

‘hier im großen internetz, wo sich alle dududuzen’

Internet discourse politeness and German address

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Our Melbourne research project *Address in Some Western European Languages* is based on different sets of sociolinguistic data. In addition to other methods of collecting empirical data we also want to turn directly to Internet news groups and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) groups trying to trigger some virtual group discussion about address usage both on-line and off-line in all three languages studied.

This paper reports on a preliminary study which is being used to choose such IRC and News groups where related topics have already been discussed and to develop adequate questions for such chat groups and news groups.

The research questions were:

- 1. Are there perceptions of a difference in address form choice on-line and off-line, or within different areas of the web?**
- 2. In which genres of internet media are German forms of address a topic?**
- 3. What are the main topics linked with German address forms discussed on the web?**

The first question is the one most essential for the decision for or against including a chat group and news group based component in our data collection:

1 Are there perceptions of a difference in address form choice on-line and off-line, or within different areas of the web? – or: Is the Internet a different country?

1.1 Is the Internet a different country?

The quote in the title of my paper “hier im großen internetz, wo sich alle dududuzen” [here on the big internetz where everyone is on dududu terms] is from a posting by “stickyshanghai” 7. August 2003, 21:58 on the blog “außerlomografische opposition” in the Antvill.org. domain. <http://alo.antville.org/stories/473805> (24/09/04):

Text 1:

‘hier im großen internetz, wo sich alle dududuzen’

[here on the big internetz where everyone is on dududu terms]

“stickyshanghai” 07/08/2003 on the blog “außerlomografische opposition” in the Antvill.org. domain.
<http://alo.antville.org/stories/473805> (24/09/04)

Taken on its own, the lightly ironic line with its rap rhythm would suggest that there is general agreement to use the German T form exclusively or at least as the unmarked form within the German speaking area of the web. In addition, the ad hoc Gerglish term *internetz* seems to suggest that the choice between alternative address forms that German offers is forfeited in imitation of a perceived overwhelming anglophony of the web.

If this were so, the internet variety of German would very clearly differ from the off-line varieties to constitute another – virtual – normative center among the geographically polycentric standards of German.

This is clearly in agreement with the remark of a the newsgroup administrator “Christof”, who informed a new participant in his forum on 04/09/2004:

Text 2:

‘Zum Thema duzen: Im täglichen Leben im Internet ist es KEINE Unsitte sich zu duzen. Es ist sogar gänzlich normal.

Andere Länder, andere Sitten, und das Internet ist definitiv ein "eigenes Land" [...]

In Anlehnung an das englische "you" hat sich im Laufe der Zeit im deutschsprachigem Internet durchgesetzt "Du" zu sagen, unabhängig davon, mit wem man es zu tun hat.’

[Regarding *du*-ing: In daily life on the Internet it is NOT bad manners to address each other as *du*. Rather, this is completely normal.

When in Rome, do as the Romans do, and the Internet definitely is “a different country”, [...]

Following the model of English *you*, in the German speaking Internet it has become customary over time to address everybody as *du*, no matter who you are dealing with.]

“Christof (Administrator), 04/09/2004 <http://www.internet-foren.de/printthread.php?Cat=&Board=talk&main=154018&type=thread> (24/09/04)

A universal and unproblematic German *du* on the Internet (or at least in newsgroups and chat groups) is also widely taken for granted in the linguistic literature dealing with address in German CMC (cf. Schulze 1999: 80-81; Bader 2002: 52 and 127, n. 214; Hess-Lüttich/Wilde 2003: 167; Schepelmann 2004: sect. 3.2.2.2)¹.

If the picture that the research literature is painting to date were true, it would strongly contradict the great appreciation for the choice between alternative address pronouns in German which participants in our focus groups as well as in the network interviews often expressed.

Or else, it would mean that German speakers – or at least the internet-savvy part of them – clearly behave differently in terms of address forms use on-line than when

¹ The question of address in non-English speaking CMC has, however, been discussed in much more detail in a study on Portuguese CMC (de Oliveira 2003).

they are off-line and completely suspend their rejection of pressure to choose a particular address form while they are on-line.

Both seems unlikely, and indeed, it is not so.

If we look at the two quotes mentioned earlier in their context, we find that both try to advise newcomers who had previously misbehaved by using the “wrong” address form for that particular newsgroup or blog and who had immediately been sanctioned for it by other participants. In both cases, the “inter-subcultural” misunderstanding triggered strong feelings of being treated inappropriately on both sides:

The whole paragraph in “stickyshanghai’s” posting reads:

Text 3:

‘duzen: ich weiß auch nicht wieso, aber eine eigenart von alo (vielleicht weil nur hier und auf einigen anderen antville-seiten) ist es, daß man sich siezt. hier siezen sich sogar die leute, die sich sonst duzen, hier siezen sich sogar ehapaare. es ist ein ungewohntes brauchtum hier im großen internetz, wo sich alle dududuzen, aber man gewöhnt sich recht schnell dran (glauben sie nicht, das sei förmlichkeit).’

[*du*-ing: I don’t really know why, but is’s a peculiarity of alo [=“außerlomografische opposition”, HLK] that one is on *Sie* terms here (maybe only here and on some other antville-pages. Even people who are normally on *du* terms address each other as *Sie* here, even married couples do that here. That’s an unusual custom here on the big internetz where everyone is on dududu terms, but you get accustomed to it soon (just don’t think that’s done out of formality)]

stickyshanghai” 07/08/2003, on the blog “außerlomografische opposition” in the Antvill.org. domain. <http://alo.antville.org/stories/473805> (24/09/04)

And the administrator Christof's advice comes after the newcomer "werbefrust" had a heated argument with another "old" member of the forum about the universality of *du* address in newsgroups. It reads in its context:

Text 4:

‘Also ich weiss nicht, warum du so harsch reagierst?

[...]

Zum Thema duzen: Im täglichen Leben im Internet ist es KEINE Unsitte sich zu duzen. Es ist sogar gänzlich normal.

Andere Länder, andere Sitten, und das Internet ist definitiv ein "eigenes Land". Das hat übrigens nichts mit Respektlosigkeit zu tun, nicht, dass du in die falsche Richtung denkst und glaubst, wir wollen dich mit dem Duzen jetzt ärgern. [...]

In Anlehnung an das englische "you" hat sich im Laufe der Zeit im deutschsprachigem Internet durchgesetzt "Du" zu sagen, unabhängig davon, mit wem man es zu tun hat.’

[I really don't know why you react in such a harsh way.

[...]

Regarding *du*-ing: In daily life on the Internet it is NOT bad manners to address each other as *du*. Rather, this is completely normal.

When in Rome, do as the Romans do, and the Internet definitely is "a different country".

By the way, this has nothing to do with lack of respect, so don't get it wrong by thinking we want to annoy you now with addressing you as *du*. [...]

Following the model of English *you*, in the German speaking Internet it has become customary over time to address everybody as *du*, no matter who you are dealing with.]

“Christof (Administrator), 04/09/2004 <http://www.internet-foren.de/printthread.php?Cat=&Board=talk&main=154018&type=thread> (24/09/04)

“werbefrust”, by the way, does not accept “Christoph’s” argument, referring in further postings to the participant’s own experience with other newsgroups where *Sie* address is customary.

Based on the research we have done with focus groups and Network interviews, we can hypothesize that in the case of the Usenet, we find a parallel to off-line communication in the coexistence of two systems, one tending towards unmarked *du*, the other towards unmarked *Sie*. These two possible situations have to be negotiated by newcomers, and often this is done on the basis of perceived degree of social distance. Since, due to the anonymity/pseudonymity in the Usenet, relative age can hardly be guessed, “gemeinsame Lebenswelt” (perceived commonalities, cf. Kallmeyer 2003) become the most important factor for a decision between alternative forms of address.

1.2 Discourse Politeness

The use of the “wrong” address form in a particular web forum often causes a high degree of offence and leads to heated mutual accusations of misbehaviour or impoliteness. CMC is a semi-public and often synchronous or quasi-synchronous communication precariously balanced between oral and written communication (cf. Schulze 1999; Bader 2002; Hess-Lüttich/Wilde 2003), but lacking vital paraverbal and nonverbal communication channels that lower the risk of embarrassment by misunderstanding. Linguistic choices “that work to maintain smooth human relationships” become essential in this context.

Those choices are subsumed by Mayumi Usami under the category of “discourse politeness”, encompassing both “language use that conforms to social norms and conventions and the individual speaker’s strategic language as well as [...] the interaction between these two” (Usami 2002: 4).

So in terms of discourse politeness, neither the T nor the V form *per se* can be said to be the “polite form”, but only the form which is agreed upon to be the unmarked form in a particular situation by all participants in that situation. i.e. the form which expresses a comparable mutual perception of degree of social distance between the interlocutors.

Having such an unmarked and therefore “polite” address form either for the Internet in general or for a particular newsgroup or chat group, however, meets with a strong resistance. On-line as much as off-line, many German speakers reject any pressure to use a particular form of address. Accordingly, the German language netiquette pages (see Storrer/Waldenberger 1998 for examples) are reluctant to prescribe a particular form of address and rather recommend reciprocity:

Text 5:

‘Nicht wundern, wenn man per Sie oder per Du angeschrieben wird, einfach genauso antworten.’

[Don’t be astonished if addressed as *Sie* or as *du*, simply reciprocate.]

(Reiser 1996)

So we can give a preliminary answer in the positive to the research question whether there are perceptions of a difference in address form choice on-line and off-line, or within different areas of the web. This, of course, immediately opens up links of our own research to the recently evolving fields of sociological studies on CMC (Rutter/Smith 1998; Rutter/Smith 1999) as well as on equally new research on CMC based in the fields of ethnography and intercultural communication studies (cf. Pargman 1998, Abdelnour-Nocera 2002; Macfadyen in pr. a; in pr. b; in pr. c, Macfadyen/Doff in pr.; Matei 2005).

2 In which genres of internet media are German forms of address a topic?, or: to *Sie* or not to *Sie*, where is that the question?

Is the metalinguistic discussion of the German address forms limited to the conditions of their use in newsgroups? This leads us back to the second preliminary research question: In which genres of internet media do German forms of address become a topic?

A lot of public discussion on address forms in German is going on in off-line media, and consequently it is no surprise that one finds a comparable amount of discussion

on-line. On-line genres, even more so than textual genres in general, tend to share blurred boundaries and vast overlapping fields as well as to develop and change too fast for the most sophisticated definition to keep them apart. So, without any claims to having clearly defined the different genres, this crude list shows types of on-line genres where German forms of address are discussed:

- e-press
 - journals and newspapers primarily published on the web (e.g. Tornow-Kneebone 2000)
 - journals and newspapers primarily published in print, secondarily on-line (e.g. Bock 2004)
- newsgroups
- chat groups
- blogs (those three genres are more and more blending into each other)
 - on an internal Netiquette page (eg the welcome page of <http://forum.schollgym.de/>)
 - as substantial threads of their own (eg. Knigge (2005) has 74 postings from 17 April to 12 May)
 - as asides/side topics within other threads (examples above)
- personal websites
 - private (e.g. <http://daniel.rehbein.net/>)
 - professional (e.g. Sakowski 2001)

3 What are the main topics linked with German address forms discussed on the web?, or : What is all the fuss about?

The main topics linked with German address forms discussed on the web appear to be:

- 3.1 addressing of customers/consumers as *du* by companies and media
- 3.2 company policies suggesting or prescribing a particular form of address
- 3.3 questions of appropriate address behaviour off-line (etiquette) and on-line (netiquette, chatiquette)

We have already shortly dealt with the last topic. Let us therefore discuss the first and second topics.

In his blog forum *close your eyes* which mostly deals with music, the blogger “alex63” has a section “deutsche sprache schwere sprache” which is about German language. On 6 February 2004, “alex63” is annoyed with being addressed “pseudo-personally” as *du* by a commercial radio station:

Text 6

‘Heute morgen bei der Fahrt zur Arbeit mal wieder befremdet von den privaten Radiostationen. Ich höre gerade CD, die CD wird von Verkehrsmeldungen unterbrochen. Der Sprecher sagt so was wie

"Am Frankfurter Kreuz stehst du 5 Minuten."

Nicht nur dass ich das ziemlich penetrant und anbiedernd finde. Hier wird eine falsche Direktheit erzeugt, oder bin ich etwa der einzige Hörer dieses Senders? Da werden mit einem Schlag tausende Leute pseudo-persönlich angesprochen.’

[Was disconcerted once more by the private radio stations this morning on my way to the office. I was just listening to a CD, the CD is interrupted by the traffic report. The reporter says something to the effect of

"At the Frankfurter Kreuz you [du] will stand for 5 minutes."

It's not only that I find that an annoying instance of chumming up. A false directness is being displayed here, I am not the only listener of this station, am I? In one go thousands of people are addressed in a pseudo-personal way]

“alex63”, 06/02/2004 <http://musik.antville.org/stories/680819/> (24/09/04)

On 12 September 2004, “alex63” asks the self-critical question:

Text 7

‘Wieso bin ich eigentlich so allergisch gegen Radiomoderatoren [...], die mich und millionen andere im Singular duzen und finde es total affig, wenn mich jemand in meinem Blog siezt?’

[Why on earth am I that allergic to people on the radio [...] addressing me along with millions of others as *du* in the singular and still find it completely silly when someone addresses me as *Sie* in my blog?]

“alex63”, 12/09/2004 <http://musik.antville.org/stories/913710/> (24/09/04)

In a comment to this posting, “koalarama” remarks:

Text 8:

‘sogar im aktuellen ikea-katalog wird man neuerdings geduzt, und das obwohl die seit jahren ihr studi-image erfolgreich hinter sich gelassen haben. befremdlich.’

[Even in the new IKEA catalogue one is addressed as *du* now; even though they have succeeded in leaving behind their student image for years. Disconcerting.]

“koalarama”, 16/09/2004 <http://musik.antville.org/stories/913710/> (24/09/04)

The change to addressing customers as *du* which IKEA Germany made in their catalogue and ads in 2004 provoked a lot of online comments and discussions. The majority of reactions were as disconcerted as “koalarama’s”, some refer to the fact that IKEA Austria had addressed their customers as *du* for a while already before IKEA Germany joined them in doing so.

As a matter of fact, the three different Websites in German of IKEA Germany, IKEA Austria, and IKEA Switzerland differ dramatically in respect to addressing their customers. A look at the kitchen planners on the respective websites shows this:

	<p>Web pages last accessed 18/06/05 bold = V (Sie) <i>italics = T (du)</i></p>
Austria	<p>http://www.ikea.com/ms/de_AT/rooms_ideas/kitchen/download.html</p>
	<p><i>Möchtest du deine neue Küche zuerst am Bildschirm sehen? Hier kannst du es - mit dem IKEA Küchenplaner!</i></p> <p><i>Unsere Planungshilfe versetzt dich in eine komplett neue Küche - ohne dass du von deinem Stuhl aufstehen mußt. Füge die Küchenelemente per "drag and drop" in den Plan ein, betrachte deine Küche in 3D, probiere verschiedene Farben aus und drucke deinen Entwurf aus.</i></p>
Switzerland	<p>http://www.ikea.com/ms/de_CH/rooms_ideas/kitchen/download.html</p>
	<p>Wollen Sie Ihre neue Küche zunächst auf dem Bildschirm sehen? Hier können Sie es: Mit dem IKEA Küchenplaner!</p> <p>Unsere Planungshilfe versetzt Sie in eine komplett neue Küche – ohne dass Sie von Ihrem Stuhl aufstehen müssen. Fügen Sie die Küchenelemente per Drag and Drop in den Plan ein, betrachten Sie Ihre Küche in 3-D, probieren Sie verschiedene Farben aus, drucken Sie Ihren Entwurf und sehen Sie, was Ihre neue Küche von IKEA kosten würde.</p>
Germany	<p>http://www.ikea.com/ms/de_DE/rooms_ideas/kitchen/download.html</p>
	<p>Möchten Sie Ihre Küche zuerst sehen, bevor Sie sie kaufen?</p> <p><i>Unsere Planungshilfe versetzt dich in eine komplett neue Küche – ohne dass du von deinem Stuhl aufstehen mußt. Füge die Küchenelemente per Drag and Drop in den Plan ein, betrachte deine Küche in 3-D, probieren verschiedene Farben aus, drucke deinen Entwurf und sieh, was deine neue Küche von IKEA kosten würde.</i></p>

The reluctance of consumers to accept a German T (*du*) address form in consumer advertising and a sales situation that can be seen in text 8 as well as in many blog entries from Germany and Austria is neither restricted to the web nor to IKEA.

In our questionnaire data, a male informant from Leipzig uses a car sales encounter as an example:

Text 9

Q 13: Have you ever been addressed with a form you didn't expect? When, by whom?

‘Wenn es förmlich ist, wenn es um einen Vertrag geht, kann ich es überhaupt nicht leiden, wenn man sich mit du anspricht, weil man dann in so eine unformale Ebene fällt, wo es immer ganz schwer ist, seine Interessen durchzusetzen. Ein Beispiel ist, ich wollte ein Auto kaufen, da kam der Mann zu mir und sagte, was für ein tolles Auto es war und du ..und so ..das war in diesem Moment extrem unpassend. Das war ein seriöses Geschäft, da möchte man sich nicht duzen...ich hab ihn zurückgesiezt, aber er hat mich geduzt. Das war ein eigenartiger Mensch. Das war unangenehm.’

[In a formal situation, if it is about a contract, I don't appreciate it at all if one is on a *du* basis, because it moves one to such an informal level at which it is always very difficult to see to one's own interests. One example is, I wanted to buy a car, and this man approached me and told me what a brilliant car it was ... and addressed me as *du* ... and so ... that was extremely inappropriate at that moment. That was a serious business transaction, one does not want to be on a *du* basis there ...I returned a *Sie* address, but he addressed me as *du*. That was an odd person. It was unpleasant.] (L3 M2)

Apart from using a T address towards their customers in Germany and Austria (even if not in Switzerland), IKEA is also often used as an example for company policies suggesting or prescribing a particular form of address.

Alongside with the German subsidiaries of Wal-Mart, H&M and Marks&Spencer, Ikea is often named as one of the companies that put pressure on their employees to use *du* in the workplace (cf. Kiwitt n.d.) - online as well as in our interview data:

TEXT 10

Q 19: *What do you think of businesses that make du mandatory?*

[I have never experienced that, but I think it's rubbish... I know that about Ikea. I can imagine. To be on a *du* basis with your boss, that's the last line of defence.] (L3 M5)

The same rejection of blurring the lines between boss and employee via a compulsory or offered mutual *du* is displayed in the name of an anarcho-syndicalist newsgroup dealing with exploitative practices in the New Economy. Those practices are exemplified in the bleak conditions of call centre workers who lack the most basic rights and are under constant thorough control, and who in exchange for that are given the dubious bonuses of free coffee and the privilege to address their boss as *du*.

With grim humour, the Newsgroup called itself 'Chef Duzen – Forum der Ausgebeuteten' [On *du* terms with the boss - Forum of the Exploited]



Apparently, on-line as well as off-line, German speakers feel that "gemeinsame Lebenswelt" can be expressed by reciprocal T, but people deeply mistrust any attempts by corporations, institutions and job superiors to produce a false image of "gemeinsame Lebenswelt" by pushing for "T".

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