Analyzing Pronoun Usage
A Project in Linguistics

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UG -1

CLD

IIIT - Hyderabad

Introduction to Linguistics - 2

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Contents

1 Introduction

Pronouns are an integral part of communication in our daily lives. They help us refer to variety of things without having to continually refer to it by its proper name. Since it's usage is very common, we have a lot of variance and uncertainty around what pronouns one must use at any given set of circumstances since they have the ability to convey respect or camaraderie. I have thus interviewed 16 people, and analyzed their responses to see whether any patterns exist in the usage of pronouns, and what those could imply. Of these 16 people, 9 were females, while 7 were males, and 15 of the interviewees were UG-1s, while a singular interviewee was from UG-2. Attached is a list of the interviewees and their responses for reference (so that one can verify that all my respondents and their responses are legitimate).

1. 2024115013 - Aarnav

2. 2024101136 - Abdul

3. 2023113025 - Ananya

4. 2024102034 - Chandralekhya

5. 2024102073 - Gauri

6. 2024101123 - Kaushik

7. 2024113023 - Neharika

8. 2024112007 - Saikiran

9. 2024111035 - Samarth

10. 2024102071 - Sanshray

11. 2024101071 - Shreem

12. 2024101146 - Srinivas

13. 2024112018 - Sudeepti

14. 2024101134 - Vaishnavi

15. 2024113021 - Veeksha

16. 2024117008 - Veena

Figure 2: Results of the interviews - 1

Roll No	Name	Gender	Language	Father	Mother	Grandparents	Siblings	Extended Family	Requesting from Father	Requesting from Mother	From GP
2024115013	Aarnav	M	Konkani	Informal	Informal	Informal	Informal	Informal	Informal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative
2024101136	Abdul	M	Urdu	Formal	Formal	Formal	Informal	Formal	Formal Imperative	Formal Imperative	Formal Imperative
2023113025	Ananya	F	Telugu	Informal	Informal	Informal	Informal	Dependent on closeness	Informal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative
2024102034	Chandralekhya	F	Telugu	Informal	Informal	N/A	Informal	Formal	Informal Imperative	Informal Imperative	N/A
2024102073	Gauri	F	Malayalam	Formal	Formal	Formal	Informal	Formal	Formal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative
2024101123	Kaushik	M	Telugu	Informal	Informal	Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative
2024113023	Neharika	F	Tamil	Informal	Informal	Informal	Informal	Formal	Informal Imperative	Informal Imperative	Formal Imperative
2024112007	Saikiran	M	Tamil	Informal	Informal	Informal	Informal	Formal	Informal Imperative	Informal Imperative	Informal Imperative
2024111035	Samarth	M	Kannada	Informal	Informal	Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative
2024102071	Sanshray	M	Malayalam	Informal	Informal	Informal	Informal	Informal	Informal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative
2024101071	Shreem	F	Hindi	Informal	Formal	Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal Imperative	Formal Imperative	Formal Imperative
2024112018	Sudeepti	F	Telugu	Formal	Formal	Formal	Informal	Formal	Formal Interrogative	Informal Imperative	Patriarchal
2024101134	Vaishnavi	F	Telugu	Informal	Informal	Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative
2024113021	Veeksha	F	Telugu	Informal	Informal	Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal Imperative	Informal Imperative	Formal Interrogative
2024117008	Veena	F	Malayalam	Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal	Informal	Informal Interrogative	Informal Imperative	Formal Interrogative
		F = 9		Formal = 5	Formal = 3	Formal = 11	Formal = 0	Formal = 11	Imperative = 6	Imperative = 8	Imperative = 4
		M = 7		Informal = 11	Informal = 13	Informal = 5	Informal = 16	Informal = 3	Interrogative = 10	Interrogative = 8	Interrogative = 10
								Dependent = 2			Patriarchal = 1

Figure 2: Results of the interviews - 1

Roll No	Name	Gender	Language	From siblings	Hostess	Requesting from friends	Shopkeepers	Random Younger	Random Same Age	Random Older	Male Workers	Female Wokers
2024115013	Aarnav	M	Konkani	Informal Imperative	Formal	Depends on proximity and Sol	Formal Imperative	Dependent	Dependent	Formal Interrogative	None	None
2024101136	Abdul	M	Urdu	Informal Imperative	Formal	Depends on proximity and Sol	Informal Interrogative	Informal Imperative	Formal Imperative	Formal Imperative	Bhaiya/Uncle	Didi/Aunty
2023113025	Ananya	F	Telugu	Informal Interrogative	Informal	Depends on proximity	Formal Imperative	Informal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative	Formal Imperative	None	None
2024102034	Chandralekhya	F	Telugu	Informal Imperative	Informal	Depends on proximity	Formal Interrogative	Informal Imperative	Informal Interrogative	Formal Imperative	None	None
2024102073	Gauri	F	Malayalam	Formal Imperative	Formal	Depends on proximity and Sol	Formal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative	Cheta	Chechi
2024101123	Kaushik	M	Telugu	Informal Interrogative	Formal	Depends on proximity	Formal Interrogative	Informal Imperative	Formal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative	Anna/Uncle	Akka/Aunty
2024113023	Neharika	F	Tamil	Informal Imperative	Formal	Depends on proximity	Formal Interrogative	Informal Imperative	Formal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative	Anna	Akka
2024112007	Saikiran	M	Tamil	Informal Imperative	Informal	Depends on proximity and Sol	Formal Imperative	Informal Imperative	Formal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative	Anna	Aunty
2024111035	Samarth	M	Kannada	Informal Imperative	Informal	Interrogative	Formal Imperative	Informal Imperative	Formal Imperative	Formal Imperative	Anna/Uncle	Aunty
2024102071	Sanshray	M	Malayalam	Informal Imperative	Informal	Interrogative	Formal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative	Cheta	Chechi
2024101071	Shreem	F	Hindi	Informal Imperative	Formal	Depends on proximity and Sol	Formal Imperative	Formal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative	Bhaiya/Uncle	Didi/Aunty
2024101146	Srinivas	M	Telugu	Informal Imperative	Formal	Interrogative	Formal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative	Anna/Uncle	Akka/Aunty
2024112018	Sudeepti	F	Telugu	Informal Imperative	Informal	Depends on proximity and Sol	Formal Imperative	Informal Imperative	Informal Imperative	Formal Interrogative	None	None
2024101134	Vaishnavi	F	Telugu	Informal Interrogative	Informal	Imperative	Formal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative	Informal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative	Anna	Akka/Aunty
2024113021	Veeksha	F	Telugu	Informal Imperative	Informal	Depends on proximity	Formal Imperative	Informal Imperative	Formal Imperative	Formal Interrogative	Anna	Aunty
2024117008	Veena	F	Malayalam	Informal Imperative	Formal	Depends on proximity	Formal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative	Formal Interrogative	Cheta	Chechi
		F = 9		Imperative = 13	Formal = 8	Imperative = 1	Imperative = 3	Imperative = 10	Imperative = 5	Imperative = 3	<elder_brother> = 7	<elder_sister> = 4
		M = 7		Interrogative = 3	Informal = 8	Interrogative = 3	Interrogative = 12	Interrogative = 5	Interrogative = 13	Age dependent = 5	Aunty = 3
						Depends on Proximity = 6		Dependent = 1	Dependent = 1		None = 4	Dependent = 5
						Depends on Proximity and Sol = 6						None = 4

Figure 3: Results of the interviews - 2

My dataset is slightly skewed, with all of my interviewees being people of my generation. Clubbed with this is the fact that most of my respondents are speakers of Dravidian languages, and a large chunk of those being speakers of Telugu. Together, this means that while these figures cannot be generalized for a larger population, they should closely represent the trends present in South India.

When I began on this project, I did it with the sole aim of collecting and analyzing the ways in which my peers would refer to the people around them, and peg that against what I would use in the same scenarios. Thus, I chose my dataset so as to find respondents with backgrounds most similar to mine. Also, I tried to interview at least 20 people for my report, but I had to stop at 17 due to a lack of time. But regardless, I would say that 17 respondents, while grossly insufficient in most cases, is much better than (approx.) 10 respondents (unlike what some of my classmates would have us believe). Finally, I would also argue that the usage of pie charts in my report is not incorrect, as it is a neater and more effective alternative to either having to refer to my list of responses at every section, or attaching bar graphs in the stead of the pie charts.

The dataset was compiled from the responses of the participants, which involved some processing of data, but all of this was done with inputs from the participants themselves. Also, since most of my data was collected a priori to being informed that we were required to collect the 3rd person data, I lack that in most cases, except the familial perspective, but that too is not reflected on the response sheet or the pie charts since these were made before being intimated of this fact.

I had taken 3 frames of reference in total, the family sphere, the society of friends and the situation where they would meet perfect strangers. I then proceeded to split the family sphere into two categories so as to analyse them more effectively. I also clubbed the case of having to deal with shopkeepers along with the society of friends, since I was able to notice that the terms used to refer to the host(ess) straddled the middle ground between close chums and people providing services like shopkeepers.

Finally, I'd like to express my sincere thanks to all those who were interviewed, especially those who helped me prepare the framework for the rest of the interviews. This would not have been possible if not for the cooperation of my friends, and their impeccable patience while I tried multiple permutations and combinations of the ideas I had in my mind on them.

2 How do people refer to their family members?:

(a) Terms used for Father

(b) Terms used for Mother
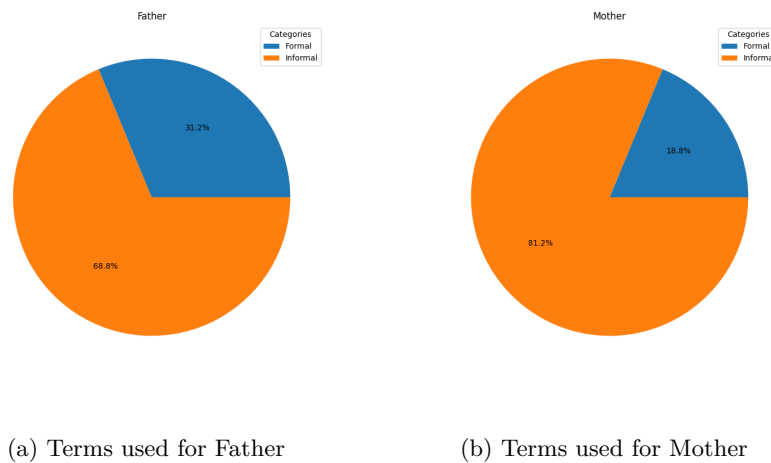
As can be inferred from the data, most people tend to use informal terms of reference for their parents, regardless of the language they use. There is also a sizeable portion of the respondents who use formal terms to refer to both their parents. But most importantly, there is a minority who use formal terms with their fathers while resorting to using informal terms with their mothers. It is very possible that the usage of formal or informal terms for one's parents This is most probably related to the fact that most modern families are nuclear in nature, and that parents are much closer to their children than it was a generation or two ago.
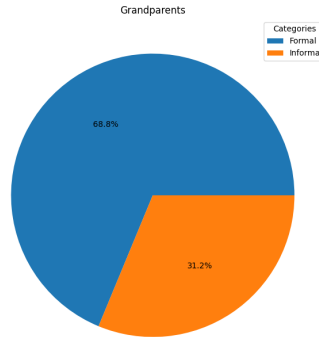
Figure 5: Terms used for Grandparents

This is also supported by the fact that the number of respondents who are formal to their father but not their mother is very low, contrary to what it would have been a generation ago, due to stronger patriarchal stereotypes back then. Most respondents use formal terms, but there is a sizeable minority who use informal terms with even their grandparents, which could point to closer relations with grandparents overriding the formality that is provided to elders in Indian societies.
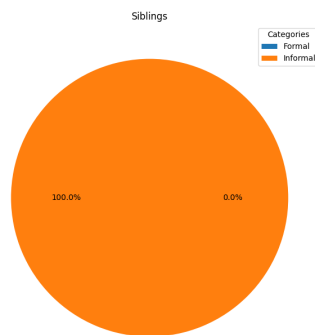
(a) Terms used for Siblings
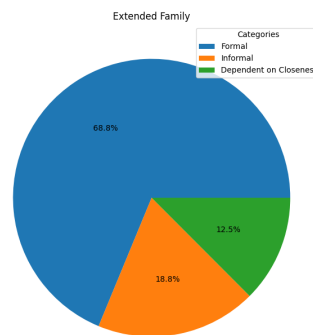
(b) Terms used for Extended Family

Everyone without exception uses informal terms of reference with their younger siblings, which is as expected. People also use formality with their extended family, but whether they use Formal or Informal terms is completely dependent on

how close they are with their extended families, with a few people preferring to using the two on a case by case basis using proximity as a metric.

3 Requests to Family Members:
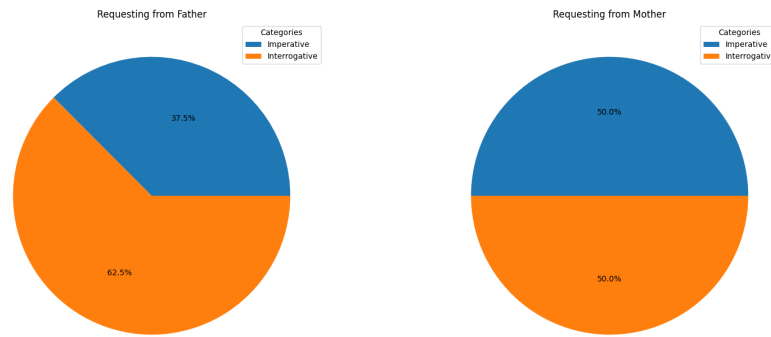
(a) Terms used while requesting from Father

(b) Terms used while requesting from Mother

Once again, we can see the trends similar to the case with simply referring to family members. The surveys show that people are nearly divided equally on the question of being polite with their parents. But even here, one can see the remaining influences of patriarchy where fewer people are comfortable with being upfront with their fathers compared to their mothers, and tend to use questions more often while dealing with their fathers. But once again, this is much lower than what was expected.
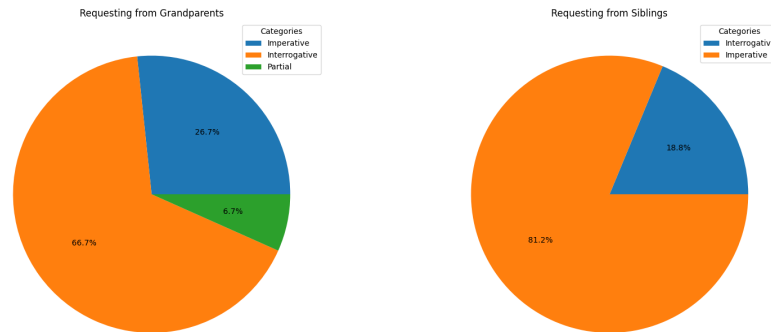
(a) Terms used while requesting from Grandparents   (b) Terms used while requesting from Siblings

Even here, there is a marked divide when it comes to grandparents, where most people choose to be polite instead of using assertive statements with their grandparents. In this field, there was also a single outlier who used interrogatives with their grandfather, while resorting to imperatives with their grandmother. This was very common in the past, and the it's only for the better that its reduced its influence in the younger generations. In the case of younger siblings, while there is still a clear majority opinion, it is no longer as absolute as it was while people were referring to them. While the majority tends to use assertive commands with their siblings, there are a few people who use interrogatives with their younger siblings, but the trends show that these are the same people who use interrogatives while requesting anything, regardless of their relations within the family.
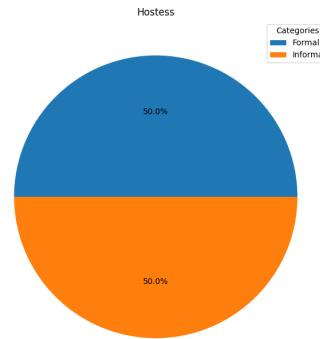
4   In Society:

Figure 9: Terms used for Hostess

The interviewees had very strong views on the importance of proximity on their choice of pronouns for the individuals that they could possibly meet in society. All of the respondents unanimously decreed that they would use only informal terms with their friends, but had a 50-50 split in opinion regarding what terms one ought to use with a host(ess) [of similar ages] who was not a direct friend of theirs, but rather a second degree connection. The people who said that they would use formal terms said that they would do so because since they did not know the host(ess) personally, they would rather err on the side of politeness. On the other hand, the other half argued that they would use informal terms since they were of similar ages and even the second degree connection established camaraderie.
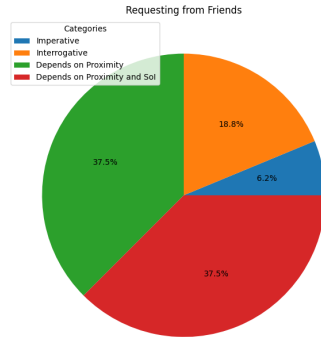
Figure 10: Requesting from Friends

While all of the respondents were certain that they would be informal with their friends, only a single respondent said that they would use imperative statements while requesting from their friends, regardless of proximity or the size of imposition. Ironically, more of the surveyed said that they would resort to using interrogative terms while requesting from their friends. The rest of the majority said that while proximity was a strong condition for deciding the way they would frame their requests to their friends, they were equally split on the importance of the size of imposition of their requests. These trends closely correspond to the expected responses, and this could be attributed to the way we as humans interact with others.
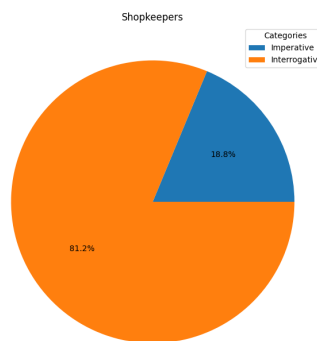

Figure 11: Dealing with Shopkeepers

In the case of shopkeepers as well, the interviewees followed the expected trends. Nearly everyone agreed that they would be formal with the shopkeeper, and only a small minority said that they would use imperative requests, while most others said that they would choose interrogative requests with the shopkeepers. This might also be closely related to why people preferred using formal terms of address with the host(ess), because in both cases, the referent is in a slightly more powerful position than the speaker is, making the speaker feel that using formality is a necessity.
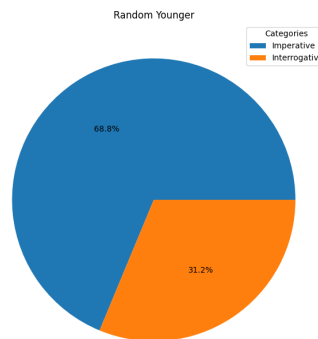
5 Meeting Perfect Strangers?:

Figure 12: Conversing with Young Strangers

In the case of meeting perfect strangers in their daily lives, the respondents' responses showed a clear variation across the different age groups that the stranger could belong to. In case the person was younger than the interviewee, then the interviewees, by a large margin used only informal terms and imperative commands while talking to the stranger in question. This closely relates to the way in which the participants chose to refer to their younger siblings.
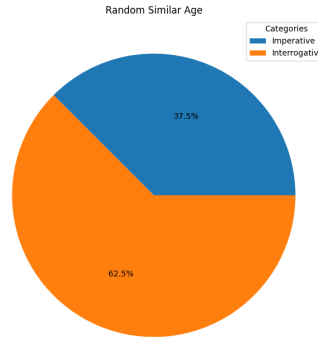
Figure 13: Conversing with strangers belonging to similar age groups

Again, the way in which the respondents dealt with strangers of similar age is reminiscent of how they dealt with the case of the host(ess) previously, where we have a nearly equal split as to whether one would use formal terms or informal terms with the stranger. But on the other hand, they way they would request the stranger is the polar opposite of the case of a younger stranger, with nearly symmetric splits, but this time with the majority favouring the usage of more polite interrogative terms for requests.
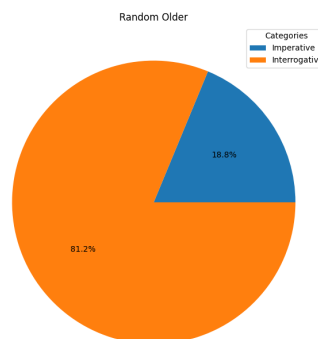

Figure 14: Conversing with Older Strangers

In the case of older strangers, the case is a clear parallel to the case of the shopkeeper, with nearly everyone preferring to use formal terms along with in-

terrogative requests instead of assertive statements. This might be due to the fact that in Indian societies, one is expected to provide respect to people who are older than oneself, and hence most people recourse to using formal + interrogative statements to not commit any FTAs unnecessarily.
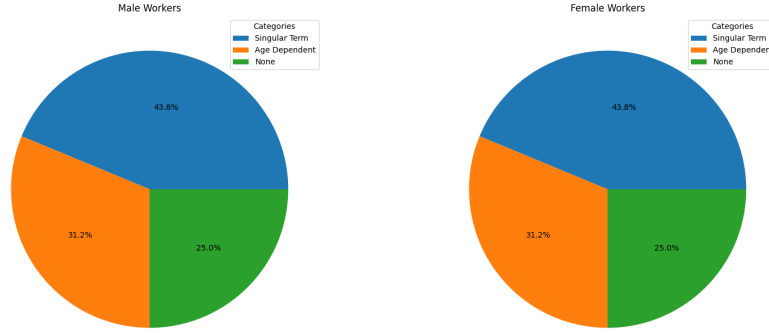
(a) Terms used for Male Workers   (b) Terms used for Female Workers

When it comes to referring to workers of either gender, the majority uses only a singular term to refer to them, which is usually of the form <elder-male-sibling> or <elder-female-sibling> or <aunty>. Another large chunk of the respondents say that the terms that they would use are age dependent, and this usually varies between [elder-sibling to uncle/aunty]. There is a also a sizeable majority who do not use any term to refer to these workers and instead choose to skirt around any situation where they could be required to refer to the hearer by a pronoun. This seems to follow the usual pan-Indian trend.

6   Conclusion:

Based on all the data that I have collected and analyzed, there was very little deviation from the trends that I had expected based off of what I had observed with my friends and family in the past. The only place where there was a significant deviation from the expected distribution was in the case of families, where more people preferred using Informal terms and Imperative requests with both their parents, and in a few cases, with their grandparents as well. This ran in contrast to what I had expected, that the participants would use informal terms with their mother while using formal terms with their father. I assert that this difference is wholly due to the fact that the respondents were all from urban environments and that they had very little influence of patriarchy from the older genertions. This, I believe, is due to wide reach of education in the present time, that people are slowly beginning to erase any differences that

might exist between the males and females in the household, with which the difference in the styles of utterance also fell out of fashion.