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Address systems

Unit 9



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INVESTING IN YOUR FUTURE

Unit 8. Address systems

1. The topic of this unit:

The present unit discusses systems of address – that is, all those ways of using language that we have to address our interlocutors: pronouns, verb forms, names, and even greetings that co-occur with them. The study of address forms provides invaluable insight into the relationships of speakers with people in their lives, the selection mechanisms people use in making their choices, as well as into larger societal patterns as well.

2. Address forms

The most important address forms are pronouns. While Modern English has only one pronoun, *you*, which can be used in both informal and formal address, most European languages make a distinction between an informal and a formal pronoun of address: *tu* vs. *vous* in French, *tu* vs. *Lei* in Italian, *du* vs. *Sie* in German, *ты* vs. *вы* in Russian, *te* vs. *maga* and *ön* (as well as a construction involving the verb *tetszik* “please”) in Hungarian, etc. In sociolinguistics the former is usually referred to as ‘T address’, the latter as ‘V address’ (after the first letters of the Latin pronouns, *tu* and *vos*). In the languages of Asia (Japanese, Korean, Chinese etc.) address systems are much more complicated, often with several levels of formality – the present discussion will focus on languages spoken in Europe.

The pronouns of address co-occur with specific verb forms in European languages: the T pronoun with second person singular verb forms, and in most (including the Slavic languages and French), the V pronoun co-occurs with second person plural forms. In Hungarian, the V pronouns co-occur with the 3rd person singular verb forms.

The reason why the V pronoun goes together with 2PI verb forms is the following, according to the classic paper “Pronouns of power and solidarity” (1960) by Brown and Gilman: in the times of the Roman Empire when there were two Emperors in the two parts of the empire, the western and the eastern parts, and when speakers were addressing one of them, they used a second person plural address while receiving second person singular address from the emperor. This type of address was then extended to other people in positions of power, with such a person receiving V address and giving T address. Later, the practice of giving V address became mutual in polite upper class usage, to show mutual respect. Thus, the three kinds of address relationships were created: T–V address, for power relationships, mutual V for equal but respectful relationships, and mutual T for equal and intimate relationships:

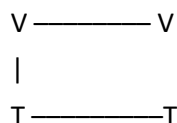


Figure 1. The three types of address relationships

In English today there is only one pronoun of address, but title + last name (e.g. *Mr. Black, Dr. White*) vs. first name (e.g. *John, Liz*) address correspond roughly to V vs. T, respectively.

The use of T–V address is an expression of power, and that of T–T address is that of (equality and) solidarity (to use Brown and Gilman’s terms), while V–V address is an expression of an equal but not solidary relationship. T–V address is non-reciprocal, while T–T and V–V address is reciprocal.

V–T address used to be very widespread in European languages in situations where there was a power difference between the interlocutors: between master vs. servant, officer vs. common soldier, teacher vs. student, parent vs. child etc. In some cases it still remains used to this day (between teachers and school children).

The crucial difference between V–V and T–T address is solidarity: the membership in the same social group that the members see as creating affinity and/or a common interest. As we can observe in languages that have V vs. T address in pronouns, the basis for solidarity can be virtually anything: membership in the same political party, family, religious group, profession, workplace, age group, gender group, etc. We can see when group membership creates solidarity in address because members of the group will address each other with T and non-members with V. For instance, a Hungarian child today addresses adult family members (parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents) with mutual T while addressing adults who are not family members (but neighbors or strangers) with V (while receiving T). At Hungarian workplaces, co-workers of the same gender are more likely to use mutual T address with each other than across gender lines – although workplaces might differ greatly in address used: in some workplaces (IT companies, arts faculties of universities, etc.) everyone uses mutual T address with everyone else, while in others (hospitals, medical faculties of universities, etc.) choice between mutual T vs. mutual V depends on a complex system of rules determined by rank, relative age, and gender.

Question to think about:

Consider a European language you know well.

1. Review what relationships would involve V–V address and what relationships would involve T–T? What constitutes the basis for solidarity in this language and what does not?
2. Can you think of relationships in which V–T address is used today?

3. Can you think of situations in which a person might receive a different kind of address from a stranger than what they might expect (for instance T instead of V)? Situations like this often arise from people having a different rule for what constitutes the basis for solidarity. How do people usually handle these situations

4. Can you think of a workplace context where mutual T and mutual V address are both used? What is choice of address defined by?

In languages that have the T vs. V distinction in pronouns, these pronouns are often referred to as expressing “informal” vs. “formal” or “respectful” vs. “intimate” address by everyday speakers. Sociolinguistically speaking, while informality vs. formality of the relationship does have to do with the choice, it is not necessarily the primary reason. “Respect”, however, is very much of a popular idea that many speakers share, which does not have to do much with our sociolinguistic choices (unless a speaker decides to purposefully use T address in a relationship where V would be expected in order to offend their interlocutor): T address can be just as respectful as V address if it is sociolinguistically appropriate.

During the 20th century there was a gradual shift in European languages towards a system of address that is more equal than before: non-reciprocal V–T address has been replaced, in most situations, by reciprocal address, V–V or T–T. Brown and Gilman (1960) explain this with the spreading of egalitarian ideology which requires us to deny power asymmetries. In most languages today V–T address remains only in a limited range of situations: between teachers and schoolchildren, and a few limited contexts. Interestingly, some remnants of the non-reciprocal address are still there in many contexts in the name use: children may be using mutual T with their parents and grandparents these days, but they still do not usually reciprocate first name use but call the latter by kinship terms (*Mom, Dad, Grandpa, Grandma* in English, *anyu, apu, mama, papa* in Hungarian, or whatever forms of kinship terms are used in a given family). At universities non-reciprocal name usage is also usual: students at Hungarian universities typically address their instructors and professors as *tanár úr* (for males) and *tanárnő* (for females) while getting first name use back while using mutual V address in terms of pronouns.

Research task:

If your first language is a language with a T–V distinction in pronouns, do a small study of address in your family. Ask your parents and, if you can, your grandparents about address in their childhood families: what address (T or V) they used with their various family members. Define what rules governed the choice of address in the various generations.

As a person’s relationship with somebody changes, the address they use often changes as well. When students graduate from high school or university, their former teachers or instructors may suggest changing the mutual V address to mutual T, if the former students are perceived to be “in the same group”: adults, or university educated professionals. It is always the person with more claim to power (i.e. the more highly placed person) who has the right to initiate such as change: the person with more authority, the older person, and, in intersex dyads, the female. Such as change is usually irreversible, except in extreme situations of personal conflict. In some societies there are ceremonies associated with changing the address: in Hungary people often make the change when there are alcoholic beverages present, clinking glasses, linking arms while downing their drinks, and then kissing on both cheeks. In Germany the change has

the name *Brüderschaft* and involves drinking to making the relationship closer. In English, the change is usually marked by a simple request like “Just call me Dan”. Deciding who has the more claim to power may sometimes be difficult: in a male former instructor vs. female former student relationship the role and the gender conflict with each other, possibly creating an impasse where neither party feels comfortable to initiate the change.

3. Variation and change in address

The address system is never completely uniform within the same language: people with different regional or social class backgrounds, of different educational levels and/or age groups etc. have different systems within the same society and language area.

For instance, in Hungary urban vs. rural communities have different systems, and Hungarians living in different countries in the Carpathian Basin also have differences in address. In Vojvodina, Serbia, Hungarian speakers use the V pronoun *ön* much more rarely than speakers in Hungary do, using *maga* in most situations. While between university instructors and their students mutual V or mutual address is usual (the latter is usual in case of younger instructors) in Hungary, among Transylvania Hungarians (in Romania) non-reciprocal V–T address is common in the same situation.

In today’s Hungary, very interestingly, membership in the same age group has become the basis for solidarity among young adults: people in their 20s and early 30s who are strangers to each other address each other, in most contexts (with the exception of highly status marked settings such as between doctor and patient etc.), with mutual T address just because they are members of the same age group. The upper boundary of the age group has been observed to be going higher: in the early 2000s speakers were gradually starting to use mutual V with strangers by the time they were 30, whereas today people in their 30s tend to still use mutual T.

Misunderstanding or awkward situations can often stem from the fact that two people have different systems of address due to their different social backgrounds and selecting a form of address which is different from what the other person in the interaction is expecting to receive.

The address system a person uses changes throughout one’s life as one goes through the various stages of life and as one’s position in life changes accordingly. Passing from one stage to the next may be difficult, for instance, in the case of teenagers getting used to being addressed as adults rather than as children by other adults.

4. Beyond pronouns

In addition to pronouns, names and name combinations, and sometimes even greetings co-occur in particular ways in systems of address. In Hungarian, the greetings *Jó napot* “Good day!” and *Viszontlátásra* “Good-bye!” co-occur with V address, while *szia*, *szerbusz*, *szervusz*, *szóka*, *heló* etc. co-occur with T address, and *Jó reggelt* “Good morning!” can co-occur with both.

While in English TLN vs. FN address is the only manifestation of address differences, in languages with T vs. V pronouns the combinations of the pronouns with various forms of nominal address (title + last name, full first name, diminutive) and the various pronoun choices can result in a large number of choices that speakers have to learn to choose among in order to select the appropriate one for a given relationship. In Hungarian the following combinations of pronoun address plus name forms all indicate different relationships and/or found in different social contexts:

V address:

ön + profession name: *Tanár úr, ön*

ön + full name: *Kovács András, ön*

ön + first name: *András, ön*

ön + last name: *Kovács, ön*

maga + profession name: *Tanár úr, maga*

maga + full name: *Kovács András, maga*

maga + first name: *András, maga*

maga + last name: *Kovács, maga*

T address:

te + profession name: *Tanár úr, te*

te + full name: *Kovács András, te*

te + last name: *Kovács, te*

te + first name: *András, te*

te + diminutive: *Adris, te*

Research task:

If your first language is Hungarian, take the above list of pronoun + name combinations and describe briefly what kind of situation would you expect to hear each one.

For instance: “Tanár úr, te” might be heard in a situation where a professor offered mutual T address to a student, but where the latter chooses to use “Tanár úr” as a nominal address instead of the professor’s first name out of deference.

What form of a first name to use with a particular person is also the question of subtle social differences in the relationship between two people. For instance, in US universities, even if students are invited to address their professors by their first names, this does not extend to the use of diminutive forms: if a professor whose name is Daniel goes by *Dan*, it is not appropriate for students to call him *Danny*.

Address avoidance is also a choice in address systems, resorted to in cases where the speaker is uncertain which option to choose. Address avoidance is relatively easy in English, where the verb form and pronoun and greetings that go with the choices are all the same. In languages with a choice of pronouns and corresponding verb forms, greetings, and a choice of name forms it is much more difficult to avoid addressing in conversations.

Questions to think about:

1. If your native language has T vs. V pronouns, make a list of different forms with the use of which addressing can be avoided.
2. Think of situations where two people may use non-reciprocal name address with each other in a particular social setting.

In situations of large scale social change in a society it is usual to see a radical change in the address system as well. For instance, when Hungary became a communist country in the late 1940s, the use of hereditary feudal titles was abolished, and the use of *elvtárs* “comrade” became widespread. In the 1950s, *elvtárs* was used together with almost a universal *te* (T) address in Hungary. By the 1970s, with the change from a Stalinist country to that of Goulash communism, *elvtárs* became less widespread and used with either T or V pronouns. In the sociolinguistics literature, there are accounts of social change in Sweden, East Germany and Iran being accompanied by an accompanying change of address systems. This also shows that address forms are very sensitive to differences in social relationships, which, in turn, means that the study of address systems in society can provide further insight into social changes in that society.

Question to think about:

1. Think of a language you know well. Can you think of ways in which address in this language changed at some point or another? Was there an obvious social reason for the change to happen?

5. Summary

Address systems provide an insight into social relationships of speakers. A lot of European languages have an informal way of addressing (T) and a formal one (V). The non-reciprocal V–T address is indicative of power relationships, where the person with the more authority receives

V, while the other one receives T. Both V–V and T–T address is reciprocal and indicates an equal relationship, but while T–T expresses solidarity, V–V does not.

Address systems have variation within the same language and same society, along age, social class, level of education, or gender. A person's address system also changes throughout their lifetime as their social position and relationships change as well.

Review questions:

1. What are the three main address configurations?
2. Which types are reciprocal? Which one is non-reciprocal?
3. What address type expresses power? What address type expresses solidarity? What address types express equality?
4. Give examples of variation in address systems.
5. What do changes in address systems provide an insight into?

Glossary of terms:

Non-reciprocal address: an address relationship where an interlocutor gives a different form of address than what they receive.

Reciprocal address: an address relationship where an interlocutor gives the same form of address as what they receive.

T address: address indicating an informal relationship expressed with grammatical 2nd person singular pronoun and verb form.

V address: address indicating a formal relationship expressed with grammatical 2nd person plural pronoun and verb form in a range of European languages.

Further reading:

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