

Address in American English

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The relationship between the speaker and his addressee determines the choice of linguistic forms. There are two major forms of address in American English: the use of the first name (FN) and use of a title with the last name (TLN). The use of these forms of address is governed by the relationship between the speakers. It is not predictable from properties of the speaker alone or the addressee alone.

This paper provides an example of the application of semantic analysis to the study of social structure. It starts with a description of the norms of American address, and then points out a certain pattern in these norms which is to be found in the forms of address of many languages.

Method

Materials

To discover the norms of address in American English, four kinds of data have been used.

- 1- Usage in modern American plays: there are more instances of address in plays than in any other form of literature. Thirty-eight plays written by American authors were used. Playwrights accurately reproduce the true norms of address.
- 2- Actual usage in a Boston business firm: for two months a man employed in a drafting firm took advantage of leisure moments to write down instances of linguistic address overheard from his fellow workers. He collected address terms for 214 different dyads in which 82 different people are involved either as speaker or addressee.
- 3- Reported usage of business executives: a group of 34 Sloan Fellows, who are business executives between 30 and 38 years old nominated by their employers to study for one year at the institute, served as informants for this study. Each man was asked to write down the full name and position of 4 persons whom he was accustomed to see nearly every day. His selection of these 4 persons should include: one person equal to himself in the organization hierarchy with whom he was on intimate terms, one person equal to himself with whom he was on distant terms, one person superior to himself, one person subordinate to himself. After listing the names the informant was asked to write down for each person listed the exact words that he would speak in greeting that person for the first time each day.
- 4- Recorded usage in Midwest: it includes an extended study of 10 "specimen records" each of which records the events and conversation in a full-day of the life of a child in the Psychological Field Station.

Procedure

One-third of the 38 plays were examined in order to discover rules that govern the choice of address forms. The resulting rules were tested against a second set of plays. These rules proved adequate to the description of all instances of address in the final set of plays. Also data from the business firm, from the Sloan Fellows, and from the Midwest records were used as additional checks on the rules.

Major patterns of address:

Regarding FN and TLN types of address there are three possible dyadic patterns:

- 1- The reciprocal exchange of FN
- 2- The reciprocal exchange of TLN

3- The nonreciprocal pattern in which one person uses FN and the other TLN

FN includes full first names, familiar abbreviations, and diminutive forms. In American English, male first names seldom occur in full form. However, female first names are often left unaltered. Titles in this study include Mr., Mrs., Miss, Dr., Senator, Major, and the like.

Two reciprocal patterns

In the plays, most of the dyads exchange FN (Mutual FN). However, Mutual TLN is most commonly found between newly introduced adults. The distinction between the two patterns is one of degree of acquaintance, but the degree required for Mutual FN is less for younger people than for older people, and less where the members of the dyads are of the same sex than where they are of different sex.

It seems likely that the two reciprocal patterns are on a dimension that ranges from acquaintance to intimacy. In English of the past, the Mutual FN is farther displaced from the Mutual TLN. However, in modern American English the distance between the two points is small with the Mutual FN usually representing only a very small increment of intimacy over the Mutual TLN; as small as 5 minutes of conversation. The principal factors predisposing to intimacy seem to be shared values (like kinship, nationality, sex, etc.) and frequent contact.

Nonreciprocal pattern

In the nonreciprocal pattern, one member of the dyad says FN and the other TLN. There are two kinds of relation that can generate this pattern. The first is a difference of age: an elder by 15 years or more receives TLN and gives FN to his junior. The second is a difference of occupational status.

Age and occupational status are correlated and most instances of nonreciprocal address involve differences on the two dimensions. However, there is proof that a difference on either dimension alone is able to generate the nonreciprocal pattern. The proof is the existence of nonreciprocal dyads matched on one dimension but not on the other. The question is what happens to address in dyads where the elder has the humbler occupation. In the plays there are many examples in which the criteria oppose one another. In all these examples occupation prevail over age.

The other three sets of data confirm this generalization.

- 1- Sloan Fellows call almost all of their business acquaintances by FN and expect this address to be reciprocated. In the few cases where one of these men would say TLN and expect to receive FN the other member of the dyad was a superior and was also the elder.
- 2- In the Boston drafting firm, most address is on the pattern of Mutual FN. The few cases of Mutual TLN involved persons who were scarcely acquainted and who were matched by age and position. There were 40 instances of nonreciprocal address. In 36 of these the recipient of TLN was the organizational superior and elder. In 3 cases the organizational superior was younger than his subordinate and it was the superior, not the elder, who received TLN. The remaining case involved a pair matched by rank but not by age and in this case the elder received TLN.
- 3- Midwest children participate in nonreciprocal address dyads with parents and teachers and in Mutual FN dyads with other children.

Variant forms of address

In addition to FN and TLN, there are several common forms of address.

Title without name

Titles (T) that are used commonly include sir, madam, ma'am, and Miss. These forms are used like TLN either reciprocally between new acquaintances or nonreciprocally by a person of lower status to a person of higher status. The address form T is a degree less intimate and a degree more deferential than TLN. It may be used reciprocally where acquaintance is so slight that the last name is not known. In military, TLN may be used to immediate superiors but the T to remote colonels, generals, etc. even though the names of these are well known.

Also, particular forms of T have their specialized uses. The form ma'am is most commonly heard from young men to mature women. Schoolchildren in Yoredale, England, address their teachers by Miss. However, children in Midwest use TLN to address their teachers.

Last name alone

Usually an occasional person is addressed by LN. This occurs where the FN is polysyllabic and has no familiar abbreviations whereas the LN is either a monosyllable or easily transformed into a monosyllable. In these cases LN is a substitute for FN and is used in identical fashion.

Where the LN is not the usual form for an addressee it represents a degree of intimacy greater than TLN but less than FN. In military usage enlisted men receive the LN from officers when they are little acquainted. Increased familiarity leads to the FN. Elderly and very distinguished professors sometimes begin letters to junior colleagues whom they know fairly well: "Dear Jones..." the form is not reciprocated in this case.

LN is used reciprocally between enlisted men until they become acquainted.

Multiple names

The case of multiple names (MN) is the case in which two or more versions of the proper name are used in free variation with one another. A speaker may use more than one form of the proper name for the same addressee, sometimes saying TLN, sometimes FN or LN or a nickname, sometimes creating phonetic variants of either FN or the nickname.

The instances of MN in the plays suggested that this form represented a greater degree of intimacy than the FN. This hypothesis is tested in a more direct way. The test involved individual interviews with 32 Sloan Fellows. Each subject was asked to think of four men of about his own age, some of whom he is on close and friendly terms with, and some on more distant terms. The subject was asked to write down the full names of the four men and then to record the name by which he usually addressed each one.

The result showed that the subjects addressed their close friends by MN. One informant addressed his closest friend whose name is Robert Williams as Williams or Robert or Rob or Willie and his next closest friend whose name is James Scoggin as Scoggin, James, Jim, or Scoggs. Many informants reported that they sometimes playfully address a good friend by TLN. Others used playful phonetic variations: Magoo for Magee, katool for Katell, Lice for Leis.

The tendency to use MN to address intimate friends is interesting because it accords with a familiar semantic-psychological principle. Within a language community, a speaker more concerned with a given referent field will make finer lexical distinctions than a speaker less concerned with that field.

We have seen that where distance is greatest, titles alone are likely to be used in address. To call someone Miss or sir is to address the person on a categorical level which does not establish the addressee's individual identity. The proper name constitutes the individual as a unique organism. Beyond the single proper name, where interest is still greater, the individual is fragmented into a variety of names which expresses various ways of regarding someone who is close.