How to address people in English and German

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From the linguistic point of view...
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Pragmatics is not part of the structural core of a language and so anything which belongs to it, such as the use of address terms, is generally acquired fully in later childhood.

Address terms require a certain amount of practice and children need to be told who they should refer to by ‘Du’ and who by ‘Sie’. Adults are generally tolerant of misapplication of address terms by children. Among themselves, adults are less tolerant (more on that presently…).
From the social point of view...

Linguistic politeness is determined by the conventions which hold in a given society.
Scene in a German bakery early in the morning

Customer to shop assistant:

‘Zwei Vollkorn und drei Normale.’

(hands money to assistant, takes change and leaves shop)
Scene in an English bakery early in the morning

Customer to shop assistant:

‘Oh, good morning! Sorry to bother you. I wonder if I could have two wholemeal and three plain rolls, if you don’t mind.’

(hands money to assistant)

‘Sorry, there you are.’ (handing over a five pound note)

‘Great, that’s lovely, thanks a lot. Have a nice day!’

(takes change and leaves the shop)
Question:

Is the customer in the German bakery less polite than the customer in the English bakery?

The answer is probably ‘no’. However he/she engages in different conventions for social exchange which do not involve high degrees of ‘empty’ elements as does the language used by the English customer.

So politeness is relative – it is about the conventions which apply in a society.
Address terms in European languages
The major European languages use different personal pronouns depending on the degree of acquaintance which speakers have with those they address. The systems found in Europe show a twofold distinction: one form for addressing acquaintances, friends and relatives and one for addressing strangers or more distant acquaintances. The formal means for realising this distinction vary from case to case. Each language uses the second person singular for informal address but there are a variety of ways for expressing formality pronominally as can be seen from the following table.
The forms from different languages in the above table have various sources. For instance, the third person singular feminine in Italian *lei* ‘she’ refers originally to *maiestà* ‘majesty’. The German use of *sie* ‘she-SG’ with plural verb forms (later with an initial capital *Sie*) is attested and would appear to be a combination of indirect third person address and respectful plural as augmented deference. In French and Russian the *vous* and *vy*, both ‘you-PL’ respectively, attained a double function: as a reference to more than one individual with whom one is on informal terms and as a form for more distant acquaintances and strangers which could be used in the singular or plural.
Because of the differences in realisations, it is practice in linguistic discussions to refer to the informal marker as the T form and the formal one as the V form (corresponding to the first letters of the French and Russian pronouns). Such systems are termed *dyadic* as they have two possible pronouns for addressing individuals.

In those languages with the above distinction the higher levels of society tend to use V-forms more and the lower levels the T-forms. This fact may be a remnant of the historical situation out of which the pronominal distinction arose.
# Turkish personal pronouns of address

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2. Person Singular</th>
<th>2. Person Plural</th>
<th>Double Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sen</td>
<td>siz</td>
<td>sizler (very rare)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Imperatives**

| gel                | gelin            | geliniz       |

In addition, honorifics can be used, e.g. [firstname] + Bey (male) or [firstname] + Hanım (female), [firstname] + Hoca (those in a religious office, teachers)
"Hatten wir uns das letzte Mal eigentlich geduzzt oder gesiezt?"

"Geihrat."
The development of pronominal systems

The use of a plural of respect is commonly assumed to reach back to Latin and anecdotally to Julius Caesar. What is true is that the plural came to be used for addressing a single individual and so documents the encoding of social distance in language use. This distinction was picked up by vernacular European languages by the early Middle Ages, in German, for example, the earliest record of *ihr* ‘you-PL’ with singular reference goes back as far as the ninth century. Well into the early modern period this remained the only deferential pronoun of address. Its use was regulated by social status in the feudal system and later by class affiliation. By the end of the sixteenth century the third person singular – *er* ‘he’ or *sie* ‘she’ – appears as an indirect address form indicating deference.
Present-day systems

The factors which determine the use of T versus V forms vary across languages, both in history and at present. By and large today's European languages have an absolute system where a given form is used for a certain individual and maintained until a possible switch is made. Switches are generally irreversible, indeed the only normal switch is from V to T with the important exception of teenagers becoming adults and experiencing the shift of T to V on the part of adults who address them.
Present-day systems

Another orientation of the address system is conceivable. This would be where speakers decide from the actual speech context in which they find themselves what form of address to use. Such systems tend to be unstable over time because of the flux and uncertainty which they generate. The dyadic address system of English did not survive and this may be because it was not absolute. In the early modern period *thou* (the original T form) and *you* (the original V form) could be used for one and the same person, depending on the situation.

How do I feel towards him/her today?
Address systems serve the function of giving linguistic expression to fairly stable aspects of social relationships, such as power, distance, solidarity or intimacy. But speakers often feel the desire to be more formal or less formal with certain individuals on certain occasions. If the direction the speakers wish to take is not congruent with the T/V form they use, a tension arises which cannot be resolved simply in absolute systems but which can be mitigated by the use of other features which congregate around the address pronouns, such as colloquial expressions, discourse elements which promote informality (or formality as the case may be).
Occasionally, a language may consciously abandon an established dyadic address system. This happened in the mid twentieth century in Sweden when the V form, *ni* ‘you-PL’, came to be replaced entirely by *du* ‘you-SG’ as the only pronoun of address, irrespective of degree of acquaintance. A similar situation applied, though to a lesser extent, in Norway and Denmark (but not in Finland). A slight swingback can be seen in Sweden where some young people think it fashionable to address other individuals using the *ni* form.
The German address system

Wir könnten ja ‘Du’ zueinander sagen, oder?
The German address system

The general rule in German is that the formal Sie ‘you’ is used for strangers and the informal Du ‘you’ for friends and relatives. However, the matter is considerably more nuanced than this simple statement implies.

Social maturation and the use of T/V A system of address in a language is something which is learned consciously by children in their society. The rule always holds that children use the familiar form with each other and with their relatives. However, they must learn (by 5 or 6 at the latest) that there is a marked formal form which is to be used with strangers. As opposed to the acquisition of other aspects of language (morphology, syntax, etc.) children require a fair degree of correction as they overgeneralise the T form (here: Du) to begin with. Because the T form is the original unmarked form, there is a general correlation between age and the use of the formal V form. The T form is used among peers up to their twenties (unless some professional situation forbids this or the parties in a conversation are complete strangers).
The German address system

Non-reciprocal usage and the notion of power The practice of one partner using one form of address and the second another is dying out quite quickly in European languages. It used to be common where one member in a conversation enjoyed a position of greater social power and thus was entitled to use the T form whereas the other had to use the V form. Originally, this was the situation with the nobility. Occasionally, there may be professional relationships today which reflect a similar type of situation. For instance it is common in German for master craftsmen to say Du to their apprentices but not vice versa.

Politeness and the use of formal address From the original use of the Du form for social inferiors there developed a secondary usage as a sign of contempt. In this sense it can still be used today. However, this only works in those situations in which the person addressed has an inherent claim to be addressed with the Sie form, e.g. an older pupil in school, an inmate in a prison, a worker on a building site, etc. The application of the Du form is always felt to be indignifying by the other party as it demonstrates a lack of respect.
The German address system

Because the *Du* form implies close acquaintance it can be used to force this. Very often such a move is taken by one partner in an exchange and frowned upon by the other. Speakers often resist attempts on the part of others to use *Du* so as to keep their social distance from them. Forcing the *Du* form on someone is regarded as bad social behaviour. Retention of the *Sie* form can often occur simply where individuals want to be on the safe side: stick to politeness and you cannot go wrong.

_Solidarity and the T form_ A frequent function of the *Du* form is to demonstrate solidarity, i.e. strong common interests, with another individual or group of individuals. In this environment the requirement of close acquaintance can be waived. This is evident in many groupings in society. For instance, there is a tradition that members of the social democratic party say *Du* to each other. The use of the *Du* form for reasons of solidarity probably has its origin in working class usage. For example among miners, road workers, hauliers, etc. reciprocal *Du* is ubiquitous.
The German address system

The converse of this situation is that where people use the Sie form as a sign of politeness and mutual respect. This usage would seem to be confined to the middle classes, probably because with working classes politeness does not have such a high value as solidarity, indeed it is often regarded as being class disloyal, i.e. aspiring to a higher social class, to overuse the Sie form. In keeping with the fact that the Sie form occurs in socially stratified contexts, there is a greater occurrence of the Du form in rural as opposed to urban settings. Indeed languages which have an entirely rural population (such as Irish) may often not have any formal pronominal address at all.
The German address system

*Degrees of acquaintance and the T form* There is a general rule in all languages which have a formal/informal distinction that at the level of greatest personal acquaintance, the reciprocal *Du* form is used. This holds for instance between siblings, husband and wife, lovers, etc. Formerly, the age difference could have outweighed this with children using the *Sie* form to their parents or at least to their parents-in-law, however this usage has completely died out.
The gender issue

On the whole, there is a greater tendency for the use of ‘Du’ within gender than across the genders. This probably has to do with the greater degree of informality within a gender and with the interpretation of an offer of ‘Du’ as an unwelcome approach by a member of the opposite sex.
Activities/groups/situations which prescribe informal address

The best example of this probably sport. For instance, you simply cannot play football with somebody and say ‘Sie’ to them. Groups such as students (now) always use the ‘Du’ form.

There are also extreme situations in which it is not possible to retain the ‘Sie’ form, for instance, while climbing a high mountain with someone. Furthermore, situations which are very dangerous would preclude the use of ‘Sie’, e.g. ones which are a matter of life or death.
Formality in language: binary or scalar?

Formality continuum (a scale from least to most formal)
Du / Sie + other elements in a sentence

How do you reach a scalar situation with a dyadic pronoun system? The answer is in combination with other elements. Consider the following situations.

Duzen + Tschüß  
Siezen + Tschüß

*Duzen + Aufwidersehen  
Siezen + Aufwidersehen

Siezen + 1 person  
‘ihr’ + several persons (all of whom would be addressed individually with ‘Sie’)

‘Du’ or ‘Sie’
Du / Sie + other elements in a sentence

The combination of pronoun and name can provide some additional options in addressing people. Again, the variation exists with the formal ‘Sie’.

Duzen + Vorname

Siezen + Vorname

*Duzen + Nachname

Siezen + Nachname
Non-reciprocal address usage

Except for very few situations (remnants of historical ones), reciprocal pronominal usage is the rule in German. So either both parties say ‘Du’ or both say ‘Sie’ to each other.

However, asymmetry is found in the use of names. It is quite common for young people, at least up to their mid-twenties to be addressed by their elders with ‘Sie’ + their firstname whereas the older person is addressed back via ‘Sie’ and their surname.

This usage can be a way of reaching more relaxed exchanges without having to make the big, irreversible change to ‘Du’.

Often the interlocutors have no problem themselves about using the ‘Du’ form but are afraid of what others might say …
The use of personal pronoun in address situations is additionally dependent on the personalities of the two interlocutors. Some people are very reserved and prefer to use ‘Sie’ as much as possible. In addition, you might not find someone likeable and decide to stay with ‘Sie’ for that specific person.

Changing from ‘Sie’ to ‘Du’ general requires a particularly relaxed situation, e.g. a party, an outing or a drink together. But what is such a situation does not arise? Well, you just stick to the ‘Sie’ form, as with next door neighbours who just keep to ‘Sie’ for years because the opportunity never arose to switch to ‘Du’.

Anecdote: I have a colleague I knew for over 20 years at the university and we changed to the ‘Du’ form on his retirement, in fact in an email we had a few days after he had left. Well, better late than never as they say!
Switching from the V to the T form

This switch is often socially codified in many languages, e.g. in German there is a quaint ceremony of *Bruderschaft trinken* ‘to trink brotherhood’, which is optional. Incidentally, the same term and ceremony also exists in Polish. Once the *Du* form has been established it is impossible to return to the *Sie* form without insulting the other person.

Where both interlocutors are on an equal social, employment or age level either of them can suggest changing from ‘Sie’ to ‘Du’.

In situations in which there is a asymmetrical relationship it is always up to the social superior to take the initiative and propose the *Du* form, e.g. a boss vis à vis an employee, a professor vis à vis a younger colleague, etc. This is a residue of the original situation where the more powerful members always said *Du* to the less powerful.
Ausnahmesituationen!

By and large, you keep to either 
*Sie* or *Du* with any one person in German. However, there are 
some strictly defined exceptional 
situations. One of these is the 
Karneval-*Du* (which Thomas 
Mann comments on in *Der 
Zauberberg*). Here you are 
allowed to switch to *Du* for a 
short period in a well defined 
situation (that of carnaval 
celebrations) without the 
commitment to keep to this when 
you return to ‘normal’ life.
The English address system
English is remarkable among the European languages in not having a distinction between personal pronouns used for strangers and non-strangers. Indeed English does not even have a distinction between a pronoun for the second person singular, when addressing one person, and another for the second person plural, when addressing more than one. Both these matters are related.
The English address system

English used to have a distinction in pronouns for address. On the one hand, there was a singular form *thou* ‘you-SG’, which now only survives in a few rural regions in England and in religious usage. On the other hand there was a plural form *ye* ‘you-PL’ which survives in some conservative varieties of English such as Scottish and Irish English. The *ye* form was later replaced by *you*, the original accusative. The singular was used for familiar and the plural for polite address. However, the system did not establish itself, most likely because it was not absolute. In the early modern period – as attested, for instance, in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* – one could say *thou* and *you* to one and the same person, depending on the situation. Hamlet appears to use *thou* to his mother when he is addressing her in this function and uses *you* when addressing her as queen.
A further feature of the early modern English address system is that the *thou* form was often perceived as contemptuous, at least in certain varieties of the language (though not in traditional rural usage).

The net effect is that the *thou* – *you* distinction did not maintain its function of social differentiation and went into decline. By the 18th century it was gone entirely in the standard language and survived a little long in poetry. Now it is really only present in religious usage, e.g. in prayers.
How does the German system compare with the English one?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duzen</td>
<td>Firstname</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siezen</td>
<td>Surname</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Is the equivalence of English and German as simple as implied by the table on the left? Certainly not. Duzen is much more than just using firstnames in English.

German Duzen often implies that two peoples are in collusion with each other, especially in a context where the ‘Sie’ is the default form.
What is the default manner of address in English?

When you have two or more choices which you can make the one which is the most common, most neutral, most obvious is the default. But in English there is no choice of pronoun. True, but there are choices with names. The default with names is to use firstnames in virtually all social situations nowadays. In fact, to the surname when addressing someone can be interpreted as slightly unfriendly. For younger people to do, e.g. students amongst each other, is plainly ridiculous and when foreigners do this it is clear that they have not mastered the pragmatics of contemporary English.
What is the default manner of address in English?

Foreigners, such as German students, should not use the honorific ‘Sir’ either. This is now only found in service encounters, used by the service provider.

Using firstnames as a default is a simple option in English. It does not constitute a social faux pas (as it would in German) and provides speakers with a straightforward and uncomplicated way of addressing each other, no matter what the social situation.
Thankyou for your attention.
Any questions?

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References


