make a general switch to defaulting to *du*.

From this data it is clear that German and Swedish underwent similar reforms in their T/V usage. However these two languages are both Germanic. The question remains whether Spanish— a romance language that did not undergo a drastic pronominal system reform in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century—uses the informal 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun in the same liberally-driven manner. The Spanish corpus only contains political Christmas addresses, so there are no examples of an actual person being addressed when the pronouns are used. Therefore we can assume that *vosotros* is the default pronominal form in Spain as it was the only one that was used out of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns. Additionally, as can be seen in this quote from the 1939 speech, the 1<sup>st</sup> plural (*nosotros*) form is often used as well:

“*Vosotros* conocéis cómo es la España que *recibimos* [1<sup>st</sup> pl conjugation]: con los grupos en lucha, con sus burgos tristes y sus viviendas míseras, sus funcionarios hambrientos y sus obreros sin trabajo [...]”

“You all know what the Spain that we received was like: with fighting groups, with its sad bouroughs and its miserable houses, its hungry civil servants and men without jobs [...]”

The context of this quote implies that there is no impoliteness attached to the informal meaning. Additionally, the politician’s use of the *nosotros* in conjunction with the *vosotros* forms is a demonstration of in-grouping—the speaker is putting themselves and the listeners on the same level. The informality in Spanish is what is denoting the sense of equality, as it was for Swedish and German. Although the corpus was not big enough to see the shift towards using *vosotros*, Spanish scholars have pointed to similar equality-driven social movements in the 1930’s which caused this change [6]. It appears that the same forces behind the *du*-reform in Sweden and Germany caused the informal 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun to be the default in Spain and lead to the same result: reciprocal informal pronominal usage.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper quantitatively demonstrated the similarities in German and Swedish *du*-reform. Additionally, the discussion showed that this cross-lingual shift towards the informal pronoun was motivated by a liberal political shift that emphasized equality. While other languages, like English, shifted towards a more egalitarian reciprocal form of address earlier in history, it appears that the unique pressure of 20<sup>th</sup> century European politics drove a reform in T/V

languages towards reciprocal informal pronoun usage. In the future, it would be interesting to look at a multilingual European corpus (e.g. EuroParl [11] but it would have to be augmented with date stamping) and do this for all European languages that exhibit T/V pronouns. In an ideal world, in/out group labels would also be added to the dataset so as to quantitatively examine this hypothesis more thoroughly.

## References

- [1] ALBERT GILMAN and ROGER BROWN. Who says “tu” to whom. *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 15(3):169–174, 1958.
- [2] Helga H. Delisle. Intimacy, solidarity and distance: The pronouns of address in german. *Die Unterrichtspraxis / Teaching German*, 19(1):4, 1986.
- [3] CORNELIA ILIE. *Politeness in Sweden: Parliamentary Forms of Address*, page 174–188. Multilingual Matters, Clevedon; Buffalo, 2005.
- [4] Luke Fleming. Dispensing with europe: A comparative linguistic anthropology of honorific pronouns. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 33(1):25–50, 2023.
- [5] Christina Bratt Paulston. Language universals and socio-cultural implications in deviant usage: Personal questions in swedish. 29:1–15, 1975.
- [6] Leo Hickey. *Politeness in Spain: Thanks But No ‘Thanks’*, page 317–330. Multilingual Matters, Clevedon; Buffalo, 2005.
- [7] Adrien Barbaresi. A corpus of german political speeches from the 21st century. In *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC 2018)*, page 792–797. European Language Resources Association (ELRA), 2018.
- [8] Adrien Barbaresi. German political speeches corpus. June 2019.
- [9] Väinö Aleksis Yrjänäinen, Fredrik Mohammadi Norén, Robert Borges, Johan Jarlbrink, Lotta Åberg Brorsson, Anders P. Olsson, Pelle Snickars, and Måns Magnusson. The swedish parliament corpus 1867 – 2022. In Nicoletta Calzolari, Min-Yen Kan, Veronique Hoste, Alessandro Lenci, Sakriani Sakti, and Nianwen Xue, editors, *Proceedings of the 2024 Joint International Conference on Computational Linguistics, Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC-COLING 2024)*, page 16100–16112, Torino, Italia, May 2024. ELRA and ICCL.
- [10] Elena Álvarez-Mellado. A corpus of Spanish political speeches from 1937 to 2019. In *Proceedings of The 12th Language Resources and Evaluation Conference*, pages 928–932, Marseille, France, May 2020. European Language Resources Association.
- [11] Philipp Koehn. Europarl: A parallel corpus for statistical machine translation. In *Proceedings of Machine Translation Summit X: Papers*, pages 79–86, Phuket, Thailand, September 13-15 2005.