

45. Politeness Distinctions in Pronouns

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1. Politeness in pronouns

Map 45 is concerned with politeness distinctions in personal pronouns, and more specifically second person pronouns. This phenomenon has been particularly well-studied in European languages. In German, for instance, there is a threefold distinction between a 2nd person singular *du* 'you.SG.FAMILIAR', a 2nd plural *ihr* 'you.PL.FAMILIAR', and a 2nd person polite *Sie* 'you.HONORIFIC', which does not distinguish number. The polite pronoun *Sie* is the default form of address among German adults who are not in a close social relation to each other. If they are relatives, married, close friends, professional colleagues, or university students, they are very likely to use the familiar *du* to address each other. The usage of *du* and *Sie* is symmetrical (the one who gives *Sie* (or *du*) will also receive it), with one exception: Adults address children and adolescents with *du*, but receive *Sie*.

The simplified example of the usage of German *du* and *Sie* given here demonstrates that a single grammatical distinction (familiar versus polite) corresponds to a complex set of pragmatic rules and social contexts determining the choice between the two forms. In addition, the pragmatic rules which determine the choice of *du* and *Sie* are not identical to those of other languages with a binary politeness distinction in pronouns. Although there is a significant degree of overlap in the conditioning factors of the usage of *du* and *Sie* in German, *tu* (you.SG.FAM) and *vous* (you.HON) in French, and *ты* (you.SG.FAM) and *вы* (you.HON) in Russian, there are also significant pragmatic differences. In French, for example, the mother-in-law continues to be addressed by the (new) son-in-law or daughter-in-law with the polite form *vous*, whereas in German, the

mother-in-law always receives the familiar form from the (new) son/daughter-in-law. In Russian, the usage of *ty* and *vy* is also conditioned by the affective relation between the interlocutors, the topic, and the discourse context (cf. Friedrich 1966, 1972). Interlocutors can change from the polite form of address to the familiar form and back again with certain pragmatic effects. This is not possible in a conversation of German interlocutors. Once two German interlocutors have agreed on the familiar form of address, they cannot return to the polite form.

2. Definition of politeness values

The scope of this chapter is restricted to politeness distinctions in second person pronouns: Politeness distinctions in first person and third person pronouns are excluded (for an overview of politeness distinctions in first and third person pronouns, see Shibatani 1998 and Helmbrecht 2004: chs. 8, 10). In addition, only referential expressions which can be classified as personal pronouns are considered. For the majority of the languages in the sample, this does not raise any problems, as the forms in question are part of a well-organized paradigm of structurally and distributionally similar forms. A problem arises, however, in some Southeast Asian languages such as Thai, Burmese, and Vietnamese, where personal pronouns do not constitute an easily identifiable word class. Rather, there is a continuum stretching from pronominally used forms resembling the European type of personal pronouns, to forms which are more similar to nouns. In these cases, only those forms which are used exclusively for second person reference are taken into consideration, regardless of whether they are also used as nouns. In Vietnamese, for instance, there is a large class of kinship nouns such as *anh* 'elder brother', and *ông* 'grandfather' (cf. Cooke 1968: 127–130) which are frequently used in pronominal function. But these can be used for first and third person reference, as well as for second person reference. These

nouns are therefore excluded from the database. By contrast, other forms which are etymologically nouns have acquired an exclusively second person reference with a specific politeness value. Often, nominal and pronominal uses coexist. These forms are included in the database.

No difference was made between bound pronominal affixes and pronouns which are free independent words. Languages with bound pronouns indicating degrees of respect are found in Mesoamerica, e.g. in Nahuatl (Uto–Aztecan) and Mixtec (Oto–Manguean) languages.

The values for this map are indicated in the value box:

Second person pronouns			
@	1.	encode no politeness distinction	136
@	2.	encode a binary politeness distinction	49
@	3.	encode multiple politeness distinctions	15
@	4.	are dominantly avoided for politeness reasons	7
total			207

The four honorific values for second person pronouns are explained in the subsequent sections.

2.1. No politeness distinctions. This feature value is self-explanatory. Languages that were assigned this value have no personal pronouns in their paradigms which are used to express different degrees of respect or intimacy toward the addressee.

2.2. Binary politeness distinctions. This feature value covers all languages with the European type of politeness distinction (German *du/Sie*, French *tu/vous*, Russian *ты/вы*). These languages have a paradigmatic opposition between one intimate or familiar pronoun of address and another one expressing

respectful address. Such a binary distinction may also be expressed by several distinct pronouns. It may be the case, for instance, that two different pronouns indicating the same degree of respect are used in different dialects. This is the case with *wy* and *Pan/ Pani* in Polish: the former is used in rural areas, the latter in urban areas (cf. Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990: 145–150). Or, different respect pronouns may be used in different grammatical contexts, e.g. one is a free pronoun fulfilling all grammatical functions, the other is an obligatory clitic only in subject function. This is the case with Taba (Austronesian; Indonesia) *meu* (2nd.SG.HON free pronoun) and *h=* (2nd.SG.HON clitic pronoun) (cf. Bowden 2001: 187–189). Criterial for this honorific type is that the pronouns do not indicate more than one politeness distinction.

2.3. Multiple politeness distinctions. This feature value covers all languages which exhibit two or more degrees of politeness within a pronominal paradigm. These systems are rare cross-linguistically. A typical example can be found in Marathi (Indo-Aryan; India). There is a form *tū* used for family members and intimate persons, two forms with the same degree of respect *te* and *he* (2SG.HON) for people with higher social status, and an extra polite form *āpaṇ* (2SG.HHON) for priests and teachers and in very formal contexts (cf. Pandharipande 1997: 375–94).

2.4. Pronoun avoidance. This feature value is the most difficult to identify of the four, and is terminologically rather different from the first three. The names of the first three values describe a categorical feature of the pronominal paradigms to be investigated. The term "pronoun avoidance", however, describes a strategy of pronoun usage which has an effect on the overall shape of the paradigm. Languages of East and Southeast Asia such as Japanese, Burmese, and Thai have a strong sensitivity to politeness in language usage and within their grammars. Speakers have to account for a variety of social distinctions

linguistically. Social distinctions between speaker and hearer may reflect relative age, kinship, social ranking, intimacy, and other social features. From a linguistic point of view, one of the most important strategies of being polite is to avoid of addressing people directly. This strategy of negative politeness (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987: 129–210) is the functional background of the emergence of politeness distinctions in pronouns in European languages, and indeed holds in languages both with and without grammaticalized politeness distinctions. The peculiarity of the languages of (South)–East Asia, however, is that personal pronouns are not used in polite address at all – instead, status and kinship terms, titles, and other complex nominal expressions are employed. The effect of this strategy on the shape of pronominal paradigms in these languages is that there are rarely polite pronouns of address. If there are 2nd person pronouns they are used to address social equals and inferiors. Polite forms of address, e.g. for the address of superiors, mostly do not belong to the class of personal pronouns in these languages. Since the discrimination of a separate class of personal pronouns is not as clear-cut as in European languages, e.g. in terms of binary paradigmatic oppositions, I prefer to specify this feature value in terms of the overall strategy, instead of using a term which presupposes paradigmatic generalizations for these languages which would necessarily be vague and difficult to measure.

3. Frequencies and areal distribution

The cross-linguistic survey of politeness distinctions in pronouns reveals that this is not a marginal grammatical feature in the world's languages. Around three quarters of the languages have no politeness distinctions in personal pronouns. But of the remaining quarter which do have politeness distinctions in second person pronouns, two thirds have a binary politeness distinction, about ten percent have multiple

politeness distinctions, and around twenty percent must be classified as languages which express politeness by means of pronoun avoidance. These figures are based on a more representative subset of languages than is the actual 207-language sample used. The sample of 207 languages is somewhat biased towards European and (south)east Asian languages, where politeness distinctions in pronouns is a widespread phenomenon.

The geographical distribution of the different honorific types across the languages of the world is not even. As the map clearly indicates, there are large areas where politeness distinctions in pronouns are totally absent, and there are areas where this phenomenon occurs with a remarkable density. Areas where politeness is not a category in personal pronouns are North and South America, New Guinea, Australia, and most of Africa.

Pronominal paradigms with a binary politeness distinction (value 2) occur everywhere else but show a hotbed in Europe and adjacent areas.

Multiple politeness distinctions (value 3) in pronouns are rare, but occur predominantly in languages of South Asia and neighboring areas. This feature could be considered a defining feature of this area. Many of the languages there use a 2nd.PL pronoun for the first degree of politeness, and a 3rd person or reflexive pronoun for the expression of the next higher degree of politeness. The 2nd.SG form is usually reserved for close equals, family members, and inferiors.

Pronoun avoidance (value 4) is a defining feature of the Southeast Asian area. Languages such as Thai, Burmese, Vietnamese, and others often lack any polite second person pronoun, but have many forms for reference to equals, inferiors or for impolite usage. These lexical gaps with respect to polite second person pronouns are characteristic of the paradigms in these languages.

4. Linguistic politeness – theoretical issues

A very influential attempt to provide a general account of the usage of second person polite pronouns is Brown and Gilman (1960). The basic idea is that the usage of familiar/polite second person pronouns (in European languages) is largely determined by two not fully independent macro-sociological parameters, power and solidarity. Polite pronouns may be used for address when there is a difference in social rank and prestige between the interlocutors; the asymmetrical use of second person pronouns reflects the difference in the social power of the interlocutors. This parameter seems to be relevant in German only with respect to the usage of *du* and *Sie* between adults and children. The solidarity parameter pertains to the social distance of the interlocutors. If they are strangers there is a greater social distance between two interlocutors than if they are members of the same social group, such as family, school, professional organization, and so forth. Polite pronouns are used if the social distance is great, familiar counterparts are used if the social distance is less. The usage of German *du/Sie* largely reflects differences along this scale. Solidarity-based pronoun usage is always symmetrical (for a critical overview of this approach, see Agha 1994).

A theory which incorporated the two parameters of Brown and Gilman, but is much wider in its scope, is Brown and Levinson (1987). Their theory tries to give a general explanation of (linguistic) politeness based on the social-psychological notion of face. Face is described as the "public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61). This public self-image, face, is a part of the personality of each individual, and has to do with the way the individual wants to be seen and treated by others in the society. Brown and Levinson's basic idea is that there are numerous

types of speech acts and utterances which threaten the face wants of the addressee.

The avoidance of direct (linguistic) reference to the addressee in the context of face-threatening utterances is the main functional motivation for developing polite referential expressions such as *vous* in French, and *Sie* in German. The 2^{PL} pronoun *vous* in French presumably came into use historically as a polite form of singular address because it renders the reference less direct and less specific (cf. Malsch 1987, Helmbrecht 2003, 2004). Other possible diachronic sources for second person polite pronouns are 1st person plural pronouns (for example in Ainu (Japan)), demonstrative pronouns (for example in Sinhala (Indo-Aryan; Sri Lanka)), reflexive pronouns (for example in Hungarian), and nouns and nominal expressions designating social status (as in Spanish). All these sources of polite second person pronouns avoid a direct second person reference in the sense that they initially required some pragmatic inferencing before they were conventionalized as a polite means for pronominal reference. For a more detailed treatment of the functional aspects of the grammaticalization of second person polite pronouns, see Helmbrecht (2004: ch. 9).

5. Conclusions

The uneven distribution of politeness distinctions in pronouns across the languages of the world suggests that there are other conditioning factors that have to be taken into account. Language contact and the social and cultural disposition to adopt linguistic means which are used to express politeness in neighboring languages that have a high prestige seem to be more important as a determining factor than the general functional background of polite language use. It is this social and cultural disposition of the adopting society which is responsible for the selection of certain forms as politeness

forms.