

T/V Reform in Europe: a Corpus Study

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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 2nd 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].

For each of the languages that experienced this shift there is an individual claim that switching to a reciprocal informal pronominal system (where one expects to receive the same informal pronoun that they used to refer to their interlocutor) mirrored a societal shift towards valuing equality [4, 5, 6]. Addressing everyone using the informal pronoun evokes a sense of brotherhood and comradery. While there are many reasons as to why such a shift might occur, this paper explores the idea that the languages that shifted in the late 20th century experienced the same shift for the same sociopolitical reasons. This hypothesis is explored 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 2nd person pronouns for each of these languages.

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

Table 1: 2nd 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 20th 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 observed and predicted 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.

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 20th 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 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, its prevalence 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 corresponding state ministers/secretaries, and the Minister for

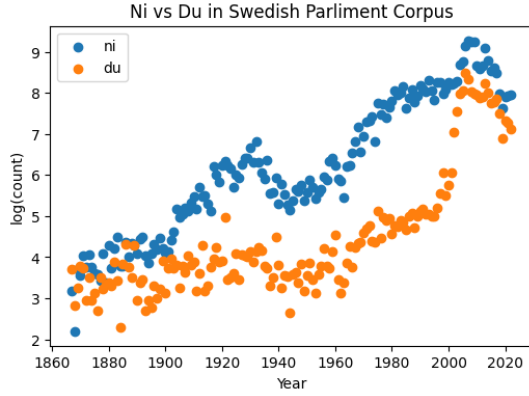


Figure 1: Log of frequency counts for T/V pronouns in the Swedish Parliamentary corpus

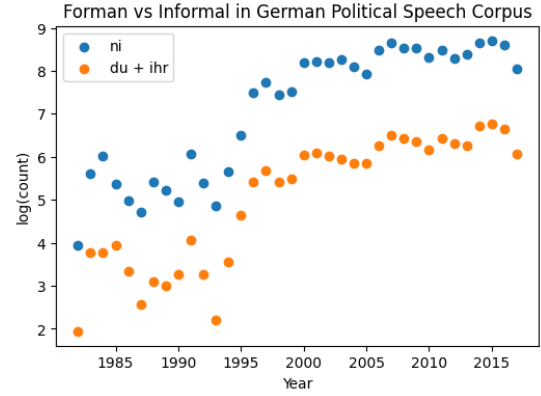


Figure 2: Log of frequency counts for T/V pronouns in the German political speech corpus

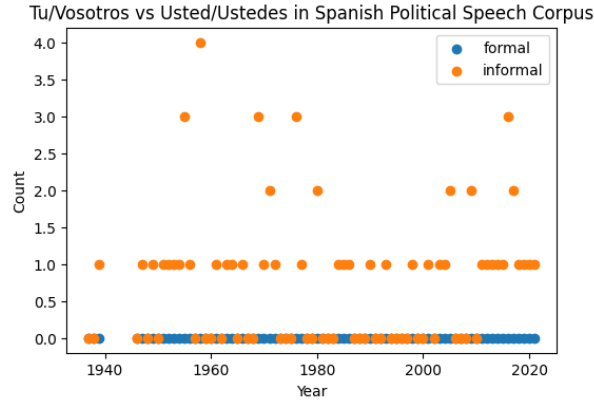


Figure 3: Raw T/V counts in the Spanish Christmas speech corpus

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 singular and plural 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 2nd 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 axes 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 in a way that matched Sweden's *du*-reform.

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 three languages have developed to accept a default use of the informal pronoun. While all display a growing (or steady) usage of the informal 2nd 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 equality¹.

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 to offend—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.”

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

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

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 appears to be part-and-parcel with the reasoning 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, so their similarities do not make a large claim about European languages. The question remains whether Spanish— a romance language that did not undergo a drastic pronominal system reform in the late 20th century—uses the informal 2nd 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 2nd person pronouns. Additionally, as can be seen in this quote from the 1939 speech, the 1st plural (*nosotros*) form is often used as well:

“*Vosotros* conocéis cómo es la España que *recibimos* [1st 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 2nd person pronoun to be the default in Spain and lead to the same result: reciprocal informal pronominal usage. It is specifically interesting that the informal pronoun is the one that became the default, and it appears to be due to a shared societal emphasis on comradery.

5 Conclusion

This paper quantitatively demonstrated the similarities in German and Swedish *du*-reform. Additionally, the discussion explored whether 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 20th century European politics may have driven a reform in T/V languages towards reciprocal informal pronoun usage. There are many reasons why a society might change the leading pronominal system. Therefore 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) to explore whether this happened in all European languages that exhibit T/V pronouns or whether there were other social factors at play that maintained different honorific systems. In an ideal world, in/out group labels would also be added to the dataset so as to quantitatively examine this hypothesis more thoroughly.

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