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Title: A cross-linguistic comparison of address pronoun use in four European languages: intracultural and intercultural dimensions

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Abstract:

While the use of address pronouns in languages spoken around the world has been of interest to linguists for some time, relatively little attention has been paid to direct cross-linguistic comparisons. In this paper we consider and compare contemporary patterns of address pronoun use in four major European languages (French, German, Italian and Swedish) based on our own recent large-scale data collection and analysis. These languages have traditionally differed significantly in the nature of their address pronoun systems. As such they provide a useful point of comparison of how different systems in a relatively small geographical area may interact, change or vary over time – in this case since the rise of European integration in the 1950s.

We focus specially on two questions:

- (1) the extent to which speakers of these languages have shifted to more reciprocal and more informal pronoun use, as predicted since the 1960s
- (2) the possible effect of European integration on patterns of address pronoun use.

Our results show that while there has been some shift towards more reciprocal informal pronoun use (Brown and Gilman's T-form), the rate of change has been very different across languages. Swedish has shown the most radical change, with a large-scale shift to generalized T-use, albeit with evident national variation between Sweden Swedish and more conservative Finland Swedish. The other three languages have proved much more resistant, e.g Italian has maintained its marked tendency towards non-reciprocal use. Moreover, change across the four languages has not always been linear with evidence of a counter-cyclical return to more formal pronoun use, even in Sweden.

With respect to the second question, our results point to the persistence of significant differences both across languages but also within the same language used in different regions and nations. Previously well known regional/national variation in Italian appears to be waning but survives in German- and Swedish-speaking areas. The extent of difference is perhaps surprising given the strong process of local, regional and national socioeconomic integration under way in Europe for at least 50 years. While European integration might be expected to favour language contact and convergence of patterns of address across Europe, we note that it also has the potential to create language conflict and intercultural misunderstanding when different systems meet.

We consider some of the reasons for this cross-linguistic variation and suggest that they depend on longstanding historical differences at the local and regional level, differences in cultural attitudes and more recent socio-political developments. The possibility that European integration might in fact trigger language conflict and intercultural miscommunication with respect to address pronouns is borne out. We discuss a number of examples, including some requiring legal resolution and a recent, well known case of international statesmanship involving the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair and the French President, Jacques Chirac.